

THE KOREAN TEA SET

By Amanda Hale

Jim has hands like dinner plates, and a body to match. He fought in Korea as a boy, with the Princess Patricia's, and came home with a tea set for Mom. She's dead now, and he's left with the tea set which is providing its own legacy of war in the family. There was no will because she didn't think she had anything to bequeath. *Anyways, love, she'd said, it's too much trouble for me with lawyers and papers and the money they'd charge. I can't afford that.* Although she'd had a houseful of stuff she'd barely eked out a living on her pension from the Bell, where she'd worked, assembling telephones for 35 years.

Jim used to take her out for lunch every Sunday once she moved up to Saint-Sauveur. He was the bouncer at a bar-hotel – *using my big mitts to keep the place clean for Francie*, he'd joke. Francine was the owner, and his own personal bit of fluff. He'd pull up in front of Mom's building at exactly 11.30 Sunday morning, bound up the steps to her first floor apartment, and help her on with her coat and boots. In summer he'd just drape a cardigan around her shoulders, then they'd drive over to the hotel and he'd sit her down at her own table where she'd dine like a queen and flirt with Billy, her favorite waiter, who spoiled her rotten. There would be fresh flowers on her table in summer and a seasonal table-decoration in winter. The winter up north always seemed like a long Christmas, with all the snow, and the skiers passing through the village on their way to Mont Saint-Sauveur.

Mom had never used the Korean tea set. It was too good. She'd been almost afraid to handle it with the pot and cups so small and delicate. Though there was nothing as delicate as Mom's hands, Jim thought – small and precise, handling those microscopic instruments at the Bell. He would sit at her kitchen table drinking from the serviceable mugs where she made the

tea direct, each with its own bag. No fancy teapots for her. That was from the old days in England, she would tell him as he watched her hands and marvelled at how she could have kept them so good after what she'd lived through. *Your dad would roll home drunk as a lord on a Friday night and slap me around*, she'd tell him. *Sometimes it was a good beating after he dragged me out from under the bed where I was hiding with you kids, but if we were lucky he'd collapse on the bed and sleep it off before he could get to me. And then he would've forgot by morning*, she smirked.

Why are you telling me this again, Mom? Jim asked gruffly. *The old bastard's been dead almost thirty years.*

You don't remember those nights, do you, love? That's a blessing.

Judging by the tea set, Mom had supposed Korea to be something like England. The blue china cups had gold rims where your lips would rest, and golden dragons racing round the body of the cup. There were six of them but all without handles, so how could you have a nice hot cup of tea without burning your fingers? The little pot was a squat thing with a jutting gold spout like a stubby erect penis, not that she'd ever seen one that small. Her idea of a spout, as well as a penis, would have a nice curve to it, an elegant line, but this thing was too abrupt, as though it had been cut off in the middle of something. She suspected that if she were to use it to pour tea it would drip on her nice clean tablecloth. The dragons ran riot over the teapot, which being larger than the cups had more room for them to run. Also there was a strange jar, the tallest piece in the set, something like the urn in which her second husband's ashes had been delivered at the funeral home. She'd asked Jim what it was for and he'd said, *That's where they keep the tea, Mom. You could put your bags in there.*

Jim never spoke of the war, except to say that the Koreans were amazed by his height and his size.

Big lug, Mom teased, Just like your dad.

He never said how he came by the Korean tea set, never told anyone about the girl who'd served him in a tea ceremony with slow repetitive movements, her wide sleeves barely brushing the cups as she made a broad swath with her arm, swinging the tiny cup on a small tray from a hidden shelf onto the table. He remembered the smell of jasmine as she moved and the bitter smell of the twig tea as she spooned it from the urn into the pot. She had made tea the way she made love to him, with a precise and measured sensuality. The memory of it made his skin tingle.

Mom had her pantry stacked with teabags – Red Rose, Orange Pekoe – the names themselves took her to faraway places. Sometimes she bought PG Tips, the one that was advertised on the TV with a monkey supping tea with his big lipless mouth. She only bought Tetley when it was on sale – she couldn't resist a sale. She'd lived through the Second World War in England and had a great fear of running short.

When Mom died Jane came down from Toronto to claim her due. The tea set should go to her she said because she was the only daughter, but Milly claimed she was first in line as Jim's wife, even though they were divorced. *When he came home from Korea it was me he was engaged to,* she said, *and it was me should have received that tea set – I always said so.* Nora laid claim because she was Jim's only daughter and was getting married and could use it in her new home. Milly and Nora fought long and hard over it, but meanwhile Kathleen came forward with the

news that Mom had promised the tea set to her. No, she had no proof, but everyone knew that she'd been the one to help Mom after Alex died and it was then, sitting at the kitchen table in Verdun, with his ashes on the table between them, that she'd pledged it. *She took hold of my hand*, Kathleen said, though Jim could hardly imagine it – Kathleen had big meaty hands, red from scrubbing the floors in that cafeteria where she worked, and Mom's hands would hardly have fit around them – *she took hold and looked me in the eye and she said, I want you to have the Korean tea set when I'm gone, love. You're the only one who has time for me and I want you to have it, d'you hear?* Jim was inclined to believe her because she had tears in her eyes as she spoke and Kathleen was not given to sentiment. And because Mom had been fond of setting them one against the other with her small, vicious acts of favoritism. When Wayne's wife Val laid claim over the phone from Ottawa, Jim said, *To hell with it, I don't want to hear no more of this*, and he slammed the receiver down and let it ring off the hook when his brother Wayne called back to curse him.

Mom would have been shaking with laughter in her grave, Jim thought, had she not been cremated and without the force to reconstitute herself. She'd had that smirking, closed mouth way of laughing – more of a snigger, as though she couldn't allow herself a good belly laugh. She'd never spoken about her childhood in England. And she'd been estranged from her only sister until late in both their lives when they met up again and became inseparable. It was after Alice's death that Mom has begun to founder.

Jim trudges up the stairs to her old apartment one last time. Most of her stuff has been taken to the Sally Ann or tossed in the dumpster with the other garbage. But the Korean tea set is still in its box on the kitchen counter. He stands there and removes each piece, fumbling a bit with his

big hands. As he cradles the china cups one by one, the pot with its snugly fitting lid, and the tea jar, he remembers.

He'd been 17; lied about his age to get enlisted. He was full of piss and vinegar, but when the time came, in battle, in the hot thick mess of it, he'd been so scared that his finger had locked on the trigger. It was only when he saw George Sawchuck, go down beside him, half his face blown off, and flecks of his blood and skin spattered on Jim's uniform, that his finger pressed down on the trigger, and then there'd been no stopping him. Nothing mattered after that. George was dead, but Jim was alive, and next day he went on leave and got laid for the first time. He never did catch her name, and there were many more Korean women, but it was her that he remembered, how she had performed the tea ceremony for him, calming him with her slow movements. Her hands had reminded him of Mom's, but everything else about her had been so different from what he knew, which was Milly with her plump body and high-pitched voice, her red nails and the nicotine stains up the sides of her fingers. What is this? he'd thought. There must be girls like this in Canada. I'm going to find me one when I get home. But when he'd returned his resolve had melted. He'd had a glimpse of heaven and he'd lost it.

The cup is so small in his hand, like a wounded bird. He remembers holding Nora when she was newborn, afraid of crushing her she was so tiny and perfect.

I didn't know what I had, he says, his voice echoing around the empty apartment. If only I'd been able to talk to her. I thought it was just the beginning, that there would be more.

Suddenly he brings his fist down on the cup, and he keeps on punching until the entire tea set is smashed into tiny pieces, then he sweeps those pieces onto the linoleum floor and pulverizes them with the heel of his boot. He's surprised to see flecks of blood all over the white kitchen cupboards, and to find himself weeping as he crushes the porcelain fragments into a fine

powder - everything from his broken life - the murder and the ecstasy. *Heaven and hell!* he sobs hoarsely, *that's what it is – heaven and hell, and I'm stuck in between!*