

Golden Gifts

By Sarah Craven – Cabin John, Maryland

Golden apples falling at your feet. This was a phrase my father often used to remind me of the many gifts and privileges in my life. Lately, I have reinterpreted his adage through the lens of golden plumeria—the tender and fragrant blossoms of the tropics.

In 1969, my parents moved our family from Maryland to Honolulu. My mother famously told my father she was willing to live there for "one year—and not a day more." Yet, by the following year, they were signing the deed to a house on Wa'a Street—the Hawaiian word for canoe. The house, small and open-air, sat on the curve of the street under a rainbow shower tree shading the carport. A prodigious mango tree stood sentry at the corner of the lot, and the back garden brimmed with golden plumeria trees. Neighbors often knocked on the door, asking for a few ripe mangos or plumeria blossoms to string into leis.

We made our leis with long wire needles from Long's Drug Store, threading them with dental floss. A plumeria lei could welcome a visitor, mark a birthday, or celebrate a graduation. Even a single plumeria tucked behind the ear carried meaning—on the right if you were single, on the left if you were committed. The plumeria's delicate fragrance and fleeting beauty became part of the rhythm of our lives.

This spring, my mom, now 99, reluctantly moved from her beloved home to The Ivy, a senior living community a short drive away. The irony of the name Ivy – a plant non-indigenous to Hawaii – did not go unnoticed. Her new studio apartment overlooks a serene garden filled with fragrant plumeria trees. In the early days of her transition, she sighed wistfully, noting, "They are pretty trees but they're not MY trees."

Recently, a Wa'a Street neighbor texted, upset about plumeria blossoms from my mother's trees drifting into her yard. I promised to trim the tree but couldn't resist sharing how, years ago, those blossoms were treasures, not troubles. She wasn't swayed. Perhaps I'll send her a lei needle.

Two plumeria plants thrive in my Bethesda home, once mere sticks hastily bought from the Honolulu airport gift shop on a trip back. To my surprise, they blossomed, offering three or four flowers at a time. I tenderly care for them, floating the infrequent but cherished blossoms in a small dish of water so their gentle fragrance seasons my home with memories of Honolulu.

Some things change—our homes, our stages of life—but some endure, like plumeria blossoms, quietly falling, a testament to beauty's persistence. These small, simple treasures have been a constant through decades of change, bearing silent witness to our joys and sorrows, milestones and departures.

My father's wisdom lingers: golden blessings abound if we're willing to notice. Sometimes, they fall at our feet, waiting to be gathered. Life, like the plumeria, offers fleeting beauty and connection. We must pause to honor them, weaving a lei of memories, an offering of gratitude.