THE TEA SHOP AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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I found the tea shop one afternoon in February, when I was not in the least looking for it. As a matter of fact, I was just looking for a place to get out of the wet and cold, or at least so I thought. If the old me had known what I was getting myself into by stepping in, I probably would have walked right by and sought shelter in the plain, rectangular, strictly and safely conventional tobacco store a few doors down.

But the tea shop was there and the bulging bay window with the little lead-lined panes caught my eye. For a moment something stirred in me that I thought had been quietly strangled to death a long time ago by the dreary conventionalities of daily life—a thirst for adventure.

The wooden sign hanging beside the door and swinging gently from its chains in the miserable February wind read:

*The Tea Shop at the Edge of the World*

*Tea and Pastries, Open 9-5, (almost always)*

I opened the door and went in. A bell attached to the door went off as I did. The sound was like a combination of all the bells I’d ever heard or imagined; tinkling bells on the harness of a horse-drawn sleigh, a clanging bell on a buoy rocking back and forth in a choppy sea, a multi-tone chiming doorbell, and, underlying all the layers of sound, the slow, solemn, regular gong of a church bell.

I blinked in surprise. But the melodious cacophony was already fading away and the crackling of a fire and the whistling of a tea kettle became audible in the ensuing quiet.

The inside of the shop was small, but it felt safe and cozy rather than cramped. The left side of the room was taken up by a counter and a display case with cakes and other baked goods. The wall to my right contained a fireplace and all the remaining space was taken up by little round tables each with two or three chairs.
There were only two other people in the shop: a man sitting at the table in the furthest corner and a woman standing next to his table, talking to him. They both turned to look at me as I stood uncomfortably on the doorstep.

But then the woman bustled over to me in a flutter of apron strings and lace with an irresistibly warm and friendly smile on her face. She was short, wide and round, with a short, wide, and round face and she reminded me of my Great-Aunt Mary Alice.

“Welcome, welcome, my dear! I’m so glad you found us!” She said, seizing my hand. “I’m Madame Toukay. I hope we can get you what you’re looking for.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I didn’t mean to buy anything. I just came in to get out of the sleet.”

Madame Toukay stopped smiling and gave me an earnest stare, but it was a kindly look. “You didn’t know about this shop before you came in?”

I shook my head.

“How fascinating!” A smile wreathed her face again, “Well, dear, you’d get soaked if you went back out in that weather. And it’s a slow time for us right now. You won’t be in the way. You sit down here and I’ll get you a cup of tea while you wait for the storm to pass. Who knows, you might enjoy trying something new.” She pulled out a chair from one of the tables.

That sense of adventure that had been awakened in me by the quaint appearance of the shop was growing stronger by the moment. I sat down in the chair and surveyed the room as she bustled back behind the counter. It was decorated with a hodgepodge of different time periods, an interior designer’s nightmare, but the effect, like that of the many bells, was strangely harmonious.

There were delicate Edwardian tea tables, a Grecian couch in one corner, curtains of Flemish lace, an Andy Warhol print in an ornate Victorian frame on one wall and, above the fireplace, an impressionistic painting that looked like it could have been a Van Gogh.

Behind the counter (where Madame Toukay was pouring me a cup of tea from a huge silver tea urn) there was a long wooden rack on the wall with a great variety of teacups hanging
from pegs. There were flowery china cups that looked like something Great Aunt Mary Alice actually would have had in her dining room cabinets, strange square cement mugs the like of which I’d never seen before, wooden beer steins, small bowl-shaped sake cups, and no two teacups were alike.

I looked over at the man who had been talking to the woman when I first came in. He was sipping his tea while reading a glossy travel brochure. Looking more closely at him I realized that he was dressed in a suit that was straight from the 1920s--white pants with flawlessly pressed creases, a red jacket with white pinstripes and neatly tied black bow tie. I was wondering where on earth he had found such a perfect vintage outfit when he looked up from his teacup. Our eyes met and I hurriedly looked away.

“Here you go, dear,” Madame Toukay bustled out from behind the counter with a glossy red ceramic cup and saucer and put it in front of me, “It’s my special tea.” She started laughing and after a minute I caught the pun she had made and chuckled.

“What kind of tea is it?” I asked, dropping in a spoonful of sugar from the sugar bowl and stirring.

“Taste and see.” Madame Toukay said with a smile, sitting down at the chair across from me. I took a sip. The hot liquid touched my tongue in an explosion of flavor and instantly I was wrapped in a memory...six years old again, sitting astride the branch of a tree fearlessly waving a stick at a horde of imaginary pirate foes. No scurvy rabble would ever take my good ship Sycamore from me!

I laughed aloud, surprised by the vividness of a memory that I hadn’t thought of in years.

“Good stuff, isn’t it? It’s a special blend of mine,” Madame Toukay beamed at me, “I call it Audentia. It’s very good for bringing the spirit of adventure back in those who have lost it.”

“Like me?” I asked, slightly insulted at the implication. She laughed at the expression on my face.
“Don’t take offence, dear. Most of our customers come here specifically for adventure, but those who don’t, like you, still have that urge somewhere deep down. They just need a little help realizing it.”

I thought of that thrill of courage I had felt when looking at the shop from the outside, but then I looked around the inside of the shop a little doubtfully. Eccentric it might be, but it felt like a haven of peace and quiet, not a place where adventures happened.

“People come to a tea shop for adventure?” I asked, “They must lead pretty boring lives.”

Realizing that sounded a little rude, I bit my tongue, but Madame Toukay didn’t seem offended.

“Oh bless you, they don’t have the adventures in here. What a thought. No, this tea shop is the doorway to all the adventures you can dream of.”

I looked at her suspiciously. “Are you talking about one of those life lessons where I learn that when I walk out the door I realize everything’s an adventure if you look at it the right way?”

Again, as soon as I said it, I felt a twinge of fear that I had been a bit too rude but Madame Toukay was unperturbed.

“Don’t worry,” She said, walking to the door, “I meant exactly what I said. This is literally a doorway to adventure.”

She pulled open the door and I gasped in amazement. The gentleman with the travel brochure in the corner, who had been absorbed in his own business up till now, looked up and gave an impressed smile from under his neatly trimmed little mustache.

Outside the door of the tea shop, instead of the sleety, rain-lashed street lined with houses that I had left behind ten minutes ago, stretched a vast galaxy in a swirl of purple and blue, studded with thousands of pinpoint stars.
I stared in wonder until Madame Toukay shut the door and she smiled at my bemusement. "It is called the ‘Tea Shop at the Edge of the World,’ you know. Not just a fanciful name. You can go in pretty much any direction you want from here."

“Quite a spectacular view,” The man in the corner said, speaking for the first time as he pushed his chair back and stood up, “Though I would not advise going on an adventure out there without some sort of artificial breathing apparatus.” He had a British accent. “Some sort of pressurizer too, I would imagine.”

“Yes, as well as a few other things.” Madame Toukay said, with a chuckle, “Don’t worry Charles, they will invent those eventually—a few decades after your time though, if I remember correctly. Now then, are you ready to decide?”

“Yes, I do believe I am,” he said. She trundled over to his side to look at the travel brochure he was holding.

I took another sip of tea as they talked. For a moment I was wrapped in a memory of diving off a cliff into an abandoned quarry full of crystal clear water, eyes tightly shut, the ice cold water an exhilarating shock as I plunged into the cerulean blue depths.

“A very interesting choice!” I heard Madame Toukay say, jarring me from my memory. I opened my eyes to see Charles turn a little pink and smooth his mustache self-consciously.

“I am a great admirer of Miss Austen,” he said, “And one of my dreams has always been to meet her in person.”

“And so you shall.” Madame Toukay opened the door and stepped to the side, holding it open for Charles as he picked his white straw boater hat up off the table and put it on, adjusting it at a jaunty angle. I craned my neck to see out the door, curious as to what kind of scene would meet my eye.

A horse-drawn carriage rattled past in a clatter of hooves on cobblestones. Once it passed, I could see groups of ladies in long muslin dresses walking past and men in cravats
and suit jackets with tails. The shop was filled with the sound of bustle and conversation. It looked almost like a BBC period drama but more real.

Charles tipped his hat to us and stepped out into the street. Madame Toukay waved her hand encouragingly at him and he shut the door behind him. In comparison with the hubbub of the street, the tea shop seemed even quieter than it had before.

“Now then, dear,” Madame Toukay said to me, “Shall I bring you some brochures or travel books? There are many, many times and places to choose from.”

I thought for a moment, “You know what, that’s okay. I think I’ll take whatever adventure the tea shop gives me.”

She cocked her head at me, “Are you sure? If you step out that door without deciding where you want to go, you will certainly get an adventure but you might end up anywhere and anywhen.”

I shrugged. “I’m feeling adventurous. That’s what this shop is for, isn’t it? And if I can really get to any time and place through that door, there are really too many to choose from. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“I knew there was a reason you found this shop.” Madame Toukay said with a warm smile, “No one ever walks in who doesn’t have that spark of the spirit of adventure in them somewhere. Well then, good luck, dear. When you finish, you’ll have to come back and tell me all about it. You know where to find us now.”

Suddenly feeling very excited, I got up and went to the door. As I laid my hand upon the knob, I stopped and looked over my shoulder at Madame Toukay.

She smiled encouragingly. “Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, I’m ready!” I opened the door and stepped through the doorway into the adventure beyond.