



tea drops

short stories by
Adam Buczek

Tea Drops

*Short stories with tea
in the background by
Adam Buczek*

Thanks to George & Lou for their time

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Drinking tea is about so much more than simply enjoying a refreshing beverage. Throughout the centuries the humble cup of tea has been the cornerstone of social ceremonies the world over. Tea is an opportunity to meet and exchange stories. It's a chance to revive one's social skills and over the years, 'dropping in for a cup of tea' has become a subtext for spreading news or sharing some juicy gossip. Major social secrets have been safely broadcast across countless tea parties, establishing the rules of our society. So you could say that it's down to the humble cup of tea that we have all become more sociable.

Tea has caused wars, influenced industrial revolution, was a currency in many countries and a luxury in few, was smuggled, pressed, steeped, powdered and taxed. Tea has played a huge role in our history.

'Tea Drops' are short tea stories, where the facts about tea ceremonies and tea history are placed in a fictional context, to present different kinds of tea drinking. To deliver a reason to drop in for tea and share a story.

主人
TEA MASTERS





It is said that when the country was under the dominion of the Qin Dynasty, Master Lao-tzu decided to take his leave of the world of people. Whilst travelling through the mountains, he saw the moon bright over Han Pass and, on the eighth day, found himself weary from the journey in front of Yin Hsi's hut. Yin Hsi told him that he was a customs inspector who had lived in these mountains for a very long time without seeing many travellers. He offered the traveller "the froth of liquid jade" as Master Lao-tzu later described the tea in the writings he began, with Yin Hsi's encouragement, that very night. Thus "the way of life" was born – the ancient ritual of welcoming strangers in honour of Yin's generosity.

At this point, Master Lu Yu stopped his story to prepare some one leaf tea. He placed a single curled leaf resembling a small stick into a small pitcher, then poured the hot

water, shook it for a while and emptied it onto the tea tray. After he had poured tea into the translucent white cups, the company proceeded to taste it with the liveliest appreciation. Just three fingers were permitted to touch each cup. The women pointed their remaining fingers away from their body like phoenixes; the men held theirs closed in the shape of dragons. After the second cup had been poured, Master Lu continued his story:

In return for learning this custom, Master Lao-tzu told Yin Hsi the story of how monkeys once opposed the forces of nature:

“At the foot of Mount Tai lived two people: a man and his wife. It was such a long time ago that they had no knowledge of how to cultivate grain. To survive they picked fruits from the forest and fished in the river. One autumn, they were collecting food as usual – the man in the river and his wife in the forest looking for wild mushrooms and berries. When they returned to their dwelling they realised that they did not have enough food to survive the coming winter. So they decided to leave and look for food elsewhere. After travelling for a very long time, they grew tired and had run out of food. As a result, they started to argue, blaming each other for their misfortune. An old man who was picking herbs nearby heard loud voices. When he approached, they were so tired they could no longer speak. He took them into his hut and treated them with a drink that they thought was an “elixir of life”. When they asked who he was and what the drink was, they heard this story:

“I am Shennong, some call me the Divine Farmer. I teach people how to cultivate plants, pick herbs and preserve food. I have tested many plants to learn their purpose. One day I was poisoned seventy times and all I had left was some water which I put on the fire. While I was awaiting certain death, a couple of monkeys jumped onto a small tree nearby and looked at me helplessly. When they jumped away, a few leaves from the tree fell into my pot of hot water. I drank it and, a short while later, I was cured and rejuvenated.”

Later that same autumn, the couple found shelter nearby and started learning agriculture and medicine from the Divine Farmer. “

Master Lao-tzu left Yin Hsi and journeyed further. Later he became known for his sayings called the Tao Te Ching and for Taoism inspired by his humble roamings.

At that moment, Master Lu Yu finished the story and emptied the final pot of tea. He filled the pot once more with hot water but, this time, with no tea. Then he turned it around with his index finger against the pot's foot to empty it onto the tea tray. After he had collected all the wooden saucers, he poured the remaining hot water from the pitcher into each cup. Using tea-tweezers he turned the cups upside down on the bamboo slatted tea tray and the water slowly found its way out through the base beneath. The ceremony was complete.

A vintage-style room with a window, a wooden chair, and a bed. The window is framed by light-colored curtains and looks out onto a green landscape. The room has a warm, aged atmosphere with wooden paneling and a bed in the foreground.

SETTLINGS



She put on the samovar. That old Russian piece of steel junk. She wouldn't use anything else, though, because she'd come here with the others. Alone. After the Vistula Action. Her brother, like the rest, was killed when he refused to relocate. "Lithuania, my country! You are like good health. How much one should prize you, he only can tell, who has lost you..." It's like a permanent scar on their bodies, our minds. The samovar was all she had kept, all she wanted to remember. We spoke with silence, humbled over paper-thin tea-glasses as she kept playing the same record over and over again: despairing violins, Shostakovitch. Once in a while, she would take the pot of tea essence and refill our glasses, measuring the strength almost unconsciously, as if she'd never made a mistake. This samovar had probably survived so long simply because there were never enough guests. She would have boiled it to death if she'd had the chance.

Thinking it over, I started to believe that she had finished him off to get the house. Could it really be a coincidence? This odd, secret marriage came a couple of months later. How old was she? 66? But there's always a catch. This time it was his son abroad. And now? Why has the poor old man given her his entire pension, for ever! Another tea. She's got a nerve. Grandmas are supposed to bake biscuits, make tea, nothing more. I had hoped to share her passion for something else. But what? I looked at Ivona and knew it was time to leave the old lady to her own mysterious business. Although Ivona liked coming here, she wouldn't want to stay too long. Too calm, too empty and too much of nothing, as she would say, however cathartic.

Our steps were marking silence with the soft crunch of snow under our boots. The garden was covered in a blanket of white fluff. There were crows everywhere, as far as the horizon. God, it was cold, as always and like never before at the same time. I couldn't start the car. As usual. Pushing it was as difficult as always. They should start teaching that in schools. Who needs to know how to shoot with an airgun? Knowing how to push cars properly in a deep snow, that would make us better people. We always have to learn the hard way. She passed me a cigarette as we made our way through the white void of mid January. Watching others pushing their cars.

I dropped her off at the college gates where she was giving another lecture, about polysyllabics or something even dustier. I went home to continue staring at the blank page, calling on my beloved, crystal-clear vodka for inspiration. For some reason I felt that she had had too many lectures recently. It wasn't reflected in her salary which made it even more intriguing. Part-time students usually paid more. If there was someone else, I was too scared to admit how intrigued I would be. The best subject I could probably find to write about. Instead I drove to a tea place where she used to go and read. Whenever she was at home, I pretended to be busy, hitting the typewriter keys in a burst of inspiration that was bound to disturb her. She said there was only one thing I couldn't guarantee to give her, and that was silence. I am not sure what I had done to make her think like that.

I always lingered for a while watching the world inside before I gate-crashed the place. As if there was a pinch of heroism in it. Not at all, just a boring tea place. I admit I didn't like the tea. The aftertaste wasn't that compelling. She used to say that I had washed away my senses with vodka and all I had left was a sense of humour. That tragic and distant participation in reality. Making as many difficult choices as possible so that, later, I could brag to myself that it was me that Sartre was writing about. This place was always half full with strange people who were not even snobs, perhaps still glad that Hlasko couldn't come back to fix the country with even

more vodka and wood. I could imagine appreciating the wine, but tea? Give me a break. The whole country grew up with black granulated Assam or Ceylon. The better kind was smuggled, by appointment, from the Queen of England's royal pantry. Why would they think they knew anything about it, now? Dear God! Fifty years of darkness under the red flag left them convinced that tea grows in Britain. If it was true, God forbid. That would probably mean no Shakespeare and no vodka. Ten years ago, places like this were non-existent, now everyone was trying to get some fresh western air. The round table of bald and fat Lancelots had opened the windows and made the whole country a bit draughty. Ironically enough it was actually eastern air that brought the tea but nobody, of course, knew that. The best porcelain is from China and the best tea is from Great Britain.

Then she came in. Took the table in a corner, close to the window. Somehow she could read better in sunlight than in tungsten. She ordered a pot of tea. Interestingly enough, they don't serve it in tea glasses here, only in those porcelain cups on small porcelain saucers. Glasses are already old fashioned. Simply because they remind us of all that smouch we used to brew, with the bitter aftertaste of tea settlings and powerlessness. The new kinds deserve better, or at least different. My grandma's samovar would stop working if she ever found out. The Russian caravan would stop too. That's the only kind of tea that made me curious. Too late. When tchai got its

name I wasn't around. She's always said that I know too much about tea for someone who didn't give a damn. It is more about language than tea, I think. Russians have tchai simply because of the route it followed from China. North China equals tchai, hence caravans. South China equals te, or was it ta? Intriguing enough, we seem to be the only nation calling it herbata. We all learn Latin at some point and one can figure out for yourself that herba and te make a perfect match. But how come we're the only people who think of it as a herb?

This was the first time I had seen her writing. She would usually write while I was asleep and had stopped making all that hullabaloo. I had the irritating feeling that she could write me under the table. Maybe it was true and I was actually meant to be a taxi driver for the rest of my life. Listening to the radio all day long. Knowing almost everything about the Russian army taking leave of our country, once and for all. Taking copper pipes and radiators, as if returning home with the spoils of war: central heating. Ironic spoils of a cold war! We all just wanted to get it over with. I couldn't. I was captivated. I went in. Sat down. Looked at her. And then she stood up, passed me this piece of paper and left. I'd be better off reading it on my own. I thought I understood. She was damn right although it wasn't the best place to do it. I had to pay for the broken tea pot and clean the floor. It actually calmed me down a lot, made me postpone my plan of killing her. God! How could she? It was a mistake,

that's what she wrote. Damn right it was. And what am I supposed to do with it? Get over it? A total stranger bumped into her and now I am to be held responsible for bringing up this mistake? Love is one thing and somebody else's child another. Infidelity as love? That is elementary bullshit. She knew that.

I went home and found her skilfully peeling a slice of lemon to stop the tea tasting bitter. She was obviously in bad shape, and had just finished crying. I was in even worse shape. We sat opposite each other, she with the lemon sinking in her tea, me sinking in my bottle of shots. This time, I confess, I needed a few. To remain sane. She obviously couldn't explain how it had all happened. I wasn't too worried about 'when', since it was done, I just couldn't grasp the 'why'. She said she had written it all down and now it was up to me. We still had about six months before the real trouble would start. She stood up and I stayed at the kitchen table to think it over. I started drinking it over. By the time I saw the bottom of the bottle, I had stopped thinking over anything.

The next day was a Cobbler's Monday. Couldn't be worse. My car started though. Five trips to the opposite sides of the city and I fell asleep on my way home. I woke up in a snowdrift. Thank God for winter. I needed a nap but not like that. I couldn't be a fully irresponsible drinker. It requires way too much effort. I slept it off later. At breakfast, the letter reminded me that I might continue

to make progress in bumping into snowdrifts. In hope, perhaps, of a less prosaic sleep.

The next week wasn't that snowy and, as a last resort, I was about to head for the samovar. Being such a failure in her eyes, this would probably cost me my inheritance. So I decided to keep driving, double shifts, double the bitterness of drunken nighthawks. From time to time I would drive to a small wood to smoke half a packet of cigarettes until morning. Then the bloody flute would wake me up. It was summer again.

When I was a bit shorter, they used to have it on the radio as well. One of those evergreens. Like plastic flowers. Plus news on the current power supply and the gas pressure being delivered to homes. Just after the news. And then of course, there was "Summer with the radio", when thousands of lucky car owners were heading to the seaside from the south and vice versa. Somehow they generated that strange demand for announcements. Radios acted like car phones. If someone left the south with 9 hours to go until they saw the beach, they might have heard this message: "Fiat 125, registration number: WBM5218 attention please. Your family is asking for your immediate return home." or "Have a pleasant journey from grandma". And I would listen to all of it. I still remember the gas pressure and power supply. And then it came. I think it was actually an oboe, playing a tune that was as recognizable as an air raid warning and,

unlike the siren, adored all over the country. The whole of summer belonged to the radio. All I remember now is the gas pressure news, which we needed for our recipes.

Ingredients: one working radio, granulated tea, preferably assam, 250ml cold water, tea glass and a kettle.

Method: in the morning listen to Radio 1 for info on gas pressure. If OK, stand in queue for tea or borrow from neighbour (if any left to borrow from). Boil the water. Then think if you have any tea glasses left. They are always too thin for enough to survive in the cupboard. So try not to touch them with the neck of a bottle when pouring vodka. Then again, if you are using tea glasses for vodka, why worry about the social etiquette? May as well drink it straight from the bottle.

Vodka, tea glasses, spirit vinegar and summer with the radio. The mantra of a happy childhood.

My memories acted as a kind of dangerous trigger. I had another moment of bravery: I thought I could drink my mirror image under the table. At the end, we were even, apart from the fact that I was the one who had to clean up afterwards. I gave in and made my first tea. With lemon. It wasn't that bad after all. I think it will always remind me of nothing, other than her.



Keshkusha



Praise be to Allah! Know, O thou Ifrit, that in days of yore and in ages long gone before, a King called Yunan reigned over the city of Fars in the land of the Roum... the storyteller's words faded into the crowd's clamour as Abdul walked away to meddle in another part of the square. He had been wandering around the Petit Socco since early morning, trying to sell "something special", stealing dates from stalls and generally dreaming. It wasn't easy for him to be a pimp's apprentice while keeping his secret dream of being a merchant alive. To have his own stall, selling anything at all, would put an end to his dependence. He wasn't like most of his peers; he wanted a good job, not to get mixed up in murky business.

He walked dismally towards the port, where he used to sit and watch goods being unloaded. Occasionally

he would help merchants with their shady deals with longshoremen to raise the wind. Quite often they would drive him away. His well-known occupation didn't encourage them to trust him. He knew that even his quick wits were not enough. Abdul was just a street arab brought up with street walkers and looters. He realised it very well, even in his bones.

Recently though, times had been getting better. He was seeing more ships docking with different ensigns. The crowds were getting bigger and he felt safer approaching the different longshoremen. Slowly he got to know his way around the docks. And it was just then, at the beginning of autumn 1854, that he met the Englishmen. He actually bumped into them while he was running with a message that never got delivered. They were standing around a crate of dark leaves, shouting at each other and on the point of exchanging blows when Abdul appeared. He ran straight into the chest, breaking it into pieces. He knew that, if he didn't act smart, he wouldn't survive once they'd recovered from their initial bewilderment. Although he suspected that he had fallen into the middle of some strange business, he still hoped to make something out of it. He needed to offer them the best hospitality he could afford. Sailors' needs were never that sophisticated and a couple ounces of hashish and some female company usually did the job. Abdul was curious about the cargo though. He had never seen anything like it. Running into the crate gave him more

than a close look but he still couldn't figure out what it was. He expected people to smuggle drugs into Tangier, it was the best place for it. He knew almost everything about what had been delivered and when and who the beneficiary was. If he found out who this cargo was intended for, the information could make a big difference to his future. He kept them company.

That night he learned that, for some reason, the ship has been refused docking in northern Europe. When the voyage then continued for a day longer than intended, the ship's pilot lost his head, literally, by the captain's hand. They were supposed to unload somewhere in Europe where demand was high for whatever they were carrying. Especially since, apparently, it wasn't an official shipment from China. Abdul's gift for recognizing opportunities hadn't made him rich yet but he kept trying and made a deal with them: if they told him what the cargo was that they were fighting over, he would sell it for them. He regretted it as soon as they started to explain. It turned out to be a plant, similar to the Arabs' mint, which they brew with sugar and drink. It was dark green, dried and smelled like rotten leaves. They called it tee. He couldn't imagine anybody here drinking it. At first, he didn't want to try it but, when he brewed some of his mint, they forced him to mix theirs with it. He knew his head was in danger and thought that was the circumstance that made him enjoy this drink. After a few glasses he suddenly became rather excited and, with nothing to lose

but his head, ran into the city. He had just remembered some rumours about Abderrahmane's court which had something to do with something English. He wasn't sure what or whether it was at all helpful, so decided to add some 'facts' of his own about the King's new fad. Apparently, Abderrahmane was mixing the tee with his usual mint brew and soon it would become a national custom.

Over the next couple of days, Abdul came to realise that the trust he commanded in port was worth nothing after all. Oddly enough, every time he mentioned what he had to sell and that it didn't seem to be illegal, they advised him to stop wasting their time. Mentioning the King was even more irrelevant. Nobody was interested in legal goods.

At the end of the week, he felt like he had already lost his head. The Englishmen were very upset and the only person they could rely on or vent their frustration on was Abdul. He knew the language and the city but obviously he didn't know much about trading. The problem then escalated when the captain looked closer into the cargo. Every chest was only half full compared to when they left China. The captain was sure that the rest of the crew were cheating him. And, clearly, Abdul had to know something about it because, without his help, they couldn't sell it.

A week had passed, half of the load had apparently disappeared and nobody in the whole of Tangier even wanted to think about drinking it. The captain was permanently drunk and frustrated and decided to leave Tangier the following day, decapitating Abdul as a farewell gesture. It was time for Abdul to run away but he had his pride. He had given his word. He needed a miracle and one happened. He heard the sound of cannons. Iftar had been announced, the end of Ramadan. He saw people preparing feasts in the streets. He didn't feel like celebrating just yet but he was hungry. He joined some porters who invited him to eat with them and another miracle happened. They had just stolen some crates and weren't sure what was inside. When they opened them, they were full of pots, cups and plates carrying the same crests he had seen on the English smugglers' ship. The captain had drunk rum from similar cups. Abdul started putting the various clues together. The rumours he had heard and elaborated were about the visit of the English Queen at the end of Ramadan. It looked as if these two porters had purloined some of the Queen's goods and it seemed that she was bringing quite a lot of these 'tee' sets. The story he had made up was about to become reality. This time, Allah was on his side.

Convincing the captain to postpone his execution required a few scratches and bruises. He managed to do so and on the next day he ran through the city like never before. First learning about the arrival of the

Queen and then about the new drink that obviously had been smuggled out of the court. Rumours were, even for Abdul, a bit exaggerated, that there was a miraculous cure and some sort of magic utensils that keep liquids warm and are somehow translucent and extremely smooth, as if water had been flowing on them for ages. He knew straight away what was at stake and that being a retailer in this situation would be a waste of time. He started approaching spice merchants with a quite new story and everybody seemed to believe it. That he had a spy in a court who let him smuggle out vast amounts of this new 'spice' together with some of these translucent cups. Less legal, the same goods became very popular and, 'supported' by the very Abderrahmane, saved Abdul's head and the captain's pride. In a very short time the whole city was tasting a bit of royal life that was even tastier considering Abdul's story. Perhaps because of the natural respect due to the effort of acquiring the goods, local merchants appreciated Abdul's tea. When official shipments arrived for the king, there were already quite a few popular tea merchants producing perfect keshkushas.

A vintage typewriter is the central focus of the image, positioned in the lower half. It is a dark-colored machine with a sheet of paper in its carriage. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a backdrop, with a subtle pattern of light-colored lines. The overall lighting is dim, creating a moody and atmospheric scene.

A TALE
OF THREE SISTERS



It's not that difficult to begin this story. After all, one cannot forget one's own mother's funeral. The rain was pouring onto her coffin with a sound like millions of tiny fingers. I stood there adding my own tears to this monotonous symphony of grief. When I was a child she used to tell me that angels weeping made the rain. Now they had a good reason to cry their heads off.

Back then, I didn't know most of the people who were gathered around her grave, some even crying. We never had the money to afford such an event and now, out of nowhere, came this big funeral with all these strange people who must have been family. They were indeed.

"Clarice?" I remember my astonishment when I heard this voice from behind me, clearly calling my name.

“Yes”, I answered although I wasn’t in the mood for conversation. Still I was quite intrigued.

“We didn’t have the opportunity to meet.”

“No, I’m sorry, I am still quite confused.”

“No. I am sorry. I owe you an explanation. Would you mind if we talked in rather drier circumstances?”

His motorcar took us to Hampstead where we were served tea and scones. From then on, it all went very fast. I soon realised that I wasn’t left alone after all; although I’d just lost my mother, I had found myself a new family. The voice turned out to be my mother’s brother-in-law, with the tawny name of Brinley. He was married, my God!, to my mother’s sister. This was too much for one day and I fainted. It was already dark when I woke up. The smell of peppermint was everywhere; they must have used it to revive me. Tea with liquorice helped me to meet one more family member. My mother’s sister was distractingly pretty and seemed incapable of taking anything seriously. If the resemblance had been even a hair less perfect, I wouldn’t have believed it. In fact, she was her mirror image, the same but completely different. The two of them invited me to stay for a while at their house in the country. I felt that I couldn’t survive my mother’s death and I was incapable of holding down any job at the moment, so I nodded in answer.

Straight after my arrival, I met Lady Wetherby, who was rather old and a little pompous. She was like a radio, broadcasting local news, at her private natters. She would invite one person at a time only because she preferred to avoid crowds. Then she would start her interrogation. Her knowledge was vast and served her well when she wanted to apply, very precisely I must say, social pressure in her favour. I probably wasn't her best subject yet; I was too new here and didn't know a thing about current affairs. She gave me a few clues about Martha, who had died in an accident a long time ago; she was my uncle's first wife. Unfortunately I wasn't paying too much attention. I would rather have heard more about my mother and why she'd never told me about the rest of the family. When she said she wouldn't know, she was lying.

I also recall a tough lesson Lady Wetherby gave me in regard to my tea. When she saw me reach for the milk, she delivered quite a lecture about how inappropriate it was to apply such common behaviour to her porcelain. She explained that the lower classes would put the milk in first so as not to risk cracking their cups with the hot water. Her teacups were made of the finest china and gave much finer control over the colour of the tea. I must admit that I left very embarrassed.

My Aunt Cecil wasn't any help either. At first, I thought she was completely incompetent but then I realised she was quite the opposite. She just gave that

impression in public; in private she was very smart. I started to be more suspicious than curious. When she appeared at afternoon tea with Lady Wetherby, I felt a tension between the two women. Inside I felt that they were speaking about me, about something that was worrying Cecil. I'd met Beardsley there and he seemed very friendly. He was a sort of gardener-gamekeeper, with his hands always full of work he knew everyone. After a few minutes of conversation, he had drawn me a social map of the surrounding area. I think I spoke to a few other people and then, all of a sudden, I remember sitting with just the other women in the orangery. There I listened to Lady Wetherby recalling afternoon tea at the Ritz, the only place where young women were allowed to go alone. Interestingly enough, she mentioned being there with Martha few times before she married my uncle Brinley. I felt an irresistible urge to ask him a few more questions but he didn't turn up again for a couple of days. By then, I had started being a bit nosey and that's how I discovered the letter. My mother must have sent it just hours before she'd passed away. She was asking Cecil to take care of me when she was gone! Oh my dear, it was quite a disappointment. It looked like only my uncle considered me as a member of the family. Anyway, the letter was very difficult to understand. They clearly had some secrets and Cecil owed my mother something. I'd rather say she owed me. I couldn't speak to anybody about the letter which made it very difficult. I soon realised how alienated and alone I was there.

It didn't take long to discover that Martha died in very suspicious circumstances. She and Cecil were on a rowing boat when it capsized. They both ended up in the water and Martha didn't make it. I found out all this from my uncle's letters which he kept hidden in his tea cabinet. Somehow, the whole story was getting more and more interesting. Not many people would speak to me about the past. Cecil was ignoring my questions even more than my presence, and uncle Brinley, after being asked the first time, got pretty upset. A few days later, I met his friend, Alvin, who was staying with us for a while. He had supposedly made a fortune smuggling tea during the Opium Wars and, although very old, still had a bad reputation. He shed some light on my family's past though, which raised even more suspicions. He had been present on the day of Martha's death. He was surprised that Cecil wasn't as wet as she should be and just half of her dress was wet, while her top and her hair were perfectly dry. He didn't beat about the bush. He thought Cecil had murdered Martha for her husband. He said that these suspicions had almost ended his friendship with Brinley, however true they might have been. Apparently it was common knowledge that Cecil and Martha did not like each other as sisters should and Cecil was making a lot of effort to avoid any kind of scandal. She was spreading strange rumours, that she had had an affair with Brinley and that Martha was unable to have children. Fortunately she wasn't successful and merely got herself a bad name.

These were the last words I heard from Alvin.

Afterwards, he disappeared for a few days and was later found dead in the lake. Everybody considered it an unfortunate accident. Alvin was old and it wasn't difficult to slip into the water considering the last few days of rain. I was terrified. The only person who was honest with me had ended up dead and I couldn't believe that he hadn't been murdered. I went to the manor farm where Beardsley lived. He had found Alvin when he went fishing. I got there in time for high tea. I had never experienced such a vigorous gathering. The tea was strong enough to trot a mouse on and the whole table was weighed down under an impressive array of food including shrimps, pies, hams, cheese and I think I even saw a jug of kippers. The whole family was bidding the day farewell. It was that evening that the Beardsleys told me about my mother. She had left after Martha's accident and no one had ever mentioned her again. They both found it difficult to tell me that there had been someone else on that boat. They clearly didn't want to speak about it anymore so I had to bite my tongue and enjoy this peculiar supper.

After Alvin's funeral I spent a few days trying to understand who was who in my family and what else they were hiding from me. I was quite sure back then that my uncle was actually my father, that my mother had had a child with him and, to avoid scandal, then had to leave. But that wouldn't account for Martha's accident and other vagueness. Soon the time came for the first summer afternoon tea. I had been told that, here, this was

more like a New Year celebration than a mere tea. There was, of course, champagne, marble and wicked and my favourite Madeira cake. I already knew that it wouldn't be possible to avoid Lady Wetherby's tea lecture. This time she explained how Harold Knox had attempted to increase his tea sales in the 1830's by naming, without his consent, a blend of Indian teas and an extract from peel of bergamot after Earl Grey, the then Prime Minister. To advertise it, he then made up a story that the recipe had been a diplomatic perquisite from an Indian rajah rescued from a tiger by Grey's men. It turned out to be a quite profitable invention and historically significant. I found these stories about tea quite odd and unnecessary but then I was told that it was a game that she played with Alvin. It was her way of reminding him, rather eloquently, where his fortune came from. Now that he was dead, nobody found it any longer amusing.

This time even my uncle made it. I had no choice but to try and clear the air of my suspicions a little. So I asked him 'Are you my father?'. He smiled and Lady Wetherby dropped her cucumber sandwich in surprise. She always seemed to be in the right place at the right time. To my good fortune and disappointment, he told me that I would have been too young. He also told me the rest of the story. He and Martha had had a daughter but she had drowned with her in the boat. My mother couldn't cope with the loss and, for some reason, she couldn't cope with Cecil either. So she left and never came back. He said

that Cecil knew about her funeral so though that they had kept in touch somehow even after all these years. He was, of course, sorry that I hadn't had a father and that my mother died so young. He explained that he didn't like to recall his wife's death, as I probably didn't my mother's. I left very embarrassed.

Next morning, we drank a strong breakfast tea blend made by the local tea master while Lady Wetherby helped me to cope with more news. She told me that my previous day's performance had triggered a particular memory and she thought there was something we should talk about. She was brutally honest with me, saying there was a distinct possibility that my uncle was actually my father. The body of Martha's child had never been found and my mother left almost immediately. I must be the same age and she never recalled seeing my mother pregnant. This would explain the letter from my mother to Cecil regarding myself. But then it would imply that my real mother was Martha. Then, all of a sudden, she was trying to convince me that she was related to the 7th Duchess of Bedford who, dying from boredom, had asked for a couple of sandwiches and a cup of tea and thus started the national 4 o'clock tea ritual. That's when I understood that it wasn't a game at all. It was her obsession. I was no longer sure that there was the smallest pinch of truth in anything she was saying about my family.

My uncle wouldn't know the truth anyway so I decided to confront Cecil. I went to her bedroom She

wasn't there but I found something really odd: Alvin's walking stick. It all started to make sense to me. As I left the bedroom with the walking stick in my hand, I bumped into her. She knew that I knew everything by now. Somehow the whole situation seemed ridiculous to me but then I realised the danger I was in. I thought how stupid it would be for me to go there just like that. I couldn't possibly have known until I saw the stick. Alvin was too old and this was his favourite one, I remember him telling me the story of where he got it. I didn't know what to say. She had probably killed my real mother and made her sister leave home. Even her husband didn't know that his daughter now called him uncle. I lost control or maybe I premeditated it in the short time we were preparing to make a move. I pushed her with Alvin's walking stick and she fell without a sound. I stood there for a long time, looking at her lying down the stairs. I haven't told anyone until now. I still call him uncle though and I still have the stick.

Tea Drops is a little book where a few historical tea facts have been put into a fictitious context in order to tell stories about different tea ceremonies and different tea rituals in four significant tea cultures: China, where tea is supposed to originate a few thousand years ago, Eastern Europe where tea arrived overland and, because of that, is called tchai while in Poland it is *herbata*, North Africa, where the mint tea ritual is most significant and, of course, Great Britain, the home of the proper modern tea ceremony, and to whom we all are indebted for shipping tea to our tables.

This book is also intended to accompany a tea set “Drop in”, not as a guide for drinking tea. It is simply about enjoying and sharing stories as you drink.

