Tea Leaves in Fallen Snow

By Kat Joseph

I found it completely by accident, although looking back perhaps that's not true at all. It was midnight of course, that's when the most interesting things always happen and London was slumbering under a blanket of snow. I always write at night and that particular evening I had a frustrating case of writer’s block that wouldn’t budge. Feeling restless I donned my hat, scarf and shapeless old wool jacket and ventured out. I’ve always enjoyed night walking, there is something both tranquil and invigorating about being the only one awake in a normally bustling, loud city. Under the streetlamps snow whirled in little flurries down the streets, tickling across the old looming architecture. London is usually hell in the snow. It turns to a drab grey slush, delaying trains and angering drivers. But that night the snow was fresh and glimmering, only a few fox prints laced its crystalline surface and it had created a beautiful hush over the city.

I wandered out across the bridge towards Vauxhall pausing half way to stare out across the swirling, moody Thames whispering secrets on the wind as if I could ever understand her ancient tongue. As I was lent over the side I heard the soft crunching of footsteps behind me and turned to see a figure approaching. I got a bit of a fright at first only their shape in the darkness was like a villainous hunchback from an old Penny Dreadful novel, but as they came closer the hunch rippled and a pair of bright green eyes shone out at me. A black cat was on the man's shoulder, huddled in against the cold and half tucked into the coat collar, its fur puffed for warmth. The gentleman was wearing an old fashioned but beautiful blue coat, and a lovely (if impractical for the weather) pair of brogue boots with matching blue laces. His hair was chestnut brown contrasting with the cat's deep inky fur. Their eyes however were a near perfect match for his were a beautiful forest green even in the dim lamplight.

He was rummaging in his pockets and appeared to be in deep discussion with the cat, who, thankfully didn’t reply. As he hurried past he dropped something - a glass vial that landed with a *'whumph'* in a snow drift. He didn't notice so I bent down and picked it up. However to my surprise when I stood up to return it he was already at the far end of the bridge. I called out to him but my voice must have been lost in the wind for he turned a corner and was gone as abruptly as he'd appeared.

I looked at the vial and saw it was full of brownish dried leaves and flower buds, unsure of what to do I unstoppered it to examine the contents, giving them a cautionary sniff. Words cannot do it justice but the best way to describe the scent is as though someone had enchanted Spring and distilled her into a scattering of leaves. Sweet pears and honeysuckle intertwined with warm sunshine wafted up around me. I closed my eyes, transported for a moment out of London into a memory of blossoming trees, humming bees and twittering songbirds.

I was brought abruptly back to the present by a small but insistent yowl at my feet closely followed by a bony head that bumped me politely on my shin. The gentleman’s cat sat and looked at me expectantly, tail twitching side to side sweeping a snow angel. By her front paws was a card about the size of my palm. It was a tad soggy from the snow and one corner had indents which I suspect came from feline teeth but the paper was thick and somehow the calligraphy hadn’t bled. It spelt out my name in dark indigo ink with tiny, perfectly detailed gold leaves and flowers coming off it in tendrils and whisps resembling curling steam.

When I looked up the cat had vanished once again like her owner. I turned the card over and saw a miniature, beautiful sketch drawn in the same blue calligraphy with a figure on a bridge. They had on a lumpy looking coat and a scarf that matched mine which I could have sworn fluttered out of the corner of my eye. There was a silhouette of a cat peeping out from behind their legs. As I studied it I noticed tiny inky footsteps led out away from the figure across the bridge and past what I assumed was the station with a line of miniscule trains. My heart leapt with an excitement I hadn’t felt since childhood as I realised I was holding a map.

Without stopping to think of danger or what it could possibly be leading to I ran skittering and stumbling down the slippery path along the route the footprints traced, clutching the card as tightly as I could. Past the station I lost track and found myself before a brick wall that was just above head height. The footsteps on my map seemed to go straight through, carrying on down a winding path with bushes and flowers drawn on either side. I looked for a gate or archway, but after finding nothing I realised I was in for a climb and managed to half scramble/ half heave myself up and over landing with a thump on the other side. I lost the elbow of my coat in the process but barely noticed as I stood up in a moonlit garden. The path looped and curved as promised between bushes brimming with white roses and jasmine whose delicate scent filled the night. There were fewer lamps here, their tops hidden amongst trees creating the effect of warm, glowing leaves and branches amidst the starry sky.

Something changed in me then. Something deep in my bones knew, could feel it in the air itself- magic. The whole place was tingling with it like the hush of anticipation before the curtains open and the orchestra begins. Excitement and trepidation bubbling in me I rounded a corner past a stream with darting silvery fish and came across a huge weeping willow growing out of the cobbles. It was lit with hundreds of what I thought were Christmas lights until one moved and I realised they were luminescent moths. I stood gazing up at their orangey constellations wondering at them dancing their languid waltz until I heard the tinkle of a shop bell and a snippet of muffled laughter from somewhere further up the path. Brushing aside the leafy curtains of willow I found it led to an octagonal building. It was painted the same dark indigo colour as the card’s ink, warm yellow light glowed out of the tall windows which were misted up and figures moved inside and I could hear muffled music and conversation.

Glancing down at the card to check it was the right place I went up to the door and stepped inside where six or seven people were either stood or sat in mismatched antique arm chairs. They sipped cups of tea and were having murmured conversations in various languages, some that I didn’t recognise. An elegant man sat by a window dressed in black with olive skin and wavy dark hair playing chess with an auburn haired woman whose pale skin was covered in botanical tattoos under her sky blue dress.

There were several tables brimming with glass domes containing the most enticing cakes I’ve ever seen with lashings of thick icing, tiny silver stars or fresh flowers decorating them. One was drizzled with honey and crystallised lemon slices whilst another had roasted peanuts and dripped with thick chocolate and caramel. There were fresh wild flowers adorning every spare surface in amongst steaming tea pots of different shapes and sizes. Low golden lights hung above several large exotic looking rugs and names of teas were painted in gold above each window.

Off to the left was a fireplace where I spied my little messenger cat curled up atop a purple cushion next to a saucer of cream. Beside her on an armchair was a wizardly looking old man with a silvery beard. He wore a slightly threadbare paisley velvet outfit in a faded tone of vermillion and a matching round flat topped hat with a gold tassel hanging down. I went over, bending to scratch the cat’s ears, she gave me a rumbling purr and I nodded a greeting to the older gentleman as someone came up behind me. I turned and saw the lovely but impractical brogue boots, looking up and meeting the smiling eyes of the man from the bridge. He had removed his coat and now wore a blue waistcoat with coppery embroidery. “I see you’ve met Ceylon” he said indicating the cat, “I’m Felix, may I take your coat and fetch you some tea?” His voice was warm, spun with a slight accent I couldn’t put my finger on and somehow he felt like coming home to an old friend.

He showed me over to the back of the shop which was stocked with jars upon jars of tea all labelled in that same calligraphy. I read a few that sounded odd amongst the familiar names- there was one called “Dragon’s breath” which had cinnamon sticks, candied cherries and shrunken dried red chillies. It was sat next to another simply labelled “fireflies, Autumn” that had little gold flecks amongst reddish leaves and orange peel.

I returned the vial from my pocket handing it over the counter to Felix and he grinned, thanked me and pulled down a jar labelled “Spring 1830” He tipped the contents into it then picked another whose label was covered by his hand with just the word “Pekoe” visible between his thumb and forefinger. The tea he passed to me tasted of maple smoke bonfires, walnuts, burnt toffee and nutmeg. It was warming and festive, full of boots in fallen leaves and fireworks in air so cold it made your nose red. We sat with a few of the others by Ceylon toasting bread on the fire and spreading butter on it that melted deliciously. We talked for hours. I forget details of the conversation but there were far off lands where Felix got his ingredients and a travelling circus the chess player was in before he met the auburn lady and they ran away together. The wizardly man told us of mapping stars for navigation over the arctic sea where on some evenings you could spot narwhals duelling in the waves.

We left as dawn was breaking, the fire was dying low and the last of us said our thank yous to Felix who handed us our coats as we went out into the waking sun which winked off the melting snow. I walked home feeling renewed and lighter than I had in years, my head full of honey and inspiration. I slept deeply until late the next day, dreaming fantastical dreams of narwhals, circuses and spices.

Time passed and I often tried to find that cobblestoned path or catch the scent of jasmine and roses, leaving my desk and creeping out into the night hoping to hear the footfalls of a man in a blue coat or see a little black shadow trot around the corner.

 It never happened of course. But years later when my Mother had passed away and I was sat, lost in grief with my head in my hands staring at a blank page I heard a muffled mewling outside my door. On the doorstep was a tiny black kitten with mischievous green eyes, I scooped him up and he purred heartily, bumping his chin affectionately up under mine. His fur was soft and smelt of maple smoke bonfires, walnuts, burnt toffee and nutmeg. “Hello, I think I met your mother once, I’ll call you Pekoe I think, let’s put the kettle on shall we? It’s cold out here.”