

## Winter Tea

The snow squeaks beneath my wet, sodden boots as I march uphill through the woods. The naked trees mutter indistinguishable words in their sleep. The ground is whiter here than in town. More like the color of white lace than the soiled, muddy mess of driven-on snow. It dangles on the trees like Christmas ornaments, spiraling in the light.

I break free of the woods as I reach the bald crown of the hill. An old hut sits in disregard, hugging the snow to itself for warmth. It is crumbling like an old gingerbread house that was put together in a hurry, with cracks and crooked walls hiding its beauty. Trudging upwards, I reach the door and push it inwards.

The one-room shack stands empty. I arrived first, it seems. Stumbling to the empty frame of the window, I look at the forsaken china set that stands in the corner. I can't help but remember the first time I saw it. I was nine years old. My family had just moved into town a day ago, and I was convinced I hated it. Racing through the strange forest, tears leaked from the crevices of my eyes, painting my face with hurt and anger. Lost in the memory of home, I wandered up the hill and saw the shack for the first time. With wide eyes and my heart beating in confusion, I pushed in the door, damp with rain and dew, and blanketed in mold. The sight of a girl about my age, sitting on a rumpled blanket and holding up a tea cup like British royalty, left me clutching to the door. For a moment, her startled eyes matched mine. Then she set the cup on its saucer, like a leaf drifts to the ground.

"About time you came. I've been waiting here for ages," she said in a fake accent. "Don't just stand there. Come and have some tea." The girl poured imaginary tea from the brittle porcelain tea pot into a matching cup. Pale lilacs cling to the sides, trailing avocado green vines. Kneeling on the patchwork blanket, I accepted it.

"Oh no, you can't hold it like that!" she exclaimed, fixing my hands to hold only the handle. "See? Now you won't burn yourself." She smiled. "I'm Holly, by the way."

The door rasps behind me, and I am thrust back into reality. Turning, I see my childhood friend standing in the doorway, much like I must have looked the first time we met.

"Hi, Jane," she says, offering me a tentative smile. All I can do is stare at her. I had half expected-and hoped-that she would not come. She walks over and picks up a cup, brushing off

years of solitude from its surface, before setting it down again. "I'm glad you came. I wasn't sure you would."

I am about to say the same, but the words get stuck in my throat, like a cough drop I swallowed too soon. I wish I hadn't come. But now the pause has stretched out too long, and I have to say something. "I didn't think you would come either, Holly."

She laughs, a sound I used to love before I grew to hate it. It made me feel invisible.

"You, at least, have an excuse, though," I say, if only to make her stop. "Living in another state typically makes it harder for you to get here than me. This is practically my backyard, after all."

"Yes, but I have too--" she starts to reply, before cutting herself off. She stares at the ground, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. I know what she was going to say, but pretend like I don't notice. The distance between us stands silenced by years of neglect.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" I ask. "It's too cold to just stand here."

Holly just nods, stuffing her gloved hands deeper into her pockets. She looks relieved to change the subject. We leave the hut behind and wander through our old childhood playground, not speaking. The trees are waking now, groaning, stretching and trying to reach for the sky, just like Holly and I used to do. Now that we are too old to climb trees, it makes it harder.

"Why did you want to meet out here?" I grumble. "Couldn't we have just gone out for some coffee or something? Where it isn't snowing?"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess so. It never occurred to me. It only seemed right to come back here, like it would make this easier," she replies. Stopping to look at me, Holly grabs my hand, and pulls me around to face her. "Don't you remember those days?" she asks. "How much fun we had together?"

I study the sky carefully above me. The clouds, normally small white dots against the periwinkle blue, have taken over the whole sky, hogging the space selfishly to themselves. Their rough textures are riddled with bumps and ridges, forming a maze. I guess I am the mouse, following merely the scent of cheese in a desperate attempt to reach the edge.

"Of course I remember," I say carefully "I just don't know how much you've forgotten." I watch her expression closely. Although my words come out loosely, like a handful of pennies from a large jar, I can't help biting my nails.

She looks at me with glazed eyes, as if seeing me as the nine year old girl I used to be. I turn away quickly, and keep walking. Under her gaze, I feel naked and small. It wasn't always like this. When we were growing up as neighbors, Holly and I were best friends. We would lose ourselves in the forest, with countless hours filled with tea parties and make believe. One summer, when I was about thirteen, I tried to climb to the top of a tree. We weren't really supposed to go that high, but I wanted to know what it felt like to be a bird. I wanted to be able to reach up, and hold the sky in the palm of my hand. It turned out that I was afraid of heights, though, and I never made it all the way. Climbing back down, I fell and broke my leg. Holly stayed inside with me every day until my leg healed. In those days, Holly made me feel strong.

"I haven't forgotten any of it, Jane," she calls after me. "I'm sorry."

I pretend not to hear. I walk faster now, determined to lose Holly, but she doesn't follow me. The wind pushes the trees closer to me, trapping me and pushing me even deeper into the maze. I can feel them condemning me. I shouldn't care about the past. I should smile, and pretend like it is nothing. But I can't.

Holly's family moved when she was seventeen. She gave me the tea set, but the cups and tea pot weren't the same sitting on my shelf. So I kept them in the shack where they belonged, right next to my memories. Now their perfect round corners are chipping, and the vibrant red roses are peeling off. She claimed she gave them to me so I would remember her, but I couldn't help wondering if she just wanted to forget.

The path we took is only a small loop around the shack, and I soon reach it again. I pull open the door. The tea set is still lying abandoned in the corner. Without thinking, I walk over to them and pick a cup up by its handle. Dust and dirt tattoo my fingertips like wet paint. I haven't touched these since my graduation day, when the invitation I sent to Holly was returned unopened. She had come to visit during spring break. On her last day, we got into a fight. I hoped she would forget about it by graduation, and would come. But Holly seemed to have meant what she said. She had new friendships and it was too much work maintaining ours.

A woodpecker begins to sing outside as Holly walks through the door. I don't turn around. I wait for her to speak, but she doesn't. She just stands there. It reminds me of her silence after I broke my leg. Holly hadn't wanted me to climb the tree, and when I fell I thought it would be a fall from her grace. But she never said a word. Holly never told anybody of how I froze up,

and never once said “I told you so.” We sat on my porch, played card games and drank tea. She had always been there for me, and now it was my turn.

I turn around and smile. “Want to get some tea?” I ask.

Holly smiles back.