

2024 ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST – 2ND PLACE

English Breakfast

By Naomi Louie

Every morning, Poppy makes tea. She puts the kettle on with just enough water for one cup—she hasn't made tea for two in almost a year—and listens for its whistle as she butters her toast. Most days she takes it off the heat as soon as the water's boiling, but some days she lets it go on and on until her ears ring, until it starts to sound like a voice of its own, filling the apartment with its shrill song.

Today is one of those days. She lets it boil for seven and a half minutes. It's better than this endless quiet.

It's been so quiet since Henry went away.

She spends those seven and a half minutes picking out a mug. It's a tough call, but she finally settles on a blue one dotted with buttercups. She takes the wailing kettle off the heat and reaches for a teabag.

Poppy is a firm believer in the superiority of English Breakfast (but only when she makes it—Henry always over-steeps his tea). She's tried 46 varieties of tea, from a pomegranate-rose rooibos to a smoky three-year-aged Pu-erh, but none of them compare to a steaming cup of Weatherby's classic blend (an English import, smooth and refined, her mother's favorite). She keeps the tea bags in an old Weatherby's tin—the company's cut costs in recent years, so they're only sold in cardboard boxes now, but she always empties the boxes into the little copper tin on her kitchen table. Thirty-five bags per box. She buys another box on the eighth of every month, so the tin never runs empty.

But today, she peers inside and finds she's taken the last one.

"Time to restock," she says. Her words hang in the air, painted birds with nowhere to land. Suddenly aching, she addresses the tea bag instead, watching swirls of amber drift up as it sinks. "Poor thing. You must have been awfully lonely in there."

She finishes her toast, grabs her purse, tucks her nicest cashmere sweater in the crook of her elbow. In the downstairs lobby, she checks her mail: a telephone bill, a book of coupons, this week's *New Yorker*. No letter from Henry, and no news of him.

She squeezes into the sweater on her way out. It is September 15th, and there's a chill in the air.

The 91st Street European Grocery is, as the name would imply, on the corner of 91st and Park, tucked between Silvio's Fine Tailoring and Gold Fortune Chinese Restaurant. It's 20 blocks away from the apartment, but Poppy doesn't mind. She's taken this pilgrimage a hundred times without tiring, each one different from the last. New storefronts, new people, new ink-black spots of sidewalk gum.

There's nowhere else in the city she can buy Weatherby's, not since the dingy little tea shop by the university closed. She had spoken to the tea shop owner at the clearance sale, a slender, crane-like woman with graying hair and a thick Oriental accent. *My country is burning*, the woman had said, busying herself with the jars behind the counter, a restless tremor in her

voice. Everyone was restless then, the war still a silhouetted figure at the threshold, soon to step into the light.

Poppy had paid for a silver teaspoon with a hundred-dollar bill. *Keep the change*, she'd said, pressing the money into the woman's hand. *For your family*.

Sometimes, when she prays for Henry, she prays for the woman too.

When she finally reaches her destination, her hands are cold and her knees are beginning to ache. She chalks it up to the nights she's spent pacing around her living room until her feet grew sore, trying to ward off nightmares: gunfire and shadows and raw-faced, bloody corpses wearing Henry's wedding band.

She steps into the 91st Street European Grocery, blinking hard to adjust to the harsh light. It's brighter than she remembers. Larger, too, and cleaner, all gleaming metal shelves and freshly waxed tiles. The musty, spiced aroma of the cluttered aisles is gone, replaced with a strange sterile smell. No portly mustachioed man at the register. No wine racks. No Spanish ham.

"Can I help you?" says the lanky, mop-haired boy at the checkout counter. He looks about 20 or so, not much younger than Henry was when he proposed.

The memory strikes her like a blow to the gut—her dark-eyed darling kneeling in his best blue shirt, the top two buttons undone, taking her hand with impossible softness. She thinks of how he'd looked up as he kissed her knuckles, the gaze he reserved for her and only her, always warm around the edges. Then she thinks of the men she's seen returning, all sunken cheeks and vacant stares. She thinks of the men who don't return. The woman in apartment 408, wailing for her son, as a uniformed officer struggles to hold her upright. The twins, who play hopscotch outside the deli every weekend, left forever fatherless. And Henry, his brother's dog tags slung around his neck, his mouth set with terrible certainty, turning away away away—

No. No. He'll be home any day now. Any day now.

"Sorry, what?" the boy says, and Poppy realizes she's spoken aloud. Her mouth is dry, and her breaths come quick and shallow. The light makes her temples throb. The quiet hum of machinery becomes a sudden roar.

She stumbles outside, head spinning, twisting her ring so hard it hurts. The boy calls after her, just barely audible over the panicked thrum of her heartbeat. She scans the street, frantic, searching for anything familiar, anything at all. There's no Silvio's, no Gold Fortune, no 91st Street European Grocery. Just her, adrift and alone.

The cool breeze makes her shudder. She sways, unsteady. The mop-haired boy bursts through the door just in time to catch her as her legs give out. His face looms close in her tear-blurred vision, but his voice seems to come from the far end of a tunnel. "Hey, ma'am? Hello? Are you okay?"

He's warm. Solid.

God, how long has it been since someone held her like this?

"Hello?" the boy says again, jolting her out of her thoughts. "Can you hear me? Should I call an ambulance?"

Bracing herself against his arms, Poppy stands. She's feeling better already, though her hands are still trembling. It takes her a moment to find her voice. "No, no. Thank you. I'm all right." She blinks until the world comes back into focus. "Just a little dizzy."

The boy frowns. "I can call you an ambulance?"

“That really won’t be necessary. I’d rather just go home.”

“Can someone come pick you up? Children? Husband?”

“No,” she says, sharp and bitter. She clutches the boy’s arm a little tighter. “My husband enlisted.”

“Oh,” says the boy. “I take it he didn’t return?”

Poppy’s stomach twists with sudden fury. She shoves the boy away, and he staggers backward, bewildered. “He will,” she snaps, turning to fix her sweater. “I know he will.”

Even to her, the words ring hollow.

The boy clears his throat behind her. “Ma’am? I, uh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I think you’re just a little confused. I’ll call you an ambulance, okay?”

“Thank you for the offer, but I don’t need one. I’m going home.”

She starts in the direction of the apartment, but the boy follows, quick as a foxhound and twice as eager. It’s no use trying to lose him—he’s tall enough to match her stride with ease, talking as he goes. “I really don’t think you should walk there.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Ma’am. Please. It’s cold out.”

“Then go back to your nice warm shop and leave me alone.”

“Look, I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I just want to help, and—”

“I don’t *need* help!” Poppy snarls. It comes out louder than she intended—several passers-by across the street stop to gawk—but she can’t bring herself to care. She whirls around to confront the boy, a bit too fast to keep her balance. Before she can even react, he’s there, his hands on her shoulders, holding her steady until she regains her footing.

“See?” he says, bending to meet her gaze. His eyes are the color of fresh-brewed Ceylon green, light and piercing. She looks away, mortified. “You shouldn’t be out walking, ma’am. Especially by yourself. Please just let me help you.”

“I... I don’t want an ambulance. I just want to go home.”

The boy sighs, letting go of her shoulders. “If you’re absolutely sure, I’ll drive you. Just give me a minute to lock up. And don’t go anywhere. Okay?”

Poppy takes a long, deep breath, drawing the sleeves of her sweater down over her ring. A shiver runs through her. He’s right—it’s getting chilly.

Poppy and the boy take the shop vehicle, a small white junker of a box truck with *QUALITY PRODUCE* emblazoned on the sides, accompanied by cheerful, chipped paintings of various fruits and vegetables. The ride is brief and quiet, the low grumble of the engine broken only by distant honks. Poppy watches the city go by—brownstones, bodegas and boutiques all blurring into each other. The whole world trickling away.

“Is this it?” the boy asks, pulling up outside of her building. She nods, and he double-parks, putting his hazards on.

“Thank you,” she says. Her purse feels heavy as a boulder in her lap, but she opens it anyway, rummaging for cash. She comes up with a fistful of ones. “Here. Take these.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “No, ma’am. I couldn’t possibly—”

“Take them,” she insists, stuffing the bills into the cup holder as she zips her purse. “Consider it an apology for lashing out. I know you meant well.”

“I don’t need the money. Really. But—”

“Too bad. It’s yours.”

“But ma’am—”

“Thank you again, and goodbye.”

“Wait!”

Poppy stops, already halfway out the door, and glances back. “Yes?”

The boy hesitates. He’s fidgeting with the steering wheel, his slender fingers tapping along to the beat of the blinkers. “There’s nobody I can call for you?” he says at last.

A thousand memories of Henry flash through her mind: the first kiss they’d shared at the top of the Coney Island Ferris wheel, the way only his left cheek dimpled when he laughed, the drowsy *good morning* he’d whisper into her neck every time she woke up by his side.

But above all, she remembers that night. How he’d kissed her forehead and squeezed her so tight it hurt, his brother’s dog tags pressing against her skin, cold as the moon. How stark he looked in the hallway light, like a man carved from stone, the harsh line of his mouth unmoved by her tears. How she’d fallen to her knees and begged him to stay and he’d left her there, sobbing on the hardwood floor, her heart hollow.

“No,” she says, closing her eyes. Her wedding band feels like a vise. “Not now. Not anymore.”

“I could walk you to your apartment?” the boy offers. “Make sure you’re settled in. Even leave you my number in case you need anything.”

When Poppy looks up, he’s gazing at her searchingly. His face is softer than Henry’s, rounder in the jaw, but handsome in its own way. As he reaches toward her, a few stray locks of shaggy hair fall across his forehead. She’s overcome with an inexplicable temptation to brush them away.

The boy takes her hand carefully, like she’s made of paper, his thick brows knitting together with concern. His palm is smooth and dry against her own. “You don’t have to do this alone, you know.”

She could invite him upstairs and tell him everything. It’s commonplace for military wives to seek solace in the company of other men—frowned upon, perhaps, but not unusual. An abandoned wife makes a more sympathetic character than the wife of a draftee, of course. It would be only natural for the boy to comfort her, to let her melt into the warmth of his arms. And from there, anything could happen.

Emotion rises in her, shame and rage and aching loneliness all knotting together at the base of her throat. For one treacherous moment, she allows herself to *want*.

Then she pulls away and gets out of the truck. “I’ll be all right.”

The boy doesn’t leave until Poppy is safely inside. She waves goodbye from behind the glass door and watches him drive away. The truck grows smaller and smaller until it rounds a corner and disappears completely. As if it were never there at all.

In the downstairs lobby, she checks her mail: a telephone bill, a book of coupons, this week’s *New Yorker*. No letter from Henry, and no news of him.

It’s warm in the building. She pulls off the sweater on her way up.

Her tangled emotions have faded to a bone-deep exhaustion. It takes a couple of clumsy tries to unlock her front door—her fingers are still numb from the cold. She puts her purse on the kitchen table, then pauses.

Someone’s made her a cup of English Breakfast.

She takes a sip. It's cold and bitter. Over-steeped.

Poppy sinks into her chair, hope sparking in her chest, startling her with the breadth of it. She raises the mug to her lips again with shaking, age-spotted hands, eyes trained on the door, and waits for her man to come home.