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How to Make a Cup of Tea

Here is how you make a cup of tea. First, clean the kitchen. Sweep the week's crumbs into the sink. Wipe the splattered food from the stovetop and backsplash. The compost reeks of rotting citrus. When was the last time you had an orange or squeezed a lemon? Take the compost bucket, and the trash, downstairs.

Spend most of the day standing in the middle of the grimy kitchen doing things that do not need doing. Reorganize the spice rack. Dust the stack of bowls on top of the fridge that no one will ever check for dust, or even notice. Flip through outdated cookbooks with faded photos of gelatined desserts on cake stands, pieces of pale, cubed fruit cocktail and red maraschino cherries suspended through the bright orange Jell-O. You wish you had the wherewithal to turn out something so ridiculously majestic, but you can barely manage the effort to rummage in the cabinet to find a pack of cookies.

Fill the kettle with fresh, cold water. Put it on the burner but don't boil it yet.

Set the table with a clean tablecloth. The trick is to make it look like you've done nothing. As though you always have a nicely set table, a clean home. Take the teapot down from the shelf. The big one, the one that can easily serve three or four people, even though it will just be the two of you. There's a few months' worth of kitchen grease on the lid. Wash the teapot in hot water. Leave it to dry beside the stove.

Choose the right kind of tea. If you were alone, like you usually are, you'd go for a smoky earl grey or Russian caravan. Something as strong as the Islay whisky you tell yourself you really should ration. Settle on loose leaf English Breakfast. Innocuous but hearty. It will be better than what your guest is used to. It will make you seem thoughtful.

Spoon some sugar into a small porcelain bowl. Pour some full fat milk into the delicate creamer brought back from your last vacation. Put it back in the fridge to stay cold.

Check the clock. He told you he'd be over by now, but maybe he's just late. Maybe you forgot to change your clock last week. Or maybe he forgot to change his. That whisky is starting to sound better than the tea, but you push that thought out of your mind. Outside, your neighbor is sweeping the landing. It's a comforting sound. Swish, swish.

Grab two mugs from the cabinet. Midnight blue, handmade, the name of the potter scratched into the bottom of each. They are big café-style mugs. You could drown in them. They're good for when he comes around. You think you're so sneaky, refilling his mug when he looks away, telling him he can't leave until he's finished his tea. Stretching a half hour into an hour and a half. But he knows. He has to. Still. You'll take what you can get. You picture his hands wrapped around his mug. His perfectly manicured nails—better than yours. The lopsided wry smile. The way he catches your eyes and holds them, when you usually cannot bear prolonged eye contact from anyone.

Outside, the light has shifted. It is officially late. Turn on the stove to boil the water. Spoon two heaping tablespoons of tea into the teapot. While you wait for the water to boil, even though you don't think you need to bother with it, change your cotton underwear for ones with some lace. Everyday bra for the green one he once told you he liked. Feel ridiculous that you're even making the effort. Put on the gold hoop earrings from your sister. A quick spray of perfume.

The water will boil, the screech of the whistle almost too shrill to bear. Run back into the kitchen to turn it off. Lift the kettle from the burner and fill the teapot. Be careful not to fill it too much or it will overflow and you'll flood the countertop. Put the fancy tea cozy on top of the teapot. It's made of scratchy plaid wool and is thick enough to keep the tea hot for several hours. The apartment will be too quiet. Put on some music. It doesn't matter what. He won't know it anyway. The shadows are starting to climb the walls. Turn on the lights.

You can stand in the kitchen, or sit on the couch, or even sit in the chair by the window and stare out into the street, but it won't make a difference. Like the old adage that a watched pot never boils, a watched street will rarely yield the visitor you long for.

Admit defeat.

In the kitchen, arrange seven cookies on a plate.

Lean up against the counter and eat a couple of cookies straight from the box.

They will be stale. Eat another one.

When the doorbell rings, don't rush to answer it. Finish chewing your cookie. Check your hair in the hallway mirror. When you buzz him in, wait in the doorway for him to climb the stairs.