

# Tatiana's Tea House

by Shriya Inuzuka

My husband and I have lived in the same house for almost 30 years. Every evening we take a walk. We always use the sidewalk and after a few blocks we take a right and go to a small park that has a playground where we sit on one of the benches and talk while watching the children play. But one day we found ourselves inexplicably lost and very confused.

We had walked the two blocks to where the sidewalk veered to the right in order to get to the playground but on this day, the sidewalk just disappeared. Instead of a sidewalk there was now a dirt road and on either side were woods. The woods were thick and dark. We both stood there confused and looking around for anything familiar but when we turned to look behind us to retrace our steps, our neighborhood was gone. Behind us and in front of us was nothing but thick woods and the dirt path that went as far as we could see in both directions.

I turned to my husband and said, "What just happened?"

He shook his head but said nothing. He just kept staring down the road rubbing his eyes in disbelief. "We must have taken a wrong turn," he finally said.

I knew that he knew that was impossible. We had lived here long enough to know every twist and turn of our neighborhood and we had never seen any woods. "Do you want to keep going or turn back?" I asked.

"It looks the same both ways. We might as well keep going."

We continued walking for quite some time. The further we walked the stranger things got. A fine mist began to form winding its way through the trees and skirting low across the path. The woods were unnaturally silent which gave me an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I began to feel very odd. It felt as though we had been plucked up and placed on an alien planet. After walking in silence for a while, we noticed that the atmosphere seemed different. The air felt lighter and somehow bubbly as though we had drunk a glass of bubbly champagne tickling our nose and making us feel rather giddy.

The change in atmosphere lessened our fear of the bizarre situation that we found ourselves in and we began laughing and talking in a manner we use to when we were younger. At one point, my husband took my hand, something he had not done in an exceptionally long time. We realized it was no longer a cold, fall day but now it felt mild. The feeling between us was light, airy and filled with anticipation. Of what I did not know but I kept feeling that any minute something extraordinary was going to happen. At one point, when I looked over towards the trees, I noticed another path. It was going up an incline and further into the woods.

"Let's check out this path and see where it goes," I said, grabbing my husband's hand and pulling him along.

As we continued walking further into the woods, I noticed a beautiful fragrance drifting in the air that smelled of roses and jasmine. The fragrance was intoxicating and seemed to draw us further along the path. When suddenly we came upon an incredibly old blue and lavender building that was covered in moss and vines. Colorful woodland wildflowers led up to the door and honey suckle vines wound their way in mass over the little house and through the surrounding trees. There was a sign up over the door that read Tatiana's Teahouse.

The two of us looked at one another with that look that says, "Can you believe this?"

We walked up to the front door. A small sign in the window read "Open", so we opened the door and stepped inside. It took us a moment to adjust our eyes to the dark interior. There were several tables and chairs and in the middle of each table was a teapot. We chose a table by the window and sat down.

Within a short time, someone came out from behind a curtain that was located behind the bar. It was hard to see who or what it was at first as they moved quickly and the lighting in the place was sort of murky with a tinge of green which made it difficult to really see what the person looked like. As the person approached I could see it was a girl because of the crinoline dress she wore. The shadows made her face hard to focus on but when the light caught her face it was sparkling.

“Good day to you.”

I looked up into her sparkling face. “Yes, hello,” I said. “We were so surprised to find this place. We’ve lived around here for ages and we’ve never seen these woods.”

The girl smiled indulgently before saying, “Tea and coffee choices are on the board. Today we have thistle soup with freshly picked mushrooms and pumpkin bread. Or if you prefer something sweeter, we have a fresh raspberry layered cake.

After she walked away and disappeared behind the curtain I looked over towards my husband. “Isn’t this a strange little place?” I wanted to get my husband’s opinion about all this, but he didn’t seem to have much to say as he sat mesmerized by the crackling fire that suddenly lit in the fireplace. I followed his gaze and I too started to get hypnotized as I watched the flames dance in a mad crimson circle. Even though many bizarre things had happened, I felt strangely relaxed. So much so, that I literally could have fallen asleep if I’d rested my head upon the table. The girl suddenly reappeared to take our order.

“I’ll have lavender tea and we’ll share the raspberry layered cake,” I said.

“I will be back shortly with the tea and bits,” she said, as she picked up the delicate china teapot and went back behind the curtain.

Within seconds she was back, and the lavender tea smelled heavenly as she poured it into the cup. Clouds of white steam wafted up into my face making me feel slightly euphoric. The girl sat the raspberry layered cake on the table between us.

“How long has this tea house been here?” I asked.

The young woman smiled sweetly but for a fraction of a second the murky light reflected on her smile and I was momentarily shocked to notice how sharp her teeth were. “Here in these parts, mam, time seems to run differently. Why we’ve been here for as long as I can remember. Enjoy your tea now,” she said, as she walked back behind the bar and disappeared again behind the curtain.

I looked over at my husband. “Did you notice her teeth?” He shook his head no and picked up one of the forks and dove into the cake. I did the same and in no time flat we had polished off the cake and drank the entire pot of tea.

The moment we laid down our forks the young woman reappeared from behind the curtain right on cue. “Is there anything else I can get for you?” she asked, as she cleared the dishes.

“No,” I said. “Just the check please. The tea and cake were delicious.”

“No gold need be exchanged. We barter with wishes in these parts of the woods. Unless, of course, you have something pretty and shiny you’d like to trade?” As she said this, she glanced at my necklace. I was a bit confused but got the gist that she would take my necklace as payment for the meal. I don’t know why I did it, but I hesitated briefly before slipping the necklace off and handing it to her.

She gave me a knowing smile. “Very well madam,” she said, as she took the necklace and put it on. “For that you be gettin a wish. Close your eyes and make a wish. If it be heartfelt it will come to pass.”

I found this an extremely odd thing to say but found myself doing as she said. I closed my eyes and made a heartfelt wish. She walked to the door and opened it as we gathered our things. She opened the door and as the light shone through a shadow of her was cast upon the wall. Strangely enough on the top of her head was what looked to be the shadow of a crown. The thing was, she wasn’t wearing a crown. As I walked down the stairs I turned and asked, “Are you Tatiana? Is this your tea house?”

She did not answer but only smiled as she slowly closed the door.

We made our way down the path to the main road. It took us a few minutes to notice but it dawned on us that it no longer looked like autumn but now it was spring, and the leaves of the trees were tender and bright green. In fact, the woods were sparkling with thousands of dewdrops clustered on the leaves, grass and webs. Dappled sunlight shifted and shimmered upon the woodland floor. They looked around in amazement and then at each other.

My husband stared at me. "You're so beautiful! You look so young! You look like a young girl again," he said, in awe. "Look at yourself."

I reached in my purse and pulled out my compact mirror. As I investigated my now unlined face and lack of gray hair I was in shock. Then it hit me. My wish. I had wished for something that I thought impossible. I had wished to be young again but as I looked into my husband's face, it dawned on me. I had forgotten to include him in on the wish.