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Essay by Channing Rion

A Surprising Call for Female Authority



“Where can a girl go around here to find a good conversation?”

It was Eva, the Savannah girl in her late twenties from our journalism class, whose runway-model presence seemed out of place against Harvard Square’s greasy afternoon snow banks. The “World’s Only Curious George Store” sign dripped overhead. Last January, we were both on assignment to search for an inspirational conversation in less than thirty minutes.

I had already used fifteen of them searching.

“I’m going to a tea shop!” I yelled back from the other side of the crosswalk.

She made a face. “People still talk in tea shops?”

Tealuxe is on Brattle Street, and I go there—instead of its bigger, prettier sister Starbucks—when it’s cold. I’ve always had a heart for the underdog. And though I’ve lived in the Boston area for more than a year now, this little shop still gives me the zip of feeling like a cultural foreigner. Tea-drinking was an extreme sport I rarely played in my wild Texas homeland. Most of my whiskey-consuming neighbors in Dallas considered black coffee the only acceptable hot liquid, especially if served beside pancakes and a pretty woman.

The ceilings soar in Tealuxe, but it’s cozy and tight. Small wooden drawers stack to the top and cover the wall like bricks, labeled with exotic tea-leaf names such as Lady Londonderry, Gyokuro, and Dragonwell. It’s like being inside a fairytale giant’s cupboard. As soon as I entered, I was greeted by a warm breeze that smelled of lavender and Christmas breakfast.

That afternoon, two of the dozen metal chairs were occupied by a pair of guys in matching black-leather baseball caps and red-checked shirts. One of them, a Robert Downey Jr. lookalike with a panda bear-tattoo on his forearm, was talking with his outside voice, a squeaky sound between a whine and a command. He wore shorts (it was 34 degrees outside).

The other guy, clean-shaven and pale with a ballet-like posture, seemed painfully aware that everybody in the shop—all four other patrons, including me—could hear them. He shifted uncomfortably in tight corduroys when I took the seat across their mini-table with my to-go cup of Crème de la Earl Grey. His tea partner blathered on. Their hands gripped matching white mugs, brimming with green healthy-looking liquid.

“So it’s, like, questions, you know?” Panda Tattoo said. “How do you add value to the universe? Why do people pay you—to do what? Like, that was a whole *thing* that took years of internal questioning. You know what I mean?”

“Well, there’s nothing like learning with experience,” said the shifty-eyed one, in a tone reminiscent of Kermit the Frog.

In the precarious stack of books on their table, *Real Artists Don’t Starve* stuck out at me from beneath Kermit’s elbow. I couldn’t read the subtitle’s scribble of fine print, but I quickly—sneakily—looked up the book on my phone: *Real Artists Don’t Starve: Timeless Strategies for Thriving in the New Creative Age* by Jeff Goins. Now, the conversation made a little more sense. I figured they were talking about their lives as creative directors or, more generally, the hardship of being creative humans.

“There are people our age who have done great things in the past and don’t come from big backgrounds...but who gained success.”

“Exactly.”

“And in my opinion, these are all giants we’re gonna have to kill in one form or another. We will keep getting these same problems over and over and over again—“

“Right, right, right, right.”

If I’d been made to guess, I would have said these fashion twins were art entrepreneurs of some sort—either that or gourmet brewers who host trivia nights and run a gentlemen’s-only barber shop in the back. Panda Tattoo stroked a meticulously groomed beard, his lips moving at wicked speed through the road of his thoughts.

“We’re in an absolute apex of all those things—it’s literally the time of resourcing, planning, strategizing, optimizing—it’s, like, *THE time*. And the meta-pressure on all of that is, how will we deliver the promises?”

Mellow bossa-nova music played from the speaker system. A bell tinkled every time the door opened. Sitting in front of me, across from the conversation, a skinny guy in a white T-shirt wouldn’t stop sniffing. He pounded his fingers at blinding speed on a laptop that looked like it was about to break, probably coding the next Facebook. His focus was

inspiring.

“You know what I love?” Panda Tattoo broke my focus. “Female authority.”

They began talking about a new boss they’d hired in the company named Allison. “She’s so kickass she wouldn’t know she was,” he said. Kermit agreed.

“That’s it. That’s what you need, right? Something bro-tastic at the top. The front line of the company can’t be all driven by guys, like, hard charging athletic alpha-hipster dudes like us.... Like, ultra-dudes, you know?” He rubbed the panda’s belly. “So having, like, a good balancing female authority figure in there, that’s why I’m so hyped about Allison taking the role. It creates the right cultural dynamic, you know what I mean?”

The speaker system now played a strange humming song, like crystal bells on a synthesizer, and just at that moment, a cloud covered the sun outside, casting an eerie blue light on the copper tables. The tattooed ultra-dude continued, but his tone softened.

“The biggest challenge is, like, I have to every day, literally seven days a week, I have to wake up and spend literally 45 minutes to an hour in bed with a notebook, outsmarting my day.” He sighed. “It’s been a very long time. A very long time.”

As I got up to leave, a homeless man with a Gandalf beard entered Tealuxe, dragging a large roller suitcase and three plastic bags behind him. He politely asked if he could take my table. I smiled and cleared the area.

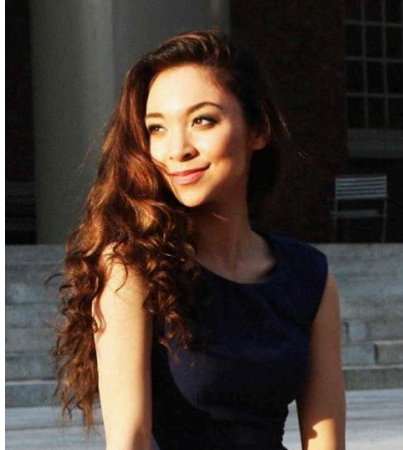
Downing the last of my Crème de la delight, I noticed some words painted above my head on the turquoise wall, in hand-sized black script:

“Where there is tea, there is hope”

—Sir Arthur Pinero

Art Information

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Channing hails from the Lone Star state and studies psychology at Harvard. In her first year at school, a newfound love for history, walking backward, and Italian cannoli prompted her to set up a walking tour of Boston's Freedom Trail, guiding lost tourists from the North End to the Common in under an hour. In the same year, she began writing a children's novel set in romantic colonial Boston, inspired by her adventures in historical imagination. The book will be released along with an original music album in 2019.

She later learned that the Tealuxe wall's quote came—probably—from a Victorian actor and playwright nobody remembers anymore.

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