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Lokke Heiss

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Tea With Emily

by Lokke Heiss

It was a wet April afternoon in Elm City, and Barbara was already an hour behind schedule. Pulling into a driveway, she turned off the engine and took out her list of names and addresses. The rain came back—a few drops at first, and then with a clap of thunder, it started to sheet down. Rivulets of water jetted across the windows. The rain sounded like a thousand impatient fingers drumming against the roof of the car. Barbara was so nervous her hands were shaking, and she had to hold her paper against the steering wheel to read it. The address was correct; this was the right house. After this stop, there were still three people left to see tonight. She had to get in and out quickly. Every minute she delayed would make it that much harder to get back to Tucson in time.

When had she last seen Emily? Barbara couldn't remember. She looked at her watch. No time to wait for the rain to let up. Sticking her brochures into her purse, she took a deep breath, opened the car door, and ran to the house.

Barbara reached the shelter of the porch and pressed the doorbell. She tried to remember to be confident and not look anxious. A thin, white-haired woman answered the door. The old woman smiled and raised her arms. "Barbara! I haven't seen you in so long."

"How are you?" Barbara asked, folding into the hug. Emily was frail and felt as though she might break into pieces if Barbara squeezed too hard.

Emily pulled away and shook her arms. "My goodness, child, you're soaked."

"I'm just a little wet."

"Where's your umbrella?"

"I didn't think it was going to rain so hard."

"How'd you grow up in this town and not learn about spring thunderstorms? Come inside and I'll get you a towel."

Barbara followed her down a front hall to a parlor. It had been twenty years since she'd been

in this room. The antique organ was still sitting in the same place in the far corner. She'd been too small to reach the pedals, and Emily had pushed them for her while she'd played "Chopsticks" on the keys. An oak hutch was next to the organ. On the other side of the room, two chairs and a small table were in front of a small brick fireplace. There were family photos and other bric-a-brac on the mantle.

Emily returned with a towel. She paused at the doorway, staring at Barbara, and then came into the room. "I'm sorry, but you look so much like your mother," Emily said, giving her the towel.

Barbara patted down her face. "People say that."

"Are you sure you can't stay for dinner?"

"I'm so sorry. I really can't."

"But you'll have some cookies?"

"Of course."

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea. Thanks."

While Barbara dried her hair, Emily made a trip to the kitchen and returned with a tray of cookies and a steaming teapot. She put them on the table in front of the fireplace and showed Barbara a small bowl of assorted tea bags. "Why don't you pick what kind of tea you want."

"It doesn't matter. Anything."

"I bought these from a specialty store. You choose."

The last thing Barbara wanted to think about was what kind of tea she was going to drink.

She pointed to the tea bag closest to her.

Emily picked up the tea bag. "Rosemary. I don't think anyone's picked that tea before. What does it taste like?"

Barbara had no idea what it tasted like. "It's hard to describe," she said.

"These special teas have quotations," Emily said. Taking a pair of reading glasses from a pocket,



she slipped them on. With some difficulty, she read, “*There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance, pray you love, remember.*” She squinted. “This print is so small. Where’s that from?”

“It doesn’t matter. Why don’t you try some?”

“I usually drink Earl Grey, but you’re right, we should always try new things.” Emily tore open the sealed envelope and put the bag in the pot. “I read that the only way to really enjoy tea is to use loose leaves. But when Phil and I were in England, everyone used tea bags. And we figured if it was good enough for them, it was good enough for us.” After waiting a moment for the tea to steep, she poured out a cup for Barbara and put a tea cozy over the pot. “Phil bought that for me when we were in the Lake District. What a wonderful trip that was.”

“It’s nice. You must miss him a lot.”

“Sometimes I just pretend he’s in the next room puttering about,” Emily said, sitting down. “It’s nice to use the tea set. Don’t get many guests anymore.” There was a distant rumble of thunder from outside. Emily took a bite of a cookie and looked at Barbara, who hadn’t touched any of her food. “Would you like some cake instead?”

Barbara picked up a cookie from the dish. “No, this is fine.”

“Are you sure? I have some cake in the kitchen, if you want it. That reminds me of the Lafayette carnival. The year I was running the cakewalk? You must have been in about fifth grade.”

“That’s right.”

“I was in charge of the cakewalk, and somehow you kept winning all the cakes. And I remember thinking, *that’s odd—winning all those cakes in a row*. Then you tried to carry them all away at once, and you dropped them. Wasn’t that a mess?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Wait until you get to be my age,” Emily said, blowing on her tea. “I can see you trying to hold all those cakes like it just happened. But I can’t remember what I did yesterday.”

Barbara was too nervous to be hungry. She took a sip of her tea and pretended to nibble on a cookie. “Your memory sure seems good to me.”

Emily tested the tea with her lips. “You know how much everyone in town misses your folks.”

“I know.”

Emily took a bigger sip, rolled her tongue. “Tastes minty to me.” She settled back in her chair and stared at the pictures on the mantle. “Your dad wasn’t just a judge. I mean, he was more than a judge.”

“More?”

“I don’t ever remember anybody being mad at him. You knew he was going to treat you fair, even if you lost.”

Barbara was silent. She held her cup, thinking back to days when she sat at the back of the courthouse, kicking her heels under the polished wood bench, waiting for a session to be over.

“And your mom, she taught French at IC for how many years?” Emily asked.

“Ten.”

“Wasn’t she acting dean for awhile?”

“That’s right. She helped out for a year.”

“Phil and I were in England when the accident happened. That was a terrible thing.”

The last thing Barbara needed was to think about that day. She took a breath, sipped her tea, and focused on giving the simplest answers possible.

“You know, afterward, they put up a big four-way stop there, where Highway 54 crosses 36.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I guess you wouldn’t have had any reason to drive on that road.”

“Not since I left town.”

“Anyway, I think about your folks a lot. They did so much for everyone here.”

“Thanks.”

Emily put her cup back on the saucer. “But what about you? You told me on the phone about great things happening in Arizona.”

That was lucky. Since Emily had brought it up, Barbara wouldn’t have to be so obvious.

“It’s really exciting. In fact, that’s why I can’t stay. I have to get back to the project.” Barbara handed Emily a brochure she had brought in from the car. “Here’s a step-by-step explanation of what



we're doing."

"It looks impressive."

"The key is how the medicine affects the tissue. See these photos? This is before the injury, and this is just two weeks after."

Emily nodded. "You wouldn't know it's the same person."

"And we were just at the most critical stage when we ran out of money. A thousand dollars more, and we can finish the project."

Emily put down the brochure. "Why can't you get any money from the drug companies? If this works as well as you say it does, I'm sure they'd be happy to help you."

This was it. Sink or swim. "That's just the problem," Barbara explained. "The idea is so simple that the moment a drug company hears about it, they'll just pull the rug out from under us. No, we have to do it on our own."

Emily nodded, then got up and went to the hutch. Opening a small drawer, she took out a checkbook. "I'm writing this for one thousand dollars. Who do I make it out to?"

Barbara had rehearsed this many times. She paused, took another sip of tea. "Our company isn't incorporated, so it's best you make it out to me. That way we won't have any delays."

Emily wrote the check with a shaky but persistent hand. "Watch me do this. I want to make sure I have the zeros right."

Barbara stood up and peered over her shoulder. "That's right. Three zeros."

Emily finished writing the check, but instead of giving it to Barbara, she walked back to the table. She took off the cozy and poured herself another cup.

"Barbara, you're not telling me the truth."

Barbara froze. "What did you say?"

Emily twirled a spoonful of sugar into the tea. "I said, 'you're not telling me the truth.'"

Barbara could grab the check and run. The door was behind her. Ten steps and she would be out of the house. But then what? One phone call



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

would stop the check, and Emily might call the police. It wasn't going to work. Barbara sat down, defeated.

Emily put the cozy back on the teapot.

Barbara stared at the floor. "How did you know?"

Emily smiled. "I just know. When someone says they need a thousand, they always really need more."

Barbara's heart started to beat again. She didn't trust herself to look at Emily, so she stared down at the bowl of tea bags on the table. "You're right. We need more money."

"If you're trying to do something as big as this," Emily said, turning to face Barbara, "a thousand dollars is a drop in the bucket. I know how expensive medical supplies can be."

"We're all putting everything we have into this. But I just didn't feel right asking you for more."

Emily went back to the hutch and lifted up a

ceramic letter holder. "I've got some emergency cash."

Barbara was so surprised she could hardly talk. "Cash?"

Emily pulled out a roll of bills from under the letter holder. "Sure sounds like an emergency to me." She brought the check and cash over to Barbara.

"Just now, you looked like you did a long time ago, when you were a Brownie. You were right here in this room, and so cute in your uniform. It was something to do about a raffle...trying to get me to buy some kind of ticket. It was for something really unusual, especially for you being so young. What was it again?"

"It was...it was just one of my harebrained schemes."

"You were sure cute. That's all I can remember." Emily handed Barbara the check and the cash. "Here you go. That's all I have for now."

Barbara wrote out a receipt. "When the project takes off, we'll convert your donation into preferred stock."

Emily gave a quick little laugh. "I never did understand that stuff. Don't worry about it."

She walked Barbara to the door.

"This means a lot to me," Barbara said.

"You just look so much like your mother. Oh, I'm sorry, I already told you that."

Barbara nodded and said the last thing she had to say, "It's really important not to talk to anyone about this. For at least four weeks. This is the crucial moment."

Emily put her finger to her lips. "Mum's the word."

They walked out to the porch. It had stopped raining. "I can give you an extra umbrella."

"I'll be okay, really."

They hugged one last time.

"I hope it all works out for you," Emily said, letting go of Barbara.

Barbara got into her car, waved, and drove off.

After two blocks, she pulled over. Taking the cash from her purse, she counted the bills carefully—five hundred dollars—and a check for a thousand. If she could get back to Tucson by Sunday night, she could pull a favor from a check-cashing service and get all the checks converted into hundred-dollar bills. If the money wasn't back at work by Monday, somebody would notice, and if they did an audit, it would all be over.

Barbara felt a wave of nausea coming. Rolling down the window, she closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. Emily had called her out, not on the project itself, but on how much it cost.

Had she known it was all lies, and had she decided to give me the money anyway?

The thunderstorm had pounded all the dust into the earth. The air was absolutely clear.

Cradling her head with her arms against the car window, Barbara opened her eyes and realized she was on Webster Avenue. Just across the street was Annie Kilmer's house, or at least it used to be her house. In grade school, Barbara had been friends with Annie and had played in her bedroom.

Annie had a set of beautiful silver brushes that had belonged to her grandmother; she kept them on a table by her bed. A couple of times they'd brushed each other's hair. Barbara remembered the comforting pull of the brush as she swept the curls down and away from Annie's head.

What had happened to Annie? Where was she now? Were the brushes still by her bed? With her bad credit, and with nothing left to pawn or sell, this had all looked so easy from far away. When you were far away, they weren't people, really—just names. And this town wasn't home—it was just a place where she was from.

Barbara didn't start the car. Instead, she watched the last of the sunlight play off against a row of small, neat, wood-framed houses. The shadows crept out and took over the street as the outline of houses slowly faded into the dusk.

