

The Fire-breathing Teapot

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It was six o'clock when Brenda set her desk in order and picked up her handbag. The carpet silenced her tread as she wove to the back door. It closed decidedly behind her, locking all from the bank until morning.

Brenda's car waited in its designated spot. She fished out the keys. Dropped the keys. Opened the door. Got in.

Brenda stared drearily out the windscreen as she pattered down the suburban street. Joan Sullivan was bringing the bins in. Brenda returned her wave and pulled up the neighbouring driveway.

The house was just as quiet as the bank.

Brenda changed into her loungewear, microwaved a meal, and sat before the TV. It was several minutes before she thought to reach for the remote.

A cheery *briiing-briiing* made her jump.

Brenda eyed the landline. Another marketing call.

She let it ring twice.

Thrice.

She picked up.

"Hello?"

There was silence at the other end. Then, a feminine voice.

"Is this Brenda Lanson?"

"Yes," she replied. What was it this time? Solar panels? Insurance?

"You might not remember me, but we used to be neighbours."

Not the usual marketing spiel.

Brenda searched her memory but couldn't recall sharing more than a cordial nod with a former neighbour. She had moved too much in her twenties to build any meaningful connections. She was only beginning to get properly acquainted with her current neighbours, and she'd been living here for five years!

"Whereabouts?" she hedged.

"Hamond street."

"Priya?"

"You *do* remember!"

"Remember?" Brenda spluttered. "Gosh, it's been thirty years, but imagine forgetting Pipi Ripped-stockings?"

Laughter came at the other end – breathy, with a steady rhythm. Brenda recognised it instantly.

"How did you get my number?"

"From your parents. I found them in the White Pages."

"Did they remember you?"

"Your dad picked up. He didn't until I reminded him of the ginger cat who used to vomit on his porch."

"Henry? Greedy thing! First helpings at your place, second helpings from our dog's bowl!"

Priya sighed. "May he now eat ten breakfasts a day."

A solemn moment passed, then the two delved into energetic chatter.

Priya had a husband and two sons. One eleven, the other eight. They lived less than an hour's drive away. Priya's memory of their childhood friendship endured just as well as Brenda's.

"Do you remember the tea parties?" Priya asked. "We'd take turns to host with the plastic set."

"Yes, I think my parents still have it in the shed. What I loved most were the pink cupcakes – especially the one with star sprinkles."

"You always ordered that one. I loved the teapot most – and the little teacups."

"We'd fill it with nasty concoctions sometimes, wouldn't we?"

"Oh yes," Priya laughed. There was a distant voice on her end of the line. "I'm sorry Brenda, I need to take Joey to cricket practice."

"Of course." It was a shame to hang up. Priya had invoked an excitement that Brenda hadn't felt in a long time. "Would you like to leave your number with me so we can keep in contact?"

"Actually, Joey has a game nearby on Saturday. Maybe we can stop in afterwards. Around three?"

"Just in time for afternoon tea."

"Yes, I suppose so." Brenda could hear the smile in Priya's voice. "Is there going to be real tea this time?"

"Of course! And real food. It shall be the grandest tea party you have ever seen."

"I'll bring some pink cakes along, and I won't be stingy with the star sprinkles."

With the goodbyes said, Priya hung up.

Brenda put down the phone. She stood and did a lap around the couch.

Guests!

She was going to have guests!

She was going to see Priya.

Brenda remembered her well. She always wore her dark hair in one braid. Her favourite colour was sky-blue, and she wouldn't consent to leave the house without it. She was quiet and demure around other children, but not with Brenda, who had always been the bolder of the two.

Brenda caught her own reflection in the black TV. Her smile wavered. She did not look like the eight-year-old girl Priya remembered. Her eyes were heavy. Her body had been bent to the shape of her desk chair. Her hair was tamed back from her face – brunette now instead of blonde. With age, the easy confidence had faded too.

Never mind.

Brenda was going to host the best tea party Priya had ever seen.

There would be lamingtons, and chocolate-chip biscuits. Tiny sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Quiches, sausage rolls, lemon meringue tarts, and a big pot of tea, right in the middle of the table.

Brenda went to the cabinet in the dining room and pulled out her old teapot.

The rim was chipped, the blue flowers had faded unevenly, and it was only big enough for two cups of tea. Not exactly a grand statement piece to wow Priya.

The teacups came from three different sets, mismatched in style and colour.

She sighed.

They would have to do.

The next day, Brenda woke in a happy mood. She replaced her usual cereal with a pair of poached eggs on an English muffin. Then, she wandered onto the back deck.

The air was warm and smelled sweetly of eucalypt. Birds bickered over dominance of the biggest tree.

Brenda sorrowed at the thought of spending the whole day indoors.

Perhaps she could make use of the morning and walk to work.

It was the first time Brenda had noticed the beauty of the neighbourhood since moving in. The trees formed a leafy corridor down the road. The grass by the path was spotted with daisies. Flowers bloomed behind her neighbours' fences.

Too quickly, Brenda arrived in town.

She dawdled down the main street and felt her feet stall before an antique shop. It was a pokey place, sandwiched between a bakery and a boutique. She had never taken much notice of it before but found herself transfixed by a lovely tea set in the window – sage-green with white polka dots, and four matching cups.

She popped in for a closer inspection.

The shop was dim. Tall shelves formed a maze to the window display. She picked up the teapot.

Lovely indeed, but expensive for something that was only to be used once.

Nearby, Brenda saw another set. It was not quite as pretty, but the price tag was friendlier.

"Morning, Brenda."

She startled.

Joan Sullivan stood at the end of the aisle. Her pixie cut was looking particularly attractive today.

"Good morning," she returned.

A silence passed. Joan wandered closer, browsing the shelves. She picked up a candleholder, examined it, tutted over a chip, then put it back.

Usually, Brenda would shy away from a conversation with Joan, but she was unusually cheery today.

"How's the extension coming along? I haven't heard many builders lately."

"All finished! We moved the new furniture in last week. I'm just picking up a few bits and bobs." She held up a vase. "Surely, this is lead crystal. It's far too heavy to be glass."

Brenda nodded in agreement, though she had no idea what lead crystal was.

Joan tucked it into her basket.

"After a new tea set?"

"Yes! I'm having guests over on Saturday for a – a high tea."

She would *not* call it a tea party in front of Joan. It sounded silly and childish – nothing like the grandiose event she was planning.

Joan's smile turned sympathetic as she examined the teapot in Brenda's hands.

"This place doesn't have a very good collection, does it? I don't suppose you have time to order online."

"No, I shouldn't think so," Brenda said, putting down the teapot.

Joan leant forward conspiratorially. "Don't worry, we have a grand old thing back home. You can borrow it."

Brenda snapped to attention. A tea set from Joan? Brenda knew it must be very special indeed. "That is so kind of you."

"Consider it an apology for the racket."

"Shall I stop by after work?"

Joan hesitated. "Yes, of course."

"I can come tomorrow?"

"No – it is only that the housewarming starts at six-thirty."

"Oh, I don't want to intrude!"

"Don't be silly! Bob invited you, didn't he?"

Brenda shook her head.

"Must have forgotten. Of course, you're invited."

Brenda's heart pattered excitedly. A tea party with a long-lost friend, and now a housewarming? Amazing how things happen all together!

"Shall I bring anything?"

"No – no. Only yourself. We have enough catering, and after the Maldives, Bob doesn't need any more temptations sitting around the house, if you know what I mean."

"Of course," Brenda agreed.

"Perfect! I'll see you tonight."

Brenda arrived promptly at six.

Joan greeted her in a gauzy gown and welcomed her inside.

She was led down an ivory hall that opened into a kitchen, dining area, and lounge.

Three children played UNO in a bay window. Bob Sullivan was busy carving the roast. The air was perfumed with rosemary and vanilla.

Brenda silently admired the canapes as Joan imparted the difficulties of raising the ceiling.

"The mezzanine came with its own world of challenges, of course," she continued.

"The tea set is up there."

Brenda trailed her upstairs. The space was full of squashy chairs, bookshelves, and an assortment of breakable antiques.

"I'll have to remove some of this. Too dangerous with the children running about, but I'll have my way for one night."

Joan bent to a glass cabinet. She procured a lovely wooden box and set it on the coffee table.

She lifted the lid with a flourish.

Brenda stepped closer, drawn to the box as a moth is drawn to a lightbulb.

The teapot had a crimson under-colour. It was painted with intricate designs in metallic gold. The base was crinkled to match the rim of the lid. The spout reminded her of a snake, rising to the call of its charmer.

It looked foreign.

Regal.

Big enough to fill the six matching cups with an herbal tea. Ginger, perhaps? Or aniseed.

"What do you think?"

Brenda startled. It occurred to her that she was kneeling before the box. Her cheeks flushed. "Oh Joan, it is the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on! I couldn't possibly – ". Even as she said it, her hand inched towards the box.

Joan chuckled, "You can pick it up when you leave."

The lid fell, obscuring the tea set.

Brenda's hand stilled. It seemed she had woken from a spell.

"We had best get downstairs."

Brenda rose to Joan's beckoning hand.

"You have such lovely things, Joan. A beautiful house. A perfect family. You must be so content."

She probably sounded wistful because Joan laughed airily. "And you are not, Brenda? A woman with your esteemed career?"

Brenda watched her in surprise.

Joan shook her head. "You work so hard, Brenda. It's something I admire about you. Early mornings. Late nights. I can't recall how many times I've heard the phrase, 'Thank god for Brenda' in town. If that's not something to be proud of, I don't know what is."

Brenda felt touched, but simultaneously undeserving of the praise.

She sighed. "I am proud, but I cannot say that I am content. I never am, no matter what I accomplish, who I impress, or how much money I make. I fear I am destined to always want more."

Brenda had never confessed this to anyone and was relieved when Joan nodded sympathetically. Brenda knew she sounded horribly ungrateful. She owned her own home. No debts. A good job. It should be enough.

"But that is a fault in the human design, isn't it? You are wise to wish for contentment above all else." The doorbell rang. Joan smiled. "I would love to continue this discussion later."

Brenda startled. "Of course! Thank you, Joan. You are an angel."

Joan paused at the banister. "Let me know if you need anything at all, Brenda."

She glided downstairs, skirt wafting behind her.

As the guests arrived, Brenda observed that none had listened to Joan as well as she had. They came with wine, chocolates, flowers, and giftbags. All were received with an exclamation of gratitude.

Brenda spent a little while forcing small talk before gravitating to an isolated nook.

She sought out her host several times, but Joan was always occupied. Most recently, Brenda only managed to say what a wonderful time she was having when Joan smiled, touched her shoulder, and made a comment about circulating the room.

At nine o'clock, Brenda collected the tea set and left, feeling like a thief.

When she got home, she lifted the pot from the box and placed it reverently on the tea stand.

It didn't fit.

She would have to buy a new one tomorrow.

The following day was Friday, and Brenda hadn't even started baking. After work, she attempted the lemon meringue tarts.

She made a mess of the first curd. It was nine-thirty when she finally piped the meringue on top. Brenda went to admire the teapot while they hardened in the oven.

The tea set was perfect, but it was meant for a hall of kings, not for Brenda's homely dining room.

She removed the woven placemats and pulled back the floral curtains.

Several minutes into the transformation, she smelled something burning.

Bugger! She'd forgotten to adjust the temperature.

She ran back to the kitchen and opened the oven. Smoke curled off the white peeks. Her little mountains had erupted.

Brenda brought the tray to the dining table and sunk into a chair.

Exhaustion caught up with her quickly. She massaged her brow.

Tomorrow. She would try again *tomorrow*. She would make the rest of the food. She would set up the party. All after a good nights' rest.

Brenda stood at the bench, leaning over a tray of mishappen tarts. Some were burnt. Some were broken. Others oozed a sticky, yellow substance.

Yet, among the carnage stood one perfect specimen. The shell was crisp and golden. The meringue rose in a twisting spiral. A lemony aroma filled the kitchen, masking the burning. One green shoot growing from the rubble. Brenda would protect it at all costs.

Heat scorched her back.

She turned.

A golden dragon rose from the oven. Steam gushed from its nostrils. Red light fired within its jaws.

It leapt upon the bench, squashing the tart.

Brenda woke in a sweat. Her bedsheets were twisted around her legs. She jerked up. Checked the digital clock.

3:12

She lay back with a sigh. Her head thumped in time with her pulsing heart. Moonlight poked into the inky room.

She breathed deeply, willing her heart to slow, but there was no relief in waking.

There was so much to do before Priya arrived. Forget the teapots. It was too hot for tea anyway. She should have chosen a different centrepiece. Flowers in a lead crystal vase.

She screwed her eyes shut. Not now. In the morning.

But try as she might, Brenda could not sleep. There was a persistent rattling. An insect caught against the window, perhaps?

Brenda sat up again.

No, the sound was not coming from her room.

On reflection, it sounded more like...

Like rattling china.

Brenda got up. She tiptoed down the hall. The sound grew louder as she approached the dining room. She paused before the doorway, shivering despite the heat.

The rattling stopped.

Brenda peeped inside.

The monster was on the table. A hulking, golden creature beside her burnt tarts. Even as she stared, Brenda could imagine steam rising from its spout. The lid beginning to rattle. A horrible red light glowing within.

Her stomach boiled.

She snatched it and the nest of teacups from the table and returned them to the box.

Then, she reclined herself in a chair, feeling her heart begin to slow. Feeling her mind sharpen.

How silly of her.

The hunt for a perfect tea set had driven her quite insane.

She went to the cabinet and drew out the old teapot.

There. This one wasn't scary. As Brenda set it down on the table she felt oddly comforted. She drew out the mismatched cups. Suddenly, they did not bother her as before.

Brenda worked efficiently in the morning. Party-pies, lamingtons, caramel slice, and mud cake were acquired from the supermarket.

She removed the burnt meringue from the tarts and whipped up another batch. This time, Brenda sat by the oven.

She polished the cutlery and tidied the back deck. The mugginess had faded with the night. The air was crisp and pleasant.

As the hour drew near, she made the sandwiches, cooked the pies, brewed the tea, and assembled everything on the deck.

The doorbell rang soon after. Brenda didn't even have time to scrutinise the placement of the old teapot on the table.

The hours that followed would provide Brenda with happy memories for years to come.

Priya looked almost as she remembered, but for a lack of sky-blue. Her husband was pleasant. Her boys, shy. At least until they saw afternoon tea.

Priya's cupcakes were a perfect addition to the banquet.

The party pies were the first to disappear.

Next, the boys.

Brenda received many compliments, but no comment was made on the teapot. Brenda had quite forgotten about it until she and Priya stood, looking out at the boys playing in the backyard.

“What a dear little tea set you have.”

“It’s on its last legs, I fear,” Brenda blushed.

“It reminds me of our plastic teapot. It’s almost the same colour – my favourite if you recall.”

“Yes, but the matching cups were smashed or lost ages ago.”

“None of our cups matched, did they?”

Brenda considered this. “No, I suppose they didn’t. My parents found them at garage sales.”

“Then you have recreated everything perfectly,” Priya smiled. “I hope to return the favour when you are next in the area.”

“Just tell me when, and I’ll be there.”