

Background: The narrator (a Canadian living in Britain) has been in love with Tessa (a co-worker) for the longest time, but hasn't been able to make anything happen. He decides to go for broke. This is how his adventure unfolds.

The Tea Room. The center of the Paragon E-Learning universe. Its name might suggest a restaurant-type affair, an in-house café of sorts. Or a quaint little shop where scones with Devon clotted cream and jam are served.

The Tea Room was a tiny alcove. A counter, a sink, a fridge, an insignificant afterthought of a window...and three walls. That was it.

With everyone lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, you might fit four people in there. Five, if most of them were gals. Sometimes, the-morning-after-the-night-before, it was best to have the support (physical and otherwise) of maximum bodies. But no matter how many were sardined in there, everyone else waited outside, lingering at the entrance, where a set of brief stairs connected the two buildings that made up the Paragon complex, loitering until it was their turn at the kettle and all the requisite tea-making *accoutrements*.

It was where people got recharged. Not just by way of the caffeine-infused libation, but from the tea-making process itself. From this being a meeting place. From this escape from the travails at their desks, a diversion, a reminder of a bigger world, a greater context. And the contact. The personal contact, *seeing* someone up close, bumping into them, touching their hand, maybe even getting -or giving- a hug. *Communal comfort*.

Making tea is *so* different than making coffee. Never mind the effects of each, the very acts of preparing them, their associated ceremonies makes them entirely dissimilar creatures. So I was caught a little off-guard my first time in The Tea Room. I was unprepared for the fast-track intimacy. The various kettles being filled, plugged-in, waited on...turned off, emptied into serried cups -each one with its own bag, no communal tea-pot here- filled up again, plugged-in...

All this was new to me. In my -overlong- years in retail, I often went out into the mall to get a coffee, but it was usually solo. Or, as a sports technician, you'd catch-as-catch-can, grabbing something on the fly right there in the tech-shop. *This...* This was so wonderfully social. Listening to gossip, chatting about renovations in a new flat, anguishing over a football match, negotiating plans for the weekend; I fell in love with the process on my first day.

In the end, it had been almost a year since the first of my Tea Room visits...two times a day, each occasion with an ever-changing mix of faces...before everything unfolded, before Fate and my need did some articulated collaboration of their own.

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Tessa's nickname was 'The Ice Queen'. She could be nice enough when it was necessary, but known for often freezing people out. Hardly the sort you'd want to 'pal it up' with at the local pub. Unless you wanted some quiet time, with silence reigning. 'Purposefully enigmatic'. Not long after 'discovering' her, I was told that she'd been devastated by a breakup months previously, a calamitous ending to a five-year relationship. "She's closed up shop, mate. Move along; there's nothing for you there."

But I couldn't. I couldn't 'move along'. I was caught. Trapped. And you know what happens to an animal when it's trapped, when it gets desperate? It takes a big breath, digs deep and does the craziest things imaginable.

No, this has nothing to do with the chewing off of a limb. But to those watching, it might have appeared that way.

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Day One

By the time I'd walked from the Tea Room across the broad expanse of office a few steps higher in altitude, up the perilous, so-narrow-as-to-allow-only-one-venturer-at-a-time staircase and entered The Attic, the news had already gotten back to the rest of my sequestered workmates, news of what had just happened. (Admittedly, I'm leaving out a protracted trip to the bathroom.)

Nothing was said before I sat down at my desk, but I could tell from the looks people gave me that something was up. This was confirmed by the Messenger pane with a wry message from my cross-room brother-in-arms, Pete.

Pete: "Mate, you must be barmy!"

Me: "Eh? You didn't like my edits on your document? Or is it the 'drinking' issue again? Look; just because I don't quaff beer, doesn't make me 'barmy'. Merely 'boring'."

Pete: "TESSA!"

Me: "Oh. That. Nothing that can't be revised. No matter how bad the draft is, right?"

Pete: "Seriously; you're playing with fire."

Me: "Canadians are good with extremes. Extreme heat, extreme cold..."

Pete: "Good luck with that."

Still, no matter how I shrugged it off, it's no wonder that what had happened downstairs had the gossip wires buzzing.

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Already in the kitchen when Tessa arrives, it's a good thing I'm consumed by the busyness I'd attached myself to -washing some mugs out, wiping down the counter, clearing smelly detritus out of the fridge- because outside of 'strictly business' exchanges, Tessa intimidated me.

Clarification: she didn't intimidate me as a person. (I've actually never known what that feels like in my entire life experience.) No, 'The Visual Being That is Tessa' intimidated me. For example, this:

One afternoon some months previous, I entered the kitchen to find Tessa there. She was wearing jeans and a white top.

But between the waist of her Levi's and the southern extent of her ribbed-cotton, long-sleeved garment, a succulent slice of brown. A delectable copper crescent.

I have to emphasize that it was only a *slice*. This was the visual foodie's version of a discreet *sliver* of the most delectable *gateau chocolat* imaginable, not a quite-gauchely excessive *slab*, not a plate's overflow. And in its economical presence, that it was only a *suggestion*, a murmured temptation rather than a blunt, yelled offering, its power was considerable.

Obviously, most of my energies were spent on trying to *not* stare. To record peripherally the sight of this distracting patch of tanned skin. While still chatting to Tessa. While trying *not* to sound -or appear- the fool while all these mental games were taking place.

For the record, I failed. It was illustrative of the fact that I was extraordinarily susceptible to her visually, that this usually quite-adept-with-words guy was a verbal klutz around her.

So, back to our revelatory interlude; I'm busy doing stuff. Tessa walks in. Small greetings are offered her, and she responds in kind...or as expected. (A person's reputation tends to manage itself, to an end that sometimes seems wholly independent, doesn't it?) I give her a quick glance...

...and switch into Manic Guy With Apparently No Regard For The Inherent Dangers Involved.

"Tessa! Hey, I saw your online ad! Very original, very effective. I was surprised by your strategy, but all-in-all, the approach you've taken is really, really commendable."

Now, you have to understand that Tessa, while being a strong-willed Cancerian woman, opinionated, stubborn...legendarily *bitchy* on occasion...is also, by default, a 'stand-back and remain quiet' sort of gal. You'd never hear her telling a joke. She'd rarely be the one leading a conversation. She's the one taking it all in, viewing,

assessing...spectating. Not so much in a Machiavellian 'save it for the right occasion' way...though apparently she's not above using the odd choice bit when the time's right.

And so, once I've fired this off towards her...I could never have directed this tack *at* her, no matter how hyper-fueled I was by chutzpah...she doesn't respond as an equal combatant.

No, it's Rachel, one of our co-workers that keeps the volley in motion. "Online ad? You selling something, Tessa?"

I sneak a glance Tessa's way; it's fascinating how the tiniest of moments can reveal a person's true character. Their response, how it's framed, its phrasing, the body language involved...

Some gals, they'd be sparked by this riff, grin at the attention, no matter how obtuse or mystifying the comment had been, and want to know more. Maybe even have gone all 'girly' in showing they were interested in where it was going.

Other women, they'd get defensive. End the exchange before it had gone any further. Fend off the attention.

Tessa hardly registers a response, but I can still see it: barely-contained mortification.

In concert with the other cohorts *in situ*, I prepare to pour the just-boiled water into a properly marshalled line of mugs. So I have something to focus on, a task to execute, I have a right to be here...no matter how suicidal my intent seems to be, no matter how violently my heart is pounding, no matter that I've drenched myself with kerosene and lit the match. "I lie; it's not an 'ad' per se so much as it is an actual site. Or maybe 'blog' better describes it. Anyway, I loved how you took the 'mail order bride' concept and turned it on its head. Injecting some e-learning into an idea that's centuries old. (I have a great-great-great-great uncle who went this route back in Saskatchewan back in the 19th century, incidentally.) The way you had your biographical information available via clicks, and the charts and statistical info that popped-up, how you injected 'blended learning' into the process..."

There were four of us here once Tessa had arrived. Now there's two more, and I as I sense that a wave is about to begin my instincts tell me I need to start wrapping things up. Pronto.

"...it was stellar stuff. Chuffed-client quality." Knowing that timing is everything, I count off a fitting pause. "Good luck with your adventure," I eventually say, stirring my tea until its milk and sugar are fully engaged, everything there swirling as much as my insides. Preparing to head past her, I look her straight in the eye, and hear our audience's held-breaths, only *just* keeping at bay an assortment of snickers and guffaws. I pause, positioning myself as if I were sharing a secret, though I don't speak *sotto voce*.

“Although if you were *that* serious about being properly coupled, all you *really* had to do was make the trek to The Attic. I’m the guy sitting in the south-east corner of the alcove, hard not to miss; *I* would have said ‘Yes’.”

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Oh, the looks I got from my neighbours. As they got up from their desks to head to meetings downstairs. As they made mini-visits within The Attic, takin’ care of project business, commiserating with teammates. And from others, who, as Messenger sessions allowed friends elsewhere in the building to catch them up, would eventually peer over at me, eyes wide, or smirking, or shaking their head. Sometimes, all three of them.

Naturally, even though nobody had said anything to me, I felt like crawling out the window, navigating the array of pigeons, and leaping off the building. All the aforementioned high-octane chutzpah and all its associated adrenaline and endorphins had been bled out of me, taking with it my resolve, my determination, and my confidence. In their place, ‘doubt’, ‘regret’ and a much, *much* larger version of ‘mortification’ than the one Tessa had felt in the Tea Room.

“If you can type your name that way,” a soothing voice began to say, as I stared at the keyboard, having lost the will to hold my head up and stare at the screen, “I’ll be impressed.”

Before I’d raised my gaze, I was smiling. When I did look up, I found Lena standing beside me. Winking at me, she knelt, forearms spread on my desk. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“What, *willing* you over here? It’s a family trick. From my mom. She used to execute it when meals were ready. Simply *hated* yelling.”

A grin. And then an incline towards me, her face approaching discreetly. “I don’t know how you manage to play ‘Jack the Girl Hunter’ without coming off as the usual smarmy pickup artist.”

“So *you* don’t think I’m an idjit?”

“Someone called you an- Who?”

“Mr. Pete. Not in so many words.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s hardly the standard-bearer for much in that regard. He takes ‘lothario’ into new territories. And no, I do *not* think you’re an ‘idjit’. At all.”

Though Lena could read me my death sentence and I’d still feel comforted, I had tripped so far into The Dead Zone that even her melodious tones couldn’t spark me. Still, she carried on.

"I'm proud of you. For following through. I just wasn't expecting it to be so soon."

"Well, I *had* confided in you that I had to do *something*. I couldn't languish like- The way I was, I couldn't handle that much longer. Not again."

"Again?"

Not wanting to get into it, I remain silent.

"Better to push and find out what's what, huh?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

She took a good look around the room, a stationary visual tour. As the team's senior designer *nonpareil*, she had her finger on the room's pulse. She *has* to. It doesn't take much to get people –and therefore projects– off-track. "Do us both a favour?"

I shook my head. "I can't, Lena. I'm sorry." Now *I* was the one inclining to her. "I'm sure you're very, very...um...'fascinating' in bed...but my heart is, resolvedly, undeniably, spoken for."

"Truly, madly, deeply?" she allowed, playing her part perfectly.

I sighed. "And *then* some."

"Anyway," she smiled, "the favour is to not put any energies this afternoon into conversations about this. With anyone here. There are three deadlines I'm trying to hit, and I need everyone to focus."

I nodded. "A blow-job, then," I whispered as quietly as is possible, while still being heard.

Her stare was all she could manage without cracking up.

"Oh. Sorry. I forgot that you don't do the 'dangled carrot' as a means to manage people. Still; it was worth a shot."

Lena was all 'ravenous smirk'. "If this goes nowhere with her...I'm going to see she's fired."

"And the b-j...?"

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'You can run, but you cannot hide.'

Or, you can hide...but not forever...and really, why would you want to, after launching a gambit such as the one I just had in the Tea Room? (Confession #1: it might have taken all of my courage, all on-hand verve to say what I said, do what I did, but I don't think that I believed for even a second that my little broadcast would be the end of it. This was the equivalent of a 'teaser trailer' in a massive campaign for a new film. The only question might be 'What's the genre?') Besides; the nature of Paragon was that it was a relatively small environment, a tiny, enclosed village if you will.

A village in *business* together, where everyone knew everyone else's business within the business, and over time, knew much about their *personal* business as well.

So in time, *everyone* knew just about *everything* worth knowing.

I remember my first trip into the rest of 'the village', the first time I had to venture out of The Attic after Compression Moment The First. The tea interlude had been mid-morning. I'd spent the next two hours combing through some scripts, making amendments, suggesting edits, thoroughly revising the material so that we could deal with the project's updated needs that afternoon at a team meeting. This wasn't unusual, putting your head down at your desk and remaining there for an extended period of time. In fact, it was one of the reasons for the Tea Room; relief from being sequestered, a chance to stretch your legs, have some human contact, retrieve some liquid sustenance.

Come 12:45, I was ready for lunch, or in my case, a trip to the seafront gym I belonged to. Grabbing my stuff, I ventured out of The Attic, down the stairs and onto the floor below. It was a nice day outside, so many had exited for some lunch-hour sunshine; the desks were half-empty.

For example the cluster of desks where Tessa was worked was empty.

Except for her.

Several people noticed as I approached. One offered up no reaction at all to my passing. Two did, clearly broadcasting something...though I would have been hard-pressed to say whether they were projecting mild derision, whimsy...or merely delight that something had transpired that took the edge off what was often a pretty dull and regimented existence.

Tessa? Raising up her head as I strolled past, knapsack strung over my shoulder, the look she gave me, the expression on her face...

Daggers.