

Michelle Mee

DARJEELING TEA

In Darjeeling when you ask for tea it is served on a tray. The teapot size is chosen according to the number of drinkers. There will be cup, saucer, strainer and teaspoon. The milk and sugar are separate in a jug and bowl. In other parts of India, tea is *chai*. Tea, milk and sugar are boiled up together, and it will taste very sweet to those who take no or small amounts of sugar.

Madeleine took no sweetener in her tea. She liked to taste the flavour all by itself. "Unadulterated," she would say when speaking to other lovers of Darjeeling tea.

Madeleine and her husband Mark had been doing ethnographic research with the few remaining Lepcha people living in the region. He could speak the language and she recorded information and details. They worked and walked together, often without speaking directly to one another. Although vastly different in temperament, they seemed to join together and be complete in less pointed ways. At least that was how it appeared to Madeleine.

She now took tea by herself in her hotel. Sitting on the verandah, she stared at the bright green of the nasturtium plants. In spring, the flowers would look like small isolated fires. But now, in the cold she missed them. For periods now, she was the only guest in the hotel. It was just as well, for Madeleine could not bear to see another Westerner. This trip overseas had not turned out as she expected. Mark had left her abruptly, without warning, while in Darjeeling, for another woman. Stunned and bewildered, she did not so much feel wronged as wrenched from a happiness.

Madeleine comforted herself, when not completely thrown into an emotional sea, with a large brass pot of tea. The trickling sound as the liquid reached the base of the cup and slowly filled, the subtle flavour, and the warm, dark colour soothed her. Strangely, she thought the movements resembled those that occurred at a Mass. Taking tea was like visiting a church or temple for solace. Not for instruction or communion with a spiritual power, it was the order she liked, the small correct activity, the enhancement that came about through ritual.

Madeleine would take tea as often as ten times a day during this period, but she wouldn't eat. The staff at the hotel could see that she was surprised into grieving by her husband's sudden departure. Meena, the hotel owner's daughter, thought that before this event, Madeleine seemed to have centre, was

apparently secure. Now, thrown off course, she seemed to be punishing herself, or at least not thinking about her physical self. In her sorrow she was starving her body of nourishment, feeding only a desire for her husband's return.

As Madeleine had been in the hotel for two weeks, some of the staff had got to recognise her. They offered up small, interesting pieces of information about people and places and routes for various walks. Now that Madeleine's husband had left, one member of the staff, in particular, felt for her. Kanchi, the benevolent servant who dealt most with Madeleine, had some time ago also lost a husband in a similar way. Kanchi did not see Madeleine crying, but walking past the hotel room door, she could hear her. She performed small acts of kindness that Madeleine, inattentive because of her grief, barely noticed.

A week or so after her husband's betrayal, Meena suggested to Madeleine that she begin to go out again. Had she been to the tea gardens? An hour's walk, no more. She should make an effort and not hide in the room she was renting, as if there was nothing outside of interest. "Be independent," Meena insisted.

It was a winter's morning in Darjeeling. The mountains were obscured by clouds, and mist hung low and heavy in the valleys. Not far into the walk, Madeleine, strengthening herself, said, "Before I met him I was independent." She thought about it, how she made things work for herself, how she took risks, how she completed things. Then alternate thoughts crept into her head: "but with him I took care, thought more thoroughly before jumping into the fire."

Madeleine's emotional fog started to descend once again. She walked slowly, made tired by several days of disinterest in food.

When the gates of the Happy Garden Tea Estate came into view, Madeleine's mood brightened. "Well, maybe I won't make the same mistakes this time. Maybe some good will come from this," she thought, at once hopeful and doubtful.

But the gardens were a disappointment. Madeleine found that this was not the season for picking. There were no Nepali women working amongst the clumpy bushes of tea. The factory too was closed. She turned smartly on her heel and walked back into town.

On the verandah, back at the hotel, Kanchi yet again brought tea to the table unasked. Meena took a seat opposite Madeleine and arranged her sari across her lap. "Well?" She asked.

"Closed," Madeleine said dolefully. Meena poured tea. A river sounded into the cup. The spoon rang out twice.

"Let me tell you about Darjeeling tea," Meena said. Madeleine quietly nodded her head, and prepared to concentrate on something other than herself.

"There are four seasons," Meena began. "Each produces a difference in quality. The second season, or flash as it is called, is the best. Darjeeling is famous for it. It is not so bitter, although it does not have the green youthful flavour of the first flash. The second season tastes better. The flavour is rounded, and it does not need maturing like the first. It has learnt from the initial young spurt in spring, and comes out formed with a fine flavour. People sometimes have bad reactions to the first flash. There can be headaches and lack of sleep. The third and fourth seasons are stronger but have a different flavour.

"We want you to taste the second season tea. Kanchi has made it especially." Meena smiled a serene, patient smile, gathered the wraps of her sari, stood up and moved the cup closer to Madeleine.

Madeleine stared after them as they left, Kanchi the servant, behind her mem-sahib, Meena. "Those two women of different castes conspire over a selfish, sentimental tourist," Madeleine said to herself.

She looked down at her tea. It was amber-coloured, a leaf settled in it like a small ancient insect. She put the tea to her lips, and recognised the kindness shown to her. There was yet more thought and nourishment in the cup. At first she said, "sugar!" but no, she realised it was the sweetness of honey. It reached her stomach and glowed warm. The flavour of the tea, resonant and singular, made from unacknowledged strained labour, and the fragrance and taste of the honey combined to make her momentarily whole. Madeleine knew her sadness would re-surface. "But I'll deal with that when it happens." Meanwhile, the tea had made her hungry.

Hungry for the kindness shown in the cup, and in other ways, but also for the independence Meena spoke of. It had been lost and now must be found. The second flash may very well be the best.