

Tea For Two

“And then you’ll never guess who I heard from the other day. Yes! She’s still that spitfire we knew back in grade school.”

Alex had been enjoying the quiet evening on his balcony reading. She did this almost every evening. Each day after work, Alex would cook something for dinner and read whatever he’d taken from the library earlier that weekend in the setting sun. For the first few months, Alex had barely noticed her presence. Now, he was getting tired of having to listen to half of Mrs. James’s conversations.

As far as the scenery went, the bay was quite pleasant to look at while Alex ate his dinner there—or breakfast when the rare weekend allowed it. He had made a comfortable spot with a lounge chair and a few containers with the beginnings of mint and basil as the summer sun urged the plants along. The neighbors to Alex’s left rarely came out on the patio for more than testing the weather before leaving their apartments for the day. On his right was Mrs. James.

Mrs. James had a nice balcony to look at: metal patio furniture, flowering plants, and space for her orange and white tabby named Theo to watch over the neighborhood. She was a good neighbor: friendly, quiet, and wouldn’t admonish him if he had a few friends over on the weekend. The only problem was when Mrs. James had started having conversations with herself on the patio.

“And then she—what? Yes, still has those awful glasses! Big black frames that make her eyes bug out of their sockets. More tea?”

Alex lowered his book and looked over to the balcony. Mrs. James was pushing ninety and fiercely independent, though not afraid to ask Alex for help with her computer or moving a piece of furniture. She often wore long dresses with her hair up in a bun and chunky jewelry. Mrs. James was sitting at the patio table with a large, flowery teapot. She had two cups on the table and was filling one. Alex kept watching her as she put the teapot aside and raised her cup to her lips. Mrs. James looked up and met his eye with a kind wave.

“Good Evening, Alex!”

“Mrs. James...” Alex returned the friendly smile.

“That’s the young man I was telling you about,” Mrs. James leaned across the table. There was a pause and she smiled. “Yes, he does look a bit like a young Henry! I keep telling Irene that. No, he’s not seeing anyone right now. Oh, stop!”

“Do you...have company, Mrs. James?”

“Oh, how rude of me! Alex, this is my dear friend, Claire Neale. We’ve been friends since childhood.”

“Are you video chatting?”

“Oh, you know I can’t figure out that blasted thing,” Mrs. James said. “Alex is a good boy...always tries to help me with technology. Even gave me his phone number for when I’m in trouble.”

Alex looked across the way. Where Mrs. James was pointing and chatting, there was an empty chair. He’d hoped, at the very least, the cat would be occupying the chair. Mrs. James would sometimes talk to Theo, but she had been talking to people who weren’t there. Alex always assumed they were out of earshot for him, but Mrs. James had also never introduced one of her invisible friends before. Still, as delusions went, it seemed harmless and Mrs. James’s family visited her often enough for Alex not to see a point in creating worry. Alex sighed and grinned back. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Neale—“

“Oh, Miss Neale, please,” Mrs. James said. “She married, but—Irene, he’s young enough to be your grandson!”

Mrs. James shared a slight chuckle with the unseen person. Alex grinned back with a nod. “Well, I won’t keep you from tea with a friend.”

“Not a problem at all, Alex,” Mrs. James waived. “We—Claire! Don’t embarrass the poor boy. Let him read in peace.”

“I’ll move inside,” Alex smiled. “Hope you ladies enjoy the weather.”

“Oh, Alex!” Mrs. James stopped him. “Before you go—yes, I’ll ask! Irene has a granddaughter, Jane. If you’d like, I can see if she’d like to meet you and pass your phone number along.”

“If I Miss Neale’s blessing, feel free to introduce us.”

“Very good. Have a good evening, Alex!”

Alex collected his book and went back inside. He heard Mrs. James laughing across the street, a light chuckle rather than a cruel cackle. If she wasn’t senile, perhaps she was poking fun at Alex. He rinsed his dish clean and put it in the dishwasher, pausing for a cookie before picking up his book and settling onto his couch to read. Alex was from his book when his phone rang. He checked the display and could identify the number. He almost disregarded it, but something made him pick up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, my name is Jane,” the young woman on the other end replied. “This is going to sound weird, but are you Alex?”

“I am.”

“Do you know a Mrs. James?”

“Ah,” Alex chuckled. “I see my neighbor took my joking a little too seriously. I didn’t think she would pass my number along.”

“I’m sorry about her. She’s been calling me about talking with my grandmother for...months.”

“So, Mrs. Neale is real?”

“Mrs. James started having regular tea with her about a year after my grandmother died. It was a harmless enough delusion at the time, so we didn’t stop her. Her son and grandsons check-in and seems fairly aware otherwise. Still, it’s nice to know she’s still thinking of Gran.”

“I hope the call didn’t disturb you.”

“She may be a little...what’s the best word to describe Mrs. James?”

“Imaginative?”

“That’s a kind statement,” Jane laughed, “but it makes looking after her easy if she’s calling with messages for me from Grandma Claire. It’s actually kind of nice in a way. I hope I didn’t intrude, but she was rather insistent that Gran wanted me to call

you and I didn't want to lie to her."

"You could have told her that you'd call. I would have lied for you."

"I'd hate to do that to you. Besides, she spoke very highly of you. It's nice to know someone is taking care of her when her family isn't there."

"It's nothing really," Alex urged. "She's harmless enough and I think the most I've had to do is help her move a desk once. I don't mind too much."

"Well, then I'm glad she told me to call you. She may insist on playing matchmaker, but Mrs. James has good taste."

"Are you suggesting we take her advice?"

"I'm suggesting we see where this phone call takes us if I'm not pulling you from anything important."

Alex surveyed the open pages of his book, gauging how long it would take him to read the rest of the novel. After a quick calculation, he decided he could squeeze it in before bed. "Well," Alex laughed, sticking his bookmark between the pages and closing the tome, "we should at least be honest when I tell Mrs. James we talked."

"She says you're a big reader," Jane said. "What do you normally read?"

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"Quite the skittish boy, isn't he?"

"Oh, Claire," Mrs. James said, "let the kids have a few moments of privacy. Just because you can walk through walls doesn't mean that you have a right to everyone's private life."

"Just a quick pop in," Claire smiled, pointing a spectral hand. Claire looked just the way Mrs. James had remembered her when they were young. Long, blonde hair framed her face and seemed to fade in and out of existence with the light wind. She was wearing a white blouse and a dark skirt that Mrs. James had trouble telling exactly what color it was since it was so faded. The light passed through her form making it hard to see her hand as it pointed toward Alex's apartment. "I'll barely be gone."

"Now, now," Mrs. James said. "Don't bother the poor boy."

“How can you be so patient?” Claire said. “I want to know what’s happening!”

“I’ve made my fair share of good matches over the years,” Mrs. James said. “I think he and Jane will get along. We’ll let them have a phone conversation in quiet.”

“Phooey!” Claire folded her arms. “I only met him for a moment and I’m very protective of little Jane.”

“She’s a smart girl,” Mrs. James took a sip of her tea. “Besides, they’re both adults.”

“Hmmm,” Claire folded her arms and took a breath. “If this turns out wrong, I’ll haunt you for the rest of your days.”

Mrs. James let out a sharp laugh that startled the cat by her feet. “I’m sure you won’t have to wait here very long!”