

## Datura Tea

I never meant to hurt him. I hadn't wanted him dead. Well, that wasn't entirely true. On many cold nights, I'd shiver and picture him there. Right next to me his body would lay in that lofty attic, cold as the grave. Or his body convulsing, screams muffled by the fabric of those feather pillows he was so fond of. Or the ash sifting through my fingers after he succumbed to the flames of a beautiful inferno. I'd fantasized about his death in a myriad of fashions, each more gruesome than the last. No. To say I didn't want the man dead was untrue.

The true statement is I wanted him dead, but I hadn't meant to kill him. His death was completely an accident. A girl does not simply slay her father, no matter how despised or deserving that father may be. I'd only intended to scare him.

Let it be known that poisoning your own father is easier than one might think. Alarmingly so. Especially when your father treats you like a servant.

To be completely fair, he hadn't always been a vindictive tyrant. He was rather pleasant for much of my life. He and I got along swimmingly. Did all the daughterly and fatherly things expected. He would take me on strolls through the town square, buy me the occasional doll from Thaddeus the toy tinker, or something sweet from the bakery. Then we would come home and my mother would be waiting for us with a beaming smile. She'd greet us, a big hug for me and a kiss to my father's lips. We would spend time in the fields. I would run around, incredibly fast while my mother and father sat, their fingers twined together. A smile never graced my father's lips quite like those aimed at my mother. If ever he was passionate, it was about her. She was everything to him as was he to her. They were the epitome of what true love should be. And I always smiled to

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think that I was the product of such amorous devotion. Every day shined when it was the three of us.

But it poured each day that it was just the two of us. When Mama died of pneumonia, something in my father went with her. Never did I see a smile on that man's face after that dreaded day. Nor did I see any shred of warmth in his eyes. What I did see was fire. A scorching wrath that grew at every glance my direction. That very conflagration lashed burns across my back. Scarlet streaks across my skin that would remain until the day I died. I became less than human in his eyes. He had no daughter. How can a man with no wife have a child? Now he had a useless girl who could at least bring him meals and light his fireplace. Now he had a slave. No. I was worse than a slave. I was the despicable harlot that cost him the love of his life. I had gotten sick, Mama caught it too and from then on both of us were dead to him. But I was still alive. My heart still beat, my blood still coursed through my veins, but I might as well have been as stiff as Mother. Fifteen years it had been, yet he still looked at me as if I was nothing. And after fifteen years of servitude and beatings at his hand, my animosity towards him only grew..

One night, after a particularly brutal lashing, it came to me. He finished his abuse with a sharp strike of his cane- his weapon of choice as a man of his *sageous* age.

“Go clean yourself. You look a mess,” he guffawed, already cleaning my blood off the metal of his cane with his handkerchief.

I gathered myself, wiping the crimson trail that had tread down my cheek- almost as a substitute for the tears I no longer bothered to cry. I hardly ever let out a scream, either. After a while, these tokens of misery lose meaning. Silently, I stood from the ground, limping towards the door to exit his chamber. “And, when you're through collecting yourself, bring me my tea.”

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Without a word, I grabbed the handle, ready to flee. I knew it was a mistake, but I so desired to be free of this interaction.

It wasn't to my surprise when he roared a curse and pounded his cane into the wooden floorboard, "Are you deaf?!"

His voice trembled and was now hoarse, but it echoed just as it did fifteen years ago.

*"She's dead!"*

*Slam!*

*"You did this!"*

*SLAM!*

*"Are you deaf?! She is dead and you killed her! It should have been you!"*

It's a strange thing, that is. How a voice can wizen decades but ring just as powerful and resentful. As can a body. There was no out. He needed an answer or I'd regret it. I turned back his direction. "No. I am not deaf."

"Are you dumb?" he questioned, approaching me with an agonizing *thump, thump, thump* of his cane. He looked me over with his one remaining eye. Old age had overtaken his vision and he now possessed only a single functioning eye, the other glazed over in an almost icy blue film, yet his gaze remained heavy, almost palpable.

"I appear to be speaking. Are my words not answer enough?" the words escaped me before I could think better and just as quickly, his cane came down upon my head.

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“A sharp tongue can easily be removed. Speak wise as such again and you will regret it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I gritted.

“Oh. Well, thank you for your late-found decorum. Now go get my tea.”

I arched my back, my body taut as I once again forced the words past my clenched jaw, “Yes, sir.” Yes, I would get him his tea. That was exactly what I would do.

That was when my plan was hatched. And it was the last time the man that had once been my father would ever beat me.

And so, I got my father his tea. That is, after a stop through the market to get his favorite oolong. The merchant was a kind woman from Asia my family had dealt with for years. She sold good product, both foreign and native, and we made sure she made good profit. Perhaps my father’s only redeeming quality was his wealth.

“Chen, I’m looking for a certain plant. Do you suppose you could help me?”

“Of course, Miss Bennett. What is it you are looking for?”

“Are you familiar with the datura flower?” Her eyes widened and she didn’t have to ask the question that was visibly rattling within her brain. It was clear that she was well-acquainted with what I sought. And it was clear she was hesitant, even for a regular patron such as myself. I pulled a handful of coins from my pouch and placed them on her table. It took a moment, in which her eyes flicked from the metal before her to my face and back, before she grabbed the coins, slipping them in some pocket I couldn’t dream of caring about. With a nod of her head,

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she disappeared behind the cloth barrier between the market and some secret area the public didn't belong. I followed, a skip in my step.

I returned to the house hours later, with a basket full of herbs and teas. I spooned the oolong into some steaming water. Perhaps too much, but my father always did fancy a strong cup of tea. Then, I pulled from the basket a pale white flower. It looked an awful lot like the type my mother used to place in my hair on those shiny days. "A flower for my flower," she used to croon, placing the delicate blossoms in the crook of my ear.

*"There are dangers to this flower, Miss Bennett."*

*"I know of the dangers, Chen, or else I wouldn't be asking for it."*

Now, I stroked the pale petals of its bloom, almost too enchanted to grind it up. But all flowers must one day die.

*"But this plant... The harm it can do..."*

*"What harm might it do? It's a hallucinogen, I'm not asking to buy hemlock for God's sake! Now, sell me this plant. Or should I take my money elsewhere?"*

From a cabinet on high, I pulled the granite mortar and pestle I kept for making flour and placed the delicate thing into the bowl. A sweet, honeysuckle scent filled my nostrils as I ground up the plant.

*"Of course not. Very well. You shall have your flower."*

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Soon, I was carrying a tea cup up to my father's chamber. This cup had been a part of a fine china set. It had always been Mother's favorite. Fifteen years and still, everything reminds me of her. People never really change, I suppose.

I reached my father's door and tapped gently on it. As I did this, I could feel the pounding of my heart. The blood coursing through my veins.

I waited a moment for a reply. None came. I tapped twice more. Nothing.

For a moment, I stood there. I simply stood there. Somewhere, deep in my mind something told me not to do this. Something that sounded far too close to my mother's voice. My mother. She wouldn't want this. But neither would she want me mercilessly beaten. Neither would she want me left in an attic to freeze at thirteen years old. Neither would she want all this to befall her only begotten child by the hand of her husband. This would stop it. So, swiftly, I creaked open the chamber door, only to find the room pitch black.

I took hold of the lantern from the outside wall and journeyed in.

In the bed across the room, lay my father, covered in a sheet, as if he were a covered corpse. If only he had been. How things would differ if he were but a limp mound of rotting flesh. Perhaps I'd not have this weight on my chest. Perhaps I might even be happy.

Light on my feet, I neared his bedside and placed the cup and lantern on the dresser nearest him.

Slowly, I shifted the cloth, until a crescent of light fell upon his face. I gasped at the sight, both of his eyes wide open, his glazed, sightless eye somehow staring straight into my soul. I felt anger boil deep within me as it looked at me, mocking me. Who'd think it possible that a resting,

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inanimate eyeball could tease? But it did. It did so often, practically every day of my ghastly existence. A chill ran down my spine and a scream welled in my throat.

Before I could act in my fury, the old man stirred in his sleep. I jumped a mile before darting hurriedly out of the room and behind the wall. My chest heaved and my labored breathing almost muffled the grumbling of my father. I could barely hear the sheets rustle but then the unmistakable slurp sounded and I knew it was done.

For a fortnight I continued this. Each day, near the early hours of the night, I delivered him his tea. And what a joyous two weeks it was.

Every morning, I awoke to the sound of shrieking. Shrieking that boomed as my father's voice did, but was filled with all the fear of the screams that ripped from my own throat for fifteen years. And every day, the wailing would increase in intensity. At that point I would arise from my bed- a luxury appointed to me when my father found it in himself to possess some caricature of a heart- startled. The alarm I felt quickly settled when I recalled just who was shrieking.

I'd change quickly, then make my way to my father's bed chamber. Every morning, the same delightful sight. The old man would scramble in his sheets, clawing at things I couldn't see. And, in all accuracy, neither could he. As I would enter the room, making my presence known, his face lit up with sheer terror as I, surely, was some hideous and insidious beast. I'd simply smile and exit without a word, shutting his door as he continued his hysterics. Every day he seemed further down the path of insanity and his health worse and worse. And from there I would spend the rest of my day how I wished. I read books in the library. I went about town, greeting neighbors and townsfolk. I even bought myself a few new gowns. For the first time in fifteen

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years, I was living and my father was suffering. The world had completely turned in my favor, it appeared. It was... Bliss.

Until it wasn't. On the fourteenth day, I did not wake up to screams. I woke up at the exact hour I usually do, but there was not a shriek. Only a thump, followed by strained gasping. In the preceding two weeks, I had never bolted from my bed faster than I had that day. I propelled myself into the wall, I'd run so fast down the hall. I swung the door open and found him on the floor, swatting as he often did, but choking as he never had.

Quickly, I found myself on my knees by his jolting body. His eyes were screwed tight and his head was jerking left and right as if trying to wake from a bad dream.

Curious, isn't it? How can a girl spend half her life wishing her father would die, but when he's on the floor before her, doing just that, she panics?

"Father. Father!" I cried, trying to grasp his attention.

Suddenly, he gasped, eyes snapping open. Behind the film of his putrid eye, red flooded the icy blue. He lulled his head both ways, as he had before until his gaze fell on me. I felt myself flinch with my entire body, prepared to be struck or admonished, but it never came. When I finally looked back his way, all I saw was his lips stretched across his teeth in a wide smile. A wide, sweet smile. His hand raised and brushed my cheek, almost lovingly. "Rose," he barely croaked.

"No, Father. Mama's dead. It's me. It's Lillian."

"Rose... You're just as beautiful as the day I met you." his voice was growing faint and I had no idea what overcame me, but a tear slid down my cheek. "I'm sorry, Rose."



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“What for?” I choked out between heaving breaths. He had to say it.

“Lilly... I’ve done her wrong. I was a horrible man, a horrible father.”

A sob escaped me and my fists clenched around the cloth of his nightgown. “Yes, you were.”

“But you must understand, I was lost. When you took your own life, I was heartbroken.”

“N-no... No, it was pneumonia.”

His head tilted upward and his brows furrowed. “What? Did the girl tell you that silly story about sickness I told her?”

“No. She-I... I was sick and that’s how I died. I would never-”

“But you did, I found you myself- on the floor surrounded by those little white flowers. Rose, I don’t have time. I need to tell you... What I did was unspeakable. But, you’d said it yourself in your note, she *killed* you. I know you told me to take care of her, but I couldn’t pretend to love the very person who took you from me. Even if it was your dying wish. I am so sorry.”

If I’d had any breath in my lungs before, it was gone now. Tears were flooding down my face and I shook my head, “Your apology means nothing.”

“I know. But I had to say it. I am just a weak man who loved you too much. I’m so, so sorry, Rose.” And without another breath, his head fell back, and his body went limp.

I spent the rest of that day in sobbing fits. On that very floor, I fell asleep right next to my father’s dead body.

On the morning of the fifteenth day, I woke up. There was no shrieking. No thump. No gasping.

I rose from my resting place and took to the stairs, stopping only when I arrived at the door to my father's study. When I was thirteen, my father forbade me from ever entering his study. It felt strange, crossing the threshold, but fulfilling all the same. The walls were lined with shelves full of books and his desk was piled with a few more. That had been another of his few redeeming qualities. He loved to read. My mother and he would stay up late, discussing Jane Eyre or some Brontë novel. Father didn't care for them- he claimed they weren't men's books, that they were folly women's literature- but he always read them and always talked with her about them just to see her eyes light up. I'd watch from the staircase as she beamed at him, talking erratically with both her voice and her hands. Then I'd come tumbling loudly down the steps and their eyes would land on me. And they would smile.

Well, Father would smile.

She didn't. Of course, she *did* smile, but, now I seemed to remember it differently. When I'd come down the steps, Father lit up with joy. And Mother dimmed. Something in her soured and the look in her eyes was far from welcoming. But I'd jump in my papa's lap and hug his neck as his warm arms wrapped around me. Then, when I would turn back, my mother's smile was right there, where it had been.

Had it been a lie? A facade? All of it? I was her baby. Her child. Her flower. This couldn't be true. No. I saw it. She loved me. She *loved* me.

My father was sick. I'd been poisoning him for two entire weeks. He was delusional. Delusional people make things up. My mother died of pneumonia, I was there, I remember being sick!

But do I? Did my mother... take her own life?

There was only one way to know.

It took an hour. An hour of sifting and tossing papers. I tore books off of shelves, swiped everything off of my father's desk, opened drawers desperately when I saw them. Sitting in a drawer to the left. With a gut-wrenching roar of a scream tearing from my lungs, I threw his chair across the room, collapsing to the floor, the open drawer tumbling with me. A sound like broken glass echoed as the china tea cup struck the floor and brown remnants of long-since shriveled flowers drifted to the ground as well as a slip of paper covered with flowing cursive script.

I crawled on my hands and knees towards the piece of parchment. With trembling hands and teary eyes, I read the note:

*My dearest,*

*All I'd ever wanted was to be with you. And together we made something beautiful. But you got lost in her beauty and I lived in her shadow. This was never supposed to hurt you; it was never about you. I only wanted out, so I did what I had to. I couldn't live with it, but you can. You have your little girl so there's no reason to be tearful. She always was your girl. Treat her well, as you always did. And I never could.*

*Love, Rose.*

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My eyes were dry by the time I reached the signature. So, it was true. All of it. Not only had I killed my father, but my mother's blood had been on my hands for years. I suppose I really was her flower. A little, white flower.

Before long, I found myself at the stove, boiling a kettle of water, almost mechanically. I pulled out one of my mother's fine china tea cups. Poured boiling water into the cup with a few spoonfuls of oolong tea leaves. I brought out the mortar and pestle and ground up three of the white flowers, filling the air with a honey-sweet odor. I scooped the grounds into the cup and I took one long drink of datura tea.