

Chicken Soup for the

Tea Lover's Soul



Stories steeped in comfort

Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Patricia Lorenz



Compassion and a Cannoli

My dear, if you could
give me a cup of tea to clear
my muddle of a head, I should better
understand your affairs.

Charles Dickens

I grew up in a house where coffee was the strength of rocket fuel, and everyone drank it black. The only experiences I'd had with tea were the rare requests on holidays from one elderly aunt.

In college, I worked as a waitress in a small café on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. Inside the café I felt as if I'd left Manhattan. There were Renaissance-style paintings on the walls, chairs with iron backs with curlicue designs, big black and white floor tiles, and a ceiling made of stamped tin with a diamond pattern.

My boss, Pepe, wore a white apron tied around his waist, and his round belly rolled over the top. He wore black Keds and jeans. His T-shirts were red, green, or white—the colors of the Italian flag. He taught me how to put the cream in the cannolis by holding my hand in the same way my father had when he'd guided me through cutting a steak.

On my first day, Pepe directed me to the tea boxes. They took up two shelves behind the espresso machine. They were a parade of rainbow colors—Darjeeling, English Breakfast, Earl Grey, Jasmine, Peach, Vanilla Almond, Hazelnut, and Green—and an array of decaf choices, many with the same names, plus Peppermint and Chamomile.

I asked Pepe, "Why so many teas? Does anybody actually order tea?"

He laughed and said, "You must be Italian. Italians drink espresso, but everybody else . . ." Pepe shrugged and rolled his eyes.

We had a regular customer in the café, a man in his early fifties. His thick glasses had heavy dark frames that were too big for his face. They magnified his hazel eyes. He always wore a khaki trench coat and smelled musty, as if he lived in an attic. He always chose the table in the corner by the window. He'd take off his trench coat, fold it neatly, and place it over the chair across from him. I think he thought of that trench coat as the friend he was dining with. If his table was already taken, he'd break out in a sweat, and his magnified eyes would dart around the room. Usually, he'd wait for his table, except on rare occasions when I told him that folks had just sat down and it would be a long wait.

I'd bring him the tall, glossy menu, and he'd study it intently with his wacky glasses. I'd look over at him now and then. Finally, he'd close the menu, push it in front of him, and stare at his napkin. He'd move the salt and pepper shakers into position like defensive pawns in a chess

game. He always ordered the same thing—an Earl Grey tea and a cannoli. I'd ask him if he wanted milk or lemon with the tea. He always paused as if carefully considering these options and then he'd reply politely, "No, thank you."

When I put down the tea and pastry, his posture changed. He'd sit up a little straighter, hold his head a little higher. He'd pick up the teacup, put it right under his nose, and inhale deeply. His face lost its tension. He'd pull the tea bag out of the cup and place it in his spoon. He'd wrap the white string around and lift the spoon three times, forcing a few drops of tea into the cup. He'd set down the spoon with the tea bag on his napkin. He'd curl his hands around the warm cup. He'd then switch over to the cannoli. He was the only customer who used a knife and fork. Everybody else just picked up a cannoli like a hot dog.

I secretly named him Norman, after Norman Bates in the movie, *Psycho*. It was not because he frightened me, or seemed capable of killing a woman in a shower, but because he seemed like a man who'd always lived with his mother and rarely ventured out into the world.

One day, I decided to surprise Norman. I was tired of our silly ritual of me bringing the menu as if Norman had to think about what he was going to order. I wanted him to know that I knew him so well that I could bring him exactly what he wanted without him uttering a word, like in movies when the main character calls out to the waitress, "I'll have the usual." I wanted him to feel special.

As Norman folded his trench coat and placed it in its

spot over the chair across from him, I was already at the counter.

"Pepe, gimme an Earl Grey and a cannoli."

Pepe, knowing full well that our Norman always took his tea plain, winked at me and said, "Lemon or milk?" I giggled and picked up my order. I bounced over with my twenty-one-year-old spring in my step and proudly placed the tea and pastry in front of Norman with a big, proud smile. Norman broke out in a horrible sweat, far worse than the sweating when his corner seat was occupied. Poor Norman's hands started to shake. He began to rock back and forth in the seat and mutter words too quiet for me to make out. He looked up at me the way a child would if I told him I'd given away the family dog.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "I thought it would make you happy if I surprised you."

Norman replied in a whisper, "No, no, no. Please don't do that."

I nodded my head and silently gave Norman my solemn vow that I would never, ever do that again. Norman pushed the salt and pepper shakers into position. The following day when Norman arrived, I pretended not to see him. I wanted to give him privacy and time to meticulously fold his trench coat, lovingly drape it over the chair, sit down in the wooden chair by the window, and get his bearings. When he looked comfortable, I walked over to Norman with a menu and said, "Good morning," trying to sound nonchalant.

Norman took the menu and began to study it through his big, thick glasses. I trotted off to answer the calls of my

other customers. After I made my rounds, I returned to Norman in his neat and tidy corner with the folded menu and the salt and pepper chess pieces poised in position.

"What can I get you today?" I asked.

"Earl Grey tea and a cannoli," Norman said without looking up.

"Would you like lemon or milk with that?"

"No, thank you," he said.

I smiled, took the menu, and walked over to the counter, relieved that Norman was happy again and that he had at least one friend in the world—his waitress.

Dorri Olds