



Tea Judgement

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“No, I do not want to hear anything,” I say to the beggar who follows me around the tea plantation.

“Sir ... Sir, I need help. Sir!” he keeps repeating.

“Bullocks! You are utterly annoying!”

Enough is enough. It's so exhausting to work all day in this hopeless country where I find no amusing entertainment in the days of leisure, only tea leaves, a few cows, and the need to run away. I moved to Ooty a few months ago because it is my duty to carry on my family's legacy. Since my siblings and great-grandparents all live in London, I am the eldest son, the

one who must obey every command. We own a large amount of land in this place, which is used for tea plantations, because South Indian tea is in great demand all over the world. I used to work in better affairs. I worked for years in Dubai for a big company, also in hospitality, with great people. Here I must spend my time with people who just bury their dirty faces between tea leaves, always looking for some money from the boss.

As soon as I leave the house, I feel that all eyes are on me. The worst part is that I live right next to the plantation and many employees live in small houses nearby, so they do not miss a day of work. But the best time on a normal weekday is when I can smell the fragrance of fresh tea leaves as the fumes of freshly boiled tea drift across the field to my office window. Usually around five in the evening, the whole country smells like fresh tea. It is nothing like coffee, but it is even better. The sublime, sweet, creamy, and crisp smell of freshly made milk tea is heavenly. That's why I usually climb the stairs and grab a cup of this lovely beverage to keep working until seven. Then it's time for dinner at nine, because people eat late here.

“*Vanakkam!* It's good to see you, sir. How are you today?” asks a worker with a cup of tea in his hand.

“No *Vanakkam* nor *Namaste*. Yes, do not stay too long and watch the tea get cold. Go back to work.” I reply, because if there is one thing I detest, it is lazy people.

I do not fall for these people with their smiling faces and their hidden desires not to work.

They can take others for fools; they are here with their families and live in our premises because of their work. They are mainly employees, and we need many to extract the tea leaves and maintain the plantation. That is why my parents could not send my sister to help, because she is too soft for this. They need a strict hand, discipline, and rules. Otherwise, they will just spend their time lost in the fields doing nothing.

However, I have been feeling uncomfortable lately and have a little discomfort here and there. It started on the back of my left foot and has now spread to my upper right back. It is a tingling sensation with an ache that spreads, it feels like electrical tension. Sometimes I feel a kind of stabbing pain inside the marks. The one in my back looks like a giant leaf, but maybe it just seems that way because I have spent too much time looking at tea leaves. I think about going to the town doctor to have my ailment checked out, but I do not trust him, probably I would go to the state hospital. Some of these people advise me to go to their alternative medicine doctors, if you can call them that, but I trust them even less. So, I have come to believe that the marks feel like the ones whiplashes leave on the skin. It's crazy to think that because I have never experienced the effects. Not that I can remember it. But some nights I wake up in a sweat from nightmares that have to do with someone hitting me with a leather whip and me falling on the ground of a plantation. The pain feels so real that it even feels like the blows are slicing my skin and ripping it off all at once. I feel like I am bleeding every time I dream this. Yes, I try to comfort myself with the fact that they are just dreams, just dreams.

Whereas, feeling convinced and arriving at the hospital, the Indian doctors think they know everything. I ask if they have an English doctor or someone from abroad to treat me. No one knows, they know nothing, it seems. If they do not know about other doctors, me neither. Useless hospital! I wanted to see if I could find someone at the Medical Centre in Coimbatore who could help me, but that is equally useless. If it were not for the other miracles, if it were not for the culinary arts and ...

The ecstatic sound of the village songs, their incredible melodies soothe my soul. That is one of the things I want to thank these people for, their music. Also, for their lovely tea in the evening. But these melodies swirling in magical tones,

flute melodies and angel feathers, are something else entirely. I have never heard anything like it in my entire life. When I first landed in the south and heard my first village song, my heart stopped, and I felt like my soul was leaving my body and going somewhere else. I feel like this music is healing me and that maybe I'll be okay when I hear it. So, this afternoon I am going to sit on the lawn to listen to the villagers' pre-evening concert. They probably do not know that I am sitting there listening to these angelic sounds, but that is part of my privilege as the owner of their land.

I have been sitting here for an hour, the music never stopping, making me feel intense things I did not feel before. I have started crying for no apparent reason. There, among the tea bushes, the small green shrubs of tea goodness, I see a bright plant. It looks like another tea plant, but it is slimmer, taller. Its color is a little lighter, its green is yellowish, and it glows very intensely. I do not think anyone else has seen it, or I would have heard about it. Is that a tea plant? It does not look like it. I walk toward it, lured by its glow. And in the distance, I hear voices that sound like people working in the fields. But the closer I get to the plant, the more I realize that the voices are speaking in English, with a slight British accent. There are many voices, some of them familiar to me. I hear one that sounds like my grandfather's. Frighteningly, I realize that they are coming from the plant, which no one would believe me. Many voices come out of it at the same time until they stop murmuring and only one voice remains, my grandfather's. I hear "Charles, listen ... Charles ..." over and over again, causing me to distance myself from it and wonder if my rare ailment has turned me into a madman. The plant continues to glow, calling me from within, but suddenly I land on the ground. Wait! Ahh! I tripped and fell in front of the plant and now, I am having flashbacks of someone whiplashing me and kicking me to keep working when no one is around. Why is

this all happening? My back hurts like never before and it feels like someone is ripping my entire back off, like I am burning in a fire.

“I must get out of here! I must get out of here! This land is cursed!” I scream as I try to get to my bungalow and hastily close the door.

Even when I get back, I feel like I am going to have nightmares tonight, I do not feel well at all. I struggle to get some sleep; I know it will take time, so I get up and sit down at my desk. There's not much to do here at night, but today most of all when the angry wind outside is beating down on everything. There's a small storm and I hope it does not flood the plantation with all the prime material in it. Bullocks! I need peace and quiet! If not, it's going to be a very tough day tomorrow managing these people.

“What the heck is this?” I ask the wind that beats furiously against my window, looking out at the land drowning in the stormy fury.

But in the midst of the damp, windy, noisy field, I catch a glimpse of the glowing plant.

It continues to glow like a giant firefly, lighting up half the plantation. But I also hear a flute, a melody. But I do not see anyone nearby. I hear a tantalizing melody. Where does it come from? It is glorious, it is like melted bliss.

“I have got to find out what's going on down there.”

Soon enough am I in the field, setting out to find the glowing tea plant amid this raging storm, then I hear a voice asking me, “Who are you?”, I look around and see no one. And it asks me the same question again, until I come to the plant, which begins to glow brighter than before. The music stops.

“Charles, not even lashes, pain and violence is enough for you, huh?” a voice asks.

“Who's talking?” I ask, looking around in horror.

“It does not matter. Have you met your great-grandfather yet? A terrible man.”

“Who's talking? Show yourself!”

“Are you sure you want that?”

Immediately I begin to see things in my head. I see plantation slaves screaming and crying, falling to the ground, and being pushed by a man that looks like my great-grandfather. He even ignores children who are starving and ask him for food, just like I did with beggars, and even hits them several times, just because. I see his hand with his chunky gold rings and how he uses the arm of one of the children as a fleshy ashtray to put out the light of his cigarettes. I hear the pain in their voices, the suffering. How could I have been so blind? This was so wrong. I did not know all this because my family told this false story of us as the saviors who took the industry to new heights, but all at the cost of their lives, their existence.

“Forgive me, I repent. For my misdeeds, for those of my family ...” I exclaim.

“That is not enough, Charles. This had been going on for a very long time,” says a creepy voice coming from the glowing bush.

“What do you mean?”

I look around frantically, searching for the presence of someone or something that might make sense. The stinging sensation on my back has disappeared. I feel as if the entire mark has been erased or as if a curse has been taken from my path, from my body. But I feel more threatened by the minute. I sense that something is going to happen, that I am being examined and judged.

“So ... Are you repenting? Charles?” the voice asks.

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Would you do anything for that?” it asks sinisterly, almost laughing.

“Well ... what do you mean?” I ask with horror.

Wait ... I have realized that my feet no longer feel the ground beneath them, and my body is lifted into the air. I can see the small lighted houses in the distance. Everyone asleep, so peaceful in their homes. The field as dreamy as day ... the wind blowing gently ... no ... storm anymore. The ... green ... of the land. Oh, the tea ... I hear the wind blow ...

“Where am I? I cannot see anything so well. It’s out of focus. Why so many leaves? I am not able to take them off my face. What is this?”

I see people walking past me, but they do not seem to notice me. Why do they keep walking? I call out to them. Why do I not seem to be moving? I try to move my body, but I do not feel anything, it's like it's not responding. I am not even able to look down. I am just stuck here between leaves and leaves. That is all I can see.

“Hey, hey, excuse me! Sir! Mam ...” I shout, but no one listens to me.

“How beautiful this melody is! Do you hear it too? It must be someone from the villages, let’s see.” say a couple of tourists and go on.

“Hey, no! I am calling you!” I yell to get their attention as I see one of them collapse and fall to the ground. Others come to her aid and carry her away.

“Nobody comes around anymore ... Just a few people now and then.”

A group of tea workers come closer to me, they are talking among themselves, and I have hope that they see me, but they do not. They continue to pick tea leaves and throw them into their baskets, all in a hurry. Until they reach me, but they just grab me by the head and pull me so hard that I pass out. When I open my eyes again, I see that they are holding a bundle of tea leaves and pulling me towards them. They pull on what I think is my leg, and this time more leaves come out. I scream in pain, but no one hears.

“Stop! Stop! Somebody please ... get me out of here! Stop! That hurts, you ...!”

“Charles Willow is now more than a decade missing. We never heard of him again. Who knows what really happened,” one of them asks the other.

“Nobody knows but that was just a blessing from the *devas* for us. Awful man he was.” the other replies.

“No! I am here! I am not a bad person ... no ...,”

It can't be me. It can't ... They are plucking the leaves off my body. No. I cannot imagine I have become a plant. I must be dreaming. It must have something to do with the voices I heard from that crazy, glowing plant. Madness ... that's it, Charles. Madness ... I must be... crazy. I feel sleepy ... this is madness. Glowing... plants. Glowing ... sounds... music. Mad ...

“The day seems so bright. There is no storm, no rain. I do not see any workers either. It must be early morning; I can feel the fresh dew.”

I keep looking toward the field and can now see the back of my bungalow, but it looks different. It's painted brick red and decorated with wooden details. It was not like that before. It does not look like my bungalow anymore. I wonder why that is.

I see that there's a metal sign on the wall that says ... "British people are not allowed in these premises. They can experiment high toxicity that leads to death. Declared in 2025, by the Government of India."

"Mad ... ness ..."



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Madyanis was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Literatures and Languages of the Caribbean in English at the University of Puerto Rico. Her creative works have been published in Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture, Latino Book Review, among others.

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