Chai

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April 16

Dear diary,

He drinks chai.

She stopped writing, re-reading the words printed neatly on the page before her. Her teeth gently gnashed the top of her old black Bic pen, as she was prone to do, the tiny teethmarks running up and down the side as evidence. He drinks chai, she thought again to herself. Only three small words, but what a revelation. She removed the pen from between her front teeth and continued.

I thought I was alone in that particular fetish. I don't know anyone else who drinks chai, who likes it, or hell, has even heard of it. Half the coffeehouses in town don't even serve it.

She pondered the last sentence for a moment, before crossing it out lightly and scrawling WHAT COFFEEHOUSES?! in bold ragged capitals in the margin of the notebook. She smiled thinly at her own joke. Ashwood wasn't exactly known for its chic coffee varieties. Actually, apart from the college, it wasn't known for much at all, except for the time the local high school baseball team won the state tournament back in 1984. The people of the town still talked about it. Some called it reminiscing; she preferred to call it “stuck in a time warp.”

But somehow he’s found it. And he’s enjoying a steamy foam cup full of it right now, on this hideously dreary Monday morning. Will wonders never cease?

I know all this not because he told me, but because I can smell it. It sits on the left-upper-hand corner of his desk every day, patiently waiting to be consumed. The scent is that of pumpkin pie, laced with cinnamon and whipped cream. I know it’s chai. It’s a very distinctive scent.

Novelist John Gardner describes fiction as an extended dream. Readers take up fiction to be transported: to enter unfamiliar (or familiar) mental states and experience them more fully, from the safety of a position outside the story. Writers, on the other hand, must re-experience the often difficult emotions of their characters while maintaining some degree of artistic distance. Allision Perry’s short story, “Chai”, explores a young woman’s romantic preoccupation with an apparently unattainable young man. This is, of course, an old topic, but Allision renders it in a fresh and contemporary way. The story takes place in one room and within the space of an hour. The story’s final twist, a move worthy of O. Henry himself, proves that its true subject matter is not obsession, but courage.
The professor shut the door, startling her out of her daily mid-morning reverie. The one that always revolved around the boy who apparently enjoyed chai, or Gabe, as she had taken to calling him. It wasn’t his real name. She found the bland moniker given to him by his parents completely blasphemous in relation to his appearance, and had decided to christen him with an appropriate nickname. Gabe, short for Gabriel. A heavenly name for a heavenly creature.

The professor began his usual monotony-soaked lecture, forcing her to pretend to pay attention for the time being. He turned his back to write something on the board, and she snatched up her pen and scribbled down her thoughts in the few moments she had.

He sits one row across and three seats up from me. I’ve studied his back and head so arduously that I could draw it from memory, if it weren’t for that whole “lack of artistic talent” thing.

She chuckled to herself, thinking how proud her high school English teacher would have been of her for using the word “arduously.”

His hair is lovely. I don’t know how else to describe it and even that word simply can’t do it justice. Blonde and shaggy, it falls just below his chin in layers and rests on the nape of his neck in the back. And you know what else? It always looks just right, no matter what the weather. In a way, I’m insanely jealous. My hair will never come that close to perfection.

She patted her own brown locks self-consciously, cursing the humidity of the room and the stupidity of following her mother’s nagging advice to use hairspray. Meanwhile, the professor droned on about World War I.

She set her pen down for a moment and let her calm brown eyes stray one row across and three desks up. Gabe. He sure knew how to dress. Most of her journals consisted of her description of whatever outlandish ensemble he’d chosen to wear on that particular day. Today’s entry would be no exception.

Today he’s wearing a simple black t-shirt with the words “Hysteria, Bloody Hysteria” printed in bold silver English script across the chest. It doesn’t make much sense out of context, but really, what does? The shirt is faded and slightly wrinkled. I bet he does his own laundry. His jeans are washed out and worn, the dark denim color having been chased away by years of laundering. A coal-black leather belt littered with silver studs keeps them hanging precariously on his hips. They cling to his skinny frame the way a child clings to a mother’s hand — yearning to let go but knowing it’s safer to hold on. His shoes are plain black and white ADIDAS, the laces stained with years of dirt and frayed at the ends.

She was forced to close her journal and tuck it underneath her history book as the professor began to walk about the room as he lectured. To deter students like her from not paying attention, no doubt. Her fingers itched for freedom as he ambled up the aisle past her desk. Gabe swung sideways in his seat to watch the professor, and her chest thumped slightly as she planned what to write next.

Locking her fingers together, she rested her chin on the tops of her hands and studied him. What would it feel like to run her fingers through that silky blond hair? It was always drifting into his face, a fact that she actually found quite irritating. She wanted to see his face, his gently sloping nose and chin. Some days she had to resist the urge to walk up the aisle and tuck the baby-fine strands back behind his ears.

The professor returned to the front of the room, and her pen returned to her hand.

His eyes are the bluest things I’ve ever seen. They remind me of a blue crayon I used to draw with when I was young, my favorite drawing utensil. The wax from that crayon flowed smoothly onto the page like a light blue waterfall.

She had cried when that crayon broke, but she was only seven at the time and didn’t understand the concept of “Your father will buy you a new box tomorrow, dear.” She did, however, understand the concept of sentimental value.

So when I see those spring-sky eyes, I can’t help but think of that particular crayon, and it attracts me even more to him, if that were possible.

A faint rustling from a diagonal direction caught her attention. She halted her pen and raised her head, watching intently as Gabe stood up gracefully and walked to the other side of the room toward the pencil sharpener. She sought a quick remedy when her view of his frame was blocked. Her old wooden desk, with its unflattering graffiti scratched across the top, squeaked in exasperation as she scooted it over to get a better look.

The way he walks is fascinating, and completely unlike any other male I’ve seen. It’s almost as if he’s not even walking, but just gliding, his sneaker-clad feet barely whis-
pering across the tiles. His arms, like his legs, are long and lithe. Even something as mundane as sharpening a pencil seems beautiful and ethereal when he does it.

Gabe gently blew the stray shavings from the tip of his pencil and headed back to his seat. She edged her desk back into place, satisfied now that he was back in her direct line of vision. After he settled back into his usual position, she reluctantly directed her gaze back to her notebook.

He slouches. Not as much as Daniel Blevins, who sits right across from me; Lord knows he must have the spine of a snake to sit like that. No. Gabe leans back in his seat, those long legs spilling carelessly out from under the desk and into the aisle. He sets his elbows on the desk, sometimes resting the side of his face in the palm of his hand. His hands are large, nimble, smooth, with long fingers. I wonder if he plays an instrument. Piano, maybe. Not guitar, that would surely put calluses on his delicate fingertips.

He taps his feet. I don’t think it’s a conscious thing. I just think he can’t help but create rhythm, which feeds my earlier suspicion about the instrument. His taps are light, gentle, and quick, but they shake his desk slightly. I worry that one day the vibrations will scoot the chai right off the edge and into the floor.

She sighed, wishing she had a cup of chai to nurse that moment. His cup. But even more than that, wishing she had him. But all she had was a mind full of colorful dreams and an empty heart. Some called it obsession; she preferred to call it an “engaging interest.” Well, her mother always said she had a way with words.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday she observed and wondered about him in the same way. She planned on what she would say to him at the end of class. It always began with the same scenario.

Maybe today I’ll follow through with the plan. I can see it now—Dr. Bowman dismisses us, the class stands up to leave, and I follow him out into the hall, where he will take his cup and throw it into the nearest trash can. I’ll ask him about it, we’ll talk, and then I’ll ask if he’d like to go get a cup together sometime. I’ve envisioned various conclusions to this fantasy, some are good, some are not so good. Some end with a smile or a “maybe,” I’m rather fond of these. Others end with all of my worst nightmares coming into play.

What if he laughs, and walks away? What if he has a girlfriend? What if he throws his chai into my face with disgust?

OK, so maybe the latter one is a bit melodramatic. I’ve come up with a thousand other endings, and only one possibility scares me more than that one. What if he says yes?

She tossed her pen aside disgustedly, shaking out her wrist. It always seemed to ache when she got to this part. The “confession” part of her journal. And it was always the same thing. Every day, she vowed to do it. Every day, she failed grandly. She flipped back several pages in the notebook to view the proof.

March 18

I’m going to do it. I have to. It’s the last day before spring break. If I don’t do it now, I won’t see him for a week. Besides, if he says no, I’ll have the whole week to recover.

Logical enough. But had she followed through? No. She flipped back some more.

February 15

He can’t be from around here. I’m sure he’s from New York, or Chicago, or someplace huge and exciting. His clothes are too different, too vintage and casual; his hair too perfectly coiffed, and his manners too polite, to be from around here. I’m dying to know where he’s from. I’m dying to hear about the world outside of this campus, and outside of Ashwood.

I’ll do it today. If he rejects me, then maybe I can pretend I’m still hung over from Sarah’s singles party last night.

She smiled to herself briefly. That certainly would have made for some interesting conversation. More pages fluttered.

January 10

He’s here. In this class, in this room, with me. I can see him right now. I can’t believe this. I haven’t seen him since that day. I was beginning to wonder if he ever really existed, or whether it was all just a figment of my imagination.
She remembered that day well. The start of the spring semester, the day she realized he was in her class.

She continued the backwards journey through her thoughts, searching for the day she’d first caught sight of him.

**September 28**

*I saw an angel today.*

Not a real one, of course; at least, I don’t think so. I was crossing the street, walking to chemistry. The sky was gray, the ground was gray, and my mood wasn’t much better. But when I looked up, my eyes caught a glimpse of light. Tall, blonde, fair, with a light blue backpack that concealed his wings. I nearly tripped over the curb, staring at him. When I regained my balance, he was gone. Out of sight.

September 28. The day her obsession — erm, “engaging interest” — began.

“OK, class. Put your books up, get paper and pencil. Pop quiz,” the professor announced.

SHIT.

She tossed her books into her bag haphazardly. Before slamming her journal shut and throwing it in with the rest, she scrawled one more word at the bottom of the page, in stout, declarative letters.

*TODAY.*

“This quiz is a bit different from the ones I usually give. It’s not multiple choice, and it will be worth 100 points, instead of 50.” The professor smiled at them as if he expected a warm round of applause. It didn’t come. “It consists of one question. Only one. We’ve been talking about World War I today. When it comes to war, soldiers are often defined as ‘courageous.’ Not many would argue with that, but, I ask you — what is courage?”

The class sat blankly, waiting for him to continue. She tapped her pen against the desk, Gabe scratched his left shoulder.

“That’s your question,” the professor said pointedly. “What is courage? Write it up, turn it in. You may go ahead and leave when you’re done.”

How lame, she thought, staring at the blank sheet of paper that mocked her. Courage was a million things. It was diving into a lake to save a child. It was refusing to sit at the back of a bus because of your color. It was moving out of a small town and out west to pursue your dreams. It was... Finding the guts to ask a boy if he’d like to have coffee sometime. She chewed on her pen thoughtfully. True, true, but she couldn’t very well put that down verbatim. She wondered how to define the word succinctly and sufficiently.

Gabe stood up. He was done. Her heart leaped; he was leaving. This was her chance. She could stop him in the hall, and no one would be around to see her make a complete ass of herself.

It occurred to her that the situation was already looking nothing like the ones she had envisioned in her head for the past few months. She took that as a good sign.

She thought of that one word, written boldly at the bottom of her entry for April 16.

*TODAY.*

What is courage? she printed neatly at the top of the paper. Her eyes never left him, and she took a deep breath, knowing that finally, it would be TODAY.

‘*THIS IS.*’ She drew the letters large and brash, finishing the ‘S’ with a flourish and dotting a neat period at the end. Picking up her backpack, she scurried up the aisle, paper in hand, and tossed it face down on the professor’s desk, offering him a sweet smile. Adjusting the frayed black straps of her backpack, she walked purposefully out the door.