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The last time I was in Shanghai, I was lured into a tea shop by a display in the window. There were six large wine glasses lined up on a shelf. In each one, at the bottom, rested a tea flower. Each tea flower had unfolded its leaves to reveal a different blossom or bud—chrysanthemum, rose...The blossoms and buds floated above the tea flower, adding a contrasting color to the glass of green tea. I immediately went into the shop and purchased a box of this special tea. Events prevented me from enjoying it.

Months later, I remembered the box and examined the writing on the back. Since I don't read Chinese very well, I had to make do with the strange and awkward translation. 'Adding-Flowers-to-the-Brocade Tea incorporates thirst satisfaction, health protection, and magic appreciation. It is praised...for its Six Superbs of green color, distinct fuzz, delicious fragrance, clear juice, sweet taste, and nice shape.' Just what I need under the circumstances, I thought, as I broke the seals on my package of Kangyi Famous Tea. Inside was a plastic tray filled with dried tea tied up in tight buds. I broke the plastic and took one out to look at it more closely. As to the other matter, I can't tell you a thing. My lips are sealed.

I was determined to find a proper container for the unfolding of my tea flowers. I thought that the use of wine glasses in the shop window in Shanghai was an affectation of the exotic, a European exotic that added an extra zest to everything Shanghainese. I had purchased a glass teapot in anticipation of this moment.

On the box it advised: 'Put a tea flower in boiling water in a glass with 7 cm in diameter and 12 cm in height. Uncover it in 3 minutes, and then you can enjoy both the taste and the scene.' As the tea leaves slowly unfolded, I began to worry about the code I was working on. I suppose that I can reveal that much. I break codes. This one was particularly difficult because I suspected it was in a language I didn't know. That meant that I had to guess the language, break the code with that in mind, and deliver a text I couldn't understand.

A series of eight small orange flowers emerged from the tea flower, floating out into the teapot and finding their level. I waited the required three minutes and then poured some tea into my cup. The taste was indeed delicious.

The code had been typed on an old Selectric Typewriter with a broken 'e' key. The paper had been folded so many times that lines bisected letters in unpredictable patterns. I began to think that the lines were also part of the code. My mind wandered off to a set of Chinese seals I'd seen recently. What if each seal was a symbol in the code, or each flower. Dipping the seal into red ink, placing a piece of paper on a soft surface, stamping the seal and carefully rocking it back and forth to get the ink to print evenly...

There was knock on the door. I hesitated just long enough to imagine the lock cracking, the door breaking...

'Come in,' I said, and he did. He looked suspiciously around my room, taking in the box of tea, the glass teapot and its contents, the crushed piece of paper and my notebook.

'Working?' he said.

'Just playing around with some ideas,' I said as I closed my notebook and covered the piece of paper with a napkin.

'Let's take a look,' he said, as he opened my notebook and took the piece of paper in his hand. Everything had quickly moved to another level.

'What's that you're drinking?'

'Kangyi tea.'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't know, that's what it says here on this package.'

'I see that it was recently sealed. You had to break the seals to open it.'

'Yup.'

'Funny those Chinese, very clever.'

'Not any more clever than most.' I didn't like his attitude.

'Well, are you going to give me a cup?'

'Excuse me, I didn't mean to be impolite.'

'Let's drink tea. Isn't that the way those Chinese scholars would do it. Very civilized. Then, we'll talk about your project. Maybe we can work on this together.' He looked at the paper and notebook in his hand, immediately absorbed in the problem.

I went out into the kitchen to get another cup. My hand trembled but I didn't drop anything.

When I poured his tea, I noticed the gesture. It's something that most Chinese do. They tap their fingers on the table near the teacup. Someone told me that it had to do with bowing to the Emperor or not bowing in this case but making a small gesture like bowing, a truncated gesture. And he knew it. When had he been to China? Had I been followed?

He sipped his tea as though he were tasting a fine wine.

'A valuable purchase,' he said. 'When did you break the seals?'

'Just now, a few minutes before you arrived.'

'I'd say that was a lucky break.'

'You would?'

'I won't kill you now, not with this glorious tea. I see you're a woman of taste.'

He put his hand over mine and I felt something break inside me. I began to cry, silently, in a way I hadn't done in years. He leaned into me, holding me in his arms and caressing my hair.

'It's over,' he said. 'Let it go.'

I'd like to say that I did. But I saw the tea through my tears, flower buds floating in pale green water, tea splayed out like a weird sea animal. It was then that I broke the code.

'You won't break my silence. My lips are sealed,' I whispered as he kissed me again.

'We'll see,' he said and sipped his tea.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.