

## **An Extra Tale of Ba Sing Se**

**Jenny Sweeney**

"How unusual," the man remarks to no one in particular as he walks down the busy cobbled street.

"What's unusual?" asks another man, shorter and skinnier than the first, standing beside a cart laden with large verdant cabbages. He has a slightly nervous way about him. The first man answers quickly to reassure him.

"The buildings. They remind me of Japan. Or China maybe."

"Never heard of China or Japan but this looks like just about every other street in Ba Sing Se to me. You're clearly not from around here, are you?"

"No". The taller man frowns. Where has he come from exactly? Snatches of memory flit across his mind and coalesce into a life story: his own crossed legs in front of him as he lifts a bucket slowly from the sandy floor, his anticipation rewarded with a perfect cylinder made out of the grains. Standing in front of a room full of students who dutifully copy the equations he has written on the board that will definitely be on the exam. A house full of teenagers that fill him with a wellspring of paternal tenderness as they mill about the kitchen taking breakfast as they please. The smiling face of the wonderful woman that gave her love to him. Her name is Barbara. He knows it better than his own. In the memory she calls him Joseph.

"You feeling ok?" asks the cabbage seller.

It suddenly occurs to Joseph that he could do with a drink. The recommendation from the seller is a small tea shop run by a man called Mushi and his teenage nephew. "Odd kid, that one. Sullen, quiet boy."

Joseph smiles. He is well versed in the art of appreciating sullen adolescents and their hidden depths. He thanks the seller and heads off to the tea shop. Two lefts and a right...

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Mushi cuts a very comforting figure when Joseph steps through the door. A stout older man with an impressive triangular beard and kind eyes pottering about the kitchen of his establishment, wiping down the sideboards, his movements unhurried and calming. He turns to his new customer and says "I'll be right with you." There's no one else in the shop. Clearly this is a slow hour for them.

"No rush!" Joseph calls before taking a seat on one of the wooden benches. Within a few moments, the proprietor has presented him with a plain teapot and a small cylindrical cup. Joseph is pleasantly surprised by the simplicity. Before the war he was accustomed to standing in line at a modern coffee chain, trying to find a plain option in a needlessly complex menu as the loud coffee machines hissed at him to hurry up. He fully sympathized with a kid he knew who said those places triggered a meltdown in them. Mushi sits at another table, taking his own tea and the opportunity for a quick break. Joseph clears his throat and asks "would you like to join me?"

Mushi's face brightens "certainly my friend. Tea tastes much better when shared." Soon, proprietor and customer are sitting together striking up an easy conversation that flows as smoothly as the tea they pour.

"Have you been in business long?" asks Joseph.

"Not at all. Both my nephew and I needed a fresh start, a simpler life with far gentler passions than we were used to."

Joseph smiles. "Tea is a passion of yours?"

"Yes. I find there are very few sorrows that cannot be soothed at least a little by a well brewed pot of tea," Mushi tells him.

"Something we have in common. Where I'm from, offering a cuppa can be an apology, a remedy or a sign of affection."

"The language of tea! I wish my nephew would appreciate it as I do but he is young. I have faith in the potential growth of his wisdom."

"Young men have a habit of surprising you and, very often, themselves."

Mushi chuckles "Indeed!"

The two men talk for over an hour. Of places and politics that Joseph has no clue about but which he is sure will be useful to know of in the strange world he has passed into. Mushi, it turns out, was a soldier in his own war once. "I wish I could say it was against my nature but I was a more vainglorious man at that time. My son followed me into the war and never came home." Here darkness passes across the man's face. "It would have been his birthday in a week from now."

"I'm sorry."

Mushi looks hard at him. "Something tells me you have been in a similar place yourself."

"I have lost a wife. Not a child though." Joseph considers this. "Actually I suppose I have. Where I'm from there is strife and war too. I suppose I might be considered a soldier as well although I'd much rather be called a teacher. Ewan, a young friend of mine, would say the latter suits me more I think."

"Then you are wiser than I was when I fought my war, my friend. I wish I had known what it would cost." Mushi tells him.

Something tells Joseph that this man will appreciate the mantra he has lived his life by. "The pain of missing someone is always worth it for the joy of having known them."

Mushi looks thoughtfully at Joseph. "I very much agree. Lu Ten was a great joy in my life."

When it comes time for Joseph to leave he thanks Mushi for the delicious tea. Then, with a rush of embarrassment he remembers that he doesn't have any means of paying.

"But you have paid me." Mushi tells him. "An interesting conversion is worth more than common money. Be well my friend. Enjoy the peace you have found away from your war."

"You as well," Joseph wishes from the bottom of his heart and resolves to pay another visit to this place of soothing words and comforting tea.