



2013 Honorable Mention

## The Teacup

by CJ Fosdick

**Like the whine of a bee, the sound called up the ghost of GrannyLou. I was sitting in her favorite chair with a coffee cup warm in my hand, absently circling the rim with a forefinger. The hum startled me; I had often seen Granny do this on the rim of a glass half-filled with water.**

She always laughed at me when I tried it. I rubbed harder, faster, slower, changed glasses, varied the levels of water and still always failed to produce a single decibel.

"Obviously, this talent isn't hereditary," I lamented. Granny would then console me with what we did consider hereditary: our dry wit, bookworm penchant, and of course, our physiology. When she died, Granny's hair was thin and patchy and her eyes were clouded by cataracts, but I had photographic proof on my nightstand that she once mirrored my thick red hair and eyes rich as dark chocolate. We joked about our long waists and walnut-sized bosoms, but my long legs gave me a definite height advantage.

"Age shrivels the bones," Granny chortled. "If I had breath for another hundred years, I'd be living in a shoe-box."

Our christened names reflected the family propensity to sentimentality. "Lack of originality," Granny preferred. She was named Louisa May because one of our ancestors inspired the Alcott author of *Little Women*. There were at least four or five Louisa's in our genealogy. There were also plenty of Jessica's—my name, a modern version of Jessamin—my great-great-grandmother's name.

Granny told me that her mother and grandmother Jessamine were also redheads. "Jessamine even escaped being scalped by Indians only because they considered the color sacred," she snickered.

"Anne Boleyn was also a redhead," I snorted. "Her hair color did nothing to spare her life."

Quick as ever, Granny quipped, "Cured her royal headaches, though."

Longevity was another trait shared by the western women in our family. I knew Grandmother Jessamine had also lived to the century

mark because her extraordinary life had been detailed in a memoir written by my brunette mother, whose life was shortened by cancer 20 years ago. In 1993, at age 10, I had inherited all Granny Jess's original journals and sketchbooks that my mother used for her book, and if I have a daughter they will pass to her.

If my favorite cousin Jake or my two uncles felt cheated by all this feminine legacy, they didn't let on. Like the red hair that seemed to pass mostly through our female line, the gift of storytelling also passed from one descendant to the next, varying only by degree of talent. As vanished hands beknighted us through generations of tough Wyoming women, we must have felt empowered with a sense of history that needed telling. By mouth, pen, and eventually laptop, we recorded that history in diaries and journals and memoirs like my mother's. The men of our family were bemused and tolerant, accepting our "gifts" as one might accept a left-handed child with a smattering of second sight. It was more than second sight, though. So much more.

Sipping coffee, I stood at the kitchen window watching the squirrels scan the ground for seed scattered from the birdfeeder. Women in every family, by virtue of pro-creation, must relate to links, I thought, chained to the past with an eye to the future. An organic bite of immortality? Perhaps as natural and normal as royal successions. Princesses to queens?

Our scepter was the calling stone, also passed down by Granny Jessamine. The story goes that she found the little buffalo-shaped stone in a riverbed of The Black Hills in 1875. It



was thought by Indians to be a talisman, meant to call the buffalo that was their commissary. When the herds began to disappear, the stone's magic shifted to lesser specifics of prosperity and love. The charm had worked so far. None of Granny Jess's descendants possessing the stone had ever died poor or hungry or bereft of love. She had set a particular benchmark for love, marrying a green-eyed Indian half breed against all 19th-century odds.

So far, I was not poor or hungry, but romance wasn't knocking at my door. Being still single at age 30 wouldn't bother me if I didn't feel the pressure to conceive a female heir. Of course, in 2013 it wasn't considered a necessity to be married before conception. But I didn't even have a sperm donor in mind. True love was always the anecdote that eluded my life, despite a few short-term relationships squeezed into semester breaks. My focus was elsewhere.

Cousin Jake once called me a professional student, collecting degrees like he collected matchbox cars as a kid. I had a B.A. in Women's Studies, after dabbling in Art, American Indian Studies and Western History as an undergraduate. I double-majored in Education, collecting an M.A., also earning a M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Wyoming University in Laramie.

"You should have gone into engineering or geophysics," Jake teased one lemonade afternoon on the bungalow's back deck. "Surrounded by testosterone, you might have also picked up an M-R-S degree."

Smirking on the outside, I burned on the inside at the tired old joke that made GrannyLou laugh out loud. At 32, Jake was still single. GrannyLou, herself, had not married until she was 35 and my mother was born years later. By these gauges, I still had time before I resorted to an online matchmaker.

When the job market in education dried up in the stagnant economy, I settled for a job a half hour away, at the resurrected Old Ft. Laramie, doing whatever the Park Service delegated. This included library research in the old Cavalry building, using my writing skill to create pamphlets, write scripts for the interpretive staff; even conduct an occasional tour when Wyoming schools took spring field trips. All of this at less than half the pay I had expected for a woman with multiple degrees. If I didn't enjoy the history, I might have felt a little bruised.

Still, I wasn't suffering. I had a job, my little red Nissan, and now, Granny's bungalow with a full basement to sort through. Jake claimed Granny's old town car, and some of the other relatives took odd china pieces or knick-knacks for keepsakes. Her clothes went to "Mr. Goodwill," and I expected to provide him with more donations as soon as they were processed. In my own good time; processing my grief was going to take time.

I missed the woman who had raised me after mother died. There was just the two of us. I knew my grandfather and father only from

photos; both of them were lost to 20th-century wars before I was born. Granny was a survivor; forced to be independent long before women decided to trade spatulas for screwdrivers during WWII. Her work in a defense plant gave her the impetus to follow her heart's desire, seeking a career that gave her the most independence—and satisfaction.

She raised mother alone after grandfather died in the Korean War, working as a freelance technical writer for several national corporations. When her eyesight became fuzzy and she lost enthusiasm for travel, she retired to live comfortably off Social Security. Despite the nagging infirmities of age, she never complained, accepting thicker glasses and brighter wattage to enable her love of reading. Every year she donated a box of books to our local library for their annual sale.

"An enlightened mind will always keep you young," she would say. I was never chastised for my taste in reading fantasy and sci-fi, while she preferred classics and non-fiction. In her lifetime she had seen airplanes and television,

fast cars and computers break the barriers of sci-fi. She revered the Kindle I bought her a few years ago, amazed at the technology that allowed her to adjust the font size and backlighting.

Her hybrid mix of wit and introspection was like the needle of a compass, always pointing me true north. A well-intentioned neighbor told me at her funeral that the death of someone as old as Gran was more of a blessing. "Grief lingers only when someone is young or dies unexpectedly," she assured me. I could only imagine what Gran would have quipped about that remark. Until she caught pneumonia, I

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thought she was invincible, if not immortal.

When Jake came to collect Granny's car, we did a rough survey of my task. "Why don't you just light a match?" he joked in his off-hand way. "There must be hundred-year-old dust in those boxes, not to mention spiders." For such a tall piece of physical fitness, my brawny cousin had an irrational fear of spiders.

"Moron, I'll save you some specimens," I chuckled, playfully cuffing him on the chin. This was going to be my own private tour of history. Even if anyone had volunteered, I would have refused their help. No one—not even Jake—was going to sift through Granny's basement booty of photos and books, cards, magazines and yellowed news clippings. What did other families do? What happens when someone dies without heirs? "Light a match?" Granny might have agreed with Jake.

For weeks, I wallowed in legacy...and dust that forced me to pop allergy pills like jelly beans. I kept a box of Kleenex and bottled Dasani close at hand. The Kleenex absorbed tears over photos and memories, and removed some of Jake's spiders, living and dead. The water soothed a throat dried more by emotion than dust.

I felt Granny's presence as I went through box after box. She wasn't a hoarder, but she did save a lot of things that made little sense, and sometimes I found myself talking out loud to her.

"Why, Granny, WHY would you keep a scrapbook of John Garfield, interspersed with old news clippings of the assassinated President Garfield? Were the Garfield's related?" I could see her as a girlish fan of the handsome actor, maybe meeting him once and blurting out her connecting thought; "Are you related to the President, John?" She would have called him John. Granny never stood on ceremony or felt intimidated. She was on a first name basis with everyone she ever met, famous or not.

In a small trunk I found a rusty spur and moldy pinecones, alongside a packet of unmarked seeds wrapped in a threadbare corset, and an old leather shoe that looked like a reject from a munchkin of Oz. I laughed at the imagination that must have cherished such keepsakes.

The metal box was in a locked drawer of a small kneehole desk under the basement steps. I had been in the basement many times, but never noticed the desk in the deep recesses of the stairwell. Perhaps because it blended into the dark cubbyhole, shrouded in a brown tarp tucked neatly around it? The little desk was probably more than 100 years old, with a scratched top and two drawers on the right side. I snapped a dinner knife, wedging the locked drawer open. The box was locked as well, but the rusty clasp was no match for my determination and curiosity.

Wrapped in yards of cotton wool, the teacup was a surprise. For something so carefully wrapped and deliberately hidden, it was just an ordinary blue and white teacup, the twin of one I had accidentally broken many years ago. I remember Granny's fingers shak-

ing uncontrollably when she picked up the pieces. Her face was white as frost, matching the tone in her voice when she scolded me for being careless. I had run to my room in tearful shame, confused by her unexpected anger. It wasn't like her to set such store in a stupid cup. Was it some kind of superstition or one of those legacy things, a sentimental hand-me-down? Even when I broke one of the little ceramic owls in her collection, she merely shook her head. "No life lost; just a couple wings clipped," she had smiled.

I examined the cup carefully. It was an antique; that much I presumed, with a circle of little blue turtles collar-ing the rim. Holding it up to the light, I could tell it was porcelain, and when I examined the bottom for a trademark, Mitawin was painted there in delicate black script. Oriental? I didn't recognize the company. Neither did Google or Wikipedia. I decided to take the cup to work. My supervisor, Sandra Mowry, was a flea market sleuth who was interested in Granny's owl collection. Maybe she would know if the cup was worth anything?

"I don't recognize the hallmark," she said, tipping the cup upside down. "Maybe it's not a company name. Mitawin sounds like a foreign word. It almost looks like a hand-painted addition, not a stamp. If your grandmother added this, it would certainly devalue the worth of the teacup."

Puzzled, I shook my head. "This isn't Granny's handwriting, and besides English, she only knew a few words in Lakota. We had a Sioux ancestor," I explained with a shrug.

"I think there's a paperback English-Dakota dictionary for sale in the Visitor Center." She ran a hand

through her mop of unruly brown curls. "Worth a look, anyway."

"So you think the cup might be valuable?"

"Well, it could be, but it's not gold-trimmed or intricately designed, and without a matching saucer it would probably not be worth more than a couple tanks of gas these days."

I decided to check out "the word" before donating the cup to the prop room. People often donated vintage clothing or antiques to the Fort, to include in the restoration "sets" or the museum displays. Besides the library, the old cavalry building had many rooms on the top floor converted to props and storage. I was scheduled later in the day to join the interpretive staff for an 1875 ladies tea party in the parlor at the old Burt House next to the Trader's store.

My costume was a blue toile dress with faded lace trim at the high neck and buttoned cuffs on the long sleeves. It was an original dress, typical of something once worn by a young officer's wife, but it was tight around the neck. I always marveled at how small the young 19th-century woman must have been. Most of the original dresses had to be lengthened at the hemline and let out in every seam from the waist up.

I brushed my hair and tied it back with a blue ribbon, grimacing into the mirror. Did Fort Laramie women suffer a spill of freckles over their nose? Probably not, if they wore hats or carried parasols, and they did have rice or corn powder to dust on unwanted blemishes. Our ancestors were not sun worshippers. In most of the old photos of women from that era, hands and faces were the only skin that showed; always pale and pasty.

Since I was the first to arrive at the Burt House, I fired up the cast iron kitchen wood stove and set the teakettle on the burner. Because the interpretive staff decided to be as authentic as possible to the times, we didn't cheat by using tea bags. An old tin canister held the dried leaves of sassafras and mint. When the teakettle whistled, I poured the boiling water into a large copper teapot over a measure of dried flakes. While it steeped, I arranged a bowl of sugar and small teaspoons on a pewter tray, and carried it all to the table in the front parlor.

Small by today's standards, the parlor was still the largest room in the old house, containing a wicker settee, a piano and a few carved wooden chairs, with a black pot-bellied stove in the corner. A large open archway led to the adjoining sitting room with additional chairs and small tables covered in stiff linen doilies anchored by painted globe oil lamps. A bookshelf hung on the wall between two deep windows displaying an array of books with the same mustelene covers, including many by Mark Twain, an acquaintance of the Burt family. Family photos in an accordion frame dominated one table.

I set my teacup down to study the handsome face of Lt. Colonel Burt in his braided uniform. Even without the streaks of gray in his coarse hair, he had the dignified look of a man of great authority.

His wife, in counterpoint, had shiny dark hair parted in the middle and dark eyes hooded by straight brows. Two boys and a girl in the linking photos had their father's long face and light hair, but all were favored with the same complacent mouth of their mother.

With Granny's teacup filled, I settled in a tapestry-covered rocking chair in the parlor and absently ran my finger around the rim of the teacup. The humming surprised me again. Granny's talent finally passed on? It was a strange hum, lower than the whistle of a teakettle, almost like the wind souging through the trees in a stiff evening breeze. I felt suddenly light-headed, transfixed by the sound, and fingers that seemed to circle with a will of their own.

So engrossed was I that I barely noticed three other women had joined me. I didn't recognize any of them—or their costumes—but then I was still a recent hire since the Park Service always added extra part-timers for the busy tourist seasons. I had only filled in with interpretive history once before and wasn't familiar with all the scripting. Basically, we were tour guides pretending to be historic characters in little vignettes meant to showcase history more than any acting skill.

I set my teacup down on a little lamp table and smiled. "I'm pretty new to this, but I did start the tea already." I gestured to the teapot I had covered with a quilted cozy to keep it warm, and rose to introduce myself.

"I'm Jess..."

The brunette image of Elizabeth Burt curled a brow. "I know who you are," she said very slowly, "and I do thank you kindly for fixing the tea. I only meant to take a short nap after Andrew left for drill. I must have drift-

ed off upstairs.”

I followed her glance toward the hall stairway. The upstairs bedrooms were also staged with period furniture, including a tall carved wooden bedstead with a horsehair mattress covered by a 19th-Century patchwork quilt. Before any of the interpreters passed the grade for living history tours, we had to learn the history of the house and furnishings, the names of the past residents and even a few of their personal quirks...to spark interest. I remembered reading that Reynolds Burt, the youngest son, was still living when the Park Service restored his former home. On a nostalgic visit to Ft. Laramie he had donated some of the actual furnishings and described where everything was once placed when he lived here as a boy.

There was no Indian threat to the fort in Burt's childhood memories. To combat the monotony of life here, Reynolds recalled the soldiers were diverted by playing baseball, racing on foot or horse, playing cards or reading. He had followed in his father's footsteps in the military, earning the rank of Brigadier General by the time he died in 1969.

“You must be Elizabeth Burt,” I said, amazed by her uncanny resemblance to the photograph.

She fixed me with a squinty eye. “Of course.” As the hostess she was portraying, she invited the other two women to sit while she took charge of the teapot and poured three cups of tea.

One of the women was quite portly, but well-fitted to her costume, her hair fashioned for the times with a neat part in the middle and pulled back into a bun at her neck. The hostess called

her Sadie. The other woman was younger, with a few forehead curls and light gray eyes. “I'm fairly new here myself,” she said. “There are so many names to remember.” She nodded as she brought her teacup to her lips. “Cynthia Capron, Miss. I do remember you, however. There aren't many redheads here, even among all the men.”

I laughed. “You ladies are quick, but shouldn't we wait for an audience before we fall into character?”

Elizabeth Burt frowned at me. “An audience? Well if you mean the children, they have already left for school, and the men are all at mess for dinner. It looks like we may be the only women today who'll substitute tea for dinner.”

“I still need to lose some baby weight,” Cynthia sighed, “and I'm happy to skip a meal now and then to do so.” Surreptitiously, I glanced at Sadie, noting her flush descend into the folds of her neck.

“How is little Henry?” Elizabeth Burt quickly asked.

“Alas, he has not got his father's constitution; seems to catch the ague easily.”

Alas and ague? Wow! These women have even studied the language of the times. I rose to pour myself another cup of tea and nearly tripped over the length of my dress. When I pulled my skirt up, I could hear the intake of air suck around me.

“What are those?” Sadie pointed, and all eyes converged on my feet. I had forgotten to find a pair of button-down shoes in the separate costume room that held historic accessories.

“Oh crap,” I said, “I forgot to ditch my Crocs.” I met the stares and stifled gasps head on. “What?” I peeled the purple sandals off my bare feet and held one gingerly in each hand. “I'm so used to the comfort.” I shrugged, “They mold to my feet.”

“Where did you get those?” The hostess backed away as if I held a dead mouse.

“WalMart in Cheyenne,” I told her. “They have some in neon colors this spring, perfect with beachwear, and great to wear gardening or washing your car. I mean your horse,” I chuckled.

Stout Sadie plopped down hard enough to make the wicker settee wobble sideways. She pulled a cloth handkerchief from her bosom and began to dab at her neck. The other two ladies carefully examined a sandal, each turning it over and over in their hands, sniffing it then staring at me, dumbfounded.

“What is it made of,” one of them asked.

“Rubber, I think, or some kind of synthetic.”

“Sin...sin...thetic?” the Capron woman's gray eyes were round as silver dollars.

“Where are your stockings?” Sadie asked.



I lifted my skirt to my knees. "You don't wear stockings with Crocs," I said, wiggling my orange-painted toenails.

Startled grunts followed Sadie's slow hissing, like a tire deflating. I looked from one shocked face to another. "You've never heard of Crocs? They've been around for over 10 years now." What was wrong with these women? Were they playing with me? Pretending to live in character as some kind of initiation for newbies?

Flustered, I picked up my teacup and marched to the front door, suddenly craving fresh air...and tourists. Several costumed soldiers passed on the boardwalk, heading for their stations, no doubt, at the oldest military building in Wyoming—just two doors away. Old Bedlam was over 164 years old now, the two-story, white-washed building reminding me of a mansion seen in the Civil War South more than bachelor officer quarters.

I did a double-take, clutching the porch pillar when my knees began to quiver. A boardwalk replaced the gravel tour paths. The ash trees bordering the parade grounds were gone, replaced by trees and bushes pulled inside grass yards with picket fences. Picket fences? I stumbled to the gate and shielded my eyes to look down Officer's Row. Two more homes now stood between Bedlam and the Surgeon's house next door, and south of the landmark, three large identical buildings had replaced the limestone ruins. Across the parade grounds I could see more buildings where none had stood two hours ago, more trees and picket fences and even gaslights!

I knuckled my eyes and turned left. A group of costumed children were playing with some soldiers. Horses were tied to a hitching rail in front of the trader's store, and two Indians in

costume lingered around the entrance, talking to a tall man dressed like a cowboy. Horses? Cowboys and Indians? What happened to the paved parking lot...the cars...the Visitor Center?

I closed my eyes and could feel my body sway in the wind. No Wyoming wind? The air was unusually stifling, heavy and still. A woman came out of the Trading Post and opened her parasol. She followed a little boy headed in my direction, thrumming a stick along the picket fencing. I stopped the boy with a hand trembling on his shoulder. "What...what day is this?" I asked.

The boy stared at me blankly. I squeezed his shoulder. "S...Saturday," he stammered.

"No, no," I hissed, "what year? I mean what is the year?" He shrugged my hand off and ran back to his mother, now close enough to catch the worry in her face. "The year," I screamed. "What is the year?" Dizzy, I leaned heavily against the fence, dimly noticing tea stains on my dress, and fingers clamped around an empty teacup. In a blur I saw the tall cowboy turn and run toward me in slow motion. The little boy was yelling something at me. I saw his mouth move, and the words shoot at me like bullets slugging through air thick as honey.

"Eighteen...eighty...six!"

The last thing I heard was the scream of the teacup as it smashed against the fence.

**"JESSAMINE, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"** The deep voice came at me through a tunnel. I blinked at the shadowy face backlit by the sun. The cowboy was cradling my head on his lap, loosening my neckline, circling my temples with calloused fingers that smelled of leather and woodsmoke. "Jess, look at me," he commanded in a voice edged with concern. "Are you hurt?"

I struggled to my elbows, shaded my eyes from the sun and looked into the chiseled bronze face of a man with long black hair and eyes the color of emeralds. I knew the face, had seen it in a leather-framed tintype in one of GrannyLou's basement trunks. The faded gray image did the man no justice. I was lost in the subterranean depths of brilliant green. I knew the history of those eyes, the color of my mother's eyes. The eyes of my great-great-grandfather!

A little girl suddenly appeared beside him...on her knees...grabbing my hand. "Ma," she cried, her red pigtailed banded in bright yellow ribbons. Her eyes were wide as pennies...green copper pennies. She has his eyes.

"What's wrong with Ma?" the girl cried.

My stomach lurched. I could feel the sour contents climb to swirl in my mouth, a whirlpool looking for an exit. I turned my head and retched into a clump of weeds poking through the boardwalk, then wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Embarrassed, tears prickled in my eyes and blurred the new faces that surrounded me. An overture of voices buzzed over me. I recognized only those of the tea ladies.

“Did she faint?”

“Loosen her stays.”

“Take her to the Doc’s office,” Elizabeth Burt said.

I could feel his arms supporting my back, my knees, lifting me as if I were light as a sunbeam. For a few seconds he tipped me toward his chest and bent his head toward mine. The brim

of his hat sheltered us and I could feel his breath warm on my face. “Mitawin,” he whispered, softly kissing my brow. “I’m here.”

My heart skipped a beat. Mitawin... Mitawin? The word inscribed on the bottom of the teacup. The Lakota dictionary I checked out at the Visitor Center said it meant wife. My wife!

The little redhead picking up the shards of the teacup was the last thing I saw before everything went black again.



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**CJ FOSDICK'S** short stories have appeared in *Writer's Digest*, *Seventeen*, *Woman's World*, *Far West*, and anthologies in the U.S. and Canada, including *Blossoms & Blizzards*, a Minnesota anthology she edited and published with a grant. Find excerpts of her historical fiction saga at [www.cjfosdick.com](http://www.cjfosdick.com).