

A History of Tea
By Jemimah Halbert

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Mrs Charles was our neighbour when I was growing up. Her children had grown up and left home before I was born, and the only time I saw her husband was when he was sitting in a big brown armchair watching TV in the front room.

Mrs Charles always had time for us; she would give each of us a glass of juice and a stale biscuit from the pantry. She had contracted polio as a child and her right arm was small and weak. She walked with a limp and would often use a crutch when she walked up the front path to collect the mail.

My brother, Mum and I would visit her quite often, and I have many memories of sitting at her green kitchen table every Thursday after school. Mum and Mrs Charles would sit across from each other with a huge brown teapot between them and a mug each. Mrs Charles liked her tea strong, and put four heaped tablespoons of loose leaf tea into the pot. Mum didn't like it quite so strong so she drank it with lots of milk and some cold water.

For the first cup they would drink their tea and chat politely while my brother and I nibbled our biscuits, drank juice and kicked each other under the table. Come the second cup they would be telling each other funny stories and we would laugh along, often not understanding what was so funny. By the third cup of tea my brother and I would be bored and whining, so Mrs Charles would go into her son's old room for a board game or some toys and leave us in the front room with instructions not to disturb Mr Charles. After that Mum and Mrs Charles would talk all afternoon, sometimes in hushed voices, leaning across the table to share the week's gossip. They would drink the teapot empty several times before we finally left at dusk. Mum would stay up late that night watching television or reading, I assume to dispel some of the caffeine in her system. Mrs Charles would soon call to arrange another tea-date the following Thursday.

We visited Mrs Cold and her children less often than Mrs Charles, but they were much more enjoyable visits for my brother and me. Mrs Cold, or Kaz as she told us to call her, had four children around our ages, and we would tear through the back yard on their expensive bikes or build cubbies next to the chook house from sheets of corrugated tin. Kaz and Mum would smoke cigarettes and drink tea from a white pot with a cartoon cow on the side. Kaz collected cow-themed kitchen implements. Mum only smoked when she was around Kaz; she called it social smoking. Kaz would often pour something else into her tea: a dark liquid from a little bottle at the back of her pantry. She

usually offered it to Mum, who always politely refused. They would sit on the back verandah with a pack each and a cup of tea and Kaz would tell Mum about the latest drama with her kids, her sisters-in-law, her mother-in-law, her own mother, and whatever else was happening on the farm. I sometimes sat with them to listen to the stories, but most times cubbies were more interesting.

Kaz swore a lot. She smoked, she swore and she was mean to her kids. They didn't care, but one incident left me in tears and Kaz was horrified, bribing me with a jam biscuit and some Coke. I didn't understand any of this until Mum told me the story several years later. Kaz's family was very different from ours. I think that's why Mum liked going there every couple of weeks for a smoke and some tea.

Kim's house was beautiful. Our house was cluttered with items that were practical, but not very pretty. Kim's house was minimalist, with hardwood floors, and beautiful furniture and decorations. She and her husband Steve lived on a farm two hours' drive from our place, so we only visited them a few times a year. My strongest memory of their house, apart from it being beautiful, was the smell. We would go into their house and there would be a very strong smell, not an unpleasant one, but strangely herbal and smoky. Years later Mum and Dad told me that it was the smell of dope, because Steve smoked a lot of dope in the house; he mixed it with his tobacco and smoked it like cigarettes.

Mum, Dad, Kim and Steve would sit at the antique wooden table in the kitchen, smoking and drinking tea from a funky purple pot with a curly handle. Kim and Mum drank green tea with cold water and no sugar. Dad and Steve sometimes had beers, but usually drank loose-leaf black tea so strong that you could almost stand a spoon in it. They had all known each other for years: since before they were married. They had two children, Sara and Josh, who were the same age as my brother and me. We would run around in the garden or play in their big shared room. Sara's Auntie in England sent her dolls for every birthday and Christmas, and she had a huge collection. We would drag out the enormous dream house and play dolls with the boys until late at night while our parents were smoking and drinking tea. At the end of the night we would all be asleep in the lounge room in front of a movie, and Mum and Dad, smelling like cigarettes, would pick up my brother and me and take us out to the car. I knew we had left Kim's house when I woke up in the car and couldn't smell the strange smell any more.

We visited my Mum's parents quite often, a few times a year, but we only visited my Dad's mum and his step father once or twice. Nanna and Bob lived several hours' drive east of our place, and when I was young I thought that was why we didn't visit them much. I discovered some time later that it was because when Bob married Nanna he forbade Nanna's children from visiting them.

I have almost no memories of Bob because we always visited Nanna when he was at golf or visiting his children. Nanna was a lovely little lady who always smelled like soap and lavender. However, she didn't seem to know what to do with us when we were there. We would all shuffle into her very clean house and sit down at the dining room table. She would make weak tea in a delicate china pot with geese painted on it, and pour the tea into small matching cups with saucers, adding a lot of milk and no sugar, in the tradition of the Depression generation. Soon after pouring the tea and sitting down herself she would offer to put on a video for me and my brother, or we could go play in the garden. Her garden was beautiful, but there were no swings or things to play on, so we always chose the video.

One day Bob came home early from golf while we were there. My brother and I were in the living room when he came in. Mum, Dad and Nanna all stood up when he came in, and there was some conversation. I don't know what was said, but we left soon afterwards. Many years later Nanna gave me the teapot that she used to use, the one with the geese on it. She didn't give me the matching cups and saucers, and when I asked what had happened to them Nanna said she didn't have them any more. I saw one of the saucers on her shelf a few months later; it had been carefully glued back together with only a few chips missing around the edge. There were no cups or other saucers sitting with it.

In the small country town I grew up in there was a bush fire brigade. The fireys, mainly middle-aged men, would train each spring on the footy oval for fire-related emergencies, in preparation for summer. Dad was in the fire brigade, along with the fathers of most of my friends, some of the teachers from our school, and some older blokes from farms around the district. After each training session they would gather in the old town-hall-cum-fire-depot and drink tea from tea bags so ancient they had to be boiled with the water to get any flavour out of them. One of the dairy farmers would bring a flagon of milk from that morning's milking, and someone would rummage around in the kitchen to find the black pot encrusted with brown sugar which had to be chipped loose with a teaspoon. They'd sit around in their smoky fire gear and swap stories of all the fires they'd fought in their time, or the fires their fathers or grandfathers had fought before them. There weren't many genuinely dangerous bushfires in the history of our small town until the Spring of '97. I was eight years old at the time, and the whole event had a strong impact on me. My brother and I thought the world was going to end that week.

A spring storm blew through in the first week of November, lightning and thunder rattled the trees and the houses, but the only damage was two broken windows in the top storey of the pub.

Two days after the storm it was discovered (by a man of questionable character who had been checking his crop of questionable tomato plants in the middle of state forest) that the lightning had started three separate fires in the old growth forest south of the town. The fireys rallied, along with the fire brigades of several other towns north and east of us. Most of the bush around the towns in that area was burnt off every two or three years to prevent build-up of fuel – the generations of fallen leaves and debris that cause the worst fires. But these three fires had started in old-growth state park forest – forest that had not been burnt off in over a hundred years to preserve old trees and wildlife within the park's boundaries. The most the fire fighters could do was to burn back from the roads to prevent the main fires from getting out of control and crossing into the bush around the towns. The fireys worked all day and all night, sleeping in shifts around the clock.

For the first two days no-one in the town was very worried, but by the third day the wind was behind the fires, pushing them closer to the town, and a government warning told everyone to be on alert for evacuation. Our fore-runner was packed with clothes, books and food in case we had to make a quick escape, and Mum kept us home from school just in case.

Dad was out fighting the fires on the second and third days after their discovery, and on the evening of the third day he didn't come home but slept in the town hall/fire depot, which had been decked out with food and beds for the fire fighters. The morning of the fourth day was grey, and grew darker and darker until the clouds finally broke and it rained all afternoon, all through the night, and all the next day. The fires were all but out, and the forest too damp for them to gain heat or momentum. When Dad came home on the morning of the fifth day he was black with soot and damp from the rain, but all three of us jumped on him when he came through the door. He told Mum that the fires were out and no-one was hurt, which was a relief for her because we'd only had exaggerated word-of-mouth news up until then. That afternoon Mum unpacked the car and Dad cleaned up, then we all sat down at the kitchen table, Mum and Dad with a cup of tea each and my brother and I with a milo. Dad told us all about the fires and he and how the other men had pulled together and fought it to the last, conveniently leaving out the part about the rain. The story of the fires became a source of town pride – everyone kid at school had their own details and versions to share, and poetic licence was rife. Every spring training since then has seen the fire brigade settle around the table in the town hall and tell the story of that fire. And I believe the leftover box of teabags from the nights spent there during the fire has greatly improved the proceedings.

The first time I made a pot of tea was using my parent's seventies enamel pot made for sitting on the edge of a stove. It makes up to eight cups of tea at a time, although the size of the cups my

parents use reduces that to about three cups per full pot. They have used that enamel pot for as long as I can remember, and I know it's because it cannot be smashed.

I had a lot of ideas about the procedure for making tea, but when faced with the empty cups of four guests, none of these ideas formulated a process. Mum wandered over and I expressed my problem. She leaned over the island bench and said: 'You got the kettle boiled? Good. Now how many of us are there? Your dad already has a coffee so it's me, Mrs Charles, Irene, Mr Putton, Sal, and do you want one? Ok, that's six of us, so put seven scoops of tea in the pot: one for each person and one for the pot. Now fill it up with hot water to the fourth line of straining holes where the spout is, see? Right, let it sit for a bit then strain it through the tea strainer in the drawer, the one with the ducks on it. Mr Putton doesn't have milk, just add a bit of cold water to his, don't fill it too much. Sal has three sugars and Irene only likes a bit of milk so don't add too much. There you go, all done! I'll help you carry them over...'

When I left home at nineteen, Mum gave me a small one-person pot with flowers on the side. It holds one whole cup of tea, plus a little extra if you fill it up to the top. I've tried many different teas with many different people over the years, but I have to say that my favourite will always be bog-standard loose-leaf with some sugar and milk. Nothing fancy.

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About the author

Jemimah Halbert is an Honours graduate of Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. She is the Editor-in-Chief of the creative writing 'zine *Underground*, has volunteered at the State Library of Western Australia, Katharine Susanna Prichard Writers Centre, and University of Western Australia Publishing. She has since relocated to Melbourne, Victoria, and finally caved and joined Twitter.