

Reflections on Chrome

by Paul Hargreaves

Deirdre and Pearl look on from their perch at a nearby table as Eleanor dribbles water from a plastic measuring cup into the bowl of crushed chalk and, using a clean fork, mashes it into a thick paste. A few more dribbles bring it to the correct consistency, somewhere between pancake batter and cooked fudge. There's a silver teapot sitting on the table before her, gleaming in the mid-morning sunshine that floods in through the east-facing windows.

The hand that rolls up the sleeves of her crisply starched shirt is liver spotted and tremulous. But what it lacks in grace it repays in purpose as Eleanor pinches a corner of a rag into the paste and vigorously smears it onto the belly of the teapot. Using fingertip pressure and tiny circular motions, she works the paste round and round, round and round, eventually covering the entire surface with a milky veil.

Using a second rag, pulled from a cardboard box on the floor beside the table, Eleanor wipes the teapot clean and begins a slow process of buffing the metal to a mirror sheen. For added measure, she exhales forcefully onto the silver and polishes it yet again. This is the part that most animates the hushed discussion between Deirdre and Pearl — the thought of Eleanor's fetid breath dewing up on the cold metal.

Deirdre and Pearl witness this performance almost every morning — provided the sky is bright, for Eleanor chooses to remain in her room on overcast days — and their whispered discussion, much like the polishing, is invariably the same.

"Imagine drinking tea brewed in that filthy thing, the way she breathes all over it," says Pearl.

"It was certainly clean enough to start with," agrees Deirdre.

Both have heard the nurses discussing it, have caught the words 'obsessive' and 'forgetful' amid the medical terms. Eleanor has heard these whisperings, too, and knows that the two women are

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watching her intently. But she pays them no mind as she places the pot on the very centre of the table and leans back to admire her work. The sun and the sky and the flowers of the garden all bend beautifully along its polished curves. Her own image, centred on the shoulder of the pot, is round and full and almost youthful, and all the lines magically bend into a vanishing point directly behind her, framing her in the very centre of her tiny reflected universe.

The teapot had been a gift from her mother, presented on the day of her engagement. Looking at it now, she remembers the sunlit afternoon of the party, a family picnic in the woods. She remembers the red dress she had worn that day and the sight of Ted as he had picked her up in his new Ford convertible. The flash of crimson pleats reflected in the chromed bumpers had dazzled her so. Indeed, everything about Ted had dazzled her so, which is both the gift and the price of innocence. The wedding had taken place the following spring.

Sitting with her teapot, Eleanor sometimes wonders what ever became of the old Ford. She pictures it lying unloved and canabalized in a crowded junkyard or in an overgrown backlot, weeds fingering into the bottoms of the seats through rust holes in the floor and rainwater seeping in through the rotted canvas roof. She pictures the bumpers, the chrome deeply pitted and scaling off, exposing dark patches of the underlying, ever-seeping corrosion.

The marriage had not lasted through its fifth year. Ted's appetite had grown more insistent, his expectations increasingly disturbing. She could not imagine any decent woman submitting to the sorts of perversions into which he wordlessly manoeuvred her body, and her resistance had only fuelled his frustration. Nor did she have to wonder what he found so fascinating in Janet Bullard, with whom he was whispered to be spending more and more time. Knowing the kind of woman Janet was had allowed Eleanor to retain a measure of dignity as Ted backed the Ford down the driveway, the back seat filled with armfulls of his things.

Deirdre and Pearl now rise and walk past her table, on their way to the snack bar for shortbread biscuits and a little something to dip them into.

“What a lovely shiny teapot,” Pearl offers, with thinly veiled scorn.

Eleanor does not answer. She leans forward and watches as the reflections of the two women recede behind her. It is during this close observance that she notices the fingerprint on the base of the pot. She knows that a yellowing spot of tarnish will begin to form there almost instantly, slowly turning sepia and marring the perfection of the reflected image.

One of the nurses now approaches and offers to help gather her cleaning things. But before she can pack any of it away, Eleanor's sinewy fingers clench upon a corner of the cloth and she once again exhales deeply onto the side of the pot.

