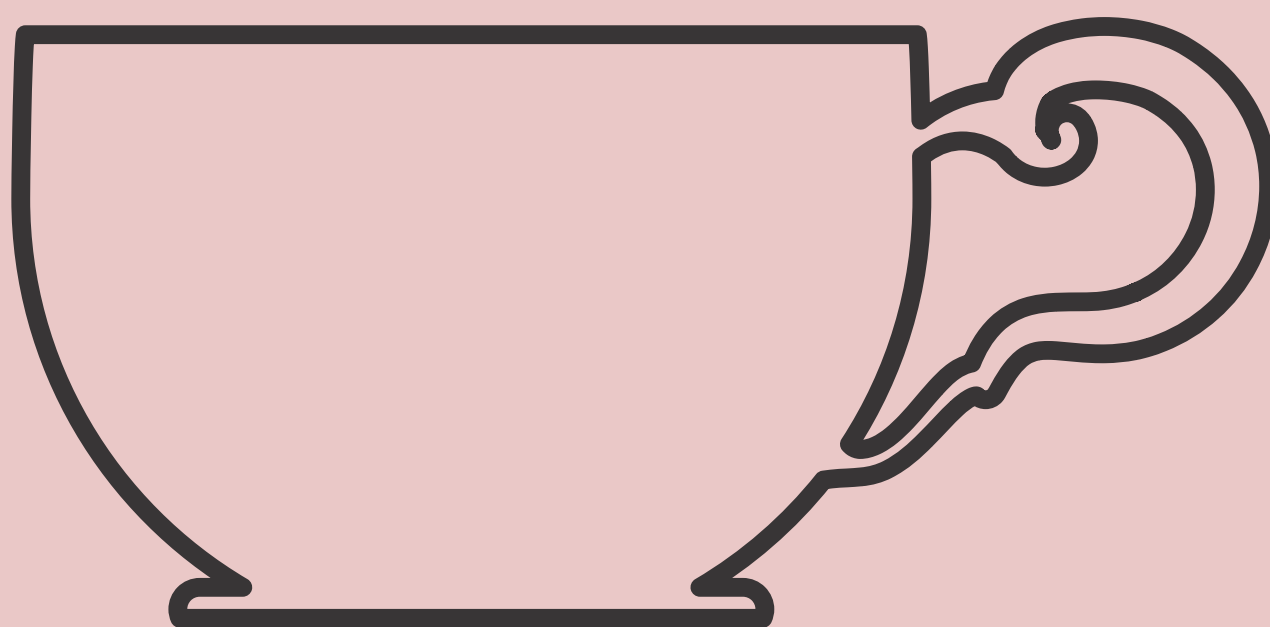


6

YEARS
LATER



Part 1

Two women sit opposite at a large wooden table, their fingers hugging tea mugs molded to their hands. The wrinkles in the fabric tablecloth mimics the lines that stretched across each woman's brow. The red tabletop extends toward a large bay window that looks over the neighbors' yards. Just out of Esther's sight, there's a figure standing behind the bushes. It had been an hour since Mabel had arrived and Esther welcomed her offering tea. Mabel accepting on the condition they drink black chai. Esther's hands shook as she poured the tea into the cups. Each cup had the name Anna delicately printed on the bottom. It was the summer of 96' when Esther and Mabel had first met. Esther had just moved in next door to get away from the city. That was the same summer that Esther took her young daughter Anna to paint these teacups. As Esther traced the rim of her tea cup in a slow, circular motion. A single tress of Esther's tawny hair, escaped her bun as she adjusted in her chair. Both Mabel and Esther understood that no matter how much they spoke, they were both still very alone, a condition of their past. Four years had passed yet they sat patiently waiting for the other to speak. Cannon Bay was a small town. Your average beachside community with as many pelicans as there were people. The Main Street littered with tourist traps and lined with salt water taffy vendors. Mrs. Smith's ice cream shop sat adjacent to the town dentist and the souvenir shop took up post down the block. You never had to go beyond the block radius with it's red doors and white awnings. But it was Esther's Photography studio that stood out in the town square. The white box shaped building that sat between two brownstones and was blooming with different colored flowers. The studio had brought life to the town.

The windows were filled with pictures of townspeople, tourists and the inescapable sea that contributed to the town's isolation.

There was one picture that stood out among the rest. It was David and Anna sitting on the beach, David's cherry red Shelby in the background. Everyone in town stopped to admire this photo, Esther had even won an award for it. But the photography shop had been abandoned for the last few years.

Gangs of kids now hang out in front of the shop, using the pictures as the backdrop to their delinquency. Mothers pass by with their children in strollers only to turn their gaze. But once in a while, an old man stops in front of the neglected windows and stares at the pictures for hours. Perhaps it is his admiration that keeps the walls from crumbling.

It had been six years David ran away. Yesterday, Mabel could have sworn that on her walk by the beach she could hear the wind calling her son's name. Now all she knew is that her son was gone and her husband laid patiently connected to a breathing machine. Mabel fidgeted as she picked her cup back up, spilling the tea into a small puddle on the tablecloth. And as it seeped into the red fabric Esther finally broke the silence that's had been permeating the kitchen walls, "I'll grab a cloth". Esther got up and ran over to the sink, grabbing the green hand towel that cascaded from the titanium basin. She pushed the towel against the tablecloth, lifting it up to expose a darkened section of wood. Silence fell on the room again as Esther made her way back to the sink. She brushed stale bread crumbs off the counter as she retrieved the kettle. Esther refilled Mabel's cup and the two women made eye contact for the first time in an hour. Mabel had missed the intensity of her best friend's green eyes.