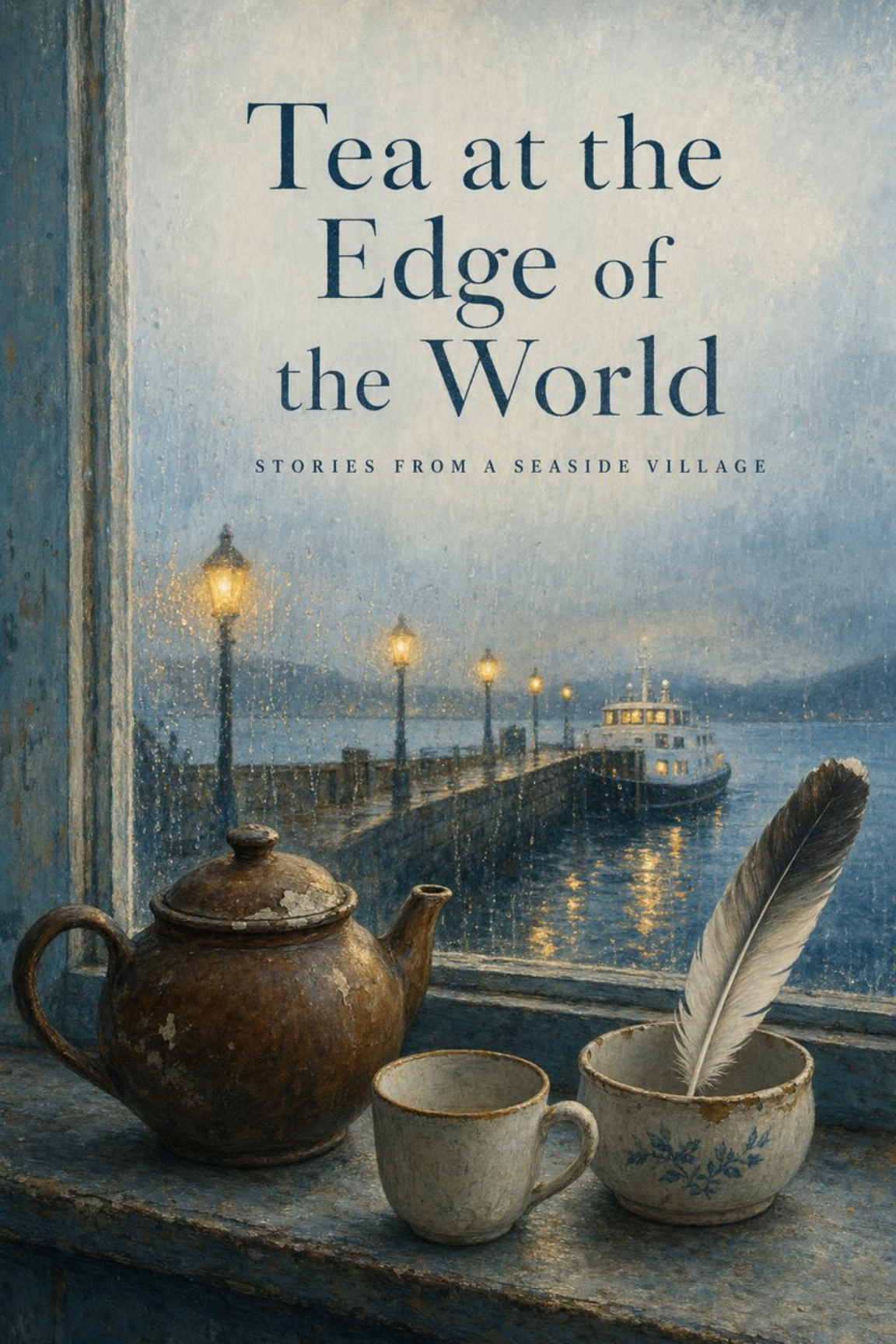
Tea at the Edge of the World

STORIES FROM A SEASIDE VILLAGE



Tea at the Edge of the World

STORIES

YOUR NAME

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The Last Pot of the Season

MORAG SINCLAIR HAD run the tearoom at the end of the pier for thirty-one summers, and on the last day of every one of them she made the same mistake. She baked as if the season were starting rather than ending, and by four o'clock the counter was crowded with scones that nobody would come to eat.

This year it was cherry scones and a lemon cake, and the rain had been falling since breakfast in the fine, patient way that meant it had no plans to stop. The windows ran with it. Beyond them the harbour was the colour of a wet slate, and the only boat moving was the ferry, a white shape at the mouth of the bay, waiting for the evening crossing.

She was wiping down tables that were already clean when the bell over the door rang.

The young man who came in had the look of someone who had been walking for a long time without deciding where to stop. He wore a coat too thin for the coast and carried a holdall with a broken zip, held shut with a belt. He stood dripping on the mat and seemed surprised to find himself indoors.

"Are you open?" he asked.

"For another hour," Morag said. "Then I'm closed till April, so you've timed it well. Sit by the heater. I'll bring a pot."

He sat where she pointed, at the table by the window that looked straight down the pier to the ferry. She brought tea in the brown pot with the chipped lid, two cups because it was a habit, and a scone with butter and jam because it was the last day and she could not stand to see them wasted.

"I didn't order that," he said.

"You didn't have to. It's on the house. Everything after three o'clock on the last day is on the house. It's a rule."

"Whose rule?"

"Mine," said Morag, and went back behind the counter, where she could watch him without seeming to.

. . .

HE ATE THE SCONE in four bites and then sat looking at the crumbs as though he had been caught at something. When she came back with a second one he did not argue.

"Are you for the ferry?" she asked, sitting down across from him, because there was no one else to serve and her knees had opinions about standing.

"Half seven." He turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "I've a job on the rigs. Three weeks on, three weeks off. They fly you out from the mainland."

"That's good money."

"That's what everyone says." He looked out at the ferry. "My mother says it. My uncle says it. The man at the agency said it twice, as if I might not have heard him the first time."

Morag poured more tea for both of them. She knew this conversation. She had heard it at this table more times than she could count, in different coats and different accents, from boys and girls and once from a woman of sixty who had sold her house and was going to Canada to start again. The tearoom at the

end of the pier was the last warm room before the water, and people said things here they had not said anywhere else.

"My husband went to sea," she said. "Fishing, not the rigs. Forty years ago now."

The young man looked at her properly for the first time. "Did he come back?"

"Every time but the last." She said it plainly, the way she had learned to say it. "He used to sit where you are sitting, the night before he went out. He'd have a pot of tea and not drink it, and look at the boat the way you're looking at that ferry."

"How was he looking at it?"

Morag considered this. "Like a man trying to work out whether he was leaving or arriving."

. . .

THE LIGHT WENT EARLY, as it did at the end of the season. The lamps came on along the pier one by one, and the rain turned gold where it crossed them. Out in the bay the ferry sounded its horn, one long note that came back off the hills a moment later, smaller, as if the hills were not sure they agreed.

The young man stood and reached for his wallet. Morag shook her head.

"The rule," she reminded him.

He hesitated, then took something from his coat pocket and set it on the table: a feather, long and grey and barred with white, the kind the gulls dropped on the harbour wall. "Found it on the road this morning," he said. "I don't know why I kept it. It seems wrong to leave without paying anything."

She picked it up and turned it in the lamplight. "It'll do," she said. "I'll put it in the window. Then next April, when you come back for your three weeks off, you can tell me if it was worth the money."

For a moment he looked as if he might say something else. Then he smiled, which changed his whole face, and picked up

the holdall with the broken zip, and the bell rang over the door, and he was gone down the pier into the gold and the rain.

Morag stood at the window until the ferry pulled out. Then she set the feather in the empty sugar bowl on the sill, where the morning sun would find it, washed the brown pot with the chipped lid, and turned the sign on the door to Closed.

She left the second cup on the table. It was a habit, and some habits were worth keeping.