

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



"An elegant love story . . . as exquisitely sculpted as fine porcelain." — *Entertainment Weekly*

# A CUP of TEA

*A Novel of 1917*

AMY EPHRON

• Author of *One Sunday Morning* •

# **A Cup of Tea**

**A Novel of 1917**

**Amy Ephron**

 HarperCollins e-books

*For  
Nora, Delia, and Hallie*

# Contents

[Begin Reading](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise](#)

[Other Books by Amy Ephron](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

*New York City*  
*January, 1917*

**A** young woman stood under a street lamp. It was difficult to make her out at first because she was standing almost in shadow and the mist from the ground, the rain, and approaching night made the air and the street seem similarly gray and damp. It was dusk. A light rain was falling.

A man walked up and solicited her. It startled her. She shook her head and turned away. Without another thought of her, he hailed a cab which stopped for him at once. She pulled the thin sweater, hardly protection from the rain, tighter around her shoulders as she stepped back from the curb to avoid the spray of dirt and water as the taxi pulled away.

**D**own the street, a very different scene. In an antique store famous for accepting only quality estates and European shipments where not a speck of dust had ever been allowed to gather on the shelves, a woman, slightly older than the woman under the street lamp, stood in front of a display case. Her name was Rosemary Fell. Her clothing was exquisite. Her dark hair framed her face even though in the morning she had put it up severely but it was of such thickness that no amount of coaxing, particularly in damp weather, could ever get it not to fall, a few moments later, softly around her face. She liked the effect and would sometimes play with one of the curls about her forehead when she wanted to appear as though she was thinking of something. Her stance was casual, almost disinterested, her gloves and coat still on as though she had not yet decided whether she had stopped in long enough to actually consider anything. Mr. Rhenquist, the owner of the antique store, was all over her.

“You see, I love my things,” he said, in low respectful tones, waiting for her reaction. “I would rather not part with them than sell them to someone who has not that”—he gestured with his hand displaying a pale green jade ring on his ring finger that Rosemary could not help but notice—“feeling of appreciation which is so rare.”

He unrolled a tiny square of blue velvet and pressed it on the glass counter with his pale finger-tips. It was an enamel box he had been keeping for her with a glaze so fine it looked as though it had been baked in cream. “I saved this for you.”

On its lid, a minute creature stood under a flowery tree. A hat, no bigger than a geranium petal, with green ribbons, hung from a branch. And a pink cloud like a watchful cherub floated above the creature’s head. Rosemary took her hands out of her long gloves to examine the box.

She set the box down as though she had no interest other than to look at it. She said, after a moment, “It’s beautiful.” And then very casually asked, “How much?”

For a moment, Mr. Rhenquist seemed not to hear her, or else he was considering the price. “For you...” He leaned in and whispered to her as if it would be impolite to speak of this out loud.

She made a face and then looked vague. She stared at an etched glass figurine on a shelf directly above his head. She reached for her gloves and started to put them on. And then, as she was about to leave, she said, “I guess I have no choice,” as her eye was caught by something else in the display case.

Rhenquist saw what she was looking at and without a word, took it carefully out of the case and put it on the glass for her to see. It was a letter opener, simple yet ornate, silver slightly etched in gold. She took it in her hand to gauge its weight. Its blade was thin and razor sharp. For a moment, it caught the light from the overhead lamp and glinted slightly.

“I’ll take it, too,” said Rosemary laughing. “At least it will be something useful.”

“Of course, Miss Fell,” said Rhenquist as he put the porcelain box carefully in a velvet bag. With a pen carved out of mother-of-pearl, he discreetly scribbled a number on a piece of paper and turned it toward her.

It was fairly extravagant. She could sometimes be such a wasteful thing. But what good was it to have money if one didn’t sometime indulge.

Rosemary nodded and reached into her purse for her chequebook. She wrote him a cheque, ripped it from her chequebook, and casually left it on the counter.

Rosemary watched as Rhenquist wrapped the velvet bag and letter opener deftly in brown paper, his pale hands amazing for their dexterity. Nothing rare was ever broken here.

He handed her the parcel and bowed his head slightly. It was clear he would have kept them for her forever. Rosemary smiled and started to leave. As she opened the door, the bells on the shop door jingled slightly.

It was still raining but Rosemary didn’t seem to mind as she walked down the street to the flower shop. Smoke was rising from the potholes contributing to the mist and griminess of the city.

On the corner, there was still the shape of the woman standing under the streetlight. It was more than an accident of birth and a length of pavement that separated these two women.

The salesgirl followed Rosemary as she made her way through the crowded florist shop a few doors down from the antique store. “I’ll have those and those.” Rosemary pointed to some lilies and irises. “Four bunches of those. And I’ll take those sweet pink roses.”

The salesgirl held some lilacs up for her to see.

“No, no lilacs.” So this next didn’t come out too harshly, Rosemary smiled. “I hate lilacs. They have no shape. And that smell, you know they’re there before you even walk into the room.” She laughed. “But give me those stumpy little tulips, the red and white ones.” In her mind she was figuring that they would sit prettily in the gray stone vase in her bedroom while the longer stemmed lilies could be arranged downstairs in the dining room in the pewter vase.

Her thoughts drifted to how she might get out of Florence Pemberton’s invitation to lunch the following day. Flo was always so serious. Flo’s life was so uneventful. Rosemary would have cut her years ago if it hadn’t been for the fact that Florence Pemberton was Philip Alsop’s cousin and Rosemary had known since she was a little girl that she was going to marry Philip Alsop. But now that the wedding was six months off, couldn’t she afford to be a little less attentive to Florence Pemberton or did it require that she be more so?

She seemed distracted as the salesgirl trimmed her flowers and wrapped them in paper. She took some money out of her wallet to pay. And then the salesgirl walked in front of her out of the shop to the car, carrying the immense white paper armful.

Rosemary stopped on the pavement. Her eye was caught by the creature with enormous eyes holding her sweater around her with reddened hands. It was raining harder now and with it came the darkness spinning down like ashes. Rosemary walked over to her. “Are you all right?”

The woman nodded. She looked at Rosemary and hesitated before speaking. “C-could I—?” the creature stammered. “Could I ask you for some money—enough for a cup of tea?”

Rosemary couldn’t help but notice it wasn’t the voice of a street-person. “Have you *no* money?” she asked.

“None at all, ma’am,” was the answer.

Rosemary considered this a moment. She looked over at her car and her driver who stood waiting for her. The rain was coming down in sheets around them.

It was like something one would read about, to find a girl in the dusk and bring her home for tea. Ought she to have been frightened that the girl would turn out to be a thief or half-mad. She didn’t look half-mad. She looked like someone who life had done a wrong turn to, who had never had the proper opportunity. And think how she would feel if she could successfully show this poor creature that life could be wonderful, that all women were sisters, that the world was full of possibilities. She would help her get on her feet. It was an act of altruism. What good was it to have

power, if one couldn't be beneficent some of the time.

She could hear herself saying to her friends, "It just seemed like such an adventure," as she turned and said, "Why don't you come home to tea with me?"

The woman stepped back from her.

"Why don't you?" said Rosemary. "Come home with me now in my car and have tea. At least until it stops raining."

The woman protested. "I couldn't," she said. "It wouldn't be—"

Rosemary interrupted her. "—right?! Why not?!" She put her hand on the woman's arm and started to propel her towards the car.

Rosemary's driver had opened the car door and was holding an umbrella over their heads.

"Don't be frightened," said Rosemary with the sort of confidence you have when you've never had to be frightened of anything. "Why shouldn't you come home with me?"

The inside of the car was leather. There was a pale brown cashmere afghan folded neatly on the seat, a small nosegay of flowers in a bud vase attached to the seatback that separated the rear of the car from the driver. The engine had been idling and the inside of the car was warm. The girl managed a small smile as Rosemary hurdled her into the warmth and safety of the backseat of the car.

And, for a moment, in the backseat, Eleanor, for that is the name she would tell you if asked, Eleanor Smith, had a moment to be nervous.

Did the driver look at her disapprovingly...of course, he did, but it wouldn't be his place to speak about it. He did seem to take a long time though to shut the car door and walk around to the front, close the umbrella, get in, finally, and shift the car into gear. Long enough for her to worry that this could end (as it must certainly end) before it had even started.

“Oh Gertrude, don’t look like that...” thought Rosemary as she saw the expression on her housekeeper’s face when she appeared at the door to help with the packages. “Not that anything I do should surprise her by now!...”

“We don’t need help, Gertrude, thanks,” said Rosemary. “Just tea...and sandwiches.” And she hurried the poor girl out of sight up the stairs to spare her being stared at. And then shouted down to Gertrude again, “Not just butter. Make some with chicken, would you? We’ll have it up in my room.”

Halfway up the stairs, Rosemary stopped and took her gloves off. She took a deep breath. “It’s just too cold out. I’m frozen through. I can imagine how you must feel!” She put her arm lightly on the young woman’s back. “We’ll go up to my room. It’s cozy there.”

Gertrude stayed where she was at the bottom of the stairs and looked after them distrustfully. Rosemary turned and saw her and laughed. “We don’t need help, Gertrude, honest. Just tea.”

Gertrude walked off to the pantry grumbling, as if she didn’t have enough to do besides make an unscheduled meal...and what was Rosemary up to, anyway?

But ever since Rosemary’s mother died, going on nine years ago, Gertrude had been the mother-hen variety of housekeeper, peckish and overbearing but in a completely endearing way. Maybe she was always that way but when Mrs. Fell was alive there was a direct chain of command and order in the household and ever since she’d passed, it had sort of been betwixt and between with Gertrude not knowing whether it was Rosemary, the woman of the house, giving her orders or Rosemary, the child, whom she was obliged to be telling what to do. Not that she’d ever been able to stop Rosemary from doing anything.

**T**here was a fire burning in the fireplace in Rosemary's room, a funny assortment of flowers that looked as if it had been thrown together from a garden in a vase on the table in front of the couch. Rosemary threw her coat and hat off carelessly onto the back of a velvet chair. The young woman stood not far from the fire, holding her sweater around her. She seemed unsure of what she was to do, if it were all right for her to warm herself by the fire or take a seat.

"You are soaked through," said Rosemary in the way a big sister would to a little girl and then because she knew it would take some prodding, she helped the girl off with her sweater and hung it over the screen of the fireplace to dry. "There."

The young woman stood holding onto the back of the sofa as though it was all that stood between her and the floor as Rosemary reached distractedly for a cigarette on the mantel.

And then the creature spoke. "I'm sorry, I think I may—" She braced herself and tried to gain control again. "I've never fainted."

Rosemary put the cigarette down. "Oh, how thoughtless of me." She opened the door and called down the stairs. "Could you hurry those sandwiches, Gertrude?"

Rosemary raced about and took a decanter off the table. She poured a glass of brandy which she offered to the woman.

And then the creature spoke again. "I don't—I don't drink brandy."

Rosemary smiled. "It will revive you. At least, I think it will revive you. Would you feel better if I had one...?" She poured herself a brandy and took a sip. "Here, now we've both gone off."

She held the glass out again to the woman, and this time it was accepted and downed, rather quickly, although Rosemary didn't notice as there was a knock on the door at exactly this moment.

"Oh, the tea. That will help. You just sit there." Rosemary watched as the woman collapsed into the softness of the sofa.

She opened the door to a rather sour-faced Gertrude holding a tray. "I'll take it, Gertrude, thanks." She closed the door before Gertrude could quite get a look inside and set the tray down on the table. "There."

The woman helped herself to a tea sandwich and ravenously took a bite.

"They're good, aren't they?" said Rosemary trying to be polite. Rosemary delicately bit into a cucumber sandwich as the woman finished hers. "Have as many as you want, please." And then because she wanted to make conversation, make it seem as though it were an ordinary afternoon for this poor creature, she went on much as she would to anyone she was trying to make conversation with. "I should learn to cook but with Gertrude here..." She gestured with her hand sort of vaguely and then trailed off. "Do you cook?"

The woman nodded, her mouth full of sandwich. "A little," she said.

Rosemary sat herself in the chair opposite the woman. "I'm sure you do. I don't

know how to do anything useful. I play the piano some. But I don't know who that's useful to." She laughed a little at her own remark. She wanted to ask her (out of curiosity and because later, when she told her friends about the girl she had helped, she wanted to be able to relate her story) how she had come to be in this circumstance. Surely, something terrible had happened to her, maybe more than one thing terrible, but she had escaped, she was all right now, she was safe. And there would be time to ask, she reasoned, after the tea and sandwiches had done their work and she was feeling refreshed.

Rosemary noticed there was a hole, more than one, in the girl's stockings and jumped up, not that she could ever sit for long, anyway. "I'll find you some stockings," she said and left the girl alone as she disappeared into the dressing room.

What she thought about while Rosemary was in the closet. The picture on the wall of the child sitting cross-legged in the woods with an angel overhead, an obvious holdover from when Rosemary was young, the satin coverlet on the bed, the ivory and silver hairbrushes on the vanity, the warmth from the fire that made everything else seem so faraway. She hadn't realized how tired she'd been or how long it had been, not really that long, since she had sat down. Actually, a moment's peace.

"Try these," said Rosemary coming out of the closet with stockings and a skirt and a clean over-blouse. She didn't even have the heart to protest but rather let Rosemary press the clothes on her and show her into the bathroom.

Rosemary lit a cigarette and leaned against the mantel. Rosemary considered how she could phrase her inquiry, what she could ask to bring the girl out. Her temporary musing was broken by the door opening and a woman's voice.

"I hear you're on some kind of a tear." The woman who entered the room had a clipped way of speaking. Her clothes were plain and tailored but looked expensive. Her hair was cut unfashionably short. She seemed to take everything in in an instant. Her name was Jane Howard and she had been Rosemary's best friend since childhood and, from the way she entered the room, she had been doing this, entering without knocking, for some time.

Rosemary put a finger over her mouth to urge her to speak quietly. Jane looked around curiously. "What have you done?"

"I don't know quite," said Rosemary laughing. "It was an impulse. I met a girl. Well, I found her really."

"You—what?"

Rosemary stepped over to her and spoke softly. "Shh. Let me tell you. She was on a corner. She asked me for some money. And I thought—what if—well, you'll see her. What if circumstance, well, anyway, I thought what if I brought her home, gave her some clothes. God knows I have clothes I can spare. Helped her find a job somewhere. What if I actually made a difference. It would be so easy really."

"It's not that I don't commend you," said Jane, who privately thought people weren't quite like strays to be taken in so easily. "But have you thought about—" The way Rosemary stared at her stopped her mid-sentence.

"I couldn't resist it," said Rosemary. "I mean, think how I would feel if...I were actually able to help. What's the danger? Or, if there is one, doesn't that make it all the more exciting?" She laughed a little at herself. "Haven't you ever done anything on impulse," she asked, "just because you felt you should!"

"Well, of course, I have but—"

Their exchange was interrupted by the bathroom door opening and the object of their conversation stepping back into the room. The color had returned to her cheeks. The long, tangled hair was brushed now and her dark lips were quite full. She had deep, lighted eyes. The plain dark skirt, white shirt and sweater that had been pressed

on her made her look almost as if she were one of them.

“Jane Howard,” said Rosemary, “this is Miss—”

“Smith,” said the girl. She stood there strangely still and unafraid. “Eleanor Smith.”

“Charmed,” said Jane Howard. But before they could have more of an interchange, the bedroom door opened again and Philip Alsop, Rosemary’s fiancé, entered the room.

Eleanor studied him, although she was careful not to look at him too long, shyly dropping her eyes or turning back to Rosemary. She was unclear, at first, what his relation was to Rosemary. Brother? No, probably not, there wasn’t enough of a physical resemblance. He was tall, good-looking with aristocratic lines, high cheekbones, but more substantial somehow, broad-shouldered with a slightly athletic countenance enhanced by the fact that his skin was tanned which Eleanor mistakenly attributed to idle afternoons taken up with lawn tennis, boating, or whatever it was that gentlemen did on idle afternoons. But, really, it was from working on the docks as he owned a shipping business which he’d built up on his own. He was staring at her. She was used to that, men staring at her. What she wasn’t used to was wanting to stare at them back.

“Rosemary, may I come in?” he said, somewhat after the fact. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize you had—Oh, hi, Jane.” He hadn’t seen Jane at first because he was so struck by the appearance of Eleanor. There was something frail about the girl and yet exciting as if she had another side. Not like Rosemary’s usual friends who were done up to appear exactly what they were. He looked at Rosemary questioningly.

“Philip, this is my friend Miss Smith. Eleanor Smith. We were just having tea. Would you like a cup, Philip? Jane?”

Philip shook his head, “No, I—”

Jane Howard interrupted. “I’ll help myself as always,” she said as she filled a plate with tea sandwiches and poured herself a cup of tea.

Philip had trouble taking his eyes off Eleanor even though he was speaking to Rosemary. “I was just going to ask you, Rose, to come into the library for a moment.”

Rosemary laughed up at him. “I haven’t done a thing about the wedding all day.”

“It’s not that,” said Philip. “Actually, I can’t wait until it’s over. I don’t mean that the way it sounds, but it is such a fuss for a single afternoon.”

“Not such a fuss to start an entire life,” said Rosemary smiling up at him.

Of course, thought Eleanor understanding, in that moment, their connection, he was her betrothed. She’d looked like a girl who had a perfect life.

“And you know,” said Rosemary laughing, “how much I like to arrange things.”

Philip smiled because he knew that every detail of the wedding mattered to her. “Would you excuse us, Jane? Miss Smith?” he asked looking once more at Miss Smith as he said it.

Rosemary answered for them. “Of course, they would.” She followed Philip out of the room.

The rain was still beating steadily outside. Jane Howard walked over to the fireplace and took a cigarette off the mantel. She offered one to Eleanor. “Would you

like one?" she asked.

Miss Smith narrowed her eyes. "I'd love one, thanks," she said almost languidly. And, in that moment, it appeared she might not be as innocent as she seemed.

**P**hilip shut the door behind them to the library. “What gives?” he asked.

Rosemary came over and kissed him playfully on the mouth. “What do you mean, what gives?”

“Who is she?” Philip asked. “Where did you find her?”

“Could you tell, then?” said Rosemary laughing. “I picked her up.”

Rosemary walked over to the fire. There was a mirror in a large wood frame behind them on the mantel. Rosemary looked at herself in the glass for a moment and at Philip standing behind her. She turned to him.

“That is what I did.” She was sort of pleased with herself. It was like something in a Dostoyevsky story, to pick a girl up in the dusk and bring her home. “I found her on the corner of Greenwich,” she said. “I don’t know. You read about these things. And I just did it.”

“And now what do you plan to do?” asked Philip. This wasn’t the reaction she had expected. “You can’t just pick someone up like that. And, then what?”

“I don’t know,” said Rosemary. “We haven’t talked yet. Be nice to her. Be awfully nice to her. Show her—make her feel—”

Philip cut her off. “I’m not sure it can be done.”

“Why not?...” said Rosemary, pouting again. “I want to. I decided—”

“She is so astonishingly pretty,” he said.

“Pretty?” said Rosemary. “Do you think so? I hadn’t thought of it.” She turned and looked at her own face in the mirror for a moment. Philip looked at her reflection, as well.

“She’s absolutely lovely,” he insisted. “Take a look at her again.” Rosemary turned to him. “I was knocked out by her when I came into your room just now. Even so, I think you’re making a mistake.” He laughed and said, “But let me know if Miss Smith is going to dine with us tonight.”

Rosemary searched his face for a moment before she gave a small laugh back. “I will, Philip,” she said.

**R**osemary left the library but did not go immediately to her bedroom. She walked instead to the little sitting room upstairs where she kept her papers and wrote notes in the morning. Pretty! Absolutely lovely! I was knocked out by her when I walked into the room! She sat at the Victorian desk. Her cheeks were flushed. She reached for her chequebook. But cheques would be no use. She opened the desk drawer and took out fifteen one-dollar bills, and after a moment's contemplation, put three back, folded the others neatly and tucked them in the pocket of her skirt.

Eleanor and Jane were deep in conversation when she walked back into the room. Jane was laughing. Rosemary cut them off. "Jane, would you be a dear and check on Philip?"

Jane stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray. "Of course," she said. Rosemary liked to run things in her own house and Jane Howard rarely questioned her. "It was awfully nice to have met you," she said to Eleanor, gave a small wave, and left the room.

Rosemary walked into the closet and hurriedly went through some things. She came out of the closet carrying an overcoat.

"I think the rain is stopping," she said to Eleanor.

Eleanor sat up on the couch. She knew what this meant.

Rosemary pressed the coat on her.

"No, take it," said Rosemary as the girl reached a hand up to protest. "I never wear the thing. It isn't new." Not that anything Rosemary had was old, probably only been worn a couple of times. "I've put some money in the pocket. No, don't say a word. If the tables were turned, you would—I wish I could do more."

Eleanor Smith just stared at her. She sat with the angled posture of a ballerina, slightly bemused, her head slightly tilted to one side, her hair falling perfectly around her face. She was not surprised that this had happened. She had almost a faint smile. She knew why she was being asked to leave.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" asked Rosemary, wishing the girl would say anything and not just stare at her like that.

When she did answer, her voice was soft, extraordinarily composed and self-assured. "Yes, I'll be fine." She slipped the coat on over her shoulders. "Thank you—ma'am." The ma'am was almost an afterthought.

Philip and Jane had switched to champagne when Rosemary walked into the library. She opened the door and leaned against the door frame and looked at them with her dazzled, exotic gaze. "Miss Smith," she said, "will not be joining us for dinner."

Philip looked surprised. "But," he said, "I thought—"

Jane Howard interrupted. "I can't stay either," she said, standing. "I've stayed too long already." Jane set her glass down on a table, blew a kiss with two fingers, and

rushed out of the room.

After they left, the prospect of staying alone with Philip and filling the night up with simple conversation seemed too much for Rose. The air in the house felt thick as though something untoward had settled there. “Why don’t we try that sweet little Italian place on the corner,” she suggested, smiling up at Philip. “I don’t feel like staying in.”

**I**t was just drizzling as Jane Howard hurried down the darkened street. She had no umbrella, just a hat, but she was not the sort to be bothered by the rain. She saw what she was looking for, the shape of a woman on the next block, and almost ran across the wet cobblestones which seemed to shimmer like cut glass.

“Wait!” she called out. “Miss Smith. I’m so glad to have caught you. It would have been terrible not to have seen you again.”

Terrible not to have seen her again? Jane didn’t give her an opportunity really to answer. She went on, “It’s almost a pretty night out, if it wasn’t so wet, that is. I always like the way it smells after a rain, don’t you?” Jane continued to walk, long, mannish strides, so that Eleanor was forced to keep pace with her. “You might not like the way it smells after a rain. Not everyone does.” This made Eleanor smile. There was something about the way Miss Howard rattled on. “I have a—I don’t mean to intrude—but we have intruded, haven’t we. Are you going to be all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Eleanor.

Jane Howard didn’t look convinced. She stopped on the sidewalk unmindful of the rain which was coming down almost like a mist around them. She looked at Eleanor. “I have a friend,” she said, “who owns a hat shop. Dora’s, on Sutter. Here, I’ll write it down for you. Tell her that I sent you, Jane, Jane Howard, and that I thought she might have a job for you. You’d be good at that, I think, selling hats.” She smiled at Eleanor.

Eleanor was unsure what to make of this. She was not used to people taking care of her. This was what it was, then, to make a connection? To be given a helping hand? And, yet, it had a similar sting to when her mother had been forced to rummage shoes for her from the rector who’d always, after that, looked at her pityingly as if to say, her father can’t even put shoes on her feet, would rather spend it on a Friday night at a local pub.

“I won’t tell her anything about you,” said Jane. “I’ll leave that part up to you.”

“Nothing is for free, Leni,” her mother had said to her as they’d walked away from the parish, the new shoes snugly on her feet. “It’s always best not to take something from someone, if you can help it. But there’s some times when y’can’t help it.” But wasn’t that the chance she was being given here, to work for a living, to have an honest job, to be dependent on no one but herself.

“Thank you,” she said almost shyly. “I might stop by.”

“Well, only if you think that it’s a good idea,” she said, having actually no idea what the girl did think. Jane Howard glanced at her watch. “I’m late,” she said. Jane reached out her hand to say good-bye. “Good luck.” And the interview ended as suddenly as it had begun, leaving Miss Smith again alone on a street corner.