**The Tea House**

The first time I walked past Mr Musashi’s Tea House the soft mist of old rain lay heavy in the night air. Wandering home along the broken footpath, I had been mulling over a dreary day at the office. Thinking and walking was a small pleasure in my strained schedule. In and out for work, the phone ringing, time to eat and time to bathe, work, more work, and more work. It all crowded out time for fulfilment. My walks were like a soft balm, choosing a new route whenever I wanted, gave me freedom which I could not match anywhere else. I had been exploring new parts of the city for years, each neighbourhood had its own sights, sounds and stories to go along with it.

What struck me later was that I had never noticed Mr Musashi’s Tea House before. It was a traditionally sombre affair; green tiled interior and hardwood furniture were complemented by full length portraits done in a Japanese style. The groups of elderly patrons and warm restaurant lighting gave the Tea House an air of inviting contentment. In contrast, the surrounding neighbourhood was non-descript in its grey high rise and with streets empty of people. The sign was bamboo green, with “Mr Musashi’s Tea House” inlaid in rich black wood. I drank in each detail on my first visit to Mr Musashi’s Tea House, and I admired it as a bastion of light in the desolate neighbourhood. For an hour I stood there, staring at the Tea House while the broken rain drifted in the night air. Feeling content, I was weighing up going inside, maybe as a treat, when the incessant buzzing of my phone broke me out of my reverie. Fumbling frantically, I grabbed it to answer. All thoughts of Mr Musashi’s Tea House forgotten; I had to push on, answering the call of the modern world.

I only walked past Mr Musashi’s Tea House the second time because I was curious. I had stuck to my differing routes for weeks, always finding new ways to walk home through more interesting and alive parts of the city. But the Tea House drew me back. It felt, had felt, so good to enjoy the ambience, drinking in the culture of each decorative detail. My walk there had not been filled with misty rain like before, rather a cloying summer humidity, its’ heavy feeling itchy sticky on the skin. At a jog, I rounded the corner to what Mr Musashi’s Tea House had become - shuttered and empty. The wide windows closed, and the warm lighting cut off. I could see nothing of the interior, no elderly patrons, no hardwood stools nor intricate paintings. It was a snuffed-out lighthouse, now blending in with the cliffs of grey high rise. For some time after, I stood, unmoving, watching, and wishing for a miraculous recovery. The shutters did not fly up and the elderly patrons remained absent. With a heavy heart, I turned away, thoughts lingering on the lifelessness of Mr Musashi’s Tea House. I still had dinner to make, reports to write and a balance sheet to fill, the idea of Mr Musashi’s Tea House was quickly overwhelmed.

The third time I walked past Mr Musashi’s Tea House was the last. Since the Tea House’s shuttering, I had dreaded walking anywhere near the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, I had a morbid curiosity, a need for closure, which drove me to walk down the highrise straddled street. Unlike my former trips, the horizon was stained with the colours of a summer sunset, and dust blew billowed in the wind. My other walks, still enjoyable, though I knew every route back to front, however, I was always searching for more. More stories, more sights, and more sounds. I had admitted to myself that it was only because I had hoped there would be another Mr Musashi’s Tea House, hidden, my searches had been in vain. The chance it was only closed for a while, just temporary, the warm lights would buzz once more, to be a lifeline. Work and chores consumed any time I had for myself, which made the walks and searching ever more precious. Slipping out of my melancholy musing, I approached the familiar corner, unsteady for what lay ahead. I was stuck at the corner, going around it would reveal what had become, staying behind would at least leave the belief there was something left. Pushing around the corner felt sickening, the sight of what greeted me more so. There was nothing at all left to even suggest Mr Musashi’s Tea House had ever existed. In its place was an unmarked grey door, set in freshly mortared cinderblock. The door had a shiny silver handle and a dull coat of paint, smooth and faceless. Staggering back, the brutal finality of the Tea House’s end hit me. Falling on my hands and knees, I went to searching for any trace. All I found were scuffed splinters of black wood flecked with green paint. The suns last rays kissed grey concrete as I gathered myself and turned once more to stare again. At nothing.