The Tea Drinkers

March 1, 1998 By Patrick Donnelly

We know who we are.
I see the thin but still handsome
guy across from me at the community table
in the veggie bistro, watch him
pull a plastic bottle out of his knapsack,
pour a dark liquid
into a cup; watch him sip once,
wince, then chug the rest quickly.
So I get the whole picture:
the visits to the Chinese herbalist,
the tiny sharp needles in the lung,
liver and spleen meridians,
the trip home with a plastic bag full of black
bark, fungus, dead flowers and dry leaves,
the pot on the stove that boils
and boils, until the house fills
with the evil stink of astragalus,
isatis, licorice and honeysuckle,
the mushroom tea that sits in the fridge
between the mustard and the acidophilus,
the dresser drawers full of quercetin,
curcumin, N-acetyl-L-cysteine,
and the hard necessity of knowing
what these things are.
The little bruise, the slight
temperature, the nightly bitter melon enema,
the twice-weekly inhalations of garlic mist
through a gas mask,
the colonoscopy, the tissue sample,
the weekly support group,
the file full of dropping T-cells, rising
insurance premiums,
the long-distance calls that begin with how you feel,
the powdery taste of condoms,
the yoga classes, reiki initiations,

tea ceremonies, fortune-tellers,
bookshelves full of Zen tracts,
Ayurvedic diets, immune-building videos from
celebrated and reviled doctors,
guided visualizations, bells
to balance chakras and
crystals to cleanse auras,
the health-care proxy, the Tarot,
the friend at St. Clare’s, the friend
at Beth Israel, the friend who eats
through a tube, the friend on a respirator,
the friend who no longer recognizes you,
the lover who died in August,
the certificate of cremation, the Quaker
memorial, the Catholic mass,
the Buddhist chants, the little printed notice
about ashes scattered over the mountains
in New Mexico, over
a lake in the Catskills,
the wind lifting the leaves of holy tea
above the Isle of Skye.

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