

**Mihaela Gašpar**

**ON TEAPOTS AND WOMEN**

(*O čajnicima i ženama*, Disput, Zagreb, 2016)

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**About the novel:**

*O čajnicima i ženama* (*On Teapots and Women*) is a typical blend of the emotional and the rational from Mihaela Gašpar's workshop, a story of a family and the women who make every effort to belong to it and to escape from it at the same time, a story of frustration and guilt, turning, as it were, the essence of life into beautiful literature.

**Sample translation:**

Sometimes I pretend I'm shopping for porcelain dishes. Usually I do this on Saturdays when the malls are most crowded. Families with children swarm the spacious marble halls, faces fresh and neon-bathed, and their hair, shiny and soft, dissolves under the beams of light, flowing in sync with their movements, curling and undulating in the barely noticeable ventilation draft. The music streaming through the labyrinthine halls softens their voices, and their steps are light. Shopping-mall Saturdays are fragrant and sparkling, the swarms lazily browsing through stores make you feel safe and satisfied. Festive.

I've always liked the word porcelain. Maybe that's why I pretend I'm shopping for it; the word "porcelain" itself has a festive sound to it. Among the shelves stacked with porcelain decorated with plastic peonies and silk ribbons, the mall lights make my skin seem dried up. The plastic peonies also look dry, their petals brittle and impenetrable to the neon lights.

My fingers are gnarled. Especially the index. I can't even recognize them, as if, over night, someone else's, unfamiliar palms sprouted from my wrists. I check for the scar on the palm of my right hand to make sure these hands are really mine. There it is. A pale scar crossed by three lines, probably traces of stitching. It reminds me of a fishbone.

I have no memory of the injury. Mother says I fell when my bicycle caught a mulberry root, but I don't remember we ever had a mulberry tree in the yard. I remember a hand wrapped in

white bandage and pulsating pain, then, after I got my stitches, my father taking me to a restaurant for fried calamari, and him popping ring after ring onto his pink tongue through the thicket of his beard and mustache.

"Oh, well, three stitches, this one was crusty", father's voice in an attempt at comfort.

Several drops of sweat glisten on his forehead. On the way down to the thicket of his black brows each leaves a trail for the next coaxed out by the July sun.

"Are you in pain?" he asks.

I shake my head and move about a calamari ring in my mouth, then I stick it on the tip of my tongue, all the while clenching my toes under the table from the pain that is ceaselessly nesting in my soft palm. Pain is a small needle-toothed beast, untameable until it gets tired and loses its strength, which sometimes takes hours or even days.

"How can I help?" the saleswoman's voice interrupts my inspection of my own unfamiliar palms. I put on the mask of a buyer's diffidence and let the skinny little lady with a white streak in an otherwise dark hair repeat the question.

"I'm looking for a cheaper teapot", I reply to her repeated inquiry.

I follow her scrawny shoulders and hands deftly navigating through plates and glasses, and I clench my unfamiliar palms in the silk lining of my coat. Soon we stop in front of a wooden cabinet with teapots on display. Gilded spouts and bellies glisten, reflected in the cabinet's glass. Their shine is as sharp as needles and it seems as though it's piercing my eyes, forcing me to repeatedly close them so as not to go blind. The saleswoman leaves me alone with the gildings and ornaments, pale red poppies, little dots and silver amoebas, blue stripes and a sailor's knot tied around the spout and around two birds with beaks lovingly touching on the belly of a large teapot. For a moment, the feigned desire turns into genuine intent to buy one. I'm not sure what I would use it for, as I don't drink tea. I actually need to buy toothpaste, I've been brushing my teeth with shampoo for three days. It seems more acceptable than dish- washing liquid. I pick out a black and white teapot with a saucer. The decorations on its belly make my head spin. It's as if they were alive, they spin and stretch, blend with one another and vanish in the centre of rotation. The teapot is offered at a discount and the price is quite low. It occurs to me that it must be due to the vivid decorations. At the checkout my teapot is packed in an old cardboard box and taped shut. The saleswoman with the white streak of hair tears off pieces of the scotch tape with her teeth. Her index finger leaves a clearly visible mark on the tape.

At 2 pm sharp, Jasen waits for me on the corner in front of the restaurant. Inside, behind his back, people are cutting their steaks and lifting wine glasses to their lips like in a silent movie. I observe him through the crack between the shoulders of two women walking in front of me and talking about dreams. One of them misplaced her dreambook. From this distance Jasen looks sullen. He has buried his neck in the collar of the jacket, a thick wool cap covers his eyebrows. Sometimes I pluck a hair that mars his profile. I approach him and tap his shoulder. We never kiss each other on the cheek. Shoulders touching equals a kiss. He stretches his thin neck from the collar, his Adam's apple bounces vigorously beneath his pale skin.

"What've you got there?" he points his chin at the bag in my hand. "A porcelain teapot."

"What do you need that crap for?" He was in a foul mood.

"I don't know, I never had a porcelain teapot of my own. Only my mother's." "We aren't going to start drinking tea, are we?"

He laughed hoarsely, and his mole-black eyebrows peeked out of the wool cap, did a quirk and then fled back beneath the wool. Jasen's moodiness sometimes needs to be tamed.

We are driving in silence down a muddy road. Snowflakes soundlessly hit the windshield and disappear in our eyes. A foil made of fog is stretched tight across the sky, and at its edges, along the horizon, a thin pink ribbon. My eyes are filled with snowflakes. It's cold in the car, the heating has been off since last winter, so I take off my shoes and tuck my feet under my bottom, while Jasen reaches for a small yellow blanket on the back seat and hands it to me. I place it folded into my lap as if it were a dog. It smells of petrol. Music is playing on the radio, interspersed with male voices. We cannot discern what they're talking about, nothing is clear but their laughter which leaks through the speaker every once in a while, dissolving the chill inside the car. Sometimes we are gentle with one another, but this is not one of those days. Today is sour apple day, so we both suck on the inside of our cheeks and keep silent.

Jasen crashed into my life one Saturday night. I say crashed because he might as well have fallen down from the sky at my feet like some angel banished down the heavenly stairs with a kick in the behind. Later it turned out that he had been drunk and had leaned over the balcony rail of his first-floor apartment to pick some cherries. He had a blood-red trail around his mouth, and his fingers were also red. While he lay there on his back, seemingly dead, arms spread wide, in a shirt that had ripped when he fell and revealed his skinny and sunken stomach, only his fingers moved, with incredible speed, as if they were playing the piano.

They punched the air. I didn't dare touch him. They made me fearful that I might interrupt the noiseless melody of shadows which, guided by the fingers, traced long lines across the swaths of grass of the town park. The shadows leaped over the leaves of grass stretching into the dark, then they resurfaced from it and merged again with the fingers and nails still crimson with pieces of cherry beneath them.

"For fuck's sake", he said drunkely and opened his eyes. The melody of shadows slipped into the darkness of treetops and under swaths of grass, and Jasen's fingers tried to sew together two ripped halves of the shirt and hide his stomach.

Along the way we became friends. About halfway, we nearly became lovers. Driving like this on sour apple day, we were glad we didn't.

Every bump in the road made the teapot in the box clink. In the bag, my sisters's name IRMA danced across the display of the cellphone set to silent. It bobbed irritably, threatening to burst through the screen and paste itself on my forehead. We were half an hour late. On Saturdays, at noon, we both go to the cemetery. I am accompanied by Jasen, Irma by a bouquet of flowers, a torrent of words and shallow breath.

We parked at the entrance. Beneath her red hat, Irma's torrent of words mixed with snowflakes was already beginning to pour out.

"Late again. You're hopeless." She lightly tapped her hip with the bouquet of roses, then enveloped me in them and kissed my hair right above my ear. Jasen pulled his wool cap down almost to his eyelids.

Irma is holding my hand while we're making our way down the narrow lines of headstones. "They look like twin beds", she says.

"Dad must be thrilled with mom on his back", a chuckle escapes her under the hat, much like a hiccup.

I feel a void in my stomach. A huge hole I want to fill in as soon as possible, wall it out with the ferocity of alcohol, pad it with its warmth. My fingers restlessly squeeze the insides of my pockets.

Jasen's pockets are as lively as my own. They bounce like two empty bellies. Irma's pockets are still, their insides intact. Her docile gloved hands are resting at her sides.

The tombstone wears a white cap of snow, which is swiped away in a brisk assault of Irma's black lamb-skin glove. In the next moment the glove reveals the names on the stone, then the bronze vase with last week's withered flowers. For a second she hesitates with the bouquet, uncertain whether she would rather toss it in a ditch, for the grave is at the very edge of the woods. Instead she hands it to Jasen. His hand automatically grips the bouquet, as if it had

expected it all this time. The bouquet flies straight into the ditch. The lamb-skin glove unwraps the crinkly cellophane and sticks the new bouquet into the vase. The roses' heads are visibly bowed down by the cold.

"*The Lord is my shepherd*", Jasen reads aloud the inscription on the tombstone. There is a hint of mockery in his voice. He knows the inscription was Irma's idea.

"I want a plain grave", she said at the time as if she were buying shoes, "I want plain shoes, nothing extravagant."

The engraver had several suggestions, and Irma thought that one was fitting, although our mother, let alone our father, would never have agreed to it if we had discussed it before they died. It seems to me that Irma doesn't like the inscription either, but she is blankly staring ahead. No one is praying. Not a word is said. We are fulfilling the obligation of Saturday silence, which is the closest thing to a prayer. Jasen is sniffing.

"So... how are you doing?" my sister asks me. I shrug.

"I saw him early this week, you know, he's let his hair grow long. It looks like a woman's, with silky soft curls." The lamb-skin glove makes a gripping gesture.

"Do you remember how devastated mom was about his big hands, with her wanting him to be a dentist like dad? Back then he had that ridiculous haircut, what was it called?"

"The Italian cut", I say.

"Yeah, right, that's the one... who could have known", she breathes out a warm puff into the flakes of snow, which immediately devour it.

"Did he see you?" I ask Irma.

"I'd bet he did. But he just walked by with that hair of his, and it actually occurred to me you two have the same cheeks. Do you remember how normal our lives used to be? It seems to me that, in a way, everything was exactly how it was supposed to be. Right until they died... everything's been going downhill since then. Have you read in the papers that there is a backwards-walking goose in Indonesia?"

Jasen sniffs and says that some woman has been walking backwards ever since getting a flu shot. Another series of warm puffs mark Irma's surprise, and then we head towards the exit.

The bellies bounce vigorously, the pocket insides rip at the seams. Jasen walks ahead. His back is bent as if it had to carry the weight of the whole world, the soft snow-covered path is scarred by his thick soles. In the parking lot, the index finger in the lamb-skin glove draws a

circle in the air and asks whether we would like some tea. The belly bounces once again, and I hurriedly give the excuse that we are in a rush.

Before she enters the car, Irma cautiously asks me:

"How is she?"

"Fine, she's hanging in there", I reply.

"Does she ever get out of bed?" Nothing but her lips can be glimpsed underneath her hat. "Not anymore. Sometimes she sits up in bed, that's the most she can do."

"You think she'll die soon?"

"I don't know, she's been like that for months. The doctor says every day could be her last." Irma brushes the snow off the brim of her hat, and for a moment it seems she is brushing off the thought of death.

"It's alright", she says, then pulls me under the hat's brim, and her icy lips press a dry kiss on my cheek.

We sit in the frosty silence of Jasen's car, seeing off Irma. She vanishes behind the curtains of snow, in the white distance, and then, slowly, some broken part of the engine squealing, our insides raw, we set off as well.