

# Porcelain and Other Casualties

MASHIAT LAMISA

The surface beneath my feet feels like a mossy ground on a summer day—slippery yet dry. It's possibly from the porcelain being too used up to have the stains of tea and coffee completely removed. That's the thing about porcelain and all of its distant cousins, after a while, no amount of detergent can remove the stains on them. I remember my mother had a set of 12 porcelain cups. Someone brought it for her from China on her wedding. The set was mother's favourite. She would bring it out from the cupboard on special occasions like our birthdays, or her anniversary. She would tell us how expensive porcelain was in China and how beautifully the orchids and lilies were imprinted on them. For some reason, father was never really fond of this particular set. He used to stay quiet and still for as long as mother talked about these. Father was a calm, happy man who liked talking about how magical Planet Nine was and how hard he has been working to make the place livable. But there was a strange expression on his face whenever mother talked about those cups with the same gleeful eyes with which she loved the world.

One winter, father had just returned from one of his missions on Planet Nine when he took out 11 of the cups, stomped to the garage and dipped them in a bucket full of black tar. Mother stood silently behind him with her eyes that spoke of untold stories and a sickening naivety. She didn't ask him anything, nor did he give her an

explanation of why he was doing what he was doing.

Mother tried to wash them with soap and detergent once but the stains were too strong to be removed. We couldn't find the 12<sup>th</sup> cup; it was not in the cupboard nor on the table. But I guess, mother and we were too taken aback by what happened to the 11 cups to even think about grieving for the vanished one. Father and she never said one word about it to each other again. The silence and veiled obliviousness was haunting, it was a mutual understanding we'd never been able to fathom.

After that, we never saw the flowered cup set of porcelain from China again.

But here I am today, years later, inside a very similar porcelain cup with orchids and lilies lining its inner curve in colours green and blue. The lightest shade of orange has created beautiful hues on my palms and toes. The rippling warm water feels dry against my skin, the tea bag resting behind my back. The water cooling down by the minute. It's a black honey flavoured tea bag. I know because I never quite liked the smell of honey. It's a relief that there's enough space inside the cup for

me to sit with my knees folded to my chest. At least I won't fall off when the tea sipper creates tornadoes with his spoon in this round world of translucent ceramic.

There's some conversation going on outside. Something about how sugar cubes are still sophisticated, even though most people use organic granular sugar now. I don't mean to pry but I delve into the conversation anyway. My sipper is a man, and the other participant of the conversation is a woman, whose voice sounds a lot like one of those opera singers.

"I have missed drinking tea," says the man as he drops three sugar cubes on my head, marking my wait for the last ingredient, the supreme white milk that will dissolve me and cease my existence in a matter of seconds.

"I know. Every time you come back from Planet Nine, your tea consumption goes out of hand," says the woman.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I didn't say that, John."

I shuffle and sit up straight to listen more carefully at this point. John was my father's name too. John Nine, the astronaut after whom Planet Nine was named.

"Alright, darling, if you say so. But, are we using these cups on a regular basis now?" says John, hastily.

"Why not? It's been long enough,

the stains are quite visible now, the lower surface is slippery and we better use them before they crack," snapped the woman.

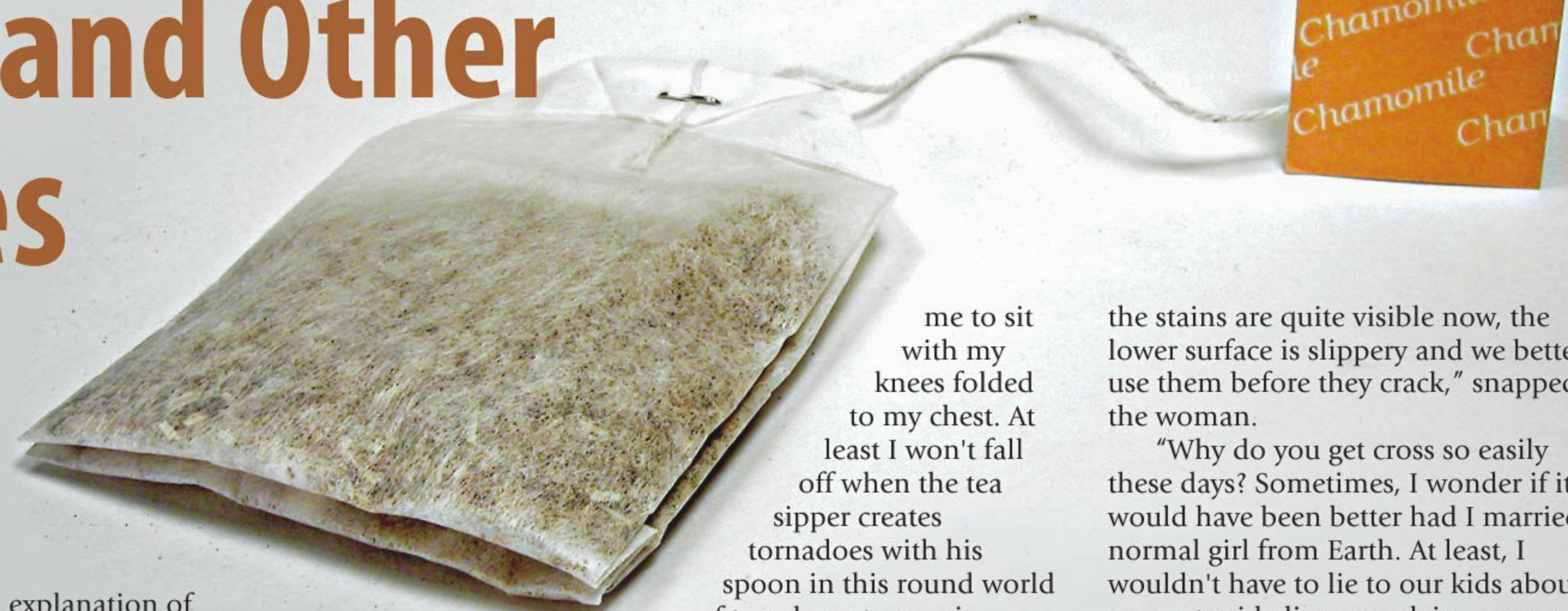
"Why do you get cross so easily these days? Sometimes, I wonder if it would have been better had I married a normal girl from Earth. At least, I wouldn't have to lie to our kids about some stupid alien porcelain cup your father sent for you."

"They are my kids too, John. We both know these cups are one of the very few things that have kept us together as a family and let us have normal lives within the limitations of earth's timeline."

"I don't believe you, or your superstitious alien father. We will be fine without these. I will destroy these cups and prove it to you."

The container of fresh, condensed milk lies beside my cup. The voices of John and the opera singing woman are now hushed, two children are gasping and screaming at the garage. Fixing my tie, I stand up balancing myself in the cup, and gulp in the extremely sweet, cold tea. Somehow I feel like I've outgrown the cup already. The instructions said if the sipper missed one of the ingredients of tea, and never came back to drink it, I would not be dissolved in it, but the cup along with I would vanish into another universe, running a loop of events programmed in Planet Nine several billion years ago.

I stare at my watch, and wait until I disappear in ether with the memories of John, his wife, and the secret of the 12<sup>th</sup> cup.



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