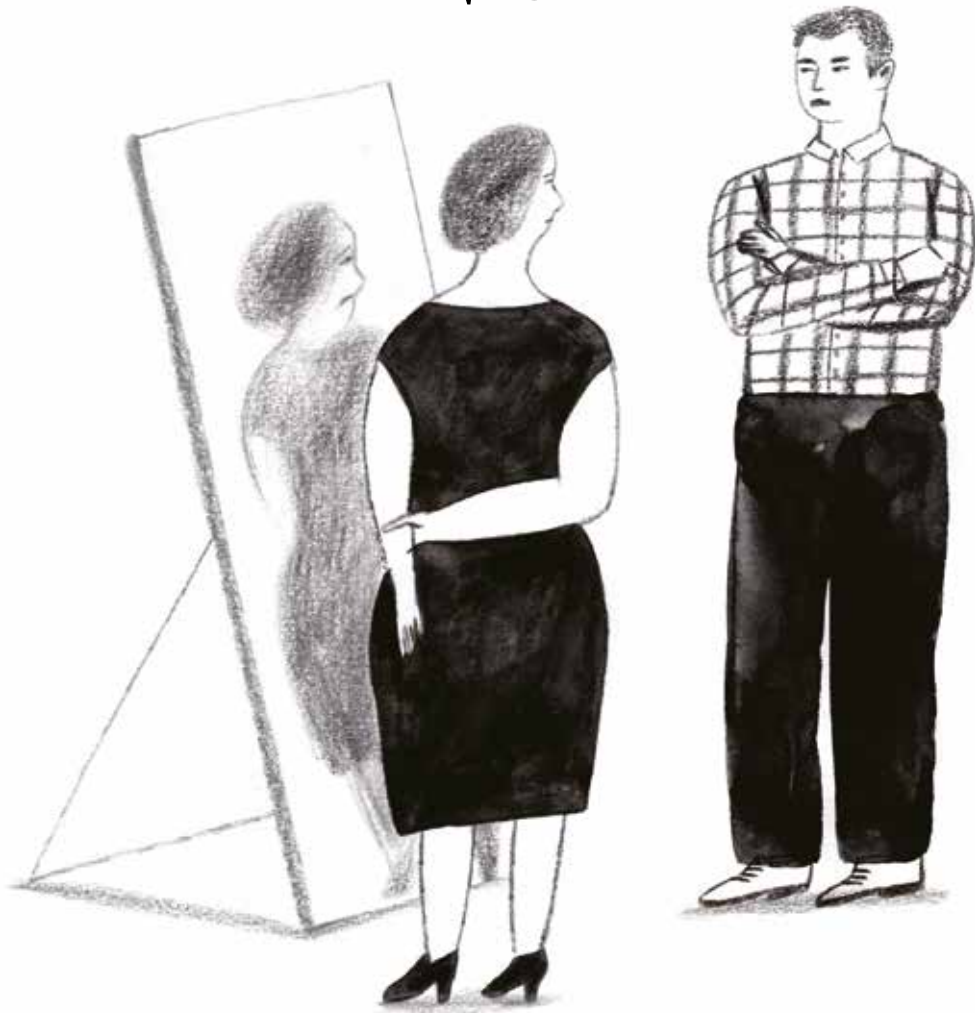


AND
I
WAS
NEVER
HERE
ANYWAY
SO



Emilia Ong

The first time I saw him, he was wearing a red and white checked shirt which had plainly been ironed and which, being so redolent of gingham and of all-round bucolic Innocence, would have looked very Little House on the Prairie on a girl. But he wasn't a girl so instead it looked like he had a girlfriend to look after him – a docile little handmaiden to do his shopping and to advise him on what looked smart-casual – and that always makes a man more attractive. Or at least I thought so. I didn't know whether this was because the man seemed unavailable, or because it was made plain that he was not averse to Care, that is to being Cared For. I liked the idea of a man who responded well to Care. Yes. Because you know that's the sort of fellow I slot right into – the sort that requires Care, I mean. Might he want my Care? is what I thought, straightaway. I admit it.

Also he wasn't bad looking. In fact he was good looking, albeit in that aggressively normal, bland kind of way which I tended to find appealing. Like an aged Backstreet Boy. His hair was the same colour as the fake wood laminate on the desk. The red and white check did not clash with his hair. He had a mild tan which made the line between his hair and his skin appear somewhat blurred. Even his eyes were a sort of sandy-gravel colour, like a desert, or a road. There was something unending about it. I mean that kind of thing made a difference given that the flesh of all the other men in the office was pink and bulged up around the tops of their collars, and when they also did things like wear swirly ties with spotted shirts and sent you dick pics of an evening. Unlike these men, who had featured heavily during the preceding months of my work-cowed existence, he looked like a fine, upstanding, not-too-young man – you know, wholesome, like a well-baked granary loaf. It took him a long time to dare to go and get lunch as well. It was his first day and he was making a great show of working hard you see, and I knew he wanted to make a good impression and I wanted to tell him, It's alright, no one cares. And that if they did, he shouldn't give a rat's arse. I didn't say it though and that's fortunate because I later discovered that he wasn't the sort of person who took well to that sort of thing – to advice, that is. When you advised him he'd leap up like a cobra and spread his reptilian wings you see, as if what you'd actually done was step on him with the malefic intent of exposing the

lowly status of his existence. It was not a good call, all in all, to express any sort of irreverence about the things for which he was reverent, that's what I later learned. He was, on that day, the first day that I saw him, extremely reverent about work.

The job was meant to save him. Perhaps I could feel that even then. His anxiety was like a hot soup thrown at my body. When he came back from fetching his lunch, at long last, I noticed that he'd bought a packet of nasi lemak – the cheapest thing they sold downstairs. I knew it had cost two ringgit, forty pence, because that was all I ever allowed myself to buy when I was working, and I understood that I wanted to protect him from his own meanness. That was when I knew I wanted him. Loved him, even. It all felt so natural. He didn't eat it all straight away and that drove me mad. I saw him leave it half-consumed on the desk for a long time. Every time he lifted the lid and took a spoonful it made the office smell. Now that I think of it, I believe he even left half of it uneaten in the end. Well of course I said something, probably something like, One's never enough, is it. I was trying to encourage him. But he said that one was enough for him, and I was ashamed – because whenever I ate one packet I instantly felt starved. Whether this was because it was not enough food or because it was cheap – meaning that all that droned through my mind as I ate was SCARCITY – I don't know. I believe he added something about his putting on weight easily. He was so vulnerable. Everything was quivering.

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The first time we had sex we didn't have sex, because I was on my period and even though I didn't mind he said, Ugh. He didn't want blood on his dick. That had happened before apparently and apparently that was Gross. Well to be frank I didn't much care. To be honest, before I'd got a bit carried away, I'd been grateful for the get-out, even though he'd acted all peeved, like I'd led him on. It was a strangely schizoid experience, being around someone who was ruining precisely what you made you a woman. Who was regretting, that is, the mark of your robustness and health. For a long time I hadn't been robust you see: I was good at Caring for other people but frequently forgot about myself. He'd said to me, earlier that day, You look like someone who's had their growth stunted. I supposed he meant my body looked out of proportion, and I was dismayed. Later I concluded that he was just shitting over my lifelong vegetarianism, because I'm not sure he ever really looked at me and because he liked

to make a point about his Masculinity in a variety of ways and because he had told me on several occasions that I should listen to Joe Rogan. Joe Rogan it turned out told everyone to eat red meat, and lots of it. And if you could hunt it yourself, all the better, although somehow I didn't think he was addressing his female listeners.

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Whilst he was sitting there not eating his nasi lemak and with his head scrupulously down like a schoolboy, we exchanged some words. Now I come to think of it that might have been when I first started hating him. I don't mind telling you that they tend to come pretty much at the same time for me, hate and love. In fact they're probably the same thing, trite as that sounds. I was wearing the same black trousers I always wore, even though they were a size six and I was by then a size twelve at least. Well size six clothes that you've had for years are always more accommodating than size sixes fresh from a shop – the fabric of these trousers was stretched and shiny and the elastic was almost entirely gone, but I still liked to wear them because it stressed me out to buy bigger clothes. I had tried once or twice I suppose but had concluded, following those ordeals, Never again, which was not a problem because it also meant that I got to dawdle along happily in the belief that the day when I would dress nicely and be a legitimate person was To Come – and believing that nice things and one's personhood is To Come is even better than having nice things and one's personhood here and now. Not to mention the fact that if you don't go to the mall you never have to endure the sight of your top-to-toe body in all the mirrors and metal and glass, or give away the sense of virtue derived from wearing something until it falls apart. I've always liked things which are falling apart. I'd even go so far as to say that I am an expert in maintaining things in that delicate, penultimate condition. I can hover in the penultimate for aeons; like a hummingbird, I make the strain of moving-unmovement look totally easy.

Early on I'd clocked his posh moleskine-imitation notebook, and his MacBook Air. Honestly, I thought, What is this, a fucking advert for irreproachability? Everything was just perfect you see and the soup was just scalding with his need. It was like he was heating it remotely from where he sat on the other side of our two desktops, which were facing each other. He was the metal element and I was the pot. The soup bubbles became bigger and bigger. They unfurled like a time-lapse video of an

incoming monsoon cloud. Everything felt feverish. There were long silences between each of our exchanges. The silences were full of his domination. I felt myself drifting into it, like an addict into a backstreet opium den.

It's war.

That's what he said. Well of course I found this just wonderful. It had been so long, you see, since anyone had said anything remotely interesting. There was something simultaneously challenging and resistant about his words. In the office people mostly discussed how much they loved cheese and, concomitant to this, sent dancing cheese gifs back and forth on WhatsApp. Cheese was the basis of our amity; umami sedimented our camaraderie; in itself, however, our association was the sort of plastic-wrapped, pre-sliced tasteless simulation that you should only eat when exceptionally fraught with barren despair. I must have been exceptionally fraught then, because I'd been lapping it up indiscriminately for months, but when A. emitted his cryptic evaluation, well, I felt like someone who, until given a spoonful of gruel, hadn't realised how hungry she'd been. My head did a sort of grinding thing, as though all the cogs were getting back into gear. His words were like fibre. I had to work at digesting them.

It's war. He'd said that it was war with a faint smile. I saw it ripple over his face even though his head had remained angled studiously down. It was plain that he believed he had the world's number, and because I myself believed that life was something of a dog-eat-dog affair, I perked up at his proclamation in spite of his continuing and nauseating posture of piety. Kill or be killed, that was the situation, he said, and although he did not elaborate much further, it was patently obvious that he regarded his task as that of the military strategist. He said something about having been in Saudi. I'd hear a lot more about this later.

Then he said, You're a Gemini. Which, if all the rest hadn't been the start of it, was the start of it. I don't know how he knew and to be honest I wish he hadn't said it because it was completely misleading. That is, it was the first and last time he got something right about me – not that it stopped him from telling me all about myself in the weeks to follow – and I still can't quite fit his early display of intrapersonal insight into the fellow I subsequently got to know. At that stage I thought he was psychic or something, and so I struggled to contain how flabbergasted I was. He was a Gemini too, he said. I felt that we were tuned in.

The truth is that I was thinking about how impressed my Asian family would be if I could introduce this white man to them as my boyfriend. Chinese New Year was only about six weeks away



and just
imagine! I
saw my life begin-
ning. I saw it taking on the

dimensions the Real – of what I'd considered to be Real when I was a little girl. I'd thought these dimensions were lost to me forever. But maybe it was possible: a man for me! One of those normal-looking lives, appropriately accoutred!

Every so often during the course of that afternoon he'd be called off for some newbie training session in a side room with one of the managers. He'd do that thing of going into the room on schedule, instead of waiting for the manager to call over to him with a, Hey, so sorry, ready now? The managers always said sorry when they asked for anything because they were women. They also said sorry because nothing they did ran on schedule. Nothing ran on schedule because they didn't know how to say no, and so ended up doing a thousand other things that people called them to do instead of getting on with their own shit. They didn't know how to say no because they were women. The result was, that afternoon he did a lot of anticipatory sitting around. I felt the soup thicken. Slowly it became a treacle – fetid, fermented treacle, if that's possible. There's something rotten in the state of Denmark, I thought to myself, as I always did when I was uneasy, or emotional, which were usually the same thing. I couldn't decide whether it was worse when he remained there,

lurking alone in a room across the hall, with his perfect notebook and three colours of pen, or when he got up and returned to the office and stood by the photocopier, oozing accusation and conscientiousness. Beneath the conscientiousness was rage, of course. I knew full well how exhausting it was to spend one's time meeting other people's expectations when the other party lets them fall into the dirt. I noticed that he had brought a black v-neck sweater with him, which at some point he had put on over his shirt. It made him look a bit like a schoolboy. I liked that too.

* * *

The first time we WhatsApped I was in bed and just about to turn my phone off but – no matter. I believed his message was more important. The dialogue which unfolded on the little screen was very serious, and for a long while I found it difficult to recalibrate my persona. Because of the cheese, you see, not to mention the dick pics and the Game of Thrones gifs and cats doing karate videos and the That's what she saids. That was what I'd been used to and so there was a disconnect. I joked around as best I could at first, in spite of his not being especially responsive. Maybe I even said something as crude as – for it had rained – I got wet going home today. He didn't say That's what she said however, as I would have expected from the others, and I started to feel annoyed and snubbed. Eventually and out of the blue he wrote, Is this a conversation or not. Well I was shocked and hurt for a moment but I quickly replaced that with shame. I said Yes, of course it is. I apologised for being silly. He proceeded to regale me with his impressions of our colleagues and boss, and to give me the rundown on the game he believed each of them was playing. He told me who was trying to impress who and who had the power and who was trying to take it, and he told me about how he wasn't going to let anyone take it from him, for one. Not from him, no way: he'd been in Saudi, he knew the tactics. I typed, Exactly. I typed Exactly a lot. There wasn't much else I could say. I had the sense that he was enjoying himself. That made me enjoy myself too.

I soon discovered that A. liked to talk about himself a lot. I couldn't speak because when A. was talking about himself, because he didn't like to be interrupted. No not even with the sorts of indistinct noises which indicate that one is engaged and attentive throughout a drawn-out monologue, and not, either, with my questions, which were the sorts of question most people welcome, intended to deepen the conversation and to furnish

the speaker with the sense that he has been fully understood. I learned that he didn't like me to speak on our first evening out, when we were walking in the dark. I had bought him dinner, and he was talking. I made intermittent sounds of sympathy, thought and appreciation. I had spent the same amount on our dinner as I usually permitted myself to spend across three days. For once I hadn't cared and had gone recklessly on, ordering all the dishes I thought he would enjoy. He was like the child inside myself whom I had buried: I wanted to give him everything. It made me happy. It made me feel safe.

I remember wondering whether all men were like this. Was this what love was: pretending that the other person was you? It could be convenient, I thought. You could give them everything you couldn't give yourself, and that seemed to me like a Life. It could be a Life. My heart went out for him. I had a curious seeping feeling.

We'd just crossed the road when suddenly he stopped short and said: If you'd just be quiet and let me finish. Now this didn't come out at all with the composure the printed words appear to suggest. To be clear: he exploded with these words. He erupted. A., you see, was a grenade.

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The next time we WhatsApped he was in crisis. He was in crisis because he'd gone out for a massage – Not that kind of massage, he clarified stonily (though I'd said nothing) – and had become angry when loud Chinese men's voices had started through the wall. He'd banged heavily on the wall a few times and had even yelled Shut the fuck up. Naturally these Chinese men had subsequently stormed into his room and he'd had to run, half undressed as he was. He'd run down the road and was typing to me as he was running. He thought that they were Chinese mafia and that they were in a car hunting him down. He wondered whether he'd have to leave the country. I typed lots of Oh my Gods as the story unfolded, and then he typed Stop interrupting. Well I should have known, but one never does you see.

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A few weeks went by and I was spending all my free time with A. He'd call me up and say, B., come to so-and-so place at so-and-so time, and I'd do it. It made my life very simple. A. always decided where we went. Well, once he allowed me to decide but when we

got to my chosen establishment he made it so plain that he found the offerings subpar that I was filled with guilt, self-doubt and apology. I spent so long conceding to the Truth of his condemnatory evaluations of the place that I never made a decision for him again. No matter, I thought: demurral is generally the easier route in all avenues of life. I found it was a broadly applicable strategy. Things got better after that.

Once we'd started spending all our weekends together my eyelashes fell out. Some of them did. I pretended they hadn't and used lots of kohl to fill in the blank space above my pupil. I was still rushing out as early as I could because he had said that he never saw me in the morning, and what he meant was that I was Lazy and Unproductive. It was always me who had to apologise in the evenings for wanting to go to bed. He was quite biting about it at times. Off to beddybies, he'd say. Off to dream-land. He didn't read novels, only real-life stories, or books like *Sapiens*, which Joe Rogan had probably recommended. His new life was going to be supremely Productive, and there was nothing Productive about either sleep or novels. He was making himself get up before dawn, had quit caffeine, and was going to the gym. And then there was all the walking he made us do. He was studying ESL theory in his free time like he was doing a degree in it instead of the shit job we were actually doing. Of course I tried to tell him to Calm the fuck down and to Be gentle and to not beat himself up twenty-four-seven, as he plainly did. I said, Think about your inner child, does he really deserve to be punched and kicked about like this. On one occasion he looked touched when I said this and that gave me hope, but that one time was never repeated. Whenever thereafter I suggested desistance or rest he looked extremely irritated, like I was trying to sabotage him. I understood that he considered me and my ethos to be an Idle and Toxic element which needed to be eliminated. He said I should exercise more. I said that I went swimming. He said, Yeah, I can just imagine your kind of swimming – that doesn't count.

Go at it harder and That's not enough and The world is dangerous. These were the messages he told himself. They were the messages I also told myself, but I did so in a much more subtle way, and I began to resent his blatant bullying. Where he thought the injunctions would make him into a better person, I knew that they were precisely what would kill me.

* * *

One day, when I was feeling particularly tired – my eyelashes were still bothering me – he decided that we should go to the beach. He wanted us to go to the far-away beach, at the extreme end of the island. It was a big beach but it was tacky and touristy, overpopulated by rich Arabs. Husbands in shorts would lead their burka'd wives slowly along, and I'd watch the bottom of their black mantles drag in the sand. A. forever wanted to be going to this beach, because, I thought, he was an idiot who thought the only places which existed were the ones he'd read about ten years ago in *Lonely Planet*. I suggested another beach which was closer to where we were. I bought a bus ticket to the closer beach. He bought a bus ticket to the further beach. We sat in the back row of the bus and had an argument. The last valid stop for my ticket came and I stood up. A. didn't. The bus driver got angry. I gestured for us to get off but he just sat there as though my will counted for nothing and in fact like I wasn't there. So I sat back down. By now the bus driver was yelling. He was a corpulent man with fleshy cheeks which swiftly reddened. A. gestured at me: he wanted me to give him money for a ticket extension. So I did. I took out one coin and one note from my purse and placed them both in A.'s hand. He walked down the aisle and gave the bus driver my money. I thought, Now it's over.

However, when the bus driver gave him the new ticket, A. snapped the little rectangle of card out of the bus driver's fingers with attitude. Well, then the bus driver refused to drive. He started yelling even more, stalled the engine, and opened the door to his cubby hole. He began waving his fists about. A., I thought, looked curiously content. He made a few pacifying gestures and we got off the bus as the driver yelled blue murder. I understood that A. felt he'd had the situation in hand. He said it was all my fault for confusing the driver. I knew there was no point saying anything.

This was the thing, you see. Everywhere A. saw danger, and yet everywhere he created danger where there was none. He'd point out Arab men in the mall and nudge me and say, That guy's a killing machine. They had broad shoulders perhaps, but they looked like normal men to me.

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It was a relief when he left, in a way. I wouldn't have to worry anymore about pointing or speaking or sleeping. Or eating, for that matter. For a long time I'd believed A. to be interested in me, but it turned out that he was interested only in his own rambling

confessionals. The foreign land we were in was a backdrop for his drama, and I was a backdrop for his drama too. I remembered how, when I'd lifted my arm in order to point towards something I wished to show him, he would bat it down. Yes, quite literally in fact, like I was some sort of mosquito. A combination of shiftiness and fury would come over him and he would lift his arm and force mine down. Not that it had required much forcing: I'm the kind of person who knows when she's taken up space she isn't really allowed.

So I'd drop my arm obediently and adopt a suitably chastened look, but a few blocks later there'd be something else which I'd wish, like an excited child, for him to see – and up my arm would go again. Partly I'm a slow learner and partly I just couldn't get it into my head that he didn't care. Generally one does tend to hope you see. To hope that they're interested. But after he left I thought he'd been ashamed of me. And then a long time after that I realised that he wasn't actually ashamed of me, but that my pointing filled him with shame because he couldn't tolerate being shown anything. Probably he thought it made him look needy. That, I supposed, I could understand.

Emilia Ong is a writer and journalist living in Margate. An ex-teacher with a degree in philosophy, she is currently at work on a novel. Twitter and Instagram @e_o_n_g_. www.emiliaong.com.

