

Emilia Ong

Careful

This may never have occurred to you, either in life or in mind, but let me tell you, it is a very odd experience to be sitting on a bench surrounded by men eating an apple. The men weren't eating the apple, I was. I was listening to the lap of the ocean you see, and I wouldn't have bought the apple because so often here they are crumpled like used brown paper bags, fitfully lined and quiltedly squishy, but I just thought I'd check in Big Mart, and what do you know, on the one day I wasn't desperate for an apple, there were two sitting there on top of the mound – rather a shambolic hillock, I must say, and one whose stack had been built up inside a dangerously tilted crate (tilted, I suppose, for ease of access, though neither the tilting nor the stacking has ever struck me as a particularly conducive way to store apples, given that these choice items of Nature's bounty are so feebly susceptible to harbouring the tenacious signs of the knocks life has seen fit to serve them) – and they were, to boot, astonishingly unbruised and shining in that lustreless matte way which I prefer. They were the kind that are both green and red too, which I prefer. The ones that are only red – that deep shade, just like the blood which appears, I must confess, only every so often on my sanitary towels, and which consequently when dried I tend to hold up close to my face such that I might appreciate its glorious vegetal aroma before folding the towel in half and putting it in the bin, yes sticky side to sticky side and blood face out, and this even in a unisex cubicle because you see I no longer much care to protect the fearful sensibilities of men – have very tough skins, I find, and the all green ones in this alien country look almost yellow, like buttered potatoes, or like malformed lemons, or else like the lurid lime flavour icicle pops which have to be pushed up out of those clear plastic wrappers whose sides cut the sides of your mouth, for plastic is indeed basically a switchblade, so I find it difficult to get excited about those. Well, I dithered a little while, took in the prices of the other goods around the store – did I really want an apple,

not to mention two; in fact, did I want anything at all? – but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. The two green-and-red apples cost around one hundred Lek, a much better price than at the flash grocers opposite the gas station, and it must have been my lucky day, because in front of me in the queue a dusky-haired white man was counting his money, and he had to remove two items from his basket which he could not afford. The cashier assisted him in suggesting that he take out a yoghurt and a tall baby-blue canister of deodorant, if I recall correctly, which he duly did without much complaint and without throwing any of the sort of lingering glances in the direction of the lost comestible that I would have done, had I found myself in his unfortunate position (I wouldn't have been bothered about the deodorant). He needed some left for tomorrow you see, that's what he said to the bulgy-eyed cashier, without a trace of embarrassment. Well this was a heartening exchange to behold, especially because the man was a tourist, and furthermore one wearing those special walking sandals with reinforced soles that look like they're sort of squelching out beneath the feet like irregular rice terraces, which meant that he was not really poor. I'm not the only one then, I thought: not the only one who counts when she doesn't need to. Who has to count, even though she doesn't need to. Who is (most of the time, except when I'm absolutely not) careful with their money and who is, because of this care, most of the time, humiliated.

As I say, the man however was not embarrassed, and so nor I think can we safely surmise was he humiliated. Humiliation, you see, only occurs when what has happened reaches into the pit of your soul and drags it out all naked and pimply with its hair uncombed and its stomach distended from its last mountainous meal for all to see. Humiliation only occurs when the beat by which your heart is kept marching leaps into your mouth and out onto the floor or onto the counter or into the lap of another and sits there throbbing away, disembodied and yet so very damningly bodily, while everyone looks on with horror and in disgust. This man wore the encounter lightly: he did not have the money to hand. Certainly he could have sourced more money for the next day, could have exchanged more Euros, could have done whatever it was he was in

no mood to do. The situation was simple circumstance, happenstance; what have you. It was not the case that he could not put his own money into his hands. That is what I'm talking about: this was where we differed. Having but not having; a poverty of the soul: one with which I am afflicted and with which he, I believe, was not.

Being careful is humiliating because nobody likes a miser – either in money or in life. Often I am upset about money in this crazed country. You see, they round everything up in the most unmathematical of ways. For instance, if the price is 261 Lek, they will charge you 270 Lek. I am not able to ask whether this is normal practice because it is too degrading – too telling of my broken soul – for me to do so, so I still don't know if they do this because I am a foreigner who surely, they erroneously think, does not care for such pennies, or because that really is the nonsensical way of doing things here. To ask would in my case not be a question but an exposure, an exposure of the most repellent foibles of my psyche. So I pulp my query, compress my rage; by the time I get home, however, I often feel very sick indeed.

Worse is when they just don't give you your change. The other day the bill was 489 Lek. I gave the lady a 500, and she just smiled, and smiled, and waited for me to realise that I was supposed to walk away.

Still, it's better to be humiliated than broken. Or punished! I have had times of not being careful you see, times when I have permitted myself to spend with abandon, heedless of the figures which have totted ever so quickly up. I must tell you it is not a pleasant thing at all. When money comes out of me too effusively, so too does what it has purchased. Yes, everything leaks out in the end. I throw it away or dispose of it in some other wasteful manner. Which leads me to suppose that my money is not my money, and that what it buys me I do not subsequently own. Honestly this is rather a bind. I don't know how to get out of this fugitive existence. The point is that, bought or unbought, the world is never mine.

Then there's the way you have to gnaw at an especially big apple. Like an animal. Jaw open wide like a snap trap and then the unladylike clamping down. Have you seen the size of apples on the continent?

Quite incredible, let me tell you. These two were each larger than those pink grapefruits my father used to cut in half, one half for me, one half for him, and serve to us for breakfast on Saturdays. He liked them so I liked them too. He'd cut around the edges of the ruby flesh just where it collided with the chalky pith using a special knife which was curled at the end so that it got right in around the curvature of the fruit. The trick was to make sure the fleshy bit didn't detach completely but remained tethered by a thick cord lurking dutifully down in the murky apex of the grapefruit half's concavity. Because it was established, following my first failed attempt, that I was not good at preserving the affixed status of the grapefruit, I was never allowed to do the gentle knifing. I appreciated the rationale. I myself didn't enjoy trying to partake of my half of the grapefruit when every time I jabbed at it it spun coquettishly around like a freewheeling hussy.

Well I would never have imagined that I'd bring such a giant orb right up to my face and press it up against my tremulous lips, and certainly not in public, but there I was doing just that on the bench in full light of the fading day. As my teeth pierced the greenish-red apple skin juices spurted out in maybe three directions at once like leaping spiders, and aside from the sticky liquid which by way of said spurt came to anoint my cheeks and wrist and possibly forehead, the rest of the apple, being so large, was pressed up against my chin and nose. Well let me tell you I felt like one of those Siamese cats that my friend with three brothers owned for a certain interlude; she liked to remind me that it was a Very Expensive Cat, but it had such a flat face that whenever it ate its disgusting stinky food the brown mush would attach itself to its furred phizog, and when it lifted its head following degustation it was a pitiful sight to behold. Its fur in its untarnished state was already a muddy cream colour, like a mug of coffee prepared by someone who's been too stingy with the Nescafé, and this whole eating business of course just made it worse: to look at the rare feline after she had taken a moment to attend to her physical wellbeing was to be reminded of dishwater that's been sullied by a stack of unscrapped Bolognese plates. After I took the first bite I glanced to the left and to the right and then towards the apple itself, yes I looked right

at the bitten apple and at its grainy innards, which would have made me cross-eyed if it had been a normal-sized apple, but it didn't because this one was the size of Jupiter, and I discovered that I had left a sliver of skin dangling from the bottom arc of the jagged canyon whose circumference I had so boldly incised with my teeth. Honestly it had been quite a long time since I'd eaten an apple, because of the exacting requirements of my stomach I suppose, but as soon as I saw that nasty skin dangling all wet and browning rapidly along its underside I recalled all the apple-eating moments of my life and I shook my fists at you there God and I cried out Why, why is it O God that I can never take a clean bite of my apple? What is so wrong with my teeth and why have you cursed me with such a faulty set of gnashers? Or is it my style of biting perhaps, in which case O God why is it that you have not taught me how to follow my sweet incursions through to tidy, irrefragable completion?

The dangling sliver repulsed me, but I could do little about it because of the men. I didn't want to pick it off and throw it into the sea and so draw attention to its existence. When I'd chosen the bench of course there'd been no one there. Before stopping at Big Mart I'd been up the hill again you see, up the hill which is near my house and beside my house, but not really near and not really beside, and it is not anyway my house. Well I'd just gone up again and come down again and it had been my third time up there, I had already firmly established it in my head you see that I liked the hill although of course I am rather wary of my likings and fondnesses at all moments because history has advised me to be so. My partialities are frequently not to be trusted you see, I'll tell you that at least. Well anyway, I liked the hill because as one walks up the road past the rogue coffee shops, each empty excepting a solitary patron drinking an espresso – usually an aged leather-faced man in jeans even in the most aspirationally-decorated establishments – and then past the dairy products factory, and then past the rival dairy products factory, and then over the forecourt of the car maintenance garage, which extends itself right across the pavement and whose virile youth stare unabashed at my person as I pass, hoses in their hands, and then alongside the arid display of the bathroom appliances showroom, one feels oneself

to be leaving everything behind despite it all. Each step is a heave. The pedestrian footpath is broken in several places, not only by the garage, so I walk in the gutter for much of the way. Doing so is not a hassle, for walking in the gutter is anyway my tendency in cases unrelated to these and in cases undemanding of this strategy: it is one might say a morbid preference or a sick mirror of my quota of self-esteem. It's an absurd preference of course because at the same time I am the sort of person who likes things to be very clean, and so following every hill visit and the concomitant trawl through the dust-laden trench, through that pit for all the shit which is where I belong, through that ditch along the side of the road which is full of all the crap that the people zooming past in cars never have to bother with, I have to put my shoes in the washing machine. Because they are cheap shoes this is however playing a not disregarable degree of havoc with the sole and its glue, and therefore my hill-going habit and its outfall give me cause for concern during those quietest darkest moments of the still still night, when I do not wish to think of other, less tangible things. Well I heave myself up the hill bit by bit and with each step it feels like my being is being left just that little bit behind, like my being is a boulder in a sack in fact which I am electing not to take with me, no, not this time; this time I am leaving the boulder down there in the fracas where all the people are you see. And so, though I am undeniably still gripping at the sack as I heave-ho, what I am really doing is pulling at the matted fibres and stretching them out out out until eventually they'll break – of this I'm convinced. Yes, one day the sack will break in spite of its having proved to have been made of a very supple material thus far, and in spite of its having thus far been a sack which has never broken. For no, heavy as the boulder is and in spite of all my worldly meanderings and all of my other hill climbings – for yes there have been others – the sack has never broken.

Eventually there's a turning because what I have not told you is that there is in fact a castle at the top of the hill. Manifestly that's where I'm going, and it's where the people all think I'm going, and thereby the sporadic stares (for yes there are always a few individuals lurking malevolently by the side of even the hill road) remain at a normal level

and I don't receive any more China! greetings I think than I would down there in the town below. But you know what, in fact I'm not really interested in the castle at all. I couldn't give a flying fuck about the castle if you want to know, all I'm interested in is the actual slog up the hill. Or the mountain. Yes, I think it's a mountain really. And accordingly I'm not very interested when I get to the top either, and not even when I have completed the climb and am able to stand on the viewing platform with its broken binoculars and survey all the land like a king, which one would think would be an exhilarating experience but truly it is not, can I muster the remotest bit of interest. But even though I know this now, when I'm not at the top all I can think about is getting to the top, which shows you just how stupid I essentially really am. That said I do like the view of the other hill-mountains all crumpled around the back, they look like nothing so much as a sheet pushed down the mattress during sleep and this reminds me of so much you see, not least of my mother's bed, and the remembering makes me feel very good, very well indeed. It's a sort of connectedness.

And so of course I ate the foul sliver and all the slivers that followed, though I was mindful of the men and their possible probable gazes. I did not want to look disgusting you see, like I was slobbering all over my apple, though in fact it was hard for me to tell if I was or not because it was such a juicy apple. Juice or saliva was running all down my chin and the splatters had also attached themselves in dinky translucent hummocks to the rather large lenses of my plastic spectacles and because of this I had taken my spectacles off and lain them on my bag beside me on the bench. For some reason I was faintly afraid the wind would blow them away but I reasoned that though a tad strong perhaps, the wind was surely not cheeky enough to commit such a dastardly deed. So there I was, blind and eating an apple with three black figures – each wearing one of those awkward winter to spring coats whose scanty padding looks sparse and shoddily done, or maybe they were actually their winter coats, I don't know, this is a poor country, it's hard to tell what's deliberate - on two benches opposite me whose faces I couldn't make out. The sun was behind

them because I had chosen the single bench facing the long afternoon rays, and this had been a triumph because on several preceding days I'd coveted this bench and found it perpetually taken but now I found that my securing of the favoured seat meant that I was spot-lit whereas they were in shadow and so I felt distinctly disadvantaged when it came to this unintended instance of finding myself thus garishly illuminated upon the social stage. I could hear the sea lapping gently around the stone platform to which all the benches were fastened. It was not a pier exactly but a kind of stub which departed only half-heartedly from the shore. Which wasn't a shore in the natural beachy sense that you may reasonably be imagining but a manmade esplanade with giant swirls and crude seashell designs embedded into the two-tone concrete. The concrete looked to me like someone'd been playing with the arrangement of their pate on a giant matzo cracker with no intention of eating it. People liked to walk up and down this matzo cracker at all times but especially between five and seven o'clock in the evening and just then it was oh around thirty-five minutes past six so it was rather busy. Then as now there would be families strolling companionably together and kids on bicycles and it was quite a lethal journey trying to get from A to B during these promenading hours. There were also lots of made up girls with tight black tops and rips in the knees of their jeans. And there were boys in figure-hugging tracksuits which, I thought, must be a new thing, and I felt glad of it because of course it is high time they got a taste of what it means to have to be body-conscious inside absurd clothes. I ate my apple as fast as I could. I wanted it to go away because of the possibility of the black figures' indiscernible stares. But then of course once I finished it I remembered that I had the second apple and that it was still snug in the plastic bag and reclining gently on the bench where I had placed it and once I'd remembered it I could not well forget about it. I didn't want to seem like a monster so I let some time pass. This was very difficult. I wanted to look at my phone because I thought this would look like a normal thing to do and perhaps I would not seem so darkly alone in this godforsaken wide world but my fingers were sticky and I didn't want to make myself and my belongings even more dirty just in

order to look normal. That would be too high a price to pay, I concluded. And so I stared at the ground and at the discarded black and white shells of the sunflower seeds which had collected in the depressed grouting between the stones around my feet. The people here eat a lot of sunflower seeds in shells after taking them out of their shells and it is just like China in this way, which is funny because I feel this is perhaps a racist or simply closeted place and that they don't like Chinese people, a fact I can tell because of the stares and the greetings, and eating seeds strikes me as a very companionable and soothing way to pass the time but I myself don't do it because I have no one to break up a conversation with by way of the cracking and chewing of seeds and besides I have never quite got the knack of the cracking of the shell and extracting of the seed and therefore neither have I often managed to reach the ultimate goal of chewing because my mother never taught me, or because I am not really, properly Chinese.

And so I stared at the blueish sky to my left, though this of course meant looking in the polar opposite direction to the men and I didn't wish to appear hostile. Nor did I wish to appear friendly though so in the end there really was little place else for me to look but at the seedless husks on the ground.

Some time passed with difficulty. And then I thought fuck it and I took my second apple out of the plastic bag and I bit into it and what do you know the men stood up and went away. They must have been waiting for my bench I thought and now they could see that I was not going to be moving for a while what with this edible basketball in my hand still to be got through. I felt a ribbon of exhilaration then and then I felt mortifyingly exposed. Now I was all alone on the stubby outpost. Who does she think she is, I thought the people on the esplanade must be thinking, not giving up her seat. Taking up all that space as if she has a right to.