

Persona non grata

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The idea that we are defined more by the things we dislike than those we choose: this notion, read once – part-forgotten – surfaced in my mind one morning as I sat in the institutional patient lounge, pen poised, closely guarding my treasured (and feared) weekly menu. It was time to finalise those all-important options for the food that would be served on the ward over the week ahead, but my mind drifted, pen cast aside; world expanded.

As I remember, the suggestion had resonated strongly: that one's dislikes may mark a firmer boundary or barrier between you and the flood of the world: more specific, more individualised, more often illogical - guided by strange unconscious forces that cause some innocuous foodstuff to evoke visceral disgust, the involuntary tongue-thrust of rejection. It may tell you more about a person to read a list of their dislikes than their rather more vague choices or preferences. In my own mind, the list of 'likes' may feel inexhaustible, endless; how can one ever hope to fit all those things in, when the body's need is boundaried and not infinite, and the time allotted in our lifespan is short? How can I choose the components with which to fill it, when I covet so much? My identity and objectives could be clearer if I were to exclude more, allow less in. Narrow my list of wants. Define my edges more severely: "this is who I am not".

My skill as a refuser was my stealth: I used to turn down offers with a firm yet unobtrusive, rarely varying, response. People would not notice, unless they were looking closely, that this answer was given regardless of the food in question. "I don't really eat biscuits"... "I don't really eat sweet things"... "I don't really eat lunch"... "I don't really eat..."...full-stop. People closer to me would notice the things I did, reluctantly, have to keep in the kitchen during visits back to the family home. Mum: "Shall I get you some of those yogurts you used to like?" "I don't really eat them anymore." The question "Well, what *do* you eat?" hung in the air, unasked.

I excused myself from 'family' meals (special occasions, in the workplace, or with friends) – hating to be 'the one who never eats'. It seemed rude, and I didn't intend it to be read as a rejection of them, their values, or a symbolic distancing of myself from their communal food-

taking. But I could not eat the food that they ate. It was too much: too oily; too rich; too sweet...too *unknown*. Too early; too late; too expensive; I really just fancied a drink. I was like Goldilocks but everything was wrong. Plates cleared, I seized my moment, came in from the cold where I'd stood looking in - waiting, watchful – persona non grata while the others took their fill. Taking up my place with a flurry of distracting greetings, I batted away the reasons I hadn't 'made it' for the meal. Traffic. Work. Family. (*There are two Ryvita in my bag and I can't stop thinking about them.*) These people might linger for hours yet, replete with the glow of companionship, the bonhomie from sharing that extra pudding ('Diet starts tomorrow!') while I sit here and starve. I could not eat their food, had to stand outside waiting for them to finish - and now they insist on my presence here: these people are cruel. I am being denied access to those plain, dry crackers which I'd packed in a plastic bag to eat furtively, in a far corner of the tube station, or dark street corner - wherever I might hide my squirrel-like nibbling and finally experience the long-delayed relief of the longed-for food... I need to leave. Work. Traffic. Family. (*Ryvita in my bag, and more in the packet at home*).

It may be that to have a list of 'dislikes' or 'things that cannot be eaten' which exceeds the number of 'acceptable' items signals something rather more than just a boundary or an expression of identity. I wonder if there is more nuance here than in the black and white 'hunger striker' of Susie Orbach's description (Orbach, 1993), who wants or can ask for nothing – the (usually female) person with anorexia whose lips are sealed against the overwhelming demands and forces of a cruel, grasping world. The act of putting in barriers between oneself and the super-consumer society where choice proliferates may be, to begin with at least, a sane attempt to hold back the tide: a seductive grey area between rational strategy and disorder where it's hard to perceive a divide. We live in a world where the issues of waste and excess are causing frightening environmental and economic consequences (Wallman, 2015; Sayer, 2015). New 'disposable' (often in fact impossible-to-dispose) products are manufactured, put on shelves, bought and wasted, not bought and binned, dangled in front of our noses in glossy adverts trying to tempt us to want more than we need, buy more, take more, eat more, exercise more, *process* more... and in the end the attempt to keep up, or to make any choices at all in the face of the onslaught, makes it necessary to protect oneself by setting up rules, boundaries, definitions, which keep the self safe and intact.

The list shrinks. Apples (green - but not red, pink or yellow), carrots, natural yogurt, Ryvita (plain), cabbage (cheapest on shelf), tuna (cans of – NOT in oil). Is that ok? Wouldn't it be

better to cut out the apples? I can't, realistically, eat all of the bruised apples I see in the shops, which gives me a nagging sensation of unease: tasks left undone, missed opportunities to curtail food-waste. *And the costs add up.* Do I need them? Would I really miss them? Wouldn't having only 5 things on the list feel more manageable: the number of fingers on one hand? It might creep up to 10, if I'm not vigilant, if I fall victim to a *special offer* out in the bright persuasive aisles of the densely stocked supermarket. Perhaps apples OR cabbage... and of course cabbage is better, being less popular, cheaper, more 'nutritious'...lower in sugar. Utilitarian: the food of the Soviet state and agricultural Poland. However, apples, unlike cabbage, are undeniably virtuous on the electricity-front – make no demands on the non-eco, aging, one-ring hob. A plan presents itself. I will cook my cabbage in the early hours of each morning, when the electricity is charged at 'night' rate: I already rise at five to boil a series of kettles, the hot water to be kept in a succession of flasks for hourly doling out of coffee, saving precious pence (and power) with every tepid cup. (I exclude good coffee from my list of 'things to be rationed' on slightly illogical 'cultural' grounds; as an affectation; a symbol of good taste; a rejection of the corporate Nespresso pods or expensively-ersatz 'barista'-branded instant. I buy fresh beans and grind my own. I buy Fairtrade: I am supporting a farmer. I am a writer, who runs on black coffee and high ideals. At work I drink the bitter, strong, Maxwell House and I do not complain as it's not pretending to be anything other than cheap instant coffee, which pleases me and satisfies my need to be contrary.) I eat my cabbage cold in the evenings, from then on, which fills me with a kind of sanctimonious despair.

I cannot solve the global issues of over-consumption, waste, and inequality – but I can, at least as far as my responsibility goes, not take more than I need. I will have no part in this wasteful system; I do not buy into its rules. I will take no apples, and they will have no place in me. My energy bills will be minimal; I put no extra demand on the system. I will not want. To attempt to reconcile or balance the books, in such a world of austerity and suffering, is a tempting premise, and not without some logic. I am unlikely ever again to eat an avocado, since learning of the unfolding ecological impact in terms of exacerbating drought, all to fulfil the orthorexic desires of a wealthier, well-watered society for #cleaneating and #healthyfats and the ignorant hunger for #avotoastporn on the Instagram feed. Anger makes me bitter, as I swig down more Maxwell House coffee, and resolve to donate to WaterAid.

Rationally I know that my extreme refusal to take what I might need is in fact creating further societal hardship. I am a drain on the taxpayer, with my demands on the health service and the state: the inability to become as self-sufficient and wholly giving as I require myself to be is an endlessly circular, self-fulfilling agony. This does not lessen the guilt.



Back to the immediate matter in hand: the question of who offers the food, and when it does or doesn't feel acceptable...this is a tricky arena – how to circle around it, creep closer to it, avoiding direct discussion or interactions at the point of handover. Food offered when I feel humiliated, vulnerable, laughed at, or my need or entitlement to it questioned, cannot be accepted; I cannot ask for things to be more (greedy) or less (needy) – or not make use of the items provided (waste).

I can accept food on my terms, but I cannot always ask for it, especially in person. The requirement in inpatient treatment to submit a weekly menu with my preferences feels shameful, endlessly anxiety-provoking in the obsessive juggling to find the 'perfect' combination of mismatched items based on personal fluctuating rules around 'safety' versus 'challenge'...yet also illicitly thrilling, as I thrust the final version (no eye contact) at some passing staff member once I've plucked up the courage to brandish my embarrassing choices ("there, I've done it now...no going back!"). To query what is actually served, is often impossible, even if it's not what I expected: I don't like, at the point of offering/acceptance, to seem as if I am at all bothered by what is on the plate. However, if anything goes awry during the process, such as my snack not being visible on the trolley, it can put me off to the extent that I can accept nothing at all. But usually I will not show upset over what may or may not be there. It must seem to be of no consequence to me in the public arena, however much I hurt inside.

At a 'normal' social occasion with others, where there is food on offer communally, if I can't eat what is provided then I can have nothing at all. I cannot ask for 'special' things: there must be no additional entitlement for me. But I have learned that it seems to unsettle others to have the skeleton at the feast, so I make myself scarce – literally and metaphorically – at mealtimes. I have to go to the bank, the chemist, the cashpoint, to call someone... to eat my pre-boiled

cabbage on a cold park bench, if I can find one where I will be unobserved. I cannot eat the calorie-dense, taste-full, unfamiliar, unregulated choice of food at the banquet – so my place at the table remains empty. If I am conspicuous by my absence, then the noticing has sometimes been something I've needed (a distress signal to an uncompromising world); at other times a concern and source of embarrassment – for to say no, to refuse food, to take no part in the normal rituals of offering and acceptance, bestows the status of outsider – the lone wolf. There is often a sense of unease, or discomfort, to be among a group where one goes without.

But, away from the social forum, what becomes of that one who continues to refuse? How does it feel to see a person who is quite literally starving to death, the 'sufferer' of anorexia who may be unable to see the true ravages of the illness which cripples with its cruelty, its delusional convictions of 'greed' and 'fat' in a mind desperately alert but trapped in an unrecognised skeletal body? To witness the spectacle of an ongoing battle against appetite, the refusal or inability to conform, or take in, or acknowledge one's most basic needs? In the face of such denial, my sadness can erupt into impotent rage: I want to force this person to *see* the sad reality of their wasted body and destroy these wretched thoughts which torment them... I want them to eat, to be nourished, to stop myself feeling so bloody angry and scared about the march to the scaffold I see in front of me. I want to ram entitlement down their throat. Then hate myself for the sudden, savage, loss of empathy. Perhaps I am no better than the maligned student nurse who asks innocently "Would you like some butter with your toast?" or the GP who refuses to offer a referral to psychotherapy services because "You obviously don't want to get better." Yes: we are choosing this life. Is that easier for you to believe? Is it easier for me to condemn myself for a 'wilful refusal' than to work through the sadness of an inability to accept my fair share?

I sometimes read articles in psychotherapeutic and nursing journals, relate too closely to the counter-transference issues raised around working in a setting where one's role can comprise both punishing, force-feeding jailor, and over-anxious caregiver to desperately unwell patients whose lives may be living hell, and whose bodies are so fragile as to need constant monitoring – yet are found pulling out drips, or flexing wasting muscles, when your exhausted back is turned. How can you keep offering, in the face of such hollow-eyed and relentless refusal of all the good that you would seek to instil? How do you not, sometimes, feel the rejection of the food to be a symbolic refusal of your best attempts to care, support, deliver what you were

able...or not occasionally feel irritation with the person who hurls the meal you've meticulously measured out (at the optimum temperature, as per individual preferences, in the 'right' cup, without a single speck of 'dirt' – and just one, clean tissue – because you know the details matter) to the floor, all because you forgot to use the agreed wording when you handed it over...



Primary school: old fashioned, overwhelming noise and floor polish smell, and tables of children being doled out plates of food that looked unfamiliar, unappetizing, *strange*. You had to finish everything on your plate. I felt sick with the noise and the cooking smells, and my feeling of dread inside. I could not finish; I became upset and tearful. This drew attention to me, the kind I did not want. I was in trouble, I was causing worry and anger, which was making things worse: there was no need to worry, and I didn't mean to be "bad" – it was just that I couldn't eat the food when I felt so sick and overloaded with smells and noises and stimulation. I learned to discreetly drop food on the floor.

Eating in restaurants, houses of friends, more formal settings, brought a higher level of panic: nausea and actual retching. I spent most family occasions in the toilet, my mum explaining to the concerned others that I was fine, that I just got a bit 'overwhelmed'. Her determined reading of Dr Spock, the childcare guru of the time, in combination with her own childhood memories of revolting school dinners and stern teachers with long harsh rulers as rods led my well-intentioned mother to adopt the "it doesn't matter if you eat it *or not*" policy at home. This allayed my anxieties about having food forced on me; however, I took in the message that – unlike in friends' homes with anxious, fussing, "Just *try* and eat a little more" encouragements to their own stuffed offspring – it was unproblematic, and in the end, unremarkable and accepted, for me not to eat at the table.

I tried to 'join the others' when I moved to shared student life: I tried for three whole weeks. Trembling, I prepared myself 'normal' meals, and made myself eat in the kitchen, hoping no one would notice my shaking hands. I felt sick, I forced down the food. People seemed to like me: I made friends. I realised that it didn't matter if I ate with them or not – they still talked to me, and I had 'proved' I did eat – that I was *normal* - hadn't I? I stopped eating and went back to the late-night nibbling in the sanctity of my bedroom. Storing food in my underwear drawer

in case the kitchen was snug with flatmates, meaning I couldn't walk in and take nourishment from under the perceived spotlight of their gaze. I felt they were depriving me; I resented their unashamed, unhurried consumption. I told myself I didn't need the food anyway, and replaced hunger and hatred of others with the private thrill of denial and shivering delight of emergent bones. I read 'Holy Anorexia' (Bell, 1987) and kept it with my secret cereal boxes, for guilty hurried paragraphs and greedy handfuls late at night, once I had despatched my boyfriend back to his flat in order to indulge myself in solitude and All-Bran. I was abnormal: I was not a *real* anorexic - throughout the tedium of prolonged and dutiful love-making, I had longed for the comforting fullness that would come only with food. Nothing all day, fulfilling my duties, acting my part - desperate only for what could not be taken until the very end, lights dimmed, under cover.



Here, in treatment, I try not to think too much about the intimacy of accepting food that has been prepared for me, following my preferences, following what people have said that I need. The sight of a tray with food items on it, and a label with my name on it, feels excruciatingly, exquisitely painful almost – there being something for me – someone has spent time assembling this for me: food has been ordered, my name written down. This is too much time spent on me – and too much effort expended on my behalf. I am so ashamed and grateful and embarrassed all at once, that if I think about all this too much I don't think I can take the tray and accept it. It's too much. It is often actually easier to accept or take food from people who know me less well (not so *personal*) – or for example if my tray is wrong or incomplete.

However, the hurt and confusion of seeing NO TRAY AT ALL can feel like being kicked in the stomach. You don't matter. You don't need food like everyone else. You're not really here. You shouldn't need us to do this for you. You asked for too much. I am evidently not allowed food, so after this experience, even when it's offered I will turn it down. I cannot be seen to have wanted it all along.

If the food looks too much (and in this context it often will) it's because you are greedy. We are playing a big joke on you – see how much food we can pile on her huge greedy plate and see if she still gobbles it down. More and more, day by day. Is she still eating it all? Ok, then

let's up the stakes: make it revolting. Soggy bagels. Greasy oily sauces. Extra butter (she loves to slap it on). Let's see if she still licks the plate. Anyone else would have called quits. Refused the food. Queried it. But not her – she just keeps on going and still comes and asks for dessert. Going to the trolley is embarrassing, shameful. Reaching out for something which you both want and don't want. (I cheered the arrival of automated checkouts in the supermarket – at least the public humiliation of the conveyor belt and the cashier handling your pitiful but desired goods is gone.)

In any situation, I have to take the bananas that no one else might want to eat: the brown, oozy, rotting ones. The apples with bruises. I feel as if I am doing a public service, which slightly lessens the guilt of eating more than I feel I should be. I am not so much feeding my body as disposing of excess produce: a greater good! That pear didn't live its life in vain, to be tossed aside by some Moaning Minny who says it's "too hard" or "too ripe" or "too much like a pear", when I am around: I'm like a human waste disposal unit, and everyone knows it. Not so much a food refuser but a food re-user.

The particular dynamic of being the 'wrong' kind of anorexic, is hard in an environment where food is on offer. I feel that people can see that secretly I want all the food, and think that they think if I were left on my own, I'd eat my way through the entire lot in a frenzy. Perhaps I am not here because I refuse food, but because I can't be trusted to NOT refuse it. Supermarkets offer food at reduced prices with limited shelf lives: I find it hard to walk past, even if I don't want the food. I feel almost a moral duty to 'make use' of this unwanted food, even if that is just by eating, purging, sending the food to landfill in a slightly altered format. I have considered buying the food and binning it on the way home – to cut out the middle (wo)man. I have not yet done so: the act of 'processing' it seems vital.

The compulsion to binge dwindles once I'm no longer starving and restricting and desperate – but once tarred with the greedy brush, it's easy to get professionals to collude with you on 'managing' bingeing urges. They come eager to arm you with their newly-acquired 'CBT-e' techniques for the poor greedy souls with voracious beast-like appetites, who must be taught to restrain themselves, become good human beings, and to take neatly the acceptable portion of cake in the polite manner required. We must all be responsible for our own waistlines. You can't have your cake AND eat it: that was not part of the offer. The waste line is to be drawn.

So I go away with my ‘coping skills’ and use these to more successfully refuse more food. I am now not only not eating, but also punishing myself by starvation with professional endorsement! No wonder patients aren’t allowed into the ward kitchen. Keep it under lock and key when *she* is around, staff must have been warned. Make sure she only has her two Weetabix in the morning: give her an inch and she takes a mile!

There is a saying that I’ve heard, ascribed to Arab culture: “Once you eat with someone you can’t betray them.” I guess in our collective memories, to eat with someone symbolises dropping one’s weapon, letting one’s guard down, letting yourself be vulnerable – and allowing oneself to be *seen* as more vulnerable in that moment. Coming into treatment (voluntarily) is an act of trust. I trust that you are not making fun of me; I trust that you will not harm me (too much); I trust – by accepting your food – that you are not giving me too much. I recognise that I have become disordered and muddled about what may or may not be too much – and I am willing to try it your way, as long as I am relatively convinced that this is in my best interests, and on my terms.

Sometimes this goes wrong. To be presented with food which to me is already ‘spoiled’ (for example: too much butter on what would have been a nice, shamefully enjoyable, fresh bagel – doughy, chewy and comforting in the way that I like but can’t allow myself to choose instead of utilitarian pre-sliced bread or – better – Ryvita) feels all the more punishing. I will *re-claim* my right to refuse both bagels and butter now. I was just beginning to accept that butter (and bagels) might be something I might choose for myself in future, that it might be ok to want and have them in my life, in place of post-expiry-date economy range brown bread eaten straight from the packet (no spread, no electricity wasted in unnecessary frivolous toasting) – but now I feel as if I am being deservedly punished for having had this foolish, selfish, dream. Bad anorexic: go straight to bed hungry – no supper for you. Life *is* tough and you’d better get used to it.

So – next time a bagel is offered, I will not be here to receive my tray. I dare not think too much about the possibility that it will go to waste. (LET it go to waste in fact – see if I care!) I will choose Flora over butter, though I dislike the taste. Being rather more like solidified engine oil than a foodstuff, I find it easier to leave a slightly concealed residue in the tub, NOT scraping every ounce out for usage; I flagrantly smear it on my paper towel (hell, this is now a PROTEST

– I will even use two paper towels for once – specifically for the purpose of more unobtrusive smearing-area!) like all the real anorexics do. See – I genuinely dislike this revolting yellow stuff – I discard it without a second thought. Self-harm through bagel deprivation and Flora choosing: I really know how to make people sit up and take notice (sarcasm noted).

I will not eat the food that you offer, but if you didn't offer it I would feel desperately alone, unnoticed, uncared for. I want and need you to offer it to me, SO that I can refuse it. How else could I tell you that the care is not enough, is not right, not sufficient, not there at the right time, might be taken away when I have not yet grown out of the need for it...? The offering is important, even if I refuse it. If I accept, then I'm still here, on my terms: we have a bargain for now.

Acceptance doesn't mean all is well, but it means at least that I have some level of trust in the genuineness of the offer. If I feel you don't think I need it, then I will choose to be elsewhere when the food is offered. I may act as if it doesn't matter what the food is, or the amount of it offered. (I will deal with this later.) I must not admit – through my demeanour or words – in the moment of acceptance – any wanting, preference, anxiety, or difficulty. The food doesn't matter. (But inside it matters more than anything, and I am scared someone will see how much it means to me). I guess I am dropping my guard enough to take in food, but I am keeping my sword within eyesight in case of attack.

Generally I dislike people knowing what I choose to eat or don't eat, but I will be more vocal about it the less privately disordered (*sacred*) I feel it to be. I can express a preference for chips rather than mash, for example: there's that contrariness again! – my compulsion to confound stereotypes whenever an opportunity presents. When compiling a food diary, especially during times of deterioration, I substitute similar foods, as if to protect my real self, so that 'half an apple and three teaspoons of fat-free fromage frais' might become 'half a pear and two tablespoons of fat-free natural yogurt'. Just so they don't know the truth; won't have an accurate and truthful vision of me eating my select diet. Otherwise next time I sat down to my solitary feast, my food might be ruined by that person popping up in my mind, as if they were at the table with me, observing, distracting me, *knowing* what I eat, and what I choose to allow myself. The pathetic half apple kept in my sparse fridge, to be peeped at and checked, during the day (Testing my resolve? Reassuring myself it's still there? That I can see it but resist its cold but sweetened charms?) – safe for tomorrow? This must be kept private. And if I have *lied*

about the exact nature of the foods I eat, then I might say, quite truthfully, in the unlikely but technically possible case of being ambushed with a pears-and-yogurt offering: “I don’t really eat pears or yogurt”....

Hah! Job done. Ryvita in the bag. Bagels on the floor, and butter in my napkin.

You made me do this: your offerings are all wrong and I will not have them. Or: your offerings are *too* thoughtful, and I cannot accept as I should not need or want them.

Offering and refusal – it confronts me everywhere. I am too often the girl drifting around the supermarket tempted by everything, yet walking out empty-handed, a security guard in tow... They are trained to pick up on people who want yet cannot legitimately have the goods on offer (the unconscious signals of someone in desperate need, acute longing, and full of anxious furtive glances - they can spot me a mile off). I feel acutely ashamed that my desires and lack of entitlement are so accurately read, yet I find some self-assured solace in walking out with nothing – a public avowal of self-sufficiency and negated need.

You have nothing that I want. I am in myself complete.

I do want. I need you to offer, as I am not sure I need, but may accept, with relief.

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