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# Operation Earlybird

**Jess Thomson**

**(CW: poisoning)**

The clock struck twelve on a grey Thursday in November, and Aressa braced herself. At that time, every day, Martin would plonk himself down at the desk opposite Aressa's and start eating his lunch. This wouldn't be a problem if anyone else in the world had this desk, but a series of unfortunate coincidences, including his parents meeting and him lying on his CV to get the job, had resulted in it being Martin's seat. Aressa therefore had to endure approximately 17 minutes of the eighth circle of hell, five days a week, 50 weeks a year. Until, she thought as a sly grin spread across her face, today.

The strange thing about Martin was that nobody really liked him, but they couldn't put their finger on why. He was bland-looking, sexist in the way that weird uncles often are despite only being 29, and loved to tell everyone how much money his side hustle as a podcaster was making him. Nobody believed him, and even fewer people cared. That was where the rest of the office's opinions on Martin began and ended, with the exception of Aressa. She knew the worst thing about Martin, the trait that turned him from a beige man from Kettering to red-eyed devil: he always ate with his mouth open. That Thursday was no different; the noises echoed across the desks, worming their way into Aressa's ears and igniting her increasingly short fuse. Crunch, slurp, smack, munch went the spaghetti-Os, scotch egg, the packet of prawn cocktail crisps.

This is how he ate, every day, all within 2 meters of her. She had mentioned that noisy eating was one of her pet peeves in group conversations, trying to subtly hint to him to please just fucking stop, but that hadn't worked since Martin was too busy telling people about his own pet peeve, which was, in classic Martin fashion, women breastfeeding on the bus.

As he started to munch that fated Thursday, Aressa's left eyelid started to spasm involuntarily with rage as it always did - but today was different. Today, if all went to plan, would be the last time she would have to put up with Martin's shit. She had spent the last 7 weeks meticulously planning every detail of her revenge, and now, it was time.

Every day for the last couple of months, Aressa had asked nearby colleagues what they were having for lunch, Martin included. They all replied, describing their bog-standard cheese sandwiches and Caesar salads, but she only cared about what vile concoction Martin was about to shovel behind his crooked teeth. She had made note of Martin's terrible lunch choices, and had come to notice a pattern; he had a set meal for each day of the week, like a total sociopath would. On Thursdays, he consistently ate tuna and sausage pasta, with a Gala apple for afters.

The apple was key to the first part of her plan. Every Thursday since she'd noticed Martin's bizarre food patterns, she'd started poking a little hole in the side of his apples when he left his desk to go have some uninteresting conversation about bus seat patterns with Clive from HR. The holes started small, but as each week went by, Aressa carved them just a little bit bigger. Martin had noticed the hole the first time it appeared, but it was just a small dent, so he paid it little mind. The little dents slowly grew to about the width of a pencil, but Martin had quickly learned to ignore them, assuming something in his bag kept poking the holes in his apples. Commuting via electric scooter tended to jostle the contents of his satchel, after all. Then, on the Thursday of vengeance, when Martin left his desk to make his second cup of tea of the morning, Aressa grabbed the apple and swapped it with one that she had brought from home.

Aressa had spent the weekend in an allotment, you see. She brought with her a large bottle of water, a watering can, a trowel and a big plastic bag, all stuffed into a camping rucksack. The strange looks she got on the Tube didn't faze her; she was steely-eyed and focussed on her plot. It had to be perfect, and it all started with a big bag of soil.

It hadn't rained for a few weeks, so she had needed to recreate the event for herself. She had crept into the allotment at sunset, when the

resident pensioners had likely returned home for their dinner and Emmerdale session. Finding the loamiest-looking soil she could, she had filled the watering can with the water and poured it generously into the bed, doing her best impression of a rainstorm. Her goal was simple: earthworms. After a few moments of simulated precipitations, their pink little heads started to wiggle their way to the surface, and Aressa gently scooped them up into the plastic bag, along with a good helping of soil for the journey. Once she'd got a good number of poor innocent annelids into the bag, she shoved it back into her rucksack and headed home, where she unloaded the worm-laden soil into her compost bin.

The night before the big day, she had gently placed a Gala apple at the top of the Worm Enclosure, and as if instructed, when she woke up there was a pencil-shaped hole in the apple, with a little soft worm taking residence inside. This was the apple that she took in to work the next day, and the apple that she gently placed in the exact spot where Martin's pre-pierced apple had been sat moments before, ready for lunch.

If part one of Operation Earlybird (as her flatmate Steph had coined it after three glasses of wine) was the spark that lit the fire, part two was the gust of wind that blew it into a raging inferno. After months of listening to Martin slurping rhubarb- and custard-flavoured yogurt opposite her, Aressa had noticed that he only ever brought in vegan dairy-alternative products to eat or drink, and only ever used his personal oat milk when making cups of tea. He definitely wasn't an actual vegan; the main giveaway being the fact that he would eat a whole packet of ham as a snack every day at roughly half past three. Aressa concluded that he must be lactose intolerant, which incidentally she considered to be the most interesting thing about him.

She had woken up at 4am every day that week to get the last night bus to Bethnal Green so that she was outside of Martin's local Tesco just in time for the doors to open. She had then proceeded to buy every vegan milk carton in the entire store, ensuring that for the rest of the day they would be out of stock. Just for good luck, she did the same in the nearest Sainsburys and Morrisons. Aressa also explained her plan to the corner shop man Rashid, who agreed that Martin was deserving of his fate

(Martin had once tried to haggle down the price of an 89p packet of walnuts), promising to tell Martin that they were sold out. She didn't bother with Waitrose after hearing that story; she knew Martin was a total cheapskate.

As Martin sat to eat his lunch, Aressa smothered a giggle as she pictured what her flat had looked like that morning; an entire wall stacked with oat milk, almond milk, soy milk, you name it. They weren't going to go to waste under the supervision of her housemates, though, who were planning on drinking half and handing the rest out to their favourite cafes. Aressa may have been a self-admitted, revenge-fuelled bitch, but she wasn't a big fan of food waste. She knew that after three consecutive days of there being no milk in the nearby shops, Martin would have run out at home by now. He would therefore be limited to using his back-up carton in the back of the office fridge to over-milk his morning tea.

That morning, Aressa had emptied most of his oat milk down the sink when nobody had been watching. She kept about a third of the carton to make sure that Martin wouldn't taste the difference, and then filled the remaining volume up with full-fat cow's milk. Now, you may be wondering some nonsense like "is this legal" and "couldn't this be classified as poisoning?"

Well, Aressa didn't know, nor did she care. Lactose intolerance wasn't life threatening, it just caused a number of intestinal issues in the hours following consumption, which was exactly what she had intended.

With no milk at home, Martin couldn't have had any tea before work, so he doubled-down on the brews once he got to the office. Just like that, he started the Rube-Goldberg machine of what was going to be, for him, a very bad day.

His stomach started burbling after the first cup of tea, but he thought it must have just been hunger; he had only eaten 2 hard boiled eggs for breakfast that morning, after all. He had a quick snack of a couple of pickled onions, picked straight out of the jar with his special metal skewer. Any guilt that Aressa might have been feeling about her elaborate revenge

plot evaporated as the volatile stench of onion-y vinegar wafted across the desks.

As lunchtime drew closer, Martin helped himself to another two cups of tea, tipping his dairy consumption levels over the event horizon. He began to feel a bit dodgy, but figured that his carefully planned lunch would settle his stomach. The clock struck twelve, and he tucked in.

Part three of Aressa's plan needed to happen in this crucial lunch period. That morning, she had asked her flatmate Steph, who happened to be a nurse, to think of the most gruesome story that she possibly could, based on the various bodily fluids that she was sprayed with on a daily basis. At 12:05, her phone rang, and she answered it with the volume turned up as loud as it could be without actually being on loudspeaker. Despite the crunches echoing around Martin's thick skull as he ate, he was able to hear every word that Steph said.

“Oh hey Steph, you alright?”

“Holy shit, Arry, you'll never guess what just happened in the hospital,” Steph shrieked with all the subtlety of a GCSE drama performance.

“Is it worse than the time that lady came in with a fish hook in her left eye and it popped out of her face when you tried to take the hook out?”

“Way worse. This guy came in with his arm hanging on by a single tendon because – and you're actually not ready for this – he'd tried to cut it off so that he could taste what his own flesh was like.”

“Jesus Christ, Steph,” Aressa replied. She was facing away from Martin, but with a smile she realised he had stopped eating to listen to their grim conversation.

“He'd taken a LOAD of acid, right, and he was tripping absolute balls. He told me that in his drug-addled state, his left arm looked like the most delicious leg of lamb he'd ever seen, and that he felt like he hadn't eaten

for a year. So – brace yourself – he tried to hack it off at the elbow so that he could finally have some good damn food. Using... a weed trimmer!”

Aressa shrieked, eyes wide like saucers in a combination of mirth and disgust. She and Steph hadn't discussed the contents of the story before that point, so she was genuinely quite shocked by this R-rated anecdote. Aressa prided herself on having a strong stomach for gory tales, but crucially, was very aware of Martin being extremely squeamish. He could barely put a plaster on himself after a paper cut, and had more than once mentioned during a tea break how grotesque he thought period blood was, a bold move which was received with icy looks from all the women around the table.

Steph continued. “So his arm is only hanging on by a bit of sinew, right? Which might have meant we could reattach it if he'd come in just afterwards. But he didn't - he was so incoherent that he didn't really realise what had happened.”

“Oh no, so what happened?”

“He somehow didn't bleed out, by some miracle. I guess his heart rate was so low that blood just forgot to move around his body.” Steph was enjoying this; she always loved recounting disgusting hospital stories at parties, laughing maniacally as her drunk friends recoiled in repulsion. “The thing is, he slept for about 5 days afterwards, as the drugs wore off. In the garden, next to the compost heap. So, when he finally came into A&E...”

“Wait, no - “ Aressa gasped, playing up the drama for her eavesdropping audience member behind her, who was getting paler and paler by the second.

“...*the arm was full of maggots!*” came the crescendo, Steph's sadistic grin basically audible over the crackly line.

“That’s fucking vile, Steph”, Aressa said, laughing. “Well, thank you for that horrible lunchtime story. You can go back to wiping people’s asses now.”

“Any time.”

Steph hung up. Aressa looked around and saw Martin rapidly get up from his chair and power walk down the corridor. She grinned. Part 3 of the plan was complete.

Martin had been listening to the conversation the whole way through. He loved eavesdropping; he always liked to nose into people’s private lives and find out their dirty secrets. It was easy to hear Aressa’s friend on the phone from across the desks, and he made it look like he wasn’t listening by eating his lunch with his phone in his hand. What he hadn’t bargained for, however, were the particularly gory contents of their conversation.

As Aressa gasped and swore in glee in reaction to the grim tale, Martin began to feel more and more ill. His grumbly stomach from earlier began to bubble again, and he dug his nails into his palms to stave off the nausea. For the life of him he couldn’t figure out why he was feeling so gassy today – he hadn’t touched any dairy, and had the same oat milk from the fridge that he’d been drinking all week. Could oat milk go off?

He regretted listening in to Aressa’s conversation this time: if he’d known it was going to be a grisly hospital anecdote he would have gone and had lunch with Clive. His guts began to clench.

*“...He tried to hack it off at the elbow...”*

He couldn’t finish his lunch. Maybe something fresh would settle his stomach.

*“So, when he finally came into A&E...”*

He reached across his desk to where his apple had been sat all morning. There it was again, that tiny hole that had been on all his apples for the last few weeks. I really need to figure out what keeps stabbing my fruit, he

thought to himself. Stomach churning, he took a bite. It tasted bitter. Pulling the apple back, he squinted at the bite mark –

*“The arm was full of maggots!”*

Martin choked as he heard the story’s climax through Aressa’s tinny phone speaker, spitting the half-chewed apple pulp onto his desk. He stared into the apple, and half a worm stared back at him, still wiggling. He felt the bile rising in his throat, his insides gurgling, the image of a necrotic arm filled with squirming larvae flashing behind his eyes. He stood up, light-headed, and stumbled to the bathroom as fast as he could without drawing attention, not knowing yet which end needed tending to.

Martin rushed to the toilets, balling his fists in an attempt to distract his brain from the squirming tubers that were his intestines. He slammed open the door to the men’s toilets, but to his great dismay, all four of the cubicles had an ‘out of order’ sign stuck on the doors with tape. *I could have sworn those weren’t there earlier*, he thought to himself – and he was right. Aressa had printed those signs a mere half an hour ago, and had nipped into the men’s loos just before lunch to put them up. He stared around wildly, panicked, acid rising in his chest. Could he throw up in the urinals? No, that would be mortifying if someone came in.

He ran out of the men’s and towards the disabled toilet. As he got there he realised with a sinking heart that it was occupied. It was – Aressa, having followed Martin down the corridor, was currently sat on the sink inside, scrolling through Instagram as she listened to Martin desperately shuffle around in the corridor. His only option left was, god forbid, the women’s bathroom. Martin was the sort of man who would cringe at the mention of a sanitary towel, so to be forced inside the women’s toilets was the height of embarrassment.

He opened the door as quietly as he could, peering suspiciously at the three cubicles lining the far wall. The coast was clear; he made a break for the cubicle with door that was slightly ajar, and therefore was certain to not contain a urinating woman who had inconveniently forgotten to fasten the lock. He bundled himself in, locking the door behind him and

collapsing onto the seat. As he looked down, he saw his worst nightmare: tampons haphazardly scattered all over the floor. They weren't actually used—Aressa wasn't that cruel—but they had been delicately dipped in her lunchtime Ribena so that to the untrained chauvinist eye, they were entirely convincing. That was enough to shock his already fragile stomach into retching. Twisting around as fast as he could, he knelt in front of the toilet and let loose his fishy, sausage-y lunch.

The grand finale of the plan was inspired by Aressa's young cousin, who after watching Youtube prank videos for the best part of 48 hours, had wrapped the toilet bowl in cling film and waited for her to go to the loo. Thankfully, it was the lighter kind of toilet activity, and there wasn't that much cleaning up to do. Still, it had stuck in her mind as a devious method to ruin someone's day.

As Martin spewed forth his guts, the sick appeared to hover about four inches away from his face. His eyes widened in horror as he realised what was happening, but he couldn't stop the flash flood emerging from his oesophagus. After about three minutes of embarrassed retching, he stopped, wiping his mouth as he looked down at the huge mess he'd left all over the neatly-clingfilmed toilet bowl. Shakily, he got to his feet. I can't clean all this up myself, he thought, deciding that because it wasn't his fault then it definitely wasn't his problem.

He peered around the door, checking that the coast was clear of stray women, then stopped dead. Written across the mirror in bright red lipstick were the words:

**MARTIN, STOP EATING WITH YOUR MOUTH OPEN, YOU  
FUCKING ASSHOLE!**

He couldn't believe his eyes. Was this was all someone's doing? Had somebody somehow gotten a worm inside his apple, known he'd need to

vomit, boobytrapped the exact toilet he'd find himself in? Who could possibly be this vindictive, this vengeful, this manipulative?

Martin sheepishly left the women's bathroom, praying that nobody would walk past and notice where he was coming from. With legs like jelly, he crept back towards the office. Aressa was sat, feet propped up on her desk, pointedly eating a Gala apple with her mouth open as wide as she could. As as she saw him slink his way back to his desk, she raised her eyebrows and flashed him a huge grin, white teeth flecked with apple pulp between two immaculately applied red lips.

Based in London, **Jess** is a big fan of carb-based foods, cosy jumpers, and small dogs. She has words in *Era Magazine*, *The Demented Goddess*, *Dear Damsels*, *Potluck Zine*, and various other publications. You can find her on Twitter @thomsonjessic, and on Instagram @jessicthomson.