



Source: 'Female sailor was forced to strip', AFP, *The Guardian* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 10/04/07.  
Tags: [food](#), [workplace](#), [discomfort](#)  
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If we were shipwrecked, I know I'd be the one to get eaten so the rest of the group could survive. Looking around the tea room, it was obvious. I am the fattest, and although I'm the youngest, I can't imagine any of the others offering themselves as a sacrifice. Perhaps with age comes a desire to cling to life's remaining years. I knew that no matter how much I protested, they'd be able to bully me into it.

I watched Elizabeth reaching for a slice of cake from the Michel's Patisserie box, and imagined her reaching for a slice of my arm instead. The image formed easily. I felt like Hansel in a nest of witches. She saw me looking and pushed the box in my direction.

I shook my head.

She pushed the box again and mouthed 'come on'.

I took a piece of the cake. If I don't accept their cake, they make a big fuss.

As hard as I try, I lose my ability to defend myself when I'm with my fellow workers at lunch time—all women—any one of them old enough to be my mother. This is how I feel as I sit with them, like I'm a boy staying home from school, forced to sit at the table while his mother natters to her friends.

'Growing boy,' Marie said as I bit the cake. I blushed.

They make you take the cake, then they make you feel bad for eating it.

I'm sure if I mentioned their jowls and the stray hairs on their chins and the saggy skin on their upper arms that this would be highly inappropriate, but they get away with all kinds of jibe and innuendo about my appearance.

If only I was as brave as Richard from Haematology, who spends his lunch hour sitting in the nearby graveyard with ham sandwiches from the vending machine. I know he does this because everyone else makes fun of him for doing it. 'Boring old Richard, lunching with the corpses.' They laugh about his bright red socks and how they are misaligned with his dreary personality.

Richard must know what they say about him, but he doesn't seem to care. He leaves the lab smiling, jingling the coins in his pocket, on the way to the vending machine.

Why can't I be like Richard?

Richard wouldn't be shipwrecked, because he wouldn't have gone on the boat in the first place. He would have disappeared with his ham sandwiches, somewhere safe on dry land. Against my will, but too sheepish to refuse, I'd board the leaky vessel that would capsize and wash us up on a godforsaken island.

Marie would put herself in charge. She's that type of person who thinks she knows more than anyone else and has special license to be able to say anything she wants to.

'My daughter would kill for skin like yours,' she said on my first day. 'Baby smooth.'

Yes, she would have no difficulty eating me. She was always first at the cakes, which hadn't seemed to affect her wiry figure. I suspect an eating disorder?

Today, thankfully, no one paid much attention to her observation I was a 'growing boy'. The big topic of conversation was, as usual, the ineptitude of men. Today's sub-category was a common one: infidelity. All of them had husbands, either current or ex, who, despite their great differences in age, occupation and interests, 'couldn't manage to look after themselves if their life depended on it.'

Naturally I never have much to contribute to such discussions.

I chewed on a corner of the cake as Anya complained about Graham taking up with a 'floozy'.

'And I said to him,' she said, 'guess who isn't going to be here to pick up the pieces!'

The circle of heads around her nodded.

'I won't be here when she chews you up and spits you out!'

Stupidly, I found myself nodding too, and my eyes met Anya's. Everyone else's eyes followed her eyes until they were all looking at me.

'What do you know about it Martin?' Marie asked. 'Has anyone ever chewed you up and spat you out?'

'No,' I said. 'Not yet.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Vanessa Berry.*