

Once upon a time there was a little old man with no name who lived on the very top of a huge mountain called Academia. He lived in a large house with a few servants and spent his days sitting on a tall stool in front of a big dusty desk. On the top of his desk was an enormous stack of books, and on either side of the desk there was a basket. The basket on his left was quite small and bore a sign that said 'Approved'. The basket on his right was much larger; it was almost as tall as the stool. It was labelled 'Rejects'. The little man would perch on his stool for hours at a time sorting through the pile of books which, incidentally, never seemed to get any smaller. Usually he tossed the books into the reject basket; but once in a great while, he would pause in his frantic sorting to snatch up a rubber stamp and stamp the words "GREAT BOOK" in red ink on the cover of a volume. Books like that always went into the approved basket. The odd thing was that the little man never actually opened the books to see what was in them. He would just glance at the covers, which all looked exactly alike.

When he got tired of sorting through the books, the little man would reach into his desk drawer and pull out a fat scroll. On this scroll was a seemingly endless list of school subjects. Next to subjects like Arithmetic, Spelling, Geography, and Penmanship, he would place ticks of approval. When he came across such subjects as Forming Friendships, Enjoying Life, and Sexuality, he drew thick black lines through them. He could go on like this for ages, making ticks and lines as the fancy took him. When he eventually got bored with the scroll, he would simply tear off the completed portion and drop it into the approved basket. The rest of the scroll would be tucked back into the desk drawer.

Then the little man would take out a small pad of paper and scribble notes to himself. He wrote whatever he felt like writing, whether it made sense or not and whether it was true or not. He had a habit of humming tunelessly while he wrote. His notes frequently said things like this: "Man is a generic term even though the statement, 'Man is a mammal and he breast feeds his young' is absurd." or "Heterosexuality is the norm. Homosexuality is deviant. Monosexuality, self-stimulation, is not even to be considered as an option." or "People must work for a living and try to get ahead of their neighbours or else they are failures." When he had written a lot of notes, he would sweep them into the approved basket to get them out of his way. Then he would put away his pad and pen and go back to sorting out the books.

Once a day a servant would come in to empty out the baskets. The large one would be emptied into the rubbish bin and the small one into a special machine. When the machine was turned on it would make a terrible racket and eventually spew out a great number of packed lunches in white boxes that looked exactly alike. Another servant would take the boxes and load them into a cart. She would then drive the cart to a village at the foot of the mountain. The village was called School and the villagers spent most of their time standing around waiting for the packed lunches to be delivered from Academia. Once the lunches arrived the people would sit down and eat them in the village hall.

This might sound nice to you at first, this having your food delivered to you, but very few people in School were satisfied with it. There were a lot of problems with this way of doing things. To begin with, some of the people were vegetarians. If the lunches one day consisted of roast beef sandwiches and watermelon, the vegetarians would turn up their noses in disgust at the meat. They would devour the watermelon with great gusto and greedily lap up the juice that dribbled down their chins and hands. Much as they might enjoy the fruit, they would go away hungry because they couldn't eat the sandwiches. Other people liked both the fruit and the sandwiches but didn't properly enjoy their meals because they happened to prefer mustard on their roast beef and salt on their watermelon, and these things didn't come with the packed lunches. Some went away hungry because the lunches were too small for them, but others left feeling ill because the lunches were too big. You might ask, why didn't the hungry ones eat what the others were too full for? Or, why didn't people bring their own salt and mustard? Or, why didn't the vegetarians trade their roast beef sandwiches for someone else's watermelon?

The people in School thought of these things too, but there were some rules that went along with these packed lunches. You weren't allowed to trade or give away bits of your lunch. You also weren't allowed to eat in the village hall if you brought your own lunch or even a bottle of ketchup to make what you were given taste better. And it was forbidden to leave the village hall before everyone had finished eating. This meant that those who ate fast had to sit about twiddling their thumbs in boredom while the slow eaters plodded along. In turn, the slow eaters couldn't stop to savour each bite or chew slowly and thoroughly because of all the angry looks they got from the people who had finished. Slow eaters would frequently wind up with indigestion from gulping down their food to try and keep up with the others. Nobody in the village was very happy with this system of doing things or with the lunches, which happened to be bland and unappetizing a lot of the time.

In spite of their dissatisfaction, the people never complained to the servant who brought the lunches. They would often grumble to one another, but all were silent when lunchtime rolled around. The reason for this was that they were afraid of losing the lunches if they complained. A free bland lunch was better than no lunch at all, and a lot less trouble than making your own special lunch. Besides, if you fixed your own lunch, how could you be sure you were getting the proper vitamins and minerals? Everyone assumed that the little man on the mountain knew what was best for them because he had always chosen what was to go in the lunches. It never occurred to anyone to actually question his judgement. None of the villagers had ever met him, and none of them realised just how very old he was. Likewise, they had no way of knowing that living by himself in the rarified climes of Academia had made him go a little bit mad. So they sat, day in and day out, eating their lunches, too full of apathy and complacency to bother with questioning or changing the way things were.

If I'm not mistaken, they're sitting there still.