

The Sound of Peeling Apples

My mother-in-law, Elena came through to the main living area at 10.30 tonight from her separate part of the house, to join me watching BBC World News in November, 2008. At this hour I guessed there must have been a mighty mission for her; I noticed she was awkwardly carrying a plastic bag of utensils and several green apples. She wanted to boil them for breakfast.

I was sharply reminded of my grandmother in Scotland who used to do the same thing, and would take a long time to prepare the fruit, producing sweet soft-apple compote. One difference between my grandmother and my mother-in-law was the way they cut the apples: as a young teen watching my grandmother labouring over her Granny Smiths, I never registered the sound of peeling apples; possibly she was using an ordinary knife.

In addition, my desire to listen to the BBC News was being thwarted, so I keenly noticed the sound of Elena scraping away at the crunchy skin. Furthermore on this particular night I had decided to go to bed early, and since I slept Japanese style in the living-room, my “futon” was laid out already. Anyway, as she settled herself into the big chair, I doubted she had noticed my bedding. She took out the necessary implements for apple peeling, and got started quite vigorously.

“Scrush scrush scrush”.

The peeling went smoothly and I became absorbed in Hard Talk, the participants dealing with the terrible possibility of another Rwanda / Congo war – would there be a genocide like in 1994?

“Scrush scrush”.

The superb Stephen Sackur was interviewing Clare Short, ex-Cabinet minister in the Blair government until 2003, when she resigned over Iraq. They were discussing how the war could be prevented, how the deaths of thousands

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could be avoided ... when I became aware of silence, no sound of peeling. Elena had fallen asleep in mid-peel. I could see half a twirly bit sitting up over the knife. I waited hoping she was all right. An eerie feeling invaded the room.

I was reminded of what my sister-in-law, Sarah had told me that same day about her mum's "qi gong" class – the rest of the group had come to a stop in the middle of their exercises and gathered round Elena's wheelchair where she was slumped forward. Fortunately, she was simply napping and I had suggested to Sarah perhaps they were doing revival energy or get-up-and-go exercise, encircling her mother with electric force. Was it the same now with the apple peeling? I was gripped by wild imaginings of unconsciousness, illness and how to rescue the apples and utensils ...

"Scrush, scrush, scrush".

I realised I'd been holding my breath as I let out a puff of relief.

The peeling had resumed after 30 seconds, an eternity under the circumstances. It was strangely louder than before. Suddenly it stopped again. She was in a greater state of slump than before. I resumed the breath holding and started to wonder if I should call the ambulance services even at that late hour ...

