

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Paper Beads

Filipa Bellette

‘Kay, it’s Avie – she’s with *them*.’

‘What are you talking about Mother?’

‘Them next door – she’s with *them* – eating *their* food!’

‘Calm down, Mother, you’ll burst your hernia.’

‘This is *serious*, Kay...Don’t you sigh at me! You need to come home right now.’

Pause. Another sigh. ‘I’ll be there in ten.’

Kay glanced at her computer screen. 4:55pm. Almost knock-off time, anyway. She grabbed her keys and handbag from her office desk and made her way to the car. She was not at all surprised to get such a phone call from her mother. It was only a matter of time until she found *something* to get her knickers in a knot about. Ever since the new family moved in next door, Mother had been watching them like a hawk, muttering that soon the whole city would be swarming with them, them with all their ratty kids running round as if they’ve been breeding like rabbits. Mother’s fidgety spying-through-the-window had only gotten worse since the news clip on the telly the other week. Kay remembered it, the hazy footage captured on a security camera. She could almost smell the sweat and wildness of it: the bloodied mess of a whiskered man’s face, obscured by the fists and boots of hooded black bodies.

The moment Kay pulled up Mother came storming, in her stiff hobbling way, out of the house and down the cracked path. She practically yanked her daughter from the car, as if Kay failed to see the urgency of the matter. It was beyond her as to why her mother didn’t just go over there next door and get Avie herself. *Principle*, Mother would’ve answered abstractly, her lips pinched in like an over-dried date. *It’s the principle of the thing*. What principle she was referring too, Kay could only imagine. Perhaps it was her mother’s belief that she might be *tainted* by them if she happened to edge too close.

‘Look, Avie’s there!’ Mother pointed a crooked arthritic finger towards the neighbours’ lounge-room window, and then she heaved her tub-shaped chest in the air as if she were getting ready for a brawl. ‘To think my own granddaughter would choose *them* over *me*.’ She wagged her finger at her daughter as she used to when Kay misbehaved as a child. ‘Told you it would be the wrong move letting Avie catch the bus with that lot. The *wrooong* move.’

Kay shook her head at her mother and rolled her eyes. But Mother kept at it. ‘You never know what she might get mixed up in over there, Kay. Come back speaking some gibberish language. There’s even one of those hooligans over there. That one with the scar on his cheek. I bet I know exactly how *that* got there.’

Kay began to feel as if her nerves had just been attached to a high-voltage fuse-box. They always did when her mother got all worked up like this. She was sure someone passing by would hear. But it wasn’t just Mother who had tightened her nerves, sharp like a pin. It was also that news footage that arose in her mind again, almost instinctively with her mother’s reference to the scar: the crowbar, how it

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glittered in the streetlight, the scuffling of feet disappearing round a corner, the whiskered man's body splayed out like a hanky.

She turned her back to her mother and tried to block her (and the horrid news image) out. Through the window of the neighbours' house she could make out the shape of her daughter. The teenage boy was there too – the one Mother was huffing and puffing about – and a bunch of other younger Sudanese kids. He was a well-dressed boy, corduroy slacks and a polo top. Hardly a 'hooligan.' And besides, there were so many other ways someone could be marred with a scar. They did escape a war, after all. She watched as the boy swooped down and grabbed one of the kids. A perfect grin spread across his face as the little girl held high in his arms squealed with laughter. Upon straining her eyes, it was evident to Kay that Avie was ok – more than ok, really. Her head was bobbing with the rhythm of laughter, her mouth a grinning shape of delight as she watched the boy and the little girl spin in circles.

It was an undeniable fact that her daughter was happy to be there – over there, *in there* – with them. Much happier to be over there with them than she had been in her own home. Not that she could blame her, what with the incessant verbal tornado that Mother had turned into since the Sudanese family had moved in. It was true that Kay herself had been working longer hours at the office, reluctant to go home to their house, thick and rich with tension.

Her husband, Patrick, had also reached the end of his tether. He was the quiet, pensive type. Would rather get lost in one of his woodwork projects than have to bother with an unpredictable human. But just the other night, when her mother had been harping on about *them* next door chewing up all *our* tax-payers' money, he had stood up from the couch and lurched at her, his beet-red face mere millimetres from hers, and said in a voice that could splinter, 'what are you so afraid of, old woman?' Before Mother could reply, before she could even remove his fleck of spit from off her cheek with the scrunched up tissue stuck up her sleeve, he took off to his workshop out the back.

Kay knew he'd be in there, carving another African sculpture. He loved Africa, ever since his backpacker days before they were married. The house was filled with them, all his meticulous Tasmanian Blackwood carvings. Brawny lions, bare-breasted women, thin, sinewy men with spears. They were beautiful, she had to admit. But since the arrival of the new neighbours those exotic bits of wood had begun to unsettle her, charged with the same tension that swamped the air. It almost seemed as if they had come to life, breathing and moving, taking over, having the ability to change you. She wondered if the neighbours could see her husband's handiwork through the windows. She wondered if they thought them an invitation to visit uninvited. Or did they smirk at them, turn their noses up at them, as if they saw a clumsy man's attempt to capture them?

After Patrick left the room that night, Mother stood with her whole face puckered in as if she'd suddenly swallowed her tongue. There was silence. At last, glorious silence! But it didn't last long. Mother started spluttering an incomprehensible string of words. She seized one of Patrick's blackwood figures in her flaky hands and hurled it across the room, barely missing Avie who had been sitting as small as a pip, completely unnoticed, staring and fragile as if the thick air might crush her cheeks. Mother was too distracted unleashing her tongue, but Kay saw it, how Avie slid to the ground, as quiet as a slipper, and picked the carving up.

She cradled it to her chest, as if it were alive and real, in a way that only unsettled Kay further.

From the driveway, Kay strained to see her daughter through the neighbours' window. She watched as Avie's pale moon face (how white she looked inside that house) gleamed at the boy and the other wide-eyed, bright-toothed children. And then the group of them huddled together as if they were one and the same body looking at something held in the palm of the boy's hands. The reflection on the window was such that Kay could not distinguish what he was holding, and strangely, this frustrated her.

She knew she should be filled with a sense of relief to see Avie content, perhaps even quietly proud that she had defied Mother's tornado remarks, but the fact that she was out here, while Avie was in there, the fact that it was not Kay that had Avie smiling, made her feel as if there was a fist lodged inside her throat. It was as if her daughter was slipping away from her hands, as if her whole world as she knew it was slipping away, and without any warning all she could think about was the news-clip image of the hazy figure left with his barely shallow breathing. She suddenly felt herself turning into some kind of protective dog, growling over a saliva-marked bone. It was this – and not Mother's impatient nudge – that had Kay marching towards the neighbours' home.

She knocked on the door three times. A spicy, foreign scent wafted from inside. A woman answered. Her face peered, cautiously, around the door as if this unexpected knock might hurt her. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper. 'Hello?'

Kay attempted a polite smile. 'Hi, I'm looking for my daughter Avie.'

'Oh! You Avie's mama?' The woman brightened, her face suddenly warm and open as if she'd just bumped into a long lost friend. She stepped out from behind the door, revealing a round homely body. Kay couldn't help but notice the way her pair of waist-high jeans bulged tight over a belly that had borne too many children. 'Oh welcome to you,' the woman said. 'Please, come in for some tea.'

'Oh no, no, there's no need for that.' Kay waved her hand as if to enforce the matter. Perhaps another day, in another time, Kay might've taken the woman up on the offer. Sat down with her at a faded wooden table and nattered with her about the annoying habits of their husbands, the achievements of their children. Today, however, she wanted nothing more than to grab her daughter and race her back to the sturdy walls of her own house. At least there, even there with Mother, even there with all those breathing, moving sculptures, she could keep her world intact, keep Avie by her side, keep her from becoming some foreign, unreachable thing.

And just then, it shocked her, these overprotective thoughts. She sounded just like her mother. A much more subtle version, yes, but still traces of Mother were evident. It was true that Avie's involvement with the Sudanese family bothered her. Avie would soon, no doubt, bring them into her house. She imagined all those kids lounging on her cream leather couches, eating her expensive gourmet food, fiddling with her photos and her chinaware and her hard-cover book collection. The family had ruffled up their quiet neighbourhood too. What with their stream of never ending guests, the Friday night drumming, their healthy laughter as big as a boulder. It made the odd flitter of laughter inside her own home seem thin and measly in comparison.

She heard Mother's leather-stretched voice, the strain of it in her head. *You never know what she might get mixed up in over there, Kay.* But it wasn't quite

Mother's voice; it was her voice as well, the two sounds grating together like a beat-up hull of a yacht against a rock. And suddenly she wished she could reach a finger inside and hook out the voice – her mother's/her own – but she knew it wasn't that simple. For how could one extract a voice from the depths of the mind with a hand that refused to enter?

The Sudanese woman uttered a quiet, 'hmm,' in response to Kay's refusal for her tea. The noise was innocent enough, but Kay couldn't help notice the way the woman's lips pursed, how it drew deep wrinkles around her mouth, made her eyes, her forehead, her whole face sag to the creases that pierced her dented chin. How many others had scarred this woman's skin? For just one moment, she wanted to reach out and brush the worn-out creases from off her face. But then she thought of Avie inside this African woman's house, heard the grating voices – Mother/Me/Mother/Me – and her hands remained rigid by her side.

The woman disappeared into the dark hall to fetch Avie. As she waited, a ginger kitten curled around Kay's ankles. She wasn't one to harm an animal, but she had a terrible urge to kick the ball of fluff from off her feet. Avie appeared at the door, along with the boy. He smiled at Kay. That perfect grin again. Healthy and big like the laughter that bowled from this house. It almost made her smile back.

Before she had a chance to tell Avie to come back home, right now, a flood of squealing kids came spilling out onto the porch. She was surrounded by them all – all these Sudanese children – threading around her an invisible piece of string as they played a game of tag. She felt tangled up in their laughter and grasping hands and their bright, winking smiles. Tangled up and losing air and yet her hands stayed like sticks by her side.

The woman hissed something at the children that Kay could not decipher and they disappeared back into the house, leaving Avie and the boy on the porch with their mothers.

Avie held up a necklace made of multi-coloured paper beads, a huge grin on her face. 'Look what Aunty Nafy helped me make,' she said, beaming at Kay and then at the Sudanese woman. Paper beads? It took her by surprise, these tiny, shiny cocoon-shaped bits of African art. So unpretentious, so innocent – not like the breathing, moving, exotic mass of Blackwood sculptures back in her house. Kay tried her best to inspect her daughter's necklace with interest, but it was that word – *Aunty* – which left Kay's attempt to praise her daughter's craftwork sounding dull and hollow.

Aunty? Already Avie was calling this woman Aunty? Already she was sitting there making beads with this woman, eating her food, learning her words, laughing and living with her, while Kay herself stood rigid and unhuman, stuck in the grating wars of the voices in her mind.

'Kay!' It was Mother. She'd ventured over to the end of the neighbours' driveway. Her stocky body in her faded chequered dress planted firm on the path. She wouldn't dare inch a toe onto *their* territory. 'What's the hold up?'

She looked at her mother, was about to speak, but then she caught sight of the paper beads held in the palm of her daughter's hand.

Could she press these voices down, press them until they were thin and evanescent?

'Kaaay?' Mother's voice turned to a menacing growl, biting at the y of her

name. The Sudanese woman – Nafy, that’s what Avie had called her – edged towards the door. Her eyebrows narrowed at the old bat at the end of the driveway, and deep creases overtook her face. Again, Kay had that urge to touch her. Her hand, stiff with stricture, lifted, even if only a fraction.

It slipped out then, unbidden, but it felt warm as it passed her tongue. ‘If it’s still on offer, perhaps I will come in for a bit, for that tea?’

Nafy looked at Kay, her face still etched with the worn-out wrinkles. The boy with the scar on his cheek looked at her too. They looked at Kay with a look that made her feel as if her skin had suddenly been sliced open, exposing her soul – ugly, bare and beating. It wasn’t too late – was it? – to gather the flaps of her skin and sew herself shut and retreat back to her mother with Avie. It wasn’t too late, was it?

Nafy opened the door and stepped aside to let Kay in.

There was a bark behind her. She couldn’t look round to see if it was a dog or her mother. She didn’t dare look around. But as she walked through the door she imagined Mother, alone, out there on the pathway, dissolving on the ground, like an abandoned hanky. Left alone, on the ground, like the whiskered man in the hazy news clip footage.