

## *Khola's Infinite Amount of Hope in the Universe*

‘What do you think... Khola, is it?’ There were no snickers at her name. At this university, political correctness reigned. Khola’s skin was deep brown and therefore she was treated with faux-friendliness, with caution.

‘Yes. Like Coca-Cola.’ There was a polite, insincere tittering at her comment. ‘You can call me Khol. Or Kay, if you wish.’

‘Like the protagonist of *The Trial*,’ smirked the man.

Khola smiled at the man’s joke. It was a polite smile. She, too, was capable of insincerity.

‘So Khol, what were your impressions of this week’s reading? Did you like it? Did you not like it? What was your gut reaction?’ asked the man, Khola’s lecturer, now her tutorial leader. Despite this being an Australian University, he was an American. His accent produced bright tones similar to the crackling cassette tapes Khola had learned her English from, but he spoke too quickly for her to follow. She again smiled, now due to nervousness.

‘What did you think of the story?’ clarified a classmate, a girl with fluorescent-red hair and sinewy tattoos that ran down her plump, freckled arms. She beamed at Khola, looking like she had just done her a tremendous favour.

‘I did not like the story,’ responded Khola. This was a sincere answer. Khola had not enjoyed the allocated reading: Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. She had read it through once, with a dictionary and a highlighter, to comprehend the difficult words. She had read it through a second time to get her bearings and imagine the story in her mind. She had read it through a third time to answer the lecturer’s provided questions. And she had read it through a fourth time to confirm her personal feeling that the text was not only insincere, but cruelly so. ‘I did not like it at all.’

‘That’s fine. You don’t have to like Kafka. It’s not compulsory. But you have to tell me why,’ said the American man.

Khola shrugged. ‘The beetle, he could just fly away with his wings.’ Judging by the shuffling of seats, Khola gauged her opinion was not shared. She sensed allegiances waver, each of her classmates questioning whether to support the foreign student’s independence or their lecturer’s passion. And the American man was certainly passionate. At the start of his lecture he had announced, with a fiery tone,

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‘There is an infinite amount of hope in the universe, but not for us... in this course!’ The audience had reciprocated his hearty laugh, a laugh Khola did not comprehend. ‘Some of you will not understand Kafka, and I suspect this is a good thing.’ The lecturer had grinned, as if divulging an incomprehensible suffering of which he was enormously proud. His PowerPoint presentation had bombarded them with images of dirty cockroaches, hungry supermodels with exposed ribs, thickly-bearded Europeans and text so dense that Khola’s eyes could not make out the words despite her holding her spectacles in front of her face to focus her vision. She had never once visited an optometrist. She had simply selected her glasses from those available in a shop in downtown Nairobi, in another hemisphere, in another lifetime. She did not even know the word for optometrist in either English or her native Swahili.

The girl with the fat, tattooed arms and the red hair began talking. She spoke fast, with a thick Australian accent. Khola presumed she was simultaneously defending Khola while expressing her own admiration for Kafka. Attention diverted. Discussion shifted. Khola’s opportunity to defend her position disappeared. She wished that she could have expressed her distaste for Kafka’s desperation and hopelessness. She wished that she could have, with pristine English, articulated how she had spent her childhood locked indoors with her father, rereading the same books, chewing the inside of her cheeks to distract from hunger. She wished she could have articulated how during the M23 rebellion her father had gone out and never come back, how she had been led away by strangers, how she had traveled on foot out of the DRC and through Uganda, salvaging apple cores from bins, slurping from muddy puddles, avoiding the eye contact of men with barking guns and attitudes, hoping her squalor and the sharpness of her ribs would earn their indifference. She wished she could have articulated how she had collected used bottles from bins, scrubbed toilets, guided tourists and slept in crowded beds of rancid people while clutching her saved shillings close, how she had applied for refugee visas at every available embassy, how she had hoped against hope that one of her applications would be successfully processed. She wished she could have articulated how she had come to Australia and left all her previous life behind her. But Khola could express none of that. Like Kafka’s cockroach, she was stuck in her body, completely unable to communicate.

The class continued their discussion of symbols, World War II, Jews, humour, vegetarianism... Khola’s attention disconnected from the discussion and drifted

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instead to the students themselves. A pair of girls, bored, smudged phone-screens with their thumbs. A chubby boy with a ring in his nose stuffed his face with chocolate. An old woman with grey curls yawned. Before long the American lecturer announced that they had spoken enough and that time was up. Most of the students packed up their books instantly and rushed out the door. A few lingered. As Khola left the classroom she smiled at her lecturer and remaining classmates. It was a sincere smile. None of these students, not even the lecturer, would ever understand her aversion to Franz Kafka for none of them would truly understand Kafka as she did. Khola suspected that this was a good thing.

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