

"It's absolutely brilliant—tragic, funny, eccentric. . . . Kohda makes the vampire trope her own." —RUTH OZEKI, AUTHOR OF *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

WOMAN EATING

A NOVEL

CLAIRE
KOHDA



Copyright

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For BC and T, for us.

All life, to sustain itself, must devour life.

Lafcadio Hearn, 'Ululation'

PART 1

1

The guy from Kora is standing outside the building in the sun. I've read online that this place used to be a biscuit factory.

'Hey,' the guy calls. He waves.

I feel self-conscious walking these last few metres, since he has seen me now and so is just watching me approach. It feels like a long time passes between the guy's hey and my eventual arrival in front of him.

'Hey,' I say.

'Lydia?'

'Lyd.'

'Okay, hey Lyd. So, I'm Ben. You're seeing ...' He looks down at the paper he's holding. 'A14.'

'Yeah,' I say.

'You know it doesn't have much light, right?' He looks up. 'I mean, if you want, I can show you one of the studios with a skylight and everything.'

'No, it's okay.'

Ben raises an eyebrow. 'Photographer?'

'Performance.'

'Really?' He sounds surprised. I get this a lot. I come across shy. 'Fair enough.'

Ben opens the door to the building. It's a large metal door with an iron gate in front of it that he has to open first. There are four keys he uses to get in.

‘Pretty secure,’ Ben says. ‘It’s a definite plus for the women who work here. So you can be here late and you’ll probably feel safe.’

I look up. The windows don’t start until the second floor. It’d be difficult to reach them even with a ladder.

‘Yeah, so –’ Ben follows my line of sight ‘– there are no windows on the ground and first floors because the biscuits they made here were coated with chocolate.’

‘Oh,’ I say.

‘Yeah, it’s interesting, isn’t it?’ The door opens with a clang. ‘A whole building basically designed around the fact that chocolate melts in sunlight.’

‘Mm.’ The building goes up very high. The first two floors look like part of the foundations.

There’s an awkward moment as we go inside. We both gesture for the other to go first, and then bump into one another as we try to go through the door at the same time.

‘So, where did you come from?’ Ben says as we walk down a dark corridor.

I pause. I get this a lot too. ‘Well, I’m from England. But my dad was Japanese, and my mum is half Malaysian.’

He turns around. ‘Oh my god, shit, no, sorry – I mean where did you come from today? Like, are you living in London?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ I lie. ‘I live just near here, in Kennington.’ I don’t actually live in Kennington. I’ve just seen the stop on the tube map.

‘Nice!’ Ben says. ‘It’s pretty nice around there, isn’t it?’

I nod.

Ben opens a door with a nameplate on it that reads A14. I step into the room. It’s quite small, but enough. On one side is a sink and a counter with a microwave on top and a small fridge underneath.

‘The rent on this studio is cheaper than the ones with windows. It’s two hundred and fifty-five pounds per month, with Kora subsidising the rest as part of the young artists’ scheme.’ Ben’s looking at one of the pieces of paper he is holding. ‘Bills are on top, but they’re cheap. Payment is due on the twenty-eighth of every month. I can leave this with you if you decide to take

the room.’ He holds the piece of paper up to show me. ‘There’s a map too, fire exits, all that.’

‘Do the lights dim?’ I ask, and Ben nods. I go to the switch and try it. The lights go down until they’re almost off. I leave them at their lowest and, for a moment, the room looks like it is just made of shadows. Then my eyes adjust, and I can see everything. Ben squints in my direction, frowning slightly.

‘I like it,’ I say.

‘Okay, great! You’ll take it?’

‘Yep.’

‘Let’s sit down with the contracts then. So, shall we ...’

I realise that he is expecting me to turn the lights up again.

‘Okay,’ I say, but I don’t go to the switch. I go to the table and sit down in the half-light, hoping that he will just go with it. He does. He stumbles a bit on his way to the table, over nothing. *People*, I think to myself, *have appalling night vision*. And he sits down.

He spreads the papers on the table. Then he looks up towards me. In this light his features look very soft, whereas outside he had looked slightly more angular. I take in his cheeks, which are round and tinged pink. He must be quite young. He’s fairly good-looking. I smile at him. Ben puts one of his hands in the other, and then says, ‘Would you mind if I ...’ and he points to the light above our heads. He begins to stand up.

‘Actually, would you mind if we just left it?’ I ask. ‘I’m getting a headache,’ I add.

‘Oh ... yeah, yeah, sure. I’ve got some ibuprofen, if you want ...’ Ben reaches towards his bag, next to him on the floor. It’s a nice svelte-looking cycling bag.

I shake my head. ‘It’s okay. I’m good. I’m probably just hungry.’ And as I say the word ‘hungry’ my stomach rumbles. I shuffle on my seat to disguise the noise, but it’s pretty loud and the empty room is particularly resonant. I feel embarrassed. Ben pretends he hasn’t heard, which makes it even worse.

‘Er, so ... I can’t actually see the forms,’ he says. He laughs and looks up. ‘But I’ve marked crosses where you need to sign.’ He brings his head low over the table and squints. ‘Um,’ he says. ‘Here’s one.’

He slides a piece of paper and a pen across the table towards me, his thumb held firmly part way down the page where I need to sign. I can see the cross; I can see it quite clearly, in black Sharpie at one end of a dotted line, but I don’t tell him. Instead, I pick up the pen, then feel where his hand is on the paper and use it as a guide. I feel his thumb with my fingertips. It’s very warm. I don’t know where this sudden decision to flirt has come from. I suppose, in this room, in the very dim light, I feel quite powerful. Men, I think, feel insecure in silence and much more confident when there’s the sound of traffic and other people all around. And this room is completely silent. I sign my name on the line.

‘And where else?’ I ask. He slides over another page, his thumb there to guide me again.

‘Okay, so, um. Basically, what you just signed is, you know, all the usual stuff.’

‘Yeah,’ I say.

‘Can’t sleep in here, have parties, no openings, no gatherings over, like, five people. No open flames, obviously. No, like, dangerous chemicals.’ He laughs. He seems nervous.

‘It’s okay, I read it all online.’

‘Sorry,’ Ben says. ‘Probably should have told you all that before you signed, right?’

I don’t say anything. His eyes are wide. ‘Okay,’ he says, and he starts gathering together all the pieces of paper on the table. ‘When would you like to pick up the keys?’

‘Now? I’ll move my stuff in today.’

‘Today? Wow, yeah, okay. That’s quick. I won’t have time to properly clean the studio, but if that’s okay?’ He reaches into the pocket of his shirt and takes out the key to this room, and also four other keys for the front door and front gate.

‘That’s fine. I’m starting an internship tomorrow, so I want to get moved in before.’

‘Oh sweet. Where? Will I know the place?’

‘The OTA.’

‘No way!’ Ben says. ‘The Otter? Very nice. There’s another girl here who interned there a while back. You’ll probably meet her. Her name’s Shakti.’ He hands me the keys. In the dim light, he misjudges where my hand is and puts his hand in mine along with the keys. ‘Oops,’ he says. I can see that he is blushing.

I smile. ‘Thanks.’

‘Where did you say you live in Kennington? Anywhere near City and Guilds?’ he asks as he puts his bag on his back.

‘Yeah,’ I say. I vaguely remember where City and Guilds is. And I can kind of imagine living around there. I think that there are a few tall townhouses, maybe, in that area. ‘In a flatshare,’ I add.

‘Oh right, artists?’

I’m making up a life on the spot now. ‘No, a couple who work in music and a guy who’s just working in retail at the moment but he ... he wants to get into film.’

‘Ooh, good luck to him. I’ve got a mate in film; she’s a production designer. I can put him in touch if he wants.’

‘Maybe, yeah.’

Ben starts cautiously making his way to the door. I like the knowledge that, while he is struggling simply to walk across the room in this light, I could easily thread a needle. I could sit him down and draw a detailed portrait of him. As I walk behind him, I study all the fine hairs growing out of the back of his neck, his goosepimple skin and its light pinkness. Before he reaches the door, he turns around.

‘Er, so.’ He clears his throat. ‘So, I’m upstairs. My studio, I mean. I’m two floors above. The first floor with windows. There’s no one above you, so we’re basically neighbours.’

‘Oh right,’ I say. ‘You’re an artist.’

‘Yeah – but I do this for Kora, like all the studio viewings and stuff, and I manage the building so I get the studio for free. Anyway, if you want to pop in to say hello, I’m C14. And if I’m not in my studio, I’m in The Place a lot too.’

‘The Place?’

‘Yeah. The Place is the common living area, and the studios are The Space. It’s what we call them.’ Ben’s smiling. I can see he finds this funny, maybe a bit embarrassing. ‘I know, it’s a bit of a cliché,’ he adds. ‘It’s meant to be, like, the studios are ... your space, you know? And The Place is, like’ – he does air quotes and puts on a voice like a narrator in a TV advert – ‘“the place to be”.’ He laughs and then snorts. I find it endearing.

He puts his hand on the door handle. The papers I have just signed are tucked under his arm. ‘So, I should ...’ he begins.

I kind of want to follow him out. There’s something about being with him that I find comforting, even though I’ve only just met him. He feels extremely human. His smile is cute, as is his nervousness. His skin is very taut over his body in the way a toddler’s is, which I find sweet. He’s covered in little freckles.

‘Unless, do you fancy getting some lunch?’

My heart sinks. At the same time, I feel my stomach rumble again.

‘I’m probably going to just pop down to Pret or something. Get one of those avo-falafel wraps,’ he says.

‘Yeah no,’ I say – saying both yes and no as I always do when I want to say no to someone but without sounding harsh – ‘I can’t.’

‘Oh, okay.’ He looks a bit put out. I suppose he probably expected me to say yes after hearing my stomach rumble.

‘Sorry.’

‘Nah, it’s okay. You want me to pick you up a coffee or anything?’

I shake my head. ‘I’m good, thanks.’

‘Okay. Well.’ He goes to open the door. ‘My number’s on the piece of paper I left on the table.’

‘Okay,’ I say.

‘Hope your head feels better soon,’ he says, and he opens the door – momentarily letting in a huge amount of dazzlingly bright light – slips out and disappears down the hall.

I lie down on the floor. It’s just plain concrete with nothing on top. No carpet or rug or anything. The cold feels good on my back.

The lights are still low. I’m more comfortable in the dark. It’s not even that the lights in here would burn me; it’s that sometimes too much light is overwhelming, especially after a day filled with things I’m not used to doing much of – packing, moving, travelling. It’s too much input, almost painful for the brain, not necessarily the skin. However, sunlight does burn. Not in the way it does in films and TV programmes; I don’t let off smoke or singe, or burst into flames. Rather, my skin burns as if it has no pigment at all, as if I’m without any melanin, as if I’m completely and purely white.

I roll over onto my side. I can see the sink, fridge and microwave from here. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Partly because I’ve been so busy. I left Mum’s house at seven-thirty. I went around all the rooms one last time to make sure there was nothing left behind. Crimson Orchard recommends that residents have as many of their belongings – photos, books, furniture even, any personal artefacts – arranged around their rooms as possible, because old things with memories already associated with them encourage the formation of new memories, apparently. But Mum still ended up having too much stuff. She essentially had several lives’ worth of belongings all stuffed into our little two-bedroom house. And some of it was really, really old. An ancient pair of spring scissors ended up being taken by a local museum when I put them up for sale on Facebook. One of my old school friends who works at the museum had seen my post and talked to the curator to see how much she would offer for them – and it turned out that they could offer a fair amount: enough to pay for a couple of months’ rent on my studio.

I left Mum at Crimson Orchard yesterday, so I could do the last bit of sorting by myself. I don’t know how she would feel if she knew she’d been moved out of her house; if she could see all the rooms empty; if she knew

someone else would be renting it and moving in soon. The staff at Crimson Orchard are telling her that she is staying only temporarily and that, before long, she'll go back home. They've let her keep her front-door keys, which she clutched in her hand right up until I left her. Although, quite soon, if she were to go back with them, the locks will have been changed.

'Lyds,' my mum said when I was leaving. She looked out of place in her new room, which was decorated with someone in their eighties or nineties in mind. Mum has for the last couple of centuries looked like she is in her early forties. She still has black hair, just with some streaks of grey here and there. Her eyes are still bright.

'Mum, I'll be back in a couple of minutes,' I said, as the doctor had told me to say.

'Julie, don't worry,' the doctor said. 'Lydia's just going to pop out and get a cup of tea and a bite to eat.' But, of course, that was the wrong thing to say, and my mum's eyes had widened until they were so big that they distorted the rest of her face, pushing her eyebrows far up her forehead. 'You're leaving! You're leaving your mother!' Mum wailed, looking terrified like a child being left at nursery for the first time.

'No, no, Mum, I'm not.' I reached to pat her on the head, but she twisted around and tried to bite me, so I pulled my hand away quickly. 'The doctor misunderstood. I'm not going out to eat – I just need a wee.'

'GO HERE,' Mum bellowed, gesturing to the bathroom adjoining her room.

I paused. 'I ...'

'Don't worry, Julie. She'll be back in a moment, I promise you,' the doctor said.

'Lyds, Lyds,' my mum whispered, ignoring the doctor and grabbing my top and pulling me closer. 'Lyds, you hate me, don't you? You hate me. Lyds ... please ...'

'Mum.'

'Lyds,' she said – and, momentarily, her expression changed to one of concern. 'You won't make it without me. You're not the same as them.' But I

shook her off, and her expression changed again to something more contrite. 'Please ... why do you hate me so much ... *please*.' Tears ran down her face. But it was hard to know what was real with Mum, even tears.

'Mum,' I snapped, and I pulled myself free. I walked to the door and let myself out. 'I'll be right the fuck back, okay?' I said, immediately feeling guilty about snapping. I closed the door, behind which I could hear my mum screaming and sobbing, 'You hate meeee, you hate meeee ... Lydia! I did everything for *you*; everything was for *you*. I'll kill myself! I'll do it! I can. I *will*!'

I walked down the hall, ignoring whatever the doctor next to me was saying – something about food and weight and personal hygiene. The sun was particularly bright outside, but I wanted to get out. In here, I felt strange, like my skin was burning, like the guilt was a fire that was spreading deep inside my body.

'Okay,' I said to the doctor outside, surprised to find my voice was shaking. 'It's nice meeting you.'

'You too. We will be in touch, probably in the next couple of days, but we have a policy here, as I'm sure you've already been told, of not letting residents talk to any family or friends for the first week. But if you need anything at all, you have our number.'

I put my hand out for the doctor to shake. 'Blimey!' he said. 'Your hands are cold.' I sighed. I couldn't be bothered to think of an excuse. I ended up just agreeing, like he had expressed an opinion about something, rather than a fact. 'Yeah, true,' I said. 'Thank you.'

The doctor cocked his head sympathetically. And then, as I turned to walk towards the gate, he said, 'Okay, so ...' I expected him to say something else before I walked out of earshot, so I slowed down my footsteps, but he didn't. He just left the 'so' hanging there in the air and went back into the building.

I went back to my mum's house straight after. I topped up my sunscreen and walked in the shade as much as possible, but my nose and the top of my forehead still got burnt. At home, I put some Neal's Yard Baby Balm on the red bits of my skin. I swept and hoovered the floors, pulling up the dust from

the carpets that had accumulated over all the time we'd lived in this house. All of our DNA, maybe even some of Dad's DNA from when he was alive. I held a clump of it – bits of skin and hair with carpet fluff and dead bugs mixed in – up to my nose and inhaled, thinking that I could connect with my dad somehow in the smell, before putting it in the bin. I cleaned the sink, too, which was stained from years of use.

I rolled out my sleeping bag in the living room. Upstairs was a bit too creepy. Though Dad was the one who actually died in this house, it was my mum's presence I could sense upstairs, as though each moment I'd spent with her here had turned into a separate ghost that haunted her bedroom. I sat up on top of my sleeping bag and tilted my head back onto the sofa that had come with the house. Recently, I'd read a post on Facebook about rituals to do with moving out of homes. It said that moving out of a place you've lived in for a significant amount of time can leave you with all sorts of spiritual baggage, if you don't move out in the right way. The post included pictures of a woman with long blonde hair in loose clothes blessing all kinds of different rooms, throwing salt on the carpets and doing some sort of full moon new beginnings ritual. I couldn't imagine anything like that taking place in this house. It was, I felt, beyond new beginnings. I let my head slip off the sofa cushions and land with a thud on the floor.

That evening, I'd finished mine and Mum's last bucket of pigs' blood from the butcher's, slightly warmed and from a wine glass to create a sense of ceremony; another bucket had been poured carefully into flasks and stashed in Mum's fridge at Crimson Orchard, along with some human food – cheese, microwavable meals, milk, sausage rolls, vegetables – that was there to act as a decoy. I'd drunk what blood remained in the house, sitting alone at the kitchen table where, for years and years – for my whole life – I'd eaten meals with my mum. I wasn't allowed to eat upstairs. Because the blood would stain the carpets if I spilled any, Mum had said; but I think the real reason was that she didn't like eating alone.

Before dinner we always said a prayer. Our table was a small white-topped one from the 1950s, with metal legs. I sat at one end and my mum sat at the

other. Our arms reached towards each other and met in the centre. Our fingers interwove so that our linked hands were standing upright and our wrists were pressing down on the table top. Mum would wait until I closed my eyes, and then she would close her eyes too and recite a prayer. It wasn't directed at a god, like the grace said before food in films and TV programmes. When I asked why our grace was different, when I was around six years old and learning about God and the Nativity at school, she looked at me impatiently.

'Lydia,' she said, using my full name, which she only did when she was angry. 'Do you think God would feed a body like yours?'

I had tentatively shaken my head, but I didn't really understand. My mum continued: 'Something else lets us eat, not God. God wouldn't want to help a demon survive, and that's what we are, Lyds. We are unnatural, disgusting and ugly. Look at us; we are just sin.'

Mum then had reached across the table for my hands. 'But it's okay,' she said. 'Because we are the same, so we have each other.' And then she said our prayer, the version that suited us, which wasn't to any higher being but just to the pigs whose blood we drank.

I lay awake all last night. The house, while I'd been growing up, had always been cluttered, full of things that never got thrown away – mail, documents, piles of old rags and old clothes – as well as, before my mum sold it all to pay the rent, my dad's artwork. The pieces he left behind were framed like they were ready to be hung in a gallery, but were propped up against the walls of Mum's bedroom instead, the backs of the canvases facing into the room as if the paintings were in fact photographs of his face that my mum couldn't bear to look at. Now all of that is gone. I barely remember my dad's art, other than the few pieces viewable online. Last night I'd felt the emptiness of the house as if it were a presence. I felt it judging me for selling all of my mum's things, and moving on with my life, and leaving my mother behind, in a home.

In the morning, I packed my belongings – my sleeping bag; my laptop; a few books on art, others on animals that in the past I'd read to try to find

similarities between myself and other species, some cookbooks and foraging books; my clothes; my favourite mug; some old sketchbooks – into a large suitcase and my rucksack. I opened the fridge but there was nothing in it, apart from the stubby end of a black pudding sausage wrapped in clingfilm, which had been in there for god knows how long, as an emergency stash for when we ran out of blood or the butcher's was closed. I chopped it up into little pieces and carried them in the palm of my hand, like I was offering breadcrumbs to birds, while I went around the house one last time. I took little pieces one by one and popped them in my mouth. The black pudding tasted bad, especially so cold from the fridge. And my body couldn't take much of the egg and oats and pepper that were mixed with the blood to make the sausage; I had to spit most of it out. But it was sustenance, enough to tide me over. Then I left.

So, now, I'm pretty hungry. This happens quite a lot, I suppose. Maybe it's laziness, or maybe it's something else. I'm lying on my side in the new studio, with none of my stuff here apart from what's in my rucksack, listening to my stomach rumble until I get so hungry that it seems to stop bothering to even rumble.

I don't know what it is. It's not that I don't value myself, which I'm sure is what a psychologist would say is the case. It's more that I know that I can survive for ages without eating, and pushing my body in the vague direction of its limits is satisfying, in that I feel more alive than I ever otherwise do. I've heard of people who go running for something like fifty or sixty miles across the countryside – and not just the flat countryside in Kent, but the hilly countryside up near Sheffield – just so that they can feel the same feeling. It's as though, because they are pushing their bodies to their outermost limits, they can feel their mortality. Like, they go right up to the edge of what it means to be alive, and look over it and down at the huge immeasurable void below, and feel joy because they're not in the void, but above it. That's what being alive is. But, normally, people don't see over the edge and witness the contrast between the everythingness of life and the

nothingness of death, so they don't feel or understand that life is exhilarating like those runners do.

I know it's a bit different for me. Neither the void nor the cliff above it look the same to me as they do to normal people. The void, for me, has stuff in it, so it's not a void anymore; and the cliff is engulfed by a black and measureless haze. Still, I like to push my body towards its limits. Or, rather, I like to pretend my body has limits. I like to feel the pain of hunger and imagine that the next step after that pain is death. It's annoying, though. That peak feeling of being right at the edge is always out of my reach. I could stay here, on the floor of Studio A14, Kora Biscuit Factory Studios, for several days, even several weeks, months, years, whatever, and I'd still be able to get at least part way up and crawl to a food source, eat and recover fully; and if I was *really* weak, so weak that I couldn't get up and move, I'd still stay alive, just lying here in a coma, for years and years and years, my body refusing to properly die until the Sun came down and engulfed the Earth.

I pull at a bit of loose skin next to one of my fingernails and squeeze my finger so that the blood forms a little bead. I suck it until it stops bleeding. Then I get up off the floor.

I enjoy the dizziness. I stagger to my bag, open it and take out the last couple of pieces of black pudding from this morning. I eat it. Over the sink, I spit out a few bits of oat and pepper. Then I take my wallet and my phone and go to the door. I close it behind me and feel a little bit of anxiety about locking up in an unfamiliar place, with an unfamiliar key and an unfamiliar lock. The lock clicks, and I push the door a few times and jiggle the handle to make sure it's closed. Then I unlock the door and open it again, just to make sure I can get back in later. I'm locking up and jiggling the handle for a second time when I hear a shuffling sound further down the corridor. There's a woman standing outside her studio, maybe ten doors down from mine, on the phone and with a bike helmet hanging from her arm. Very tall, very slim, with dark skin and her hair wrapped tightly in a headscarf. She is smiling at me.