

"If a Book Is Locked There's
Probably a Good Reason for
That Don't You Think"

by

Helen Oyeyemi

from the collection

What Is Not Yours

Is Not Yours (2016)



*if a book is locked there's probably
a good reason for that don't you think*

Every time someone comes out of the lift in the building where you work you wish lift doors were made of glass. That way you'd be able to see who's arriving a little before they actually arrive and there'd be just enough time to prepare the correct facial expression. Your new colleague steps out of the lift dressed just a tad more casually than is really appropriate for the workplace and because you weren't ready you say "Hi!" with altogether too much force. She has: a heart-shaped face with subtly rouged cheeks, short, straight, neatly cut hair, and eyes that are long rather than wide. She's black, but not local, this new colleague who wears her boots and jeans and scarf with a bohemian aplomb that causes the others to ask her where

she shops. “Oh, you know, thrift stores,” she says with a chuckle. George at the desk next to yours says, “Charity shops?” and the newcomer says, “Yeah, thrift stores . . .”

Her accent is New York plus some other part of America, somewhere Midwest. And her name’s Eva. She’s not quite standoffish, not quite . . . but she doesn’t ask any questions that aren’t related to her work. Her own answers are brief and don’t invite further conversation. In the women’s toilets you find a row of your colleagues examining themselves critically in the mirror and then, one by one, they each apply a touch of rouge. Their makeup usually goes on at the end of the workday, but now your co-workers are demonstrating that Eva’s not the only one who can glow. When it’s your turn at the mirror you fiddle with your shirt. Sleeves rolled up so you’re nonchalantly showing skin, or is that too marked a change?

EVA TAKES no notice of any of this preening. She works through her lunch break, tapping away at the keyboard with her right hand, holding her sandwich with her left. You eat lunch at your desk too, just as you have ever since you started working here, and having watched her turn down her fourth invitation to lunch you say to her: “Just tell people you’re a loner. That’s what I did, anyway.”

Eva doesn't look away from her computer screen and for a moment it seems as if she's going to ignore you but eventually she says: "Oh . . . I'm not a loner."

Fair enough. You return to your own work, the interpretation of data. You make a few phone calls to chase up some missing paperwork. Your company exists to assist other companies with streamlining their workforce for optimum productivity; the part people like you and Eva play in this is attaching cold, hard monetary value to the efforts of individual employees and passing those figures on to someone higher up the chain so that person can decide who should be made redundant. Your senior's evaluations are more nuanced. They often get to go into offices to observe the employees under consideration, and in their final recommendations they're permitted to allow for some mysterious quality termed potential. You aim to be promoted to a more senior position soon, because ranking people based purely on yearly income fluctuations is starting to get to you. You'd like a bit more context to the numbers. What happened in employee QM76932's life between February and May four years ago, why do the figures fall so drastically? The figures improve again and remain steady to date, but is QM76932 really a reliable employee? Whatever calamity befell them, it could recur on a five-year cycle, making them less of a safe bet than somebody

else with moderate but more consistent results. But it's like Susie says, the reason why so many bosses prefer to outsource these evaluations is because context and familiarity cultivate indecision. When Susie gets promoted she's not going to bother talking about potential. "We hold more power than the consultants who go into the office," she says. That sounds accurate to you: The portrait you hammer out at your desk is the one that either affirms or refutes profitability. But your seniors get to stretch their legs more and get asked for their opinion, and that's why you and Susie work so diligently toward promotion.

But lately . . . lately you've been tempted to influence the recommendations that get made. Lately you've chosen someone whose figures tell you they'll almost certainly get sacked and you've decided to try to save them, manipulating figures with your heart in your mouth, terrified that the figures will be checked. And they are, but only cursorily; you have a reputation for thoroughness and besides, it would be hard for your boss to think of a reason why you'd do such a thing for a random string of letters and numbers that could signify anybody, anybody at all, probably somebody you'd clash with if you met them. You never find out what happens to the people you assess, so you're all the more puzzled by what you're doing. Why can't you choose some other goal, a goal that at least includes the possibility

of knowing whether you reached it or not? Face it; you're a bit of a weirdo. But whenever you feel you've gone too far with your tampering you think of your grandmother and you press on. Grandma is your dark inspiration. Your mother's mother made it out of a fallen communist state with an unseemly heap of valuables and a strangely blank slate of a memory when it comes to recalling those hair-raising years. But she has such a sharp memory for so many other things—price changes, for instance. Your grandmother is vehement on the topic of survival and skeptical of all claims that it's possible to choose anything else when the chips are down. The official story is that it was Grandma's dentistry skills that kept her in funds. But her personality makes it seem more likely that she was a backstabber of monumental proportions. You take great pains to keep your suspicions from her, and she seems to get a kick out of that.

But how terrible you and your family are going to feel if, having thought of her as actively colluding with one of history's most murderous regimes, some proof emerges that Grandma was an ordinary dentist just like she said. A dentist subject to the kind of windfall that has been known to materialize for honest, well-regarded folk, in this case a scared but determined woman who held on to that windfall with both hands, scared and determined and just a

dentist, truly. But she won't talk about any of it, that's the thing. *Cannot* you could all understand, or at least have sincere reverence for. But *will* not?

Your grandmother's Catholicism seems rooted in her approval of two saints whose reticence shines through the ages: St. John of Nepomuk, who was famously executed for his insistence on keeping the secrets of the confessional, and St. John Ogilvie, who went to his death after refusing to name those of his acquaintance who shared his faith. In lieu of a crucifix your grandmother wears a locket around her neck, and in that locket is a miniature reproduction of a painting featuring St. John of Nepomuk, some tall-helmeted soldiers, a few horrified bystanders, four angels, and a horse. In the painting the soldiers are pushing St. J of N off the Charles Bridge, but St. J of N isn't all that bothered, is looking up as if already hearing future confessions and interceding for his tormentors in advance. *Boys will be boys, Father*, St. J of N's expression seems to say. The lone horse seems to agree. It's the sixteenth century, and the angels are there to carry St. John of Nepomuk down to sleep on the riverbed, where his halo of five stars awaits him. This is a scene your grandmother doesn't often reveal, but sometimes you see her fold a hand around the closed locket and it looks like she's toying with the idea of tearing it off the chain.

Suspect me if that's what you want to do.

What's the point of me saying any more than I've said . . . is it eloquence that makes you people believe things?

You are all morons.

These are the declarations your grandmother makes, and then you and your siblings all say: "No, no, Grandma, what are you talking about, what do you mean, where did you get this idea?" without daring to so much as glance at each other.

YOU WERE IN NURSERY school when your grandmother unexpectedly singled you out from your siblings and declared you her protégée. At first all that seemed to mean was that she paid for your education. That was good news for your parents, and for your siblings too, since there was more to go around. And your gratitude is real but so is your eternal obligation. Having paid for most of what's gone into your head during your formative years there's a sense in which Grandma now owns you. She phones you when entertainment is required and you have to put on formal wear, take your fiddle over to her house, and play peasant dances for her and her chess club friends. When you displease her she takes it out on your mother, and the assumption within the family is that if at any point it becomes

impossible for Grandma to live on her own you'll be her live-in companion. (Was your education really that great?) So when you think of her you think that you might as well do what you can while you can still do it.

EVA'S POPULARITY grows even as her speech becomes ever more monosyllabic. Susie, normally so focused on her work, spends a lot of time trying to get Eva to talk. Kathleen takes up shopping during her lunch break; she tries to keep her purchases concealed but occasionally you glimpse what she's stashing away in her locker—expensive-looking replicas of Eva's charity-shop chic. The interested singletons give Eva unprompted information about their private lives to see what she does with it but she just chuckles and doesn't reciprocate. You want to ask her if she's sure she isn't a loner but you haven't spoken to her since she rejected your advice. Then Eva's office fortunes change. On a Monday morning Susie runs in breathless from having taken the stairs and says: "Eva, there's someone here to see you! She's coming up in the lift and she's . . . crying?"

Another instance in which glass lift doors would be beneficial. Not to Eva, who already seems to know who the visitor is and looks around for somewhere to hide, but glass doors would have come in handy for everybody else in the

office, since nobody knows what to do or say or think when the lift doors open to reveal a woman in tears and a boy of about five or so, not yet in tears but rapidly approaching them—there’s that lip wobble, oh no. The woman looks quite a lot like Eva might look in a decade’s time, maybe a decade and a half. As soon as this woman sees Eva she starts saying things like, *Please, please, I’m not even angry, I’m just saying please leave my husband alone, we’re a family, can’t you see?*

Eva backs away, knocking her handbag off her desk as she does so. Various items spill out but she doesn’t have time to gather them up—the woman and child advance until they have her pinned up against the stationery cupboard door. The woman falls to her knees and the boy stands beside her, his face scrunched up; he’s crying so hard he can’t see. “You could so easily find someone else but I can’t, not now . . . do you think this won’t happen to you too one day? Please just stop seeing him, let him go . . .”

Eva waves her hands and speaks, but whatever excuse or explanation she’s trying to make can’t be heard above the begging. You say that someone should call security and people say they agree but nobody does anything. You’re seeing a lot of folded arms and pursed lips. Kathleen mutters something about “letting the woman have her say.” You call security yourself and the woman and child are

led away. You pick Eva's things up from the floor and throw them into her bag. One item is notable: a leatherbound diary with a brass lock on it. A quiet woman with a locked book. Eva's beginning to intrigue you. She returns to her desk and continues working. Everybody else returns to their desks to send each other e-mails about Eva . . . at least that's what you presume is happening. You're not copied into any of those e-mails but everybody except you and Eva seems to be receiving a higher volume of messages than normal. You look at Eva from time to time and the whites of her eyes have turned pink but she doesn't look back at you or stop working. Fax, fax, photocopy. She answers a few phone calls and her tone is on the pleasant side of professional.

AN ANTI-EVA movement emerges. Its members are no longer fooled by her glamour; Eva's a personification of all that's put on earth solely to break bonds, scrap commitments, prevent the course of true love from running smooth. You wouldn't call yourself Pro-Eva, but bringing a small and distressed child to the office to confront your husband's mistress does strike you as more than a little manipulative. Maybe you're the only person who thinks so: That side of

things certainly isn't discussed. Kathleen quickly distances herself from her attempts to imitate Eva. Those who still feel drawn to Eva become indignant when faced with her continued disinterest in making friends. Who does she think she is? Can't she see how nice they are?

"Yes, she should be grateful that people are still asking her out," you say, and most of the people you say this to nod, pleased that you get where they're coming from, though Susie, Paul, and a couple of the others eye you suspiciously. Susie takes to standing behind you while you're working sometimes, and given your clandestine meddling this watchful presence puts you on edge. It's best not to mess with Susie.

ONE LUNCHTIME Eva brings her sandwich over to your desk and you eat together; this is sudden but after that you can no longer mock others by talking shit about Eva; she might overhear you and misunderstand. You ask Eva about her diary and she says she started writing it the year she turned thirteen. She'd just read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and was shaken by a voice like that falling silent, and then further shaken by the thought of all the voices who fell silent before we could ever have heard from them.

“And, you know—fuck everyone and everything that takes all these articulations of moodiness and tenderness and cleverness away. Not that I thought that’s how I was,” Eva says. “I was trying to figure out how to be a better friend, though, just like she was. I just thought I should keep a record of that time. Like she did. And I wrote it from thirteen to fifteen, like she did.”

You ask Eva if she felt like something was going to happen to her too.

“Happen to me?”

You give her an example. “I grew up in a city where people fell out of windows a lot,” you say. “So I used to practice falling out of them myself. But after a few broken bones I decided it’s better just to not stand too close to windows.”

Eva gives you a piercing look. “No, I didn’t think anything was going to happen to me. It’s all pretty ordinary teen stuff in there. Your city, though . . . is ‘falling out of windows’ a euphemism? And when you say ‘fell,’ or even ‘window,’ are you talking about something else?”

“No! What made you think that?”

“Your whole manner is really indirect. Sorry if that’s rude.”

“It’s not rude,” you say. You’ve already been told all about your indirectness, mostly by despairing ex-girlfriends.

“Can I ask one more question about the diary?”

Eva gives a cautious nod.

“Why do you still carry it around with you if you stopped writing in it years ago?”

“So I always know where it is,” she says.

SUSIE gets restless.

“Ask Miss Hoity-Toity if she’s still seeing her married boyfriend,” she says to you.

You tell her you won’t be doing that.

“The atmosphere in this office is so *stagnant*,” Susie says, and decides to try and make Miss Hoity-Toity resign. You don’t see or hear anyone openly agreeing to help Susie achieve this objective, but then they wouldn’t do that in your presence, given that you now eat lunch with Eva every day. So when Eva momentarily turns her back on some food she’s just bought and looks round to find the salad knocked over so that her desk is coated with dressing, when Eva’s locker key is stolen and she subsequently finds her locker full of condoms, when Eva’s sent a legitimate-looking file attachment that crashes her computer for a few hours and nobody else can spare the use of theirs for even a minute, you just look straight at Susie even though you know she isn’t acting alone. Susie’s power trip has come so far

along that she goes around the office snickering with her eyes half closed. Is it the job that's doing this to you all or do these games get played no matter what the circumstances? A new girl has to be friendly and morally upright; she should open up, just pick someone and open up to them, make her choices relatable. "I didn't know he was married" would've been well received, no matter how wooden the delivery of those words. Just give us *something* to start with, Miss Hoity-Toity.

Someone goes through Eva's bag and takes her diary; when Eva discovers this she stands up at her desk and asks for her diary back. She offers money for it: "Whatever you want," she says. "I know you guys don't like me, and I don't like you either, but come on. That's two years of a life. Two years of a life."

Everyone seems completely mystified by her words. Kathleen advises Eva to "maybe check the toilets" and Eva runs off to do just that, comes back empty-handed and grimacing. She keeps working, and the next time she goes to the printer there's another printout waiting for her on top of her document: **RESIGN & GET THE DIARY BACK.**

EVA DEMONSTRATES her seriousness regarding the diary by submitting her letter of resignation the very same day. She

says good-bye to you but you don't answer. In time she could have beat Susie and Co., could have forced them to accept that she was just there to work, but she let them win. Over what? Some book? Pathetic.

The next day George "finds" Eva's diary next to the coffee machine, and when you see his ungloved hands you notice what you failed to notice the day before—he and everybody except you and Eva wore gloves indoors all day. To avoid leaving fingerprints on the diary, you suppose. Nice; this can only mean that your coworkers have more issues than you do.

You volunteer to be the one to give Eva her diary back. The only problem is you don't have her address, or her phone number—you never saw her outside of work. HR can't release Eva's contact details; the woman isn't in the phone book and has no online presence. You turn to the diary because you don't see any other option. You try to pick the lock yourself and fail, and your elder sister whispers: "Try Grandma . . ."

"Oh, diary locks are easy," your grandmother says reproachfully (what's the point of a protégée who can't pick an easy-peasy diary lock?). She has the book open in no time. She doesn't ask to read it; she doubts there's anything worthwhile in there. She tells you that the diary looks cheap; that what you thought was leather is actually

imitation leather. Cheap or not, the diary has appeal for you. Squares of floral-print linen dot the front and back covers, and the pages are featherlight. The diarist wrote in violet ink.

Why I don't like to talk anymore, you read, and then avert your eyes and turn to the page that touches the back cover. There's an address there, and there's a good chance this address is current, since it's written on a scrap of paper that's been taped over other scraps of paper with other addresses written on them. You copy the address down onto a different piece of paper and then stare, wondering how it can be that letters and numbers you've written with a black pen have come out violet-colored. Also—also, while you were looking for pen and paper the diary has been unfolding. Not growing, exactly, but it's sitting upright on your tabletop and seems to fill or absorb the air around it so that the air turns this way and that, like pages. In fact the book is like a hand and you, your living room, and everything in it are pages being turned this way and that. You go toward the book, slowly and reluctantly—if only you could close this book remotely—but the closer you get to the book the greater the waning of the light in the room, and it becomes more difficult to actually move, in fact it is like walking through a paper tunnel that is folding you in, and there's chatter all about you: *Speak up, Eva* and

Eva, you talk so fast, slow down, and So you like to talk a lot, huh? You hear: You do know what you're saying, don't you? and Excuse me, missy, isn't there something you ought to be saying right now? and You just say that one more time! You hear: Shhh, and So . . . Do any of you guys know what she's talking about? and OK, but what's that got to do with anything? and Did you hear what she just said?

IT'S MOSTLY men you're hearing, or at least they sound male. But not all of them. Among the women Eva can be heard shushing herself. You chant and shout and cuckoo call. You recite verse, whatever's good, whatever comes to mind. This is how you pass through the building of Eva's quietness, and as you make that racket of yours you get close enough to the book to seize both covers (though you can no longer see them) and slam the book shut. Then you sit on it for a while, laughing hysterically, and after that you slide along the floor with the book beneath you until you find a roll of masking tape and wind it around the closed diary. Close shave, kiddo, close shave.

AT THE WEEKEND you go to the address you found in the diary and a gray-haired, Levantine-looking man answers

the door. Eva's lover? First he tells you Eva's out, then he says: "Hang on, tell me again who you're looking for?"

You repeat Eva's name and he says that Eva doesn't actually live in that house. You ask since when, and he says she never lived there. But when you tell him you've got Eva's diary he lets you in: "I think I saw her on the roof once." His reluctance to commit to any statement of fact feels vaguely political. You go up onto the rooftop with no clear idea of whether Eva will be there or not. She's not. You look out over tiny gardens, big parking lots, and satellite dishes. A glacial wind slices at the tops of your ears. If you were a character in a film this would be a good rooftop on which to battle and defeat some urban representative of the forces of darkness. You place the diary on the roof ledge and turn to go, but then you hear someone shout: "Hey! Hey—is that mine?"

It's Eva. She's on the neighboring rooftop. She must have emerged when you were taking in the view. The neighboring rooftop has a swing set up on it, two seats side by side, and you watch as Eva launches herself out into the horizon with perfectly pointed toes, falls back, pushes forward again. She doesn't seem to remember you even though she only left a few days ago; this says as much about you as it does about her. You tell Eva that even though it looks as if her diary has been vigorously thumbed through

you're sure the contents remain secret. "*I* didn't read it, anyway," you say. The swing creaks as Eva sails up into the night sky, so high it almost seems as if she has no intention of coming back. But she does. And when she does, she says: "So you still think that's why I locked it?"