

Pat Mosel



Seasons of Satisfaction and Discontent

He mustn't ring the bell. Just don't ring the bell – that's all. The sheets are cool at last and the fan is shaking its head methodically; in fact, this is the same sense I get when I dunk my hot body in the sea. Yes, yes, the sound of the air-conditioning could make me think I'm in a sea cave, floating amongst white sheets, with the fan giving and taking its breeze, rhythmically, on my face. Rupert is away again. If he were here I wouldn't be able to imagine I was in a sea cave; instead, I'd be in bed with my husband, a bedsheet draped over the hump of his body, a fan and an air-conditioner. Rupert's head on the pillow. I just know he is going to ring the bell. Why can't he be a good slave and wait patiently outside until I get out of bed and open the door. He doesn't do things like that because he's too aware. Aware of what? Himself, of course. That's all very well – I don't like people who grovel – but I have to be considered too. Right now I'm enjoying waking up slowly, pretending I'm in a sea cave, cocooned by the hum of the air-conditioner and the sun-coloured curtains. I should have no deadlines. Yet that bell about to be rung... What should I wear today? The ironing was done yesterday so I've plenty of choice. Something which doesn't show I'm not wearing a bra – can't feel exactly free under the circumstances, although I would say it's practical to go without one in the tropics. The dog wants to go outside. I feel like wearing my shorts today but as I'm not going to the beach that would be a bit whimsical. Blessed breeze, fan breeze. What's the time? Not that the clock helps much – it's always fast or slow – I can never find out the *real* time here. The red dress, I think. Loose. Cool. Thin shoulder straps. Oh, for heaven's sake, can't he give me a few more minutes? He'll just have to wait. He rang the bell before I was ready.

* * *

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‘Jambo.’ Hello. ‘Habari?’ Yes, yes, what news? ‘Salaama.’ Peace be with you brother. He doesn’t wait to hear how I am; doesn’t treat me as a human being at all really, which in some ways is quite a relief. Doesn’t tell me how he is either. And I do wonder. Not exactly how he is, but who he is and what he thinks. To start with, it’s impossible to imagine anyone thinking in a language other than English.

* * *

I watched him go into the kitchen and waited until he’d started crashing around a bit, the signal that the day’s work had begun. As a general rule he doesn’t make a noise with the crockery; it’s the knives and forks he throws into the sink, in a heap, *clunk*, steel onto steel. Then the water comes shuddering out of the taps. I seldom interfere in the morning. It’s a difficult time of the day for everybody.

The dog was bouncing around like a bit of flotsam, her bladder egging her on. We went out of the flat and downstairs to the back-yard. It *was* early I realized. There were still plenty of idle cars scattered about, lining the driveway, anywhere but under the pigeons’ tree. A woman in the downstairs flat feeds pigeons for some reason and so they stay, monopolizing that tree which is as tall as our three-storeyed block of flats. Two of them loved and laid eggs amongst our balcony pot-plants last year. It was a bit of a nuisance because we couldn’t water under the nest. Nevertheless, plants and baby pigeons survived. Green and purple and grey. His reaction was strange. He wanted to pitch the shiny white eggs over the balcony railing and he laughed when I told him not to touch them. It was almost as if he thought I was being weak-willed. It’s the same with the geckos which I tried to explain to him are useful house guests as they eat insects.

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Although I've never seen those strange albino lizards doing anything but scuttling away.
He kills cockroaches with great glee.

The dog, Fluke, was snuffling around near the gate in a vain search for her master. Usually she's knee-deep in ant-infested fish bones and fly-covered milk cartons, savouring the nauseating stench. I pulled her back from her sure route to the busy road, tossed her up in the air and cuddled her so that she wouldn't mind too much about going back upstairs. Or, keep me waiting.

I didn't really expect breakfast to be ready as soon as I walked in the door but I did anticipate some progress. When I saw the table laden with nothing but the daily newspaper I felt a familiar impotence.

* * *

Glancing tolerantly through the kitchen doorway I watched him bending over the cooker, scraping away at burnt toast. For some reason his top priority in the mornings is to make toast under the grill, then he tackles the fruit (mangos or pawpaw), then the eggs. The toast, which is made with inferior bread anyway, is always rock-hard despite my injunctions to wrap it up in a tea-towel as soon as it is ready.

I sat down in an armchair with my newspaper. It was riddled with slogans. The cruel were the capitalists or the fascists and the kind were comrades. I've learned to put up with such blatant propaganda. The paper he reads is written in Swahili. They say that the political slogans are reserved for the English-language papers, but frankly I don't believe them. Anyway, he reads his paper avidly, puffing away at a cheap menthol cigarette while we're eating breakfast. I don't mind really.

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* * *

Soon I was confronted with a mountain of scrambled egg and tomato. He doesn't seem to be too flexible about quantities; I am required to eat Rupert's portion in his absence. Which was impossible, so Fluke helped me.

One of the things I wish he wouldn't do is wear those ghastly shorts. It's not that they're patched and dirty that offends me: it's that they give him an image which collaborates with that insulting word 'houseboy' which is still in common use here and which I consciously avoid. At a guess, he's over thirty-five and, therefore, most certainly not a boy.

A few weeks ago one of our overseas visitors left him a pair of shiny running shorts and he wore them to work for a few days. He was embarrassingly proud of his appearance during those days and I could understand what a relief it must have been to wear a piece of clothing which was intact, without a tear, without a patch. Yet, he seemed over-dressed, his loins girded in shiny red cloth, an athlete, a jogger, crouched on the floor and swilling around soapy water.

He could hardly bear me to look at him. Whenever I addressed him his legs seemed to squirm around as if he would like to put them behind his back. In his eyes, which meet mine occasionally, there was an uneasy mixture of defensiveness and pride. I should have joked with him about those shorts – and I almost did but something made me hold back.

That something is my role as Madam. I must wear the right clothes for that too.

'Husseini, can you pika chai, please.' *My Swahili is abominable; his English is improving.*

* * *

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He'll take about half an hour to produce tea. To start with, the kettle on the gas cooker is slow, but also he has another sense of time.

It's this foreign concept of time which has brought me nearer to racism than anything else in this country. You can see it in the way people here walk.

They saunter in the sun.

I no longer find their movement sensual, no longer. Instead, it infuriates me, arouses in me an almost violent impatience. Watching it, I think only of aimlessness, hopelessness. Sometimes I imagine that there is an airborne, sun-coated drug in this country so that the more you breathe in this air the more doped you become. Until you fall into slow motion. Over the years, you wind down to a standstill – when your time is up.

'Husseini. Chai!'

I went through to the kitchen where the water in the kettle had worked itself into a frenzy of bubbles.

He was out dumping the rubbish.

* * *

What does he think of me? Madam. He, strolling in here every day, doing the work I don't want to do, breaking dishes if he wants revenge for an angry word, never saying no. Always, always doing what I say he should.

It can't be natural, for in traditional African society – as far as I know – the women are the workers. I've seen them on the inter-city roadsides, tough mamas, work gouged into their skin. The President reiterates that the country must lighten the load on its hard-working women in the fields. Ploughing the soil, bearing children. Harvesting the crop.

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Having another baby. Still the status is in man, in manhood. They're breaking the backs of their women, and I – I am drinking tea.

* * *

This government doesn't want me to work for money. The argument is that there are so many unemployed citizens that expatriate women must not be allowed to deprive 'the people' of jobs. Yet it is possible to deceive the powers that be, or bribe them. It is done.

* * *

That time he saw me leaping away from the nip of army ants, Hussein laughed.

We were green then.

He doesn't laugh at me any more.

I don't jump.

* * *

I once saw his home, in a village surrounded by city suburbs. Driving him there one afternoon, I saw him living out a fantasy. I was the chauffeuse. He sat reclined in the front passenger seat, not talking, not smoking, but breathing arrogance. One knee was cocked upon the other and his elbow rested on the car window. He smirked, anxious. He was sure his triumph wouldn't last. Thus, he sat and directed me to his home, past the scudded football field with its startled patches of grass and the market place where vegetables cost a fraction of what we paid, past clusters of woolly-haired children, through the narrow

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spaces between the homes of his neighbours. We drove over the bumps and dips that the rain had formed, exciting the dust.

I saw a tin roof and cool mud walls. There was a verandah supported by slight wooden poles, a passage which passed by curtained openings to the light of the back door. Inside, I suspected there'd be some of our forgotten goods, perched in corners. I could imagine smoke from cooking fires. The extended family, moving between jobs. Photographs of mother and father, framed, people smiling starchily. Dust on the floor. Cloth over a chair. A low, basket-weave bed; a scarred, wooden table. Short people and a tall, tall silence if I had entered. To some, nothing at all.

He introduced me to his cousin, an orphan; to his sister, mightily pregnant. They stood around the car, smiled and looked.

* * *

I was sweating and Fluke was licking the salt off my legs.

In the atmosphere between us today there are the seeds of a request. Since he came to work for us the pattern of his demands has changed. At first it was daily that he wanted something – not food, but money or clothes. He thrust guilt in my way. Then monthly. Now quarterly; seasons of satisfaction and discontent. He'll want again soon.

* * *

I found his girlfriend a job soon after she had been to see me, plaits sprouting all over her head, wearing a red and orange kitenge. She sat, feet together, on the edge of the settee during the interview, while he brought her tea, jam and bread without asking me.

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She behaved like a guest, and I suppose she was one.

* * *

Husseini took Fluke downstairs.

He has no great respect for Fluke, which I can understand for in this country a dog is regarded as either a means of protection or an extravagance.

* * *

Husseini has developed a certain flair for being at home in our flat. When he first came to us he appeared to think he had found a luxury nest. I think he had hit upon this mistaken idea, not so much in reaction to the relative poverty of his own home but as a result of being unemployed for over a year.

I surprised him one day when he was still nervous and gauche. I came home from shopping earlier than he had expected and discovered him lounging on the settee, fag in hand, our radio belching out a hardy African beat. He had taken Rupert's bush hat from its hook and now it was aslant on his fuzzy black head, propped up on the bridge of his nose. The ironing board stood at ease near the door, the red light on the iron blinking dimly.

There was something so contrived and inflated about this scene that I wanted to giggle, although I managed to stop myself.

When he realized I was there he froze for some moments then, slowly, so that I had to respect his self-control, he tipped off the hat, held it reverently in two hands and, easing

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himself out of the settee, he took the hat to the hook. Still moving slowly, he began to busy himself with the ironing.

Without malice, I moved across to the radio and turned down the blast before leaving the room.

After a decent interval, I came back to turn it off completely, and took it away for my own use.

* * *

Some months later I surprised him again. Or, was it the other way around? Did he surprise me?

There had been an eruption of robberies in the city. Rich and poor alike were living on the alert. Amongst our friends, tales of intrusion were a dinner party obsession; a child held hostage with a machine gun, a woman almost raped, a man coshed in the bushes; screams, defence, departure. *The rich strengthened their gates and locks.*

‘Husseini, have you locked the door?’

What happened that day was that I started out for lunch beside a hotel swimming pool, only to discover when I was already on the road that I had forgotten to take any money. I turned back and let myself into the flat in the usual manner. Granted, I was wearing rubber sandals which make little sound on the stone floor. I went to the bedroom and locked the door before opening up the cupboard where we keep valuables and cash. I don’t know where Husseini was at the time but he couldn’t have heard me come in.

With a wad of cash in my handbag, I opened the bedroom door... only to close it again, quickly. I’d seen two shadowy, nearly-naked men cross the light and slide into the spare bedroom. For a while I was paralysed. It was finally my turn. I was the next victim of

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armed robbery. Up until then my plan had been to shatter a window and scream for help but I realized with horror that my voice had gone. After a silent fight my senses returned and though there was a drumming in my head, I recovered enough to experience a kind of delayed recognition of the patch on Hussein's shorts. It was, after all, unmistakable.

Emerging with my dignity all but restored, I found Hussein creeping cooly out into the passage followed by the friend and bodyguard he had summonsed. He was making the peculiar glottal 'oops' sound he resorts to when things don't go quite as he had planned.

Then we laughed, great whoops of laughter.

Eventually he became very earnest and explained to me in my mother-tongue that, hearing noises in the bedroom, he had thought I was a thief.

* * *

Hussein always opens the door to visitors but he's extremely inconsistent in his style. He can be silent and intimidating, leaving guests hovering in the doorway while he comes to rouse me. He can also display a sudden effusiveness which might well make a stranger think he or she has rung the wrong bell. 'Karibu', he'll say – the Swahili word for 'welcome' – and beam steadily until he has extracted a smile.

* * *

The time of day when the tick of the clock surfaces and the heat is suffocating. Fluke on her back with her legs in the air, to catch a draught.

* * *

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The inevitable happened. Hussein submitted a letter asking for another loan. He must have asked the village scribe to draft it for him.

Dear Sir ad Madam,

I have the hon our to submit this letter on the subject of a roofing loan.

For sometime now I have been doing my level best to construct a mud thatched house for my family. So far, foundation, walls and upper part have been finalized. What I fail to acquire on my own is the galvanized corrugated sheets as the rains ar just around the corner; I appeal to you for a loan as stated above to enable me to finish my house.

I will repay it in instalments per you. I am looking forward to your paternal aristance with confindence.

Thak you,

I remain sir,

Your's faith full servant,

Husseini Mkwawa

* * *

'Mzee' would sort it out, I told him. 'Mzee' is the term of respect I attach to Rupert when I'm trying to drag in support from somewhere.

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* * *

The phrase ‘paternal assistance’ has come back into my mind like the local propaganda.

A resonant error.

* * *

The kitchen door banged shut, as part of the daily ritual. ‘Madam.’ The word was uttered not as a command, nor as a call, but as a statement. My part of the ritual entails getting up, giving him money for the next morning’s newspaper, letting him out, saying goodbye and locking the door behind him.

Each day I turn from the closed door and see that the flat has been cleaned, not spotless, not shining with soap and polish, simply brought to order. After a few hours Rupert and I manage to make it untidy enough to look as if we are living here.

I’m always relieved when Husseini has gone, and I’m just as thankful when he comes back.

* * *

His letter was on the table, a very ordinary sheet of creased, lined paper. I picked it up.

There is no evidence that it is the work of a village scribe. The mistakes are artful, and to spell ‘acquired’ correctly is difficult – even for an English person. This man Husseini could be a con trickster, a man deliberately having trouble with his spelling.

Absurd thoughts, yet he has always shown greater ability than he gave himself credit for in the first place. A servant shouldn’t be able to write a letter like this.

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And now I have hit upon what has been troubling me – the surname he has used on this letter is not the same as the one on the reference he gave us, dated a year back.

* * *

I have confirmed that, and I am now wondering whether we are employing Hussein Mkwawa or Hussein Mwaipopo.

* * *

A shadow of leaf patterns is laid out on the ground below, cast on a dusty surface.

From a tree, a piece of paper; from a man, a letter.

I have heard of Africans using different names for different purposes, for work and home. I think myself into this position for a while – as far as I can. I conclude that he is using two names to preserve the Hussein who dares to try on his master's hat, who gives the Madam directions from the passenger seat of a car, who smokes a cheap menthol cigarette while we eat breakfast.

(unless, of course, that reference isn't his.)

It's true that the rains are due and perfectly likely that his family does need a roof for their new home. I suppose that for me there is only one way to interpret this letter. He needs help.

* * *

From where I stood I could see half-empty tea cups littering the room.