

ROOM SERVICE
(A Short Story)

By

Kyalo Mativo

This morning the sacred call of the Imamu came bouncing through the misty layers of the morning air:

"Allaaaaah akbarrrrrrr."

And all the mud walls, even the ones without windows, shook with the impregnation of the holy message:

"La illahiiiiiii ila Allaaah...."

She turned on the other side; not to offer the other cheek, but to listen to the echo of the cry.

There was this plaintive something, this uninviting and uninvited summon about it. The echo faded reluctantly across ages and slowly dissolved in the distant wailing of a stray dog, leaving behind it those childhood memories of unidentified voices from across the valley. Unidentified? Some attributed them to the village sugarcane millers; others said they were the voices of ancestry. But that was another age.

She sat up and remained silent in the dark. Salim stirred:

"Mama, where... what...,"

"Sleep child, it's still very early."

Mustafa was disturbed in his sleep and let his displeasure known dramatically: he planted his left leg on Salma's belly and pushed her against the wall.

"Mama, mama, mama," Salma protested, launching a strong complaint against this brutal violation of her nocturnal rights.

Yusufu had been awakened, by the way, but decided to let things take their course. As long as nobody vied for room on the floor, it was all his by occupation. The general cacophony going on on the bed belonged to the bedbugs,...and the bed-sleepers.

Mariaⁿ took Salma into her arms and sat her on her lap, while separating Salim from Yusufu by shoving a blanket between them. There now, in a short while all should be quiet on the fronts.

It is still dark inside, very dark. She fumbles for the lamp, the magic shik'n'tandike kerosene lamp. She always deposited it nearby, with a box of matches within reach. Careful not to awaken the children again, she takes the can lamp and the matches and goes out onto the corridor where such things as lighting lamps, cooking, washing dishes and the rest of the chores are performed.

This morning, like all mornings, she is not alone. Rehema is there, Angela is too, and so are Mrina, Fadhaa and Zakaria. They are all there, in full force. And not unlike any other, this morning they are all chatting and relating to each other the marvels of yesternight's dreams. Mrina, for example, makes a point of dreaming every night, or so it seems; and last night was not an exception.

"I'm walking along Makupa round-about when this white Benzi pulls up by me with a tremendous squeak. I ignore it and keep walking. But then the car keeps driving beside me and somebody is trying to talk to me, calling me, 'Hi, baby doll, that's a nice round bottom you got there, I dare say...., boy do you know how to sway it. Say, want a ride...., may be a drink. C'mon honey, life is short.' I say nothing. Then the Benzi drives in front of me and stops. The man gets out of the car and comes towards me. I stop and watch him come. He approaches and stops right where I'm standing. Then...., then...."

Silence. Her audience waits in expectation.

"Then what happens?" wonders Angela.

"...Then he puts his arms around me and I wake up."

"Aaah...." The disappointment of the day. Unanimous sense of shared loss. Which is why Mrina turns and disappears into her cubicle, fighting tears.

Silent confusion.

"Mine is not a dream," announces Rehema to salvage a sinking morale. "This is something real. It happened to me last night...."

"Tell it woman; out with it," Mrina's due contribution.

"But let it be good," Fadhaa's warning.

"Doesn't matter," Zakaria's personal opinion. "Just tell us what happened, no more no less."

"I stopped by at the American Grill," starts Rehema.

"Ooooh...", general appreciation of marvel.

"There were a few guys at the counter as I came in," continues Rehema. "One of them came straight at me and took my hand. He led me to a seat. Another guy came up to us and said to this guy: 'That's my chic, now beat it.'" Sustained chuckle.

"My guy turned, faced the second guy and said, 'I ain't....'"

"Oh my God."

"And what did...."

"Weren't you scared?"

"Wait, wait, the story is not finished yet." Rehema wanted to concentrate on the sequel. "Then my guy pulled me behind him; 'Over here baby, I don't want you to get hurt,' he said. Then when the second guy tried to reach me, my guy swung a right and caught the intruder by the jaw, knocking him down. He tried to stand up but my man hit him again right back, sending him to the floor where he belonged...."

"Didn't anybody do anything?"

"No, nothing.... Oh yes, the bartender rang 999. But then suddenly the second man sprang up and managed a combination of left and right which put my man out of balance a bit. I stood by the corner and waited. Then the police arrived and separated them."

"But Rehema," Zakaria wondered, "how did you escape arrest?"

"Oh, my guy talked them out of it. That's one good thing about American marines.... If you want fat cash and no police hustle..., you know what I mean?"

By now the women had lit their various charcoal stoves and were as absorbed and committed in boiling porridge and third grade coffee as they were active in their anecdotes. Maria's stove was broken, so she had to wait to borrow Angela's. Meanwhile she took a waterbucket and went to the common toilet to wash herself.

The air was warm and moist outside. The first rays of the morning sun peeped through the thicket of the palm trees. A wayward cloud came hovering over her head, but then shied away in an instant, unveiling a pageant of a blue sky, lit, as it were, by the ocean beneath it. But it was the whispering of the palm trees that added to the natural rhythm of things a fable charm of a mundane character. This mysterious enchantment, this very

otherness of the earth, it is only here, here in Mombasa that we find it, here, where, once upon an age, you lay under a mango tree and let mangoes rain on your childhood. Even today, this morning, as you walk once again along this footpath, you look up to the same trees and entertain a secret desire to lie under and wait.

But all that belongs to the past, to which the present now lies subjugated. And the past never ceases to tempt Maria into committing herself to it..., to replay the by-gones. And today, especially today, if she has any wish to make, let it be this: that she be spared the pomp that always gives expression to the banality of ordinary daily occurrences. Yes, she means ordinary daily occurrences.

A bicyclist makes a dramatic *début* from around the corner. He manages to ring the bicycle bell only twice before he swerves sharply to the right to avoid hitting Maria. The effort lands him into a ditch, spilling the water in the tin he is carrying on the 'carrier'.

"What the devil do you think you are doing?" he shouted trying to disengage himself from the bicycle on top of his body. "Didn't you have enough dreams last night?"

"You should look where you are going yourself," retorted Maria unrepentantly.

"Whoever told you that you own the earth?"

"It doesn't belong to you either," she said as Salma and Salim came trotting along behind her.

"So that's what you think," cried the bicyclist.

"Yes," she affirmed. "It's a narrow road, you know," she added, "even the barefooted ones should have room in it."

The bicyclist cast a quick glance at Salma and Salim before he picked up his bicycle and rode away. Perhaps he understood what Maria meant.

She led her two children across the gulley behind the banana trees and emerged onto the other side of the slum quarters. They turned left and followed a zig-zagging footpath that wound its way around and beyond mud houses, traversing open sewages and stagnant pools of water swarming with mosquitoes. An there, amidst them all, was her destination: a typical mud house, waiting.

Inside one of the compartments Mama Sofia was waiting too.

"I thought you were not coming," she said answering to the voice call at the door.

"I almost didn't," responded Maria. "But I'm out of everything: charcoal, ghee, paraffin, unga, matumbo..., everything. I wouldn't know what to give them tomorrow."

"I know what you mean," said Mama Sofia, "...especially these days."

Meanwhile Salma and Salim were bracing themselves for a busy day. What with all those bridges to build, bricks to make, waterpools to wade through; or simply chase one another around. And if that failed, what about helping fruit vendors push their carts in exchange for a much needed orange? Or go mango hunting? You could even find Ebrahim tending his cluster of goats beneath the mango trees or among the mangroves. There are so many things to do in this place....

"Don't go out to the mango trees," warned Maria. It was as if she had read their thoughts. "That madman Ebrahim roams around there with his goats; stay here where Mama Sofia can keep an eye on you. Is that clear?"

"Yes mama," Salim agreed, all the while fighting a strong urge to get up and go to the mango trees to look for Ebrahim.

Today was Mama Sofia's day off. Yesterday she returned home a little bit late; she had been detained, as she put it, by an unpaying client. So she was still tired and in bad spirits.

"How did it end?"

"I just had to give up," answered Mama Sofia. "What can you do? He said in America, all a man has to do is pay for the drinks. The rest of the pleasure is equally shared. They are equal there, man and woman."

"Yes, I've heard of that story before," said Maria. "One of them once told me that a young rich woman with two degrees once paid him ninety-thousand shillings a month, made him drunk every night, bought him a new car and made herself a complete female for him. He said he could do anything he wanted because the woman could protect him from any crime he chose to commit. She adopted his lifestyle and rejected everything else, but her wealth began to diminish and he left her."

"Well, it's getting late," said Mama Sofia. "I suppose you want to start early."

"I left some cassava in my room, if you need some," said Maria standing up.

"No, I think I'll be fine for the day. Yusufu and Mustafa can prepare something for themselves there. I'll make some kitoweo for these four here."

"Where are Sharif and Bakari?"

"Ah those two -- they're wild. They got up in the morning and went palm tree climbing. Yesterday they sold a raw coconut to an American tourist for ten shillings, so today they decided to make it a profession."

It was no longer dark. The sun had sneaked surreptitiously from behind the ocean and peeped into the affairs of the night. The wind had fled, and the palm trees now stood guard as Maria retraced her bath to the bus stop. She was not alone, nobody is alone in this part of the town.

The first two buses were full, or something to that effect. And the third came and Maria saw that it was full. Then came a fourth. Maria scrambled for a place, like everybody else, and managed to hang onto the door. There was no need to close the door as the bus wouldn't make any more stops until the final destination.

Business had started on the other side of Makupa Causeway, Maria got out of the bus at Makupa round-about, the very spot where a would-be customer had accosted Mrina last night in her dream, the local police station just to the right, notwithstanding. Then she walked down the road to Majengo King'orani. It is quite a distance from here to Kilindini Road. You can follow several roads, if you want, and all sorts of criss-crosses of footpaths and blind alleys almost forever before you hit Kilindini Road on the other side of the railway station. Take a bus rather, and get out in front of the railway station, then plough your way due southeast through a maze of food vendors' shacks. You will come to a two-way street, and you have arrived.

The buses serving Kilindini Road are efficient and relatively clean. And the one which Maria takes is especially efficient and clean. The bus driver and the bus conductor are efficient and clean. The passengers are clean too, and especially the one who deposits himself next to Maria. He is clean, or should be, at least his white uniform is -- or appears to be. He takes off his white cap and caps his right knee with it. The usual exchange of glances; the customary silent confirmation that each has found the other; the habitual artificial smiles and mutual encouragement. Then enter the second stage:

"Where are you from?" The accent was unmistakable, but the question quite unnecessary.

"From here," was Maria's standard answer, followed by a

standard counter-question:

"And you?"

"Modesto."

Question: "Is that far?"

Answer: "Yeah, I guess."

Silence.

Question: "Modesto? Where is that?"

Answer: "California."

Silence.

Question: "Where are you going?"

Answer: "To see friends."

Question: "Where?"

Answer: "Beyond the sea."

Silence.

Question: "And you?"

Answer: "Nowhere. Jus' goofin' around."

Silence. Pronounced and eloquent.

Question: "You wanna go for a drink?"

Hesitation.

Interruption: "Tickets, tickets, please."

Question: "Where?"

Answer: "Anywhere."

Interruptions: "Tickets, tickets, please."

Maria begins to hunt for a coin in her handbag. But the uniformed customer gives the bus conductor a ten-shilling note.

"Two tickets, please."

"Where to, sir?"

"Well..., anywhere, it don't matter really."

"But how can I tell where you want to go?"

"Gimme two tickets and keep the change, o.k.?"

"Yessir."

Silence.

Question: "Wanna come for a drink with me?"

Answer: "...I don't have much time really."

More interruptions: "C'mon. We got all the day to do nothin'.
"C'mon."

The bus pulls up and Maria and her new-found friend step out.

Taxi-service is in heavy demand too, and the taxi-drivers know almost by instinct who the good customers are. Which is why the most experienced ones don't sit around and wait. They drive up to them, soliciting their good patronage, cajoling them and offering the best bargain to boot, all in gentlemanly cahoots to negotiate the survival of the fittest. Woe unto the weak and the meek, they shall not inherit the earth.

No, the experienced taxi-drivers don't sit around and wait. They drive up to the good customers and say unto them,

"Taxi, sir?"

"Yeah, I guess."

For Maria, everything appeared promising, smooth and almost lucky. Perhaps, when the day is over she wouldn't need to work for a whole week thereafter. Perhaps. Because when this business booms, it booms, there's no doubt about it.

"Where to, sir?"

"New Florida."

Maria's heart jumped in the expectation of plenty. The man noticed her internal cacophony and ignored it, or pretended to. Then he moved closer to her and put his left arm around her shoulders.

"How much is it by the way?"

Maria thought the question a bit unprofessional, but he was talking to the driver.

"Ooh, not much...say eeh..., three hundred and fifty?"

"Three hundred and fifty? That's a lot...."

"Well that's what I charge...."

"Hey, whatcha think I am, a millionaire or somethin'? Gimme a break."

"Well, how much you want to pay, sir?"

"I'll give you three hundred, buddy, no more, o.k.?"

"Well, o.k., sir. But next time you pay four hundred... eeh ha ha ha."

The New Florida! A masterpiece of architectural finesse hitherto unknown to tourism. Right on the beach, awash in the balmy sea breeze from the blue tropical waters. Here, inside this monument of unstained glass, many things have come to pass. It all begins at the room at the top, or the dining room, to use common language. Sitting literally on top of the rest of the building, it is designed in such a way as to offer the all round view of the island. This is a guarantee. You sit at any of the dining tables at any time of the day, and the whole immense structure moves, rotating on its axis. At the end of your dinner you will have described a complete revolution.

The ascension to the room at the top is a heavenly experience. On arrival, customers are greeted with the daily menu, featuring crabs, oysters, eels, shark brains, frog legs, bull testicles, tadpoles and snakes. It is here that all kinds of orientations, ceremonies, celebrations and various forms of performances, general and specific take place. The minister of culture and economic orientation dined here last night. The general manager of Safari Clubs, Ltd. has a permanent reservation here, the director of Voice of the People sleeps here every other day.

And the marines? They too have a place at the New Florida. There's a pamphlet circulating in the Navy ships anchored off the coast announcing to the marines all that they wanted to know about fun but were afraid to ask. "Woman," declares the pamphlet, "your name is the New Florida."

Maria had heard of the New Florida, but it was beyond her dreams ever to think of being patron in this privy of the privileged. It is the secret desire of every lady of the night,

including Mrina, Fadhaa, Angela, Zakaria, even Mama Sofia. And now it is to Maria that the first honour falls? How would she begin to tell the story tomorrow morning and who would believe her? She covered her face with her hands and wept internally with joy.

"Here you are, sir," said the taxi driver stopping finally in front of the New Florida.

Everything is automatic in New Florida. You "check-in," as the new tourist parlance has it; you make your orders for the day, if you please, sir: lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, etc.,... you pay everything in advance, kindly sir, including the room, so that when you want to leave, you leave, simple.

"You wanna go for a quick swim eeh...baby, by the way what's your name? Mine is Ronny."

"Maria."

"What?"

"Maria."

"Yeah, Moria, you wanna go for a swim before we have a drink?"
An overture to the splendour of good life needs be pleasant to the ear.

"I don't mind."

They came down, cigarettes in mouth, arm-in-arm and agiggling at small jokes. A splash in the swimming pool tuned them up and sharpened their appetite.

Back to the room agiggling, arm-in-arm and cigarettes in the mouth.

Drinks.

Lunch-time.

Drinks.

Four o'clock tea.

Drinks.

Night-fall.

Dinner-time.

Drinks.

At some point during the course of the events, the marine graduated from cigarettes to what he called "joints". At first Maria wouldn't join in the "joints". But with "C'mon, baby, whatcha matter with you, are you prudish or s'methin'..." she decided to acquiesce. They burned out a few of these "joints" until they reached a new "high", from which the marine graduated, yet again, and took a step forward.

Maria watched him fish out from his marine robes, a vile and syringe. The adroitness with which he performed the art of self-innoculation spoke of an expertise born of long experience. Then, the theoretical concept of "fun" assumed, for him, its tangible form.

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It was eleven o'clock at night, quite late by local standards, when Maria sat up in bed and said shaking her bed-fellow:

"I should leave now."

No response.

"I want to leave now."

"Hmm...what?"

"It's late and I want to go."

"Go? Go where? You gotta stay here with me til tomorrow."

"Oh, no, I can't, my children..."

"Children? Fuck your children."

"Well, I have to go anyway," insisted Maria getting up from the bed. The marine grabbed her and pulled her back.

"Stay right there," he shouted pinning her down on the bed.

"Don't give me that shit about kids. I paid for everything for the whole night..." Maria was a little shaken. She lay there petrified and irresolute. Then she tried again to get up.

"I have to leave really, I have four children to take care of, I can't stay, don't you understand?"

"I don' unnerstand nothin'," came the marine's response. You get yoo butt right back to bed or I go mad.... You hear me...?"

Maria struggled to set herself free from the Marine's grip.

He pulled her back with a tremendous force.

"Get back here, you jerk."

She fell back to bed. After a while she said:

"Please pay me and let me go."

"Pay you? Whatcha talkin' about sucker. You wanna go and you want me to pay you... Gimme a break."

"You won't pay me then?"

"Hey listen, baby, I don' wan' no hustle...we gotta get even, you stay here until tomorrow...tomorrow Ammona go back to work, but I'm free all night. Now get back to bed."

Maria made one final jerk and got out of bed. She quickly began dressing up as the marine set up in bed and watched her for a while. Then he stood up and walked up to her.

"Get back to bed," he thundered authoritatively. Maria ignored him.

"G-E-T back to bed, I said."

Maria went on dressing up. The marine grabbed her by the neck and knocked her against the wall several times. Then he hurled her onto the floor, sat on her and squeezed her jugular veins. She tried to scream unsuccessfully. The marine dug his nails right into her throat until he drew blood. He heaved her up and threw her forcefully against the bed table. She crumbled and gathered up into a heap. The marine, eyes flashing with fury like a wounded warthog, seized a chair and with a final blow, finished her off.

He stood there naked, shaking, fuming with fury and raging like a murderous bull. Then, heaving loud breaths, with Maria's blood trickling gently on his left arm, he lifted the lifeless body and put it back on the bed.

Feverishly he washed the blood from his arm, quickly dressed up in his marine robes and stormed out of the room, shaking, fuming with fury and raging like a murderous bull.

* * *

This morning the sacred call of the Imamu came bouncing through the misty layers of the morning air:

"Allaaaaah akbarrrrrrr."

And all the mud walls shook with the impregnation of the holy message.

Yesterday, the law of this land found Ronald Jackson Smith, the American marine accused of cold-blooded murder, NOT GUILTY of cold-blooded murder. The Judge, may he also rest in peace, took into account the marine's youth, his good conduct and the fact that he apologized for having been "a little bit carried away." Furthermore, the young man confirmed his love for this country and its people, reiterating his sincere wish to stay and settle here when he retires.

Maria's four children are now on their way to America; an American millionaire has taken custody of them and will take care of their education and life. That's nice. Perhaps one day Yusufu will write a bestseller entitled "How I Became A Millionaire"; and we, the African intellectuals, unlike our learned counterparts, the Africanist specialists, lost and confused in our 'radicalism', removed as we are from the realities of life, will gnaw our teeth all the way to the grave.

Tomorrow, the sacred call of the Imamu will come bouncing through the misty layers of the morning air....

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