

## THE SERVANTS

In my three years in England, I recall seeing only one black face, an African on a double-decker bus going into the town near where I lived. How different things are today. Of course, I'd seen plenty of Africans before, in South Africa and Rhodesia, but being so young, I never stopped to think about them and the lives they led. Now, I'd returned to Bulawayo and was almost ten years old. I was curious about the servants as individuals.

The head servant was Francis, the cook, a dapper, clean-shaven gentleman from Mozambique. In his late thirties or early forties, he spent most weekdays in the large, cool kitchen. He could cook most of the dishes we ate, and what he didn't know, he soon picked up from my aunt. Polite and diligent, he maintained an air of dignity. All was well when he was in the kitchen peeling vegetables or dicing meat.

Francis's wife, whose name I can't remember, was the housemaid, a big, strong woman with large hands, who towered over her husband. She was quiet and serious and seldom spoke.

As the housemaid, she washed the family's clothes in the bathtub and ironed them in the kitchen, made the beds, cleaned the bathroom, and swept and polished the floors. One of her duties was to polish the long front veranda with its wide steps. Red Cobra wax polish, with its distinctive look and smell, could make the entire house feel fresher. Francis's wife applied the polish with gusto but was not so good at brushing it in to achieve the high shine it could produce. Marbles that rolled on the veranda, and the tyres of dinky cars, soon got coated with the red stuff.

Joseph was the gardener, a young twenty-something with a neat beard and moustache. His job was to tend to the seven-acre property, particularly the areas near the house. Sometimes, he polished the veranda, so it may have been his efforts that led to my marbles and dinky car tyres being coated with red Cobra wax polish.

Most times, if you were looking for Joseph, you'd find him with his hockey-stick shaped flat-iron, swinging it from side to side, cutting the long yellow grass. An old rag wrapped around the top end made for a more comfortable handle.

Joseph lived elsewhere, but Francis and his wife occupied a kia about seventy metres from the house. There were two separate rooms, one a bedroom, the other they used as storage space.

On an evening with nothing much to do, I walked down to their kia and found them sitting on small wooden crates, eating their dinner. In Bulawayo's comfy climate, they often cooked and ate outdoors. They invited me to try their food, so I took a little, not wanting to deprive them. It was the first time I'd tasted sadza, and I didn't much care for it. I felt it lacked salt. The spicy meat, though not quite a curry, was still tasty. Their open-air dining looked the picture of cosy domesticity.

Life in the servants' quarters wasn't always idyllic. On weekends, Francis often dressed in his best clothes and visited the local beerhall, but his wife would stay home. Our good-looking, well-dressed chef was bound to attract female attention at the beerhall, and Francis was not immune to flattery.

One morning, he didn't turn up for work. The next day, he turned up battered and bruised, with swelling and cuts on his face, and he moved rather gingerly. Might a jealous husband or boyfriend have assaulted him? No! The story came out: his wife heard gossip about his activities with the young ladies at the beerhall and given him a severe beating. I later discovered it wasn't the first time this had happened. Apparently, he was not a fast learner in all respects.

Clearly, it was a bad idea to marry a woman much bigger and stronger than himself. Francis's appearance was testimony to that.