

## Milena ODA

from the novel *Call Me Servant*

### Part I: My Name Is Servant

My name is servant.

And I request you to address me as such; I am Servant and am called Servant. An individual does not, as people imagine, require a first and second name. My name is Servant. When people persist in asking ‘what are your first and second names?’ I turn away and refuse to listen. The gentlefolk claim not to comprehend me? How else should servants indicate their servitude? They are astonished, shake their heads, stare at me and still will not understand. ‘I cannot assist you with an answer sir.’ They ask me again, trying to unnerve me. ‘Your name is Steven Servant?’ No, my name is Servant. I have no answer to questions such as ‘Why do you call yourself Servant?’ It pains me that I must hear words such as ‘unfortunate’ and ‘pitiable’, must continually point out my vocation. You do not see a Servant? You have not noticed my resplendent livery? People rely on patterns, and if they are missing, the world dims around them. Servant is neither a Christian nor a surname; my name might have been Footman, Valet or Right Hand Man. I could also be called Aide, Adjunct, Attendant or Lackey, but no word better describes my character, always ready to serve, than Servant. I have always been the quiet accompaniment to the loud melody: chestnut seller, newspaper deliverer, keeper at the military museum, porter, doorman. I began as a lackey and I wish to finish as one.

I am enthralled by subordination, its self-effacing constraints. My sense of self is insufficient (a servant’s sense of self) and I cannot and will not live in liberty. Independence is unbearable to me. I shy away from freedom and free time. I panic when I don’t know what I have to do. I can only do what is required of me. I seek release from the burden of individuality and willingly put myself on a lead. I want to be available to my master day and night like an object, for the master is incapable of basic tasks and only the Servant can fulfil them for him, only he wants to. The Servant is air, his master’s air, who needs it to breathe. Only a good master knows how to treat the servant; if you wish to show your Servant consideration you must allow him to sense your superiority and you must never release him from your sphere of influence.

I am always dressed in my livery (except during my morning and evening ablutions) so I believe there is no reason (any more) to call me Leonard. I require a lengthy pause for breath when I hear the word ‘Leonard’ or must speak it. If I deliberately call myself Leonard, it means I wish to leave a long, deep scar in my body. I have to leave something there, someone indeed, who I wish to be... so I am disparaging about myself. There really is no-one left to whom I am Leonard. And certainly not when I face people in my livery. *I stand before him in my livery and call him, ‘my master!’ He knows full well what it means – to me – to wait patiently by someone with the obedient composure of a servant.*

I advocate traditional serving values. I am the embodiment of a court attendant’s courtesy. The searching gaze of my wide-spaced eyes betrays my innate servility. ‘Alongside your utter obsequiousness there’s also a certain honesty to your plucky little cross-eyed face,’ the mother used to tease me. My eyes are wet and bulbous, and I have ‘water on the brain’ with a broad forehead and protruding ears. She called me ‘my baboon’. I have large ears – an unmistakable sign of a congenital developmental disorder. My colourless hair points to a serious degeneracy. Nature made me ugly. When I open my mouth I reveal a cleft between my two front teeth. I think of this repugnant gap every time I have to speak; I would rather use sign language. I stutter over the simplest greetings. Uttering even a brisk ‘Good morning’ is difficult. I have no

desire to wish anyone except my master a good day or a good evening. It is required of the Servant that he exchange words only with his master. Forcing me to speak has a crushing effect. My stutter consciously restrains me from contact. I maintain distance from anyone not interested in me as a Servant. I like to serve in company where I can genuinely be of service. I deploy every resource of my soul to uphold my servant psyche.

In the morning I look in the tiny mirror with one eye closed, in order not to see more than my chin and jaw while shaving. Leonard never looks in the large mirror when he is naked. Only the naked man is called Leonard. How inept this Leonard is. I abhor Leonard's degenerate masculinity. A hideous individual. I am overcome by a ghastly angst if forced to see myself without my livery. I detest the asymmetry of my body. It is ten years since I last saw my deformed frame exposed in a mirror. This grotesque sight causes me pain and embarrassment. When I see myself naked, I beat and tear and hate myself. Leonard's ugly physicality is a mixture of the ridiculous and the merciless; nature made a joke at his expense when she begat him. How damned similar he is to a poor cripple in every detail of his own wounded, malformed appearance! How disgusting to be like such people! I am precisely like them. A vile hound. Naked and debased, Leonard barks helpless on his lead.

If I put on my finest livery and pull on the exquisite white silken gloves, the bland individual Leonard becomes a snappy, dapper Servant. Then I stand in front of the tall mirror and admire the allure of the attractive Servant before me. What release: an unleashed dog's euphoric cry! The moment each morning when I see myself in the delightful livery is a vision of style, a feeling of joy. I begin my service with renewed courage and resolve.

And I do not answer the question, 'why do you wear your livery outside of your working hours?' I remain silent in line with Rule 8. I, the Servant, wear livery day and night, and this livery is my skin, my ego. The livery allows me to call myself I, raises my status. It is the highest honour to wear the livery constantly, and to be clothed in it in the presence of a master. This is dictated by the most important rule, Rule 1.

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### **Part III: At the King's Court**

Not yet an English palace, but a master requiring 'assistance for scientific purposes'. I repeat the requirement, the precise nature of which remains unclear. How strange it is to travel across the city. For the last fifteen years I have barely left my street. My environment has consisted of the four roads surrounding the house I live in, the daily walk in my *sortie*-livery sufficing.

The journey through the city makes me alert. I stand taut in the bus; I neither talk to anybody, nor gaze inquiringly at anyone. I do not have the strength for strangers' gazes. My legs give way, my long body buckles, out of my control.

Along the streets, my pace breathless. The people are loud. Following the pavements, lost in the traffic, saved by a friendly gentleman – he could easily be my master. I walk fast down a narrow alley. Fear of the unknown. I see myself as a fearful person, although I have long waited for this unique moment. I must be

free of any doubt. Dazed by the journey, I hear the noise of the streets in my gut. There is the house. At last! I stand at my new master's front door. How long I have waited for this moment! I hear myself ring the bell. I am not told his name. I address him for now as 'sir'. He will soon reveal the title the humble one is to use when speaking to him.

Half past four on the dot, you've managed it. Pull yourself together Servant. Were I not now here at the door, I would be arranging the four-thirty tea-time ceremony, would be taking delight in serving my good master Earl Grey in green china cups with fruit scones. I long for these strong, static, aristocratic traditions; to be one of the finest servants around.

'Enter!' A man's voice calls from behind the door, a voice leading me to expect something noble. How pleasant it is to hear the command 'Enter!' - a foretaste of ritual and of a real master! It is a good start.

I step inside. Through the dark passage straight into a bright living room. A small, rotund man with a square skull and a wide, round face sits in a wingback chair by an open window in the huge room - he reminds me of a Swedish bulldog. His sallow, unrelenting, green eyes observe me earnestly, curling eyebrows arching up as if the man were forced to endure acute pain. His small, open mouth breathes loudly and with effort, and his eyes reveal exhaustion and inertia. Is this the master? I check my posture and my standpoint.

Then the sight of his living room - such chaos! Everything in a mess. I understand now; I have been summoned on account of this disorganisation. He needs a fastidious assistant such as myself. With my acute sense of structure I will create impeccable order amongst his books and papers, make every intractable corner beautiful; I cannot abide negligence.

He heaves himself up from the armchair and cries out, 'Bohumil, how tall are you? I need to know precisely. Detailed knowledge is my business. I approach data and facts meticulously. Do you know the exact length of your limbs?'

'Of course, sir.' I bow in compliance. 'I am 1 metre 97 tall, my arms are 1 metre and 3 centimetres, my torso is 97.3 centimetres long, my legs 99.5, my feet 33.4. Should I continue?'

'Highly interesting personal details. Every determinable number relating to your person is of great interest to me. My research field is man and the world as a mathematical figure! You understand what I am saying?'

A pause. He is waiting for my 'yes'. I am silent. I will not pronounce a 'no'.

'You do not I see. It is most simply defined. It is a mathematical - algebraic - discipline! I collect numbers, sums, amounts. I am a well-known number collector. The series of numbers on my sheets is like a series of fine, sunny days. The figures radiate, golden in the sun. The fine weather holds out for as long as I sun myself in it. Continue.'

'Right thigh 84.4 cm long with a circumference of 68.3, left thigh 86.2 cm and 72.1 cm, right hand 34.3 cm long, 1.4 longer than the left. The right thumb is 15 cm... I know the size of every part of my body by heart, thanks to my bespoke liveries.'

'Yes, indeed. Discoveries learned through practical application. Brilliant! It is truly a wonder that you know all this. You too are stalked by facts expressed as sums Bohumil? Yes?'

I nod. Why is he calling me Bohumil? Why has he still not asked my name? Call me Servant! I have uttered my heart's desire 11,638 times.

'Astonishing! Extraordinary! A kind of aura!' He offers me a coffee and asks me to sit by him.

The servant cannot - he will not - sit down. He does not consider *expressing* this inappropriate wish.

'I would rather stand, thank you. I can answer better.' (Rule 2.) At the same time I maintain a pleasant, calm expression.

He takes a deep breath, opens his mouth wide and continues to speak. 'Numbers are ticking everywhere. They are continuous, like a clock or like the stars in the cosmos. Like a butterfly escaping its chrysalis, I cast off the earthly using numbers. Through figures our world becomes more intelligible, more wonderful. Mathematics can indeed exist without mathematicians. Did you imagine I was a mathematician? No, I am a professor of linguistics! Do you speak Czech?'

'No!' I force the 'no' out. I would love to soar above every question and not hear them, not answer any question I do not know.

'No matter. There is a wealth of ignorance; one must simply acknowledge it, as Montaigne said. Do you know Montaigne? The third volume is on the second shelf above you.'

Hopefully I will soon understand every word he says. I concentrate solely on the words the stupid one knows, without inquiring as to their significance. They need only provide a mirror to my servile existence; the simple one needs nothing more. I bow respectfully.

He fixes his eyes on my obedient posture: feet adjacent and parallel, legs pressed together, hands aligned to the trouser seam, arms clamped to the body like a grenadier! A serious expression, mouth closed, head held still, eyes like a Great Dane, determined to be the best possible manservant. Now he is noticing how attractive my livery is – or is it my exceptional size which interests him?

'What is the matter, Bohumil? You are shaking and shuddering. And why are you standing so stiffly by the door?'

'I am waiting, sir.'

'What? What for? Do come closer. Come here. Do you want to be a member of my mathematical club, my right hand? Anyone applying for a position here today must reckon to undergo a personality text. This does not involve determining professional abilities; the test provides information on the very personal strengths and weaknesses of the applicants.'

'Yes,' I answer immediately, going red. The servant may not redden however, as dogs do not do this either (Rule 11).

'Seeing is all, Hebbel said, and you will see too. Look at all my books, newspaper cutting and papers: 3,456 periodicals, 12,567 newspaper cuttings and 7,233 books. My search does not just follow any old system! The planets have their system, as Giordano Bruno showed. And the heavens have a theory too; see Kant. I file articles, books and periodicals strictly according to the system "used and unused", adhering to a scrupulous discipline: used on the right, unused on the left! It makes sense to categorise the people out there in this way too – as I see them, count them and asses them. I sort them into orderly and disorderly. The sum total: 5,789 disorderly and 3,123 orderly people observed within a period of five years. 5,789: how many disorderly people the world contains! My retreat into passivity and anonymity has truly been the best solution. I was confronted with this disorder too often and experience has proved the best teacher of all, as Caesar said.'

My face falls, white as chalk. I do not understand him.

'Before you arrived here, at 16:15, I saw 28 people pass by, of which 16 were unknown to me, 12 were faces already familiar. At 8:15 on the other hand, nine were standing in the bakery, three at the newspaper stand and four were drinking coffee in front of the bakery. With binoculars one sees this clearly. I am interested in the question, "How many?" The precise number – no stories, no chit-chat; the subject under discussion is the figures! I explore a kingdom of numbers, using the traditional method – I count. Counting is a natural

human activity like eating and excreting. I transform each word, each bird, each object into numbers. I dissect everything into numerals. In my opinion I thus confer a higher significance on everyday objects, as did Pierre de Fermat, Isaac Newton and C F Gauß. My greatest desire is simply to arithmetise the world around me each day. I want to make a breakthrough. I am converting everything into a system of numbers. This is more than a stamp collection or an insect collection, yes, soon I must cease this; a counting voice – no it is *my* voice counting – pursues me constantly, day and night! That is why you are here Bohumil. You are to save me from decline. You will note the numbers down from time to time, but you must also protect me from the sickly attacks of arithmetic mania!

He sobs. I do not know what I should do. I stand, awkwardly. Should I offer him a handkerchief? That would be a sensitive sign of concern for the suffering of my master.

‘How romantic mathematical structures feel! The daily contemplation of quantities – Highly romantic! A continuum from linguistic poetry into the poetry of numbers. As Einstein said, the numbers offer so much space for intuition, we must simply allow the speechless connections and collisions and their sparks to shine like the midday sun. In thinking, speaking and writing, numbers repeatedly appear; Gödel demonstrated this. And according to Wittgenstein thought must not accompany activity.’

I struggle with every word this gentleman says.

[...]

‘He who eats beans is a loner who likes to live cloistered and rarely achieves contact with other people. The Japanese nutritionalist Dr Kaichin Kurichama has pioneered a new branch of scientific enquiry: fruit and vegetable psychology. By analysing the various elements found in species of fruit and vegetables they eat he can sort the character and talents of the person into solitude and togetherness. He uses the most rigorous academic methods in his work, he wrote to me. What talents do you have? Bohumil, don’t look so astounded. Your incredulous face! It is by no means unusual. You will see how much I like to eat beans and what effects they have. One farts – yes it’s true. Willhelmina has complained and no longer wishes to cook beans – as if farting were inhuman. Do you eat beans? What do you eat?’

‘Lentils,’ I answer quickly.

‘Lentils? Then you too fart, and by the way you are too withdrawn – above all when it comes to the female sex – no wonder. He who eats beans and lentils must withdraw... Or are you suffering, are you afraid? What of? Bohumil! But I love to eat lentils too. My best friend ate cucumbers every day with a passion and was a thoroughly gregarious person. He made friends rapidly and was liked by all, a genuine dandy! He also found it hard to say ‘no’. All thanks to the cucumbers. Successful with money, blind in love – because I like peanuts. I hide my sensitivity behind a rough hull, in horror of sentimentality. All because of cherries, which I consume with a passion. According to Kurichama that makes me intolerant, very intolerant. Is that not the case? Of course it is. I am after all a professor. A distinguished person. Do you like cherries and peanuts too?’

I simply nod again.

‘On the very first day we have discovered so many things we have in common! My Bohumil. My visionary, my poet and writer. Amor dei intellectualis!’

Why does he continually call me Bo-hu-mil? What kind of name is that? He calls me a poet and writer? Me? He must be mistaking me for someone else!

‘Your rigid head, your cramped eyebrows and lips are swollen. Are you in pain? Like me, no doubt exactly like me!’

Why does he not ask after my particulars, instead of playing a game I don't understand with me? As a servant however, I must understand everything, immediately, without asking myself what sense the master's questions, commands or behaviour make. As a servant I may not ask 'why' (Rule 6). My rules radiate through my head like a ray of sunlight guiding me. To keep on your toes is the trick.

'Bohumil, how tired I am, always having to look for someone and ask if he can count, or if he wants to learn a foreign language. The greatest artists can do both and that is us! For my research it is necessary to be an artist of life. To comprehend the celestial bodies each night and determine the results arithmetically, with intelligence and aptitude. Do you understand me? Yes or no? Here lies our illusion.'

'Yes sir.' I offer my master my 'yes', accompanied by a gentle bow.

I participate in the conversation with renewed strength. Even the servant must resort to wiles to please his master, without necessarily himself finding pleasure in the conversation. My reverence for my master is genuine however. I am making assumptions about what he is discussing, taking the risk I may be misunderstanding him. Then my master might penalise me in accordance with Rule 4, banish me to the punishment corner. Through inexperience I am placed in a very awkward situation. I ask myself how this will end. I make sure not to adopt a questioning grimace; my acquired calm can easily abandon me when I have to suffer an ordeal. The fight inside me is exacerbated by my inadequate intelligence. But I repeat Rule 6 to myself: the servant must not think or reflect; he simply carries out instructions which have already become habit, in every minute variation. I retain the firm belief that I have not practiced all these years in vain. I will not add bitterness to the pain of rejection.

'I can no longer bear it. The numbers are destroying me! They are robbing me of my health. Too many numbers jostling all around me! I have a burning desire to end this endlessness. I hereby announce: the end! Bohumil I wish to call stop, to achieve it with your help ... I am exhausted. I am on my last legs. What luck that you are here now and are breathing the same air as me - sometimes it is stuffy. We will make it fresh again!' He looks fevered. His despondent face crumples and his mouth sticks out. 'Now it really has to end, a definite end. I wish to be the opposite of Pi. I long for an end.' His body shivers, he tumbles and I leap towards him and hold his heavy body in my arms. 'I beg you, such a highly adorned servant as yourself must surely be the best assistant for my scientific purposes. We will experience a great deal together. Stay Bohumil. I need you. Have you noticed, I have given you a truly honourable name. Do you know this, my poet and actor?'

He is pleased to own the Servant? I can belong to a master? He calls me 'Servant!' I can hardly believe it. Now I stagger too - has he recognised the Servant? Is it really true, or is he deceiving me in his fever? Only the strange name I find hard to take.

'Your devotion and passion makes you interesting. Very important in a poet!'

In me? I answer him: 'Thank you, sir!' I bow modestly, barely moving from my obedient position. It is really true. I take these words of honour on board. I bow deeper, much deeper than Rule 2 dictates. Can I possibly be this happy?!

'You are my stroke of luck Bohumil.'

'My dear, dear master, I thank you, but do not anger yourself over your most respectful, ugly Servant. I am wretched, that is the truth, but no doubt you can fathom the servant's soul standing before you in his livery. Rest assured, as a devoted servant I will always keep a watchful eye on my master, who must always be certain that I am here for your highness.' I congratulate myself on these fluid sentences. I am proud of myself!

'No problem, Bohumil. You are a true poet and actor. You are an extraordinary person. I am delighted that you wish to stay. Do you wish to stay, my *amor dei intellectualis*?'

I find it hard to open my mouth, but I blurt out, 'Yes, my King!'

[...]

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