

An excerpt translated by STEPH MORRIS.

PLEASE CALL ME SERVANT (NOVEL)

Milena Oda

My narrative is a masterpiece of finest burlesque. It is a successful blend of the bizarre, the grotesque and the ridiculous.

Part I: MY NAME IS SERVANT

My name is servant.

I respectfully request you to address me as Servant; 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 is your Christian name, your surname?’ I turn away and decline to listen. The ladies and gentlemen refuse to grasp this? How else should servants indicate their servant status? They are astonished, shake their heads, regard 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?’ That I must hear words such as ‘unfortunate’ and ‘pitiable’, and continually point out my vocation, pains me. 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 Retainer, 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 artillery museum, porter, doorman. I began as a lackey and I wish to finish as one.

The fetters of selflessness and self-effacement are what entice me to servile submission and bondage. My sense of self is not self-sufficient (a servant’s sense of self) and therefore I cannot and will not live in liberty. I cannot bear a second of freedom. I steer clear of everything that is free, from every free feeling. I panic when I don’t know what I have to do. I can only do what is required of me. I wish to be released from the burden of individuality, of the free self. I 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; he 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 feel 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

no-one has any reason (any more) to call me Leonard. I require a lengthy pause for breath when I hear the word 'Leonard' or must speak it out loud myself. If I deliberately refer to myself as Leonard, it means I wish to leave a long, deep scar on my body. I have to leave something, someone indeed, who I would like... so I speak disparagingly about myself too. There really is no-one left to whom I am Leonard. And certainly not when I face someone 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 adhere to the old-fashioned values of a traditional servant. I am the embodiment of this century's most courteous courtier's most refined servility. The searching gaze of my widely-spaced eyes betrays my congenital subservience. 'Alongside your utter subservience there's also a certain honesty in your plucky little boss-eyed face', the motherly one used to tease me. My eyes are watery and bulge out. I have slight hydrocephalus, with a broad but well-formed forehead and protruding ears. My mother called me 'my baboon'. I have large ears – an unmistakable sign of a congenital developmental disorder. My pigment-free hair points to a serious degeneracy. Nature made me ugly. When I speak I reveal a crevice between my two front teeth. When I am forced to speak I think of this repugnant gap; ideally I would prefer to communicate through sign language. I stutter, even when I have to say hello or goodbye. Simply uttering words such as good day or good evening is difficult. I have no desire to wish anyone, except for my master, a good day or a good evening. It is required of the Servant that he exchange words only with his master, greeting him only. Any attempt to bring me to speak has a crushing effect on me. My stutter results in a strange, wilful restriction on attempts to make contact. I consciously seek to maintain distance from anyone who is not interested in me as a Servant. I only like to serve in company where I can be of obedient service. I am then serving my soul, cherishing my servant psyche. (...)

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