



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

**Kunapipi**

---

Volume 26 | Issue 2

Article 9

---

2004

# Black fishnet stockings

Ken Kamoche

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

## Recommended Citation

Kamoche, Ken, Black fishnet stockings, *Kunapipi*, 26(2), 2004.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss2/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Black fishnet stockings

### **Abstract**

Otieno loved the car like his own child. He could sit for hours while he waited for Mzee, the old man, just admiring the sleek, shiny bodywork. He knew the car very well. When he heard the engine purr, he understood its language in a way Mzee never could. He heard what it was telling him. It spoke in gentle tones, as only a new Mercedes could.

KEN KAMOCHÉ

## Black Fishnet Stockings

Otieno loved the car like his own child. He could sit for hours while he waited for Mzee, the old man, just admiring the sleek, shiny bodywork. He knew the car very well. When he heard the engine purr, he understood its language in a way Mzee never could. He heard what it was telling him. It spoke in gentle tones, as only a new Mercedes could.

His wife, Selina, had begged him many times to give her a ride around the streets of Nairobi in his precious Mercedes. That's what he called it, *his* Mercedes. But he never let her into the car. He always said the boss would not permit it. He would get into trouble. He couldn't afford to lose his job if Mzee found out he was using the car to impress his wife, or even to take her shopping.

'Just one time,' she begged. 'How will he find out? After taking him to work, you're free, just drop by here, one hour, and then go. Please?'

Otieno smiled. 'Okay, maybe one day.'

'Promise? I'll sit quietly, behaving myself. Back left. You won't even know I'm there!'

He laughed. 'I can't promise, but I'll try.' She rubbed his back lovingly and lay back on their single bed, dreaming about the day she would sit in the Merc, back left, while her husband took her on a joy ride, as if it was their own car.

Selina spent a great deal of time dreaming of the good times. On the way to work, she often sat quietly on the bus watching how other women dressed. She watched their hairstyles and wondered where they had their hair done. She herself worked for a hair salon in the city centre. Charlotte's Beauty Salon was in an upmarket plaza on Kimathi Street. Her job was to wash, shampoo and plait hair. She loved the job. She loved the wonderful things she could do with hair.

But more than anything else in the world, she wanted to run her own beauty salon. She dreamed about the glamorous pictures of famous actresses she would place on the walls. She did whatever she could to get to know the well-heeled women who visited Charlotte's. She knew they were the wives or mistresses of the city bigwigs.

'You never know when you might need these people,' she whispered to her friend Amina. Amina didn't need to be told. She knew a lot of important and famous people in the city. She told Selina she was close to quitting her job and setting up her own salon. She had cultivated contacts with clients who had introduced her to what she called VIPs, very important people. She smiled mysteriously when Selina asked what these VIPs did for her.

For several weeks, Selina begged Amina to let her in on her secret. All Amina could say was that there were many men out there who were only too happy to help a girl in need.

‘How do I meet them?’

‘You might not have time, Selina.’ Amina was single, and unattached. She considered herself free and independent.

‘I may be married,’ replied Selina, with a naughty pout, ‘but I’m not a slave.’ She imagined herself making enough money to buy her own car, something chic like a BMW.

‘If you’re sure, I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Good girl, I’ll buy you lunch today,’ offered Selina. They giggled conspiratorially as they walked into the street to their favorite sausage and chips café.

Otieno started the day by cleaning the car, a task that lasted the better part of two hours. He was like a man possessed, to the point of wiping off imaginary specks of dust, and then leaning back to see if any marks were discernible on the bodywork. He was ready to drive Mzee away to the office by eight. He and his wife lived in Kawangware village, only a few miles away from Mzee’s mansion on Ngong Road. It took him ten minutes to cycle there.

The guard smiled and greeted him, calling him the magician, for pulling off the incredible trick of coming into the expansive compound in a battered Black Mamba bicycle and driving off minutes later in a brand new Merc.

As Mzee walked out of the door of his palatial home and into the waiting car, Otieno glanced up at the bedroom window and saw the little wave with the index finger beckoning. Mama’s coded message. *Hurry back!* Sometimes Mzee needed him all day. So, after dropping him off at the office in Westlands, he would wait in the car park, clean the car and wait to be summoned. If he wasn’t needed, he would drive the eight kilometres back to the residence and wait there. He used to while the hours away chatting with the other servants, waiting for the call from Mzee’s office.

He liked showing off the new Motorola cell phone Mzee had recently provided him. Gone were the days when Mzee could only reach him by giving instructions in advance. In those days gone by, appointments were sacrosanct. Now, you never knew when you were needed where. Plans could change at a moment’s notice.

As he drove Mzee in the early morning traffic, he tried not to glance into the rear-view mirror. He couldn’t face Mzee. The traffic was a little heavy going down to the city on Ngong Road, but it got lighter heading out of town up Waiyaki Way. Mzee preferred to take that route because it gave him the impression he was going into the city although they actually just skirted round it on Uhuru Highway. The alternative was to drive through the posh residential areas like Kileleshwa. That was the way Otieno drove when he went back to the house to meet Mama.

It had been going on for two months. His affair with Mama. When it first started, it was so unreal he thought he was dreaming. Whenever he took the Merc back, he would ask her if she needed to be driven anywhere. She would inform him if she had errands to run, or wanted to go shopping. So, he would clean the car again while he waited for her to get ready. John, the domestic driver, was responsible for the Range Rover, which was used for taking the children to school. Madam did not like the Range Rover, so she never asked John to drive her, unless Otieno was held up somewhere looking after Mzee. Otieno couldn't blame her. The Merc was in a class of its own.

One day when he brought the car back after dropping Mzee off at the office, he was informed by one of the servants that he was needed in the house. He had never been invited into the house before. He had, over the years, come to enjoy its opulence second-hand, by listening to the two servants and the cook. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined he would ever step through the imposing mahogany door.

'I am wanted?' He repeated, thinking he had heard wrong.

'Yes,' Auma assured him, 'you had better come into the visitors' chambers.' She led him into a large, airy parlour, with curtains stretching from the ceiling to the floor. 'Leave your shoes here.' Auma opened a wall cabinet, reached out for a pair of sandals which she handed to him and then left him standing there.

He didn't know whether to remain standing or take a seat. The leather sofas looked inviting, but he couldn't bring himself to sit down, in case he damaged something. He looked around the room, aware that it was only a waiting room, though it was bigger than his entire house where he lived with his wife, Selina and four children. He did not dare imagine what the rest of the house must have looked like, or just how big it was.

As he was contemplating the carvings and paintings on the walls, Mama arrived suddenly. He stood to attention almost like a soldier and clasped his hands behind his back. Mama was wearing a translucent gown which did a poor job of obscuring her voluptuous curves. Struggling hard not to stare, Otieno averted his eyes and muttered a greeting.

When she walked up close to shake his hand, he took in her fragrance, which was a mixture of a perfume he would never even have heard of and the natural smell of a woman which seeped through her skin as she slept, and then stayed on her skin, as if to remind anyone who needed reminding that she was a woman. It was raw, natural and infused with the suggestion of closeness which made him want to turn around and run away, back to the more familiar ambience of the Merc. He felt guilty about being aware of something as intimate as the woman's body smell so soon after driving her husband off to work.

'You are here.' She motioned him to a seat.

'Yes, Mama. I have arrived.'

'Have you had breakfast?' Before he could answer, she added: 'Have some tea, anyway, while we talk.' She pressed a buzzer on the table. Presently, Auma

popped her head round the door. Mama instructed her to serve tea for two. Auma suppressed a sardonic smile as she noticed Otieno's wide-open eyes.

'Listen, Otieno. We are changing our travel arrangements from now on.'

He listened attentively, while keeping his gaze on the beige carpet, and nodding occasionally. Auma brought a tray in and poured for Mama and was about to walk away when Mama passed the cup on to Otieno and asked her to pour another one for her. Otieno saw Auma's facial muscles tighten as she said: 'Yes, Mama. Sorry.' As she was leaving, she stepped on his toes. Otieno winced and bit his lower lip. He sensed she could just as easily have poured the hot tea 'accidentally' on his lap, or worse.

'Here's the new arrangement, Otieno,' Mama continued, as soon as Auma was out of earshot. 'After you drop Daddy off, come back and take me to Adam's Arcade. I'm opening a shop there. I'll need to move around a lot, so you may have to stay with me, and pick Daddy up in the evening later, or maybe John can deal with that.' She had been looking him straight in the eye, but then she started to gaze out of the window to the jacaranda trees outside.

'That is alright,' he said. 'That is good.' He felt some sort of response was expected.

'Mmhh. I'll call for you when I'm ready.' She got up to leave, and tightened the robe around her. He too got up, ignoring her entreaty to remain seated.

'Finish your tea, and wait for me here.'

Otieno didn't dare look into her eyes. He stole a quick glance at her retreating figure after breathing in deep to take in her smell as she brushed past him. He was completely flustered and was left feeling foolish, like a naughty schoolboy. He was still standing there, not knowing what to think when Auma waltzed in, with a sneer on her face.

'So now you're the VIP around here?'

Otieno shook his head, waved her away and walked to the window. But Auma sneaked up behind him and asked: 'So, do you want me to fix you breakfast, mister big shot visitor, eh?' Otieno could only laugh. When she realised he was intent on ignoring her completely, Auma walked away, but not before snapping: 'Let us know if your highness is staying for lunch! Just press that thing!'

When Mama returned an hour later, resplendent in a light blue suit and matching headscarf, Otieno felt less threatened by her business-like demeanour and more able to relate to her. He drove her to the premises that were going to serve as her new business. After staying idle for two years following the birth of her third child, she had finally prevailed upon Daddy to allow her to return to work. And this time she wasn't intent on taking any old job. She wanted to run her own business, selling ladies' clothes.

As far as Otieno could tell, the business was doing well. There were always customers to take care of, and Mama talked excitedly about new designs, styles and fashions. Most of these things meant little to him, but he learned to make appreciative noises as he drove her to her numerous appointments. She insisted

on asking for his opinion even when it was clear to her, or so Otieno thought, that he was clueless.

He always tried to sound cheerful and never dared contradict her. He gradually became aware she liked him, and little by little, he discarded his shyness in front of her. She told him things he didn't believe he needed to know, about her husband. She tried every trick in the book to discover what he, Otieno, knew about Daddy's trysts with other women.

Otieno denied everything. How can she possibly expect me to disclose such matters! He merely shook his head and remained mute. It was impossible for him to tell her how Mzee often called him on the cell phone to tell him where to pick up some girl, and where to deliver her. Mzee preferred the quiet motels conveniently located around Westlands, and sometimes Parklands, which was only a five minute drive from his office.

Sometimes, Otieno was simply told where to wait. The girl would have been instructed what car to look out for. To kill the time, Otieno played a guessing game, trying to figure out which approaching woman was heading for his Mercedes. He scanned the neighbourhood on his mirrors and watched as girls walked past. Out of the corner of his eye, he took note of the women who stood by the side of the road, pretending to talk on their cell phone while searching for the appropriate license plate.

Sometimes he was caught quite unawares. He would be watching the front or side and the rear door would open without warning and a smiling face would loom in his rear view mirror. The women invariably wore dark glasses. He never got to see their eyes. Sometimes he saw their high heels, boots, or slit skirts as they wandered up and down the road trying to pick up Mzee's Merc.

'Jambo,' he would offer a polite greeting.

'Twende.' Let's go. A soft reply. And a gentle smile.

The central locking activated, and the engine purring almost inaudibly, Otieno delivered to the designated motel. While the girl made herself at home, Otieno drove rapidly to pick up the boss. It was a well-rehearsed routine. They had done it for years.

There was no way Mama was ever going to find out, certainly not from him. If she wanted to know anything, she could ask her husband herself. Otieno shrugged and kept his eye on the road.

But even this did not prepare him for what she did next.

'Take me to Ongata Rongai,' she told him. 'I have an appointment there but I'm not sure what time exactly. So we can aim on being there all afternoon. I've told Daddy to call John.'

They drove through Kibera and got to Ongata Rongai half an hour later. Mama had taken care of everything. She instructed him to drive to a motel hidden away behind a thicket of acacia and oak trees.

'This is it.' She declared.

He helped her pick up a bag full of samples. She led the way into the motel, and as soon as they got into the lobby, she sent him back to the car to fetch another bag. While he was gone, she paid for the room she had reserved in advance on the phone that morning.

‘We’ll wait here.’

Otieno sat in the armchair, and observed as Mama emptied the two bags on the bed, talking to herself the whole time. The idea of getting a motel room to show a prospective customer samples seemed rather strange. Why couldn’t they meet in the lobby, or at the customer’s place of work?

‘Do you want a drink?’

‘A soda. Thank you, Mama.’

She reached into her handbag and extracted a two hundred shilling note.

‘Go to the bar and get two beers, Otieno.’ It was an order.

Mama spoke for the next half hour, mostly about Daddy. Otieno listened patiently. Then she sent him to the bar to get a bottle of wine. He had never tasted wine before. He got drunk quickly. Meanwhile Mama was talking about her business. She asked him if he wanted anything for his wife. He didn’t know what to think, and he was certain he couldn’t afford anything she sold. So he lied that his wife didn’t care too much about clothes.

‘Oh, come on,’ she cajoled. ‘Every woman loves beautiful clothes.’ She laughed joyously, and, picking up a bra, asked him what her size was.

He laughed to hide his embarrassment. He had no idea. He told her that as an African man he didn’t involve himself in such women’s things. His wife would think him strange if he took an interest in her underwear.

She laughed again and tossed the bra at him.

‘You’re so traditional, Otieno. Men know about such things nowadays, you know? Times have changed!’

‘For us ordinary people, nothing changes,’ he informed her.

He glanced at his watch. It was 3pm. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

‘There’s no signal here,’ she said. ‘You can forget about the phone.’

He felt a shudder of unease go down his spine when he realised his boss wouldn’t be able to reach him. What would Mzee think?

‘How about stockings?’ Mama asked, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Stockings?’

‘For your wife.’

‘Oh, I see. I don’t ... I don’t know, Mama.’ He shook his head and looked away.

Then he remembered his wife talking about fishnet stockings. Her father was a fisherman back in Homa Bay.

‘I saw stockings that look like fishnets,’ she had informed him one evening.

‘Why are you interested?’ He demanded. ‘You don’t even like stockings.’

‘You’re so foolish,’ she had teased him. ‘You don’t even know what I like!’ He smiled to himself when he remembered that conversation.

‘Ah, I see you’re smiling,’ said Mama. ‘I bet your wife likes stockings. Select a pair. I’ll give it to her.’

Shyly, he searched through her samples and selected a pair of black fishnet stockings.

‘I’ll try them on for you,’ said Mama.

Otieno stared at her, open-mouthed, as she got up from the bed, peeled off the brown pair she was wearing and proceeded to wear the pair he had selected for Selina.

God, she’s shameless! Otieno gripped his glass of wine tightly and watched horrified as Mama lifted her skirt and showed off her long, slender legs. Then she danced, languidly, and seductively, with her eyes closed, like someone lost in a fantasy. Otieno felt an inexplicable force take over his being. The force, which he was powerless to resist, gave his previously immobile frame the energy to rise and walk over to the dancing woman. He took her in his arms and together they danced, she with her eyes shut, and he, with his eyes tightly focused on her face.

They danced for ten minutes, without music.

Later as he drove her back home, he replayed the events of the afternoon in his mind. But try as he might, he could not recall the precise moment when the slow dance turned into a romp in bed. All he could remember was that suddenly they were both naked, and although there was no music in the single room, an incomprehensible sense of musicality appeared to have consumed their two bodies. He vividly remembered the moment when she stopped kissing him, reached for her handbag and extracted a packet of condoms.

He had never seen a woman do that before. The embarrassment he thought he had set aside overwhelmed him once more. This time totally. He struggled hard to overcome the sense of guilt that prevented him from rising to the occasion. Mama was well aware of his sense of unease and less than passionate response to the fire that burned in her. But she knew how to light up his fire.

He wondered what Mzee was doing at that very moment. Would he have sent John to pick up a girl for him? Was John ever privy to this quiet arrangement or was he, Otieno, the chosen one? He had always envied Mzee, the boss, he of the unlimited amounts of money and the capacity to obtain any woman he desired. Mzee usually gave him a generous tip on those occasions, as though to buy his silence and loyalty.

Yet here he was taking that which belonged to his benevolent boss. The image of Mzee would not leave him even as he succumbed to Mama’s wild passion. She was like a lioness on the savannah, anxious to devour a helpless gazelle. Otieno cursed himself for likening himself to a humble, innocent gazelle. Deep in his heart he knew he was more like a hyena, betraying his boss the lion.

He wanted to ask Mama whether her customer was coming at all. But Mama seemed to have completely forgotten about it. Perhaps there was no customer at all. Otieno shivered involuntarily as he realised he was probably the unwitting customer. He couldn't bear to look at Mama. He heard her snore softly as she sat beside him in the luxurious Merc.

The pair of black fishnet stockings in his jacket pocket felt like an oily smudge on the gleaming surface of his beloved Merc. He had put it back neatly in its tiny plastic wrapper, hoping Mama's smell no longer lingered on it. Selina would love it. She had spoken longingly about fishnet stockings but hadn't found any she liked and could afford.

\*\*\*\*\*

Selina prevailed upon her friend Amina to allow her to meet some of her friends in high places who could help her on her way to her own beauty parlour. They made a few phone calls and a friend of a friend agreed to help.

For Otieno, the call from Mzee was just a regular call. *Wait outside that new cybercafe on Banda Street, between the bank and that curio shop. 3pm on the dot.* He was there at 2.50, ever the reliable, punctual driver. The man who always delivered, and asked no questions.

He gave up searching around him on the mirrors. There were too many people walking by. He couldn't keep track of them. He saw the low skirt first. The shape of a woman turned away from the crowds on the pavement and reached for the door. Instinctively, he released the central locking and she eased herself in. Back left.

He tried not to peer into the rear-view mirror. There was never any need. He always felt like an intruder. He only murmured a laconic greeting. *Jambo.* As he reached across the glove compartment to pick up a CD, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, what looked like a lattice on the legs that stretched out just behind him. Before he could turn his head to see her face, he heard a gasp of horror escape her lips.

And then he saw the lattice more clearly. It was black fishnet stockings. He felt a plaintive voice tear through his troubled mind: *you won't even know I'm there!*