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# **Is Mavis a housekeeper? No, she's a domestic worker. Actually, she's a helper, but certainly not a maid!**

'I always clean before the cleaning lady comes.  
If not, when I come home, I can't find anything.  
Cleaning ladies are always hiding things you leave out.'  
– Celia Cruz

Have you ever got so lost in your car that you have to turn the music down so that you can 'concentrate'? The distraction of Katy Perry singing 'Teenage Dream' while you're trying not to end up in Tzaneen is too much to handle. Why exactly we think we'll find our bearings when the volume is turned down is one of the most interesting things about human beings. But getting lost or losing anything makes us act crazy. I've heard of people who've searched for their cars in their pockets after they've arrived at a parking bay to find their vehicle missing. I mention this because I've often acted similarly when I cannot find an item of clothing that has seemingly been swallowed by my wardrobe. This usually occurs after my 'helper' has been to my house.

Those of you who have someone who cleans your house will know what I'm talking about: you're late for a meeting, there's a particular shirt that you want to wear that day, but you can't seem to find it. At first, you're calm. You're sure it's not dirty, because the last time you wore that white shirt, you distinctly remember how you got a blotch of tomato

sauce from your pasta lunch on it and how bummed you were having to walk around with a stain on your shirt the whole day. Your cleaning lady was at your house three days later, so you're very sure that shirt should be hanging in the wardrobe somewhere.

So you continue to search. Hanger upon hanger you look. You begin to notice how some hangers have four items hung over them, while others are empty, lonely, without any clothes on them. Now irritated, you yank those clothes from one hanger and put them on another in an attempt to arrange everything in an orderly fashion. By now you're swearing and having a pretend conversation with your maid: 'But Mavis, why would you hang a skirt, vest, dress and jacket in the same place? Look now, the clothes are creased!' You're starting to wonder why something so obvious to you isn't as clear to her. Next time you'll tell her about this, but for now, you're late and topless, still searching for that shirt.

Much like driving over that bridge in Cape Town that stops in mid-air, you have just spent ten minutes searching for a white shirt and have ended up nowhere. Now you're starting to doubt yourself. Maybe the shirt *is* dirty? So you check the laundry basket just in case you're wrong. Nothing. At this point you're nearing the end of your tether. You go back to the wardrobe, and this time you decide the only way around this is to remove clothes in sections so you can look more thoroughly. You're going to find this shirt *even if it kills you*.

Shaking your head and muttering expletives under your breath, you throw some of the clothes on the bed and turn once more, begrudgingly, to the cupboard. One more time for the people, you say to yourself. After this you'll give up if you don't find it. You claw through the clothes again and, finally, you find the shirt buried under a winter jacket and a summer dress. But now you're late. Instead of feeling relief, you're anxious and irritated. You leave the discarded clothes on the bed; you'll deal with them when you get back. Arriving at your meeting flustered, you recount the tale of the hunt for the white shirt ...

**'Dude, I'm so sorry I'm late. My maid hid my favourite white shirt so deep in the wardrobe that it took me fifteen minutes to find it'**

'Did you say "maid"?'

**‘Ja, so what? Didn’t you hear what I just said?’**

‘Dude, don’t you know, that’s not a good word, hey? They’re called helpers now’

**‘What’s the difference between a maid and a helper?’**

‘I can’t tell you, bruh, but all I know is, maid is not politically correct’

So let’s talk frankly about why ‘maid’ has become a swear word in the South African vocabulary. Black people, brace yourselves for impact. According to the dictionary, a maid is defined as *a female domestic servant*. Depending on where you are in the world, maids can look different. In America, for instance, generally this will be a lady from, say, Mexico (Donald Trump and Kelly Osbourne would agree here, even though this is a gross and unjust generalisation); in France, this person could be from Eastern Europe and, in Africa, this could be a woman from, say, Diepsloot (or Grassy Park, depending on where you live).

Nowhere in the dictionary does the word ‘maid’ refer to a race of people. But the way I see it, about ten years into our democracy, black South Africans who had begun climbing the social and financial ladders started feeling guilty about having ‘maids’. (Yes, white people, you’re no longer the only ones suffering from middle-class guilt.) The extent of our middle-class guilt as black people is so deep that many of us would rather spend hours sitting idly at Exclusive Books than be in the house when the cleaning lady is there. We find it too embarrassing to be lounging around while they work.

‘It’s like watching my aunt clean and I’m not helping. It makes me feel sooo bad,’ we tell our friends. Only the truly emancipated among us will simply lift our feet and let the housekeeper clean around us while we lounge about watching daytime television. If you’re like me, however, then you try to prove that you were raised well and you do this by tidying up just before your housekeeper comes.

It’s only recently that I realised how dumb it is for me to employ someone to clean my house but feel so guilty that my house is dirty that I tidy up. What’s the point? But that’s black middle-class guilt for you – it makes us want to cling onto anything that makes us feel more ‘black’, no matter how illogical. I can tell you that many black people in this

country – especially those who feel they are slowly losing their mother tongue and customs – are holding onto anything that makes them feel less awkward about the fact that they’re now walking their dogs at Zoo Lake on Saturday afternoons or sipping wine in Stellenbosch on holidays.

You see, back in the day when the working class headed to the suburbs to work (before the Rainbow Nation con – but more on that later), people in the townships, particularly in Soweto, called the suburbs *emakhishini*. The literal translation is ‘kitchens’, but in the figurative sense it was an allusion to the fact that the kitchens in the suburbs were so big that they were the equivalent of a house in the township.

This was fine when it was an obvious ‘us-against-them’ situation. But then the Sibekos, Mokoenas and Khumalos moved into Parkhurst and Waterkloof and other nice, leafy suburbs in SA, and suddenly the ‘us’ referred to a class of people instead of a race group. The idea that we were the same as the Weinstains and Van der Merwes freaked us out. When you’re enjoying the same lifestyle as the people who once oppressed your people, it doesn’t feel so lekker. Black people envy but often struggle with affluence. It’s like having champagne and caviar with a one-legged, blind beggar standing next to you asking for money. Because of the trauma caused by the systematic degradation of our people, which basically stripped us of our humanity, it is hard for some black people to now admit to being upper class. This is why we shy away from speaking about money or acknowledging that we even have it. I’ll say this much: apart from a few black folks who suffer from an acute case of *nouveau riche*, we are not comfortable with wealth and affluence. I have friends I’ve known for years whose houses I’ve never visited because they’re worried that people will see exactly how privileged they are.

Whether you’re a business owner who was raised by the white family who employed your mother or you’re a secretary whose mom cleaned houses to put you through school, the reality of being raised by someone who sweated and most likely got ridiculed so you could get an education is a real thing to most black people in this country. I reckon this is why we had to find a word that was more palatable to us. It’s better to say someone is ‘helping’ you clean and maintain your house than calling them a maid.

If we trace our family histories, I'm willing to bet that we all have at least one family member who cleaned houses or worked emakhishini. (That is if it's not a reality right now.) It's a sore point for us.

I understand why we are sensitive to labelling – when you are labelled and called derogatory names by other races for centuries, you become acutely aware of what a word can do to the psyche of a human being. A single word can define the way people look at themselves. A word – used effectively – can make the proudest man slouch with defeat or ball up his fist to throw a right hook.

From America to South Africa, black people have always had to deal with some kind of racial slur being thrown at them. So I get it: we're sensitive about labels. Yet I know I'm going to upset my people by proposing that we stop owning words that have nothing to do with our quality as human beings. Let me say it plainly: black people need to stop giving so much power to words that don't relate to them. I'll give you an example: when a man greets me and I don't answer back and he then calls me a bitch, I keep moving, because 1) I know I'm not a bitch; 2) he doesn't know me.

People will continue to name-call until we switch the frequency. Without an audience, even the biggest bullies lose interest in their victims; it's hard to fight with someone who's not interested. When an estate agent from KZN named Penny Sparrow decided to start 2016 by calling black people monkeys on Facebook, I posted her incredibly offensive remarks on Instagram. Yet a few of my followers were completely unbothered. They said that because they don't see themselves that way, what she said didn't affect them. Although I was incensed by Sparrow's comments, I understood their point.

That's not to say people like Penny Sparrow should be allowed to spew their mindless drivel freely, of course. It's more about understanding that people like her are intellectually bankrupt – they can't help themselves. All non-racist people should correct them, yes, but as black people we should rather focus our energy on gaining economic equality. Racism can be a distraction from what truly needs to be done. As Toni Morrison once said: 'The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining,

over and over again, your reason for being ... Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art so you dredge that up ... None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.'

We need to look at racist people the same way in which we regard stupid people. If you've ever encountered a truly stupid person, in the true sense of ignorance, you never take anything they say seriously; you're always half listening and can be facetious without them even getting it. Racists are stupid. That is a fact. Rejecting labels and derogatory terms is taking back our power. But I'm proposing too much too soon, right? Forgive me. I guess it's easier to find a less emotionally explosive word for something already so incredibly awkward for you – being a 'madam'.

I'll say it again: I understand. I guess this is one of the reasons black people are opposed to having their helpers wear uniforms – we think it's degrading. We didn't ask anyone else what they thought, particularly not the helpers themselves – our guilt was enough of an assertion. Let's face it, white people didn't have issues calling their domestic workers 'maids' until we told them it was wrong. And because some of them – obviously not the evolved folks in Orania – wanted to show us that they feel really, *really* bad about 'what happened', they joined us.

'Maid', much like 'garden boy' – undoubtedly one of the most distasteful, racist references in this country – was a term used freely pre-1994. It's clear to me that once we as black people had dealt with our own feelings of guilt and shame around our affluence, all we had to do was guilt-trip the white liberals – who probably wanted to show Madiba and the rest of the world that they wanted to be a part of the Rainbow Nation – into not using 'maid'.

But the truth is, 'maid' is a word that describes what someone *does* – it's not derogatory in and of itself. In fact, one of the things I love about going to Cape Town is how some white people there don't give a fuck about being politically correct. A maid is a maid is a maid over there. Helper for what? For whom?

White South Africans who live in Cape Town fascinate me. I'm not talking about the Joburgers who've moved there for work or love, I'm talking about people who went to Rondebosch Boys High and spent

weekends in flea markets in Muizenberg – people who really call that city home. They are not easily guilt-tripped like the wimpy white people in Joburg.

You see, in Joburg, the middle and upper class is mostly divided by things, not necessarily by race: SUVs vs. sedans, holidays in Durban vs. vacationing in Italy. Joburg was built on money, and that's what drives this great African metropolis – cash. White money is just as good as black money in my city. Back in the 1800s, it was diamonds and gold, now it is tenders and acquisitions; either way, in Joburg it's about how deep your pockets are. You may be white, you may be coloured, but if your pockets are deep, then Jozi will roll out the red carpet for you and scatter roses as you walk to your table.

In Cape Town, things are a little different. Race is a stronger currency there. Oh, please, don't be sensitive, you know I'm right – go to any restaurant right now in Camps Bay and check how many black people are dining there. If there's more than five, I'm willing to bet they're from Joburg. No really, try me. (I won't go into the mechanics of why black Capetonians don't enjoy their city the way their white counterparts do; there aren't enough pages in this book for that.) In the Mother City you can say 'maid' without being side-eyed. In Joburg, however, your Westcliff neighbour, who drives the same Discovery Land Rover as you and drops off their child at Red Hill, will shoot you an icy-cold look should you mention you have a 'maid'. In fact, I've seen white people in Joburg be visibly appalled when a black person calls their housekeeper by that word.

I love the fact that we're sensitive to each other's feelings and that we're using our guilt to make us more cognisant of how we treat each other. However, I'm wary of *too* much sensitivity. It can be false. What I'm about to say might have me stripped of my black membership, but truly, I see nothing wrong with calling the woman who cleans my house a maid. Admittedly, I'm too chickenshit to call her that myself, but I certainly won't judge you if you do. In the same way that I don't judge people who don't tip car guards.



Allow me to take a short detour here and talk about car guards for a second ...

I consider myself a levelheaded, kind person, but let me tell you, nothing drives me up the wall like the damn car guards who are all over SA. Where the bloody hell did they come from? Who asked for them? It's as if, in 1999, a bunch of unemployed guys got together and decided that the best way to intimidate motorists into giving them money was to act like they were trying to 'help' us.

I want to assure you, dear reader, that I will not be swayed when it comes to this particular subject, so don't even try. I feel strongly that car guards are mostly a nuisance in our society. How is it logical that someone who doesn't have a driver's licence, or a car for that matter, should be telling *me*, the driver, how to park?

No seriously, hear me out here. It's a Saturday and you're running around doing errands. You drive to the neighbourhood shopping centre, knowing you're not going to be there for a long time, and decide to use the car park that's closest to the entrance you want. You see an open space and indicate to turn into it. Then, out of nowhere, a guy wearing one of those neon jerseys rushes towards your car and points at the spot. He didn't find the spot for you, but oh no, by virtue of *pointing* at the parking spot, you're obliged to tip him when you leave. What the fuck for? And what if you're running errands all day – are you supposed to tip every car guard?

Not me, baby. The ones that really get on my nerves, though, are the car guards who make sure to greet you *loudly* when you get out of your car, as if to shame you in front of others into tipping them. 'HELLO, MY SISTER!' they'll shout. In my mind, I'm like, 'You can "hello, my sister" all you want, buddy, you're not getting a cent from *me*.' If you help me with my bags, find me a parking spot or offer to wash my car – even when it's clean – *then* I might consider tipping you. My understanding is that a tip is for services rendered. If all you did was greet me enthusiastically, then I'm afraid you don't qualify.

This is why I always do my Dr Evil laugh when I'm feeling benevolent on the day and reach for my purse but the car guard ignores me and instead lavishes all his attention on the family driving an E-class,

only for them to leave him reeling in the fat fumes of their German precision. Serves him right! Don't get me wrong, I'm all for people trying to make a living, but to intimidate me by being aggressive will not work. I come from one of the toughest neighbourhoods in this country – I know that should a carjacker point some steel at the car guard, he will not fight for my car because I'm going to give him a five-rand tip. He'll simply stay out of the robber's way and, when I return, tell me that he didn't see a thing.

Help me with my groceries, take the empty trolley and store it safely, and I'm happy to tip you. But please, *do* something. Anything. Don't be entitled. Otherwise, you can respectfully go to hell. But I digress. Where was I? Oh yes, maids ... Sorry, I mean 'helpers'.



Now I know that many of my white friends feel that they are lost in translation with their housekeepers because of the obvious language barrier. But I'm here to tell you that sometimes even black people don't understand their housekeepers. So many times I've switched to Zulu in an effort to put my point across clearly, only to be met by a blank stare. I'm starting to suspect that perhaps our 'helpers' do this deliberately in order to make themselves appear less intelligent, therefore making us feel elitist for talking down at them.

Yet language is not the only problem we face in this complicated relationship. I'm amazed at how my housekeeper can work for me for years and every time she cleans my house, she arranges the ornaments and cushions the way *she* wants to. Never mind that every single time I come home, I change everything back to the way it was before. Oh no, week after week, she changes and moves things according to *her* mood. It's as if she's trying to tell me that I'm doing it wrong.

We also can't forget those housekeepers who like our stuff so much, they have to steal it. One woman who worked for me stole my boyfriend's cologne. When he noticed it was missing, he told me and I immediately called to ask my housekeeper where it was. She said the bottle broke while she was cleaning, and yet there was not a single whiff of Gucci

Guilty in the air. I had to promptly let her ass go. My friend Damon had been keeping some precious bottles of Scotch that his mom had given him before she died. Less than six months later, his housekeeper had polished off more than half the bottles. He had not had a single sip. Maybe there's an assumption that we won't miss certain things because we have 'too' much, but you never know what something means to someone.

Living in South Africa has made me vigilant, because at first it's a perfume and the next thing you know your entire house is being ransacked. No thanks. I'd rather deal with a dirty house for a couple of weeks than an empty one. My ultimate, though, are those housekeepers who have what Americans call 'sass', as in, they talk back, or freely dish out personal comments. You come home with a tub of ice cream and she's looking at you judgmentally: 'Ice cream! Tjo! No wonder your jeans don't fit anymore!'

It's at those times that many of us are tempted to remind the person that they're the help. I've realised that when it comes to people who work for you – be it in an office or at your house – maintaining a polite distance is wise. If you choose to be friends, trust me, you will find yourself being interrogated about your vibrator or porn stash. Heed my advice.

But no matter how elitist and rude we may be about our helpers, there is one time of the year that humbles us all and reminds us why we need these women. These women who've carried future world leaders on their backs while their own children suffered nights without them. These women who allow us working executives to be at PTA meetings because they are at home, making sure our children are clean and tucked into bed – these women are not just housekeepers, they are superheroes. No time of year reminds us of that more than the festive season – when they leave the four walls of their tiny cottages to go be with their children and families for a precious two or three weeks.

During that time, us middle-class kugels are left to fend for ourselves. Oh, the horror! You laugh, but if you haven't done your own washing, ironing or cleaning in years (if ever) and you're faced with doing it yourself, it can really break your spirit. Especially in December, when we're all feeling rich and festive, inviting people over for braais, and buying everything from the latest iPad to a flat-screen TV. By the time January 2nd comes around, the boxes from our December purchases have gathered

around the bin like a congregation does at church, the laundry basket has started to overflow and an indecipherable smell has started to permeate the bathroom.

The merriment is gone, the kids are driving you crazy and your house is starting to look like it belongs in an episode of *Hoarders*. This is when you realise just how important your housekeeper is. So much so that, on the day before she arrives, you bake her favourite koekies and even hug her when she walks in the door, because you know your life would be a shambles without her. Without nannies and housekeepers, we would see a lot of female executives arriving at work in their pyjamas because they'd be so *deurmekaar*.

And so this chapter is dedicated to these hardworking women of South Africa. The ones you're not going to see on the cover of a magazine talking about the millions they've made, who won't be celebrated on TV shows for having done great work for feminism, and who will certainly not have streets and buildings named after them.

Women like me – from single mothers to wives – have a lot to thank them for. We owe these superheroes more than just a hug and a fair salary. We owe them our children, our sanity and our red-soled shoes. But, most importantly, we owe our helpers/maids/housekeepers our lives. For to be loyal and to continue doing a job that is often regarded as the lowest of the low, and to do so with dignity, excellence and a sense of love, is nothing short of godly.

On behalf of all working women in South Africa, I salute you!

