



## To be blank ... or not to be blank? That is the question.

I am relaxing in *my* rather grand café – the place I like to call *second office* in jocular fashion – on the outskirts of Mombasa. I shouldn't really use the term relaxing, because *second office* is meant to convey the definite impression that I actually come here to work, which on occasions I do ... like now!

I learnt this trick of transforming an image of leisure into one of perceived work - with this flippant description that implies some sort of routine - from a died-in-the-wool journalist friend. He organizes media websites and has shown me copies of numerous, co-authored travel books, so I am left with the distinct impression that he qualifies as a real journalist; unlike me, who has turned to writing on my own behalf, after spending a lifetime editing submissions, pamphlets, newsletters, and every other scripted thing that qualified as work-text, for other people. So, I thought, '*I like that*'. *For those who think I'm just here to have a good time, I'll copy the idea and tell them it's my second office!*'

But at this particular moment in time I cannot disguise the matter; I am indeed extremely relaxed, following a lengthy weekend and the alluring promise of my favoured '*Shekarato and cheese stick*', on Monday morning at the grand café – my off-menu choice (or perhaps I should rephrase that to office-menu choice) as a regular customer - which now I am pleased to say, sits here in front of me. Delicious food in a sumptuous venue: not, I hasten to add, how many in *The West* might imagine life in Africa.

My *second office* has recently been renovated, from just large to grand, roaming out to a second servery-bar and new smoking terrace, where you can puff away whilst inhaling the passing exhaust fumes, to boot. Back inside the indoor expanse - where I have my usual laptop and reading space - the dozen or so fans rotate silently beneath a lofty ceiling, perhaps twenty feet above the tastefully designed ceramic floor.

The décor, I have to say is very much in keeping with grand cafes and their underlying purpose, which (apart from making oodles of money for the owner) must be to offer relaxation, in the extreme, for its discerning customers. That's not to make the mistake of describing the wide-ranging ball-pool of musak, broadcast over quite fitting *BOSE* speakers, in the same way. This can vary from the wonderfully laid-back jazz of *Norah Jones* or *Diana Krall* to highly alarming stuff you might expect while partying along at an outdoor rock concert or whooping it up for an evangelical church service. *AC/DC* strutting sounds, or loud gospel choruses, do *not* gel with grand cafes. I even went to the expense of buying large, ear-covering headphones as a last resort, in case I happened to strike the rough side of the music loop.

As it turned out, justifying the cost was shared by another frequent anomaly (if there can be such a thing) of ear-bashing voices booming from the next-door table. I sometimes shrink in trepidation when a young male approaches the adjoining spot with his cellphone in hand, because from cyclical experience, I know full well he will soon be joined by one or two clones who will then start bellowing at each other, or he will perform the equivalent one-sided act, using his own phone. The same does not often apply to the female set, whom I find tend to be much more subdued. Maybe I am just an intolerant geriatric, but perhaps not, because this line is backed up by my very real (and much younger) journalist friend, who trawls the best cafes in Nairobi and vows he has the same problem. He also carries a similar *last resort* in his backpack, just in case.

So, to the point. While sipping my *Shekarato* and listening to mellow and much-approved sounds from *Nat King Cole*, I happened to glance up to the higher wall space – three enormous, blank, magnolia-brushed squares – wondering if the owner (or perhaps his in-or-out-of-house décor expert) has really thought this through. The lower

space was fantastic: gaslight-fashion electric light balls; antique looking, battery driven clocks; ten-foot tall tropical plants (some almost undiscernibly plastic), along with marble staircase and stupendous pink and white (plastic) flower-wall, leading to the toilets. It was all very much in-keeping .... and relaxing. But that upper, vacant wall space? That was something else! It played on my mind.

It was a philosophical question, as well as a market-focused query. Is it better to leave the blank space as it is: sparse and devoid of feeling ... except sparseness! Magnolia I have always known as real estate paint: cheap, neutral and designed to sell a house; but in a café setting could it be that such blankness gives the clientele time to sit back and conjugate, in the same way: to focus without clutter? Or would it be better to fill those upper spaces with more of the same intriguing décor from below, and so inspire the *up-looker* towards a higher plane of thought, the results of which could be either stored internally or emitted (along with those noxious carbon gases and corona viruses we hear all about) to share with a friend? And, perhaps more importantly – from the owner’s point of view – to result in the buying of more delicious delights, thus encouraging further contemplation, as is now the case: “Could I have another *Shekarato* please?”

My own meditative mood then began to wander, away from the spaces above - though still with them very much in the back of my mind - to the choice of genre that might be able to improve on the void that was currently in situ. Perhaps images of inspirational architecture from foreign lands: a burnt orange *Taj Mahal* caught in the setting sun, or *Sydney Harbour Bridge* celebrated amidst an extravaganza of pyrotechnics? But then I mused, that could reduce the whole affair to not-so-much a grand café, as a grand travel agent’s office. What about renowned actors, or musicians, or sporting types? Maybe too many to choose from, and those chosen might inflame argument, because of all those not chosen. Perhaps a blank space was a smart idea after all.

Then mulling across potential categories, I hit on the answer: something that could fill those upper vaults, being – like the almost undiscernibly plastic palm trees down below - not too far away from authentic, while at the same time not modern enough to initiate ill-

feeling amongst friends. The answer had to be art! Those cavernous ten square-metre spaces required replicas of renowned artworks, enlarged to fill their emptiness.

I could visualize it being invigorating; something to make my journey on Monday mornings even more tinged with anticipation. It could really make my day: sipping that ice-cold *Shekarato*, while being carried away on the melodic strains of *Oscar Peterson*; able to lean back and look up to the splendour of renowned works from my favoured impressionists and post-impressionists: *Van Gogh's Starry Night*, *Monet's Waterlilies*, *Renoir's Woman with a Parasol*, *Picasso's Don Quixote*. In my mind's eye I could picture them all, up there now.

But on second thoughts perhaps not Picasso: that might cause more disagreement - both intra and inter-table - with me diving for headphones, surrounded by even louder-than-normal voices booming forth from tables around, unconsciously drowning out the smooth side of the musak loop, and people scrambling to compete for the marbled stairs, seeking refuge in the toilets up above!

And then again, I begin to think, *Starry Night* might also instigate a fair degree of shouting and screaming around traumatic topics, such as *Meniere's Disease*, mental health and *Mike Tyson* ...even in the end extending to that very much taboo subject here in Kenya: *homosexuality*? Maybe, blank is better when all is said and done.

Perhaps I should talk to the owner about it on my next visit. I wonder if he would understand the interconnected nuances of it all?

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