

Men of the South

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| South Africa |

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“I am sorry my brother. I know that you were to get a salary review every six

months when you signed the contract with us. Now, your work has been exceptional but the organisation is not in a position to give you a raise right now, our budget just does not allow it,” the Secretary General of AfriAid, James Congwayo said, giving me the same response I had received from his predecessor Livingstone Stanley. I was AfriAID Regional Manager for the SADC region. The only person in the organisation since Mzi left, who had on my Rolodesk several powerful SADC ministers, influential MPs, knew on first name basis the leaders of the regional national organisations we worked with and yet again I was being told that I could not get a raise.

I wanted to curse but could not. This was not working for me. I had done everything right that those go-getter male magazines said one needed to do before asking for a raise. I set up a meeting for a salary review highlighting the major things I wanted way in advance. I made sure the email requesting a meeting (and the meeting) were both on a Friday (when bosses are said to be more relaxed and therefore feeling more generous). Yet here I was being told that the organisation had no money to give me a raise. Me, with my vast knowledge of regional relations. And yet the Secretary General’s monthly salary was large enough to fund

a few wars in the region?

I had had enough. Perhaps I could transfer my work permit and go and find work elsewhere? There were many organisations willing to pay someone with my expertise a better salary. A friend had told me of a job that he could hook me up with in the Corporate Sector right up my alley. Director of Diversity or something. Had to do with political correctness in the corporate world, relaxed hours, and a large salary with incentives. I tried, “perhaps you would allow me to transfer my work permit and look for a job elsewhere?” I said tentatively. Congwayo looked at me intently his blue eyes seemingly staring straight into my soul. Yes I said blue eyes. His own gaze was harsh enough but add the blue eyes in the dark complexion and when he gazed upon you, you could not help but feel as though you had erred greatly.

For some strange reason ever since he married an Afrikaner woman a few months back, he had started wearing blue contact lenses. He had also started ranting against the system and how the whites exploited our people which was rather rich coming from him if one knew his history. Congwayo, you see, was one of those South Africans with a wonderful ability for reinvention. A former Special Branch man, according to the Human Resources Manager and my colleague Maki, when the winds of change were beginning to blow towards South Africa – way after Harold MacMillan’s speech but before Mandela became president – Congwayo aligned himself well. He started feeding bits of information about his colleagues in the Special Branch to the UDF, ingratiating himself as though he had a Saul-like conversion.

The leadership of the UDF accepted him as an informer for the other side but there were those who still looked at Congwayo with suspicion. Apparently to this day, there are certain neighbourhoods he cannot walk in Soweto without being spat on for having partaken in the deaths and disappearances of many locals. Congwayo eventually got fired from the Special Branch, became a bag-carrier at CODESA, advising the ANC here and there and was later awarded with a position of power post-ANC victory in 1994. Alas, being in the civil service, the position did not have much money but when international aid organisations decided post-apartheid South Africa was the new spot to do business and needed a South African head, Congwayo suddenly realised that he wanted to really make a difference to his people and he became the man taking over from the British Stanley.

He talked a good game, did Congwayo, but I was proving a wee-bit to clever so when I suggested I transfer my work permit elsewhere his eyes dilated before he said in a voice full of disappointment, "After all the resources we put forward so you could come here you want us to transfer your work permit so you can work elsewhere?" He paused meaningfully before continuing, "Are you aware young man, just how many young people in this very country are looking for jobs? Do you have any idea how many of your fellow Zimbabweans with degrees are sleeping at the Central Methodist Church because they have no work permits?" Why did South Africans always do this when someone complained of unfair labour conditions in their country?

I really could not give a hoot at that moment how many of my fellow Zimbabweans were sleeping at the Methodist church or wherever, after all, this was a meeting about MY salary raise and I would have told him this but I could not afford to be disrespectful when I was the one who wanted a favour from him. I shook my head, "No Comrade James." He insisted on being called comrade. I think it made him feel like a benevolent leader. Or made him feel like he was making up for his shady past (his work CV conveniently forgot to mention about his Special Branch days but waxed lyrical about his contribution in the UDF)" "No Comrade James?" he paused as though talking to a three year old, 'Right. Plenty.

The way I hear it, half of your country, qualified or not, is in this country because your damned leader thought he could run the country without white capital. A banana republic is what your country and most of your African countries have become and the monkeys that are your politicians have been siphoning money to offshore accounts for years." Congwayo sometimes overstepped his mark.

He forgot that he was supposed to be politically correct working in the NGO field as he did. Did he also forget that South Africa was an African country? "I am disappointed in you." He said shaking his head again, "I really believed you were out to make a difference when I saw you had been recruited here." I answered seeing the blackmail before he had finished, "But of course sir.

If I am going to make a difference, however, I need to do so on a full stomach. It would be hypocritical of me to go on international platforms and tell everyone to stand up and speak

out against poverty when I am not speaking out against my personal poverty.” Congwayo’s eyes twinkled. He seemed to enjoy my turn of phrase but then he continued as though I had not said anything at all. Or maybe I had not? Maybe it was what I wanted to say? What I would have said? Then why did he smile? “So here it is Mr. Musonza, if you want to leave you can go ahead but you cannot transfer our work permit elsewhere.

Those who are offering you a job will have to get you a work permit as well as pay us for the rest of the contract. Now, are you staying or are you going?” “I am staying comrade,” I said in a whisper. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you?” Congwayo asked seeming to relish my discomfort. “I said I am staying comrade,” I said a little louder. He patted me on the shoulder with a smile that did not quite reach his blue eyes, “You are a good man Musonza. A good man.

May be after the coming six months our donors will see that we have men of your calibre and give us more funding so that our finances will be better and I will bring the possibility of your raise to the board. If that is all...” He said dismissively. I stood up wishing that I was financially well-cushioned to tell him to take his job and shove it. But I had become a slave to this job. If it were just me, I would have survived but my father’s salary which had seen me through one of the best private schools in Harare, now seemed just sufficient to get him to work and back.

The family depended on me to send money for my sister’s tuition (which for some unknown reason was paid in US dollars and constantly had to be topped up every term) and to pay for other essentials like the telephone and DSTV (yes. I just called that essential. Anyone who has had to sit through an hour of ZTV will tell you why).

If Sunu had been getting an income it would have helped but he had decided he wanted to help at the farm – which really meant selling what he could whenever he could get away with it and driving around picking up girls although he had a wife with two children staying at the farm. Add to that my own expenses. Sure, I was not starving. I was renting a two bedroom spacious Killarney flat. I could afford to take myself to a restaurant for dinner every once in a while but add my parents’ expense and mine and I often found there was, as the saying goes, always so much month at the end of the money.

My contract was for four years (I know. Weird. But the first year had been a trial year). Just

a year less than it would have taken me to seek residency. I had been in this country for three years. From the way Congwayo looked at me after I asked for a raise, it was highly unlikely that I was going to get the contract renewed after it lapsed. I was in a quandary. I started thinking of this country that I loved again but that did not want to love me back. I remember how excited I had been when I left Oxford. How I nurtured a dream of coming back to the continent and joining hands with other like-minded Africans to save the continent from the plagues of poverty on an international platform. But ever since I arrived I realised something. In South Africa, an African country, I was just what I had been in England.

An immigrant. To the white South Africans who sat on the board of AfriAID, I was probably filling the quota of the black head count. To black South Africans I was one of them *kwerekweres* because I allegedly took one of their brothers' jobs. I would think without vocalizing, "aren't I a brother too?" Other immigrants had the benefit of escaping in their work or having a salary that they could sufficiently utilize to give themselves little vacations and weekends treats of a glass of single malt, but not me. I no longer had job satisfaction — neither from the love for my job nor from the pay (or was that peanuts?) I earned in salary. I had also become aware of something that I should have known even when I was still studying. It served organisations like AfriAID for Africans to remain in poverty. And even budgets for conferences and conferences calls to talk about poverty had the sort of monies that would have gone far to alleviate some small nations' World Bank debts.

Hate is too soft a word for what I now felt about my job. I wanted to quit but I could not. If I quit, I'd no longer have a valid work permit. People in the developmental field were a dime and dozen in the UK so there was no way I was going back there. The only other place I could go to was Zimbabwe and I could not, would not, go back there. Only a fool would go there while the rest of the country was escaping. There had to be a way that I could stay in my beloved Johannesburg but with a job that gave credit to the academic training I received without reducing me to a yes-man to an annoying sellout of a black man. I loved this country as well as the next person and never asked to be born a Zimbabwean. Why could I not be treated like an equal? Then I had what I thought was a brain wave. I scrolled down my cellphone and dialled her number.

