

The Consultant

It was his first time in Africa. He looked through the window as his plane growled and sank towards the Jomo Kenyatta airport at Nairobi. He was disappointed he couldn't see any elephants or giraffes. He had always wanted to see African animals in the natural home. Michael felt good. Here he was in Africa. And for the first time in his long life he was on an excellent salary too. Nearly three times what he could earn at home. His employers were looking after him. Michael was a foreign aid expert, a consultant. Fancy that, he thought. The taxpayer is paying for me to be here. And there was a five thousand-pound bonus for him when he got home. All paid by the taxpayer in his home country. But, he told himself. I'm a reasonable man. I'll work extra hard. After my time here I'll be able to say - I earned my money, I helped to make Kenya a better place. I love Africa. There was a thump as the plane landed.

It taxied to the terminus. Michael's mind taxied too. He was thinking, I'll be generous with the money. I don't have a wife. She went her way a long time ago. So I'll share my money with the poor, the beggars, the church. And I'll spend some money on food and souvenirs. That helps people too. So many people will benefit from this money. He trundled out of the customs holding his bottle of duty free cognac and smiling benignly at people. He saw his name on a large white card - Mr Michael - Consultant. He smiled and followed the brown girl with the Rastafarian hair. She introduced herself in English but spoke it with an awful accent and worse grammar. Michael thought about helping Kenya and Kenyans, and then, God forbid, his next thought, perhaps he could fuck her too. It didn't matter that he was sixty and she was twenty. She would understand his need. He could smell cheap perfume. Not like the French perfumes his former wife used to wear. He would educate her and teach her the benefits of Chanel and Dior as they lay in bed together. She drove the car through the potholed streets from side to side like a dancer as she avoided the worst holes. Michael noticed that the pedestrians danced too, as they leaped aside from the swerving vehicle. Michael watched a pregnant woman and a baby do a double leap together to the side of the road. He admired their agility.

The car stopped at the traffic lights. There was a tap on the car window. Michael turned and saw his first beggar. What a sight. Crippled, dirty. Michael opened his wallet and reached for some loose coins. Then he changed his mind. He would be generous. He would certainly not humiliate the beggar with a token coin. After all, he was on a good salary and this is foreign aid money. He forgot about the loose change and put a five pound note in the dark hand of the beggar. Michael followed the beggar's movement. Both legs were crippled and his back was bent. He looked more like a bird than a man.

Michael's flat was delightful - except the water stopped and started and the telephone had the same problem. Next day when he got to his new workplace he found that his Manager also started and stopped work when he felt like it. Michael got his first sense of an impending African gloom. His second moment of shock, was when he found the young single woman with the sexy look was in fact married, had four children and went to church twice a day. She was possibly eighteen. His sexual ardour and his view towards work both evaporated. That night as he went home in a taxi he consoled himself by giving more money to beggars. Here he thought is the work of God. It is important to be generous. He remembered the story of St. Francis.

Four weeks later, Michael looked in his diary and re-reads his meandering notes. His consultancy was nearly over. There was no doubt about it. Work was not going well. He felt less and less warmth towards his colleagues. Today was pay-day. He was expecting the small group of men who had borrowed money from him would return some of the many loans. He felt happy he had helped them in their hours of need. But to his surprise, no one came near him to repay even one Kenyan shilling. But everyone was happy. They were celebrating pay-day as if it was a full-time holiday. Michael had thought perhaps they would all work a little harder on a pay-day. That was what he thought they should do, and build their country. Instead they had a great, a party, a Swahili Sherehe. Many men were drunk. Young girls talked loudly to young boys. The secretary in the Principal's office said she couldn't do his photocopying as the machine had broken down. Michael remembered she had said that last pay-day too. He wandered forlornly around the college. What was happening? He watched a cheerful Principal and the secretary take off in a car. By two o'clock on that hot afternoon, he was one of four people left in the building. A woman, a cleaner, was sleeping unashamedly on the front steps of the building. Near her were two men laughing and smiling. Both were drunk. Michael began to realise that many of these people were irresponsible. Drinking. Possibly whoring. Gambling. And they didn't care about paying their debts. Where was their sense of honour?

He took a taxi to town. Oh, he thought, ungrateful people. I helped them in their need. On pay-day they take their money, forget their debts and leave work early. He thought to himself - I must be more selective and only help those who help themselves. It was a sobering thought. He had an even more sober moment. Perhaps they have no intention of re-paying me, ever. The taxi stopped. People from a bar crossed the road, some were singing. They were drunk. It was two thirty in the afternoon. This did nothing to calm Michael's doubts about the work ethics of the black people of Africa.

Michael may not have realised it, but he was making a significant change in his thinking. Gone was the beautiful girl with the Rastafarian hair, who had met him at the airport. She was no longer an attractive individual he wanted to know. She was just one more person from Africa. Michael was on the verge of discovering that universal European truth that

these people were all the same. It was time to treat them, not as individuals, but as Africans. He felt lucky. So many Europeans had come before him, and many of them had lived all their lives before they realised that Africa could never be called home. Michael thought to himself, Africans are different, I've been here less than a month and already I'm getting wiser. The taxi stopped. Michael got out. He paid the driver, held a tip for him in his hand, then quickly put it back in his pocket. It was an important decision. If he had given it to the driver, who knows what might have happened to the money. He might have bought too much beer, got drunk and then driven his dirty smelling taxi over a sleeping beggar or child. Michael felt better as he realised how quickly he was starting to see the real face of Africa.

Monday was a useful day. His last cheque arrived from London. It was huge. Michael realised he could buy a new luxury car for cash when he got home. Tuesday was another day. He relented his previous moral view and gave the taxi driver a tip and also one to a street boy. He was going to give some money to a beggar woman with her dirty looking baby, but when he looked in his purse, all his small change was gone. By the time he deliberated whether to give her a small note she had gone too. He looked at the note. It was not much. Three were needed for a cup of coffee. Oh, well, he murmured to himself, if beggars want money, they will have to beg. He was not going to be controlled by her. The woman had moved quickly to the next customer seeking money. He thought about her and the baby. She certainly didn't keep the baby clean. A bad mother. And she sure had a shifty look. He wondered if she was a prostitute. He was sure he was right. If she was, then good riddance. She was earning money, doing an immoral job. He remembered her face. Young. Sensual. Under her torn shift, he'd seen the shape of her body. The outline of it had made him feel sexually hot, he remembered that she was a prostitute. He held on to his note, knowing he had done the right thing. At the coffee shop he added four other notes and a handful of coins to make up the price of a cup of coffee and a sweet cake.

Time passed. The consultancy was nearly over. Michael made his final visit to the bank. He could hardly believe his good luck. His money was all tax-free. He thought of his friends at home and took out three hundred pounds to buy gifts. There was plenty more in the account. As he left the bank he felt his wallet. It was full. Never has he ever had so much money. Africa had been good to him. Now, he would spend that three hundred dollars in local shops. He would be good to Africa. He went for a final cup of coffee. It tasted better than usual. He took out his wallet and tipped the waiter lavishly, knowing that in eight hours he would be on his way back to London. It was a pity he didn't see the waiter's eyes as he sorted out the money from the bulging wallet. The waiter had never so much money in one purse. He looked towards the door. Three teenage boys were outside. He nodded to them.

Michael never knew what happened in those next few minutes after he left the café. He became aware of being tripped, kicked in the groin and a sharp feeling of pain. A policeman, a middle aged woman and the shoe-shine man picked him up. They apologised for Kenya and street boys. "We too get robbed" said the woman "Poli, Poli - I'm sorry." Michael felt for his wallet. It was gone. It was not easy to go back to the hotel and pack after that. He was aching from the kick and he had no gifts for his friends. The police did nothing. Lazy bastards. As Michael left the hotel in a taxi early next morning he saw a street boy he usually gave money too. He felt hatred and anger towards him. He was of the same breed as those who had cheated him. Dirty, filthy. The boy smiled, expecting to get a few coins. No, thought Michael, why should I be kind to Africa? Starve you bastard, he thought. Starve. And wash yourself too.

At the airport the plane was delayed. Michael walked around the duty-free shop, fingered everything and bought nothing. The woman behind the counter asked he could help. He looked at her. Another Rastafarian hairstyle, he thought. No originality. The first boarding call went. Michael looked once again at the tourist gifts shop. The second call went. He took out his credit card, looked at it then put it back into his pocket. I'll buy my gifts in London, he thought. I'm through with this awful place. He walked through the check-in barrier.

In a few minutes the plane roared along the runway. It rose quickly and was soon over Masai Mara Game Park. Michael was still thinking about the street boys as he heard two children in the opposite seat excitedly talking about the animals they could see. He pulled down the window blind. Michael had no interest in what was out there. It was only Africa.