



## Dreams of Gold

By Wayne Visser

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I pieced together the story of Langa's sojourn in Johannesburg from news that trickled back over a number of years through the highly effective African grapevine. It was a time of discovering new landscapes and reconnecting with old roots, of liberation of the mind and incarceration of the spirit. Let me tell it as it happened:

As the snaking train slithered into Johannesburg, sliding through the crisp, icy morning air, the city was shrouded in brownish-grey smog. Langa caught a misty glimpse of an eroded, yellowing mine dump and the silhouette of the mine's cog-like headgear. He let out a triumphant, muted shout, punching the air victoriously with his fist. As the fog began to melt away before the thawing rays of the sun, he felt the dark clouds in his mind disperse as well, as if a new, brighter day was dawning on his young adult life. Surely, this was the place to make dreams come true!

Langa was met at the station by a distant cousin, Ithumaleng, who had been living in Joburg, or Jozi Town as he called it, working on the mines for five years already. He had promised Langa's concerned parents that he would get their son settled in, help him to find a job and show him the ropes for surviving in the "big city".

Langa was overwhelmed, but still bursting with excitement. At first, his buoyant mood seemed justified. The streets of the city centre bustled with activity. Shop windows were cluttered with a tantalising spoil of brand-new things - things he had only heard about before, or seen third- or fourth hand. The carved stone buildings of the mining houses rose up like bastions to a heritage of wealth. There was an air of prosperity, of growth, of purpose. Not a cloud was in sight in the vaulted blue sky. Everything seemed perfect, in those initial hours of discovery.

But, his mood was soon to sour and his anticipation curdle into disappointment, disbelief, disgust and eventually, anger. Ithu's hostel was dingy, crowded and stank of rancid sweat and dirty clothing. The people were a mixed bag, "like liquorice allsorts" he thought - some territorial and aggressive, some private and introverted, some easy going and friendly. Soon enough, the harsh realities began to hit home.

The job interview Ithu had arranged turned out to be his first taste of his "place in the scheme of things". The mine manager barked questions at him accusingly and kept referring deridingly to "your type". Langa felt psychologically battered by end of it, but was grateful that he got the job nevertheless.





However, nothing could have prepared him for the work itself. Each day, he spent eight exhausting hours crouched in a narrow tunnel hundreds of metres beneath the surface, his ears throbbing with the deafening roar of a pneumatic drill, his throat choked with fine dust, his eyes straining in the dim light, his breath heaving in the hot, humid atmosphere, his body drenched with water spray and filthy sweat, his back aching, his joints grinding and his muscles screaming from brutal exertion in the cramped space.

"You'll get used to it," said Ithu sympathetically. "Soon, you'll be tough as nails!" But it wasn't just the strenuous physical labour that changed Langa's outlook. It was the attitude of his "superiors" at the mine that got him down - the whites he had to call "baas". If they weren't treating him like an incapable, delinquent child, they were cursing and deriding him like some animal, or worse! Of course, there were exceptions, but not many. Even off the job, the police routinely harassed him and his friends when they were out walking in the streets, accusing them of being troublemakers and calling them "scheming *kaffirs* that could not be trusted". He was rapidly discovering his "place", as Ithu had so euphemistically described it - the degrading place of all blacks in a country ruled by a racist white government regime.

Over the next ten years, Langa thought more than once of quitting, of going back to his parents' village. But the shame, the sense of failure, would be unbearable. "In any case", he lamented to himself, "the gold mines are my destiny". Ithu was right when he had said, tapping his temple with a forefinger, "If you're going to survive, you've got to be strong - up here, in your head. Sometimes, keeping quiet is smart. Sometimes, licking the boots of those white *boere* is smart. Not because you're too afraid to fight back. But because you'd rather keep your options open. Because you don't rely on others to tell you that you're worth something. So that you're still there when the opportunity for something better comes along."

So, Langa dug deep within himself and learned to cope with the hardships of being a South African miner in the 1980's. He discovered how to make the most of small freedoms - the camaraderie of his fellow workers, the anaesthetising power of music and dance, the liberating surge of self-determinism on the soccer field, the mustard seed of hope in the Zionist church's beliefs. He knew they were compromises, that he was sacrificing his adolescent vision, but he could not see another way out. Perhaps he was foolish to have expected anything more in the first place? Perhaps he had found his humdrum lot in life and should just be grateful? At least he wasn't stuck in an isolated, backward rural village, like some of his childhood friends. Or out on the streets without a job like so many.

Then Langa met Khabonina and everything changed. Seeing her for the first time at a post-soccer match party, he was instantly struck by her regal looks, her sharp wit and her obvious intelligence. She had large, penetrating eyes, smart, braided hair and a poised, lithe frame. When he was with her, he felt as if he was in the presence of royalty. It didn't take them long to discover their mutual, romantic attraction. She lived with her family in the Soweto township and was studying sociology at the local college. Her mother worked as a char for a wealthy white family in the snobbish suburb of Sandton, while her father worked as a labour union leader in the steel industry in Vereeniging.





At a time when Langa was hitting rock bottom, Khabo helped him to believe in himself again and in the future of the country. "Don't think of yourself only in terms of your job, my darling. You are so much more than that. And don't listen to *their* hollow insults. They don't know you like I do. They don't see how much potential you've got. Things are changing in this country. One day, you'll be able to be anything you want to be. But right now you've got to be part of the change. You've got to find a way to make a difference, without getting yourself fired, jailed or killed. There are other, more subtle ways."

Langa felt inspired again. He knew that he had to do something, to make some contribution to challenging the unjust apartheid system, to channel his anger in a constructive direction. But he could not think what or how. Then, a tragic accident happened on the mine - an underground gas explosion occurred, killing three miners and injuring ten others. Langa was among the injured miners who were trapped in one of the tunnels, knocked unconscious by the blast. He remembered the deafening boom, a blinding flash and a thumping blow to his chest, as he was thrown into a strange, surreal landscape:

*The flash of light turned into a throbbing crimson vortex, radiating waves of searing heat that made him feel like he was suffocating, choking on scorched air. As he gasped for breath, a miniscule fleck of golden light caught his peripheral vision, like an incandescent yellow spark exploding free from the flames of a raging scarlet fire. He focused on the hypnotic light and before his gaze it grew larger and brighter, stabilising as a perfect white-gold orb piercing a shimmering, orange-red dawn sky.*

*Unexpectedly, the glowing sun burst into a great waterfall of luminescent golden liquid. Langa felt himself floating upwards above the scene, released from the stranglehold of the blazing heat, he soaring light and free on a cool blue wind. Like a dam that had just burst its walls, the golden torrent was forging a snake-like path through the shadowy landscape, branching into tributaries, sub-tributaries and multi-fingered deltas.*

*Following the longest of the shining rivers, Langa reached a gigantic stone pyramid, so big that it cleaved the rusty desert horizon in two.*

*Miraculously, he was able to dive through the eroded walls and found himself whirling through a complex warren of tunnels and chambers. When the motion ceased, he was standing before a rectangular, granite coffin. He watched as ceremonial priests removed the lid, revealing another, smaller wooden coffin encased within, in the shape of a man. When they opened the second coffin, he was dazzled by an intricately sculpted sarcophagus, made of solid gold and depicting a resting king, with a serpent coiled around his forehead, a staff held in one hand and a flail in the other.*

*The rapturous vision was abruptly shattered by a horde of angry, fist-waving slaves swarming into the royal tomb and intoning in frightening unison:*

*"Rise and fall! Your era of cruelty is ended!  
Rise and fall! Your hoard of treasury lies undefended!  
Rise and fall! Our quest for power has started!  
Rise and fall: Our inheritance of gold will be imparted!"*





*Clad in simple, white cotton tunics, but with hideous contorted faces framing eyes black with hatred, the seething mass of attackers lashed out at the golden sarcophagus in a frenzy of destruction, wielding the heavy, iron chains that had once bound their hands and feet. When the metallic cacophony died down, all that remained was a powdery, yellowish dust, which blew away and mingled with the desert dunes.*

*As Langa withdrew from the smoking ruins, he noticed that the river of gold was streaked with red.*

When he opened his eyes, Langa saw the blurred outline of a beautiful face. Feeling dazed and confused, he tried to sit up, but a sharp pain shot up his spine and he collapsed back onto the bed. As he lay there, eyes shut, trying to gather his senses, he heard the faint, familiar, soothing voice of Khabo, saying "easy now, my love". A wave of relief and emotional affection temporarily blotted out the pain in his back. When he asked her where he was and what had happened, she explained that he'd been in a bad accident down in the mine, and had been unconscious for five hours. He was now in the mine hospital. A mine official had called her and she had come at once.

Just then the white mine doctor walked in. His blank expression turned to relieved surprise when he saw that Langa was awake. "Well, well," he said, "back in the land of the living I see." Without introducing himself, he began to do a series of diagnostic tests on Langa, checking his eyes, his hearing, his breathing, his reflexes and countless other things. Upon completion, he cheerily proclaimed, "Good. Just a bit of bruising, a few scratches and some temporary hearing loss and slight amnesia. Nothing a bit of R 'n R won't take care of." He then strode out of the treatment room without another word.

Langa was discharged that afternoon from the hospital. Khabo insisted that he stay with her in Soweto while he recovered, since he had been given two weeks off work. It didn't take much to persuade him. Those two weeks were a turning point in his life. Not only did he enjoy the affections of his lovely girlfriend, her family and friends fussed over him as well, sharing freely what little they had in material means and household comforts.

It was only towards the end of the second week after the accident that Langa summoned enough courage to talk about his strange dream. At first, he thought people would laugh at him, or tell him that the dream was just the nonsensical hallucinations of concussion. But he remembered every detail so vividly, and the experience had felt so real, that he knew the dream was somehow important. As soon as he told Khabo, she called her father, Themba, and asked Langa to recount the dramatic images that had played across the screen of his unconscious mind.

Themba was a large, solidly built man, with full, round face and thin black beard dusted with tight, white coils of hair. He listened intently, nodding regularly, as Langa self-consciously retold his dream. When Langa was finished, Themba looked across at Khabo and nodded again. "This is no ordinary dream," he said. "Langa, I am no *sangoma*, but I can see its message as clearly as my own reflection in the crystal pools of my native Transkei homeland." Langa suddenly felt as if he was back in the Initiation Circle, listening to his vision quest being decoded.





"As you have guessed, the dream takes place in the ancient land of Egypt, where civilization once began. Thousands of years ago, while people of the West were still grunting like savages in Europe's caves, Egyptian society had already risen to great heights, inventing writing, making paper and perfume, advancing the science of medicine, cultivating the land and building great temples to the many gods that ruled their lives.

"But once gold was discovered in Nubia, the Egyptian kings became corrupted by material greed and power lust. Soon, thousands of ordinary citizens were placed under the yoke of the ruling class, toiling to amass great wealth and riches which were never shared with the populace; which the royals hoarded instead, to decorate their palaces, temples and tombs. In your dream, the burden of injustice grew too heavy and those enslaved masses rose up against the selfish royalty and used force to liberate themselves from the bonds of tyranny.

Themba's words struck a deep, resonant chord in Langa. He felt a profound respect for Khabo's father, for his insight, for his courage, for his job and for everything he stood for. He had given Langa a new direction, a clue about how he could make a difference. In an instant, Langa's self-image had changed - from miner to soldier. His days of slavery to the white man and his golden shackles were numbered. From now on, he would be a fighter, a proud warrior in the tradition of his ancestors. The enemy was clear. He was signing up for a modern war - against colonialism, against apartheid, against capitalism. His life had meaning once more.



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