

# EVEN THE WEAK

Thabo Mpho Miya (South Africa)



Maybe it's because I am a woman. It may even be because I am black. All I know right now is that, over the past few months, this disciplinary committee has tried hard to tear apart my side of the story so much so that I even began to doubt that it actually happened at all. Before I tell you what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020, I would like to tell you a little bit about myself.

My name is Phelile Mahlalela but my friends call me Pheli. I cannot even remember when or why they started calling me that but I like it. Like all young people, after I completed my higher diploma in tourism and hospitality, the sky was my limit. I knew that I would immediately land myself a job with one of the big five hotels in Cape Town – read Emperor Hotel in Sandton. After my parents passed away, my grandparents took me in and brought me up as their daughter rather than granddaughter and so I wanted them to also enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Well of course without a job, I could not afford a house in the suburbs or one of the highrise buildings so I rented a three-bedroomed 'weatherman shack' in Johannesburg's CBD. I call it that because you could tell by 5 o'clock in the morning just how hot or cold the rest of the day would be by feeling the temperature of the walls. I knew that we would not live there for long. One month turned into the next and the next and the next. I lost control.

One day, I overheard my neighbours discussing about a hotel that was hiring waitresses. One of them mentioned that they knew a waitress who earned R8 000 per month and this was before adding the tips. I knew that this was my chance. I had to get the job.

I went to the nearest internet café and can you imagine that the man charged me a whole R50 for just typing and printing out my CV which was only 2-pages long. Anyway, the R50 was not mine to keep as I had also silently borrowed it from my neighbour while she was deep asleep. And of course I also had to ‘shop’ for some clothes as well.

On the morning of the interview, I woke up very early as I had to wear my new clothes and leave before anyone else woke up. I was a definite sight to behold. But that did not matter. My eyes were set on the job. To cover myself, just in case I met someone from one of the places I had shopped, I wore my grandfather’s long coat. I was ready for the interview.

You may think that I should be ashamed of what I did that day to get here. But I am so unashamed about that day. In fact I always commemorate it with some tasty takeout for my family. That was the last time that I helped myself to something that was not mine. In hindsight, I might have had to continue living that way if I hadn’t gotten this job.

But I don’t have to live that way anymore. This is why I am so surprised to hear that the current manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton has accused me of stealing from one of our clients on 8th June 2020. He even managed to present an affidavit from the client in question who alleges that I stole her cell phone. I might as well have been accused of stealing all her belongings including the

hotel's bed. I was not given a chance to defend myself and within no time, I was disgracefully chased from the hotel. But I am a fighter. There was no way I was taking my grandparents back to the weatherman shack. So I kept calling and I called the boss of my boss. Well call me lucky but she agreed to give me a chance. Maybe it is because she was a woman or maybe because she was also black. But there was a problem...

You see as soon as I went home, the next day, South Africa announced the first COVID-19 case and from there it took a turn for the worse. Johannesburg was a hot spot. I had to be vaccinated before I set foot in the hotel. Well, I am glad for my days living in my weatherman shack. Let us just say that I got the shots – two months apart before I set my foot in the hotel. I even have my vaccination card. I can show it to you if you want.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today is 25th September 2020. I am before the disciplinary committee. I have to explain my side of the story. I cannot mess it up. “Miss Phelile Mahlalela please tell us what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020 in this very hotel,” my boss's boss asks. ‘Of course, it has to be in this hotel,’ I almost say but catch myself just in time. I look at my boss's boss then I look at my boss and I know that one of them will not like what I have to say.

“My dear disciplinary committee,” I begin, “Thank you for giving me an opportunity to talk about the events between the dates you have mentioned. As usual, we have to pick our tips from Mr. Walters here. So this particular Friday when I went to pick up my tip, I was

informed that Mr. Walters had temporarily relocated his office and I had to go and see him at the basement.

“I really needed my tips because I had to make some payment. I found him in this so-called office. It is a small room that is used occasionally by construction workers. Oh I forgot something, one of our clients had given me a cell phone as a gift. I showed it to Mr. Walters as I am required to do by the HR manual. This displeased him immensely.

“My dear lady and gentlemen of this disciplinary committee, there is a part of this story that I had hoped I would not have to tell. As we were arguing on my tips, I saw a bag with a lot of money. I knew that it was money that he had stolen from the hotel. I told him that I would report him to my seniors and that is when Mr Walters said that he would teach me a lesson that I would never forget.

“Lady and gentlemen, I cannot explain what happened without crying. Here is my medical report,” I finished as I handed the report to my boss’s boss.

She read it and passed it on. Mr. Walters did not speak. That is the last I heard from and of him.

\*\*\*\*\*

This is another two months later ...

THABO MPHO MIYA

Internal disciplinary committee  
The Grand Emperor Hotels (Pty) Ltd  
10 Downer street  
Cape Town, WC

November 25, 2020

Phelile Mahlalela  
Food and beverage services conductor  
The Grand Emperor Hotel  
807 Naledi Street  
Sandton, GP

Dear Ms Mahlalela,

We would firstly like to offer you our deepest apologies at what you suffered at the hands of one of our managers. You have truly been brave, in expressing your story. In so doing, you are making our company a safer place for all women, from the highest-ranking ones to others, like you, who keep everything running at our various hotels.

Our initial investigation into a case of theft against you has been an evolving and dynamic one. In it we have had to investigate claims made against you, as well as the counterclaims which you presented to the committee.

Finding the truth has been a difficult and humbling journey for us as the committee. Be that as it may, we also respect the ways in which the work of this disciplinary committee has affected you. We suspended you and stripped you of your livelihood for six months.

This is just one of the many errors which we have made, as the disciplinary committee, that largely disadvantaged you. We have made some decisions which we hope you would accept as a token of our remorse.

- Your suspension at the company has been lifted.
- You will be awarded the full sum of the salaries withheld from you during your suspension.
- Those salaries will be awarded as a lumpsum plus interest at 2% above the rate of inflation.

Your accuser has been fired from the company.

Furthermore, given the fact that his absence creates a vacancy, we are offering you the role of manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton. We wish that you will accept this offer as we have the utmost faith in your ability to serve the guests and employees of the hotel. We look forward to leaving the management and administration of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton in your very capable hands.

Sincerely

*Charlize K. Theunissen*

Chairperson of the Internal Disciplinary Committee