



LUNCH AMONG LEKOWAS

A. S. Compton

My own dad is too far away for me to say this today, so I thought I'd wish it to you instead. Happy Father's Day."

I cautiously wrapped my arms around the stout man in front of me.

I swallowed back the threatening homesickness

I had just celebrated my nineteenth birthday; I was living in Gaborone, Botswana, far from my family. Father's Day came, and as I swallowed back the threatening homesickness, I asked God to show me someone to whom I could wish a happy Father's Day. It was a simple prayer, and with it I was more intent on moving past my own emotions than thinking of what God might do with it.

My day wore on, through dusty streets, crowded public transit and a high, hot sun, to an air-conditioned church with singing and dancing and very hard chairs, and still no one stood out to me. So I kept my Father's Day wishes to myself and thought maybe it was arbitrary anyway. Sundays were a time when the *lekovas*, foreigners like me, found each other and shared a meal together. An Afrikaans woman took me to lunch to meet her friends from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Holland, and Germany. All her guests were old

enough to be my parents, or perhaps even grandparents, and I enjoyed their stories of adventure around the world.

As we gathered at the long table in the shade I saw him. He was barely taller than I, with a curled, white mustache and a jolly disposition. There was no soft voice guiding me, but I felt direction that clearly turned me to him. I scuttled behind the other guests and made my way to him before we were called to be seated.

“My own dad is too far away for me to say this today, so I thought I’d wish it to you instead. Happy Father’s Day.”

I felt a little clumsy and awkward. As I drew away from the hug he clasped both my hands in his and looked me in the eyes. I could see he was surprised by my gesture. He murmured, “Bless you.”

We were called to eat, and our host gestured for me to sit near her at the other end of the table. I was soon lost in stories of Rhodesian Zimbabwe and camping on the Kalahari. Our meal drew to a close and seats were swapped as conversations broke off, and I found myself not far from the man I had wished a happy Father’s Day. Holding his wife’s hand, he caught my eye and asked me my age. I dodged the answer because most foreigners told me I was too young to be on my own here. He asked again.

“Nineteen,” I responded reluctantly.

Conversations around the table had grown silent. He and his wife looked at one another, then back to me.

“Our daughter would have been 19 now, if she would have lived,” he said slowly. His voice cracked, and he reached out and took my hands again as the tears began to stream down his face. “What you said earlier, it was like it came right from her. God offering us comfort.”

God worked through my simple prayer and clumsy words

I held his hands for a long time. Everyone around us had drawn closer, and some were crying with him. I suppose most of them knew his story, but I did not. Later, through tears, our host thanked me for what I had done. I was humbled, knowing I did nothing, but God worked through my simple prayer and clumsy words to bring comfort to a father missing a daughter. ☘