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**Angel**

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I awoke to the sounds of singing and the pounding of feet. The beautiful yet haunting sound of voices in harmony moved closer as men and women paraded down the red dirt road in a Saturday ceremony for the dead. AIDS was making its own inexorable march across my village of more than 3,000 families, snatching someone away almost weekly. And while AIDS was talked about, few people accepted its existence among them. Those who had the disease were shunned.

One of those was a young woman who called herself Angel. When she was born, her mother named her Mankhu, which means "death" in Northern Sotho. In the end, she would use her life to be an example so that others could live.

My primary job as a Peace Corps Volunteer was to help teachers implement a new curriculum adopted by the South African government in their schools. My secondary job was left up to me. Based on the needs of my community, I could decide what project outside of the school I wanted to do. As I sought the perfect fit, one came knocking at my door.

"Mabatu!" My host mother called out my South African name.

*"Yebo, Ke etla!"* (Yes, I'm coming!) I replied.

"You have a visitor," my host mother said at my door, coming to me instead.

Outside, under a large mango tree, sat a woman, neatly dressed in a white button-down blouse and navy blue skirt.

*"Dumelang"* (Hello), I said.

*"Aowa! O bolela!"* (No way! You are speaking my language!) she said, as many do when they hear me speak.

Though I am black like they are, I am still a stranger, and so they are surprised that I can speak their language. We chatted a while about general, small topics, and then she explained that she had started a home-based care group that would visit the sick in the village and take medicine or food to them. She wondered if I could come and train them about HIV/AIDS and how it is transmitted. I quickly agreed and made arrangements to run a series of weekly workshops at the small village clinic.

Among the regular attendees at these sessions was a young woman in her 20s "Angel"who sat quietly, listening intently. She was exceptionally thin for her height and walked with a slight limp. I noted her and wondered about her, but never approached her. During a special session, I invited a fellow Volunteer who was a retired nurse to make a presentation. When she was finished and final words were being spoken, the young woman stood up. She thanked me, and her smile and beautiful large eyes spoke volumes across cultures, across language barriers. Afterward, she asked if I could come and visit her. This was the beginning of a significant life lesson for me.

I went the following week to Angel's home. She lived in a small, bare concrete house. Only one of the rooms had walls on all sides. She didn't invite me in; we sat outside on two wire chairs, and she began to tell me her life story: She didn't know her father, and her mother had left her with her grandmother when she was a girl. She had three children, two of whom lived with relatives. I had often seen her third child in the village. Her current boyfriend, she told me, had given her AIDS. As she continued to talk, I inwardly despaired at the bleakness of her situation. I was there to help, but nothing could prepare me for this woman's story. Nothing could prepare me for the hopelessness or helplessness I felt. She had no job, no money, and a child to feed. There was no medication for her disease. She had full-blown AIDS and would undoubtedly die within five years.

"Mabatu," she said, "I want to talk to people about my life. I want to warn other girls. You taught me so much. And you didn't just teach; you hugged me. No one ever hugs me because they are afraid they will catch AIDS. Thank you, Mabatu."

Angel wanted to share her story. I sat stunned, awed that she wanted to talk about her disease to people in a village where she could easily become ostracized. And I was amazed that something so small as my simple hug could mean so much.

I went to the local high schools and middle schools to ask if Angel could come and talk to the life-skills classes. Though the teachers were hesitant, they knew a growing number of teenagers were dying of AIDS and so they agreed that she could speak to the students.

By telling her story, Angel found confidence and a reason to live. She found a church and became part of a community. The challenges were still there, of course. Even my host mother would whisper and ask me why I bothered with such a woman. Yet, she realized, like so many others in my community, that Angel was worthy of being loved, she was worthy of *ubuntu,* which means treating fellow humans with dignity.

Toward the end of my Peace Corps service, Angel asked me to help her make a memory box for her daughters. As we sat together and prepared this box that would be given to her children after her death, I realized she was creating it not with sorrow, but with practicality and love.

I had started out the teacher, but in the end it was I who was taught. She taught me strength and survival and love. She taught me how to live. I often complained about the small worries of life. Now, even so far away from Africa, I remember Angel, who learned to embrace her situation, prepared for it, and worked to help others along the way. She taught me that my problems are not so big that they cannot be conquered with courage. Angel still lives, as far as I know, and I hope that the memories she has to give to her daughters through the box she made and how she lived her life will be many—and unforgettable, like Angel.