

## **Dream On**

### **By Jeff Lucas**

Their broad, beautiful smiles should belong to two young teenagers who are grateful for a secure, loving family life, where laughter and hope have been their daily bread. They giggle easily and seem utterly devoted to each other as brother and sister. But their story is more about tears. I bumped into Segent (17) and Dawit (12) in Ethiopia recently. Their brief journey through life has been shrouded by difficulty, a struggle of two little people alone in a big, intimidating world.

Segent and Dawit live in a tiny, dark, one room shanty, its bare brown walls containing just one bed which they share. Segent has been the primary carer ever since their mother died five years ago from the AIDs virus. She took the reins of the home when she was just 12; the worries and weight of adulthood feel upon her far too quickly. Their days are helped by the presence of a Christian-run community centre, which provides education and basic healthcare, and an occasional lifeline visit from a social worker.

Their nights are not so easy. Sometimes they have to bolt the rickety door and hide under the bed, fearful of the rowdy drunks who cavort just outside, wondering if they are coming in uninvited.

I asked Segent what her dreams were. If she could have anything, fairy godmother style, what would be her request? I actually wondered for a moment if the word 'dream' would translate into Amharic. It must be difficult to ponder possibilities when everyday is the same numbing, uphill grind. But globalization means that Segent and Dawit are very aware of the world beyond Africa. So would her teenage heart long for an ipod, a boyfriend or more likely, a one-way ticket out of a country where 60% of the population exist on less than 25 pence a day? She flashed that dazzling grin again. "I'd like to live the Christian life well as a good example for my brother". Both wanted to take career paths that would make life better for their peers. I stared into those bright shining eyes; this was no rehearsed script to impress the westerner. There was no hand held out for a cash reward; a few quid for a good answer. They both meant every word. When we left we prayed together and gave them gifts. They bowed their heads with embarrassment, and I fought back the tears, which would not have helped them. I felt like kneeling before these kids to humble myself before their lovely hearts.

This was my first trip to Africa and I was taken aback by the extravagant, unexplainable joy that I found there. The poverty is gut-wrenching, the AIDs pandemic devastating. The ravages of drought and war have left a country that looks like a post-nuclear attack landscape. But many of the people are just beautiful, and it's way beyond skin deep.

I'd been prepared a little for their loveliness at a church leaders' conference in England. We'd played 'Pass the Parcel', and so us Europeans had lingered for a second or two over that wrapped bar of chocolate, hoping to make it our

own, all rather competitive over a 30p item. An African guest finally won the prize and surprised us all with his delighted exclamation: "Look what we've won". We tried to explain that he'd won it. He didn't get it, and unwrapped the silver foil with delight, passing the squares around.

Back in Ethiopia, we wandered into a tiny home where a family of six had adopted the boy next door, who had been orphaned by AIDs. Their meagre resources were already stretched to the limit, so why add to their burden? Some of these people were not practising Christians, so there was no biblical ethic behind their sacrifice. But they couldn't conceive of a situation where they wouldn't share what they had. Of course,

lest I paint Africa as a utopia, we also know that it is a continent that has been beset by corruption, violence and brutal hatred. Sin is certainly international. And yet I cannot deny that I bumped into people who have little to live on, and yet really know how to live.

A leading missiologist spoke at a conference recently and suggested that we, in the western church, have much to learn from our brothers and sisters overseas. He received an irate letter from a conference delegate, who insisted, "We have nothing (and I repeat, nothing) to learn (and I repeat, nothing to learn) from those overseas". It would be laughable if it wasn't so tragically lamentable.

Segent and Dawit face some mountainous struggles ahead. They are at the bottom of the economic pile, disadvantaged, and marginalized. But whatever we do, let's not call them poor. With our trivial, big brother, techno obsessed and relationally dysfunctional culture, I think that we are the ones who are really poor.

## **Jeff Lucas**

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