

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2010, Fiction Winner

By Laura How

Beyond Circumstance

Chipo leans back from her desk, letting a magazine spill onto her lap.

A Kenyan woman in a dark blazer smiles broadly on the cover. The headline reads *Kenya's Top Nursing Student Earns Scholarship to University of Nairobi*. "Me," Chipo whispers to herself. "That'll be me someday – a great nurse! Maybe I'll get to see Nairobi someday, if I'm good enough." Amid the classroom, crammed with nearly seventy students Chipo's remark blends into the general commotion in the room. Chipo lets her gaze drift out one of the smudged windows; she looks unseeing upon the rusty swing set in the schoolyard and allows visions of nursing school to invade her thoughts.

The classroom is stifling and noisy, the scene of chaos. Fa directs his attention to the videogame in his hands, considering himself an oasis of decorum and ambition among the distasteful disorder of his Zambian peers. He ignores the jam-packed arrangement of desks, chairs and students. Mr. Chiluba lectures on at the chalkboard. Fa tunes this out; back in Shanghai, he had been learning this math in grade 7, two years before his parents decided to move to Zambia to capitalize on economic opportunities. His father was now a Chinese supervisor of Collum Coal, one of many Asian companies taking advantage of Zambia's mineral-rich earth and unstable economy.

"Excuse me."

Fa brushes past the girl beside him, hardly hearing her. As always, he is in a hurry to leave school and connect online with the many friends that he left behind in Shanghai. Despite the many hours he fills with advanced math problems and videogames, he misses the company of others his age.

"Excuse me."

This time, it is obvious that the girl is addressing him. Annoyed, Fa turns. "Yes?"

“You have the textbook for this class, is that right?”

Her accent is strange and heavy, and Fa suddenly becomes self-conscious of his own limited grasp of their common language, English. “Yes, at home.”

“I’m Chipo. I plan on becoming a nurse. I’m hoping to study extra questions, but can’t afford the textbook. Can I borrow yours on Thursday afternoons?”

Fa frowns. This girl wants to borrow his textbook? She could be anyone. He is on the verge of saying no, when he is stopped by her expression, a mix of trust and hope - a belief that he would do this simple task for her. “Okay. But I won’t let that book out of my sight. I’ll stay late at the school with you on Thursdays.” Almost surprised at himself, he acknowledges that it will be nice to have some company on occasion.

Fa watches Chipo curiously, pretending to be engrossed in his videogame. She sits hunched over the textbook, intent. She methodically works through the questions. Her work is good, Fa can tell, but her pace is exasperating. When he suggests that she work more quickly, she merely shrugs and smiles. “It’s the Zambian way.”

Chipo was a fast learner. It surprised Fa how quickly she grasped concepts and how easily she manipulated numbers. One Thursday, he decides to bring some advanced math problems.

“Try this.” Fa pushes the math booklet towards Chipo. She considers the first question for some moments, then works it out perfectly, if unhurriedly. Some minutes later, Fa interjects. “You’ll need this.” He hands her a rectangle, covered in numbered buttons. Bewildered, she turns it over in her palm.

“What *is* this?” she asks, amused.

“It’s a calculator. It can solve problems for you.”

She looks at him, sceptical, evaluating whether he is pulling her leg. He shows her how to use the calculator. It is like magic. Chipo immediately likes the device. It possesses the swiftness and precision of an African Fish Eagle, Zambia’s national bird, shooting towards the water for its prey.

“Lazy! The miners here don’t care for hard work. They want two days a week off now.” Fa’s father pushes his chair back from the table with a sigh of antipathy. Fa cringes to hear his father’s remark. Although, he agrees that Zambians work more slowly than Chinese workers, his growing friendship with Chipo is teaching him a slower pace of life which promotes health and happiness. Fa’s mind wanders, and he wonders whether he will see Chipo the next day. She had missed three days of school. Although it wasn’t uncommon, as she often had to care for her younger brother, Caoco, or sell peanuts if her grandmother was sick, Fa knew that she hated to miss classes.

A week later...

Fa waves down one of the public mini-buses, always filled well beyond capacity and in an unpromising state of working order. He grimaces; he avoids these buses whenever he can. But it’s unusual for Chipo to miss more than a week of class, and, more urgently, his father has just told him that the family is moving back to Shanghai. Rising tensions within the coal company were hurting his father’s reputation, and his mother was unhappy in the unfamiliar country. Fa hands a 2000-Kwacha bill to the teenager collecting fares and squeezes into a seat between a woman holding a baby, and a man with a crate of empty Fanta bottles.

He watches the Zambian life go by outside. Kids in uniforms walk home from school, unemployed men sit at checkerboards, moving purple and orange Fanta caps over the squares, married women sport their headscarves proudly, swaying purposefully but without hurry along the hot earth by the road. At last, Fa spots the compound in which he now knows that Chipo lives.

Fa moves purposefully, asking after a Chipo Chinyama, and at last comes across a small boy playing with a rubber tire who knows her. The boy abandons his tire, and runs off on his skinny legs. Fa tries to keep up, aware that he is drawing attention. When the little boy finally arrives at a simple hut, Fa has gathered a significant assembly of curious children, all jostling about him.

“You’re going back?”

“Yes, a week yesterday.” Silence. Chipo’s younger brother Caoco, a tiny boy with a bloated stomach, sits on the floor. The room is furnished by a straw mat, a wooden shelf, and a bolt of fabric hanging in the doorway. There are no windows in the two-room house.

“You must be glad to go back to Shanghai.”

“I - I guess so.” Fa realizes with a pang that this isn’t so.

He doesn’t want to return without really knowing this culture, one that he rejected at first. With shame, he remembers the prejudices that he carried during his first weeks in Lusaka.

“Say you’ll come back, Fa.”

“I hope so – I want to.”

“You won’t.”

“Chipo – ”

“They always say that. All the volunteers that come to the school. Nobody ever does.”

“Chipo, don’t think like that. Listen to me. You’re really smart - as smart as any of the kids in my classes back home. So don’t let anyone stop you from reaching for your dreams, and one day, I know it, you’ll be a great nurse.”

“Fa, I – I don’t know anymore.”

“Don’t say that! You can do anything, Chipo, anything.”

“No, Fa, no I can’t. It’s easy for you to say. *You* can do anything. You can go home, and go to school whenever you like and say that you lived in Zambia. But did you? You lived here, but you don’t really know us. You’ve never eaten nshima, or slit a chicken’s neck as he protests, slowly subdued as he accepts the inevitability of death, as my mother fought and eventually returned to a life of subsistence farming. She had hoped that moving to the city would be a step towards a better future, but you know what, Fa? If you’re poor, the city’s worse. There’s more crime, competition, illness. My mom still

hopes that Caoco and I can make something more of our lives. Even if I finish grade school, though, marks won't matter. My grandmother won't be able to sell peanuts forever. My uncle is very good to have taken Caoco and me in, but I will not become dependent on him. I'll find a job somewhere – I can dance for weddings, and braid hair, and sell bananas at the tourist market. Maybe I can save enough to send Caoco to a better school. I would like that, Fa.”

Chipo's eyes are shining with unshed tears. She tries to smile, and doesn't quite manage.

“Chipo, I, I'm – here – ” Fa reaches into his pocket, and pulls out his old calculator. The electronic device seems suddenly so inadequate, so inappropriate. It weighs heavily in his hand. “I know it's not what you need, but maybe this can be for your dreams. I hope that you get to nursing school, Chipo, I really do.”

Chipo takes the calculator slowly, thoughtfully. “Thanks, Fa, for getting to know me.”

Their paths diverge from here, these same paths having brought two cultures a little closer.