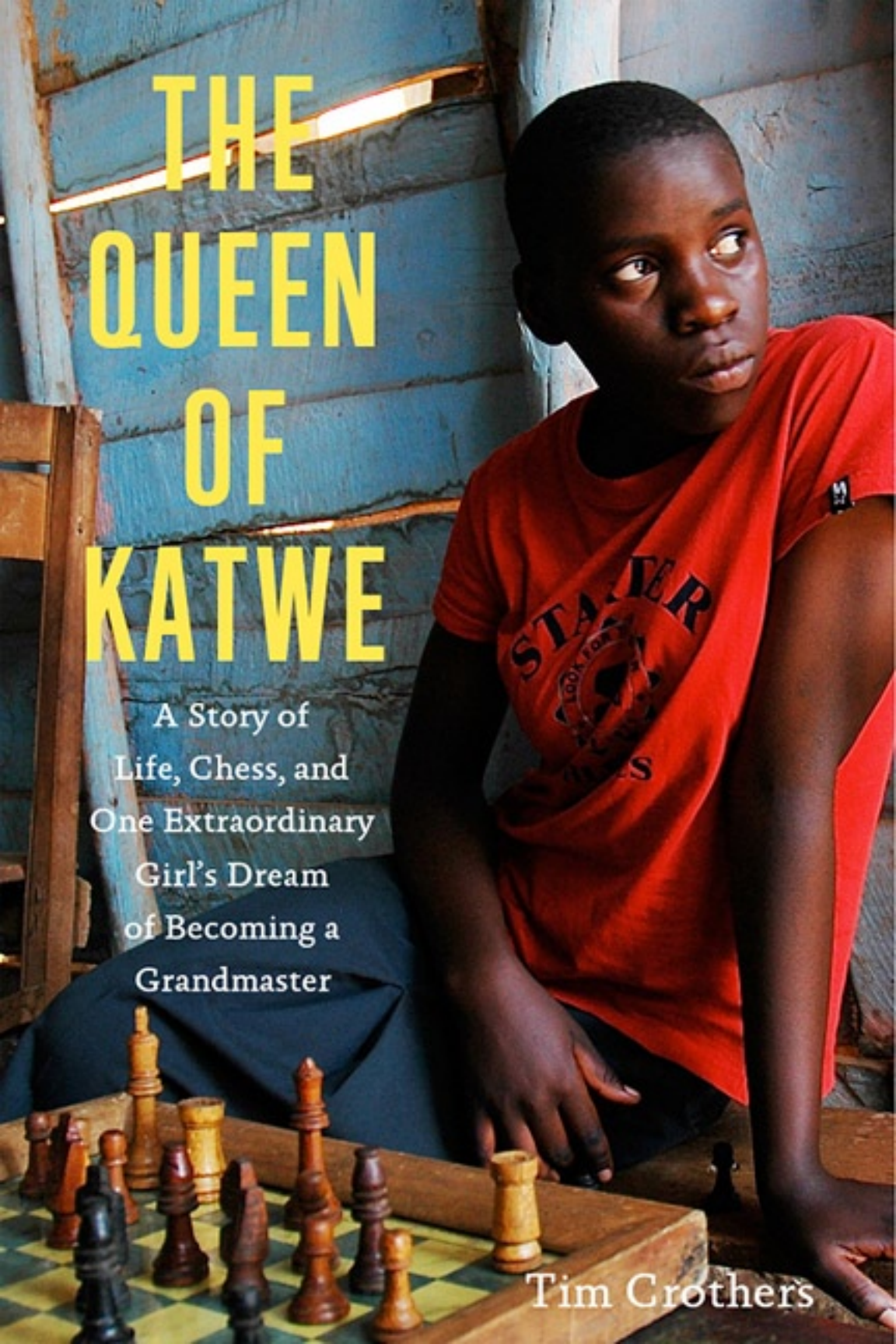

THE QUEEN OF KATWE
A Story of Life, Chess, and One Extraordinary Girl's Dream of Becoming a Grandmaster
Tim Crothers

Prologue

She wins the decisive game, but she has no idea what it means. Nobody has told her what's at stake, so she just plays, like she always does. She has no idea she has qualified to compete at the Olympiad. No idea what the Olympiad is. No idea that her qualifying means that in a few months she will fly to the city of Khanty-Mansiysk in remote central Russia. No idea where Russia even is. When she learns all of this, she asks only one question: "Is it cold there?"

She travels to the Olympiad with nine teammates, all of them a decade older, in their twenties, and even though she has known many of them for a while and journeys by their side for 27 hours across the globe to Siberia, none of her teammates really have any idea where she is from or where she aspires to go, because Phiona Mutesi is from someplace where girls like her don't talk about that.

19th sept. 2010

Dear mum,

I went to the airport. I was very happy to go to the airport. this was only my second time to leave my home. When I riched to the airport I was some how scared because I was going to play the best chess players in the world. So I waved to my friends and my brothers. Some of them cried

because they were going to miss me and I had to go. so they wished me agood luck. They told me that they will pray for me. So we board on europlane to go from Uganda to Kenya. The Europlane flew up the sky. I saw clouds looking niece. This time I thought that I was may be in heaven. I asked God to protect me. because who am I to fly to the europlane. so it was Gods power. We riched in kenya very well. I was very tired and they gave me acake it was like abread. I had never tested that before but it was very sweat and I liked it.

When we boad an europlane to Dubai it was very big. So they served us very many eats. I was very hungry. I prayed to God to protect us very well. and he did so. and we riched very well. What I surprised of people which I went with. They were like my parents. they treated me well and my coach treating me as if I was his babby. What I never expected before. That was my first day.

When we riched in Dubai things were different. every was on his own. After then we board the last europlane to take us in Roncha. we prayed so that we rich well. An europlane flew. This time we were along distance from the ground. I think this time I was nearly to tutch on heaven. the clouds were looking niece. then they served me food which I not seen and I was not used to that food. I felt bad. wanted to vomite. So we riched very well. We were welcomed at the airport.

Then they gave us rooms.

The opening ceremony at the 2010 Chess Olympiad takes place in an ice arena. Phiona has never seen ice. There are lasers and woolly mammoths and dancers inside bubbles and people costumed as chess pieces, queens and bishops and pawns, marching around on a giant chessboard atop the ice. Phiona watches it all unfold with her hands cupping her cheeks as if in a wonderland. She asks if this happens every night in this place and she is told, no, that the arena normally serves as a home for hockey, concerts, the circus. Phiona has never heard of any of those things.

She returns to the hotel, which at fifteen floors is by far the tallest

building Phiona has ever entered. She rides the elevator with giddy trepidation like it is an amusement park roller coaster. She stares out her hotel room window for a half hour amazed by how tiny people on the ground look from six stories high. Then she takes a long, hot shower, trying her best to wash away her home in the slum.

The following afternoon when she first enters the competition venue, a vast indoor tennis stadium packed with hundreds of shiny new chessboards from baseline to baseline, she immediately notices that at 14 years old she is among the youngest competitors in a tournament that features more than 1,300 players from 141 countries. She is told this is the most accomplished collection of chess talent ever assembled. That makes Phiona nervous. How could she not be? She is playing for her country, Uganda, against other nations, but she isn't playing against kids anymore like she does in Katwe. She is playing against grown women, and as her first game approaches, as she struggles to locate her table because she is still learning to read, she keeps thinking to herself, "Do I belong here?"

Her first opponent is Dina Kagramanov, the Canadian national champion. Kagramanov, born in Baku, Azerbaijan, the hometown of former men's world chess champion Garry Kasparov, learned the game at age six from her grandfather. She is competing in her third Olympiad and at age 24 has been playing elite chess longer than Phiona has been alive. They could hardly be more different, this white woman playing black against this black girl playing white.

Kagramanov preys on Phiona's inexperience by setting a trap during the game's opening and gains a pawn advantage. Phiona sits forward in her chair, leaning over the board aggressively as she often does, with her hands pressed to her forehead, as if she might will her pieces into a better strategic position. Phiona stubbornly tries but fails to recover from her initial mistake. Still, it is the victor who comes away impressed. "She's a sponge," Kagramanov says. "She picks up on whatever information you give her and she uses it against you. Anybody can be taught moves and how to react to those moves, but to reason like she does at her age is a gift that gives her the potential for greatness."

21st sept. 2010

Dear mum,

I great you in the might name of Jesus crist. I have written this letter to inform you that this way it was not fine it was raining at morning and it is very cold now. I don't want to eat any thing. Iam not used to eat this type of food. Whenever it riches to break fast I feel like sick and I feel like I want to vomit. But let pray to God may be I will be ok. What I have like from this way they have given us so many gifts even if I have lost the first game but I will wine others I promise you mother. My coach is ecouraging to play very well. But I am sure I will not disapoite him. I am going to work for my best. I will make sure I wine five games even if I am playing strong women. I pray to at God to make my promise possible. In Jesus's name I have preyed amen.

Phiona is lucky to be here. The Ugandan women's team has never participated in a Chess Olympiad before because Uganda could never afford it. But this year the president of FIDE, the world's governing body of chess, has arranged funding for the entire Ugandan team to travel to the Olympiad in the hope of garnering the country's vote in his reelection campaign. Phiona needs breaks like that.

She arrives early for the second day of matches, because she wants to explore. She sees Afghan women dressed in burkas, Indian women in saris, and Bolivian women in ponchos and black bowler hats. She spots a blind chess player and wonders how that is possible. She notices an Iraqi suddenly kneel down and begin praying to someplace called Mecca.

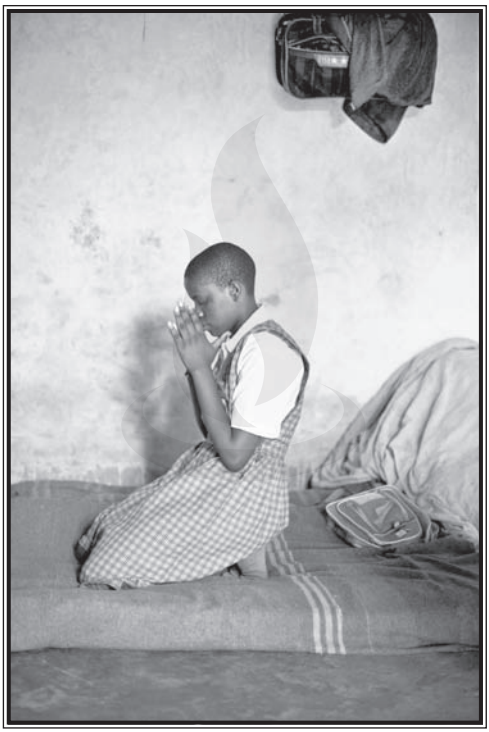
As she walks toward her designated table, Phiona is halted by security and asked to produce her player credential to prove she is actually among the competitors, perhaps because she looks so young, or perhaps because with her short-cropped hair, baggy sweater, and sweatpants, she could be mistaken for a boy.

Before her next game, against Yu-Tong Elaine Lin of Taiwan, Phi-

ona slips off her sneakers. She has never played chess wearing shoes. Lin is stoic, staring only at the board, as if Phiona is not even there. Midway through the game, Phiona commits a tactical error that causes her to lose two pawns. Later, Lin makes a similar blunder, but Phiona does not detect it until it is too late, missing an opportunity that could have turned the game in her favor. From that moment on, Phiona gazes into the distance, hardly able to bear looking at the pieces left on the board, crestfallen as the remainder of the moves play out predictably and she loses a game she knows she should have won.

Phiona leaves the table and runs straight out to the parking lot. Coach Robert has warned her never to go off on her own, but Phiona boards a shuttle bus alone and returns to the hotel, then goes straight to her room and bawls into her pillow like a typical teenager. Later that evening, her coach tries to comfort her, but Phiona is inconsolable. It is the only time chess has ever brought her to tears. In fact, despite the extraordinarily difficult life she has endured, Phiona cannot remember the last time she cried.

Chapter 4
Resurrection



Phiona Mutesi prays inside her family's shack before leaving for her three-hour trek through the treacherous alleyways of Katwe to fetch fresh water.

"I have no memory of my father," Phiona says. "I was so young I didn't even know how he died. After his funeral we stayed in the village for a few weeks and one morning when I woke up, my older sister Juliet told me she was feeling a headache. We got some herbs and gave them to her and then she went to sleep. The following morning we found her dead in the bed. That is what I remember."

Only God knows what day the child was born. There is no birth certificate. No documentation of any kind. They don't bother with that kind of paperwork at a clinic in Katwe. Many Africans trace their birthdays back to nothing more specific than a certain year marked by a landmark in their country's history. In Uganda, many people track their birthdays to a war. Harriet believes her third daughter was born in 1996, but she doesn't know her daughter's birthday and doesn't understand why anyone would need to know, because nobody celebrates birthdays in the slum.

Because she is illiterate, Harriet didn't bestow a name upon her newborn daughter, so much as a sound. Harriet's cousin, Milly Nanteza, had given all of her children names beginning with an *F* sound. Harriet liked that. Nanteza had named one of her daughters with the sound *FEE-OH-NUH*. It was never spelled out. When Harriet is asked how her daughter's name is spelled, she does not understand the question. The answer would not be determined in any official manner for many years.

Phiona was about three years old when her father died and her life turned upside down. She had been preparing to go to kindergarten. Suddenly she was no longer a child but a worker. The widowed Harriet needed all of her children to be part of her labor force.

By the time Harriet had returned home from Buyubu after the second family funeral she'd endured in three weeks, she had lost her job at the New African Child School and the family had been evicted from their home on Salaama Road. Night and Brian, who were about 13 and six years old, respectively, dropped out of school to help support the family. "After my husband's death I had so many children and I could not pay the rent," Harriet says. "Life was so, so, so terrible. I could not pay for their school fees and they were denied exams or report forms. Eventually I had to make a choice to either educate my children or to feed them."

One day after seeing a child walking through the slum selling boiled maize from a saucepan on her head, Harriet, believing she had no other choice, decided her family would do the same. Each morning she would walk to the Kibuye outdoor market and buy some maize, often on borrowed money. Harriet would then cook it and she and her children would wander around selling it in the slum.

"At times you could grow weary because you are walking long distances with the maize on your head without anyone buying," Brian says. "And personally I had bad feelings about what we were doing. We all wanted to be in school. It would come to around 5 P.M. and at that time most of my friends would be playing and I wanted to go and join them, but that is a time that our mother would tell us to go and sell the maize."

Beginning when Phiona was about five years old, Harriet sent her daughter out alone into the slum each day carrying a saucepan of maize on her head. She would sell during morning and evening teas. Phiona carried 20 corncobs and each was to be sold for 100 shillings (U.S. $.06), a supply worth 2,000 shillings, but a five-year-old girl rarely returned with that.

"There were some moments when you would come across some

street children and they would beat you up and steal your maize and then they go," Phiona says. "At times they would even take the money you have so far earned and you go home with nothing. It was really very challenging because I could go home crying and I could not express anything to my mother because she is also feeling very bad about that and she is preparing to cane me. So it was such a terrible moment. That really affected us because when we were unable to raise enough money, we would end up not eating that day."

There were plenty of days when Harriet had no food for her children. They usually ate no breakfast in the morning. At times Harriet was able to scrape together some rice for a meal at midday. A cup of tea often would have to suffice as dinner. Whenever there wasn't enough food for the entire family, Harriet would fast. Once a year, on Christmas Day, Harriet allowed her children to skip selling maize and she would buy meat for their daily meal, which she would split among them while taking none for herself. Christmas was the only day of the year the children were permitted to eat until they were full.

Before her first run of maize each day, Phiona was expected to do much of the housework that her sister Juliet had once done. She was also required to fetch water. Phiona would wake up at five o'clock each morning to begin a three-hour roundtrip trek through Katwe to fill a jerry can with drinkable water. Sometimes she would even sling an extra jug over her shoulder for a neighbor in exchange for a few shillings she could give to her mother for food.

"We fetched water, sold maize, and did chores," Phiona says. "That was our day. In most cases we used to come back and we were really tired and our mother realized this and she used to help us to even wash our clothes because we were too tired to do that ourselves."

Understanding the value of the education that she could never get as a child, Harriet tried repeatedly to reenroll her children in school, but she could never keep up with the fees. She transferred them from school to school, but they were typically expelled before completing a full term. During a period of six years, Phiona completed less than

two grades of school. Even when they were enrolled, Phiona and her siblings continued to sell maize in the evenings.

As she grew older, Phiona's behavior began to change. She would often fight with children around the neighborhood. Unlike most girls, she would even stand up to the boys. One time a boy teased her about how she had no father and her family slept on the ground and Phiona attacked him so aggressively that Harriet had to break up the fight before Phiona hurt the boy.

"I would do all sorts of bad things," Phiona says. "I would run around with the wild kids in the neighborhood abusing whoever we find. I did not even fear to quarrel with older people if anybody did anything that was not in line with what I wanted. I usually had nobody around telling me what to do and what not to do, so I wound up learning a lot of bad actions."

Phiona attributes her poor conduct to her family's constant state of desperation. "It affected us to a certain extent, but our mother used to encourage us so we didn't lose hope," Phiona says. "Many times the landlord would come to our home demanding his money for rent and we had no money even for food. Everything was really in a mess so we were really very much scared and we didn't know what was next."

When she is asked if there were any happy moments in her childhood during that time, Phiona shakes her head and for emphasis she responds in English: "No."

In her mind it would be best if it happened by car. Harriet wasn't exactly sure where or when, but that would be a quick way to go. It wouldn't require any planning, just a snap decision. A brief jolt of courage, or perhaps cowardice, and she would be gone.

"The life I was leading, I was fed up with it," Harriet says. "I had so many challenges and at times I lost hope. During that time for sure I had nothing in mind apart from looking for food to make us survive and I always wondered if God would ever remember us. I was so tired

of living that kind of life. I was working very hard but all in vain. It was a real devil distressing me. It caused me to hate myself and I felt like it wasn't worth living. So time came when I said, 'Why don't I die and leave this kind of life?'"

Only her responsibility to her children had prevented Harriet from committing suicide. She would always think of them and wonder what would happen to them without her. In her most despondent moments she wondered if she wouldn't rather die than see her kids suffering. She wanted to let them go. At some point in Katwe, Harriet Nakku approached that dark point of no return when she began to think, "Could my children really be any worse off without me?"

Sometime around the year 2000, about a year after the death of her husband and daughter, a friend who was worried about Harriet's state of mind directed her to see a pastor. "Before 2000 I had a dream over and over and a voice spoke to me, 'Why don't you get saved?'" Harriet says. "But I would not pay attention."

That day Harriet confessed Christ as her savior. She was born-again. Then the pastor shared a prophecy.

Says Harriet, "When I went to church and I saw that man of God, he spoke to me and he said, 'You have been praying to God that a vehicle can hit you and you die. You go today and God will indicate something to you.'"

Later that afternoon, as Harriet was walking through Katwe carrying her infant, Richard, near a place called Prayer Palace, she heard a car speeding around a bend in the road and it was headed directly toward her. The onlookers in Katwe that day drew in a collective gasp, certain they were about to witness yet another senseless death in the slum. Harriet said a quick prayer and braced for the impact.

"The vehicle came and suddenly stopped right where we are," Harriet says. "I saw the motorcar turning around and then facing where it had come from and I remembered the prophecy and realized that the man of God was referring to me. Maybe it was God's arrangement. I cannot explain that."

That single day changed Harriet's entire outlook on her life.

"At that time my heart was transformed," Harriet says. "I used to spend most of the time crying and worried before I got saved. Then I became strong and I gained hope and inner peace. Our situation was not all that good, but I began to meditate on what God had done for us, somehow keeping us alive. I wouldn't be here anymore if it wasn't for the power of God. And I thank him for that."

The first time Phiona died she was about seven years old. It happened suddenly one evening. Phiona fell sick with a fever and then she was gone. Her body was cold and still. Nobody could find a pulse.

Phiona's body was dressed for burial and cotton was placed in each nostril to stem any flow of blood. As is custom in Uganda, the family removed all of the possessions from the shack, placed the body in the center of the floor, and invited the neighbors to sit on mats along the walls and help the family mourn and pray for the deceased. Harriet went to church to solicit some funds for Phiona's body to be transported to the village for a funeral, while Phiona's youngest siblings were sequestered outside the shack unaware of what had occurred.

Several hours after Phiona had died, Night began to notice some sweating around her sister's legs. Before long, Phiona's entire body appeared to be perspiring, so Night removed some of the clothes she had put on her sister. By the time Harriet had returned from church, Phiona had resurrected. "Personally, I've never seen anything like that," Harriet says. "Even though the child was mine, I really feared her. I don't like even to talk about that, because I know people will be fearing her. For sure, there is no way I can explain that. It is God's glory. At that time, I was just praying and believing God, but I was not even praying for her to be brought back to life. I don't even know what happened to bring her back to life, but I believe there is a reason for it."

"All of a sudden we saw Phiona returning to life and all of the visitors scattered and ran out of the room because they believed this is a

ghost," Night says. "We were also fearing her. We thought she was a ghost. Then our mother said, 'No, it is God who has brought back my daughter.' We went ahead and told Phiona, 'You were dead.' Phiona told us, 'No, I was just asleep.' She became better, but people feared her for some good time."

Some of the neighbors who had mourned Phiona that night refused to make any further contact with her and began referring to her as "the girl who feared the grave."

About a year later, Phiona died again. She fell gravely ill and Harriet begged one of her sisters for the money to take Phiona to the hospital. While Harriet was never informed of a diagnosis, she believes her daughter had an acute case of malaria, a malady that is contracted with the frequency of the common cold in Katwe, and which Phiona had endured many times before. Phiona lost consciousness and fluid had to be removed from her spine. Harriet was informed that her daughter's condition was life-threatening. "I was so terrified," Harriet says. "I was told that when someone gets some water removed from their spinal cord the chances are very small that they are going to survive. I knew Phiona was going to die, just like Juliet before her."

Harriet left Night at Phiona's bedside because she was so certain of Phiona's fate and could not bear the thought of losing another daughter. She took Brian and Richard with her to try to gather the money to bury Phiona. Several days later, Phiona baffled her doctors by making a sudden recovery.

"I was very surprised that Phiona stabilized," Harriet says. "Maybe her time had not yet come. That must have been God's plan. I believe there is divine intervention in my daughter's life."

Says Phiona, "I don't remember anything about that time except that when I came home my mother told me, 'You died for two days.'"

Harriet had lost everything that belonged to her, except for her children and a mattress. Now the mattress was gone. Harriet had offered her

mattress as collateral for a loan, seed money for a job selling cassava in the Kibuye market. When the business failed within a week, the mattress was gone. Harriet and her children had nothing left to sleep on.

At that point they had moved in with Harriet's mother, into a tiny shack in Katwe barely fit for one person but sleeping six. One day the landlord showed up and told them that without a rent payment, they would have to leave immediately. They had no money.

So the family moved to another shack in the Kizungu zone which borders Katwe, a dwelling that had been abandoned because it was in such a decrepit state. Shortly after they arrived there, Harriet's mother died. They continued to stay there despite returning one day to find that their possessions had been stolen because they could not afford a lock for the door. Finally, the house collapsed. At that time, Harriet didn't have money to rent another house, so she begged her stepbrother, Juma Sserunkuma, to allow her family to stay with him in the two-room shack he rented in the nearby Nateete slum.

Harriet didn't know until they arrived there that Sserunkuma practiced witchcraft. On some nights Sserunkuma would wake up Harriet and the children at 3 A.M. and insist that they go outside while he performed rituals like slaughtering a chicken and spreading its blood around the shack. Sserunkuma constantly claimed that someone was urinating in his bedroom, even though he kept it locked. He would complain that he was no longer getting the money he used to earn and that Harriet's presence precluded him from obtaining a wife. "He would tell me that everything of his was in a mess," Harriet says. "There were some flowers he would irrigate with local brew and they all dried up. It seems he thought that we had disorganized his spirits."

Sserunkuma eventually ordered Harriet and her family to leave. "I told my children that it was not safe for us to stay with him," Harriet says. "I feared he could sacrifice us, slaughter us, so we had to leave his place and go on the street."

Because she had no other choice, Harriet and her children stayed on the roadside near the Kibuye market. The only other option for shel-

ter was back in her father's village in Seeta, but Harriet didn't have the fare to transport everybody there and wasn't sure she'd even be welcome. "During that time when we slept on the street, I didn't know that we would ever be able to get another house to stay in," Phiona says. "We were sleeping in the road and people were laughing at us. Our mother's plan was for us to sometime go back to the village."

Day after day on the roadside, Harriet split a single cassava among her children while she fasted on water. Harriet survived on small donations from friends in the church, who eventually persuaded her that living in the street wasn't safe for the children and that she should take her family to sleep in the church once it had emptied each evening.

At that dire moment, the solution fell to Night. She left the family on the roadside and made a decision she'd been resisting for a long time, the same decision her mother once made in a similar moment of hopelessness. "I had to go and get a man and I started staying with that man," Night says. "So when I got that man, it wasn't the right thing to do because really I was not of age. I was fifteen years old. But I had no option and he was the one now giving me some money to support my family. So that's how God rescued us from the street."

After three weeks on the roadside, with a gift of 40,000 shillings from the man with whom Night was staying, Harriet rented a room in the nearby Masajja district, where the family stayed for four months until that structure was demolished because the landlord wanted to build a sounder structure. So once again Harriet moved her family to yet another shack in Katwe, the sixth time they had relocated in five years.

To help muster the rent for each of these humble dwellings, Harriet returned to work at the Kibuye market, a chaotic outdoor bazaar that offers everything from vegetables to underwear to toothpaste to dishes, much of which sits in the mud inside an entrance marked by cattle defecating in the street.

Harriet didn't give up after her first business failure at the market, but tried again after learning from her mistakes. She no longer sold

cassava, which had proven to be expensive and had a short shelf life, instead choosing to sell curry powder, which was far cheaper and more durable.

Harriet would eventually expand her inventory to tea leaves, avocados, and eggplants, which she normally sells from a wobbly wooden stand under a feeble umbrella that offers virtually no protection from the blistering sun. Six days a week she leaves her home at 2 A.M. to make a five-kilometer walk to meet the farmers who bring their goods into Kampala for purchase, and then she resells those goods for a tiny profit that she hopes will amount to enough money each month to pay rent and feed her children a daily meal of rice.

Because of her work schedule, Harriet is usually gone from the family's shack and her children never know when she will return. Harriet sometimes passes several days without seeing them. "When I wake up in the morning I commit my kids to God's hands," she says. "I don't always know where my kids are. God is like their father."

One day when it came time to go out on the evening run selling maize, Brian was nowhere to be found. Before his accident with the bicycle he had begun a routine of wandering off at about the same time each day. Curious, his little sister would try to follow him. But Phiona would inevitably lose her big brother among the labyrinth of alleys in Katwe. She couldn't keep up with him.

But on this day, perhaps motivated by the possibility of finding a meal on a day when she'd had nothing to eat, Phiona was able to track Brian for five kilometers, all the way to an abandoned lot, a dump site that was being used as a soccer field. Phiona looked on from a safe distance as Brian began to play soccer with a group of boys, watched over by a young coach. She studied the coach and liked the way he joined in the game and seemed to genuinely care for the children. After about an hour, the soccer game ended. Brian and the other boys then walked deeper into the valley of Katwe, toward the heart of Nkere. Phiona

continued to follow her brother until at one point a boy named Gerald turned, saw Phiona, and said, "Brian, your sister is coming."

Brian retreated to where Phiona was standing and insisted she go home. After initially resisting, Phiona turned and began to walk back toward home, but then turned again and continued her stealthy pursuit of her brother until she reached a dusty veranda across the alley from the shack of Hakim Ssewaya. Brian disappeared inside. Phiona carefully peeked around a corner to see where he had gone.

"I saw there were many children seated and they were all looking at some good things and I didn't know if it was a game because I had never seen it," Phiona says. "I looked at it some more and I just felt like I really wanted to go inside and touch the beautiful pieces. I thought, 'What could make all these kids so silent?' Then I watched them play the game and get happy and excited and I wanted a chance to be that happy."

Phiona kept peering around the corner, fascinated by the game. Suddenly she was spotted by the coach. "Young girl," said Katende. "Don't be afraid. You come."