

I Will Always Write Back



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CAITLIN ALIFIRENKA, MARTIN GANDA, AND LIZ WELCH

Caitlin Alifirenka is an ER nurse who lives outside Philadelphia with her husband and daughters. She first met Martin Ganda in 1997 as part of a school-assigned pen pal program, and the two became best friends. In 2015, she and Martin published *I Will Always Write Back*, a memoir that recounts the story of their friendship, starting with its long-distance beginnings and ending with when they first met in person. Caitlin continues to do events related to the book. Martin Ganda grew up in Chisamba Singles, one of the poorest regions of Zimbabwe at the time. After meeting Caitlin through a pen pal writing program, the two kept up a correspondence that would last for years. Always good at school, Martin eventually went on (with some help from Caitlin's family) to get a scholarship to study at Villanova University. Martin later got his MBA from Duke University and went on to work with investment banks in New York City. Liz Welch is a journalist and memoirist currently based in Brooklyn, New York. Before *I Will Always Write Back*, she was best known for writing *The Kids Are All Right*, an award-winning memoir about her parents that she co-authored with her siblings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Caitlin and Martin were born in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was president of the United States, and Robert Mugabe was prime minister (and later president) of Zimbabwe. The 1990s and early 2000s, when most of *I Will Always Write Back* takes place, were a time of economic decline and high inflation in Zimbabwe. The Mugabe administration blamed this decline on Western nations and on white farmers living in Zimbabwe (even condoning violent—sometimes deadly—seizure of land from these farmers). This caused Zimbabwe to lose international support and fall deeper into economic decline. Meanwhile, in the United States, college tuitions were high relative to the rest of the world and rising—this is why Martin's dream of attending a U.S. university was so difficult. Another historical event that impacts the book's characters is the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which occur midway through the memoir. On 9/11, hijackers crashed passenger planes into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The attacks led to heightened security efforts in the United States, including tighter borders, which also helps explain why it was difficult for a foreigner like Martin to study in the country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

I Will Always Write Back is a contemporary coming-of-age memoir intended for a mass audience. Some of the most influential books in this genre include *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr, *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, *Rocket Boys* by Homer Hickam Jr., and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (which also takes place in a semi-rural area of Pennsylvania). Liz Welch's first book, *The Kids Are All Right*, was the book that established her as a memoirist, and her experiences with that book influenced the way that she helped Caitlin and Martin tell their own story—it is also a memoir with co-authors that is told from different points of view.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *I Will Always Write Back*
- **When Written:** 2008–2014
- **Where Written:** Pennsylvania and New York City
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Hatfield, Pennsylvania and Mutare, Zimbabwe
- **Climax:** Martin meets Caitlin and her family at the Philadelphia airport.
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, inequality, the financial costs of education
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

On the Road. The co-authors of *I Will Always Write Back* continue to speak at schools and book clubs. After doing several online events, in late 2021, Caitlin Alifirenka and Liz Welch made their first in-person appearances for the book since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the suburban town of Hatfield, Pennsylvania in the late 1990s, Caitlin's teacher Mrs. Miller gives her class an assignment to pick a foreign country and write letter to a pen pal there. Though Caitlin knows almost nothing about Zimbabwe, she chooses it anyway because something about the mystery intrigues her. She does some research before sending off a letter.

Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, Martin is at the top of his class. His

family lives in a poor region outside the of Mutare, the third-largest city in the country. Not every student at his school gets a pen pal, but because Martin is one of the best students in his class, he receives Caitlin's letter and is tasked with writing one back. He is fascinated with imagining Caitlin's life, since he doesn't know much about the U.S.

Even after the school assignment ends, Caitlin and Martin decide to keep writing back and forth to each other. This proves to be particularly difficult for Martin, since Zimbabwe is in economic turmoil, and stamps are getting increasingly expensive. Things get even more difficult when Caitlin asks Martin for a **photograph** (since photos are rare and expensive in Zimbabwe at the time), but Martin always does what he can to try to please Caitlin, eventually finding a photo to send.

Though at first Caitlin and Martin are guarded in their letters, eventually, they feel more comfortable talking about the real circumstances of their lives. Martin sends Caitlin a photo that reveals how small of a house his whole family lives in. Meanwhile, Caitlin's family can afford to buy her a car before she even gets her driver's license. Caitlin gets the idea that she should send some of her babysitting money to Martin to see what happens.

At first Caitlin sends the money in secret, and Martin is shocked but grateful to receive it, since the conversion rate means it's enough for Martin and his family to buy several weeks of food. When Martin's father loses his job due to turnover at the paper mill where he works, Martin's financial situation suddenly becomes even worse, and he risks getting kicked out of school since he can't pay tuition. Caitlin decides to send money to help pay for Martin's education. His family buys **chicken** to celebrate, which they usually only eat for Christmas.

When people in Caitlin's life find out about the money that she's sent to Martin, some worry that he's a scammer. Caitlin's mom, however, decides to put together a care package of clothes and other necessities for Martin's family. Among those gifts are **shoes** for Martin's mother—she grew up in poverty without shoes, and the new shoes help her be recognized as a member of society.

As Martin continues to do well in school, he is offered the opportunity to study at one of the most elite boarding schools in Zimbabwe. This could put him on track to become a doctor or a lawyer, with the possibility of even going to university in the United States. The tuition is much more than Martin's family can afford. But with some help from Caitlin (as well as some help from Martin's well-educated cousin Sekai and her husband, Alois), Martin manages to scrape together enough money to attend the new school, getting his deposit in just before the deadline.

At his new school, Martin begins formulating a plan to go to college in the United States. His school friend Wallace, who comes from a rural region of Zimbabwe similar to Martin's

home, gets accepted to an American university, which proves to Martin that his dream is possible. Wallace even ends up staying with Caitlin's family while he attends school. However, Martin will need a full scholarship to be able to afford college, and few schools are willing to give one to an international student. Martin also scores lower than he needs to on the SATs, which hurts his chances even more.

When it gets to be college acceptance season and none of the colleges that accepted Martin have offered enough money, Caitlin and her mom begin to worry that Martin's dream won't come true. Caitlin's mom makes one last attempt to contact the president of Villanova University (since she got a good feeling from the admission officers there), and at the last moment, he pulls some strings to get Martin a full-ride scholarship.

After years of writing to Caitlin from afar, Martin finally gets on a plane and goes to meet her at the Philadelphia International Airport. There, Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad greet him as if he's a member of the family, and he greets them the same way. They drive back to their home, showing him the college he'll soon attend. Then, the next day, they throw a party for him with friends and family.

Years later, Caitlin and Martin are still friends. Martin is there at Caitlin's wedding to give a speech. They meet again right before the publication of their book to reminisce. Caitlin is worried about how things might change now that their story is going to be shared with the world, but she is motivated by the hope that young people might read her book and be inspired to do similar acts of kindness.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Martin Ganda – Martin, one of the book's coauthors, is a boy from Zimbabwe who becomes Caitlin Stoicsitz's pen pal and eventual best friend. They exchange letters from the late 1990s through the early 2000s. He lives in the low-income housing development Chisamba Singles with Martin's father; Martin's mother; and his siblings Nation, Simba, Lois, and George. Martin's intelligence is one of his defining characteristics: he's almost always the top of his class and scores highly on tests (with the exception of the SATs). Many people in Martin's life, including his father and his teachers, believe that he is smart enough to go to university (which is rare in Zimbabwe compared to in the United States). He knows getting an education could help him escape poverty and live a life more similar to the lives of his cousin Sekai and her husband Alois, who are educated and comparatively wealthier. Caitlin encourages Martin to follow his dream. As the two get to know each other better through their letters, they feel more comfortable sharing the truth about their lives, and Martin reveals the extent of his family's poverty. As a result, Caitlin

begins sending him money, first in secret but eventually with the help of her Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad, who come to see Martin as something like an adopted son. Ultimately, Martin decides he wants to study at a U.S. university and meet Caitlin in person. Despite facing enormous obstacles, particularly when it comes to paying tuition costs, Martin is ultimately able to achieve his dream and get a full scholarship to Villanova. Martin's story shows that people don't need money to be generous—he pays close attention to everything Caitlin writes in her letters and always writes her back, even when it comes at great personal cost (since stamps are expensive in Zimbabwe at the time). Martin's story also shows how diligence and persistence can solve problems that seem insurmountable—his dream of studying at an American university seems impossible, but with some help from Caitlin's family, he is able to make it happen.

Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka – Caitlin, one of the book's coauthors, is a girl from Hatfield (a small town outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). Starting in the late 1990s, she becomes a long-distance pen pal and eventually a best friend to a Zimbabwean boy named Martin Ganda. Caitlin lives with Caitlin's mom, Caitlin's dad, and her brother Richie. By her own description, she's a fairly typical suburban girl who enjoys malls and roller rinks and who obsesses over crushes and has drama with her friends. When her teacher Mrs. Miller announces that the class will be writing letters to pen pals, Caitlin chooses to write to a student in Zimbabwe because she doesn't know anything about the country. As her correspondence with Martin continues, however, Caitlin begins to develop a more personal relationship with Martin, eventually coming to think of him as a brother. While Caitlin is eager to do research online about Zimbabwe, at first there are many things she doesn't understand about Martin and his life. She doesn't realize at first that, for him, it's difficult to find the money for stamps and even harder to get a **photograph** taken. When Martin finally feels comfortable opening up to Caitlin about his family's poverty, Caitlin begins sending him money, initially in secret but eventually with her whole family's support. Together, Caitlin and her family (along with workers at an embassy and administrators at Martin's school) help Martin achieve his dream of studying at a U.S. university. Caitlin's story is evidence of the value of kindness. A comparatively small sacrifice for her (the letters and money that she sends to Martin) ends up having a major impact on Martin's life. Caitlin herself is also rewarded for her generosity, as she builds a lifelong relationship with Martin that helps her find purpose in her own life. In the epilogue, she continues to be friends with Martin, inviting him to give a speech at her wedding to Dzmityr Alifrenka. Before publishing the book about her letters to Martin, Caitlin learns to accept that her story with Martin isn't just theirs anymore—it now belongs in part to everyone who reads about it.

Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville) – Anne Neville is Caitlin and Richie's mother, and she eventually becomes part of a surrogate "American family" for the Zimbabwean boy Martin Ganda. From the beginning, Anne supports Caitlin's correspondence with Martin, although she worries after she learns that Caitlin has been sending Martin money. Ultimately, however, Anne becomes a big supporter of Martin and his family, helping to pay for his education in Zimbabwe (which, due to inflation, isn't very expensive in U.S. dollars). Anne also helps Caitlin send care packages to Martin's family, one of which includes Martin's mother's first ever pair of **shoes**. When Martin wants to go to college at a U.S. university, Anne takes on a lot of responsibility for helping him—in part because she wants Caitlin to be able to focus on her own schooling, rather than having to worry about Martin's too. She even helps out Martin's friend Wallace, who is having a hard time adjusting to his new life at an American university. Ultimately, Anne is able to help Martin get a full ride to Villanova, making it possible for Martin to fly to the United States and meet his "American family" for the first time. Anne shows how parents can help their children grow by supporting their ambitions, even when these ambitions seem unusual.

Martin's Father (George Ganda) – George Ganda works in a paper mill and is the father of Martin Ganda (Caitlin's Zimbabwean pen pal), as well as Martin's siblings Nation, Simba, Lois, and George. Even living in Chisamba Singles, one of the poorest areas of Zimbabwe, George struggles to provide for his family, in part because the declining Zimbabwe economy has caused factories to replace experienced workers with younger ones who can be paid less. This eventually causes George to lose his job. George's money problems are part of what motivates him to drink, which only makes his economic situation even worse. Despite the problems his drinking causes, however, George still tries to be supportive of his children. When Caitlin starts sending money to Martin, George doesn't let his pride get in the way; he gratefully accepts the money and encourages Martin to continue his unusual relationship with Caitlin. Though George himself doesn't have many options to change his circumstances, he always encourages Martin to get an education so that Martin might one day be able to lead a different life.

Martin's Mother (Chioniso Ganda) – Chioniso is the mother of Martin Ganda (Caitlin's Zimbabwean pen pal), as well as Martin's siblings Nation, Simba, Lois, and George. Though she can be strict and often complains, Chioniso is a supportive parent who encourages Martin's dream to get an education. Chioniso comes from a very poor background and is accustomed to not having **shoes**. When Caitlin and Caitlin's mom hear about this, they send shoes as part of their next care package. Martin tells them in a letter that these shoes have helped his mother become recognized as a member of society in a way that she wasn't before. At one point, Chioniso becomes

very sick with malaria. The local clinic can't afford to help her, but luckily, Martin has money from Caitlin, which he uses to buy Chioniso's medicine on the black market. This scenario shows how important Caitlin's help is to Martin's family, and how even a simple act of kindness can have extraordinary results.

Caitlin's Dad (Richard Stoicsitz) – Richard Caitlin and Richie's father. Like his wife, Anne Neville, he becomes a surrogate parent to the Zimbabwean boy Martin Ganda. Richard has a government job that he isn't allowed to talk about with his family. This sometimes causes stress, particularly on September 11th, when he isn't answering his phone. But for the most part, Richard is there for his family, always home on time to have dinner with them. Richard's job pays well; he is able to buy a car for Caitlin before she even has her driver's license. This contrasts with Martin's father's situation: he also wants to provide for his family, but he struggles to do so, in part because of high inflation and unemployment in Zimbabwe.

Richie – Richie is Caitlin's older brother and Richard and Anne's son. Though he sometimes teases Caitlin, ultimately he supports his sister, even offering his clothes to send as donations to Caitlin's Zimbabwean pen pal, Martin. Richie struggles at first in college, eventually dropping out after he parties too hard at his first school, although eventually he reenrolls. Richie shows how even people with supportive families and other advantages can sometimes face challenges in the education system.

Wallace – Wallace is one of the first friends that Martin makes when he leaves behind his old school in Zimbabwe to attend one of the nation's most prestigious boarding schools. Like Martin, Wallace also comes from a poor area of Zimbabwe, so the two have a lot in common. Wallace manages to get accepted to study at an American university. Though he initially struggles to adapt to the new culture, Caitlin's family helps him feel more welcome in the new country. Wallace acts as proof, both for Caitlin and for Martin, that it's possible for someone from Martin's background to study in the United States, and so his story gives hope to both of them.

Nation – Nation is Martin's older brother. It was his birth that caused Martin's father and Martin's mother to get married and move to Chisamba Singles (to be near Martin's father's job in the paper mill). Like Martin, Nation is fascinated by American culture and is particularly appreciative when Caitlin sends Martin clothes and **shoes** from the United States. He is often there to help Martin, particularly when their mother gets sick with malaria and they have to take her to a far-away clinic in a wheelbarrow.

Damon – Damon is Caitlin's first serious boyfriend. Though he can sometimes be immature and jealous, the fact that his father struggles with multiple sclerosis has helped make Damon more sensitive than other boys his age. Damon's parents allow him to smoke marijuana in the house, which is very different from

Caitlin's situation and reminds her that all families are unique. Though Damon doesn't always understand Caitlin's relationship with Martin, he does ultimately show support by coming with the family on the day Martin first arrives in the U.S.

Alois – Alois is Martin's cousin Sekai's husband. He works in a bank, and when Martin goes to visit him, Martin sees a level of success that he hasn't encountered before in Zimbabwe. Alois inspires Martin to try to seek out a better life for himself. Though Alois isn't wealthy enough to pay for Martin's full education, he does help with a down payment when Martin gets accepted to a prestigious boarding school and needs the money quickly.

Mrs. Miller – Mrs. Miller is Caitlin's middle school teacher who organizes the pen pal program that pairs up Caitlin and Martin. Though Caitlin and Martin's correspondence soon leaves the classroom, Mrs. Miller represents how one teacher can make a big difference, sometimes with a lesson that might at first seem small. Her Zimbabwean counterpart is Mrs. Jaira, who plays a similar role in Martin's life.

Mrs. Jarai – Mrs. Jarai is Martin's teacher who organizes the pen pal program through which he first writes to Caitlin. Compared to Caitlin's American teacher, Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Jarai has to deal with a much larger class and has fewer resources. She isn't able to find pen pals for all her students, but because Martin is at the top of the class, he is able to get a pen pal.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sekai – Sekai is Martin's cousin and Alois's wife. She and Alois become aspirational figures to Martin because they are well-educated and well-off compared to Martin's immediate family. Their success is part of what encourages Martin to pursue his own education.

Lauren – Lauren is one of Caitlin's friends while growing up in Hatfield. Their relationship is complicated, as they frequently go from being best friends to not talking. For Caitlin, Martin represents a more stable friendship, without the complications of a relationship like the one she has with Lauren.

Simba – Simba is Martin's younger brother. He starts acting out in school after Martin's father loses his job, showing one of the effects that poverty can have on kids growing up.

Lois – Lois is Martin's younger sister and the only daughter of Martin's father and Martin's mother. Inspired by Martin's own success in school, Lois herself grows up planning to one day study at a U.S. university.

Dzmitry Alifrenka – Dzmitry Alifrenka is the man that Caitlin marries in the book's epilogue. Martin is there to give a speech at their wedding, signifying how his bond with Caitlin has continued even after their letters to each other stopped.

Carola – Carola is Caitlin's German cousin, who seems strange to Caitlin but who is actually very popular in school. She helps

Caitlin begin to realize that the world is bigger than her small, suburban hometown.

Matt Johnson – Matt a boy in Hatfield who plays soccer and who is one of Caitlin’s first big crushes.

George – George is Martin’s youngest brother, named after Martin’s father.

Stephie – Stephie is the German exchange student whom Caitlin and her family host.

TERMS

Colonialism – Colonialism is when a group of people exert political and economic control over another group of people who live in a “colony” territory, often to extract the colony’s natural resources. Though colonialism has existed in some form for much of history, today it is often condemned as unjust and associated with racism, leading to “decolonization” movements in many former colonies.

Shona – The Shona are a people that make up the largest demographic group in Zimbabwe (a group that includes **Martin Ganda**’s family). Shona is also the name of the language that many Shona people speak, particularly in their homes, although English is also widely spoken in Zimbabwe.

Sadza – Sadza is a thick cornmeal porridge and a staple food in Zimbabwe. It’s affordable, which means that poor families like **Martin**’s frequently eat it (unlike **chicken**, which is reserved for very special occasions).

poverty and the unstable political situation in Zimbabwe, but exchanging letters and photos brings them closer together and serves as the foundation for what becomes a lifelong friendship.

As their friendship deepens, Caitlin realizes how difficult life is for Martin and his family. She feels guilty that her parents can afford to buy her a car and that she eats **chicken** on weeknights, whereas Martin’s family can barely afford to pay for a small shack to live in, and they only eat chicken on Christmas, if then. Caitlin decides to start sending over money that she’s earned through babysitting. This money, which is a relatively small sacrifice for Caitlin, changes Martin’s whole world, at one point even helping Martin’s mother survive malaria. By the end of the memoir, Caitlin has convinced others to extend kindness and generosity to Martin too—not just her whole family, but even people outside her family (like the staff at the U.S. embassy in Zimbabwe and the president of Villanova University), who all help fulfill Martin’s dream of studying at an American university. Martin repays this kindness by always writing back to Caitlin, no matter how difficult it is, and by doing his best in school so that he’ll one day get to meet her and thank her in person. Caitlin, Martin, and their co-author Liz Welch depict how small acts of kindness can have a big impact, laying the groundwork for larger acts of kindness later and even forming a basis for lifelong relationships. They show that while it may not be possible for individuals to solve large-scale problems like poverty and political instability, it is still possible for individuals to effect real change through kindness, and this kindness may end up being “contagious.”



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY

I Will Always Write Back is a story about how acts of kindness and generosity can change a life—in particular the lives of the authors, long-distance pen pals Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda. The kind deeds that Caitlin and Martin do for each other start small but escalate over the course of the book. Caitlin (who is American) begins their correspondence by doing research about Zimbabwe (where Martin is from), going above and beyond what her teacher requires her to do. For instance, as the two begin writing to each other more regularly, Martin makes sacrifices to please Caitlin, working to pay for stamps and getting an expensive **photo** taken of himself that he can send to her. These are both difficult tasks due to Martin’s family’s



FRIENDSHIP

At the center of *I Will Always Write Back* is the friendship between Caitlin and Martin, which spans continents and develops over the course of years.

This friendship has unexpected benefits, enriching not only their own lives, but also their family and community members’ lives. Caitlin and Martin’s relationship begins as something unexceptional: an exchange of pleasantries in letters written for a school assignment. At first, they know little about each other beyond stereotypes. Caitlin has never even heard of Zimbabwe and incorrectly assumes that Martin and his family live just like the Black people she’s met in Pennsylvania—she knows nothing of the political and economic instability in the country at the time (the late 1990s). Likewise, Martin simply imagines the U.S. as the land of Coca-Cola and Hulk Hogan. He has rarely seen white people in real life, and even in his imagination, he can’t picture a family as wealthy as Caitlin’s. But as the two continue writing to each other long after the assignment ends, their relationship deepens, and they feel comfortable sharing more personal details about their lives.

Both friends learn surprising things about each other: for example, Caitlin can’t believe that Martin’s family lives in such a

small house, and Martin can't believe that Caitlin treats a pet rabbit like a member of her family. Despite these big differences, however, they also find that they have surprising things in common: they both like the Spice Girls and Nike shoes, for example. This shows that even people on opposite sides of the world, from vastly different economic situations can find common ground and enjoy similar things. Their friendship also helps both Caitlin, Martin, and their respective families and communities come to better understand the world outside of their own immediate surroundings. Moreover, their friendship is what leads Caitlin's family to help Martin survive hardships and realize his dream of attending an American university. Some people around them, like Caitlin's friend Lauren, think that Caitlin and Martin's relationship only makes sense if it's romantic. As Caitlin and Martin demonstrate in their letters, however, not all deep relationships are necessarily romantic. The co-authors of *I Will Always Write Back* show that cultivating friendships can be mutually beneficial, helping people become more open-minded, express their feelings, and discover and achieve their life goals. Their book demonstrates that even people who lead very different lives and/or live far apart can form meaningful relationships, so long as they're committed to understanding and supporting each other.



FAMILY

I Will Always Write Back is a book about two biological families—Caitlin's in Pennsylvania and Martin's in Zimbabwe—but it is also a book about found families. As the co-author pen pals Caitlin and Martin get to know each other on a deeper level, they begin to see each other as brother and sister. While some parents might disapprove of such a long-distance friendship or view it with suspicion, both Caitlin and Martin's parents encourage their children to keep up their correspondence. As Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad become more invested in Martin's life, they increasingly view him like a son, buying clothes for him and eventually even helping him get accepted to college. When Martin finally meets them at the end of the book, he refers to them as "Mom" and "Dad." For economic reasons, Martin's own parents aren't able to provide the same level of support for Caitlin, but they always show gratitude for her gifts and proudly share Caitlin's generosity with those around them. Families in Zimbabwe tend to live in more communal settings than in the United States, sharing things that would be considered private property in the U.S., and this more open-ended concept of family and community defines Caitlin and Martin's relationship. The co-authors of *I Will Always Write Back* demonstrate how family support can help young people achieve their full potential and how "family" is a concept that isn't strictly limited to a person's blood relatives.



EDUCATION

Much of *I Will Always Write Back* deals with Martin's struggle to pay for his education and Caitlin's efforts to help him, whether it's the tuition for Martin's local school in Zimbabwe, for the exclusive boarding school he transfers to, or for the American university that he ultimately ends up attending. Despite the enormous costs of education for Martin—who lives in Zimbabwe in the 1990s and early 2000s, when inflation is extreme and the Zimbabwe dollar plummets relative to the U.S. dollar—the benefits are potentially even greater. Many people in Martin's life, from Martin's father to his headmasters in school to Caitlin, believe that education will give Martin the opportunity to escape poverty and live a more prosperous life than his parents ever could.

While the benefits of education are clear for Martin, other characters have a more ambivalent experience: Caitlin's brother drops out of college after partying too much, and Martin's Zimbabwean friend Wallace finds himself alienated from the drinking culture at his American university. Even Martin experiences the shortcomings of education: many American universities that claim to be places for global learning nevertheless make it difficult for all but the wealthiest international students to attend, and these universities continue to use admissions metrics like the SATs that poorly capture the potential of students like Martin. Still, *I Will Always Write Back* is ultimately a book about the transformative power of education—after all, the entire story begins with a school assignment. Caitlin, Martin, and co-author Liz Welch take a pragmatic view of education in their book, arguing that while a good education is costly (sometimes prohibitively expensive), the social and economic benefits can be worth it, particularly for bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs Caitlin and Martin send each other represent how different their lives are, but also how their friendship transcends those differences. The photos highlight the extreme economic disparity between their families: photographs are commonplace for Caitlin, whereas Martin must scrimp and save to afford having a family portrait taken. When Caitlin first sends a photo to Martin, it shows that she wants to have a deeper relationship with him than just a school project—she wants to show him her true self. Martin is eager to return the gesture. He goes to great lengths to get a photo of himself because he knows that a photo will

communicate things about his identity that words never could, proving that he also wants to get to know Caitlin better. The first photos the two exchange are more formal and posed, but eventually Martin feels comfortable sending a more candid photo of him with his family. This photo helps Caitlin realize the extent of Martin's family's poverty—so different from her own upper-middle-class upbringing—and she begins to better understand where he's coming from in his letters. The photos they exchange thus show how people from across the world can connect with each other, while also highlighting the different experiences of people in wealthy countries versus people in developing countries.



SHOES

Shoes represent economic status, showing how an item that people take for granted in one country could have a life-changing impact on people from another country. Martin's mother grew up so impoverished that she isn't used to wearing shoes, which are a visible sign of all the other nice things she didn't have access to. Caitlin is astounded to learn about this, and shortly after, she sends shoes as part of a care package to Martin's family. Martin and his mother are deeply appreciative: Martin tells Caitlin that the shoes have helped his mother become recognized as a member of society. People without shoes (i.e., people who are visibly poor) face discrimination, even in rural communities like Martin's where no one is wealthy. Caitlin's desire to provide shoes for Martin and his family represents her growing awareness of her relative privilege, and the shoes are a physical embodiment of her desire to protect and care for her friend.



CHICKEN

Chicken represents how different two countries' cultures and economies can be. For Caitlin, chicken is a typical weeknight meal, but for Martin, it is a special Christmas dinner—if his family can even afford it then. Learning about how special chicken is to Martin's family helps Caitlin to better understand the economic conditions that Martin lives in. Chicken also shows how scarcity can make something more desirable: Martin values chicken much more than Caitlin because he's only able to have it on rare occasions, whereas Caitlin can have it whenever she wants. The abundance of chicken for Caitlin makes her take it for granted, showing how people in wealthier countries are often unaware of how good they have it, particularly compared to people from poorer countries. When Caitlin gives money to Martin's family, they celebrate, showing how a small gift from one person (i.e., Caitlin gifting her spare baby-sitting money) can have a big impact on the recipient. Notably, when Martin's family finally buys chicken, they share it with other people in their community, emphasizing the idea that "kindness is contagious."



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *I Will Always Write Back* published in 2016.

Part 1: Caitlin, September 1997 Quotes

●● I'd never heard of Zimbabwe. But something about the way the name looked on the blackboard intrigued me. It was exotic, and difficult to pronounce.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Martin Ganda, Mrs. Miller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes at the very beginning of the book, introduces one of the co-authors: Caitlin Stoicsitz. Caitlin describes herself as an average teenager from outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although Caitlin will become pen pals and eventually best friends with Martin Ganda, a boy from Zimbabwe, at the beginning of the story, she doesn't know much about the world beyond her small suburb, especially not about Zimbabwe. At first, Caitlin is simply attracted to Zimbabwe because it seems different from all the European countries that her teacher, Mrs. Miller, has written on the board. Caitlin is used to fitting in with the other students. She is afraid of doing things that will make her stand out. But in spite of this fear, or perhaps even because of it, Caitlin feels called to choose Zimbabwe and makes a conscious decision to be different from the other students in her class. Though this is a relatively small act of bravery, it will have massive consequences that affect not only Caitlin's life, but also the lives of people as far away as Africa. Caitlin's story shows that it's worthwhile to overcome fears about being different and that sometimes the benefits go way beyond what anyone could have predicted.

Part 1: Martin, October 1997 Quotes

●● Everyone started chattering. We all knew and loved America. It was the land of Coca-Cola and the WWF, World Wrestling Federation.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes from the first chapter by co-author and co-narrator Martin Ganda, describes what he knew about the United States before he started communicating with his pen pal from Pennsylvania, Caitlin Stoicsitz. On the one hand, Martin's knowledge about America is comically limited. He only knows about the most commercial, larger-than-life aspects of the country. While Coca-Cola and WWF are genuine parts of American culture, they also do little to reflect the reality of how a teenaged girl like Caitlin lives in suburban Pennsylvania. Still, while Martin's knowledge of the United States is limited, it is also far beyond what Caitlin knows about Zimbabwe when she writes her first letter. From the beginning, then, an asymmetrical relationship is established between Martin and Caitlin. Because of the United States's outsized influence on world affairs, particularly compared to Zimbabwe, Martin will always know things about Caitlin that she doesn't necessarily know about him, at least until they get to know each other better.


photos are hard to acquire in Zimbabwe. Photos are something that Caitlin takes for granted and slips into a letter without even thinking, but for Martin, they are something precious, showing how the cultures of the United States and Zimbabwe differ, particularly economically. Caitlin is willing to send expensive photos from a professional photographer while also sending casual, candid photos. Martin, however, must think carefully about each photo he sends. This is partly why the first few photos he sends are very formal, in a way that is strange at first to Caitlin (since it seems to contrast with his personality), but which makes more sense to her once she better understands Zimbabwean culture and how valuable photos are there.

Part 1: Caitlin, January 1998 Quotes

☝☝ The next line really cracked me up: Have you heard the one from Spicy Girls, which says friendship never ends?

I laughed out loud when he called them "Spicy," and hoped that the line would be our motto.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka, Martin Ganda (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis



The quote, which describes Caitlin reading one of Martin's early letters to her, helps illustrate both what they have in common and what separates them. Despite living on opposite sides of the world, Martin and Caitlin have some of the same pop cultural reference points. Appropriately enough, the Spice Girls song that they both know has a line about how friendship never ends. This helps illustrate that the reason why some pieces of pop culture have such a global reach is that they deal with universally relatable concepts, like friendship. Martin, however, accidentally calls the Spice Girls by the wrong name. This shows that, although he is a fluent English speaker, he still doesn't understand some aspects of American/European popular culture in the way that someone born in the U.S. or the U.K. might. In this case, his misunderstanding is humorous and helps draw him and Caitlin closer together, but at other times in the story, his lack of natural cultural fluency will present a challenge, particularly when he is trying to apply to study at U.S. universities.


Part 1: Martin, November 1997 Quotes

☝☝ When I unfolded the letter, a small snapshot fell onto my desk.

I could not believe my pen pal would send me something so precious. Photos are very rare and quite expensive in Zimbabwe.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka, Mrs. Jarai

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis


This passage describes Martin's reaction to the first time that Caitlin includes a photo of herself in a letter she sends to him. Caitlin includes the photo perhaps because she believes that showing what she looks like is the best way to reveal her true self and signal that she is looking to form a deeper relationship that goes beyond a school-sponsored assignment. Martin is eager to reciprocate, but the problem is that Caitlin has asked him for a photograph in return, and

Part 1: Martin, April 1998 Quotes

☝☝ The next evening, with a full belly, I wrote Caitlin a letter. I thanked her for the very generous dollar bill and told her I would send her something in return soon. I considered sending her a Zimbabwean dollar but knew that was one day's worth of sadza. So instead, I made the only promise that I knew I could keep: that I would always write back, no matter what.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 52


Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes right after Martin has received a letter from Caitlin that contains a dollar bill. This dollar bill is a very small sacrifice for Caitlin, who includes it simply as a sort of novelty so that Martin can see what it looks like, but for Martin, the dollar bill ends up being a serious windfall. The strength of the American dollar vs. the Zimbabwean dollar symbolizes more broadly how America has more wealth and privilege than Zimbabwe. *Sadza*, the staple food that Martin and his family eat, especially when money is tight, represents subsistence. On the one hand, *sadza* keeps Martin's family fed and inspires local pride, being an unofficial national dish of Zimbabwe. Not having enough *sadza* means hard times, and Martin doesn't want to think of what would happen if his family ever couldn't afford *sadza*. Still, despite its value, there is also a downside to *sadza*. Because it is so familiar, it isn't an exciting meal to Martin, and he doesn't look forward to it in the same way he does for rare treats like chicken. The value of the American dollar helps illustrate why Martin's family largely lives in this subsistence style of living, while Caitlin's family has more room to afford luxuries.

Part 2: Caitlin, December 1998 Quotes

☝☝ It was strange, because even though we had never met, Martin was the only person I felt I could be totally honest with. I never worried that he would judge or tease. On the contrary, I could tell Martin whatever was happening in my life, knowing he'd always take my side, no matter what.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Martin Ganda, Martin's Father (George Ganda)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a moment where Caitlin is reflecting on all the drama in her personal life, which sometimes feels overwhelming to her, and other times feels totally unimportant. She fights with people who used to be friends and has crushes and experiences other coming-of-age milestones that young suburban teenagers often go through. Martin represents an escape from all that, in part because he's so far away, but also because Martin is genuinely fascinated to hear about Caitlin's life (because it is so unfamiliar to him). Whereas Martin helps distract Caitlin from the complicated relationships she has with people at her school, Caitlin likewise helps distract Martin from the problems his family faces, like the fact that his father could lose his job any day. While it might seem that the two of them don't have much in common, in fact it is the differences between them that help them empathize with each other and get something valuable out of their correspondence.

Part 2: Martin, January 1999 Quotes

☝☝ Toward the end of 1998, things really began to disintegrate for my family. I was just about to finish Form Two, the equivalent of eighth grade in America. Nation and I began working after school as well as weekends in order to help feed our family. My father's paycheck was never enough. It was rough. Worse, I could see how it affected my father. He was no longer singing when he came home, if he came home at all. Some nights he'd creep in late, well after we had all gone to sleep. I'd wake up, not from any noise but from the sweet, rancid smell of Chibuku.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Nation, Martin's Father (George Ganda), Martin's Mother (Chioniso Ganda)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

The quote comes from a passage where Martin is remembering his family. He weaves together the story of Zimbabwe's declining economy at the time with the story of his own family, showing how broader political events can have an impact on individuals' lives. Martin doesn't attempt

to paint his father as a perfect man or as a completely innocent victim. He knows that his father drinks too much and that this is a contributing factor to Martin's family's financial instability. Still, in this passage and elsewhere, Martin looks at the issue in more depth. He notes that his father's drinking seems directly related to his father's inability to make enough money at his job to provide for his family. Without excusing or dismissing his father's drinking, Martin nevertheless shows that the drinking is ultimately a symptom of much bigger economic forces. The strong smell of Chibuku at the end suggests that Martin's father needs a lot of alcohol to dull his pain, in turn suggesting that Martin's family is truly in need of help financially.

Part 2: Caitlin, May 1999 Quotes

☝ I continued to check the mail every single day for weeks. And then one day, I saw an envelope so completely covered with stamps it barely had space for my name and address. Martin was alive! I ripped it open, thrilled. But when I unfolded the actual letter, I gasped. My friend was writing to me on trash.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Martin Ganda

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which comes after Caitlin has been waiting a long time for a letter from Martin with no response, represents the first time that Caitlin truly realizes that her friend lives in poverty. Caitlin's anxiety at first about not receiving a letter shows the difficulty of maintaining a long-distance pen pal relationship. On some level, Caitlin is aware that life is dangerous for Martin. Still, this danger remains abstract to her, and she is more worried about dramatic actions like terrorist attacks, when in fact the bigger problem Martin faces is a lack of money and food for his family. Martin has tried to hide his family's poverty from Caitlin, perhaps because he believes (correctly) that it would shock her. Still, eventually he reaches the point where the only way to continue their correspondence is to use an old ice cream wrapper as a letter (since he can't afford stationery). Martin decides that it is better to let Caitlin know about his poverty than to risk ending their friendship. In the end, Caitlin overcomes her surprise and only feels a stronger connection to Martin, showing that there are benefits to being honest, particularly as one gets to know a person better.


Part 3: Martin, June 1999 Quotes

☝ A lesser man may have been threatened by Caitlin's generosity. Here was a fourteen-year-old girl sending us more money than my father made in several months. My father only had love and respect for Caitlin. Her letters had always been precious to me. Now they were also crucial to my whole family. We were on a ship that was sinking, huddled at the tip before it went under. Caitlin's gift was a lifeboat.

My mother was afraid to keep this much money in our house. It made us a target in these difficult times.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka, Martin's Father (George Ganda), Martin's Mother (Chioniso Ganda)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 124



Explanation and Analysis

This passage from Martin describes his family's reaction to the money that Caitlin has recently sent them (because she just learned that Martin and his family live in a greater state of poverty than she realized). Previously, Martin described how the economic instability in Zimbabwe has had a negative effect on his father, pushing him to drink excessively as a way of coping with it. Here, however, Martin shows that even in the worst times, his father is able to hold on to more positive traits, like humility and gratitude. Caitlin doesn't realize how genuinely life-saving her gifts are for Martin and his family.

Still, sometimes generosity can introduce complications, and in this case, Martin's mother's fear that all of Caitlin's money could make Martin's family a target for thieves is not unfounded. Later, some of Caitlin's money will actually be stolen out of one of Martin's letters. Poverty can make people desperate, and though Martin's family gets along well with their neighbors, they also know that poverty can force hard choices and make people do things that they wouldn't otherwise do. Notably, Caitlin doesn't stop giving gifts, even in spite of these difficulties, and the story makes it clear that it is worth trying to overcome these obstacles.

☝ Alois was even more put together than my uncle. He wore a suit and tie, like the managers at my father's work, but he was only in his mid-twenties. He greeted me with a firm handshake and a broad smile, then introduced me to several of his colleagues before taking me to the tea station.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Alois, Sekai

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from when Martin leaves his home to go visit his cousin Sekai and her husband, Alois. He hasn't seen them in a while and is surprised by how they look and act, which seems to suggest a level of wealth and education beyond what anyone in Martin's immediate family has. The suit and tie that Alois wears shows that he works in a white-collar setting. Martin has lived a relatively sheltered life up until that point, and so seeing the way that other people live opens him up to other possibilities of what he could do with his own life. One of the patterns Martin notices is that many of the most well-off and successful people he meets got to be that way because of their education. Martin is impressed by his well-dressed, sophisticated relatives, and he sees them as evidence that education is a goal worth pursuing. By seeing the benefits of education firsthand, Martin gets a clearer picture of his own goals and is able to eventually start his plan to study abroad at a U.S. university. Alois and Sekai support him in this goal, giving advice, and at one point even helping financially.

another letter for Caitlin's parents, asking them for money to help continue his education. While Caitlin had previously kept parts of her relationship with Martin a secret (including the fact that she was sending him money), it is no longer possible to do so. Caitlin fears telling her parents more about Martin because she thinks it may cause them to worry—and perhaps even suspect Martin of running a scam. She recognizes that from the outside, their friendship must look unusual, and as always, Caitlin feels uneasy whenever she doesn't fit in with the crowd. While in some ways Caitlin is correct—her parents do worry after finding out that she was sending money to Martin—her parents very quickly come to understand things from Caitlin's perspective. Ultimately, Caitlin being honest with her parents helps begin the process that will have them welcoming Martin into their family as a surrogate son, proving that, while honesty may create discomfort at first, it can also lead to deeper relationships in the long term.

Part 3: Martin, November 1999 Quotes

☝ And then, like magic, a letter arrived.

This one, however, had been ripped and taped back up in a crude way. Someone had written in capital letters *INSPECTED FOR CONTRABAND* across Caitlin's beautiful penmanship. It felt like a violation.

Part 3: Caitlin, November 1999 Quotes

☝ Reading that letter brought tears to my eyes. He was so proud. He had never asked *me* for help. Asking my parents for help was probably one of the hardest things for him to have to do. He did not want to burden me. He knew that I would get sick worrying about him in such need. But there it was, written on paper, a huge SOS. My parents knew I had a pen pal in Zimbabwe, but they did not know how close we had become. That evening, I decided to tell them everything. It was the only way I could truly help Martin.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Martin Ganda, Caitlin's Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes shortly after Caitlin receives a letter from Martin revealing that he has been kicked out of school because he can't afford tuition. Included with the letter is

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka, Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes shortly after Caitlin's mom learns from the Zimbabwean embassy that it isn't a good idea to send loose money in letters to Martin because there is a chance it will be intercepted and stolen. As if to prove the point, Martin finds one of Caitlin's letters "inspected for contraband," which seems to mean that someone looked inside for money, took it, then sloppily sent the letter along to Martin. The whole episode illustrates how, in spite of Caitlin's idealism, sometimes good intentions alone aren't enough to help someone, since the real world often brings unforeseen complications. It also illustrates how economic turmoil can cause society to break down—the whole reason why the mail becomes less reliable is because people in Zimbabwe are struggling economically, and this has made some people desperate enough to turn to theft to survive. The big capital letters from the inspector written over


Caitlin's careful handwriting symbolize how good intentions can be overwhelmed by other factors.

Part 3: Martin, January 2000 Quotes

☝️ Thanks to Caitlin, we ate chicken for Christmas that year, a miracle considering what our friends and neighbors were experiencing. In Zimbabwe, if you have food, you share it, so our neighbors ate chicken with us.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 162


Explanation and Analysis


After struggling to send Martin money (because of mail theft), Caitlin finally manages to get him some, and in this passage, Martin and his family celebrate by buying chicken for Christmas dinner that year. Chicken is one of the major symbols in the book, and it means different things to Martin and to Caitlin. For Martin, it is a special treat that his family usually only gets at Christmas (most other days of the year, they eat the staple meal *sadza*, which gives them nutrients but isn't particularly exciting for them). The fact that his family has gone without chicken for the past couple Christmases indicates a disruption of normal life—it is a sign his family is increasingly struggling to get by economically. By contrast, chicken is just a weeknight meal for Caitlin. Its relative commonness for her helps to illustrate the comparative abundance that a middle-class family in the United States enjoys. The fact that Martin's family is eating chicken for Christmas again suggests that Caitlin has helped Martin's family overcome their recent financial difficulties and get back to the way things were—and perhaps even on track to a better life in the future.

Part 3: Martin, January 2000 (2) Quotes

☝️ Thank you for your effort, love, and time. Thank you for the shoes you gave us. My mom, I repeat, is now counted as a human in society.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka, Martin's Mother (Chioniso Ganda)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from a thank-you letter that Martin writes to Caitlin. Caitlin has just sent a very large care package meant for Martin's whole family. In it there are lots of clothes and other supplies, but perhaps the most noteworthy item is a pair of shoes for Martin's mother. Martin's mother grew up in a poor region of Zimbabwe—even poor compared to where they currently live in Chisamba Singles—and so she got used to going through life without shoes. The fact that she didn't wear shoes meant that other people around her could easily tell that she was poor, even for a rural area. This caused some people to look down on her—perhaps even to regard her as somehow less human. With the new shoes, however, she will no longer face this discrimination. This is what Martin means when he says that his mother will now be “counted as a human in society.” The shoes will provide additional comfort and safety to Martin's mother's feet, but they are perhaps even more important as a status symbol that will help her be treated with more respect when she goes out in public.

Part 4: Martin, January 2001 Quotes

☝️ “You're too late! We're already filled up,” he said. “Besides, there are many qualified students here who need to get in; we don't even have space for them.”

“I've come all the way from Chisamba Singles to speak to you,” I countered. “Please, give me a chance.”

That quieted him.

“I have an uncle that lives near there,” he said. “That's a tough place.”

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes from a passage where Martin tries to get admitted to an elite boarding school in Zimbabwe by talking directly to the headmaster. The headmaster initially tells him there isn't space for him, but Martin persists and is

ultimately able to get a conditional acceptance—he just needs to find a way to pay the tuition. One of the recurring themes in Martin’s life is the power of stories. Many people, particularly in education, turn him away because he can’t afford to pay, but once they hear his story, they are often more sympathetic. In this case, the headmaster becomes more sympathetic after learning that Martin comes from Chisamba Singles, an area with a reputation for being poor. The book shows that when it comes to education, there are no easy answers: the economic realities often make it impossible for schools to afford to give an adequate education to all students who deserve to be there. Still, Martin’s story also shows that, while the bureaucratic challenges of getting an education are often extreme, there are also individuals who can help cut through the bureaucracy and provide a more human touch.

Part 4: Caitlin, March 2001 Quotes

☛ Damon was different from the guys I dated in middle school. He was more mature, and sensitive. I understood why when I met his dad. He had MS and was in a wheelchair as a result. That meant he needed full-time care to do anything from eat to go to the bathroom. Damon’s mom took care of his dad, and basically let her kids fend for themselves.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Damon, Caitlin’s Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Caitlin’s Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Caitlin’s experience of meeting her first serious boyfriend, Damon. Although some of Caitlin’s friends tease her about being in love with Martin, she views him as a brother from the very beginning, and this means that as she goes through puberty, her crushes and boyfriends are people from her local area. Unlike Martin, Damon comes from basically the same cultural background as Caitlin, but it is perhaps because of these similarities that his differences are so interesting to her. Just like Martin, Damon helps Caitlin learn that her ideas about the world are limited by her own experiences, and that other people’s lives might look nothing like her own. For Caitlin, one of the main features of her life in Hatfield is that her parents are very supportive and protective. With Damon, she sees that other people have different relationships with their parents. On the one hand, Damon faces a lot of challenges, since he

is forced to care for his dad in a way that Caitlin never has to care for her own dad. Still, this also gives Damon a level of freedom and independence that is exciting to Caitlin. Ultimately, Damon shows that sometimes you don’t have to look abroad to learn about people with different lives; sometimes, you learn surprising things about people who live right next door.

Part 4: Caitlin, April 2001 Quotes

☛ The day after my birthday, my mom took me out of school to go get my learner’s permit. Damon met me at the DMV—he had skipped school, but lied to my mom when she asked him why he had the day off.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Damon, Martin Ganda, Caitlin’s Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Caitlin’s Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 262



Explanation and Analysis

This passage, about Caitlin going to the DMV to get a learner’s permit (for the car that her dad bought her last Christmas), continues the theme of Caitlin learning to become more independent. Although Caitlin is in many ways defined by the most unusual aspect of her life—her ongoing pen pal relationship with Martin—this passage makes it clear that she also went through many of the standard coming-of-age rituals for a middle-class American teenager from her era. Caitlin doesn’t rebel against her parents to the extent some teenagers do—in fact, her relationship with Martin will eventually bring the whole family together. Still, she learns new ways to be independent. A car symbolizes autonomy and the ability to make your own decisions about where to go. The fact that Damon lies to Caitlin’s parents shows that, in spite of Caitlin’s openness on some topics, there are still elements of her life that she hides from her parents. Caitlin’s experiences with learning to drive mirror Martin’s experiences of going away to a new boarding school, with both experiences illustrating how growing up often involves teenagers becoming increasingly independent from their parents.

Part 4: Martin, July 2001 Quotes

Hours later, a nurse confirmed it was malaria—thankfully not cerebral. She needed IV fluids immediately. She was so dehydrated that she was at risk of dying without them. But the hospital couldn't afford to supply any medicine. Instead, the nurse told us what we needed, and then we had to secure it. "There is a man outside wearing a blue shirt," she said. "He sells IVs."

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Nation, Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka, Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville), Martin's Mother (Chioniso Ganda)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Martin's mother suddenly becomes sick, and Martin and his brother Nation have to carry her in a wheelbarrow over a long distance to the local clinic. The nurse gives them bad news that reflects the state of Zimbabwean medicine at the time: while they can diagnose Martin's mother's condition as malaria, the hospital doesn't have the budget or the resources to give her what she needs to recover. Instead, the supply of life-saving medical resources is managed by a black market. Though the nurse's response may seem heartless, it reflects the dire state of Zimbabwe's economy at the time, which put hospitals in difficult positions. Martin's experience at the hospital makes it clear in stark terms that sometimes living or dying is just about having enough money, and that those who can't afford treatment are sometimes out of luck. Fortunately, Martin still has money from one of Caitlin's gifts. While this passage demonstrates the dire consequences of poverty, it also shows how generosity, like Caitlin's gift, can often mean more to the receiver than the giver could have ever predicted.

Part 5: Caitlin, September 2001 Quotes

I started connecting all the pieces: My dad worked for the government; he was at a military base; the Pentagon had been hit. I jumped to the impossible notion: My dad may be dead. I shook my head. That was preposterous. But then I remembered the fire I saw in the sky on the TV earlier that morning. That seemed impossible too.

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Richie, Damon, Caitlin's Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Caitlin's

Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, when Caitlin begins to worry that something might have happened to her dad (who works for the government and who hasn't been answering cell phone calls). The passage is significant, because it's one of the first times in the story that Caitlin has had to worry about her parents, instead of the other way around. Other characters have had to worry about their parents at an earlier age—Martin, for example, takes on some of the burden related to his father's precarious job situation and his excessive drinking, while Damon is forced to deal with the consequences of his father's multiple sclerosis. For Caitlin, this moment of worrying about her parents comes relatively late, and it ultimately ends up being a false alarm. Still, even though Caitlin's dad is fine, Caitlin comes away from the experience with a better understanding of how people like Martin and Damon must feel about their parents and their responsibilities toward them.

Part 5: Martin, June 2002 Quotes

I was surprised to receive a letter from Caitlin's mom. In it she offered to help me navigate the complicated American college admission process. I was so happy to hear this. It was further proof that Caitlin was not the only angel in this family.

Anne asked me if I had ever heard of the SATs. I had, in fact, because my good friend Wallace had taken them earlier that year. He, too, was planning to go to school in the States that September.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka, Caitlin's Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Martin expresses interest in studying at a U.S. university and Caitlin's mom responds by telling him more about what the process involves. The passage is a turning point because it marks the beginning of a relationship between Martin and Caitlin's mom that is



independent from Caitlin. Caitlin's mom and dad will begin to see Martin as a sort of surrogate son, and in response, Martin will begin to see Caitlin's mom and dad as his "American parents." As with any parent-child relationship, one of Caitlin's mom's most important duties is making sure that her "son" Martin is properly educated. Though it is a big burden and responsibility for her to try to organize the education of someone in another country, this responsibility actually helps bring her closer to Martin and vice versa. The relationship between Martin and Caitlin's parents shows that going to great lengths to help someone can be one of the best ways to foster a deeper relationship.

Part 6: Caitlin, June 2003 Quotes

☝ Today was different.

"We'd better start thinking about how to break it to him," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda, Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka, Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 355

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the moment in the story when, after months of struggling to get Martin accepted with a full scholarship to a U.S. university, Caitlin's mom suggests that it might be time to admit defeat. Caitlin herself had already gotten discouraged, so Caitlin's mom took on a greater share of the responsibility, in order to let her daughter focus more on her own college admissions process. As a parent, Caitlin's mom was hoping to shield not just Caitlin from disappointment, but also her surrogate son Martin. What this passage reveals, however, is that sometimes it simply isn't possible for a parent to protect their children from harsh realities. While Martin's education story ultimately has a happy ending, this passage is a reminder not only of the real struggles that he and Caitlin's family faced along the way, but also of the fact that not every student is as lucky as Martin, and some have to find ways to cope with being disappointed.

Part 6: Martin, July 2003 Quotes

☝ The first line of the email was like rocket fuel:

We are pleased to offer you a full scholarship beginning with the 2003-2004 academic year.

It propelled me from my seat. The breath I'd been holding for the past few months came barreling out of my mouth as I shouted, "Yesssssss!"

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka, Caitlin's Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 359

Explanation and Analysis

After a low point, when it seemed like Martin's dream of attending a U.S. university might finally be dead, Martin suddenly receives a new email from Villanova, and this quote comes from when he first opens it. Readers already know from Caitlin's chapter that Martin will receive a scholarship, but in his own chapter, Martin depicts his emotions at the time, in order to convey how truly exciting it was to finally see the culmination of all his hard work in school. Martin's overjoyed reaction helps really convey why education can be such an exciting thing. Many young people in the U.S. simply take it for granted that they can go to college, but Martin sees things from an outsider's perspective, and his fresh perspective helps illuminate why education can be so meaningful. His lack of privilege growing up helps him to better appreciate things that are often dismissed or overlooked by people from more privileged backgrounds.

Part 6: Martin, August 15, 2003 Quotes

☝ I felt Caitlin squeeze my hand, and I squeezed back. After six years of imagining what it would be like to see her, to hug her, to hear her laugh, to hold her hand, here she was, my best friend from afar, now standing right next to me.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifrenka

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the very end of the main story, right after Caitlin and Martin's dramatic in-person meeting at the

Philadelphia airport. Caitlin and Martin’s meeting represents the culmination of what all their letters have been building towards. It shows that, in fact, their relationship wasn’t just about words or gifts—it was always about two real people getting to know each other. The fact that Martin and Caitlin can finally touch shows that they have found a way to overcome not just all the physical geographic barriers between them but also the less visible social barriers, such as class (since Martin’s poverty almost prevented him from coming to a U.S. university). Physically touching someone symbolizes closeness and trust, which is why Martin emphasizes how astounding it was to touch Caitlin’s hand. After ups and downs and reflections on the challenges of trying to do good and be generous, the ending of the story is entirely joyful, emphasizing how Caitlin and Martin overcame the obstacles in their way to achieve an outcome that was happy for both of them.

Epilogue: Martin, March 5, 2008 Quotes

☝☝ Watching him exchange vows with Caitlin earlier that day, I got a bit choked up. Caitlin and I had already shared so many milestones—and still have many ahead. I did not know then that I would go on to do my MBA at Duke, or that Caitlin would finish her nursing degree, as she had planned since she was sixteen or give birth to a beautiful baby girl. All I knew was that we both had witnessed so many of each other’s dreams come true.

Related Characters: Martin Ganda (speaker), Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka, Dzmitry Alifirenka

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes from an epilogue set several years after the main story, details how Martin and Caitlin’s relationship has evolved since they first met in person. While the most exciting part of their story has already reached its conclusion, they anticipate that their audience might be wondering how their relationship fared after meeting in person—if, after the amazement at seeing each other wore off, they would still keep in touch. Martin assures the audience that he and Caitlin remain friends and have continued to experience major life milestones together. While there is some wistfulness to his recollections, and perhaps an acknowledgment that the responsibilities of his adult life haven’t allowed him to have the same sort of friendships that he did as a young person,

he ultimately remains thankful to have met Caitlin and grateful for the pen pal program that brought them together. Martin’s epilogue emphasizes that while adulthood changes people, it is still possible to hold on to core values like kindness and generosity, which means that good friends from childhood and teen years can go on to become good friends for life.

Epilogue: Caitlin, October 2015 Quotes

☝☝ I have no idea what any of these young people will do with the emotions our story stirred in each of them—but I am excited by the possibilities. It’s why I wanted to write this book. Kindness is contagious. It changes lives. It changed mine. What will it do for you?

Related Characters: Caitlin Stoicsitz Alifirenka (speaker), Martin Ganda, Lois, Martin’s Mother (Chioniso Ganda), Caitlin’s Dad (Richard Stoicsitz), Martin’s Father (George Ganda), Caitlin’s Mom (Anne Neville)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 396

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the last few sentences of the book’s second epilogue. In it, co-author Caitlin Alifirenka speaks directly to the audience. Because she wants the book to be accessible to a younger audience, she is very direct about stating her goals for the book. She wrote about a formative experience in her own life—her pen pal relationship with Martin Ganda—because she wanted a new generation of young people to be able to recognize something familiar in her story and help it prepare them for their own lives. In particular, Caitlin emphasizes the value of kindness. The events of *I Will Always Write Back* show a clear cause-and-effect relationship between kind actions that Caitlin took and the rewards that she later received. For example, sending money to pay for Martin’s schooling in Zimbabwe helped him achieve the credentials to study at a U.S. university, which in turn helped Caitlin build a closer friendship with him. Moreover, these acts and kindness didn’t just affect the lives of Caitlin and Martin; Caitlin gets her parents involved with helping Martin, and Martin’s success in school inspires those around him, like his sister, Lois. Kindness is “contagious” because one person doing a good deed can have surprising results, encouraging others to do the same. Caitlin offers up her own experiences as proof that generosity can enrich a life, and she suggests to readers that if they also take a chance with a kind act, it

might end up having an equally large impact on their lives.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: CAITLIN, SEPTEMBER 1997

Caitlin Stoicsitz is a seventh-grade student in a suburb outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who describes herself as an average student. One day in school, her teacher, Mrs. Miller, writes the names of several countries on the blackboard, and Caitlin is intrigued by “Zimbabwe,” which she has never heard of before. Caitlin asks Mrs. Miller how to pronounce it. The teacher tells her it’s “Zim-BOB-way” and that the country is in Africa. Caitlin and her family have been to Europe before, but she can’t even imagine traveling to Africa.

Most of what Caitlin knows about Africa comes from colorful **photos** in *National Geographic*. She was born and raised in Hatfield, a middle-class town about 40 miles outside of Philadelphia, where her parents also grew up. Hatfield is quiet and surrounded by farmland, but it has a roller rink, a mall, softball fields, and lots of other things for a kid to do.

Earlier, during a family trip to Germany, Caitlin was surprised by how different her German cousin Carola is. They’re both tall and blond, but her English-speaking accent made Carola sound angry to Caitlin, and she liked strange candies like salty black licorice instead of Hershey’s Kisses. Nevertheless, Caitlin was surprised to learn that her cousin Carola was popular at school. Caitlin began to realize that there is more to the world than just Hatfield.

Back in the classroom, Mrs. Miller tells the students they will be writing to pen pals. She goes around the room, asking which country each student wants their pen pal to be from. Caitlin’s friend Lauren chooses Germany, and many other students also pick Germany (because they have German heritage). After Caitlin picks Zimbabwe, she realizes she is the only person in the class who picked somewhere in Africa. She is embarrassed because she likes to fit in rather than sticking out.

Caitlin begins by describing herself as a normal suburban girl. She wants to emphasize that, while her story is exceptional in many ways, it’s possible for other “normal” people to have similar experiences if they keep an open mind and act with kindness. Caitlin demonstrates how little she knew about Zimbabwe at the beginning by showing that she couldn’t even pronounce the name. By choosing Zimbabwe even though she doesn’t know much about it, she shows that there are benefits to learning and to embracing the unknown instead of being wary of it.



Caitlin describes the setting for the story. She continues to emphasize her “averageness” with details: she’s from a middle-class town, it’s suburban (the middle between urban and rural), and she has typical interests for a teenager in the late 1990s.



Caitlin’s experience with her cousin Carola shows how Caitlin used to be more close-minded. She had a hard time picturing a world beyond her community, and so at first, she didn’t understand her cousin Carola and even looked down on her. By the end of the trip, however, Caitlin had learned some important things about her cousin and about Germany in general. Her experience shows how being exposed to different cultures can help people grow, particularly after they get over the initial shock.



This is the first time in the story where Caitlin does something that contrasts with her “averageness.” While she celebrates some aspects of being average, her earlier trip to Germany showed how trying to be average can be limiting, particularly since “average” means different things in different parts of the world. Caitlin’s embarrassment at sticking out shows that in some places, there is social pressure to be average and that attempting to be different can have consequences.



The homework assignment from Mrs. Miller is to write a letter to a pen pal (without knowing precisely who will receive the letter yet). While Caitlin is excited about the assignment, she also has no idea what she wants to write about. She knows the one thing she won't write about: Hatfield Quality Meats, a slaughterhouse in town that always gives off bad smells.

Every day after school, Caitlin takes a 20-minute bus ride back to her home, which is in a cul-de-sac. Her mom, an elementary school teacher who works in a neighboring county, is always home before Caitlin. One day when Caitlin gets home, she tells her mom about her new pen pal from Zimbabwe. Her mom is confused; she remembers when it used to be called Rhodesia. She mentions colonialism, a word that Caitlin only vaguely knows the meaning of. Her mom explains *colonialism* as "when powerful countries take over other countries and call them their territories."

When he isn't traveling for work, Caitlin's dad arrives home every night at 6. All Caitlin knows about his job is that he works on "energy contracts" for the government and that he has a high-level security clearance. The family eats dinner together every night at 6:30. Afterwards, they take turns using their giant computer, which has dial-up internet access.

When it's her turn at the computer, Caitlin looks up Zimbabwe (as research for her letter to her pen pal). She learns that Zimbabwe was freed from British rule in the 1980s and sees a parallel with the United States, which also broke from British rule. She learns that 90 percent of Zimbabwean people are called Shona, and that Shona is the official language of Zimbabwe (although many also speak English). Another major tribe in Zimbabwe is called Ndebele.

Caitlin begins her letter by introducing herself and telling her pen pal about her family. She looks around her room for inspiration, then mentions that she plays softball. She writes about how she likes the Spice Girls, the Backstreet Boys, bowling, roller-skating, and pizza. She asks what her pen pal likes to do for fun. The next day, she turns the letter over to Mrs. Miller.

While Caitlin takes pride in where she's from, her experience with the slaughterhouse shows that she's also aware of the less appealing side of her community. The fact that Caitlin has a slaughterhouse right in her town contrasts with the situation of her eventual pen pal Martin's family, since they rarely ever get to eat meat, except on special occasions.



The cul-de-sac further represents the way that Caitlin is isolated in her small community. Her mom's mention of colonialism is important, since much of modern Zimbabwean history has been influenced by the country's past as a colony. Back when the country was called Rhodesia, the British ruled (often violently), and they stripped the country of natural resources. Though Rhodesia eventually became the independent country of Zimbabwe, much of the economic and political turmoil in the country in its early days as an independent country was arguably a direct consequence of the prior period of British colonialism.



Caitlin's dad is able to provide economic security for the family while still being there for dinner, giving the family stability. The dial-up internet access on the computer helps to establish the time period (which is important, since physical mail played a bigger role in the late 1990s than it does now).



One of the recurring themes in the book is that, despite being from vastly different parts of the world, Caitlin and her pen pal Martin actually have a lot in common. Caitlin's comparison of the United States and Zimbabwe is a little simplistic, since she's just at the very start of her research, but it shows a growing awareness of how people on the other side of the world might not be as different as they seem.



Details like the Backstreet Boys, the Spice Girls, and roller-skating are all meant to evoke the late 1990s. These are recognizable reference points even to many people who weren't living in the United States at the time. Caitlin expects the reader of her letter to be familiar with them, and this shows how pop culture in this era had a global reach.



PART 1: MARTIN, OCTOBER 1997

In Zimbabwe in mid-October, the teacher Mrs. Jarai announces to her class that they have just received letters from the United States. Martin Ganda and his classmates know America as the birthplace of Coca-Cola and the World Wrestling Federation. Hulk Hogan in particular is popular among Martin's classmates.

There are 50 students in Martin's class and only 10 letters. Because Martin scored high on placement tests in school, he is in Group One, and so he gets a letter. In first grade, Martin was at the top of his class. When he slipped to number two in third grade, his parents told him he had to get back to number one. Martin's mom, who had to drop out of school for financial reasons, believes that school is Martin's only hope for a better life. From then on, he was always number one.

Martin's school has large classes and only four textbooks to split among all the students. When Martin gets his letter, Mrs. Jarai asks him to read it for the class. (Martin is fluent in English but speaks Shona with family and friends.) The class laughs at Caitlin Stoicsitz's name, which is strange to them and which Martin struggles to pronounce. They like the part about the Spice Girls, since the Spice Girls are very popular in Zimbabwe. Mrs. Jarai tells Martin to write a response letter as homework.

That afternoon, Martin walks home with some other kids who live in Chisamba Singles, a housing development built in the 1960s for people working in factories outside of Mutare (the third-largest city in Zimbabwe). Like Martin, his mother was also first in her class growing up. But she was poor, so at age 12, her family sent her away to work. Martin's father was comparatively well-off, from a family that owned some goats and **chickens**.

When Martin's mother got pregnant (with Martin's brother, Nation), she and Martin's father were forced to marry. Otherwise, according to Shona tradition, they would bring shame to both families. After Nation was born, Martin's father got a job in a paper mill, which was how he first ended up in Chisamba Singles. He liked alcohol and women, and soon he was only coming home every six months. Martin's mother got pregnant on one of these visits, but the child died in a couple days.

Martin's introduction of himself mirrors Caitlin's introduction in some ways, since it also begins in a classroom with a teacher announcing a pen pal assignment, but as it goes on, it will also differ in some important ways. Unlike Caitlin, who knows little about Zimbabwe, Martin knows a lot about the United States (even if a lot of it is based on pop culture and stereotypes).



Unlike Caitlin, Martin is an exceptional student. His parents believe that he needs to be exceptional in order to have a better life than they did. In fact, this turns out to be true, and Martin only gets to participate in the pen pal project because of his excellent grades. Though Martin's story is a hopeful one, it also highlights how many students, especially in places like Zimbabwe, miss out on opportunities because they don't qualify as exceptional.



Martin's experience in the classroom shows both how similar and how different he is to Caitlin. On the one hand, the fact that even Martin's teacher can't pronounce Caitlin's last name shows that there are distinct cultural differences between the United States and Zimbabwe. At the same time, however, this scene echoes the earlier scene where Caitlin couldn't pronounce "Zimbabwe," showing that maybe Martin and Caitlin aren't so different after all.



The fact that Martin's mother had to drop out of school shows how sometimes even being the best isn't enough, particularly for people who grow up in poverty. Martin himself will face similar issues: while he is clearly an exceptional student, there are many times when he struggles to get an education, usually because of financial reasons.



Martin's family is pretty different from Caitlin's. In particular, his unpredictable father is very different from Caitlin's, who is able to provide stability to the whole family. Again, however, there are also similarities: both Caitlin and Martin are close with their immediate families, and both have a mother and a father who play an active role in their lives.



In Martin's culture, any problems around childbirth are often blamed on the woman. Some of Martin's father's friends suggested he should get a new wife. (Polygamy is uncommon in Zimbabwe but accepted.) Martin's mother was determined to keep her family together, however, and so she brought Nation and moved in with Martin's father in his small shack in Chisamba Singles. This was where Martin was born in 1983, three years after Zimbabwe's liberation from Britain.

Names in Zimbabwe often have direct significance. Martin feels lucky to be named after the British medical student who delivered him. (His brother Nation was named after Martin's father's favorite cow.) Martin also has a Shona name, Tatenda, which means "thank you." Martin's other siblings are named Simba, Lois, and George. Other workers bring their families to Chisamba Singles, and sometimes 12 people end up living in a room meant for 2.

Martin tries to imagine Caitlin's life, but it's difficult because most of what he knows about the U.S. is from TV, like the World Wrestling Federation and *The A-Team*. Though Martin's mother warns him to be careful around girls, she doesn't mind Caitlin because she's so far away.

Martin's father leaves for work every morning at 6 a.m., then comes back every evening at 7 p.m., usually singing a rock and roll song, sometimes Thomas Mapfumo (a Zimbabwean legend), sometimes the Rollings Stones, Cream, and Led Zeppelin. The whole family gathers around a fire pit—shared with three other families—to eat dinner. Most meals consist of sadza (a cornmeal porridge).

Electricity is rationed in Martin's community, so he writes his letter to Caitlin by firelight. Martin figures Caitlin must be white, and although some white people live in Zimbabwe, Martin doesn't know any. Though Martin has a lot of questions, he tries to write a simple letter, using Caitlin's as a guide. Martin tells Caitlin about his grade, his family, and how he likes to play soccer. He closes the letter by saying he hopes they will continue to write back and forth to each other.

For someone in the United States, polygamy is probably one of the strangest aspects of Zimbabwean culture (even if it is fairly uncommon). Though Martin's parents aren't able to provide for their children in the same way that Caitlin's parents are, Martin's mother in particular has a strong urge to keep the family together, which helps explain why Martin himself develops such strong ideas about family.



The story frequently brings up names, because names can be a sign of what culture a person comes from. Interestingly, Martin and most others in his family have both a British name and a Shona name. This shows how, in the period after colonization, people in Zimbabwe were often caught between the culture of their former colonizers and the culture of their local traditions.



Martin's limited knowledge of American culture emphasizes its violent aspects. As he gets to know Caitlin better, however, he learns that U.S. culture can be more complicated than its main pop culture exports.



The hours that Martin's father works are much longer than the ones Caitlin's father work, showing how he has to work extremely hard to make just a fraction of the same money. Still, his singing shows that he seems to be able to stay in good spirits. Despite some of his flaws, like his periods of drinking, Martin's father still makes it home for dinner, showing that he cares about his family.



In some ways, letters put Caitlin and Martin on equal ground: they are communicating with each other using the same medium. But as this passage shows, things are not so easy for Martin, and behind his letters is a lot of work that isn't initially visible to Caitlin. At first, she sees just another boy like her who has similar interests. This first impression has truth to it, but it also hides larger truths about Martin, particularly his family's comparative poverty.



PART 1: CAITLIN, OCTOBER 1997

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin continues to go about her life, which in seventh grade often consists of thinking about how she looks. Her brother, Richie, teases her for being like a spoiled princess. He likes pretending to be a survivalist and dressing in camouflage.

Whenever Caitlin's dad comes home from a business trip, he is often wearing a trench coat and sunglasses. His children tease him about being a spy, like the *Men in Black*. Though he legally can't talk about his work with anyone, Caitlin realizes later in life that he probably doesn't work for the CIA if he still makes it home for dinner at six o'clock every day.

Caitlin's mom lets her write on the walls in her (Caitlin's) closet. That October, Caitlin writes that she loves Matt Johnson, a boy in her algebra class. Matt has long, wavy hair and plays soccer.

By October, many students in Caitlin's class have already received letters back from their pen pals in Europe, but she hasn't gotten hers from Zimbabwe yet. Finally, the week before Halloween, it arrives. Caitlin is very excited as she reads it.

Caitlin begins writing back immediately. She assumes that Martin is Black and that he must be like the Black kids she knew growing up. Though Caitlin didn't have many Black friends, she did know a girl named Marlena. Caitlin upset Marlena when she pulled an elastic band out of her hair; she didn't understand why Marlena was allowed to braid Caitlin's hair but Caitlin couldn't touch Marlena's.

Because Caitlin wonders what Martin looks like, she decides to send a **photo** of herself and ask him to do the same. Her mom had just taken her recently to get professional photos after a new haircut. She adds the photo to the letter, then decorates it with crayons. Caitlin is proud the next day in school to show Mrs. Miller her letter from Africa.

The description of Caitlin's brother helps flesh out her family dynamic. His interests in survivalism and camouflage are a little out of place for a suburban setting, suggesting that perhaps Richie longs to live a more rugged life (or at least likes imagining that he does).



Caitlin's ignorance about her father's job is one of the luxuries that she enjoys as someone from a middle-class family in the United States (which equates to a wealthy family in many other parts of the world). Martin doesn't have this same ignorance about his own father's work; in fact, he goes to the mill where his father works several times in the story.



Caitlin once again shows some of the ways that she was a typical teenage girl from her era. Her mention of Matt Johnson suggests that Caitlin's relationship with Martin won't turn out to be romantic but something else.



The delay for the letter from Zimbabwe shows how sending mail there is more complicated than sending mail to Europe. This will become an important point that affects how Caitlin and Martin communicate.



Caitlin describes how she first learned about the concept of race. Touching Black hair, particularly without permission, is taboo in the United States because of its associations with racism and slavery in the past. While Caitlin has learned some things like this, her awareness of race in the U.S. actually leads her to make false assumptions about Martin and Zimbabwe.



Caitlin's decision to send a photo to Martin shows that she wants to get to know him on a deeper level. It shows that she wants to reveal her true self—what she actually looks like. Of course, since she had a professional photographer and recently got a new haircut, what she's really showing is an idealized version of herself. Martin will attempt to do the same but will face much greater obstacles.



PART 1: MARTIN, NOVEMBER 1997

In Zimbabwe, Mrs. Jarai announces that Martin is the first student in his class to receive a response from his pen pal. He carefully opens his letter and is shocked to see a **photo** come out (since photos are rare and expensive in Zimbabwe). He is also surprised how blond she looks.

Although Martin is very excited by the letter, he worries when he sees that Caitlin wants a **photo** of him in return, since getting a photo could be difficult for him. On top of that, Mrs. Jarai tells Martin that the school can no longer afford to pay for letters (since **stamps** have become expensive under inflation).

Every two weeks, Martin's mother sends him to pick up Martin's father's paycheck, so that his father doesn't have the chance to spend it on Chibuku (a cheap alcoholic beverage made from sorghum or maize). Martin likes this task and is fascinated by the people in the paper mill where his father works.

One day at the paper mill, Martin's father introduces Martin to Stephen Mutandwa, the head of human resources. Martin is fascinated by Mr. Mutandwa, who wears a suit, uses a computer, and owns a pickup truck. He asks Mr. Mutandwa how he can become like him, and Mr. Mutandwa says he went to university.

When Martin gets home after school on the day he receives Caitlin's letter, Martin's mother and Martin's father are both surprised at Caitlin's picture and find her very pretty. Martin puts Caitlin's **photo** on his wall, next to a poster of Hulk Hogan.

Martin explains to his mother his problem about how Caitlin wants a photograph of him. Hiring a photographer would cost as much as a week's worth of food. Martin's mother, however, remembers earlier when Martin won a school award and a photographer was present for the event. It was the only time Martin ever had his **photo** taken and the only photo that Martin's family owns. Martin's mom gives him the photo as well as enough money to pay for **stamps**.

Martin's surprise about the photo once again shows how different Zimbabwean culture is from the U.S. His surprise at her blond hair shows that the photo did have its intended effect—it conveyed something about her that words in a letter couldn't.



While Caitlin's photo helps connect her with Martin, it also highlights one of the biggest cultural misunderstandings between them. When Caitlin asks Martin for a photo, she doesn't realize that this request will actually be very difficult for Martin to fulfill. Martin doesn't want to let Caitlin down—she has put him in an awkward position.



Martin's situation with his father contrasts with Caitlin's. Whereas Caitlin can just wait at home for her father to come back from work, assured that he'll have more than enough money to provide for them, Martin must actively go to his father's workplace to make sure that the whole family will have enough money to spend on food.



Martin hasn't been exposed to many wealthy people in his life, so even though Mr. Mutandwa might not be considered wealthy by the standards of the United States, he still helps Martin learn about other ways of living.



When Martin puts Caitlin's photo next to Hulk Hogan's, it is meant to suggest that his understanding about the United States is comically small, but also that it is slowly growing and becoming more realistic.



For Martin, getting a photograph is more difficult than Caitlin could have ever imagined. Still, Martin's family realizes that his relationship with his pen pal could help him learn and help open up new opportunities for him, so they use what little they have to help Martin get the photo. It is a staged photo from a school event, showing how at this early stage of the relationship, Martin isn't able to show Caitlin a more natural side of himself yet.



Martin writes a new letter to send with his photo. He tells Caitlin his birthday (March 9), apologizes for the delay on his **photo**, and promises to send a better picture next time. He adds that he hopes their friendship will stay strong forever.

Despite all the trouble he went through to get the photograph, Martin doesn't want to complain to Caitlin. Because he doesn't know her very well yet, he keeps his tone polite and positive.



PART 1: CAITLIN, JANUARY 1998

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin and her friend Lauren are sitting behind Caitlin's crush, Matt. He lends her a pencil, and she is elated when he lets her keep it. He asks her out on Halloween. They go to a costume party, Caitlin as a punk rocker, Matt as a football player. Matt doesn't pay much attention to Caitlin at the party, and pretty soon she dumps him and moves on to new crushes.

The drama with Matt shows that Caitlin had other things going on in her life besides her letters to Martin. This will always be true (and the same is true for Martin), but as the story progresses, Martin will become a more central part of her life. The scenes with Matt show the ways in which Caitlin's life resembles a typical coming-of-age story, and these scenes provide a contrast to the more exceptional and unusual relationship she has with Martin.



With all her crushes, Caitlin temporarily forgets about Martin, but she is excited when his new letter arrives. She finds him very cute, although more as a little brother than a boyfriend. She puts his **photo** under the glass on her desk, where she keeps all her favorite photos.

While biological families are important for both Caitlin and Martin, this passage is the first time that the concept of family is expanded. Caitlin and Martin's lives show that family doesn't just mean blood relatives but can also have more expansive definitions.



Caitlin buys a key chain for Martin from the novelty gift store Spencer's, then sends him a picture from her winter dance. She asks for another **photo** from him, hoping it will be more current.

Caitlin's obliviousness to Martin's situation is treated humorously here, since he clearly has no need for the keychain. Asking Martin for another photo will once again put him and his family in a difficult position, although Caitlin doesn't realize it.



About a month later, Martin writes back a four-page letter where he calls her "Queen Caitlin." He does this because of how she looks in the dance **photo**, but ironically, her parents and brother also sometimes do this (to jokingly suggest that she is spoiled). Martin promises Caitlin he's working on African earrings for his next letter, which also pleases Caitlin because she collects earrings.

Martin is formal and very complimentary in his letters, perhaps to compensate for the fact that he doesn't have a photo or any other gifts to send her. It is humorous that Martin calls Caitlin the same nickname as her family does, and that they arrive at the nickname for different reasons, showing once again how people from different cultures can have surprising similarities.



Caitlin assumed that Martin came from a wealthy family because of the school uniform he was wearing in his **photo**. She doesn't understand at first what Martin means when he says Zimbabwe is "developing." Still, the two of them continue to have similarities, like the fact that Nike, Reebok, and Adidas are popular at both their schools.

Caitlin's wrong assumptions about Martin's photos show how complicated the concept of class can be, particularly between countries. Caitlin associates school uniforms with wealth, and while Martin's school is significantly wealthier than some of Zimbabwe's most rural schools, it has massive class sizes and is relatively impoverished by U.S. standards.



Caitlin's favorite line from the letter is when Martin references a line from the "Spicy Girls" about how friendship never really ends. He asks for a U.S. dollar and promises to send Zimbabwean currency in exchange. Caitlin finds the crispest dollar from her babysitting money and excitedly sends a reply.

Martin and Caitlin both drastically misunderstand each other's economic situations, with Caitlin assuming Martin is richer than he is, and Martin not realizing how truly wealthy Caitlin is (by the standards of Zimbabwe). Martin's proposed exchange of currency is their first step towards better understanding each other economically.



PART 1: MARTIN, APRIL 1998

In Zimbabwe, the dollar bill that Caitlin sends to Martin fascinated Martin's whole family. Martin's mother believes Caitlin must be very wealthy, and Martin's father takes the dollar to have it appraised and finds it is worth over 20 Zimbabwe dollars. Martin volunteers his dollar to cover the cost of groceries for the family, and though his mother is reluctant at first, eventually they exchange the dollar. They buy so much food it feels like Christmas in April.

This scene highlights one of the biggest gaps between Martin and Caitlin: a dollar bill that she sends as a little souvenir ends up being enough to feed his whole family. By necessity, many aspects of Martin and Caitlin's relationship are asymmetrical, but this doesn't necessarily diminish the impact of Caitlin's generosity or of Martin's gratitude.



Martin thanks Caitlin for the dollar in his next letter. He decides not to include a Zimbabwe dollar, since it would equal a full day of sadza. Instead, he makes a promise that he knows he can keep: that he'll always write back, no matter what.

The precariousness of Martin's financial situation is made clear: he can't afford to spare even one Zimbabwean dollar, which is worth only a twentieth of an American dollar (which is pocket change to Caitlin).



PART 1: CAITLIN, MAY 1998

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is having a busy spring. She is fighting with her former best friend Lauren, and now her new best friend is Christa. But Christa likes Caitlin's current boyfriend, so Christa and Caitlin fight too. By Caitlin's 13th birthday, she's back with Lauren as her best friend. The only constant in Caitlin's life is her letters from Martin.

The chaos in Caitlin's personal life helps to highlight why her more stable relationship with Martin might be so appealing to her. Martin is removed from the daily dramas of her life, and so he helps her to keep things in perspective and realize that some of these problems are not a big deal in the long run.



Most pen pals stopped after two or three letters, but Caitlin has already received six or seven from Martin. The two are surprised to learn about how their countries are different. Caitlin is happy to learn that there are monkeys near where Martin lives but sad to learn that they aren't friendly. Meanwhile, Martin finds it funny that Caitlin keeps a pet rabbit, because in Zimbabwe they eat rabbits.

When Caitlin first chose Zimbabwe for the pen pal project, she was afraid that other people would consider her strange, but now she is beginning to see the benefits of making unusual choices, as her relationship with Martin continues. Meat continues to be one of the big differences between Zimbabwe and the United States, with Caitlin and Martin's different ideas about rabbits showing how their two cultures differ.



Caitlin takes a little while to respond after receiving Martin's letter about eating rabbits because of the drama in her own life. Eventually, she remembers that she missed Martin's birthday and decides to buy him a Reebok shirt as a gift. She sends it to him with a letter, saying that the shirt is what all the cool kids in her town wear.

Because Caitlin still doesn't know many things about Martin's life, she sends him something that people in her life like: Reebok T-shirts. As it turns out, the T-shirt will be even more valuable to Martin than it ever would've been to anyone Caitlin knows in the United States.



PART 1: MARTIN, JUNE 1998

In Zimbabwe, Martin continues to enjoy reading Caitlin's letters, and his family and friends come to enjoy hearing about Caitlin too. One day, Martin gets a package larger than a letter, with *BFF* written on it in purple pen (an abbreviation Martin knows from Caitlin's letters).

Martin's knowledge of the acronym "BFF" ("Best Friends Forever") shows not only that he's building a closer relationship with Caitlin but also that he's beginning to get a better understanding of American culture.



Inside the envelope is a letter wishing Martin a happy belated birthday. Most of the time, Martin doesn't get anything for his birthday. He is amazed to find a genuine Reebok shirt, which even the rich kids in his school can't afford. He puts it on right away. Normally, Martin's parents are happy about gifts from Caitlin, but Martin's father seems distracted when he sees the shirt, and Martin can tell something is wrong. Martin's mother and father are fighting—there are rumors of layoffs at the paper mill, and lately Martin's father has been getting drunk.

Once again, the value of the Reebok shirt to Martin is far beyond anything Caitlin could have anticipated. Despite her misunderstandings about Zimbabwean culture, Caitlin's generosity shines through, and her small acts of kindness (to her) have a huge impact on Martin and his family. The timing of the gift is particularly lucky, since Martin's family is having a tough time financially, causing stress for all of them.



Martin wants to show his appreciation to Caitlin for his Reebok shirt, but he doesn't know how. He starts working to pay for postage **stamps**, and eventually he gets the idea of using his earnings to buy earrings (instead of making them as he originally planned). The ones he wants to buy cost 20 Zimbabwe dollars.

Though Caitlin's gifts to Martin are generous, they also put him in the difficult position of wanting to show gratitude but often not being able to afford it. It takes more sacrifice from him to get Caitlin a gift that is much less valuable, at least in terms of money spent.



Martin saves up enough for the earrings. He gets special stationary from his father through the paper mill. He writes a very appreciative letter and keeps things light, because he doesn't think someone like Caitlin could understand issues like the problems at the paper mill. He closes the letter by sending his love and repeating that he will always write back to her, no matter what.

Martin's dedication to saving enough money to send Caitlin a gift shows that he is determined to keep their relationship reciprocal, even if he can't provide the same sort of big gifts that she does. Despite his dedication to maintaining their relationship, however, he still doesn't feel comfortable opening up to her about his problems, showing that the stigma associated with poverty can make people ashamed to discuss it openly.



PART 1: CAITLIN, AUGUST 1998

In Pennsylvania, it gets to be July, and Caitlin still hasn't heard from Martin. She wonders if he's too busy with his own life to write back. One day in early August, Caitlin's dad comes home looking upset. He tells them to put on the news, and they see that there has been a bombing at the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (African capital cities in countries not too far from Zimbabwe). Caitlin worries Zimbabwe could be next, even though she knows Martin doesn't live in the capital.

That same August, Caitlin and her family go on vacation to the Thousand Islands in Canada. Caitlin picks a **photo** from this trip to send to Martin. A few weeks into eighth grade, Caitlin receives a new letter from Martin with earrings enclosed. She is happy to hear how much he likes his Reebok shirt. She loves how unique her new earrings are (they are decorated with hand-carved guinea fowls), although she is also worried what other people will think.

Caitlin's friends are all intrigued by the earrings. Lauren teases that Caitlin is in love with Martin, which annoys Caitlin. Caitlin is fighting with Lauren again, and she appreciates how there's never any of this kind of drama with Martin.

In October of 1998, Caitlin sits down to write a letter that will go with a Nike shirt for Martin that her brother, Richie, is getting rid of. She also includes a postcard from Canada and some mechanical pencils. After some hesitation, she mentions the recent terrorist attacks and says she hopes the attacks stop. She ends her letter with "BF4E-Best Friends Forever."

PART 1: MARTIN, OCTOBER 1998

In Zimbabwe, Martin is fascinated by Caitlin's **photos**, particularly her large house and multiple cars. He mistakes Caitlin's braces for mouth jewelry. Martin and his friends are also surprised at how well dogs are treated in the U.S.

One of the consequences of Martin's decision not to open up to Caitlin is that it causes her to get the wrong idea about his letters. She doesn't know that he always intends to write back and is only stopped by his circumstances, not by his willingness. Caitlin's interest in the African terrorist bombings shows a greater awareness of the world around her, while simultaneously highlighting how sometimes only the most sensational events make international news.



Caitlin continues to struggle with her desire to fit in and be average, and how it conflicts with her desire to be exceptional and try new things. The two goals are often at odds with each other. Though Caitlin will ultimately embrace her relationship with Martin without shame, she continues for much of the story to be plagued by concerns about what other people think about her life and Martin's.



Caitlin's decision to wear the earrings shows that she is willing to accept the consequences of doing things that are out of the ordinary. Her friends are intrigued, suggesting that sometimes the fear of being thought of as different is much worse than what will actually happen as a result of being different.



The mention of the terrorist attacks marks the first time in Caitlin and Martin's letters that one of them has acknowledged a darker topic. Caitlin has signaled that she is willing to write about less happy topics, which gives Martin permission to talk in more detail about his own life.



Though Martin knows about the relative affluence of the U.S., seeing the pictures from Caitlin still helps him visualize things that letters and imported pop culture could not properly convey.



Martin is still struggling to get another **photo** of himself, so he decides to buy time by sending Caitlin a bangle from a local market. He writes a new letter thanking her for the Nike shirt.

Martin continues to struggle with the conflict between his family's poor financial situation and his desire to reciprocate Caitlin's generosity in kind.



A few weeks later, Martin's father surprises him by saying that he's arranged with a friend's help for a photographer to come that weekend. Martin wants to look nice, so he puts on his father's suit and tie, even though the outfit is too big for him. Martin's family buys two **photos** because you have to pay for the photo even if the photographer makes a mistake. One of Martin's photos is blurry, but the other one comes out well.

Though Martin has more freedom in how to portray himself in his photo, he still chooses a more formal style. The fact that Martin's father's suit literally doesn't fit Martin suggests that this formal version of Martin is in some way misrepresentative. Martin is still determined to show Caitlin the version of him that he thinks she wants to see, but he doesn't yet know her well enough to just be himself.



PART 2: CAITLIN, DECEMBER 1998

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is surprised how formal Martin's **photo** looks, but she can see him smiling beneath his serious pose. Caitlin realizes she is growing up side-by-side with Martin, and she feels like she can tell him things that she can't tell other people.

Though Martin tried to make himself look more formal and impressive in his photo, Caitlin is able to pick out details underneath the pose. This once again shows the power of photos to reveal things, perhaps things that the subject never intended to reveal.



Caitlin begins to vent about drama in her life to Martin, and he always writes back as if he understands. She doesn't realize at first that Martin seems to be holding back about himself—she only gets scattered clues in his letters about what his life is like.

While Caitlin opens up to Martin about problems in her life, she doesn't realize that Martin can't do the same, at least not without drastically altering their relationship by letting Caitlin know things that he has so far tried to hide.



PART 2: MARTIN, JANUARY 1999

In Zimbabwe, near the end of 1998, Martin feels that things are beginning to disintegrate in his family. His father's paycheck is never enough, and his father is starting to get drunk more often.

Though Martin's father drinks too much, Martin seems to suggest that the drinking is caused most of all by Zimbabwe's declining financial situation. This suggests that, while problems like alcoholism may have a personal component, they can also be influenced in part by larger factors.



At the end of the school semester, Martin is scheduled to take an important exam, which costs one Zimbabwean dollar. On the day of the exam, however, neither Martin's father nor his mother has the money. Fortunately, Martin's friend Nyasha is able to give him the money. Martin takes the test and once again places number one. He wants to tell Caitlin, but it's getting harder to put together money for **stamps**.

For the first time, Martin faces the prospect of not being able to get ahead in school. The costs of education—and particularly the barriers for students from impoverished areas—will be a major focus of the story, and Martin's troubles will only continue to compound, even as he reaches new academic heights in school.



Martin's brother Simba begins beating up other kids at school to take their money or bring him food. Martin overhears Martin's father and Martin's mother fighting about money. The next morning at school, Martin and several other students are kicked out of school because their families can't afford tuition. Martin wants to get back to school so that he can go on to university. He worries about how he'll ever contact Caitlin again.

Like Martin's father, who drinks in bad times, Martin's brother Simba also has a bad reaction to the stress of poverty. The fact that Martin, a promising student, is kicked out of school is shocking for someone like Caitlin, who lives in a country where public education is mandatory. While this could be seen as a criticism of the Zimbabwean school system, it is perhaps on a deeper level about the difficult choices that institutions have to make when they are under financial pressure.



PART 2: CAITLIN, FEBRUARY 1999

In Pennsylvania, a month passes, and Caitlin doesn't hear from Martin. Caitlin wonders what happened to him. Caitlin's mom has seen news about instability in Zimbabwe and hopes Martin is okay.

Caitlin lives in a time when getting news from around the world is relatively easy, but communicating with individuals in certain countries remains difficult. Her concern about Martin is justified, since she really does have no way of knowing how he's doing.



Caitlin decides she needs to help Martin. She writes a new letter in which she says that she hopes Martin is okay and that he isn't mad with her. She even begins getting the idea of buying a plane ticket, but she doesn't tell her parents yet.

On the one hand, Caitlin's idea of buying a plane ticket without her parents' permission is probably a little naive. At the same time, however, it signifies how Caitlin and Martin's relationship is beginning to become more and more concrete: suddenly the idea of meeting Martin in the real world seems achievable to her.



PART 2: MARTIN, APRIL 1999

In Zimbabwe, Martin's brother Nation tries to console him about being expelled from school. Martin keeps getting letters from Caitlin, asking for **photos**, and he still has no way to respond. He begins making some money by carrying luggage for local bus passengers. The money helps his family but isn't nearly enough to get him back to school.

Martin hits a low point. His willingness to work odd jobs shows that he's committed to trying to keep up his correspondence with Caitlin, as well as to continuing his education, but in this case, even his best effort isn't enough to help him meet those goals.



Martin's father tells Martin to go back to school and tell them that his father will pay later. His teacher welcomes him back, but the school's financial manager turns him away at the end of the day.

Martin's father is desperate but is so convinced of the value of education that he suggests an unlikely solution. It fails. While the teacher would like to teach Martin, the financial manager represents all the difficult financial decisions that go into keeping an institution like Martin's school operational.



Martin gets a new job selling cold drinks. At age 15, he knows that his home of Chisamba Singles is considered one of the poorest slums in Zimbabwe. He receives a third letter in a row from Caitlin and wants to write back, but he knows that any money spent on **stamps** will come out of his fund for school. Finally, he grabs an ice cream bar wrapper off the ground and uses it to write a letter back to Caitlin.

While Martin has always been aware that his family is poor, getting kicked out of school over tuition makes the reality of this poverty much more concrete. Even at such a desperate moment, however, he still thinks about his obligations to Caitlin and goes to great lengths to keep up their correspondence.



PART 2: CAITLIN, MAY 1999

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is overjoyed to receive a new letter from Martin but surprised to see that it's written on trash. She's relieved that he is alive but feels bad about the financial trouble he's having.

The used ice cream wrapper symbolizes how Martin's financial situation has gotten to the point where he can no longer hide his poverty from Caitlin.



Caitlin writes a new letter to Martin. She says she understands why he didn't write back. She gives him \$20 from babysitting that she hopes might be able to feed his family. She doesn't tell anyone in her family about the money she's sending.

Caitlin doesn't realize that \$20 is almost exactly the amount Martin needs to pay his tuition. Many of her gifts end up being exactly what Martin needed, even though she could've never predicted it. This emphasizes the power of kindness—it can have much greater benefits than the giver realizes.



PART 2: MARTIN, MAY 1999

In Zimbabwe, Martin is excited to get a new letter from Caitlin. He is amazed to find a U.S. \$20 bill—with inflation, it's worth even more than it was before and should be enough to get Martin back to school. He is glad that Caitlin doesn't seem to be disappointed in him.

Martin is rewarded for his correspondence with Caitlin in a way that he could never expect. His own kindness—of making sure to write back to Caitlin even though it came at great personal expense—is repaid.



Martin's mother is shocked by the gift but grateful. She and Martin immediately head to the bank, where they get the money exchanged with no problem. On the way back, Martin's mother buys a **chicken** to celebrate. Martin's family normally only eats chicken on Christmas, but they haven't even had chicken for the past couple Christmases. The whole family tries to keep Caitlin's gift a secret, so they don't become a target for robbery.

Though Caitlin's gift is a boon to the whole family, it also makes them a potential target for thieves. While other parts of the book emphasize the communal nature of living in Zimbabwe, desperate situations can motivate people to act selfishly, and the economic and political situation in the country is about to get worse.



Martin has missed a lot of school, so he stays after class to catch up. He is happy to do so, and within a month, he's back on track.

Martin is lucky to be such a fast learner; his situation turns out well, but it also highlights how other promising students could fall between the cracks if they ever have trouble making tuition payments.



PART 2: CAITLIN, JUNE 1999

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin begins to realize how different Martin's life is from hers. She is surprised to learn that **chicken** is a Christmas meal for him, since she has chicken on weeknights. She wonders what will happen if she sends \$40 next time.

One of Caitlin's biggest obstacles to understanding Martin so far has been her lack of knowledge about his financial situation, and now, with some help from Martin, she begins overcoming that obstacle.



Caitlin has learned that her friends, like Lauren, don't understand her relationship with Martin. They tease her about how she should go marry Martin, which offends her because he feels more like a brother to her. In her letters, Caitlin begins to be more direct about asking Martin what he needs, rather than just telling stories about her and her friends at the mall.

Lauren's teasing of Caitlin seems to be rooted in a fear of the unknown and perhaps even jealousy. Caitlin's more direct tone in her letter suggests the beginning of a new phase in their relationship, perhaps one where they can be more honest with each other, even on difficult topics.



PART 3: MARTIN, JUNE 1999

In Zimbabwe, Martin is shocked to receive two \$20 bills from Caitlin and figures she must be very rich indeed. Martin's father knows his job is endangered because of retrenchment (when the factory replaces old workers with new workers who can be paid less). Martin's father doesn't resent the money from Caitlin; he respects her generosity. Martin's mother also appreciates the money but is afraid it will make her family a target for crime. For the first time, Martin's father's paycheck doesn't cover the rent, so they use Caitlin's money to make up the difference.

This passage shows how, while kindness and generosity can improve people's lives, there are also challenges. While Martin's family desperately needs the money, there is always the risk that it could make them a target for robbery or that Martin's parents might be too proud to accept help. The authors argue is that in spite of these difficulties, the benefits of generosity are far greater.



Martin goes to visit his uncle in the city of Harare during winter break. He's impressed how put together his uncle and other relatives look including his cousin Sekai and her husband, Alois, who works in a bank. Martin enjoys spending time with this side of his family and comes away from the trip with renewed confidence that he can go to university and succeed.

As Martin grows up, he comes into contact with more educated people, and meeting them helps persuade him of the value of education. Sekai and Alois illustrate that, while Zimbabwe is a comparatively poor country, there is still a wide range of people living in it, and even within Martin's family, there are people with very different economic situations.



Martin gets his **photo** taken in Harare (wearing a shirt Caitlin has recently given him). Just as he is about to send his thank you letter, Martin gets home and finds out his father has lost his job. Caitlin's money is all that's keeping them from becoming homeless.

The photo Martin gets taken in Harare is the most casual one so far, illustrating how Martin has gotten more comfortable opening up to Caitlin in his correspondence.



Martin goes to the headmaster of his school and uses the money he earned working with his cousins in Harare to make a down payment on his next tuition bill. Martin promises that Caitlin will help with the rest. He asks to borrow the school computer (a serious request because computers are expensive there) so that he can type a letter to Caitlin asking for money for school. Martin is conflicted about how to ask Caitlin for money, but he ultimately decides to also write to her parents and explain his situation.

Martin faces a difficult problem. He knows that Caitlin and her family have more than enough money to pay for his schooling, but he also knows that asking them for money could affect his relationship with Caitlin. Ultimately, if he wants to stay in school, he really doesn't have any other option—this passage illustrates how poverty limits a person's choices. Though Martin is lucky to have Caitlin to ask, it is easy to imagine how other boys in Martin's position would face an even more difficult problem getting educated.



PART 3: CAITLIN, NOVEMBER 1999

In Pennsylvania, over the summer of 1999, Caitlin grows six inches. The growth comes so quickly that she starts having back pain and has to go to physical therapy.

Caitlin mentions her physical growth in order to highlight all the other ways that she was growing as a person at this time. Her growth pains show that sometimes development can be difficult.



The next envelope Caitlin receives from Martin is thicker than usual—it contains three letters, with one for Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad. In the letter to Caitlin's parents, Martin reluctantly asks for money for school. Caitlin hasn't told her parents the truth about how close she is with Martin, or that she's sent money before, but she decides it's time to tell them everything.

Caitlin finally being honest with her parents represents the next step of her relationship with Martin. With each new person that gets involved, their relationship becomes less about just the physical letters they exchange, growing into something bigger.



At dinner that night, Caitlin asks if it's possible to send her entire college fund to Martin, which her parents immediately reject. Caitlin volunteers to show them his letters, including the one addressed to them. Caitlin's dad asks if maybe it's a scam, which upsets Caitlin. Finally, Caitlin's parents agree to discuss the matter and get back to her.

Caitlin's relative wealth has allowed her to be naïve about certain financial matters—she doesn't really know how much is in her college fund or how much Martin needs. Caitlin's parents don't know as much about Martin and are initially skeptical.



Caitlin's parents don't give her an answer about Martin right away, but they say they're looking into ways to help him. Caitlin's mom contacts embassies and tries to figure out the best way to transfer money (since postal workers sometimes open mail). Caitlin gets the idea of hiding \$20 behind a **photo** and leaving clues in the letter. Her mom agrees to pay this time.

Ultimately, Caitlin's parents decide to trust their daughter's judgment. They help illustrate a point that Caitlin will make later—that "kindness is contagious"—since they are motivated to help because of Caitlin's own initial generosity.



Some people in Caitlin's life, like a friend's mom, worry that Martin is a scammer, because Nigerian phishing scams have been in the news lately. Caitlin is aware of the dangers but still believes Martin is honest. She worries about his safety after she doesn't hear from him for a while.

While mail and internet scams are a real possibility, Caitlin never doubts Martin's intentions because she has seen his photos and read his letters. Their relationship illustrates how communication can lead to trust.



Caitlin decides to send Martin and his family new clothes, and Caitlin's mom agrees to help. They end up buying more than just clothes, and instead of using packing peanuts, they use candy. Caitlin's mom's friend suggests sending such a large package through the American or Canadian embassy.

With the help of her mom, Caitlin is able to take her generosity to a new level. Caitlin's earlier generosity has laid the groundwork for their new gifts, which will in turn encourage even more generosity.



PART 3: MARTIN, NOVEMBER 1999

In Zimbabwe, Martin receives Caitlin's letter but finds that it has been ripped open and re-sealed with "INSPECTED FOR CONTRABAND" written on it. The money is gone. In Zimbabwe, the political and economic situation is becoming more volatile, and a new mandate allows native Black Africans to seize white farmers' land.

Martin's missing money shows how sometimes even Caitlin's good intentions are not enough to overcome the political and economic problems that Zimbabwe faces. The country's history of colonialism has far-reaching effects in the present.



In the next letter Martin receives, however, he finds the money Caitlin has hidden behind her **photo**. He takes it to his school to pay his tuition right away.

Caitlin's ingenuity helps the next gift make it to Martin intact, showing how, despite the challenges of their situation, it is still possible to find ways to do good.



PART 3: CAITLIN, DECEMBER 1999

In Pennsylvania, around Thanksgiving, Caitlin still worries about Martin, since she hasn't heard back recently. Caitlin's mom's friend says that the American embassy won't take any packages for Martin, so the best option is to just send it by regular mail and write "used school supplies" on the customs form.

While Caitlin's mom prefers to help Martin through more official channels, she learns that in some cases, Caitlin's more informal style of generosity might be the only option. Institutions that people like Caitlin's mom take for granted, like the post office, are not always reliable when countries face a crisis, like Zimbabwe did.



Caitlin is so worried about Martin that she has a hard time caring about her friends' small problems, which only frustrate her. That year at Christmas, she and her brother, Richie, get expensive presents and eat ham and turkey.

Learning about Martin's life has changed Caitlin's perspective about her own life. The ham and turkey that Caitlin's family eats symbolize the abundance they have, contrasting with the simple chicken that Martin's family eats on Christmas (if they can even afford that).



Caitlin sends Martin new letters, not knowing if they actually reach him. In one, she asks for his headmaster's name and his school's mailing address (to help facilitate getting his tuition money there).

One of the difficulties of Caitlin and Martin's correspondence is that the long distance and long wait time between letters both make it difficult for them to know if their letters have the intended effect. As with many parts of their relationship, trust plays a major role.



PART 3: MARTIN, JANUARY 2000

In Zimbabwe, Martin's family has **chicken** for Christmas because of Caitlin's gift, and they share it with their neighbors. Martin finally decides that he can be more honest with Caitlin about what his life is like in Chisamba Singles. He writes a longer letter describing the difficulties he and his family face, then signs it "your 'brother' Martin."

Though Martin's family's Christmas dinner is not nearly as lavish as Caitlin's, the presence of chicken (which they haven't been able to afford for the past couple Christmases) is a visible sign of how Caitlin's generosity has improved not just Martin's life, but the lives of his family and even his neighbors.



PART 3: CAITLIN, JANUARY 2000

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is relieved to finally hear from Martin in late January. Caitlin's mom starts making calls at 4 a.m. (because of the time difference) to track down Martin's school. Eventually, they write a letter to Martin's headmaster asking about how to sponsor Martin's education, then another letter to Martin letting him know they've contacted his headmaster.

As Caitlin and her mom get more invested in Martin's life, they find that helping him gets increasingly complicated, as shown by the 4 a.m. long-distance phone call. Their experience shows that truly helping someone takes more than just generosity: it may also require persistence and ingenuity.



PART 3: MARTIN, JANUARY 2000 (2)

In Zimbabwe, Martin hears from the postman that he has a large package waiting for him at the post office. He asks Nation for help carrying it.

The large package is clearly Caitlin's, but Martin builds suspense in order to convey how he felt on the day he received it.



Martin waits until he gets the box home to open it. His whole family is amazed by the contents. Martin's sister Lois has never had candy before. One of the gifts is a Walkman with Ricky Martin's "La Vida Loca," which they play loud enough for the whole family to hear. Martin's mother gets real **shoes** for the first time.

Although the items in the package would have been relatively common in the United States, for Martin and his family, they are exotic treasures. Perhaps the most important gift is the shoes for Martin's mother. Her lack of shoes illustrated how some people go through life without things that others consider basic necessities. They also caused her to face prejudice, since her lack of shoes was a visible sign that she was poor.



At Caitlin's request, Martin makes plans to talk to her on the phone (using the local post office phone). He writes a long, appreciative letter from the whole family and uses the art supplies Caitlin sent to decorate it.

The planned phone call marks the next step in Caitlin and Martin's relationship. A phone call is more immediate than a letter or photo and represents the first time they'll be able to communicate in real time.



PART 3: CAITLIN, FEBRUARY 2000

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is glad that Martin received her package, but she's saddened to learn about how his mother didn't have **shoes** before.

As is often the case, Caitlin didn't realize the full extent of how meaningful her gift would be to Martin and his family. Still, she seems to naturally intuit what they need, suggesting that in the context of friendship, instinct is sometimes the best guide to practicing generosity.



Caitlin's mom takes her to a luncheon at the university where she got her bachelor's degree. There's a lot of pizza left over, and Caitlin volunteers to take it, so that they can give it to a homeless Vietnam War veteran who lives nearby. The man accepts the pizza but says nothing.

Caitlin's generosity toward Martin has opened her up to being more generous towards other people around her, even people she barely knows. The Vietnam War veteran's muted response shows that not all generosity receives the level of gratitude that Martin displays, but this doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile.



Caitlin realizes that in the past she has bullied people in school without realizing that the reason why these other students were "different" was because their families didn't have much money. She vows to change.

Caitlin's character growth also causes her to look back on her past actions. She realizes that her own concerns about fitting in sometimes led her to act out against others.



PART 3: MARTIN, FEBRUARY 2000

In Zimbabwe, Martin's family continues to enjoy the gifts from Caitlin. While they don't have many opportunities to wear the new clothes (since they want to save them for special occasions and don't have many special occasions), Martin's father is able to wear his shirt when looking for jobs.

Though Martin's family doesn't use Caitlin's gifts in quite the way she intended for them to be used, they find ways to incorporate the gifts into their own lives, which is in some ways just as meaningful.



PART 3: CAITLIN, MARCH 2000

In Pennsylvania, earlier in the year, Caitlin volunteered her family to host a German exchange student. She receives a bio about a student named Stephanie.

Whereas before, Caitlin was a little dismissive of her German cousin Carola, she has grown from her relationship with Martin and now decides to open up even more by hosting a German exchange student.



Caitlin's mom redoes Richie's room for Stephanie (since Richie is away at college). When Stephanie arrives, however, she looks unhappy about it. She doesn't unpack and says that back home she has a nanny and a maid to do these things.

As Caitlin finds out, however, good intentions don't always work out as well as they do in Martin's case. The exchange student Stephanie is not open to new experiences, and this makes it difficult for her to communicate with anyone in Caitlin's family.



Despite the bad first impression, Caitlin decides to give Stephe another chance. The next day, they go shopping at the mall, but it turns out shopping is all Stephe wants to do. She asks Caitlin's mom to bring her breakfast in bed like a maid. Caitlin remains sulky for most of Stephe's time in Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile both Caitlin and her mom are worried about how long it's been without a response from Martin or his headmaster. Eventually, Caitlin's mom decides to send him a Western Union wire transfer for \$100, but they don't hear from him on the designated day. Caitlin's mom sends a postcard to follow up.

Two days after sending the postcard, Caitlin's mom locates Martin's headmaster. They manage to get him on the phone, and Caitlin's mom promises to pay for Martin's education and his siblings' education as well.

While Caitlin herself sometimes misunderstands things because of her family's relative wealth, Stephe takes this to comical new levels. Stephe illustrates how privilege can sometimes lead people to become oblivious to the world around them.



Though Caitlin's relationship with Martin is about far more than money, the amount of money that she sends goes up as her relationship with Martin deepens. Because Martin becomes like a family member to her, this shows how families provide not only emotional support but also often economic support.



Once again, kindness proves to be contagious: Caitlin's mom expands on her original promise of paying for Martin's education and decides to pay for his siblings as well.



PART 3: MARTIN, JUNE 2000

In Zimbabwe, Martin gets news that there's a call for him at the post office. It's Caitlin on the other line: she tells him that her mom has worked everything out with the headmaster, and that Martin won't have to worry about school fees any more.

On top of the school tuition, Martin receives the \$100 from Western Union, bringing relief to his family. He vows to study for his exams and make the most of his new opportunity.

In spite of all the difficulties, Caitlin and her mom have managed to ensure that Martin's education is paid for. The phone call is a moment of triumph where they can celebrate their victory together, at least for the moment.



Having money allows Martin to focus on his studies instead of working odd jobs for extra cash, showing how economic status can play a role in academics.



PART 3: CAITLIN, SEPTEMBER 2000

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is excited to start 10th grade. She chooses to study Southern Africa in a World Culture class. She uses her new knowledge to learn what sorts of things Martin's family might need, then gets a job at a local pizzeria to pay for them.

Caitlin's relationship with Martin is no longer a secret or a separate part of her life: it is also motivating what she does during the school day and after school at work.



Caitlin makes new friends at school, like Lisa from the tennis team. Together they go to the mall, where they meet two older boys with a car and try alcohol for the first time. They all end up at a nightclub, when suddenly Caitlin gets a call from her mom, asking her to come home. The boys race to get Caitlin and Lisa home. Caitlin's mom knows something is up, but she and her dad just say they're glad Caitlin is home safe.

Caitlin's life isn't entirely focused on Martin, though. This episode with boys, a car, and alcohol shows that Caitlin is also experiencing the same rites of passage as many other American teenagers from her time period. She is no longer defined by her status as an "average" teen girl thanks to her relationship with Martin, but she also has a whole life outside of Martin.



PART 3: MARTIN, NOVEMBER 2000

In Zimbabwe, Martin takes his exams in October. He and his family use some of Caitlin's money to hire a photographer to take a **photo** portrait of them wearing Caitlin's clothes. Martin is worried that Caitlin will finally see how his family really lives, but he trusts that she will understand.

The fact that Martin decides to include his whole family in the photograph shows that he is opening up to her on an even greater level. He is not just an individual—he's part of a family and a community, and he wants to convey that to Caitlin.



PART 3: CAITLIN, DECEMBER 2000

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is surprised that Martin's **photo** isn't as bright and colorful as she pictured. The photo motivates Caitlin, as well as her mom and dad, to send another care package.

Despite knowing Martin fairly well and following the news about Africa, Caitlin is still surprised by the poverty evident in Martin's photo. The photo reveals that even though Caitlin has become more knowledgeable, she still has a lot more to learn.



That year for Christmas, Caitlin gets a car with the license plate "C8LIN." In her next letter to Martin, she worries if she should tell him about the expensive gifts she received, but she ultimately decides that because he has been totally honest, she should be too.

The car that Caitlin receives once again highlights the difference between what Christmas means to an American girl like Caitlin and what it means to a Zimbabwean boy like Martin. Caitlin's reluctance to tell Martin about the car shows a growing awareness of her own privilege and how it might make others feel.



Lauren has stopped teasing Caitlin about Martin. Meanwhile, Caitlin's brother, Richie, moves back home because he was partying too much in college. Caitlin writes a new letter to Martin with some new **photos** and more cash.

Caitlin's persistence has helped even people like Lauren grow up to be more open-minded. Meanwhile, Richie dropping out of college foreshadows one of the many ways that education will not always live up to the ideal of what it can be.



PART 4: MARTIN, JANUARY 2001

In Zimbabwe, Martin's family doesn't celebrate Christmas because they want to save the money in their account. He is happy to receive a new package from Caitlin, this time with a care package for the monsoon season. Martin is also excited to receive his first pair of real American **shoes** (since the ones Caitlin sent last time were too small).

Martin wants to send something good back to Caitlin, so he waits to hear back about his exams. As it turns out, he got the highest scores in the entire region. He is told he can become anything, even a doctor or a politician. His headmaster encourages him to apply to a boarding school—the best school in Zimbabwe—and either apply for a scholarship or get help from his American friends.

Martin sends a thank-you letter where he tells Caitlin about his high exam scores. He decides to look into the private school his headmaster encouraged him to look up by going there in person. He tries to get himself enrolled but is told the only way to do so is to speak directly to the headmaster the next day.

Martin finds a student who has a rural accent and asks to spend the night with him so that he can speak to the headmaster in the morning. The student introduces Martin to other students on campus and helps him get a meal at the dining hall.

The next morning, Martin meets the private school headmaster outside of an old stone church on campus. The headmaster tells him at first that the class is already full, but he takes interest after hearing that Martin is from Chisamba Singles (since the headmaster has an uncle that lives there and he knows it is a tough place).

After questioning Martin some more, the headmaster offers Martin a spot, but he says that Martin must pay the deposit by 5 p.m. the next day: 1,000 Zimbabwe dollars. This is more than Martin has, even with Caitlin's gifts. He thinks of his cousin Sekai's husband Alois, who works in a bank, and calls him to ask for a loan. Alois says they'll help, and Sekai comes to help him buy all the supplies Martin will need for school. Alois will take care of the tuition.

Martin's family's more subdued Christmas contrasts with Caitlin's family's extravagant one. Still, Caitlin's package gives him hope, and the fact that she included supplies for the monsoon season shows that she is getting a better idea of what Martin's family might actually need.



Martin has seen evidence from others about the benefits of education, and now he is learning firsthand what these benefits could be for himself. Martin is a very gifted student, but he also has support from people like his headmaster and Caitlin, showing how education is not just about raw academic achievement.



Martin thanks Caitlin because he knows that his education up to this point wouldn't be possible without the help of her and her family. Martin's decision to visit the new headmaster in person shows that he is committed to getting the best education possible.



Martin realizes that some of the students at the school come from wealthier backgrounds than he does, but he is encouraged to see another student from a rural area. This shows how social class can help people bond, particularly when they are out of their element.



The headmaster initially tells Martin that the class is full but then changes his mind after hearing Martin's story. This shows how educational institutions are often limited by their budgets but also how, in some cases, powerful figures have the ability to bend the rules or make their own.



The money that the headmaster asks for is a major hurdle for Martin—even if he could get the money from Caitlin, it wouldn't be possible to get it in time for the deadline. The fact that Sekai and Alois help serves to illustrate that in fact Martin's education isn't just about him or about any specific school—it is a community effort that is only possible thanks to the contributions of various people around the world.



Martin heads off to his new boarding school. He realizes he will miss his family, but he's excited. The other students are curious about his pictures of Caitlin. They think she's his girlfriend, and while at first, he tries to correct them, he finds that letting them believe this raises his status on campus.

Martin leaving his family represents a major step for him growing up. He will have to become more independent. Other students don't know much about him, like the details of his pen pal relationship with Caitlin, and sometimes Martin uses this to his advantage, allowing them to believe false impressions if it benefits him.



PART 4: CAITLIN, MARCH 2001

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin exchanges phone numbers with a boy named Austin and begins talking with him. Later, a boy named Damon comes to take her on a date and is more mature than many other boys his age because his dad has multiple sclerosis. Caitlin is surprised that Damon can smoke marijuana right in his house. She feels like she can trust Damon, so she tells the whole story of Martin and his headmaster, which Damon thinks is cool.

While much of Caitlin's growth comes as a result of her relationship with Martin, she also grows up in other ways. Here, she meets Damon who, despite living in the same town as Caitlin, has a very different living situation. The fact that Damon can smoke in his house shocks Caitlin, because her parents would never allow anything like that.



PART 4: MARTIN, APRIL 2001

In Zimbabwe, Martin is starting to settle into his new school, but he finds out that the deposit from Alois has not yet arrived. The bursar gives him a week to sort it out. Martin is excited by the brilliant teachers and large library but also intimidated by the classes entirely in English and by his smart classmates.

Even after he has made it into school, Martin faces financial difficulties that threaten his future education. He faces challenges that other students at his school don't have to worry about, which makes it harder for him to fit in.



At an assembly, the headmaster calls Martin into his office to discuss his missing deposit payment. Martin calls Alois, who says that the payment should be coming that very day. The payment comes in, but Alois also says that he won't be able to help with future payments.

Although Alois seems rich compared to Martin's family, his resources are limited, especially compared to a middle-class American family like Caitlin's. Though Alois (and many others in the book) would clearly like to help Martin, the financial realities of living in Zimbabwe don't always make that possible.



Martin works hard and hopes for a miracle that will allow him to find enough money to stay in school. One day, Martin is called into the headmaster's office and believes he is about to be sent home. Instead, he learns that he has received a scholarship that will pay for the rest of his time at school. Martin is overjoyed and proudly walks back to class.

Though Martin is ultimately successful at getting his education funded, he cuts it close. This suggests that there may be other students, equally as talented as Martin, who don't have the same luck and who never have the opportunity to reach their potential in school.



PART 4: CAITLIN, APRIL 2001

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin feels vindicated by Martin's amazing test scores, which prove he isn't just some grifter. In March, Caitlin turns 16 and is finally able to drive her car. Damon, who has become Caitlin's first serious boyfriend, meets her at the DMV when she's getting her learner's permit.

Caitlin is excited at the prospect of Martin coming to a U.S. university and potentially finally meeting him. She sends emails to colleges on Martin's behalf, asking them to consider him.

Caitlin continues to experience typical teenage milestones. Getting a learner's permit often represents a new level of independence, and having a serious boyfriend is another important rite of passage that shows she has been growing up.



This is perhaps the first time that Caitlin begins to seriously believe she will one day meet Martin in person. Like Martin, she realizes that Martin's future will depend heavily on his education.



PART 4: MARTIN, JULY 2001

In Zimbabwe, Martin loves his new school but is also excited for the semester break, when he'll see his family again. He is concerned, however, to see that his mother seems to be sick. He knows that malaria and cholera have both been spreading. He and Nation decide to take her to the hospital in a wheelbarrow.

Two hours later, Nation and Martin get Martin's mother to a hospital, where a nurse confirms she has malaria. The nurse says their mother needs IV fluids, but the hospital can't provide them. There is, however, a man in a blue shirt outside who can sell the medicine and IV that she needs.

Nation and Martin are lucky to have enough money (from Caitlin) to buy what their mother needs. The medicine and IV almost instantly make their mother feel better. They take her back home in the wheelbarrow.

At home, Martin finds a new box from Caitlin—school supplies, with a note that he can take what he needs and give the rest to friends and neighbors. Perhaps that most fascinating gift is a packet of Tang, which they mix with water and give to their mother because it has vitamin C.

Though Martin's parents try to care for him, in this case, the roles are reversed, and Martin must be the one to care for his mother. This contrasts with Caitlin's situation, since she never has to care for her parents in this way. The fact that Martin and Nation transfer their mother in a wheelbarrow helps to emphasize the lack of medical resources and infrastructure in rural Zimbabwe.



As with education, there is also a cost for healthcare, and those who aren't able to pay for it will face dire consequences. While this issue is by no means limited to Zimbabwe, it serves to highlight the extent of the economic turmoil that the country was going through at the time.



Once again, Caitlin's gift has been more impactful than anything she could have imagined. The authors suggest that generosity can make a difference well beyond what the giver would have predicted.



Caitlin and her family have started to realize that it isn't enough just to help Martin—that there are many others like Martin who face similar problems and deserve help just as much. While Martin will continue to be Caitlin's focus, her note about giving the extras away to friends and neighbors shows a growing awareness of how poverty and scarcity affect people in Zimbabwe.



PART 5: CAITLIN, SEPTEMBER 2001

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin has never heard of malaria until she hears about it from Martin. Caitlin tries to send medicine to Zimbabwe but finds out that doing so is illegal. She finds out that her grandmother has been prescribed quinine, which is used as a treatment for malaria.

Meanwhile, in school, Caitlin learns that she has to wear close-toed **shoes**, ideally steel-toed boots, in one of her wood-working classes that is required if she wants to work in mechanical drawing (Caitlin's current plan). Caitlin talks with a guidance counselor, who tells her that if she wants to stay in mechanical drawing, she'll have to take other classes with uniform requirements too. Caitlin decides to find a new career.

A few days later, Caitlin sleeps in and makes it to school just in time. Things seem strange that day, and on her way to third period, she sees a teacher crying in the hallway. She learns in fourth period that two planes have crashed into the Twin Towers in New York City. Richie runs into her classroom and tells her that she has to go; Caitlin's mom wants them home. Caitlin's dad is at a military base, and the whole family is worried that something might have happened to him.

Eventually, Caitlin's mom gets a call from Caitlin's dad—he was stuck on the base because it was red alert and there was no cell reception. Richie realizes that if there's ever a draft, he'll have to go. Caitlin thinks of Martin and writes to tell him what happened with the terrorist attacks.

PART 5: MARTIN, SEPTEMBER 2001

In Zimbabwe, Martin's mother begins to make a full recovery, and Martin heads back to boarding school. A couple days after he gets back to school, there is an unexpected assembly. They learn about the terrorist attacks in the United States. Soon after, Martin learns that Zimbabwe is the target of sanctions by the U.S. and Britain (because of Zimbabwe's involvement in the Congo).

The fact that Caitlin has never heard of malaria before illustrates another way that she is privileged in comparison to Martin. Though she wants to help, she once again finds that sometimes even with good intentions, it is difficult to find the right way to help someone, especially when they're far away.



As adult Caitlin narrates the actions of her younger self, she has a sense of humor about how she used to make major life decisions over seemingly minor details. Caitlin doesn't necessarily fault her past self, however, since it was this same sense of spontaneity that led to her forming her relationship with Martin.



For Caitlin and Martin, one of the most significant aspects of September 11th is the tighter travel restrictions, which will make things more difficult for Martin to eventually come into the United States (particularly after sanctions are imposed on Zimbabwe). The event is also significant for Caitlin because it is one of the first times she has to worry about one of her parents instead of the other way around; while it turns out that her dad is fine, for a brief moment she experiences something similar to what Martin did when his mother had malaria.



One of the other effects of 9/11 is that Caitlin gets a better understanding of how Martin feels. She is used to reading about terrorist attacks in Africa, but when one happens close to her, she gets a better sense of the reality of living with violence.



One of the big differences between Martin and Caitlin is that Martin's school has a whole assembly about something that happened in the United States. It is difficult to imagine Caitlin's school having an assembly about events in Zimbabwe. This assembly highlights both how the world has become increasingly connected, but also how some nations, like the U.S., have wielded much more global influence than others.



Martin writes to Caitlin saying he is sorry to hear about the terrorist attacks. He also says he is getting more serious about becoming a doctor and asks for her help contacting more universities. Just after he sends his letter, he gets a new one from Caitlin, which contains enough money to help him get a passport.

Martin's renewed interest in becoming a doctor can probably be traced directly back to the problems with Zimbabwe's medical system that he witnessed when he was trying to get his mother treated for malaria. He wants to use his education to help fix the world around him.



PART 5: CAITLIN, JANUARY 2002

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin hasn't heard about the political sanctions against Zimbabwe, but she reassures Martin that nothing will affect their friendship.

Caitlin's letter highlights how the people in a country aren't homogenous and how a country's official political actions don't always line up with how the individual citizens feel—concepts like friendship can transcend politics.



Inspired by Martin's choice to be a doctor, Caitlin starts looking into becoming a nurse. Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad tell her that while they can't afford to pay for Martin to go to college in the U.S., they want to help look for scholarships for him. Caitlin's mom tells Caitlin that she has enough credits in high school to get an early start and take nursing prerequisite classes at a local community college.

While Caitlin has been informally referring to Martin as her brother, this is the moment that her parents really join in and begin doing things for Martin that they would do for a son. Though they can't pay for a full college education as they would for her biological brother Richie, their interest in getting Martin educated mirrors Martin's parents' own concern that he always place first in his class.



PART 5: MARTIN, JUNE 2002

In Zimbabwe, Martin is surprised to receive a letter from Caitlin's mom, telling him about the U.S. college admissions process. Martin already knows a little bit because he has a friend named Wallace who has taken the SATs and is going abroad. He makes an arrangement with the school headmaster to borrow his computer after hours to help with his correspondence to Caitlin and his college application process. He sends his first email to Caitlin.

As someone who didn't grow up learning about the U.S. education system, Martin is at a disadvantage. He doesn't even know what's required to apply, but Caitlin's mom tries to minimize his disadvantage by explaining things to him. This illustrates how, although the U.S. education system likes to put forward the idea that it is merit-based, there are facets of it that make it more difficult for some students to succeed.



PART 5: CAITLIN, AUGUST 2002

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is surprised and happy to receive her email from Martin. Caitlin's mom has been having trouble lining up a scholarship for Martin, but she keeps looking at more universities. Caitlin writes some short emails to Martin but prefers to leave longer thoughts for letters.

Even though email allows Caitlin to write to Martin immediately, she finds that she prefers to save some thoughts for letters. This shows how communication isn't always about ease of use—ritual and familiarity also play a role in determining how people maintain long-distance relationships.



PART 5: MARTIN, AUGUST 2002

In Zimbabwe, Martin tells his friend Wallace (who is traveling to the United States for college) that he should reach out to Caitlin and her family. Martin comes back to Chisamba Singles, determined to find a way to get a scholarship. He also needs to collect his passport.

Though Martin has dreamed of studying in the U.S. for a while, Wallace is the one who truly shows him that it is possible. Because Wallace comes from a similarly rural background to Martin, Martin believes that he can do the same as Wallace.



Martin takes an early bus to the passport office and finds that he's the only one there. He is surprised how easy the process goes and excited to fill the many blank pages in his new passport.

The lack of people in the passport office suggests that not many people in Zimbabwe get the opportunity to travel out of the country and that Martin is unusual for being able to do so.



PART 5: CAITLIN, SEPTEMBER 2002

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin is excited to hear about Wallace, because he is proof that someone from Zimbabwe can make it to an American university.

Wallace proved for Martin that it was possible for a boy from rural Zimbabwe to make it to the United States, and he does the same for Caitlin.



Damon is one year older than Caitlin but has no interest in leaving for college. He doesn't like that Caitlin spends so much time studying, causing the two of them to argue.

Damon is one of the things still keeping Caitlin connected to her hometown. While his disdain for education seems to suggest narrow-mindedness (or perhaps insecurity that Caitlin will leave him), it is likely also true that he doesn't have quite as much to gain from college as a smart but impoverished student like Martin.



PART 5: MARTIN, SEPTEMBER 2002

In Zimbabwe, Martin gets an email from the SAT confirming that he has a test date in Harare. He gets another email from Wallace saying that the email addresses Martin gave for Caitlin and Caitlin's mom aren't working. Martin emails back to tell Wallace about his test date and the correct emails.

This short chapter emphasizes all the logistical hurdles that Martin has to overcome to make it to the United States. Even something as simple as a typo in an email address can make a big difference, as it does for Wallace.



PART 5: CAITLIN, OCTOBER 2002

In Pennsylvania, Richie talks about going back to college at Temple University to finish his degree. Soon after, they are shocked to get an email from Wallace saying that he is studying at Temple.

Coincidence plays a big role in the story. While it is impossible to predict coincidences, Caitlin and Martin's story suggests that the most important thing is to be generous and kind, in order to make the most of these coincidences when they happen.



Caitlin's mom goes to visit Wallace at Temple. Wallace doesn't have anything in his dorm room, so Caitlin's mom tells Caitlin that they'll help him get set up. Caitlin, her mom, Caitlin's dad, Richie, and Damon all go to visit Wallace. They give Wallace new clothes and other gifts, and he thanks them many times. Wallace is friendly but gives short answers.

Helping Wallace is essentially a practice run for what will happen when Martin makes it to the United States. Still, in spite of the fact that they barely know Wallace, Caitlin's family is generous to him, illustrating yet another case in which kindness is "contagious."



Caitlin's family takes Wallace to a restaurant, and he is surprised by some of the things he sees, like the waitress's tattoos. Wallace is shy but seems to enjoy trying new foods. Caitlin's mom buys him a mini-fridge so that he can keep the leftovers. Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad let Wallace know that he has a place to stay if he ever comes to visit them.

Caitlin describes Wallace's bewilderment at the restaurant to highlight the cultural differences between their countries. With the mini-fridge, Caitlin's mom arguably goes overboard, giving Wallace an expensive gift he doesn't really understand, but reflecting back as an adult, Caitlin seems to argue that it's better to go overboard with generosity than the opposite.



PART 5: MARTIN, OCTOBER 2002

In Zimbabwe, Martin gets an email from Wallace about how nice Caitlin's family is. Martin also gets emails from Caitlin's mom, updating him on his college scholarship search. Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad say that Martin can think of them as family, and he begins to refer to them as such in his letters and emails.

Wallace's email confirms that, even though he was shy around Caitlin's family, he still appreciated being included and taken care of by them. Perhaps because Wallace has made the idea of Martin coming to the United States feel more possible, Caitlin's parents now feel increasingly comfortable referring to Martin as a son, and he returns the gesture.



PART 5: CAITLIN, NOVEMBER 2002

In Pennsylvania, Wallace comes to visit Caitlin's family during the last week in October, then starts coming every weekend. He doesn't like how other students get drunk on weekends and is having a hard time making friends.

Though attending an American university is Martin's dream, Wallace's experience shows that this dream doesn't always match up with the reality, particularly when he feels out of place because of his own cultural background.



Richie gets accepted at Temple. Caitlin's mom invites Wallace to temporarily live with them, since Richie will also be commuting and Wallace doesn't get along with his current roommate.

The fact that Richie and Wallace will be commuting to the same university sets up a parallel between them, foreshadowing the ways in which Martin, too, will eventually become like a son to Caitlin's family.



PART 5: MARTIN, DECEMBER 2002

In Zimbabwe, Martin finds that he's the only one at his school without a definite plan about where he'll be going to university. His friends debate where would be best to go, but Martin says he just needs one to give him a full scholarship.

Martin, too, is finding out that his dream doesn't quite match up with reality—because he has applied to U.S. universities, he must live with an uncertainty that his other classmates don't have to deal with.



Martin gets to the SAT test site early and feels that the test is challenging, but he doesn't let it discourage him. He goes back to school, says goodbye to his headmaster, and then goes home to his family, where he makes daily trips to an internet café to check in with Caitlin and Caitlin's mom.

Though Martin is anxious about his future, he remains dedicated to his goals. His trips to an internet café show that he is increasingly connected to the outside world, even as he goes back to his family.

**PART 6: CAITLIN, JANUARY 2003**

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin and her mom learn that Martin's SAT scores are too low to qualify him for some of the scholarships they were considering. They contact the U.S. embassy in Harare and try to see if they can find a sponsor for Martin in Zimbabwe.

Martin has been an exceptional student his entire life, so the fact that he scores poorly on the SATs may be more of an issue with the test than with him. The authors suggest that the SATs don't effectively represent some students' potential, particularly international students like Martin.

**PART 6: MARTIN, JANUARY 2003**

In Zimbabwe, Martin is also disappointed by his SAT scores. He has good scores on his other tests, though, so he applies to the Ministry of Education for a temporary teaching position, a common choice for students who don't go straight to university.

Though he perhaps isn't willing to admit it to himself yet, Martin seems to be making tentative back-up plans in case he never gets the opportunity to leave Zimbabwe.



Martin learns there's an immediate opening for a science teacher in a rural area he's never heard of before. He sends a new email to Caitlin and Caitlin's mom, letting them know of his new plans.

The fact that Martin now emails not only Caitlin but also her mom highlights the ways in which they are all becoming more of a family.

**PART 6: CAITLIN, FEBRUARY 2003**

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin and Caitlin's mom both reach dead ends in trying to find Zimbabwean sponsors for Martin's education. Damon starts getting annoyed with Caitlin about all the time she spends studying. When he says he's sick of hearing about Martin, Caitlin gets angry with him.

It's unsurprising that Caitlin and her mom have a hard time finding Zimbabwean sponsors, given how poor much of the country is and how powerful the U.S. dollar is in the exchange rate. The fact that they even started looking abroad suggests that they have already thoroughly investigated their domestic options with no luck.



PART 6: MARTIN, APRIL 2003

In Zimbabwe, Martin finds that the place where he's been assigned to teach is even more rural than he expected. He meets a fellow teacher who's a few years older and stays with him.

At the school, Martin introduces himself and can tell the children are impressed by his story—they have never left their village. Martin gets to know his students and wants to be there for them. He is disappointed, however, to see that his salary isn't being paid to his bank account, meaning he has to pay out of pocket to keep teaching there.

Ultimately, Martin makes the difficult decision that he has to leave the village in order to save money and be available for college admissions news. He is accepted at several universities, like Temple, but they don't give him nearly enough funding.

While Martin himself comes from a relatively rural area, his experience as a teacher shows that there are others in Zimbabwe who live in even more remote conditions.



Martin gets a firsthand taste of how some of his own teachers must have felt. They all seemed like they wanted to help Martin, but when finances got in the way, they were unable to help him. Now that he's in the same position, Martin realizes that he will have to do the same thing.



Once again, lack of money proves to be Martin's biggest obstacle to education. The acceptances he receives prove that U.S. universities believe he could succeed, but none are willing to offer him enough money to actually give him that opportunity.

**PART 6: CAITLIN, APRIL 2003**

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin's mom begins to focus on trying to get Martin into Villanova because she had a good feeling about the International Admission staff there. Ultimately, however, Villanova ends up like the others, offering a spot but no money. Caitlin's mom is disappointed but tells Caitlin to focus on her own finals for the moment, and that she'll keep working on Martin.

Villanova is a Catholic university, and Caitlin's mom's frustration with the university seems to be in part because its refusal to give Martin enough scholarship money seems to be at odds with Christian ideas about helping the poor. Villanova is also attractive to them because it's close to Philadelphia, meaning Martin could easily see Caitlin.

**PART 6: MARTIN, MAY 2003**

In Zimbabwe, Martin learns about how much his friend Wallace is struggling at school in the United States. Wallace's family in Zimbabwe is grateful for Caitlin's family's help, so they invite Martin to stay with them. Martin accepts and takes a two-day journey to meet them.

This is yet another instance of "contagious" kindness: Caitlin's family's generosity toward Wallace has led Wallace's family to extend a similar generosity toward Martin. Though Wallace's family isn't wealthy, their support for Martin is valuable.



Wallace's parents tell Martin about the help Caitlin's family has provided to Wallace. They go to visit nearby Victoria Falls, and Martin is amazed by the landmark. The falls are a major tourist stop, and Martin sees more white people than he ever has before.

The tourists that Martin sees around Victoria Falls foreshadow what his experience will eventually be like in the United States. He is beginning to see more of the wider world.



Martin calls the U.S. embassy and is surprised to find that they already know him because of Caitlin's emails. He makes plans to come to a pre-departure orientation for students studying in the U.S. (even though he hasn't worked out how to pay for his education yet).

The fact that the people at the embassy know about Martin suggests that the embassy has a small staff and that there are not many people in Zimbabwe who are trying to travel abroad like Martin is.



At orientation, Martin learns about some of the cultural differences between the U.S. and Zimbabwe. For example, in the U.S., you don't have to offer food to a roommate, whereas in Zimbabwe it is always customary to share if there's food.

Although the story has highlighted many of the difficulties of living in Zimbabwe, this passage shows that there are also positive sides, and that many Zimbabweans tend to feel more connected to others in their community, as evidenced by the different customs around sharing.



By July, Martin still hasn't heard anything about a scholarship from Caitlin or her mom, but he sends them an email in all caps, trying to stay hopeful.

The fact that Martin tries so hard to appear hopeful suggests that on some level he is beginning to accept the possibility that his hopes won't be fulfilled.



PART 6: CAITLIN, JUNE 2003

In Pennsylvania, by April, Caitlin has heard from all of the colleges Martin applied to. There are five acceptances: three with partial scholarships and two with no money. Caitlin thinks they've failed, but her mom doesn't give up yet.

For an American student, Martin's record of acceptances would probably be considered pretty good, but as a Zimbabwean student with no money, it's a failure. This highlights once again the unique challenges that impoverished international students face.



Caitlin's mom's initial plan is to have Martin accept a spot at Villanova and work out how to pay for it later. She sends a letter to the president, blessing the envelope with a prayer first.

Caitlin's mom prays over the envelope not just because of her own faith but because Villanova is a Catholic university. She seems to believe that Christian ideas of charity will make Villanova more likely to offer Martin money than other universities (plus it is also one of the closest universities to where they live).



Meanwhile, Caitlin holds a bake sale and works her job but doesn't make nearly enough to help fund Martin's education. Caitlin's mom finally says that it might be time to break the news to Martin that there's no way to pay for his education.

Caitlin's bake sale and part-time job recall Martin's own attempts to fund his education with odd jobs. In both cases, the cost of education is so prohibitively high that such gestures are more symbolic than anything—to actually pay tuition, it will take some outside help.



PART 6: MARTIN, JULY 2003

In Zimbabwe, Martin is surprised that Caitlin and her mom are taking so long to respond to his email. On July 15, 2003, he gets an email from Villanova and is both excited and afraid to open it.

This short chapter builds anticipation, strongly hinting that Martin might be about to receive a scholarship but still leaving open the possibility that his dreams are over.



In Zimbabwe, Martin learns that he has a full scholarship for his first year at Villanova. He rushes to the embassy to pick up the paperwork he needs. While he's there, he makes a call to Caitlin.

Martin is overjoyed, but he knows that there are still some final obstacles to overcome, which is why he gets started on the paperwork right away.

**PART 6: CAITLIN, JULY 2003**

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin wakes up to the sound of her mom screaming and wonders what's happening. It turns out the president of Villanova has personally requested that Martin be given enough money for a full ride.

The fact that the president personally made the decision to give Martin a scholarship suggests that Martin was always worthy of such support, but that he just had a difficult time making it through the bureaucracy of the college admissions process to find someone with the power to give him money.



In Pennsylvania, Caitlin gets the call from Martin and is excited. Caitlin's mom tells Martin that they already know everything. Caitlin's mom gets on the line with the embassy to arrange Martin's flight. Even Damon is excited to hear the news. Martin will leave Zimbabwe on August 15 and arrive in Philadelphia the next day.

Perhaps the biggest sign that kindness is "contagious" is how even Damon is excited about potentially getting to meet Martin. Though he complained about Caitlin's relationship with Martin in the past, the triumph of finally helping Martin achieve his dream has helped Damon get invested in Martin's story, too.

**PART 6: MARTIN, AUGUST 2003**

In Zimbabwe, Martin gets his vaccinations and then goes to his family to say goodbye. He knows it will be a while before he sees them again. Martin's father is so overjoyed that he starts running around and shouting, causing Martin's mother to scold him for bragging. She is excited too, but she doesn't want to jinx anything.

Martin's parents express their excitement in very different ways that emphasize how each of them cares for their son. While Martin's father is boisterous and celebrates his son's accomplishments, Martin's mother is more reserved, helping to keep Martin grounded even with all his success.



Martin gives his mother a portion of the money he got from Caitlin's mom. He goes to Victoria Falls to wait with Wallace's parents for the plane tickets to arrive, but by August 11, the tickets still haven't come yet. Wallace's parents invite a prophet to meet with Martin before he goes. Martin isn't sure if he believes in the power prophets, who act like witch doctors, but he agrees to go along with the ceremony.

Although the biggest obstacle to Martin's education has already been overcome, there are still plenty of opportunities for things to go wrong. With his big scholarship, Martin has a lot more to lose now—it's like earlier, when Caitlin's cash gifts made Martin's family a potential target for theft. Perhaps it is because of this danger that Martin participates in a ceremony that he himself believes is just superstition.



The prophet tells Martin that his aunt (whom Martin has never met) has placed a hex on him to prevent him from going. They pray in hopes that the hex will be lifted and that the tickets will finally arrive.

Though Martin is polite, he implies that he doesn't really believe anything the prophet said. Still, it seems as if a hex has been placed on Martin's trip out of Zimbabwe, suggesting that even superstition can have an element of truth to it.



PART 6: CAITLIN, AUGUST 12, 2003

Caitlin's mom is angry that FedEx's 48-hour guarantee doesn't apply to Africa. They worry that the tickets won't get to Martin in time. Caitlin's mom calls Villanova, and they say they'll hold a spot for him until January if he can't get there in time, but Caitlin's mom doesn't want Martin to wait that long. Caitlin's dad says they should tell Martin to go to the airport—one way or another, he's getting on the plane.

Caitlin's family experiences the same stress as Martin. They've achieved so much on his behalf, and it would be particularly heartbreaking to lose it all after the hardest part is over. Once again, the problems with the FedEx delivery show how in certain parts of the world, institutions like a reliable postal system can't be taken for granted.



PART 6: MARTIN, AUGUST 14, 2003

In Zimbabwe, Martin gets a call three hours before his flight is scheduled to leave. Caitlin's mom sounds upset and says they're still working on getting him to come. Martin is very disappointed.

The moments leading up to Martin's departure are a stressful time for everyone, in part because there aren't many flights out of Zimbabwe, and that makes the timing crucial.



Wallace's parents say that they're taking Martin to the airport and that he'll get on a plane somehow. When Martin gets there, a manager is on the phone talking to Caitlin's dad. Five minutes later, Martin has a ticket.

Though Martin's situation seemed dire for a moment, Caitlin's dad's intervention shows that with enough money, many seemingly insurmountable problems simply go away.



Martin boards a plane for the first time. He looks around at the other people, many of them tourists with strange accents. At a layover in Johannesburg, Martin buys McDonald's and has his first hamburger. The next stop is Philadelphia.

Once he is on the plane, Martin is finally reassured that nothing will stop him from getting to the United States. This allows him to finally enjoy himself, which is why he splurges on a meal that is expensive for him.



PART 6: CAITLIN, AUGUST 15, 2003

In Pennsylvania, Caitlin spends the whole night tracking Martin's flight. She and her family go to the airport an hour early with a big poster to welcome Martin. Finally, Martin comes out, and Caitlin recognizes him.

Caitlin and Martin hug while Caitlin's mom takes **photos**. Martin greets the other family members as if they're his own family. Martin has arrived with nothing but a toothbrush, some things for Wallace, and the clothes on his back—Caitlin's mom has promised to take care of everything else. On the way back, they pass through Villanova, and Caitlin's mom points it out to Martin.

The major drama in Martin's story is largely over. This section builds suspense until the big moment when Caitlin and Martin finally meet in person.



The meet-up between Caitlin and Martin is joyful and suggests that the hard work and sacrifices that each of them has undergone were all worth it. The fact that Martin has arrived with almost nothing in terms of possessions suggests how totally he trusts Caitlin and her family to take care of him.



PART 6: MARTIN, AUGUST 15, 2003

On the ride back from the Philadelphia airport, Martin can't believe that he is finally meeting Caitlin in person. Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad show Martin around Villanova, then take him home to the house that Martin recognizes from **photos**.

Martin gets the same room in Caitlin's family's house that Wallace had stayed in earlier. Caitlin decides to take Martin to the mall for the first time, and he is overwhelmed by all the sights and smells. They buy a new outfit for him to wear to dinner that night.

The next day, Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad hold a party with all of Caitlin's relatives and neighbors. Caitlin's mom gives a speech introducing the family to Martin and vice versa. This moves Martin to make his own impromptu speech about how Caitlin and her family have helped him fulfill his dreams. He and Caitlin squeeze hands and can't believe that after six years, they are finally right next to each other.

Martin's shock is unsurprising, given how many new things he's been exposed to at once. The fact that Caitlin's family is driving around with him in a car, headed back to their house, suggests that Martin really has become a member of the family.



Martin's gratitude toward Caitlin's family contrasts strongly with the dismissive attitude of the German exchange student Stephanie. This suggests that coming from an impoverished background could make people more accepting and open to new experiences than people from wealthy backgrounds.



The main book ends with the image of Martin and Caitlin physically touching, something that they weren't able to do at any prior point in the book. While the authors suggest that you don't need to be able to physically touch someone to make a difference in their life, they also show that, sometimes, there is no substitute for being with someone in person.



EPILOGUE: MARTIN, MARCH 5, 2008

At Caitlin's wedding, Martin gives a speech about how he is grateful that she met her husband Dzmityr. Wallace is there too and also cheers. Martin was living in Manhattan when he heard that Caitlin was going to be marrying Dzmityr. Caitlin and Martin will share many milestones over the years: his MBA at Duke, her nursing degree, and the birth of her baby girl.

Martin's only regret is that his family from Zimbabwe can't be there. He started sending money to them soon after arriving at Villanova and before he graduated, and he eventually saved enough to buy them a new house. He continues to send money home, even to this day. His sister, Lois, is the top of her class and also looking to go to college in the United States. Martin reflects on how one letter forever bound his family and Caitlin's.

EPILOGUE: CAITLIN, OCTOBER 2015

Caitlin reflects back on how she had no idea that her pen pal letter 18 years ago would lead to her finding her best friend (Martin) and even writing a book about it. She still lives in Pennsylvania, only about half an hour from Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad, and now has two daughters.

While Caitlin stayed in Pennsylvania, Martin helped write the book from around the world, contacting her from places like Manhattan, South Africa, and Texas.

Caitlin turned 30 three weeks before their book was published. Caitlin's mom and Caitlin's dad throw her a small party. Martin is invited, but Caitlin assumes he is off somewhere like Uganda or Zambia and won't be able to make it. He surprises her, however, by showing up; he gets to meet Caitlin's second daughter for the first time.

Caitlin realizes that this will be the last time she sees Martin before their book comes out, and after that, the story won't be just theirs anymore. The next time she sees him is at a book party in Manhattan. She finds that Martin fits in easily with the sophisticated crowd at the party, but she feels out of place.

Caitlin's wedding is one of the biggest milestones in her life, and the fact that Martin is there for it to give a speech, well after their pen pal relationship has ended, suggests that he has remained a stable part of her life. Though they no longer exchange letters, their continued relationship is also a testament to the power of letters.



Although Martin has been successful in the United States, he also has made sacrifices—he isn't able to see his family as often as he would like. Still, he continues to look out for them, and just as Wallace's success inspired Martin's journey to the U.S., Martin's success seems like it could inspire Lois.



Even more time has passed, and Caitlin and Martin continue to be friends. Interestingly, Caitlin and Martin's roles have reversed in some ways, and now Caitlin is the one who lives near where she grew up while Martin is the one who travels around the world.



Martin's diverse travel itinerary suggests that education did pay off as expected, opening the door for him to travel to places he could only have dreamed of before.



Caitlin acknowledges the hard truth that even though Martin is her best friend, they both have busy lives and aren't able to see each other as often as they'd like. Still, Martin makes an effort to be there for major milestones, showing that on some level, the bond between them is still unbreakable.



Caitlin is aware of the power of stories: after all, it was Martin's life story that helped get him the scholarship to Villanova that changed his life. In fact, Martin has been changed so much by education that he has learned to navigate social situations where Caitlin herself is uncomfortable.



Caitlin is nervous about having to speak to the crowd, since she doesn't like public speaking, but she finds that people are moved by her and Martin's story. Later, Caitlin is gratified by messages she receives on social media about how their story touched other people.

Knowing how much a teacher changed her life, Caitlin agrees to do a talk with Martin about the book at West Chester East High School (about an hour away from her), where *I Will Always Write Back* has been chosen as a school-wide read. Normally, Caitlin lets Martin do the talking, since she figures people are more interested in his story. This time, however, Martin can't make it because he's traveling. Caitlin considers canceling the event, but the organizers ask if she'd come on her own.

Caitlin stresses out about what she'll do for her talk at the high school. She puts together some **photos** in a slideshow that she hopes will give her something to talk about. When Caitlin arrives at the school, there's a big sign welcoming her, which only makes her more nervous.

Speaking to appreciative teachers helps calm Caitlin's nerves a little bit. Eventually, she gives her presentation. She closes by emphasizing how one small act of kindness changed everything and encouraging others to reach out and do the same.

Afterwards, Caitlin is shocked that people want her to sign copies of the book. She realizes then how much it meant to some people. She reflects that kindness is contagious and that it changed her life. She ends by asking, "What will it [kindness] do for you?"

Though Caitlin has done a lot of writing, both to Martin and then later for their book, she finds that public speaking is a much more difficult form of communication. One of the book's recurring themes is how communication differs depending on the medium, whether it's letters, emails, phone calls, or in person.



Though Caitlin showed a lot of independence and initiative in starting her relationship with Martin, in other ways she preferred to be passive. She was always afraid of standing out, and even as an adult, this fear seems to be what makes giving talks about her book so difficult. Still, she decides that she has to face her fear rather than backing down, even if it means going ahead without Martin's help.



Caitlin tries to cope with her stress by preparing herself. She knows from her correspondence with Martin that photos can communicate a lot, so she makes sure to incorporate some into her talk, hoping they will have the same effect there.



Caitlin lays out her reasons for writing the book in the first place. She believes that kindness has changed her life and encourages others to learn from her example and explore how kindness can change their own lives.



The positive reaction to Caitlin's talk shows that her and Martin's story resonates with people. People in the audience see parallels with their own lives as well as the potential to improve themselves and the world with kindness. Caitlin's idea that kindness is "contagious" is one of the central themes of the book, and it helps explain how something as small as one pen pal letter led to a major book that has affected thousands of readers.





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