

The Soles of Her Feet

When Lila thought of that morning, her mother's voice was clearest in her mind. The way she raised it a little higher when speaking with someone she had just met, how it dipped down when she tucked her chin and smiled. Even at age eight, Lila noticed her charm. Her voice that sang like the birds crowding the trees outside their hut as the sun came up.

The strange man spoke in Bemba. "*Njikala ku Lusaka*," he had said. "I am from Lusaka."

"Ah, Lusaka," her mother had said, impressed. The baby was tied to her front with a colorful *chitenge* cloth and Lila's little brother played in the dirt at her feet. "The city is full of opportunity, yes?"

He groaned in agreement. "The schools are like nothing that can be found up here in the bush."

"It would be so good for her to go to school."

"And all I would expect would be a little help as my maid."

"She is very good with the *methiko* cooking stick. You shall see. Please, come and sit," her mother said. She walked over to the hut where Lila stood beside her mat, where she had gone to get her only pair of shoes for the walk to the well. The mat was one of six shared between her parents and nine siblings. She always slept next to Bupe. They would curl their young bodies in a way that fit them both on one mat, their soles pressed together, in a way that they never felt alone.

Her mother peeked her head into the doorway, the baby hidden in her chest beneath the cloth. "Lila, please come. There is someone I would like you to meet." Lila came out shyly, the morning's light falling first on her red shoes with holes exposing her little toes, then her *chitenge*, and then her hands and arms. At last she felt it on her face and squinting eyes, blinded by the morning.

He was sitting on her father's carved stump just outside the cooking hut. She had never seen anyone else sit on it. Her father had gone out to work the temperamental field after breakfast. The one that not long ago had yielded nothing, leaving the family to forage for fallen fruit beside the road and use their few *kwacha* to buy a bag of mealie meal. Once that ran out, they ate green mealie meal, eventually the seed, just to satiate their rumbling bellies.

But this morning, breakfast had been unusually sweet and generous: *nshima* with *masuku*. The rains had begun the month before, and the garden was at last beginning to sprout tiny green shoots, some of the trees beginning to bear small fruit. Yet they all knew the seed was nearly gone, their father making do with what they had left, spending his day nursing what little he had to plant.

“Lila, greet your Yama. My brother.” Lila noticed how her mother hesitated, how her eyes fell to her feet covered in dirt, as she called him “brother.” She had never heard her mother speak of this brother before. Lila took a step back into the hut, but her mother tapped her neck. “Go ahead.”

Lila looked at his large face, his nice clothes, his fingers stained by cigarettes.

“Lila,” her mother said, softly to anyone listening, but Lila heard the edge.

He held out his hand. “Greetings.” The smoke was still smoldering from the morning cooking fire. She took his hand and curtsied. Her hand felt small in his, so small that when he let go, she felt herself stumble backward.

Her mother smiled at Yama. “Go finish your chores, Lila. Fetch the water with Bupe and pound the maize when you return. Yama will be with us for a midday meal.” Lila and Bupe both perked up at the thought of a meal in the middle of the day, both of them remembering when even one meal a day was enough to make them sing.

Bupe was standing by the chicken coop, holding the water basins. For the past year, Bupe always looked nervous, agitated, when they prepared to go for water. Shortly after the attack, their mother only sent their older brother to get water. But slowly her worry loosened, her forbiddance relaxed, her thoughts consumed with the new baby, the field, the little children, how she might feed them all. Lila wondered if her mother even remembered what had happened. Lila hurried over, and Bupe balanced the bucket upon the *chitenge* she wrapped around her hairline. Lila was just learning to carry it on her head, but she decided to carry it to the well in her hands. She didn’t feel steady enough just then.

“What did he say to you?”

Lila’s *chitenge* was slipping off. “Only a greeting. Have you seen him before?”

“Never. I think he must be from the city.”

“Yes, Lusaka, he said.”

“Why would a stranger from Lusaka come all this way unless he knew someone...”

“Yes, he does know someone...”

“...or was looking for something.”

“*Mayo*. She said he is her brother.” But Bupe wasn’t listening.

Lila adjusted her *chitenge* to make it stay on.

“I always wanted to go to Lusaka,” Bupe said, looking ahead, scanning the tall elephant grass lining their way. They both knew this would never be. Bupe was thirteen, and their parents had just accepted a *lobola* from a man up the road whom Bupe had not met. There was no arguing. Their parents had been making arrangements for the children over the last year, the two years of drought taking their toll. But in the last month, the rains had finally come, the garden swallowing it up, nearly dead from thirst. The nearest well, three kilometers from their village, had gone dry nine months ago, forcing Lila and Bupe to walk an extra two to the next well.

When they arrived at the well, they set their basins down and lowered the bucket until they heard the splash. They reeled it up and emptied it, and repeated this again and again until their basins were as full as they could carry. Bupe helped Lila adjust the *chitenge* around her head to make a flat resting spot to carry the water home. Lila looked at her sister as she tied it, jerking Lila’s head with the knot. She admired Bupe’s jawline, the sharp, clean bend of it.

“There. You must learn to do this yourself, sister. I will not always be here to help you.”

They helped one another lift the basins onto their heads and began their walk home.

“I wonder what he wants,” Lila said.

“Maybe you will be able to go with him to Lusaka. Auntie Kaode said there is never drought in Lusaka, enough *nshima* and fruit for anyone who asks, music always playing. And enough books, even for the girls.”

“People must be so friendly there.”

“I am sure.”

When they returned, a red-and-green *chitenge* was spread out on the ground with their best plates and cups, a mismatched set of tin. The man was still sitting on their father’s stool. Their mother brought out the jug of *mukoyo*, just as their father arrived from the field.

He smiled as he greeted the man. “Hello, we have been expecting you. Welcome!” Their father softly clapped three times, gripped his elbow in respect, and bowed his head as he shook the man’s hand. Their hands slid from a grip of the hand to the thumb and back. The sweat on their father’s brow shimmered in the daylight as the man presented him with

a shovel. Their father laid his hand on his heart in appreciation and then extended both hands to accept it.

The men sat down, the stranger again on their father's stool and their father on Lila's brother's stool. Lila watched the white milky drink with lumps of ground corn being poured by her mother into the men's cups, up to the top. Lila brought a bowl of water for them to wash their hands.

"Thank you, sister," the man said to their mother, and he began to drink.

The girls sat around them and watched. Lila saw the kwacha notes poking out from the waist of her mother's chitenge as she bent to fill the men's plates with the family's fruit. Mere pieces of paper with green and dark red print that surely had passed through many hands before arriving in her mother's skirt.

"Lila, start the nshima. Bupe, cut the rape and start the beans." Lila went into the cooking hut, the fire already started. She poured water and mealie meal into the pot and began stirring. The man opened up the masuku, its yellow fruit spilling over his fingers, and sucked out the juice.

Bupe squatted near her, placing a small metal pot of greens on the fire. Together they stirred, smelling the aroma, their young bellies growling. They listened to the slurps of the men drinking mukoyo and eating the fruit that had fallen from their tree. They had collected only a small bowl the day before. There would be none left for the children now.

Lila's siblings lingered, watching the men eat. Lila stood beside Bupe, who asked the stranger questions: "How far is it to Lusaka? Is it true the girls wear trousers? Is it true they don't marry if they don't wish to marry?"

"Bupe," their mother whispered, and from the tone of her voice, even without looking, Lila could see the scorn of her eyebrows. Bupe's gaze dropped to the ground. The man didn't answer. The only sound was of the man's fingers rolling the sticky nshima with one hand, wiping up the relish with it, and chewing. Of him swallowing gulps of mukoyo. The sounds of the dove that continued to sing, even though daybreak was long past.

"Lila," her mother finally said, the lyricism returning to her voice. "Yama says Lusaka has many schools for young girls." Lila stepped closer to her sister. "You will learn to read and write." The man continued to eat. "And make new friends. Girls your own age." Lila slipped her hand into Bupe's, seeing the kwacha peeking out of her mother's chitenge.

Their father at last spoke, his cheek round with the nshima and relish, his tone flat. "It is an opportunity we cannot refuse."

Lila's eyes settled on the baby tied to her mother's breast, free to nurse without limit, whenever he was hungry. She hardly knew what he looked like. He was always attached to her mother, hidden inside the cloth. Perhaps there were enough kwacha notes in her mother's skirt to buy school uniforms for all of Lila's brothers. She had heard her father's whispers: "My sons must go to school; they cannot rely on the rain as I have." Her mother's murmured yeses. Her father's conclusion: "We must find a way."

Lila glanced at Yama, his head thrown back, slurping out the last drops of mukoyo.

Bupe's warm hand tightened around hers. Lila glanced up at her. She was biting the inside of her cheek, her eyebrows tense, her eyes still fixed on the ground.

"Yama has assured me he will take good care of you. You will go to school, Lila. Your father and I are so pleased. We cannot afford to send you, you know this."

Lila swallowed. She couldn't stop blinking.

Her mother waited for Lila to respond, then turned away when the sticks Bupe had carefully arranged in the cooking fire burned through and collapsed. Her mother broke the silence, her charm vanished. "You will leave after Yama is finished." She nodded to the sleeping hut. "Go on. Take your clean shirt with you."

Lila picked up her shirt and went into the cool shade of the sleeping hut, safe in the shelter of thatch and dirt and her family's belongings. Her shirt was purple and smelled like dried grass and smoke because she had laid it on top of the cooking hut to dry after washing it the day before. Later, even the feel of it tight in her hands would render the memory of its scent, long after it had slipped from the shirt into clouds over Lusaka. Her mother had brought it back from the market, the only gift she had ever given her. She smiled as she pulled it over Lila's head, straightened the shoulders, smoothed it around her ribcage and hips. "Purple always reminds me of you," she had said. "The color of the soles of your feet when you were born."

"It's not fair," Bupe said as she walked into the hut, her eyes glossy with tears. "I've never left the village." She wiped her eyes. "I never learned how to read."

Lila looked at her shirt, the only thing for her to pack. She wasn't sure, had she been given the choice, if she would choose books over home, Lusaka over a marriage to a man she had never met.

The men were finished eating. She heard the ring of the plates and cups as they were dipped into the barrel of water. The clinks of the

dishes as her mother set them on the drying rack beside the cooking fire. The squeals of her younger siblings chasing the chicken, the low voices of the adults negotiating and completing the arrangements.

Bupe was sitting on their mat alone.

"I will miss your wedding," Lila said.

"Then consider yourself fortunate. Instead, you will be wearing trousers and eating with a spoon."

Lila hesitated. "Is it for the best, Bupe?" She could hardly see her sister in the darkness. "I am afraid."

Bupe's head was in her hands. "I would be more afraid to remain here."

Lila had never seen a car before. Yama's car was brown, and the late afternoon light skimmed across its shiny roof. Children stood on their tiptoes, looking inside. Yama opened the door and Lila climbed in. He smelled of spices and tobacco. Her father held the shovel beside the hole he had begun to dig, just to try it out.

"Bless you, child," her mother said, and Lila knew she was the only one to hear the small crack in her voice. She put her hand upon Lila's head before closing the door. "Listen well in school," she said through the window. "Obey your Yama."

Lila smiled, seeing everyone so happy for her. Perhaps there was no reason to be afraid. Soon she would be wearing a school uniform with white stockings that went up to her knees, like some of the girls she passed along the road to the well. Soon she would eat with a spoon.

Bupe. Lila watched her, standing in the doorway of the hut, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed, kicking the doorframe with her heel. Lila memorized her sister's face, her long neck, the rows of braids Lila had woven, reminding her of a bountiful field.

Yama turned the key and the car rumbled, rolling over the dirt toward the road.

At once, Bupe started running for the car.

"Stop!" Lila shouted, straining to look behind her, over the seat. "Stop!"

Yama didn't look back, the car speeding up. He had one hand on the steering wheel, the other picking his teeth with his thumbnail.

Lila reached for the back window, pressing her palm on the glass. Bupe was getting smaller and smaller. Her arms pumping back and forth, her neck cocked back, her knees pushing through her yellow chitenge as she ran after the car. *Bupe*, Lila whispered, trying not to cry.

Lila could see her all over again that morning, when she'd been snatched from the road and dragged into the thick grass, vanishing right before her. Lila could no more hear her sister now than she remembered hearing Bupe then. Why couldn't she hear her? Where had she gone?

Yama honked the horn twice, laughed to himself, and kept going.

Bupe's arms and legs quit, swinging like slowing pendulums until her momentum gave out. She rested her hands on her head, then bent over heaving, exposed in the sunlight. Only dirt road and grass surrounded her small silhouette. Lila kept her eyes on Bupe, knowing her sister probably could no longer see her inside the car. She watched, her arm flattened on the glass, her cheek pressed against the headrest, her other hand gripping the small metal bars attaching it to the seat as Bupe turned to walk home.

Lila had never moved so fast. Streaks of color flew past her, and only after they went by did she piece together the images, identifying the bodies and faces as people she knew along the road. Her auntie with the fruit stand, her cousins carrying yams, bananas, and pineapples in large bowls on their heads. The old man hunched over a bicycle, a large bundle of charcoal heavy upon his back. They didn't see her in the car. The wheels were spinning too quickly.

She sat with her hands folded in her lap, the seat cupping her young body like the palm of an oversized hand. Yama's hands gripped the round wheel, his fingers in the grooves, pulling it slightly to the right, a little to the left, directing the car which way to go. He didn't speak. Instead, he turned on the radio, music at once pouring into her ears. Sounds she'd never heard before. She had never heard music without the singer, the drummer, the dancer right before her.

The car threw her back and forth as it navigated the potholes. Raindrops dotted the windshield. At first she kept track of them: one here, another there, guessing where the next one might land. But soon there were too many to count, each one becoming lost among the others. She watched clusters of huts go by, patches of bush separated by a clearing. Children playing alongside the road, their bellies round like a pregnant mother's. Remnants of the drought walking, laughing, playing in the rain. They held bowls of eggs, strings of mushrooms for sale. Yama drove right past them all, his eyes fixed on the road, the car rocking from side to side.

Eventually they passed a city, marked by a smoother road, a deep ditch on either side to catch the next flood. The rain stopped as they reached crowds of people and endless market stalls built in tandem. Lila

wondered if they had arrived. If so, Lusaka was much closer than Bupe had said.

Yama stopped the car and got out, reached in his pocket for a handful of kwacha notes. Energy pulsed around the car. Talking, shouting, music, honking cars. Yama walked up to a vendor in a small stand built of scrap wood and a crooked metal roof. A man stood inside with a wall of drinks, fruit, and other boxes of things for sale. Yama bought a mango and a bottle of juice and got back in the car. He turned the key, sending the car back onto the road. He handed Lila the mango and his pocketknife, and he opened the juice to drink himself. She looked at him, waiting. She held the knife and looked at her distorted reflection in the blade, her eyes appearing large, her nose and cheeks stretched wide.

“Cut it open,” he said. “Do you not know how to use a knife?”

She had never held one like this before.

“How am I to have a maid to cook for me when she cannot use a knife?”

And so Lila stabbed the fruit with the tip of the blade and pulled it downward, cutting a straight line, yellow juice spilling out. She felt a momentary shock as the juice dripped into her lap, staining her clean shirt and soaking through the chitenge between her legs.

“Is it sweet?”

She nodded as she took her first bite.

“I chose that one because it was the softest. The rest were not yet ripe.”

Lila didn't care. She ate the entire mango and finished by scraping her teeth over the white pit. Yama reached his hand over, and she placed the skins and pit in his palm. He rolled down his window and threw them out. Seeing this, she rolled down her own window, letting the wind blow across her face, inhaling the fragrance of wet earth. She hadn't realized how warm the car had been until then. She had never felt such a sensation, the power of the wind together with a fast car over a smooth road. She smiled as her eyes became heavy, her head rocking side to side, her stomach full, the lingering taste of mango still fresh on her tongue. She dreamed of Lusaka and all of its ripe mangos and stacks of books waiting for her to learn to read.

She awoke to her head hitting the car door. The road was a trail of pot-holes. As soon as she opened her eyes, thunder cracked and lightning slashed through the dark sky. Rain poured over the windshield, a single blade wiping back and forth in useless effort.

“Is this Lusaka?” she asked, rubbing her eyes.

With every flash of lightning, she could see the sharp slopes of Yama's fingers clenching the wheel. "Two hours," he said as the car hit another dip.

She could feel the mango in her belly, sloshing around with the motion. "I am afraid," she said, seeing the wind and rain shake the banana trees.

"There is nothing to be afraid of." He was crouched over the wheel, steering with one hand and shining a flashlight on the road with the other. "This is Zambia in December."

"I want to go home."

"It is too late for that," he said, rotating the flashlight back and forth across the road. "Now sit quietly."

They arrived late in the evening. The road narrowed as they drew closer, the car rolling past vacant vegetable stands, people walking aimlessly on all sides. Lila was afraid the car might hit them, but every one of them ducked out of the way at the last second. She rolled her window down again, now that it was no longer raining. She smelled wood burning and fruit rotting, and she heard voices and music being played down the road.

In the village, she would sometimes wake in the middle of the night. It would be entirely dark, the only light from the stars.

Here, she couldn't even find them in the sky. Yama pushed a lever, pulled another, the car stopped, a door opened. The hum of all the people talking, whispering, laughing, shouting, singing. There were so many people, shadows chasing each other through the street.

She stayed in her seat. Inside, she felt safe from the city closing in from every direction. Yama knocked on the hood of the car and waved his hand for her to come. Her fingers held tight to the purple shirt in her hands. She opened the door and stepped out onto dirt and garbage. Everything was so close together. Stands, doors, boys' and girls' tangled arms and hips as they walked down the road.

Yama walked through a doorway, and Lila followed. The room reeked of fermented drink, something her father might make if given the time. Yama whistled and clapped his hands hard, and Lila jumped. He rattled off a few words in Bemba, and a woman ran into the room with a scanty shirt exposing the tops of her breasts, straps fallen over her shoulders, her eyes open halfway. A man came up behind her, his bare chest to her back.

"That's enough," Yama said to the man and jerked his head toward the door. "Be on your way." The man turned to pick up his shirt and left.

"This is Lila," Yama said to the woman. "The new maid."

She laughed a slow, drunken laugh. "Yes, and don't *you* need a maid. A young girl to make your bed and..."

"Show her the room," he said, shuffling through a stack of papers on a long, high table with a few tin cups. His shirt was stained with sweat, the cuffs of his pants draped over shiny shoes. He picked up a letter and opened it. "She's had a long journey. She needs her sleep."

The woman looked her over, and her laugh evaporated. "Come," she said. "This way."

Lila followed her, a curtain brushing against her face and arm as they walked into the next room. The air inside was warm and stale, a brew of beer, body odor, and onions. The woman kicked the mattress with her toes. "Here. Sleep well."

Lila lay down and rested her head on her folded shirt, inhaling the scent of her home's cooking fire, burying her face in its softness, peeking at the small window she couldn't see out of. She fell asleep to the sound of strange, faraway voices cooing, whispering, laughing, yelling.

The squeal of children woke her. She opened her eyes, allowing them to adjust to the dim light, and looked for Bupe on the other side of her mat, listening for her little brother and the baby. All she found was her shirt beside her, unfolded, and the dirty, green-painted walls.

She stood up and felt the cement floor beneath her feet and straightened her chitenge. Already, the day was hot. She changed into her purple shirt and wiped the one she'd been wearing across her face to clean up. She slipped her feet into her shoes and tied them. She wasn't used to getting dressed alone and missed the songs Bupe would hum as they tied their shoes and straightened their bed together. But she shooed away the sadness. A bell was ringing outside, a clattering, fast-spinning, metal-on-metal sound. This was to be her first day of school.

She ventured past the curtain into the small front room, looking for Yama and the other woman. She listened and heard only sounds from outside: music, loud talking, shouting, tires rolling in the dirt. The birds, she wondered, where were the birds?

She walked over and stood beside the curtain, a pattern of brown and black leaves, to Yama's room. She stood still, trying to listen beyond the noise from outside. The loud voices of vendors calling out names of fruits and vegetables and other food and drink for sale.

She stepped closer to the curtain, her hands pressed to her sides, and tried to see through the gap between the wall and the cloth. She closed one eye to see better, moved her head a little to the side, standing on

her tiptoes. There was a large, thick mat that took up most of the brick-walled room. A small window was set high on the far wall, covered by a white curtain with little orange flowers. The sun was out, the window too small to let it inside. A mess of cloth lay on the bed, and she couldn't tell if someone was underneath. The longer she watched the cloth, the more it seemed to pulse. The seconds passed, a cloud moved across the sun, a shadow cast. She mustn't be late for school. The books, the benches, the teacher she'd imagined were all waiting.

She paced out careful steps. *One, two, three.* Little pebbles ground into the floor and the soles of her shoes. A step away from the bed, she still could not tell if he was inside. If the movement she saw was only the pounding of her heart. Stripes of light fell across the wrinkled sheets, coming from the window.

The impulse to run came just before her vision of all of the books, all of the letters she would learn this morning. She crouched down, pinched the sheet, lifted it with two fingers.

"What do you think of this bed?" The voice came from behind her.

Lila dropped the sheet. She stood up, glancing at the window and its flowered curtain. Her heart pounded as she stood straight and stiff, her hands pressed against her chitenge.

"You may sleep here if you like." Lila was beginning to see that Yama's face never changed expression, his voice always the same. He stood beside the doorway's curtain with its pattern of leaves like those of the drought.

Lila looked at her red shoes, her toe peeking through the hole. "I was looking for you," Lila stammered, feeling like she had been caught.

"But I am right here." His hands were in his pockets. The same pants and shiny shoes from the day before. A new shirt, green like the walls.

"When do I start?" Her voice was a whisper, her eyes still on the floor.

"You will start today by filling the water jugs down the road and then preparing some food."

Her heart stopped. She looked up at him, his forehead and hairline like the letter U, the only letter her brother had taught her, using a stick to draw it in the dirt. "When does school begin?"

"School?"

She blinked and swallowed as she studied his face, the bony ridges surrounding his eyes.

"You cannot just walk into a school without being assessed and registered and dressed in uniform."

Her hands were still tight against her legs, her fingertips pinching the chitenge. But where do I go to be assessed, to register, to receive a

uniform, she wanted to ask. Where is the school? Where are the other children? Where are the benches and the teacher?

He handed her two yellow plastic jugs, a hollow *thunk* as they banged against each other. “Down that way, and to your left. There’s a borehole with a gray cement wall around it. A crowd of people will be there—you will not miss it.”

“When will I register for school?” Her throat was so dry.

He grunted a laugh. “We will discuss it when I see you are able to do your duties with time to spare. I cannot afford to have a maid and send her to school when her chores are not finished.”

Lila went to the bedroom and got her dirty shirt to tie around her head, just as Bupe had taught her. She tied it tight. The pressure felt good around her head and perhaps stopped the tears that were hot behind her eyes. As she came out into the main room, she saw Yama pull off his shoes and set them neatly on the floor. Clearing his throat, he went into his room and pulled the curtain. The bell rang again outside, metal grinding metal. She picked up the jugs and left.

The street was hot and dusty. People, rusty cars, and bicycles turning up the dirt, leaving clouds of dust, reminding her of her father hoeing his field. The entire road was lined with market stalls built of sticks and tied with twine, covered with roofs made of thick layers of cardboard. Lila wondered how they survived the rain until she noticed the sheets of plastic crumpled under the stands. The stalls were like one continuous table, a feast of neatly stacked tomatoes, pumpkin leaves, eggplants, fruit, used clothing, and piles of shoes for anyone walking down to the borehole to buy. “Five kwacha! Seven kwacha!” women shouted through the swarms of flies. Men and women lined up, emptying their pockets and opening their bags to exchange a note for a bunch of greens.

She looked at every person she passed, searching for just one familiar face. The women’s skirts were so short, some above their knees. Men walked in slow, broad strides, some wearing pants without a shirt. Lila shivered at such an immodest sight. She hadn’t passed through *chisungu* initiation, but she knew enough after watching Bupe. Women were to wear chitenge to their ankles, pushing the skirt down between their legs and knees when sitting.

Before she knew it, she was there. The pump needed only the turn of a metal handle, and clear water rushed out, anxious to fill the yellow plastic jugs and be carried away. Lila watched the women and girls ahead of her fill their basins, then lean over with their eyes closed and let the water pour into their open mouths, splashing their faces.

A woman called to her, and Lila could see it was her turn. The faucet was still running as the woman paddled her hand, beckoning Lila to come. Lila walked to her and smiled as the woman placed the jug on the cement and listened to the water pour in.

The woman spoke Nyanja. The city's language, Bupe had told her. Seeing that Lila didn't understand, the woman began gesturing, pointing to Lila and all around them. "You are new here," Lila figured out days later, after repeating the sounds in her head over and over.

Lila nodded, trying to understand if the woman was asking if she was thirsty or why she needed so much water in the city.

The woman laughed and said, "Yes, yes, yes." She motioned for Lila to come and drink from the spigot. Lila went up shyly and opened her mouth. Felt the water rush, a current, against her lips and tongue. She tasted the metal tint of the water, enjoying its coolness until the woman turned off the spigot, lifted the basin, and gave it to Lila. Lila crossed her hand over her chest and curtsied. Lila wanted to follow the woman home, sleep under her roof tonight.

The woman turned to go with the other women, baskets of bananas, clothes, and water upon their heads. Music played from metal boxes, men singing with instruments she'd never heard before.

On the way home, she passed a group of girls dressed in white shirts, dark green skirts, and white stockings. Some held books in their arms; others carried a knapsack. They were laughing and talking, and Lila stopped. The bell, it had come from the school, calling the children, announcing when classes began and when they ended, marking the time in between she knew nothing about. She felt the water swish in the jug on her head. She smiled as she watched them, hoping they might greet her, tell her where she could go to find the school and register. She stood beside the ditch that ran along the side of the road, turning her body to see the girls after they passed, to hear what they might be talking about, even though they were speaking a language she didn't understand. She imagined what they must be laughing about: a story they read in school, the sweet fruit they ate on the classroom bench, a funny thing their teacher said. The songs they sang.

Today, she wouldn't know. She looked down at her fingers, scraped the dirt from under her fingernails so the edges were clean and white. Tomorrow, she told herself as she carefully turned around to go back to Yama's house, the water on her head, the strange music still playing. Yes, tomorrow she would see what made them so happy.

As she walked through the doorway, the stench of alcohol burned her nostrils all over again. She noticed this time that the table was actually built into the wall and the ground—mud that had been smoothed and dried—like a short wall jutting into the center of the room. Much like the hut in the next village over that Bupe had described, where the men went after working in the fields to drink *chibuku* until their eyes went bloodshot and they couldn't walk straight. Where the old man poured it in cups and set them on the bar. Yes, she remembered, *the bar* was what Bupe had called it.

A small jug sat on Yama's bar, half full of dark, fermented drink. Yama was gone again, the place quiet. She carefully lifted the water from her head and set it down on the floor.

Laughter came from her room. She walked toward the curtain just as a strange woman walked out with a man she'd never seen, the curtain swaying behind them. Their faces were shiny with sweat, the woman pulling her shirt down over her navel, a kwacha note tight in her fist. The man poured some of the drink sitting on the bar into a tin cup and drank it. Lila heard it go down his throat, his sigh when he finished, and the clink of the cup as he set it back down.

The woman looked at her and snorted. "A child," she said before going into Yama's room without saying good-bye to the man. He left without a word, tucking his shirt into his pants while walking out into the bright daylight.

The woman came back out into the room. "Who are you, girl?"

"Lila." Her voice sounded small, the distance of the chisungu ceremony a wide canyon between them. Common language a bridge. How did the woman know to speak Bemba and not Nyanja? Lila smiled at her.

"Who brought you here?"

"Yama."

"Yama? You mean the big man?" The woman's fists were pressed into her hips.

Lila nodded. "I am to be his maid. And he is enrolling me in school."

The woman's fists and face didn't move, her mouth open, her eyebrows wrinkled. Her hair stuck up like rays from the sun. Lila guessed she had just woken up. "School," she finally said.

Lila nodded.

At once the woman's hands, face, and eyebrows fell. She went over to pour herself a drink, puckering her face as she swallowed it. "Promises," she said, slamming the cup down. She poured and drank again. "Promises and lies. That's all there is." And she let the cup fall from her hand, the tin echoing through the green, dark room as it hit the ground.

Lila tilted her head to the side.

The woman laughed in a way that made Lila think she wasn't amused. "You will understand soon enough."

As night fell, Lila washed the dishes from the meal she had prepared. She dipped them in the blue plastic basin outside and scrubbed off the remaining traces of nshima and tomato relish. It was during the routine chores when she most missed her sister, remembering the questions she would ask Bupe. There was always something she wanted to know, and if there was nothing to say, she would tune her ear to Bupe's singing. She had never heard such a beautiful voice, spinning through a twisted melody.

In the dark, men and women wandered in and out of Yama's house, taking no notice of Lila just outside the door, squatting on the ground, swirling the rag in circles around the plates. Lila watched them pour glasses of *kachasu*, take a fast drink, stumble back into the small rooms where they created duets of rhythmic sounds, and stumble back out. Loud music played outside. She watched the kwacha change hands in the shadows, men and women flowing in and out of the front room. The stony look in the women's eyes, broken by a smile once the kwacha met their hands.

Lila sang to herself as she washed the plates until they were clean, clean as she could see in the dark. She made up the words as she went along, as she and Bupe used to do. Words about birds and rain, games and clean shoes.

The woman who spoke of promises passed through the door into Yama's house with a short man.

"Scrub the plates clean, child," the man said, laughing. "You missed a spot."

"Do not scold her. She is only doing what she was told." She leaned over to Lila. "Go into your room, girl, and cover your eyes and ears. This is no place for a child."

Lila stacked the plates and went into her room just as a man and woman were leaving. She went over to her mat and lay down. Her blanket was not folded as she'd left it. Instead, it lay in a heap on the floor, a crushed carton of beer beneath it. She picked up the blanket and covered her face and ears as she'd been told.

Bupe, Lila said through soft sniffs, wishing her sister's feet were sole-to-sole with her own. She needed Bupe's quiet songs in her ear, the peace of her voice. The blind route of notes jumping and turning, making her ears dizzy. That's all she needed. She fell asleep listening.

How long she had been sleeping was unclear. It was the gritty sound of shoe-on-floor and the sand in between that had startled her. She opened her eyes and waited for them to adjust to the darkness, her mind trying to remember where she was, her heart booming between her ribs and spine. She sat up, the blanket falling softly down her chest, collecting in her lap.

His silhouette was as tall as a tower, his cologne clogged in the humidity of the room. She could see the moon through the small window. The place was quiet. The man's arms were crossed, his chest puffed out, his face peering over it.

She pulled the blanket up, covering her body. She tried to remember if she had finished the dishes, if she had tied the bag of mealie meal, if she had left the remaining tomatoes out.

"What are you doing in here?" The Promise Woman's whisper was sharp as she threw her thin arms between the man and Lila. She had come in from the front room. Whether she had been sleeping or was only now coming in for the night, Lila wasn't sure.

Yama didn't look at the woman. Lila heard him inhale through his nose, the sound of his lips parting just before he spoke. "The girl was talking in her sleep."

"Let her be. You have no business in her room."

Without another word, he walked away. The woman followed him, speaking fast and angry in Nyanja. She reminded Lila of her aunt nagging her husband, reprimanding him for drinking too much or not bringing enough money home from working in the mine. Her uncle was a quiet man. *Lazy*, she once heard her mother say of him. Too lazy, or too worn down to stop her nagging.

The Promise Woman's chatter stopped when Lila heard the slap. Then the silence. A stumble, a grunt, a kick, and another. The whining cry of the woman, like a kitten left outside for the hyenas. Yama's shoes grinding against the floor as he left.

Lila was too afraid to move from her mat. She lay on her side listening, hugging her purple shirt, looking through the window. She wondered if her mother was awake and watching the half moon tonight as she stroked the baby on her chest, if she saw the same wisp of cloud cutting through it.

At last, Lila heard the woman get up and limp out the door. She watched her spikes of hair passing by the window so high on the wall, right in front of the moon.

“Come,” the woman said early the next morning, shaking Lila’s shoulder to wake her. “There is someone you must meet.” The Promise Woman stood beside the bed, matting down her hair with her hands, her eye a deep purple and swollen shut.

Lila rubbed her eyes with her fists and yawned. The blanket was in a pile at her feet. She stood up, looking at the woman.

“What are you staring at?”

“Nothing,” Lila said. She picked up her other shirt and tightened her chitenge.

The woman didn’t say anything as Lila followed her into the front room, littered with cups and cartons. “Come, before he wakes. He cannot know where we are going.”

Lila followed her out into the daylight, down the road, past the empty market stalls, the women striding down the road with their chins up high, baskets of vegetables and fruit balanced on their heads.

They came to a shanty down the road, and the Promise Woman knocked on the door. Another woman opened it and stepped out. The Promise Woman smiled, lowering her face and turning it away so the other woman couldn’t see her bruise as they greeted each other warmly with both hands.

The other woman was older, her head wrapped in cloth, as Lila was accustomed to seeing women dressed. The two women spoke quietly as the older woman lifted the Promise Woman’s face, a look of pain on her own. She cupped the Promise Woman’s jaw and looked closely at her bruised eye. The Promise Woman turned away, hiding her face in her shoulder. The women glanced in Lila’s direction while Lila studied the clothesline draped with chitenges in every color: red, green, pink, orange, blue, black, and white. Baby clothes hung on the far end, still brown with dirt despite being washed. She looked at the metal roof of the woman’s home, her eyes following the ridges along the edge, up and down, up and down.

The Promise Woman turned and walked away, shielding her eye with her hand.

“But Yama,” Lila called after her. “School.”

The woman turned around and dropped her hand, revealing an eye swollen to the size of an egg. Only then did Lila notice the cut on her lip and the shiny, marbled bruise on her arm.

And only then did Lila see Bupe, the morning when she had at last returned after being snatched. Bupe walking up the path, Lila spotting her as she hung the clothes on the line. The clean shirt falling from Lila’s hands as she ran to her sister. The bruises on Bupe’s face, her

swollen lip, her blank eyes, her bloody skirt. "Where did you go?" was all Lila had been able to say before her mother came running, falling at Bupe's feet, weeping, hugging her daughter's ankles while Bupe stood still, staring at the clean clothes Lila had just hung on the line.

"School?" The Promise Woman's hair shone in the sun like a burning crown. She shook her head in sadness. "Lies, Lila. I told you. It is a house of lies." She turned back to the road filled with women walking tall and proud, setting out to make money with their bounty, balanced on their heads. Lila watched the Promise Woman walk among them, hiding her face.

Lila watched her go, the older woman pressing her fingertips to her lips. Lila could see that she wanted to go after her, but she held back. After a while, she took Lila by the arm and smiled. "How are you, child? Where are you from?"

Lila looked up. Yes, where was she from now? Was there even a name for her village? "Chief Mumba," she said. That was the best she could do.

"I see." The woman crouched down so that she was the same height as Lila. "Do your mother and father know you left?"

Lila nodded. The woman's voice lilted like her mother's, and it made Lila's eyes sting.

The woman's face was grave, then broke into a smile, changing the subject. "Was it a long journey?"

Lila nodded again.

"I see." The woman smelled like clean water. "Your friend tells me you would like to go to school." Her hand was soft and cool on Lila's elbow. "Would you like that?"

Lila's throat tightened as she watched the Promise Woman disappear into the crowd. Lila noticed she was limping. Lila couldn't shake the sight of her sandals snapping against her heels. The soles of her feet were purple.

Lila nodded, fingers knotted in her shirt. Yes. Yes, she would like that. "Come," the old woman said. "I will see what I can do."



František Kupka, The Yellow Scale, 1907. Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Museum purchase funded by Audrey Jones Beck, 94.247.