

I Will Always Write Back Study Guide

**I Will Always Write Back by Caitlin Alifirenka and
Martin Ganda**

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Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Alifirenka, Caitlin; Ganda, Martin. *I Will Always Write Back*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2016, First Paperback Edition.

I Will Always Write Back is an autobiographical account by Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda (with Liz Welch) telling the story of their global friendship that began with simple pen pal letters in middle school. The book is told in alternating chapters written by Caitlin and Martin, and together, both lives form one single story. Pieces of letters, and entire letters between the two, also help form these chapters.

When Caitlin was 12, her seventh-grade teacher conducted a pen pal activity. Caitlin, who lived in Pennsylvania, chose to write to someone in Zimbabwe, because it was the last country on the list of countries to choose from, because she knew little about Africa, and because none of her friends decided to choose the country. Caitlin did not know to whom her letter would go, but was excited to write it anyways.

Caitlin's letter ended up in the hands of a boy her age named Martin. Martin and his friends all loved America, so Martin was thrilled to receive a letter from a new American friend and write back. This began a six-year-long correspondence between the two. Through the letters, Martin and Caitlin came to have a deeper appreciation of one another, their countries, and their lives. Caitlin was especially heartbroken to learn about the horrible state of poverty in which Martin lived: Martin's family shared a one-room apartment with holes in the walls and which had as its only piece of furniture a mattress upon which his parents slept, and beneath which he and his several siblings slept at night. Indeed, Martin's family was so poor, and the economy was so bad in Zimbabwe, that Martin often had difficulty finding money even for stamps.

As Caitlin became aware of Martin's situation, she began sending him money, and alerted her parents to his troubles. Not only did Caitlin's parents send along money, but they also helped Caitlin to send along care packages with simple, everyday items that, though easy to find in America, were near impossible to afford in Zimbabwe, such as toothbrushes, shampoo, and clothing. Things were so bad that even the wealthiest families in Martin's area could not afford Reebok t-shirts –something Caitlin easily bought on sale at a discount store in America and mailed to Martin in Zimbabwe –and Martin had to write one of his letters on a discarded ice cream wrapper. Because of the help of Caitlin and her family, Martin was able to attend an excellent high school where he worked hard and thrived.

Ultimately, Caitlin and her family continued to assist with Martin's dreams of coming to America to study at school, helping him navigate the college process and helping him to find a scholarship to pay his tuition at nearby Villanova. When Caitlin and Martin finally met in August, 2003, just before college began, they were beyond thrilled to finally meet one another in person. Martin thanked God for Caitlin and her family, vowing to do good for all they had done for him. Martin and Caitlin both graduated from college. While

Martin went on to a successful business career, Caitlin went into nursing, got married, and had children. Both Caitlin and Martin remained close friends, and later decided to write a book about their experiences, so that others could be inspired to do kind acts.



Pages 1 – 80

Summary

Part I: Hallo!

Caitlin: September 1997 – Caitlin Stoicsitz was a typical 12-year-old American girl in Mrs. Miller's seventh grade class at Pennfield Middle School when she heard about Zimbabwe for the first time, and did not even know it existed until the class decided to take on pen pals. Caitlin chose Zimbabwe not only because she had never heard of it, but because it was in Africa, she did not know much about Africa, and because it was the last country on the list. Caitlin lived in suburban Hatfield, Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia, where she and her best friend Lauren got Blizzards at Dairy Queen, hung out at the mall, played softball, and went to the roller skating rink. The town itself was known for Hatfield Quality Meats, which often made the entire area smell like garbage and bacon. Caitlin rarely left Hatfield, but had been to Europe before where she has German relatives, including a cousin named Carola. Caitlin was always struck by how different Carola was, from the things she ate to the way she spoke to the clothes she wore, which in turn opened her eyes to life beyond her town.

No one else in Caitlin's class chose to write to someone in Africa. At home, Caitlin told her Mom about her plans. Her mom explained Zimbabwe was once called Rhodesia, and was a British colony until the Zimbabweans fought for their freedom like Americans did during the Revolutionary War. Caitlin's dad worked on energy contracts for the government, and he always got home late. Caitlin's 17-year-old brother, Richie, hung out with friends until it was time for dinner. After dinner, Caitlin looked up Zimbabwe using the internet through America Online (AOL) to learn more about it. She then set to writing her first letter to her pen pal. She wondered what she should write about. She wrote that her name was Caitlin, talked about herself and her family, talked about the things she did for fun, and then asked about Zimbabwe. Caitlin was excited because she knew something big was about to begin.

Martin: October 1997 – As the school year came to a close in Zimbabwe, Martin Ganda's teacher, Mrs. Jarai, announced the class had letters from America. Martin and his classmates were excited because they all loved America, especially the World Wrestling Federation, and would trade black-and-white copies of WWF pictures and wrestlers. Martin was in a class of 50, and there were only ten letters, so he was thrilled to receive one.

Martin was in Group One, which consisted of the highest placement test scorers. Martin's mother, Mai, always stressed education with Martin, urging him to do the best he could. She told him school was his only hope, and did not want him to end up like her, as she had to drop out of school at the age of 12 because her family could not afford tuition, since her family was dirt poor. Because of her encouragement and Martin's hard work, Martin was always in Group One, and was always the number one



student of the entire class. Martin lived in the town of Mutare in the Chisamba Singles housing development. Martin regularly spoke the native language of Shona, but could also speak English reasonably well in school. When Martin received Caitlin's letter, he read it out loud at Mrs. Jarai's request. Much of what Caitlin wrote about liking –such as the Spice Girls –the students were familiar with, but they also laughed lightheartedly about attempting to pronounce Caitlin's name. Martin was assigned to write back.

Martin's parents did not have a happy marriage, as his father, Baba (a paper factory worker), drank a lot and cheated on his mother all the time. Martin was born in 1983, and was delivered by an English medical student named Martin, from whom Martin took his English name. Martin and his siblings also had Shona names: Martin's was "Tatenda" which meant "thank you," Nation's was "Tawanda" which means "we are many," Mack's was "Simba" which means "power," Lois's was "Hekani" which means "surprise," and George, the youngest, was named for their father, but did not receive a Shona name. The apartment at Singles in which the family lived was only one room, with a curtain separating where his parents slept on a mattress, the only piece of furniture in the apartment. Martin did not realize until later the place was considered a slum because he only ever considered it home.

At home after school, Martin showed his mother Caitlin's letter. Mai encouraged Martin to write back, telling him he could learn much from Caitlin. Before Martin could write back, he had to do his chores for the day, such as gathering wood for the cooking fire or doing the dishes. Their electricity was not always reliable, so Martin had to write his response to Caitlin by firelight. He was excited to write back, having lots of questions to ask. Martin knew white people lived in Zimbabwe, but he had never met any. He had met white people from the Netherlands before, and they smelled very nice because they had soap to use regularly. Martin promised to keep writing Caitlin and said he would not let her down, while hoping she would do the same.

Caitlin: October 1997 – After writing her letter, Caitlin got back to life as normal while waiting for a reply. This included playing pranks on each other with her brother, and attempting without success to learn just exactly what her father did for the government. Caitlin also kept a diary, and wrote the names of boys she liked inside her closet on the wall, such as Matt Johnson in algebra class. When Caitlin received Martin's reply in the mail a week before Halloween, she was so excited she opened it in the driveway. Caitlin was thrilled with the response, and thrilled to have a new friend in Zimbabwe. She immediately read the letter to her mother, and began planning a reply. Caitlin wondered if Martin was black, and reflected on her own best friend from childhood –Marlena – being black and how it did not matter to her what color someone was. Rather than ask Martin, Caitlin decided to send a photo of herself and ask Martin to do the same. Caitlin was thrilled to share the reply at school the next day.

Martin: November 1997 – Martin was thrilled to be the first person in his class to receive a reply. He was amazed when he opened Caitlin's letter to find a photo, since photos are considered precious in Zimbabwe because photographs are very rare and very expensive in Zimbabwe. To Martin, Caitlin looked like a sweet angel with hair like gold. But Martin was worried because her request of a photo in return might be



impossible. Things were further complicated when Mrs. Jarai explained the school did not have the money to keep mailing Martin's letters, so Martin's correspondence would have to be up to his family to pay. Martin wondered how to proceed, as inflation meant his father's paycheck was worth less and only covered things like food, rent, and utilities.

Caitlin's letter gave Martin confidence, much like Mr. Stephen Mutandwa did. Mutandwa worked in human resources at the paper factory, wore a suit and tie, worked on a computer, and drove a car. Mutandwa told Martin he was bright, could go to college, and could also be successful. Mutandwa attended the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, so Martin decided he also wanted to attend. At home, Martin showed his mother Caitlin's photo. Mai called Caitlin a pretty "murungu," which is Shona for people with white skin. Martin's father was also excited for Martin, but Martin worried about having to write Caitlin back without a photo. But Martin's mother urged him to send Caitlin the family's only photo, commemorating Martin and the family at a graduation ceremony. Martin's mother also gave Martin money for stamps, and Martin then proceeded to write his response.

Caitlin: January 1998 – In America, Caitlin's crush on Matt Johnson continued to grow, and the two began dating. Matt did not seem to be into the relationship, so Caitlin broke up with him to date Drew, who played soccer with Matt. Caitlin then went on to dating Nathaniel, but they only dated for a week. Caitlin was thrilled when she received Martin's letter and picture, finding him cute like a brother might be. Caitlin could tell by the way Martin wrote that he was very intelligent. She decided to send him a keychain as a gift with her next letter, as well as another picture. She was even more thrilled when Martin wrote back with a longer letter, thanking her for the gift and the photo, telling her she looked beautiful like a queen, and that he will be sending her African-style earrings he is making for her with his next letter. Caitlin continued to read eagerly about how Zimbabwe was still developing, though she did not know what that meant. Martin went on to explain in his letter that his family was poor and could not afford much. He also went on to say that one day they would meet, and that their friendship would be like the line from the "Spicy Girls" song in that their friendship would never end. She decided to send him an American dollar to exchange currency, and felt excited writing him back in a way she never got excited over boys, because she had a friend half a world away.

Martin: April 1998 – Martin and Nation were amazed by the dollar bill. Martin's mother could not understand why Caitlin would send such an amazing gift. Martin's father explained that one American dollar was worth as much as 24 Zim dollars. Martin urged his parents to use the money for food, which bought them two weeks' worth of groceries. Martin wrote back, thanking Caitlin for the dollar and promising that he would always write back because he could not afford to send any money.

Caitlin: May 1998 – Now 13, Caitlin was thrilled to be continuing to write Martin, whereas most of her classmates had stopped writing their pen pals. While Martin's handwriting always remained the same, his letters came on different kinds of paper and were written with different pens and pencils. Caitlin noted there were many differences



as well as similarities between her and Martin. For example, whereas Caitlin had a pet rabbit named Louis, Martin and his family ate rabbits. For his birthday, Caitlin sent Martin a Reebok t-shirt.

Martin: June 1998 – Martin was thrilled by the Reebok t-shirt gift. Even the wealthiest families in the area could not afford such a luxury. Martin wore the shirt proudly, including making sure the “Made in America” tag was sticking out so people could see it was not a cheap knock-off. Martin shared the shirt with his family members, also letting them wear it. As the economy in Zimbabwe continued to worsen, and strikes and violence broke out while food became scarce, Martin wondered what he could send back to Caitlin. Martin began working as a luggage handler at the bus depot on weekends to earn money to mail Caitlin, and to buy her earrings rather than make them. It took Martin two months to save up for them. Martin was thrilled to be able to write back to Caitlin using factory stationary paper, a gift to Martin from his father’s factory manager. Martin wrote his letter apologizing for the delay, explaining there were problems in Zimbabwe and swearing he would always write back while thanking her for the t-shirt. He did not go into details because he did not wish to trouble Caitlin, or think she could understand his struggles.

Caitlin: August 1998 – Caitlin worried that Martin’s next response took so long to come. The news carried word of the unfolding events in Africa, and the rise of terrorism. Caitlin worried terrorism would spread into Zimbabwe, and worried for Martin’s safety. Still, Caitlin tried her best to enjoy her summer. She became obsessed with taking photos that summer. Richie, who could sometimes be a jerk of an older brother, could also be nice. He surprised one day by purchasing a Nike shirt for Caitlin to send to Martin. It was only after the eighth grade school year began that Caitlin finally received Martin’s letter and the guinea fowl bird-shaped earrings that she was able to relax. At school, Caitlin was happy but nervous to wear her earrings. Her friends were jealous because their pen pals stopped writing to them.

Lauren mocked the gift, which annoyed Caitlin. Lauren claimed the gift came because Caitlin and Martin were in love, but Lauren knew their friendship was not romantic. She had merely wanted to share something special with her friends, but Lauren had ruined it. Mrs. Miller, however, was happy and very encouraging that Caitlin and Martin were still corresponding. Caitlin wrote back to Martin quickly, worried for his safety and talking about how people around the world needed to be friends, and not like the terrorists. Caitlin also goes on to talk about her family, including her brother going to college, and how the family had three cars. She also included photos.

Martin: October 1998 – Martin was stunned by the fact that Caitlin’s family had three cars, let alone one, because not even wealthy people have more than one car. Martin’s friends, Joe, Paul, and Raymond, were also astonished, as Caitlin’s house resembled the house the Zimbabwean president lived in. Martin appealed to his father for money for a photographer, knowing he needed to send Caitlin back a photo. In the meantime, he purchased a wooden cheetah print bracelet to send to Caitlin with his next letter. A short time later, Martin learned his father, relying on the help of a friend, managed to



arrange for a photographer to take pictures. Martin was thrilled, and wore his father's suit for the pictures.

Analysis

One simple act of kindness will change lives. This is perhaps the most important theme that readers will find in *I Will Always Write Back*. It is a theme that takes hold of the book in the first chapter, and continues on through the Epilogue. When Caitlin and Martin began corresponding, neither have any idea that their initial simple acts of writing to one another will come to affect and change their lives in then-unconceivable ways. Caitlin's decision to write came from the fact that she knew little about Africa, that no one else was writing to Africa, and that Zimbabwe was the last country on the list of pen pal countries at school. When Martin received a letter from Caitlin, he was thrilled to begin a friendship with an American, as Martin and his friends had very high opinions of the United States.

Immediately, readers are introduced to the structural pattern that will form the rest of the book: chapters will alternate between the lives of, and being told by, Caitlin and Martin. Because there are two sides to their single story of friendship, readers are given intimate and full-fledged views into the lives of both Caitlin and Martin, so that both might be better understood as individuals, and in context to one another. And almost at once, it would appear as if Caitlin and Martin have far more differences than they do similarities (these being both cultural and economic, especially): Martin could barely afford stamps to write letters, while Caitlin had the luxury of sending a dollar bill to Martin to demonstrate what American currency looked like –and which in turn allowed Martin's family to buy two weeks' worth of food. Readers should note that photographs can be seen as more valuable than money, for while in the United States, taking pictures is an everyday, taken-for-granted occurrence, in Zimbabwe, it is a special and costly occasion.

It would seem to readers as if Martin and Caitlin could not even attempt to understand the other given their vastly different lives, but differences did not matter to them. They realized they had found a good person in the other, and this proved to be a starting point for friendship and finding things in common. Never once did Martin or Caitlin accuse the other of failure to understand their lives – and this is especially important coming from Martin, who clearly had the more difficult life. Vastly different circumstances, conditions, and situations did not bother Caitlin and Martin toward the other, but it did make them self-conscious. For example, out of the loyalty of friendship, Martin did not want to worry Caitlin with his struggles, and did not want her to look down on him for how he lived. Caitlin, on the other hand, felt bad that she had so much while Martin had so little, and was careful about what she wrote so as not to make it seem like she was wealthy and uncaring. The spirit of selflessness between both Caitlin and Martin ensured that they would be best friends.

Vocabulary

ululating, ferocity, mimic, correspondence, elated, singsong, formal, belated, adjacent, jovial



Pages 81 – 160

Summary

Part 2: Clues

Caitlin: December 1998 – Caitlin was thrilled with the photos and letter Martin sent. She realized she and Martin were growing up together though they lived apart. She also noted the suit he wore in the picture looked too big. She realized that Martin was trying to shield her from how hard his life was, but that she could pick up on little clues demonstrating it. She also realized he was a friend she could tell anything to who would never judge or tease her. Martin was becoming a better friend than Lauren, who began to distance herself from Caitlin to try to be cool and popular.

Martin: January 1999 – Things got worse for Martin at the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999. Inflation got worse, money became tighter, and food became more expensive and scarcer. Martin's father began to waste more money on alcohol while Martin's mother picked up additional jobs to provide more money for the family. Things got so bad that the family could not even afford the Zim dollar for Martin to take his year-end exam and graduate, and so Martin had to rely on the kindness and generosity of his friend Nyasha's family for the dollar. Martin's family was also ashamed when they learned seven-year-old Simba was bullying other kids for money and food at school. Money became so tight that Martin could not even begin his new year of school. He wondered when he would be able to afford to write Caitlin again.

Caitlin: February 1999 – Two months passed without a letter from Martin, and Caitlin became worried. Caitlin's mom explained the worsening situation in Zimbabwe to Caitlin. It caused Caitlin to cry, fearing Martin had been killed. Caitlin wondered why Martin had never mentioned any of it. Caitlin decided to write another letter to Martin to see if he was alright.

Martin: April 1999 – Martin was humiliated at not being able to attend school, but Nation promised him they would be back in school soon. Martin still worried, as his O-Level exams, which would come at the end of Form Four, paved the way for the future – university, work, and whatever else he would go on to do. Martin, then 15, knew however his family was also suffering, and wondered what he could do to help. He found escape in Caitlin's letters, which seemed like fantasy to him because her life was easy compared to his. Martin decided that, for the time being, he would work to earn money. He returned to toting luggage for tips, and gave the money to his mother. He also began selling cold drinks with his friend, Peter, but this embarrasses Martin. All around, things got worse in Zimbabwe, from food shortages to domestic violence to AIDS outbreaks. Martin received three letters in a row from Caitlin before finally deciding he had to find a way to write her back, even if it meant taking money away from his schooling. He used a discarded ice cream wrapper to write on, and admitted the truth about his life and his struggles in the letter.



Caitlin: May 1999 – Although his letter bore bad news, Caitlin was still thrilled when she learned he was alive. Still, Caitlin was heartbroken to learn someone her age should be working to support his family instead of being in school. Caitlin immediately wrote back, sending \$20 she earned from babysitting. She did not tell her parents she was sending money, because she did not want them to tell her not to.

Martin: May 1999 – Martin continued to work after sending his letter to earn as much money as he could. Martin was nervous about opening Caitlin's return letter, thinking she would think differently of him because of his situation. He was grateful to learn she did not – and was stunned by the presence of the \$20. Martin knew such an amount of money could get him killed, so he brought it to his mother who confirmed it was enough to get him back in school. At the bank, Martin learned that a single U.S. Dollar was now worth 35 Zim dollars. They celebrated dinner with a chicken in honor of Caitlin. When Martin returned to school the following Monday, he felt happy and at peace.

Caitlin: June 1999 – Caitlin realized after the ice cream wrapper letter just how different her life was from Martin, and how privileged she was. She wondered what she could do to earn more money to send Martin and his family more money. She took on extra chores and babysitting and sent Martin \$40 in her next letter. At school, Lauren and her new best friend Tina made fun of Caitlin's continuing brother-like relationship with Martin. Caitlin decided she would take it upon herself as Martin's friend to do whatever she had to do to make sure he would be okay.

Part 3: Generosity

Martin: June 1999 – Martin was stunned by the \$40, and had no idea how Caitlin could afford to do such a thing. Martin was further amazed that a 14-year-old girl would be sending his family more money in a single letter than his father earned over the course of several months. Martin's father was not thrown off by this, and did not feel threatened. Instead, he had only love and respect for Caitlin and her kindness. The family began a bank account with Caitlin's money, and used some of it to pay rent. Martin did not know what would have happened to him and his family had it not been for Caitlin. Martin caught up quickly in school, and over winter break, went to stay with his wealthy uncle in Harare. His uncle's daughter (cousin Sekai) had married an even wealthier bank worker, Alois, who in turn arranged a tea serving job for Martin in his bank.

The trip to Harare was exciting for Martin, who had never been there before. He was happy to meet Alois, who, along with the bank employees, were happy to meet and work with Martin. Alois was happy to learn about Caitlin as well, and encouraged Martin to pursue his education. In Harare, Martin had his picture taken for Caitlin, and bought her a thank you card in which he thanks God for Caitlin. When he returned home from break in Harare, Martin was stunned to learn his father had lost his job. With barely enough money to cover the rent, Martin could not afford to pay for school, so in turn made an arrangement to make a downpayment with the rest to follow. Martin was given permission to write Caitlin a letter on a computer, which was an amazing experience for



him. He felt bad about it, but had to ask Caitlin for money for school. He even appealed to her parents for help.

Caitlin: October 1999 – Over the summer, Caitlin was excited to have grown taller and grown boobs. Caitlin was deeply saddened by the letter she received from Martin asking for help, along with a separate letter for her parents. Caitlin knew how hard it must have been for Martin to write the letter, so she asked her parents about her college savings at dinner, wanting to send it all to Martin. She admitted then to sending Martin's family money and showed them his letter. Caitlin's dad was cautious at first, hoping it was not a scam. Caitlin insisted this was not true, so her parents agreed to see what they could do to help. In the meantime, Caitlin and her mother each sent another \$20 to Martin while her parents researched the best way to be able to help.

In the meantime, Caitlin became closer friends with Heather, who was the only friend Caitlin had interested in Martin's well-being. Heather and her family were good people, but they, too, were originally worried Martin might be scamming Caitlin because of the Nigerian phishing scam going around. As the winter came on, Caitlin and her mother decided to go Christmas shopping for Martin and his family. They bought clothes, socks, shampoo, cologne, and other toiletries along with candy for Martin and his family. It was a risk whether such a package would actually reach Martin given the crazy situation in Zimbabwe, but still, Caitlin and her mother wanted to try.

Martin: November 1999 – Caitlin's latest letter arrived already opened by the government with the words INSPECTED FOR CONTRABAND on the envelope and the promised \$20 inside now missing. Martin was angry but tried to reason that perhaps someone else needed the money more than he did. Caitlin's next letter arrived with the money carefully hidden behind a picture of her and her dog, Romey. Martin gladly paid his tuition the next day.

Caitlin: December 1999 – Caitlin became frustrated when her friends talked about boys and drama while she desperately awaited a reply from Martin. By Christmas, Caitlin had still not heard from Martin, so she chose to write him again. The letter asked for Martin's school information so that her family could directly help him and ensure the money went where it was supposed to go. Caitlin's mom added a postscript to the letter, saying she was enclosing another \$20 to tide things over.

Analysis

The political climate in the world is worsening in this section of the book. With terrorism on the rise, countries that deal with terrorists receive sanctions. These can inadvertently hurt good people who want nothing to do with terrorism, such as Martin and his family. In Martin's case, the worsening situation in Zimbabwe meant even worse inflation, the scarcity of food, and the threat that the correspondence between him and Caitlin might not get through. On at least one occasion, readers will note, the government actually opened one of their letters and stole the money Caitlin had sent. In the United States, such things would not happen. Indeed, the peace and stability of the United States



caused Caitlin to become more appreciative of what she had, especially because of the serious situations Martin faced on a daily basis. So difficult was the situation that Martin had to write a letter to Caitlin on a discarded ice cream wrapper – a piece of trash.

Indeed, as readers will note, it is during this time that Caitlin essentially began financing Martin's family. What was essentially casual spending money for Caitlin and her family became a life-saving source of income for Martin and his family. Readers should note that, as before, not once are Caitlin or Martin condescending or disdainful of one another because of their situations. Not only was Martin grateful to God for Caitlin, her family, and the money they sent, but he found a sense of escape in her letters: her letters came to mean the world to him, and he valued them as much as he valued his family. Indeed, Martin was only ever grateful for Caitlin's family, and never resentful that they had so much. He himself says he does not know what would have become of him and his family had it not been for Caitlin. Martin's tone in his writing is only ever gracious for Caitlin, while Caitlin's tone for Martin is one of compassion and concern.

Readers themselves will also be able to note profound differences between Caitlin's life and Martin's life through this section of the book – differences that become more pronounced as the political and economic climate in Zimbabwe worsens. Martin's family finds it difficult to even come into possession of things like soap, where it is so cheap and easily available in America, Caitlin and her family can send boxes of it. The help Caitlin provided became all the more needed when Martin's father lost his job. In America, public assistance programs provide unemployment income for those who have fallen on hard times, whereas in Zimbabwe, no such programs exist. (As readers will learn in upcoming chapters, the Zimbabwean government tells those who have fallen on hard times to go to the country and die so that others may have a chance to live in the cities.) Caitlin and her family, however, would not allow Martin and his family to suffer.

Vocabulary

inflation, retrenchment, regal, tentatively, resilience, ornate, interjected, adamant, grifter, volatile, dumbfounded



Pages 162 – 253

Summary

Part 3: Generosity (continued)

Martin: January 2000 – Martin and his family considered Caitlin and her family's help a miracle when, at Christmas, they could eat chicken. Martin, out of respect for the efforts of Caitlin and her family, continued to write to them about his living conditions and the state of his life. He figured he could be honest with them because they accepted him for who he was, and because they had done so much to help him and his family. He also included his school information in the letter as Caitlin had requested, and in turn asked Caitlin to help him pay for his O-Level exams.

Caitlin: January 2000 – Caitlin was thrilled to hear back from Martin. Caitlin's mom immediately used the information to begin putting together a plan for sending money. They decided they would write to Martin's principal, Mr. Samupindi, to learn more about the situation and what they needed to send to keep Martin in school.

Martin: January 2000 – Martin's Christmas package arrived in Zimbabwe in January, causing celebration in Martin's family. They were beyond thrilled and grateful for the gifts, especially considering candy was a new experience for most of them and Martin's mother had never tried on shoes before. Martin immediately wrote Caitlin back to thank her for the wonderful gifts on behalf of both himself, and his family. Martin used the letter to unveil his plans for the future: he wanted to go to school in, and move to America where he would get a good job, care for his family, care for Caitlin and her family, and repay their generosity. Martin also asked about Caitlin's plans for the future.

Caitlin: February 2000 – Caitlin was both sad and happy by Martin's letter, especially the line that said his mother could now be counted as a part of society because she had shoes. It made Caitlin angry that people anywhere could be treated badly because of how much money they did or did not have. Caitlin decided to begin doing good for the poor and in-need people living around her locally as well, such as giving food to a homeless Vietnam veteran. Caitlin also resolved to protect and stick up for poor kids, like Amanda.

Martin: February 2000 – Martin was happy to see his mother so happy about her sneakers. Among the things Martin was so grateful for were the toothbrushes Caitlin sent along, as he had had his toothbrush for seven years.

Caitlin: March 2000 – Caitlin decided to become an American ambassador and have her family host a female German exchange student named Stephie. Stephie seemed nice at first, but turned out to be the kind of wealthy person who took everything for granted, and looked down on Caitlin and her family. All Stephie wanted to do was shop, and she called everything in Hatfield "boring." Only when the family visited Washington, D.C., or



saw the play *Les Miserables* did Stephe seem impressed. At the same time, Caitlin worried about having not yet heard back from Martin, so the family sent him another \$100 by way of Western Union and finally managed to get in touch with Mr. Samupindi, who confirmed Martin was a bright student but that a poor boy like him would have no chance in Zimbabwe. Caitlin's mother asked what had to be sent to ensure Martin stayed in school, and learned the cost would be \$80 American.

Martin: June 2000 – Martin was thrilled to speak to Caitlin on the phone at the post office. He was overwhelmed with happiness and gratitude when Caitlin explained he would not have to worry about money for school anymore. Martin asked how he could possibly repay Caitlin, who said in turn that knowing Martin and his family were alright was the only repayment they needed. Martin then rushed to find Mr. Samupindi, who reminded Martin how much Caitlin and her family cared for him, and how he could not let them down and had to make the most of the opportunity they had given him. Martin later picked up the additional money at Western Union, and wrote a long letter of thanks to Caitlin and her family. He used the letter to more fully describe the living situation of not only himself, but other Zimbabweans. He explained the government was telling people that if they could not afford to live in the city, they should go to the country and die so others who can afford to live in the city can do so. After mailing the letter, Martin spent his time prepping for the O-Levels.

Caitlin: September 2000 – Caitlin began tenth grade that fall at North Penn High School where she took a wide diversity of classes. Caitlin's favorite class, because of Martin, was World Culture. This helped her to learn about the bad flooding in southern Africa could be, so she decided to send Martin and his family water-related items ranging from rain boots and ponchos to water purification tablets. Caitlin decided she would do this on her own by getting a job at Ray's Pizzeria down the road as a waitress where she was paid \$9 an hour, plus tips which could bring her daily income to \$300 a day depending on the day. Caitlin befriended a girl named Lisa on her tennis team, and met two older guys named Johnny and Jim at the mall. Caitlin and Lisa pretended to be older than they were, drank alcohol, and went with the guys to South Street where they go into a bar. Caitlin's mom called then, and Caitlin lied and said they were at a party somewhere else. Caitlin's mom insisted she come home at once, so Caitlin confessed to Johnny she was only 15 and needed to get home. Caitlin and Lisa made it back to Caitlin's in the nick of time, and as they went to sleep, Caitlin thought about how lucky she was.

Martin: November 2000 – Between October and November, Martin took the series of O-Level exams. Martin also wanted to send Caitlin photographs to demonstrate how grateful he and his family were for the packages, so the family paid for photos of themselves in the American clothing sent over by Caitlin and her family. The photos, taken at home, demonstrated the living conditions of the family as well. Martin wondered what Caitlin would think.

Caitlin: December 2000 – Caitlin was surprised to see just how impoverished Martin and his family were. She was heartbroken that the family could live in such conditions, and feels ashamed for having complained about her brother getting the bigger bedroom



when Martin's family only had one room for all of them. Caitlin showed her parents the photos, and her parents immediately agreed to help provide for the family, including rain buckets and tarps to cover the walls of the house. The family also added other items to the package for Martin and his family, such as pens, notebooks, lotions, and envelopes. On Christmas Day, Caitlin was thrilled to receive a used car from her parents, and a rabbit she named Lois after Martin's little sister. Caitlin wrote to Martin to tell him about her Christmas, while doing her best to address the poverty in Martin's photos as gently as she could. She also sent along some Christmas money. At school, Lauren has stopped teasing Caitlin about Martin, and the two decided to join the African American Awareness Club to learn more about African and African American culture. They were the only white people present in the club of about seven or eight black kids, and none of them even spoke to Caitlin and Lauren. One girl even glared at Caitlin and Lauren. The black kids only talked about black empowerment, so Caitlin and Lauren decided not to go back.

Part 4: A Future

Martin: January 2001 – Of all the things Martin received from Caitlin in her waterproofing care package, the tarps were his favorite because they were used to keep water out of the house. Previously, Mai had had to use some of Caitlin's letters to stuff into the cracks. At school, Martin was overjoyed to learn he had aced every single one of his nine O-Level exams, and scored first in his class. Mr. Samupindi congratulated Martin on this, telling him he set a record for the school and should go on to take the next exams, the A-Levels, at Marist Brothers Nyanga High School, which was an elite private school whose students went on to wealthy careers and lives. But Martin knew such a school would be very costly. Martin's family was thrilled by the news of Martin's scores, and Martin was excited to write to Caitlin about them. Martin used the letter not only to thank Caitlin, but to ask for more help.

Martin then journeyed to Nyanga to the high school there to ask about admission, but was told the school was full by the deputy headmaster. Martin was told to spend the night with one of the students, and perhaps the headmaster could help in the morning. Martin then met a student nicknamed Rabbit, who was from a rural area, who took Martin under his wing and gave him the grand tour. Martin was amazed by the individual desks students had, the amazing library, and the dorm rooms where each student had his own mattress. At dinner, Martin was given a plate and could tell almost all the other kids were wealthy from their haircuts, their causal nature, and that they used silverware so easily (Martin and his family only ate with hands at home). Martin was also amazed that uneaten food was thrown away rather than saved, but realized it was the privilege of the wealthy to be able to do so. Martin was amazed to sleep on a mattress that evening with his own blankets, and was even more amazed to have a hot water shower in the morning. Rabbit, who had also come from humble backgrounds like Martin, understood his amazement completely.

After breakfast and Mass in the school church the next morning, Martin met with the headmaster, Mr. Muzawazi. Muzawazi had a relative living near the Singles complex where Martin lived, so Muzawazi was sympathetic and willing to look at Martin's grades.



Muzawazi concluded that Martin could be admitted, provided he had a downpayment of 1,000 Zim dollars. Fortunately, Martin's cousin Sekai and her husband Alois, upon hearing of Martin's chance, agreed to help by paying and getting him the things needed for school. Martin was thrilled, and promised to pay them back. Sekai instead told him that all they wanted in repayment was for Martin to focus on his studies. Martin then packed his few possessions, including his photos and letters from Caitlin, and moved into Marist where he roomed with Rabbit, Gregory, and Bonaventure. The boys were all impressed and eager to learn about Caitlin, though Martin knew they would never understand the bond between him and Caitlin.

Analysis

The differences between America and Zimbabwe remain on clear display, and their effect on the lives of Martin and Caitlin are clear, especially as both move into high school and both open up to the other more about their lives. Some astounding cultural differences become apparent to Caitlin: In Zimbabwe, a woman without shoes is not "counted," meaning she is essentially worthless and does not exist. This is why the gift of shoes to Martin's mother meant so much to her and to the family. It is also in this section of the book that Martin reveals his government's instructions to those without work and who need help: go to the country and die. Caitlin continued to recognize how privileged she was, as she finally stopped complaining about her brother getting a bigger bedroom when she learned Martin and his family all shared only a single, small room no bigger than Caitlin's family's shed. Caitlin was excited to receive a car for Christmas, while Martin was excited his family could eat.

Readers should note that, while it would be easy to cast aspersions and look down on Caitlin for what is indeed a privileged lifestyle compared to Zimbabwe, it must be noted again that Martin – who suffers most between the two – does not. Indeed, he is only ever grateful and appreciative of Caitlin's help, and not bitter or antagonistic about her having more than him. His tone and method of writing remain unfailingly gentle and kind toward Caitlin. Not once does Martin compare himself in any kind of way that is negative toward Caitlin for what she has. It is clear that Martin does not play the victim: he is humble enough to ask for help, but refuses to allow anyone to do anything for him that he can do himself. Indeed, he repeatedly vows to pay Caitlin and her family back, and vows to do good with the good he himself has been given. A little act of kindness, as readers will recall being a major theme of the work, changes lives. It is already changing Martin's life for the better through Caitlin's friendship and help; and it is changing Caitlin's life for the better through Martin's friendship, a better perspective on life and the world, and a deeper appreciation for what she has.

Martin's efforts ultimately become just as important as Caitlin's own regarding his own life. Readers will note that, while Caitlin and her family may have helped Martin and his schooling, and while Martin's cousin may have paid the downpayment for school, Martin himself had to make a personal case with the headmaster to let him into Marist Brothers High School. Martin refuses here to play the victim – which he could easily do – but, rather, continues to take his own life into his own hands whenever possible. Nothing is



going to stop him from rising above his surroundings and succeeding – something which Martin himself repeatedly considers through this section of the book. Much of Martin’s desire to succeed came about because he knew Caitlin had his back, and because he looked to her and her family as an example of the American Dream come true – a dream he himself wanted to pursue.

Vocabulary

bewildered, durable, deplorable, fathom, commonplace, dismal, benefactors, blasé, mortified



Pages 254 – 321

Summary

Part 4: A Future (continued)

Caitlin: March 2001 – Caitlin began dating a guy named Damon in the spring, with whom she did marijuana. Caitlin felt as if she could tell Damon anything, so she told him about Martin. Damon did not assume Martin and Caitlin were dating, but rather found the entire experience to be cool.

Martin: April 2001 – Martin was stunned to learn that the deposit from Alois did not come through. He was given a week to sort things out. Meanwhile, Martin began attending classes, all taught in English. Martin found all of his teachers to be brilliant, and his fellow students to be diligent. He discovered they did not brag about wealth, only about how much they studied. Fortunately, by the following Monday, Alois came through with the money, explaining he had had to sell stock, but in a bad market, it was difficult to do. Alois explained he would not be able to help with anything beyond the downpayment. Martin did not know what to do. However, the headmaster pulled through for Martin, securing him a scholarship from the Delta Corporation, congratulating him on his early work at school. Martin was beyond grateful.

Caitlin: April 2001 – Caitlin was thrilled as she learned about Martin's O-Levels and his acceptance into Marist not only because it was good for Martin, but because it validated her doubtless faith in him. Caitlin continued dating Damon, who became her first serious boyfriend, and who helped teach her how to drive so she could get her license when she turned 16. Caitlin was thrilled when the next letter she received from Martin spoke of his doing well at Marist, and his desire to study medicine to help Zimbabweans. This made Caitlin believe Martin would come to America for school.

Martin: July 2001 – Martin, who loved dorming at Marist, was nevertheless happy for semester break when he got to go home and see his family. However, he quickly became concerned as his mother was ill and stayed in bed for two days. Martin decided she need to go to the hospital, so the family had to push her there in a wheelbarrow. There, Martin's mother was diagnosed with malaria, and so Martin had to purchase IV fluids needed for treatment, along with important pills. Fortunately, Martin and Nation had enough money between them to purchase these things, so their mother could be admitted. The medicine had an almost immediate effect on Mai, making her better very quickly. After the hospital, Martin was delighted to discover another package, this time from Caitlin's mom's class at school, where all her students donated pencils, pens, and other writing instruments. They were intended to be used by Martin and his family, and the rest were to be given out to friends and neighbors. A package from Caitlin contained more items that ranged from toiletries to Tang (because it had Vitamin C in it).

Part 5: A Changing World



Caitlin: September 2001 – When Caitlin learned of Martin’s mother’s bout with malaria, she had the urge to mail over medication. She asked Heather’s dad, who worked for a pharmaceutical company, about this. Heather’s dad explained it was illegal to send medicine through the mail. Still, Caitlin wondered how she could do it and not get in trouble. At school on September 11, Caitlin and her friends were stunned to learn about the terrorist attacks against America that were unfolding. Damon was prepared to go and fight for America if it came to it. Caitlin then wrote to Martin, talking about the attacks, and how no terrorist could ever change the American way of life.

Martin: September 2001 – Back at school, Martin and his friends learned of the terrorist attacks on America. Martin worried what would happen to his friendship with Caitlin because the U.S. was going to impose sanctions on any countries that dealt with terrorists, such as the Zimbabwean government. Martin was relieved when he received Caitlin’s letter, and another \$20 from her, which would go a long way toward getting a passport.

Caitlin: January 2002 – Caitlin continued to write to Martin, expressing a newfound sense of love for her home and country, and reassuring Martin that nothing could stop their friendship. Caitlin’s mom reassured her that the family would continue to help Martin, even by helping him find a scholarship to study in America. Caitlin’s mom, meanwhile, encouraged Caitlin to begin taking college credits as she would soon have all her high school credits taken care of. Caitlin agreed, as she could begin taking prerequisite nursing degree classes at Montgomery County Community College without having to take the SATs.

Martin: June 2002 – Martin was thrilled by Caitlin’s mom’s offer to help him handle the American college process. Martin’s good friend, Wallace, was also seeking to study in America. Wallace helped guide Martin in his next steps, such as needing to take the SATs. Mr. Muzawazi was pleased to hear of Martin’s American plans. He even allowed Martin to use his computer to register for the SATs, and to contact Caitlin and her mother.

Caitlin: August 2002 – Caitlin was thrilled to receive her first e-mail from Martin. Caitlin’s mother, meanwhile, had been visiting Catholic schools in the area (since Marist in Zimbabwe was also Catholic) to appeal for help on Martin’s behalf. Villanova High School, she revealed to Caitlin, seemed to be the best bet because everyone, including the students, were friendly.

Martin: August 2002 – As Wallace prepared to head to America, Martin gave Wallace the contact information of Caitlin and her family so he could reach out to them. Wallace also promised to write Martin, and that they would see one another when Martin followed to America the coming year. Through Mr. Muzawazi’s help and intervention, Martin was successful in gaining a passport.

Caitlin: September 2002 – Caitlin was thrilled to learn that Wallace would be in America, because it meant that if Wallace could do it, so could Martin. Caitlin was also excited to be in the high school/college dual enrollment program. Damon became angry when



Caitlin began to spend more and more time studying, especially when she studied with an old guy named Jeremy from her English class. It led to arguments and led to Caitlin doing well in school.

Martin: September 2002 – Martin corresponded with Wallace by e-mail to reconfirm the e-mail addresses of Caitlin and her mother, and to let Wallace know Martin's SAT exam was scheduled for December 7 in Harare.

Caitlin: October 2002 – Caitlin's brother, Richie, who had dropped out of college from too much partying, was given a second chance by their parents by supporting his returning to Temple University after a visit there. A short time later, Caitlin and her mother were stunned to receive an e-mail from Wallace, who revealed he was studying at Temple University. Although Caitlin could not make the first visit to see Wallace with her mother, she was thrilled to learn all about it at home when her mom got back. Caitlin's mom revealed that Wallace literally had nothing at college – not even sheets – so she and Caitlin decided to go shopping to care for Wallace.

That Friday, the entire family went to visit with Wallace and to bring him the things he would need for college. Wallace was a little shy at first to meet everyone, but then soon opened up. Wallace was overcome with gratitude, saying "thank you" over and over again for everything the family had brought him. Caitlin's mom then told Wallace that, because he was such good friends with Martin, and because Martin was part of the extended family, Wallace was now also a part of the extended family. They then took Wallace to eat at Hard Rock Café, where Wallace was amazed by the amount of food available. They then purchased a mini-fridge and food for Wallace, setting it up for him before they left.

Martin: October 2002 – Wallace e-mailed Martin to tell him just how nice Caitlin and her family were. Martin, meanwhile, continued to collect the things he needed to apply for college, such as recommendation letters. Martin corresponded with Caitlin's mom regularly during this period, as Caitlin's mom fully took charge of the college application process. Martin was so grateful and humbled he addressed his letter containing his college materials to Caitlin's parents with "Dear Mom and Dad."

Caitlin: November 2002 – Wallace had a difficult time with college, as at home, everyone studied on the weekends, while at Temple, everyone got drunk. Wallace did not like everyone being drunk, and was told by his roommate that this is why he had a difficult time finding friends. Caitlin's mother encouraged Wallace to do what he thought was right. This caused Caitlin to worry about whether or not Martin would fit in at whatever school he chose, and whether or not his future classmates would be accepting of him.

Analysis

American and Zimbabwean culture are in many ways the same, but in many ways different. This is clearly borne out by the high school experiences of Caitlin and Martin.



While Caitlin drinks, tries marijuana, and parties with her friends after school that is guaranteed to all American kids, Martin studies and must pay to be in school. Part of this is cultural and part of it is privilege: if Caitlin had to pay to be in high school, for example, she might well have spent more time studying (as she would come to do when she got into college). Part of it is cultural tradition – that most American kids party when they are young because American culture places emphasis on having a good time while young. Another part of it is that financial excess and ease allows money to be spent frivolously –something possible in Caitlin’s generation, but not possible in the Great Depression generation and something not possible with Martin’s current Zimbabwean generation. Readers should note that, while Richie got kicked out of college for partying, Wallace was going through great lengths just to get into college. The economic disparities also remain telling: while Caitlin has immediate internet access whenever she wants it, Martin’s did not exist until high school, and even then, it is limited.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 served to upend the stability and safety Americans had for long enjoyed. Caitlin herself was stunned by the attacks, knowing that even American life is not safe from terrorism. It gave her a newfound appreciation for, and love of her country. The attack also helped her to orient herself toward the future, and strengthened her resolve to help Martin. The attack was only a taste of the chaos and instability that Martin had to deal with on a daily basis, and this is what helped to motivate Caitlin. She was also able to see firsthand how coming to America would help Martin through her new friendship with Wallace. Wallace himself was amazed by all that America had to offer, and readers should especially note how amazing a simple restaurant menu was to Wallace. At the same time, the continued and increasing efforts of Caitlin and her family to help Martin resulted in them coming closer together despite being separated by physical distance, so much so that Martin began to call Caitlin’s parents Mom and Dad. Readers should also note that Martin’s tone toward Caitlin and her family grows ever softer, and ever more grateful, as Martin could only be in awe of what they have done for him.

Vocabulary

confirmation, verbatim, diligent, delirious, dignified, predicament, preposterous, somberly, maelstrom, missives, disposition, prerequisite, rebuffed



Pages 321 – 396

Summary

Part 5: A Changing World (continued)

Martin: December 2002 – Martin worried about final exams and college as his school year came to a close, as well as waiting to learn how well he did on the SATs, which were paid for by Caitlin's mother. He also worried because he was the only one of his friends who did not have a definite plan for the future. The day before graduating from Marist Brothers School, Martin thanked Headmaster Muzawazi for all of his help. Muzawazi wished Martin continued success, and told him to keep in touch. Martin agreed.

Part 6: American Dream

Caitlin: January 2003 – While Martin's SAT scores were high for someone from Zimbabwe, they were not high enough for certain American colleges for a full scholarship. Caitlin and her mom realized they would have to find alternative ways of funding Martin's college. Caitlin wrote to an acquaintance she had made at the U.S. Embassy in Zimbabwe, Rebecca Zeigler Mano, for help.

Martin: January 2003 – Martin was not happy with his SAT scores, and knew he had one more chance to do better with the SAT II. In the meantime, Martin went to work as a science teacher for little pay in a rural area in order to get by, but also to help students like Rabbit succeed.

Caitlin: February 2003 – Caitlin received a response from Rebecca, saying she would keep her eyes open for her. Meanwhile, Caitlin's mother hoped the Delta Corporation might be able to help, but Mr. Muzwazi explained it would not be possible at that time. Meanwhile, Damon became increasingly annoyed with Caitlin that she was devoting so much time to school rather than him, and Damon become very annoyed that Caitlin was so devoted to helping Martin. Caitlin refused to let Damon judge her, or hold her back.

Martin: April 2003 – Martin had been teaching in Chigodora for a few months, understanding just how rural and in need of help the area was. Martin realized poverty in the country was even worse than in the city. Martin began his work by getting to know his students, and personally seeking to understand their hardships. The pay of Martin, and another teacher named Frank, lagged in coming, so there was nothing they could live off of except the overwhelming kindness of the locals, who gave them what food they could. When Martin announced he would be leaving for school, the kids looked unhappy but were not surprised because other teachers had done the same before. One student named Givemore thanked Martin for giving them hope.



Caitlin: April 2003 – Caitlin and her mother shared frustration as many colleges rejected Martin only because of his SAT scores, but while others, like Villanova, had a spot for him but no money to give a scholarship. Still, they resolved to keep trying.

Martin: May 2003 – Martin went to work for Wallace's parents in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, as they owned a bed-and-breakfast and as Martin was still awaiting news on college from America. This gave Martin access to the internet, and allowed him to participate in the college process. Wallace's parents were very warm and welcoming. They revealed that Wallace had moved in with Caitlin and her family for a little while as he adjusted to college, and expressed how thankful they were for Caitlin and her family. Working as a receptionist at the bed-and-breakfast, Martin met many people from other countries, including Americans. He read an ad in the newspaper posted by the American embassy offering an orientation class for students set to go to study in America. Martin called the embassy to inquire about it because he did not know for sure whether or not he was going – and was amazed to be speaking to Rebecca Mano, who had previously spoken with Caitlin. Rebecca urged him to come so that he would be prepared when the money was finally found. Martin was thrilled to meet Rebecca. About 20 students attend the class, which focused on things like cultural differences. The American ambassador even came to talk to the students, telling them they now had a chance at an American dream.

Caitlin: June 2003 – While Martin was not rejected from all colleges he applied to, none offered full scholarships. As a last resort, Caitlin's mother wrote to the president of Villanova, Father Dobbins, explaining Martin's situation and telling him all about Martin. Caitlin and her mother prayed over, and kissed the letter. As time wore on, Caitlin and her mother realized at last that their situation seemed hopeless.

Martin: July 2003 – Martin was surprised he had not heard from Caitlin and her mother in a while. He decided to write them an e-mail. He discovered he himself had an e-mail from Villanova.

Caitlin: July 2003 – Caitlin woke up to her mother screaming with happiness, because Father Dobbins interceded on their behalf to ensure Martin received the funds needed to attend.

Martin: July 2003 – Martin was thrilled to be accepted into Villanova with the funds needed for the 2003-2004 academic year paid in full. Martin could not contain his excitement, and shouted that he was going to America.

Caitlin: July 2003 – Martin, and Caitlin and her mother, spoke by phone two hours after the news broke about Martin's scholarship. Martin explained he was calling from the U.S. Embassy. Caitlin's mother then spoke with Rebecca to get everything in order so that they could serve as Martin's sponsors in America. Everyone was beyond excited that Martin was coming, and was looking forward to meeting him for the first time, for he had to be in America by August 24.



Martin: August 2003 – Martin did not have much time to get ready, so he scrambled to prepare to leave for America. He thanked Wallace's parents, then went home to see and say goodbye to his own family. His family was thrilled. Upon leaving, Martin gifted his mother with \$96 U.S. from Caitlin's mother, having kept \$4 for travel. Martin became anxious when airline tickets from Caitlin's mother did not arrive, only later to learn from a local prophet-like witch doctor that Martin's aunt had placed a hex on him after a disagreement with his mother. The prophet encouraged Martin to pray, as it was the only thing that could be done to break the hex quickly.

Caitlin: August 12, 2003 – Caitlin and her mom panicked because FedEx had not delivered Martin's airplane tickets on time. Caitlin's father then stepped in, telling Caitlin to tell Martin to get to the airport.

Martin: August 14, 2003 – Martin, heartbroken that things might not work out, ended up crying. Wallace's parents then came for Martin, telling him he would indeed be going to the airport. They said they did not know how, but Martin would be getting on a plane. Through Martin's American father's efforts, Martin was put on his scheduled flight in the nick of time. Martin was amazed by the airport and the plane, and had a stopover in Paris before continuing on to Philadelphia.

Caitlin: August 15, 2003 – Caitlin stayed up all night tracking Martin's flight progress online. Caitlin and her entire family (including her grandparents), who made a welcome sign for Martin, then went to the airport to meet him. When Caitlin and Martin saw one another for the first time, they embraced while the people around them applauded. On the way to Caitlin's, they took a detour past Villanova to show Martin where he would soon be attending school.

Martin: August 15, 2003 – Martin was thrilled to be in America with his American family. He felt at home immediately with them, and was especially thrilled to be next to Caitlin, his best friend. Martin was thrilled to see Villanova on the way home, realizing he would be an American student there in less than two weeks. Martin was happy to be invited into Caitlin's house, where he was given a room in the basement and got to call Wallace on the phone later on. Caitlin then took Martin to the mall to get food and shop for things Martin would need for college, paid for by Caitlin's dad. Martin was amazed by everything, so much so that he called it excess, but in a good way. For dinner that night, Martin and his American family had pot roast, which was delicious. The next day, Caitlin's parents threw a party for Martin so that friends and neighbors could meet him. It gave Martin the chance to publicly thank Caitlin and her family for all they had done for him.

Epilogue

Martin: March 5, 2008 – Martin gave a toast at the wedding of Caitlin and her new husband, Dzmitry, whom she had met on a cruise with her parents the year before. Martin was by then living and working in Manhattan. Also present at the wedding was Wallace. Martin knew the marriage with Dzimitry would be good and would last, because Dzimitry was from Belarus, a poor country in Eastern Europe. Martin did not



know the day of the wedding that, in years to come, he would get an MBA at Duke, Caitlin would get her nursing degree, and Caitlin would give birth to a baby girl. Martin continued to keep in touch with his friends and family back home in Zimbabwe, saving enough money to buy his parents a new house, and continuing to send money whenever he could. Martin considered that he no longer had two families, but one large family. Martin realized that all their lives were changed forever by a single letter.

Caitlin: October 2015 – In the present, Caitlin reflects on the past and writes that she had no idea a simple pen pal letter could change her life, or so many lives in so many important ways. Caitlin is still happily married, now has two children, lives 30 minutes from her childhood home, and remains in touch with Martin who is now very successful and travels frequently. They both chose to share their story with the world with a book, Caitlin explains, so that more good could come from it. This was demonstrated by all the people who wrote to them through Facebook and Twitter, Caitlin explains, and by their talks with students at schools all over the place. Caitlin always explains at these talks that one small act of kindness can change lives, such as hers. Caitlin ends her book by directly asking readers what one small act of kindness could do for their lives.

Analysis

Through the continued efforts of Caitlin and her family, Martin was at last able to make it to the United States to attend college. Readers should note that, prior to his journeying to the United States for college, Martin spent several months working as a science teacher for a very rural, very impoverished area. Martin, rather than looking down on the kids he taught for being poor, was able to personally connect with them in a very intimate way. He was able to give these kids hope, as one of the students put it, because they not only recognized his genuine heart and kindness, but realized they, too, were not victims and not bound to a set fate. Their life was in their own hands. Already, Martin has begun to pay Caitlin back for his single act of kindness so many years before – the writing of a letter – and who knows what good Martin managed to do through those kids he taught.

In the United States, the first in-person meeting of Martin and Caitlin was one of happiness, hugs, and applause. Caitlin and Martin were overwhelmed and overjoyed to finally see one another. Martin himself explained that, despite never having met before, and despite half a world existing between them, it felt as if he already belonged and fit in. So appreciative of Caitlin and her family was Martin that he publicly thanked them and spoke about how wonderful they were. Their friendship had become family. No difference or distance is too great for such friendship, and Caitlin and Martin proved this then, and prove it now through their writing of the epilogue. Their language here is joyous, optimistic, and forward-looking, for their meeting in person was not the end of their journey, but the beginning of their next stage. Indeed, Caitlin rounds out their shared story just as she began, by talking about how a simple act of kindness could change lives, and in so doing, change the world. By writing the book, Caitlin and Martin hope to inspire kindness and change even more lives.

Vocabulary

bellowed, American dream, deadpanned, nominal, dismal, infuriated, impersonal, despondent, exasperated, ecstatic



Important People

Caitlin

Caitlin Alifirenka (nee Stoicsitz) is one of the authors of *I Will Always Write Back*, is the best friend of Martin, and is a wife, mother, and nurse in Pennsylvania in the United States.

Caitlin, at the age of 12, decides to write a pen pal letter to someone in Zimbabwe, who turns out to be Martin. Six years of correspondence lead to Caitlin and Martin becoming such good friends they essentially become family, especially as Caitlin and her family send money and care packages to Martin.

The letters between them also help Caitlin to develop a deeper appreciation for her own life as an American, both in terms of standards of living and the safety, security, and freedom of the country. Caitlin's life is transformed by the simple act of kindness of writing to Martin, and Caitlin now hopes readers will be inspired to reach out to the world in kindness.

Martin

Martin Ganda is one of the authors of *I Will Always Write Back*, is the best friend of Caitlin, and is a successful businessman. Born in poverty in Zimbabwe, Martin is thrilled to make Caitlin as an American friend through the pen pal program at school. Martin, despite his difficult living conditions, never complains about them, never resents Caitlin for her life in America, and never plays the victim. Martin's can-do attitude helps propel him to do well in school not only to be able to study in America and make good the efforts and investment of Caitlin and her family, but to be able to do good things with his own life in the world. Martin's life is transformed by her simple act of sending him a letter, and Martin and Caitlin hope their shared story will inspire readers to do kind things in the world.

Caitlin's mother

Caitlin's mother, Anne, is a gentle, kind, and loving woman. She is the wife of Rich and the mother of Richie. Caitlin's mother is delighted with her daughter's friendship and correspondence with Martin, and even begins to help Caitlin provide money and care packages for Martin and his family. Anne ultimately takes the reins to ensure Martin gets a scholarship to a good college in the United States. For her kindness, she is called "Mom" by Martin.



Caitlin's father

Caitlin's father, Rich, is a kind, strong, and loving man. He is the husband of Anne, and is also the father of Richie. Rich, who works in government energy contracts, is impressed by his daughter's kindness and good heart in reaching out to Martin, and so decides to help. Although it is not clear how he manages to do it, it is Rich who ensures Martin makes his flight to America to begin his college career. For his efforts, Rich is called "Dad" by Martin.

Martin's mother

Martin's mother, referred to as Mai, is a quiet, thoughtful, and deeply compassionate woman. She is the husband of Baba, and also the mother to Nation, Mack, Lois, and George. Mai never complains, and devotes herself entirely to her family. She is very happy to learn of Martin's correspondence with Caitlin, and does her best to find the money to help Martin pay for stamps. Mai is overjoyed when she learns of Martin's acceptance to Villanova, and though she will miss him greatly, she is thrilled he has a chance to follow his dreams.

Martin's father

Martin's father, referred to as Baba, is a flawed man, but good at heart. A hard-worker who has a penchant for alcohol, Baba often fights with his wife, Mai, and is not always pleasant to be around. However, Martin's correspondence with Caitlin, as well as Martin's American college prospects, delight Martin's father. Baba does come through for Martin on a number of occasions, such as providing writing paper so that Martin can send a letter to Caitlin.

Mrs. Miller

Mrs. Miller is Caitlin's seventh grade teacher. It is Mrs. Miller who first oversees the pen pal program that brings Caitlin and Martin together. Caitlin keeps Mrs. Miller updated on the correspondence between them, and Mrs. Miller is later overjoyed when Martin comes to America for school.

Mrs. Jarai

Mrs. Jarai is Martin's seventh grade teacher. It is Mrs. Jarai who handles the Zimbabwean end of the pen pal program for her school. It is Mrs. Jarai who hands Martin Caitlin's letter – and so helps set in motion the friendship, correspondence, and future between them.



Sekai

Sekai is the cousin of Martin, and is the husband of Alois. She and her husband are wealthy to Martin's family in comparison, and provide work for him at the bank where Alois works while Martin is on break. It is later Sekai and Alois who make the downpayment on high school tuition for Martin, and who help pave the way for his college career.

Headmaster Muzawazi

Headmaster Muzawazi is the man in charge at Marist Brothers Nyanga High School. Muzawazi is a no-nonsense man who, nevertheless, has a heart of gold. It is Muzawazi who helps find room for Martin at Marist, and it is Muzawazi who allows Martin to attend despite his lack of payment. It is Muzawazi who secures Martin a Delta Corporation scholarship to attend Marist, and it is Muzawazi who later works with Caitlin's mother to help her in Martin's college quest. Martin promises to keep in touch with Muzawazi when Martin graduates from Marist.



Objects/Places

Pen pal letters

Pen pal letters symbolize friendship, learning, and unity. The letters that Caitlin and Martin exchange with one another over time leads to a deep friendship between the two, allows them to learn more about one another and their native countries, and helps bring people in different parts of the world closer together in unity.

America Online (AOL)

America Online (AOL) was symbolic of the cutting edge of technology in the 1990s. AOL was a combination internet provider, e-mail service, and internet browser all in one. It used dial-up internet connections in the 1990s, and enabled Caitlin to begin to research Zimbabwe.

Photographs

Photographs are considered symbolically precious in Zimbabwe because they are so rare and so expensive. Martin is beyond thrilled when Caitlin sends him a photo of herself, not only because he learns what she looks like, but because the photo itself is a touching gift given the importance attached to photos in Zimbabwe. It takes a while for Martin to save the money to return photos to Caitlin, but when he does, he is thrilled to be able to do so because it is one of the most precious things he has that he can give her.

American dollar

An American dollar bill symbolizes economic stability and the wealth of the United States. Caitlin sends Martin the gift of an American dollar to show him what American money looks like. Martin and his family are amazed, as the American dollar symbolizes the hope, stability, and wealth of America – but is also worth as much as 20 Zim dollars (later 35) due to Zimbabwean inflation.

Reebok t-shirt

A Reebok t-shirt symbolizes the disparity in wealth between America and Zimbabwe. Caitlin buys a Reebok t-shirt for Martin for his birthday at a discount outlet, and mails it to him. Martin is stunned, as the t-shirt (purchased so cheaply by Caitlin in America) could not even be afforded by the wealthiest families in Martin's town. This demonstrates how strong the American economy and dollar are, but also demonstrates



how common clothing items causally purchased by Americans are all but impossible to afford in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwean earrings

A pair of Zimbabwean earrings symbolizes the disparity in wealth between America and Zimbabwe. The earrings are purchased for Caitlin by Martin as a gift. They cost 20 Zim dollars, and take him two months of working weekends toting luggage at a bus depot to save up for. They demonstrate how difficult things are in Zimbabwe, and demonstrate how easily available items in America can only be purchased in Zimbabwe with incredibly difficult work and long-term saving.

Ice cream wrapper

An ice cream wrapper symbolizes the privileges Caitlin enjoys in America. Martin uses a discarded ice cream wrapper to write to Caitlin, at last admitting the truth about his difficult life. The wrapper itself symbolizes his difficulties, as in America, a wrapper would be thrown away, but to Martin, it is precious letter-writing material. Caitlin treasures the letter, and it encourages her to send money to Martin to help him and his family, and to appreciate more deeply the things she has in her own life.

Care packages

Care packages symbolize love and kindness. Caitlin and her family not only routinely send Martin and his family money, but send care packages as well as an act of love and kindness. The packages contain everything from shoes and toothbrushes to paper, candy, and other essential but costly and nearly-impossible-to-find daily items needed by Martin and his family.

E-mail

E-mail symbolizes the ease of communication by internet, but also denotes the disparity in internet access between American and Zimbabwe. While Caitlin and her family have a computer that can access the internet on a whim, Martin does not have such privileges. Instead, he is given permission to use the headmaster's computer and the school's e-mail system, which he uses to communicate quickly with Caitlin.

Martin's teaching job

Martin's teaching job symbolizes human kindness and hope. Between high school and college, Martin works in a very rural area as a science teacher. His experiences growing up undergird his efforts to reach out to the rural kids, seeking to understand and relate



to them rather than looking down on them. His humility, compassion, and success give the kids hope.

Villanova acceptance

The Villanova acceptance is symbolic of faith and the future. Despite countless obstacles, Caitlin, her mother, and Martin have faith that everything will work out in the end, though they nearly all lose faith at one point or another. When Martin is accepted in Villanova, all of their faith and their hard work pays off. Villanova's acceptance of Martin now paves the way for an amazing future for Martin.

Hatfield

Hatfield is a medium-sized town in Pennsylvania, about 30 miles from Philadelphia. It is largely suburban and rural, and is dominated by a bacon factory. It also has a mall, bars, restaurants, and places to shop. It is, for all intents and purposes, a quintessential American town full of mostly good people and a safe place to live, work, and raise a family. Hatfield is the hometown of Caitlin, and is where she attends school and ends up working before going on to get married and graduate from nursing school.

Mutare

Mutare is a relatively poor city in Zimbabwe, and was the hometown of Martin. There, Martin lived with his family in the Chisamba Singles housing development where they shared one room. Their town was noted not only for the poverty, but by the markets, crime, and sheer number of people living in such close quarters. When Martin becomes successful in America, he moves his family into better housing in Mutare, in a better section of the city.



Themes

American and Zimbabwean culture are in many ways the same, but in many ways different

American and Zimbabwean culture are in many ways the same, but in many ways different, explains Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda in their book *I Will Always Write Back*. Caitlin notes it is interesting that she and Martin should be growing up together, but so very far apart and in different countries. As they write letters, they learn about these similarities and differences.

In both America and Zimbabwe, family is a very important thing. Both Caitlin and Martin love their families dearly. But in both America and Zimbabwe, families can experience struggles – such as Martin’s father losing his job and turning to drink. In both America and Zimbabwe, it is possible to succeed and thrive, but it is much harder in Zimbabwe due to the overall political and economic climate.

Both the families of Caitlin and Martin are Christian, and celebrate holidays like Christmas. But whereas American Christmases focus on things like church, presents, and large dinners, in Zimbabwe, Martin’s family struggles to even provide chicken for dinner on Christmas. While traditional gender and family roles remain prevalent in both America and Zimbabwe, women will work as well as men to provide income for the family when critical in Zimbabwe, but will also work for the desire to work in America (as well as in times of need).

Other cultural similarities and differences are less serious. For example, while in America people tend to keep rabbits and dogs as pets, in Africa, rabbits are eaten and dogs are often stray. In both America and Zimbabwe, American and Western music is very popular (such as the Spice Girls) – as are most forms of American entertainment (such as professional wrestling). In America, while high school and college are seen as times of enjoyment and partying, in Zimbabwe, high school and college are seen as the only real chance to get ahead in life, and so are spent studying.

The economies of America and Zimbabwe are vastly different

The economies of America and Zimbabwe are vastly different, explain Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda in their book *I Will Always Write Back*. The differing economies in both America and Zimbabwe affect each country’s culture and political climate. Both economies make for different lives for Caitlin and Martin.

In the United States, a stable economy and a strong currency mean that everything from food to clothing is cheap, easily available, and a part of daily life. In Zimbabwe, a volatile economy, inflation, and a weak Zim dollar mean everyday American needs are



hard, if not impossible to find or afford. Readers learn that one American dollar, as time goes on, is worth 20, then 24, then more than 30 Zim dollars. This means the American dollar will go a long way in Zimbabwe. The first dollar that Caitlin sends Martin and his family buys two weeks' worth of groceries. In America, places like Dairy Queen and Hard Rock Café sell quality food, such as chicken and burgers, at cheap prices, which are consumed every single day. In Zimbabwe, eating chicken for Christmas dinner once a year is considered miraculous.

In the United States, Reebok t-shirts and Nike tennis shoes are considered casual, everyday clothing items that are worn with little thought. In Martin's village, even the wealthiest families cannot afford Reebok shirts and Nike shoes, so that when Caitlin sends Martin these things – purchased on sale at discounts stores in America – he is amazed. He and his family lovingly wear and care for these, and other clothing items sent to them by Caitlin. This helps Caitlin to realize how much she takes for granted in her own life, while Martin aspires to do well like Caitlin and her family, to turn around and do good for others.

In America, while Caitlin receives a car for Christmas, Martin is thrilled to be eating chicken at Christmas. In America, while school is taken for granted because taxpayers ensure it is provided to all American students for free (until they grow up and pay taxes toward the next generation), every semester of school must be personally paid for by students and their families in Zimbabwe. This means that while American kids are out partying – such as when Caitlin drinks or tries marijuana – Zimbabwean students like Martin and Wallace are studying in their spare time in order to get ahead.

Things people with socioeconomic and cultural ease take for granted, others depend on for life

Things people with socioeconomic and cultural ease take for granted, others depend on for life, explain Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda in their book *I Will Always Write Back*. This is to be seen in the differing lives of Caitlin and Martin. Whereas Caitlin comes to realize she has taken much in her life for granted because of socioeconomic and cultural differences with Zimbabwe, Martin does not resent her for her life circumstances, and aspires to a life like Caitlin's.

When Caitlin begins writing to Martin, she makes several assumptions based on taking her own life circumstances for granted, but also because she does not know much about Africa. For example, she imagines Martin and his family to live in a nice house with African-styled clothing, and to be able to afford at least a nice life. However, this is not the case at all. Caitlin's first real awakening comes through how much Martin and his family value the dollar she sends, merely to show them what American currency looks like. The dollar buys his family two weeks' worth of food – whereas the family cannot even afford to take pictures to send them to Caitlin.

Things really hit him for Caitlin when Martin finally confesses the truth of his difficult circumstances, writing to her on a discarded ice-cream wrapper. This puts things in



harsh perspective for Caitlin, who has not had to think about paying for school or working to put food on the table. The photos of Martin and his family that are sent after Caitlin and her mother send care packages demonstrate the true poverty in which Martin and his family live, such as the holes in the walls of their tiny house. This makes Caitlin reconsider how she has been complaining that her older brother got the bigger bedroom in their house, when Martin's house is smaller than Caitlin's shed and is not even weatherproofed.

When Muslim terrorists attack the United States on September 11, 2001, Caitlin's eyes are awakened to the fact that no one anywhere is safe anymore – but also to the understanding that this kind of chaos is what Martin must live with the threat of on a daily basis. When Caitlin meets Wallace and then Martin in person, her eyes are further opened. Wallace has a difficult time adjusting to college because he is unused to the American youth culture of partying, while Martin is amazed by just how vibrant the American economy is in terms of choice and quantity. It causes Caitlin to look again at her surroundings, and to appreciate things as simple as choice.

Even one simple act of kindness will change lives

Even one simple act of kindness will change lives, explain Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda in their book *I Will Always Write Back*. Caitlin and Martin fervently believe this, because it has happened in their own lives. They know that acts of kindness do not always have to be grand, publicized things, but can be small and unknown – and they will still change the world.

At the age of 12, Caitlin made a split-second decision to become a pen pal with an unknown kid (who would turn out to be Martin) in Zimbabwe. Her simple act of kindness – writing a letter to a country where not many other kids her age would write letters – would ultimately change the life of a boy and his family, and ultimately, countless others throughout the world. Martin was so thrilled to have an American friend in Caitlin that it improved his outlook on life in general even at the start.

In America, while even \$20 may not be considered much due to how much many people earn, in Zimbabwe, a single dollar buys Martin's family two weeks' worth of food. Caitlin's simple gift of a dollar, and later \$20 and \$40, has a profound impact on Martin's life, and the lives of his family members. It means they can eat and afford to stay in their house. Even the sending of a pair of shoes to Martin's mother is a sociocultural improvement, for it means that Martin's mother may now count in society.

Before Martin leaves Africa for college, he works as a science teacher in a very rural area. Because he grew up in such similar circumstances, and reflecting on all the help and hope he received from Caitlin, her family, Muzawazi, Alois, and others, Martin reached out to the rural kids he taught. When he prepared to leave, the students let him know they gave them hope. Martin's kindness toward the students – getting to know them and treating them as human beings and worthy creations of God – inspired them immensely. Such a simple act of kindness undoubtedly had tremendous consequences.



No difference or distance is too great for friendship

No difference or distance is too great for friendship, explain Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda in their book *I Will Always Write Back*. When Caitlin and Martin begin writing to each other, they know that they will have many differences between them, but also know they will have many things in common – such as being friends. Caitlin herself remarks that it is exciting and interesting to think that she has a best friend she is growing up together with, but whom she has never met and who lives halfway around the world.

As noted in previous themes, Martin and Caitlin have many differences. They come from different countries and different cultures. They come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles. They live in different time zones. They go to different schools. They have different kinds of daily struggles. They have different priorities in life at different points in time. They have different family situations, different attitudes about much concerning youth (such as drinking and doing drugs), and different attitudes concerning high school.

Despite these differences, they have the commonalities of wanting to be friends, wanting to get to know one another, and being open-minded enough to learn and expand their own horizons. They come to learn that they both deeply love their families, for whom they would do anything. They both love the idea of having a bright and prosperous future. They both love similar music, and both have a deep appreciation for America. They both have a deep appreciation for their lives, both for their blessings and hardships.

When Martin comes to the United States, he already knows so much about Caitlin and her family, and vice versa, that Martin immediately feels at home. He has even taken to calling Caitlin his sister, and Caitlin's parents his parents. Martin explains that he no longer considers that he has a Zimbabwean family and an American family, but that he has one large family because his life and Caitlin's life have been joined. Caitlin feels the same way, seeing Martin as her brother and best friend.



Styles

Structure

Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda structure their book *I Will Always Write Back* with unnumbered, titled chapters. Each chapter alternates the name of either Martin or Caitlin, as one or the other narrates that chapter. Each chapter additionally bears in its title the date at which that chapter occurs. Each chapter progresses the course of their story through time, from the early autumn of 1997 through the present era (2015) in the Epilogue. This allows for their different approaches to their shared story of friendship to be fully explored. It allows readers to see how both approached their friendship, and what their lives were like in America and Zimbabwe, respectively. The dual nature of the book is reflective of the fact that it takes two people to dually commit to a friendship, and while Caitlin and Martin may be best friends, they are their own persons as well.

Perspective

Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda tell their story in their book *I Will Always Write Back* in the first-person perspective, with both Caitlin and Martin narrating each half of their shared story from their own points of view and places in the world at the time. Both Caitlin and Martin approach the story of their friendship with very unique perspectives. Caitlin is a privileged American teenager who finds greater appreciation and respect for her country and her cultural situation in her learning more about, and becoming friends with Martin, while Martin's belief in, and love in America, American goodness, and the American dream is reinforced by Caitlin. Both therein write with the perspective understanding that even small acts of kindness can do immense and unimaginably good things, such as changing someone's life. Both agree that people have more in common than they do not, and that friendship will matter at the end of the day more than any differences might add up to.

Tone

Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda tell their story in their book *I Will Always Write Back* in very similar, but distinct tones according to their lives and backgrounds. Caitlin's tone tends to be casual, engaging, friendly, but with reservation once she begins getting to know Martin. Caitlin's tone comes from having a relatively carefree life, like any typical American teen. Her writing becomes a little more serious and a little more careful as she learns about Martin's situation. For example, she does not want to sound like she is bragging when she gets a car for Christmas, and Martin's family struggles to put food on the table for Christmas dinner. Martin's tone is much more formal, contemplative, and serious – but it gains an optimistic and hopeful edge when Caitlin enters his life through letters. The seriousness and gravity of Martin's home life and poverty are reflected in his writing, as is his emphasis on the importance of education and responsibility (thus



making his language and tone formal). However, the friendship and support of Caitlin and her family allow Martin to hope for a better future, and this can be told in sentences where excitement can be detected, such as when Martin declares "I am going to America! AMER-I-CA!!!" (357)



Quotes

When I turned in my letter to Mrs. Miller the following day, I felt giddy, like this was the start of something big.

-- Caitlin (Caitlin: September 1997)

Importance: Caitlin explains here how excited she was to be able to write to Martin. She reveals she chose Zimbabwe because she had never heard of it before, did not know much about Africa, and because it was the last country on the list of countries in which students could write to pen pals. Her letter ends up in the hands of Martin.

School is your only hope.

-- Martin's mom (Martin: October 1997)

Importance: Martin explains to readers why his mother places so much emphasis on his doing well in school. His own mother had to drop out of school at the age of 12 because her family could not afford tuition, and so was not able to do well in life financially. Martin's mother knows that education is key to the future, and wants Martin to do very well both in school and in life.

I wrote a basic letter, using hers as a guide...I really hoped we'd continue to write each other. I promised her I would not let her down, and I hoped she would do the same.

-- Martin (Martin: October 1997)

Importance: Here, Martin explains his excitement over getting to write Caitlin back. He already realizes he has a friend in Caitlin in America, and hopes they will continue to write one another. He promises not to let Caitlin down, and tells her he will continue to write to her, hoping she will do the same for him.

I will always reply no matter what happens, I swear.

-- Martin (Martin: June 1998)

Importance: As the situation in Zimbabwe gets bad with strikes and hunger shortages brought on by inflation, Martin struggles to work to earn money to write Caitlin back. Martin does not trouble Caitlin with details about what is going on, but promises to write back no matter what. He apologizes for the delay in writing back, but reaffirms his commitment to their friendship despite the hardships that he faces.

I think he was actually trying to protect me from knowing how incredibly hard his life was.

-- Caitlin (Caitlin: December 1998)

Importance: Here, Caitlin talks about how brief clues in Martin's letters and pictures demonstrate how hard his life was. She explains this was because Martin was trying to protect her from his struggles so as not to make her unhappy. His kindness and his courage in doing so are deeply touching to Caitlin.



After he sent the letter on the ice-cream wrapper, Martin started to open up to me in a way that made me realize how different our lives were. Until that moment, I did not understand how truly privileged I was.

-- Caitlin (Caitlin: June 1999)

Importance: When Caitlin receives the letter from Martin written on an ice cream wrapper which details his struggles and the reality of his life, she has an awakening. She realizes how difficult his life truly is, and how easy her life truly is. It helps her resolve to send Martin more money, and to come to have a deeper appreciation for her own life.

What would we have done if it weren't for Caitlin?

-- Martin (Martin: June 1999)

Importance: The money that Caitlin sends to Martin and his family is the difference between their eating and paying their rent, and being forced out onto the street. Martin and his family are overwhelmingly grateful for Caitlin and her kindness. She has essentially financially saved the family. Martin does not know what would have become of him and his family had it not been for Caitlin.

Knowing that you and your family are okay is the only payment we need.

-- Caitlin (Martin: June 2000)

Importance: Martin and his family are beyond humbled by all of the help they receive from Caitlin and her family. Martin thanks God for Caitlin and her family, and feels horrible they have helped him so much. He asks how he can pay her back, but Caitlin explains her family only wants to know he and his family are okay. This demonstrates the genuine goodness of Caitlin and her family.

I never once doubted Martin, and so I wasn't in the least bit surprised that he did so well.

-- Caitlin (Caitlin: April 2001)

Importance: When Caitlin learns how well Martin did on his O-Level exams, and when she learns that Martin is doing well at Marist, Caitlin is thrilled. She is thrilled because she is happy for Martin, but also because her faith in him has been validated. In America, she alone never doubted Martin for a second, and now she is very happy to have the proof that her faith has been justified.

I just wanted to say thank you... For coming... And for giving me hope.

-- Givemore (Martin: April 2003)

Importance: Between Martin's graduation from high school and his entry into college, he goes to work as a science teacher in a very rural area. Martin was amazed at how poor life in the rural area was, because it was even worse than what he had experienced himself as a younger kid. Still, Martin uses his experience to reach out to



the rural kids, rather than looking down on them. He is thanked for giving the kids there hope that they too might one day succeed like Martin.

I am going to America!" I shouted. "AMER-I-CA!!!
-- Martin (Martin: July 2003)

Importance: This is Martin's reaction when he learns he has been accepted into Villanova. He is beyond thrilled, jumping up and shouting with happiness. His American dream, and his future, are now all possible. It is the happiest moment of Martin's life up until that point, and it means he will now be able to take command of his future and do good in the world.

Kindness is contagious. It changes lives. It changed mine. What will it do for you?
-- Caitlin (Epilogue: Caitlin, October 2015)

Importance: As Caitlin brings the book she and Martin have written together to a close, she makes the final case for kindness. She explains that kindness has transformed her life, all beginning with the simple act of kindness in choosing to write a letter to someone in a country she had never even heard of. If one simple, kind act could change her life - and the lives of Martin, his family, and the kids he gave hope while working as a teacher in rural Zimbabwe - then another act of kindness by the reader could do even more.



Topics for Discussion

Culture

The cultures in which Caitlin and Martin grow up have many things in common, but many things which are different as well. What are some of these cultural differences? How do Martin and Caitlin work past these cultural differences through their friendship?

Culture

While there are many cultural differences between Martin and Caitlin, there are many cultural similarities as well. What are these similarities? How are these similarities possible despite the vast distance between Caitlin and Martin? How do these similarities strengthen their friendship?

Economies

The economies of America and Zimbabwe are vastly different. Why is this so? How do these vastly different economies affect the lives of Caitlin and Martin?

Economies

The economies in America and Zimbabwe are vastly different. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the availability of everyday items (such as toothpaste) and in the value placed on certain things for different reasons (photographs). Why do Caitlin's care packages containing everyday items mean so much to Martin and his family? Why is Caitlin so surprised that they should matter so much? Should she be faulted for this surprise? Why or why not?

Socioeconomic differences

Martin is afraid to divulge his true social and economic circumstances to Caitlin. Why is this so? How does Caitlin respond when Martin finally tells her? Why? And why does this matter so much to Martin?

Socioeconomic differences

What social impact do specific items in an economy have on the lives of Martin and Caitlin? For example, consider things like shoes and clothing brands. Why do these items have different impacts on their lives?



Acts of kindness

Why does Caitlin initially choose to write a letter to someone in Zimbabwe? Why does the receipt of Caitlin's letter by Martin mean so much to him? How does it end up changing his life?

Acts of kindness

The months that Martin works as a science teacher in rural Zimbabwe, he establishes strong, personal connections with his students. Why does he do this? What happens as a result?

Friendship

Despite the many differences between them, Caitlin and Martin are able to establish a friendship so strong, it is like they are siblings. How is this possible? Why does it matter to both of them that they have such a friendship?

Friendship

How does the friendship between Caitlin and Martin not only change their lives, but change their perspectives on their own lives - and on each others' lives? Why does this matter so much, especially with respect to their friendship?