

"I hope this meets you..."

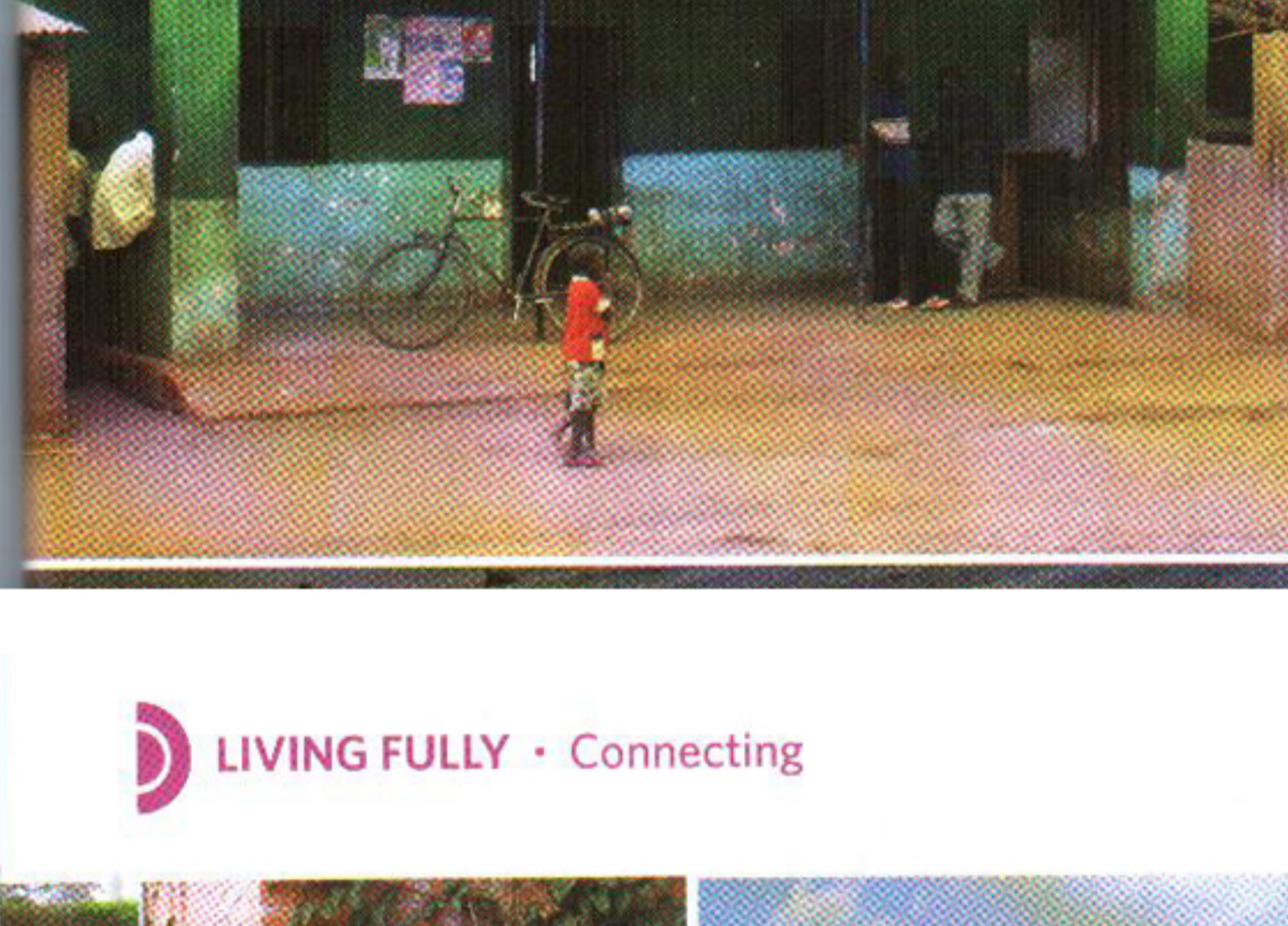
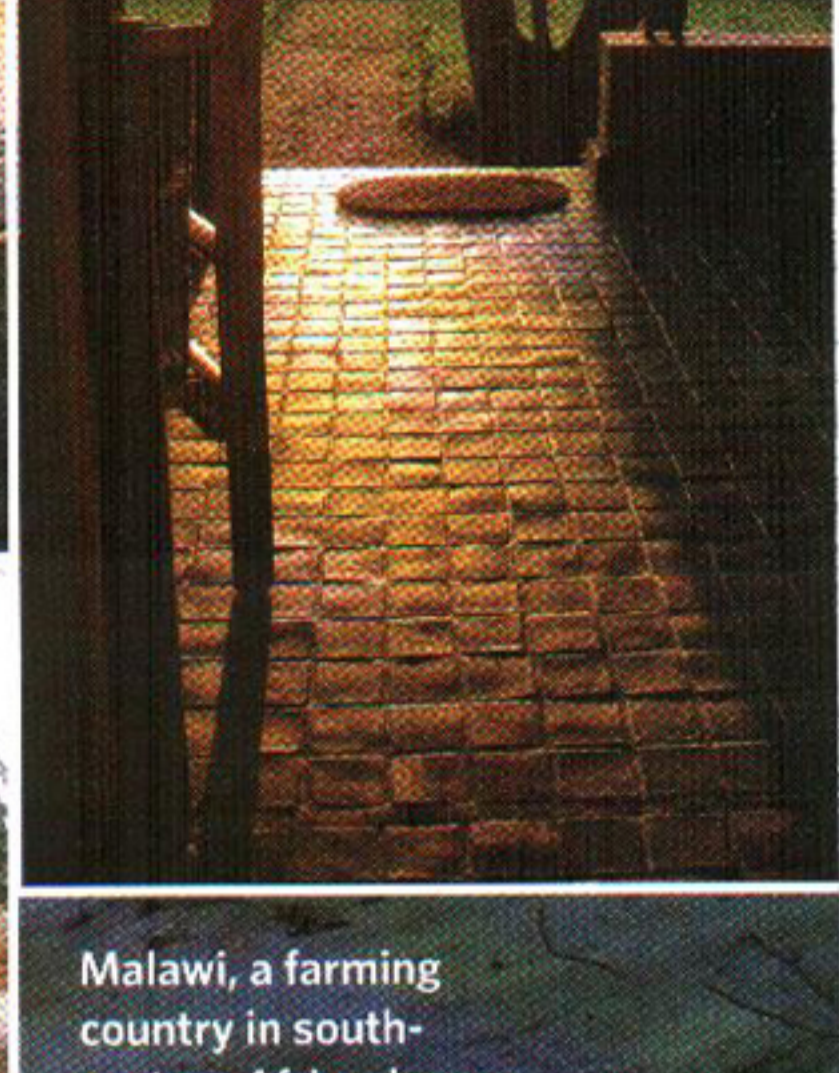
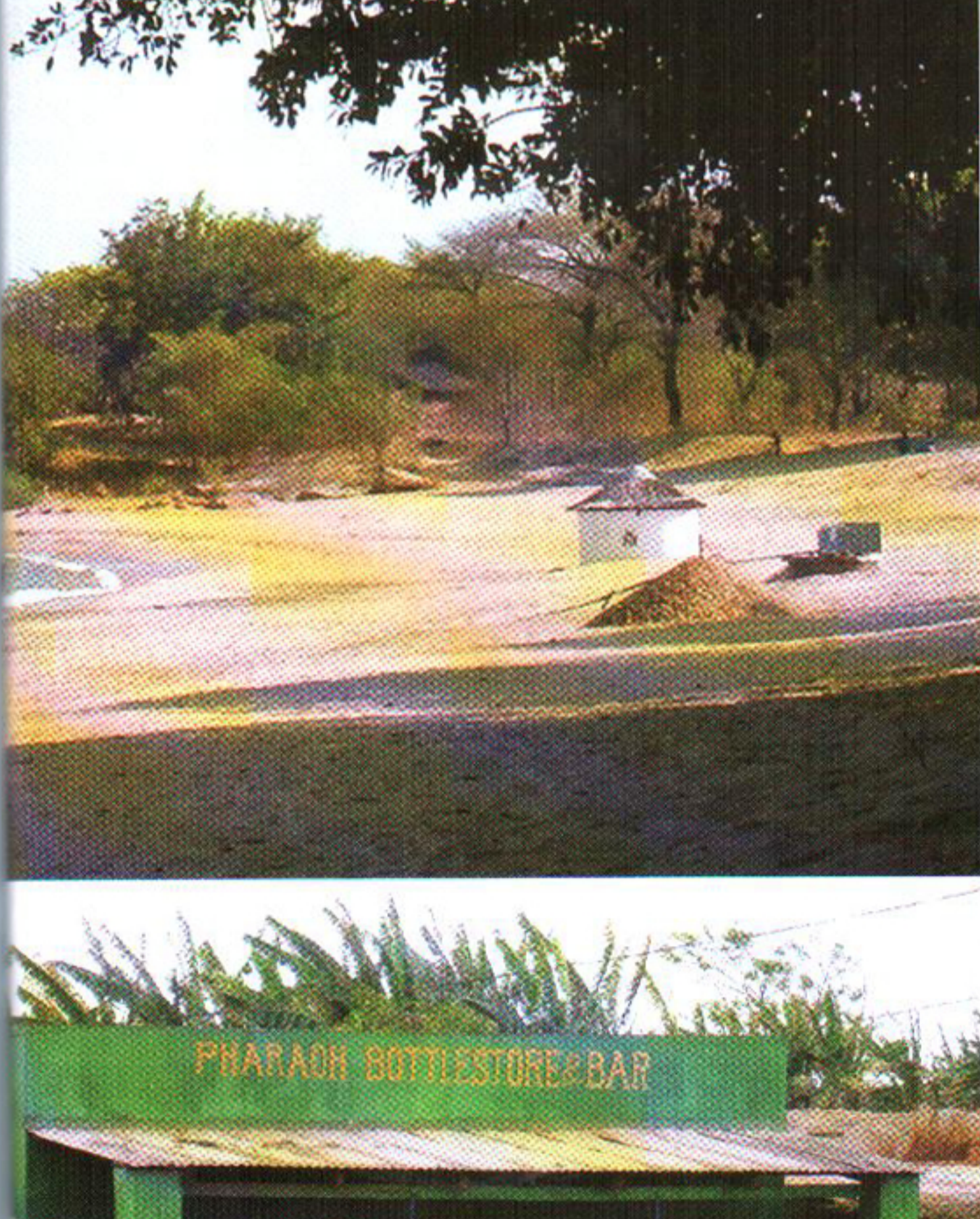
How a letter from the other side of the world changed a Canadian woman's life, as well as that of a girl in Malawi. By Colleen Friesen



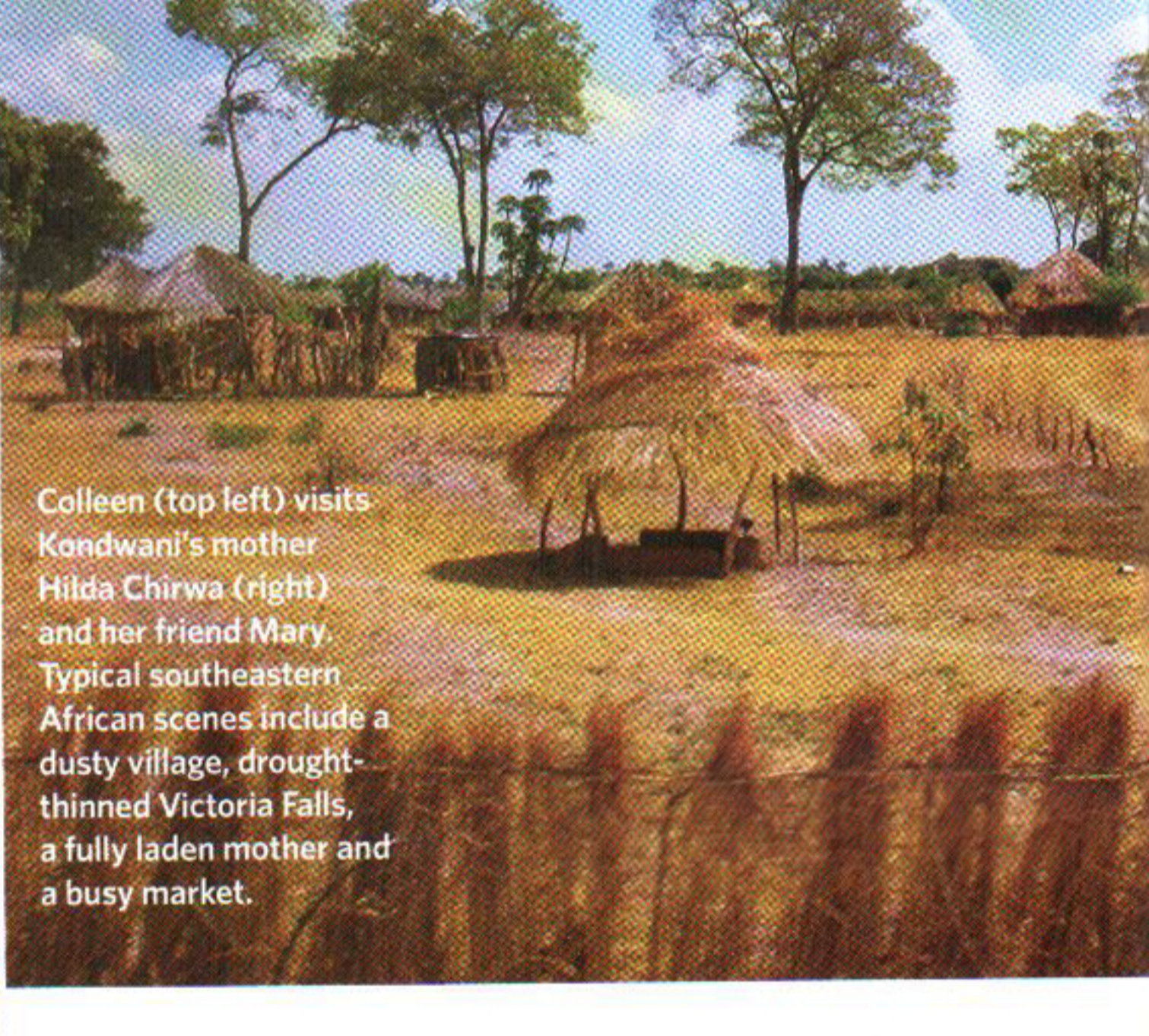
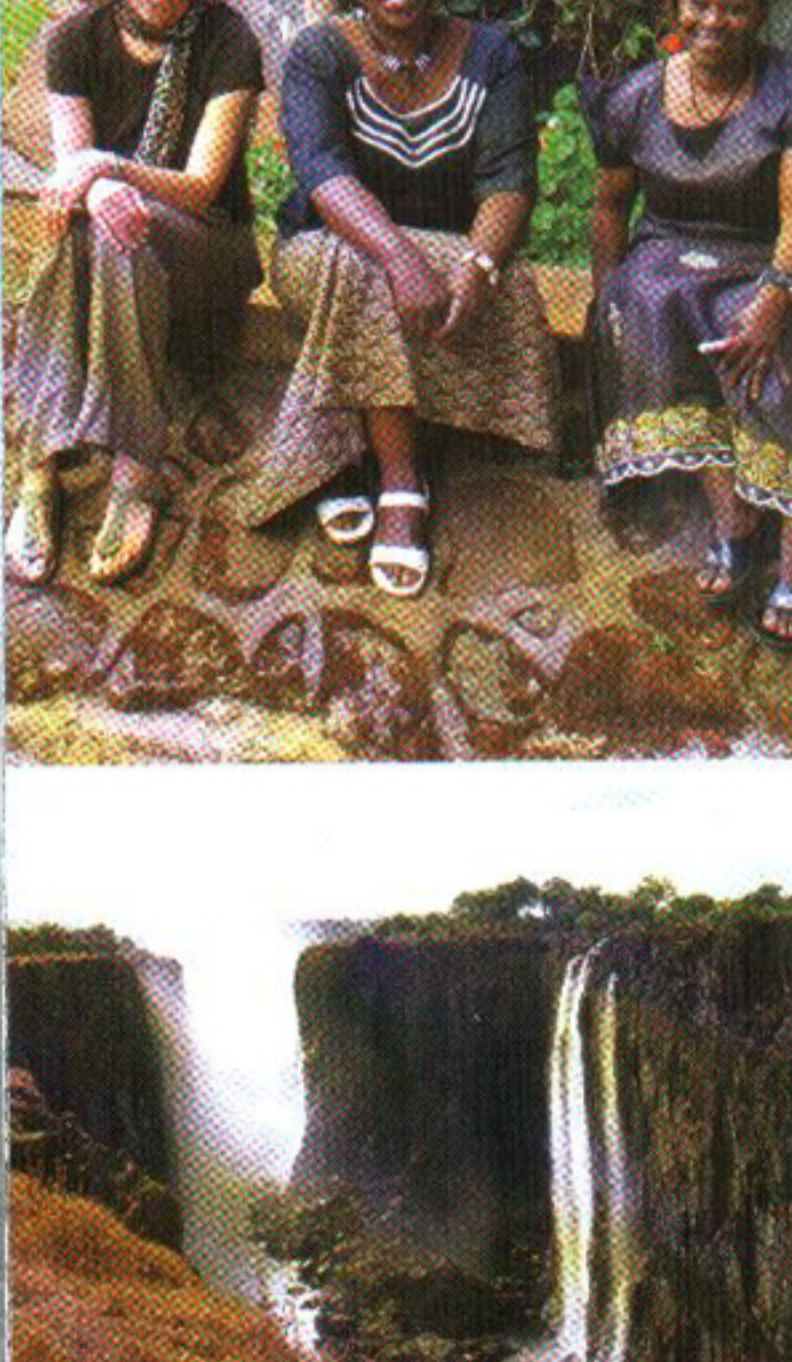
September 2001

"I'm the girl you met at Kande post office and I beg you to give me your address, kindly you agreed to my request and now I have decided to write you one... I lost my daddie last year... Hope that this letter meets you... I will be happy if you can visit me next time."
The letter is on pale paper cut from a child-size notebook. I smile at her reference to "next time." She obviously has no idea how far away Malawi is from Canada. Later I would wonder how she knew there would be a next time.

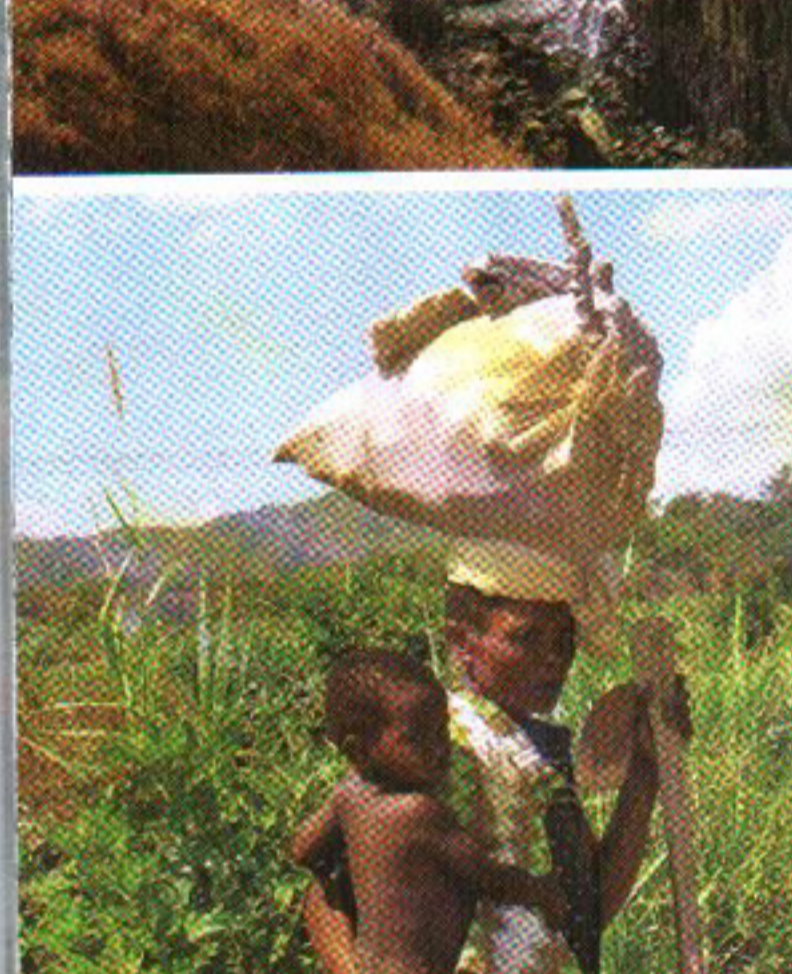
In July 2001, my husband, Kevin Redl, and I went on a five-week camping expedition through southeastern Africa. We stopped at a campsite near the village of Kande, on the seemingly endless shore of Lake Malawi. With our guide, Fraidom Savimba, our group walked a dirt trail to Kande Village. He >



Malawi, a farming country in south-eastern Africa, hugs the 500-kilometre-long shoreline of Lake Malawi. Top: Carrying loads. Middle: Dawn at Nkhotakota Safari Lodge. Left: Every village has a bottle shop.



Colleen (top left) visits Kondwani's mother Hilda Chirwa (right) and her friend Mary. Typical southeastern African scenes include a dusty village, drought-thinned Victoria Falls, and a busy laden mother and a busy market.



showed us the hospital where the only doctor performed caesareans by kerosene lantern.
Our sandals scuffed the hard dirt floor in the one-room school with a not-so-black blackboard and no desks. The school was empty that day. Everyone was at the latest funeral. The poverty felt insurmountable. At the tiny post office, a young girl approached Kevin and asked him for his address.



Her letter arrives that fall. I reply to 11-year-old Kondwani Chirwa, sending coloured pencils, pens, paper and a photo of Kevin and myself.

May 2002: "It is like a dream having one from you. How happy I am to receive a letter from you...funny you wrote last year in November and got me today...my mommy is 34 years of age and is very happy for our friendship. I love to be writing to you."

I send her a disposable camera with enough money for its return to Canada. Later, I send her the photos I've developed, keeping duplicates for our album. One picture shows her washing clothes in a blue bucket. I tucked them next to the photos of

heaping restaurant dishes and well-dressed friends at my 42nd birthday party.

I start to notice news stories about Malawi. There is a drought. Maize, the food staple, is becoming more expensive. People are dying. I learn that life expectancy is around 40 years. I am struck by the fact that I would likely be dead by now if I'd been born there.

January 2003: "I am not losing hope. God is great," writes Kondwani. She tells me she has passed her exams and wants to go to secondary school, but "Mom said that she can't afford to pay me [sic] school fees compared to her salary."

I do some research. Malawi's situation will get better if girls are educated. The birth rate will fall, infant deaths and disease will diminish, economies and hygiene will improve, and equality will gain ground. Although Malawi offers children free nursery and primary school, secondary school must be paid for.

Boarding schools are key. If girls stay at home and attend day school, they invariably end up helping with the endless duties of running a home, or become mothers as well. The median age for a Malawian woman's first birth is 19 years old. On average she will have six children. But at boarding school, girls can focus on their education.

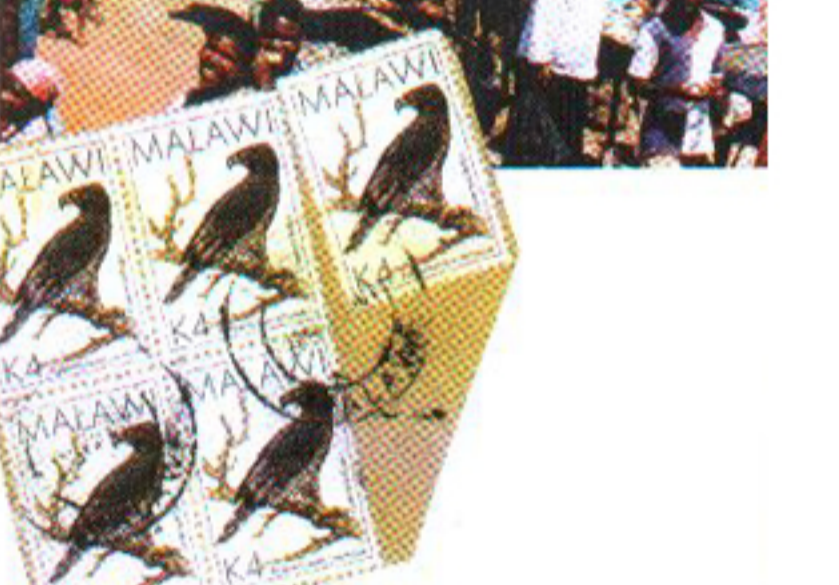
We write to offer help with school. Kondwani's mother, Hilda, finds a good boarding school about an hour-and-a-half north of their home. Sending money is complicated when banks insist on street addresses in a country with dirt roads and unnumbered houses. But each term, her school eventually receives the \$200 US we send.

July 2004: I receive my first e-mail from Kondwani's mom. She has occasional access to the Internet at her workplace, a church where she makes about \$50 per month. Part of a later e-mail reads, "You give her future." Her words sit full and heavy somewhere deep in my chest.

February 2006: Hilda ends her e-mail, "How is Kelvin [sic] and your family? This year we are facing famine, due to shortage of rainfall. People are dying with hunger." I trace a finger around Kondwani's photo on my fridge full of food. Have I ever truly been hungry? I try not to feel helpless at the enormity of the crisis. I comfort myself with the knowledge that at least Kondwani will be fed at school.

October 2007: With Kondwani's graduation imminent, Kevin and I decide that I should travel to Malawi to see her. My girlfriend Karen Judd comes with me. I want to finally meet this young woman and her mother.

We arrive amid the latest scandal. The Form 4 exams, which Kondwani is to write, have been leaked. Exams may be declared void, leaving graduates unable to apply for jobs or colleges >



What you can do
Both of these organizations encourage pen-pal relationships, while directing your donations to help girls in their communities. Plan Canada (planCanada.ca) builds schools and libraries and trains health workers. SOS Children's Villages (soschildrensvillages.ca) gives orphans homes and an education.



until the government decides whether rewrites are required. Malawi cannot afford this delay. The country desperately needs newly graduated teachers. There are already too many teaching positions filled with uneducated volunteers. According to the government's figures of 60 students per classroom, the country has a shortage of 15,000 teachers. I later discover most classes actually contain more than one hundred students.

Driving from the capital city of Lilongwe to Kondwani's school, the road shimmers in the heat. It is full. Not with cars, like the one being driven by our 26-year-old driver Jonathan Ng'oma, but with people. Endless streams of people.

Women walk with five-gallon pails of water balanced on their heads and babies snuggled onto their backs in colourful cottons. Men pedal bicycles stacked with ridiculous loads of firewood. One man has cleverly strapped a yell-yellow child's chair onto his back rack. Its four shiny plastic straddle the rear tire.

The river of people never stops. Leaving houses constructed of homemade bricks with roofs of golden grass, villagers wend along worn paths that resemble game trails. Dusty stands made of found boards display tiny piles of potatoes or tomatoes for sale. The sharp smell of smoke is everywhere, as farmers burn their fields in preparation for the next crop.

We enter the schoolyard through a guarded gate. The shards of glass embedded on top of the compound walls send sparks of light onto the soldiers' guns. Form 4 exams are going ahead while the government decides what to do.

A young teen approaches me, holding herself tightly. Her large dark eyes slide sideways and down to her feet. I can barely hear her question, "Are you Colleen?"

I grin. "Kondwani?" I try to reconcile this young teen with the photos of the little girl in my album.

Together we visit the headmaster, Mr. Zondiwe Nkhata. His desk and every available surface overflow with papers. He gestures at Kondwani, "I haven't had time to talk to this young girl about her future. She is bright. She will likely pass but she must be assisted in the proper direction."

The curtains blow into the room, scattering papers. He smooths down the thin curtain fabric and turns to say, "Kondwani, take some chairs outside. Listen to what these people tell you to do with your future."

Our driver Jonathan, Karen and I sit with 17-year-old Kondwani under a jacaranda's lavender flowers. Her knuckles jammed in her mouth, she mumbles answers, eyes darting like a cornered cat.

"We visited your family yesterday. Your mom told us you want to be a nurse?" I lean in to hear her answer.

"No," Kondwani shakes her head. "I want to be a lawyer." Jonathan speaks. "Dreams are fine, but your mom is the only wage earner in a household of nine. It is your obligation to help



There are few cars in Malawi; there people either walk or take a taxi bicycle. Mass-produced plastic shoes from China fit slender budgets.

your family. In two years you can be a nurse or teacher. You must pick one. You must not get pregnant like your sister. There are to be no blunders." I am amazed at this young man's bluntness with a girl he has just met.

I'm also very grateful. His willingness to speak to the heart of things is a godsend. With everyone we've encountered, our white privilege, and the resulting power that is conferred upon us, comes in the door long before we do, effectively silencing everyone in the room. As during our visit with Hilda and her family in the night before, these conversations feel like we're conducting an interrogation. But we have spent days driving with this independent young man, and we have managed to become friends. He has appointed himself as our go-between.

He tries again. "I wanted to be a doctor. I could not afford that dream. Instead I drive tourists and help pay for my sister to go to nursing school. It's what we must do."

Earlier, Jonathan had told Karen and me that his government is fast-tracking nurse- and teacher-training to help fill the extreme shortages. Education for lawyers and doctors takes much longer, resulting in the double cost of extra tuition and a longer time without work.

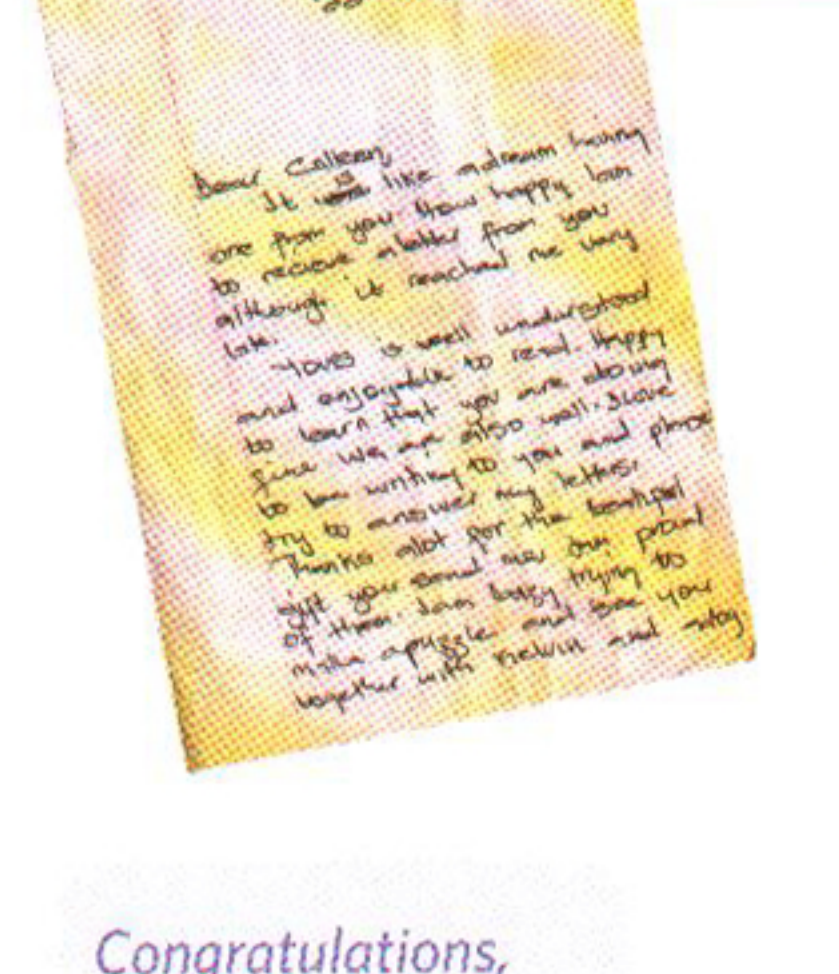
Kondwani hangs onto the arms of her chair. I smell her sharp sweat. Desperate to relieve the tension, I lean toward Kondwani and ask, "Can Karen and I see where you sleep?" Kondwani leads us past brick buildings housing 800 students. Fifteen sets of bunk beds fill her small dorm. It smells of flesh, heat and earth. Clothes hang from the rafters. I look for bureaus or closets, and then realize, they aren't necessary. Kondwani is smiling now as her friends shout and tease her about her *mzungu* visitors. She jumps up to her bunk and, at their urging, poses for my photo - just a teenage girl having fun with her friends.

She stands tall. Her compact body looks strong; she is a gorgeous girl with beautiful eyes and big dreams - and so little chance of any of them being realized.

I want to push back the mortality rate with one hand and pull her forward with the other. I want her to speak to me, really speak to me, instead of fearing me. I want her to fight to become a confident and strong young woman. I want to be a real friend to Kondwani, not a white woman whose hotel rooms for two nights cost more than her mother makes in eight months. I don't want her secondary education to grant her just the possibility of a job and the chance to be just another wage-earner.

I want her to realize her dreams. But it doesn't matter what I want. These things are not within my power. What I can do is to be a witness to her life and to continue to support her financially when she decides what she wants or, more correctly, what she can afford to want.

I take her picture. Dreams, if you're growing up in Malawi, are for later. hm



Congratulations, Graduate
A year after Colleen's visit, Kondwani rewrote and passed all her exams. In April 2008 Colleen sent fees for a 18-month rural development officer training program; Kondwani will help farmers and villagers to make a better life.