

# THE QUEEN OF KATWE

A Story of  
Life, Chess, and  
One Extraordinary  
Girl's Rise from  
an African Slum

Tim Crothers

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*To Atticus and Sawyer,  
the children of Uganda and beyond*

# Contents

Prologue	1
Opening	7
Chapter 1: Land of the Frogs	9
Chapter 2: Katende	25
Chapter 3: Pioneers	55
Chapter 4: Resurrection	69
Chapter 5: Teach Her What You Know	83
Chapter 6: Mzungu	97
Middlegame	117
Chapter 7: Like a Boy, But Not a Boy	119
Chapter 8: Heaven	141
Chapter 9: The Other Side	155
Endgame	177
Chapter 10: Hurdles	179
Chapter 11: Dreams	213
Acknowledgments	230

## Prologue

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

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

19th sept. 2010

Dear mum,

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

## Prologue

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

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

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

*Then they gave us rooms.*

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

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



## Prologue

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

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

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

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



## Prologue

21st sept. 2010

Dear mum,

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

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

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

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

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

## Prologue

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

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

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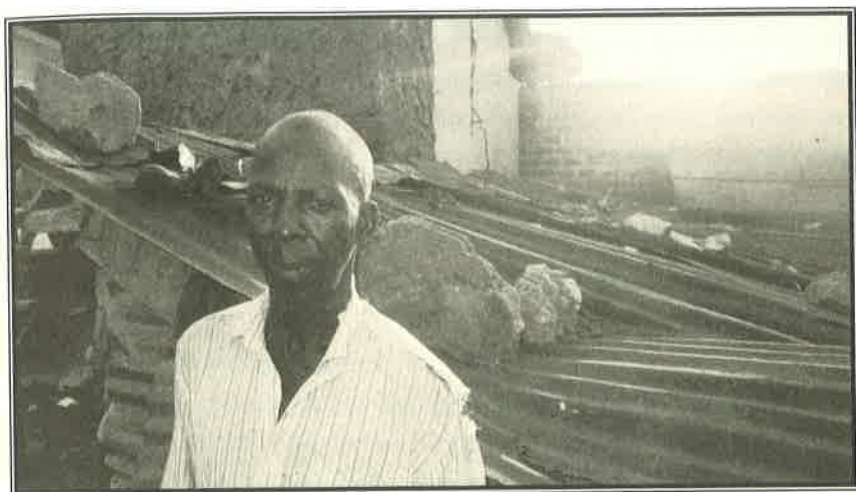
# Opening

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## Chapter 1

### Land of the Frogs



Hakim Ssewaya, who has lived 40 years in Katwe, stands in front of his shack. The structure fills with raw sewage during the slum's frequent floods.

She had no other choice. Nakito Jamidah had borne four children out of wedlock, including twins who died during childbirth, and she was no longer welcome at her parents' home in the tiny Ugandan village of Namilyango. Jamidah was working as a cook at the same Lugala Primary School where she'd dropped out a decade earlier at age eight, but she still could not afford to support her two surviving children, who lived with their grandparents. The father of Jamidah's children, who maintained relationships with several other women, was a former soldier and a violent drunk who often physically abused Jamidah until she finally left him. Then one day he came to the Lugala School in a drunken rage and kicked a saucepan full of scalding porridge over Jamidah, causing her severe burns. Jamidah feared for her life. She had to go.

So she came to the city.

When Jamidah arrived in Kampala, the sprawling, congested, dusty capital city, in 1971, Uganda was a mess and it was about to get a lot messier. The small East African nation, bordered by Kenya to the east, Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west and Tanzania, Rwanda, and Lake Victoria to the south, was nine years removed from its independence from Great Britain, and the former colony was falling victim to the same growing pains as nearly all of its fledgling African brethren. The colonial map of Africa had been drawn haphazardly, as if by children with crayons. Uganda's four primary tribes, who shared no culture, language, or custom, but had previously been bonded by a common colonial enemy, could no longer live in harmony inside the artificial borders. Uganda languished in a constant state of civil war.

The story of postcolonial Ugandan politics is that of a lieutenant

## The Queen of Katwe

who betrays his general. In the same year that Jamidah arrived in Kampala, Idi Amin, the commander of Uganda's army, deposed Uganda's president, Milton Obote, in a coup d'état. Amin would become the most malevolent dictator in African history.

A primary school dropout and former national boxing champion, Amin had joined the colonial army's King's African Rifles in 1946 as an assistant cook before enlisting in the infantry and climbing through the ranks, proving his desire to triumph at any moral cost during brutal military campaigns in Kenya and Somalia. Immediately after the coup d'état, Amin promised free elections. They never occurred. One week after the coup, Amin declared himself his nation's president and eventually bestowed upon himself the title "His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular." Amin also famously referred to himself as the "Lord of All the Beasts on the Earth and Fishes of the Sea."

Amin was known to order white Ugandans to carry him on a throne and kneel down before him as news photographers captured the scene for the outside world to see. He praised Hitler's treatment of the Jews, threatened war against Israel, insulted other world leaders, and thumbed his nose at Uganda's former colonial overseers by offering to become King of Scotland and lead the Scots to their rightful independence from England. He allied with Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and courted arms from the Soviet Union. Amin ruled through terror, his regime responsible for killing its political and ethnic enemies, both real and imagined, in a horrific slaughter that took the lives of an estimated 500,000 Ugandans. Amin was even rumored to be a cannibal who consumed the organs of his victims.

Amin's eight-year reign would devastate Uganda's economy. In 1972 Amin exiled tens of thousands of immigrant Indian merchants upon which the country's financial infrastructure depended and handed their shops over to his soldiers who sold size 17 shirts for 17 Ugandan shillings because they didn't know any better. Having banished its business

## Land of the Frogs

class, the country's economy unraveled, leaving half of the population languishing below the international poverty line. Amin nationalized the country's land, evicting Ugandan villagers from their ancestral farms and prompting other tribes to revolt against Amin and his Kakwa tribe. People flooded into Kampala seeking any kind of security. Upon their arrival, many were shooed away to a slum called Katwe where nobody else wanted to be.

Jamidah and two of her sons, Hakim Ssewaya and Moses Sebuwufu (last names in Uganda are drawn from the father's clan), rented a tiny room in Katwe near a petrol station where Jamidah sold alcohol from a stall near the gas pumps. When she began falling behind on the rent and feared eviction, one of her customers told her about an old man down the hill in the swamp who was considering selling inexpensive plots of land. "As much as my mother wanted to come and meet this man," Hakim says, "she was fearing the area because it was wild bush and no one risked going there."

Eventually Jamidah arranged to meet the man, Qasim, instead along Nasser Road, where he was working splicing newspapers into cuttings that were compacted into burlap sacks to form mattresses. Qasim was a Tanzanian who told Jamidah that he'd once worked as a servant for the Kabaka, the king of the region of Buganda and its Baganda tribe, whose ancestral lands comprised Kampala and much of its surrounding area in southern Uganda, and from which the nation takes its name. Qasim explained to Jamidah that he had been working in the Kabaka's palace up high on the hill during the 1960s, when one of the Kabaka's chiefs offered this land to him, thinking it was worthless because any member of the Baganda possessed too much pride to ever sleep in a swamp.

Jamidah agreed to meet with Qasim again, this time on his land, where they surveyed a small spit of dirt, and in 1971 Jamidah became the first person ever to purchase a piece of the Katwe lowlands. She bought her plot for 1.2 cents, but she could only afford a down payment of .8 cents. Jamidah would work for months to pay off the balance.

Katwe was a bush area of about four square kilometers filled with