

## The Child in the Photograph

'FROM AFRICA IS HOW they introduce me,' Luanda tells her mother on her first trunk-call home. 'Isn't it funny, Ma? Just *from Africa*. Can you believe...?'

A crackle zaps her mother's reply.

After the Angolan port-city, Luanda tells her fellow Masters students in Development. Yes, that's my name. But Angola's not my country. See if you can guess my country. For starters, it's landlocked and dry and farther south than the Sahara. Getting warmer? Luanda laughs. My country also has diamonds. That's a dead giveaway. What d'you call yourselves, *Development* students? My country has loads of diamonds.

'You tell them,' her mother says down a suddenly clear phone line. 'Your country's brightest diamond. Easily. Brighter than any star.'

Luanda shuts her eyes. Her mother's voice is as close as if she were right here beside her in the college phone booth. She pictures her there in the living-room at home, her big thighs spread across the fake-leather easy-chair beside the TV. She sees the black plastic mouthpiece wedged between her cheek and her shoulder in that clever way of hers, like the PA she is. She sees her red-painted fingernails twisting around the black telephone cord.

On the wall across from her mother are her own framed certificates. Luanda pictures them clearly: the certificates arranged on the wall in two columns, her university medals and honours and essay prizes, the rungs of the long ladder she has climbed to get to this ancient stone college with its single shabby telephone booth and muddy McDonald's wrappings thick on the floor. She sees the gold-embossed lettering on the certificates catch the horizontal light of the setting sun.

'Nothing short of a fancy sundial,' her mother's boyfriend Pa once mock-scolded. 'Look, the letters even cast a shadow.'

'Proud of her,' her mother staunchly said.

A pink-and-white hand beats against the glass of the phone-booth door. The glass is cloudy with condensation. Luanda can't see the body behind the hand.

'Can hardly believe it, being here,' she yells over another squall of static. 'The other students can't believe it either. I mean, *me* being *here*. When I walk into a room, they stop talking, they all stare.'

'So you're educating them. No matter how ancient and clever, they have something to learn.'

Luanda laughs at her mother's joke, if it was a joke. She laughs the open-mouthed cawing laugh that she shares with her mother. *Ha-ha-ha* it goes, rasping to a close. Some days even Nana can't tell their laughs apart.

'I must go, Ma.'

'Next time Nana will come say hello. Sorry, Lu. She was here but she's run off.'

The swallow Luanda now makes hurts her chest. The hand again slaps the door.

Her mother is calling bye, over and over again. Bye, Luanda echoes her, bye. Then she presses the silver *Next Call* button and her mother's voice cuts out. She stands holding the receiver in her hand, the dial-tone purring.

She rubs the condensation on the glass with her sleeve. Whoever was out there has given up. The foyer is empty. She scrapes off the McDonald's wrapping sticking to her shoe and takes the stairs up to her room two at a time, breathing hard with relief, almost laughing, as if she has escaped something, has got through an obstacle course without injury.

Luanda relies on her laugh in the days ahead, at the hundred ice-breaker parties and inductions she lists in beautiful schoolgirl cursive in her diary. She laughs and watches her laugh's effect on people, how it makes them turn towards her and smile. Laughing, she slides across thickly carpeted rooms between shuffling clusters of guests like a rain droplet down a windscreen, laughing when they stumble on her name, laughing when they ask about her course and then forget and ask again, laughing, laughing, till the other students start calling her Laughing Luanda. Laughing, she asks them to stop.

She wanders around the old university town, *her* university town, believe it or not, but now she doesn't laugh. A dream is beyond laughter and all this is beyond even a dream, it's beyond her imagination. Not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up this perfect green grass in the quadrangles or the spreading trees like pictures or the all-surrounding stone: the stone walls, stone flags, the Gothic stone arch of her bedroom window looking like it was stamped out with a cookie cutter, the stone steps up to her room worn away by the numberless

footsteps of numberless students. 'I mean, *stone*, Ma, *cut* stone, *worn* stone, like it's melting,' she said on the phone and still couldn't quite believe it. She could not have dreamed up the pure coldness that rises from the stone and instantly chills her hand when she touches it. That anything could be so cold! She could not have imagined the cold dark shadows that wait in the corners of the stone and never shift. Even at noon they don't shrink away.

Her university before this one, where she received the trophies and certificates on her mother's wall, is no more than a cluster of single-storey prefab blocks built on the surrounding red sand. On the side of each building a single huge air-conditioning unit sticks out like an ear-stud. The dusty area in front of the admin buildings is called the English garden though the only plants that grow there are cactuses. The English garden! Looking around at the green grass, the spreading oaks, Luanda wants to laugh, remembering, but catches herself in time and feels ashamed.

She takes pictures of her stone window arch with the Polaroid camera her family gave her at the airport—Ma, Pa, Gogo, Nana, everyone. She photographs her window first from the inside, from several angles, then from the street, looking up. These are the first photographs she takes here at her new university.

She sends the photos home folded inside a long letter about the ancient stone and her new classmates, their difficult-to-understand English, the day-in day-out black clothing that they wear like a uniform. She tells them that the only place to get her hair done is out of town, two bus rides away, close to the industrial area. She writes about the café the students all visit after class, Luigi's, how everyone helps her with her coffee order, each shouting louder than the last. Latte, macchiato, espresso, some of the new words for coffee she has never seen

let alone said before. Up to now she had only ever tasted Ricoffy Instant. She tells them about her dissertation topic. The question of whether the water that flows over your land belongs to you. Especially when that land is dry. The whole thing sounds funny over here where it rains every day.

Should she be *more* amazed? she asks them all in closing. Her way is to think about the future and the next generation, not the past. But these walls and pillars and the solid stuff inside the walls—the paintings, great oak tables, massive card catalogues—these things have stood here just like they do today for hundreds of years. They will also go on standing just like they do for more hundreds of years.

Do you see what I'm saying, Ma, Pa, Gogo? They were the future then and somehow, though they are so old, they are still the future now.

On top of the bookcase in her bedroom with its cold stone walls she places two framed photographs. Ma and her Tata on their wedding day: Ma in a ridiculous short tulle veil, Tata already bowed and sick. And a studio portrait, herself in her graduation gear at the university with the cactuses. Into a corner of the wedding photograph she wedges a passport-sized photograph of a laughing toothless child in a red dress.

'My little sister, Nana,' Luanda tells her Development classmates when they come to her room to drink tea. She goes to their bedrooms to drink tea also. Sometimes she says more. 'My little sister, Nana, trying to grow some teeth,' she tells Archie, an angular English boy who did *something in Africa* on his gap year. 'See, we have milk teeth in Africa too.'

Then, laughing, she changes the subject. 'Now, seriously, how do you manage to cope with the cold in this country? Is it M and S underwear?' And she laughs again.

She attends a gala party to mark the college's eight-hundredth birthday. She stands beside the grand piano in the

corner, champagne flute in hand. Can you believe it, *that* many centuries old? she imagines telling her mother on the phone.

This time people for some reason come over to her. A college fellow touches his champagne flute to hers and asks how Development is going. Laughter bursts from her mouth, she can't help it. She grips the skinny forearm of his wife standing beside him and, without spilling her glass, whispers into her clip-on earring, 'Yes, I'd prefer a cup of tea, too.'

The College President invites Luanda to High Table. She wears a blue-and-white waxed cotton dress that Ma's dressmaker made. The cold falls from the stone walls in slabs and lies against her skin. She wishes she had brought a woollen scarf, a shawl, a blanket. Opposite, the President's wife sits with a billowing cream bow at her throat looking like the Prime Minister herself.

A Very Big Man once in Government, our College President, she begins a fresh letter to her family. We ate a five-course meal on a stage and I sat beside him. I helped him with his wine glass because his hands shake. His wife motioned me using just her chin.

But Luanda doesn't write about the dinners in London that follow. There are too many—the dinners with the College President and his wife and people they call the Great and the Good in huge hotels with heavy glass doors that bellhops in uniform open silently as they approach. Luanda sweeps in between the two of them, the President and his wife, taller than them both, even without her head-wrap. Under her waxed cotton dresses she wears polo-neck jumpers and nylon spencers, sometimes even long-johns, like on freezing July nights at home.

'Never knew any country could have enough Big people to produce a whole group called Great and Good,' she tells her fellow guests over canapés and wonders why they laugh, including the College President. Which bit of what she said was funny?

She doesn't write that some evenings she goes to London with just the College President. Lady Sarah tires easily, he says. The trip to London is too tiring for her. You can help him with his wine glass, Lady Sarah says.

Luanda also doesn't write that one afternoon in the first-class railway carriage on the way back from London the College President asked to touch her hair. She doesn't write that she let him, which is to say, she didn't want to say no, she didn't like to. She doesn't write that, when he touched her hair, he called her Africa's diamond—like her mother, but differently, too.

She doesn't write that the very next day she paid the College President's wife a visit. It was the middle of the afternoon so Lady Sarah made Earl Grey tea and they ate the shortbread biscuits that she had brought along.

Drinking tea that afternoon, Luanda tells Lady Sarah about the English garden full of cactuses at her old university. She describes the dressmaker's tiny shop in the main street of their middle-sized town, which is in fact the country's capital. This is the shop where the waxed cotton dresses that Lady Sarah has said she likes are made and also the fancy head-wraps in matching cottons for people who enjoy making a bold entrance 'like you know I do'.

'I want to order a couple more head-wraps from home,' Luanda says, finishing her biscuit and putting her hand against the side of her head. 'I like to wear my hair uncovered like this, natural, but lately I've had second thoughts. Maybe I should get a weave or some braids. The thing is, you wouldn't believe how the Great and the Good like to touch my hair, Lady Sarah. You wouldn't believe how many. They lean across and give it a feel, a pinch, you know, how people do with pregnant ladies, making free with their stomachs.'

The President's wife suddenly blushes, and Luanda looks out of the window. She looks out of the window a long time.

She wants Lady Sarah to reassure herself that she, Luanda, has not seen her blush.

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By November Luanda is exhausted. 'Whacked out', she tells the College porters, laughing. 'You guys taught me the word. I'm just whacked out. Development is tough work.'

She presents a paper to the Masters class on the insensitivity of inequality coefficients as a measure of water scarcity in African countries with low annual rainfall. It's tiring just to outline the topic. She stays up all night to finish the thing and discovers how long the winter darkness really lasts.

At the end of the presentation, her classmates clap and her tutor smiles. He asks her to give him a copy of the paper. There are one or two aspects he'd like to reflect upon further.

'Never thought about it enough, Luanda,' her friend Archie says. 'The equations don't pick up on a basic need like water. Also, I wanted to ask, were you maybe thinking of coming along to the pub this evening? We've missed you lately.'

She nods yes, but doesn't show up.

'Fell asleep over my pot noodle,' she tells Archie in class the next day.

She also misses the President's All Saints party. *I'm so sorry*, she writes on the embossed college notepaper the porters sell her, 5p a page, her pen sinking into the thick paper like a foot into a mattress. *I fell asleep in the library. I won't let it happen again.*

'Your family called,' George the porter on duty tells her. 'Yes, all the way from Africa. They asked you to call them. They say they haven't had a letter in ages.'

'But I don't have enough pound coins saved up right now to call Africa,' Luanda says, laughing a little. 'Plus the letter I've written is so fat it'll take a fortune to send.'

Archie comes over to her room for a visit. He finds her sitting up against the side of her bed in a plush pink dressing gown apparently doing nothing.

'Mind if I come in, Lu?' he says, pushing open the door. 'I've brought some brandy. Duty-free, Nairobi airport. It'll make a nice nightcap.'

'Hardly as though I need help with sleeping, Archie,' Luanda says, yawning energetically. She waves at the kettle on the window sill. 'You go ahead.'

He switches on the kettle, puts a teabag in a mug, adds brandy. He is missing something—yes, that's it, the laugh that follows most of what she says.

He comes to sit beside her on the floor, his back against the mattress, the mug of hot tea and brandy between his feet.

'So what're you up to tonight, Lu?'

'Not much. Just sitting and thinking, you know, thinking and not thinking...'

'Penny for them, as we say?'

She lays her arm on the edge of the bed and props her head on her arm.

'Not sure I can put it into words, Archie. It's late and I'm sleepy. I'm incredibly sleepy.'

Archie looks round the room so like his own, the fatty Blu Tack marks on the walls, the desk and lamp and bookcase, the row of library books, the cards and photographs on the top shelf of the bookcase.

'Lu, there's something different, you've changed your photographs.'

She raises her head for a second, pillows her cheek back on her arm. Her Omega alarm-clock ticks in its propped-open case on the floor beside the bed.

'The other day I was tidying,' she eventually says. 'I tidied all the invitations away and I put the little photograph back

in my travel album. It was unframed. I didn't want it to get spoiled.'

'The one of your sister.'

'Yes, Nana. My sister.'

Archie edges a little closer, close enough for his shoulder to touch the tips of her fingers. He swallows the last of his tea-and-brandy. Her eyes are suddenly fixed on him.

'You could let me hold you a bit, Lu,' he says and moves closer again. 'As you're so tired. We could lie on the bed and I could just hold you, if you didn't mind. I could tell you about the summer I planted trees in the Highlands. How close the sky looked.'

He waits.

'Lu,' he whispers and puts his hand lightly against her cheek. 'If you'd let me, I'd like to get to know you better. I'd like to very much.'

The free hand lying in her lap comes up quite suddenly and pushes his hand away.

He shuffles back and, when she still says nothing, gets up awkwardly. His left leg has gone to sleep.

'Sorry, Lu, sorry, I didn't mean... I'm really sorry. Look, you know I like to see you. You know I'm always happy to see you.'

'Archie, please just get out.' Her voice is back in the room. Moisture shines in the grooves beneath her lower eyelids.

'Don't come in like that again,' she says as he pulls the door open. 'My unlocked door isn't an invitation. I leave it unlocked so I don't feel boxed in. *Sealed in a stone-cold tomb*—remember the Christmas carol.' She almost laughs.

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Luanda now comes to classes late. She slips into the seats at the back and spends her time cross-hatching shapes in her notebook. To Archie she says hello just the same as before.

Then she's not in class at all.

Lu must be in the library, the others say, she's a great one for working round the clock. Archie remembers the thing she said about the Christmas carol and checks the library. She's not there.

Perhaps she uses another library, the others say. Ask someone in her college, the porters are her friends. And Christmas is coming. Luanda is surely joining in somewhere, getting her essays in early. Didn't she say she'd try to make it over to Europe—Switzerland, she said? Didn't she want to see some snow?

After dinner, Archie takes a walk past her college. He checks her window. The light is on. There are shadows moving across the ceiling.

The next day he sees the books that were in her bedroom the night he visited on the book-returns trolley in the library. He takes them out himself, leafs through each one. There might be a note, something to tell him what's up. He finds an old train ticket dated from before the summer, before Lu ever arrived in England.

On the final Monday of term, a frosty day, he writes her a Christmas card, a plain seasonal greeting, English as it comes. He puts her name at the top and *Archie* at the bottom. Then he scrawls, *Look forward to seeing you back next term.*

The line is barely legible so she can easily ignore it.

Should he have said *back*? he asks himself, sliding the card into the envelope. He could better have left it out.

He walks the card round to her college. The porter watches him slide it into her mailbox.

'No telling when she'll pick that up,' the porter says darkly. 'In and out of here at all hours, she is.'

Archie sees the business card tucked into the metal name bracket below the mailbox.

*Kids' Hair Workshop*, the card says. *Weaves, Cornrows, Braids. Face-painting While-U-Wait. Horshill Community Centre. Once a week only. Don't miss out!*

'She's off to Switzerland, I think? She wanted to see some snow.'

'Like I said, there's no telling with Lu. No telling what's up from one minute to the next. Doing stuff with kids. Collecting toys to send to Africa. It's all for development, she says.'

'Yes,' Archie says, feeling suddenly tired. 'We're all studying Development as hard as we can.'

Luanda's reply to his card arrives at his college within hours, a Christmas card showing a red robin standing on a patch of blue snow. There is nothing written on either side of the gold *Merry Christmas*. On the facing page are two scrawled lines.

*I've found a park outside of town. It has a duck pond, a putting range, the works. Let's do a Christmas outing. Tomorrow 2pm.*

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They meet at the bus-stop beside the coffee shop in a dense drizzle. Luanda presents her cheek for a kiss and Archie presses his lips to her skin. She is icy cold. Silver droplets shine like glitter in her hair.

Their bus passes ten or more stops. Then Luanda clears a round hole in the fogged-up window and elbows him.

She leads him down a long suburban street, past a small roundabout, into a narrower street. The drizzle has faded away. They reach a green metal boom and a grassy car-park, a shuttered ice-cream hut.

'See,' Luanda says with satisfaction as they walk past the hut. 'Park all around, far as your eyes can see, park, park and more park, flat as flat. Flat, straight avenue, big flat duck pond.'

Not a single piece of old stone in sight.'

Archie follows her along a muddy path beyond the putting green to the pond.

A squashed fruit-juice carton floats on the surface of the pond amongst the dead leaves and some crumpled sheets of paper. The paper is silver Christmas wrap. A straw is stuck in the carton like an antenna. There are no ducks to be seen. They sit down at opposite ends of the metal bench.

'I come here quite often,' Luanda says after a bit. 'The first time, there was a granny with a toddler. They were feeding the ducks bread, sliced bread, I remember. *Developed* bread.' She begins to laugh, then coughs. 'There were a lot of ducks here that day, brown ducks. I looked at the ducks, the toddler and the gran. I looked and looked and then I cried, I couldn't help it.'

'You cried?'

'Yes, I cried, but not that they'd notice. See, it was so beautiful, so peaceful, the pond, the ducks. I thought how much I'd like to take Nana to this park. This would be the first duck pond she'd ever seen. It's the first duck pond I've ever seen. At home, we have a park in town, but it's sandy. There's no grass. There's a meerkat enclosure and beside it a vendor sells samosas from an ice-cream cart. There's a shade cover over the viewing area that the Australian embassy donated. We sometimes take Nana there. We like to watch the meerkats. People feed them samosas though they shouldn't.'

She folds her arms tight across her chest. Her breathing is odd, as if she's swallowing hiccups.

'I've been mistaken, Archie,' she suddenly blurts. 'I thought I could start a life here, away from them all, on my own. I thought I could fulfil my dream, study Development where everyone said Development began. I thought I could, but...'

'But...?' says Archie.

'But,' says Luanda. 'But.'

The light begins to fade. They walk back to the green boom, the shuttered ice-cream hut.

'You go on ahead,' Luanda leans against the side of hut. 'I'll stay here a bit longer. I'll make my own way back.'

She holds out her hand. Her grip is fierce. She holds Archie's hand for a long time before she steps away.

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The college tonight is quiet. In the front quad the Christmas tree is a tall dark spire. The porters have forgotten to switch on its lights.

Luanda's room is filled with a soft golden glow. She has turned off the overhead bulb and thrown a scarf over her desk lamp. She pulls two sheets of embossed college notepaper from her desk drawer.

*Dear Archie, she writes in her beautiful cursive, I'm sorry not to say goodbye in person. I love so much about being here and even about Development (ha-ha) but I have decided to suspend my studies. I miss my family too much and I don't want to carry on, at least for now.*

To the President's wife she writes the same message, minus the (ha-ha).

*Then she continues, I miss Nana especially. I think it is too much for my mother to look after her on her own. Ma has already raised her kids and Nana is not her job to look after. She's my job, my daughter. I wanted to let you know. As she gets older I will try to make it up to everyone. Most of all, I will try to make it up to her.*

She reads through both letters and adds *Happy New Year!* to the end of each, then slides the sheets of notepaper into their matching embossed envelopes.

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At the end of spring term Archie and the other Development students have coffee in Luigi's café off the High Street. They have kept on coming since the beginning of the course. These days Luigi gives them double espressos for the price of a single.

They sit at their table in the corner under the noticeboard where customers pin up their business cards. Luigi insists that every customer leaves a card. Everyone has something to sell, he says, even you students. Maybe you do typing, maybe you do haircutting. Whatever you do, make a card, let the world know.

'Sitting here I can't help thinking about Lu,' Archie says. 'Remember Luanda? How she learned to say all the words for coffee.' He notices how good it feels to say her name. 'She virtually lived in here some days.'

'Did she ever send news?' someone asks.

'No, she didn't,' Archie says.

He is looking at the noticeboard at the same moment that he speaks. It is like a conjuring trick. It is as if her name calls up something, as if the writing on the noticeboard makes him see what he might otherwise have missed. As he speaks he reads the half-familiar words on the business card. *Kids' Hair Workshop*. He knows he has read that card somewhere before.

Now he notices the Polaroid photo stuck directly beneath the business card. The Polaroid colours are fresh and bright. In the photo a young woman in a cotton print dress is holding hands with a child in a smaller version of the same dress. It is unmistakably Luanda. Luanda and the child are both wearing cross-braids. They point at each other's cross-braids. They are both laughing. The child's front teeth are growing in.

*Weaves, Cornrows, Braids*, Archie reads again. *Don't miss out!*

Luigi puts down their espressos and follows the line of Archie's stare.



*To the Volcano*

'Arrived last week,' he says. 'Our Luanda, she keeps in touch. How we miss her. But I'm so happy she is happy. Isn't it good to see her laughing again at last?'