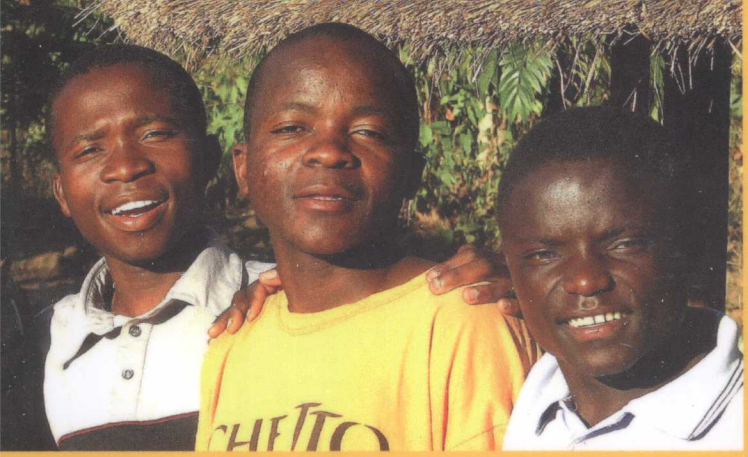

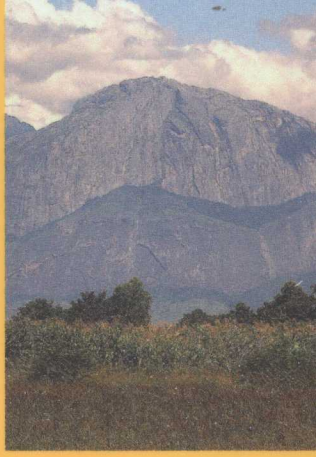

MICHAEL L. BUCKLER

FROM MICROSOFT TO MALAWI

Learning on the Front Lines as a Peace Corps Volunteer

Buckler draws readers into a journey of discovery . . .
—**Ralph Nader**

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Michael L. Buckler

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I dedicate this book to the Boys:
Myson Jambo, Gift Chimimba and Alfred Piyo.

According to a Chinese proverb, "When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people."

May the proceeds from this book pay for the Boys to attend college in Malawi, so they can realize their dreams, just as I have.

Thank you, dear sons.

Your American Father

Dear Mike,

You are completing what will probably be one of the most difficult years of your life. Preparing for change is always difficult.... I wish I could give you a road map of what to do and how to act, but I cannot.... No one [can] give you simple answers to tell you what is right.

Mike, we are all humans. The world is not perfect.... Our job is not to condemn or correct others. We cannot set up rules for others.... Rules and laws are not the way for mature adults. No one can write rules that will make people good.

Love,

Dad

— Letter from Lew Buckler, Spring 1996

What do poor people in Malawi have to offer us? Most people think nothing. I disagree. I love the amalgam of sights, smells, voices, and cultures that make Malawi such a paradoxical place. Simultaneously uplifting and depressing, welcoming and foreboding, liberating and oppressive, cruel yet undeniably vivacious, occasionally commonsensical yet vexingly illogical, Malawi gets in your blood, inhabits your dreams, and dares you to be smitten by its charms. No matter where you go, it never leaves you.

I wasn't always this way. Before joining the frontlines of the war on global poverty, I grew up in small-town America and did everything expected of me — church choir, Little League, Boy Scouts, good grades, prestigious schools, top jobs, and holy matrimony. But something was wrong: I was living everyone else's American dream. So, I walked away, determined to fulfill my destiny, my way. I haven't looked back.

Peace Corps Malawi was my calling. Without running water or electricity, I slept in a dilapidated brick house on the outskirts of a rural village, devoting two years of my life to gritty introspection, personal enlightenment and international development. I spoke local languages, cooked on open fires, drank from a nearby well, bathed out of a bucket, and shit in a hole in the ground. I was white, famous, and celibate — well, mostly celibate.

I tried my best to help. I taught at an underserved school alongside Malawian colleagues. I opened my home and heart to three of my Malawian students, whom I now consider sons. I hobnobbed with crooked politicians and starry-eyed development workers – watching aid money well spent and grossly wasted. Every day brought a blank slate of astonishment and toil, as I labored from the grassroots in nowhere Africa.

Welcomed as a Western sage, I was humbled by the wisdom of the plainspoken and powerless. Whether international aid has improved their lives is a matter of heated debate, but no one is asking them. The dominant voices are wealthy donors, government officials and international economists, not the intended recipients living in places you've never seen or heard of. But they, too, have insights and opinions that need to be considered. Indeed, they have as much to teach us as we have to teach them.

This is what I learned.

I

CHIPMUNKS & LIONS

Have you ever wondered what someone was doing at a particular moment? If only you could tune your TV to a station showing that person going about daily life. Many of you want to follow my Peace Corps service this way (especially Mom and Dad), but my words alone must suffice to satisfy your curiosity and convey what you might see on the screen if you visited the Mike Channel.

— Letter Home, May 2007

Light seeps into the room from the cracked window, gingerly at first, and then more assertively with the rising sun. I cannot escape it, so I groggily rouse my aching body from bed, feeling the effects of yesterday's bicycle ride, lactic rust ringing in shredded, driftwood legs. With a moan and slow roll, I part the cracked drapes of mosquito netting canopied above and fantasize about turning back the clock, falling backwards onto my foam mattress and squeezing out a few extra minutes of sleep. Yet, I know there are rewards for standing and starting the day.

On a table just across the room are the ingredients of a familiar morning treat — hot water (kept overnight in a Thermos) and instant coffee. Together with a sprinkle of powdered milk, they form the ultimate morning elixir, instantly transforming me from grumpy zombie to enthused jitterbug. I mix the concoction, pausing to take a deep sniff of its chicory aroma. A year ago, I would have scoffed at the thought of drinking this crap, but now it's all I've got — a relationship of convenience, a dependency of desperation.

Unfortunately, this morning there is no time to savor the drinking experience. Immediately after the first sip, my stomach growls and churns like a meat grinder, and I scurry from my room, through the backdoor and into the yard. Coolly scrambling past neighbors and their livestock, nodding apologetically for not stopping to chat, I lunge inside the *chimbudzi,* a cramped, brick outhouse with a rectangular bull's-eye hole in the floor. Crisis averted, at least for now.

Thankfully, Alfred, Gift and Myson (the "Boys") miss the bathroom ruckus. My Malawian students and housemates, they rise quietly at 3 or 4 a.m. each morning to study in a nearby classroom under solar lighting. Gift is always the first to stir from the communal bed: a creaky reed mat and blanket unrolled across a cement floor. With a shake and a rebuke, he spurs the other two to rise and seize a harsh but precious opportunity to shine in school and escape the village.

As full-fledged members of the Buckler family, the Boys have a room in my standard-issue teacher house. Theirs is square like the other three: ten feet by ten feet. Yet, unlike my tidy den, organized with bookshelves and food containers, and swept daily to remove dust and ant colonies, theirs is a mess — a rat's den of papers, shoes, skin grease, trinkets, candies and exercise books, with school schedules, sepia 4x6 inch photographs, and inspirational quotes adorning the bare, whitewash walls.

School clothes, however, are sacred cows, set apart from the ordinary clutter. Each boy has one outfit to last the entire week: perfectly polished leather shoes are parked in rows on the floor like luxury cars; and draped above them, on the backs of chairs, are folded blue trousers and white shirts, showing the wear and tear of time and wash cycles in the river. No one is particularly fond of the uniform, but wearing anything else (except on Wednesday, the school's casual dress day) draws the ire of the Headmaster.

Eager for the school day to begin, the Boys return promptly at 6 a.m. to bathe and dress. Hearing their banter, I return from the chimbudzi to find them preparing for a special event. Today is a school variety show, a showcase of songs, dramas

and comedies performed by students, and as school leaders, the Boys will attend as organizers and entertainers. As I listen to their entries, I beam with pride, as a father should, at the depth of their talents. In addition to possessing strong minds, all three sing beautifully — like most Malawians, they seem to possess a gift for music.

* * * *

By Malawian standards, the Boys are not only my housemates, but my sons. Given that two years of celibacy is an insufferable grind, and Malawian women are gorgeous, I could have made a few rug rats of my own. But instead of impregnating a villager, and playing Russian roulette with the HIV virus, I simply invite three students to live with me. It's de facto adoption — village style.

Alfred, Gift and Myson are proven "good kids" between the ages of eighteen and twenty who deserve a helping hand. For each, living in my home means extra study time to prepare for the college entrance examination and the end of long, arduous commutes to and from school. Over several months of cohabitation, maybe I can do for them what I cannot do during forty-minute teaching blocks in the classroom for the hundreds of other underprivileged and deserving students. In short, it's an experiment.

And, to be clear, it isn't altruism or pity. Well, not entirely. I'm lonely and occupying an entire teacher house by myself seems wasteful. The late Paul Tsongas (U.S. Senator and 1992 Democratic Presidential Candidate) lived with students as a Peace Corps teacher in Ethiopia and later recounted it as one of the best decisions of his life (I'm sure it beat running for President). Based on my experience, I have to agree with Paul.

The Boys, friends since primary school, enthusiastically accepted the cohabitation invitation, dramatically enriching my life. Now, they make me laugh, cook my dinners, tidy the yard and common areas, and generally fill my house (if not life) with a lively, warm humanism. No longer am I living like an island castaway, eating and sleeping in solitary confinement, envious of my colleagues and their familial support structures. In short, I am finally "at home," and the feeling is mutual.

And each of my sons has amazing tales to tell. Gathering for meals, or just lounging around the house, we chronicle our lives. They learn too much about English slang and other peculiarities of America, about the skyscrapers and TV dinners, about the poverty in Appalachia and the opulence of Park Avenue, and about the truths and fictions of homosexuality and masturbation, both Malawian taboos. And I listen intently as they describe village gossip, becoming a trusted insider and learning that Malawian life is not an innocent Peanuts comic strip (as it first appeared to me) but a torrid, Jane Austen novel full of scandal, debauchery and mayhem.

Our relationship is like Alvin and the Chipmunks, a popular cartoon from my childhood. The basic plot, as I recall: precocious, charismatic Alvin leads Simon,

the bespectacled student, and Theodore, the caring, sensitive chipmunk, in and out of endless escapades, as their father shakes his head in dismay. My Malawian triumvirate is just as good-natured and rambunctious as the Chipmunks, bee-bopping through the fields of Africa, stirring up amusement and occasional trouble. And I, like the cartoon father, watch over them with disbelief and profound gratitude.

Alfred (a.k.a. Alvin) Piyo is a love child. His parents met as young farm workers in Northern Malawi. As they picked tobacco, a valuable cash crop, under the hot sun, hormones raged, loins ached, and inhibitions melted. Nine months later, Alfred arrived. But adolescent romances always come to an end, and before long Alfred's mother (with little Alfred in tow) returned to her family in Southern Malawi. To this day, Alfred's father remains in the north, a veritable stranger. In my opinion, he's missing out.

He doesn't know that his son is flighty, impulsive and spontaneous. Alfred doesn't walk so much as bounce along like Tigger with a sprightly unmistakable gait, as if choreographing his steps to a spunky Caribbean rhythm. Daffy and unpredictable, things just seem to slip his mind, but on the bright side, he is always happy. For weeks he asks me the meaning of his Western first name. I never produce a full answer, but his face beams with pride when I tell him about Alfred the Great. Guess what he calls himself now?

Alfred is also very musical. He used to play guitar in a village band — a troupe that jams with drums, various bean-filled shakers, and three-string guitars made from recycled oil drums. Yet, unbeknownst to him, his favorite guitar was emblazoned with the name and logo of a mega corporation — Exxon Mobil, a perfect marriage of Malawian resourcefulness and American brand penetration. Fascinated by my "modern" guitar, a wooden traveler's model, Alfred often asks, "Mr. Buckler, will you play us happy sound?" I always oblige. My favorite, and his, is the G-Major chord.

Major chords help Alfred forget the past. His life was tough from the beginning and never got easier. Fatherless and poor, he lived with his mother and her family until she died, probably from HIV. Hurt, undisciplined, unwanted and motherless, he left the family compound to live with an uncle in the city. But the uncle was selfish and resentful, sometimes making dinner only for himself and eating openly under Alfred's hungry gaze. His family failing him, Alfred turned to a local gang for companionship and support.

The gang was trouble. It routinely committed petty thefts at stores and warehouses, and its favorite target was Southern Bottlers, a massive beer and soda factory. Craving sugar over alcohol, each member would steal a full crate of soda bottles, drink five or six, and pour the remainder over their bodies, ritualistically cleansing their sins in a baptism of acidic, sugary syrup. Sometimes, he reports, body parts would become glued together, temporarily immobilizing the perpetrators.

Alfred abandoned his life of crime when he narrowly escaped a police raid that

netted several members of his gang. Hearing about the close call, his mother's family sent for him, imploring his immediate return to the village. Alfred initially refused, a city man shunning country life, but things changed when his family turned to a traditional healer (i.e., medicine man) for help. Unsuspecting Alfred drank the medicine man's concoction (of who knows what) and before long his "heart longed for the village," where he remains today, living in my house with his compadres.

Gift (a.k.a. Simon) Chimimba is solemn and driven. More aloof and enigmatic than the others, he devotes his energies not to socializing, but farming and preparing for the college entrance examination. Forced to fend for himself since boyhood, bouncing between households, Gift operates with an acute sense of independence and drive, products of his singular struggle for survival in one of the world's harshest environments. Of the three, he has the best chance of succeeding academically.

Both of Gift's parents have passed away, casualties of the HIV pandemic. Yet, instead of abstaining from risky behaviors, like unprotected sex, he succumbed at the end of primary school, carelessly impregnating a fellow student. His child, I am told, lives with her mother in a nearby village, lacking the attention and financial support of a real paternal caregiver and role model. She is a "gift" like her father, but nevertheless a reminder of how desperately villagers need health education. Gift doesn't volunteer this personal information; he doesn't like to talk about it. The others tell me.

The others also notice that, despite his checkered past, Gift blossoms with us. He bests shyness to become a proactive, outspoken school leader, overcoming a tendency to follow the wrong crowd and please the cool kids. Oozing with potential, yet prone to bouts of stubbornness and rebellion, he works hard to achieve his goal of becoming a nurse, earning high academic marks and an invitation to a Peace Corps Camp for promising students. At the camp, he thrives under the tutelage of positive role models and is asked to return the following year as a Junior Counselor.

Lastly, Myson (a.k.a. Theodore) Jambo is affable and easygoing. His father, the headmaster at a local primary school, has the financial resources to provide basic necessities for his family, pay school fees for Myson (the oldest son), and invite me over for chicken dinners. That modicum of stability and status feeds Myson's congeniality and optimism. He's a talker, and that mouth, framed by a large, picturesque smile and powered by a generous spirit, might take him places. Of all my Malawian students, he behaves the most like an American.

In fact, Myson likes to fantasize about finding an American wife. After meeting several Peace Corps Volunteers, he concludes that American women are the most beautiful creatures on Earth, and once I inform him that in America, black men can marry women of other races, he is determined to realize his dream. Every morning as he bathes from a bucket, he pays tribute to American ladies in song:

"I want an American girl. You are so beautiful, my American girl," he sings.

Splish. Splash.

"No you don't," I retort, creating a dueling duet, "She will tell you to cook, and she won't eat your favorite Malawian foods. You will be very unhappy."

Splash.

"I don't care," he answers, "just give me an American, American girl...oh baby, oh baby."

Myson is also our domestic sign maker, and every week he posts new creations on the wall. We have signs banishing females (except Peace Corps women), welcoming guests, and listing duties and responsibilities of household members (after Alfred forgot to cook dinner one night). On the signs, I'm delighted to read that the Boys are responsible for doing pretty much everything, from fetching water to cooking meals. Unless all three are "on a journey," which is a rarity, my only job seems to be staying out of the way. All the signs proudly declare our shared identity in large letters — "The Buckler Family."

* * * *

Having refined their vocal act for the variety show, the Boys rush off to school, reaching their desks in the nick of time. The day proceeds uneventfully, but in the waning hours, students struggle — giddy with emotion, their minds are elsewhere. After a student leader rings the final bell (by striking an old car rim hung from a tree), they rush to the library building, and the variety show begins. Villagers are starved for entertainment, so special events like variety shows and discos ("dances" in the USA) are spirited, riotous affairs that give kids (and sometimes teachers) a valuable creative outlet.

Reviews of the show are mixed. The crowd grows impatient when a trio of nervous young girls limps through a minor-keyed, dirge of a church song, swaying stiffly in unison to an adagio beat. But things heat up when two students (a popular campus comedy duo) perform an original spoof about old, senile Malawian men. Dressed in ragged sports jackets and holding canes, they walk like hunchbacks and speak with toothless gums, as the crowd erupts in laughter. But the Boys receive the most applause of all after they take the stage and, with perfect pitch, belt out a harmonious a cappella song.

I'm there as a spectator, seated in a chair of honor (along with my fellow teachers) facing the crowded room of students. The day is hot and sunny, a rarity during the rainy season, and my body is weak, its resources spent from fighting the latest influenza virus. Just as I drift into an impromptu nap, Gift takes the floor with a speech that shakes me awake:

> Since he came here in 2006, our Peace Corps Volunteer is producing delicious fruits. As we can say — a new broom sweeps clean. Some of the things which are happening because of this hero are: providing our school with four computers which is not a joke. Furthermore

> we're expecting more from this man. But I would like to appeal to my fellow students to handle those items with care and also we must work extra harder. Lastly I beg almighty God to bless this hero, not forgetting our teachers.

Wow! A bit obsequious, but someone was actually noticing, let alone appreciating. Speechless and embarrassed, I bow my head and focus on the floor, trying to avoid the awkwardness of accolades. Yet, the kind words serve as needed reminders that my impact on this school and the surrounding villages is probably far grander and more penetrating that I can possibly know. I'll carefully file them away in a safe place and revisit them for inspiration on the low, "what the hell am I doing here" days to come.

****

Gift's public tribute to me was touching, but he would have called me a "new miracle worker" instead of a "new broom" if he had known how difficult it was to procure those computers. It all started during my first year of service when Peace Corps generously donated them in Lilongwe (Malawi's capital), subject to the condition that I ferry them to my school. I needed a free delivery service, and the Member of Parliament (MP) for my area — Patricia Kaliati — promised to provide it. Accompanied by Mr. Zimbota (our Headmaster) and Stephen Rawls (a fellow Peace Corps Volunteer who also needed help transporting donated computers to a school), I went to Lilongwe to call her bluff.

MP Patricia Kaliati has quite a reputation. As our democratically elected representative, and Minister of Information and Civic Education, she stands out in the raucous world of Malawian politics as a bully with dramatic stage presence and flair, the female Bill O'Reilly. No stranger to controversy, Kaliati was once accused in the newspapers of trying to kill her husband's lover (a charge she vehemently denies). It is also rumored that despite her modest government salary, her children attend elite boarding schools in Great Britain, fueling speculation that she is swimming in corruption.

Indeed, corruption got her canned as Minister of Tourism. In that position, she accepted a foreign company's proposal to convert a large portion of the Nyika Plateau, a pristine natural area for the public, into an elite, private hunting ground. It was akin to inviting Wal-Mart to build a warehouse super-store smack dab in the middle of Yosemite National Park. Her decision was controversial from the onset, but after it was revealed that she was flown by the company in question to the United Arab Emirates, and lavished with gifts, the deal imploded. The President, who campaigned on an anti-corruption agenda, moved her to another cabinet position.

After taking a gimpy, smog-belching bus from the heart of Lilongwe, Stephen, Mr. Zimbota and I arrived in MP Kaliati's neighborhood in a driving rain.

Dodging streams of water that smelled of stale sewage, Mr. Zimbota guided us down the paved streets, past countless lots lacking numbers or mailboxes, to the foot of her property. From the outside, her digs looked just like all the others — an expansive lot made impervious to the greater world by a tall brick fence with a single portal of entry or exit — a hefty, steel gate.

I knocked on the gate, expecting the grandeur of her property to match her reputation. Yet, when the guard answered and motioned us inside the fence, the scene was surprisingly austere, notable not for what it possessed, but what it lacked. The grounds were quintessentially Malawian — maize gardens, goats and chickens ambling about with scruffy mutts occasionally giving chase, and a large clothesline bowing under the weight of freshly washed laundry. Aside from a guard stand, there were three modest buildings — a main house, a guest house and staff quarters.

Frankly, it was a bit disappointing. Missing in action were the luxuries enjoyed by the white aid workers living down the street — large, noisy generators that spring to life seconds after a blackout, air conditioners, manicured flower beds and Labrador Retrievers that bear a striking resemblance to Cameron, my former dog. A gleaming black Mercedes sedan parked in Kaliati's driveway, and a machine-gun wielding army soldier, were the only hints of opulence or prestige. Surely she had a couple million dollars buried somewhere in the backyard, set aside for a rainy day.

"Are we in the right place?" I asked Mr. Zimbota.

"Yes, I recognize car and dogs," he replied.

"I expected to see more stuff," I said, as the guard waved us toward the house.

"Maybe she keeps that inside. Let's enter."

After passing through the front door, we were received with signature Malawian hospitality. Although MP Kaliati was elsewhere, and purportedly doing her best to rush home, her family was present and congenial, if not curious. After learning the nationality of Stephen and me, two of her daughters peppered me with flirtatious questions.

"Where are you from?" they asked.

"Stephen and I are from America," I responded, "We are Peace Corps Volunteers."

"Oh, we love America," they exclaimed, "Will you take us there?"

"Well, you might be able to study there," I suggested.

"I don't want to study. Are there any other ways of going?" the eldest one inquired, batting her eyes.

Oblivious to his sister's salacious overtures, the baby of the family diffused the sexual tension. A ten-year-old boy conditioned to believe that all Americans were proficient in kung fu, he channeled his hyperactivity into challenging Stephen and me to bouts of play-fighting in a makeshift gladiator ring in the center of the living room. He had no idea that Stephen is a black belt in karate, and, thankfully, Stephen didn't show him.

Between awkward questions and drop kicks, I inventoried the room, investigating the lifestyle of a Malawian Member of Parliament, savoring the surrealism. Plush, worn couches lined the walls. Hung high above them along the ceiling line were fancy, framed pictures of revered elders, a crown molding of visages. An old computer sat in the corner, near a dated stereo system and a satellite-fed television, all rendered inoperable by yet another power outage. A few stained ceiling tiles drooped like overcooked macaroni.

"May I use the bathroom?" I inquired.

"Yes, it is over there," said Kaliati's eldest daughter, pointing down the hall, "Would you like me to show you?"

"Oh, no thank you. I can see it from here," I replied, leaping off the couch and trying not to blush.

Like the rest of the house, the bathroom was nothing special. A flush toilet sat in one corner, a dingy sink in the other, a cracked tile floor separating the two. The door didn't lock, and the sink didn't have a hot-water tap. A naked light bulb hung by a wire from the ceiling begging for a shade to soften its glare. Are you telling me that a Member of Parliament cannot afford a lamp shade? As I finished my business, a car pulled into the driveway.

Seconds later, doors opened and voices filled the foyer. It was Kaliati alright, home from a long day of agonizing Parliamentarian debate. She looked like a two-hundred pound tropical fruit in her African-print blouse, ankle-length skirt and headgear. But instead of coming to greet us in the living room, she stormed off in a different direction.

"Where is she going?" I asked Mr. Zimbota.

"Don't worry," he replied, "She will see us soon," an amorphous time descriptor that could mean anywhere from five minutes or three hours.

"I hope so," I added, "It's getting late."

Before long, a house worker appeared and thanked us for waiting. She then led us down a hallway and into a bedroom.

Sprawled across an expansive mattress in the dark, like Cleopatra patronizing her subjects, was our queen. A sole candle illuminated her shapely body, which was adorned with dangling gold earrings, drawn-in eyebrows, and chemically whitened skin (a fad among wealthy women in Malawi). In the shadows, her personal accoutrements lay scattered this way and that — trunks of knick-knacks, racks of shoes, and bottles of wine. There was barely enough floor space for our chairs.

Joining her in bed were two cell phones. Resting nearby like toy poodles, they rang incessantly, prolonging and interrupting our unconventional bedroom meeting. She answered each ring (sometimes two at a time) and lectured callers with an angry, self-aggrandizing tone, shouting into phones not held, per se, but delicately perched on the side of her lying head. It was an impressive feat of balance.

"I have a terrible headache," she explained.

"I'm sorry," I replied.

"I don't know why all these people are bothering me."

"Don't worry about it," I assured her, "Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice."

Between calls, we described the purpose of our visit, competing for her exhausted and phone-weary attention.

"Peace Corps is an aid agency within the U.S. Government," I started to explain.

"I know Peace Corps," she interjected, "Volunteers like you have been in Malawi since the 1960s. Now continue."

"Well, Peace Corps replaced its computers and made the old ones available for Volunteers to assist their communities," I said.

"Ah, hah," she commented, "very interesting."

"Stephen and I are both teachers. We were fortunate to get some computers for our schools. But we need your help getting them there."

"You want me to take computers to Stephen's school, too?" she asked incredulously, probably thinking, "He's not my constituent."

"Yes," I responded, "His school is on the way, a few hundred yards off the paved road."

"Ok," she schemed, staring at me with the let's-make-a-deal look of a used car salesman, "Why don't you give a computer to my Ministry?"

Here we go. Her bald attempt to better the government at the expense of poor village students was shameless and brilliant. After exchanging looks of disbelief with Stephen and Mr. Zimbota, I gathered my composure and answered her question. Tempted to grant her unsavory request, I swung the other way and took my chances with the truth.

"I'm sorry, but the computers are entrusted to us for the benefit of villagers, not government agencies," I politely explained.

"Wrong answer!" she shook her head.

"Also, as Peace Corps Volunteers, we cannot participate in political activities. Giving your Ministry a computer would violate that rule."

"Just one computer, that's all I'm asking for. You can spare one. I know you can," she pushed.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, "We really can't."

Lioness Kaliati uttered a low growl of disappointment and turned her head away, as our unfulfilled transport request hung precariously in the stiff evening air. So much for the truth — I guess it doesn't always set you free.

To say that she was disinterested in the rest of our conversation would be an understatement. When she wasn't talking on the phone, we described the situation at my school, speaking in taglines to capture her attention, like guests debating on a cable TV show. "Have big plans...trying to build boarding facility for girls...fieldtrips to Mulanje Mountain...developing student-run businesses... blah, blah, blah." The Lioness registered nary a glimmer of recognition.

After ninety minutes of intermittent phone conversations (by the MP) and lobbying (by us), the candles and participants had reached the ends of their respective

wicks. It was late, and we had no idea where we would sleep or how we would get there. Malawians are adamant about the dangers of travelling at night, and I didn't want to try my luck wandering around an unfamiliar section of Lilongwe at the witching hour. We also didn't know whether the computers would be delivered to our schools. Yet, after receiving dozens of calls that evening, the MP made a few of her own.

Hanging up the phone, she resolved the uncertainty. She said that a van would come the following day to transport "all" of the computers to our schools, and that given the late hour, we would be her house guests for the night. As we thanked her profusely for helping us and exited her bedroom, the MP offered two parting gifts — a bottle of red wine and a lighthearted invitation for Stephen to stay the night with her. I quickly accepted the former and playfully tried to accept the latter on Stephen's behalf, despite his protestations.

As it turns out, a bit of immodesty may have served him well. Barely discernible in the dark, the "guest quarters" were a hard tile floor, reed mats and blankets. No mattresses, no mosquito nets, no soap by the sink in the corner. As the mosquitoes gaily buzzed around our weary heads in anticipation of the bloodletting to come, Stephen and I donned iPods and imagined ourselves in better places, as Mr. Zimbota coped by humming village rhythms from his youth. Luckily, we quickly succumbed to exhaustion and enjoyed a decent, albeit stiff, night's sleep.

In the morning, the Lioness found us in a familiar spot. We were watching satellite television in her living room (mostly Nigerian soap operas and professional wrestling from the States), not a bad way to pass time as the political prisoner of a Member of Parliament. Our jailer entered the room just as a wrestling warrior leaped from a tall ladder onto his dazed, incapacitated opponent.

"What a strange uniquely American juxtaposition," I thought, "steroid-fueled behemoths pummeling each other in bikini briefs and bookish Peace Corps Volunteers begging for some community assistance."

"Ahem," the MP signaled, as all the heads in the room swung around to her.

"Yes," we nodded, "Do you have good news for us?"

"No," she explained in a causal and unapologetic tone, "There's a transport problem, so the computers will be moved tomorrow, not today."

Reactions in the room were decidedly mixed. Her family looked delighted, especially the suggestive eldest daughter, and Mr. Zimbota didn't seem to mind, as usual. But I hid my crushing disappointment beneath a stoic face and blaring television, calmly feigning apathy, but wanting to scream. The MP graciously offered us her home for the duration of the delay, with full access to her staff and the contents of her pantry, but Stephen and I already had other plans.

Unbeknownst to the MP and Mr. Zimbota, we had plotted an escape. Celeste, a quirky but lovable middle-aged American woman from North Dakota, lived down the road. By day she toiled as a budget specialist at the Ministry of Finance, a high-level aid worker provided by the U.S. Department of Treasury. But in her free time, she was a fun-loving, party-hopping biker chick (Harley Davidsons