Zandi's Song
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Zandi’s Song

Nuzhat Shahzadi

Illustrations by
Robert Meganck

Published by the
Academy for Educational Development
Washington, DC

March 2006
As the rooster crows, Zandi comes out of the hut. Her footprints make a zigzag pattern on the damp grass. She lets the fowls out from the hen house, squints and looks up at the sky. It’s November! Her favourite time of the year. The migratory birds have begun to fly in from Asia. They come to bask in the warmth of freshwater ponds and lakes in East Africa! Zandi wishes she was as free as the birds to fly far...far away. She hums as she cleans the hen house.

Over the plains, over the hills...
I walk where the sun shines...
I walk where the wind whistles...
I follow the trails of the wild birds...
I leave my footsteps on the sands...
I have the courage to face my life...
I have the strength to change my life...
Come with me...come with me...
Over the plains, over the hills
Together we’ll walk the miles where the sun shines...
Zandi is fifteen years old. She lives at the edge of a village in Africa with her mother and her eleven-year-old brother, Nicholas. Her father passed away two years ago. Since then her uncle has been their guardian. He doesn’t help much with the finances, but he pays for Nicholas’s school expenses.

They have a small plot of land that Mama cultivates. Both Nicholas and Zandi help her as much as they can. They grow maize and vegetables. Mama also works part time in a shop. Zandi and Nicholas attend the nearby village school. Mama has to manage Zandi’s school expenses. It’s not easy. She has some chickens. She sells the eggs and sometimes the hens, as she breeds them, too. Zandi helps her in taking care of the chickens.

Nicholas loves eggs. Once in a while they have egg and rice for dinner. Oh, what a feast! ...but most of the eggs have to be sold for Zandi’s school expenses.

Uncle is an old-fashioned man. He doesn’t think much of girls’ education. Aunty is very fond of Zandi. After her three daughters moved away to their
husbands’ homes, and her only son left for college in town, she has become closer to Zandi.

Aunty bakes the best cakes in the whole village. She is also very popular for the quilts she stitches. The village headman’s wife is quite fond of her. Uncle wants to become the headman’s friend because he thinks that would make him more popular in his community. He wants to be respected by everyone in the village.

Zandi loves the patterns of the quilts. Each quilt tells a tale...they feel so soft under her fingers!

Nicholas has a pet dog. His name is Simba. Simba is not at all ferocious but very loyal. He guards the hen house and the homestead at night. Mama also has a goat. Zandi affectionately calls her “Malaika,” which means “Angel.” Simba and Malaika are good friends.

Paul goes to the same school as Zandi. He is their neighbour’s son. Paul helps Uncle in his farmstead occasionally during school holidays and weekends. Paul doesn’t like Zandi much because she is clever and good in her studies.
As she gets ready to go to school, Zandi can hear the music playing on the radio. Mama loves music. The news begins in a little while. Zandi strains her ears. The newscaster talks about a new disease that is killing the birds and fowl in some parts of the world, including Africa.

“I hope this disease doesn’t come to our village!” Zandi mutters to herself.

They can’t afford to lose the chickens. She decides to talk to her teacher, Mrs. Muchunu.

The school is at the other end of the village, close to the highway. The “Matatus” rush by at breakneck speed. The children walk faster.

In class, Zandi can hardly concentrate. Mrs. Muchunu notices her distraction. After class is over, Zandi tells her about the morning news.
“Zandi, I read about this disease in the newspaper two days ago. It’s called bird flu.” Mrs. Muchunu is thoughtful.

“Teacher, can this disease kill all our chickens, too? ...if they die how are we going to pay my fees? I would have to leave school. What can we do?” Zandi is very worried.

“Don’t worry, Zandi. Now go home and we will talk about this tomorrow in class. Let me try to find out more about this disease,” Mrs. Muchunu promises.

As she passes by Uncle’s house, she sees him talking to Paul. Paul gives her an unfriendly look. He is always mean to Zandi.

“Hey, Zandi! You’re again late from school, eh! Your mother should be spending her money on better things,” Uncle says unkindly.

Zandi is upset and quickly walks towards her house.
“I want to continue with my studies, Mama. Why is Uncle against it? He doesn’t pay my school expenses!” Zandi says angrily.

“Does he ever listen to what a woman wants?” Mama puts her arms around Zandi. “He is your guardian, Zandi. He is constantly putting pressure on me to take you out of school. What shall we do?”

“I have to talk to him myself... and to Aunty. Uncle must understand that I want to study and do something with my life,” Zandi stomps into the hut.

After dinner, Zandi sits outside in the compound looking up at the starry night. Mama holds her close and whispers, “You’re a strong girl. I’m sure you’ll find a way. Maybe you should take a gift when you go to talk to your uncle.”

Mother and daughter sit together huddled under the night sky, thinking...
Next day in class, Mrs. Muchunu keeps her promise. “Children, today I’m going to discuss something very serious. A new disease is killing birds and fowl in some parts of the world. It’s called ‘bird flu.’” She pauses.

“How does it spread, Mrs. Muchunu?” Jackson asks. He is Zandi’s friend.

“The virus that causes the flu is initially passed on by wild birds like ducks, geese and swans that live in and around water. The virus is carried in the birds’ guts. It is passed on through the droppings of infected birds. Sometimes these birds themselves do not fall sick, though they are infected. Healthy fowl can become sick by drinking water from sources where infected migratory birds have been bathing, and from soil or feed that has been contaminated by wild bird droppings. Bird flu also easily spreads through direct contact, clothing, hands,
shoes, infected fowl cages that have been contaminated with bird droppings…” The teacher points towards a drawing to explain the facts.

“Do we have it in Africa?” Zandi asks.

“The bird flu is arriving in Africa now, Zandi. The migratory birds are coming from Asia where the bird flu has killed millions of birds. They may pass the flu to our poultry. Our domestic fowl should not be allowed to mix with wild birds. If we are not careful now, all our chickens may die,” she adds.

The class wants to know if bird flu can infect humans.

“In Asia a small number of people did get infected by coming in contact with sick birds. Some fell sick and died,” the teacher says.

“What can we do to stay safe from this disease?” Jackson wants to know.
Mrs. Muchunu shows a chart to the class on how to stay safe from bird flu.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO PROTECT OURSELVES FROM BIRD FLU

1. Do not touch a sick or dead bird.

2. Announce sick or dead poultry to the nearby agriculture officer or animal health worker.

3. Always wash hands vigorously by rubbing with soap and water after coming in contact with birds or places birds have been.

4. Avoid markets where poultry is sold if you hear of an outbreak of bird flu nearby.

5. Cook chicken meat and eggs thoroughly.

6. Avoid all surfaces that may have been contaminated until they have been cleaned and disinfected.
“Share this information with others. We must do everything to be safe from this virus. As we all know, in many households poultry is the main source of protein. Protein keeps us healthy and strong. We must not let our chickens die,” Mrs. Muchunu urges.

After class, Zandi, Nicholas and their friends meet to talk about bird flu.

“How can we make our families understand that we all need to act before the disease attacks our village?” Jackson asks.
“People need to understand the consequences of the disease before it’s too late,” one girl says. She is worried. If the chickens die, where will they get eggs to eat?

“What about talking to our families and neighbours? Each one of us can talk to three families every week. Let’s invite the others from our class to join us as well,” Zandi suggests.

“We can also ask our teachers to talk about it during the next parent-teacher meeting at the end of the month. Unless everyone is aware, we can’t stop this disease from spreading,” Jackson adds. The children now feel happier as they agree to these plans.

Jackson wants to know why Zandi still looks worried. “I can always help, Zandi,” he offers.

“I have to deal with another important matter...” Zandi mentions as they wave goodbye.
Next evening Zandi talks to Uncle and Aunty about staying in school.

Uncle is angry, “Why do you want to become a judge? You have studied enough.”

“But, Uncle, my teacher is helping me to prepare for school exams. I want to finish my studies,” Zandi says.

“You need money to study,” Uncle sounds almost angry now.

“Uncle, we are also making some money from the poultry business to pay for my school expenses,” Zandi pleads.

“Why don’t we let Zandi finish her exams first? The other day, even the headman’s wife was talking about the importance of educating our girls...,” Aunty points out.
“Huh?” Uncle is attentive. “Okay, finish your exams for now. I will think about it. Money should be spent wisely,” he mumbles.

Zandi thinks hard as she walks back home. She has to find a way to keep the chickens safe from bird flu.

The next day, Zandi notices that someone has stolen three chickens at night. Simba has been on guard, but he never barked...who could this be? She needs money immediately for her registration fee for the secondary exams. This must be stopped!

Nicholas and Zandi come up with a plot. They dig a big hole in front of the henhouse and cover it with grass and straw. Whoever comes to steal tonight is sure to fall in this trap! Zandi also has more worries to deal with.

“Nicholas, now let’s think how we can stop the chickens from mixing with wild birds. What can we do?” Zandi is thoughtful.
“We can build a bigger henhouse,” Nicholas points out.

“But the chickens need enough space to run around and also find their food. What about making a big chicken run with twig fencing? Our compound is quite big. We can make a roof with long grass. It’s best to keep the chickens always separated from other flocks, new fowl or wild birds. Will you help me do this?” Zandi asks.

Nicholas agrees. He also volunteers to collect food grains from the fields, as harvest is now over. Zandi says she will grow maggots for the fowl. She has learned how to do this at home from the village vet.

Before going to bed, Zandi looks out the window. In the moonlight she can see Simba loyally sitting near the henhouse. Malaika is dozing nearby.

“Are my chickens really safe?” Zandi wonders.
Zandi falls asleep and has a dream. She sees she has become a judge and is sitting in a courtroom. There are people all around, her teacher, Mama...someone was trying to break into her courtroom and was stopped by the police. People are shouting...screaming. Zandi wakes up with a startle. She hears a voice screaming in panic...a dog barking outside the hut, a goat crying.

“Ahh...Eeeek!...Help! Help me...! My leg... hurts... Ahhhhh......”

Mama is up as well. Both of them rush to the window. In the moonlight, they see someone near the henhouse. Zandi grabs the torch and rushes out, followed by Mama. She flashes the light...it’s Paul!

Zandi and Mama help Paul inside. As they go in, Zandi catches a glimpse of Uncle standing in front of his hut.
Paul is badly shaken. Mama gives him a glass of water. Nicholas is up and has been watching from the window.

“Paul, what were you doing near the henhouse?” Mama wants to know.

Paul almost chokes, “Uncle...told me...he said he will reward me...please don’t tell anyone...don’t tell my parents,” he pleads.

“But you shouldn’t have listened to him,” Nicholas says.

“I have to go.” Paul abruptly limps out of the hut.

“We must not talk about this to anyone,” Mama warns the children.

“Uncle sent Paul to steal our chickens so that there won’t be enough money to pay my exam registration fees. Simba didn’t bark on the first night as he recognized
Paul. But tonight as he fell into the ditch, his screams frightened the animals...,” Zandi slowly unravels the puzzle. “Uncle can also easily stop me from going to school if we don’t make money from our poultry...

“I must find a way to use this incident to my advantage without being disrespectful to Uncle...this is my chance to stop him...,” Zandi thinks hard, “but first I have to do something to save my chickens from bird flu.”

Zandi is aware that Uncle knows the village headman very well. The headman’s wife also respects Aunty. What if she begins by giving bird flu information to them? Uncle can pass it on to the headman. He possibly knows by now that Zandi has discovered his plot, so he may be more willing to listen to her. People come to the headman for advice, and he can easily motivate them to be prepared for the disease. Zandi is very pleased with herself. She takes a gift for Uncle and goes to meet him.
Aunty welcomes her. Zandi asks to see Uncle. Hearing her voice, he comes out of the hut with a sullen expression. It seems he is ready to go out.

“Uncle, we are making money from the poultry...so I brought you a gift.” Uncle looks at her suspiciously as he listens.

“Uncle, our teacher told us to share some very important information with our families. It’s about a bird disease which can kill all our fowl. Everyone should be aware of it. I know how much the headman trusts you...maybe you would like to discuss this with the headman?” Zandi says.

Uncle is alert now. He heard someone mentioning it to the headman yesterday. No one, including the headman, had enough information. This is his chance to know all about it! He would definitely earn more respect from the headman. The community people would also pay him more attention when they found out about his wisdom!
Uncle quickly seizes the opportunity that has come his way...

Uncle pretends to be knowledgeable. “I know it spreads from...ahem...from...”

“Yes, Uncle, the migratory birds can infect our fowl,” Zandi adds innocently.

“Yes, yes, I know...we have to be careful...,” Uncle says quickly.

“Yes, we need to carefully wash our hands with soap and water if we come in contact with a sick or dead bird. The chicken meat and eggs need to be cooked thoroughly. Sick or dead fowl should not be eaten. Children should not be allowed to play with sick or dead fowl. Any sick or dead birds should be reported to the animal health worker or agriculture officer, as it is not easy to detect bird flu from other poultry diseases,” Zandi says as Uncle listens attentively. Aunty smiles at her encouragingly.
“Well, my niece, I think you’ve become quite intelligent by studying in school. I will share this with the headman and others...and...I...I have decided that you should continue with your studies. I want you to become someone and keep up the good family name...after me...ahhemm,” Uncle says pompously, though he had made his decision a moment ago while listening to Zandi.

“I will also share this information with the headman’s wife,” Aunty says. Zandi hugs her happily.

As she walks back home, Zandi smiles to herself. Now she is the happiest girl in the whole village. She walks fast. Nicholas is waiting. They have to collect the twigs and long grass to build their chicken run!

In the afternoon her school friends will come to discuss what they have done so far regarding awareness building among people in the community. Today they will look at the problems
they face and make new plans to get more people to talk about how to stop the spread of bird flu in their village. Maybe Mama, Aunty and Mrs. Muchunu can help them as well! Zandi can now hear the beats of the “ngoma,” the great drum in the distance, drifting in from the market. Zandi happily hums her favourite song as she runs towards home.

*I have the courage to face my life...*
*I have the strength to change my life...*
*Come with me...come with me...*
*Over the plains...over the hills...*
*Together we’ll walk the miles where the sun shines...*
The End.
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