

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Southern Sudan, 2009*



After the excitement of seeing that first spray of water, the villagers went back to work. Several men gathered in front of Nya's house. They had tools with them, hoes and spades and scythes.

Her father went out to meet them. The men walked together to a spot beyond the second big tree and began clearing the land.

Nya watched them for a few moments. Her father saw her and waved. She put the plastic can down and ran over to him.

"Papa, what are you doing?"

"Clearing the land here. Getting ready to build."

"To build what?"

Nya's father smiled. "Can't you guess?"

*Rochester, New York, 1996-2003*



Salva had been in Rochester for nearly a month and still had not seen a single dirt road. Unlike southern Sudan, it

seemed that here in America every road was paved. At times, the cars whizzed by so fast, he was amazed that anyone on foot could cross safely. His new father, Chris, told him that dirt roads did exist out in the countryside, but there were none in Salva's new neighborhood.

All the buildings had electricity. There were white people everywhere. Snow fell from the sky for hours at a time and then stayed on the ground for days. Sometimes it would start to melt during the day, but before it all disappeared, more snow would fall. Salva's new mother, Louise, told him it would probably be April—three more months—before the snow went away completely.

The first several weeks of Salva's new life were so bewildering that he was grateful for his studies. His lessons, especially English, gave him something to concentrate on, a way to block out the confusion for an hour or two at a time.

His new family helped, too. All of them were kind to him, patiently explaining the millions of things he had to learn.

It had taken four days for Salva to travel from the Ifo refugee camp to his new home in New York. There were times when he could hardly believe he was still on the same planet.

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Now that Salva was learning more than a few simple words, he found the English language quite confusing. Like the letters "o-u-g-h." Rough . . . though . . . fought . . . through . . . bough—the same letters were pronounced so many different ways! Or how a word had to be changed depending on the sentence. You said "chickens" when you meant the living birds that walked and squawked and laid eggs, but it was "chicken"—with no "s"—when it was on your plate ready to be eaten: "We're having chicken for dinner." That was correct, even if you had cooked a hundred chickens.

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever be able to speak and read English well. But slowly, with hours of hard work over the months and years, his English improved. Remembering Michael, Salva also joined a volleyball team. It was fun playing volleyball, just as it had been at the camp. Setting and spiking the ball were the same in any language.

Salva had been in Rochester for more than six years now. He was going to college and had decided to study business. He had a vague idea that he would like to return to Sudan someday, to help the people who lived there.

Sometimes that seemed like an impossible notion. In his homeland there was so much war and destruction, poverty, disease, and starvation—so many problems that had not been solved by governments, or rich people, or big aid organizations. What could he possibly do to help? Salva thought about this question a lot, but no answer came to him.

One evening at the end of a long day of study, Salva sat down at the family computer and opened his e-mail. He was surprised to see a message from a cousin of his—someone he barely knew. The cousin was working for a relief agency in Zimbabwe.

Salva clicked open the message. His eyes read the words, but at first his brain could not comprehend them.

*“... United Nations clinic... your father... stomach surgery...”*

Salva read the words again and again. Then he jumped to his feet and ran through the house to find Chris and Louise.

“My father!” he shouted. “They have found my father!”

After several exchanges of e-mails, Salva learned that the cousin had not actually seen or spoken to his father. The clinic where his father was recovering was in a remote

part of southern Sudan. There was no telephone or mail service—no way of communicating with the clinic staff. The staff kept lists of all the patients they treated. These lists were submitted to the United Nations' aid agencies. Salva's cousin worked for one of the agencies, and he had seen the name of Salva's father on a list.

Salva immediately began planning to travel to Sudan. But with the war still raging, it was very difficult to make the arrangements. He had to get permits, fill out dozens of forms, and organize plane flights and car transport in a region where there were no airports or roads.

Salva, and Chris and Louise as well, spent hours on the phone to various agencies and offices. It took not days or weeks but *months* before all the plans were in place. And there was no way to get a message to the hospital. At times, Salva felt almost frantic at the delays and frustrations. *What if my father leaves the hospital without telling anyone where he is going? What if I get there too late? I will never be able to find him again. . . .*

At last, all the forms were filled out, and all the paperwork was in order. Salva flew in a jet to New York City, another one to Amsterdam, and a third to Kampala in Uganda. In Kampala, it took him two days to get through

customs and immigration before he could board a smaller plane to go to Juba, in southern Sudan. Then he rode in a jeep on dusty dirt roads into the bush.

How familiar everything was and yet how different! The unpaved roads, the scrubby bushes and trees, the huts roofed with sticks bound together—everything was just as Salva remembered it, as if he had left only yesterday. At the same time, the memories of his life in Sudan were very distant. How could memories feel so close and so far away at the same time?

After many hours of jolting and bumping along the roads in the jeep—after nearly a week of exhausting travel—Salva entered the shanty that served as a recovery room at the makeshift hospital. A white woman stood to greet him.

"Hello," he said. "I am looking for a patient named Mawien Dut Ariik."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Southern Sudan, 2009*



"What do you think we are building here?" Nya's father asked, smiling.

"A house?" Nya guessed. "Or a barn?"

Her father shook his head. "Something better," he said. "A school."

Nya's eyes widened. The nearest school was half a day's walk from their home. Nya knew this because Dep had wanted to go there. But it was too far.

"A school?" she echoed.

"Yes," he replied. "With the well here, no one will have to go to the pond anymore. So all the children will be able to go to school."

Nya stared at her father. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. When at last she was able to speak, it was only in a whisper. "All the children, Papa? The girls, too?"

Her father's smile grew broader. "Yes, Nya. Girls, too," he said. "Now, go and fetch water for us." And he returned to his work scything the long grass.

Nya went back and picked up the plastic can. She felt as if she were flying.

School! She would learn to read and write!

*Sudan and Rochester, New York, 2003–2007*



Salva stood at the foot of one of the beds in the crowded clinic.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” the patient replied politely.

“I have come to visit you,” Salva said.

“To visit me?” The man frowned. “But who are you?”

“You are Mawien Dut Ariik, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that is my name.”

Salva smiled, his insides trembling. Even though his father looked older now, Salva had recognized him right away. But it was as if his eyes needed help from his ears—he needed to hear his father’s words to believe he was real.

“I am your son. I am Salva.”

The man looked at Salva and shook his head. “No,” he said. “It is not possible.”

“Yes,” Salva said. “It’s me, Father.” He moved to the side of the bed.

Mawien Dut reached out and touched the arm of this tall stranger beside him. “Salva?” he whispered. “Can it really be you?”

Salva waited. Mawien Dut stared for a long moment. Then he cried out, “Salva! My son, my son!”

His body shaking with sobs of joy, he reached up to hug Salva tightly.

It had been almost nineteen years since they had last seen each other.

Mawien Dut sprinkled water on his son’s head, the Dinka way of blessing someone who was lost and is found again.

“Everyone was sure you were dead,” Mawien Dut said. “The village wanted to kill a cow for you.”

That was how Salva’s people mourned the death of a loved one.

“I would not let them,” his father said. “I never gave up hope that you were still alive somewhere.”

“And . . . and my mother?” Salva asked, barely daring to hope.

His father smiled. “She is back in the village.”

Salva wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. "I must see her!"

But his father shook his head. "There is still war near Loun-Ariik, my son. If you went there, both sides would try to force you to fight with them. You must not go."

There was so much more to talk about. His father told Salva that his sisters were with his mother. But of his three brothers, only Ring had survived the war. Ariik, the oldest, and Kuol, the youngest, were both dead.

*Little Kuol . . .* Salva closed his eyes for a few moments, trying to picture his brothers through a haze of time and grief.

He learned more about his father's illness. Years of drinking contaminated water had left Mawien Dut's entire digestive system riddled with guinea worms. Sick and weak, he had walked almost three hundred miles to come to this clinic, and was barely alive by the time he finally arrived.

Salva and his father had several days together. But all too soon, it was time for Salva to return to America. His father would be leaving the clinic shortly as well. The surgery he

had undergone had been successful, and he would soon be strong enough to make the long walk home.

"I will come to the village," Salva promised, "as soon as it is safe."

"We will be there waiting for you," his father promised in turn.

Salva pressed his face tightly to his father's as they hugged goodbye, their tears flowing and blending together.

On the plane back to the United States, Salva replayed in his mind every moment of his visit with his father. He felt again the coolness on his brow when his father had sprinkled the water blessing on him.

And an idea came to him—an idea of what he might be able to do to help the people of Sudan.

Could he do it? It would take so much work! Perhaps it would be too difficult. But how would he know unless he tried?

Back in Rochester, Salva began working on his idea. There were, it seemed, a million problems to be solved. He needed a lot of help. Chris and Louise gave him many suggestions. Scott, a friend of theirs, was an expert in setting

up projects like the one Salva had in mind. He and Salva worked together for hours and days . . . which grew into weeks and months.

Along the way, Salva met other people who wanted to help. He was grateful to all of them. But even with their help, it was much more work than he had imagined.

Salva had to raise money for the project. And there was only one way to do this: He would have to talk to people and ask them to give money.

The first time Salva spoke in front of an audience was in a school cafeteria. About a hundred people had come to hear him. There was a microphone at the front of the room. Salva's knees were shaking as he walked to the mike. He knew that his English was still not very good. What if he made mistakes in pronunciation? What if the audience couldn't understand him?

But he had to do it. If he didn't talk about the project, no one would learn about it. No one would donate money, and he would never be able to make it work.

Salva spoke into the microphone. "H-h-hello," he said.

At that moment, something went wrong with the sound system. The speakers behind him let out a dreadful screech. Salva jumped and almost dropped the mike.

His hands trembling, he looked out at the audience. People were smiling or chuckling; a few of the children were holding their ears. They all looked very friendly, and seeing the children made him remember: It was not the first time he had spoken in front of a large group of people.

Years before, when he was leading those boys on their walk from the Ethiopian refugee camp to the one in Kenya, he had called a meeting every morning and evening. The boys would line up facing him and he would talk to them about their plans.

All those eyes looking at him . . . but every face interested in what he had to say. It was the same here. The audience had come to the school cafeteria because they wanted to hear him. Thinking of that made him feel a little better, and he spoke into the mike again.

"Hello," he repeated, and this time only his own voice came from the speakers. He smiled in relief and went on. "I am here to talk to you about a project for southern Sudan."

A year passed, then two . . . then three. Salva spoke to hundreds of people—in churches, at civic organizations,

in schools. Would he ever be able to turn his idea into reality? Whenever he found himself losing hope, Salva would take a deep breath and think of his uncle's words.

*A step at a time.*

*One problem at a time—just figure out this one problem.*

Day by day, solving one problem at a time, Salva moved toward his goal.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Southern Sudan, 2009*



Nya waited her turn in line. She was holding a plastic bottle.

The well was finally finished. The gravel had been put down to make a foundation, the pump had been installed, and the cement had been poured and left to dry.

Before the pump was used for the first time, the villagers all gathered around. The leader of the workers brought out a big sign made of blue canvas. The canvas had writing on it. The writing was in English, but the leader spoke to Nya's uncle, and Uncle told everyone what the sign said.

"'In honor of Elm Street School,'" Uncle said. "This is the name of a school in America. The students at the school raised the money for this well to be dug."

Uncle held up one end of the sign. The workers' leader held up the other end. Everyone else stood around it, and one of the workers took their picture. The picture would be sent to the American school so that the students there could see the well and the people who were now using it.

Then the villagers all got in line to wait their turn for water from the new well.



When Nya reached the head of the line, she smiled shyly at her uncle, who paused in his work for a moment to smile back at her. Then he began moving the pump handle. Up and down, up and down . . .

A stream of water flowed from the mouth of the pump.

Nya held her bottle underneath the pump mouth. The bottle filled up quickly.

She stepped aside to let the next person fill a bottle. Then she drank.

The water was delicious. It wasn't warm or muddy, like the water from the pond. It was cool and clear.

Nya stopped drinking and held up the bottle so she could look at it. Funny that something without any color at all could look so nice.

She drank a few more sips, then glanced around.

Everyone had a bottle or a cup. They were drinking that lovely water, or waiting in line for more, or talking and laughing. It was a celebration.

An old granddad standing not far from Nya shook his head. In a loud voice, he said, "This is where we used to gather for our bonfire celebrations. I have been sitting on this ground my whole life. And all those years I never knew that I was sitting on top of this good water!"

Everyone around him laughed. Nya laughed, too.

In a few more days, the school would be finished. Nya and Dep and Akeer would all go to school, along with the other children. Next year there would be a marketplace where the villagers could sell and buy vegetables and chickens and other goods. There was even talk of a clinic someday—a medical clinic, so they wouldn't have to walk so far to get help, as they had to when Akeer was ill.

It was the well that was bringing the village all these good things.

But the well was not for their use alone. People would come from miles around to fetch the good clean water. Nya knew from listening to the grownups that the crew leader had made many arrangements concerning the well. No one was ever to be refused water. Some of the villagers would be responsible for maintaining the well. They would be busy with this new work, so the entire village was to help them with their crops and cattle. Other villagers, including Nya's uncle, would resolve any disputes that arose.

The well would change their lives in many ways.

*I will never again have to walk to the pond for water,*  
Nya thought.

She wandered around a little, sipping at her cool, fresh

drink. Then she caught sight of the crew leader. He was standing by himself, leaning against one of the trucks and watching her uncle work the pump.

Dep saw her looking at the man.

"That man, the boss of the workers," Dep said. "You know he is Dinka?"

Nya looked at Dep in astonishment.

The Dinka and the Nuer did not look very different physically. You had to look at the scar patterns on people's faces to tell the tribes apart—Dinka scar patterns were different from those of the Nuer.

But the crew leader had no scars on his face. Nya had heard some of the teenage boys talking about that—wondering why he had no scars when clearly he was a grown man. The leader's assistant was Nuer. So were most of the crew—they all had Nuer scars. Nya hadn't thought about it much, but she realized now she had always assumed that the leader was Nuer, too.

The Dinka and the Nuer were enemies—had been for hundreds of years.

"Why would a Dinka bring water to us?" she wondered aloud.

"I heard Uncle and Father talking about him," Dep said.

"He has drilled many wells for his own people. This year he decided to drill for the Nuer as well."

Dep had not really answered Nya's question. *He probably doesn't know the answer*, she thought. But now Nya felt there was something she had to do.

She walked over to where the man was standing. He didn't notice her at first, so she waited quietly.

Then he saw her. "Hello," he said.

Shyness flooded through Nya. For a moment, she didn't think she would be able to speak. She looked down at the ground, then at the stream of water still flowing from the pump mouth.

And she found her voice. "Thank you," she said, and looked up at him bravely. "Thank you for bringing the water."

The man smiled. "What is your name?" he asked.

"I am Nya."

"I am happy to meet you, Nya," he said. "My name is Salva."

*A message from Salva Dut*

This book is based on the true story of my life. I hope that because of the book more people will learn about the Lost Boys and the country of Sudan.

I was born in a small village called Loun-Ariik, in Tonj County, southern Sudan. And just as it says in the book, I stayed in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya for many years before I came to America.

I am thankful to a great many people. The United Nations and the International Red Cross supported my life when I was in danger of starvation. The Moore family, St. Paul Episcopal Church, and the community of Rochester, New York, welcomed me to the United States. I am also grateful for the education I have received, especially at Monroe Community College.

And deepest gratitude to the people who have helped me with my project, Water for Sudan, Inc.—the schools,

churches, civic organizations, and individuals all over the country. Special thanks to the Board of Water for Sudan, and to the Rotary Clubs that have worked closely with me. My dreams of helping the people back home in Sudan are beginning to come true.

I overcame all the difficult situations of my past because of the hope and perseverance that I had. I would have not made it without these two things. To young people, I would like to say: Stay calm when things are hard or not going right with you. You will get through it when you persevere instead of quitting. Quitting leads to much less happiness in life than perseverance and hope.

Salva Dut

Rochester, New York

2010

Some of the details in this story have been fictionalized, but the major events depicted are based on Salva's own experiences. I read his written accounts and interviewed him for many hours. I also read other books and accounts by and about Lost Boys. For Nya's part of the story, I was able to interview travelers who have seen the water wells being drilled in villages like hers; I also benefited from examining their video footage and photographs.

Known as the Second Sudanese Civil War, the conflict that is depicted in this book began in 1983. Many factions were involved and numerous changes in leadership took place over the duration of the war, but in essence, the opposing sides were the Muslim-dominated government in the north and the non-Muslim coalition in the south. Besides religion, economic strife was an important factor, as the country's reserves of oil are located in the south.

Millions of people were killed, imprisoned, tortured, kidnapped, or enslaved; millions more were permanently displaced, unable to return to their homes. Among those displaced were hundreds of thousands of so-called Lost Boys like Salva, who walked in desperation through southern Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya in search of safe haven.

Many of the Lost Boys who were able to return

home after the war found that their families had vanished. Others languished in refugee camps like those Salva lived in. Some were eventually reunited with their loved ones, often after decades apart.

In 2002, nearly twenty years after the war began, the United States government passed the Sudan Peace Act, officially accusing the Sudanese government of genocide in the deaths of more than two million people. Three years later, a peace accord was signed between the north and south. The south was granted autonomy—the ability to govern itself—for six years. In 2011, a referendum took place in which the citizens of southern Sudan voted to secede, gaining their independence from the north. Unrest over South Sudan's oil and its political leadership have roiled its infancy as the world's newest nation.

The war in Darfur, in the western part of Sudan, is a separate conflict, not covered by the peace accord. As of this writing, that war is still being fought between factions who identify themselves as Arabic and those who consider themselves African. The two wars, combined with several years of severe drought, have brought untold suffering to the people of Sudan.

In size, Sudan is the largest country in Africa and the tenth largest in the world.

Salva has seen his family in Sudan twice more since the events of this story, including a moving reunion with his cousins, the children of Uncle Jewiir. And amazingly, seven of the Lost Boys who walked with Salva from Ethiopia to Kenya met up with him again when they were relocated to the Rochester, New York, area.

As of spring 2014, Salva Dut's foundation Water for South Sudan has drilled more than 200 wells in southern Sudan for Dinka and Nuer communities, supplying fresh water for at least a half million people. The very first well was drilled in Salva's home village of Loun-Ariik. Salva now spends half the year in the United States raising money for the foundation and the other half in Sudan drilling wells. You can learn more about the foundation's work at [www.waterforsudan.org](http://www.waterforsudan.org).

I first met Salva several years ago when my husband and I learned about Water for Sudan. In 2008, my husband traveled to Sudan to see the wells firsthand. I am grateful for his help in answering my endless questions: This story could not have been written without him.

My family and I feel very fortunate to count Salva as a friend. It has truly been an honor for me to write this book about him.

## *Acknowledgments*



Sincere thanks to:

Chris and Louise Moore and their children,

Salva's American family;

John Turner, Nancy Frank,

and the other members of the board of

Water for Sudan;

Jeffrey Mead for the opportunity

to view photos and video footage;

and Linda Wright and Sue Kassirer

of Breakfast Serials, Inc.

Ginger Knowlton, David Barbor,

and everyone at Curtis Brown, Ltd.

And Dinah Stevenson,

for nudges both gentle and firm,

and always in the right direction.