

...or that one swat killed dozens at a time. For every
one killed, it seemed that hundreds more swarmed in
to take its place. With their high singing whine constantly
in his ears, Salva slapped and waved at them in frustration
all night long.

No one in the group got any sleep. The mosquitoes
made sure of that.

In the morning, Salva was covered with bites. The
worst ones were in the exact middle of his back, where he
couldn't reach to scratch. Those he could reach, though,
he scratched until they bled.

The travelers got into the boats one more time, to pad-
dle from the island to the other side of the Nile. The fisher-
men had warned the group to take plenty of water for the
next stretch of their journey. Salva still had the gourd that
the old woman had given him. Others in the group had
gourds too, or plastic bottles. But there were some who did
not have a container. They tore strips from their clothing
and soaked them in a desperate attempt to carry at least a
little water with them.

Ahead lay the most difficult part of their journey: the
Akobo desert.

CHAPTER NINE

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya's family had been back in the village for several
months the day the visitors came; in fact, it was nearly time to
leave for the camp again. As the jeep drove up, most of the
children ran to meet it. Shy about meeting strangers, Nya
hung back.

Two men emerged from the jeep. They spoke to the big-
gest boys, including Nya's brother, Dep, who led them to the
home of the village's chief, his and Nya's uncle.

The chief came out of his house to greet the visitors. They
sat in the shade of the house with some of the other village
men and drank tea together and talked for a while.

"What are they talking about?" Nya asked Dep.

"Something about water," Dep replied.

Water? The nearest water was the pond, of course, half
a morning's walk away.

Anyone could have told them that.



Salva had never seen anything like the desert. Around his village, Loun-Ariik, enough grass and shrubs grew to feed the grazing cattle. There were even trees. But here in the desert, nothing green could survive except tiny evergreen acacia bushes, which somehow endured the long winter months with almost no water.

Uncle said it would take three days to cross the Akobo. Salva's shoes stood no chance against the hot stony desert ground. The soles, made from rubber tire treads, had already been reduced to shreds held together with a little leather and a great deal of hope. After only a few minutes, Salva had to kick off the flapping shreds and continue barefoot.

The first day in the desert felt like the longest day Salva had ever lived through. The sun was relentless and eternal: There was neither wisp of cloud nor whiff of breeze for relief. Each minute of walking in that arid heat felt like an hour. Even breathing became an effort: Every breath Salva took seemed to drain strength rather than restore it.

Thorns gored his feet. His lips became cracked and

parched. Uncle cautioned him to make the water in his gourd last as long as possible. It was the hardest thing Salva had ever done, taking only tiny sips when his body cried out for huge gulps of thirst-quenching, life-giving water.

The worst moment of the day happened near the end. Salva stubbed his bare toe on a rock, and his whole toenail came off.

The pain was terrible. Salva tried to bite his lip, but the awfulness of that never-ending day was too much for him. He lowered his head, and the tears began to flow.

Soon he was crying so hard that he could hardly get his breath. He could not think; he could barely see. He had to slow down, and for the first time on the long journey, he began to lag behind the group. Stumbling about blindly, he did not notice the group drawing farther and farther ahead of him.

As if by magic, Uncle was suddenly at his side.

"Salva Mawien Dut Ariik!" he said, using Salva's full name, loud and clear.

Salva lifted his head, the sobs interrupted by surprise.

"Do you see that group of bushes?" Uncle said, pointing. "You need only to walk as far as those bushes. Can you do that, Salva Mawien Dut Ariik?"

Salva wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He could see the bushes; they did not look too far away. Uncle reached into his bag. He took out a tamarind and handed it to Salva. Chewing on the sour juicy fruit made Salva feel a little better.

When they reached the bushes, Uncle pointed out a clump of rocks up ahead and told Salva to walk as far as the rocks. After that, a lone acacia . . . another clump of rocks . . . a spot bare of everything except sand.

Uncle continued in this way for the rest of the walk. Each time, he spoke to Salva using his full name. Each time, Salva would think of his family and his village, and he was somehow able to keep his wounded feet moving forward, one painful step at a time.

At last, the sun was reluctantly forced from the sky. A blessing of darkness fell across the desert, and it was time to rest.

The next day was a precise copy of the one before: the sun and the heat and, worst of all to Salva's mind, a landscape that was utterly unchanged. The same rocks. The same acacias. The same dust. There was not a thing to indicate that the group was making any progress at all across the

desert. Salva felt as if he had walked for hours while staying in exactly the same place.

The fierce heat sent up shimmering waves that made everything look wobbly. Or was he the one who was wobbling? That large clump of rocks up ahead—it almost seemed to be moving. . . .

It was moving. It was not rocks at all.

It was people.

Salva's group drew nearer. Salva counted nine men, all of them collapsed on the sand.

One made a small, desperate motion with his hand. Another tried to raise his head but fell back again. None of them made a sound.

As Salva watched, he realized that five of the men were completely motionless.

One of the women in Salva's group pushed forward and knelt down. She opened her container of water.

"What are you doing?" a man called. "You cannot save them!"

The woman did not answer. When she looked up, Salva could see tears in her eyes. She shook her head, then poured a little water onto a cloth and began to wet the lips of one of the men on the sand.

Salva looked at the hollow eyes and the cracked lips

of the men lying on the hot sand, and his own mouth felt so dry that he nearly choked when he tried to swallow.

"If you give them your water, you will not have enough for yourself!" the same voice shouted. "It is useless—they will die, and you will die with them!"

CHAPTER TEN

Southern Sudan, 2008



The men finished their meeting. They all stood and walked past Nya's house. Nya joined the crowd of children following them.

A few minutes' walk beyond her house, there was a tree. The men stopped at the tree, and the strangers talked to Nya's uncle some more.

There was another tree some fifty paces past the first one. With Nya's uncle beside him, one of the men stopped at the halfway point. The other man walked the rest of the way and examined the second tree.

The first man called out to his friend in a language Nya did not understand. The friend answered in the same language, but as he walked back toward the group, he translated for the chief, and Nya could hear him.

"This is the spot, halfway between the two largest trees. We will find the water here."

Nya shook her head. What were they talking about? She knew that place like the back of her own hand. It was there, between the two trees, that the village sometimes gathered to sing and talk around a big fire.

There wasn't a single drop of water on that spot, unless it was raining!

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva reached for his gourd. He knew it to be half full, but suddenly it felt much lighter, as if there was hardly any water left in it.

Uncle Jewiir must have guessed what he was thinking. "No, Salva," he murmured. "You are too small, and not strong enough yet. Without water you will not survive the rest of the walk. Some of the others—they will be able to manage better than you."

Sure enough, there were now three women giving water to the men on the ground.

Like a miracle, the small amounts of water revived them. They were able to stagger to their feet and join the group as the walking continued.

But their five dead companions were left behind. There were no tools with which to dig, and besides, burying the dead men would have taken too much time.

Salva tried not to look as he walked past the bodies, but his eyes were drawn in their direction. He knew what would happen. Vultures would find the bodies and strip them of their rotting flesh until only the bones remained. He felt sick at the thought of those men—first dying in such a horrible way, and then having even their corpses ravaged.

If he were older and stronger, would he have given water to those men? Or would he, like most of the group, have kept his water for himself?

It was the group's third day in the desert. By sunset, they would be out of the desert, and after that, it would not be far to the Itang refugee camp in Ethiopia.

As they trudged through the heat, Salva finally had a chance to talk to Uncle about a worry that had been growing like a long shadow across his thoughts. "Uncle, if I am in Ethiopia, how will my parents ever find me? When will I be able to go back to Loun-Ariik?"

"I have talked to the others here," Uncle said. "We believe that the village of Loun-Ariik was attacked and probably burned. Your family . . ." Uncle paused and looked away. When he looked back again, his face was solemn.

"Salva, few people survived the attack on the village. Anyone still alive would have fled into the bush, and no one knows where they are now."

Salva was silent for a moment. Then he said, "At least you will be there with me. In Ethiopia."

Uncle's voice was gentle. "No, Salva. I am going to take you to the refugee camp, but then I will return to Sudan, to fight in the war."

Salva stopped walking and clutched at Uncle's arm. "But, Uncle, I will have no one! Who will be my family?"

Uncle gently loosened Salva's grip so he could take the boy's hand in his. "There will be many other people in the camp. You will become friends with some of them—you will make a kind of family there. They, too, will need people they can depend on."

Salva shook his head, unable to imagine what life would be like in the camp without Uncle. He squeezed Uncle's hand tightly.

Uncle stood quietly and said nothing more.

He knows it will be hard for me, Salva realized. He does not want to leave me there, but he has to go back and fight for our people. I musn't act like a baby—I must try to be strong. . . .

Salva swallowed hard. "Uncle, when you go back to Sudan, you might meet my parents somewhere. You could tell them where I am. Or you could talk to those you meet, and ask where the people of Loun-Ariik are now."

Uncle did not answer right away. Then he said, "Of course I will do that, Nephew."

Salva felt a tiny spark of hope. With Uncle looking for his family, there was a chance they might all be together again one day.

No one in the group had eaten anything for two days. Their water was nearly gone. Only the vision of leaving the desert kept them moving through the heat and the dust.

Early that afternoon, they came across the first evidence that the desert was receding: a few stunted trees near a shallow pool of muddy water. The water was unfit to drink, but a dead stork lay by the pond's edge. Immediately, the group began to make preparations to cook and eat the bird. Salva helped gather twigs for the fire.

As the bird roasted, Salva could hardly keep his eyes off it. There would only be enough for a bite or two for each person, but he could hardly wait.

Then he heard loud voices. Along with the rest of the

group, he turned and saw six men coming toward them. As the men approached, he could see that they were armed with guns and machetes.

The men began shouting.

"Sit down!"

"Hands on your heads!"

"All of you! Now!"

Everyone in the group sat down at once. Salva was afraid of the weapons, and he could see that the others were, too.

One of the men walked among the group and stopped in front of Uncle. Salva could tell by the ritual scarring on the man's face that he was from the Nuer tribe.

"Are you with the rebels?" the man asked.

"No," Uncle answered.

"Where have you come from? Where are you going?"

"We come from the west of the Nile," Uncle said. "We are going to Itang, to the refugee camp."

The man told Uncle to get up and leave his gun where it was. Two of the other men took Uncle to a tree several yards away and tied him to it.

Then the men moved among the group. If anyone was carrying a bag, the men opened it and took whatever

was in it. They ordered some people to remove their clothing and took that, too.

Salva was trembling. Even in the midst of his fear, he realized that for the first time on the trip, it was a good thing to be the youngest and smallest: The men would not be interested in his clothes.

When the men had finished their looting, they picked up Uncle's gun. Then they walked to the tree where Uncle was tied up.

Maybe they will leave us alone now that they have robbed us, Salva thought.

He heard them laughing.

As Salva watched, one of the men aimed his gun at Uncle.

Three shots rang out. Then the men ran away.