A LONG WALK TO WATER, I

A novel by
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BASED ON A TRUE STORY

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the teacher—everything except his eyes and his mind
slanted, everything about him was paying attention to
turned toward the front, hands folded, back perfectly
seated at cross-legged on the bench. He kept his head

Southsea, 8 June, 1985
His eyes kept flicking toward the window, through which he could see the road. The road home. Just a little while longer—a few minutes more—and he would be walking on that road.

The teacher droned on with the lesson, about the Arabic language. Salva spoke the language of his Dinka tribe at home. But in school he learned Arabic, the official language of the Sudanese government far away to the north. Eleven years old on his last birthday, Salva was a good student. He already knew the lesson, which was why he was letting his mind wander down the road ahead of his body.

Salva was well aware of how lucky he was to be able to go to school. He could not attend the entire year, because during the dry season his family moved away from their village. But during the rainy season, he could walk to the school, which was only half an hour from his home.

Salva's father was a successful man. He owned many head of cattle and worked as their village's judge—an honored, respected position. Salva had three brothers and two sisters. As each boy reached the age of about ten years, he was sent off to school. Salva's older brothers, Ariik and Ring, had gone to school before him; last year, it had been Salva's turn. His two sisters, Akit and Agnath, did not go to school. Like the other girls in the village, they stayed home and learned from their mother how to keep house.

Most of the time, Salva was glad to be able to go to school. But some days he wished he were still back at home herding cattle.

He and his brothers, along with the sons of his father's other wives, would walk with the herds to the water holes, where there was good grazing. Their responsibilities depended on how old they were. Salva's younger brother, Kuol, was taking care of just one cow; like his brothers before him, he would be in charge of more cows every year. Before Salva had begun going to school, he had helped look after the entire herd, and his younger brother as well.

The boys had to keep an eye on the cows, but the cows did not really need much care. That left plenty of time to play.

Salva and the other boys made cows out of clay. The more cows you made, the richer you were. But they had to be fine, healthy animals. It took time to make a lump of clay look like a good cow. The boys would challenge each other to see who could make the most and best cows.

Other times they would practice with their bows and arrows, shooting at small animals or birds. They weren't very good at this yet, but once in a while they got lucky.
Some of the boys moved at once, ducking their heads.

"Everyone, DOWN!" the teacher shouted.

CRACK

CRACK

The teacher cleared his throat, which drew the boys' attention to the front of the room again. He continued the lesson from where he had left off.

He would have been more comfortable, if he had a better place to sit. At least he could see other things that were happening in the room. He could hear the sounds of the boys and the teacher, but he could not see what they were doing. He knew that he would be able to hear what they were doing a few minutes before they were expected to get up.

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and hunching over. Others sat frozen, their eyes and mouths open wide. Salva covered his head with his hands and looked from side to side in panic.

The teacher edged his way along the wall to the window. He took a quick peek outside. The gunfire had stopped, but now people were shouting and running.

"Go quickly, all of you," the teacher said, his voice low and urgent. "Into the bush. Do you hear me? Not home. Don't run home. They will be going into the villages. Stay away from the villages—run into the bush."

He went to the door and looked out again.

"Go! All of you, now!"

The war had started two years earlier. Salva did not understand much about it, but he knew that rebels from the southern part of Sudan, where he and his family lived, were fighting against the government, which was based in the north. Most of the people who lived in the north were Muslim, and the government wanted all of Sudan to become a Muslim country—a place where the beliefs of Islam were followed.

But the people in the south were of different religions and did not want to be forced to practice Islam. They began fighting for independence from the north. The fighting was scattered all around southern Sudan, and now the war had come to where Salva lived.

The boys scrambled to their feet. Some of them were crying. The teacher began hurrying the students out the door.

Salva was near the end of the line. He felt his heart beating so hard that its pulse pounded in his throat and ears. He wanted to shout, "I need to go home! I must go home!" But the words were blocked by the wild thumping in his throat.

When he got to the door, he looked out. Everyone was running—men, children, women carrying babies. The air was full of dust that had been kicked up by all those running feet. Some of the men were shouting and waving guns.

Salva saw all this with one glance.

Then he was running, too. Running as hard as he could, into the bush.

Away from home.
A dozen or so people stood in a loose group on the side

prised toward the sound of the voice.

Boher looked through him. There was his whistling He

"Turn with the whistle of turn-whistle, here!

Sala wandered around until he heard the words

several by whistle. You will find someone you know

moment. One of them called out, "Whistles—ground your

Then some of the men gathered and talked for a few

speaking in these whispers or shout with fear

see the path. At first, everyone stood around uncertainly,

The people stopped walking when it grew too dark to

sought, Where is my family? When will I see them again?

through this head in rhythm with his steps. Where are we

As sala walked, the same thoughts kept going

did not have come from the whole area.

of them that they couldn't all be from the school whistle?

Other people were walking too. There were so many

for hours... until the sun was nearly gone from the sky.

He ran until he could not run anymore. Then he walked.

Sala lowered his head and ran.

Looking back, it showed him down

building anymore. He tripped and almost fell. No more

In the smoke and dust, he couldn't see the school

head. A jet plane veered away like a deck endind

could of smoke rose. Flames darted out of it base. Over

Sala looked and looked behind him, a huge black

BOOM

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SOUTHERN SYNAN, 1995
of the road. Salva scanned their faces. There was no one from his family. He recognized a few people—a woman with a baby, two men, a teenage girl—but no one he knew well. Still, it was comforting to see them.

They spent the night right there by the road, the men taking shifts to keep watch. The next morning, they began walking again. Salva stayed in the midst of the crowd with the other villagers from Loun-Ariik.

In the early afternoon, he saw a large group of soldiers up ahead.

Word passed through the crowd: “It’s the rebels.” The rebels—those who were fighting against the government.

Salva passed several rebel soldiers waiting by the side of the road. Each of them held a big gun. Their guns were not pointed at the crowd, but even so, the soldiers seemed fierce and watchful. Some of the rebels then joined the back of the line; now the villagers were surrounded.

What are they going to do to us? Where is my family?

Late in the day, the villagers arrived at the rebel camp. The soldiers ordered them to separate into two groups—men in one group, women and children and the elderly in the other. Teenage boys, it seemed, were considered men, for boys who looked to be only a few years older than Salva were joining the men’s group.

Salva hesitated for a moment. He was only eleven, but he was the son of an important family. He was Salva Mawien Dut Ariik, from the village named for his grandfather. His father always told him to act like a man—to follow the example of his older brothers and, in turn, set a good example for Kuol.

Salva took a few steps toward the men.

“Hey!”

A soldier approached Salva and raised his gun.

Salva froze. All he could see was the gun’s huge barrel, black and gleaming, as it moved toward his face.

The end of the barrel touched his chin.

Salva felt his knees turn to water. He closed his eyes.

If I die now, I will never see my family again.

Somehow, this thought strengthened him enough to keep him from collapsing in terror.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

The soldier was holding the gun with only one hand. He was not aiming it; he was using it to lift Salva’s chin so he could get a better look at his face.

“Over there,” the soldier said. He moved the gun and pointed it toward the group of women and children.
It took him a long time to fall asleep again.

"Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?"

Salta was the only child. She was now without the men, and except for the Indian whose ever was, there was sure to be fighting. Salta stayed with the group from town really. If was a matter of what the men would do to be fighting opposite direction from the rebels, for wherever the rebels were.

After that no one spoke. The men shouted to the ground, pleading.

dear Sir him and the place with the part of a gun. The men fell, they did not want to go with the rebels. A sol...motors, shells, radio equipment, Salta watched as one man. The village men were forced to carry supplies and guns and...

Salta scurried over to the wounded side. Laughed and dropped Salta on the shoulder.

"You are not a man yet. Don't be in such a hurry."

He was gone.

They had left him.

Nobody noticed.

He rushed to the door and looked out.

Salta stood so quickly that for a moment he felt dizzy.

No one else was in the barn.

Finally, he sat up and opened his eyes.

Just to see what it might be.

thing was wrong. The law very still with his eyes closed. It was before he was fully awake. Salta could feel that some...