



# A LONG WALK TO WATER, II



*A novel by*  
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BASED ON A TRUE STORY



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Salva held his breath as he scanned the faces, one by one. Then the air left his lungs and seemed to take all hope with it.

Strangers. No one from his family.

The old woman came up behind him and greeted the group. "Where are you going?" she asked.

A few of the people exchanged uneasy glances. There was no reply.

The woman put her hand on Salva's shoulder. "This

one is alone. Will you take him with you?"

Salva saw doubt on the people's faces. Several men at

the front of the group began speaking to each other.

"He is a child. He will slow us down."

"Another mouth to feed? It is already hard enough to

find food."

"He is too young to do any real work—he'll be of no

help to us."

Salva hung his head. They would leave him behind

again, just as the others had. . . .

Then a woman in the group reached out and touched



the arm of one of the men. She said nothing but looked first at the man and then at Salva.

The man nodded and turned to the group. "We will take him with us," he said.

Salva looked up quickly. A few in the group were shaking their heads and grumbling.

The man shrugged. "He is Dinka," he said, and began walking again.

The old woman gave Salva a bag of peanuts and a gourd for drinking water. He thanked her and said goodbye. Then he caught up with the group, determined not to lag behind, not to complain, not to be any trouble to anyone. He did not even ask where they were going, for fear that his questions would be unwelcome.

He knew only that they were Dinka and that they were trying to stay away from the war. He had to be content with that.

The days became a never-ending walk. Salva's feet kept time with the thoughts in his head, the same words over and over: *Where is my family? Where is my family?*

Every day he woke and walked with the group, rested at midday, and walked again until dark. They slept on the ground. The terrain changed from scrub to woodland;

they walked among stands of stunted trees. There was little to eat: a few fruits here and there, always either unripe or worm-rotten. Salva's peanuts were gone by the end of the third day.

After about a week, they were joined by more people—another group of Dinka and several members of a tribe called the Jur-chol. Men and women, boys and girls, old and young, walking, walking. . . .

Walking to nowhere.

Salva had never been so hungry. He stumbled along, somehow moving one foot ahead of the other, not noticing the ground he walked on or the forest around him or the light in the sky. Nothing was real except his hunger, once a hollow in his stomach but now a deep buzzing pain in every part of him.

Usually he walked among the Dinka, but today, shuffling along in a daze, he found he had fallen a little behind. Walking next to him was a young man from the Jur-chol. Salva didn't know much about him, except that his name was Buksa.

As they walked along, Buksa slowed down. Salva wondered sluggishly if they shouldn't try to keep up a bit better.

Just then Buksa stopped walking. Salva stopped, too.

He pointed up at the branches of the tree, "Beehive. A fine, large one."

Salva hurried off to call the rest of the group. He had heard of this, that the fur-choil could follow the call of the bird called the honey guide! But he had never seen it done before.

Honey! This night, they would feast!

But he was too weak and hungry to ask why they were standing still.

Buksa cocked his head and furrowed his brow, listening. They stood motionless for several moments. Salva could hear the noise of the rest of the group ahead of them, a few faint voices, birds calling somewhere in the trees. . . .

He strained his ears. What was it? Jet planes? Bombs? Was the gunfire getting closer, instead of farther away? Salva's fear began to grow until it was even stronger than his hunger. Then—

"Ah." A slow smile spread over Buksa's face. "There, You hear?"

Salva frowned and shook his head.

"Yes, there it is again. Come!" Buksa began walking very quickly. Salva struggled to keep up. Twice Buksa paused to listen, then kept going even faster.

"What—" Salva started to ask.

Buksa stopped abruptly in front of a very large tree. "Yes!" he said. "Now go call the others!"

By now Salva had caught the feeling of excitement. "But what shall I tell them?"

"The bird. The one I was listening to. He led me right here." Buksa's smile was even bigger now. "You see 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?"

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

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

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!"

