

A LONG WALK TO WATER, III



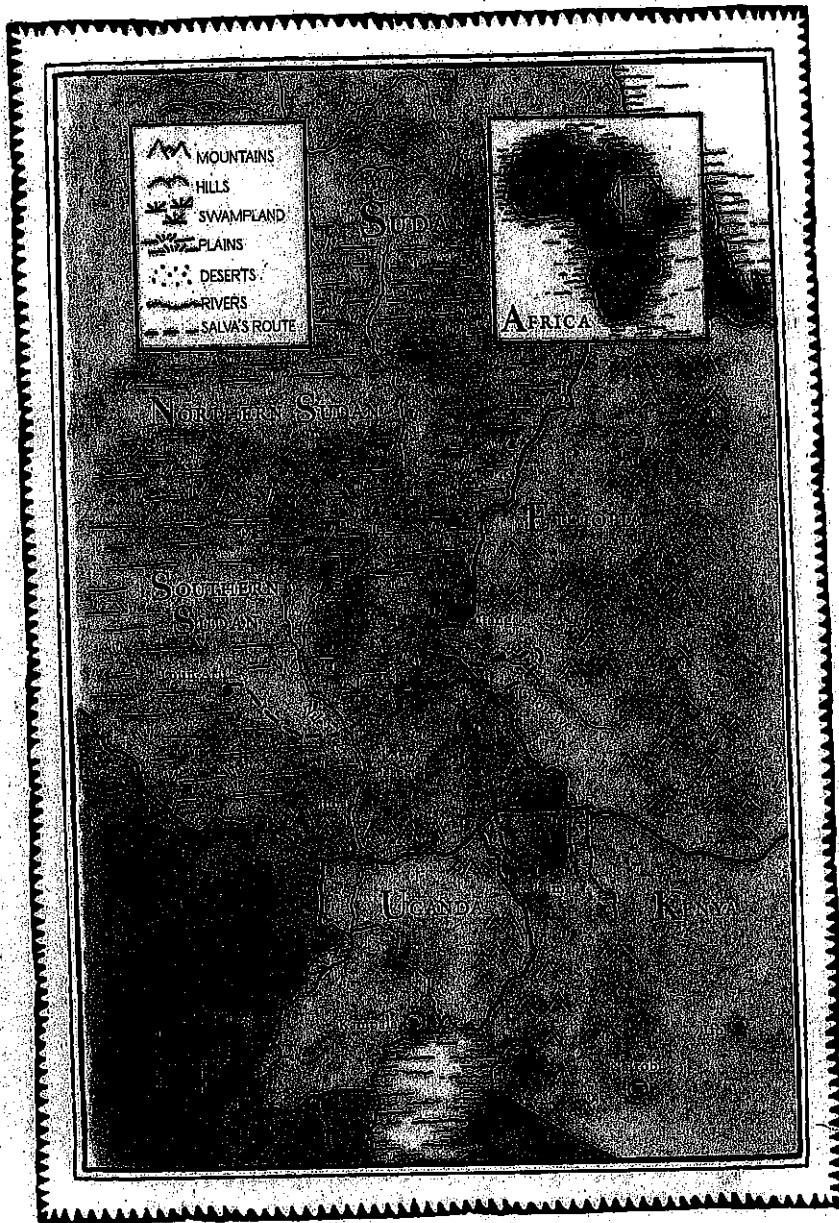
A novel by
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BASED ON A TRUE STORY



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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 groups' third day in the desert. By sunset, they would be out of the desert, and after that, it would not be far to the Kang 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? Where will I be able to go back to Loun-Artik?"

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

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 Jewit 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, 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 scarting on the mans 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

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.

LEVEN

process of clearing more of
of the... hard work. The
is... of... The
bec... dangerous
discovery... in the grass
to... to the pond
to... surely
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... question, he shook his
... eye...

Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, 1985



They buried Uncle in a hole about two feet deep, a hole that had already been made by some kind of animal. Out

of respect for him, the group walked no more that day but took time to mourn the man who had been their leader.

Salva was too numb to think, and when thoughts did come to him, they seemed silly. He was annoyed that they would not be able to eat after all: While the men had been looting the group, more birds had arrived and pecked at the roasted stork until it was nothing but bones.

The time for grief was short, and the walking began again soon after dark. Despite the numbness in his heart, Salva was amazed to find himself walking faster and more boldly than he had before.

Marial was gone. Uncle was gone, too, murdered by those Nuer men right before Salva's eyes. Marial and Uncle were no longer by his side, and they never would be again, but Salva knew that both of them would have wanted him to survive, to finish the trip and reach the Itang refugee camp safely. It was almost as if they had left their strength with him, to help him on his journey.

He could not think of any other explanation for the way he felt. But there was no doubt: Beneath his terrible sadness, he felt stronger.

Now that Salva was without Uncle's care and protection, the group's attitude toward him changed. Once again, they grumbled that he was too young and small, that he

the refugees were boys and young men who had run away from their villages when the war came. They had run because they were in double danger: from the war itself and from the armies on both sides. Young men and sometimes even boys were often forced to join the fighting, which was why their families and communities—including Salvas schoolmaster—had sent the boys running into the bush at the first sign of fighting.

Children who arrived at the refugee camp without their families were grouped together, so Salva was separated at once from the people he had traveled with. Even though they had not been kind to him, at least he had known them. Now, among strangers once again, he felt uncertain and maybe even afraid.

As he walked through the camp with several other boys, Salva glanced at every face he passed. Uncle had said that no one knew where his family was for certain . . . so wasn't there at least a chance that they might be here in the camp?

Salva looked around at the masses of people stretched out as far as he could see. He felt his heart sink a little, but he clenched his hands into fists and made himself a promise.

If they are here, I will find them.

might slow them down or start crying again, as he had in the desert.

No one shared anything with him, neither food nor company. Uncle had always shared the animals and birds he shot with everyone in the group. But it seemed they had all forgotten that, for Salva now had to beg for scraps, which were given grudgingly.

The way they were treating him made Salva feel stronger still. *There is no one left to help me. They think I am weak and useless.*

Salva lifted his head proudly. *They are wrong, and I will prove it.*

Salva had never before seen so many people in one place at the same time. How could there be this many people in the world?

More than hundreds. More than thousands. Thousands upon thousands.

People in lines and masses and clumps. People milling around, standing, sitting or crouching on the ground, lying down with their legs curled up because there was not enough room to stretch out.

The refugee camp at Itang was filled with people of all ages—men, women, girls, small children. . . . But most of

* * *

After so many weeks of walking, Salva found it strange to be staying in one place. During that long, terrible trek, finding a safe place to stop and stay for a while had been desperately important. But now that he was at the camp, he felt restless—almost as if he should begin walking again.

The camp was safe from the war. There were no men with guns or machetes, no planes with bombs overhead. On the evening of his very first day, Salva was given a bowl of boiled maize to eat, and another one the next morning. Already things were better here than they had been during the journey.

During the afternoon of the second day, Salva picked his way slowly through the crowds. Eventually, he found himself standing near the gate that was the main entrance to the camp, watching the new arrivals enter. It did not seem as if the camp could possibly hold any more, but still they kept coming: long lines of people, some emaciated, some hurt or sick, all exhausted.

As Salva scanned the faces, a flash of orange caught his eye.

Orange . . . an orange headscarf . . .

He began pushing and stumbling past people. Someone spoke to him angrily, but he did not stop to excuse

himself. He could still see the vivid spot of orange—yes, it was a headscarf—the woman's back was to him, but she was tall, like his mother—he had to catch up, there were too many people in the way—

A half-sob broke free from Salva's lips. He mustn't lose track of her!



"Mother! Mother, please!"

Salva opened his mouth to call out again. But the words did not come. Instead, he closed his mouth, lowered his head, and turned away.

The woman in the orange headscarf was not his mother. He knew this for certain, even though she was still far away and he had not seen her face.

Uncle's words came back to him: "The village of Loun-Avrik was attacked . . . burned. Few people survived . . . no one knows where they are now."

In the moment before calling out to the woman a second time, Salva realized what Uncle had truly meant—something Salva had known in his heart for a long time:

His family was gone. They had been killed by bullets or bombs, starvation or sickness—it did not matter how. What mattered was that Salva was on his own now.

He felt as though he were standing on the edge of a giant hole—a hole filled with the black despair of nothingness.

I am alone now.

I am all that is left of my family.

His father, who had sent Salva to school . . . brought him treats, like mangoes . . . trusted him to take care of the herd. . . . His mother, always ready with food and milk and a soft hand to stroke Salva's head. His brothers and sisters, whom he had laughed with and played with and looked after. . . . He would never see them again.

How can I go on without them?

But how can I not go on? They would want me to survive . . . to grow up and make something of my life . . . to honor their memories.

What was it Uncle had said during that first terrible day in the desert? "Do you see that group of bushes? You need only to walk as far as those bushes. . . ."

Uncle had helped him get through the desert that way, bit by bit, one step at a time. Perhaps . . . perhaps Salva could get through life at the camp in the same way.

I need only to get through the rest of this day, he told himself.

This day and no other.

If someone had told Salva that he would live in the camp for *six years*, he would never have believed it.

Six years later: July 1991



"They are going to close the camp. Everyone will have to leave."

"That's impossible. Where will we go?"

"That's what they're saying. Not just this camp. All of them."

The rumors skittered around the camp. Everyone was uneasy. As the days went by, the uneasiness grew into fear.

Salva was almost seventeen years old now—a young man. He tried to learn what he could about the rumors by talking to the aid workers in the camp. They told him that the Ethiopian government was near collapse. The refugee camps were run by foreign aid groups, but it was the government that permitted them to operate. If the government fell, what would the new rulers do about the camps?

They are driving us back to Sudan, Salva thought. They will force us to cross the river. . . .

It was the rainy season. Swollen by the rains, the Gillos current would be merciless.

The Gillo was well known for something else, too. Crocodiles.

When that question was answered, no one was ready. One rainy morning, as Salva walked toward the school tent, long lines of trucks were arriving. Masses of armed soldiers poured out of the trucks and ordered everyone to leave.

The orders were not just to leave the camp but to leave Ethiopia.

Immediately, there was chaos. It was as if the people ceased to be people and instead became an enormous herd of panicked, stampeding two-legged creatures.

Salva was caught up in the surge. His feet barely touched the ground as he was swept along by the crowd of thousands of people running and screaming. The rain, which was falling in torrents, added to the uproar.

The soldiers fired their guns into the air and chased the people away from the camp. But once they were beyond the area surrounding the camp, the soldiers continued to drive them onward, shouting and shooting. As he dashed ahead, Salva heard snatches of talk.

"The river."

"They're chasing us toward the river!"

Salva knew which river they meant: the Gillo River, which was along the border between Ethiopia and Sudan.

Ethiopia-Sudan-Kenya, 1991-92



Hundreds of people lined the riverbank. The soldiers were forcing some of them into the water, prodding them with their rifle butts, shooting into the air.

Other people, afraid of the soldiers and their guns, were leaping into the water on their own. They were immediately swept downstream by the powerful current.

As Salva crouched on the bank and watched, a young man near him plunged into the water. The current carried him swiftly downstream, but he was also making a little progress across the river.

Then Salva saw the telltale flick of a crocodile's tail as it flopped into the water near the young man. Moments later, the man's head jerked oddly—once, twice. His mouth was open. Perhaps he was screaming, but Salva could not

water had probably saved his life. But there was no time to marvel over this. More crocodiles were launching themselves off the banks. The rain, the mad current, the bullets, the crocodiles, the welter of arms and legs, the screams, the blood. . . . He had to get across somehow.

Salva did not know how long he was in the water.

It felt like hours.

It felt like years.

When at last the tips of his toes touched mud, he forced his limbs to make swimming motions one last time. He crawled onto the riverbank and collapsed. Then he lay there in the mud, choking and sobbing for breath.

Later, he would learn that at least a thousand people had died trying to cross the river that day, drowned or shot or attacked by crocodiles.

How was it that he was not one of the thousand? Why was he one of the lucky ones?

The walking began again. Walking—but to where? No one knew anything for sure. Where was Salva supposed to go?

Not home. There is still war everywhere in Sudan. Not back to Ethiopia. The soldiers would shoot us.

Kenya. There are supposed to be refugee camps in Kenya.

hear him over the din of the crowd and the rain. . . . A moment later, the man was pulled under. A cloud of red stained the water.

The rain was still pouring down—and now bullets were pouring down as well. The soldiers started shooting into the river, aiming their guns at the people who were trying to get across.

Why? Why are they shooting at us?

Salva had no choice. He jumped into the water and began to swim. A boy next to him grabbed him around the neck and clung to him tightly. Salva was forced under the surface without time to take more than a quick, shallow breath.

Salva struggled—kicking, clawing. *He's holding on to me too hard. . . . I can't. . . . air. . . . no air left. . . .*

Suddenly, the boy's grip loosened, and Salva launched himself upward. He threw his head back and took a huge gulp of air. For a few moments he could do nothing but gasp and choke.

When his vision cleared, he saw why the boy had let go: He was floating with his head down, blood streaming from a bullet hole in the back of his neck. Stunned, Salva realized that being forced under the

Salva made up his mind. He would walk south, to Kenya. He did not know what he would find once he got there, but it seemed to be his best choice.

Crowds of other boys followed him. Nobody talked about it, but by the end of the first day Salva had become the leader of a group of about fifteen hundred boys. Some were as young as five years old.

Those smallest boys reminded Salva of his brother Kuol. But then he had an astounding thought. *Kuol isn't that age anymore—he is a teenager now!* Salva found that he could only think of his brothers and sisters as they were when he had last seen them, not as they would be now.

They were traveling through a part of Sudan still plagued by war. The fighting and bombing were worst during the day, so Salva decided that the group should hide when the sun shone and do their walking at night.

But in the darkness, it was hard to be sure they were headed in the right direction. Sometimes the boys traveled for days only to realize that they had gone in a huge circle. This happened so many times that Salva lost count. They met other groups of boys, all walking south. Every group had stories of terrible peril: boys who had been hurt or killed by bullets or bombs, attacked by wild animals, or left behind because they were too weak or sick to keep up.

When Salva heard the stories, he thought of Marial. He felt his determination growing, as it had in the days after Uncle's death.

I will get us safely to Kenya, he thought. No matter how hard it is.

He organized the group, giving everyone a job: scavenge for food; collect firewood; stand guard while the group slept. Whatever food or water they found was shared equally among all of them. When the smaller boys grew too tired to walk, the older boys took turns carrying them on their backs.

There were times when some of the boys did not want to do their share of the work. Salva would talk to them, encourage them, coax and persuade them. Once in a while he had to speak sternly, or even shout. But he tried not to do this too often.

It was as if Salva's family were helping him, even though they were not there. He remembered how he had looked after his little brother, Kuol. But he also knew what it felt like to have to listen to the older ones, Ariik and Ring. And he could recall the gentleness of his sisters; the strength of his father; the care of his mother.

Most of all, he remembered how Uncle had encouraged him in the desert.

One step at a time . . . one day at a time. Just today—just
this day to get through . . .

Salva told himself this every day. He told the boys in the
group, too.
And one day at a time, the group made its way
to Kenya.
More than twelve hundred boys arrived safely.
It took them a year and a half.

Ifo refugee camp, Kenya, 1992-96



Salva was now twenty-two years old. For the past five years he had been living in refugee camps in northern Kenya: first at the Kakuma camp, then at Ifo.

Kakuma had been a dreadful place, isolated in the middle of a dry, windy desert. Tall fences of barbed wire enclosed the camp; you weren't allowed to leave unless you were leaving for good. It felt almost like a prison.

Seventy thousand people lived at Kakuma. Some said it was more, eighty or ninety thousand. There were families who had managed to escape together, but again, as in Ethiopia, most of the refugees were orphaned boys and young men.

The local people who lived in the area did not like having the refugee camp nearby. They would often sneak in and steal from the refugees. Sometimes fights broke out, and people were hurt or killed.

After two years of misery at Kakuma, Salva decided to

leave the camp. He had heard of another refugee camp, far to the south and west, where he hoped things would be better.

Once again, Salva and a few other young men walked for months. But when they reached the camp at Ifo, they found that things were no different than at Kakuma. Everyone was always hungry, and there was never enough food. Many were sick or had gotten injured during their long, terrible journeys to reach the camp; the few medical volunteers could not care for everyone who needed help. Salva felt fortunate that at least he was in good health.

He wanted desperately to work—to make a little money that he could use to buy extra food. He even dreamed of saving some money so that one day he could leave the camp and continue his education somehow.

But there was no work. There was nothing to do but wait—wait for the next meal, for news of the world outside the camp. The days were long and empty. They stretched into weeks, then months, then years.

It was hard to keep hope alive when there was so little to feed it.

Michael was an aid worker from a country called Ireland. Salva had met a lot of aid workers. They came and went,

separate from each other, so it was easy to tell them apart. In Arabic words, the letters were always joined, and a letter might look different depending on what came before or after it.

"Sure, you're doing lovely," Michael said the day Salva learned to write his own name. "You learn fast, because you work so hard."

Salva did not say what he was thinking: that he was working hard because he wanted to learn to read English before Michael left the camp. Salva did not know if any of the other aid workers would take the time to teach him.

"But once in a while it's good to take a break from work. Let's do something a wee bit different for a change. I'm thinking you'll be good at this—you're a tall lad!"

So Salva learned two things from Michael: how to read and how to play volleyball.

A rumor was spreading through the camp. It began as a whisper, but soon Salva felt as if it were a roar in his ears. He could think of nothing else.

America.

The United States.

The rumor was that about three thousand boys and

staying at the camp for several weeks or, at most, a few months. The aid workers came from many different countries, but they usually spoke English to each other. Few of the refugees spoke English, so communication with the aid workers was often difficult.

But after so many years in the camps, Salva could understand a little English. He even tried to speak it once in a while, and Michael almost always seemed to understand what Salva was trying to say.

One day after the morning meal, Michael spoke to Salva. "You seem interested in learning English," he said. "How'd you like to learn to read?"

The lessons began that very day. Michael wrote down three letters on a small scrap of paper:

"A, B, C," he said, handing the scrap to Salva. "A, B, C," Salva repeated.

The whole rest of the day, Salva went around saying, "A, B, C," mostly to himself but sometimes aloud, in a quiet voice. He looked at the paper a hundred times and practiced drawing the letters in the dirt with a stick, over and over again.

Salva remembered learning to read Arabic when he was young. The Arabic alphabet had twenty-eight letters; the English, only twenty-six. In English, the letters stayed

young men from the refugee camps would be chosen to go live in America!

Salva could not believe it. How could it be true? How would they get there? Where would they live? Surely it was impossible. . . .

But as the days went by, the aid workers confirmed the news.

It was all anyone could talk about.

"They only want healthy people. If you are sick, you won't be chosen."

"They won't take you if you have ever been a soldier with the rebels."

"Only orphans are being chosen. If you have any family left, you have to stay here."

Weeks passed, then months. One day a notice was posted at the camp's administration tent. It was a list of names. If your name was on the list, it meant that you had made it to the next step: the interview. After the interview, you might go to America.

Salva's name was not on the list.

Nor was it on the next list, or the one after that.

Many of the boys being chosen were younger than Salva. *Perhaps America doesn't want anyone too old*, he thought.

Each time a list was posted, Salva's heart would pound as he read the names. He tried not to lose hope. At the same time, he tried not to hope too much.

Sometimes he felt he was being torn in two by the hoping and the not hoping.

One windy afternoon, Michael rushed over to Salva's tent.

"Salva! Come quickly! Your name is on the list today!"

Salva leapt to his feet and was running even before his friend had finished speaking. When he drew near the administration tent, he slowed down and tried to catch his breath.

He might be wrong. It might be another person named Salva. I won't look too soon. . . . From far away I might see a name that looks like mine, and I need to be sure.

Salva shouldered his way through the crowd until he was standing in front of the list. He raised his head slowly and began reading through the names.

There it was.

Salva Dut—Rochester, New York.

Salva was going to New York.

He was going to America!

