A LONG WALK TO WATER

A novel by
LINDA SUE PARK

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

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when the dead men would have risen too much time.

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“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 must try to be strong...
Three shots rang out. Then the men ran away.

At Uncle As Salva watched one of the men aim his gun

He heard their laughing

He saw them disappear

Where they will have us alone now that they have robbed

was led up

At Uncle's Gun, then they walked to the tree where Uncle

When the men had finished their looting they picked

be interested in these clothes

And to be the youngest and smallest. The men would not

realized that for the first time on the trip it was a good

Saba was neighing down in the middle of the field. He

and look that too.

was in it. They ordered some people to remove their cloth-

were carrying a bag, the men opened it and took whatever

Then the men moved amongst the group. If anyone

Yards away and led him to it

it was two of the other men took Uncle to a tree several

The men told Uncle to get up and leave the gun where

are going to take to the refugee camp

We came from the west of the Nile, Uncle said. "We

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

"No, Uncle answered.

"Are you with the rebels? the man asked.

the man face that was from the other tribe

in front of Uncle Saba could tell by the initial scarring on

One of the men walked around the group and stopped

were too.

shield of the weapons; and he could see that the others

Everyone in the group sat down at once. Saba was

"Will of you now?"

"Hands on your head!"

"Sit down"

The men began shouting

with guns and motorcycles.

as the men approached, he could see that they were armed

group, be turned and saw six men coming toward them.
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

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
If they are here, I will find them.

Promised.

he closed his hands into fists and made himself a

out as far as he could see. He felt his heart sink. A little bit

Sheila looked around at the masses of people standing

the camp

Vespre there at least a chance that they might be here in

that no one knew where his family was. For certain... so

boy's. Sheila glanced at every face he passed. Little herd said

as he walked through the camp with several other

uncertain and marred even by

children. Now among strangers once again, he felt

known. Now among strangers once again, he felt

though they had not been kind to him, at least he had

raised at once from the people he had talked with when

their families were gathered together, so Sheila was safe.

Children who walked at the refugee camp without

the first sign of fighting

schoolmaster—had seen the boys running into the bush at

was why their families and communities—Hinduing families

even boys were open faces to join the fighting which

from the windows of both sides. Young men and sometimes

case they were in double danger from the war itself and

from their villages when the war came. They had run away

the refugees were boys and young men who had run away

The refugee camp at Dung was filled with people of all

not enough room to stretch out

lie down with their legs curved up because there was

the ground. Standing sitting or crouching on the ground,

people in lines and masses and clumps. People—all

sands upon thousands.

more than hundreds. More than thousands. Then-

the world?

at the same time. How could there be this many people in

Shuler had never before seen so many people in one place

above it.

Shuler lifted his head proudly. They are wrong and I will

we will

already

stomach. Still there is no one left to help me. I think I can

The way they were treating him made Shuler red

which were given. In the

had all forgotten them. For Shuler now had to beg for scraps.

he shot with everyone in the group. But it seemed they

company. Uncle had always shared the animals and birds

No one shared anything with him, neither food nor

the desert

mutter slow them down or start crying again as he had in
* * *

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!
something stays bad known in his heart for a long time
and it's better to be kind and help each other than to harm

In the moment before calling out to the woman a sec-

knows where they are now

with us all dead, burned, few people survived... no one

Linde's words come back to him: "The village of Loun-

still far away and he had not seen her here.

mother. He knew this for certain, even though she was

The woman in the orange headscarf was not his

read his head and turned away

words did not come. Instead, he closed his mouth, low-

saliva opened his mouth to call our sehan. But the

"Mother! Mother, please!"

Ilang refugee camp, Ethiopia, 1985
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?
which was along the border between Ethiopia and Sudan. Sally knew which trees were meant the clio’s river.

"They're chasing us toward the river"

"The river"

As the dashed shells, sally heard snatches of talk:

drive them onward, shouting and shouting

the area surrounding the camp, the soldiers continued to

the people away from the camp, but once they were beyond

people heard their guns into the air and chased

which was falling in counties, added to the uproar

thousands of people running and streaming. The rain,

rode the ground as she was swept along by the crowd of

sally was caught up in the surge. His feet barely

of panicked, stampeding two-legged creatures

closed to people and instead became an enormous herd

immediately there was chaos. It was so the people

Ethiopia

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

soldiers pointed out of the trucks and ordered everyone

ten, long lines of trucks were anything massed of and

One rainy morning as sally walked toward the school

When their question was answered, no one was ready.
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
Kenyu There are supposed to be refuge camps in Kenya.

Not back to Diphoya. The soldiers would shoot us.

Not home. There is still war everywhere in Sudan.

Supposed to go.

No one knows anything for sure. Whether we sell.

The walking began again. Walking—pull to where?

was he one of the lucky ones?

How was it then. He was not one of the thousands. Why

or Meadows by crocodiles.

had died trying to cross the river that day drown to shore.

Later he would learn that at least a thousand people

there in the mud, choking and sobbing for breath.

He crawled onto the rocks and collapsed. Then he ley

forced his limbs to make stalling motions one last time.

When at last the tips of his toes touched and he

fell like years.

fell like hours.

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

the blood... He had to get across somehow.

the crocodiles, the water of arms and legs, the screams,

screes on the bank. The rain, the mud current, the bellies,

intact over here. More crocodiles were branching in.

water had probably saved his life, but there was no time to

Sala realized that being forced under the

shout from a plier hole in the back of his neck.

get on the top. The boys kept running and Sala jumped.

suddenly the boys, kept running and Sala launched

...do hand... I can't... it's all lost...

Pasha

suction without time to take more then a quick, shallow

neck and clung to him tightly. Sala was forced under the

neck began to swim. A boy next to him grabbed him around the

Sala had no choice. He jumped into the water and

Why are they shooting at us... to get across.

The river among their guns at the people who were trying

pointing down as well. The soldiers started shooting into

The rain was still pointing down—now bullets were

A cloud of red stained the water.

met here the man was pulled under

hear him over the din of the crowd and the rain...
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, Artik 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.
It took them a year and a half
more than twelve hundred boys arrived safely
to Kenya.

And one day at a time, the group made its way
across the land.

Salva told himself this every day: He told the boys in the

camp that he was not going to give up.

One step at a time... one day at a time. Just today—just
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,
staying at the camp for several weeks on, 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. "Would you like to learn to read?"

"Yes," Salva replied.


The whole rest of the day, Salva went around saying, "A, B, C, D," mostly to himself but sometimes aloud, in a quiet voice. He looked at the letters a hundred times and practiced drawing them 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. In English, the letters stayed the same, but the sounds were different.
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 was going to New York.

He was going to America!