



FAMILY TEARS APART

NOVEL





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Family Tears Apart

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DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to all the innocent civilians who were killed and those who died of hunger and diseases in South Sudan.

It is, likewise, wholeheartedly and proudly dedicated to readers all over the world.

DISCLAIMER



This book is in large part a work of fiction. Although the story was inspired by actual events, the names, persons and characters are inventions of the author. Therefore, any references to historical events, to real people, living or dead, or locales are entirely coincidental. Usage of the real names of towns and villages in South Sudan is intended only to give the novel a sense of reality and authenticity.

Family Tears Apart shouldn't be taken as a definite history or a collection of historical facts about the South Sudan civil war, nor should it be construed as an accusation or praise of, or defamation against, any foreign country, tribe, clan, person or political organisation.

Note 1: The stories or folktales being told by the characters in this book are stories that have been handed down from generation to generation over many, many years across Nuer land. Nobody knows who first told them. However, what everyone knows is that they have been part of Nuer society for a long time and might be very popular in the African community. I, therefore, retold them in my own way and words but I don't own any copyright to each story.

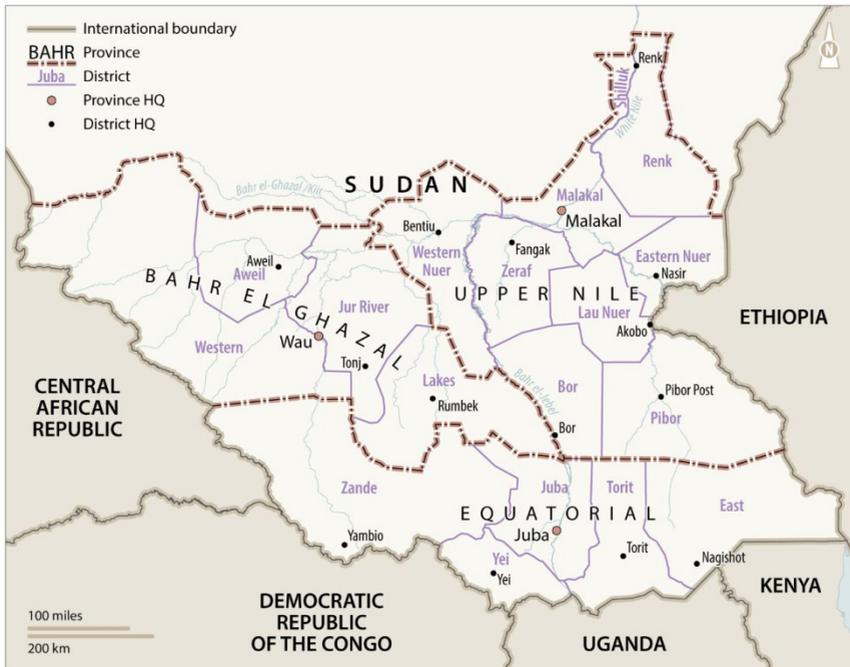
Note 2: Because many of the South Sudan-era military terms, slang or foreign words may be confusing or incomprehensible to readers and the forthcoming generation, a glossary of terms appears at the end of the book.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into four main parts with their chapters. It also includes a glossary and a chronology of important events from the earliest times of the Condominium and the attainment of independence of united Sudan in 1956, and the first and second civil wars that occurred in the run-up to South Sudan's independence. The summary of the four main parts is as follows:

- ▶ Part One attempts to reconceptualise the contentment of country life before the outbreak of the civil war in South Sudan.
- ▶ Part Two talks about life on the run at the outbreak of the civil war in 2013 and 2014.
- ▶ Part Three focuses on the darkest journey after the main character, Mi-diit, and his family members are forced out of their homeland between 2014 and 2015. The darkest journey finally ends in exile.
- ▶ Part Four shows the sufferings of Mi-diit and his siblings in exile.

MAP OF SOUTH SUDAN



PROLOGUE



If you are blessed enough to still have both your parents or either of them, your siblings or any other caring family member or friend in this world with you, please go to them physically or call them. Tell them you love them. Do anything for them right now, not tomorrow, so that you don't let the regret I carry in my life mar your dear life. Whether you have enough or not, you must love, help and cherish them from today because some people are meant to stay with us only briefly in this world. Because only God knows who will go soon and who will not, don't wait until you lose them so that you don't live a life of regret.

My name is Mi-diit Mi-go, to begin with. I am thirteen years old and turning fourteen this year. I was named by my paternal grandfather after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed by the then southern rebels and the Khartoum government in 2005. This Peace Agreement ended Africa's longest civil war. The CPA was later named '*Mal-Mi-diit*' by the local people, including my grandfather, who had been a member of the rebellion for most of his life.

'Mal-Mi-diit' literally means 'Big Peace' – the CPA – in the Naath dialect.

"Mal Mi-diit was signed shortly after you were born," my grandfather would tell me.

Some people may wonder why my name is not Mal Mi-diit. My name is shortened to Mi-diit but that does not mean my name is not linked to the 'Big Peace'.

In fact, I am currently not proud of this name anymore because I am not enjoying the 'Big Peace' linked to it. I am now instead facing a big war that will not abate until my people, who pride themselves on their tribes and bravery, come together and identify themselves as South Sudanese.

Given my age, my culture does not allow me to be telling you my story of depression and horror. But I must tell it to you to save the lives of the silent sufferers and as a lesson to the upcoming generations.

I ran away from our beautiful and natural life in a grass-thatched hut in South Sudan and ended up in a dejected exile. We thought that exile would be safer for the few of us who didn't die in South Sudan at the hands of the armed men or despoiled by beasts, or from hunger and disease, but I was wrong. I blame none other than he who holds a gun in South Sudan. Gun-holders from all sides of the conflict contributed to my suffering. I used to be a happy little boy with a promising future. But the gun-holders fired their guns, and here my little brother and I, the only surviving members of our ten-member rural family, are wasting away with hunger and insecurity in our *Rakoba*, in a foreign land. I never thought that I would share the story of my life with anyone but thankfully you are reading it now.

This is the story of my life and my dead family members. You should read it to the end to get informed on what happened, is happening, and will likely happen again in South Sudan at the hands of the merciless and insensitive political and military leaders. It is a story of misery but the saddest part of it will be when you won't share it with others. Share the story with others because it does not represent my voice alone. It represents the voice of the thousands of voiceless and defenceless victims who cannot and will not share their experiences for one reason or another.

As you are soon going to read my story, get prepared to weep because nobody is as sad as an orphan who has no food to eat, no secure place to live in, no parental care. There is nothing worse than being orphaned and uncared for at this fledgling age.

I was very young when the war started in South Sudan, too young to remember everything. However, I have done my best to remember what I can and share the story of my family. I tell it not to seek help, sympathy or attention, but to raise awareness for other children who are still suffering in South Sudan, and across the world, as I did. And perhaps the world, which remains silent and turns its back on the sufferings and deaths in my country, will understand that South Sudanese children's souls are as precious as the souls of children in England, the USA, China and other parts of the world.

I do not pretend to be older than you, reader, but the truth is that despite my age, I am old enough to confess that life is indeed a mystery. I have seen with my naked eyes the dead body of my grandfather who was slaughtered. I have seen my mother, who was as beautiful as the evening sun close her eyes for the last time as a result of hunger. I have seen the skeleton of my grandmother who was eaten by wild beasts. I have seen and touched the dead body of my little sister who was overrun by a rich man's car, and I have seen my elder sister being kidnapped at night and carried away by unknown people. As I mentioned earlier, my family was comprised of ten members before the war; but now, it consists of only my little brother and me!

Please, reader, disseminate this story and tell everyone near you that Mi-diit wants all the existing nations and all the yet-to-be-born nations on earth to learn from South Sudan, if not by our precepts, at least by our examples, the dangers that lurk with tribalism, sectarianism and incompetence and how dangerous it is to elect leaders based on

technical 'know-who' rather than technical 'know-how.'

Thank you for wanting to read my sad story. It means a lot to me to know that you will, after reading this book, be aware of the evil things that happen to children. I now ask for no more than the justice and the safety of children and the elderly people in South Sudan and across the world.

Love you!

*Mi-diit Mi-goa,
Goria – Politaria
Summer, 2018 AD*

A Story of a Destroyed Family and a Stolen Childhood in South Sudan



PART ONE

**LIFE BEFORE
THE WAR**







While they are saying, "Peace and Safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labour pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. —1 Thessalonians 5:3





Chapter 1

It was one windy summer afternoon in the year 2013. From the horizon, the sky was quickly turning from blue to dark. Heavy rain was beckoning.

I was nine years old, living happily with my family near Leer. Leer was a modest, lowly populated town planned among an array of beautiful green palm and neem trees that dotted every space to the nearby shrubs and bushes. Its streets, mostly dusty, had well-arranged shops running from one end to the other.

Freshly emerged from the devastation wrought by a long war of independence, the shops, though made of planks of palm wood and sisal messed fabric, were a testament to the unrelenting resilience of a people determined to rebuild and get on with their lives. In these shops were found all the people's daily needs, from sweet creamy Arab sweets, *thoar-katoum* and fresh vegetables to motorcycle spares. It simply was a lifeline town as it had been during the liberation wars when its airstrip, to the right of the town gates, received daily tonnes of relief assistance, access to which was a matter of life and death

for many. Leer was incomplete without the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital, Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA) operations, a World Food Programme (WFP) centre and without the role it played as a home to many great NGOs that fought tooth and nail to safeguard millions from the ravages of the scourge of war.

We were six children in total: my three brothers, Goy and Gai, who were two and six years old respectively, and Temdor, the first born, who was fifteen. Then there were my two sisters, Nyagoa, who was two years older than me, and Nyachanguoth, the third youngest, who was four at the time.

I was three years old when my grandparents joined us. They were too old to live alone in Giil village. Besides, it was so nice sharing with them the comfort of our home, especially owing to the fact that endless times of sweet old storytelling were here with us. Who could refuse?

The pair were not just storytellers, they were teachers as well. They were soft-spoken, yet their teachings made an indelible mark upon our lives! Their humble home was in Giil, a couple of miles north of Leer.

Temdor, who had the uncanny habit of laughing at every benign joke, departed soon after, to Sudan and later proceeded to Libya in search of greener pastures. This was two years prior to the post-independence civil war in South Sudan. He believed that acquiring a better education outside the country would improve his chances to support his family and he pursued this line of thought zealously.

The name of our country village is Pading. It is a rural village built on sandy ground surrounded by big woods full of different kinds of trees and bushes. Many animals and birds lived there. Most of the people in Pading lived in round thatched huts. Some huts would go

for up to nine years and sometimes even up to fourteen years without being renovated. The richer villagers had three or four huts, one for sleeping, one for cooking, one to store food, and one to keep cattle and goats. Because it was feared that hyenas, leopards or lions might break into the hut where cattle and goats were kept at night, a young man would always sleep with them to protect them from aggression. Sometimes such aggression would be committed by a human thief. A small tributary called Guol jutted out of the village towards the north. It was the village's source of clean water and had an endless supply of different species of fish – Nile perch, tilapia, Binny carp, tiger fish and catfish, among many others. But in war times, the river bore the brunt of the war. The Arab enemies pursued the local inhabitants and slayed women and children, whose bodies they left to rot in the water. The stench from the death emanated from there. No one ever believed the river would ever return to its original use again. However, thanks to the teamwork by selfless locals supported by NGO assistance programmes, livelihoods were rebuilt.

People used canoes to cross to the other sides of the river to Lual, Gaatdor and Booth villages. Pading's beautiful natural forests were the places from which the village children gathered wildflowers, honey and birds' eggs and ate them. How I loved the village life and how I loved the village rain when a clap of thunder would sound very wild. The sky of our beautiful village would be pitch-black in all corners as a result of the presence of heavy and thick clouds. The young children would get ready when the rain began to fall in torrents. They would then go out to play in the rain when it subsided. Only unhappy children would stay indoors during the rain, but the happy ones would sing in groups: '*Chi nhial deem, kore-wayway! Nhial e demni kore-wayway...*' Nothing was loved more by the village children than rain. There was a type of rain that the village children called '*Nhial-guini*' or '*stone rain*'. Children wouldn't miss that rain because

they collected the ice that fell with the rain and put it in their mouths until it melted.

Young adults herded cattle at riverside camps during the dry seasons and grew millet and other grains in fixed settlements during the rainy seasons. Fruits and vegetables for consumption were grown seasonally. Most of the villagers, with the exception of my grandfather, knew nothing about the outside world. What they only knew were their cattle and goods which were used as currency rather than money. They didn't use money much because they kept cattle, goats and sheep for marriage purposes and consumption.

My older brother, Temdor, would go to the forest with my father and grandfather to hunt wild animals and birds that they would, later on, share with the neighbours. The two fathers and two sons had once killed three antelopes and each returned home carrying one antelope.

Almost everyone in Pading was a pastoralist and cattle keeper. Our family had thirteen head of cattle and seventeen goats.

We had an extraordinary childhood filled with happiness and amusement despite the fact that we didn't have enough resources or opportunities to have new toys or gifts from our parents as the town children normally do. We always carried on the same recreational activities or engaged in the same goings-on every day without getting bored or tired. One of these games was Nyathotkol, a game involving two groups of young children who scrambled over a long sisal rope. It is a play similar to a wrestling match. Nyathotkol was meant to teach us how to be strong in order to defend the clan in times of war when we grew up.

I was among the village's industrious kids who could build excellent toy planes, cars and any other things that my imagination could capture. Young girls would build toys of little girls and utensils used

by women in the kitchen. We often played a marriage game where one married a girl he had a crush on, much as we were very young.

We could also not spend two days without playing skipping rope, hide-and-seek and many more, including Gube, a kicking game played in the watercourse. Young adults would also help our parents with the farm work and with domestic chores, such as cleaning and fetching water from the stream, which was usually very tough, as they had to walk long distances with huge water cans on their heads. We, the children, did not know places farther than our village and the neighbouring villages that we called the whole world, but I believe that no human being had lost a happier childhood than my siblings and I had lost.

My parents' and grandparents' strokes and smirks of compassionate gratification while regarding us were my first memories. My siblings and I were the family's only hope. My dream was to become a pilot someday so that I could carry people from and to all parts of the world. My elder sister, Nyagoa, on the other hand, wanted her name to be among the female doctors of the world. She always dreamt of becoming a doctor more than anything else in this world.

Both my father and mother were farmers who spent most of their time in the garden. Mother would only come home to cook for the family and would then return to help my father in our small garden.

In the summer, my mother would sell milk got from our cows in Leer town to buy us clothes and sweets. My father, on the other hand, would go to the bushes to cut down trees which he always sold for money in Leer. Wood was used for building huts and fences. Our family would finally meet up and sit around the fireside in the evening in order to share motivational stories, tales of the day's experience and updates on the happenings in the village. Our life had been very

interesting and filled with joy, laughter and fun in our small village until December 2013. That was when my life and the lives of the other rural dwellers changed. Life suddenly stopped being beautiful. It, instead, became something pretty frightening.

Storytelling was the commonest source of entertainment in our simple family. Most of these stories were told by my ageing grandparents, whom we loved dearly.

“*Mandong,*” I would often call out to my grandmother after dinner, begging for a story. “*They said our neighbour’s donkey was bitten by a hyena.*”

“*Yes,*” she said. “*That is what the donkeys deserve because they don’t respect and love their parents.*”

“*What do you mean?*” I asked, always eager for one of her stories, “*how didn’t they respect their parents? Do they even have parents? I have never seen the parents of our neighbour’s donkey!*”

“*Well, my little dogs,*” she cleared her throat and began to tell us a story about the Donkey’s laziness. “*A long time ago, both Donkey and Hyena were two good brothers. They one day asked their father to let them go to work in a nearby city. But the father disliked the idea because he thought people in the city were poisoned with the vulture’s heart that would let them not respect and love their elders again. Donkey and his brother Hyena finally left for the city after their mother had convinced their father. When they reached the town, they worked very hard and Donkey joined the drunkards of the city.*

“*He became such a heavy drinker that he always slept in the streets of the city. That made his little brother, Hyena, decide to take him back to their home in the village. ‘Brother Donkey,’ Hyena said. ‘Let’s go back home.’ ‘Home? Do I look like home now? Ha-ha!’ Donkey laughed. ‘Go! I will follow you.’*

Hyena now left for home after Donkey had said he would follow him. Upon reaching home, Hyena found that their father had just passed away. Now the mother of the two ordered his son, Hyena, to go and bring home Donkey to attend the funeral of their late father. When Hyena arrived in the city, he found out that his brother had been sleeping out in the streets. He looked for him until he found him. 'Get up, brother,' Hyena told Donkey. 'Our father is dead. Our mother needs us for the funeral prayers.' 'Okay,' said Donkey, 'go and I will follow you soon.' Hyena went home and reported what Donkey had said to his mother. The family postponed the funeral, waiting for Donkey to come. They waited and waited for many days, but Donkey didn't come. The family finally decided to hold the funeral prayers without Donkey.

"After the prayers, the mother called Hyena and talked to him regarding his future behaviour towards his brother, Donkey. 'My son, Hyena,' the mother said. 'Thank you for being loyal to your late father and me. I believe if there was an award for laziness it would be given to that lazy Donkey, but he would still send someone to bring it for him because he is the laziest creature on earth. Any time you see that lazy Donkey, bite him because he refused to attend the prayers for your late father.' Hyena became happy about that and left for the bush. That is why every time Hyena meets Donkey, he bites him. It is because Donkey betrayed the family."

"Thank you, Mandong," my sister Nyagoa said. "It is a good story."

"Yes, it is a good story," I said. "We need more stories and riddles, please."

"Okay, but next time I shall tell you the greed story of Hyena, my little dogs," our grandmother promised.

The Naath people have a culture of calling little children 'dogs'. I remember the day my little brother Gai and I went to a nearby neighbourhood to ask about the wellbeing of a sick old man who was our grandfather's associate. When we arrived, we found the old man was smoking his pipe with his food placed in front of him. Delighted

to know that we were visiting him, he happily dipped his hand into an old sack, brought out a big spoon and put food in it: "*Take this food, my little dogs,*" the old man said cheerfully, "*I am very happy to see you.*"

We stretched out our hands to receive the portion of the food he had given us and we left. We, with childish seriousness, interpreted the old man's words literally, as that he had insulted us. Therefore, we threw the food to the ground when we got out of his sight. Both my grandmother and grandfather loved each other dearly, so that they spent most of their time together chatting about past events, especially those to do with when they were still courting each other. I loved them so much that if I shared the sleeping mat with one of them this day, I would spend the other night with the other. My grandfather had a radio which neighbours sat around in the mornings and evenings and he would explain to them the news in detail. Most of the news was in Arabic and English. But he understood Arabic better than English. His news channels were VOA, Naath FM and Eye Radio. Naath FM was a local community radio based in Leer town. Most of its news and programmes were in the Naath language.

The radio had been donated by a certain organisation. It was a good radio which worked without a battery. I would put it out in the sun during the day until it became fully charged because it used solar energy. Anytime I asked my grandfather about the secret behind people talking inside the radio, he would tell me that those were the heads of badly behaved children that had been cut off and put in the radio to tell the news every day. He also told me that once a child disobeyed an elder, his head would be automatically cut off by the radio and put inside it for the people to listen to it as it told the news. When I heard that, I started to do good things for fear that my head might be cut off and put inside the radio.

At night we could see the lights on the western side of our village. However, I didn't know much about those lights until my grandfather told me one good night. And the story which was told by my grandfather about Leer being a great town still lingers in my mind.

"*Gatdoda,*" he said, pointing at a light on the western side of our home in Pading at night, "*Do you see that light?*"

"*Yes, I do,*" I confirmed. "*Is it not a shining star?*"

"*No, it is called 'electricity' and that place is called Leer. It is our town.*"

"*How is that possible, Guandong?*" I asked, surprised. "*How can it be our town when we have no single home and relative there?*"

"*Yes, we do not have a home there, but it is still our town. Most of my cousins stay in that big town,*" he said with a smile on his face.

"*Hah, Gatdoda,*" said my grandmother, laughing lightly. "*Leer is our home. Even this place you are staying in is part of Leer.*"

My grandmother's remark made me believe that she was drunk because she and my grandfather always drank wine together. Why would she say Pading itself was part of Leer when it was an independent land? And a friend of mine who once went to Leer told me that for him to reach Leer he had to travel through Gueny, Guat-Kotda, Guat, Dhortuol, Juong-kang before he could get to Leer.

I shifted the conversation because I could not comprehend anything from it. I always thought that after Leer came the end of the earth on the western side. I also thought that after Gaatdoor in the east was the end of the world. I thought the same about Mirmir in the north and Adok Port in the south. At first, I thought we were the only humans created by God. Later, I came to know about our relatives, neighbours and village-mates. I finally came to realise that there were

people called Gawaar on the other side of the River Nile and Nyuong in the far west where I had thought the world ended.



Chapter 2

One fine day, my father went to Leer and came back with sweet things that we were later told were *thoar-katuom*. While we were very slowly eating *thoar-katuom* wanting them not to get finished so soon, my grandfather kept on asking my father questions about the great town.

“How was Leer?” he asked my father while smoking his pipe.

“Leer was fine,” he was told. *“Only that you cannot recognise it now because of the development that has swallowed it. The place where Buom Diew and Riak Dong used to hold court cases is now a school.”*

“Oh, that is good!” said my grandfather with a smile. *“It is very good indeed. Our children can now learn and make South Sudan be like the rest of the world.”*

The first person to pronounce the name South Sudan was my grandfather and the name sounded very nice and unique to me. So, I went to him one evening to know more about South Sudan from him.

“Guandong,” I called him after I had lit his pipe, “*you told my father the other day about ‘Thot Thude’. What does it mean?*”

My grandfather could not understand me because I forgot the name that I had been carrying in my head the whole night. He instead told me more about Riak Dong and Buom Diew who had once been rulers of Leer. I left him feeling sad because the unique name that I had wanted my grandfather to clarify to me had slipped from my mind.

It was by luck that I remembered it again. This was after I had gone to a nearby stream and met a boy who came from Gueny by the name of Thudan. I ran back home to my grandfather as fast as I could so that the new name could not get lost again.

“Guandong,” I said. “*You said to my father when he came back from Leer that you wanted Thudan to be like the rest of the world. Is there a land with that name apart from Mirmir, Gaatdoor, Guat and Gueny?*”

My grandfather smiled and told me to sit down first. He cleared his voice painfully as he was very old.

“*Sudan was once one big country,*” he said and followed this by spitting sputum on the ground.

“And my cousins – most of whom died – and I took up arms to have this land we call South Sudan today. We were called Anyanya rebels and our enemy was the Arabs who treated us like we were nothing. The Arabs used to see South Sudanese as simply black slaves, and non-Muslims who were not adhering to any of the Abrahamic religions and who belonged to an inferior race and culture without a worthy past. So, we decided to go to the bush in order to liberate this land.”

“*Did you say you went to the bush?*” I asked, astonished. “*Did your enemies live in the bush? Didn’t they have their own homes? Why did you go to the homes of wild animals, Guandong?*”

My grandfather smiled and perhaps did not want to tell me more because I was very young. In any case, he was interrupted by my father, who came and told me to bring home the calves as the night was approaching.

“Mi-diiit,” my father called. *“Go now and bring home our calves. The cows are on their way. Let the calves not suckle their mothers or else we shall all sleep hungry. Also, look out for the village’s farms when you bring home the calves. Let them not eat from the farms.”*

“Okay, *Guandit,*” I said while running towards the nearby bush. The only thing I hated was what he had now warned about – going to bed on an empty stomach.

When I arrived in the bush I thought back to my grandfather’s remarks about joining the bush a long time ago. That was the first time to know that my grandfather had once been a soldier. But I did not even know what a soldier was like since I had never seen a soldier with my naked eyes. I only knew – later – more about soldiers through my grandfather’s description. I thought the bush where our calves used to graze was the same bush that my grandfather and his comrades had joined.

I was taking great care because I thought I might meet an enemy since I already knew that enemies lived in the bush. I brought our calves home and set fire to our cows’ dung to chase away flies and to make the home warm for us. When I finished tethering all the cows and calves to their respective pegs and places and made sure that no calf or cow was missing, I ran back to my grandfather to again take up the interesting topic of ‘South Sudan’.

“Guandong, I am back. Please continue the story you were telling me before,” I said while removing dirt from his grey-haired head.

“Goa Gatdoda,” he said. *“You will indeed be a great person in life when we are dead.”* That remark made me sad and my body went cold.

“Guandong, will you and my grandmother die one day?” I asked, worried.

“Yes, everything has its time in this world. When I was young I thought people would not die but my father and mother died at last. Take it easy.”

My grandfather had now disappointed me by letting me know that he would one day die. I did not want death to happen because I loved him very much. I hated the thing called death because our neighbour’s child was announced to be dead two years before and I had never seen him again. I did not now want death to happen to my peaceful family.

“Well,” my grandfather said after he saw the expression on my face, *“I was a member of the Anyanya movement a long time ago. Our leader was Kuar Samuel. When Samuel died we got a new leader by the name of Kuar John. We fought many wars and lost many men in battles to have the nation that we call South Sudan today.”*

“Mi-diit!” my father called me again. *“Where is the ox?”*

“Is it not inside the luak? I thought it was there.”

“You thought it was there?” I couldn’t answer my father’s question. I knew he would beat me if I kept appearing in his sight. Father was right. The cows had come home but the ox was missing. I immediately departed to search for it.

I approached a herder who knew our cattle one by one. Perhaps he would direct me to the place where my lost ox was. That boy was notorious in the village for being a congenital liar. The only truth he ever spoke was, *“I have eaten.”*

“You meant your ox with the long horns, black stripes?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Good, the fat ox with the bell jiggling around its neck? Long neck and...”

“Yes, that is exactly it, brother.”

“So, you are looking for it?”

“Yes!”

“Are you sure, Mi-dii?”

“Yes, I am sure, cousin.”

“Okay,”

“Tell me, please.”

“Tell you?”

“Yes!”

“Tell you what?”

“Its whereabouts.”

“Okay, but I am sorry. I didn’t see it.”

“What?”

“I haven’t seen it for sure.”

I left, feeling disappointed with the herder who had wasted my time only to give me a grandiloquent and scornful answer.

Fortunately, I found the ox at last. It had gone to Gueny with our neighbour's cattle.

I now ran to my grandfather so that he could continue the story. I asked him right away to pick up where we had left off.

"Guandong, was my father fighting the Arabs with you?" I asked, and he smiled and actually knew that I was either very young or stupid.

"I had not even married your grandmother when I was in the Anyanya movements. Your father was not yet born. It was some years later that I was permitted to come home to marry."

I now knew that my grandfather knew many things – not only the animal and bird stories that he told me.

"But why are you not active in the army now," I commented and he again smiled before he frowned. *"I am not active for two good reasons. One, I am too old to be a soldier. And again, my name, on behalf of which you are supposed to have been receiving a salary that could have taken you to school, was put on a 'Not Confirmed' list in 2006 and replaced with a ghost name which I am afraid are the bulls and cows of the commanders, fear their children's or relatives' names were put in the files."*

"Who put it on that list? And why would they give money to their bulls and cows that didn't fight the war?" I asked angrily. It was as if I was ready to go and fight the person who had done that if I was told.

"No, it is okay," he said. *"It is not an individual person but the government. Nevertheless, I am happy because the cause that kept me in the bush for over fifty years has finally succeeded. You are now in your land, 'South Sudan'. You will one day go to school when your brother Temdor comes back home with money or when your father and mother get some money. But you must work hard because if you don't, your today will be greater than your future. Imagine if your current situation will be better than your tomorrow."*

I wanted to go to school but there was no money for that. Besides, Leer and Gaatdoor were very far for a young child like me to go in the name of schooling.

My grandfather one dark evening called my parents and told them to take us to a certain school to study the Naath language at Padeah, but my parents said we were too young to attend classes. They promised my grandfather that they would take us the following year to school in Leer in the home of one of our relatives who lived at Rekyuol, north of Leer.

“There are better schools in Leer than in Padeah,” Father told my grandfather.

“Yes, there are two good schools for kids – Mary John Primary School in the north of the town near the hospital and Presbyterian Church and Leer Primary School in the south of the town near the Leer’s Main Market,” my mother confirmed, she used to sell firewood and milk in Leer.

I became happy. I started longing to go to school the next year as promised by my father. Whenever I was alone, I would imagine staying in Leer and I would smile. Many stories were told by my sister who had once been taken to Leer Hospital when she became sick. Indeed, Leer was the centre of all my dreams and wishes, and I always promised my grandparents that I would one day, when I grew up; take them to Leer to live there comfortably for the rest of their lives.

I always wished to be sick so that I could be taken to Leer Hospital. I would then see Leer Market, Rekyuol, Giil and Leer’s two schools. And I wanted to see the people with different colours that my grandfather had told me about. My grandfather had told me that their enemies had a brown colour and most of the traders in Leer were the brown-skinned Arabs and Darfurians.

My sister had also seen a white person. She said the person who treated her in Leer Hospital was a white woman who had a long forward-pointing nose and long hair.

“Guandong,” my sister called my grandfather one evening, *“are the white men and brown men human beings?”*

“Yes, why not?” retorted my grandfather. *“They are of course human beings. It is a matter of colour. Europeans are white, Arabs are brown and Africans are black, but all are human beings. All of these colours were created by God.”*

We soon ran to my grandmother, who told us more stories about birds and wild animals. *“Mandong,”* my sister Nyagoa, who had seen Leer, called our grandmother when she had finished telling us a story. *“My grandfather told me that Kawayni and Jallapni are human beings. But why do the white men have hospitals and cars, yet we do not have them? And why do the Arabs have bigger shops than our people?”*

“Well, listen to this myth which was told by the ancestors,” our grandmother said, *“about the reason why the black people are poor today. The curse really came from the first Black great-grandfather.”*

“How is that?” I asked, surprised.

“What did the first black person do?” added my sister.

“It was a long time ago that God used to stay with His three children – the white, brown and black. One day God decided to leave the world for His home in heaven, so he called his three children before him and said, ‘My sons, I want to go to heaven tomorrow morning. And I want all of you to clean my private parts using your tongues so that I can go to heaven clean.’”

“Did you say private parts?” I asked, mouth falling open like I was among the three people who were asked by God.

“Yes, God’s private parts,” my grandmother confirmed.

“Then what happened?” asked my sister, impatiently.

“Well, in the early morning, the first person to implement God’s demand was the white child, and the brown child followed. Now the black child, our great-grandfather, refused to do so and instead said, ‘Why would I clean the other person’s private parts when I am a man?’ He left without doing so. Today you see the white men having aeroplanes and big things. The brown people, the Arabs, have cars and big shops. It was because they listened to God. Had our grandfather accepted to clean God’s private parts with his tongue like the other two, we would now be owning cars and shops, but he let us down by opposing God.”

“But why didn’t our great-grandfather do that?” my sister asked, sadly.

“Hah, you Nyagoa,” I said, provoking her. *“It was a good decision, wasn’t it? Why would someone devalue himself to the level of cleaning the other person’s private parts for the sake of cars and aeroplanes?”*

“It is because you have not seen cars, aeroplanes and shops. That’s why you are talking like you are biting a dry fish,” my sister said.

“Even if I saw them I would still stick to my words. However, you are wrong. I know the aeroplane which always passes through the space over our village. But why did you insult me, Nyagoa?”

“Okay, I am very sorry, anthill nose,” my sister insulted me again.

“You stupid girl, you will cry and lose a tooth now,” I angrily responded.

Had my grandmother not got involved, there would have been a fight between my sister and me over the case. But I would, no doubt, win.

“Nowadays,” my grandmother continued, *“everywhere around the world that I have been to, most of the sufferers and beggars are black people. Even*

the black people themselves respect those black people with lighter skin. A lighter complexioned black man or woman thinks he/she is better than the darker complexioned man or woman. And I am afraid many people will change their colour in the future because everyone wishes to marry a brown-skinned girl or boy and nobody wishes to marry a dark-skinned person."

"So sad," my sister said.

"But I think it is better that our first great-grandfather didn't let go of his dignity for the sake of things," I said.

"Which dignity, again?" my grandmother asked. *"The black people do things without dignity nowadays. They kill one another randomly as if they are not human beings. Both the white and the brown people rule over black people everywhere. Even in the black people's lands. The term 'black' in the mind of the white and brown people means slavery, death, poverty and hunger. They say blacks are an inferior race."*

"But we have never seen them kill one another," I said.

"You cannot know because the world is very big," our grandmother said.

"How long does it take a person to reach the far end of the world?" I asked.

"Nobody in this village has ever been to the end of the world," she said, simply.

"Then I will be the first person in our land to see and touch the far end of the world," I promised.

"Good luck!" my grandmother said.

Soon, after we had finished chatting with our grandmother, our father arrived with more fish in his hand. Nyagoa, Gai, Nyachangkuoth and

I ran to him before he could reach the house. I managed to grab the fish before the rest could. I handed them over to my mother, who cleaned and put them in the pot to cook. While we were seated around the cooking pot, I asked my mother why fish had no tongue.

“Why don’t fish talk, Nyagoa?” I asked.

“If your big head with horns was put in the water would your big mouth talk?”

“Question with a question, poor girl,” I said, *“I will now ask my dear mother...Mother, why don’t fish talk?”*

“Yes, why is that?” added Gai and Nyagoa together.

“Okay, now if you want me to tell you the reason,” our mother said, *“go to the river and fill these three jerry-cans with water.”*

We all jumped to our feet and ran to the river to fulfil our mother’s condition for telling the secret behind the fish’s lack of a tongue. Each of us came home with a jerry can full of water.

“Thank you, good children,” she said proudly. *“Now sit down and listen to the reason why Fish has no tongue. A long time ago, before our grandfathers and grandmothers were born, Fish had a tongue, but he used it to insult and hurt other people around the world. One day, he went to Hippo. ‘Oh, my God! Fish said to Hippo, ‘What a big and bad nostril! Why don’t you cut it off?’ On hearing that, Hippo got angry with Fish. ‘Hi, you stupid little creature, ‘Hippo said while grabbing the Fish. ‘This nose is my nose and not yours. I will never cut it off. Mind your business.*

“After Hippo had told Fish to mind his business, he let go of Fish. When Fish satisfied himself that he had been freed by Hippo, he began to use his foul tongue. ‘Ah-ah,’ Fish laughed. ‘I am glad that you will die in seven days’ time. Rest in peace in advance, poor Hippo. I am a prophet who foresees

and predicts the future.’ After that statement, Fish swam away, leaving Hippo sad and confused. Now Hippo was truly afraid and believed that he would die in seven days. ‘I had better immediately inform my relatives about my upcoming death, which was announced by that stupid Fish,’ Hippo told himself. He now started visiting his relatives one by one. Whenever he was asked how he came to know of his death, Hippo would say that Fish had prophesied it. Those who knew Fish very well that he had a foul tongue, comforted poor Hippo. ‘We must get rid of that stupid Fish by pulling out his tongue,’ one of Hippo’s friends said. ‘Yes,’ confirmed another friend, ‘we must pull it out so that he doesn’t make fake prophecies about others. Fish is a liar, betrayer and idiot.’ In the night, Hippo and his friends started looking for Fish in the river. When they found him, they pulled out his tongue and threw it into the middle of the river. Fish rushed to where his tongue had been thrown but could not find it. He searched and searched but to no avail. To this day, Fish is still looking for his tongue in the river. That is the reason why fish is no tongue, my children.”

“Oh, what a meaningful story!” Gai said.

“Yes, it is really meaningful,” Nyagoa concurred. “Now take care of your tongue, Mi-diit. Otherwise, it will be pulled out and thrown into the river like Fish’s tongue because you always say bad things against me.”

“You, this vulture called Nyagoa!” I insulted. “Be careful. What did I tell you about comparing me with the fish?”

“Okay, you now want to fight because I have told you a story,” my mother said. “I will never ever again tell you any story in my life.”

Peace was restored again after we were warned by our mother. The problem had now been solved.

“Sorry, Ma,” I apologised.

“Sorry, Mama,” Nyagoa also apologised.



Chapter 3

There never was a single night when we were not told a story, riddle or a Naath tongue twister. These were our only sources of happiness in our land. There was this day when the sun was very hot and the heat forced most of us to the tributary near our home.

My grandparents used their fans made of sisal leaves to get rid of the heat. While I was playing Gube in the nearby tributary with some other children from our village, my eyelashes and eyelids began to twitch. I knew something new was underway. My grandfather had once told me that when a guest is on the way, God sends His people these signs. We continued our Gube game in the deep stream until my sister Nyagoa came half-walking and half-running to me. She was breathless.

“Mi-diit,” she called out from far, *“our aunt has come from Yiandany.”*

I jumped to my feet and ran back home. Our dear aunt had come and, without a doubt, brought sweet things – which she usually brought whenever she visited us. She always visited us thrice a year. However,

in case there was a sickness or bereavement in the family, then she would pay more visits.

“Aaaaaaayiiuu,” my aunt said stretching out her arms to hug me.

I soon found my little body being engulfed by my dear aunt, who loved us more than everything in this world. We were very proud to be her nephews and nieces.

“Gat-nyieri,” she called. *“It is really a long time since I last came here. But why have you become so thin like this?”*

I felt happy about what she said because she was so sympathetic to me.

“Nyakuorial,” she called my mother, *“is Mi-diit sick or he doesn’t eat well?”*

My mother laughed and said food was always available for us all.

“Boys are like that,” my mother said. *“They do not have cold hearts like girls. You can see the difference among the calves. Female calves are always fat and male calves are always thin. It is because of the hearts and not the lack of food.”*

“That is not true,” my father disagreed, who had been listening keenly. *“You women are warrens. When did females have cold hearts, when, in fact, we are the ones with cold hearts?”*

There was now a healthy argument between my father and my two mothers. They were laughing and each of them was defending their gender. My siblings and I were enjoying our mango and tamarind and other fruits that had been brought by our aunt from Rubchay and Yiandany.

The debate went on and on until my grandfather and grandmother intervened, but with respect as per Naath custom.

“Nyayiadany,” my grandfather called out to my aunt, “Mi-diiit is not sick but he is growing. A child is always thin when it is growing. Mi-diiit is actually like his father. His father was like that when he was young. My wife and I thought he was sick, but we finally discovered that he was only growing. My wife used to cry thinking that Mi-diiit’s father would die.”

“No, no! You have added an ear and a tail to your story, father of Mi-goa,” my grandmother sarcastically responded. “I had known that Mi-diiit’s father was growing before you. You were only busy with that...”

My grandfather had now been attacked by my grandmother and their thought-provoking debate went on with mirth for some time.

“Gat-nyieri,” my aunt called out to me again. “Your cousins, Rundial and Tidial, are greeting you. They said I should convey their greetings to you.”

“Oho Ma-Rundial and Ma-Tidial,” I said happily, “why didn’t you come with them?”

“Well,” she said, “I was planning to come with them, but their father had gone to Dhor-keen. And there was no one to remain with the kids.”

“Okay. I see,” I said, “but please take me with you when you want to go back to Yiandany anytime.”

“Certainly,” she said, “I must take you so that you can spend some time with your cousins, who have missed you dearly.”

“Did the father of your kids travel to Dhor-keen?” my mother asked.

“Yes, he did,” my aunt answered. “He is planning to transfer our cattle there next year because cattle do not get enough grass at Yiandany due to the flood.”

“That is a good decision,” my mother added, “but it will be good for you to get transferred to Nyaljoor, Dhor-buoy or Dhor-gathar-yang. These places are near to the Dor-kueer and Dor-beek grazing areas.”

“That is true,” my aunt said, “but Dor-kueer and Dor-beek will be far away from Pul-lual and Neng rivers.”

“Okay, I see now,” my mother said, “but can you remember when we were young girls that we were once taken to Mal-Kuer by our uncle? And our cattle always came home fully satisfied at the Dor-kueer and Dor-beek grazing fields?”

“Yes,” my aunt said, “but our cattle were suffering from thirst at the time because Neng and Pul-lual were very far. Those were good old days. You know that the biggest part of Haak-Naath land is good for grazing. You forgot that we once stayed at Madol in the far west before we could relocate to Dor-kueer and Dor-beek.”

“Yes, we once stayed at Madol. Our nomadic life was very interesting,” my mother added. “Nomadic life makes people see new places. There is no land in Mayendit that I do not know now.”

“Ah-aa,” my aunt said, laughing lightly. “You are talking of Mayendit, which is nearby. You will not believe that I have seen many places recently. My husband and I went to many places in Payinjiar and Koch when our neighbour’s daughter was married. The traditional wedding was done in Payinjiar and the blessing was done in Koch’s Ngony area. I now know Door-Nyuong, Pachienjock, Nyal, Tai-yaar and Ganyliel in Payinjiar. And I know Mirmir, Ngony, Tharuop-Nyakulang, Nor-boor, among other areas in Koch.”

“Why is that?” my mother who was surprised asked. “Why would a marriage be done in faraway places like Payinjiar and Koch?”

My aunt responded, *“The mother of the bride is from Koch and the father is from Payinjiar. But the groom lives with us. So, we have become like one family and that was the reason we risked travelling to those lands.”*

“That is very good, indeed, my dog,” my grandmother said, who had been listening intently. *“A next-door neighbour is part of the family. That is a very good heart. Keep up that kind of spirit.”*

“Yes,” my grandfather agreed. *“Life is all about loving your neighbours so that they love you back. Look, the distance between your home and ours is very far. Hence, it takes some time for us to know your problems or happiness, but your neighbour knows all your problems and happiness every single minute. Keep up that kind of heart.”*

The night had finally fallen and we were ready to listen to new stories, riddles and Naath tongue twisters from our aunt, who regaled us with them every time she came. My sister and I struggled as we insulted each other over who should share the mat with our aunt.

“I must share the mat with our aunt tonight,” I said.

“No, not you,” said Nyagoa. *“You always urinate on mats. Therefore, you will not share the mat with our aunt. I will sleep with her instead.”*

“Stupid, you are actually Nyalang,” I insulted Nyagoa.

“Me! Me!” she cried and grabbed me by the neck, *“Stupid dog.”* She would have ended my life had our aunt not intervened.

Nyagoa strongly hated being called Nyalang because Nyalang is a foolish girl. In one story, Nyalang is a fool who always talks like an idiot to the villagers. Every time she chats with people, she tells them that one day she will be eaten by the people. People laugh and chase her away for not talking sense. Nyalang keeps on making only the one statement, *“One day people will eat me.”* She keeps including that

statement in every one of her conversations. One year later, there is a great famine in the whole of Naath land and everybody is reduced to eating grass and fish.

There is a big storm one night and the barn is set on fire by a lightning strike. Nyalang is sleeping in the barn together with a goat. Nobody knows that she has gone into the barn to sleep. Early in the morning, the people go to see the barn. They find that the goat has been roasted by the fire caused by the lightning strike. Desperate from hunger, the people happily bring out the roasted meat that they could not recognise. In their minds, what they have in front of them is the meat from the goat which has been sleeping inside the barn. They eat and eat until they are fully satisfied. Nobody notices that Nyalang is not around. They search for her, but they cannot find her. They finally realise that they have eaten Nyalang's body. They now acknowledge the truth in the words that she uttered regularly while still alive: *'People will eat me one day!'*

That was the reason why Nyagoa had nearly killed me when I called her Nyalang.

"If you keep fighting," my aunt warned, *"I will go back to Yiandany right now and will never come back to you again."*

"I am sorry, Mama," I apologised.

"I am so sorry, Ma," Nyagoa also apologised.

"Well," my aunt said, *"your apologies are accepted, but we must all sleep together so that we share stories, tongue twisters and riddles tonight."*

"Oho, that is good," I said happily. *"I will begin with a story."*

"No, I will be the first to tell a story," Nyagoa protested. *"I have a new story, unlike Mi-dii's story that he keeps on telling and telling until our ears have become tired of listening to it."*

“Mi-diit will tell his story first,” my aunt instructed.

“But I know his only story, Aunt. It is the talking skull,” Nyagoa said mockingly.

“Close your ears, Nyagoa,” I said furiously. *“My aunt and others will listen to it. Here is my story: A long time ago in a land far, far away lived a young, energetic herder. That young herder was looking after his cattle in the thick forest when he accidentally came across a human skull believed to have died many, many years ago. The young man kicked it upon confirming that it was only a skull after he had looked at it for some few minutes. ‘Why did you kick me?’ the skull asked. The young man’s body turned cold. He was shocked and was ready to run but he kept a hold on himself. ‘What has killed you, skull?’ the young man asked. ‘I died because of this red tongue of mine!’ replied the skull. Upon hearing that, the young man ran back to the village, abandoning his cattle in the bush. When he arrived, he informed all the villagers about the miracle that he had witnessed. The villagers didn’t believe him and instead laughed at him. The young man didn’t want to be called a liar regarding something that he had really witnessed. Therefore, he insisted that the villagers go with him on the condition that he should be killed if the skull could not talk. ‘You can kill me if the skull doesn’t talk,’ he promised. All the people, including the wickedest youth, accepted to go and listen for themselves.*

“When they got to the place where the young man had seen the skull, he was asked to make it talk. The pride-filled young man stepped forward and asked the skull. ‘What has killed you, skull?’ he asked. There was no answer. He repeated several times, ‘what has killed you, skull?’ Unfortunately, the skull refused to talk. Now, since the young man had deceived them and brought the people all the way from the village, the elders could not protect the young man’s life from the angry youth. The young man lay in a pool of blood after spears from different youth entered his body. While the young man lay near the skull, half-dead, the skull talked at last. ‘You see, my friend,’ said

the skull. 'I said it clearly that my red tongue had killed me. Now you have been killed by your red tongue. The tongue is responsible for one's grief and gladness as well as death and life.'

"Everyone, including those who kept their promise to kill the young man, were shocked and regretted their action. 'Be careful of your red tongues, my people,' the dying young man said before his eyes closed forever. The people couldn't do anything to bring the poor young man back to life. And my story ends here."

"It is one of the best stories ever told," my aunt affirmed. "It has a moral lesson. It warns against being quick in making a promise about something that you cannot fully guarantee. An old man once said, 'What gives you sleepless nights is of your own making.' The young man in Mi-dit's story made a mistake that ended his life. You all, as kids, should always tell the truth and talk about possible things to your parents and any other elder so that you don't end up like the man in the story. Nyagoa, it is now your turn."

I felt very happy about being praised. I suspected that Nyagoa had become jealous of me for getting praised when she had thought at first that I would not be praised by our aunt. That showed that our aunt had liked my story very much.

"Okay," Nyagoa said. "Let me think of a good story to tell you."

"How come the owner of only two stories has to ask for more time to think?" I responded to the attack she had made earlier. *"You have no more stories to think of because you have only your two well-known stories that you have stolen from our neighbour's daughter."*

"Aunt, listen to him," Nyagoa said angrily. "He doesn't know that I have more stories: Nyaliny, Diang-yow, Liel-waay, Tut-boor, Bany-bor...are they yours?"

“Mi-diit, stay quiet!” our aunt interjected. “Don’t interrupt your sister.”

“Okay... I will tell you a story about Kulang Toat and his wife Nyachom Loang. A long time ago in the land of Thieng-Naath there lived a very strong man and his strong wife. They were called Kulang Toat and Nyachom Loang. One day, Kulang decided to test the loyalty of his wife. She cooked a very delicious meal including fish sauce and put it before him. ‘This food is very nutritious, mother of my kids,’ said Kulang happily. ‘It should always be the only meal in our home.’ ‘Yes,’ Nyachom concurred, ‘it is indeed nutritious and the best meal of all.’ Nyachom always agreed with whatever Kulang said and Kulang was not happy about that. He needed a woman with an independent mind and who would not agree to decisions that he thought were unfair. The other day, Nyachom had brought the same type of meal and to Kulang it didn’t seem to taste like it had done the first time. ‘What bad food this is!’ cried Kulang. ‘The taste and the smell are not pleasant. ‘Yes,’ Nyachom had responded. ‘What I also dislike about fish is its smell. It is indeed a bad thing. Not pleasant at all, father of my kids.’ Kulang got very angry on hearing Nyachom’s criticism of his food. ‘You are a bad woman who will never save me,’ growled Kulang. ‘How can you always agree with whatever I say? Yesterday you were talking in favour of the fish when I started to praise it. Now you are talking against it after I have criticised it. You are a traitor, Nyachom!’ Because Nyachom was always ready to answer her husband cleverly and sympathetically, and with much respect, she cleared her already cleared throat. ‘Father of my kids,’ she said with a soft, romantic tone, ‘if you praise or criticise anything, I must do the same unconditionally. Yes, yesterday you indeed praised the fish and I joined you in praising it. Today, you have criticised the same fish I have also done the same because I am Kulang Toat’s wife and not the fish’s wife. My loyalty must always be to you and not to anything else in this world because I am your wife.”

“With that witty reply, Nyachom received a warm hug from her strong husband Kulang. Kulang went on to spend the whole day with a smile on his face because of Nyachom’s logical reply. And my story ends here.”

“I am very glad that I have got clever kids,” said my aunt. “You are actually as wise as Rel-gengni (foxes). Your two stories are very meaningful. The moral lesson of Nyagoa’s story is that we must not be loyal to the material things and money of this world. We must always stand with our parents and people in bad times whether they are right or wrong.”

“Since you have plenty of stories,” my aunt continued, “I am not going to tell you more stories now. But I am going to tell you some riddles, proverbs and Naath tongue twisters. And after that, I shall tell you one story.”

“Yes,” we both said together. “Let us really do that.”

“Mare boor mi dieth dow mi char? (What is the white cow that gives birth to a black child?) You are all given only one chance to answer,” my aunt said.

“It is a goat,” was Nyagoa’s reply

“It is our neighbour,” I said. “Our neighbour’s colour is white and she gave birth to black kids.” I thought I had got the answer to the riddle right because our neighbour was an albino until I was rebuked by my aunt.

“Jin, Mi-diiit!” she angrily said, “respect yourself. Try to have integrity. Don’t you know that your neighbour’s colour is created by God? Be careful or you will be like her.” I immediately fell silent when I heard that I would be like the albino if I continued talking about her. In fact, I didn’t want to have a bad colour.

“None of you got the answer right,” my aunt said. “When we say ‘a white cow that gives birth to a black child’ we do not mean a goat or anybody else. The white cow is the mosquito net and the black child is a human being. A

mosquito net is white and a human being is black. So, the black cow that gives birth to a black child is the mosquito net."

"Oh, that is the exact answer," Nyagoa said.

"Yes, it is truly the answer," I said, "because a human being is black and a mosquito net is white."

"*Mare gaat-bakelti root ken dial kel?* (What are the six children who cry together when touched?)" Nyagoa said. "I give you all only one chance to try it."

"It is father's and mother's children," I said sharply, thinking that she meant us. "*Temdor, Nyagoa, Mi-dit, Gai, Nyachangkuoth and Goygoy...* Six of us always cry when touched except Temdor. I think I have killed Nyagoa's riddle, ohoo..."

"No, you didn't," Nyagoa said mockingly. "You have instead fallen into a deep river."

"Well," our aunt said and cleared her throat. "*The six children that cry together when touched are the six strings of the thom (guitar) because when they are touched they all cry together.*"

"Yes," Nyagoa said, "our aunt has scored the riddle."

It was now my turn to tell my riddle and I didn't want Nyagoa to get it right. I wanted her to fail mine the same way I had failed hers.

"*Mare thaaktirialiti loch dienke?* (What are the black- and white-striped oxen with one peg?)" I said, with my heart beating heavily because I didn't want Nyagoa to get the answer right or else she would think she was by far better than me in storytelling, riddles and tongue twisters.

“Haa...” Nyagoa laughed and I knew she would get the answer. “Those are eyes.”

“Yes,” my aunt confirmed. “They are eyes because God put the eyes in one peg and they have black and white colours... Now I will tell you the reason why hawks take chicks,” said our aunt. “The first great-grandmother of all hens was a very beautiful hen. Her parents were very poor, so they decided that whoever was able to afford her ridiculously high bride price would be her groom. News of her beauty spread across all lands and soon it got to a great hawk prince. The prince decided to see for himself, so he sneaked into the hen’s village unnoticed. When the hawk prince finally saw the hen, he was enchanted at once, just like someone who saw or greeted Nyariék Thing Luoy.”

“Nyariék? Please tell us more about her. We always hear her name,” I said.

“Let us finish this story first, you Mi-diiit,” Nyagoa warned.

“Be patient, Dalow,” our aunt said. “Let me first finish this story and then I will tell you more about Nyariék next time.”

“Okay, let me tell you about her now. Nyariék was the most beautiful girl in Naath land,” she continued. “She was cursed and had also died unmarried despite being beautiful beyond description. The Naath elders said that whenever Nyariék looked at some male youth, they would burst into a fight among themselves, each claiming to have been the one who had been looked at by her. They also said that whenever she shook hands with a boy, he would spend the whole day with that hand in his mouth.

“...Back to our story. The prince decided that no one would have the hen. This chicken was to be his only bride. The prince came with his family as custom demands. They paid her bride price. However, little did the hawk know that the hen and a wretched cock were madly in love! The hawk took his bride to his kingdom, leaving the poor cock heartbroken. Because to marry

another person's lover is suicide, the cock could love no other hen. Besides, his beloved hen had been taken because he had no cattle or wealth. The cock sneaked into the hawk's kingdom, one morning after the hawk had gone hunting. He began to crow beautifully in different styles, as he used to before his beautiful hen was taken away. The hen was drawn back to the sound of his majestic voice and remembered their great old days when they used to enjoy life together. Finally, the old lovers reunited and decided to elope for good. They had to go far to the land inhabited by human beings so that no one would ever find them again. When the hawk prince returned, he found his wife missing and also saw the footprints of the cock all around his chambers. The hawk prince was devastated."

"He sent a message to the hen's parents demanding the return of his cattle as custom demands, but they could not as the cows had already been shared out among the relatives. As a result, the prince reported the case to his father, the hawk king, who was no lover of peace. All this happened while the king had been ravaging lizard kingdoms. However, what he had always wanted was to destroy the proud chickens who thought they had the greatest voice and were the most graceful among birds. The king sent messages to all the hawk colonies around the world and declared war on all the chickens. The war is still on to this day! And that brings us to the end of the story."

"Oh, I now know why hawks take chicks," Nyagoa said gratefully.

"Yes, I have known it all along, too," I said. "The hens are to blame for betraying the hawks."

"Let us sleep now and we shall do the rest next time," my aunt declared.

We were soon snoring.



Chapter 4

We woke up very late the next morning, only to find that our dear aunt was preparing to go back to her home in Yiandany. The stories and riddles that we had shared with her almost the whole night had made us wake up late. I cried when I was prevented from leaving with her. She instead promised to take me with her during her next visit. We waved goodbye to our aunt, but tears were pouring down my face. Nyagoa was not happy, either. We hadn't expected her to return to her home as soon as she had done. I gazed at my aunt as she walked away into the distance until she disappeared from sight. I, thereafter, went back to our hut and waited sadly for our breakfast.

I was now longing for the night to fall so that the stories would begin again. And I wanted to tell my family the new riddles that my aunt had told us the previous night. I didn't want the new riddles to be first heard from Nyagoa. The night that I had been longing for finally arrived and I managed to tell our aunt's riddles to the family. When I

finished, I begged my grandmother to tell us new stories: *“Mandong, we need a story about beasts,”* I said.

“No, we need only stories with moral lessons,” opposed Nyagoa. *“Stories about beasts frighten people at night.”*

“You are a congenital coward, Nyagoa,” I said. *“Why do you fear dreams?”*

“Yes, let me be like that, long neck,” she insulted me back, but I stayed silent so as not to lose a story from our grandmother.

“Okay, my little dogs,” our grandmother said. *“I will tell you a story about beasts with a moral lesson of forgiveness so that Mi-dit will enjoy the story and Nyagoa will enjoy its moral lesson.”*

“Okay, let us start,” we all said together.

“Once upon a time,” our grandmother began, *“there was a beautiful girl called Nyechuol in the land of the Naath people. She was the only girl among her many brothers. She was so loved by her family that she was favoured above the rest of the house. A female cannibal who was barren heard about her and said: ‘I must get her.’ Because she admired her and she wanted her to be her daughter, she now prepared herself to get Nyechuol by all means possible. The cannibal practised witchcraft so that she could capture Nyechuol. The following morning, the old cannibal came to the home where Nyechuol lived. The parents and siblings were not around. She found Nyechuol playing in the compound. ‘My young daughter,’ the cannibal said, ‘I am someone who needs water. Can you give me some?’ The little girl said: ‘We do not have water.’ ‘But can you get for me some from the river?’ the woman asked. While Nyechuol was going to fetch water from the river, the woman followed her. When she was certain that Nyechuol’s cry would not be heard by the villagers, she approached her and said: ‘Should I take you or eat you?’ ‘Just take me, please,’ Nyechuol answered, frightened. So, she took Nyechuol to her home and then cooked for her dried meat. After Nyechuol had eaten, she*

hid her on the rooftop and told her that it was where she would be staying. The next morning, the cannibal went hunting. The routine was that when the cannibal came back from hunting, she would sing and Nyechuol would sing back. Months later, Nyechuol had grown fat and turned into a beautiful young woman. Every anthropophagus around was admiring her and would ask her for her hand in marriage. But the cannibal woman told them that she would not get married to a cannibal, but her fellow Naath men...”

“After some years, Nyechuol became a fully grown-up adult and her cannibal mother decided to relocate to Nyechuol’s former village. She moved there with their cattle. There, Nyechuol participated in traditional dances of the Naath which were conducted from the evenings until the hours of the early morning. Even her own brothers admired her and had nearly fallen in love with her because they could not recognise her anymore as she had now matured. Her cannibal mother told Nyechuol’s real father to brew some wine, and that the rest of the neighbouring villagers should do the same since they would have a gathering. The following morning, they gathered. The cannibal cleared her throat and began to talk. ‘You have been seeing me here, so I’m no stranger. I am a barren woman and Nyechuol isn’t my biological daughter. I am here in this land just to reunite her with her family. I will now reveal Nyechuol’s real parents in front of everyone here.’ She pointed at Nyechuol’s father. When he tried to stand, he fainted. The mother and siblings also fainted. The woman took three fat bulls and slaughtered them, and Nyechuol was re-united with her family. A couple of months later, Nyechuol along with other villagers accompanied the cannibal woman who was greatly rewarded with cows and other gifts. Then later, she brought her cows and gave them to Nyechuol’s brother Jackok. Then Jackok married a wife for the cannibal woman. The married wife, according to our Naath custom, had to be taken care of by Jackok to only produce with her children who belonged to the cannibal woman because she retained the original name as the owner of the wife. They lived in harmony with each other ever after.”

“It is really a good story that talks about kidnapping, kind-heartedness and clemency,” said Nyagoa. *“The real parents of Nyechuol have chosen to forgive the cannibal despite the kidnapping of their child.”*

“They should have killed the cannibal because she forcefully took the child at the beginning,” my little brother, Gai said.

“Well!” my grandmother exclaimed. *“The cannibal did bad things at the very beginning, but she did something good at last. Now, which would you choose between her good action and bad action? I am asking you all.”*

“I would take the good action and forget the bad part,” was Nyagoa’s quick reply.

“Yes, the good one,” Gai also responded.

“Of course, the bad action,” I said, *“because she took the girl at first when she was not asked to take her.”*

“You are wrong, Mi-diiit,” my grandmother said. *“Life is about forgiveness. You forgive today and you are forgiven tomorrow.”*

One hot evening I took our calves home from the nearby woodland. The sun had just set but its rays were still strong, and the air was hot and humid. I saw from afar my mother pounding millet with a large wooden pestle. Smoke came out through our mother’s hut. This made me believe that there would be a meal. We sometimes went to bed without a meal when the firewood got wet or when the family wanted to fast alongside those that could not afford food in the rest of the world. I could now hear one of my grandfather’s traditional songs even before I could reach home:

*...chi pithpuarparike rip Omdurman. Thil nyam lenyi e wiydan we
yiathnirwiy e miii. Wa nhialkeer bi nei wa Leek, chiengdani Leek Kurjiejch
Makur-ganruai-dhuor. Banluoy Leek Makur Lim Tena Jiech...*

My grandfather was very happy listening to his favourite song. His dignified bearing and noble face told me that he was happy. He invited me to listen with him, but I could not understand anything. When the first cassette ran out, he put in another one, which almost made him cry. The song might have reminded him of the good old days. The song repeated one phrase many times:

...kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char... kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char... kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char...

It repeated that so many times that I became tired of ‘*...kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char...*’

When I was sure that he had finished listening to his favourite song, I approached him.

“What does that song mean, Guandong?” I asked eagerly.

“The song talks about this land and the lives lost in the liberation struggle,” he said. *“The land in which we now live has been left to us by our African fathers and their fathers and grandfathers who lived before them. But the Islamic regime in Khartoum wanted to take it by force from us. They wanted us either dead or Arabised and Islamised, but our generation said a big ‘no’ to that malevolent policy because being a Muslim is a choice.”*

“What is a Muslim, Guandong?”

“A Muslim is a person who follows the religion of Islam, Gatdoda. But Islam, Christianity or any other Abrahamic religion cannot unite a nation. Educated people are united by humanity but uneducated people are united by religion.”

“Can you tell me how they were treating you?” I asked.

“It is beyond description, my little dog,” he said nonchalantly while cutting

his nails with his teeth, *“they are experts in societal discrimination. Black people and those of African descent were experiencing societal harassment. They used a derogatory word such as ‘slave’ and referred to those that belong to the Riverine Arab tribes as ‘masters’. They used to say the country was one when they had never done any development. Even the schools and hospitals that we had, had been built by the English a long time before. Whenever they wanted to carry out ‘development’ they would only build mosques and not hospitals and schools. Because of their failure to carry out development, the whole country became an underdeveloped nation. That is the reason why now, after separating from the rest of the country, South Sudan is mostly composed of the developments that were done by the English. The towns and villages in which we live nowadays were first built by the English or traditionally built by hands other than those of the Islamic governments. Meanwhile, the pathways that lead us from one place to another were built by our great-grandfathers – who are now all dead, anyway. Therefore, the Islamic-led governments did nothing in terms of development since the independence of Sudan. Because of all this, we took up arms to liberate this land.”*

“Dead!” I asked surprised, *“Did you say men have died?”*

“Yes. Men have died,” he said. “Death is inevitable and it is feared even by the most courageous because it is stronger than them. You can avoid it in your own humanly ways but, eventually, it will surely come. Men have died. Everything in life has got an end. And everything around us will one day be no more. Life and death keep on coming and going.”

“And why would people work if death is imminent?”

“Hahaha!” His laughter was mirthless. *“We are alive because of the efforts of our great-grandfathers who made a change for us to be here today. It is now our natural duty to keep up the change.”*

“When do you think the change will finish, Guandong?” I asked.

“Change has no end. It is everlasting, just like that beautiful blue sky! Everything around us here is affected by the change, in whole or in part. Everything will be no more when its time comes.”

“As every son of a woman grows up,” he continued, *“and becomes accustomed to the beautiful nature that God has given us and the land that our great-grandfathers have built or traditionally surveyed for us, we re-discover it with interest and sometimes with nervousness and even fear of the known or the unknown because our surroundings are complicated and astonishing, kind and cruel, varied and vast at the same time. Change is unavoidable, whether one likes it or not.”*

My grandfather went on to tell me many things that I had never heard before. He told me that no generation left the world as it had found it. He said many Naath age groups like Jur, Tongjuoyni, Wat, Wiakangni and Nyang had done their part in building and protecting this land. And it was the time for Koayni, Liethni, Diengni and Luaal to do their part, too, as his age group had done.

“Your children,” he said, *“will also leave behind some changes which are either good or bad. We shall all change our towns and villages, just as men have done in the past. Towns and villages, like people, grow and die. Diseases and wars decrease the population of the land while peace and health increase them. The road from Leer to Adok was built by men like us. The road is alive up to now but the men who built it are not with us anymore. They have gone on the natural journey that their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers undertook. However, they didn’t stop building the road for us even when they knew they would one day die.”*

Grandfather also told me that our generation would make some changes in the land and would not be satisfied with what the older generation had done. He said some of us would discover new places

and build new roads in our land and that our style would be different from their style of building roads and places. He said some of us would not be part of our community but would belong to other societies that they would migrate to for one reason or another. He went as far as prophesying the war in our land.

“Some of you will be great leaders of the land whereas some will turn into killers of our people in this great land,” he said. He added that every young mind was different from the minds of the past, present or future and that it might have a contribution to make to the progress of mankind. And so, the changes continue, for better or for worse.

“Change is always good and bad at the same time,” he said. *“A long time ago the Naath didn’t know how food could be cooked with fire because they didn’t have it until a dog brought it with its tail. They only used to expose the food to the sun to dry. Once part of the meat had dried, the women would take away the dried part and give it to the men and would then expose the rest of the food to the sun to dry for the kids to eat. When the dog learnt that humans were suffering, it went and brought the fire from a faraway land that our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers had never been to. Every living creature has its advantage and disadvantage.”*

Grandfather told me that the cars, shops and both white and brown people that were found in our land today would have astonished and perhaps frightened the people of long time ago before Buom Diew and Riak Dong arrived. He said their great-grandfathers didn’t walk long distances. They thought the world had an end.

“What would our forefathers and fore mothers say if they could listen to a radio like I normally do today?” he asked with a smile on his wrinkled face. *“They would notice that the events of yesterday in distant places of the world were either brought by a miracle or medicine or they might think a human head had been cut and put inside the radio. What would we say*

if we could be thrown into the time of the generation that will be born a hundred years from now? We would all be surprised about the extent of their advancement and they would also be frightened to see us. We would probably be astonished to see the things that they will have invented and we might not even believe them the same way our forefathers could not believe the things of our time if they were to be brought into our lifetime.”

My grandfather also told me that the reason why the current generation didn't get surprised was that they got accustomed to new people and new things. He said their fore parents didn't know what a hospital meant. He told me that it was not too long ago that the Leer hospital was built by the English. He said he was not very young when the English had built it. He disclosed that his fore-parents were frequently killed or kept on their mats by diseases every now and then. There were no medicines like those we have today, he added.

“Nowadays we have many drugs that can quickly cure illness. There are more things that the white man has done for us than the bad things. Had it not been for them, we would all have died in the 1980s when typhoid and cholera hit our land badly. Thousands of people died but the white man came and stopped it. Though there are diseases without drugs and a cure, the next generation will consider them easy to treat when they get the cures to them. The malaria that people don't fear today was the worst of all diseases in our time. But because Leer MSF Hospital provides people with the cure for malaria people no longer fear it...”

“When you go to big cities,” he continued, “you will think people are running away from the cities. Thousands come and thousands go half-walking and half-running in opposite directions. The sight of cars and shops may surprise a first-time visitor.”

Grandfather said in the big cities he had seen machines that washed clothes, cook food, made the water cold or hot and so forth. He noted

that the ploughing and cultivation that they always did with their bare hands were done by a machine in those lands.

“The tough garden work that your parents normally do is done just in a day by a machine in advanced lands,” he said.

My grandfather told me that all changes were not necessarily for the better. *“There are bad things, especially the changes in culture and tradition. Our rich culture is our identity. Our culture commands that nobody must eat while walking or talking. Talking between mouthfuls isn’t allowed, either. Hospitality towards the needy and guests must always be treasured. I am afraid your generation will adopt other people’s culture and forget ours and that will no doubt be very immoral...”*

“You see, my dog,” he continued, *“the music of these days is good, but none of it reaches the standards set by those great musicians of the past like Gatdet Chotlit, Gai Tut Chan, Chot Rik, Goach and Wat. The world has changed a lot but we, in this land, still have much of the past in both our minds and the environment.”*

My grandfather also told me that many old men and women of his age group hated modern life and wished that they could return to the life of the earlier days to find harmony and contentment. He informed me that in the time of their forefathers it was very difficult even to have a bath. Streams were found very far away from homes.

“My mother used to fetch water from a stream called Pul-Barthat could only be reached after two hours’ walk and would then come to Guil village,” he said, *“she used to do that every day. She would sometimes tell us: ‘You took bath last week. Why do you want to play with water?’ We would often take bath maybe twice a month in the dry seasons, but we bathed all the time in the rainy seasons because the water would be available. If we were taken back to those days we would not like that life. It would be the same thing if our great-grandchildren were brought here they would not like the life that we*

are enjoying now. We often walked naked because we had no clothes. But who could walk naked today? I remember when I was a young man; we would spend the whole day naked chatting with the young girl who had won my heart, who is now your grandmother. I was working as a farmer in Pulriali west of Giil when I met her. She used to fetch water at Pul-Bar and passed through my gardens because she lived at Ter-beer near Nyandiar. We chatted every day until we discovered that we were interested in each other. That was before more white men could come to our land. I had to pay her family bride price of eighty head of cattle.”

I learnt many things in life through my grandfather. He told me everyman was conditioned by the age in which he lived, and if he were to return to another age, he would not be happy; disease was common in the past and the death rate was very high compared to now and it was not easy to travel from one place to another because there were no roads and the wild animals could attack people in broad daylight. Grandfather noted that many people, indeed, lived and died in one village and never saw any other part of the land. Their lives would appear dull and bad to us.

“We would hate the life of our Tongjuoyni and no doubt the Tongjuoyni age group would be bewildered and miserable in our lives of today. They would be greatly surprised by the machines and the types of people and the slight change in our language. Think my little dog. Many people have accepted the changes brought by the white man without thinking. Bring something new to this land and we will be proud to embrace them, even from our graveyards. But the most important thing is to respect and love whoever and whatever you see breathing because it is your generation-mate. It is God who created them in the same generation as you. They didn’t create themselves alone or choose to be part of your generation. Don’t be too hard on any living thing of your generation. Eat from the things of your generation with respect. Make most of the human beings your friends and let only a few be your enemies because you all are alive together and will die together. And the

future children will call you 'ancient people' together."

"But how would I distinguish my friends from my enemies in this confusing world?" I asked

"Well," he answered, "the formula is very simple. He who says bad things at your face and says good things behind your back is your true friend. Again, those who are sad when you are happy are your enemies and those who are sad when you are sad are your friends. Life is too short to be spent in the company of the few wrong ones."

After talking to me for almost three hours, my grandfather stood up exhausted and walked towards our luak. I started to imagine all the things he had told me. I felt both happy and sad. I liked all the changes he had talked about, but I hated the fact that people would one day die. I wanted my grandfather to have an everlasting life.



Chapter 5

It was now close to the end of the year. The year – 2014 –in which my sister and I were supposed to be taken to Leer to study either at Mary John Primary School or Leer Primary School was about to begin. The year that I had been longing for, for more than thirteen months was now about to turn into a catastrophe for my family and me.

My sister Nyagoa was sweeping our mother’s hut when she cried out: “*Wüüw! Wüüw! Mi-diiiiiit, Mi-diiiiiit, I am dead.*” I ran as fast as I could to rescue her. I entered the hut only to see a big fat rat.

“*Nyagoa,*” I called out mockingly, “*is it this little rat that made you cry like someone being eaten by a lion?*”

Nyagoa was now shivering like an old woman who was not covered during the cold season. I went after the rat. I threw stones at it, but it was too fast and clever for the stones to hit it. I tried and tried until I managed to kill it at last. I now picked it up by the tail with the intention to show it to each of my siblings. They would instinctively

run away from me while screaming. I kept frightening them until my mother arrived in the evening.

“What is that?” my mother asked. *“Throw it away at once, Mi-diiit.”*

I immediately threw the dead rat away in obedience to my mother’s command. In the evening we went to our grandmother so that she could tell us a story.

“Mandong,” said Gai. *“Mi-diiit killed a rat today and he wanted us to be eaten by the dead rat.”*

“Neither the dead rat nor the living one eats people. But why did you kill it, Mi-diiit?” my grandmother asked. *“Rat is a good friend. Had it not been for Rat, mothers around the world would not be giving birth.”*

“How is that, Mandong?” we all asked her eagerly.

“A long time ago,” she launched into her story, *“much longer than most people can remember, people didn’t know how women should deliver their babies peacefully. Whenever a woman was about to give birth, men would catch her and cut open her stomach to bring out the baby. The baby would survive whereas the mother would die. For many years that scenario went on and the world population was decreasing and decreasing. Women sacrificed their lives for their babies to survive. When Rat learnt that the women of the world were dying, he called the people for a meeting. ‘Dear people,’ said Rat. ‘If you listen to me, believe me, no woman will die in labour again.’ Upon hearing that statement, many people burst into laughter because they believed nothing good could come out of the mouth of a creature as small as Rat. Some of the old men convinced the rest to let Rat try doing what he intended to do since they had nothing to lose. When the next woman went into labour, they called Rat. When Rat arrived in the labour room, he told the woman to open her legs. The woman did as she was instructed by Rat. Rat got between the legs of the woman and waited for the head of the baby*

to come out. Soon the baby's head appeared and Rat helped deliver the baby. The child survived and its mother did not die, either. 'Now, breastfeed the child,' Rat instructed ..."

"The mother breastfed the child and many people became happy and thanked Rat for a job well done. Since that time, women have been giving birth as instructed by Rat. The husband of the woman was pleased with Rat and decided to give him a cow, but Rat would not take it. 'Thank you,' said Rat. 'I am too little for the cow. I don't need anything for now. Just promise to let me share anything in the house with the woman.' 'Yes,' said the woman and her husband together. 'You are free. Let's start from now.' Rat left happily as per the agreement. To this day rats live in the house together with women and eat things in the house. But anytime Rat is chased, he feels betrayed since he rejected to take the cow only to share things with women. People have breached the oral agreement with Rat."

"Oh, poor Rat!" Nyagoa said. "Why have we betrayed him?"

"So sad, indeed," Gai and Nyachangkuoth said together.

I felt sorry for killing the rat after listening to the story. I promised to never kill any rat again in my life. I left Grandmother, feeling sad, and went over where Grandfather was seated, only to find him sitting in deep sorrow, his head supported on his hands, leaning against the *luak*. His radio was placed between his legs.

"Wo!" he wailed sadly after he had listened to his radio. "Juba has finished our people."

"It is very sad, indeed," my father confirmed. "Our people have been slaughtered like goats in the city of Juba. We have some people from Pading who were either slaughtered or wounded in Juba, too."

"Did you hear any names from our land here?" my mother asked sadly after she had put down the meal.

“Yes, someone told me that Kai, Thak, Nyagai, Mut and many more were among the victims,” my father said in response to my mother.

I listened to their depressing conversation with surprise. I had never heard of Juba before, but I knew the Thak they said was among those who had been killed or slaughtered. He had been a tall and smooth-skinned young man in his 20s when he left us. He was a good young man and all the village boys liked him because he told them stories about life in Leer town. Now I knew that there was a place called Juba in the far south of Pading and my grandfather had said it was our land when he had no single *tukul* there. I had slowly come to know many lands through my grandfather and I began to imagine the life in those lands where people spoke strange languages.

“If things get well soon,” my mother told me one morning, *“you and your sister will go to study in Leer and stay in the house of Nyariek Diew at Rekyuol, north of Leer.”*

I was very happy as I waited for the New Year. I believed that my mother had promised me that it would be in December when I would be sent over to Rekyuol. It might be some few days to Christmas and the New Year and my mother had already informed Nyariek Diew, who unconditionally accepted us to stay in her house the following year.

“I first knew Nyariek Diew in 75,” my grandmother disclosed, who had left her spot and moved to where the rest of the family members were after she was told that Nyariek Diew had agreed to accommodate us. *“Nya-diew is a good old woman. We used to brew and sell wine together in Malakal a long time ago.”*

“Yes,” my grandfather confirmed. *“There was a day when she gave me wine with the late singer Gatdet Chotlit for free.”*

“No, it was not she who gave you the wine for free,” my grandmother disagreed. “I had paid her that day, but you were given free wine by her younger sister, the late Nyahok Ter Nyak Liay.”

“Yes, yes, thank you, it was Nyahok, popularly known as Nyayang,” my grandfather responded. “But they say Nyariek is not originally from Leer and instead from Lou-Naath.”

“No, she is not from Lou, but her husband is the one from Lou. She is originally from Door of Nyuong-Naath, but she loves Leer very much. She is a good woman.”

I now got confused. My grandparents said Nyariek Diew, who had a house in Leer and who was supposedly going to host us, was not from Leer and they claimed to be from Leer when they didn't even have a *tukul* there. Which one was which now? I wondered. I decided to see Leer anytime with or without the consent of my family.



Chapter

6

One cold Christmas Day, my sister and I went to Guat-Kotda for Christmas prayers. The journey was so long that we left at dawn and arrived at around seven in the morning. We could hear a hymn before we could reach the church because many parishes – Pading, Gueny, Dabul, Luom and Dablual – had decided to celebrate Christmas together at the Guat-Kotda church. The singing was very emotional:

...Pal ne kuoth pal ne kuoth, pal ne kuoth pal ne kuoth nhial, pal ne kuoth ke yieeeee.

Enwaleme chi loch da teeth chi Yechu much banypiny ke kuiydaaa...,

Gatka cha nak ke dueer Wiicmuon...

The choirs livened up the Christmas with motivational hymns that got my sister to burst into tears, which did not surprise me at all. The hymns were so sad and touching. I had often heard them being sung by my mother while she cooked. It was like the end of the world was around the corner before we could even arrive back home because

of the melody and extreme sadness of the hymns. It was this small church that opened my heart to the word of God.

I zealously decided to follow Jesus Christ in that church and requested that I be registered at the Sunday school. The pastor told the congregation to pray for all the people in Juba and Bentiu. I had heard of Juba, but Bentiu was new to me. Shortly after, the pastor declared that the prayers were over, and we headed back home.

As we walked back home, we decided to drop by and greet those of our relations whose homes were on the way. As was customary for Christmas celebrations in South Sudan, these people, like us, painted and redecorated their huts. The compounds and nearby streets were swept. Almost everyone's attention was focused on Christmas and the New Year. Nobody cared about the looming civil war that we were hearing about through rumours. These people instead got on with their routine activities normally, not knowing that a wicked problem loomed ahead. Some people were even denying that there was a threat or a possible war because the army in Bentiu was under the command of their son. They also believed that the enemy would not reach our villages because it was impossible for Commander Ci-di-ar and his men to shift loyalty to the man who had killed our people in Juba or allow the enemy to capture Bentiu town, the capital of our state in the far north.

In the evening, my sister and I arrived back home and found my parents and grandparents in a foul mood. "*There is also high tension in Bentiu town,*" my father told my grandfather, whose chin was resting on his palm. "*One of my neighbours told me that his relative who came from Leer had informed him.*"

"*Guandong,*" I called him, "*where is Bentiu?*"

“Bentiu is our land, Gatdoda,” he said simply, looking sad.

“Guandong, is there a land that will never be ours in this world?” I asked nervously. He took my hand and twisted it playfully. *“You will one day know it, Gatdoda. Time is the best teacher.”* He whispered this, so I did not understand him.

“They say the Juba war is between the Naath and the Jieng, but why has it come to Bentiu?” my grandmother asked.

“It is not true. The war has nothing to do with the two innocent tribes but should instead be between the Naath and the government which killed them in thousands. Nevertheless, I am afraid the war will reach the poor people among whom we are included,” my grandfather said.

I was very sad to hear my father say we were poor. I did not want my family to be called poor.

“The only solution to the looming war is neutrality among our people,” Grandmother said.

“Yes, that is the only healthy choice. But that will not happen because the rustics we call our leaders will use the tribal cards to divide us. Our vulnerable people, including us, will be dragged into the war.”

“It won’t reach here,” Grandmother said.

“It will reach us. You always ignore rumours. Could you remember when we fought the forces of the Islamic regime at the Thar-yier-malual battle along the River Nile? What did you tell me when we defeated them?”

“Ha-ha, yes! I told you they would not come again after they were badly defeated. But they came again after two days because the forces of Paul Ruot, Paul Adung, Paul Arwel and Paul Nyingori left for Nasir.”

I saw my grandfather nod his head in approval of my grandmother's speech. Soon my father got into the hut with a changed expression on his face. I knew something bad had happened.

"Guandit," my father called, "they said people have fought in Bentiu."

"Who is fighting who?" my grandfather asked, throwing down his pipe because he did not like the news. "This land which is only two years independent is now going to be destroyed!"

"So sad!" my father noted. "The leader who is still loyal to the man who killed our people in Juba did not want to agree with Ci-di-ar, Gat-Macharjuch and Gat-Majaak."

"Who is in control of the town now?" my grandfather asked.

"Ci-di-ar and his colleagues are in full control and that leader was seen heading towards Mayom in the west."

"Towards Mayom?"

"Yes, to Mayom."

"Why was he allowed to go towards that great land of Chol-Geahdieng? He will build mistrust in their hearts and that will make our good people fight among themselves again like what happened twenty years ago. The war will now be among the sons and daughters alone. He should have instead been told to go back to Juba."

There was silence in the hut after my grandfather had talked.

I approached my grandmother to tell me the story of greed that she had promised us the previous time. *"I have no time," she said sharply. "There is no happiness in me to tell a story. Go to your sister to tell it to you because I had told them the other day when you went to look for calves."*

I went to Nyagoa to ask her to retell it to me.

“Nyagoa, let us tell stories, please,” I begged.

“Yes, I first!” she said happily. *“I will tell you the story of greedy Hyena that our grandmother had promised us last time when she told us the story about Hyena and his brother Donkey. You were not there when she told us. It is very interesting.”*

“Okay, tell me now, please,” I begged eagerly.

“But promise me that you won’t sleep and leave me talking to myself. I hate it when someone sleeps in the middle of my story.”

“Yes, I swear in the name of our forefathers, I won’t sleep,” I responded.

“Okay, here is the story,” she began. *“Greedy Hyena once saw a luak full of goats and the owner was sleeping in the hut. He wanted to eat the goats inside but the luak was closed very securely by the owner...”*

“Well,’ exclaimed Hyena happily, ‘I must make a hole in the back so that I can get in.’ He scratched the wall of the luak until he managed to make a hole that allowed him to squeeze himself into the luak. While inside the luak, greedy Hyena ate and ate until he became full. He was very happy to have eaten so many goats. Hyena now wanted to go back through the same hole that he had used to get in. He tried and tried to get out through the hole but to no avail. He could not manage to get out because his belly was full unlike when he had got in. Now greedy Hyena started to cry. Fox, his nephew, was passing by the luak when it heard Hyena’s cry and asked him: ‘Uncle Hyena, why are you crying?’ ‘I made a small hole and came into the luak to eat the goats, nephew,’ Hyena replied sadly. ‘Now I am not able to get out through the hole that I made.’ ‘Oh sorry, Uncle,’ Fox said with pity. ‘It is because you ate too much – beyond your weight. Wait until your belly reduces in size from hunger.’ Clever Fox laughed and went away, leaving his uncle inside the

luak. Fox wanted to make sure that he got into thick woodland before human beings could control their daytime as night-time was for the animals. When night caught up with a man in the bush, he would hurry to any nearby home to avoid being eaten by animals. It was the reverse for animals. Whenever daytime caught up with the animals in a place where humans lived, they had to find a hiding place somewhere as quickly as possible...

“Hyena now was convinced of his nephew’s advice. He slept inside the luak. He believed that when he woke up, what he had eaten would be gone and he would be very hungry again...”

“Wow!’ exclaimed greedy Hyena. ‘I will easily get away now since my belly has reduced in size. But why should I go away hungry when there is more food in this beautiful luak? I must eat only two to three more goats before I leave...”

“Greedy Hyena ate two more goats. His appetite now only got bigger, so he decided to eat more goats. He ate and ate. This time, his belly became bigger than before and yet the morning was approaching. Greedy Hyena remembered that he had to escape. Obviously, he could not as his belly could not allow him to pass through the small hole...”

“‘So sad,’ he told himself. ‘I had better sleep again till tomorrow morning so that the belly can reduce in size again.’

“Greedy Hyena slept for some time. However, when he woke up, he found that the belly was still big. He fell asleep again. But this time the owner of the luak had woken up and was ready to take his cows and goats out of the luak. When the owner of the luak was about to open it, he realised that something bad had happened inside. He looked at the back of the luak and saw a big hole in it. He knew that his goats had been eaten by a hyena. When he tried to open the luak, he saw Hyena running about inside it in fear.

“Oh Kuoth-nhial,’ said the man to himself. ‘Hyena is still inside my luak with my goats and cows. This is his last day to see the sun. This stupid Hyena will see the redness of the fight.’ The man brought his spears and other weapons. He opened his luak carefully to make sure Hyena couldn’t run away. He threw one of his spears at Hyena and hit him on target. Greedy Hyena died instantly. Greed had brought the life of Hyena to an end. And that is the end of the story.”

“Thank you, Nyagoa,” I said while napping. “Please let us sleep. I will tell you my story tomorrow.”

“Look at you, Mi-diiit,” she said angrily. “Why have you betrayed me after you have heard my story?”

“Sorry, Nyamin-goa,” I said. “I have not betrayed you but...”

And I could not remember what I had said as sleep overcame me.



Chapter 7

A Village hero was the spearhead behind every decision in the village. He would tell all boys to do this and that – or not to do that and this. He would eat first when an animal, fish or bird was caught and cooked by the boys in the woodland or at the riverbank. Weakness forced one to go through a childhood of agony at the hand of the village hero or whoever wanted fame or bravery through demeaning him. When children travelled to the riverbank to bathe, the village's most feared boy would take off his clothes and choose any one of the cowards to take care of them on the riverbank. Our village, Pading, had two lines, the south and the north. The Guol tributary lay behind Pading's two lines. Our home falls to the south of the line. There were only two candidates for bravery in the village. The two were Changkuoth and Goanar.

Goanar was from our village-line and Changkuoth was from the other line. The first time our village-line considered Goanar as the pluckiest on our side was when he approached the boy that we all deeply feared. But he taught the boy to fear him.

It was during the harvest season. That was when Goanar invited Doraar, the most feared, for a fight. He knew that Doraar was the most feared boy in our village-line, but he wanted to attain fame by challenging him.

Goanar approached him when all the village boys were present. Goanar intended to take advantage of the big number of the boys already present to disseminate the message of his victory to those who didn't come. Just in case he won.

"Hi, you donkey boy," Goanar said, attacking. *"Why do you look at that tree? Is it your husband?"*

Most of us couldn't believe our ears when he started insulting the most feared one. We all said it was the end for Goanar in the village-line's leadership. Why would he make such an unwise decision when he, in fact, was aware of the boy's well-built body as well as his bravery? Who had misled Goanar to take that dangerous road?

"I am talking to you, fool!" he repeated.

"Even you!" Doraar answered defensively. We held our breath, not expecting that kind of reply.

"Dog, Kalib, Homar, Kachik."

"If you like the four animals, be them all."

"They are not four," Gathuak, who once studied Primary One C in Adok intervened. *"The animals Goanar mentioned in the offence are only two!"*

"How?" asked Goanar, who didn't even know English or Arabic.

"Dog is called Kalib in Arabic." said Gathuak, *"and Homar is an Arabic word for donkey which is called Kachik in Naath."*

We had been scared of the boy, yet we had never seen him fight. It was only his guts that frightened us.

Goanar was very lucky to have struck fear in the boy. News of Goanar's victory travelled to all homes and Changkuoth, who hankered after heroism in the two village's lines, became jealous of that. He heard about Goanar being praised even by the village girls.

Changkuoth wanted to prove to both the village boys and girls that he was still the only hero alive in the village. One day, as we were playing after the heavy rain pour, Changkuoth finally broke his silence. *"Why did you insult me last year, Goanar?"* asked Changkuoth.

Goanar didn't respond. He looked down as if he was trying to see something deep inside the earth. Goanar was the type of person feared more for his tongue than for their capacity to fight. He had never been seen fighting but his tongue provoked fear in the whole village.

"Tell me now, son of woman!" Changkuoth thundered. Still, Goanar would not talk, even after being called 'son of woman', which was the worst insult that could be directed at a boy and thus was strongly resented by the village boys.

Goanar was left with no option but to look down. Goanar, in fact, hadn't insulted him the year before but he created this to justify his intention to fight him. Goanar had now been put in a difficult situation because denying the accusation would devalue him, too, and would consequently make his apparent fearfulness a farce.

"Changkuoth, please leave him. He has shown fear for you," advised a boy.

"No, this vulture needs to be taught a lesson."

"Please," begged another boy, *"leave him alone, brother."*

Changkuoth allowed Goanar to go because he had said nothing despite the insults. The next day the village boys started teasing

Goanar about his fear of his age-mate and about being insulted vilely in front of all of them without him even daring to repeat the insults. That was the way cowards normally behaved. Whenever a coward was insulted, he would only hurl back the same insult. He wouldn't hurl the attacking insults but the defensive ones.

We approached Goanar and his sweet tongue nearly convinced us.

"You have put our village-line to shame," said Ruadhel. *"Why did you keep silent when you were being insulted badly in front of everyone, Goanar? You should have at least resisted. Now everyone, including the girls, will not respect you because the message will be carried to everyone in the land and your girlfriend may stop loving you."*

"Yes, why put us to shame?" I added.

"Ha-ha!" he chuckled. *"You guys are not astute. Didn't you know that all the insults he used against me were nothing compared to the insults I launched against him?"*

"Liar," said his immediate cousin. *"Are we deaf? You said nothing and you were only just gazing at the ground like a thirsty calf."*

"Yes, he is lying! You kept silent like this ground, Goanar," added another companion.

"The ground sometimes makes a little noise," said another village companion, a tall one. *"But he didn't say anything. He was like the vagina of a woman who has drowned a child at birth."*

"Goanar has really betrayed us," I added. *"Everyone in that village-line will think we are chickens and we may suffer. Even their cowards will not give us a break this time around. They will learn to be brave through us."*

"Mates," Goanar called out courageously, and with self-respect, *"have you all finished talking or I shall give you more time to talk?"*

We all told him to continue because almost everyone had spoken out their opinions.

“Learn to have patience,” he began. “Some of you went as far as accusing me of having feared that fool. And some said I kept silent like this ground. Some said I was like this and that. But let me assure you: I insulted him more than he did me.”

“You are not serious,” Gatluak said.

“I am serious.”

“Don’t deceive us.”

“I am not.”

“Then tell us.”

“Believe me, I insulted the fool. I insulted him badly. I insulted his father, mother, sisters, brothers, and everyone else, including their neighbours and those who share his name.”

“But how?”

“You may all be right because you didn’t hear the insults. I insulted him badly with my heart, buddies.”

“Your heart? Did you say your heart?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, my heart.”

“Wordlessly in your heart?” asked another fellow.

“Yes.”

There was now roar laughter one after the other as no one could believe Goanar’s explanation. He had, in fact, degraded our village-line and himself, too.

The second day his claim of insulting Changkuoth with his heart was reported to Changkuoth himself by some intermediaries who wanted to flatter him in order for them to be on the safer side.

Changkuoth, angered by Goanar's remark about insulting him with his heart, decided to beat him in front of everyone. One day, as the boys from the two village-lines were playing, Changkuoth called on us to give him a chance to fight Goanar. Goanar pretended to be ready for the fight. But he knew what he was going to do since his tricks were many. His tricks in avoiding fights with half-convincing reasons were too many to be counted.

Now, all the boys from the two village-lines formed a circle. Almost fifteen boys were present as the most feared two, Changkuoth and Goanar, were going to fight on behalf of the two village-lines.

Everyone was happy to see what the village boys called a 'film'. An independent instructor called out the rules and regulations of the fight.

"Now that you will start the Bor-Nuara fight," he began, "you are both aware that biting is left for women, young girls and dogs. No one shall bite his opponent."

"Agreed," said Goanar, quickly and with high morale.

"I am a man and I cannot bite," asserted Changkuoth.

The fight was set to begin. The two boys were only waiting for the green light. This would come in the form of a line that was always drawn on the ground so that the quicker of the two could start the fight by attacking. Goanar, the cowardly but entertaining one, looked around in fake anger.

“Ha-ha,” he laughed as if he was happy. “My name is Goanar. I am a sturdy man. I have inherited this utmost bravery from my dear father. My father runs away when he is in a rage so that his opponent can follow him to an empty place. Haters and those who don’t know the different types of anger may have different opinions on that. But who cares? If this fool called Changkuoth is brave enough, let him follow what I am going to do soon so that he sees the redness of the fight. I will now run away and...”

Goanar didn’t finish his speech. He sped off, claiming to have been too irritated to hang around. Who could follow him? Not even Changkuoth. Everyone was surprised at this turn of events. That kind of bravery had never been shown before in the village; it was not even reflected in the stories of the past. Goanar might have done what he did in order not to get humiliated through being beaten badly in front of many people. Could that be a tactical withdrawal as always said by my grandfather about their wars? Only Goanar or God knew.

The next day I approached him myself – alone.

“I don’t want to share any words with you, faint-heart,” I told him after he tried to talk to me.

“Yes,” he said, trying to defend himself. *“You may call me faint-hearted, but I know myself better than any fool who may call me names. Try to know that anger has many types. There are those who cry when they are angry and those who run away or laugh when in a rage. And those who...”*

“These types of anger must only be made in your home,” I criticised.

“Do you need me in a fight?” he said, furious.

“No,” I said.

“Then respect yourself.”

The leadership of the village had now been taken by Changkuoth. We all bowed down before him since the day Goanar, our only hero, had run away from him. Who could now challenge Changkuoth's bravery when our only hero had run away? We all surrendered and each of us was now trying to build a strong relationship with Changkuoth.

Changkuoth, the new leader, one day ordered us to see Leer town without informing our relatives. Who could refuse? We tried to go to Leer, but we were tracked down and stopped on the way and then returned without seeing it. So, we decided to keep the idea of going to Leer for another day. We took a rest before we could start going back to Pading. Group sittings were always the origin of fights. Wanting to be considered the fiercest was done in steps. One had to start by beating more and more boys until he was noticed by everyone. There were two cousins who, after noticing that I was seated drawing things with my fingers on the ground, were planning to interrupt me. They were talking within earshot though they were part of a different group.

"Why is Mi-diiit smiling?" asked one of them.

"I don't know," said the other one, ignoring the subject.

"Then let us go and upset him," suggested the first one.

"I am not ready as of now because there are two boys here that I want to upset first. But that boy is a coward. You can go and try him."

Soon the boy came to me prepared to fight me. Seeing that the boy was prepared, I got ready, too. He decided against his plan, went back to his cousin and said, *"but you said he was a coward. Then why did he prepare himself to fight me back if he was, in fact, a coward?"*

"Cowards do put up resistance, though just a little," his cousin said. *"Do you think you can beat him without trying a little defence? He who fears*

without a little or big resistance isn't a coward but there is no word invented yet to call him."

Shortly after we had returned to our village, a certain boy accidentally pushed me.

"Why have you accidentally pushed me, dear brother?" I fearfully asked.

"It is not accidental. Do you think my back has eyes?"

"Just say sorry, brother."

"I don't say sorry to dogs!"

I kept silent, surveying those who were looking and listening to us. I would have ignored his attack and insult had I not found two of the boys were paying attention to our exchanges.

"Woman!" I angrily insulted him as if I had just heard the insult.

"Hey, you two! Don't disturb us! Go and fight alone in the bush!" Changkuoth ordered.

"Yes, if they are men, let them go and fight alone in the bush," added another coward.

"Mi-diiit," a relative of mine called from far-off, *"just forgive him if he said sorry."*

"Yes, he said sorry, but he doesn't look sorry."

"Who said sorry, fool?" my opponent insulted again. The village boys now forced us into the bush to fight alone there.

My opponent and I left for the bush in order to fight. When we reached the bush we stared at each other with reduced anger for a couple of minutes, waiting for the other to start the fight.

"Why don't we just return home and deceive them that we have fought?" I said, breaking my silence with a smile.

"Good suggestion, brother."

As we were putting on our clothes, my opponent remembered something and stopped me.

"But Mi-diiit," he said, *"they will not believe our story."*

"Believe me, brother, they will believe us."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure many times, dear."

"But Mi-diiit, what if they ask about the wounds and bruises?"

"Not all fights involve wounds and bruises, brother."

"Impossible," he said, looking down to avoid my eyes.

"It is possible, brother," I said. *"We will pray that they will not ask a lot of questions about our fight."*

"No amount of prayers will stop them from knowing. Gatdet, Murguj... are curious."

"Then what is the way forward?" I asked, sadly.

"I think, brother, the way forward is for us to fight," he said sadly.

"Please, let us just go," I said.

"No..., I am sorry to say no, Mi-diiit. Honestly, I don't know how to fight without being hurt or hurting someone," he said. *"Let us just fight. I need no more talk."*

My opponent was now determined. He wanted to take advantage of my pleas for us to avoid fighting.

“I know you need no more talk,” I said, breaking the ice to cool him down, *“but I have a reasonable solution.”*

“What is your solution, my dear?”

“Kindly cut my face so that they will think we have fought.”

“How?”

I kept silent for a while, and then I disclosed my solution. “Scratch me with your nails until blood comes out.”

My heartless opponent now hurt me. He quickly did it so that I couldn't change my mind. The fight was over before it had begun. Blood poured down my cheek, but still, it was better than fighting him. I knew he would defeat me if I chose to fight him. And defeating me would make me a coward. And becoming a coward would make me suffer in the village. Unfortunately, when we returned home, no one asked us about our fight. How humiliating that was!

Months passed and Changkuoth was still the village's hero. Many tried to take over the leadership from him by beating him but to no avail. I never attempted to take the title until I was sure that I would take it. Every night I exercised and ran. I wanted the title, but I knew I would be humiliated badly if I didn't try my best.

It was by luck that I was forced to take the title. One day, as most of our cattle, lay down, chewing cud, and only a few were pulling and mauling the grass from far-off, we went to the watercourse to take bath. Many people, including girls who went there to fetch water, were there. Changkuoth, the owner of the title, tried to humiliate me when some girls were present at the riverbank. Who could accept any

kind of humiliation in front of girls? The girls asked Changkuoth to bring them twigs from a neem tree so they could use them to brush their teeth. He accepted the request and promised them that he would send one of his boys though we were age-mates. He looked around proudly in front of the girls, trying to see who he could send.

“Mi-diiit,” he called out, *“go and bring two good neem twigs for these girls. Hurry up!”*

“Who?” I asked as if it was not my name he had called out.

“You,” he said simply.

“I am not going,” I said. As I said this, all the boys breathed heavily in surprise. Why would I say that to a hero in front of girls? But on the other hand, I asked myself: Why would the hero say that to me in front of girls?

“What!” he roared. *“My people, did this bighead say he would not go?”*

“Yes, he said so. He must be mad,” said one of the cowards, who feared Changkuoth deeply.

One of my best friends winked at me, trying to persuade me to change my mind for the sake of my safety but I would not do it. Many others tried and tried to let me do Changkuoth’s bidding to no avail.

Changkuoth, angered by my refusal, now came and slapped me hard. I stepped forward, ready to fight. Everyone stood up when they saw that I was determined to fight the most feared boy.

“Mi-diiit,” Goanar called out, *“will you fight Changkuoth?”*

“He is even too late now!” I said sharply, taking off my clothes.

“Does he want to fight me?” Changkuoth said, cross. *“Okay, Goanar, come and take care of my clothes.”*

We were now ready to fight and everyone was silent as I was representing our village-line and Changkuoth was representing their village-line. Everyone thought I would be beaten but they were wrong. A middle-aged man who was present asked us whether we liked the stick-fight or the hand-fight.

“Hand-fight,” I said.

“Any kind of bout that he likes,” he said proudly.

We started to fight. At first, Changkuoth gave me two hard punches and everybody thought I was going to be beaten badly and would cry. But the girls’ presence played a great role as I didn’t intend to surrender. Most of the time I was taking steps back and that made his supporters boost their master’s morale: *“Yioy-Yioy, Yarw-yarw-yarw-e-Keeth...”*

They said many things, trying to scare me, but I was not going to give up. Whenever I felt tired, I would look through the corners of my eyes and I would notice that the girls were still present, some three or four sitting on their water-barrels. The fight went on for some time. We finally got hold of each other and started to grapple, trying to throw each other down. Our hands and legs intertwined and we tried to get the better of the other.

Changkuoth tried to lift me off the ground. He was late as I had already trapped him with my legs. Changkuoth fell down and I lay on his stomach. Most of the onlookers couldn’t believe their eyes. Those who thought that Changkuoth would win and who boosted his morale were now in shame. Changkuoth tried and tried to get up but to no avail. Whenever he tried to get up, I would hit him hard on the nose. I did this until his nose started to bleed.

“Changkuoth,” I called, *“will you again do it?”*

“Vulture,” he said, *“who are you to warn me?”*

Just then, one boy stepped forward and tried to force me to get up. However, my friends and relatives, who had been fortified by my actions, intervened.

“Let them fight!” they said angrily.

Goanar was among them, and he was happily watching. He had already thrown away Changkuoth’s clothes since he knew I was winning.

“Changkuoth,” I called again, wanting him to surrender, *“will you again do it?”*

He kept still this time around and I knew that the leadership title was going to be on me. I knew without a doubt that I would be crowned not only by the village boys but girls, too, because three or four girls were already watching us. I now got up and washed. Poor Changkuoth got up painfully.

“Yioy-Yioy, Yarw-yarw-yarw-e-Keeth...” the boys said. This was a sign of the transfer of leadership from Changkuoth to Mi-diiit. Those who had been supporting him now changed sides.

“Wash yourself and go and bring the neem-tree branches to these girls,” I ordered him. He nodded miserably.

Changkuoth went and brought the branches. He presented them to me and I ordered him to give them to the girls.

“Now everyone must be present tomorrow at Paraibeet square for the coronation,” I ordered as one of my first decrees.

“Goa, Mi-diiit!” everyone shouted.

Goanar and my previous opponent, who had cut my face, were among those who celebrated my victory.

“Did you know why I ran away from Changkuoth?” Goanar said, divulging

what he had never allowed anybody to discuss before.

“I think you did it because you didn’t want to be beaten.”

“Not only that. Beating is not worse than humiliation and shame. Small shame is better than big shame. Being beaten by an age-mate in front of everyone is a big shame. Running away to avoid the big shame is a small shame.”

As Goanar departed, my former foe now came and apologised for what he had done to me earlier. He knew I was tough and might beat him any time I wanted because he saw me beat the most feared hero.

“Congratulations, Mi-diiit Migoa,” he said. I kept silent, looking down as if my victory over Changkuoth was normal.

“I am sorry for what happened between us earlier,” he continued. *“Let us be friends now, instead.”*

“We will be friends, but we must schedule a fight. I cannot accept the cut on my face that you gave me last time without a fight.”

“I am very sorry, brother Mi-diiit,” my former opponent said, shivering. *“I am actually a congenital coward. If I am ever to fight someone I die inside. I always see death’s face before I could fight someone. I am an irredeemable coward. Sorry to tell you.”*

“Okay, I forgive you, Coward.”

“I am very happy with you, young sir.”

Changkuoth went back home looking very gloomy. On the other hand, I was very happy with my victory. The lesson I learnt was that whenever a man celebrates something, another one is mourning as a result of the former’s happiness. I couldn’t actually believe that I had secured a victory over Changkuoth, the most feared of the boys. As a

young man, I hung out with cowards, of whom Goanar is an example. Sometimes he would drag us into multiple fights. We would suffer and regret and would sometimes wonder why we didn't just run away. We would sometimes meet multiple opponents from different villages who would fight us when they had a numerical advantage. They would chase us until they became tired. But now I was the village hero. Who could dare cross my line?

The other day, as we took our cattle out to graze, I, the new leader of the village boys, decided to select four of the boys to remain behind in order to look after the cattle while we were away visiting Leer. Among the boys I selected was Changkuoth. All the boys accepted my order but the four who remained were very sad but could not show it because of fear. I promised them that they would see Leer during our next visit. We had all never seen Leer town before. It was the first time for us. Our main target was the Leer market and Leer Primary School. It took us two hours to reach the Great Town, as my grandfather called it. We were really inquisitive.

The first thing that came to mind was the fact that the people in the marketplace didn't greet each other, unlike our village people. We entered the classrooms of Leer Primary School after the pupils had left for home at the end of their classes. We wished we were pupils there, too.

We now decided to return to Pading before the elders of the village could notice that we had gone to Leer. Visits to towns were restricted by the village elders. Many villagers believed that children easily turned into thieves and thugs when they saw the town.

"No one shall talk about this visit to anyone," I told the boys, *"because our parents may beat us. So, the visit must remain a secret forever."*

"Yes," they all agreed.



Chapter 8

Much as I was now the village's most feared boy, I neither ruled with despotism nor with iniquity. All my actions were fair. Almost everyone in the land, except for the village farmers, loved me. The village farmers had their own reasons for hating Mi-diit and his group. I was adored by the boys because, after eating lots and lots of our stolen mangoes and other fruits, I would tell them to enjoy defecating without stopping them in the middle of the sweetness of defecation. Unlike the previously feared boys who could take, by force, others' prepared places underneath a tree and who would force other boys to stop defecating just because they themselves had finished, I never did that. Everyone was free to take their time enjoying defecation as others waited.

We also would gather the wild green pepper and mixed them with salt and then add water to the mixture. Then we would drink the mixture the same way a girl slowly drinks juice in public. We would enjoy the defecation later.

The boys enjoyed nothing in the bush more than defecation and masturbation. Some drank the pepper water in order to defecate or masturbate with greater pleasure later in the bush. We would defecate while putting down our heads down on the ground. That kind of defecation would last for many minutes as one enjoyed it. It was always called 'lailiem' or sugary defecation.

When it came to stealing cucumbers, watermelons and other vegetables, I would let the boys, without any restrictions; steal from all homes, including our home. Some of my predecessors would order the theft be carried out only in other boys' homes, and their own homes would be spared. They would also force the other boys to slip and fall down if they had slipped accidentally just because they wanted everybody to be dirty. If some of those feared boys were sad, they would force the other boys to be sad too, at least to look sad.

Kuiyier had once been one of the boldest boys in the land. It was said that he pushed his age-mates around a lot, and perhaps that was why he had now become a beggar in the land. He might have been cursed for the transgressions he had committed. Kuiyier, according to our elders, beat whoever didn't laugh even when he told a humourless joke. His age-mates became flatterers to the extent of laughing before Kuiyier could even open his big mouth. He went as far as beating Mamuch one day for failing to cry when Kuiyier's grandmother had died of old age.

"You stupid dog called Mamuch," Kuiyier insulted. *"I heard you didn't cry when my dear grandmother died...and I couldn't believe that disloyal act of not crying when your leader was going through great depression..."*

"Yes, for sure," said one of the flatterers, *"Mamuch didn't shed a single tear! He didn't cry when all of us cried bitterly and..."*

“Hi, you this little thing,” Mamuch rebuked the boy who was trying to get him into trouble with Kuiyier, the greatest puncher. “Who told you that I didn’t cry? Go and ask my mother if I didn’t cry when I reached home that day.”

“Okay, well.” Kuiyier said, “then who shed crocodile tears among all of you? Tell me who looked happy when my dear grandmother died. Let me know that woman among you because...”

“It was Jal.”

“No, it was you, Tap.”

“As a matter of fact,” said one of the boys, a good conversationalist, “none of us was happy. The death of our grandmother is something that will never be forgotten in our hearts and minds.”

“Okay, I now see. But you, Jal and Tap, stop your stupid accusations,” Kuiyier told them animatedly. “Listen! Next time when any relative of mine dies, be the first to come and cry. He who fails to do so will lose a tooth.”

All the boys agreed to Kuiyier’s instructions unconditionally. They laughed, pretending to be amused, whenever they were insulted by Kuiyier. His insults made everyone seem to be pleased as if it led some of them to get recognised. They said one of the chicken-hearted boys of that time had once gone to Kuiyier and burst into tears. When asked why he was crying, he said it was because Kuiyier had always ignored him since he had never been insulted. They also said he once slapped a man who, instead of hitting back, appreciated him by remarking that the slap was the best and warmest he had ever been given in his entire life.

As opposed to the heroes of the past, I decided that everyone was to be treated with justice and admiration. I also decided that all the

households must suffer or enjoy together because we were part of the same community. Almost everyone applauded me for being fair in running the village. The one really irksome exception was my elder sister, Nyagoa. This was not because she beat me but because of her wits as she outdid me in any debate or war of words. She would even detect if I had stolen fruits and vegetables from other people's farms. This happened whenever I reached home with a heavy belly and carrying a smile of satisfaction, Nyagoa always made biblical remarks which would superficially relate to me and to what I was doing.

"Thief, you are known," she would say scornfully. *"The Bible says all thieves will go to the fire."*

"Liar!" I would say. *"How would someone go to fire for taking things as small as fruits and vegetables?"*

"There is nothing called small things. A thief is a thief. There is no small or big thief. All of them fall under the same category."

"Then do not forget that thieves are created by God, too."

"Is that how you convince yourself, burglar?"

"Yes, big head!"

"You will defecate now."

"You will eat it."

Because of Nyagoa's scary fire threat, I decided to give up stealing. But I didn't stop at once. I promised myself that I would stop stealing vegetables and fruits at the end of the season or the next, or maybe the one after that, and repent. It all depended on the sweetness of the fruits and vegetables.

“Fire is awaiting you if you don’t repent now,” Nyagoa kept repeating to me.

“Who are you to judge me? Have you ever been to that fire? You are one of those who frighten people about fire and heaven like they have been there and returned. You need to stop talking about an imaginary world because...”

“Oh, my Lord Jesus,” she prayed, *“let him die alone for I have no hand in the words he has just uttered...Amen!”*

How I feared death! Nyagoa’s remarks had now scared me more than our frequent, usually heated debates. I became terribly afraid and thought I would die. What could I do now?

I was reminded of the day she frightened me with the prospect of death just because I had asked about God’s gender. *“How dare you ask about the gender of Kuoth-Nhial, Deng-Taath, Gat-Kuoth Mi-goa, Dung-diiit, Manuel, and Lord Massai and...?”* Nyagoa reeled off all of God’s names and prayed afterwards as if to tell God that it was Mi-diiit who had done Him wrong. What a conspiracy? I asked myself.

“This Nyagoa is conspiring with God so that I don’t go to heaven,” I said to myself. *“Who cares? May be I will be friends with Satan – and for a good reason, too.”*

Whenever it came to the Bible Nyagoa would talk like she had secured her ticket to heaven. So, I looked like the real Satan in the eyes of Nyagoa and even to my own eyes.



PART TWO

LIFE DURING
THE WAR







There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to mourn and a time to dance. – Ecclesiastes 3:1-4





Chapter 9

It was now the beginning of the New Year and I was still willing to go and study in Leer in accordance with my family's wish. But that dream would not materialise. The summer of 2014 would instead be the beginning of my suffering. I could hear sounds of guns from far away, but my grandfather couldn't. They came nearer and nearer until he could hear them clearly now.

Dim! Dim! Gir! Gir! Takuf! Takuf! Wuu! Wuu! The sound of different guns went on in the early morning. The sun had just blown away the horizon and the twilight lightened so that we could see the western side of our village that was now red with gunpowder and smoke. If the smoke and the fire came from the eastern direction, one would think it was the sun illuminating the earth with beautiful new rays. And if the sounds were to happen during the rainy season, one would think it was just a thunderstorm. But I knew right away what this was all about. It was a war, not a battle! I knew that one side was being driven towards us. And this would, in no doubt, be our men. The closing-in of the sound of guns in the dawn made me shiver.

I woke up and found my grandfather already awake. Shortly after, there was complete silence to the west. We thought the day would be another normal day, not realising that by the end of it, our lives would be at risk and that I would find myself in a very dark corner of a strange land.

My grandfather, despite the silence of the guns to the west, talked to himself resting his head on his two hands. *“Oh! Kuoth-Nhial!”* he screamed. *“Why don’t you give a break to us and our children? We were born in the war, grew up in the war and will now die in the war!”*

He went silent. However, immediately after, the sounds resumed to the west, this time on the outskirts of the Guat area.

The sun had now risen over the horizon, emitting an impressive mixture of orange, yellow and red. Soon, many displaced people from Leer and Bentiu were seen running towards Gaatdoor and Ngemtony. It was from seeing these displaced people that we believed that the war was real. My father came to my grandmother and grandfather and assured them that Leer had been captured by the enemy, who had come with more vehicles and heavy machine guns. My ambition to go to Leer was now a thing of the past. I knew that it was the beginning of the end, not the end of the beginning.

“The enemy outnumbered our men. Our commissioner managed to let the civilians go away by engaging the enemy before he withdrew towards Thonyoor,” my father said, who had received the news from a first-hand witness.

“Who do you term as an enemy?”

“The soldiers who are fighting our people are the enemy.”

“Never term them as such again, my dog. No South Sudanese must be termed

as an enemy. Brothers fight everywhere but that doesn't end their brotherhood. It instead shapes their brotherhood."

"Well, your advice is accepted for consideration," my father said. "Do you know the appointed commissioner physically?"

"Yes," my grandfather responded affirmatively. "I first got to know that little boy along with three other ground-breaking boys during the Thialem/Thialelee wars. They were very tough when they were under the command of Kuar Tito, one of the bravest and most charismatic leaders in this land. If we were fighting the Islamic regime now, I would support and praise the commissioner. But supporting a South Sudanese gunman against his fellow South Sudanese gunman is foolishness. My biggest fear is the involvement of the youth of the land."

"You have reminded me of Kuar Tito, the forgotten hero," my father said. "Where is he? I haven't heard about him since your movement signed the CPA with the Islamic-led government shortly after my son Mi-diit was born."

"Kuar Tito is there in Juba," my grandfather disclosed, "Only that he is not in a place he deserves to be. Sadly, almost all the officers, soldiers and people who chose to stand with the Anyanya movements in the 60s and 70s and again in Thialem/Thialelee from 83 to date have now either become juniors or nothing to all the different factions in the country who were either with Jallaba during the wars or who have joined recently. Our big men don't appreciate or reward those who tirelessly promote their names and legacies."

"So sad, indeed, they should change that habit or else they will lose men," my father said.

"They will never change their habits of exploiting and taking people for granted. Nobody changes their nature," my grandfather said. "They will do it again and again until they retire from politics and hand over power to their children, wives, in-laws or their cheap loyalists irrespective of what

they know or do not. But we must always try our best to distance ourselves from them in their days of suffering just as they distance themselves from us in their days of happiness.”

“...Okay, I now know why I have never seen any qualified cadres who are groomed by our leaders in this land,” my father said, resting his head on his hand.

“Yes, most of them don’t groom leaders but followers. It was only those few martyrs who trained some of their soldiers and political cadres by sending them overseas in order for them to get the necessary education and training. Those were different. They didn’t care how long the struggle would take but what they wanted was to leave behind good and ripe fruit instead of bad fruit. Nowadays, there are PhD holders and leaders groomed by those martyrs that actually can do well for both themselves and the land. But when you go to most of these leaders’ offices you will only find people who do not know their left hand from their right hand, people who do not know what they should know and who instead only know what they need not know. And most of these have been with the so-called leaders for years. The leaders don’t want them to learn anything. They like only the flatterers who are always by their side and forget their genuine loyalists. But not all people can be flatterers or people without dignity and integrity for the sake of employment and accommodation. There are many people who should have access to these things without flattering.”

“And yet they are highly educated with many degrees, and even PhDs,” my father said.

“Yes, they don’t want anyone from our motherland to feature in history like them. They have taught our young men only to build their bellies and wear jackets,” added my grandfather.

“Well, let us forget about them. I have come here to tell you that I am joining our youth who have taken up arms to defend the land,” my father announced.

“Jack and his colleagues are doing a good job by protecting our people. I will be with their forces to help defend our land.”

“Gojam?” my grandfather asked, lowering his voice and looking down.

“Yes, Gojam,” my father confirmed.

“You shouldn’t take part in a war between brothers killing and destroying one another. Remember that when you killed your brother, you are not a hero but a fool. When your brother killed you, you are not a martyr but a fool.”

“I must take part in the war against the enemy.”

“Enemy? Who is the enemy? How many times shall I warn you against using the term ‘enemy’?”

“But any soldier who is still loyal to the killer of our people in Juba is an enemy.”

“Well, that leader killed our people who are also his people,” Grandfather said, slowly picking his words in a way that was intended to discourage my father from joining the war. *“But that doesn’t qualify him or any supporter of his to be termed as an enemy. Be fair, please. When my comrades and I took up arms a long time ago, it was because I knew our war was a result of the imposition of the Arab-Islamic identity on the African-Christian identity.”*

“But to fight for the right cause is the right choice. Even Jesus Christ, our Saviour, fought those who turned His church into a market for transacting bad things.”

“Fine,” Grandfather said. *“Our Naath people say, ‘One is advised after his coming not before his going towards the danger.’ It is difficult to stop a man from a decision he has taken. I know it is always good to die or live with your people in a time like this though big disappointment at the end of this war is pending. But you must accept any disappointments later on the same way you*

have unreservedly accepted the beginning of the war... Had it not been for the ego of our leaders who are making us fight among ourselves, we would not have been fighting now. But there is time for everything in this world and everything happens for a reason. Go in peace, son of man. Never touch any civilians or any captured soldiers or any who has surrendered. But never call any South Sudanese who is against you as an enemy. Try any other names but not 'enemy'. You are all South Sudanese – who are only made to kill one another by the evil leaders. Go, my son, and pass my regards to those sons of lions. I knew their fathers. They were as brave as lions."

"But I think our generation is braver than yours and the lions," my father said, and the two of them laughed. They exchanged a few jokes before my father left.

As soon as my father waved goodbye to us, I started to cry bitterly.

"Why are you crying, son?" he asked, wiping tears from my eyes. "You are a man, aren't you? Would you not be able to take care of our family members if I died?"

I said nothing because his words were too heavy for me to reply to. After he had left, news and rumours had it that the enemy had hired the Sudanese rebel group called Toroboro to fight us.

"Toroboro?" my grandfather asked.

"Yes," my grandmother confirmed.

"The involvement of the Toroboro in our internal fight will give bad consequences for the Darfurian traders in the land later because my Naath people are the most warlike, violent people and the most generous people at the same time in terms of welcoming and treating strangers. I know my people very well. They won't differentiate the Darfurian traders in the land from the Darfurian soldiers."



Chapter 10

Now that our dear father, the pre-eminent and answerable dad, Mi-go, our only father, wasn't at home because he had gone to war. He had spent some time without coming to see us, his 'little dogs' and his parents, without bringing us sweet things that he always brought from Leer after he sold the wood. Our family became worried about my beloved father's long-time absence, long-time disappearance, and long-time stay on the battlefield in his attempt to protect our motherland. One month passed, and then two, and then three ... and he was still at the frontline.

My grandfather one day called us together for a family prayer. He asked us to pray for my father, my father who had chosen to defend the land, who had left behind a comfortable life with his dear 'little dogs', wife, parents, relatives and friends.

My grandfather told us that soldiers were never there for their loved ones, never there to ensure that their lives were wonderful and comfortable, never there to enjoy their wealth or live their lives to their natural end. Instead, they were there to defend the fatherland.

He told us many things about life on the battlefield – a life of everyday battles, everyday ambushes, everyday attacks, everyday killings and everyday disappointments. We prayed, prayed and prayed until the tears in our eyes dried; until we got tired; until we felt the presence of the Lord. A soldier, according to my grandfather, never expects to see his family and friends, nor anyone else, in peacetime because he is prepared to give away his life for the sake of others.

It was on this strange morning that I, for the first time, saw brown people shooting randomly at the people of our village. Armed civilians dressed in one type of sport shirt came with them. These armed civilians were believed to be from the Naath tribe, and I was later told that they came to take cattle that they had been promised by the country's leader in exchange for helping him fight the rebels.

I ran towards the nearby tributary together with the rest of my family members, leaving behind my grandparents because they could hardly walk or run. They could only walkabout with the help of sticks. Every time the enemy came, we ran to the nearby stream to hide there, leaving our grandparents at home. The enemy took away our cows and young women and used them as their property. That went on and on for some time. Three months later, a certain man, accompanied by a group of soldiers, came walking towards our home.

When we saw them from afar, we ran to the tributary, thinking that they were the enemy. One of them followed us and assured us that they were not the enemy. We returned only to find that their leader was a very tall and thin guy in his 20s, who was later identified as Jack by my grandfather. We looked at the hundreds of them who had no military uniforms but had a few guns and spears in their hands. We thought we would identify our dear father among them. Jack talked to my grandfather for a few minutes and urgently left, heading towards the north. This was immediately after we started hearing *Dim! Dim! Gir! Gir! Takuf! Takuf! Wuu! Wuu!*

The enemy had shortly before captured Dolwak, Pultutni, Mirmir, Panjala and Pantoot.

Soon my grandparents called a meeting with my mother along with my elder sister, leaving me alone. They were within earshot, but I couldn't hear half of the things they were talking about. Soon, everybody started to cry. My mother and my elder sister were crying bitterly. In response, I started crying without knowing the reason for their crying. I had the feeling that my father was not alive. Tears ran down my face. I felt that my father had been killed by the enemy. I was later told about his death by my grandfather in the evening.

"Your father was a man, Gatdoda," he said despondently while smoking his pipe. *"He was killed in the Dhorboor battle, south of Bentiu together with many people."*

I could not help resuming crying, but my grandfather rebuked me.

"If you can cry for someone who willingly went to fight, what will you do for someone who has not and is just slaughtered in cold blood?" my grandfather told me. I pretended to be a bit stronger when I was not.

"You are a man now," he continued. *"You are now the head of your family."*

That speech made me remember my father when he had said I would take care of the family when he was gone. I knew my grandfather wanted me to be strong enough to join Gojam when I had grown up to continue the fight against the enemy who had killed my dear father.

Shortly after my father's death was announced, the enemy again came and took all the few cattle in our village, including ours that had survived the first raid. We were left with only a goat, whose milk could not feed the whole family. My little brother Goy was only

two and a half years old and needed milk badly. So were my two old grandparents.

Many young women and girls were also kidnapped including my aunt who was on the way coming from Yiandany to visit us in Pading after she had heard that my father had been killed and our village had been burned. I was later told that she was alive only that she was given to a certain army commander as a wife.

Hunger had now badly hit the land of Pading and its surrounding. People survived only on water lilies and weeds' roots. A neighbouring boy whose father arrived after a long time of absence in a faraway town teased me.

"Look at our biscuits that my father has brought, Mi-diiit," he said teasingly, unaware that my dear father had been killed. He would have teased me more had he known it.

"Good for you."

"My father is richer than yours because he always sends us biscuits and clothes."

"No, my father is better than your father." I told him, "A poor father or mother who stays with his or her children is by far better than a rich father or mother who always stays away from them. I am blessed because my poor family stays with me, but you only see your father once a month or twice a year because he works overseas. When you multiply the days he spends with you in the full lifetime, they may only be weeks if not months. Then what is the point of having a parent for only weeks or months in a lifetime?"

"I will tell my father and he will beat you."

"Tell him that a poor father who stays with his children is better than a rich father who doesn't stay with his children and only sees them once a month."

My mother was such a strong woman. She would go at dawn to the river to check our nets for fish and at sunset just to make sure we got food.

Life was still going well despite the battles between Gojam and the enemy in most parts of the land. It was until I reached another land that Gojam force was referred to as 'rebels' or 'Freedom Fighters.'

I also knew that the leader of the government troops lived in the country's capital and the leader of the rebels or Freedom Fighters lived on the other side of the River Nile. My grandfather told me that he knew the two leaders physically.

"They were young men when they joined us in the bush," he told me one day. "The leader of Freedom Fighters is from our land here and the leader of the government troops is from our neighbouring Jieng tribe. They were with me in a place called Bilpham."

"But why doesn't the leader of Freedom Fighters bring guns and bullets to Gojam if he is really from our land?" I asked him angrily.

"His nature is very confusing, my little dog. He is a man who doesn't want people to die and doesn't want the able ones to appear in whatever he does. He only lets the ineffectual ones enjoy. I know he doesn't want to give them guns and bullets because he fears the Naath youth may go to Jieng lands and revenge on the innocent Jieng who have nothing to do with the Juba massacre that was planned by the government."

"But we are losing men daily. Doesn't he know that my father was killed by these people that he doesn't want to be swept out? I wish I could meet the leader of Freedom Fighters and tell him frankly."

"You would not even be allowed to see him let alone meeting him," said my grandmother, "he is a big man."

I went away very sad and thought for so long about how to end such suffering that had surprised me for the first time in my short life. The war went on and on every day and they said some sons from Leer had joined the rank and file of the enemy including some well-known people in the land.

“Most of the Dok’s adopted sons have joined the rank and file of the enemy,” said my grandmother, *“and they are currently being made leaders of Leer by the enemy.”*

“Do they have their Jack?” I asked but no one answered me, and I knew it was a stupid question.

“Yes, I knew from the beginning that there would be our sons who would join the rank and file of the opponent,” my grandfather said. *“Because a long time ago the same people were working with Islamic regimes while we were busy fighting in the bushes for years. Some of them were either working in factions in Rubnyagai or with the Islamic led-government. But when the peace agreement was signed, they were given leadership and we, the veterans, were called unconfirmed old-timers. Most of them didn’t even vote for the independence of this land while they were highly rewarded by that old man we call our leader. So, these turncoats now want to do it again the same way they did it before.”*

“They are betrayers, pirates and lairs.” my grandmother said.

“Yes they actually are, as you have put it,” my grandfather confirmed. *“Even if you got one of them inside a toilet defecating, he would still tell you that he was there to take rest or for a certain governmental mission! They are congenital liars, pretenders and swashbucklers who grab other people’s work.”*

“It was that adopted son with forehead cracks who forced some of them to be known by making them leaders in this land,” my grandmother said angrily.

“Yes,” my grandfather said, “he is the same poor little thief who stole our money at Kuer-Mandoke when you were a bride. The scars on his forehead were the result of theft. He was beaten and sexually assaulted between Kuer-Mandoke and Bimruok by a hungry Arab trader when he stole his sack full of bread. I know most of the street boys of Kuer-Mandoke will join the rank and file of the enemy just like when their mothers joined the Islamic regime during the big wars of Anyanya and Thialem/Thialee movements.”

“They are fiend and wicked people, Guandong,” I told him, but I didn’t know who they were talking about. I knew they did not want to disclose their names but both of them knew all they were talking about very well.

“Well,” he said and went silent for a few minutes. “They are truly bad in our own story here, but we are also bad in their stories.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “But we are on the good side.”

“They also think like that. They are on the good side,” my grandfather said, “They may have their own reasons of joining the rank and file of the enemy. Perhaps they were disappointed before by the people leading this movement now. We also have bad people within us who may chase away the capable ones when the ‘food gets ready’. But I think the outcome of this meaningless war will tell who is on the right or wrong side. That day will come and many will get disappointed but that will not stop the unnoticed success ahead.”

“I don’t agree with you, father of Mi-goa, on calling them bad,” my grandmother opposed my grandfather, “because there is no good or bad description of a person. All the evil and good deeds are what make a person. All of us are bad and good at the same time. We have dark days, bright days, happy days, sad days..., and every sort of day. When people meet us on our bad days, they will think we are bad. When they meet us on our good days, they will think we are good and vice versa.”

“You have now said a point, mother of Mi-goa,” my grandfather said, “but look at the poor men with guns in Juba harassing their fellow poor, hungry men and women just to please the rich men and women who have no guns and poverty. Can you still call them good?”

“To you and any other victim they are bad,” my grandmother said, “but to the beneficiaries, they are the best and holy people on earth. If you were one of those rich men and women, you would not see the harassment that they are doing as bad. You would instead see it as spraying of perfume to give a good smell.”

Every day the government troops and the allied militias were gaining more territories in the land. The Freedom Fighters’ force that was supposed to protect the civilians was no more in the land. They said they had been ordered to station or reorganise in Nhial-diu town far in the north. We were only left under the care of the Gojam force that had no guns and bullets.

It was now not only Leer that was under the government control but most of the towns and villages were now controlled by government troops, and that had weakened our boys. Soon they came closer and closer towards our land. I wondered a lot after hearing many more frightening stories. I asked myself why the village civilians would become threats to the government. Why would the government act like rebels and rebels act like government? They were actually the opposite of each other. The civilians ran away from government troops but never ran away from rebel forces. I knew without a doubt that the names of the two forces were incorrectly made.

Meanwhile, the few boys that didn’t leave their burned homes would come to me to play games together. It was now not the same games that we used to play like before; the Gube game in the tributary, the Nyathotkol game, hide and seek game, the marriage game, the fire-

camp gatherings to share stories and riddles, and so on and forth, but a strange new game of war.

We would divide ourselves into two groups. One group would be Freedom Fighters (rebel force) or their leader and the other would-be government troops or the President. We would all debate or fight for a long time over who would be Freedom Fighters' force because no group wanted to be the government forces.

After we had known that Freedom Fighters' force was always the choice of all the boys, we would only choose it through a game similar to 'head and tail'. We would make two signs in an earthen-made coin so that one side would be Freedom Fighters' leader and the other sign would be the President. That one would reduce our debate on which group would be Freedom Fighters or government forces.

We would fight by throwing on ourselves wet mud that acted as bullets. The short boys among us used that advantage of being near the ground to easily and quickly gather stones to hurl at people. We sometimes pretended to save the civilians from the government's or Freedom Fighters' troops. We also dug graves to pretend to bury our fallen heroes and the civilians killed in the war.

At the end of the game, we would select some people to pretend to be peace negotiators to negotiate the peace agreement between the government and Freedom Fighters. That agreement would take time to be signed as each of the selected leaders would give difficult demands for the agreement to be signed. Once it was signed, we would go to sleep as if we were implementing it. The next day, we would declare the agreement as broken by one of our previous leaders and new leaders of the day would be selected. The fighting would then continue until it was signed again when the night approached.

There was this day that I will never forget in my life. I was on shore taking care of our only goat since all the cows had been taken by the enemy when a group of armed young men came running towards me and gunshots from afar could be heard. They told me to leave the goat immediately and hide myself. I did as I was advised. I climbed a big tree and saw ten pick up cars mounted each with guns that I later learnt to be Boyevaya Machina (BMs).

Most of the soldiers had a brown skin complexion. They did not look like us. I confirmed by looking at them clearly since they could not see me. They were speaking Arabic. They, before long, fired shells towards Gaatdoor and the river which they suspected to have people. They left after one hour but another group without uniforms came and set fire on the *tukuls* of the villages. Our *luak* was among the huts which were set on fire. Fortunately, my grandfather and grandmother were in a hut that the enemy might have ignored or forgotten to set on fire. Our only goat, the only source of milk was also taken by the armed civilians. Its kid, that was only two months old, died afterwards. In the evening, we came back home and found my two grandparents safe in a hut, but all their blankets and other belongings had been burned in the other *luak* which was set on fire by the enemy. There was a small mango tree that I had just planted which had been uprooted and some banana plants had also been cut down by the enemy.

Among the burned homes was our neighbour's whose five family members were burned inside their tukul. Seeing their roasted bodies including that of my playmate, Kondial, made me fail to eat the meat of our goat's kid whose mother had been taken by the enemy during the raid. My grandmother and grandfather didn't care at all. They ate despite the odour of our neighbours' bodies.

It saddened me as I questioned myself of what heinous crime the civilians had committed to the government to be punished like that.

A village people where the majority had never seen Leer or Bentiu before... A village people who had recently known about the leader of Freedom Fighters and the President of the country! A village people who thought that the world was Pading alone! I asked myself many questions, but I could not find answers.

Could that be their desperation, I asked myself, in order to reduce their own military casualties that were inflicted on them by our youth last year during the Bentiu and Dhorboor battles, or do they want to reduce the number of our people so that when it is time for the elections, the leader of Freedom Fighters fails? Is every civilian a combatant? Do they think that killing and torturing us will make them win the war against their rivals that decided to die for us and with us?

All those lingered in my mind.



Chapter 11

We ran to the River Nile to hide in bigger swamps than our village's small tributary when the war had intensified. My mother had precious grain that she had managed to carry when we were being chased by the enemy from Pading like antelopes.

We stayed in the River Nile with many civilians from different lands. Our main food was the grain which was only boiled without salt or oil. My mother would secretly take food at night to my ageing grandparents that we had left home. Our ageing grandparents could not manage to cook their food. My blind grandmother could not cook for my old grandfather.

Our problem was now Goy, Gai and Nyachangkuoth who were fed up with chewing boiled grain every day. Mosquitoes that disturbed people in the River Nile were another factor. The grain needed to be grounded by a hand grinder or a grinding stone first, but neither we nor the hundreds of the people on the island had one. We had left our grinding stone home because it was very heavy to carry.

My two brothers and sister complained that the grain was tough and hard to chew. They refused to eat the boiled grain for a day until they surrendered. For my elder sister and I, grain was the most delicious food that we were lucky to get as many people were starving to death in the islands and homes. Anytime my little siblings refused to eat the boiled grain, our hunger-starving neighbours would pop out their eyes as if to say 'Wow, look at them they do not want to eat food, food and food the powerful'. My mother would share the little we had with our hiding neighbours on the island. And soon there would be laughter and play in their hunger-starving families.

Eventually, the grain and the little food that we all had on the island got finished and the river was now hotter than the land. Most of the families became so desperate for food that they would travel back to the mainland in dug-out canoes, risking their lives under the sounds of artillery fires only to find the next meal. But my mother assured herself that it was better to die with her dignity of hunger in the island than to be killed with an extra judicial killing and raping by the enemy. I knew very well that we were marooned on the lonely island of the River Nile.

There was this morning when the canoes that always helped us were waiting on the shore for their owners to return after they brought us some food and fish. Some armed soldiers who secretly monitored their movement stole them and crossed over the river to the island where we were hiding among others.

They were well-armed militias backed by soldiers. They opened fire on us. We speedily ran down further into the reeds and papyrus where they couldn't see us because it was very thick. They didn't know where exactly we were, so they sprayed bullets and bombs into the reeds and papyrus randomly. That attack claimed the lives of seven children including two mothers. My mother said we had to get down

into the deep water for us to be safe. The water came up to her chest, but my sister Nyagoa and I were catching her two hands that were carrying Goy, Gai and Nyachangkuoth. She assured us that our safety was when we held her hands very tight.

There was also a young woman who had one child on her back, a baby around her neck and a blanket around her waist. Anytime she walked into the deep water, the blanket would sink. This time the power of the blanket in the water pulled her down with her two children and they were not seen again as the flow of the River Nile waters could not be described. My mother cried terribly when the young woman disappeared as we looked on helplessly. She tried to follow her, but she changed her mind as that would also end our lives.

“It is her day,” said a voice from behind. *“God said they would die like that at this time. So, wait for your place and time to die. Maybe you will die now, or after a minute or more.”* My mother was speechless and shivering in fear.

We were all going to be killed had not Gojam come to our rescue. We could hear more ‘Takuf! Takuf’ outside the River Nile and that made the enemy withdraw from following us. They were engaged in a fierce battle by our youth who had only a few or no bullets at all until they were chased back to Leer town. Now the civilians were able to return to their places in the river. One of Gojam’s soldiers gave us more food that they might have taken by force from the enemy. The man advised us to relocate to another island as the enemy had already known our hiding place.

“You would better relocate to Meer, Nor-maar, Guori, Nyoat or Kok island.” the soldier said, *“It is your choice to hide in one of these islands that you like.”*

"...but there are more hippos and crocodiles." one of the women reacted.

"Our Naath people say, 'there is no problem after problem.' Include Tuochriah also to the safe islands." added the soldier who was as thin as stick. The soldier returned to where his comrades were.

"Oh!" cried an old woman sorrowfully. *"What a terrible life! We have run away from the dangerous man only to drown in the dangerous River Nile."*

"...from death at homeland to death in the river," replied another woman. *"The sky is the only safest place. But where can we get feathers and wings?"*

"The man in Juba has Jet fighters too," replied an old man mockingly, *"he would still get rid of you if you got feathers to take you to the sky because that old man in the country's chair is nothing but a snake in the grass, scorpion in clothes, landmine on the ground, crocodile in the River Nile. Whatever he says is the opposite except killings and destruction which are true."*

"Even the man we call our leader and his wife are snakes in the grass," said the old man.

"But who knows," he continued, *"maybe there are people in a faraway land who are also suffering under the leader of Freedom Fighters the same way we are suffering from the long-bearded man who lives in Juba."*

"Who are Freedom Fighters and what freedom do we want again?" asked another old man who had been silent from the commencement of the debate.

"Freedom Fighters are Gojam and our men who fight the enemy."

"But what if they are turned to fighters of positions later? Don't be fooled."

"They cannot."

“Okay time is our only judge. But remember this terrible beginning won’t match with its end later.”

“Does that inconsiderate old man in Juba know how many kids he has now orphaned, mothers widowed, people displaced, and so on? The people he called rebels are fathers, brothers, sisters, mothers and friends to many. Killing them is robbing their children and loved ones of them. He is the master of fatherlessness and homelessness,” another desperate old woman said.

“Honestly,” another old man with a wrinkled face said, *“being fair with any situation is what defines a person. Fairly, the president and the rebel leader are naturally good men but the company they keep are the root causes of the decline of their legacies. They are both dignified. But their only difference is who misleads them. The president is misled by Jieng Council of Elders meanwhile the rebel leader is misled by his wife.”*

That evening my mother left to visit our grandparents back home in Pading. She took with her two big fish and some of the grain that was given to us by the soldier who had come earlier. She left us along with several other families on the island. We spent the entire night in hiding between the river and its bank, trying to make as little noise as possible so that we were not heard and tracked by the enemy. There was a certain woman who had to go to extraordinary lengths to keep her young children safe and quiet when she heard gunshots. Unfortunately, she was eaten by a crocodile in the river. Many people became afraid now.

The civilians started to fear animals and not the human beings that chased them. Life was very tough in the River Nile and many brave civilians chose to die in the hands of the enemy than to painfully be eaten by wild animals of the River Nile.

“Yes, we are better killed by guns than be eaten alive by crocodiles,” one desperate woman noted, *“You do not feel the pain when you are shot.”*

“How do you know, stupid woman,” said another desperate woman who was opposing the idea of going out of the river. *“Have you ever been shot at or eaten by a crocodile before knowing the difference and experience?”*

“Slave!”

“Even you.”

“Red dog.”

“If you love the red dog be it.”

The two angry and hungry women wanted to fight after exchanging insults while they were lying down on their respective mats.

“Okay, I do not want more talk,” the first woman said. *“If you want us to fight then move forward your mat a little bit and I will do likewise so that our hands can reach the other.”*

I was very happy to see a fight where people lay down on their mats. I was eager to experience that fight when people were hungry and angry at the same time. The other one went silent as she could not be able to move her mat to fight the other. The two were too hungry to reach each other. Soon there were more gunshots heard from afar and peace was restored between the two warring women.

“Womenfolk,” said an old man. *“I have been monitoring your debate. Let me tell you, my daughters, death has no fixed place and time; there is no good or bad death. It is all about where, when and how God will end your life.”*

Shortly the enemy arrived near us and started shooting randomly in the river. Goy and Nyachangkuoth kept asking my elder sister

about where our mother had gone. They kept screaming, “*Where is my mother, where is my mother? Where has my mother gone?*”

Nyagoa was such a clever girl. She needed to keep Goy and Nyachangkuoth quiet so she lay on top of them at the shore such that their cry would not be heard by the enemy. The two, Nyachangkuoth and Goy, had mud all over their faces and they looked at me as if to ask for a fight with Nyagoa, but they were wrong. I didn’t want to die. I told them not to ask questions because we needed to survive.

In the evening our dear mother arrived and we were very happy though she had bad news about the land that was burned down to ashes. Life was now very tough for us and the elderly people in the river. On the River Nile’s boring days, we gathered around to watch the elderly people play dominos or cards. But I liked the stories the most. We sometimes joked around to kill time. I was very glad to have an old man as a friend who happened to be our neighbour. That old man was a storyteller and I was fond of stories. There was a day when two other women fought. One was accusing the other of stealing her bundle of water lilies. The old man intervened and told them a story:

“A long time ago,” the old man began, “There were two good friends just like the two of you, young women. They grew up and lived together in a village. Each of them had a family and one time a famine hit the village where they were living. One of the friends was rearing goats, while the other had none. One evening, the friend who had nothing decided to steal one of his friend’s goats. He took it at daytime and hid it in his house waiting for the darkness to fall. At night when people were asleep, he slaughtered the goat, cooked and ate it with his family. The smell of goat’s meat inhabited the whole midnight breeze. His friend came out of the hut, sniffed and sought out the direction the smell was strongly coming from. When he realised that the smell was coming from his friend’s house he decided to tiptoe over; he

stood at the back of the house and watched his friend and family enjoy their meat happily. As he was there he heard his friend's lamentation: 'Kachilooj, hunger is a very stupid and heartless thing! It has persuaded me to steal my friend's goat. This is terrible! What will happen if my friend gets to know this?' Immediately his friend who was standing outside intervened and said to him, 'Indeed you are right to realise that this is a bad thing. You should have just asked me rather than taking it in that way. Remember the white man says a friend in need is a friend indeed. You know that I am your best friend; what I have is yours and what you have is mine. Anyway, have a good night.'

"With that, the friend went home. Early in the morning, the man went to his friend's house to ask for forgiveness. 'My dear friend,' he said 'I have come to tell you that I'm sorry for what happened last night. I have come to give you one of my daughters to marry so that our relationship will be stronger than ever.'

"Look, my dear friend,' the friend said. 'I have already forgotten what happened last night, and I don't want your offer because if we did not have a good relationship, I would have twisted your neck that very same night I found you eating the meat of the stolen goat! So, you go home and let us live as usual. Take back our daughter.'

"The friend who had taken the goat was so happy that his friend had forgiven him. 'Ok, my friend,' he said. 'Thank you very much for understanding the habit of hunger.' Now, women, shake your hands at once and be like the two people in the story. None of you stole the food but hunger did it. Hunger is a thief, murderer and traitor. Now I repeat, shake hands or we declare you as enemies like those who have forced us here."

Soon the two women smiled and greeted each other, and there was peace again on the lonely island. Shortly, most of the displaced people packed their things and decided to relocate to Tuochriah, Meer, Guori

and Kok islands as advised by one of the soldiers who had come to us before.

My mother encouraged all the mothers on the island to take good care of their children as we were leaving for our home.

“We are very sorry. We will not be going with you ahead up to Tuochriah or Meer Island because those islands will be very far from Pading where my two ageing parents live,” she told dozens of the people on the island. *“Women, kindly know that it’s the responsibility of a mother to put up and wait for better times. Better times must come soon for our families who have already been through so much in the last few months on their search for safety.”* The civilians in the River Nile wished us goodbye on our way back home.



Chapter 12

On our way back home with my mother and siblings, we heard people cry in the side of Gaatdoor, but we couldn't hear gunshots. We became cold and afraid. My mother put my siblings in the hole under a big and thick sisal tree and took me with her to find out why people were crying without gunshots. We finally saw from far the armed men raping women in masses. Men were arrested at gunpoint while other soldiers were investigating the whereabouts of the rebels and Gojam. There was no sign or link with the rebels and Gojam because the men were as old as my grandfather.

We could now hear and see the events nearby. After raping and killing the captives, the enemy had now played a game on the people. It was the most terrible game I have ever seen in my life. It was the game of seeing what sort of food someone had eaten during the day. How would they know it? Well, they were going to pierce stomachs. Among the captives was a fat belly Naath man. Three of the soldiers argued and debated on what the fat belly man had eaten.

"I think he has eaten Walwal," the first one said.

"No. It is dry fish," the other said.

"You are all wrong. It is milk," the third one said.

To confirm who was right or wrong they pierced open the poor man's stomach to see what he had actually eaten. To their surprise, the man had eaten grilled millet. The two, being disturbed by the failure, again tried their game on another person. This time it was on a pregnant woman. They argued and argued. One said she was pregnant with a baby boy. The second one said she was pregnant with a baby girl. And the third one said she was pregnant with twins. The poor pregnant woman began to sob when she knew that she was going to be the next victim, but these men had no mercy. They now pierced the woman's womb and found twins. The third one fired two bullets into the sky and the other two bullets into the head of an old man in happiness for passing the test against the other two. That game went on and on. I nearly cried but my mother covered my mouth with her hands.

After that terrible killing of the pregnant woman, my mother suddenly grabbed my hand and took me underneath a thick tree. We hid ourselves to see what was going to happen next. I could again see from afar five women each being raped in line by over ten men. Each man waited for his turn to rape the women. Soon after they finished gang-raping the women, two of the five women were run over by a pickup car. The other three were burned alive.

As these soldiers finished raping the captives, they now met two beautiful young girls who were going to fetch water from the river. These little girls didn't know what was going on. They might have heard the gunshots but perhaps they thought it was Gojam soldiers trying out their guns as it was normal in the village for gunshots to be heard everywhere and anytime. When the little girls accidentally

fell into their territory, they now scrambled over who was to rape the oldest girl.

“Comrades,” one of them called out, *“I have never broken any virginity in my life. Please leave this little girl for me.”*

“Why do you always like anything precious to be yours?” another one asked angrily.

“Don’t forget you dog first when we found that beautiful woman at Rubnor.”

“You are a liar! Do you remember you monopolised a beautiful young girl at Norbor?”

Their quarrel went on because each of them wanted to break the virginity of the young girl first. They tried their military hierarchy but couldn’t work. The young girls were surprised at what was going on. Finally, a certain soldier suggested that they should rape the oldest girl first, then the youngest.

The youngest girl, after realising that her elder sister was either going to be raped or killed, now turned to her sister and cried.

“Sister,” the young girl said, crying, *“let them rape you so that we may live.”*

“Over my dead body,” the girl said, *“I better be killed than being raped by them.”*

The girl resisted and resisted. Finally, she was shot in the chest.

“I am now happy that I chose death over being raped by these heartless people,” she told her younger sister smiling, *“go and tell Mama that we shall meet in the next life.”*

Because of the girl's speech, they became angry that they brought a peck and forced it into the girl's private part as punishment and a lesson for all the girls in the land to be cautious on refusing rape in future or insulting like the girl had just done. The girl finally closed her eyes forever. One of the soldiers turned to the youngest girl and grabbed her by force in front of all. He removed his uniform and the young girl's clothes.

"Just let her go," advised another soldier, *"your thing won't go into her because she is too small to satisfy you."*

"Let me try first," he said, shivering. The soldier tried and tried but to no avail.

"Try your finger if that cannot enter her."

The soldier put his finger into the young girl who was crying bitterly. When he finished pushing in his finger several times, he let the young girl go.

Consequently, one of the Dok-Nuer soldiers allied to the government soldiers was among those present during the killing of the girl and the assaulting of the youngest girl. He now cocked his gun, turned it to his head and shot himself dead. His comrades laughed instead.

Two young boys were brought and hanged in neem trees. All this happened without gunshots. It was only after we decided to go back to the place where my siblings had been hidden that the bullets were sprayed on us given the sound of dry leaves from our footsteps. We were very lucky because they didn't see us. A certain old man ran away when he saw them onshore.

"Old man!" the soldiers called with a loud voice, *"Stop running! Stop running! We won't kill you! We won't touch you! This is a promise! This is a promise! Stop! Stop!"*

“Ah,” the old man said, laughing. *“Thank you, my sons. But I have already decided to run. Let me run and leave me when you reach me later, sons.”* The old man was talking while running breathlessly and shaking with terror. He did not want to blame himself if he was caught resisting. He would be happy being killed in resistance than being killed without resistance. One fast soldier was chasing after him until we heard gunshots as they disappeared into the thick bushes of Padeah. What I saw was not a normal run. The two were running as if they had fans in their legs or as if they had machines or wings in their feet. One would think they were flying.

The soldiers, after killing the civilians, now went towards the River Nile islands where we had come from. They had amphibious vehicles to hunt down the civilians that we had left in the swamps. They started shelling the river before they could arrive. However, most of the civilians had started relocating to different islands in the River Nile when we were leaving the swamp.

In the evening, we arrived in Pading and found our two grandparents chatting and laughing as if nothing had happened. They wholly trusted my mother who used to serve them at night. After resting for a while, a young woman arrived and soon my grandparents started to investigate her.

“Tell us exactly what happened to you, Nyaphilieny.” my grandmother requested her.

“I came from Kuidoak village,” the girl responded. *“It was early in the morning when the attackers arrived. I had just woken up to collect the cow dung and do the morning chores as women normally do. The good thing was that they fired gunshots before they could reach Wulu and that warned my husband and me to run to the swamp for our safety. But they came to search for us in vehicles which moved both in the river and on land. Many people*

were in the swamp. They sprayed more bullets in the area where we were hiding. These claimed many children's lives in the swamp. My husband was among the unlucky ones. He was shot in the chest. He cried out bitterly in pain like a child. I tried to pull him further but in vain as he was a heavyweight man in his fifties. He told me to run at once. The enemy heard the voice and detected his place. They came and pulled him from the river while he was still alive. They put him down outside the swamp and the next I heard was three gunshots. I knew they had killed him."

"So sad," my grandmother said. "Was he a soldier?"

"No," she said. "My husband had never been a soldier. He was just a farmer. He wouldn't have been at home had he been a soldier. But the problem of guns that our youth use in self-defence is what will finish our vulnerable people."

"It was not only soldiers and men who were killed," she continued unhappily, "they killed anything that has a life. Goats, hens, cows, mango trees..., all killed or destroyed. Those who were unable to flee - especially the elderly, children and people with disabilities - were often burned in their huts."

I was saddened to hear all this. The following morning more newcomers also talked to my grandmother.

"Welcome, Nyapanyang," my grandmother welcomed her, "this is your home."

"Thank you very much," she replied. "I don't even believe that we are alive now. The scene is very horrific. All our neighbours including my two children were collected and put into a hut by the enemy. They set fire on the hut with almost twenty children in it. We could hear them scream from where we had hidden. One of the boys managed to come out of the house but an angry soldier shot him and pushed him back inside to burn with the rest."

“That is very sad,” both my grandfather and grandmother said, “why do they do it like that when even the Islamic army, our main enemy, did not do it like that when we were fighting them?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “The Islamic soldiers didn’t do it that way. They never burnt civilians’ huts let alone killing them. I remember, in 1997, we had run to their military base at Payak when the war intensified between them and the Thiale. But can someone now run to a nearby South Sudan Army barracks? That would mean death. Better to run towards an angry lion and beast than to run to a garrison that belongs to the South Sudan Army.”

“Not every South Sudan army is wicked,” Grandfather corrected. “To be fair to the few good ones let us say majority but not all. I am quite sure the South Sudan Army of the upcoming decades will be the best army ever in Africa and the world.”

“Yes,” she continued narrating the story, “there were also five boys from Tuluong whom they had hit against a tree by swinging them. They were two or three years old.”

“Two or three years old?” my mother asked, surprised with eyes popped out.

“Yes, they don’t want boys to live,” said the woman, “because they know they will grow up to become Gojam and...”

“That is beyond description,” my grandfather sorrowfully said leaving the hut.

“My daughter was also taken after she was raped in my presence by the armed militias. She was taken with many of the abducted women and girls who were subjected to forced labour, including carrying looted goods for long distances, as well as cooking and cleaning for their captors. Those women

who tried to resist were killed. I do not know if she will return alive. But God knows." she concluded sadly with tears dropping down like rain from her eyes.

"They are bad events that had never happened before in our lives," said the first woman, *"My father-in-law who lived in Rubkuay town, together with two elderly men and their two young grandsons were burned alive in their hut. When a little girl tried to run out, carrying a small baby, a soldier shot her and crushed the baby to death with his foot. Their home is now closed. Even if peace reigns in the land, it will remain uninhabited because my husband who was his only son was killed and his wife had passed away before the war. Nobody will live in his house in the future. All the family members have perished just in two years' time."*

"They actually are animals," my grandmother declared.

"No," my grandfather opposed, *"they are not animals. It is in fact an insult to animals. Have you ever seen animals doing that similar work? No, animals cannot do like that. Animals cannot even kill what they cannot eat. But these people kill what they cannot eat and leave what they can eat."*

"...and what is wrong with your toenails? I can see they are bleeding," my mother asked.

"Yes," she said, *"It is because I have been standing in the water during the daytime for more than five days. That is why my toenails have fallen off and..."*

"Death is actually a heartless thing," I said silently and walked away from them, but they were continuing the talk of terrible events.



Chapter 13

We stayed again in our only hut for some more days, but the fights were still going on in the whole land. There was never a day without the sound of a gunshot. Life was uncertain. The whole village was burned down as well as the mango trees and other important trees were either cut down or burned.

“Guandong,” I called one night, “*but you told me last year that you liberated this country from the Islamic regime. Is this the result of the liberation now?*” My grandfather was sad and went silent for a few minutes before he answered me.

“Gatdoda,” he said, “*life is like this. Do not lose hope because discomfort and contentment are part of life. If we had known that this land would be like this, we would not have spent over fifty years fighting the Islamic led government. But your freedom will come by the time our generation is gone. Our generation is the one doing all this, telling children to fight their wars of interest. I believe you will one day unite the whole of South Sudan with its entire people from different tribes and cultures.*”

“Guandong,” I called him again after he had listened to the news from his radio. *“Why do you always like listening to your radio?”*

“Well, my little dog,” he said, *“I always listen to it in order to confirm rumours from the government agents who are my former bush colleagues.”*

“Do you believe the rumour when they confirm it?”

“No, I confirm it when they deny it. And, on the other hand, I deny it when they confirm it.”

“How is that possible?”

“You cannot understand our generation. But we know and understand ourselves very well. We had been in the bush for over fifty years, and whenever someone says ‘yes’ he means ‘no’. When you now go to the cells in the land, you will only find people who stole soap, sweets and pens inside and those who stole bigger things and had once betrayed this country, are just carrying big bellies in the cities, in the name of politics.”

“But why do they jail those poor people?” I asked

“Maybe they do not want someone who practises what has been their habit and culture.” my grandfather said.

“What is their custom and culture?” I eagerly asked.

“I do not know. But what I know from them is that their unity means looting of our resources and their disunity means the death of our people,” he simply replied.

Suddenly as my grandfather was encouraging me, a group of military tanks could be heard moving towards Gaatdoor firing shots at people.

Immediately, my mother told us to run to the nearby tributary as usual. As we were running, there was a fierce battle at Rubnor between our

youth and the enemy who had slaughtered many people in the Kuok area. But our youth were defeated and ran towards Guat because they did not have enough bullets against the well-armed government army and militias.

The enemy who had taken everything now marched towards our village again. Because our home was near the tributary that we had hidden in, my grandfather called me and I left my mother, sisters and brothers inside the deep tributary.

“Hide yourself very well, Gatdoda,” he told me like he had known the coming of the enemy would end his life. *“Perhaps you will be the only one to upsurge our lineage since our nation is falling apart. Take care of your little brothers and sisters. I have understood the world well because I have lived in it for over eighty years. It doesn’t appreciate one’s achievement no matter how many times it is done. It is rather one’s failures or mistakes even when it is one in a million good achievements. In whatever situation do not lose hope. Be brave because everyone is a coward in this world. But the person believed to be a coward is the one who shows his cowardice in front of other cowards. A real coward pretends not to fear outwardly but is dying inside. And other cowards will call him brave.”*

I was going to talk when he continued talking. *“If anything happens to us anytime,”* he continued, *“leave this land at once but not forever. Do not forget to return later when people also return. They may destroy it, kill the people and take away its resources as they have already done, but they can’t take away the land. It will be yours for the span of your lifetime before your lineage replaces you. This land is our forefathers’ land. It is like a shade of a tree on the road side by which passengers stop and rest under for a while, and then go on not knowing that someone has always been there and will always come back. Take the Naath proverb of an antelope which says, ‘A home is not abandoned for thirst.’ You cannot leave your homeland forever because of war and famine. I want you to forgive later, for the sake of peace but*

try to have a terrible memory that doesn't forget everything. You can forget anything but not everything. Try to always judge between a friend who gives you and laughs afterwards and one who laughs at you first and later gives. Now, go back to the river and pass my regards to your dear mother, brothers and sisters. Go in peace and be strong, my little dog." He concluded but tears ran down my face like water. I wondered why he would say all these words at a time when the enemy was approaching!

He told me all this while the enemy had already controlled some parts of Pading. I went back to hide. Now the gunshots were in every place in Pading. We stayed in the tributary for some hours until nightfall. The enemy shelled the tributary to get rid of the people who might have hidden but we were not hurt. When darkness approached, my mother told us to go back home only to find my grandfather lying in a pool of blood; the rotting flesh was on my grandmother's lap.

"He was slaughtered like a goat when they came," my grandmother said who put the dead body on her lap. *"Some of them wanted to shoot him but others said there was no need to waste a bullet on an old man who could easily be killed. So, they slaughtered him. I told them to slaughter me too, but they said I was worthless to be slaughtered. They said I would die alone of hunger."*

My grandmother was such a strong old woman. She was not crying despite all this. My mother soon started to dig the ground to bury my dear grandfather. It was the first time for me to participate in burying a human being. We dug for almost the whole night until we managed to dig two to three metres deep. We finally put the rotten body of our grandfather in the grave. My late grandfather who had been my trusted guardian in life since my birth had now been taken by the heartless death!



Chapter 14

Soon, after the death of my grandfather, there were terrible stories of castration of boys, killings and violence. We were now very nervous and none of us, the young ones, knew what they were all about.

It was that very time that I lost interaction with most of my village playmates that had either been killed with their families or abandoned the village for the islands or bushes or unheard-of lands. Ruadhel was overrun and killed straightaway. Changkuoth had drowned in the River Nile. Goanar and Gatluak were castrated and died of blood loss afterwards when their parents refused to run with the villagers to the River Nile after getting exhausted from running every day. Kondial was burned with his blind sister inside their huts with goats. The whereabouts of the rest remain unknown to me the same way my location is unknown to them. They may or may not be alive. Only God knows. All of this made us very terrified, but my mother insisted that we should not leave our home where our grandfather was buried. She told us many convincing facts about the tomb of our late grandfather

that she feared being dug by hyenas and dogs that had turned wild of everyday deaths.

I loved that idea because I loved my grandfather very much and I didn't want his rested body to be eaten by animals.

It was in the early morning when the same man who had disclosed my father's death again arrived. My mother and grandmother welcomed him with open hands calling him 'Gatkan'. He looked around but he could not see my dear grandfather. He shortly convinced himself that he had either died of old age or been killed by the enemy. He did not ask until he was told. His face changed and began to cleanse his AK47 gun to reduce his anger on hearing my grandfather's murder. My late grandfather used to refer to him as his little friend. Jack was not only a brave warrior but also a generous man who believed in helping people who could never repay.

"I am very sorry," Jack said, with hundreds of his soldiers around. *"You need to take heart. In whatever situation, you need not lose hope."*

"Thank you, my little dog," my grandmother said, *"I was with him when they slaughtered him. They spoke with an accent similar to ours. They must not be far off but our neighbouring clan. They, at first, wanted to fire a bullet in his head but someone pushed the crowd and we thought he was coming to our rescue only to say that the old man was worthless of wasting a bullet. He said he should either be killed with a knife or beaten to death."*

"Take it easy, grandmother," Jack said. *"The man in Juba uses our people against us just to make it look like the crimes are done by us. But the good thing is that most of the true sons of our neighbouring clan are standing with us. We should not give the traitors and militias credit by calling them with our neighbouring clan's name when, in fact, they are just a group of bribed civilians who will understand their wrong actions in the long run."*

“Yes,” another leader whose name I could not remember confirmed, “many are with us as we speak. Why would we get worried when we have the dignified leaders of our neighbouring clan genuinely fighting side by side with us? I agree with Kuar Jack’s remark of not calling them with the name of our clan. Yes, our land is being destroyed by the people who should be with us now. We blame these implementers when our land gets ruined, people killed, huts burned. But listen to this: when a spear is thrown and has pierced us, who do we blame between the spear and the person who threw it?”

“Of course, the person behind it,” my grandmother said.

“It is not that person to blame,” the leader said, “not even our main enemy. No one is to blame. It is the war to blame. War destroys and kills and loots and ruins. War must be fought by all. But I am quite sure that we are cowards of war, but war is a coward of tomorrow. It fears the future the same way we fear its present.”

“Well, I want all of you, including Mandong to leave this land for Bentiu UNMISS. The war is now increasing and we do not know when it will end.” Jack told my mother and grandmother.

“But I am blind,” said my grandmother. “I must remain here alone until death whispers to me. I have lived well and long in this world. I must die and be buried where my dear husband is buried.”

“Don’t wish death to yourself, grandmother. Wish for life instead,” a soldier advised.

“Everyone thinks life is better than death. It is biased, my sons,” Grandmother said, “You can’t judge a one-sided story. Well, you have lived and that is an experience. You haven’t died and that shows you have no experience. We hate death because we haven’t been to it. Death on the other hand hates life because it doesn’t know its importance. Our mothers in the countryside hate the city because they haven’t got used to it. Our mothers in the city hate the

countryside because they haven't got used to it. One hates what he or she doesn't know. Therefore, death is neither good nor bad. I am looking forward to dying."

"Please listen to me, Mandong," Jack begged, "Death is from God. Being old or young doesn't mean that one will die or live in the short or long run. Better move from this empty village for now and return later when the war subsides."

"...but I do not know the way to UNMISS or Bentiu," my mother said. "I have never been to Bentiu in my life."

"Do not worry," Jack said. "I shall give you one of my soldiers to escort you until you reach Jikany land."

"There is no problem; you will find many people going thereafter you reach Jikany," said another man.

Soon after Jack was sure that we had accepted his request, he left for another home making sure that all the people in the land were safe. I could not help crying, seeing him go tirelessly from home-to-home checking on all the villages in the land. Jack was the only hero that I had always wanted to be like when I grew up.

Shortly after Jack left, the soldier who was to escort us was shot from afar by another group of soldiers who were believed to be from the same organisation, Freedom Fighters. We ran inside our hut when the man who was supposed to take us fell down like a tree leaf. The killers soon ran towards him scrambling over his gun.

"It is my gun because I saw him first," a voice said angrily.

"No, you are a liar. It is mine because I shot him with my bullet. Look here! I have now remained with only two bullets!" said another angry voice.

“You are all wrong,” said the third angry voice. *“It was I who brought us through this way; otherwise, you would not have found a person.”*

Each of all the voices claimed to have been the person who made the target; they quarrelled and quarrelled until there was now some more *takuf! takuf!* When we came out, we found on the ground three other bodies apart from the body of the person who Jack had given to escort us. They had now all killed themselves and nobody claimed the four guns.

The guns lay by beside each other. Soon some eagles and vultures came down from nowhere and started to eat the four bodies in our watch. I was really very sad and sorry for their foolishness. Why did they kill the only person who was going to take us just to take his gun that they didn't even take at last? Why did they also kill themselves for a gun that none of them claimed? Why did people from one camp fight each other because of greed? It was from that lesson that I knew greed kills.



PART THREE

THE DARKEST
JOURNEY







*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear
no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they
comfort me. – **Psalm 23:4***





Chapter 15

Everyone in the land was going and coming. People were going east, west, south and north. Sons and daughters of the soil were leaving their places of origin for other villages whose inhabitants were also leaving for unknown lands. The land had now become as hot as the bush fire to the offspring of the earth. The sick, healthy, poor, rich, strong, youngsters, elderly, defenceless, the good and the bad people of the land were now moving in opposite directions. Some were going into the River Nile, the bushes and to the nearby or faraway lands that they might have never heard of or seen in their new or old lives. They were walking as well as running in different directions like the people I first found in Leer market before the war.

These descendants of the land were fleeing one by one, two by two, family by family, extended family by extended family, clan by clan, multitudes by multitudes. Among them were those going to cross borders into the strange lands just to survive.

They included dignified and undignified women who will, later on, be whores and prostitutes together just to feed their children in a foreign land. Others were the diseased and healthy women who will get infectious diseases in the name of feeding their children in a foreign land. Among them were honourable and inappropriate men who will be criminals together just to feed their children in a foreign land. More were the well-brought-up children and the disruptive children who will be undisciplined together in a foreign land. The poor and the rich, beautiful and ugly, brave and cowards will be the same in strange lands. Those who once lived in towns and those who lived in villages will now stay together in Rakobas or the streets in foreign lands. Forlornly, while in foreign lands, they will compete negatively among themselves over little things until they will become enemies, worst enemies to themselves than what had destroyed their lands. Brothers, friends and neighbours who had once lived peacefully will meet in public as if they had never seen each other. They will, after they become enemies who stay differently, mourn sadly the deaths of their loved ones who were killed or died a natural death back home. Little things will make them disagree and never agree until death does them apart.

It's in a foreign land where the poor and old mothers with less or no erotic bodies for sensual sale in exchange for food will encourage their little and virgin daughters to sell their bodies and virginities for the sake of just a day's meal for survival. Brothers, after bargaining with men over their sisters, will see their young sisters being taken to make love with outsiders in their watch just for the survival of the family. Men and young men who had never heard of or experienced homosexuality in their lands will involve in it in a foreign land for the sake of survival. Religions will be shifted and converted for the sake of food and respect. Culture and identity will be denied for the sake of food and drinks. Names will be changed as well. Those girls

who once had generosity, kindness, good manners and who could care less about the material things will turn to be the worst materialists. They will not care about the person's dignity and integrity. The same children who were once warned and cautioned against imitating the lame, crippled, sick and people with hunchbacks, will imitate all including those with other kinds of disabilities. They will even call a person by their disability.

Most of these people didn't know where and what they were deserting their homelands for. Everything was left behind including the remnants of the goats and cattle that were not looted in the land. I even pitied the abandoned dogs, cats and calves because they are of flesh and blood and spirit as well. Animals need care and protection just like mankind does because they also feel joy, pain and hunger as well. Homes and wealth were, too, left behind to those who wanted to get rid of their opponents in politics who questioned their cesspool of dictatorship, corruption and misrule. Most of these leaders who wanted change in the country happened to be from our lands, but they never mind about our suffering. Their children and families stay in the faraway lands enjoying life and never turn on their television channels just to see what is going on in the land, and never wish us good luck. Yet the poor Gojam and civilians refused to surrender for their fathers. We lost our dear ones for them, we lost our wealth for them, we wasted our time for them, and we died for them. Their children will call Gojam and their children names later when they return or visit our destroyed lands or when they come to run their businesses with us as their workforces. They will treat the Gojam like slaves not knowing that they once lost their dear ones and wealth for the sake of their fathers, uncles and aunts. They will call Gojam illiterates and incompetents who have never gone to school or who have no university degrees and experiences, who speak poor or broken English, Arabic, French and Spanish languages, forgetting that they

left schools and universities because of the cause. They will speak to Gojam in foreign languages which most of them will not understand or speak. Well, that is politics. It kills the poor, the sick and the mad just for the sake of leaders to get accommodated or stay in power for so long.

Our family was among those fleeing, fleeing and fleeing. Per the advice, we stopped going south, east or west but north. Our beautiful homeland would be deserted forcefully whether we liked it or not. Here lay the tomb of my late grandfather. Here was the green grass of the land, here was the wild bushes of our land, here were the trees of our home, here were the flowers and beautiful leaves, here were the different kinds of birds singing as usual not knowing that we were forced to move. Will I ever get them the same way I left them? Will life return to normalcy again? Will my playmates be there again? Only God can answer these questions.

I thanked God for creating us, but I blamed Him for choosing this century for us and putting us in South Sudan and the continent of Africa. Why would God punish us again after that untold suffering imposed on us for decades when the country was one? That suffering when vultures and dogs were waiting from a nearby distance for the hungry children and elderly to die; that suffering when the young and old were being taken daily for slavery; that suffering when we were being called names: infidels, slaves, ugly, poor, inferior, unhealthy and stupid. Why wouldn't God salvage us? What did we do to Him for our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, our fathers and mothers, and ourselves to suffer for days, weeks, months, years, decades and centuries? Only God can answer me.



Chapter 16

It was one cold autumn day when we packed our things going to the place where Jack had told us to go when he saw our situation after our father and grandfather had been killed. I wished I was one of his fighters. I really liked the man. He committed himself to voluntarily safeguarding people's lives at a young age. He had saved many people in Pading when he was not even from there.

I now stood in tears near the tomb of my late grandfather who was my hope. I stood there to say the last goodbye to him. I looked at the beautiful trees and the tributary of our land. I tried as much as possible to picture them in my memory in case I never saw them in my whole life again. The sun rose across the beautiful trees and the long papyruses and reeds of Guol-tributary at the backyard of our home. The beautiful green grass with a nice scent lay around us on every side but we were soon going to leave our home against our wish for an unknown destination. I asked myself many questions about the forceful exile from our homeland. I wondered what we had done to the government for us to be forced to leave our land. Many questions were unanswered in my mind and I was too miserable.

Padding, the name that had been my third spoken word after mama and dad, was now going to be a land in the past though no one forgets a place where he has lived his entire childhood life. It would only be my land in dreams but the enemy's ground in real life.

It was the first time to witness such a situation. It was only through stories that my late grandfather had told me about such. People were once forced out of their homelands in big wars, but it could not be compared to the current mass displacement and killings. They said some people in the previous wars died in exile and the lucky ones never had a chance to see the land they were born in. My mother wept bitterly when she saw me in tears glaring at our land for the last time. My little siblings: poor Goy, Gai and Nyachangkuoth were too young and had already known the war and killings in their short lives. They knew without a doubt that we were being displaced by force against our wish. They had already witnessed a dead body in their young lives. It was the dead body of our grandfather who was slaughtered. They even saw us dig the ground to bury him. They might have thought we would be home in no time and get back to their normal village games. They were wrong as most of us would not even make it alive to the end of the journey let alone returning home.

We crossed the Guol-tributary to the other side with an old canoe that had been used for fishing by my late father. The canoe was made by my late grandfather before I was even born. As we crossed the tributary, the day became warm and clear, and we could see that most parts of the Lual and Booth villages were deserted. It was late afternoon or midday by then. The sky was clear, but it was suddenly covered by rain clouds from nowhere. We continued our journey towards the north despite the falling of the raindrops. I was leading, with a long stick, my grandmother who could not see. We were now almost in the middle of our journey towards Bentiu UNMISS in the northern part of our land though there were many frightening stories about

going there through Bentiu town which was controlled by the enemy. The sunlight was our only direction whereas the moonlight was our director at night. With the help of both the sun and the moon, we were able to identify the east from the west. The River Nile on the other hand helped us a lot. It helped direct us and in the provision of drinking water and fish. They said a journey from Pading to Bentiu UNMISS took a barefooted walk of about two to three weeks for nights walk because the enemy was patrolling at day times. They said many people had died because of thirst and hunger on the way, and others who were too weak to keep up the steps were eaten by wild animals. Lions, vultures, eagles and hyenas would watch and wait, picking off those who were too exhausted to continue. They also said even a cat could challenge a human in a fight on the way. All things became wild including birds, stones and grass.

People who went for days without food or water would eat anything that could keep them alive. People ate wild leaves and sucked moisture from mud to stay alive. Sometimes, when they reached a place where there was not even mud-covered to suck on, some of the people drank their own urine, concentrated from dehydration, so that they would not die of thirst. When I heard all this, I promised to only drink my urine on the way and not anybody else's urine. They also said that soldiers who were grounded by thirst would aim their guns at people they had seen to be active so that they were given urine. They forced people to urinate for them to quench their thirst. A wounded soldier would also force people to carry him to the place he liked or else he would shoot at the people in case his forceful request was turned down.

My mother was carrying Goy and Gai with our sleeping mats on her head. My elder sister was carrying Nyachangkuoth and our utensils. It was a very difficult journey for the first time in our lives except for my grandmother who was used to walking with my late grandfather

to many strange lands during the big wars of Anyanya and SPLM/A. But now she was blind. We did not use the main road to Bentiu for fear of imminent attacks on the way and the stories about thirst that we were told. We instead went along the River Nile. We slept at Nyalepchang the first night. Nyalepchang was a dangerous place as it had wild animals. They said an animal could approach people that it discovered not to have men or guns with them. We slept under a big tree. When we woke up in the morning, my little brother Gai was missing. We searched and searched but to no avail.

We spent three days at Nyalepchang looking for our little brother who had just disappeared at night. My mother said we would never leave without knowing the fact about the little Gai. We would not have gone had not our food got finished. We finally decided to leave. My mother was only carrying Goy gloomily since Gai was no more with us. Goy cried bitterly calling our brother's name.

“Mama, mama,” cried little Goy, *“where is Gai? Where is Gai please?”*

That would make all of us burst into tearful cry. It was the third saddest time in my life after I had lost my father and grandfather. Now Gai was gone. The possibility of seeing his face again was zero since Nyalepchang was a place of wild animals which could attack people in broad daylight. They got used to eating human flesh since the outbreak of the war in the land.

We arrived at Muodin, in Jikany land, after a four-day walk. We could see the lights of Bentiu UNMISS at night the same way we used to see the lights of Leer from Pading. There was no happiness in our family. We were going to reach the camp the next day had not a man said he had seen some dead bodies near Nyalepchang. He claimed to have identified children's bones among the skulls. My mother decided to go back to confirm the death of Gai such that we could continue

our journey. She left us at Muodin and went back to Nyalepchang.

As we were waiting at Muodin for our mother who had left to check on Gai's life status at Nyalepchang, we decided in her absence to always search for food in the river. My sister and I would go and bring fish to supplement our diet as we had been eating cooked sorghum without salt and oil. One day, we caught a tortoise and we happily took it where our grandmother, Goy and Nyachangkuoth were.

"Look, Mi-diiit," my sister called. "What is wrong with the back of this tortoise?"

"It is not this tortoise alone," I told her. "All of them are like that but I don't know the secret behind the cracks on their backs."

"Then we can ask our grandmother to tell us," she said.

"Yes, our grandmother will definitely tell us the reason because she knows everything."

We ran home and found our little family under the shade of a big neem tree. *"Mandong," Nyagoa called. "We have found a tortoise today."*

"Well done, my little dogs," she replied. "Now roast it for your two siblings."

"Mandong, why is tortoise's back not smooth?" I asked.

"Yes, why is that?" Nyagoa supported.

"Ahaa," she laughed a peal of merciless laughter. "Do you want the reason behind it?"

"Jioooo!" we all answered including Nyachangkuoth.

My grandmother then went silent before she could tell us the story about the tortoise. She could have been trying to remember it since she had become too old to remember things quickly.

“Well,” she finally said. “The tortoise is one of the animals that live in the river and sometimes in the land. It belongs to the family of ‘Guet’ likewise to the crocodile, the monitor lizard, and the different species of lizards and the turtle. Once upon a time, all the birds on earth were invited by God in heaven for a meal. All the birds prepared themselves to go for the feast in heaven and the tortoise wanted to go too.”

“Did I hear heaven?” Nyagoa asked.

“Yes, to heaven,” Grandmother replied.

“Is heaven not up?” I asked, and then she coughed— a dry cough.

“But it has no feathers!” added Nyagoa, using the advantage of grandmother coughing.

“Wait,” my grandmother whispered, “patience matters a lot. You miss what is meant for you when you are too quick and you miss what is for you when you are too slow. Learn to balance your actions and steps in order to be fine.”

“So,” she continued when no one spoke, “the tortoise now wanted to go to heaven too. But he has no feathers and wings to carry him from earth to heaven like the birds. All the birds knew him very well as a terrible glutton. ‘My dear brothers,’ the tortoise said. ‘I want to go to heaven with you, but I do not have feathers and wings to take me there. Can you please help me by giving me feathers so that we can go together?’ ‘But you are a thankless creature full of slyness.’ The birds told him. ‘Oh, my brothers, didn’t you hear that I have changed? I am a changed creature now. I am now not like before. I am now almost being given the title of an angel. Last time I was an idiot but now I am fine.’ The birds, with the description that the tortoise had made about himself, agreed to give him feathers. Each of them contributed a feather that made the tortoise have more feathers to carry him to heaven. The tortoise now tried his new feathers and they worked out. He was happy

to go with the birds to heaven for the first time in his life. They promised to help him if he got tired on the way. The day had finally come for the tortoise to go to heaven with the birds. When the tortoise became tired on the long flight, the birds helped him. They finally arrived in heaven and found their chairs ready. Because the tortoise is sweet-tongued, the birds appointed him as their representative. When he knew that he was made a leader by the birds, he began to think in his mind about how to eat the food alone. 'Well, thank you for the trust in me.' The tortoise said, and all the birds smiled. 'I will never let you down before God. But there is one thing you should know. I was in heaven more than a hundred years ago in my first life and everyone who stepped foot here gave himself a nickname. I think we can all create alias names to please God. Our names on earth might contain sins since we know ourselves very well. No one is perfect.' All the birds were nodding their heads in approval of all the tortoise was saying. Now all the birds gave themselves amazing new alias which sounded consecrated: Light, Angel, Angela, Faith, Cross, Disciple, Mercy, Blessed, etc... and the clever tortoise took an alias of 'All of you'...

"Soon the big meal was brought by God's servants and put down before them. When the tortoise, the representative, saw the food he told the birds to wait. 'We cannot eat before we are told to eat,' said the tortoise. 'Let me ask the servant first...'

"Sir, whose food is this? The tortoise asked loudly. 'It is for all of you.' the servant replied and walked away. The tortoise turned to the birds and said; 'You see my name is 'All of you'. The culture of heaven is to serve the representative first and serve the rest later with more delicious foods. Wait they will bring your food.' The tortoise started to eat the food alone while the birds were sadly looking at him. When he got satisfied, the hungriest birds ate his leftovers. The rest of the birds became too irritated for being betrayed by the tortoise whom they had only invited in their mission. Now the birds decided to go down to the earth. Each took back his feather from the tortoise that they now called 'traitor'. Soon the tortoise was left as it was before. The

tortoise approached the Crow which was the last to take back its feather. 'Please tell my wife to bring out all the soft things in our house so that I can fall on them from heaven since I have no feathers.' The Crow accepted to deliver the message. But when he arrived, he twisted the message and instead said: 'Your dear husband said you must put all the sharp and hard things outside so that he can drop down with one of God's servants.' The wife of the tortoise now brought out all the axes, knives and other sharp tools. When the tortoise saw the ground from heaven, he started to jump down. He fell onto the sharp tools and broke his back. But his wife took her to a nearby traditional doctor who treated him. That is why his back remains with many knots till today."

"Oh! What a greedy tortoise!" said Nyagoa.

"Yes the bad one," I said, *"Why did he bite the hand that gave him food?"*

"A traitor always gets the outcome of betrayal," my grandmother said.

On the third day, my mother returned only to learn that Gai was eaten by an animal. From there my mother restored her strength after discovering that my little brother had been eaten.

We started our short journey to the camp and unfortunately, the road was blocked by the soldiers who camped in Bentiu. What were we to do now since our food had got finished and we could not manage to live in the abandoned land of Muodin without food? A certain man advised us to go to Payang-gay instead of dying of hunger in Muodin. Moving to Bentiu UNMISS which was blocked meant death because people were being shot from afar before being identified as civilians or soldiers.

Most of our entire journey had been sunny without tree shades. My family would retreat to whatever shade we could find to take a rest. We would desperately use any shadow including the one of a single

reed or papyrus. As we were taking a rest, a group of soldiers with ragged clothes arrived and pointed their guns at us. They, except for one who was looking at my mother straight in the eyes, threatened us and finally broke their silence after too much beating around the bush. They wanted a night with my dear mother. The one who was looking at my dear mother straight in the eyes became the ringleader of the plan. With that, I knew that not everyone who smiles is happy or good and not everyone who cries is sad or angry; some pretend or mock to confuse the environment, meanwhile some cry, smile and shriek because they don't know how to react positively or negatively. When these men with guns insisted on their demand, Mother protested and declined to call it an indecent, disgraceful and inhuman act. She told them that she was a mother, but they couldn't listen. "Mother?" one of them asked sarcastically, *"what a funny woman this is! Do you think we need fathers? All we need is a mother, not a father. There is nothing called Mother in war nor is there shame and fairness. Just undress so that we can enjoy you. It has been a while since we last enjoyed."*

"Learn to unconditionally surrender what belongs to men, woman," another soldier said, *"what you have is made for men. It is God's meat in women for men."*

My grandmother pleaded too but it fell on deaf ears. *"Fear God, my sons,"* she said.

"Which God, old woman?" the shortest of all said, *"people of your type who think of religions and God will be disappointed later when they die and discover that there is no God but Mother Nature. Besides, everything is an imagination on the face of the earth. Who knows, maybe the life we are living is an imagination. We could have died a long time ago and only imagining being alive today. Just thank Mother Nature for making your face wrinkled otherwise we would have requested the night with you too."*

“Yes Mighty God is magical, my son,” my grandmother said, opposing, “He created Mother Nature that you are talking about.”

The soldiers now ignored my grandmother and only concentrated on my dear mother who was looking stranded and miserable.

“We give you an hour, woman. While we are eating our food think before you decide. We want to be fair with you. Accept our offer and live. Refuse and lose your life and family. Only three will spend the night with you. Not many. Don’t fear, woman.”

My dear mother had no other alternative than to cry. When she cried, it scared me a lot because I had never seen her weep as such. The cry she had only shed before was when my dear father’s death was announced. However, she shed fewer tears than what she was now shedding in front of these soldiers. A cry of a grownup is worse than death itself.

Suddenly the power of Nature appeared. Something roared and hissed like thunder. The entire earth shook heavily like an earthquake had come. We were under attack from another force. The soldiers now parted ways in disarray as gunshots were spraying everywhere. Two of the seven soldiers who had requested a night with my dear mother were now on the ground, dead.

The force that we believed to be Nature’s force was now for Gat-Majaak. This force was the patrolling coy that used to wander about at daytime monitoring the activities of the enemy. Meanwhile, those who were threatening us were said to be the Naath militiamen allied to the enemy against us. We were now advised by our rescuers to go northward as they were still on duty. We decided to go to Payang-gay that we had never heard of or seen before.

“Commander Gat-Majaak is there,” said a soldier, “we are men under his command.”

It reminded me of my grandfather's conversation. I had heard of Gat-Majaak's name several times from him. He always identified him as a silent and patient lion that spoke very little but was so tough in action.

"But what have you been doing here since many fled the country?" another old soldier asked while enjoying snuff.

"We at first only chose not to abandon the homeland, my son," Grandmother said.

"What homeland?" he asked, surprised, *"a homeland is where you live peacefully and happily. Any place that makes you cry, sad, sick, hungry or makes you suffer isn't meant for you. It is for those who are happy and have plenty of food in it. If you are not comfortable in the place you called your home, don't just move away with immediate effect but run away from it like the wind because the world is blessed with many beautiful places and islands with peace and greener pastures. It is only mountains and plants that suffer the wonders of life in one place because they can't move."*

"I am speechless, son," Grandmother said, appreciating, *"thank you for telling me the fact."*

I was very glad to see that lion at Payang-gay. But many questions came into mind. If Gat-Majaak was such a brave person, why didn't he help Gojam fight the enemy in Pading and other areas? I got confused as no one could answer my confusing questions. The only friendly grandfather who used to answer all my silly and cognitive questions was slaughtered like a goat. I was now lonely.

My mother, my brother Goy, my little sister Nyachangkuoth, my elder sister Nyagoa, my grandmother and I started our journey towards Payang-gay. We were advised to travel at night as the enemy was moving between Bentiu and Parieng with pick-up cars and they

killed any living creature that they found on the way. We were now a little bit happy and little Goy forgot about our brother Gai who was eaten at Nyalepchang.

“Mi-diiit,” Goy would call. *“Look at my mother’s stomach getting bigger and bigger. She ate a lot.”*

“Yes Gatlow,” I would tell him. *“Leave our mother alone. It is our brother in her stomach.”*

“Our brother?” he asked, *“Then why did she eat Gai?”*

With those very sad questions from my little brother Goy, I had wished I had not answered him that way. We continued going in a silent mood until we all forgot about Gai after a long walk. It was through my little brother that I knew my mother was pregnant. Her stomach was really not the same as we were in Pading sometime back. I was very happy expecting a new brother or sister to replace Gai who had just disappeared.



Chapter 17

We arrived in the evening at a place called Konkot along the Bentiu-Parieng road. Hunger and fear for possible wild animals and human attacks didn't allow me to sleep at night. So, I had to remain awake as insomnia could not even allow me a minute of sleep. Soon I heard a voice from far in the western side of Konkot. I secretly got up and took a spear that I had been carrying with me and the stick that I had been using to lead my grandmother. When I reached near the voices, I hid underneath a thick tree so that they could not see or hear me. I wanted to know more about them, whether they were the enemy or our people. I would have asked for water or food from them if they had been Freedom Fighters or our people.

I soon, through their chatting, discovered that some of them were Naath and the majority of them were Jieng. That scenario made me believe that they were the enemy. The Jieng didn't speak Naath fluently, but they spoke little Naath mixed with Arabic-Juba. I also learnt that the Naath soldiers didn't speak Arabic also. But one of the Naath soldiers spoke Arabic and he was the translator between the Naath and Jieng soldiers.

These soldiers were talking about their views on the previous wars that they had fought against the rebels and their leaders who led failed or successful missions. They also discussed the details of combat missions and traded surprisingly detailed accounts of the atrocities they both observed and committed when they defeated the rebels in one place or another. They were giving details of violence against civilians, rape and genocide in some parts of our land too.

“My friend, Weigoah, I wish I could be deployed to Leer again in the next operation by our Captain,” said one of the soldiers.

“Yes, I too,” said another one, *“the rebels there have no bullets and guns which let us enjoy their girls and take their cows easily. These rebels in Payang-gay have everything including tanks but do not have girls and cows, I hate them to death.”*

“I also hate making any operations in a place without civilians,” said the Jieng soldier in a broken Naath language. *“Leer has a good number of civilians, but Koatnyaa Ngonyam in Leer is very tough. Even when they do not have guns they still disturb people.”*

“What is Koatnyaa Ngonyam, Corporal Anei?” the first Naath soldier asked.

“He meant the Gojam of Koat Jack,” said the Naath soldier who was the translator.

They all laughed loudly and forgot that they were in a reconnaissance mission monitoring the rebels. If I had been a rebel fighter, I would have killed them all because most of them seemed drunk. For some minutes the topic about my land came up. They now talked about the less salary they received from the government in Juba and the benefit they got when they looted cattle in Bentiu.

"...our salaries will soon be paid but they are nothing with the current austerity measures in this country," the first soldier said.

"Yes, but didn't you hear that we were told to take anything from civilians in Rubkona, Koch, Guit, Mayendit and Leer in order to help us feed our children because our salaries have become valueless?" asked another voice.

"Oh, really, when was it said openly?" asked another soldier.

"Stupid Sergeant! Who would announce that officially? It was verbally announced to all the units by the Governor and commanders in charge. But it could not be made official in public otherwise Kawajat would put our government into a question mark and..."

"Okay thank you, comrade," the soldier said happily.

Soon they returned to the topic of my land because it was very interesting to them.

"Once, when we were deployed in Leer County, we carried out two important attacks on the civilians who were stationed at an island called Tuochria," said one of the soldiers. *"We first shelled the island from far before we got in. Each of us, after the raid, returned to Leer town at least with a beautiful young girl. We slept with them for two days before we let them go back."*

"Oops! But why didn't you marry them? Many including my friend Jidiet have got wives there that they got for free from that part of Leer and Mayendit where beautiful girls are."

"No, I like enjoying and letting go. I do not need a permanent wife because my wife would leave me if she discovered that I got another wife. She is there at school in Uganda with my kids."

"But you guys didn't do destructive attacks on the rebels with a specific target like what we did," said the Jieng soldier identified as Anei with his mix of

Naath and Arabic accent. "We followed the civilians with canoes up to an island called Tuoch-Mandong very far away in the middle of the River Nile. We enjoyed some beautiful ladies there and we killed more youth because they were ready to join the rebels as they were around eleven and twelve years."

"Thok-gany," insulted the Naath soldier. "I think it is the first time for you to enjoy Naath girls."

"No, I enjoyed them before in Juba during the beginning of the war but not very well as I did in these parts that I have been deployed in. However, these people of Unity State are very tough indeed. No matter how much you kill them, they do not surrender. I think they do not have hearts. They will finish you if they do not surrender."

"Yes they do not surrender but they will when we start killing anything that breathes. I believe the few survivors who didn't make it to heaven or hell when we attacked them last year at Tuoch-Thiel will surrender any time because when we secretly reached the island where they lived peacefully, we fired at them. You could see and imagine how they danced very well with the bullets and their papyrus and reed huts going up in the air."

"Did they dance with your bullets? Hahaha... there was also a time we had hit Meer, Tuoch-Mandong and Guori islands, and we got more clothes and money. The people of Leer build their homes like birds. You burn it today they rebuild it again tomorrow and..."

"Yes, they are real birds. When we attacked and burnt their huts, we just only gave them a few days to rebuild them before we went back to destroy them again. There was an event on their little market-day at Philieny market square; crowds of people, speeches being given by elderly people and there we sprayed them with some more bullets when we reached Kai-gai! That was fun! My friend Makerdit got himself a beautiful lady that he took to Aweil."

"...but I think our fun was better than yours. We once flew through our

China-made Badge which travels on land and over water without making a sound. We made a low-altitude attack in Rubkuay. When we got down very slowly, we saw a handful of people who were in a circle and there was apparently a ball or something like that being held. In any case, there were lots of young girls in nice dresses and they were watching the players happily. We flew past the first time, but then we reached the junction and being certain that they would not escape even when they noticed us from afar, we attacked and really confused them with one RPG-7 bomb. Everything blackened out. We killed the men in good number... oh my dear friend it was a lot of fun with the beautiful young ladies! I wished I had more male organs so that I could have enjoyed more beautiful girls and...”

“Wow that was really fun! We also had a mission in Guit and we flew down low over the street of a place called Boma. When we saw civilians coming from the opposite direction, we put on the yellow rebel uniforms that we had captured from the runaway rebels so that they would think we were rebels. We were approaching them shouting ‘Yayo viva! Freedom fighters viva! South Sudan viva...,’ Soon they became happy thinking that we were real rebels, then we shot them with the PKMs and they danced like they were dancing Awilo and Extra Musica dances. We had a lot of successes that way. It was great, a lot of fun after we collected their bags and sacks. We found a lot of money. We went on and attacked cow herders and other staff the same way we had fooled the civilians at first. This time we castrated some boys so that they would not give birth to rebel children.”

“Hahaha...that is good, they will join us and fight themselves soon when things become hot. Believe me, you will have a rebel fighter alongside you fighting against his rebel colleague with all the things that we have done to them.”

“Guys listen to this funny story that happened when I was deployed in Koch,” said a soldier who arrived late and found the rest sharing their experiences. “There was a man whose blanket was robbed off by me, and

he could see me carry the blanket. The man asked me fearfully and said, 'My son didn't my blanket fall on your shoulder?' But I couldn't answer him as I was still going ahead.

"Didn't my blanket fall on your shoulder? Hahaha... did you shoot him?"

"No, I did not shoot him because he asked me a funny question that made me forget to kill him. I laughed instead. The man reminded me of a scene that happened when we attacked a town in the 1990s. A group of civilians found themselves by mistake at our end. Most of the soldiers ruled out that the civilians irrespective of their gender had to be raped. Then I protested and refuted that agreement by telling them not to include the rape punishment to the oldest man among them. 'It is inhumane to punish this old man with raping,' I said, 'the old man shouldn't be raped but should only be killed so that he dies a dignified death than living a shameful life; raping is for females.' 'Kachdu, my son,' the old man said quickly, 'you are wrong. Why shouldn't the old man be raped? Your reasoning is unfair because war is war and all gender must face the consequences of the war. Besides, any first suggestion from soldiers has to be put into consideration. I am ready with my daughters, sons.'

"Weithiang also told me a similar story like that when he reached Buoytong. He said a man heard the farts of him defecating in an open toilet in his garden, but he didn't know that Weithiang was a soldier. He might have thought he was an ordinary person or a rebel soldier. Therefore, the man in an angry voice said, 'Who is that idiot defecating in my garden? When he saw Weithiang in the army uniform with a gun, he nearly ran out of his skin. He instead fearfully apologised and talked to him smiling: 'Ha, sorry, soldier, my dear son. Enjoy and be free even if you want to defecate in my hut.' Despite the man's pleading words, knowing Weithiang doesn't forgive any breathing creature, he shot the man dead."

“Yes, I know Weithiang very well. He once slaughtered a two-year-old baby at Rubnor in my watch. He nearly shot me when I told him to leave the child who was even going to die alone after we had killed its mother. He is very tough when it comes to killing...”

“Guys,” called another soldier, “I found Mapuor of Platoon two enjoying the white girl who was killed in the crossfire.”

“Oh, stupid Mapuor, why did he do that insensitive act?”

“He had nearly shot me when I told him to stop. He thought I was jealous...”

“...but the girl was not even a real white girl. She was just an albino.”

“He doesn’t know. He was very proud to...”

The soldiers continued and continued until they slept. Soon I could hear them snore from far-off in the midnight. I carefully crept back making sure not to crush the dry leaves that could wake them up. I returned in the darkness towards the place where my family was. I was not afraid of animals now because of the strange things I had heard from the wicked soldiers who were enjoying the suffering of my dear people though they had nothing to do with the rebellion and the politics in the country. It became clear that they had been doing all this simply to make the rebels surrender as well as the civilians. I talked to myself as I was going back to where my family was hungrily sleeping. *“...but Gojam will never surrender if all they need is for them to surrender. The army may get tired of bush life and join them, but I trust the Gojam and the white army because their fight has nothing to do with the leader of this movement and his dear wife whose objectives are positions and wealth at the expense of our blood...”*

I arrived and found my grandmother wide awake and she asked me where I had been to. I told her that I had gone out to defecate. In the morning we did not move very far from Konkot. We decided to go and sleep in the northern part of Konkot because we had slept in the southern part of it the previous night for fear of the movement of the enemy between Bentiu-Parieng junctions.



Chapter 18

We finally arrived at a place where people were not allowed to talk at night. Unlike the place we had slept in the previous night, it was exactly near Unity, a place where the government soldiers were stationed. It was the same Konkot but the northern part of it. I will never forget Konkot for the rest of my life because there I lost two important people at a go. All along from Muodin, we had been eating but what we didn't know was that my mother was not as she used to give the only fish she caught to us. We didn't know that she had been staying on an empty stomach and no one among us noticed it. My grandmother who was the only experienced person was blind.

There was no water at Konkot but there were a few ponds that had previously been dug by the Chinese during their drilling work in Unity oilfields. Those ponds had water, but they said most of them were poisoned by the soldiers who were stationed in Unity and Parieng so as not to provide the rebels with the drinking water as the whole place was a desert from where one would die of thirst. Our mother's swollen stomach confused us. We thought she was always satisfied.

It was this saddest day when we slept hungry and woke up like the world was ending. Our stomachs felt like a Chinese-made bulldozer had dug out everything. We all managed to wake up, but my mother could not even manage to move her body while on the ground let alone getting up. We thought she was sick, but we later discovered that she had spent more than five days without eating anything. I tried to lift her hand, but she said she was okay claiming she was only resting.

“Leave me, son,” she said with a forced smile. *“I am okay.”*

“But if you are okay get up, Mama,” I said with tears rolling down from my face, as I knew she was not well. *“Please Mother get up and let us go.”*

“My son,” she said pretending to be strong and fine, *“can you please take your brother, sisters and your grandmother ahead so that I can follow you tomorrow? I want to rest here waiting for a lady who went to bring for us something to eat from UNMISS camp in Bentiu.”*

“Man-Mi-dit,” my grandmother called. *“Are you fine?”*

“Yes I am, Mandong,” she told my grandmother. She spoke to my grandmother in parables so that we could not understand anything. I finally realised that my mother wanted us to go ahead so that she could die in our absence. But I was not going to allow that to happen.

Her sweet speech convinced my elder sister, but I questioned why she was on the ground helplessly if she was in fact waiting for our food. I knew my mother would never survive since there was no person to help us. I looked around and saw a lalob tree and ran towards it. I brought some lalob fruits for her, but she would not eat them as her throat had difficulties in the opening.

“Thank you, my strong son,” she said, smiling. *“Give them to your brother, sisters and grandmother. I don’t eat lalob fruits.”*

I went away again to find more fruits but to no avail. When I returned, I found her still lying on the ground.

“My son,” she called. “Please take care of your grandmother, your two sisters and your little brother Goy.”

“But why have you said all this, Mama?” I asked, crying. Everyone now cried with me including my little brother Goy who was too young. My grandmother did not weep. Death might not have been new to her. She had experienced more deaths in her life including the death of my grandfather who had been slaughtered in her presence in Pading.

“Mi-diiit,” she called again while holding my hand. “You are a man now. I am proud to have a child-like you. Look after your father’s family and never let the world confuse you. Your late father and I have been among the poorest class in the village of Pading, but nobody knew that we were poor. I will indeed be gone but please do not let the world know that you are poor. And you must never in your life ask strangers to give you things. Do not choose to beg or steal, work hard and never believe in luck until you achieve your goal. Above all keep your dignity, integrity and the name of your forefathers alive.”

I knew my dear mother was dying. The face I saw was now new. The beautiful face that I had first known for many years had turned into a new cheerless face. It was now a new terrible and disappearing face. Her beautiful old face had now turned into a sorrowful and deathly face. She might have perhaps worried herself about us in the unfinished journey.

She faked a beautiful smile and then closed her eyes for the last time and her body became cold. I grabbed her and cried bitterly. I thought she would get up, but I was wrong. My grandmother asked me to help put her hand on my mother’s body because she couldn’t see her. When she touched my mother’s hands and neck, she confirmed that she was dead.

“Bring the bed-sheet, Nyagoa,” she ordered. Soon Nyagoa, whose face was covered with tears, brought the bed sheet and my grandmother covered the dead body of my dear mother who chose to die making sure we survived. It was the saddest moment of our lives to lose our dear mother whose face and smile that we had been seeing every day could have departed forever from our sight. Our dear mother’s familiar voice which had been dear to our ears had now been muted by the heartless death, and never more to be heard. The gloomiest moment in life is when you say the last goodbye to someone you wish to spend the rest of your life with. My mother was dead, but our blind grandmother veiled her sorrow and strove to act as the comforter to us on our darkest journey. I never knew we were poor until my mother told me when she was dying. I never knew the difference between poor and rich. Why would we be poor when she and my late father always brought food for us? Why would we be poor when we had had nice clothes and they sometimes brought sweet things like thoar-katuom for us?

We had no choice but to go ahead towards Payang-gay otherwise we would have all died in the bush that swallowed my dear mother. The saddest thing again was that my grandmother could not move and no one could manage to carry her. She tried three steps forward but in vain.

“Go in peace, my four little dogs,” she said while on the ground helplessly. *“We shall meet in peace in the name of our ancestors. Your dear mother has just told you everything. I have no more to tell you again. But you, Mi-dit, always make sure to cry with the world in bad situations but never laugh with them in their happy situations. The good and bad people of this world can, with or without an apparent reason, attack you physically, verbally or any other way. You may be hated for the way you look, dress, perform positively or negatively, and the company you keep. But never lose hope when this happens to you tomorrow. Take care of your sisters and your little brother. Teach*

them all your late grandfather and I have taught you because he who doesn't pass the words of the old ones is a generational failure. I trust and love you. Go and take care, Mi-diit, my little dog."

"Again," she continued, recalling, "never let your body be popular than your name. It is better for people to say, 'Oh is this person the individual I have been hearing about?' than to say, 'Oh I have been seeing this person, but I didn't know their name.' Go! The dust on your legs will be nothing but peace."

I almost committed suicide at hearing the strange words from my mother and now my grandmother. It was the worst part of my life were going backwards hurt and going forward hurt. I have always been a night-time dreamer, but this one sorrowful event didn't want and still to this day doesn't want to be a dream.

I wish this suffering could be a dream, just a mere dream. I wish I could wake up tomorrow morning to bring out our calves from our luak, to find Father, Grandfather, Grandmother, Mother, Brother, Aunt and all our village people alive. But Nature doesn't want to make it a dream. It is real so that I can't see them again forever and ever. Death, the enemy with many friends! Life, a friend with few friends!

Forward is always better than backward, I said to myself, though I don't know what would happen ahead.

I finally decided to go very fast to Payang-gay to bring water and food for my starving grandmother before I could take her and then bring some tools so that I could come and bury my mother.



Chapter 19

I left with my two sisters and my little brother, Goy. It was at night when we reached a place called Laffah Fahm.

The reconnaissance of rebel forces was still out monitoring the movement of the government forces. As we were walking through the dark forest, our feet crushed the dry leaves and the sound was heard by the soldiers on night duty.

“Saabit miin?” one of the young soldiers cried out. I had forgotten the reply of that military night challenge and password for identifying people at night which my late grandfather had told me before he died.

“Saabit miin!” I shouted back, soon they opened fire on us, but we were not hurt. I told my two sisters to snooze down while I held my little brother, Goy.

After firing for some more seconds, they knew we were not the enemy because we did not fire back. They again called after a short silence. *“Saabit!”* My sisters, this time, cried.

“*Sabiit!*” I shouted back, but this time they knew I was either stupid or a civilian. Two of them matched forward and asked us in Naath language.

“*Who are you?*” they asked from far.

“*We are people,*” Nyagoa said, with a shaking voice, “*please do not shoot.*”

“*Where do you come from?*” one of them asked while pointing his gun at us and coming towards us.

“*We are coming from the land of Pading,*” I told them, but they didn’t know Pading.

“*Where is Pading?*” asked another soldier.

“*Pading is near Gueny and Ngemtony,*” I told them but still they did not know Gueny and Ngemtony.

The soldiers took us to a nearby garrison called Wией Gat-Kera, a name given after its commander who was in charge of it. Gat-Kera was also among those my late grandfather had well-regarded. I was very glad to see him. He spoke gently and deliberately picking his words with great care. He was indeed a good person from his facial expression.

“*Where do you come from, my little children?*” he asked us.

“*We come from Pading,*” I replied. He knew Pading right away unlike the young soldiers who didn’t know our land.

“*I know Pading along the River Nile,*” he said. “*I was there in the 1990s.*”

I was very happy when he knew my land, unlike the young soldiers who had brought us to him.

"This boy is from Leer," Gat-Kera told two of the three soldiers who were among those who had brought us.

"Really?" one of them said uninterestingly while cleansing his AK47, *"Are you really from Leer?"*

"No, sir I am not," I said quickly, *"I am from Pading."*

"Hahaha," the other one laughed dryly. *"Pading is also part of Leer ya comrade."*

That one reminded me of what my grandmother had told me when she had said Pading was part of Leer. Now I felt shy because of being stupid while I was almost twelve.

"Why did he call me 'comrade' when I am Mi-diiit Mi-goa?" I thought. *"He should have asked my name rather than giving me a name whose meaning I don't know. 'Comrade' must be an insult but why would he just insult me when I didn't insult him?"* I became very sad like I was insulted badly.

"We are also from Leer. This comrade is from Thonyoor and I am from Giil. Have you ever heard of Thonyoor and Giil before?" one of them asked. I was now happy when one of them referred to the other as 'comrade' which I had been called before.

"Yes, sir," I sharply replied, *"I have heard of them but have never been to them."*

I was now a little sad because one of the soldiers stood still looking at my elder sister and I was much disturbed by that. My sister in fact had become mature with some tiny sharp-pointed breasts despite the hardships we were in. She looked elegant and gorgeous, and every soldier was focused on her. She was our only hope. *"We would not allow any man to take her without paying dowry that would help us settle our destroyed family,"* I thought loudly. I had had a plan in mind to take

Nyachangkuoth and Goy to school wherever we settled and when Nyagoa would get married.

We were given some thirst-quenchers and food, but our throats could not take any. We were finally given some hot milk and our throats opened at last. I asked one of the soldiers to take me back to where their commander was seated. I was taken to his place by a soldier almost my age. When I arrived at where the commander was seated near a big tank like the one I had seen near Pading, my body went cold. I told him my sad story and I could see from his face that he felt sorry for me. He ordered twelve of his men that I later learnt to be from all the seven lands of Bentiu. Among those taking me were from Rubkotna, Payinjar, Koch, Guit, Mayom, Mayendit and Leer. They escorted me to the place I had left my dead mother and my alive grandmother. We carried with us some food and thirst-quenchers as well as some hoes and other sharp tools to bury my dear mother.

I left my two sisters and my little brother Goy with the commander who took good care of them well from the soldiers who spent some time without girls. We finally arrived the next day only to find hundreds of eagles and vultures around the two bodies of my already dead mother and grandmother whom I had intended to save and bring.

The eagles and some vultures that stood from far were so angry and wild that they would have eaten me alive had I come alone without the help of the soldiers. My hands failed to carry the things I had intended to give to my grandmother. They fell down and my legs couldn't carry me anymore. I tried to persuade the soldiers to bury the two bodies, but we couldn't find anybody parts to bury. When we went near with covered noses what we saw was of their remains were skulls and some long bones from their backs. My grandmother's skeleton was as white as a piece of chalk. It was like it had been

thrown to the dogs. Eagles and crows had pecked away every flesh. Her mouth was wide open. So was my mother's.

We turned towards the garrison but on the way, we were ambushed by soldiers who came from Unity and who might have been monitoring and intercepting our movement. It was from these soldiers that I knew Jack and his group were not the only brave people. These twelve young boys fought the three full pickup cars each mounted with heavy guns that I later learnt to be P10s. They were singing while firing at their opponents:

“Biliukerwuorlielchar!”

They sang and fired their guns like they were just playing until they defeated the government soldiers. Soon after they had defeated the soldiers, they advanced delicately crawling towards the place where the dead bodies of the government soldiers were, either to collect their guns or kill the wounded ones that could not run. They continued singing their song as they collected guns and removed uniforms that were not destroyed by their bullets from the bodies of dead soldiers.

After a long search, two other government soldiers who had hidden called out and said they wanted to join our guys. That was the reason they didn't fire at us or run away. I knew the soldiers had surrendered themselves. The language they used was purely Naath. That one gave me many unanswered questions about the nature of the war which other people called a war between the Naath and Jieng. But the fact is that it was a pure Naath versus Naath war and had nothing to do with the Jieng. It was Naath sons killing themselves and destroying their lands.

Their Corporal who was responsible for our mission called before him the surrendered soldiers for investigation. As the corporal was investigating the captives, other soldiers were winking their eyes and

using body language among them. Soon I heard gunshots. The poor soldiers who surrendered and relied on them were now killed. I was very afraid and sad to see them dead in front of me. My grandfather had once told me that a soldier who surrendered was never killed during their wars. He said a soldier who surrendered rendered service and contribution to the force he surrendered to. He said the bad one was he who surrendered without a gun. But these soldiers had now surrendered with two guns: AK47 and PKM. My late grandfather also had said that if a surrendered soldier was killed, the rest would not surrender in the war. They would fight to death even if they were in a compromising situation.

They had killed over ten on the government's side including the captives that they had killed in cold blood. I was very sad to learn that four of our guys were killed simply because of my mission which was also unsuccessful. The loss of those precious lives gave me insomnia. Why would fourteen from both sides die for my sake? I had wished I was the only one who was killed because they were so kind and generous to me. The survived combatants were boasting over their little victory. A victory that loses lives is not a victory but a waste of souls. I am to blame for the losses.

Gat-Kera, the commander, comforted me when he saw that I was more frightened than hurt.

"They died defending vulnerable people of whom you were part," he said.

The commander ordered his driver to take us to Payang-gay, but the scene was still in my mind. It was really the first time for me to witness a battle in my life. I had only been hearing gunshots whenever I went to the tributary in Pading. But now I had seen clearly how guns were cocked, aimed and fired at targets.



Chapter 20

Payang-gay, the greatest military garrison that I have ever seen in my life. It was the first time to see more soldiers, a thousand times more than Jack's soldiers. They all wore brown uniforms except their leaders who were wearing different colours similar to the uniforms that I had later seen being worn by soldiers at the border. We sat under a big tree along the long road. The rainy season was beckoning as now it was between the dry season and rainy season. The soldiers hated the dry season because their last battles were fought on hot sunny days. There were many casualties during the dry season because the government's vehicles moved easily, and the leaves of trees that they used for protection had fallen.

The sun, on the other hand, burned harshly onto their skinny bodies. The wind, too, blew away everything they had, blankets, shelters and many other things except their guns. All this happened during the previous wars that were fought during dry seasons. Only a few men survived from the previous battles of the dry season after fierce, barbarous and horrible killings. But now their morale was high as the

force awaited the rainy season for possible attacks against government soldiers who had all kinds of war vehicles. They were dearly waiting for the rainy days of the autumn season such that the road would be impassable for the government vehicles and badges to wander about. While exploring the entire garrison of Payang-gay, I realised those who seemed sad and hungry were more than those who seemed happy. One of the young soldiers now grabbed my attention.

“Why is he sleeping like that on the street?” I asked a certain young soldier who stood still looking down on the boy, *“doesn’t he have a place to sleep?”*

“He is not sleeping,” he said unexcitingly, *“he is not around.”*

“Not around? How is that? But he is here lying on the ground.”

“Yes, he is here but he left.”

“But he hasn’t left to anywhere because he is around, brother.”

“Young boy!” he angrily called, *“The person has joined his ancestors.”*

“You meant he is dead?” I asked surprised.

The gentleman didn’t answer my last question. He was instead joined by three or four soldiers who helped him carry the person into the thick bushes. I stood surprised looking at the soldiers chewing grains while carrying the motionless body.

“Young boy,” someone called me from the back, *“Take care. I heard you asking nonsense about the young soldier who died of hunger. Never pronounce that someone has died again or else you will find yourself in jail.”*

I was longing to see Gat-Majaak that my late grandfather used to talk about. He soon came and sat near us. I would not have known him if

all the big and small men didn't stand up. I knew that he must be the lion as my father had always said. He sat near another person that my grandfather had told me about too. That person was later identified to be Gat-Wich. My grandfather admired him very much also. He said he looked like another martyred leader called Cdr. Nyuon who shared with him bravery, physical appearance and a lot in common.

"Whose kids are these?" Gat-Majaak asked another leader, a young smart man with a gap in his white teeth. He was later identified as James.

"They have just come from Gat-Kera's garrison," James said, who talked with a smile and almost as dignified as Gat-Majaak and Gat-Kera.

I stared at Gat-Majaak as if to see the lion in him but there was no lion at all. He was the same as other people in Pading and beyond. But his speech reminded me of my grandfather when he had told me that Gat-Majaak spoke with dignity, quietly and consciously selecting his words carefully. His speech exactly resembled that of Gat-Kera who had accommodated us before. The two commanders motivated me a lot and I had wished to go back to our land so that I could call myself their names in our military game with my village mates. The way they spoke, walked and laughed was very simple. They didn't brag or act proud. They didn't chase their soldiers away from them like most of the commanders normally do.

Soon, as they were chatting, another leader with a dotted or tattooed face arrived and looked serious as if he was being chased by a tiger. He walked as if he wanted to fly. His movement was a pure proud swaggering sort of style. He was very proud of himself more than the rest. I knew he was not a good leader because he scared me with his serious look. He came and ordered his soldiers to chase us away and the big leaders said nothing to stop him from chasing us. I learnt

more about that man later after one of my friends took me to a pond called Pool-Nya-Gaileek where small fish were caught for survival by the young soldiers.

“That is Koy-Janga,” he told me smiling, perhaps he had wanted to say more unscrupulous things about him, but he held them in reserve. He instead told me that, Koy-Janga with tattoos on his face, had contributed a lot to the movement during their time at Luonyluony, one and a half years before, and that could have been the reason why he walked like he wanted to fly. But why would he walk and behave so badly like that when in fact, Jack, the warrior, never used to walk like that? I knew no matter how strong or brave he was he would never surpass Jack in a fight. Not even Jack’s deputy, Biel Kuol.

Whenever I went to Pool-Nya-Gaileek for fishing with the soldiers, I would enjoy their unity. They, after catching fish, would chat for more hours before returning to the Payang-gay military base. All they talked about was the life back home in their respective villages that shared a lot of similarities with Pading from the description. Most of the young soldiers talked about their beautiful girlfriends and village girls that they feared to have been taken while they were away doing military operations.

“My girlfriend was thirteen when I left her,” said one of the young soldiers who had plenty of fish in his hand.

“Count her among other people’s wives now. She must be sixteen and married,” answered another one mockingly.

“Hah, my gun will cry in the head of the man who married her,” he replied, throwing down his fish.

“What if she is married to a senior commander’s son? Will you still let your gun cry in his head?” another one interfered sardonically.

“Yes, but this time it will cry in the leg of the commander’s son.”

There was now roaring laughter as some were teasing and mocking the speaker to have feared the military commanders.

“Young boy,” the oldest one called, “did you say you would kill someone in case you found her married?”

“Yes, because I love her so much.”

“It is not about how much you love her that makes her yours forever, but it is instead the destiny. Never be upset if you find her married or changed her mind about you.”

“So, you meant she can end our love?”

“She might or might not because people wake up with different feelings every single day. Therefore, never get too attached to your thoughts if you don’t want humiliation. And here you have been away from her for so long and you are expecting her to carry on the same feeling over the years? She is human. She can change any time.”

The boy seemed affected by the ocean of advice and was now only nodding in approval. They then overlooked the topic of girlfriends and beautiful girls of the rural areas.

The soldiers talked about their magnificent bulls and cattle clusters around the fire camps in their villages. Some talked of their battles against the government troops and militias, and of the number of the soldiers that they had killed. They also spoke openly of battles lost, cowards, braves, and fallen comrades. They teased those who might have feared in their previous battles against the government forces. Those who didn’t fire their guns or who fired their guns while were lying on the ground in fear. Those who could not face the government’s tanks, vehicles and Ural tracks or who faced the opponent with eyes

closed in fear. They talked about those who didn't sing war songs during the war in fear, but none of them talked about going to school or becoming a doctor or teacher. They did not know how good life was in cities or beyond military zones. I was very surprised to be given a cup full of wine by one of them.

"Sorry I don't drink wine," I told him.

"What? Where are you coming from?" he said angrily with a breath of wine, "then why are you here if you are a woman? I have never seen a man who doesn't drink wine in my life."

"You must now drink it whether you like it or not," he continued in rage, "there is nothing called 'I don't drink' in this jungle. Do you think we are drunkards?"

"He is a child," said another one, "leave him alone please."

I kept quiet to avoid beatings and humiliations. Soon another one grabbed it and drank. After they were drunk, weed was smoked in line by almost all of them. All these activities were done at the border between South Sudan and Politaria where one could take the advantage of being near the border to sneak or escape towards Politaria. That was the last thing they would do. They loved the military more than anything in their young lives. I knew even if they were offered to be released from the military, they would not accept. Their guns were like their children.

At Pool-Nya-Gaileek these young soldiers would boast for a long-time on killing news; we defeated the government, we won, the government badly lost, their leader will soon be captured, Bentiu will soon be reclaimed back by its owners, the UN will provide food for our mothers back home whereas the population in the government's territories will starve of hunger, the world will soon be on our side,

most of the South Sudanese people are joining us one by one because the government kills them too and the much-loved Doctor will take over the leadership of the country...and so on and on.

Some of these soldiers kept different kinds of memory albums of all kinds of people, South Sudanese women or foreign celebrities, old and young, beautiful and ugly, lovers and past lovers. I believe it was the result of the insecurity and hunger which had hit the land badly and left the civilians with a little option that let them seek the protection of an armed group by joining them at a young age. I admired the soldiers because I always forgot about my suffering when I went fishing with them. They talked as if they had no parents or relatives. They also behaved as if a gun couldn't kill them.

An old man who knew my late grandfather accommodated us and gave us food but there was no soup at all. That was the reason I always went to Pool-Nya-Gaileek with the young soldiers. That old man treated us with respect and love. He was among the victims of the war. His wife and four children had been slaughtered in their village by government-allied militias. He had been away in the river searching for food to feed his children when he returned and found the dead bodies of his family members lying down. The oldest daughter was not slaughtered with the rest because she was mature as she was a teenager. The enemy kidnapped her instead and kept her captive in their base only to be raped and tortured for more than a month almost every day by all who were her captives and their friends. She was finally penetrated with foreign objects including iron rods and light bulbs, and fireworks were inserted into her genitals and set them off and cut her nipple out with pliers simply because she shared the same clan with the rebel leader. With those entire inhumane acts, the man became depressed that he nearly committed suicide. He was rescued by his neighbours. Left without any choices, he joined the army at Payang-gay. The man was the opposite of Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder because he was very kind to children. He was different from many who were suffering from stress. Many who suffered stress would get drunk all the time and beat or fight people every day.

Life became somehow good after I reached thousands of people who were ready to help Gojam in defence of the land. What I disliked from the soldiers was their failure to praise or take notice of Gojam's activities back home. They really didn't care about how the soldiers were suffering back home. They only talked about those who were with them in Payang-gay. My thoughts were with Jack and his poor men who used spears to fight the well-armed government troops. I wished I was the leader of the Freedom Fighters at Payang-gay such that I could reinforce the poor Gojam back home.



Chapter 21

We spent three good weeks in Payang-gay. I had almost joined the army. I changed my mind later not only because I was too young to join but my little brother and my two sisters would suffer. There were as many young soldiers as me in the army. Most of the young ones were from Payinjiar, the land of Nyuong-Naath.

One fine day in May, I was fishing at Pool-Nya-Gaileek when I heard heavy shelling that fell into the garrison of Payang-gay many times. I was so afraid and worried. I was thinking about the safety of my two sisters and little brother, Goy that I had left behind at the headquarters. The enemy bombarded the garrison until it lighted like the fires of the unseen hell. It went on for the whole day and subsided in the twilight. When I arrived at the garrison in the evening I found out that the shelling had resulted in the killing of the man who had been accommodating us. The young soldier who forced me to drink wine at Pool-Nya-Gaileek was one of the many soldiers that had been killed and badly destroyed by the bombardment. A much-respected engineer by the name of Mr West was among other civilians and

soldiers killed by the shelling too. The shelling had also killed around forty head of cattle near the main market of Payang-gay. It was such an awkward moment where even birds and cats cried like babies. Living in Payang-gay one could run mad or be frightened to death by the daily battles, death reports and looming battles.

A young soldier now broke the silence as he talked to his friend older than him shortly after the bombardment. He knew I was listening, but he ignored me perhaps because I looked younger or wasn't a soldier.

"Will we just be poured into the war without first finishing our training?"

"What about the two-week training they gave us?"

"Do you mean that nonsensical training? It's actually a bogus training because it is not enough."

"Yes, it may not be enough. But it is not about how long you have been trained that matters. It is all about how well you know about what you do, your determination and willpower!"

"Comrade, they say if a soldier is not trained he is easily killed."

"Guns don't know who is trained and who is not."

"Yes, the gun doesn't distinguish between a trained soldier and an untrained one, but training helps a soldier to acquire all kinds of skills on confidence so that he doesn't panic."

"Let us forget about training. You look sad and you talk harshly. What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing,"

"Be honest."

"Yes, I am sad."

“At least you are sad. Some have died and are dying as we speak. Tell me why you let sadness rule you.”

“Won’t you betray me if I tell you what is inside me?”

“Do I look like Judas Iscariot?”

“Not only you but everyone including me is Judas Iscariot. We indeed hate ourselves to death. If thoughts and hearts, and what people say behind our backs were to be read, seen and known respectively, no man or woman would be friends with one another. We are all silent and secret enemies to each other. Just swear for me to partially believe you.”

“I swear in the name of our God.”

“Okay, you know as well as I do that we used to be totally free and happy in our poor or rich families in both villages and towns until the leader of this movement and his rich group made politics that he dragged us into. We gave up schools, jobs, marriage plans and development when we were fooled into the war in the name of removing the dictator that butchered our people. The removal of the dictator resulted in the deaths of my three brothers in the last dry season’s battle. I am sad because I want to go back home but no one allows me to. Enough is enough. We are only five in total: the three that were killed, plus my blind sister. This war is endless. It will only close off some homes at the end of it. We should know that even our fathers keep some seeds for every next planting season to keep on the lineage of seeds. I want to survive to be the seed for our falling family. I haven’t yet lived my life. I must now leave to live. I meant desertion. But never think that I am afraid of dying and the coming battles, but I see an unwinnable war and no loser. If the result is one side that wins, call me woman later if we survive.”

“Please don’t do that,” his friend said, “you will be caught on the way. Our men and enemy on the way will be your enemy. So, you will be alone against the two powerful forces plus wild beasts and hunger. You know the price of desertion: firing squad or execution.”

“I don’t fear death, nor do I care because I know it very well that every soul shall taste death. Escaping death is impossible. I am not escaping death but this terrible situation. I would even be happy being killed on the way trying to go back home than being killed in this endless war. There are times that I even think death is the only friend that will give me permission and total freedom than these commanders. I think death will not only permit me but a complete rest from the military, hunger, stress and fear. Most importantly off from the suffering so that I can be committed to doing heavenly tasks with our Lord Jesus Christ. But the mission uncompleted kills me. I don’t want my dead brothers to die in vain. My only and biggest fear is that the dictator will not be removed and our leaders will only wash their hands later and eat with him at the expense of the thousands of lives lost.”

The guy, after the long speech without a pause, started to sob. The rain had now poured and was now washing over his thin, sad face as the tears rolled down with the rain. His friend cried too.

“I feel your pain, comrade,” his friend comforted, crying. *“Our elders say, ‘many are the hyenas that don’t giggle or laugh than those that do.’ I am a victim myself. I come from a family of veterans who, like me, volunteered to serve our Mother South Sudan, only to return with hard lessons and unanswered questions about humanity. Exploitation is not far from what they will be doing after this war. The same way my veteran relatives were thrown away after the previous wars are the same way I am likely to be thrown away.”*

“Pretend to be weak and unusable for our leaders to love you,” the young man said, wiping tears from his eyes, *“they hate strong people because they know their rights.”*

“I don’t support your desertion, comrade,” his friend pleaded, *“you should wait, maybe there will be peace and this suffering will be no more. Peace will take us home and away from this cruel jungle full of pain and suffering.”*

“It is too late, comrade.” he said, cleaning his gun, *“I must go by desertion.”*

The guy left. Just as he was about to get away from the Freedom Fighters’ territory, he fell in the ambush that had been set by his comrades’ reconnaissance. He was killed mistaking him for an enemy’s security agent. His death was announced in the morning to frighten whoever would try to desert in future. A group of soldiers was authorised to bury the victim. They left but refused to bury him calling him a deserter and conspirator. His body was only exposed to the sun. They only used the mission as an advantage to wander about in the forest. In the evening they deceived their commanders that they had buried the victim.

I couldn’t sleep the following night after the death of the poor soldier killed by his own comrades. He thought he was done with one problem only to face another which was now his natural end. His image, sounding confident and judgment still lived on. His friend was sorry too. He was for sure humiliated and misunderstood when he at first asked for permission from his senior commanding officer. What a merciless and cruel war zone world where no one can tell what will happen next!

The following morning the soldiers made their parade to fight the enemy. But the war was going to be a tragedy. The man whose face was dotted with the traditional tattoos was going to sabotage the operation and many lives would be lost. It was later said he had had a connection with the other two defectors in Politaria who were tirelessly working day and night to let down the appointed governor and Commander Gat-Majaak. It was also rumoured that he wanted to be in the place of Gat-Majaak who was the Division Commander too.

I could not believe my eyes when over 20,000 men were briefed and taken to different fronts by operational commanders. In his tiny

spectacles and cheap, old khaki uniform, Gat-Majaak, the Division Commander by then, looked brave and serious. He spoke softly in a non-violent way. The commander stepped forward, “No one must touch any civilians or surrendered soldiers.” he began, briefing his soldiers on the rules of war, “it isn’t only a serious war crime but a sin before God to kill civilians and unarmed ones. Our fight is an objective war. It is a defensive one. If we leave this problem unsolved, then the fallen heroes and our innocent civilians who were killed will feel betrayed in their graves, and the Lord of the land will punish us. But I know your braveness! No more cowards among you!”

“*Chakokekuenthiang!*” cried out Bornyidor, the soldiers’ lead singer who always motivated everyone including the quitters.

“*Keneidhiech!*” the soldiers roared back with high morale, “*Viva! Doctor Viva! IO Viva! South Sudan Viva!*”

“...*the wounded, sick, traders,*” continued Gat-Majaak, still selecting his ground-breaking words with great care, “*and those who are no longer able to protect themselves must be protected...Aid workers must fully be protected irrespective of their tribe, religion or colour...any detainees and the surrendered ones must be fed. Let them eat with you on the same plate... the captives must be reported to the garrison here. No one must harm any captives. No rape or other forms of sexual violence and...a well-trained soldier ignores girls and women during a given battle. Their beautiful faces, foreheads, swaying walks, beautiful smiles and natural perfume must be ignored. If you have a crush on someone in the enemy’s territory you are signing your death certificate. Remember you are crushing the death not the girl or woman. When you rape, you rape the death. The recoil comes anytime.*”

The morale of his soldiers was at the topmost. Almost all including the few bodyguards that were not ordered to the battlefield went to

the battleground on their own without the commanders' knowledge. The battle began. Gunshots were heard in the east, west, south and centre. The echoes of the cannon fires in the far south could be heard from the garrison because they were loud and they shook the earth. Dim! Dim! Tiling-gir! Tiling-gir! Wuu! Wuu!

Soon there were many casualties brought back from the battlefield. The sound and echo of the guns were now becoming louder towards the garrison. '*Takuf! Takuf!*' was now the Kalashnikovs' sound. Everyone knew that the fight was getting nearer and nearer. The support forces were now ordered to join the war. Almost all the special guards of the commanders were ordered to go to the battlefield as the war was intensifying fiercely.

The confusion of this war was that there were different feelings and emotions; some were laughing, some were crying or shouting, some were talking, some remained silent for a short time or forever and ever. The feeling of this very tough battle ever is unforgettable; the screams of mothers and children, the yells of old men, the cry of young soldiers whose legs or hands got amputated or large and small intestines poured on grounds, and the random running of those whose heads were beheaded by cannonballs. That was the most terrible carnage, butchery and horrific nature of combat in history.

Gat-Majaak's troops tried to take all efforts to maintain their defensive position of Payang-gay but miserably failed. The war was lost at last and Payang-gay was captured by the enemy. When the enemy arrived in the garrison they sprayed gasoline and set the entire grass-built garrison alight. After that fierce battle, the dried grass with yellow colour changed into red from the blood of many dead bodies and of the wounded soldiers that died later on after withdrawal. Broken bodies, blown apart and burned bodies lay everywhere. Shortly after that fierce battle, crows and eagles darkened the sky. Some of the

soldiers who were captured by the enemy were forced to dig their own graves before they were executed. Some were put in sacks and thrown into the ponds alive. But most of the dead bodies on the ground were not buried; they were burned by poisoned bullets so that their rotten bodies were avoided by animals including ants and birds.

To confirm my late grandfather's description of Commander Gat-Majaak, I saw him with my naked eyes walking slowly holding his military cape, indifferent to the bullets hissing around him like flies. I saw him refuse to run when most of his soldiers ran away with the officers. The enemy had already captured the garrison when he was only some few minutes away from the garrison. I had now known that he was a lion in a human form. It was rumoured that Gat-Majaak didn't fear death, but he was only sorrowful for the heavy unfinished task. It was believed that he would even give his life away if that would bring stability to the land. Here was a simple leader whose cup of tea was his death just for the sake of his beloved people! Gat-Majaak is actually the man who wasn't frightened by death, the heartless!

It was now the gloomy autumn with too much rain. The season was prolonged by the endless war. The soldiers were now walking with torn civilian clothes. Their bodies and faces were changed by hunger. Even the young faces looked like old people. Most of them had lost hope in the endless war which kept on giving the government an upper hand every new day.

After the capture of Payang-gay by government troops, Gat-Majaak took his force westward to the place that they would leave later on for Garia. We spent some days with them just a few miles away from Payang-gay which was now under government control. I again re-joined the company of the few old acquaintances who survived the Payang-gay battle. Shortly, as I was with these soldiers, their ammunition and food arrived. Everyone slapped their chests happily

when their bullets arrived. Women ululated and slapped their thighs too in happiness.

Two of my friends now started to evaluate the arrival of the bullets. They knew there was going to be another deadly war against the enemy, either in Bentiu or Payang-gay.

“How I hate guns and ammunition!” the fat one said.

“Why do you hate them?”

“Because they kill people.”

“You are wrong. Guns and ammunitions neither kill nor harm people but the people behind them are to blame.”

“Then the people to blame will be these commanders who love wars but don’t fight in wars.”

“But they have a role even if they don’t fight. Soldiers and commanders have their own way of contributing. They do what they are best suited for.”

“You sound like commanders’ puppet. What do they give you?”

“Nothing at all, Comrade, but I want you to stay so that you can see what this war will bring at the end.”

“What is so significant or bad to be seen again in this land when everything is already seen? Even if I become blind I can’t regret it because nothing is left unseen in our land. I have seen all impossibilities and indecent events. South Sudan is the only country where everything, good or bad, is seen by all ages including children.”

Silence befell the two friends. Soon the fat one continued their debate of blame and defence.

“I wish life had a pause and playback button,” the young man spoke again, breaking the befallen silence, *“so that I could change my decision of joining the war. I wish I had just worked for international organisations. Unfortunately, the past can’t be changed.”*

“I don’t even see myself among the veterans after this war;” he continued with his hand resting on his cheek.

“Why?” asked his friend.

“Because I am going,”

“Congratulations! Have you been given permission?”

“No permission has been given to me. I think you have forgotten that there is only single permission given here: the heavenly permission.”

“Then where are you going?”

“I feel like I may go in the upcoming battle.”

“Oh no! don’t say that!”

“It is easy because it is two choices only: death and life. It is not a big deal because I am not better than the fallen comrades and civilians. I see myself among unburied heroes who will be left exposed to the sun in this jungle. Please never let my album be thrown away if I die. Keep it and give it to my family in case you survive the upcoming battles and hunger. I pray you don’t die of hunger.”

“Death is death, Comrade,” his friend said, *“it doesn’t matter what killed you.”*

“Yes, it doesn’t matter how one dies but death due to hunger is shameful. It is better to die a glorious death by getting killed at the frontline than die a shameful death. Don’t you know that our people don’t bury someone who has died of hunger?”

“Yes, I heard but what is the secret behind it?”

“Because it is an abomination and it brings bad omen. If someone who died of hunger is buried, most of the natives of that entire village will also die of hunger. The body is just dragged into the bushes to be eaten by animals.”

“Sad!”

“Does that seem sad to you?”

“Yes, how about you?”

“Nothing will be as miserable as how we, the veterans, will be treated after this war. The people we now called comrades will deny us the same way Jesus Christ was denied by Peter and will betray us the same way Jesus Christ was betrayed by Judas Iscariot for only thirty silver coins. The complainants of robbery after this war will be us, the committed ones,” he continued, with a smile when his friend was surprised by his strange testimony, *“insults will be felt by the educated ones, forgotten will be the song of the victims, mocking will be the melody of the senior ones and...”*

“Please stop! You are getting mad.”

“Not at all, Friend, I was brought up honourably without drinking alcohol or disrespecting the elderly. I was also raised to be hard-working and so on. If I die, all that will be nothing, just a waste of time and guidelines. I am alive outwardly but dead inside. If you want me to resurrect let me desert and go back to Ganyliel.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Many questions come into mind when I am alone; what is the purpose of this endless war that I believe will be enjoyed by people overseas? It has been clear from day one that we, the sons of the poor peasants, are being recruited by traditional chiefs to protect the children of these commanders that lead

us to wars and battles nowadays. Their children are enjoying the profits of war overseas leaving us in bushes and jungles with our poor parents exposed to all kinds of hardships. I pray to God that no South Sudanese child will again be fooled and sweet-talked into another war of positions and ranks in future and..."

Soon there was an order from the officer in charge that the two should go and bring him water to bathe. It was until I reached the border that I heard that the two had been killed at the Panyilang battle.

The autumn rain had now increased that it rained continuously day and night. And here the imminent war was again smelled and predicted by the experienced ones. But everyone was now fed up with the continuous war without end, series of long, sad and suffering days and nights with uncounted withdrawal after withdrawal, defeat after defeat, victory after victory, retreating and counterattacking, captured and full control, and vice versa. Only the heartless weren't fed up with the war that wasn't going anywhere but kept on circling and circling like four seasons of the year. A strict law on deserters was set by senior commanders. If anyone failed to report himself during any given parade for whatever reason, he was going to be considered a deserter and deserters were charged with betrayal and consequently shot at the parade. All the soldiers would report themselves before time for fear of being labelled deserters. No one would want the firing squad, the unjust death.

This poor and doomed generation of war didn't actually enjoy their childhood. No childhood at all because their lives were fully dedicated to the military.

Happiness was, to everyone, always looked for in the childhood days but these soldiers looked for it in the unforeseeable future! Poor them!

I now imagined myself taking part in the looming war.

“What if I was killed?” I would ask myself, *“would people really cry?”* I think no one would cry because my mother, father, grandmother and grandfather are dead. I wouldn’t even be missed except by Nyagoa, Goy and Nyachangkuoth. But burial was impossible. My poor young body would simply be thrown away into the bush,” I thought and thought of nothing but war and fighting, killing and dying in defence of the land.

I departed ways with the soldiers when I saw them turn west. I wanted a journey that could turn north. I took my two sisters and my little brother Goy to a border territory. While at the border I had one day put my attention on two men talking about the war crimes being committed by government soldiers in Leer. My heartbeat fast when they mentioned some places like Guat, Lual and Kur. All these places are neighbouring our village of Pading.

“Did you hear about the Leer container’s suffocation?” said the first man.

“No, I did not. Which container? What happened again in Leer?” the second man asked, surprised.

“It was last week when the government soldiers arrested the civilians, tied their hands behind their backs and forced them in a shipping container which had no air holes or vents at Comboni church of Phomdhoor area in Leer town. Almost all of the 70 young men died apart from a young boy who survived,” the first man said.

“Yes, I know the two containers inside the compound of the church. One is red and the other is blue. They are situated underneath a tin roof near a rectangular office made from iron. But how did the government soldiers and their militias manage to get that big number at a go?” asked the second man.

“The government,” said the first man, *“after dislodging the opposition who had no bullets, announced to the civil population who were in hiding to take their cattle to Leer or risk being taken on by government during their future offensives in the villages of Guat, Lual, Koat and Kur. So, the poor youth responded by taking, to Leer, their cattle thinking that the South Sudan army safeguards civilians like the Islamic army used to do during Africa’s longest civil war. When the youth reached the ghost town of Leer they spent the first night peacefully. But early in the morning, they were accused of being with the opposition fighters in pretext to kill them and take their cattle when none of them was an opposition fighter.”*

“A dead person is never blamed otherwise they have done a grave mistake. Why would they listen to them? It is a very unwise decision,” said the second man angrily.

“Yes, it is a very unwise decision ever,” said the first man. *“Most of their dead bodies were not even buried. They were dumped at Kulier and Juongkang and some along the Gaatdoor road exposing them to animals and the sun. But the good part was that some of the bodies were recovered by their families and buried.”*

It was at the border that I had an idea of going to Politaria. Now I wanted to take my two sisters and my little brother Goy there. Perhaps we would change a life by forgetting all that had happened to our family and people in the land of Pading and its neighbouring villages. A Good Samaritan took good care of us while we were at the border. We told him that we wanted to go to Politaria. He gave us money and paid for our tickets. We boarded a big bus one windy morning for the first time in our lives, apart from the military pickup that Gat-Kera had put us in when we were going to Payang-gay. We were longing for the bus driver to start the bus’s engine so that we could go. My heartbeat and I knew there was a disappointment on the way. Soon a tall and thin man believed to be the Freedom Fighters’

MI agent climbed the big bus that we were in and began to look at the people who had boarded. I was busy looking at him through the corners of my eyes because I didn't want his eyes to fixate on mine. I knew the man would disappoint us.

"Hi, you little boy!" he called at last, *"Where are you going?"*

"I am going to Politaria," I told him.

"Politaria?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, Politaria, sir," I said.

"Well, show me your written permission and where your father is," he asked sharply.

"My parents are all dead and I have no letter. My three siblings and I are going to Politaria to stay there until peace is restored in our land," I told him sadly, hoping that he would feel sympathetic to our situation, but I was wrong.

"When will the peace come?" he asked rhetorically.

"I do not know, sir," I told him.

"Liar!" he insulted and caught me by my collar, pulling me as if I was a cow being taken to a slaughtering house. *"Come down all of you! You are stealing yourselves out."*

Soon we found ourselves on the ground with tears in our eyes. I had wished I was an evil-eyed person so that I could bewitch him at once. Our happiness had now turned into sorrowfulness. We sadly sat around the big bus. He was cruel and merciless to children. I insulted him in my heart. I am good at insulting people silently in my heart the same way my former playmate, Goanar, did back home, with whoever he feared.

After the MI agent was sure that our seats in the bus were occupied by different passengers that they successfully vetted, he left to the main market. I went to the conductor and told him my story. He wept bitterly with tears filling his eyes like autumn rain. The conductor was a very kind young man and he promised to take us with him. He let me hide in the luggage after he gave each of my siblings to people inside the bus so that the cruel man could not see. I felt very happy again when we were all on the bus after the trick of my good friend who wanted us to go to Politaria. I now knew my story had touched the conductor to let us for free. I could not help smiling when I imagined life in Politaria with thoar-katuom, dates. It was only some years ago when our father used to bring us dates from Leer.

As our bus took off, a wicked spy who had seen the conductor put us in the bus ran speedily and informed that cruel agent who followed us with his old motorcycle and forced the driver to stop by waving at him from far-off.

“Stop! Stop!” he called angrily while riding his motorcycle at a high speed. *“Why are you taking those young children without the consent of their parents? Children, who have no fathers or mothers, are not allowed to leave, what if they are smuggling themselves?”*

The driver and his conductor were only nodding their heads in approval of all he was saying. They feared the man would stop them from working in that part of the border for not abiding by his regulations. Everybody on the bus was silent. Everyone didn't want to say anything for fear of being told to come down. When I saw the same man, I nearly threw my bag at him. I insulted him silently and even wanted him dead for stopping us on the way for the second time.

“You, you, stupid boy,” he called, pointing at me angrily with a long shaking finger. *“Come down at once.”*

We sadly and angrily stepped down for the second time with more tears this time than before. I held my little brother Goy who didn't know what was going on. We returned to our previous place and sat sadly and silently, similar to the time our mother had died. After a few minutes, there was a cry all around the border town. I jumped to my feet and saw many people running northward, following the long road.

"The bus has crashed! The bus has crashed!" said an old woman who was running unconsciously.

I ran with the people to see the accident and save the survivors. I finally arrived in the place only to find the passengers all dead. All people were shocked. They had never seen such an accident. What a terrible accident it was! My good friend who wanted me to go with them was now among the dead. The MI agent who stopped me twice was among the people collecting the dead bodies for the mass grave burial. When he had stopped us twice, he was an evil man in my eyes but now that the bus had crashed, he was our angel. It was only through that terrible accident that I knew everything in this world happens for a reason. Hadn't that man stopped us twice, we would have been by now among the dead.

I began to judge the actions of the two; the bad MI agent and his spy who prevented me from going and the good conductor who wanted me to go. The conductor in fact had no bad intention but was rather moved by the empathy of my story. On the other hand, the MI agent had no intention of stopping us but was only implementing the laws that his boss, Gat-Majaak, had given him. I knew it was God who had saved our lives through the MI agent. What a good God! I promised to praise Him when I reached Politaria one day. But that one day in Politaria that I intended to praise the good God would never come as I would never have a chance to see a church let alone praising Him on a daily basis because I would instead be suffering.

I didn't drop the idea of going to Politaria despite that terrible accident. I still wanted to take my siblings there. I knew God didn't want us to go on that day; there would be another blessed day for us to go. We waited for another bus that was going to take off after three days.

This time I approached the same MI agent. He had this time listened to my story and permitted us to go. He gave us a letter which was written in bad handwriting. We could not manage to buy the tickets for more seats. We only managed to pay for one seat for the four of us. We had spent most of our money while staying at the border. Most of our age mates were carried by the kind people. There was this neighbour of ours who refused to put Goy on her lap when I asked her.

"What if he urinates on my lap?" she asked angrily. *"Do you want me to get dirty?"*

"Sorry madam, forgive me!" I told her. She was such a rude woman who might not have children. We managed to use our only seat as we were looking forward to seeing Politaria, the great land. The MI agent wished us good luck on our journey when the bus was about to take off. I was very happy but still feared that there might be an accident ahead as the picture of the previous accident was still in my mind. We left the border towards the north, in the evening.

As the sun was fading we were approaching a small town inside the Politarian territory, when the bus was ambushed by soldiers that were later identified as Politarian rebels. I was told they were fighting the Politarian government. They fired some bullets in the air to frighten us. Our bus finally stopped and they got in it with their guns cocked.

When I saw these soldiers it reminded me of the day I saw brown-skinned soldiers shelling our land. These soldiers looked exactly

like them. I thought they might have been following us. They soon ordered men and women who had no children on their laps to come down and help carry their belongings.

“All men must get down,” one of their officers said, *“And every woman who has no child on her lap must come down at once.”*

When ordered, I turned around to look at the woman who had refused to carry Goy. I found that she was helplessly looking at my little brother Goy and wanted to carry him so that she is not taken by the soldiers into the thick bushes.

“Come,” she called Goy with a smile, but Goy didn't let us down. He refused at once before I intervened. The poor woman, seeing the soldiers forced her to get down, grabbed Goy who was resisting.

“Hey,” I warned. *“Put him down at once, he will urinate in your clothes. He is not your son. You refused him before.”*

“He is my son,” she told one of the officers with a faked smile.

“No, sir, she is lying,” I told my interpreter to tell the officer when I knew he was going to believe her lies, *“this child has no mother. His mother died of hunger when we were coming from Pading.”*

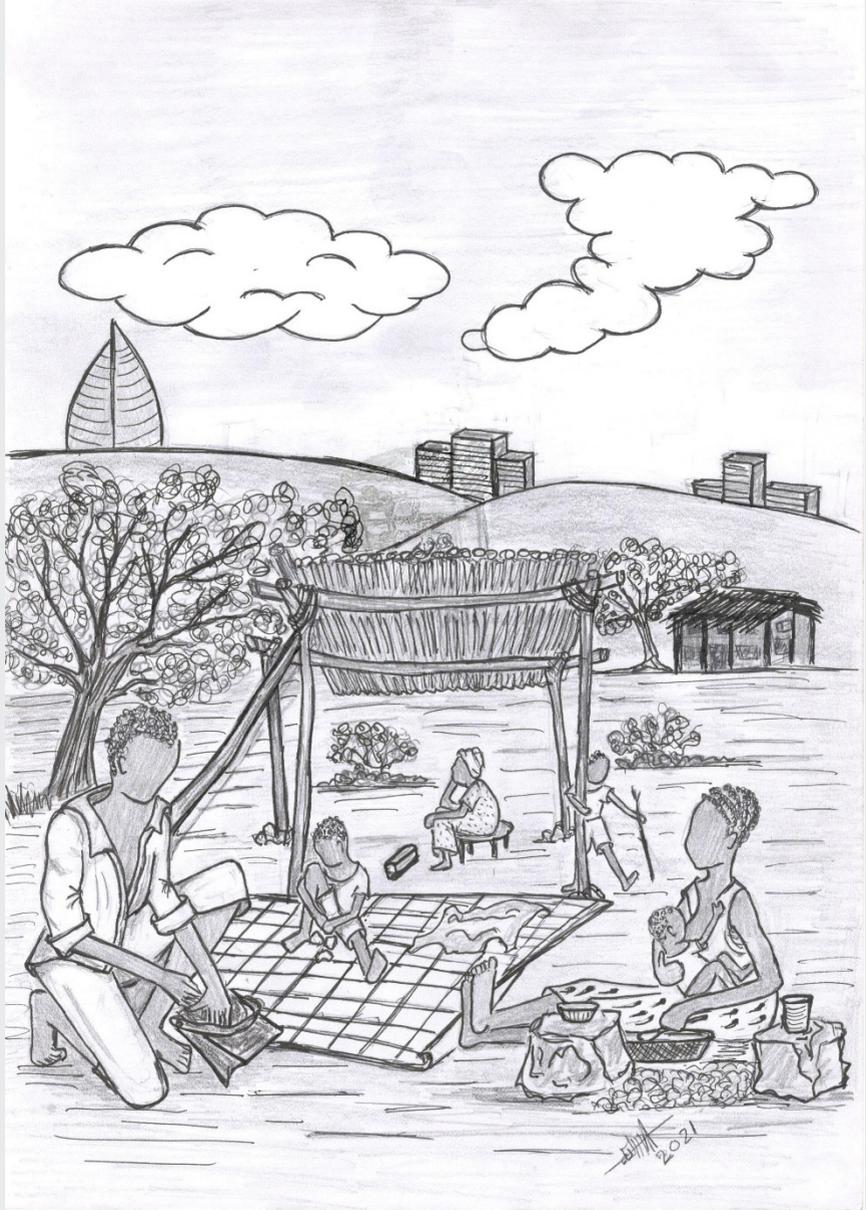
I regretted saying that because Goy and Nyachangkuoth who didn't know that our mother had died on the way burst into tears. I tried to convince them but to no avail. The rude woman was taken in our watch. I was now very happy for two good reasons; to punish her for being unkind to children and to replace her in the seat too. We soon replaced her before she could even get down from the bus. They were taken into the thick bushes and our bus took off again. I now had another evil thought like there was going to be another big problem ahead, but luckily that evil thought didn't mature.



PART THREE

LIFE IN EXILE







*And God spoke to this effect – that his offspring
would be sojourners in a land belonging to others,
who would enslave them and afflict them four
hundred years. – Acts 7:6*





Chapter 22

It took us two days to reach Politaria, the great land I have ever seen in my life. If only I knew Politaria would add more and more suffering to our anguish, I would have detested the look of it as I now do. I thought Politaria would be a place to bury my bad thoughts and sad memories but here I was, instead of mourning because of the sorrow back home, the sorrow here was almost equal.

We stepped down from the bus and the man whom we came with handed us over to a woman who lived in the Kalla suburb. This is where most of the black people lived at Rakobas and the brown people in big, beautiful and expensive buildings.

These Rakobas are made out of discarded boxes, old sacks and plastic sheeting. That one reminded me of the story that our late grandmother told us. She had said God asked the white, black and brown children to clean His private parts with their tongues and the Black child refused to do so after the other children had done their part. And she had also told us that Black People were suffering all

over the world as a result of opposing God. I have now confirmed her remarks to be true.

Why would most of the black people, including the black Politarians stay in Rakobas or in inexpensive and dirty houses when other brown-skinned and white Politarians including brown-skinned foreigners live comfortably? I wondered but no one would give me an answer.

We were welcomed and accommodated at Kalla by a friendly and welcoming human. She was very generous, and her generosity wasn't just extended to her children alone but to anyone who needed a helping hand. That woman was one of the few people in this world who use their right hand to help you, without their left hand knowing it. She was fond of giving from her heart and asked for nothing in return. She was a God-fearing woman who prayed most of her time. Prayer was part and parcel of her life. That woman was called Mary. She treated us like her biological children. I still remember her words when she called her oldest daughter, Monica, to take us to the market and buy clothes.

"Monica here is the money," Mary said to her daughter, *"Take these children to Hai-salam and buy them shoes and clothes to change from these old dirty clothes they are wearing. Buy them a lotion too."*

"Buy them clothes and shoes?" asked Monica rudely, *"but mother, you have never bought any clothes and shoes for my children since last year and now you are buying for these strange kids. I know you have a lot of money and you hate us to death."*

"Hate you?" Mary asked, *"stop being jealous you bad girl."*

"Why would I be jealous?" she asked with tears in her eyes, *"I am only wondering where on earth a grandmother would buy for strangers leaving her grandchildren when she gets the money."*

“Open your Holy Bible,” said Mary, “and read James 1:27.”

“I do not want because you are now mocking and telling me that you are rich,” Monica said.

“Listen, Monica,” Mary said, “It is accurate that we gain more contentment when we do things for others than we do for ourselves. When you help it doesn’t mean you have too much, but we do it to help those who have less. Why would you feel jealous for helping these poor kids in just a day while you have been by my side all the time since your birth? Don’t you know that I have been taking care of you for things bigger than this money?”

“It is my right to be taken care of by you,” said Monica angrily, “it is very unfortunate to compare us with these orphans.”

“Is it still your right to be taken care of by me even when you are a fully grown-up woman with children?” Mary asked.

“Buy for your orphans,” Monica replied, “Perhaps they will bury you when you die.”

“Listen, my daughter,” Mary said, “Nobody had a choice to choose who their parents or situation would be. Some people in this world were born by rich parents, some by poor; some lose their parents when they were still too young to fend for themselves.”

“One like you should only thank God for the situation you are in,” Mary continued, “It is not their fault to be orphans. And who knows about tomorrow? Have you guaranteed that you and your loved ones, me included, will be alive till the natural end?”

Monica kept quiet and sobbed.

“Answer me,” Mary thundered, “Give me back my money I will take them to the market myself.”

Monica still could not answer but Mary grabbed the money from her hand. She told us to go with her. We went to the market for the first time since we came into this world. Mary hired a taxi that took us to the place she called Hai-salam market which she believed was the cheapest market in Politaria. Mary gave us full freedom to choose any types of outfits and shoes we wanted. We really enjoyed trying on our new outfits and shoes. Life was now covered by our hopelessness because we felt like we were Mary's biological children. After we had chosen our favourite colours, she paid a lot of money to the trader and we soon drove back to our Rakoba. Monica was still angry and she even became angrier after she discovered that we had come home with nice clothes and shoes.

After staying for three to four weeks with us in her Rakoba which had no water, electricity and fan, Mary died of malaria and heart attack. Some said she had died of trauma because she had once been a rich woman back in our homeland. She always thought about her possessions which were looted. Now that she was gone, I could still feel her love and guidance when I was sick or sad. Life was now going to be tough after her death. We were left under the care of her firstborn daughter, Monica, whom I believe is the worst woman in the whole world, due to many reasons. It was until I met Monica that I knew there are people in this world who are worse than Satan himself. I believe Satan knows his limits and knows that there is God, but some humans like Monica are confused.

Monica had children but I had never seen her children's father. Monica, her children, my three siblings and I used to sleep in the same Rakoba. The Rakoba had the only bed that had previously been for the late Mary which was now controlled by Monica. Almost every night there would be a different sound outside of who called and knocked noiselessly. We couldn't hear their speech properly, but they used body or sign language with Monica. The first day that scenario

happened Nyagoa cried thinking that a thief might have broken into the Rakoba. She received a heavy punch from Monica that closed her left eye for five days due to swelling and muffling.

After that incident, Nyagoa or anyone among us never even attempted to breathe heavily when someone got into the Rakoba in the middle of the night-time. Nobody would even attempt to go out to urinate when someone had broken into the Rakoba silently. But what Monica didn't know was that most of us if not all including her children would be awake whenever a man got into the Rakoba. Whenever someone entered, there would be carping and panting and the poor double-bed would squeak and shuffle like an abandoned frog. This scenario went on and on for nights.

Monica would beat us every day and send my elder sister to bring wine from Oular suburban, a town that was very far away from Kalla. Wine is prohibited in Politaria and everyone who was caught selling or brewing it would be jailed for at least six months. But wine business was the only means for survival in Politaria, for the poor people like us.

My little sister Nyachangkuoth, one day, accidentally fell near Monica's table and a crack sound scared all of us. "Oh," wailed Monica, *"Thank God it's her head; I almost had a heart attack thinking it was my plate or glass cup."*

There was this day when she sent my elder sister to bring wine and she was caught on the way. My sister was taken to jail and Monica could not visit her in the jail. I tried for two weeks to find her but to no avail until she returned home on her own.

"I was in jail. They caught me but I was lucky to be set free when a big leader visited us in the jail. Had it not been for that leader who released us in a general amnesty, we would have spent over six months in the jail," my sister

told me one day when she returned from jail. Monica had just greeted her like nothing happened. *“You, stupid girl,”* she insulted her, *“Why didn’t you pass via the secured roads so as not to be caught by the police? You wasted our wine. Why didn’t you get lost with our wine?”* She rebuked my sister instead of welcoming her after spending a month in jail.

There was another day when she sent my two sisters, Nyagoa and Nyachangkuoth, to bring wine from another town far away. Monica didn’t want to send her daughters because she knew they would be caught. My sisters left not knowing the problem ahead. The two girls left but were caught by police on their way back home carrying the wine in crystals and big bottles. Nyachangkuoth was set free as she was only nine years old. She came and informed us, but Monica would not go to the jail to see our sister. She neither didn’t want to be jailed as a replacement for my sister or else she didn’t care.

When she refused, Nyachangkuoth and I went to the police unit. We were allowed to visit my sister. She cried when she saw us. She first asked about Goy and we told her that he was fine and only missing her.

“Take good care of our little brother and sister, brother Mi-diiit,” she told me. *“Until the good God who brought us all along the way from Pading to Politaria reunites us again.”*

“Do not worry, Nyagoa,” I said, with tears rolling down our faces. The people around wondered why the three of us were shading tears. We left our sister and went back on foot because we had no bus fares to take us home from Kalla West to the eastern side where we lived. Monica didn’t care about our sister who was in jail for her sake. We found out that she had beaten our poor little brother Goy, in our absence.

“She, she, she beat me and she did not give me food...,” Goy said while crying after he took a little rest in my lap. *“Where is Nya, nya, Nyagoa and where are my mother and Mandong?”*

Those questions made Nyachangkuoth and I cry bitterly. *“Keep quiet, Dalow,”* I said, *“Your sister went to bring you milk.”*

“But when will they come with my milk, please?”

When Monica heard Goy crying, she came and caned him badly. What made me burst into tears was not because she had beaten my little brother but because Goy didn't cry. She slapped the little boy and he fell like a sack of cotton, but he kept quiet as if he knew Monica would kill him if he dared to cry. *“Stupid animal without a tail,”* Monica insulted him. *“What did you say about me?”*

I had now replaced my sister in doing home chores because she was in jail. I would be forced to wake up in the early morning to carry a jerry can to a nearby home that had piped water just to fetch water for the family. The water would stop flowing when the sun was up. That was the reason why I had to go there in the early morning. Carrying of water in jerry cans or water-barrels was a women and girls' work back home in South Sudan. But I had no other alternative than to do it in exchange for the little food and a place to sleep for my little siblings and me.

My sister carried a bigger jerry can which was equivalent to her age, and here I was carrying the same size. This was new since in South Sudan my sister was the one fetching water.

“Aunt Monica,” I called her one morning, *“I want to take this small jerry can. I had nearly fallen yesterday when I was coming home because the other one was very heavy.”*

“Are you mad?” she insulted, “If it were food would you say it is big? Just go and bring water soon or I will cut your long neck.”

What could I do now? I had to endure the heaviness of the jerry can or else I would be punished either through beating or insulting. If ever I was told or given a choice to choose between Monica’s insulting and beating, I would choose the beating. Monica was the type of person who would use any insult that would deeply hurt people’s feelings.

When I arrived back home, I found that she had gone to a nearby shop to buy milk for her kids. The jerry can was on my head and it was painfully hurting my head as there was nobody to help me put it down. I called on her kids, but they were instead laughing at me. My little siblings: Goy and Nyachangkuoth were too young to help me put down the jerry can. Nyachangkuoth came and tried to help me but to no avail. I tried to bring it down but to no avail.

Soon my neck and head became exhausted because of the jerry can full of water. It was too heavy for me. I tried to make it remain on my head until Monica arrived but it fell and broke. The water poured down. When her children saw that the jerry can had broken, they ran to her at the shop to report. Monica came hastily.

“Ya awalik, Nale-yomek, Nale-abuk, Nale-omak,” she insulted me in Arabic before she could reach my body. I soon was in her heavy hands being punched. My two siblings cried when they saw me being beaten badly by Monica, like an African thief caught in a busy market.

“You have broken my children’s jerry can,” she said with tiredness from the punching and beating me, *“You must follow your mother and father today, a stupid orphan.”*

I knew from the way she breathed that she had become more tired from the beating she gave me. Her beating seemed not to be harmful or painful to me.

Monica had now got up from my body and requested for some drinking water from her kids breathlessly. With that, I knew there was no easy fight in this world. No matter how little or old the person you fight or beat, there will always be sweat and tiredness just like Monica had now faced. When she left me, I tried to get up but to no avail as my body was heavy. I tried to walk about but I fell down like Goy when he was learning to walk. I finally managed to reach the side where my siblings were. While I was doing all this, Monica's kids both grownups and the young ones were ceaselessly laughing at me.

When evening approached, Monica refused to give me food, so I slept on an empty stomach. I had many dreams about different foods at night. I woke up several times to drink some water. When morning finally came, I was very exhausted from both the bitter beating of the previous day and the hunger. I thought I would die so I prayed to God: *"Kuoth-Nhial, please let me not die now before my sister can come to take care of my two little siblings."*

God answered my prayer. I recovered after three days. I didn't want to die because my little siblings would suffer or die in Monica's home. I feared they would not even know our family's lineage in case Nyagoa didn't return. I didn't want them to let our lineage go away from their minds. The other morning, I was again told to carry the same size jerry can like the one that broke. But this time I was very lucky, I found her waiting for me and she helped me put it down.

"Oh, you are a strong orphan," she said trying to praise me. *"You would win the orphanage world cup on carrying big jerry cans if it were to be done,"*

I said nothing because her words were very complicating and mocking. I really hated her to death the same way she did to us, but I could not show it to her.

“You are a thankless creature, Mi-diiit,” she said while holding me by the neck, *“why don’t you thank me when I have just praised you to have taken a world cup for orphans?”*

“Thank you,” I compromised for the sake of my two little siblings’ survival. I had to hide my hatred for her for our safety. Sometimes they would gossip about us in Arabic and look at us with laughter. It’s when I learnt more Arabic that I realised that the Arabic they had been using for gossiping was fake and didn’t even match that of the local Politarian Arabic, let alone the classical Arabic. It was just a mixture of Naath and broken local Arabic.

Awalik, Nale-yomek, Nale-abuk, Nale-omak had now become my names to her kids. Whenever these kids failed to upset me they would become upset because their happiness depended on my sadness and my happiness was their sadness. When they wanted to get my attention, they would call me with one of these insults.

“Ya awalik,” her elder son called me one day, *“you are told to take and eat our leftovers by my mother.”*Awalik is an Arabic word for idiot.

“Hi you little boy,” I called him angrily, *“who is awalik? My name is Mi-diiit if you do not know.”*

The boy now ran to his mother to report what I had said. *“Mama, look at that orphan,”* he said breathlessly as if I had said something weird. *“He said I should not have called him awalik.”*

“Really, Mi-diiit is it true? Don’t you want to eat?” she asked me. I kept quiet but we had now spent the day without food. Goy cried a lot when it was afternoon, but he was very lucky because I had with me a coin that I had found on the street the previous day when I went to fetch some water. I went and bought him some bread from the shop and he was happy again.



Chapter 23

Monica always gave us leftovers after her children had eaten. We always waited for her kids to get satisfied first so that we would eat their leftovers. The painful part was that the kids would spend a lot more time eating yet they knew we were only depending on their leftovers. We sometimes waited for half an hour for them to finish eating. If Monica's children felt sympathetic for us on some days, they would finish in time. But there was her ten-year-old child who was always rude and wicked. He hated us to death. Whenever we requested salt or complained of sour food that needed some additional salt, this rude child would come and flush out his nasal mucus or discharge such that it could get into our food as if to give it a salty taste! Eating or leaving the food mixed with mucus would depend on the depth of our hunger.

“Nyachangkuoth,” the rude boy called rudely, “you are my wife. You can dance now!”

“You, stupid boy,” Nyachangkuoth insulted him back, “respect yourself or I will cut your neck.”

“Who? Me?” he said while marching towards Nyachangkuoth for a fight. *“Look at this slave girl! Are you not even dancing for me to call you my wife? Will you ever get a rich boy like me in your life? You are just a poor slave who always eats our food and drinks our water for free. You are not even worthy to be my wife. You are at the level of my foot, not even my two feet, female donkey. Why would I marry an orphan if it was not insanity for me to joke that way?”*

“You little boy,” I intervened, *“Why don’t you respect young children? Why would you call her your wife when she is younger than you?”*

“You, poor big donkey,” he insulted me. *“Then be my wife if you do not want her to be my wife. You are all...”*

I told Nyachangkuoth who was crying to cease crying and forget about what she had heard from the rude boy. Monica now interfered and insulted us more. We did not reply to anything because all she said was not new to us. These became a song in our ears every day. Monica always beat little Goy whenever he complained of hunger in the afternoon. There was always some milk for her children who were bigger than Goy. Goy would always painfully look at them whenever they were drinking their milk. There was a day when Goy tried to beg one of her children. *“Give me some milk please,”* Goy requested desperately. *“What? Did you say my brother should give you?”* asked Monica’s ten-year-old child. *“Don’t you know that you are just a poor orphan whose father was killed in the war and mother was eaten by animals? Did we tell the animals and the soldiers to destroy your family? You should go and beg outside to satisfy your wants and needs.”*

Goy didn’t feel insulted because he was too young to understand them. But Nyachangkuoth burst into a ceaseless cry when she was reminded of our parents’ deaths by Monica’s child. We didn’t know that our story was known to all including the children until Monica’s ten-year-old child insulted my little brother Goy.

“Little boy, why all this now,” I rebuked slowly, “Just say you don’t want to give him than all those harsh words to a little child. Besides, he wasn’t begging you but your little brother.”

With that simple advice, he slapped me as if he would manage to fight me. *“You, this big donkey,”* the boy insulted imitating his mother’s way of humiliating us, *“Do you think we are animals who finished and tore your family apart?”*

It was the first time to get slapped by a child younger than me. I slapped him back but not as hard as he had done to me because he was younger than me and I feared his tough mother. Monica wasn’t at home when that incident happened. She had gone to Oular where they always brewed wine. The boy ceased crying after a few minutes. But after he had seen his mother come home from far, he started to cry as if I had freshly slapped him. The child cried loudly as if a knife had cut his hand. When I saw Monica coming, I wished I could withdraw the slap on her son’s cheek. Unfortunately, the slap couldn’t be withdrawn. I knew Monica slapped anything including bread.

“Why? Why? Who killed you, son?” Monica asked angrily as if the child was going to die.

“It is Mi-diiit,” the child said at once and returned to a ceaseless cry, *“Mi-diiit has killed me.”*

“What? This poor orphan has nearly killed you?” she reacted and came towards me. She gave me a hard kick with her heavy thick right leg that made me lose my upper tooth. Blood flowed down like water from my mouth, but it was as if nothing had happened. Monica didn’t care about me losing a tooth at all.

“Stupid animal without a tail,” she insulted, *“You wanted to kill my son while I always give you free food in this world. That energy has made you kill my children!”*

Any time I tried to explain the case she would keep on kicking and kicking me. I now stopped talking because it was like adding oil to an already flaming fire.

“Don’t you know my kids are your masters?” she continued. *“If I hear any case again I will slaughter you all and throw your poor bodies in the dustbin or feed the dogs with them and nobody will ask me.”*

“You,” she continued after a long pause, *“must not think yourselves equal to my beloved children in anything.”*

I kept quiet. This time we suffered more than before from the hands of Monica’s kids. They would hit and slap us several times, any time they wanted, and we would endure the unscrupulous treatment since we had nowhere to go and our elder sister was still in jail. With my missing tooth, I became a laughingstock to Monica’s kids. They would tease me from morning to evening by calling me toothless guy. I would keep silent for my safety. Her kids changed my name from ‘Mi-diiit’ to ‘Ley-Kel’ (One tooth-guy). Some would insult me as the others would laugh off the insult.

They would make nasty faces at little Goy whenever they wanted to. They would spit at him when their nasty faces seemed not to worry little Goy. They were free to give any kind of punishment to my little brother since their mother, who was supposed to teach them good manners, didn’t care at all. She would instead praise them for being confrontational as this would make them strong people in future. Because Goy had gotten used to their bad treatment, he became a pale, patient and silent child. He accepted all kinds of punishments from Monica’s children or Monica herself without crying. If ever he was pinched, he would just pop out his eyes as if he was hurt unintentionally. He would sometimes smile and flatter by praising the slap given to him just to please them. Whenever one of us had flu or

running nose, Monica would isolate us until the disease cured for fear of infecting her children. But whenever it was one of her children suffering from the flu, she wouldn't isolate the child.

I grew to hate the life completely in Monica's Rakoba. She uprooted my tooth and now her children were teasing me as if it was not the fault of their mother. We had really become slaves to the children of Monica. She had given them a green light by calling us her children's slaves. The children were only implementing the powers their mother accorded them.



Chapter 24

My sister spent five months in jail. She was allowed to come home because the police unit had learnt that no old person was responsible or cared for her. When she returned, Goy had almost forgotten her as she had grown taller and thinner.

“Why, Nyagoa, didn’t you come with my mother?” Goy asked my sister while crying. *“Mi, Mi, Mi-diit doesn’t want to take me to my mother and he doesn’t want to bring her.”* With Goy’s speech, the three of us cried bitterly. Monica rebuked us hard after seeing what was happening. *“Go and cry in the cemetery,”* she said harshly. *“Do not disturb my peaceful home with your cry. Who did not lose a mother? Was your dead mother made up of gold?”*

Monica this time didn’t even greet my sister let alone shake her hand. My sister was embarrassed.

My sisters and I always had dreams of eating enough and delicious food almost every night. Anytime we finished eating our little leftover dinner, I would spend the rest of the night dreaming about eating and

drinking good food and thirst-quencher. I thought that it was only I dreaming about that until one day my sisters told me their dreams.

“Nyagoa, I had a good dream where we were eating a lot of Kisra with omrogeiga and okra soups. But what was peculiar is that my dream didn’t come true,” said Nyachangkuoth.

“Yes, me too,” my elder sister Nyagoa also disclosed, *“But mine was a roasted chicken.”*

“I also had a dream where we had enough food that satisfied us all,” I said.

“I dreamt that Nyagoa had cooked Kisra with omrogeiga and okra soups,” Nyachangkuoth stated, *“she then put the delicious food in front of us including Monica’s kids. I was very glad to share the food for the first time with Monica’s children since the death of Mary. I was enjoying eating until Nyagoa interrupted me by waking me up. I wish she hadn’t woken me up because I was going to eat the meat that I had hidden between Kisra and the plate.”*

“Even if I didn’t wake you up,” said Nyagoa. *“You would still wake up hungry, sister.”*

“I do not know why we are the only children dreaming of food when Monica’s children never dreamt about food,” said Nyachangkuoth sadly.

“One doesn’t dream of what he or she gets at daytime,” said Nyagoa. *“We dream of food because we do not get enough of it. Monica’s children are always satisfied.”*

“Dreams allow us to imagine and eat the foods and sweets that we have no chance of getting in real life. Our only difference from Monica’s children is that we own the food in dreams and they own the food in real life. But still, the excitement is the same in both dream and real life,” said Nyachangkuoth.

“Yes, but all this suffering shall come to an end in Kuoth-Nhial’s name very soon, my sisters.” I comforted them while tears were rolling down from my eyes.

Soon, Monica’s daughter stepped in and we stopped sharing our dreams. It was time for a meal. Monica put a plate before her children who sat in a circle. We had to wait as usual for them to finish such that we could eat their leftovers.

As Monica’s children were eating, my elder sister Nyagoa sneezed and coughed dryly. *“Oops! Kuoth-Nhial,”* Monica screamed, *“She will poison my children with her poisonous cough and sneezing. God, let her transmissible disease deal with her alone!”*

As soon as she said this, her ten-year-old son vomited as if he had been poisoned for real. With that, we were badly punished. We were forced out of the Rakoba in an autumn season where thunderstorms, darkness and cold nights frightened us. We had no choice but to go outside. After staying in the cold and dark night with thunderstorms for some hours, poor little Goy couldn’t manage to tolerate it as we were enduring. He cried bitterly wanting to be allowed back into the Rakoba.

“Aunt Monica,” I called, *“please my little siblings are suffering in the cold weather. Can you please let them in? Nyagoa and I shall remain outside.”*

“You, that little thing,” she thundered with a threatening voice, *“Don’t disturb my peaceful night by calling me again. Let them die. The cemetery isn’t full yet. We shall pay people to bury them tomorrow don’t worry.”*

Monica’s baby died during birth shortly after we had arrived in Politaria. She would always get rid of her milk to feel at ease. One day she was really clogging with her milk; she milked herself and forced my little brother to drink it simply because he had asked for milk

when her children were drinking their milk. I tried to stop her from doing so but Goy was eager to drink it, after all, it was milk to him. Goy who stopped breastfeeding a couple of years ago was given milk, milk which was human milk, not even his mother's milk, just because he needed food dearly! What an unfair world? I wondered. Why did God create the universe and leave it to rule over itself unfairly? This unfair world where some people are born poor and are in war lands, lose their cheap homes when some people are born rich, live rich and die peacefully rich. The unfair world where the wicked do evil things and live longer than those who do well!

One windy morning when Monica left for Politaria's main market, my elder sister called me for a meeting. *"Brother Mi-diiit,"* she said, *"There was a Naath woman who was jailed with me for five months. That woman said all her children had died and she had a Rakoba in Gorja. She told me that we could stay there when I was released after I had told her about our life situation with Monica. Let's pray that it is not burned because it has been vacant for six months since her imprisonment."*

"That is a good decision, sister," I added, *"We better be independent in our own place than continue suffering at the hand of Monica who has no sympathy like the death which took our parents."*

My elder sister and I decided to go to Gorja for the first time one fine Friday morning. We went to a nearby shoeshine boy for directions and how long it would take to reach Gorja.

"Sir, how long does it take to reach Gorja?" I asked the shoeshine boy, and just then he received a phone call. *"Just a minute,"* he replied, and turned his attention to the phone.

"What a near place, Mi-diiit!" said my sister, *"A minute is too near for sure!"*

“Yes, it is near if it takes only a minute,” I added. “It will only take us ten minutes or less to clean the Rakoba and return back home to our siblings. One minute for us to go there, and one minute for us to come back. Then, add eight minutes of searching and cleaning the Rakoba.”

My sister and I now left for Gorja in the North-Eastern side of Kalla. To our astonishment, the journey didn't only take us a minute as said by the man on the phone. It instead took us two and a half hours to reach Gorja. We thought the man had deceived us until we had learnt little Arabic that we finally discovered that the man had wanted us to wait for him in a minute in order to direct us.

We searched the Rakoba in Gorja as per the description that the woman in jail had said. We searched and searched but couldn't find it. I told my sister to go and find the right description from her the other day in jail. This time we were given a phone number of a shopkeeper who directed us until we found the very dirty Rakoba in Gorja. It was very dirty with human and animal waste. But it was still better than suffering from Monica who was as heartless as death.

My sister and I cleaned the Rakoba and went back at night. We found Nyachangkuoth and Goy sleep in the backyard of Monica's Rakoba. She didn't tell them to get in when they were playing before sleep stole them. We took our two siblings inside the Rakoba. Unfortunately, they didn't eat any meal as Monica had not given them food because I and my elder sister had left without helping her work with the house chores. We did not get permission from her.

The next day, we left Monica's Rakoba towards our new destiny. The shopkeeper gave us free milk and bread on the first day. Goy and Nyachangkuoth finally played after they were satisfied.

I appreciated having learnt so much about life and myself in general, in the care of Monica. I was much more indebted to my life than

ever before because I have met many people in my short life; those who love or hate orphans. With the experience I got from both the good and bad people, I now know how to be kind to orphans when I grow up. The good thing I have learnt is being contented with the very basic things around me and discovered what it means to be a child. I have now without doubt known how a good father or mother can behave not only to his/her biological sons and daughters but to the orphans and other children who may need help as the late Mary accorded us.

We missed the late Mary's big hugs and kisses she gave us when she was alive. Her beautiful smile and loving words still linger in my mind. It was only when she was alive that we used to eat Kisra. With Monica, it was only in a dream. We were very sad to miss her, but God was the one in control. I remember, on her death bed, she whispered something in Monica's ear and she nodded. I believe she was telling her to take care of us, but Monica did the opposite. I wished all mothers in the whole world were like the late Mary.



Chapter 25

Life was a little bit all right for the first two weeks in our small and dirty Rakoba in Gorja as no one beat or humiliated us this time around. I knew without a doubt that home isn't a place but a feeling of freedom and contentment. When we could not find food, we would still be happy of being independent. We had all become like skeletons, but the Naath elders said, 'No matter how thin a person has become, the buttocks don't miss their places later.' I knew with time our small family would be fine. Water and good behaviour aren't a problem in Politaria.

I am quite sure there are other people in the world that may be as hospitable as the Politarians, but they have extraordinary hospitality though I have never been to those countries.

It may only be in Politaria where one calls a stranger to eat with him. It is only in Politaria where drinking water is for free along the streets for all to enjoy. It is only in Politaria where one greets a stranger. Hospitality is shown in many ways in Politaria. My late grandfather

had told me many stories of life in different lands in Africa which may be hospitable but the people of Politaria are the best despite the few who do social and religious discrimination. What angers me the most in this part of the world is that respect is given depending on what and who you are and the place of origin. Above everyone in Politaria is a white foreigner, mostly the Westerners, then followed by the white foreign Arabs of Asia, next to the white Arabs of Northern Africa, followed by the lighter-skinned complexion Politarians, and then the Eastern and Northern Politarians. Finally, the black Politarians who are too religious are towards the end. My people fall outside the respect zone just because of their religion and colour. Thank God they are better than the street dogs and cats of Politaria that are in a worse situation.

We always managed to struggle for the little portion of food for our survival almost every day until a certain neighbour, whose home's backyard was where we built our Rakoba, promised to bring us more food one cold morning.

"Wait I will bring you something to eat," he said supported by deaf signs since Arabic was our problem.

"Shukran," I thanked him in Arabic, *"Allah will bless you."*

The man smiled and left towards his compound. We were very happy to the extent that we forgot our struggle putting all our hopes in him. We waited happily for the fall of the evening such that our food could be brought by the Good Samaritan. When the evening fell no one came to us.

We waited patiently thinking that he might have been preparing a lot of food for us. Unfortunately, our rich neighbour had locked his door and forgotten us. We could not know whether it was intentional or unintentional. We had to sleep on hungry stomachs. When morning came, I went and knocked at his door.

“*Saba el-kheir,*” I greeted when he had opened the door.

“*Oh, poor little boy,*” he sighed, “*Saba el-nour. I am very sorry. I really forgot about you. But come back during breakfast to carry your food.*”

The man shut his door and disappeared. I went back sadly to my siblings.

“*He has forgotten us,*” I told Nyagoa who was waiting anxiously, “*but he said we should go to him again during breakfast so that we get our food.*”

“*Going to him again? He did not keep his promise,*” said Nyagoa. “*We were content with the little we got before he promised us and giving us false hope.*”

“*Yes, very bad,*” I said, “*it is not good for someone to make an empty promise because it might bring down someone’s hope.*”

“*True, but it is a good lesson, my little brother. We must now ignore his second promise and go to look for our own food,*” Nyagoa said miserably.

We refused to give up in order not to be at the level of the poorest class that always went outside in order to steal, beg or eat the leftovers at restaurants and shops. I know as well as everyone else knows that hunger has the power of shrinking one’s good looks; grownups, as well as the children, have the same behaviours and attitudes when it comes to food. People lose hope and dignity forgetting their industriousness and hardworking only to attach and depend on other people’s efforts and comfort. Leaning on others to me was a wide-ranging death. My late mother had once advised me to work hard and never expect or take things from strangers.

“*...It is true that I will be gone but please do not let the world know that you are poor. And you must never in your life ask strangers to give you things. Do not choose to beg or steal, work hard and never believe in luck until you achieve your goal, but above all keep your dignity, integrity and the name of your forefathers alive,*” she had said when she was dying.

With that I jumped to my feet towards the market with the hope of getting a job; whatever job that could pay except that of theft and robbery as the poor and hopeless people normally do. Almost in every street of Gorja, and almost every single day, there falls a South Sudanese native, young or old; hungry, intoxicated, sick or dead. Here you find young children, with torn clothes, walking barefooted, carrying sacks of bottles or scrap materials so that they can sell to scrap dealers in order to get a day or night's meal. Wherever my dear people go they top the poorest class. If I were the President of South Sudan, I would form a committee to collect all the vulnerable, mad, sick, castaway children and elderly in the streets of Politaria and transport them back home for further treatment and compensation. This can only be done when one or two Hummer vehicles are sold so that the money could be used in transporting these vulnerable people if there is no money at all in the Central Bank.

On my way to the main market, I saw many of the poorest class. I saw mothers with ragged and torn clothes nursing their little ones at the dark corners of Gorja. Surprisingly most of these poor people were very religious. Believing in the God of the rich and powerful people is like separating waters of different seasons in the river. But these rich and powerful people who are loved by God don't pray to Him either. What a heartless and hostile world it is! What a heartless world, it is ironic that those who are rude and those that don't even love God are abundantly blessed as compared to those that are not rude and love God!

I really became sadder than I was. *"Life was indeed unfair for those who don't work hard."* I thought aloud, *"It is always good for one to sacrifice before death whispers, since the Almighty God of all nations sides with the rich people."*

Finding a job in Politaria is challenging, difficult and seemingly impossible as the main job for most black people is casual work which is too hard for a young boy like me. Despite all the odds, my sister and I didn't surrender. Most of the streets and pathways of Gorja and surrounding areas are full of women who sell tea in the doorways of local shops, behind buildings and underneath trees. Most of these workers are black people mostly from the western and southern Politaria. But the public order agencies, in coordination with the social welfare department in the Ministry of Social Planning, sometimes make campaigns known as Kasha in Arabic. That Kasha involves gathering tea sellers in groups once a month and taking them to prison. I knew it was the result of the negative reputation that tea sellers are being associated with commercial sex workers. But despite all the odds we knew our little siblings would die if we got frightened by the hardship and harsh treatment by the Politaria local police on tea sellers.

"Which is the right job to do here?" I asked Nyagoa one evening. *"I tried many ways but in vain."*

"For me, I think I can sell tea," she replied.

"Do you think tea will bring income?" I asked her.

"Yes I think so since there is no other alternative, brother," she said.

I accepted my sister's decision to sell tea near our Rakoba. We both went to the main market and bought a small kettle and a stove. We managed to get a few chairs in a certain Friday's Black Market Day of Gorja at an affordable price. My sister started her business for the first time and it went well at the end of the day. Over ten people mostly the youth came and took tea. My sister managed to sell over ten cups of tea on the first day. The second day, the same youth each brought with him some more youth that I later learnt to be street

boys after behaving negatively towards my sister. I came to learn that these street boys needed only my sister but not the tea, and that was the reason most of them always came with their big wallets with an amount of money for my sister to see.

Almost all of them needed Nyagoa and all were battling for her attention. When my sister refused their entire love requests, they stopped coming to buy our tea. And our market had now reduced because she had chased away the customers to maintain her dignity. This was the best choice. Nyagoa complained to me of the bad behaviour these youths portrayed after they had known her name though she did not tell me in detail. I knew she was protecting her feminine ego and dignity; after all, I was masculine not a gossip. I only realised that she had refused them when we spent three days with two old customers to buy the tea.

“They have no respect for tea sellers, brother,” she told me one night sadly while collecting teacups, *“They think everyone who sells tea is a whore or heartless.”*

“Then we must stop it immediately and find another job, sister,” I told her. *“Being poor or broke doesn’t mean one has no dignity, integrity and feeling. Your dignity is better than more money. Do they think we will die because they have stopped buying our tea? Let the stupid youth go away with their money.”*

We immediately stopped selling tea and looked for a different job to save my sister from such heartless youth who always loved tea makers and young girls at churches including their mothers’ age mates. I knew at first that these boys were street gangs from the derogatory sexual terms and their exhibiting aggressive demeanour towards my sister. They looked at my sister as a sexual object. When my sister stopped selling tea, I began to look for a job. It was not easy to find a job. I tried and tried in the neighbourhood but in vain.

Finally, I found a certain woman near the market who told me to work with her in exchange for just food. I told her to instead give me money such that I could buy my own food, but she insisted that she would only provide me with a meal. I told her we also had other needs not only food, but she refused. In fact, we needed basic things to survive. We needed soap for bathing and washing our clothes, sugar for morning tea and so on and forth but she didn't accept it. I knew the woman wanted me to work as a slave. I had to accept for only some days as I was looking for another job elsewhere. We agreed on the takeaway meal so that I could share it with my siblings at home. It was not even good food. Fateh Fuul!

That woman was one of the worst women in the whole world. She did not respect other people's feelings. Why would she make a human work for a meal as the salary in the 21st century? Slaves were by far better off than me because they were provided with food and housing but here I was only given food without housing and yet I still worked for her. She was indeed exploiting and degrading me to nothing. I was in fact even inferior to her cats. Her cats were better-off than me because they got free food by only chasing rats which were also their food. Nonetheless, here I was doing all kinds of work in the house: washing the family's clothes, spring-cleaning the rooms and so forth.

I wished she knew that God created all human beings free, and with the potential of being higher than angels in status. If God really looks down on His children on Earth, I believe there are some like her who will not make it to heaven.

I had to accept working with her because I knew there was no other way as my siblings were starving. I actually didn't want to beg as my late mother had told me before she died. I didn't also want to live on other people's efforts. I had now become the breadwinner and I had to be serious. I would wake up in the early morning to go to work at the house of that woman in exchange for food.

I knew the Almighty God loves the hands that work than sit idle. I promised myself that if my sister found a better job that paid her money, I would quit that wickedest woman's job who wanted to take advantage of our suffering to use it for her ambitions. The worst was when her son hit me with a spoon and didn't apologise. When I asked him why he had hit me, he told me that her mother told her that dark-skinned people were not humans and they didn't feel any pain like other humans felt. I told him that it was not true, but the child got mad and cried, "*you, stupid cleaner,*" he said, "*do you think my mother tells untrue things?*" I was now in trouble because my reply was twisted like I had called his mother a liar. There was a certain day that my left ear was almost removed by the child. Filled with anger, I pushed the little boy. His mother stepped in shivering in rage. "*You, this little slave,*" she said, shaking, "*why don't you want my sons to play with your rabbit-like ears and wide nose? Don't you know that touching your ears makes them happy? Relax and I will pay you well. Don't you know that their dolls have not yet been bought by their dear father from Saudi Arabia?*"

"But I come here to work not to be used for playing. Besides, I am not a plaything," I replied, avoiding her wild eyes.

"Why not? You are just a poor little thing. My children can use you to play when they are bored, kick you when they are angry, entertain themselves with you because enduring that is part of the job I am offering you. Don't fool yourself that you are something valuable. You are futureless. I am not among those who tell lies after lies saying that people are equal. No, people are different. Accept this bitter truth than the sweet lies of the world on equality."

"You are wrong," I said in my heart. "*Just because I am born in poverty doesn't mean I will be poor forever. I have a future. It is just a matter of when."*

It was only after two days when I stopped working in exchange for a meal that my sister was offered a job of cleaning in a next-door home that belonged to a rich driver. Previously she turned down the job of waking up schoolchildren and bathing them. These pupils had several times ignored the alarm clock. I wish they had known my land. In my home country South Sudan, you don't need to set up an alarm because the unknown gunmen wake you up with gunshots either in your home or in the neighbourhood. But even though I am in the free country, my stress, which was caused by both these unknown and known gunmen back home, has replaced them. They wake me up. Setting an alarm is when you are free of stress. If you have stress you don't need an alarm because you are already awake by the time you are supposed to wake up.

Nyagoa was assigned to washing their clothes and cleaning their houses with some little money weekly. That also helped us a lot. Our big problem was the Arabic language as most of our neighbours are Arabic speakers. Arabic is the national language in Politaria. We didn't even know where most of the Naath people were because we had no person to ask.

Every day I would go to Gorja market hoping to find someone who could speak Naath but to no avail. There was this day when I thought I was very lucky. I found a person with six forehead-marks and some traditional dotted tattoos that I believed to be a Naath man. When I approached him using the Naath language by the simplest word 'Maale', he rebuked me by calling me bad names in Arabic. He might have either felt ashamed of the Naath language or thought I was too dirty to talk to him, as he was very clean. Or he might have thought I was going to beg him. That man made me hate my people. I only wanted him to direct me to the place where most of the Naath lived; perhaps we could find someone who might know our family. I now went back home and found my sister crying in our Rakoba.

“What is the matter, Nyagoa?” I asked astonishingly.

“It is okay, brother,” cleaning her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Please tell me who beat you again? Did Monica come?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Mi-diit,” called Goy, pointing at the blood pouring down between our sister’s legs. *“Look at the blood in her legs. Big people came and fought her today. They grabbed her hands and covered her mouth. And they told her they would kill her if she resisted or cried. Each of them put his third small and thin leg several times forcefully between our sister’s legs. That is why she has blood.”*

“Why is this blood, Nyagoa?” I asked furiously. *“Tell me please because Goy said big people fought you.”*

“It is okay, my little brothers,” she said, hiding the pain. She tried several times to walk painfully to the nearby old shack that we called the bathroom but in vain. She finally managed to stand up with shaky legs and hands with blood flowing down from her legs. She was unable to clear her sadness away. She walked to the bathroom and washed her legs and face. Tears never stopped even after she washed them. It was until I made a serious investigation that I knew a group of men around our Rakoba gang-raped my sister. They had been monitoring us until they made sure that we had no old person living with us. The bad part was that they had raped my sister in the presence of my little brother Goy. My dear sister who wasn’t raped in our land by the enemy where many women and children were raped on a daily basis was now raped in Politaria which I thought was safe!

My sister became sick after that incident that she didn’t want to disclose. And she was the only breadwinner in our little family. We spent two days with a loaf of bread because my sister lay down on

her mat sick from an unknown sickness that she refused to disclose. When the situation became worse I went to the market to collect some leftovers in the name of feeding my cats and dogs at home. I once asked a waiter to allow me to collect the remains of beans, bread and lentils but he said cats and dogs only liked fish and chicken more than other foods. I told him my cats and dogs ate anything. The man agreed at last. I took it home and lied to my siblings that I had bought the food. I didn't want them to know that the food was scraps because my mother had warned us of theft, laziness and begging before she died. Luckily, Ramadan came shortly and I would go, in the evening, to collect leftovers in the name of feeding the same dogs and cats.

My sister Nyagoa's life had now changed a lot. She would always bleed a lot. She tried several times to hide the pain but to no avail. She was bruised all over and had difficulty in walking, like she had broken or dislocated bones. She had had difficulty in trusting any person including us. She always saw us as untrustworthy. We were all saddened by Nyagoa's changed behaviour including having anger outbursts over the simplest things. I knew we would all die of hunger lonely in our Rakoba if I didn't find a job. I thought a lot and tried to find a job in the same home where she used to work. Unfortunately, they said boys were not allowed to wash clothes and clean rooms.

I again went to Gorja market. I found brown-skinned boys that I later learnt to be Fallatas who could speak Arabic fluently. Any brown person, to us in our land, was an Arab. These boys looked exactly like the Toroboro and, this too, reminded me of how they were killing our people back home in South Sudan.

"Hi ya Jinubi," (Hi, you South Sudanese, how are you?) one of them called me. *"Salam-alek,"*

"Ya Abshorom (Mr Toothless)," said another one.

“*Ya Fara Belet,*” (villager) said the third speaker.

They knew I was South Sudanese because I am dark. I kept quiet because I didn’t know how to respond to them though I knew the first speaker was greeting me when he said ‘Salam-alek’. But I didn’t comprehend the words said by the second speaker. I came to understand the word to mean toothless after I had learnt some more Arabic. The boy who insulted me would have either lost a tooth or an eye had I known his insult at first. My tooth was uprooted by Monica at Kalla. She actually made me a laughing stock of the boys of my age. Why would a fully grownup woman hit and uproot a young child’s tooth? I thought deeply.

For the third speaker who had insulted me as a villager, I would not have fought him that much even if I had known his insult at first because it was a fact. However, he should not have used it to insult me. If all their insults were *Awalik*, *Nale-yomek*, *Nale-abuk*, *Nale-omak*, I would have been so dangerous to them. Monica had indeed taught me those insults though I didn’t know their meanings. All I knew was that they were bad insults.

“*Kallam ya zoolinta,*” ‘Talk with me, you!’ said the first speaker in an angry and threatening voice.

I still kept quiet. He kept on talking in Arabic as fast as my grandfather’s radio, but I could not hear anything. My silence made him think that I was cowardly and afraid of him. But the boy was wrong. I had wished he had known that I had been our village’s hero back home. To my surprise, the boy gave me a hard slap on my face and I fell. Had he slapped me in a war zone I would have ignored it because in war zones a slap is laughed off. Insults, including the worst insults hated by our village mates, are like greetings in war zones. I suddenly stood and matched forward in self-defence. I gave him one punch that made

him faint. The boy was a little bit older than me, but I knew I was representing the black people in the whole world. I didn't want to let them down in a fight.

His other colleague also ran towards me reinforcing him, but my leg made him fall like an old dying cow. Fighting was what I have known since I was seven in Pading, and I had once owned a bravery title which was very rare in my age group. We used Bor-Nuara with other boys of my age. It would have been a betrayal to my boyhood and the title of bravery that I had been given in our village back home for the youth of the same age to beat me. The embarrassment would be being beaten by Jallap. Being poor or rich doesn't change someone's nature.

An old man with a white Politarian garment came and stopped us from continuing the fight. One of the boys who saw me beat the two of the boys came and approached me but still I would not talk because Arabic was my problem. The boy used sign language to talk to me. After we had understood each other using sign language, he gave me some coins and told me to come to the market later.

I was very happy to take the coins home to my two starving sisters and brother. They were happy and Goy played after eating some bread. I had again known that everything happens for a reason in this world. If the first boy hadn't slapped me, I would not have been given the coins. I always kept in mind my mother's advice that one should not beg, steal or drop his dignity even if it means death. I didn't want to be a thief or a beggar simply to feed Goy and Nyachangkuoth. I knew the same God who brought us along the way from Pading would answer our wish.

The next day, I went to my friend of the previous day and he offered me a place to sit at his place of work. He promised to teach me how to

work. *“If I just tell you or show you how people work here, you won’t know it soon,”* he told me, *“but I will involve you so that you will understand it quickly and to the fullest.”*

He also told me that the two boys whom I had beaten the previous day were his worst enemies at the place of work. They always disturbed him and took his money by force. I now knew the boy wanted me to be his protector and I was ready to do so as long as that would let my siblings get food. I knew a man could not reap good results without incurring danger. I was now feared by all the boys because of the fight I had put up.

A boy from their group later gave me an alias of black Jackie Chan because I had pushed down the boy who was reinforcing the first one like an old dying cow. Another big boy gave me an alias of John Garang and that name reminded me of my late grandfather. My two nicknames were acceptable. Some called me Jackie Chan and others John Garang.

If you went to our place of work and asked for Mi-diit Mi-go, no one would bring you to me. But if you asked for John Garang or Jackie Chan, dozens of boys who feared me would bring you to me pretty fast. My new Fallata friend allowed me to work for him until I made a shoeshine box of my own. I was very happy because of my bravery; all the black people were respected in that small place of work.

They always said, “Jinubiin sabiin” (South Sudanese are tough) in terms of war when one crossed them. In that respect, I didn’t say anything about the South Sudan war because I didn’t want them to know that South Sudanese were killing themselves and living contrary to each other. I always told them that South Sudan was a peaceful country and I was in Politaria for a short time and would return to the great land soon. None of them knew I was suffering. Most of the

boys would just stare at me but when I would glance at them, they would quickly pretend to be looking at something else. That scenario made me very happy indeed. I was now the hero in that small part of Goria. I actually without a doubt knew that one's co-workers are the reason for him to love or hate his job. Because of my co-workers at Goria I, without doubt, enjoyed the job though it paid very little. Some of the coward ones including the two boys I had beaten before would give me free money if I didn't have more customers so that I would not beat them. I sometimes bounced proudly like I wanted to fly; just like the man I had seen in Payang-gay. Being feared is sometimes better than being respected.



Chapter 26

Our main problem was now not the Arabs that my grandfather had told me were their main enemy. But the people, who hate us, discriminate against us and do all kinds of hate crimes, are the black Politarians who are like us. My sister complained about how the black Politarian people in the police department humiliated her when she was in jail. According to her, some went as far as asking to sleep with her in exchange for her release, but she turned their demands down. This systematic racism which considers superiority over another person in everything, even among the black race is a corrosive and widespread problem in Politaria and beyond. Something needs to be done in confronting it in our lands, neighbourhoods, and in ourselves.

After three weeks and a half, my sister recovered and was ready to go back to her usual place of work. I was very happy for she would help me increase our family income. Unfortunately, the Arab woman who had employed her travelled to Saudi Arabia and another woman with bleached skin took control of the house. When my sister reported back to her workplace, the new woman said she didn't know my

sister. She also said she didn't want a black girl for a maid. My sister, despite her little Arabic, told me how rudely the new woman in the workplace had talked to her. It was the second time for her to face racial harassment even by black people who were only just a little bit lighter in complexion. She also told me that a group of young school children bullied and followed her as she was coming back home one day.

"They followed me as they were laughing," she said sadly, "one of them said, 'look at this black girl, Zeinab! She is even darker than our maid. She must be a sack of charcoal in human form.'"

Nyagoa told me that she didn't respond to their insults but when she turned back to look at them they all ran away in fear of her killing them. They were wrong because my sister was not the confrontational type to fight them. She only wanted to make them fear so that they could cease their bullying. That kind of racial harassment reminded me of what my late grandfather had been telling me. I keep wondering why 'black' has been used to only connote evil when there are black people in the world? It should have been green or any other colour which doesn't represent a human race colour. A dark colour even to the African minds means bad, evil and all sorts of wickedness. Most often than not, one would even hear a black person say things like: 'You are a bad human with a black and dark heart, black market, his heart is darker than hers, and this is a good person with a white heart, and so forth.' All this made me believe that the extent of brainwashing the black man has been subjected to over a long period to accept that anything black is bad.

It will surprise you, reader, that even my elder sister Nyagoa herself was a racist against the black colour. She always wore black clothes to demonstrate that we were mourning or when we were hit by misfortune. She would only wear white clothes when she was in a

joyous mood to show how devoted and holy she was to the various deities the black people worshipped. I know the mindset of the black people in the world is colonised by the white majority. The fact that our Saviour Jesus Christ's picture is shown in white contributes a lot in making the black colour inferior. The white represents holiness. This preponderance of brainwashing is extensive and it will take a sustained conscious effort over a long period to overturn the tide and make the black people associate good with being black. As slavery ended, it is also time to end the languages and images that associate the dark and black with evil, and white with good.

It is very sad seeing the black colour as inferior to all, including among the black people. When black children were given pens to draw a Satan, they would with no doubt draw a black man who looks just like themselves. I believe self-love and peace of mind will be back no matter how long it takes, though most of the black people are busy killing and hating each other. They shall one day wake up from the million years of sleep.

When my sister had reported all this to me, I told her not to lose hope and I advised her to continue looking for more jobs from different homes. I also told her that people were not the same as many homes were ready to have a black girl as their maid.

"Your dignity matters a lot dear," I told her. *"Take good care of your body."* My advice made her burst into tears because she knew she had been raped and lost her virginity. I only noticed the weight of the statement when she wept. In the evening, she came and told me that she had found a job with an old woman in the marketplace.

"We must register Goy and Nyachangkuoth to an evening school," she told me one evening.

“Yes that is a good decision, sister,” I told her. “Our late grandfather wanted us to study in Leer before he died. So, we must now fulfil his wish by sending our two young ones to school. Perhaps they will help themselves when they grow up.”

My sister and I worked very hard this time around to make sure we had enough money to send the two kids to school. We saved our money for three months and we finally managed to get two hundred Politarian pounds worth \$20. We went and registered our two young ones at a school. We also left some little money to buy them two books and two pens. When we successfully registered our little siblings at a school, we had the challenge of not knowing which day of the week it was except the time. I could only tell time because I had a watch. Nyagoa knew the time by the shadow of our Rakoba. She didn't know how to tell time even if I gave her my watch.

We were very happy indeed with our siblings going to learn. My sister and I made a timetable for the kids' schooling. She would take them at around 2p.m. and I would bring them back at 7 p.m. when they finished their classes. Nyagoa had an upright stick that she used to put in the ground to cast an ever-changing shadow as the sun sailed across the sky. In the morning her stick's shadow would be long and completely reduce or even disappear in the afternoon. That was the sign that the time for school time had reached.

As far as keeping time was concerned, Nyagoa used to go and bring the kids home from school at any hour when I was at the place of work. I remember one Friday evening she took them to school thinking that it was a normal schooling day for the kids. She knew very well that Politaria was an Islamic state and people weren't allowed to study or work on Fridays, but she didn't know that the day was Friday.

We had now become very happy and proud of both Goy and Nyachangkuoth for reading the alphabet and phonics very well in just two months.

My elder sister was now fifteen years old. She was now a tall dark-skinned young African lady with a beautiful smile. One could tell from her physical appearance that she was one of the most beautiful girls alive. She could outsmart many girls in a beauty contest the way she had been impressive. But a bad situation doesn't favour beauty.

Today, most of the girls use make-up and bleach their skins but my sister didn't use a lotion or any cosmetics let alone skin bleaching-creams. Yet she was still the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life. We didn't know that humankind in Politaria would be our enemy as death was. Our life went very well with our two little ones reading their lessons every day. We continued our working though they paid us less. It was still better than nothing because the small thing that one has, is always better than the more things that one actually doesn't have. I sometimes managed to come home with twenty coins whenever work was good and my sister would come home with eighty coins every week.

All the shoeshine boys competed over customers, but I could beat them all. I sometimes walked around the market to get customers. Anytime I got some money I would give it to Nyagoa to save it for the 'black days ahead', if I may borrow the expression of the human beings which sounds racist and discriminative. I would give her the little money I got also for the school fees and transport of Goy and Nyachangkuoth. It was not a lot of money because the cost of living was quite high. One big problem in Politaria is that the money loses its value every day.

Good customer care brings customers to a place of work. Whenever I saw people, I greeted them cheerfully and invited them to sit and get their shoes shined. I normally gave them some slippers to wear while shining their shoes. They eventually became my daily customers. Rich or caring people want their shoes shined more often for the poor children to benefit but rude and unkind people shine their shoes once a week even when they have money. If I were rich, I would make sure that my shoe is shined twice a day for the poor children to benefit. If I could choose another job apart from shoe shining, I would be a bus conductor because it is easier to earn money than shoe shining based on the research I carried out.



Chapter 27

The only person among us who suffered the most because of the little Arabic language was my elder sister Nyagoa. We fought, quarrelled and made blasphemies with many people that misunderstood her words for other meanings in Arabic. It was one rainy day when she went out to buy us soap to bathe. Our favourite soap was Fa-nik which was cheaper than the other soaps. When my sister arrived in the shop she asked for the soap in her poor Arabic:

“Ana der-Nik, (I need-Nik),” she told the shopkeeper who became sexually famished on hearing my sister’s remarks. My sister Nyagoa naively mistook Fa-nik soap for Nik which means sexual intercourse in Arabic. My sister’s request to the shopkeeper was that she wanted sexual intercourse with him. Previously, this shopkeeper always looked, starred and stalked at Nyagoa any time she passed by his shop, but Nyagoa would spurn him cursorily. But this time when Nyagoa made a mistake he thought his hanger had trapped freely in favour of his wishes.

“*Hee –hee...!*” he laughed as if his fishhook had caught a fish by luck. “Then get inside, abibi.”

My sister stepped inside the shop thinking that it was the normal way of buying things in the shop. She had never bought anything by herself in the past. In fact, it was me buying the soaps always but that day I was so tired and she had to help me do it. When she reached inside the shop, the poor shopkeeper touched her breasts that had grown alarmingly as the result of being mature.

“Wiiiiiw!” was Nyagoa’s usual cry.

“Ooooooy!” was the poor shopkeeper’s cry.

Nyagoa bit and caught the man by his testicles and that was the reason the two cried terribly and everyone in the nearby neighbourhood including me came to the place for rescue.

I was the first to reach the shop. I directly kicked and caught the throat of the shopkeeper who was also suffering from Nyagoa’s hand at the same time. We now beat the poor shopkeeper for trying to rape my dear sister. Most of the bystanders were on our side. Shortly the old men came and tried to settle down the problem. It was solved after many apologies.

“*In what way did the shopkeeper get you into the shop, Nyagoa?*” I asked her when we reached home.

“*The fool lured me in just after I asked him to give me the Nik,*” she said.

“*Did you tell him like that?*”

“*Yes,*” she said, “*I told him to give me Sabun Nik.*”

“*Tell me the exact words in Arabic.*”

“*Gathima, ana der Nik.*”

“Oops!” I yelled, “then the man was right, sister. You shouldn’t have said it that way, sister. You could have just said, ‘Asima, ana der Sabun Fa-nik.’ Or you should have used sign language and just pointed at the soap. It was because you said something different to his advantage”

Goria town is a dangerous place to be for a woman or young girl because of the sexual frustration, patriarchal dominance and hopelessness. Because of the Islamic dressing code, when a girl in Goria wears any dress which shows her thighs and other parts of her body or above the knee, the inhabitants will think that the girl wants sex. Both boys and girls are not treated equally. The fact that a brother is separated from his sister contributes a lot to the sexual frustration not only in Goria but in the whole land of Politaria.

The devaluing and hiding of women systematically among society contributes to these kinds of sexual frustration. Why would your sister be hidden away from you? Anything which is hidden out of your reach or sight is a thing that you can eat or enjoy and that will make you struggle to get it or else you try anything that resembles it. It is disastrous that a sister is hidden away from her brother. Can someone make love with his sister, cousin and any other relative? It is not in our culture. Even the girl you share the great-grandfather number thirty is not married or given any sugary look because she is your relative.

Most of the young men in Politaria are very cheap socially. The restriction of their freedom in many things has turned them into cheap creatures that can do anything with anyone or anything. I have heard some make love with chickens, birds, cattle, cats and trees and anything that they see. But the way these people behave when they see women and girls, and the way their government complicates things, I am not surprised when I hear that someone is being accused of raping a fly, an ant or even a fish. I haven’t yet heard of someone making love with fire.

There was also a time we fought another restaurant owner but this time it was Nyagoa's right unlike the issue with the shopkeeper.

"*Gathima*," she said with the same *Gathima* word that she used in calling any person that didn't speak Naath. Her *Gathima* should have been *Asima* or *listen*.

"*What types of foods do you have?*"

"*Fuul, Ades, Fateh be ruuz...*," the man listed the long menu.

"*What?*" asked Nyagoa, wanting the man to repeat one of the foods.

"*Zuud!*" said the restaurant owner, insultingly.

"*Well, give me Zuud with two pieces of bread,*" Nyagoa demanded.

There was now continuous laughter from the customers.

"*Nyagoa, Zuud is not a food. It is an insult,*" I told her quickly so that she could change her order. Her hand was soon in the throat of the man who was now calling out for help. When the fight was over we went to another restaurant and left this owner who had no respect for girls and children.

There was another day when she went to a different restaurant alone. She wanted *Kumuniya*.

"*I want that food with a name like that of Yak,*" she told the man. The good man mentioned all the foods on the menu's list for Nyagoa to pick what she wanted; "*Shaye, kibda, bathathes...jidad, rijla, showrba... kuminya...*"

"*Yes it is this food!*" she said and hit the poor man with the plate in her hand. The man fell to the ground from his chair. Nyagoa hurt the man, but she was not doing it on purpose. She had done it out of happiness because what she wanted had been mentioned.

There was also a time she boarded a bus from Gorja to Kalla. She could not get out at her designated stopover because her words were mistaken for trying to fall. She ended up at Kalla.

“Ana bagaine, ana..., (I will fall here)” she had said. On hearing that, the conductor ordered the passengers to close all the bus’s windows such that Nyagoa couldn’t fall. Nyagoa cried and cried and cried but no one clearly understood her. The conductor and the passengers might have mistaken her for a mad girl. She in fact wanted to get down but she said it wrongly in Arabic.

“I had to come on foot all the way from Kalla to Gorja,” she told me when she arrived.

“But why?”

“I don’t know, maybe I said a wrong Arabic word again.”

“Don’t worry,” I comforted her, *“we must buy a radio when we get money perhaps you will learn a little Arabic.”*

Another case was when she messed up with energetic footballers trying to rescue the ball from being inhumanely humiliated. Nyagoa was given a warm slap this time around by a player who didn’t joke. She came home crying and told me the case.

“But why did you do that, Nyagoa?” I asked her, feeling apologetic for her irrationality.

“But Mi-diiit, they were humiliating that weightless little thing,” she told me, *“besides, it is not in our culture to stand and watch people conspire and kill little creatures.”*

“That little thing is called a football, sister,” I told her, *“it doesn’t have blood.”*



Chapter 28

The night was very cold and dark. It had just stopped raining and the world was very quiet. The sound that we could hear was only that made by the frogs around our Rakoba's nearby pond. I knew it was not going to be a normal night. I was very frightened indeed. We had no electricity to see around when insomnia engulfed me. Soon the moonlight and stars came out in the western direction and I was very happy to see around but they rapidly disappeared. I checked the old watch that was given to me by one of my friends at the workplace. It was late.

I didn't know why I could not sleep. I didn't even know why I was afraid. Shortly after sleep had got me, I had a shallow dream. My late grandfather was telling me to run and hide in the River Nile to avoid the government force that was marching towards Pading. I jumped to my feet in surprise, and tension hit me like a wave. My sister Nyagoa woke up when she realised that I had had a bad dream.

"Are you fine, brother Mi-diit?" she asked.

"Yes I am okay, sister," I said, *"I have just had a bad dream."*

"Take it easy. Go back to your sleep," she said, *"dreams are things that you think of during day time."*

I went back to sleep but my ears were keenly monitoring the environment. It was like I knew something was going to happen. Soon there were footsteps from faraway. But I dismissed them as imaginary or raindrops. Regrettably, this time they came again. They were slowly by slowly coming towards our Rakoba. Nyachangkuoth, Goy and Nyagoa were just snoring.

I wondered after I listened attentively. The plastic sheeting in the roof of our Rakoba was disturbing me because the wind was blowing them away giving sound. Could they be thieves? Why would they come to a Rakoba if they were real thieves? What would they get in a garbage can like our Rakoba where lice, bedbugs, cockroaches and rats live? I again dismissed the thought and convinced myself that it was just an imagination from me. I went back to sleep. Still, there was a sound of more footsteps this time around. I finally said they must be new thieves learning or practising theft in less harmful places like ours. Or else they could be mad or stupid thieves because a real thief would have nothing to do with people of our class. What would a real thief do with poor and cheap creatures living like us in an inferior hut made of thrown-away sacks and plastic sheeting? I wondered. In our filthy Rakoba there were even no beds, bags and nothing apart from the two mats with two pairs of bed sheets that helped us in encountering the cold nights. Why would a thief forego his sleep just to come and steal our cheap things that even a beggar cannot pick if they fell? Could they be killers? I wondered. But our only enemy is Monica and she doesn't know our hideout. Then why would Monica leave behind her children at night very far just to harm us?

Near our Rakoba were beautiful and expensive homes that a thief could raid and not ours. I couldn't come to an agreement with my thoughts.

"Can we start?" a voice was heard.

"Not now," was the response, from a low tone voice. *"Let it strike midnight so that no one will follow us."*

It might have been the time that they had scheduled. A man stepped inside our Rakoba. I stood up and spoke, trying to imitate the gentlemen's way of thought-provoking thieves.

"Who are you?" I asked but they never answered. Some more men got in and this time Nyagoa woke up and cried. My two little siblings woke up and cried too. When Nyagoa continued crying, I cried too but none of our neighbours came to our rescue. The men, after making known their presence inside our Rakoba, scared us first by threatening us with swords and knives before they could take away my elder sister by force. Nyagoa forcefully tried to resist but to no avail. They threw her in a car like a sack of cotton and ran away with her. My sister's mouth was covered with a piece of cloth. We were left helpless that sad night. My two little siblings were surprised and scared. They could not comprehend what had happened.

"Mi-diiit," poor Goy broke his silence sadly after my sister was out of sight, *"are they going to bring her back tomorrow?"*

"Yes, brother," I said with a shaking voice, *"they will bring her tomorrow."*

"But why have they taken her by force if they will return her tomorrow," asked Nyachangkuoth sadly again. I wanted to say much but the words couldn't come out. I didn't know how to convince my little siblings. Silence was my only solution.

Why would people take her by force? Could they be the same people who had raped her last time? Will they be going to make her their wife or kill her? I almost became crazy. I didn't sleep that night. Immediately after my sister's mouth was covered with a piece of cloth I tried to run after them, but it was very stupid to run after a car. In the morning we woke very sad because our elder sister, the most bread winner was missing. I thought; if they meant to take her for marriage they would appear the other day per the Naath custom of marriage.

Months passed without seeing my sister. I counted her in the list of my father, grandfather, brother, mother, and grandmother who died in South Sudan. I became the mother of the two; Nyachangkuoth and Goy. I was now their only hope. I would boil for them their tea and cook their breakfast in the morning before leaving for work. I would then again return in the evening to take them to school and after that I would report back to work. That went on for over six months until the two reached primary three since their school is a Six-Month-Academic system for adult education, mostly for the South Sudanese children who could not afford morning schools in Politaria.

One Saturday morning, I left Nyachangkuoth and Goy at home while I went for my usual job. At around one o'clock they became very hungry and decided to come to my workplace so that I could buy them some bread. I was also on my way to take them to school. When they saw me at the other side of the road, Nyachangkuoth smiled and decided to come running across the road to meet me.

"No, No, Nyachangkuoth!" I called with a warning voice, *"Stop Nyachang! Stop! I am coming please!"*

Unfortunately, she could not hear. She continued running across the road. She was eager to meet me so that I could buy them bread. At

that very moment, a very big V-8 car that I believed to be for a rich person came at high speed. It was too late. Nyagoa looked helplessly as it was fast approaching. The V-8 mercilessly ran over her, as I watched. Nyachangkuoth fell and blood flowed down in the street of Goria. The killer stepped down from the car but when he discovered that Nyachangkuoth was a dark and dirty girl, he got back into his car and drove away very fast as if nothing had happened. When I saw my little sister on the ground, I hugged her soiled body and I shrieked in an emotional agony. The world seemed to be cruel to me. I couldn't even know the safety of the other little brother, Goy. Nyachangkuoth now lay in the pool of blood.

A few people came and helped, and soon more people gathered around. It was the sirens of the ambulance that made me conscious. The shock was too much. I boarded with the motionless body of my sister in an ambulance leaving poor Goy confused at the scene of the accident. When we arrived at the hospital, I was not allowed into the emergency room until they came out to bring me the news. I cried bitterly for the second time when I saw the mournful look on the doctor's face before they could even pronounce that my little sister Nyachangkuoth was not alive anymore. Nyachang, my dearest little sister, whose beauty could only be compared with a rainy night, and innocent, was now dead. The heartless death had followed us again! I was very sad and blamed myself for her death.

If South Sudanese leaders had not created the war of greed, I wouldn't have felt the massive amounts of guilt flooding my heart. If I had just played with my two siblings that day, Nyachang wouldn't have died. But what would they eat? She would not have tried to come to me looking for something to eat had there been food at home. Till this day, I blame myself for her death. It was my carelessness that I lost my beautiful little sister. Most of all are the South Sudanese leaders who are to blame.

Nyachangkuoth was now no more with us in this world. I knew how hard she was overrun by the car that she would not make it. Even if she had lived, her organs had been badly damaged. The doctors, after confirming that my sister had died, asked for the details for them to hand me the dead body for burial. I had no ID card for identification and documentation. They also asked for our relatives, but I told them my story in broken Arabic that I had learnt at the place of work. They assured me to come on Sunday morning for the possible process so that I could take the body to the cemetery for burial.

I returned home only to find my little brother Goy crying loudly calling Nyachangkuoth's name alone in our lonely Rakoba.

"Nyachangkuoth! Nyachangkuoth, please come!" he called several times before he could even see me. That one had nearly made me commit suicide. But who would take care of that poor little boy if I killed myself? Would it not be the end of our family on the face of the earth? Who knows the fate of our elder brother Temdor who left us for Libya when we were in Pading?

I again comforted myself remembering the advice of my late grandfather who used to call me 'man' when I was not even at that given age for the title. I was now thirteen years old and I beat two strong boys at ago. Boys who always watched movies of different fights and sports, and here I was, never had I watched television let alone the movies.

I hired a donkey to take the dead body to the cemetery because I could not afford an ambulance or a car. I went back to the hospital and found the body of my late sister put in the mortuary.

"Kids are not allowed in Mushra," said the mortuary attendant, a black man who could not speak my language.

“My sister’s dead body was put here,” I told him, but he seemed unhappy. Perhaps he recognised me. He might have seen me on that sad day when I was unconscious.

I asked him to give us the dead body for burial as I had gone there with two of my workmates who were kind. One of the boys who went with me to the hospital was the one I had beaten sometime back. They promised to help me bury Nyachangkuoth’s dead body at Kalla where the Christian’s cemetery was, though the two were Muslims.

“Go and get a letter from the next office,” he said uninterestingly.

We went to the office that he had directed us to. The one in charge of the dead bodies’ department was a black man too who looked like me but didn’t cooperate. He instead told me that I must pay a hundred dollars or else I bring a paper from the South Sudan Embassy that I had never heard of or seen in my life.

My two friends and I tried hard to find the needed letter but to no avail, as nobody listened to young dirty boys. I concurred that there was no big deal on a person who had died. I decided to look at Goy since death the heartless had taken away my little sister again in Politaria. I thought death had left us when we abandoned South Sudan.

My little brother and I continued our life normally again. But this time I always took him with me to the place of work until he knew how to work as a shoeshine boy by himself. He was six years by then. We would work together in the morning and I would take him to school in the evening. Anytime he asked about Nyachangkuoth or Nyagoa, I would lie to him that they had gone to bring some water from far. The same answer when he asked about our mother or grandmother. For our father and grandfather, he had forgotten and erased them out of his mind a long time ago because he was only two to three when

they died. How misleading this world is where you find enemies at every step!

My siblings and I thought we had run away from death and poverty in South Sudan to find peace and content in Politaria not knowing that it was our death warrant.



Chapter 29

Goria is indeed a shoddier place for the poor people especially the homeless who cannot manage to build a Rakoba hut of their own. Most of them suffer a lot of harassment, abuse and exploitation at the hands of rich people and sometimes the police.

It was very sad to know that most of my workmates died after they were suffocated with tear-gas in the underground they lived. Many who couldn't afford rent or didn't like to live along the road to avoid accidents and humiliation, chose to stay inside 'khors'. Khors are vertical tunnels that stretch for many miles and act as storage for rainwater. Rain in Politaria is not discharged into the drainage system.

Because we live in a world where rich people think they are God, a group of rich people of Goria stormed the Goria Central Police unit one day complaining about thefts in the neighbourhood. They were blaming it on people including us. Most of these rich people thought that all the shoeshine boys or people in a class lower than theirs were thieves. They thought we worked as shoeshine boys during the day and as thieves at night.

A rich person is the most respected creature in the universe. In respect of this, the police force took immediate action against the poor people who were suspected of theft at night. These poor people lived in the khors because it offered them a rent-free place to live with their little children before they could set out in the morning to beg or work for their survival.

The police authority, in implementing the rich people's demand, now stormed most parts of the khor in Gorias with teargas. They threw it inside the tunnels where the poor people lived as if they were directly applying pesticides in mosquito control! The plot was not done at day time when they often went begging or working in less paid work like our job, but it was done at night when all of them had returned to take rest after a hard and long day of begging or working. The police continued the crackdown for two days until most of these poor people fled to the different places of Politaria.

After a few days, there was a strong smell of decaying flesh from the side of the khor. This was used for shelter by the poor people and yet a place where garbage was dumped by the rich people. Some of us at the market thought it could be the remains of a dog or cat killed and dumped there. But we were wrong as it was found out that there were the remains of dozens of the poor people mostly the elderly and children who had died as a result of an overdose of methanol. I was saddened to learn that one of my neighbours in the workplace was among the victims. I knew life was really hard for poor people in a place where the majority were rich. Among the dead were South Sudanese children who had come to live at Gorias khors. I blamed all this again on the South Sudanese leaders who forced children out of their country to be denied their basic rights in a foreign land. Most of the black street children from South Sudan are taken from their families without notice or resistance and are denied their identity by giving them new Arabic or Islamic names. This makes them feel happy as if these names are heavenly.

Many of these adopted children could deny their real parents simply because of the luxurious lives they have adapted to. Being an adopted child is the last thing I wish for. I better die with my dignity and identity than living rich as a slave in the homes of rich people.

It was Thursday morning in the winter season when a police vehicle arrived at our place of work. The police arrested dozens of us who worked together in a circle. I was surprised to be put into a big police truck for the first time without any crime. Goy bitterly wept when he saw me being thrown like a sack of maize into the police vehicle.

“Don’t leave me please!” he cried; eyes filled with tears. *“Don’t leave me alone, Mi-diit! Don’t go, brother.”*

I looked around and found ten of the policemen. I decided to talk to the policeman who was dark-skinned like perhaps he would listen to me. Seven of the nine policemen with us were dark-skinned and the other two were light skinned. It was the darkest skinned one that I approached and requested that my little brother also be put in the truck, but I regretted my action. The heartless man made me believe that he had no children. His response shocked me, he punched me. This was between life and death.

That dark-skinned policeman humiliated me. Now I knew that a black man never has sympathy for another black man. Brown-skinned policemen in Politaria are by far sympathetic than the rude dark-skinned policemen. The dark-skinned policemen may be humiliating their fellow black people to show loyalty or to secure praises from their brown-skinned bosses since most of them do not have controlling ranks. I have never seen a dark-skinned policeman as officer or a boss either in Gorja or in the prison I was jailed.

We were put inside the prison cell for three days without investigations. Given the unfair free world, equality irrespective of social class was a

mere expectation. We were thrown into a small room that contained dozens of prisoners. Among these prisoners were thieves, drunkards, rapists, the convicted government officials and many more. To our surprise, there were inmates who called themselves police among the prisoners. We found the cabinet of the prisoners that comprised of leaders and their ministers inside the prison cell. These self-imposed leaders inside the jail had their self-imposed ministers for new arrivals. We were now going to be investigated again inside the lockup room by our fellow inmates. The investigation would focus on our names and the kinds of crimes we had committed.

Before I was jailed, I thought that jail was the only house where people discuss matters on equal terms, but I was wrong. Those with high crimes ranging from murder and conspiracy against the state were heads of the prisoners. They would eat the delicious food first and give the leftovers to those with feminine crimes. They would force other prisoners to tell stories so that they could enjoy. They would force others to come out of the toilet when they felt like they wanted to defecate. With what I had seen in jail, I believe it will only now be a cemetery where those who died first will not dictate or humiliate the new buried people. And there will not be social injustice too unlike our living world where the rich and the poor of all types of people will be eaten by ants and other tiny living organisms together. Everyone will wait for that final fair destiny where the world of prejudice, murder, hunger, hatred, and gossiping will be left behind to those who will practice them again before they can leave it behind, and the cycle repeats for generations to come.

The prisoner's leader now ordered his minister for new arrivals to investigate us before we could sit down. I was very lucky because I didn't enter the prison cell first. My shoeshine mate represented us and talked on our behalf. The minister for new arrivals had now stepped forward to investigate us.

“Little boys, why were you brought here,” he asked.

“Because we are all accused of stealing a phone,” our spokesperson replied.

“Is that so?” he asked, disregarding. His attention was on an old man with a long beard and a funny moustache. That old man was brought into the prison cell after us. So, the prisoners’ minister for new arrivals ignored our case and focused on the old man. He pointed to a dirty corner of the prison cell for us to sit. We sat with our hands in our laps because it was not enough to accommodate us.

“Tell us your crime before you sit,” the prisoners’ minister told the old man.

“Who are you to ask me here?” the old man said angrily. This was a result of being humiliated outside by the real police and now trying to show his frustration to the inmates.

“What? Is it his first time to be behind bars?” asked the boss who was jailed for killing two policemen who tried to arrest him after raping a woman in broad daylight. The old man was now between death and life after the boss ordered other prisoners to beat him up. The policemen outside the cell didn’t know what was taking place. Even if they knew, they couldn’t try to enter the cell for criminals with their bare hands or else they would lose their lives.

“Tell us your crime or else you will be killed now, we don’t joke here,” said the boss, *“and no forgiveness here because no matter what crime one commits here there is no other jail apart from this.”*

“I am falsely accused of raping a schoolboy,” he said at last, annoyingly.

“What?” the boss thundered in rage, *“you raped a schoolboy and not a schoolgirl or school-chicken or school-dog or school-fish or school-stone?”*

These are the kinds of crooks I want. Abdallah, Yousif and Munem let us do him."

Soon the old man was done in front of all. I tried to close my eyes so that I couldn't see the scene, but I was smacked and forced to look straight at the actions of the old man who was almost as old as my late grandfather.

"Irresponsible old man," insulted one of the bosses after getting down from doing the old man, *"that is now the reward of your satanic act. It is given back to you the same way you gave it to the poor schoolboy."*

"Yes that was a fair reward," confirmed another one.

We spent Friday, Saturday and Sunday in the jail as these were the days for a weekend in Politaria. What disturbed my mind was my poor little brother who would suffer alone in our lonely Rakoba in Gorja. I was also disturbed by the news about people stealing children to remove their kidneys for sale to rich people. I sobbed when someone with me in the jail told me that disturbing story. Another one said his own brother about ten was found dead after his kidneys were removed. I now feared like my poor brother would die.



Chapter 30

It was Monday morning when we were all seated before a police officer who investigated us. When my turn came, I went to him in his cold and fine room that I had never seen in my life.

“Hi Arami,” he called, *“Isimek munu.”* Which loosely and literally means, ‘Hi thief, what is your name?’

“Isimi Mi-diiit,” I said, *“Lakin ana ma arami, Kuar.”* (My name is Mi-diiit, but I am not a thief, boss). With that, he gave me a hard slap and I fell down like a loaf of bread.

“Inta min ween ya arami? (Where are you from, thief?)”

“Ana min Pading. (I am from Pading)”, I answered.

“Pading bi ta kusumak!” (Pading of your mother’s ass), he insulted and caught me by my murky collar.

“Omi mat! (My mother is dead)”, I said. I thought he wanted my mother’s name or to know more about me when he said kusumak. It was after

that cruel policeman humiliated me that I knew not everyone wishes to know everything about you. Believe me, I had forgotten the name Leer that I had once visited roughly with my village-mates and that I was also told about by the soldiers in Payang-gay. What I could only remember was Pading. When they knew I was in fact poor in Arabic they called a Naath boy who had been jailed for smoking shisha at a certain marketplace. Shisha is banned in Politaria.

The boy talked to me in Naath language and we understood each other very well despite the slight differences in the language as the boy was from Rubkotna which belongs to Leek-Naath. When he wanted to say the plural form of a man in Naath he would say 'wutna' while we pronounce it as 'wutti' in Pading and sometimes 'wutni', the plural 'girls' that they pronounce as 'Nyiera', we pronounce it as 'Nyieri'.

After exchanging words with him in front of the police captain, he knew where I was from because of the way I had pronounced some words.

"E jindhol Dok," he said, *"ka Leer laa?"* (Are you a Dok son from Leer?)

"Jio e handhol Dok ka Pading chi mo Leer," (Yes, I am from Dok but not from Leer), I told him.

I now confused the boy because he didn't know Pading. After we had finished, he told everything that we had been discussing to the police captain.

"Zol da min Dok," (This boy is from Dok) he told the policeman. But before he could say more about what I had told him he was hit in the head.

"Stupid South Sudanese boys," another officer affronted, *"We do not want your subsections. We need your tribes since your skin colour shows that you*

belong to South Sudan which doesn't belong to you; it belongs to foreign investors, greed and tribalism."

"We are Naath," the boy said very quickly and he was left to go.

"Why are you coming back to Politaria again?" asked yet another dark-skinned officer, *"You separated from us and you lost your country to corruption and guns, idiots!"*

Nobody answered that tough question. Nobody would answer it even if we knew Arabic very well. It was the naked truth and fact. But I wondered why would people hide adoration and show abhorrence instead? Could it be because the adoration is very expensive and abhorrence is cheap?

I remained in the investigation room for some time until my little brother Goy arrived with another shoeshine boy who was lucky to avoid the arrest. He had gone to the toilet when we were arrested. When Goy saw me, he burst into tears and said, *"Why Mi-diiit? Why did you leave me alone? I am hungry Mi-diiit. Why did you refuse to bring me here with you if there is food?"*

I almost killed myself at hearing my little brother talk like an adult. The police officer had empathy for me and decided to let me sit outside for a while as I waited for others who were being investigated. The police officer finally found one of the boys that had stolen the phone of an old woman. It was only that time that I knew the reason why I was in jail. For three days, we the innocent were in jail because they believed everybody who worked as a shoeshine boy was a street boy or a thief. That was the reason why they didn't care even after they discovered the thief. I wish they had understood my situation. I didn't choose to be an orphan or work with thieves, but the heartless death made me like that.

It was before I stepped foot outside the police station when the Naath friend of mine who translated my speech told me bad news.

"Life is so dangerous for me," he said after he finished talking on the phone. *"My brother drowned in the ocean trying to cross to Europe."*

"Sorry to hear, brother," I comforted him. *"My big brother left us five years ago and I was told he is in Libya too."*

"What is his name?" he asked me.

"His name is Temdor Mi-goa," I told him.

"Okay, let me ask my cousin who is in Libya. He is the one that told me the bad news. Perhaps you will talk with your brother if he knows him," he told me.

"Oh, thank you very much. I will be glad to talk with my big brother. I believe he will be happy to hear my voice, but I will not tell him about our family deaths because he is very far," I told him.

He dialled his small mobile phone that he had managed to hide while he was in jail. When the phone was answered, he asked his cousin whether he knew Temdor or not.

"Temdor the boy from Dok?" asked the voice from the phone.

"Yes, he is from Dok," my friend told him.

"Who wants him?" the voice asked.

"His little brother by the name Mi-diit is here with me and he needs to talk to him desperately." "Okay please go away from him if he is near you," the voice said, and soon my friend moved away from me.

I now knew my brother was not alive. I thought alone in my heart; why would he first ask the details of my brother and then tell someone to move away from me? That means my brother is not alive. What a heartless death!

“I am sorry, Mi-diiit,” my friend told me when he returned. *“My cousin said he doesn’t know your brother.”*

“What? But he confirmed it when you put the phone on loudspeaker?” I told him, *“Please better tell me the fact. I am a man who has seen more deaths. There is nothing new on hearing any death this time.”*

After my friend was sure that I was a strong boy, he cleared his throat.

“I am so sorry, brother,” he said looking down to avoid my eyes. *“Your brother is said to be among the twelve Naath boys who drowned in the ocean with other African immigrants mostly from Nigeria and Ethiopia.”*

Tears now rolled down my face, but I managed not to disappoint my friend who would be sorry.

“Death is a heartless thing,” I said. *“My elder brother, Temdor, is dead!”*

“Take heart, my brother,” my friend told me, *“I am from Leek and you are from Dok. We are among the most sufferers in South Sudan. Our dear people had been living in peace, harmony, love trust and unity with each other over the years until those old men and most importantly the long-bearded old man used them against each other in the name of retaining his maladministration headship of our country. Everyone, every family, every society, every community as well as every nation is made of both good and bad sides. Because it’s natural to have two sides, the man easily made a lot of noise supported by finance and positions in controlling our people against the side he wanted to get rid of. And our dear people cannot be one now. Some of our people are now being slaughtered in their thousands while others are*

either fighting us or playing dominoes and other games with him. Here is my phone number, any time you need help call me. We are from Bentiu."

"Very bad but everything is timed in this world, my brother. This suffering and death will one day come to an end like there has never been a night-time without daytime. It will one day be a story in the past," I told him.

"My mother and father were also slaughtered in Rubnyal village in Rubkotna," he said sadly. *"And I am lonely here in Politaria, but I am returning to Garia military base as soon as possible since I have been released from the hospital. I came here when I was shot."*

"Please take me with you to Garia whenever you want to go back," I told him seriously. *"I must be one of Jack's fighters."*

"You are still very young to carry a gun, cousin," he told me contemptuously. *"But where did you know Colonel Jack from?"*

"Yes I do, why not?" I told him. *"He is very tall, thin and brave. I knew him back home when he saved us. I love him so much. I can't wait to see him again with his colleagues..."*

"But I am very sorry," he told me discontentedly, *"to tell you that Jack and all the heroes that you have now mentioned were all killed by the enemy back home. They were killed with another hero called Nyekupeny from our land some months ago. It was the same battle which killed Nyakupeny that I was shot in."*

"Killed! Jack! Jack killed?" I asked while standing and shivering. It was the first time to shiver since I lost all my family members.

"Yes, so sad indeed," he said.

My friend was very sorry for having disclosed to me the death of Jack after I came to life only in a hospital where I was rushed when I fainted. He apologised after I had regained consciousness.

“Sorry, Mi-diit Mi-goa,” he said. “I thought death was normal for you when you didn’t cry bitterly after disclosing to you your brother’s death.”

“It’s not your fault, brother. It is instead the heartless death’s fault,” I told him. “Jack saved thousands of lives in Pading and other neighbouring villages. I didn’t expect him to die before meeting him again. I thought I would thank him for all he and his colleagues had done for us ever since my grandfather and other slaughtered elders left this world to join our ancestors in the land beyond.”

“Take it easy. He is a hero,” he said.

“Yes very true, he is indeed a hero like the rest.” I said sadly “But tell me about the other commanders.”

“All the commanders are fine,” he told me.

“How about Gat-Majaak, Gat-Kera, Gat-Wich, James...,” I asked him. The names were still in my mind because they were among the names my grandfather had told me. He told me many names that he said were the names of strong men. Some of the leaders who helped burn down our land were among the names that my grandfather had once praised.

“Gat-Majaak and his comrades: Gat-Kera, James and... are all very fine at Garia,” he told me.

I asked him if he knew the names of my late grandfather’s favourite musicians.

“I cannot know unless you sing the songs first,” he said.

“Chi pithpuarparike rip Omdurmaan. Thil nyam lenyji e wiydan we yiathniwiy e miii. Wa nhialkeer bi nei wa Leek...”

“Oh,” he said with a smile, “*these are Goach Nger and Wat Ngunow and Kuong Gatpan. They are from our land.*”

“*I hope they are alive, please? Their song always makes me remember my late grandfather. I cry whenever I listen to that part,*” I said.

“*Oh, very good,*” he said, “*Goach was killed in cold blood in his farm, but Wat and Kuong are alive. But it is difficult to know someone’s life status at this time in our motherland. You are with someone today and he is pronounced dead tomorrow.*”

“*So bad indeed,*” I said. “*Other more songs are here, please. I want the names of the musicians so that I can buy their cassettes when I get some money one day.*”

“*Okay, can you sing them now? I am waiting,*” he said with a smile on his face.

I cleared my throat very well to imitate the voices of the musicians so that he could identify it: “*Thiele mi, thiele mi, thiele mi, thielemi, thiele migora ne keho bi Thudan chop be par kelkedor tin kong, Thudan be rode jiech...and this one also, kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char...*”

“*Oh, the former is Great Moses Chot Rik meanwhile the latter is Great Mabor Chany popularly known as Gatdet Chotlit,*” he said very quickly, “*I also like their songs very much.*”

“*Where is Gatdet Chotlit now?*” I asked.

“*He died a long time ago before our mothers and fathers were even born,*” he said, “*he was a revolutionary singer of both Anyanya One and Two. There is his verse which is my favourite verse too. It says: ‘Kor gan-Nuara chiekormithiak, Tharyier-malualchiapal-rueeeei...there are many revolutionary musicians like him too; Gai Tut Chan and legendary Moses Chot are also strong heroes...*”

“Gai Tut Chan has a song which says: ‘Nasir wiyda-la-cha-mi-lenye-wiydiaal...Kobe-wiyda-la-cha-mi-lenye-wiydiaal...Fangak-wiyda-la-cha-mi-lenya-wiydiaal...Bentiu-wiyda la cha mi lenye wiydiaal...Chiengda ni wiew-Nuar e wiew puany wieygarka-Nyayiel e wieypuanye...chieng-Nuara be ma dong...”

I was happy to know more from him. I got almost everything I needed from him. He was such a kind and witty young man that I have never ever seen in my life. I was glad to know the well-being of all our people through that friend of mine who knew everyone in my land. He knew every person I asked about. I was only sad that Jack had died. Jack had saved many lives including ours. Had it not been for him, we would have all been slaughtered the same way my grandfather was slaughtered. I wished he was alive. But there is no problem. When I grow up I will find where his children are, including the children of other fallen heroes. They gave their lives away for us. They need not be forgotten under all odds.

I thanked my friend and left with my little brother Goy. Life was now a useless thing to me because I had heard more deaths apart from my family. Before I had met my friend from Rubkotna, I thought I was the only sufferer in the whole world. But now a man who was shot also lost his mother and father the same way my grandfather had lost his life. I would have killed myself had it not been the fate of my poor little brother Goy who made me his mother, father, brother, sister and his everything in this world.

I now know many children are suffering the same way I am suffering. However, I am among the luckiest children to reach Politaria alive as most of them are in the swampy areas and islands of Meer, Kok, Tuochriah, Guori, Tuoch-Mandong, Tuoch-Thiel, Tuoch-Nyanyireew, and even in the camps across South Sudan and overseas.

Anytime I saw or heard a radio I would burst into tears. The radio reminds me of my late grandfather. The radio was his lifeline and he listened to it constantly. There was never a day that he never turned it on. He would only turn it off during sleep time. His favourite songs still linger in my mind. They have become my favourite songs that I sing everyday whenever I do anything. My late grandfather might have blessed these songs because anytime I sang them while working in my shoeshine box I would finish the work neatly in a short time.

My friends in the workplace have got used to my songs and the melody. They always sing them though they do not know the Naath language.

...chi pithpuarparike rip Omdurmaan. Thil nyam lenyji e wiydan we yiathniwiy e miii. Wa nhial keer bi nei wa Leek, chiengdani Leek Kurjiejch Makurgan ruaidhuor. Banluoy Leek Makur Lim Tena Jiejch...

The boys sing it fluently as if they were Naath. I don't know if they sing it for fear so that I don't beat them or from the bottom of their hearts. Only God knows. Another song is ...kume dan konnei tin char konnei tin char...

I am now staying in our Rakoba in Gorja with my little brother praying to God in order not to let the Oular Locality Police come to destroy it again after they had destroyed it several times. The good thing is that Goy can read and write very well. He is finishing his primary three this year. He always teaches me Eight Parts of Speech and Phonics:

"Phonics: a e i o u," he would read to me.

"aiyey ii ow wu," I would repeat.

“No, *Mi-diiit*,” he would say, “*It is phonics, not Naath vernacular’s alphabets.*”

“*Okay, Goygoy*,” I would say.

“a for car, a for cat, a for rat,” he would read to me very fast. “e for egg, e for bed, e for red, i for ink, i for big, i for things, o for pot, o for dog, o for no, u for bus, u for cut, u for gun...Ba Be Bi Bo Bu. Ca Ce Ci Co Cu...”

I pray to God to continue keeping us safe until we return to our burned motherland of Pading in South Sudan. My little brother and I will rebuild our destroyed home again in the tomb of my late grandfather and have families to raise up our fallen family. But my sister is still missing. If she is alive, she will one day come to us as I know her very well. She is the best and loyal sister in the whole world. The person who took her must be heartless or an enemy who wants to punish us, but he is wrong, we will never give up. If he knew our struggle and suffering, he would not think that we could surrender to the situation that he has created.

I didn’t choose to let my father be killed in the war, to let my grandfather be slaughtered, to let my little brother Gai get lost in the bush, to let my mother die of hunger in Konkot, to let my grandmother be eaten alive by wild animals, to let my caring aunt be kidnapped by the armed men on her way coming to help my mother carry us to hiding places in the River Nile, to let my little sister Nyachangkuoth be overrun by a V-8 car, to let my elder sister be kidnapped from us by unknown kidnapppers at a time when we needed her the most, or to let my elder brother Temdor drown in the ocean trying to cross to Europe for a better life....

No parents choose to die leaving their young ones like my little brother Goy and I being marooned by the heartless death in Gorja to fight for our survival. Because this world is a strange place that has both good and bad people, I want my orphan-mates all over the world to be vigilant like dogs, busy like bees, farsighted like vultures, patients like cranes, valiant like lions, fearful like crows, and be faithful and sincere like the village's old men and not old men in politics.

The good God will watch over us and all the orphans in the whole world. Because most of our people have been cleared off the earth surface either by wars or famines in the hands of bungling leaders, I want to tell the world that when I grow up I want to be the President of South Sudan so that children will fully be protected; unity, prosperity and stability among all South Sudanese people will be the priority of my leadership.

Sometimes in a dream at night, I dream walking about in the forest of Pading and even travelling to Guat-Kotda, Lual, Booth, Padeah, Gueny, Geer, Kuer-lel, Kuur, Koam-Geer, Juong-kang, Dhorgoyini, among other places. I can hear the voices of my late grandfather and grandmother only to find that it was in a dream. In my dreams, these people still appear and I shout at them whenever I see them.

Anytime I close my eyes, I see the picture of my late grandfather's tomb. I also see the picture of my late father, mother, grandmother, brother Gai, aunt, sister Nyachangkuoth, Temdor, Nyagoa, among other people in our land who lost their lives. I see the trees I had planted and the beautiful nature of our land. The tributary at the backyard of our home always comes into my mind even if I do not close my eyes. In my mind live the two long pathways and dykes that separate from our home; one goes towards Gueny and the other towards Ngemtony.

I want peace not only to be in every village, home or house but in every heart of my people and whoever is suffering in the whole world at the hands of armed people. I know even if I go back home I will not get the same friends that I used to bathe within the tributary, play hide and seek game, Gube game in Guol-tributary, fight or play Nyathokol together. Even if I get some of them back home it will be impossible for us to play our childhood games as our age won't allow us to. Our childhood is completely stolen and ruined by those who enjoyed their childhood to the fullest. But it is better than not to return home from this forced exile.

I am currently fourteen years old as I tell this adventurous story. I have grown into a young man with my beard and moustache coming out. I was nine years old when the war started.

It is still the same me despite the age and situation. The difference is only I in the pre-war days who wanted to revenge by killing as many enemies as possible but now it is I after-the-war who wants as many souls as possible to live. Forgiveness! Two people in different war zones: Before-war and after-war eras.

A single day in the life of a human is very important and should not be wasted for anything. But I have been completely robbed of my childhood and all those years wasted on the run in a bloody journey that ended in sorrow and tears. And I don't even know the way forward. I don't know if I will be alive or dead here in exile. I don't know if my little brother will be alive or dead here. I don't know if he will continue his education or not since the school fee is being increased every year.

I don't want any child whether black, white or brown, Christian or Muslim, religious or non-religious in the whole world to waste a single day or hour of their life as a result of war. I am hopeful that, the

time will come for those who treated us inhumanely to regret and feel the guilt. I do not need any kind of revenge but their remorsefulness. Despite all this, I dream to see a better South Sudan and the world before my death. I am desperate to see South Sudan leaders stop self-centredness, tribalism, corruption and the killing of their people for leadership. Most importantly, I don't want gunshots, cries and silence to be our national languages again in South Sudan.

That very day will happen possibly in my lifetime. God, if you are there, listen to me and bring permanent peace to my country, South Sudan, and all the nations at wars so that death, the heartless, is chased. Death is heartless and tears apart every family.

Epilogue

Dear God, I am very sure, as well as you are, that the pain and suffering I have been undergoing cannot be compared to the happiness and cheerfulness that is coming my way. Father, You made it clear in **2 Chronicles 7:14** that: *If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn away from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.* Father, South Sudan has emerged from one of the most inhuman, vicious and punishing conflicts in the history of humankind. The scale of destruction, rape, pandemonium, burning and torture perpetrated during our civil war is mindboggling – and among the most shocking in Africa’s post colonial history. You have created South Sudanese like the rest of humanity for a purpose and have never deviated from this purpose. You are the Almighty God, creator of the heavens and the earth. As a nation and as a people, we acknowledge that you are the true architect and designer of all nations. You are a loving Father who created us in your own image and likeness and has given us dominion over the earth, with power to tread upon troublemakers, beasts and scorpions and to overcome the power of our enemy and nothing shall by any means hurt us. God of forgiveness and kind-heartedness, we are disgusted by the daily reports of continued death and destruction in South Sudan.

My Father, You are the just Judge, Holy and True. You are the Most High God. I submit to You that South Sudan is under attack. Our

dignity and faith are under attack; our young country is under attack and invasion from the world's most feared enemies: war, cancer, HIV, hepatitis, viruses lurking in the shadows etc. We know as well as You do that all diseases come at Thy call and go at Thy bidding. Father, our brothers and sisters who are up use all means possible to stop those who are willing or try to get up to their level. Those who are down try all means possible to bring down those who are up. Our powerful brethren celebrate our pain and suffering. Lord, we are lost, but we come to You with grace. Guide my people towards better health and give them the wisdom to identify those You have placed around them.

The leaders You have set over us are not proactive enough: We are losing our fathers, mothers, children, families, friends, heroes and the engineers of the agenda for prosperity; the infection is spreading, and the resources to contain the situation are either destroyed or stolen by outsiders through our political leaders. We ask You, our heavenly Father, to grant us peace and harmony in our country and throughout the continent.

Please God, be with all living souls who are not fed, sheltered or loved. I beg You to bless those who wake up in beds and those who wake up on floors together. I beg You to raise up men, women and ministers that champion the cause of the defenceless and vulnerable. Be their rock of support, their fortification of safety and their shepherd and defender. Millions of children in South Sudan and across the world have become orphans or abandoned for so many different reasons and have never known parental love. Father, we know that you are for all people but have a special place in Your heart for these orphans and the vulnerable. O God of all nations! I beg You to deliver our young country from those in positions of authority who resort to violence directly or indirectly through their mighty unknown gunmen to carry out their objectives. They sweet-talk us into believing they are acting in our interests, and brainwash us into paying blind loyalty to them

so that they can continue looting and destabilising our nation. They have rained down death, wasted our resources and time, castrated thousands of young boys and exploited the poor while their own children live in luxury in First World countries. Our Heavenly Father, I ask You to lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from bad leaders to good leaders who love peace, from despair to hope, and from fear to trust in our young nation, South Sudan.

A glossary of Naath and Arabic Words and Phrases

Anyanya – The Anyanya movement was the movement of the first Sudanese Civil War between the Africans of the country's southern part against the northern Arab's Islamic-led government. Anyanya is a term in the Madi language which literally means 'snake venom'.

Arami – An Arabic name for a thief

Biliu ke wuor liel-char– You will die while running away, black ass

Bor-Nuara – A traditional Nuer punching fight

Chako ke kuen thiang – We counted them last night

Dim Dim – The sound of a big machine gun

E jin Dhol Doak ka Leer laa – are you a Dok son from Leer?

Fallata – A Sudanese tribe

Fateh Fuul – A Sudanese meal

Gatdoda – Grandson

Gatlow – A name given to kids to feel happy

Gir Gir – the sound of machine guns heard from a distance

Goa – Good

Gojam – Armed civilians who voluntarily defend themselves against the enemy; the name is of Ethiopian origin.

Guandit – Elder

Guandong – Grandfather

Omi mat – An Arabic expression meaning 'My mother is dead'

Isimek munu? – An Arabic expression meaning 'What is yourname?'

Isimi – An Arabic expression meaning ‘My name is...’

Inta min ween, ya arami – An Arabic name for ‘Where are you from, thief?’

Jallapni – The Nuer name for Arabs

JEM – Justice and Equality Movement/Sudan

Jinubi – An Arabic name for South Sudanese

Jinubin sabiin – An Arabic expression meaning ‘South Sudanese are tough’

Jiooo – Yes

Kachdu – You are untruthful

Kalam ya zol inta – An Arabic expression meaning ‘You talk!’

Kawayni – The Nuer name for Europeans and the English.

Keneidhiech – They are five people.

Kuar – Leader/boss.

Kusumak – An Arabic insult for ‘Your mother’s ass’

Kuoth-nhial – God of heaven

Lakin ana ma arami Kuar – An Arabic expression meaning ‘But I am not a thief’

Lalob tree – *Balanites aegyptiaca* which is believed to be a member of either Zygophyllaceae or the Balanitaceae and grows in South Sudan

Luak – A kraal, manger or dwelling for cows

Nyariek Thing Luoy – The most beautiful Nuer girl of the 20th century

Mandong – Grandmother

Man-Mi-diit – Mother of Mi-diit

Mushra – An Arabic word for mortuary

Rakoba – A kind of hut made out of discarded boxes and plastic sheeting

Sabiit miin – A military challenge or password at night

Salam alek? – An Arabic greeting meaning ‘How are you?’

Shisha – A single or multi stemmed hookah for smoking.

SPLM/A – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army/South Sudan

SPLM/A-North – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army/Sudan

SPLM/A IO – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition.

Takuf Takuf – The sound of an AK47 Machine Gun.

Thialem/Thialee – A local slang word for SPLM/SPLA

Thoar-katuom - Nuer name for dates

Toroboro – An alias for the Sudanese rebel Justice and Equality Movement

Tukul – An Arabic name for a grass-thatched hut

Wiiw – A cry made by ladies when they are frightened

Wo – A cry of despair

Wuu Wuu – The sound of a heavy weapon heard from afar

Yayo – A local slang word for IO

Zol da min Dok – An Arabic expression meaning ‘this person is from Dok’

A Chronology of Important Events

1820 – Egypt conquers Northern parts of Sudan, developing the ivory and slave trades.

1880s – Nationalist revolutions, led by Mohammed Ahmed Al-Mahdi, begin to form in opposition to Egyptian and British rule (at the time Egypt was under British rule). The Egyptians and British are defeated.

1885 – Al- Mahdi establishes a theocracy in Khartoum.

1890s – The British regain control of Sudan with military campaigns led by Lord Kitchener.

1899 – Egypt and Britain agree on a shared government of the Sudan.

1930 – The British Civil Secretary in Khartoum declares the ‘Southern Policy’, officially stating what has always been in practice: the north and south, because of their many cultural and religious differences, are governed as two separate states.

1946 – Britain and Khartoum (by this time, Egypt is effectively out of the picture) abruptly decide to merge North and South into a single administrative region. The Arabic language is chosen as the official language of the administration in the South, and northerners begin to hold positions in the South.

On January 1, 1956 – Independence is granted to Sudan as a single unified nation.

1958 – General Ibrahim Abboud leads a military coup against the civilian government elected earlier in the year.

1964 – The ‘October Revolution’ overthrows Abboud and an Islamic-led government is established in the country.

1969 – Jaafar Numeiri leads a military coup.

1971 – Sudanese Communist Party leaders are executed after a short-lived coup against Numeiri.

1955 – 1972 (The First Civil War)

1955 – Anticipating independence and fearing domination by the North, Southern insurgents stage a mutiny in Torit. These early rebels develop a large secessionist movement in the south, called the Anyanya. The Anyanya struggles with a lot of internal factionalism and instability, much like the SPLA will deal with the Second Civil War.

1972 – All rebel factions gather under the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) to negotiate a peace agreement with the Sudanese government. The Addis Ababa Agreement is signed, granting the South considerable autonomy and a share of natural resources. Juba is made the capital in that agreement. A ten-year hiatus in the conflict follows.

1970s – As Sudan gains legitimacy in peacetime, Western countries begin supplying the government with arms. The United States sells Sudan a great deal of equipment, hoping to counteract the Soviet support to Marxist Ethiopians and Libyans.

1978 – Chevron finds large oil fields in the Upper Nile and Southern Kordofan regions. Shortly thereafter, oil is discovered in Bentiu.

1980 – Khartoum attempts to redraw the boundaries of southern Sudan, transferring oilfields to the North. When this fails, Khartoum begins taking the territory by force, including the Muglad Basin. The Muglad Basin is an area near the north-south border that was claimed by Khartoum and renamed, using the Arabic word for ‘unity’.

1983 – 2005 (The Second Civil War)

Late 1970s – Repeated violations of the Addis Ababa Agreement by the north lead to increased unrest in the south.

May 1983 – 105 Battalion, stationed at Bor and composed mostly of ex-Anyanya troops, is attacked after refusing to transfer to the North. The battalion flees to Ethiopia.

June 1983 – The Sudanese government officially abrogates the Addis Ababa Agreement and divides the south into three regions. The Southern regional government is dissolved. President Numeiry institutes a bold Islamification campaign, transforming Sudan into a Muslim Arab state. Mutinies occur throughout the South and rebel forces grow.

July 1983 – The Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) led by Dr John Garang, forms in Ethiopia.

September 1983 – Numeiry issues a set of decrees, known as the September Laws, imposing Sharia law throughout the country. These laws include extreme punishments such as cutting off offenders’ hands for stealing.

Mid-1980s – Civil war rages through the south. The SPLA battles government forces and attempts to gain control. Raids by the

Murahaleen – government-armed Arab militias – reach their peak. Villages throughout the south are repeatedly attacked and destroyed. Slavery becomes widespread. As villages are ransacked and survivors flee, the ‘Lost Boys’ begin their walk across southern Sudan into Ethiopia.

1985 – After widespread popular unrest, President Numeiri is deposed by a Transitional Military Council and Sadiq Al-Mahdi rises to power as Prime Minister in 1986. Various peace negotiation attempts between Al-Mahdi and the SPLM/A fail as the conflict worsens.

June 1989 – President Omer Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir topples the government and begins deploying army militiamen notoriously known as the People’s Defence Forces to raid villages in the south alongside the Murahaleen.

1991 – The SPLA and all the refugees at Pinyudo are forced to leave Ethiopia when Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam is overthrown.

August 28, 1991 – Three members of the SPLM/SPLA Political-Military High Command make the Nasir Declaration. This creates the SPLM-Nasir faction which splits from the main movement, SPLM/A. Shortly after the split, there is a massacre against the Dinka people in Bor, among other areas. A second rebel faction forms in 1992, followed by a third in 1993. Eventually, the rebel factions unite in a coalition called SPLA-United led by Dr Riek Machar Teny and calls for the separation of the south, which is contrary to the policy of the main movement led by Dr John Garang de Mabior, which calls for a united secular and multi-ethnic New Sudan.

1993 – The UNHCR Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya begins accepting Sudanese refugees.

1993 – A peace initiative for Sudan is pursued by Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) but has little effect. Conflict in Sudan continues to worsen.

April 21, 1997 – The Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA) is signed. The agreement covers freedom of religion, movement and so on, and defines a federal structure with a formula for revenue sharing. The signatories are: The South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM) under Dr Riek Machar Teny, The Union of Sudan African Parties (USAP) under Samuel Aru Bol, Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under Kerubino Kuanyin Bol and the Equatoria Defence Force (EDF) under Thiopholus Ochang Loti. The agreement doesn't last longer as it doesn't gain an international legitimacy.

August 20, 1998 – After embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the United States launches a missile attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory outside Khartoum that it believes is producing chemical weapons for terrorist groups.

1999 – Almost 4,000 Sudanese refugee boys are approved for resettlement in the United States.

1999 – Sudan begins to export oil.

2001 – Famine affects three million Sudanese.

September 2001 – President George Bush appoints former U.S. Senator John Danforth as the President's Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan.

2002 – Dr John Garang, the leader of the SPLM/A Torit faction, reconciles with Dr Riek Machar, the leader of SPLM/A Nasir faction. Dr Garang remains the leader of the unified SPLM, whereas Dr Riek again becomes one of the senior commanders of SPLM/SPLA.

2002 – Machakos Protocol talks in Kenya lead to a breakthrough agreement with southern rebels on ending the civil war. The Machakos Protocol paves the way for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which will provide for the south to seek self-determination after six years.

February 2003 – The Darfur conflict begins.

January 9, 2005 – Peace is finally brokered between the southern rebels and the Government of Sudan. The Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) is signed, granting autonomy to the south for a six-year trial period, after which the south will have the opportunity to vote to secede. The agreement calls for a permanent ceasefire and sharing of oil revenues. Islamic law remains in effect in the north, while its use in the south is decided regionally.

July 9, 2005 – Dr John Garang de Mabior, the former rebel leader, is sworn in as First Vice President, and the new constitution gives a large degree of autonomy to the south.

July 30, 2005 – Dr John Garang dies in a helicopter crash three weeks after being sworn in as First Vice President of Sudan. Riots result, but peace continues. Cdr. Salva Kiir Mayardit takes over and Dr Riek Machar deputises him. As per the CPA, a referendum is scheduled to be held in 2011 to determine if southern Sudan will remain a part of Sudan or secede and gain its independence. The people of southern Sudan await their historic opportunity for peace and stability, after a 21-year conflict that has claimed at least two million lives. Meanwhile, in Darfur, the number of dead and displaced continues to grow, and the conflict rages on with no clear end in sight.

April 11– 15, 2010 – Sudan holds its first multiparty national elections in over 20 years. Key opposition parties boycott at the last minute,

alleging election fraud. Omer Hassan Al- Bashir wins the presidency of Sudan. Salva Kiir, on the other hand, wins the presidency of the Autonomous Government of Southern Sudan.

January 9, 2011 – Southern Sudanese vote in a referendum stipulated in the 2005 CPA to decide if the region will separate from the rest of the country and become an independent nation or not. When results are tabulated, the vote for separation is overwhelming. A six-month period of transition begins.

July 9, 2011 – The Republic of South Sudan celebrates its birthday.

July 14, 2011 – The Republic of South Sudan joins the United Nations as the world's 193rd nation.

July 29, 2011 – South Sudan is admitted to the African Union.

February 23, 2012 – South Sudan shuts down oil production after accusing Sudan of stealing \$815 million worth of its oil. Sudan says it confiscated the crude oil to make up for unpaid fees to use the pipeline and processing facilities in its territory.

March 26, 2012 – The two countries, Sudan and South Sudan, clash over rights to the oilfields around Heglig, a town just at the border between Sudan and South Sudan.

May 3, 2012 – President Salva Kiir sends letters to more than 75 government officials and eight foreign governments in an attempt to recover \$4 billion allegedly lost to corruption.

May 30, 2012 – A spokeswoman for the UN peacekeeping mission confirms the full withdrawal of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) from Abyei. The Sudanese police forces remain in the area.

September 27, 2012 – Al-Bashir and Kiir sign a deal to resume oil exports and establish a demilitarised zone. The presidents do not reach an agreement on the status of Abyei.

January 6, 2013 – Al-Bashir and Kiir agree to temporary arrangements for the Abyei region.

March 8, 2013 – Defence ministers from Sudan and South Sudan sign an agreement to soon withdraw their respective military forces from the 14-mile-wide demilitarised zone between the countries.

May 2013 – President Salva Kiir dissolves key SPLM organs, namely: the Political Bureau and the National Liberation Council and the National and States Secretariat on account that their mandates have expired. This move comes after Dr Riek and other SPLM leaders have openly expressed their intention to contest the SPLM chairmanship in the 3rd SPLM national Convention.

(The beginning of the South Sudan Civil War)

January 2013 – President Salva Kiir dismisses six deputy chiefs of staff and 29 major generals from the army.

February 2013 – President Salva Kiir retires 117 army generals.

July 23, 2013 – President Salva Kiir Mayardit dismisses his entire Cabinet, including Vice President Dr Riek Machar Teny.

December 6, 2013 – senior leaders of SPLM give President Salva Kiir an ultimatum ‘to put things right or else they will resort to the party constitution and act accordingly.’

December 15, 2013 – On Sunday, senior SPLM leaders, including Dr Riek Machar, Pagan Amum and Rebecca Nyandeng, among others, vote to boycott the meeting of the National Liberation Council at the Nyakuron neighbourhood in Juba.

2013 – (The Civil War)

December 15, 2013 – At 9:30 p.m. South Sudan local time, fighting breaks out in Juba, South Sudan's capital within the presidential units known as Tiger Battalion.

President Salva Kiir Mayardit, an ethnic Dinka/Jieng, dressed in military uniform, in the morning, announces it as a failed coup attempt on the government by his former Vice President Dr Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer/Naath. Shortly after, the South Sudanese forces deliberately start killing the Nuer/Naath civilians based on their ethnicity and perceived political affiliation. Dr Riek, on the other hand, denies President Kiir's claim and instead calls it a failed assassination attempt against him. He forms a resistance movement against the government known as SPLM/SPLA in opposition (SPLM/A IO). Fighting spreads to other areas across the country, leading to the flight of most of the civilians. The Nuer/Naath people to whom Machar belongs are targeted in Juba and they are forced to stay for almost a decade in the Juba UNMISS's Protection of Civilians sites (POCs), among other camps across the country.

2014 – (Civilians go to UNMISS {United Nation Mission in South Sudan} camps)

Many civilians in the Upper Nile Region seek a safe haven in UNMISS POCs in Bentiu, Bor and Malakal, other six places in the country.

January 2014 – The first of many ceasefires after the opposition has taken most of the towns in South Sudan's Upper Nile Region is negotiated, declared, and quickly broken by the warring parties because they still have the thirst to continue with the war as they are only one month into the fighting.

2014 – On the morning of April 15, opposition forces capture Bentiu from the government troops and the allied Darfuri rebels. Many Darfuri traders who seek shelter at the Khalibalek mosque are killed after some of the Darfuri rebels are alleged to have fled to the mosque and the hospital.

2014 – On the morning of April 17, mostly Dinka/Jieng men that are mobilised by the government, march to the UNMISS compound outside Bor town, where they kill and abduct the internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly Nuer/Naath, besides looting the camp.

December 22, 2014 – Dr Riek Machar declares the dissolution of the 10 states and the formation of 21 new states in a federal system. The declaration is not recognised by the South Sudanese government.

2014-2015 — (The new wave of displacement)

June 2014 – 1.4 million people who have not left their homes for UNMISS compounds in January 2014 now go to UNMISS compounds and refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia.

Four million people – one-third of the country's population – face critical food shortages. The war has interrupted the farming season, making food scarce and expensive, mostly in Upper Nile Region.

October 22, 2015 – Over 60 civilians are suffocated in a shipping container in Leer by government troops.

October 2015 – President Salva Kiir issues a decree establishing 28 states in place of the 10 previously established states. The decree establishes the new states largely along ethnic lines.

2016 – (Civilians are forced into refugee camps)

After the August 2015 peace agreement is signed by President Salva Kiir, the Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of SPLM/A, and Dr Riek Machar, the Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of SPLM/A-IO, the Transitional Government of National Unity is formed on April 26, 2016. The opposition goes to Juba with a force of 1,370 soldiers, as per the agreement.

July 8, 2016 – Another fight breaks out in Juba in the Presidential Palace, popularly known as J1, between the bodyguards of the two leaders, President Kiir and Dr Riek. More than 200 soldiers are killed on both sides. The result of the July 8 battle at J1 triggers a new wave of displacement in the country as the war intensifies again. About 2,000 South Sudanese refugees have been crossing into Uganda daily.

2017 – (Fighting and famine)

January 2017 – President Salva Kiir decrees a further subdivision of the country from 28 into 32 states.

February 2017 – Famine is declared in parts of Unity State, mostly in Leer and Mayendit counties. The U.N. calls the famine a ‘man-made catastrophe’ which is brought on by conflict and economic collapse.

In May of the same year, a unilateral ceasefire is announced by both parties, SPLM/A and SPLM/A IO.

July 2017 – The hunger and malnutrition crisis continues in most parts of the Upper Nile Region, but famine conditions are a little improved.

August 2017 – The UN reports that the number of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda surpasses 1 million.

2017 – The sixth Command Council conference of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) sits to change the historical army's name to South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF). President Salva Kiir, the Commander-in-Chief of SPLA, issues a decree providing to formally change the name in 2018.

2018 – (The Revitalised Agreement)

April 2018 – The terms of the 2015 peace agreement expire for both the transitional government and the president's office.

June 2018 – President Kiir and Dr Riek meet for the first time in two years.

August 12, 2018 – President Salva Kiir and the opposition leader, Dr Riek Machar, sign, in Khartoum, under the auspices of IGAD through Omar al-Bashir, former Sudanese President, a new, revitalised ceasefire and power-sharing agreement.

2019 – The “revitalised” peace agreement that is signed by the government and opposition leaders in 2018 moves very slowly. It also does not end the fighting between government forces and various rebel forces across the country. The agreement envisions a

transitional government led by President Salva Kiir with Dr Riek Machar as First Vice President and four additional Vice Presidents. The agreement provides for an eight-month pre-transitional period, followed by a 36-month transitional period.

January 31, 2019 – Government forces and SPLA IO agree to a ceasefire deal in Wau.

April 11, 2019 – The Vatican holds a spiritual retreat for peace in South Sudan. At the end of the two-day meeting with the South Sudanese leaders, Pope Francis shocks those present by kneeling and kissing the feet of South Sudan's former warring leaders.

September 9, 2019 – Dr Riek Machar arrives in Juba to meet with President Salva Kiir.

September 10, 2019 – President Salva Kiir and Dr Riek Machar meet in Juba, agreeing that security forces will be screened, a 3,000 strong force called the Republican Guard will be created to protect opposition leaders, and also on the formation of a transitional government on November 12.

September 2019 – SPLA IO decides to relocate its headquarters from Phow State to Juba.

September 13, 2019 – Sudan and South Sudan agree to reopen border crossings closed since South Sudan's independence.

October 4, 2019 – The first batch of army instructors who will train the unified army graduate arrive.

October 7, 2019 – 420 SPLA IO soldiers arrive at Luri, near Juba, to form the VIP protection unit called for by the peace deal.

October 8, 2019 – The European Union provides \$10.4 million to the

UN's World Food Programme in South Sudan.

October 19, 2019 – Dr Riek Machar arrives in Juba to discuss the November 12 peace deal.

October 2019 – President Kiir promises to form a coalition government, but Dr Riek makes an impassioned plea to the Security Council delegation in Juba on October 20, 2019, warning that the ceasefire which has been enjoyed by much of the country for over a year can fail if the unity government is not formed by November 12. Nonetheless, President Kiir, while addressing the South Sudan National Police Service at the 7th Command Council conference, instead declares the formation of the government of national unity by November 12 with or without Dr Riek. Other sticking points include the carving out of state boundaries, the creation of a unified national army and the protection of Dr Riek.

November 6, 2019 – Saudi Arabia gives the World Food Programme dates valued at \$160,000 to feed school children in the Greater Upper Nile area.

November 7, 2019 – a Tripartite Summit is called by President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda to assess the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-TGoNU). The Tripartite Summit is attended by President Salva Kiir, Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Military Council of Sudan, and Dr Riek Machar. The Tripartite Summit extends the formation of the Government of National Unity for 100 days effective from November 12.

November 8, 2019 – Germany gives the World Food Programme \$10.9 million to support humanitarian activities and flood response in South Sudan.

November 10, 2019 – Pope Francis says he wishes to visit South Sudan in 2020.

November 14, 2019 – The United States provides \$92.5 million in humanitarian assistance through USAID.

November 21, 2019 – Juba City gets electricity for the first time with the launch of a power plant that will supply electricity to about 50,000 to 70,000 households.

November 28, 2019 – Sudan and South Sudan extend an oil transit deal that allows South Sudan to export its oil through Sudan until March 2022.

November 29, 2019 – The IGAD calls for the international community to lift sanctions on Sudan and South Sudan.

December 4, 2019 – Government and opposition negotiators finish three days of meetings on the number of states without consensus and agree to meet again in ten days.

December 8, 2019 – Italy donates 1 million Euros to help with flooding in South Sudan.

December 17, 2019 – President Salva Kiir and Dr Riek Machar end days of meetings without a breakthrough on the number of states.

December 23, 2019 – South Korea donates US\$500,000 to the World Food Programme for refugees in South Sudan.

December 23, 2019 – The Joint Military Ceasefire Commission begins sending forces to training centres to form the united army.

February 14, 2020 – President Kiir announces South Sudan will return to 10 states in addition to the establishment of three Administrative Areas of Abyei, Pibor and Ruweng.

February 22, 2020 – Dr Riek is sworn in as First Vice President among four other Vice Presidents for the creation of the unity government, ending the civil war. Among the Vice Presidents is Hon. Rebecca Nyandengde Mabior, the widow of the late Dr John Garang de Mabior. The two leaders have said outstanding issues will be negotiated under the new government.

April 5, 2020 – The first case of COVID-19 is confirmed in South Sudan in a 29-year-old patient working for the UN who arrived from The Netherlands on February 28, 2020.

May 14, 2020 – The first death from COVID-19 is recorded.

May 18, 2020 – First Vice President Dr Riek announces that he and his wife have tested positive for COVID-19.

May 19, 2020 – All members of the nation's 15-member Coronavirus Taskforcetest positive for COVID-19. Shortly after, two more Vice Presidents test positive for COVID-19 too.

August 9, 2020 – Seventy people are killed in Tonj East after SSPDFsoldiers attempt to disarm at the market.

December 11, 2020 – International food security experts from the Famine Review Committee say that Pibor County is likely in a famine. Flooding and violence have prevented access to aid.

December 31, 2020 – One million people have been displaced by floods since June. Food shortages, malaria and diarrhoeal diseases spread.

February 16, 2021 – The United Nations Organisation, including the

WHO and UNICEF, launched the second round of polio vaccination targeted at 2.8 million children. Workers have been going from house to house using a polio vaccine to inoculate children.

April 6, 2021 – Vaccination for COVID-19 starts in South Sudan.

Acknowledgements

The book you have been reading is a historical fiction as has been made clear on the Disclaimer page. However, the background material and some names of places and army officers and men in South Sudan are authentic. The idea to write this book was reinforced by my personal visits to Leer and other parts of Unity State in 2015. One of the visits was occasioned by the need and obligation to lay to rest the body of my late uncle, James Bichok Puok Baluang.

I have decided to put this first-hand information into book form after numerous conversations with the civilians affected as well as my adventurous journey from Leer to Panakuach when we were dislodged from Leer town on 18th May 2015 by government troops.

One of the unexpected insights I gained from these interviews was the gaiety of the displaced people on the road and having fun on the way with them to let them reduce trauma and stigma.

Unless the victims receive professional treatment, compensation and a presidential apology and apology from the leaders of the different political and military camps, besides being repatriated, the shocking and disturbing sexual violence and crimes will leave physical, psychological and social impacts for decades to come. Though I know about most of the brutalities, I have tried my best to make sure the worst of these appalling crimes committed in Leer and other places in South Sudan are not mentioned in this story. This is because talking about them may provoke future violence, the prevention of which is the main aim for writing this book. Another war must be stopped from happening by all means possible in the world's newest nation, South Sudan.

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Weirial Baluang

10th October 2021 AD

