

After my walk to Kenya, when Maria found me on the road wanting to be lifted back to God, I spent many months thinking about why I should have been born at all. It was a grave mistake, it seemed, a promise that could not be fulfilled. There was a musician at Kakuma, the only musician in those early days, and he would play one song, day and night, on his stringed rababa. The melody of his song was cheerful but the lyrics were not. "It was you, mother, it was you," he sang, "it was you who birthed me, and it is you I blame." He went on to blame his mother, and all the mothers of Dinkaland, for giving birth to babies only to have them live in squalor in northwest Kenya.

There is a perception in the West that refugee camps are temporary. When images of the earthquakes in Pakistan are shown, and the survivors seen in their vast cities of shale-colored tents, waiting for food or rescue before the coming of winter, most Westerners believe that these refugees will soon be returned to their homes, that the camps will be dismantled inside of six months, perhaps a year.

But I grew up in refugee camps. I lived in Pinyudo for almost three years, Golkur for almost one year, and Kakuma for ten. In Kakuma, a small community of tents grew to a vast patchwork of shanties and buildings constructed from poles and sisal bags and mud, and this is where we lived and worked and went to school from 1992 to 2001. It is not the worst place on the continent of Africa, but it is among them.

Still, the refugees there created a life that resembled the lives of other human beings, in that we ate and talked and laughed and grew. Goods were traded, men married women, babies were born, the sick were healed and, just as often, went to Zone Eight and then to the sweet hereafter. We young people went to school, tried to stay awake and concentrate on one meal a day while distracted by the charms of Miss Gladys and girls like Tabitha. We tried to avoid trouble from other refugees—from Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda—and from the indigenous people of northwest Kenya, while always keeping our ears open to any news from home, news about our families, any opportunities to leave Kakuma temporarily or for good.

We spent the first year at Kakuma thinking we might return to our villages at any moment. We would periodically receive news of SPLA gains in Sudan and the optimistic among us would convince ourselves that a surrender from Khartoum was imminent. Some of the boys began to hear about their families—who was alive, who was dead, who had fled to Uganda or Egypt or beyond. The Sudanese diaspora continued and spread throughout the world, and at Kakuma I waited for news, any news, about my parents and siblings. The battles would continue and the refugees arrived without pause, hundreds per week, and we came to accept that Kakuma would exist forever, and that we might always live within its borders.

This was our home, and Gop Chol Kolong, the man I considered my father at the camp, was a wreck on a certain day in 1994. I had never seen him so flustered.

—We really have to get this place in order, he said. —We have to clean this place up. Then we have to build more rooms. Then we need to clean up again.

He had been saying this every morning for weeks. Mornings were the time he worried most. Every morning, he said, he was leapt upon by the snarling hyenas of his many responsibilities.

—You think two more rooms will be enough? he asked me.

I said it seemed like plenty.

—Whatever it is it won't seem like enough, he said.

He could not believe they were coming.

—I can't believe they're coming here! To this rathole!

At that point I had been living in Kakuma, with Gop Chol, for almost three years. Gop was from Marial Bai, and had come to Kakuma by way of Narus and various other stopovers. Kakuma had been born with the arrival of ten thousand boys like me who had walked through the dark and dust, but the camp grew quickly, soon

encompassing tens of thousands of Sudanese—families and portions of families, orphans, and after some time, also Rwandans, Ugandans, Somalis, even Egyptians.

After months of living in squat shelters like the ones we customarily built when first arriving at a camp, we eventually were given, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, poles and tarpaulins and materials to build more presentable homes, and so we did. Eventually many boys like me moved in with families from our hometowns and regions, to share resources and duties and to keep alive the customs of our clans. As the camp grew to twenty thousand people, to forty thousand and upward, as it grew outward into the dry wind-strewn nothingness, and as the civil war continued unabated, the camp became more permanent, and many of those, like Gop, who first considered Kakuma a stopover until conditions improved in southern Sudan, now were sending for their families.

I said nothing to Gop about the prospect of bringing his wife and three daughters to such a place, but privately I questioned it. Kakuma was a terrible place for people to live, for children to grow. But he really did not have a choice. His youngest daughter had been diagnosed with a bone disease at the clinic in Nyamlell, east of Marial Bai, and the doctor there had arranged for her transfer to Lopiding Hospital—the more sophisticated clinic near Kakuma. Gop did not know precisely when the transfer would take place, and so spent an inordinate amount of time searching for information from anyone at Lokichoggio, anyone involved in medicine or refugee transfer in any way.

—Do you think they'll be happy here? Gop asked me.

—They'll be happy to be with you, I said.

—But this place... is this any kind of place to live?

I said nothing. Despite its flaws, from the beginning it was clear that this camp would be different from those at Pinyudo and Pochalla and Narus and everywhere else we had been. Kakuma was preplanned, operated from the start by the UN, and staffed almost entirely, at first, by Kenyans. This made for an orderly enough operation, but resentment festered from within and without. The Turkana, a herding people who had occupied the Kakuma District for a thousand years, were suddenly asked to share their land—to cede a thousand acres in an instant—with tens of thousands of Sudanese and, later, Somalis, with whom they shared few cultural similarities. The Turkana resented our presence, and in turn the Sudanese resented the Kenyans, who seemed to have seized every paying job available at the camp, performing and being compensated for tasks that we Sudanese were more than capable of in Pinyudo. In turn,

the Kenyans, in their less charitable moments, thought of the Sudanese as leeches, who did little more than eat and defecate and complain when things didn't go as desired. Somewhere in there were a handful of aid workers from Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States, all of whom were careful to defer to the Africans, and who cleared out when the camp erupted into temporary chaos. This did not happen too often, but with so many nationalities represented, so many tribes and so little food and so great the volume and variety of suffering, conflict was inevitable.

What was life in Kakuma? Was it life? There was debate about this. On the one hand, we were alive, which meant that we were living a life, that we were eating and could enjoy friendships and learning and could love. But we were nowhere. Kakuma was nowhere. *Kakuma* was, we were first told, the Kenyan word for nowhere. No matter the meaning of the word, the place was not a place. It was a kind of purgatory, more so than was Pinyudo, which at least had a constant river, and in other ways resembled the southern Sudan we had left. But Kakuma was hotter, windier, far more arid. There was little in the way of grass or trees in that land; there were no forests to scavenge for materials; there was nothing for miles, it seemed, so we became dependent on the UN for everything.

Early in my days at the camp, Moses again appeared in and departed from my life. When Kakuma was still being shaped, I would take daily walks around its perimeter, to see who had made it and who had not. I saw arguments between the Sudanese and Turkana, between European aid workers and Kenyans. I saw families being re-formed, new alliances forged, and even saw Commander Secret talking passionately to a group of boys just a few years older than me. I kept clear of him and any SPLA officers, for I knew their intentions. While walking the camp's borders in the first few weeks, I learned that Achor Achor had made it after all, and that three of the original Eleven were with him.

When I saw Moses, it was not very dramatic. Early one morning in the first months of Kakuma, as I stepped over a group of young men sleeping, sharing one long blanket, their feet and heads exposed, I simply saw him. Moses. With another boy our age, he was attempting to cook some asida in a pan, over a fire in a small can. He saw me just as I saw him.

—Moses! I yelled.

—Shh! he hissed, and came to me quickly.

He turned me away from his companion and we took a walk around the perimeter of the camp.

—Don't call me Moses here, he said. Like many others at the camp, he had changed his name; in his case, it was to avoid any SPLA commanders who might be looking for him.

He was a different boy than the last time I had seen him. He had grown many inches, was built like an ox, and his forehead seemed more stern and severe—the forehead of a man. But in essential ways, in his wide crooked smile and bright smiling eyes, he was still very much Moses. He wanted immediately to tell me about his time as a soldier, and he did so with the sort of breathless excitement one might use in describing a particularly attractive girl.

—No, no, I wasn't a fighter. I never fought. I only trained, he said, answering my first question. I was greatly relieved.

—But the training! Achak, it was so different than the life here, than in Pinyudo. It was so hard. Here we have to worry about food and insects and the wind, but there they were trying to kill me! I'm sure they were trying to kill me. They killed boys there.

—They shot them?

—No, no. I don't think so.

—Not like Pinyudo, the prisoners?

—No, not like that. No bullets, they just drove them to their deaths. So many boys. They beat them, ran them into the ground, chased them back to Heaven.

We walked past a small tent, inside of which a white photographer was taking pictures of a Sudanese mother and her emaciated child.

—Did you get to shoot a gun? I asked.

—I did. That was a good day. Have you shot a gun?

I told him I had not.

—It was a good day when they gave us the guns, the Kalashnikovs. We had waited so long, and finally they had us shoot at targets. Oh man, the guns hurt! They shoot you while you're shooting the targets! They call it kickback. My shoulder is sore right now, Achak.

—Which shoulder?

He indicated his right shoulder, and I punched it.

—Don't!

I did it again. This was hard to resist.

—Don't! he said, and tackled me.

We wrestled for a few minutes and then, because we were tired and underfed, realized we had no energy to wrestle properly. We were hungrier than we had been in Pinyudo. We ate one meal a day, at night, and the rest of the day we tried to conserve our energy. I do not know why it was easier for the UN to feed the refugees of Pinyudo than it was those of Kakuma. We stood and continued walking, past a group of shelters where the SPLA's families lived.

—They gave us five bullets and they held us steady while we shot. We lay down on our stomachs to help keep still. It was very painful but I was happy to see the bullets come from my gun. I hit nothing. I don't know where my bullets went. I never saw them again. They went into the sky or something.

I told him the training sounded good.

—No, no, Achak. It wasn't good. No one thought it was good. And I was singled out for punishment. In their eyes, I did something wrong, Achak. I was late to the parade one day and they thought I was a troublemaker. They had me confused with another Moses, I later discovered. But they thought I was a bad guy so I was punished. They put me in a pen, like the pens where you keep livestock. I had to stay there for two days. I couldn't sit down. I stood for every minute until I slept. They let me sleep from dawn until the sun was up, maybe two hours. It was worse than the Arab's house. When I was with the Arab it was easy to hate him and his family and those kids. But this was so confusing. I came to Bonga to train and fight but they were fighting me. They were trying to kill me, I swear, Achak. They said it was training. They said they were making us men but I know they wanted to kill me. Have you ever felt like people were really trying to kill you, you in particular?

I pondered this question and realized I didn't know for sure.

—We ran all day, Achak. We ran up the hills and then ran down. While we ran, the trainers were hitting us, yelling at us. But the boys weren't strong enough. Those trainers were not very smart. They had their training methods and they were using them but they forgot that these boys were very sick and weak and skinny. Can you start running up hills while being beaten, Achak?

—No.

—So the boys fell. The boys fell and they broke bones. I watched one boy fall. We were running down the hill and one of the trainers started yelling at this boy, whose

name was Daniel. He was my size, but thinner. I knew when I saw him that he should not have been at Bonga. He was one of the youngest and he was so slow! He ran slower than you can walk. It was funny to watch but it was real, it was stupid the way he ran. This made the trainers so angry. They didn't want him in the camp, like they didn't want me at the camp. So they yelled at Daniel and they called him Shit. That was his name at Bonga: Shit.

We both laughed for a second about this. We couldn't help it. We had never known someone named Shit.

—We were always running up and down this hill and one time when we did this it was almost dark. The sun was down and we were having trouble seeing. There was a trainer named Comrade Francis who was cruel to everyone, but I had not seen him interact with Daniel before. This night he was everywhere Daniel was. He ran alongside him, he ran backward in front of him, always blowing a whistle. Comrade Francis had a whistle and he just blew and blew it into Daniel's face.

—And Daniel? What did he do?

—He was so sad. He didn't get angry. I think maybe he made himself deaf. He didn't seem to hear anything. He just did his running. Then Comrade Francis kicked him.

—Kicked him?

—The hill was steep, Achak. So when he kicked him it was like he flew. He flew twenty feet I think, because he was already running and had momentum. When he began to fly, Achak—sorry, I mean Valentino—when he was in the air my stomach got sick. I felt so sick. Everything dropped into my knees. I knew this was bad, that Daniel was flying down the hill with all the rocks. The sound was like the snapping of a twig. He just lay there. He lay there like he'd been dead forever.

—He was dead?

—He died right there. I saw the ribs. I didn't know this could happen. Did you know your ribs could come out of your skin?

—No.

—Three of his ribs had come through his skin, Achak. I walked up to him right after it happened. The trainer was doing nothing. He thought the boy would get up, so he was still blowing his whistle but I had heard the sound so I went to Daniel and saw his eyes open, like they were looking through me. They were dead eyes. You know what those look like. I know you do.

—Yes.

—And then I saw the ribs. They were like bones on an animal. When you slaughter an animal you can see the bones, and they're white and have blood around them, right?

—Yes.

—This was like that. The ribs were very sharp, too. They had been broken so the parts coming through his skin were very sharp, like curved knives. I was there and then the trainer yelled at me to keep going. I turned around and there were two other trainers there. I think they knew something was wrong. They beat me until I ran down the hill and I saw them surrounding Daniel. Three days later they told us all that Daniel had died of yellow fever. But everyone knew it was a lie. That's when boys began to escape. That's when I left.

Moses and I had made a circle of the camp and now were back at the site of his fire and companion and asida.

—I'll see you around, Achak, right?

I told him of course I would see him around. But we didn't actually see each other much. We spent a few weeks making journeys together in the camp, talking about the things we had seen and done, but after telling his story, Moses was not very interested in discussing the past. He saw our presence in Kenya as a great opportunity, and he seemed constantly to be thinking of ways to take advantage of it. He became a trader of goods in those early days, silverware and cups and buttons and thread, starting with a few shillings and tripling their value in a day. He was moving faster than I could, and he continued to do so. One day not long after our reunion Moses said he had some news. He had an uncle, he said, who had long ago left Sudan and was living in Cairo, had located Moses at Kakuma and was arranging for him to go to private school in Nairobi. He was not alone in this arrangement. A few dozen boys every year were sent to boarding schools in Kenya. Some had won scholarships, some had located or were located by relatives with means.

—Sorry, Moses said.

—It's okay, I said. —Write me a letter.

Moses never wrote a letter, because boys don't write letters to boys, but he did leave one day, just before refugee-camp school would begin for the rest of us. I would not hear from him for almost ten years, until we found that we were both living in North America—myself in Atlanta and he at the University of British Columbia. He would call once every few weeks, or I would call him, and his voice was always a salve

and an inspiration. He could not be beaten. He went to school in Nairobi and Canada and always looked courageously forward, even with an 8 branded behind his ear. Nothing about Moses could be defeated.

Maria was living with foster parents, with a man and his wife from her hometown, in the area of Kakuma where the more or less intact families had set up their homes. Maria had lived with three other young women and an old man—the grandfather of one of the women—until the man died and the women were either married off or returned to Sudan, leaving Maria available for the claiming. One day I spent a morning looking for her, and finally saw her shape in a corner of Kakuma, arranging men's garments on a clothesline.

—Maria!

She turned and smiled.

—Sleeper! I was looking for you last week in school.

She called me Sleeper and I did not mind. I had so many names at Kakuma and this was the most poetic. I would allow Maria to call me anything she wished, for she had saved me from the road at night.

—What class are you in this year? I asked.

—Standard Five, she said.

—Ooh! Standard Five! I bowed deeply before her. —A very special girl!

—This is what they say.

We both laughed. I hadn't realized she was so extraordinary in her academics. She was younger than I, and to be in Standard Five! She was surely the youngest in the class. —Are these all your clothes?

I pointed to a pair of pants that reached the ground. Whoever owned them was at least six-and-a-half feet tall.

—My father here. He was the bicycle man in my town.

—He fixed bicycles?

—He fixed them, sold them. He says he was close to my father. I don't remember him. Now I'm with them. He calls me his daughter.

There was so much work, Maria said. More work than she'd ever done or heard of. Between the chores and school, after sunset she was too exhausted to speak. The man she lived with expected two sons to join them soon at the camp, and Maria knew her workload would increase threefold when they arrived. She finished hanging the

clothes and looked into my eyes.

—What do you think of this place, Achak?

She had a way of looking at me that that was very different than most Sudanese girls, who did not often meet your eye so directly, did not speak so plainly.

—Kakuma? I said.

—Yes, Kakuma. There's nothing here but us. Don't you find that weird? That it's only people and dust? We've already cut down all the trees and grass for our homes and firewood. And now what?

—What do you mean?

—We just stay here? Do we stay here always, till we die?

Until that moment I hadn't thought of dying in Kakuma.

—We stay till the war ends, then we go home, I said. It was Gop Chol's constant and optimistic refrain, and I suppose I had been fairly convinced. Maria laughed loudly at this.

—You're not serious, are you, Sleeper?

—Maria!

It was a woman's voice coming from the shelter.

—Girl, come here!

Maria made a sour face and sighed.

—I'll look for you at school when we start again. See you, Sleeper.

Gop Chol was a teacher loosely affiliated with the SPLA, and was a man of vision and careful planning. Together, we had constructed our shelter, considered one of the better homes in our neighborhood. With the UN-provided poles and plastic sheeting, we built a home, with palm-tree leaves on top, keeping it cool during the day and warm at night. The walls were mud, our beds assemblages of sisal bags. But it was so hot in Kakuma most nights that we slept outside. We slept under the open sky, and I studied outside, under the light of the moon or the kerosene lamp we shared.

Like Mr. Kondit, Gop insisted that I study constantly, lest the future of Sudan be in jeopardy. He too imagined that once the war was over, and once independence for southern Sudan had been achieved, those of us educated in Pinyudo and Kakuma, and benefiting from the expertise and materials of the international community hosting us, would be ready to lead a new Sudan.

But it was difficult for us to see this future, for at Kakuma, all was dust. Our mattresses were full of dust, our books and food were plagued with dust. To eat a bite of food without the grind of sand between one's molars was unheard of. Any pens we borrowed or were given worked sporadically; the dust would clog one in an hour and that was that. Pencils were the standard and even they were rare.

I blacked out a dozen times a day. When I stood up quickly the corners of my vision would darken and I would wake up on the ground, always, strangely, uninjured. Stepping into darkness, Achor Achor called it.

Achor Achor was better connected to the prevailing expressions of the young men at the camp, for he still lived among the unaccompanied minors. He shared a shelter with six other boys and three men, all former soldiers in the SPLA. One of the men, twenty years old, was missing his right hand. We called him Fingers.

There was not enough food, and the Sudanese, an agrarian people, were not allowed to keep livestock in the camp, and the Turkana would not allow the Sudanese to keep any outside the camp. Inside Kakuma, there was no room to grow crops of any kind, and the soil was unfit for almost any agriculture anyway. A few vegetables could be raised near the water taps, but such paltry gardens went almost nowhere in meeting the needs of forty thousand refugees, many of whom were suffering from anemia.

Every day in school, students would be absent due to illness. The bones of boys my age were attempting to grow, but there were not enough nutrients in our food. So there was diarrhea, dysentery, and typhoid. Early on in the life of the school, when a student was ill, the school was notified, and the students were encouraged to pray for that boy. When the boy returned to school, he would be applauded, though there were some boys who felt it best to keep their distance from those who had just been sick. When a boy did not recover, our teachers would call us together before classes, and tell us that there was bad news, that this certain boy had died. Some of us would cry, and others would not. Many times, I was not sure if I had known the boy, and so I just waited until the crying boys were done crying. Then the lesson would continue, with those of us who did not know the boy hiding our small satisfaction that this death would mean that school would be dismissed early that day. A dead boy meant a half day, and any day that we could go home to sleep meant that we could rest and be better able to fight off disease ourselves.

After some time, though, there were too many boys dying, and there was no time to mourn each one. Those who knew the dead boy would mourn privately, while the

healthy would hope we would not get sick. Class would go on; there were no more half days.

This made study difficult, and academic achievement near impossible. Frustrated with it all, many boys would simply not go to school. Of sixty-eight boys in my junior-high class, only thirty-eight went on to high school. Still, it was safer than being in Sudan, and we had nothing else. I was hungry, but I was thankful every day that I seemed to be free, for the time being, from the threat of SPLA enlistment. There were fewer canings, fewer reprisals, less militarism in general. We were, for a time, no longer Seeds, no longer the Red Army. We were simply boys, and there was, after a time, basketball.

I discovered basketball at Kakuma, and I quickly came to believe that I was very good, that like Manute Bol, I would be brought to the United States to play professionally. Basketball would never become as popular as soccer in the camp, but it attracted hundreds of boys, the tall ones, the quick ones, those who liked the chance to get more touches than we would in one of the mass herdings that passed for soccer. The Ugandans were good with basketball strategy—they knew the game—the Somalis were quick, but it was the Sudanese who dominated, our long legs and arms simply outclassing the rest. When a pickup game came together, and the Sudanese banded against whatever team could be assembled against us, we invariably won, no matter how good the outside shooting was, no matter how quick the guards were, no matter how much will the opponents could muster. It gave us great pride to think of ourselves as we once had, as the kings of Africa, the monyjang, the chosen people of God.

In the days before his family was to arrive, Gop began to posit various scenarios by which his wife and daughters would not make it to Kakuma. They could be shot by bandits, he would suggest. I would tell him that that was not possible, that they would be coming with many others, would be safe, perhaps even in a vehicle. Gop would be content for an hour or so, and then he would get positively manic, taking apart his bed and putting it together again, and sliding back into crushing doubt. “What if my daughters don’t recognize me?” he asked six times each day. To this I could not muster an answer, given that I no longer could remember what my own parents looked like. Worse, the daughters of Gop were younger, far younger, than I had been when I left home. His three daughters had all been under five, and now it was eight years later. None would know Gop by sight.

—Of course they'll know you, I said. —All girls know their father.

—You're right. You're right, Achak. Thank you. I'm thinking too much.

Each day, Gop waited for news about those who were coming to Kakuma. We occasionally received word about a movement of refugees, and would anticipate their arrival and prepare for it. Even after three years, any given week could bring a thousand new people, and the camp continued to grow outward by miles, such that I could walk a new avenue each morning. Kakuma grew to encompass Kakuma I, II, III, and IV. It was a refugee city with its own suburbs.

But most of the arrivals came from regions of Sudan, and particularly those villages closer to Kenya. Few were from anywhere near Marial Bai. Most of those I asked had never heard of my village. And when they knew anything of northern Bahr al-Ghazal, they provided sweeping news of its elimination from the planet.

—You're from northern Bahr al-Ghazal? one man said. —Everyone there is dead.

Another man, elderly and missing his right leg, was more specific.

—Northern Bahr al-Ghazal is now the home of the murahaleen. They've taken over. It's their grazing land. There's nothing there to go back to.

One day, news of my region came from a boy I did not know well. I was at the water tap before school when the boy, named Santino, ran to me, explaining that there was a man at Lopiding Hospital who was from Marial Bai. Another boy had been at the hospital for malaria and had begun talking to the man, who mentioned my hometown, and this man said he even remembered me, Achak Deng. So I was obligated to find a way to Lopiding, quickly, I thought, for this was the first time in many years that someone had come to Kakuma from Marial Bai.

But then I thought of Daniel Dut, another boy I knew who had awaited news of his own family, only to learn that they were all dead. For months afterward, Daniel had insisted that he wished he'd never found out, that it was far easier to walk through life in doubt and with hope than knowing that everyone was gone. Knowing your family was dead brought on visions of how they died, how they might have suffered, how their bodies might have been abused after death. So I didn't immediately seek out the Marial Bai man in the hospital. When I heard, a week later, that he was gone, I was not unhappy.

The announcement of the census was made while Gop was waiting for the coming of his wife and daughters, and this complicated his peace of mind. To serve us, to feed

us, the UNHCR and Kakuma's many aid groups needed to know how many refugees were at the camp. Thus, in 1994 they announced they would count us. It would only take a few days, they said. To the organizers I am sure it seemed a very simple, necessary, and uncontroversial directive. But for the Sudanese elders, it was anything but.

—What do you think they have planned? Gop Chol wondered aloud.

I didn't know what he meant by this, but soon I understood what had him, and the majority of Sudanese elders, greatly concerned. Some learned elders were reminded of the colonial era, when Africans were made to bear badges of identification on their necks.

—Could this counting be a pretext of a new colonial period? Gop mused. —It's very possible. Probable even!

I said nothing.

At the same time, there were practical, less symbolic, reasons to oppose the census, including the fact that many elders imagined that it would decrease, not increase, our rations. If they discovered there were fewer of us than had been assumed, the food donations from the rest of the world would drop. The more pressing and widespread fear among young and old at Kakuma was that the census would be a way for the UN to kill us all. These fears were only exacerbated when the fences were erected.

The UN workers had begun to assemble barriers, six feet tall and arranged like hallways. The fences would ensure that we would walk single file on our way to be counted, and thus counted only once. Even those among us, the younger Sudanese primarily, who were not so worried until then, became gravely concerned when the fences went up. It was a malevolent-looking thing, that maze of fencing, orange and opaque. Soon even the best educated among us bought into the suspicion that this was a plan to eliminate the Dinka. Most of the Sudanese my age had learned of the Holocaust, and were convinced that this was a plan much like that used to eliminate the Jews in Germany and Poland. I was dubious of the growing paranoia, but Gop was a believer. As rational a man as he was, he had a long memory for injustices visited upon the people of Sudan.

—What isn't possible, boy? he demanded. —See where we are? You tell me what isn't possible at this time in Africa!

But I had no reason to distrust the UN. They had been feeding us at Kakuma for years. There was not enough food, but they were the ones providing for everyone, and thus it seemed nonsensical that they would kill us after all this time.

—Yes, he reasoned, —but see, perhaps now the food has run out. The food is gone, there’s no more money, and Khartoum has paid the UN to kill us. So the UN gets two things: they get to save food, and they are paid to get rid of us.

—But how will they get away with it?

—That’s easy, Achak. They say that we caught a disease only the Dinka can get. There are always illnesses unique to certain people, and this is what will happen. They’ll say there was a Dinka plague, and that all the Sudanese are dead. This is how they’ll justify killing every last one of us.

—That’s impossible, I said.

—Is it? he asked. —Was Rwanda impossible?

I still thought that Gop’s theory was unreliable, but I also knew that I should not forget that there were a great number of people who would be happy if the Dinka were dead. So for a few days, I did not make up my mind about the head count. Meanwhile, public sentiment was solidifying against our participation, especially when it was revealed that the fingers of all those counted, after being counted, would be dipped in ink.

—Why the ink? Gop asked.

I didn’t know.

—The ink is a fail-safe measure to ensure the Sudanese will be exterminated.

I said nothing, and he elaborated. Surely if the UN did not kill us Dinka while in the lines, he theorized, they would kill us with this ink on the fingers. How could the ink be removed? It would, he thought, enter our bodies when we ate.

—This seems very much like what they did to the Jews, Gop said.

People spoke a lot about the Jews in those days, which was odd, considering that a short time before, most of the boys I knew thought the Jews were an extinct race. Before we learned about the Holocaust in school, in church we had been taught rather crudely that the Jews had aided in the killing of Jesus Christ. In those teachings, it was never intimated that the Jews were a people still inhabiting the earth. We thought of them as mythological creatures who did not exist outside the stories of the Bible.

The night before the census, the entire series of fences, almost a mile long, was torn down. No one took responsibility, but many were quietly satisfied.

In the end, after countless meetings with the Kenyan leadership at the camp, the Sudanese elders were convinced that the head count was legitimate and was needed to provide better services to the refugees. The fences were rebuilt, and the census was

conducted a few weeks later. But in a way, those who feared the census were correct, in that nothing very good came from it. After the count, there was less food, fewer services, even the departure of a few smaller programs. When they were done counting, the population of Kakuma had decreased by eight thousand people in one day.

How had the UNHCR miscounted our numbers before the census? The answer is called recycling. Recycling was popular at Kakuma and is favored at most refugee camps, and any refugee anywhere in the world is familiar with the concept, even if they have a different name for it. The essence of the idea is that one can leave the camp and re-enter as a different person, thus keeping his first ration card and getting another when he enters again under a new name. This means that the recycler can eat twice as much as he did before, or, if he chooses to trade the extra rations, he can buy or otherwise obtain anything else he needs and is not being given by the UN—sugar, meat, vegetables. The trading resulting from extra ration cards provided the basis for a vast secondary economy at Kakuma, and kept thousands of refugees from anemia and related illnesses. At any given time, the administrators of Kakuma thought they were feeding eight thousand more people than they actually were. No one felt guilty about this small numerical deception.

The ration-card economy made commerce possible, and the ability of different groups to manipulate and thrive within the system led soon enough to a sort of social hierarchy at Kakuma. At the top of the ladder as a group were the Sudanese, because our sheer numbers dominated the camp. But on an individual basis, the Ethiopians were the top social caste—a few thousand representatives of that country's middle class who were forced out with Mengistu. They lived in Kakuma I, and owned a good portion of the prosperous businesses. Their rivals in trade were the Somalis and the Eritreans, who found a way to coexist with the Ethiopians, though their countrymen were at odds with each other at home. Meanwhile there was tension between the Somalis and the Bantu, a long-suffering group who had been transplanted from another Kenyan camp, Dadaab. The Bantu had first been made slaves in Mozambique and in the 1800s migrated to Somalia, where they endured two hundred years of persecution. They were not allowed to own land, or given access to political representation at any level. When civil war engulfed Somalia in the 1990s their situation worsened, as their farms and homes were raided, their men killed, and their women raped. There were eventually some seventeen thousand Bantu in Kakuma, and even there they were not always safe, as their numbers brought resentment

from many Sudanese, who considered the camp theirs.

Just below the merchants were the SPLA commanders, and under them, the Ugandans—only four hundred or so, most of them affiliated with Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group at odds with the ruling National Resistance Movement. The Ugandans couldn't go back; most were well-known at home and had prices on their heads. Sprinkled around the camp there were Congolese, Burundians, Eritreans, and a few hundred Rwandans who many suspected had been participants in the genocide and were unwelcome in their homeland.

Somewhere near the bottom of it all sat the unaccompanied minors, the Lost Boys. We had no money, no family, and little means to attain either. One step up from this low rung could be gained if one found his way into a family. Living with Gop Chol had afforded me some status and a few privileges, but I knew that once Gop's family arrived, it would be difficult to spread the family's rations around, and the many items necessary—with so many young girls in the home—would mean that there needed to be more income in our home, and an extra ration card was the beginning of the flow of wealth.

—One of us will have to recycle once the girls get here, Gop said one day.

And I knew this to be true. I received my own rations every week, and when his wife and daughters arrived, Gop would qualify for a family ration. But the rations for a family of five would be insufficient, and we knew that the prime time to recycle again would be immediately after the census, when there would be extra vigilance about how much food we would be given.

—I will go, I said, and I was sure of it.

I would go as soon as his wife and girls arrived, I announced. Gop pretended to be surprised by my offer, but I knew he expected this of me. Recycling was always done by the young men at Kakuma, and I wanted to prove my worth to the family, to earn their respect shortly after they arrived.

For the weeks that followed, Achor Achor and I spent many nights lying outside my shelter, doing our homework in the crisp blue light of the moon, plotting my recycling trip.

—You'll need extra pants, Achor Achor said.

I had no idea why I would need pants, but Achor Achor enlightened me: I would need pants because with the pants I would get the goat.

—One pair of pants should do it, he surmised.

I asked Achor Achor why I needed a goat.

—You need to get the goat to get the shillings.

I begged him to start at the beginning.

I needed the pants, he said, because when I left Kakuma, I would be traveling to Narus, in Sudan, and in Sudan, they cannot find the sort of new, Chinese-made pants that were available in Kakuma Town. If I were to bring such pants to Narus, I could trade them for a goat. And I needed a goat because if I were to bring a healthy goat back to Kakuma, where goats are scarce, I would be able to sell the animal for two thousand shillings or more.

—You might as well make some money while you're out there risking your life.

This is the first I had heard of the trip still being dangerous. Or rather, I knew that in the past, if one left Kakuma, and traveled the roads to Lokichoggio and past Lokichoggio, there were bandits one might encounter, Turkana and Taposia bandits, and they would, at best, steal everything you had, and at worst, steal all you had and kill you afterward. I had thought that those dangers were in the past, but apparently not. Nevertheless, the plan continued to develop, and Gop joined in.

—You should bring more than one pair of pants! Gop huffed one night over dinner. Achor Achor was eating with us, which he often did, because Gop knew how to cook and Achor Achor did not.

—More goods, more goats! Gop bellowed. —You might as well really make it worthwhile, since you're risking your life and all.

From then on, the plan expanded: I would bring with me two shirts, a pair of pants, and a blanket, all new or seemingly new, and with all this I would be able to trade for at least three goats, which would bring six thousand shillings in Kakuma Town, an amount that would keep Gop's family in necessities, even in luxuries like sugar and butter, for many months. The money, combined with the extra ration card, would make me a hero in the family, and I dreamed of impressing my soon-to-be-sisters, who all would look up to me and call me uncle.

—You can start your own store, Achor Achor said one night.

This was true. Immediately I liked the idea, and thereafter this too became part of the larger plan. I'd long wanted to start a small retail outfit, a canteen, outside my shelter, where I would sell foods and also pens, pencils, soap, slippers, dried fish, and whatever soda I could get my hands on. Because I was trusted by those who

knew me, I was confident that if I offered my goods at a fair price I would do well, and once I had some capital, the stocking of the canteen would be no problem. I remembered lessons from my father's store in Marial Bai, and knew that in such matters customer relations were crucial.

—But you'll need more than the two shirts and pants, Achor Achor noted. —You'll need two pairs of pants, three shirts, and at least two blankets, wool ones.

Finally the plan became real. I would be leaving at the next opportunity, the next time the roads were considered safe. I was given a backpack by Gop's cousin, a sturdy vinyl apparatus with zippers and many compartments. Inside I placed the two pairs of pants, the three shirts, the wool blanket, and a bag of nuts and crackers and peanut butter for the trip. I planned to leave early in the morning, to sneak out from Kakuma IV, and then walk the mile or so to the main road to Loki, which I would follow, avoiding Kenyan police, camp guards, and passing cars.

—But you can't leave during the day! Gop sighed when he heard of this part of the plan. —You leave at night, you dope.

So the plan was altered again. At night I would not be seen by anyone. The official way to leave Kakuma was with an approved refugee travel document. But I had no legitimate business leaving, and even if I did, applying for such a document could take months. If I had connections at the UNHCR, I might be able to get my application expedited, but I knew no one well enough that they would risk anything for me.

That left one remedy, the most popular and speedy, that being the bribing of the Kenyan guards along the road. Kakuma was never a gated camp; the refugees could walk out of the camp if they wished, but very soon, along the main road, they would be stopped by Kenyan police at stations or in Land Rovers, and the traveler would have to present his or her refugee-travel document. It was at that moment that a traveler without a document would have to present an appropriate incentive for the officer to look the other way. Night travel was recommended, for the simple fact that the less upstanding officers were given the night shifts, and there were fewer of them.

So finally I was ready to go. But first we would wait for Gop's family, to make sure there were still three daughters and one wife. Though they had sent word months before that the four of them would be arriving together, there were no such guarantees in Sudan. Gop and I did not talk about this, but we knew it to be true. Anything can happen during so long a trip.

In the end they arrived, everyone intact, though they appeared without warning. One morning, Gop Chol and I walked to the tap to get more water, so that no one would have to retrieve it for a few days. As we approached the tap, we saw, in the distance, a Red Cross van steaming through the dust. We both stood, knowing that it was unusual to see a van in our part of the camp, and at the same time, we both wondered, Could it be? Gop had received word a week earlier that his family might be transferred sometime soon, but there had been no news since. We watched the van slow as it approached our home, and when it came to a stop it was in front of our door and Gop was running. I ran after him. Gop was not a fast runner, so I overtook him quickly. When we were within sight of the van, Gop began yelling. He sounded maniacal and unwell.

—Aha! Aha! You are here! You are here!

They couldn't hear us yet. We were a few hundred yards away.

A tiny girl, frail and in a white dress, stepped out of the van first, followed by two more girls, each taller than the last but both under eight years old, also in white. They stood, squinting in the sunlight, flattening their dresses over their legs. They were followed by a beautiful woman in green, the green of rain-soaked elephant leaves. She stood, guarded her eyes from the sun, and looked around at Kakuma.

—You are here! You are here!

Gop was yelling but wasn't close enough to be heard. He ran, waving his arms wildly. Soon he was near enough for the woman in green to see him, but only as a vague shape in the dust. I had run ahead and could see his family clearly.

—Hello! he yelled.

She turned her head to him and gave him the kind of disgusted look reserved for drunkards and the raving mad. The driver helped them with a few bags he retrieved from the back, and deposited them on the ground in front of the house.

—It's me! It's me! Gop was screaming, and it was evident that his running toward them was making the girls, and their mother, uncomfortable.

Gop was no more than one hundred yards away when he seemed to change his mind. He slowed and then stopped, and then ducked out of the road. I followed him as he dodged between the anarchic maze of homes nearby. We were now out of sight of the road and Gop's family. He leaped over the low fences of the neighboring homes and under the clotheslines and around the sad stringy chickens kept by our neighbors, until he was at the back door of the home we shared. He entered his home and

I followed him. I could hear someone at the front door, and guessed it was the Red Cross driver, whose knocking was loud and impatient.

Gop was in his bedroom.

—Don't answer the door! he begged me. —Let me change.

I waited by the door.

—I don't want them to know I was the man screaming down the road.

By now, I had guessed as much. I waited by the door as Gop splashed and straightened and cleaned. In a minute he emerged, freshened and wearing his finest white shirt and clean khakis.

—I'm ready, yes?

I nodded, and opened the door. Gop strode through, his arms wide.

—My wife! My daughters!

And he lifted the girls, one after the other, starting with the oldest and finishing with the youngest and most delicate, a tiny girl he kept on his arm for the better part of the day, as they unpacked and ate. The family had brought many foods from Sudan, and he and I showed the women the house we had constructed for them.

—There was a crazy man running down the road, his wife eventually said, as she arranged sheets on the girls' beds. —Did you hear him?

Gop sighed. —There are all types here, my darling.

I became close with Gop's wife, Ayen, and their daughters, Abuk, Adeng, and Awot. The restructuring of the household, which was extensive, changed my life and worked to everyone's advantage. Because Gop and his wife now needed a bedroom of their own, we built another one, and the girls moved into the one that he and I used to share. Gop and his wife wouldn't have me sleeping in the room with the girls, so a separate bedroom was built for me, and in the middle of building it, we had an idea: it was unusual for a boy my age to have his own room, and Gop and I knew of plenty of boys who would gladly move in with us and would help bring in more income and food, so invitations were extended to Achor Achor and three other boys, all students of Gop's, and my bedroom was built to accommodate five boys. When we were done, the household had grown from two to ten in one week.

There were four shelters now, all of them attached, and a kitchen and common room in the middle and it made for a very large household with many young people moving within it. It was never a question of whether or not all us kids would get

along; there was no choice but to become a perfect machine, all of us parts moving in sync, peacefully and without complaint.

Every day, all eight of us kids would wake up at six o'clock and together go to the water tap to fill our jerry cans for our showers. The water would run from the tap starting at six o'clock; it was then that everyone in our region of the camp, about twenty thousand people, had to get their own water for washing; the water for cooking and cleaning was retrieved later. The line at the tap was always long, until years later, when the UN dug more taps. But at that time, there were commonly over a hundred people in line when the taps came alive. At home we would all shower and dress for school. During those years, breakfast was not eaten at Kakuma—it was not until 1998 that there was enough food for morning meals—so if we consumed anything before leaving the house it was water or tea; there was enough for one meal a day, and that came at dinner, together, after school and work.

We all attended the same school, a short walk away, with an enrollment just under one thousand. First there would be an assembly, where announcements would be made, and we all would be given the advice of the day. Often the advice pertained to hygiene and nutrition, an odd subject given how poorly we were fed. Just as often, it would cover malfeasance and punishment. If any students had been misbehaving, there would be retribution then and there, with a quick caning or verbal reprimand in front of the student body. Then there would be prayer, or the singing of a hymn, for all of the students in that school were Christians, at least as far as we could tell. If there were Muslims, they were very quiet about their faith, not protesting then or during the regular sessions in what they called Christian Religious Instruction.

There were sixty-eight students in my class. We stayed in one classroom throughout the day, sitting on the dirt, as our instructors, specialists in English, Kiswahili, Math, Science, Home Science, Geography, Agriculture, and Arts & Crafts & Music moved in and out. I enjoyed school and was well liked by my teachers, but many of my friends had stopped attending classes. They were impatient with it, could not see the point, and went into the markets to make money. They would trade their rations for clothes, sell the clothes in the camp and turn a profit. And of course they continued to leave Kakuma for the SPLA, and we would hear soon enough about who had been shot, who had been burned, who had been separated from his limbs by a grenade.

On the days food was distributed, we kids would be sent to the UN compound,

where we would line up. The UN workers or the LWF workers would scoop food from the trucks, first checking the ID cards and ration cards of each recipient. On the way back, we would carry the bags of grain or sorghum the mile home, either on our heads or shoulders, resting frequently. We all complained about retrieving the rations, and on the rare occasions when someone missed the distribution, when they slept late or were late getting into line, the ration would not be brought home and the family would be affected. Backup plans had to be made and carried out, to ensure the family ate. It was time for my recycling trip.

I had my backpack and good shoes and—

—Do you have a hat? Gop's daughter Awot asked me.

—Why would I need a hat?

—What if there's someone at Loki who knows you when you come back?

She was a brilliant girl, this Awot. So I included Achor Achor's prized Houston Astros hat in the backpack and finally I was ready. It was midnight when the family saw me off. Gop did not seem to fear for my life, so I took our goodbye lightly and the girls followed suit. Achor Achor walked me to the border between Kakuma and the great beyond, and when I turned to leave, he grabbed my arm and wished me luck.

—Did you bring your ration card? he asked me.

And I had indeed brought my ration card, a grave mistake. If I was robbed by the Turkana, or interrogated by the Kenyan police, or asked to empty my pockets by the officials at Loki, my original ration card would be taken, and the entire point of the trip would be lost. So I gave my ration card to Achor Achor, we patted each other on the back like men, and I was off into the night, with no identifying papers on me. I was new, I was no one.

I had been told that if I came upon any Kenyan police along the road, a bribe would be requested and I soon would be on my way. And this is precisely what happened: within a few miles of Kakuma it happened three times. Each set of guards were bought with fifty shillings and were exceedingly polite and businesslike about the transaction. I might as well have been buying fruit from a sidewalk grocer.

I walked through the night perhaps too cheerfully, thinking my trip charmed and knowing I would be successful. With any luck I would be back at Kakuma, with six thousand shillings and another ration card in three days' time.

I arrived at Loki in the early hours, found the dirt roads empty, and slept inside

a compound maintained by Save the Children, an NGO we knew well: they had been supplying food to the starving in southern Sudan for years. Loki is dotted with these NGO staging areas, which are in most cases no more than small shacks or adobe houses, surrounded by wooden fences or gates of corrugated steel. Save the Children, back then and still today, works closely with the Sudanese, and their people are always willing to help those of us coming to Kakuma or leaving for Sudan.

When I woke up I saw first the feet of a man standing over me, talking to another man on the other side of the fence. The man almost stepping on me, I learned, was named Thomas. He was a bit older than me, had been SPLA, but left during the split between Garang and Machar. When he was done speaking to the man over the fence, he turned his attention to me.

—So what's your situation? he asked.

I told him a general version of my plan.

—How much money do you have?

I told him I had only fifty shillings left.

—Then how do you intend to get your papers from the SPLM?

I had not been told that these papers would cost money. I knew if I entered SPLA-controlled territory, I would need an SPLA/SPLM-issued identification card, but I thought they would provide it for free. The SPLA/SPLM, I had been told, would put any name you wanted on the document, and I had planned to give them a name similar enough that it would be regionally correct; that way I would be able to answer any questions about clans in my part of Sudan. With the new document, I would ride back to Loki, sell the goats, and, at the Loki immigration office, I would hand them my documents and claim to be in danger if I returned to Sudan. I would be processed as a refugee, and under my new name be granted admission to Kakuma.

—No money left, huh? Thomas said. —You just left last night!

Thomas gave me a curious smile, his head tilted.

—Poor planning, Achak. Do you have a new name chosen? No doubt you'll be glad to be rid of Achak.

I told him Valentino Deng would be my new name.

—Not bad. I like that, Valentino. There are a few other Valentinos around. It won't look suspicious. Listen, here's fifty shillings. You can pay me back next time you come through. I'm here a lot; I do some business here and there. You take the fifty shillings, combine it with yours, you have one hundred. That might be enough

if the SPLM takes pity on you. Give me a pitiful face, Valentino Deng.

I turned my mouth downward into a pout, and teared my eyes.

—Wow, not bad, Valentino. Impressive. You have a ride?

I did not have a ride.

—Oh lord. Never have I encountered such an unprepared traveler. If you give me the face again I'll tell you where to get a ride into Narus.

I gave him the look again.

—That is really a pitiful look, son. I congratulate you. Okay. There's a truck coming from Sudan right now. It's down the road and one of the drivers is a friend of mine, cousin to my wife. It's going back to Sudan in a few minutes. You ready?

—I am, I said.

—Good, he said. Here it comes.

And indeed a truck pulled up at that moment, a standard flatbed truck, the sort I was accustomed to seeing full of passengers. It was a dream, it seemed, to have found a direct ride so quickly. I had only been awake five minutes. The truck shook to a halt in front of Save the Children. Thomas spoke to the driver for a few minutes and then gave me the signal. The engine rumbled awake and the tires chewed the gravel.

—Go, fool! Go! Thomas yelled to me.

I gathered my bag and ran after the truck and jumped onto the back bumper. I turned to wave to Thomas, but he had gone inside the compound, finished with me. I threw my bag in and climbed over the back door. My first foot landed on something soft.

—Excuse me! I gasped.

It was then that I saw that I had stepped on a person. The truckbed was filled with people, fifteen or more. But they were grey, white, covered in blood. These people were dead. I was stepping on the chest of a man who made no protestation. I jumped off his chest and onto the hand of a woman who also offered no objection. I stood on one foot, my other foot hovering over the exposed innards of a boy only a bit older than myself.

—Careful, boy! There are a few of us still alive.

I turned to find a man, an elderly man, lying prone and twisted like a root, near the back of the truck. —I'm sorry, I said.

The truck jerked and the old man's head hit the back hatch. He moaned.

We were moving, and the truck quickly picked up speed. I gripped the side of

the truck and tried not to look at its cargo. I looked into the sky but then the smell overtook me. I gagged.

—You'll become accustomed to it, the man said. —It's a human smell.

I tried to move my foot but found it stuck; blood covered the truck floor. I wanted to jump but the truck was traveling too fast. I looked forward, wanting to get the attention of the driver. A head emerged from the passenger side of the truck cab. A cheerful man hoisted himself so he was sitting on the window ledge, looking back at me. He seemed to be an SPLA soldier, but it was difficult to tell.

—How are you back there, Red Army?

—I'd like to get out please, I stammered.

The maybe-rebel laughed.

—I'll walk back. Please. Please, uncle.

He laughed until tears filled his eyes.

—Oh Red Army. You are too much.

Then he slipped back into the cab.

A moment later, the truck swerved and I lost my footing, and for a second I found my knee in the broken thigh of a dead soldier, whose open eyes stared into the sun. As I raised myself, I glanced over the contents of truckbed. The corpses were arranged as if they had been thrown. Nothing held them in place.

—It's pitiful, it is, the old man said. —Many of us were alive when we left Sudan. I've been keeping the vultures away. A dog jumped aboard yesterday. He was hungry.

The truck jumped again and my foot slipped on something viscous.

—The dogs now, they have a taste for people. They go straight for the face. Did you know that? It was lucky that one of the men in the cab heard the dog. They stopped the truck and shot it. Now it's just the four of us, he said.

Four aboard were yet alive, though it was difficult to find them, and I was not sure the old man was correct. I glanced to a body next to him. At first it seemed that this man's arms were hidden. But now it was clear, because I could see the white bones of his shoulders, that the man's arms had been removed.

The truck swerved wildly again. My right foot landed on the arm of a teenage boy, wearing a blue camouflage uniform and a floppy hat.

—He's still alive, I think, the old man said. —Though he hasn't spoken today.

I raised myself again and heard wild laughter from the truck cab. They'd swerved on purpose, each time. The cheerful man's head again appeared from the passenger window.

—The driver is very sorry, Red Army, he said. —There was a lizard in the road and he was very concerned about killing such a creature of God.

—Please uncle, I said. I don't want to be here. I want to leave. If you could only slow down a bit, I'll jump off. You don't need to stop.

—Don't worry, Red Army, the maybe-rebel said. His face and tone were suddenly serious, even compassionate. —We only have to drop the wounded at Lopiding Hospital, and then bury the bodies over the hill, and we'll have an empty truck all the way to Sudan. Wherever you need to go.

The truck had taken a bump and the man's head had struck the top of the window frame. Soon he was inside the truck again, yelling at the driver. For a moment the truck slowed and I thought I had a chance.

—Take the ride, boy.

It was the old man.

—How else will you get to Sudan? he said.

He looked at me then, as if for the first time.

—Why are you going back, anyway, boy?

I did not consider telling the man the truth, that I was trying to recycle, to get another ration card. It would seem ridiculous to a man struggling to live. The people of southern Sudan had their problems, and by comparison the mechanisms of Kakuma, where everyone was fed and was safe, were not worth mentioning.

—To find my family, I said.

—They're dead, he said. —Sudan is dead. We won't ever live there again. This is your home now. Kenya. Be glad for it. This is your home and it will always be your home.

A sigh came from below my feet. The teenage boy turned over, his hands praying under his ear as if he were comfortably at home on a pillow of feathers. I looked down at him, determined that I should focus on him, for he seemed most at peace. My eyes assessed him quickly—I could not control them, and cursed them for their speed and curiosity—and realized that the boy's left leg was missing. It was now a stump covered with a bandage fashioned from a canvas tarpaulin and rubber bands cobwebbed to his waist.

The ride, I now know, was less than an hour, but it is impossible to convey how long it seemed that day. I had covered my mouth but still I gagged continuously: I felt chills, and my neck seemed numb. I felt sure that this truck represented the

devil's most visible deeds, that in every way it symbolized his work on Earth. I knew I was being tested, and I rode until the truck finally slowed upon reaching the driveway to the Lopiding Hospital.

Without hesitation I jumped over the side and tumbled onto the ground. I meant to outrun the truck and find safe haven in the clinic. Upon landing on the hard dirt, I needed a moment to re-engage with the world, to know that I was not dead myself, that I had not been cast into Hell. I stood and felt my legs and arms working and so I ran.

—Wait, Red Army! Where are you going?

I ran from the truck, which was slowly traversing a series of potholes. I ran and outpaced the vehicle easily, aiming myself for a building on the end of the compound.

Lopiding was a series of tents and a few white brick buildings, sky-blue roofs, acacia trees, plastic chairs set outside for waiting patients. I ran to the back of a building and almost knocked over a man holding a false arm.

—Careful, boy!

The man was Kenyan, middle-aged. He spoke to me in Kiswahili. All around him were the makings of new feet, legs, arms, faces.

—Hey Red Army! Come now.

It was the soldier from the truck.

—Take this. Put it on.

The Kenyan gave me a mask, red, too small for me. I sank my face into it. I could see through the holes for eyes and the Kenyan tied it closed.

—Thank you, I said.

He was a constant-smiling man, heavy-jowled and with great sloping shoulders.

—No need, he said. —Are they still looking for you?

I peered around the corner. The two men from the truck were walking toward the building. They went inside for a moment and returned to the truck with a canvas stretcher. They first unloaded the old man, and brought him inside. They returned to the truck and retrieved the teenage boy with the missing leg, and he lay on the stretcher just as he had in the truck, looking as comfortable as could be. These were the only two passengers who disembarked at Lopiding. The rest were dead or would soon be dead. The men threw the stretcher into the back of the truck and the driver climbed into the cab. The other man, maybe-rebel who taunted me, stood with one hand on the door handle.

—Red Army! Time to go! You can ride in the cab this time! he yelled.

Now I was unsure. If I did not take this ride I would probably not get another. I stepped out from the building. The maybe-rebel looked directly at me. He dropped his hand from the truck, and tilted his head. He was staring into me, but made no movement, and neither did I. I felt safe behind the mask. I knew he would not know me. He turned from me and yelled up into the trees, looking for the boy who had been in the truck.

—I'm sorry, boy! the man yelled. —I promise we'll take you to Sudan. Safe and sound. Last chance.

I stepped forward, toward the truck. The Kenyan grabbed my arm.

—Don't go. They'll get a price for you. The SPLA would be happy to have a new recruit. Those guys would be paid well for delivering you.

It was an impossible decision.

—I'll get you back to Sudan if you need to go, the Kenyan said. —I don't know how, but I will. I just don't want you getting killed over there. You're too skinny to fight. You know what they do, right? You train for two weeks and then they send you to the front. Please. Just wait here a second till they leave.

I wanted so badly to join the men in the truck, wanted to believe their promise to keep me with them, in the cab, to deliver me safely over the border. And yet I found myself trusting the Kenyan, whom I did not know, more than my own countrymen. This happened occasionally and always it was a conundrum.

I was still standing in full view of the man from the truck, and again he fixed his eyes on me. It was so pleasing to wear that mask, to be invisible!

—Final chance, Red Army! he said to the boy he thought he was looking for.

The man shielded his eyes from the sun, still trying to figure out why this boy with a mask seemed so familiar. And still I stood, emboldened, until he finally turned back to the truck, lifted himself into it, and left in a cloud. The Kenyan and I watched the truck disappear into the orange dust.

I didn't want to remove the new face. I knew that the Kenyan would not give it to me, and I wondered briefly if I could escape with it at that moment. Perhaps the mask would make it possible to run—back to Kakuma or into Sudan—undetected. I luxuriated in the thought of presenting this new face to all the world, a new face, without marks, blemishes, a face that told no tales.

—Doesn't fit you, boy, the Kenyan said. His hand was on my shoulder, his grip

strong enough that I knew escape was impossible.

I took the mask off and handed it to the Kenyan.

—Where will they bring the bodies? I asked.

—They're supposed to bring them back to Sudan, but this is not done. They'll drop them in the creek and take paying passengers back to Sudan.

—They'll bury them at the creek?

—They won't bury them. Does it make a difference? They get buried, they're eaten by worms and beetles. They don't bury them, they're eaten by dogs and hyenas.

The man was named Abraham. He was a doctor of sorts, a maker of prosthetics. His shop was behind the hospital, under a yawning tree. He promised me lunch if I could wait an hour. I was happy to wait. I did not know what doctors ate for lunch but I imagined it was extravagant.

—What are you making now? I asked.

He was fashioning something like an arm or shin.

—Where do you live? he asked.

—Kakuma I.

—Did you hear an explosion last week?

I nodded. It had been quick, a pop, like the sound of a mine coming alive.

—A soldier, SPLA, a very young one, was visiting his family in the camp. This was Kakuma II. He had brought some souvenirs home to show his siblings. One of the souvenirs was a grenade, so here I am, making a new arm for the soldier's little brother. He is nine. How old are you?

I didn't know. I guessed that I was thirteen.

—I've been doing this since 1987. I was here when they opened Lopiding. It was fifty beds then, one big tent. They thought it would be temporary. Now there are four hundred beds and they add more every week.

Abraham carved the plastic as it cooled.

—Who is this for? I said, picking up the mask I had worn.

—A boy's face was burned off. There's much of that. The kids want to look at the bombs. One boy last year had been thrown onto a fire.

He held his creation to the light. It was a leg, a small one, for a person smaller than me. He turned it around and around, and seemed satisfied.

—Do you like chicken, boy? It's time for lunch.

Abraham brought me to a buffet line, arranged in the courtyard. Twenty doctors and nurses lined up in their uniforms, blue and white. They were a mixed bunch: Kenyans, whites, Indians, one nurse who looked like a very light-skinned Arab. Abraham helped me with my plate, filling it with chicken and rice and lettuce.

—Sit over here, son, he said, nodding his head to a small bench under a tree. —You don't want to sit with the doctors. They'll ask questions, and you never know where that might lead. I don't know what kind of trouble you're in.

He watched me tear into my chicken and rice; I hadn't had meat in months. He took a bite of a drumstick and stared at me.

—What kind of trouble *are* you in?

—I'm in no trouble, I said.

—How did you get out of Kakuma?

I hesitated.

—Tell me. I'm a man who makes arms. I'm not an immigration officer.

I told him about sneaking away and bribing the police officers.

—Amazing how easy it is still, right? I love my country, but graft is as much part of life as the air or soil. It's not so bad to live in Kenya, right? When you're old enough, I'm sure you'll find a way out of the camp, and to Nairobi. There you can find some kind of job, I'm sure, maybe even go to school. You seem smart, and there are thousands of Sudanese in the city. Where are your parents?

I told him I didn't know. I was dizzy with the taste of chicken.

—I'm sure they're fine, he said, examining his chicken and choosing the location for his next bite. With his mouth full, he nodded. —I'm sure they lived. Did you see them killed?

—No.

—Well then, there's hope. They probably think you're dead, too, and here you are in Kenya, eating chicken and drinking soda.

I believed the words of Abraham, simply because he was educated and Kenyan and perhaps had access to information that we did not inside the camp. The separation of life inside Kakuma and in the rest of the world seemed completely impenetrable. We saw and met people from all over the world, but had virtually no hope of ever visiting any other place, including the Kenya beyond Loki. And so I took Abraham's words as those of a prophet.

We finished our lunch, which was delicious and by volume too much for me to

consume; my stomach was not accustomed to this much food in one sitting.

—How will you get back to Kakuma? Abraham asked.

I told him I still intended to try to make my way to Narus.

—Not this time, son. You've seen enough for this trip.

He was right, of course. I had no will left. I was broken for now, and the plan was broken and all I could do now was return to Kakuma, with nothing gained or lost. I thanked Abraham and we promised to meet again, and he put me on an ambulance going to Loki. There, I waited for any trucks going to Kakuma whose drivers would not ask questions. I saw no sign of Thomas and so did not venture into the Save the Children compound. I walked up and down the dirt roads of Loki, hoping an opportunity would reveal itself before nightfall, when I knew that the Turkana would see me as a target.

—Hey kid.

I turned. It was a man, his nose broken and bulbous. He seemed Turkana but might have been anything else—Kenyan, Sudanese, Ugandan. He spoke to me in Arabic.

—What's your name?

I told him I was Valentino.

—What do you have there?

He was very interested in the contents of my bag. I gave him a brief look inside.

—Ah yes! he said, suddenly grinning, his smile as broad as a hammock. He had heard, he said, that there was a very smart young Sudanese man who possessed clothing from Kakuma Town. He seemed a kind and even charming man, so I told him about the trip, the truck, the bodies, Abraham, and the broken plan.

—Well, maybe it's not a total loss, he said. —How much would you take for all of it, the pants and shirts and the blanket?

We volleyed a few prices until we settled on seven hundred shillings. It was not what I had hoped for, but it was far more than I would have gotten in Kakuma, and double what I had paid for the clothes.

—You're a good businessman, the man said. —Very shrewd.

I had not thought of myself as a good businessman until that moment, but certainly this man's comment seemed true. I had just doubled my money.

—So seven hundred shillings! he said. —I have to pay it, you've got me over a barrel. I haven't seen pants like this here in Loki. I'll bring you the money tonight.

—Tonight?

—Yes, I have to wait here for my wife. She's at the hospital, too, having an infection checked on. She's with our baby, who we fear has some kind of dangerous cough. But they said she'll be back in a few hours and then we return to Kakuma. Will you be around at eight o'clock?

The man was taking the bag from my hands and I found myself saying yes, of course, that I would be there at eight o'clock. There was something trustworthy about him, or perhaps I was just too tired to be sensible. In any case, I wished the man well, sent my blessings to the man's wife and baby, improved health to the three of them. The man walked away with my clothes.

—Don't you need to know where I live? I asked him as he shrank into the crimson light of one of the shops.

The man turned and did not seem at all flustered.

—I assumed I would ask for the famous Valentino!

I gave him my address anyway, and then went out to the road leading back to Kakuma. After walking for a short while, I realized that I had been swindled, and that the man would never come to Kakuma. I had just given my clothes to a stranger and had sent to the wind the only commodity I had. I walked the entire distance back to Kakuma, watching trucks pass; I did not ask for a ride and did not have bribe money. I moved only in shadows, for I knew if I were caught all would be lost, and I would lose all my benefits, such as they were, as a refugee. I darted from bush to bush, ditch to ditch, crawling and scraping and breathing too loudly, as I had when I first ran from my home. Each exhalation was a falling tree and my mind went mad with the noise of it all, but I deserved the turmoil. I deserved nothing better. I wanted to be alone with my stupidity, which I cursed in three languages and with all my spleen.