This book is dedicated to my firstborn, Achol (Cholie).
You've taught me about beauty, about what it means to be
a mother, and about who I really am.

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Preface

A LOST GIRL

My name is Rebecca Ajueny Nyanwut de Deng de Awel. If I were introducing myself in South Sudan, I would start with my dad's side of the family—Rebecca Ajueny Nyanwut de Deng de Awel de Luk de Ajang de Padiet de Ajang. Then I would go on to list my mother's side—Ajueny Nyanwut de Achol de Riak de Gong de Lual de Akau. My name is long because our tradition dictates that we say our name to at least the tenth generation. Growing up, I learned the names of my ancestors to the fifteenth generation, but now I struggle to remember some of them. I was born into the Hol clan of the Dinka tribe. I come from the Pathiel line in a subclan called Pan-Aluk. And I am from the house of Ajang, Pan-Awel Luk. That's a lot to remember!

I am from the village of Aruai Mayen in the Duk Padiet region, which is on the border of Dinka and Nuer land and is located in Sudd, a huge swampland. The village was in Jonglei state in what is now South Sudan, although now it has vanished.

I survived the Bor Massacre of 1991, which completely

wiped out my village, killed thousands of people in one attack, and displaced one hundred thousand. The Sudanese civil war killed roughly two million people and displaced four million. I was one of those displaced.

I am one of the Lost Girls of South Sudan. I am not the first or the last Lost Girl. Much has been told of the forty thousand Lost Boys who were orphaned and fled the country on foot to Ethiopia or served as child soldiers, and of the 3,700 Lost Boys who came to the United States as refugees. Few stories have come out about the eighty-nine Lost Girls who found their way from Kakuma Refugee Camp to the United States. There are many reasons why so few girls made it out of Sudan or the refugee camps. Some were either killed, married off at the tender ages of fifteen or younger, sold as slaves, or are still living in a refugee camp, with little hope for a brighter future. That was what war did to the tens of thousands of innocent children who lost everything—it took their childhood, their innocence, their families, their homes, even their lives.

Leon Trotsky once reportedly said, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." War is ugly. If people were truly aware of the consequences it inflicts on humanity, no one would ever think of starting it. Now, only those who have borne witness to the destruction of war can attest to its unreversed damages. I have experienced its ruthlessness, how it destroys human dignity and the human spirit.

Yet in the midst of war, of devastating loss, I experienced something unexpected. My life has been one of

experiencing grace upon grace. God walked patiently with me through the darkest days to show me that I am his child and that he cares about me, although I didn't always see it clearly. It's difficult to see clearly through pain and trauma.

I do not understand the suffering of the innocent or why the unjust seem to thrive. I have often prayed the prayer of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk: "Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise" (Habakkuk 1:3).

But even in the midst of those prayers, I know God sees it all, and one day he will redeem all of creation. Until that time, I know our job is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

I have learned that the greatest thing in the world is to love. God is love, and he invites us to join him in loving all people regardless of their religion, race, class, or gender. Growing up, I didn't understand this concept, especially in regard to the Khartoum government or Riek Machar, who caused personal suffering for me. I wanted them to suffer as I had suffered. And yet God taught me about the power of love, of hope, and of never giving up.

Even though I am a former refugee from one of the deadliest wars in our history, often I haven't wanted to share my story, because reliving parts of it has been painful. Though many of my friends and work colleagues encouraged me to share, still I battled revealing what I had been through. It would be much easier to focus on helping others heal than exposing my own trauma.

But on March 21, 2014, while I was in the Native American museum in Washington, DC, I came upon an exhibit that challenged my thinking. The exhibit was of a time ball replica. It symbolized a woman's life. The description stated: "A young woman would use a time ball to record her courtship, marriage, and other experiences using a system of knots and beads that only she could decipher. As she grew older, a woman might have several time balls with which to share her life story or keep those memories private. When she passed on, they were buried with her."

I reread that description five times, and each time I reached "When she passed on, they were buried with her," tears streamed down my cheeks. *So if I were to die today*, I thought, *my stories will be buried with me*. How would my children or grandchildren know of me? How would my daughter, Cholie, learn about her heritage and our family background? What stories would I leave behind? How could she know about both happy and sad times of my life when I am no longer here?

Am I going to be buried with my life story? I wondered.

I thought about my relatives. I was still mourning the stories that perished with those who died in the war. I was mourning Dinka knowledge from the grandmas and grandpas, which I could not retrieve. I knew little of my father and mother, since I was orphaned at a young age.

I also thought about the meaning of living authentically. I knew my daughter could handle anything, especially the wounds of my life, because she is a child of God. So for me not to share the truth of my life with her would

keep her from the foundation of her heritage. It was at that moment I realized I needed to share my story—not just for Cholie, but for the thousands of orphans who never had the opportunity to share with their families and the world what they had experienced.

And so, this is my story.

Part One

Home

Africa is mystic; it is wild; it is a sweltering inferno; it is a photographer's paradise, a hunter's Valhalla, an escapist's Utopia. It is what you will, and it withstands all interpretations. It is the last vestige of a dead world or the cradle of a shiny new one. To a lot of people, as to myself, it is just home.

—Beryl Markham,
West with the Night

CHAPTER 1

The Joy of Innocence

They're coming closer and closer, and it's harder to fight them off, but we must!" My father pleaded with the village elders. He was a commander in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), so everybody listened to his words and respected him. He pulled out a piece of cloth from his pants pocket, revealing the SPLA flag. The colors were black, green, red, blue, and yellow. But what stood out to me was the gold-yellowish star. As my dad held it up, the wind moved the piece of cloth. It fluttered in the breeze, beautiful.

He continued to speak, but at four years old, I wasn't interested in what they were discussing; I was too busy playing. Even if I were interested, I wasn't allowed to listen in. The elders told me to go away because they were having adult talk, and I certainly wasn't an adult.

Because my dad, my *baba*,[1] was a soldier, he was gone from our village most of the time, "fighting against the

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[1] Dinka contains many loanwords from Arabic, due to the country's past. There are six different dialects of Dinka that have different spellings and grammar. Most Dinka, and especially most former refugees, speak a combination of these dialects, and may include words from Swahili, Arabic, and English in everyday speech. There may also be words in common with Nuer.

oppressors in the Sudanese government to bring freedom to black Africans, *Monyjang*," which was what Dinka people called themselves. But it didn't make much sense to me. Why would Baba and his dress-alike men, whom Baba called soldiers, fight? He was also a Christian, so he said he fought to defend his family and to make sure everyone could have the freedom to live and worship as they wanted.

But I never saw anybody keep anyone in our village from worshiping. Our village had no church, but I always saw the elders say prayers when they sacrificed to the gods. So why fight over that? I had never seen anyone except boys fighting. Sometimes the older people yelled at us kids not to fight or destroy each other's toys, which were made from mud and plants. And that always ended it. Could the adults not do the same?

I overheard stories of the years of *riak* and *pawar* (wars and disasters). These were times when our ancestors struggled because of crop failure, clan wars, and intertribal disputes, but I had never seen anything like that happen. Our village, Aruai Mayen, was quiet, isolated, and peaceful, so isolated and peaceful I didn't even know what "war" meant.

I asked one of my cousins what the war, *tong*, was about. He told me we were enemies with the red people, the Arabs, *Jalaba*, in Khartoum.

I've tried to italicize words that are not found or typically used in the English language—they may have their origin in a wide array of different languages spoken in South Sudan. It's possible that no authoritative source fully captures the vocabulary and grammar used by the South Sudanese diaspora.

"Where is Khartoum?" I asked.

"Very far away."

Adults are crazy, I thought. *Why would anybody fight somebody far away?* Then I thought, *I wish I could travel very far away*. But I couldn't even go into my grandmother's garden, not far from our hut. And if I could travel, I would go with Baba, so I could spend more time with him and help him fight. I thought that would be fun. It must be, since whenever he came home, he always brought me candy and pretty dresses. But then, if I did travel with Baba, I would have to leave my mom and my *kokok*, my grandma, the mother of my father. They would miss me too much.

So Baba was fighting the Jalaba, and that was all I knew. I never met any Jalaba. But I knew they were the enemy.

Whenever Baba came home after being gone a long time, he would shoot off guns to let us know he was arriving, and all the villagers would dress in their best clothing and jewelry and prepare for a special ceremony in which they would kill a cow. At the ceremony the older men and women would sing or make some kind of speech, and then Baba would jump over the dead cow. Kokok told me this was a ceremonial cleansing from the war.

"When a soldier returns to the village after the war, the sacrifice for sin is made to atone them for killing people in the battlefield. When the soldiers fight, they enter a different world that we don't know," she said. "Then they can be reunited with their family and the villagers."

I didn't like it, because Baba would come home but he couldn't greet me and my half siblings until after he'd

jumped over the cow. I stood on one side of the cow while he stood on the other. The elder men, whom we called grandpas, sang and chanted until the cow urinated before they killed it. I never saw that happen, though, because I wasn't allowed to go there until the cow was already dead and lying on the ground. As soon as I walked to the place, I looked for my baba. I longed to run to him and throw my arms around him, but Kokok held tightly onto me. She made sure we didn't cheat, because she didn't want Baba to pass the spirit of a dead person from the war to us. Baba said being a Christian, he didn't believe in it, but Kokok did and he wanted to honor her.

After he jumped over the cow, he would pick me up and squeeze me tightly to his chest. My heart flooded with happiness each time. My father was home again and we could all be a happy family once more. Even though I knew he would stay only for a short time, those moments with him gave me joy.

Other soldiers came with him. They all wore camouflage clothing and carried guns. I didn't understand what guns were, since I never saw the soldiers do anything with them except carry them. I just thought they were holding long, odd-looking sticks. I was intrigued, though, since they weren't like the canes the grandpas carried or like the spears the men—whom we called uncles—and boys carried when they tended the cows or went fishing, so one time I drew close to a soldier and touched the gun. It felt like our *sanduk* felt—the cold, rough, metal boxes that we stored cloth, salt, and sugar in.

"Be careful," he told me. "Fire comes out of its mouth." My eyes grew wide and I wanted to know more, but he walked away, leaving me confused and a bit scared.

On his visits home, my father would talk about how the SPLA/rebels' territory was expanding, which cities they were able to capture, and how someday we might win the war and our people would be free. He would say, "We fight because we want our children to have a chance to go to school and to farm freely and without fear."

I didn't understand school because there was no school in our village, but I understood farming. The Monyjang, my Dinka clan, were farmers and raised cattle. The cows were mostly to give us milk or for rituals, marriage dowries, and other cultural occasions. The number of cattle a villager had showed how wealthy he was in the village. Kokok had thousands of cows.

I loved when Kokok would take milk from the cows and turn it into butter; then she would boil the butter for hours to make ghee. The ghee, creamy and a deep golden-orange, was nutty and sweet. When she was finished cooking the ghee, Kokok would call me, my half sister Atong, and the other children to clean the cooking pot. The burned milk solids from the butter were stuck hard to the bottom and we had to scrub it. I didn't mind so much, because I knew how tasty our food was going to be. Kokok used the homemade ghee to cook our food. She could make *anything* taste delicious with it.

Kokok, like the other villagers, had a large garden beyond our hut where she would plant and harvest our

food. She never let me go into the garden with her, though, because she told me snakes and scorpions hid in there, and she couldn't keep a good eye on me.

Even if I couldn't go into it, I loved Kokok's garden. It had so many colors and varieties of food. Green vegetables, red and green tomatoes, sorghum, okra, pumpkin, colorful maize, and squash. I loved watching Kokok work in her garden, because she would rustle up the hundreds of butterflies and dragonflies that fluttered through the crops, kissing the leaves. And the birds in the garden! They were covered with colors too. Red, yellow with black heads, blue, turquoise, golden, orange—all so beautiful. Kokok would often shout at the birds to fly away because she didn't want them to eat our crops.

I loved harvest time. When the women would grind fresh corn, sorghum, and other grains, the air around them gave off a lightly sweet smell. Sometimes if we children were especially good, the women would peel the sorghum stems and give them to us to eat. The sweet smells would flood my nostrils as I'd bite off the husk. Then I'd take off the leaves and open the stems. Sometimes the inside was a vivid red—we called these "dove's wine." It was like candy!

I loved looking at all the colors of our village. I saw *alook*, which is a tall, golden grass. It was like a thousand yellow cats turned upside down. The fuzzy tops of the grass always made me feel good. And everywhere I looked around our huts, I saw the greenest greens I'd ever seen. Kokok said our land was the greenest place in the whole world—lush

pastures, she called it, made that way because the Nile River's Sudd and her tributaries were so close to our village. We were only a twenty-minute walk to a stream that flowed into the Nile and only a day's walk from the Nile itself. I didn't know much about the Nile, because I had never been there either, but a lot of our village's teens and newlyweds went with the cattle to one of the Nile's larger tributaries and cared for the cows there, especially during the dry season. They called that place Toch. The boys went there and learned how to wrestle and wrote love songs, which they sang to girls they were courting, but then when they came home during the rainy season they sang them for us to learn. The cattle camp sounded exciting to me, and I always begged Kokok and my mother to let me go, but they said I was too young. Kokok promised that when I grew older, I too could go with the others to the Nile to care for the cattle and learn about courtship. Until then I was to stay put and enjoy life in our village.

That was easy to do, because I always found something to keep me busy. I played with other children and explored around our huts. Even though I was the only child of my mother, my father had another wife and children, and they lived near us too. I especially liked to play with Atong, who was one year younger than me. My two older half brothers, Luk and Padiet, didn't want to play. They were too busy doing older boy stuff.

Our village had about a hundred people living in it and was tucked back not far from the main highway, even though I never got to travel on it. It was made up of many

mud huts with hard dirt floors—huts we slept in, huts we cooked in, huts for the cows and their babies. The roofs were covered with straw thatch, thick enough to keep the rain out and keep us dry. We didn't have bathrooms, so if we had to relieve ourselves at night, we used a cow's horn, which Kokok set in the wall, like a urinal, or a gourd that we'd empty outside the hut in the morning. If I had to do the other, Kokok or another adult would have to take me outside to Panom, a cleared area away from the huts, where I could relieve myself.

Surrounding our huts were the pastures for all the tribe's cattle, and on the far edge beyond was the forest, though I never went that far. I loved to climb the trees near Kokok's hut or watch the women in our village spend their days collecting food from the garden and cooking, with all the delicious smells. The women talked and laughed as they ground corn and sorghum to make all kinds of food for us to eat. We were never hungry. But we were lean and really tall.

The Dinkas are a tall people—everyone in our village stood like giants, and I knew one day I too would stand tall like the trees of the forest. Kokok said we were the tallest people in all of Africa. My mom was tall, but I noticed that her stomach bulged out bigger than the other women's. She told me that was because she was keeping a baby there, and soon I would get to meet a little brother or sister. That made me happy, because then I would have someone else to play with and care for.

Although I enjoyed playing during the days, it was

always very hot. I liked when the temperature cooled down and the night came to life. In the evenings, the adults set piles of dried cow dung on fire to keep away the tsetse flies and bugs and provide warmth for our cows. Then the adults milked the cows. The cow dung didn't smell too bad. It had a sweet scent to it from all the grass the cattle ate. It was nice out in the open, but I didn't like it when we burned it inside the hut, because the smoke became trapped and made me cough.

At night I especially liked to lie on my mat in Kokok's hut and look through the window at the moon and stars. The sky looked like a deep body of water full of lights. Since our village had no electricity, the moon, stars, the villagers' fires, and fireflies were our only source of light. That was okay with me because they were beautiful as they shone or flickered. I listened to the crickets singing their songs and watched the frogs as they leapt from one place to another and the fireflies as they danced around the leaves.

"Kokok, why is there an ocean above us but water doesn't pour down on us?" I asked her once.

"Because Duchak, the creator, governs the water and tells it when to come and when not to come," she told me. "When it rains, part of the water comes from that deep ocean that snakes itself across the sky at night."

During cloudy nights, I couldn't see this ocean, but when the sky was clear, it was my favorite time. Sometimes I'd see running and dancing stars with burning fire on their tails. It looked like the firewood the elders carried at nighttime. In the stars I could see faces—Baba, Kokok, my

family, friends. Night after night when Kokok told us to be quiet and go to sleep, I would lie on my back facing the sky, look up at the stars, and communicate with my family because I could see them there and the stars always smiled back at me.

When the nights were cloudy, I would lie on my mat and listen to the other people lying by me, since our family all slept in the same room. They would often tell stories or play guessing games. I liked listening, even though I didn't understand them because I was too young to know what they were talking about.

I loved my village. I was safe and free to run and play. We had plenty to eat. My family was kind and loved me well. Other than my father being gone a lot, there was nothing else I needed or wanted. I couldn't imagine living any other way.