

A NEW SUDAN

AGED 14, MODEL AND ACTOR GER DUANY FLED WARTORN SUDAN. EIGHTEEN YEARS LATER, HE RETURNS TO CAST HIS VOTE FOR SECESSION AND SEARCH FOR THE FAMILY HE LEFT BEHIND. THIS IS HIS STORY

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Three years ago, I began to seriously think about going back to South Sudan. My friends thought I was crazy, that it would be like going into a war zone. They urged me to wait until after the secession referendum. They didn't understand how much my heart belonged to that place. When people think about Sudan, they think of genocide, famine, disease. But I remember a fertile, green country. It's true that civil war was always present, but even then I used to go down to the Nile with my friends to swim and fish.

I first left Sudan with my family in 1987 at the age of nine. We took refuge in Ethiopia. But in 1991, President Mengistu Haile

Mariam government fell and 300,000 South Sudanese were forced to leave the country. Back in Sudan, I volunteered to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). I wanted to be a soldier like my father and the men around me. I wanted to experience the action myself. But a rival faction raided our base camp in 1992 and killed 80 of my compatriots. Soon after that, my sister was killed in a boating accident.

At that point I was distraught and didn't know what to do. War had escalated and violence revolved around us on a daily



Marnath Thabach Duany – stepsister, daughter of wife number six. “When she saw me, she said, ‘Who is this guy?’ We don’t differentiate stepsisters from blood sisters. We are brother and sister.”

Changun Thabach Duany – stepbrother, son of Nyakiir Tony (pictured right) and a police officer. “Most men who have jobs are either police or in the military.”

Nyachak Tuong – stepmother, father’s fifth wife. “She wept when she saw me again. She said, ‘I didn’t think you were old or strong enough to survive escaping to Ethiopia.’ She didn’t agree with Nyakiir’s criticism of me (see right), but they both were for secession.”

Gatbel Thabach Duany – Nyachak’s second son, 15, a student. “He was the one who urged me not to take a speedboat down the Nile to get to my mother. He had survived a shooting raid on such a boat over a year ago. People died.”

Ger Duany – “This is my reunion with family members at one of my childhood homes in Malakal, Christmas Eve 2010. They make the open-hand sign in support of secession. Others pictured are extended cousins of mine who attend school in Malakal.”

Nyakiir Tony – stepmother and father’s senior wife. “She thought I neglected the family, being gone for so long and never sending money.”

Tut Thabach Duany – stepbrother, 9. “He told his mother, make sure you lock Ger in the house so he doesn’t leave.”

Nyamach Thabach Duany – stepsister, daughter of Nyachak Tuong (pictured left). “When I left, Nyamach was only six months old. Now she’s a married woman with three children.”

didn’t go to school – there was no school to go to. One day I took off for Ethiopia on foot, dodging armed thieves and encountering corpses on the road. I spent the next two years drifting between refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya.

I finally met a man from my ethnic family, which is Nuer, who got sponsored by the Lutheran Church to resettle in the United States. He listed me as a dependent on his food-ration card, and I boarded my first aeroplane as his stepbrother.

MODEL STUDENT

My life in the States mimicked my life in Sudan. I felt restless and couldn’t stay in one place for long. I joined an aunt and uncle in Bloomington, Indiana, where I finished high school. I went on to Los Angeles on a basketball scholarship, before winning another scholarship to the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut and switching coasts. I started acting and would often go into New York for auditions. A woman told me I should be a model. I just laughed at her, but a photographer friend of hers did a photo shoot with me and my modelling career began. I was at Syracuse University in New York training to play professional basketball abroad, when I was selected from a pool of 400 actors for a role in the movie *I Heart Huckabees*.

Throughout those years, my heart ached to return and find my family. I didn’t know where my parents were or if they were still alive. My dad had six wives and in Sudan there were always people around me who shared my language and my way of life. But here in the States I felt isolated.

My first trip back to Sudan was in February 2008. On the flight over my head was filled with mixed feelings. What if my family didn’t

recognise me? And worse, what if my mother, my father, my little sisters and brothers were no longer alive?

When I landed in Juba I saw abandoned tanks in the overgrown fields surrounding the airport. I jumped in a taxi and went to find my uncle, who had returned to Sudan from the States earlier. As I neared his house I saw my older brother Duany sitting under a tree. He was 19 the last time I’d seen him, a wild kid who was into guns. He had joined the SPLA very young, training as a soldier from the age of 10. Now 37, he looked as if the life had been drained out of him. I said, “How are you? I’m Ger,” as if I were meeting him for the first time. He had lost his right hand so he offered me his

left. I pulled him in to me to hug him. I was very happy. I wanted to cry, but couldn’t.

He told me he had been attacked by three men. One had a machete and went for his head. Duany blocked the blade, trading his hand for his life. Like scores of people in the country, he wasn’t working. He lived in a hut in the mountains near Juba, surviving on the kindness of friends. He told me Mom was in Akobo, where I was born, and that our father was in prison serving a life sentence. I was very quiet.

And then I said, “How can I get to Akobo?”

Duany said it was too dangerous to travel as I no longer knew the tribal alignments and conflicts in the country. He suggested sending for our brother Both, who was six when I last saw him, and who lived with our mother.

Both came. He had to travel through Jonglei state, which was rife with armed conflict. As I looked at him I realised how much time had passed. During the war I used to carry him in my arms when we were running away from an attack. He was 21 now and a policeman.

Both stayed with us for two weeks. I had made plans to fly to Akobo on a military plane but I couldn’t get seats for both myself and

Both. So I gave Both some photos of me and some money to buy clothes and gifts for my mom and told him to tell her that I was alive, here in Juba, and I was coming to her.

My plane ended up in Waat, in Akobo West. It was a two-day walk from there to see my mom, through dangerous areas. The soldiers urged

He had been attacked by three men. One had a machete and went for his head. He blocked the blade, trading his hand for his life

me not to attempt the journey. I stayed in Waat for six days, frantically trying to figure out how to get to my mother, but there was no way.

By now my three months in Sudan were up and I had to fly back to the States. I came so close to seeing my mom. I never even got close to seeing my dad. I was devastated.

SUMMIT MEETING

Back in the States I knew I had to come back to Sudan. I planned for three years, then decided to hold a summit in Nairobi for the Lost Boys and Girls. These are Sudanese children who had volunteered or been conscripted into the army, or were sold into slavery and eventually fled the country. My friend Emmanuel Jal, an activist and Sudanese rapper based in London, said the timing was perfect as the referendum on secession was set for January 9. Emmanuel and I contacted other Lost Boys and Girls, including Valentino Achak Deng, co-author and subject of the acclaimed memoir *What Is The What*; Lopez Lomong, an Olympic runner for the US who carried the flag for the States at the Beijing games; and David Nyuol Vincent who was now a community organiser in Australia, to help us mobilise our people.

The summit was set for November 23-25. There was a short period to register to vote in the referendum in Sudan that month so it was imperative I get there. My friends David O Russell, who directed *I Heart Huckabees*; Mark Wahlberg, who co-starred in the film; and Mark’s agent, Ari Emanuel, also encouraged me to do a documentary, so I drafted in a Kenyan filmmaker friend, Wanuri Kahui.

More than 100 Lost Boys and Girls came from all over the world and the summit was a huge success. It was good to know that I wasn’t alone. The Sudanese government flew 11 of us to Juba so we could register for the referendum – on the condition that we return to vote on January 9.

When we landed at Juba airport, there was a huge celebration going on in our honour,

❖❖ I told Mom I wanted to see her vote. I had cast a ballot for the first time when Barack Obama ran for office. But she had never voted in her life ❖❖

with jubilant dancing and media everywhere. We were taken to register at a polling site near the grave of Dr John Garang, Sudan's first vice president from the South, who negotiated the peace agreement between the SPLA and the Sudanese government.

FAMILY REUNITED

I made the decision not to go back to the States. Instead Wanuri and I were determined to try to reunite me with my family in South Sudan. So with Marius van Graan, our director of photography, in tow we flew to Malakal in Upper Nile State where my father was in prison. We were escorted into a reception room. When my father entered he didn't recognise me. I had to stand up and say, "Dad, it's me." He said: "I had no idea you would grow up to be so tall!"

We hugged for a very long time. Now 71, he had been in that prison for five years. He said he was sorry he had shot and killed his brother's wife, my Auntie Nyantek, with an AK-47 in 2004 over a property dispute. I was horrified and angry. It doesn't excuse what he did but he had fought through two civil wars. Violence had overtaken him. He told me to tell my mom and the rest of my family when I saw them that he wanted them all to vote in the referendum. He said it would be the most important act of our lives.

We stayed in Malakal for eight days, trying to figure out how we would get to Akobo. Renting a speedboat to go up the Nile would cost us over US\$3,000. However we learned that the first boat to leave for Akobo had been shot at. I couldn't put Marius and Wanuri through that risk. Finally we hopped on a commercial flight back to Juba and then

hitched a lift on a small United Nations aircraft going to Akobo.

I had told an extended cousin of mine, a commissioner in Akobo, that I was coming, and asked him to warn my mother. I also asked if we could stay with him under his protection. He was waiting at the airport and brought us to the government compound where he lived.

My mother lived only a five-minute walk away. We went on foot with the camera rolling. I recognised my mom from a distance as she was walking back to her hut. She was an old woman now, thinner than I remember.

Sudanese tradition states that when a person has been away for a long time it is bad luck to touch them right away. My mother would first have to anoint me with water or sacrifice an animal, so she got a bucket of water and splashed my feet and my face. She did the same to Wanuri and Marius.

Then she sat down and cried. She couldn't believe it was me. The first question she asked me was, "How far is the land that you went to? Is it at the end of the world?" I said you couldn't go there on foot, as I had to Ethiopia.

I stayed in Akobo for seven days and saw her every day. I told Mom that I wanted to see her vote. I had cast a ballot for the first time when Barack Obama ran for office. But she had never voted in her life.

MAKE YOUR MARK

January 9 was a warm, bright day. The polling site was under a tree. We arrived at six in the morning but people had been there since 4am. The polling officials, seeing our cameras, let us in at the front of the line. They handed us paper ballots with two diagrams – hands clasped for unity, an open hand for separation. We had to ink our finger and press it in the space for unity or separation.

It brought tears to my eyes to watch my mother mark that paper and drop it in the box. She had lost children in both civil wars and with this action she was helping to end the violence that had disrupted our lives as a family and ripped us apart. Two days later she walked us to the airport. After so many years of sadness, she knew that I was alive and that she would see me again.

My mother had explained to Wanuri that my name, Ger, means separation – when things come apart. Wanuri told me that I had a name for my film. We needed 61 per cent for secession. In the end the tally came in at 99 per cent. ●

□ www.gerduany.com



SUDAN: A NEW BEGINNING?

Sudan, the largest nation in Africa in terms of area, has long been considered a bridge between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa. Since gaining independence from Egypt and Great Britain in 1956, the country has been embroiled in violent, long-running ethnic and religious conflicts. Millions have died or been displaced including children conscripted into military service or sold into prostitution – the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan.

In 2005 the Sudanese government and rebel groups in the South struck a peace accord that paved the way for a referendum. The ballot finally took place earlier this year, from January 9-15, with the South Sudanese voting overwhelmingly to secede from the North. "We accept and welcome these results because they represent the will of the southern people," announced Sudan President Omar al-Bashir, who assumed power in 1989 in a bloodless military coup (although the International Criminal Court has issued two arrest warrants for al-Bashir on charges of genocide).

On July 9 power in South Sudan will be handed to the new president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir. Many questions remain though. How will the South, with its vast petroleum fields, and the North, with its superior infrastructure and pipelines, share the proceeds from the region's oil wealth?

And the violence continues, even after the referendum. In early February fighting broke out within an integrated North/South military unit. As many as 50 people, including civilians, were killed. Despite these challenges, Kiir's government has announced that it is considering establishing a new capital, while a new national anthem has already been composed in a X-Factor-style competition.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
GER CASTS HIS VOTE IN THE
SECESSION REFERENDUM;
"LET THIS BE THE LAST SHOT
I FIRE"; MALAKA BY NIGHT;
GER HOLDS NIECE NYIBOL –
NYIBOL IS A NUER NAME GIVEN
TO A CHILD BORN AFTER THE
DEATH OF TWINS; GER AND HIS
MOTHER ARE BLESSED BY THE
COUNTY PRIEST