Excerpt from *A Long Walk to Water*

One of the main characters in this piece of historical fiction is Salva Dut, a young boy, who in 1985, had to leave his home and, like many of the “Lost Boys of Sudan” walked between 700-1000 miles to find safety in refugee camps in Ethiopia and later Kenya.

Salva was at school when the military from northern Sudan attacked his village. His teacher told all the students to run away from the village and hide in the bush. Since it was not safe to return to his village, he kept walking away from the burning huts and fields. Eventually he found an uncle in a group of others also fleeing the violence. This excerpt takes place when Salva and his uncle are traveling together with other members of their tribe they’d met along the way.

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*Southern Sudan, 1985*

The lake’s surface was calm, and once the boats had pulled away from the shore, there was not much to see – just water and more water.

They paddled for hours. The scenery and motion were so monotonous that Salva might have slept, except he was afraid that if he did, he might fall over the side. He kept himself awake by counting the strokes of Uncle’s paddle and trying to gauge how far the canoe traveled with every twenty strokes.

Finally, the boats pulled up to an island in the middle of the river. This was where the fisherman of the Nile lived and worked.

Salva was amazed by what he saw in the fishing community. It was the first place in their weeks of walking that had an abundance of food. The villagers ate a lot of fish, of course, and hippo and crocodile meat as well. But even more impressive were the number of crops they grew: cassava, sugar cane, yams . . . It was easy to grow food when there was a whole river to water the crops!

None of the travelers had money or anything of value to trade, so they had to beg for food. The exception was Uncle. The fishermen gave him food without having to be asked. Salva could not tell if this was because Uncle seemed to be the leader of the group or because they were afraid of his gun.

Uncle shared his food with Salva – a piece of sugar cane to suck on right away, then fish that they cooked over a fire and yams roasted in the ashes.

The sugar-cane juice soothed the sharpest edge of Salva’s hunger. He was able to eat the rest of the meal slowly, making each bite last a long time.
At home, Salva had never been hungry. His family owned many cattle; they were among the better-off families in their village of Loun-Ariik. They ate mostly porridge made from sorghum and milk. Every so often, his father went to the marketplace by bicycle and brought home bags of beans and rice. These had been grown elsewhere, because few crops could be raised in the dry semi-desert region of Loun-Ariik.

As a special treat, his father sometimes bought mangoes. A bag of mangoes was awkward to carry, especially when the bicycle was already loaded with other goods. So he wedged the mangoes into the spokes of his bicycle wheels. When Salva ran to greet him, he could see the green-skinned mangoes spinning gaily in a blur as his father pedaled.

Salva would take a mango from the spokes almost before his father had dismounted. His mother would peel it for him, its juicy inside the same color as her headscarf. She would slice the flesh away from the big flat seed. Salva loved the sweet slices, but his favorite part was the seed. There was always plenty of fruit that clung stubbornly to the seed. He would nibble and suck at it to get every last shred, making it last for hours.

There were no mangoes among the fishermen’s great stores, but sucking on his piece of sugar cane reminded Salva of those happier times. He wondered if he would ever again see his father riding a bicycle with mangoes in its spokes.