

# From Sudan to Australia, one woman's story of **COURAGE**



**“War, this is the story of life,  
the story of everyday.”**

By REBECCA HINCHEY

**S**TARTTS bicultural counsellor Naome Yar Paul Madut pronounces this tragic statement with simple resignation.

It is a fact of her life. Even before she was born the war in Sudan was determining the pattern of her existence.

Despite the horrors behind such words, Naome shows no signs of bitterness. Instead, the forces of her life have produced a woman with an extraordinary blend of strength and gentleness, a woman who embodies the word resilience.

Naome should have been born in Southern Sudan, but the civil war which began shortly after independence in 1956 forced her parents to flee. Instead, Naome was born in the eastern Sudanese city of Algadari in 1967.

It was the year her grandfather was slaughtered. A chief in his village, he had refused to name the rebels among his people. Although she was too young to realise it, Naome was marked with the same sort of bravery, a bravery which

would eventually see her become a leader among her people.

Five years after her birth, the rebels in the south signed a peace agreement with the Khartoum government in the north, allowing her family to return to their rightful home.

For the five-year-old, life was happy, joyous even. Her large home was full of love and laughter, filled with a constant stream of family and friends looking for work in the capital or returning from fighting in war.

In the hot afternoons she would collect lemons from their trees or the flowers of the henna, later using their brown paste to create intricate designs on her small hands.

“In the evening we have story time. My father would tell us tricky stories, about what happens to animals when they lie or steal. You would have to learn something from it, about good character or attitude.

“My mum would go for the ancestor thing, where we came from, our histories. My aunts and cousins would talk about love stories. It suited each of them,” she mused.

“It was family, what I call happy family,” she smiled.

Yet among all the happiness, lay dangerous undercurrents which the blissful child only sometimes perceived.

Originally a teacher, her father became a politician, holding regular meetings in the family home.

As the rebels returned from fighting, they would gather at the Paul house, bringing stories of the conflict with Arab militia from the north.

“I understood the problem since I was a child,” she said.

“There were lots of stories everyday of war.

“It was terrifying when I heard about my grandfather and people who were fighting, but I wasn't sure how much danger my father was in.

“He was working within the main government, trying to work inside to change things.

“Sometimes they would take my father to prison, if there were going to be demonstrations.

“One day I remember following my mum to prison, she had heard dad was taken from work. We were still in primary school,” she said.

Each disappearance would last just a short time, days or sometimes weeks. Each lasted just long enough for the government to prevent the people's leader from taking an active part in the struggles.

At school, Islam was the golden subject, despite the fact that most children

come from Christian families.

“If you didn't do religion studies you wouldn't be at the top of the class, it gave you the marks,” Naome explained.

“My parents were very angry, they would ask me to give up the marks and I would argue. They would say ‘This is why people went to war. This is the way the government is pressuring people to be Muslim.’” she said.

When Naome grew old enough for junior secondary, her father was transferred to the smaller city of Bor, where they built their family home. When work required another move to the southern Sudanese capital of Juba, the family remained behind, for the children to continue their schooling.

The bright young student enjoyed her studies, particularly her favourites of maths and science.

“I used to be clever, I used to get the highest marks,” Naome reflected, somehow ignoring her considerable achievements in Australia.

But an uneventful education was never to grace this proud Dinka Sudanese Australian woman.

In the early 1980s, the Arab government of the north introduced Sharia law across the whole country.

“We had to put on trousers and tarha, it's like a veil,” she explained

At each morning's assembly the girls would engage in their own small, mutinous acts, rolling up their trousers or sharing their veils.

The precarious peace was deteriorating. Demonstrations in the streets grew in number and frequency.

“People were being amputated; the first people were from southern Sudan. They would say ‘which hand did you steal with’ and they would cut it off,” Naome described the horror.

“People were arrested, some were shot,” she said.

Amid the chaos, a personal tragedy befell the family. In 1982, her father Paul K Awar died suddenly, following a very brief illness.

“It was a very, very difficult time, he was the head of the extended family,” she said.

“My father was special, caring, loving. We had a very good relationship, he showed us love. Men don't tend to show love in Sudan. He was very approachable, not like other fathers,” she whispered.

Around this time schooling in southern Sudan was transformed. The government of the southern regions negotiated a conversion from studies in Arabic to all studies in English.

Naome, who previously had learnt the rudiments of this internationally dominant language, found it extremely difficult. Notwithstanding this, most students, Naome among them, were glad to be done with the hated Arabic, a symbol of the oppression of their native voice.

The English experiment was short-lived.

In May 1983 at three in the morning, war knocked on her door.

It was the sound that first attracted her notice. Lying in bed there arose from the pitch blackness a piercing noise, like no other sound she had heard before.

For Naome, it was to become the sound of Sudan.

“It was completely terrifying. It sounded like thunder but it continued, heavy and strong. It was the sound of shells being dropped.

“That's when the rebellion started, 16 May 1983.

That day, the town moved en masse, making for a village 26 kilometres away. There were no cars, everyone walked.

As war dictated, she became separated from her mother. Thankfully, Akur Ayom joined the younger members of her family the following day.

After one month, they were informed by the government that the situation had calmed, and they were able to return to school.

“When we returned, the town had been taken over by the military, there were guns and military cars moving around everywhere.

“They would come everyday to school and harass us. The boys were beaten up in front of assembly.

“They would say ‘so and so is a rebel’ and then they would hit and kick you and

hit you again. They would hit you with bike chains.

"Afterwards they would go, leaving the school in horror.

Studies were abandoned. The morning terror made it impossible to concentrate. Instead, students would gather, discussing the events of the assembly and who they would target next.

After a few months, the school emptied of boys. They had fled or been rounded-up by brutal soldiers.

The young female students faced a dreadful decision. Did they stay in their hometown caring for their mothers and fathers but risking a forced marriage or did they abandon the home they loved for a chance to be free?

Naome was determined, regardless of the enormous cost. There was no way she would be the enslaved wife of an Arab. Along with 15 other girls, she made the decision to be first to leave.

The secrecy surrounding her departure was absolute. Not even her mother, who would surely have forbidden her from leaving, was told.

For two weeks their blackened feet trod the path to Ethiopia. Supplies were meagre but they shared what they had, scavenging for any water they could find.

The women travelled by day, trying to avoid the intensity of the sun's fearsome rays by marching in single file, following the shadows of the person in front.

Arriving in Africa's melting pot in 1984, Naome managed to find employment in an office, working for the Sudanese Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRRA).

It was during these years in exile that Naome met her husband Caesar Madut, a fellow worker with the SRRRA.

Although the demands of their work kept them mostly apart, the loving couple had their first three children while Naome still lived in one of the world's oldest Christian states.

In Ethiopia, Naome also had her first intimate encounter with death. One night she spotted a young boy who seemed

stuck in the wire of a fence. She called her two sons to disentangle him.

The boy was critically ill, but the hospital turned Naome away, suggesting she return in the morning with the child.

All night, he cried out in pain. Sleeping next door, Naome brought blankets and panadol. Perhaps they helped, perhaps he felt cared for. Who knows? He died that night.

"I can't explain how that felt. His parents did not even know their son was dead," she lamented.

"What do they imagine? Do they think he died in a bush? I just wanted to communicate with them but I couldn't.

"I wanted him to die like a human being. It is still very painful to me," she said.

Although she never knew him, she reached out to the young Nuber boy as only a person of her compassion could. She organised the funeral, and invited the Nuber to complete a proper Muslim burial, which she attended with her children as if it were her own family.

"When I hear the story of the lost boys I think, 'this is really the lost boy,'" she mused.

It wasn't long before Ethiopia too descended into conflict. Mengistu's Ethiopian government collapsed in 1991 and the rebels began targeting the Sudanese, believing they were siding with his genocidal rule.

Naome's organisation was forced to re-establish headquarters in Torit, in southern Sudan.

Just prior to their return, the president of Sudan was overthrown, and a transitional government came to power. Poisoned with mistrust, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the main opposition, refused to head to the capital Khartoum. Negotiations to join the new government broke down and in the fresh elections an alliance of mostly Islamist parties swept to power.

Around the same time a claim was made for the upper Nile area.

This action led to a vicious conflict between the divided tribes of the south.

## It was a massacre

In Naome's hometown, everything was destroyed, cattle, homes, schools.

Naome's grandmother was killed and her uncle too. Despite the scale of the atrocities, news of this massacre did not reach the media. It remains a forgotten conflict in the largest country of Africa.

The young mother's home became a makeshift restaurant, hotel and sanatorium.

"We cared for everyone. Sick children, adults, they would just walk into your house. You try and feed them, fix them, take them to hospital if you can," Naome explained.

The war only intensified, with daily aerial bombardments and news of another loved one dead.

Eventually, a move to Uganda became the only option.

The journey was petrifying. Paul would move forward, and then return for the rest of the family.

There were no meals, just scraps for survival shared among all. A droplet of water was the most you could find. Many people went missing, starved or were killed as they lost the path they hoped would lead them to safety.

In Kampala, the capital of Uganda, life was relatively peaceful, if lonely. Naome found a job with International Aid Sweden, while her husband returned to a violent Sudan to continue his relief work.

Although the job brought desperately needed funds, Naome lived in a constant state of tension, never sure if the next phone call would be more news of death. Perhaps it would be her husband or her brother. Already they had lost so many.

Her husband returned three times a year, fathering another two children with his young wife.

As their time in Uganda moved on, more friends came to join her. Times became more relaxed. Her children joined school; mastering the local language and helping their mum to do the same.

After the birth of their fifth child, Naome joined a Sudanese human rights organisation, helping to protect refugees.

It was intense and dynamic work. They were coordinating with the Red Cross to ensure prisoners of war from the north had their basic needs met. Although in the full-flight of parenting, family support allowed Naome the freedom to undertake this hectic and sometimes hazardous role.

This passion for justice led to even more deadly work with the Humanitarian Landmine Project. Based in Sudan, she travelled across the country, training, consulting, and educating communities about the dangers of the landmines in their midst. Meanwhile, Naome's mother cared for her children in Uganda.

There were many horrendous experiences. The Sudanese were under a constant onslaught of bombs from the sky. Security, such as it was, was found in large concrete bunkers.

"When the bomb is ready to drop you will hear it. You wait for them and then you go underground. Any running person gets hurt.

"By that time we were the rescue team in town. When there was an incident of bombs or anything we would take the patients to the hospital. We would help when there was a fire.

"When you are in that situation you don't think of danger, you just have to face it.

"In early 1999 about six bombs were dropped on the compound where we were living. We stored explosives there which we used for the demolition of mines. Everything was burned, houses, everything.

It was not long after this experience that another peace agreement was signed, but not before another tragedy befell her family.

Just 48 hours before that momentous day her husband 'disappeared'.

"I knew from 21 years experience that he would be killed, no one ever came back.

"But still I tried. I had appointments with the Red Cross, letters, and meetings. I travelled to Nairobi where the negotiations were taking place.

"I knew he was dead but I couldn't stop searching.



Capital of Uganda- Kampala

She found solace in a new job, helping to demobilise child soldiers.

"We held official ceremonies where they would hand over their gun. Many cried. The gun was their mother, their father, their protection, their food.

"We set up transit centres where we undertook tracing, counselling, case management. We used lots of activities and sports.

Although not really sure of what she wanted, Naome applied for refugee resettlement in Australia in 2003.

The visa came quickly, faster than Naome could scrounge up the funds for the airfare. She approached the International Migration Office for assistance, but being a woman of integrity, she refused to pay bribes, so they would not help her.

Eventually a member of the Sudanese community, Joseph Akoonda, Chair of the Southern Sudanese community in NSW, sponsored her resettlement. She was on her way. Almost.

Before leaving she returned to Uganda one final time. To move through Uganda required travel documents, but with limited days before her departure there was no time to apply. She knew the language, knew the area, and thought she would be ok.

She wasn't. At the border, a female official pulled her up. At first, the Sudanese woman claimed to be Ugandan, but she wasn't believed. A series of basic questions unravelled her mask.

"I knew the answers, it was simple stuff. I knew the names of the towns, the mayors. They were things I knew back-to-front, people I had negotiated with everyday in my work. But for some reason I couldn't remember.

"It made me so angry. I wanted to shout 'Look at me. Why should I sneak? Why should I illegally cross borders if only Sudan had not been in civil war. It is my country's fault.'"

Thankfully, they released her, and on 9 February 2004, Naome, together with her five school-aged boys, arrived in Australia.

The new journey was hard. Like most refugees, Naome was ecstatic upon arrival. She lived with an aunt and quickly scored a job with the Department of Education.

Yet the euphoria quickly diminished.

"The most terrible part was looking for a house. I applied for more than 10 houses but they would reject me again and again.

"I would get the paper and look outside the houses at night after work but I wouldn't know where to go. People were very helpful, take this train, and go to this platform. On Saturday I would go for the appointment.

"I felt discrimination. The way they would look at me at reception. They would say they would call, but they wouldn't, they wouldn't tell you why you were refused," Naome protested.

Eventually Naome Yar Paul Madut scored a house in Blacktown and applied for one of the African trainee counsellor positions at STARTTS.

Almost three years later, she is no longer a trainee and is studying for a degree in social work from Charles Sturt University.

When asked if she was happy, she answers like many migrants.

"My children love it so much, more than I do. They laugh all day. There are so many opportunities for them." ■