GER'S JOURNEY

BY **ELISABETH** ANDREWS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MANI** ZARRIN
PHOTOGRAPHY IN NEW YORK BY **CLIFF** DOERZBACHER

How a **child soldier** and one of the **"Lost Boys of Sudan"** survived to make his way to Bloomington, New York, and Hollywood.

In the October/November 2011 issue of Bloom, *we told you the story of Wal and Julia Duany and their children, Duany, Kueth, Nyagon, Nok, and Bil: how they came to this country and made successes of themselves, Wal and Julia each earning advanced degrees at IU and all five children attending NCAA Division I universities on basketball scholarships. We told you how Wal and Julia took a leading role, sometimes at great danger, in helping South Sudan become an independent country. If you missed the issue, you can read their story online at magbloom.com. This is the story of their nephew and cousin Ger, as he recalls it.*

The name Ger means "to be separate." During the three years that Ger Duany attended Bloomington High School North, he did his best to fit in. He looked and seemed just like his Duany cousins: tall, attractive, hard working, a gifted basketball player. No one knew how far apart he felt from his family. He hid the horrors that had brought him here.

It's only now, having made a name for himself as a model and actor, that Ger, 33, feels ready to revisit his childhood as a "Lost Boy of Sudan." In between filming an independent comedy with Tony Award winner Alice Ripley, posing for fashion spreads in magazines like *Numéro Homme* and *Arise*, and walking runways with Naomi Campbell and Tyson Beckford, he's also working on a documentary about his life. That means reliving memories of a decade of war, displacement, famine—even serving as a child soldier—and seeing many of his friends and family members die.

"This is personal healing for me. This is how I find peace," he says of the documentary. "Secondly, I want to educate people in the United States about where I'm from. It's also for my mother, who has a lot of questions about what I'd been up to all those years when she thought I was dead."

LEFT TO RIGHT:

This photo of the refugee camp at Itang, Ethiopia, was taken during the time that Ger lived there.
Photo by Imants Gross

Ger dunks outside Tulip Tree apartments, where he lived for three years.
Courtesy photo

(l-r) Ger, Julia, Duany, Nok, Wal, and Nyagon during Ger's time in Bloomington.
Courtesy photo

At Duany's wedding in Bloomington, (l-r) Julia, Nyagon, Kueth with daughter Jinai, Duany, Bil, Duany's wife Cyndi, and Ger.
Photo by Deckard Photography

Ger checking in at Boss Models in New York.
Photo by Cliff Doerzbacher

Mark Wahlberg and Ger on the set of *I ♥ Huckabees*.
Courtesy photo

MAIN IMAGE:

A shot of Ger from the photo series State of Mind.
Photo by Mani Zarrin

BORN IN A GRASS HUT

The story begins in Akobo, a town on the eastern edge of South Sudan. Ger Duany was born in a grass hut in 1978 to one of eight wives of his father, Thabach Duany. A prosperous businessman, Thabach had a fleet of trucks he used as a transportation service and to bring in different types of alcohol that he sold at his bar. In 1983, these deliveries became the medium of the message of war.

"When Sharia law was introduced to the country, they banned all alcohol. My father already had a [truck] coming that was bringing him a shipment of beer. When it arrived, every bottle was broken," Ger says. Thabach, who had fought against the north in the First Sudanese Civil War that raged from 1955 to 1972, understood the wreckage as a threat. "That's when my dad decided to join the SPLA [Sudan People's Liberation Army]," Ger says.

The family couldn't stay in Akobo, as it was soon taken over by the northern army in what had become another full-blown civil war. "My father moved us to a village. He thought that would be a solution," Ger says. "But then the northerners came to the village with helicopters and bombs. Each day we had to hide in the forest until nightfall, then we'd go home and sleep."

It was months before the SPLA obtained weapons capable of shooting down the helicopters. For a time, the fighting seemed to slow, but one by one Ger's older brothers—just barely teenagers—left to join the war. By 1986, it was clear the family needed to get out.

Ger outside his apartment in Harlem.

LIFE AS A REFUGEE

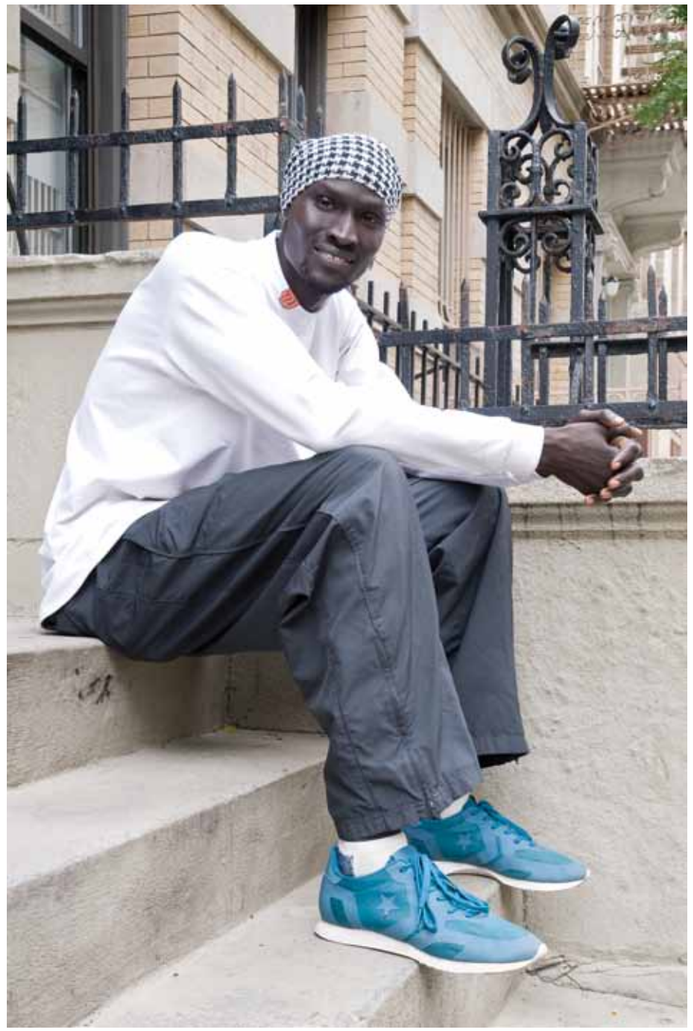
"Word came from everybody that there's a place called Ethiopia where we could go and settle down," Ger remembers. "So we decided to walk from South Sudan to Ethiopia." The journey was some 150 miles as the crow flies, but had to be taken along waterways and around enemy encampments, shepherding small children, animals, and extended family and carrying all their belongings on their backs.

After a long slow journey, they arrived in 1987 in Itang, a crowded camp in western Ethiopia where hundreds of thousands of refugees lived under tarps. The only food was rice and beans from the United Nations. Cooking it meant venturing farther and farther from the camp to gather firewood, risking assault and worse. Death was so common that there were no burials, just shallow trenches dug in the ground.

"The life of a refugee is a difficult one," Ger says, adding dryly, "It's not for everyone."

The camp was also an SPLA training ground. Leader John Garang was often present, reminding the boys that they were part of the "Red Army" of young freedom fighters. In between marching exercises and the singular daily meal, however, Ger also got a taste of what he most wished for: education. "We went to school under a tree. We wrote our ABCs on the ground," he remembers. As the situation worsened in Sudan and their stay at the camp stretched into four years, Ger, whose first language is Nuer, learned basic English and Arabic from wounded SPLA soldiers who had received some schooling before the war.

Ger's time at Itang came to an abrupt end in May 1991. Ethiopia's President Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had supported the SPLA, was ousted by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The new regime had no interest in sheltering the Sudanese refugees, and in the camp, Ger says, "civil war exploded that day." He's unsure how the fighting started—whether EPRDF troops appeared, local villagers attacked the camp, or something inside the camp sparked the shooting—but in what seemed like an instant, "everybody pulled out their guns and opened fire on everybody else. Everybody was screaming, crying, running in every direction." Rain fell and mixed with the blood on the ground, and Ger slid as he ran first to his stepmother's house, then to his mother's, but found both empty.



IT GETS WORSE

The refugees fled across a river that quickly became choked with dead bodies that had been shot from behind. Ger had no choice but to follow and join those who made it across as they marched back to Sudan.

"Itang was like heaven or paradise compared to coming back to Sudan," he says. Not only did the Sudanese government seize the opportunity to bomb the newly returned refugees, but the SPLA had also split into two factions that were now attempting to eliminate each other. Anyone who resisted the will of either army was a target, resulting in anarchy in which there were no real civilians, only warriors. "Everybody's armed. Everybody's at war," he says. "Any given day, someone will come and kill large numbers of people. You always had to protect yourself against someone, and it made every one of us have this rage."

At Itang, Ger had been sheltered by the SPLA while his father fought. But back in Sudan and separated from his family, there was no protection. He was 13 years old, attempting to survive in violent chaos and eating little more than grass. So when he found an SPLA base that would take him, he had no hesitation in becoming a soldier.

AT 13, A SOLDIER

For the better part of a year, Ger lived at the military base in Balliet, cleaning guns and occasionally firing them. He's not sure if he killed anyone. "You fire in front of you, and you find people on the ground later on. How do you know if you're the one who killed them?" Ger grew accustomed to the carnage, until one attack in 1992 wiped out nearly everyone in his camp.

"We were raided by our enemies. They surrounded our camp. People fled into the Nile, and they killed a lot of people in the water. You come up for air and they pop you in the head," he says. "How I escaped, I have no idea even now. We had one vehicle, a military Hummer, and I hung onto it with a bunch of other guys while it drove away. I was not even thinking about land mines.

"Afterwards, we went back to try to find all these numbers of people. We could not find my friends. They were all dead. I didn't have any direction after that battle. I tried to go back to my birthplace and find my mother, but she was not there."

What came next was arguably the worst experience of all—what Ger calls a "turning point" in his life. Some of his siblings and stepmothers were back in Akobo, and an aid agency had arranged to transport children across the river to administer vaccinations. Ger stood on the bank and watched as his six-year-old sister sped off with 30 other children on a motorboat. Moments later, the vessel capsized and emptied all the children into the water. Ger jumped in after his sister, but the flooded river carried everyone away and under, taking all but the strongest swimmers and nearly drowning Ger.

It seemed, at that point, that there was nothing but death in Sudan. "I saw no future there," he says. Ger dropped his gun and crossed the Nile once again into Ethiopia—alone, this time—and kept moving toward Kenya, where at least there would be no war.

THE LOST BOYS

It was another 100 miles before he emerged from the forest where he had walked at night to avoid detection. "I met up with some other young guys. We walked for eight days with no food and not enough water. We made it to a refugee camp where we stayed for a few days to rest because our feet were so swollen with cuts and things. All my toenails had come off," he says.

The group of boys continued south by means of bribes and theft, alternating days and nights of walking with rides they bartered for anything they carried. "Food was stealing mangoes in the villages," he says. Even that fruit was out of season, hard and green, and gave the boys stomach cramps. They slept in the woods or on the streets, anywhere they could find a dry place—or sometimes in mud puddles, as almost nowhere was dry.

A world away: at the Kickstarter campaign party for Ger's documentary, held in New York City's Chinatown. (l-r) selma-i, emcee and activist; film producer Michelle Stockwell; Rhys Thomas, producer and director at *Saturday Night Live*; director Celine Danhier; filmmaker Sarra Idris.

The changes in the landscape presented further problems. First was the drop in temperature as they moved up in elevation. "Going into the Ethiopian highlands was difficult because it was so cold," he says. "All I had was a ripped-up T-shirt. The cold was making us sick."

The final obstacle into Kenya was something Ger had never encountered: a mountain. With hostile villagers throwing rocks at them as they walked, the group decided to tackle the mountain at nightfall. That night, he says, was the most terrifying of his journey.

"Sudan is flat," he explains. Climbing the mountain, "we were scared about a lot of things. We didn't know the forest, the animals there. In the dark, you can't see anything at all. You only hear people's feet. A monkey would scream and I didn't know what the noise was."

Negotiating blindly on unfamiliar terrain, tearing feet and limbs on unseen rocks and thorns, he made his way to the top. Then, as the slope turned downward, he couldn't figure out how to slow his descent.

"Coming down a mountain is the worst thing ever!" he says. "I'll take a month-long walk from

> "Everybody's armed. Everybody's at war. Any given day, someone will come and kill large numbers of people."

Sudan to Ethiopia again before I'd want to do that."

On the other side was Kenya and a gigantic refugee camp called Walda. "We saw this big storage of food, and I thought, 'Here is the place we've been hoping for,'" he remembers.

MORE KILLING FIELDS

Some 2,000 Sudanese lived at the camp, representing only a tiny percentage of the hundreds of thousands of refugees there. Ger attempted to settle at Walda, but his stay lasted only a few months. The majority of the refugees were Somalis, Ger says, and some of them were rebels "pretending to live as refugees." After a few months, tensions exploded between the Islamic Somalis and the Christian Sudanese. "They came and attacked us. Five or six Sudanese guys had gone out to the bushes to get firewood for cooking, and they grabbed those guys and hung them up," he says. "War broke out between us and these people. They pulled out the AK-47s and shot down nine more of us. Then we killed over a hundred people with our bare hands." The only solution to the violence, it seemed, was for the U.N. to move the Sudanese refugees to Ifo, "known as the worst camp in East Africa," Ger says.

After their experience at Walda, the Sudanese refugees decided not to take any chances with their neighbors. The day they arrived at Ifo—before bathing or even setting up their tents—they cut down all the trees within walking distance and built what Ger describes as a "fence" but might properly be called a wall. "We bound the trees together. You can't walk through it," he says. "That fence still exists."

Behind the wall, Ger was safe. Though the next two years were spent on the edge of starvation and often in 120-degree heat, life was calm. A number of resettlement agencies were working to bring Sudanese refugees to the United States, but Ger would not be eligible to travel on his own until he turned 18. So he played soccer and ate one meal a day and waited. And one day, in 1994, when Ger was 15, he got the chance he had hoped for since he first learned his ABCs in Itang.

"A friend who was older said he would put me on the form with him as his brother. We had to make up our story, but it was our true story, although we made it up to combine it as though we were family," he says.

FROM EAST AFRICA TO IOWA

Soon, unbelievably, Ger was on an airplane to Des Moines, Iowa.

"It was the first time in my life to fly," he remembers. "I was afraid of the running water in the [airplane] bathroom. Washing down my piss felt so strange. I had my own tray of food, when I was used to eating the same thing every day—beans and maybe rice and flour mixed together. But there I was, sitting comfortably with the cool air on my head."

Upon arrival, Ger was greeted by former campmates who showed off their cars and fluent English. They took him to an apartment, where he attempted to shower. "I couldn't figure out how to balance the water," he recalls. "I turned the water on the hot side and it's getting warmer and warmer, and next thing you know it's so hot the water burned me on my back and I'm in there screaming. I thought I'd made a big mistake and broken the thing."

> "Five or six Sudanese guys had gone out to the bushes to get firewood for cooking, and they grabbed those guys and hung them up."

Fortunately, he had a summer to assimilate before starting high school. He learned to speak fluent English in just three months, he says, by watching television. Ger made it through freshman year without much trouble, even dating an American girl named Kim.

Best of all, he discovered basketball. "One day I went to the YMCA and the guys showed me how they were dunking," he says. "So I grabbed the ball and jumped up and slammed it, and when I let go of the rim I fell on my back and went unconscious. That's how I started to love basketball."

The game, he says, let him escape from the terrible memories that plagued him. "Basketball captured me away from a lot of the things I'd known about in the past. I could think about nothing," he says.

COMING TO BLOOMINGTON

After that first year, Ger wasn't getting along with the man designated as his guardian. He left and stayed with friends in South Dakota until he summoned the courage to call on his uncle Wal.

"They didn't know me, but I knew them," Ger explains of his Bloomington family. "My uncle was a famous politician in South Sudan, but I was one of sixty kids of his brother. I was nervous about going there."

Wal did nearly turn Ger away—but only because Ger arrived in a taxi he had taken from Indianapolis. "I had no clue where anything was," Ger explains. "I couldn't even say 'Bloomington.' All I had was the address written down. When I arrived, the cab fare was something like a hundred dollars. My uncle went ballistic yelling at the cab driver. He was telling him, 'Take him back! Take him back where you found him!'"

Once the driver agreed to a reduced fare, though, Ger was welcomed. He got the room his cousin Duany Duany was vacating in their Tulip Tree apartment as Duany headed to the University of Wisconsin on a basketball scholarship. With Ger's Uncle Wal and Aunt Julia and cousins Kueth, Nok, Nyagon, and Bil, Ger became one of the family.

While attending Bloomington High School North between 1995 and 1998, Ger didn't talk about the trials he had been through. "That chapter of my life, I tried to close it," he says. "My cousins had been in Bloomington pretty much all their lives. All they knew was basketball, and all I knew was warfare. Living in Tulip Tree, I didn't think they would relate to where I was a year before, living in a refugee camp."

Ger didn't even tell his Aunt Julia about his experiences, though he felt exasperated when she encouraged him to join the U.S. military. Instead, just like his cousins, he focused on doing well in both athletics and academics. When he graduated, it was with a basketball scholarship to Lakeland College in Matoon, Illinois.

"The day I graduated, I was so happy," he says. "It was a dream come true for me. Nobody knew what was going on in my head, but I was thinking about all that running, stealing somebody's food, getting shot at. I was thinking, 'What if I didn't do all that? Would I ever have graduated from high school in Indiana?' I started to know what kind of strength I have as a person. That's when I knew I'm not just going to be Ger, the war victim; I'm not a war victim anymore."

Ger did well at Lakeland, later transferring to Los Angeles Southwest where he helped his team win a state championship. After finishing his associate degree, he received another basketball scholarship to the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut.

Ger with girlfriend Nyamuoch Girwath at the Kickstarter party.

HOLLYWOOD BECKONS

Meanwhile, in 2003, Mary Williams, head of The Lost Boys Foundation (and Jane Fonda's adopted daughter) was asked to round up young Sudanese men to audition for the role of a refugee in a feature film. Ger and his cousin Kueth Duany, who was studying and playing basketball at Syracuse University, drove to Hartford, Connecticut, to join dozens of other Hollywood hopefuls in a day of auditions that felt like a South Sudanese reunion.

"They wanted to cast a kid that really had experience as a refugee, so we all did it. It was just a fun, playing day," Ger says. He didn't put much thought into the outcome until he got a call from Williams two months later announcing that he'd been chosen, out of hundreds of lost boys, to appear in the film *I ♥ Huckabees*.

"I was like, 'Okay,' and they flew me to Los Angeles. Next morning I'm sitting in a trailer with Dustin Hoffman and Mark Wahlberg and Lily Tomlin," he says.

Ger was astonished by both the opulence and the friendliness of Hollywood. "Dustin was like, 'Hey, come to my house and have dinner.' He had this huge house and more than one car—I'd never even owned a car. Everyone was so nice to me. I'd be trying on suits, with personal stylists saying, 'You're such a handsome man.' I met the director, David [O. Russell], and he gave me a hug. I was like, 'Okay, this is a huggy place.' All these kisses flying back and forth. I was thinking, 'You are such strange people.'"

Ger's role in *Huckabees* was a small but central one as Stephen Nimieri, the enigmatic stranger whose recurring presence leads the protagonist (played by Jason Schwartzman) to seek help from existential detectives (Hoffman and Tomlin). The film opened a world of opportunities for Ger—particularly after he met Wahlberg's friend, Ralph Lauren model Tyson Beckford, who encouraged him to try modeling. Ger felt at home in front of the camera from his first shoot, which was with New York fashion photographer Norman Watson. "Basketball helped me, because you have to take in detailed directions from your coach just like you do in a [photo] shoot," he says. "I took it very seriously, but it became very natural. I could just be myself."

Ger has since moved to New York City where he continues to work as an actor and to model for commercial, editorial, and runway assignments. Highlights of his career so far include modeling for Tommy Hilfiger, appearing on HBO's *Sex and the City*, and acting in director Andrew Dosunmu's film *Restless City*, which was featured at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival.

INDEPENDENCE FOR SOUTH SUDAN

Even as he became immersed in the glamour of Hollywood and the fashion world, though, Ger thought about home. "Then in 2005, something huge happened: Peace," he says. "It was a shocking thing. I couldn't believe it." He went back to South Sudan for the first time in 2008, hoping to find his family, but was unsuccessful. "There was still so much sectarian killing and chaos," he says. He spent the next two years planning a second trip and waiting for the violence to die down. When he returned in November 2010, he was finally reunited, after 20 years, with his mother and father.

"It was amazing. I can't explain it in words," he says quietly, lapsing into uncharacteristic silence.

Just as meaningful was the opportunity to vote in the referendum that took place in January 2011, and to return a third time for the independence celebration in July. As he watched the South Sudanese flag rise for the first time, he says, "A light came on. I realized that all my accomplishment, money, college—my life is beyond that. I don't live for that anymore. If I have to die now, I might die with a smile on my face, because I see my country independent."

Ger hopes to raise awareness of the needs of South Sudan through the documentary he's now filming about his journey, *Ger: To Be Separate*, with director Wanuri Kahiu. Beyond that, he plans to split his time between New York and Akobo, where he's working to build a nonprofit organization that will support a school and a health clinic. He intends to keep his acting and modeling career going in order to fund those projects, but he's no longer interested in the luxurious lifestyle to which he once aspired. For a quarter century, he did everything possible to escape the life he came from. Now, he just wants to make life better for those he left behind.

"I'll never be rich. I came to that conclusion," he says. "There's no money that I need. Now I'm helping my country, and that is enough."