



What Is the What

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In this section of What Is the What, the narrator, Valentino Achak Deng, an immigrant from Sudan, describes some of what he experienced when he first arrived in the United States.

... But while Sasha told us that in America even the most successful men can have but one wife at once—my father had six—and talked about escalators, indoor plumbing, and the various laws of the land, he did not warn us that I would be told by American teenagers that I should go back to Africa. The first time it happened, I was on a bus.

A few months after I arrived, we began venturing out from the apartment, in part because we had been given only enough money to live for three months, and now we needed to find work. This was January of 2002, and I was working at Best Buy, in the storeroom. I was riding home at 8 p.m., after changing buses three times ... I was about to get off at my stop when two African-American teenagers spoke to me.

“Yo,” one of the boys said to me. “Yo freak, where you from?” I turned and told him I was from Sudan. This gave him pause. Sudan is not well-known, or was not well-known until the war the Islamists brought to us twenty years ago, with its proxy armies, its untethered militias, was brought, in 2003, to Darfur.

“You know,” the teenager said, tilting his head and sizing me up, “you’re one of those Africans who sold us out.” He went on in this vein for some time, and it became clear that he thought I was responsible for the enslaving of his ancestors. Accordingly, he and his friend followed me for a block, talking to my back, again suggesting that I go back to Africa....

Though I have a low opinion of the teenagers who harassed me, I am more tolerant of this sort of experience than some of my fellow Sudanese. It is a terrible thing, the assumptions that Africans develop about African-Americans. We watch American films and we come to this country assuming that African-Americans are drug dealers and bank robbers. The Sudanese elders in Kakuma told us in no uncertain terms to stay clear of African-Americans, the women in particular. How surprised they would have been to learn that the first and most important person to come to our aid in Atlanta was an African-American woman who wanted only to connect us to more people who could help. ...

When we landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport, we were promised enough money to cover our rent and groceries for three months. I was flown to Atlanta, handed a temporary green card and a Medicaid card, and through the International Rescue Committee provided with enough money to pay my rent for exactly three months. My \$8.50 an hour at Best Buy was not enough. I took a second job that first fall, this one at a holiday-themed store that opened in November and closed just after January began. I arranged ceramic Santas on shelves, I sprayed synthetic frost on miniature wreaths, I swept the floor seven times a day. Still, between the two jobs, neither of them full-time, I was taking home less than \$200 a week after taxes. I knew men in Kakuma who were doing better than that, relatively speaking, selling sneakers made of rope and rubber tires.

Finally, though, a newspaper article about the Sudanese in Atlanta led to many new job offers from well-meaning citizens, and I took one at a furniture showroom, the sort of place designers go, in a suburban complex with many other such showrooms. The job kept me in the back of the store, among the fabric samples. I should not feel shame about this, but somehow I do: my job was to retrieve fabric samples for the designers, and then file them again when they were returned. I did this for almost two years. The thought of all that time wasted, so much time sitting on that wooden stool, cataloging, smiling, thanking, filing—all while I should have been in

school—is too much for me to contemplate. My current hours at the Century Club Health and Fitness Centre are superficially pleasant, the gym members smile at me and I at them, but my patience is waning. [pp. 23-24]

In the following section, the narrator is describing his first meeting with Phil, the man who became his mentor.

... I told Phil a brief version of my story. I could see that it affected him deeply. He had read about the Lost Boys in the newspaper, but hearing my more detailed version upset him. I asked about his life and he told me something of his own story. ... When Phil read about us and the Lost Boys Foundation, he was determined to donate money to the organization; he and his wife, Stacey, had decided on \$10,000. He called the LBF and spoke to Mary. She was thrilled with the prospect of the donation, and asked Phil if he might like to donate more than money, that perhaps he'd like to come down to the office and possibly donate his time, too?

And now he was sitting with me, and it was obvious that he was struggling with the predicament we both found ourselves in. He had not originally planned to become my sponsor, but within minutes he knew that if he left that day and simply wrote a check, I would be exactly where I had been before—lost and somewhat helpless. I felt terrible for him, watching him struggle with the decision, and in any other situation would have told him that money was enough. But I knew that I needed a guide, someone who could tell me, for instance, how to find treatment for my headaches. I stared at him and tried to look like someone with whom he could spend time, someone who would be appropriate to bring into his home, to meet his wife and twins, then under a year old. I smiled and tried to seem easygoing and pleasant, not someone who would bring only misery and trouble.

“I love childrens!” I said. For some time I could not remember to leave the s off the end of the plural for child. “I am very good with them,” I added. “Any help you might give me, I will repay you in child care. Or yard work. I will be happy to do anything.”

The poor man. I suppose I put it on too thick. He was near tears when he finally stood up and shook my hand. “I’ll be your sponsor. And your mentor,” he said. “I’m going to get you working, and get you a car and an apartment. Then we’ll see about getting you into college.” And I knew he would. Phil Mays was a successful man and would be successful with me. I shook his hand vigorously and smiled and walked him to the elevator. I returned to the LBF offices, and looked out the window. He was emerging from the building, now just below me. I watched as he got into his car, a fine car, sleek and black, exactly beneath where I stood against the glass. He sat down behind the wheel, put his hands in his lap and he cried. I watched his shoulders shake, watched him bring his hands to his face. [pp. 158-159]

In this section, the narrator, suffering yet more danger and indignity, talks about his gratitude and frustration about living in the United States.

I am tired of this country. I am thankful for it, yes. I have cherished many aspects of it for the three years I have been here, but I am tired of the promises. I came here, four thousand of us came here, contemplating and expecting quiet. Peace and college and safety. We expected a land without war and, I suppose, a land without misery. We were giddy and impatient. We wanted it all immediately—homes, families, college, the ability to send money home, advanced degrees, and finally some influence. But for most of us, the slowness of our transition—after five years I still do not have the necessary credits to apply to a four-year college—has wrought chaos. We waited ten years at Kakuma [refugee camp] and I suppose we did not want to start over here. We wanted the next step, and quickly. But this has not happened, not in most cases, and in the interim, we have found ways to spend the time. I have held too many menial jobs, and currently work at the front desk of a health club, on the earliest possible shift, checking in members and explaining the club’s benefits to prospective members. This is not glamorous, but it represents a level of stability unknown to some. Too many have fallen, too many feel they have failed. The pressures upon us, the promises we cannot keep with ourselves—these things are making monsters of too many of us. [p. 13]