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"This is not a market like we have," said Sudanese refugee Aciek Ateng Nai (right), in a grocery store in Grand Rapids. "This is a president's palace." Nai and William Thon Deng (left) are among the 3,600 African refugees being resettled in America.



Ethan Hill

## Out of Africa

**During a Civil War, thousands of Sudanese boys fled through the bush, facing death at every turn. Now the survivors are moving here. This is their story**

By **Donatella Lorch**  
NEWSWEEK

March 19 issue — An hour into his round-the-clock journey from Nairobi, Kenya, to Grand Rapids, Mich., Aciek Ateng Nai got a first taste of his life to come. High over Sudan, a flight attendant set down a plastic tray in front of him. It was typical airline fare: a mysterious meat sauce over rice, wilted salad and cold, dry bread. Yet to

19-year-old Nai and the 45 other Sudanese refugees on board—orphans who had survived an almost Biblical thousand-mile trek across Africa in search of a home—it might as well have been a feast.

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NAI PICKED UP the frozen pat of butter from his plate. Not sure what to do with it, he popped it into his mouth and chewed. His seatmate poured a carton of milk over the lettuce. "We are going to eat twice in eight hours?" Nai's companion marveled.

The meal was one of many firsts that January day. The young men had never so much as seen an airplane or a refrigerator or a telephone. Shivering in the air-conditioned cabin, they wrapped themselves in blankets like mummies, staring out the window at the vast continent they were leaving behind.

There they were known simply as the Lost Boys. Left parentless in Sudan's brutal civil war 14 years ago, Nai and more than 20,000 other boys—many younger than 10—were left to flee across the wastes of sub-Saharan Africa, drinking from fetid puddles and eating dried leaves. Many died along the way, succumbing to disease or starvation or mauled by lions. By the early '90s, the few thousand who survived found shelter in a U.N. refugee camp in Kenya, where they have lived ever since in primitive squalor.



COMING UP ON TV

- Watch Donatella Lorch's report on the Sudanese refugees on "The News With Brian Williams," Monday at 9 p.m. ET on MSNBC.

**“We are giving them a chance. It’s kind of a recognition that enough is enough for this group.”**

**— STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL**

## **LOST BOYS IN AMERICA**

Until now. After a decade in the camps, the Lost Boys are coming to America. In the largest and most ambitious child-refugee relocation program since the Vietnam War, the U.S. State Department, with help from the United Nations, will take in some 3,600 of the boys—nearly all who are left in Kenya—by the end of this year. “We are giving them a chance,” says one State Department official. “It’s kind of a recognition that enough is enough for this group.” Because most of the orphaned girls were long ago taken in by refugee families, who married them off to men willing to pay a dowry, only 68 of the new émigrés are girls. So far about 600 of the young men have already made the trip, settling into cities across the country, including Seattle, Houston and Grand Rapids. Most have enrolled in school, have found jobs and are beginning to deal with the physical and emotional scars left by their years on the run. NEWSWEEK spent weeks with several of the young men as they prepared to make the thrilling, terrifying journey from Kenya to their new home in Grand Rapids—and accompanied them as they began new lives in a world that, just a few weeks ago, they barely knew existed.

When Aciek Ateng Nai arrived in Michigan, he had to learn how dial a telephone, distinguish the refrigerator from the freezer, and operate a television



Ethan Hill

Ask Aciek Nai to name his most treasured new possession, and he points to his shoes—Doc Martens knockoffs from the local megastore. For Nai, the thick-soled lace-ups are a stark reminder of everything he didn’t have in his former life. Six years old when government soldiers attacked his village, Nai was separated from his family in the chaos. He hid for days in a swamp, then joined the other fleeing children. Nai and his friends never saw their families again.

They didn't stop walking for nearly two months. As they slowly made their way across the harsh terrain to safety in Ethiopia, the scorching sand blistered Nai's bare feet. Older boys tried to help by tying pieces of goat skin under his toes. The boys ate whatever roots and plants they could find along the way, but Nai says the unforgiving thirst was worse than the hunger.

### CHASED BY SOLDIERS

They found brief refuge in Ethiopia, but were driven out when troops attacked their camp, forcing them to flee on foot back toward Sudan. Chased by soldiers, the boys ran to the banks of the Gilo River. "We didn't want to enter, but there was shooting and people were pushing us," recalls Nai. Many drowned before reaching the other side. Crocodiles ate dozens of others.

It took nearly a year for the 12,000 remaining boys to find their way to the U.N. refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya. They arrived rail-thin and knobby-kneed, their legs and feet ravaged by infected sores. For the next 10 years, the sprawling mud-hut settlement of 70,000 refugees from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan became the boys' home. Each day was a struggle. Malaria regularly swept through the camp. Refugees were stung repeatedly by scorpions and camel spiders, which came out by the hundreds at night. The boys had to guard their bimonthly U.N. rations, barely enough for one meal a day, storing the containers of flour and lentils and cooking oil under their bunks. Often they had to choose between food and other necessities. Selling part of their rations to Kenyans was the only way to get money for shoes and clothing. Before arriving in Grand Rapids, Nai had worn the same shoes since 1994.

Despite the bleakness of their surroundings, they were determined to remain hopeful about their future. Convinced that education would someday lead them out of Kakuma, they compulsively attended the camp's school. In the scorching afternoons, when camp life came to a halt, the boys quizzed each other on English and math.



**Newsweek**  
Donatella Lorch  
CORRESPONDENT

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**AUDIO** [Newsweek On Air: Refugees: Sudan's "Lost Boys"](#)

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### SEEKING A WARM HOME

For the past year the Lost Boys have excitedly studied maps of the United States, spending hours discussing which cities they'd most like to live in. Mostly, they were concerned

about living someplace warm. On the day before their departure, the State Department-funded resettlement agencies told Nai and his friends which cities would become their new homes. Nai grabbed the map, scanning the country in search of Grand Rapids. The agencies placed the boys in whatever cities would take them, but tried to keep relatives together. In a final ritual, the departing boys handed over all their spare clothing to those staying behind. It was a stoic goodbye. No tears, no hugs. Each carried only photos of friends, a Bible written in Dinka, their native language, a toothbrush and a paperback book entitled “Welcome to America.”

Too excited to sleep aboard their first flight, the boys fussed with the headphones, turning up the volume as high as it would go. They stared in awe at the mini-television screens, channel-surfing in an endless loop. They even had their first encounter with air rage. A French-speaking passenger refused to put out her cigarette and threatened to set fire to the plane. One of the young men, John Marial Deng, politely offered to help. “We are over 200 people on this plane and she is only one,” he explained to the flight attendant in his formal, stilted English. “We can tie her up.” The flight attendant gently declined.

When they arrived in Grand Rapids, the real culture shock set in. The first day, the boys went to buy shoes at Meijer, an enormous one-stop-shopping emporium that sells everything from clothing to groceries. The young men were transfixed by the rows of shoes. “This is not a market like we have,” said Nai. “This is a president’s palace.” Throughout the day, people in Grand Rapids treated them like celebrities, stopping them in the aisles to shake their hands. They asked about some of the young men’s six missing bottom teeth, markings from a Dinka tribal ritual. The manager treated them to ice cream and pizza. One teenage girl, a student from Kenya, pressed her phone number into Deng’s hand.

“The first three years weren’t so easy. I had to fight for everything.”

— RUZMIR  
KOVACEVIC  
Bosnian refugee

### FOCUSING ON SIMPLE THINGS

To help them through the first awkward months, a government-funded charity, Catholic Development Outreach, has assigned the boys caseworkers. One, Ruzmir Kovacevic, a Bosnian who spent months in a Serb concentration camp, came to Grand Rapids as a refugee three years ago. At first he showed them simple things, like how to dial a telephone and the difference between a refrigerator and a freezer. Now he focuses on self-sufficiency, explaining how he works two jobs to support his parents in Bosnia. “The first three years weren’t so easy,” he told them. “I had to fight for everything.”

In the six weeks since they arrived, the novelty has begun

to fade as they have settled into their new lives. Those under 18 have been placed in foster homes. The young adults like Nai receive food stamps and Medicaid, and live in low-income apartments. The Catholic charity is picking up the young men's \$600 rent—but for only four months. After that, they are expected to pay their own way. Over the next few years, they will also be required to repay the U.S. government \$848 for their one-way air fare from Nairobi. Many are already on their way to self-sufficiency. The manager at Meijer was so taken with their enthusiasm that he hired 18 of them. Both Nai and Deng work in the pet department. Mostly they work nights, leaving days free for classes at the local community college, where they are studying for the GED. Eventually, Nai hopes to become a geologist.

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At night, he says, coming home after a long day of school and the late shift at Meijer, his mind often travels back to the camp. At times he deeply misses the friends he may never see again. Yet he admits he often has violent nightmares about his childhood. Deng's older cousin, 23-year-old William Thon Deng, says he still shakes out his shoes every morning to

check for scorpions, an old habit from the camps. And many of the refugees are only now being treated for chronic illnesses and infections. Several contracted hepatitis B from sharing dirty razors. Others suffer from severe headaches—possibly the first signs that the young men, at last out of danger, are beginning to feel the psychological damage of their long trauma.

There are other, more hopeful signs that the past may yet recede. Six weeks after he took his first car ride, Nai is preparing to take his driver's license exam. And last week William and John Deng went to a dentist to each have their six missing teeth replaced with dentures. "This doesn't mean I am not Dinka," John says. Yet it may, in time, help him feel more like an American.

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