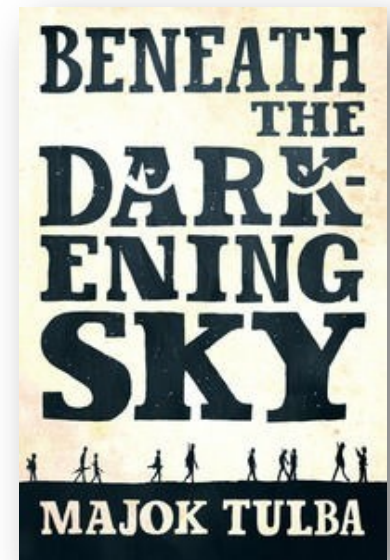


# Beneath the Darkening Sky

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## Extract

### Rebels

My papyrus mat creaks as I roll in my sleep.

Mama says when you dream of running in circles, it's because you're sleeping with your legs folded up. I dream I'm falling into a dark bottomless pit, red eyes in the black following me. Then the night is dark water and I'm swimming for the surface. The neighbour's dogs bark and my stomach moans and gargles in the night. I force myself awake.

My skin tingles all over, like I'm still falling or swimming. I listen to the night outside and hear only crickets, no birds or cockcrows yet. It's still not safe to go out. Maybe I'll hold it until morning. I lie back down, stare and blink into the dark hut.

Last night, my big brother Akot asked me to go out with him. It was midnight and hyenas were crying in the bushes. So I said no. Akot is thirteen years old, two years older than me, but he's still in Primary 4. I'm in Primary 5, and in a few months I'll be in Primary 6. I get bullied by the bigger boys because I'm the youngest in my class. Whenever they pick on me I tell the teachers. Then the big boys get punished.

The teacher says, 'Bend over. You're getting five lashes. If you touch your backside before I get to five, I start again.'

When I tell Akot he is ashamed. 'You're such a baby, Obinna! You're a coward. You're not even a real man. If you were a man, you'd fight back. But no, you just go running to a teacher, crying like a baby. Or a little girl.'

He hates me because everybody says I'm the clever one and Akot's the stupid one. So the big boys tease him too. But Akot doesn't tell the teachers, he tries to be a man and fight them.

He got into a fight last week.

Afterwards he told me, 'I'm running away from here.' His nose was bleeding. 'I'm going to go join up with the rebels.'

I laughed at him. Soldiers have to know about guns, but he can't even write. How was he going to learn about guns? He growled at me and hit my shoulder.

'You're just a baby,' he said, wiping blood off his lip.

That's why I didn't go out with him last night. If he's a man he should be brave enough to go out in the dark by himself. Akot says that when he comes back he'll be a soldier, and he's going to show me his gun. He says he'll be a sergeant then.

I want to be a doctor and wear one of those things around my neck. You know that thing real doctors always wear? They put it on your chest and listen. Last time I was sick, Mama took me to the clinic. There was another sick kid there and I saw the doctor put the thing on his chest and listen. When it was my turn he didn't use it, so I asked him, 'Doctor, why aren't you using that on me?'

'What?'

'That thing.' I pointed. 'You used it on the other boy, but not on me.'

'Oh, you mean my stethoscope? I used it on the other boy because he has tuberculosis in his chest, while you only have headache. A headache I give you some tablets for. Does that make sense?'

'A little bit.'

'Do you want to see it?'

'Yes, please!'

Mama got angry. 'Obinna, don't bother the good doctor. He's a very busy man. I'm very sorry, sir. He's always asking questions.'

'That's all right,' the doctor said. 'Obinna, do you want to listen to my chest?'

'Can I? When I grow up, I want to be a doctor.'

'Good. You'll have to study really hard in school, then you have to go to university to study medicine. And always listen to your teachers.'

'But sometimes my teachers are wrong. And they don't like it when you tell them.'

He smiled. 'Adults can be like that. It's a weakness.'

'This one time, my maths teacher got an answer wrong, and when I tried to tell him it was wrong he pulled on my ears.'

Mama said it was time to go.

'Thank you, Doctor.' She grabbed my hand. 'Come on, Obinna, the doctor's very busy. Thank you again, Doctor. You've been very patient.'

'Quite all right, ma'am. Obinna, come and see me again sometime and we can sit and talk, yes?'

We haven't gone back, yet. Every time I ask Mama to take me she laughs, and says the doctor is too busy to see naughty little boys.

My stomach aches. Maybe it was the mangoes. Mama always says not to eat green mangoes, but we were bringing the goats home and they looked really good and I was very hungry. Oh, my stomach hurts!

'Akot,' I whisper. 'Akot. Akot, come outside with me. I really need to use the toilet.'

'Leave me alone.' He's still mostly asleep. 'You didn't go out with me last night.'

'Okay, I'll just have to go right here.'

'Go ahead.' That woke him up. 'I'll tell everyone at school about it and Mama will make you rub cow dung on the floor. Do it right there, I dare you.'

I knew he'd say something like that. And he means it, too. Mama and Papa sleep in another hut near the goats, so the wild animals don't come and eat the goats in the night, but Akot would make sure they knew. So I get up, feeling like my backside's going to explode. I open the door, careful of splinters, and then run as fast as I can across the dirt. The paths of the village are like rock, packed down by generations of feet. As soon as I squat, it all flows out in one big go. The morning is crisp, the air stings my nostrils and chills my throat as I gulp it in.

The dogs are still barking. It's not them yelling just at each other. Mama says that bark is for when someone is around who they don't like.

The toilet house is a fair way from our hut. So I open the door just a little and peek out.

I see men with guns in the village.

Fear grips my hands and limbs. My mind goes blank. I have no idea what to do. What should I do? Who are these men?

I try to calm my breathing. No one in our village has a gun. I keep watching from my hiding place.

Three men are quite close. One is just wearing shorts and a T-shirt, but the other two are in camouflage pants and black shirts.

They're running towards the hut I share with Akot.

They yell, 'Everybody out!' I can hear doors being kicked and things crashing and breaking. Villagers scream and shout.

Akot is alone in the hut.

I don't hear Papa's voice. I tell myself, It's okay, it's okay, Papa is a man. He'll be all right. We'll all be all right. But my heart can't stop thumping. My body shivers.

God, don't let anyone hurt my brother. I love him. He's mean sometimes, but I forgive him.

Are these the rebels I've heard about? Or the army? I haven't seen rebels before and I don't know how to tell them apart.

I can't just hide in the toilet. I think of running into the bush but soldiers are everywhere. There's no way I can run without them seeing me but I can't stay where I am. I creep out, extra quiet, and head for the mango tree. My knees are shaking so much, like I'm going to fall over. When I get to the tree, I hide behind it and hold my breath. I need to stop shaking.

The sky is still dark. The sun isn't out yet, but the village is so bright. Where is all the light coming from?

I look around and see pillars of flame, maybe six huts away. They're setting our huts on fire! My heart stops. Now there's a flash, and a flicker becomes another flame, and it crawls up the side of my hut, eating at it, singeing my home black.

Not even thinking, I climb the tree. I'm up so fast, hiding in the shadows of the leaves.

'Obinna!' I hear Akot cry out.

It's hard to hear over everything. Soldiers yelling, villagers crying and screaming. The burning huts crackle and crash.

The only things moving slowly are the soldiers. They stroll through the village like children playing with toy guns, shooting at people as they run for their lives.

'Obinna!'

If it wasn't my name, I wouldn't have heard it. 'Where are you?' But Akot stops. He's looking at the tree, then everywhere else. Did he see me? I want to call out to him, to tell him where I am so that he can come here and hide in the leaves with me, but if I call out to him the soldiers will hear. If I don't, they will hurt him. I'll call him quietly. I open my mouth, and as I'm about to yell he turns and goes back towards our hut.

I creep out on the limb so I can see better. A soldier is trying to pull Mama out of her hut and Papa is holding onto her, refusing to let go. Two more waving guns in the air move towards them. One raises his gun with both his hands and pounds Papa in the shoulder with the wooden end of it. Papa lets go of Mama with a groan. Maybe his arm has gone numb. The rebels – now I'm sure they're the rebels – drag all of my family out of the hut and force them to lie in the dirt for a second, and then yell at them to get up again. Akot runs to Mama, and wipes the dirt out of her hair and whispers something to her. A soldier comes up from behind, an enormous shadow rising slowly. The soldier hits Akot and my brother spins and falls into the dirt.

I can hear him in my head – 'Real men always fight back.' Don't be a man, Akot. Please. The rebel keeps the gun pointed at my brother's head on the ground, he can shoot him any second. No! God. Not Akot! Not now. The soldier shouts at him and Akot drags himself up, looking at the soldier as if he wants to remember his face.

I can count everyone, my whole family, standing close together near our hut. Where's little Nini, our cousin? She's hiding under her mama's arm. A bunch of soldiers guard our home, but no one looks at my tree. One of the men is talking. The sound has died down, but I still can't hear him, I'm too far away. He waves his hands and points at my family. The soldiers herd them like cattle, for a moment I think to my tree! But then I realise they're going just to the left, into the central meeting place of the village.

The soldiers separate people into two groups. The first group is all men and boys. My father and grandfather and two cousins are there. Akot, and my other cousin, Otim. He's the same age as Akot, but he's in Primary 6 and is known for his big feet. The second group is the women and the girls and the very young children. My mother and my grandmother, my uncle's wife, and little Nini and her two sisters. Mama is holding my baby sister, and my two

little brothers grip her legs. My uncle's sister-in-law, Akidi. She doesn't even live with us, she's just visiting. Akidi is thirteen and her breasts are just starting to show. During the day, Akot keeps looking at them, but not now. No one says anything, not after they hit Akot.

Over there is my father. Even from this far away I can see the hatred in his face. The deep creases are pure black shadow, with our burning home lighting his face. He is fighting himself not to move. I can hear his voice in my head. He's telling me and Akot to be brave. 'Be men. You have to prove yourself if you want to be a man.' Seeing Papa's face, I feel more sad than scared. Just for a moment. Mama's scared, she looks like she's about to cry. She suddenly looks old. No one is moving, just shaking. I've stopped breathing. Even the wind is still. Time has stopped. What I'm seeing can't be real, but I want it to stay as it is. I'm more afraid of time starting again.

Another burning hut collapses and the villagers jump. One of the rebels laughs. He looks barely older than me, not by more than a year. Now I see that a lot of the rebels are just boys. All of them are wearing army clothes, some tattered, others really new, but all a few sizes too big. A lot are dirty. I think it might be blood. Maybe the rebels make the younger ones cook, so they get goat blood on their clothes. Their faces are all shiny with sweat and ash from the burning huts. It looks like face paint for the village dances.

Behind me, more soldiers come from the far side of the village, out of a mist of dust and smoke, waving their guns in the air. They pass close to my tree. My foot slips and I almost lose my grip. A mango falls. Eyes turn to the tree. But they don't track it back to me.

The rebel leader calls out orders again, this time I can hear him. 'Burn the rest of the huts. And fire the granaries!'

Laughing like devils, the rebels set fire to the other huts. Flames spread like ants over a dead bird, racing along, eating at the huts and granaries. Orange dancers above our homes. My stomach twists and turns cold. The soldiers are burning the food.

Who burns food? They're crazy.

More rebels appear with people from the furthest huts. They shout and push so many, maybe the whole village. Everyone I know. I swallow a sob. All I can do is watch. How can I only watch? Now the rebels have pulled the boys out of the first group and are separating them into two lines. I see them pushing tall boys into one line and short boys into the other. Akot is in the line of tall boys. A soldier kneels in front of the short boys' line. He stands his gun on its wooden end and then takes hold of the first boy. He brings him next to the gun, the tip of the barrel against the boy's temple.

A cold wash of horror passes through me, like I've suddenly fallen back into the cold dark water of my dream. I wonder whether they're going to shoot the short boys in the head.

No. The soldier is not shooting him. I realise that he is measuring him, to see how tall he is. He slaps the boy and pushes him to the line of the taller boys, and then moves to the next boy. He puts this boy next to the gun. Then he puts the open palm of his hand across the boy's head and the tip of the gun. He lets go of the gun – both boy and gun stand still. The same height. The soldier thinks for a moment and then, as if he has just remembered what he's doing, he pulls the boy up by the ear and points him to go to the taller line. He yells, 'Next!' and they go through the line of short boys.

God help us. God help us. Don't let us die, not today. God! I'm just a kid, but please hear me. God. God! God.

A knot in the tree is digging into my elbow, like it's cutting me, but I know it isn't. This helps me forget how scared I am. I look back out through the mango leaves. My whole village is split into these three groups, boys, women and men. A couple of the rebels stand by the groups, making sure villagers don't run or talk. The guards are older. Men with thick necks and arms clutching guns.

Another soldier, a beret smoothing the shadow of his head, starts shouting and waving, and the younger rebels make a big circle around him. This must be their leader. I don't know a lot of the words, but every once in a while the grown-up rebels shout something back. They call him Captain. They push the kids to shout too. The Captain is talking about injustice and strength. He says names I've never heard before. Now he's talking about enemies. The rebels in the circle shout louder. Every time the Captain takes a breath, they're yelling. Jumbled words, not real sentences. The guards join in too, raising their guns above their heads. The young rebels' voices are higher and they crack.

They think my village is their enemy. I didn't know we were on a side.

The Captain in his beret is yelling, 'Revolution.' The grown-up rebels shout the slogans over and over. They grab the kids' arms and raise them up, making them repeat the slogans. The grown-ups smile at the older boys and shake their fists to encourage them more. Now the Captain just stands silently, hands on hips, and looks at his soldiers as they shout. Some stomp. Some whistle. Some hoot.

All at once, they stop. A few of the youngest ones cover their mouths with their hands. The Captain has raised his arms, pistol pointing upward as if he wants to shoot the sky. The quiet is like another voice, louder than the shouting. Scarier than the screaming.

'Revolution!' the Captain yells, and they all shout again. The grown-ups move without orders. Two of them grab an old man and drag him into the centre of the circle. Another soldier appears holding a long, dirty rope. The man from my village has a short grey beard and is very thin. They push him, and he stumbles and falls into the dirt. I can see his mouth move, but the rebels are making too much noise for me to hear him.

They wrap the rope around the old man's feet, then his wrists. They pull him up to his knees so they can tie the knot better. The villagers watch through the wall of rebels. I climb up a little higher in the tree, careful not to make the branch shake. I watch too. I can't remember the old man's name, but he knows a lot of songs. He taught Akot one about being a strong warrior. I know it because Akot sings it so much.

The Captain holds a machete over his head. It shines in the light of our burning homes. The others are all so dirty they don't shine much.

Shouting, stomping and chanting. The old man is tied up like a fat goat and the Captain walks around him. More soldiers join the circle, like spectators at a cock fight. The Captain steps away and points with his shining machete at one of the boys, an older one with scars on his cheek. The boy screams like he's won something and runs forward, his own machete raised. What's he doing?

The boy swings the machete down, onto the old man's neck.

The old man's head is not joined to his body. Both are lying on the ground, blood pumping out of the neck just like a goat killed for a feast. The rebels cry out in celebration. The killer boy grabs the head from the ground. The old man's eyes are still open. Maybe he's still alive. Maybe they can put the head back on.

Blood drips from what used to be the old man and now looks like a tree trunk. The killer dances around, swinging the head by its thin hair and waving his dirty blade. The old man knew so many songs. One grown-up calmly unties the rope from the body.

The killer boy throws the head as hard as he can. It tumbles past the villagers and lands in a burning hut. The killer boy howls and shakes his fists like he's just made a goal in football. Grown-ups drag the old man's body out of the ring and throw it to the side.

Mouths gape. A flash of someone shooting his gun in the air. Feet stomp. But I can't hear a thing. They are dragging another man into the ring.

*It's Papa.*



His face is all hate.

When he laughs, Papa's mouth gets really big and his bright teeth shine, even in the dark. Then his Adam's apple bobs up and down and his laugh is deep like thunder and happy like a rainbow.

While the grown-ups tie a dirty rope around Papa's wrists, some big boys run around, getting the young ones to jump and scream.

The Captain stands outside the circle and whispers in one young boy's ear.

A boy younger than me. The Captain shows him how to hold a machete with both hands.

Papa is pushed down on his knees and they tie his ankles together. Tight.

'You're all animals!' Papa yells. I can hear him, louder than the rebels.  
'Animals that sniff through their own shit for food! You're all dogs, eating your own vomit!'

'Animals,' one of the rebels shouts back, 'live in the dirt.' He kicks Papa to the ground. 'Now you're an animal too!'

The Captain pushes the boy into the circle. He runs forward.

I want to hold Papa in my arms and protect him but I can't.

*Don't do it!*

The boy jumps and swings his machete down with both —

Papa!

I close my eyes. For the briefest moment I think, When I open my eyes I will see Papa alive and well. When I open my eyes everything will be okay.

I look back up and see the boy's face covered with blood. The boy stumbles back, dropping his machete and rubbing the blood out of his eyes. A fresh shout breaks out in the circle. I can't see Papa's face. It's real. I can't believe Papa is gone. I can't breathe.

A grown-up goes to Papa and grabs his hair, but the blade didn't go all the way through. He pulls and twists for a moment, and then hacks down with his machete, once, twice. I open my mouth to be sick, but nothing comes out. The rebel offers Papa's head to the little boy, who is still wiping the blood off his face with his sleeve.

They hand the little boy my papa's head. His eyes are closed, but I can see his bright teeth shining. His mouth screams, but no sound comes out.

God kill them all. And kill me too. Then I can be with Papa.

Mama holds my youngest siblings close to her skirt and wails. Her eyes have vanished in wrinkles, tears run through them. Akot stands, watches, his whole body shaking, fists clenched.

The rebels circle and sing songs. Another man is brought in, and another and another. They make the young ones kill first. Heads are tossed into the burning huts and bodies are thrown. Just like the butcher, only he never killed so many animals at once.

I sob, but no one hears me because everyone's sobbing. The women pull at their hair and wail at the sky. Children cry and cling to their mothers. Some look about, trying to make sense of what they see. Others just sit and bawl with their hands over their eyes. This isn't happening, it can't be.

The rebels disperse. They behead men at random. Akot and Otim and Akidi are held back by some of the guards, but most of the grown-ups ignore the men and go to the women. I can see one of them grab my uncle's wife. She screams and cries, tears soak her face and baby Nini holds onto her. My uncle's wife is screaming and reaching out. The other women reach for her but the rebels hold them back, pushing and kicking, hitting them with their guns. Her dress is ripped off. Children are pushed and thrown and kicked. What happens to the women is nothing like what I've glimpsed in our village at night, or even seen with the animals in the fields – it is not from this world. They rip, and push, and cut.

The fires rise higher and come closer, spitting red. They crack and spread, glowing orange. When the hut crashes, the yellow and red flames sparkle into the sky and then fall back down again, raining fire.

I can barely see because I'm crying so hard. It's the worst smell – burning flesh and fresh blood and shit. Mama whimpers like a little girl. Two of the rebels come and drag her out. Mama screams. One of the rebels spins and hits Mama in the face with his gun. I reach out.

No!

'Mama!'

As if on cue, the beasts turn. All eyes on the mango tree.