



*The following is a work of fiction.*

**D**isguised as a young Dinka woman, God came at dusk to a refugee camp in the North Darfur region of Sudan. He wore a flimsy green cotton dress, battered leather sandals, hoop earrings, and a length of black-and-white beads around his neck. Over his shoulder he carried a cloth sack which held a second dress, a bag of sorghum, and a plastic cup. He'd manifested a wound in the meat of his right calf, a jagged, festering gash that was attracting flies. The purpose of the wound was twofold. First, it enabled him to blend in with the residents of the camp, many of whom bore similar injuries from the slashing machetes of Janjaweed raiding parties. Second, the intense,

burning ache helped to mitigate the guilt he felt at the lot of the refugees, over which he was, due to an implacable polytheistic bureaucracy, nearly powerless.

It was these imposed limitations that had driven God, finally, to abandon his celestial post and come to Darfur. For millennia he'd been forced by his superiors to observe and document suffering without intervening in the slightest. For eons he'd followed orders, squelching the paternal feelings he had for his creations and turning a deaf ear to their pleas. But no more. He was not the omnipotent God most of them imagined — his knowledge of things was incomplete, and the miraculous abilities he did have were like cheap parlor tricks compared to the infinite powers attributed to him by man. He

# God Is Dead

*a short story by* RONALD F. CURRIE JR.

could not save the righteous or smite the wicked, but he could create for himself a physical form, and he could search for and find a boy named Thomas Mawien.

There was nothing unusual, in this place of wholesale murder, about Thomas's sorry fate. In fact, it was the very commonness of his plight — thousands of Dinka had, like him, seen their families slaughtered and been sold into slavery — that made him the perfect symbol of his people's suffering and the ideal recipient of God's repentance. In his relative powerlessness God had come to believe in the importance of small kindnesses and symbolic gestures, and while he could not save the Dinka, could not restore their families or their farms to them, he could find Thomas and, upon finding him,

throw himself down and beg forgiveness.

Also, God did have the bag of sorghum, and the bag of sorghum was infinite, so that he was able to offer the sweet grain to others endlessly. For weeks he'd done this, following the path of the Lol River through scorched plains, posing as Thomas's fictitious sister Sora, giving away sorghum and asking if anyone knew the boy. Most said no. Some, grateful for the food and eager to offer something in return, claimed to have seen him as recently as the day before, headed north, away from the fighting, or else southeast, but when God followed their directions, he became hopelessly lost. Without the river to guide him, he wandered in wide circles, often coming upon the same boulder or stand of trees days after he'd first seen it. Denying himself the sorghum, he ate leaves, *abuk* roots, and on one occasion what was left of an ostrich carcass after it had been picked over by both people and hyenas.

He suffered under the sun he'd created. Sick with heat and cholera, he collapsed in a field of spindly yellow grass. His dress rode up immodestly, but he was paralyzed by exhaustion, unable even to cover himself, and when two wild dogs came and began walking wide, hungry circles around him, he could not move to drive them away.

Deliverance came in the form of the Janjaweed. The dogs heard their approach and bolted, but God could only lie in the grass and listen as the mass of horses and Land Rovers rumbled closer, like some great and terrible machine that drove every living thing before it, shaking the earth as it passed. The Janjaweed saved him from the dogs, and his paralysis saved him from the Janjaweed; had he been able to rise and run, they would have captured him easily, and seeing in him not the creator of this universe, but rather a slender Dinka woman with a long, elegant neck and almond-shaped eyes, they would have raped him over and over until he died from the trauma.

But God remained hidden as the Janjaweed sped past all around him. Birds took to the sky; rodents scrambled for the safety of their burrows. Even the mosquitoes and cicadas fled. Bursts of semiautomatic fire sounded over the riot of diesel engines and galloping horses. A hoof, cracked and badly shod, struck the ground inches from God's head. Still he could not move, did not make a sound.

And then, as quickly as they'd come, the Janjaweed were gone, leaving in their wake a silence so absolute even God had a difficult time believing it was real.

He rested.

When he came to, it was light, and he found he could move again, if slowly and with great effort. He rose and followed the path of the Janjaweed — the trampled grass and burned huts and dead things of every description — which led due north, and when he again reached the bank of the Lol, he threw himself into the shallow water and drank greedily and tasted dirt and shit and did not care.

Early that afternoon, God entered the refugee camp along a rutted dirt path and approached the only people in sight, an elderly couple sitting together in the dust beneath a tamarind tree. Behind them the empty camp spread out in clusters of fragile huts made from thatch and torn white plastic tarps.

"*Kudual*," God said to the old couple in greeting. "Are you hungry? You look hungry."

The man sat hunched over and asleep, his bare legs folded like two bent sticks beneath him. The woman raised her eyes slowly and nodded yes. God offered the endless sorghum to her. With a hand as shriveled as a strip of jerked meat she reached in and removed a small amount, then held it to her chest with both hands, nodding modestly and muttering words of thanks.

"Take more," God said. "Please. There's plenty."

Without hesitating, the old woman did so. She placed the sorghum on the ground beside her, grasped and kissed God's hand (at which he, embarrassed and heartsick at the limits of his ability to help these people, demurred), then woke her husband with a rude jab of one bony elbow.

"Go find wood, and water for boiling," she said. "We have food."

With the deliberateness of someone who has learned never to feel too blessed, no matter how good the news, the man unfolded himself and stood up. God watched him recede into the empty camp.

"That man once owned five hundred head of cattle," the woman said. "Now look at him."

"Old woman, may I ask," God said, "do you know a boy named Thomas Mawien? Fifteen years old, but quite tall? He was taken as a slave by the Janjaweed many years ago, but he has escaped."

"I don't know him," the woman replied. "But that doesn't mean he's not here."

"It doesn't look like anyone's here," God said. "Did the Janjaweed attack?"

The woman laughed, revealing red, toothless gums. "No, not today," she said. "Today, with the big man here, we'll be safe."

"Which man is this?"

"The *ajak*, big man. Fat and pale like a mango. He comes to see us from America. Wherever that is. Walks around, smiles, shakes hands."

From America. God knew, then, who this *ajak* was, and how he might be able to use him to find Thomas.

The woman continued. "Then, tomorrow, he will go home —" she made a motion with her hand like a plane lifting into the air — "and the Janjaweed will come back."

"Where is he now?" God asked.

"On the west side of the camp," the woman said. "That's why you don't see anyone. They're all following him around out there, singing and dancing like fools."

**T**he U.S. secretary of state hid from an angry sun in the air-conditioned interior of his Chevrolet Suburban. Head down, he spoke quietly into a satellite telephone. A senior State Department official sat on the leather bench seat opposite him, holding the secretary's linen Ralph Lauren jacket across his lap. Outside, the Diplomatic Security Service detail had formed a tight perimeter around the parked Suburban. To a man they wore black boots, khaki pants and vests, mirrored

sunglasses, and thigh holsters with SIG Sauer P229 pistols. Each brandished a Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun. The DSS agents scanned the singing, ululating crowd of Dinka refugees, exchanged information (and the occasional one-liner) via tiny earpieces, and maintained a robotic, perspiration-free command presence despite the ninety-five-degree heat.

With a curse, the secretary turned off the telephone. "Tell me something," he said to the official. "Why do I always end up relaying messages through the lowliest goddamn subassistant deputy aides in the White House? Why, in almost four years, have I gotten through directly to that redneck son of a bitch only *three times*?"

"I don't know, sir," the official said. "Maybe that gaffe you made in the *Post* last February? But listen, we should go over our key words for tonight's press conference."

"I'll tell you why," the secretary said. "Because I'm black."

The official, uncertain, said, "Well, maybe, sir."

"The same reason I got this job in the first place," the secretary continued. "Because I'm black. I got the job because I'm black, and my boss won't talk to me because I'm black."

"If I may speak frankly, sir," the official said. "I'm not sure *black* is the word I'd use to describe you."

The secretary deployed a fierce, wide-eyed gaze he'd perfected as a young army officer. "Oh no?" he said.

The official, realizing he'd stepped squarely in the metaphorical pile of dung, tried to backtrack. "Well of course, I mean, ethnologically speaking, you're black. Sir. Of course. I was thinking more of your *appearance*, a sort of benign, non-threatening, *ashy* sort of tone which —"

"I'm black as night, motherfucker!" With a sweep of his hand, the secretary indicated the throng of Dinka surrounding the Suburban. "Those people out there," he said, "are my brothers and sisters. *My family*."

"Of course they are, sir," the official said. "I apologize, sir."

"Good. You're still employed. For the moment."

"Back to the key words for tonight, sir. If we may."

"Make it fast."

"OK, so we're talking about the Sudanese government and our attitude toward them. Key words for our attitude, as regards the humanitarian situation here, include but are not limited to: *steady, demand, firm, control the Janjaweed, do what's right, and solution*."

"Got it," the secretary said.

"Key words for the Sudanese government include, but are not limited to: *denial, avoidance, responsibility, militarism, racism*, and — here's your ace in the hole, sir; it'll bring the house down — *obfuscate*. It means 'to obscure or confuse.'"

"I know what the fuck it means."

"Of course, sir. Sorry."

"OK. I'll go out and do my little soft-shoe routine. Make it look like that hillbilly actually gives a shit what's going on here."

There was a sudden commotion outside. The secretary looked up and saw two DSS agents restraining what was surely the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen. The agents

struggled to keep the woman away from the Suburban. One grasped at the green fabric of her dress, while the other applied a chokehold and issued a firm textbook directive for her to cease and desist. Still the woman continued to call to the secretary through the window's reflective, bulletproof, blast-resistant glass. A third agent moved to join the fray, pistol drawn and pointed at the woman's head.

The secretary threw open the door of the Suburban to a hammer stroke of dry heat. "What's wrong with you men?" he hollered. "Let her go!"

The agent choking the woman loosened his grip. "She rushed the vehicle, Mr. Secretary," he said.

With a fierce gesture, the secretary called the agent over to him. "Perhaps you failed to notice the hundred or so cameras here," he whispered through clenched teeth. "And perhaps you failed to notice that this girl speaks perfect, unaccented English; doesn't that strike you as a bit odd in this place, you dumb cracker?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary. I suppose it does."

"Then let her go, and let her speak."

The agent turned and motioned to his colleagues, who stepped aside. The woman lifted her cloth sack from where it had fallen in the dirt, straightened her dress, and approached the Suburban.

The secretary smiled. "What can I do for you, young lady?"

"Mr. Secretary," the woman said, her large eyes brimming with tears, "I need your help."

**W**e are anxious to see the end of *militarism*," the secretary of state said. "We are anxious to see the *Janjaweed brought under control* and disbanded so people can leave the camps in safety and go back to their homes."

In front of the cameras, under a large canvas tent erected for the press conference, God sat to the secretary's immediate right. To the secretary's left, the Sudanese foreign minister tried without success to summon a smile to his face. The senior State Department official stood just out of view of the cameras, hanging on the secretary's every word.

"I've delivered a *steady* message to the Sudanese government that the violence must be addressed," the secretary said to the assembled reporters. "The *solution* has to rest with the government *doing what's right*."

He turned to Sudan's foreign minister, who finally managed a smile of benevolence and cooperation by envisioning the secretary's head atop a pike.

"To that end, in a show of good faith, the Sudanese foreign minister has agreed to assist in locating Thomas Mawien, who was abducted by the Janjaweed and forced into slavery a decade ago, and whose sister Sora, seated here with me, has asked for our help in finding her brother. For my part, I've promised Sora that I will not leave Darfur until she and Thomas are reunited. So we'll all be sticking around a little longer than we'd thought."

The State Department official, whose left eyelid had begun to twitch as the secretary wandered farther and farther off

message, now performed a spasmodic little dance as he fought the impulse to rush in and swat the cluster of microphones off the table.

"As we speak," the secretary continued, "units of the Sudanese army are scouring the region for Thomas Mawien. Once he is returned to his sister in good condition, then, and only then, can we be assured that the Sudanese government is not merely continuing its campaign of *denial* and *avoidance*. Only then can we be assured that they are no longer trying to *obfuscate* and avoid any consequences.

"Thank you," the secretary said, rising from his seat. "That's all for now."

The mass of reporters rose with him, waving their hands and clamoring as one attention-starved organism. The senior State Department official rushed in, screaming, "That's it! No more questions!" The secretary put an arm around God, held the pose for several seconds while the cameras flashed, then turned and offered his hand to the foreign minister. For a moment the foreign minister merely stood and regarded the hand as one regards a dead squirrel or a fresh pile of dog feces, but when the secretary fixed him with a fierce stare, he gave it a limp, spiteful shake. Then, flanked by his entourage, the secretary turned and strode out of the tent.

As the DSS agents began herding reporters out into the arid night, the official turned to the secretary. "Due respect, sir," he said, "but are you insane? We're scheduled to be in Indonesia tomorrow. Sir, it's *already* tomorrow in Indonesia."

"Indonesia isn't going anywhere," the secretary told him.

"Besides which," the official said, "besides which, sir, and forgive me if I'm out of line here, but our function is not to *order* foreign governments around. Our function is to *persuade* and *convince*."

"Fuck that," the secretary said. "I'm a general, don't forget. And generals give orders. Like I'm giving you an order right now: leave me alone."

The official's satellite telephone rang, a shrill, angry sound. He clawed at his jacket, found the phone, and clutched it to his ear with both hands.

"Yes?" His face blanched. "Yes, sir. . . . Sir, I don't know. . . . This is as much a surprise to . . . I have no idea why the secretary has turned off his telephone. . . . Sir, let me . . . let me assure you that I remain a faithful servant of the admin— . . . Sir, perhaps you'd like to speak with . . . Yes, sir, he's right here."

The official thrust the phone at the secretary. "It's the president."

The secretary waved it away. "Take a message," he said.

*(end of excerpt)*