

A close-up portrait of Akuch Kuol Anyieth, a Black woman with short, dark, curly hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her facial features against a dark background.

Akuch Kuol Anyieth 

Unknown

'TOLD WITH FIERCE INTELLIGENCE AND URGENCY.' ALICE PUNG

In January 2006, Mathew and Mama took Gai and me to enrol at Western English Language School on South Road in Braybrook.

When we arrived, we waited in front of a little glass booth while Mathew told the woman sitting inside that we had an appointment with the principal. She picked up a phone and spoke to someone, before pointing us to chairs lined up against the wall. Everywhere we went in this new country, people sat behind glass windows and pointed us to chairs. We were constantly shocked by this behaviour. In Kakuma and Nairobi, when a visitor arrived, you got up and greeted them, asked how they were, how their family were doing, asked about the kids, if they had any, and then warmly offered them a seat. The way white people acknowledged others here felt unwelcoming and disrespectful, but it seemed to be completely normal.

After a while, a tall woman emerged from an office on the far left of the hallway. We all stood up to greet her, our eyes downcast, to show respect. In Kenya it was also respectful to call a woman in her position 'Madam'. She shook our hands in turn and led us back to her office. She handed Gai and me enrolment forms—which turned out also to be tests to assess how much English we knew—and through Mathew asked us to sit in opposite corners of her office while we filled them in.

The first question was 'Name' so I wrote my name, the second was 'D.O.B.'. I had no idea what that meant, so I left it empty. On the next line, I didn't know how to spell our address, so left that empty as well. The questions became more complex. As I was attempting to read the last question, which seemed to require us to write a brief description of our family, the principal asked for the papers back. I had only written my name; it was the only question I could answer.

I hung my head in shame as I handed it to her, and I could see

Gai doing the same. The principal then explained that the results of our tests would determine what grade we would be allocated to, and how long we stayed in Language School before we were considered ready for high school. Again, just like the woman at Centrelink, her English was completely foreign to us. We did not understand a single word until Mathew interpreted for us.

The following day, he took Mama and Atong to Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) in St Albans to enrol in English classes. Akuol was also enrolled in a nearby childcare centre, so that Atong could drop her off before class and pick her up afterwards.

Dragon was supposed to enrol at AMES too, but he was busy being Dragon. He wanted to work, but never really got around to looking for a job, because he was drunk most of the time. And even if he had tried to, he would have had to first learn the application process in this country, and what was required of employees, since he had never worked under someone's supervision in his life.

Our first day at Western English Language School was overwhelming: there was so much to remember, on top of the fear of the unknown, and the fear of failure. When we arrived at the front office, the principal took us to our classes. I was in the beginner level for those of high school age and Gai was in the equivalent level for primary school students. The principal introduced me to my teacher, then took Gai to his class.

My teacher was a young woman, probably around, Atong's age, or a bit older. She was very welcoming, and introduced me to the rest of the class, before pointing me to an empty seat in the front row. I guess no one else wanted to be that close to the teacher.

There were only ten students in the class, all from different cultural backgrounds, South Sudanese, Ethiopian, Asians, Middle

Eastern. Next to me was an Ethiopian girl with beautiful thick, wavy hair that bounced on her shoulders as she turned her head. She was the quietest in the class. The rest of the students all called out at the same time when the teacher asked a question.

‘Please raise your hands if you know the answers, don’t shout your answers,’ the teacher insisted, but no one obeyed her.

A bell rang. I watched the other students, then took my sandwich and apple juice from my bag while everyone hurtled out as if a ticking bomb was in the room.

The teacher walked up to me. ‘How did you find the class?’ she asked.

I looked at her, confused. I couldn’t understand what she was saying, but I took a guess. ‘Fine,’ I replied in a soft voice.

She smiled and walked back to her desk.

The Ethiopian girl was still in the room with us. She was waiting for her brother, who rushed in as if he was about to miss a flight. He snatched a lunchbox from her hands and ran back out. I began to wander out of the room, with no idea where I was supposed to go or what I was supposed to do.

‘Hi,’ said a voice behind me.

I turned; it was the Ethiopian girl. I smiled and we walked side by side towards the grass, where some of the boys were playing soccer and running around. We sat on a bench.

‘My name is Alem,’ she said.

‘My name is Akuch.’

She couldn’t pronounce my name so we practised it. Alem said it was the first day for her and her brother too. No wonder we were both hesitant in class.

‘Let’s go and look for my brother,’ I suggested.

We walked around the field, dodging the soccer ball. Coincidentally,

Gai had already met Alem's young brother, Surefeil. After introducing ourselves, we all ate together, and carried on a conversation in broken English.

We went back to class, but when lunchtime came, none of us had any lunch to eat because we had eaten our sandwiches instead of our fruit during the recess break. We didn't know that the trick was to eat a good breakfast so you were not starving by recess—to eat fruit for recess and keep lunch for lunchtime.

Our problem was that we couldn't eat before school. In Kakuma, in order to eat in the morning, your mum had to wake up early to make you porridge, which most families couldn't afford. If we didn't go to school early to line up for the school porridge, we ended up not eating in the morning, and often not at lunchtime either. The only regular meal was dinner, but even then we sometimes went to bed hungry, until God provided, as Mama used to say, quoting Matthew chapter six, verse thirty-four: 'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.' We became so familiar with this verse, we recited it every night when we prayed before Dragon got home.

It turned out that Western English Language School served toast, milk and fruit before classes, for the kids who couldn't have breakfast at home for whatever reason. We tried to make it in time, but usually missed it as we had dramas at home almost every morning.

One day on Alfrieda Street, Mama ran into old family friends from Nairobi who used to come to our nightly rescue in Zimmerman when Dragon attacked us. Abraham and his wife, also called Akuol, had often hidden Atong and our Akuol at their place. Now they were living minutes away in St Albans.

The next day, Mama took us to visit them. They had a two-year-old boy, Sabit, and a new baby daughter. Sabit was a cute kid, always

smiling. Gai and I loved him. The family became good friends and Gai and I used to babysit Sabit.

Abraham would say, 'You love this boy so much you won't be able to say no when he grows up and asks you to marry him. You know you're already a part of this family, so marrying Sabit will be a bonus.'

His wife Akuol seconded this each time. Short and petite with a baby face, I could easily have been confused for a ten-year-old. But I was already sixteen and Sabit had just turned two; there was no way we were getting married, so I never bothered to object.

There were only a few South Sudanese families living in St Albans, not more than five that we knew of. All the mums—and the dads who weren't back in South Sudan—went to AMES in St Albans and their children attended Western English Language School and the nearby high schools. Everyone knew each other, and of course we followed our traditional social practice of visiting each other's houses without prior arrangement. Everyone was always welcome. Some of the families also attended the Sunday afternoon service with us at the Anglican church on Alexina Street.

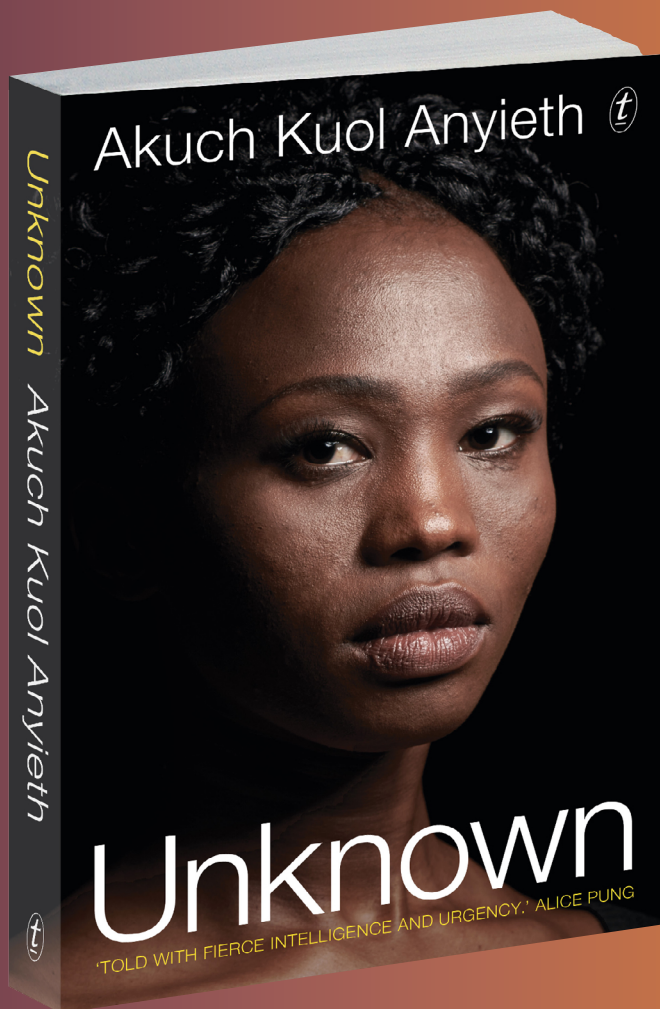
But there were no other South Sudanese on Theodore Street, and we felt alone. All our neighbours minded their own business. Their doors were always shut. When we walked by their houses, we only ever saw them getting in or out of their cars. And when we happened to pass them on the footpath while they were walking their dogs, instead of saying hello, they just gave us an aloof nod.

It was bewildering. How could people live in such isolation? *Maybe that's just how white people live*, I thought to myself. Maybe you're not meant to greet people, not meant to knock on someone's door and say, 'Can I have a piece of onion because I ran out and I can't go to the shops—I need to prepare a meal for my family.' Maybe

we were just meant to stay home and not bother other people.

Where we came from, our neighbours were like family, and we knew almost everything about them. I wondered if our new neighbours here were afraid of us—perhaps, because we couldn't speak English, they felt they couldn't knock on our door and welcome us.

And we must have looked alien to them as well; we were the only dark-skinned people on Theodore Street. And, whether we liked it or not, some people form prejudices based on physical appearance. We looked different and we lived differently. Our neighbours were quiet, indoor types. We were loud and spent every sunny day in our front yard. We craved the heat. If I give them the benefit of the doubt, maybe our neighbours wanted to be friends with us but didn't know how to approach people who didn't look like them. Maybe they were waiting for us to make the first move. Who knows? In the end, we had to come to terms with the fact that, in this different country, people did things differently. We had to learn how to mind our own business.



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