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Dramatic Publishing



iceandfire

presents

Crocodile Seeking Refuge

by

Sonja Linden



A U R O R A M E T R O P R E S S

Crocodile Seeking Refuge is dedicated to
the indomitable spirit of my mother,
Lilo Wilberg (1920-2005),
who remained profoundly grateful
to the British Government
for giving her refuge
from Nazi Germany
in 1939.

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Playwright's Note:

In 1997 I set up the *Write to Life* Project at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, a creative and testimonial writing programme to enable survivors of torture and persecution to process their 'heart of darkness' experiences through the medium of writing. So inspired was I by the individuals I worked with and so incensed did I become at the indignity and suffering they had been forced to undergo, not just in their own countries but also here in their country of 'refuge', that I founded **iceandfire** to communicate some of the individual stories I found myself witness to.

Real life testimony therefore was the catalyst for *Crocodile Seeking Refuge*. Working with five individuals as part of the *Write to Life* project, the play has been in development for three years.

One of these individuals was Pierre Junior N'Khiembet, a torture victim from the Republic of Congo, whose treatment in this country was a major traumatising factor. The first writing he did for me was about his shock at finding himself put into a prison alongside racist and violent criminals, immediately after asking for asylum at Dover. Here he remained for six months, bewildered, unable to speak English, and haunted by memories of his endangered family back home:

"Unfortunately I had committed the same idiocy as the crocodile that escapes from the rain. Believing the raindrops falling on him to be stones, he takes refuge in the river without realising that the rain was also water. This is my story too! What hurts me most is the way I was and am treated in a country that boasts of democracy and human values. Finding myself in prison for several months simply because I asked for help and protection, I ask myself where is the human dignity and honesty? Why, in a country like England, does a victim become the guilty party? Where are the human rights? "

I also worked with Nasrin Parvaz from Iran, Doctor Qasim Albrisem from Iraq, Aziz Idris and later Sharif Barko from Sudan and Maritza Jubelly from Colombia. Weaving their experiences into a piece of theatre meant that the play underwent a number of drafts shifting from a documentary-style piece to becoming a full-length drama focused around the fictionalised character of a British woman asylum lawyer.

Many of the encounters in the final version of the play have been invented, but the back stories of what happened to each of the five characters and how they have been treated by the British asylum system are entirely accurate. No longer could all the stories be told in the same depth and the one that I felt compelled to focus on above all was that of Zakariya from Darfur in Sudan, with the hope of drawing some attention to the genocide that tragically continues there unimpeded.

Sonja Linden

Sa'adi Youssef's poem *A Woman* was reproduced with kind permission of the author and *Banipal* Magazine where it appeared in the author's translation in Spring 2000.

Crocodile Seeking Refuge

Sonja Linden

First performed at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio, 20th September 2005. Made as part of theMIX at Lyric Hammersmith, supported by Deutsche Bank.

Destin – Daniel Kobbina

Harriet – Katharine Rogers

Jalal – Gary Condes

Marie-Elena – Karina Fernandez

Nick – Gary Condes

Parvaneh – Viss Elliot

Zakariya – **Nick** Oshikanlu

All other parts played by members of the cast.

Director – Ariella Eshed

Designer – Kate Klinger

Setting: London, September, 2004 – March 2005

Characters: *(can be performed by 4 male/3 female)*

Claudia Belluci

Court Usher

Destin – 30s, Congolese

Doctor Alexander, Hospital Consultant

Mrs Fahimi – late 40s, Iranian

Fiona – 40s, British

Harriet – 40s, British

Hassan

Helena

Junior Doctor

Jalal – 50s, Iraqi

James – neighbour

Justin

Katrina – neighbour,

Lucy Wainwright

Marie-Elena – 30s, Colombian

Maryam

Museum Guard

Nick – 40s, British

Parvaneh – 40s, Iranian

Tesco Man

Zakariya – 30s, Sudanese

Note:

Suggested doubling for characters

Actress 1: Harriet

Actress 2: Parvaneh/Mrs Fahimi/Lucy Wainright/
Fiona/Doctor Alexander/Claudia Belluci

Actress 3: Marie-Elena/ Maryam/ Helena/ Katrina/ Junior
Doctor/ Zara

Actor 1: Nick

Actor 2: Zakariya

Actor 3: Jalal/ Hassan

Actor 4: Destin/ Justin/ Museum Guard/ James/ Court
Usher/ Tesco Man

Language Note:

Brief sections in Farsi and Arabic have been transliterated phonetically in the Roman alphabet.

Scene 1: Departures

Late September 2004. Coffee shop at Heathrow airport.

An attractive Iranian woman, Parvaneh, is perched on a high-backed stool. She is wiping her section of the counter with a napkin. Nick enters carrying a coffee and sits near but not next to her. The scene is punctuated with flight announcements. Parvaneh's mobile phone goes off. She has a brief conversation in Farsi, then hangs up.

Parvaneh Salaam Fara, tawchi cheeshawde?.... Ki Immigration?Takhshir tawnist marzerat khali nackon eb nadawre. Man too kawfi shopam. Inja va-eemeestam varseyatawtaw tarzangbezane baashe. Khawdafess Faradjun.

[Hello Fara, is that you? What's happened?....Who, Immigration?....Stop apologising Fara, it's not your fault.....I know but don't worry, I'm in a coffee shop. I'll wait here till you call me...Fine. Bye Fara, love.]

Nick Hale shoma khube.

Parvaneh *(surprised)* Khubam merci. You speak Farsi?

Nick Only a little. I used to have an Iranian friend, at university. Long time ago now.

Parvaneh Before the revolution?

Nick *(pause, then)* Oh the Iranian revolution, yes, actually, about a year before. I hardly got to see him after that. He was always rushing off to meetings. And then he left.

Parvaneh He went back to Iran?

Nick No, Los Angeles. I heard he's doing really well out there.

Parvaneh *(disapproving)* I'm sure he is.

Nick Going somewhere nice?

Parvaneh No, I'm supposed to be meeting a friend. She's been delayed though. And you?

Nick I've just seen my daughter off for her gap year. Brazil. She'll be teaching kids English. Kids from poor families.

Parvaneh That's good!

Nick It doesn't feel too good from where I'm sitting.

Parvaneh Why?

Nick She's still so young.

Parvaneh How old is she?

Nick 18.

Parvaneh Well, that's when you start wanting to do something about the problems in this world.

Nick Oh yes, she has a strong social conscience. She was determined to do something useful in this year.

Parvaneh I felt the same at her age. I would have loved to get away from my parents and see the world. And now I hate airports!

Nick I know what you mean - all the hanging around, specially now with all these security checks. But I still get a buzz from travelling.

Parvaneh I guess it depends on how much freedom you have to travel. My friend's having a bit of a problem in Immigration right now.

Nick Really? She's Iranian?

Parvaneh She's a German citizen now. A doctor. Respectable enough you'd think? *(beat)*
You have travelled a lot?

Nick Quite a bit.

Parvaneh You have been fortunate.

Nick Well, some of it was business. I've always wanted to go to **your** country actually.

Parvaneh *(sharp)* It's not my country any more. I'm British now. *(teasing)* Like you.

Nick Oh right. Been here long?

Parvaneh Ten years.

Nick Ah, that explains your good English. Been back home, to Iran I mean?

Parvaneh No.

Nick I've always wanted to see some of your... the ancient cities in Iran - Persepolis, Isfahan, Shiraz, with those beautiful old mosques. *(off Parvaneh's look of disdain)*
You don't think they're worth seeing?

Parvaneh If they were empty, perhaps, just on show as museum pieces, or architecture.

Nick Speaking as an architect, I must say I'd rather see these famous mosques as functioning buildings.

Parvaneh We need visitors who see with their eyes, not with their cameras.

Nick We?

Parvaneh In Iran I mean.

Nick *(ironic)* Ah.

Parvaneh Then maybe some changes could start to happen.

Nick *(looks up at an unseen monitor listing departure times)* Ah. Her flight's gone. I kind of wanted to hang around till her plane took off. Silly really. Anyway. Nice talking to you. Hope you don't have to wait too long.

Parvaneh Oh I'm used to waiting. *(Nick exits)*

Scene 2: Waiting Room

The same day. The waiting room of an East London law office specialising in asylum cases. A clock on the wall permanently fixed at twenty past eight. The sole occupant of the room is Mrs Fahimi, a middle-aged Middle Eastern woman, dressed from head to toe in dull Islamic garb. Enter from external door Destin, early 30s, African, casually dressed but dapper. He takes a seat. He and the woman refrain from making eye contact.

A Middle-Eastern looking man, Jalal, late 40s, enters.

Jalal Salaam aleichem.

Mrs Fahimi Aleichem salaam.

Jalal You are well?

Mrs F Thanks be to Allah . And you Mr Jalal?

Jalal Thank you, I am fine.

Mrs F *(anxious)* Mr Jonathon is here?

Jalal Yes, yes, he'll see you soon.

Jalal busies himself with some files. Enter Harriet, formally dressed. She is brisk at the same time as being very warm. Smiling she makes straight for Destin holding out her hand.

Harriet Mr Destin Kimouna?

Destin Yes.

Harriet I'm Harriet Michaels.

She shakes him vigorously by the hand.

Harriet I'm running a little late I'm afraid, so Jalal here will take down some of your details in a minute. All right?

Harriet re-enters her office. Jalal follows her.

Enter from the street, Zakariya, African, tall, dignified, upright. He is wearing an immaculate white shirt and black trousers with razor sharp creases which are too long for him. The black velvet vertical stripe on each trouser leg suggests they are the bottom half of a dinner suit.

Zakariya takes a seat. The three clients sit in silence for a while, locked into their own worlds.

Zakariya *(to Destin, indicating the clock and grinning)* Is broken, yuh? Must be African, right?

Destin hardly reacts. Mrs Fahimi looks at the clock as though seeing it for the first time. Zakariya rubs the back of one of his heels, sore from his newly acquired shoes.

The door to Harriet's office opens and a young woman emerges tear-stained. She is very pregnant.

Harriet I'll phone you later today, Maryam. Try and get some rest.

Maryam Thank you.

The young pregnant woman exits.

Harriet notices Zakariya and beams at him. Zakariya gets up when he sees Harriet and shakes her hand.

Harriet Well! How's freedom?

Zakariya (*his face lighting up with a huge beaming smile*) Is good you know, very good!
Thank you Harriet, really, thank you

Harriet Well it's not over yet, we've got to work on your appeal. You look smart.

Zakariya My cousin burned all my prison clothes! He say "You don't want these no more." And he get me these. From one friend, shoes, from one friend, this shirt.

Harriet Smart trousers!

Zakariya This from another friend. Only... (*he grins as he undoes the belt to reveal that the waist is about four times too big*)

Harriet Well you'll have to eat a bit more now. I'm afraid I'm running a bit late Zakariya, so I'll be seeing you after this gentleman.

Zakariya (*holds up his hands, generous, smiling again*) Nnnnno problem! I have time. I have nothing to do. In London everybody is busy, busy. But me, nothing. Only waiting. No problem.

Harriet exits through her office door.

Jalal goes over to Destin.

Jalal OK. Let me check your details for our files. First your full name.

Destin Destin Kimounga.

Jalal How do you spell your first name

Destin D.E.S.T.I.N.

Jalal Date of birth?

Destin February 14, 1970.

Jalal Place of birth?

Destin Brazzaville. Republic of Congo.

Jalal And you arrived in the UK..?

Destin August 1, 2003.

Jalal Port of entry?

Destin Sorry?

Jalal Heathrow? Gatwick?

Destin Dover.

Jalal And you claimed asylum at Dover?

Destin *(turns to one side)* I tried to, but then they put me in prison. For five months.

Jalal On arrival?

Destin Yes.

Jalal The name of the prison?

Destin Lindholme Prison. In Doncaster.

Harriet emerges from her room and signals to Jalal.

Harriet Jalal.

Jalal One moment. Sorry. *(exits into Harriet's room)*

Zakariya *(to Destin)* You been in prison?

Destin Immigration put me in prison.

Zakariya Hey, me too! When you come out?

Destin Last year. You?

Zakariya Last week!

Destin Bail?

Zakariya Yes.

Destin How long for?

Zakariya Three months. You?

Destin Still on bail. Why they put me in prison, huh? Very, very bad time in prison. I will never forget this.

Zakariya I know.

Destin So humiliating. They make you wear uniform, with HMP...

Zakariya *(indicates his chest)* In big letters. It's big shock. You sleep only you in your cell?

Destin I never sleep.

Zakariya Me too. Every night I'm awake.

Destin Maybe I fall asleep at 6 in the morning.

Zakariya Exactly. Every hour, the secerew, you know he look in my cell, through the small window and I wave at him. He say "Adum~~ah~~, when you sleep? Eh? I never see you sleep."

Destin I never sleep in the prison.

Zakariya I know. When they send me to prison, I feel shame, big shame.

Destin Yeah.

Zakariya And I was so scared. I think they gonna beat me, like at home you know? But now I think, thank you God, maybe you put me there for a reason. They give me food, they give me clothes. They give me English classes. So now I speak English. Is good prison for me.

Destin looks dumbfounded.

Zakariya You have mobile?

Destin Sure.

Zakariya I take your number? *(produces a pen and a used envelope for Destin to write on)*

Destin *(surprised)* OK. *(writes down his mobile number and hands it to Zakariya)*

Harriet comes out of her office

Harriet *(to Destin)* Mr Kimounga? *(starts to exit)*

Destin and Zakariya shake hands and Destin exits after Harriet

Scene 3: Dinner for Two

The evening of the same day. The dining area of the Michaels' kitchen. The table is laid for two and in the middle is a collection of sealed take-away cartons. Nick is in the act of arranging some flowers in a vase. He does this with some artistic care. He removes the lids of the take-away dishes and decants the contents into some serving dishes. Harriet calls from the next room.

Harriet *(off)* Won't be much longer...

Nick OK.

Harriet *(off)* I got Indian this time.

Nick I can smell.

Harriet *(off)* You said you were fed up with Chinese.

Beat

Nick She's half way there by now.

Harriet *(off)* God yes. Look I've just got to finish this one e-mail. Then you can tell me how it went.

Nick Not much to tell. **She** was OK. **I** was the problem.

Harriet *(off)* Darling!

Nick fusses with some of the items on the table.

Harriet *(off)* Fuck!

Nick What?

Harriet *(off)* My laptop's playing up.

Nick Is it plugged in?

Harriet *(off)* Yes. No. Christ. I can't bear this I've just written this massive e-mail...

Nick Come and have supper.

Harriet *(off)* God it's not there! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Nick It's only an e-mail.

Harriet enters looking almost unrecognisably different from her office self. She is wearing an unbecoming man's towelling robe and over-sized fluffy slippers. She stomps straight to the table and starts spooning food onto her plate.

Harriet It's not just an e-mail, it's this pregnant case. Her removal date's still set for Thursday, can you believe it - in her state! Not only that but when she....Why did you take the food out of the cartons? *(gulps down some wine)*

Nick You know I can't stand eating out of plastic.

Harriet But it'll be luke warm now. I left the lids on specially. *(pours more wine)* Anyway I managed to get hold of Lord Rooker - at last! And he said he would only deal with it if I summarised the whole case in an e-mail - tonight. Took me ages. And then the damn thing.... *(tails off)* Oh God Nick, you bought me my favourite flowers. Christ I am such a pain. You don't need to hear all this over supper. And what I really want to talk about is how it was with Mel.

Nick I told you - **she** was fine.

Harriet You don't think she minded too much about my not being there?

Nick She knows you can't change a court date, it was just bad luck.

Harriet She said she'd call when she arrived. *(looks at her watch)* Another five hours? God I'm going to have to crash out after I've done that e-mail and get some sleep. I can't wait up till 2 o' clock. I'll set the alarm.

Nick I thought we could celebrate.

Harriet What?

Nick Our new found freedom.

Harriet Hang on a minute, I've just had months of you moaning on about 'a chapter in our lives coming to an end'....

Nick I've turned. Decided to invest in the new chapter.

Harriet What brought this on?

Nick I don't know. I fell into conversation with this woman at the airport.

Harriet Mmmm.

Nick Iranian woman, attractive...

Harriet How attractive?

Nick Attractive! Didn't fancy her though.

Harriet Oh thanks.

Nick Too spikey. She practically bit my head off when I said I'd like to visit Persepolis, as though I'd be single-handedly propping up the regime by going there.

Harriet Well, they've been to hell and back under that regime. We've had quite a few Iranian clients. God Nick, I saw this new client today, and you won't believe this, honestly, he's been tortured in his own country, Congo, he arrives in Dover at midnight and at 5 'o clock in the morning, the Immigration Officer says to him. "Look you're tired, I'm tired, why don't I find you a comfortable room for the night and we'll deal with your case in the morning...."

Nick What's wrong with that?

Harriet Only that the room turns out to be a prison cell four hours up the motorway in Doncaster. And there he sits for the next five months during which time he tries to hang himself – twice - and when he does get out, he ends up in a psychiatric hospital a complete wreck, no idea what's happened to his wife and kids back home and...

She breaks off and smiles sheepishly, realising she's droning on about her work again.

Harriet (*mouths*) Sorry.

Nick Sooo...there's some champagne in the fridge.

Harriet Nick!

Nick And I got you this. (*produces a gorgeous flimsy piece of night wear*)

Harriet Wow!

She rushes over to take it from Nick, kissing him in the process.

Harriet You're amazing! I'll try it on.

Sound of a telephone ringing.

Nick Don't answer it!

Harriet It might be Mel.

Nick She's thirty thousand feet up in the air!

Harriet It might be about my pregnant case.

Nick Not at this time of night.

She picks up the phone

Harriet Hello?... Speaking.... Oh Lord Rooker, it's very good of you to phone...I was just going to send you something...Yes of course, I'll just get a pen.

Nick, throwing his eyes to the ceiling, starts to clear away the dishes.

Scene 4: Torture in Darfur

One week later. The waiting room of Harriet's law firm. Marie-Elena is the sole occupant. She performs a series of 'waiting activities' eg: moving to a different chair, smoothing her skirt repeatedly, searching her bag for a document, checking her appearance in a compact mirror, getting up to look at a notice on the wall, examining the room, looking at the clock and then her watch.

Jalal enters carrying a file

M.Elena (*indicating*) Your clock is broken.

Jalal (*with a gesture of dismissal*) I am not a mechanic, Miss er (*glances at his file*) Her-nan-deth?

M.Elena (*correcting his pronunciation*) 'Hernandes'. Marie-Elena.

Jalal Ah '...des' (*writes it down in phonetics, then reads back with exaggerated pronunciation*) 'Hernandes'? Correct?

M.Elena (*bemused*) Yes.

Jalal I use the fanatic alphabet. This way I can pronounce names from all countries correctly. (*writing and pronouncing at the same time with exaggerated care*) Marie-Elena. From Colombia?

M.Elena Si. Mr Michael is always so late with his appointments? I am here nearly two hours now.

Jalal **Mrs** Michaels.

M.Elena Oh a lady. She is good lawyer? I need good lawyer this time, really. I have big problem with the Home Office.

Jalal She is excellent. But she takes her time. This is why she is good. And you were very early.

M.Elena Always. I hate to be late. (*smiling and shrugging*) And I hate waiting.

Jalal starts to exit.

M. Elena (*lowering her voice*) Excuse me, where is the powder room, please? (*off Jalal's confused look*) For ladies?

Jalal Ah, we don't have a ladies room. We just have toilet. Unisex. Come I show you.
(indicates the way as they start to exiting together) You know this word unisex?

Harriet exits from her office with Zakariya, just as ME exits with Jalal behind her

Jalal *(to Harriet on exiting and indicating the disappearing M.Elena)* The 'powder room'.

Harriet Oh right. *(to Zakariya)* Sorry we ran out of time.

Zakariya No, no I was late.

Harriet But I think we've got all the important things now for your statement.

Zakariya Good.

Harriet And good luck with your Red Cross appointment tomorrow. It would be wonderful if they managed to locate your wife and children

Zakariya She doesn't even know I am out of Sudan.

Harriet Really?

Zakariya Yes, when I escaped from prison I wanted to go back to see her and my sons. I hadn't seen them for six months, and all I wanted to do was go home and see them, but my uncle said no. I was fighting with him about this, really. My family need me to protect them I said. The Janjaweed militia are attacking all the villages, making fire to them. But he said it was too dangerous, they might arrest me again, kill me this time, so I must leave immediately.

Harriet But I thought your wife visited you in prison?

Zakariya That was in the prison in Darfur.

Harriet Wait a minute you were in two prisons? So where was it that the guard slashed both your legs with the broken bottle.

Zakariya In Darfur. After, they sent me and the other village leaders to the prison in Khartoum.

Harriet And you were tortured there too? *(grabs a piece of paper and starts making notes)*

Zakariya Everyday. They beat me.

Harriet What with?

Zakariya I don't know this word in English.

Enter Jalal

Harriet Ah Jalal here can help you. He speaks Arabic. What did they beat you with?

Zakariya Sot.

Jalal Horsewhips.

Zakariya Okas.

Jalal Batons.

Zakariya I have scars.

Harriet is writes all this down

Zakariya *(to Jalal)* Inta meen wen? [Where are you from?]

Jalal Iraq. Anan min a Sudan? Meen al Khartoum? [And you are Sudanese, are you from Khartoum?]

Zakariya La, ana min Al Jeneina fee Darfur. [No, near Al Jeneina in Darfur.]

Enter Marie-Elena

Jalal Your next client - Miss Hernandez. This is Mrs Michaels.

Harriet *(shaking her hand)* Harriet. I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting like this.

Marie-Elena Is OK.

Harriet Jalal will show you into my office and start taking your details. I'll be with you very soon. *(to Zakariya)* Unless you would like Jalal to translate for you now, in case there are any words...? I just want to take a quick note before you go.

Zakariya *(looking at Jalal, sharp)* No it's OK. It's not necessary

Jalal. and Marie-Elena exit into Harriet's office

Harriet What was the name of this second prison?

Zakariya Kober

Harriet Can you say what happened there?

Silence as Zakariya is drawn back into the memory of torture.

Harriet *(gently)* Listen I think we need to make another appointment so that I can write this all down properly. This is very important for your statement. You were interrogated in the second prison as well I presume?

Zakariya Yes. They asked me for the names of the rebels.

Harriet And did you give them any information?

Zakariya No. Let them kill me but the others are safe.

Harriet starts to fold away her sheet of paper as though the meeting is over

Harriet *(winding down)* OK. So maybe next time you can tell me...

Zakariya I still hear them screaming.

Pause. Harriet clocks the intensity of Zakariya's expression and sits down and motions to Zakariya to sit down also.

Zakariya For me I'm alive now, but my friends... I see people killed in that prison, when they take you out of isolation. I see some of my friends sometimes, how they look, *(mimes)* their eyes out here you know, blood. I hear them tortured every day - me also, but if you hear it is your friends, *(shakes his head, voice breaks)* and you love them you know. *(beat)* And when they stop screaming and suddenly there is no sound coming I know someone is dead. *(pause while he wipes his eyes)* The good people don't live in this world. My best friend died in that prison. Then my uncle helped me to escape. He said to me "They want to kill all of you." He paid money, a lot of money to get me out. Then he died too. Only me alive now.