
Waiting

by E C Osondu,

My name is Orlando Zaki. *Orlando* is taken from Orlando, Florida, which is what is written on the T-shirt given to me by the Red Cross. *Zaki* is the name of the town where I was found and from which I was brought to this refugee camp. My friends in the camp are known by the inscriptions written on their T-shirts. Acapulco wears a T-shirt with the inscription *Acapulco*. Sexy's T-shirt has the inscription *Tell Me I'm Sexy*. Paris's T-shirt says *See Paris And Die*. When she is coming towards me, I close my eyes because I don't want to die.

Even when one gets a new T-shirt, your old name stays with you. Paris just got a new T-shirt that says *Ask Me About Jesus*, but we still call her Paris and we are not asking her about anybody. There was a girl in the camp once whose T-shirt said *Got Milk?* She threw the T-shirt away because some of the boys in the camp were always pressing her breasts forcefully to see if they had milk. You cannot know what will be written on your T-shirt. We struggle and fight for them and count ourselves lucky that we get anything at all. Take Lousy, for instance; his T-shirt says *My Dad Went To Yellowstone And Got Me This Lousy T-shirt*.

He cannot fight, so he's not been able to get another one and has been wearing the same T-shirt since he came to the camp. Though what is written on it is now faded, the name has stuck. Some people are lucky: London had a T-shirt that said *London* and is now in London. He's been adopted by a family over there. Maybe I will find a family in Orlando, Florida that will adopt me.

Sister Nora is the one who told me to start writing this book, she says *the best way to forget is to remember and the best way to remember is to forget*. That is the way Sister Nora talks, in a roundabout way. I think because she is a Reverend Sister she likes to speak in parables like Jesus. She is the one who has been giving me books to read. She says I have a gift for telling stories. This is why she thinks I will become a writer one day.

The first book she gave me to read was *Waiting for Godot*. She says the people in the book are waiting for God to come and help them. Here in the camp, we wait and wait and then wait some more. It is the only thing we do. We wait for the food trucks to come and then we form a straight line and then we wait a few minutes for the line to scatter, then we wait for the fight to begin, and then we fight and struggle and bite and kick and curse and tear and grab and run. And then we begin to watch the road and wait to see if the water trucks are coming, we watch for the dust trail, and then we go and fetch our containers and start waiting and then the trucks come and the first few containers are filled and the fight and struggle and tearing and scratching begin because someone has whispered to someone that the water tanker only has little water in it. That is, if we are lucky and the water tanker comes; oftentimes, we just bring out our containers and start waiting and praying for rain to fall.

Today we are waiting for the photographer to come and take our pictures. It is these pictures that the Red Cross people send to their people abroad who show them to different people in foreign countries and, after looking at them, the foreign families will choose those they like to come and live with them. This is the third week we have been waiting for the photographer, but he has to pass through the war zone so he may not even make it today. After taking the photograph, we have to wait for him to print it and bring it back. We then give it to the Red Cross people and start waiting for a response from abroad.

I want to go and join my friend under the only tree still standing in the camp. Acapulco is raising a handful of red dust into the air to test for breeze; the air is stagnant and the red earth falls back in a straight line.

"Orlando, do you think the photographer will come today?" he asks.

"Maybe he will come."

"Do you think an American family will

adopt me?"

100 "Maybe, if you are lucky."
"Will they find a cure for my bedwetting?"
"There is a tablet for every sickness in America."
"I am not sick, I only wet myself in my sleep because I always dream that I am urinating outside and then I wake up and my knickers are wet because it was only a dream, but the piss is real."
"The same dream every night?"

110 "Yes. Do you think that if I go to America, my parents will hear about me and write to me and I will write to them and tell my new family to let them come over and join me?"
"When the war ends, your parents will find you."
"When will the war end?"
"I don't know, but it will end soon."
"If the war will end soon, why are the Red Cross people sending us to America?"

120 "Because they don't want us to join the Youth Brigade and shoot and kill and rape and loot and burn and steal and destroy and fight to the finish and die and not go to school."
125 This was why Acapulco was always sitting alone under the tree: because he always asked a lot of questions. Sister Nora says it is good to ask questions, that if you ask questions you will never get lost. Acapulco begins to throw the sand once more, testing for breeze. Pus is coming out of his ears and this gives him the smell of an egg that is a little rotten. This was another reason people kept away from him. A fly is buzzing around his ear; he ignores it for some time and at the exact moment the fly is about to perch, he waves it away furiously.
135 "I wish I had a dog," he said.
"What do you want to do with the dog?"

140 "I will pose with the dog in my photograph that they are sending to America because white people love dogs."
"But they also like people."
"Yes, but they like people who like dogs."

145 "London did not take a picture with a dog."
"Yes, London is now in London."
"Maybe you will soon be in Acapulco," I said laughing.

150 "Where is Acapulco?"
"They have a big ocean there, it is blue and beautiful."
"I don't like the ocean, I don't know how to swim, I want to go to America."
155 "Everyone in America knows how to swim; all the houses have swimming pools."
"I will like to swim in a swimming pool, not the ocean. I hear swimming pool water is sweet and clean and blue and is good for the skin."
160 We are silent. We can hear the sound of the aluminium sheets with which the houses are built. They make an angry noise like pin-sized bullets when going off. The houses built with tarpaulin and plastic sheets are fluttering in the breeze like a thousand plastic kites going off. Acapulco raises a handful of dust in the air. The breeze carries it away. Some of it blows into our faces and Acapulco smiles.
170 "God is not asleep," he says. I say nothing.
"There used to be dogs here in the camp." He had been in the camp before me. He is one of the oldest boys in the camp.
175 There were lots of black dogs. They were our friends, they were our protectors. Even though food was scarce, the dogs never went hungry. The women would call them whenever a child squatted down to shit and the dogs would come running. They would wait for the child to finish and lick the child's buttocks clean before they ate the shit. People threw them scraps of food. The dogs were useful in other ways too. In those days, the enemy still used to raid the camp frequently. We would bury ourselves in a hole and the dogs would gather leaves and other stuff and spread it atop the hole where we hid. The enemy would pass by the hole and not know we were hiding there.
180 But there was a time the Red Cross people could not bring food to the camp for two weeks because the enemy would not let their plane land. We were so hungry we killed a few of the dogs and used them to make pepper-soup. A few days later, the Red Cross people were let through and food came. The dogs were a bit wary, but they seemed to understand it was not our fault.
185 And then, for the second time, there was no food for a very long time. We were only able to catch some of the dogs this time. Some of them ran away as we approached, but we still caught some and cooked and ate

205 them. After that we did not see the dogs
again; the ones that ran away kept off. One
day, a little child was squatting and having a
shit. When the mother looked up, half a
dozen of the dogs that had disappeared
210 emerged from nowhere and attacked the
little child. While the mother screamed, they
tore the child to pieces and fled with parts of
the child's body dangling between their
jaws. Some of the men began to lay ambush
215 for the dogs and killed a few of them. They
say the dogs had become as tough as lions.
We don't see the dogs any more. People say
it is the war.

I decided I was going to ask Sister Nora.
220 As if reading my mind, Acapulco told me
not to mention it to anyone. He said people
in the camp did not like talking about the
dogs.

"I am not sure the photographer will still
225 come today," I said.

"Sometimes I think there is a bullet lodged
in my brain," Acapulco said.

"If you had a bullet in your brain, you
would be dead."

230 "It went in through my bad ear. I hear
explosions in my head, bullets popping,
voices screaming, *banza, banza bastard,*
come out we will drink your blood today,
and then I smell carbide, gun-smoke,
235 burning thatch. I don't like smelling smoke
from fires when the women are cooking
with firewood; it makes the bullets in my
brain begin to go off."

"You will be fine when you get to
240 America. They don't cook with firewood;
they use electricity."

"You know everything, Zaki. How do you
know all these things though you have never
been to these places?"

245 "I read a lot of books, books contain a lot
of information, sometimes they tell stories
too," I say.

"I don't like books without pictures; I like
books with big, beautiful, colourful
250 pictures."

"Not all books have pictures. Only books
for children have pictures."

"I am tired of taking pictures and sending
them abroad to families that don't want me.

255 Almost all the people I came to the camp
with have found families and are now living
abroad. One of my friends sent me a letter

from a place called Dakota. Why have no
family adopted me? Do you think they don't
260 like my face?"

"It is luck; you have not found your luck
yet."

"Sometimes I want to join the Youth
Brigade but I am afraid; they say they give
265 them *we-we* to smoke and they drink blood
and swear an oath to have no mercy on any
soul, including their parents."

"Sister Nora will be angry with you if she
hears you talking like that. You know she is
270 doing her best for us, and the Red Cross
people too, they are trying to get a family for
you."

"That place called Dakota must be full of
rocks."

275 "Why do you say that?"

"Just from the way it sounds, like many
giant pieces of rock falling on each other at
once."

"I like to go to that place with angels."

280 "You mean Los Angeles."

"They killed most of my people who could
not pronounce the name of the rebel leader
properly, they said we could not say *Tsofo*,
we kept saying *Tofo* and they kept shooting
285 us. My friend here in the camp taught me to
say *Tsofo*, he said I should say it like there is
sand in my mouth. Like there is gravel on
my tongue. Now I can say it either way."

290 "That's good. When you get to America,
you will learn to speak like them. You will
try to swallow your tongue with every word,
you will say *larer, berrer, merre, ferre,*
herrer."

"We should go. It is getting to lunchtime."

295 "I don't have the power to fight. Whenever
it is time for food, I get scared. If only my
mother was here, then I would not be
Displaced. She would be cooking for me; I
wouldn't have to fight to eat all the time."

300 We both looked up at the smoke curling
upwards from shacks where some of the
women were cooking *dawa*. You could tell
the people that had mothers because smoke
always rose from their shacks in the
305 afternoon. I wondered if Acapulco and I
were yet to find people to adopt us because
we were displaced and did not have families.
Most of the people that have gone abroad
are people with families.

310 I did not mention this to Acapulco; I did

not want him to start thinking of people who could not say *Tsofo*. I had once heard someone in the camp say that if God wanted us to say *Tsofo* he would have given us
315 tongues that could say *Tsofo*.

“Come with me, I will help you fight for food,” I say to Acapulco.

“You don’t need to fight, Orlando. All the other kids respect you, they say you are not
320 afraid of anybody or anything and they say Sister Nora likes you and they say you have a book where you record all the bad, bad, things that people do and you give it to Sister Nora to read and when you are both
325 reading the book both of you will be shaking your heads and laughing like *amariya* and *ango*, like husband and wife.”

We stood up and started walking towards the corrugated-sheet shack where we got our
330 lunch. I could smell the *dawa*, it was always the same *dawa*, and the same green-bottle flies and the same bent and half-crumpled aluminium plates and yet we still fought over it.

Kimono saw me first and began to call out to me. He was soon joined by Aruba and Jerusalem and Lousy and I’m Loving It and Majorca and the rest. Chief Cook was standing in front of the plates of *dawa* and
335 green soup. She had that look on her face, the face of a man about to witness two beautiful women disgrace themselves by fighting and stripping themselves naked over him. She wagged her finger at us and
340 said: No fighting today, boys. That was the signal we needed to go at it; we dived. *Dawa* and soup were spilling on the floor. Some tried to grab some into their mouth as they fought to grab a plate in case they did not
345 get anything to eat at the end of the fight.

I grabbed a lump of *dawa* and tossed it to Acapulco and made for a plate of soup but as my fingers grabbed it, Lousy kicked it away and the soup poured on the floor. He
355 laughed his crazy hyena laugh and hissed, saying: the leper may not know how to milk

a cow, but he sure knows how to spill the milk in the pail. Chief Cook kept screaming, hey no fighting, one by one, form a line, the
360 *dawa* is enough to go round. I managed to grab a half-spilled plate of soup and began to weave my way out as I signalled to Acapulco to head out. We squatted behind the food shack and began dipping our fingers into the food, driving away large flies with our free hand. We had two hard lumps of *dawa* and very little soup. I ate a few handfuls and wiped my hands on my shorts, leaving the rest for Acapulco. He was having a hard time driving away the flies from his bad ear and from the plate of food, and he thanked me with his eyes.

I remembered a book Sister Nora once gave me to read about a poor boy living in England in the olden days who asked for more from his chief cook. From the picture of the boy in the book, he did not look so poor to me. The boys in the book all wore coats and caps and they were even served.

We had to fight, and if you asked Chief Cook for more, she would point at the lumps of *dawa* and the spilled soup on the floor and say we loved to waste food. I once spoke to Sister Nora about the food and fights but she said she did not want to get involved. It was the first time I had seen her refuse to find a solution to any problem. She explained that she did not work for the Red Cross and was their guest like me.

I was wondering how to get away from Acapulco. I needed some time alone but I did not want to hurt his feelings. I told him to take the plates back to the food shack. We did not need to wash them because we had already licked them clean with our tongues.

As Acapulco walked away to the food shack with the plates, I slipped away quietly.

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Annotations:

- 1 Zaki**probably a city in Nigeria;
- 44 Reverend Sister**title of respect for a member of a religious community;
- 51 *Waiting for Godot***a play by Samuel Beckett;
- 58 to scatter**move very quickly in different directions;
- 60 to curse**to swear, to use rude or offensive language, usually because you are angry;
- 60 to tear**to damage sth by pulling it apart or into pieces;
- 121 to loot**.....to steal things from shops, stores or buildings after a riot, fire, etc.
- 130 pus**[U] a thick yellowish or greenish liquid that is produced in an infected wound;
- 136 to perch**(informal) to sit on sth, especially on the edge of it;
- 164 tarpaulin**a large sheet made of heavy waterproof material, used to cover things with and to keep rain off;
- 184 to raid**(of soldiers, fighting planes, etc.) to attack a place without warning;
- 197 wary**.....cautious;
- 213 to lie (in) ambush**.....hiding and waiting for sb and then making a surprise attack on them;
- 231 banza**region in northern Nigeria;
- 233 carbide**.....dt. Karbid;
- 233 thatch**.....dried straw, reeds, etc. used for making a roof;
- 328 corrugated (iron)**shaped into a series of regular folds that look like waves (dt. Wellblech);
- 350 to toss**.....to throw sth lightly or carelessly;
- 354 hyena**a wild animal like a dog, that eats the meat of animals that are already dead and has a cry like a human laugh;
- 354 to hiss**.....to make a sound like a long ‘s’;
- 355 leper**a person suffering from leprosy [Lepra];
- 357 pail**.....[old-fashioned] bucket;
- 361 to weave**.....to move along by running and changing direction continuously to avoid things that are in your way;

Worksheet “Waiting”

I. Questions on the text

1. In what way can the first four paragraphs (ll. 1-73) be regarded as an introduction?
2. What does the reader learn about the situation in the camp? Refer especially to the episode with the dogs.
3. Give a characterization of Orlando.
4. Give a characterization of Acapulco.
5. Does the text contain any hope that Acapulco may find a family to adopt him?