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Idi Amin Dada:

His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin, Victoria Cross, Distinguished Service Order, MC, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea, King of the Scots and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.

Idi Amin had been a mouthful. When I had heard of his death, I had boarded up that part of my memory with the enormous relief of irrevocability. And now, walking up with my agent through the shuttered market of Jerusalem with the mosque behind us, deserted but for the sporadic movement of distant patrols and scuttling cats, I had trouble getting my mind to bridge between his being dead and buried and the very much alive harbouring of business grievance on my account. No need to panic, but I quickened my pace in the direction of the Danish Tea House and my cold tea.

When we had started off in this line of business we had had to experiment with subterranean marketing methods to locate clients. But this was not difficult, since we were targeting exiles: the Palestinians are a nation of exiles with a well-furnished Diaspora all the way up and down the social ladder. My agent went off on a long business trip. Between us we had uncles and aunts and in-laws in just about every port. So word got around advertising the brand of unorthodox banking services we would be offering, and after a while a trickle of furtive contacts found their way into my hands. With a bit of skilful financial plumbing, the valves were opened wide and blocked resources were able to flow away free. Tasteless. Odourless. Transparent and invisible. Untraceable. I told that to my clients, it became my sales pitch, they saw that it was true and good. One day my agent came to me with an unmarked envelope, and it contained precise military instructions, ordering us to report to Mr Idi Amin Dada on the ship *Mina Al-Bakr* which would be moored in the Port of Aqaba, Kingdom of Jordan, Monday following.

Jerusalem and Amman face each other over the deepest valley in the world. A short hop, down and up. One crosses the Jordan River at the Allenby Bridge, just north of the Dead Sea and east of Jericho. Each time I go down from Jerusalem I measure the advance of age by the diminished number of goats cropping at the little sustenance the barren slopes offer, and the galloping increase of Israeli suburbia colonising the hill tops. The Israeli checkpoint at the river is much more zealous with those returning, but they wanted to know where I was going and whom I would be meeting. Most of those crossing were on pilgrimage to Mecca, and when I told them in Hebrew that Mr Idi Amin of Jeddah had invited me for tea, this was greeted by an outbreak of hilarity from the soldiers who waved me through without further ado.

We arrived in Amman in paling pastel evening light, a far flung, melancholic antechamber for Jerusalem. Amman is

an enormous, sprawled-out city, that gives the impression of having been spray painted from a canister onto the rocky hills. Not a city built-up on sediments, like Jerusalem, Amman is a city of displaced strangers doing their best to feel at home: Bedouin nomads who were ferreted out of their desert life by the market economy, aging Palestinian refugees, who would sit outside in the hot evening and reminisce about hide and seek in the orange groves. All that is left is a key on the wall.

Daybreak, already baking, and we were on our way again, a high air-conditioned blue bus that whisked us out of Amman on the freeway to the south, the cement houses of the outlying suburbs giving way grudgingly to smattered Bedouin tents that swivelled giddily by our passage. I was in a state of reverie for most of the journey, as I had been up all night sharing memories with my cousin, who had fled to Amman in 1967. Together we remembered how we had sneaked into the old Ramallah cinema to see Lawrence of Arabia, how it had seemed so exotic to us and yet we came out standing taller, and now as I roared down a road crisscrossing the very railway line that had taken Lawrence and his companions months to dominate, dream and reality and memory and landscape merged into a tumbling blur.

Next morning we were in Aqaba Harbour.

The *Mina Al-Bakr* was docked next to a large ship flying a South African flag. A very tall crane was hitching armoured personnel carriers out of the latter, and without even setting them down, the crane shunted down to the *Mina Al-Bakr* which swallowed them into its hold. There was a reception committee at the bottom of the gangway. We were led onto a rusty deck, down steep stairs and into Idi's wardroom, where he was waiting for us in a lurid red Nike training suit which appeared to have been reverse engineered to fit his ample frame. Idi had a hyperactivity problem; waiting for us he was bouncing around the deep leather sofas like a Super Ball. He embraced us both in a single, enormous hug. You came from Israel, he told us. When I demurred 'Palestine...', he seemed to take offence. Ariel Sharon was his friend. They were both professional soldiers. Sharon himself had given him his parachute wings, when the Israelis had trained him in up-to-date warfare. Then Idi was storming, Sharon that traitor, the Palestinians were his friends and Israel was crocodile food. Idi was bouncing against the wall, I was thinking of Ritalin. We prayed that he remembered that we were Palestinians. Apparently our prayers were answered, for affable Idi was sitting us down, offering us Scotch whisky. He only drank Scotch, it was sent to him by his friend, Mel Gibson. Now there was someone who knew his Jews, Idi said. Then we got down to business. Idi had been kicked out of Uganda, he told us, and he had been done out of his severance pay.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Joseph Rabie.*