



Source: 'Ex-traffic engineer on a collision course', *The Sunday Times* in *The Australian online*, 19/12/05.

Tags: [desert](#), [Africa](#), [diplomacy](#), [fortune](#), [travel](#)
Writer/s: [Joseph Rabie](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

A night of fitful sleep, curled like a pipe cleaner in a British Airways business class seat. My slumbering mind was prisoner to unwelcome thoughts of other aircraft, four-engined Hercules with grinding propellers that rumbled through the African night, on their way to Entebbe, just like me.

I had the middle seat, and the window passenger sat up all night poring over a large book spotlighted by the overhead lamp, his ever moving, small black eyes glinting within the shadow, next to the unfathomable dark of the porthole. Economics I thought, and every now and then he made notes in the margin with his right hand, animated by evident emotion, agreement here, demurral there. His other hand, plunged into his pocket, shoved coins around. At first the sound jarred me, but gradually it became sleep-soothing like waves knocking the pebbles on a shore, and suddenly I was awake and the sun was up and dancing over Lake Victoria. The aeroplane made a wide turn from south to north to line up with the runway, the dark blue waters slurring hazily into the sky, and suddenly we were rushing in low over the lake edge and an instant later touching the runway, great scarves of birds flung up from the luxuriant brush surrounding the airport, flapping up over the waters of the lake.

And suddenly my taciturn fellow passenger had become garrulous. We shared a taxi that took us away from the lake, northwards to Kampala. Yes, he was an economist. He had come to study the fishing industry. Some decades ago, Nile perch, a large predator, had been introduced into the lake. They had thrived off the indigenous fish, becoming the dominant species. A prosperous fishing industry had grown up all around Lake Victoria. Each night, tons of frozen produce were being flown from the packing plants to markets in Europe. And in order that the Antonov and Illyushin freighters not lose money flying in empty, they were delivering arms to the Congo and Angola outward bound. The Nile perch was a monopoly, my companion said, and here was nature's proof: economies must evolve towards monopolies, which represent the natural genius of the economy to optimise opportunity. He was an expert for the defence of Microsoft in the lawsuit brought against the company by the European Union. Microsoft was going to win, he said. And he was going to get the Nobel. He made me write his name down, so that I would remember that he had told me so.

I had time to kill in Kampala. Idi had hedged his extra cash out to all the banks in town. So after I had settled into my hotel, I called to set up appointments, spread over the coming few days. And in between I walked, for I was spellbound by the rich red African earth, exposed along the verges of the roads, and smothered everywhere else by riotous vegetation, so unlike the rock riven hills around Jerusalem, where each bush, each tree, was a statement made against the desert. Kampala was the image of its population, in a state of vibrant growth, the neighbourhoods of colonial villas giving way to the shanty towns, the rain stained thoroughfares crowded with

minivans and buses, shunting past the open-air stalls selling lounge suites and elegant tan varnished coffins. And whenever meeting time came up, I would go in to the prosperous banks in the high-rises, or the seedy banks in the old town centre, with its thirties modern style architecture, long cantilevered concrete awnings against the rain, and long strip windows, lighting the dingy, encumbered offices behind.

And each time the ceremony was the same. I would take out the forged powers of attorney, and copies of passports, and sundry letters and photographs testifying to the link between a grandfatherly Palestinian from Jerusalem and bank accounts in Kampala, Uganda. Idi's accounts were thoroughly dispersed, involving investments in coffee, copper, real estate, timber. No fisheries, thankfully. And as all this had been born in original subterfuge, it was simple fiction to bring to fruition. Idi had provided me with a list of account numbers, and my visit to Kampala had been preceded by that of my agent. Far more surreptitious than me, his job was to convince the archives clerks to take a coffee break while he did the photocopies. And thereafter, in Ramallah, it was easy to counterfeit the handwriting, fabricate all manner of bogus documents, a speciality of occupied territories the world over. And I am an affable man, I would hold my hat before my knees as I was introduced to the bank manager, and if there was ever a little doubt, these accounts being so old, it took a little commission to smooth out the awry kinks brought on by the precarious nature of relations between a people on the move and the world of banking...

We had almost reached the Danish Tea House.

A sudden wild image came to me of Idi sitting there, waiting for me, cushions squashed out from his underside.

Not to panic, I thought, and glanced at my agent trying to hold pace with me, his face inscrutable with rapidly marshalled thoughts, like night shadows. Idi Amin was not exactly welcome here. But reassurance was hard to come by, and I had a vision of a large crocodile folding itself out of the toilet in precise, deliberate movements, taking five minutes or so to wheeze off its exertion onto the shiny tiles, and wedging itself through the door as it came waddling out after me.

There was a group of Israeli soldiers outside the entrance, and they turned towards us as we walked up. An officer with a jovial smirk like a rabbit pulled from a hat stepped forward, he addressed me by my first name, he had my laptop computer tucked neatly under his arm.

'Clearstream mean anything to you?', he asked.

I did not really know what to reply. My mind snagged.

'Come in', he said. 'How about a cup of tea?'

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