



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Arab League may help Hamas',
The Australian online, 21/02/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [husband/wife](#), [corporeality](#),
[Malaysia](#), [travel](#), [workplace](#)

Writer/s: [Helen Grace](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

As she sat there, in dark glasses, smoking in the warm terminal building surrounded by palm trees, waiting for the next flight to Kuching, she knew she would not return to him. In the beginning, there was the usual happiness, and relief from the years of traveling alone from one city to another, selling 'Fair and Lovely', the skin whitening cream the women all used.

She'd met him on a bus from the airport and they'd fallen into easy conversation and later he had called her in the usual way and one thing led to another and before long she had moved to Miri with the handsome asset planner from Petronas Carigali, embarking on their adventure of development, just as the offshore gas fields were expanding in the early nineties and there were lots of assets to be planned for.

The new Shell/Petronas joint venture brought more people and more building, which meant more shopping centres and she would go and spend the day—though not every day—walking through the Boulevard Shopping Mall and perhaps having afternoon tea at the Dynasty Hotel on Jalan Pujut Lutong, because at home there was nothing to do, everything taken care of by the young orang ulus who had moved to Miri from longhouse villages inland, out of the way places where small communities eked out a trading existence, but where there were no schools or jobs.

Things would have been much easier if there had been children, and then she would have been much more a part of the community but it somehow didn't happen. They had tried, as is usually said in such situations, but it had not happened.

And he was always busy with work, because this was the time after the new production sharing contracts came in, after Shell's 75 year oil contract expired and there was a lot of new development and a new state arranging things differently. Shell had run the show since oil was first drilled at the beginning of the century—in a well now called 'the Grand Old Lady'—when, it amused her to find, they were called the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company Limited.

After the new production sharing contracts—the PSCs as everyone called them—Petronas expanded and there were lots of deals being done. Sometimes he would speak of them and it seemed that, in the usual way, funny money was involved between members of the government and the local ruling families who had gained most from the new arrangements. And people began to feel that things were simpler under the rule of the White Rajah, an Englishman it turned out, who had inherited the place from his father who in turn had inherited it from his uncle, who had been given it by the Sultan of Brunei, in return for pacifying the natives.

She knew all the stories, of how the White Rajah had 'married' Dayang Mastiah, the adopted daughter of Abang Aing, who was Iban, before he had officially married Marguerite de Windt and a son who was born to Dayang Mastiah was sent to Canada and adopted, though later the son's daughters returned. She imagined the Iban scattered all over the world in this way, especially if they were sons, while Iban mothers as unofficial wives mourned quietly the loss of their children, whose grandchildren might one day turn up looking for their ancestors.

She knew all this of course because she herself was one of the son's daughters and when she had first returned, her grandmother was already dead and the sense of belonging she'd hoped to find no longer existed. So there she was, with lighter skin than usual, figuring out the rest of her life, and he had come along.

But that was a decade ago now, and she was still figuring out the rest of her life and waiting for this flight to Kuching, where the search for her story had begun, and she just wanted to sit by the river, watching the boats go upstream, while the ferries with their awnings painted with the skin-whitener logo, took people backwards and forward across the river in the steamy heat.

Conscious again of where she was, after the reverie, which had taken her into the strangeness of the past, she gazed dreamily around the terminal building, her eyes falling on the brightly-lit news stall near the duty-free store. Flicking the cigarette butt into the ashtray beside her seat and leaving her luggage behind, she walked towards the news stall.

But at the last minute she found herself distractedly entering the duty-free store, browsing the cosmetics counter, reading the labels of make-up promising skin-brightening ingredients, to help counteract shadows and give skin a more even tone. Others offered long-lasting from moderate to full coverage on light to medium skin tones. She read the list of shades on offer—bisque, beige, cloud, babyskin—and finishes—matte light, matte medium—but she couldn't decide whether her skin any longer fitted in this universe of tone.

Discouraged by the realization that she no longer had the money to buy expensive cosmetics, she moved quickly past the solicitous shop assistant, who was wearing cloud on her bisque skin, and too much perfume. At the news stall she picked up a copy of the local newspaper and settling back into the seat, she lit another cigarette and sat reading the stories of amok running, while she waited for the next flight to be called.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.