

Story for performance #931
webcast from Sydney at 08:10PM, 07 Jan 08



Source: Reuters, 'Israel kills four in Gaza raid: reports', *The Age online*, 07/01/08.
Tags: Israel, Palestine, Africa, South Africa, travel, violence
Writer/s: Joseph Rabie

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

A brief glance at my Oslo passport, the sound of rapid typing on a computer keyboard, and a group of well-dressed and -bred gentlemen came to escort me out of the customs hall. No brutality would be shown here, not in front of the queues of foreign visitors. My being so outnumbered ensured that any objection on my part would be in vain.

I was ushered into a low room and introduced to my interrogator. He wanted to know everything, and I obliged, for I had nothing to hide, certainly not the aching desire to be going home to Jerusalem. I wondered how complete a report the Israelis had received from the Americans. When I described the multifarious creativity the latter devoted to the art of coercion, my curious friend pricked up his ears, and wanted precise details: did they slap both cheeks before they plunged my head into a basin of freezing water, or afterwards? Or perhaps before, and afterwards—wasn't that more efficient? A glimmer of dawn was peeking through the narrow window when we finished. 'Could I go?' I ventured. He turned and laughed, saying that I would be cashing in many more airline miles before the day was done.

I wanted to telephone my family, surely they would allow that. He pushed over the telephone. It was early; I would wake my aunt in Ramallah for the solace of a few words. A telephone recording announced that the line had been disconnected. Sudden qualm ballooned in my guts. My interrogator knew all about it: a cousin, who also lived in the building had a grandson, 'a cocky bastard' who should have stuck to throwing stones. After he gutted a Border Guard jeep with a Molotov cocktail, grievously injuring four soldiers, the inhabitants of the building were herded out, explosives were placed in every corner, and boom! After living in Ramallah for so many generations, my family had become refugees in their own city.

And my agent? His name I murmured with trepidation.

They had sent him to Gaza. Too dangerous to let him continue his mischief in the West Bank. They had delivered him to the Jihad people. I was aghast. With his close relationship to the Palestinian establishment, that was murder. 'Oh', my interrogator told me, 'they had tons to talk about!' By the time they had finished with him, his every bone had been shattered. His body had been found floating in Gaza harbour, splayed out like a mattress which had been voided of its springs. They never found his head. What remained received special permission to pass through Israeli territory so that his body, at least, might finally return to Ramallah for burial.

The South African government had offered me political asylum. I was put onto the morning flight to Johannesburg.

The aircraft climbed into the sun over the hills welling up towards Jerusalem. A few minutes later, the outskirts of the modern city came into view, running along the crests above the sinuous *wadis* that wind

down from the city in all directions, for Jerusalem is on the watershed between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. As the plane flew higher I could see the city centre with its tall buildings, then the stone wall around the Old City, a flash of sunlight from the gold and silver domes of the mosques, and beyond the ramparts, the hills dropping to the bottomless valley, blotted out by the morning light. Jerusalem appeared to float infinitely high in the heavens. I pushed my head against the window to make this last glimpse endure, but now I could only see the southern suburbs, the concrete separation wall that throttles Palestinian Jerusalem snaking over the hills like Christo's running fence, but so much more durable; and there were the new Israeli settlements cutting deeply into Palestine; and there was Bethlehem which in modern times had become a walled city.

The territory which might one day be Palestine is minuscule. We flew over the fertile olive groves around Hebron, and thereafter southwards over desert. A sliver of sea, the Gulf of Aqaba, a last thought for business negotiations with Idi on his boat. Over Sharm el-Sheikh, its luxury resorts and stillborn peace conferences. Soon we were floating above the Red Sea, the wingtips of the aircraft caressing the distant coastlines of Arabia and Africa. Beyond the Sudanese frontier, we turned south over Eritrea. By and by, as the Ethiopian highlands rose up, we passed over the source of the Blue Nile. Its waters would flow down past Khartoum, past the pyramids, and perhaps a tiny amount would find its way into Gaza Harbour, and I was seized with grief for my friend.

The lunar landscapes of northern Kenya gave way to the fertile south and a glimpse of the last, gasping snows of Kilimanjaro. We would be over the Serengeti, and I imagined the Masai, converted to the trinket industry, selling their wares to the busloads of tourists come to gawk at their authenticity. Not far off, those white men wealthy enough to afford a hunting licence would be blasting away at creatures large and small, living for the moment but thinking of the reward of sundowners and virile encounters.

Blue afternoon shadow lipped the dips amongst the rolling, green hills, cut with the occasional forestry road, gashing the orange earth. We were over Zambia, Zimbabwe, and finally we were coming down, as the lengthening *koppie* shadows filled the Highveld grasslands, and we landed at Johannesburg International Airport.

The customs official led me to an inner office. I was given temporary documents, and an envelope with an allowance. They told me that there was lodging available for me in a hostel in Cape Town, and unless I objected, I should take the morning plane.

I was driven to the Holiday Inn behind the airport, and shown to my room. I washed, and went down to the restaurant and had dinner. People were kind to me.

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