

## Closer to Home

I had swum too close to the sun. The day before we'd gone down to Lake Nabugabo at the equator to escape the capital which was still jittery after the explosion of three bombs and nearly eighty dead. Now I lay on a day bed in the deep shadow of a friend's veranda hooked up to a drip. Her bungalow lay within the compound of an international Aids hospital, and one of the doctors had come down and diagnosed heatstroke.

I lay in half sleep, my reverie broken only by the *thwack thwack* of the gardener's machete as he cut down jackfruit, and the regular patrol by one of the compound guards, who strode across the lawn, an AK-47 slung casually over his shoulder. The imminent arrival of General Gadaffi for a meeting of the African Union had heightened the tension. Despite the billboard messages all along the highway between Entebbe airport and Kampala welcoming the African delegations to Uganda, Gadaffi was no friend of the Ugandan president, who was suspicious of the mosques he funded in the northern Ugandan provinces and his vision of a United African presidency. Already rumours swirled that Gadaffi was complicit in the recent atrocity...that he was trying to destabilise the country as presidential elections loomed.

For a day or two our planned trip to Jinja seemed unlikely. I'd had my heart set on visiting the source of the Nile and the spot where some of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were scattered. But by the third day the nausea had settled and I could stand. The back seat of my friend's car was filled with cushions and icepacks, and a bucket. Just in case.

Jinja was cooler. Mist crept up the banks of the Nile and swathed the gardens surrounding Gandhi's memorial. Our faces were rain-streaked as we offered our strands of marigolds. Afterwards, we took shelter beneath the town colonnades which were filled with cafes and fabric shops. In one I was struck by the Birmingham burr of the owner. They were ethnic Indians, they told me, who'd fled in 1973 after Idi Amin's expulsion of the Asian community. They'd travelled first to Tanzania and then on to the UK. A new law now allowed them to reclaim their property, and they'd returned after nearly forty years. Their daughter, Rita, however, had stayed on in Birmingham. "She's got a family now, and no longer thinks of this as home."

And then it happened. As it had throughout this trip. This time it was a word – 'home'. Previously it had been the smell of green bananas roasting over a roadside fire, the sight of a hillside, the red earth turned over and ready for planting, and the sound at night of fruit bats in the paw paw tree outside my bedroom window. I felt the deep ache of something lost. I'd grown up in the 1970s in Papua New Guinea, in the wetlands, amongst the abandoned airfields and ammunition dumps of the Pacific War. When we weren't scavenging for spent cartridges my best friend Sangeeta Shrivastava and I would lie beneath her parents' bed reading her father's Playboy magazines, while she told me hair-raising tales of Idi Amin. They too had been refugees from Uganda. But the place where I'd spent my first twelve years was also descending into post-independence turmoil. One Saturday, returning home from swimming lessons, I was told we were leaving. Thirty five people were dead after demonstrations, and the Prime Minister had declared a state of emergency. That night I left my home, my dog, and my father who was bound to see out his contract. I never had a chance to say goodbye to Sangeeta.

The rain lashed our windscreen as we sped through the Mabira Forest on our way back to Entebbe. We passed groups of men playing checkers on dripping verandas, goats shivering as they searched for weeds amongst the rubble, and a sign which read 'You were lost and now you are found'.

By the time we reached the outskirts of the city the sun was blazing, but now we were caught up in the rush hour traffic. As we navigated potholes hidden by surface water, we heard the rotation of helicopter blades, and then, somewhere behind us, sirens.

“Shit,” said our driver Moses, as an armoured car tried to nose ahead of us. It was flying the flags of Libya.

“Gadaffi”, whispered my friend.

There was the horrible sound of metal on metal. An army jeep forced us up onto the sloped embankment. The six tall soldiers kneeling on the back, Kalashnikovs in hand, didn’t even glance our way.

I began to sob.

“Please auntie,” said Moses, “don’t be afraid.”

But how could I explain to him it wasn’t fear that made me weep?