



Way of the Infidel





Way of the Infidel

by

David Milnes

First Edition

First published by what tradition books in 2021

Contents © David Hartley Milnes

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978-191618322-3

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Also from what tradition books:

The Ghost of Neil Diamond by David Milnes

The Whores of Coxcomb Hall by Egg Taylor

To Have Nothing by David Milnes

The Pathology of Graphology by David Milnes





All hail *The Ghost of Neil Diamond*:

“Ghost is a beautiful cathedral - at the risk of sounding effusive you should make a pilgrimage. It’s that superb.”

dissidentbooks.com New York

“some of the most meticulous prose I’ve ever read”

the novel blog Canada

“A dark comedy stemming from the howling despair of a man who is out of his element in every way . . . a book that subtly plays with the tropes associated with its subject matter to raise some interesting questions about what represents the real, and what constitutes the fake”

“A thoroughly enjoyable and idiosyncratic story that holds your attention until the rather brilliant end.”

bookmunch.co.uk Manchester UK

*“I highly recommend *The Ghost of Neil Diamond* if you’re tired of reading the same old shit and want to check out something truly unique.”*

alternativereel.com Florida





**“Where life had no value, death,
sometimes, had its price.”**

Sergio Leone: *For a Few Dollars More*





Way of the Infidel

by

David Milnes

**what tradition books
whattradition.co.uk**







Chapter One

The Lazy Infidel

Egg Taylor had only been in the desert one week when a neighbour came begging for help with his suicide note. He'd tried his damndest to write it himself, he said, but he could not. He crumpled a sheet of paper into an angry ball and tossed it into Egg's shower unit.

It was 3 a.m.

"But why can't you write it yourself, Pdraig?" Egg asked, puzzled, blinking in the striplight, sitting up in bed, covering his nakedness. "It's your suicide note, after all, not mine."

"The self-pity! The bitterness!"

"But isn't that unavoidable? Inevitable?"

"I can't bear it! It cannot be borne! There's no honour in it!"

And there was no reasoning with him either. He would not go away until Egg avowed to "set it all down"





Way of the Infidel

over the weekend, this last will and testament. And once he'd made himself comfortable in Egg's easy chair, there were more conditions. When the note was written, after Padraig had approved it and signed it – airy, drunken waves dismissed these formalities – Egg had to post the note himself, recorded delivery, to Padraig's wife and daughter in Belfast.

“You'll have to pop down to Dhahran Central Post Office for that, Egg, I'm afraid.”

Dhahran Central Post Office? Where on earth was that?

“May as well check me post box while you're down there, Egg. No sense in not checking it, is there? While you're about it. I'll give you the key and that.”

“But why don't you pop down the post office yourself? Post your own suicide note? Check your own post box?”

“Because I can't! Because I cannot!” was all the explanation offered. “I've been telling you!”

“And how do I know you won't renege? After I've posted it? I'd need some guarantee, you know,” Egg countered. “Or it will look the most dishonourable and self-pitying cry for help ever contrived. Think on it, you lazy fellow.”

“You *post* it!” the drunkard shouted at him, leaning forward and jabbing his finger at the floor. “I'll see it *posted* first! Then I'll do it right enough! You may depend upon it! Attention must be paid!”

“But no attention will be paid,” Egg quickly followed, trying not to provoke but sticking to his corner. “No one will pay any attention at all, Old Bean, and that's a fact.”

This only incensed the drunkard further,





made him more violently insistent. And Egg was so defenceless. He was sitting up in his bed, quite literally cornered there, with his splayed knees drawn up under the sheet, with his scraggy, sixty-eight-year-old arms, whose Popeye muscles rolled like billiard balls beneath his curtained skin, knitted around his knees, at three o'clock in the morning, with a full day's classes ahead, at the end of his first draining week in the desert, quite unable to defend himself in any way.

Nonetheless, he once more declined the office.

"A note is a pointless thing, Padraig," he said. "Pointless. Go gently into that good night without any note, says I. Then no one has to bother writing it, posting it or anything else."

"Attention must be paid!" Padraig repeated, but his eyes were down now and roved the dull linoleum floor.

"Well," Egg sighed, "look at poor Frank the Australian." As tactfully as he could, he cited this recent precedent and the lessons to be gained. "No one paid any attention to poor old Frank, did they? And now I've got his horrible classes, no one gives a damn, do they? It would be the same for you, for me, for anyone in the desert." His voice hardened for the lesson here: "We are but men, Paddy, when all's said and done. Not families. We do not care about each other, and only a fool would pretend anyone cared back home." He chuckled at this blatant absurdity. "You think they'd pay attention back home? Eh?" he teased the drunkard. "They want Padraig back home, do they? They want to open the front door and find Padraig McGuire, Esquire, sitting at the kitchen table, stirring a cup of tea, doing the crossword puzzle?" He laughed more openly. "Or upstairs? Naked in the





Way of the Infidel

bedroom? Eh? Stinking up the toilet? Forget it, Paddy! That's finished. Home's finished. That old dream. Sending the dollars back is all. So I say, remember Frank the Australian, poor fellow, and let's show some respect. Put a bit of iron in your soul, Paddy. Remember Frank, and repent!"

The Australian's story was already folklore and more colourful than the man had ever been. Over twenty years he'd amassed two million dollars of Arabian gold and retired to spend the rest of his days playing golf across Australasia. Pictures of the brilliant greens and fairways of the famous clubs he was going to visit, thousands of miles apart, from Christchurch, New Zealand, to Melbourne, Victoria, had scented his work station like potted plants. But back in Brisbane his young wife had turned to cocaine and blown all his money on toy boys and brainless swindles. Frank came back to the desert to start over, but after a couple of weeks he'd driven deep into The Empty Quarter and suffocated in his aged Land Cruiser.

Remembering Frank brought out a true drunkard's nationalism in Padraig.

"I am not Frank the fuckin' Australian! I am Padraig the fuckin' Irishman!"

"But my good man!" Egg rejoined, with as much chuckling as he dared at this non sequitur. "What difference could that possibly make? Be reasonable. Even if you had planned it this way, you could not have picked a place on the planet where less attention would be paid to your self-destruction. Nowhere on earth. You have desert on one side, sea on the other. Not unless you're going to do it in some spectacular way – self-immolation? Seppuku? Hara-kiri?"





There was no response from the Irishman to setting himself on fire, or sawing out his soggy belly. His head hung to the floor. His big red hands hung uselessly between his knees.

“And you’re not planning on that, are you?” Egg insisted. “Far too painful, I should imagine. Wouldn’t you? But there’s your honour, if you want honour . . .” Egg turned away and stared wistfully at his grey prefab walls. “. . . the Japanese way, or the Buddhist way, the heathen way, something along those lines . . .” Then he turned back to his intruder, who seemed to be sobering up a bit, so he risked another joke at his expense. “No self-pity in setting yourself alight, Paddy, I’m pretty sure of that! But don’t do it here! Don’t burn down me tuppenny cabin, Old Chap!”

At this well-intentioned cheekiness the drunkard straightened up again and became more threatening and abusive, winding himself into a vindictive fury against Egg. He cashed in all the acts of kindness he had done Egg Taylor over his first week – all the lifts, all the friendly chats at their work station cubicles, and in the cafeteria over lunch, after lunch – how he’d listened to Egg’s endless boring updates about precious England; how he’d helped him settle in with their ‘colleagues’ . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . But there really wasn’t much to recount on this theme. Egg listened in silence, with hooded eyes, with great patience, forbearance. Apart from the lifts, for which he would insist on paying petrol money after this 3 a.m. attack – a risible sum, when petrol was cheaper than water anyway – the other *favours* the big-hearted Irishman supposed he’d done the ingrate Englishman, were completely delusional. Egg had found his own niche at work quickly enough, with his hail-





Way of the Infidel

fellow-well-met cordiality, with no help whatever from the noisome drunkard, thank you very much. If anything, being associated with Padraig was a liability. There was not only the rancid hooch, which ballooned up now in Egg's bedroom-cum-bathroom, his prefab cell – forcing Egg to breathe through his mouth, slack-jawed, it was so foul – there was also the weeks of body odour, and worse than either, or both combined, the seaweed smell of flesh-eating yeast, the kind of fungi that took hold around an unclean and sweaty anus, and between neglected sweaty toes. In Padraig's Corolla every morning this stench forced his passengers to breathe through their mouths all journey, reducing them to gormless idiots as they stared out at the low, white, baked streets of Dhahran, longing to get to their hellish jobs early because the journey to work was so foul and fetid. And Padraig, for the sake of his fagged out air-conditioning, which was nothing more than a puff of bad breath in the desert anyway, allowed no windows open either.

“Set it all down!” Padraig demanded – he was off again – raising his right fist and thumping it into the open palm of his left hand. “Set it all down! Take it all out of here – ” he raised both fists and kneaded his hung-over, aching temples with the points of his knuckles, as if pain could drive out pain – “Take it all out of here! And set it down there!” He pointed at the hollow floor of the prefab, where he wanted to be buried, it seemed. “Set it all down *there!* *She* has been the ruin of my life! My own flesh and blood!”

Womankind was indeed to blame for his current state, and this suicidal visit. It was his wayward daughter, who, by getting herself pregnant and abandoning her university studies, which by Padraig's own admission





she had always found irksome and far too challenging – it was she that had brought ruin upon him, blighted the very hope of his life. It was her fault and the fault of the “bloody wee bairn, not yet come into the world to see what it’s fuckin’ well like here!” This thought set him off on another rant about his long-looked-forward-to walking holiday around Lake Como, that he’d sacrificed on the altar of these new “*family*” obligations at home. “I’m off to Lake Como, me! Away with the rainy boredom of Ben Bulben’s back!” he’d cheerfully declared, time and again, to anyone who’d listen. “I’m off to Lake Como, me! With a bottle of Chianti in me swag!” And more recently, as his departure approached: “I’m off to Lake Como, me! Strip poker by the campfire with the lovely signorinas! Ahahaha! . . .” But now he’d cancelled the trip. He’d had to sacrifice that precious fortnight in Italy, and much of his savings, on account of what he called his daughter’s ‘confinement’. The drain on his savings was recorded by his daughter herself, picture by picture, on his phone: a top-of-the-range pram, complete with parasol, on a grey pavement under a grey sky – as if that parasol would ever be raised in Northern Ireland! – and a shiny, chrome and blue, state-of-the-art buggy, that collapsed in a trice to be slipped away with the shopping in the back of a brand new Ford Focus. A photo-burst showed his daughter, heavily pregnant, going through the motions with this buggy and stowing it with some Sainsbury’s bags – from which projected, here and there, the necks of wine bottles, Guinness bottles – in the back of this new Ford Focus, the “little car” his wife had bought their daughter from their savings – from *his* savings! – FROM HIS SAVINGS! – because living where his daughter lived, on the first floor of a





Way of the Infidel

broken down cottage outside town, life would be ‘far too difficult’ without a ‘wee car’.

Oh, would it! – Padraig ranted on to the helpless, hapless Egg Taylor – Would life, then, be so *difficult* for her?! – he bellowed. Get on the bus, woman! And what about *his* life, was that not just bloody *impossible*? Oh no no no no NO! That just did not matter a farthing, that didn’t! That was ne’er e’en thought about! Not for a moment! So his daughter now had what she wanted, and what he and his wife had never had in their lives – a brand new car! A brand new Ford Focus! Because, his wife said – No use in getting anything second hand without Padraig at home to tinker with it all weekend, in the pouring rain, when it didnay work, and getting nowhere anyway, not unless Uncle Dennis was around to help.

“Set it all down!” he cried to Egg. “Set it all down there!” he cried, stabbing at the floor again.

“But you do not have to give away all your savings like that!” Egg was quite frustrated by now. “Put your salary in a separate bank account. Retain control. Money is all the power you have in life and you’re giving it away, Padraig. You’re like some terrible old King Lear, ranting at his daughters in the storm.”

“Don’t you go citing your Shakespeare at me!” Padraig returned. “I’m an Irishman! I’ve loved literature all me fuckin’ life! It’s scripture to me. Now look where it’s got me!”

“Be that as it may,” Egg insisted, as hard as he dared, “how can you be such a fool as to put your money where someone else can take it and spend it?”

“Ye gods!” Padraig shouted back. “She is my *wife*! Do you call my wife a common *thief*?”





“Yes! Of course she is a common thief!”

“But it is the bairn, I tell you! The bairn must have it all! Must have everything I’ve saved! It is not questioned for a moment!”

“And where’s the father in all this?”

“Don’t talk to me about the bloody father! Do not call my *wife* a *thief*!” The Irishman jabbed his hand down towards the hollow floor as if it were his fate now to be buried beneath it. “*Do you fuckin’ hear me? You fuckin’ old newbie-come-lately! You fuckin’ old not-been-in-the-desert-five-fuckin’-minutes but you know it all already! You fuckin’ ugly old BASTARD!*”

This came out with such vehemence, from such a frothy and inflamed visage, teeth bared – teeth tombstone yellow, lichen yellow, with neglect – that Egg sensed whatever he said next the drunkard might actually lash out at him, strike him, smash him, as he sat there in his bed in the corner. He had made so many gestures with his fists, so many stabbings and jabbings with his bare red hands already. He was out of control. And the viciousness of that insult – *You fuckin’ ugly old BASTARD!* – came from a further complication to the Irishman’s tumultuous feelings, and Egg sensed the change and knew exactly what it was. It came from the shame and humiliation the Irishman felt looking at Egg Taylor, sitting there on his bed, knees up under the very thin, worn, near transparent, single sheet. The shame that he shared the adjacent cell to this ugly old man, that life had come down to unchosen company of his kind, in this endless desert. No strip poker by the campfire with the signorinas of Lake Como; only Egg Taylor’s dark crotch through a thin, soiled sheet. No bottle of Chianti in his swag at all; only the hooch he brewed in his roach-ridden





Way of the Infidel

shower unit.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Egg asked.

At this question, Padraig’s anger collapsed in an Irish storm-burst of tears.

“I don’t want to climb Ben Bulben’s back in the fuckin’ rain!” he moaned, his face in his hands. “I want to walk around Lake Como . . . ”

Egg sighed. The danger seemed to have passed. And the insult.

“And why must you do that? Why must you climb Ben Bulben’s back in the fuckin’ rain, as you say?”

“That’s what they say I should do instead of going to Italy. Lake Como. Spend my leave at home and climb Ben fuckin’ Bulben. Yet again.”

Egg nodded. “Well, if it was good enough for Yeats – ”

“Fuck Yeats!” the Irishman moaned, weeping into both closed hands. “Fuck that romantic bastard! Fuck all romantic bastards!”

This interview at three in the morning at the end of his first working week, when there was still a full day’s classes ahead, had been most disturbing and most unwelcome for Egg Taylor, but there was nothing to be done. No exit. It had dragged on long enough. And there was no denying the Irishman now. Not now the tears were upon him. Egg, still sitting up in bed with his hands knitted around his knees, a position he found almost impossible to sustain it was so uncomfortable, had been obliged to accede to the commission of Padraig’s suicide note, and the posting of it, by registered post, at Dhahran Central Post Office, to his wife and daughter in Belfast, just to get Padraig’s foul smell back to his own foul





quarters, beyond their long partition wall.

So at last the moribund Irishman stood up from Egg's easy chair and lumbered to the exit. But then stopped there, hand on the door handle, head dipped, and spoke to the aluminium door in front of him:

"You set it down for me, Egg. Can't do it meself. Tried me damnedest. Look at the state of me. You must do it. I've done good by you, now you do good by me. Fair's fair. Now I'm out of here. I'm out of here!"

He left, closing the flimsy door behind him with surprising gentleness.

Naturally, Egg had wanted to ignore the whole business and set it aside as some drunken blathering the Irishman would forget about over the weekend.

But Padraig's demands were opened to broad daylight at breakfast, while he ate his hangover fry-up of beef bacon, double egg and chicken sausages.

Then in the car to work after the weekend, amid the breakfast smells, and other smells.

"How long d'you need to finish it, Egg? You're a slow worker, to be sure!"

Then coming back from work.

"Have you not done it yet, Egg? Could you nay find five minutes? Is it not ready to post?"

In the car Padraig's tone was always light, friendly and unassuming. His daytime moods made Egg





Way of the Infidel

think of an angler's float, colourful and bright, bobbing on some Irish brook under the willow trees, righted by the leaden shot of his night-time threats and sorrows.

"It's coming on, it's coming on . . ."

"I need it soon, Egg, I tell you. Can't take much more, you see." Padraig nodded at the long, sand-strewn, desert road ahead, the home straight. They were coming up behind an open pick-up truck, crammed with crouching Bangladeshi labourers, hoes and picks in hand, cowering from the sun, the wind and sand.

"I'd be much obliged, you know."

"It's coming on, Padraig. Don't you worry."

There was a roaring, a snarling of impatience from outside their car, a throttling up and slamming down through a manual gearbox, and from the hard shoulder a blue Dodge Charger catapulted by like some monstrous metal kingfisher, rocking the lightweight Corolla and its occupants, and not a moment later, on the driver's side, a green Camaro, a low-slung, squawking, monstrous parrot, slipped past so close their wing-mirrors kissed. The two cars raced a figure of eight around the tatty pick-up truck of Bangladeshis, and roared off into the desert.

By the fourth morning this week Padraig's gentle queries had turned to stout resolution. As the Corolla rattled to a stop in the car park, he hitched the handbrake and declared:

"You tell them I've had enough, Egg! I'm jackin' it in, I tell you! I'm jumpin' fuckin' ship! They'll have to fend for themfuckinselves without me carrying them no more."

An extra click on the handbrake ratchet made it clear to Egg that the Irishman was never going to let up.





“It’s coming on, it’s coming on . . .” would no longer do.

He’d racked his literary brains for any models he could copy for such a note but found nothing suitable. The authors and poets who’d committed suicide themselves, who might be trusted to make a good job of such a note – Hemingway, Woolf, Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Crane, Koestler, and others – had left nothing, not on the internet anyway, or notes that were quite unadaptable to Pdraig’s purposes.

As quietly as he could now, at one o’clock in the godforsaken morning, at the end of his second week, at the end of his tether, Egg moved his table to the narrower end of his quarters. He wedged it there, slightly buckling the shower unit, in order to spare his neighbour any disturbance through their shared wall, where the table had rested before. Whatever Pdraig brewed in his shower to knock himself out woke him up again feverish, raging, quite unappeasable, at any time of night, and Egg knew only too well that with the slightest abrasion against the fibreglass wall – if he accidentally rocked the table against it, or carelessly flicked off a shoe against it – the bullying Irishman, like some nocturnal troll or Mr Hyde, would thump angrily on the wall and shout through it – “Keep it down, Egg! Whatever are you about in there? At this time o’ night?” Another thump. “I’m coming over!” Though he’d never returned. “Will you nay go to sleep, Egg?” Another thump. “Let’s get some shut-eye! Classes tomorrow!” And Pdraig’s drunken shouts disturbed his new pet, a miniature, stumpy dog that had waddled into the compound at the weekend, immediately exciting the Irishman’s sentimentality – “Poor totty thang!” – and this neurotic animal, that was forever cowering from imaginary blows, then took a further five minutes





Way of the Infidel

coaxing to silence.

Egg lifted his chair, tucked himself into the table, and settled soundlessly in the very heel of his shoe-box cell, to the work Padraig had assigned him.

'My dearest wife and daughter. It is with much regret I must confess to you that I have decided, in all honour and honesty, that I must take my own –'

Egg crumpled up yet another sheet he'd wasted on the Irishman and threw it as violently as he dared to the floor.

But then he sat still.

Rigid.

Not a sound, except the white-noise of the air-conditioner.

At last, he had it.

Of course!

The note could be *fictional* – borrowed, stolen, plagiarised. Thomas Hardy, bless him, a morbid fellow at the best of times, had already done the job for him. From memory Egg picked out the final testament of Michael Henchard, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and in a fever of excitement adjusted it thus, allowing Padraig's own voice and thoughts to imbue the Mayor's lines with fresh despair:





David Milnes

To His Wife & Daughter!

After much prevarication and
procrastination, and for the reasons set out below,
namely:
 that there is no happiness, pleasure or
peace of mind in my existence;
 that work is drudgery and the very blight
of life;
 that I am drinking myself to death
anyway;
 that there is no prospect of carnal pleasure
in the remainder of my days;
 above all that you have stolen from me
my savings and thereby all prospect of hope,
pleasure and reprieve;
 that I do not care about the new life
you have begotten because it was begat without
thought;
 and it was begat without understanding of
how it could be paid for;
 and it was begat without respect for me
and my life and my hopes and desires;
 and it was begat without paying any bills
at all – I have paid all its bills, all bills, already;
 and it was begat without a father who'll
nurture and support it anyway.

And for all these reasons I quit my life
and I owe you nothing;

no apology at all;

you fend for yourselves now; earn your
own way; pay your own way;





Way of the Infidel

you who owe me everything, but have
nothing to pay me with – not even, wife, your
body, which I hereby reject, as you have always
rejected mine.

And I blame you both for everything.

And let no man remember me.

Signed this day by,

Padraig Stanley McGuire

Fare thee well.





Chapter Two

The Affairs of Men

In the stiff way Ebrahim stood before the dusty venetian blind, closed against the desert sun, there was a detachment that denoted vanity and ambition. Only slits of light broke through behind him, under his control. He was a tall, slim, elegant, serious young gentleman in a dark and expensive three-piece suit, quite out of place in this disused office on the ground floor.

Yussif, the only other person in the room, altogether lacked Ebrahim's vanity and ambition. Bald and short, round-shouldered and middle-aged, he had settled in life, rolled into his own cup or pit or dent, as it were. A few months ago he spoke as the supplicant at these meetings, asking young Ebrahim to lay his bets and paying handsomely for the privilege, win or lose. But not any more. There was a new bond between them, and it held these very different men fast together, in a closed conspiracy and brotherhood.

That bond was insider-dealing.

Though this was originally Yussif's idea, at every





Way of the Infidel

opportunity young Ebrahim tried to steal credit for it – “*When we first came up with this idea . . . I’ve been thinking over our idea . . . I’ve reconsidered my idea . . .*” For Yussif it was too tedious to correct the Englishman. He wore you down. Never underestimate the pettiness of this young man, he forever told himself. Yussif had been surrounded by tedious, pretentious and petty Englishmen his whole career, but without doubt young Ebrahim, for all his Arabist pretences, was the worst, the pettiest and most tedious.

It was also Yussif’s idea that they rendezvous either in public places, where information could be exchanged unsuspectingly on a piece of paper, or private places, such as this disused office, when open discussion could not be avoided. But Ebrahim always arrived at these appointments early and pretended Yussif came at his behest. “Ah, there you are . . .” They’d never met in this office before but Ebrahim had been standing there behind the dusty desk, tapping his Tissot watch, when Yussif arrived at exactly the time arranged. “Ah, there you are . . .”

“I want to get on, you see, Yussif,” Ebrahim often remarked, whether pushing forward the meeting or his weighty bets. He spoke incessantly of making his first million from Yussif’s clever ideas, whereas for Yussif, a humble Muslim, any gains would fund his children’s education, nothing more than that; he would risk only what was necessary for their sake.

“Are you in, or are you out, Yussif?”

Yussif frowned, said nothing. Ebrahim was always so terse, matter of fact and to the point, so *pushy*, and here he was reasserting himself as syndicate member – the one who could actually place their bets, his old





leverage. Now he thrust a printout across the desk in a dramatic way, demanding a decision.

Yussif parked his short bulk sideways on the desk, ignoring the dust, and leaving his scuffed, family man's toe-caps dangling two feet from the floor.

The printout was a colourful spreadsheet, A4 Landscape, setting out bets in a minute font for the current week and weekend: straight bets, lay-off bets, multiplier bets, each with its variable odds, day by day, and some even hour by hour, placed on when a tribe, or *squad*, as Ebrahim preferred to call them – Qarra, Rashid, Manahil, Danakil – would dispatch a particular infidel: *Almawt lil kafir! Death to the infidel!* The infidels' names were corralled into the merged cells at the bottom, as if stacked in crates on top of one another.

One name didn't share a cell, and was ticked in red felt tip.

Padraig McGuire. The Irishman. Cell K.

"If your Paddy doesn't do the coup de grâce by *Thursday*," Ebrahim warned, stroking his slender fingertip along the spreadsheet, "the window closes. Simple as that." He spoke as a man absolutely certain of his information. "I say one of the squads will have him next week. Look here. Look at the stakes today. And tomorrow. And Tuesday. If he doesn't go this week, confidence in his suicide will evaporate and he'll be deemed a spineless coward. Stakes will shift to the Rashid or Danakil taking him out for a ride next week – it's already happening – look at these bets – look here and here. Look at this row of Xs all week – that's ten thousand on him *not* doing it this week at all! There's even one thousand on him never committing suicide – but that's a crazy bet. Odds are rising on some of the





others too. On Old Johnson, look, and Raymond Athill, and Lutyens, all of whom will probably kill themselves in due course – no one’s arguing with that – but none of whom is a *genuine* suicide bet right now. Not like Pdraig. Faked – yes, of course – but not *genuine*. The real deal.”

There was a pause.

At last Yussif spoke.

“Not even Old Johnson?”

“Not even Old Johnson.” But Ebrahim sighed and shook his head, eyes still down on the sheet, “Well, all right. Old Johnson maybe. *Maybe*. Who knows? But not one of them is an obvious candidate in the way Paddy is right now. He’s in quite a state. And when he does it – *Bank’s zero*, Yussif, remember! Winner takes all on a genuine suicide – every single stake. Remember that. *We* take all, Yussif, if we nail the time right – if *you* nail the time right. Not one other infidel is clinically diagnosed suicidal. Only Paddy. So this is our chance. The Big One. There will be other chances, no doubt, in due course, as I say – ” he looked up from the sheet at last; it had served its purpose – “as each gives in to deprivation, dissolution, despair – the three Ds, so to speak, as the desert does its damage. Four D’s. Five D’s. Of course. But at the moment, Paddy is our only genuine suicide ticket. And he’s going to do it damn soon. No two ways about that. We must seize this chance, Yussif. We must *seize* it, Yussif, I tell you!”

“Never Lutyens. His fate is sealed elsewhere.”

“Yussif! At least one team will drop out over the weekend, then multipliers will shrink and we’ll lose a fortune. He must go by Thursday. My friend says it *has* to be this week.”





Yussif screwed up his eyes at the rows of dates and squads and the enormous sums dangling invisibly behind them.

“Fix it, Yussif. Thursday is best. That’s the tipping point. If you get it within an hour, I’m forever in your debt. Within ten minutes, and I tell you frankly – our fortunes are made. Literally. With these multipliers, our fortunes are made. *Bank’s zero!* Winner takes all! I sometimes wonder if we shouldn’t break our enterprise to the coroner. Fix that too.”

“Out of the question.” Yussif waved a dismissal. “Now, you say at least one team will drop out at the weekend. Why?”

Ebrahim sighed. The question was irrelevant. A staller. “The usual thing, Yussif. Lost too much at the casino, can’t cover the stake, squad is lame for some reason, or someone lied about his funds – not uncommon. There’s always a narrowing of the field, and that will be our loss.”

In the manner of these secret meetings, it was Yussif’s turn to play his hand.

“Look here.” He straightened his short back, puffed up his bulk on the edge of the desk. “Suppose I were to tell you that I have information that could put this man – ” he waved the Irishman to safety – “Padraig McGuire, back on a plane to London or Belfast tonight, this very night, or tomorrow night, or whenever I wanted to dispatch him. Same result, after all. One that got away. Flew the coop. He doesn’t have to die at all.”

Ebrahim frowned, lifted his long chin. This was a disappointing response, to say the least.

“Excuse me, Yussif . . . ” Ebrahim’s impatience strengthened; he braced his own straight back. “Our





Way of the Infidel

Royal Lancasters – ” Ebrahim always referred to his masters at The Royal Lancaster Hotel, Westminster, as a fighting regiment “ – don’t want Padraig McGuire, Esquire, or any infidel they hired, to ‘fly the coop’, as you say. There’s no sport in that. For the Lancasters the result must be terminal, every time. No one’s flying any coop here, Yussif. It’s a clay pigeon shoot. These infidel were chosen for a reason. A purpose. They are special. An elite squad, if you will.” He laughed at that, but Yussif kept his head down. “And with a shared mission – to enrich the syndicate, and you and I in particular, of course.” He laughed again.

“You and me, you mean.”

“You know what these Royal Lancasters are like, Yussif. They are not real Muslims at all, like you and I.”

“You and me, you mean.”

Yussif looked up at Ebrahim now, and Ebrahim looked down at Yussif. Ebrahim’s smug smile made his upper lip disappear beneath his light, pubescent moustache. The smile was an invitation to share a moment of sentiment between compatriots. But Ebrahim was the son of successful Egyptian estate agents in Royal Leamington Spa – *Royal Leamington Spa*, Warwickshire; and, The *Royal Lancaster Hotel*, Westminster – Ebrahim always gave these names due fealty. He was an Englishman through and through. To Yussif he was no more an Egyptian or a Muslim than the doomed Irishman on the sheet. He was just another petty English hypocrite trying to get out of earning an honest living, like so many bourgeois, opportunist Englishmen he’d met in the desert.

Ebrahim continued casually now, winding things up, assuming Yussif’s concurrence. “That fat Aussie of





yours raised the stakes, you see.” He chuckled. “Fancy driving so deep into The Empty Quarter, and at midday too! What a silly fellow! If you’d stayed with me on that one, as I told you to, you’d have made yourself a pretty penny, Yussif. The Danakil are the best in the desert, bar none. They *know* the desert. Know where to take them. They are Assaaimara, you see, not Adaaimara.” With this point scored, he returned to his theme. “For any of these infidel to go home, Yussif, having taken so much of Allah’s gold – well, this doesn’t sit right with our Royal Lancasters. They’ll only bet on a one-way ticket, every time.”

Yussif stared down again at the spreadsheet.

“Let me think.”

He knitted his hands and hung his blunt, bald head, his blunt moustache, in deep thought.

“Well, you haven’t got long,” pressed Ebrahim. “. . . the odds will slip Thursday midday, and they use the western clock, not ours, so . . .”

Ebrahim was so *damn* pushy! Yussif raised two questions, one each on the forefinger and index finger of his swarthy left hand.

“I have to know two things.”

“No harm in asking, Yussif.”

“Firstly, how do I *know* I’ll get my third?”

Confusingly, Ebrahim closed his eyes and nodded while replying in the negative. “You don’t.” He opened his eyes. “You can’t. Trust is our bond, Yussif. Nothing else. But look at it from the point of view of my friend in London. After this he can only make one more bet himself. He could never do three wins in two months. The Lancasters would kill him. No questions asked. Therefore, that second bet has to be The Big One.”





Way of the Infidel

There was a boyish relish in Ebrahim's cryptic, gangster-gambler idioms, his movie-speak – *Are you in or are you out? . . . One-way ticket . . . Elite squad . . . Bank's zero . . . The Big One . . .* that Yussif found disheartening, depressing.

He said nothing.

There was another sigh from Ebrahim, which might have provoked Yussif's decision: he hung his head again.

"I'm out."

Ebrahim's long face sagged.

"I'm not interested," Yussif declared his hand. "Not yet. It's still not right. Later, maybe, on different terms. Better for me. More than one third. I'm doing the donkey-work here. The dirty work."

After a pause to absorb his defeat, Ebrahim said: "Very well . . . I will apprise the professor."

"*Apprise the professor!*" Yussif jeered. "What kind of talk is that? Who is this *professor*?"

"Sorry, Yussif," Ebrahim replied, reverting to his superior tones. "Need-to-know basis only. However, if you change your mind, his identity will be divulged."

"Bah! . . . Tell me one other thing."

Ebrahim took up his colourful spreadsheet, his lost cause, from the dusty table. "No harm in asking, Yussif," he repeated, "I suppose."

"The new fellow. Funny name. Egg Taylor. There's no stake on him yet. Why not?"

"There will be soon, never fear . . . and . . . there's no stake on you either, Yussif."

"*What?*" Yussif scowled. "You're joking, of course!"

"Am I?"





David Milnes

“I’m no *infidel!*”

“Never trust these Lancasters more than you have to, Yussif. That’s my call. They have been away a long, long time. They are all addicts now. Addicts to the casinos, to white whores, to alcohol, to London. They will never come back. They are infidel themselves in all but name.” He stopped and smiled. “Think of the Eskimos, Yussif. We gave them drink and they were ruined.” He folded the spreadsheet into a tight square and tucked it into his waistcoat pocket. “And please remember, Yussif – *There is a tide in the affairs of men* – ” Ebrahim had a schoolboy’s pocket book of quotes from Shakespeare and others that he’d conned to impress, residua from his private education in Royal Leamington Spa. “. . . *Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune . . .*” He stumbled to remember the next lines but passed over the fault with a dramatic intake of breath, and then he had them –

*Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

