

A light gray silhouette of a city skyline featuring several domes and minarets, with a large crescent moon positioned in the upper center. The skyline is set against a white background.

An eye for an eye

We flee across the border. Sand djinn scratch against the car windows. The Al Shemal storm wails after us. Cramped in the well behind the driver seat, I am covered by an oily blanket, trying to scrawl this last note to you. My head throbs from the petrol fumes and my ribs ache as we jolt over the hard, rocky desert. Patrick swears at the thick road ahead; and at the road we can't see behind, the dark shadows that must pursue us. I cannot bear to think that the truth will be buried beneath the surly, thirsty dunes.

The cold metal of Laila's small gun presses against my hipbone, through my pocket.



A grey silhouette of a city skyline featuring several domes and minarets, with a large crescent moon positioned in the upper center. Below the skyline, the word "one" is written in a simple, lowercase, sans-serif font.

one

Every line of my palms and fingers is digitally captured. A veiled official snatches my passport. She pushes me into a booth, 'Asrèèe.' I am blood typed, blood tested, X-rayed, measured, weighed, prodded, examined for all sorts of infectious and sexual diseases, even tested to see if I am pregnant. I can't fight it, the heat, humidity, and all these needles. A nurse warns me that if I am found pregnant or have TB or HIV, it will mean instantaneous deportation, no appeal. All I can taste is dust, red dust. It coats me.

The official returns with my passport stamped. The stamp permits me to work; it also forbids me to leave for six months, 'Yanni, no turning back now, Miss Aisling.'

I'm used to the Ryanair lifestyle, coming and going as I please across Europe, like a kittiwake on the current. There, beneath our unclipped wings, borders barely exist. Now I am fenced into the desert with digital, medical and actual barbed wire.

The official hustles me around the Immigration Processing Centre, jumping the queues of sullen, male, immigrant workers. I lower my eyes from their cursing stares. Hundreds of forms



are pushed at me to sign, none of which I understand, as I'm not allowed to look at them and anyway they are in Arabic.

'Sign, sign,' snaps the official, as she hurries me from one desk to another.

At once I appreciate those rights we have at home, that I've never thought about much before. Suddenly they are all gone, with a stamp.

Finally, the day's barbarities are over; the porcelain blue skin of my right arm is blackened with bruises. I am pushed out into the velvet heat. My eyes are drawn to the Arabic moon; full heavy gold, it barely holds itself above the dark horizon of the Bay. Mesmerised, for a moment I melt away from the noise and hustle of the centre into the inky sky, the night that promises ancient dreams.

No one is here to meet me. I look about for a taxi to take me to my hotel but I can't find one. I watch lines of dazed young Indian men in drab overalls line up at the health check queue. One bony body pressed against another. Whole villages. No one speaks; all cower before the formidable immigration officials, guns in holsters at their waists. I am unnerved, my white skin is too luminous. And I am the only woman in the crowd.

I don't know where to turn, where to go next. I am jostled a few paces deeper into the crowd. Bladed elbows jab my ribs, my toe is stubbed against a heavy boot. I gasp for air, my flesh is clammy and strands of hair stick across my face, catching in my eyes. A hand grips my wrist and pulls at me.

'*Yallah!*' A gruff male voice at my ear.

I cannot see his face; he is twisted away from me. He gives me another sharp tug.

A twinkling point catches my attention and above the crowd a Liverpudlian shriek, 'Straight off the plane and already swanning



off with a local. I'm goin to 'av to watch you'se.' A set of zebra striped nails slap away the dark hand grasping still at my wrist. 'Ee, kiddo, don't mind them, women are liquid gold here; you'll soon learn to zone it out.'

I am acutely aware of the dark, brooding eyes watching this spectacle. I try to see where the man who grabbed me has gone, but he has disappeared into the mass. His grip was so insistent I can still see the mark of his thumb on my wrist.

'I'm Angie, welcome to the desert.' Angie is resplendent in hair extensions and killer heels, 'Sorry I'm late, the traffic is mad tonight. Come on, kid, there's a bottle of vino collapso with your name on it waiting for us.'

We hop into her startling siren-pink Land Cruiser.

'What do you do at the Health Board?'

'Nurse training.'

'So, have you been here long, Angie?'

'About a year in these parts, but it must be five years now since I came to the Gulf. Was only meant to be for a weekend of retail and cocktails, when that prick of a husband of mine ran off wiv me sister. I just ripped up me return ticket, and I'm still 'ere, gerrin' a tan and lookin' for a Sheikh.'

Neons scream past us at hyper speed as we drive down the airport highway. I can't see anything of the city beyond the dazzling headlamps.

'How do you like it?' I ask Angie.

'I know three roads – the road to work, to the airport, and best of all, the road to the bar, hon. And that's all you need.'

It's to the bar where we are heading now, which Angie says is known as the 'airport lounge', as everyone goes there first for a drink whenever they arrive, 'And before they leave, if they're lucky.' Angie laughs.



‘Dickead!’ Angie swerves sharply, narrowly missing another Land Cruiser in the left-hand lane as a Ferrari bears down on us from the right. I cling to my seat belt. ‘Friday night, prayers are over. Look at ‘em go. It’s like the Grand Prix.’ Angie flicks her talons at the sports cars and Land Cruisers racing past, one so fast that as it takes a corner it tips on two wheels. ‘Just last week, me mate Mick had his jeep written off in a pile-up on the airport road, and his pelvis is a write-off too.’

‘That’s terrible. What happened?’

‘Fifteen-year old local in a Hummer, completely stoned, but no action will be taken against him. After all, no good Muslim boy drinks and there ain’t no drugs in the desert.’

We pull off the highway and enter a small dusty compound of low-rise concrete boxes. A battered sign over the nearest door reads ‘Heather’s Scottish Club and Coffee Shop’. Balding and paunchy middle-aged British men are queuing, handing over bank notes to enter. Angie’s arrival provokes a storm of wolf whistles; she gives an appreciative wiggle and we totter past. Inside, it’s all sticky surfaces and choking smoke. The main saloon is almost entirely male, and I feel myself take a step back into a time warp as we walk in. In Dublin, the bars these days seem to be mostly female territory, all wine glasses and wasabi nuts. I don’t know where all the men have gone.

Angie has her spot by the bar and a crowd of rough-diamond admirers are lining up drinks for us both, starting with a bottle of Jameson, in tribute to my homeland. Accents from all over the north of England and Scotland boom around me. Perhaps it’s the long journey, different time zone, the smoke, the whiskey, but in this muddling noise I can barely make out a word anyone is saying. Mostly the conversation snatches I catch seem to be about football



and stories of nights on the lash. I tune out. I want Scheherazade's tales, enchantment.

'He won't be seen alive again, poor sod.' I tune back in, listen to a man talking to Angie. He says a British national has been detained, accused of industrial espionage. He has broken his contract with the national airline early to take a new senior post in a rival airliner. His Royal hosts, owners of the airline, do not approve. Now, they are my Royal hosts too, as they are the patrons of the National Health Board. 'The wife's desperate, no one will tell her where he's being held. All she knows is he's in solitary confinement, somewhere out there.'

I see him, huddled, sweating in the corner of a small, dusty cell.

Mammy, maybe you were right. When I told Mammy a couple of months ago that I'd got a job in the desert she completely lost it. She would rather I had set my sights on the familiar tracks of America. I have a brother, Danny, in Detroit. But there's no work there. Great cities across the Western world have ground to a halt. Danny has lost his job and is even thinking of coming home. He has a notion of being self-sufficient, growing potatoes and all that. He's forgotten the Irish winters after all these years.

'The Middle East though, Aisling, women are covered up there. It's a male society, traditional, and there's them religious fanatics, bombings.' Mammy exploded the cutlery on the kitchen table. I'd put this conversation off all week until after Mass, when I thought she might be more serene. Some hope.

'And where do we live? Mammy, look back twenty years ago. Anyway, the Middle East is quiet enough these days. See these brochures of all the new cities, it's real opulent, the future, Mammy.'

'You go now Aisling, and you're lost to me.'

'Woman, let her go, will ya.' Granddaddy roared from his chair by the stove, 'I remember when I was a young' un my mother,



and her mother before her, were always covered from head to toe in black. My mother was a clever woman, but she was dead behind the eyes from peeling spuds all day. We had our own Taliban, those fecking Christian Brothers'. Mammy chiseled the Sunday roast in the tin to within an inch of its life. 'Our young 'uns need to travel, mix, change the world. Feck, look at that wee Polish girlie in the chipper. She's a good girlie, gives all the fellas round here a little bit extra fish, and a little bit extra with it!'

'Grandaddy!'

So this morning I was packed off with a box of Bewley's best and prayers to St. Jude, of Hopeless Causes.

One of Angie's admirers, Jimmy, an oil rig worker, half hanging-off a bar stool, lurches his gut towards me and clamps a bulbous red hand on my shoulder, 'So what's a wee Irish girlie like you doing here, if ye donna mind me asking?'

'Ah, she's here because she's the Prof's bit of stuff,' Angie cackles.

'Don't be telling me yer here after one of them dreamy-eyed Sheikhs, coz I'm telling ye now they're all shysters.'

'Ee, don't look so mortified,' Angie says, 'I'm only joking, but you do know that's what the Arabs will think, don't you? Probably most of the expats in the office too. We all know you've worked with the Prof before.'

'But he's married.' This causes a gale of laughter.

'Aren't we all lassie, doesn't stop me having a Chinese takeaway tonight though does it?' Jimmy leers. Angie sees the bewildered look on my face and points to two small Chinese women, dressed in leopard-print leggings and silky camisoles, sat at the far side of the bar with a portly older woman, pin-thin eyebrows. 'Sweet young girlies like you don't come out here all alone, no husband or



boyfriend in tow. Most of the women out here, expat women, are sunny mummies. You are a rarity, kid.'

'Ay, so why are you here young Aisling? Debt or an ex? Why on earth else would anyone come to this God-forsaken hellhole?' Jimmy asks.

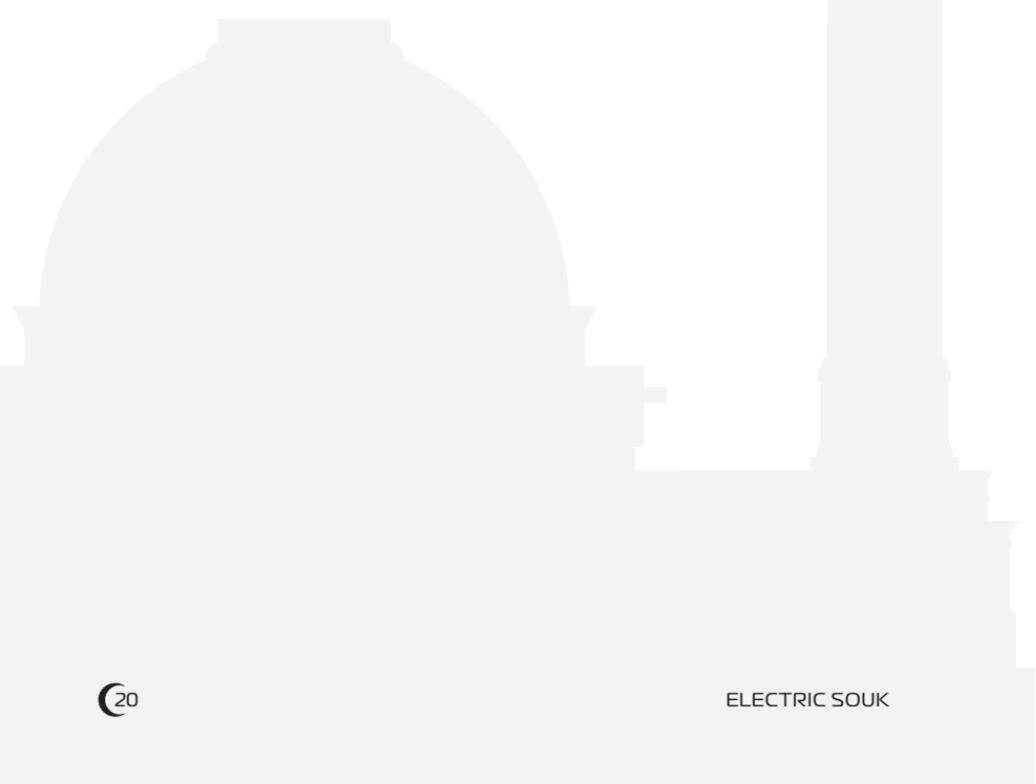
'Ireland's gone bust. I was laid off from the hospital where I worked.'

'Jeez, isn't that everyone's story now?' Jimmy rumbles into his beer.

No more questions, I breathe. A drop of whiskey from my glass glides along my finger, tracing the lines of my palm. I had walked out of the Mater hospital the day they gave me my official notice and over to the bar, ordered a tot, knocked it back. My mobile had buzzed. I'd looked at it, ordered another; but the barman must have misheard me and brought me a gin. I couldn't drink it; my hands were shaking too much. *Mother's ruin*, that's what it's called, isn't it? I left it on the bar. I walked down to the Royal Canal, looked at a pram half submerged in the murk. It couldn't be the usual shopping trolley could it, not that day of all days? My stomach had cramped hard, I'd had to turn away. Looked again at *his* text, 'Take care of yourself, Ash.' Take care of yourself. Was that it, after ten years? Four little words. And how perfectly timed; no job, no fiancé, no ... I hadn't been able to form the word in my mouth, those two precious tiny syllables. I'd leant against the rail on the bridge. A splash on the face of the phone. Another. The bitter wind pinched my fingers. Numb. Barely a ripple as my phone sank. Shite, I didn't feel it slip.

The smoke thickens into smog, men curse, dribble in their pints and slobber periodically over Angie. In a corner a card game seems to be getting out of hand and a scuffle breaks out. Glass

splinters across the floor. Before I came here my dreams were of mystical figures riding stallions with silvery manes across the dunes. Through a window I just catch the last golden glow as the moon slides beneath the oiliness of the Bay.





two

I give in to the urge to steady myself, and lean against a cool white wall. It's forty degrees, even the two minute walk from the car to the building foyer has grilled me. Back home the September leaves will be flushed with a russet rash, and Granddaddy will be piling up the turf ready for the winter.

Only half awake yet, my head is sore from last night's welcome at Heather's and the day starts early here. My first day in my new job. Six o'clock and I'm inside a contorting Rubik's cube. My new office is an old marble palace, slightly dishevelled by the standards of the new, thrusting glass shard buildings being forged all over the city. Some time ago the palace became an apartment block and each floor was divided into a warren of flats, winding off long, dark corridors. Coming up in the lifts it is difficult to orient yourself. Each snap of the cube, each turn along a hallway, leads to a different endpoint.

Angie finds me and leads me into a huge office where Joe, my new office mate is sitting at one of the desks, tapping away at a computer, whilst simultaneously obsessively wiping the desk about him with a tissue. Joe looks like an angel fallen to earth and tumbled in a bush.



'Tea, tea?' A small, thin elderly Indian man with a broken toothy grin hurries in behind us.

'Miss Aisling, meet Abdullah, our tea boy. Would you like some tea? Any time you do, just ring this bell,' Joe says, pointing to a switch on the wall.

'You're joking me?'

'No, I'm not. Each flat has its own tea boy. Granted 'tea boy' doesn't seem quite the right description for Abdullah, he must be ninety.'

'I'm really not sure that I can ring a bell and expect someone to come running to bring me tea, it seems so ...'

'Coffee?' By now Abdullah who had shuffled out of the office during this exchange has returned with a small, piping hot glass of a murky, sludge-yellow liquid. He offers it to me, 'Marhabaan bik.'

'Oh, thank you, shukran, but I don't drink coffee.' He hands me the coffee anyway.

'You'll have to get to like it. You'll be drinking at least a dozen cups of this a day,' says Joe.

'Everyone you meet with will insist you drink a cup and won't start a meeting until you do. It's all about the hospitality.'

I try to sip, but it is nuclear hot. The taste is not unpleasant, slightly nutty, and maybe menthol even. It catches at the back of the throat, quite unlike anything I have tasted before.

'*Yanni*, there you are. Miss Aisling Finn?' I start at the sharp, strangely mottled French, Arabic, trans-Atlantic accent. 'Jez, mad Mozah, that's all you need' Angie mutters. Two fully veiled women and a tall, droopy looking man in a long white thawb enter the office. They move like eels. Behind them slinks a woman with an insolent air. She is chewing gum; her pneumatic figure just about restrained by a tight vest top and ripped jeans, all barely hidden by her flapping open abaya. Joe's face flashes boiled sweet cerise as he



scrubs intently at his desk, eyes down. She pouts her fulsome lips, leans against Joe's desk, her tamarind eyes spiking, 'You are quiet today Mr Joe, no kiss for Miss Mozah?' Joe mumbles something, grabs a file from his desk and shoots out the office, tripping over his own feet. Mozah laughs after him, 'Live, there is only one life.'

Angie coughs her disapproval. Mozah flicks her a look and turns to me, 'Shufi, Miss Aisling, you need to come with us for official processing.'

'I've done all that, haven't I?' I soothe the indigo bruises, still darkening on my arm. Joe and Angie laugh.

'You'll learn.'



Five hours later and I'm faint from thirst. Mozah has pulled me from one office to another. She does not think twice about personal space; no civil requests to follow, move here, sit there please. I am just manhandled expertly into place. Cameras flash in my eyes for my Resident's Permit, my staff ID, this record, that record. A couple of spivs from the government bank sidle up, dressed in Mafiosi suits, gold chains and dark shades. I know the procedure now, just sign. I do. One hands me a card, 'Miss Finn, if you need anything, just call me. Any time, really any time. Even at midnight. Yes, call me at midnight. I will come to you then.' Mozah snatches the card from my hand and throws it in the bin.

'Your business here is finished.'

'Ah now Mozah, you are not so shy in Beirut. Let's party tonight.'

'In your dreams,'

'Always, baby, always.'

Mozah has pushed me to the door during this exchange. One prod and we are in the corridor. She turns, letting the hood of her



abaya slip and tossing her purple streaked curls. The look over her shoulder to the spivs is long enough.

‘See you at the Celestine, *chéri*,’ one calls after us. Mozah whistles low under her breath for a second.

‘*Hallas*, enough for today. I will call you a driver to take you back to your hotel.’ She arranges the driver and leaves me waiting in the foyer. She has made no attempt to hide her irritation at having to babysit me all day and is eager to be done with me, and elsewhere. As she walks away her mobile rings, she ignores my thanks and goodbye. It’s home time and I watch as streams of fully veiled women, like black magnolia buds, leave the building and find their drivers, all in white Land Cruisers. The pick-up area is tight and countless spats take place as cars scrape each other and the women scream and slap at their Indian drivers. How will I spot my driver in this pixelating scene? My eyes blur. I need water. Mozah’s voice pierces above the din. She is biting her words and jabbing at some unseen foe. She flings her phone in her tote bag and turns back to me.

‘La, la, Miss Aisling, you look sad. *Yanni*, sweetie, no need. You miss your home. Come, let’s go shopping.’ She tweaks my cheek and blows a gum bubble.

Long hours of shoe shopping in the ice-cold mall follow, trying on impossible teetering stilettos, adorned with diamante bows and ankle fringes. Several maids drag around after us, carrying Mozah’s ever-increasing number of bags. Mozah does not take a breath, ‘Those girls in the Professor’s office, you know what they do all day? *Mafi, mafi*. That one, Fatima, she’s always late, says her baby is sick. Pah! She’s lazy. She stays in the mall late, late at night. Shopping, always shopping. I speak Arabic, English, and French. I have a certificate from the American International Global College of Commerce, Kansas. *Yanni*, tell me, why does the Professor not



take me in his office? You think I would be a better secretary for him, *yanni*?’

My ears bleed. We stop for mint lemonade at a cafe; it is so sweet my teeth pinch. Mozah wraps her long fingers around my wrist, ‘Miss Aisling, you move out from your hotel this week? You cannot live alone in this country. It’s not proper. In Beirut, New York, Paris, yes, I can live with my girlfriends in a condo, but here I must live with my family. You will be my sister. Come, I have room in my villa and you’ll have your own maid. The Prof will be very happy. I will look after you for him.’

More than my teeth pinch.

After the café, we go to the Electric Souk in search of an illegal mobile phone trader. Mozah insisted we come here to get me a mobile, although the Board is meant to be supplying one. ‘La, la, no one will give you a mobile, they are playing with you only. Fill this form, fill that form, your phone come tomorrow, then tomorrow, then next week. *Inshallah*.’ Mozah explains that we need to get my phone in the souk as none of the mobile shops will sell expats a SIM card without official paperwork and CID clearance.

I imagined the souk would be a warren of alleys, where merchants in red fez would proffer trays of tarnishing silver trinkets and I would glimpse dark, kohl eyes through an upper floor lattice window. I want to hear a drum or a lute. Instead, the Electric Souk is a vast warehouse, packed with a central ring of corrugated iron booths, where traders sell every kind of hand-sized gadget, from electric toothbrushes to mini DVD players. Young boys in thawbs jump around these booths, arguing over the merits of each beeping, flashing must-have device. The outer ring of the warehouse accommodates boxy shops, piled high with white goods, wrapped and bound in strips of plastic. The men stand



about the shops, rubbing their beards, chewing *khat* together and occasionally directing a clip about an ear to a particularly bouncy youngster.

‘That’s our beloved *Maleka’s* - the Queen’s - private hospital.’ Mozah points through the doorway to a shiny building across the road. ‘She’s a great business woman. She’s going to open some community clinics next, private, *yanni*.’

‘Really, you sure? Hasn’t His Highness declared that all the community clinics should be free to everyone, no need for private health care anymore?’ This is why I am here after all, to work on His Highness’s great healthcare reforms. Mozah smiles, ‘There will never be any free clinics, watch.’ She taps a finger to her right eye.

‘*Shufi*, here’s Raschid.’ Mozah sweeps us to a dull corner, where a wily looking man with a heavy satchel is shifting from foot to foot, half-hidden behind a stack of microwave ovens. ‘Raschid, *Salaam-Alaikum*,’ Mozah greets him with a flourish of jangling arms, heavy with gold bangles.

He returns the greeting with a mumble, and a scowl, ‘*Alaikum Salaam*.’

‘*Kaifa haluka?*’

‘*Alhamdulillah*.’ The greeting over and the mobile phone flutters from Raschid’s hands to Mozah’s, ‘SIM, you stupid man, we need a SIM,’ Mozah demands. Raschid mumbles something.

‘What’s he saying?’

‘Oh *mafi miscallah*, nothing.’

‘He doesn’t look too happy about this.’

‘He’s never happy, he’s from Syria, no visa.’

Raschid is looking at me in a way that makes my skin prickle; I turn my back to him. Mozah continues talking. ‘He wants more money for the SIM, and he should know to just give me it, no arguments, I work for the Government.’ The SIM card is handed



over for the agreed sum. Raschid hands some papers to Mozah to sign, more mumbling.

Mozah flares, ‘*Akh Fariq*.’ She slaps her hands together, in opposite directions as if brushing dust from them. Raschid spits.

‘*Akh Fariq*? What’s that mean?’

‘La, la, no, you must never use that name. No, forget you heard it. Come, we go look for some bags now.’

I look back to see Raschid scuttle out the souk and immediately into a black Hummer pulling up fast, windows dark.