

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 said he'd tried his damndest to write it himself, 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, Padraig?" 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" 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 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 workstation 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 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 broken down cottage outside town, life would be 'far too difficult' without a 'wee car'.

Oh, would it! – Pádraig 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 Pádraig at home to tinker with it all weekend, in the pouring rain, when it didn't 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, Pádraig. You're like some terrible old King Lear, ranting at his daughters in the storm."

"Don't you go citing your Shakespeare at me!" Pádraig 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!" Pádraig 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' newbie-come-lately! You fuckin' 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 shower unit.

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

At this question, Pdraig’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 Pdraig’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 Pdraig’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.