

## CHAPTER 1

### *Into the Land of “Insha’Allah, no problem”*

The morning of the first full day of Ramadan at 8:10 a.m., I stood for the second time in front of a door marked “Women’s Toilet.” *This* was a classroom? And *my* classroom?

Excited to get to my first hour teaching at United Arab Emirates University, I’d given myself ample time to find my schoolroom. Now I was ten minutes late. I’d lost another ten trudging in from the gate where my ride had been obliged to drop me—taxis, their drivers being uniformly men and non-Emiratis, were barred from the “girls” campus. The only males allowed to enter were professors, some of us Western expats, and South Asian laborers, neither of these classes deemed men in the UAE.

Other than what I’d determined from a Xeroxed map, the layout was unfamiliar. New-faculty orientation had omitted visits to any of UAEU’s facilities, including its famed Islamic Center. When several in my cohort pointed this out to the dean, an affable white-haired Canadian, he had commandeered a van and escorted us on a personal tour. We’d done no more than cruise by the female campus here at Maqam. At the sight of its high perimeter masonry wall topped with barbed wire, I had asked whom the high security was meant to keep out. The answer I anticipated was “terrorists.” But the dean let out a peculiar laugh. “It’s not to keep anyone *out!* It’s to keep the girls *in!*”

Now that I was behind the wire, I looked around for signs of the activities that would motivate young women to flee. There seemed to be no activity at all. The morning sun was already brutal, the temperature nudging 100°F. My search for Building 66 took me past a few structures in generic cement-block architecture, access roads and concrete sidewalks. I identified the highest thing around, a flagpole from which the UAE’s green-black-white-red banner waved. This would logically be the center. From there, I could spot one of the major buildings identifiable on my map and orient. A big bluish one.

I confirmed what was typed on the other paper I clutched: *Building 66. Room 04.*

Standing at the base of the pole, I turned a slow circle, scanning the buildings. No quads. No lawns. A few stunted trees. I can't recall now what I had pictured as the women's campus of the United Arab Emirates national university. But I'm sure it wasn't this. The place looked less like a place to study than an old, nondescript corporate office park. This was my refuge from the wreckage of the life I'd fled back in Cleveland?

Doors on distant buildings opened and young women streamed out, clad head to toe in black. I checked my watch. Seven fifty-three. So, those buildings were the dorms the map identified. Building 71 was in front of me. That put Building 66 to my right, a distance of maybe a hundred yards.

As I turned to hurry off in that direction, something in my peripheral vision pulled me up short. Stepping through a door in the wooden construction fence behind Building 66, amid the rolling waves of girls in black, a flash of color. I turned back and squinted against the glare—I was facing east and the sun was still low. Yes, one of the dozens of women streaming out of the dormitories like flocks of starlings stood out in dramatic chromatic relief. She wore the traditional *sheyla*, but not in black -- in flaming, flamboyant, flamingo pink.

The mystery was arresting and kindled a sense that the uniformity of my new work environment might not be so uniform after all. But that would have to be filed for later contemplation. I was due at Building 66. Room 04, which turned out to be—or at least so identified by its sign—a women's toilet.

First reaction: panic. Was I, a freshman member of the faculty, about to make a fool of myself and reveal that I was so stupid I couldn't find my classroom? I scampered, sweat pouring from my head, my shirt soaked, around all three floors of Building 66, scrutinizing the number above every door. Which brought me back, even more anxious, to Room 04, Women's Toilet.

I noticed that three young women stood nearby, uniformly attired and looking bemused. They confirmed this was indeed the room assigned to the class for which they were registered. I learned their names—Fatima, Mariam and Sheikha—and asked them to meet me right there for

the next scheduled session. Thus ended Day 1 of *Computer-Assisted Reporting*. Class dismissed. The students seemed unfazed. I can't say the same for myself. An enrollment of three? And a restroom to teach in?

I braced myself for another trudge in the heat and set off back across the sand and a sidewalk to Building 71, home to the Mass Communication department's administration. Fulminating silently, I fought the loop I was sliding into. This just couldn't be true. This was absurd. This was a farce. But of course it was—all three! Not yet two full weeks in the UAE, I was already feeling like an old hand.

Thirteen days earlier, amid the throng pushing and shoving outside Dubai Airport's old Terminal 1, whether by some act of divine providence or mere serendipity, I had found the driver sent by my new employer. I was soon sprawled on the back seat of a white Camry and despite full-blast a/c, dripping sweat. Not just pouring perspiration but pasted to the seat, my black t-shirt as limp as a dishrag.

As the man at the wheel, a quiet South Asian, negotiated thick traffic we passed a long series of banners lining the airport road. They featured a boy of maybe ten, smiling, in a wheelchair, wearing a form-fitting Superman leotard-shirt. The banners with the boy, his smile, and wheelchair drove home what I'd just done: Flown a third of the way around the world to spend three years in a country whose language, customs, even its alphabet, were indecipherable to me. Add to that an alien take on Superman.

I was working over those strange, jet-lagged epiphanies as we traversed a floating bridge and merged onto a congested concrete highway. I counted twelve lanes. From the ground, Dubai was hardly the vision I'd peered out at in the bright morning light, nose pressed to the acrylic shield of an economy-class window: a string of glittering skyscrapers, sharp-cut rhinestones strung along a sapphire sea. B-roll used on gushing American TV stories about the Miracle City of the Middle East. From my backseat vantage point, that skyline was somewhat less inspiring,

though very much a work in progress. Even from this distance, the progress looked frantic.

Most cities, I reassured myself, lose their magic and appeal as one closes the distance. Just like people. The longer shot is more forgiving. Manhattan from the last rise going west on the Long Island Expressway, especially when the old towers were there. San Francisco from the Golden Gate. Cities like Paris, more breathtaking the closer you get, are the exception that proves the rule. That generally applied to cities of the past. Then, of course, there were cities of the past such as Cleveland, the one I'd just left, its unending rust-belt downturn eased only moderately by the national real estate bubble.

Dubai, a committed city of the future, was riding a magic carpet, delirious with *nouveaux*-riches and content with the dreams that money *can* buy. Toast of the financial media, the sheikdom gushed wealth: the world's tallest building going up and biggest shopping malls, one alleged to have an indoor ski slope. A secular Mecca. We passed a building that looked like the conning tower of the world's largest nuclear submarine, home to Zayed University, a billboard extolling Dubailand, another the Dubai Outlet Mall. I was curious to see the place, feel it around me. My immediate destination, however, lay elsewhere, deep in the desert. Al Ain, in the sister emirate of Abu Dhabi, sounded quite different from Dubai. It lay an hour or so south, my driver said—so far, the only words he'd spoken.

Unemployed for more than a year, the divorce to cap a dead-end marriage stalled short of finalization, I'd applied in a seat-of-the-pants way for a teaching job. Financial desperation wasn't my motivator. I had a decent nest egg tucked away in investments, and the Dow was lounging in the 14,000 range. I needed something to do. I needed to *get out* of my life. My search for jobs at American journalism schools kicked up nothing. Then I was struck by a new idea: the farther flung the better.

One item in the United Arab Emirates University's online application had almost turned me off for good, the box marked "Religion." I stared at the space a good thirty seconds, debating leaving it blank. But, really, how could I be surprised? I wanted to teach at a university in the

heartland of the Islamic world. Their place, their rules. I filled in the answer. No way was I going covert with this element of my identity. I had a hunch my reply on that question alone would put an end to the matter.

But the prospective employer emailed almost immediately to set up an interview—a teleconference. One member of the panel of three, a female professor from Egypt, pointed out that I had neither a PhD nor non-Stateside teaching experience. Further—now I could practically hear her looking over the rims of her glasses at the rest of the committee—I had never taught full time. Valid objections, it seemed to me, all overruled by her two colleagues, both Americans.

The interview had been followed by a nearly summer-long silence. I'd pretty much forgotten the idea when an email turned up with two attachments, a contract and an e-ticket on Emirates to Dubai. Departure date two weeks away, start date only four. The salary, the equivalent in local currency of about US\$80,000 a year, would put me just under the IRS's limit for exemption on foreign-earned income, but would be tax-free in the UAE. Perks: rent-free luxury housing, a fat furniture allowance, high-end healthcare, annual round-trip airfare from the US to the UAE for myself and my son, and an end-of-contract bonus. The escape hatch I'd been trolling Google for, in the form of an exotic working vacation, with eighty thousand in pocket money? I didn't negotiate any terms. Since the contract wasn't binding until I got to Al Ain and signed it in person, what did I have to lose but some time? Time being the thing I had too much of, I signed the attachment, scanned to a digital copy, attached it to an email and hit SEND.

In reply UAEU's Mass Com department chair, one of my two advocates in the interview, emailed her congratulations. I'd been selected over more than seventy-five other applicants, she said, and was earmarked to be "our expert in journalism." The second paragraph departed from the official-sounding, cheerleading stuff. Dr. Beverly got surprisingly personal and noted what had inspired her to push hard for me: the discovery, via Google, of the lawsuit I'd brought against my previous employer, a Cleveland TV station. Never thought I'd hear that cited as a factor in my favor. "You have courage," said my prospective boss. "David versus Goliath. We could use you

here.” Her email closed with one more observation, carefully worded. “Our journalism technician scarcely knows English, yet she is advising the newspaper in both languages.”

A warning? An odd flash of color in a landscape of shimmering, raven black? Either way, it was what intrigued me most.

Cruising out of Dubai, I told myself again that the abrupt, utter change would be good for me. Life had laid me low. The UAE was on a high. Maybe the perfect moment for our lives to intersect. For a whole host of reasons, at any rate, here I was on the sleek, six-lane E-66, headed into the interior. The landscape outside had turned to something less urban. Dunes, a few scrub trees. A backdrop to *Beau Geste*, the world of the Foreign Legion. The a/c had dried the sweat, and my T-shirt felt almost crisp. My blue Cleveland Indians cap wasn't a Panama hat, but I fancied myself a character from Graham Greene.

Those romantic reflections were pierced by a steady, very annoying two-beat beep. A ping. Ping-ping. Ping-ping. The noise came from the dashboard, but the driver looked oblivious.

“Is it possible to turn that off?”

He nodded and let up on the accelerator. I watched the needle. When it dropped below 120 kmph, the irritating sound ceased. “Thank you.”

He acknowledged that with a nod and a glance in the rear-view mirror. How must his latest passenger look to him, a burly, bearded, sleep-deprived middle-aged *schlump* in sunglasses and a blue cap? Whatever his thoughts, the driver directed none of them my way. We drove on in restful silence, packed in a tight caravan of luxury sedans, SUVs, Toyota pickups, laborer-crammed Tata buses—an Indian make, I remembered from somewhere—and open-sided six-wheelers hauling camels and goats. High-tension lines followed the ribbon of smooth concrete, framing sand dunes that rolled into the distance like massive breakers on Oahu's North Shore. I had seen plenty of deserts, from the Sonora and Mojave to the Negev, but nothing as arid as this. Nor had my previous experience included a yellow road sign bearing the image of a camel, a

*Ghostbusters*-like slash bisecting its midsection.

I was working out what that could mean—dromedaries banned not to cross the highway? Or banned from it to get to Al Ain?—when the ping-ping came back.

I caught the driver's eye in the rearview mirror, my look imploring. That got him to speak. "If I go slower, under one-twenty, it turns off. Over that, it makes the noise. It's the radar."

"Are we in a hurry?"

He shrugged. "It will take us longer to get to the hotel." Maybe his usual passengers had limited knowledge of the relationship governing speed, time and distance. With something approximating a smile, he added, "*Inshullah*, no problem. We will get there later, *inshullah*."

*In-SHULL-uh?* The phrase, stress on the middle syllable "*SHULL*," befuddled me.

The highway narrowed to four lanes, fronded palms filing down the median. Off and on the car pinged, and my nerves resigned themselves to being worked.

I noted a sign telling us we'd passed into what was to be my home emirate. The dunes turned red and swelled taller. Shortly, we exited the highway into that landscape onto a road skirted by a high security fence. This terrain was familiar from my reconnaissance via Google Earth: the border with Oman and the "twin city" of Buraimi, contiguous with Al Ain.

"We'll be at the hotel in maybe, *inshullah*, ten minutes," the driver said.

The Intercontinental sat at the city's edge in a walled compound. It was precisely noon—for me, three a.m.—when I staggered out at the drive-up. The desk informed me as I checked in that there was a meeting set by UAEU for nine the next morning. I was confident I could easily sleep most of the intervening twenty-one hours. Even through the exhaustion, I felt an eagerness to make my first foray out. Looking from the shade of the lobby onto the surrounding landscape, I noted that the dominant life forms were the date palm and the automobile. The land was wide and flat around the resort compound, but featured no pedestrians. Sidewalks did flank the roads—and could have fried eggs, literally and fast. Even the short stretch to the bottom of the Intercon's

drive up looked like heat stroke waiting to happen. Google Maps had shown me that the Al Ain Oasis lay just two miles west, beyond the Hilton we'd passed. I'd pictured myself walking there from the resort compound. So much for that idea. Walking the other way was a non-starter; the Oman border and its fence formed the northern boundary of the Intercontinental's spread.

A bellman, South Asian, took my bags and me to the fourth floor. Deposited in my room, I opened the sliding door and stepped onto the balcony. It was the first I'd been truly outside and not under the shade of a passenger pickup or drop off. Blast-furnace-hot wind held me in a bear hug. The cool interior beckoned. I slipped back inside, drew the blackout curtains, and fell into bed.

And, of course, was suddenly wide-awake. Back home, my career had blown up. Well, I'd dynamited whatever bridges might have been behind me. Fired from the CBS affiliate where I had spent two years as managing editor and executive producer of news shows, I'd sued, won a pyrrhic victory, and walked away with a settlement decent enough it came with a non-disclosure clause and headlines. Only fair, as I'd surely never work in TV or mainstream media again.

The marriage, too, was behind me. It had been played out for years; only paperwork remained. There'd been no ill will, just no will at all. My wife and I had agreed we'd wait for Max to finish high school, but my mother-in-law's death, followed by my court case, kept delaying the inevitable. Now Max was starting his sophomore year of college.

So, surfing the net, I'd spotted an escape hatch and dived for it. Down a rabbit hole that had deposited me in this air-conditioned room with its balcony overlooking a swim-up bar. The room was cool, the mattress firm, and I was starting to feel drowsy.

Did I have regrets? Neither I nor the ceiling staring back at me knew the answer. More pressing to me was the question of whether I had a future. It involved an unsigned contract and a promise of physical comfort, but I had no idea what I was getting myself into *this* time.