



Source: Michael Slackman, 'Ballot boxes? Yes. Actual democracy? Tough question.', *New York Times online*, 07/06/07.

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#### Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951

*[a refugee is any person who] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.*

The problem is, she doesn't know whether she's Egyptian, American or English. She's crossed borders that many times. But she knows where she was when she got here. 36° 9' North, 5° 50' East. The beach at Zahara de los Atunes, where an unfinished, derelict hotel rises up from the sand, row upon row of circular, unglazed windows facing out blackly to a tuna-churned sea.

It's dark on the E-5 and the police van is speeding towards Tarifa, where they will be processed on Isla de las Palomas. Memories of Tweetie Bird and Sylvester the Cat shift to visions of peacock blue, crow black and robin red, the avian colours of official bruising. The rattling wall panels and hinges and the deep-throated roar of the diesel engine blur into a rhythmic drone and she remembers that night out in Prenzlauer Berg last year. But with all she's heard about Andalucian highways and the driving skills of the civil guard she is mainly hoping to make it out of this in one piece.

She remembers waking up in the Zodiac under the stars. She remembers hearing how these Canadian boats, these symbols of saving the whales and anti-nuclear protest, are now loaded with explosives to ram freighters in the eastern Pacific. She remembers her first thought on waking was whether the Nigerian girl still asleep beside her would make it to Barcelona.

'Want a cigarette?'  
'No. Thanks.'

Although she's led a privileged life, she has never taken her freedoms for granted. Her freedom to play really loud guitar, to sing men's songs, to wear a veil, to travel alone, to not smoke.

She remembers her second thought in the boat. She still couldn't quite believe how it had all come to this. The plan was to trade music. First to Cairo to see the folks and then head across north Africa. Relying on her non-person status, neither African nor Western, she played things as they came. Because no one can ever figure her out, she was able to gain entry almost anywhere, learn songs from everyone and pass them on as she went. By the time she hit Tangiers she thought she had made it. She was safe, her notebook, mp3 recorder and memory had made it across the deserts filling up with hundreds of musical lives. She treated herself with the last of the money and stayed at the Hotel Continental, to play tourist for a couple of days.

She remembers her first mistake was hooking up with a small group of Congolese on the beach. 'There isn't any

democratic regime in the whole world', he'd said. 'Just look at this month's twelve elections.'

Senegal, Parliament, June 3  
Belgium, Parliament, June 10  
Mayotte, Assembly, June 10  
France, legislature, June 10 and 17  
Israel, President, June 13  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, first round of Parliament, June 24  
East Timor, Parliament, June 30  
Papua New Guinea, Parliament, June 30—July 10  
Jordan, Parliament, no date set  
Kiribati, Parliament, no date set  
Nauru, President, no date set  
Samoa, a le Ao o le Maio, no date set

All that choice, yet hope died in her heart then.

Her second mistake was introducing them to that Californian from the hotel who fancied himself an anti-globalisation type. He knew where to find a bar that would serve both alcohol and refugees. He thought it was pretty cool to make friends with the politically oppressed. And if she was really honest with herself, so did she.

She remembers that the bar was full of people making plans for getting to Spain. For that one night, though, they forgot about the everyday grind. They drank more, danced and argued pointlessly about politics. It was then that he had his big idea. He told them about his boat on the harbour. A stint back in the '90s with some anarchist rainforest gang resulted in the Zodiac, which he'd shipped over to Spain in the hold of a passenger freighter from New York. If they played it right no one would think twice about a rich, white American going for a midnight boat ride with his friends.

Problem was, it was a 16-seater and there were a lot of them in the bar. He didn't want any money. He certainly didn't want to look like someone transporting refugees. She remembers who suggested the vote. It was the same Congolese guy who'd been talking earlier in the day about dictators using elections to claim legitimacy. One person, one vote. She remembers walking down to the sea. The night air woke her up a bit so that she realised too late that this was not a game for the rest of them.

She looks around at these people, her friends-for-a-night. She remembers how, as the police led her away from the beach, she looked down at the purple finger and remembered the faintly improbable bottle of ink on the bar, the hastily drawn-up ballot papers. They stop and the back of the van opens. High school Macbeth comes to mind when she looks at the stain. It's her mark of participation in a pointless exercise in choice. It points her out in the crowded interview room and punctuates her pointing. The ink picks out her fingertip whorls. It allows her to reproduce her prints, prints that tell everyone around her that, unlike them, she can leave anytime and go anywhere.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Angela Piccini.*