

NIGHT BOAT TO TANGIER



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Chapter One

THE GIRLS AND THE DOGS

At the port of Algeciras, in October 2018

Would you say there's any end in sight, Charlie?

I'd say you nearly have an answer to that question already, Maurice.

Two Irishmen sombre in the dank light of the terminal make gestures of long-sufferance and woe – they are born to such gestures, and offer them easily.

It is night in the old Spanish port of Algeciras.

Oh, and this is as awful a place as you could muster – you'd want the eyes sideways in your head.

The ferry terminal has a haunted air, a sinister feeling. It reeks of tired bodies, and dread.

There are scraps of frayed posters – the missing.

There are customs announcements – the narcotraficante.

A blind man roils in night sweat and clicks his teeth to sell lottery tickets like a fat, rattling serpent – he’s doing nothing for the place.

The Irishmen look out blithely at the faces that pass by in a blur of the seven distractions – love, grief, pain, sentimentality, avarice, lust, want-of-death.

Above them a café bar reached by escalator hisses with expectancy, clinks of life.

There is a hatch with a sign marked INFORMACIÓN – tell us more – and a small ledge tilts out from it, questioningly.

Maurice Hearne and Charlie Redmond sit on a bench just a few yards west of the hatch. They are in their low fifties. The years are rolling out like tide now. There is old weather on their faces, on the hard lines of their jaws, on their chaotic mouths. But they retain – just about – a rakish air.

Now, in precise tandem, they turn their faces to the hatch marked INFORMACIÓN.

You want to hop back there, Charlie, have another word? See about this next boat that’s due in?

Yeah, but the same lad is still on. The lad with the bitter face on him. He’s not a talker, Moss.

Try him, Charlie.

Charlie Redmond rises up from the bench in a bundle of sighs. He unfolds his long bones. He approaches the hatch.

He's lame, and he drags the right peg in a soft, brushing motion, with practised ease. He throws his elbows onto the counter. His aura is of brassy menace. He wears a corner-boy's grimace. His Spanish pronunciation is very much from the northside of Cork city.

Hola y buenos noches, he says.

He waits it out for a long beat, looks over his shoulder, calls back to Maurice.

No response, Moss. Bitter face on him still.

Maurice shakes his head sadly.

I fucken hate ignorance, he says.

Charlie tries again.

Hola? Excuse me? Trying to find out about this next boat coming in, this boat from Tangier? Or . . . going out?

A blue silence; a gesture.

Charlie looks back to his friend and mimics the informacionista's shrug.

All I'm getting here is the shoulders, Maurice.

Habla Inglés is what you say to him, Charlie.

But Charlie throws up his hands and shuffles back to the bench.

Habla my hole, he says. All he's doing is giving me the shoulders, giving me the eyes.

Face on him like a bad marriage, Maurice says.

He turns sharply and screeches at the hatch –

Lose the fucken face!

– and now humorously grins.

Maurice Hearne's jaunty, crooked smile will appear with frequency. His left eye is smeared and dead, the other oddly bewitched, as though with an excess of life, for balance. He wears a shabby suit, an open-necked black shirt, white runners and a derby hat perched high on the back of his head. Dudeish, at one time, certainly, but past it now.

You've him told, Maurice. You've manners put on the boy.

Charlie Redmond? The face somehow has an antique look, like a court player's, medieval, a man who'd strum his lute for you. In some meadowsweet lair. Hot, adulterous eyes and again a shabby suit, but dapper shoes in a rusted-orange tone, a pair of suede-finish creepers that whisper of brothels, also a handsome green corduroy neck-tie. Also, stomach trouble, bags like graves beneath the eyes, and soul trouble.

Laid on the floor, between the men's feet, there is a hold-all – it's a fucked-up old Adidas.

All the years we been coming here, Charlie?

I know it.

You think we'd have the lingo got.

Slow learners, Maurice.

Tell me about it. Poor little Maurice Hearne, from Togher, down the back of the class, minding the coats.

Now the bone-tip of Charlie's snout twitches to read a change on the terminal's air.

Policía, he says.

Where at?

You watching? Over.

Fear of God in me. Arrange your face, Charlie.

Tell you what, Moss? I wouldn't fancy your chances in the Algeciras jailhouse. Know what I'm saying? Inside in a mixed cell?

I'm too pretty for a mixed cell, Charlie. I'd be someone's missus inside half an hour. Pedro, come in there, your dinner's ready.

The policía fade into the crowd again.

The crowd is by the moment thickening.

Nobody knows what's coming or going over the Straits tonight – there are disputes on the far side; there is trouble in Tangier, and not for the first time.

There could be hours in this, Maurice.

They won't move until the 23rd. It's not midnight yet.

Yeah, but which end of the 23rd? They move at five past

twelve tonight? Five to twelve tomorrow night? It's still the fucken 23rd. We might have a day to wait it out.

Through the high windows there is an essay on the complicated light at the port of Algeciras. From the glare of the arclights, the lingering of pollutants and the refraction of heat left by the late October sun, the air is thick and smoky, and it makes the night glow a vivid thing, and dense. It is more than heavy enough for the ghosts that it holds suspended here above us.

A tannoy announcement cranks up – a rush of fast Spanish consonants in the fierce Andalusian idiom – and the men are annoyed by the intrusion.

The announcement becomes more breathless and complex as it goes on – we are in the suburbs of hysteria – and, lacking the language, the men are puzzled by it, and irate.

At length, the announcement fades out, and ends, and they turn to look at each other.

That's not telling us a whole lot really, is it, Maurice?

No, Charlie. No, it is not.

Maurice Hearne rises from the bench and stretches out to the full extent of himself. He listens with concern to the creaking of his joints – mother of fuck. He feels out the lizardy nodes of his spine.

How Jesus at Gethsemane wept, he says.

He squints morbidly towards the high windows and now,

with a quick silent look, he questions his old friend; from Charlie Redmond comes a sigh in tired assent.

From the Adidas hold-all the men take out bunches of laser-printed flyers. Each flyer shows the image of a girl about twenty years old. The girl is Dilly Hearne. Her whereabouts now are uncertain.

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It's about a young girl we're looking for, Maurice says.

This man's daughter we're looking for. The man haven't seen his daughter in three years.

Photo's a bit old now, but she'd still have the same kind of gaatch to her, I'd say.

Maurice? They're not going to know gaatch from their fucken elbows.

Photo's old now, but she'd still have the same kind of . . . Same kind of look to her, I'd say.

She's a small girl. She's a pretty girl. She'd probably still have the dreadlocks.

Dreadlocks, you know? Bob Marley? Jah Rastafari?

She might have a dog or two with her, I'd say.

Dog on a rope kind of thing?

She's a pretty girl. She's twenty-three years of age by now. She'll be dreadlock Rastafari.

You know what we're going to need, Charlie?

What's that, Moss?

We're going to need the Spanish for crusty.

Crusty types? Charlie tries. Hairy bastards? New Age-traveller types? That what ye call them?

And, in an aside –

I wouldn't mind, Maurice, but these cunts invented the whole concept of crusty.

On account of they'd have the weather for it, Charlie. Lounging on their black-sand beaches. With all the girls and the dogs.

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I suppose I do have the odd word, Moss. Thinking on. I mean, lingo-wise.

Hit me up, Charlie.

Supermercado.

What's that when it's at home?

Tesco.

I've a few I remember. Like . . . Gorrión?

Go where?

Gorrión! From a time I spent in Cádiz . . . Did I ever tell you one time, Charlie, I was in love with an older lady, in Cádiz?

I'd nearly have remembered, Maurice.

We used to make love all night, Charles.

You were younger then.

And you know what she'd do for me in the mornings?

I'm all ears.

She'd feed me sparrows, Charlie.

They'd fucken ate anything, wouldn't they? This crowd.

Gorrión! Sparrow!

If it's not nailed down, they'll ate it. Into the frying pan, down the gullet. But it must be class of greasy first thing, Moss? A little sparrow?

Greasy like John Travolta. And not a lot of atein' on them bones, it has to be said.

Personally speaking, Maurice? My arse isn't right since the octopus we ate in Málaga.

Is it saying hello to you, Charlie?

It is, yeah. And of course the octopus wasn't the worst of Málaga.

No, it wasn't.

Not by a long shot, boy.

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The sound of the night at the Port of Algeciras –

The newsy static of tannoy announcements.

The hard insect drone of police boats on the harbour.

The soft hubbub of the ever-moving crowd in the terminal building.

Outside –

An attack dog barks a yard of stars.

A jet from the army base breaks the sky.

Inside –

A soft-headed kid in singsong makes an Arabic prayer.

An espresso spout gushes laughingly.

And, stretching out his long, spindle legs, crossing them at the ankles, knitting his fingers, clasping his hands behind his head, Charlie Redmond looks high to consider the vaulted reaches of the terminal building, and the vagaries of life that are general.

You know the tragic thing, Maurice?

What's that, Charlie?

I haven't enjoyed a mirror since 1994.

You were gorgeous in your day, Charles.

I was a stunner! And sharp as a blade.

Maurice turns left, turns right, to loosen out the kinks in his neck. Images slice through him. The wood at Ummera, in north Cork, where he spent his first years. And Dilly as a kid, when he'd walk her through London's grey-white winter, Stroud Green Road. And Cynthia, in the place outside Berehaven, on the morning sheets as the sun streamed through.

I suppose I was an unlikely sex symbol, he says. I mean you put this old mug together, on paper, and it don't make any sense. But somehow?

There's a magic. Or was, Moss. There was.

They look into the distance. They send up their sighs. Their talk is a shield against feeling. They pick up the flyers and rise again. They offer them to passers-by – few are accepted. Sympathy is offered in the soft downturn of glances. The missing here make a silent army.

Her name's Dill or Dilly, Charlie says.

She was in Granada maybe? Not long ago.

She might be with a gang of them, I'd say. They kind of move in packs, like?

They move in shoals, the crustaceans.

Dilly Hearne, twenty-three, a pretty girl, with dreadlocks, and dogs, and she have pale green eyes.

Off the mother she took the eyes. The mother was a left-footer from Kinsale.

God rest her.

Green eyes and low-size. Dill or Dilly?

Maurice?

Charlie has clocked a young man's arrival in the terminal. Now Maurice notes it too. The man is in his early twenties, dreadlocked, wearing combat trousers and army-surplus boots, and carrying a rucksack in a state of comic dis-habille. He has a dog on a rope. He throws down his rucksack. He is deeply tanned. Dirt also is grained into his skin – the red dirt of the mountains. He takes out a litre carton of vino tinto. He takes a saucer from the rucksack, pours a little wine onto it and offers it to his dog. When he speaks, it is with an English accent, countryish, from the West Country.

Cheers, Lorca, he says. Your good health, mate.

Maurice and Charlie watch on with interest. They exchange a dry look. The dog laps at the wine; the young man pats the dog and laughs. Maurice and Charlie approach the man. They stand silently smiling before him. He looks up at once with a measure of fear, and he takes the rope, as if to hold the dog back. Maurice turns his smile to the dog, and he clenches his tongue between his teeth, and spits a hard

Ksssssstt!

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But Charlie Redmond? He's a natural with dogs. He reaches a long hand for Lorca, takes the paw, shakes it. He bats at

the dog with his free, open palm, gently, about the eyes, as though to mesmerise, just little back-and-forth movements of the palm, and the animal is at once besotted.

Maurice and Charlie sit on the bench just west of the hatch marked INFORMACIÓN at the Algeciras ferry terminal on an October night with the ragged young man wedged firmly between them.

All three consider the laughing, the lovestruck dog.

He's a lovely fella, isn't he? Charlie says.

He's a dote, Maurice says.

A dotey old pet, Charlie says. What you say his name was?

His name's Lorca.

And your own name?

I'm Benny.

Good man, Ben.

Benny and Lorca. Lovely. He's named for the little winger lad, is he? Used be at Real Madrid? Around the same time as Zidane?

Little dazzler fella? Maurice says. A jinky winger type?

I always loved a little winger, Charlie says. A slight fella and fast.

Nippy little dazzler, Maurice says. Twist your blood and you trying to mark him.

That was kind of your own style and all, Moss?

Oh, I definitely had a turn of pace, Charles.

You were very quick over the first five yards.

But I lacked a first touch, Charlie.

You were always hard on yourself.

Benny rises and reaches for his dog – he wants to get away from these odd gentlemen.

Boys, I got to think about making a move, he says.

But Charlie reaches out a friendly hand and lets it hover there, for a moment of comic effect, and now it snaps a clamp on the shoulder and presses the young English firmly down to the bench.

There's no rush on you, Ben. You know what I'm saying?

But listen, Benny says.

Maurice flicks to a stand and pushes his face close in to Benny's.

Dilly Hearne is the girl's name, he says. Dill or Dilly?

She'd be twenty-three years of age now, that kind of way?
Charlie says.

I don't know no Dill or Dilly! I don't know no . . .

Irish girl?

I known some Irish.

Is that right? Charlie says.

But I don't know a Dill or Dilly. I mean . . .

Where'd you know these Irish? Where at, Ben? Was this in Granada, was it?

I don't know! I mean I've met loads of fucking . . .

Benjamin? Maurice says. We're not saying ye all know each other or anything, like. Sure there could be a half million of ye sweet children in Spain. The way things are going.

Charlie whispers –

Because ye'd have the weather for it.

Maurice whispers –

Ye'd be sleeping out on the beaches.

Like the lords of nature, Charlie says.

Under the starry skies, Maurice says.

Charlie stands, gently awed, and proclaims –

'The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.' Whose line was that, Maurice?

I believe it was the Bard, Charlie. Or it might have been Little Stevie Wonder.

A genius. Little Stevie.

Charlie, with a priest's intelligent smile, limps behind the

bench. He wraps a friendly arm around Benny's neck. He leans to whisper in his ear –

The girls and the dogs all in sweet mounds on the beaches and the sky is laid out like heaven above ye.

You're lying there, Ben, Maurice says, and you're looking up at it. You don't know whether you're floating or falling, boy. Do you think he can hear the sea, Charlie?

I have no doubt, Maurice. It's lapping. Softly. At the edges of his dreams.

You know what he don't want in his dreams, Charlie?

What's that, Moss?

Us cunts.

She's a small girl, Benny. She's a pretty girl. And you see what it is? Is we've been told she's headed for Tangier.

Or possibly she's coming back from Tangier.

On the 23rd of the month. Whichever fucken direction? It's all going off on the 23rd.

Is what we've been informed by a young man in Málaga.

On account of the young man found himself in an informational kind of mood.

Maurice moves close in to Benny again and considers him. There is something of the riverbank in his demeanour. Something beaver-like or weasel-ish. He reads the feint blue flecks of the boy's irises. He might not live for long, he

thinks. There is a hauntedness there. He is scared, and with reason. Now Maurice softly confides –

You see, it's my daughter that's missing, fella. Can you imagine what that feels like?

Charlie speaks as softly –

Do you have nippers yerself, Ben?

Any sprogllets, Ben? No? Any hairy little yokes left after you?

In Bristol or someplace? Charlie says. Any Benjamin juniors left behind you? Hanging out of some poor gormless crusty bird what fell to your loving gaze.

What you shot your beans up, Maurice says.

Benny shakes his head. He looks around to seek help, but his predicament remains his own.

You have empathy, Benny, Maurice says. You're a lovely fella. I can see that in you. So feel it out with me here now, okay? Imagine, after three years, how you'd do anything to be free of this feeling. Because my heart? It's outside of its fucken box and running loose in the world. And we've been told that she's heading for Tangier, Dilly, and she's travelling with her own kind.

I don't know, Charlie says, sitting again, flapping out a lazy hand. Maybe a convoy is going to come together in Algeciras? Spend the winter in Africa, the hot sun on yere bony little pagan arses. Lovely. And all about ye the colourful little birds is a ho-ho-hoverin'. I'm seeing pinkies and greenies and yellowy little fellas. All very good-natured.

So is that the plan, Benjamin? Ben? You've gone a bit pale on us, kid.

What I'm going to do is I'm going to ask you again, Benny? Dilly Hearne? Dill or Dilly?

I don't know no fucking Dilly!

Now Charlie folds an embrace around the boy's neck.

You know what I think, Maurice?

What's that, Charlie?

I think this lad is a ferocious wanker.

That's a harsh view, Charles.

Benny makes to get up, but Charlie, with a smile and force, pushes him back down to the bench.

You see what happens, Benny, he says, with all the self-abuse, and this is just my opinion, son, I mean this is just my theory, you know? My kind of . . . morbid speculation. But what happens, with the self-love, it's not just the seed itself that gets spent, it's not just the essence that's lost. What happens, in my theory, and it's something I've thought about quite a lot, actually –

Philosopher, Maurice says. This fella. Charles Redmond of Farranree.

You see what happens, in my opinion, on account of all the wanking, is that the brain starts to get affected and the memory is shot.

The memory? Maurice says.

And clicks his fingers sharply.

Kaput, he says.

And there's no point crying out now, son. Because in the Algeciras ferry terminal?

They've heard much worse.

And I don't mean to be in any way personal with this speculation, Benny. But I'd have to say you have the look of an animalistic fucken self-abuser altogether, you know?

Maurice shouts –

He have one arm longer than the other from it!

And he stands and drags Lorca on his rope, as if to make off with the dog.

Come here, he says. Wouldn't it be a horrible fucken thing for poor Lorca to wake up without a head on him in the port of Algeciras? Like in a nightmare, Ben.

It's an awful place, Charlie says.

It's a shocking place, Maurice says.

Sort of place things could take a wrong steer on you lightning quick, Ben. You heed?

Dilly. Have you seen Dill, have you?

She's a small girl.

She's a pretty girl.

Dill?

Or Dilly?

When the young man answers finally his voice is hollow,
weak –

I might have seen her one time in Granada, he says.

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It is a tremendously Hibernian dilemma – a broken family,
lost love, all the melancholy rest of it – and a Hibernian
easement for it is suggested: fuck it, we'll go for an old drink.

They move to the café bar. As though on a gentle night's
saunter. The young man, Benny, is arranged between them
as they rise on the escalator in a careful caravan – he could
bolt, but somehow he is reluctant to.

The bar awaits grimly beneath the glare of its strip lights. It
runs the thread of its voices. The men sit on three swivel-
ling stools that creak rustily as they turn. This is a place in
which time passes almost audibly. Charlie and Maurice sit
either side of Ben. They are all three drinking from small
glasses of beer. Lorca sits happily beneath on Charlie's grip
and tether.

How're you finding Spain, Ben?

It's all right.

Myself and this man been coming here a long while now.
What are we talking about, Maurice?

'92, Charlie, I'd say. '93?

Time? It's like fluff on the breeze, Benny.

Benny? Maurice says. You have a grave look on your face. Relax your bones. All we're doing is having a little cerveza, wetting our whistles.

Charlie leans down and talks lovingly to the dog.

Who's my number one boy? he says.

The dog lets its eyes roll. Charlie Redmond knows at once the tune of a dog, and hums it. Now he starts to whisper a football commentary –

Zidane's on the ball . . . He turn on a sixpence . . . He look up . . . He knock it in the box . . . Raúl! . . . Raúl misses it, the keeper has it . . . No! Keeper's spilt it! . . . And it's Lorca on the rebound! . . . And the Bernabéu is singin' his name.

Maurice leans in to Benny to address him confidentially –

Charlie Redmond? In my opinion? Is a man that communicates with dogs on a visceral level. You know what I'm saying by that?

I have no fucking idea, mate.

They nearly stand up and talk to him.

That right?

Now Charlie consults the dog and listens carefully for a moment.