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NIGHT

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BOAT

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TO

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TANGIER

KEVIN BARRY

THE *IRISH TIMES* NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

# NIGHT BOAT TO TANGIER

KEVIN BARRY



CANONGATE

## 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 informaciónista'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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