
Opening Extract from...

The Temporary Gentleman

Written by Sebastian Barry

Published by Faber & Faber

The Temporary Gentleman

A novel

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FABER & FABER

First published in 2014
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in England by CPI Mackays

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–27695–0 (hardback)
ISBN 978–0–571–27696–7 (export)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

To Jacquie Burgess,
beautiful and wise

hic amor, haec patria est.
Virgil, *Aeneid*

Remember me, forget my fate.
Nahum Tate, *Dido and Aeneas*

Chapter One

'It's a beautiful night and no mistake. You would never think there was a war somewhere.'

These less than prophetic words were spoken by a young navy second lieutenant, on the wide, night-bedarkened deck of our supply ship, bound for Accra. He was a tubby little man, whom the day's sun had scorched red. Happy to hear an Irish accent I asked him where he was from and he said, with that special enthusiasm Irish people reserve for each other when they accidentally meet abroad, Donegal. We talked then about Bundoran in the summer, where my father had often brought his band. It was a pleasure to shoot the breeze with him for a few moments as the engines growled on, deep below.

The cargo was eight hundred men and officers, all headed for various parts of British Africa. There was the noise of the little parliaments of the card-players, and the impromptu music-halls of the whisky drinkers, and true enough a lovely mole-grey air moved across the ship in a beneficent wave. We could see the coast of Africa lying out along a minutely fidgeting shoreline. The only illuminations were the merry lights of the ship, and the sombre philosophical lights of God above. Otherwise the land ahead was favoured only by darkness, a confident brushstroke of rich, black ink.

I had been in an excellent mood for days, having picked the winner of the Middle Park Stakes at Nottingham. Every so often, I stuck a hand in my right pocket and jingled part of my winnings in the shape of a few half-crowns. The rest of it was inserted into an inside pocket of my uniform – a fold of lovely crisp white banknotes. I'd got up to Nottingham on a brief furlough, having been given a length of time not quite long enough to justify the long trek across England and Ireland to Sligo.

France had fallen to Hitler, and suddenly, bizarrely, colonies like the Gold Coast were surrounded by the new enemy, the forces of the Vichy French. No one knew what was going to happen, but we were being shunted down quickly to be in place to blow bridges, burst canals, and break up roads, if the need arose. We had heard the colonial regiments were being swelled by new recruits, thousands of Gold Coast men rushing to defend the Empire. I suppose this was when Tom Quaye, though of course I didn't know him then, joined up.

So I was standing there, flush with my winnings, not thinking of much, as always somewhat intoxicated by being at sea, somewhat in love with an unknown coastline, and the intriguing country lying in behind. I had also about a bottle of Scotch whisky in me, though I stood rooted as a tree for all that. It was a moment of simple exhilaration. My red hair, the selfsame red hair that had first brought me to the attention of Mai, for it was not I who said hello to her first, but she, with her playful question in the simple neat quadrangle of the university, 'I suppose you put a colour in that?' – my red hair was brushed flat back from my

forehead, my second lieutenant's cap holding it down like a pot lid, my cheeks had been shaved by my batman Percy Welsh, my underclothes were starched, my trousers were creased, my shoes were signalling back brightly to the moon – when suddenly the whole port side of the ship seemed to go up, right in front of my eyes, an enormous gush and geyser of water, a shuddering explosion, an ear-numbing rip of metallic noise, and a vast red cornet of flames the size of the torch on the Statue of Liberty. The young second lieutenant from Donegal was suddenly as dead as one of those porpoises you will see washed up on the beach at Enniscrone after a storm, on the deck beside me, felled by a jagged missile of stray metal. Men came tearing up from below, the doorways oozing them out as if so much boiling molasses, there were cries and questions even as the gigantic fountain of displaced water collapsed and found the deck, and hammered us flat there as if we were blobs of dough. Two of my sappers were trying to peel me back up from the deck, itself splintered and cratered from the force, and now other stray bits of the ship rained down, clattering and banging and boasting and killing.

'That was a fucking torpedo,' said my sergeant, with perfect redundancy, a little man called Ned Johns from Cornwall, the most knowledgeable man for a fuze I ever worked with. He probably knew the make and poundage of the torpedo, but if he did he didn't say. The next second the huge ship started to pitch to port, and before I could grab him, Ned Johns went off sliding down the new slope and smashing into the rail, gathered himself, stood up, looked back at me, and then was wrenched across the rail and out

of view. I knew we were holed deep under the waterline, I could more or less feel it in my body, something vital torn out of the ship echoed in the pit of my stomach, some mischief done, deep, deep in some engine room or cargo hold.

My other helper, Johnny 'Fats' Talbott, a man so lean you could have used him for spare wire, as poor Ned Johns once said, in truth was using me now as a kind of bollard, but that was no good, because the ship seemed to make a delayed reaction to its wound, and shuddered upward, the ship's rail rearing up ten feet in a bizarre and impossible movement, catching poor Johnny completely off guard, since he had been bracing himself against a force from the other direction, and off he went behind me, pulling the trouser leg off my uniform as he did so, sending my precious half-crowns firing in every direction.

So for a moment of odd calm I stood there, one leg bare to the world, my cap still in place inexplicably, myself drenched so thoroughly I felt one hundred per cent seawater. An iron ladder full of men, from God knows where, maybe even from inside the ship, or from the side of the command deck more likely, with about a dozen calling and screaming persons clinging to it like forest monkeys, moved past me as if it were a trolley being wheeled by the demon of this attack, and crossed the ravaged deck, and pitched down into the moiling, dark sea behind. Everything roared for that moment, the high night sky of blankening stars, the great and immaculate silver serving dish of the sea itself, the rended ship, the offended and ruined men – and then, precipitatively, a silence reigned, the shortest reign of any silence in the empires of

silence, the whole vista, the far-off coast, the deck, the sea, was as still for a moment as a painting, as if someone had just painted it all in his studio, and was gazing at it, contemplating it, reaching out to put a finishing touch on it, of smoke, of fire, of blood, of water, and then I felt the whole ship leave me, sink under my boots so suddenly that there was for that second a gap between me and it, so that wasn't I like an angel, a winged man suspended. Then gravity broke the spell, gravity ruined the bloody illusion, and I went miserably and roaringly downward with the ship, the deck broke into the waters, it smashed through the sacred waters like a child breaks an ice puddle in a Sligo winter, it made a noise like that, of something solid, something icy breaking, glass really, but not glass, infinitely soft and receiving water, the deeps, the dreaded deeps, the reason why fishermen never learn to swim, let the waters take us quickly, let there be no thrashing and hoping and swimming, no, let your limbs go, be calm, put your trust in God, pray quick to your Redeemer, and I did, just like an Aran fisherman, and gave up my soul to God, and sent my last signal of love flying back across Europe to Mai, Mai, and my children, up the night-filthied coast of Africa, across the Canaries, across the old boot of England and the ancient baby-shape of Ireland, I sent her my last word of love, I love thee, I love thee, Mai, I am sorry, I am sorry.

The ocean closed over my head with its iron will, and the fantastical suck of the sinking ship drew me down as if a hundred demons were yanking on my legs, down down we went, our handsome troopship made in Belfast, the loose bodies of the already drowned, the myriad papers and plans

for war, the tins of sardines we had taken in in Algiers, the fabulous materiel, the brand new trucks, the stocks of tyres, the fifty-three horses, the wooden stakes, the planks, the boxes of carefully stored explosives, all down down to Neptune we went, extinguished in a moment without either glory or cowardice, an action of the gods, of queer physics, that huge metal mass sucker-punched, beaten, ruined, wrecked, fucked to all hell as Ned Johns would say, and I felt the water all around as if I were in the body of a physical creature, as if this were its blood, and the scientifically explainable forces at work were its sinews and muscles. And it stopped my mouth and found the secret worm-whorls of my ears, and it wanted entry into me, but I had grabbed, stolen, fetched out with an instinctive exuberance, a last great gulp of breath, and I was bearing this down with me, in my chest, around my heart, as my singing response, my ears were now thundering with the thunders of the sea, I thought I could hear the ship itself cry out in a crazy vocabulary of pain, as if a man could learn this lingo somewhere, the tearing death-cries of a vessel. All the while as if still standing on the deck, but that was not possible, and then I thought the ship was turning sideways, like a giant in its bed, and I had no choice but to go with it, I was like a salmon looking for the seam in a waterfall, where it could grip its way to the gravel-beds on grips of mere water, and now I thought I was rushing over the side, away from the deck, accelerated by some unknown force faster than the ship itself, and I was scraping along metal, I felt long sea-grass and barnacles, surely I could not have, but I thought I did, and just as the ship went right over, or

so I imagined it, how could I know, in the deepest dark, the darkest deepest dark that ever was, an instance of utter blankness, suddenly I felt the very keel of the troopship, something wide and round and good, the sacred keel, the foundation of the sailor's hope, the guarantor of his sleep between watches, but all up the wrong way, in the wrong place, violently torn from its proper place, and just in that moment, just in that moment, with a great groan, a weird and menacing sighing, a sort of silence as the worst noise in creation, the keel halted and went back the other way, like the spine of a whale, as if the ship were now fish, and because I was holding onto the keel, riding it, like a fly on a saddle, it sort of threw me back the other way, catapulted me slowly, Mr Cannonball himself in the tuppenny circus of old at Enniscrone, my childhood flaring in my head, my whole life flaring, and then I seemed to be in the shrouds of the little forward mast, and I squeezed my body into a tight ball, again pure instinct, not a thought in my mind, and as the killed ship rolled slowly over, seeking its doom at least in a balletic and beautiful curve, the furled sails rolled me over and over, giving me strange speed, volition unknown, and I unfolded myself, like a lover rising victorious from the marriage bed, and I spread my arms, and I thrashed them into the ocean, and swam, and swam, looking for the surface, praying for it, gone a mile beyond mere breathlessness, ready to grow gills to survive this, and then it was there, the utterly simple sky, God's bare lights, in the serene harbours of the constellations, and I grabbed like a greedy child onto something, a shard of something, a ruined and precious fragment, and there I floated, gripping on, half-mad,

for a minute without memory, oh Mai, Mai, for a minute all absence and presence, a creature blanked out and destroyed, a creature bizarrely renewed.

By the grace of God we were travelling in convoy that night. And by the grace of God, for some reason only known to its captain and its crouching sailors, the submarine melted off into the deeps, not that any of us saw it. A corvette bristling with machine guns manoeuvered up near me, I heard the confident voices with wild gratitude, arms reached down into the darkness for me, pulled me from the chaos, and I slumped, suddenly lumpish and exhausted, at the boots of my rescuers, falling down to lie with other survivors, some with dark-blooded wounds, a few entirely naked, the clothes sucked off them.

I lay there, ticking with life, triumphant, terrified. I noticed myself checking my inside pocket for the roll of banknotes, as if watching someone else, as if I were two people, and I laughed at my other self for his foolishness.

We steamed into Accra the following morning.

Chapter Two

Now it is 1957 and I am back in Accra, after many comings and goings. The war has been over for twelve years. The Gold Coast has turned into Ghana, the first African country to gain independence. As a former UN observer I watched it all with immense interest and excitement – the enormous politeness of the departing British, the beautiful speeches, the Ciceronian phrases. We are very good at leaving. At the same time, there is still a governor here for the moment, and a skeleton of the old administration. There are currents of darkness in this bright new river and slowly-slowly seems to be the ticket, for fear of old hatreds and old scores fomenting up –- indeed as they did in Ireland in the twenties.

Soon I'll go back to Sligo. It is so strange to be in a freed country, and yet not so strange, since my own home place once was freed. I did not understand freedom. I understand it better now, just a little. I have been renting this little plaster house, with an old design of swirls and squares on the outside, like one of the local temples. It is not a temple, but the temperate, honest quarters of a minor official, Mr Peter Oko, who was happy to rent out his extra house to this whiteman, while gainfully employed by the UN, and now staying on when many of his type, 'the others' who have haunted Africa for three hundred years, have packed their trunks and gone. When I first arrived over a year ago

he was described to me by the lady, whose name I forget, in the letter from the UN, as 'the lovely Mr Oko, who will help you in all things'. And he was as good as her word. Two thirds my height, with a penny-sized patch of baldness on his pleasant crown, fluent in English, more so than many an Irishman, he kept me fully informed and decently housed throughout the period of my contract. Maybe a few years my senior, he referred to me as 'his son', as in, 'Mr McNulty, my son,' and generally gave himself and all his fellow Accrans a good name in my heart. And I remember Accra when it was all tin roofs and ant hills, long before the war, and it was the despair of the European wives, asking the old administrative headquarters here by means of persistent and frantic letters for information about dresses, hats, and most urgently of all, mosquito-proof stockings, as we lurked vulnerably in our distant station.

The local English newspaper, the *Accran Clarion*, whose pages have shrunk from twenty to one single sheet, says there is still a little trouble here and there, that old trouble for instance bubbling back up between Togoland and the Gold Coast that I and others laboured to fix just a few months ago. If the men come in their new uniforms to ask me to quit their Ghana, of course I will have to go. But as yet nothing disturbs the delightful atmosphere here at the edge of the city, where the houses give way to the bright green squares of passionately growing vegetables. I cannot see the Atlantic, but I can smell it, half a mile distant, that hazy and infinite expanse of acres, with its immense depths, and sometimes terrifying waters. So I am content enough not to be in sight of it. Even as I looked it over last year, the

house I mean, with Mr Oko, and he darted about showing me its glories and idiosyncrasies, I was thinking, 'But Mai would have liked to be by the sea, for the swimming.' And with the next thought remembered she would not be living here with me.

Mai.

And I will go back to Ireland, I must, I must, I have duties there, not least to my children.

1922. There she was, the first time I ever saw her, sailing along in her loose black skirts, her lovely face above a long-boned frame, on the cinder path of the university, hidden by tree trunks and then revealed, so that she whirred in my eyes like a film reel, a shadow half-ruined by sunlight under the famous plane trees. Her blouse so white, with the soft bosom plainly moving within, that it was a bright shield in the underwood. And myself still very young, when the brain seemed to brook no real thought of the past or the future – the movement of time and the world stilled. I watched her from under the dark arch of the entrance to the quadrangle. It was still my first year in the university, in the time of the civil war.

She had many friends, chief of them a splendid girl called Queenie Moran, a great favourite in the college, but none of them among my own set, which was very male I suppose, technical-minded boys among the engineers, and those dark, mysterious chaps who got light only from the more distant galaxies of mathematics and physics. Her friends

were the new girls of the century, who had come into the university on fearless feet, and who swished up and down the paths of the college with the confidence of Cortez and Magellan. Sometimes she could be seen in the small swarm of these women, coming out of lectures talking fast and loud, well aware I do not doubt of the lonesome male gazes thrown their way. And then there were those boys in their set that can insert themselves among a group of women, a talent in itself, the sons of doctors and even people in the new government, with the smoke of both victory and surrender drifting above their heads.

The way I found out she lived on the Grattan Road was I followed her home one evening, keeping at a distance behind her, like a detective or a thief, as she swept along the seafront. I was impressed by the fact that she never looked back, not once. The glass-dark acreage of the bay over to her left and the muddle of small cottages and bigger houses to her right seemed to funnel her efficiently all the way to Salthill.

She disappeared in through old gate-posts with granite balls on top. I knew there must be metal spikes securing them invisibly and I found myself hoping her father did not have a similar spike in him, for the place spoke of considerable status and grandeur. I watched her open the big front door, go in, drag off her hat and scarlet coat and, with her right boot raised behind her like a skater, without looking back out into the dreary evening, kick the door shut.

In order for her to make her first remark to me, I had to keep putting myself in her way. I didn't know any other method to utilise. I placed myself near her as she wandered

out of one of her commerce lectures. I had watched her go in, spent the hour of the lecture traipsing about – and then more or less threw myself in her path. Terrified but resolute.

'I suppose you put a colour in that?' she said, looking at my red hair. 'Who are you anyway? Everywhere I go, you seem to pop up like a Jack-in-the-box.'

'Well, my name *is* Jack, now you mention it.'

'Which of the Jacks are you?' she said, as if there were a hundred Jacks in her life.

'Jack McNulty,' I said. 'John Charles McNulty.' Then I added, as if for full illumination: 'Engineering.'

She was silent for a moment. What I noticed suddenly was that she was nervous too, I am not quite sure how I knew that, but I did. Of course she was nervous, she was only nineteen years old, accosted by a blushing, red-haired boy she had never met.

'That's a decent handle. I'm Mai Kirwan,' she said, as if anyone would be fully aware of the name, and she was now but putting a face to it.

Then, as if we were diplomats at a border somewhere, she held out her gloved hand. The glove was an orange-coloured leather. I stared at the hand a moment, then rushed to shake it lightly. She smiled at me and laughed.

'No doubt I'll see you about the place,' she said, maybe not having the arsenal of phrases to bring us any further.

'You will,' I said, 'you will,' and then she was past me in a pleasant fog of perfume, and gone.

That was how it started.

It is evening now in the fringy fields. Tom Quaye was here all day, and cooked a lovely fish stew with okra and palm-nut. He sings songs in Ewe under his breath the whole time, and has excellent English from an Irish priest who taught him years ago. Indeed he has a bit of a Roscommon accent, which makes me homesick. It was Mr Oko found Tom. He is the perfect houseboy for me, as he was in the Gold Coast Regiment in the war. He survived the horrors of Burma, and finished up a sergeant major. He is a big, wide man that scorns shoes, and indeed as far as I remember NCOs of the GCR didn't always wear shoes, even on parade. He is exactly my age, down to the very month, as I noted from his scrupulous papers.

There was some trouble with pensions when he came home from the war and he and his fellows marched in protest through Accra, and the police killed some of them. Which was a poor way to say thank you for their defence of the Empire, no doubt. But he doesn't say too much about this, and is more concerned to fashion a decent stew, or whatever he happens to be doing. Sweeping out the ants. Shining up the whisky glasses. He just gets on with it. Life. Precious life.

I pay him two shillings a day, which is a bob less than Eneas got in the Royal Irish Constabulary in the twenties, at home in Ireland, which was his undoing. 'The ould death sentence' as Eneas quaintly called it, conferred on him by his own childhood butty, Jonno Lynch, in best Irish style. Now Eneas is in exile somewhere and I don't know where he is. Easy money is a treacherous thing.

In the army, Tom tells me, he was paid a bob a day, unlike

most of the other nationalities, who got two. They kept a third back from his pay too, which was to be given to him as a sort of bonus after the war. This came to £23 in his case, for three years' fighting, including Burma. As for a pension, he says only wounded lads get one of those, and it's only a pittance really. Thousands of soldiers couldn't find work, and they all pledged themselves to Nkrumah as a result. The best you could hope for was a job in the police, but Tom didn't want to do that, especially after being shot at by the same gentlemen. He says he was a happy man when Mr Oko sent him a message that there was a sort of job going with me, although I am not sure he really knows how short-lived it might be. It sufficeth for the day, I suppose.

Tom has a wife and children upcountry somewhere that he never sees. Up along the Volta river somewhere, he did say the name of the village, but I didn't retain it. The reason for this is apparently that the wife won't let him come. He told me that regularly he sends a message to her, asking if he can see his sons and daughters. The messenger has to take a bus, walk twenty miles, and then hire two boats. It is very expensive for Tom. But she always sends a message back to say no. It was strange when he talked about this to see his usually confident, 'manly' face in disarray.

It took him a few months to confide in me. I had asked him to sit but he didn't sit, he just stood there, telling me about his wife.

'Some day I pray she will tell me to come,' he said.

On my new writing table – which I bought in the labyrinthine Kingsway department store in Accra, breasting my way

through the great sea of wives – is an old photo of myself, in a flyblown frame. A chubby six-year-old child on Strandhill beach with a wooden spade and one of those wintry smiles that little boys specialise in. I am holding up the spade with pride to the person taking the photograph. My father, with his box Brownie. When I look at the photo of course I can see myself, but I can also still see him, standing on the sand in his black suit, frowning down at the viewer, and yet smiling, being a somewhat contradictory person sometimes, like a sun-shower.

When we were small boys, myself, Eneas, and Tom – Teasy came later – my father used to come in at night and make himself what he called 'the great bird'. He would stand at our bedsides and spread his arms, and we would try to disappear under the blankets, the three of us in a row in the single bed. With our eyes closed, half terrified, half crazy with delight, we would sense 'the great bird' slowly slowly alighting above us, and then we would feel the human kiss he laid on each of our foreheads.

When I was ten I asked him not to be the great bird any more, and watched his face alter with emotion as he agreed. The difficulty was, he couldn't reach the part of the kiss without it, so myself, Tom, and Eneas went without.

My mother, small, black-clothed as if she were already a widow, was the foundation stone that I based my stability on, like the pier of a bridge. If she seemed harsh sometimes when I was small, it was only a habit that had got a hold of her. And there were times, in particular when my father was away in Roscommon or Mayo with his little orchestra, when she was inclined to take your arm, and tell you things,

funny, quick and startling things, little truths, stories maybe of her youth, before her marriage. And she would stand on the hearthstone of the tiny parlour, and show us one of her dances, which she performed with great dexterity and expertise. And her children would stare gobsmacked at her as she clattered her soles on the black slate.

She rarely addressed my father directly, but called him 'he' and 'him' – even when he was in the old doss beside her. It was a curious habit.

Her occasional crossness had its roots in her terror of being connected to a mystery, something clouded, which was the unknown story of her true origin. She had been raised by the Donnellans, but had eventually found out she was not theirs. This tore at my mother's core. My mother had a horror of her own self sometimes, and her great fear, and the word fear does not encompass her suffering, was that she was illegitimate, which then and now can make a small pit of torment inside a person's soul. Not that she ever spoke of this to me, even when I was a young man, it was Pappy told me about it, in familial whispers.

My father for his part loved nothing more than going out on those sorties with his band. All kitted out in his best suit, his straw boater cocked sideways, he would shove his instruments into the pony and trap, and often me also. I was reckoned to be a decent hand at shaving a reed, or replacing a string. Not to lower the high tone of the band I was also kitted out in a little frock coat perfectly sewn by him, down to the tiny tin buttons.

But my father was also the tailor in the Sligo Lunatic Asylum, that was his real job.

Every year the staff there held their dance, clearing the lunatics back into the further recesses of the enormous building and dragging the old benches out of the Lunatics' Hall. So then I was standing at the rear of an impromptu platform with my penknife poised and my spare strings. I had a privileged view of the buoyant arses of the band, and their bobbing boaters. They wiggled and twisted their bodies like seaweed in the sea as they ground out the evening's music, and the little crowd of revellers milled in a democratic maelstrom on the huge drum of the floorboards. There was something of mania in the wildness of it, as if only mania after all could be manifested in an asylum. Arms were flung around like hurlers, legs were swung in extravagant moves. Normally sober and discouraged females were nearly thrown into the air during the set dances. And I stood there, my face open and staring, delighted with everything, while my father lashed away on the violin, or drove at the cello with his stick like he was trying to saw himself in half.

Then in the little back room, when all was done, and the motley dancers had drifted home, we would eat big white sandwiches, the jam a bloodstain on the bread, and drink cold, cold glasses of milk, the only music now the drifting cries and lamentations of the inmates, raging or sorrowing in the rooms of the echoing building.

Standing beside the little photo of myself, a genuine relic now, is a daguerreotype of my great-uncle Thomas McNulty, who was scalped by a band of Comanches in the central grasslands of Texas. He was a trooper in the US cavalry. It is so faded that I can only just make him out, in

his blue uniform. My father was named after him, and my brother too, necessitating the terms Old Tom and Young Tom. It was this photograph made me want to be a soldier when I was small.

It was our bit of 'ancestry', a thing thin on the ground in general in my family. My father also told me with great solemnity that we had once been butter exporters in Sligo, and had lived in a mansion called the Lungey House, just around the corner from our quarters on John Street. This old place was by then a charmless and festering ruin. In an even more heartfelt confidence, he told me that up to the time of Cromwell, our ancestor, Oliver McNulty, had been chief of his tribe, only to lose his lands to a brother who turned Protestant.

Though this was a history without documents, it constituted in my father's mind a faithful and important record of real things. And it was from this that inevitably I drew a sense of myself in the world, and I never questioned any of it.