



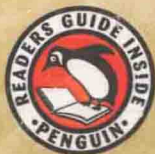
a novel

SEBASTIAN BARRY

THE WHEREABOUTS OF ENEAS McNULTY

"It's a symphony of a novel, and you'll sing along and
wander with Eneas McNulty into the next century."

—FRANK McCOURT, author of *Angela's Ashes*



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*The Whereabouts of
Eneas McNulty*



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TO RITA CONNOLLY

*‘And whosoever was not found written in the book of life
was cast into the lake of fire’*

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PART ONE

I

IN THE MIDDLE OF the lonesome town, at the back of John Street, in the third house from the end, there is a little room. For this small bracket in the long paragraph of the street's history, it belongs to Eneas McNulty. All about him the century has just begun, a century some of which he will endure, but none of which will belong to him. There are all the broken continents of the earth, there is the town park named after Father Moran, with its forlorn roses – all equal to Eneas at five, and nothing his own, but that temporary little room. The dark linoleum curls at the edge where it meets the dark wall. There is a pewter jug on the bedside table that likes to hoard the sun and moon on its curve. There is a tall skinny wardrobe with an ancient hatbox on top, dusty, with or without a hat, he does not know. A room perfectly attuned to him, perfectly tempered, with the long spinning of time perfect and patterned in the bright windowframe, the sleeping of sunlight on the dirty leaves of the maple, the wars of the sparrows and the blue tits for the net of suet his mother ties in the tree, the angry rain that puts its narrow fingers in through the putty, the powerful sudden seaside snow that never sits, the lurch of the dark and the utter merriment of mornings.

At twilight his father stands beside him at the window, a low man in his black clothes and his white skin pale and

damp like a dandelion under a stone. He is showing Eneas the ruins of the Lungey House at the end of the yard, an old jumble of walls and gaps, with brickwork about the empty windows, the rest granite and bluer shale.

‘Never forget the people that went in and out of that place in their time,’ says Tom his father, ‘because, Eneas, they were your own people, and wore the better clothes and were respected. They had plentiful carriages and were respected. People with your own face’ – and his father’s neat fingertips touch the top of his head – ‘that sent butter down the river and out into the wide ocean to Spain and Portugal where cows are scarce.’

Their own circumstances are pinched, that’s the truth. Tom rises with the lark if there ever were a lark in John Street and off he goes with a dapper air to the lunatic asylum to stitch suits for the madmen. That is his father’s work. And his mother too once entered there each day, to be a seamstress to the distressed women. And that was how they met, over their needles and thread, and Eneas is the fruit of their union. A sort of child thrown together out of oddments, lanky, only later to find good muscles pile on his bones, but weak at five.

He does not believe so much in the old butter exporters but he believes in the black rooks, *craws* his mother says they are but he does not think she is right, that call the Lungey House their home and screech and bawl like winged babes in the old sycamores above the Presbyterian graves. An old sycamore is a lovely thing with the bark gone to elephants, as ruckled and rough as elephants. He believes in the gangs of wallflowers that take over each summer, and on a rare day in the wild kids that go along the walltops heading for the orchard of the minister. He believes in those

children and some day they will call to him and he will follow. Some day he will be famous for his friendships or so he believes. No treasure in life beyond pals, his father decrees. He will be heroic and carry the round red apples off into the town in his best gansey, that his grandma Mrs Byrne created – *created*, says his mother – out of an exhausted shawl, and the people of Sligo will admire him for it, the boys of Sligo anyhow.

He sees the wild boys go by the house too, at the front, his own thin and narrow house on John Street and he longs, he longs to open the door and fight them and win his place among them, but he is lanky and weak as yet. The day of strength has not yet come. But it will. He likes the soft face of the leader boy that is called Jonno. He hears the other boys calling Jonno's name in the dusk of the autumn when the apples are ripe and the minister not guarding his possession. He longs to call out Jonno's name through the dusk and be one among many, with torn ganseys and trousers too big, all hand-me-downs from their brothers.

Those days will dawn he devoutly believes and he practises his fighting in the back parlour with the dog Tam. He wrestles with Tam beside the autumn fire and his mother laughs and urges him on. She lifts her black skirts and dances suddenly on the hearth, throwing back her little head, and dances, and Tam goes spark crazy and jumps almost over her head. And the lamb stew boils on the stove with a slightly evil air, mutton really, and Tam is hoarse from barking now, and Eneas is not truly the victor yet.

His mother is a dixie, a lovely dancer, she bangs her shoes on the big black stone of the hearth, where the Spanish gold is buried snugly. The Spanish ran around Ireland in a filthy storm in lovely ships and fetched up among McNulty's who

ate them, his mother says. The hearth, that is where she tells him that story and all the stories, and dances for him. She is as daft as the dog, he knows. She put dresses on the lunatic women. And the old dames half dead in the beds, lying doggo for decades and decades, in turn, in thanks, in sisterhood, put little seams of daftness into her, little cross-stitches and patterns. She sat under the early windowlight stitching in her youth, in the asylum, before his father stole her away. Isn't she dour too, a deal of the time, dour as a fallen loaf in a cold oven, a disappointed loaf? But when the spirit strikes her, fires through her, when some surge of delight infects her, up go the skirts and out the short legs and there is dancing to beat the band.

Tom is often gone for days over to Bundoran or such places with his little orchestra and he plays for the holiday folk and the townspeople letting off steam after the long weeks of work. He plays waltzes, polkas and foxtrots and lately he has been giving them a touch of the new music, the ragtime and the like, that the Negramen of famed America play, because there is a call for it, a call. His father gets in the music in exciting batches, it comes from New York and Galveston, passing the Azores through the light-filled summer storms, the music purposefully silent in the little folded books, waiting for landfall on the Garravogue, waiting for Tom McNulty. But he has the older music too, and the Irish, so you might get a touch of Carolan, Strauss and New Orleans' finest in the one night in the lobby say of the Grand at Bundoran. He goes off winter evenings with his piccolo, his violin, his wooden flutes and oftentimes his cello, and he is not heard of till Monday. He might come in Monday itself early, five or six, long before the milkman's cart, and have a few mugs of strong tea, and then be gone

up to the asylum as right as rain as if he had spent Saturday and Sunday in his doss.

‘And how is it, Pappy, that you’re not weary?’ Eneas asks him, the pair of them sitting together at the scrubbed kitchen table, the loud clock hurrying on above the stove. Eneas’s own eyes are heavy as bullets. He looks in astonishment at his father, with the brightened face and the drumming hand beside the mug, and the neat feet tapping the floor beneath, his smiles cracking his face like a rip in a cloth. And Eneas rose from his tight sheets because he can never resist the lure of his father’s noises below him, but he is nevertheless pole-axed with tiredness.

‘Life, Eneas, life keeps me awake – don’t it you? Here, boy, let me play you a tune I was given last night, by Tom Mangan of Enniscrone . . .’ And he’s reaching again for the tin whistle.

Eneas likes that father of his. He has a rake of friends. There is fellas calling for him all hours. Fellas that want to give him that jig out of North Sligo maybe, for a Yank come home that wants to hear it the one more time. Or now and then a wedding arrangement is made on the doorstep, and Eneas’s father Tom will play you through the streets of Sligo, from your house to the church and back again, if you have but twelve bob and three shots of Scotch. His great ambition is to have his dancing hall in the fabulous glooms of Strandhill.

Doesn’t he rent a garden over in Finisklin, just under Middleton’s hazel woods that used to be coppiced, but have been left to chance now with the coming in of foreign timber? There’s more muck comes up the Garravogue in ships than goes down in the dredgers, his father avers. His garden is the mighty spot. It was a big square of wild grasses

and meadow-rue and heart's-ease, eyebright and strawberry clovers till Tom went in there with his spades and his plans done out on rasher paper and dug the whole thing. And it isn't long while you're digging till it's dug though you might think it would take an age, just looking at it first, the peaceful neglect of the place with the sombre old walls and the locked iron door that used to lead into Midleton's. He put seventeen cartloads of dung into the black soil the first year till he had his compost going off the vegetable peels and the leavings of tea. Eneas played the while on the little space of grass that was left for his sole use, and his father dug till nightfall and the sprinkle of Sligo stars came out above their heads. The minute, the second he ate a bit of clay he is heartily smacked for it – so he keeps to the patch of grass after that playing with a handy weeding trowel and maybe truth to tell giving the isolated sniff despite himself. Over the seasons ensuing his father sets in a mighty system of paths with sacks of cinders bought from the laundry, from fuel that had done the convent's water heaters. He rakes them out and his son Eneas trots along the paths gratefully, not in any way eating the alluring cinders. In go the hollyhocks and the peonies and the hebes and the blue hydrangeas, in splendid great rows, and the sweet pea along Midleton's wall and he has a few young pear trees in a warm and windless corner. One spring at last after much asking a fella comes up from the lake with big flat stones worn by the lapping of waves and there are five steps down from the pears in the passing of an afternoon. That is a great day for the garden.

At night he is brought back to the little back bedroom with the dark blue linoleum through the nuns' field gone dark with a pitch darkness that no child could like, hand in

hand they go, gaining the little house at last, and enjoying the spot of supper in the lamplit parlour at first, and then away up to bed like a ghost, his mother after scrubbing at his nails fiercely, as tired and contented as humankind may be.

These are the ancient days when his father plays the piccolo and his mother dances for him and he sits on the hearthstone smiling crazily at them, smiling, smiling, his face opened by that smile, such an honest happy smile, cracking his face like a miniature of his father's, generous, amazed. When in truth the world is simple with pleasure, and precise, and he hears the boys calling Jonno in the dusk and thinks of the apples going off in the ganseys as the light fails in the arms of the sycamores.

2

THEY BOTH HAVE a cargo of brown parcels – small but enough to fetter their hands – and it begins to rain. The rain comes in over Sligo deviously, searching them out in the sunken street. It is funny how quickly even such a light rain manages to cover the paper with its drops till there are precious few dry gaps. So the two go cantering along the sidewalk, his mother surprisingly agile, but maybe not so considering her dances, they are both in clothes quite black, running, and it is the Easter, and they are after having a gander at the big candle in the cathedral, and into the Café Cairo with them both, from the sublime to the ridiculous his mother gasps, for the shelter. Usually they would not go into such a place, out of respect for the expense of bought tea – a mere pot of it for ninepence, gracious. But his mother is too – too ashamed maybe to shelter without purchasing anything, so they tuck themselves into a table. They have to build a veritable wall with the parcels.

‘Look at the style of us,’ his mother whispers. ‘And us with a half-pound bag of best Fast Clipper tea.’

And the server, a mere girl of sixteen in an apron stiff as a nun’s hat, comes up to them lazily with a neat book and pencil stub and he stares up at her, at her ruby lips and her eyes loose with lights and the queer impression she gives that she believes that she will live and look so for ever.

'Tea for the two of us, dear,' his mother says innocently.

'Is that it?' says the server severely, as if millionaires like her are offended by such tiny orders, and Eneas relaxes because she talks just the same as himself, with the grey pebbles of the Sligo slingshot talk.

'We were gone past the Abbey and there was two wildcats in it,' he says to her. But the server scribbles on her book and clips away on her hard, hard shoes. There is a star on the arch of each strap. Her stockings are coal-black, she looks like two young trees in her stockings. His mother smiles at him in her odour of panic.

There are two ladies at a near table and they are staring at his mother he notices. Staring like there was no sin in staring, so he gives his mother a private signal and his mother gracefully swivels her head and meets their pesky eyes. The ladies are heaped up into huge hats and their coat collars are worse than wings. They might be insects. At any rate they are still whispering away like bees. Now his mother's face has two plaques of red where her cheeks were. The red is seeping down her neck, into her collar with the blue stitching following the up and down of the lace. Eneas is staring at her too now, because of the fiery colour. If a flame were to lick out of her skin he would not express his surprise.

The tea comes down and his mother and himself take it in the blue cups, furtively. He has five sugars for the sake of the free bowl of it, despite his despair. The old hats across the way nod and tip at each other, the ragged feathers swept about minutely. It is not so long before his mother and himself can bear it no longer and up they rises and away with them. Happily the rain has let up. He thinks of the wildcats in the ruined yards of the Abbey. He wishes he

were a wildcat, sheltering under the heavy leaves of the laurel, looking out in fearless alarm as wildcats do.

*

‘Pappy, how is it that the Mam goes puce in the Café Cairo and we’re getting stares?’ he says, under the shelter of the cloudy moon in John Street.

‘I don’t know rightly, Eneas,’ says Tom. ‘Were you getting stares?’

‘We were, Pappy, stares like staring was no sin, Pappy.’

His father is looking at him quietly. He has the old bedtime book on his lap, the one he likes to read, the one his own father used read to him in the old days. He saved the book for his own children.

‘On the other hand, Pappy,’ says Eneas, ‘we passed the Abbey and there were these two cats in the bushes.’

‘Cats?’

‘Wild ones, I would say, Pappy, desperadoes.’

‘No doubt!’

‘And we were after seeing the Easter candle in the Cathedral too, and had a great gape at it, the two of us. We were happy. And then down comes the rain and we ducked into the Café Cairo and then we got the stares.’

‘Don’t mind it,’ says his father.

‘A star on each shoe, she had,’ he says.

‘Who, boy?’

‘The poor wee girl giving us out the tea.’

‘She never.’

‘She did. Mam said she was just the sort of girl you’d see hanging out of a fella up the steps of the picture house Fridays.’