A Long Long Way

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PART ONE

Chapter One

He was born in the dying days.

It was the withering end of 1896. He was called William after the long-dead Orange King, because his father took an interest in such distant matters. On top of that, an old great-uncle, William Cullen, was yet living in Wicklow, across the mountains as they used to say, where his father himself had been reared.

The winter sleet bit into the Dublin cab-men, where they gathered in their mucky gabardines by the Round Room in Great Britain Street. The stony face of the old building remained indifferent, with its strange decoration of ox-skulls and draperies.

The new babies screeched inside the thick grey walls of the Rotunda Hospital. Blood gathered on the nurses' white laps like the aprons of butchers.

He was a little baby and would be always a little boy. He was like the thin upper arm of a beggar with a few meagre bones shot through him, provisional and bare.

When he broke from his mother he made a mewling sound like a wounded cat, over and over.

That was the night of a storm that would not be a famous storm. But, for all that, it rattled the last leaves out of the regal oaks in the old pleasure gardens behind the hospital, and it drove the wet harvest along the gutters and into the gaping drains and down into the unknown avenues of the great sewers. The blood of births was sluiced down there too, and all the many liquids of humanity, but the salt sea at Ringsend took everything equally.

His mother took him to her breast with the exhausted will that makes heroes of most mothers. The fathers stood well away, taking a beer in the Ship Hotel. The century was old and weak, but the men spoke of horses and taxes. A baby knows nothing, and Willie knew nothing, but he was like a scrap of a song nonetheless, a point of light in the sleety darkness, a beginning.

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And all those boys of Europe born in those times, and thereabouts those times, Russian, French, Belgian, Serbian, Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, Italian, Prussian, German, Austrian, Turkish – and Canadian, Australian, American, Zulu, Gurkha, Cossack, and all the rest – their fate was written in a ferocious chapter of the book of life, certainly. Those millions of mothers and their million gallons of mothers' milk, millions of instances of small-talk and baby-talk, beatings and kisses, ganseys and shoes, piled up in history in great ruined heaps, with a loud and broken music, human stories told for nothing, for ashes, for death's amusement, flung on the mighty scrapheap of souls, all those million boys in all their humours to be milled by the mill-stones of a coming war.

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When Willie was six or seven the King of Ireland came from England to visit Ireland. The King was as big as a bed. There was a big review over at the barracks in the Phoenix Park. Willie stood there with his mam because the King as big as a bed, a brass bed mind, for two people, wanted to see the gathered men of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. And why wouldn't he? They were as grand and as black as an army, marching and drilling there. His father, though only an inspector at that time, was put up on a big white horse, so the King could see him all the better. His father on that horse looked much finer than any King, who after all had to stand on his

polished shoes. Like God Himself, or the best man in God's kingdom.

For years after, till he put away such childish ideas, he thought his father always went out to do his work on the white horse, but of course it wasn't so.

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Such a singing voice he had. His mother, who was a blunt woman enough, one of the Cullens herself, daughter of the coppicer on the Humewood estate in Wicklow, got only good from it. She set him on a chair to sing like any woman might, and he threw his small head back and sang some song of the Wicklow districts, as might be, and she saw in her mind a hundred things, of childhood, rivers, woods, and felt herself in those minutes to be a girl again, living, breathing, complete. And wondered in her private mind at the power of mere words, the mere things you rolled round in your mouth, the power of them strung together on the penny string of a song, how they seemed to call up a hundred vanished scenes, gone faces, lost instances of human love.

His father, right enough, was a dark policeman in dark clothes. Willie Dunne was washed every night of his life in an enamel bath set beside the big fire in the sitting-room. And six o'clock every evening prompt, his father would come in and grip the wet little boy and lift him to his breast, where the silver buttons were, and Willie would lie up there like a scrap, like a featherless pigeon, still damp from the bath, his mother straining up with the towel to dry him, and his father perpetually frowning, all six foot six of him, and saying what a fine policeman he would make in time, a fine policeman.

And year by year his father measured him, standing him up against the wallpaper by the old marble fireplace, and putting a volume of operettas on his head, The Bohemian Girl and Other Popular Operas, and marking off his height with a stubby official police pencil.

And then Willie was twelve at last and a proper boy. And his youngest sister Dolly was born in the house in Dalkey and his mother was killed by that. And then it was his father only and the three girls and him, and at last into Dublin Castle with them in 1912, it was the winter of that year, and the memory of his mother was like a dark song that made him cry in his bed alone, strong though he was and all of sixteen, and the steam of his sisters' cooking turned to tears on the chilly glass of the old windows.

And then there was another thing to make him secretly cry, which was his 'damnable' height, as his father began to call it.

For his growing slowed to a snail's pace, and his father stopped putting him against the wallpaper, such was both their grief, for it was as clear as day that Willie Dunne would never reach six feet, the regulation height for a recruit.

Willie cursed his very bones, his very muscles, his very heart and soul, for useless frustrating things, and shortly after he was apprenticed to Dempsey the builder, which in the upshot was unexpectedly very pleasant, and gave Willie secret joy. Because it was a pleasure to work at building, to set stone upon stone by gravity's rule.

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Gretta was the secret he kept from his father, he loved her so much. It had happened by accident that he met her. During the terrible lock-out the year before in '13 his father had had the responsibility of keeping order in the streets of Dublin, as being high up in B Division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. He had led the baton charge against the crowd gathered in Sackville Street, that time the Labour leader James Larkin had spoken to them.

Many heads had been smacked with those batons. And indeed a few of the DMP men themselves, the batons wrenched out of their hands, had been thumped in turn with their own weapons. But it was considered generally by the

government that the police had acted bravely and had won the day.

One of the thumped citizens was a man named Lawlor, who Willie's father knew from around Dublin Castle, because he was a carter there. And Lawlor's head was done in good and proper, and Willie's father had tried to make it up to him, coming to visit in the evenings with apples and the like, but Lawlor was outraged and would scarcely speak to him, even though the policeman wore an ordinary suit to protect Lawlor's feelings and was inconspicuous. But the fact was Mr Lawlor was passionately in Larkin's court. The old policeman could never even countenance such a possibility, and for many months continued to court the man's friendship. Why him among all the others Willie did not know, unless it was a question of neighbourliness, an important matter to a Wicklow man.

Now Willie was nearly seventeen by this time, and when his father's conscience ached and yet he was too busy to go and see Lawlor, Willie was sent. The first time he was given two pheasants to take that had been shot on the Humewood estate, and sent up by the old steward, Willie's father's father, to his son in the castle. Now Mr Lawlor's rooms were in a tenement under Christ Church Cathedral, so it wasn't a long walk for Willie. Nevertheless, he carried the two birds with an inexplicable shame, though in the event not even the critical urchins in the streets mocked him.

When he got to the house Mr Lawlor was not in, but Willie went up to his room anyhow, just intending to leave the birds inside the door. They had beautiful feathers, those cock pheasants, like something you would see in the hat of the Viceroy's wife – or mistress. Willie always enjoyed the scandalous stories told by Dempsey's men, when they would be having their breakfast all together at some site or other at six, lovely sausages and hot tea and the scalding scandals of the day. He was as plagued as any other boy by desire, trying to put manners on the endless erection of his sixteen years, and

the laughter and passionate disclosures of the men delighted him well enough.

Willie went in through a dirty, heavily scratched door into an old room with a high ceiling. All around the edge of the ceiling were musical instruments in plaster, violins and cellos and drums and flutes and fifes, because it had once been the music-room of a great Protestant bishop connected to the cathedral, long ago. There was an elaborate marble fireplace at the top of the room, as yellow as a hen's leg from the damp and the soot. The room itself was divided here and there by long rags sewn together, so that the inhabitants of the place might have privacy. Indeed, there were four families in the room, so each division was a separate kingdom.

And in one of those kingdoms he saw for the first time his princess, Gretta Lawlor, who truly was one of the beauties of the city, there would be no lie in that. Dublin could show many beauties, skinny and destitute though they might seem. And she was among the finest, though of course she knew nothing of that.

She was sitting by a window writing on a piece of paper, though he never found out what she was writing. Her face made his stomach weak, and her arms and breasts made his legs of poor use to him. She had the strange look of an old painting, because the light was on her face. It was a neat, delectable face and she had long yellow hair like something caught in the act of falling. Maybe in her work, if she had work, she kept it tied and pinned. But here in her privacy it was glistening with the secret lights of the old room. Her eyes had the green of the writing on a tram ticket. Her breasts in a soft blue linen dress were small, thin, and fiercely pointed. It was almost a cause for fainting on his part, he had never witnessed the like. He held the pheasants up in the gloom and noticed for the first time that they had a curious smell, as if left hanging too long, and they were starting to decompose. She was just thirteen in that time.

As he stood there a man came in behind him and pushed past into the curtained space. He was wearing a long, black, threadbare raincoat. The man laid himself down on one of the rickety beds and swung his feet up wearily, and it seemed only then noticed Willie.

'What you want, sonny?' he said.

'I was bringing these up to Mr Lawlor,' said Willie.

'Who are they from?' said the man.

'From my father, James Dunne.'

'The chief super at the castle?'

'Are you Mr Lawlor, then?'

'Do you want to see the scar on my noggin?' said the man, laughing not entirely agreeably.

'Can I put them down somewhere?' said Willie, uneasily.

'So you're his son, are you?' he said, maybe noting his height.

'I am,' said Willie, and then he knew the girl was looking at him. He raised his eyes towards her and she was smiling. But maybe it was a smile of mockery, or worse, pity. She's thinking, he thought, I am small to be a policeman's son. He was hoping still in those times he might make a last spurt of growth. But he couldn't tell her that.

'So what do you think, son, about Peelers rushing in on passers-by and knocking the bejaysus out of them?'

'I don't know, Mr Lawlor.'

'You should know. You should have an opinion. I don't care what a man thinks as long as he knows his own mind.'

'That's what my grandfather says,' said Willie, expecting to be mocked for his words. But the answer wasn't mocking.

'The curse of the world is people thinking thoughts that are only thoughts which have been given to them. They're not their own thoughts. They're like cuckoos in their heads. Their own thoughts are tossed out and cuckoo thoughts put in instead. Don't you agree? What's your name?'

'William.'

'Well, William. Don't you agree?'

But Willie Dunne didn't know what to say. He could feel the eyes of the girl on him.

'Yes,' said the man, 'if Gretta here, my daughter Gretta, was to elope to Gretna Green tomorrow with some young fella, with you even say, I would ask her as she went out the door, "Gretta, do you know your own mind?" and if the answer was yes, I couldn't stop her. I might want to stop her, but I couldn't. And I might beat you just for the sake of it. But if it was a thought put in her head by another, you for instance, why, I would bolt her leg to the floor.'

This was peculiar, embarrassing talk for Willie and, he believed, for anyone in his position at that moment. And while he was reluctant truly to move away from the girl, he was longing to move away from Mr Lawlor.

But Mr Lawlor had stopped talking and closed his eyes. He had a bushy black moustache but his face was long and thin.

'Mother of Jesus,' he said.

'It's all right,' said the girl, and she had a low, deeply pleasing voice, Willie thought. 'Leave the birds there. I'll cook them for him.'

'I don't want the birds,' said Mr Lawlor. 'And I don't want his jars of lamb stew and his jams and his – Do you know, William, your father sent me in a live chicken last week? I'm not going to be wringing the necks of hens at my time of life. I sold it to a lady for a shilling only because I couldn't watch the creature starve to death, for the love of God.'

'He's only trying to make it up to you. You're his neighbour,' said Willie. 'He didn't like to see a neighbour hit on the head.'

'But it was him hit me on the head. Well, not him, but one of his lads. Wild, big, feverish-looking fellas with big black sticks knocking sparks off of my skull. See, does he know his own mind? Now, does he? If he knew his own mind, he could give a man a belt and not think twice about it. And I suppose

could be quite easy in that same mind about the four men killed that day.'

Willie Dunne stood there marooned by these truths.

'I'm being a miserable old so-and-so, hah?' said Mr Lawlor. 'Yes, Gretta? I expect so. Put down your birds, sonny, and thank you. But don't thank your father. Tell him I threw them out the window into the street. Tell him I did that, William.'

Four men killed that day. The phrase sat up in Willie's head like a rat and made a nest for itself there.

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Although he protested, Mr Lawlor was brought further treats in the coming times and Willie ferried them for his father. Mr Lawlor had lost his work as a carter because of the blow to his head; it was thought by his employer that he was a dangerous man if he had been agitating in Sackville Street. But thousands had forfeited their jobs for the duration of the lock-out and when it was over many found it impossible to get them back. So Mr Lawlor was one of many. And like many another he joined the army so he could get food for himself and send his pay to Gretta. And so he was away for days on end, and although there were women in the other parts of the room that looked out for her, it was easier for Willie to come and talk to her. And they talked about everything that was in their heads to talk about.

He kept it all a secret from his sisters on instinct and no doubt it was a good instinct, because the truth was that Gretta was a slum dweller and Willie knew what Maud and especially Annie thought about such things, and they would immediately tell his father. And he did not wish that to happen. And he confined himself to going when his father gave him a parcel or a little bit of beef, so it all seemed normal and straight. But he supposed it wasn't normal and straight exactly. He was in love with Gretta like a poor swan was in love with the Liffey and cannot leave it, no matter how often the boys of Dublin stone

her nest. Her voice to him was just music, and her face was light, and her body was a city of gold.

One day he came and she was sleeping. He sat on a broken chair for two hours watching her breathing, the gappy coverlet rising and falling, her face dreaming. The coverlet fell away and he saw her soft breasts. There were angels on the O'Connell Monument but she was not like them but he thought she looked like an angel, at least how an angel ought to look. It was as if he were being shown the heart of the world, such beauty in that shabby place. The weather was evil beyond the window, a harsh sleet pinning the darkness with a million pins. He loved her so much he wept. That was how it was for Willie Dunne, and maybe they were matters that could only be taken away from him.

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By the time he was seventeen and she was nearly fifteen, they had been almost a year dodging both the fathers. Gretta was an extremely straightforward person and she knew herself when she saw Willie that first time that he was for her, young though she was. Her world became things before Willie and things after meeting Willie, like the world designates things before and after Christ.

Perhaps merely by some rough chance he never slighted her or grossly offended her, though they could have a row like the best. She wasn't so wedded to the idea of his erection as perhaps he was.

'Well, you boys are all the same,' she said.

Her father was going to put her to service in one of the Merrion Square houses if he could, or failing that, he thought he might send her down the country to a good family. And he might have done so already except he was fond of her, and his wife had died of a galloping consumption many years before, turning to a wet stick in the goosedown bed at his side. And he had no other companion in the world.

Willie, for his part, was going to grow rich at the building with Dempsey, and marry her. He felt he could carry the day with her father when the time came.

But then that other queer time of the war came suddenly and, much against Gretta's desires, he wanted to go to the war.

It was difficult for him to explain to her why it was so, because it was difficult to put it into words for himself. He told her it was because he loved her he had to go, that there were women like her being killed by the Germans in Belgium, and how could he let that happen? Gretta did not understand. He said he would go to please his father also and though she did understand that, she thought it a poor enough reason. He told her her own father would be in the fight now, and she pointed out that he was part of the garrison at the Curragh, and she didn't think he would be sent to France.

But he knew he must play his part, and when he came home he would not be remorseful, but content in his heart that he had followed his own mind.

'Your Da said himself we have to know our own minds,' he said.

'That's only a thing he got out of a little book he reads. St Thomas Aquinas, Willie. That's all,' she said.