

5 'You saw an execution then too, didn't you?' I asked my father, and he started to tell
as he rowed. He'd been captured in an ambush in late 1919, and they were shooting
prisoners in Mountjoy as reprisals at that time. He thought it was he who'd be next,
for after a few days they moved him to the cell next to the prison yard. He could see
out through the bars. No rap to prepare himself came to the door that night, and at
10 daybreak he saw the two prisoners they'd decided to shoot being marched out: a man
in his early thirties, and what was little more than a boy, sixteen or seventeen, and he
was weeping. They blindfolded the boy, but the man refused the blindfold. When the
officer shouted, the boy clicked to attention, but the man stayed as he was, chewing
very slowly. He had his hands in his pockets.

15 'Take your hands out of your pockets,' the officer shouted again, irritation in the
voice.

The man slowly shook his head.

'It's a bit too late now in the day for that,' he said.

20 The officer then ordered them to fire, and as the volley rang, the boy tore at his tunic
over the heart, as if to pluck out the bullets, and the buttons of the tunic began to fly
into the air before he pitched forward on his face.

The other heeled quietly over on his back: it must have been because of the hands in
the pockets.

25 The officer dispatched the boy with one shot from the revolver as he lay face
downward, but he pumped five bullets in rapid succession into the man, as if to pay
him back for not coming to attention.

30 'When I was on my honeymoon years after, it was May, and we took the tram up the
hill of Howth from Sutton Cross,' my father said as he rested on the oars. 'We sat on
top in the open on the wooden seats with the rail around that made it like a small
ship. The sea was below, and smell of the sea and furze-bloom all about, and then I
looked down and saw the furze pods bursting, and the way they burst in all directions
seemed shocking like the buttons when he started to tear at his tunic. I couldn't get it
out of my mind all day. It destroyed the day.'

‘It’s a wonder their hands weren’t tied?’ I asked him as he rowed between the black navigation pan and the red where the river flowed into Oakport.

‘I suppose it was because they were considered soldiers.’

5 ‘Do you think the boy stood to attention because he felt that he might still get off if he obeyed the rules?’

10 ‘Sounds a bit highfalutin’ to me. Comes from going to school too long,’ he said aggressively, and I was silent. It was new to me to hear him talk about his own life at all. Before, if I asked him about the war, he’d draw fingers across his eyes as if to tear a spider web away, but it was my last summer with him on the river, and it seemed to make him want to talk, to give of himself before it ended.

Hand over hand I drew in the line that throbbed with fish; there were two miles of line, a hook on a lead line every three yards. The licence allowed us a thousand hooks, but we used more. We were the last to fish this freshwater for a living.

15 As the eels came in over the side I cut them loose with a knife into a wire cage, where they slid over each other in their own oil, the twisted eel hook in their mouths. The other fish – pike choked on hooked perch they’d tried to swallow, bream, roach – I slid up the floorboards towards the bow of the boat. We’d sell them in the village or give them away. The hooks that hadn’t been taken I cleaned and stuck in rows round the side of the wooden box. I let the line fall in its centre. After a mile he took my
20 place in the stern and I rowed. People hadn’t woken yet, and the early morning cold and mist were on the river. Outside of the slow ripple of the oars and the threshing of the fish on the line beaded with running drops of water as it came in, the river was dead silent, except for the occasional lowing of cattle on the banks.

‘Have you any idea what you’ll do after this summer?’ he asked.

25 ‘No. I’ll wait and see what comes up,’ I answered.

‘How do you mean what comes up?’

‘Whatever result I get in the exam. If the result is good, I’ll have choices. If it’s not, there won’t be choices. I’ll have to take what I can get.’

‘How good do you think they’ll be?’

30 ‘I think they’ll be all right, but there’s no use counting chickens, is there?’

‘No,’ he said, but there was something calculating in the face; it made me watchful of him as I rowed the last stretch of the line. The day had come, the distant noises of the farms and the first flies on the river, by the time we’d lifted the large wire cage out of the bulrushes, emptied in the morning’s catch of eels, and sunk it again.

5 ‘We’ll have enough for a consignment tomorrow,’ he said.

Each week we sent the live eels to Billingsgate in London.

10 ‘But say, say even if you do well, you wouldn’t think of throwing this country up altogether and going to America?’ he said, the words fumbled for as I pushed the boat out of the bulrushes after sinking the cage of eels, using the oar as a pole, the mud rising a dirty yellow between the stems.

‘Why America?’

‘Well, it’s the land of opportunity, isn’t it, a big, expanding country? There’s no room for ambition in this poky place. All there’s room for is to make holes in pints of porter.’

15 I was wary of the big words. They were not in his own voice.

‘Who’d pay the fare?’

‘We’d manage that. We’d scrape it together somehow.’

‘Why should you scrape for me to go to America if I can get a job here?’

20 ‘I feel I’d be giving you a chance I never got. I fought for this country. And now they want to take away even the licence to fish. Will you think about it anyhow?’

‘I’ll think about it,’ I answered.

25 Through the day he trimmed the brows of ridges in the potato field while I replaced hooks on the line and dug worms, pain of doing things for the last time as well as the boredom the knowledge brings that soon there’ll be no need to do them, that they could be discarded almost now. The guilt of leaving came: I was discarding his life to assume my own, a man to row the boat would eat into the decreasing profits of the fishing, and it was even not certain he’d get renewal of his licence. The tourist board had opposed the last application. They said we impoverished the coarse fishing for tourists – the tourists who came every summer from Liverpool and Birmingham in
30 increasing numbers to sit in aluminium deck-chairs on the riverbank and fish with rods. The fields we had would be a bare living without the fishing.

I saw him stretch across the wall in conversation with the cattle-dealer Farrell as I came round to put the worms where we stored them in clay in the darkness of the lavatory. Farrell leaned on the bar of his bicycle on the road. I passed into the lavatory thinking they were talking about the price of cattle, but as I emptied the worms into the box, the word Moran came, and I carefully opened the door to listen. It was my father's voice. He was excited.

'I know. I heard the exact sum. They got ten thousand dollars when Luke was killed. Every American soldier's life is insured to the tune of ten thousand dollars.'

'I heard they get two hundred and fifty dollars a month each for Michael and Sam while they're serving,' he went on.

'They're buying cattle left and right,' Farrell's voice came as I closed the door and stood in the darkness, in the smell of shit and piss and the warm fleshy smell of worms crawling in too little clay.

The shock I felt was the shock I was to feel later when I made some social blunder, the splintering of a self-esteem and the need to crawl into a lavatory to think.

Luke Moran's body had come from Korea in a leaden casket, had crossed the stone bridge to the slow funeral bell with the big cars from the embassy behind, the coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes. Shots had been fired above the grave before they threw in the clay. There were photos of his decorations being presented to his family by a military attaché.

He'd scrape the fare, I'd be conscripted there, each month he'd get so many dollars while I served, and he'd get ten thousand if I was killed.

In the darkness of the lavatory between the boxes of crawling worms before we set the night line for the eels I knew my youth had ended.

I rowed as he let out the night line, his fingers baiting each twisted hook so beautifully that it seemed a single movement. The dark was closing from the shadow of Oakport to Nutley's boathouse, bats made ugly whirls overhead, the wings of ducks shirred as they curved down into the bay.

'Have you thought about what I said about going to America?' he asked, without lifting his eyes from the hooks and the box of worms.

'I have.'

The oars dipped in the water without splash, the hole whorling wider in the calm as it slipped on the stern seat.

‘Have you decided to take the chance, then?’

‘No. I’m not going.’

5 ‘You won’t be able to say I didn’t give you the chance when you come to nothing in this fool of a country. It’ll be your own funeral.’

‘It’ll be my own funeral,’ I answered, and asked after a long silence, ‘As you grow older, do you find your own days in the war and jails coming much back to you?’

10 ‘I do. And I don’t want to talk about them. Talking about the execution disturbed me no end, those cursed buttons bursting into the air. And the most I think is that if I’d conducted my own wars, and let the fool of a country fend for itself, I’d be much better off today. I don’t want to talk about it.’

I knew this silence was fixed for ever as I rowed in silence till he asked, ‘Do you think, will it be much good tonight?’

15 ‘It’s too calm,’ I answered.

‘Unless the night wind gets up,’ he said anxiously.

‘Unless a night wind,’ I repeated.

20 As the boat moved through the calm water and the line slipped through his fingers over the side I’d never felt so close to him before, not even when he’d carried me on his shoulders above the laughing crowd to the Final. Each move he made I watched as closely as if I too had to prepare myself to murder.