

Back from America

Eilis comes back to Ireland after learning about her sister's death, a (secretly) married woman.

The house itself did not seem strange; Eilis noted only its solid, familiar aura, the lingering smell of cooked food, the shadows, the sense of her mother's vivid presence. But nothing had prepared her for the quietness of Rose's bedroom and she felt almost nothing as she stood looking at it. (...)

As they ate breakfast Eilis wished she could think of something more to say but it was hard to speak since her mother seemed to have prepared in advance every word that she said.

By the time she managed to say that she was tired and would need to lie down for a while, her mother had not asked her one question about her time in America, or even her trip home. Just as her mother seemed to have prepared things to say and show to her, Eilis had been planning how this first day would go. She had planned to give an account of how much more smooth the crossing from New York to Cobh had been than her first voyage from Liverpool, and how much she had enjoyed sitting up on deck taking in the sun. She had planned also to show her mother the letter from Brooklyn College telling her that she had passed her exams and would, in time, be sent a certificate to say that she was a qualified bookkeeper. She had also bought her mother a cardigan and scarf and some stockings, but her mother had almost absent-mindedly left them aside, saying that she would open them later.

Eilis loved closing the door of her old room and drawing the curtains. She had put no thought into what it would be like to come home because she had expected that it would be easy; she had longed so much for the familiarity of these rooms that she had presumed she would be happy and relieved to step back into them, but, instead, on this first morning, all she could do was count the days before she went back. This made her feel strange and guilty; she curled up in the bed and closed her eyes in the hope that she might sleep.

Her mother woke her saying it was almost teatime. She had slept, she guessed, for almost six hours and wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep. Her mother told her that there was hot water in case she wanted a bath. (...)

When she came back into the kitchen, having had her bath and put on the fresh clothes, her mother looked her up and down in vague disapproval. It struck Eilis that maybe the colours she was wearing were too bright, but she did not have any darker colours.

They sat at the dining-room table going through all the letters of condolence and mass cards they had received in the weeks after Rose died. (...) As her mother read out lists of people, Eilis was almost inclined to giggle at names she had not heard of, or thought of, during her time in America. When her mother mentioned an old woman who lived down near the Folly, Eilis could not resist speaking. "God, is she still going?" (...)

For the next few days as she moved around the town, and on Sunday, when she went to eleven o'clock mass with her mother, people commented on Eilis's beautiful clothes, her sophisticated hairstyle and her suntan. She tried to make plans to see Annette or Nancy either together or separately every day, telling her mother in advance what she intended to do. On the following Wednesday, when she told her mother that, if it was fine, she was going the next day in the early afternoon to Curracloe with George Sheridan and Nancy and Annette, her mother demanded that she cancel her outing that evening and begin the task of going through Rose's belongings, deciding what to keep and what to give away.

They took out the clothes hanging in the wardrobe and put them on the bed. Eilis wanted to make clear that she did not need any of her sister's clothes and that it would be best to give away everything to a charity. But her mother was already setting aside Rose's winter coat, so recently acquired, and a number of frocks that she said could easily be altered to fit Eilis.

"I won't have much room in my suitcase," Eilis said, "and the coat is lovely but the colour is too dark for me." Her mother, still busy sorting the clothes, pretended that she had not heard her.

"What we'll do is we'll take the frocks and the coat to the dressmaker's in the morning and they'll look different when they are the proper size, when they match your new American figure."

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