

A Quiet Call to America

Father Flood was tall; his accent was a mixture of Irish and American. Nothing he said could convince Eilis's mother that she had known him or his family. His mother, he said, had been a Rochford.

"I don't think I knew her," her mother said. "The only Rochford we knew was old Hatchethead." Father Flood looked at her solemnly. "Hatchethead was my uncle," he said.

"Was he?" her mother asked. Eilis saw how close she was to nervous laughter.

"But of course we didn't call him that," Father Flood said. "His real name was Seamus." "Well, he was very nice," her mother said. "Weren't we awful to call him that?"

Rose poured more tea as Eilis quietly left the room, afraid that if she stayed she would be unable to disguise an urge to begin laughing.

When she returned she realized that Father Flood had heard about her job at Miss Kelly's, had found out about her pay and had expressed shock at how low it was. He inquired about her qualifications. "In the United States," he said, "there would be plenty of work for someone like you and with good pay."

"She thought of going to England," her mother said, "but the boys said to wait, that it wasn't the best time there, and she might only get factory work."

"In Brooklyn, where my **parish** is, there would be office work for someone who was hard-working and educated and honest."

"Ifs very far away, though," her mother said. "That's the only thing."

"Parts of Brooklyn," Father Flood replied, "are just like Ireland. They're full of Irish."

He crossed his legs and sipped his tea from the china cup and said nothing for a while. The silence that descended made it clear to Eilis what the others were thinking. She looked across at her mother, who deliberately, it seemed to her, did not return her glance, but kept her gaze fixed on the floor. Rose, normally so good at moving the conversation along if they had a visitor, also said nothing. She twisted her ring and then her bracelet.

"It would be a great opportunity, especially if you were young," Father Flood said finally.

"It might be very dangerous," her mother said, her eyes still fixed on the floor.

"Not in my parish," Father Flood said. "It's full of lovely people. A lot of life centres round the parish, even more than in Ireland. And there's work for anyone who's willing to work."

Eilis felt like a child when the doctor would come to the house, her mother listening with cowed respect. It was Rose's silence that was new to her; she looked at her now, wanting her sister to ask a question or make a comment, but Rose appeared to be in a sort of dream. As Eilis watched her, it struck her that she had never seen Rose look so beautiful. And then it occurred to her that she was already feeling that she would need to remember this room, her sister, this scene, as though from a distance. In the silence that had lingered, she realized it had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America. Father Flood, she believed, had been invited to the house because Rose knew that he could arrange it.

Her mother had been so opposed to her going to England that this new realization came to Eilis as a shock. She wondered if she had not taken the job in the shop and had not told them about her weekly humiliation at Miss Kelly's hands, might they have been so ready to let this conversation happen. She regretted having told them so much; she had done so mostly because it had made Rose and her mother laugh, brightened a number of meals that they had had with each other, made eating together nicer and easier than anytime since her father had died and the boys had left. [...]

In the days that followed no mention was made of Father Flood's visit or his raising the possibility of her going to Brooklyn, and it was the silence itself that led Eilis to believe that Rose and her mother had discussed it and were in favour of it. She had never considered going to America. Many she knew had gone to England and often came back at Christmas or in the summer. It was part of the life of the town. Although she knew friends who regularly received presents of dollars or clothes from America, it was always from their aunts and uncles, people who had emigrated long before the war. She could not remember any of these people ever appearing in the town on holidays. It was a long journey across the Atlantic, she knew, at least a week on a ship, and it must be expensive. She had a sense too, she did not know from where, that, while the boys and girls from the town who had gone to England did ordinary work for ordinary money, people who went to America could become rich. She tried to work out how she had come to believe also that, while people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud. She wondered if that could be true.

Colm Toibin, Brooklyn, 2009

Parish: name given to the Christian community attached to a church.