

Brooklyn

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Extract

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Eilis Lacey, sitting at the window of the upstairs living room in the house on Friary Street, noticed her sister walking briskly from work. She watched Rose crossing the street from sunlight into shade, carrying the new leather handbag that she had bought in Clery's in Dublin in the sale. Rose was wearing a cream-coloured cardigan over her shoulders. Her golf clubs were in the hall; in a few minutes, Eilis knew, someone would call for her and her sister would not return until the summer evening had faded.

Eilis's bookkeeping classes were almost ended now; she had a manual on her lap about systems of accounting, and on the table behind her was a ledger where she had entered, as her homework, on the debit and credit sides, the daily business of a company whose details she had taken down in notes in the Vocational School the week before.

As soon as she heard the front door open, Eilis went downstairs. Rose, in the hall, was holding her pocket mirror in front of her face. She was studying herself closely as she applied lipstick and some eye make-up before glancing at her overall appearance in the large hall mirror, settling her hair. Eilis looked on silently as her sister moistened her lips and then checked herself one more time in the pocket mirror before putting it away.

Their mother came from the kitchen to the hall.

'You look lovely, Rose,' she said. 'You'll be the belle of the golf club.'

'I'm starving,' Rose said, 'but I've no time to eat.'

'I'll make a special tea for you later,' her mother said. 'Eilis and myself are going to have our tea now.'

Rose reached into her handbag and took out her purse.

Opening it, she placed a one-shilling piece on the hallstand. 'That's in case you want to go to the pictures,' she said to Eilis.

'And what about me?' her mother asked.

'She'll tell you the story when she gets home,' Rose replied.

'That's a nice thing to say!' her mother said.

All three laughed as they heard a car stop outside the door and beep its horn. Rose picked up her golf clubs and was gone.

Later, as her mother washed the dishes and Eilis dried them, another knock came to the door. When Eilis answered it, she found a girl whom she recognized from Kelly's grocery shop beside the cathedral.

'Miss Kelly sent me with a message for you,' the girl said. 'She wants to see you.'

'Does she?' Eilis asked. 'And did she say what it was about?'

'No. You're just to call up there tonight.'

'But why does she want to see me?'

'God, I don't know, miss. I didn't ask her. Do you want me to go back and ask her?'

'No, it's all right. But are you sure the message is for me?'

'I am, miss. She says you are to call in on her.'

Since she had decided in any case to go to the pictures some other evening, and being tired of her ledger, she changed her dress and put on a cardigan and left the house. She walked along Friary Street and Rafter Street into the Market Square and then up the hill to the cathedral. Miss Kelly's shop was closed, so she knocked on the side door, which led to the upstairs part where she knew Miss Kelly lived. The door was answered by the young girl who had come to the house earlier, who told her to wait in the hall.

She could hear voices and movement on the floor above, and soon the young girl came down and said that Miss Kelly would be with her before long.

She knew Miss Kelly by sight, but her mother did not deal in her shop as it was too expensive. Also, she believed that her mother did not like Miss Kelly, although she could think of no

reason for this. It was said that Miss Kelly sold the best ham in the town and the best creamery butter and the freshest of everything including cream, but Eilis did not think she had ever been in the shop, merely glanced into the interior as she passed and seen Miss Kelly at the counter.

Miss Kelly slowly came down the stairs into the hallway and turned on a light.

‘Now,’ she said, and repeated it as though it were a greeting. She did not smile.

Eilis was about to explain that she had been sent for, and to ask politely if this was the right time to come, but Miss Kelly’s way of looking her up and down made her decide to say nothing. Because of Miss Kelly’s manner, she wondered if she had been offended by someone in the town and had mistaken Eilis for that person.

‘Here you are, then,’ Miss Kelly said.

Eilis noticed a number of black umbrellas resting against the hallstand.

‘I hear you have no job at all but a great head for figures.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Oh, the whole town, anyone who is anyone, comes into the shop and I hear everything.’

Eilis wondered if this was a reference to her own mother’s consistent dealing in another grocery shop, but she was not sure. Miss Kelly’s thick glasses made the expression on her face difficult to read.

‘And we are worked off our feet every Sunday here. Sure, there’s nothing else open. And we get all sorts, good, bad and indifferent. And, as a rule, I open after seven mass, and between the end of nine o’clock mass until eleven mass is well over, there isn’t room to move in this shop. I have Mary here to help, but she’s slow enough at the best of times, so I was on the lookout for someone sharp, someone who would know people and give the right change. But only on Sundays, mind. The rest of the week we can manage ourselves. And you were recommended.

I made inquiries about you and it would be seven and six a week, it might help your mother a bit.'

Miss Kelly spoke, Eilis thought, as though she were describing a slight done to her, closing her mouth tightly between each phrase.

'So that's all I have to say now. You can start on Sunday, but come in tomorrow and learn off all the prices and we'll show you how to use the scales and the slicer. You'll have to tie your hair back and get a good shop coat in Dan Bolger's or Burke O'Leary's.'

Eilis was already saving this conversation for her mother and Rose; she wished she could think of something smart to say to Miss Kelly without being openly rude. Instead, she remained silent.

'Well?' Miss Kelly asked.

Eilis realized that she could not turn down the offer. It would be better than nothing and, at the moment, she had nothing.

'Oh, yes, Miss Kelly,' she said. 'I'll start whenever you like.'

'And on Sunday you can go to seven o'clock mass. That's what we do, and we open when it's over.'

'That's lovely,' Eilis said.

'So, come in tomorrow, then. And if I'm busy I'll send you home, or you can fill bags of sugar while you wait, but if I'm not busy, I'll show you all the ropes.'

'Thank you, Miss Kelly,' Eilis said.

'Your mother'll be pleased that you have something. And your sister,' Miss Kelly said. 'I hear she's great at the golf. So go home now like a good girl. You can let yourself out.'

Miss Kelly turned and began to walk slowly up the stairs. Eilis knew as she made her way home that her mother would indeed be happy that she had found some way of making money of her own, but that Rose would think that working behind the counter of a grocery shop was not good enough for her. She wondered if Rose would say this to her directly.

On her way home she stopped at the house of her best friend

Nancy Byrne to find that their friend Annette O'Brien was also there. Since the Byrnes had only one room downstairs, which served as a kitchen, dining room and sitting room, with a small kitchenette at the back, and it was clear that Nancy had news of some sort to impart, some of which Annette seemed already to know, Nancy used Eilis's arrival as an excuse to go out for a walk so they could talk in confidence.

'Did something happen?' Eilis asked once they were on the street.

'Say nothing until we are a mile away from that house,' Nancy said. 'Mammy knows there's something, but I'm not telling her.'

They walked down Friary Hill and across the Mill Park Road to the river and then down along the prom towards the Ringwood.

'She got off with George Sheridan,' Annette said.

'When?' Eilis asked.

'At the dance in the Athenaeum on Sunday night,' Nancy said.

'I thought you weren't going to go.'

'I wasn't and then I did.'

'She danced all night with him,' Annette said.

'I didn't, just the last four dances, and then he walked me home. But everybody saw. I'm surprised you haven't heard.'

'And are you going to see him again?'

'I don't know.' Nancy sighed. 'Maybe I'll just see him on the street. He drove by me yesterday and beeped the horn. If there had been anyone else there, I mean anyone of his sort, he would have danced with her, but there wasn't. He was with Jim Farrell, who just stood there looking at us.'

'If his mother finds out, I don't know what she'll say,' Annette said. 'She's awful. I hate going into that shop when Jim isn't there. My mother sent me down once to get two rashers and that old one told me she didn't sell rashers in twos.'

Eilis then told them that she had been offered a job serving in Miss Kelly's every Sunday.

‘I hope you told her what to do with it,’ Nancy said.

‘I told her I’d take it. It won’t do any harm. It means I might be able to go to the Athenaeum with you using my own money and prevent you being taken advantage of.’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ Nancy said. ‘He was nice.’

‘Are you going to see him again?’ she repeated.

‘Will you come with me on Sunday night?’ Nancy asked Eilis. ‘He mightn’t even be there, but Annette can’t come, and I’m going to need support in case he is there and doesn’t even ask me to dance or doesn’t even look at me.’

‘I might be too tired from working for Miss Kelly.’

‘But you’ll come?’

‘I haven’t been there for ages,’ Eilis said. ‘I hate all those country fellows, and the town fellows are worse. Half drunk and just looking to get you up the Tan Yard Lane.’

‘George isn’t like that,’ Nancy said.

‘He’s too stuck up to go near the Tan Yard Lane,’ Annette said.

‘Maybe we’ll ask him if he’d consider selling rashers in twos in future,’ Eilis said.

‘Say nothing to him,’ Nancy said. ‘Are you really going to work for Miss Kelly? There’s a one for rashers.’

Over the next two days Miss Kelly took Eilis through every item in the shop. When Eilis asked for a piece of paper so she could note the different brands of tea and the various sizes of the packets, Miss Kelly told her that it would only waste time if she wrote things down; it was best instead to learn them off by heart. Cigarettes, butter, tea, bread, bottles of milk, packets of biscuits, cooked ham and corned beef were by far the most popular items sold on Sundays, she said, and after these came tins of sardines and salmon, tins of mandarin oranges and pears and fruit salad, jars of chicken and ham paste and sandwich spread and salad cream. She showed Eilis a sample of each object before telling her the price. When she thought that Eilis had learned these prices, she went on to other items, such as cartons

of fresh cream, bottles of lemonade, tomatoes, heads of lettuce, fresh fruit and blocks of ice cream.

‘Now there are people who come in here on a Sunday, if you don’t mind, looking for things they should get during the week. What can you do?’ Miss Kelly pursed her lips disapprovingly as she listed soap, shampoo, toilet paper and toothpaste and called out the different prices.

Some people, she added, also bought bags of sugar on a Sunday, or salt and even pepper, but not many. And there were even those who would look for golden syrup or baking soda or flour, but most of these items were sold on a Saturday.

There were always children, Miss Kelly said, looking for bars of chocolate or toffee or bags of sherbet or jelly babies, and men looking for loose cigarettes and matches, but Mary would deal with those since she was no good at large orders or remembering prices, and was often, Miss Kelly went on, more of a hindrance than a help when there was a big crowd in the shop.

‘I can’t stop her gawking at people for no reason. Even some of the regular customers.’

The shop, Eilis saw, was well stocked, with many different brands of tea, some of them very expensive, and all of them at higher prices than Hayes’s grocery in Friary Street or the L&N in Rafter Street or Sheridan’s in the Market Square.

‘You’ll have to learn how to pack sugar and wrap a loaf of bread,’ Miss Kelly said. ‘Now, that’s one of the things that Mary is good at, God help her.’

As each customer came into the shop on the days when she was being trained, Eilis noticed that Miss Kelly had a different tone. Sometimes she said nothing at all, merely clenched her jaw and stood behind the counter in a pose that suggested deep disapproval of the customer’s presence in her shop and an impatience to be rid of them. For others she smiled drily and studied them with grim forbearance, taking the money as though offering an immense favour. And then there were customers whom she greeted warmly and by name; many of these had

accounts with her and thus no cash changed hands, but amounts were noted in a ledger with inquiries about health and comments on the weather and remarks on the quality of the ham or the rashers or the variety of the bread on display from the batch loaves to the duck loaves to the currant bread.

‘And I’m trying to teach this young lady,’ she said to a customer whom she seemed to value above all the rest, a woman with a fresh perm in her hair whom Eilis had never seen before. ‘I’m trying to teach her and I hope that she’s more than willing, because Mary, God bless her, is willing, but sure that’s no use, it’s less than no use. I’m hoping that she’s quick and sharp and dependable, but nowadays you can’t get that for love or money.’

Eilis looked at Mary, who was standing uneasily near the cash register listening carefully.

‘But the Lord makes all types,’ Miss Kelly said.

‘Oh, you’re right there, Miss Kelly,’ the woman with the perm said as she filled her string bag with groceries. ‘And there’s no use in complaining, is there? Sure, don’t we need people to sweep the streets?’

On Saturday, with money borrowed from her mother, Eilis bought a dark green shop coat in Dan Bolger’s. That night she asked her mother for the alarm clock. If she wanted to have any breakfast, she knew, she would have to be up by six o’clock in the morning. She did not think there would be a break for food or tea at Miss Kelly’s.

Since Jack, the nearest to her in age, had followed his two older brothers to Birmingham, Eilis had moved into the boys’ room, leaving Rose her own bedroom, which their mother carefully tidied and cleaned each morning. As their mother’s pension was small, they depended on Rose, who worked in the office of Davis’s Mills; her wages paid for most of their needs. Anything extra came sporadically from the boys in England. Twice a year Rose went to Dublin for the sales, coming back each January with a new coat and costume and each August with a new dress

and new cardigans and skirts and blouses, which were often chosen because Rose did not think they would go out of fashion, and then put away until the following year. Most of Rose's friends now were married women, often older women whose children had grown up, or wives of men who worked in the banks, who had time to play golf on summer evenings or in mixed foursomes at the weekends.

Rose, at thirty, Eilis thought, was more glamorous every year, and, while she had had several boyfriends, she remained single; she often remarked that she had a much better life than many of her former schoolmates who were to be seen pushing prams through the streets. Eilis was proud of her, of how much care she took with her appearance and how much care she put into whom she mixed with in the town and the golf club. She knew that Rose had tried to find her work in an office, and Rose was paying for her books now that she was studying book-keeping and rudimentary accountancy, but she knew also that there was, at least for the moment, no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications.

Eilis did not tell Rose about her offer of work from Miss Kelly; instead, as she went through her training, she saved up every detail to recount to her mother, who laughed and made her tell some parts of the story again.

'That Miss Kelly,' her mother said, 'is as bad as her mother and I heard from someone who worked there that that woman was evil incarnate. And she was just a maid in Roche's before she married. And Kelly's used to be a boarding house as well as a shop, and if you worked for her, or even if you stayed there, or dealt in the shop, she was evil incarnate. Unless, of course, you had plenty of money or were one of the clergy.'

'I'm just there until something turns up,' Eilis said.

'That's what I said to Rose when I was telling her,' her mother replied. 'And don't listen to her if she says anything to you.'

Rose, however, never mentioned that Eilis was to begin work at Miss Kelly's. Instead, she gave her a pale yellow cardigan that

she herself had barely worn, insisting that the colour was wrong for her and that it would look better on Eilis. She also gave her some lipstick. She was out late on Saturday night so she did not witness Eilis going to bed early, even though Nancy and Annette were going to the pictures, so that she would be fresh for work at Miss Kelly's on her first Sunday.

Only once, years before, had she been to seven o'clock mass and that was on a Christmas morning when her father was alive and the boys were still at home. She remembered that she and her mother had tiptoed out of the house before the others even woke, leaving the presents under the tree in the upstairs living room, and coming back just after the boys and Rose and their father had woken and begun to open the packages. She remembered the darkness, the cold and the beautiful emptiness of the town. Now, leaving the house just after the twenty to seven bell rang, with her shop coat in a carrier bag and her hair tied in a ponytail, she walked through the streets to the cathedral, making sure she was in plenty of time.

She remembered that on that Christmas morning, years before, the seats in the central aisle of the cathedral had almost been full. Women with a long morning in the kitchen ahead of them wanted an early start. But now there was almost nobody. She looked around for Miss Kelly, but she did not see her until communion and then realized that she had been sitting across from her all along. She watched her walking down the main aisle with her hands joined and her eyes on the ground, followed by Mary, who was wearing a black mantilla. They both must have fasted, she thought, as she had been fasting, and she wondered when they would have their breakfast.

Once mass was over, she decided not to wait for Miss Kelly in the cathedral grounds but instead lingered at the news-stand as they unpacked bundles of newspapers and then stood outside the shop and waited for her there. Miss Kelly did not greet her or smile when she arrived but moved gruffly to the side door, ordering Eilis and Mary to wait outside. As she unlocked the

main door of the shop and began to turn on the lights, Mary went to the back of the shop and started to carry loaves of bread towards the counter. Eilis realized that this was yesterday's bread; there was no bread delivered on a Sunday. She stood and watched as Miss Kelly opened a new strip of long sticky yellow paper to attract flies and told Mary to stand on the counter, fix it to the ceiling and take down the old one, which had dead flies stuck to every part of it.

'No one likes flies,' Miss Kelly said, 'especially on a Sunday.'

Soon, two or three people came into the shop to buy cigarettes. Even though Eilis had already put her shop coat on, Miss Kelly ordered Mary to deal with them. When they had gone, Miss Kelly told Mary to go upstairs and make a pot of tea, which she then delivered to the newspaper kiosk in exchange for what Eilis learned was a free copy of the *Sunday Press*, which Miss Kelly folded and put aside. Eilis noticed that neither Miss Kelly nor Mary had anything to eat or drink. Miss Kelly ushered her into a back room.

'That bread there,' she said, pointing to a table, 'is the freshest. It came yesterday evening all the way from Stafford's, but it is only for special customers. So you don't touch that bread whatever you do. The other bread'll do fine for most people. And we have no tomatoes. Those ones there are not for anybody unless I give precise instructions.'

After nine o'clock mass the first crowd came. People who wanted cigarettes and sweets seemed to know to approach Mary. Miss Kelly stood back, her attention divided between the door and Eilis. She checked every price Eilis wrote down, informed her briskly of the price when she could not remember, and wrote down and added up the figures herself after Eilis had done so, not letting her give the customer the change until she had also been shown the original payment. As well as doing this, she greeted certain customers by name, motioning them forward and insisting that Eilis break off whatever she was doing to serve them.

‘Oh, Mrs Prendergast now,’ she said, ‘the new girl will look after you now and Mary will carry everything out to the car for you.’

‘I need to finish this first,’ Eilis said, as she was only a few items away from completing another order.

‘Oh, Mary will do that,’ Miss Kelly said.

By this time people were five deep at the counter. ‘I’m next,’ a man shouted as Miss Kelly came back to the counter with more bread.

‘Now, we are very busy and you will have to wait your turn.’

‘But I was next,’ the man said, ‘and that woman was served before me.’

‘So what is it you want?’

The man had a list of groceries in his hand.

‘Eilis will deal with you now,’ Miss Kelly said, ‘but only after Mrs Murphy here.’

‘I was before her too,’ the man said.

‘I’m afraid you are mistaken,’ Miss Kelly said. ‘Eilis, hurry up now, this man is waiting. No one has all day, so he’s next, after Mrs Murphy. What price did you charge for that tea?’

It was like this until almost one o’clock. There was no break and nothing to eat or drink and Eilis was starving. No one was served in turn. Miss Kelly informed some of her customers, including two, who, being friends of Rose, greeted Eilis familiarly, that she had lovely fresh tomatoes. She weighed them herself, seeming to be impressed that Eilis knew these customers, telling others firmly, however, that she had no tomatoes that day, none at all. For favoured customers she openly, almost proudly, produced the fresh bread. The problem was, Eilis realized, that there was no other shop in the town that was as well stocked as Miss Kelly’s and open on a Sunday morning, but she also had a sense that people came here out of habit and they did not mind waiting, they enjoyed the crush and the crowd.

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