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Readers

BROOKLYN

COLM TÓIBÍN

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For Peter Straus

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Note about the story

Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy in Ireland, and much of his writing is about his home country.

Brooklyn is the story of Eilis, a young Irish woman in the early 1950s, who moves to the United States of America. Until then, she has always lived with her family in the small town of Enniscorthy. The Catholic religion is important in many people's lives, and they go to **mass*** in church every Sunday. An Irish Catholic **priest** helps Eilis to get a job in Brooklyn, where many other Irish Catholics are living.

Many Irish people travelled to the United States. They travelled across the Atlantic Ocean to New York by ship. There, as well as showing their **passports** and other documents, they might also be checked by a doctor.

A film of *Brooklyn* was made in 2015.

Before-reading questions

- 1 Look online, and find out about Enniscorthy in Ireland. How big is it? What can you do there? What has changed since the 1950s, do you think?
- 2 How was Brooklyn in New York different to Enniscorthy in the 1950s, do you think?
- 3 In the 1950s, many people moved from Ireland to New York. Why did they do this, do you think?

*Definitions of words in **bold** can be found in the glossary on pages 92–95.

CHAPTER ONE Better than nothing

Hearing her sister come back from work, Eilis Lacey put down her books and went into the hall. Rose was standing in front of the mirror.

"You look lovely, Rose," their mother said, coming out of the kitchen.

"I'm going straight out to play **golf**, so I've no time to eat," Rose said.

"I'll make a special tea for you later," her mother said.

Rose opened the new **handbag** that she had bought in Dublin in the **sales**. "You might want to go to the cinema this evening, so here's a **shilling**," she said to Eilis.

"What about me?" her mother asked.

"Eilis will tell you the story when she gets home," Rose said, laughing.

All three were still laughing as they heard a car stop outside the door. Rose picked up her golf bag and was gone. It was a beautiful summer evening, and she would not be back till late.

Soon after, there was a knock on the door. Eilis answered it and **recognized** the girl from Kelly's food shop.

"Miss Kelly wants to see you," the girl said.

"Me? Why?" Eilis asked.

"I don't know," the girl said, impatiently. "Shall I go back and ask her?"

“No, but are you sure that the message is for me?” Eilis said.

“I am. Miss Kelly wants you to come to the shop this evening.”

After she had changed her dress and put on a **cardigan**, Eilis left the house and walked through Enniscorthy to Miss Kelly’s shop, near the church. The shop was closed, so Eilis knocked on the side door, where Miss Kelly lived. The girl from earlier came and told Eilis to wait in the hall.

Eilis knew Miss Kelly’s shop, but she had never been inside. Her mother did not go there because it was too expensive. And Eilis believed that her mother did not like Miss Kelly, although she did not know why.

Miss Kelly came slowly down the stairs.

“Now,” Miss Kelly said. Then, she said it again, but she did not smile.

Eilis did not know what to say. Miss Kelly was looking her up and down.

“I hear that you’re studying **bookkeeping** and are good with numbers, but you don’t have a job,” Miss Kelly said.

“Is that right?” Eilis said.

“Oh yes, the whole town comes into the shop, and I hear everything about everyone,” Miss Kelly said. “I just need someone on Sundays because we’re the only shop open, and we get very busy. I have Mary, but she’s so slow, and I need someone quick. You’ll be paid seven shillings and sixpence. You can come in tomorrow to learn the prices and how everything works.”

Eilis wanted to think of something clever to say to Miss Kelly without being rude.

“Well?” Miss Kelly said.

Eilis realized that she had to **accept**. It was better than nothing, although Rose would probably think that working in a shop was not good enough for her little sister. Rose was thirty now, and most of her friends were married women with children. Eilis was proud of her beautiful sister, who worked in an office and paid most of the family’s bills, now that their brothers had all gone to work in England.

On her way home, Eilis stopped at the house of her best friend, Nancy Byrne.

“I danced four dances with George Sheridan on Sunday, and then he walked me home,” Nancy whispered, excitedly. “I know that you don’t like the men there, Eilis, but please come to the dance with me next Sunday! Annette can’t come.”

“Miss Kelly has just given me a job working in her shop on Sundays,” Eilis said. “So I might be too tired.”

“You’re not going to take the job, are you?” Nancy said.

“I am. It’s better than no job,” Eilis said.

During the next two days, Miss Kelly showed Eilis everything in the shop. Miss Kelly wanted her to remember all the prices and would not let her write anything down. When customers came into the shop, Miss Kelly acted differently with each person. With some customers

she made her mouth small and looked impatient. But there were a few customers that she called by name. She smiled at them and gave them all the best things.

“You’ll have to be up early on Sundays now, and go to seven o’clock **mass**,” Miss Kelly told Eilis. “And you’ll have to buy yourself a good shop coat.”

On Sunday morning, Eilis left the house before breakfast and walked through the quiet streets to the church. After mass, she did not wait for Miss Kelly and Mary to come out of the church, but went straight to the shop to wait for them there.

Miss Kelly did not smile or say anything when she arrived at the shop. She unlocked the door silently and turned on the lights. Eilis put on her new shop coat and waited. Perhaps they would have their breakfast before the customers arrived. But Miss Kelly and Mary had nothing to eat or drink. At first, the shop was very quiet, but straight after the nine o’clock mass a crowd came in. From that moment, until they closed at one o’clock, the shop was full of customers. Miss Kelly was always by Eilis’s shoulder, checking every price. Sometimes, she called to someone she recognized to come to the front and be **served** first. This made the other customers angry, but Miss Kelly did not care. After working all morning with nothing to eat or drink, Eilis was extremely hungry.

When she got home for lunch, Eilis enjoyed telling her mother and Rose about her morning and the awful Miss Kelly. She copied Miss Kelly’s voice and made her

mother and her sister laugh. It was like the time when Jack, the youngest of her brothers, was at home, and they all used to laugh like that. Then, Jack had followed their other brothers to England.

That evening, Eilis called at Nancy’s house so they could go to the dance hall together. Nancy’s hair was lovely, and she looked very pretty in her best summer dress.

“I’m not going to look at George Sheridan. He might not even be there,” Nancy said. “And I’m not dancing with anyone else, because he might come in and see me. If we see anyone coming over to ask us to dance, we’ll stand up and go to the toilets, all right?”

Eilis was not surprised that Nancy was so nervous. Her last boyfriend had come to the dance hall a year ago with another girl, and had not spoken to Nancy all evening. Then, he went away to England. George Sheridan was not only handsome, but his parents owned a shop in Market Square, which one day would be George’s.

When Nancy and Eilis went into the dance hall, there were only a few **couples** there. They stood by the wall watching the couples dancing and waited. More people arrived, but no one asked them to dance. Suddenly, Eilis knew from Nancy’s face that she had seen George. Eilis looked over at the bar and saw him there with his friends. He walked across the hall towards them and asked Nancy to dance. Eilis watched them for a while and then looked at the ground. Perhaps she could go home soon if Nancy and George danced again. But after that first dance, they