Part One

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 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, Eilis 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 Eilis 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.

Eilis could hear voices and movement on the floor above, and then 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 noticed 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, Eilis wondered if she had been offended by someone in the town and had mistaken her 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 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, 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?' Eilis asked.

'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 George 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?' Eilis 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 for that customer to go. 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. She would have to be up by six o'clock in the morning.

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 sister, 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 Eilis 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 while the others were sleeping, 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 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.

Although she had planned not to mention her new job in Miss Kelly's over dinner at home that day unless Rose raised the

matter first, Eilis could not contain herself and began as soon as they sat down to describe her morning.

'I went into that shop once,' Rose said, 'on my way home from mass and she served Mary Delahunt before me. I turned and walked out. And there was a smell of something. I can't think what it was. She has a little slave, doesn't she? She took her out of a convent.'

'Her father was a nice enough man,' her mother said, 'but she had no chance because her mother was, as I told you, Eilis, evil incarnate. I heard that when one of the maids got scalded she wouldn't even let her go to the doctor. The mother had Nelly working there from the time she could walk. She's never seen daylight, that's what wrong with her.'

'Nelly Kelly?' Rose asked. 'Is that really her name?'

'In school they had a different name for her.'

'What was it?'

'Everyone called her Nettles Kelly. The nuns couldn't stop us. I remember her well; she was a year or two behind me. She'd always have five or six girls following behind her coming from the Mercy Convent shouting "Nettles". No wonder she's so mad.'

There was silence for a while as Rose and Eilis took this in.

'You wouldn't know whether to laugh or to cry,' Rose said.

Eilis found as the meal went on that she could do an imitation of Miss Kelly's voice that made her sister and her mother laugh. She wondered if she was the only one who remembered that Jack, the youngest of her brothers, used to do imitations of the Sunday sermon, the radio sports commentators, the teachers at school and many characters in the town, and they all used to laugh. She did not know if the other two also realized that this was the first time they had laughed at this table since Jack had followed the others to Birmingham. She would have loved to say something about him, but she knew that it would make her mother too sad. Even when a letter came from him it was passed around in silence. So she continued mocking Miss Kelly,

stopping only when someone came for Rose to take her to play golf, leaving Eilis and her mother to clear the table and wash the dishes.

That evening Eilis called at Nancy Byrne's at nine, aware that she had not made enough effort with her appearance. She had washed her hair and put on a summer dress, but she thought that she looked dowdy and was resigned to the idea that if Nancy danced more than one dance with George Sheridan then she was going home on her own. She was glad that Rose had not seen her before she left, as she would have made her do something more with her hair and put on some make-up and generally try to look smarter.

'Now, the rule is,' Nancy said, 'that we are not even looking at George Sheridan and he might be with a whole crowd from the rugby club, or he might not even be there at all. They often go to Courtown on a Sunday night, that crowd. So we are to be deep in conversation. And I'm not dancing with anyone else, just in case he came in and saw me. So if someone is coming over to ask us to dance, we just stand up and go to the ladies'.'

It was clear that Nancy, using help from her sister and her mother, with both of whom she had finally shared the news that she had danced with George Sheridan the previous Sunday, had gone to a great deal of trouble. She had had her hair done the day before. She was wearing a blue dress that Eilis had seen only once before and she was now applying make-up in front of the bathroom mirror as her mother and sister made their way in and out of the room, offering advice and commentary and admiration.

They walked in silence from Friary Street into Church Street and then around to Castle Street and into the Athenaeum and up the stairs to the hall. Eilis was not surprised at how nervous Nancy was. It was a year since her boyfriend had let her down badly by turning up one night with another girl in this very same hall and staying with the other girl all night, barely

acknowledging Nancy's existence as she sat watching. Later, he had gone to England, coming home briefly only to get married to the girl he had been with that night. It was not just that George Sheridan was handsome and had a car, but he ran a shop that did a thriving business in the Market Square; it was a business he would inherit in full on his mother's death. For Nancy, who worked in Buttle's Barley-Fed Bacon behind the counter, going out with George Sheridan was a dream that she did not wish to wake from, Eilis thought, as she and Nancy glanced around the hall, pretending they were not on the lookout for anyone in particular.

There were some couples dancing and a few men standing near the door.

'They look like they are at a cattle mart,' Nancy said. 'And God, it's the hair oil I hate.'

'If one of them comes over, I'll stand up immediately,' Eilis said, 'and you tell them that you have to go with me to the cloakroom.'

'We should have bottle glasses and buck teeth and have left our hair all greasy,' Nancy said.

As the place filled up there was no sign of George Sheridan. And even as men crossed the hall to ask women to dance, no one approached either Nancy or Eilis.

'We'll get a name for being wallflowers,' Nancy said.

'You could be called worse,' Eilis said.

'Oh, you could. You could be called the Courtnacuddy Bus,' Nancy replied.

Even when they had both stopped laughing and had gone back to looking around the hall, one of them would begin giggling again and it would start the other one off too.

'We must look mad,' Eilis said.

Nancy beside her, however, had suddenly become serious. As Eilis looked over at the bar where soft drinks were on sale, she saw that George Sheridan, Jim Farrell and some of their friends from the rugby club had arrived and there were a number of

young women with them. Jim Farrell's father owned a pub in Rafter Street.

'That's it,' Nancy whispered. 'I'm going home.'

'Wait, don't do that,' Eilis said. 'We'll go to the ladies' at the end of this set and discuss what to do.'

They waited and crossed the floor, empty of dancers; Eilis presumed that George Sheridan had spotted them. In the ladies' she told Nancy to do nothing, just to wait, and they would go back out when the next dance was in full swing. As they did so, and Eilis glanced over to where George and his friends had been, she caught George's eye. Nancy's face, as they searched for somewhere to sit, had turned a blotched red; she looked like someone whom the nuns had told to go and stand outside the door. They sat there without speaking as the dance went on. Everything Eilis thought of saying was ridiculous and so she said nothing, but she was aware that they both must seem a sad sight to anyone who paid any attention to them. She decided that if Nancy made even the weakest suggestion that they should go after this set, then she would agree immediately. Indeed, she longed to be outside already; she knew they would find some way of making a laugh of it later.

At the end of the set, however, George walked across the hall even before the music began and asked Nancy to dance. He smiled at Eilis as Nancy stood up and she smiled at him in return. As they began to dance, with George chatting easily, Nancy seemed to be making an effort to look cheerful. Eilis looked away in case her watching made Nancy uncomfortable, and then looked at the ground, hoping that no one would ask her to dance. It would be easier now, she thought, if George asked Nancy for the next dance when this set was over and she could slip quietly home.

Instead, George and Nancy came towards her and said they were going to get a lemonade at the bar and George would like to buy one for Eilis as well. She stood up and walked across the hall with them. Jim Farrell was standing at the bar holding

a place for George. Some of their other friends, one or two of whom Eilis knew by name and the others by sight, were close by. As they approached, Jim Farrell turned and kept an elbow on the counter. He looked both Nancy and Eilis up and down without nodding or speaking, and then moved over and said something to George.

As the music began again, some of their friends took to the floor but Jim Farrell did not move. As George handed the glasses full of lemonade to Nancy and Eilis, he set about introducing them formally to Jim Farrell, who nodded curtly but did not shake hands. George seemed at a loss as he stood sipping his drink. He said something to Nancy and she replied. Then he sipped his drink again. Eilis wondered what he was going to do; it was clear that his friend did not like Nancy or Eilis and had no intention of speaking to them; Eilis wished she had not been brought to the bar like this. She sipped her drink and looked at the ground. When she glanced up, she saw Jim Farrell studying Nancy coldly and then, when he noticed he was being watched by Eilis, he shifted his ground and looked at her, his face expressionless. He was wearing, she saw, an expensive sports jacket and a shirt with a cravat.

George put the glass on the counter and turned to Nancy, inviting her to dance; he motioned to Jim, as if to suggest that he should do the same. Nancy smiled at George and then at Eilis and Jim, left her drink down and went to the dance floor with him. She seemed relieved and happy. As Eilis looked around, she was aware that she and Jim Farrell were alone at the bar counter and that there was no room at the ladies' side of the hall. Unless she went to the ladies' again, or went home, she was trapped. For a second, Jim Farrell looked as though he was stepping forward to ask her to dance. Eilis, since she felt she had no choice, was ready to accept; she did not want to be rude to George's friend. Just as she was about to accept him, Jim Farrell appeared to think better of it, stepped back and almost imperiously glanced around the hall, ignoring her. He did not look at her

again and when the set was over she went and found Nancy and told her quietly that she was leaving and would see her soon. She shook hands with George and made the excuse that she was tired, and then walked from the hall with as much dignity as she could.

The following evening at tea she told her mother and Rose the story. They were interested at first in the news that Nancy had been dancing two Sunday nights in succession with George Sheridan, but they became far more animated when Eilis told them about the rudeness of Jim Farrell.

'Don't go near that Athenaeum again,' Rose said.

'Your father knew his father well,' her mother said. 'Years ago. They went to the races together a few times. And your father drank in Farrell's sometimes. It's very well kept. And his mother is a very nice woman, she was a Duggan from Glenbrien. It must be the rugby club has him that way, and it must be sad for his parents having a pup for a son because he's an only child.'

'He sounds like a pup all right and he looks like one,' Rose said.

'Well, he was in a bad mood last night anyway,' Eilis said. 'That's all I have to say. I suppose he might think that George should be with someone grander than Nancy.'

'There's no excuse for that,' her mother said. 'Nancy Byrne is one of the most beautiful girls in this town. George would be very lucky to get her.'

'I wonder would his mother agree,' Rose said.

'Some of the shopkeepers in this town,' her mother said, 'especially the ones who buy cheap and sell dear, all they have is a few yards of counter and they have to sit there all day waiting for customers. I don't know why they think so highly of themselves.'

Although Miss Kelly paid Eilis only seven and sixpence a week for working on Sundays, she often sent Mary to fetch her at other times – once when she wanted to get her hair done with-

out closing the shop and once when she wanted all the tins on the shelves taken down and dusted and then replaced. Each time she gave Eilis two shillings but kept her for hours, complaining about Mary whenever she could. Each time also, as she left, Miss Kelly handed Eilis a loaf of bread, which Eilis knew was stale, to give to her mother.

'She must think we're paupers,' her mother said. 'What would we do with stale bread? Rose will go mad. Don't go there the next time she sends for you. Tell her you're busy.'

'But I'm not busy.'

'A proper job will turn up. That's what I'm praying for every day.'

Her mother made breadcrumbs with the stale bread and roasted stuffed pork. She did not tell Rose where the breadcrumbs came from.

One day at dinnertime Rose, who walked home from the office at one and returned at a quarter to two, mentioned that she had played golf the previous evening with a priest, a Father Flood, who had known their father years before and their mother when she was a young girl. He was home from America on holidays, his first visit since before the war.

'Flood?' her mother asked. 'There was a crowd of Floods out near Monageer, but I don't remember any of them becoming a priest. I don't know what became of them, you never see any of them now.'

'There's Murphy Floods,' Eilis said.

'That's not the same,' her mother replied.

'Anyway,' Rose said, 'I invited him in for his tea when he said that he'd like to call on you and he's coming tomorrow.'

'Oh, God,' her mother said. 'What would an American priest like for his tea? I'll have to get cooked ham.'

'Miss Kelly has the best cooked ham,' Eilis said, laughing.

'No one is buying anything from Miss Kelly,' Rose replied. 'Father Flood will eat whatever we give him.'

'Would cooked ham be all right with tomatoes and lettuce, or maybe roast beef, or would he like a fry?'

'Anything will be fine,' Rose said. 'With plenty of brown bread and butter.'

'We'll have it in the dining room, and we'll use the good china. If I could get a bit of salmon, maybe. Would he eat that?'

'He's very nice,' Rose said. 'He'll eat anything you put in front of him.'

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.'

'It's 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 with each other, made eating together nicer than any time since her father had died and the boys had left. It now occurred to her that her mother and Rose did not think her working for Miss Kelly was funny at all, and they offered no word of demurral as Father Flood moved from praising his parish in Brooklyn to saying that he believed he would be able to find Eilis a suitable position there.

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.

Father Flood did not visit again; instead, he wrote a letter to her mother when he returned to Brooklyn, saying that he

had spoken, soon after he arrived, to one of his parishioners, a merchant of Italian origin, about Eilis and wanted to let Mrs Lacey know that there would soon be a position vacant. It would not be in the office, as he had hoped, but on the shop floor of the large store that this gentleman owned and managed. But, he added, he had been assured that, were Eilis to prove satisfactory in her first job, there would be plenty of opportunity for promotion and very good prospects. He would also, he said, be able to provide suitable documentation to satisfy the Embassy, which was often not so easy nowadays, and would, he was sure, be able to find suitable accommodation for Eilis near the church and not far from her place of work.

Her mother handed her the letter when she had read it. Rose had already gone to work. There was silence in the kitchen.

'He seems very genuine,' her mother said. 'I'll say that for him.'

Eilis read the sentence again about the shop floor. She presumed that he meant she would work behind a counter. Father Flood did not mention how much she would earn, or how she would raise the money to pay the fare. Instead, he suggested that she should get in touch with the American Embassy in Dublin and ascertain precisely what documents she would require before she travelled so they could all be arranged. As she read and reread, her mother moved about the kitchen with her back to her, saying nothing. Eilis sat at the table, not speaking either, wondering how long it would take her mother to turn towards her and say something, deciding that she would sit and wait, counting each second, knowing that her mother had no real work to do. She was, in fact, Eilis saw, making work for herself so that she would not have to turn.

Finally, her mother turned and sighed.

'Keep that letter safe now,' she said, 'and we'll show it to Rose when she comes in.'

*

Within weeks, Rose had organized everything, even managing to befriend by telephone a figure in the American Embassy in Dublin who sent the necessary forms and a list of doctors authorized to write a report on Eilis's general health, and a list of other things the Embassy would require including a precise offer of work, work that Eilis was singularly qualified to do, a guarantee that she would be looked after financially on her arrival and a number of character references.

Father Flood wrote a formal letter sponsoring Eilis and guaranteeing to take care of her accommodation as well as her general and financial welfare, and on headed notepaper came a letter from Bartocci & Company, Fulton Street, Brooklyn, offering her a permanent position in their main store at the same address and mentioning her bookkeeping skills and general experience. It was signed Laura Fortini; the handwriting, Eilis noted, was clear and beautiful, and even the notepaper itself, its light blue colour, the embossed drawing of a large building over the letterhead, seemed heavier, more expensive, more promising than anything of its kind she had seen before.

It was agreed that her brothers in Birmingham would, between them, pay her passage to New York. Rose would give her money to live on until she was settled in her job. She told the news to a few friends, asking them not to tell anyone else, but Eilis knew that some of Rose's colleagues at work had heard the phone calls to Dublin; she was aware also that her mother would not be able to keep the news to herself. Thus she felt that she should go and tell Miss Kelly before she heard it from someone else. It was best, she thought, to go during the week, when things were not so busy.

She found Miss Kelly standing behind the counter. Mary was at the top of a ladder stacking packets of marrowfat peas on the higher shelves.

'Oh, you've come at the worst time now,' Miss Kelly said. 'Just when we thought we would have a bit of peace. Now don't disturb that Mary one whatever you do.' She inclined her head

in the direction of the ladder. 'She'd fall as soon as she'd look at you.'

'Well, I just came to say that I'll be going to America in about a month's time,' Eilis said. 'I'm going to work there and I wanted to give you plenty of notice.'

Miss Kelly stood back from the counter. 'Is that right?' she asked.

'But I'll be here on Sundays of course until I go.'

'Is it a reference you're looking for?'

'No. Not at all. I just came to let you know.'

'Well, that's lovely now. So we'll see you when you come home on holidays, if you'll still be talking to everyone.'

'I'll be here on Sunday,' Eilis said.

'Ah, no, we won't be needing you at all. If you're going, you're best to go.'

'But I could come.'

'No, you couldn't. There'd be too much talk about you and there'd be too much distraction and we're very busy on a Sunday, as you know, without that.'

'I was hoping I could work until I left.'

'Not here you can't. So be off with you now. We have plenty of work, more deliveries today and more stacking. And no time for talking.'

'Well, thank you very much.'

'And thank you too.'

As Miss Kelly moved towards the store at the back of the shop, Eilis looked to see if Mary would turn so she could say goodbye to her. Since Mary did not, Eilis quietly left the shop and went home.

Miss Kelly was the only one who mentioned the possibility of her coming home on holidays. No one else mentioned it. Until now, Eilis had always presumed that she would live in the town all her life, as her mother had done, knowing everyone, having the same friends and neighbours, the same routines in the same streets. She had expected that she would find a job in the town,

and then marry someone and give up the job and have children. Now, she felt that she was being singled out for something for which she was not in any way prepared, and this, despite the fear it carried with it, gave her a feeling, or more a set of feelings, she thought she might experience in the days before her wedding, days in which everyone looked at her in the rush of arrangements with light in their eyes, days in which she herself was fizzy with excitement but careful not to think too precisely about what the next few weeks would be like in case she lost her nerve.

There was no day that passed without an event. The forms that came from the Embassy were filled in and sent back. She went on the train to Wexford town for what seemed to her a cursory medical examination, the doctor appearing to be satisfied when she told him that no one in her family had suffered from tuberculosis. Father Flood wrote with more details, of where she would stay when she arrived and how close it would be to her place of work; her ticket arrived for the ship to New York, which would leave from Liverpool. Rose gave her some money for clothes and promised to buy her shoes and a complete set of underwear. The house was, she thought, unusually, almost unnaturally happy, and the meals they shared were full of too much talk and laughter. It reminded her of the weeks before Jack had left for Birmingham when they would do anything to distract themselves from the thought that they were losing him.

One day, when a neighbour called and sat in the kitchen with them having tea, Eilis realized that her mother and Rose were doing everything to hide their feelings. The neighbour, almost casually, as a way of making conversation, said: 'You'll miss her when she's gone, I'd say.'

'Oh, it'll kill me when she goes,' her mother said. Her face wore a dark strained look that Eilis had not seen since the months after their father died. Then, in the moments that followed, the neighbour appearing to have been taken aback by her mother's tone, her mother's expression became almost darker and she had to stand up and walk quietly out of the room. It was

clear to Eilis that she was going to cry. Eilis was so surprised that, instead of following her mother into the hallway or the dining room, she made small talk with their neighbour, hoping her mother would soon return and they could resume what had seemed like an ordinary conversation.

Even when she woke in the night and thought about it, she did not allow herself to conclude that she did not want to go. Instead, she went over all the arrangements and worried about carrying two suitcases with all her clothes without any help, and making sure that she did not lose the handbag that Rose had given her, where she would keep her passport, and the addresses in Brooklyn where she would live and work, and Father Flood's address in case he did not turn up to meet her as he had promised to do. And money. And her make-up bag. And an overcoat maybe to be carried over her arm, although perhaps she would wear it, she thought, unless it was too hot. And it still might be hot in late September, she had been warned.

She had already packed one case and hoped, as she went over its contents in her mind, that she would not have to open it again. It struck her on one of those nights, as she lay awake, that the next time she would open that suitcase it would be in a different room in a different country, and then the thought came unbidden into her mind that she would be happier if it were opened by another person who could keep the clothes and shoes and wear them every day. She would prefer to stay at home, sleep in this room, live in this house, do without the clothes and shoes. The arrangements being made, all the bustle and talk, would be better if they were for someone else, she thought, someone like her, someone the same age and size, who maybe even looked the same as she did, as long as she, the person who was thinking now, could wake in this bed every morning and move as the day went on in these familiar streets and come home to the kitchen, to her mother and Rose.

Even though she let these thoughts run as fast as they would, she still stopped when her mind moved towards real fear or

dread or, worse, towards the thought that she was going to lose this world for ever, that she would never have an ordinary day again in this ordinary place, that the rest of her life would be a struggle with the unfamiliar. Downstairs, once Rose and her mother were there, she talked about practical things and remained bright.

One evening, when Rose invited her into her room so that she could choose some pieces of jewellery to bring with her, something new occurred to Eilis that surprised her by its force and clarity. Rose was thirty now, and since it was obvious that their mother could never be left to live alone, not merely because her pension was small but because she would be too lonely without any of them, Eilis's going, which Rose had organized so precisely, would mean that Rose would not be able to marry. She would have to stay with her mother, living as she was now, working in Davis's office, playing golf at the weekends and on summer evenings. Rose, she realized, in making it easy for her to go, was giving up any real prospect of leaving this house herself and having her own house, with her own family. Eilis, as she fitted on some necklaces, seated in front of her dressing-table mirror, saw that in the future, as her mother got older and more frail, Rose would have to care for her even more, go up the steep steps of the stairs with trays of food and do the cleaning and cooking when her mother could not.

It occurred to her also, as she tried on some earrings, that Rose knew all this too, knew that either she or Eilis would have to leave, and had decided to let Eilis go. As she turned and looked at her sister, Eilis wanted to suggest that they change places, that Rose, so ready for life, always making new friends, would be happier going to America, just as Eilis would be quite content to stay at home. But Rose had a job in the town and she did not, and so it was easy for Rose to sacrifice herself, since it seemed that she was doing something else. In these moments, as Rose offered her some brooches to take with her, Eilis would

have given anything to be able to say plainly that she did not want to go, that Rose could go instead, that she would happily stay here and take care of her mother and they would manage somehow and maybe she would find other work.

She wondered if her mother too believed that the wrong sister was leaving, and understood what Rose's motives were. She imagined that her mother knew everything. They knew so much, each one of them, she thought, that they could do everything except say out loud what it was they were thinking. She resolved as she went back to her room that she would do everything she could for them by pretending at all times that she was filled with excitement at the great adventure on which she was ready to embark. She would make them believe, if she could, that she was looking forward to America and leaving home for the first time. She promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the smallest hint of how she felt, and she would keep it from herself if she had to until she was away from them.

There was, she thought, enough sadness in the house, maybe even more than she realized. She would try as best she could not to add to it. Her mother and Rose could not be fooled, she was sure, but there seemed to her an even greater reason why there should be no tears before her departure. They would not be needed. What she would need to do in the days before she left and on the morning of her departure was smile, so that they would remember her smiling.

Rose took the day off from work and travelled with her to Dublin. They went to lunch together in the Gresham Hotel before it was time for the taxi to the boat to Liverpool, where Jack had agreed to meet her and spend the day with her before she set out on her long journey to New York. That day in Dublin Eilis was aware that going to work in America was different from just taking the boat to England; America might be further away and so utterly foreign in its systems and its manners, yet it

had an almost compensating glamour attached to it. Even going to work in a shop in Brooklyn with lodgings a few streets away, all organized by a priest, had an element of romance that she and Rose were fully alert to as they ordered their lunch in the Gresham, having left her luggage in the railway station. Going to work in a shop in Birmingham or Liverpool or Coventry or even London was sheer dullness compared to this.

Rose had dressed up beautifully for the day, and Eilis had tried to look as well as she could. Rose, merely by smiling at the hotel porter, seemed to be able to make him stand in O'Connell Street to get a taxi for them, insisting that they wait in the lobby. No one who did not have a ticket was allowed beyond a certain point; Rose, however, made an exception of herself with the assistance of the ticket collector, who fetched a colleague to help the ladies with their suitcases. He told Rose she could stay on the boat until half an hour before it was due to sail, when he would locate her, accompany her back and then find someone to keep an eye on her sister for the crossing to Liverpool. Even people with first-class tickets would not get this treatment, Eilis remarked to Rose, who smiled knowingly and agreed.

'Some people are nice,' she said, 'and if you talk to them properly, they can be even nicer.'

They both laughed.

'That'll be my motto in America,' Eilis said.

In the early morning when the boat arrived in Liverpool she was helped with her luggage by a porter who was Irish. When she told him she was not sailing to America until later that day, he advised her to take her cases immediately down to a shed where a friend of his worked, close to where the transatlantic liners docked; if she gave the man at the office his name, then she would be free of them for the day. She found herself thanking him in a tone that Rose might have used, a tone warm and private but also slightly distant though not shy either, a tone used by a woman in full possession of herself. It was something

she could not have done in the town or in a place where any of her family or friends might have seen her.

She saw Jack as soon as she descended from the boat. She did not know whether she should embrace him or not. They had never embraced before. When he put his hand out to shake her hand, she stopped and looked at him again. He seemed embarrassed until he smiled. She moved towards him as though to hug him.

'That's enough of that now,' he said as he gently pushed her away. 'People will think . . .'

'What?'

'It's great to see you,' he said. He was blushing. 'Really great to see you.'

He took her suitcases from the ship's attendant, calling him 'mate' as he thanked him. For a second, as he turned, Eilis tried to hug him again, but he stopped her.

'No more of that now,' he said. 'Rose sent me a list of instructions, and they included one that said no kissing and hugging.' He laughed.

They walked together down the busy docks as ships were being loaded and unloaded. Jack had already seen that the transatlantic liner on which Eilis was to sail had docked, and, once they had left the suitcases in the shed as arranged, they went to inspect it. It stood alone, massive and much grander and whiter and cleaner than the cargo ships around it.

'This is going to take you to America,' Jack said. 'It's like time and patience.'

'What about time and patience?'

'Time and patience would bring a snail to America. Did you never hear that?'

'Oh, don't be so stupid,' she said and nudged him and smiled.

'Daddy always said that,' he said.

'When I was out of the room,' she replied.

'Time and patience would bring a snail to America,' he repeated.

The day was fine; they walked silently from the docks into the city centre as Eilis wished that she were back in her own bedroom or even on the boat as it moved across the Atlantic. Since she did not have to embark until five o'clock at the earliest, she wondered how they were going to spend the day. As soon as they found a café, Jack asked her if she was hungry.

'A bun,' she said, 'maybe and a cup of tea.'

'Enjoy your last cup of tea, so,' he said.

'Do they not have tea in America?' she asked.

'Are you joking? They eat their young in America. And they talk with their mouths full.'

She noticed that, when a waiter approached them, Jack asked for a table almost apologetically. They sat by the window.

'Rose said you were to have a good dinner later in case the food on the boat was not to your liking,' her brother told her.

Once they had ordered, Eilis looked around the café.

'What are they like?' she asked.

'Who?'

'The English.'

'They're fair, they're decent,' Jack said. 'If you do your job, then they appreciate that. It's all they care about, most of them. You get shouted at a bit on the street, but that's just Saturday night. You pay no attention to it.'

'What do they shout?'

'Nothing for the ears of a nice girl going to America.'

'Tell me!'

'I certainly will not.'

'Bad words?'

'Yes, but you learn to pay no attention and we have our own pubs so anything that would happen would be just on the way home. The rule is never to shout back, pretend nothing is happening.'

'And at work?'

'No, work is different. It's a spare-parts warehouse. Old cars

and broken machinery are brought in from all over the country. We take them to pieces and sell the parts on, down to the screws and the scrap metal.'

'What exactly do you do? You can tell me everything.' She looked at him and smiled.

'I'm in charge of the inventory. As soon as a car is stripped, I get a list of every single part of it, and with old machines some parts can be very rare. I know where they're kept and if they're sold. I worked out a system so everything can be located easily. I have only one problem.'

'What's that?'

'Most people who work in the company think they're free to liberate any spare part that their mates might need them to take home.'

'What do you do about that?'

'I convinced the boss that we should let anyone working for us have anything they want within reason at half the price and that means we have things under control a bit more, but they still take stuff. Why I'm in change of the inventory is that I came recommended by a friend of the boss. I don't steal spare parts. It's not that I'm honest or anything. I just know I'd get caught so I wouldn't risk it.'

As he spoke, he looked innocent and serious, she thought, but nervous as well, as though he were on display and worried what she would think of him and the life he had now. She could think of nothing which might make him more normal, more like himself. All she could think of were more questions.

'Do you see Pat and Martin much?'

'You sound like a quiz master.'

'Your letters are great but they never tell us anything we want to know.'

'There's not much to say. Martin moves around too much but he might settle in the job he has now. But we all meet on a Saturday night. The pub and then the dancehall. We get nice and clean on a Saturday night. It's a pity you're not coming to

Birmingham, there'd be a stampede for you on a Saturday night.'

'You make it sound horrible.'

'It's great gas. You'd enjoy it. There are more men than women.'

They moved around the city centre, slowly becoming more relaxed, beginning even to laugh sometimes as they talked. At times, it struck her, they spoke like responsible adults – he told her stories about work and about weekends – and then they were suddenly back as children or teenagers, jeering at one another or telling jokes. It seemed odd to her that Rose or their mother could not come at any moment and tell them to be quiet, and then she realized in the same second that they were in a big city and answerable to no one and with nothing to do until five o'clock, when she would have to collect her suitcases and hand in her ticket at the gate.

'Would you ever think of going home to live?' she asked him as they continued to walk aimlessly around the city centre before having a meal at a restaurant.

'Ah, there's nothing there for me,' he said. 'In the first few months I couldn't find my way around at all and I was desperate to go home. I would have done anything to go home. But now I'm used to it, and I like my wage packet and my independence. I like the way the boss at work, or even the boss in the place I was before, never asked me any questions; they both just made up their minds about me because of the way I worked. They never bother me, and if you suggest something to them, a better way of doing things, they'll listen.'

'And what are English girls like?' Eilis asked.

'There's one of them very nice,' Jack replied. 'I couldn't vouch for the rest of them.' He began to blush.

'What's her name?'

'I'm telling you nothing more.'

'I won't tell Mammy.'

'I heard that before. I've told you enough now.'

'I hope you don't make her come to some flea-pit on a Saturday night.'

'She's a good dancer. She doesn't mind. And it's not a flea-pit.'

'And do Pat and Martin have girlfriends as well?'

'Martin is always getting stood up.'

'And is Pat's girlfriend English as well?'

'You're just fishing for information. No wonder they told me to meet you.'

'Is she English too?'

'She's from Mullingar.'

'If you don't tell me your girlfriend's name, I'm going to tell everybody.'

'Tell them what?'

'That you make her come to a flea-pit on a Saturday night.'

'I'm telling you nothing more. You're worse than Rose.'

'She's probably got one of those posh English names. God, wait until Mammy finds out. Her favourite son.'

'Don't say a word to her.'

It was difficult to carry her suitcases down the narrow stairs of the liner and Eilis had to move sideways on the corridor as she followed the signs that led to her berth. She knew that the liner was fully booked for the journey and she would have to share the berth.

The room was tiny, with a bunk bed, no window, not even an air hole, and a door into a minuscule bathroom that also, as she had been told, served the room on the other side. A notice said that passengers should unlock the other door when the bathroom was not in use, thus facilitating access for passengers in the adjoining room.

Eilis put one of her suitcases on the rack provided, placing the other against the wall. She wondered if she should change her clothes or what she should do between now and the evening meal that would be served to third-class passengers once the boat had set sail. Rose had packed two books for her, but she

saw that the light was too weak for her to read. She lay down on the bed and put her hands behind her head, glad that the first part of the journey was over and there was still a week left without anything to do before she arrived. If only the rest of it could be as easy as this!

One thing that Jack had said remained with her because it was unlike him to be so vehement about anything. His saying that at the beginning he would have done anything to go home was strange. He had said nothing about this in his letters. It struck her that he might have told no one, not even his brothers, how he felt, and she thought how lonely that might have been for him. Maybe, she thought, all three of her brothers went through the same things and helped each other, sensing the feeling of homesickness when it arose in one of the others. If it happened to her, she realized, she would be alone, so she hoped that she would be ready for whatever was going to happen to her, however she was going to feel, when she arrived in Brooklyn.

Suddenly, the door opened and a woman came in, pulling a large trunk behind her. She ignored Eilis, who stood up immediately and asked her if she needed help. The woman dragged the trunk into the tiny berth and tried to close the door behind her but there was not enough space.

'This is hell,' she said in an English accent as she now attempted to stand the trunk on its side. Having succeeded, she stood in the space between the bunk beds and the wall beside Eilis. There was barely room for the two of them. Eilis saw that the upturned trunk was almost blocking the door.

'You're on the top bunk. Number one means bottom bunk and that's on my ticket,' the woman said. 'So move. My name is Georgina.'

Eilis did not check her own ticket but instead introduced herself.

'This is the smallest room,' Georgina said, 'you couldn't keep a cat in here, let alone swing one.'

Eilis had to stop herself from laughing, and she wished Rose

were close by so she could tell her that she was on the verge of asking Georgina if she were going all the way to New York or if she planned to get off somewhere on the journey.

'I need a fag but they won't let us smoke down here,' Georgina said.

Eilis began to climb up the little ladder to the top bunk.

'Never again,' Georgina said. 'Never again.'

Eilis could not resist. 'Never again such a big trunk or never again going to America?'

'Never again in third class. Never again the trunk. Never again going home to Liverpool. Just never again. Does that answer your question?'

'But you like the bottom bunk?' Eilis asked.

'Yes, I do. Now, you're Irish so come and have a cigarette with me.'

'I'm sorry. I don't smoke.'

'Just my luck. No bad habits.'

Georgina slowly made her way out of the room by edging around the trunk.

Later, when the engine of the ship, which seemed remarkably close to their berth, began to fire up and a large hooting whistle started to blow at regular intervals, Georgina returned to the room to fetch her coat and, having brushed her hair in the bathroom, invited Eilis to come on deck with her and see the lights of Liverpool as they departed.

'We could meet someone we like,' she said, 'who could invite us to the first-class lounge.'

Eilis found her coat and scarf and followed her, inching with difficulty past the trunk. She could not understand how Georgina had managed to get it down the stairs. It was only when they were standing on deck in the dwindling evening light that she was able to get a good look at the woman with whom she was sharing the berth. Georgina, she thought, was anything between thirty and forty, although she could have been more. Her hair was a bright blonde, and her hairstyle was like a film

star's. She moved with confidence, and when she lit a cigarette and pulled on it, the way she pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes and released the smoke from her nose made her seem immensely poised and glamorous.

'Look at them,' she said, pointing to a group of people standing on the other side of a barrier, who were also watching the city as it grew smaller. 'They're the first-class passengers. They get the best view. But I know a way around. Come on with me.'

'I'm all right here,' Eilis said. 'There'll be no view in a minute anyway.'

Georgina turned and looked at her and shrugged. 'Suit yourself. But, by the look of it and from what I've heard, it's going to be one of those nights, one of the worst. The steward who carried my trunk down said it was going to be one of those nights.'

It grew dark quickly and windy on deck. Eilis found the third-class dining room and sat alone as a single waiter set the tables around her, eventually noticing her and bringing her first, without even showing her a menu, a bowl of oxtail soup, followed by what she thought was boiled mutton in gravy with potatoes and peas. As she ate she looked around but saw no sign of Georgina and was surprised at the number of empty tables. She wondered if most of the cabins were first class and second class, and if third class was just the small number of people she saw now in the dining room, or had seen on deck. She thought this was unlikely, and asked herself where the rest of them were, or how they were going to eat.

By the time the waiter brought her jelly and custard, there was no one else in the dining room. She thought that Georgina, since there was no other restaurant in third class, must have slipped into first or second but she did not think it could be easily done. There was nothing for her to do, in any case, since there was no third-class lounge or bar, but to go back to her cabin and settle down for the night. She was tired and she hoped now that she might sleep.

In the cabin, when she went to brush her teeth and wash her face before going to bed, she discovered that the people on the other side had locked the door; she believed that they must be using the bathroom and stood waiting for them to finish and then unlock the door. She listened but heard no sound, except the engine, which she thought loud enough to muffle any bathroom noise. After a while she went into the corridor and spent time outside the door of the adjoining room but could hear nothing. She wondered if the people in there had gone to sleep and waited in the corridor hoping that Georgina would come. Georgina, she thought, would know what to do, as would Rose or her mother, or indeed Miss Kelly, whose face came into her mind for one brief moment. But she had no idea what to do.

After a while, she knocked gently on the door and, on receiving no reply, banged harder with her knuckles in case they could not hear her. Still there was no reply. Since the liner was full, and since there was no one in the dining room, which was by now surely closed, she presumed that all the passengers were in their cabins; some of them could even have been asleep. In her agitation and worry, she suddenly realized that not only did she need to brush her teeth and wash her face but she needed to empty her bladder and her bowels as well, and do so quickly, almost urgently. She went into her own cabin again and tried the door of the bathroom, but it was still locked.

She went back into the corridor and made her way towards the dining room, her need more and more urgent, but she could find no bathroom. She went up the two flights of stairs towards the deck but found that the door had been locked. She walked down a number of corridors, checking at the end of each one for a bathroom or a toilet, but there was nothing except the sound of the engines and the beginning of a movement as the liner lunged forward, which made it necessary for her to hold the rails carefully as she went back down the stairs so she could keep her balance.

She was desperate now and did not think she could manage

much longer without finding a toilet. She had noticed earlier that towards each end of her own corridor there was a small alcove where a bucket and some mops and brushes were kept. She realized that since she had met no one, then, if she were lucky, no one would see her now as she went to the alcove on the right. She was glad when she saw that there was already some water in the bottom of the bucket. She moved fast, trying to relieve herself as quickly as she could, keeping inside the alcove so that even if someone came along the corridor they might not spot her unless they had to pass. She used the soft mop to wipe herself when she had finished and then tiptoed back to the cabin, hoping that Georgina would come and know how to wake their neighbours to make them unlock the bathroom door. She would not, it struck her, be able to complain about this to the ship's authorities in case they associated her with what they would, she was sure, discover in the bucket the following morning.

She went into her berth and changed into her nightdress and turned off the light before climbing up to the top bunk. Soon she fell asleep. She did not know for how long she slept, but when she woke, she found herself covered in sweat. It soon became clear to her what was wrong. She was going to vomit. In the darkness she almost tumbled from the bunk and could not stop herself throwing up parts of her evening meal as she tried to keep her balance while searching for the cabin light.

As she found it, she moved past Georgina's trunk towards the door, and as soon as she reached the corridor she began to vomit copiously. She got down on her knees; it was the only way she could manage since the ship was swaying so much. She realized that she should try to vomit everything up as quickly as possible before she was discovered by one of her fellow passengers, or by the ship's authorities, but each time she stood up thinking she had finished, the nausea came back. As she began to return to the cabin, longing to cover herself with blankets on the top bunk, hoping that no one would realize that she was the one who had

made the mess in the corridor, the urge to be sick became even more intense than before, forcing her to get down on her hands and knees and vomit a thick liquid with a vile taste that made her shudder with revulsion when she lifted her head.

The ship's movements took on a harsh rhythm, and replaced the sense of lunging forward and then being pushed back she had felt when she woke first. They seemed to be making progress only with great difficulty, almost banging against something hard and forceful that attempted to withstand their progress. A noise, as though the massive liner were creaking, appeared louder sometimes than the engine itself. But, once back in the cabin, when she leaned against the door of the bathroom, she heard another sound, faint until she put her ear right up against the door, and then unmistakable, of someone retching. She listened: it was a heaving sound. She banged on the door, angry when she understood why it had remained locked. The people on the other side must have known how rough the night was going to be and known they would need to use the bathroom all the time. The retching came at intervals from the other side, and there was no sign that the door into her berth was going to be opened.

She felt strong enough to look at where she had vomited in the cabin. Having put on her shoes and a coat over her night-dress, she went into the corridor and walked to the alcove on the left, where she found a mop and a brush and a bucket. She was careful where she stepped and careful also not to lose her balance. She wondered now if many of the third-class passengers had known what this night was going to be like and had therefore kept away from the dining room and the deck and the corridors, had decided to lock themselves in their cabins, where they were going to stay until the worst was over. She did not know if this often happened when a liner sailed out of Liverpool destined for New York, but, remembering that Georgina had said that it was going to be one of those nights, she presumed that it was worse than usual. They were now, she imagined,

close to the coast somewhere south of Ireland, but she could not be sure of that.

She carried a mop and brush back to the cabin, hoping that the smell could be got rid of by pouring some of the perfume that Rose had given her on the parts of the floor and the blankets where she had vomited. But the mopping appeared only to make things worse and the brush was no use. She decided to bring them back to where she had found them. Suddenly, as she left them in the alcove, she felt nauseous again and could not stop herself vomiting in the corridor once more. There was hardly anything left to vomit, just a sour bile that left a taste in her mouth that made her cry as she banged on the door of the cabin beside hers and kicked it hard. But no one opened the door as the liner shuddered and seemed to lunge forward, and then shuddered again.

She had no idea how far under the sea she was except that her cabin was deep in the belly of the ship. As her stomach began dry heaves, she realized that she would never be able to tell anyone how sick she felt. She pictured her mother standing at the door waving as the car took her and Rose to the railway station, the expression on her mother's face strained and worried, managing a final smile when the car turned down Friary Hill. What was happening now, she hoped, was something that her mother had never even imagined. If it had been somehow easier, just rocking back and forth, then she might have been able to convince herself that it was a dream, or it would not last, but every moment of it was absolutely real, totally solid and part of her waking life, as was the foul taste in her mouth and the grinding of the engines and the heat that seemed to be increasing as the night wore on. And with all this came the feeling that she had done something wrong, that it was somehow her fault that Georgina had gone elsewhere and that her neighbours had locked the bathroom door, and her fault that she had vomited all over the cabin and had not succeeded in cleaning up the mess.

She was breathing now through her nose, concentrating,

making every effort to stop her stomach heaving again, using all of the force of will she had left to climb the ladder to the top bunk and lie there in the dark, imagining that the boat was moving forward, even though the shuddering sound became fiercer as the liner seemed to hit a wave stronger than it was. She imagined for a while that she herself was the sea outside, pushing hard to resist the weight and force of the liner. She fell into a light, dreamless sleep.

She was woken by a soft hand on her forehead. She knew exactly where she was when she opened her eyes.

'Oh, the poor little pet,' Georgina said.

'They wouldn't open the bathroom door,' Eilis said. She made her voice sound as weak as she could.

'The bastards!' Georgina said. 'They do that every time, some of them, whoever gets in first locks the door. Watch me dealing with them.'

Eilis sat up and slowly made her way down the ladder. The smell of vomit was dreadful. Georgina had taken a nail file from her handbag and was already busy working at the lock on the bathroom door. She opened it without too much difficulty. Eilis followed her into the bathroom, where the passengers in the other berth had left their toilet things.

'Now, we have to block their door because tonight is going to be even worse,' Georgina said.

Eilis saw that the lock was a simple metal bar that could easily be lifted by a nail file.

'There's only one solution,' Georgina said. 'If I put my trunk in here, we won't be able to close the door, we'll have to sit sideways on the toilet, but they won't have a chance of getting in. You poor pet.'

She looked at Eilis again with sympathy. She was wearing make-up and seemed untouched by the ravages of the night.

'What did you have for dinner?' Georgina asked as she set about moving the trunk into the bathroom.

'I think it was mutton.'

'And peas, plenty of peas. And how do you feel?'

'I have never felt worse. Did I leave a big mess in the corridor?'

'Yes, but the whole ship's a mess. Even first class is a mess. They'll start the cleaning there and it'll be hours before they make it down here. Why did you eat such a big dinner?'

'I didn't know.'

'Did you not hear them saying it when we were coming on board? It's the worst storm in years. It's always bad, especially down here, but this one is terrible. Just drink water, nothing else, no solids. It'll do wonders for your figure.'

'I'm sorry about the smell.'

'They'll come and clean it all up. We'll move the trunk again when we hear them coming and we'll put it back when they go. I got spotted in first class and I've been warned to stay down here until we dock or I'll be arrested at the other side. So I'm afraid you've got company. And, darling, when I vomit, you'll know all about it. And that's all's going to happen for the next day or so, vomiting, plenty of it. And then I'm told we'll be in calm waters.'

'I feel terrible,' Eilis said.

'It's called seasickness, duck, and it turns you green.'

'Do I look terrible?'

'Oh, yes, and so does every person on this boat.'

As she spoke, a loud knocking came from the other cabin. Georgina went into the bathroom.

'Fuck off!' she shouted. 'Can you hear me? Good! Now, fuck off!'

Eilis stood behind her in her nightdress and her bare feet. She was laughing.

'I need to go to the toilet now,' she said. 'I hope you don't mind.'

Later in the day they came with buckets of water filled with disinfectant and they washed the floors of the corridors and

the rooms. They took away the sheets and blankets that had been soiled and brought new ones and fresh towels. Georgina, who had been watching out for them, pushed the trunk back to its place inside the door. When the neighbours, two elderly American ladies, whom Eilis now saw for the first time, complained to the cleaners that the bathroom had been locked, the cleaners shrugged and carried on working. The second they had gone, Georgina and Eilis edged the trunk back into the bathroom before their neighbours got a chance to block the door from the other side. When they banged on both the bathroom door and the door of the cabin, Eilis and Georgina laughed.

'They missed their chance. That will teach them now!' Georgina said.

She went to the dining room and came back with two jugs of water.

'They have only one waiter,' she said, 'so you can take what you like. This is your ration for tonight. Eat nothing and drink plenty, that's the key. It won't stop you being sick, but it won't be as bad.'

'It feels as if the boat is being pushed back all the time,' Eilis said.

'From down here it always feels like that,' Georgina replied. 'But stay still and save your breath and vomit to your heart's content when you feel like it and you'll be a new woman tomorrow.'

'You sound like you have been on this boat thousands of times.'

'I have,' Georgina said. 'I go home once a year to see my mam. It's a lot of suffering for a week. By the time I've recovered I have to go back. But I love seeing them all. We're not getting any younger, any of us, so it's nice to spend a week together.'

After another night of constant retching, Eilis was exhausted; the liner seemed to hammer against the water. But then the sea

became calm. Georgina, who moved regularly up and down the corridor, met the couple in the adjoining cabin and made an agreement with them that neither side would prevent the other from using the bathroom, but they would instead attempt to share it in a spirit of harmony now that the storms were over. She moved her trunk out of the bathroom and warned Eilis, who admitted to being hungry, not to eat anything at all, no matter how hungry she was, but to drink plenty of water and try not to fall asleep during the day, despite the overwhelming temptation to do so. If she could sleep a full night, Georgina said, she would feel much better.

Eilis could not believe she had four more nights to spend in this cramped space, with stale air and weak light. It was only when she went into the bathroom to wash herself that she found moments of relief from the vague nausea mixed with terrible hunger that stayed with her and the claustrophobia that seemed to become more intense whenever Georgina left her in the cabin.

Since they had only a bath in her mother's house, she had never had a shower before, and it took her a while to work out how to get the water at the right temperature without turning it off altogether. As she soaped herself and put shampoo on her wet hair, she wondered if this could be heated sea water and, if not, then how the ship managed to carry so much fresh water. In tanks, maybe, she thought, or perhaps it was rainwater. Whatever it was, standing under it brought her ease for the first time since the ship had left Liverpool.

On the night before they were due to dock, she went to the dining room with Georgina, who told her that she looked wretched and that if she did not take care she would be stopped at Ellis Island and put in quarantine, or at least given a thorough medical examination. Back in the cabin, Eilis showed Georgina her passport and papers to prove to her that she would not have a problem entering the United States. She told her that she would be met by Father Flood. Georgina was surprised, she

said, that Eilis had a full, rather than a temporary, work permit. She did not think it was easy to get such a document any more, even with the help of a priest. She made Eilis open her suitcase and show her what clothes she had brought so that she could select suitable attire for her when she was disembarking and make sure that nothing she wore was too wrinkled.

'Nothing fancy,' she said. 'We don't want you looking like a tart.'

She chose a white dress with a red floral pattern that Rose had given Eilis and a plain cardigan and a plain-coloured scarf. She looked at the three pairs of shoes that Eilis had packed and selected the plainest, insisting that the shoes would have to be polished.

'And wear your coat over your arm and look as though you know where you're going and don't wash your hair again, the water on this boat has made it stand out like a ball of steel wool. You'll need to spend a few hours brushing it to get it into any shape at all.'

In the morning, between arranging to have her trunk carried on deck, Georgina began to put make-up on, getting Eilis to comb her hair out even straighter now that the brushing was done so that it could be tied back into a bun.

'Don't look too innocent,' she said. 'When I put some eye-liner on you and some rouge and mascara, they'll be afraid to stop you. Your suitcase is all wrong, but there's nothing we can do about that.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's too Irish and they stop the Irish.'

'Really?'

'Try not to look so frightened.'

'I'm hungry.'

'We're all hungry. But, darling, you don't need to look hungry. Pretend you are full.'

'And I almost never wear make-up at home.'

'Well, you're about to enter the land of the free and the brave.

And I don't know how you got that stamp on your passport. The priest must know someone. The only thing they can stop you for is if they think you have TB, so don't cough whatever you do, or if they think you have some funny eye disease, I can't remember the name of it. So keep your eyes open. Sometimes, they don't stop you at all, except to look at your papers.'

Georgina made Eilis sit on the bottom bunk and turn her face towards the light and close her eyes. For twenty minutes she worked slowly, applying a thin cake of make-up and then some rouge, with eye-liner and mascara. She backcombed her hair. When she finished, she sent Eilis into the bathroom with some lipstick and told her to put it on very gently and make sure that she did not spread it all over her face. When Eilis looked at herself in the mirror she was surprised. She seemed older and, she thought, almost good-looking. She thought that she would love to know how to put make-up on properly herself in the way that Rose knew and Georgina knew. It would be much easier, she imagined, to go out among people she did not know, maybe people she would never see again, if she could look like this. It would make her less nervous in one way, she thought, but maybe more so in another, because she knew that people would look at her and might have a view on her that was wrong if she were dressed up like this every day in Brooklyn.