

# Almost There

1 On the night before they were due to dock<sup>1</sup>, she went to the dining room with Georgina, who told her that she looked wretched<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> 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.’

40 ‘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.’

45 ‘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 of the bunk<sup>4</sup> and turn her face towards the light and close her eyes.

For twenty minutes she worked slowly, applying a thin cake of<sup>5</sup> make-up and then some rouge, with eye-liner and mascara. She backcombed<sup>6</sup> 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 she did not spread it all over her face. When Eilis looked at herself in the mirror she was surprised.

65 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.

Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn*, 2009

