

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BROOKLYN*

Colm Tóibín

LONG ISLAND



About Long Island

A novel of enormous wit and profound emotional resonance from one of the world's finest writers.

Eilis Lacey is Irish, married to Tony Fiorello, a plumber and one of four Italian American brothers, all of whom live in neighbouring houses on a cul-de-sac in Lindenhurst, Long Island, with their wives and children and Tony's parents. It is the spring of 1976 and Eilis, now in her forties with two teenage children, has no-one to rely on in this still-new country.

One day, an Irishman comes to the door asking for Eilis by name. He tells her that his wife is pregnant with Tony's child and that when the baby is born, he will not raise it but will leave it with her. Eilis has choices to make, and what she does in the wake of this shattering news is at the heart of one of Tóibín's most riveting and emotional novels to date.

Praise for Long Island

'A masterful novel full of longing and regret ... Intensely moving and yet full of restraint' Douglas Stuart

'His best yet ... It reads like the tensest of stage plays, but with all the pleasures of interiority that the novel form allows. I haven't wanted to hug this many characters in a while' Naoise Dolan

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LONG ISLAND


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Part One

‘THAT IRISHMAN HAS BEEN here again,’ Francesca said, sitting down at the kitchen table. ‘He has come to every house, but it’s you he’s looking for. I told him you would be home soon.’

‘What does he want?’ Eilis asked.

‘I did everything to make him tell me, but he wouldn’t. He asked for you by name.’

‘He knows my name?’

Francesca’s smile had an insinuating edge. Eilis appreciated her mother-in-law’s intelligence, and also her sly sense of humour.

‘Another man is the last thing I need,’ Eilis said.

‘Who are you talking to?’ Francesca replied.

They both laughed, as Francesca stood up to go. From the window, Eilis watched her walk carefully across the damp grass to her own house.

Soon, Larry would be in from school and then Rosella from after-school study and then she would hear Tony parking his car outside.

This would be a perfect time for a cigarette. But, having found Larry smoking, she had made a bargain with him that she would give up completely if he promised not to smoke again. She still had a packet upstairs.

When the doorbell rang, Eilis stood up lazily, presuming that it was one of Larry’s cousins calling for him to come and play. However, from the hallway, she made out the silhouette of a grown man through the frosted glass of the door. Until he called out her name, it did not occur to her that this was the man Francesca had mentioned. She opened the door.

‘You are Eilis Fiorello?’

The accent was Irish, with a trace, she thought, of Donegal, like a teacher she had had in school. Also, the way the man stood there, as though waiting to be challenged, reminded her of home.

‘I am,’ she said.

‘I have been looking for you.’

His tone was almost aggressive. She wondered if Tony’s business could owe him money.

‘So I hear.’

‘You are the wife of the plumber?’

Since the question sounded rude, she saw no reason to reply.

‘He is good at his job, your husband. I’d say he’s in great demand.’

The man stopped for a second, looking behind him to check no one was listening.

‘He fixed everything in our house,’ he went on, pointing a finger at her. ‘He even did a bit more than was in the estimate. Indeed, he came back regularly when he knew that the woman of the house would be there and I would not. And his plumbing is so good that she is to have a baby in August.’

He stood back and smiled broadly at her expression of disbelief.

‘That’s right. That’s why I’m here. And I can tell you for a fact that I am not the father. It had nothing to do with me. But I am married to the woman who is having this baby and if anyone thinks I am keeping an Italian plumber’s brat in my house and have my own children believe that it came into the world as decently as they did, they can have another think.’

He pointed a finger at her again.

‘So as soon as this little bastard is born, I am transporting it here. And if you are not at home, then I will hand it to that other woman. And if there’s no one at all in any of the houses you people own, I’ll leave it right here on your doorstep.’

He walked towards her and lowered his voice.

‘And you can tell your husband from me that if I ever see his face anywhere, I’ll come after him with an iron bar that I keep handy. Now, have I made myself clear?’

Eilis wanted to ask him what part of Ireland he was from as a way of ignoring what he had said, but he had already turned away. She tried to think of something else to say that might engage him.

‘Have I made myself clear?’ he asked again as he reached his car.

When she did not reply, he made as though to approach the house once more.

‘I’ll be seeing you in August, or it could be late July and that’s the last time I’ll see you, Eilis.’

‘How do you know my name?’ she asked.

‘That husband of yours is a great talker. That’s how I know your name. He told my wife all about you.’

If he had been Italian or plain American, she would not have been sure how to judge whether he was making a threat he had no intension of carrying out. He was, she thought, a man who liked the sound of his own voice. But she recognised something in him, a stubbornness, perhaps even a sort of sincerity.

She had known men like this in Ireland. Should one of them discover that their wife had been unfaithful and was pregnant as a result, they would not have the baby in the house.

At home, however, no man would be able to take a newborn baby and deliver it to another household. He would be seen by someone. A priest or a doctor or a Guard would make him take the baby back. But here in this quiet cul-de-sac, the man could leave a baby on her doorstep without anyone noticing him. He really could do that. And the way he spoke, the set of his jaw, the determination in his gaze, convinced her that he meant what he was saying.

Once he had driven away, she went back into the living room and sat down. She closed her eyes.

Somewhere, not far away, there was a woman pregnant with Tony’s child. Eilis did not know why she presumed that the woman was Irish too. Perhaps her visitor would be more likely to order an Irishwoman around. Anyone else might stand up to him, or leave him. Suddenly, the image of this woman alone with a baby coming to look for support from Tony frightened her even more than the image of a baby being left on her doorstep. But then that second image too, when she let herself picture it in cold detail, made her feel

sick. What if the baby was crying? Would she pick it up? If she did, what would she do then?

As she stood up and moved to another chair, the man, so recently in front of her, real and vivid and imposing, seemed like someone she had read about or seen on television. It simply wasn't possible that the house could be perfectly quiet one moment and then have this visitor arriving in the next.

If she told someone about it, then she might know how to feel, what she should do. In one flash, an image of her elder sister, Rose, dead now more than twenty years, came into her mind. All through her childhood, in even the smallest crisis, she could appeal to Rose who would take control. She had never confided in her mother, who was, in any case, in Ireland with no telephone in her house. Her two sisters-in-law, Lena and Clara, were both from Italian families and close to each other but not to Eilis.

In the hallway, she looked at the telephone on its stand. If there was one number she could call, one friend to whom she could recount the scene that had just been enacted at her front door! It wasn't that the man, whatever his name was, would become more real if she described him to someone. She had no doubt that he was real.

She picked up the receiver as if she were about to dial a number. She listened to the dial tone. She put the receiver down and lifted it again. There must be some number she could call. She held the receiver to her ear as she realised that there was not.

Did Tony know this man was going to appear? She tried to think about his behaviour over the previous weeks, but there was nothing out of the ordinary that she could think of.

Eilis went upstairs, looking around her own bedroom as if she were a stranger in this house. She picked up Tony's pyjamas from where he had left them on the floor that morning, wondering if she should exclude his clothes from the wash. And then she saw that that made no sense at all.

Maybe, instead, she should tell him to remove himself to his mother's house and she could talk to him when she had collected her thoughts.

But what, then, if it was a misunderstanding? She would be in the wrong,

too ready to believe the worst of a man to whom she had been married for more than twenty years.

She went into Larry's room, examining the large-scale map of Naples that he had pinned to the wall. He had insisted that this was his real homeplace, ignoring her efforts to tell him that he was half-Irish and that his father was actually born in America and that his grandparents, in any case, came from a village south of the city.

'They sailed to America from Naples,' Larry said. 'Ask them.'

'I sailed from Liverpool, but that does not mean I am from there.'

For a few weeks, as he worked on a class project about Naples, Larry became like his sister, fascinated by detail and ready to stay up late to finish what he had begun. But once it was completed, he had reverted to his old self.

Now, at sixteen, Larry was taller than Tony, with dark eyes and a much darker complexion than his father or his uncles. But he had inherited from them, she thought, a way of demanding that his interests be respected in the house while laughing at the pretensions to seriousness apparent in his mother and his sister.

'I want to come home,' Tony often said, 'get cleaned up, have a beer and put my feet up.'

'And that is what I want too,' Larry said.

'I often ask the Lord,' Eilis said, 'if there is anything else I can do to make my husband and son more comfortable.'

'Less talk and more television,' Larry said.

In the houses in the same cul-de-sac where Tony's brothers Enzo and Mauro lived with their families, the children, most of them teenagers, did not speak with the same freedom as Rosella and Larry. Rosella liked an argument that she could win by using facts and finding flaws in the other person's case. Larry, in any discussion, liked to turn the argument into a set of jokes. No matter how hard Eilis tried, she found herself supporting Rosella, just as Tony often started laughing at some absurd point that Larry had made even before Larry did.

‘I am only a plumber,’ Tony would say. ‘I am needed only when something leaks. One thing I am sure of, no plumber will ever make it to the White House unless they have problems with their pipes.’

‘But the White House is riddled with leaks,’ Larry said.

‘You see,’ Rosella said, ‘you are interested in politics.’

‘If Larry studied,’ Eilis said, ‘he could surprise everyone.’

—

Eilis heard Rosella coming in. She wondered if the usual easy banter among all four of them at the table would be possible now. Unless the man’s visit had been a ruse of some kind, a part of her life was ended. She wished that he had made some other decision about his wife’s pregnancy, one that didn’t involve her or Tony in any way. But then she saw how desperate and how futile such wishing was. She could not force the man not to knock on her door just because she wanted that.

As they sat down to dinner each evening, Tony would describe his day, going into detail about his clients and their houses, how much dirt often lay in the area near the sink or the toilet. If Eilis had to tell him to stop, it was only because he was making Rosella and Larry laugh too much.

‘That is what puts the food on the table,’ Larry would say.

‘But wait, things were worse this afternoon,’ Tony would begin again.

In the future, Eilis thought, she would watch him to see what he was concealing.

Having shouted a greeting to Rosella, Eilis went back into the main bedroom and closed the door. She was trying to imagine Rosella’s response, and Larry’s, to the news that Tony had fathered a child with another woman. Larry, despite his swagger, was, she thought, innocent, and the idea that his father had had sex with a woman in whose house he was fixing a leak would be beyond him, whereas Rosella read novels and discussed the most lurid court cases with her uncle Frank, the youngest of Tony’s brothers. If a husband choked his wife and then chopped her up, Frank, who was a lawyer, the only one among the brothers who had gone to college, would learn even

more alarming details and share them with his niece. Finding out that her father had been involved with another woman might not shock Rosella, but Eilis could not be sure.

Strangely, she thought, Tony was more prudish than she was. He grew uncomfortable if a kissing sequence on television went on for too long. He and his brothers often nudged one another at family meals and hinted at jokes that could not be told at the table, but it would go no further than that. They would never actually tell the jokes. She liked how old-fashioned Tony was. She remembered his blushes when they had discussed family planning. In the end, having listened in to a conversation between her two sisters-in-law who seemed to have no problems ignoring church teaching, she had simply put a packet of condoms on Tony's bedside table.

He had smiled when he noticed them, opening the packet as though not quite sure what was inside.

'Are these for me?' he had asked.

'I think they are for both of us,' she had replied.

He might have used one of those very condoms to some purpose, she thought, a few months before, thus saving them the trouble that was to come.

She sat on the edge of the bed. How would she even tell Tony that the man had called? For a second, she wished there was somewhere she could go, a place where she would not have to contemplate what had happened.

The extra room they had built onto the house, once Eilis's office, was now used by Rosella and Larry for study, although Larry, in reality, spent little time there.

'I can make you tea, or even coffee, if you want,' Eilis said when she found Rosella there.

'You did that yesterday,' Rosella replied. 'It's my turn.'

Rosella had a way of composing herself, not smiling, remaining silent, that set her apart from her cousins. They used any excuse to burst into loud laughter or an expression of wonder while Rosella looked to her mother in the hope that she might soon be taken away from this family gathering to the calmness of their own house. When Tony and Larry set about disturbing this

calmness, often by vying with each other in replicating the radio commentary on baseball games, Rosella retired to her study, as she called it. She even had Tony put a lock on the door to prevent Larry from barging in when she was trying to concentrate.

At times, Eilis found it stifling living beside Tony's parents and his two brothers and their families. They could almost see in through her windows. If she decided to go for a walk, one of her sisters-in-law or her mother-in-law would ask her where she had gone and why. They often blamed her interest in privacy and staying apart as something Irish.

But, since Rosella's looks were so Italian, they did not really think there was anything Irish about her. Thus, they could not imagine where her seriousness came from.

Rosella tried not to stand out. She paid attention to everything her aunts and cousins said and commented on new clothes and hairstyles, but she had no real interest in fashion. They would have thought her bookish and eccentric, Eilis knew, if she had not been so good-looking.

'All her grace and beauty,' her grandmother said, 'comes from my mother and my aunt. It passed over our generation – God knows I didn't get any of it – and then came to America. Rosella belongs to an earlier time. And those women on my side of the family had brains as well as beauty. My aunt Giuseppina was so clever that she almost didn't get married at all.'

'Would that be clever?' Rosella asked.

'Well, sometimes it would, but not in the end, I think. And I am sure you will be snapped up when the time comes.'

Two days a week, between school and supper, Rosella crossed from her own house to her grandmother's and they talked for an hour.

'But what do you talk about?' Eilis asked.

'The re-unification of Italy.'

'Seriously.'

'You know, of her three daughters-in-law, she likes you best.'

'No, she doesn't!'

'Today, she asked me to pray with her.'

‘For what?’

‘For Uncle Frank to find a nice wife.’

‘She means an Italian wife?’

‘She means any wife at all. And with his brains, she says, and his salary and bonuses, and the fact that he lives in Manhattan, he should have women following him in the street. I don’t think she cares whether the woman is Italian or not. Look what Dad found when he went to an Irish dance.’

‘Would you not prefer to have an Italian mother? Would it not make life simpler?’

‘I like things the way they are.’

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As Eilis flicked through the books on Rosella’s desk, it struck her that the life Rosella took for granted depended on her father and his two married brothers, who worked together, applying themselves to their trade, being diligent and dependable so that people trusted them. Most of their work came by word of mouth. Their catchment area was so much bigger than a town, but sometimes it seemed more intimate, more enclosed. It would not be long before someone found out that Tony had made a woman pregnant while working in her house. And news would spread in the same way as it might in a village.

So far, she had managed to avoid picturing Tony in his work clothes in the house of this woman. She now had an image of him standing up from fixing a pipe and finding the woman of the house looking at him gratefully. She could imagine Tony’s initial shyness. And then he would linger, about to leave. There would be an awkward silence.

‘Are you having problems at work?’ Rosella asked.

‘No, none at all,’ Eilis replied.

‘You seem preoccupied. Just now.’

‘Things are good at work. A bit too busy.’

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When Larry arrived, having pecked her on the cheek, he pointed to his feet.

‘My shoes are perfectly clean, but I have left them outside the door. And I need to listen to the radio. I will be in my room if anyone is looking for me.’

Later, Tony appeared and went straight upstairs, as usual, to have a shower and change out of his work clothes before coming downstairs and seeking out Rosella as he had done each day since she was a baby. Often, if she could manage to listen into their conversation, Eilis would find out something that neither of them had told her, something that had been said by Rosella’s grandmother, or a piece of information about his brothers that Tony confided to his daughter.

She added potatoes to the stew that she had prepared the previous evening while Larry set the table. She had managed so far to avoid Tony without anyone noticing. He was now in the living room watching television. What she dreaded was his coming into the kitchen, commenting on the delicious smell, or making some joke with Larry. He could fill the air with a presence that was always genial, thoughtful. Her sisters-in-law complained about their husbands’ silences and lack of good humour once they were home with the family. Their mother-in-law had asked Rosella how her father behaved at home.

‘What did you tell her?’ Eilis had asked.

‘I said that he finds everything funny and that he is always lovely.’

‘And what did your grandmother say?’

‘She said that you bring out the best in everyone so maybe Lena and Clara could learn from you and then Uncle Enzo and Uncle Mauro might be more cheerful at home.’

‘She just said that to you. I wonder what she says to other people.’

‘She never says anything she doesn’t mean.’

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Eilis kept her back to the door, stirring the stew and then standing at the sink washing some dishes. If only this, she thought, could go on. If only Tony could be enthralled by something on the television and could delay coming to the table for as long as possible.

When he did come into the room, she busied herself drying plates. For a moment, in her confusion, she could not remember in what order she normally served dinner. Was it possible she gave Tony his dinner first? Or maybe Larry, as the youngest? Or Rosella? She dished out the stew and crossed the room with two plates, putting them in front of Rosella and Larry. Then without speaking or looking at Tony, she went to get the other two. He was telling Rosella and Larry a story about being attacked by a dog while half his body was in a cupboard looking for a leaking pipe.

‘As soon as he got the bottom of my trousers between his teeth, the brute began to yank. And his owner was a Norwegian woman who had never had a man in her apartment before.’

Eilis stood listening to him. He did not, she was sure, have the smallest idea of what this sounded like to her. It was just another of his stories. Leaving her own plate aside for the moment, Eilis lifted Tony’s and crossed the room. Just as she was ready to put the plate on the table, she let it tilt until some of the stew began to spill. Then she tilted it some more. The food fell to the floor near Tony. When he looked up at her alarmed, she stood still with the empty plate in her hand.

Rosella rushed over and took the plate from her mother’s hand while Tony and Larry moved the table itself and the chairs so that the floor could be cleaned. Tony began to pick up pieces of the stew from the floor.

‘What happened to you?’ Rosella asked. ‘You just stood there.’

Eilis kept her eyes on Tony who had fetched a sponge and a bowl of water. She was waiting for him to look at her again.

‘There’s more stew in the pot,’ Larry said.

With the floor cleaned and the table back in place, and with a fresh helping of stew for Tony, they ate in silence. If Tony were to speak, Eilis was ready to interrupt him. She realised that Rosella and Larry must see that there was something happening between their parents. But it was Tony on whom Eilis was concentrating; he must be aware that she knew.

ON SATURDAYS, TONY'S FATHER'S morning ritual was to visit his sons who lived beside him to see if they had been having any problems with their cars. Her father-in-law began to pay more attention to her when Eilis bought a cheap car for herself, and asked her every time he saw her how the car was going.

'It is turning out to be a bargain,' he said. 'I had my doubts at the time. My wife instructed me to keep them to myself, but now that I have been proved wrong, I can speak freely.'

Each time Frank visited, his father came out to inspect his son's car, lifting the hood, checking the oil and the water, despite his wife's insistence that he not get himself dirty.

'The best cars ever made stop dead in the street because their owners didn't check the oil and the water.'

If any of the cars needed attention, he recommended his old friend Mr Dakessian, the Armenian, who, he said, knew almost as much about cars as he did, which was just as well since Mr Dakessian owned a garage, the best one for many miles, with the most competitive prices and the friendliest service, if you could keep the man from discussing Armenian history.

'The rest of them would insult your car and then fleece you,' the old man said. 'Any problem with your car, you go to Dakessian.'

Since Eilis, at that time, was still doing the accounts for the family business, she dealt regularly with Mr Dakessian who looked after Tony and his brothers' cars. She found him as congenial and dependable as her father-in-law said.

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One day when she was getting the oil checked in her car, Mr Dakessian gave her a book on Armenian history.