

Mr. Whiteman

Eng 9

Liam O'Flaherty, The Sniper

Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through the clouds. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

5 On a roof-top a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders were slung a pair of field-glasses. His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic. They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to look at death.

10 He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. Then he paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk.

15 Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, inhaled the smoke hurriedly and put out the light. Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he crawled away to the left.

20 Cautiously he raised himself and peered over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet whizzed over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

Just then an armoured car came across the bridge and advanced
25 slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards ahead. The sniper's heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to fire, but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never pierce the steel that covered the grey monster.

Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head
30 covered by a tattered shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.

The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking towards the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head
35 fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted towards the side street. The sniper fired again. The woman whirled round and fell with a sudden shriek into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot rang out and the sniper dropped his rifle with a curse. The rifle clattered to the roof. The

40 sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He stooped to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead.

"I'm hit," he muttered. Dropping flat on to the roof, he crawled back to the parapet. Then he lay still and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to
45 overcome the pain.

In the street beneath all was still. The armoured car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner's head hanging lifeless over the turret. The woman's corpse lay still in the gutter.

50 The sniper lay still for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape. Morning must not find him wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof covered his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to do it. Then he thought of a plan.

55 Taking off his cap, he placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upwards over the parapet, until the cap was visible from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately there was a report, and a bullet pierced the centre of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap
60 slipped down into the street. Then catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hands with him. Crawling quickly to the left, he peered up at the corner of the
65 roof. His ruse had succeeded. That other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge
70 of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards – a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand devils. He took steady aim. His hand trembled with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath through his nostrils and fired. He was almost deafened with the report and his arm shook with
75 the recoil.

Then when the smoke cleared he peered across and uttered a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was reeling over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to keep his feet, but he was slowly falling forward, as if in a dream. The rifle fell from his grasp, hit the
80 parapet, fell over and then clattered on to the pavement. Then the dying man on the roof crumpled up and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust
85 of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood

out on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing 90 everybody.

He decided to leave the roof now and look for his company commander, to report. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets.

When the sniper reached the street, he felt a sudden curiosity as 95 to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He wondered did he know him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army. He decided to risk going over to have a look at him. In the upper part of the street there was heavy firing, but around here all was quiet.

100 The sniper darted across the street. A machine-gun tore up the ground around him with a hail of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downwards beside the corpse. The machine-gun stopped. Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.