

Then the peculiar thing would happen. I'd sit on a deck chair in the lovely October sun with the gorgeous blue Atlantic all around me and try to imagine what New York would be like. I'd try to see Fifth Avenue or Central Park or Greenwich Village where everyone looked like movie stars, powerful tans, gleaming white teeth. But Limerick would push me into the past. Instead of me sauntering up Fifth Avenue with the tan, the teeth, I'd be back in the lanes of Limerick, women standing at doors chatting away and pulling their shawls around their shoulders, children with faces dirty from bread and jam, playing and laughing and crying to their mothers. I'd see people at Mass on Sunday morning where a whisper would run through the church when someone with a hunger weakness would collapse in the pew and have to be carried outside by men from the back of the church who'd tell everyone, Stand back, stand back, for the lovea Jaysus, can't you see she's gasping for the air, and I wanted to be a man like that telling people stand back because that gave you the right to stay outside till the Mass was over and you could go off to the pub which is why you were standing in the back with all the other men in the first place. Men who didn't drink always knelt right up there by the altar to show how good they were and how they didn't care if the pubs stayed closed till Doomsday. They knew the responses to the Mass better than anyone and they'd be blessing themselves and standing and kneeling and sighing over their prayers as if they felt the pain of Our Lord more than the rest of the congregation. Some had given up the pint entirely and they were the worst, always preaching the evil of the pint and looking down on the ones still in the grip as if they were on the right track to heaven. They acted as if God Himself would turn His back on a man drinking the pint when everyone knew you'd rarely hear a priest up in the pulpit denounce the pint or the men who drank it. Men with the thirst stayed in the back ready to streak out the door the minute the priest said, Ite, missa est, Go, you are dismissed. They stayed in the back because their mouths were dry and they felt too humble to be up there with the sober ones. I stayed near the door so that I could hear the men whispering about the slow Mass. They went to Mass because it's a mortal sin if you don't though you'd wonder if it wasn't a worse sin to be joking to the man next to you that if this priest didn't hurry up you'd expire of the thirst on the spot. If Father White came out to give the sermon they'd shuffle and groan over his sermons, the slowest in the world, with him rolling his eyes to heaven and declaring we were all doomed unless we mended our ways and devoted ourselves to the Virgin Mary entirely. My Uncle Pa Keating would have the men laughing behind their hands with his, I would devote myself to the Virgin Mary if she handed me a lovely creamy black pint of porter. I wanted to be there with my Uncle Pa Keating all grown up with long trousers and stand with the men in the back with the great thirst and laugh behind my hand.