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Saints and Sinners

Written by Edna O'Brien

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Saints and Sinners

Edna O'Brien



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Shovel Kings

In one lapel was a small green and gold harp, and in the other a flying angel. His blue jacket had seen better days. He wore a black felt homburg hat, and his white hair fell in coils – almost to his shoulders. His skin was sallow, but his huge hands were a dark nut brown, and on the right hand he had a lopsided knuckle, obviously caused by some injury. Above it, on the wrist, he wore a wide black strap. He could have been any age, and he seemed like a man on whom a permanent frost had settled. He drank the Guinness slowly, lifting the glass with a measured gravity. We were in a massive pub named Biddy Mulligan's, in North London, on St Patrick's Day, and the sense of expectation was palpable. Great banners with Happy St Patrick draped the walls, and numerous flat television screens carried pictures of the homeland, featuring hills, dales, lakes, tidy towns, and highlights of famed sporting moments down the years. Little votive lamps, not unlike Sacred Heart lamps, were nailed in corners to various wooden beams and seemed talismanic on that momentous day. Only three people were there, the quiet man, a cracked woman with tangled hair gabbling away, and myself.

Adrian, the young barman, was chalking up the prom-