

Aul' Wan Sue

.....hell hath no fury like a cailín rua

Sue's rage was building. Hunger gnawed at her stomach as she trudged through the streets wet with slush and garbage, rain lashing down and turning to ice without even pausing to sleet. Even on such a cold and miserable day, she could smell the stench of these god-awful slums where the Irish landed years before after leaving the beautiful Old Sod, then owned by the English and run by the despicable Irish overseers and Gombeen men. Things had changed very little for many of the Irish peasants coming to America. It was just another beautiful land that belonged to someone else. Sue's great grandfather had sailed from Fermoy, County Cork to Canada hoping for a new life. Finding only squalor in an immigrant enclave southwest of Ottawa, Michael continued down to America, crossing the Great Lake of Ontario and the Tug Hill Plateau to walk through the Black River Valley and arrive at Utica in 1824, where he would eventually prosper, as would his children. But almost 100 years later Sue's mother and father, with her sister and 5 brothers, lived here in penury so painful it reminded her of a canker on the tongue that would never go away. Historians, all sons of the ruling class, would one day publish reams of drivel about the Irish immigrant population and why many of them failed to move up the economic ladder for so long. To Sue, walking these sordid streets on a cold, wet afternoon in March, the real reason was simple and clear. Booze. Liquor, hooch, poteen, whiskey, rotgut alcohol.

Give a man a job and wages, then hand him whiskey over the bar and take back his money. He didn't complain, because the alcohol took away his ambition, his energy, his dignity and his bollocks, leaving only anger and a destructive cruelty to be played out on those around him. Certainly not all Irishmen were like that, but generations of them had wrung an ocean of tears from their innocent families.

On the second Tuesday of the month when the New York Central Line's Utica Shops paid the man Sue called Da and the other workmen for their menial labor in the railroad yards, Ma dispatched all seven children to the saloons and booze joints that dotted her husband's route home from the paymaster. They had to find him before he spent all his wages. It was crucial to stop him in the first hour before he switched from stout to more expensive whiskey. After that, what was left in his pocket would drain quickly. Any dim thoughts he had entertained about bringing home even a portion of his pay would disappear.

The children were deployed in a sensible manner with sixteen year old Sue, the oldest and fastest runner, sent to the farthest saloon. Younger brothers Jack and Billy covered the bars closer to home and the middle children handled the ground in between. They were instructed to report back, but not to engage if any of them found their father.

Da's drinking was a real problem. The family could not skip paying the rent again and stay in the house. They had been without any food for 4 days. The coal ran out last week and it was still early March. The only warmth in the house was body heat. Sue and her sister Agnes slept with their mother in a bed that filled the back room off the kitchen. The five boys, ranging from 4 to 15 years of age, shared one bed in the house's front room. Somehow the boys all bunched up on it at night, the three shortest lying lengthwise like a small load of logs and the two older brothers draped across the head and the foot of the bed. Da slept alone in the only other room. It was best that way. When the demons took him in the night and the walls crawled with monsters, his screams would wake the dead before trailing off to whimpers and muffled cries.

Their rented house on Mohawk Street was a shambles, barely a cottage, a teepee built before the Civil War. The phrase "in need of repair" would be a sad joke. Sue didn't know toilets flushed until she started school and saw one operate as it should. But not the one in their house. There was certainly no money to repair it. Beyond that, no one seemed interested enough. So a pail of water was carried from the kitchen before each use, most of the time.

As the oldest daughter in a household of seven children, a drunken father and dying mother,

Sue felt the enormity of a lunatic circus dumped on her young shoulders. Sickness, daily catastrophes of one kind or another, violence, the need for her to find work to augment the family's meager income all of these factors thwarted Sue's attempts to build her own life. The nuns at the free Catholic academy said she was a smart girl. She needed to get her schooling or she'd become the aul' wan, or old woman, as the oldest girl who took care of the family was sarcastically called. She couldn't let herself be mired down in this unfolding tragedy. "This vale of tears," as the Church called it, could go straight back to hell without her.



Sue now walked east along Bleecker Street toward the train repair shops, peeking in the doors of numerous gin mills now beginning to fill with workmen from the railroad. She would not walk in and check every snug up against the walls, but she'd give each bar her best going over from the doorway or a window. She didn't need a calendar to tell it was payday. Large numbers of workers and whores were abroad. In an hour or so any respectable young woman would face certain danger if out on the streets. When evening fell, just her presence would be taken as a salacious invitation.

Sue passed what remained of the tobacco and cigar company built by her late and well regarded grandfather. Patrick, ironically the City of Utica's former Overseer of The Poor, had been a staunch Republican and industrious businessman. He had been admired for his financial acumen and sought after for his entrepreneurial advice. Of Patrick's three sons, his first, Michael, became a famous baseball player ...a summer occupation in the 1890's... for the team from Brooklyn that became the Dodgers. Uncle Mike married into a higher layer of society where he moved with ease and furthered his father's business interests. Before his untimely death from pneumonia in 1908, Mike sailed to Cuba each year to vacation with his socialite wife and to "check the leaves," setting up tobacco contracts for the firm. A second son became a dentist. Da was the third son, the bad seed. Neither Da or his family ever mentioned each other. To speak their name in the hovel on Mohawk Street was to invite a lightning storm from Da that a family of any

drunk knew so well. Last winter when the coal ran out toward the end of the month and the temperature in their house dropped below freezing, Ma walked up to the neighborhood of beautiful mansions on Rutger Street and asked the ball player's widow for a quarter to buy a bag of coal. The woman acted as though she didn't recognize Ma....maybe that was true but gave her the money. Da came home stocious that night, but still managed to figure it out. Ma got the worst beating any of them remembered.

Sue had to clean up the mess. She wasn't sure what to do with her mother's teeth when she found one under the table and another behind the stove. Each tooth looked perfectly complete and useable and so personal. They came from my Ma's mouth, Sue thought, the same mouth that had kissed her and soothed her when she was a baby. The same mouth that must have kissed Da in the getting of the family. Sue threw the teeth out.

She didn't go to school for a few days after the beating and she told herself she was needed at home to nurse Ma. But in reality she was simply afraid. Of everything and anything. Of demons she could not quite name. But it would have been better had she left the house, because Da's remorse turned as ugly as all the other emotions he could never handle and soon the family became punching bags once again. Ma was finally able to crawl from her bed a week later. She wore a face veil to cover her injuries.

Sue poked her head into a beer joint and found her father. Against orders she walked into the noisy, smelly dive. A tall attractive cailín rua, a redhead, she moved through the abusive gauntlet of huzzahs and cat calls, looking straight ahead, stopping short at a table loaded down with beer mugs and shot glasses and surrounded by drunks. The table blocked the space between Sue and her father, who stood a few feet away, elbows on the bar. He turned to look at her. Sue was infuriated at this man who was ruining her life, who gave his family nothing but pain and misery. Sue was now so angry she began to see red for the first time in her life, her loose teeth so tightly clenched she couldn't speak, even if she could have possibly thought of anything to say to this man, to this fekkín' pig. She picked up a mug from the table in front of her and hauled back her arm. All her frustration and anger, all her shame at wearing rags and having boys laugh at her teeth rushed into her arm. And with it her confusion as she flowered into a woman,

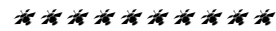
maybe just a little bit pretty she hoped, getting no notice except more punches and more vile words spat at her. She knew the feeling of being trapped like an animal, knew she would never finish school and she would have the responsibility of her mother, her sister and the five boys all her life. This pig in front of her gave nothing ... nothing ... to his family. The pain and disgust and despair and hunger erupted through her arm as it shot the heavy glass mug at her father's head. It could have killed him. It missed. Da turned back to his drink, as if he was finished noticing her. A scream came from deep within her and screeched across the beer joint. Everyone turned to look at her. Except Da.

An overwhelming tiredness sank to the center of her chest. She would have fainted, but a drunk's hand slid off the table next to her and began to run up the side of her leg. Flinging her arms out, she pushed the seated man over in his chair, landing him on the floor. Then she quickly left the saloon. Out on the street, she longed to rest for a minute, even if she had to sit in the slush and the garbage in the gutter, but she had to find her mother so the same old show could begin.

Mobs of children and mothers were now running in the street, shouting exchanges of information about who was in which saloon. Ma came and waited outside the joint for a short time until more women assembled in sufficient numbers for their own protection, not only from their husbands, but more so from the bartenders and company men there to see the workers spend their wages without female interference. The women entered the bar as a group and began to assail their husbands. Begging, pleading, sometimes hitting and being hit, the women worked as hard as they did on any other day of the month to provide for their children as they tried to get some of the money before it all went to the saloon. Money to buy bread and maybe meat, for sure some canned vegetables and almost certainly coal at this time of year. The bar-owners, who often sat at sumptuous dinners with the employers of these men, resisted the women's assault on their profits only to a point. They knew when to stop their goons, before the ire of the workers turned against them. Still, wives were punched and kicked by the paid henchman, and the result was often broken bones.

Sue left to be with her siblings and to wait by the cold stove for Ma to return with money. When her mother came home all the children were sent

out, each by a different route to buy the necessities. If perhaps intercepted by Da, no single child would be caught with all the loot. Sue was sent to pay a very small amount on the back rent. Then she hurried home from the landlord's house to her wards. She loved Ma and her sweet sister and the boys, but she was so worn out and frustrated, knowing her life would always be like this. But now was not the time for the aul'wan to think of herself. She needed to quickly start a fire so they could eat and then hide in their beds. Da would be home early tonight, out of money but no more sober. He would pick on Sue first. Then on Ma when she intervened, then the boys. It always happened this way. She would never escape.



Sue would in fact remain the family caretaker and matriarch until her death in 1979 at age 78. Ma died young, and Sue worked and kept house for Da until he died shortly before WWII. She continued the responsibility for two of her bachelor brothers, who lived with her through much of their adult lives, one until he died. The telephone listing of their flat remained in Da's name for thirty-five years after his death, until they carried Sue out one last time to spend her final days at the home of a sister-in-law. Sue never married. She finished school, or at least enough to eventually become an office manager at Utica's foremost brewery, where it was said she was an expert at anticipating the owners' emotional lightning storms. She wore business suits. She wore dentures. Aunt Sue had women friends and went to New York City on shopping trips, where she would stay at a hostile run by nuns on 23rd Street. She sailed to Bermuda every few years. She managed to build a life as well as play the Aul Wan, a role she came to accept.



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The characters in a piece of fiction have a right, some say a duty, to stand up and take over the plot when the author's imagination fails to sizzle enough to be worth their while to come on stage. Such was the case with this fictional account of my family. All the characters are from real life, but their actions are purely from my imagination ... or theirs. I have never heard my grandfather was violent, but it would fit the profile. If I have offended, I'm sorry. I do stories, not history.

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