

## 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 almost 100 years ago after leaving the beautiful Old Sod, 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, another beautiful land also belonging 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 south to America, crossing the Great Lake of Ontario and the Tug Hill Plateau to walk down the Black River Valley and arrive at Utica in 1824 where he would eventually prosper, as would his children. But now almost 100 years later, Sue's Ma and father or Da (DAH), along 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 for so long to move up the economic ladder. To Sue's mind, and to anyone 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 a whiskey over the bar and take back his money. He won't complain, because the alcohol will take

away his ambition, his energy, his dignity and his bollocks, leaving only his 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 from their families an ocean of tears.

On the second Tuesday of the month when the New York Central Line's Utica Shops paid 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. He had to be found before he spent all his wages. Ma saw it was crucial to stop him in the first hour before he switched from stout to 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, while the younger 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.

Sue knew this was a real life or death problem. The family could not skip 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 heat in the house was body heat. Sue and 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 they 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. Not the one in their house. There was certainly no money to repair it. Beyond that, no one seemed interested enough.

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<sup>1</sup> aul'wan – old woman, mother  
<sup>2</sup> cailín rua – red girl, redhead

So a pail of water was brought from the kitchen after 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 immensity of a lunatic circus dumped on her young shoulders. Sickness, daily catastrophes of one kind or another, the 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 school said she was a smart girl. She needed to get her schooling or she'd become the aul' wan to this crew. She couldn't let herself be mired down in this awful tragedy. "This vale of tears," as the prayer called it, could go straight back to hell. Without her.



Sue continued to walk east along Bleecker Street toward The 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 against the walls, but she'd give the place her best going over from the doorway or a window. One could tell without a calendar it was payday by the number workers and hoormongers abroad. In an hour or so it would be downright dangerous for a respectable young woman to be on the street. When it got dark, just her presence would be taken as a salacious invitation.

She 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 and a staunch Republican, had been an industrious businessman, 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 the higher strata 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 the name of any of these relations 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 to far below freezing, Ma walked up to the neighborhood of beautiful mansions on Rutger St. 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 she didn't . . . 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 them scattered under the table and behind the stove. A bizarre thought occurred to her. Since she needed teeth of her own, maybe she could borrow one or two. Each tooth looked perfectly complete and useable, but 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 and a little girl. The same mouth that must have kissed Da in the getting of the family. She threw the teeth out.

Sue 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 the real reason was she was just simply afraid. Of everything and anything. Of things she couldn't quite name. But it would have been better had she gone from the house, because Da's remorse turned as ugly as any other emotion he could never handle and soon the children became punching bags 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 cailin rua, 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 with drunks as it blocked the space between Sue and her father, who stood a few feet away at the bar. He turned to look at her. Infuriated at this man who was ruining her life, who gave his family nothing but pain and misery, Sue, who was now so angry she began to see red for the first time in her life, with 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 fekkin' pig, picked up a mug from the table in front of her and threw it at him with all her might. All her frustration and anger, all her

disappointment at wearing rags, having boys laugh at her teeth, her confusion as she flowered into a woman, maybe even a little bit pretty she hoped, to get no notice except more punches and more vile words spat at her, of knowing she would never finish school and she would have the responsibility of her mother, her sister and the five boys all her life because this animal in front of her gave nothing .... nothing ... to his family. All of the pain and disgust and despair and hunger released itself into her right arm as she shot the mug at him. It missed. He turned back to his drink, knowing she was finished. That mug could have killed someone.

An overwhelming feeling of tiredness came from the center of her chest and she would have fainted, but she could feel a drunken wanker's hand begin to run up the side of her leg. With both arms bursting out from her, 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 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 bit until other women assembled in sufficient number 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, trying to get some of the money before it all went to the saloon. Money to buy bread and maybe meat, certainly 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 as their wives were punched and kicked by the company henchman.

Sue had left by then to be with her siblings and to wait by the cold stove for Ma to return with money. When Ma came home she sent all the children out, each to buy different necessities,

so if perhaps intercepted by Da no single child would be caught with all the loot. Sue went to pay a very little 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 just so worn out and so frustrated to realize 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 her first. Then on Ma when she intervened, then the boys. It always happened this way. She would never escape.

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My Aunt Sue would in fact remain the family caretaker and matriarch until her death in 1979 at age 78. She 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 and sailed to Bermuda every few years. Her brothers drank themselves to death, except my father, with whom she remained close until the end of her life. Her sister Agnes, my crazy and loveable Aunt Toot, married an Englishman (for God's sake,) a wonderful man, and with him built a nice life with two children and a small home in the country. Not surprisingly, Ma left her vale of tears early. Da survived until just before the War and died before I was born. I'm glad I never met him.

*David Griffin, copyright by, 2007*

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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Write to me at [davidgriffin@cisbec.net](mailto:davidgriffin@cisbec.net)  
I would be glad to hear from you.