



The Paymaster

My Irish grandmother orders a hit on grandpa.

I was six years old when my grandfather died. He was Pap to us kids and George to his adult family. An Irish wake was held in the front room of the family home, a three-story, five-bedroom brick row-house in a racially transitioning neighborhood where he and his late wife Bridget birthed and raised ten kids. My father was among the youngest of these. Nine were still alive on that day.

George and Bridget both died in their sixties, victims of a hard life with never enough money, the diet of the poor, little or no healthcare, and never enough rest. They were first generation Americans, Catholic, Shanty-Irish some might say. Their lineage was one of refugees from Europe, several having passed through Ellis Island under the watchful eyes of the Statue of Liberty.

The wake was a traditional Irish affair with family, neighbors, and friends coming and going, food brought by mourners, and there was whisky. There was sobbing and keening, and drinking, and when the whisky did its work, there was singing and maudlin speeches. An uncle of mine by marriage gathered up the younger kids and led us to a local theater to see a movie, none of which I remember. He wanted to protect the younger ones from the inevitable scenes that were likely to come as the wake progressed. Many years later, stories of that night had Pap sitting up in his coffin flanked by close kin for a final toast, a song and a photograph. The truth of the matter is lost with the ages. No such photos survived.

I never spoke to my father about that wake or about the death of his parents. He was reticent to talk about the family life of his youth. But one day, many years later, my mother told me a story, corroborated by my father, that put everything into perspective. My grandfather worked on trains for the Pennsylvania Railroad hauling coal from the anthracite mines of northeastern Pennsylvania to industrial centers in Allentown and Philadelphia. He was paid a respectable wage, but it was hardly enough to support a wife and ten kids. Bridget tried to make up the shortfall by taking in laundry, mending clothes for neighbors, and even taking in boarders. Six of the children were boys, and as they aged could find jobs and make some contribution, but it was never enough.

To make matters worse, old George was given to drink. He was sober when there was no money to be had, but when he got his hands on any money, he had only one thing on his mind. Railroad workers were paid once a month and in cash. Men would line up at the paymaster's window and collect their monthly wages. It was the custom of the men to head for favorite pub and celebrate

with a pint or two before going home to their families. Bridget resented the custom but tolerated it for many years. But as time went by, the demands of a growing family required more money, just as Pap's thirst seem to increase and a pint or two became three or four or more. Each payday he would come home in increasing states of inebriation and with increasingly less cash for family maintenance. Something had to be done.

Then on one desperate payday, facing a near empty larder, Bridget gathered her sons around her and instructed them to meet their father at the paymaster's shed and when he had been paid, to take the money from him and bring it home to her. There were five of them in the strapping prime of their youth, the oldest and tallest of them over six feet in height. She warned them that there would be a fearsome fight, but that they must prevail for the sake of the family. After they subdued their father, they were to give him a dollar to drink away his bruises and save face with the other workmen.

She was not wrong. Pap bellowed and menaced and threatened. Punches were thrown, noses bloodied, and arms twisted. In the end the boys piled on their father, drove him to the ground and wrested his purse from his grasp. They left him there on the ground, yelling and cursing, with a dollar hastily stuffed in the pocket of his coal-blackened shirt.

On the next payday, she sent four boys. There was a fuss and much shouting but no fight. Over time she had her way and would send only the youngest of her boys to collect the pay, a skinny boy barely in his teens, my father.

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