

More Stories!

Forum

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Dying Himself Blue

By Robert J. O'Connell

Irish families, like many others, have a tendency to tell great stories to each other. One of my favorite stories is about my father's father. As my grandmother told it to me, at the time the family was living in North Adams MA an old mill town in the northwest corner of Massachusetts. My grandmother, who had come over from the old country as a young girl, her husband and four children lived on a quiet street. Both of her sons were hemophiliacs. Her husband was a dye chemist working for one of the many local woolen mills. At the time, most color-fast blue dyes were imported from Germany. But the first world war had put an end to that trade so most mills were hard at work trying to develop their own color-fast blue dyes.

Grandfather apparently would whip up large vats of the latest chemical creation to dye the wool and then test it to see if the wool was now color-fast. It was also said that he was fond of the "creature" and occasionally drank his lunch. On one of these occasions he came back to work a little tipsy and subsequently fell into the latest vat, hit his head and drowned. This immersion effectively dyed him blue. I never thought to ask, but it seems that he was now color-fast. In addition to the outrage she felt at his death she now had to bear the shame of wakeing him in that condition. At the time, funeral parlors were not used as the deceased were laid out in a white shift on the dining room table in their own home. If you had the money you could hire some "wailers" to sob and keen at the body before and during the wake. I am not sure of the relationship, but this keening was also supposed to keep the banshees away. She always told me to be good or the banshees would get me. Grandma complained bitterly about the condition of the corpse and the shame associated with having a blue dead husband on display. She claimed, that as a result of this shame she had to pack up and

leave North Adams. First moving to Troy, then Albany and then to Syracuse where she spent the rest of her life working as a registered nurse. As a young child I lived with her and my Aunt Kate and her family every winter, so I lived with this story and a constant fear of the banshees.

As you may have suspected by now most of this often repeated story was false. Many years later, after the death of all the characters in the play, we were able to piece together what may be a truer version. My Grandmother wanted to become a registered nurse, perhaps as a result of the medical condition of her sons. At the time, being a nurse was viewed by most of society as being one step up from prostitution or stage acting. I'm sure that her husband was dead set against this idea. At about this time my father's younger brother died as a result of a blow to the head caused by a piece of roofing slate falling off a house. I think this was the real blow that caused her to pack her three children and leave her husband. Now she was related, in some way, to Daniel P. O'Connell, the political boss of Albany, and I suspect that he helped her in her travels to Syracuse. Some where along the way she became a registered nurse.

Uncle Dan was rarely mentioned in the family but I know my father enlisted his help some years later when the state motor vehicle department revoked my drivers license after a minor traffic accident. Although I had been given a ticket for failure to keep to the right and had paid my fine, the bad luck of having a minor automobile accident with the president of the state AAA club was the bigger underlying problem. After Dad called "Uncle Dan" to fix the accusation of reckless driving, I was informed by the state department of Motor Vehicles that my file had been misplaced and that I could ignore the revocation letter until my file was found. Many years latter I got a letter from them saying that the file had reappeared, but since I had a clean driving record in the intervening years they would continue to forget about the revocation.

My father commented that it was hard to know how many files Uncle Dan had caused to be "lost" behind that file cabinet. The never blue husband continued to live quietly in North Adams till his death some years after grandma's passing. I still occasionally worry about the banshees.

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