

*As soon as Dr. Stern said the words, I wanted to stuff them back in his mouth. It didn't matter so much for me, I knew something wasn't quite right, the way I trembled at odd times, and the way the depression attacked in waves. I thought the doctor was going to say this was a normal part of aging, give me some words about exercise and mental activity, and maybe write a prescription for one of those happy pills my friends had been taking. My diagnosis was fatal, but it was not fear or grief, but guilt that overwhelmed me. Each of my four children, Patrick, Colleen, Sean and Peg, had a fifty-fifty chance that I had given them a death sentence along with my love.*

*Huntington's Disease lurks silent, covert, until making its move. Then, for up to twenty years, it wracks the body and the mind in worsening stages. In my case, it turned out to be only ten, but for my children, adding my disease to theirs could consume almost their entire adult lifetimes. Patrick, the oldest, was thirty-two when I got the diagnosis. Many people get sick in their thirties. I was a late bloomer. I was fifty-five. My dear husband sixty. My oldest grandchild, Kayleigh, was five.*

*The credenza behind Dr. Stern's desk had a noisy brass desk clock with elegant Roman numerals that chimed every fifteen minutes. It chimed as we were sitting down, it chimed for the interview, it chimed as we were leaving. He should turn the chimes off when meeting with patients. I told his nurse that on one my subsequent visits, and, sure enough, I don't remember them sounding again.*

*That day, Dr. Stern gripped his hands together so tightly his knuckles nearly popped out of his skin, stretched white. My husband Daniel seized my left hand and my wedding band cut*

*into my finger until I shook him loose. Patrick didn't look up from his note-taking. We told the others over Sunday dinner. What happened after that is my family's story of courage and despair, of truths and triumphs and tragedies.*

*I wanted a different disease, one that would be solely mine. I would take all the symptoms, all the pains, all the indignities of Huntington's, if only I didn't pass them on to my children. It's not like a predisposition to alcoholism or arthritis or obesity. If one of my children has this gene, he or she will certainly suffer the same ugly death as I. Because Dr. Stern named my disease, they all knew immediately that they might bear the marker. There is a test for the Huntington's gene, but no cure. So they could either live with the risk, or with the certainty. For their own reasons, they each made their choice: to know or not to know.*

*I'm not asking for pity--I lost my "I" in my earthly disease--but to understand my children, you need to know just a little of what they had to watch. After my diagnosis, I didn't spend long in mere depression. Soon my speech slurred and my body constantly jerked, as if an electric current was running through it. I'd clenched my fists a lot when Patrick was a teenager and got high and mighty with me--always such a bossy fellow. Clenching them stopped me from smacking him or saying something I'd regret, but then, in the second stage of my disease, my fists would clench and unclench, clench and unclench, without reason or purpose. I would look in the mirror in the morning, and barely recognize my own face, contorted, grotesque, no longer expressing the person I knew as me. My smile--Daniel used to be calmed by my smile--became twisted, the red flesh of my mouth turned inside out, dripping saliva. My new smile repulsed him.*

*Five years into my disease, I didn't recognize myself anymore. I refused the assistance of the nurses Daniel hired to help me with getting out of bed, my toilet, my meals, my incessant*

*flailing through my exhausting day. I didn't recognize my children when they came to visit. I didn't recognize my home, and so they put me away. They said it was "a nice place," but it wasn't home.*

*At last, I stopped jerking and twisting. I stared blankly, seeing nothing, understanding nothing. Sometimes, when he came to visit at the nursing home, I felt Daniel's hand take mine. His touch was comforting and familiar, but unnamable.*

*I was empty. I forgot who I was. I was just instinct and primal function.*

*For these past thirteen years, I have been waiting for my brave Daniel. Today, I welcome him. We are, at last, as promised in the marriage vows, one, but my ghost haunts all who bear his name--and even some who don't, like this fellow Gates, who found himself in the middle of Daniel's funeral procession and for whatever reason--boredom or loneliness, adventure, the prospect of a good meal, or just destiny--followed it to places none of us imagined.*

For the third time in a month, Gates found himself in the middle of a funeral procession. He'd been waiting behind an old Ford 250 at the corner of Central Street and Hill and when the truck caught a break in the traffic and made a right, Gates hitched a ride on its bumper. He glanced in his rearview mirror at the tell-tale headlights of a silver Mercedes and in its windshield caught the yellow card, "Funeral." Damn. He didn't belong in this line. Ahead of him, the 250 braked and turned off Central at the first opportunity.

Three funeral processions in one month was a lot for Townsend, a city of 95,000 that swelled to almost 110,000 when the university was in session. Increasingly, it was almost always in session, with summer school, academic symposia, creative writing workshops and an annual statewide conference of educators. In a town like that, in south central Wisconsin, you could expect eight hundred or so deaths per year, sixty-six per month. Gates assumed that more people were cremated than were delivered in a ceremonious cavalcade to a hole in the ground, and so, even if half went to cemeteries, he judged his personal encounter with ten per cent of them unusual. Hopefully not an omen, but perhaps worthy of investigation.

It was early May, the students were gone, and the University Admissions Office where Gates worked was closed for two weeks. It would be several more before the students and their anxious parents would start streaming to his office every half hour, 9:30 to 1:30 and 2 to 5:30, begging his indulgence and endorsement. He'd had a week off already, and felt restless. He should continue his work on his dissertation in demographics and populations studies, but he'd lost interest in "How Demographic Changes in Urban Households Could Affect Adoptions of Children in Foster Care." The dissertation was meant to correlate changes in household

structures with adoption opportunities for children in need of permanent families, but he was finding the topic unwieldy, and easily avoidable. He wanted both to be done with it, and not. What would he do then? What did he *want* to do? At thirty-two, shouldn't he know better who he was, and where he belonged in life?

The car in front of him ran the next stoplight, at MacArthur Road, and Gates followed, nodding somberly to the cop who held off the cross traffic and waved the cars through. Without intending to, he'd become part of the procession, and turned with the others at Mary Mother of Angels, following as the line of cars wound through the S curve whose sole purpose was to make the cemetery look bigger than it was. Near the end, where it flat-lined ninety degrees towards a back exit, a young man in a shiny black suit and skinny black tie directed him to stop. Ahead, on the right, a square white tent shielded a double-wide granite monument and two rows of chairs shrouded in maroon cloth. It would be impossible now to extricate himself, but it would be more awkward to stay in his car, like a voyeur, so he leaned over to his glove compartment and grabbed his emergency blue and gold striped tie. Getting out of his car, he collected his navy jacket from the back seat, settled his tie, and took a deep breath.

He'd never crashed a funeral before. The last time he'd deliberately gone someplace where he hadn't been invited, he'd been a senior in high school in Louisville. Looking for adolescent adventure and trying on new persona, he and his friend Boone had found it easy enough to crash debutante and Derby parties--there were always more parties than there were clean-shaven young men willing to don starched shirts, blazers and ties, and dance with a few girls in exchange for all you could drink and eat. "I'm a friend of John's," he would say to the host or hostess, and point across the room, and his friend Boone would magically appear to whisk him away from any further inquisition.

Once, the host became suspicious. “Who are you again?” he’d asked, drawing himself up.

Boone, whose parents were part of this social scene and so technically “belonged,” pulled a piece of paper out of his blazer pocket. “We’re in from college,” he’d lied. “John said his uncle lived at 347 Thornton. Aren’t you his uncle?”

“This is 347 Thorn-*ridge*,” the man said, holding his ground.

Without missing a beat, Boone had apologized, “We’re so sorry. A terrible mistake. You have a lovely home,” and the two of them had dashed off.

Gates admired his friend’s ease in the world, and had been his devoted student. He envied Boone’s sense of belonging, his ease in both the familiar and the new. Sometimes, in Boone’s company, Gates could feel himself also to be magnetic, confident, friendly, proper. More often, though, he felt his insides and his party-crashing outsides didn’t match. Unlike Boone, he didn’t come from a long-standing Louisville family steeped in Louisville tradition and its own history. He wasn’t deeply attached to any family, and so didn’t have a clear idea of who he was or who he was expected to be. This could have made it easier to experiment with new persona, but without an anchor, he found it more difficult to pretend.

His own parents had been killed in a car crash when he was eight, too old for him to be attractive to childless couples who wanted to adopt babies and raise them from scratch, and so he spent his next eight years in and out of different foster homes in central Illinois, until he got a scholarship--quite by fluke--to a private Catholic boys boarding school in Louisville, checking out on weekends to Boone’s parents’ house, and then a scholarship to Townsend University. Not belonging anywhere else, he’d stayed in Townsend, working for the University and waiting for his future.

Now, he felt a little rush of adrenaline as he walked to the gravesite. He'd never crashed any event without Boone; a solo run could be more difficult. He'd have to dig deep to remember all of Boone's instructions: look 'em in the eye, firm handshake, don't be afraid, leave yourself an out. Boone had been smooth. It occurred to Gates that Boone had never really crashed. Boone knew in his bones that he belonged, in some greater sense, in the company of the party.

It's a funeral, he thought. There'd probably been widows and professional funeral goers in the back seats of the church. It wouldn't hurt anything if he attended grave-side. Who'd mind if there was an extra mourner? One could make the argument--it had been made, he recalled, in Philosophy 101 by a scholar whose name he didn't remember, and also by that poet, John Donne, was it?--the death of one diminishes us all.

Unnoticed, he took his place at the back of the crowd that gathered behind the family. It was one of the advantages of being exactly what he assessed himself to be--completely average. Six feet tall, when measured in his Bass Weejuns, average build and average weight, tending towards skinny and in need of the extra starch he ordered in his shirts. Unremarkable brownish hair; hazel eyes, clear skin. He was wearing what he always wore: khaki slacks and a white, button-down shirt, more often than not the blazer, usually a tie. Bland enough to blend.

The family sat, heads bowed, in throne-like chairs lined up in three rows in front of the burial plot. Two children, Gates surmised, each in his or her fifties, a couple years apart, and their children, in their teens and twenties. Judging by the ages of the mourners and their lack of hysteria, he'd stumbled into a not-unexpected event. The grieved one, probably in his or her eighties, was obviously on a relatively normal schedule.

As far as he could tell, there wasn't a widow or widower, which relieved him. He'd overheard his first foster family one night telling each other it was "lucky" that his mother and

father had gone together. It would be unbearable, they'd said, to lose the love of your life, to be alone with your grief forever. The woman sobbing and the man sniffing, he'd heard a great commotion over the uncorking of another bottle, and the clinking and then shattering of glasses. Fifteen months later, the couple divorced over "irreconcilable" differences, and Gates was moved on, encouraged by the social worker not to grieve this second loss, one of a string of such unfortunate placements. He remembered that phrase, though, "alone with your grief forever," and he thought it incredibly sad.

The priest was a party crasher's dream. He started the graveside service in Latin, but then switched to English. The deceased's name was Daniel Francis Murphy and the priest addressed each of his children and grandchildren by name: Patrick and his lovely wife Ann, and their daughter, Kayleigh; Colleen and her husband Elliot, and their three children, Aaron and the twins Deborah and Diana, and, lastly, Sean and Peg, both single. The priest remembered Daniel Francis Murphy's devoted wife Margaret, who preceded him to their heavenly home and would welcome him with open arms to rest in their Lord Jesus forever, and whose remains occupied, Gates surmised, the other half of the double plot.

The priest returned to the reading of the formal prayers, the undertakers lowered the gleaming metal casket to ground level, and Patrick, the new patriarch of the Murphy family, opened a handkerchief and tossed a bit of soil on his father's coffin. Then each member took a stalk of Bells of Ireland from a standing basket and placed it on top, their final good-bye. After the family left, the priest told the remaining mourners that they were invited to the Townsend-Riverdale Country Club for a light meal. With exquisite timing, Gates' stomach growled appreciatively.

Gates knew Townsend-Riverdale Country Club to be exclusive; not as exclusive as The Founders Club, where memberships had been passed down in families for the past one hundred years, but certainly a haven for the well-to-do. From the priest, Gates had gathered that the Murphys were a large, rich, and generous family, dedicated to the community and, he guessed, welcoming and inclusive. At an event of this type--he'd counted thirty-five cars at the cemetery, maybe seventy people--if he simply followed the crowd, Club personnel wouldn't question his attendance.

In the car, he rehearsed his cover. The first of Boone's rules: you had to know who you were and why you were there. The priest had said the deceased's wife had been dead for thirteen years; he decided to be the son of one of Margaret's friends, now also deceased, God rest her soul. If asked, Margaret's friend was Kathleen. Happy with his story, he pinched his own cheeks, the way one of his foster mothers had done to give herself color. It seemed appropriate to him that grief would pump itself red in the face of a shocked friend, although it might drain all life pale in the faces of the closest survivors. Pink was a healthy and ambiguous median.

At the Club, he parked away from the Murphy limousines, and bowed his head as he walked across the parking lot to the double doors of the entrance, held open by a doorman in a red and gold uniform. He remembered Boone saying it was important to look these people in the eye. While the regulars would probably walk by without so much as a nod of acknowledgement, Gates would need to make solid eye contact, to establish the memory of his belonging. The doorman had gray hair under a captain's cap and clear blue eyes, and offered his condolences with a little click of his heels. Gates realized that even if the doorman detected that he looked uncomfortable, that was exactly what was expected at a time like this. He solemnly bit his lip.

The private dining room was on the small side for the seventy or so who showed up. There was a buffet along one wall and a bar along the other. There were a few tables, occupied by family friends, themselves graying, waiting for someone to bring drinks or a plate of food, but most people were standing, drinking, talking, mingling, hugging. The children--adults, really--registered surprise, then gratitude, to various folks who'd taken the time to come. Patrick shook hands and put his left hand on a man's shoulder, as if he were the one to console, not to be consoled. Colleen dabbed at her eyes. Of the four children, she was the most bereft. Near the buffet, Gates found himself next to Sean, who stood with the youngest, Peg. Sean looked at Gates, not exactly expectantly, but with a furrow in his brow, as if he was trying to place him.

"Thank you for coming," Peg said across her brother. "So many people here. My father had a lot of friends."

"I understand he was a wonderful man," Gates said. "I am sorry for your loss." He held out his hand, and Sean took it routinely, but Peg leaned around him to study Gates' face.

"You didn't know him?" she challenged. She glanced around towards the door, and Gates followed her gaze. What if there was a security guard? Would he identify Gates immediately as a fake?

"I'm Kathleen's son," he hurried.

"Oh," Peg said, recovering her manners. "Which Kathleen?"

For a second Gates panicked, and regretted that he hadn't headed straight for the bar. Having a drink in his hand could've bought some time. He started to sneeze.

"O'Grady or Collins?" Peg asked, then added, "God rest their souls. Great friends of my mom's, both."

“Collins,” he said, thinking it better to choose the second name that came to Peg’s mind, hopefully the one she knew less well. He allowed his voice to crack slightly. “I know how hard it is to lose.... Again, my condolences.” Instead of shaking hands again, he dabbed at the corner of his right eye, bowed slight to both Sean and Peg, and made a hasty retreat to the bar, a bullet dodged.

At the bar, Gates ordered a Bloody Mary, which seemed to be the drink of choice among the mourners. “Double-shot,” he said to the bartender, his voice low. The bartender gave him a look that suggested he was insulted, as if a regular member might be expected to know that all his drinks were double shots. Gates wasn’t troubled, however. He’d accomplished the same goal of recognition with the bartender as he had with the doorman. Belonging by not belonging. It was an art.

Gates took the Bloody Mary, thanked the bartender, and removed the celery stalk, leaving it on a white napkin on the bar. He’d once had a bad accident at a Derby brunch which he blamed on the leafy green stalk. He’d had to make a hasty retreat on the ruse of finding a towel for the innocent victim in her once-perfect white linen dress. It was one of the few crashes he felt truly guilty about.

He stood to the side of the bar. The party before him was in full swing, tears turning to laughter, talk to the upcoming mayoral election, the economy, summer vacations, the nascent careers of the adult grandchildren of Daniel Francis Murphy. Aaron, Colleen’s son, who looked to be in his early twenties, approached the bar, and the bartender handed him a glass of club soda with a slice of lime. He glanced at Gates and raised his glass in greeting. Gates nodded, sure he didn’t know him, but also aware that Aaron didn’t belong in this family. Aaron had black, kinky hair, pulled back in a short pigtail. He was darker than the rest of the Murphys, and he had

steeper features, a high forehead and a prominent nose. Aaron didn't look like his Irish mother, Colleen. He was most likely Jewish, ethnically, if not religiously.

The young man approached. Gates had violated a cardinal rule--Boone's rules were coming back to him, but slowly--he'd not left himself an "out." He was backed in a corner and now Aaron wanted to know, innocently enough, "Are you one of the second cousins?"

"I've never understood what a second cousin is," Gates said.

His distraction worked. "I think you'd be my second cousin if we shared a great-grandparent."

"I was an only kid," Gates said, which he hoped made him sound not like family but close. "How do you keep all these people straight?"

Aaron shrugged. "I don't. That's why I asked. Actually, I thought maybe you were with Uncle Sean."

"Uh, no," Gates said, making a mental note of this new intelligence. "I'm the son of your grandmother's friend Kathleen."

Aaron stiffened. "My grandmother's been dead for a long time," he said.

"So has my mother," he said, which was true, but not in the way Aaron thought. "You might say I'm here out of respect for them both." Again, he touched his eye, smiled sadly at Sean and put down his drink before Sean could quiz him further. In an oversized gesture, he looked at his watch and made his way to the door with business-like efficiency. He wanted it to be clear to Sean, and anyone else who was looking, that he had places to be.

Outside the room, however, he took his time exploring the Club, finding his way to the terrace overlooking the eighteenth green. With rolling hills and ancient oaks, the course was as splendid as its reputation. He'd heard that when it was built, it had been hoped that one of the

Majors would be played there, but now it was considered too short, not challenging enough for the current PGA stars. He wasn't a golfer, but every so often he thought perhaps he should learn, in preparation for his eventual success in whatever his eventuality was, or, if nothing else, in preparation for his retirement from that eventuality.

Back inside, near the coat-check, there was a placard of coming events. The Club would be closed on Saturday night for a private black-tie dinner dance for the benefit of the County Alzheimer's Association. A limited number of tickets were still available for \$500 each by calling the charity. Gates didn't have plans for Saturday night, nor did he have \$500, but it was a good cause. At Boone's suggestion, he'd bought a tux when he'd been Boone's best man three years ago. It had been dry-cleaned and hanging at the ready every since. Buoyed by the Bloody Mary, and the success of his first social adventure without Boone, he was inspired. Aside from his parentage, he hadn't had to fake it much to fit in. It might not be so hard to belong, after all. He smiled broadly at the doorman on the way out. "See you Saturday!"

"Yes, sir," the man said.

