

*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 the years of 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, and it chimed as we were leaving. He should turn the chimes off when meeting with patients. I told his nurse that on one of 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 had prayed for 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 separate choices: 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 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 husband. Today, I welcome him. We are, at last, as promised in the marriage vows, one, but my ghost haunts all who bear the Murphy 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 he could not have imagined.*

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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.

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?

Gates automatically noted that 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.

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