

**MARKERS (A novel)**

*Margaret*

*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 tidal 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.*

*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.*

*The day Dr. Stern delivered the final diagnosis, he 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 notetaking. 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.*

*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. For my children, adding the years of*

*my disease to theirs could have consumed 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. I am grateful I only lived ten years after the diagnosis.*

*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. Huntington's is 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 did. 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 and their stories, 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 he got high and mighty with me--always such a bossy fellow. Then, clenching them stopped me from slapping 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.*

*For a while I could still read. Daniel would take me for a drive and I would read the signs, "S-P-E-E-D-B-U-M-P" and "Q-U-I-E-T-Z-0-N-E-C-E-M-E-T-E-R-Y" and when Daniel looked at me, surprised, I felt proud. I would smile and he would nod, but a little sadly, I thought, and I didn't know why.*

*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 I didn't know him—my own husband! But I saw his eyes glistening.*

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*I was empty. I forgot who I was. I was just instinct and primal function. They made me wear a diaper and tsked when they had to replace it.*

*For these past thirteen years, I have been waiting for my husband. Today, I welcome him. At last, we are, 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.*