

Grave Games

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How is it that no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night,
this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other by
mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing
it? Wear the same disguise.

— Don Delillo, *White Noise*

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine
Meanwhile the world goes on...

— Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”

I shook hands with Tom Stoppard when I worked at the Roundabout Theatre Company on Broadway. We were doing a production of his play *The Real Inspector Hound*. There is a corpse on stage during the entire play. No one sees it. At one point, one of the characters is actually standing on the corpse without realizing it. The audience laughs uncontrollably.

I was riding in the front seat of my parents’ Volkswagen Bug. It had white seats. My mother was driving. I was around five years old. As we turned the corner from Main Street to Meek’s Lane, I opened the door. I remember this well. It is like a movie I have seen many times. I stare at the door handle for a long time before I pull it toward me. Swoop. Air. My mother grabs my left arm before I fly out of the car. She pulls over to the side of the road. She is still holding my arm.

“Why did you do that? Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to see what would happen. I wanted to see what it would be like.”

When my friend Lance was a child, he thought he could not die. “I thought if I was shot in the heart, I would not be dead; I would just have a hole in my heart.”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead may be even funnier than *The Real Inspector Hound*:

Ros: Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?

Guil: No.

Ros: Nor do I, really...It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead...

German philosophers said something similar. Kant. Hegel.

Dupell. Defrere. Gregory. Yates. Pitman. Swirbul. Daily. Scully.

These are names on the mausoleums that face the road on the way to the South Shore Mall in Bay Shore, New York. I still have them memorized. When my mother would drive by, I would rattle them off without looking. I was good at the Grave Game. I started playing with a girl named Sandra Ross. Our mothers were friends and they took us to the mall fairly often.

One day on the way to the mall, I decided I wanted a mausoleum when I died. It would be like living in a house. A large play-house. This kind of intrigued me. But I did not like the idea of being stuck inside. Mausoleums look pretty well sealed.

650 BC. In central Italy, Etruscans are building homes with windows, fluted pillars and false domes over rectangular chambers. They are also building graves with windows, fluted pillars and false domes over rectangular chambers.

I knew that an entire family often occupied a single mausoleum. I pictured the walls of a playhouse lined with bunk beds. The word "cemetery" comes from the Greek "koimeterion" and the Latin "coemeterium." Both mean sleeping chamber.

In second grade, I began going to catechism at St. Mary's Church in East Islip. I had to learn about heaven and hell before my First Penance and Holy Communion. I learned that hell is full of fire and the devil. I also learned that all people in heaven do is relax and that everyone there knows everything.

"What do they talk about?" I wondered.

Years later, in a college cafeteria, I said to my friend Jake, "Roman Catholic 'heaven' is not a place for children. The last thing kids want to do is relax." Jake told me he once discussed this problem with a nun who assured him there is also a heaven for those who do not want to relax.

"Aren't people in heaven bored?" I asked my father one day.

"What are you worried about? I'm going to die long before you do," he said.

On holy days, my family went to mass. I hated mass because it made me think of heaven. Of being there eternity. Of knowing everything and doing nothing. Of being quiet. Of not talking. Of dying of boredom. Of not even being able to die of boredom because I was already dead. I wanted to stay on earth forever. I loved earth even if it wasn't so great. At least earth changed. At least there were things to do on earth.

I tried hard to distract myself at mass. I would guess what people's faces were like by studying their shoes. I would stare at old ladies. How can they stand to be here? Especially by themselves? I would watch an old lady's eyes. Blink only when she blinked. Watch her eyeballs move. Look here. Look there. Up. Down. Side-to-side. Try to do the same, which was tough because my eyes were busy watching. Most of the time, I still ended up thinking about heaven. Especially when the priest said, "Now and forever." Getting away usually helped. I spent a great deal of time in St. Mary's restroom.

My father made me watch Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* when it first aired on PBS. I was eleven. I could not stand *Cosmos* then....humankind is a dot on the "Cosmic Calendar." The sun is growing. Star stuff. Novae. Supernovae. Space. Plutonium. Explosions. Implosions. Billion. Black hole. Eternity. *Cosmos* made me want to run and scream and scream and run. But there was nowhere to run to and no one who should not also be screaming. I wanted to run and scream until I could run and scream no more. But even this would not help. This would do no good. There was nothing I could do. Nothing.

Alabama. Alaska. Arizona. Arkansas. California. Colorado. Connecticut. Delaware....I know the fifty states in alphabetical order. I used to say them in my head as I watched *Cosmos*. For a long time, I could not play the Grave Game. I asked my mother to take a different route to the mall.

When I asked my sister Meegan what she did when she had scary thoughts, she said, "I read."

I began to read like crazy. Once, I checked out the young adult book *A Summer to Die* by Lois Lowry. In the book, a girl bleeds all over her sheets because she is dying of leukemia. Reading this book was like playing with a loose tooth.

My mother had a malignant melanoma when I was thirteen. My father thought my siblings and I were too young to visit her in the hospital. I sat for hours on the roof of the house, reading Irving Stone's, *Lust for Life*, a biography of Vincent Van Gogh. It did not occur to me that I was getting badly sunburned. After surgery and skin grafts, my mother recovered from the cancer.

In high school, I ran really fast because I was thinking of someone who was dead. My maternal grandfather died the night before a cross-country meet at Van Cortland Park in the Bronx. I did not want to run because I was sad and I thought it would be disrespectful. But my mother told me life must go on and we would be in the area anyway because my grandfather's apartment was near Van Cortland Park.

It rained like hell that day. BANG! I started so quickly that I pitched into the mud at the starting line. I got up and ran harder. And harder. Teeth clenched, dirt between them, flying up hills, leaping over roots, crashing through puddles, passing runner after runner after runner along the winding trails. Through mud and rain, I thought only of my grandfather. I cut minutes off my time and qualified for the New York State Competition. It took me years to run that fast again.

When my father's mother died, I was studying philosophy at Oxford University. I got the phone call late one night and rode my bicycle to Port Meadow, a large field outside the city. It was very dark and I could see billions of stars. For a long time, I lay on my back and looked up at the sky.

At Oxford, my roommate Natasha tried to make me a true Catholic. I decided to try to become a true Catholic. I loved the sense of community. I loved the reflecting and praying. I loved listening to Gregorian chant. But I also love many things about Judaism, Hinduism, Transcendentalism, Islam, Lutheranism, Buddhism, astrology, and earth religions.

In Cormac McCarthy's, *Blood Meridian*, a hermit says, "A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know with."

My mother died of pneumonia when I was twenty-six. In the hospital, she could not speak because a respirator tube blocked her words. She wrote notes on a yellow stenographer's pad until her writing was too hard to understand. The last note I could read said, "Pray. I love you."

Gina and I were both in Mrs. Rothenberg's fifth grade class. Gina wrote haiku about death, fear and depression using words I had to look up. I first encountered the word "ominous" in one of Gina's haiku. My mother told me she was "precocious" and I had to look that up, too.

Gina graduated from high school early and began traveling around the world. I bumped into her on Long Island nearly ten years later. We decided to have dinner at a Chinese restaurant. After we ordered, Gina began telling me about a paper she was writing on female spirituality. She had interviewed nuns, ministers, witches, priestesses and other female religious figures from a variety of cultures.

"What do you believe in?" I asked as the meal was being served.

"I don't know," she said and we began to feast.

After our mother died, my brother Peter was visiting friends. One of the children in the house was using my mother's mass card as a book mark for her math text book.

Red is not always red in Madagascar. Part of the funeral ritual are large, elaborate shrouds. They come in many colors, but they are always called red.

After someone dies, the Berewan, a small tribe in Borneo, beat drums and gongs non-stop for days. There are special small gongs for the children.

After my mother's funeral, someone said to my sister, Brigid, "I would have gone to the wake, but I didn't have anyone to go with."

Another person met my cousin and wanted a date. “She didn’t seem that into me,” he said later.

“It was her aunt’s fucking funeral!” I yelled, laughing and throwing up my arms.

When I was thirty-one, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. The peak was a mangling of jagged teeth which seemed close then far away. Near the summit, I could hardly look up. The stars were so large; my mind could not contain them.

As we walked away from my mother’s grave after the burial, an old friend said to me, “Well, she’s not moving for at least a million years.”

“What a comfort,” my brother Peter said when I told him later. “Our mother is a fossil!”

On my way to Tanzania, I had a layover in England. I went back to Oxford for a visit. There I met a homeless man who reached into his pocket, extended his hand, “I worship this pebble because God has made it. I picked it up not far from here.”

“Rightly heard, all tales are one.”
Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

My sister Brigid drove seventy miles to visit my mother’s grave for the first time since the burial. It was getting dark and the gates to the maze-like cemetery were about to close. “You have fifteen minutes,” the guard warned. Brigid drove her Nissan, speeding down lanes, frantically scanning gravestones and feeling that her bladder was going to burst. Five minutes left! She gets out of the car and begins running, running, running, crying, crying. She ducks behind a mausoleum to empty her bladder, stands, and as she is pulling up her pants, she sees my mother’s name: ANNE BUCHLER REILLY.

Ten months after my mother died, someone thought she was still alive. “Who is this friend and why wasn’t she contacted?” I asked my brother when I opened the Christmas card addressed to my mother.

“Someone was bound to slip through the cracks,” he said as I picked up the phone to dial Philadelphia information.

“Your mother is my second friend to die this year,” the woman said into the phone. She had just come in from shoveling snow.

When I was in college, I had a great time dancing at a cemetery in Providence, Rhode Island. My friend Mike asked if I would help with a photography project he was working on. I dressed in white and danced and strolled about the graves while he took photographs using infrared film. I jumped off a sepulcher and he got a really good shot of me in the air. Every once in awhile, Mike and I would start laughing uncontrollably. Then we would calm down in order to continue. We had a lot of fun that day even though there were corpses beneath our feet.

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