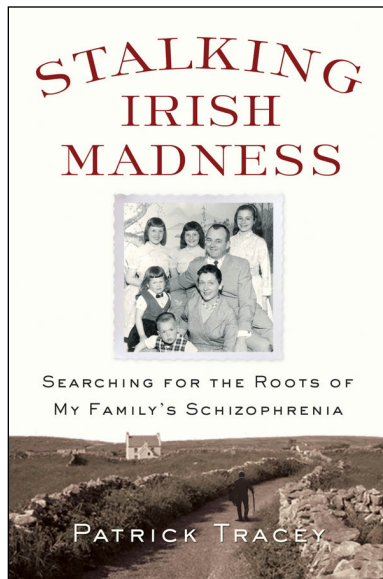


First Eight Pages



It's dark and murky inside Ireland's Cave of the Cat. A muddy abyss in the heart of bog Ireland, the Cave of the Cat, or the Oweynagat, as it's known, is no ordinary grotto. A royal shrine in the second century, this natural limestone fissure was said to be a local doorway to the "otherworld" of the fairies, a race of paranormal beings reputed, among other things, to possess the minds of the insane.

I crept in here just before midnight, searching—vainly, I suspect—for clues to the madness that has mauled my family for generations: the victims include two of my four sisters, along with one uncle, one grandmother, and her great-grandmother before her, a perfect storm of schizophrenia that follows a maternal line stretching from Boston back here to County Roscommon, our ancestral homeland.

Inside the cave, the silence is split only by the drip-drop of water, the emptiness of the place and the steady pounding drip unleashing in me small pangs of paranoia. But the limestone is my lodestone, drawing me into its black depths because this is as far back as the fairy myths of madness go in Ireland. According to 1,100-year-old manuscripts, the *sidhe* (pronounced "shee")—the mischievous fairy people who capture minds from those who lose them—set the nearby palaces of mortals afire and ran into this cave. It's all too fantastic to believe but I'm trying to be receptive.

Unlike those Irish American who dig after genealogical clues, I have no sentimental attachment to my forbears. Instead, I feel I'm chasing much bigger game here, stalking the madness that stalks my family in a direct line down to—but not including—me. Of all the caves in Ireland (and there are thousands), the Oweynagat is the one that gets the most attention in the early Irish literature. Psychotic cats, a symbol of the devil in ancient Ireland, were said to prowl the countryside from here; curses were probably cast here as well by robed Druids, the old wizard priests of Ireland who gathered at this spot for royal pagan feasts. Back when all madness was seen as a punishment, as payback for crossing some deity—first pagan and then Christian—so phantasmagoric were the myths surrounding this cave that to step into its darkness was to enter "Ireland's hellmouth."

I'm here with my own hellish story of sorts, because I know of at least three ancestors who suffered—as two of my fifth-generation Irish-American siblings do now—from schizophrenia, a savage psychosis for which there is no cure or effective treatment. Statistics reveal that one of every four people worldwide suffers from some type of mental illness—one in one hundred from schizophrenia, the most severe form, its victims

typically tortured by voices and other hallucinations that give rise to bizarre and demented behavior. I pick my steps carefully, groping in the darkness for the widening cave walls, yet my quest feels as slippery as the muddy clay floor that dips then rises toward the neck of this bottle-shaped chamber.

The fairy cave and a massive network of Druid ring forts that surround it are a short distance north of where my mother's side—our schizophrenic side—hails from, an area thick with archaeological sites that hold secrets of the past. Tonight is Halloween, known here for thousands of years as the Samhain (pronounced "sow-when"). The pagan new-year feast day, the Samhain in Ireland marks a fresh start for the year ahead. But it's also the most bewitched evening of the Celtic calendar, the Feast of the Dead, when the veil dividing our world from the next is thought to be at its thinnest. Of the four major pagan festivals, the Irish are most uneasy about this one, with mortals going to the otherworld and the dead returning here. It is said that tonight, from here at the stroke of midnight, our ancestral ghosts are let loose to roam the earth.

As the hour nears, I can't help wondering about the haunts of my own schizophrenic lineage. The thought of them lurking here in the cave's darkness gives me the shivers. One might be Mary Egan, who limped out of bog Ireland, a twenty-four-year-old already driven insane in the midst of the Great Famine that pushed her with her husband, John, to Boston. Or so goes the family lore.

Another schizophrenic ghost might be her great-granddaughter, my grandmother May Sweeney White. She never set foot in Ireland, but her gene string stretches back here to Mary Egan and forward in time, with little mutation, to my mother's brother and two of my four sisters. We are a busy nest of schizophrenia, all wrapped up in a twisted strand of DNA. I count myself as a genetic near-miss. But for the sake of the next generation, I'm out here probing the hereditary horizons, monitoring the schizophrenic frontier. And this cave is as close as I'll ever get to the psychic origins of the "voices" that afflict my family like nearly no other.

To my mind, May Sweeney's story was the scariest and therefore probably the most "schizophrenic" of all. Her "incident," as my mother called it, happened on a crisp autumn day in 1924. There was already some doubt about May's rickety state of mind that morning, but by evening it was obvious that she was the latest victim. The twenty-nine-year-old mother of six must have thought it was a special day, because she picked out her best outfit—a dark shawl thrown over a chiffon dress, a velvet cloche hat, and a pearl necklace. Slipping on a pair of white kid gloves, and without leaving a note, the poised-looking beauty set off through the leafy streets of Providence, just an hour's drive down the old Post Road from Boston.

No one saw her slip out for the day, and by twilight her husband had grown worried. Jack White waited at their modest Hannah Street bungalow in the heart of the Olneyville section of town, watching from the window in the gathering dusk. Normally, Big Jack was a sea of calm, but today he was concerned for a host of reasons. For one, May had not been eating properly; for another, it was past sunset and unsafe in the city at

night, and it was not like a young woman to stay out so late, her whereabouts unknown. Out on the unlit parts of the neighborhood or on the hidden banks of the river, bad things were known to happen. Mostly, though, it was that May had not been herself lately. Once cheerful and lighthearted, she'd grown aloof and lifeless in the months since her sixth child was born. The melancholy—a listless sort of head fog that had come over her—now hung like a dark bank of clouds.

At last Jack sees May's figure approaching in the darkness. In her white-gloved finery, she moves up the walkway. But something is amiss; she is clutching her shoes; her hat is cocked, her makeup smudged. May stands in the middle of the road, her shoeless feet swollen and reddened, hard-worn, it would seem, from hours of walking. She says nothing, but as Jack goes out the gate to meet her, her slow grin says it all: every tooth has been wrenched from May's head—her gums a swollen and bloody mess.

Jack drops his teacup, shocked by the sight of her. "Jesus Christ!" he shouts. "What has become of your goddamn teeth?"

May, it turns out, was nobody's victim. She had gladly paid for the dental surgery, she said, to stop the voices in her head. The voices had grown in power and strength until she could no longer bear them. The voices told her they would go, happily, if she would free them from her dental cavities. Whether extensions of her mind or enemies in her head, these strange voices lied, though; they were still chattering, her empty gums still bleeding, as May collapsed into my grandfather's arms and was carried inside to an old Victorian fainting couch.

May had been wobbly leading up to the incident. For months she'd endured a settled depression. Now it was plain to see that something far more serious if initially less obvious was at work. May had swerved off, though *swerved* may be the wrong word because it suggests a sudden deviation, that the route can be regained, that May might be able to merge back into the lanes of life. *Flipped* is wrong too, as she was never able to flip back over to lead a normal existence. *Swirled*, then, may best capture what happens with this enigmatic psychosis, for whoever May Sweeney was—or thought she was—that day she went swirling off forever, the pieces of her personality dancing like autumn leaves in the breeze.

I never got to meet my insane grandmother, who was hospitalized until her death thirty-one years later. She and her fellow patients at the Rhode Island Institute of Mental Health, outside Providence, were some of the earliest patients studied since the clinical term *schizophrenia* was coined in 1911 by renowned Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. He believed that schizophrenia, which had earlier been known as dementia praecox, was not an organic deterioration of the brain, as some had thought, but a "disharmonious" state of mind. The general feeling of the day was that schizophrenics were best left out on a pastoral site, away from city chaos. So on a hill above the Pawtuxet River, May had her own room in a large asylum on the Howard campus, where my mother and sisters went to visit every other weekend.

The full consequences of my grandmother's dental catastrophe were never divulged. My grandfather, Jack White, a Teamsters leader in the style of Jimmy Hoffa, had good reason to keep mum. It was whispered he'd had the dentist whacked, payback for his wife's surgery. "Good man," his sister (my great-auntie Rose) said, nodding. "And who could hardly blame him?"

As Rhode Island's top Teamster, the business manager for Local 57 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, he was a guy who could get the job done. Gruff and non-nonsense, my maternal grandfather had a heart of gold that only the closest could see. Grampa White used to visit our house like clockwork on weekdays, arriving between 10:00 and 10:30 A.M. for tea and raisin toast with my mother. When school was out, I'd always wait to catch him coming out of his black, chauffeur-driven Chrysler Imperial. Jack White cut a tough-guy figure in his big black car, while a large hat gave him a gangster-like air of authority.

Big Jack White, as he was known in Teamsters circles, was a union boss right out of central casting. With his name hitting the front pages for the embezzlement charges the FBI could never make stick, he and my lawyer mother had a lot to talk about in the 1970s. But I could never get Grampa White to tell me much about his bride, May Sweeney, the mad mother of his six children. All he said was that her hideous face was the most frightening thing he'd ever seen. He said her madness had been handed down from Ireland, and passed it off by joking that if I ever wanted to go back there to shake the family tree, lots of lunatics would fall out.

Right up until a couple of years ago, the idea held zero appeal. I wish I could say I had a passionate devotion to my ancestral homeland, a sentimental view of the Emerald Isle like so many Irish Americans, but I could never traffic in the tourist myths. To me Ireland was never the land of happy-go-lucky leprechauns, never a place to follow dogs across rolling green fields. To me, it was a dark and doomed place—the bog of no return. The less I thought about it, the better, because Ireland to me was the source of the same inexplicable storm of madness that kept rolling, taking two of my four sisters.

As a boy, before my sisters went mad, I did wonder innocently about the dentist getting whacked. Grampa White's reticence only tickled my curiosity, the noir scene unreeling in my mind like an old black-and-white movie: A poised, well-dressed woman appears at the dentist's door. She is a dark stranger, in a hurry to have her mouth looked at. The dentist examines her but sees nothing wrong. She insists she wants her teeth out—all of them, top and bottom. He refuses. She insists. Finally, the lady tells the dentist that she'll pay him well—so well, with the wad she produces from her ample breast, that he reluctantly agrees to do it. He loads her up with a syringeful of morphine and, working well past sunset, he does the deed.

In the next scene that unfolds in my mind, Grampa White is a young man now, just thirty, and he is pacing the floors of his Hannah Street home, plotting revenge, and then serving it cold months later when some of his goons in big hats and overcoats push

An excerpt from *Stalking Irish Madness, Searching for the Roots of My family's Schizophrenia*, by Patrick Tracey, available on Bantam Dell hardcover August 26, 2008.

into the dentist's office. The pencil-thin dentist squirms, begging for his life in his own dental chair. "How was I know to know she was mad?" he pleads. "How was I to know that she was the wife of Big Jack White? She certainly looked fine in her expensive clothes. How was I to know that she was some schizo?"

Indeed, May was a real head turner when she set off that day, bewitchingly beautiful with her jet-black hair, her sparkling blue eyes, her radiant smile. When she got home, she was in bits. As shocking as it was, losing her teeth was the least of it. May had lost her mind too, and what could be worse? May had schizophrenia, an apocalyptic form of madness because it robs its victim of our most precious human gift: the ability to separate the real from the unreal and to trust one's thoughts as true.

Schizophrenia is not a case of snapping back and forth between different personalities—a common misconception. Schizophrenia is the hearing of voices, but the hallucinations can be seen, felt, and smelled as well as heard. It's fright night for life for many, an all-consuming terror that never ends.

(Thanks for reading this far. The book, available at amazon.com, just gets better.
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0553805258>)