

Michael Dulman

“Wall”

“Get ready to hit a wall,” said the man pushing the wheelchair. Sure enough, when we stepped outside the air-conditioned baggage claim onto the arrivals platform, Orlando’s humidity immediately began suffocating us. The weather in Ireland had been stunningly beautiful until the last two weeks of our stay, when it downpoured and deluged so badly we couldn’t leave the house. It was a fitting end to a trip that had had tension building from the second we arrived. The sky was simply more open about how I felt than I ever would dare to be.

“There’s our ride,” I said, half to myself, half to my friend seated in the wheelchair. I stood behind him so he couldn’t see my expression.

“Thank you so much for coming with me, Dominic. I never could have made it without you.” He reached a feeble hand over his shoulder. I held mine out for him to clasp, and he gave a firm squeeze that I returned, trying to convey an enthusiasm I didn’t feel, wishing he could tell it was fake.

“Dominic,” he had said as we watched the rain from his brother’s Cork sitting room. “You know you’re my best friend.”

I knew I was his best friend. I knew because he had told me once a day every day we had been together in Ireland visiting his family. He said it while we sat at dinner, while we sat in the car, while we sat on the ferry, while we sat in the church, and while we sat on the plane. I knew because every time he said it, I would have a physical reaction similar to gagging I would have to hide, because

every time I heard those words, I felt Death wrap its icy hands just a little tighter around my throat.

Because I was 16 and he was 80. Because I was in the prime of life and he had been diagnosed with stage four melanoma. Because the closer I came to him, the closer I came to death; while the closer he came to me, the closer he came to life. I didn't hate him. How could you hate someone who trusted you enough to travel with them across the Atlantic? No, I was indifferent to him, which as everyone knows, is far worse than hating someone, because when you hate someone, you at least feel something toward them, whereas with indifference, you feel nothing.

"Let's go," I said in a monotone. Because I normally spoke in monotone, he never picked up on my indifference. Or maybe he did. After all, he'd had 64 more years to practice concealing how he felt. But then, everything he said normally sounded sincere, so it was hard to tell. I had sounded sincere every time I told him I loved him, putting on my most heartfelt tone to let him know he was my best friend.

When you've been a consistently honest person, nobody notices when you finally break ranks, especially the people you're closest to. Best friends don't lie to each other. I guess that means we were no longer that. I wondered when he would notice, when he would understand that I no longer considered him worth the time, the stress, the willpower I required to conceal how I really felt about this person who now disgusted me. Soon, I hoped. We had a long ride ahead of us, and I wanted to avoid the temptation to run us into a wall.