

# The Feast of All Souls

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Preface: What follows is fiction. The persons are, with a few obvious exceptions, made-up. The places are, with a few obvious exceptions, made-up. The scholarship, with no exception, is made up. My thanks go to Tom Lorman and Allan Winkler for their advice on the plausibility of the careers in this story.

“Well, Gil, it’s been a good ride for you, hasn’t it?” Gil thought it was good of the President to put that question, just as it had been good of him to arrange the retirement party at the student center. The speeches by his fellow faculty has been full of bland, fond lies. The ones by his old and current students in the Classics department were closer to roasts, and, since they couldn’t have been used for just any “fill-in-the-blank” retiring professor, were much more appreciated.

Gil had hardly come to love the PowerPoint medium, but he loved what those students had done with it. Like showing the paper he’d commented on in the ‘70’s, covered with so much red ink that it really did, as his old TA said, “look like it had been steeped in claret.” And he had long forgotten that he had scrawled on the paper of the young woman in his Ovid seminar (who had gone on to publish two best-selling novels so far) an opinion that conveyed good advice: “I *hate* adverbs – bitterly!”

It had been a good ride – all the way from the start. As he walked, Gil took the ride again in memory. Growing up in Hastings-on-the-Hudson, less than an hour’s train from the City, but far enough away that coping with the City’s demands was a choice, not a necessity. And being the son of the greatest female architect of a generation did lead to interesting times in the City. Then on to Andover, where he overlapped one year with George H.W. Bush. His later students loved it that Gil’s summary of that acquaintance was simply this: “Read my lips – no shrewd Latinist.” Gil did explain, in fairness, that “Poppy” was 3 years’ Gil’s senior, and captain of everything he wasn’t president of, and was only dimly aware of the freshman who would acquire the nickname “*Summa*” – for no reason, Gil thought, other than his fellow students’ lack of imagination. The ease that Gil had with the coursework no doubt, though, had something to do with it. Gil did acquire a reputation for effortless academic brilliance – burnished by his being a gifted tailback on a team that humiliated Exeter when Gil started. To be that good at Greek *and* breaking tackles – no one could believe that was due to anything but God-given talent.

Andover to Yale was the expected step. There Gil picked up Akkadian and Sumerian as easily as he had Latin and Greek. Enticed by a fellowship to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Gil decided to make an old-school crossing on the Queen Mary. He then learned what it meant to cross the deep in a ship built for speed, in the worst storms that ship would ever see. He learned at voyage’s end that ropes had been strung in the passageways for the passengers

to get from cabin to dining room. Gil had been laid so low by seasickness that he never got past his cabin door during the worst of the storms.

When he finally got to Oxford, he thought that no one had ever gone through so much to get there. That counted for nothing at his college, where brilliance without effort, or without the *appearance* of it, at least, was the expected.

“Never let them see you swot,” could have been the local byword, and Gil was up to it. He gradually came to realize that the Oxonian immortality of tenure in Classics was not to be his fate. Even if he could attain it, his nostalgia for the permeability of class in his homeland was too great. He started looking for teaching jobs back in the US.

Monroe College didn't start high on his list; but Will Anderson, who was laboring away at Berkeley while Gil was at Oxford, spoke well of the Classics department head, and Gil decided to pay a visit. His low expectations were exceeded. The department head was candid: “If you want to be the head of the American Philological Association, don't come here. If you want to teach young people who are studying Classics for the love of it, by all means do.” Gil listened to that. But what got him to come, was the drive in, first through oceans of wheat fields, then up a slight rise, and a sharper one, and all at once being in the town of Monroe – which seemed like the best parts of Georgetown, plunked down in the middle of those wheat fields. Much later, Gil came to call it his “walled city.” His slight article for the school newspaper, *The Monroe*

*Doctrinaire*, describing those wheat fields as the walls and moats against the worst of American society, (though admittedly not the most original trope) was attacked by half a dozen student letter-writers as racist and elitist. Then and now, Gil thought, they just didn't get it. What he meant was only this: that Monroe was one of the happy places where the rawest types of academic ambition bowed to substance, and the ability to impart that substance. That was a message that the administration wouldn't love him to explain, he knew. So he held his tongue, and by his fifteenth year at Monroe had the reputation of retrograde curmudgeon.

He had realized that for a Classics professor, "retrograde curmudgeon" wasn't the worst persona. Year by year, his classes were in high demand, though Latin and Greek weren't the school's easiest ways to satisfy its language requirement. Gil saw himself as entertainer as well as teacher, and believed that his students would for that reason suffer the rigors of his courses happily, over the pain of sitting through a boring "easy A." His belief seemed vindicated when he received Monroe's distinguished teaching award, unhappily known as the Rutter Award<sup>1</sup>, after the early Monroe alumnus who had funded it.

The opening lines of his acceptance speech were purged from the official record, but spread quickly among the students, even in those pre-Twitter days: "Ladies and gentleman, I could not be more pleased to receive the Rutter

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<sup>1</sup> The Distinguished Teaching Award at UCLA is known as The Rutter Award.

Award. I have been so ever since the moment President Benson told me of its significance, and explained that its title is an eponym, and not a descriptor.” Old Benson was not amused. Either Gil had mistaken Benson’s sense of humor, or, as the rumor went, the line made it back to the Rutter Fund trustees. In any event, the following year Gil’s classes went from doubly to trebly overbooked.

Still walking back, after the retirement party, Gil thought of his best student of all in those years: Ken Dailey. A talented son of one of the small local farmers who had to rely on cows, pigs, and chickens, rather than thousands of acres of wheat, to get by. Dailey arrived at the school looking not that different from one of those farm animals. They both joked later that Ken could have won the title of “most hirsute human.” Dailey’s farm-boy-meets-Yeti look turned to preppy sleekness within a month of his getting to know a fellow student with a TriDelt pin always perched wonderfully on her cashmere pullovers. The transformation stuck, even if the girl didn’t. Gil recalled trying to comfort Dailey over the breakup, but hearing “Mr. Dailey, be grateful to her. You’ll always know who made you human,” though it became cause for later laughs, was too cold for comfort, when the comfort was needed.

Dailey had a genius for Classics. At first, in a typical language test in an American college, he didn’t fare exceptionally. He flubbed a few endings in the more out-of-the-way declensions. But he could soon communicate in Latin,

usually perplexing his fellows who had the impeccable paper grammar. And in the poetry classes, he was soon finding connotations and parallels that left even Gil impressed. In a paper in Gil's Ovid seminar, Dailey offered interpretations so beyond the expectations for an undergraduate, that Gil checked all the sources where Dailey could have cribbed them, and couldn't find them there. He told Dailey that, and that Dailey shouldn't waste time studying for and taking the final exam. "Just keep reading. You've already earned an 'A'."

In his valedictory address two years later, Dailey had told the assembly that that was the point when he had decided to become a professor of Classics. A moment, he added with a nod that only he and Gil would understand, "When I became a little more human, thanks to Monroe College."

From there, Dailey's path through academia had been magical. Berkeley, Chicago, the Cambridge fellowship, and, startling even to Gil, who had well appreciated Dailey's gifts, the professorship there. Despite the ocean between them, the two stayed in touch in long letters, usually dense disputes over Dailey's paper asserting that to the classical Athenians, the Erinyes, the Ancient Ones born of Night, "The Kindly Ones," Goddesses of (take your pick) vengeance or justice, were pure metaphor – guilty conscience, personified. Gil thought that Dailey's connecting Aeschylus to the middle-English "Ayenbite of Inwit" was a neat exercise, getting many cites in their little world, but a view

that gave an ironic outlook to the Athenian world that was, as he let Dailey know, impossible.

His last moments with Dailey had been a mix of perfect recall and oblivion. They had both been at a conference in Asheville, and Dailey had convinced him that the nearby Cedar Mountain area would be perfect for the two of them to do a little canoeing – to blow off a little of the fustiness of three days of presentations. It turned out there was too much whitewater for Gil’s liking, but Dailey was strong and expert, if still a little wild, and at first they handled everything the stream threw at them.

It was in a calm stretch that they had time and quiet to talk, and the talk turned, as it always did, to the Erinyes, the Furies. Gil then recollected Dailey’s Ovid paper, and the originality it showed, and knew he had a deeper dispute he had to launch.

“I’d like to go in a little different direction, Ken – one that we two have to go in. You know I spent a summer researching in Heidelberg. Great library, as you know. Mostly in German, but you can certainly do academic work in that, as can I.”

“I can fumble around in it, Gil. I’m much more comfortable in the Romance languages.”

“Still, Ken, I’ve read your critiques of German works, and you quote extensively and accurately from the original texts. Your Chicago paper even had some German word-quibbles in it. I’ll make my point. In Heidelberg, I found an old unpublished and misfiled monograph of Schreiber’s. It anticipates your Erinyes paper. In long chunks, it *is* that paper.”

Gil could recall that dialogue verbatim. And he could bring up his next memory -- a fascinating vision. A beautiful liquid, dripping, dripping into still water, with a sound like radio static in the background. Very gradually, Gil had realized that the liquid was his blood, and the sound was whitewater at a distance. And very gradually, Gil stopped being fascinated by both realizations, and willed himself to raise himself from the rock where his forehead was so beautifully dripping blood into the stream’s pool.

Gil recalled scratching his way back to civilization, and all that unfolded in the next forty-eight hours. Learning that Dailey’s body had been found, also with head trauma, two rapids upriver from the pool where Gil had hung up on his rock.

The coroner’s findings came fast in rural North Carolina. Accidental drowning. A negligent, surprise release from an upstream dam had made the river wilder than expected. There was only one witness to what had happened to them,

and Gil could offer no recollection that would support any conclusion but accident. He had told the sheriff everything, except that he had confronted Dailey with facts that made plagiarism beyond Dailey's denial. Gil saw no point in airing that. Ken was dead. Better to let his memory fade without a blot.

Recollection ended as Gil's walk reached his new house. New to him, that is. His 1883 Italianate just off Monroe's Main Street. Thirteen-foot ceilings, near floor-to-ceiling windows facing the street, a house built by and for the town's most prosperous general merchant. Buying it from the estate of a ninety-four-year-old widow had been a bargain, though not exactly a steal, since there hadn't been a touch of maintenance in twenty years. There were rooms, maybe a floor, that the widow probably hadn't been in in those twenty years. At least Gil wouldn't have to undo someone else's bad remodel, and the bones of the place were stylish and good. And by keeping his house on the far side of campus until the rehabbing was done, he could miss the pain of living in a work in progress.

The workers had knocked off for the day. He let himself in to check the place over. The old fir floors, freed of shag carpet and lightly refinished, showed their age in a clean way, just as Gil had hoped. And the cellar, which had been dirt-floored, with the first floor's joists offering barely five and a half feet of basement head-room, had been dug out to allow him easy walking to the new

cedar-lined wine keeper, with its temperature and humidity readouts glowing softly and continuously in a back corner.

Gil knew that the local workers would be happy to finish his project. Even across the town-and-gown divide, his intolerance of any deviation from the agreed plans, and his quick rejection of any substandard work, had become coffee-shop topics. The local consensus was that this bird would have to go far from Monroe to find anyone to take on future work on his place.

So there was more than usual satisfaction on all sides when, seven months after his retirement party, Gil was able to move his library and his antiques into his new place. Those antiques included tablet fragments that had left Iraq under clouded circumstances (though long enough ago for Gil to feel easy in owning them). He moved from his old farmhouse, with its two remaining acres, to what was acclaimed as the new showplace of the town proper.

The move had its intended effects. His place's nearness to the campus, his reputation, his taste, and his well-stocked cellar brought frequent visits from his old colleagues. He encouraged them to bring along their best and favored students, and soon he held the nearest to a literary salon as could be found in the town of Monroe.

For just over two years, Gil happily lived this “Mr. Chips” life. The students brought around, being professor-selected, were impressive, if a little too earnest. By the second glass, most were more than willing to talk about what they actually cared about: what was going to happen to student loans; would anyone but the information-tech majors ever get a job; would Monroe ever enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have co-ed dorms.

Gil had always felt young for his years. Now, he felt practically immortal. He had always enjoyed the annual infusion of new youth when he was teaching. Now, he had it without faculty meetings, without pressure to publish, and without clunky memos from the administration on how the latest cuts in fill-in-the-blank budget were in reality a boon to all.

He realized he was becoming a sort of unofficial campus mentor-at-large, and set rules for himself: no career advice – he wasn’t competent to give it; no advice to the lovelorn – too messy; no religious debates – with twenty-somethings, that was just too boring.

His life in retirement was celebrated enough to get chronicled in the school paper. His summary of it to his interviewer -- “Bliss it is in this dawn to be alive, but to be old is very heaven” – even had a brief life in the Twitterverse as “the best Wordsworth rip-off ever.” This Gil had to take on faith, as he would consider entering the Twitterverse equivalent to a turn through one of the lower

circles of hell. His house became an even more popular student destination after a follow-up story in *The Doctrinaire* quoted his boast that “At least when students visit me, I have the satisfaction of knowing they’re not on Facebook or Twitter.”

Soon after that story, Gil was host to Dunn, a freshman Classics major, brought along by one of his old colleagues from the department. Dunn was, like Dailey at the same stage, a hairy beast. And, as Gil came to know, the newcomer was like Dailey had been in many ways – uncouth, disheveled, disorganized, and brilliant. He became a regular at Gil’s. In the first quarter of that year, Dunn read Dailey’s famous paper, and, knowing that Dailey had been a student of Gil’s, asked about Dailey, his student days, how he had gone from Monroe student to Cambridge don.

This was the first time Gil chose to give sustained thought to Dailey since his retirement. Gil had chosen to drive Dailey from his mind. And he could do that easily enough, since he recalled so little of their last moments together.

“Professor, you must be very proud to have had a student who went so far, and was such an original thinker,” Dunn said after his third coffee during one of his weeknight visits to Gil’s. The question turned Gil’s thoughts from the far more mundane one he had been mulling – the enviable ability of the young to drink coffee far into the night.

Dunn had offered Gil a dilemma. Letting this teenager believe in Dailey's originality in this moment seemed a lot harder than what he had for years done – let his colleagues, the profession, and the world, believe in it. Telling Dunn that Dailey was a plagiarist (yes, a brilliant one!) was out of the question. But letting the hero-worship simmer was, too: “Dunn, when you get far enough into study of a field as old as Classics, you'll see that there's hardly an idea that hasn't been anticipated. Professor Dailey was one of my most brilliant students, but his creativity isn't what I admired most about him.”

“What was that, then?”

“Getting the Brits to hire someone whose accent was as prairie-flat as yours. That's what you should find inspiring.”

The laugh this wisecrack got let Gil steer the conversation toward topics infinitely safer, like incompetent RA's. Dunn even brought up an incomparable TriDelt, of which there seemed to Gil to be always at least one. Or maybe only one. Gil smiled to himself at the notion of the Immortal TriDelt. Whether this Immortal existed to lure to perfection or destruction seemed to Gil from his long observation ... beyond knowing.

It was the evening after Dunn's latest visit that Gil's lovingly renovated townhouse began to act up. The dug-out basement floor must have touched an underground spring that was surging in this record-wet fall. A fair rivulet began to run from the southeast corner to the northwest, where it pooled a bit, and somehow found a path to flow under the old stone foundation. Having a gurgling brook in the basement was bad enough, but this water was hard and sulfurous. "My basement smells like that pulp mill way upriver," Gil thought. He knew the locals there called it "the smell of money," at least when prices were good enough to keep three shifts working. To himself, Gil thought "It smells like a rotten egg cooking over a burning tire. I've got to get the idiots who dug out this basement back tomorrow."

Tomorrow seemed a long time coming. Gil's sleep was usually dreamless and mostly uninterrupted. This night he dreamt of the female German prof who had retired 20 years ago -- Frau Gnaedig. The dream was vague. Gil could only recall half-waking, over and over, roused by intense disapproval from Gnaedig. Intense disapproval was Gnaedig's base state. Nothing remarkable there. But why had he dreamt of her, dead these eighteen years? She'd left no wake in the school, or in his life.

That morning, Gil called his contractor. "The basement's a sieve. It's not acceptable." "We can be out Thursday a week." Back-and-forth over an earlier date went nowhere.

Gil tried to pursue his routine. His early walk around the town went as usual. Devoting the rest of the morning to catching up on the scholarly journals he still subscribed to, and on his correspondence, went less well. His attention wouldn't stay on the page of – anything. So, fully knowing that his contractor would blame him for everything, including the root problem, he decided to try to tackle the creek in the basement himself. After a trip to the hardware store on Monroe's Main Street, he slathered the foundation's stone walls with the waterproofing compound recommended by the proprietor. It wasn't hard work, but he thought it merited the steak and half-bottle of cabernet he rewarded himself with. His fitfulness of the last night led to an early bed this night.

He fell asleep fast. There were no dreams of Frau Gnaedig. But soon enough appeared a male – was it Dailey or was it Dunn? -- oozing censure for something. Even in sleep, Gil racked himself -- what had he done, or left undone? This male in the dream connected somehow to the basement door, next off the hall to his bedroom door. That door became a horror and a fascination. He couldn't sleep facing away from it. What sleep he had was light, filled with a sense of warning. Again and again he awoke and forced himself to look at his bedside clock. 1:38. 3:15. Even groggy in his bed, he remembered the Bergmann movie named for 3:00 A.M.: "The Hour of the Wolf." He hated that hour. Too late for anyone honest to be about. Too early

to hold the promise of dawn's breaking soon. He drifted back. Again and again, he stopped his tossing about to force his eyes open to check the clock. 4:27. 5:12. 5:48. Around 7:50 the room seemed to lighten ever so slightly, which brought an enormous relief, and, at last, a sound sleep.

He awoke two hours later, groggy, but unwilling to lie longer abed. Staying in bed half the day he knew, was a sign of depression, and he was too much in control of his mind, he felt, to ever be depressed. A good walk in the still-cool air would blow out the cobwebs, and get him ready for the afternoon conference call with the editorial board he still served on.

As usual, he walked quickly, soon passing the town's boundaries, sticking to his path along the small river that supported its line of trees as it snaked through the wheat fields. In the light of day, his dreams and his dredging up the "Hour of the Wolf" seemed absurd. Pitiful, even. He would take steps. No caffeine for two hours before retiring. No reading in bed. He'd do his reading in his sitting-room-turned-library, and not go to bed before sleep seemed at hand.

On his way back through town, he stopped at the town's one drugstore to pick up one of those new painkiller plus "sleep-aids". He smiled at the euphemism. "Sleep-aid." Sleep doesn't need aid. He does. Still, he supposed the FDA bureaucrats would have frowned on labeling them "knockout pills."

The town druggist, whom Gil had known for twenty-five years, seemed solicitous even before Gil asked for “one of those ‘PM’ painkillers.” Gil wasn’t used to being asked if he was “under the weather,” or being quizzed on whether he had a laundry list of symptoms. Which he didn’t. He also didn’t like how the druggist looked at him. Looking at his face too long, too intently. “I must have dark circles. Well, the pills will take care of it. I’ll get a few good nights’ sleep, and be myself.”

Gil struggled to pay attention to his afternoon call. “Conference calls are always bad,” he thought, “and calls with eight scholars of varying competence are nigh intolerable.” He found himself so frustrated that a bottle of high-end single-malt came out from its sideboard storage much sooner than the usual 8:00 P.M. or so. After all, he thought, he wanted a good space between his daily spirits and his retiring.

Gil awoke the next morning, seemingly in the same position he lay down in. His sleep had been uninterrupted, and restful, but he recalled every detail of his dream. He and Dailey were going downriver in their canoe. He didn’t know if it was before or after they talked about Gil’s finding in the German library. They came into rough rapids. The canoe overturned, they went into the water. Gil watched unused helmets and life-jackets toss in the whitewater with him. Then he was again watching that fascinating red drip.

Gil was relieved. This was the lost memory. The simplest explanation covered the facts. Rested at last, he had a productive day over the manuscript articles his old secretary was kind enough to continue to print out for him, and deliver to his house.

As he fixed his dinner, Gil recalled that it was Halloween night. Few children lived near his townhouse, and he didn't know whether his doorbell would be ringing at all this evening. He hoped not, so an early lights-out, following the same prescription that gave him last night's rest, was in order.

This night gave the same uninterrupted sleep. The dream was different. This time, the German manuscript raised a bitter argument. Dailey distinguished the monograph, discounted its significance. Gil repeated: "My translation of Schreiber matches nine long paragraphs of your article." Dailey got quiet. For a long time. Gil heard the sound of rushing water ahead. Dailey said, just loud enough to be heard over it, "I can't let you do this." Gil turned back toward him, and saw the heavy wooden paddle come down. His next vision, again, was the mesmerizing red drops.

The morning called for another long walk. He walked very fast, but barely saw the river or the path. He worked out the problem. This second dream was the real memory. In the first, he'd suppressed what he didn't want to believe of the

protégé he'd tutored and groomed, and seen go on to great things. Not the simple explanation of the first dream, but one that was more plausible.

At least the sleep had been good. He'd heard nothing from trick-or-treaters, if there had been any. So that evening, the "sleep-aid" again followed a few thimblefuls of good whisky. Just the amount recommended for good health, as Gil liked to remind himself. And again, his sleep came quickly. In his dreams, he was soon back on the river, in the canoe. At some level, even in this sleep, he was telling himself this was a dream. He told himself that, even as in the dream, he again told Dailey of the German manuscript. This time, what followed was different. He listened to Dailey's explanations, and the distinctions he drew. Finally, he told Dailey, "You're too good, for me to let you end up that way." The canoe tilted, a paddle again flashed. This time it was in Gil's hands.

"Just a dream," he was telling himself, even in his sleep. Then came the image of Frau Gnaedig. "No. You did this. This way." It seemed then that the basement trickle became a roar, and the basement stench flowed and whirled around him – wherever he was. And then there was fear, and then there was falling, and then there was -- nothing.

Ten days later, Monroe's weekly paper reported that the body of retired Monroe Professor Gilbert Mesher<sup>2</sup> had been found in his home. Death was attributed to head injuries suffered in a fall down his basement stairs. Without a doubt, it was death by accident.

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<sup>2</sup> This story is *roughly* framed on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.