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Word count: 3,404

Murphy's Load
by Darryl Benjamin

Her grief is sideways and upside down. It weighs on her like iron bricks in her apron pockets. Her brown hair looks like an oil spill on the pillow.

My mother looks at me with mournful eyes. "Please," she says, and turns away, wrapping the covers tighter. I am thirteen years old. It is 2002, a year after the accident.

There's no getting through to her. So I rip open a pack of fresh yellow rubber gloves, make my way down two flights of stairs to the basement.

I knock on the door three times and sing out, "Who loves ya, Murphy?" I can feel the floor vibrate at his familiar stomping. Then I turn the knob.

Murphy gallops around the pool and the house shudders. "Settle down, boy," I say, and after a while he does. He is almost four feet tall and over eight hundred pounds, though barely three years old. He's built like concrete Legos: rectangular body, square head, and cylindrical columns for legs. I let him run it out of his system.

He sidles up to a fresh mound of poop that's a quarter his size. He seems proud of himself.

“Mom’s trying to sleep.” I clank the metal bucket and shovel to the concrete floor, but not too loud. Murphy studies me with weak but alert eyes and I want to believe he is smiling. He’s got a wide gash of a mouth and a tiny hole in his forehead.

“You ever gonna grow that horn?” I ask him while shoveling. He cocks his head slightly, like a dog.

I used to wear a face mask. But rhinos scare easy. They’re eager to please, though, and as playful as puppies. Smart, too. The smell doesn’t bother me so much anymore. A person can get used to almost anything. It takes me about thirty seconds to finish cleaning up.

“Bya, Murphy,” I say, stroking his cheek, “I’ll be back soon to play.” He prances around the pool.

* * *

Most people call it an attack, but I prefer to call it an accident. As a consultant, my father could’ve been in any of over three dozen places from Montauk to Schenectady. It was an accident that he was in New York City.

I’m as patriotic as the next guy, but September 11, 2001 doesn’t mean any more to me than the day my father died. You can roll it up in a giant taco and smoke it, but the long and short of it is my father died that day on a job. I don’t know what tower, north or south, because they never found anything, not even a DNA smudge. He was crushed to death, reduced to atoms. My father was a computer programmer, a tech geek, who was said to make magic out of data the way some people paint pictures or write poetry. He was on a one-week assignment. He told me he could see “almost to the Point,” meaning Harmony Point, which is where we lived on Long Island.

I plan to get a good look at his horoscope and see what was in store that day. Maybe it was one of those “don’t-get-out-of-bed” days, a cat’s cradle of appalling circumstance, or maybe he’d recently received a Chinese fortune cookie warning him to watch out for falling objects. There is no logical explanation for a person’s life, I think, and if you believe there is, you haven’t lived long enough.

* * *

Before the accident my father hired contractors to finish the basement. It was the mid ’90s and business was booming. He had ten rooms built of various shapes and sizes: home offices for him and my mother, a meditation room, storage rooms, a family room with a large-screen TV and couches, even an exercise room with Nautilus. The full kitchen was a crowning touch.

After the accident my mother called the same contractors and had them tear down the works, clear through to the cement walls, including the exercise equipment room, which I was especially sorry to see go. The only thing left were the narrow horizontal windows high up by the ceiling.

“Build a rectangular pool. Dig it in the floor,” my mother commanded imperiously, her arms akimbo, confident as a Greek goddess I’d seen in history textbooks. My mother was Wonder Woman, minus the headband, gesturing madly to the contractors, delineating area, depth, width. She never explained why she wanted it, and they never asked.

* * *

It is a beautiful late summer day, warm and sunny, with low humidity. I rinse the pail and shovel with the backyard hose and leave them to dry in the sun. I go inside to wash my hands and from the bathroom I can hear voices in the kitchen.

My mother is up, and Gayle, her best friend, is with her. They are sitting and arguing and sipping coffee, which is what they do most mornings. Gayle is trying to convince my mother to have a party.

“I haven’t seen those people since the accident,” my mother says. “I’m tired.”

My mother walks as if she’s pushing against an unseen energy, with slow steps. Like me, my mother believes 9/11 was just an accident, as impersonal as a black hole. We had lost my father. It didn’t matter who is responsible. She only knows it was the day her husband stopped coming home. The irreversibility was shocking. Everything else, including the politics, was irrelevant.

“You can sleep when you’re dead,” Gayle bickers. She is round and squat and fond of wearing thick mock-leather belts. She is the only one of my mother’s friends who stuck around after the accident. She made it her business. Murphy was Gayle’s idea.

She is a zoologist for the San Diego Zoo where Murphy is destined after he reaches a certain age. She found him somewhere in Africa trying to suckle his half-dead very old mother. Her teeth were worn flat. Baby Murphy was terrified. He sucked her udder almost clean off. The blood attracted hyenas. Only two months old, he chased them away. That was Murphy, all right.

The authorities euthanized Murphy’s mother and carted him off. That’s when Gayle, who is responsible for his health and development, somehow procured him as “just the thing” for her friend Linda, who had lost her husband only half a year before. It was her secret therapy, and it was our secret to keep, because rhinos are an endangered species. How Gayle had managed this she never revealed. “At some point, he’ll have to go. It’s only temporary,” she constantly reminded me. “And you mustn’t mention him to anyone.” She was concerned I was growing too

attached. I guess Gayle's okay, but she's *so* in her own bubble. And, like my mother, she pretty much ignores me.

"Gayle, I know you're just trying to help, and I appreciate it, but no. Everything's different now," my mother says, protesting the party. Then she laughs. It's a hollow laugh, and it ricochets lifelessly off the walls.

So Gayle says to my mother like this: "OK, no party, you win," and sighs dramatically, visibly slumping in her seat. In a moment she perks up and says, "Why don't we call it a *get-together*?" A cell phone appears in her hand and she starts calling people. She can be real stubborn. ("*Monomaniacal*," my mother says.)

I know most of the people she's calling: the Collinses, the Steins, the Lees, the Millers. I know their kids from school. And I know their parents from the parties we used to give. Great big affairs, with lots of hooting and hollering and booze. Mostly I hid in my room.

My mother sits quietly, listening, her arms carelessly resting on her outstretched legs, still in her nightgown.

When Gayle comes up for air between calls my mother says tartly, "They'll come with condolences and sentimental crap and then get drunk." Then she shrugs, as if to say, "Whatever."

Gayle glances at me and I know what she's thinking. My mother will come and she'll get plastered with the rest of them.

* * *

My mother leaves Gayle on the phone and trudges to the stairway leading to her bedroom.

"How's Murphy this morning?" she asks.

“Chipper. His poop is getting bigger. Him, too. He’s almost too big for the basement.”

It is the start of a conversation I don’t want to have. In the bush, Murphy’s mother would be kicking him out of the nest by now.

But my mother is already halfway up the stairs to her bedroom. She makes no sign she hears me. She closes the door to her room and I imagine her slumping into bed.

I return to the kitchen table and sit with Gayle. A minute by myself before I hang with Murphy. I thumb through the August edition of *Rolling Stone* while she keeps chattering on the phone.

There is an article about how Britney Spears remade herself in Madonna’s image. It gives me the willies to think how calculated an act it was. She’s gone overnight from Angel to Devil, Sex-Kitten to She-Demon. When her first persona crashed and burned, she went into despair — probably where the real Britney lives — for about two months before her agent reinvented her. I consider how long my mother and I have suffered and how we didn’t have an agent to reinvent us, although Gayle sure as hell is trying.

* * *

I was there at breakfast the day my father died.

The day before, the neighbor had chopped down the large oak tree between our properties. No one really knew for sure whose tree it was, but it didn’t matter anymore because the tree was done with.

“Technically, that tree was half ours and half theirs,” my mother said while she prepared scrambled eggs and toast. “Technically, they had no right to chop down *our* tree.”

She plunked down a plate and my father stared at the eggs. He looked as if he was about to say something, but changed his mind. “Do we have any olives?” he asked.

“In the fridge,” my mother said without turning. I could tell my father felt guilty about the tree. Maybe it was his fault because he failed to intervene. Maybe his wife thought less of him for not having intervened.

“I want it for you,” my father said in a flat, heightened voice.

“You want it so you can run around,” my mother said.

Of course I knew what they were talking about. I wasn’t born yesterday, for one thing; for another, they argued about ‘the vasectomy’ for months.

My mother’s eyelids were blinking like strobes. “You never wanted it before,” she said in a clipped, angry voice.

“I thought we were done having kids.”

“You shouldn’t have let them do it,” my mother said.

“Do what?” my father asked.

“Chop down the tree,” she said. Tears glinted in her eyes. “You *know* I loved that tree!”

My father turned in his chair, his face crimson, and looked at her.

My mother ran into the bathroom. That’s what she did when she was upset. We heard her flush three times before she opened the door.

“Sure, go ahead, have it done,” she said. Her face was white. “I don’t care.”

“Fuck you,” my father said under his breath, and slammed the door on the way to the car. He hadn’t touched his eggs. That was the last time we saw him.

* * *

In fifteen minutes Gayle has a dozen couples invited to an “impromptu get-together” — as she now calls it — but it looks promptu to me, planned from start to finish.

Many of my mother's friends disappeared when she withdrew into her cocoon after the accident. At first they'd been anxious to stay in touch, send flowers, love, etc., but my mother remained incommunicado and they gradually vanished.

I decide to visit Murphy. As I descend the stairs I am surprised by two things — first, he doesn't respond to my knocking, and second, he is explosively butting his head against the posts that support the main floor. The house trembles with each impact, which only encourages him to try harder.

I stride around the pool and Murphy keeps up, as faithful as any dog. I stomp my feet and he does the same; I weep, feel sorry for myself, and worry about what will become of my mother. When I open my eyes I'm standing in front of an impressive mountain of rhino poop.

Let me tell you about rhino poop: it's more than it seems. There are dozens of flaming messages inside, ready to be unspooled and interpreted by the right set of receptors. It's Rhino Facebook: *Just passing through! O baby won't you be mine? There's a New Kid in Town.*

I want him to know he belongs here with us and we'll protect him no matter what. I want him to know he's *safe*.

I kick his shit clean across the room. It makes a wet thwacking sound against my sneakers. Murphy joins me, of course; it's his natural instinct to kick shit and paint the town with his tag. The shit soars like grenades and detonates against the walls.

I lose track of time as we kick the shit pile. I am giddy with joy. It is magnificent, satisfying. I feel transported, drowning in the sweet air. "Murphy!" I yell, "Murphy!"

I leap on his back. He withstands me effortlessly and bolts forward, secure and sure-footed, taking the turns without slowing, me hanging off his neck like a rodeo cowboy, whooping like a madman. We cavort like this for I don't know how long. Long enough to make

him tired, which isn't easy. After, he lies on his side and I rest my head on his belly and we sleep.

* * *

I wake up to the sound of guests arriving. I can hear them blowing greetings to each other, laughing, the steady ebb and flow of muffled conversation, the tinkle of ice in glasses. "Gotta go now, Murphy," I say and pat him on the belly. He moves his head slightly in response. His eyes are open. "Love ya, Murphy," I say.

I climb the stairs to the basement door and crack it. The coast looks clear. Two steps in, I'm busted. Mr. Collins, a cigar-chomping fat accountant, is in my face. "Eddy, Eddy, how are you?" He doesn't bother to look, really. I'm covered in Essence of Murphy. He smells it. "You smell like shit," he says. I grin. His son, Tad Collins, is a classmate of mine. He's an ass. "There's a leak in the sewage system," I mumble. "Gotta clean up, if you'll excuse me."

I leave him there with his mouth wide and his cigar poised in his left hand. "Sewage system?" he says.

* * *

My bedroom is on the top floor, and so is my mother's, as I've already said, separated by a bathroom. Before I head to the shower I decide to check on her. I enter her room but it's empty. She must be downstairs playing hostess.

The room is exactly as it was when my father was alive. It reminds me of *Great Expectations*, real sad and lonely and sort of pathetic. Their wedding pictures are in frames on the marble-topped bureau. The purple sheets on the king-size bed are perfectly tucked. I pick up one of the photos. My father's lips are smiling, but his eyes are haunted. He looks scared. I put the picture down and open the first drawer of the bureau. I've inventoried and memorized the

contents of each drawer: socks (black argyle), boxer shorts, a red leather belt, odd cuff-links. I move my hands under the clothing and stop suddenly when I hear an unfamiliar scraping. A micro-cassette, the kind used in old telephone answering machines, looks up at me. On the label it says, in my mother's hand, "9/11/01. Do Not Erase." I pop it into her answering machine.

* * *

"Jumping Jesus, Linda, I'm gonna die," a raspy and muffled voice says. I sink to the floor because my knees won't hold.

"I'm under someone's fucking desk with my jacket over my head," my father yells. *"Hold on,"* he says, and I hear him cough. *"Mother-fucking smoke,"* he gasps. *"Shit, they're jumping like flies out the window. Good god, Linda. I don't want my last words to you to be 'fuck you.' We had more than that. I love you, Linda,"* and then he pauses and said, *"Shit! Fucking floor is moving!"*

The last part — the part that makes me feel most chilly — is his voice falling: *"Tell Eddy I love him."* And then the phone is dead as it smashes to bits along with my father under hundreds of thousands of pounds of concrete and steel.

* * *

A few moments later my mother enters the room. She can tell at a glance what has happened. The tape is rewinding itself. It clicks to a finish; on an impulse, I hit the eject button and pocket the cassette. She is about to speak when there's a jarring impact and the house shudders on its foundation.

"Murphy!" I yell.

"Earthquake!" my mother yells.

We run for the stairs but another thud knocks us off our feet. We stumble down the stairs, which are swaying, but we hold on. People are running and screaming, trying to get out the door, which is blocked by too many people exiting at once. Liquor is spilled everywhere and glass crunches under our feet. We run for the basement door but before we get there it opens and Mr. Collins staggers out, slamming it hurriedly behind him. His hands are shaking as he raises his palms. His cigar is gone. "I was only trying to help," he says in a whiny voice, which reminds me of his son Tad, who is usually saying the same thing in gym class. He springs to the front door, which is finally free. "*I had no idea.*"

"Murphy!" I cry, lunging for the door, but it's too late. He's butted his head against one post too many. I can hear the basement stairs give way as the house inhales and then collapses in slow motion. My mother grabs my hand and yanks me out of the house.

One winter when I was seven I steered my Radio Flyer sled down the steep hill behind our house into a pine tree. It was my first time alone on a sled, and I wasn't quite sure how the thing worked. The jolt was terrific. I tumbled through the air like a gymnastic Olympian, not as much defying gravity as hurtling through it, tumbling in somersaults, and landing with a resounding thwack on my butt.

My mother and I now huddle behind that same pine tree, and although it does little to shield us, it is comforting to hold. For a few moments we quietly watch the scene unfolding below us. We hold hands with each other and the tree. We're praying for Murphy.

Through tears I see walls, ceilings and floors tumbling hard toward the foundation. Then an enormous puff of white smoke and dust is released, accompanied by an explosion — probably from the gas main — that blows an SUV-sized hole into the foundation.

My mother's grip is firm. Smoke screws lazily into the sky and flames surge like contrails into the evening sky. I don't dare look at her face and break the spell. We hold our breath and watch it all burn until Murphy swaggers out the hole, proud of himself, and surges down Main Street like a runaway train. Hard on his heels is Gayle, clattering futilely after him in high-heels and bouncing pearls, yelling "Murphy, stop! Hold up!"

Only then do we let our breath out. The next sound amazes me. It is my mother laughing, without irony or resentment, her eyes glistening. "Run, Murphy, Run!" I shout, and my mother joins me, both of us joyous. I knew then we would be all right, and that Murphy would be all right too, even when they caught him and put him into a cage. A little bit sadder, but grateful for the freedom he once enjoyed and the love he once knew.