



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:8:00

Murphy's Law

By Len Davis

He had more than one, of course. Laws, I mean. I should know. I met him once. Murphy. He was buying a crate of herring. It was almost dawn. He was so drunk he could scarcely stand. We all were. The wind that tugged our clothes had howled a thousand miles across the ocean from Iceland, shredding crimson-streaked clouds on the eastern horizon. Despite the wind a layer of haar coated the ground in swirling mist like foam on a cappuccino. It gave an out-of-focus feel, but that could have been the whiskey.

Murphy was on the quayside next to the foulest smelling public convenience in Scotland. I'd followed him along Scrabster's granite sea-wall to meet the arriving trawlers. A mistake. I was the nearest. He had to shout above the crash of the Atlantic rollers.

'Lend us a couple of quid, young Seamus'. I had to think. It was Friday. Payday. No, no, that was yesterday. The party had gone on all night. It was now early Saturday. I had exactly two pounds, three shillings and sixpence, to last me until next Friday. But I was swathed in a warm blanket of Glen Fiddich.

'By all means.' I handed him the two notes. They passed quickly to the fisherman. Murphy bent to the crate of still wriggling fish at his feet.

‘Would you be good enough to take one end?’ Murphy’s manners were impeccable when drunk.

‘With pleasure, Mr Murphy.’ Good manners are catching.

We staggered through night’s departing shadows along the harbour wall. At least the Icelandic wind was now behind us. We slung the crate into Murphy’s decrepit Land Rover. Mrs Murphy said she should drive. After a brief shouted altercation, Mrs Murphy prevailed. I was squeezed between them on the Rover’s bench seat. The others followed us; a three-vehicle convoy.

Murphy’s eyelids would not stay up. His wife’s mini-skirt would not stay down. Her tights were laddered. She saw me looking at her legs and smiled. It was a smile I couldn’t fathom. To cover my confusion, I asked her why their cottage was besieged by delivery vans at month-ends.

‘Isn’t it obvious? It’s when the money arrives. Murphy’s wealthy family have banished him. The monthly cheque is guaranteed provided Murphy says north of the Great Glen. He’s a modern-day remittance man. That’s the law of the Murphys.’

Their home hugged the cliff-top above the harbour. Murphy’s garden was remarkable. It possessed the only tree for miles. I passed it every day on my way from Thurso to Dounreay. The Atom Research Centre was set in a landscape so bleak, so featureless and so utterly devoid of life, that the wits claimed the bomb had already been dropped there.

There was nothing to do in Thurso except drink and fish. The ‘Locals’ certainly drank like fish. The ‘Atomics’, as we were known, partied most weekends. In my memory these parties are merged into

one long boozy fog. But this party was different. It's when I met Murphy. And Murphy was to women what bees are to honey.

When I first saw him, he was snogging our hostess, dancing on her living room carpet, his fingers firmly cradling her arse. Eventually her husband rescued her. Later, in the kitchen, he was cuddling the tall girl from Payroll, his hand worming under her sweater. She stepped back hard on his instep.

In the small hours, as the party was winding down, I was hiding the Glen Fiddich beside me on the sofa. There was a scuffle, a shriek. Murphy suddenly appeared next to me. A female voice complained from the hallway. 'Honestly, the nerve! He's got hands like a pair of ferrets.'

I looked at him quizzically. He spread his hands. 'Women!' he said, raising his eyebrows.

'I know' I lied, 'Have a drink.' His glass magically appeared.

'By god, Seamus, you're a true gentleman.' He offered his other hand. 'I'm Murphy' he said, as if he were royalty. We gravely shook.

'An' what's a foin young feller like yourself doin' all alone here, with the place chockful of girls of the female persuasion?'

'I'm not alone, I've got Glen here keeping me warm' I replied, waving the bottle.

'Ahh come on now. You can't be depriving these young ladies of your sintal.. skintil .. scintillating company. That's just cruel.' I made some excuse about not knowing them.

'Let me tell you about women, Seamus. You young shavers just need to get stuck in there, rather than moping about. Take me. I'm no oil painting, but I make love to every woman I meet. Well, at least all those I fancy. Which come to think of it, is nearly all of 'em.' He

took a deep swallow of whiskey, gargled briefly, swallowed and burped.

‘And you know what, Seamus?’ he continued, ‘I get lucky more often than not. Some of ‘em says no, right out.’ He tilted his head half-ward. ‘Fair enough-ski. Some of ‘em says maybe. So then the game’s afoot. And quite a few says yes. See? It’s a numbers game. I call it Murphy’s Law.’

‘Every woman? I asked. ‘What about the married ones?’

‘Listen, Seamus, the married ones are the easiest. Just watch out for the husbands.’

He helped me dispose of the malt whiskey. He helped me dispose of various other bottles. I ceased protesting I was not Seamus. I asked if his wife objected to his pursuit of other women.

‘Well, you can’t always be certain, like. She is female herself, sometimes. But generally she is most accomod...accommod...er... understanding.’ He winked broadly and finished the dregs in his bottle. Our hosts were pointedly clearing up.

Murphy’s wife had invited the remaining few for breakfast. We all went. Two young couples and me. We all knew each other. We all worked together. But not Murphy. He didn’t seem to work at all. As we went we saw the lights of trawlers returning after a night’s fishing. Murphy roared ‘Herring. Grilled herring!’. That’s how we came to be fighting the gale on Scrabster’s sea wall.

I helped Murphy carry the herring crate from the Land Rover. We went crab-wise through the broken-down gate. Murphy lurched, staggered. ‘Christ’. He tripped and dropped his end of the crate. ‘Oh shit piss bugger!’ Glistening herring spilt over the path. He knelt to

retrieve them, sank slowly to his elbows, then subsided to the ground like a deflating balloon. His snores tumbled into the wind.

I looked back for help. In vain. A chorus of 'Thanks anyway!' 'Bed calls' 'See you later' announced the rapid departure of the other couples. Mrs Murphy and I looked at each other over Murphy's crumpled body.

'Help me get him inside'. We got him to his feet and half dragged him through the cottage. We dropped him onto the bed. 'Bless me, Father' he giggled as we pulled off his shoes.

'He'll be out for hours' she said, pulling the bedroom door shut. 'Now, breakfast.'

'I should rescue the fish.' Outside gulls were squabbling noisily around the crate.

'Forget the frigging fish. They're Murphy's fish – he can sort them. Breakfast!'

'er, I think I should be going. I'm not hungry just now. I'll just ...'

Mrs Murphy pulled me close, smiling that smile again. I realised it was anticipation.

'Nonsense. Tea and toast, I think. But first you can help me off with these damn tights.'

Murphy was quite right about married women. Afterwards, over the promised tea and toast, she asked what Murphy had said about her.

'He said that you were, er, accommodating.'

'What, like a landlady?' she laughed. 'He means I never give him grief over his skirt-chasing. I don't need to. That Murphy's all piss and

wind. He can't get it up any more. I haven't had a proper shag in months.

She took a final mouthful of toast and wiped her buttery fingers on my chest. Rain drops formed shifting streams down the croft's window, buckling the limp morning sunlight. With my fingernail I traced the shifting patterns it made on her bare legs, tucked up under her chin. She eased up against me, yawning. She finished her tea, put the mug down, turned to me.

'Now, where were we..?'

It was mid-morning when she drove me back to town. The radio was playing. Shirley Bassey was singing *"If there's a wrong way to do it, a right way to screw it up... Nobody does it like me"*.

'By God'. She beat the steering wheel with the flat of her hand. 'That's it. That's hisself all right. That's the real Murphy's Law.'