

MURPHY'S REVENGE

by
Barbara Stoughton

My parents were sure there must be some hidden agenda. Perhaps they doubted my good judgment, or maybe they were just being protective, despite the fact that I was 43 years old. But really, what ulterior motive could a single 48 year old man with a good career, whose children were grown and married, have for marrying a divorced mother of four children (three of whom were teenagers) who also came encumbered with a St. Bernard and two cats? I can't think of a single one aside from temporary insanity, otherwise defined as love.

Nevertheless my mother and father were dubious about Bud's intentions.. They were driving from New York to our new home in Mt. Clemens, prepared to inspect this potential evil-doer. They were also convinced that we were probably living in some crime-infested slum as opposed to our previous safe, small town environment. I suppose there come a time in one's life when parents' opinions no longer matter, but I had not reached that point. I wanted all the people I loved to love one another. I wanted Mom and Dad to see that our comfortable four-bedroom colonial home in a suburb of Detroit compared favorably to the 18-room Victorian on the river in Eaton Rapids the kids and I had just left. Please let them like the city, the house, and most of all, the man!

In an advanced state of nervous tension, I awaited the phone call from the Holiday Inn that would signal their arrival in town. I wanted everything to be *perfect*. Murphy's law was to be repealed for this visit.

It was July, and hot. When their call came, it was to announce that the air conditioner in the room we had reserved for them was not working and they were sweltering. I gulped a little, but this was an easy problem to solve...just get them moved to a different (cooler) room. Surely this was not an omen.

I picked them up and drove the few blocks back to our home. Dinner was almost ready, introductions were made, cocktails served, and the inevitable awkward beginnings were being struggled through. Mom noticed that we had a Hammond electric organ in the living room, and wondered who played. "Bud," I told her proudly, happy to emphasize an accomplishment she would approve of, and then mentioned that since my

18 year-old daughter Bronwen played piano, my thoughtful, generous husband had encouraged her to experiment a little with the organ. “Oh, Bron,” asked my mother, “please play a little something for me so I can hear what it sounds like.” Bron declined in an unusual moment of self-effacement, and said Bud should be the one to demonstrate. Giving me a deer-in-the-headlights look, Bud made his way to the bench and sat down. He was not an expert either, having taken lessons for only about a year, but he was game to try. He fumbled through the sheet music, searching for a piece he felt comfortable with, while my mother leaned over to me and, in what was supposed to be a whisper, inquired, “Does he always shake like that?” This was not calming to his nerves, but he managed to play some of the theme music from *The Godfather* in a respectable fashion and then mercifully dinner was ready.

My parents were tired from the long drive so after dinner we made plans for the next day and they returned to the motel. We relaxed and congratulated ourselves that we were over the first hurdle and there had at least been no major disasters.

Since Bud had to work that next afternoon we planned that Bron, my mother, and I would drive over to Metro Beach so she could see how lovely and convenient it was, and then check out one of the nice nearby malls. My Dad was to stay home with the three boys and tend to the turkey which Bud would start on the charcoal rotisserie in the backyard. My father and Bud both enjoyed grilling...(a mutual interest, yay!) so the turkey would be a kind of bonding project.

With the bird turning on its spit and Bud off to work, we three women set off to the beach. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, with a few cumulus clouds beginning to build. On the fifteen minute drive to the beach I extolled its virtues: its accessibility, the lovely sand, the gentle waves, the friendly people. We parked the car and strolled along the boardwalk toward the swimming area. As we passed a group of young people smoking pot, Bron and I exchanged glances; Mom was blissfully unaware.

We crossed the sand to the area where we usually spread our towels. If you have ever lived on a lake with beachfront, you are probably familiar with the phenomenon referred to as the lake “turning over.” That’s not actually what happens, of course, but occasionally after the weather has been just right (or wrong) the water seems to cough up a month’s collection of gunk and debris, and deposit it in a three or four foot wide ribbon

of ickiness at the water's edge. Lake St. Clair had chosen today to demonstrate this feat. Mom looked dubiously at the slime and seaweed spread before her and decided that she really didn't want to try the water that particular day. As we were unanimously coming to the same conclusion, the tornado warning sirens began blasting, along with the loudspeakers suggesting that all swimmers clear the beach. Despite the fact that our weather still looked pretty good, a look of panic crossed Mom's face -- she had never heard a tornado warning in her life and didn't even much care for a strong breeze. We hustled back toward the parking lot. Just as we arrived at our car, a seagull, obviously trained in precision bombing, dropped a juicy present in my mother's beautifully, rigidly coiffed silver hair.

Our time at the mall was spent primarily in the Ladies' Room, attempting to remove seagull excrement from my mother's hair without destroying her beautician's handiwork, which was intended to last for the week. Mom had never attempted a pin-curl, and was not about to start now. With our spirits...and Mom's hair...considerably dampened, we made rather short work of the mall and decided to return to the safety at home.

The first thing I saw as we pulled into our driveway, was *water* dripping from the grill in the backyard! Before I had time to process this unusual sight, two of my three boys raced out the back door, their words tumbling over one another. "Some guy socked Mike in the eye!" shouted Jeff, age 9. "Broke his glasses," added Clint, 16. "He got glass in his eye! Grampa had to take him to the hospital! The turkey caught fire!" they were both exclaiming. I had a serious desire to flee the premises.

My father next appeared at the back door, calm and reassuring as always, to tell me that Mike was fine (although the glasses were not) and the staff at the hospital had efficiently made sure no glass was left in his eye. The victim himself (age 13) was reclining on the couch with a cold compress, rather enjoying the attention. To add to the drama of the story he confessed that on leaving the hospital, he had managed to throw up on his grandfather's heretofore spotless, shiny shoes.

As I grappled with all this information I tremulously inquired about the water dripping from the charcoal grill. It seems that just before the punch in the eye, our precious turkey had briefly spent time as a bonfire. Dad had extinguished the poor bird

by turning the hose on it. We now went to work drying everything off and restarting the cooking process, hoping Mr. Turkey would be none the worse for its incendiary experience. Indeed, by the time Bud got home from work the potatoes, veggies, salad and rolls were done and the turkey looked and smelled wonderful. This was one of the dishes Bud was widely acclaimed for, and as we all waited expectantly, he began to carve. Alas! Although that bird had appeared perfect, it was cooked only on the outside. Microwave ovens were not in common use at that time, or it would have been the perfect solution. Faced with waiting more hours for our supper or sending out for Kentucky Fried, Bud managed to shave a few inches of cooked meat from all sides of the surface of our main dish and provide enough for each of us to have a small serving. Fortunately, there were sufficient other dishes so no one arose from the table hungry, but dinner was not the triumph for which I had hoped.

The next day my parents were preparing to start back home. They came by to distribute hugs, kisses and good-byes. As Dad was arranging the last of the bags in their car, Mom and I stood on the front porch, with Bud just inside the screen door. Mom stepped down from the porch, turned back for a moment, clutched my hand and looking earnestly into my face said, “Honey, I just *have* to know before we leave...are you *pregnant?*” As I assured her I was not, I glanced at the door where my husband had been only a moment before. He had disappeared from sight...