

### Riding with Murphy

A Short Story by Sheri Barile

In our Read & Write story this month, we get to know a man called Murphy through the voice of his stepson, Nick Hartford. Nick is 64 and a retired real estate broker who still takes a keen interest in the housing market. One morning while browsing the listings, he sees something that evokes strong memories and sends him on a mission to find an item of great importance from his past. What is he looking for? Will he find it? Read on to share in Nick's journey as he remembers a very special person in his life and recovers a cherished memento that he'd thought was forever lost.

#### Preparation & How-To's

- Print a [large-print copy of the story](#). Ask for volunteers to read a section or read the dialogue of the characters like a script.
- Read the story and use the [Discussion Starters](#) at the end to spark a conversation.
- [Pictures](#) can be printed out or they can be [displayed on the television](#) during the activity.



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#### The Story

His name was Jack, but I had always known him as Murphy. Everyone called him by his last name, and he seemed to like it that way. A proud Australian American, Murphy was a man who lived large, made friends as easily as he breathed, and would gladly give you his last dollar. He was also my stepdad, and although he had been gone for six years now, my memories of him had not faded a bit. That had never been truer than it was one recent morning, sitting in my office and browsing the real estate listings 400 miles away in Bristol, Rhode Island—the town where I grew up.

I retired just nine months ago and moved to Columbia, Maryland, a planned community made up of 10 self-contained villages in the Baltimore metropolitan area. I love this place but still feel strongly rooted in Bristol. That's probably why I check the listings there at least once a month. It's a nostalgic exercise, I suppose, but there is always a vague and intangible sense of purpose in it. When I looked in on my hometown that morning, I saw something I didn't expect. My childhood home was on the market, and this made me think of Murphy.

The man rode into my life in the autumn of 1973 behind the wheel of a '57 Chevy Corvette convertible. It was Cascade Green with Shoreline Beige coves and a beige interior. I had called the body color aqua, but Murphy quickly corrected me.

"Only five percent of this vintage were painted Cascade Green, Nick," Murphy had said, with his distinct Aussie pronunciation of vowels and an inflection that made his declarative sound like a question. "This car gives a whole new meaning to the word *classic*."

I was just 15 then, and as the oldest of four children, I had become the man of the house three years earlier when my dad left and my parents ultimately divorced. Mom had met Murphy at a singles group function, and it seemed he had wooed her instantly. While I was quite smitten with his car, I viewed the man with a measure of suspicion. He was a little too... everything. Charming. Engaging. Handsome. Fearless. And, in my opinion, all wrong for a single mother of four.

The recipient of a solid maternal upbringing, I always treated him with respect and a polite disposition. However, he was a man of considerable intuition, and I suspect he recognized the challenge I presented from the start. It turns out, he was more than up for that challenge. He showed me the first sign of his capacity to win over just about anyone on a Friday night in October.

I was getting off work as a soda jerk in Bristol's most popular diner and teen hangout. I did not yet have a driver's license, just a learner's permit, and I was expecting my mother to show up any minute to collect me and allow me to drive home. Instead, Murphy came rolling up in his Vette. Half the varsity football team and a couple of cheerleaders were there hanging out after the game. They all took notice of Murphy's car, and when he climbed out, tossed me the keys, and said, "You're driving, kid," they went nuts.



We left the parking lot, and when I started to take the most direct route back to my house, he said, "Naw, let's take the long way home. Nose her down Main Street."

I did as I was told, watching out of the corner of my eye as two metal discs—one round and one an elongated octagon—swung from a thin, leather cord looped over the rearview mirror. They piqued my curiosity, but I willed myself to keep my eyes trained on the traffic around me. Soon, horns were honking and hands were waving as we passed some of my classmates on the street, and at that point, this was all I saw.

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I pulled into the driveway at my house and stopped just short of the tailgate of my mom's station wagon, which was parked under the carport. I looked at Murphy and thanked him. Then I reached out and finger-grazed the metal discs dangling from the mirror. "What are these?"

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I watched as a couple in their 30s came out and descended the front porch steps. They were chattering so busily about the floor plan they barely noticed me as we crossed paths on the walkway.

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"Feel free to look around, and let me know if you have any questions," she said, smiling.

"Have you been busy?" I asked.

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I opened the closet door and stepped inside. It was a large walk-in with painted floorboards that looked virtually the same as I remembered them. My heart leaped as I sensed for the first time that not only the floors but also what I had left under a loose plank might have remained untouched. I knelt and tapped the boards in the area that I recalled, and after a few misfires, I felt some give on one of the shorter planks. I pushed again on that board, and it tipped but fell back into place.

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"Nice room," I said to the couple who had just come in. "Good-sized closet, too."

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Outside, leaning against the driver door of my Porsche, I withdrew my find. Along with the dog tags, a photo had been stashed. I recognized it as one that my mom had taken of me at age 15 alongside Murphy, standing next to his '57 Corvette. What I couldn't figure out was how the picture had wound up in my hidey-hole. I didn't remember putting it there. I had hidden the dog tags there because Sam had taken an interest in them, and I had found him wearing them on a couple of occasions after I had left them on the bureau in our room. But for the life of me, I couldn't recall being in possession of the photo, let alone putting it beneath the floorboard.

I turned it over out of habit. My mom had always written dates and names on photos, and I half expected to see her handwriting there. Instead, I saw Murphy's.

*I knew you'd find a way, he had written. I never doubted that you'd come back for them, because that's what I would have done. Love you, kid.*

Now, tears were stinging at the backs of my eyes, and I willed them to retreat. I thought I might burst wide open from the realization that Murphy had trusted me this deeply. He must have stumbled upon the loose plank and found the tags inadvertently while packing. I was amazed that he'd decided to leave them right where I had put them. Knowing that the tags were there in the closet and leaving them behind must have been a very difficult thing to do.

I climbed into the Porsche and hung the tags from the rearview mirror. As the engine roared to life, I took one last look at the photo, now lying in a compartment of the console. A single, renegade tear escaped the corner of my eye and beat a hasty path down my right cheek. I caught it with a forefinger, wiped it aside, and then threw the car into gear. As I drove off, eyeing the dog tags swaying before the windshield, I thought of my stepdad.

*Murphy. A spirited, fun-loving, and adventurous soul who won the hearts of people wherever he met them. He won my heart in the fall of 1973, and from that point on, life was a fun ride.*

## **The End**

### **Discussion Starters**

- Did you ever own or drive a classic sports car?
- Was there ever a relationship in your life that became so special it surprised you?
- How much value would you place on such a relationship?
- Do you think you could walk away from an important memento in the hopes that someone you cared for would have a chance to recover it?
- If you were Nick in this story, would you consider buying the home in which you were raised?
- Have you ever known anyone like Murphy?
- Which of Murphy's qualities most captured your heart?

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Outside, leaning against the driver door of my Porsche, I withdrew my find. Along with the dog tags, a photo had been stashed. I recognized it as one that my mom had taken of me at age 15 alongside Murphy, standing next to his '57 Corvette. What I couldn't figure out was how the picture had wound up in my hidey-hole. I didn't remember putting it there. I had hidden the dog tags there because Sam had taken an interest in them, and I had found him wearing them on a couple of occasions after I had left them on the bureau in our room. But for the life of me, I couldn't recall being in possession of the photo, let alone putting it beneath the floorboard.

I turned it over out of habit. My mom had always written dates and names on photos, and I half expected to see her handwriting there. Instead, I saw Murphy's.

*I knew you'd find a way, he had written. I never doubted that you'd come back for them, because that's what I would have done. Love you, kid.*

Now, tears were stinging at the backs of my eyes, and I willed them to retreat. I thought I might burst wide open from the realization that Murphy had trusted me this deeply. He must have stumbled upon the loose plank and found the tags inadvertently while packing. I was amazed that he'd decided to leave them right where I had put them. Knowing that the tags were there in the closet and leaving them behind must have been a very difficult thing to do.



I climbed into the Porsche and hung the tags from the rearview mirror. As the engine roared to life, I took one last look at the photo, now lying in a compartment of the console. A single, renegade tear escaped the corner of my eye and beat a hasty path down my right cheek. I caught it with a forefinger, wiped it aside, and then threw the car into gear. As I drove off, eyeing the dog tags swaying before the windshield, I thought of my stepdad.

*Murphy. A spirited, fun-loving, and adventurous soul who won the hearts of people wherever he met them. He won my heart in the fall of 1973, and from that point on, life was a fun ride.*

## **The End**

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