

THE WISH JAR

Some things are beyond our understanding.

My name is Liam Donald Murphy, but everyone calls me “Mac”, which is the Irish word for son. My dad started calling me it when I was still in diapers and it has stuck with me ever since. I’m the oldest child of eight and I figure it’s only suitable that I finally write this down, on behalf of all of us. But most of all, I write this in memory of my father, Donald Liam Murphy.

I was raised in New Jersey where I grew up in a big Irish Catholic family. Like any big family, things could get crazy at times. But nothing was as strange and unsettling as the time my little sister made her wish on New Years Eve ten years ago.

Ten years, that’s how long it’s been since Dad passed away. He died close to a year after my five-year-old sister made her wish. One year after the birth of a new millennium. It happened the same year as the birth of the youngest Murphy child, my sister, Ashling. What I remember most about that year was how we all loved Dad just a little bit more.

He was a good man.

In addition to being raised as a Catholic, the Murphy’s were devout sports fans. Missing Sunday mass or rooting for the Mets was forbidden in our household. We believed in the Bronx Bombers. In fact, that year the New York Yankees won their third consecutive World Series Championship against none other than, the New York Mets.

Yeah, life was good.

That year, football season was heating up around the same time that President Bush was sworn in as the 43rd president of the USA. The New York Giants would finish 12-4

and clinch a first-round bye in the playoffs that helped propel Big Blue straight to the Super Bowl. I had been away at college and I couldn't wait to talk some football with my old man. Football was our thing.

It was my freshman year of college. When December arrived I flew from halfway across the country where I was studying for my BFA and MFA in creative writing at the University of Iowa. Yeah, I know why the hell did I decide to attend a college so far away, but believe me, growing up in a packed house where privacy and quietness were about as plausible as a soup sandwich, I looked forward to gaining some distance from the constant chaos of a huge family (no offense, everyone). I had made a promise to my parents that I would come visit for Christmas and the New Year. I made such a pledge because I planned on staying in Iowa during the following spring, summer, and fall break, which meant not visiting again till next winter.

This was before my mom read from the *Wish Jar*.

In the beginning, of the school year, I had hooked up with this online literary magazine called *Scared to Death*, who hired me as a part-time freelance writer. This was during my first semester. I earned enough money to pay for my books by writing a bi-weekly ghost/science-fiction short story. Next to sports, horror was my specialty. Although you'd never twitch a nerve or break a drop of sweat just by looking at me: the total opposite of my father, I stand a looming 5'9", massive one-hundred-thirty pounds—soaking wet—with glazed chestnut hair. But it's what's under that glossy red hair that is scary. The magazine was so impressed with my writing that they offered me a full-time gig in the summer working 30 to 40 hours a week to write a horror novella.

So with a busy summer of writing ahead of me and maybe just a bit of off-campus partying too, my plan was to drink, smoke and write (and hopefully get laid).

Thus, I did the right thing and flew back to the Jersey Shore for the holidays, even though a bunch of my friends were making a road trip over to Jackson Hole Ski Resort in Wyoming. I was bummed I wouldn't be joining them, but I quickly reminded myself that this would be my only visit to the family for an entire year.

I was wrong.

I can recall a number of times when during my holidays visit I caught my youngest sister, Keeva, listening to my mom's stomach. Initially, I thought nothing of it. The first time I spotted this was on Christmas Eve when we were doing our Secret Santa gift exchange. I remember Keeva was laying down on the couch with the side of her head pressed up against Mom's belly, eyebrows scrunched together in concentration. This lasted until her name was pulled from the Santa hat to open her gift. Then she shot up like a rocket ship; the intent listening abandoned. I swear, though, she was listening to my mom's stomach

Then it happened again on Christmas morning, even weirder this time. We all gathered around the miniature ceramic nativity scene and sang *Silent Night* (when the Murphy family sang we sounded like a kitten and a chainsaw playing Patty-cake). When the last verse was sung, the youngest child laid the baby Jesus in the cradle. After that, all hell broke loose.

In the midst of gift opening carnage: green and red tissue paper scattered across the living room floor, open boxes of cardboard gutted and ravaged. The sounds of the

shredding flesh of wrapping paper being ripped open to scraps and the *snap* of tightly sealed tape torn apart. With seven kids, and most of them still believing in the Christmas magic, there was no rhyme or reason to the opening of Santa's presents.

While most of the kids were on their third or fourth gift, I noticed Keeva was still working on her first. She worked on untwisting the twist ties to her sparkly pink plastic Barbie Singing Star Microphone. A pile of untouched presents assigned to her from St. Nicholas still sat under the glistening tree. I had just opened my second present thinking that Mom knew me so well. As I was skimming through the pages of Edgar Allan Poe's *Complete Tales and Poems*, Keeva had found the recording function on the Singing Star Microphone and hurried to my mom, or rather, her stomach. She pushed the mic up against mom's belly and pressed the record button. I watched with a curious expression stretched across my face. Mom on the other hand—busy making sure everyone was getting the right presents and trying to keep things in order (almost impossible with an army of kids)—kindly brushed Keeva away. "I'll play pretend later honey." She said.

I disregarded Keeva's strange stunt, as one of those odd things kids will do. Heck, when I was a kid—I'm not sure what age—I can remember the man I thought was living in my foot. I swore there was a tiny man chiseling away with a pickaxe inside my foot mining for hidden gold. I'm sure my parents caught me yelling at that annoying man plenty of times and scratching the sole of my foot frantically. My mom and dad just had the sense to detect it as the dry, scaly rash from eczema I suffered from. With my fair, dry, Irish skin I still have trouble with that little bastard. As for Keeva and her belly listening, I never thought into her odd tendency enough to come up with rational a diagnosis.

The only answer that comes to mind now is that she was pretending (or not) to use the microphone to listen to the baby living in Mom's stomach. Maybe she was just excited to be a big sister right? No. Because my mom didn't even know she was pregnant yet. At the time, she would have only been one week into her pregnancy.

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The magic of Christmas Day left as night arrived, and with it came a soft blanket of snow. The half-moon shined from above with a big vibrant grin. Dad was smoking his new pipe he had gotten from Kris Cringle on the back porch with a face reflecting that of the moon. All the younger kids were asleep, (supposed to be asleep) which meant ten-year-old Ava and down. I'm sure seven-year-old Daniel and little five-year-old Keeva were upstairs playing with their new toys. Hannah, the oldest Murphy sister at seventeen, was listening to her new pink iPod Nano next to me on the couch in front of the dancing flames of the fireplace. I could hear Sean and Patrick, who were fourteen and twelve at the time, from their bedrooms making machine gun sounds as they killed virtual enemies on their brand new video game system, the Nintendo GameCube.

Mom was sitting across from me, her eyes pasted to a book. I put a pause on my own reading of Mr. Poe's tale, *The Black Cat* and asked her if she thought Keeva seemed to be acting a little strange lately. "I mean, with that Barbie toy. You notice?"

Mom looked at me from the top rim of her reading glasses that never failed to land at the tip of her nose. She glanced at me as if examining. "No, no. I know what you mean Mac. She's seen an ultrasound before hun, I'm sure on one of those television shows. She was just pretending to use the mike like that instrument they use. That little lady is quick as a whip I tell ya. She's just a clever little lamb Li." Mom said.

And that was that.

So I had no choice but to think nothing of it. Kids will do the darndest things. If you can come up with a better answer be my guest.

New Years Eve came, and at midnight, we welcomed the birth of a new year with fireworks, horns and metal noisemakers. The world had made it through the new millennium without coming to its end as a large part of society predicted.

I remember going to the kitchen to get away from all the noise for a minute and take the hors d'oeuvres out of the oven. "Snacks are ready!" I yelled over the raining Roman candles outside and my screaming brothers chasing each other around the living room with Mylar blowouts.

It was up to Dad to settle everyone down. And with one loud, sharp whistle the Murphy children knew to stop and pay our father attention. Everyone listened, and we all huddled around the long dining room table. It was time for a family tradition. Mom and Dad stood at the head and the all us kids took a seat. Mom went to the mahogany cupboard that stood in the corner of the room. She reached up one tier above where her special Gaelic tea set sat and brought down the glass jar filled with an array of different colored paper. Every New Years we took the glass Mason jar that had the words **WISH JAR** written on its transparent body down from its shelf and read from the strips of paper inside. Throughout the year anyone at any time could write down a wish or a dream or something they were thankful for. Then fold the piece of paper and put it back inside the glass jar. We all chose a specific color of construction paper, which would be ours so that

when we read the slips of paper we'd know whom they belonged to. The colored sheets of construction paper were stacked in the bottom drawer of the cupboard.

My dad got dubbed black and my mom white every year because, let's be honest, no kid wants to get stuck with those dull colors. The rest of us picked a color. Keeva picked green that year, "Because it look like Christmas tree color," she said with a glint that sparkled in her golden brown eyes. I thought that was cute. But if you ask me now what I think, I'd tell you that yes, she picked green for a Christmas tree, but also—although she didn't know it—because an evergreen tree is supposed to symbolize hope and life.

That's what I like to think.

The wish.

It was one of the first slips of paper picked. And little did we know that when Mom reached into the glass Wish Jar she would unfold a mystery beyond the grasp of our comprehension.

I remember Mom reading the words from a black piece of paper. "The snow", She read, and then, "The moon." My father enjoyed the simple things in life.

Next Mom pulled out two pieces of green paper that were folded into each other. "Oh, Keeva." She said with a soft laugh and a thin smile. She separated the two stripes of paper. We all waited to hear what little Keeva came up with. Mom read, "Daddy don't crash. What is this supposed to mean?" She asked. A confusing frown hung from the corners of her mouth.

I can't say for sure, maybe I've made myself believe this over the years, but I could have sworn that when my mom questioned Keeva, "What is this supposed to mean?" Keeva pointed right at my mom's stomach.

Mom read the next green piece of paper to herself this time. What she read caused her eyebrows to droop. Her frown twisted into a grimace.

Dad quickly recognized the scowl etched on his wife's face and before she could jump to any conclusions he reached into the glass Wish Jar. "Me next!" Dad shouted saving his baby girl from getting any more stern questions. Dad used his thick index and middle fingers as tweezers and pulled out a blue scrap of paper. He read, "Giants win Super Bowl."

Neither Keeva's nor my wish came true that year.

Later that night I had to look at it for myself. There was no denying the handwriting belonged to my baby sister. One green slip looked like this: **DaDDY DOnT CraSh** and the other: **DOnT dIE**

One thing I'll never figure out: How could she have guessed the crash? This will always remain a mystery.

Three weeks later my mom found out that she was one month pregnant and—having a real ultrasound done with a real transducer probe rather than a pink microphone—recalled Keeva's little stunt. She laughed about the whole thing. When she told my dad he thought it was pretty funny too.

None of us made the connection with the Barbie microphone and the Wish Jar.

Almost a month after the Wish Jar "incident" I came back to New Jersey. Yes, I know, OK so I broke the promise to myself and visited before the next winter. Those two scraps

of green paper might have had something to do with the infringing of my college vow. I just had to watch the Giants in the Super Bowl with Dad. Unfortunately, Big Blue got their butts kicked by Ray Lewis and the Baltimore Ravens. It cost me half my savings to make the trip out but I'll never regret it. Would I have made the visit if not for those two green pieces of paper? I can't say for sure. But I'm sure as hell glad I spent that time with my father. We laughed, and we cried and best of all, we did it together. It was money well spent.

“Maybe another year Mac.” I remember Dad reassuring me before I went to sleep.

It was the year we loved Dad just a little bit more.

Time passed. The holidays turned into candy hearts and (my family's favorite) St. Paddy's Day. We all slowly began to forget about Keeva's stomach-listening antic, and the wishes on those green slips of paper were moved to the back of our minds.

What my dad thought of everything I'm not sure, but I think towards the end of his life he understood.

In fact, he must have.

My sister Hannah helped my mom plan a surprise twentieth wedding anniversary gift for Dad. Come that June they drove down to Cape May for two weeks. I'm so thankful that they had that trip together; it would have been a lot harder on Mom if that second honeymoon never happened. Mom will never forget that trip. Hannah had also created a slideshow for my parents to watch on Dad's laptop while vacationing. It had their wedding song playing in the background as the collection of photos slid, faded and appeared in and out from the screen. I remember Dad telling the kids that Mom cried

when she heard Etta James singing “At Last” in their paradise, beachfront suite, conjuring up memories from their past.

That was the year that Sean and Patrick finally gave in to Dad’s wish and joined a bowling league with him. Why that year? Well, I bet they had two strips of paper float up to the surface of their minds when they signed up. They didn’t win one game all season—Dad averaged a 215, so that shows you how bad the two knuckleheads were—but they had a bunch of fun and made memories that time can never steal.

That was also the year that seven-year-old Daniel asked Dad to coach his spring little league team. The Yellow Hornets finished 7-1 and went to the championship where they tied the Brown Beavers after the nine-inning limit. Both teams were crowned Little League Co-Champions. Because Dad was the head coach he got to keep the big gold trophy with a giant glove and baseball on top. He gave it to Daniel in July for his eighth birthday. I thought that was real neat. Now, ten years later, it’s crazy to think that little Danny is all grown up. He got a baseball scholarship to play at Rutgers University. Dad’s birthday gift stands atop his desk in his dorm room.

My sister Ava, who was in her “Wonder Years”, turned eleven that year. From what Mom told me, she started asking my father to tuck her in to bed and tell bedtime stories again. There had been a two-year drought. It was their thing when Ava was still in single digits and hadn’t become a “woman”. Dad began telling her, and Keeva too, his adaption of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mr. Mark Twain each night. Dad would substitute and add his own scenes and make up characters. He had done the same rendering with Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* when Hannah and I were kids, replacing orcs and ogres with dinosaurs and adding fairies to the fantasy mix.

Guess I got my storytelling gene from Dad.

With every chapter read each night, a loving kiss was placed on Ava and Keeva's forehead. It's the little things that count in the end.

Ava will swear till her face is as red as her Irish locks that the night before Dad's business meeting, (this would've been at halftime during the Giants Monday night game) they finished the last chapter of Tom's adventures. We might have lost Dad, but I count the finishing of that book as a little miracle.

Coincidence? Providence? I can't say for sure. But what I do know is that finishing the last chapter helped them cope with the arduous time that waited ahead of them. And more importantly: each having their last kiss good-night meant the world to them because in their hearts they can still feel the warm, tender, love of their father's last goodbye.

Dear little Keeva. For her, it was the year she kept on loving her Daddy the same as always. She continued to welcome him with a running hug and kiss to his scruffy cheek as soon as he stepped foot in the door from work. I know he cherished those warm welcomes after a long day of work and the commute to and from the Big Apple where he worked for the New York State Department of Taxation. That was the year she continued to ask for piggyback rides around the living room and den. It was the year she cut her knee when she tripped playing hopscotch on the driveway and went running to her Daddy, "kiss it better!" and he did. Donald Liam Murphy always kissed it better.

In March, my brothers and I joined our Dad on a camping trip during my spring break. Dad had been trying to get us "city boys" to go for years. We finally gave in. We went camping at up at Cranberry Lake in New York State for a weekend. We fished and hiked and told ghost stories around the campfire. On the last day of our trip Dad and I got

poison oak in the last place you would ever want an orangey, blistering rash; it didn't look very pretty. Dad used one of his many Irish sayings, swearing we had been cursed for bringing a tent and not sleeping under the starlight, "We've been afflicted with itching without the benefit of scratching Mac!"

Sean and Pat got a kick out of it. Dad and I didn't see what was so funny, but by the time we were halfway way home we could only laugh. And you know what, I'm glad we took a leak on that tree. Sure the bubbly blisters itched and burned like hell, and I just about wanted to cut my manhood off, but I'll always have that memory.

I've learned in life that sometimes you happen to be driving down the wrong road; sometimes you're in the wrong place at the wrong time—sometimes you just pick the wrong tree to piss on.

God, I love you, Dad.

Ten years ago, in June, I had taken a job with a food catering company, *Toast the Host Catering*, working three nights a week to start making some extra cash. It was also around this time when I began writing the horror novella I mentioned. I had gotten the idea for my story while on the camping trip in March. It came to me when my brothers and I were hunting for frogs and toads at night. I was writing about a lonely woman who lived in the woods and would do just about anything to find true loves kiss. She eventually comes upon a puce colored toad with yellow and orange spots juxtaposed on its slimy skin. She'll kiss the ugly toad in hopes of freeing the charming prince trapped inside that gooey, poisonous amphibian. But there's not always a fairytale ending.

The printing company wanted a minimum of ten thousand words by the end of each month. No problem. I got paid fifty dollars with each monthly quota completed. Between the catering job and my writing gig, I had earned enough money to make an important trip back home to New Jersey in September.

What was so important? The New York Giants season opener. They were playing against the Denver Broncos. After Big Blues, pathetic performance in the Super Bowl, Dad and I were pumped for the start of a new season. The game was on a Monday night. What's better than Monday Night Football in America! I arrived back home Friday night and spent the weekend with the family.

I *wish* so much that next I can tell you that my visit to New Jersey saved Dad's life; that because I decided to come home, Dad never went on that plane. I wish I could tell you that Keeva's wish came true.

But I can't.

September 10, 2001, Monday night. The Giants lost to the Denver Broncos. Dad and I stayed up all night for the game. Big Blue disappointed us, but nothing can ever take away the beers we shared, the cheers, or the yells barked at the television screen. I'll always remember the laughs, the cries, and the high-fives. I can still picture my father. He was so happy. Sipping a cold brewski, shoving a handful of chips in his mouth and screaming at the Giants defense to, "Stop playing like a bunch of sissies!" and cursing the entire offensive line with an Irish swear, "May the cat eat you, and may the devil eat the cat."

After the game, I joined Dad on the porch while he smoked his pipe. My nose can still summon up the pleasant whiffs of the apple and cherry wood tobacco blend Dad smoked.

I don't know how else to describe it; the smoke was a cozy smell. We spoke little as we stared back at the giant chrome colored moon and watched the dark clouds that had a hue of purple roll across the sky. I'm glad Dad got to fly in those clouds before he died.

At some point before we went inside to bed, Dad wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a tight squeeze.

No words were spoken.

No words were necessary.

I'll never forget how that hug felt.

I woke up Tuesday morning to my cell phone buzzing. Outside the sun was bright and blue blanketed the sky. I was nursing a hangover from beer and defeat. It was Dad on the line. He spoke to me softly but his voice kept cracking as if he was crying. I was confused and scared. I heard women and children screaming in the background, but Dad spoke calmly to me.

He started with my mom, "Tell your mother I love her Mac."

I heard a man yelling in the background but I couldn't understand any of the words. He was screaming in another language. I can't explain why, but that foreign accent made me feel sick.

Then Dad spoke her name. I could tell by the eerie tone of desperation in his voice that he needed to her name one last time. "I love you, Anna."

A sharp pain pierced my neck. I sat up and winced. I worked on gathering my thoughts while I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and mind. *Dad is on his way to a*

business meeting ... San Diego? No, it was San Fran. I offered to drive him to the airport, but he said he was hitching a ride with Bob or Rob from financing. I remember thinking.

Dad was flying out of Newark Airport. The barking and screaming were getting louder from the other side of the phone. That unfamiliar voice sent needles of ice down my spine. Static was making it hard to hear my dad. He told me to listen. I did. He said to tell all the kids he loves them. Then I heard him say, “Ashling ... tell mom to name her Ashling.”

I couldn't comprehend what he was saying. It happened so fast. I can't remember for sure but I think Hannah was screaming downstairs in the living room at this point. She must have turned on the TV, which would have been set on channel 7 because the last thing we were watching was the football game. ABC must have been on.

I'll never forget what Dad kept on saying. It hit me like a heavy black anvil later on. “Crash! I've got to try and stop them. We're going to *crash!*” The word *crash* wrinkled my flesh with goosebumps.

Then his final words were spoken in the midst of static and chaos. “I love you Mac!” Those words hit me like a double-fisted punch.

Dad died on September 11th, 2001. He was on United Airlines flight number 93 en route to San Francisco. There were 33 passengers. The aircraft collided with the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. There were no survivors.

Dad had died in a crashed.

Did our yet-to-be-born baby sister tell Keeva that our father was going to die? Should we have listened to her and those green strips of paper from the Wish Jar? That I'll never

know. Maybe we could've stopped it from happening? I don't know, but I doubt it. I really doubt it. You see if Dad skipped that business meeting he would have never crashed in that airplane but instead would have been on the 86th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in his work office. He would have never been able to call me. He would have never been able to tell me he loved us.

Some things are beyond our understanding. Maybe some things God only intended Himself and the angels to know. All I *know* for sure is that time may have healed the loss of our dad, but it will never take away the year we loved him just a little bit more.

Mom gave birth to a beautiful healthy girl ten days after the attacks. Ashling Donalda Murphy. She has beautiful sapphire eyes like her daddy.

The New York Giants won the Super Bowl this year, their second championship since Dad's death. I know my good luck charm up in the sky was with me for both those games. Like I've said, it's the small things that count in the end

Oh, one more thing I'll never figure out. When did my dad decide on the name?

The Irish name Ashling means "a vision" or "a dream".

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