



1980

Mrs Murphy

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Recommended Citation

Clanchy, John, Mrs Murphy, *Kunapipi*, 2(2), 1980.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss2/3>

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Abstract

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The other girls had laughed at her at first, saying it wasn't right to be calling your sweetheart by his family name, leave alone Mister, when he had a perfectly good name of his own to be going by, Arthur. She still had trouble with the forms sometimes where it said 'name of head of household, surname, other names', and what other name would a decent man be going by, Mr Murphy? Her friends had got used to it in time, and only occasionally sniggered behind her back, and did they think she didn't notice, when their hearts were hard against their own men, about the private relations between Polly McQueen, as was, and her Mr Murphy, and little enough she saw of them now and didn't she have enough to keep her hands busy and her mind out of mischief what with five young ones to worry over, and did they think that they came, bless her name, by Immaculate Conception? It showed a proper respect, the Father had said, a proper respect Mrs Murphy, and the young things nowadays with their skirts about their waists and its Johnny-this and Jimmy-that, no sooner did they meet a boy and all eyes and will you be at the dance on Sunday? Well her own girls

‘Seen the paper, dear?’

‘Thank you, Mr Murphy. I have my darning.’

would learn to show more respect, a little more common decency. No, it wasn't her girls she was worried about, they were growing, the whole parish said it, the Murphy girls, into proper young ladies, and a pity there aren't more like them about. Why did you see little Maureen, what's her name, the mother with the unnatural hair and no husband, that's it, Petersham as she calls it, at mass on Sunday with herself all dolled up and her face all painted and making eyes, the little miss, on the way back from communion and no respect for the Host. It's a wonder the Father doesn't speak to her mother, though enough the poor man's got on his plate already what with his ulcers and the Church Fund. No, the girls were all right, she'd see to that. It was the boy that worried her, not that he wasn't loving enough or willing and the Sisters all said he was the smartest boy in the school though wilful at times, they'd soon train that out of him. But it was secretive somehow not in a dishonest way but close and not saying much, you never knew what he was thinking Mrs Fitzgerald said, just watching, and obedient when you asked him but the way he'd watch you. Comes from having too many women about Mrs Watson said and her with five girls already and always hoping for a boy as if it isn't trying enough for the poor woman with him off drinking, at least Mr Murphy had the pledge, thank the Lord there's little to go round as it is, and coming home all hours with his friends even worse, tramping their oaths through a Christian house and her sick with all those little ones.

‘I'll send some soup round to Mrs Watson in the morning.’

‘Hrmph.’

No, it was the boy worried her. He got too much inside himself. It's not good all that rummacking about inside your own head, and reading, and him to the library three times this week already, books are all right in their own way there's value in books her own father would say and him never read one in his whole life, value in books, but you need to get out once in a while. He needs to get out in the fresh air and play with other children more, even when he's out it's playing by himself his own games and that silly scoring game he plays with his rag football, sounded like the radio going as she came up the street the other day Mrs Watson said, playing both sides in the Grand Final and who'll win in the last quarter and Mrs White shaking her head over the fence, if that football goes in my roses again I'll keep it and what would she do, the boy said, sixty and with a football.

‘Mr Murphy?’

'More tea, dear?'

'That boy. He'll have to get out in the air more.'

Not that Mr Murphy himself didn't spend time with the boy, she couldn't complain that way, though he was tired home from work but a boy needs boys of his own age. Even if it is his father.

'He needs other lads to play with', said Mr Murphy.

She remembered some of the lads, though they were grown men by then, that Mr Murphy would, what was the word he used, knock with when he was courting. That awful fellow with the red hair and pimples where he didn't have freckles, always loud and interrupting their walks when her father would let her go out on a Sunday after the dishes, what was his name?

'Paddy O'Brien', said Mr Murphy.

That's it and drinking often into the bargain though where he got it on a Sunday.

'Special mate of mine', said Mr Murphy. 'And Liam and James with the club-foot, could never keep up and we'd have to help him over the fences when he went pinching apples from Maguires. Do you remember Paddy? You must.'

Mr Murphy settled the newspaper around his knees, 'Ah, those were the days', as if they were, and never again, and watched in the fire the club-foot boy with the arse out of his britches leap the fence as though he'd never had a bad day's walking and old Maguire two yards behind yelling with his arms pulled out by his labrador with a grin as wide as the chookhouse that was their own special pet and hadn't had such fun since Mrs Maguire got her leg caught in one of Mr Maguire's traps and her shouting at the dog to fetch the old idiot as had crippled her and the dog supposing that Mrs Maguire was a sport after all and going down on his front paws with his tongue in the dust and waiting for the stick he had to fetch.

'Those were the days', said Mr Murphy, picking up his newspaper again.

Did she remember Paddy O'Brien, huh, and James so sweet with his affliction and all the girls mad for him and seeking him out special to take to the church dance but only because he was a club-foot and didn't dance and all the other boys would crowd around and spend half the night persuading him to give it a try, which he never would but always say dance with Peggy or Maureen as they brought him and wouldn't get a dance otherwise — and got every dance. And Liam Patrick, she could have married him, Carmel Patrick, Carmel Mary Patrick, if only he'd

asked her but didn't. And went to war and was killed.

And would he have married her after feeling her that night behind the church wall, such thoughts dear Mary drive me pure. She looked up quickly.

'Damn sentiment and romance', Mr Murphy angrily turned a page. 'The papers is full of it nowdays. Naked women next thing we know.' He was always going on about 'damn sentiment and romance' since the Father had forbid them to read the picture papers though he never damned it so satisfactorily as Mr Murphy.

But Liam was quick with a softness in him that wasn't for war. Not saying much and never the leader but a smiley face as if he knew a secret that they'd all end up in the bad but went along anyway for the company. Where would she be now if he'd lived and asked her and she'd said yes as she would and not a second's thought? It was hard to tell but not darning Mr Murphy's socks and him beginning to doze and soon he'd be snoring and waking each few minutes to tell her he was only dozing as if she cared if he really slept and what was there to keep a vigil over the mending of his socks?

Mr Murphy's chin hit his chest and he snapped awake. 'Only dozing, dear', he reassured her.

'Dozing, huh', said Mrs Murphy, 'snoring soundly more's the like. And me with a pile of mending to go through and much's the company I get.' Mr Murphy began to snore.

Her own boy was a bit like Liam, not so soft, the hardness grew in him, but quick and something of the secret in him. The way you'd suddenly turn from the ironing with nothing said between you in the kitchen and catch him smiling and you'd ask what's tickling your fancy and he'd say 'nothing' and go straight on smiling, not nasty like somebody laughing when you weren't looking, and not offensive, so you wouldn't ask anymore. There was none of that in Mr Murphy.

'Dozing m'dear', without bothering to wake up.

A good enough man, as gentle as he could be, but dull, yes, she'd have to say dull if all had their dues, with his bald pate dropping towards his knees and his weak chin and the dandruff on his collar, where had that come from, she hadn't seen that before, if he had no hair? And Liam's hair was like her son's, brown like honey in the sun and curling when it was washed which was every Saturday after his bath and hung about his ears where you could kiss the sweet pink whorls of his skin, if he let you, and soft and fair like a new-fruited peach where no worm had got in...

'Mr Murphy', she said quickly, knowing as she said it that she had

married him because he'd asked her.

'Dozing, m'dear', recorded Mr Murphy.

'It's late and I've done all the darning I'll do tonight. It's time we took our rightful ease. Arthur.'

Mr Murphy hurled his paper to the floor and headed for the bedroom. 'Don't be long, love', he called over his shoulder.

Mrs Murphy smiled and knelt to pile the ashes in the back of the grate. Ah, Liam. She crossed herself. Well, the Lord would forgive her, her sins were little enough. And the boy, the whole parish said it, needed a brother.