

Murphy's Law

Mark Souza

Copyright 2011 by Mark Souza

Smashwords Edition

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please share it and return to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Table of Contents

[Story](#)

[Murphy's Law Tidbits](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Upcoming Titles](#)

[Find Me Online](#)

["The Diary of Horatio White" Excerpt](#)

Murphy's Law

By Mark Souza

When I was a kid, I jumped off our garage with a towel tucked into my collar emulating Superman. Seconds passed like minutes. Wind raced through the bristles of my crew cut. Not until the last few feet did I have doubts I would fly. That's the kind of sucker I am. Hero complex is what the shrink at the hospital said. It was the first time I'd broken my nose, though far from the last. Murphy's Law has been in effect ever since.

A few weeks ago at Frank's Bar, I was shooting off my mouth with just enough of a buzz on that I didn't feel ashamed to admit I'd had my pistol in my mouth with the safety off. My intent was to show I had at least contemplated whether continuing to live was worthwhile. Most people never even consider the question. They live their lives without thought, unaware they have a choice. At least I had faced the choice. I live now because I choose to.

"Does he ever shut up?" the bartender asked.

“Only when he passes out,” someone yelled. Laughter erupted around the bar. The bartender turned away to wash glasses. He wasn’t buying my bravado. Maybe he sensed that I was only alive because I was too chicken to pull the trigger.

They say it doesn’t hurt, that death is instantaneous, but how does anyone really know? While lining up the shot, trying to extrapolate the best angle through my brain, my hands shook and the gun barrel chattered against my teeth. I finally quit, worried that in a few more seconds, eight years of orthodontia might be ruined. I left that part out. Why ruin a good tale?

My story hadn’t gotten very far when a pretty blonde in her mid-thirties strutted through the door. Stuffed into a little red sausage skin that passed for a dress, she was hard to miss.

I drink at Frank’s because it’s just a neighborhood bar that’s not aspiring to be more. There’s no dance floor, funky lights, or music, and drinks aren’t priced pretentiously high. And the fact that it’s walking distance from my place comes in handy for the stagger home. The point is it’s not the kind of place that normally attracts the likes of her. She stuck out from the regulars like a cat in a dog show.

By the time I finished my story my fifth scotch at Frank’s was a dead soldier and needed refilling. I was in the zone. Bobby the bartender – I think it’s Bobby - came carrying a cheap bottle of scotch looking annoyed, jaw set and molars grinding. He was no more than a freckle-faced kid resembling Sunny Jim more than anything. I smiled and jingled the ice in my glass signaling him to pour. He raised an eyebrow expectantly, and moved the bottle away.

“Put it on my tab,” I said.

“Your tab is over four-hundred bucks. Pay it off and we can talk.” The turnover for bartenders at Frank’s is high. Even so, the kid knew enough to make me pony up. I smacked a fin down on the bar. Bobby snatched it up and refilled my tumbler. I checked to see if the blonde had been listening while Bobby announced the dismal status of my finances. Her attention seemed rapt on a glass of Chardonnay. Maybe I’d lucked out and she hadn’t heard the deadbeat tag being applied. I moved down a couple of stools for a closer look.

She appeared a little hard around the edges, but tasty enough. Though she had been around the block a time or two, there was still enough tread left on the tires to turn heads. A faint band of lighter skin on her ring finger hinted at a recent divorce. I’m a private investigator. It’s my job to notice little things like that. She was here trolling, and not for Mr. Right. Reality had lowered her expectations. No, she was here looking for Mr. Just-Good-Enough -- hard work on a weeknight. She probably had a chick or two back in the nest who could benefit from a second income. She looked over at me and I gave her the winning McEvoy smile. Her brows pinched and she rolled her tired green eyes as if to say, Puleeeease.

Sure, I was over a decade older than she was and maybe twenty over fighting weight, but I was still tall, dark, and had most of my hair. I’m not a bad looking guy. It was more than that, though. In a fraction of a second she had labeled me a loser with no prospects. The part that stung was that she had utterly nailed it.

I turned toward her and leaned forward slightly to let my coat drape away so she could see my gun. Some women like a touch of danger in their men.

“Pills, next time,” she said. “Pills are painless.” I love a helper. She must have overheard my conversation a minute earlier with Bobby the bartender.

“I don’t like the thought of puking,” I replied.

She looked up from her wine. “If you mix the pills with alcohol it increases their potency and you won’t puke. You look to me like you have half that equation perfected already.” She turned her attention back to her drink, which was just as well. She was losing appeal by the syllable.

I moved off to a corner booth to salve my wounds. For a while I watched her. She put out an aura as effective as porcupine quills, further fortified by Exhibit A, her public filleting of me. No one else even tried.

After finishing my drink, I didn’t feel like hanging around anymore. The mood in the bar had flat-lined. I gathered up my coat and stood to put it on. A hand on my arm stopped me. When I turned, it was the blonde. I pulled away. It was late and I wasn’t up for more games. My eyes met hers. They had warmed from the cold emeralds she’d flashed earlier. Now they looked sad and vulnerable.

“I’m sorry for before,” she said. “I was out of line. I’ve been under a lot of stress lately, not that I’m trying to make excuses. Let me buy you a drink to bury the hatchet.” She extended her hand, “Janine Johnson.”

I didn’t leave her hanging for long. She had a firm grip for a dame. “Murphy McEvoy,” I replied. She smiled. I waved Bobby over and ordered another scotch and a Chardonnay.

Once you got past the thorns, she was okay. She actually laughed a couple of times and was funny. Behind the smile, though, her emotions seemed walled off. She deftly deflected personal questions with humor, or answered in a way that redirected the question back at me. I managed to learn she was new in town, and her company had relocated her. When I asked about the missing wedding ring, her face went slack for a second before tears pooled in her eyes. She covered her face with her hands so I wouldn’t see them fall. Murphy’s Law at work again. Just when the ice was thawing, I put my nose where it didn’t belong and kill my chances.

“I’m sorry. That’s none of my business. I was just trying to make small talk. Are you going to be okay?”

She waved me off, caught her breath, and dabbed her eyes with a cocktail napkin. “I’m the one that should be sorry; ripping your head off one minute, blubbing the next. I must look like the wackiest bitch who ever walked the Earth.”

“I’ve dated worse.”

She snorted out a laugh and had to blow her nose. “How do I look? Do I have that raccoon-thing going on?”

Her mascara had run. She managed to clean it off her cheeks and smudge it across her lower lids. The effect was like the phony grease-paint shiners applied for stage plays.

“No, you look good,” I assured.

“Liar. That was nice of you, though.” Her eyes drifted across the bar. “I think I’ve worn out my welcome here. Do you want to walk a girl home?”

“Sure.”

She tipped the remainder of her wine back in a single swallow. I did the same.

Outside, she shivered and pulled her coat tight around her. It was a thin mid-calf London Fog, better for show than for November in the Puget Sound. She wasn’t used to

the cold, or prepared for it – a hint maybe that she came from a warmer climate. I put my arm around her and she didn't resist. We headed west on Hewitt toward the interstate. As we walked, we talked about insignificant things - mainly about me. She paused and I could tell she was building up to something.

“Why do you carry a gun?” she asked.

“I'm a private investigator.”

“Really?” Her eyes seemed to spark as she mulled this over. “Have you ever had to shoot anyone?”

I grinned; it's a question I usually get from curious kids. “No,” I replied. “If the situation gets to that point, I've screwed up royally. It's mainly for show. It's supposed to say, don't fuck with me. Most people are bright enough to get that.”

“Hmmm.” She was quiet for a while. We passed through a purplish spot of light from a street lamp, one pearl in a long necklace stretching out into the distance. Our shadows passed us and raced ahead until they disappeared into the darkness.

“Do you think you could if you had to – shoot someone I mean?”

I had considered the question more than once, so it didn't take long to answer. “If I had to, yeah, I think so.” She snuggled tight against my shoulder and wasn't shivering anymore.

“Do you make a good living as a private investigator?”

I stifled a laugh, and there was no point in lying after that. “I get by.”

“Me too,” she said.

I thought about asking why she cried back at the bar. There was a story there – remorse, betrayal, something. But the evening was going too well now, and I still had hopes of getting lucky. I didn't need another setback.

We were nearing the freeway. Our pace slowed as if she was trying to draw out time as long as she could. “This is where I'm staying.”

The Manorwood stood in the jaundiced glow of sodium vapor lights, an old two-story cinderblock apartment building adjacent to the Pacific Avenue off-ramp. The Manorwood made no pretenses at style. Its appearance announced that it was a place for those low on cash and down on their luck. Those who lived there hoped it was nothing more than a temporary stop on the way to better things, which was rarely true.

Outside the door to 1B, she fished through her purse for keys. She looked at me, her forehead knotted with concern, key frozen inches from the lock. “This may be too personal,” she said, “and you don't have to answer, but why did you try to commit suicide?”

It wasn't an invitation inside, and it wasn't the traditional peck-on-the-cheek brush-off. A weak smile crossed my face. Her question highlighted a fundamental difference between men and women. She had to know my most painful secrets even if it ruined the mood, whereas I wouldn't do anything that might cost me a potential roll in the hay. I felt I was on thin ice with her, and trying hard not to break the spell. Yet she could ask or say whatever she pleased and I'd still sleep with her if I had the chance, and she knew it.

“It's okay,” I said. “I was depressed. I guess I lost perspective. For a few minutes suicide seemed like a perfectly reasonable way to end the pain. That's all it was, a few minutes. But what happens in those minutes can mean everything. When I put the gun in my mouth and my hand started to shake, it didn't make sense to me. If I wanted to die,

why should my hand shake? Then it dawned on me that a part of me wasn't convinced and I started to rethink it."

Her eyes never left mine as I spoke. She misted up and for a moment I thought she might cry again. She stepped close and wrapped her arms around me, her head pressed against my chest. "I've been there too," she whispered.

She pulled away to unlock the door then turned toward me. "Would you like to come in for a drink? All I have is vodka."

I didn't have to be asked twice.

Her apartment was small, decorated with worn commercial furniture you might find at any cheap motel chain. Bad modern art hung on the walls. Her clothes were still in a pair of suitcases in the living room as if she had just arrived. Janine's living arrangements spawned more questions, but this was not the time.

I awoke the next morning to a stabbing headache and Janine's hair in my face. My stirring must have awakened her, or perhaps she had been waiting. She rolled from under my arm and out of bed. I watched as she pulled my tee shirt over her nude body. It fit her like a mini-dress that needed cinching at the waist to flatter her figure. She left the room without a backward glance.

Consciousness was a slower process for me. Smells of coffee wafting in from the kitchen helped. Janine had set a pair of mugs and a box of powdered donuts on a bistro table in the kitchenette. Conversation didn't come as easily as the night before. Even eye contact seemed awkward. I wanted out of there as soon as possible and sensed the feeling was mutual. I checked my watch and made the excuse that I had an appointment with a client. She gave me her number, which I stuffed into my coat pocket.

I had almost forgotten about Janine when she called a week later. She was hysterical, sobbing, gasping and nearly incoherent. "Help me, please. It's J-Ja-Janine. Please, please, please, please. Come and get me. He..." The receiver clunked down on something and I could hear Janine's voice grow faint. She didn't hang up, but she didn't pick up the receiver again either.

When I arrived at her place, the door stood open, the jamb splintered where the striker plate had been. The phone was on the table still off the hook. Furniture was in disarray and a shattered chair rested on its side near the entry. Janine stood bent over the sink rinsing blood out of her mouth. Her face was a mess. Her voice sounded hoarse and phlegmy. "I'm sorry to drag you into this. You're the only person I could think of to call."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Wade found me."

"Who the hell is Wade?"

"He's my ex. He, he -" She broke down crying again.

I hate it when women cry. There isn't much to be done other than waiting it out and providing sympathy. She eventually got out the sentence – he raped me. The more she told me, the tighter my jaw clenched. Her ex had stalked her across the country. This was her third city in two years. She had left behind friends, family, and a good job to get away.

He beat her up pretty good and it wasn't the first time. The rape was a new twist. Escalation is what they call it. I'd seen it before. "How did he find you?"

She cocked her head and her eyes went hard. I got the hint. He had hired a private detective.

"You need to report him to the police."

She pulled away from me. "He'd kill me. He's already warned me, and he'll do it, too. You don't know Wade."

"How can he if he's locked up?"

"Because he won't be locked up. The police will put me through the ringer half sure I'm making it all up to cause trouble. They'll run a rape kit and send it off for DNA testing. That will take weeks. In the mean time, Wade will lawyer-up and won't say a word. He'll be free until there's enough evidence to charge him. When the DNA finally comes back a match, he'll claim everything was consensual and I'll have disappeared off the face of the Earth – just another wacky bitch crying wolf. The case will die and Wade will walk away clean. Thanks, but no thanks."

"He told you this?"

She nodded.

"Where is he staying?"

"Where he always stays, the Essex. He's a corporate executive for Essex Hotels."

"Get yourself cleaned up and put on some fresh clothes."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Essex."

Janine was jumpy as rabbit. She had worked a little magic with make-up and looked decent in a puffy sort of way. You couldn't tell anything was wrong unless you were close and looking for it. We parked across the street from the Essex and waited for the ex to show. She slumped down in the passenger seat and nearly panicked after a couple hours when she had to pee. Ducking low, she exited the car and remained crouched as she crossed the sidewalk into a restaurant. She assumed the same skulking posture a few minutes later for the return trip, this time with a Styrofoam cup in each hand.

"I got us coffee."

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Sneaking across the sidewalk like some cartoon character."

"I can't let Wade see me."

"Sneaking around like that draws attention. Walk like everyone else. There are hundreds of people on the street. Blend in and you're invisible."

She handed me one of the cups.

"Coffee?" I complained, "What were you thinking? You're going to have to pee again."

"I'm sorry. I thought it would keep us alert," she said.

Steam rising from the cups fogged the windows. I tried to keep a hole open with my sleeve, but eventually gave up and cranked the engine and turned on the defroster. Janine tugged at my shoulder.

"That's him."

A plain looking black sedan had pulled under the portico of the Essex. A dark-haired man in suit stood near the rear door. Wade was a big boy who looked like he could take care of himself. Two other men stepped out of the car and quickly flanked him front and rear, heads on swivels checking the street for trouble.

“Why does your ex have bodyguards?”

“Like I said, he’s an executive. The company assigns bodyguards so their execs won’t be kidnapped and ransomed. It’s happened before.”

His two escorts quickly whisked Bobby into the hotel. They were pros. “This is going to complicate things. I don’t know if I can get past them.”

Janine smiled. “It’s okay. He has a secret weakness. You just watch.” She was right. About forty minutes later Wade walked out of the Essex alone. He nervously checked the street and walked into an alley at the side of the building.

“He smokes,” Janine said. “The hotel doesn’t allow it. He was supposed to quit, but he hasn’t yet so he sneaks out.” Who would know a man’s weaknesses better than his wife?

I opened my door and started after him. Janine caught my arm. “Be careful. He carries a gun,” she warned.

Now she tells me. My knees went wobbly. Initially I thought roughing up Wade and leaving him with a warning to stay clear of Janine might be enough. Once I saw him, though, I knew Wade would likely kick my ass in a physical confrontation. Now she tells me he’s packing.

The alley was dark. I pulled my gun from its holster and held it tight to my side. My heart fluttered and felt light. My eyes took a while to adjust to the darkness. Despite a racing pulse, the time between heartbeats felt like forever. Ahead, Wade’s lighter flared illuminating the alley. It was a dead end. Wade had taken up a position between a pair of tall dumpsters. I crept along the hotel wall keeping the nearest dumpster between us. When I rounded the corner, the orange ember of Wade’s cigarette glowed like a beacon. He saw me right away and reacted quickly, thrusting a hand inside his jacket.

Shoot low is what I was thinking. I only needed to hurt him. When he went for his gun, self-preservation took over. My arm bucked even with my shoulder. I fired without aiming. The alley lit up in the muzzle flash.

I screamed, “This is for Janine!” my voice high and quivering.

The first shot caught him in the chest. His face had the queerest expression. He staggered back and managed to clear his pistol from his jacket. I fired again. This time the bullet hit his eye. Wade collapsed to the ground limp as flank steak. His gun clattered across the concrete. I froze for a moment, ears ringing. Gunshots resonating inside the narrow alley must have sounded like artillery in the street. It would draw a crowd. There would be witnesses, a lot of them, and 9-1-1 calls, and police. I ran.

By the time I arrived at the street, I remembered what I told Janine about blending in. I flipped up my collar, slowed to a walk and calmly turned onto the sidewalk as if returning home from the evening train. A crowd gathered outside the alley. A few of the onlookers made eye contact. It took a block before my heart rate slowed to double digits again, and another before I was sure I wasn’t being followed. Wade was my first and I could still picture the shocked expression on his face. Bullies never see the payback coming.

After crossing the street, I doubled back toward where I had parked. On the way, a pair of black and whites sped past with sirens blaring and lights blazing. A cluster of squad cars stood in formation closing off the alley when I arrived at my car. Janine was gone.

I drove to her place taking the long way, checking the mirror the entire time, half expecting to see blue lights flashing behind me. Her apartment was empty. The suitcases were missing and so was she. The building manager didn't know where she had gone. In fact, he didn't recognize the name Janine Johnson. The woman in apartment 1B signed her lease Teresa Turner and paid in cash. I later tried searches on both names. They led nowhere.

The murder at the Essex was the top story in the paper the next day. The article said the man shot in the alley was Rolly Carpio, an undercover cop who had penetrated a local drug cartel and was to testify before a grand jury. Carpio was staying at the Essex under protection against a possible hit. He was a bachelor who had never married. Later that night I chucked my gun off the end of Hansen's Pier. What a sucker I am.

Murphy's Law Tidbits

Murphy McEvoy is a hard luck private detective on a lifelong losing streak. His toast always hits the floor jam side down. He is a character from a failed novel I'd written years ago. The fact that he has any sense of humor or optimism at all is endearing, and to put it bluntly, the reason I love Murphy so much. In the novel, Murphy is shot down during his encounter with Janine at the bar. They part ways and that's the end of it. Their encounter sizzled in the novel, so I gave them new life in this short story and asked what would have happened if Janine didn't shoot him down that night? As expected, it isn't good news for Murphy.

About the Author



Mark Souza lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, two children, and mongrel beast-dog, Tater. When he's not writing, he's out among you trying to look and act

normal (whatever that is), reminding himself that the monsters he's created are all in his head, no more real than campaign promises.

Upcoming Titles

My novel *Robyn's Egg* will be released in the spring of 2012

A collection of my short stories, *Try 2 Stop Me*, will be released in September of 2012

Other **FREE** short stories coming soon:

Cupid's Maze (Already Available)

Appliances Included

The Diary of Horatio White

Second Honeymoon

The Comfort Shack

Connect With Me Online:

My Website: <http://www.marksouza.com>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/souzawrites>

An Excerpt From

The Diary of Horatio White

By Mark Souza

There are some who question the reasoning and courage of General McClellan over the events at Antietam Creek. How could an army of ninety-thousand surprise a force half their size and not emerge victorious? Why would a man with that kind of advantage retreat? Was McClellan inept, or was he a coward? Those who ask these questions were not there. They cannot understand. They don't know the true events of Antietam Creek. Perhaps no one ever will.

Though sworn by the Federal Army to secrecy, I have placed an account of those days and my life here on these pages. I have no plans to allow other eyes see these words, so in that regard, I consider that I have maintained my vow. If these words were somehow to be read, who in their right mind would believe them? I scarcely do myself. I question my reasons for this record, as it can do nothing but open me to ridicule. Perhaps the best explanation is that what occurred was so unbelievable that perhaps by putting the events to paper, the fact that they take on physical form, though only ink on a page, can make them more real, more than the rants of a madman. For I fear I may truly be going mad.

We had pitched camp ten miles northeast of Sharpsburg on September 16th, 1862. Though the days were hot, the onset of fall brought a chill to the night air. I was with the 12th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry under Major Burbank. Our scouts reported that the bulk of Lee's Confederate Army was consolidated in Sharpsburg and we had caught him unawares.

We had marched for days and hadn't had a hot meal in a week. This night was no exception. Dinner consisted of potted meat in jars, apples from a nearby orchard just coming ripe, and stale bread. After sunset, Major Burbank gathered us around the campfire and gave us our orders. McClellan's plan involved a three prong attack over the three bridges crossing Antietam Creek. Our regiment was to attack from the north at first light. We were a diversion to occupy Lee's attention while the bulk of the army led by General Burnside, attacked from the south. The Major said we were to be the tip of the sword and could end the war by our efforts on the morrow. We'd finally caught Lee with his pants down.

We looked at one another and I think we all saw the same thing. Tears glossed our eyes. Some shook with nerves. None more than Billy Gillespie, a seventeen year-old kid from Danvers who hadn't yet sprouted his first whisker. My mouth went dry. The Major was a good man and well intentioned, but how could he think we would be happy to receive this news? We were quiet. He delivered his orders with the fire and conviction of someone sure we would end the day triumphant. And although he compared us to the tip of the sword, none of us believed it. Swords don't bleed, and tomorrow we certainly would. We were green and really hadn't seen battle. We'd had training, but till now we'd been held in reserve as a reinforcement unit. Tomorrow would be our first real test. As we looked to one another, we realized for many of us, if not most, these were our last hours.

After Burbank left, we couldn't sleep. We listened in as the order was delivered to the Pennsylvania boys over at the next campfire by their commander, Colonel William Christian. What a waste of hide he was. He cared more for his horse than his men. His regiment used to joke that it might be a service to the army if Christian was shot in the back, but that there was little chance of that as he was the type who liked to lead from the rear. They fell as quiet as we had upon hearing the news.

We settled around the fire. Those of who could write wrote letters to mothers and wives trying to set everything to rights. I wrote to my Cora. Henry Talbot offered me a sip of his whiskey. He somehow always managed to maintain a supply. He was an educated man, a school teacher from my hometown. He got it in his head that he should stand for the cause and be a part of history as it was being made. He volunteered like the rest of us, each man for his own reasons. But in the face of the reality of it, he had had second thoughts and taken to drink. Talbot's teeth were black at the edges and looked like old corn rotting on the cob. I respectfully declined.

During the wee hours of September 17th, the officers roused us to our feet. We moved out under cover of darkness. The hike was good for the men. It worked out some of the nerves we'd built up the evening before. Marching was definitely better than thinking. We worked our way to edge of the East Woods using the trees for cover. As far as we could tell, we hadn't been discovered. And that was the end of our luck.

The terrain on the far side of Antietam creek rose sharply to a bluff. Over half a mile of open ground stood between the edge of the wood and the bluff, broken only by an

expansive cornfield. A single narrow bridge crossed the creek creating a choke point without any cover. It was an ideal killing ground. We'd be spotted the moment we stepped from cover and would draw fire the entire way. We'd be easy pickings. My hands began to tremble and I clutched tighter to my rifle. I craned my head around and checked the others. Their eyes were wide and faces pale with tension. The situation didn't need to be explained to them. They could see it as plainly as I.

"This ain't good, is it corporal?" Gillespie asked. I shook my head. "Maybe we should find another place to cross."

A deep voice behind me barked, "But that isn't the order, now is it?" It was Major Burbank. He dismounted and leaned against the tree I was using for cover. His eyes scanned the lay of the land. He spoke to me with his eyes fixed on the horizon. "We definitely have the short end of it, don't we Corporal White?" I didn't say anything and he continued. "I think the best we can do is hit this field at a run. We'll lose fewer men that way. That corn is no real cover, but they can't see us in there and it'll give us a chance to regroup. Then we hit the remaining stretch to the bridge at a sprint and give 'em holy hell. Sound like a plan?" I nodded. "Await my signal," he said. He mounted his horse and rode off to deliver his plan to the next group of soldiers. I gathered my men, who between them couldn't generate enough spit to put out a match, and repeated what Burbank had said.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)