

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

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Mama Murphy

IN MY LAST YEAR OF COLLEGE, I rent a house in Champaign with my friend Caitlin and her boyfriend Brandon. It's on Edwin, a dead-end street cut off by a group of industrial buildings where something manly and important is made, like concrete or maybe gravel. Train tracks cut between us and the buildings, but the trains are few and far between.

Our house looks skeletal. Off-white siding, grassless yard, a front room with five shutterless windows lined in a row like gaps in a set of teeth. As dull and unloved as any rental house a college student could afford. The tenants before us sold crack out of it. But the neighborhood is quiet, and coming from campus housing, that's enough for us.

Mama Murphy's place sneaks up on you. Tucked further back from the road behind some trees, it's invisible until you get past our house, which is right next door. Overgrown shrubs choke it like a tight collar. Its lavender shutters are friendly, deceiving. Wind chimes and sticky traps dotted with dead flies hang from the ceiling of the screened-in front porch. The dusty windows are clogged with trash, mostly newspapers and wrappers I think, although one day I think I see a doll's head. Not once in our year of living here do we see lights in those windows. We're pretty sure Mama Murphy lives without electricity, maybe running water too. I realize my first time looking at the place that this is illness turned outward, filling an entire house.



I never learn her actual name. Brandon starts calling her Mama Murphy after a character from the video game *Fallout 4*. That Mama Murphy is an old lady living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland who claims to be psychic. She's also an addict and will read your fortune if you bring her these fictional drugs called chems. I never really played the game much, but when I google the character, the nickname makes sense. Both are clearly older, but their ages are impossible to pin down. They both wear heavy shells of clothing no matter the weather. They both have vacant faces and empty eyes.

Our Mama Murphy earns the name within a month of us moving in. A few days a week, she journeys to the end of her driveway or to the stop sign at the street corner. She's always in a dark Baja hoodie and grey sweatpants that are several sizes too big, and she's always wearing a fleece hat, the kind that has tassels and hugs your skull tightly. She just stands there. She mumbles and laughs at nothing. Sometimes she raises her arms straight to the sky.

Brandon, Caitlin, and I watch this through our living room window. We smile uncertainly at one another, smiles equal to shrugs, because what else can we do? I sort of feel like a voyeur when I watch her. It feels too intimate, like watching someone pee in an alley or make out in a parked car. You're supposed to look away. That's the polite thing to do. And the three of us do look away after a bit, once we get bored.

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Caitlin has two conversations with her the first couple weeks we're here. One starts out as small talk about the weather. Within a minute, Mama Murphy is ranting about the police planting bombs in people's refrigerators and their legs getting blown off. Another begins with how hard it must've been getting our couch through the front door and ends with birds drowning in lakes.

These are not cohesive stories, but snippets Caitlin pulls from an ambush of gibberish. It always starts with innocent neighborly chitchat. One second you're talking about how much it's supposed to rain tomorrow, the next you're learning that your house is wired by the mafia. Mama Murphy weaves in and out of sense like a clumsy dancer.

Sometimes she's standing at the end of her driveway when I come home from class. She glares at my car as I pull up in front of our house, hands always on her hips. She watches me park, intent and judging, like a supervisor. When she's feeling particularly ballsy she stands beyond her driveway, right at the edge of where I park. I have no choice but to pull up within a couple yards of her. If I don't, I'll be blocking in my roommates.

When she does this, I'm careful not to meet her stare. I pretend not to notice her as I walk quickly, but not too quickly, to my front door. Sometimes she stays quiet. Sometimes she starts babbling at my back, a rush of mumbled words I can't untangle. I force myself to keep an even pace.



After a few months in the Edwin house, I come home one day to find Caitlin in the kitchen with Brandon's mopey black lab, Hades. She's scooping kibbles into his bowl and sighing heavily.

This is what Caitlin tells me: she was in our backyard with the dog when Mama Murphy stormed outside and shouted at her to put him on a leash. Caitlin kept trying to tell her that Hades was harmless, that our fence was way too high for his fat, ancient ass to jump over. But nothing got through. Mama Murphy was certain that Hades was going to hop the fence and rip out her throat.

"So she left her house, where there's no dog, to go outside, where there is a dog, to yell about the dog attacking her?" I ask. I was hoping the driveway was where this would all end.

"Oh, but that's not even the *best* part," Caitlin continues. She holds up a quick finger and flashes a sarcastic smile. "So, she's ranting on and on about nothing, right? On and on about the dog. Then I hear the words 'rat poison.'"

"Wait, what?" I widen my eyes.

"Yeah. Oh yeah." She leans against the counter and presses her lips into a stiff line. A classic Caitlin sign of exasperation.

"Was it, like, a coherent threat?"

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"Sounded threatening the way she said it. All I could pick out was 'dog' and 'rat poison.' I took him back inside as soon as I heard those words together."

We feel like we shouldn't just let this go, but there's not much to be done, really. What are you supposed to do with a semi-coherent, sort-of threat like that? In the end, Caitlin asks me to stay with Hades whenever I let him out from now on.

"This is gonna be an interesting year," I say.

We both look at Hades. He stares back up at us, the usual look of profound and infinite sadness on his peppered face.



Caitlin and I juggle theories. Meth, schizophrenia, dementia. But Brandon isn't interested in explanations. Mama Murphy never bothers us about the dog again, but the whole ordeal has left him itching to call the police the moment she gives us a reason.

"Maybe they'll see how she's living and put her in a home," he says. I think maybe that would be best for everyone but don't say anything.

I have just one encounter with Mama Murphy. She comes to our door one afternoon when I'm home alone. Caitlin's in class. Brandon's at work. The knocks are rapid and small, like an angry kid trying to get into his brother's room. I stand in the kitchen where she can't see me and wait for her to give up, but she's relentless.

"Shit," I sigh to myself. I go to the door, heart thumping. I hate that I'm scared of an old woman four inches shorter than me and half my body weight.

"I would appreciate it," she says as soon as I open the door, "if you would move your car."

Her voice is hard and unfriendly but carries no real weight behind it. This is my first and only time seeing her up close. She's wearing the usual hoodie/sweatpants/tasseled beanie combo. I take in her face in little glances, not wanting to make eye contact. Her pale skin is as paper-thin as her voice, and her face looks slightly sunken, like a pumpkin on the verge of rotting. I don't notice many wrinkles. Just blemishes and shallow lines here and there. Being this close gives me no further hints to her true age. She could be sixty-five. She could be fifty.

"I'll move it," I reply. There's an edge to my voice I won't even try to hide.

"I don't know how many times I—"

"I'll move it." I start to close the door, which I know is an asshole thing to do, but I don't want to give her the chance to start rambling at me. "Just give me a minute," I add through the crack. But she's walking away, muttering to herself.

"I don't know how many times you've told them..." is all I hear. This is my first time being told anything.

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I never do move my Kia that day, and I keep parking it in the same spot I always have. I have to stand guard over Hades every time he shits, so I'm feeling petty. But Mama Murphy never knocks on our door again.



Once every ten days or so, Mama Murphy's sister stops by in an older Ford hatchback to drop off groceries. She parks at the very edge of the gravel driveway by the mailbox. Mama Murphy comes out to meet her but never lets her come any further, never invites her in the house. They chat for a bit, though I can't imagine what the topic would be. Then the sister leaves and Mama Murphy retreats inside with her handful of grocery bags.

Does the woman know how her sister is living? Caitlin and I wonder to each other every time we see the grey Ford. Is there a lot of playing along, or does the woman try to nudge Mama Murphy back toward reality? Is the woman sad about her sister? Resentful? I assume they talk around each other a lot, two realities in unsteady orbit.

We learn that this woman is the sister thanks to a chance meeting Caitlin has with our neighbor across the street, Ellen. She's the one with the plastic snowman in her yard all year. He leans against an overgrown shrub, waving at the sky.

According to Ellen, Mama Murphy used to live out in California. She did a lot of unknown drugs for an unknown amount of time. She moved back to Champaign about a decade ago, where her family is. Her father bought the lavender-shuttered house. Her sister helps out by delivering groceries and making sure she's still alive. Ellen reveals Mama Murphy's real name, but Caitlin can't remember it.

"I wanna say it's something with a J," she says after giving me the run-down on Ellen. "June? No. Judy?"

"I can't believe you learned Mama Murphy's true identity and forgot," I scold lightly.

"What's a classic older lady name that starts with a J?" she asks. "J... Jolene?"

"Joyce?" I suggest, but we never pin it down.

None of us see Ellen again after that. Like everyone else around here, she's a bit of a shut-in. She cracks open a tiny window into Mama Murphy's life and vanishes. But I don't let myself wonder too much about what happened in California. What little Ellen gave us is more than enough for me.



The shenanigans peak in the spring. One morning, Caitlin finds trash scattered on the hood of her Toyota. Used tissues, fast food wrappers, Styrofoam cups. Like someone grabbed handfuls out of a garbage can and tossed everything at the windshield.

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Who else but Mama Murphy?

I help Caitlin clean her car. We steam over it a bit and then joke it away, another shrug because we're not sure what to do. No serious damage. It doesn't happen again.

Then, a few weeks later, I forget to lock my car. The next morning, my glovebox is wide open. Everything inside it—old receipts, Taco Bell napkins, Nirvana CDs, the driver manual—has been flung across the floor and passenger seat. My blood hums as I try to remember if I kept anything valuable in here, anything with sensitive information. No, I didn't. Nothing has been taken. Just rummaged through.

Then I notice my front license plate. The bottom half has been ripped away from its screws and folded upward in a U shape. I check Brandon's and Caitlin's cars, glance over the neighbors'. Only mine has been touched. At first I think maybe this is the work of a goofball who sucks at crime, but then I understand. I straighten out my plate the best I can and head to work, shaking at the wheel from the adrenaline.

"It had to have been Mama Murphy," I tell my roommates later that day. They urge me to call the police, but I never do. It seems silly and cold to sic the cops on a mentally ill woman for this, especially when she thinks they put bombs in people's fridges. But more than that, I just don't want to deal with it. The phone call, the questions, the neighborhood spectacle. In the end, my laziness and discomfort trump my anger and compassion.



Mama Murphy leaves a gift for me in early May. I'm taking out the trash when I notice a drawstring bag made of pink mesh tucked under my windshield wipers. In it is a yellow envelope and a tree branch about five inches long. I take the bag inside in case she's watching me from her porch.

The branch is dry and cracked. Flakes of it fall everywhere as soon as I pull it out of the bag. No markings, no runes or hidden messages. I throw it out the back door.

In the envelope is a birthday card wrinkled and faded with age. An orange cartoon cat on the front smiles goofily at me. He looks like a knockoff Garfield. I open the card to see a quick message signed "Dad" in that big, blocky handwriting all dads have.

"Happy birthday. Love you," it says.

I don't know whether this is a peace offering or a threat. Maybe it's something she once cherished, left for me in good yet cloudy will. Or maybe it doesn't mean anything. For now, it feels too heavy with some kind of sentiment to throw away. I store the card in my desk drawer and don't tell Brandon or Caitlin about it. I'm not sure why. Maybe I want this to be a wink between Mama Murphy and I, a shared secret, even if I have no idea what that secret is.

Several weeks later when I'm cleaning my room, I pitch it. Impulsively, to clear space, to move along I guess. That quick choice nibbles at me

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throughout the day. I start to feel like a jerk, even if it is just a dollar-store birthday card from the mid-90s. Knocking on her door and returning it isn't an option. At the very least, it could be an odd keepsake. But when I look in the kitchen trash can to get it back, the card is buried under a mound of coffee grounds and old spaghetti.



Every night I sit on our back porch and smoke a cigarette. And almost always, I hear Mama Murphy in her house. Her voice drags along her thin walls, raspy and constant. Sometimes I think I hear a radio. Sometimes she laughs, but it's joyless and cynical, as if someone just told her the dumbest thing she's ever heard.

This time of year, there are so many lightning bugs in the trees at the edge of our backyard. More than I've ever seen in one place. Their lights flash from everywhere like cameras in a packed stadium. I try to enjoy them despite the droning voice next to me. When that voice suddenly gets louder, I put out my cigarette and go back inside.

Then, the week before graduation, Mama Murphy falls silent. I don't hear her voice during my little smoke breaks anymore. Nobody sees her walk to the stop sign or keep watch in her driveway.

"Should we call somebody?" Caitlin asks me. "I hope nothing happened to her."

"Her sister should be stopping by again anytime now," I say. A non-answer.

We get lost in other things that week. Caps and gowns, job applications that lead to nowhere. I remind myself here and there that nothing happened to her. There's something perpetual about Mama Murphy, about her hollow laugh and her hat tassels and her vine-sprayed house. Like she's been muttering and standing guard over her driveway for centuries. A hidden piece of Champaign folklore.



We graduate in May. Brandon and Caitlin move out several days before I do. They leave for Wisconsin early in the morning, and Caitlin wakes me up before they head out. She hugs me as I sit up in bed, half-awake and crusty-eyed. We promise to visit each other as often as possible, write letters, call, text, redundancy be damned. And then she's gone, and I fall back asleep.

I've never lived by myself before. For the first couple days, I relish the extra space and the quiet. I pee and shower without shutting the bathroom door, walk around the house without pants, smoke with the back door open. Then I become a little stir crazy. I apply to dozens of jobs, get ghosted by potential employers, try to come to terms with moving back in with my mom until I can figure my shit out. I throw out eight trash bags of stained shirts, cans of old food, homemade holiday decorations from when Caitlin and I spent too much time on Pinterest. I purge the entire

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house, room by room, until it's like the three of us were never there.

I step outside the night before I leave to smoke my last cigarette in Champaign. The fireflies have slowed down quite a bit. I watch them for a while, swatting at the mosquitos that swarm my legs. It's all so anticlimactic. No tearful goodbye hugs, no big-city paychecks on the horizon, no final, triumphant night out drinking myself stupid with friends. My four years in this town are ending softly and quietly, and it feels like failure.

"Pretty weird, huh?" I say to Mama Murphy's unlit window. No answer of course.



My mom and stepdad get here around 9 AM. We load up everything quickly and efficiently, anxious to get the three-hour drive home over with. I can tell my mom is happy I'm moving back for a while. I can also tell she's trying not to be too obvious about it.

We're about halfway done when I step outside with a box and notice that familiar silver hatchback. It's parked closer to Mama Murphy's house than normal. Her sister and the mailwoman are talking at the end of the driveway, too far away for me to hear them clearly. Mama Murphy's front door is propped open with a brick. She's nowhere in sight.

Deep down, I know what's going on over there. I try to stay focused on the task at hand. Sweeping up dog hair, doublechecking cupboards, Tetris-ing boxes and suitcases. When everything's out, I do a final walkthrough of the place and lock the front door behind me.

"I just heard that lady over there say your neighbor died," my stepdad tells me. His voice is lowered, but Mama Murphy's sister and the mailwoman are both gone.

"What?" is all I can think to say.

"Yeah. I heard her talking to the mail lady. Said something about 'she's in a better place now.' I think she was cleaning the house out."

This is the news I was expecting, and I wish I felt sadder about it. The most I can muster right now is respectful stoicism. We should've called somebody. The non-emergency number maybe. I give my parents a brief summary of Mama Murphy. A shut-in who threatened to poison Hades is pretty much all I tell them. We all say how it's too bad, what happened over there, and we finish packing.



On the way back to my hometown, I think about the last time I saw Mama Murphy outside. It was a little over two weeks ago. She treks slowly to the corner stop sign and plants herself at her usual spot, just close enough to the road that a passing car would have to edge around her. Luckily, there's not much traffic around here.

The three of us crowd the living room window to watch, even though it's more or less the same thing every time. Her mouth dances on her face

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as she speaks with conviction to the empty street. I'm not sure, but she looks even smaller in her baggy clothes than usual, more buried, as if she's receding into them.

Suddenly, she turns and walks away from the road in our direction. Her hat tassels bounce off her papery face. Caitlin and I flinch away from the window in an eruption of nervous laughter, but she doesn't notice us. Her eyes are lasered straight ahead. She takes several steps, then spins around and returns to her post with surprising speed, like she's changed her mind about something.

"What the hell is she doing?" Brandon asks.

Mama Murphy raises her arms from her sides and brings them above her in a slow, intentional arc. This is a new motion for her.

"She's signaling the mothership," I answer, and we all laugh as she clasps her hands together over her head, her entire body stretching for the sky.