

DEVIN MURPHY

How We Disappear

Paula wants to yell and let her frustration hiss and crackle out over the line. She's been calling like this since the house went on the market. Every time there's a visit that doesn't end in an offer or at least a follow up, these calls come. The house is the last financial link between us, and she wants the money to turn full force into her life without me.

My dog, Taft, comes and lies at my feet as Paula lectures me about how to clean the house. Taft is a hundred-and-twenty-pound Newfoundland mix with black and white fur and a head the size of a go-cart engine.

"You have to go somewhere else when there are walkthroughs."

"No problem." I start to run the dog comb over Taft's fur. His undercoat comes out in finger-length clumps.

"I want the sale," I say. "I'm not obstructing any visits."

"Good," she says from somewhere outside of Santa Fe, where I'm sure she dreams of dissolving this last connection, our home by Salt Creek—sold off to the highest bidder and split 60/40 in her favor as per her blood-sucking lawyer.

"Rea will be over later today," she says, "so clean up and clear out."

"Sure thing."

I've filled half a plastic grocery bag full with dog fur by the time I hang up. I walk the whole house pulling fur from the bag like smelly cotton candy and distributing it on the floor where it be visible enough that anyone would be turned off. Taft follows me and gives me his sad, take-me-for-a-walk eyes. I haven't walked him much lately.

The realtor's name is Rea Davis. She shows up two hours after my ex-wife's call. Rea is a plump, triple-chinned lady who's wearing a pleated brown blouse and gray pencil skirt that makes her look upholstered in carpet. She has thick, meaty calves smells of rose water and vanilla. For nothing she's done, but her mere presence in my life, I hate Rea. Her eyes make me irrationally angry, like she's some Gaul come to pillage my home.

Rea arrives with a young couple and their agent. Rea's face drops a little when she sees me sitting in the back by the creek with Taft. My feet are resting on a white dingy my son, Hunter, used to float downstream in. The dingy is chipped and dented at the bottom. Hunter used to climb in, wave good-bye, and call hours later from a payphone to tell me where he was so I could come and get him. Over and over he'd round the oxbow of the stream and disappear, practicing for what would become of him.

Taft wants to go greet the couple, but I hold his collar. His tail thumbs the ground. They wave at me. The man has a thin black beard, and the woman is Filipino, raven-haired, and pregnant, showing but not uncomfortable yet by the looks of her easy stride into my home. I think, check out all that dog fur, all those allergens.

They are inside for twenty minutes. Too long. I imagine them looking at the pictures on the wall. Hunter growing from room to room. Me getting older. A few of Paula when she was young and before her head filled with sand. Then they come outside. They admire the trees, the garden, and walk to the retaining wall at the edge of the property; it drops six feet down into Salt Creek.

Taft is whimpering to go say hello to the strangers. Rea gives me a polite little wave. The bearded young man wanders over to me. I recognize this thing he is doing: he wants some insider information.

"You have a beautiful house," he says.

"Thank you." I know this; it's my house.

"Where does the creek go?"

"This is Salt Creek. It goes two miles down, then through Busse Woods and keeps going, halfway down the state."

He scans the banks.

"Interesting setting," he says.

Across the stream are two large properties hidden in summer by the full canopy of trees. Beyond those houses is an Egyptian Coptic Church with a gold dome, and a no-frills, redbrick, Lutheran church with a parking lot where a dozen bagpipers gather on Tuesday evenings to practice. Beyond the church is an old wooden wall

built to blot out the sound of the highway, which can still be heard as a muffled thrum cut by the high-winning buzz of crotch-rockets.

“Does the water get much higher than this?” The young man points to the little boat at my feet. The water is a slow babble over the stones now, six inches deep beneath the retaining wall and several feet where it fans out at the curve in the bank beyond my property. In the spring the stream floods and hops the wall. My backyard has had a current moving through it several times, and I’ve had to keep Taft on a leash to let him out. Of course I tell him this.

“Turns into a river.” I let this sink in. “In fact I’m worried it might be crumbling away the concrete wall there.” I point to the wall holding back the yard. He looks at his wife and the real-estate agents. I think this ought to do it for him, and I’m happy when he walks back to his wife and they all start back to the house.

So far I’ve pointed visitors to the crack in the rusted AC unit by the bedroom window, the proximity to the highway, and the flight pattern of thunderous planes coming and going from O’Hare airport. My goal is to make it through the reality season without an offer. Not to keep some link between myself and Paula, but because I fear this place is the last tangible link I have to my son.

Paula calls that night. She holds nothing back.

“The dog is shedding. What do you want from me?” is what I say.

She hangs up. I understand why she does it. I’m being difficult.

I look at a wall of pictures. Hunter’s a sweet, pumpkin-headed baby and a lean, pimply boy in hockey gear, before becoming a thick-necked, somber young man who was always in trouble. Then a soldier. Muscled. Stern. Unaware of how soon his dark fate would call on him.

Taft is chewing at the base of his tail, and I give him a tap with my foot to get him to stop.

I go into Hunter’s old room. The only thing in there is a bed and my hockey equipment. I coached all of Hunter’s teams despite knowing nothing about the game when he started. Now I play in a fifty-five-and-over league. There’s only four teams, which I think constitutes all of the men in Chicagoland who’ve made it this long and can still skate. The games are on Tuesday and Friday nights and checking and slap shots aren’t allowed. It got to a point where Hockey was all Hunter and I had to talk about. That’s probably why hockey is one of the only things in my life I still love to do. The equipment stinks to high-hell, which is why I’ve been keeping it in Hunter’s old room in sight of visitors and not in the garage.

After a game I take Taft for a walk around the neighborhood. We walk toward the deep notes of the bagpipers. The Egyptian Coptic Church set across the stream is empty but fills on Sundays with mini-vans, dull sedans, and the occasional boxy Mercedes or BMW. Dark-skinned men and women with burkas get out and herd children through the parking lot. Some of the women, frumpy, with covered faces have sharp yellow eyes, with hazel and soft brown flecks. When I can, I walk Taft by the parking lot before their services start at ten and noon and try to make eye contact with them. I like thinking how centuries of bloodlines on the other side of the world had to work that color into existence, and it makes me appreciative and anxious, as it is rare that I think of the other side of the world as anything but a place that takes and never returns.

It's mid-July, after a series of rainstorms, when it gets so hot at night, it's hard to sleep. I sit outside and tend to the fire pit to keep the bugs away. I'm sore from skating. My calves knot up. Ankles throb. The hum of the highway never stops. Every few minutes a plane rumbles overhead. Its lights cut a white cone from the dark sky. Maybe its because my time sitting next to Salt Creek is coming to an end that I really pay attention to the place.

In the summer, animals from Busse Woods pock the muddy banks as they follow the stream beneath the Interstate 90 overpass, wind under the Highway 53 ramp and climb the banks to wander the neighborhood. Deer, opossum, skunk, weasels, and raccoons that drive Taft wild at night. He senses or smells them out there. Though it is in the winter, when the stream freezes, and food in the woods is sparse, the coyotes use the ice path as their highway in and out of the edge of my property where Taft goes ballistic, giving them a primal growling fit that starts deep in his chest and reverberates through his whole body. He is inconsolable at these times and can't be dragged from the window when they are out there. Sometimes they come in twos and hunker close to each other under the evergreen. They wait and watch the house, listening to Taft and trying to sense what danger him and I watching mean to them.

When the fire starts to burn low with the last of my chord of wood, I wade into the stream and sneak through my neighbor's yard. I cut through the parking lot between the Coptic and Lutheran churches and cross Frontage Road to the section of wooden wall in disrepair. Some of the higher boards have fallen. I pick up two eight-foot wooden planks and carry them under my arm back to the fire, and I listen to see if the highway is any louder. For my next fire, tomorrow night, I'll bring a crowbar and pry loose new boards. I'll do this until I can hear every movement from the highway, every avenue of change. I know I should have done this earlier.

With Hunter. Shown him how his life could have led so many other ways. A sin on my part. The sin. I gave up on him too early. Wrote him off as troubled when he was just young, energetic, and unfocused. I suggested the Marines. Paula was against it. Every part of Paula was against it. At the root of Paula's heart she cannot forgive me that.

At nine in the morning the phone rings. A call right at the start of business hours seems ominous, and I'm correct. The machine takes the call. It's Paula's lawyer.

"Jack. It's Ethan Corwin. We need to talk about your availability to show the house and the state in which it's being shown. Rea Davis has another round of visitors today and it seems like it would be best if you caged the dog and weren't on the property. I'll call again later."

"Guess I better clear out today," I say to Taft. I'm afraid of Ethan Corwin. He has made life miserable and the less dealing with him the better.

I fry up a whole package of bacon, letting the fat sizzle and the grease fill the air. I feed the strips to Taft once they're cool. When the pan is full of grease I let it boil and evaporate so the house will smell for hours.

I pack up to go to Busse Woods and spend the day fishing. The woods are huge and consist of one giant interconnected body of forest-lined water that looks like eight good-sized lakes on a map. I set up along a concrete fishing wall—folding chair, small cooler, white five-gallon bucket, and three poles in the water at once.

Mid-morning, a man walks toward me. I can see it all over the guy before he's even fifty yards. Kmart shoes, worn jeans, a red flannel shirt poking out under a five-dollar gas station sweatshirt with the symbol for Route 66 screened on the front. He's balding with sad gray puffs of hair fighting it out for which direction to point. Two little poodles run behind him. One black. One white. The white dog already found a puddle, and its chest and legs are brown and wet. The man walks to the edge of the pond, nods, then strolls over, asks if I'm having luck, what I'm hoping for. I want to tell him I have very little hope left, though say nothing of the sort. He lingers. We talk. About bait—Muskie need expensive lures and are a hard fish to catch. Yes. They are in these waters. Night crawlers for bluegills. Why I'm using leeches—for bass.

There's a pause. A fish story swap. A pause. That stench of loneliness is between us. The little black dog sits at the edge of the water by his side. The white one is rutting through the swamped Russian olive grass.

This park is full of lonely men. Most probably weathered a long history of unforeseen diversions. I used to look at men like this one as a warning, a precautionary tale of how not to end up. Though now that my son vanished in a

gruesome blast in some sandbox on the other side of the world, my ex-wife rightly hates me for pushing him into the service, and I have no one to tell these things to, I count myself amongst his ilk.

When I'm done fishing, I pack up and drive home. In my driveway is Rea with the young couple I'd told about the crumbling wall. The woman is larger. Her belly now arches into a tight drum. With them is a large Mexican man wearing a tool belt and holding a meter-long level. He's telling them something about the house. I park on the side of the road up the street and watch what I'm certain is a conversation that will affect the rest of my life.

I think of ways to make the house look like a mess. Hook iodine to the tap water. Put food coloring in the toilet basins. If only I can make it to the fall; people don't buy houses in the fall.

That night, when it's dark, and bagpipers have stopped marching, I put on my hockey gloves and wade across the river with a crowbar and flashlight. I make sure there are no cars coming and use my light to hunt along the highway wall for loose nails. When I find one low to the ground I start prying it away. Nails groan. I keep at it, pulling until I've got four boards down and there's a gap in the wall large enough for me to squat down and walk through. The gloves keep splinters from driving under my skin as I carry the boards back to my fire pit.

Next to the new bonfire I catch the scent of bacon coming from Taft's fur.

I don't ever want to leave this place. Inside, the doorframes are marked with the pencil etchings of my son's growth charts. The walls are scuffed with his energies and games. I dipped into the crawl space to check the sump pump and found BB gun targets taped up where Hunter and his friend engaged in an insane sort of gunplay that involved violent tiny metals ricocheting off concrete. This place has marked time during his passage through the world and I already long for it like its been yanked away from me.

Ethan Corwin just called. It's Friday afternoon. An offer was submitted to Rea Davis.

"We're going to go ahead and take the offer," Ethan says, as if it's his life on the scales. "Paula has given her consent so we'll need a few signatures from you, and we'll go ahead and deal with their financing."

I make myself an early dinner. I have one of my old-men hockey games tonight. I eat a salad with ground meat on top. I drink plenty of water. When I'm finished eating I sit at my table looking out at the yard. My fork taps the plate. A small defeated action.

At the ice rink, I go through the warmup and feel slow and groggy. Though there is something about breathing the cold air, the *huwbiet-huwbiet* of ice scraping away beneath my skates, and the chaotic rattling of the boards I love. The first period goes by frantically. I'm all over the place. There's no order or grace to my movements.

With under seven minutes left in the second period, Terry Hofstadter scores for our team to tie the game. When I take the next face off I feel a manic excitement working itself up in me. Loose and alive, I let everything beyond the ice go. I skate after the puck when a wingman intercepts a wrist pass at our blue line and has a breakaway with only me to beat.

I skate right at him. A surge of anger rises, one that has been slowly spiraling loose to only now show itself. I am going to bowl him over despite the rules. But the winger stops, sets his skates, and lowers his shoulder to brace himself—all in one fluid movement. His braced shoulder pad lifts me off the ice and knocks all the air out of me. The back of my helmet crashes down hard, and I spin across the ice in a long three-sixty on my back before stopping in front of the goalie crease.

From the ice the rafters look like the ribs of a giant whale that has swallowed me. I can't breathe, and there's that familiar cold against the back of my neck. The goalie looks down on me, but his face is hidden beneath a crimson mask. A blackness. The glove of my right hand was knocked off, and my pointer finger rubs back and forth against the ice. I can hear voices calling my name, but no words rise from me in response. I'm empty, unavailable, far away. It occurs to me this is another of the ways we disappear.

My teammates help me off the ice, and I spend the rest of the game with my fingertips prodding at the swelling knot on the back of my skull. I'll be sore tonight when I'm home alone looking out the window with Taft.

The other almost-sixties skate back and forth in a patternless swirl. I shut my eyes, as even their slow pace makes me dizzy. The *huwbiet-huwbiet* of skates fill the air, and I see myself skating down Salt Creek alongside the coyotes. I open my eyes, and my vision is still unfocused. I feel undone. When I shut my eyes again I am getting in my son's little dingy and floating down Salt Creek, Taft is running along the banks as I flow into a new life. Though even half-concussed, I know it will look much different. More like a small U-Haul with the last of my belongings, pulling out onto the highway in search of the phantom of hope, that lurking shape-shifter I long to someday find again.

DEVIN MURPHY'S debut novel, *The Boat Runner*, is forthcoming with Harper Perennial/Harper Collins in the fall of 2017. His recent fiction appears in *The Chicago Tribune*, *Glimmer Train*, and *The Missouri Review*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *New Stories from the Midwest* as well as many others. He is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Bradley University.