

The Moth Presents The Art of the Story

Eye Spy

by Michaela Murphy

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Voted a favorite by The Moth audience



Michaela Murphy is a multi-talented Seattle-based actor, writer, director, producer, and storyteller. Listeners have heard her on WNYC's Studio 360, and seen her at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Lincoln Center. Her work as a playwright and actor has been featured at the Manhattan Theatre Club, La MaMa, and the Clinton White House. What follows is an adapted transcript of a story that Murphy told live at The Moth recounting a summer day in Hyannis, Massachusetts, and the seaside adventures of two remarkable Irish-American families.

I grew up in Providence, Rhode Island, and for my entire childhood, we were never more than fifty miles away from the core of our universe: the Kennedys. We were Irish, they were Irish; we were Catholic, they were Catholic. They were family. We were like the relatives that they never got to see, but we knew, you know, they were busy, and we knew that they loved us. So anything that was happening to them was also happening to us. And their tragedy plus our own tragedy was a lot.

So this one Thanksgiving, after dinner and a family fight at Grandma's house, we were in the car and driving home, and the radio was playing this tenth-anniversary commemoration of the J.F.K. assassination, and I'm sitting in the back seat, and I start to cry. And my sister Erin says, "Hey Dad, Michaela's crying." My father pulled that car right over to the shoulder of I-95, he stopped it, he turned around and looked at us, and with tears in his own eyes, he said, "Don't you *ever* be ashamed to cry for that man."

My parents grew up near Newport, and they got married in the same exact church as Jack and Jackie—St. Mary's. And my father gave jewelry to my mother that was the exact replica of the jewelry that Jack gave to Jackie. Every Saturday night after Mass, my family would be in the living room, and we'd be happily-ever-aftering to the original soundtrack of "Camelot." And every year during the seventies, my four aunts would take me and my two cousins on their dream vacation: A rented beach house, in Hyannis, on the very cove sharing beachfront with the Kennedy compound.

Every day for an entire week, my aunt Pat would roll up her sisters' hair, my aunts would apply sunscreen to the back of their necks, the backs of their hands, and the tops of their feet. Then they would drag their beach chairs down to the water's edge, and set them up perfectly—not facing the water, not into the sun for tanning, but perfectly for spying on the Kennedys.

They would sit there all day in the broiling sun with high-powered binoculars and keep a constant surveillance, and every year they'd have the same exact conversations. Around mid-morning the first sighting would be made, usually by my aunt Pat: "Ope, they got Rose out... Walkin'... Ethel looks drawn." And then about an hour later, my aunt Gert would say, "How old is Rose now?" And aunt Momo would make the calculations: "Well, let's see. Jack died in '63 when she was seventy-three, and Rose's birthday is two weeks this Thursday, and Joe died in '69, makin' her a widow at seventy-nine—so eighty-one." And then they'd break for lunch...

So after lobster and drawn butter and hosing us down, they'd all hustle back to their posts, and they'd watch. And every now and then, there'd be something they didn't know. "Hey, who's that, who's that, who's that?" So they'd draw out the family tree in the sand, they'd analyze it,

they'd come up with a profile, and they'd crack the code. "It's one o' Bobby's." Now, any mention of Bobby would always bring up the inevitable, "Ohhh, I just pray to God they don't tell poor, senile Rose about Bobby; it'll break her." So then the long afternoon stretch would end with the inevitable, annual observation, "You don't see Jackie much here." And then all of my aunts would drop their binoculars and look at each other meaningfully.

Now all of this meant that no one was paying any attention to me and my cousins in the water. Now, had an aunt (perhaps in an effort to ease a cramp in her prying neck) just sort of glanced towards the water, she might have seen us climbing into this tiny plastic, half-inflated boat; she might have cried out in alarm at the lack of oars and life vests; she might have had a conniption fit to see us shove off and drift into the violent riptide that would sweep us, within five minutes, out to the open sea and the Nantucket-bound ferry. But an aunt didn't, and we did.

It all happened so fast that we were swept away, and it wasn't until we could make out the specific features of the ferry passengers that we realized we were really far from shore. We were so far from shore that my aunts were now reduced to four hopping dots. It was like "Gilligan's Island" for real. So an Atlantic swell crashes over our heads, and as soon as the water clears out of our eyes, a powerboat pulls up out of nowhere. And in this powerboat are—David and Michael Kennedy. So David and Michael pull us up into the boat, and we are like, "Oh, my God, we are saved by a powerboat." So the powerboat sends us back to shore, and we're psyched 'cause we're saved, until we start to watch the four hopping dots morph back into our four crazed, livid aunts. We are so gonna get it.

Now, my family under any circumstances has this really weird thing (well, they *each* have, like, their own weird thing) about yelling and getting into huge trouble. Like my aunt Gert, she gets so freaked out that all she can do is yell out our addresses. Like, "Eileen and Kevin! 275 Hooper Street!", "Michaela! 180 Asylum Road!" (I swear to God, I grew up on Asylum Road. Yes, a very telling piece of my childhood.)

And then my aunt Pat would say these things that were like actually kinda nice things, but she'd say them like they were death threats: "Yeah, I'll save you from drowning. You get on that beach towel and you lie in that sun. *Now!*" Or she'd say, "I'm gonna buy you a birthday present. You eat that cake. *Now!*" So we knew that this was what was coming. The Kennedy boys didn't. So they're vivaciously tanned, and they pull up to the shoreline, and we brace ourselves.

Now, what happens is, our aunts are out of their minds, they're ready to flay us. But when they see us in the same boat as the Kennedys, it's like they don't have the emotional capacity to handle it. They kinda snap. They're kinda like freakin' out to yell at us, but they start fake smiling, trying to act all normal. My aunt Momo, she takes on this Kennedyesque way of speaking, which is sort of halfway between Katharine Hepburn and the Queen of England. And we're like, looking at them, like, "What are you guys doing?" And they're smiling the smile, but when they smile at us, it's like, "You just wait..." But they're like, "Oh, David, oh, Michael, thank you, thank you, thank you."

They're not mad at us for almost drowning. They're mad at us because the Kennedys had to save us. Like, "Don't those people have enough trouble? Now you?" It's as if our almost drowning was yet another Kennedy tragedy. So these poor boys finally pull and pry themselves away from my aunts, they get back on the boat, and they're leaving, and my aunt Momo's going, "Please give our best to your grandmothah."

And now it's time for our "for real" punishment, which was that we, for the rest of vacation, had to stay on the beach because we did not have any respect for the water. So it's about a hundred degrees out, and after about a half hour of whining and fighting, and like, emptying out all the Coppertone, and kicking sand, we break my aunt Pat's last nerve and she says, "All right. You can go in the water, but only up to your knees." So we're happy for a moment, and we get in the water and realize how boring "up to your knees" is, and then we get the great idea of having chicken fights.

So we start to have chicken fights, but it's kinda weird because there's only three of us, but we're doin' the best we can to have a chicken fight like that, and like, knock each other off into the water so we get fully immersed. And then my uncle Al, who never, ever played with us, *ever*, comes into the water to play chicken fights with us. He puts his daughter, my cousin Eileen, up on his shoulders, and then I get up on my cousin Kevin's shoulders, and we're having chicken fights, and it's like, actual family fun for a moment. We're, you know, hitting each other, falling in the water, and then I take my foot and I accidentally kick the side of my uncle Al's head really, really hard, and his eyeball pops out of his head and falls into the water. It pops out of his head. And it sinks.

Eileen, Kevin, and I are in instant, complete shock. Right this minute there is still a part of me that is on that beach, screaming. It's like, Oh my God! We had no idea that he had a *fake eye*. We didn't even know that you could have a fake eye. Why would you have a fake eye?

They didn't tell us Uncle Al had a fake eye 'cause they didn't want us braggin' to the whole neighborhood, so they didn't tell us, so we didn't know, and like, later on, you know, there was Columbo and so on, but this was way before that. We had no idea.

So we're all standing there and it's like so horrible, I can't even like, I'm like "Oh my God"... And my cousins Eileen and Kevin are staring at me with complete hate: "You *broke* our dad." And my uncle Al is standing there and he's got the lid open, so you can like see inside the socket where now it's just like skin with the eyeball gone, and like, you cannot just say, "*I'm sorry*" to someone that you just...

So I don't know what to do. And my aunt Pat is hysterically screaming because that eyeball cost top dollar. It was a special eye, engineered to keep up with the other one. And now I had just better pray that vacation was over and that they got that deposit back, because now they were going to have to buy a brand-new top-dollar eye that was not in the budget.

So I just didn't know what to do. I was like, "My life is over. I am no longer Michaela. I am now Murph's girl who kicked Al's eye out at the Cape. And it's awful, and everybody's just crying and pointing at me, and now my other aunts are gettin' in on it and the who's-to-blame part of the conversation's happening.

So I just kinda back off into the water. I'm kinda like going back and like regressin' to where life as I once knew it had ended. And I just stand there and, like, I kinda wish I had drowned. And I kinda wish the Kennedys hadn't saved me. And I bend off into the waves and I just start sifting through sand and shells and pebbles, and it's totally ridiculous, but I will never stop looking for this eye. I am gonna look forever. And I keep looking and looking, and I'm sifting through, and all of a sudden there is an eyeball in my palm, staring right at me. And so I scream, and I drop it back, and it sinks back into the water. But now we know it's possible.

So everybody gets back into the water, and now we're all sifting through and sifting through, and I pray to God for no more future happiness until we find this eye. And I also kinda pray that it not be me that finds it this time. So after like an hour, my cousin Kevin finds the eye and he holds it up in triumph. He does not let go. And my uncle Al takes the eye, he like washes it off, and just pops it back in. And then he kinda like tests it, you know, and it's like keepin' up with the other one, so it's workin' still, and now it's the weirdest thing because... now we know it's a *fake eye*. And now that you know it's a fake eye, it totally looks like a fake eye, and I can't believe that I never noticed it was a fake eye before.

So now vacation's back on, everybody gets back into their beach chairs, and they start to settle down to begin telling the story over and over like a million times about what I just did, and I have not really fully reintegrated back into the family yet.

I'm kinda standing apart. And I notice that there actually has been a group of people who have been watching this whole thing. And then I see something that I didn't notice; that *no one* noticed. And that's that, the two Kennedy kids, David and Michael, had taken a walk on the beach, and I can tell just by the look on their faces that they had stood there and seen the entire episode; that they had been there watching *us*.