

Mrs. Murphy's Law

Everyone has heard of Murphy's Law and, perhaps smiled about the essential wisdom contained therein: "Anything that can go wrong, will." My life, however, has been governed by the lesser-known Mrs. Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong, will...*while your husband is away.*"

Like most things worth knowing, I learned this from my mother. My mom told me the facts of life shortly after our furnace blew up in the wee hours of a bitter Michigan winter night, while my father was in Pasadena on business. At my then-tender age, I regarded this bit of wisdom skeptically and set it aside for future verification.

By the time I got married, I had begun to suspect that Mrs. Murphy was on to something. The overhead stories of women's mishaps always seem to end with some variation of "... and, of course, (the husband) was (somewhere else)!" It was not long after my own wedding that I started to accumulate empirical data.

I married my high school sweetheart over Spring Break during our sophomore year of college. In Michigan, calling March "Spring" is optimistic at best. But what our mid-school-year wedding may have lacked in seasonal ambiance, it made up for by saving us the expense and inconvenience of a honeymoon.

Immediately after moving into our tiny apartment in University Married Housing, my husband took a job as the night manager at a nearby hotel. At the time, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable solution to the dilemma of concurrently going to college and paying rent.

That first night of his new job, I kissed my darling husband goodbye and went to bed alone in this strange place. Sleep was elusive and I got up about an hour later. As I switched on

the kitchen light, the sink, stove, counters, and walls rapidly changed color from a dark golden brown to their more familiar colors. In my ignorance, the realization came to me slowly: cockroaches. The kitchen was teeming with the little beasts, a matter of feet from where I slept. Having no chemicals on hand, my only weapons were light and a rolled-up newspaper. I spent the next six hours sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed with every single light on. As I scanned the walls for strays, I could not help but feel “Where is HE when I really need him!?!” I knew it was totally unfair but, hey, he did abandon me in my hour of need. As a postscript – I did eventually learn to sleep with the ever-present fragrance of insecticide and Lysol, and just a few lights on. We also discovered that even 20-year-old men need to sleep. Who knew?

After the birth of our first son, the Mrs. Murphy incidents became almost routine. Storms, power outages, and failing appliances are hardly worth mentioning. Whenever I related the mishap du jour to my co-workers, they automatically asked “Oh, and where was your husband?”

Late in my second pregnancy, we afforded ourselves the luxury of a weekly housekeeper. One day returning to our somewhat rural home from work, 8 months pregnant with a 2 ½-year-old toddler in tow, I was greeted by a short note from the housekeeper. Anticipating a routine subject like the status of furniture polish, I was chagrined to read: “I did not clean around the piano because there is a large snake next to it.”

Of course, the “large snake” was no longer by the piano. Gripping my young son's hand much too tightly in one hand and a broom in the other, we cautiously searched for the snake. Finally, we found it in the basement, cozily napping under a saddle. The housekeeper was not kidding about the size! Being ignorant about snakes, very pregnant, and with a small child, I did not feel prepared to confront the intruder alone. An unusual proliferation of rattlesnakes in our

community was recently front-page news so I thought that perhaps the police department would have some useful information for me, like clues to determine whether it was a rattlesnake without getting too close (this was pre-internet, obviously). Calling the non-emergency police number, they could not help in identification or referral. They did, however, send over a patrol car. The responding officers were kind enough to gingerly wrangle the snake into a paper grocery bag with garden implements and take him away.

My little son was SO excited to see a REAL police car and meet two REAL policemen! However, my poor husband arrived home early from his business trip to find a patrol car in his driveway. I remember trying to calm him down while our son was excitedly telling him about our grand adventure with “a really big snake and REAL policemen!”

Then there was the first time that my husband was going to Europe shortly after our second son was born. At least we had time to prepare so prepare we did! We made sure that I had adequate stores of all the essentials: diapers, apple juice, and peanut butter. My car was gassed up. Meals were prepared and frozen. Laundry was completely current, perhaps for the first and only time ever. My mother was even going to come over so that I could get at least one shower while he was gone that did not involve a mad dash of soap and shampoo with crying children semi-secured on the other side of the bathroom door.

As my husband scurried to finish his last-minute packing, I came down with the flu. The phrase “came down with” is entirely inadequate; a better phrase might be “was taken down by”, with corresponding mental images of a lion and doomed gazelle. Fever, uncontrolled chills, body aches, and overwhelming nausea; interrupted only by panicked sprints to the bathroom.

I called my Mom and told her that exposing her to the virus might not be the best idea and perhaps she should not come. My heart sank when she agreed. Tentatively my husband offered "I could cancel my trip....". I knew he could not. "We'll be fine," I said, trying to convey a confidence I did not feel. "Really."

Our three-year-old son was hysterical. Daddy was leaving for a *whole week* (almost forever) and Mommy was apparently on death's doorstep. Either event would have been traumatic but, together, they signaled the probable end of his world. Naturally, the baby assumed that big brother was right about the impending catastrophe. If crying was the appropriate response, then he was surely doing his part! As my husband pulled his suitcase out the door, I managed a feeble "Have a good trip." and bitterly thought of Mrs. Murphy.

As the incidents piled up, I had to wonder: "Is it just me?" I mean, how many people have snakes in their house anyway? Or yellow jackets chewing through the drywall over the baby's crib. Or trees falling directly in front of the garage door. Or furnace fuel lines plugging up during a winter storm – all while hubby is away on business? Of course, the minor inconveniences of power outages, croup, chickenpox, and closed daycare centers invariably occurred while he was suffering through a week-long sales meeting at some sunny resort. (He quickly learned to never-ever complain about the food.) I came to realize that Mrs. Murphy was the closest thing to a fairy godmother that I was ever going to have.

Our boys are long since grown and fully engaged in their own busy careers. One day, my daughter-in-law called me from Florida. She was alone in the middle of an intense tropical storm, complete with near-hurricane force winds and rain measured in inches per hour. The power was out, the patio was flooded, branches were down, and the pool was overflowing like a waterfall. Having grown up in the Big City, this was a new and unsettling experience. My son

was, of course, somewhere on an airplane. “Well,” I said, “There is not much you can do except unplug the electronics and keep the refrigerator closed.” Then I asked, “Have I ever told you about Mrs. Murphy?”