

What's the Worst That Could Happen?

by Bruce Coville

If thirteen is supposed to be an unlucky number, what does it mean that we are forced to go through an entire year with that as our age? I mean, you would think a civilized society could just come up with a way for us to skip it.

Of course, good luck and I have rarely shared the same park bench. Sometimes I think Murphy's law – you know, “If something can go wrong, it will” – was invented just for me. I suppose the fact that my name is Murphy Murphy might have something to do with that feeling.

Yeah, you read it right: Murphy Murphy. It's like a family curse. The last name I got from my father, of course. The first name came down from my mother's side, where it is a tradition for the firstborn son. You would think my mother might have considered that before she married Dad, but love makes fools of us all. I guess. Anyway, the fact that I got stuck with the same name coming and going, so to speak, shows that my parents are either spineless (my theory) or have no common sense (my sister's theory).

I would like to note that no one has ever apologized to me for this name. “I think it's lovely,” says my mother – which, when you consider it, would seem to support my sister's theory. Anyway, you can see that right from the beginning of my life, if something could go wrong, it did.

Okay, I suppose it could have been worse. I could have been born dead or with two heads or something. On the other hand, as I lie here in my hospital bed trying to work out exactly how I got here, there are times when I wonder if being born dead might not have been the best thing.

To begin with, I want to say here and now that Mikey Farnsworth should take at least part of the blame for this situation. This, by the way, is true for many of the bad things that have happened in my life, from the paste-eating incident in first grade through the bus fire-drill situation last year, right up to yesterday afternoon, which was sort of the Olympics of Bad Luck as far as I'm concerned. What's amazing is that somehow Mikey ends up coming out of these things looking perfectly fine. He is, as my grandfather likes to say, the kind of guy who can fall in a manure pile and come out smelling like a rose.

The one I am not going to blame is Tiffany Grimsley, though if I hadn't had this stupid crush on her, it never would have happened.

Okay, I want to stop and talk about this whole thing of having a crush. Let me say right up front that it is very confusing and not something I am used to. When it started, I was totally baffled. I mean, I don't even like girls, and all of a sudden I keep thinking about one of them? Give me a break!

In case it hasn't happened to you yet, let me warn you. Based on personal experience, I can say that while there are many bad things about having a crush, just about the worst of them is the stupid things you will do because of it.

Okay, let's back up here.

I probably wouldn't even have known I had a crush to begin with if Mikey hadn't informed me of this fact. “Man, you've got it bad for Tiffany,” he says one day when we are poking around in the swamp behind his house.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. At the same time, my cheeks begin to burn as if they are on fire. Startled, I lift my foot to tie my shoe, which is a trick I learned in an exercise magazine and that has become sort of a habit. At the moment, it is mostly an excuse to look down.

What the heck is going on here? I think.

Mikey laughs. "Look at you blush, Murphy! There's no point in trying to hide it. I watched you drooling over her in social studies class today. And you've only mentioned her, like, sixteen times since we got home this afternoon."

"Well, sure, but that's because she's a friend," I say, desperately trying to avoid the horrible truth. "We've known each other since kindergarten, for Pete's sake."

Mikey laughs again, and I can tell I'm not fooling him. "What am I going to do?" I groan. He shrugs. "Either you suffer in silence, or you tell her you like her."

Is he nuts? If you tell a girl you like her, it puts you totally out in the open. I mean, you've got no place to hide. And there are really only two possible responses you're going to get from her: (a) She likes you, too, which the more you think about it, the more unlikely it seems; or (b) anything else, which is, like, totally, utterly humiliating. I'm sure girls have problems of their own. But I don't think they have any idea of the sheer terror a guy has to go through before any boy-girl stuff can get started.

I sure hope this gets easier with time, because I personally really don't understand how the human race has managed to survive this long, given how horrifying it is to think about telling a girl you like her.

Despite Mikey's accusation, I do not think I have actually drooled over Tiffany during social studies class. But it is hard not to think about her then, because she sits right in front of me. It's the last class of the day, and the October sunlight comes in slantwise and catches in her golden hair in a way that makes it hard to breathe.

It does not help that eighth-grade social studies is taught by Herman Fessenden, who you will probably see on the front of the *National Enquirer* someday as a mass murderer for boring twenty-six kids to death in a single afternoon. It hasn't happened yet, but I'm sure it's just a matter of time.

I spend the entire weekend thinking about what Mikey has said, and I come up with a bold plan, which is to pass Tiffany a note asking if she wants to grab a slice of pizza at Angelo's after school. I am just getting up my nerve to do it – there are only five minutes of class left – when Mr. F. says, "So, what do you think the queen should have done then, Murphy?"

How am I supposed to know? But I blush and don't hand the note to Tiffany after all, which wouldn't have been so bad, except that Butch Coulter saw I had it and grabs it on the way out of class, and I have to give him the rest of my week's lunch money to get it back.

Tuesday I try a new tactic. There's a little store on the way to school where you can pick up candy and gum and stuff, and I get some on the way to school and then kind of poke Tiff in the back during social studies class, which is about the only time I see her, to ask if she wants a piece of gum. Only before she can answer, Mr. Fessenden comes up from behind and snatches the whole pack out of my hand. So that was that.

Then, on Wednesday, it's as if the gods are smiling on me, which not something I am used to. Tiffany grabs my arm on the way out of social studies and says, "Can I talk to you for a second, Murphy?"

"Sure," I say. This is not very eloquent, but it is better than the first thought that crossed my mind, which is, "Anytime, anywhere, any moment of the day." It is also better than, "Your words would be like nectar flowering into a hungry mouths of my ears," which was a line I had come up with for a poem I was writing about her.

She actually looks a little shy, though what this goddess-on-Earth has to be shy about is more than I can imagine.

She hands me a folded-over set of papers, and my heart skips a beat. Can this be a love letter? If so, it's really long one.

"I wrote this skit for drama club, and I thought maybe you would do it with me next Friday. I think you'd be just right for the part."

My heart starts pounding. While it seems unlikely that the part is that of a barbarian warrior prince, just doing it means I will have an excuse to spend time with Tiffany. I mean, we'll have to rehearse and ... well, the imagination staggers.

"Yes!" I say, ignoring the facts that (a) I have not yet read the script and (b) I have paralyzing stage fright.

She gives me one of those sunrise smiles of hers, grabs my arm and gives it a squeeze, and says, "Thanks. This is going to be fun." Then she's gone, leaving me with a memory of her fingers on my arm and a wish that I had started pumping iron when I was in first grade, so my biceps would have been ready for this moment.

Mikey moves in a second later. "Whoa," he says, nudging me with his elbow. "Progress!" What did she say?"

"She wants me to do a skit with her."

"He shakes his head. "Too bad. I thought maybe you had a chance. How'd she take it when you told her no?"

I look at him in surprise. "I didn't. I said I would do it."

Mikey looks even more surprised. "Murphy, you can't go onstage with her. You can't even move when you get onstage. Don't you remember what happened in fifth grade?"

As if I could forget. Not only was it one of the three most humiliating moments of my life, but according to my little brother, it has become legendary at Westcott Elementary. Here's the short version: Mrs. Carmichael had cast me as George Washington in our class play, and I was, I want to tell you, pretty good during rehearsals. But when they opened the curtain and I saw the audience...well, let's just say that when my mother saw the look on my face, she actually let out a scream. She told me later she thought I was having a heart attack. As for me, my mouth went drier than day-old toast, and the only reason I didn't bolt from the stage was that I couldn't move my arms or legs. Heck, I couldn't even move my fingers.

I couldn't even squeak!

Finally, they had to cancel the performance. Even after the curtains were closed, it took two teachers and a janitor to carry me back to the classroom.

"This time will be different," I say.

Mikey snorts.

I know he is right. "Oh, man, what am I gonna do?" I wail.

"Come on, let's look at the script. Maybe all you have to do is sit there and she'll do all the acting."

No such luck. The script, which is called "Debbie and the Doofus," is very funny.

It also calls for me to say a lot of lines.

It also calls for me to act like a complete dork.

Immediately, I begin to wonder why Tiffany thinks I would be just right for this role.

"Maybe she imagines you're a brilliant actor," says Mikey.

He is trying to be helpful, but to tell the truth, I am not sure which idea is worse: that Tiffany thinks I am a dork or that she thinks I am a brilliant actor.

"What am I going to do?" I wail again.

"Maybe your parents will move before next week," says Mikey, shaking his head. "Otherwise, you're a dean man walking."

I ask, but my parents are not planning on moving.

I study the script as if it is the final exam for life, which as far as I'm concerned, it is. After two days I know not only my lines, but all of Tiffany's lines, too, as well as the lines for Laurel Gibbon, who is going to be playing the waitress at the little restaurant where we go for our date.

My new theory is that I will enjoy rehearsals and the excuse they give me to be with Tiffany, and then pray for a meteor to strike me before the day of the performance.

The first half of the theory actually seems to work. We have two rehearsals – one at school and one in Tiffany's rec room. At the first one she is very impressed by the fact that I know my lines already. "This is great, Murphy!" she says, which makes me feel as if I have won the lottery.

At the second rehearsal I actually make Laurel, who is perhaps the most solemn girl in the school, laugh. This is an amazing sound to me, and I find that I really enjoy it. Like Tiffany, Laurel has been in our class since kindergarten. Only I never noticed her much because, well, no one ever notices Laurel much, on account of she basically doesn't talk. I wondered at first why Tiffany had cast her, but it turns out they are in the same church group and have been good friends for a long time.

Sometimes I think the girls in our class have a whole secret life that I don't know about.

Time becomes very weird. Sometimes it seems as if the hours are rushing by in a blur, the moment of the performance hurtling toward me. Other times the clock seems to poke along like a sloth with chronic fatigue syndrome. Social studies class consists of almost nothing but staring at the sunshine in Tiffany's hair and flubbing the occasional question that Mr. Fessenden lobs at me. Some days I think he asks me questions out of pure meanness. Other days he leaves me alone, and I almost get the impression he feels sorry for me.

Mikey and I talk about the situation every night. "No meteor yet," he'll say, shaking his head.

"What am I gonna do?" I reply, repeating the question that haunts my days. I can't possibly tell Tiffany I can't do this.

"Maybe you could be sick that day?" says Mikey.

I shake my head. "If I let her down, I will hate myself forever."

Mikey rolls his eyes. "Maybe you should run away from home." He suggests, not very helpfully.

Finally, we do come up with a plan, which is that Mikey will stay in the wings to prompt me in case the entire script falls out of my head. I don't know if this will really do much good, since if I freeze with terror, mere prompting will not be of any use. On the other hand, knowing Mikey will be there calms me down a little. It's like having a life jacket.

Ha! Little do I know what kind of life jacket he will turn out to be.

To my dismay, I have not been able to parlay my time working on the skit with Tiffany into anything bigger. This is partly because she is the busiest person in the eighth grade, with more clubs and committees and activities than any normal person could ever be involved with. It is also because I am stupid about this kind of thing and don't have the slightest clue how to do it. So I treasure my memory of the two rehearsals and, more than anything else, the sound of her laughing at some of what I have done.

Despite my prayers, Friday arrives. I don't suppose I really expected God to cancel it, though I would have been deeply appreciative if he had. I go through the day in a state of cold

terror. The drama club meeting is after school. Members of the club have invited their friends, their families, and some teachers to come see the skits. There are going to be four skits in all. Tiffany, Laurel, and I are scheduled to go last, which gives me more time to sweat and worry.

Mikey is backstage with us, but Tiffany does not know why. I tell her he came because he is my pal. Getting him aside, I check to make sure he has the script.

At 2:45 Mrs. Whitcomb, the drama club coach, comes back to wish us luck. She makes a little speech, which she ends with, "Okay, kids – break a leg!"

This, of course, is how people wish each other luck in theater. According to my mother, the idea is that you're not going to get your wish anyway, so you wish for the thing you don't want and you may get the thing you do want instead.

I suddenly wonder if this is what I have been doing wrong all my life.

On the other hand, Tiffany is standing next to me, so that is one wish that is continuing to come true.

"Are you excited" she asks?

"You have no idea," I answer, with complete honesty.

Laurel, who is standing on the other side of me, whispers, "I'm scared."

"Don't worry, you'll be fine." I reply.

I am fairly confident this is true, since I expect to make such an ass of myself that no one will notice anything else anyway. Inside me, a small voice is screaming, "What were you thinking of you moron? You are going to humiliate yourself in front of all these people, including the girl you would cut out your heart for, who will be even more humiliated than you are because it's her skit that you are messing up! Run away! Run away!"

If I could get my hands on this small voice, I would gladly beat it to a bloody pulp. Instead, I keep taking deep breaths and remind myself of how funny I was during the rehearsals.

The first skit goes up. I think it's funny, but at first no one laughs. This terrifies me all over again. Then someone snickers. A moment later someone else lets out a snort. Pretty soon everyone is laughing. Clearly, it takes people a while to get warmed up when they are trying to have fun.

At first the sound of that laughter is soothing. But it takes only a few minutes for me to get terrified by it. What if they don't laugh at *our* skit? Even worse, what if they laugh for the wrong reasons? What if Tiffany is totally humiliated, and it's all my fault?

I go back to wanting to die.

The second skit goes up and dies in my place. It just lies onstage, stinking the place up like a week-old fish. It's as boring as last month's newspaper. In fact, it's almost as boring as Mr. Fessenden, which I would not have thought possible. I feel a surge of hope. We can't look worse than this. In fact, next to it we'll seem like geniuses. Too bad we can't go on right away!

Unfortunately, we have to wait for the third skit, which turns out to be brilliant, which makes me want to kill the people who are in it. Now we'll be compared to them instead of the dead fish of that second skit.

The curtain closes.

"Our turn," whispers Tiffany. "Break a leg, Murphy."

"Break a leg," I murmur back. Then, so Laurel won't feel left out, I say the same thing to her as we pick up the table that is our main prop and move it onto the stage. Tiffany is right behind us with a pair of chairs. Once they're in place, we scurry to our positions, Tiffany and me stage right, and Laurel stage left.

My stomach clenches. Cold sweat starts out on my brow.

"Murphy!" hisses Tiffany. "Your shoelace!"

I glance down. I have forgotten to untie it, which is the key to one of my first funny bits. Out of habit, I lift my foot to take care of the lace. At that instant the curtain opens, which startles me so much that I lose my balance and fall over, landing onstage in full view of the audience.

There they are. The enemy. The people who are going to stare at me, judge me, whisper about me tomorrow. I am so frozen with terror I cannot move. I just lie there looking at them.

And then the laugh begins. My temperature goes in two directions, my blood turning to ice at the same time that the heat rises to my face. I have a long moment of terror – well, it feels like a long moment; according to Mikey it was less than two seconds – while I think that this is it, I will never stand up again, never come to school again, never leave my house again. I will ask whoever finally picks me up to carry me home and put me in the attic. My parents will have to shove my meals through a slot in the door because I will never be able to face another living human being.

Love saves the day. “Murphy, are you all right?” hisses Tiffany.

For the sound of that voice, I would do anything – even get back on my feet.

And then, the second miracle. Some brilliant portion of my brain realizes that this is a comedy and I have just started us off with a big laugh. I stand at the edge of the stage to do a fake knock. In rehearsal, I only mimed it. Now, for some reason, I say loudly, “Knock-knock. Knockity-knock-knock.”

To my surprise, the audience finds this funny. Another laugh.

Tiffany comes to the door, and we go through our opening business, which establishes that she is prim and proper and I am a total idiot, which doesn’t take much acting because it is pretty much real life anyway. But something is happening. I’m not making up lines, but I am making bigger gestures, broader moves, weirder voices than I did in rehearsal. People are howling. Tiffany’s eyes are dancing, and I can see that she is trying not to laugh. I am feeling like a genius.

We get to the imaginary restaurant. Laurel comes out to take our order, and I have the same effect on her.

I am starting to feel as if I’m having an out-of-body experience. Who is this funny person, making everyone laugh? How long can it go on? Can I keep it going, keep cranking up the jokes, hold on to this glorious lightning bolt I’m riding?

Laurel disappears to get our order. I fake blowing my nose on the cloth napkin, then inspecting it to see the results. I act as if I am fascinated by my imaginary boogers. Tiffany acts as if she is repulsed, but I can see she is hardly able to keep from bursting into laughter – especially when I hand the napkin across the table so she can examine it, too.

The audience is just about screaming. I am beginning to think that this kind of laughter is even better than the sound of Tiffany’s voice.

Laurel comes back with our “order” which, because this is a skit and we are on a low budget, is a plate of Hostess cupcakes. Chocolate.

I am supposed to eat in a disgusting way. The script does not specify how. Still riding my wave of improvisation inspiration, I pick up a cupcake and stuff the entire thing in my mouth. Tiffany’s eyes widen, and she turns her head to hide the laugh she can’t hold in. Her shoulders are shaking. This is too good to be true.

I deliver my next line – which is about how beautiful she is – with bits of chocolate spewing out. It’s disgusting but hilarious. Tiffany has tears streaming down her cheeks from trying to hold in her laughter.

Desperate to keep the riff going, I cram another entire cupcake in my mouth.

This is when disaster strikes. Suddenly, I discover that I can't breathe because there is a chocolate logjam in my throat. I only need a minute, I think, and I'll get this. I try to give my next line, but nothing comes out. Tiffany looks alarmed. The audience is still laughing, but the laughter is starting to die down, as if some of them realize I am in trouble.

Which is when Mikey comes barreling on stage from behind me, screaming, "He's choking! He's choking!" Then he grabs me around the waist and jabs his fists into my belly.

I've been Heimliched!

Those of you who know about the Heimlich maneuver will remember that basically it forces the air out of your lungs, blowing whatever is blocking your breathing out of your mouth.

Those of you who have been staging this in your mind as you read will remember who is directly across from me.

Those of you with even minimal powers of prediction will know what happens next. An unholy mix of partially chewed Hostess chocolate cupcakes spews out my mouth and spatters all over Tiffany.

I am filled with deeper horror than any I have ever known. Wrenching my way out of Mikey's grasp, I bolt around the table to clean her off.

Unfortunately, the table is close to the edge of the stage. Too close. Tripping over my untied shoelace, I hurtle headfirst into the darkness.

My body makes some very unpleasant sounds as it lands.

Okay, I probably could have accepted the broken leg.

I might even have been able to live with the memory of the look on Tiffany's face.

But when the ambulance guys came and put me on a stretcher, and everyone stood there watching as they rolled me out of the school, and Mikey followed after them to tell me that my fly had been open during the entire fiasco, I really thought that was too much.

Anyway, that's how I ended up in this hospital bed, staring at my right leg, which is up in traction.

Tiffany came to visit a while ago. That would have been wonderful, except she brought her boyfriend, Chuck. He goes to another school and is old enough to drive.

Something inside me died when she introduced him.

To make things worse (and what doesn't?), it turns out that Chuck was in the audience yesterday.

"You were brilliant, man," he says. "At least, until the part where it all fell to pieces."

I want to shove a Hostess cupcake down his throat.

After they are gone, Mikey shows up.

"Tough luck, Murphy," he says, looking at my cast.

I try to remember that he is my friend and really thought he was saving my life when he Heimliched me.

It is not easy.

"Cheer up," he says. "It couldn't get worse than this."

He's lucky my leg is in traction and I can't get out of bed. He is also lucky I don't have a cupcake on me.

After Mikey leaves, I make two decisions: (a) I am going to change my name and (b) I never want to be thirteen again as long as I live.

There is another knock on my door.

"Hello, Murphy," says a soft voice.

It's Laurel.

She smiles shyly. "Can I come in?"

I've never noticed how pretty she is when she smiles. For a brief moment I think life may not be so bad after all.

I am fairly certain, however, that this is a delusion.

After all, my name is still Murphy Murphy.

And I am still thirteen years old.

I don't even want to think about what might happen next week.