



*The Enigma of Iris Murphy:  
Stories*

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***For my sister, Megan Frances Millea,  
in Charlotte, North Carolina***

This is a work of fiction.  
Surely you know the rest: any resemblance  
to persons living or dead is coincidental.

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brothers and sisters, we need 'em.

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## *Pardon Palimpsest*

THEY SMELL IRIS MURPHY BEFORE THEY SEE HER.

She wears a faint scent that could best be described as clean and comforting and probably expensive and not sold at Target. Or at least this is how Kenneth Yellow Dog has always thought of her perfume. It wafts into the visitation area of the Nebraska State Penitentiary in Lincoln announcing her. The convicted and their guests pause to inhale, momentarily stopping their conversations. Seconds later when she walks into the room heads turn.

“The Bird, The Bird,” they say in astonishment to one another.

The convicts all know that this is a rare sighting. Rumor has it, that she is afraid of prisons and that bars and razor wire send her into panic attacks. What they know about Iris Murphy is what they’ve heard about her. Some somebody telling another somebody a story that another guy’s cousin swears to be the truth about this public defender. They believe it, though. For them it is immutable, a fact, a law of the physics that defines the gravity of their world. In this way, as in many ways, felons are like all other human beings. Their beliefs are based on stories.

When a visitor shouts out,

“Hey, Ms. Murphy!”

This draws a wary prison guard’s attention.

“You know the rules, keep to your own conversation,” he barks in warning at the speaker and to everyone else in the room. “This ain’t the





neighborhood.”

When the guard looks away Iris Murphy greets the offending voice with a slight nod of her head and a small wave. The woman smiles back at Ms. Murphy and then gives the uniformed man’s back the stink-eye, before returning to the story she was telling about a cousin and a baby. The listener is her boyfriend, a once bungling burglar who decided to kiss a sleeping teenage girl, rather than just steal the cash he had found in her parents’ bedroom. She awakened and screamed before hitting him. He then did her unforgettable harm. Now he is a rapist. His girlfriend blames it on the methamphetamines.

With a slight twist of his neck, Kenneth watches the scene unfold. He knows Iris Murphy to be rare and good, beautiful and generous, and inscrutable. Dressed in a tailored pink suit and pearls she appears to have stepped out of a time machine, a woman of 1956, or 1961, who has materialized into late April of 2012. He knows that her patent leather pumps are undoubtedly Italian in origin and that she has chosen a wine-colored lipstick in a matte finish because it brings out the contrast in her pale skin and silver hair.

“I would fade away without the lipstick, Kenneth,” Iris once told him. He was walking her to her car after a Democratic Party meeting.

Ms. Murphy’s style does not matter to the felons. What matters to them is her ethic. After over thirty years at the Douglas County Public Defender’s Office in Omaha, Ms. Murphy still works hard. She doesn’t lecture her clients. She knows everyone at the Courthouse, and she knows what to plead and who to cajole. Her manners are impeccable. She treats homeless men and political wives with the same kind courtesy. Before judges she wears conservative suits tailored to please them. Cops call her “The Bird.” It is an apt comment of disrespect referring to the plumage of her clothes outside of the Douglas County Courthouse where she dresses like Audrey Hepburn or Jacqueline Kennedy and never Marilyn Monroe.





An ex-con can see Ms. Murphy from a distance on Farnam Street, or in the Old Market, wearing a Pucci dress or a Chanel suit. (Kenneth knows this because he saw Iris Murphy long before he met her.) No felon, however, will ever care about the provenance of Iris's clothing. For they dress in jeans, T-shirts, and basketball shoes all bought at Walmart, or in a thrift store. If they aspire to something better, and probably some of them do, they will never announce it. An eye toward style would be considered different, almost queer, and perception is everything to them. What they like is the pop of the color in Ms. Murphy's threads and that she's pretty, even if she's old. For them her beauty feels like an act of defiance. She doesn't care about what the cops think of her, or her clothing, and not caring is basically the convict's credo. The very sight of her breeds hope in their hearts, that thing of feathers. So for the felons, Ms. Murphy is "The Bird" as well.

There is a collective intake of breath among those in the room when Iris Murphy sits down with the deaf-mute Leonard Howard and her hands begin to fly. The inmates know that Leonard Howard was never a client of the public defender's office. He is a man who still has money and whose attorney is one of his rare visitors. A little boy tugs on a woman's hoodie, saying,

"They're talking with their hands, Grandma."

The boy's grandmother ignores him, as do the guards, because they are trying to translate what the hands are saying while pretending not to pay attention even as they speak. (The guards allow for the rumble of one-on-one conversations. It is the call and response, the groupthink of it that they halt and despise.) None of them have the faintest idea of how Ms. Murphy could know Leonard Howard. Collectively it feels wrong to the felons and their visitors, for they believe that she is theirs. Information has been withheld from them and they will get to the bottom of this breach in due course.

This meeting does not surprise Kenneth Yellow Dog. Iris Murphy





has a profoundly deaf sister who lives in Cincinnati. He met the sister years ago when he ran into Iris and her family at the zoo. The deaf community in Nebraska is small and insular by the very nature of the disability, so Iris would know Leonard. However, seeing Iris and Leonard together does create a knot of worry in Kenneth's stomach. He shares a cell with Leonard Howard. Leonard is a man of issues that have nothing to do with his deafness. When Leonard is in the mood to talk about them, he writes in a small notebook that he keeps in his shirt pocket, ripping out page after page to hand off to Kenneth in his manic moments. Leonard's political views, his misogyny, and his desire to register on free Internet dating sites once he is released from prison are topics he has addressed in his near perfect cursive. When Leonard feels less agitated about the world he teaches American Sign Language to Kenneth, and Kenneth has been happy to learn what he can. A commitment to learning something everyday is part of the habit of his life, in or outside of incarceration.

Kenneth adjusts his eyes, bringing his attention back to his own visitor. He sits across from his cousin the attorney, Cameron Kills Pretty Enemy. The two men sit on molded plastic chairs the color of blueberries. The chairs are armless. Between them is a small round-topped table that reaches their shins. There is something of a contemporary art center feel to the room's design, but also a sense of a military recruiter's office in a poor neighborhood's strip mall. Kenneth realizes the didactic purpose of the scene every Thursday. Thursday is his day for visits. Once a month Cameron drives the seven hours from Prior Lake, Minnesota to see him while Kenneth's colleague Alfred Moorman comes on an alternate Thursday to report on the Willa Cather Branch Library in Omaha. This is the library that Kenneth has managed for seven years and from which he has taken a formal leave to serve out his prison sentence. Whether he will be reinstated as manager there is up to the library director and the Mayor of Omaha. Kenneth's fiancée, Madeline Rea, visits on the other





two Thursdays.

Beyond Iris Murphy and Leonard Howard, Kenneth can see men with women and children and a few men with men in the periphery of his vision. Their chorus of conversations creates a constant background noise that mutes individual exchanges. It is hoped that visits will promote a sense of support from family and that the very controlled nature of the room will create a template of bonds not based on drama or drugs. Kenneth did vast amounts of research on prison life before surrendering himself in Lincoln. He prepared, as best he could, before arriving for his nineteen-month sentence and he understands the details of his surroundings.

While incarcerated, Kenneth has found it helpful to imagine himself, and each of his fellow prisoners, to be a dog. He is a mastiff among black mouth curs, pit bull mixes, rottweilers, and golden doodles gone wrong. These are the kinds of dogs that turn up at the Nebraska Humane Society where Kenneth has volunteered for many years. They have, at the very least, been neglected, sometimes abused, either by their owners or other dogs, and in general have bad manners, and at their worst are aggressive and dangerous. Many have been abandoned, and an animal control officer will have captured them after a complaint about a dog running loose in an Omaha neighborhood. From there they are delivered to a shelter. Abandoned dogs are manageable, but they are not easy, and often have vast amount of trust issues, making them difficult for people to adopt.

In the population of the Humane Society there are also animals that have been given up by their owners. Since the financial downturn in 2008, people have surrendered animals in record numbers to shelters. These animals come with names, histories, bowls, beds, collars, and tears. Often they are older creatures, white faced and long in tooth, needing love and care, but still very viable. Frankly, it is hard to convince a young family to adopt an older or abandoned animal. They want





puppies, kittens, and bunnies, sweet, loveable, and undamaged.

Kenneth assumes that many of his fellow inmates have histories that are similar to those of the abandoned animals. Inevitably these dogs are mixed breeds. They have been trained to defend and fight and have been maltreated for their efforts. The males have gonads the size of small oranges. The bitches are skeletal from too many litters and not enough food. The Humane Society canines talked to Kenneth Yellow Dog like the inmates talk to him here. The dogs told him their stories — the cruel owners, the willing bitches — while prisoners offer up to Kenneth particular chapters of their histories, the better parts of themselves. Unbidden they will hint at why they did what they did and how that brought them to Lincoln. The convicts want the big, quiet Indian on their side, as they do Iris Murphy.

“About the pardon,” Cameron says in a very low voice that forces Kenneth to lean into him. “The Board of Pardons meets every six to eight weeks. Your hearing for a pardon, though, won’t come until the next quarter.”

“Cameron, I want to vote in November.”

“Well, I’m sure the Board of Pardons would rather have you not voting in November.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone. I didn’t make any money. I didn’t sell drugs. They were just three miniature animals.”

“Yeah, but you upset the zoo and you angered the Nebraska Cattlemen’s Association.”

“I didn’t steal cattle.”

“Well, little horses are close enough for the Cattlemen. To them it’s all cattle. Some of them still think that people should be hung for stealing steers.”

“One was a donkey.”

“Yeah, but the donkey was the most popular animal of the three.”

“I always vote,” Kenneth says in a low voice, looking at Cameron





and, for a second, across the room at Iris Murphy, a fellow Douglas County Democrat.

“The State of Nebraska will let you be reinstated as a voter two years after your release, with or without a pardon.”

“I’m not a felon.”

“No one made you die on this sword, Kenneth. You didn’t have to take the fall. It’s a minor felony, but a felony nonetheless, and so until we can arrange a pardon, you’re a felon. The Board has the power to give pardons. Power is about opacity. There are layers to this that must be peeled back, carefully. It is not like an onion.”

Kenneth pauses. He is sorely disappointed in this turn of events. He wants to vote again for Barack Obama in November. Kenneth has voted in every election, local and national, since his eighteenth birthday.

Even before he made his plea, his attorney mentioned the possibility of a pardon.

“You’ll get pardoned, Kenneth. The Board of Pardons loves to pardon the good guys. You know, the ones who shouldn’t have been sentenced in the first place. But mostly, they pardon prominent assholes with tax and fraud convictions.”

Inwardly, he sighs and then embraces the vast silence that will compose most of his visitation time with his cousin. Cameron provides presence and the sustaining public notion that he is concerned about his cousin, because he is, even if he doesn’t have a lot to say. Prisoners and their guests gape at Cameron Kills Pretty Enemy whenever he walks into the space. He is twenty years older and two inches taller than Kenneth, and that makes him very tall. Cameron wears Tony Lama boots with well-tailored suits. His hair is a long white braid wrapped in a beaded cover. “Indian lawyer,” the convicts say under their breath with awe when he passes by.

It is hard for the two cousins to hold an extended conversation because Cameron is not a big talker while Kenneth’s talent in life is





listening. They are private men. If they have an important concern they keep it to themselves, or tell it to their dog. The give and take of conversation is not part of their friendship. They like being together, plain and simple. Mutual silence is comforting to them.

Kenneth knows that people in the Twin Cities bring problems to Cameron Kills Pretty Enemy — petty crimes, drunken driving arrests, divorce — they pay him to find the least painful of legal answers. Like any attorney, Cameron likes to be paid for both listening and any talking he might do. His net worth has been built on billable hours.

“What about justice?” Kenneth remembers once asking Cameron.

Cameron was working then as a Hennepin County attorney in Minneapolis and Kenneth was a teenager.

“I don’t truck in justice.”

“What about innocence?”

“There’s very little of that in this world.”

Even as a teenager Kenneth disagreed with Cameron about his view of the world, but rarely did he challenge his cousin’s point-of-view. It was a waste of breath.

But that day in Minneapolis, Kenneth’s face must have betrayed him, because Cameron laughed and said, “Kenneth, you’re a gosh-darn liberal. You’re a soft-hearted man.”

Kenneth remembers saying, “I am.”

This made Cameron laugh all the more.

Of course, Iris Murphy believes in working for justice.

“Everyone in America likes to think that they did it all on their own. That they jumped out of their mother’s womb fully formed, ready to take on the world. They forget that we all come into this world helpless and leave it the same way.”

Kenneth can remember hearing Iris say this in late 1999, at a wine and cheese event to raise money for some shared political cause, and his heart beat faster listening to her. It was an odd time for him. His





girlfriend had recently broken up with him and moved to Houston. Everyone was worried about computer systems failing at the turn of the new century and millennium. In 1999, the universe seemed to be against Kenneth Yellow Dog, but Iris Murphy never was. She greeted him with a smile every time she saw him that year, and he was a man in need of some smiles.

Kenneth thought 2000 would be better and he worked the phones hard for Al Gore. But Florida, a state he rarely thought about, put his efforts into jeopardy. Chads and Katherine Harris upended everything. During a brief telephone conversation after the election, Cameron had declared, “that there was no difference between Bush and Gore anyway.”

“I don’t believe that to be true, Cameron,” is all Kenneth would say to his cousin, not wanting to argue. Cameron had recently lost his dog, a beautiful golden retriever named Tribulation, and his heart had hardened in grief. Kenneth knew he could not move that stone heart one inch. Cameron concluded the call with these words,

“You know, I’m a Libertarian, these days.”

It’s what everyone said in 2000, as they held their collective breaths after the election. When the Supreme Court made its decision in December, many people announced that they were Libertarians, implying it would seem, that they had voted for Governor George W. Bush. If politics had taught Kenneth Yellow Dog anything it is that people like to attach themselves to winners. What he knew, as a dependable Democrat, is that people lie about their voting records as much as they do their sex lives.

“The Supreme Court has made a moral error of seismic proportions,” Iris Murphy told Kenneth the evening after the Court’s announcement. They were leaving a Douglas County Democratic Party gathering.

Kenneth had needed to hear these words from Iris because he believed them to be true, and he knew that most Nebraskans were go-





ing to bed happy to have Governor Bush moving into the White House. Many of his patrons were going to walk into the Willa Cather Branch Library relieved by the decision. For days he was going to have to listen to their glee in professional neutrality, privately soldiering on in his minority positions.

By the time they reached her Subaru Forester parked four blocks away on a side street, Kenneth wanted to believe himself to be in love with Iris Murphy. Like-minded politics in an election year can have this effect on people. Furthermore he had always been attracted to Iris, even though she was much older than he. So Kenneth bent down, kissing her full on the lips. What startled him was that tiny Iris kissed him back, opening her mouth and finding his tongue. There in the cold December darkness the tall man and the small woman made out until the headlights of a car turned down the street, forcing them to pull back.

“Iris.”

“Kenneth.”

She smiled. Her eyes were sparkling, and he felt hope for the first time in weeks. The car passed them by. Then they both laughed, and he kissed her again before she pushed him away to reach into her handbag for her car keys.

Kenneth took her gloved hand, stopping her.

“Marry me, Iris.”

“Kenneth!”

“I mean it.”

(He remembers sort of meaning it: wanting to sleep with Iris Murphy felt to him, then, like something that should be sanctified by marriage.)

Then she kissed him, her small frame pushing into his crotch, causing a huge erection.

Car lights again illuminated the street and they stepped away from each other.

