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*In Loving Memory, For Mom & Dad*



# Introduction

As I approach my sixth decade, I sense a bit of heel-dragging and glancing behind, perhaps a drive to sum things up and make sense of this lengthy trip. As an artist, I recently devoted two years of my life to painting circus stories. The question was often put to me, “Why this particular theme?” After some thought, I concluded that it was an allegory for my childhood. The concept of “controlled chaos” comes to mind.

I was born in 1957, number 7 in an Irish Catholic family of 11 children. We lived with our parents in a large, drafty, but tidy, colonial in West Bridgewater, a small country town south of Boston. Dad, Bill Murphy, was an elevator mechanic and, in general, an uncomplicated family man. He loved his wife and children. He was a smart, cheerful Irishman who whistled. He had no objectionable vices (except that car-key-as-ear-cleaner thing). He faithfully turned over his paycheck and watched his growing family with detached amusement, unless crossed. Dotty Frazier, our mother, was a housewife who publicly obeyed her husband but in the home was Supreme Commander. Dotty had been raised an only child. She was intelligent, well-read, loquacious, forceful in personality, and hopelessly overburdened by domestic duties. It was the 1960s, feminism was parading down the avenue, and she wanted the hell on that float.

As a family, we journeyed through the volatile '60s/'70s era with 13 separate dramas playing themselves out, melding and crashing narratives along the way. The Murphy children grew into teens with a wider social consciousness. We challenged the status quo both at home and at large. Our parents attempted to ride along with the changing times, occasionally succeeding and often failing. From a personal standpoint, I often felt that the stork had dropped me down the wrong chimney, simply making a Murphy drop out of long-established habit.

What makes this passion play remarkable is not so much the dramas in our family, but the mechanics: feeding, bathing, schooling, disciplining, counseling, funding, doctoring—the humming and thrumming of daily life. Our family dynamics engendered friendly, sometimes prying, curiosity. Why did a high school educated WWII vet and a recently graduated nurse choose to have 11 children? What confluence of events informed such a life decision (or non-decision, if we *think Catholic*)? Exactly who did the childrearing? How did it all turn out? The Murphys are still evolving as a family, so the short answer is that this was a long-term, Herculean joint effort among us all that covered a span of roughly 30 years. Our parents have passed on to their rightful rest, and we are, all 11, still a close and happy clan today. Something went right. This tale is not a typical slog through family dysfunction, but one of clockwork function on the scale of Big Ben. I give you—the story of the Murphy family as seen through the eyes of a high-strung, skinny kid who draws.



The Murphy Family  
Circa 1961 (left)

Top Row: Lorraine,  
Jack, Jim, and  
toddler Peter

Middle Row: Dad,  
Dorothy, Mom, baby  
Bill, and Tom

Bottom Row: Nancy  
and Joseph

Princesses Mary and Martha (right)



# *About the Pictures*

**M**odern art trends, much like technology trends, are beginning to leave this artist in the dust. I recently visited an avant-garde show that included inkjet paintings selling for five figures and a refractive/reflective photographic technique that left me *very* sorry I had asked about it.

Considering my own studio endeavors, I felt more certain than ever that this memoir needed to be presented in a very low-tech style. Twenty-first century art celebrates the process and, to my mind, loses some of its soul. These stories pour out from the heart, as do the drawings. Hence, there is no process to speak of: simply charcoal on paper.



# *My Baby Doll*

**F**rom very early consciousness, I knew I had an Important Job, and that was to help protect, feed, wash, dress, nap, and entertain the babies, Mary and Martha. The oldest daughter, Lorraine, handled the night shift (more on that later). It would be years before these two girls were thought of as individual people. Like Border Collies, Nancy and I took to these responsibilities with great enthusiasm and seriousness of purpose. As the last two in such a long line of siblings, Mary and Martha were adored beyond measure and blossomed into confident, happy girls.

Later, as an adult and a mother in my own right, my recurring nightmare was always a narrative of getting distracted and losing track of my baby sisters.