

THE DAY MURPHY'S LAW KICKED IN

By Marci Martin

Henry's world came crashing down on him, bit by bit. The restaurant where he waited tables fired him, saying he was too clumsy. Well, he did drop a few things, but steadfastly claimed the incident with the fat lady was not his fault. How could he know she would get up as he passed her chair? The clam chowder could have gone anywhere at that point. Not his fault her bosom loomed in the way when the soup fell off his tray.

To make things worse, Charlene couldn't work for three weeks while both the children were home with the measles. The rent came due and the landlord threatened to throw them out if they didn't pay by next Friday. And Charlene was pregnant again.

That's why early Thursday morning, Henry parked his beat up '82 Ford pick-up truck in the parking lot in front of the Portersville First National Bank. Should I do it, he thought? The reasons he should made sense to him, but he battled with himself for what seemed a long time. Sweat poured down his freckled face. He wiped it with a dirty handkerchief, and tried to dry his clammy hands.

His tall wiry body squirmed, worrying about getting caught. No, he reasoned, other guys do this all the time and get away with it. He swallowed hard making his large Adam's apple bob up and down. Finally, he sat up straight, squared his bony shoulders, and made a decision. The time had come.

He watched the bank employees enter the wide double doors then took his .44 out of the brown paper bag on the seat next to him, tucked it under his belt, and put the empty bag in his jacket pocket. He shuddered, pulled his jacket close around him, and took deep breaths. Glancing at himself in the rear-view mirror, he slicked back his long red hair, wishing he'd shaved like Charlene told him to. "Oh well," he said, "maybe neatness won't count."

A short fat man and a young girl with a baby in a shoulder harness went into the bank in front of him. Once inside, Henry got in the only open teller's line. When his turn came, he glanced around to find he was the only customer there.

He turned quickly to the teller and said, "Gimme your money, lady, and don't press no button or I'll shoot you."

The teller looked like her big brown eyes would pop out of her head. "OK, OK, just a minute," she whimpered.

The wait was more than Henry could bear. With one huge push, he jumped over the counter and stood beside her, but one foot landed in the waste basket. "Damn," he muttered. "Everybody get over here. And hurry up," he said, shaking his foot loose from the basket. Trash flew across the floor. He waved his gun at the six employees to hurry them up.

One by one they filed in behind the counter and lined up against the back wall, never taking their frightened eyes off the crazy gunman.

With a shaky hand, he took aim at the camera in the upper corner of the room and fired his gun. "Damn!" he cursed, and fired again. It took three shots to put it out of commission. Gotta practice if I'm going to be good at this, he decided.

"In here, lady, put it in this here bag, and be quick about it."

The teller emptied her cash drawer into the bag, and Henry shoved her back from the counter so she wouldn't be able to push the alarm button.

Feeling pretty confident by this time, he decided to leap the counter again, but when he put his

hand out to brace himself, it landed in an open stamp pad. His arm slid out from under him and he sailed over the counter, scooted across the floor, and crashed into the manager's desk. He scrambled to his feet and waggled his gun at the stunned employees leaning over the counter watching him. "Okay, you guys, don't nobody move, and wait ten minutes before you touch that phone."

He ran as fast as his long wobbly legs could carry him, got in his truck, and revved up the engine. But Henry hadn't considered the parking lot layout. Cars were parked in curving rows with the exits at opposite ends of the block. And it was double stamp day at the super market. Every housewife in Portersville must have been there shopping.

Henry moved his car out of the parking space and waited while women and children wandered from cars to the store, or slowly pushed loaded carts across the street in front of him, blocking his way. He inched along, waved his arms and honked, drawing only stony stares and a few meaningful hand gestures in return. Sweat rolled down his face and large wet circles appeared under the arms of his shirt. He glanced over at the bank. Nobody was coming out after him.

Finally out on the street again, he drove a few blocks and pulled over to see how much money he had. "Two hundred-fifty-five lousy bucks for all that trouble?" he grumbled. "I could've got more than this from the diner out on the highway. Come to think of it, I'm goin' out there right now." He looked in the rear view mirror and pulled away from the curb.

But, right then, a black and white rounded the corner behind him. Henry kept his wary eyes on the police car and carefully observed the stop signs and speed limits, wondering if he'd be able to shake himself loose. His clammy hands slipped around on the steering wheel. Better go home, he decided. About that time the black and white passed him.

"Goodbye, you turkeys," he chuckled.

A few minutes later, he turned into his driveway. He stashed the gun in the glove compartment, grabbed his money bag, and ran into the house.

"Charlene, where are you, doll? Come here, got a surprise for you."

Charlene sauntered into the room, a cigarette in one hand and a diet Coke can in the other. Scruffy red house slippers slapped the floor with each step. But before she could answer her husband the door bell rang. "I'll get it," she said, stuffing her cigarette into the empty can.

When she opened the door, two cops had guns pointed at her head, pushing their way into the house.

"We know you're in here, Henry Lathrop," the tall one yelled. "Come on over here so we don't have to shoot this pretty lady."

Henry pulled Charlene out of the way. "What do you want?" His stomach churned as he stared into the gun barrels.

"What did you do before you started robbing banks, Henry? You're not too good at it," the tall cop said, a slight smile on his ruddy face.

Charlene slapped Henry's arm and yelled, "You robbed a bank? Why'd you do such a darn fool crazy thing like that? Now what'll the kids and me do while you're in jail? Stupid, Henry, just plum stupid!"

"Daddy, Daddy," his children cried, running into the room, but when they saw the policemen they hid behind Charlene's ample body and peeked around her skirt.

Poor scared little babies, Henry thought. "You're right, Charlene, I am stupid. I'm not good at anything. I'm sorry little darlings," he said, kneeling down to hug the children. "Don't be like your daddy, you hear?"

"Well, you'll have time to figure out something better, Henry," the tall cop said. He frisked and

handcuffed his prisoner, while reading him his rights. "Where's your gun?"

"Glove compartment of the car," Henry replied.

"And the paper sack of money?"

"Over there on the couch."

Charlene tried to reach out to Henry, but the officers held her back.

"How'd you find me so quick?" Henry cried, his eyes glued to the floor.

"Well, son, next time you decide to leap bank counters better be sure your billfold doesn't fall out of your pocket. Guess you didn't see the teller kick it under the counter. Not to mention the inky fingerprints on the floor. We knew who you were two minutes after you left the bank."

* * *

appro. 1400 words

