

# CONTROLLED BURN

**DEVIN MURPHY**

You have an outing with your wife and kids, one of those “You never spend enough time with us and you’re going to regret it” deals your wife laid on so thick that you agree to shut the clinic down early on a Sunday. Noon, instead of three, to take the kids to the flea market. Let them rummage through the junk. Show them nostalgic items from your and your own parents’ childhoods. A fun, inexpensive activity. Together.

But you have a full morning of people filling the lobby with pets. Then the Macklans call up and say they’re ready to put their dog down, which you’d told them was necessary three days ago. Stomach cancer with a tumor that was about to rupture. They needed time for the kids who were away at school to come say goodbye. So the couple come in and sit in the lobby because the receptionist said there might be time if there’s a gap in appointments. But there are no gaps. You’ve got a St. Bernard with mange, an adopted greyhound with a torn ACL, and a bunch of violent cats you have to pin down by the shoulders to work on.

And you get done with all that, and it’s ten minutes past noon, and there’s the Macklans who’ve been bringing their two yellow labs to you for over a decade.

Last week their old dog ran off into the woods and lay down in the bushes. “Sort of seemed like to die,” the woman had said earlier when she first came in. “Since then she’s been laying in front of the door when we leave so we have to push it open with our shoulder to slide her away. And she’s stopped eating.” The woman looked sick.

It was a good dog. A healthy pup. Lots of good years with a nice family. Tons of checkups, tons of money this family has spent for your services over that time. You're already ten minutes late, but these people are crushed in the lobby, their hands digging into the old dog's fur.

So, what do you do?

You're in the back room where the vet tech and you have picked the old lab up on the table, and this couple is balling their eyes out. This dog caused fights when no one picked up the muddy paw prints, cuddled up on them on cold nights, and at times felt like it was there to love and save them.

This part never gets easier. You put the animals down all the time, and the most terrible part is being around the people acting like you're robbing their souls. You talk them through the whole thing. You know your vet tech has made plans for a half day on a weekend, and you let her go after the dog is down. It's almost one and you hear the phone ringing in the lobby and know it's your wife, but the Macklans want to spend some time in there with the dog. The kids will just have to wait to filter through junk, and your wife will have to be angry and disappointed. It doesn't matter if she questions your love for her or your kids, this is how it is right now.

The room is quiet. The dead dog is still as a chair in an empty farm house.

"Do we take him?" Mr. Macklan asks.

"No. We take care of everything here," you say, answering a question you've answered dozens of times before, practiced at hiding your surprise that no one thinks about the logistics of this part of pet ownership. Did these people think they were supposed to take the dead dog back to their car? The dog, heavy in their arms, walking through the lobby with its head lolling, tongue slack, cold eyes reflecting the other patients and pets in the lobby.

You get home at two-thirty and there's no one there. No note. You could have left the dead dog until the next day but it seemed only fair to treat it the way the Macklans would have. When they finally left the room, after giving the dead dog a forty-five minute vigil, you said goodbye to them, locked up the clinic, and wheeled a stainless steel gurney into the

room to lug all seventy pounds of the dead dog to the freezer. Then you make the calls to have it picked up in the morning.

You know people never think of this when they get their puppies from breeders. They never think of this when they have years of getting to train and love these creatures. You wonder how many of them even know what happens to their pets when they leave the clinic. How there has to be someone, and today it's you, to move that carcass around, to arrange it being disposed of, but what does that even mean? You bet none of them think about it. How cremation is too expensive. Even landfills cost too much. How the rendering truck will come and get them for free and the rendering plant will break Snoopy, and Opy, and Fido into tallow and hydrogenated animal fat for makeup and household products, and you don't like that part of it, but it is part of the deal, and you do it because someone has to, even if it means being home late from work when you were told that would not fly if your family were to stay healthy and happy together, but you do it.

So you have a sunny afternoon to yourself with no note as to when your wife and kids will be back. You have a drink. Beefeaters gin and tonic with a wedge of lime floating on the ice. You sit on your back deck and watch the birds resting in the field of saw grass, cattails, and Russian Olive. Red wing black birds flutter, and there are the warbling calls of grouse hidden in the dry brush. At the far end of the field, over three quarters of a mile away, you see a work crew in bright yellow vests cutting at the vegetation. A fire crew and police officer with their lights off pull onto the grasses from the nature reserves access road. You have a look at them through the binoculars you keep handy for your bird list, for the lift and twitch of purple martins, red tail hawks, and barn owls. The fire crew is fitting on their gear. The police officer is sitting in his car. You refill your drink. It's nice to have time to yourself. You are a responsible man. You get little rest and it's nice to have it now, though you will pay for it when your family gets home. If you only left them one message from work, inquiring where they were, to call back, if you should go meet them.

You watch through the binoculars in one hand. In the other is the Beefeaters. A firefighter walks into the field with what looks like a propane torch and touches it to the grass. He walks another ten yards and dips the

flame to more dry grass, and then ten more yards and touches the flame again, and again, like he is ministering the sacrament to the heads of the willow bushes. You watch as the flame follows him and widens, and in the distance, through the binoculars, you see the waves of heat warping the air. Soft orange licks of fire seem translucent in the sunlight. The fire crew is larger than you first thought. You see several dozen firefighters with shovels and picks working the perimeter of the blaze. But the blaze keeps swelling, keeps eating more of the field.

You've seen the remnants of a controlled burn along the side of the road, but you've never seen one from the start. You've never seen the flicker and spread of a blaze as you're watching now. Over the first hour, you fill your drink twice more. The phone has still not rung. The smoke across the field is black and dense and gray as it rises. You can no longer see the firefighters behind the new wall of smoke, and over the afternoon, the wall moves closer to your home. It's a quarter mile off when the sun begins to set.

You wonder what work schedule the firemen have. Do they work six and half days a week? Do they have round the clock schedules? Do they have debt and mortgages and child care expenses that feel overwhelming? You watch the fire move closer and know you shouldn't, but pour another drink. Your cup is half full of cut and tamped limes under the fresh ice. You are not aware of your neighbors, if any of them are on their decks, looking at the flame. Perhaps they have gone elsewhere because they knew of the burn. Or they see it has grown quicker than the fire crew can contain. You hear the phone ring, but you don't answer. You hear it ring several more times, but you don't care. When do you get to watch the world burn? When do such things happen in your life?

You know this is a special moment. One you will remember. You are drunk as a lord when you pull the ringing phone from the wall and go back to the deck. You are aware that it is a sick fantasy, but you want the fire to run its course and flow over you, your home, incinerate you, turn you to ash and let you drift away from all this. You are happy to be ash and free of yourself. The sound of the door opening means nothing to you. Neither does your name being called, or footsteps coming down the hallway, calling

Murphy: Controlled Burn

your name louder, then stopping when you are spotted out on the deck.  
None of that is for you now. You are in the fire, your matter breaking  
down in brilliant orange light, your essence drifting away in the gray smoke  
pillars high overhead where you know nothing and feel nothing and know  
nothing of burdens.