

## Murphy's Midnight Manoeuvres.

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Murphy knew that he would have to play second fiddle to the big wedding.

Langass Lodge and all the B&Bs in the Lochmaddy area were fully booked.

John the Chef had been snappy for days - and forgetful, which would give Murphy his chance.

"Ann, on North Uist a Homecoming Wedding is a big deal. It has to be done right, everything has to be perfect. Make a mess of it and they cast it up to you for years. There'll be a hundred and thirty of them now! I told Neil ninety-five maximum!"

Murphy and Ann (John's wife) had heard this outburst hundreds of times over the last few months and now The Big Day had arrived - a wedding on Mid-summer's Day, with the short mid-summer's night to follow giving only a few hours of glimmer between dusk and dawn.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning when the car skidded to a halt outside the Kitchen door. John ejected himself, already barking orders to his Cook Team. Ann had arrived at Langass Lodge much earlier to serve breakfasts and see off the departing fishermen and walkers. She then supervised the cleaning and preparation of the bedrooms making them ready for the incoming wedding guests.

Murphy sprawled across the back seat of the Volvo, let out a deep sigh, and closed his eyes. It was warm and humid and the midges were coming in through the gap in the window. They would not let him slide over into canine oblivion.

Who was in charge of Murphy on this big day was uncertain. In fact it had never actually been discussed.

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'Murph, are you there laddie?' the low voice growled.

It was Murphy's litter mate, universally called The Corgi on account of being an unusually short-legged Labrador.

'Corgi, are you out, running free?'

'I am that, laddie. Can you work that door lock?'

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Murphy had escaped twice before and enjoyed it. He tried the door and it opened. He slipped out and bummed it closed.

'Right, what'll we do, Corgi?'

'Sssh. Keep it down and follow me, laddie. You make us nine, so far. Let's go. And don't start that stupid running and barking stuff. Keep it quiet and follow me. No running. Just quiet skulking, laddie, until we're clear of the hotel, all right?'

Normally Murphy would have had a yapping good argument but he knew that The Corgi was right, and stayed as quiet as he could, although it was tricky, since he was very excited and longed to run and bark. Unlike Murphy, The Corgi was a working dog, trained to the gun: he was held in high esteem by most other dogs on North Uist.

Ten minutes later the two dogs stood with The Corgi's pack on the hill above the hotel, looking down on the Wedding Guests standing in the garden. The piper was playing a handful of jigs with every third tune being "Mairi's Wedding".

Alda's small fleet of mini-buses and taxis had been coming and going for the last two hours and a new batch of The Guests were disgorging to gather in the garden for the ceremony. They were drinking, laughing and shouting, and smoking against the midge,

The Sun showed his face and a wee breeze got itself up to carry the midge away.

It was a paradise for man and dog alike.

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'Right lads and lassies, time for a wee bit of an adventure, all right?' said The Corgi.

'But where are we going?' yapped many canine voices in unison.

'But where else would we be going on The Mid-summer's Night but up to The Fairy Hill?'

'But Corgi, is not that miles and miles to it,' said Murphy.

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---

'And what if we get caught running loose, will we not be shot at, and then what will happen?' said Rona, Paric's collie, who was always the first to worry.

'Look, The Humans are having Their Party so we can have ours, all right?'

The Corgi was always the boss dog, even though he looked odd. Or maybe because he looked odd no one wanted to offend him by arguing. And of course it was well known that The Corgi hob-nobbed with The Gentry when they came to shoot at the wildfowl.

'Anyone who is not coming will be staying here by your ownelves. Else you might take yourselves back to The Owner before you would be even having a wee bit fun. The Bold of us will be taking ourselves off now.'

'Wait one minute, Corgi, old boy,' said Ollie, a rather overweight ornamental Cocker Spaniel. Ollie's English owner, Ms Marigold MacDonald, had volunteered herself as the unofficial photographer and videographer for The Homecoming Wedding. 'What exactly will be provided in the way of victuals for this overnight expedition? Must think of the inner dog and all that, what, eh?'

'The Fairy Cakes is what we will be having, in dozens of flavours,' shouted The Corgi, disappearing off into the bracken with Murphy and the others racing in pursuit. Filled with pack fever, Ollie forgot his stomach and hurtled after them.

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Below in the garden of Langass Lodge Hotel the happy tearful couple confirmed that they did indeed promise to love, honour and occasionally obey. They were roundly applauded by their family and friends. The assembled throng featured their five relieved grown-up children who, with a sprinkling of grandchildren, had insisted on and funded this long hoped for wedding, giving them longed-awaited legitimacy at last.

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It took The Corgi's pack nearly three hours to reach the far away Fairy Hill. Nowadays it sported a big white golf ball radar dome that Murphy had heard was used for military purposes.

Along the way, the pack had added another seven dogs to its number; four collies, two Labs and a Visitor's Labra-doodle called Radley, who barked with a rather posh Bearsden accent.

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On arrival at the top of The Fairy Hill, the dogs gathered on a mound about half a mile from the Golf Ball. The Corgi took charge, as usual, and nominated Murphy to tell a joke or a story.

'Did you hear the one about the Barra dog that went into an Irish Pub and asked the barman if he could use the telephone to ring a Coll Girl?

The Irish barman said, "Bejaysus and be getting away wid ye, was that yerself down there taalkin. Mother o God, whoever heard o a dog that could do the taalking, that's paws-y-tiffly amazin, so it is!"

This effort was rated as a six out of ten, but it left room for the others to improve on it, and soon the pack was howling to the moon with laughter. Even Ollie found he enjoyed his night out among the local rustics and told a few of his Winston Churchill stories. No one could understand Radley when he spoke and so, being A Visitor he was excused. But Radley was saving up every story and joke to tell his pal Bertie the Greyhound, when he got home.

And so the pack went at it, round and round until, at about five o'clock the next morning, The Corgi announced the second stage of his plan.

'Right lads and lassies, this is how it will be working for us. We will be heading back home, each to our very own house, all right? Leave Radley to me, I'll be getting him to his holiday place safe and sound, all right? When you get to your own place, you sneak quietly and carefully up to the back door, all right? Then you wait and listen. If your Owner is inside you give a wee sad bark and lie there making a whimpering noise.'

'Surely The Owner will be angry at us, old boy, stands to reason, what, eh?' asked Ollie.

The Corgi ignored the interruption.

'If they are not back from The Homecoming Wedding then go round to the front gate and make a big fuss of them when they come home.'

'Why, old boy, why do that, should we not hide, what, eh?'

Again The Corgi ignored him.

'This is called a Win-Win strategy, all right?'

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---

The dogs wagged their tails in agreement. All except Ollie, who, being a Cocker Spaniel, could not fathom The Corgi's advice.

'And see you all again next year, all right?' said The Corgi, and set off with Radley at his side.

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At just before seven o'clock in the morning Murphy arrived home.

He listened at the back door.

'No, John, *you* brought Murphy in the car, to Langass. Don't you remember? I said he would be fine here but *you* told me it would be too long to leave him. Anyway, the last time I saw him he was here, with *you*, when I went off early to do the breakfasts.'

'Where is he then, Ann? Perhaps we should phone round the neighbours, see if they've seen him?'

'Don't you dare even think it! If they learn that Murphy's been running loose they'll pin every lost chicken and piglet on the Island on him, even though everyone knows he would never harm a fly! No, we'll just have to go out and look for him. You drive round the Island one way, slowly, and I'll drive round the other. C'mon. Now!'

When John and Ann heard Murphy's sad bark they raced to the back door and made him so welcome that he began to feel a wee bit guilty.

The big bowl of seafood and roast lamb left-overs went down a treat.