

## The Mumbler

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I was seven the day I sent Daddy to see the Mumbler. It snowed. I remember it snowing cause after the doctor people left we made snow angels, and Mommy didn't cry and I didn't have to eat any carrot sticks. When my hands got cold we went inside and played pretend. I pretended my doggie was alive and Mommy pretended she hadn't found Daddy dead in the basement.

After Mommy put me to bed I didn't close my eyes cause the Mumbler was making noise and I was so afraid it would come up and crunch me, too. I remembered Daddy folding through the stairs and the crunching sound he made, like when someone bites an apple on TV except I knew it wasn't that cause Daddy was screaming my name "Richie! Richie!" and apples don't smell like rubber.

The doctor people told Mommy Daddy tripped on the stairs and broke his back. I asked them if Daddy hurt a long time and they said you can't hurt with a broken back. That's how I knew they were liars, cause Daddy screamed a real long time after he folded and people only scream loud when they hurt. I hid in bed until the sun came up and then Mommy walked in and kissed me to sleep.

I didn't go to school when Mommy went to work, but when I woke up I could still hear the Mumbler. I called it the Mumbler cause it hid under our basement stairs and talked to itself, like the guy in the smelly clothes outside the icecream store.

One time Daddy took me for icecream and when we came out a smelly guy was mumbling, but there wasn't anyone for him to talk to and he just kept wringing his hands. The thing in our basement sounded just like that except I couldn't understand the words and it mumbled with lots of voices instead of just one.

The mumbling really scared me so I ran to the backyard to get away. I sat in the snow and made a big snow ball and that's when Bookie's yellow ghost crawled out of the ground and barked.

"Such a good boy Richie!" Bookie's ghost jumped up on me and licked my face and I fell down, and I wiggled cause it tickled so much. "We sure showed mean old Daddy!"

Bookie was my Labrador puppy and I liked him very much. Daddy gave him to me for Christmas and he licked my fingers when I got jelly on them. Bookie used to hide under my bed and whine when Daddy yelled, but one time Bookie wasn't hiding and Daddy knocked me down and that's when Bookie bit him on the leg. Then Daddy kicked Bookie real hard and Bookie ran under the bed.

Mommy got Bookie out but he kept whining and limping and barfing up blood. I hugged him and cried a lot and Bookie just shivered and licked me. Then Mommy kissed my forehead and took Bookie outside, and she told me a cowboy came by and asked to take Bookie to his ranch cause he was cute. Bookie could play with other doggies on that ranch and run through the forest and be happy. For awhile I was happy for Bookie but then I found out at school that that's what Mommies said when doggies died.

"Silly Daddy thought Mommy hid the beer!" Bookie's ghost laughed his high-pitched puppy laugh and rolled around in the grass. "But Daddy just drank it all and forgot! Silly Daddy!"

It was me who told Daddy that Mommy put the beer in the basement. He kept yelling that Mommy took it and he always hit her when he yelled and I didn't want him to hurt her and it was the only way I could stop him. I just didn't know how much Daddy would scream and I felt awful. "Bookie, why did Daddy scream?"

Bookie just wagged his tail. "Daddy's happy, happy Richie brought the Mumbler! Mumbler makes everyone happy!"

I wanted to believe Bookie but I'd heard people scream happy when Daddy took me to the horse races, and I knew Daddy hadn't been screaming happy. He'd been screaming bloody, the way Mommy screamed the time

Daddy threw her into the doorknob.

"Where's Daddy now, Bookie?" The doctor people had taken a black bag out the door but I didn't know if Daddy was in it, and even if he was I wanted to know where Bookie thought he was.

"Daddy never hits Mommy again!" Bookie promised, but that didn't answer my question. Bookie never talked when he was alive and now that he did he only said things about the Mumbler. I stared into the snow.

"I want the Mumbler to go away."

Bookie rolled onto his back and tilted his head. "But Mumbler makes people happy!"

I felt like crying then but knew Bookie's ghost didn't like that, and I didn't want him growling cause last time he growled it scared me so bad I peed my pants.

"The Mumbler can make other people happy. Mommy's happy cause we get Daddy's insurance soon." I didn't tell Bookie I was afraid the Mumbler might fold Mommy through the stairs, too.

Bookie whined. "But Mumbler *likes* you! That's why it made Daddy go away!"

I remembered Daddy crunching through the stairs and felt all froze again inside. "I don't care. I want it to leave."

Bookie stared, eyes glowing yellow like when he'd growled. "Richie, Mumbler had to work hard to help you and Mommy, but you aren't grateful yet. Mumbler doesn't like not grateful."

When I looked up Daddy was standing in the yard. He was naked and holding a baseball bat. His skin was all yellow and covered in white veins and worms were eating his eyeballs.

"Richie," Daddy growled.

I screamed and jumped up and ran into the house. Bookie ran in with me and as soon as he was safe I locked the door.

"See Richie?" Bookie whined. "Mumbler made Daddy go away, but Mumbler can make Daddy come back too!"

"Make him stop!" I shouted. Daddy's baseball bat slid through the door.

I tried to run out of the kitchen but the only way out went by the basement, and I could hear the Mumbler creaking up the stairs. "Bookie, make him stop!"

Then all of Daddy just walked right through the door. Worms plopped off his eyes and made big bloody stains and I knew Mommy would be upset when she got home and saw the mess on the floor.

"Mumbler thinks you aren't grateful, Richie," Bookie whispered.

"Mumbler thinks maybe Daddy should come back."

I backed up against the sink and heard the basement stairs creaking. "Mumbler can stay!"

"Richie," Daddy warned, and then he spit up more worms and they wriggled toward me on the floor.

I screamed again. "Mumbler can stay!" I felt warmth on my leg and knew Mommy was going to be upset about that, too.

"You have to *ask* Mumbler to stay, Richie," Bookie said softly. "Maybe then it'll make Daddy go away."

Daddy was inside now and he slammed his bat against his hand, and one of his fingers fell off and crawled toward me with the worms. "Richie, you've been a very bad boy."

"Please stay Mumbler!" I shouted, but the noises from the basement were so loud I couldn't hear myself. "Please stay!"

The sky made thunder and Daddy turned and walked through the door, and then it was light again. I looked down and saw a yellow puddle on the floor, but I didn't see blood or worms.

"Good boy, Richie!" Bookie barked happily and then ran after Daddy. "Mumbler's going to make *everyone* happy now!"

I was glad Daddy took the blood and worms with him cause all I had to clean up then was pee. By the time Mommy got home I was changed and the kitchen was clean. She kissed me and hugged me and told me she'd make spaghetti, so I just nodded and made sure the basement door was locked before we sat down in the kitchen.

After she was done cooking Mommy rolled spaghetti on her fork and smiled at me. "So what did you do today, Richie?" The Mumbler was making

noises but Mommy didn't hear it, and I was glad cause I wasn't unlocking the basement for anything.

"Nothing." I wanted to tell Mommy what had happened with Daddy and the worms, but I knew if I did she'd just go down in the basement to check. Mommies always did that to show kids it was just dreams, but this time the dream was real and I didn't want Mommy folding through the stairs and screaming.

"I was thinking." Mommy chewed spaghetti and pushed her curls out of her face. "Maybe we should get another dog."

I dropped my fork and it clattered real loud, and Mommy jumped. Then thunder rumbled and I looked at the kitchen door to make sure Daddy hadn't come back.

"I still miss Bookie," I told her, cause I knew if we got another dog the Mumbler would just crunch it and I didn't want some poor dog to hurt bad like Daddy.

Mommy smiled and touched my hand. "I know you miss Bookie, honey, but I'm sure he's happy on his ranch. I don't think he'd mind if you made another friend."

I got angry then and poked at my spaghetti and looked up at her and said "Bookie's dead."

Mommy's eyes got wide, and her lip moved like it did when Daddy pushed her. When I saw that I felt like I did when Bookie barfed blood, so I ran over and hugged her real hard.

"Mommy, I'm sorry!" It started raining and we both started crying, and the Mumbler got real quiet until we were done.

Finally Mommy said she'd make chocolate pudding, and I liked chocolate pudding a lot so I left her in the kitchen and went to the living room to watch TV. I turned a show on and sat on the couch, but I kept looking at the basement door. I didn't really watch TV cause it was thundering outside, and every time it did I thought Daddy's bat was coming through the wall.

"Hello Richie!" Bookie's ghost scampered out from underneath the couch. "Mumbler's getting hungry now!"

I got down on the floor and made my voice real low. "Bookie, you can't be here now. Mommy's cooking pudding."

Bookie laughed his puppy laugh and wiggled his behind. "Silly Richie, Mommy won't see! You said you'd be grateful. Mumbler hasn't eaten since he made Daddy go away!"

I grabbed the coffee table and held on tight. I listened for the Mumbler on the stairs, but all I heard was Mommy humming in the kitchen. I got real scared the Mumbler would eat her so I watched Bookie close and asked "What does Mumbler eat?"

Bookie's tail started wagging so fast that the wind made my homework papers flap against the table. "Mumbler eats sad things! Mumbler makes them happy, just like I am happy!"

"Mumbler didn't eat you," I reminded Bookie.

"Old Mr. Bobby's puppy is out in the rain!" Bookie shouted. "Old Mr. Bobby forgot. Look how sad he is, Richie!"

Bookie pointed his nose at the TV. The normal shows were gone and the TV was showing Mr. Bobby's muddy old backyard. His old brown chow Max was huddled inside his doggie house.

"Go get Max, Richie!" Bookie ran around in circles beneath the coffee table. "Go get Max out of the rain!"

"Mommy won't let me," I whispered, but then Bookie ran into the kitchen and that's when Mommy stopped her humming.

I jumped up and ran into the kitchen and found Mommy sleeping on the table with worms crawling in her hair. Daddy's bat was stuck in the table and he was trying to tug it free.

"No Daddy!" I ran to wake Mommy and get her away but the floor kept sucking at my feet and Daddy's bat was coming free.

"See!" Bookie yelped. "Mumbler can keep Daddy from hitting Mommy for a little while, but not if he's all hungry! Go Richie, get Max! He'll catch cold out in the rain!"

"Richie." Daddy's yellow muscles strained as he worked to free his bat. One of his white veins popped, and white stuff squirted all down his arm. "I'm

going to bash in Mommy's head."

"I'll go!" The floor stopped sticking and I ran past Daddy and threw open the door. The rain smacked my cheeks like hard rocks but I ran on the mushy snow and climbed over the fence. The snow soaked my socks before I even got to Max's house.

Max's head came up when I ran over. He came into the rain and nuzzled my hand and started licking it. I had fed Max for two weeks one time when old Mr. Bobby was at the hospital, and that was why Daddy gave me Bookie. He said I was "responsible".

My feet burned bad and I couldn't feel my cheeks. My knees quivered and Max whined and stopping licking, and he looked up as if to ask *What's wrong?* but he couldn't talk like Bookie and I didn't want to send Max to see the Mumbler. Then I remembered Daddy tugging at his bat and Mommy fast asleep, and I walked backward through the snow. I called Max and he followed me, and he kept his mouth closed and rain soaked his hair.

I opened Mr. Richardson's gate and led Max to our front door. When I let him inside he shook himself off and got water all over the hall. He kept wagging his tail. Then I closed the door and Bookie's ghost ran out from the kitchen, and Max's tail stopped wagging and he growled real deep and low.

"Good Richie, good Richie!" Bookie yelped. "Hurry up! Daddy's almost got his bat!"

"Richie!" Daddy shouted from the kitchen, and I heard something break. "I'm going to count to ten!"

"Quick Richie!" Bookie ran down the hallway and wiggled his behind before the basement door. "Bring Max!"

"One!" Daddy shouted. "Two!"

My eyes got all blurry. Max was growling at Bookie and the wet hair on his neck was standing on end.

"Three!"

My feet burned and my cheeks hurt and Daddy was going to kill Mommy with his bat.

"Four!"

So I grabbed Max's collar and dragged him down the hall. He whined and his paws slid all over the slick wood floor.

"Five!"

Bookie jumped at the doorknob and the door came open. Max snarled once and then whined real loud.

"Six!"

As I dragged Max closer he whined louder and that made me feel worse, but I was still too scared to look up from the floor and the whole hall smelled like rubber.

"Seven!"

I pushed Max inside so his front paws clopped down the stairs. I closed it quick cause I didn't want to see him look back. The door hit Max's behind and pushed him down the steps.

"Eight!"

Then I heard crunching and yelping and something big hitting the door. I covered my ears and screamed, but I couldn't scream louder than the crunching. After awhile it got real quiet, and then I ran into the kitchen cause the rubber smell made me gag. Daddy pulled his bat out of the table when I came in. He spit in Mommy's hair and walked through the sink and disappeared.

"Good boy, Richie!" Bookie ran around in circles and licked my hand but I hated that now cause it made me remember how Max had licked me and now Max was dead. With Daddy it was different cause he would hit Mommy if she didn't give back his beer. But Max just wanted out of the rain and trusted me and now that I'd let the Mumbler crunch him I thought I should be crunched, too.

"Mumbler's happy, Richie! Mommy's happy, too!" Bookie ran right into a wall and disappeared. I ran over to Mommy and shook her cause she wasn't moving at all.

"Wake up! Wake up Mommy!"

Mommy opened her eyes and said "Good Heavens, Richie, what's wrong?" Then she looked out the window and looked at her watch and said



"Oh, Richie, I'm sorry, your pudding." Then she hugged me and stroked my hair and smiled. "I guess I fell asleep."

I cried a lot then and she hugged me and she didn't let go. I slept in her bed that night but I was so afraid Daddy would come back that I stayed up and watched shadows until she fell asleep. It was hard to breathe quietly but I tried my best cause I hoped that if I did, Daddy wouldn't know we were here.

The Mumbler was getting louder all the time and I wondered if old Mr. Bobby would pick up Max from the bottom of the stairs. I wasn't sure I could ever make some poor doggie crunch like Max again, even if Daddy tried to hurt Mommy, and that scared me more than I'd be scared if the Mumbler climbed the stairs.

I remembered Max whining, and the tears made my face sticky so I rubbed at them and watched for baseball bats. Mommy rolled onto her side, and for a second I wasn't hugging her and in that second I knew what I had to do.

I slid out of bed real quiet and walked into the hall. I walked past the basement and into the garage. The streetlights came in through the windows and showed Daddy's motorcycle sitting next to Mommy's car. His spare red gas tank was beside it.

I picked up the tank and walked into the house, and then I set the gas tank by the basement door and went into the living room. Bookie's ghost walked out of the living room wall and yawned and looked at me. I unplugged the TV and pushed at the table and then I got the TV and table rolling across the floor.

"What are you doing up, Richie?" Bookie waddled beside me.  
"Everyone's tired. Mumbler's tired cause it made Max happy."

I didn't think Max was happy at all. "I'm going to bring this TV into the bedroom so Mommy can watch it."

Bookie rolled onto his back. "You good boy, Richie, just like Mumbler says. Good to Mommy!" Bookie thumped his tail against the floor and wiggled his puppy behind. "Mumbler will hide Daddy as long as you feed him, but doggies aren't best food. Mumbler thinks now you should bring over a friend."

I told Bookie I might do that, and he laughed his puppy laugh and rolled over and sneezed. "You good boy, Richie. Bookie needs to sleep." After that Bookie's ghost waddled through the wall and disappeared.

I wedged the TV table against the basement door then went back and got the gasoline can. I unscrewed the top and flipped over the funnel and screwed it back on, just like Daddy taught me. I poured gasoline on the couch and splashed it on the walls. Then I poured gasoline on the front door and on the TV table and in the hallway and the kitchen. I got the matches from the kitchen and made a gasoline line all the way to Mommy's door.

Bookie's ghost waddled out of the wall and yawned. I dropped the gas can and pulled out a match and lit it. Bookie's ghost looked up and his eyes glowed yellow and he growled "*What are you doing, Richie?*"

I wet my pants and dropped the match and the carpet went *whoosh*. I rushed into Mommy's room and slammed the door.

"Richie?" Mommy got up in her bed, her curls all crushed from sleeping. "What are you—"

"Mommy!" I ran and grabbed her hand. "We've got a fire!"

I saw smoke coming under Mommy's door, and I knew Mommy saw it too cause she crawled out of bed and grabbed me.

"Richie, what did you do?"

Daddy walked in before I could tell her and slammed his bat into his hand. The door broke into little bits and all those bits turned into worms. Mommy stared at Daddy and squeaked.

"Mommy!" I tried to tug her to the window, but she kept squeaking and breathing really fast. I knew she saw Daddy when her eyelids went all crazy and she flopped down on the floor.

"Mommy, no!" I heard loud thumping and knew the Mumbler was throwing itself against the basement door. I hoped the TV table was heavy cause if it wasn't the Mumbler would come out and crunch us both. I grabbed Mommy's arms and pulled, but she was heavier than the TV table and the worms were coming to eat her.

Daddy walked closer. "Richie, you've been a *very* bad boy."

I couldn't move Mommy so I ran to stomp on the worms. The worms popped like bubbles when Mommy cooked pudding except these bubbles were wet and sticky and red. I got in Daddy's way and waved my arms and yelled "Daddy stop!" but he just swung his bat.

The bat hurt my chest in a line, like the one time Bookie scratched me, except it burned about thirty times as bad and made me sit down fast. My shirt was still on fire when Daddy's bat pulled free, so I sat and whimpered quiet until the flames went out. I didn't feel like getting up then, but then Daddy raised his bat and I knew he was going to hit Mommy next.

I screamed different this time and charged Daddy. I swung my fists and bit his white squirting legs, and Daddy shouted and hit me with his bat. That made my back and legs burn too but I kept biting and hitting and clawing, and Daddy kept swinging, and each time he swung he backed toward the bedroom door.

"Go away!" I swung at him as the fire lines burned and one of my eyes stuck shut. Then Mommy woke up and shouted loud.

"Richie!" she yelled. "Run!"

I ran from Daddy and grabbed her, and I couldn't feel her hand but that was okay. She rushed me to the bedroom window and opened it. She lifted me though. I landed in the mushy snow and flipped onto my back. Then Mommy just stood inside the window and screamed bad words at Daddy, even though the whole house was on fire and flames were all over her roof.

I tried to yell "Mommy! Run!" but my mouth wasn't working, it just hurt. I ran to the window and Mommy saw me. She tried to climb out the window but Daddy swung his bat and it hit Mommy in the back. Mommy cried out and hit the snow with a loud thump.

My toes were cold and my hands burned but I didn't stop trying to scream. Mommy's hair was singed and her skin was sooty and her nightgown was wet with snow. She grabbed me and picked me up and started running, limping, and then we got to the sidewalk and turned to look. Daddy and Bookie and Max were all standing on the porch, and flames were all over the house.

Mommy whispered something and I couldn't understand it, but I didn't need to hear to understand the way she hugged me. We stayed there and watched the house burn until it collapsed. I kept on hearing mumbling but I knew it was a trick cause burning things don't mumble and the Mumbler was burning bad.

We weren't cold long before the firemen got there, and the doctor people made a big fuss and put me on a rolling bed. I heard one say "in shock" and another said "third-degree burns" but I didn't know what they meant and I was just glad that worms weren't going to eat my Mommy.

They put me in an ambulance and put Mommy in beside me. She wore a big orange blanket and kept shaking but I knew she was safe cause she held my hand and kissed me when the doctor people shoved a nail into my arm. I was so glad Mommy would live that I cried more, and then I didn't know why I couldn't feel my tears.

I saw Daddy and I saw Bookie and I saw Max and I felt awful that they'd died, but I made sure Mommy lived and that made everything okay. The doctor people put a mask on me that smelled so rubbery it made my eyes heavy, and then I went to sleep.

That's how I got the scar on my neck and why I can't talk any more. I wanted to write this cause I'm already starting to forget and I don't want to, I need to remember why I can't talk.

It was the Mumbler that did this to me, and I don't think it's dead even though our house burned down. I hope that if any other kids out there hate their daddy they know not to call it, know not to call the Mumbler to fix things like I did.

The Mumbler isn't nice, and it doesn't make people happy. It just eats. If your dead dog ever comes back and tells you to call it, don't listen. I don't want the Mumbler to eat you, too.

THE END