

FROM THE BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *IF ONLY*

Melanie Murphy

**Two estranged
sisters**

**One overgrown
garden**



And a journey of hope

Glass Houses

'Moving, unexpected and compassionate'
LOUISE O'NEILL

Melanie Murphy is an award-winning lifestyle YouTuber and best-selling author from Dublin, Ireland where she lives with her husband and son.

Melanie's online content about creativity, relationships, motherhood, sexuality, confidence and mental health has attracted hundreds of thousands of followers across social media platforms and her YouTube videos have amassed over 72 million views to date. She was named Blogosphere's 'Influencer of theYear' in 2018 and 'Best Social Media Star' at the 2020 Gossies. Her first short film, *Choice*, premiered at Buffer Festival in 2017, where it won the 'Excellence in Cultural Experience' award.

Glass Houses is her second novel.

Also by Melanie Murphy

Fiction

If Only

Non-Fiction

Fully Functioning Human (Almost)

**Melanie
Murphy**
Glass Houses

HACHETTE
BOOKS
IRELAND

Copyright © 2022 Melanie Murphy

The right of Melanie Murphy to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Ireland in 2022 by
HACHETTE BOOKS IRELAND

1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781473691803

Hachette Books Ireland
8 Castlecourt Centre
Castleknock
Dublin 15, Ireland

A division of Hachette UK Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hachettebooksireland.ie

Contents

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Melanie Murphy](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Rosie](#)

[Jenna](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

For Johann Hari, whose work inspired the story, for Jessica, and for Thomas, without whom this book wouldn't exist. Glass Houses was like the One Ring that I had to get to the top of 'Mount Doom' – pregnancy and birth during a pandemic. Thank you for carrying me, my dear Sam.

Please note that this book explores subjects such as suicide, eating disorders, self-harm, bereavement and revenge porn which may be upsetting to some readers.

PROLOGUE

Dublin sleeps. A delicate stillness permeates the cluttered study where David Dolan settles into his desk chair with a warm can of stout. He pushes back the curtains of silver hair from his forehead with an arthritis-twisted hand and takes a celebratory swig. For a long moment, David regards the open Word document on his laptop and the tall stack of journals beside it, each filled with sticky tabs and folded edges – research pertaining to *the project*. Pride floods his waxy face. Finally, he knows what he has to do.

His late wife, June, always showed him the way, and even now – four years on from her death – she’s penning his future with the invisible ink of the essence of her.

‘It’s perfect.’ David says it aloud to the empty room. He closes his eyes, and there she is: bright eyes behind glasses, a vision of thick, dark curls with that one grey streak that frames her face.

The first time David ever saw June she was leafing through a magazine in the waiting room of his medical practice, visibly out of breath with nerves ahead of her interview to be the new receptionist. With legs wrapped around one another like tangled tree roots, June took an apple from her handbag only to leave it half-eaten on her chair upon hearing her name sound from the hallway. David presented it to her at the back door before she left, told her ‘Hygiene is important in a place like this – remember that’. June snatched the chewed-up apple from David’s un-gloved hand and took another bite, right in front of him. Winked. Left him reeling. June didn’t get the job, but David – in spite of himself – wanted to know everything about her.

He would soon discover that the woman loathed traditional medicine – except, of course, when an antibiotic would save her from developing sepsis or when a simple tube of medicated cream could soothe her skin, splitting in pain from an allergic rash spawned from God only knows where. ‘So, you’re one of *those people* – you’d sooner jig on broken glass than accept some help,’ he’d teased over dinner and wine on their first date. Hot with attraction, they wound each other up in the town’s finest Italian restaurant, La Scarpetta – a phrase in Italian referring to mopping up the sauce left on your plate with a piece of bread, which they did. Apple crumble for dessert.

Their love’s first breath spanned months on a mattress on his sitting-room floor under a high ceiling where they lay drenched in sweat and sunset, high on the ecstasy of living – for it was as much living as David had ever done after years studying medicine, hunched like a hiker in a too-bright campus library. In her silk underwear and bare skin, *always* smelling of lavender and peppermint, June talked about spiritual dimensions and sound healing, that sort of malarky, malarky that almost put him off her entirely – not her fiery temperament, not the hair growing from her armpits and covering her legs, not the gap in her teeth, not even her wild laugh. June was completely at odds with his first love: science. Fairy doors and crystals and hippy-dippy through and through. They clashed all the time, but night would come and David would hold her and he’d stroke her hair because she was *his girl*.

For a long time, it’s been David’s greatest secret that sometimes they communicate like this now, that in death June plants ideas in his mind and pulls him this way and that, helping him to decide what colour shirt to wear or what brand of bread to buy or what Meat Loaf song to play in the car. He’s sure that she’s even responsible for saving his life on more than one occasion. But he doesn’t attempt to explain any of it to his siblings or his friends for fear of the looks and the whisperings behind his back that might dismantle his solid reputation as the ‘dependable ex-doctor’, one who always picks up the phone, even in retirement.

David ran two medical practices during his long career. Almost everyone in Skerries – his small coastal hometown, where he'd worked for over thirty years – recognised him. They smiled, waved; some would even wish him a lovely afternoon when passing him in the cereal aisle. Others felt so comfortable with David, they would divulge their deepest secrets to him while he analysed their heartbeats. He had hoped to work in Skerries until his retirement but after losing his wife, the fear of ostracism pushed David miles away and into the city, where he finished out his years with the stethoscope. He was afraid that people would read madness all over his face. And he couldn't have that.

She still exists.

Without her, there's no me.

Yet here I am.

The table clock ticks. David's laptop screen lights up the smattering of photos strewn across the desk. He downs another mouthful of stout then examines the photograph again, the one with June's message – the one that started him off down this rabbit hole – scrawled across the back in blue biro.

It'll serve as centre stage. They will grow fast and tall, like sunflowers.

Thank you, thank you, the world will thank you, my dearest love! J x

The photo was taken back in 1993 when their adopted son, Peter, was only as tall as David's dodgy hips and when June still had her eighties perm. Their faces smile up at him from the aged, glossy paper.

The family then lived in a big house tucked away in the hills of Milverton, Skerries, on the outskirts of Ireland's capital city, but of course David couldn't stay there after losing June. To be home without her was to ache all over with a grief so fierce it could bruise his living flesh. Peter moved back from New York to live with David in Dublin city, the pair of them motherless and wifeless – lost boys in the Big Smoke.

David's eyes examine the glasshouse forming the backdrop of the photo – back then, it flourished, full to the brim with blossoming plants. It winks at

him.

He had decided to sell the house off-market – to ensure it would go to a young family who would look after it, not some institution or investor with euro signs for eyes. Peter has been handling the house viewings; *he* doesn't experience the same insurmountable dread when faced with the prospect of walking across floorboards that used to press against June's feet, or the agony of hearing her voice carry through the mist of memories that cloud every corner of every room. But last week came the first sign that he wasn't supposed to sell up: Peter told David that the old glasshouse was putting off potential buyers. He recalls the conversation. 'We might as well advertise it as a bird-shit palace with a house out the front. The glasshouse is in bits ...'

'Let it put them off.' David says it now, under his breath, knowing June will hear and will nod approvingly.

It'll serve as centre stage.

JENNA

Two months later

Don't assume I'm inconveniencing my sister for the fun of it, right? Rosie would want you to think that little of me – that I love being a pain in the arse. In the conversation we won't be able to have, I'd tell her everything. I'd apologise for dumping myself on her like this and, mostly, for what's to come.

'He won't last long, Jenna. Might be time to consider putting him down,' the vet said on Bertie's thirteenth birthday – two years ago now. On a planet of nearly eight billion people, Bert is all I have left – this old, tailless fur bag of bones that can't even speak. I look down at Bertie, all crusty and frightened in his cage now, paws in piss but breathing, *still breathing*. Fifteen for a cat is seventy-six in human years, apparently. Bet that prick vet doesn't think it ethical to put sick human beings down when they're frail and in *their* seventies. Not everyone who's suffering wants to die.

I mean, *I* do. But it's just so – I don't know – arrogant, isn't it? To believe you can make that decision for someone else?

I inhale a lungful of strawberry vape and look down into the open-air atrium from the ninth – top – floor of Rosie's building, wondering where my baby will have to wander during his last days on earth. Of course Rosie had to buy the least animal-friendly property going: a one-bedroom apartment in Grand Canal Dock. It's the stuff of my sister's fantasies to live in such a wanky building, though – a fat glass cylinder housed within steel pillars and all snuggled up with the Dublin elite. Her kitchen table is likely as see-

through as her decision to live here. *This* is where you live if you grew up in the sort of family to holiday in Disneyland. Dublin's upper middle class is a cohort Rosie has loathed not being part of ever since we were kids, when we'd be sent to school wearing uniforms that didn't fit.

I sent Rosie a long (admittedly desperate) Facebook message a few hours ago and asked if I could stay with her for a bit. Rosie replied to my message with her address and nothing more. No emojis, no 'can't wait to see you', no funny GIFs, no 'how've you been?!', no updates about her life. I thought she'd at least feign concern so I wouldn't be standing here feeling so fucking awkward. A cup of coffee here, a phone call there, that one evening after Auntie Bridie's funeral, and then radio silence for coming on thirteen months now.

I plonk Bertie down and look at my phone to double check I'm at the right apartment.

I'm in number 203.

Two knocks with my weak knuckles, small as Skittles.

Rosie opens the door a couple of seconds later, like she was waiting. It catches me off guard in a choking cloud of strawberry vapour. She eyeballs my vape like it's a loaded gun so I bury it in my pocket. A silence clings while she glances from my face to Bertie's cage then back to my face.

Bottle blonde and caked in make-up, she's dressed in a black blazer over a white tank top and dark skinny jeans that look a bit too small for her. We still share the same crooked face: my straight, dark eyebrows, my slightly-too-big nose, my wonky mouth, all looking back at me.

'Are you not freezing?'

I am, but I tell her that I'm grand. I'm wearing black denim shorts in October. Irish October never sees pale, stubbly legs, but I deserve the sting of cold, so it's fine, really. I hang like a limp puppet and wait for her to invite me in.

Rosie crosses her arms. Her pointed cream heel makes a clicking sound against the gleaming marble tiles inside the doorway where she stands and I wonder why she's bothered with torture shoes: they can't be for my benefit. 'You know the landlords around here don't allow pets?'

I remind her that she owns the place.

'Yeah. But ...' she starts, clearly trying to make something up to save herself, 'one of the neighbours hates animals. He'll need to stay inside.'

Who *hates* animals? 'If you don't want us here ...' It escapes me before I've thought it through.

'I don't have a choice, do I?' She already sounds exhausted by me. I don't answer her. I don't think she wants me to. 'It's not for long, anyway, this arrangement. I've only one bedroom.'

My God, what? She must be repaying the bank a couple of grand a month for this place – for one bedroom? Isn't it well for some! I tug at the sleeve of my oversized hoodie and think about how Rosie's couch in la-di-da land is my best and only option: I have to stay where I'm not welcome.

'You could've told me that,' I say, my voice smaller than I intend it to be. 'How was I supposed to know?'

'Know what?'

I feel pathetic. 'That you wouldn't have a bed for me.'

She looks away. More silence. More strangled-sounding meows from Bertie and the distant coaxing of melodies from a keyboard from one of the other apartments. Rosie notices it, too. The sides of her mouth curl up ever so slightly, just before she notices my lack of a suitcase.

'Hang on. Jenna, where's your stuff?'

I swallow all the spit that's gathered in my mouth. My head was in a dark place leaving Deb's – I needed to get out of there quickly and I didn't know anyone with a car who could help me to transport my stuff, so I left most of my (few) belongings behind. All I have with me is inside the fake leather backpack from Penneys that's hanging off my shoulder: my laptop, my chargers, my wallet, a sketchpad with some pen and ink, a knot of costume

jewellery on top of about fifty muddled earrings and a half packet of Mentos. 'I don't need stuff,' I lie.

Of course, I do need stuff. Mostly for Bertie. A comfy bed, cat food, some oil for his coat, some catnip toys ... I'm running low on funds, to be honest, but Rosie's tone isn't really inviting of a loan request. Better sign on before the week is out. I don't have the energy to look for another job.

Rosie's reply is air forced through her nostrils. Then, 'You'll need *my* stuff.' Her snarky voice. My least favourite of her voices.

I chew my lip.

Bertie yelps.

'Just come in.'

Martian soil. We walk single file. The only sound is the click of Rosie's heels. Her hallway leads to a spotless open-plan living area with a kitchen kitted with everything you could possibly need and more. Her blender looks more expensive than my second-hand MacBook, and crisp clear views of Dublin City beckon through the massive curved windows on the other side of the couch and TV. The place is decorated with fake plants, pretentious quotes in frames, minimalist 'art' posters that represent nothing at all. It looks like a magazine ad, not a home.

The *actual* grimness of my student accommodation in contrast with the divine order of Rosie's – it's like hopping from the piping hot Blue Lagoon into an ice bath. I could do with a warm towel for a minute.

After Jason inevitably broke up with me, I moved in with a right old wagon named Deb, an hour's walk away from the National Academy of Art and Design in Dublin where I am – *was* – studying. Although my room was forever Baltic and I had to 'keep to myself' in the house, I was grateful to have somewhere to sleep in Dublin for under five hundred quid a month and my own (very tiny) press where I managed to stuff my bits and pieces.

But this morning Deb rang me during my walk home. Said she needed to talk. When I got back, she sat me down and laid out a bunch of new rules. 'Bertie has to stay in your room. I don't want him wandering the rest of the house or shitting on my patio. You can turn on the hot water when I've given

permission, so remember to *ask me* before you run a shower. Oh ... and tell me when you are coming or going ahead of time, please. I'd actually really appreciate it if you could text me a picture of your full class schedule. Is that all right? Hmm. What else. Ah! Yes! Don't go out after 7 p.m. for any reason. No friends are allowed to stay over. No blokes, either. If you can't verbally agree to all of this, Jenna, I'm afraid I'll have to raise your monthly rent of €460 to €620.'

I'm not even exaggerating. Can you even imagine a bigger bitch?

Honestly, I think that one-way conversation just tipped me over the edge. I stood up, found Bertie, walked out. Fuck the stupid course, fuck funnelling the last of my earnings from countless retail hours into Deb's pockets ...

'What do you think?' Rosie eyes me, seemingly desperate for any glimmer of jealousy, for a sign that I'm inordinately impressed by her home. She tucks her chin and raises her eyebrows, awaiting a gasp. 'It's a Victorian gasometer, this building. One of a kind.'

I don't know what that means, so I just stare into space.

'We're inside an old gas storage tank. That's why the building looks so ... unique! See how the wall there is curved?'

I shrug my shoulders.

Rosie tucks flyaway hairs behind her ear and rounds her shoulders as her chest caves with disappointment. 'Anyway. You'll be sleeping on the couch, there. It pulls out. There're blankets down the hall to the right, in the hot press, beside my bathroom. No bath,' she says, touching the side of her head and staring at the floor, as if having no bath is something to be embarrassed about. 'But, sure, this isn't a five-star hotel.'

Isn't it?

We both look around to avoid eye contact. I wait for her to say something else. You'd think she'd at least ask me how I am. Offer me a toastie. A shower. A cup of tea. *Anything*.

'Listen, Jenna, I've to go.'

My jaw falls.