

THE FLIES

By B. R. Flynn

Mark didn't tell Amy about the flies - didn't even think of mentioning them to her - until three days after first noticing them.

They congregated in one small spot, all crawling together in a pile, on the sliding door. The sliding door let out into Mark and Amy's backyard and, since it had been raining for almost a full week, Amy had not even looked out back during the period when the flies began to amass on the door.

But Mark did.

He first noticed them in the early morning hours; just after dawn, perhaps. He crossed the kitchen, which looked into the family room, where the sliding door sat installed in the wall, a window onto almost nothing: a small yard with well-kept grass that was a deep, summer green.

The rains stimulated the grass' growth and Mark had found himself mowing the lawn every couple of days, early in the morning, which was why he was up at this time.

On this first occasion, he barely paid the flies a single glance: just one brief head turn as he opened the sliding door to go out. There were perhaps seven or eight flies then, all of them clinging to the glass door in a rough, moving, black circle. When Mark opened the door, they flew off, into the yard and parts beyond. And that was all, nothing else.

The only reason he remembered them at all was that, the next day, they were back. Mark liked to stand at the back door and look out at the rain on summer days like this, where lightning crashed across the sky and the driving wind blew the water droplets almost sideways into their yard. Amy preferred to stay planted in front of the television, watching a movie or perhaps one of those shows where people found their dream home.

The storms bothered her. She would never articulate this to Mark, but he already knew. They had been together for more than ten years now and knew most things about each other.

He was looking out at the storm on that second occasion. It was early evening, the clouds blocking the setting sun from his sight, and Mark suddenly noticed them again:

Flies.

More of them this time: ten or twelve, all crawling about each other in the same spot. He frowned down at them for a moment, then looked about the house. Amy was in their bedroom, watching one of her shows. So he wouldn't be disturbing her.

He hit the sliding door with the palm of his hand right on the spot that the flies had collected; a hard, flat slap. Hard enough that it would, if not knock someone over, at least make them think twice about approaching. The flies on the other side of the glass door dispersed immediately, flying off into the storm to be pelted to pieces by the driving rain.

Mark smiled to himself, satisfied. And that was that.

On the third day, in the morning, the storm had well and truly passed. The bright sun shown down on their yard and both Mark and Amy were up early, talking about the kinds of things that teachers talk about during the summer: vacation plans, what was likely to change in the next semester, etc.

They were sitting in the family room as they spoke and Mark leaned back in his seat, the sun from outside hitting him in the eyes and he brought one hand up to shield himself. Through his fingers, he

could just see them.

The flies.

They were back in the same place, right where they had been the past two days. More of them this time: fifteen or twenty, all crawling about themselves like it was the end of the world. Mark didn't think before speaking, it just came out.

"They're back."

"What's that?" Amy asked.

"Oh, nothing," Mark said, sitting back up in his chair.

"Mark, you don't just suddenly say, 'They're back' and then say that it's nothing. What is it?"

"Oh, it really is nothing. Just these damn flies."

"Flies?"

"Yeah, flies."

He stood up from his chair and walked to the sliding door, stooped down slightly to get a good look at them from this side of the glass. Amy joined him a moment later.

"It's just some flies, hon," she said.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Mark said, "nothing."

"So why is it bothering you?"

"Bothering? It's not bothering me."

"It clearly is. You brought it up."

"Bothering?"

He put his hand against the glass, right where the flies were, not a slap this time, but a soft touch. The flies seemed to respond, moving quicker, like they were panicking.

"Just some flies," Mark said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Okay," Amy said.

And that was all, nothing else.

After this, Mark found himself not looking at that spot on the sliding door where the flies congregated. He actively avoided walking past the back door entirely. In fact, he started using the side door of the house to go into the backyard when he mowed the lawn or when some other function needed to be fulfilled.

It was on one of these occasions - he was replacing a sprinkler head that been broken at some point during one of the storms - when he started to hear them. Hear their buzzing, their incessant buzzing.

Still, he refused to look.

He kept his eyes focused on the job of replacing the sprinkler head and blocked out all else. It proved difficult, as the buzzing gradually increased in intensity and volume as he worked outside. It started to dig into his head from the outside in, burrowing into his skull.

But he kept a brave face on. With the job accomplished, he looked up at the house - his house - while still avoiding the spot on the sliding door. He looked at the roof, at the tree near him. It was a good house and had served them well for the eight years they had been living here. It had been built some forty or so years before they bought it but it was in good shape. Sometimes, at moments like these, he wondered who had lived in his house before himself. What kind of people had they been? What did they do for fun? Did all of them watch TV like Amy did or did some of them find their own paths to frivolity?

Pondering these questions, he started walking across the yard without thinking and almost tripped over his own feet. Startled, he looked down and found that the ground where he had just stepped was lower than the rest of the yard. Not by much - an inch or so, perhaps - but enough for his feet to be momentarily muddled, it seemed. He frowned down at the spot in the yard and, all the while, the flies buzzed and buzzed and buzzed. Mark paid them no mind.

Several days later, in the middle of the night, Mark woke suddenly. It wasn't like in the movies, where the protagonist was always snapping up in bed, drenched in sweat, a scream on their lips. No, it wasn't like that. First of all, Mark was sleeping on his side, as he always did and his eyes simply popped open suddenly, looking about, as if trying to find something hiding in the room. Certainly, the shadows cast about the bedroom suggested concealed shapes, suggested hunched, creeping forms. But there was nothing.

Nothing that he could see, at least. But there was the sound. As there always was lately.

The buzzing.

The infernal noise of the flies by the sliding door. By rights, he shouldn't have been able to hear them. They were not only in an entirely different room but also outside said room. It made no sense. And, yet, here was the sound.

It sounded like there were thousands of them outside that door. Mark could picture them, all grouped together in a pile, like some kind of man formed out of insects, trying to walk, stumbling, falling, catching himself - or herself - before disaster.

He imagined this man-made-of-flies reaching out and touching the spot on the sliding door where he had seen the flies those first three times. It was a disquieting image and Mark pushed it out of his mind.

He got up, out of bed, and went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom next to their bedroom. Soon enough, he found a bottle of some kind of sleeping aid and took one more than the recommended dosage. That helped him sleep the rest of the night.

But it didn't save him from dreaming.

In his dream, he walked out of his bedroom in the middle of the night and looked out the sliding door. The flies were there, of course: perhaps forty or fifty of them all bunched together as if trying to punch their way inside, to break the mighty glass of the sliding door and seek sanctuary in the house beyond.

But Mark only gave them a passing glance. He was more interested in what was happening in his yard.

There was a storm raging in the sky above. Lightning crashed across the heavens and rain poured down. Despite this, someone was in his backyard, digging.

Mark could see the shovel as it kicked wet dirt into the air, again and again. The figure was already three feet into the ground at this point, so they had been at it for some time. Mark could make out no details of the figure. It was just a shape in the rain.

But Mark did recognize *where* the figure was digging. It was in that patch of his yard that was lower than the rest of it, where he had stumbled the other day while replacing the sprinkler head.

As Mark puzzled over this, the figure suddenly stopped digging. It took Mark a moment to notice that the figure had stopped and, when he did, he was horrified to see that the figure was now looking at him. He caught more details of the man now - yes, a man, certainly - as the figure looked at him, a large grin across his face. The man put both of his hands on the wet dirt and started to pull himself out of the hole.

Mark could see that there was something the ground near the man, something that he had been blocking while digging. What was it? A sack?

"Get out of my yard!" Mark yelled before he had even realized that he had opened his mouth. "Get outta here!"

And he smacked the sliding door for emphasis, right where the flies had congregated. Once again, the flies dispersed into the rainy night air, leaving the spot clear. Mark could see that in their place was a hand print.

A bloody hand print.

Mark, fear mounting inside him, looked up at the figure as he finished getting out of the hole. He took a moment to wipe his wet brow before starting towards Mark.

If there was anymore of the dream, Mark couldn't remember it. He woke in the early hours of the morning once again, but he had no intention of mowing the lawn today.

A few days later, Mark was sitting at the kitchen counter, which faced away from the sliding door, his head in his hands trying to block out the sound of the flies. His eyes were bloodshot and dark circles surrounded them. When Amy put a hand on his shoulder, he jumped.

"What's wrong, honey?" she asked.

"Doesn't that drive you crazy?" It was little more than a whisper.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired. Haven't been sleeping well."

"We need to get you to the doctor."

"Tomorrow."

And that was all, nothing else.

That night, Mark lay awake in his bed. The pills no longer worked and he only ever heard the sound of the flies as they buzzed away.

It was an unworkable situation. He could no longer live like this. It had to be dealt with.

He got up out of bed and walked into the family room. His gaze was on his feet as he walked but he made himself look up as he approached the sliding door.

There they were. Hundreds of them, all buzzing and crowding in together against the sliding door. They looked like a great, undulating black curtain, brought to horrible life by some unseen force.

Before opening the sliding door, he slapped his hand against it. The flies went crazy and started to head in all directions outside. Soon enough, they were no longer near the door and Mark felt safe opening it.

Doing so, he stepped out into the backyard. It was a clear night, not a cloud in the sky. The temperature gauge/clock that he had hung out here told him that it was 3:45am and that it was a balmy 71 degrees Fahrenheit.

He could no longer see any flies but he could still hear them. They seemed to be everywhere.

Before heading into the yard, he turned around and saw that the bloody handprint was on the sliding door once again. He wasn't dreaming. He knew he wasn't dreaming.

He looked back out into the yard and the hole was there. No figure, no grinning nightmare of a man anywhere to be seen. But the hole he had dug was there, just the same.

Mark approached it slowly, every step he took seeming like a thousand miles through rough desert. He imagined that each of his footfalls sounded like an anvil dropped from a hundred feet up but he could hear nothing but the buzzing of the flies.

Finally, he reached the hole and looked down. There was a bag down there at the bottom of the hole, which was about six feet deep. A bag or sack of some kind.

And there were flies everywhere. Clinging to the bag, crawling on the sides of the hole.

Mark put a fist to his mouth and bit down on one of his knuckles. It hurt but he just wanted to prove to himself that he wasn't dreaming. That this was really happening.

And so it was.

A fly buzzed around his head and landed on his left ear. Mark could feel the thing brush its legs against its face, could feel its head twitching madly. It was all too much and he swatted the thing away.

He became aware of something standing behind him. A person? A mass of flies in the shape of a person? He didn't know. All he knew was that there was something behind him and that it was reaching out for him. Reaching out to touch him, to put a hand on his shoulder.

Mark steeled his courage and turned to face it, whatever it was.

And that was all, nothing else.

The next morning, Amy awoke just before eight. She yawned, stretched and got up. She left her bedroom and entered the kitchen, idly looking out the sliding door into the backyard beyond.

There was a single fly on the glass door and Amy chuckled to herself and shook her head. She remembered the ten or twelve flies that had amassed at that spot on the sliding door a few days ago. After Mark had pointed them out to her, she had gone out with some window cleaner and wiped the spot, which had clearly been spoiled with soda or something. Since then, she had seen no other flies. But it had seemed to bother Mark, and she had no idea why. Where was Mark, in fact? She looked about, frowning.

But she didn't see her husband anywhere.

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