

SUBURBAN LURE

BY B. R. FLYNN

Jim Klein liked to get up early to run. Around six, or slightly before, was ideal, especially since Phoenix could get hot early, doubly so as summer approached.

Jim was a big man, in both height and width. Sixty-three years old, a widower. Margie Klein had passed away at the too-young age of fifty-four to cancer. That had been seven years ago now.

Their marriage had produced no children and Jim had no siblings and few friends, so his supposed golden years were spent alone. Sometimes he would chat with the neighbors on either side of his house; the ideal chit-chat of people who live in close proximity to each other but know hardly anything of each other's lives - weather, new cars in driveways or garages, etc.

So Jim spent time on the house. He maintained the desert landscape front yard and the lush green grass backyard with diligence. He watched television - mostly the ID channel, where the best murder stories were - but was not much of a reader.

His big passion lately was running. He worked up a sweat and hopefully lost some weight, as well. He liked it. Seemed to clear his head somehow.

Most morning runs, he would circle the park that his house looked out on five or six times, depending on how he felt on any particular morning. It was a good park but nothing spectacular: green grass that wasn't quite as lush as Jim's backyard, a play area for children, periodic benches for picnics. A typical neighborhood park.

On this particular morning, Jim made his way around the park - his first lap - when he saw the little girl on her scooter. She was eight or nine, by Jim's estimation, blonde hair tied up into pigtails. She was looking down at her feet, as if she was afraid that she was going to fall off the scooter. However, she seemed to be doing just fine, in Jim's opinion. Her progress was steady and she hardly ever wobbled from side to side.

He frowned. It was a little strange that she was out this early. Jim didn't usually see children on his morning runs. Hell, he hardly saw anyone on his morning runs. People, in his neighborhood at least,

didn't seem to go running anymore.

He shrugged it off. She probably just wanted to get out of the house before heading off for school. It wasn't any of his business, to be sure.

As he was musing over this, the little girl did begin to wobble on her scooter. Slowly, at first, then more violently as she began to lose control. Jim realized that she was going to topple over in mere seconds and he sped up to catch her.

Just as she began to tumble, her small head alarmingly leading her down to the hard cement below, Jim caught her. Her feet came out from under her and the scooter crashed to the ground instead of her. Jim placed the girl on her feet and knelt down, trying to look her in the eye. It didn't entirely work: even kneeling, Jim was still looking at the top of the girl's head.

"Thanks, mister," the girl said, looking up at him with a wan smile.

"You're welcome," Jim responded. "You be careful on that thing, now."

And, with a pat on her head, Jim stood up. The girl got on her scooter without another word and got back at it. Jim, however, did not. Something had caught his attention.

He was on the complete opposite end of the park to his house. In fact, if he turned directly around, he would be able to see his house, with his truck parked in the driveway next to a not-used-in-almost-ten-years fifth wheel camper trailer next to the well-maintained desert landscape yard.

Now, here across the park, he was looking at an almost exact duplicate of his house. Same yard, same driveway, same colors, same mailbox. The only major differences were that there was no truck in the driveway - no vehicle at all, in fact - nor was there a trailer. And there was something else, too, something that made Jim's head hurt slightly when he thought about it.

It was the exact opposite of his house. A mirror image, in fact.

Jim turned and looked at his own house, peering over the relatively short distance of the park to confirm what he already knew. Yes, it was a nearly exact duplicate of his own house, just opposite.

Jim shook his head. He took a short step towards the house but didn't cross the narrow neighborhood road to get really up close. He did, however, shield his eyes from the rising sun, cutting out the glare to take a better look.

The blinds in the window to the right of the front door looked to be the same shade of beige as his blinds. And they were open.

Just a crack.

Jim felt the desire to cross the street and look through those blinds, to see who lived in the house, assuming they were already up this early. It was a powerful urge but one that seemed profoundly silly to Jim's rational, ordered mind.

As he looked, he could have sworn that there was movement behind those blinds. That urge intensified and he actually found himself putting a foot forward in preparation of crossing the road to the opposite house.

He stopped himself. It was silly. A silly fancy. There was nothing strange about this house. First of all, there were many houses in the neighborhood that used the same model, same floor plan, as his house. This was suburban Phoenix, after all, where most houses were just cookie-cutter units winding around water-strapped neighborhoods. And, yes, many of those houses had desert landscapes in their front yards. It was easier to maintain a desert landscape out here in the actual desert than it was grass.

So, again, nothing but a silly fancy. Jim shook his head once more, smiled, and continued on his run.

But late that night, when he was lying in his empty bed, thinking over things, there was something that bothered him. Something that hadn't occurred to him at the time. Something that, in retrospect, seemed obvious. Why hadn't he noticed the house before? He ran almost every morning and certainly would have passed it many times.

At night, he was eventually able to convince himself that he simply hadn't ever looked to his right as he passed that particular house. He was focused on the Great Ahead, that space in front of a runner that was both so close and yet ever outdistancing them: a moving finish line that they would never reach. Yes, that was it. He had simply been too focused before to notice the house.

Sleep came, as did the morning. And, as was the case most mornings, Jim went on his run.

This morning, he did cross the street to look at the opposite house. There was a patch of mud across the sidewalk that circled the park which Jim used as an excuse to cross the road to the house side, but if he stopped to cross examine this thought process, he would have discovered this shallow ruse in no time flat. He wanted to take a closer look at the house.

He stopped in front of it, again lying to himself that he was just stopping to catch his breath. He leaned over, hands on both knees, breathing heavily. At first, his eyes were closed as he shook sweat out of his hair.

Then, he slowly opened his eyes and looked at the opposite house. Yes, those did appear to be the same blinds that he used in his house. Again, there was nothing too strange about this. There was a big hardware store less than three blocks away from his neighborhood and he bought the blinds there, as did the owners of this house presumably did. Nothing strange at all.

But still.

He stepped onto the driveway of the opposite house and took a few more steps closer to it. The trim was a light brown, same as his and Jim marveled at a spot about six feet off the ground right next to the garage. A spot where the paint had chipped away. Exactly the same as his own house.

But on the opposite side. A mirror image.

His rational mind tried to justify this - paint gets chipped all the time, often in the same few places - but he couldn't make it work. It was exactly the same. The same shape, the same spot.

His head began to hurt again and he turned away from the chip, two fingers from either hand at both temples, rubbing deep. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was looking at the front window, and the blinds. They were open.

Just a crack.

He could see inside the house. It was laid out exactly like his house, but the opposite. He could just see into the kitchen, where someone was standing, back turned to the window. It was a woman and she wasn't moving.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She was moving, but in place. Her hands, unseen by Jim, were in front of her and she was doing something with them. What, Jim didn't know. Cleaning a glass, perhaps? Maybe something like that.

The woman had long strawberry blonde hair, like his dear, departed Margie. In fact, this woman looked an awful lot like Margie from behind. She wore a simple house robe like Margie used to wear in the mornings when she didn't feel like getting dressed right away. Yes, she looked a lot like Margie.

That desire to step closer to the house returned and Jim found himself being pulled along by it. He took another step towards the house. He was halfway across the driveway now. Another few steps and he would be at the front door.

Then what?

Would he knock? Ring the doorbell? Just stand there for a full minute before turning around and leaving?

No. It was silly. All of it. Nothing but a silly fancy! Jim turned away from the house and got back to running. The rest of the run, he pushed the house out of his mind as best as he could. He tried to convince himself that the house was just a simple neighborhood house. That there was nothing strange about it. Nothing wrong with it. But his mind wouldn't leave the house alone. It kept returning to it, again and again. So he had to concentrate on the Great Ahead. Concentrate on that and nothing else. Running made sense.

The opposite house didn't.

The third morning, he avoided the house entirely. He ran laps up and the down the park, actually running through the grass, difficult and unpleasant as that was. He would have to wash the soles of his shoes when he got home, lest he wanted them to be stained green for the rest of their relatively short life.

But he did find himself looking at the opposite house more than once. It was still there. Not a dream or hallucination, then. Nothing that could be explained away so easily. It was real. A real place.

But that wasn't entirely true, was it?

He hadn't actually touched the house, had he? Maybe it was all a hallucination. Maybe dementia was setting in. He was young for that sort of thing but it wasn't impossible. Margie had been young for the cancer that had killed her, so why not him? Could he be imagining the house?

He decided that he had to touch the house. Had to make sure it was real. Tangible.

But not today.

Not this morning. This morning, he would continue his unconventional run and go home, shower, shave, have breakfast - a big one, he was thinking: eggs, bacon, hash browns - and watch the ID channel. Yes, that was what he would do.

And so that was what he did. The various activities that he planned for himself were nothing more than a slight distraction, however. He spent most of the day thinking of the opposite house.

The next morning, he got up later than normal. Slept in, in fact. He didn't get out for his run until just before eight. He felt unrested, light-headed. Perhaps he should have eaten before the run this morning.

But no matter. Today was the day. He would approach the house, give it a touch and see if it was real. He smiled. He felt good, despite the hard night and the fact that his head was pounding. High blood pressure, surely.

There were a few people in the park this morning - a Sunday - and he nodded to several of them. When he reached the opposite house, he didn't hesitate at all when he crossed the road, but he did stop in the driveway once again to catch his breath. He looked about.

A cable van was parked next door. Its driver had the back of the van open, pulling out tools. Presumably he was headed to the cable box that stood like a tombstone at the edge of the yard just shy of the sidewalk.

Jim nodded to the man but the cable guy didn't see him. No matter. Jim approached the opposite house, heading for the corner that was formed by the garage and the small walkway that lead to the front door, set back from the garage, just like his house.

His head started to really hurt as he reached out to touch the corner - brick here, lining the wood trim - and he hesitated for a moment. It was his blood pressure, surely.

Jim shook it off and grabbed the brick. It was solid enough.

So, real then.

Jim didn't know if this made everything better or worse. He supposed it was better because it

suggested that he wasn't developing early onset dementia.

But it was worse because it suggested that the opposite house, with all of its strange coincidences and mirror images, was here to taunt him somehow. Here to mess with him in some way.

Jim looked at the front window. The blinds were open.

Just a crack.

He approached the window, walking through the carefully-maintained desert landscape. He looked through the crack in the blinds.

There was the woman again. The woman who looked like Margie from behind. She was still standing in the kitchen, hands unseen in front of her, moving in some way. Washing her hands? No, she was too far away from the sink for that.

As Jim watched, the woman turned her head. Just slightly, but it was enough to convince Jim that the woman was Margie. The line of her jaw was the same, the shape of her nose was the same. It was her.

Jim's mouth dropped open in shock. His head cleared. He realized that the opposite house wasn't here to taunt him or mess with him.

It was here to help him.

It was here to give him a second chance with Margie. It was here to give him enough time to say all the things that he wished he had said to Margie before she was gone.

It was here as a gift.

Jim smiled wide. He walked confidently to the front door and opened it. The thought that it might be locked never occurred to him at all. Of course it wouldn't be locked. He knew this.

And it wasn't.

Jim opened the door and stepped inside. But inside wasn't right. Jim saw this right away.

Outside, the sun shone down hard and bright. Inside, it was extremely dark. Inside the opposite house was a large space that fell away into darkness. The space was far larger than the house could possibly hold. It was all big, marble tiles, black and white, like a chessboard. In the middle of the space was a staircase leading up. This also disappeared into darkness after about thirty or so feet.

The pounding in Jim's head intensified and he grasped both sides of it in his hands. He could hear his heart beating; it was louder than it had ever been in the past.

All the while, he kept his eyes fixed on that staircase. Something came out from the darkness behind the staircase, something that glided across the tiled floor towards him, something that Jim recognized.

It was the little girl on her scooter.

She was smiling at him. A big, toothy smile. All teeth. Perfect, white teeth all in a line. The smile

was huge, fixed in place. The kind of smile that existed only in nightmares. Her eyes were pure, shiny silver. There were no pupils, or whites, only silver.

She - it - glided towards him on her scooter, slowly kicking it along. Jim's muscles all locked in place, betraying him in his most desperate hour. He couldn't move at all. It was as if the house - or the girl - had grasped hold of him. His head pounded, his heart as well.

The little girl scooted towards him, in no hurry to cross the distance between them. As Jim finally managed to pry the muscles of his jaw loose and open his mouth to scream, the front door slammed shut behind him. The little girl was less than a foot away now, her smiling, utterly inhuman face the only thing in his field of vision now.

She didn't hurry.

They all the time in the world.

The cable guy - Louis was his name - looked up from the cable box on the edge of the yard. He looked at the house next door and frowned. Had he heard something? For a moment there, it seemed like he had.

But all these thoughts left his mind as his eyes focused on the house next door. It was a tri-level house, modest but homey. Its soft green color complimented the green grass of its front yard.

It looked exactly the same as his own house. But opposite.

The mirror image of his house.

The only thing that was missing was his own car parked in the driveway. Maybe it was in the garage, Louis thought. Sometimes it's in the garage. Then he shook his head. What was he thinking about? This wasn't his house. It was just a house that looked like his house.

But still.

It was intriguing. He felt like he should get a closer look at it.

As he was musing on this, a little girl on a scooter glided by on the sidewalk in front of him. She had blonde hair in pigtails and looked around eight or so.

"Hey," Louis said. The little girl stopped and looked at him. "You live around here?" A nod. "You know who lives in that house?" He indicated the house next door.

The little girl smiled and started moving again. As she kicked away on her scooter, she looked back at him and finally answered.

"Nobody lives there, silly!"