

Kenneth Stubert

Poppy House

If only she hadn't bought the red one.

Nick had besieged his sister, Judith, not to buy the large red house. "Look at the neighborhood; it's run down and surrounded by tenements and vacant lots. It's way too large for one person. The house needs a lot of maintenance and you can't do it. Don't do it, Sis. Please!"

"The house is perfect for me, Nick, and you are not my keeper," she forcefully countered. "The streetcar runs right past the house; I can hop right on it and be downtown in a jiffy. It has room for an art studio. You know I always wanted to paint. Now I can. You met the caretaker; he comes with the place and lives outback. He'll do most of the maintenance and you saw the landscaping job he does. You have to admit, it's beautiful!"

Dejected, Nick had to concede her points, particularly regarding the landscaping. His shoulders slumped and he suddenly looked tired. "There are other houses in town." His voice was barely audible. "One's that don't have the history. One's that aren't," he paused as his throat constricted and he whispered. "One's that aren't... cursed."

"Nicholas Collins!" Judith jumped up and paced around the room as her she tried to calm her rising temper. "You of all people, a big, strong, policeman, a guardian of the people, falling for stupid rumors. That's ridiculous!"

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The large, 3- story, red brick home with a widow's walk that overlooked the city, was built in 1920 by the heir apparent to the city newspaper. It occupied a full, half-block, adjacent to one of the main streets leading to downtown. Two weeks after moving in, his wife, carrying their newborn

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son, tumbled down the circular staircase killing them both. It was the gardener, Clyde Lewis, that discovered the two.

Once a tall virile man, Clyde had been gassed and wounded in the “War to end all wars” and was hired out of kindness. Clyde never talked much, but when he did, his voice was gruff and disarming, and he walked with a limp as a result of a broken hip. The magnate-to-be, also a veteran, had deeded Clyde a small dwelling in the rear of the property for life in return for Clyde’s services as gardener and handyman. The reason for the owner’s generosity was never fully known, although most speculated that Clyde had been wounded saving the young man’s life.

Clyde meticulously planted a large bed of red poppies and a smaller adjacent bed of flowers as a tribute to his benefactor’s wife and son. However, it had a reverse effect on the owner. Instead of seeing the beauty in the flowers, he was reminded of the death of his family. He soon fell into an abyss of despair, and, one late, spring afternoon when the poppies were in full bloom, he took his life.

The next owners were a rancorous, older couple that argued all the time. The police were called numerous times to quell their domestic uprisings and their fighting was well-known throughout the neighborhood. One morning, Clyde found the woman beaten to death on the kitchen floor with her husband sound asleep in the upstairs master bedroom. When Clyde was questioned, all he said was, “They fought a lot.” The police arrested the man and, although he venomously denied killing her, he was tried and found guilty of murder. As a memorial to the deceased woman, Clyde planted the third bed of splendid red poppies.

Owners number three loved to party. Their neighborhood parties became legendary with continued celebrations marking the end of Prohibition carrying on well into the morning hours.

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Sometimes they lasted the entire weekend. It was after one such weekend party that Clyde, while pushing his wheelbarrow past the closed garage door, heard a car running. He quickly opened the side door only to see the woman slumped over the steering wheel. She was dead; her husband was found passed out, dead drunk on the living room couch. The death was classified as accidental. Custody of their two children was awarded to the wife's grandmother and the husband was committed to a state hospital for alcoholics. He never recovered and, within three years, died of cirrhosis of the liver.

By now, rumors began to circulate that the house was cursed. It sat empty until a young, recently married couple bought the home at auction. It was their first house and they devoted themselves to its care. She was always smiling and decorated the home with new, fresh, modern wallpapers and paint. Tasteful curtains brightened each room. On the outside, her husband installed new white shutters and painted the trim to match; he worked alongside Clyde manicuring the lawn and flower beds. Newly planted, red, rose bushes climbed trellises around the spacious front porch. It was a happy home, perhaps for the first time since it was first built, and the rumors subsided.

In June of 1942, as war raged in Europe and the Pacific, the man enlisted and left his beautiful wife and happy home. On November 13, 1942, the young, vibrant marine, was killed on Guadalcanal. His body was never recovered. The neighbors rallied around the widow and, though grieving, she responded to their kindness. While one never recovers or forgets such a tragedy, to all, she appeared to be doing, "as well as could be expected." And so, it came as a complete surprise, that in the summer of 1943, early in the morning, Clyde Lewis discovered the body of the young woman on the concrete pad between the house and the garage. The ensuing police investigation concluded that, in despair, the once-vibrant young woman had leaped from the

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widow's walk. The neighbors were shocked and gossip concerning the cursed red house once again surfaced.

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"There is no such thing as a cursed house," reiterated Judy Collins. "Sometimes I think you just don't want to see me happy."

Nick wrung his hands together and looked nervously to the sky and then back to his sister. "It's not that. It's just that, well, this house has been sitting vacant for three years. I think you can do better."

Judy crossed her arms across her chest and stared at her brother. She was always head strong and stubborn. This time she was also adamant. "I'm buying this house whether you like it or not. That's final and I don't care what you say."

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It was a particularly warm, clear, dry, late spring day in 1947 when Nick and Judy sat on the wide, wooden porch of her home. Content and happy, Judy soaked in the view. "Smell those roses. How lovely!"

Nick rocked serenely in his newly purchased Adirondack rocker and silently sipped his ice tea.

Judy leaned over the railing and surveyed her front yard. "The new poppy bed, the one put in a few years ago has matured. Those five beds are so very beautiful. I could sit here all day and just look at them. The red roses are divine too, and Clyde is planting dozens of red geraniums along the walkways. I just love red flowers!"

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Nick joined her. “You always did like red. Red everything and anything. It is pretty but...” He paused and looked out at the gardener. “There’s something about that guy, Clyde, that creeps me out. When he looks at you, he stares like no one’s there. It’s like he sees right through you. I just don’t trust him, Sis.”

She locked her arms with her brother’s and leaned against him. “The war really affected him. Besides his wounds, he was shell shocked and lost a lot of friends. That’s got to be tough. A lot of WWII vets are going through the same thing now. Cut him some slack.” Nick nodded.

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An extreme cold wave swept through the city early that winter when an odd sensation awakened Judy in the late evening. She suddenly felt cold and a heaviness enveloped her. She couldn’t move her arms and her eyes blinked rapidly as she tried to focus on the shadowy figure that stood in the doorway of her bedroom. Her voice warbled, “Clyde? What are you doing here?”

The figure didn’t move. Finally, his voice, barely audible, croaked. “I, I brought you some tea, Miss Judy. I thought it might help you... you know, warm up a little.”

Judy relaxed but remained very much on guard. Her speech was assertive. “Thank you, Clyde. You may put it on the side table. And Clyde, don’t ever come in my bedroom again.”

Clyde dutifully put the tea down but only looked past Judy. A cold shiver went up and down her spine, but she remained silent, staring at the gardener as he withdrew. Since then, she sensed a change in Clyde. His vacant, empty, stares lingered longer, and she swore she could see a snarl curl up from the corner of his mouth before he turned away. She became more and more uneasy when he was close-by, and, at times she sensed his presence even when she didn’t see him.

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In the summer of 1948, Nick Collins sat on his front porch, rocking and looking out over his newly-inherited, half-finished, sixth, red poppy, garden. Almost seven months had passed since Judith had died. As he contemplated all that had transpired, he laughed aloud, “Things couldn’t have worked out better!”

Late last year, Judy showed him her diary outlining her concerns about Clyde’s behavior toward her. She had become afraid of him and wanted him off the property. She asked Nick for advice. “Why don’t you sell the house? I heard one of those new supermarkets is interested in nearby real estate. You could make a bundle.” Judy wouldn’t hear of it; she loved the red house too much. Nick said he’d talk with Clyde but never did.

Clyde found Judy dangling from the stout newel post anchored on the overhanging landing of the foyer. At first, the police said it was suicide, but Nick threw immediate suspicion on Clyde. He produced the incriminating diary and, based on his stature as a fellow officer, Clyde was brought in for questioning. Clyde was emotionless, as always. The police were relentless, badgering the man for over 24 hours. Clyde fervently denied killing Judith, but he surprised everyone by breaking down and admitting he killed five other poppy house women.

In his raspy yet whispery, monotone he explained. “I punched the widow. I carried her to the roof. She came to just as I threw her from the railing. She screamed then hit the ground. I liked that.”

He explained that the fourth woman was drunk and passed out. He put her in the car and started the engine. He dispatched the killing as, “Plain, simple and easy.” Victim number three found

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him raiding her kitchen and began yelling and belittling him. “I lost my temper and hit her. She was soft. It felt good so I hit her again and again with the skillet. I kept it. It makes great eggs.”

“She ignored him,” he said of the original owner’s wife. “He was my friend. She spent all of her time with that crying kid. One little push was all it took.”

However, he denied killing Judith Collins. That didn’t matter to the police; Clyde Lewis was guilty of murder and would pay the price.

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Nick rocked peacefully and pulled a document from his shirt pocket. “I can’t believe how easy it was,” he said to himself. “Her neck snapped so easily. When I hung her, no one thought she had died earlier. As for Clyde’s confession, that was a bonus. Never saw that coming! What a break!”

He opened the paper and grinned. “WOW! Sold to A&P! Never thought this house would be worth that much!” He tucked the paper away and calmly rocked. “She could have bought three other houses. If only she hadn’t bought the red one. She’d be alive. But I wouldn’t be rich... very rich!”