

Blunder Lane
By Sophie Shulman

Jim's elbow knocked into the wall of the cramped breakfast nook as he flipped the page of the newspaper. Balancing the edge of the paper on his knee, he slowly lifted the coffee mug to his lips.

"Good morning, dear husband!" Lynette exclaimed, bursting into the kitchen. Startled, Jim jerked his hand, spilling coffee onto his lap. He jumped up, swatting the hot stain burning through his pants.

Oblivious, Lynette rummaged through the refrigerator. "The fridge is out again!" She opened a carton of milk and sniffed. She grimaced and chucked it in the trash. "You know," she said, slamming the refrigerator door, "it might be nice to live in a house with working electrics."

Jim wiped the crotch of his pants with a damp cloth. "We'll look at new refrigerators this weekend."

"Or we could look for a new house instead," Lynette said softly.

Jim threw the cloth on the table, which rocked on its broken leg. "How many times do I have to tell you it's not the right time to buy a house?"

"How much money do we have to pour into this dump to make you realize that it is?"

"I'm not having this discussion again." Jim sat back down and opened the newspaper again, shutting down the conversation.

"I have to go get ready for work," said Lynette, breaking the silence and storming out of the room.

Jim crumpled up the paper and sighed. He hated to see Lynette so upset, but moving was such a pain and finding a decent home in this seller's market would be nearly impossible. His gaze wandered around the room – the faded wood of the cupboards, eroded tile of the countertop and slightly leaning floor. True, it needed some work and the kitchen was so small that only one person could cook at a time, but it had a certain charm. Still, he knew Lynette wanted to start a family soon and this would be no place for children.

Jim opened the newspaper again and turned to the realty section. He scanned the meager selection of over-priced, run-down homes. But just as he was about to fold it back up, a listing near the bottom caught his eye. It was decently priced, near the golf course and had a big backyard. He quickly tore out the ad and stuffed it in his pocket.

He dumped the last of his coffee in the sink just as the dishwasher beeped – a sound reminiscent of a dying mouse. Jim paused. If he voluntarily helped with the housework, Lynette would be so pleased he might get lucky later. He yanked it open and a swell of soapy water spilled out, flooding the kitchen floor. In a panic, Jim slammed the dishwasher shut and splashed out of the room.

"Honey?" he called down the hall. "There's something happening in the kitchen."

Lynette appeared with half her hair curled. Her eyes bulged when she saw the mess. "What happened?" she whispered.

Jim shrugged. "I went to change my pants and when I came back, the soap was all over. The dishwasher must have leaked."

Lynette bent over and ran her fingers through the murky water. "You didn't open it, did you?" she asked suspiciously. "Because if you open it right after it's finished, this can happen. You need to wait at least an hour, otherwise—"

"I know that," Jim said with irritation. "I've lived here just as long as you have."

"I don't have time for this," muttered Lynette.

"I'd love to help, but I have an important meeting I can't be late for." He kissed the top of her head and left.

"Jenkin's Realty," answered a lively woman.

"I'm calling about a listing in today's paper. It's the four bedroom across the street from—"

"The golf course? With the big backyard? Great house. Would you like to take a look at it?"

Jim cleared the surprise from his voice. "That would be great."

"Fabulous. Tomorrow afternoon? Say, around four?"

"I'll see you there." Jim hung up the phone and tilted back in his chair. Lynette won't be expecting him home until dinnertime, giving him ample time to check out the property. He closed his eyes and smiled as he envisioned himself standing on the bright green grass of the golf course hitting a hole-in-one.

"The soap was *everywhere*." Lynette shoved another bite of salad in her mouth.

"That sounds truly terrible," said Jacky sympathetically. "Have you spoke to Jim about moving?"

"Of course – almost every day. Something goes wrong with the house and I tell him it's time to move, but every time he says it's not the right time."

"Maybe you should move without him," suggested Jacky.

Lynette lowered her fork. "You mean like break up with him?"

"I mean look for a house on your own. Why do you need his approval?" She leaned forward, giving Lynette her serious eyes. "Your dreams are important, too."

Lynette eyed her skeptically. "Is that what your therapist told you?"

"Yes," she said, straightening up and pouring herself another glass of wine. "But it's true."

Lynette thought about the perfect cottage where she and Jim could sip coffee on their sunny porch. Jim would see it was worth it, she convinced herself. He was just being stubborn. "It won't do any harm to look, right?"

"Absolutely not! I have this realtor friend – Janice. One of the best in the county. I'll send you her contact." Jacky winked and gulped down the rest of her wine.

The next morning, Jim sat in the breakfast nook, browsing the newspaper. Jim lifted his coffee cup, pausing when he heard Lynette's footsteps pad down the hall.

“Good morning, darling,” greeted Lynette as she waltzed into the room. “Busy day for you today?”

Jim took a sip of coffee, thinking about his appointment with the realtor. “Just the usual. You?”

Lynette buried her face in a cupboard, pretending to rummage through the glassware. “Me, too.” She shut the cupboard and swirled around, taking care to avoid eye contact with Jim. “I better start getting ready,” she announced, and left the room.

A minute later, Jim heard the whirring of the blow dryer. He turned the page and lifted the coffee to his lips, faintly aware that the blow dryer stopped.

“Jim!”

Jim jolted at the sudden shriek, slopping coffee all over his freshly dry-cleaned pants.

Lynette appeared, her hair a partly frizzy mop. “The fuse is out again.”

With a sigh, Jim crumpled the paper. “I don’t have time to start it up again. I have to change my pants again.”

“What am I supposed to do about my *hair*?”

“I don’t know, dear. It looks fine to me,” he lied and left the room.

Lynette stood frozen in the deserted foyer of the realtor’s office. Her damp hair was pulled back in a tight bun, some frizzy strands sticking up. She glanced down a long corridor hoping to spot someone, but it was empty.

“Can I help you?”

Lynette jumped and whipped around to face a young man with slick black hair and a pearly-white smile.

“Actually, I have an appointment with—“

“Are you looking for a house?” he interrupted, stepping toward her.

“Yes, but—“

“A modest cottage, something fit for a growing family?”

Lynette slowly nodded.

“In a quiet residential neighborhood near a good school and a safe park?” The man straightened his tie. “Follow me,” he said.

“Are you Lynette?” asked a woman just emerging from the corridor. She was petite, barely clearing Lynette’s chin, even with her incredibly high heels. “I’m Janice,” she said, extending her hand in greeting.

Lynette shook her hand, wincing at the bone-crushing grip of her thin fingers.

“Thanks, Bill,” Janice nodded at the man. “I’ll take it from here.” She whisked Lynette down the corridor. They turned into a small office and Janice gestured to a chair in front of a desk scattered with papers.

“Jacky told me what you’re looking for and I pulled a few options that are the perfect fit,” said Janice as she settled behind the desk. “This first one is a bit far from the local school, but it has a lovely backyard and a front porch. Isn’t that swing precious?” squealed Janice, handing Lynette the flyer.

Under the heading *Gorgeous Home with Darling Front Porch* was a photo of the house. It was square in shape and reminiscent of a military barrack. Its beige paint was peeling and there was a tiny, slightly leaning porch with a swing made of chain links and a slab of rotting wood.

"Imagine," began Janice with a faraway look in her eyes. "A fresh coat of paint and some simple fixes here and there and this place could be a real gem! Inside there's a magnificent dining area with a built-in chandelier that comes with the house. It's a steal – a *steal*."

Lynette shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not quite sure this place is what I'm looking for. I was hoping for something more—"

"Classy?"

"Classy," Lynette sighed. "That sounds nice."

"Great!" I have one here with class seeping through its every crack! Mind you, that's just a saying – this gem doesn't have any real cracks." Janice roared with laughter, suddenly growing serious when she handed Lynette the flyer.

Lynette timidly glanced down. Partially hidden behind a blooming apple tree sat a modest sunny-yellow home with bay windows and white trim.

"The landscape has been completely redesigned," explained Janice. "It has state-of-the-art grass and exotic plants imported from South Africa. The bay window was specifically designed for the house. Its decorative panes add a touch of sophistication, while keeping the exterior quaint and informal. It even has bullet-proof glass!"

Lynette's head snapped up. "Bullet-proof glass? Why would bullet-proof glass be necessary?"

Janice blinked. "Extra protection, I suppose." She laughed nervously. "Can't have enough, especially with children in the house."

Lynette slowly nodded in agreement and scanned the rest of the flyer. The bedrooms were a good size with ample storage space, which would come in handy once plastic toys began taking over the house. She was just about to ask if she could see it in person when something caught her eye. She squinted at the window in one of the bedrooms, which looked onto a brick building marked with the bold words, *County Jail*.

"County jail?!" Lynette shrieked. "This home is next to a jail?"

"And a playground," injected Janice, quickly snapping the flyer from Lynette's grasp.

Lynette shook her head and started to stand up. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

"Wait! I haven't shown you the best one yet! I really do think this is the perfect home for you. It's in a lovely neighborhood and it has a large backyard – simply perfect for children to run around and play. It's been recently renovated with wainscoting and crown molding accents. It has a porch, too!" Janice gasped for air, her wide eyes glued to Lynette, forcing her back into the chair.

Lynette stifled a gasp as she laid eyes on the charming two-story home.

"This place is a real gem, let me tell you." Janice leaned forward. "As you can see, it has a wrap-around porch large enough to fit one of those wicker outdoor sets from Pottery Barn. Step inside the front door and you will face the gorgeous foyer and ornate staircase. The first floor is home to a formal living room complete with a remodeled fireplace, a laundry room and bathroom, a living room that can house a grand sectional, and a kitchen with granite countertops. On the second floor you will

find two bedrooms and the master suite with its own 'his' and 'hers' bath. It's the perfect family home. You can see it this afternoon, if you'd like."

"Yes!"

"Fabulous!"

Jim stood in the porch and gazed at the sweeping green lawns of the golf course across the street. A few minutes later, a car pulled into the driveway. A slender woman wearing a form-fitting skirt suit stepped out of the car, her blonde ponytail swishing back and forth as she advanced toward Jim.

"Mr. Jaffe?" she inquired, extending her hand in greeting.

"Jim," he said as he shook her delicate hand. She had the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"Janice. It's a pleasure to meet you. As you can see, this house is fairly new and freshly painted," she said as she unlocked the front door. "It has been recently renovated, which means less upkeep for you." She winked and motioned for him to step inside.

"The whole house has hardwood floors, so there's a better chance of you being allowed to keep your shoes on." Janice smiled and swiftly moved down the hall into a large living room. She pointed to the wall. "There's a cutout for a sixty-in flat-screen television and enough space for a wrap-around couch – best for those super bowl parties, you know."

Jim's gaze swept over the empty space, imagining this buddies – perhaps even the President of the company he works for – digging into a bowl of chips and yelling at the television screen.

"Let's move into the kitchen," said Janice, leading Jim away from his reverie. "Open the refrigerator."

Jim stared at the stainless steel door of the refrigerator with little interest. The only reason he opened the refrigerator was if he knew it contained steak leftovers. Nonetheless, he opened the door.

"See these shelves right here? Custom-made to hold a dozen beers at a time."

"Wow," whispered Jim. He had never seen anything so spectacular.

Janice gently placed a hand on Jim's shoulder. "Shall I show you the backyard?"

A set of double-doors off the kitchen led to the back porch, which overlooked a spacious grassy area.

"It's the size of half a football field," Janice explained. "Big enough to install a state-of-the-art basketball court over there, or a swimming pool over here."

Jim clearly saw himself shooting hoops on his very own basketball court. He could invite the buddies over for some five-on-five. Maybe the logo in the center could be inscribed with his initials.

They went back inside and up the stairs to the second floor.

Janice paused at the landing and looked out the window. "Golf course looks amazing from up here, doesn't it?"

Jim followed her gaze to the rolling green plain glowing in the light of the setting sun. "Sure does."

“The master suite is right this way.” She guided Jim across the landing. “This room is large enough to fit a California king,” she exclaimed. Somehow the room looked huge with such a petite woman standing in its center. “And the golf course looks great from this window, too.”

As Jim looked at the course, he felt satisfied. It was everything he wanted. He could become the man he had always wanted to be. “I’d like to make an offer.”

Janice’s eyes lit up. “Fabulous!”

Lynette pulled to a stop in the driveway. Janice stood on the porch, fluffing her hair in the reflection of the window and turned when Lynette approached.

“Nice to see you again,” said Janice. “I’m thrilled to show you this gorgeous home.” She opened the door, gesturing for Lynette to enter. “The cherry wood floors are beautiful and easy to keep sparkling clean.”

Janice walked down the hallway, her heels clicking on the wood floors. “This is the living room, large enough to fit one of those comfy sectionals from Pottery Barn. This is a great space to spend that quality family time – charades, movie nights, you name it!”

Lynette imagined collapsing on a beige couch with her children while Jim silently acted out the title for *The Notebook*.

“And wait till you see the kitchen,” Janice boasted.

Lynette gasped when she entered the kitchen. Her eyes settled on the white cupboards with etched glass and modern appliances.

“It’s like shabby chic charm meets contemporary convenience. Just take a look at this refrigerator,” she said as she opened the door. “These drawers are specially deigned to keep vegetables fresh and these shelves fit kid’s juice boxes perfectly.”

Lynette reached for the shelf, as if grabbing for a juice box to pack in her little girl’s lunch.

They meandered through the double doors to the backyard. “This is a great space for the children to run around in a safe, enclosed place. You could put a play structure over there or a tree house over here.”

Lynette had always wanted a big backyard. She could watch the kids from the kitchen as she cooked dinner, without having to worry if they were safe.

Janice led Lynette up the stairs, pausing on the landing. “It’s very light and airy up here, isn’t it?”

Lynette nodded eagerly.

“The kids’ bedrooms are off to the left, just across the hall from the master suite should they need you in the middle of the night. As you can see, the master suite is quite large – suitable for a California king that could comfortably fit the whole family on a rainy Sunday morning.

Lynette looked around. The house was everything she had ever wanted. They could build a family here, make memories and grow old. “I’d like to make an offer.”

“Fabulous! Now,” said Janice, her tone suddenly changing. “I must tell you that another offer has been made. I suggest you make your offer a little higher than asking price to make it more competitive.”

Lynette slowly nodded. The asking price was already slightly higher than they could afford. It would be a stretch, but as she thought about the family room, big backyard and dreamy kitchen, she was resolved. "I'll do it."

Jim sat in the breakfast nook reading the newspaper and sipping his coffee. "Good morning, darling," said Lynette as she whisked into the room. The phone rang and Lynette picked up. It was a woman who asked for Jim. Lynette handed the phone over.

It's Janice. Jim turned to the wall, buried himself in the newspaper, lowered his voice, changed his tone.

Lynette washed dishes, but kept glancing suspiciously over at Jim. Janice said that another buyer had made a higher offer and the sellers were interested. She recommended Jim make an offer higher than asking price, to be more competitive. Jim looked at Lynette as she washed dishes. She had been such a good wife. And then the golf course came to mind. He said he'll do it, then hung up.

"Who was that?" Lynette asked. Jim said it was a business call.

"Jim's cheating on me." Lynette stared at her full plate of salad, forlorn. Jacky's mouth popped open in awe. "How do you know?" she whispered. "A woman called for him this morning and he was asking really weird." Jacky topped off her glass of wine and then moved to Lynette's. "I suppose," she said slowly. "This new house could be more beneficial than initially thought. Have you seen it yet?"

"I put in an offer yesterday. Oh, Jacky, it's a perfect family home." She cast her gaze downward, thinking about the woman on the phone.

"That's it!" Jacky exclaimed. "This house is the key to saving your marriage. Once you purchase this house, Jim will realize that he wants a family more than he wants some hooker. Trust me."

Suddenly, Lynette's phone rang. "Hello?" she answered. "Lynette, darling, it's Janice." "Hello, Janice."

"Listen, another buyer made an offer higher than yours. If you really want the house, you need to make an even higher offer. You must be competitive in this market."

Lynette stared at Jacky, who was drawing a family of four stick figures outside a house on her napkin. "Okay, I'll do it," she said. She hung up the phone. "I made a higher offer," she told Jacky.

"Great! This is the answer, Lynette, I just know it. But," she said seriously. "If it doesn't work, don't put up with a cheating husband, honey." Jacky paused to gulp down some wine. "You deserve to be treated with respect."

"Therapist?"

Jacky nodded. "I have this friend – a divorce attorney – named Kevin. He's the best in the state. I'll give you his contact." Jacky winked and gulped down the rest of her wine.

Jim sat in his cubicle concentrating on his computer screen.

He clicked on the button on the webpage that read *Jackson Golf Course Membership Information*. He nearly choked on his Werther's Original hard candy when he saw the number under the yearly dues section.

He jumped when his phone rang. "Jim Jaffe," he answered.

"Jim, Janice here. Listen, another buyer made a higher offer than yours. If you really want the house, you need to top it. It's competitive out there, Jim."

"How much higher?" he asked warily.

"Another twenty thousand at least. We have to knock this other buyer out of the rink."

Jim bit his lip. He didn't want a higher offer to compensate his golf course membership. He flicked through the photos of the smooth green course and satisfied groups of men swinging their trendy clubs. Why couldn't he be one of them? He needed this golf course membership to be a good husband or, dare he think it, father one day.

"Okay, let's do it."

Jim hung up the phone, still staring at the screen. Lynette will be so excited about the house she won't even question the golf course membership. She might even be on board considering its proximity to the house. Of course, she wouldn't have to know that non-members are not allowed, or that cell phones are restricted from the course. With a satisfactory click, Jim signed up for membership.

Jim sat in the kitchen reading the newspaper.

Lynette entered the room silently. She poured herself a cup of coffee and looked up to see Jim staring at her.

"Good morning," he said after a pause.

"Good morning," she replied. She opened the upper cabinet to grab a plate for her toast and the hinge snapped off. Surprised, she stumbled backward with the cabinet door in her hand, her fingers still wrapped around the knob.

Jim stared at her, his mouth agape.

The phone rang.

"I'll get it," said Jim. A moment later, he handed the phone to Lynette. "It's for you."

"Hello?" said Lynette with exasperation, setting the cabinet door on the floor.

"Lynette. Janice. How are you? Bad news. The other buyer made quite a higher offer." A pause. "You would need to raise your offer by at least one hundred thousand."

"That's *insane!*"

"It's very competitive out there, Lynette. If you really want the house, you've got to –"

"No thank you!" screamed Lynette and hung up the phone.

Jim blinked at her. "Is everything all right?"

Lynette looked at the mess before her. "No, it's not." She stormed out of the room.

Jim started cleaning up the mess, curious as to what could have angered Lynette. Perhaps it was the unfortunate incident with the door. She would forget all about it when he handed her the keys to their new house.

Jim stared at his computer screen, at the perfect greens of his new golf course, the happy men holding state-of-the-art clubs.

Suddenly, his phone rang.

“Jim. Janice. I’ve got great news. Your offer has been accepted – the house is yours!”

Jim smiled and pumped his fist in the air. “That’s great.”

“Congratulations. Let’s talk details later.” She hung up.

Jim sat in the kitchen, but he did not read the newspaper. He waited for Lynette to come into the room.

Lynette walked into the room, gunning straight for the coffee. He popped out of his chair and stood in front of her.

“What are you doing?” she asked with irritation.

“I have something to show you.” He dragged her out of the kitchen toward the front door and put a blindfold on her face.

“Jim, I don’t have time for games.” But Jim stuffed her in the car anyway.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they drove down the street. They pulled to a stop and he helped Lynette out of the car, positioning her so she had the best view of the house. He took off the blindfold and stepped away.

“Welcome home.”

Lynette stared ahead, at first blinded by the sudden morning light. She stared at the porch she dreamed about sitting on with Jim.

Jim ran up the steps. “I was thinking I could install a porch swing right here, where we could sit in the evening after dinner.” He swung down and grabbed her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes. “It has a big backyard fit for a family game of basketball and a living room great for watching movies together. And honey – you should see the kitchen.”

“Jim—” she started to say.

“I know I should have talked to you first, but I wanted to surprise you. I paid a little more than asking – some other buyer was relentless – but it will be worth it.”

A pause. Then Lynette burst out laughing so hard tears streamed from her eyes.

Jim was confused. “Well? What do you think?”

“I think it’s perfect.”

And together, they walked hand-in-hand into their new home.