

The Descent of A Man

In late 2019, a young family moved into the house next to us on the makai side. The wife was from the upper Midwest, the husband (call him “Jim”) from Kalihi. They had two young daughters, one in elementary school, the other in high school. We were delighted by this young family and made efforts to welcome them into the community and connect with them as neighbors.

Within short order, we realized that there was something odd about the couple. That oddness puzzled me, but I did not think too much about it, assuming it was just the usual difference in human styles. Still, Jim’s habit of calling his wife (call her “Mary”) “she” and “her” or “wife” rather than by her first name seemed peculiarly Rumpolesque (see *Rumpole of the Bailey* by John Mortimer), without any affection. Jim also made it very clear that he left everything (finances, voting, family care) to Mary as he had done his time and was now retired, not looking much over 30 years old (he is in his 40s). Mary was friendly but reserved and rarely seen. The daughters were heard and occasionally had friends over, as did the parents.

In 2021, we heard that the owners of the property had decided to sell and first offered the property to their renters, the young family. When I first talked with Jim and Mary about the prospect of buying, expressing my support, Mary seemed hesitant and Jim seemed indifferent. The neighbor who lived on the makai side of them (call him “Brian”) seemed dubious as well. It all seemed odd, but I again thought of the benefit of younger people moving into and rejuvenating our community. Jim and Mary did end up purchasing the property and we continued to try to be good neighbors and introduce them to others in the neighborhood. Jim told me at one point that he was working at a high school in Kalihi and interacting with students, straightening them out. He indicated that the administration was not appreciative of the tough love approach that he thought the kids needed to keep them out of trouble.

One day in 2022 we realized that Mary’s car had not been around for several days, nor had we heard the daughters. Jim was present, so we assumed that Mary and their daughters may have gone to visit her family on the mainland. Then one morning as we headed out for a walk, we noticed Jim sitting in a chair in the front driveway of his home, staring into space with a stunned expression on his face. When we asked how he was doing, Jim replied that his wife had left him. We were stunned and said we were sorry. Things went downhill from there.

For several weeks after that startling announcement, Jim would ask us when he saw us whether we had seen his daughter. He only asked about one daughter, not about the

other or his wife. Then a neighbor told me about a creepy guy who had followed her on her walk, trying to talk to her. When she described the guy, I realized it was our neighbor but put the incident down to his loneliness and seeking his wife. That worked until I started seeing posts on Nextdoor about a male following women in our area, including one incident in which the male had followed a woman up to her front door. Other incidents involved the male watching or following children. Concerned about the escalating tone of anger in posts, I responded with an explanation of what was happening with Jim in hopes of encouraging neighbors to be more understanding than angry. I also sought help from various agencies and individuals, thinking that Jim was suffering from mental collapse due to the shock of his wife's leaving. That effort met roadblock after roadblock. Meanwhile, the situation continued to devolve.

One night I was awakened by loud banging, as if someone were trying to break into our house. When I moved into the center of our home to figure out where the sound was coming from, I realized it was from Jim's house. Brian subsequently told me that Jim was chasing ghosts. I assumed that was what had led the wife to leave. We also went through a period when Jim would set off his car alarm repeatedly, usually in the middle of the night. My husband had to go over and bang on the bedroom wall to get Jim to stop setting off the alarm. Then Jim spray painted the front of his carport, creating an elaborate image of apparently spiritual beings. That was followed by his spray painting his car. Completely. Including head- and brake-lights, license plates, and windows. He subsequently set about scraping paint off the windows and lights so he could drive it, which he would do periodically. Then his car disappeared. When we asked Jim where it was, he informed us that it had been towed when he was at Kahala beach and that "they" could have it.

Thereafter we noticed various individuals visiting and staying at Jim's home. The individuals were males who arrived on foot, including Jim's younger brother. Socializing seemed to only happen in the carport and barriers began to appear along the sides and front of the house. Cooking was done on small fires between the carport and front bedroom of the house, eventually moving to a small kettle-type barbecue. Periodic banging noises continued from the house.

We sought to maintain cordial relations with Jim, recognizing his increasingly unstable behavior, and that of some of his cohabitants. Maintaining good relations gave us a better idea of the living arrangements established by Jim for his cohabitants. We learned that his cohabitants were only allowed to be in the carport and front area of the property. They were not allowed in the house, which had two bathrooms and a kitchen, or in the backyard. We were told that individuals would use the restrooms at the shopping center down the valley, although we later saw them (including Jim) peeing on the front of the

carport and elsewhere on the property. Bathing was done with a garden hose on the side of the house, making laundry and trash disposal an uncomfortable adventure for us. Then one day a female joined the cohabitants in Jim's carport and neighbors began reporting thefts from their carports. Something had to be done, but what? Fate stepped in.

No one will probably ever know why Jim started the fire that destroyed his house, burned through Brian's house, and heat damaged our home. Nor will we know what Jim was doing between the time the first neighbor noticed flames and a half hour later when we all heard Jim shout a warning to his brother and homeless friend sleeping in his carport. Jim denies responsibility for what happened but continues to live on his burnt-out property, tearing apart sections of his burnt house, stirring up ashes, and starting small new fires. He has no utilities or bathroom facilities. Jim can be seen and heard soliloquizing at times, stopping to listen to his ghosts before replying to them. There are periodic parties with unknown individuals during which we hear Jim giggling, singing, and talking. We also see and hear individuals visit Jim, spending time talking, drinking, and who knows what else with Jim. A new cohabitant joined Jim recently after he drove his brother off, telling him, "You're only hanging around to get my money." The new cohabitant left after the weather turned particularly rainy and windy.

It is genuinely sad to watch the descent of a man. I have heard from individuals about how well liked and respected Jim was in the Navy and how shocked his former friends are by reports of his current behavior. We all wonder what led to his decline. Was it a latent character fault or drugs? Learning that might help bring him back from his current self-destructive course.