

My Landlord is a Serial Killer

By David Rodwin

My landlord is a serial killer.

This is not hyperbole. I'm not speaking figuratively either. There is no poetic license I'm applying for when I state this. I'm not trying to indicate that she's a mean old witch thereby justifying my request that she take down the fence she built weeks after I moved in allowing me almost no access to my back patio because she was afraid I was going to throw wild parties and the police would come and SHE'D get in trouble.

She's actually just murdered a bunch of people.

Which I guess explains why she was afraid of the police. Far more legitimate than my fears.

Here's how I found out:

There was a knock on the door.

It was 9AM. I was just getting out of the shower. I was naked and drying myself with a towel and I was shocked.

WHO would knock on my door?

Oh, God! It wasn't locked. They could come right in and kill me! Why didn't I lock it? After the night with the crackwhore and all the threatening messages left by the guy whom she left mid-evening in order to spend the night with me you think I'd have learned my lesson. After him threatening to track me down since he had my name and phone number, you think I'd learn to lock my door. I never used to, not even in New York. I figured if someone really needed something I had of value so badly that they'd break into my place, they deserve to have it. I've never been mugged, but I feel the same way. Take the cash. You've been left out by society and this is just a grass roots socialist equalizer. It would be fun and heroic to fend them off and capture them, but I genuinely feel if they're so down and out, it's the least I can do to give them a few bucks. And as for my apartment. Aside from the computer there's not much in there that's too expensive. I mean, you could try to take the bed out, but that's a bitch getting it through the door and down the stairs. I wish you luck and suggest you get a few illegal immigrants at Home Depot to help you carry it to you man with a van.

But I've learned there are some dangerous people out there, so now I lock my door. Sometimes. But not this morning. I'd gotten lax. I figure if Eddie didn't come and break my legs that night or the week or month after, I was safe. Ironically, I'd just recovered

from having broken my leg and I would love to see the faces of the doctor at the hospital if I came back in with the other side broken now.

"Just trying to even things out, doc. Hope you don't mind."

So if it wasn't Eddie, WHO was knocking on my door?

No one knocks on my door. I live in a safe little stand-alone beach cottage the size of my old tiny NY studio. It's built above a garage so there's no one I can directly annoy with my padding about or playing the piano. And I have friendly neighbors which is a joy, because I've never even had neighbors I knew before, but they don't knock. When they come home and I'm writing at my desk, they see me in the window and wave or call out to me "David!". And I wave back and I look down on them (since I'm a good 12 feet above with the garage and all) and we carry on a conversation right out of Romeo and Juliet. Sometimes they invite me over for dinner or a drink and I'd do the same if I had a back patio on which to entertain, but as we've already established, my landlord's a serial killer who's got me penned up like a veal bird waiting for the gallows.

Interesting note on veal birds. My father, for reasons I cannot explain, always referred to veal as veal birds. Perhaps he was trying to assuage his guilt for eating the poor creatures, or maybe it was a playful description he made up or heard one day, but if my mom announced we were having veal he'd clap his hands together and exclaim, "Alrighty! Veal Birds!" Now veal is a tender white meat and could convincingly play the part of poultry in my mind. Since I'd heard nothing contrary to this declaration, I truly thought veal were another form of foul laying eggs and occasionally having their head chopped off and plucked before being served as a delicious meal.

I went to college still very much under this impression and I don't know if they still do this today, but back then even at a conservative institution such as Princeton, they were protesting veal. Absurd I thought. Next thing you know we can't eat, chicken or eggs and we'll all be forced on a vegan diet. I have nothing against vegans, but I generally believe in moderation when it comes to diet. Don't eat too much or too little generally as well of any one thing and you'll be fine. This of course led to my gaining 30 pounds over my first 10 years out of college without realizing it, but that's another story.

Here I was faced my first week at Princeton with rabid veal haters. I was fond of veal. Particularly of veal marsala which is a dish I can gladly say I've gotten very well down, though now I use chicken only. They wanted me to sign a petition saying I was against veal and the horrible treatment of the creatures as they were prepared for death from their very birth. I must admit, it is a lousy trajectory to be raised for slaughter, but so were chickens and cows and where do we draw the line? Again, I was unprepared to accept a life of veganity.

So, I interacted with these fine women wearing their Guatemalan knit jackets with the hoodies. I told them that I was an omnivore and poultry had a place in society.

They looked at me like I was nuts, but I was standing my ground. I'll even eat duck in a Chinese or French restaurant I taunted them.

Then they showed me the pictures of the calves in their pens and I didn't know what to make of it. Where were the veal birds?

It occurred to me at that moment, that I didn't quite know what a veal bird looked like. I didn't know if it was flightless or what its migratory habits might be if it were a wild beast.

Slowly it began to dawn on me that I'd been deceived. All this time my father had bamboozled me with his aphoristic attempts to be cute.

I signed the petition.

This is what happens when we get so separated from our food. We walk through the grocery store and we don't know the origin of things. It would be lovely if they had little video monitors placed through ever aisle that showed you the planting, the harvesting, the picking of all your fruits and vegetables. Perhaps interviews with the migrant workers who's sweat went into making your nice little salad. The butcher section would have close circuit feeds going straight in back where you could see the carcasses being divided up. I suppose you could interview the cows before their demise, but it might be a little slow. Better would be to capture those smells from the ranches where they're raised, but smell-o-rama technology always seems like a garish fad lacking any dignity. And I wouldn't want to rob the bovines of their dignity in their final hours.

So at 9AM, it seemed highly unlikely that a neighbor would knock.

And there was a firmness to the knocking. Not a confidence, but a determination. They were serious knocks. No shave and a haircut type dealio.

This was a knock that meant business. And following my fear of police, I assumed the worst. The cops had discovered I had recently begun contact again with a crackwhore whom I was trying to get in for an interview for a movie I was thinking of making. They'd tracked me down and now I was sunk.

I calmed myself momentarily, thinking, "I always think things are worse than they are. It couldn't be the police at my door."

"FBI! Open the door. We'd like to talk to you."

OhGod OhGod OhGod OhGod

How can this be happening?

I yell back "I just got out of the shower. (TRUE!) I'm not dressed. (TRUE!) Just give me a minute to throw on some clothes. (BAD MOVE)"

I realized after I said it, that "Just give me a minute to throw on some clothes." in FBI talk means, "I'm flushing the drugs down the toilet and hoping out the back window, now's a good time for you to bust in the door before I escape."

The door was unlocked, but they didn't force their entry. I threw on some clothes and opened the door. It was a woman mid 50s, stout and graying blond wearing a frumpish tweed suit. She held her FBI ID at me and it was so beautiful. White with blue squiggles - that old typographic style they use designing money. I was looking for that silver badge I thought they had, but this laminated ID (sans picture) was all she had.

Standing next to her was a man wearing a windbreaker.

"How can I help you?"

"Can we come in? Sure. It's a mess. I apologize. I'm producing a half dozen films right now and things are crazy. My place is also really small. There aren't many places to sit."

I walk toward the bed and realize I had a bag of pot sitting right out in the open on my nightstand. I casually go to it, trying to block their view with my body. I open the drawer and put it inside.

They had bigger fish to fry.

"We'll stand."

The place is a wreck there really is no place to sit except the bed, where I place myself.

"We'd like to ask you some questions about your landlord."

Relief.

"OK"

"Have you noticed any strange behavior?"

"Well, you've met her right?"

They look at each other. Not sure whether or not to reveal their information.

"No. Not yet."

"OK, then where should we begin? She's got this bouffant from the 50s. It's really incredible - sticks 8 inches above her head. She has it perfect every time I see her. She's had a bunch of plastic surgery. I figure she's 65 or so, but it's hard to tell. She also wears nothing but pant suits and 4 inch heels. I have no idea how she gets up the driveway which has got to be a 30 degree angle, but she does. Nearly every day. She's always

coming by to check on what we're up to. I often feel watched. It's a bit creepy. They've been doing work on one of the cottages before they rent it out, so she's been around all the time, but even when there's no work being done, I'll see her car pull up, block the driveway, and then she'll wander up. I'll sometimes literally duck out of the view of the window so she won't think I'm home. She scares me."

"Why does she scare you?"

"She's got this air about her. We've also been in a dispute about a fence she put in right after I moved in. No one else has access to the patio that she's blocked off. It's just sitting there unused."

They didn't understand and that's par for the course. So we go out to take a look at the fence. They see I have a sliver of room for two chairs and a good 200 square feet - almost the size of my main living space have been cordoned off such that NO one has access to it.

I mention that I recently petitioned her again to remove the fence because she just built an add-on patio to the cottage behind mine. If she was so afraid about parties and police why should she do that. I was being unfairly singled out and I wrote her a letter asking her to take down the fence once again.

"I ran into her in the driveway a few days ago and confronted her about it. She just snapped at me 'My decision is final! If you don't like it, you can just move!!!"

I was put in a state of panic by that. I'm pretty bad and standing up for myself and people can sense it sometimes. Often when I feel I've been wronged I won't say anything. I'll pay the fee I don't think I owe, I'll just take it and shirk away. So the fact that I got up the nerve to write another letter much less confront her in person was remarkable. That I was so rudely turned down was somewhat devastating. Proof that standing up for oneself doesn't make a difference.

If only I'd know I was taking my life in my hands by sparring with that black widow.

They asked me about the patio and noted there was a storage space under it.

"What's in there?" The man asked. I had no idea. He took a chair of mine and leapt over the fence. He was going to find out.

They still hadn't said what they were looking for, or what she'd done wrong, but it suddenly occurred to me that there were body parts under there.

No luck, but then I started showing him all the other storage spaces in the complex including one scary semi-finished space underneath the main front house. An artist used to rent it out and work down there, but it feels like something straight out of a horror flick.

Finally I mentioned that there's a space above the house that I've heard is a livable attic space. My old neighbors who'd since moved out told me that Helen, my land lord, had a daughter who lived there. One day they got into a huge fight and she locked her daughter out so she was homeless. They asked more details, but I didn't know the daughter's name or what happened to her after that. I'd never actually met her. But the story just made Helen all the creepier and I believed it was true.

As we're wrapping up, they take out some pictures to show me. Two men. Older. Scraggly. They ask if I know them. They ask if I've seen Helen consorting with anyone. And I told them the truth, I've always seen her alone.

They put the photos away and I say,
"If I knew what you were looking for I might be able to point you better in the right direction. Can you tell me what this is all about?"
They glance at each other again and she speaks
"No...But if you watch the news tonight, it'll probably be on."

They gave me their cards and left. Hers simply said Special Agent and had her info. His card said "Robbery-Homicide Division".

I got on the phone with my old neighbor who told me the story about the daughter in the attic and we search the web, but there's nothing. When my other neighbors got back we confer. The police asked one of them a bunch of financial questions. One thinks it's a fraud case. I'm thinking tax evasion, at one point. But why would the LAPD investigate that? And why would the FBI be interested in some lousy land deal she might have put together.

So my thoughts go from Robbery to Homicide. Maybe they killed her. She's finally pissed someone off so badly that they up and killed her. The photos of those guys looked like they could be up for the task. My God! Someone killed Helen.

Ding Dong the witch is dead.

Horrible thought. I restrained myself, but no one liked this woman. She's refused to return the deposit of every previous tenant who'd moved out while I'd been there. 2 had taken her to court. The third one was about to.

Now I was afraid I would get my deposit back because she was dead.

We waited for hours 'til the AP wire put out their report.

The TV news had it next.

Suddenly I saw the image of my landlord being put in the back of a squad car. They pushed her head down, but I'm amazed all the hair made it into the car.

They announced that Helen and an accomplice were accused of mail fraud. Mail fraud. This is what they said she'd done:

They befriended homeless men, got them to promise everything in their will to them in exchange for free housing. Helen put them up for 2 years. She copied their signatures onto life insurance policies and named herself as the beneficiary. She paid the premiums until the blackout period was over - 2 years. And then she killed the fuckers. Ran them over in a car. Herself.

To avoid suspicion, they took out more than a dozen small policies. They'd collected over 2 million so far, but there was an outstanding 1.5 million that insurers were refusing to pay. So SHE took THEM to court! This first happened in 1999 and the court sided with her! The next time her claims to a policy were contested in 2005, the insurers were simply refusing to pay. So she went the next step and reported the insurance companies to the federal oversight group and she demanded that action be taken against any company that refused to pay her.

The audacity is truly astounding.

The LAPD came back a few weeks later to ask me some more questions. They showed me pictures of 6 other people who's hit and run deaths they were investigating - with Helen and her crony as the main suspects.

My friends tell me this stuff always happens to me.

I didn't seek this one out though.

It just happens to be that my landlord's a serial killer.