

The Treehouse

I was moving 3,000 miles to be with a man I had known 90 days. This might sound impulsive, sure. Reckless, even. But I wasn't going to move in with him. That would make it irresponsible.

I met said man in April when he was in New York on business and visited him in Park City, where he lived, for the first time that June. He'd already asked me to move out west by then, and unfortunately, I had agreed. My plan for that one-week June trip included perusing wildflowers, exploring expensive resorts, and securing an apartment. I planned to move across the country by the following month. Overly optimistic, yes, but wasn't the whole shebang?

When I found the above-garage apartment for rent on Craigslist, it seemed a little too good to be true. A running theme in my life, though, was ignoring that concern, so I called and made an appointment to see it. The woman who answered the phone sounded very nonchalant. Almost too nonchalant.

"It's small," she said, "like, really small."

She repeated over and over how unimaginably tiny this space was, and I started wondering whether she really wanted anyone moving in. She obviously didn't know that my standards of living up to this point were nonexistent.

I'd been bumming around New York City for the past few years, bartending for the cash and lack of accountability. I'd lived in a studio in the East Village, a one bedroom on the Lower East Side, a co-op sublet in Queens. I'd always start my lease with the best of intentions—matching stemware, coffee with neighbors, a pristine duvet cover. Somehow, though, it tended to end with me being locked on the roof, missing my key, eagerly sniffing the last of my morning cocaine.

As the GPS led us left and into one of the most perfectly manicured neighborhoods of Park City, my concern grew. This had to be a scam. It was called Park Meadows, and it was full of enormous cabin-style homes surrounded by towering pines and views of ski runs.

When we pulled into the address, we were met by a waving woman with wiry blonde-gray hair down to her shoulders. She stood in front of her open garage, squinting. Behind her was a massive, sprawling ski-lodge of a house. Two types of people lived in Park City year-round—fancy ones and ski bums. She was a fancy one.

The woman introduced herself as Lynne. She spoke in short sentences with a directness that I recognized as distinctively east-coast. She guided us through the garage to show me the washer and dryer that she and I, and only she and I, could use. We exited the side door and turned a corner. We climbed a flight of stairs that brought us to a private deck and a set of sliding glass doors. I suppose you could say it was small. But her garage was the size of a house, and the apartment extended the length of it.

Inside, the smell of sawdust danced. She had just had the space remodeled. The doors opened to vaulted ceilings and shiny kitchen appliances. Beyond the kitchen was a short hallway with a bathroom on one side and a walk-in closet on the other. The bathroom filled with sun from a skylight. The bedroom, the biggest room, had windows all along the back wall. Outside, the breeze moved the birch trees, thin and white and dotted with green leaves. A treehouse.

Lynne finished the tour and I tried not to act too excited. She walked us back downstairs to the lawn and told us she was a lawyer. Something to do with taxes. She said she wanted to rent to me month to month because she didn't like leases. A lawyer who disliked legal agreements.

She had an old black lab, and she was fine with my yellow mut living there with me. She lived in her big house alone, mostly, and didn't seem like she needed my money. I didn't think of it then, but she may have been lonely. She had the grit of an attorney but the kind eyes of a mother. She liked me, and she said I could move in the next month. Everything was going according to plan.

It turned out that the apartment was not too good to be true, but ultimately my faith in myself was. She asked if \$600 was a reasonable rent, and with a nod and a handshake, our deal was bound.

Once we'd moved my red sofa and thrifted dining table and boxes of cheap clothes across the country and into the treehouse, I discovered that Lynne was an interesting woman. She had a blonde, 12-year-old daughter who spent half her time with her father. Lynne had the leathery skin and wiry muscle tone of outdoorsy mountain people. I hated the outdoors. Rather, I hated that I hated them.

Lynne loved to talk to me. I hadn't yet made the switch to early riser, thanks in part to the empty beer bottles lining my nightstand, and in the mornings, I mostly wanted to be left alone. If, for some reason, I stepped foot onto my deck early in the day, Lynne would come out on her front porch and yell advice up at me. She seemed to take an interest in my well-being, which, at the time, was the least attractive quality one could have.

She told me about her past. She went to college in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She was somewhat of a nomad, a peace fighter, a flower child. I'm not sure when the tax attorney stuff came into play. She took great pride in her garden, even though she hired someone to care for it. She told me things I didn't ask about. She was open, I was closed. I think she saw our relationship differently than I did. She wanted a friend, a mentee, and I wanted a silent, anonymous landlord who wouldn't charge me late fees if I paid past the 5th.

Lynne liked to preach at me the importance of making new friends. If we passed each other in the driveway or took our dogs out at the same time, Lynne jumped on the opportunity to sell me on a support system, she insisted on it, something more than this guy I'd just met. I, a serial

codependent, had decided that my new love was going to fulfill all my needs and no one and nothing aside from it was valuable.

Normally, when I told people about my whirlwind romance, they'd play along with my fairytale narrative. He was athletic, had money, good teeth. I was easy going (irresponsible), fun (a drunk), and a free spirit (directionless). We met in a bar, by chance, no, *fate*, and I loved to shove it in people's faces.

I think people agree with things that sound crazy because it's too depressing not to. Not Lynne. She didn't buy it. She nudged me to come on early morning bike rides with her and her friends, an invitation I returned with a smile but never an acceptance. She warned me with cautionary tales about her own marriage. More smiling and nodding. *I'm nothing like you*, I would think to myself, with my perfect relationship and 20-something skin. She harped on compatibility and explained that the only things she and her ex-husband had in common were the outdoors and sex.

Have you ever been angry at someone for saying things that deep inside you fear are true but aren't ready to admit yet? That was what happened every time Lynn opened her mouth near me. Every word sparked a low burning heat. I had been in Utah for a few weeks, and while some warning signs flashed, it wasn't yet time for me to admit to myself that my vision of a dreamy, mountain-top future might not turn out how I'd expected it to. She was telling me things that my future self would be happy to learn, but the version of me that she met was absolutely terrified of.

My ex liked to stay at my apartment. He didn't like to be without me for any length of time, really, and I was too insecure to exert my need for occasional space.

Because I had a dog and he didn't, my place was the designated sleepover spot almost every night. I'd hide my empties and he'd parked his car on the street, as the garage wasn't big enough for his car. Lynne didn't like this. She asked me one day if he was living there. My defenses flared up. "No," I asserted a little too boldly, both in defense of my relationship and out of fear that she was seeing a problem that I was not. She went on to tell me that he was there too much (which he was) and that if he was coming over all the time, he needed to at least park in the driveway to not annoy the neighbors. *Jesus*, I thought, *who cares?*

The thing is, under my displeasure, I knew she was right. I wanted to tell him that he couldn't stay there every night, that my landlord wasn't comfortable. That *I* wasn't comfortable. I knew somewhere in the farthest reaches of my guts that she made a good point.

But that's not how I acted.

I continued to let him stay over regularly, joining him in mocking her need for control and nosiness. It hurt my chest to say these things about her, which confused me, because I really did find her annoying. With little to no effort, though, I became convinced that she was

overbearing and too particular. I was happy to gang up on the well-intentioned if it meant preserving the illusion that I had come all this way for.

One time Lynne knocked so aggressively on the glass doors to my place that I thought she needed medical attention. I had grown accustomed to her showing up unannounced. She liked to tell me what she was making for dinner or invite my dog over to play with hers. I was faintly aware of my rights as a tenant, but I had already inched toward her bad side, and my rent was cheap. Once I came out of the shower to find the lower half of her body scrunched up on my kitchen floor, the rest of her disappeared into a crawl space in the wall. She was fixing something, or looking for something, and didn't see the need to warn me.

When I heard the loud knocking, I walked over to the door, burning inside but a smile plastered on my face. "I have a new dog walker coming today," she said breathlessly. "She's short but she wears sweatshirts and kind of looks like a man. I just wanted to let you know. I didn't want you to get scared." I stared at her. The idea that I might be afraid of a strange man on our shared property makes perfect sense to me today, but back then it just furthered my irritation. *She hates men*, I thought, and internally rolled my eyes.

The washer and dryer in the garage were for Lynne and I only. I knew this, and my ex knew this, but he still brought his sweaty biking kits over whenever the pile grew too big in his laundry machine-less apartment. There are three things that people wake up early in Park City to do most days: run, ski, and bike. I did none of these, but he did all of them, which only fueled my contrarianism by way of self-hate. It also meant that I fell prey to the argument that someone who takes their physical health so seriously needs a lot of clean clothes, and I had the power to make that happen. I used to hate the version of me who became so easily convinced of bullshit, but now, thinking of her just makes me sad.

Every time he emptied his clothes into the washer below and I heard its thump thump thump through the floor, my hands tingled. I grew tense but pretended not to, hiding my guilt under having made Lynne the villain of our story.

The first time she saw his clothes in there, Lynne gritted her teeth and scolded me like a child. The second and third times, she threatened my lease. The last time she found his clothes in the dryer, she came pounding up the stairs and dropped his laundry basket at my feet.

"I'm so angry I could spit," she said. I dropped my gaze to the floor. "And you can't even look at me!"

She was right. I searched my head for excuses and though a few chimed in, none held enough weight for me to say out loud. She was hurt, and I was ashamed, and she told me I had 30 days to leave.

Fast forward past rationalization and countless its-probably-for-the-bests, and I filed Lynne away as the crazy landlord who didn't give me a chance. I took my eviction as a sign to move my

dog and me into my boyfriend's apartment. Away from her, I convinced myself that I was the victim, the perfect tenant, crucified only for loving a man. Moving in with my boyfriend only shined a brighter light on our glaring differences and set into motion our slow but unavoidable disintegration. That, I should thank her for.

Two or so years into sobriety I started writing letters to landlords. One thing that a clear mind helps with is recognizing patterns. I was able to see that I never left an apartment in the appropriate way—I was either evicted, left the place a mess, or didn't pay the last month (or few months) rent. Lynne was on my list of landlords to contact, because although I was pretty sure she'd been paid all the money she was owed, she didn't deserve to be treated the way I treated her. I put her in a shitty position, and 730 days without a drink or a drug will show you that type of thing.

I sent her my obligatory email, outlining the ways that I had been wrong in our short-lived relationship and telling her how I was committed to change. I asked if there was anything I could do for her, and to please contact me if she had any questions. I heard back right away from other landlords, some happy to hear I was alive and some not so much. But not Lynne. Months went by without a word. Radio silence.

Life commenced as usual, my new usual, and I woke up every day at the same time to drive to a job I hated. I sat in church basements with like-minded people at night. Then, one day, an email appeared from Lynne. I opened it and braced myself for a request of funds, which was my least favorite but most popular response to the type of letter I sent to her. As I read, I exhaled. Lynne began with the usual platitudes, the happy-but-surprised-to-hear-from-me's. She told me that she didn't see me as a bad tenant, and that she was sad she had to ask me to leave. She was glad that I was better now. All the usual things. Until this:

I have been sober for 25 years. I had no idea you were suffering.

Her words stunned me. 25 years. An avalanche of memories unlocked in my head—her concern, her stories, her boundaries. She felt how much I hated myself. Smelled my shame. She tapped into my spirit in a way that only another once broken spirit can.

Lynne cared about me. The part of her that was healed spoke to the part of me that was broken. She stirred up my anger back then because she saw me, she *was* me, whether we knew it or not.

I sat and stared at my computer, reading the word *suffering* over and over. It sliced me in half. I felt the ache of her love through her words, I let myself feel it for the first time from all those years ago. I thought of her relentless prying. She loved me with her intrusions both physical and emotional. She loved me with the bravery of the selfless—enough to tell me the truth.

