

It was shortly after my housesitting baby sister called to let me know that Kingsley, my 4-year-old cocker spaniel, was “floating on the couch” that we realized we had made a very poor rental decision.

The toilet in the apartment above us had overflowed thanks to a tenant who might have given the more incorrigible cases on *Hoarders* a run for their money. For the better part of a weekend, my girlfriend’s and my postage stamp-size one-bedroom in the West Village (“charming,” “bright,” “renovated,” the ad had read) was covered in a Niagara of the kind of plumbed water you don’t want to think about soaking your into walls and furniture while you’re out of town. Or in town, for that matter.

Throughout the winter, we’d already discovered other delights of our second-floor walkup at 53 Leroy Street. There was, for instance, no radiator installed in the living

room, just a tenth-rate electric fireplace that Amy and I couldn't will into warmth while we sat shivering in our down coats in the middle of December.

Weekday mornings were given to holding a hair dryer up to the shower pipes, which of course had frozen over. Nights would be a scratching scurry of mice who had come up through every orifice in the floor and through the back end of our dishwasher, where, we'd later learn, a plywood separation wall had only been built halfway up because who would ever notice?

Before he was waterlogged on the living room pull-out, poor Kingsley was our unprompted pest control. He'd wham the rodents dead in the dark with an oversize paw (no doubt revenge for their burrowing into his kibble), greeting us in the morning with a wagging tail and a lifeless offering awaiting the Glad bag.

Then we'd place yet another call into 9300 Realty and withhold

rent until the repairman showed up. It all ended with a Notice to Evict and Amy and I moving to England, where we got engaged, married, and forgot all about 9300 Realty.

Until Monday, when our former New York City slumlord, Steven Croman, was arrested on 20 felony counts, including grand larceny, business record falsification, and tax and mortgage fraud. Croman stands accused of listing rent-regulated apartments at market prices in order to obtain \$45 million in bigger bank loans than his properties deserved over a three-year period. He was also hit with a simultaneous civil suit by the state attorney general, filed in New York state Supreme Court, for years of allegedly harassing tenants out of their apartments, either by suing them on bogus claims of unpaid rent or by leaving their homes perpetual worksites where they'd have to dodge debris and inhale unending plumes of toxic dust to reside. Many of these worksites apparently employed

unlicensed laborers doing non-permitted renovations, according to New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who seems to have cleared up the origin of our critter-penetrated kitchen appliance.

Croman's employees at 9300 Realty allegedly considered rent-regulated tenants in buildings he owned "targets," there to be ganged up on to accept "buyouts" so their units could be superficially spruced up and listed at market prices, as ours had been. (9300 Realty staff were reportedly enticed with \$10,000 bonuses for every tenant they chivvied out of his home.)

A former NYPD cop turned private investigator with the *Goodfellas*-ish name of Anthony Falconite, who was also arrested Monday, was Croman's "secret weapon" of intimidation. According to Schneiderman's suit, Falconite would enter "target" apartments under the guise of being a property manager, repairman, or

UPS delivery guy, and then take the residents' photographs and accuse them of illegal occupancy—until they gave up and vacated. If acquitted, Falconite will almost certainly have a promising future as FBI director in the Trump administration.

One longtime tenant who suffered worse than most is Cynthia Chaffee. We first became acquainted in 2010, after Amy and I moved out of our apartment and started a short-lived Facebook page dedicated to the more memorable experiences of living in a Croman-owned property. Chaffee messaged me way back when to commiserate and invite us to join her in petitioning the state to investigate a man she believed to be not just sleazy but also criminal.

A four-decade resident of 346 East 18th Street, Chaffee started a website of her own, the Stop Croman Coalition, which is an up-to-date index of Manhattan real estate misfortune and/or

scumminess spanning over a decade.

Some of the incidents appear merely tragic, such as a 2003 electrical fire at 340 East 18th Street, started by a spark in a power strip, which left 21 year-old Isabelle Heina with burns on 50 percent of her body and others hospitalized from smoke inhalation.

Others must be terrible coincidences. In 2011, Adam Berk and Karen Kushkin, a couple in the East Village, went out to celebrate a rare victory against Croman: a \$2,850 default judgment issued against him over their East 7th Street ground-floor apartment. When they got home, their place had been burgled and arsoned. Their Labradoodle, Foster, died of smoke inhalation and burns in a vet's clinic eight days later.

“He just ruined my life completely,” Chaffee recalls of Croman. “I was a young person, about 25, when I moved in here. Now I’m 64. I’d move but I can’t afford to. So instead, I’ve

fought this guy since he bought my building in 1999.”

Croman took Chaffee to court three times since 2010 for non-payment of rent when she paid in full and on time and has the cashed checks—copies of which are now with Schneiderman’s office, appended to her affidavit—to prove it. Yet the bogus claims of being in arrears continued into 2016, two years after New York began investigating Croman’s real estate practices. “Our rent check for this January was \$26,135.89. We don’t owe him 26 cents.”

This strong-arm tactic of frivolous litigation was coupled with unlivable conditions. From October to December 2011, Chaffee had no gas in her apartment. From January 2011 to September 2013, no heat or hot water. From January to March 2013, only two working electrical outlets, owing to cascading water pouring down from the upstairs unit—and out of her light fixtures. A video on her Stop Croman website carries a creepily familiar scene:

Tupperware containers filled with a disgusting, brown liquid dripping down into her kitchen from the ceiling.

Then there are the physical side effects of living in a Croman property. “I’ve been disabled over the last few years,” Chaffee says. “The dust from the unfinished renovations choked the hell out of me. My husband and I were breathing this stuff in for so long.”

The man Schneiderman called the “Bernie Madoff of landlords” was out on \$500,000 cash bail on Monday, but if convicted he could face 25 years in prison. He has pleaded not guilty.

Unsurprisingly, when she answered the phone last night, Chaffee was buoyant. “Today was beyond even my dreams. Croman once said I was his worst tenant. I intend to live up to that expectation.”