

Prison for Slumlord

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As I've grown older, I have increasingly begun to believe that there is something to "karma"—slumlord Steven Croman's recent criminal arrest being a case in point.

I had the distinct misfortune of buying my townhouse in the West Village from Mr. Croman. As part of the contract of sale, he agreed to split utilities, as his much larger commercial properly shared electrical and heating with my small home, and he was planning a major renovation, anyway. I stuck to my guns on this point, even though he came to our closing with a half-dozen lawyers (which should have given me a hint of his "way of doing business").

Over the next few months, I contacted him directly and through his many lawyers to ask him to honor his closing commitment, but they never responded. To my surprise, one night I went down to my basement to do laundry, and the cellar door was missing, and the large German furnace that had been there heating his commercial building next door was gone! Apparently, he had his contractors break into my house to remove it during the day when he knew I would be at work!

I contacted the police, who said that I could file a "breaking and entering" complaint, but that Croman would probably deny he told his contractors to break in, and a criminal conviction wouldn't do much to reimburse me for damages. So I just had my cellar door and floor repaired.

A few months later, Croman started jacking up his building to level the floors, which caused the walls in my house to crack, because we shared a "party

wall.” Again, he and his lawyers never even bothered to reply to my complaints, so I hired a mason to reinforce the wall and patch the cracks.

One year later, I noticed that my electrical bill inexplicably quadrupled. When I exclaimed to the ConEd meter man that I couldn’t figure out what was going on, he replied, “I’ll tell you what happened—your neighbor in the commercial space next door rerouted the wiring, so now your meter is powering his entire building.” He let me join him in the basement, and I was astonished to see that this was true (and took photographic evidence). I remember asking him, “Croman is worth over \$100 million dollars—why on earth would he try to save a few thousand dollars a month stealing my electricity?”

The ConEd man replied, “Didn’t you know that he has been featured in the “worst landlord list” by the Village Voice for many years? He probably got to where he is now by being a sleazy jerk—what makes you think that now that he’s a zillionaire, he will suddenly change his ways?”

This was the final straw, and I knew as a native New Yorker that if I didn’t finally stand up to him, Croman would continue to bully and take advantage of me. So I did what every good New Yorker does when confronted with an existential problem—I sued him.

The case dragged on for years, not because “the wheels of justice turn slowly,” but because his army of lawyers were incredibly adept at using delaying tactics to drive up my legal expenses in an attempt to have me abandon my claim. In fact, one of his lawyers whom I will refer to as “B.B.” (or they will probably harass me with a lawsuit) told me when I miraculously got him on the phone, “You should give up, as we have more resources, and will outlast you until your legal expenses exceed what your damage award will be.” This infuriated me, so I

called up my lawyer and said, “I don’t care if you have to increase your contingency fee to 50% from the standard 33% because this is taking so long—just make sure Croman eventually pays!”

After another two years, our case finally went to court, and we of course won on all claims. Croman’s company cut me a check, and I got about \$30,000—
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which covered my actual losses after legal fees, and a rounding error in the “cost of doing