

Cracked Houses

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I was seven years old when my mother fell in love with our landlord. The apartment we lived in, in retrospect, was a slum.

It was a three story red paneled building with eight units, two on each floor, all occupied by cartoonish caricatures of poverty, myself and my mother included. My father was battling alcoholism, and my mother, yearning for stability, filed for divorce and moved us into the red apartment. She got a job down the street waiting tables at a restaurant, and we lived in that apartment for the next five years.

My mother always kept me gingerly tucked under her arm when shuttling me up and down the stairs to our topmost unit, and steered me away from conversing with anyone else in the building. Whenever possible, she encouraged me to have sleepovers at my more affluent friends' houses. I could tell, despite the fact that we were just as poor as any of our neighbors, that she did not want me associating with them. The trauma of single motherhood wicked away her fellowship and replaced it with a sheen of self-preservation. She was generous, and would offer aid to our neighbors whenever a crisis arose, but the idea of befriending them or organizing with them for better conditions didn't seem feasible, given her responsibilities and fears as a parent and a woman.

I don't think she felt that she could afford to be political, and in many ways she actively diverted herself from learning about revolt or resistance. An orphan by the age of 16, my mother had lived in chaos her whole life, and the idea of rules, sanctions, and authority appealed to her because autonomy, it seemed, had always failed her. Rather than turn her frustrations towards the systemic causes of her inability to remain self-reliant, she pushed them inward, and believed that if she herself could just become more responsible, she would be able to create an island of consistency for our two person family. She may not have known the terminology, but what she yearned for was the capacity to self-govern, a capacity that was stripped from her by poverty, wage-labor, and false promises of picket-fenced suburbia. She was so far away from the lofty academic writings that might have introduced her to ideas of mutual aid and self-sufficiency, and she kept herself isolated from poor radical communities—which might have otherwise helped her to raise me and free herself from the emotional constraints the status quo—because she lived in constant fear of anything that might potentially jeopardize the legitimacy of her single-motherhood in the eyes of the court. In retrospect, I think it was the rope of whiteness that curled around her and ushered her back onto the track. She had been raised to believe, however unconsciously, that if she kept playing along with the rules, her whiteness should raise her up, instead of just shielding her from experiencing even worse atrocities.

In my teen years I remember having multiple conversations with friends who would refer to this building as "The Red Crack House," unaware of my childhood ties to it. I personally never saw any "crack" being used in the apartment building, but the fact that it had been saddled with such a reputation was a testament to the observable state of the building's disrepair. Yet, it was always the behavior of the inhabitants living in the building, and never the negligence of the landlord in charge of its upkeep, that was called into question.

The landlord of this building was an ex-military man named Rick. When my mother met him, she was drawn to his strength and his self-reliance. He owned several properties and several guns. Her father had been in the military as well, and although he was an alcoholic that deserted her family when she was only three, I think the

association played on my mother's hopes for me to have the strong father figure she never had. When they met, my mother was working 60 hours a week at the restaurant and could barely pay the rent he charged for our one bedroom apartment, although she insists to this day that it was "very cheap."

He was single handedly responsible for the conditions we were living in, but my mother recognized in him a way out. I'm not sure she was quite aware of the type of devil she'd agreed to sit with side by side, but the squeamishness with which she approached their physical encounters led me to perceive, even at seven, that she was not as comfortable in his arms as one should be when in love. Still, with property ownership comes power, and the prowess to use that power to create wellbeing and safety for yourself and your loved ones. Once their romantic relationship got off the ground, he quickly persuaded her to move into a house he was renovating in one of the neighboring rural towns. I think it was the house itself that convinced my mother more than the man who invited her. This would be both the first and last time I would ever live in a stand-alone house without sharing with roommates. The privacy, the yard, the wholesome implications of a happy childhood, these were all irresistible to my mother as the white house with its two floors, three bedrooms, a patio, and bright-sprigged forsythia bushes flanking its outer walls. I think my mother wanted very badly to give me the illusion of a rich person's childhood; she had every hope to make this house our haven.

But when we stopped paying rent in money, we started paying rent in trauma. Over the next year and a half, Rick systematically consumed my mother's life. Our run down van worked very intermittently, and we often had to take multiple busses to get into town. The bucolic splendor of the rural suburb became instantly isolatory. His connections with the military overseas had fishtailed into connections with local police stateside, and we became painfully aware of how easily he could have my mother institutionalized by way of whatever accusations he chose to levy against her. He spread rumors amongst all their shared friends that she was prone to greeting the day with a few shots of whiskey. It became very clear very quickly that her love for me was the major threat to his control over her, and he would regularly go out of his way to remove me from the house by foisting me off on questionable third parties, or pushing to have me sent to my father's despite his ongoing alcoholism. He spoke often of boarding school. My mother, meanwhile, often spoke to me in fevered whispers about making sure to never say anything that could be used in court to separate us.

I remember an incident in which he and my mother got into a screaming argument that resulted in the both of us being locked out of the house, standing in the itchy crab grass by the gravel driveway. She had called a friend to come and pick us up, but needed her keys and purse from inside the house. When she attempted to jimmy open a back window to slip in and grab her things, she found herself confronted with the fatal end of a shotgun in the hands of her landlord lover. Years later she told me that she knew in that moment that he could shoot her in the chest and get away with it by telling the cops that she'd broken into the house in a crazed fit. She knew the only thing he could not defend would be a gunshot to the back of the head, so she swallowed her fear and turned her back on her aggressor, letting the barrel of his gun aim at the base of her skull. He lowered the thing and threw her keys and purse into the dark yard where we searched on hands and knees until our ride arrived.

That winter he bought up some real estate in Reno, Nevada and flew out to work on the property for a few months, leaving my mother and I alone in the house. Those were joyful months for me. I remember waking to find my clothes hung over the wood stove to warm. I had one room for sleeping and one room for playing. We fostered puppies in a crate in the kitchen, and let them skitter through the snow in the yard. I had my first slumber party. We were still incredibly poor, but the circumstances of the house made it feel as if I were playing out the normal actions of a middle-class reality. I loved that house, even unsteady and vulnerable as I often felt inside it.

Of course, Rick's presence still loomed. His military connections also allowed for him to have unexpected access to physical surveillance technology. One evening my mother pulled me to the couch and had me put the phone receiver, too large for my face, up to my ear to listen for the surreal clicking noise of the wire tap he had placed on our phone line. We would prepare for his return visits by scrubbing the house to an utmost level of cleanliness, but he would always arrive a different day than planned. He once laughingly admitted to us that he had actually flown in the day prior, but sat outside the house in a car to watch the house for a full day. It became clear very quickly that we were not free to leave the white house, and he had made certain that if we did try to leave, there would be nowhere for us to go. My mother spent months furtively saving money and dodging his demands that she make

plans to marry him, follow him out to Reno, and put me in private school there. We had many more whispered conversations about how and when we would leave, and what would happen when we did.

Searching for a new apartment was a heartbreak for both of us; the house had shown us comforts we'd never imagined possible. To sail so close to the sun of self-reliance only to realize we were being held aloft by winged shackles was devastating. When we did find a place, it was in a mega apartment complex, often referred to as the "ghetto" of our small liberal town.

I wish I was being facetious when I say that we left in the dead of night, but we did. When we moved into the new apartment complex, I noticed that there were a lot of other poor children there, and similar characters to those I remembered from our time spent in the red apartment building down town. But my mother no longer pulled me away from them. We knew then what I will never forget now: fear not your neighbor, lest the landlord come for you.

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