

Strange Days
December 06, 2021

It was 11 in the morning. Tuesday, November 16, 2021.

I set out from my house in Guilford to go to my cottage in Northwest Connecticut. I was looking forward to hunting pheasant with my black lab, Ajax. The next morning was opening day for deer and my brother Chris and I would hunt together as we have for over 60 years.

I had to stop at the house and studio that I had just designed and built on speculation to set the thermostats at 60 degrees.

This is a very contemporary house and studio on a spectacular site with 26 miles views to Long Island. It was a very challenging site on granite ledge. Looking at my 80th birthday coming up, I wanted to do two minimalist, structures with dramatic spaces, unfettered by the whims of a client.

I worked on the project for 10 months straight, often 6 days a week, 12-14 hours a day running the job, doing carpentry, building one of the fireplaces. It was brutal with the Covid supply problems. I almost burned out. It was never about making money. It was a chance to do livable exciting sculptural spaces with very simple beautiful materials, stone and wood. I hoped a family would buy it and live there.

My mantra is "Build or Die." This was a labor of love.

It is staged with virtually all of the furniture from my house. Corbusier and Wassily chairs, other nice things. All I have now is a bed and a night table. It has been on the market for several months at \$2.2 million.

I drove up into the courtyard and walked to the front door. I was surprised to see a metal frame on the inside around the two doors levers. When I tried to open the doors this frame held tight and I couldn't get the doors open.

I tried the garage door opener – nothing. Then I noticed the lockset from a side door had been removed and a new keyed deadbolt installed.

What was going on? I called my realtor, Barbara. She was as mystified as I was.

Some locksmith got the wrong address?

It is a controversial house, does somebody have it in for me?

Everyone who worked on the house had been paid, all taxes and insurance up to date.

I called my secretary of 30 years Roxann. No, everything is in order.

I checked with the neighbor below. He hadn't seen anyone. No lights on at night.

I checked the mailbox – nothing. I checked the separate studio building – all ok. I called Michael Hentschel, who was my right hand man during construction. He had been there 3 days before and all was in order. He said he would stop over shortly.

I called the police who said an officer was on the way. Michael arrived with his 4 year old daughter.

He said, "Look, there's the crawl space access door which is open. We can crawl through to the garage" – a good 75 ft. I was in work clothes. He wasn't and he had his daughter. I started out on my hands and knees as it is very low clearance. A minute later Michael yelled – "I found a sliding window unlocked."

Michael is in his late 40's, big, strong, street smart with a steel trap mind and extremely cool headed.

"I think I can jump up and get in through the windows."

Like a cat he was up and in.

I went to the front door and he let me in. At first glance everything looked ok, but the sliding doors to the deck

were blocked by a metal tube on the sill. Not quite long enough, someone had taken my 1974 copy of The Joy of Cooking and my L. L. Bean Wild Game Cookbook to fill the space.

Michael said, "I'm going to check the second floor."

As he we went up the curved stair in the two story entry to the balcony I stayed at the bottom of the stairs.

The door to the bedroom in front of him was closed. He opened the door halfway.

I heard him say, "Are you alright? Then put on some clothes and stay right there."

He turned to me "there is a naked black woman nursing a baby."

I started to call 911. Just as they answered a cruiser pulled up. I told the office the situation. We were standing at the entry door.

"I can't go in without backup."

Just then the second officer appeared.

"You wait here."

They walked in, Michael at the balcony. As the two officers headed up the stairs a man in his 30's with a baseball hat, a hoodie and fashionable torn jeans appeared beside Michael. He was of medium build, a blank look on his pallid goateed face.

Michael spoke to the officer then came down and took his daughter to his car. I watched as the handcuffed man was led down the stairs and put in a chair in the kitchen. The woman, now dressed in a blood red sweater, clutched the baby. She was brought down and seated 6 feet away from the man.

I waited while the officers talked to the pair. A third officer appeared and waited with me just outside.

A few moments later one of the officers came out.

"Here's their story: They claim they saw this house for rent on the internet at \$5700 per month. They paid this guy the money and he let them in and left. They didn't know his name. They came yesterday, been here one night."

He paused, looked at me, serious.

"Mr. Woerner, you're going to have to decide whether or not to press charges, take a few moments to decide."

My first reaction was maybe their story was true and they were just really gullible. I didn't feel like pressing charges.

The third officer said he'd been working thirty years in Hartford. "I've seen everything. That guy has gang tattoos all over him. These people find these vacant places and break in."

The other officer came out. "It turns out the court ordered a restraining order against this guy. That is serious. He is not supposed to be with this woman, so he's going in regardless."

"What do you think? Are you going to press charges — breaking and entering, burglary?"

I said, "If you think they are telling the truth then I won't press charges. But it doesn't add up. There has to be a third party."

The officer looked at me, "Let me see if I can get the truth here."

The officer returned a few minutes later, "She's cooperating. It's a burglary ring. We got a lot of information just now from their cell phones. They have addresses of places from here to Rye, NY."

"Is she kind of a bystander in this? If, so I won't press charges on her but I will on him."

"Yes, she's sort of a bystander."

"Ok, go ahead."

With one of the officers we went into the house and went through everything — no guns, no drugs. In the refrigerator was a pack of children's popsicles. The only real damage was the forced entry of the lockset. The original locksets and some tools were left on the floor. A bag of tools was in the entry closet. The master bed had been slept on.

As Michael and I walked past the woman he said to her,

"That is a beautiful baby, what is her name?"

"Kamala."

A female officer arrived to deal with the woman and baby. The woman gathered some of her belongings. The officer said they would take her to the police station. She took me into the bedroom. It was strewn with clothes.

A large television which they had brought with them had been set on the floor. There were tote bags, 2 expensive coats, a back pack, half a dozen large candy bars, Reese peanut butter cups, Milky Ways, child popsicles, night clothes, a gallon of canola oil, and phone cords. The only things that passed for food was an unopened a jar of salsa and a bag of corn chips. In the bathroom were wet towels in a heap on the floor and several shampoo and conditioner bottles. By the sink was an opened box of Dove soap.

In the closet was four pairs of expensive sneakers and clothes. I asked the officer, "What should I do with all this?"

"We can't take it. It's yours, take it to the dump if you want."

After the police left with the man woman and baby I went to my shop and got big contractor trash bags. I went back to the house up the stairs and into the bedroom. I was alone. It was three hours later than when this all started.

The police were really good, all four of them. I made a mental note to send them a thank you.

I thought of what might have happened if the guy had had a gun, with Michael in front of him on the balcony and me at the bottom of the stairs.

I looked at all the clothes strewn on the floor.

When I was fifteen and my brother was thirteen our father died and money was tight. Our mother clothed us mostly with used stuff from second hand stores. We used to keep our eyes out for good decent stuff, free stuff.

On the bed was an expensive down jacket with a fur collar. I pulled it up and tried it on. It was too small.

There was a white hand towel. It had been used to put out a cigarette. The towel was burned and the cigarette was still there.

I stopped dead when I looked down at a single baby sandal on the warm white oak flooring.

Suddenly a feeling of disgust came over me.

I began to throw everything into the garbage bags.

On the night table was an open pack of caramel clusters.

I ate one and was going to take the rest.

I threw them out.

I took it all to my garage. I didn't want to throw it out at the dump. It would go to Goodwill on Monday.

There wouldn't be enough time to go pheasant hunting today. I didn't really feel like it.

An hour later I got a call from the officer in charge.

"The woman would like to get her remaining stuff, we'll accompany her."

I explained that the other officer had said it could be thrown out, but I had no problem with them coming to get it. The officer called later to say it wasn't happening.

My brother and I got up the next morning at 4:30 a.m. At 6:15 a.m., a half an hour before sunrise I was in my deer stand. It was pitch black.

As 7:10 a.m. a deer appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, 60 yards away. I made a clean shot. The deer went right down.

I got out my knife and began to field dress the deer. I cut up from the anus to the breast plate. All the stomach and lower organs poured out of the cavity. I reached up with my knife and cut through the diaphragm separating the heart and lungs. Blood poured out over my hand and on to the liver.

The color of the liver was dark brown, the color of the woman and her baby's skin.

The blood was the color of the sweater she was wearing.