

Pied-à-terre

By Melanie Fogel

The house looked weary, sinking from its own weight. A porch-heavy Edwardian monster, it stood separated from its neighbors by a strip of lawn and a wide driveway on both sides. The gingerbread and stained glass were intact, if not well preserved. I couldn't see a separate address for the flat advertised in *The Renter's News*, but the woman's response when I'd called about it now made sense.

"I'm more interested in the tenant than the rent," she'd said in a voice dry with age. "Are you married?"

The ad called it an "executive pied-à-terre." Presumably she wanted someone who'd use it only when weather or an evening at the opera precluded a long drive to the country manor. I needed a place to live -- cheap -- and the time to find one was running out, so whatever she wanted in a tenant, I'd be.

"No husband, no kids." I put a little impatience in my tone, like I was sick of being asked. "And I'm past the age of wanting either." So far so good. It's always easier when you tell the truth.

"And you are employed?"

"I'm in business." That had been true at one time.

She'd used a friendlier tone when we made the appointment to see the place and I arrived right on time in my best silk suit -- better dressed than the house, whose "walking distance to downtown" lure omitted the proximity of tattoo parlors and sex shops.

She looked to be in her mid sixties; plump, no makeup, wearing a flowered cotton housedress of the type my grandmother had favored. She took a nanosecond to assess the teal skirt and jacket, Armani briefcase and Thomas Wallace shoes, then greeted me by my first name, Karen.

We walked around to the side of the house where what I'd taken for a lean-to garden shed proved instead to be the entry to the apartment. "It's very private," she said as she unlocked the door. A twenty-five watt bulb barely illumined unpainted wooden stairs ending in a small landing and

another door. "You can fix it up however you like." She proceeded down, using the wall as a banister, planting both feet before attempting the next riser.

"Oh," I said when the bottom door swung open, "I didn't realize it was furnished."

"It isn't," she replied. "But the previous tenant...died and I have to keep the furniture for a year, in case somebody claims it."

I could see the whole apartment from the doorway. To my right, a galley kitchenette the color of cooked bones. In the far left corner, a single bed wrapped in faded pink chenille. Along the wall facing me, a sway-backed, nine-drawer dresser beside a closet door. Three occasional tables of varying styles. Only the venetian blind over the one window broke the monotony of the peachy-brown walls; and on every possible surface, save the kitchen counter, lay one or more decorative boxes.

"She lived here thirty-four years," said the woman.

A flash of my bright, airy condo with the south-facing picture windows strobed through my brain.

"No extra charge for the furniture," she offered.

"I wouldn't think so, no." I sat on the bed and felt the mattress. Lumpy -- and all I had were queen-size sheets. A rosewood pencil-case on the night table caught my eye. Even under the film of dust, its smooth surface seemed to glow. I resisted the temptation to look inside. Thirty-four years. What had the woman done all day? No books, no TV.

For a basement, the room was dry and smelled faintly sweet, like pressed flowers. As I sat there trying to detect the source of the smell I heard a faint ticking. My wristwatch. No clock in here either, not even on the stove.

It wasn't hard to pretend I didn't care for the flat, but my choices had run out. "How much?" I asked.

She named a price less than the only other place I'd found within my means and where I'd have to share the bathroom.

"Karen, you've got no place to go but up," Allan had said. I could think of only one level down from here and it would require a couple of shopping bags and a free doorstep.

"I'll take it," I told her. She nodded as if she'd known that all along.

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You find out who your friends are when you're bankrupt. Not that I ever had many. The gallery took up most of my time: working to save enough to open it, making the right connections, keeping it afloat. Through it all, the only constant was Allan -- first as my accountant, then