

THE TRIPLEX ON PINE STREET: A FICTIONAL TALE OF
SUICIDE



By Dr. Rudolph Masciantonio

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Dedicatum Sorori Carissimae et Parentibus Optimis

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CHAPTER ONE: THE TRIPLEX AND ITS LANDLORD

The twenty hundred block of Pine St. in Center City Philadelphia consisted of stately old four story houses that in some cases had been converted into luxury apartment buildings or condominiums. Most houses have grand Greek revival style entrances with elegant marble steps. People said that the block reminded them of some of London's tonier residential blocks. The rents and real estate taxes were high. Young professionals and a sprinkling of young families populated the block.

2006 Pine St. was different from the other buildings. It was the smallest building on the block and, some said, the ugly duckling. It was a three story triplex building with an apartment on each floor. The basement was incorporated into the first floor apartment which was in effect a bi-level apartment. Like most of the houses on the block it was built in the 1840's. However, while the other houses were most probably single-family mansions and some had even remained mansions over long years, 2006 Pine was a vernacular house perhaps occupied by servants and household staff that worked in the nearby mansions.

The building had changed hands many times over time. Most of its recent owners kept it for five to ten years and then sold it. No one ever did the thoroughgoing renovations or restorations that the old place needed and perhaps deserved. Instead temporary repairs were made to get through some crisis or problem. The front door and the woodwork around it had been painted and repainted many times. No one ever scraped the old paint off or smoothed the surfaces. So the old place had a sad and almost depressed look, especially in contrast to the other buildings on the block. Many of the other buildings on the block had been meticulously restored to look as

they did originally. All were very well cared for with perhaps a couple of exceptions.

There was a small front garden in front of 2006 Pine St. that included ivy, mint, ground cover, and catnip. The current landlord had added this feature to try to give the building a more festive look. He wanted the old building to look warm and inviting and to set a good positive tone for tenants and their guests. Whether he succeeded was a matter of opinion. The front garden was made by cementing bricks in a row across the pavement about three feet away from the building façade. The area between the row of bricks and the building itself was filled with a few inches of topsoil and then the plants were added.

The current landlord was a 67 year old bachelor named Anthony Strong. He had retired from his long career as a high school teacher of Latin and spent a good deal of his time now taking care of 2006 Pine St. and other larger apartment buildings including one about a block away where he lived. He liked to brag about being a one-man parade. He did the maintenance, showed vacant apartments, advertised vacancies, selected new tenants when necessary, made minor electrical, plumbing and carpentry repairs, hired contractors to do work he was not prepared to do himself, collected the rents, shoveled the snow, and put out the trash where the tenants did not do this themselves. When there was a problem he was the first person the tenants or the city contacted. Sometimes he would characterize himself as a one man Triumvirate, i.e., owner, manager, and superintendent.

Anthony had lived with his sister for many years. She had died suddenly three years ago and now he was alone except for three thoroughly spoiled cats, viz., Oedipus Cupcake, a big orange tabby who liked to half-meow in friendly fashion, Messalina Vicki, an all black cat with yellow eyes who had a deviated septum and therefore snuffled as she breathed, and Livia Pumpkin, a white, black and orange calico who liked to hiss at other cats and all humans except Anthony. Anthony had his circle of friends and

kept in touch with cousins and friends by e-mail and telephone with occasional visits, e.g., at holiday time. In a way he viewed his tenants as his children. Many times he found himself in loco parentis and was expected to give out advice on all sorts of matters. He liked to say that as a housing provider he had become a psychologist, father confessor, counselor, friend, advisor, parent, chief cook and bottle washer.

His tenants tended to be young professional people. Some of them were renting an apartment for themselves for the first time. Many seemed never to have taken Housekeeping 101 as they grew up or to have done badly in the course if they had had it. With a few honorable exceptions the tenants did a minimum of cleaning and straightening. Anthony was surprised to see that dirty dishes and pots would simply be put in the kitchen sink and left there until the tenant ran out of a supply of the items. In which case he or she would wash only the item or items needed.

It amused Anthony that many of his young tenants did not get their gas service connected for their gas ranges. They did not use the range at all except as a storage area and cabinet. To eat they preferred to microwave food or use hotplates and toasters and toaster ovens to heat prepared food or simply to send out for pizza or other take-out food. The pizza delivery people knew Anthony's tenants well. Anthony knew of a pasta store that had opened up on Rittenhouse Square to sell good ingredients for Italian food. It failed. The store thought that people would be glad to buy excellent ingredients and cook it at home. They were not. They wanted instead to buy food that was already prepared and could simply be heated at home and eaten. Anthony thought that his tenants and their lifestyles had perhaps contributed to the failure of the pasta store.

It also amused Anthony that the tenants did not bother to get landline telephones. They used cell phones instead and tended to keep old cell phone numbers even though the area codes referred to another part of the country. When Anthony would have to call such

tenants on his landline phone he would wind up paying for long distance calls. Being the frugal type of guy that he was Anthony tended to make very few calls to cell phones with strange area codes. Instead he communicated by note or in person. He had to be careful to get all the cell phone numbers directly from the tenants for emergencies since it was impossible to obtain a cell phone number from a directory or directory assistance. Anthony liked to joke that modern communications technology made it harder and harder for folks to communicate.

Some aspects of property management appealed to Anthony more than other. Decorating the hallways and stairways of the buildings was a favorite of his. 2006 Pine had lots of pictures of ancient Greece and Rome hanging in the small vestibule and hallway. Anthony joked about his buildings being a small part of the ancient Roman Empire that had not fallen. Many of the pictures were from his bulletin board collections amassed over the years as a high school teacher of Latin. He was careful not to display anything that could not easily be replaced if it were lost or stolen. His fellow landlords had cautioned him about the “taking ways” of guests, workers, and even tenants in rental properties. It was an easy matter to remove a framed picture from the wall and walk out with it. And it did happen.

Anthony also enjoyed the physical labor involved in vacuuming the hallway and stairs, sweeping the sidewalk, and tending the modest front garden. He found that physical labor relieved his stress and anxieties. One summer Anthony took out a trail membership at a local gym. He tried to use the facilities each day but did not really enjoy them. He thought of his buildings and the physical labor they required as his own private gym of sorts. The difference was that he liked working on his buildings.

He liked being able to greet the tenants in a cheery yet business-like fashion. He did not like having to go after tenants who did not pay the rent in timely fashion- especially if the tenant became nasty or difficult. He tried when screening prospective tenants to reject

anyone with insufficient reliable income to pay the rent. He was surprised to learn that many tenants lived paycheck to pay check with virtually no financial reserves. For himself, Anthony was always careful to keep funds in reserve for emergencies or unexpected expenditures.

When Anthony first retired from teaching he thought that managing his apartment buildings would be easy and would leave him plenty of time for scholarly projects or just to rest and have fun. He soon learned that the apartments required daily attention and could eat up tremendous globs of time very easily.

Take a simple thing like fixing a non-functioning doorbell. He cleaned the wires that attached to the pushbutton and made sure there was good contact. The doorbell still would not ring. So he replaced it with a wireless pushbutton and a chime that plugged into an electrical outlet within the apartment. But even this new device did not work because the chime seemed to be too far from the pushbutton. So he got a long extension cord for the chime. Bingo! Success! But all of this work took about two hours since he had to make repeated trips to the hardware store to get advice and materials.

Take putting out the trash. There was no way to predict how much trash and recycling there might be in a given week or how well packaged it might be. Sometimes he had to re-bag material. But 2006 Pine was his favorite building as far as trash was concerned. He had gotten the tenants to put out their own trash after 7:00 PM on the night before the city collection. All he had to was check to see that the trash was put out properly- no cardboard boxes allowed as trash containers, no mixing of trash with recyclables. The City was not very efficient about many things. However, it was efficient about handing out trash violation tickets. These tickets carried a twenty-five dollar fine. If not paid or contested within ten days the fine doubled all the way up to \$300 and a lien against the property involved. The City held the landlord responsible for whatever was put on his or her sidewalk. It did not matter who actually put out

the offending items. It could be a tenant, a neighbor, or a passerby. It could be a suburbanite passing through town with a bag of trash to unload. Whoever it was, the landlord got blamed. If the recipient of a ticket requested an administrative hearing and told his or her side of the story convincingly, sometimes the fine was removed. But one could spend several hours waiting for a hearing and then be told that the landlord was responsible and the fine must be paid. One could, of course, hire a lawyer and pursue the matter further. But the consensus was that hiring a lawyer was not likely to be cost effective.

In recent time Anthony had taken to paying the fines rather than contesting them. The whole procedure was unfair, but it was difficult to fight City Hall. The fines amounted to a tax on trash and were a source of revenue for the cash-strapped City that was always looking around for new taxes to impose or sources of revenue. Anthony found it amusing that Philadelphia had a tax on trash. He liked to compare it with the tax on tea that the British tried to levy on their American colonies. Perhaps the comparison was not totally apt since victims of Philadelphia trash tickets could hardly be expected to dump their trash in the river or to rebel against the Crown.

Anthony prided himself on running his small business well, despite the fact that he made no profit from it. The expenses of the buildings were enormous. The real estate taxes (which were being raised each year through the device of changing the assessed value of the property), the insurance premiums (which also increased annually), the expenses of repairs and supplies and all the other expenses exceeded the rents collected. If Anthony did not have a pension from his teaching career he could not afford to live as a landlord. None of the buildings showed a profit most years. However, Anthony felt that in running the buildings he was providing decent affordable housing in Center City for people and therefore was doing something socially constructive. Some told him that his rents were too low. But he pointed out that his apartments were not the most modern or fancy apartments

available. Further, if he charged too much apartments would sit empty. There was plenty of competition among housing providers in Center City and neighboring areas of South Philadelphia and University City.

Anthony was amused that his immediate neighbor wanted to buy 2006 Pine St., gut it, and convert it into a single-family dwelling. Gutting old buildings while preserving the façade seemed to be very much in vogue. In Center City the gutting often involved rebuilding the interiors with new materials but with floor plans very similar to those present before the gutting. So why gut at all? Why not simply improve or modify the existing floor plan and interior structure? No one seemed able to answer these questions for Anthony.

Anthony was careful to greet neighbors warmly, to inquire about their health and circumstances, and to make small talk about their pets. His mother Mildred had taught him to do this. She herself always had practiced what she preached. “You never know, she would say, “when you need someone’s help. Besides, life is so much more pleasant when neighbors get along”. She cautioned against becoming involved in litigation with neighbors. She urged compromise and even giving in entirely in the event that some dispute arose.

Anthony had recently had a neighbor threatening to sue because a Virginia creeper vine originating in Anthony’s yard had grown up the neighbor’s wall and damaged, in the neighbor’s view, the bricks and mortar. Anthony found it difficult to believe that folks in Center City were so litigious. They wanted to sue at the drop of a hat. To accommodate the neighbor Anthony carefully removed the vine even though he was sick of heart at the thought of killing such a grand and beautiful Parthenocissus quinquefolia vine. The neighbor still was not satisfied. He wanted the wall painted and the mortar repaired at Anthony’s expense. The neighbor had an estimate of \$1800 for the job. Anthony, ever tactful and friendly, was able to persuade the neighbor to split the difference. So

Anthony wound up paying \$900. But he told himself that maintaining good relations with his powerful neighbor was worth it. Besides, it was Anthony and his tenants that got to look at and enjoy the freshly repaired and painted wall. Deep down though he grieved over the loss of the Parthenocissus quinquefolia. Later a lawyer friend told Anthony that he had done the right thing to compromise because if the matter had gone to court the judgment would most likely have been in favor of the neighbor. The legal principle was *Cujus radices ejus responsibilitas*. (“The one who has the roots of a plant has the responsibility for it.”) Anthony, being an inveterate and enthusiastic Latinist, enjoyed hearing the principle enunciated in legal Latin.

Anthony visited the triplex on Pine St. almost daily. Every Monday he would sweep the sidewalk, tend the front garden, and vacuum and dust the stairway and hallway. Sometimes he would run into tenants while doing these tasks. He would exchange pleasantries, though some of the tenants wore iPods and thus made communication a little difficult.

For many years Anthony had employed a Vietnamese gentleman named Mr. Loc as a painter and carpenter. Mr. Loc’s spoken English was not strong, though he could read and write with facility and accuracy. Mr. Loc at first had described himself as a painter. Later he added carpenter. Most recently he was describing himself as a general contractor and was fond of saying “I do it all!” Loc’s wife was named Co and did not seem to understand English at all. Her repertoire of spoken English was limited to “Hello” and “Thank you very much!” Her lovely smile and warmth more than made up for her lack of English language skills.

Often Loc would bring Co along for jobs. She steadied his ladder, dusted in anticipation of his painting, helped him to clean the paintbrushes, and kept him supplied with food and beer during his jobs. Co was a firm believer in a postprandial siesta. Once when Loc was painting an apartment Anthony was looking around and opened a closet door only to find Co snoozing inside the closet. He

did not disturb her but instead told Loc about it. “I know”, Loc said. “She need nap after big lunch”. Co was a large, corpulent woman, a real contrast with Loc who was thin and wiry and short.

Once when Loc and Co were both in Anthony’s apartment together they were talking in an animated fashion about Oedipus Cupcake, one of Anthony’s fat cats at the time. Anthony did not understand the conversation in Vietnamese, but he thought from the occasional gestures and interlarded English words such as “chop-chop” that they were discussing the potential merits of Oedipus Cupcake as a main course at dinner!

It was so sad for Anthony when after Christmas one year he phoned Loc and was told by his son Richard that Loc had passed away. When he inquired further Anthony was told that another son, not Richard, had in fact killed Loc in an accident. Richard said that his father drank too much but did not wish to tell the details of Loc’s death to Anthony. “It’s too painful”, Richard said. He added that his mother Co was doing okay under the circumstances. Richard had the sad duty to transport his father’s body back to Vietnam because his father wanted very much to be buried there with his ancestors. So Richard obliged. It was a tremendously expensive trip. Richard was also a contractor and had worked with his father on some of Anthony’s projects. He said he would be glad to help Anthony with future projects. Anthony’s new business relationship with Richard was the one positive outcome of Loc’s death.

Anthony liked to pass by Pine St. as often as possible. He took a certain pride in the building and the fact that he had owned it since 1977. He attended the traditional Latin Mass at a church in New Jersey. A friend drove him there on weekends. To meet his friend at the garage he had to pass the Pine St. building. He always smiled when he passed it.

When his bicycle rides were completed along the Schuylkill River, he would return home via the sidewalk on Pine St. When he passed

2006 Pine he either rang his bicycle bell or tooted his horn. Sometimes he would see a tenant or guest on the front steps or going into or out of the building. He would try to exchange pleasantries- though sometimes this was not possible, as was mentioned, because the tenant was i-Poded, i.e., had earphones from an i-Pod in his or her ears. I-pods struck Anthony as strange. They seemed to cut wearers off from their environment and other people. But somehow i-Pods were deemed to be progress!

Motorists tended to regard Pine St. as an expressway of sorts. They came barreling down the street at high speeds and were particularly disdainful of bicyclists and pedestrians. It was not uncommon for a motorist to shout obscenities to bicyclists as they passed by. New Jersey drivers seemed particularly impatient to Anthony. They were used to wide boulevards and turnpikes and resented bitterly the narrow streets of Center City Philadelphia, which, after all, had been planned in colonial times when horses and horse drawn vehicles were in use. At one time plans were being considered in Philadelphia for a crosstown expressway going from river to river between South and Bainbridge Sts. It was never built, though the looming threat of such an expressway caused the entire city block to decay slowly river to river. Now folks joked about Pine St. being the crosstown expressway by default.

One day an octogenarian motorist jumped the curb in front of 2006 Pine and knocked down the big three-story streetlight and plowed into the wrought iron railing near the marble steps. Fortunately no one was hurt and the marble steps themselves were undamaged. Anthony later learned that these street light poles were designed in such a way that they fall when struck along the curb rather than into the building or into the street. The wrought iron railing on the front steps of Anthony's building was mangled beyond repair and the wood work near the main door was damaged. The façade of the neighbor's house was also damaged, though only it seemed in a minor way.

The elderly gentleman who caused the crash had insurance, but it was limited. The gentleman's insurance company believed that the settlement had to be divided into three equal parts, viz., one for the City to reimburse it for the street light, one to the neighbor for his façade, and one for Anthony for his railing and damaged woodwork. The elderly gentleman had evidently confused the gas pedal for the brake pedal, panicked, and driven onto the sidewalk. There was no other plausible explanation. He was embarrassed and afraid that the police might want to take away his license to drive. He was not able to reimburse Anthony or his neighbor for the damages not covered by the insurance company. Anthony remembered what his father had once told him about how insurance was great until you actually needed help. Anthony gritted his teeth about the whole affair and chalked it up to part of the expense of doing business. He also made it a point to remember the elderly gentleman in his prayers.

Whenever he passed the building thoughts of previous problems and situations there came to mind. For instance, there was the time when a mysterious muddy water had backed up into the basement presumably through the toilet in the basement bathroom. It ruined the tenant's box spring which was directly on the basement floor as well as damaged some of his clothing that was also directly on the floor. Anthony called a drain cleaning service. They attempted to cable out the drain from the curbside cleanout but without success. So George, the owner of the drain cleaning service, decided to lift the toilet in the basement and go in that way with his gigantic electric cable. George determined that the main drain line was broken. It was one of those old clay pipes and had been there a very long time. With his cable George was able to open a passage way and thereby restore drain service to the building at least pro tempore.

But George determined that the main drain had to be replaced. It was an old clay pipe that had cracked. Mud that surrounded it had found its way into the pipe and ultimately into the basement when

passage through the pipe was blocked. At least George had made the drain usable.

Anthony's plumber Mike had to hire a subterranean subcontractor to do the work of replacement since the drainpipe was over 8 feet under the sidewalk. The sidewalk had to be broken and excavated. But before that could be done the various utilities that had cables or pipes underground had to mark where their cables or pipes were located. Some utilities came very promptly to paint their colored lines on the sidewalk and thus indicate locations. Others delayed. The single phone number that was supposed to get all the utilities to cooperate seemed unable to get the cable company to respond. So Anthony tried to contact the cable company directly. He was given the royal runaround. The stupid menu system that the cable company had seemed designed to assure that no one could talk to a live human being. Anthony spent a whole afternoon trying to get some one to come out and paint the lines. Finally someone came.

The excavation work had to be performed in the bitter January cold. It was hard work for the skinny young guys who had to shovel out the dirt manually. When they finally reached the old clay drainpipe they realized that for a long time the waste from the building was not flowing into the city's main drain under the street. Rather it was flowing into the clay and mud under the sidewalk. Anthony suddenly realized why his ivy in the front garden was so vigorous and full despite the fact that he almost never watered it. It had a secret source of water and nutrition, viz., the wastewater of the building. The subterranean plumbers installed a new cast iron pipe that was extremely difficult to work with. Philadelphia was one of the few places in the First World where cast iron pipes were still required by code. Most communities allowed the use of PVC pipe that is much easier than cast iron to cut and install and lasts much longer also. The plumbing job was expensive, over \$3000.

After the new pipe was installed and the sidewalk filled in, Anthony had to look for a cement contractor to re-cement the sidewalk. His old cement contractor, who liked to call himself

Giuseppe the Godfather of Cement, was no longer available to do sidewalks. Giuseppe had a knee problem that prevented him from doing everything except brick pointing. Though Anthony himself was experienced at doing some cement work, the depth and scope of this job frightened him a little, and he decided to find a contractor to do it. He found a company called South Philadelphia Cement that seemed willing to do the job and reasonable in price.

The cold and somewhat snowy January weather prevented the South Philadelphia Cement people from starting the job. Anthony was worried that someone might fall on the broken up sidewalk or stage a fall in order to collect insurance money. So he took precautions. He put signs up urging caution. One of the signs was even in Latin. (*Cave, pavimento fracto!*) He found orange caution cones and put them around. Then he covered the whole broken sidewalk with an old maroon oriental style rug. If someone did fall they would land on a soft carpet! He joked with his opera singer friend Becky about how he felt like Clytemnestra strewing carpets for her husband Agamemnon on his return from Troy. Becky recognized and enjoyed the Aeschylean and operatic reference. Then he took pictures with his digital camera. The pictures would be proof that precautions had been taken in the event there was some kind of an accident.

Anthony was an old hand at defending against lawsuits in the very litigious Center City area. As was mentioned, people wanted to sue at the drop of a hat. Lawyers urge people to sue through television commercials. Anthony had grown up in an era when lawyers and doctors did not advertise. He found the commercialization of law and medicine very *déclassé* and distasteful. But, he tried to tell himself, that's the way the world is, and there is no sense stressing out over it. You cannot change it even if you tried.

Anthony called a part of the sidewalk in front of 2006 Pine St. Marjorie Snodgrass Gulch. It was here several years ago that a young woman named Marjorie Snodgrass claimed to have fallen while walking her little dog in the snow. She was a kidney dialysis

patient. Her claims therefore elicited a level of sympathy that she might not otherwise have gotten. She hired a “savage” lawyer who advertised on television. Marjorie claimed that someone had stopped to help her when she slipped and fell on Anthony’s sidewalk. That person just happened to be a medical doctor.

Anthony’s insurance company provided him with a lawyer. Anthony had to give a deposition, as did his maintenance man at the time who had shoveled and salted the sidewalk. Anthony’s lawyer was afraid that if the case went to trial the jury would sympathize with Marjorie Snodgrass in light of her kidney condition. So a settlement in the amount of \$78,000 was agreed upon.

When Anthony’s insurance premium was due the next year, the insurance company did not submit an invoice. So he called them. Eventually they submitted an invoice doubling his premium. He remembered what his father had said about insurance, viz., that it was great except when you needed it.

Several years later Marjorie Snodgrass died of the complications arising from her renal condition. It was then that Anthony learned from good sources that she was a professional “suer”, i.e., that she went around staging accidents and then collecting insurance settlements. This was her primary source of income. She was an expert at it, even arranging for appropriate witnesses to be present at the times of the putative accidents. Still, he felt sorry for her and said the *De Profundis* for the happy repose of her troubled soul.

Anthony had a way of taking on other people’s problems and internalizing them and even wanting somehow to save the world! He was aware of his tendency to take on other people’s problems and tried to avoid getting stressed over them. Some of the tools he used to block stress and worry included exercise, good eating, planning recreation, meditation, prayer, relaxing music, reading, playing with cats, and talking and joking with friends and relatives. Anthony felt that in some ways he was an expert at reducing stress

and worry without use of medication. He was proud that he did not need medication and felt that so much of the modern world was overmedicated and wanted a quick fix in the form of a pill for every problem.

He noticed that many of his young tenants were on psychotropic medication. Containers of Xanax, Valium, Paxil, Wellbutrin, Zoloft and others were very much in evidence in the tenants' apartments. Anthony did not snoop but often saw the containers in the bathrooms and kitchens when he was arranging for repairs. As was mentioned, Anthony had grown up at a time when doctors and lawyers did not advertise. The hard sell that the drug companies used to pedal their wares on television and radio upset him. He was also aware of the fact that many of his young tenants who took the medication also indulged freely in drinking alcohol. Not a good combination.

