

HOUSE GUEST

By Tracey Johnson

Back in 1997, Paul's brother, Larry, who then lived in Seattle, would frequently phone Paul and his wife Tracey, sometimes sounding as though he had been having too much to drink.

Larry was recently divorced from his second wife, Kate.

Paul and Tracey think his second marriage lasted less than one year. Larry had married Kate after being married to his first wife, Hita, for more than 25 years.

With each phone call Larry made to Paul and Tracey, Larry seemed to be becoming more and more depressed.

Larry was 54, a successful lawyer with three kids, the youngest a senior in high school.

Paul told Tracey he was worried about Larry.

Paul became concerned Larry might be contemplating suicide.

Larry was damn near broke. Financial problems seemed to have contributed to Larry's most recent divorce.

Paul told Tracey that Larry no longer wished to be a lawyer and Larry wanted to move back to Minneapolis, his old home town where as lads Paul and Larry enjoyed a happy upbringing with their younger sisters and brother.

Larry had always wanted to be a bartender and Paul suggested to Tracey that Larry could live with them until he found a job and a place to live.

Larry said he had some cash but no credit because his marriage resulted in all of his credit cards being maxed out.

Tracey was apprehensive. Larry had previously stayed with Paul and Tracey on vacations. Tracey felt Larry's personality traits made Larry often become loud and obnoxious.

Plus Tracey felt he tended to be a slob and a snob. As much as Paul loved Larry, Paul pretty much agreed.

Tracey felt that whenever Larry and Paul got together, Paul would often alter Paul's personality and behave and act in a manner that matched how Larry would behave and act, if for no other reason than Paul enjoyed pleasing Larry.

To top it all off, Paul had been previously diagnosed as being clinically depressed and despite being on medications was no longer motivated to do anything, was reclusive, and was no longer working as a docent for a museum.

But Tracey felt if Larry and Paul might spend some "quality time" together, that might help Paul. So Tracey said, "OK."

Tracey did not stop long enough to think what it might be like to be living with two people who were having emotional and financial difficulties.

Paul and Larry's younger sister Sue, who also lived in Seattle and who also was undergoing financial and emotional problems also wanted to return to Minneapolis with Larry at the same time and stay with Larry and Paul and Tracey.

Paul could handle Larry, but not Larry and Sue at the same time. Plus Paul knew that including Sue would not be acceptable to Larry and Tracey.

Paul and Tracey were living in a small one-bathroom house with no guest bedroom. Larry said he could sleep on his back on the floor. Said it was better for his aching back.

Paul flew to Seattle. Larry had sent Paul a one-way plane ticket.

Paul and Larry packed what they could into Larry's little Subaru. Larry had boxed up all his other stuff and had mailed it off to Paul and Tracey's house in Minneapolis.

Tracey took a week of vacation from her full-time job to clean and de-clutter the house. Paul and Tracey had a 10x10 bedroom with a closet that they called their Library because that's where their several ceiling-high bookcases were lined up along the walls.

Also in the Library was an antique desk that had belonged to Paul and Larry's maternal grandparents.

Tracey cleaned out the desk drawers and the closet so that Larry could have room for his shoes, coats, shirts, pants, socks and underwear.

During the week boxes began arriving from Seattle. Tracey hoisted and carried them into the Library. Some were too heavy. Tracey left them in the middle of the living room for when Paul and Larry would eventually arrive from Seattle.

Paul and Tracey had made up a list of rules for Larry to abide by until Larry found a place to live within the coming month of June.

By mid May Paul and Larry arrived, Larry's loaded beat-up Subaru having survived the trip over the Cascade and Rocky Mountains.

Larry smoked, which was fine with Paul and Tracey. But he was not careful about using ash trays. He would just flick the ash on the end of his cigarette in the general direction of an ash tray several feet from wherever he sat and although Paul and Tracey would ask him to be more careful, he seldom seemed to care.

Larry would purchase some groceries for himself. His diet staples were eggs, butter, milk, bread, cookies, doughnuts, and diet pop. He also purchased lot of liquor and beer.

Tracey also found herself spending more and more on groceries. And also finding it harder to find room for food and beverages in the refrigerator and kitchen, where the small counter and table overflowed with bread bags and liquor and beer bottles.

Larry was a large man and even as a kid never graceful afoot, according to Paul.

A total klutz, Larry was dropping and breaking glasses. Whenever he broke a glass he would shout "WHOA" and just reach into the cupboard for another, never bothering to sweep up the shattered glass from the floor. That was for Paul and Tracey to do.

So Tracey removed most of the remaining glassware from the kitchen cupboard and stashed it in the basement.

Paul and Tracey asked Larry to use newly purchased plastic cups and beverage containers.

Larry never sat down upon furniture. Larry always “fell down” upon Paul and Tracey’s chairs and sofa.

Larry “fell into” Paul and Tracey’s living room recliner and broke it. Paul and Tracey then requested that Larry be more careful and stop “falling into and onto” their furniture.

Larry replied, “You should not be so materialistic.”

While Larry sat at Paul’s personal computer, munching goopy doughnuts and getting the keyboard and mouse sticky, Paul yells for him to stop that. Larry smiles, turns in the creaking chair, and wipes his sticky fingers and goopy palms on Paul’s shirt.

Tracey opens the kitchen cupboard and discovers what’s stinking: a plate with unwrapped mushy butter.

Larry then said “I prefer real butter, but if left in the refrigerator it becomes too hard for me to spread on bread.”

Tracey and Paul ask Larry to nevertheless leave it in the fridge.

The next day Tracey finds another mushy stick of butter in the cupboard and again asks Larry to stop doing that.

Larry says, “Okay. Okay. Okay.”

Later in the week Paul and Tracey discover hidden plates of unwrapped butter in nooks and crannies, as though whoever stashed them would not detect their rancid stench.

One morning Tracey got up early and sat in the kitchen to have a serene quiet cup of coffee. But Larry gets up at the same time, plops on the piano bench in the living room, and starts his morning by playing and singing opera in his booming voice.

Tracey takes her coffee down to the TV room in the basement.

On other such mornings whenever this again occurred, Tracey would take her coffee out on the back deck if it was a nice day.

After Larry lived with Paul and Tracey for a month, Tracey sits down at the cluttered kitchen table to write checks for the monthly bills. Larry had told Paul and Tracey that he would be making a lot of long-distance phone calls to his current and former law clients and that he would pay his share of the phone bill.

Tracey opens the phone bill which she expects to be \$50 and is stunned to see it's well over \$200 and writes a check for the full amount.

Larry pays Paul his share of the phone bill and then Paul fails to reimburse Tracey. And then after the second month of Paul failing to reimburse Tracey with the money Larry is giving Paul to pay for his long-distance calls, she tells Larry to give her the money and not give it to Paul.

Larry starts getting phone calls from a woman with whom he had a romantic relationship in Seattle. Her name is Candy.

While Candy had formerly lived in Minnesota, she became a beauty queen, and now it seems she's returned from Seattle to again live in Minnesota.

Larry told Paul that Candy had a jealous boyfriend named Thor and Thor lives in a gated community in a nearby plush suburb of St. Paul. Larry declares that Candy had come back from Seattle to again be with Thor. But now that Larry is living nearby, she wants to start seeing Larry again.

Tracey now worries that some guy named Thor is going to show up at their house in the middle of the night with a baseball bat.

Tracey repeatedly steps into large puddles of water on the kitchen floor and points this out to Paul, thinking their kitchen plumbing might be leaking.

Paul says, "No. That's from Larry trying to help out with washing the dishes. He's just trying to help out."

Tracey does not ask Paul why he or Larry does not mop up the water on the now stained kitchen floor. Instead, Tracey tells Larry he must never wash the dishes again and from now on she will perform that chore.

Larry falls butt-first upon the sofa in the basement TV room, and while thrusting backward into a reclining position, he punches a hole in the plasterboard wall behind the sofa. Worse yet, the leg rest is now bent sideways and forever after no longer functional.

Larry then goes upstairs and plops onto a kitchen table chair and breaks the chair's legs.

Occasionally Tracey would recline upon her favorite lounge chair out on the back deck, enjoying a gin and tonic after coming home from work, usually about once a week, and sometimes during a nice Saturday evening. Now it's every evening.

Paul phones Tracey an hour before she departs her office at 6 p.m.

"Larry wants to enroll in the Minnesota School of Bartending. But Larry says it costs \$200 to enroll and he does not have the money and wants to know if you can pay for it. Is it okay with you if Larry and me drive over to the school now and use our credit card to pay for his tuition? Larry will eventually pay us back."

Larry soon repaid the money to Paul. But Paul never put the money to the credit card bill.

After Larry starts bartending school, Tracey comes home tired from work and Larry asks her if she would like him to fix her a tall gin and tonic.

"Yes. Thank you."

Tracey reclines on her favorite lounge chair and awaits her drink.

Tracey hears ice cracking and smacking into a glass tumbler.

Tracey hears ice and glass smashing onto the kitchen floor.

Tracey hears Larry shout, "WHOA!"

Tracey hears Larry pop more ice into another glass.

Tracey extends her hand as Larry presents her a gin and tonic and says to Tracey, "Sorry about that."

On that particular night Tracey ends up having two gin and tonics while lounging on the deck in her favorite lounge chair.

Larry plops down upon the toilet seat and breaks it.

Larry is now sleeping at night upon the living room sofa because the Library floor is such a mess there's no room on the floor for him to sleep. Supposedly sleeping on the floor was good for his back.

Tracey gets up in the morning to open the front door and get the newspaper. Larry is still asleep on the sofa.

Tracey sees the front door is already wide open.

Larry later tells Paul and Tracey that he opened the door in the middle of the night because he wanted some fresh air.

While Paul and Tracey are watching TV in the basement, Larry's playing the piano in the living room, a piano Tracey's father had given her as a Christmas present.

When Paul and Tracey come up from the basement, Larry then says, "I owe you a piano key."

Tracey looks at the piano keyboard and sees how one key has been scorched.

Larry says, "I was smoking a cigarette while playing the piano and was not using an ash tray. I was balancing a lighted cigarette on top edge of the piano. It fell upon the key. Burned it."

Tracey goes into the kitchen, mixes herself a gin and tonic, and out on the back deck, reclines upon her favorite lounge chair.

Larry wishes he could meet a woman to date and Paul introduces Larry to two attractive women he worked with at a suburban newspaper. They both agree to meet together for dinner and drinks with Paul and Larry and Tracey at a bar and restaurant located near their posh suburban homes that their former lawyer husbands granted them as part of their divorce settlements.

Later, Paul asks Larry what he thought about the cute blonde who plays cello in a classical string trio with her two daughters.

"Her breasts aren't big enough and she was not wearing enough makeup. That shows a lack of self-esteem."

Tracey tells Paul to stop trying to be a match maker for Larry.

Paul picks up Tracey from work and as they are driving home, Paul says, "Larry told me to tell you to not get upset when we get home. He says he will pay for a new lounge chair."

When Paul and Tracey arrive home and ascend the back deck, Tracey sees a mangled tangled mess of metal and mesh that once was her favorite lounge chair.

Several days later Larry goes to Target and buys Tracey a new lounge chair that is sturdy and comfortable. Larry promises Tracey he shall never sit upon it.

Tracey notices how for the past several days the phone has not rung. Not once. Not even any calls from telemarketers. She picks up the receiver to make sure there's a dial tone. There is.

But then Tracey discovers a button on the phone has been set so that the phone will not ring and she asks Paul who turned off the phone's ringer.

"Larry did that because he's maxed out his credit cards and gets calls every day and evening from creditors harassing him about when he's going to make payments."

Tracey turns the phone's ringer back on.

The phone rings at 10 p.m. and again at 11 p.m. and again at midnight and then again at 1 a.m. Tracey fears a phone call at such late hours means only one thing: bad news.

Paul tells Tracey that Larry has instructed people to call him after 10 p.m. so he would know it was not a debt collector calling him.

During the next several weeks Tracey admires how Larry obtains four part-time jobs: teaching a German class at the Volksfest Haus, serving as a tour guide at the Schubert Club's Museum (both located in St. Paul) teaching a paralegal course at a suburban business college, and working 20 hours a week as a singing bartender for an Italian restaurant.

There are now three evenings a week when Larry does not arrive home until after 9 p.m. Yippee!

But during early evenings debt collectors call and ask for Larry.

When Tracey tells the debt collectors that Larry is not home, they start harassing Tracey. They want to know who she is and what's her relationship with Larry. Some assume Tracey is his wife and they start making threats.

Tracey works hard for her money. She pays bills on time. And while Paul has not been employed but is spending money, it has not been all that easy for her to manage prompt payments.

And now in addition to Paul's debts, Tracey's getting flak from Larry's debt collectors.

When one of Larry's debt collectors says to her, "We can start repossessing things he owns," Tracey replies, "Be my guest."

The astonished debt collector shouts, "What?"

Tracey says, "Start with his car. It's an old beat-up Subaru parked in the alley behind our house."

Because Larry had changed his home address to Paul and Tracey's home and had changed his phone number to their phone, listed under Tracey's name, Tracey worries that maybe Larry's debt collectors might attempt to garnish her wages and attempt to repossess her property.

Paul asks Larry if he's looked for an apartment to rent and Larry tells Paul that he has yet to find one that he likes.

During an afternoon while Paul's not at home, Larry leaves the house to go to one of his four part-time jobs.

After Paul picks up Tracey from work, they arrive home to discover their front door is wide open.

When Larry arrives home that evening they ask Larry to please remember to lock the house doors.

Larry complains that they have too many house rules. And says something about where he once used to live with his family.

"On Vashon Island we never had to keep any of our doors locked all the time. And we kept our windows open, too."

While sitting at the kitchen table doing a cross-word puzzle, Tracey hears Paul and Larry talking in the basement while they watch a TV show.

Larry says to Paul how great it will be when there's some website on the internet that's a "big virtual vagina that men can fuck."

Larry goes on to say that it could be set up in such a way as to be very realistic and yet nobody would have to worry about getting any diseases. Then they begin to talk about the different sound effects that could be added to make it seem even more realistic.

It seems to Tracey their conversation about this subject would go on and on, so Tracey decides to not complete her crossword puzzle to instead just call it an early night and go upstairs to read in bed.

The next day Larry announces he has to take a plane to the west coast to complete some unfinished lawyer work for a client.

Tracey is elated.

Larry tells Paul the client has purchased a plane ticket for Larry and the plane ticket will be waiting for Larry at the airport.

Paul drives Larry to the airport and they enter the terminal.

Turns out that there's no plane ticket waiting for Larry.

Larry does not have any way to purchase a plane ticket, so Paul purchases a round-trip ticket using Paul and Tracey's credit card.

After Larry returns from the west coast, Larry pays Paul for the round-trip plane ticket and Paul fails to put the money toward the credit card.

While sitting on her new lounge chair, Tracey considers leaving Paul and Larry, but she does not know where she would go to, and wonders why must it be she who has to leave her own house because of her brother-in-law.

Paul puts an old Mitch Miller 1960's record (*Sing Along With Mitch*) onto the turntable and cranks up the stereo speakers.

Mitch Miller and His Gang and Orchestra burst forth in the living room with their rendition of "Beer Barrel Polka."

Five minutes later, Larry emerges from the Library and announces he is going out for a walk.

A week later, Paul and Tracey again put their “Sing Along With Mitch” record on the turntable.

Five minutes later, Larry emerges from the Library and announces he is going out for a walk.

Paul and Tracey now realize that if they ever want to get Larry out of the house, all they have to do is put on their Mitch Miller record.

While Tracey’s sitting at the kitchen table, Larry is in the Library at his personal computer and talking long-distance on the phone with someone.

Tracey hears a loud crash and Larry yelling, “WHOA! WHOA!”

Tracey rushes to the Library and sees Larry upon the floor, amidst a broken tangled mangled mess that had been a kitchen chair.

The phone cord is tangled around Larry’s massive torso and he still has the receiver in one hand while he explains to the person on the other end of the line how his chair broke while leaning backward.

Tracey asks Larry if he is okay.

Larry says, “Yes”.

Tracey goes back to the kitchen, mixes a stiff gin and tonic, and heads for the deck and her new lounge chair.

As Tracey is getting ready for work the next morning, the phone rings. Tracey worries any phone call before 8 a.m. might be bad news.

Picking up the receiver, a woman asks for Tracey Johnson.

She asks what Tracey’s relationship with Larry Johnson is and before Tracey can reply she asks Tracey if she’s Larry’s mother.

“No,” says Tracey.

Then she asks, “Are you Larry’s wife?”

“No,” says Tracey.

The woman gets hostile as she describes to Tracey Larry's debt.

Upset, Tracey hangs up the phone.

The debt collectors have now chosen to not speak with Larry and instead speak with Tracey.

Tracey yells unprintable words toward Paul and Larry and heads out the door to "have a nice day" at work.

Tracey has grown weary of being Paul and Larry's 24/7 bank and tired of the household mess. She wants her house back. And now she's ready to take up residence in a cheap Motel 6 room if that would allow her to continue to make the mortgage payments.

That evening Larry tells Paul and Tracey he wants to take them out to dinner.

"To thank you for being such life-savers" Larry said.

They go to The Olive Garden, where upon being served their meals, Larry again thanks Paul and Tracey as he reaches toward Tracey's plate and forks up large portions of Tracey's meal and places it upon his plate.

Tracey drains her glass of Chianti and pours herself another.

The next day there's a knock on the door and Paul opens it.

A man asks Paul if he's Larry Johnson.

"No. He's away at the moment. May I help you?" says Paul.

He hands Paul an envelope and asks Paul to give it to Larry.

When Paul later gives it to Larry, he tells Paul that it's a subpoena and the IRS is after him because he owes them a lot of money.

Tracey now worries she will come home from work someday and her house will have been padlocked shut by the IRS and soon her wages will be garnished, since both her home address and phone number are one and the same as Larry's and all Larry's debt collectors who call seem to think she's Larry's wife.

Larry tells Paul and Tracey he wants to make them a big spaghetti dinner and while Tracey's in the basement watching and awaiting, she hears much banging and clanging up in the kitchen.

Paul lumbers down, bringing Tracey a pre-dinner glass of Chianti.

Tracey admits the dinner is delicious.

After dinner, Tracey goes up to the kitchen and to her horror sees it now looks like a federal disaster area.

Larry tries to explain that the only way you know if spaghetti is truly ready to eat is to toss it against a wall. If it sticks to the wall it's ready to eat. Of course if it falls to the kitchen floor? Well then it's not.

Tracey decides to have one last glass of Chianti out on the deck before tackling the mess in the kitchen.

The week before Thanksgiving, Larry announces that having a lot of money as a lawyer is actually more important to him after all, and he's going back to Seattle to resume his lawyer work.

Paul's disappointed.

He's been hoping Larry would remain in Minnesota and get an apartment he could afford.

Larry decides to take the train to Seattle and asks Paul and Tracey if he could leave his rusting Subaru with them until he can return next spring and drive it back to Seattle.

"Sure nuff Larry. You betcha," sing Tracey and Paul.

A couple nights later Tracey's upstairs reading in bed, Larry down in the Library on his PC, Paul in the Den on his PC.

Tracey hears Larry shout out, "Hey Paul, what's your credit card number?"

"What for, Larry?"

"I'm on the Amtrak website. There's a discount fare available for a train to Seattle. But gotta use a credit card to get the discount."

Paul trudges upstairs to ask Tracey if it's okay to let Larry to enter their credit card on Larry's PC so's he can get the discount.

Larry gets upset when Paul trudges back down the staircase and tells Larry, "Sorry. No way. She says that since as you have cash to pay for the train fare, you can drive over to the Amtrak Station in St. Paul tomorrow and pay for your own way back to Seattle."

Days later Paul and Tracey drive Larry to the Amtrak Station.

Tracey comments to Paul that she thinks it is no coincidence that Larry decided to go back to Seattle the week before Thanksgiving. The weather had been getting colder and Tracey thinks Larry had no intention of re-living a brutal Minnesota winter after living the last 20+ years in Seattle.

Six months later, in the spring of 1998, Larry and his son Jesse arrive to pack some of Larry's left-over possessions into his rusting Subaru and somehow drive it over the Rocky Mountains and the Cascades and back to Seattle.

Paul and Tracey wave goodbye to Jesse and Larry, and as they drive off, Larry collides into Paul and Tracey's garbage and trash cans, and drives on down the alley in ONE BIG LAST HURRAH.