

# How I almost gave \$1,400 to a Craigslist scam artist

by Annie Margarita Yang

Greetings everyone!

Several years back, my parents told me a news story that I still think about from time to time. A landlord had given a prospective tenant an apartment tour. The tenant signed the lease, paid one month's rent and security deposit, and got the keys. A few days after the tenant moved in, the real landlord appeared, wondering who this tenant was and what was going on. The first landlord was a scam artist who disappeared after getting the money.

We all laughed at how foolish the tenant was. How could someone be so stupid?

Earlier this month, I could have been that fool.

There have been some issues in my personal life lately, so instead of moving to Boston, I planned on moving to San Diego. [By the way, I am not moving to San Diego in the end. I am moving to Boston, as it turns out.] With a job lined up, all that was left to do was find an affordable apartment close to work. I found a room on Craigslist for \$700/month + \$700 security deposit. It included utilities and private parking, was furnished and looked newly renovated. It was a steal. I desperately wanted this apartment.

I sent an email introducing myself and explaining that I lived in Texas and was moving to San Diego. The landlord, Nancy, emailed back with the address: 3948 5th Ave, San Diego, CA 92103. She said I could look at the outside of the building but not inside. She was currently in Texas renovating her house, which was damaged by Hurricane Harvey. She didn't have an agent, as she fired the last one for dishonesty. But not to worry, the apartment was nothing different from what I saw in the pictures. The room was 300 sq ft.

Since I was not in San Diego and couldn't look inside anyway, I looked at the address on Google Street View. There was a "Fifth Avenue Apartments" sign on the door of building no. 3948. There was a private parking garage across the street. The whole thing looked legit.



To move forward, I would need to sign the lease, send \$1,400, and get the keys via FedEx. I was about to do that until my SO pointed out that the room in the picture looked too small to be 300 sq ft. It did look small, but I defended Nancy. She probably made a mistake in her email.

I thought some more and recalled the news story from my teenage years. Then I called the San Diego

County Assessor, asking who owned the building on 3948 5th Ave, San Diego, CA 92103. No such address existed. The building numbers only went up to 3946. Google Street View showed building number 3948. I felt confused and worried. Could this be a scam?

I asked Nancy to verify her identity first and she wrote back, "Good luck with your search." SCAM!! Thank goodness I dug a little deeper. Otherwise, I would have lost \$1,400.

My message for you today: conduct a landlord background check and search the county public records before signing that lease and writing that check. A landlord can ask for rental and criminal history, credit report, proof of income, references, and more. I say it is fair to turn this around and investigate your future landlord up to a certain point.

What if your investigation shows that the building belongs to someone else? If the owner's name is correct, but there's a lien on the property, can you be sure you will get your security deposit back? What if the property is being foreclosed? What if the landlord has a criminal history of murder or rape? You can never be too thorough, especially when signing a contract.

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