

Edited and published by: El Portal, www.elportaljournal.com
Publication date: Fall 2016
Issue: Volume 74. Number 2. Fall 2016, print

Someone I Know

He says he's big-boned, that he has problems with his glands, that he eats nothing, but still gains weight. Whatever the explanation is, there remains one undeniable truth: he's morbidly obese. From inside my third-floor apartment I can hear when he enters our 6-unit building through the front door. He has to squeeze his way through it, watching out not to bump into things--but of course he does. He bumps into the mailboxes, the entrance door frame, the hallway wall, into other people's apartment doors, and into the stairs' handrail. Inertia turns every attempt at guided movement of his enormous limbs into a high energy impact.

He also pulls a shy little Dachshund mutt behind him. The dog seems very skittish and afraid of the 350 pounds of Brooklyn beef wavering above it. He attached a bell to the dog's neck. Nobody knows why. He probably thinks it's cute. We think that he has to attach a bell to the dog because he can't see it when it scurries on its leash in the shade of his planetary girth--like a little satellite trapped in orbit. Anxiously, it tries to avoid the heavy impact of his feet or that of his behind threatening to crash down on it. He had a young dog before this one. We don't know what happened to it. One day it was simply gone and replaced by this new one. He tells the dog every step of the way what to do. *Walk, Hershey!--its name is Hershey--Sit Hershey. Stop. Go up the stairs, Hershey. Come here. Hershey, go in. Come on. Jump. Sit.* The dog never does anything he says.

He has to climb one flight of stairs to get to his apartment on the second floor. After he takes the first step, he starts panting. I can hear it two floors up in my apartment through the flimsy and ill-fit front door. Our apartment building is built very shoddy, overall. New York developers of the Golden Years made their profit by saving on the quality of the materials and selling the facades they constructed to hard-working Greek and Irish immigrants. In turn, they were hoping for a go at leftover profits by rearing tenants and ignoring upkeep. Along with the buildings decayed anybody's feeling of responsibility for them.

After he takes the next seven stairs, halfway up, panting like a pair of bellows, he has to rest. He tells his dog to sit and there he stands, leaning his weight against the drywall coated by several layers of lead paint. Moist, heavy panting. Heaving lungs under a sweaty layer of pale Irish skin and fat, working hard to get up the stairs--harder than he ever worked in his life. Rumor has it that he used to be a dispatcher at a car service. Then he got injured. Now he doesn't work anymore and is on disability. Rumor also has it that he sued the car service for his injury and got some money from that. But, you know, people who don't like him say that. After he stopped working, he sold his mother's house in Astoria and moved to Bay Ridge with his wife into the apartment below mine. His wife is bigger than him. She must have exceeded 375 pounds. Sometimes, when the first of the month approaches, I can hear them yelling at each other. He calls her a fat piece of shit, she calls him a deadbeat and tells him to get out of the apartment. She doesn't work either. She used to be a teacher, but she has been mostly home for the last one-and-a-half years.

A handful of times during the three years they have lived below me, I have heard him fall out of his bed at night. It's a loud thump and then a long pitiful scream, unnecessarily long and

pitiful. It sounds like an infant screaming for its mother, just a few registers lower and louder. After a few initial screams he calls for his wife, who sleeps on the couch. It took me a while to figure out that the wife doesn't sleep in bed with him. She doesn't stand up to help him and so he has to get on his feet by himself. Somehow. Faintly, out of the twilight of sleep, I'm following what's going on, but the exhaustion of the prior day and the impending exhaustion of the next force me sternly back to sleep. The next morning, I pick up parts of a conversation from the apartment below through his ceiling, my floor--not the words, but the cadence of their speech. He fills his voice with accusation and sorrow. It seems he is telling her something like, "You didn't help me up when I fell out of the bed last night. You don't love me." And she answers something like, "We are not in this for love. Being unable to function in society, we have embarked on a self-destructive journey and become unbearable. We're together because we have between us enough fat to buffer our egos."--but, you know, that might all be in my head.

After the quick break in the middle of the flight of stairs, he tells his dog to keep moving and hoists his weight up further. I hear every thump of his feet in the staircase and the wood of the shoddy stairs groaning. When he reaches his door, he slams it open and steps through into his apartment. Since my apartment is above his, they have the same layout. I can tell where in his apartment he is moving. I hear him bumping into the narrow walls of his entrance-hallway. He bumps into the furniture he took with him from the house he sold in Queens; too much furniture for the space of a one-bedroom. He bumps through to the back section that is supposed to be the bedroom. He, however, uses it as a pen for their 5 rabbits. 5 rabbits in a 12-by-10 foot room. He talks to his rabbits for a while in a high-pitched, childlike voice. He tries to be nice to them by rattling their cages, tries to sooth them by knocking on their cage walls. Then he dials a number on his phone on speaker. I can hear him dial. He does it at a slow speed. Half-a-number per second. Ringing, then, somebody picks up on the other end and he spills out all that he has been eating into himself. He starts talking. Without interruption. Sometimes louder, sometimes quieter, sometimes more frantic, sometimes calmly, arrogantly, plaintively, never stopping. The person on the other end can hardly get a "yes" or a "hm" in. If he stands in the right spot, I can hear what he is saying. He speaks about the doctor's appointment he has for his diabetes. His voice gets more angry as he speaks about "bama." Then, he gets a little quieter and speaks about his past and his alcoholic father. Eventually, he breaks into tears and the person on the other end tries to cheer him up, hoping to end the conversation with a good conscience. After the phone call has ended, he sits there crying. He howls like a little girl. I don't mean that judgmentally. That is really how it sounds. A 350-pound Brooklyn man whose crying sounds like that of a little girl.

You are right. One can't write that without sounding judgmental.

Constantly witnessing his dysfunction, I got pulled along myself once and one time when he wouldn't stop screaming at his wife, I banged on the floor with a baseball bat. He eagerly picked up the challenge and banged back on his ceiling. I stood there yelling at my parquet, telling him that we need to settle this in front of our landlord. His answer was that I'm a motherfucker and he would break my knees. I wondered if I would cry like a little girl if he broke my knees.