

Neighbors of a Kind

Pederson stepped into the elevator. A short ride to the third floor of his new apartment building, no doubt, but a man with feet his size tired easily. Lifting them up three flights of stairs would be like putting on those ridiculous ankle weights people used to wear. It had been quite some time since he saw someone with those. Except he couldn't take off the extra weight to toss in the back of a closet or the donation bin at Goodwill. Pederson's giant feet were permanent appendages with no advantage gained for lugging them around.

By the time he got to 3B his mood soured. His own fault for allowing himself down the sore loser path, his mind knowing the way like the eye knowing when to blink. But the downslide didn't end there. A note in red ink was taped to his door.

To the tenant in 3B, please be aware that I will soon have no choice but to turn you into the manager if you cannot keep the noise down. It sounds as if you are constantly moving furniture or that you have kids jumping around. (Did you know that kids are not allowed at Solstice Gate? That alone may have you removed!) I wish to live in my apartment without having to suffer from your lack of respect for your neighbors. Someone lives below you, you know? This apartment building has rules, you know? I hope you heed my warning. Sincerely, your neighbor in 2B. Mr. Drumm.

Heat rose in Pederson's neck and cheeks, the first wave of a rage he felt over and over in his life. How many times had he dealt with the ill-effects of having the largest feet of anyone he

knew? How many pairs of staring eyes? How many snide remarks? And who was this Mr. Drumm with the audacity to call him disrespectful? No one who has experienced similar levels of humiliation and would deign to be disrespectful, he thought. What an insult, and from someone who didn't know him at all.

And moving furniture? Really. What need would he have for that? He lived alone, and the furnished unit had everything in the standard places. He was no interior decorator, for sure. And kids? Forever without a lover, poor Pederson. His sexual resume' consisted of sweaty hand holding, awkward kisses, and embarrassed fondling. He lost his virginity in the daytime with a woman too old for conception. She thought his feet promised something but was disappointed. The closest he could count as children were creatures at the aquarium where he worked.

Pederson previously lived in a first-floor apartment in a building with a dance studio, of all things. But the building was sold to be turned into a multi-use mid-rise with a trendy shoe retailer as the anchor tenant. The dark humor of the situation did not escape Pederson. Worse, he knew he could never afford a place in the remodeled building or even the shoes to be sold there. He once visited the retailer's downtown location. His hand went to his mouth when he saw the three-figure price tag. When he looked up, a saleswoman held her hand to her mouth, too. Then she turned around.

And the line about rules? It felt like an outright attack on his character, a puncture to the heart of his conscience. Besides sizeable feet, Pederson's sense of rules was ample. Talk about toeing the line! Following rules kept him out of trouble his whole life, kept him from being noticed. More specifically, kept his feet from being noticed. If at work they told him to wear a toga, he would. If they asked him to take his lunches in the tank with the sea stars, he would. He liked them better than people anyway.

Pederson re-read the note and then stared at his feet like a pair of bad dogs. Despite a strong desire to clomp to the second floor and give his neighbor an earful, he went into his apartment. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to clear his mind, a practice honed over years to combat his inner storms. He decided he would acquiesce.

For the next two days Pederson did his very best to reduce all noise, including wearing the huge slippers he custom ordered a year back, something that made him feel very melancholy. In these blue slippers he shuffled, more or less looking like a novice ice skater. If he needed to move a chair, he didn't slide it even an inch, he instead picked it up and replaced it as gently as you might a sleeping baby in a crib. He layered his counters with towels so his pots and pans would not clink or clank. He even delayed flushing his toilet until he could no longer stand the smell. No laughing out loud at his TV shows, he told himself. When he felt the need to cough, he clamped his mouth shut until his eyes watered and his body shook.

On the third day, his phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Sir, this is your downstairs neighbor.” The man spoke in a soft voice.

“How did you get my number?”

“Did you not read my note? About the noise?”

“Of course, I can read! Did you not notice I have been quieter?”

“Quieter? You've been quieter?”

“Yes, and I am insulted you think I am moving furniture or have kids who are jumping around. I have no kids. I assure you; I am taking extreme measures not to bother you. Did you

ever think maybe you're just being a little too touchy? This is a big city after all, nobody lives in isolation." Then Pederson hung up, livid as ever. But he didn't slam the phone.

He propped his feet on the coffee table and turned on the TV and set it to mute. He had to move his feet to see the screen.

After another day of being what he thought was exceptionally quiet, including taking a full minute to move from his bedroom to kitchen, pausing between each stride for a count of ten, he heard a soft knock from the entryway. He slid over the floor, stopping short of the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's your downstairs neighbor, Mr. Drumm."

Pederson did not feel like opening the door, let alone giving the over-sensitive Drumm much of his time.

"What do you want?"

"My notes and phone call apparently did not penetrate your sense of responsibility or perhaps not even your skull. I cannot live in an apartment below such a rude tenant. If you cannot change your behavior, I have nothing left than to bring in the manager. You are on a probationary period, are you not?"

Pederson's nerves jolted, starting with the ones in his soles. He wanted to let Drumm have it like never before. He'd defended his feet from childhood when he came to blows with other boys over rude jokes. Of course, chasing down the offender always ended in Pederson tripping over himself. Into adulthood, foot-size-to-penis-size innuendo didn't garner promising winks, just horrible comments he reported to the HR department. They told him to forget about

it. But how could he when everyday he had to lace up size twenty-nines? And now this assault on his ability to just be, just to live in his apartment, his own space. He would not stand for it.

Pederson stomped the rest of the way to the door -- how do you like that! -- and yanked it open but could not speak. Before him stood a small, thin man with the largest ears he'd ever seen. Each ear by itself bigger than the rest of his head. The man looked as if he could spend time in a freak show (not too unlike Pederson himself, but he would never say so). The small man's head wobbled, and his neck and shoulders looked strained from the weight of the radar dishes mounted to his head.

It seemed Drumm could not speak right away, either. He just stared at Pederson's feet. For a moment, the hallway was quieter than the monastery where Pederson once worked as custodian.

Finally, Pederson broke the silence. "I assure you, sir. I have been trying to keep it down. I want to live in peace. I want to be undisturbed."

"I do, too," Drumm said in a voice only a degree above a whisper. "I enjoy living in this building in such a quiet neighborhood. The last place I lived was next to a playground, and with a fire station two blocks away, nearly driving me mad. This has been the only place I have ever lived that wasn't on a busy street. Cars honking, all that coming and going. So, when I moved here, I thought, perfect! My ears never assaulted, my nights peaceful. Then I started hearing you move around upstairs, I..." Drumm fingered the edge of one ear, looking like a man holding a giant conch shell. "Well, I see that you, you have..."

"I have uncommonly large feet. And you, your ears..."

The hallway grew quiet again as each man considered his new neighbor.

“My ears are enormous. It has been the hardest part of my life. No end of ridicule and embarrassment,” Drumm said.

Pederson felt a release of tension, a spool unwinding. “Me, too! For my feet. Always the stares and comments and giggles. And finding shoes that fit, oh! And I had to move out because of a shoe store.” He laughed at that for the first time. It felt so good.

The two stood with each other, a bond already forming. More than that, a sensation of being understood, something that hadn’t come to either man with any regularity over the course of their lives. Outcasts with oversized features, both men settled long ago on the fact that acceptance would be a reality they could hardly call their own.

Drumm broke the silence this time.

“Besides my astute hearing, I have a keen sense for problem solving.”

“Is that so?”

Drumm nodded and for a moment Pederson wondered if he would recover from the shift in balance. “Yes, and I know how we can both live in this building and be happy.”

“OK, I’m all ears – oh, so sorry. I’m listening.”

Looking down at Pederson’s feet again as if he needed to size them up to believe it, Drumm said, “I think we should trade apartments. I don’t have many things to move, and I suspect the layout of the rooms is nearly identical, if not so. And I would guess the rent is the same.”

Pederson thought about it. To be sure, the furniture would stay put and he also did not own much, and much of what he did own he hadn’t unpacked. He never liked to disclose his

financials except for the times he complained to the crustaceans about his pay, but he figured Drumm was right. How could the rents be so different?

“I think it could work.” Pederson moved his feet as they ached when he stood in one place for too long. His slipper scraped the floor and the sound ricocheted down the dim hall. He looked to his earful neighbor and saw a cringe from the sound that must have penetrated every nook of his brain. Drumm’s shoulders hunched in their purple shirt.

“Sorry about that. But, what about the manager? Do you think the manager will approve?”

“I think we do this without her knowing.”

“We do? Is it legal?”

“Probably not. And even if she says yes, let’s just say she has a big mouth. You’ve seen her, right? A toilet bowl of a thing. Even if she agrees she’ll blab it around and everyone in the building will raise a fuss. Wanting to swap apartments. Saying, why did the freaks get special treatment...”

So Drumm thought of the word freak, too. Somehow it reassured Pederson. And the big mouth manager? That struck Pederson as funny. A woman with a big mouth blabbing about the big foot man and the big ear man. The picture it created tickled his sausage toes. It took concentration not to laugh.

But he said, “Well, OK,” surprising himself. “Let’s do it.”

With a great stroke of fortune not often experienced by Pederson or Drumm, only twice did they encounter other residents of the building during their move. The first time when the elevator opened and a sharply dressed female tenant just stared at the two men and said, "I'll take the next one." Pederson pushed out a sigh of relief when the elevator door closed. Drumm put his fingers to his lips.

The second time they were in the third-floor hallway. An older tenant heading to his door turned when he heard Pederson coming. Pederson put down the box he carried so it blocked any view of his feet, feeling quite proud of himself. Thank goodness it was a rather large box with three pairs of Pederson's shoes in it. He nodded to the old man who did nothing to recognize the gesture and continued to his door.

Determined to complete the task, they finished in one afternoon. Pederson moved from the third floor, the top of the building, to the second. Drumm in the opposite direction. But even though both had sparse apartments, the exercise proved tiring. Such physical activity was uncommon for men who stayed indoors and laid low for the bulk of their lives. Not to mention their nerves were on edge the entire time -- risk takers they were not.

Pederson set the last box down in his new second floor apartment. He sat down to rest his feet on it. The top sagged in the middle from the weight.

"Well done. I should think we'll both be happier now," said Drumm, his giant ears dripping globes of sweat.

"Yes. I want, like I said, to live in peace."

"Indeed. And I might venture to say, we have a friendship. Ho, a kinship?"

Friends in Pederson's life were few, and those there were lived afar now and were rarely in touch. Gordon with the tiny hands. Allison with the breasts hanging to her waist. Bertram with no hair anywhere, not even eyebrows. Well, why not? A move should bring change, shouldn't it? Why not a new friend? One who could understand his problems. One who needed his understanding in return.

"Yes. Neighbors and friends," said Pederson.

After some small talk, during which Drumm pleaded with Pederson to whisper, "from here on," the men shared a bottle of champagne Pederson received years before when he left a job. He took the bottle and left the other gifts behind as they were all jabs at his condition: a sock someone made from a kid's sweater, a dozen shoelaces tied together, tickets to the circus that turned out to be bogus.

And the champagne went down as if the men were hard drinkers. They toasted, to neighbors and one to new friends. They finished the bottle in a matter of thirty minutes. It was far more than either had ever drunk, especially in such a brief amount of time. Still, Drumm, saying he felt like celebrating a little more, slipped upstairs to his new apartment and returned with two dusty bottles of wine, one red, one white, saying he rarely opened a bottle because of the whole cork popping thing. Pederson slowly, carefully opened the unchilled white first.

"So, friend. What do you do?" asked Pederson. He enjoyed the feel of the glass in his hand.

"I work in an archive. My dream job, really. I'm alone all day with my list of pulls and putbacks. Books and files make no noise, of course."

"Of course."

“And you?”

“At the aquarium. Backstage, so to speak. I tend to the sea animals before they’re transferred to the viewing tanks. They don’t care about my feet, although I did once take a large geoduck out and compare...”

Both men giggled and before long the new friends were slurring their words. Their vision hedging to blurriness. Drumm told of the wheeled ladder he climbed to reach the higher shelves and how he had to overcome his fear of being up so high and that now he enjoyed the vantage point of looking down at all the knowledge in one space.

They continued to drink wine. Pederson shared another story, this time about a crab scuttling across the floor he trapped with his feet, still surprised about how fast ten little legs could go. And about how he humors himself by imagining little shoes on the crabs, and the shrimp, and the octopus. Drumm explained how he fell in love with a pretty woman who worked in the front office at the archive, but he thought she’d have to be blind to appreciate him.

“Heartbreaking,” Pederson said, in all honesty. Then, “I feel funny. Not bad, just funny.”

“I feel good. Happy, I think, for the first time in...” Drumm said, unable to find a number of years to satisfy the equation.

“Happy. Yes, that may be it. But, oh my, I need to pee,” Pederson said, and he got up.

But he forgot himself, forgot the size of his feet. He tripped over the leg of Drumm’s chair. That sent him stumbling, unable to stop inebriated momentum. He crashed into the kitchen table, moving furniture undeniably, sending an open box of pots and pans crashing to the linoleum floor.

“Oh, no, no, no. Too loud!” Drumm hushed, his face pinched, his hands doing little to cover the breadth of his colossal earholes.

For his part, Pederson tried to regain his balance, his feet like two ships jockeying for the same pier. He was unsuccessful, the alcohol treating his head to a rollercoaster ride. Back peddling, he fell into a side table, knocking a lamp to the floor with a smash.

“Ow, no. My ears!” yelled Drumm, his eyes tearing. “Stop. Please!”

Pederson wanted nothing more than to stop, but his limbs, even his behemoth feet it seemed, were drunk beyond help. He grabbed the closest thing he thought could right his wobbling body. The drapes. But this action brought the whole curtain rod down with a clatter and Pederson to his knees with a painful thud.

“No, you’re going to attract attention,” cried Drumm. “And you’re destroying the apartment!”

Pederson knew this, too, in the sober corner of his mind. Now he tried to stand up again, determined to bring an end to the embarrassing episode, but instead, his balance failed him once more. He fell forcefully onto Drumm. The impact took the two of them crashing to the floor over the back of the chair.

The men lay in a tangle, stunned and nerve wrecked. A loud knock soon came, not as loud as Pederson’s bumping about, but loud enough to add insult to Drumm’s injury.

“Hello? Who’s there?” slurred Pederson. It was his apartment now, after all.

“The manager. Open up. I demand to know what’s going on.”

Drumm shut his eyes like it might make her go away. Pederson crawled to the door to keep from falling again. He opened it and saw that Drumm did not exaggerate earlier. The manager had a very large mouth, even closed.

“What’s the racket I’m hearing? Sounds like fighting or a burglar tossing the apartment. What’re you two doing? Trying to get yourselves evicted?” She left her gaping hole open, gathering in volumes of air for a few seconds before shutting it.

Drumm could barely stand the manager’s loud voice. He grabbed the throw pillows from Pederson’s love seat and held them against the sides of his head.

Pederson spoke from all-fours. His toes lifted his backside so high he looked like a sprinter at the starting line.

“We are very sorry. We don’t want trouble. I think, I think we got carried away.”

“Huh. I’ll say. Looks like you got some clean up to do,” the manager said, pointing into the room. An eel, Pederson thought. With her mouth open, she looks like an eel. He couldn’t respond.

“Yes,” Drumm said, barely audible, the pillows pressed to his head. “We will clean this up.”

The manager addressed her newest tenant. “You just moved in, right? Peters?”

“Pederson.”

“Well, you stink like a drunk. Best you crawl back up to your apartment and sleep it off. Quiet-like!”

In a moment of panic, Pederson considered saying something about the switch, and reconsidered just as fast. He hoped Drumm wouldn't tell, either. It was their secret, the horizon of a new life, already in jeopardy as if onrushing night would obscure any view of the future. There were a few seconds of weighty silence. Then the manager closed the door herself. Drumm let out a gush of air that must have challenged his own hearing.

"What do we do now?" Pederson asked. He slumped to his side, feeling like he could sleep right there, on the wood floor of the entryway.

Drumm lay down on the tan love seat, head pounding, the problem solver trying to figure the best course of action through the cloudiness of stupor.

"I think we've caused too much trouble," Drumm said, and here he let out a whimper. "I don't want to say so, but I think we go back to our original apartments."

Pederson struggled to lift his head off the floor to speak up. "But we just moved. Can't we wait and see if we'll get away with it? I'm so tired. Maybe..."

"If she finds out, we most certainly will lose our homes. And this location is exactly what I need! I don't think I'll ever find such a place again. I told you, this is such a perfect location. Better than anywhere I've lived."

Even with his mind a slurry, Pederson knew he was right. If they were evicted for violating their leases, then what? Where do men like themselves go? It would be painful to reverse the course, but at least they would have each other, this new friendship. Wouldn't they?

"Will you promise to be quiet upstairs?" Drumm said. "I could start plugging my ears with something. Normal earplugs don't fit, of course."

“Yes, well, I’ve tried, I’m telling you.” Pederson didn’t like being reminded that his efforts went unnoticed. “I’ve been shuffling, muting my TV, and…”

“I have it, Pederson!” Drumm said in a volume that for him, came close to shouting. “You could get a wheelchair – wheel yourself around the apartment!”

“A wheelchair?” Pederson’s gut and throat burned, from the drinking, from the offense. “How rude. Why don’t you put the corks from the wine in your ear holes?”

The new brotherhood was in turmoil. Suspended by the kind of insults each man absorbed for a lifetime. But neither man wished to fight, despite the apartment looking like there had been a row.

Drumm stared out the window to the quiet neighborhood he coveted. He capitulated. “I realize I deserved that comeback. To say my new friend should wheel himself around like a handicapped person. I apologize.”

“No! We aren’t handicapped!” Pederson said. Through the fog of approaching sleep he thought, we’re just unusual. Neighbors of a kind. Men who needed to stick together.

Drumm continued with a gushy apology. “I didn’t mean, I mean, that’s not what I should have suggested. I’m sorry, really. I do not want to offend you, I know what that’s like. Oh, I know. I want us to be friends. I do. Will you forgive me, Pederson?”

Only Pederson’s labored breathing filled the space where Drumm wanted forgiveness.

Drumm tried again. “Friend, do you forgive my careless suggestion?”

Nothing.

“Pederson?”

From his position on the love seat Drumm would not have been able to see his neighbor lying on the hallway floor, eyes closed. Pederson slept a drunk's sleep, his feet like two bowling pins knocked over. He started snoring, mouth open and tongue dangling, abusing poor Drumm's ears again. Drumm wedged his dizzied head between the pillows and the back of the love seat.

The ugly trouble of reversing their failed plan would have to wait until tomorrow. But if Drumm's special power was problem solving, and that was in doubt, Pederson had compassion. The forgiveness Drumm sought was only at rest.

In Pederson's dreams, he saw a vivid image of a miniature young woman with summer-sun hair but no eyes. She rolled a small wheeled ladder next to Drumm, who stood by a shelf of purple spined books. She felt her way up the ladder, up to the height of Drumm's head, hefting a box. When she reached the top, she put the box down and felt for Drumm's head, then his ears. She caressed the ridges. Then she opened the box and took out the whitest, softest cotton and placed a wad in each of Drumm's ears.