

**UPSTAIRS FROM THE SH\*T HOLE**

Upstairs from my sh\*t hole apartment lives a girl. A lady. From the giant windows in my basement apartment, I've watched her navigate the front steps. She dresses well and has a delicate enough touch when dropping trash in the garbage and recycling barrels. Over the past just-over-3-years, we have crossed paths a few times as she was leaving and I was arriving or we were both arriving or leaving. I have a different entrance to the building than she does, so our encounters were very brief, not even the obligatory length of the front stairs. Either way, it's awkward as I'm navigating my Hobbit-sized door and we nod shyly at each other. She is cute, of Italian stock, with long, dark hair and soft features. Over the years, she lost a chunk of weight, found a boyfriend, and gained most of it back. What you can't tell, though, from looking at this sweet thing is that her feet are made of steel.

And, she might be training for the strong-woman competition.

Now, I understand there is to be foot traffic when *anyone* lives above you, but I struggle to describe *her* force of impact. I'll start by saying her feet are heavy. Really, *really* heavy. She's like the Woman of Steel (From the Ankles Down). In addition, I'm cursed by the fact that she has inconsolable Restless (Steel) Leg Syndrome. And, she can also move like the wind! She can move with such speed that my eyes can't even follow the clunking across the ceiling. At times like that, I've imagined there to be more than one of her up there. The effect is like living beneath a wildebeest's 2,000 mile migration across the Serengeti Desert, but the animal is hurried and drunk so it ambles in rushed circles. Oh, and it has decided, in its drunkenness, to put on steel-tipped, tap-dance shoes. I, honestly, have heard her navigate the length of her apartment over twenty times in a row, back and forth. Twenty times. Nonstop. At a quick clip. What the hell is she doing?

Now, her apartment has a different layout than mine, so her bedroom rests over my living room. Her living room rests over my kitchen. Her kitchen rests over my bedroom. It's very rock-paper-scissors. Despite that difference, there is still no method to the madness of her pacing.

Oh, and I wish it was just the footsteps! My first year in the apartment, she'd start moving boxes at 5am on weekdays. Though I commend her on her verve to attack the day, sometimes I wanted to sleep in past 5:10 when the box-moving had become so intense I got the feeling she was training for a strong-woman competition by chucking sets of encyclopedias across the room. The moving of boxes went on for a good hour: steel-foot stomping, box crashing down. Steel-foot stomping, box crashing down. That wait between stopping-of-feet and box-dropping was... torture. Clomp, clomp..... BOOM. Clomp, clomp.... BOOM. I struggled through Satan's percussion by hugging my pillow, muttering black-magic incantations that should have delivered her a herniated disc. They failed. Eventually, the first movement of Satan's music would end, bringing a delightful pause as she fiddled in the bathroom. Then it was on with the high heels and she transported each box to her car. Second movement. I heard the steel-bearing pumps travel the length of the apartment, out her front door, down the front steps, then out to her SUV. By this time, I'd given up on slumber was spying out of my front window. I watched the sound of feet as they traversed the apartment, the front hall above me, then I watched her navigate the steps, giant box in hand. She still looked peppy in her business suits as she shot-put the boxes into the SUV's bowels. I wanted to kill her. Eventually, I heard the lock of her door slide into place and she descended the stairs with a mug. No box! Huzzah! Concert was over! The shipping portion of today's entertainment was at an end. The SUV sped off without a start, and I'd commend its power at hauling stiletto-bound steel feet and tons of boxes.

She'd return home at 2 in the afternoon. I'd be recording a song, studio headphones on, and I'd hear the clomping come through the microphone. I knew today's vocal recording session was now, officially, done. The boots came off, and her cell phone would come out. Now, I couldn't hear her opening her phone, or the actual dialing, but I could hear the non-stop conversations spilling down through my bathroom vent. Like me, she's a roamer when she talks, so the wildebeests' migration would continue, those steel feet pounding out a tract around the apartment. 1,706 miles to go.

To pay my rent checks, I have to run up the stairs to the apartment above hers, where my elderly Italian landlord Petulina lives with her gentle, but IQ challenged, son Trogdor. I'd check out Woman of Steel (From the Ankle Down)'s door as I'd walk past, expecting her to kick through it with her dense feet, dissolving the wood into dust and then unleashing the feet's power on me, turning *me* into dust. It's the fabric nightmares are stitched from.

One time there was a giant pile of UPS deliveries cluttering the hall outside her apartment. My heart stopped at the sight of the damned boxes she played bocce with at 5am. I had a mind to introduce them to a matchbook. I stepped closer. Cautiously. The cardboard was branded with a logo I had never heard of, but it was generic enough a name for me to deduce it was a pharmaceutical product... something like Allegration or CharmFlo. I was happy I didn't recognize the name, because *maybe* they'd go out of business soon. If it was Viagra, I knew these boxes would be arriving for as long as men were getting old.

After about a year into the 5am box-chucking, she got a cat. What are the chances that she'd get a cat that also had steel feet? The kitty's favorite toy was a ball with a bell in it, and I'd hear the ball run the length of the apartment, bell dinging and lead feet clomping.

A cat, you ask? A *cat* is bothering you? You might think I'm particularly sensitive to neighbor noise. Trust me, I'm not. I've had young men, freshly-moved-out-of-a-frat-house, live above me in three of the four NYC apartments I've had. The only time (and there was only one, ever) I took issue with noise was when, in E. 85<sup>th</sup> St., upstairs' tenant fell in love with that Dave Matthews Band song "Crash Into Me" that has the same base line repeated throughout the entire recording. He loved that song for three weeks, two days and 14 hours, because it was looped at deafening volumes for that long. Exactly. Then I never heard it again. Nor did I hear his stereo set to that volume ever again. That was my only complaint. All other noise I chalk up to someone trying to live a life.

So, this noise situation, in the sh\*t hole, is not *my sensitivity*. This is *she*, the Woman of Steel (From the Ankles Down) with the Cat of Steel (From the Ankles Down). Actually, there is a one-day addition to the noise onslaught that requires retelling. One afternoon, about a year after the cat was in the picture, I heard a strange set of feet up there. These thumps were softer than the cat's and moved at a different pace... I actually had no problem with these new feet, but I wondered, "Had she upgraded her kitty to a leopard? Had she, herself, decided to ambulate on all fours?" Well, the bark gave him away.

Around 6pm on a spring Saturday, I heard the wildebeest's migration move the length of the apartment and out the front stairs. The dog started barking once she closed that door. He barked with amazing precision with about two seconds between yelps. He didn't move from her kitchen, right above my bedroom, and he paced himself like a marathoner, constant and sure not to empty his reserves too quickly. **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.**

After about half an hour, I knocked on her door, hoping she might have clomped back home and I hadn't noticed. No such luck. The marathon barking continued on the other side of the door. Two second intervals. Steady. **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** By this time the dog was around bark 1,800. After another hour—bark 3,600—I pounded again on her door, this time with a lot of aggression. If she *was* home, this would have been a very strange way for us to finally meet as she kicked through the door, pulverizing it, and then me. All of us dust. Nightmares!

She wasn't home.

**Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.**

Around 10pm, I checked again. Four hours into the barking. 7,200 barks in. Seven THOUSAND two hundred. No response to my knocking. I mean, his marathon was done, wasn't it? Four hours of steady barking? Isn't that enough for dog to know Woman of Steel (From the Ankles Down) couldn't hear him? He seamlessly continued into another marathon. **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** [Two seconds.] **Bark.** I was so frustrated, I called Trogdor, the landlord's son who

managed the building and never had an answer to *anything* I asked. He said he thought the woman had left. “4 hours ago,” I said. “Do you hear that barking, Trogdor?”

“Jaaaaaaan, that barking has scrambled my brain.”

“Is there any way to shut him up?”

“Scrambled!”

I tried to go to bed around midnight, counting barks as if I was counting sheep. It didn’t help. The dog hadn’t moved and had barked steadily for 6 hours. I think he was on bark 10,800. Ten THOUSAND eight hundred. After a good half hour of trying to find slumber, I got up and settled on the living room’s couch, pulled out the recording studio headphones and played video games. I woke up at 2:30 in the morning, the introductory video to Halo 2 looping over and over on the screen and headphones.

I took the headphones off, hoping for silence.

No such luck. The dog was still barking. Steadily. It was 2:30 in the morning. The beast had been barking for eight and a half hours. Fifteen THOUSAND three hundred barks. I threw on a TV show. A half-hour in, I heard wildebeest’s footsteps. Amen! Nine hours into it—16,200 barks—and the dog accelerated his pace. That shit head still had fire in him. He was sprinting the last twenty feet of his double marathon. I went to my bathroom to hear her say, “Oh, did you miss me? Did you miss me? It’s so good to come home to you!”

The dog stopped barking. Cold turkey. 16,220 barks later.

The next morning someone pulled up in an SUV and Woman of Steel (From the Ankles Down) took the dog down the stairs and chucked him into the car like so many boxes, and he was off. That dog never came back.

About a year into living there, once I started becoming accustomed to rising at 5am with the box juggling, a new sound joined the fracas that was even earlier and even more annoying. Saturday mornings, around 4:30AM. There were sounds of metal crashing and being dragged from one side of the apartment to another. It sounded like either construction or free-weight basketball. My mind raced with other possibilities as I watched plaster peel off the ceiling: maybe it was steel beams being moved? Anvil bowling? The noise was so loud that I’d slide out of bed and stumble into the kitchen, now fully convinced the ceiling would fall in on me. I stood by my fridge, the tallest, sturdiest thing in the apartment that might break the building’s collapse. I was too scared to sleep.

The clanging and smashing would continue for a good half hour, then the wildebeest’s migration would traverse the apartment a couple of times and it would be silent up there until her return on Sunday night. Maybe she was selling kegs, door-to-door, as a weekend job?

This continued throughout summer weekends.

One of these Saturday mornings, I stepped out from the refrigerator’s shelter and sprinted to my giant window to catch her in motion before she slipped into the SUV. I couldn’t spy her, though. All I saw was the SUV pulling out. I’m telling you, she can move those bottom-heavy legs as if she was a cheetah.

Eventually it became a project to figure out what the hell was going on above the sh\*t hole on Saturday mornings. I’d sleep on the living room couch to try to catch the wildebeest’s activities once the metal started clanking around at 4:30AM. It took a few weekends (*she was so fast!*), but at last I caught her. Mid-act. It was 5am and the sun was just up. She walked down those front steps with short shorts on and a tiny tank top. (This was the phase when she had trimmed down.) It wasn’t until she turned around to sit on the SUV’s back bumper and drop oxygen tanks into the trunk that I saw the source. Oxygen freakin’ tanks. Goddamn it. Just my luck. The wildebeest has decided to become New Jersey’s Jack Cousteau.

The trips continued all summer, with load-in on Saturday morning and load-out on Sunday night. Towards August, I spied her unloading her car. As usual, she grabbed a wet suit out of the trunk and

grabbed the tanks. Then, totally unexpected, a man stepped out of the SUV's passenger seat and got his tank out of the back, too. My lord. She found a man.

They are still together. In fact, he's moved in. I hear his footsteps up there, too. His feet aren't made of steel. They are heavier. Maybe lead. I think his feet are nothing but lead bone. No skin, no padding, no tendons, no nails. Just lead bone. The one similarity he has with her is that shares her Restless (Heavy Metal) Leg Syndrome. Between them, they continue that insane, drunken, frightened wildebeest migration. They clunk around that apartment like two mad Saharan animals desperate to find water and salvation.

They continue to SCUBA every weekend, usually leaving on Friday nights. She has a different job now, so there is no box bocce, but he works at home (if he works at all), and I hear his clonking all day. They go to bed early and get up early. They throw their trash out together. They seem very happy.

They still rattle my ceiling.

Now, granted, I make noise. My footsteps (and I step lightly) affect no one because I'm in the basement. (Satan can't hear them over the percussion I know they play down there: Clomp, clomp..... BOOM.) I do enjoy the video games and movies, but the next-door neighbor says he hears none of it. The only thing he has complained about is my singing. My voice, apparently, travels the distance between the two buildings from mine into his. He complained one night, and I shut my mouth. But, I realized that the woman upstairs *had* to hear my singing! It was traveling buildings, for heck's sake, I'm sure it was traveling through that ceiling! It had been years, and yet she had never complained. I started thinking we had a secret bond, of sorts, where I didn't complain about her feet and she didn't complain about my singing. Could it be one of those cute urban neighbor stories? It had to be! I accepted the box bocce and tanks lugging because she had accepted my high B's. I felt good about her. I felt good about our understanding.

Since my next-door neighbor informed about the noise, I've been very conscientious of when I open the pipes. A few months ago, though, I was playing piano and singing around 11:30 on Saturday night. (How I let loose.) The dial certainly wasn't at 11, by any means. More like a 7. When I took a pause in the music, I heard three distinct thumps from her bedroom upstairs. Those stomps hit me in my soul, because I knew it was *his* stomping. He was new on the scene and didn't know anything of our secret understanding. I stopped my music, as the thumps requested.

They spoiled everything, those three knocks. It destroyed our understanding, and the fury I had bottled up over the wildebeest and her cat and her boxes and her high-heels and her marathon-barking dog and her god damn oxygen tanks spilt out onto these pages. That damned boyfriend. I'm debating dropping 1,000 copies of this to her with a note that says, "Feel free to line your floor with these... any sound proofing is good soundproofing. Get your boyfriend to help. The way you two move, it shouldn't take a minute."

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July, 2008

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