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Adventures in Taxidermy

Before The Corpse went cyber, I often mentioned my downstairs neighbor, Elmer, he of the Frankenstein-shaped head, crab-like sideways walk, and tendency to obsessively rant on...you name the subject. He lives on mental disability checks but claims to be an "antiques dealer"--he will sell you a used extension cord for 50 cents. He's the type of guy who, if found on a rooftop with an AK-47 picking off pedestrians, would not elicit the usual neighborly responses to the press: "But he seemed so normal!!!"

A while back, because he basically had nothing better to do, he decided to wage a campaign of terror against me. He discovered an obscure branch of the N.Y.C. Civil Courts System: the IMCR Dispute Resolution Center. It was established for tenants to resolve grudges against other tenants through the use of "mediators". The IMCR Dispute Resolution Center is so Kafka-esque that you would actually have to be crazy just to locate it, no less utilize it. Elmer had been on my case for "walking too loudly" for years, even though the previous tenants of this apartment had been a 250 lb. wife, her raging alcoholic husband, and their abused foster daughter. I tried to reason that physics alone would dictate that a fat family of three would create a louder decibel level than a single, slender woman who basically walked from her bedroom to her office in the kitchen and back. I also reminded Elmer that, for one thing, I had graciously complied with his request when I first moved in that I go barefoot whenever I was at home, even though I was under no legal obligation to do so, and that he had never been particularly thankful for this effort on my part. Rather, he was always compulsively rude and nasty whenever I saw him. He also requested that I do no walking whatsoever after 3 a.m. I said, "But Elmer, what am I supposed to do if I need to go the bathroom? Fly there?" "Just don't go," he responded. The next logical step would have been for him to get a court-order for me to wear Depends at night.

My landlord was too wimpy to intervene, and at that time, everyone in the building was afraid of Elmer, because he was doing lots of blow (he told me this much later) and was so aggressive and angry, picking fights with everyone, that no one wanted to get in the same elevator as him, no less sign a petition on my behalf.

So I kept finding these little yellow slips under my front door summoning me to the IMCR Dispute Resolution Center, threatening me that if I didn't go, the "case" would go to Civil Court. I finally decided to go, because I know that Elmer's mind is so anarchic, so oceanic, that he needs to have someone telling him how to behave (like a mediator saying, "Leave her alone, you creep.") Sort of like a habitual offender who can't make it on the outside, so he keeps committing crimes because he craves the structure of prison life.

When I finally showed up, the building was as shabby as a South Bronx tenement. In the family court in front of the IMCR "Court", an African-American woman stood up and said that she wanted the man she lived with to stop beating on her. "And what is this man's name?" asked the judge. "Tyrone." "Tyrone What?" "How the fuck am I supposed to know?" I knew I had descended into one of Dante's Circles of Hell.

The "Center" was actually a small room, where Elmer and I sat across from each other on folding chairs. A Black man in judge's garb sat at a table before us. He seemed pleasant enough, until he introduced himself, with a West Indian accent, as a "Judge, lawyer, musician, playwright, poet and taxidermist."

'Ohmigod!' I thought. 'He's even crazier than Elmer!!!' (a possibility I had never considered.) I chided myself for not having brought along a dead squirrel for the "judge" to stuff while he deliberated.

Elmer spoke first. Believing himself to be in a 19th Century British courtroom filled with barristers wearing powdered wigs, he enunciated in a peculiarly pretentious style.

"You see, your Honor, when Ms. Surovell peruses the length of her abode, she creates an unbearable cacophony which is astoundingly disconcerting."

To my utter amazement, the mediator replied, "But Ms. Surovell is but a young woman. Would you wish that she had...no vitality?"

I was in a state of total shock and amazement. It had never before occurred to me, and yet it was all so obvious. The only way to "get through" to someone crazy is to talk to them in their language.

"Well, no...I guess I want her to have vitality. But her walking really disturbs me after 10 p.m." Here he held up a map of my apartment, which was the same scale as his own, and in the livingroom he had drawn a small pathway on which I should be restricted to walking on at certain hours. I became instantly livid. "You motherfucker!" I shouted. "How dare you think you can tell me where to walk in the apartment I pay rent for?"

"Calm down," said the mediator. "Elmer, Ms. Surovell is a writer, she is an artist. Do you wish her to be restricted to sitting on a sofa? Don't you agree that she must have the freedom to walk from room to room, seeking inspiration, communing with the muse?"

I got into the spirit. "Yes!" I exclaimed. "And furthermore, is this not America? Is this Russia, where the government comes in and tells you how to furnish your home?" (I don't know whether they do that in Russia, but it sounded plausible at the time.)

"Well, no," said Elmer, mulling it over. " I guess you guys are right."

"What if Ms. Surovell agrees to always wear rubber-soled slippers, like hospital slippers, in the apartment, would that be an adequate solution for you?"

"Sure," said Elmer, beaming scarily.

Then the mediator said, "Ms. Surovell, I was wondering if I could ask you how to

get published?" and he handed both of us sheets of his original poetry. Illustrated with the kind of kindergarten-esque drawings of robins and stick-figures a schizophrenic homeless person begging for money on the subway would shove in your face. The rhymes went along the lines of "In the merry month of May, we have fun all day, then the sun goes down and we can't play."

"Um, um, I'll see what I can do." I was quickly making headway to the seventh circle...

"Now I want you to shake hands and walk out together." I disdainfully shook Elmer's sweaty palm; he was still radiant with the thrill of "victory", even though, technically, he had lost. As we walked out, Elmer asked me. "Weren't those poems brilliant?"

The mediator had followed us, and said he had to speak to me personally. He asked if he could take me out to lunch, and I accepted his offer, hoping I could convince him to issue a decree that Elmer never have further verbal contact with me, under penalty of, say, a monetary fine. At a tacky nearby cafeteria, the judge instead unsuccessfully tried to put the moves on me. I did some checking up and found that he was neither a judge nor a lawyer. NYC trains psychotic people and then pays them \$30,000 a year to be "mediators". However, this Romeo may well have legitimately been a taxidermist...I just didn't really want to go there and find out. All I wanted him to stuff was...

I began a campaign of writing to the mayor, who is always whining about finances, as mayors tend to do, saying that I found it unfair that any mentally-ill person could harass a fellow tenant with any complaint whatsoever (she has little green men standing on her fire escape shooting gamma rays at me) and that he could save millions by simply disbanding this idiotic "pseudo-court". I continued to receive replies from the N.Y. Dept. of Mental Health saying that mentally-ill people have the same rights as do any other people to annoy their neighbors.

I never once wore the slippers. Elmer never mentioned the subject of my "thundering footsteps" again. I think, essentially, that he ran out of money or lost his blow connection, so that every sound emanating from my apartment wasn't amplified 50 million times in his already deranged brain. I still suspected, nonetheless, that he could probably hear those silent dog whistles.

Then, they invented Prozac. Now, Elmer is still an energy vampire, he will rant at a moment's notice, but he doesn't seem homicidal.

Nonetheless, I decided to do get revenge in my own way. I got a black candle in the shape of a nude male from the creepy Satanic evil witchcraft store, (which has since been closed down by the N.Y.P.D.), retrieved one of Elmer's many erratic, nonsensical notes featuring the looniest handwriting in the annals of graphology, (because I needed something that had personally belonged to him to work the spell), & stuck the note up the candle's ass with a pushpin. Then I put it in the freezer. I told my neighbor Sherry I was doing this.

It was summer & I had a problem with the freezer a few days later. I had forgotten about the candle, but the Russian immigrant super never mentioned it. Perhaps he thought frozen candles were a common American custom.

Several weeks later Sherry stopped me in the hallway as I was coming home to my apartment and looked at me with genuine fear. "I will never, ever fuck with

you for the rest of my life," she said. (Naturally, she fucked with me big-time several months later, but that's another story.)

"Why? What happened?"

"Elmer is in the hospital."

"The mental hospital?"

"No, the regular kind. He has a perforated bowel."

Finally, justice had prevailed.

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