

The Night of 1,000 Steps

Little is known about the microanarchies that reign supreme over the concrete bunkers we call condominiums. There is a certain uncanny "order" to both the lifestyle and politics that accompany condo life—an order of which I only became aware after my significant other and I purchased and moved into a shorefront condominium in Hillsboro Beach.

A 30-plus-year-old gem (well, perhaps more of a diamond in the rough), the building had held up well to both time and the harsh ocean climate. But the innards were another story.

The first thing to go was the carpet.

White shag.

It reeked of the early '70s; the theme from "Shaft" reverberated through my head whenever I entered the door. Our first home improvement need was clear: hardwood flooring. Who could have guessed it would also provide our first lesson in condo warfare?

We should have known something was amiss when the missus of the unit below—whose husband happened to be president of the condominium association—turned white and nearly dropped her bag of groceries when we told her of our plan.

Remarkably coincidental, the following day she hand-delivered an official-looking addendum to the condo's "Rules and Regulations." Along with the list of hours one may run one's air conditioner, dishwasher, garbage disposal, hair dryer and other household appliances were United Nations guidelines for fair but humane practices concerning when one may breathe, blink, use the bathroom and floss. And, now, there was added a provision at the bottom of the "board memorandum": the pre-installation of quarter-inch soundproof corking, requiring the inspection and approval of a board member before the installation of any new carpeting and/or flooring.

Speaking of flooring, we were floored. So, calmly, collectedly, after counting to 10 and taking almost the same milligram dosage of Xanax, I called my flooring guy.

"How much extra would it cost to install cork in my unit?"

"Oh, about \$1,000," he replied. "Why, you got a problem there?"



"Is the U.N. Peacekeeping Force having problems in Bosnia?"

Having already spent thousands more dollars than the downstairs owners, we felt we paid dearly enough to appreciate our elevated view. But we also appreciated the fact that our floor was someone else's ceiling. So, after much hand-wringing and pacing back and forth (with our shoes off) we arrived at a solution: We approached our neighbors with our idea of splitting the cost. Our position was that the cork was for their benefit and comfort. Their position was, quite simply, that the cork was in the "Rules."

Things quickly turned from bad to ugly. After an evening of verbal assaults, legal threats and name calling, each side retreated to its dwelling behind slammed doors.

Nothing compares to the wild-eyed gaze of a condo snitch about to rat out a fellow resident. There may be honor among thieves, but here it's each man, woman and widower for himself. It's dog eat dog—as long as the dog is less than 24 inches high and weighs less than 18 pounds. Condo association "Members of the Board"—a.k.a. The Politburo—hide behind an anonymous veil of certified letters fired off by the "property management company," citing horrific breaches, left and right. In our new home for less than three months, we had a rap sheet a longtime street hood would envy.

During one month's time, we received Pecksniffian mis-sives for such felonious occurrences as parking one car behind another while unloading packages and allowing our handyman to park in an unmarked "emergency area";

demands to remove two wind chimes barely audible to ourselves; and a proviso reminding us that our barbecue grill must be 10 feet from the dwelling during use. Was it possible that in the conglomerate of communal living we were the only reckless residents indicted for shameless disregard of the rules?

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Fearing we would eventually be "noticed" to death, we suited up for battle.

We put on our shoes.

I, in T-shirt, boxer shorts and black socks, donned my finest Bruno Maglis. My girlfriend, wearing a delightful Victoria's Secret selection, chose a pair of '70s platform shoes. And then we began.

We clomped from the living room to the bedroom, from the bedroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the bathroom. We opened

and closed closet, pantry and storage doors looking for things we knew we wouldn't find, in order that the grating sound of metal on floor might seep through to the enemy below. Saddam Hussein take note; biochemical warfare, ha! We had shoes on creaky floors!

And even condo residents have the right to wear shoes in their homes.

If the downstairs commandos had failed to recognize, acknowledge or appreciate the fact that we usually removed our footwear upon entering and donned it only moments before leav-

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ing the house, the fact was made abundantly clear on The Night of 1,000 Steps.

Miraculously, divine intervention came to pass—or was it a sale at Home Depot? Our neighbor below called to say he had "found" cork for a remarkably low price, was willing to split the cost and offered to help install it!

It's incredible how a deadlocked dialogue can be reactivated with a simple Fred Astaire dance routine. Fear not, fellow condo comrades. There is hope.

"Big Brother" has come and gone from the pages of George Orwell's *1984*; today he lives and resides in South Florida. Granted, he may peer at you through bifocals, but see you he will. Rule-breakers beware: You will be noticed, cited and served. ♦

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