

RYAN KNIGHTON / Monkey

Some strange folks live in my building. Hell, many would even agree. Being the resident blind guy, however, I likely clock in as the most peculiar, and that's saying something.

Consider my competition, the guy on the other side of the wall. Dylan lives in the loft next to ours. To describe him, I suggest you imagine a six-foot-four Bon Jovi action figure. Don't be shy, add scarves to your picture and a sexy breeze to make them, you know, dance. My wife Tracy is my informant here, and I trust her. She's seen it all, including Dylan watering plastic ferns in his window, and I'm not talking about a single occasion. Were the ferns real, they'd be in fine shape.

Dylan is pushing forty but still uses a Canadian flag for curtains. It's possibly one of those practical decorating hangovers from his impoverished student days. Or maybe, more likely, it's just that interior design tick specific to guys who listen to Judas Priest really, really loud. Dylan does. Especially when he works out. That is, when he works out by the open window. When he works out shirtless and grunting. By the open window. Tracy also reports that he wears a shark's tooth around his neck and has no irony. Sometimes I'm glad I can't see.

A lot of friendly and interesting people live in our building, too. I just seem to meet the Dylans in the elevator and miss the friendly and interesting ones.

The elevator in our building is a theatre of smell. Some mornings it's bleachy, so I know the cleaning fellow has been through. That's when the elevator is tabula rasa, registering a sort of baseline smell the rest of the day will imprint itself upon. I like to construct mini-narratives about my neighbours and their lives based on the accumulating odours.

For instance, one woman from the fourth floor always sheds a cloud of hairspray and cigarette smoke on her way out. By its strength, I can roughly estimate the hour she left, sort of like carbon dating her movements. My measurements use the half-life of odors instead of isotopes.

Her smell is suggestive in other ways, as well. Because of it, I suspect she is the sister of Norma, a woman who lived above us in our previous building. Like my new neighbour, Norma also smelled of eau de toilette and Matinee Slims, a particular combination which sends me into fits of hydrophobia.

Norma, you see, was an arachnaphobic and an avid gardener. Paranoid and delusional, too. Norma swore she saw invading masses of black widow spiders on her little apartment deck. That's why she set out to drown them. If it hadn't been so hot, maybe she would have set the building on fire, who knows. But out came the gardening hose and, with her deck drain securely plugged, she let her rip and filled it up like a hot tub.

I know what you're thinking—what about the spider nests, the ones behind the building's vinyl siding? It worried her, too. That's why she stuck her gardening hose behind the building's waterproof membrane and gave the inside walls a soak.

I know this because the light fixtures in our apartment, the ones below her deck, subsequently looked like goldfish bowls without goldfish. Lots of water in them, no fish. No spider corpses, either.

Now when I smell that smoky perfume in the elevator, I remember Norma and I speculate that her sister just left for work. Then I listen for running water.

Seems I know most of my neighbours this way. Not by my paranoid fantasies, I mean, but by smell. I can tell, for example, when the guy down the hall, Glen, is home or has left for the day because his apartment has stained him with a pleasant but odd health food store odor. He sells all sorts of organic remedies and herbs and hippie elixirs for the Vancouver bongo-bangers. When he's left for the day, I can smell his passage in the elevator. If he's home, his door is always open, stinking the entire floor with wheat germ and patchouli.

Occasionally my neighbours and their different smells mix in the elevator, telling me who rode down or up with whom a few minutes ago. Certain mixtures register more frequently than others. In them I can detect, with some accuracy, and with some wildly incorrect guesswork, budding romances and blooming affairs. When you're blind, even an empty elevator inspires the pornographic imagination.

Then again, some smells I come across in the elevator elude me altogether. The other day I was overwhelmed by a strong cocktail of baby powder, gasoline and fish. What am I supposed to do with that? Newborns trolling for trout? A mafia hit signal delivered on a go-cart by a new father? Then that pornographic imagination takes a run at it.

But the clearest evidence of strange neighbours is our elevator graffiti. A bit of it comes and goes in felt on the walls, not much, and when it does appear it's pretty

innocuous stuff. “I was here”, “Fuk U”, “Hi Jim”, that sort of thing. The cleaning guy wipes it away and that’s that.

Except for the message some ninny carved into the door. When Tracy first noticed it, she placed my fingertips on the letters. I could feel that our elevator door declares in boldly etched capitals—wait for it—LOAF.

You’re probably wondering what we’re wondering. What the hell does “loaf” mean? And why would anybody want that scratched into an elevator door? Maybe it’s a slacker slogan and the vandal fiend really meant to carve LOAFER into the door. Maybe one of us got on before the job could be finished. Maybe he or she, the one wielding the vigilante protractor, lives in the building and is even too slacker to finish “loafer” off with a bit more carving. I don’t know, except to wonder why they didn’t carve it into their own door, or forehead.

Nevertheless, between Dylan’s plants, the occasional fishy smell and the loaf on the door, I know I’ve got some strange neighbours. Then there’s my own example.

Tracy and I have an efficient blind guy routine when we arrive home from work and we’ve parked the car in the underground lot. She hoofs it up the stairs to the lobby and scoops the mail while I cane my way to the elevator and take it up to meet her. She gets on at the lobby level and up we go together to the third floor, and home. It’s faster this way. Navigating the doors and the winding stairs up to the lobby slows me down too much. Tracy would have to wait for me to catch up, so our arrangement is good blind guy strategy to get home and get to the off-hours cocktails pronto.

The other day I took the elevator and Tracy stepped on board from the lobby as usual. The door shut, then we stared at LOAF for lack of anything else to read. At least it felt that way. We were both quiet and I was facing the door, as I suspect she was too, her shadowy blur beside me in a rigid pose. Tracy was a bit blue that day, so I wasn’t enjoying the silence. It felt heavy, a bit angstful. Being the kind of guy I am, I decided to have a laugh with my gal and see if I could cheer her a bit, just a small laugh, a tension breaker at best.

What I did was—well—er, I jammed my tongue behind my upper lip, turned to Tracy and smiled.

“This,” I explained, removing my tongue for a second, “this is what I would look like if I was a monkey.” I jammed my tongue back into place and smiled like the missing link.

Tracy began to laugh. Uncontrollably. But her laugh came from behind, not beside me, where I thought she was standing.

When the elevator door opened, we stepped out and Tracy said, between convulsions, "See you later, Dylan."

The blur I had taken for Tracy grunted a bewildered acknowledgement, and walked down the hall to his apartment. I hadn't heard him follow Tracy into the elevator, not a footstep, not a tinkle of his shark's tooth. So much for my super-senses.

I bet I know what happened after that. Safe at home, behind locked doors, Dylan probably whipped open his flag and spritzed his ferns, furious and convinced LOAF was my doing. Who else would etch their graffiti other than the blind guy down the hall? It all began to make sense to Dylan. Who would *etch* LOAF other than a guy who gives his neighbours monkeyface?

But that's blindness for you: the other missing link.