

Elevator Neighbors (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

The first time Jane saw Bim, she and I were standing at the table near the elevator, checking the mail. About a week, say, after I signed the latest lease. So for her, living here with me, that would have been a few days in.

I turned my head and raised my hand to wave, but Bim didn't see us because he walked out of the elevator looking straight ahead, going right outside—on his way, I suppose to the grocery store.

When we got into the elevator and the doors closed, Jane asked, "So who's your friend?"

I said, "He's not so much a friend; he lives on five."

"Just him?"

"He's taken."

"But . . ." she said, smiling. "So were you."

I like the way it goes with Jane. I don't have to lie—I've never lied to her. And I don't have to tell the exact truth—that Bim's really, really taken. That it has to do with how he gets his information. So I just said, "Bim's not me," with the elevator rising.

Bim, almost any afternoon, down at the grocery store on the corner, buying tangerines: testing them between his thumb and fingers, deciding in his palm. One hand selects as many as the other hand can hold—three tangerines, or four, or five, depending on the size. He pays and steps out onto the sidewalk. Sliding the hand with the tangerines into his jacket pocket, he releases all but one: that tangerine, both hands help to peel. Then it's his selecting hand that separates a section and brings it to his lips as he walks away to work.

It's not that I follow Bim around all day, or spend much time thinking about what Bim does or why he does it, but since he lives on the floor below me I can't help seeing him a lot. And sometimes in the elevator, though Bim's not there, I'll see a tangerine that I figure must have fallen from his pocket when he was taking out his keys. I like tangerines o.k., so when this happens I pick it up, and as I walk along I peel and eat it—nothing special, at least not for me. I mean, I don't know what it is with Bim and tangerines, but it must be something.

Bim and Lily, they're on five and I'm on six. All the other tenants hate us because of the elevator thing. They call us the Elevator Neighbors, but it was the landlord, down on one, who set up this system, long before any of us moved in. When he converted this building from a factory, instead of installing a new elevator he just fixed the old one; then, thinking that with less use it might last longer, he sealed the elevator entrances to two, three, and four. He left our floors alone: good fifth- and sixth-floor-walkup tenants might not be easy to find and keep. (If anyone downstairs from us complains to him, he says that according to the law this building doesn't have to have an elevator at all.)

For a while, Bim and Lily tried letting the other tenants take heavy things up on the elevator into their place and then out and down the stairs, but it usually ended up being just as hard to move stuff down the stairs as up. And if anyone says anything to me about the elevator I just put it this way: "You think I like the landlord?"

I *do* like the landlord—him with his one-year leases, always thinking that the city's going to let the controls on rents expire. Then, with one-year leases, he wouldn't have to wait longer to raise the rents. But I like a one-year lease as opposed to a two-year lease, because then I never have to stop and think if it's the year to sign a new lease or not. And because I always look forward to the day I sign the lease, a one-year lease is twice as good as a two-year lease to me.

Bim and I moved into our floors at the same time. Bim alone, really alone, unlike me—I was just waiting to get settled before asking Sandra to move in.

The landlord actually gave Bim and me the same appointment to sign our leases. So that's where I first met Bim, in the landlord's office. There we were, both painters needing space to live and paint, signing leases with identical terms.

After shaking hands with the landlord, Bim and I went out and had a burger. Bim told me he worked five nights a week as a dinner chef and I felt bad to have to tell him that I'd started painting full-time. But Bim already knew my work, because I was beginning to get shown in some galleries here and there. I hadn't seen any of Bim's paintings then, but I had a feeling that they were probably not much like mine, because when I told him I used mostly acrylic paints he said he used all oils.

It was five one-year leases ago, about six months in, at three in the morning, when Sandra woke me up, all worried. At first I thought it was smoke, because the air seemed heavy, but as I started to get more wide-awake I said to Sandra, "That's turpentine. I don't use it, but Bim might—he paints with oils." Though so much that it would come up through the floorboards? And in the middle of the night?

I pulled on some clothes, ran down the stairs to Bim's place, and knocked on the door: "You awake, Bim?" It wasn't long before Bim opened the door, a finger on his lips.

"I am, but *she's* not," he said, pointing over at the sofa. With the paintbrush in his other hand he motioned me in.

"So everything's o.k.? Sandra and I were wondering about the turpentine. We never noticed it before."

"Never painted all night before," said Bim, and I followed his eyes to a painting at the other end of the room, and then back to the sofa. Whoever she was, sleeping there in a sweatshirt and jeans, partly covered by a mohair blanket, she looked familiar.

“You don't know Lily?” he said. “You eat breakfast every day where she works.”

But I didn't know her name, because she's second shift there, and I go in early. “Yeah,” I said. “I see her coming in, having coffee with the busboys at the back before she starts.”

“Ten to four-thirty. When I was having lunch in there today, I told her that if she'd come over to the place where I cook, I'd feed her dinner in the kitchen. So she comes straight from work and stays, watching, eating a little bit of this, of that—stays until I'm through. And then she says, ‘Now that I've tasted your cooking, I want to see your painting.’ So I brought her back here and dragged out a few paintings and she says, ‘No, not your paintings. Your painting. You painting.’ So she goes and stretches out on the sofa, and I start painting with her watching. Around midnight she falls asleep. So I just cover her up and then keep painting.”

I looked again at Lily sleeping, and then the other way, at the painting Bim was working on. I couldn't tell if what I was seeing was because of the lights Bim was using or if it was a way Bim had of painting light. “Bim,” I said. “You buy some kind of special lights?”

“Nope,” said Bim. “Just plain old lights.”

I stayed a few more minutes. When I got back upstairs, Sandra asked me, “Turpentine?”

“Turpentine,” I said.

And then she asked, “So what's going on down there?”

Later I thought about it—if what I answered was actually lying, because what could I really say about painting light like that, or painting all night, if I'd never done it? I suppose it would have been true to say, “Bim painting, Lily sleeping.” But then Sandra would have asked me who *Lily* was. I mean, if you're introduced to someone when she's sleeping, what can you say about her? That she's just some waitress? That wouldn't sound right. So because of all that I lied. And because I'd never lied to her before, she didn't notice that first time.

So, sure, I knew I was lying when I said to Sandra, “Nothing.”

The morning after I met Lily, when I went for breakfast where she works I asked Karen, the waitress there who I'd known the longest, "Besides working here, what's Lily do?"

"Who knows? She never talks about anything like that."

"Do you think she paints?"

"Her face, a little. But don't you find her kind of bony?"

"Look, I just met her downstairs in my building last night."

"Then why didn't you ask her yourself?"

"I never like to ask—anyway, she was asleep."

"Then you should have asked Bim."

"You know Bim?"

"I *knew* Bim."

"O.k.," I said. "So maybe you don't like Lily."

"What I know about her is that she looks like her father."

"You know her father?"

"She was going through her wallet one day and I asked her about a picture in it and she said it was her father. Same nice facial structure. Same eyebrows, same color hair. Then I started to wonder if I didn't know that anyway. Sometimes without ever seeing the mother or father you can tell which one the daughter looks like. And one more thing . . ." Then Karen surprised me. "Except for her moving a little too fast—in here, on her feet, got that? Making me look slow? I really don't mind Lily."

After Lily moved in with Bim, the turpentine at night became a regular thing. Sandra wasn't bothered by it—things didn't seem to bother her when she knew what they were. But whenever I suggested to her that we invite Bim and Lily up she said she spent enough time, at the gallery where she worked, with artists who were cooks and, in restaurants where she ate, with waitresses who might or might not be artists. Me, I was becoming much less interested in just what else, if anything, Lily did, or whether Bim's painting would ever be in demand. I began to think that riding in the elevator with Bim and Lily, or either one of them, or even one of Bim's tangerines,

might be one of the nicer things that could happen to me in a day. And maybe one of the nicer things that happened in a year was when I'd set up the lease-signing appointment on one of Bim's days off. After signing, Bim and I would go from the landlord's office to meet Lily after work and the three of us would go and have a burger somewhere. Once, just once, I also got Sandra to meet us, but I ended up spending so much time trying to keep her from asking Lily *exactly* what it is she does, or had ever done, or planned to do, that I really lost the evening. And that made it like having a two-year lease.

Other than lease-signing days, the longest time I ever spent with Bim alone was when I drove him out to catch a plane when his mom got sick. As we walked through the airport, it seemed to me that every woman in the place was looking at us. But whenever I looked back at any of them I noticed that the angle of the gaze was never quite right, their eyes not meeting mine. A little higher, a little to the side—it was just Bim they were looking at. And there was Bim, looking only straight ahead, always seeming to take too much time before brushing the hair out of his eyes.

I almost walked right by him once because of the way he lets that hair just fall over his face. On days when I used to meet Sandra at work uptown, I'd go a little early and see what was doing at the Met. And I was walking up the steps outside when this hand with a tangerine pushes out at me. There's Bim, sitting, elbows on his knees.

“Hey,” I said. “Any good shows in there?”

Bim, peeling the tangerine and handing me half: “I just came up to see a painting,”

“Just one?”

I sat down and he told me which one, and he had to tell me where, because it was a painting I was only slightly familiar with. And nothing at all like anything that I or, I thought then, Bim would paint.

As I got up, I said, “Lease time's coming around.”

“O.k. Set it up,” said Bim, bringing a section of tangerine to his lips.

When I got inside the museum, the first thing I went to, of course, was that painting. No, nothing like what either Bim or I would paint, not what's in it. But then I found myself trying to figure out the lighting in the room—until I remembered the last time I'd done that. And just like then, in Bim's place, it wasn't the room that was strangely lit.

I'd always been so careful not to ask Lily questions that in almost four years I'd hardly talked to her at all. Over the yearly lease-signing burgers, she'd mostly just listen to Bim and me. In the elevator it would be things like the weather, or I would just say hi when I saw her walking double-speed into work in the mornings, or just as fast afterward to hang around where Bim was cooking. With Bim, on her days off, Lily had another, almost sideways way of walking: slower, and she'd face into him and talk and talk and talk. And he'd be walking, looking straight ahead, as usual, but nodding his head and smiling. I used to try to avoid them when I saw them like that, because I didn't want to interrupt. Then one time—it was just before Sandra left—they were walking and saw me and stopped to say hello. After a bit, I noticed Lily looking at my jacket—I was wearing an old khaki jacket. “Something you like about my jacket, Lily?” I guess that's the first question I'd ever asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “It . . .” Then she turned to Bim and said, as if I weren't there, “It softens him.” And then, because I was there, she turned back to me. “It softens you.”

I'd started spending time with Jane just before Sandra moved out. It was about halfway between leases, and I thought, Let's see what happens. Let's wait six months—I can work here but sleep at Jane's place. And see if I feel I won't start lying as I lied to Sandra through all those one-year leases, starting with the first one, six months in. So even after Sandra left, it was a while before Jane moved in here with me.

I'd almost decided to give up this place, because I really should be thinking about buying something of my own. But when lease-signing time was coming around and Bim, as he did every year, said, "Set it up." I thought I might as well stay put for now.

The morning of the day we were going to sign the lease, I was sitting in the restaurant when Lily came in. I started thinking that, with Sandra gone, and with Jane still at her place and busy packing, instead of going out somewhere afterward why not take Bim and Lily back to my place, because they'd never been there. Rent a movie. Cook up something. And later I'd go over to Jane's.

I went to the back of the restaurant, where Lily was drinking coffee and listening to the busboys. When I told her my idea, she said they had some food that Bim had brought home from work the night before, and it could be a kind of picnic, but then she said, "Maybe hold off on the movie. Because Bim might not like a movie."

I said, "Bim and I could drop by the video place before we pick you up here. He could choose it."

"But he couldn't choose the frames."

"He . . ."

"Bim finds movies too full of things to see."

"Oh."

"Bim's very careful how he gets his information."

I was trying to think of something to say to make myself more comfortable. "Ted Williams," I said. "Ted Williams played baseball for the—"

"The Boston Red Sox," said Lily.

"Right, the Boston Red Sox. Ted Williams, when he was playing for the Red Sox, never saw a movie because he wanted to save his eyes for seeing the pitch." I looked at Lily. "But that's different."

Lily thought for a minute as she started to get ready for her shift. "Um, different, different, but not so different."

That night, after we'd finished eating and I was leaving to go to Jane's, I said, "Come on," and pointed to the elevator. "I'll let you out at your place. How often in this building do you get to take the elevator one floor down?"

At five, I kept my hand on the button that holds the door open. I said to Bim, "Hey this morning Lily was filling me in on Ted Williams and the Red Sox . . ."

Lily started laughing. She said, "My father must have thought I was the closest thing to a boy in our family. He wouldn't stop talking to me. And I loved to listen."

There'd be no one waiting to use the elevator. I kept my hand on the button and allowed myself a question. "So there's more like you at home, Lily?"

Lily looked at Bim.

"He wants to know about your *sisters*, Lily."

"Oh. Well, there's two of them, but they're really not so much like me. They're... they're like . . ."

"They're like *each other*," said Bim to Lily. And then he said it again, but to me. "They're like *each other*."

I used the hand that was holding the button to wave good night.

Anyway, it's late. Already, some nights, three months in, this happens.

"It's late," says Jane. "Honey, come to bed."

I turn off the VCR and in the dark, with open eyes, I get in bed. My hands know where I am and where they are, and you would think that whatever I'm then becoming part of would be enough to set aside that turpentine.

But that turpentine—if it starts to float up through the floorboards, I guess I start to float inside of it. Because the next thing I know, Jane has to say my name—my name, but as a question. And, so far, that's the only question that she asks, because, by asking it, I'm back.

But what happens if Jane starts asking *more* than that? Not just in bed, but other times, when something makes me think of Bim painting light with Lily sleeping. Or Bim and tangerines. Or my khaki jacket. Sandra used to ask.

If Jane starts asking? I'll start lying. I'll say, "Nothing." If it's something.

