

What New Yorkers Do in Elevators

By Ralph Keyes

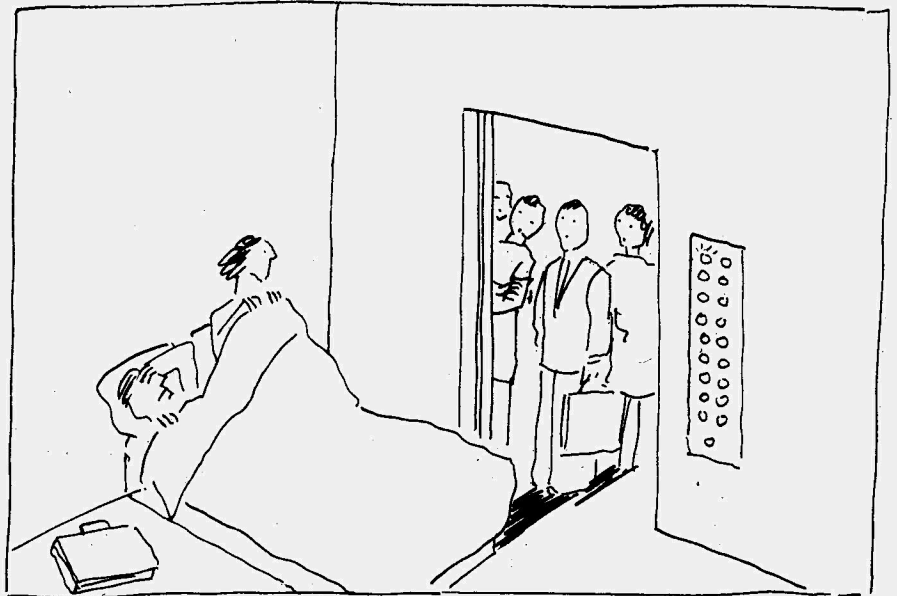
"...Research shows that the average American won't get on an elevator offering less than two square feet of space per occupant..."

Going to work one morning, a Manhattan advertising executive was pleased to find herself alone in the elevator with her company's shiest and most naïve vice-president. As she later explained, "I've always figured that if two co-workers get in a kiss before the seventeenth floor—that's bound to be an *exciting* kiss." So she cornered her unsuspecting partner as they rose past the third floor, joined her lips to his by the fifth, was in a passionate embrace by the tenth . . . and reluctantly gave up as "14" blinked into "15," "16," and "17," where both had their offices. "He was worried that the doors might open on us," she said. Then she giggled. "I kind of hoped they would."

The typical New Yorker spends at least eight minutes a day in elevators, two minutes waiting. Such constant exposure helps us forget how bizarre the moment is—to be sealed in capsules leaping straight up at fifteen miles an hour, pressed tight as cattle off to the slaughter, gravity tugging at internal organs, fear charging the air as the cars strain to fly off into space. Not to speak of an even harsher terror: close encounters of the weirder kind—with would-be rapists and robbers.

Hardly the place for romance? Guess again. New Yorkers may look bored or tense in elevators, but the more resourceful—like our Manhattan ad executive—treat time in the elevator (whether they know it or not) as an opportunity to engage in the exciting art of liftmanship. To a practiced liftman, time aloft can be a grand chance for making political progress, making new friends—and for making love.

"There's no doubt that elevators are erotic places," says priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley. "If exciting things didn't happen in them, I'd fear for the future of the species."



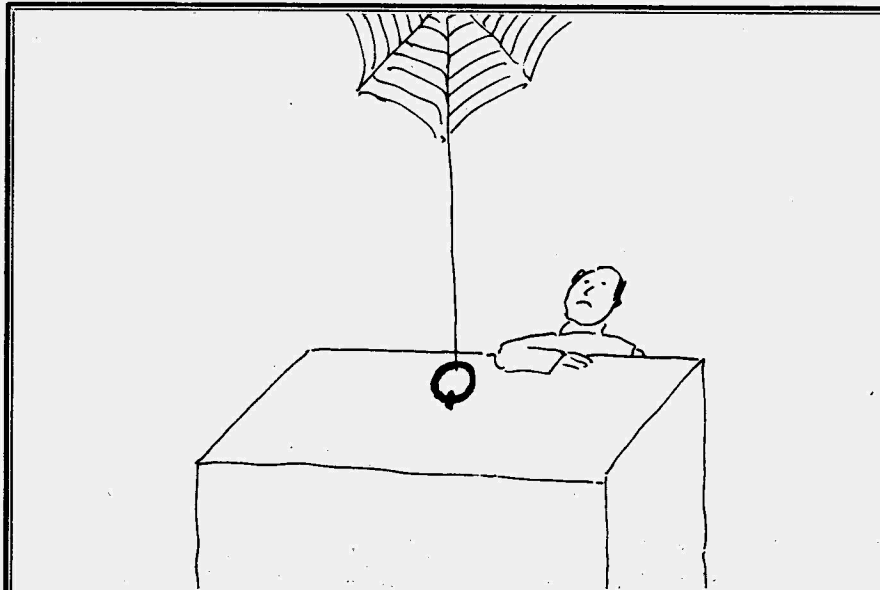
Several women told me they also find an elevator ride physically arousing. A psychologist mentioned a female patient who stopped using elevators because she was sure other passengers could see how physically turned on she was by the ride. The doctor was dubious, but one secretary I spoke with was not. It's the slowdown at the bottom, she explained, that gives women "a definite twinge of excitement."

Air-force researchers agree—sort of. Dr. Henning E. von Gierke, out at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, says it's the speeding up and slowing down that our bodies notice most. The body doesn't react much when it's moving at a constant speed, no matter how fast, if it's in a closed capsule and can't pick up visual cues like floors flashing by. But during acceleration, says Dr. von Gierke, who has studied such things for our astronauts, the vestibular system of the inner ear warns the brain about the change

in gravity's pull. And the belly, being heavier than the bone structure, tugs the trunk out of shape and presses the bladder. In a badly adjusted elevator, experts report, people in poor body condition may wet their pants.

There are approximately 1,000 elevator injuries annually in the United States, and an average of twenty people die in such accidents each year. Despite the danger, elevators are an attraction to children in New York. In housing projects, kids have devised terrifying elevator games. The Spider-Man game consists of riding on the tops of cars or counterweights; the "chicken" game, of sticking heads into an open shaft to see who pulls out first as the car descends; and the Tarzan game, of jumping from the top of one moving car to another as they pass. Such play caused most of last year's nine fatal elevator accidents in the city.

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The Inspector Wears Double-Tied Laces

A Cagney in the face, senior elevator inspector John Ryan, 53, moves among building supers with the crusty humor of a man who knows what he's doing. He'd been maintaining elevators all his working life until, seven years ago, he got to join the city's Buildings Department.

On our first stop in a midtown commercial building, the super growled, "You guys was just here."

"I know," Ryan rumbled back. "But there's a couple of things we have to look at again." He had to reinspect some minor violations that should have been fixed after the checkup two days earlier. As we made our way down through the subbasement to a huge drum wound with groaning steel cables, he admired the old machinery. "Simplicity itself—they haven't made this kind for 50 years."

New York City's elevator code is the strictest in the country, says Ryan. Inspectors make sure the cables have not been worn down, that each piece of machinery is in smooth working order, that guide rails are not worn thin. But mainly they check the machine brakes (see "How Elevators Work," page 64) and the backup safety systems. Lifting people in a box is no special trick; what counts is making sure they don't fall. He also checks at least 50 of the elevators' basic features and urges passengers to look for the following four:

1. Mirrors that let passengers see, before they enter, into all corners of a cab. (Some supers try to get by with polished hubcaps.)
2. The alarms that must be connected to all stop buttons—an anti-crime rule.
3. A safety phone or a red alarm button connected to building security in public elevators that are not under active surveillance 24 hours a day.
4. Lights—five-candlepower or better.

Inspectors take no chances—personal or otherwise: They never wear neckties or loose coats, and they double-tie their shoelaces. Though today's double doors—one set on the building floor, one on the cab—reduce the danger, even sophisticates like Ryan worry about getting clothes caught in lift machinery. Just this year, Metropolitan Opera chorus member Betty Stone was dragged to her death when her flowing costume caught in the grille of the backstage elevator at Cleveland's Public Hall.

Ryan shakes his head over the city's fiscal crisis: In one side effect, the number of annual inspections fell from the code-mandated four to fewer than one. Officials claim inspections today are more frequent (now twice a year), but you can check by comparing the dates on the inspection certificate in your own elevator.

—R.K.

(By the way, no matter how foolhardy they may be, project kids are very sophisticated about their elevators. Senior Inspector John Ryan [see "The Inspector Wears Double-Tied Laces" box, at left] says they learn at an early age how to defeat outer-door locking mechanisms and gain access to the shaft with tools as simple as a shoelace. Once, struggling to open a jammed outer door, the inspector was confronted by a six-year-old kid from across the hall who deftly opened the door with a spoon.)

So why, you may ask, if elevators are so risky and erotic, is the average elevator gathering about as exciting as a Bible-study group? Normally, such physical closeness is a trigger for emotional arousal. "But to protect against the possibility of intimate contact," says psychologist Layne Longfellow, director of seminars for the Menninger Foundation, "we make as many behavioral rules as possible in the opposite direction."

Among these unspoken elevator rules, Longfellow lists:

- ☐ Face forward.
- ☐ Fold hands in front.
- ☐ No eye contact.
- ☐ Watch the numbers.
- ☐ Don't talk to anyone you don't know.
- ☐ Stop talking with anyone you do know when anyone you don't know enters the elevator.

☐ Avoid brushing bodies.

Elevator taboos are easy to test—and are a favorite subject of desperate psychology students. All one need do is face to the rear, establish eye contact all around, talk loudly, and stand right next to strangers, even when there's room to move over. Your fellow travelers will recoil in horror.

Industry research has shown that the average American won't even get on an elevator offering less than two square feet of space per occupant. The outer limit of body compression is 1.5 square feet for men-only cars, 1.0 square feet for women-only, and 1.3 square feet in coed cars. At this level of crowding, women commonly fold their arms in front of their chests for a bit of extra protection. Men cover their genitals with briefcases.

Defensive tactics actually begin in the lobby. Catatonic though they may appear, fellow elevator waiters are in fact keeping a sharp eye on each other's approach to the buttons for what this

shows about the inner person. The most revealing behavior is that of striding right up to hit a lighted button and in so doing letting everyone else know just how you rate their competence at summoning elevators. A pollster once grew so intrigued by how often his own push of the button was duplicated that he spot-surveyed repeaters. Their explanations included:

- ☐ "Frustration."
- ☐ "Nervous energy."
- ☐ "Just wanted to make sure it was working."
- ☐ "I'm not going to ride on someone else's push!"

Far more impressive in fellow waiters' eyes is to stand in the lobby with a serene look as if meditating on the fact that there are things in life which can't be hurried—the wind, the river, and the elevator. "You want to act cool, like you're not really waiting," explains Mike Smith, sampling director of Yankelevich, Skelly and White, "especially if the door's just closed in your face."

Frequent studies have shown that passengers become impatient if they have to wait more than 30 seconds for an elevator in a commercial building and more than 60 seconds in a residential building.

One woman, a government bureaucrat, says that waiting for elevators is the main time in her working day when she feels put down because of her sex. While waiting in the lobby, she finds her male colleagues formed into an impenetrable elevator circle. "They stand as close as possible without touching," she explains, "close enough so that an outsider must take the initiative to break in. A man can break in; a woman cannot. These elevator circles are one part of a larger pattern in which men get to know one another but leave women colleagues out."

By contrast, another woman, a media executive, has learned how to exploit her thousands of elevator waits over the years. "Say there's someone from another department you need to talk to," she says, "but don't really know well enough to call out of the blue. With a little patience, you'll eventually bump into them in the lobby outside the elevator and sort of create a climate for a call."

The virtue of such brief conferences is the seeming coincidence. And the liftman must never forget how drastically the political climate changes with the elevator's arrival. New questions arise. Is it higher status to get on first or last? Is manning the floor buttons an act of power or servility? Are the corners safer or more dangerous stations?

Studies of elevator body placement show a standard pattern. Normally the

Fear of Elevators—A Bundle of Phobias

An untold number of foot-weary New Yorkers will trudge up any number of stairways before they'll set foot in an elevator. Others, like Doreen Powell, freeze up only in specific situations. "My phobia," explains the White Plains resident, "was such that I could ride with others, just not alone."

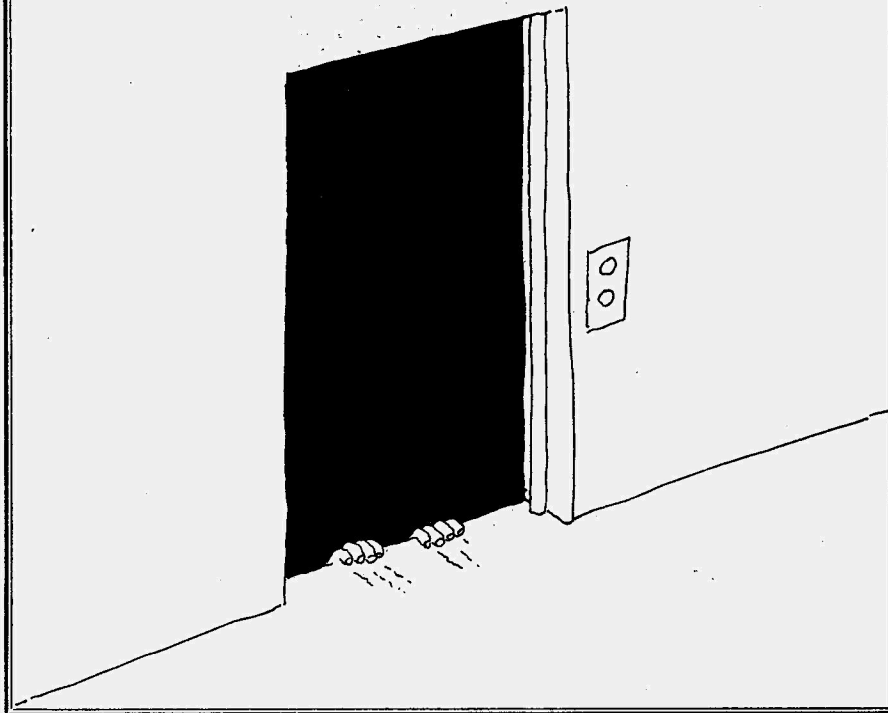
But six years ago she discovered that she might have to move into Manhattan. Panic. Along with several fellow worriers, she joined the first clinic, run by psychiatrist Manuel Zane, for elevator-phobes. People in the group had different hang-ups. Some could ride elevators alone, not in company. Others couldn't ride at all for fear of falling, suffocating, being crushed by shrinking walls, or shooting off into space. Or were simply crippled by free-floating terror. Elevator phobia is a snake pit of horrors drawing on such cousins as claustrophobia, acrophobia, shyness, and agoraphobia (fear of being out in the open among people).

"You have to distinguish between a real phobic, a person who must use stairs, and those who are fearful of elevators but ride them," explains Dr. Zane. "I think this fear is much more widespread than we realize. Phobics I've worked with watch other people in elevators. They tell me you can pick up on who's scared by who's watching every little thing that's going on. Phobic people know far more than I do about elevators."

Confronted by such a patient, a classic therapist might spend years uncovering the "real" fear involved—of masturbation, say (up and down, up and down), or of rising too high in life. But Dr. Zane's approach is less theoretical. Relying on what he calls "contextual therapy," the Manhattan analyst simply forgoes the "why" of a phobia and deals with the problem in context. One woman was so afraid of elevators she could not go near one. Even to stand before elevator buttons sent her anxiety soaring. As a first step, this phobic was placed in a phone booth; it didn't move and had windows all around. Then she tried a pantry with the door open, later with the door closed. She now felt able to stand in a real elevator with the doors propped open, later with doors closed. And finally, as the eight-week session drew to a close, she rode down one flight in a moving elevator. "Once you can do it, you're elated," says Mrs. Powell of the first breakthrough. "Then you're anxious to walk right back up and do it again."

Dr. Zane's phobia clinic at White Plains Hospital (914 949-4500) is perhaps the first of its kind. Other therapists now use similar techniques in phobia clinics at Manhattan's Roosevelt Hospital (554-6730), at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies (582-1566), and at Long Island Jewish-Hillside Medical Center (470-4556).

—R.K.



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Why We Stare at the Numbers

We all watch the numbers flash overhead, says social-ritualist Erving Goffman, “as if this activity were required to ensure getting off at the right floor.” Watching the numbers is not merely a way to tell you how fast you’re moving and where you are. By the most common psychological interpretation, keeping our eyes on the numbers lets us keep them off each other.

But anthropologist Harvey Sarles takes the opposite view. Just because we’re looking at the numbers doesn’t mean we’re watching them. To the contrary, says the University of Minnesota professor, “the real purpose of looking up is to enhance peripheral vision and allow you to keep an eye out for any quick, dangerous movements around you. Then if someone is going to jump you, you can make an adjustment.”

In his own observations on elevator behavior, Sarles has found that the up-lifted eye’s corner follows the activity of a fellow passenger as if by reflex: We look at numbers so as to watch each other. He’s also noticed how common it is for shorter passengers to back up and get a better field of peripheral vision. Sarles is sensitive to this sort of thing. He’s six feet two inches tall.

—R.K.

first person on grabs the corner by the buttons or a corner in the rear. The next passenger takes a catercorner position. Then the remaining corners are seized, and next the mid-rear-wall and the center of the car. Then packing becomes indiscriminate.

Self-esteem can be measured by elevator etiquette. The self-confident, it turns out, never get on first. Instead, they wait affably with underlings for the cab, then wave everyone ahead into the car like a hen mothering chicks. “I’ve seen David Rockefeller at Chase Manhattan wait for everyone else to get on first,” says an impressed executive recruiter. “It’s a power thing, true noblesse oblige. The really heavy high-level guy will step back and not exercise his privilege by letting others

get on first. And *that* is exercising his privilege.” A former United Nations employee recalls with amusement the time he watched diplomats of three different nations miss an elevator as each struggled to be the last man on board.

At least 270 Manhattan residents (by estimate of borough inspectors)—including some of the city’s most powerful corporate executives, like Con Ed’s Charles Luce—avoid such sticky scenes by having their own elevators. At a superficial level, the private shaft might appear to be the ultimate status symbol. But a dedicated liftman treasures those communal moments in the elevator when he can garner some of the best intelligence about his co-workers. An NBC vice-president, Paul Klein, makes it his business as a programmer

to “listen to what people are saying when riding in an elevator. . . .”

Elevators can provide a rare sense of community. Bonwit Teller last year threw a chummy party using their elevators for bars. And it was while sharing a lift at the St. Regis Hotel that Mia Farrow struck up a lasting friendship with Salvador Dali. Even President Carter finds them a source of great inspiration. “I want to help people on elevators,” he said, according to Doris Kearns, “to see what I can do for them, rather than what I can derive from them or blotting them out of my mind.”

Then there was the impeccable *Fortune* editor, Charles J. V. Murphy, who shared a Time Inc. elevator with a winsome researcher on the first day of its new Muzak system. Wincing at the sound, the editor laid down his briefcase, held out his arms, and said, “Shall we dance?”

The lasting delights of liftmanship, of course, come not from outrageous showmanship, erotic fantasies, or quick thrills. They are the joys that come from being totally alone, solo in a soaring capsule, away from phone and “In” box, where the New Yorker can enjoy a fleeting moment of complete and blissful freedom: freedom to comb hair, scratch privates, make faces, pray, or burst into song. Who’s to know? One woman says she sealed a lasting friendship the day she and a co-worker stumbled onto the information that each did exercises when alone in an elevator. “I just let it slip out that I did . . . you know, got in a quick knee bend, between the first floor and the eighth, and she said, ‘Oh, you do too?’ It was like a little mutual vulnerability, and we had this great feeling of camaraderie.”

In need of a good scream, Lynn Caine, author of *Widow*, once took an extended express elevator ride after hours, pressing the top button and howling to the top of one of Manhattan’s taller office buildings. She had two kids at home and didn’t know how to drive, she told me, so where else could she go to let it all out?

Psychologist Longfellow feels that men and women jammed in cities hurt from lack of protected privacy. “When you stop to consider,” he says, “there are not really all that many times when you’re enclosed in a space without windows, a room not much larger than you are. One such space is the womb, another the tomb. In between, there’s the elevator.” ■