

## BECAUSE WE LIKE TO WATCH

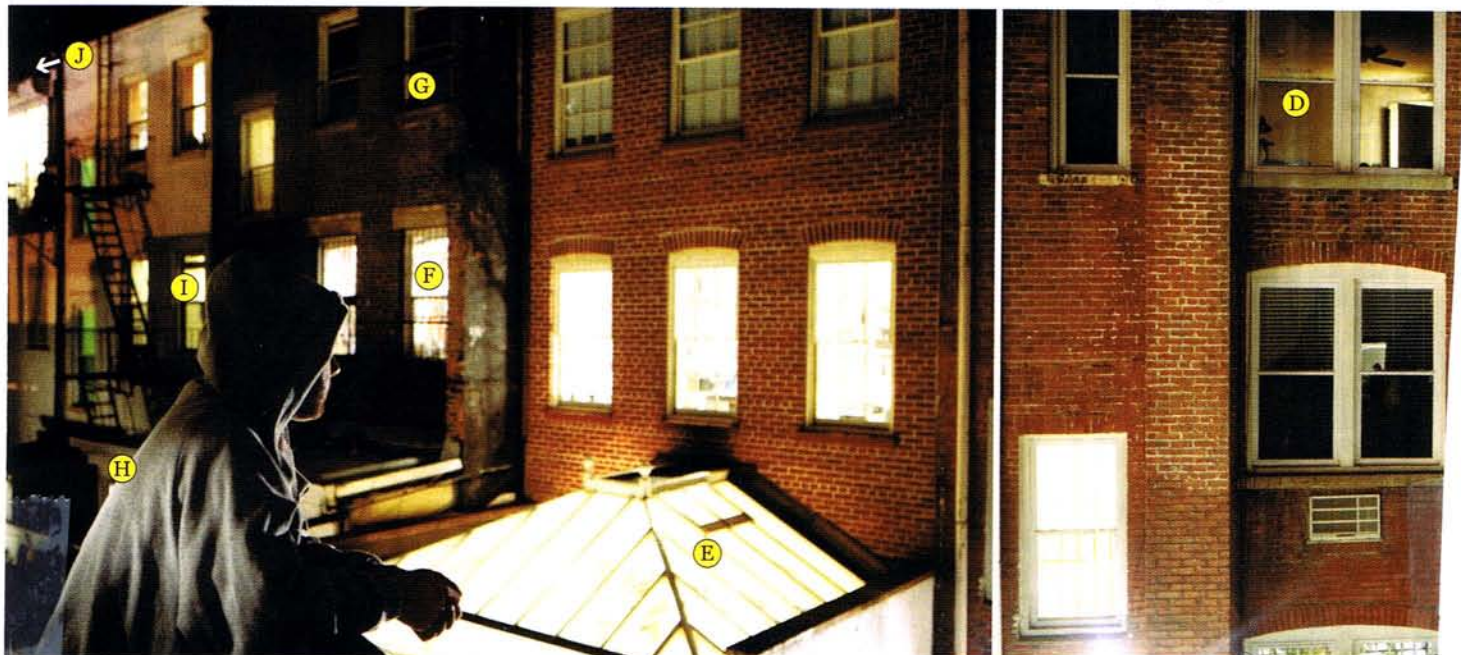
**N**EW YORKERS don't need to watch sex tapes. We live in the voyeurism capital of the world, where we can catch our neighbors in the act practically any time we want. Adorama Camera on West 18th Street sells thousands of low-end telescopes a year, and those models ain't for stargazing. Eight million people are separated by mere windowpanes. Take Nick Engstrom's back window on West 4th Street. He can see into seven immaculate townhouses, where he can glimpse casual nudity, duck hatching, and ladies' hat-making. Engstrom, 28, has ample time to consider the view: He's a creative-writing graduate student with a nice deck and a bad case of writer's block who works (or tries to) next to his window six to ten hours a day. "My backyard," he says, "is like the Hitchcock movie *Rear Window*." So we engaged in a little investigative voyeurism. Here are the people Engstrom stares at all day—who he thinks they are, who they *really* are, and what they say they see when they look at him.

ARIANNE COHEN



Nick Engstrom on his West 4th Street deck.

Photographs by Michael Edwards



**A WHAT ENGSTROM SEES:** “A famous actress lives on the top floor. She lives in the one with the stained-glass windows. My neighbor told me.” The occupants pull their shades, so Engstrom can’t confirm the celebrity’s identity. When people are visible, they “seem to read a lot of books. Like, constantly.”

**WHO REALLY LIVES THERE:** Ray Albergotti, 53, marketing executive, and Andre Becker, 48, president of Gotham Writers’ Workshop. No famous actress—the partners have lived there for a decade. “We do like to read,” says Becker. (The rumored actress is probably model Stella Tennant, who once lived on the block but moved to Scotland years ago.)

**WHAT THEY SEE OF ENGSTROM:** “That bedroom light is on all night long,” says Albergotti. “And they built that deck. Our shades are usually down, though, so we don’t see much. We hear a lot of partying from the building.”

**B WHAT ENGSTROM SEES:** “One light goes on every night for about an hour. I’ve never seen anyone there. It’s creepy.” A third-floor light shines on a glass-enclosed nursery. “How the plants get watered is a mystery.”

**WHO REALLY LIVES THERE:** Theresa Fritsch, 84, retired editorial researcher and recent widow. “I’ve lived here 30 years,” she says. “I’ve been living downstairs since my husband died. I leave a light on my plants so that the neighbors can see greenery.”

**WHAT SHE SEES OF ENGSTROM:** “I don’t look.”

**C WHAT ENGSTROM SEES:** A naked woman! “She thinks she’s high enough that no one can see her. But anyone on the third floor can. I think it’s a bit of a lonely-hearts situation. She’s like 35, though, so she’s probably more excited by us.”

**WHO REALLY LIVES THERE:** Leah Chalfen, 37, milliner. “I don’t use shades—I love seeing the sky. I never see the people directly across from me, so if they’re seeing me, it’s



very mysteriously. But I don’t think they can, so I carry on.” Chalfen has been carrying on here for eleven years.

**WHAT SHE SEES OF ENGSTROM:** “On Halloween, I saw lots of nudity and costumes and stuff through that big window. He seems to be, um, social. I also hear a lot of people, and that goes for making love, too, though I’m not sure where it’s coming from, but maybe directly across the way. Oh, and there’s been a pair of sneakers on the deck ledge forever. I think he forgot about them.”

guy—he wears a long white nightshirt. He looks a little like Jack Kevorkian.”

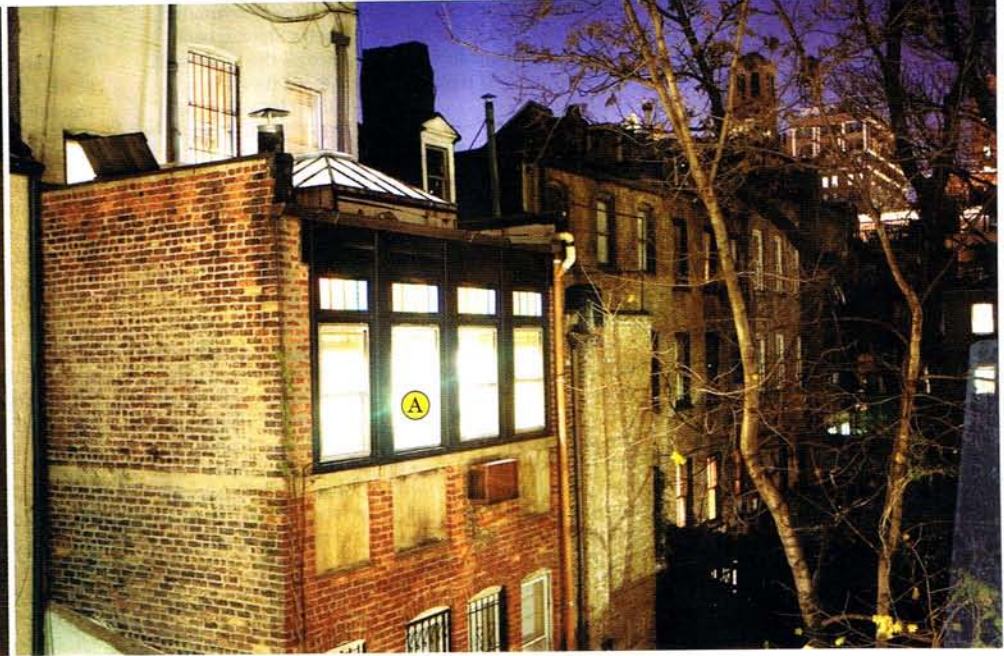
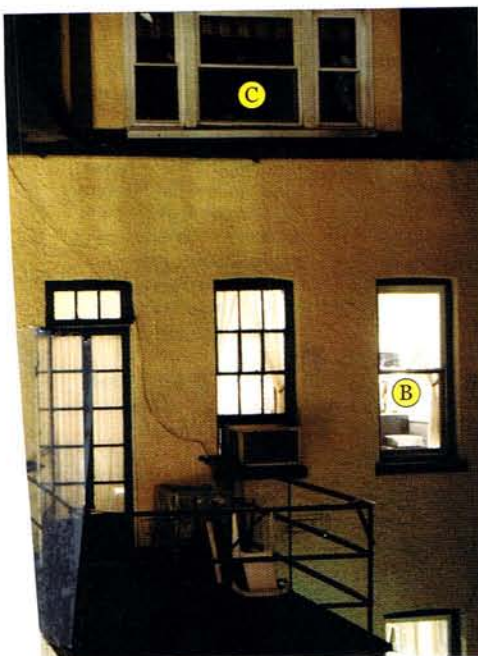
**WHO REALLY LIVES THERE:** Gregory Abels, theater director, and Janet Abels, Zen teacher. Maybe the home is silent because they’re practicing *zazen*, a form of sitting meditation. The Abels run Still Mind Zendo, where she is the *sensei* and he is the “dharma holder.”

**E WHAT ENGSTROM SEES:** “Let’s face it, looking at them reminds me that I live in an impoverished, crumbling townhouse.” Upstairs, a middle-aged man types at a computer for eleven hours a day. “I watch him write instead of writing my book,” says Engstrom. In the solarium, a woman knits “very large things. Always knitting. They’re always home. I have a

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**D WHAT ENGSTROM SEES:** An empty house. “I thought it was abandoned. The shades are always down. Then they were doing a lot of early-morning drilling, which was contributing to my hangovers. I finally saw the

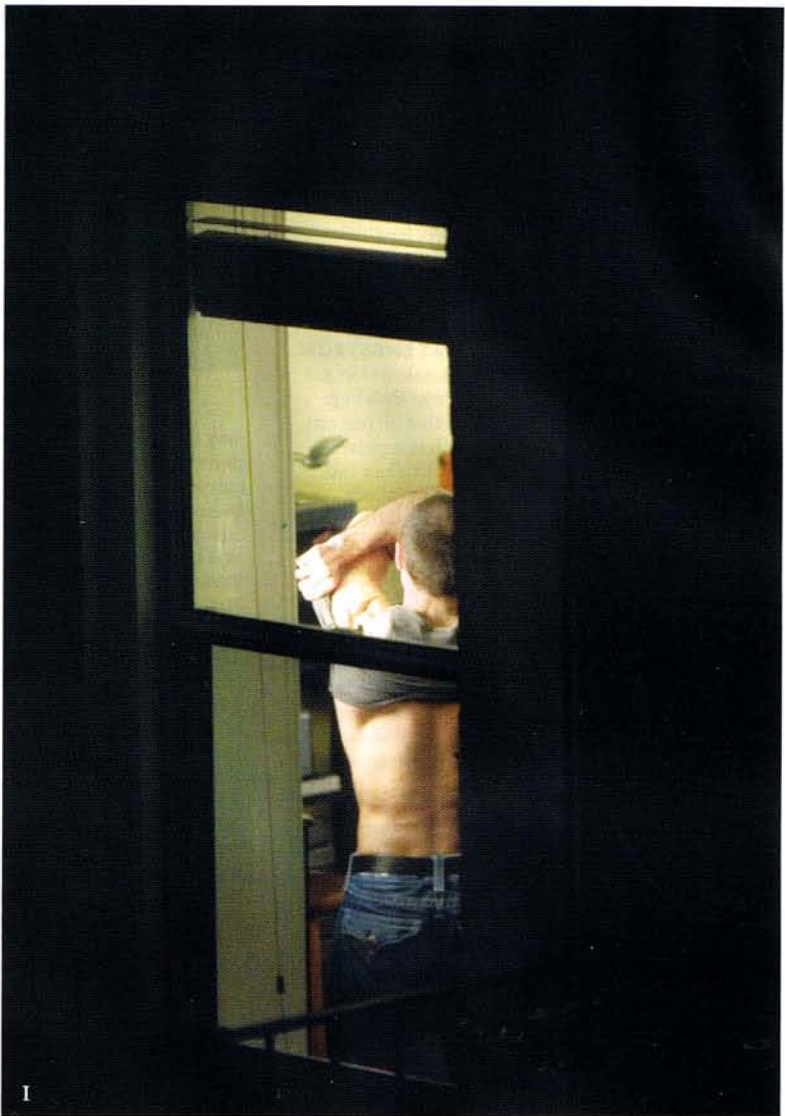




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relationship with their cat. He's very inquisitive. He comes outside and stares up at me."

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Laure-Anne Bosselaar, 63, and Kurt Brown, 63, poets. "The woman knits and the man writes? That is not what happens in this house!" says Bosselaar. Her writing room is in the front, where she writes from 4 to 10:30 A.M. daily. "And I only knit around Christmas. It's a vest for my husband." There are two cats, Soot and Snooze. "The two cats are so alike that he might think it's only one."

**WHAT THEY SEE OF**

**ENGSTROM:** "That building changes all the time. I see window

treatments, then darkness, then boxes, then window treatments again. We wave to the guy on the deck [Engstrom]. But the whole thing about such close proximity is that you don't look."

**F WHAT ENGSTROM**

**SEES:** Middle-aged man and wife who cook a lot. "Nothing unusual."

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Michael Ratner, 63, a human-rights lawyer, and Karen Ranucci, 51, general manager of "Democracy Now!," a news-radio show. Ranucci hatches live turkeys, chickens, and ducks in the backyard. Ratner, a two-decade resident, is the ad hoc block historian.

"Armand Hammer owned the three townhouses next to us—they were a compound. Minetta Stream runs under all the backyards, about six feet down."

**WHAT THEY SEE OF**

**ENGSTROM:** "I've always wondered about that window. Because it's always open, in the dead of winter and summer," says Ranucci. "And the television is always on. Always. What are they doing?"

**G WHAT ENGSTROM**

**SEES:** "An apartment of women in their twenties who occasionally go on the roof and get drunk. I've never seen a man there. Could they be lesbians?"

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Ratner and

Ranucci's 16-year-old daughter, who sometimes simply sits on the roof with her friends.

**H WHAT ENGSTROM**

**SEES:** "They just got new window shades."

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Linda Honan, 26, advertising manager. "I moved from Australia five months ago. When I first moved in, I had no blinds, and I had to sprint naked past my French doors from the bathroom to my bedroom in the dark. They took months."

**WHAT SHE SEES OF**

**ENGSTROM:** "My window shades. It's horribly dull."

**I WHAT ENGSTROM**

**SEES:** "I can see into the window, but I never see

anything going on. Nothing."

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Jack Farinhas, 34, radiologist and rock guitarist. "I'm never home, and when I am, I practice."

**WHAT HE SEES OF**

**ENGSTROM:** "I see only the people directly across from me, and they're pretty old. But one night, I was in bed and I saw this gaggle of people scaling my fire escape. Scared the crap out of me. I found out later it was the neighbor's kids."

**J WHAT ENGSTROM**

**SEES:** A large white building. "I think it's commercial."

**WHO REALLY LIVES**

**THERE:** Neighborhood gossips say it's Philip Seymour Hoffman.