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2020 in Review

- **Kim Kardashian and the Limits of Checking Your Privilege**

By Lauren Michele Jackson

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We have already, I think, exhausted the subject of Kim Kardashian West's birthday bash earlier this year. But allow me a brief recap: "40 and feeling so humbled and blessed," she wrote on October 27th, six days after her special day, captioning a series of Instagram photos showing the Kardashians and company bronzed and professionally lit at an indistinct, beachy location that one might have assumed was Malibu. It was not Malibu. "After 2 weeks of multiple health screens and asking everyone to quarantine, I surprised my closest inner circle with a trip to a private island where we could pretend things were normal just for a brief moment in time," the message continued. "I realize that for most people, this is something that is so far out of reach right now, so in moments like these, I am humbly reminded of how privileged my life is."

What was so risible wasn't Kardashian West's defensive posture; many of us have, in the past year, sprinkled similar apologia into tales of our own *COVID*-19-era outings. ("Six feet apart!" "All wearing masks!") I've come to think of these as a kind of verbal tic of the pandemic, an oral asterisk assuring others of our consideration and responsibility—very unlike *those* heedless people over there. But the "privilege" so dutifully acknowledged in Kardashian West's statement stared dumbly, blinking, at the phrase "right now," spinning a phantasmagoric version of the world in which the pandemic was the main obstacle preventing the rest of us from jetting our own inner circles to a private island. Nor did it seem to occur to the universe of Kardashian West's sentence that, in the eternal words of her own sister Kourtney, spoken years ago at another island getaway, "Kim, there's people that are dying." Kardashian West's was a sentence that so badly wanted points for trying but maybe also didn't give a fuck; her name-check of privilege was a feeble Cheeto against the battering ram of wealth, gaudily flaunted. In one photo from the festivities, Scott Disick, Kourtney's ex,

clutched their son Mason in the foreground of a dinner-party scene while, in the shadowed background, a masked waiter prepared to serve.

Twitter content

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It is inevitable that phrases diagnosing social conditions in situ will mutate over time. “Performative” has just about lost the executorial function that the British philosopher J. L. Austin established, no matter how many valiant e-mails the professor Judith Butler may write. “Intersectionality,” a term created by the law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to address a special sort of legal negligence that leaves Black women invisible to grievance, is now more typically applied to those who lie at the crossway of two or more discrete identities. “Privilege,” though—which was not created by, so much as attributed to, the scholar and educator Peggy McIntosh—hasn’t dramatically changed. The advantages of maleness and whiteness captured by McIntosh’s image of the “invisible knapsack” have been joined, in our current usage, by other politically significant traits: cis-ness, thinness, an absence of disability. But privilege has retained its capacity to affix an affirmative charge to dynamics that would otherwise be discussed strictly in terms of discrimination and oppression. Privilege gives everyone something to talk about: the downtrodden can articulate society’s injustices without salting their own wounds, while those on the cushier side of things can sidestep an inhospitable language of struggle and instead gaze inward.

But the urge to make one’s self-awareness known seemed driven to excess by the events of this year. Over the summer, as the artist and writer Hannah Black recently wrote, “The riots saved social life by proving that it was possible, with masks and moving air, to spend time together outdoors without getting sick.” Yet the more that radical possibilities unfurled across the country, the more predictable racial discourse became. In the face of cities on fire, invocations of “privilege” proliferated, joined by its helpmates

“fragility” and “antiracism,” a fountain of means-well liberalism. Such words were a civic foil to the wan corporate statements paying lip service to “systemic racism,” proffered as measures of repair against the catastrophe of silence. The confessions poured out on social media and in op-ed pages and interviews: the anthropologist who’d been arrested for using an allegedly counterfeit bill, in the nineties—privilege, he now knew, had saved his life. The baseball player who realized how privilege had emptied his empathy for his Black colleagues; the Dallas man who was taking the opportunity to “teach his young sons uncomfortable lessons about the privileges their family enjoys because they’re white.” A “check your privilege” challenge had its day on TikTok, its creator, Kenya Bundy, beckoning participants to hold up their hands and “put a finger down if you’ve been followed in a store unnecessarily,” and so forth. These broadcast testimonies swirled among more private expressions that also wanted to be heard, as acquaintances and estranged friends, family members and hookups, came out of the woodwork, confessing a privilege that they hoped to be comforted for. One began to realize that for some people there must be ecstasy in saying, over and over, for whomever would receive it, “I am . . . ,” “I am . . . ,” “I have . . . ,” “I have . . . ”

Take, for instance, Jameela Jamil, the British actress and TV host. In late September, on Instagram, someone complimented her skin, and she took the comment as an opening for this three-part reply:

> My skin is currently clear because:
>
> A) Privileged people have more access to good quality nutrition and also our lives are significantly less stressful than the lives of those with less privilege. I also get to sleep more because of this. All of these things keep my hormones in balance and I’m able to address food intolerances easily.
>
> B) I believe that trans rights are human rights. □
>
> C) I exfoliate twice a week.

She was not wrong, exactly, but how grating was the bulletin? You might have detected a secret gloating there: someone whose needs we might

already assume were being met and exceeded, what with her being a celebrity, going on and on about how her basic needs were being met and exceeded. A different kind of sleight of hand was performed earlier this month, when Olivia Jade Giannulli, the daughter of the Operation Varsity Blues delinquents Lori Loughlin and Mossimo Giannulli, confabbed with Jada Pinkett Smith and the other women of the online interview show "Red Table Talk." Giannulli, swathed in the feminine armor of gold hoops and fuchsia silk, pronounced herself "the poster child of white privilege," but it was Pinkett Smith who helped frame Giannulli's privilege as a predicament. Pinkett Smith said that she was reminded of her own daughter, Willow, who was also born into the kind of wealth that can preclude sympathy from the masses. "People go, 'Your kids are going to be fine because they're rich. We don't care,' " Pinkett Smith said. "And that's painful."

Listen

Lawrence Wright on how the pandemic response went wrong.

Copping to a better life without insight is its own mark of entitlement, of course. A more pedestrian example, only recently called to my attention, was published all the way back in June, in *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Written by the magazine's deputy editor, Deborah Way, the essay, "What the Black Lives Matter Movement Has Taught Me About My Whiteness" (another response to murdered Black people, etc., etc.), is notable only for its painstaking obliviousness. Its author might not have been implicated in a national admissions-fraud scandal or commandeered an island, but she nonetheless felt compelled to unburden the sins of her privilege, in public and at length. In breathless detail, she wrote about the time she flagged down a Black police officer to ask if she was in the process of committing a crime (stealing signs she considered an eyesore), and the time she got up close with trees on strangers' lawns (for gardening inspiration). These "liberties," as she calls them, she attributes to—of course—the privilege of whiteness. "I trespassed, I stole, I expected no consequences," Way writes, sounding a hairbreadth from smug. The liberty she took in writing a two-thousand-or-so-word, unself-conscious reënactment of these realizations doesn't seem to have crossed her mind. "I'm deciding that from now on when I take one, I'm also going to take three additional actions," she writes. But even in this promise she cannot imagine a reduced entitlement, only penance added for

liberties taken—a naughty tax for privilege enjoyed, then lamented. A cycle repeated ad infinitum. It did not occur to many people in 2020 that unbosoming can be worse than silence. ♦

A version of this story appears in the print edition of the August 29, 2022, issue.

By Anthony Lane

Above & Beyond

- **Birds in Residence, at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden**

At the **Brooklyn Botanic Garden,** bird-watchers should prepare to be house-hunters, too: the garden-wide installation “For the Birds,” on view until Oct. 23, features site-specific birdhouses made by thirty-three artists. The Indian-born, New York-based designer Sourabh Gupta fashioned the cloudlike “Woven” (pictured) from burlap, husk, plaster, and water-based sealer, in the hope that a quarrel of sparrows might take up residence. On Aug. 27, Martha Harbison, of the Feminist Bird Club, leads a guided tour.

By Jill Lepore

By Ali Ruth

By Andrea K. Scott

By Zareen Choudhury

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Bad Guys

- **Richard Pryor: “I Was Born Under the Sign of Funny”**

By Jamaica Kincaid

Two things we know about Richard Pryor for sure: he is the funniest man in America, and, after Muhammad Ali, he is the baddest person anywhere. “Bad” here does not mean rotten or no good. It means being so extraordinarily good at doing something that for someone to call you the greatest, or anything like that, does not quite measure up to describing how incredible you are. Only the word “bad” will do. For instance, not long ago we saw Pryor performing at the Felt Forum, in Madison Square Garden, and he said things that are usually considered uncomplimentary about blacks, whites, and women, and the audience, which was made up of blacks, whites, and women, laughed and laughed.

He was in town the other day, and around dinnertime we stopped by his suite at the Regency Hotel for a chat with him. Before we had a chance to say hello, he stuck a finger out and showed us a ring he was wearing and said, “Look at this ring. It’s nice. Ain’t pimpy at all.” We looked. It was a slim, plain gold band decorated with three delicately set diamonds. Then we looked at him. We had never before seen him close up, and noticed that he is quite handsome. He is tall, slim (he was dieting, he said), with a boyish face that is especially nice when he smiles. He was wearing tapered gray trousers, a mottled black-and-white sweater, and brown mules. In his room with him were a woman he introduced as his girl friend; his manager; his valet; and his jeweller.

We spent three hours with him, and during that time this is what happened: he bought a gold necklace with a heart-shaped, diamond-studded pendant for the woman he had introduced as his girl friend; he bought a gold ring for his manager and a gold ring for his valet; he wrote a check for sixteen hundred dollars to his jeweller; he ordered a dinner of sweet-and-sour fish from Greener Pastures, a health-food restaurant not far from the hotel; he picked up his spinach with his bare hands and said with a British accent, “I like my spinach squeeze-dried, don’t you?”; when the telephone rang, he spoke into his mules; during dinner, he watched “The CBS Evening News with Walter

Cronkite" and mimicked Walter Cronkite many times; after dinner, he disappeared for a while with a copy of *U. S. News & World Report*. When he was not mimicking Walter Cronkite, these are some of the things he said: "I am now a vegetarian. I was standing at the corner of Forty-second Street, and this man came up to me and said, 'Rise, and go forth and be a vegetarian.' One thing I can say—I was lucky he didn't pick my pocket. Vegetables are funny. They have a great sense of humor. You drop their seeds in the ground and they rub around in the dirt and then they grow up and you can eat them. Politicians are always doing things to Negroes. One will be standing on his head, another on his ass, and another on his foot. Politician to Negro: 'Look, buddy, this is what I can do for you.' Negro to politician: 'Man, will you take your foot off my mother?' I'm trying to figure out things to sell to the Chinese. They don't dig Joe DiMaggio. How about an album of Mao's greatest hits? I was born under the sign of funny. I haven't met the other people born under that sign yet, but I think a couple of them became scientists. You know how I get to be funny? I go to sleep for about a year. I wake up with cobwebs all over my face. I roll them up in a large ball with milk and sugar, eat it quickly, and then I start laughing. People say, What's so funny? I tell them. They start laughing. Then I have lunch. Some of the things I say are true, some are not, but it all happened." ♦

By Nick Paumgarten

By Michael Azerrad

By Lauren Markham

By Vinson Cunningham

Books

- **Elizabeth II’s Fine-Tuned Feelings**

By Martin Amis

Word of the car crash reached Balmoral Castle, in Scotland, at one o'clock in the morning of August 31, 1997. Word of the death came through at four. Prince Charles was in residence, with his sons; the Queen advised him not to wake them (they would need all their strength), adding, "We must get the radios out of their rooms." Charles broke the news just after seven. Prince Harry, then twelve, couldn't quite take it in. Was everyone sure? he asked; would somebody check? The boys were asked if they would like to accompany the family to church. (It was Sunday.) Prince William, then fifteen, wanted to attend—so he could "talk to Mummy."

"The world's going to go completely mad," Charles said, presciently, when he heard. By the following Thursday, the Royal Family was facing the strangest crisis in its history. Certainly, King Egbert (802-39) would not have known what to make of it; and neither did Queen Elizabeth II (1952-). "We don't have protocol here," an eminent courtier once drawled, "just bloody good manners." But national cohesion, and indeed public order, now depended on a preposterous punctilio: the people wanted a flag flying at half-mast above Buckingham Palace, and the Queen wasn't having it. Flags were flying at half-mast at other royal seats; the flag at the palace, however, flies only when the Queen is staying there (and she was still in Scotland: a further scandal). The flag at the palace doesn't go halfway down for anybody's death, even the monarch's. Within the inner circle, the dispute was unprecedentedly fearsome. ("A lot of people," an aide said, "were heavily scarred by it.") The desperate courtiers were unanimous: the flag must go up. But the Windsors hadn't yet sensed which way the wind was blowing.

More from the Archive

As in all matters royal, we are dealing here not with pros and cons, with arguments and counter-arguments; we are dealing with signs and symbols, with fever and magic. To the Queen, the flag (or its absence) was an emblem of her nonnegotiable inheritance. To her subjects, the flag was an emblem—a display—of grief; and a display of grief was what they were demanding.

Prime Minister Tony Blair was onto "the mood" so quickly that you feel he must have partaken of it. Before noon on that same Sunday, he huskily addressed the nation: "We are today a nation, in Britain, in a state of shock, in mourning, in grief that is so deeply painful for us. . . . She was the People's Princess, and that's how she will stay, how she will remain in our hearts and in our memories forever." Now the British newspapers, having cheerfully savaged Diana for years (right up to and including that weekend), were cheerfully at work on her black-bordered canonization. *"where is our queen*? *where is her flag*? *" "show us you care." "your people are suffering. speak to us, ma'am."*

Diana's funeral was set for Saturday. The Queen had intended to process south, in the royal train, on Friday night. But by now she had adapted to the new reality—had remembered that she was a servant as well as a potentate. She flew down on Friday afternoon; she would speak, she would show us she cared; the flag, which had not been lowered for her father, George VI, would be lowered for Diana. There were heightened fears for the safety of the Queen and Prince Philip when they arrived at Buckingham Palace. Obligingly, they climbed out of their limousine and inspected the shoulder-high heaps of flowers and tributes ("Diana, Queen of Heaven," "Regina Coeli," and so on). It was felt that, at the very least, there might be a repetition of Queen Victoria's experience in her Golden Jubilee year (1887), when she was greeted in the East End by what she called "a horrid noise" she had never heard before: booing. It didn't happen. Here is Robert Lacey's account in his exemplary book "Monarch: The Life and Reign of Elizabeth II" (Free Press; $27.50):

> As Elizabeth II, dressed in black, walked down the line of mourners, an eleven-year-old girl handed her five red roses.
>
> "Would you like me to place them for you?" asked the queen.
>
> "No, Your Majesty," replied the girl. "They are for you."
>
> "You could hear the crowd begin to clap," recalls an aide. "I remember thinking, 'Gosh, it's all right.' "

Well, not yet. There was also the speech. The Queen would have to come as close as she could bring herself to pretending that she loved Princess Diana.

Lacey is very good on the Queen's feelings about feelings, the "curious knotting in the impulses" that complicates her expressions of emotion. She could write a passionate four-page letter to a friend in response to a brief commiseration about the violent death of a favorite corgi. This was heartache of a manageable and articulate order. But when, in 1966, a hill of slag collapsed on a village in South Wales, Aberfan, killing a hundred and sixteen children (and twenty-eight adults), the Queen, against all advice and family precedent, delayed her visit for more than a week. Her husband and her brother-in-law went (and so did the P.M., Harold Wilson); but she felt she would be an immodest distraction from the continuing rescue and relief. When she did go (and she has maintained her links with Aberfan), she involuntarily revealed why she had stayed away. In the photographs, you can see the terror, as well as the pity, in her eyes. She was the Queen. And Aberfan: what did *that* tell her about the state of Great Britain? Monarchical emotion is emotion hugely magnified. It asks for a detachment that Queen Elizabeth only imperfectly commands.

She respects emotion, and cannot fake it. This is one of Lacey's typically pertinent anecdotes:

> Early in her reign, Elizabeth II was due to visit the Yorkshire town of Kingston upon Hull and asked one of her private secretaries to prepare a first draft of her speech.
>
> "I am very pleased to be in Kingston today," the draft confidently started.
>
> The young queen crossed out the word "very."
>
> "I will be *pleased* to be in Kingston," she explained. "But I will not be *very* pleased."

One duly notes, however, that she was, nonetheless, sincerely "pleased" to mingle with various humdrum worthies in the dour surrounds of Kingston

upon Hull. The woman is adamantine. How could she emote, to order, for the definitively brittle Diana?

It was to be, in effect, her first live televised speech—in two senses. The Queen addressed the people in real time; and she also had to show them the live being, the creature of glands and membranes. She spoke from the Chinese Dining Room in Buckingham Palace. The windows were open, and you could hear the crowd, ten thousand or more, milling and murmuring in the background. An aide asked the Queen, "Do you think you can do it?" And she answered, "If that's what I've got to do." The countdown began; the floor manager mouthed "Go."

She was being asked to confront an intense need that she didn't understand. No one understood it. Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober's "The Monarchy: An Oral Biography of Elizabeth II" (Broadway; $32.50) contains, at this point, entry after entry from assorted insiders expressing blunt incomprehension: "absolutely amazed . . . really amazing . . . beyond my capacity to understand . . . inexplicable . . . astonished . . . staggered," and so on. And we still don't understand it. My best guess is that the phenomenon was millennial. Human beings have always behaved strangely when the calendar zeros loom. And Dianamania bore several clear affinities to the excesses described in (for example) Norman Cohn's "The Pursuit of the Millennium": it involved mass emotion; it exalted a personage of low cultural level; it was self-flagellatory in tendency; and it was very close to violence. The phenomenon was, then, part of mankind's cyclical festival of irrationality.

"So what I say to you now," Elizabeth II made clear, "as your Queen and as a grandmother, I say from my heart." It was an extraordinary performance: she gave a near-pathological populace what it wanted, while remaining true to her own self. Of the two words they most needed to hear, she allowed them one ("grief"), but not the other (see below). She didn't sell her integrity to the yearnings of the many. Nor did she attempt the solace of aphoristic eloquence. Curiously enough, she saved that for the events of September 11th: "Grief is the price we pay for love." One final, mangled irony: Diana's boyfriend, Dodi Fayed, was an Egyptian Muslim. "To Diana and Dodi," read the inscription on one floral tribute, "together in heaven." *Which* heaven?

And it was not yet over. With the Windsors, a familial drama inevitably becomes a national drama; but the drama had now become global. At dinner on Friday, it was still uncertain whether the two young princes would walk behind the gun carriage that held their mother's coffin; and "their composure," as Lacey notes, "would be the pivot on which the whole occasion turned." The struggle, once again, was not to divulge emotion but to master it. This was a heavy call on their courage, and, of the two, Prince William was the more uncertain. The royal, the kingly thing, plainly, was to walk. Prince Philip, who had not intended to join the cortège, finally asked his grandson, "If I walk, will you walk with me?" And William walked.

If we are to tiptoe into the psyches of the royals, we must first understand that they were all world-famous *babies*. Driven out of the Royal Mews in an open carriage for her regular airings, the diapered Elizabeth drew large crowds of cheering, waving admirers; one of her earliest skills was to wave back. She made the cover of *Time* at the age of three. The first biography, "The Story of Princess Elizabeth," appeared when she was four. "She has an air of authority & reflectiveness astonishing in an infant," wrote Winston Churchill, who would be the first of her ten Prime Ministers. As the Queen celebrates her seventy-sixth birthday, she can reflect that the only time she misbehaved in public was at her christening. She cried throughout, and had to be dosed with dill water.

And the Princess was, at this stage, a minor royal. She was the granddaughter of George V (whom she called Grandpa England), and the niece of the heir apparent, Edward, Prince of Wales. The King died in January, 1936, when Elizabeth was nine. On December 10th, Edward VIII signed the "Instrument of Abdication" (in order to marry the twice-divorced Wallis Simpson), and, in his later wanderings, became a living example of royal futility. The ten-year-old now became the heir presumptive. While her father, who was suddenly George VI, went off to the Accession Council on December 12th, Princess Elizabeth and her sister, Princess Margaret, were given a refresher course on their curtsy by their governess, Marion Crawford; on his return they greeted him with this formality, and it jolted him. "He stood for a moment touched and taken aback. Then he stooped and kissed them both warmly," Crawford wrote. "Does that mean you're going to be Queen?" was a question Margaret put to her sister. "Yes, I suppose it does," said Elizabeth. "Poor you," said Margaret. Their grandmother Lady

Strathmore noticed that Elizabeth had started "ardently praying for a brother."

Prince Philip of Greece was her third cousin, and she had known him, slightly, since childhood. The *coup de foudre* seems to have come when she was thirteen and he was an eighteen-year-old cadet—and the Second World War was six weeks away. Although penniless and homeless, and a nomad all his life, Philip could boast a sensational pedigree (he had a great-great-grandmother in common with Elizabeth: Queen Victoria). His broke father moped in Monte Carlo. His deaf mother fancied that she was the mistress of both Jesus Christ and Buddha; Freud himself advised radiation of the ovaries "to accelerate the menopause." The mental frailty of Diana Spencer has sometimes been attributed to her unhappy childhood. Much more graphic insecurity had the opposite effect on Philip, investing him with a brisk, and sometimes brusque, self-sufficiency. Elizabeth knew what she would be needing in a husband—a source of strength. And this was the strength that Philip was still able to offer his grandsons, nearly sixty years later, on that Saturday in 1997.

Philip and Elizabeth both had a "good" war, Philip distinguishing himself on the battleship Valiant, Elizabeth forming part of the royal *tableau vivant* of national solidarity. (Hitler called her mother "the most dangerous woman in Europe.") They corresponded, and there were visits to Windsor and elsewhere when Philip was on leave. Early in 1947, Elizabeth went abroad for the first time, to South Africa; the idea was to train her up for royal responsibilities but also to test the constancy of her feelings for Philip, to whom she was now unofficially engaged. On April 21st, her twenty-first birthday, she addressed the Empire and the Commonwealth, and the speech was to be broadcast from Cape Town. "It has made me cry," she admitted, after reviewing the final draft. Elizabeth was talking to her people, but one suspects that she was also talking to her future husband:

> It is very simple. I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong. But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do: I know that your support will be unfailingly

> given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.

It is not *very* simple, is it—to agree to become a metaphor? At this time, Philip told a friend, "This is my destiny—to support my wife in what lies ahead for her."

They married later that year—a flash of luxury in the postwar monochrome. Within three months, Elizabeth was carrying Charles III. Philip was posted to Malta, and for a while she experienced the unrelieved exoticism of ordinary life. They were in Kenya when word of the King's death reached the royal party. An old friend passed the news on to Philip, and later said, "I never felt so sorry for anyone in all my life." George VI was fifty-six. The total claim on the young couple's freedom was now formally submitted. "He took her up to the garden," the friend went on. "And they walked slowly up and down the lawn while he talked and talked and talked to her."

In addition to their innumerable duties, almost all of them excruciating, the Royal Family has one main function: to go on being a family. In "The Royals," Kitty Kelley's louche but lively blockbuster of 1997, the most capacious subsection in the index for Prince Philip is "and women" ("76, 152, 154-55, 159-60, 192, 196, 265, 422, 423-27, 510-11"). Lacey's emphasis falls the other way ("rumors of infidelities, 166-168, 212"). And there is certainly a moral persuasiveness in Philip's confidence to a relative, "How could I be unfaithful to the Queen? There is no way that she could possibly retaliate." The skittish Diana could not dissimulate her exasperation with married life; but neither could the duteous Charles. The demeanor of his parents, at least to this distant observer, is eloquent of mutual ease and admiration. Anyway, there they are, still, in 2002.

Divorce is modern, and monarchy must fear modernity. Now modernity came to the Windsors in the form of their own children. When Princess Margaret broke up with the Earl of Snowdon, it was the highest-profile royal divorce in centuries. It used to be the case that the Lord Chamberlain personally excluded the divorced from the Queen's presence. "In later years the Lord Chamberlain's duties were modified," Kelley writes eagerly, "so the Queen could visit her divorced cousins, her divorced sister, her divorced daughter, and her two divorced sons, including the heir to the throne."

Meanwhile, her third son, Edward (recently married), was somehow acquiring the nickname of Dockyard Doris.

So we come to 1992, the "annus horribilis." Princess Anne divorced in April. In August, the Duchess of York—Fergie—was photographed topless with a "financial adviser" (who was administering the famous "toe-job"). At this juncture, another tabloid released the "Squidgygate" tapes, in which Diana pillow-talked on the phone with a young car salesman. And that November it was revealed that Charles had been recorded while having a similarly intimate chat with Camilla Parker Bowles. Long intrigued by the idea of the transmigration of souls, Charles saw himself reborn as, "God forbid, a Tampax," so that he could "just live inside your trousers." The Camillagate and Squidgygate tapes were both available on phone lines provided by the newspapers. You could listen to Charles saying, "I want to feel my way along you, all over you and up and down you and in and out . . . particularly in and out." Then you could listen to Diana saying, "Bloody hell, after all I've done for this fucking family." Then came the great fire at Windsor. The monarchy was burning.

Or so it seemed. In fact, only Diana had the power to bring it all down; and this was her semi-subliminal intention. George Orwell, in his long essay "The English People," described the placards in the streets during the Silver Jubilee celebrations for George V, in 1935: "Some of the London slum streets bore . . . the rather servile slogan 'Poor but Loyal.' " Other slogans, though, "coupled loyalty to the King with hostility to the landlord, such as 'Long Live the King. Down with the Landlord,' or more often, 'No Landlords Wanted' or 'Landlords Keep Away. ' " Orwell elaborates:

> The affection shown for George V . . . was obviously genuine, and it was even possible to see in it the survival, or recrudescence, of an idea almost as old as history, the idea of the King and the common people being in a sort of alliance against the upper classes.

What Diana tried to bring about was an alliance between herself and the common people against the Royal Family. "The People's Princess" was an entirely sophistical notion—and it worked. Despite the "pattern of deceit and narcissism" (Lacey), the schemes and manipulations, and the near-Sicilian taste for revenge, Diana, of course, had a genius for love—for indiscriminate

love. Her besetting humor was self-pity; and temporary relief from its corrosiveness, I think, lay behind the undoubted force of her presence among the suffering. This connects again to the dangerous emotions that attended her death. Self-pity is a natural component of grief, of a roused sense of mortality, but in Dianamania it sourly predominated. “Bloody hell, after all I’ve done for this fucking family”: In the end, horribly, what she did for the family was to die. It was a Restoration.

This project of Diana’s was doubly radical, because the monarchy is maintained by love. If you are English, then your patriotism is unconscious (Orwell again); when it becomes conscious, and focussed, it surprises you with a sense of hunger awakened and allayed. The feeling is unmistakably familial. “A princely marriage is the brilliant edition of a universal fact,” Bagehot wrote, “and as such, it rivets mankind.” The same could be said of a princely funeral—or, nowadays, of a princely divorce. The Royal Family is just a family, writ inordinately large. They are the glory, not the power; and it would clearly be far more grownup to do without them. But riveted mankind is hopelessly addicted to the irrational, with reliably disastrous results, planetwide. The monarchy allows us to take a holiday from reason; and on that holiday we do no harm. ♦

By Sam Knight

By Andrew Solomon

By Stephania Taladrid

By Michael Azerrad

Comment

- **The Celebrity Profile, from Piaf to Kardashian**

By Michael Schulman

One morning in 1957, Truman Capote arrived at the Miyako Hotel, in Kyoto, to interview Marlon Brando. The press-shy star was in Japan shooting "Sayonara" for Warner Bros. The film's director, Joshua Logan, had got wind of Capote's plans and, upon seeing the diminutive, piccolo-voiced writer at the front desk, picked him up like a disobedient poodle and plunked him outside. Capote returned later with a bottle of vodka and found Brando in his hotel room, surrounded by dirty socks and hangers-on and books about Buddhism. Left alone with Capote, Brando inhaled apple pie and cigarettes and talked—about his "inability to love," about how he was doing "Sayonara" for the money, about his alcoholic mother—and Capote listened. He left at two in the morning.

The result, "The Duke in His Domain," ran in *The New Yorker* that November, at some fourteen thousand words, giving the public the kind of soul-piercing, myth-puncturing portrait of a celebrity uncommon in an era when the studio system kept its stars on an unreachable pedestal. Brando, Capote concluded, was not so much a deity as "a young man sitting on a pile of candy," by which he meant the trappings of fame. Brando had begged Capote not to publish the piece, pleading that his innards would be "festooned with harlequin streamers for public musing." When the story came out, the star raged to his director, "I'll kill him!"

"It's too late," Logan replied. "You should have killed him before you invited him to dinner."

As the decade's preëminent Method actor, Brando was redefining what a movie star was: not a suave personality with a mid-Atlantic accent but a mumbling, implosive mess of a human being, as vulnerable as an open wound. But Capote, taking inspiration from Lillian Ross's astonishing *New Yorker* pieces on Ernest Hemingway and John Huston, was also breaking new ground, giving a celebrity portrait the depth and the detail of fiction. (Regrettably, that detail included Capote's cringey descriptions of Japan and its "giggling" girls.) Discussing the Brando assignment with *The New Yorker's* editor, William Shawn, Capote had argued that certain genres of journalism could be elevated to high art. "Let's take the very lowest form of journalism that could possibly be: an interview with a movie star," he said. "I mean, what could be lower than that?"

This week's issue plumbs the magazine's archives to show how the lowest form of journalism can reach the heights of nonfiction prose. This selection of Profiles, essays, Talk of the Town pieces, and even fiction offers extreme closeups of cultural titans, spanning seven decades. Together, they tell a story of how the very concept of celebrity has evolved, from the dawn of Hollywood to the democratizing advent of Instagram. (We're all celebrities now, with the right filter.) They also trace the idiosyncratic spirit of the magazine's celebrity coverage, driven less by the winds of popular taste than by the enthusiasms of writers. The oldest piece in this issue, by A. J. Liebling, is an encounter with the chanteuse Edith Piaf in 1947. The newest, by Lauren Michele Jackson, is a 2020 deconstruction of Kim Kardashian's pandemic-flouting birthday bash and the resulting discourse about "privilege." It's often said that figures like Kardashian are "famous for being famous," but stars have always held an allure that transcends craft. Consider the silent-film ingénue Louise Brooks, who helped invent the freewheeling flapper image of the Jazz Age. Kenneth Tynan's Profile, from 1979, captures her ineffable magic, as Tynan watches her old movies in a reverie, before introducing us to Brooks at seventy-one, arthritic and reclusive but still mesmerizing.

Celebrity is, among other things, a way of marking time. Who were we when Bob Dylan was a rising folksinger in 1964, the year that Nat Hentoff profiled him? Or when Missy Elliott burst onto the hip-hop scene in 1997, the year that Hilton Als captured her brash, stagestruck ascent? These pieces of writing are time capsules but also destinations of the mind, beckoning us to return. ♦

By Lauren Collins

By Jessica Winter

By Michael Azerrad

By Michael Schulman

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, August 16, 2022**

By Patrick Berry

Decade in Review

- **The Age of Instagram Face**

By Jia Tolentino

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

This past summer, I booked a plane ticket to Los Angeles with the hope of investigating what seems likely to be one of the oddest legacies of our rapidly expiring decade: the gradual emergence, among professionally beautiful women, of a single, cyborgian face. It's a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella. The face is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic—it suggests a *National Geographic* composite illustrating what Americans will look like in 2050, if every American of the future were to be a direct descendant of Kim Kardashian West, Bella Hadid, Emily Ratajkowski, and Kendall Jenner (who looks exactly like Emily Ratajkowski). "It's like a sexy . . . baby . . . tiger," Cara Craig, a high-end New York colorist, observed to me recently. The celebrity makeup artist Colby Smith told me, "It's Instagram Face, duh. It's like an unrealistic sculpture. Volume on volume. A face that looks like it's made out of clay."

Instagram, which launched as the decade was just beginning, in October, 2010, has its own aesthetic language: the ideal image is always the one that instantly pops on a phone screen. The aesthetic is also marked by a familiar human aspiration, previously best documented in wedding photography, toward a generic sameness. Accounts such as Insta Repeat illustrate the platform's monotony by posting grids of indistinguishable photos posted by different users—a person in a yellow raincoat standing at the base of a waterfall, or a hand holding up a bright fall leaf. Some things just perform well.

The human body is an unusual sort of Instagram subject: it can be adjusted, with the right kind of effort, to perform better and better over time. Art directors at magazines have long edited photos of celebrities to better match unrealistic beauty standards; now you can do that to pictures of yourself with just a few taps on your phone. Snapchat, which launched in 2011 and was originally known as a purveyor of disappearing messages, has maintained its user base in large part by providing photo filters, some of which allow you to become intimately familiar with what your face would look like if it were ten per cent more conventionally attractive—if it were thinner, or had smoother skin, larger eyes, fuller lips. Instagram has added an array of flattering selfie filters to its Stories feature. FaceTune, which was released in 2013 and promises to help you "wow your friends with every selfie," enables even more precision. A number of Instagram accounts are dedicated to identifying the tweaks that celebrities make to their features with photo-editing apps. Celeb Face, which has more than a million followers, posts photos from the accounts of celebrities, adding arrows to spotlight signs of careless FaceTuning. Follow Celeb Face for a month, and this constant perfecting process begins to seem both mundane and pathological. You get the feeling that these women, or their assistants, alter photos out of a simple defensive reflex, as if FaceTuning your jawline were the Instagram equivalent of checking your eyeliner in the bathroom of the bar.

"I think ninety-five per cent of the most-followed people on Instagram use FaceTune, easily," Smith told me. "And I would say that ninety-five per cent of these people have also had some sort of cosmetic procedure. You can see things getting trendy—like, everyone's getting brow lifts via Botox now. Kylie Jenner didn't used to have that sort of space around her eyelids, but now she does."

Twenty years ago, plastic surgery was a fairly dramatic intervention: expensive, invasive, permanent, and, often, risky. But, in 2002, the Food and Drug Administration approved Botox for use in preventing wrinkles; a few years later, it approved hyaluronic-acid fillers, such as Juvéderm and Restylane, which at first filled in fine lines and wrinkles and now can be used to restructure jawlines, noses, and cheeks. These procedures last for six months to a year and aren't nearly as expensive as surgery. (The average price per syringe of filler is six hundred and eighty-three dollars.) You can go get Botox and then head right back to the office.

A class of celebrity plastic surgeons has emerged on Instagram, posting time-lapse videos of injection procedures and before-and-after photos, which receive hundreds of thousands of views and likes. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, Americans received more than seven million neurotoxin injections in 2018, and more than two and a half million filler injections. That year, Americans spent $16.5 billion on cosmetic surgery; ninety-two per cent of these procedures were performed on women. Thanks to injectables, cosmetic procedures are no longer just for people who want huge changes, or who are deep in battle with the aging process—they're for millennials, or even, in rarefied cases, members of Gen Z. Kylie Jenner, who was born in 1997, spoke on her reality-TV show "Life of Kylie" about wanting to get lip fillers after a boy commented on her small lips when she was fifteen.

Ideals of female beauty that can only be met through painful processes of physical manipulation have always been with us, from tiny feet in imperial China to wasp waists in nineteenth-century Europe. But contemporary systems of continual visual self-broadcasting—reality TV, social media—have created new disciplines of continual visual self-improvement. Social media has supercharged the propensity to regard one's personal identity as a potential source of profit—and, especially for young women, to regard one's body this way, too. In October, Instagram announced that it would be removing "all effects associated with plastic surgery" from its filter arsenal, but this appears to mean all effects *explicitly* associated with plastic surgery, such as the ones called "Plastica" and "Fix Me." Filters that give you Instagram Face will remain. For those born with assets—natural assets, capital assets, or both—it can seem sensible, even automatic, to think of your body the way that a McKinsey consultant would think about a corporation: identify underperforming sectors and remake them, discard whatever doesn't increase profits and reorient the business toward whatever does.

Smith first started noticing the encroachment of Instagram Face about five years ago, "when the lip fillers started," he said. "I'd do someone's makeup and notice that there were no wrinkles in the lips at all. Every lipstick would go on so smooth." It has made his job easier, he noted, archly. "My job used to be to make people look like that, but now people come to me already looking like that, because they're surgically enhanced. It's great. We used to

have to contour you to give you those cheeks, but now you just went out and got them."

There was something strange, I said, about the racial aspect of Instagram Face—it was as if the algorithmic tendency to flatten everything into a composite of greatest hits had resulted in a beauty ideal that favored white women capable of manufacturing a look of rootless exoticism. "Absolutely," Smith said. "We're talking an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern." Did Smith think that Instagram Face was actually making people look better? He did. "People are absolutely getting prettier," he said. "The world is so visual right now, and it's only getting more visual, and people want to upgrade the way they relate to it."

This was an optimistic way of looking at the situation. I told Smith that I couldn't shake the feeling that technology is rewriting our bodies to correspond to its own interests—rearranging our faces according to whatever increases engagement and likes. "Don't you think it's scary to imagine people doing this forever?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, it's *obviously* terrifying," he said.

Beverly Hills is L.A.'s plastic-surgery district. In the sun-scorched isosceles triangle between the palm trees and department stores of Wilshire and the palm trees and boutique eateries of Santa Monica, there's a doctor, or several, on every block. On a Wednesday afternoon, I parked my rental car in a tiny underground lot, emerged next to a Sprinkles Cupcakes and a bougie psychic's office, and walked to a consultation appointment I had made with one of the best-known celebrity plastic surgeons, whose before-and-after Instagram videos frequently attract half a million views.

I'd booked the consultation because I was curious about the actual experience of a would-be millennial patient—a fact I had to keep mentioning to my boyfriend, who seemed moderately worried that I would come back looking like a human cat. A few weeks before, I had downloaded Snapchat for the first time and tried out the filters, which were in fact very flattering: they gave me radiant skin, doe lashes, a face shaped like a heart. It wasn't

lost on me that when I put on a lot of makeup I am essentially trying to create a version of this face. And it wasn't hard for me to understand why millennial women who were born within spitting distance of Instagram Face would want to keep drawing closer to it. In a world where women are rewarded for youth and beauty in a way that they are rewarded for nothing else—and where a strain of mainstream feminism teaches women that self-objectification is progressive, because it's profitable—cosmetic work might seem like one of the few guaranteed high-yield projects that a woman could undertake.

The plastic surgeon's office was gorgeous and peaceful, a silvery oasis. A receptionist, humming along to "I Want to Know What Love Is," handed me intake forms, which asked about stress factors and mental health, among other things. I signed an arbitration agreement. A medical assistant took photos of my face from five different angles. A medical consultant with lush hair and a deeply warm, caring aura came into the room. Careful not to lie, and lightly alarmed by the fact that I didn't need to, I told her that I'd never gotten fillers or Botox but that I was interested in looking better, and that I wanted to know what experts would advise. She was complimentary, and told me that I shouldn't get too much done. After a while, she suggested that maybe I would want to pay attention to my chin as I aged, and maybe my cheeks, too—maybe I'd want to lift them a little bit.

Then the celebrity doctor came in, giving off the intensity of a surgeon and the focus of a glassblower. I said to him, too, that I was just interested in looking better, and wanted to know what an expert would recommend. I showed him one of my filtered Snapchat photos. He glanced at it, nodded, and said, "Let me show you what we could do." He took a photo of my face on his phone and projected it onto a TV screen on the wall. "I like to use FaceTune," he said, tapping and dragging.

Within a few seconds, my face was shaped to match the Snapchat photo. He took another picture of me, in profile, and FaceTuned the chin again. I had a heart-shaped face, and visible cheekbones. All of this was achievable, he said, with chin filler, cheek filler, and perhaps an ultrasound procedure that would dissolve the fat in the lower half of my cheeks—or we could use Botox to paralyze and shrink my masseter muscles.

I asked the doctor what he told people who came to see him wanting to look like his best-known patients. “People come in with pictures of my most famous clients all the time,” he said. “I say, ‘I can’t turn you into them. I can’t, if you’re Asian, give you a Caucasian face, or I could, but it wouldn’t be right—it wouldn’t look right.’ But if they show me a specific feature they want then I can work with that. I can say, ‘If you want a sharp jaw like that, we can do that.’ But, also, these things are not always right for all people. For you, if you came in asking for a sharp jaw, I would say no—it would make you look masculine.”

“Does it seem like more people my age are coming in for this sort of work?” I asked.

“I think that ten years ago it was seen as anti-cerebral to do this,” he said. “But now it’s empowering to do something that gives you an edge. Which is why young people are coming in. They come in to enhance something, rather than coming in to fix something.”

“And it’s subtle,” I said.

“Even with my most famous clients, it’s very subtle,” the doctor said. “If you look at photos taken five years apart, you can tell the difference. But, day to day, month to month, you can’t.”

I felt that I was being listened to very carefully. I thanked him, sincerely, and then a medical assistant came in to show me the recommendations and prices: injectables in my cheeks ($5,500 to $6,900), injectables in my chin (same price), an ultrasound “lipofreeze” to fix the asymmetry in my jawline ($8,900 to $18,900), or Botox in the TMJ region ($2,500). I walked out of the clinic into the Beverly Hills sunshine, laughing a little, imagining what it’d be like to have a spare thirty thousand dollars on hand. I texted photos of my FaceTuned jaw to my friends and then touched my actual jaw, a suddenly optional assemblage of flesh and bone.

The plastic surgeon Jason Diamond was a recurring star of the reality show “Dr. 90210” and has a number of famous clients, including the twenty-nine-year-old “Vanderpump Rules” star Lala Kent, who has posted photos taken in Diamond’s office on Instagram, and who told *People*, “I’ve had every part

of my face injected." Another client is Kim Kardashian West, whom Colby Smith described to me as "patient zero" for Instagram Face. ("Ultimately, the goal is always to look like Kim," he said.) Kardashian West, who has inspired countless cosmetically altered doppelgängers, insists that she hasn't had major plastic surgery; according to her, it's all just Botox, fillers, and makeup. But she also hasn't tried to hide how her appearance has changed. In 2015, she published a coffee-table book of selfies, called "Selfish," which begins when she is beautiful the way a human is beautiful and ends when she's beautiful in the manner of a computer animation.

I scheduled an interview with Diamond, whose practice occupies the penthouse of a building in Beverly Hills. On the desk in his office was a thank-you note from Chrissy Teigen. (It sat atop two of her cookbooks.) As with the doctor I'd seen the day before, Diamond, who has pool-blue eyes and wore black scrubs and square-framed glasses, looked nothing like the tabloid caricature of a plastic surgeon. He was youthful in a way that was only slightly surreal.

Diamond had trained with an old guard of top L.A. plastic surgeons, he told me—people who thought it was taboo to advertise. When, in 2004, he had the opportunity to appear on "Dr. 90210," he decided to do it, against the advice of his wife and his nurses, because, he said, "I knew that I would be able to show results that the world had never seen." In 2016, a famous client persuaded him to set up an Instagram account. He now has just under a quarter million followers. The employees at his practice who run the account like that Instagram allows patients to see him as a father of two and as a friend, not only as a doctor.

Diamond had long had a Web site, but in the past his celebrity patients didn't volunteer to offer testimonials there. "And, of course, we never asked," he said. "But now—it's amazing. Maybe thirty per cent of the celebrities I take care of will just ask and offer to shout us out on social media. All of a sudden, it's popular knowledge that all these people are coming here. For some reason, Instagram made it more acceptable." Cosmetic work had come to seem more like fitness, he suggested. "I think it's become much more mainstream to think about taking care of your face and your body as part of your general well-being. It's kind of understood now: it's O.K. to try to look your best."

There was a sort of cleansing, crystalline honesty to this high-end intersection of superficiality and pragmatism, I was slowly realizing. I hadn't needed to bother posing as a patient—these doctors spent all day making sure that people no longer felt they had anything to hide.

I asked Diamond if he had thoughts about Instagram Face. "You know, there's this look—this Bella Hadid, Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner thing that seems to be spreading," I said. Diamond said that he practiced all over the world, and that there were different regional preferences, and that no one template worked for every face. "But there are constants," he said. "Symmetry, proportion, harmony. We are always trying to create balance in the face. And when you look at Kim, Megan Fox, Lucy Liu, Halle Berry, you'll find elements in common: the high contoured cheekbones, the strong projected chin, the flat platform underneath the chin that makes a ninety-degree angle."

"What do you make of the fact that it's much more possible now for people to look at these celebrity faces and think, somewhat correctly, that they could look like that, too?" I asked.

"We could spend two whole days discussing that question," Diamond said. "I'd say that thirty per cent of people come in bringing a photo of Kim, or someone like Kim—there's a handful of people, but she's at the very top of the list, and understandably so. It's one of the biggest challenges I have, educating the person about whether it's reasonable to try to move along that path toward Kim's face, or toward whoever. Twenty years of practice, thousands and thousands of procedures, go into each individual answer—when I can do it, when I can't do it, and when we can do something but shouldn't, for any number of reasons." I told Diamond that I was afraid that if I ever tried injectables, I'd never stop. "It is true that the vast majority of our patients absolutely love their results, and they come back," he said.

We talked about the word "addiction." I said that I dyed my hair and wore makeup most days, and that I knew I would continue to dye my hair and spend money on makeup, and that I didn't consider this an addiction but a choice. (I thought about a line from the book "Perfect Me," by the philosopher Heather Widdows: "Choice cannot make an unjust or exploitative practice or act somehow, magically, just or non-exploitative.") I

asked Diamond if his patients felt more like themselves after getting work done.

“I can answer that in part because I do these things, too,” he said, gesturing to his face. “You know when you get a really good haircut, and you feel like the best version of yourself? This is that feeling, but exponential.”

On the way to Diamond’s office, I had passed a café that looked familiar: pale marble-topped tables, blond-wood floors, a row of Prussian-green snake plants, pendant lamps, geometrically patterned tiles. The writer Kyle Chayka has coined the term “AirSpace” for this style of blandly appealing interior design, marked by an “anesthetized aesthetic” and influenced by the “connective emotional grid of social media platforms”—these virtual spaces where hundreds of millions of people learn to “see and feel and want the same things.” WeWork, the collapsing co-working giant—which, like Instagram, was founded in 2010—once convinced investors of a forty-seven-billion-dollar vision in which people would follow their idiosyncratic dreams while enmeshed in a global network of near-indistinguishable office spaces featuring reclaimed wood, neon signs, and ficus trees. Direct-to-consumer brands fill podcast ad breaks with promises of the one true electric toothbrush and meals that arrive in the mail, selling us on the relief of forgoing choice altogether. The general idea seems to be that humans are so busy pursuing complicated forms of self-actualization that we’d like much of our life to be assembled for us, as if from a kit.

I went to see another Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, one who had more than three hundred thousand Instagram followers. I told the doctor that I was a journalist, and that I was there for a consultation. He studied my face from a few angles, felt my jaw, and suggested exactly what the first doctor had recommended. The prices were lower this time—if I had wanted to put the whole thing on my credit card, I could have.

I took the elevator down to the street with three very pretty women who all appeared to be in their early twenties. As I drove back to my hotel, I felt sad and subdued and self-conscious. I had thought that I was researching this subject at a logical distance: that I could inhabit the point of view of an ideal millennial client, someone who wanted to enhance rather than fix herself, who was ambitious and pragmatic. But I left with a very specific feeling, a

kind of bottomless need that I associated with early adolescence, and which I had not experienced in a long time.

I had worn makeup at sixteen to my college interviews; I'd worn makeup at my gymnastic meets when I was ten. In the photos I have of myself at ballet recitals when I was six or seven, I'm wearing mascara and blush and lipstick, and I'm so happy. What did it mean, I wondered, that I have spent so much of my life attempting to perform well in circumstances where an unaltered female face is aberrant? How had I been changed by an era in which ordinary humans receive daily metrics that appear to quantify how our personalities and our physical selves are performing on the market? What was the logical end of this escalating back-and-forth between digital and physical improvement?

On Instagram, I checked up on the accounts of the plastic surgeons I had visited, watching comments roll in: "this is what I need! I need to come see you ASAP!," "want want want," "what is the youngest you could perform this procedure?" I looked at the Instagram account of a singer born in 1999, who had become famous as a teen-ager and had since given herself an entirely new face. I met up with a bunch of female friends for dinner in L.A. that night, two of whom had already adopted injectables as part of their cosmetic routine. They looked beautiful. The sun went down, and the hills of L.A. started to glitter. I had the sense that I was living in some inexorable future. For some days afterward, I noticed that I was avoiding looking too closely at my face. ♦

A version of this story appears in the print edition of the August 29, 2022, issue.

By Jessica Winter

Dept. of Gloom

- **Edith Piaf's Thousand (Delightful) Ways to Bum You Out**

By A. J. Liebling

One of our men, who used to admire Edith Piaf, the tiny French singer, in Paris in 1939, was afraid that she might have brightened up her repertory for her engagement at the Playhouse here, on the theory that Americans demand optimism. He was so concerned that he went over to the Hotel Ambassador to see her before he took a chance on going to the show to hear her—said he wanted to remember her in all her pristine gloom, and not be disillusioned. In Paris, he said, she used to stand up straight and plain in front of a night-club audience—no makeup, a drab dress—and delight it with a long series of songs ending in a drowning, an arrest, an assassination, or death on a pallet. At the finish of each, the listeners would gulp a couple of quick drinks before the next began. "She was a doleful little soulful," our man remarked sentimentally. He made an engagement with her for one o'clock, and when he called on the hotel phone at that hour, she thanked him in French for being so punctual. "I forgot to set the alarm clock," she explained, "and if you hadn't come, I'd have gone on sleeping." Our man went up to the chanteuse's living room to wait while she dressed, and while waiting there saw some pencilled notes lying on a coffee table beside a book titled "L'Anglais sans Peine," open to a chapter called "Pronunciation of the English Th," which began, "Some people who lisp pronounce without wishing to do so the two sounds of the th as in English perfectly." The notes were in English and were obviously for introductory speeches for songs that Mlle. Piaf was going to sing in French. Knowing that she had never appeared before an English-speaking audience, prior to her current engagement, he concluded that she had been memorizing the speeches with "L'Anglais sans Peine" as a reference.

More from the Archive

Sign up for Classics, a twice-weekly newsletter featuring notable pieces from the past.

"A woman is waiting for a suitor who promised to return to her when he becomes a captain," the first note read. "In the corner a phonograph is playing a popular record it is cold as long as there is life there is hope. She waits for 20 years but he does not come back and the record keeps on playing until it is worn out." The second said, "Perrine—and now the sad story of Perrine, a pretty girl who worked for a priest, but had a secret lover.

One night the priest surprises them together and Perrine hides her lover in a large box, but alas forgets about him and leaves him to the mercies of the rats. When he is found a candlestick is made from his leg and a basin for the church from his head, and so ends the sad story of a young man who liked girls too well." Heartened by what he had read, our man greeted Mlle. Piaf, when she appeared, like an old friend upon whom he could depend. She wore gold mules with platform soles about six inches thick, which increased her height to approximately five feet. Her mop of rusty-red hair, a stage trademark, was imprisoned under a tight turban. She looked sleeker offstage than on, our man said. Mlle. Piaf was born in Belleville, a quarter of Paris not generally considered chic, and made her first public appearance at seven, in a circus in which her father was an acrobat. She made her adult début in 1935, and was a hit almost from the start. When our man asked her—disingenuously, it would seem—whether she had any more of those wonderful sad songs she used to sing, she said, "No, I don't feel the old songs any more. I have evolved. I was never really a pessimist. I believe that there is always a little corner of blue sky, nevertheless, somewhere. In those old songs, there arrived invariably, at the end, a catastrophe. But now I have one called 'Mariage,' which is quite different. It begins in the cell of a woman who has *already* murdered her husband. She reviews her life, she hears the wedding bells, she sees herself in the arms of this man whom she has killed, an innocent young bride. It's very beautiful." As for herself, Mlle. Piaf said, she has never married and never killed anybody. "For me, love always goes badly," she said. "It is perhaps because I have a mania of choosing. I don't wait to be chosen. That places me in a position of inferiority. And I always choose badly. So the relationships turn out badly. Sometimes only two or three days. But I'm always optimistic." She is studying English hard, with the assistance of an associate professor at Columbia and of the night clubs of the city. She thinks Ray Bolger is *formidable* and had been to see him three times up to the day our man called.

Reassured, our man went to hear Mlle. Piaf a couple of nights later, and turned up at the office the next morning radiant. "The best number she did," he said, "was where an accordionist goes off to the war and gets killed. His sweetheart listens to the music of another accordion and goes nuts. Then there is one about a woman tourist who has one big night with a sailor in a port where the ship stops, and the sailor goes off on another ship and gets drowned. For an encore, she sang that old honey about the woman who falls

in love with a Foreign Legion soldier—she hasn't even had time to learn his name—and he gets killed and they bury him under the warm sand. I haven't had such a good time in years." ♦

By Emma Cline

By Kate Zambreno

By Mavis Gallant

By Rachel Syme

Dept. of Transplants

- **John and Yoko Take Manhattan**

By Hendrik Hertzberg

John Lennon Yoko Ono
New York City are your people.
John Lennon Yoko Ono
New York City is your friend.
—David Peel and the Lower East Side.

Some good local news, for a change: John Lennon and his wife and co-worker, Yoko Ono, have become, for most practical purposes, New Yorkers. They have been living here more or less continuously for the past six months; they have rented a studio in the West Village to live in and a loft in SoHo to work in; they have been observed doing New Yorkish things, such as riding their bicycles in the Park, going to the movies in the middle of the night, and picking up the Sunday papers in Sheridan Square. So far, they have not been heard to complain that the city is unlivable. When that happens, we'll know that they're here to stay.

On a recent Saturday, we went down to the West Village to see for ourself how they are getting along in their new home. A long-haired retainer opened the door and steered us toward a curtain in the rear. We ducked through it, into what is surely one of the pleasantest rooms in town. It is a studio in the old, romantic way—high-ceilinged, with serrated skylights, trees outside the windows, and a cast-iron circular stairway, painted muddy green, leading to the roof. The walls are beige, trimmed in the same muddy green. There was a relaxed dishevelment—piles of clothing, electronic equipment, a guitar, magazines in English and Japanese. The only uncluttered horizontal surface was a bed, big and solid, which jutted into the room like the stage in a theatre-in-the-round. A television set, picture on, sound off, perched at the foot—a prompter's box. John Lennon, wearing jeans and a blue tank top, sat cross-legged on the bed. He was a trifle smaller than we had expected, his skin was ruddier, his hair was fairer, but his face was as familiar as an old friend's. Yoko, dressed in green, lounged beside him. We pulled up a chair.

“Why did you choose New York to live in?” we asked.

“We love it, and it’s the center of our world,” John said.

“It’s the first international city, race-wise, if you think about it,” Yoko said. “It has more Jews than Tel Aviv.”

“And more Irish than Dublin,” John said.

“And blacks, and Chinese, and Japanese, and they’re all living pretty well together,” Yoko said. “Right now there’s fantastic pessimism, both in the art world and in the general society. Even the most intelligent people in New York are saying, ‘Oh, nothing is happening in New York. It’s boring. Let’s all go to the West Coast.’ That was the general tenor when we got here. We’re sort of trying to change the wind to a more positive wind.”

“I think all of us went through a big depression in the last year and a half, all over the world,” John said. “We think there’s something in the air that’s going to pick us all up again. You know, New York *is* a fantastic place. Yoko is a New Yorker. She spent fifteen years here before she met me, and she used to go on about New York to me all the time, but I had never really seen it. I was overwhelmed by America in the early days when the Beatles were here, because we were all brought up on Americana. Britain is the fifty-ninth state, or whatever, and America was the mother country of the whole culture. There’s an unbelievably creative atmosphere on this little island of Manhattan. Like they say, there just isn’t anything you can’t get in New York.”

“It’s a very rich island,” Yoko said solemnly.

“It has everything you could possibly want, night and day. That’s what I can’t stand about England and Europe: it closes down, unless you go to Hamburg or Amsterdam for the night-club scene, which I don’t enjoy. But New York never sleeps.”

“If you had all the money in the world and you were in Spain or somewhere, what could you do with it?” said Yoko. “Here there’s no end to it.”

“In a way, it’s better to be poor in New York than rich in Spain or England,” John said.

“Exactly, exactly,” Yoko said. “I was an artist *cum* waitress *cum* lecturer in New York, and a superintendent also.”

“She was the superintendent of the building Jerry Rubin’s living in now,” John said. “Jerry took us to see it, and it turned out to be a place where Yoko was superintendent ten years ago.”

“I was fired,” Yoko said, and she laughed. “One night, I was having a concert at Carnegie Recital Hall, and I forgot to turn the incinerator on. All the garbage was stuck, and two days later I burned it, and the smoke was everywhere, and the Fire Department came, and I was fired. I was a waitress and a cook in a macrobiotic restaurant—the Paradox. The critics would come to interview me about my concerts.”

“She’d serve ’em macro and then sit down with ’em and talk about her art,” John said.

“I thought I was a very rich person then, because this city has that quality, that even a waitress can feel rich about it,” Yoko said. “There’s no set thing about your fate here. Your fate is what you create in this city.”

We said that the talk of riches reminded us of a recent song of John’s, “Imagine,” which asks the listener, among other things, to “imagine no possessions.”

“I wish ‘Imagine’ would come true,” John said. “I’ve been listening to it myself, because I get an objective view after, and I was imagining. I began to think: I don’t *want* that big house we built for ourselves in England. I don’t want the bother of owning all these big houses and big cars, even though our company, Apple, pays for it all. All structures and buildings and everything I own will be dissolved and got rid of. I’ll cash in my chips, and anything that’s left I’ll make the best use of. Yoko is a three-tatami woman, and she’s been working on me to get rid of this possessions complex, which is something that happens to people who were poor like myself—not starving but poor.”

We asked Yoko about her three tatami, and she said, “One tatami is the length and width of a person lying down. A friend of mine in Tokyo says that in today’s society, with its overpopulation, the natural space that a person can acquire without fighting or making unnatural efforts is three tatami—one for himself to lie down in, a second for his companion, and a third for them both to breathe in. There is a kind of poverty where you have an excess of things, and all your energy is directed toward getting and keeping them. John was poor, and it was natural for him to strive for wealth, but I come from a background of excessiveness. It was very natural for me to live in New York in a bohemian way, because I was trying to get away from that.”

John was still preoccupied with his possessions. “It’s *clogging my mind* just to *think* about what amount of gear I have in England. All my books and possessions. Walls full of books I’ve collected all my life. I have a list this thick of the things I have in Ascot, and I’m going to tick off the things I really want, really need. The rest goes to libraries or prisons—the whole damn lot. I might keep my rock-and-roll collection, but even *that* I’m thinking about.”

“Everything you’ve got in here looks like something you use,” we said.

“Yes, it’s very casual,” Yoko said. “If we lost everything in here, we might be annoyed, but not to the point where it would affect our health. I like the idea of everything being transient, so that all that is with me is somebody I love and myself.”

We asked the Lennons how they liked their new neighborhood, and Yoko said, “It’s so good! It’s like a quaint little town.”

“Yes, it’s like a little Welsh village, with Jones the Fish and Jones the Milk, and everybody seems to know everybody,” John said.

“People don’t grab us when we walk in the Village,” Yoko said. “They sort of smile from a distance, which is nice.”

“We stand out more in Britain than in America as a mixed-marriage couple,” John said. “Although there is race hatred in America, you see more different-

colored people in America than in Britain."

"Even the white people are different colors here," we said.

"Yes, there are all shades, all different kinds of descent," he said. "In England, everybody south of Calais is a 'wog,' and that includes the French and the Italians."

"John has a New York temperament in his work," Yoko said. "Liverpool is very much like New York, for an English city."

"Liverpool is the port where the Irish got on the boat to come over here, and the same for the Jews and the blacks," John said. "The slaves were brought to Liverpool and then shipped out to America. On the river front in Liverpool you can still see the rings in the side where they were chained up. We got the records—the blues and the rock—right off the boats, and that's why we were advanced musically. In Liverpool, when you stood on the edge of the water you knew the next place was America."

The sun was setting, and the television set glowed more brightly. On the screen, a gigantic lizard was crunching Times Square underfoot. "Do you *like* watching television without the sound?" we asked.

"TV to me is like what the fireplace used to be," John said. "You always get these Surreal things happening. I used to watch the fire as a child, but since they took the fire away from us, I've decided that TV is it. It's like the window—only this picture continually changes. You'll see China and the moon, all in ten minutes. You'll see real, Surreal, strange, psychedelic—everything."

We got up to go, and said goodbye to Yoko. John walked us to the door, peered out cautiously, and came out on the stoop with us for a moment. "Everywhere's somewhere, and everywhere's the same, really, and wherever you are is where it's at," he said. "But it's more so in New York. It does have sugar on it, and I've got a sweet tooth." ♦

By David Sedaris

By Michael Azerrad

Fiction

- Roy Spivey

By Miranda July

Twice I have sat next to a famous man on an airplane. The first man was Jason Kidd, of the New Jersey Nets. I asked him why he didn't fly first class, and he said that it was because his cousin worked for United.

"Wouldn't that be all the more reason to get first class?"

"It's cool," he said, unfurling his legs into the aisle.

I let it go, because what do I know about the ins and outs of being a sports celebrity? We didn't talk for the rest of the flight.

More from the Archive

Sign up for Classics, a twice-weekly newsletter featuring notable pieces from the past.

I can't say the name of the second famous person, but I will tell you that he is a Hollywood heartthrob who is married to a starlet. Also, he has the letter "V" in his first name. That's all—I can't say anything more than that. Think espionage. O.K., the end—that really is all. I'll call him Roy Spivey, which is almost an anagram of his name.

If I were a more self-assured person I would not have volunteered to give up my seat on an overcrowded flight, would not have been upgraded to first class, would not have been seated beside him. This was my reward for being a pushover. He slept for the first hour, and it was startling to see such a famous face look so vulnerable and empty. He had the window seat and I had the aisle, and I felt as though I were watching over him, protecting him from the bright lights and the paparazzi. Sleep, little spy, sleep. He's actually not little, but we're all children when we sleep. For this reason, I always let men see me asleep early on in a relationship. It makes them realize that even though I am five feet eleven I am fragile and need to be taken care of. A man who can see the weakness of a giant knows that he is a man indeed. Soon, small women make him feel almost fey—and, lo, he now has a thing for tall women.

Roy Spivey shifted in his seat, waking. I quickly shut my own eyes, and then slowly opened them, as if I, too, had been sleeping. Oh, but he hadn't quite opened his yet. I shut mine again and right away opened them, slowly, and he opened his, slowly, and our eyes met, and it seemed as if we had woken from a single sleep, from the dream of our entire lives. Me, a tall but otherwise undistinguished woman; he a distinguished spy, but not really, just an actor, but not really, just a man, maybe even just a boy. That's the other way that my height can work on men, the more common way: I become their mother.

We talked ceaselessly for the next two hours, having the conversation that is specifically about everything. He told me intimate details about his wife, the beautiful Ms. M. Who would have guessed that she was so troubled?

"Oh, yeah, everything in the tabloids is true."

"It is?"

"Yeah, especially about her eating disorder."

"But the affairs?"

"No, not the affairs, of course not. You can't believe the 'bloids."

" 'Bloids?"

"We call them 'bloids. Or tabs."

When the meals were served, it felt as if we were eating breakfast in bed together, and when I got up to use the bathroom he joked, "You're leaving me!"

And I said, "I'll be back!"

As I walked up the aisle, many of the passengers stared at me, especially the women. Word had travelled fast in this tiny flying village. Perhaps there were even some 'bloid writers on the flight. There were definitely some 'bloid readers. Had we been talking loudly? It seemed to me that we were whispering. I looked in the mirror while I was peeing and wondered if I was

the plainest person he had ever talked to. I took off my blouse and tried to wash under my arms, which isn't really possible in such a small bathroom. I tossed handfuls of water toward my armpits and they landed on my skirt. It was made from the kind of fabric that turns much darker when it is wet. This was a real situation I had got myself into. I acted quickly, taking off my skirt and soaking the whole thing in the sink, then wringing it out and putting it back on. I smoothed it out with my hands. There. It was all a shade darker now. I walked back down the aisle, being careful not to touch anyone with my dark skirt.

When Roy Spivey saw me, he shouted, "You came back!"

And I laughed and he said, "What happened to your skirt?"

I sat down and explained the whole thing, starting with the armpits. He listened quietly until I was done.

"So were you able to wash your armpits in the end?"

"No."

"Are they smelly?"

"I think so."

"I can smell them and tell you."

"No."

"It's O.K. It's part of showbiz."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Here."

He leaned over and pressed his nose against my shirt.

"It's smelly."

“Oh. Well, I tried to wash it.”

But he was standing up now, climbing past me to the aisle and rummaging around in the overhead bin. He fell back into his seat dramatically, holding a pump bottle.

“It’s Febreze.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about that.”

“It dries in seconds, taking odor with it. Lift up your arms.”

I lifted my arms, and with great focus he pumped three hard sprays under each sleeve.

“It’s best if you keep your arms out until it dries.”

I held them out. One arm extended into the aisle and the other arm crossed his chest, my hand pressing against the window. It was suddenly obvious how tall I was. Only a very tall woman could shoulder such a wingspan. He stared at my arm in front of his chest for a moment, then he growled and bit it. Then he laughed. I laughed, too, but I did not know what this was, this biting of my arm.

“What was that?”

“That means I like you!”

“O.K.”

“Do you want to bite me?”

“No.”

“You don’t like me?”

“No, I do.”

“Is it because I’m famous?”

“No.”

“Just because I’m famous doesn’t mean I don’t need what everyone else needs. Here, bite me anywhere. Bite my shoulder.”

He slid back his jacket, unbuttoned the first four buttons on his shirt, and pulled it back, exposing a large, tanned shoulder. I leaned over and very quickly bit it lightly, and then picked up my *SkyMall* catalogue and began reading. After a minute, he rebuttoned himself and slowly picked up his copy of *SkyMall*. We read like this for a good half hour.

During this time I was careful not to think about my life. My life was far below us, in an orangey-pink stucco apartment building. It seemed as though I might never have to return to it now. The salt of his shoulder buzzed on the tip of my tongue. I might never again stand in the middle of the living room and wonder what to do next. I sometimes stood there for up to two hours, unable to generate enough momentum to eat, to go out, to clean, to sleep. It seemed unlikely that someone who had just bitten and been bitten by a celebrity would have this kind of problem.

I read about vacuum cleaners designed to suck insects out of the air. I studied self-heating towel racks, and fake rocks that could hide a key. We were beginning our descent. We adjusted our seat backs and tray tables. Roy Spivey suddenly turned to me and said, “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, I had an amazing time with you.”

“I did, too.”

“I’m going to write down a number, and I want you to guard it with your life.”

“O.K.”

“This phone number falls into the wrong hands and I’ll have to get someone to change it, and that is a big headache.”

“O.K.”

He wrote the number on a page from the *SkyMall* catalogue and ripped it out and pressed it into my palm.

“This is my kids’ nanny’s personal line. The only people who call her on this line are her boyfriend and her son. So she’ll always answer it. You’ll always get through. And she’ll know where I am.”

I looked at the number.

“It’s missing a digit.”

“I know. I want you to just memorize the last number, O.K.?”

“O.K.”

“It’s four.”

We turned our faces to the front of the plane, and Roy Spivey gently took my hand. I was still holding the paper with the number, so he held it with me. I felt warm and simple. Nothing bad could ever happen to me while I was holding hands with him, and when he let go I would have the number that ended in four. I’d wanted a number like this my whole life. The plane landed gracefully, like an easily drawn line. He helped me pull my carry-on bag down from the bin; it looked obscenely familiar.

“My people are going to be waiting for me out there, so I won’t be able to say goodbye properly.”

“I know. That’s all right.”

“No, it really isn’t. It’s a travesty.”

“But I understand.”

“O.K., here’s what I’m going to do. Just before I leave the airport, I’m going to come up to you and say, ‘Do you work here?’ ”

“It’s O.K. I really do understand.”

“No, this is important to me. I’ll say, ‘Do you work here?’ And then you say your part.”

“What’s my part?”

“You say, ‘No.’ ”

“O.K.”

“And I’ll know what you mean. We’ll know the secret meaning.”

“O.K.”

We looked into each other’s eyes in a way that said that nothing else mattered as much as us. I asked myself if I would kill my parents to save his life, a question I had been posing since I was fifteen. The answer always used to be yes. But in time all those boys had faded away and my parents were still there. I was now less and less willing to kill them for anyone; in fact, I worried for their health. In this case, however, I had to say yes. Yes, I would.

We walked down the tunnel between the plane and real life, and then, without so much as a look in my direction, he glided away from me.

I tried not to look for him in the baggage-claim area. He would find me before he left. I went to the bathroom. I claimed my bag. I drank from the water fountain. I watched children hit each other. Finally, I let my eyes crawl over everyone. They were all not him, every single one of them. But they all knew his name. Those who were talented at drawing could have drawn him from memory, and everyone else could certainly have described him, if they’d had to, say, to a blind person—the blind being the only people who wouldn’t know what he looked like. And even the blind would have known his wife’s name, and a few of them would have known the name of the boutique where his wife had bought a lavender tank top and matching boy shorts. Roy Spivey was both nowhere to be found and everywhere. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, do you work here?”

It was him. Except that it wasn’t him, because there was no voice in his eyes; his eyes were mute. He was acting. I said my line.

“No.”

A pretty young airport attendant appeared beside me.

“*I* work here. *I* can help you,” she said enthusiastically.

He paused for a fraction of a second and then said, “Great.” I waited to see what he would come up with, but the attendant glared at me, as if I were rubbernecking, and then rolled her eyes at him, as if she were protecting him from people like me. I wanted to yell, “It was a code! It had a secret meaning!” But I knew how this would look, so I moved along.

That evening, I found myself standing in the middle of my living-room floor. I had made dinner and eaten it, and then I had an idea that I might clean the house. But halfway to the broom I stopped on a whim, flirting with the emptiness in the center of the room. I wanted to see if I could start again. But, of course, I knew what the answer would be. The longer I stood there, the longer I had to stand there. It was intricate and exponential. I looked like I was doing nothing, but really I was as busy as a physicist or a politician. I was strategizing my next move. That my next move was always not to move didn’t make it any easier.

I let go of the idea of cleaning and just hoped that I would get to bed at a reasonable hour. I thought of Roy Spivey in bed with Ms. M. And then I remembered the number. I took it out of my pocket. He had written it across a picture of pink curtains. They were made out of a fabric that was originally designed for the space shuttle; they changed density in reaction to fluctuations of light and heat. I mouthed all the numbers and then said the missing one out loud: “Four.” It felt risky and illicit. I yelled, “*FOUR*!” And moved easily into the bedroom. I put on my nightgown, brushed my teeth, and went to bed.

Over the course of my life, I’ve used the number many times. Not the telephone number, just the four. When I first met my husband, I used to

whisper “four” while we had intercourse, because it was so painful. Then I learned about a tiny operation that I could have to enlarge myself. I whispered “four” when my dad died of lung cancer. When my daughter got into trouble doing God knows what in Mexico City, I said “four” to myself as I gave her my credit-card number over the phone. Which was confusing—thinking one number and saying another. My husband jokes about my lucky number, but I’ve never told him about Roy. You shouldn’t underestimate a man’s capacity for feeling threatened. You don’t have to be a great beauty for men to come to blows over you. At my high-school reunion, I pointed out a teacher I’d once had a crush on, and by the end of the night this teacher and my husband were wrestling in a hotel parking garage. My husband said that it was about issues of race, but I knew. Some things are best left unsaid.

This morning, I was cleaning out my jewelry box when I came upon a little slip of paper with pink curtains on it. I thought I had lost it long ago, but, no, there it was, folded underneath a dried-up carnation and some impractically heavy bracelets. I hadn’t whispered “four” in years. The idea of luck made me feel a little weary now, like Christmas when you’re not in the mood.

I stood by the window and studied Roy Spivey’s handwriting in the light. He was older now—we all were—but he was still working. He had his own TV show. He wasn’t a spy anymore; he played the father of twelve rascally kids. It occurred to me now that I had missed the point entirely. He had wanted me to call him. I looked out the window: my husband was in the driveway, vacuuming out the car. I sat on the bed with the number in my lap and the phone in my hands. I dialled all the digits, including the invisible one that had shepherded me through my adult life. It was no longer in service. Of course it wasn’t. It was preposterous for me to have thought that it would still be his nanny’s private line. Roy Spivey’s children had long since grown up. The nanny was probably working for someone else, or maybe she’d done well for herself—put herself through nursing school or business school. Good for her. I looked down at the number and felt a tidal swell of loss. It was too late. I had waited too long.

I listened to the sound of my husband beating the car mats on the sidewalk. Our ancient cat pressed against my legs, wanting food. But I couldn’t seem to stand up. Minutes passed, almost an hour. Now it was starting to get dark.

My husband was downstairs making a drink and I was about to stand up. Crickets were chirping in the yard and I was about to stand up. ♦

By Alejandro Zambra

By Bruna Dantas Lobato

By Emma Cline

By Sandra Cisneros

Poems

- **“Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove”**
- **“One for the Rose”**

By Rita Dove

late, in aqua and ermine, gardenias
scaling her left sleeve in a spasm of scent,
her gloves white, her smile chastened, purse giddy
with stars and rhinestones clipped to her brilliantined hair,
on her free arm that fine Negro
Mr. Wonderful Smith.

It's the day that isn't, February 29th,
at the end of the shortest month of the year—
and the shittiest, too, everywhere
except Hollywood, California,
where the maid can wear mink and still be a maid,
bobbing her bandaged head and cursing
the white folks under her breath as she smiles
and shoos their silly daughters
in from the night dew . . . What can she be
thinking of, striding into the ballroom
where no black face has ever showed itself
except above a serving tray?

Hi-Hat Hattie, Mama Mac, Her Haughtiness,
the "little lady" from Showboat whose name
Bing forgot, Beulah & Bertha & Malena
& Carrie & Violet & Cynthia & Fidelia,
one half of the Dark Barrymores—
dear Mammy we can't help but hug you crawl into
your generous lap tease you
with arch innuendo so we can feel that
much more wicked and youthful
and sleek but oh what

we forgot: the four husbands, the phantom
pregnancy, your famous parties, your celebrated
ice box cake. Your giggle above the red petticoat's rustle,
black girl and white girl walking hand in hand
down the railroad tracks

in Kansas City, six years old.
The man who advised you, now
that you were famous, to “begin eliminating”
your more “common” acquaintances
and your reply (catching him square
in the eye): “That’s a good idea.
I’ll start right now by eliminating you.”

Is she or isn’t she? Three million dishes,
a truckload of aprons and headrags later, and here
you are: poised, between husbands
and factions, no corset wide enough
to hold you in, your huge face a dark moon split
by that spontaneous smile—your trademark,
your curse. No matter, Hattie: it’s a long, beautiful walk
into that flower-smothered standing ovation,
so go on
and make them wait.

By Charles Bock

By Katie Barsotti

By Jane Hirshfield

By D. T. Max

By Philip Levine

Three weeks ago I went back
to the same street corner where
27 years ago I took a bus for Akron,
Ohio, but now there was only a blank space
with a few concrete building blocks
scattered among the beer cans
and broken bottles and a view of
the blank backside of an abandoned hotel.
I wondered if Akron was still down there
hidden hundreds of miles south among
the small, shoddy trees of Ohio,
a town so ripe with the smell
of defeat that its citizens lied
about their age, their height, sex,
income, and previous condition
of anything. I spent all of a Saturday
there, disguised in a cashmere suit
stolen from a man twenty pounds
heavier than I, and I never unbuttoned
the jacket. I remember someone
married someone, but only the bride's
father and mother went out
on the linoleum dance floor and leaned
into each other like whipped school kids.
I drank whatever I could find and made
my solitary way back to the terminal
and dozed among the drunks and widows
toward dawn and the first thing north.
What was I doing in Akron, Ohio,
waiting for a bus that groaned slowly
between the sickened farms of 1951
and finally entered the smeared air
of hell on U.S. 24 where the Rouge plant
destroys the horizon? I could have been
in Paris at the foot of Gertrude Stein,
I could have been drifting among

the reeds of a clear stream,
like the little Moses, to be found
by a princess and named after a conglomerate
or a Jewish hero. Instead I was born
in the wrong year and in the wrong place
and I made my way so slowly and badly
that I remember every single turn,
and each one smells like an overblown rose,
yellow, American, beautiful, and true.

By Jane Mayer

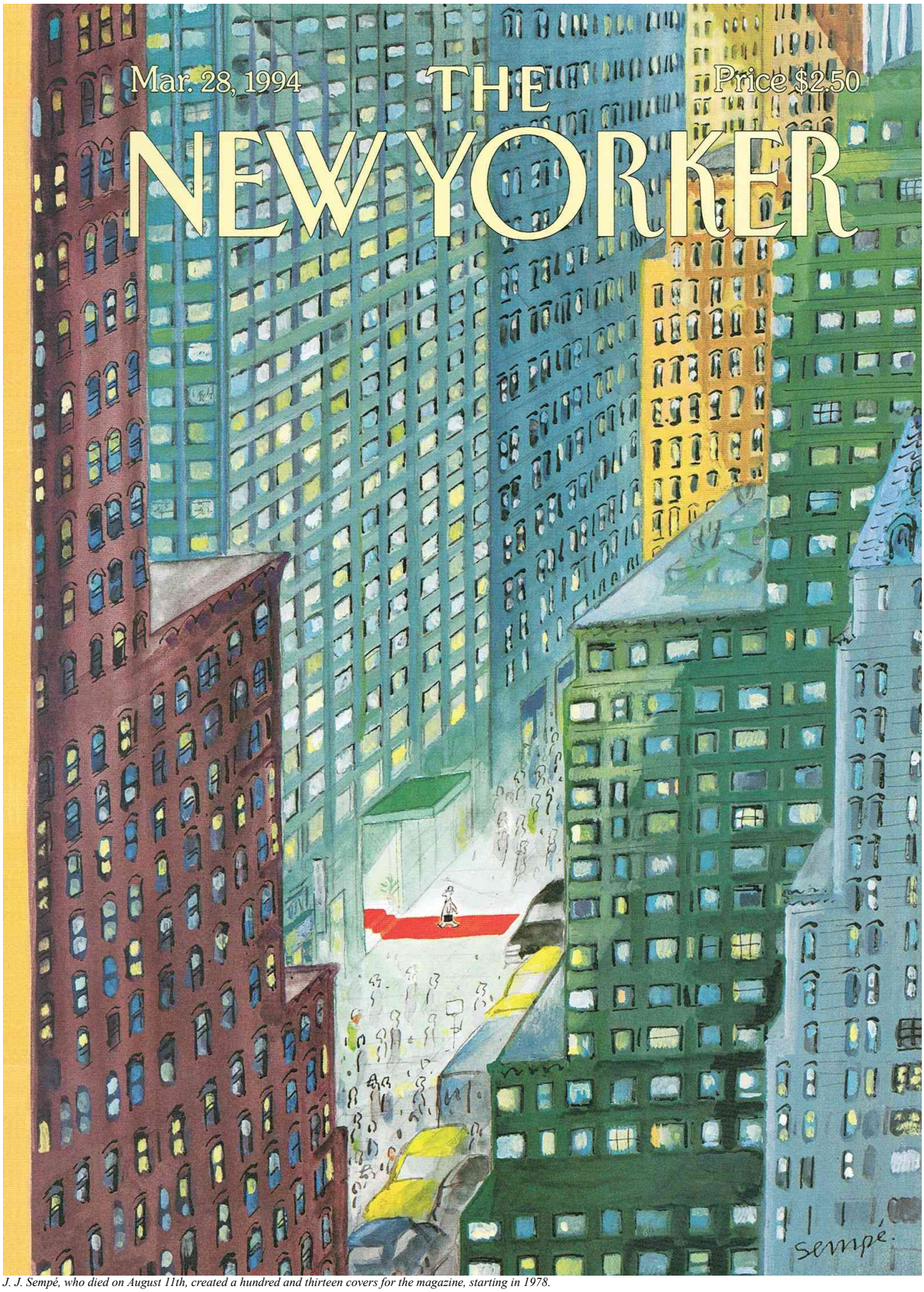
By Jonathan Blitzer

By Danielle Dutton

By

Postscript

- **Remembering the Art of J. J. Sempé**



J. J. Sempé, who died on August 11th, created a hundred and thirteen covers for the magazine, starting in 1978.

By Lauren Collins

By Michael Schulman

By Jessica Winter

By Jane Mayer

Profiles

- **Louise Brooks Tells All**
- **What Bob Dylan Wanted at Twenty-three**

By Kenneth Tynan

None of this would have happened if I had not noticed, while lying late in bed on a hot Sunday morning last year in Santa Monica and flipping through the TV guide for the impending week, that one of the local public-broadcasting channels had decided to show, at 1 *P.M.* that very January day, a film on which my fantasies had fed ever since I first saw it, a quarter of a century before. Even for Channel 28, it was an eccentric piece of programming. I wondered how many of my Southern Californian neighbors would be tempted to forgo their poolside champagne brunches, their bicycle jaunts along Ocean Front Walk, their health-food picnics in Topanga Canyon, or their surfboard battles with the breakers of Malibu in order to watch a silent picture, shot in Berlin just fifty years earlier, about an artless young hedonist who, meaning no harm, rewards her lovers—and eventually herself—with the prize of violent death. Although the film is a tragedy, it is also a celebration of the pleasure principle. Outside in the midday sunshine, California was celebrating the same principle, with the shadows of mortality left out.

I got to my set in time to catch the credits. The director: Georg Wilhelm Pabst, reigning maestro of German cinema in the late nineteen-twenties. The script: Adapted by Ladislaus Vajda from "Erdgeist" ("Earth Spirit") and "Die Büchse der Pandora" ("Pandora's Box"), two scabrously erotic plays written in the eighteen-nineties by Frank Wedekind. For his movie, Pabst chose the title of the later work, though the screenplay differed markedly from Wedekind's original text: "Pandora's Box" belongs among the few films that have succeeded in improving on theatrical chefs-d'œuvre. For his heroine, Lulu (the dominant figure in both plays), Pabst outraged a whole generation of German actresses by choosing a twenty-one-year-old girl from Kansas whom he had never met, who was currently working for Paramount in Hollywood, and who spoke not a word of any language other than English. This was Louise Brooks. She made only twenty-four films, in a movie career that began in 1925 and ended, with enigmatic suddenness, in 1938. Two of them were masterpieces: "Pandora's Box" and its immediate

successor, also directed by Pabst—"The Diary of a Lost Girl." Most, however, were assembly-line studio products. Yet around her, with a luxuriance that proliferates every year, a literature has grown up. I append a few excerpts:

> An actress who needed no directing, but could move across the screen causing the work of art to be born by her mere presence.—*Lotte H. Eisner, French critic*.
>
> Her youthful admirers see in her an actress of brilliance, a luminescent personality, and a beauty unparalleled in film history.—*Kevin Brownlow, British director and movie historian*.
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> One of the most mysterious and potent figures in the history of the cinema . . . she was one of the first performers to penetrate to the heart of screen acting.—*David Thomson, British critic*.
>
> Louise Brooks is the only woman who had the ability to transfigure no matter what film into a masterpiece. . . . Louise is the perfect apparition, the dream woman, the being without whom the cinema would be a poor thing. She is much more than a myth, she is a magical presence, a real phantom, the magnetism of the cinema.—*Ado Kyrou, French critic*.
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> Those who have seen her can never forget her. She is the modern actress *par excellence*. . . . As soon as she takes the screen, fiction disappears along with art, and one has the impression of being present at a documentary. The camera seems to have caught her by surprise, without her knowledge. She is the intelligence of the cinematic process, the perfect incarnation of that which is photogenic; she embodies all that the cinema rediscovered in its last years of silence: complete naturalness and complete simplicity. Her art is so pure that it becomes invisible.—*Henri Langlois, director of the Cinémathèque Française*.

On Channel 28, I stayed with the film to its end, which is also Lulu's. Of the climactic sequence, so decorously understated, Louise Brooks once wrote, in *Sight & Sound*, "It is Christmas Eve and she is about to receive the gift which has been her dream since childhood. Death by a sexual maniac." When it was over, I switched channels and returned to the real world of

game shows and pet-food commercials, relieved to find that the spell she cast was still as powerful as ever. Brooks reminds me of the scene in "Citizen Kane" where Everett Sloane, as Kane's aging business manager, recalls a girl in a white dress whom he saw in his youth when he was crossing over to Jersey on a ferry. They never met or spoke. "I only saw her for one second," he says, "and she didn't see me at all—but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl."

I had now, by courtesy of Channel 28, seen "Pandora's Box" for the third time. My second encounter with the film had taken place several years earlier, in France. Consulting my journal, I found the latter experience recorded with the baroque extravagance that seems to overcome all those who pay tribute to Brooks. I unflinchingly quote:

> Infatuation with L. Brooks reinforced by second viewing of "Pandora." She has run through my life like a magnetic thread—this shameless urchin tomboy, this unbroken, unbreakable porcelain filly. She is a prairie princess, equally at home in a waterfront bar and in the royal suite at Neuschwanstein; a creature of impulse, a creator of impulses, a temptress with no pretensions, capable of dissolving into a giggling fit at a peak of erotic ecstasy; amoral but totally selfless, with that sleek jet *cloche* of hair that rings such a peal of bells in my subconscious. In short, the only star actress I can imagine either being enslaved by or wanting to enslave; and a dark lady worthy of any poet's devotion:
>
> For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
> Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Some basic information about Rochester, New York: With two hundred and sixty-three thousand inhabitants, it is the sixth-largest city in the state, bestriding the Genesee River at its outlet into Lake Ontario. Here, in the eighteen-eighties, George Eastman completed the experiments that enabled him to manufacture the Kodak camera, which, in turn, enabled ordinary people to capture monochrome images, posed or spontaneous, of the world around them. He was in at the birth of movies, too. The flexible strips of film used in Thomas Edison's motion-picture machine were first produced by Eastman, in 1889. Rochester is plentifully dotted with monuments to the creator of the Kodak, among them a palatial Georgian house, with fifty

rooms and a lofty neoclassical portico, that he built for himself in 1905. When he died, in 1932, he left his mansion to the University of Rochester, of whose president it became the official home. Shortly after the Second World War, Eastman House took on a new identity. It opened its doors to the public and offered, to quote from its brochure, "the world's most important collection of pictures, films, and apparatus showing the development of the art and technology of photography." In 1972, it was imposingly renamed the International Museum of Photography. Its library now contains around five thousand movies, many of them unique copies, and seven of them—a larger number than any other archive can boast—featuring Louise Brooks. Hence I decide to pay a visit to the city, where I check in at a motel in the late spring of 1978. Thanks to the generous coöperation of Dr. John B. Kuiper, the director of the museum's film department, I am to see its hoard of Brooks pictures—six of them new to me—within the space of two days. Screenings will be held in the Dryden Theatre, a handsome auditorium that was added to the main building in 1950 as a gift from Eastman's niece, Ellen Andrus, and her husband, George Dryden.

On the eve of Day One, I mentally recap what I have learned of Brooks's early years. Born in 1906 in Cherryvale, Kansas, she was the second of four children sired by Leonard Brooks, a hardworking lawyer of kindly disposition and diminutive build, for whom she felt nothing approaching love. She herself was never more than five feet two and a half inches tall, but she raised her stature onscreen by wearing heels as high as six inches. Her mother, née Myra Rude, was the eldest of nine children, and she warned Mr. Brooks before their marriage that she had spent her entire life thus far looking after kid brothers and sisters, that she had no intention of repeating the experience with children of her own, and that any progeny she might bear him would, in effect, have to fend for themselves. The result, because Myra Brooks was a woman of high spirits who took an infectious delight in the arts, was not a cold or neglectful upbringing. Insistent on liberty for herself, she passed on a love of liberty to her offspring. Louise absorbed it greedily. Pirouetting appealed to her; encouraged by her mother, she took dancing lessons, and by the age of ten she was making paid appearances at Kiwanis and Rotary festivities. At fifteen, already a beauty *sui generis*, as surviving photographs show, with her hair, close-cropped at the nape to expose what Christopher Isherwood has called "that unique imperious neck of hers," cascading in ebony bangs down the high, intelligent forehead and

descending on either side of her eyes in spit curls slicked forward at the cheekbones, like a pair of enamelled parentheses—at fifteen, she left high school and went to New York with her dance teacher. There she successfully auditioned for the Denishawn Dancers, which had been founded in 1915 by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, and was by far the most adventurous dance company in America. She started out as a student, but soon graduated to full membership in the troupe, with which she toured the country from 1922 to 1924. One of her fellow-dancers, Martha Graham, became a lifelong friend. "I learned to act while watching Martha Graham dance," she said later, in an interview with Kevin Brownlow, "and I learned to move in film from watching Chaplin."

Suddenly, however, the discipline involved in working for Denishawn grew oppressive. Brooks was fired for lacking a sense of vocation, and the summer of 1924 found her back in New York, dancing in the chorus of George White's "Scandals." After three months of this, a whim seized her, and she embarked without warning for London, where she performed the Charleston at the Café de Paris, near Piccadilly Circus. By New York standards, she thought Britain's Bright Young Things a moribund bunch, and when Evelyn Waugh wrote "Vile Bodies" about them, she said that only a genius could have made a masterpiece out of such glum material. Early in 1925, with no professional prospects, she sailed for Manhattan on borrowed money, only to be greeted by Florenz Ziegfeld with the offer of a job in a musical comedy called "Louie the 14th," starring Leon Errol. She accepted, but the pattern of her subsequent behavior left no doubt that what she meant by liberty and independence was what others defined as irresponsibility and self-indulgence. Of the director of "Louie the 14th," she afterward wrote, again for *Sight & Sound*, "He detested all of Ziegfeld's spoiled beauties, but most of all me because on occasion, when I had other commitments, I would wire my non-appearance to the theatre." In May, 1925, she made her movie début, at the Paramount Astoria Studio, on Long Island, playing a bit part in "The Street of Forgotten Men," of which no print is known to exist. She has written a vivid account of filmmaking in its Long Island days:

> The stages were freezing in the winter, steaming hot in the summer. The dressing rooms were windowless cubicles. We rode on the freight elevator, crushed by lights and electricians. But none of that mattered, because the writers, directors, and cast were free from all supervision.

> Jesse Lasky, Adolph Zukor, and Walter Wanger never left the Paramount office on Fifth Avenue, and the head of production never came on the set. There were writers and directors from Princeton and Yale. Motion pictures did not consume us. When work finished, we dressed in evening clothes, dined at the Colony or "21," and went to the theatre.
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> The difference in Hollywood was that the studio was run by B. P. Schulberg, a coarse exploiter who propositioned every actress and policed every set. To love books was a big laugh. There was no theatre, no opera, no concerts—just those god-damned movies.

Despite Brooks's erratic conduct in "Louie the 14th," Ziegfeld hired her to join Will Rogers and W. C. Fields in the 1925 edition of his "Follies." It proved to be her last Broadway show. One of her many admirers that year was the atrabilious wit Herman Mankiewicz, then employed as second-string drama critic of the *Times*. Blithely playing truant from the "Follies," she attended the opening of "No, No, Nanette" on Mankiewicz's arm. As the houselights faded, her escort, who was profoundly drunk, announced his intention of falling asleep and asked Brooks to make notes on the show for use in his review. She obliged, and the *Times* next day echoed her opinion that "No, No, Nanette" was "a highly meritorious paradigm of its kind." (Somewhat cryptically, the review added that the score contained "more familiar quotations from itself . . . than even 'Hamlet.' ") Escapades like this did nothing to endear her to the other, more dedicated Ziegfeld showgirls, but an abiding intimacy grew up between her and W. C. Fields, in whose dressing room she was always graciously received. Later, in a passage that tells us as much about its author as about her subject, she wrote:

> He was an isolated person. As a young man he stretched out his hand to Beauty and Love and they thrust it away. Gradually he reduced reality to exclude all but his work, filling the gaps with alcohol whose dim eyes transformed the world into a distant view of harmless shadows. He was also a solitary person. Years of travelling alone around the world with his juggling act taught him the value of solitude and the release it gave his mind. . . . Most of his life will remain unknown. But the history of no life is a jest.

In September, 1925, the "Follies" left town on a national tour. Brooks stayed behind and sauntered through the role of a bathing beauty in a Paramount movie called "The American Venus." Paramount and M-G-M were both pressing her to sign five-year contracts, and she looked for advice to Walter Wanger, one of the former company's top executives, with whom she was having an intermittent affair. "If, at this crucial moment in my career," she said long afterward in *London Magazine*, "Walter had given me some faith in my screen personality and my acting ability, he might have saved me from further mauling by the beasts who prowled Broadway and Hollywood." Instead, he urged her to take the Metro offer, arguing that if she chose Paramount everyone would assume that she had got the job by sharing his bed and that her major attribute was not talent but sexual accessibility. Incensed by his line of reasoning, she defiantly signed with Paramount.

In the course of twelve months—during which Brooks's friend Humphrey Bogart, seven years her senior, was still laboring on Broadway, with four seasons to wait before the dawn of his film career—Brooks made six full-length pictures. The press began to pay court to her. *Photoplay*, whose reporter she received reclining in bed, said of her, "She is so very Manhattan. Very young. Exquisitely hard-boiled. Her black eyes and sleek black hair are as brilliant as Chinese lacquer. Her skin is white as a camellia. Her legs are lyric." She worked with several of the bright young directors who gave Paramount its reputation for sophisticated comedy; e.g., Frank Tuttle, Malcolm St. Clair, and Edward Sutherland. Chronologically, the list of her credits ran as follows: "The American Venus" (for Tuttle, who taught her that the way to get laughs was to play perfectly straight; he directed Bebe Daniels in four movies and Clara Bow in six). "A Social Celebrity" (for St. Clair, who cast Brooks opposite the immaculately caddish Adolphe Menjou, of whose style she later remarked, "He never felt anything. He used to say, 'Now I do Lubitsch No. 1,' 'Now I do Lubitsch No. 2.' And that's exactly what he did. You felt nothing, working with him, and yet see him on the screen—he was a great actor"). "It's the Old Army Game" (for Sutherland, who had been Chaplin's directorial assistant on "A Woman of Paris," and who made five pictures with W. C. Fields, of which this was the first, and of which the third, "International House," is regarded by many Fieldsian authorities as the Master's crowning achievement; Brooks married Sutherland, a hard-drinking playboy, in 1926—an error that was rectified inside two years by divorce). "The Show-Off" (for St. Clair, adapted from

the Broadway hit by George Kelly). “Just Another Blonde” (on loan to First National). And, finally, to round off the year’s work, “Love ’Em and Leave ’Em” (for Tuttle), the first Brooks film of which Eastman House has a copy. Here begin my notes on the sustained and solitary Brooks banquet that the museum laid before me.

Day One: Evelyn Brent is the nominal star of “Love ’Em and Leave ’Em,” a slick and graceful comedy about Manhattan shopgirls, but light-fingered Louise, as Brent’s jazz-baby younger sister, steals the picture with bewitching insouciance. She is twenty, and her body is still plump, quite husky enough for work in the fields; but the face, framed in its black proscenium arch of hair, is already Lulu’s in embryo, especially when she dons a white top hat to go to a costume ball (at which she dances a definitive Charleston). The plot calls for her to seduce her sister’s boyfriend, a feckless window dresser, and she does so with that fusion of amorality and innocence which was to become her trademark. (During these scenes, I catch myself humming a tune from “Pins and Needles”: “I used to be on the daisy chain, now I’m a chain-store daisy.”) Garbo could give us innocence, and Dietrich amorality, on the grandest possible scale; only Brooks could play the simple, unabashed hedonist, whose appetite for pleasure is so radiant that even when it causes suffering to her and others we cannot find it in ourselves to reproach her. Most actresses tend to pass moral judgments on the characters they play. Their performances issue tacit commands to the audience: “Love me,” “Hate me,” “Laugh at me,” “Weep with me,” and so forth. We get none of this from Brooks, whose presence before the camera merely declares, “Here I am. Make what you will of me.” She does not care what we think of her. Indeed, she ignores us. We seem to be spying on unrehearsed reality, glimpsing what the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson later called “*le moment qui se sauve*.” In the best of her silent films, Brooks—with no conscious intention of doing so—is reinventing the art of screen acting. I suspect that she was helped rather than hindered by the fact that she never took a formal acting lesson. “When I acted, I hadn’t the slightest idea of what I was doing,” she said once to Richard Leacock, the documentary filmmaker. “I was simply playing myself which is the hardest thing in the world to do—if you *know* that it’s hard. I didn’t, so it seemed easy. I had nothing to unlearn. When I first worked with Pabst, he was furious, because he approached people intellectually and you couldn’t approach me intellectually, because there was nothing to approach.” To watch Brooks is to

recall Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, who observes, "Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone."

Rereading the above paragraph, I pause at the sentence "She does not care what we think of her." Query: Was it precisely this quality, which contributed so much to her success on the screen, that enabled her, in later years, to throw that success so lightly away?

To return to Frank Tuttle's film: Tempted by a seedy and lecherous old horseplayer who lives in her rooming house, Brooks goes on a betting spree with funds raised by her fellow-shopgirls in aid of the Women's Welfare League. The aging gambler is played by Osgood Perkins (father of Tony), of whom Brooks said to Kevin Brownlow years afterward, "The best actor I ever worked with was Osgood Perkins. . . . You know what makes an actor great to work with? Timing. You don't have to feel anything. It's like dancing with a perfect dancing partner. Osgood Perkins would give you a line so that you would react perfectly. It was timing—because *emotion means nothing*." (Emphasis mine.) This comment reveals what Brooks has learned about acting in the cinema: Emotion per se, however deeply felt, is not enough. It is what the actor shows—the contraband that he or she can smuggle past the camera—that matters to the audience. A variation of this dictum cropped up in the mouth of John Striebel's popular comic-strip heroine Dixie Dugan, who was based on Brooks and first appeared in 1926. Bent on getting a job in "The Zigfold Follies," Dixie reflected, "All there is to this Follies racket is to *be cool and look hot*." Incidentally, Brooks's comparison of Perkins with a dancing partner reminds me of a remark she once made about Fatty Arbuckle, who, under the assumed name of William Goodrich, apathetically directed her in a 1931 two-reeler called "Windy Riley Goes Hollywood": "He sat in his chair like a man dead. He had been very nice and sweetly dead ever since the scandal that ruined his career. . . . Oh, I thought he was magnificent in films. He was a wonderful dancer—a wonderful ballroom dancer in his heyday. It was like floating in the arms of a huge doughnut."

What images do I retain of Brooks in "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em"? Many comedic details; e.g., the scene in which she fakes tears of contrition by furtively dabbling her cheeks with water from a handily placed goldfish bowl, and our last view of her, with all her sins unpunished, merrily

sweeping off in a Rolls-Royce with the owner of the department store. And, throughout, every closeup of that blameless, unblemished face.

In 1927, Brooks moved with Paramount to Hollywood and played in four pictures—"Evening Clothes" (with Menjou), "Rolled Stockings," "The City Gone Wild," and "Now We're in the Air," none of which are in the Eastman vaults. To commemorate that year, I have a publicity photo taken at a house she rented in Laurel Canyon: poised on tiptoe with arms outstretched, she stands on the diving board of her pool, wearing a one-piece black bathing suit with a tight white belt, and looking like a combination of Odette and Odile in some modern-dress version of "Swan Lake." Early in 1928, she was lent to Fox for a picture (happily preserved by the museum) that was to change her career—"A Girl in Every Port," written and directed by Howard Hawks, who had made his first film only two years before. Along with Carole Lombard, Rita Hayworth, Jane Russell, and Lauren Bacall, Brooks thus claims a place among the actresses on David Thomson's list (in his "A Biographical Dictionary of Film") of performers who were "either discovered or brought to new life by Hawks." As in "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em," she plays an amoral pleasure-lover, but this time the mood is much darker. Her victim is Victor McLaglen, a seagoing roughneck engaged in perpetual sexual rivalry with his closest friend (Robert Armstrong); the embattled relationship between the two men brings to mind the skirmishing of Flagg and Quirt in "What Price Glory?," which was filmed with McLaglen in 1926. In "A Girl in Every Port," McLaglen, on a binge in Marseilles, sees a performance by an open-air circus whose star turn is billed as "Mam'selle Godiva, Neptune's Bride and the Sweetheart of the Sea." The submarine coquette is, of course, Brooks, looking svelter than of old, and clad in tights, spangled panties, tiara, and black velvet cloak. Her act consists of diving off the top of a ladder into a shallow tank of water. Instantly besotted, the bully McLaglen becomes the fawning lapdog of this "dame of class." He proudly introduces her to Armstrong, who, unwilling to wreck his buddy's illusions, refrains from revealing that the lady's true character, as he knows from a previous encounter with her, is that of a small-time gold-digger. In a scene charged with the subtlest eroticism, Brooks sits beside Armstrong on a sofa and coaxes McLaglen to clean her shoes. He readily obeys. As he does so, she begins, softly, reminiscently, but purposefully, to fondle Armstrong's thigh. To these caresses Armstrong does not respond, but neither does he reject them. With one man at her feet and another at her

fingertips, she is like a cat idly licking its lips over two bowls of cream. This must surely have been the sequence that convinced Pabst, when the film was shown in Berlin, that he had found the actress he wanted for "Pandora's Box." By the end of the picture, Brooks has turned the two friends into mortal enemies, reducing McLaglen to a state of murderous rage mixed with grief which Emil Jannings could hardly have bettered. There is no melodrama in her exercise of sexual power. No effort, either: she is simply following her nature.

After her fling with Fox, Paramount cast its young star (now aged twenty-one) in another downbeat triangle drama, "Beggars of Life," to be directed by another young director, William Wellman. Like Hawks, he was thirty-two years old. (The cinema is unique among the arts in that there was a time in its history when almost all its practitioners were young. This was that time.) At first, the studio had trouble tracing Brooks's whereabouts. Having just divorced Edward Sutherland, she had fled to Washington with a new lover—George Marshall, a millionaire laundry magnate, who later became the owner of the Redskins football team. When she was found, she immediately returned to the Coast, though her zest for work was somewhat drained by a strong antipathy to one of her co-stars—Richard Arlen, with whom she had appeared in "Rolled Stockings"—and by overt hostility from Wellman, who regarded her as a dilettante. Despite these malign auguries, "Beggars of Life"—available at Eastman House—turned out to be one of her best films. Adapted from a novel by Jim Tully, it foreshadows the Depression movies of the thirties. Brooks plays the adopted daughter of a penniless old farmer who attempts, one sunny morning, to rape her. Seizing a shotgun, she kills him. As she is about to escape, the crime is discovered by a tramp (Arlen) who knocks at the door in search of food. They run away together, with Brooks wearing oversized masculine clothes, topped off by a large peaked cap. (This was her first serious venture into the rich territory of sexual ambiguity, so prosperously cultivated in later years by Garbo, Dietrich, et al.) Soon they fall in with a gang of hoboes, whose leader—a ferocious but teachable thug, beautifully played by Wallace Beery—forms the third point of the triangle. He sees through Brooks's disguise and proposes that since the police already know about her male imposture, it would be safer to dress her as a girl. He goes in search of female attire, but what he brings back is marginally too young: a gingham dress, and a bonnet tied under the chin, in which Brooks looks like a woman masquerading as a child, a sort of adult Lolita. She stares

at us in her new gear, at once innocent and gravely perverse. The rivalry for her affection comes to its height when Beery pulls a gun and tells Arlen to hand her over. Brooks jumps between them, protecting Arlen, and explains that she would prefer death to life without him. We believe her; and so, to his own befuddled amazement, does Beery. There is really no need for the title in which he says that he has often heard about love but never until now known what it was. He puts his gun away and lets them go.

Footnote: During the transvestite scenes, several dangerous feats were performed for Brooks by a stunt man named Harvey. One night, attracted by his flamboyant courage, she slept with him. After breakfast the next day, she strolled out onto the porch of the hotel in the California village where the location sequences were being shot. Harvey was there, accompanied by a group of hoboes in the cast. He rose and gripped her by the arm. "Just a minute, Miss Brooks," he said loudly. "I've got something to ask you. I guess you know my job depends on my health." He then named a Paramount executive whom Brooks had never met, and continued, "Everybody knows you're his girl and he has syphilis, and what I want to know is, Do you have syphilis?" After a long and frozen pause, he added, "Another reason I want to know is that my girl is coming up at noon to drive me back to Hollywood." Brooks somehow withdrew to her room without screaming. Events like these may account for the lack of agonized regret with which she prematurely ended her movie career. Several years later, after she had turned down the part that Jean Harlow eventually played in Wellman's "The Public Enemy," she ran into the director in a New York bar. "You always hated making pictures, Louise," he said sagely. She did not bother to reply that it was not pictures she hated but Hollywood.

"The Canary Murder Case" (directed by Malcolm St. Clair from a script based on S. S. Van Dine's detective story, with William Powell as Philo Vance; not in the Eastman collection) was the third, and last, American movie that Brooks made in 1928. By now, her face was beginning to be internationally known, and the rushes of this film indicated that Paramount would soon have a major star on its hands. At the time, the studio was preparing to take the plunge into talkies. As Brooks afterward wrote in *Image* (a journal sponsored by Eastman House), front offices all over Hollywood saw in this radical change "a splendid opportunity . . . for breaking contracts, cutting salaries, and taming the stars." In the autumn of

1928, when her own contract called for a financial raise, B. P. Schulberg, the West Coast head of Paramount, summoned her to his office and said that the promised increase could not be granted in the new situation. “The Canary Murder Case” was being shot silent, but who knew whether Brooks could speak? (A fragile argument, since her voice was of bell-like clarity.) He presented her with a straight choice: either to continue at her present figure (seven hundred and fifty dollars a week) or to quit when the current picture was finished. To Schulberg’s surprise, she chose to quit. Almost as an afterthought, he revealed when she was rising to leave that he had lately received from G. W. Pabst a bombardment of cabled requests for her services in “Pandora’s Box,” all of which he had turned down.

Then forty-three years old, Pabst had shown an extraordinary flair for picking and molding actresses whose careers were upward bound; Asta Nielsen, Brigitte Helm, and Greta Garbo (in her third film, “The Joyless Street,” which was also her first outside Sweden) headed a remarkable list. Unknown to Schulberg, Brooks had already heard about the Pabst offer—and the weekly salary of a thousand dollars that went with it—from her lover, George Marshall, whose source was a gossipy director at M-G-M. She coolly told Schulberg to inform Pabst that she would soon be available. “At that very hour in Berlin,” she wrote later in *Sight & Sound*, “Marlene Dietrich was waiting with Pabst in his office.” This was two years before “The Blue Angel” made Dietrich a star. What she crucially lacked, Pabst felt, was the innocence he wanted for his Lulu. In his own words, “Dietrich was too old and too obvious—one sexy look and the picture would become a burlesque. But I gave her a deadline, and the contract was about to be signed when Paramount cabled saying I could have Louise Brooks.” The day that shooting ended on “The Canary Murder Case,” Brooks raced out of Hollywood en route for Berlin, there to work for a man who was one of the four or five leading European directors but of whom a few weeks earlier she had never heard.

“Pandora’s Box,” with which I had my fourth encounter at Eastman House, could easily have emerged as a cautionary tale about a *grande cocotte* whose reward is the wages of sin. That seems to have been the impression left by Wedekind’s two Lulu plays, which were made into a film in 1922 (not by Pabst) with Asta Nielsen in the lead. Summing up her predecessor’s performance, Brooks said, “She played in the eye-rolling style of European

silent acting. Lulu the man-eater devoured her sex victims . . . and then dropped dead in an acute attack of indigestion." The character obsessed many artists of the period. In 1928, Alban Berg began work on his twelve-tone opera "Lulu," the heart of which—beneath the stark and stylized sound patterns—was blatantly theatrical, throbbing with romantic agony. Where the Pabst-Brooks version of the Lulu story differs from the others is in its moral coolness. It assumes neither the existence of sin nor the necessity for retribution. It presents a series of events in which all the participants are seeking happiness, and it suggests that Lulu, whose notion of happiness is momentary fulfillment through sex, is not less admirable than those whose quest is for wealth or social advancement.

First sequence: Lulu in the Art Deco apartment in Berlin where she is kept by Dr. Ludwig Schön, a middle-aged newspaper proprietor. (In this role, the great Fritz Kortner, bulky but urbane, effortless in the exercise of power over everyone but his mistress, gives one of the cinema's most accurate and objective portraits of a capitalist potentate.) Dressed in a peignoir, Lulu is casually flirting with a man who has come to read the gas meter when the doorbell rings and Schigolch enters—a squat and shabby old man who was once Lulu's lover but is now down on his luck. She greets him with delight; as the disgruntled gas man departs, she swoops to rest on Schigolch's lap with the grace of a swan. The protective curve of her neck is unforgettable. Producing a mouth organ, Schigolch strikes up a tune, to which she performs a brief, Dionysiac, and authentically improvised little dance. (Until this scene was rehearsed, Pabst had no idea that Brooks was a trained dancer.) Watching her, I recollect something that Schigolch says in Wedekind's original text, though not in the film: "The animal is the only genuine thing in man. . . . What you have experienced as an animal, no misfortune can ever wrest from you. It remains yours for life." From the window, he points out a burly young man on the sidewalk: this is a friend of his named Rodrigo, a professional athlete who would like to work with her in an adagio act.

Unheralded, Dr. Schön lets himself into the apartment, and Lulu has just time to hide Schigolch on the balcony with a bottle of brandy. Schön has come to end his affair with Lulu, having decided to make a socially advantageous match with the daughter of a Cabinet Minister. In Lulu's reaction to the news there is no fury. She simply sits on a sofa and extends her arms toward him with something like reassurance. Unmoved at first,

Schön eventually responds and they begin to make love. The drunken Schigolch inadvertently rouses Lulu's pet dog to a barking fit, and this disturbance provokes the hasty exit of Schön. On the stairs, he passes the muscle man Rodrigo, whom Schigolch presents to Lulu. Rodrigo flexes his impressive biceps, on which she gleefully swings, like a schoolgirl gymnast.

A scene in Schön's mansion shows us his son Alwa (Francis Lederer, in his pre-Hollywood days) busily composing songs for his new musical revue. Alwa is joined by the Countess Geschwitz (Alice Roberts), a tight-lipped lesbian who is designing the costumes. Lulu dashes in to announce her plans for a double act with Rodrigo, and it is immediately clear that both Alwa and the Countess have eyes for her. She strolls on into Dr. Schön's study, where she picks up from the desk a photograph of his bride-to-be. Typically, she studies it with genuine interest; there's no narrowing of eyes or curling of lip. Schön, who has entered the room behind her, snatches the picture from her hands and orders her to leave. Before doing so, she mischievously invents a rendezvous next day with Alwa, whom she kisses, to the young man's embarrassed bewilderment, full on the mouth. With a toss of the patent-leather hair and a glance, half-playful, half-purposeful, at Alwa, she departs. Alwa asks his father why he doesn't marry her. Rather too explosively to carry conviction, Dr. Schön replies that one doesn't marry women like that. He proposes that Alwa give her a featured role in the revue, and guarantees that his newspapers will make her a star. Alwa is overjoyed; but when his father warns him at all costs to beware of her, he quits the room in tongue-tied confusion.

So much for the exposition; the principal characters and the main thrust of the action have been lucidly established. Note that Lulu, for all her seductiveness, is essentially an exploited creature, not an exploiter; also that we are not (nor shall we ever be) invited to feel sorry for her. I've already referred to her birdlike movements and animal nature; let me add that in the context of the plot as a whole she resembles a glittering tropical fish in a tank full of predators. For the remainder of this synopsis, I'll confine myself to the four great set pieces on which the film's reputation rests.

(1) Intermission at the opening night of Alwa's revue: Pabst catches the backstage panic of scene-shifting and costume-changing with a kaleidoscopic brilliance that looks forward to Orson Welles' handling,

twelve years later, of the operatic début of Susan Alexander Kane. Alwa and Geschwitz are there, revelling in what is obviously going to be a hit. Dr. Schön escorts Marie, his fiancée, through the pass door to share the frenzy. Lulu, changing in the wings, catches sight of him and smiles. Stricken with embarrassment, he cuts her and leads Marie away. This treatment maddens Lulu, and she refuses to go on with the show: "I'll dance for the whole world, but not in front of that woman." She takes refuge in the property room, whither Schön follows her. Leaning against the wall, she sobs, shaking her head mechanically from side to side, and then flings herself onto a pile of cushions, which she kicks and pummels. Despite her tantrum, she is watching Schön's every move. When he lights a cigarette to calm himself, she snaps, "Smoking's not allowed in here," and gives him a painful hack on the ankle. The mood of the scene swings from high histrionics through sly comedy to voluptuous intimacy. Soon Schön and Lulu are laughing, caressing, wholeheartedly making love. At this point, the door opens, framing Marie and Alwa. Unperturbed, Lulu rises in triumph, gathers up her costume, and sweeps past them to go onstage. Dr. Schön's engagement is obviously over.

(2) The wedding reception: Lulu is in a snow-white bridal gown, suggesting less a victorious *cocotte* than a girl celebrating her First Communion. Dr. Schön's wealthy friends flock admiringly round her. She dances cheek to cheek with Geschwitz, who rabidly adores her. (The Belgian actress Alice Roberts, here playing what may be the first explicit lesbian in movie history, refused point-blank to look at Brooks with the requisite degree of lust. To solve the problem, Pabst stood in her line of vision, told her to regard him with passionate intensity, and photographed her in closeups, which he then intercut with shots of Brooks. Scenes like these presented no difficulty to Brooks herself. She used to say of a young woman I'll call Fritzi LaVerne, one of her best friends in the "Follies," "She liked boys when she was sober and girls when she was drunk. I never heard a man or a woman pan her in bed, so she must have been very good." A shocked Catholic priest once asked Brooks how she felt playing a sinner like Lulu. "Feel!" she said gaily. "I felt fine! It all seemed perfectly normal to me." She explained to him that although she herself was not a lesbian, she had many chums of that persuasion in Ziegfeld's chorus line, and added, "I knew two millionaire publishers, much like Schön in the film, who backed shows to keep themselves well supplied with Lulus.") The action moves to Dr. Schön's

bedroom, where Schigolch and Rodrigo are drunkenly scattering roses over the nuptial coverlet. Lulu joins them, and something between a romp and an orgy seems imminent. It is halted by the entrance of the bridegroom. Appalled, he gropes for a gun in a nearby desk and chases the two men out of his house. The other guests, shocked and aghast, rapidly depart. When Schön returns to the bedroom, he finds Alwa with his head in Lulu's lap, urging her to run away with him. The elder Schön orders his son to leave. As soon as Alwa has left, there follows, between Kortner and Brooks, a classic demonstration of screen acting as the art of visual ellipsis. With the minimum of overt violence, a struggle for power is fought out to the death. Schön advances on Lulu, presses the gun into her hand, and begs her to commit suicide. As he grips her fingers in his, swearing to shoot her like a dog if she lacks the courage to do it herself, she seems almost hypnotized by the desperation of his grief. You would think them locked in an embrace until Lulu suddenly stiffens, a puff of smoke rises between them, and Schön slumps to the floor. Alwa bursts in and rushes to his father, from whose lips a fat thread of blood slowly trickles. The father warns Alwa that he will be the next victim. Gun in hand, Lulu stares at the body, wide-eyed and transfixed. Brooks wrote afterward that Pabst always used concrete phrases to get the emotional responses he wanted. In this case, the key image he gave her was "*das Blut*." "Not the murder of my husband," she wrote, "but the sight of the blood determined the expression on my face." What we see is not *Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée* but a petrified child.

(3) Trial and flight: Lulu is sentenced to five years' imprisonment for manslaughter, but as the judge pronounces the sentence, her friends, led by Geschwitz, set off a fire alarm, and in the ensuing courtroom chaos she escapes. With perfect fidelity to her own willful character, Lulu, in defiance of movie cliché, comes straight back to Schön's house, where she acts like a débutante relaxing after a ball—lighting a cigarette, idly thumbing through a fashion magazine, trying out a few dance steps, opening a wardrobe and stroking a new fur coat, running a bath and immersing herself in it. Only Brooks, perhaps, could have carried off this solo sequence—so unlike the behavior expected of criminals on the run—with such ingrained conviction and such lyrical aplomb. Now Alwa arrives and is astounded to find her at the scene of the crime. The two decide to flee together to Paris. No sooner have they caught the train, however, than they are recognized by a titled pimp, who blackmails them into accompanying him aboard a gambling ship.

Geschwitz, Schigolch, and the tediously beefy Rodrigo are also afloat, and for a while the film lurches into melodrama—sub-Dostoevski with a touch of ship's Chandler. Rodrigo threatens to expose Lulu unless she sleeps with him; the Countess, gritting her teeth, distracts his attention by making love to him herself—an unlikely coupling—after which she disdainfully kills him. Meanwhile, the pimp is arranging to sell Lulu to an Egyptian brothel-keeper. Anxious to save her from this fate, Alwa frenetically cheats at cards and is caught with a sleeve full of aces. The police arrive just too late to prevent Alwa, Lulu, and Schigolch from escaping in a rowboat. For the shipboard episode, Pabst cajoled Brooks, much against her will, into changing her coiffure. The spit curls disappeared; the black bangs were parted, waved, and combed back to expose her forehead. These cardinal errors of taste defaced the icon. It was as if an Italian master had painted the Virgin and left out the halo.

(4) London and catastrophe: The East End, icy and fogbound, on Christmas Eve. The Salvation Army is out in force, playing carols and distributing food to the poor. A sallow, mournfully handsome young man moves aimlessly through the crowds. He gives cash for the needy to an attractive Army girl, and gets in return a candle and a sprig of mistletoe. Posters on the walls warn the women of London against going out unescorted at night: there is a mass murderer at large. In a garret close by, its broken skylight covered by a flapping rag, Lulu lives in squalor with Alwa and Schigolch. The room is unfurnished except for a camp bed, an armchair, and a kitchen table with an oil lamp, a few pieces of chipped crockery, and a bread knife. Lulu's curls and bangs have been restored, but her clothes are threadbare: all three exiles are on the verge of starvation. Reduced by now to prostitution, Lulu ventures down into the street, where she accosts the young wanderer we have already met. He follows her up the stairs but stops halfway, as if reluctant to go farther. We see that he is holding behind his back a switchblade knife, open. Lulu proffers her hand and leans encouragingly toward him. Her smile is lambent and beckoning. Hesitantly, he explains that he has no money. With transparent candor, she replies that it doesn't matter: she likes him. Unseen by Lulu, he releases his grip on the knife and lets it fall into the stairwell. She leads him into the attic, which Alwa and Schigolch have tactfully vacated. The scene that follows is tender, even buoyant, but unsoftened by sentimentality. The cold climax, when it comes, is necessary and inevitable. Ripper and victim relax like familiar lovers. He leans back in the armchair

and stretches out his hand; she leaps onto his lap, landing with both knees bent, as weightless as a chamois. Her beauty has never looked more ripe. While they happily flirt, he allows her to pry into his pockets, from which she extracts the gifts he received from the Salvation Army. She lights the candle and places it ceremonially on the table, with the mistletoe beside it. In a deep and peaceful embrace, they survey the tableau. The Ripper then raises the mistletoe over Lulu's head and requests the traditional kiss. As she shuts her eyes and presents her lips, the candle flares up. Its gleam reflected in the bread knife on the table holds the Ripper's gaze. He can look at nothing but the shining blade. Long seconds pass as he wrestles, motionless, with his obsession. Finally, leaning forward to consummate the kiss, he grasps the handle of the knife. In the culminating shot, he is facing away from the camera. All we see of Lulu is her right hand, open on his shoulder, pressing him toward her. Suddenly, it clenches hard, then falls, limply dangling, behind his back. We fade to darkness. Nowhere in the cinema has the destruction of beauty been conveyed with more eloquent restraint. As with the killing of Dr. Schön, extreme violence is implied, not shown. To paraphrase what Freddy Buache, a Swiss critic, wrote many years later, Lulu's death is in no sense God's judgment on a sinner; she has lived her life in accordance with the high moral imperatives of liberty, and stands in no need of redemption.

After the murder, the Ripper emerges from the building and hurries off into the fog. It is here, in my view, that the film should end. Instead, Pabst moves on to the forlorn figure of Alwa, who stares up at the garret before turning away to follow the Salvation Army procession out of sight. A glib anticlimax indeed; but I'm not sure that I prefer the alternative proposed by Brooks, who has said, with characteristic forthrightness, "The movie should have ended with the knife in the vagina." It may be worth adding that Gustav Diessl, who played the Ripper, was the only man in the cast whom she found sexually appealing. "We just adored each other," she has said in an interview with Richard Leacock, "and I think the final scene was the happiest in the picture. Here he is with a knife he's going to stick up into my interior, and we'd be singing and I'd be doing the Charleston. You wouldn't have known it was a tragic ending. It was more like a Christmas party." At Brooks's request, Pabst had hired a jazz pianist to play between takes, and during these syncopated interludes Brooks and Diessl would often disappear beneath the table to engage in intimate festivities of their own.

The Berlin critics, expecting Lulu to be portrayed as a monster of active depravity, had mixed feelings about Brooks. One reviewer wrote, "Louise Brooks cannot act. She does not suffer. She does nothing." Wedekind himself, however, had said of his protagonist, "Lulu is not a real character but the personification of primitive sexuality, who inspires evil unawares. She plays a purely passive role." Brooks afterward stated her own opinion of what she had achieved. "I played *Pabst's* Lulu," she said, "and she isn't a destroyer of men, like Wedekind's. She's just the same kind of nitwit that I am. Like me, she'd have been an impossible wife, sitting in bed all day reading and drinking gin." Modern critics have elected Brooks's Lulu to a secure place in the movie pantheon. David Thomson describes it as "one of the major female performances in the cinema," to be measured beside such other pinnacles as "Dietrich in the von Sternberg films, Bacall with Hawks, Karina in 'Pierrot le Fou.' " It is true that in the same list Thomson included Kim Novak in "Vertigo." It is also true that we are none of us perfect.

Day Two: My first view of the second Pabst-Brooks collaboration—"The Diary of a Lost Girl," based on "Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen," a novel by Margarethe Boehme, and shot in the summer of 1929. After finishing "Pandora," Brooks had returned to New York and resumed her affair with the millionaire George Marshall. He told her that a new movie company, called RKO and masterminded by Joseph P. Kennedy, was anxious to sign her up for five hundred dollars a week. She replied, "I hate California and I'm not going back." Then Paramount called, ordering her to report for duty on the Coast; it was turning "The Canary Murder Case" into a talkie and required her presence for retakes and dubbing. She refused to go. Under the impression that this was a haggling posture, the studio offered ever vaster sums of money. Brooks's determination remained undented. Goaded to fury, Paramount planted in the columns a petty but damaging little story to the effect that it had been compelled to replace Brooks because her voice was unusable in talkies.

At this point—April, 1929—she received a cable from Pabst. It said that he intended to co-produce a French film entitled "Prix de Beauté," which René Clair would direct, and that they both wanted her for the lead—would she therefore cross the Atlantic as soon as possible? Such was her faith in Pabst that within two weeks she and Clair ("a very small, demure, rather fragile man" is how she afterward described him) were posing together for publicity

shots in Paris. When the photographic session was over, Clair escorted her back to her hotel, where he damped her enthusiasm by revealing that he proposed to pull out of the picture forthwith. He advised her to do the same; the production money, he said, simply wasn't there, and might never be. A few days later, he officially retired from the project. (Its place in his schedule was taken by "Sous les Toits de Paris," which, together with its immediate successors—"Le Million" and "À Nous la Liberté"—established his international reputation.) With nothing to do, and a guaranteed salary of a thousand dollars a week to do it on, Brooks entrained for a spree in Antibes, accompanied by a swarm of rich admirers. When she got back to Paris, Pabst called her from Berlin. "Prix de Beauté," he said, was postponed; instead, she would star under his direction in "The Diary of a Lost Girl," at precisely half her present salary. As submissive as ever to her tutor, she arrived in Berlin aboard the next train.

Lovingly photographed by Sepp Allgeier, Brooks in "Lost Girl" is less flamboyant but not less haunting than she is in "Pandora's Box." The traffic in movie actors traditionally moved westward, from Europe to Hollywood, where their national characteristics were sedulously exploited. Brooks, who was among the few to make the eastbound trip, became in her films with Pabst completely Europeanized. To be more exact: in the context that Pabst prepared for her, Brooks's American brashness took on an awareness of transience and mortality. The theme of "Lost Girl" is the corruption of a minor—not by sexuality but by an authoritarian society that condemns sexuality. (Pabst must surely have read Wilhelm Reich, the Freudian Marxist, whose theories about the relationship between sexual and political repression were hotly debated in Berlin at the time.) It is the same society that condemns Lulu. In fact, "The Education of Lulu" would make an apt alternative title for "Lost Girl," whose heroine emerges from her travails ideally equipped for the leading role in "Pandora's Box." Her name is Thymian Henning, and she is the sixteen-year-old daughter of a prosperous pharmacist. In the early sequences, Brooks plays her shy and faunlike, peering wide-eyed at a predatory world. She is seduced and impregnated by her father's libidinous young assistant. As soon as her condition is discovered, the double standard swings into action. The assistant retains his job; but, to save the family from dishonor, Thymian's baby is farmed out to a wet nurse, and she herself is consigned to a home for delinquent girls, run by a bald and ghoulish superintendent and his sadistic wife.

Life in the reformatory is strictly regimented: the inmates exercise to the beat of a drum and eat to the tapping of a metronome. At length, Thymian escapes from this archetypal hellhole (precursor of many such institutions in subsequent movies; e.g., "Mädchen in Uniform") and goes to reclaim her baby, only to find that the child has died. Broke and homeless, she meets a street vender who guides her to an address where food and shelter will be hers for the asking. Predictably, it turns out to be a brothel; far less predictably, even shockingly, Pabst presents it as a place where Thymian is not degraded but liberated. In the whorehouse, she blossoms, becoming a *fille de joie* in the literal sense of the phrase. Unlike almost any other actress in a similar situation, Brooks neither resorts to pathos nor suggests that there is anything immoral in the pleasure she derives from her new profession. As in "Pandora," she lives for the moment, with radiant physical abandon. Present love, even for sale, hath present laughter, and what's to come is not only unsure but irrelevant. I agree with Freddy Buache when he says of Brooks's performances with Pabst that they celebrated "the victory of innocence and *amour-fou* over the debilitating wisdom imposed on society by the Church, the Fatherland, and the Family." One of her more outré clients can achieve orgasm only by watching her beat a drum. This ironic echo of life in the reform school is used by Pabst to imply that sexual prohibition breeds sexual aberration. (Even more ironically, the sequence has been censored out of most of the existing prints of the movie.) Brooks is at her best—a happy animal in skintight satin—in a party scene at a night club, where she offers herself as first prize in a raffle. "Pabst wanted realism, so we all had to drink real drinks," she said later. "I played the whole scene stewed on hot, sweet German champagne."

Hereabouts, unfortunately, the film begins to shed its effrontery and to pay lip service to conventional values. Thymian catches sight of her father across the dance floor; instead of reacting with defiance—after all, he threw her out of his house—she looks stricken with guilt, like the outcast daughter of sentimental fiction. In her absence, Papa has married his housekeeper, by whom he has two children. When he dies, shortly after the night-club confrontation, he leaves his considerable wealth to Thymian. Nobly, she gives it all to his penniless widow, so that the latter's offspring "won't have to live the same kind of life as I have." Thereby redeemed, the former whore soon becomes the wife of an elderly aristocrat. Revisiting the reform school, of which she has now been appointed a trustee, she excoriates the staff for its

self-righteous cruelties. “A little more kindness,” her husband adds, “and no one in the world would ever be lost.” Thus lamely, the movie ends.

“Pabst seemed to lose interest,” Brooks told an interviewer some years afterward. “He more or less said, ‘I’m tired of this picture,’ and he gave it a soft ending.” His first, and much tougher, intention had been to demonstrate that humanitarianism alone could never solve society’s problems. He wanted Thymian to show her contempt for her husband’s liberal platitudes by setting herself up as the madam of a whorehouse. The German distributors, however, refused to countenance such a radical dénouement, and Pabst was forced to capitulate. The result is a flawed masterpiece, with a shining central performance that even the closing, compromised sequences cannot dim. Brooks has written that during the making of the film she spent all her off-duty hours with rich revellers of whom Pabst disapproved. On the last day of shooting, “he decided to let me have it.” Her friends, he said, were preventing her from becoming a serious actress, and sooner or later they would discard her like an old toy. “Your life is exactly like Lulu’s, and you will end the same way,” he warned her. The passage of time convinced her that Pabst had a valid point. “Lulu’s story,” she told a journalist, “is as near as you’ll get to mine.”

In August, 1929, she returned to Paris, where backing had unexpectedly been found for “Prix de Beauté,” her last European movie and her first talkie —although, since she spoke no French, her voice was dubbed. The director, briefly surfacing from obscurity, was Augusto Genina, and René Clair received a credit for the original idea. Like so much of French cinema in the thirties, “Prix de Beauté” is a *film noir*, with wanly tinny music, about a shabby suburban crime of passion. Brooks plays Lucienne, a typist who enters a newspaper beauty contest. It’s the kind of role with which one associates Simone Simon, though the rapture that Brooks displays when she wins, twirling with glee as she shows off her presents and trophies, goes well beyond the emotional range accessible to Mlle. Simon. Lucienne-Brooks is triumphantly unliberated; she rejoices in being a beloved, fleshly bauble, and she makes it clear to her husband, a compositor employed by the prize-giving newspaper, that she wants a grander, more snobbish reward for her victory than a visit to a back-street fairground, which is all he has to offer. She leaves him and accepts a part in a film. Consumed by jealousy, he follows her one night to a projection theatre in which a rough cut of her

movie is being shown. He bursts in and shoots her. As she dies, the French infatuation with irony is fearsomely indulged: her image on the screen behind her is singing the movie's theme song, "Ne Sois Pas Jaloux." In "Prix de Beauté," Brooks lends her inimitable flair and distinction to a cliché; but it is a cliché nonetheless.

At this point, when Brooks was at the height of her beauty, her career began a steep and bumpy decline. In 1930, she went back to Hollywood, on the strength of a promised contract with Columbia. Harry Cohn, the head of the studio, summoned her to his office for a series of meetings, at each of which he appeared naked from the waist up. Always a plain speaker, he left her in no doubt that good parts would come her way if she responded to his advances. She rebuffed them, and the proffered contract was withdrawn. Elsewhere in Hollywood, she managed to get a job in a feeble two-reel comedy pseudonymously directed by the disgraced Fatty Arbuckle; her old friend Frank Tuttle gave her a supporting role in "It Pays to Advertise" (starring Carole Lombard); and she turned up fleetingly in a Michael Curtiz picture called "God's Gift to Women." But the word was out that Brooks was difficult and uppity, too independent to suit the system. Admitting defeat, she returned to New York in May of 1931. Against her will, but under heavy pressure from George Marshall, her lover and would-be Svengali, she played a small part in "Louder, Please," a featherweight comedy by Norman Krasna that began its pre-Broadway run in October. After the opening week in Jackson Heights, she was fired by the director, George Abbott. This was her farewell to the theatre; it took place on the eve of her twenty-fifth birthday.

For Brooks, as for millions of her compatriots, a long period of unemployment followed. In 1933, determined to break off her increasingly discordant relationship with Marshall, she married Deering Davis, a rich young Chicagoan, but walked out on him after six months of rapidly waning enthusiasm. With a Hungarian partner named Dario Borzani, she spent a year dancing in night clubs, including the Persian Room of the Plaza, but the monotony of cabaret routine dismayed her, and she quit the act in August, 1935. That autumn, Pabst suddenly arrived in New York and invited her to play Helen of Troy in a film version of Goethe's "Faust," with Greta Garbo as Gretchen. Her hopes giddily soared, only to be dashed when Garbo opted out and the project fell through. Once again, she revisited Hollywood, where

Republic Pictures wanted to test her for a role in a musical called “Dancing Feet.” She was rejected in favor of a blonde who couldn’t dance. “That about did it for me,” Brooks wrote later. “From then on, it was straight downhill. And no dough to keep the wolves from the door.” In 1936, Universal cast her as the ingénue (Boots Boone) in “Empty Saddles,” a Buck Jones Western, which is the last Brooks movie in the Eastman collection. She looks perplexed, discouraged, and lacking in verve; and her coiffure, with the hair swept back from her forehead, reveals disquieting lines of worry. (Neither she nor Jones is helped by the fact that many of the major sequences of an incredibly complex plot take place at night.) The following year brought her a bit part at Paramount in something called “King of Gamblers,” after which, in her own words, “Harry Cohn gave me a personally conducted tour of hell with no return ticket.” Still wounded by her refusal to sleep with him in 1930, Cohn promised her a screen test if she would submit to the humiliation of appearing in the corps de ballet of a Grace Moore musical entitled “When You’re in Love.” To his surprise, Brooks accepted the offer—she was too broke to spurn it—and Cohn made sure that the demotion of an erstwhile star was publicized as widely as possible. Grudgingly, he gave her a perfunctory screen test, which he dismissed in two words: “It stunk.” In the summer of 1938, Republic hired Brooks to appear with John Wayne (then a minor figure) in “Overland Stage Raiders.” After this low-budget oater, she made no more pictures.

In her entire professional career, Brooks had earned, according to her own calculations, exactly $124,600—$104,500 from films, $10,100 from theatre, and $10,000 from all other sources. Not a gargantuan sum, one would think, spread over sixteen years; yet Brooks said to a friend, “I was astonished that it came to so much. But then I never paid any attention to money.” In 1940, she left Hollywood for the last time.

Eastman House stands in an affluent residential district of Rochester, on an avenue of comparably stately mansions, with broad, tree-shaded lawns. When my second day of séances with Brooks came to an end, I zipped up my notes in a briefcase, thanked the staff of the film department for their help, and departed in a taxi. The driver took me to an apartment building only a few blocks away, where I paid him off. I rode up in the elevator to the third floor and pressed a doorbell a few paces along the corridor. After a long pause, there was a loud snapping of locks. The door slowly opened to

reveal a petite woman of fragile build, wearing a woollen bed jacket over a pink nightgown, and holding herself defiantly upright by means of a sturdy metal cane with four rubber-tipped prongs. She had salt-and-pepper hair combed back into a ponytail that hung down well below her shoulders, and she was barefoot. One could imagine this gaunt and elderly child as James Tyrone's wife in "Long Day's Journey Into Night"; or, noting the touch of authority and panache in her bearing, as the capricious heroine of Jean Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot." I stated my name, adding that I had an appointment. She nodded and beckoned me in. I greeted her with a respectful embrace. This was my first physical contact with Louise Brooks.

She was seventy-one years old, and until a few months earlier I had thought she was dead. Four decades had passed since her last picture, and it seemed improbable that she had survived such a long period of retirement. Moreover, I did not then know how young she had been at the time of her flowering. Spurred by the TV screening of "Pandora's Box" in January, 1978, I had made some inquiries, and soon discovered that she was living in Rochester, virtually bedridden with degenerative osteoarthritis of the hip, and that since 1956 she had written twenty vivid and perceptive articles, mainly for specialist film magazines, on such of her colleagues and contemporaries as Garbo, Dietrich, Keaton, Chaplin, Bogart, Fields, Lillian Gish, ZaSu Pitts, and (naturally) Pabst. Armed with this information, I wrote her a belated fan letter, to which she promptly replied. We then struck up a correspondence, conducted on her side in a bold and expressive prose style. (It matched her handwriting.) Rapport was cemented by telephone calls, which resulted in my visit to Rochester and the date I was now keeping.

She has not left her apartment since 1960, except for a few trips to the dentist and one to a doctor. (She mistrusts the medical profession, and this consultation, which took place in 1976, was her first in thirty-two years.) "You're doing a terrible thing to me," she said as she ushered me in. "I've been killing myself off for twenty years, and you're going to bring me back to life." She lives in two rooms—modest, spotless, and austerely furnished. From the larger, I remember Venetian blinds, a green sofa, a TV set, a Formica-topped table, a tiny kitchenette alcove, and flesh-pink walls sparsely hung with paintings redolent of the twenties. The other room was too small to hold more than a bed (single), a built-in cupboard bursting with press clippings and other souvenirs, a chest of drawers surmounted by a

crucifix and a statue of the Virgin, and a stool piled high with books, including works by Proust, Schopenhauer, Ruskin, Ortega y Gasset, Samuel Johnson, Edmund Wilson, and many living authors of serious note. “I’m probably one of the best-read idiots in the world,” my hostess said as she haltingly showed me round her domain. Although she eats little—she turns the scale at about eighty-eight pounds—she had prepared for us a perfectly mountainous omelette. Nerves, however, had robbed us of our appetites, and we barely disturbed its mighty silhouette. I produced from my briefcase a bottle of expensive red Burgundy which I had brought as a gift. (Brooks, who used to drink quite heftily, nowadays touches alcohol only on special occasions.) Since she cannot sit upright for long without discomfort, we retired with the wine to her bedroom, where she reclined, sipped, and talked, gesturing fluently, her fingers supple and unclenched. I pulled a chair up to the bedside and listened.

Her voice has the range of a dozen birdcalls, from the cry of a peacock to the fluting of a dove. Her articulation, at whatever speed, is impeccable, and her laughter soars like a kite. I cannot understand why, even if she had not been a beauty, Hollywood failed to realize what a treasure it possessed in the sound of Louise Brooks. Like most people who speak memorably, she is highly responsive to vocal nuances in others. She told Kevin Brownlow that her favorite actress (“the person I would be if I could be anyone”) was Margaret Sullavan, mainly because of her voice, which Brooks described as “exquisite and far away, almost like an echo,” and, again, as “strange, fey, mysterious—like a voice singing in the snow.” My conversations with the Ravishing Hermit of Rochester were spread over several days; for the sake of convenience, I have here compressed them into one session.

She began, at my urging, by skimming through the story of her life since she last faced the Hollywood cameras: “Why did I give up the movies? I could give you seven hundred reasons, all of them true. After I made that picture with John Wayne in 1938, I stayed out on the Coast for two years, but the only people who wanted to see me were men who wanted to sleep with me. Then Walter Wanger warned me that if I hung around any longer I’d become a call girl. So I fled to Wichita, Kansas, where my family had moved in 1919. But that turned out to be another kind of hell. The citizens of Wichita either resented me for having been a success or despised me for being a failure. And I wasn’t exactly enchanted with them. I opened a dance studio

for young people, who loved me, because I dramatized everything so much, but it didn't make any money. In 1943, I drifted back to New York and worked for six months in radio soaps. Then I quit, for another hundred reasons, including Wounded Pride of Former Star. [Peal of laughter. Here, as throughout our chat, Brooks betrayed not the slightest trace of self-pity.] During '44 and '45, I got a couple of jobs in publicity agencies, collecting items for Winchell's column. I was fired from both of them, and I had to move from the decent little hotel where I'd been living to a grubby hole on First Avenue at Fifty-ninth Street. That was when I began to flirt with fancies related to little bottles filled with yellow sleeping pills. However, I changed my mind, and in July, 1946, the proud, snooty Louise Brooks started work as a salesgirl at Saks Fifth Avenue. They paid me forty dollars a week. I had this silly idea of proving myself 'an honest woman,' but the only effect it had was to disgust all my famous New York friends, who cut me off forever. From then on, I was regarded as a questionable East Side dame. After two years at Saks, I resigned. To earn a little money, I sat down and wrote the usual autobiography. I called it 'Naked on My Goat,' which is a quote from Goethe's 'Faust.' In one of the *Walpurgisnacht* scenes, a young witch is bragging about her looks to an old one. 'I sit here naked on my goat,' she says, 'and show my fine young body.' But the old one advises her to wait awhile: 'Though young and tender now, you'll rot, we know, you'll rot.' Then, when I read what I'd written, I threw the whole thing down the incinerator. "

Brooks insists that her motive for this act of destruction was *pudeur*. In 1977, she wrote an article for *Focus on Film* headed "Why I Will Never Write My Memoirs," in which she summed herself up as a prototypical Midwesterner, "born in the Bible Belt of Anglo-Saxon farmers, who prayed in the parlor and practiced incest in the barn." Although her sexual education had been conducted in Paris, London, Berlin, and New York, her pleasure was, she wrote, "restricted by the inbred shackles of sin and guilt." Her conclusion was as follows:

> In writing the history of a life I believe absolutely that the reader cannot understand the character and deeds of the subject unless he is given a basic understanding of that person's sexual loves and hates and conflicts. It is the only way the reader can make sense out of innumerable apparently senseless actions. . . . We flatter ourselves when

> we assume that we have restored the sexual integrity which was expurgated by the Victorians. It is true that many exposés are written to shock, to excite, to make money. But in serious books characters remain as baffling, as unknowable as ever. . . . I too am unwilling to write the sexual truth that would make my life worth reading. I cannot unbuckle the Bible Belt.

Accepting a drop more wine, she continued the tale of her wilderness years. "Between 1948 and 1953, I suppose you could call me a kept woman," she said. "Three decent rich men looked after me. But then I was *always* a kept woman. Even when I was making a thousand dollars a week, I would always be paid for by George Marshall or someone like that. But I never had anything to show for it—no cash, no trinkets, nothing. I didn't even *like* jewelry—can you imagine? Pabst once called me a born whore, but if he was right I was a failure, with no pile of money and no comfortable mansion. I just wasn't equipped to spoil millionaires in a practical, farsighted way. I could live in the present, but otherwise everything has always been a hundred per cent wrong about me. Anyway, the three decent men took care of me. One of them owned a sheet-metal manufacturing company, and the result of that affair is that I am now the owner of the only handmade aluminum wastebasket in the world. He designed it, and it's in the living room, my solitary trophy. Then a time came, early in 1953, when my three men independently decided that they wanted to marry me. I had to escape, because I wasn't in love with them. As a matter of fact, I've never been in love. And if I *had* loved a man, could I have been faithful to him? Could he have trusted me beyond a closed door? I doubt it. It was clever of Pabst to know even before he met me that I possessed the tramp essence of Lulu."

Brooks hesitated for a moment and then went on in the same tone, lightly self-mocking, "Maybe I should have been a writer's moll. Because when we were talking on the phone, a few Sundays ago, some secret compartment inside me burst, and I was suddenly overpowered by the feeling of love—a sensation I'd never experienced with any other man. Are you a variation of Jack the Ripper, who finally brings me love that I'm prevented from accepting—not by the knife but by old age? You're a perfect scoundrel, turning up like this and wrecking my golden years! [I was too stunned to offer any comment on this, but not too stunned to note, with a distinct glow of pride, that Brooks was completely sober.] Anyhow, to get back to my

three suitors, I decided that the only way to avoid marriage was to become a Catholic, so that I could tell them that in the eyes of the Church I was still married to Eddie Sutherland. I went to the rectory of a Catholic church on the East Side, and everything was fine until my sweet, pure religious instructor fell in love with me. I was the first woman he'd ever known who acted like one and treated him like a man. The other priests were furious. They sent him off to California and replaced him with a stern young missionary. After a while, however, even *he* began to hint that it would be a good idea if he dropped by my apartment in the evenings to give me special instruction. But I resisted temptation, and in September, 1953, I was baptized a Catholic."

Having paused to light a cigarette, which provoked a mild coughing spasm, Brooks resumed her story. "I almost forgot a strange incident that happened in 1952. Out of the blue, I got a letter from a woman who had been a Cherryvale neighbor of ours. She enclosed some snapshots. One of them showed a nice-looking gray-haired man of about fifty holding the hand of a little girl—me. On the back she'd written, 'This is Mr. Feathers, an old bachelor who loved kids. He was always taking you to the picture show and buying you toys and candy.' That picture brought back something I'd blacked out of my mind for—what?—thirty-seven years. When I was nine years old, Mr. Feathers molested me sexually. Which forged another link between me and Lulu: when *she* had *her* first lover, she was very young, and Schigolch, the man in question, was middle-aged. I've often wondered what effect Mr. Feathers had on my life. He must have had a great deal to do with forming my attitude toward sexual pleasure. For me, nice, soft, easy men were never enough—there had to be an element of domination—and I'm sure that's all tied up with Mr. Feathers. The pleasure of kissing and being kissed comes from somewhere entirely different, psychologically as well as physically. Incidentally, I told my mother about Mr. Feathers, and—would you believe it? [Peal of laughter.] She blamed *me!* She said I must have led him on. It's always the same, isn't it?" And Brooks ran on in this vein, discussing her sex life openly and jauntily, unbuckling one more notch of the Bible Belt with every sentence she uttered.

The year 1954 was Brooks's nadir. "I was too proud to be a call girl. There was no point in throwing myself into the East River, because I could swim; and I couldn't afford the alternative, which was sleeping pills." In 1955, just

perceptibly, things began to look up, and life became once more a tolerable option. Henri Langlois, the exuberant ruler of the Cinémathèque Française, organized in Paris a huge exhibition entitled "Sixty Years of Cinema." Dominating the entrance hall of the Musée d'Art Moderne were two gigantic blowups, one of the French actress Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's 1928 classic, "La Passion de Jeanne d' Arc," and the other of Brooks in "Pandora's Box." When a critic demanded to know why he had preferred this nonentity to authentic stars like Garbo and Dietrich, Langlois exploded, "There is no Garbo! There is no Dietrich! There is only Louise Brooks!" In the same year, a group of her friends from the twenties clubbed together to provide a small annuity that would keep her from outright destitution; and she was visited in her Manhattan retreat by James Card, then the curator of film at Eastman House. He had long admired her movies, and he persuaded her to come to Rochester, where so much of her best work was preserved. It was at his suggestion that, in 1956, she settled there.

"Rochester seemed as good a place as any," she told me. "It was cheaper than New York, and I didn't run the risk of meeting people from my past. Up to that time, I had never seen any of my films. And I still haven't—not right through, that is. Jimmy Card screened some of them for me, but that was during my drinking period. I would watch through glazed eyes for about five minutes and sleep through the rest. I haven't even seen 'Pandora.' I've been present on two occasions when it was being run, but I was drunk both times. By that I mean I was *navigating* but not *seeing*." When she watched other people's movies, however, she felt no need for alcoholic sedation. As a working actress, she had never taken films seriously; under Card's tuition, she recognized that the cinema was a valid form of art, and began to develop her own theories about it. In 1956, drawing on her powers of near-total recall, she wrote a study of Pabst for *Image*. This was the first of a sheaf of articles, sharp-eyed and idiosyncratic, that she has contributed over the years to such magazines as *Sight & Sound* (London), *Objectif* (Montreal), *Film Culture* (New York), and *Positif* (Paris).

The Brooks cult burgeoned in 1957, when Henri Langlois crossed the Atlantic to meet her. A year later, he presented "Hommage à Louise Brooks"—a festival of her movies that filled the Cinémathèque. The star herself flew to Paris, all expenses paid, and was greeted with wild acclaim at a reception after the Cinémathèque's showing of "Pandora's Box." (Among

those present was Jean-Luc Godard, who paid his own tribute to Brooks in 1962, when he directed "Vivre Sa Vie," the heroine of which—a prostitute—was played by Anna Karina in an exact replica of the Brooks hairdo. Godard described the character as "a young and pretty Parisian shopgirl who gives her body but retains her soul.") In January, 1960, Brooks went to New York and attended a screening of "Prix de Beauté" in the Kaufmann Concert Hall of the 92nd Street Y, where she made a hilarious little speech that delighted the packed audience. The next day, she returned to Rochester, from which she has never since emerged.

Interviewers and fans occasionally call on her, but for the most part, as she put it to me, "I have lived in virtual isolation, with an audience consisting of the milkman and a cleaning woman." She continued, "Once a week, I would drink a pint of gin, and would become what Dickens called 'gincoherent,' go to sleep, and drowse for four days. That left three days to read, write a bit, and see the odd visitor. No priests, by the way—I said goodbye to the Church in 1964. Now and then, there would be a letter to answer. In 1965, for instance, an Italian artist named Guido Crepax started a very sexy and tremendously popular comic strip about a girl called Valentina, who looked exactly like me as Lulu. In fact, she *identified* herself with me. Crepax wrote to thank me for the inspiration and said he regarded me as a twentieth-century myth. I appreciated the tribute and told him that at last I felt I could disintegrate happily in bed with my books, gin, cigarettes, coffee, bread, cheese, and apricot jam. During the sixties, arthritis started to get a grip, and in 1972 I had to buy a medical cane in order to move around. Then, five years ago, the disease really walloped me. My pioneer blood did not pulse through my veins, rousing me to fight it. I collapsed. I took a terrible fall and nearly smashed my hip. That was the end of the booze or any other kind of escape for me. I knew I was in for a bad time, with nothing to face but the absolute meaninglessness of my life. All I've done since then is try to hold the pieces together. And to keep my little squirrel-cage brain distracted."

As an emblematic figure of the twenties, epitomizing the flappers, jazz babies, and dancing daughters of the boom years, Brooks has few rivals, living or dead. Moreover, she is unique among such figures in that her career took her to all the places—New York, London, Hollywood, Paris, and Berlin—where the action was at its height, where experiments in pleasure were conducted with the same zeal (and often by the same people) as experiments

in the arts. From her bedroom cupboard Brooks produced an avalanche of manila envelopes, each bulging with mementoes of her halcyon decade. This solitary autodidact, her perceptions deepened by years of immersion in books, looked back for my benefit on the green, gregarious girl she once was, and found much to amuse her. For every photograph she supplied a spoken caption. As she reminisced, I often thought of those Max Beerbohm cartoons that depict the Old Self conversing with the Young Self.

"Here I am in 1922, when I first hit New York, and the label of 'beautiful but dumb' was slapped on me forever. Most beautiful-but-dumb girls think they are smart, and get away with it, because other people, on the whole, aren't much smarter. You can see modern equivalents of those girls on any TV talk show. But there's also a very small group of beautiful women who *know* they're dumb, and this makes them defenseless and vulnerable. They become the Big Joke. I didn't know Marilyn Monroe, but I'm sure that her agonizing awareness of her own stupidity was one of the things that killed her. I became the Big Joke, first on Broadway and then in Hollywood. . . . That's Herman Mankiewicz—an ideal talk-show guest, don't you think, born before his time? In 1925, Herman was trying to educate me, and he invented the Louise Brooks Literary Society. A girl named Dorothy Knapp and I were Ziegfeld's two prize beauties. We had a big dressing room on the fifth floor of the New Amsterdam Theatre building, and people like Walter Wanger and Gilbert Miller would meet there, ostensibly to hear my reviews of books that Herman gave me to read. What they actually came for was to watch Dorothy doing a striptease in front of a full-length mirror. I get some consolation from the fact that, as an idiot, I have provided delight in my time to a very select group of intellectuals. . . . That must be Joseph Schenck. Acting on behalf of his brother Nick, who controlled M-G-M, Joe offered me a contract in 1925 at three hundred a week. Instead, I went to Paramount for two hundred and fifty. Maybe I should have signed with M-G-M and joined what I called the Joe Schenck Mink Club. You could recognize the members at '21' because they never removed their mink coats at lunch. . . . Here's Fritzi LaVerne, smothered in osprey feathers. I roomed with her briefly when we were in the 'Follies' together, and she seduced more 'Follies' girls than Ziegfeld and William Randolph Hearst combined. That's how I got the reputation of being a lesbian. I had nothing against it in principle, and for years I thought it was fun to encourage the idea. I used to hold hands with Fritzi in public. She had a little Bulgarian boyfriend who was just our height,

and we would get into his suits and camp all over New York. Even when I moved out to Yahoo City, California, I could never stop by a lesbian household without being asked to strip and join the happy group baring their operation scars in the sun. But I only loved men's bodies. What maddens me is that because of the lesbian scenes with Alice Roberts in 'Pandora' I shall probably go down in film history as one of the gloomy dikes. A friend of mine once said to me, 'Louise Brooks, you're not a lesbian, you're a pansy.' Would you care to decipher that? By the way, are you getting tired of hearing my name? I'm thinking of changing it. I noticed that there were five people called Brooks in last week's *Variety*. How about June Caprice? Or Louise Lovely?"

I shook my head.

Brooks continued riffling through her collection. "This, of course, is Martha Graham, whose genius I absorbed to the bone during the years we danced together on tour. She had rages, you know, that struck like lightning out of nowhere. One evening when we were waiting to go onstage—I was sixteen—she grabbed me, shook me ferociously, and shouted, 'Why do you ruin your feet by wearing those tight shoes?' Another time, she was sitting sweetly at the makeup shelf pinning flowers in her hair when she suddenly seized a bottle of body makeup and exploded it against the mirror. She looked at the shattered remains for a spell, then moved her makeup along to an unbroken mirror and went on quietly pinning flowers in her hair. Reminds me of the night when Buster Keaton drove me in his roadster out to Culver City, where he had a bungalow on the back lot of M-G-M. The walls of the living room were covered with great glass bookcases. Buster, who wasn't drunk, opened the door, turned on the lights, and picked up a baseball bat. Then, walking calmly round the room, he smashed every pane of glass in every bookcase. Such frustration in that little body! . . . Here, inevitably, are Scott and Zelda. I met them in January, 1927, at the Ambassador Hotel in L.A. They were sitting close together on a sofa, like a comedy team, and the first thing that struck me was how small they were. I had come to see the genius writer, but what dominated the room was the blazing intelligence of Zelda's profile. It shocked me. It was the profile of a witch. Incidentally, I've been reading Scott's letters, and I've spotted a curious thing about them. In the early days, before Hemingway was famous, Scott always spelled his name wrong, with two 'm's. And when did he start to spell it right? At the

precise moment when Hemingway became a bigger star than he was. . . . This is a pool party at somebody's house in Malibu. I know I knock the studio system, but if you were to ask me what it was like to live in Hollywood in the twenties I'd have to say that we were all—oh!—marvellously degenerate and happy. We were a world of our own, and outsiders didn't intrude. People tell you that the reason a lot of actors left Hollywood when sound came in was that their voices were wrong for talkies. That's the official story. The truth is that the coming of sound meant the end of the all-night parties. With talkies, you couldn't stay out till sunrise anymore. You had to rush back from the studios and start learning your lines, ready for the next day's shooting at 8 *A.M.* That was when the studio machine really took over. It controlled you, mind and body, from the moment you were yanked out of bed at dawn until the publicity department put you back to bed at night."

Brooks paused, silently contemplating revels that ended half a century ago, and then went on. "Talking about bed, here's Tallulah—although I always guessed that she wasn't as keen on bed as everyone thought. And my record for guessing things like that was pretty good. I watched her getting ready for a meeting with a plutocratic boyfriend of hers at the Elysée Hotel. She forgot to wear the emerald ring he'd given her a few days before, but she didn't forget the script of the play she wanted him to produce for her. Her preparations weren't scheming or whorish. Just businesslike. . . . This is a bunch of the guests at Mr. Hearst's ranch, sometime in 1928. The girl with the dark hair and the big smile is Pepi Lederer, one of my dearest friends. She was Marion Davies' niece and the sister of Charlie Lederer, the screenwriter, and she was only seventeen when that picture was taken. My first husband, Eddie Sutherland, used to say that for people who didn't worship opulence, weren't crazy about meeting celebrities, or didn't need money or advancement from Mr. Hearst, San Simeon was a deadly-dull place. I suppose he was right. But when Pepi was there it was always fun. She created a world of excitement and inspiration wherever she went. And I never entered that great dining hall without a shiver of delight. There were medieval banners from Siena floating overhead, and a vast Gothic fireplace, and a long refectory table seating forty. Marion and Mr. Hearst sat with the important guests at the middle of the table. Down at the bottom, Pepi ruled over a group—including me—that she called the Younger Degenerates, and that's where the laughter was. Although Mr. Hearst disapproved of booze,

Pepi had made friends with one of the waiters, and we got all the champagne we wanted. She could have been a gifted writer, and for a while she worked for Mr. Hearst's deluxe monthly *The Connoisseur*, but it was only a courtesy job. Nobody took her seriously, she never learned discipline, and drink and drugs got her in the end. In 1935, she died by jumping out of a window in the psychiatric ward of a hospital in Los Angeles. She was twenty-five years old. Not long ago, I came across her name in the index of a book on Marion Davies, and it broke my heart. Then I remembered a quotation from Goethe that I'd once typed out. I've written it under the photo: 'For a person remains of consequence not so far as he leaves something behind him but so far as he acts and enjoys, and rouses others to action and enjoyment.' That was Pepi."

Of all the names that spilled out of Brooks's memories of America in the twenties, there was one for which she reserved a special veneration: that of Chaplin. In an article for the magazine *Film Culture*, she had described his performances at private parties:

> He recalled his youth with comic pantomimes. He acted out countless scenes for countless films. And he did imitations of everybody. Isadora Duncan danced in a storm of toilet paper. John Barrymore picked his nose and brooded over Hamlet's soliloquy. A Follies girl swished across the room and I began to cry while Charlie denied absolutely that he was imitating me. Nevertheless . . . I determined to abandon that silly walk forthwith.

For me, she filled out the picture. "I was eighteen in 1925, when Chaplin came to New York for the opening of 'The Gold Rush.' He was just twice my age, and I had an affair with him for two happy summer months. Ever since he died, my mind has gone back fifty years, trying to define that lovely being from another world. He was not only the creator of the Little Fellow, though that was miracle enough. He was a self-made aristocrat. He taught himself to speak cultivated English, and he kept a dictionary in the bathroom at his hotel so that he could learn a new word every morning. While he dressed, he prepared his script for the day, which was intended to adorn his private portrait of himself as a perfect English gentleman. He was also a sophisticated lover, who had affairs with Peggy Hopkins Joyce and Marion Davies and Pola Negri, and he was a brilliant businessman, who owned his films and demanded fifty per cent of the gross—which drove Joe Schenck

wild, along with all the other people who were plotting to rob him. Do you know, I can't once remember him *still* ? He was always standing up as he sat down, and going out as he came in. Except when he turned off the lights and went to sleep, without liquor or pills, like a child. Meaning to be bitchy, Herman Mankiewicz said, 'People never sat at his feet. He went to where people were sitting and stood in front of them.' But how we paid attention! We were hypnotized by the beauty and inexhaustible originality of this glistening creature. He's the only genius I ever knew who spread himself equally over his art and his life. He loved showing off in fine clothes and elegant phrases—even in the witness box. When Lita Grey divorced him, she put about vile rumors that he had a depraved passion for little girls. He didn't give a damn, even though people said his career would be wrecked. It still infuriates me that he never defended himself against any of those ugly lies, but the truth is that he existed on a plane above pride, jealousy, or hate. I never heard him say a snide thing about anyone. *He lived totally without fear*. He knew that Lita Grey and her family were living in his house in Beverly Hills, planning to ruin him, yet he was radiantly carefree—happy with the success of 'The Gold Rush' and with the admirers who swarmed around him. Not that he *exacted* adoration. Even during our affair, he knew that I didn't adore him in the romantic sense, and he didn't mind at all. Which brings me to one of the dirtiest lies he allowed to be told about him—that he was mean with money. People forget that Chaplin was the only star ever to keep his ex-leading lady [Edna Purviance] on his payroll for life, and the only producer to pay his employees their full salaries even when he wasn't in production. When our joyful summer ended, he didn't give me a fur from Jaeckel or a bangle from Cartier, so that I could flash them around, saying, 'Look what I got from Chaplin.' The day after he left town, I got a nice check in the mail, signed Charlie. And then I didn't even write him a thank-you note. Damn me."

Brooks's souvenirs of Europe, later in the twenties, began with pictures of a burly, handsome, dark-haired man, usually alighting from a train: George Preston Marshall, the millionaire who was her frequent bedfellow and constant adviser between 1927 and 1933. "If you care about 'Pandora's Box,' you should be grateful to George Marshall," she told me. "I'd never heard of Mr. Pabst when he offered me the part. It was George who insisted that I should accept it. He was passionately fond of the theatre and films, and he slept with every pretty show-business girl he could find, including all my

best friends. George took me to Berlin with his English valet, who stepped off the train blind drunk and fell flat on his face at Mr. Pabst's feet."

The Brooks collection contains no keepsakes of the actress whom she pipped at the post in the race to play Lulu, and of whom, when I raised the subject, she spoke less than charitably. "Dietrich? That *contraption*! She was one of the beautiful-but-dumb girls, like me, but she belonged to the category of those who thought they were smart and fooled other people into believing it. But I guess I'm just being insanely jealous, because I know she's a friend of yours—isn't she?" By way of making amends, she praised Dietrich's performance as Lola in "The Blue Angel," and then, struck by a sudden thought, interrupted herself: "Hey! Why don't I ask Marlene to come over from Paris? We could work on our memoirs together. Better still, she could write mine, and I hers—'Lulu' by Lola, and 'Lola' by Lulu." To put it politely, however, Dietrich does not correspond to Brooks's ideal image of a movie goddess. But who does—apart from Margaret Sullavan, whose voice, as we know, she reveres? A few months after our Rochester encounter, she sent me a letter that disclosed another, unexpected object of her admiration. In it she said:

> I've just been listening to Toronto radio. There was a press conference with Ava Gardner, who is making a movie in Montreal. Her beauty has never excited me, and I have seen only one of her films, "The Night of the Iguana," in which she played a passive role that revealed her power of stillness but little else. On radio, sitting in a hotel room, triggered by all the old stock questions, she said nothing new or stirring—just "Sinatra could be very nice or very rotten—get me another drink, baby—I made fifty-four pictures and the only part I understood was in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro.' . . ." In her conversation, there was nothing about great acting or beauty or sex, and no trace of philosophical or intellectual concern. Yet for the first time in my life I was proud of being a movie actress, unmixed with theatre art. Ava is in essence what I think a movie star should be—a beautiful person with a unique, mysterious personality unpolluted by Hollywood. And she is so *strong*. She did not have to run away (like Garbo) to keep from being turned into a product of the machine. . . . What I should like to know is whether, as I sometimes fancy, I ever had a glimmer of that quality of integrity which makes Ava shine with her own light.

The next picture out of the manila envelopes showed Brooks, inscrutable and somewhat forlorn in a sequinned evening gown, sitting at a table surrounded by men with pencil-thin mustaches who were wearing tuxedos, black ties, and wing collars. These men were all jabbering into telephones and laughing maniacally. None of them were looking at Brooks. Behind them I could make out oak-panelled walls and an out-of-focus waiter with a fish-eyed stare and a strong resemblance to Louis Jouvet. "You know where that was taken, of course," Brooks said.

I was sorry, but I didn't.

"That's Joe Zelli's!" she cried. "Zelli's was the most famous night club in Paris. I can't remember all the men's names, but the one on the extreme right used to drink ether. The one on my left was half Swedish and half English. I lived with him in several hotels. Although he was very young, he had snow-white hair, so we always called him the Eskimo. The fellow next to him, poor guy, was killed the very next day. He was cut to pieces by a speedboat propeller at Cannes."

Whenever I think of the twenties, I shall see that flashlit hysterical tableau at Zelli's and the unsmiling seraph at the center of it.

From the fattest of all her files, Brooks now pulled out a two-shot. Beaming in a cloche hat, she stands arm in arm with a stocky, self-possessed man in a homburg. He also wears steel-rimmed glasses, a bow tie, and a well-cut business suit; you would guess he was in his early forties. "Mr. Pabst," she said simply. "That was 1928, in Berlin, while we were making 'Pandora's Box.' As I told you, I arrived with George Marshall, and Mr. Pabst hated him, because he kept me up all night, going round the clubs. A few weeks later, George went back to the States, and after that Mr. Pabst locked me up in my hotel when the day's shooting was finished. Everyone thought he was in love with me. On the rare evenings when I went to his apartment for dinner, his wife, Trudi, would walk out and bang the door. Mr. Pabst was a highly respectable man, but he had the most extraordinary collection of obscene stills in the world. He even had one of Sarah Bernhardt nude with a black-lace fan. Did you know that in the twenties it was the custom for European actresses to send naked pictures of themselves to movie directors? He had all of them. Anyway, I didn't have an affair with him in Berlin. In

1929, though, when he was in Paris trying to set up 'Prix de Beauté,' we went out to dinner at a restaurant and I behaved rather outrageously. For some reason, I slapped a close friend of mine across the face with a bouquet of roses. Mr. Pabst was horrified. He hustled me out of the place and took me back to my hotel, where—what do I do? I'm in a *terrific* mood, so I decide to banish his disgust by giving the best sexual performance of my career. I jump into the hay and deliver myself to him body and soul. [Her voice is jubilant.] He acted as if he'd never experienced such a thing in his life. You know how men want to pin medals on themselves when they excite you? They get positively radiant. Next morning, Mr. Pabst was so pleased he couldn't see straight. That was why he postponed 'Prix de Beauté' and arranged to make 'The Diary of a Lost Girl' first. He wanted the affair to continue. But I didn't, and when I got to Berlin it was like 'Pandora's Box' all over again, except that this time the man I brought with me was the Eskimo—my white-headed boy from Zelli's."

Brooks laughed softly, recalling the scene. "Mr. Pabst was there at the station to meet me. He was appalled when I got off the train with the Eskimo. On top of that, I had a wart on my neck, and Esky had just slammed the compartment door on my finger. Mr. Pabst took one stark look at me, told me I had to start work the next morning, and dragged me away to a doctor, who burned off the wart. If you study the early sequences of 'Lost Girl,' you can see the sticking plaster on my neck. I hated to hurt Mr. Pabst's feelings with the Eskimo, but I simply could not bring myself to repeat that one and only night. The irony, which Mr. Pabst never knew, was that although Esky and I shared a hotel suite in Berlin, we didn't sleep together until much later, when 'Lost Girl' was finished and we were spending a few days in Paris. 'Eskimo,' I said to him the evening before we parted, 'this is the night.' And it was—another first and last for Brooks."

More fragments of Brooksiana:

I: Do you think there are countries that produce particularly good lovers?

B*ROOKS*: Englishmen are the best. And priest-ridden Irishmen are the worst.

I: What are your favorite films?

B*ROOKS*: “An American in Paris,” “Pygmalion,” and “The Wizard of Oz.” Please don’t be disappointed.

I: They’re all visions of wish fulfillment. An American at large with a *gamine* young dancer in a fantasy playground called Paris. A Cockney flower girl who becomes the toast of upper-class London. And a child from your home state who discovers, at the end of a trip to a magic world, that happiness was where she started out.

B*ROOKS*: You *are* disappointed.

I: Not a bit. They’re first-rate movies, and they’re all aspects of you.

Postscript from a letter Brooks wrote to me before we met: “Can you give me a reason for sitting here in this bed, going crazy, with not one god-damned excuse for living?” I came up with more than one reason; viz., (a) to receive the homage of those who cherish the images she has left on celluloid, (b) to bestow the pleasure of her conversation on those who seek her company, (c) to appease her hunger for gleaning wisdom from books, and (d) to test the truth of a remark she had made to a friend: “The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset once said, ‘We are all lost creatures.’ It is only when we admit this that we have a chance of finding ourselves. ”

Despite the numerous men who have crossed the trajectory of her life, Brooks has pursued her own course. She has flown solo. The price to be paid for such individual autonomy is, inevitably, loneliness, and her loneliness is prefigured in one of the most penetrating comments she has ever committed to print: “The great art of films does not consist in descriptive movement of face and body, but in the movements of thought and soul transmitted in a kind of intense isolation.”

As I rose to leave her apartment, she gave me a present: a large and handsome volume entitled “Louise Brooks—Portrait d’une Anti-Star.” Published in Paris in 1977, it contained a full pictorial survey of her career, together with essays, critiques, and poems devoted to her beauty and talent. She inscribed it to me, and copied out, beneath her signature, the epitaph she has composed for herself: “I never gave away anything without wishing I had kept it; nor kept anything without wishing I had given it away.” The

book included an account by Brooks of her family background, which I paused to read. It ended with this paragraph, here reproduced from her original English text:

> Over the years I suffered poverty and rejection and came to believe that my mother had formed me for a freedom that was unattainable, a delusion. Then . . . I was . . . confined to this small apartment in this alien city of Rochester. . . . Looking about, I saw millions of old people in my situation, wailing like lost puppies because they were alone and had no one to talk to. But they had become enslaved by habits which bound their lives to warm bodies that talked. I was free! Although my mother had ceased to be a warm body in 1944, she had not forsaken me. She comforts me with every book I read. Once again I am five, leaning on her shoulder, learning the words as she reads aloud "Alice in Wonderland."

She insisted on getting out of bed to escort me to the door. We had been talking earlier of Proust, and she had mentioned his maxim that the future could never be predicted from the past. Out of her past, I thought, in all its bizarre variety, who knows what future she may invent? "Another thing about Proust," she said, resting on her cane in the doorway. "No matter how he dresses his characters up in their social disguises, we always know how they look naked." As we know it, I reflected, in Brooks's performances.

I kissed her goodbye, buttoned up my social disguise—for it was a chilly evening—and joined the other dressed-up people on the streets of Rochester. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the names of John B. Kuiper and Thymian Henning, and misstated the frequency of The Connoisseur and the names of "Windy Riley Goes Hollywood" and Dr. Ludwig Schön.

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Content

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The word “folk” in the term “folk music” used to connote a rural homogeneous community that carried on a tradition of anonymously created music. No one person composed a piece; it evolved through generations of communal care. In recent years, however, folk music has increasingly become the quite personal—and copyrighted—product of specific creators. More and more of them, in fact, are neither rural nor representative of centuries-old family and regional traditions. They are often city-bred converts to the folk style; and, after an apprenticeship during which they try to imitate rural models from the older approach to folk music, they write and perform their own songs out of their own concerns and preoccupations. The restless young, who have been the primary support of the rise of this kind of folk music over the past five years, regard two performers as their preëminent spokesmen. One is the twenty-three-year-old Joan Baez. She does not write her own material and she includes a considerable proportion of traditional, communally created songs in her programs. But Miss Baez does speak out explicitly against racial prejudice and militarism, and she does sing some of the best of the new topical songs. Moreover, her pure, penetrating voice and her open, honest manner symbolize for her admirers a cool island of integrity in a society that the folk-song writer Malvina Reynolds has characterized in one of her songs as consisting of “little boxes.” (“And the boys go into business / And marry and raise a family / In boxes made of ticky tacky / And they all look the same.”) The second—and more influential—demiurge of the folk-music microcosm is Bob Dylan, who is also twenty-three. Dylan’s impact has been the greater because he *is* a writer of songs as well as a performer. Such compositions of his as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” have become part of the repertoire of many other performers, including Miss Baez, who has explained, “Bobby is expressing what I—and many other young people—feel, what we want to say. Most of the ‘protest’ songs about the bomb and race prejudice and conformity are stupid. They have no beauty. But Bobby’s songs are powerful as poetry and powerful as music. And, oh, my God, how that boy can sing!”

Another reason for Dylan's impact is the singular force of his personality. Wiry, tense, and boyish, Dylan looks and acts like a fusion of Huck Finn and a young Woody Guthrie. Both onstage and off, he appears to be just barely able to contain his prodigious energy. Pete Seeger, who, at forty-five, is one of the elders of American folk music, recently observed, "Dylan may well become the country's most creative troubadour—if he doesn't explode."

Dylan is always dressed informally—the possibility that he will ever be seen in a tie is as remote as the possibility that Miss Baez will perform in an evening gown—and his possessions are few, the weightiest of them being a motorcycle. A wanderer, Dylan is often on the road in search of more experience. "You can find out a lot about a small town by hanging around its poolroom," he says. Like Miss Baez, he prefers to keep most of his time for himself. He works only occasionally, and during the rest of the year he travels or briefly stays in a house owned by his manager, Albert Grossman, in Bearsville, New York—a small town adjacent to Woodstock and about a hundred miles north of New York City. There Dylan writes songs, works on poetry, plays, and novels, rides his motorcycle, and talks with his friends. From time to time, he comes to New York to record for Columbia Records.

A few weeks ago, Dylan invited me to a recording session that was to begin at seven in the evening in a Columbia studio on Seventh Avenue near Fifty-second Street. Before he arrived, a tall, lean, relaxed man in his early thirties came in and introduced himself to me as Tom Wilson, Dylan's recording producer. He was joined by two engineers, and we all went into the control room. Wilson took up a post at a long, broad table, between the engineers, from which he looked out into a spacious studio with a tall thicket of microphones to the left and, directly in front, an enclave containing a music stand, two microphones, and an upright piano, and set off by a large screen, which would partly shield Dylan as he sang, for the purpose of improving the quality of the sound. "I have no idea what he's going to record tonight," Wilson told me. "It's all to be stuff he's written in the last couple of months."

I asked if Dylan presented any particular problems to a recording director.

“My main difficulty has been pounding mike technique into him,” Wilson said. “He used to get excited and move around a lot and then lean in too far, so that the mike popped. Aside from that, my basic problem with him has been to create the kind of setting in which he’s relaxed. For instance, if that screen should bother him, I’d take it away, even if we have to lose a little quality in the sound.” Wilson looked toward the door. “I’m somewhat concerned about tonight. We’re going to do a whole album in one session. Usually, we’re not in such a rush, but this album has to be ready for Columbia’s fall sales convention. Except for special occasions like this, Bob has no set schedule of recording dates. We think he’s important enough to record whenever he wants to come to the studio.”

Five minutes after seven, Dylan walked into the studio, carrying a battered guitar case. He had on dark glasses, and his hair, dark-blond and curly, had obviously not been cut for some weeks; he was dressed in blue jeans, a black jersey, and desert boots. With him were half a dozen friends, among them Jack Elliott, a folk singer in the Woody Guthrie tradition, who was also dressed in blue jeans and desert boots, plus a brown corduroy shirt and a jaunty cowboy hat. Elliott had been carrying two bottles of Beaujolais, which he now handed to Dylan, who carefully put them on a table near the screen. Dylan opened the guitar case, took out a looped-wire harmonica holder, hung it around his neck, and then walked over to the piano and began to play in a rolling, honky-tonk style.

“He’s got a wider range of talents than he shows,” Wilson told me. “He kind of hoards them. You go back to his three albums. Each time, there’s a big leap from one to the next—in material, in performance, in everything.”

Dylan came into the control room, smiling. Although he is fiercely accusatory toward society at large while he is performing, his most marked offstage characteristic is gentleness. He speaks swiftly but softly, and appears persistently anxious to make himself clear. “We’re going to make a good one tonight,” he said to Wilson. “I promise.” He turned to me and continued, “There aren’t any finger-pointing songs in here, either. Those records I’ve already made, I’ll stand behind them, but some of that was jumping into the scene to be heard and a lot of it was because I didn’t see

anybody else doing that kind of thing. Now a lot of people are doing finger-pointing songs. You know—pointing to all the things that are wrong. Me, I don't want to write *for* people anymore. You know—be a spokesman. Like I once wrote about Emmett Till in the first person, pretending I was him. From now on, I want to write from inside me, and to do that I'm going to have to get back to writing like I used to when I was ten—having everything come out naturally. The way I like to write is for it to come out the way I walk or talk." Dylan frowned. "Not that I even walk or talk yet like I'd like to. I don't carry myself yet the way Woody, Big Joe Williams, and Lightnin' Hopkins have carried themselves. I hope to someday, but they're older. They got to where music was a tool for them, a way to live more, a way to make themselves feel better. Sometimes I can make myself feel better with music, but other times it's still hard to go to sleep at night."

A friend strolled in, and Dylan began to grumble about an interview that had been arranged for him later in the week. "I hate to say no, because, after all, these guys have a job to do," he said, shaking his head impatiently. "But it bugs me that the first question usually turns out to be 'Are you going down South to take part in any of the civil-rights projects?' They try to fit you into things. Now, I've been down there, but I'm not going down just to hold a picket sign so they can shoot a picture of me. I know a lot of the kids in S.N.C.C.—you know, the Student Nonviolent Coördinating Committee. That's the only organization I feel a part of spiritually. The N.A.A.C.P. is a bunch of old guys. I found that out by coming directly in contact with some of the people in it. They didn't understand me. They were looking to use me for something. Man, everybody's hung up. You sometimes don't know if somebody wants you to do something because he's hung up or because he really digs who you are. It's awful complicated, and the best thing you can do is admit it."

Returning to the studio, Dylan stood in front of the piano and pounded out an accompaniment as he sang from one of his own new songs:

> Are you for real, baby, or are you just on the shelf?
> I'm looking deep into your eyes, but all I can see is myself.
> If you're trying to throw me, I've already been tossed.
> If you're trying to lose me, I've already been lost. . . .

Another friend of Dylan's arrived, with three children, ranging in age from four to ten. The children raced around the studio until Wilson insisted that they be relatively confined to the control room. By ten minutes to eight, Wilson had checked out the sound balance to his satisfaction, Dylan's friends had found seats along the studio walls, and Dylan had expressed his readiness—in fact, eagerness—to begin. Wilson, in the control room, leaned forward, a stopwatch in his hand. Dylan took a deep breath, threw his head back, and plunged into a song in which he accompanied himself on guitar and harmonica. The first take was ragged; the second was both more relaxed and more vivid. At that point, Dylan, smiling, clearly appeared to be confident of his ability to do an entire album in one night. As he moved into succeeding numbers, he relied principally on the guitar for support, except for exclamatory punctuations on the harmonica.

Having glanced through a copy of Dylan's new lyrics that he had handed to Wilson, I observed to Wilson that there were indeed hardly any songs of social protest in the collection.

"Those early albums gave people the wrong idea," Wilson said. "Basically, he's in the tradition of all lasting folk music. I mean, he's not a singer of protest so much as he is a singer of *concern* about people. He doesn't have to be talking about Medgar Evers all the time to be effective. He can just tell a simple little story of a guy who ran off from a woman."

After three takes of one number, one of the engineers said to Wilson, "If you want to try another, we can get a better take."

"No." Wilson shook his head. "With Dylan, you have to take what you can get."

Out in the studio, Dylan, his slight form bent forward, was standing just outside the screen and listening to a playback through earphones. He began to take the earphones off during an instrumental passage, but then his voice came on, and he grinned and replaced them.

The engineer muttered again that he might get a better take if Dylan ran through the number once more.

“Forget it,” Wilson said. “You don’t think in terms of orthodox recording techniques when you’re dealing with Dylan. You have to learn to be as free on this side of the glass as he is out there.”

Dylan went on to record a song about a man leaving a girl because he was not prepared to be the kind of invincible hero and all-encompassing provider she wanted. “It ain’t me you’re looking for, babe,” he sang, with finality.

During the playback, I joined Dylan in the studio. “The songs so far sound as if there were real people in them,” I said.

Dylan seemed surprised that I had considered it necessary to make the comment. “There are. That’s what makes them so scary. If I haven’t been through what I write about, the songs aren’t worth anything.” He went on, via one of his songs, to offer a complicated account of a turbulent love affair in Spanish Harlem, and at the end asked a friend, “Did you understand it?” The friend nodded enthusiastically. “Well, I didn’t,” Dylan said, with a laugh, and then became sombre. “It’s hard being free in a song—getting it all in. Songs are so confining. Woody Guthrie told me once that songs don’t have to rhyme—that they don’t have to do anything like that. But it’s not true. A song has to have some kind of form to fit into the music. You can bend the words and the metre, but it still has to fit somehow. I’ve been getting freer in the songs I write, but I still feel confined. That’s why I write a lot of poetry—if that’s the word. Poetry can make its own form.”

As Wilson signalled for the start of the next number, Dylan put up his hand. “I just want to light a cigarette, so I can see it there while I’m singing,” he said, and grinned. “I’m very neurotic. I need to be secure.”

By ten-thirty, seven songs had been recorded.

“This is the fastest Dylan date yet,” Wilson said. “He used to be all hung up with the microphones. Now he’s a pro.”

Several more friends of Dylan’s had arrived during the recording of the seven songs, and at this point four of them were seated in the control room behind Wilson and the engineers. The others were scattered around the studio, using the table that held the bottles of Beaujolais as their base. They

opened the bottles, and every once in a while poured out a drink in a paper cup. The three children were still irrepressibly present, and once the smallest burst suddenly into the studio, ruining a take. Dylan turned on the youngster in mock anger. “I’m gonna rub you out,” he said. “I’ll track you down and turn you to dust.” The boy giggled and ran back into the control room.

As the evening went on, Dylan’s voice became more acrid. The dynamics of his singing grew more pronounced, soft, intimate passages being abruptly followed by fierce surges in volume. The relentless, driving beat of his guitar was more often supplemented by the whooping thrusts of the harmonica.

“Intensity, that’s what he’s got,” Wilson said, apparently to himself. “By now, this kid is outselling Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis,” he went on, to me. “He’s speaking to a whole new generation. And not only here. He’s just been in England. He had standing room only in Royal Festival Hall.”

Dylan had begun a song called “Chimes of Freedom.” One of his four friends in the control room—a lean, bearded man—proclaimed, “Bobby’s talking for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe.” His three companions nodded gravely.

The next composition, “Motorpsycho Nitemare,” was a mordantly satirical version of the vintage tale of the farmer, his daughter, and the travelling salesman. There were several false starts, apparently because Dylan was having trouble reading the lyrics.

“Man, dim the lights,” the bearded friend counselled Wilson. “He’ll get more relaxed.”

“Atmosphere is not what we need,” Wilson answered, without turning around. “Legibility is what we need.”

During the playback, Dylan listened intently, his lips moving, and a cigarette cocked in his right hand. A short break followed, during which Dylan shouted, “Hey, we’re gonna need some more wine!” Two of his friends in the studio nodded and left.

After the recording session resumed, Dylan continued to work hard and conscientiously. When he was preparing for a take or listening to a playback,

he seemed able to cut himself off completely from the eddies of conversation and humorous byplay stirred up by his friends in the studio. Occasionally, when a line particularly pleased him, he burst into laughter, but he swiftly got back to business.

Dylan started a talking blues—a wry narrative in a sardonic recitative style, which had been developed by Woody Guthrie. "Now I'm liberal, but to a degree," Dylan was drawling halfway through the song. "I want everybody to be free. But if you think I'll let Barry Goldwater move in next door and marry my daughter, you must think I'm crazy. I wouldn't let him do it for all the farms in Cuba." He was smiling broadly, and Wilson and the engineers were laughing. It was a long song, and toward the end Dylan faltered. He tried it twice more, and each time he stumbled before the close.

"Let me do another song," he said to Wilson. "I'll come back to this."

"No," Wilson said. "Finish up this one. You'll hang us up on the order, and if I'm not here to edit, the other cat will get mixed up. Just do an insert of the last part."

"Let him start from the beginning, man," said one of the four friends sitting behind Wilson.

Wilson turned around, looking annoyed. "Why, man?"

"You don't start telling a story with Chapter Eight, man," the friend said.

"Oh, man," said Wilson. "What kind of philosophy is that? We're recording, not writing a biography."

As an obbligato of protest continued behind Wilson, Dylan, accepting Wilson's advice, sang the insert. His bearded friend rose silently and drew a square in the air behind Wilson's head.

Other songs, mostly of love lost or misunderstood, followed. Dylan was now tired, but he retained his good humor. "This last one is called 'My Back Pages,' " he announced to Wilson. It appeared to express his current desire to get away from "finger-pointing" and write more acutely personal material.

“Oh, but I was so much older then,” he sang as a refrain, “I’m younger than that now.”

By one-thirty, the session was over. Dylan had recorded fourteen new songs. He agreed to meet me again in a week or so and fill me in on his background. “My background’s not all that important, though,” he said as we left the studio. “It’s what I am now that counts.”

Dylan was born in Duluth, on May 24, 1941, and grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota, a mining town near the Canadian border. He does not discuss his parents, preferring to let his songs tell whatever he wants to say about his personal history. “You can stand at one end of Hibbing on the main drag an’ see clear past the city limits on the other end,” Dylan once noted in a poem, “My Life in a Stolen Moment,” printed in the program of a 1963 Town Hall concert he gave. Like Dylan’s parents, it appears, the town was neither rich nor poor, but it was, Dylan has said, “a dyin’ town.” He ran away from home seven times—at ten, at twelve, at thirteen, at fifteen, at fifteen and a half, at seventeen, and at eighteen. His travels included South Dakota, New Mexico, Kansas, and California. In between flights, he taught himself the guitar, which he had begun playing at the age of ten. At fifteen, he was also playing the harmonica and the autoharp, and, in addition, had written his first song, a ballad dedicated to Brigitte Bardot. In the spring of 1960, Dylan entered the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis, which he attended for something under six months. In “My Life in a Stolen Moment,” Dylan has summarized his college career dourly: “I sat in science class an’ flunked out for refusin’ to watch a rabbit die. I got expelled from English class for using four-letter words in a paper describing the English teacher. I also failed out of communication class for callin’ up every day and sayin’ I couldn’t come. . . . I was kept around for kicks at a fraternity house. They let me live there, an’ I did until they wanted me to join.” Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake, who edit the *Little Sandy Review*, a quarterly magazine, published in Minneapolis, that is devoted to critical articles on folk music and performers, remember meeting Dylan at the University of Minnesota in the summer of 1960, while he was part of a group of singers who performed at The Scholar, a coffeehouse near the university. The editors, who were students at the university then, have since noted in their publication: “We recall Bob as a soft-spoken, rather unprepossessing youngster . . . well-groomed and neat in

the standard campus costume of slacks, sweater, white oxford sneakers, poplin raincoat, and dark glasses."

Before Dylan arrived at the university, his singing had been strongly influenced by such Negro folk interpreters as Leadbelly and Big Joe Williams. He had met Williams in Evanston, Illinois, during his break from home at the age of twelve. Dylan had also been attracted to several urban-style rhythm-and-blues performers, notably Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. Other shaping forces were white country-music figures—particularly Hank Williams, Hank Snow, and Jimmie Rodgers. During his brief stay at the university, Dylan became especially absorbed in the recordings of Woody Guthrie, the Oklahoma-born traveller who had created the most distinctive body of American topical folk material to come to light in this century. Since 1954, Guthrie, ill with Huntington's chorea, a progressive disease of the nervous system, had not been able to perform, but he was allowed to receive visitors. In the autumn of 1960, Dylan quit the University of Minnesota and decided to visit Guthrie at Greystone Hospital, in New Jersey. Dylan returned briefly to Minnesota the following May, to sing at a university hootenanny, and Nelson and Pankake saw him again on that occasion. "In a mere half year," they have recalled in the *Little Sandy Review*, "he had learned to churn up exciting, bluesy, hard-driving harmonica-and-guitar music, and had absorbed during his visits with Guthrie not only the great Okie musician's unpredictable syntax but his very vocal color, diction, and inflection. Dylan's performance that spring evening of a selection of Guthrie . . . songs was hectic and shaky, but it contained all the elements of the now-perfected performing style that has made him the most original newcomer to folk music."

The winter Dylan visited Guthrie was otherwise bleak. He spent most of it in New York, where he found it difficult to get steady work singing. In "Talkin' New York," a caustic song describing his first months in the city, Dylan tells of having been turned away by a coffeehouse owner, who told him scornfully, "You sound like a hillbilly. We want folk singers here." There were nights when he slept in the subway, but eventually he found friends and a place to stay on the lower East Side, and after he had returned from the spring hootenanny, he began getting more frequent engagements in New York. John Hammond, Director of Talent Acquisition at Columbia Records, who has discovered a sizable number of important jazz and folk performers

during the past thirty years, heard Dylan that summer while attending a rehearsal of another folk singer, whom Hammond was about to record for Columbia Records. Impressed by the young man's raw force and by the vivid lyrics of his songs, Hammond auditioned him and immediately signed him to a recording contract. Then, in September, 1961, while Dylan was appearing at Gerde's Folk City, a casual refuge for "citybillies" (as the young city singers and musicians are now called in the trade), on West Fourth Street, in Greenwich Village, he was heard by Robert Shelton, the folk-music critic for the *Times*, who wrote of him enthusiastically.

Dylan began to prosper. He enlarged his following by appearing at the Newport and Monterey Folk Festivals and giving concerts throughout the country. There have been a few snags, as when he walked off the Ed Sullivan television show in the spring of 1963 because the Columbia Broadcasting System would not permit him to sing a tart appraisal of the John Birch Society, but on the whole he has experienced accelerating success. His first three Columbia albums—"Bob Dylan," "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan," and "The Times They Are A-Changin' "—have by now reached a cumulative sales figure of nearly four hundred thousand. In addition, he has received large royalties as a composer of songs that have become hits through recordings by Peter, Paul, and Mary, the Kingston Trio, and other performers. At present, Dylan's fees for a concert appearance range from two thousand to three thousand dollars a night. He has sometimes agreed to sing at a nominal fee for new, nonprofit folk societies, however, and he has often performed without charge at civil-rights rallies.

Musically, Dylan has transcended most of his early influences and developed an incisively personal style. His vocal sound is most often characterized by flaying harshness. Mitch Jayne, a member of the Dillards, a folk group from Missouri, has described Dylan's sound as "very much like a dog with his leg caught in barbed wire." Yet Dylan's admirers come to accept and even delight in the harshness, because of the vitality and wit at its core. And they point out that in intimate ballads he is capable of a fragile lyricism that does not slip into bathos. It is Dylan's work as a composer, however, that has won him a wider audience than his singing alone might have. Whether concerned with cosmic spectres or personal conundrums, Dylan's lyrics are pungently idiomatic. He has a superb ear for speech rhythms, a generally astute sense of selective detail, and a natural storyteller's command of narrative pacing.

His songs sound as if they were being created out of oral street history rather than carefully written in tranquillity. On a stage, Dylan performs his songs as if he had an urgent story to tell. In his work there is little of the polished grace of such carefully trained contemporary minstrels as Richard Dyer-Bennet. Nor, on the other hand, do Dylan's performances reflect the calculated showmanship of a Harry Belafonte or of Peter, Paul, and Mary. Dylan off the stage is very much the same as Dylan the performer—restless, insatiably hungry for experience, idealistic, but skeptical of neatly defined causes.

In the past year, as his renown has increased, Dylan has become more elusive. He felt so strongly threatened by his initial fame that he welcomed the chance to use the Bearsville home of his manager as a refuge between concerts, and he still spends most of his time there when he's not travelling. A week after the recording session, he telephoned me from Bearsville, and we agreed to meet the next evening at the Keneret, a restaurant on lower Seventh Avenue, in the Village. It specializes in Middle Eastern food, which is one of Dylan's preferences, but it does not have a liquor license. Upon keeping our rendezvous, therefore, we went next door for a few bottles of Beaujolais and then returned to the Keneret. Dylan was as restless as usual, and as he talked, his hands moved constantly and his voice sounded as if he were never quite able to catch his breath.

I asked him what he had meant, exactly, when he spoke at the recording session of abandoning "finger-pointing" songs, and he took a sip of wine, leaned forward, and said, "I looked around and saw all these people pointing fingers at the bomb. But the bomb is getting boring, because what's wrong goes much deeper than the bomb. What's wrong is how few people are free. Most people walking around are tied down to something that doesn't let them really *speak*, so they just add their confusion to the mess. I mean, they have some kind of vested interest in the way things are now. Me, I'm cool." He smiled. "You know, Joanie—Joanie Baez—worries about me. She worries about whether people will get control over me and exploit me. But I'm cool. I'm in control, because I don't care about money, and all that. And I'm cool in myself, because I've gone through enough changes so that I know what's real to me and what isn't. Like this fame. It's done something to me. It's O.K. in the Village here. People don't pay attention to me. But in other towns it's funny knowing that people you don't know figure they know

you. I mean, they think they know everything about you. One thing is groovy, though. I got birthday cards this year from people I'd never heard of. It's weird, isn't it? There are people I've really touched whom I'll never know." He lit a cigarette. "But in other ways being noticed can be a weight. So I disappear a lot. I go to places where I'm not going to be noticed. And I *can*." He laughed. "I have no work to do. I have no job. I'm not committed to anything except making a few records and playing a few concerts. I'm weird that way. Most people, when they get up in the morning, have to do what they *have* to do. I could pretend there were all kinds of things I *had* to do every day. But why? So I do whatever I feel like. I might make movies of my friends around Woodstock one day. I write a lot. I get involved in scenes with people. A lot of scenes are going on with me all the time—here in the Village, in Paris during my trips to Europe, in lots of places."

I asked Dylan how far ahead he planned.

"I don't look past right now," he said. "Now there's this fame business. I know it's going to go away. It has to. This so-called mass fame comes from people who get caught up in a thing for a while and buy the records. Then they stop. And when they stop, I won't be famous anymore."

We became aware that a young waitress was standing by diffidently. Dylan turned to her, and she asked him for his autograph. He signed his name with gusto, and signed again when she asked if he would give her an autograph for a friend. "I'm sorry to have interrupted your dinner," she said, smiling. "But I'm really not."

"I get letters from people—young people—all the time," Dylan continued when she had left us. "I wonder if they write letters like those to other people they don't know. They just want to tell me things, and sometimes they go into their personal hangups. Some send poetry. I like getting them—read them all and answer some. But I don't mean I give any of the people who write to me any *answers* to their problems." He leaned forward and talked more rapidly. "It's like when somebody wants to tell me what the 'moral' thing is to do, I want them to *show* me. If they have anything to say about morals, I want to know what it is they *do*. Same with me. All I can do is show the people who ask me questions how I live. All I can do is be me. I can't tell them how to change things, because there's only one way to change

things, and that's to cut yourself off from all the chains. That's hard for most people to do."

I had Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin' " album with me, and I pointed out to him a section of his notes on the cover in which he spoke of how he had always been running when he was a boy—running away from Hibbing and from his parents.

Dylan took a sip of wine. "I kept running because I wasn't free," he said. "I was constantly on guard. Somehow, way back then, I already knew that parents do what they do because they're up tight. They're concerned with their kids in relation to *themselves*. I mean, they want their kids to please them, not to embarrass them—so they can be proud of them. They want you to be what *they* want you to be. So I started running when I was ten. But always I'd get picked up and sent home. When I was thirteen, I was travelling with a carnival through upper Minnesota and North and South Dakota, and I got picked up again. I tried again and again, and when I was eighteen, I cut out for good. I was still running when I came to New York. Just because you're free to move doesn't mean you're free. Finally, I got so far out I was cut off from everybody and everything. It was then I decided there was no sense in running so far and so fast when there was no longer anybody there. It was fake. It was running for the sake of running. So I stopped. I've got no place to run from. I don't have to be anyplace I don't want to be. But I am by no means an example for any kid wanting to strike out. I mean, I wouldn't want a young kid to leave home because I did it, and then have to go through a lot of the things I went through. Everybody has to find his *own* way to be free. There isn't anybody who can help you in that sense. Nobody was able to help me. Like seeing Woody Guthrie was one of the main reasons I came East. He was an idol to me. A couple of years ago, after I'd gotten to know him, I was going through some very bad changes, and I went to see Woody, like I'd go to somebody to confess to. But I couldn't confess to him. It was silly. I did go and talk with him—as much as he could talk—and the talking helped. But basically he wasn't able to help me at all. I finally realized that. So Woody was my last idol."

There was a pause.

“I’ve learned a lot in these past few years,” Dylan said softly. “Like about beauty.”

I reminded him of what he had said about his changing criteria of beauty in some notes he did for a Joan Baez album. There he had written that when he first heard her voice, before he knew her, his reaction had been:

> “I hate that kind a sound,” said I
> “The only beauty’s ugly, man
> The crackin’, shakin’, breakin’ sounds’re
> The only beauty I understand.”

Dylan laughed. “Yeah,” he said. “I was wrong. My hangup was that I used to try to *define* beauty. Now I take it as it is, however it is. That’s why I like Hemingway. I don’t read much. Usually I read what people put in my hands. But I do read Hemingway. He didn’t have to use adjectives. He didn’t really have to define what he was saying. He just said it. I can’t do that yet, but that’s what I want to be able to do.”

A young actor from Julian Beck’s and Judith Malina’s Living Theatre troupe stopped by the table, and Dylan shook hands with him enthusiastically. “We’re leaving for Europe soon,” the actor said. “But when we come back, we’re going out on the street. We’re going to put on plays right on the street, for anyone who wants to watch.”

“Hey!” said Dylan, bouncing in his seat. “Tell Julian and Judith that I want to be in on that.”

The actor said he would, and took Dylan’s telephone number. Then he said, “Bob, are you doing only your own songs now—none of the old folk songs at all?”

“Have to,” Dylan answered. “When I’m up tight and it’s raining outside and nobody’s around and somebody I want is a long way from me—and with someone else besides—I can’t sing ‘Ain’t Got No Use for Your Red Apple Juice.’ I don’t care how great an old song it is or what its tradition is. I have to make a new song out of what *I* know and out of what *I’m* feeling.”

The conversation turned to civil rights, and the actor used the term "the Movement" to signify the work of the civil-rights activists. Dylan looked at him quizzically. "I agree with everything that's happening," he said, "but I'm not part of no Movement. If I was, I wouldn't be able to do anything else but be in 'the Movement.' I just can't have people sit around and make rules for me. I do a lot of things no Movement would allow." He took a long drink of Beaujolais. "It's like politics," he went on. "I just can't make it with *any* organization. I fell into a trap once—last December—when I agreed to accept the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. At the Americana Hotel! In the Grand Ballroom! As soon as I got there, I felt up tight. First of all, the people with me couldn't get in. They looked even funkier than I did, I guess. They weren't dressed right, or something. Inside the ballroom, I really got up tight. I began to drink. I looked down from the platform and saw a bunch of people who had nothing to do with my kind of politics. I looked down and I got scared. They were supposed to be on my side, but I didn't feel any connection with them. Here were these people who'd been all involved with the left in the thirties, and now they were supporting civil-rights drives. That's groovy, but they also had minks and jewels, and it was like they were giving the money out of guilt. I got up to leave, and they followed me and caught me. They told me I had to accept the award. When I got up to make my speech, I couldn't say anything by that time but what was passing through my mind. They'd been talking about Kennedy being killed, and Bill Moore and Medgar Evers and the Buddhist monks in Vietnam being killed. I had to say something about Lee Oswald. I told them I'd read a lot of his feelings in the papers, and I knew he was up tight. Said I'd been up tight, too, so I'd got a lot of his feelings. I saw a lot of myself in Oswald, I said, and I saw in him a lot of the times we're all living in. And, you know, they started booing. They looked at me like I was an animal. They actually thought I was saying it was a good thing Kennedy had been killed. That's how far out they are. I was talking about Oswald. And then I started talking about friends of mine in Harlem—some of them junkies, all of them poor. And I said they need freedom as much as anybody else, and what's anybody doing for *them*? The chairman was kicking my leg under the table, and I told him, 'Get out of here.' Now, what I was supposed to be was a nice cat. I was supposed to say, 'I appreciate your award and I'm a great singer and I'm a great believer in liberals, and you buy my records and I'll support your cause.' But I didn't,

and so I wasn't accepted that night. That's the cause of a lot of those chains I was talking about—people wanting to be accepted, people not wanting to be alone. But, after all, what is it to be alone? I've been alone sometimes in front of three thousand people. I was alone that night."

The actor nodded sympathetically.

Dylan snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot," he said. "You know, they were talking about Freedom Fighters that night. I've been in Mississippi, man. I know those people on another level besides civil-rights campaigns. I know them as friends. Like Jim Forman, one of the heads of S.N.C.C. I'll stand on his side any time. But those people that night were actually getting me to look at colored people as colored people. I tell you, I'm never going to have anything to do with any political organization again in my life. Oh, I might help a friend if he was campaigning for office. But I'm not going to be part of any organization. Those people at that dinner were the same as everybody else. They're doing their time. They're chained to what they're doing. The only thing is, they're trying to put morals and great deeds on their chains, but basically they don't want to jeopardize their positions. They got their jobs to keep. There's nothing there for me, and there's nothing there for the kind of people I hang around with. The only thing I'm sorry about is that I guess I hurt the collection at the dinner. I didn't know they were going to try to collect money after my speech. I guess I lost them a lot of money. Well, I offered to pay them whatever it was they figured they'd lost because of the way I talked. I told them I didn't care how much it was. I hate debts, especially moral debts. They're worse than money debts."

Exhausted by his monologue, Dylan sank back and poured more Beaujolais. "People talk about trying to change society," he said. "All I know is that so long as people stay so concerned about protecting their status and protecting what they have, ain't nothing going to be done. Oh, there may be some change of levels inside the circle, but nobody's going to learn anything."

The actor left, and it was time for Dylan to head back upstate. "Come up and visit next week," he said to me, "and I'll give you a ride on my motorcycle." He hunched his shoulders and walked off quickly. ♦

By David Cantwell

By Bruce Handy

Tables for Two

- **The Food of Taiwan, and Home, at Wenwen**

By Hannah Goldfield

You'd be forgiven for assuming that a dish called BDSM Chicken, at Wenwen, a new Taiwanese restaurant in Greenpoint, is a marketing ploy—in not only its name (which stands for "brined, deboned, soy milk") but also its availability, or lack thereof. One order is a whole bird, deep-fried, and just five are offered each day, beginning at 5 *p.m.*, when the restaurant opens. People start lining up at 4:30; by 5:05, they're gone.

But this scenario of scarcity was not intentional on the part of the chef Eric Sze and his business partner Andy Chuang, who own Wenwen as well as the restaurant 886, in the East Village. "I've been working on deboning chicken since 2019," Sze told me the other day. One challenge of cooking a chicken whole is that the breasts finish faster than the legs, which are denser, with a higher bone-to-flesh ratio. He knew that spatchcocking the bird helped—but wouldn't removing the bones insure that it would cook even more uniformly, and faster?

A loophole for trying the BDSM Chicken is a sandwich featuring just the thigh (far left), available only at brunch, but it's hardly the only consolation prize on a menu packed with dishes inspired by those which the chef and co-owner Eric Sze grew up eating at home in Taiwan, and by those he eats at home in New York now.

Experiments commenced at 886, using what are known as "yellow fat chickens," sourced from Flushing Live Poultry, which are fed a diet high in beta-carotene. The result (whose recipe just happened to lend itself to the acronym) was a resounding success, and "a spectacle," Sze said, an obvious centerpiece of any Wenwen meal. But frying a whole chicken (twice, per the final formula) requires a whole fryer. Wenwen was set up with only two fryers, and the kitchen wouldn't be able to produce the rest of the menu with just one. Five chickens at 5 *p.m.* it was.

Thanks to the soy-milk-based batter, which is whipped with sweet-potato starch and tofu for extra lift and crunch, the BDSM's exterior is exceptionally craggy and crisp. Finished with "Taiwan dust" (white pepper, MSG, sugar, and salt) plus smoked paprika, turmeric, and curry powder, it cracks open to reveal luscious meat punctuated by pockets of the promised yellow fat. If you can't swing a 4:30 *p.m.* arrival, there's a loophole: brunch, when the thigh is served on a roll, accompanied by nori-flecked fries.

Also available at brunch: battered and fried sweet-potato-custard-stuffed French toast, made with milk bread sourced from Chinatown and topped with ice cream and five-spice honey.

But the sandwich is far from the only consolation prize. As opposed to 886's party vibe, Wenwen's guiding principle is comfort, inspired by the food that Sze grew up eating in Taipei, and by the way he eats at home. The restaurant is named for his mother, Wenchi, and his wife, Wenhui; both Wens make a version of Sze's shell-on, head-on Huadiao Shrimp, which are glossed in a tantalizing sauce of ginger, scallion, garlic, and ketchup and served with sliced scallion *mantou*, or steamed bun, for sopping.

A pork-collar *paigu*, or cutlet, is almost hidden on the menu, as an add-on to an unflashy bowl of fried rice called Lily Flemming (an Anglicized play on the Mandarin for "every grain distinct"). Marinated in five spice, rice wine, and sugar, the collar is battered in a mix of coarse and fine sweet-potato starch, which makes it as craggy as the chicken. For a dose of greens, there are pea shoots that have collapsed into silk in a wok, strewn with pleasingly spongy tofu skin, or water spinach that's been stir-fried with shrimp paste and tiny, pungent dried shrimp, both dishes punctuated with generous handfuls of roughly chopped garlic.

Sze, who has an almost academic knowledge of Taiwan's culinary history—and a deep desire to explore and preserve it—shared a few theories for why Taiwanese food skews sweet: the influence of Shanghainese arrivals in the nineteen-fifties, after the Chinese Civil War; the use of sugar, once a limited commodity, as a way to broadcast wealth. It might come as a surprise, then, that Wenwen's single (spectacular) dessert—inspired by treats at what Sze described as an "ice-cream-burrito stall" in Yilan, in northern Taiwan—leans savory. Piping-hot *tangyuan*, traditional Chinese glutinous-rice balls, are deep-fried and filled with black-sesame paste, then nestled with scoops of vanilla ice cream, drizzled in condensed milk, and showered in chopped cilantro, candied peanuts, and dehydrated-peanut-butter powder—"a loose interpretation of a very Taiwanese pairing," Sze said. *(Dishes $8-$52.)* ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Ronan Farrow

By Patricia Marx

The Next Music Mogul

- **Missy Elliott's Hip-Hop Transformations**

By Hilton Als

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

The New Negro is an inventive amalgamation of past and future trends that are indigenous to black American style. Generally, the New Negro—who is "new" every decade or so—is female, a woman who considers her marginal status a form of freedom and a challenge: she takes the little she has been given and transforms it into something complex, outrageous, and, ultimately, fashionable. She is outrageous because no one cares what she does—until, that is, she begins to make money. Missy (Misdemeanor) Elliott, the twenty-five-year-old hip-hop performer who is energetically redefining the boundaries of rap music, is a singer, a songwriter, an arranger, a producer, and a talent scout. Six months ago, few people outside the music industry had heard of her; six months from now, it will be necessary to pretend that you've known about Missy Elliott for years. She is the biggest and blackest female rap star that Middle America has ever seen. She is the latest incarnation of the New Negro.

I first met Missy Elliott last June, in the waiting room at WPGC-FM, a D.C. soul station. She was there to promote the release of her début solo album, "Supa Dupa Fly," and, in characteristic Missy Elliott fashion, she had dressed for the occasion—in a red-and-yellow baseball jersey, bright-yellow vinyl overalls, a bright-yellow vinyl jacket, and brown Timberland boots. Her hair was styled in crisp finger waves close to her head, like tiny black ribbons, and her fingernails, two inches long, were varnished white. But there was no publicist or receptionist to greet her. On the wall above the reception desk were a number of shabby, poster-size black-and-white photographs of the station's disk jockeys, their hair and teeth celebrity-bright, which did nothing to dispel the forlorn atmosphere. She looked around and reduced the dim room and the station's lack of amenities to a weary expletive: "Damn."

Missy had arrived with three people in tow: her cousin Malik, who is as tall and lanky as Missy is short and round; Rene McLean, a rap promoter from the Elektra Entertainment Group; and Keisha, a pretty young black woman

who is a third of the girl group Total. As is often the case in Missy's professional circle, exactly who was promoting whom wasn't initially clear.

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WPGC was Missy's final guest appearance that day; earlier, she had publicized her album at three record stores and another radio station in the Washington area, and she had been greeted in all those places with considerable fanfare. ("Yo, it was dope," Keisha said, chewing gum as she smiled her most seductive girl-group smile.) In an effort to generate a little of that excitement at WPGC, Missy dispatched Rene to find Tigger, the host of the program she was supposed to appear on. Then she announced that Keisha would be interviewed on Tigger's show, too: less airtime for "Supa Dupa Fly," maybe, but more exposure for another Missy project: she had co-produced and co-written a number of tracks on Total's yet-to-be-released album.

Malik returned with Tigger, and in short order Missy, sitting opposite Keisha in the control booth, was introducing her to WPGC's listening audience. She then took calls from her fans—whom she addressed as Baby, Boo, or Go-Go Head—while autographing her way through a stack of eight-by-ten black-and-white glossies. Even four months ago—before she appeared on David Letterman, before the MTV Video Music Awards, before her record went gold—Missy's unorthodox blend of personal confidence, professional generosity, and entrepreneurial spirit were in ample evidence. After signing off, Missy talked about the lyrics she'd written for her song "The Rain," which was already on its way to becoming a hit: "One minute I'm talking about weed, the next minute I'm talking about a man—like that. Closer to life and closer to how my mind works." She walked into a WPGC conference room and sat down, her oversized yellow overalls ballooning up around her. "I don't want to be oh-so-brag-about-it, but 'The Rain' is hot," she said with a shy laugh, her almond-shaped eyes closing up tight. Then she made the comment that would become her mantra in the coming weeks: "We give our music a futuristic feel. I don't make music or videos for 1997—I do it for the year 2000."

In the nineteen-sixties, when Diana Ross was with the Supremes, she was a superb New Negro. When she sang, she did so much more than just sing: she

shrugged her shoulders, bugged her eyes, and bopped her big head on her skinny neck. When she sang "Where Did Our Love Go?" she looked as though she were having a very controlled, elegant freak-out. Then, in the seventies, the Pointer Sisters clunked around in Andrews Sisters wedgies and Ruby Keeler shorts, while waving little American flags and singing riffs from "Swanee" with a great deal of energy and irony. In the eighties, the disco diva Grace Jones not only intoned that she could feel like a woman while "looking like a man" but also, in her extended video "One Man Show," resurrected Dietrich's "Blonde Venus" ape suit, with its racist overtones. In 1997, Missy Elliott is the New Negro of hip-hop.

"Women in rap, it's the same as it ever was—they come and go," Sharee, a New York d.j., told me. "Back in the day, in the nineteen-eighties, they were cute and sexy. Now they're cute and sexy and mad about something. They don't last, because they work one gimmick—their sex appeal—and that doesn't last long. Think Marilyn Monroe talking in rhyme, and you have a pretty good idea of the way most female rappers go." But Missy Elliott has not only avoided the prevailing stereotypes of the music-video industry; she has spent the last few months bringing the industry around to her style of dance, costume, and song. "She slowed down rap—she took chances," Jac Benson, a senior producer at MTV, says. "She opened the door for other sounds." As for Missy's lyrics, they are about her internal world—not the material world of money, jewels, and men—and in her video she has managed to catapult herself beyond the clichéd horny-boy images of girls in Jacuzzis chugalugging champagne. Instead, she has capitalized on the hip aesthetic that Sly Stone founded in the late nineteen-sixties, when he developed a persona that managed to retain a hard-edged black sound without making white listeners feel hopelessly unhip. Missy told me that she wants her work to show "where black folks are from, and where we're going."

In the video "The Rain," her hair, which fits her like a cap, is reminiscent of the marcelled coiffure that Duke Ellington sported in the forties and fifties. In some shots, she wears an inflated black patent-leather suit and black sunglasses attached to a rhinestone headpiece—a look that the Whitney Museum curator Thelma Golden has described as "cyber mammy." In another sequence, she moves toward the camera wearing a lime-green outfit and oversized yellow-framed glasses, jerking her arms up and down and

proclaiming, “I’m supa dupa fly!” Missy’s little dance looks like an accelerated version of Walter Brennan’s “dead bee” hop-and-skip walk in “To Have and Have Not.” In another shot, her lips and eyes are “morphed,” or enlarged. Features once made grotesque by racist caricaturists are celebrated by this New Negro: exaggerations of physiognomy are an aspect of her style.

In another “Rain” clip, Missy is chanting—her warm, rich voice layered against the song’s background track, the soul classic “I Can’t Stand the Rain”—“I feel the wind / Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten / Nine, ten / Begin / I sit on hills like Lauryn until the rain starts comin’ down, pourin’.” Sitting on a near-psychedelic grassy knoll and running her fingers through a straight-haired wig she’s wearing, she’s a caricature of the Little Bo-Peep white girl. “We wanted to make fun of the ways record companies try to make black women look white,” Missy has said. “Fake hair, fake music.”

Missy conceived of “The Rain” video together with the black music-video director Hype Williams, who has also directed the rap stars Busta Rhymes and the late Tupac Shakur. Both Missy and Williams were aware that for many viewers the video would provide a way into her music. “Videos are the most valuable tool for selling songs,” says Gina Harrell, who heads Elektra’s video-production department. “Until they saw the video, radio programmers didn’t understand ‘The Rain.’ She taught people how to move to the track. And Hype was able to pull out the core of Missy—the performance artist.” It was only after radio programmers and the general public saw Missy dancing that her position as a New Negro icon was established. After all, the idea that “it’s a ten because you can dance to it” didn’t go out with “American Bandstand.” “The Rain” has inspired a score of imitations since its release—some of them directed by Hype Williams himself. “I wanted the video to look avant-garde, so white people could get into it, too,” Missy told me. “And if I lose cool points with other rappers ’cause I don’t want my sound and look to be about one thing, then I lose cool points.”

Melissa Elliott was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, in 1971, two years before “I Can’t Stand the Rain” was first recorded and released. As an only child, Missy, as she was called by her family, amused herself by lining up her dolls —“Baby Alive, G.I. Joe, whatever”—and singing to them. Her parents’

marriage was an unhappy one, and when Missy was fourteen they separated. She and her mother have lived together in Portsmouth ever since.

A solitary and industrious teen-ager, she helped form a singing group with three other neighborhood girls. The group's first name was Fay Z; then it became Sista. "Missy always wanted to be up there," her mother, who works as a dispatcher at an electric company, recalls. "As a little girl, she would ask me to bring home stamps, for all these letters she was writing. The letters would be returned, and I'd see that she'd written to Diana Ross, and whatnot."

Sista began performing at local talent shows and local colleges, and in 1992 attracted the attention of Devante, a member of the popular singing group Jodeci, by waylaying him at a concert. When Devante signed Sista ("We had long-ass weaves, we was a mess," Missy recalls), Missy was twenty. She and another neighborhood friend, Tim Mosley, who went by the name of Timbaland, had written many of the songs that the group performed. Sista eventually dissolved, but Timbaland and Missy are still partners.

Their songwriting process has been the same for years: first, they create the basic tracks (often incorporating samples from soul classics like "Pass the Dutchie"). "Then I'll sit down," Missy says. "He may go to the movies, the mall, or something. And I sing the whole song, background and all." The work grows out of a variety of musical genres—reggae, rap, R. & B. ballads—but its basis and primary influence is soul music, ranging from Rick James's "Super Freak" to black-exploitation-movie soundtracks like Curtis Mayfield's "Superfly." By 1995, Missy and Timbaland were writing songs for the hottest acts in R. & B., from Aaliyah to Ginuwine, and were on their way to becoming a latter-day Ashford and Simpson.

"When people say the music business, they mean the producer business," Jac Benson told me. "Producers, not artists, are the ones who really get to control an artist's over-all sound and message." And Missy recognized that very early. Unlike most performers, who first struggle to succeed as solo artists before they turn to producing, Missy did the reverse. Her experience with Devante turned out to be a bad one—Sista had made a record and then waited for years, in vain, for it to be released—and she was determined not

to repeat it. “I didn’t want to just be an artist and let someone else have all that control over *me*,” she said. “I knew I would have to produce.”

In fact, Missy’s potential as a solo artist and video presence didn’t become evident until last year, when her now signature “hee haw” rap for Gina Thompson’s remix of “The Things You Do” was showcased in the video. “Gina’s song was the ice-cream sundae,” the hip-hop impresario Fab Five Freddy told me. “Missy’s rap was the cherry on top.” In contrast to the funky bubblegum ballads she’d written for groups like SWV and 702, Missy’s raps were sharp and strong: the woman was always saying what she wanted, and when and where she wanted it. And Missy’s visual impact proved to be as captivating as it was unexpected. “She’s a full-figured black woman,” Freddy continued, “and, let’s face it—a lot of black women look like her. She has Southern sophistication, a country elegance.” But there was also an iconic quality to Missy on video from the beginning; Freddy described her as “the twenty-first-century incarnation of Aunt Jemima; it feels like she’s putting the whole house in order.”

After the Thompson video came out, rap fans began asking for the “hee-hee haw-haw” girl. Missy says that she was approached by companies from Arista Records to Motown, but that they wanted to sign her only as an artist, and she refused. Merlin Bobb and Sylvia Rhone, two senior executives at Elektra, agreed to give her more. “We wanted to set her up in a small situation where she could develop her songwriting and producing abilities,” Bobb explains, “whereas other companies wanted to sign her as an artist and make some fast money.” He adds, “Missy was shocked when she understood that we were interested in her business sense.” In the summer of 1996, Elektra agreed to subsidize a small label called Gold Mind Records, which Missy now oversees. Bobb says that when Missy first joined Elektra she was writing songs for other artists, but that she soon grew confident enough to begin writing songs for herself. In the spring of 1997, she and Timbaland recorded the music and Missy’s vocals for “Supa Dupa Fly” in a week.

On July 22nd, the video of “The Rain” was nominated for three MTV Video Music Awards: Best Rap Video, Best Direction in a Video, and Breakthrough Video. The next day, “Supa Dupa Fly” went gold—No. 3 on Billboard’s pop chart, and No. 1 on its R. & B. chart—thereby reinforcing Elektra’s belief in Missy as a strong, marketable artist. By mid-August,

articles had appeared in the *Times*, the Washington *Post*, and the business section of the Los Angeles *Times*. By August 20th, Missy had begun working on a new video of her second single, “Sock It 2 Me,” with Hype Williams.

"This sure beats couples counselling."

Cartoon by Liana Finck

When I saw Missy at the filming of the video, in a cavernous hangar in Long Island City, she was wearing red superhero boots, white tights, and red Pac-Man arms, and she had a big red "M" emblazoned on her chest: the inspiration for this video, which also featured Da Brat and Lil' Kim, was Japanese superhero animation. This time, Missy was not only the video's main attraction but also its co-producer. "Sock It 2 Me" had a nine-hundred-thousand-dollar budget, half of which Missy was personally responsible for —a budget that she hoped would make the video harder to rip off visually. ("If people gonna copy me this time, they gonna have to come out of their pockets," Missy says.) She is unlike many performers in that her wit and her sense of character go hand in hand with her marketing savvy: her rap on SWV's "Can We" begins, "Me and Timbaland / We got the sh— that hits from here / From here to overseas / Where SWV is."

Throughout the day, Missy would look at the playbacks—alone, and then with whoever else wanted to watch. (At one point, the stylist for the shoot, June Ambrose, walked by. Glancing at Missy's image on the flickering screen, she remarked, "She has lost her mind, and that's a good thing.") Missy consulted with Timbaland several times about her performance. She was not concerned with how she looked; rather, she wanted to know whether "Sock It 2 Me" was a suitable follow-up to what she had done before; she wondered out loud if people could "really understand where this Missy thing is going."

Sylvia Rhone, for one, sees the "Sock It 2 Me" video going in the direction of television: "No one's really used that Japanimation kind of thing, and I want to take this video and try to sell the concept of these characters—which are played by Missy, Lil' Kim, and Brat—and do a real special cartoon. Black folks haven't moved into that genre."

Rhone was particularly pleased about the coverage that Missy received in the L.A. *Times*. "I want white America, which is scared of hip-hop artists, to see that some of us are real businesspeople, who command major dollars and a major consumer base, and have more vision than just doing a rap record." Rhone thinks that Missy's easygoing manner can be misleading. "If you ran into Missy, you would say, 'This is a ghetto girl with ghetto curls,' " she told

me. “Underneath the ‘hee-hee haw-haw,’ she’s one of the sharpest businesswomen I’ve ever come up against.”

And, if Missy wants greater longevity than is usually accorded a rap star, writing and producing under her own label, Gold Mind, may provide it. “I feel like, O.K., if I can make it as a singer, then let me try rapping,” Missy told me. “If I can make it as a rapper, then let me try writing. All right? If I make it as a rap singer and writer, then why not try to produce? I don’t feel limited in any way. There’s that saying ‘God gave you talent, and if you don’t use it He’ll take it away from you.’ And I always said, ‘I don’t want God to come down and take my talents away.’ So, by using all these talents and being successful in all of them, I’ve always got something to fall back on.”

On September 3rd, the night of the rehearsal for the MTV Video Music Awards, Missy Elliott arrived at Radio City Music Hall to perform her rap on Lil’ Kim’s single “Not Tonight,” along with the radio personality Angie Martinez; Left Eye, from TLC; and Da Brat. As usual, she was dressed to thrill, and, as usual, she looked like no one else there. In an industry where, as Missy says, “you either gotta be light-skinned or have long hair” to satisfy a teen-age boy’s video idea of a proper “vide-ho,” Missy Elliott has managed to be something else altogether. Before her “Supa Dupa Fly” success, she had the feeling that people “might not like me hopping around,” she recalls. “You wouldn’t see me in one of those model magazines unless it was, like, *Healthy Woman*. But I’m cool.”

Lil’ Kim’s number was to have an Egyptian theme: Lil’ Kim, Left Eye, and Angie would be dressed in Nefertiti-like costumes; Da Brat would be dressed as a Roman gladiator. They all assembled on the stage and, silhouetted against a big-screen projection of a pyramid, began working out various moves with the choreographer. Unlike the other participants, Missy would be entering the act from the audience, dressed as herself—as though her fellow-entertainers were her bitches. While the women gyrated and gestured onstage, Missy sat with her cousin Malik, drinking a large bottle of soda pop and looking apprehensive. This would be her first live television performance. It was a far cry from singing in hair extensions and Jordache jeans at the local high school in Portsmouth. Billy B., Missy’s makeup person, had been eavesdropping when her mother beeped her a few days

earlier: “I could hear Missy say, ‘Now, Ma, please don’t come to the awards. I’ll be too nervous to perform—it’s the white people’s awards, Ma. Very important.’ ”

But when it came time for Missy to walk the length of the aisle doing her little Walter Brennan dance, her nervousness seemed to vanish. A number of MTV staff members, publicists, and managers representing other artists moved to seats at the front of the stage in order to have a clear view. Hop-skipping down the aisle toward her sister rappers, Missy carried a mike in one hand and made flapping gestures with her other, saying, “Yo, yo, Kim, you not gonna get me on this song just singing hooks. What I look like—Patti LaBelle or something?” Then Lil’ Kim giggled her peroxide giggle as Missy engulfed her in a tight embrace.

Each time they ran through Lil’ Kim’s number, Missy performed her part of the song differently. Sometimes she added an extra “yo,” or she made a little “tiki tiki” sound between the “yo”s, like an urban voodoo priest bent over a cauldron. One time when she said, “Oh, what a night,” at the song’s conclusion, she conveyed a certain flirtatiousness; another time she conveyed boredom. Unlike the majority of rappers, who try to approximate in their live performances the exact sounds and movements they’ve used in their videos for easy audience identification, Missy approaches rapping the way jazz musicians approach jazz—as an improvisational musical form. It was only after the rehearsal was over—when the others had wandered off and she stood alone on that vast and unfamiliar stage, blowing kisses and mouthing “Thank you”s to a nonexistent audience—that one remembered how astonishing it was that such a newcomer had performed there in the first place.

A week later, on September 10th, Missy was in a dressing room on the sixth floor of the Ed Sullivan Theatre, at Broadway and Fifty-third Street, getting ready to perform “The Rain” on the “Late Show with David Letterman.” Missy had never been on a late-night show before, and, while the invitation was a welcome indication of her recent crossover success, she did not have a clear idea of who, precisely, Letterman was. “I never catch the show,” she said. “What does he do up there?”

That afternoon, during Missy's pre-taping rehearsal, Letterman's technical staff had been plagued by a similar question: What, exactly, were Missy and her entourage planning to do up there? She was singing with a seven-piece band, but there were also two dancers, two more rappers, and two backup singers in attendance. In addition, Ann Peebles, the woman who first made "I Can't Stand the Rain" famous, was making a guest appearance with Missy. "They didn't know where to put the camera," Missy's manager, Louise C. West, recalled later.

Fifteen minutes before Missy was to appear in front of a live studio audience, Anne Kristoff, her publicist, and Billy B. were waiting outside the performer's dressing room. There was consternation over the fact that Missy hadn't announced a final plan for her performance, and Billy B. was upset with his client for not giving him the time he needed to make her up. ("I was promised an hour to do her face," he complained, to no one in particular. "Missy's face is my face. I want to be proud of it.")

Then Sylvia Rhone stepped off the elevator with Merlin Bobb, and Rhone asked how Missy was and what time she was going on. "Now," replied a young woman who was passing by in the narrow hall. Right behind her was Missy herself, wearing outsized red leather trousers, a large white T-shirt, and a gold pendant depicting an Afro'd woman in silhouette. A sleeveless red leather basketball jersey had the word "Supa" written on the front and a big purple leather fly stitched on the back. She was trailed by Malik, two dancers in purple trousers and tops, and the singers Magoo and Timbaland. Everyone else stepped into line behind them, followed Missy into the elevator, and disappeared, like circus performers pouring into a tiny joke car.

Downstairs, the non-performing members of Missy's entourage sat in the greenroom watching as Letterman introduced the number while holding Missy's CD upside down. The camera closed in on the face of Ann Peebles singing, "Missy, you can't stand the rain," while Missy performed her distinctive shimmy and belted out the lyrics "Beep, beep, who got the keys to the jeep, *vroom!* " Rhone was watching the monitor in the greenroom, and her eyes filled with tears. "She's got it, she's got it!" she chanted.

At the end of the song, David Letterman kissed Missy's hand. Suddenly, the woman who only moments before had been skating from one side of the

stage to the other and making cat's eyes at the audience became modest and subdued. "You Missy people come back!" Letterman called after her as she and her fellow-performers left the stage. Minutes later, Missy was climbing into a black stretch limousine—with Magoo, Malik, and Louise in tow—that had been waiting outside the theatre. Clutching her cell phone, she called her mother: "Yo, Ma, watch me tonight on David Letterman. What channel is it on, y'all? Yeah, Ma, Channel 4."

In the coming months, Missy will be a presenter at the 1997 MTV Europe Music Awards. She will tour England, France, Holland, and Germany to promote "Supa Dupa Fly." But she will also be launching Nicole Ray, a young singer from her home town, on Gold Mind, and producing four songs on the Total album. At twenty-five, after less than two years as a producer with Elektra, she's already sounding like an old hand ("I like young people—not to say that I block old people out. It's just that you can develop young people"). It also may be time, Missy thinks, to break into the movies. "I don't want big scenes at first," she explained to me recently. "I want to work my way up. Sometimes, when you get a heavy role, you can't deliver, and people are so jealous, they'd be like, 'Yo, Missy can't act.' But if it's something small people will say, 'Yo, Missy is tight.' "

After the Letterman taping, as the limousine moved through the blue twilight, the driver asked Missy how the show had gone. When he heard that Letterman had kissed her hand, he observed that that was a sign of great respect—or props, as he called it. "That means Letterman's a European," he explained. "Those Europeans, they can give it up to a Negro; Missy, one day soon they gonna give you all your props." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the title and the lyrics of an SWV song.

By Susan B. Glasser

By Adam Entous

By Naomi Fry

The Wayward Press

- **Where's the Oprah in O Magazine?**

By Nancy Franklin

"Only a hermit could be unaware of Oprah Winfrey's new magazine, and he'd have to be beyond range of television, newspapers, radio, records, and rioting fans," someone said a couple of weeks ago, except it was actually thirty-six years ago and he was talking about John, Paul, George, and Ringo and the quote was on the back cover of "Meet the Beatles!" Still. Oprah Winfrey, Queen of All Media, put her latest unsinkable vessel in the water recently, and, in at least one magazine store on the Upper West Side, it caused a brief flareup of Oprahmania. Late in the afternoon a couple of days after the launch, just around the time that "The Oprah Winfrey Show" was starting, three female subjects of the Queen went into the shop and, within the space of two minutes, snapped up the three remaining copies of the magazine, called *O*, which were stacked near copies of *F*, the magazine for people who have flunked out of school, *X*, the bible of treasure-map collectors, and *I*, one of the dozen or so magazines competing for the market niche of upscale self-important blowhards.

Winfrey's mark is all over the magazine, starting with the cover: under the title, which comes from its founder's nickname, are the words "The Oprah Magazine," and posed in a wicker chair is Oprah herself, looking like a million bucks (which is 1/150 of what she earned in 1999). The cover looks much like that of another personality-driven magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, and the magazines contain complementary articles this month: in *O* we are told about the virtues of an all-white decorating scheme, and in *M.S.L.* we find out how to restore the original whiteness to our walls, marble floors, and rubber spatulas. Both magazines, as it happens, have calendars for the month of May, but the differences in the two magazines' Weltanschauung can be more or less summed up by the entries for May 12th: one of them tells you what *she's* going to be doing ("Wash greenhouse windows"), and the other tells you what *you* should be doing ("Ask yourself what you're really afraid of in life: Ridicule? Rejection? Loneliness? Instability?").

Many people find Winfrey's show inspirational, but her magazine is constructed more along perspirational lines. There's work involved, and you'll need tape, refrigerator magnets, and several notebooks. You are supposed to keep a journal recording each courageous act you perform, "no matter how small," and to "make it a point to add one new item every day." You are supposed to make a list of your health goals, and then fill in and tear out the supplied "contract." There is a step-by-step planning guide for making your dreams come true. You are supposed to write out the words "Don't take anything personally"—one of the "four agreements" concocted by the shamanic teacher Don Miguel Ruiz—and put them on your fridge. (Things you might take personally but shouldn't are, to use Ruiz's examples, someone's saying to you, "Hey, you are stupid" and "Hey, you look fat." I couldn't agree more; if you allow such words to bother you, you are a big fat idiot.) There are questions you are supposed to ask yourself or people in your reading group, such as "How many of your statements could others interpret as criticism?" Next to that page are five bookmarks you can tear out and equip with tassels. On page 131, there are four of Winfrey's favorite sayings printed on thick paper. "You can slide these pullout cards into pretty frames, slip them into your handbag or paste them into a journal. Or you can follow Oprah's lead and tape the cards to your mirror." Then by all means get out the blender and treat yourself to "Oprah's favorite smoothie."

Winfrey may be all over her magazine, but Oprah herself, the charismatic mover of mountains, is strangely absent from its pages. In person—on TV, that is—she is an awesome figure with the very real power to change lives, and she talks to and listens to people with a respect and interest that many of them have never experienced. In print, the force is not with her: it's the difference between an audience with the Queen and a promotional brochure about the Queen's life style. *O* is basically just another one-dimensional women's magazine, and it has a self-nullifying, numbing quality; it can have a piece about a half-Korean woman who as a child watched her uncle and brother kill her mother for refusing to sell her into slavery right next to a piece about "five fabulous things to do with fresh strawberries." (May I suggest a sixth fabulous thing? Try just eating them.) The literal binding together of the inane and the serious doesn't add up to something that's worthy of Winfrey, and, unlike her TV show, which is new every day, you're stuck with it for a whole month.

Another important quality missing from *O* is Winfrey's humor; on TV, she manages to project earnestness and be funny at the same time. A recent guest was Sarah Ban Breathnach, who wrote a book that Winfrey is high on: "Simple Abundance," which teaches you how to feel and express gratitude. (One of the ways you do this is by keeping a "journal of gratitude." The practice of writing things down in order to find, heal, nurture, and empower the real you has become so important to the self-help way of life that a new word had to be invented for it: a woman interviewed in one of the stories in *O* says, "It took ten years of journaling for me to even figure out what I wanted.") Breathnach's book has been very successful, and she told Winfrey that the book works for people "because I'm Everywoman." Oprah, looking shocked and upset at this usurpation of her identity, said, "I thought I was Everywoman." Whether she is or she isn't, she can at least laugh at herself (and expertly disarm would-be Oprahphobes by doing so). I find Winfrey admirable and compelling, but I won't be subscribing to what she calls her "personal growth guide." I feel kind of bad about that, but on May 16th I should start to feel better. That's the day when, according to *O's* calendar, I'm scheduled to "practice saying no without feeling guilty." ♦

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