APRIL 2022
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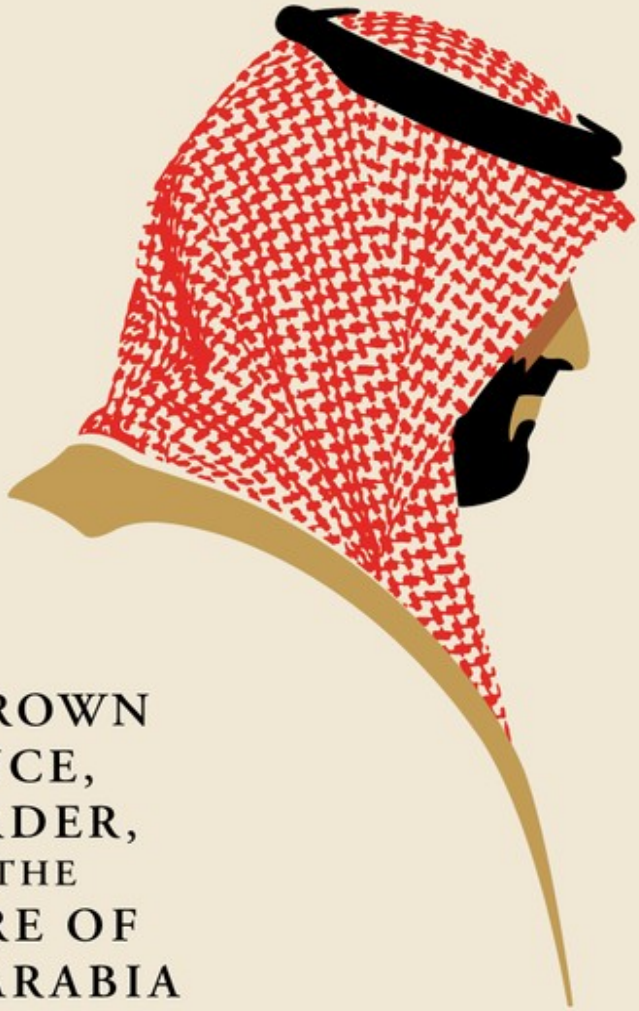

THE CROWN PRINCE, A MURDER, AND THE FUTURE OF SAUDI ARABIA

BY GRAEME WOOD

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

The Atlantic

[Sat, 02 Apr 2022]

Cover Story

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  Asked about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Mohammed bin Salman said, “If that’s the way we did things, Khashoggi would not even be among the top 1,000 people on the list.” -- Graeme Wood

A woman walks past a poster showing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (left) with his father (right) and grandfather (top), at the old market in Taif, Saudi Arabia.

Absolute Power

Inside the Palace With Mohammed bin Salman

By Graeme Wood

Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, is 36 years old and has led his country for almost five years. His father, the 86-year-old King Salman, has rarely been seen in public since 2019, and even MBS—as he is universally known—has faced the world only a few times since the pandemic began. Once, he was ubiquitous, on a never-ending publicity tour to promote his plan to modernize his father's kingdom. But soon after the murder of the *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, MBS curtailed his travel. His last interview with non-Saudi press was more than two years ago. The CIA concluded that he had ordered Khashoggi's murder, and Saudi Arabia's own prosecutors found that it had been conducted by some of the crown prince's closest aides. They are thought to have dismembered Khashoggi and disintegrated his corpse.

MBS had already developed a reputation for ruthlessness. In 2017, he rounded up hundreds of members of his own family and other wealthy Saudis and imprisoned them in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel on informal charges of corruption. The Khashoggi murder fixed a view of the crown prince as brutish, thin-skinned, and psychopathic. Among those who share a dark appraisal of MBS is President Joe Biden, who has so far refused to speak with him. Many in Washington and other Western capitals hope his rise to the throne might still be averted.

But within the kingdom, MBS's succession is understood as inevitable. "Ask any Saudi, anyone at all, whether MBS will be king," a senior Saudi diplomat told me. "If there are people in Washington who think he will not be, then I cannot help them. I am not a psychiatrist."

His father's eventual death will leave him as the absolute monarch of the birthplace of Islam and the owner of the world's largest accessible oil reserves. He will also be the leader of one of America's closest allies and the source of many of its headaches.

I've been traveling to Saudi Arabia over the past three years, trying to understand if the crown prince is a killer, a reformer, or both—and if both, whether he can be one without the other.

Even MBS's critics concede that he has roused the country from an economic and social slumber. In 2016, he unveiled a plan, known as Vision 2030, to convert Saudi Arabia from—allow me to be blunt—one of the world's weirdest countries into a place that could plausibly be called normal. It is now open to visitors and investment, and lets its citizens partake in ordinary acts of recreation and even certain vices. The crown prince has legalized cinemas and concerts, and invited notably raw hip-hop artists to perform. He has allowed women to drive and to dress as freely as they can in dens of sin like Dubai and Bahrain. He has curtailed the role of reactionary clergy and all but abolished the religious police. He has explored relations with Israel.

He has also created a climate of fear unprecedented in Saudi history. Saudi Arabia has never been a free country. But even the most oppressive of MBS's predecessors, his uncle King Faisal, never presided over an atmosphere like that of the present day, when it is widely believed that you place yourself in danger if you criticize the ruler or pay even a mild compliment to his enemies. MBS's critics—not regicidal zealots or al-Qaeda sympathizers, just ordinary people with independent thoughts about his reforms—have gone into exile. Some fear that if he keeps getting his way, the modernized Saudi Arabia will oppress in ways the old Saudi Arabia never imagined. Khalid al-Jabri, the exiled son of one of MBS's most prominent critics, warned me that worse was yet to come: "When he's King Mohammed, Crown Prince MBS is going to be remembered as an angel."

For about two years, MBS hid from public view, as if hoping the Khashoggi murder would be forgotten. It hasn't been. But the crown prince still wants to convince the world that he is saving his country, not holding it hostage—which is why he met twice in recent months with me and the editor in chief of this magazine, Jeffrey Goldberg.

In our meetings, the crown prince was charming, warm, informal, and intelligent. But even at its most affable, absolute monarchy cannot escape weirdness. For our first meeting, MBS summoned us to a remote palace by the Red Sea, his family's COVID bunker. The protocols were multilayered: a succession of PCR tests by nurses from the Royal Clinics; a Gulfstream

jet in the middle of the night from Riyadh; a convoy from a deserted airstrip; a surrender of electronic devices; a stopover at a mysterious guesthouse visible in satellite photos but unmarked on Google Maps. He invited us to his palace at about 1:30 a.m., and we spoke for nearly two hours.

For the second meeting, in his palace in Riyadh, we were told to be ready by 10 a.m. It also began after midnight. The halls were astir. The crown prince had just returned after nearly two years of remote work, and aides and ministers padded red carpets seeking meetings, their first in months, with the boss. Neglected packages and documents had piled up on the desks and tables in his office, which was large but hardly opulent. The most obvious concession to high taste was an old-fashioned telescope on a tripod, its altitude set shallow enough that it appeared to be pointed not at the heavens but at Riyadh, the sprawling and unsightly desert metropolis from which the Saud family has ruled for most of the past three centuries.

At the outset of both conversations, MBS said he was saddened that the pandemic precluded giving us hugs. He apologized that we all had to wear masks. (Each meeting was attended by multiple, mainly silent princes wearing identical white robes and masks, leaving us unsure, to this day, who exactly was present.) The crown prince left his tunic unbuttoned at the collar, in a casual style now favored by young Saudi men, and he gave relaxed, nonpsychopathic answers to questions about his personal habits. He tries to limit his Twitter use. He eats breakfast every day with his kids. For fun, he watches TV, avoiding shows, like *House of Cards*, that remind him of work. Instead, he said without apparent irony, he prefers to watch series that help him escape the reality of his job, such as *Game of Thrones*.

Before the meetings, I asked one of MBS's advisers if there were any questions I could ask his boss that he himself could not. "None," he answered, without pausing—"and that is what makes him different from every crown prince who has come before him." I was told he derives energy from being challenged.

During our Riyadh encounter, Jeff asked MBS if he was capable of handling criticism. "Thank you very much for this question," the prince

said. “If I couldn’t, I would not be sitting with you today listening to that question.”

“I’d be in the Ritz-Carlton,” Jeff suggested.

“Well,” he said, “at least it’s a five-star hotel.”

Difficult questions caused the crown prince to move about jumpily, his voice vibrating at a higher frequency. Every minute or two he performed a complex motor tic: a quick backward tilt of the head, followed by a gulp, like a pelican downing a fish. He complained that he had endured injustice, and he evinced a level of victimhood and grandiosity unusual even by the standards of Middle Eastern rulers.

When we asked if he had ordered the killing of Khashoggi, he said it was “obvious” that he had not. “It hurt me a lot,” he said. “It hurt me and it hurt Saudi Arabia, from a feelings perspective.”

“From a feelings perspective?”

“I understand the anger, especially among journalists. I respect their feelings. But we also have feelings here, pain here.”

The crown prince has told two people close to him that “the Khashoggi incident was the worst thing ever to happen to me, because it could have ruined all of my plans” to reform the country.

In our Riyadh interview, the crown prince said that his *own* rights had been violated in the Khashoggi affair. “I feel that human-rights law wasn’t applied to me,” he said. “Article XI of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that any person is innocent until proven guilty.” Saudi Arabia had punished those responsible for the murder, he said—yet comparable atrocities, such as bombings of wedding parties in Afghanistan and the torture of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay, have gone unpunished.

The crown prince defended himself in part by asserting that Khashoggi was not important enough to kill. “I never read a Khashoggi article in my life,” he said. To our astonishment, he added that if he *were* to send a kill squad,

he'd choose a more valuable target, and more competent assassins. "If that's the way we did things"—murdering authors of critical op-eds—"Khashoggi would not even be among the top 1,000 people on the list. If you're going to go for another operation like that, for another person, it's got to be professional and it's got to be one of the top 1,000." Apparently, he had a hypothetical hit list, ready to go. Nevertheless, he maintained that the Khashoggi killing was a "huge mistake."

"Hopefully," he said, no more hit squads would be found. "I'm trying to do my best."

If his best is not good enough for Joe Biden, MBS said, then the consequences of running a moralistic foreign policy would be the president's to discover. "We have a long, historical relationship with America," he said. "Our aim is to keep it and strengthen it." Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have called for "accountability" for Khashoggi's murder, as well as the humanitarian disaster in Yemen, due to war between Saudi Arabia and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. The Americans also refuse to treat him as Biden's counterpart—Biden's peer is the king, they insist—even though the crown prince rules the country with his father's blessing. This stings. MBS has lines open to the Chinese. "Where is the potential in the world today?" he said. "It's in Saudi Arabia. And if you want to miss it, I believe other people in the East are going to be super happy."

We asked whether Biden misunderstands something about him. "Simply, I do not care," he replied. Alienating the Saudi monarchy, he suggested, would harm Biden's position. "It's up to him to think about the interests of America." He gave a shrug. "Go for it."

Also risible to the crown prince was the notion that his citizens fear speaking out against him. We need dissent, he said, "if it's objective writing, without any ideological agenda." In practice, I noted, dissent seemed to be nonexistent. In September 2017, MBS ordered a boycott of Qatar, citing the country's support for the Iranian government, the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and other Islamist organizations in the region. His tiny neighbor suddenly transformed from official friend into official villain, and those expressing a kind word toward it disappeared into prison.

These sentiments, apparently, did not count as objective or nonideological. Qatar, MBS said, was comparable to Nazi Germany. "What do you think [would have happened] if someone was praising and trying to push for Hitler in World War II?" he asked. "How would America take that?" Of course Saudis would react strongly to Nazi sympathizers in their midst. Three years later, however, the countries reconciled, and the Saudi government tweeted out a photo of MBS and Hitler—that is, Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani—wearing board shorts and smiling at MBS's Red Sea palace. "Sheikh Tamim's an amazing person," MBS said. The fight between them had been no big deal, "a fight between brothers." The relationship is now "better than ever in history." The dissenters remain in prison, however, and I do not mean the Ritz-Carlton.

As for the actual Ritz-Carlton prisoners: They had it coming, the crown prince said. Overnight he'd rounded up hundreds of the most prominent Saudis, delivered them to Riyadh's most lavish hotel, and refused to let them go until they confessed and paid up. I said that sounded like he was eliminating rivals. MBS looked incredulous. "How can you eliminate people who don't have any power to begin with?" If they had power, he would not have been able to force them into the Ritz.

The Ritz operation, MBS said, was a blitzkrieg against corruption, and wildly successful and popular because it started at the top and did not stop there. "Some people thought Saudi Arabia was, you know, just trying to get the big whales," MBS said. They assumed that after the government extracted settlements from the likes of Alwaleed bin Talal, the kingdom's richest man, corruption at lower levels would resume. MBS noted, proudly, that even the minnows had been hooked. By 2019, everyone "understood that even if you steal $100, you're going to pay for it." In just a few months, he claims to have recovered $100 billion directly, and says that he will recover much more indirectly, as dividends of deterrence.

MBS acknowledged that to outsiders the Ritz operation may have looked thuggish. But to him it was an elegant, and by the way nonviolent, solution to the problem of vampires feasting on the kingdom's annual budget. (An adviser to MBS told me that one alternative his aides had suggested was executing a few prominent corrupt officials.) During the months that the

Ritz served as a prison, the kingdom's financial regulator was essentially made king pro tempore, to devote the full power of the government to bleeding the vampires dry. But the Ritz guests had not, MBS said, been placed under arrest. That would imply that they had entered the court system and faced charges. Instead, he said, they had been invited to "negotiate"—and to his pleasure, 95 percent did so. "That was a strong signal," he said. I'm sure it was.

The Saudi throne does not, like the British throne once did, just pass to the next male heir. The king chooses his successor, and ever since the founding king of the modern Saudi state, Abdulaziz, chose his son Saud as crown prince in 1933, each king has chosen another son of Abdulaziz. (He had 36 sons—with multiple wives and concubines—who survived to adulthood.) All were old enough to remember the camels-and-tents days, before extreme wealth, and they ruled conservatively, as if to lock in their gains. Even the shrewdest and most ambitious kings accomplished little. Abdullah, who took power in 2005, began as a reformer, but much of the momentum of the first half of his reign was lost as he doddered in the second, and the royal treasury was looted. (One notorious alleged thief in the Ritz, a major figure in the Royal Court, was said to have stolen tens of billions of dollars during His Majesty's decline.)

Salman, the current king and at 86 one of the youngest of Abdulaziz's brood, saw the perils of unchecked gerontocracy and anointed a successor from the next generation. His choice of Mohammed was not obvious. King Salman's sons include Faisal, 51, who has a doctorate in international relations from Oxford; and Sultan, 65, a former Royal Saudi Air Force pilot who in 1985 spent a week on the space shuttle Discovery as a payload specialist. Either of these competent and educated men, citizens of the world, might have been a natural successor. But Salman had an inkling that the next king would need a certain grit and fluency with power that cannot be acquired in a seminar or a flight simulator. The new generation, born into

luxury, tended to be soft, and the next king would need to be a modern version of a desert warlord like his grandfather.

Outside the immediate family, Salman considered his nephew Mohammad bin Nayef, who is known as MBN, appointing him crown prince in 2015, when he was 55. As a spymaster and security official in the 2000s, MBN had led the country's domestic war against al-Qaeda, and in the process had become well connected with counterparts in Washington and London. In 2009, MBN was injured when an al-Qaeda bomber packed his underpants with explosives and approached him at an event.

Foreign governments considered MBN a safe pick: old enough but not too old, a proven fighter, respected overseas. But for Salman he was merely a throne-warmer for his son. (MBS had held no high office prior to his father's coronation and needed a couple of years as defense minister to burnish his CV.) In 2017, Salman fired MBN. When you fire a prince, you fire all those who staked their fortunes on his rise; among the opponents of MBS are foreign governments who had planned for the reign of King MBN, and Saudis whose wealth and influence flowed from him. MBN's chief adviser, Saad al-Jabri, fled to Canada. He alleges that MBS sent a team there to kill him. MBS's government alleges that al-Jabri stole a massive fortune and is bankrolling efforts to defame the crown prince. (Both parties deny the claims.) "MBN survived al-Qaeda," al-Jabri's son Khalid told me. "But he couldn't survive his own cousin."

Others have suggested Salman's younger brother Ahmed, a well-liked former deputy interior minister, as a throne-worthy alternative to MBS. Ahmed reportedly opposed MBS's appointment as crown prince. In 2020, he was arrested on suspicion of treason.

Having consolidated power, MBS focused on Vision 2030. He is exasperated by the rest of the world's failure to acknowledge how well it has gone. "Saudi Arabia is a G20 country," he said. "You can see our position five years ago: It was almost 20. Today, we are almost 17." He

noted strong non-oil GDP growth, and reeled off statistics about foreign direct investment, Saudi overseas investment, and the share of world trade that passes through Saudi waters. The economic success, the concerts, the social reform—these are all done deals, he said. "If we were having this interview in 2016, you would say I'm making assumptions," he said. "But we did it. You can see it now with your eyes."

He was not lying. Between my first visit to Saudi Arabia, in 2019, and this conversation two years later, I had gone to the movies in Riyadh and sat next to a Saudi woman I had never met. She wore jeans and canvas sneakers, and she bounced her bare ankle while we watched *Zombieland: Double Tap*. When I first visited, I ate at restaurants that had cinder-block walls dividing single men on one side from women and families on the other. These were sledgehammered down—a little Berlin 1989 in every restaurant—and now men and women can eat together without eliciting so much as a sideways glance from fellow diners.

Many of the crown prince's most persistent critics approve of these changes, and wish only that they had come sooner. (Khashoggi was such a critic. When I met him in London for brunch, shortly before his death, I asked him to list MBS's failings. He said "90 percent" of the reforms were prudent and overdue.) The most famous Saudi women's-rights activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, campaigned for women's right to drive, and against the Saudi "guardianship law," which prevented women from traveling or going out in public without a male relative. Al-Hathloul was thrown in prison on terrorism charges in 2018—*after* MBS and his father had announced the imminent end of both policies. In prison, her family says, she was electrocuted, beaten, and—this was just a few months before Khashoggi's murder—threatened with being chopped up and thrown in a sewer, never to be found. (The Saudi government has previously denied allegations of torturing prisoners.)

Left: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is greeted by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Al Thani in Doha, Qatar, in 2021. Center: The Saudi activist Loujain al-Hathloul in 2021. Right: MBS and his father, King Salman, in 2017. (Saudi Press Agency / Reuters; Ahmed Yosri / Reuters; Saudi Press Agency / AP)

Al-Hathloul and other activists had demanded rights, and the ruler had granted them. Their error was in thinking those rights were theirs to take, rather than coming from the monarch, who deserved credit for having bestowed them. Al-Hathloul was released in February 2021, but her family says she is forbidden from traveling abroad or speaking publicly.

Another dissident, Salman al-Awda, is a preacher with a massive following. His original crime, too, was to utter publicly a thought that would later be shared by the crown prince himself. When MBS began squabbling with his counterpart in Qatar, al-Awda tweeted, “May God harmonize between their hearts, for the good of their people.” He was imprisoned, and actual harmony between the two leaders has not freed him. His son Abdullah, now in the United States, claims that his father, who is 65, is being held in solitary confinement and has been tortured.

Saudi authorities say al-Awda is a terrorist and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is supported by Qatar and intent on overthrowing the monarchy and replacing it with a theocracy. (The Muslim Brotherhood plays a bogeyman role in the Saudi imagination similar to the role of Communists in America during the Red Scare. Also like Communists, the Muslim Brotherhood really has worked covertly to undermine state rule, just not to the extent imagined.) Al-Awda’s defenders say he is being punished for daring to speak with a moral voice independent of the monarchy’s. He faces death by beheading.

Would MBS consider pardoning those who'd spoken out in favor of women driving and normalization with Qatar—both now the policy of the country? "That's not my power. That's His Majesty's power," MBS said. But, he added, "no king has ever used" the pardon power, and his father does not intend to be the first.

The issue, he said, is not a lack of mercy. It is a problem of balance. Yes, there are liberals and kumbaya types who have run afoul of state security—and perhaps some could be candidates for a royal pardon. But some of the others in his jails are bad hombres indeed, and pardons cannot be meted out selectively. "You have, let's say, extreme left and extreme right," he said. "If you give forgiveness in one area, you have to give it to some very bad people. And that will take everything backward in Saudi Arabia."

On one side are liberals, tugging on the sympathies of Westerners; on the other, Islamists who are also opposed to the monarchy. Letting this latter group out would not just mean the end of rock concerts and coed dining. They would not stop until they brought down the House of Saud, seized the country's estimated 268 billion barrels of oil and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and established a terrorist state. In private conversations with others, MBS has likened Saudi Arabia before the Saud family's conquest in the 18th century to the anarchic wasteland of the *Mad Max* films. His family unified the peninsula and slowly developed a system of law and order. Without them, it would be *Mad Max* all over again—or Afghanistan.

Still, the crown prince's argument—that if he extended forgiveness to good people who deserved it, he would have to extend it equally to bad people who did not—struck me as bizarre. Why would one require the other? Then I realized that MBS was not saying that the failure of his plan to remake the kingdom *might* lead to catastrophe. He was saying that he'd guarantee it would. Many secular Arab leaders before him have made the same dark implication: Support everything I do, or I will let slip the dogs of jihad. This was not an argument. It was a threat.

Ali Shihabi, a Saudi financier and pro-MBS commentator, told me that the changes in Saudi Arabia could be compared to those in revolutionary France. An old order had been overturned, a priestly class crushed; a new order was struggling to be born.

The priestly class in particular interested me. The brand of conservative Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia—called Wahhabism, after the sect's 18th-century founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab—once wielded great power and enjoys at least some popular support. I asked Shihabi if MBS really had diminished the Wahhabis' role. "Diminished their role?" Shihabi asked me. "He put the Wahhabis in a cage, then he reached in with gardening shears"—here he made the universal *snip snip* gesture with his fingers—"and he cut their balls off."

In France, revolution worked out just as badly for the House of Bourbon as it did for the clergy. (Diderot famously wrote that the entrails of the priests would be woven into ropes to strangle kings.) The House of Saud wanted the anticlerical revolution while conveniently omitting the antiroyalist one. I wanted to see how that alliance between monarch and sansculottes was working.

Vision 2030 made modernization easier to observe now than it would have been just a few years ago. Until October 2019, tourist visas to Saudi Arabia did not exist. Then the Saudis realized that to attract crowds to the concerts they had legalized, they'd need to let in visitors. Overnight, a visa to Saudi Arabia went from one of the hardest in the world to get to one of the easiest. In minutes I had one valid for a whole year. My flight into Riyadh was packed with foreigners attending Stan Lee's Super Con. Ahead of me in the passport line I saw Lou Ferrigno, the Incredible Hulk, on his way to an autograph signing.

The new system arrived so fast that the first visitors were like an invasive species, an unnatural fit in the rigid social order of the kingdom. For years, almost every non-Saudi in the country had needed a document called an *iqama*. It was a sort of license to exist: Your *iqama* identified your Saudi patron, the local national whom you were visiting or working for, and who controlled your fate. Every Saudi patron had his own patron, too—sometimes a tribal leader, sometimes a regional one. Even those bigwigs

paid obeisance to someone and, eventually, by the transitive property of Saudi deference, to the king himself. Saudi Arabia, MBS explained, "is not one monarchy. You have beneath it more than 1,000 monarchies—town monarchies, tribal monarchies, semitribal monarchies." The *iqama* guaranteed that every sentient creature fit into this scheme of Saudi society.

MBS batted away my suggestion that this system is antiquated and might be replaced with a constitutional monarchy—one where citizens have freestanding rights not granted by a monarch or a demi-monarch. "No," he said. "Saudi Arabia is based on pure monarchy," and he, as crown prince, would preserve the system. To remove himself from it would amount to a betrayal of all the monarchies and Saudis beneath him. "I can't stage a coup d'état against 14 million citizens."

But he has already forced that system to adapt. Nearly every day someone asked for my *iqama*, and I had to explain that I had none. They reacted as if I'd told them that I had no name. Renting a car, buying a train ticket, checking into a hotel—all of these interactions left some poor clerk baffled. But in the new Saudi Arabia I was free to wander, to listen, to overhear.

In Riyadh I found, effortlessly, young people thrilled by the reforms. Like the other major Saudi cities, Dammam and Jeddah, Riyadh has specialty coffee shops in abundance—little outposts of air-conditioning and caffeine, in an environment otherwise characterized by heat and boredom. Many of the Saudis I met professed a deep love for America. "I spent seven years at Cal State Northridge," one told me, before rattling off a list of cities he had visited. He was one of several hundred thousand Saudi students who'd attended U.S. universities on government scholarships in the 2000s. "I studied finance," he said. "But I never graduated. I had a wonderful time." He listed his American friends, who had names like Mike and Emilio. "I drank and did too much meth, and my grades weren't good."

"Is it possible to do just the right amount of meth?" I asked.

"When I came back, I stopped." He looked out the window of the coffee shop at the parched cityscape. "This country is the best rehab center on the planet."

Now he was studying again, at a Saudi university, and planning to open his own business. He had already attended concerts, and he said his fondest wish was to listen to music in the open air and smoke a joint—just one, he promised. He asked if I thought that would happen. I said I did not think that was explicitly part of Vision 2030, but he'd probably get his wish. Later, with him in mind, I asked the crown prince whether alcohol would soon be sold in the kingdom. It was the only policy question that he refused to answer.

In another café, in the northern city of Ha'il, a man pointed to a mural, freshly painted, of the Lebanese singer Fairouz, her hair flowing beautifully over her shoulders. Next to her were her lyrics (in Arabic): "Bring me the flute and sing, for song is the secret to eternity."

"One year ago," he said, "that would not be possible." By "that," he meant pretty much everything: a woman's hair; a celebration of song; a celebration of a song about singing; and, on top of all this, the music playing in the café as we spoke. Before the rise of MBS, every component of this scene would have violated long-standing canons of Saudi morality enforcement. The religious police, known in Arabic as the *hay'a* or *mutawwi'in*, would have busted the joint. They used to show up in ankle-length white *thobes*, their beards curly and unkempt. They yelled at people for dressing immodestly, or thwacked at them with sticks to goad them to the mosque for one of the five daily prayers. For the flagrancy of the Fairouz sins, the café's managers would have been detained, questioned, and punished. "Screw those guys," the man said, in a succinct expression of the most common sentiment I heard about the religious police.

Encounters with the *hay'a* have provided many an appalling story for foreign visitors. When Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* went to Riyadh in 2002, the *hay'a* spotted her in a shopping mall and objected to being able to see the outline of her body. Her host, the future foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, pleaded with them, but they were unimpressed by his status as a prominent diplomat, and she fled to her hotel room. "I fretted that I was in one of those movies where an American makes one mistake in a repressive country and ends up rotting in a dungeon," Dowd wrote.

I told one of MBS's advisers that the religious police had been an international PR problem. "May I be impolite?" he asked me. "I don't give a fuck about the *foreigners*. They terrorized *us*." He likened the religious police to J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, operating with unchecked authority. (The religious police's official Arabic name dates back hundreds of years, but still sounds Orwellian in English: the Committee for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue.) Anyone who wished to drag down a professional or political rival could scrutinize him for sins, then call the religious police to set up a sting. Or the *hay'a* could flex its authority on its own, either for political reasons—toppling a prince they disliked—or for recreation.

"The religious police were the losers in school," Ali Shihabi told me. "Then they got these jobs and were empowered to go and stop the cute girls, break into the parties no one wanted them at, and shut them down. It attracted a very nasty group of people." The Saudi diplomat told me that he did not miss them, and that Saudi Arabia had needed someone with the crown prince's mettle to get rid of them. "When someone hits you because he does not like what you are wearing," he said, "that is not just a form of harassment. It is abuse."

MBS ordered the religious police to stand down, and one of the enduring mysteries of contemporary Saudi Arabia is what these thwackers do, now that they are invisible on the streets. Fuad al-Amri, who runs the *hay'a* in Mecca province, confessed to me that since the reforms, one of his main activities has been vetting his own employees, to ensure that they aren't fanatics loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood.

MBS's grandfather King Abdulaziz founded the modern Saudi state with the support of the clergy. But he also cracked down on them, hard, when they outlived their usefulness. MBS has recounted a famous anecdote about his grandfather. In 1921, Abdulaziz attended the funeral of the most senior religious scholar in the kingdom. The king told the assembled clerics that they were dear to his heart—in the Arabic idiom, "on my *iqal*," the black

cord that holds a Najd headdress in place. But then he warned them: “I can always shake my *iqal*,” he said, “and you will fall.”

For the past 50 years, Abdulaziz’s successors have taken a softer line with the Wahhabis. The Saudi clerical class’s power grew, and their imprimatur mattered. In 1964, they sealed the fate of the inept King Saud when his brothers Faisal and Mohammed sought and received religious approval for ousting him. To oppose the religious conservatives was risky. Peter Theroux, a former National Security Council director who worked on the Saudi portfolio during the 2000s, recalls being aghast at the vicious sermons still being preached by government-paid imams years after September 11. Theroux told me he confronted a senior Saudi official about the sermons. “You know,” the official apologized, “the big beards are kind of our constituency.” The rulers of Saudi Arabia put almost no limits on the speech or behavior of conservative clerics, and in return those clerics exempted the rulers from criticism. “That was the drug deal that the Saudi state was based upon for many years,” Theroux told me. “Until Mohammed bin Salman.”

Who could resist cheering on MBS as he renegotiated this relationship? One of MBS’s most persistent critics in Washington, Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut, told me the concerts and Comic-Cons in Riyadh have not yet translated into defunding Wahhabi intolerance overseas. “When I’m traveling the world, I still hear story after story of Gulf money and Saudi money fueling very conservative, intolerant Wahhabist mosques,” he said. A hallmark of traditional Wahhabism is hatred for non-Wahhabi Muslims, whom the Wahhabis view as even worse than unbelievers for perverting the faith. With little modification, Wahhabi teachings can lead to Osama bin Laden–style jihadism. Murphy said he thinks that isn’t over. “The money that flows from Saudi Arabia into conservative Islam isn’t as transparent as it was 10 years ago—much of it has been driven underground—but it still exists.”

Yet after spending hours in MBS’s company, and in the company of his allies and enemies, I was convinced that neutering the clergy was not just symbolic. He was fighting them avidly, and personally. “The kings have historically stayed away from religion,” Bernard Haykel, a scholar of

Islamic law at Princeton and an acquaintance of MBS's, told me. Outsourcing theology and religious law to the big beards was both an expedient and a necessity, because no ruler had any training in religious law, or indeed a beard of any significant size.

By contrast, MBS has a law degree from King Saud University and flaunts his knowledge and dominance over the clerics. "He's probably the only leader in the Arab world who knows anything about Islamic epistemology and jurisprudence," Haykel told me.

"In Islamic law, the head of the Islamic establishment is *wali al-amr*, the ruler," MBS explained. He was right: As the ruler, he is in charge of implementing Islam. Typically, Saudi rulers have sought opinions from clerics, occasionally leaning on them to justify a policy the king has selected in advance. MBS does not subcontract his religion out at all.

He explained that Islamic law is based on two textual sources: the Quran and the Sunna, or the example of the Prophet Muhammad, gathered in many tens of thousands of fragments from the Prophet's life and sayings. Certain rules—not many—come from the unambiguous legislative content of the Quran, he said, and he cannot do anything about them even if he wants to. But those sayings of the Prophet (called Hadith), he explained, do not all have equal value as sources of law, and he said he is bound by only a very small number whose reliability, 1,400 years later, is unimpeachable. Every other source of Islamic law, he said, is open to interpretation—and he is therefore entitled to interpret them as he sees fit.

The effect of this maneuver is to chuck about 95 percent of Islamic law into the sandpit of Saudi history and leave MBS free to do whatever he wants. "He's short-circuiting the tradition," Haykel said. "But he's doing it in an Islamic way. He's saying that there are very few things that are fixed beyond dispute in Islam. That leaves him to determine what is in the interest of the Muslim community. If that means opening movie theaters, allowing tourists, or women on the beaches on the Red Sea, then so be it."

MBS rebuked me when I called this attitude "moderate Islam," though his own government champions the concept on its websites. "That term would make terrorists and extremists happy." It suggests that "we in Saudi Arabia

and other Muslim countries are changing Islam into something new, which is not true," he said. "We are going back to the core, back to pure Islam" as practiced by Muhammad and his four successors. "These teachings of the Prophet and the four caliphs—they were amazing. They were perfect."

Even the Islamic law that he is bound to implement will be implemented sparingly. MBS told me a story, reported in Hadith, about a woman who commits fornication, confesses her crime to the Prophet, and begs to be executed. The Prophet repeatedly tells her to go away—implying, the crown prince said, that the Prophet preferred to give sinners every chance at lenience. (MBS did not relate the end of the tale: The woman returns with indisputable evidence of her sin—a bastard son—and the Prophet acquiesces. She is buried to her chest and stoned to death.)

Instead of hunting for sin and punishing it as a matter of course, MBS has curtailed the investigative function of the religious police, and encourages sinners to keep their transgressions between themselves and God. "We should not try to seek out people and prove charges against them," he said. "You have to do it the way that the Prophet taught us how to do it." The law will be enforced only against those so flagrant that they are practically demanding to take their lumps.

He also stressed that none of these laws applies to non-Muslims in the kingdom. "If you are a foreign person who's living or traveling in Saudi Arabia, you have all the right to do whatever you want, based on your beliefs," he said. "That's what happened in the Prophet's time."

It is hard to exaggerate how drastically this sidelining of Islamic law will change Saudi Arabia. Before MBS, influential clerics issued fatwas exhibiting what might charitably be called a pre-industrial view of the world. They declared that the sun orbited the Earth. They forbade women from riding bikes ("the devil's horses") and from watching TV without veiling, just in case the presenters could see them through the screen. Salih al-Fawzan, the most senior cleric in the kingdom today, once issued a chillingly anti-American fatwa forbidding all-you-can-eat buffets, because paying for a meal without knowing what you'll be eating is akin to gambling.

Some of the clerics may have given in because they were convinced by the crown prince's legal interpretations. Others appear to have succumbed to good old-fashioned intimidation. Formerly conservative clerics will look you in the eye and without hesitation or scruple speak in Stepfordlike coordination with the government's program. The minister of Islamic affairs and guidance, normally an unsmiling type, now cheerily defended the opening of cinemas and mass layoffs of Wahhabi imams. I liked him immediately. His name, Abdullatif Al Asheikh, indicates that he is descended from a long line of stern moralists going back to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself. I told him I had seen the *Zombieland* sequel in his country, and if Woody Harrelson reprised his role in *Zombieland 3*, I would return to Riyadh so we could go to a theater and watch it together. "Why not?" he replied.

Mohammad al-Arefe, a preacher known for his good looks and conservative views, mysteriously began promoting Vision 2030 after a meeting with MBS in 2016. Previously, he had preached that Mada'in Saleh, a spectacular pre-Islamic archaeological site in northwest Saudi Arabia, was forbidden to Muslim tourists. God had struck down the civilization that once lived there, and the place was forever to remain a reminder of his wrath. The conventional view held that Muslims should follow the Prophet's warning to stay away from Mada'in Saleh, but if they absolutely must pass through, they should cast their gaze downward and maintain a fearful demeanor toward the Almighty. Then, in 2019, al-Arefe appeared in what seemed, to me, like some sort of hostage video, filmed by the Saudi tourism authority, lecturing about the site's history and inviting all to enjoy it. If he was displaying a fearful demeanor, it was not toward the Almighty.

In the smaller cities it isn't clear how quickly modernization is catching on. I visited Buraydah, the capital of Qassim, the most conservative part of the country. In two days, every woman I saw wore a black, flowing abaya. I attended the opening of a new shopping mall and showed up early to watch the crowds arrive. The sexes separated themselves without discussion:

women in the front, all in black, near the stage where children recited poems and sang; men, in white *thobes*, in the back of the audience and on the sides. The process was unconscious and organic, but to an outsider remarkable, as if salt and pepper were shaken out onto a plate, and the grains slowly and perfectly segregated themselves. Cultural practices decades or centuries old do not yield suddenly.

Taif, a city an hour outside Mecca, was once the summer residence of the king and his family. The Prophet is thought to have visited there, and many Muslims supplement their pilgrimages to Mecca with side trips to other sites from the Prophet's life. The Wahhabis have, historically, treated these visits as un-Islamic and reprehensible. Whenever pilgrimage sites have fallen into Wahhabi hands, they have methodically and remorselessly destroyed them by leveling monuments, grave markers, and other structures sacred to Muslims in other traditions.

One morning I took a long walk to a mosque where the Prophet is said to have prayed. On arrival I found a building in disrepair, fenced off by rusty wire, with parts of it reduced to rubble. A sign at this site, posted by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, noted in Arabic, Urdu, Indonesian, and English that the historical evidence for the Prophet's visit was uncertain. It suggested, further, that "to feel an adoring reverence or regard toward these places is a kind of heresy and fabrication in religion," an innovation not sanctioned by God that "leads to polytheism."

Later, I met Mohammad al-Issa, formerly the minister of justice under King Abdullah and now, as secretary-general of the Muslim World League, an all-purpose interfaith emissary for his country. In the past, Saudi clerics inveighed against infidels of all types. Now al-Issa spends his time meeting Buddhists, Christians, and Jews, and trying to stay ahead of the occasional surfacing of comments he made in less conciliatory times. I asked him about the site, and whether Saudi Arabia's new tolerance—which he emphasizes so energetically overseas, with non-Muslims—would apply domestically. He assured me that it already did. "If in the past there were some mistakes, now there is correction," al-Issa said. "Everyone has the right to visit the historic places, and there is a lot of care given to them."

"But the signs are still up," I said.

“Maybe they are there to remind people to be respectful,” he suggested. “You see signs like that at sites all over the world: ‘Don’t touch or take the stones.’”

But these signs are not meant to preserve the ruins. They are there to remind you that you are wicked for visiting at all.

The day after my trip to the mosque, I stopped by a Starbucks in Taif. It was early afternoon. When I pulled the door handle, it clunked—the shop was closed for prayer, just as it would have been if the religious police had been enforcing prayer times.

As I waited outside alone, a small police truck pulled up behind me. The police officer salaamed me, and I responded in Arabic. Only after a short interrogation (“What are you doing here? Why are you here?”) did he discover that I was American—not, as I think he suspected, Filipino—and apologize awkwardly and leave. It took me a minute to realize what had happened: The religious police have stood down, and the ordinary police have stood up in their place. The conservatism in society has not gone away. In some places, it has just undergone a costume change.

These lingering manifestations of intolerance illustrate what MBS’s critics say is his ultimate error: Even a crown prince can’t change a culture by fiat.

Belated realization of this error might be behind the grandest and most improbable of his projects. If existing cities resist your orders, just build a new one programmed to do your bidding from the start. In October 2017, MBS decreed a city in a mostly uninhabited area on the Gulf of Aqaba, adjacent to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, the southwestern edge of Jordan, and the Israeli resort town Eilat. The city is called Neom, from a violent collision between the Greek word *neos* (“new”) and the Arabic *mustaqbal* (“future”).

At present, little exists but an encampment for the employees of the Neom project, a small area of tract housing. Regular buses take them to shop in the nearest city, Tabuk, which is itself a city only by the standards of the vacant, rock-strewn desert nearby. (If you recall the early scenes of *Lawrence of Arabia*, when a lonely camel-borne Peter O'Toole sings "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo" to the echoes of a sandstone canyon, then you know the spot.) The ambitions for this settlement are vast. Neom's administrators say they expect it to attract billions of dollars in investment and millions of residents, both Saudi and foreign, within 10 to 20 years. Dubai grew at a similar pace in the 1990s and 2000s. MBS said Neom is "not a copy of anything elsewhere," not a xerox of Dubai. But it has more in common with the great globalized mainstream than with anything in the history of a country that, until recently, was remarkably successful at walling off its traditional culture from the blandishments of modernity.

For a few hours, the Neom team showed me around and made grandiose promises about the future. Neom would lure its investors, I gathered, by creating the ideal regulatory environment, stitched together from best practices elsewhere. The city would profit from central planning. When New York or Delhi want to grow, they choke on their own traffic and decrepit infrastructure. Neom has no inherited infrastructure at all. The centerpiece of the project will be "The Line"—a 106-mile-long, very skinny urban strip connected by a single bullet train that will travel from end to end in 20 minutes. (No train capable of this speed currently exists.) The Line is intended to be walkable—the train will run underground—and a short hike perpendicular to its main axis will take you into pristine desert. Water will be desalinated; energy, renewable.

So far, Neom is less a city than an urbanist cargo cult. The practicalities can come later, or not at all. (The projected cost is in the hundreds of billions of dollars, a huge sum even for Saudi Arabia.) But many good ideas look crazy at first. What struck me was that Neom's vision is really an anti-vision. It is the opposite of the old Saudi Arabia. In the old Saudi Arabia, and even to an extent today, corruption and bureaucracy layered on each other to make an entrepreneur's nightmare. Riyadh has almost no public transportation. No matter where you are, you cannot walk anywhere, except

perhaps to your local mosque. No one in Neom mentioned religion at all. Even Neom's location is suggestive. It is far from where Saudis actually live. Instead it is huddled in a mostly empty corner, as if seeking sustenance and inspiration from Jordan and Israel.

Seen this way, Neom is MBS's declaration of intellectual and cultural bankruptcy on behalf of his country. Few nations have as many carried costs as Saudi Arabia, and Neom zeroes them out and starts afresh with a plan unburdened by the past. To any parts of the kingdom that cling to their old ways, it promises that the future is everything they are not. And the future will wait only so long.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Saudi Arabia was a net exporter of vision, but it was a jihadist vision. The standard narrative, now accepted by the Saudi state itself, is that the kingdom was seduced by conservative Islam, and eventually the jihadists it sent overseas (most famously Osama bin Laden) redirected their efforts toward the Saudi monarchy and its allies. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi citizens.

"A series of things happened that made the Saudis realize they couldn't keep playing the game they had been playing," Philip Zelikow, a State Department official under George W. Bush and the executive director of the 9/11 Commission, told me. The years of violence that followed 9/11 shocked the Saudis into realizing that they had a reckoning coming, though only after jihadists began attacking in the kingdom itself did the government move to crush them. What the Saudis did not have was a plan to redirect the jihadists' energy. "They needed to have some story of what kind of country they were going to be when they grew up," Zelikow said. Jihadism would not be that story. But there was no immediate alternative, either for society or for the individuals attracted to jihadism. Saudi Arabia was left to do what most other countries, including the United States, have done, which is to imprison terrorists until they grow too old to fight.

Last year, Saudi officials informed me that the crown prince had a new plan to deprogram jihadists. One morning they sent a convoy of state-security SUVs to my hotel, and with lights flashing, we left behind the glassy skyscrapers of the capital and continued along one of the straight, hypnotic roads radiating from Riyadh to nowhere. An hour later, we turned off at an area called al-Ha'ir and went through a security checkpoint.

Ha'ir is a state-security prison, run by the Saudi secret police, which means that its prisoners are not car thieves and check forgers but offenders against the state. They include jihadists from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—I met at least a dozen of each—as well as softer Islamists, like Salman al-Awda, the cleric.

We drove past the checkpoint and through the gates, into a windswept compound coated in a film of light-brown dust, like tiramisu. We were met by the director of state-security prisons, Muhammad bin Salman al-Sarrah, and what appeared to be a television crew of at least half a dozen men, each bearing a microphone or a camera. I worried about what would happen next. Newsworthy events inside the walls of terrorist prisons tend not to be good. Lurking in the background were several bearded men in identical gray business suits.

Al-Sarrah, it turned out, was a real jihadism nerd, and over tea we reminisced about various luminaries in the history of Saudi terror. After this small talk, he invited me to join him in an auditorium that could have been a lecture hall on a small college campus. Shutters clicked as the cameramen followed.

In the auditorium, the men in suits took the stage. Their leader, a man named Abdullah al-Qahtani, explained that he and most of the others in the room were prisoners, and that they had a PowerPoint presentation they wished to show me about the enterprise they were running in the prison. The camera crew was made up of prisoners too, and they were documenting my visit for imprisoned members of jihadist sects.

What followed was the most surreal slide deck I have ever seen: a corporate org chart and plans for a set of businesses run from within the prison by

jihadists and other enemies of the state. Al-Qahtani spoke in Arabic, translated by an excitable counterpart nearby.

The org chart showed CEO al-Qahtani at the top, with direct reports from seven offices beneath him, among them financial, business development, and "programs' affairs." Under the last of these was another sub-office, "social responsibility."

Al-Qahtani explained that 89 percent of the prison population had taken part in the program so far. In a way, it was like any other prison-industry program; in the United States, prisoners staff call centers, raise tilapia, or just push brooms in the prison corridor for a dollar an hour. But the Ha'ir group, doing business as a company called, simply, Power, was aggressively corporate and entrepreneurial.

Al-Qahtani and the interpreter took me to a small garden, where prisoners cultivated peppers under plastic sheeting and raised bees and harvested their honey to sell at the prison shop, in little jars with the Power logo. They operated a laundromat and presented me with a price list. The prison will clean your clothes for free, they said, but staff and inmates alike could bring clothes here for special services, such as tailoring, for a fee. I could see shirts, freshly laundered and pressed, with prisoner numbers inked into the collars. Each number started with the year of entry on the Islamic calendar. I saw one that started in 1431, about 12 years ago.

Almost all the men wore thick beards, and many had a *zabiba* (literally "raisin"), the discolored, wrinkly spot one gets from pressing the head to the ground in prayer. Some of their products were artisanal and religious-themed. They led me into a tiny room, a factory for the production of perfumes for sale outside the prison, and to another room where they made prayer beads from olive pits.

"Here, smell this," a former member of al-Qaeda commanded me, sticking under my nose a paper strip blotted with a chemical I could not identify. I think the scent was lavender. Another prisoner, at the Power-run prison canteen, offered me free frozen yogurt. As I walked around the prison, the yogurt began to melt, and my interpreter held it so I could take notes.

Strangest of all, I found, was Power's corporate nerve center—a warren of drab, cubicle-filled offices. The employees wore uniforms: suits for the C-suite executives and blue Power-branded polo shirts for the mid-levels puttering on their computers. They had a conference room with a whiteboard (at the top, "In the name of God, the most gracious, most merciful" was written in Arabic, and partially erased; the rest was the remains of a sales brainstorming session), a reception desk, and portraits of the king and the crown prince overseeing it all.

Nothing is stranger than normalcy where one least expects it. These jihadists—people who recently would have sacrificed their life to take mine—had apparently been converted into office drones. Fifteen years ago, Saudi Arabia tried to deprogram them by sending them to debate clerics loyal to the government, who told the prisoners that they had misinterpreted Islam and needed to repent. But if this scene was to be believed, it turned out that terrorists didn't need a learned debate about the will of God. They needed their spirits broken by corporate drudgery. They needed Dunder Mifflin.

My hyperactive interpreter, who had been gesticulating and yapping throughout the tour, was no ordinary jihadist. He was an American-born Saudi member of al-Qaeda named Yaser Esam Hamdi. Hamdi, now 41, emerged from a pile of rubble in northern Afghanistan in December 2001. His dear friend, pulled from the same rubble, was John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban. Hamdi spent months in Guantánamo Bay before being transferred to the U.S.; he was released after his father, a prominent Saudi petrochemical executive, helped take Hamdi's case to the Supreme Court, and won (*Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*). Hamdi was sent back to Saudi Arabia on the condition that he renounce his U.S. citizenship (he was born in Louisiana and left as a small child), but the Saudis decided he needed more time in prison and locked him up for eight years in a facility in Dammam, and for another seven in Ha'ir. He is due for release this year.

Hamdi guided me like a kid showing his parents around his sleepaway camp. He explained that Power is part of a larger entity at the prison, known as the "Management of Time" (*Idarat al-Waqt*)—a comprehensive but amorphous program meant to beguile the inmates out of bad ideas and

replace them with good ones. It involves corporate training, but also gathering the inmates together for song and music, for poetry readings, for the publishing of newspapers (I snagged a copy of the *Management of Time News*), and for the production of TV shows. I watched a room full of men sing a song they had written, "O My Country!," and show videos in which they extolled the government and the crown prince. Al-Qaeda and ISIS forbid most music and revile the monarchy. Like so many other Saudis, these men seemed to have swapped their religious fanaticism for nationalist fanaticism. One wondered what they really believed.

Al-Sarrah followed close behind us, and I shot him a look when I heard the name of the program. One of the most famous jihadist texts, a playbook for ISIS, is "The Management of Savagery" (*Idarat al-Tawahhush*). It is a deranged manual for destroying the world and replacing it with a new one. That was what this program was doing in reverse: replacing the jihadists' savage appetite for an imagined future with an appetite for the real, the now, and the ordinary.

I told Hamdi that I had corresponded with his friend Lindh, who served 17 years in federal prison in the United States before his release in 2019. Our correspondence had led me to believe that he was just as radical as ever, and that his stay in prison—spent in solitary study of Islamic texts—had confirmed his violent streak and converted him from an al-Qaeda supporter to an ISIS supporter.

"Really?" Hamdi asked, before venturing a guess as to why. "The United States doesn't know how to deal with Muslims. When I was in Afghanistan, I had extreme thinking." Going to a Saudi prison helped. "The difference is that in jail [here] we have a program. You want to explode the thinking we have in our brain. For 17 years he was alone." The Saudis filled Hamdi's time. They managed it. "We didn't have time to read the Islamic books … We didn't have time to do anything but work to improve ourselves." He was a specialist in Power's media department, and could now produce videos of passable quality.

"I didn't know what a montage was," he said. "I didn't know what a design was." We were driving to another part of the prison with al-Sarrah in the front seat and Hamdi and me in the back. "Now I am professional!" he said.

“I am a complete montage expert!” He pointed at al-Sarrah, who smiled but did not speak or even look back. “All thanks to this man! The government opened this for us! Now I am in a car! Talking to you! Normally! Peacefully! No kind of problems!” Upon release, he said, he might work for his father’s company, or even (this was his dream) go into film and television production. I wondered what it might be like to have a co-worker like Hamdi, with, shall we say, an unconventional work history, and a penchant for extremism and Osama bin Laden that he swore up and down had been thoroughly replaced with a love for film and video production and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. I was pretty sure Hamdi would be a better colleague than John Walker Lindh.

At the prison I asked many inmates how they could trade jihadism for these worldly things, which surely amounted to frippery compared with the chance to die in the path of God. They laughed, nervously, as if to ask what I was trying to do—get them to leave the prison and kill again? They were mostly still young, and they yearned for freedom. That they no longer wanted something thrilling and extraordinary was exactly the point. It is possible to have too much vision, or the wrong kind—some of them had gone to Syria, barely survived, and had had enough vision, thank you very much. “We don’t want anything but a normal life,” one told me. “I would be happy just to go outside, to walk on the Boulevard in Riyadh, to go to McDonald’s.”

“I went to Syria because I was offered to take part in a dream, the dream of a caliphate,” said another. Ali al-Faqasi al-Ghamdi, a bookish man who had been with bin Laden at Tora Bora, told me he now recognized such dreams as counterfeit. What, he asked, is the point of a big, exciting dream when it is a false one? A small ambition that can actually be fulfilled is preferable to a big one that cannot. He looked me steadily in the eye, like he was trying to convince me and not himself. “Vision 2030 is real.”

America must now decide whether that vision is worth encouraging. Twenty years ago, if you had told me that in 2022 the future king of Saudi Arabia would be pursuing a relationship with Israel; treating women as full members of society; punishing corruption, even in his own family; stanching the flow of jihadists; diversifying and liberalizing his economy and society; and encouraging the world to see his country and his country to see the world—Wahhabism be damned—I would have told you that your time machine was malfunctioning and you had visited 2052 at the earliest. Now that MBS is in power, all of these things are happening. But the effect is not as pleasing as I had hoped.

In 1804, another modernizing autocrat, Napoleon Bonaparte, arrested Louis Antoine, the duke of Enghien, on suspicion of sedition. The duke was young and foolish, and no great threat to Napoleon. But the future emperor executed him. Around Europe, monarchs were shocked: If this was how Napoleon treated a harmless naif like the duke, what could they expect from him as his power grew, and his domestic opposition dissolved in fear? The execution of Enghien alerted the most perceptive among them that Napoleon could not be managed or appeased. It took a decade of carnage to figure out how to stop him.

Enghien's schemes wouldn't have stopped Napoleon, and Khashoggi's columns wouldn't have stopped MBS. But his murder was a warning about the personality of the man who will be running Saudi Arabia for the next half century, and it is reasonable to worry about that man even when most of what he does is good and long overdue.

For now, MBS's main request to the outside world, and especially the United States, is the usual request of misbehaving autocrats—namely, to stay out of his internal affairs. "We don't have the right to lecture you in America," he said. "The same goes the other way." Saudi affairs are for Saudis. "You don't have the right to interfere in our interior issues."

But he acknowledges that the fates of the two countries remain linked. In Washington, many see MBS's rise as abetted, perhaps even made inevitable, by American support. "There was a moment in time where the international community could have made it clear that the Khashoggi murder was the straw that broke the camel's back, and that we weren't

willing to deal with MBS," Senator Murphy told me. The Trump administration's support, when MBS was at his most vulnerable, saved him. "If MBS ultimately becomes king," Murphy said, "he owes no one bigger than Jared Kushner," Trump's personal envoy to the crown prince. ("You Americans think there is something strange about a ruler who sends his unqualified son-in-law to conduct international relations," one Saudi analyst told me. "For us this is completely normal.")

Some still hope that MBS will not accede to the throne. "Only one of the last five crown princes has eventually become king," Khalid al-Jabri noted to me, optimistically. But everything I see suggests that his ascent is certain, and that the search for alternatives is forlorn. Two of those four also-ran crown princes were sidelined or replaced by MBS himself. The other two died of old age.

The United States needs its partners in isolating Iran, and MBS is a stalwart there. And even domestically, he remains in some ways the right man for the job. He is at least, as Philip Zelikow reminded me, not a ruler in denial. "We wanted Saudi leadership who would face their problems, and embark on an ambitious and incredibly challenging generational struggle to remake Saudi society for the modern world," he told me. Now we have such a leader, and he is presenting a binary choice: support me, or prepare for the jihadist deluge.

MBS is correct when he suggests that the Biden administration's posture toward him is basically recriminatory. *Stop bombing civilians in Yemen. Stop jailing and dismembering dissidents.* The U.S. might, on the margins, be able to persuade MBS to use a softer touch—but only by first persuading him that he will be rewarded for his good behavior. And no persuasion will be possible at all without acknowledging that the game of thrones has concluded and he has won.

Many of the exiles I spoke with said their best hope now is that the crown prince will mellow, and that elder Saudi wise men will keep him from destroying the country with rash decisions, like the fight with Qatar, or the murder of Khashoggi. MBS does have a sense that being capricious and impulsive can be costly. "If we run the country randomly," he told me,

“then the whole economy is going to collapse.” Others had tried that strategy: “That’s the Qaddafi way.”

King Salman has instituted measures ostensibly intended to force his son to govern more inclusively after Salman’s death. He changed the law of succession to prevent the next king from naming his own children, or indeed anyone from his own branch of the family, as his crown prince. I asked MBS if he understood that to be the rule, and he said yes. I asked if he had anyone in mind for the job. “This is one of the forbidden subjects,” he said. “You will be the last to know.”

When he is king, however, the rules will belong to him, and to ask him to abide by them against his wishes will be about as easy as negotiating from your suite at the Ritz-Carlton.

A crown prince with a subtler mind and a gentler soul might have implemented MBS’s reforms without resorting to his brutal methods. But it is pointless to consider policy in a state of childlike fantasy, as if it were possible to conjure some new Saudi monarch by closing your eyes and wishing him into existence. Open your eyes, and MBS will still be there. If he is not, then the man ruling in his place will not be an Arab Dalai Lama. He will be, at best, a member of the unsustainable Saudi old guard, and at worst one of the big beards of jihadism, now richer than Croesus and ready to fight. As MBS told me, to justify the Ritz operation, “It’s sometimes a decision between bad and worse.”

Since reality has handed us MBS, the question for America is how to influence him. This question is practical rather than moral: If your moralism drives him into a partnership with China, what good will it have been? A fundamental principle of Chinese foreign relations is butting out of other countries’ internal affairs and expecting the same from them. Certainly Beijing will not reprimand him for his treatment of dissidents.

In effect, both the Saudis and the Americans are now in the Ritz-Carlton, forced to bargain with a jailer who promises us prosperity if we submit to his demands, and *Mad Max* if we do not. The predicament is familiar, because it is the same barrel over which every secular Arab autocrat has positioned America since the 1950s. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria all traded semitribal societies for modern ones, and they all became squalid dictatorships that justified themselves as bulwarks against chaos.

Twenty years ago, Syria watchers praised Bashar al-Assad for his modernizing tendencies—his openness to Western influence as well as his Western tastes. He liked Phil Collins; how evil could he be? By now most everyone outside Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow recognizes him as Saddam Hussein's only rival in the dubious competition for most evil Arab leader.

MBS has completed about three-quarters of the transition from tribal king with theocratic characteristics to plain old secular-nationalist autocrat. The rest of that transition need not be as ruthless as the beginning, but MBS shows no sign of letting up. The United States can, and should, make the case that Saudi Arabia's security and development will demand different tools going forward. It might even suggest what those tools should be. But it probably cannot make MBS use them.

A more pragmatic approach is to make sure that the reforms he has instituted stick, and that the changes in Saudi culture become irreversible. The opening of the country and the forcible sidelining of a crooked royal class—these are hard changes to undo, and they bind even the absolute monarch who decreed them. Granting women driver's licenses was ultimately a smooth process. Taking them back would disrupt millions of lives and sow protest across the kingdom. American influence can acknowledge and encourage such changes.

Sometimes this is how absolute power relaxes its grip: slowly, without anyone noticing. In England, the transition from absolute monarchy to a fully constitutional one took 200 years, not all of them superintended by the most stable kings. MBS is still young and hoarding power, and everyone who has predicted that he would ease up on dissent has so far been proved optimistic. But 50 years is a long reign. The madness of King Mohammed

could give way to something else: a slow and graceful renunciation of power—or, as with Assad, an ever more violent exercise of it.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "Absolute Power."

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A Good Man, at One Time

The Inmate Who Advocated for His Own Execution

By Elizabeth Bruenig

By the time David Neal Cox's life was put to an end last fall by the state of Mississippi, the man had become a rarity among death-row prisoners—a jailhouse advocate for his own execution. Some in that unusual tradition have had an agenda, such as Timothy McVeigh, who expected his 2001 death to become a symbol of federal brutality; others, including another Mississippian, Bobby Wilcher, who was killed in 2006, waived their appeals in a fit of pique or despair and then died trying to reinstate their pathways to survival. But not Cox. No ardent supporter of capital punishment could have found their passion for the practice better matched, or their reasoning for it better embodied, than in the 50-year-old man's rawboned frame.

The state of Mississippi wanted Cox dead, and Cox did too. In the days leading up to his death, the family of Cox's victims—people who were once related to Cox himself—told reporters that Cox was evil; that if he were ever free, he would kill again; and that his execution would bring closure to their beleaguered clan.

Cox had earned their hatred. Around dusk on a May 2010 evening in the northern-Mississippi town of Sherman, Cox, armed with a .40-caliber handgun, shot his way inside a trailer in search of his estranged wife, Kim. Cox was apoplectic. He had spent nine months in the Pontotoc County Jail, after being arrested on charges of statutory rape, sexual battery, child abuse, and drug-possession offenses related to crystal meth. The victim of his alleged sexual predation was Lindsey Kirk, his 12-year-old stepdaughter, whom he had raised since she was 2. Cox blamed Kim for his incarceration because she told the police that her daughter had been abused. A few weeks out of jail on bond, Cox had come for revenge.

He had set out with enough ammunition to kill not only Kim but her father and stepmother, Benny and Melody Kirk, and her sister, Kristie Salmon, with whom she was staying. Benny and Melody were, mercifully, miles away at the time. Kristie managed to escape the hellish scene, along with Cox and Kim's 7-year-old son. Only Kim, Lindsey, and the couple's other son, who was 8, remained trapped inside.

First, Cox shot Kim twice, once in the arm and once through the abdomen —an injury that, a local surgeon told the jury at Cox's trial, likely generated

agonizing pain as the contents of the intestines spilled into the abdominal cavity during the several hours it took Kim to bleed to death. The greater torture is harder to quantify: In a taped interview reviewed by the jurors, Lindsey recounts that after Cox shot her mother, he forced the young girl to undress and then sexually assaulted her while Kim looked on, helpless. Lindsey struggled to tell the story through tears, indicating where on her body Cox had touched her as her mother lay dying.

Over the course of approximately eight hours, police gathered outside the trailer and attempted to negotiate with Cox. Occasionally, he would take to the telephone to spew poison at the police (if law enforcement tried to breach the premises, he warned, he would be "going for head shots") or at Benny, Kim's father, whom he seemed to delight in tormenting with details of his daughter's imminent death, at one point informing Benny that Kim was "bleeding like a stuck pig." On the phone, Cox told his sister Sharlott's husband that he had a bullet for Lindsey and another for himself, and yet that isn't how the assault came to an end: Eventually, around 3:30 in the morning, a SWAT team stormed the trailer. The officers rescued Lindsey and her half-brother and arrested Cox. Kim was already dead.

Cox pleaded guilty to charges of capital murder, sexual battery, burglary, kidnapping, and firing into a dwelling. If he meant to avoid the death penalty with a swift and complete admission of guilt, he failed. In September 2012, the jury returned a unanimous verdict sentencing Cox to death.

For a time, it seemed as though Cox would, like most prisoners condemned to die, fight his fate. In 2016, his attorneys began filing the sundry motions associated with post-conviction relief. But by the summer of 2018, Cox had begun communicating directly with the Mississippi Supreme Court, sending handwritten letters demanding that his lawyers be fired and all appeals be waived. Cox had come to a new faith, he said, and he wanted to die as soon as possible.

"I seek in earnest to wave all my appeals immediately, I seek to be executed as I do here this day stand on MS Death row a guilty man worthy of death," he wrote. Spiritual awakening notwithstanding, Cox was unrepentant. "If I had my perfect way & will about it," he wrote, "Id ever so gladly dig my

dead sarkastic wife up of in whom I very happily & premeditatedly slaughtered on 5-14-2010 & with eager pleasure kill the fat heathern hore again." When overt hostility failed to elicit the instantaneous response Cox was looking for, he offered a constitutional plea. "I am Anabaptist," he wrote some weeks later, "namely, old order Amish, & it is in conflict with my religeon to have lawyers."

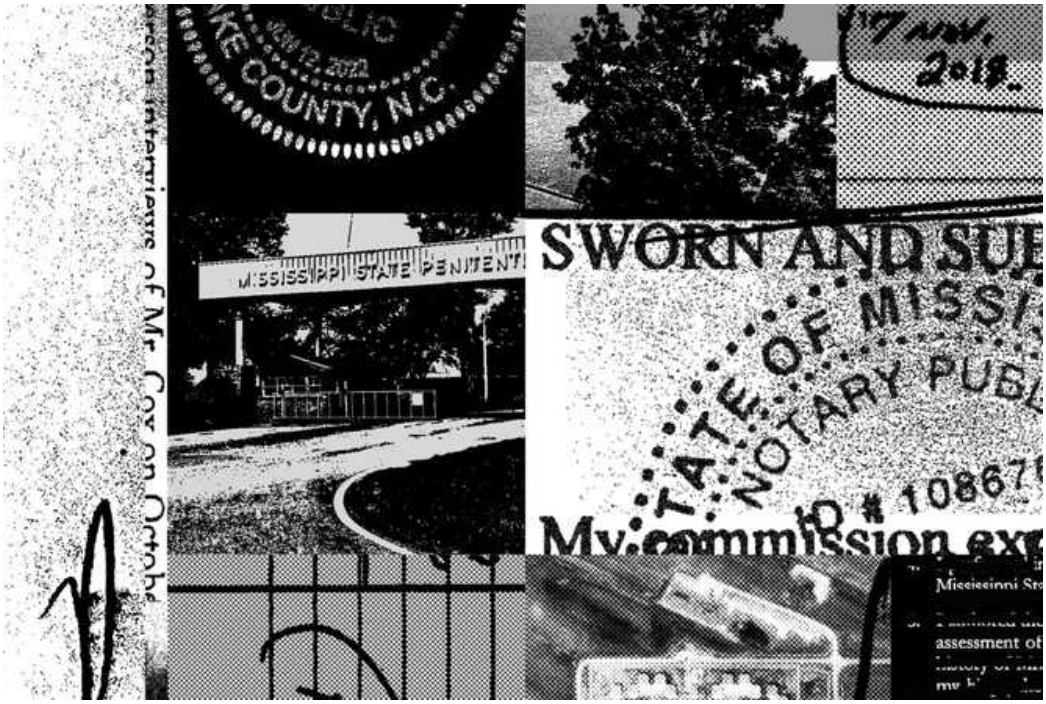
Five days later, Cox's lawyers filed a motion to retract all of Cox's efforts to waive his appeals. Cox had been extremely depressed when he sent the letters, they wrote, but he had since spoken with them and changed his mind about his situation.

This didn't last, however. In November 2018, Cox wrote again to the court, insisting anew on his desire to die. "I am worthy of death & I do not wish to challenge the State of Mississippi any further," he said. "I seek to bring clousure to my victims & family & all I hurt whether it be emotionally, phsyikally or both, by the speedy execution of my guilty body." A couple of days later, Cox explained in a handwritten affidavit that he had withdrawn his earlier pleas to live because he suffered a divided existence, torn between two parts of himself, which he described as "skin #1" and "skin #2." "Skin #1 seeks life & relief," Cox wrote, while "skin #2 seeks death & relief, still."

Cox's second skin won out. And despite the alarming impression that his declaration of a split psyche gave about his mental state, the Mississippi Supreme Court found him competent to waive his appeals. In October 2021, the court obliged Cox and set a date for his execution.

In court opinions pertaining to Cox, Mississippi's jurists appear largely incurious about what, precisely, had motivated the man to campaign for his own death. Maybe that sort of thing lay beyond their purview. The state had already condemned Cox to die, after all, so the termination of his appeals was, in all likelihood, just a matter of quibbling over time.

Still, I was intrigued by Cox's death-row volunteerism. There is an old adage, often attributed to Samuel Johnson, that the sight of the gallows clears the mind. With the total and irrevocable finality of death imminent, priorities fall into their proper place, pride and bluster wither away, and people begin to act rationally.



Yet Cox's proffered motives for seeking out his end didn't seem to me to reflect anything of the sort. In fact, they implied the opposite: that the possibility of hastening his own demise had motivated Cox to concoct lies and cruelties and misdirections, all with the goal of dying, which he felt was a better immediate prospect than the others available to him. His rationale was never coherent; his statements about his decision were contradictory. Yet he had a clear aim in mind. Why else would someone in one breath boast that they would "with eager pleasure" kill their victim again, and in the next express a desire to provide closure to that same victim's family in partial redress for emotional injury?

There was something else that could have—should have—been of interest to a Mississippi jurist with a real and heartfelt concern for justice. Cox had long been suspected of involvement in another disturbing incident, still unresolved. His brother's wife, Felecia Cox, had been missing since July

2007. According to Felecia's daughter, Amber Miskelly, Felecia disappeared while visiting Kim, a beloved friend, and it was Kim who filed the missing-person report. Miskelly told me she had suspected for years that Cox knew more about her mother's whereabouts than he let on, and had even written letters to him in prison begging him for information.

Miskelly told me that she was 18 years old and pregnant with her first child when her mother went missing. Her mom knew she had a grandchild on the way, Miskelly said, which is how "I knew she wouldn't just leave." So Miskelly searched for Felecia, whom she described as kind and loving —"my best friend"—for some 14 years. It was a painful, aching loss, kept fresh by uncertainty. But if Cox knew anything about Felecia's fate, he had never confessed.

Miskelly was distressed by the news that the court had agreed to execute Cox. "I thought I had more time to try to figure out—or at least contact David myself or something," she told a local news station.

If anyone was ever going to learn what had happened to Felecia or the location of her remains, Miskelly thought, it would come down to Cox himself, and the bloody war between his two skins.

And so I turned up in Mississippi on November 17 to see David Cox die.

The execution arrived at a tense moment in the national debate over the death penalty. Roughly three weeks earlier, Oklahoma had executed a 60-year-old prisoner named John Marion Grant using a three-drug cocktail beginning with midazolam, a sedative. Grant's death did not go as planned. While media witnesses looked on, the man heaved, convulsed, and vomited before finally succumbing to the other drugs in the triad—vecuronium bromide, a paralytic, and potassium chloride, which stops the heart.

Grant's torturous death inflamed a years-long battle over whether lethal injection, in any of its many forms, is the humane and scientifically sound method of execution that its supporters claim it is. And while capital-defense attorneys across the country anxiously reviewed their clients' cases in light of Grant's misfortune, Mississippi openly planned to proceed with Cox's execution using the very same drug protocol.

Cox was to be killed at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, in Sunflower County, about a two-hour drive from Memphis. The prison, better known as Parchman Farm, sits near the center of the Mississippi Delta, some 7,000 square miles of broad, flat, rich-soiled floodplain.

Cox grew up in the northeastern corner of the state, the tail end of Appalachia. He was born to a 41-year-old mother of four; a sister, Sharlott, followed a year later. Before the girl was born, Cox's father left the family. From then on, Sharlott stated in a sworn affidavit, their mother worked multiple jobs, as a nursing-home cleaner, a school-cafeteria worker, and an aide to the elderly. Money was tight and occasionally absent altogether. Cox's mother seems to have relied on the kindness of kin with mixed success. When the family's utilities were shut off, Sharlott recalled, their church raised money to cover the bill. When, one day, Cox and Sharlott arrived home on the school bus to find their mother standing newly evicted at the end of their driveway, the trio walked 15 miles to their aunt Myrtis's house, Cox told a social worker during a series of interviews in October 2018. They were permitted to sleep on a mattress in the chicken house adjacent to the hog and hen enclosures, where sun and rain fell intermittently through a hole in the roof. On starry nights, Cox recalled, his mother would drag the mattress underneath the hole and the three would gaze up together at the spangled Mississippi sky.

An itinerant and impoverished childhood gave way to an adolescence rife with substance abuse, neglect, and despair. Cox, who had been placed in special-education classes in elementary school, dropped out in seventh grade. By then, he had already been huffing gasoline on a daily basis for years, a habit that would persist into his adulthood. When he huffed, he told the social worker, he was "no longer a pissed off loner, I was no longer hungry, was no longer ugly," and he "loved the feeling of not being me."

Cox and Sharlott sometimes stayed at their father's house, where Cox alleged that he witnessed his father sexually abusing his sister on at least one occasion. Their mother, Cox recounted, feared informing social services out of concern that the children might be put into foster care due to the family's abject poverty. Cox left home at 19 to work on a farm; by age 25, he had become a commercial truck driver.

I thought of Cox's life on the road during the drive south from Memphis. Maybe he once worked routes like these, where raw cotton fibers blow back from great heaping bales stacked on the beds of semitrucks crisscrossing the Delta. It would have been his last taste of real freedom, his closest brush with clean living. According to a sworn affidavit by Ricky McCain, Cox's first cousin, Cox was happy behind the wheel of his truck. "David loved being on the road," McCain said, "and would want to get back on the truck as soon as he could."

In 1995, while pulling a short-block engine from his pickup, Cox injured his back, which required surgery and, naturally, postoperative opioids. In 2003, a driver rear-ended Cox, further damaging his back. Another surgery, more pills, and disability benefits followed. By 2005, Cox was addicted to meth and cooking his own supply.

Cox had met Kim Kirk several years earlier. The two had married in 2000, and had two sons. Cox told the social worker who interviewed him in prison that he loved being a father, though he and Kim disagreed about how to raise the boys, leading to marital discord.

In April 2009, Kim and Lindsey left the home they shared with Cox and the boys to live for a time with Kim's cousin Brandy. Cox looked after the couple's sons, stewing in suspicion that Kim was cheating on him. In July of that year, Cox told the social worker, Kim called Cox in tears, asking to come home; Cox agreed that she and Lindsey could return. But before they did, Lindsey confided to Kim that Cox had raped her. Kim reported the allegation immediately, and Cox was arrested and incarcerated at the Pontotoc County Jail in August 2009, a turn of events that infuriated him. Cellmates of Cox's would later testify that he repeatedly vowed to kill Kim during his stint inside. In April 2010, Cox made bond. Weeks later, Kim was dead.

The night before Cox's execution, Melody Kirk, Kim's stepmother, told me that he had always been an "outdoor person," and that he likely hated being trapped inside. As the prison came into view, it occurred to me that the grand openness of the roads that once signaled freedom for him must now feel like a mockery of the same. The fields stretching for miles on either side of the highway had long been picked clean. A man would find it hard to escape from Parchman. The horizon would give him up.

Inside Parchman Farm's visitors' center—a white, windowless, barnlike building surrounded by a chain-link fence—I sat with a handful of local media personnel at two-seater tables facing a platform with a lectern, awaiting an address from Burl Cain, the commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections.

Cain took to the podium at 4:47 p.m. to answer the press's questions. A former warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, infamously known as "The Farm," Cain is himself something of an institution. His tenure at Angola was long and exceptional, marked by the introduction of what Cain calls "moral rehabilitation"—the establishment of strong religious organizations to take the place of the unifying, anchoring, guiding presence otherwise supplied by gangs. Cain presided over occasional scandals and controversies at Angola too, including some of the sort one would associate with a large prison built on a former plantation, though he has denied any wrongdoing. According to Cain (but not his critics), his reign greatly diminished violence at the Farm. Now, at Parchman, he hopes to bring about a similar transformation.

He stood before us in a blue suit and blue-tinted aviators under a swoop of white hair. A local journalist asked Cain whether Cox had said anything about the possible location of Felecia Cox's body. Cain said he had confessed nothing, but noted that prison officials hadn't pressed him to. Another journalist asked who would claim Cox's body upon his death; Cain had no idea. Someone asked if Cox seemed remorseful.

“He is very, very remorseful,” Cain said. Cain told us that he had shared Cox’s last meal with him, a southern feast of fried catfish, french fries, coleslaw, and banana pudding. The man, Cain said, was “ready to go.”

Later, sitting in the same small auditorium after Cox was dead, Cain would tell me that he had asked Cox about Felecia—at length, many times. And though Cox never said whether he had killed the woman, “he did tell us that he dug the grave … but he wouldn’t tell us where.” Cox seemed to have believed that if he explained the details of Felecia’s death and burial, he’d have to live through another trial, delaying his death. With his execution in sight, he was unwilling to risk that.

I asked Cain why he thought Cox wanted so badly to die.

“He said to me the other day, ‘I’m so tired of doing this. I need rest. I just need to rest,’” Cain said. He told me that Cox had become fervently religious in prison, a devout Anabaptist, as Cox had told the court, and that whatever hope he had for the future seemed to be invested in the next life. “David would say, ‘I used to be a good man, but now I’m a real bad man’ … He didn’t like being a bad man. It was like—almost like he was demon-possessed.”

Some evil is hard to explain in any other way. A few hours earlier, as we waited to be taken away to the execution chamber, I’d wondered whether Amber Miskelly would ever know what had happened to her mother. What reason would Cox have to tell anyone anything about a crime he had more or less gotten away with? Sometimes prisoners surrender bits of information about prior crimes during lengthy sentences in exchange for better conditions or other rewards; a canny convict might have gambled with the details of a past killing to delay his own death. But Cox showed no compunction about dying, rather the opposite. It was hard to stake much hope on the man’s conscience.

At 5:30 p.m., the media witnesses were led one by one into a staging area at the rear of the visitors' center, where we were parted from our phones, computers, and recorders, then given steno pads and pens. We waited on maroon-vinyl-cushioned chairs in a tiled room like a church basement until a white prison van arrived to transport us to the execution chamber.

Night was falling. The van rolled along a few narrow back roads before arriving at Unit 17, where, under blazing-white floodlights, the death house is located. We were searched and patted down, then taken to the chamber itself.

We filed into a small, stuffy room fit with rows of folding chairs facing a window covered on the opposite side with a curtain. We were told not to speak. A row ahead, I saw two of Cox's long-suffering attorneys, Humphreys McGee and Treasure Tyson, both slump-shouldered and defeated. And then the curtain lifted away, revealing David Neal Cox, already strapped to a gurney. A prison official asked an officer by the door of the witness room to hit the lights, and a murky dimness fell around us.

Cox looked peaceful, or resigned, or maybe just worn-out. As tall and lanky and awkwardly proportioned as ever, dressed in a red prison jumpsuit, a needle already in his arm. His hair was long, with a beard to match—maybe in accordance with his Old Order Amish inclinations—wiry and gray, speckled with white. The prison's superintendent lowered a microphone so Cox could deliver his last words.

"I want my children to know that I love them very much," he said, "and that I was a good man, at one time. And don't ever read anything but the King James Bible. And I wanna thank the commissioner for being so kind to me. And that's all I got to say."

Later, press reports would note that Cox's final words contained not a hint of remorse. But perhaps he had already expressed it. Cain told me that Cox's 18-year-old son, whom he had last seen fleeing from the trailer as a boy, had come to see him that day, something Cox had been anxiously hoping for. Cain told me that Cox had said to his son, "I wish I hadn't done what I did. I wish I hadn't done it. I wish I hadn't taken your mama away from you."

Not that what he had to say mattered; it wasn't as though any expression of regret could have redeemed him, not then. Nor had Cox ever been good at finding the right words. Humphreys McGee told me that Cox had hated himself, that he had insulted his own intelligence frequently, his inability to express himself, to say what he meant to.

They don't tell you when they start the poison drip; it just begins. You can see the changes, though, in the person. Sometime after six, Cox took a few labored breaths, and his lips worked fruitlessly for a moment or two. His skin began to appear livid to me then, shades of violet settling near his ears. And then a long stillness. A woman with a stethoscope stepped forward and declared Cox's time of death to be 6:12 p.m. The curtain dropped, the lights came on, and they herded us back to the van.

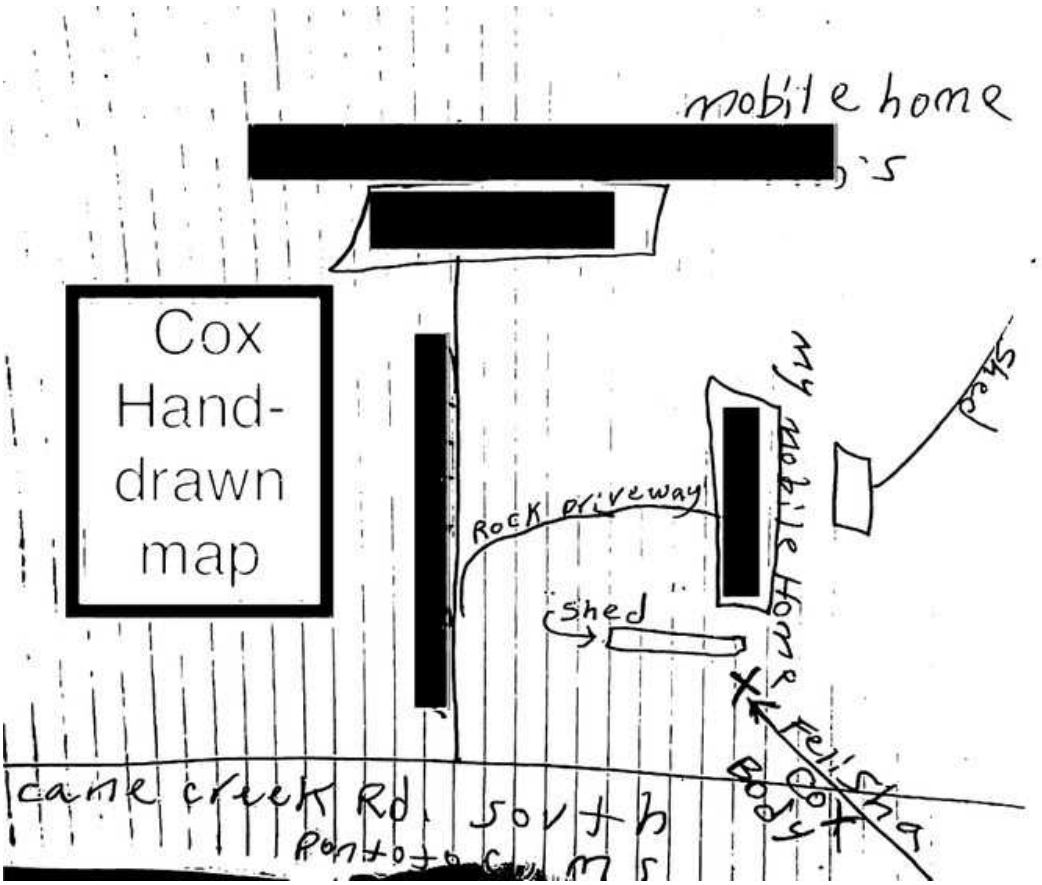
I read the statement Cox's attorneys issued after his death the next day, as I traveled home. Cox had asked his lawyers to say that the "inhumane prison conditions at Parchman" had factored into his decision to give up his appeals. Vermin ran rampant inside the prison walls, Cox told McGee: rats, mice, spiders, cockroaches, snakes, opossums. There was no air-conditioning during the long southern summers. The humidity control was so poor, Cox said, that when it rained outside, "it rained inside," with water falling from the ceiling. (Cain says that most buildings in the prison are now air-conditioned and have undergone cleaning and repairs.)

I thought of Cox peering up at the stars through the hole in that chicken coop he'd lived in with his mother and sister, with the fowl and pigs squawking and shuffling nearby. Everything had ended more or less the way it had begun for him: misery to misery, isolation to isolation, dust to dust.

I went home. The holidays arrived. Cox haunted my thoughts. McGee had told me that Cox had said he wanted to die so he could experience something in the next life that he couldn't in this one. He recalled how Cox

had reminded him to treasure his family and friends, because he himself had lost all of those relationships—or destroyed them. “And I didn’t contradict him,” McGee said. “I wanted to tell him, ‘You do have friends.’ But I just let him talk.”

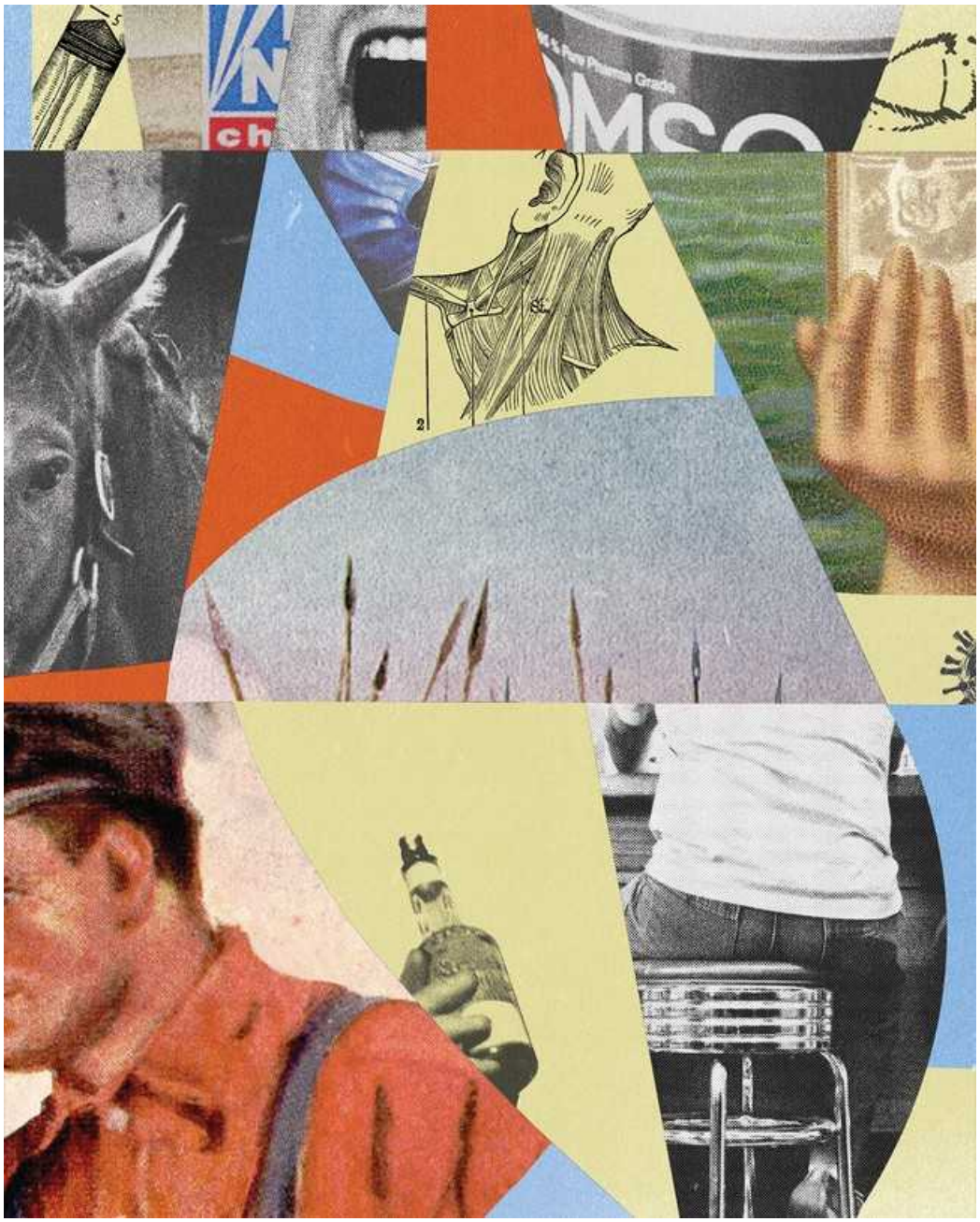
In the end, the monster of North Mississippi was a wizened, miserable old man, alone in the world and hounded by guilt and shame and ceaseless pain. Cox had never wanted to be himself—hardly anyone had ever seemed to want him for any reason at all—and the American criminal-justice system had only confirmed what he had perhaps always known: that he was worthless, his life was worthless, there was nothing in him of any value to anyone, and the only good he could do, even for his own children, was to die. Much of his personal hell was of his own making, and he had no fixed presumption as to whether the next life would hold more or less of the same.



Still, Cox's better skin spared time for one last act. On October 26, after the court had set a date for his execution, he drew a map of the area near his mobile home where he had buried the body of Felecia Cox. He attached a waiver permitting his attorneys to share the information after his death, and mailed the documents to their office, trusting that they would disclose what he had asked. And then, a day before his execution, he dictated a letter for his attorneys to transcribe and deliver to Amber Miskelly. He apologized "for taking your mom away." Roughly a month after Cox was killed, on December 12, Felecia's remains were recovered from the site Cox had indicated.

Felecia hadn't done anything wrong, Cox said in his final dictation. He said that her death was senseless. He said that he shouldn't have harmed her. He said that he prayed for forgiveness.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "A Good Man, at One Time."



My Father, the Fool

How I Found Sympathy for COVID Skeptics

By Richard Russo

The call is one we've been expecting, so when it comes we're jolted but not surprised. It's from my wife's sister, who lives in Arizona. She and her husband are both proudly unvaccinated—predictably enough, since their chief sources of information are Fox News and social media. They've believed from the beginning that the coronavirus has been overblown by mainstream media, and that doctors are in on it because they somehow get paid more when they record the death of somebody who died in, say, a car accident as having been caused by COVID-19, though how exactly that would work, my relatives don't explain. For them, the vaccines are not about public health so much as personal freedom. My body, my choice, and they've made theirs.

And now, the reckoning. For a year and a half they've been lucky, but their luck has finally run out. Both have been infected by the virus. On the phone my sister-in-law can't stop coughing, though she says her own case is relatively mild. Her husband, however, is being put on a ventilator; his chances of survival, according to his doctors, are roughly 50–50. She's distraught, and the question she wants my wife to help her with isn't "How could we have been so stupid?" but rather "Why is this happening?," and she asks this in all sincerity. The obvious answer is one she can't or won't accept—in part, I suspect, because it naturally leads to another question that, even in this excruciating moment, she refuses to entertain: "What else have we been wrong about?"

I can't listen. As my wife tries her best to console her sister, I have to leave the room. The events of the past two years—political, cultural, epidemiological—have eroded my ability to sympathize with people who should damn well know better. I ought to be able to summon a more sympathetic response than "What on earth did you expect?" but often I just can't. I am fed up and, I admit, no longer my best self. Somehow it has come to this. We are now a nation that has to be specifically warned not to drink bleach. Out of necessity, a feed-store owner in Nevada is refusing to sell ivermectin to anyone who can't prove they own a horse. Though three different vaccines against the coronavirus have been proved safe and effective for use here in the United States, and though those vaccines are free, people like my wife's sister and her husband will use up precious oxygen berating their doctors for refusing to treat them as a veterinarian

would treat a barnyard animal suffering from a completely unrelated malady. Such lunacy makes common decency difficult to summon and act upon.

When my wife finally hangs up in the next room, I hear her let out a cry of pure exasperation, and for some reason when she does, a memory of my father lurches unbidden from the back of my mind to the front.

When I enter the tavern, he's seated at the bar, surrounded by his cronies, one of whom notices my entrance and alerts him. *Jimmy. Your kid.* This is how it's been since I actually was a kid. After my parents separated, I didn't see much of him, but every now and then there he'd be, big as life, talking with some guys in front of the pool hall or drinking coffee at the counter of the Palace Diner. Seeing me approach, somebody would nudge him and stage-whisper, *Jimmy. Isn't that your son?* But that was then. At the time of this particular memory, I'm probably 30, a newly minted college professor with a recent Ph.D., and because my life is elsewhere now, I haven't seen him for some time. He has an apartment, of course, a place where he goes to crash after last call, where he showers in the morning and again after work before heading to whatever blue-collar dive bar he and his buddies are gracing these days. So this is where I've sought him out. On a barstool he is the personification of elegance, and I expect him to execute his signature move: The stool itself will swivel, but so too will his head, a beat quicker, allowing him to locate me before the stool and the rest of his body complete their arc. This time, though, something is off. Both stool and man rotate as if welded together.

When he hands me a bottle of the beer he remembers me drinking years earlier, while we worked road construction together, I imitate his hunched, rigid shoulders and say, "So, what's all this?"

"Nothing," he assures me. "A stiff neck is all."

"Since when?" I ask.

He shrugs. "A while."

I clock the expression on one of his friend's faces. *Fucking Jimmy*, it says. *What're you gonna do?* So, longer than a while, then.

"It's no big deal," he tells me. "I know a guy."

Turns out the guy he knows is a horse trainer in nearby Saratoga Springs who has access to dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO), an industrial solvent that is easily absorbed into the skin and used, among other things, to reduce inflammation in racehorses. Doctors prescribe medical-grade DMSO to treat bladder inflammation and irritation in humans, as well as joint pain and shingles. But these days, DMSO can also be purchased in various strengths in health-food stores. When my father scores his topical-cream version the day after admitting to me that he has a stiff neck, he will not be supervised by a doctor or even, for that matter, the horse trainer. He's probably been warned not to get it in his eyes if he can help it, because, yeah, it's an industrial solvent. But hey, guess what? The stuff actually works! Almost immediately he can move his neck—not a lot, but still. Okay, there are some side effects. It stinks to high heaven. As advertised, it absorbs right into the skin, and from there it keeps right on going. My father can taste it, metallic, on the back of his tongue, and because the taste is even worse than the smell, his appetite is pretty well shot. But so what? He isn't going to be using it forever, just until the stiff neck goes away, so he considers the trade-off a pretty good one. By the end of the week, he's his old self, on barstools and off. He considers himself fortunate to know a guy with access to a miracle cure, whereas other people with a stiff neck just have to suffer through it.

You know how this story ends, right? Months later, after a long-deferred trip to the VA hospital, my father will learn that the cause of his stiff neck, which kept returning despite repeated applications of DMSO, is lung cancer. It's a shame he didn't come in sooner, he will be told. Too bad he's wasted precious months treating his lung cancer with horse liniment, which alleviates his discomfort just enough for him to continue working, which even at 60 he still needs to do.

Yes, too bad.

One of the problems with screaming "How could you be so stupid?" at people who behave stupidly is that we too often think of the question as rhetorical when it isn't. Though vaccine hesitancy is often seen as purely political, that's not necessarily the case. It also correlates to lack of health care, which means that when public-health officials urge the unvaccinated to consult their family doctors (on the assumption that they might be more persuasive than government agencies), they're assuming facts not in evidence. If you can't afford health insurance, you probably can't afford a doctor either, and if this is how you've been living for the past decade, chances are good that surviving without sound medical advice has become part of your behavioral DNA. Your strategy will be much like my father's: keep working, save what you can (not much) for the rainy day you know is coming, and hope for the best. Maybe you'll get lucky and know a guy.

So, yes, my father was foolish not to go to a doctor sooner, but it's not terribly surprising that he didn't. After he returned from the Second World War, his primary access to health care was the VA hospital, an hour away, in Albany. Road construction in upstate New York was seasonal. Summers, you worked 10-hour days and six-day weeks, so when exactly would you go to the doctor? How would you even know when to schedule an appointment? Winters, when you went on unemployment, you had more time but far less money. You might consult a doctor if you fell seriously ill, but you were unlikely to have a regular physician or get regular checkups. Even if you were injured and in pain, you'd be as likely to turn to somebody on the street to sell you painkillers. (Here again, you'd know a guy.) While unwise, such behavior isn't stupidity so much as lack of resources, and recognizing this should, at the very least, slow our march to judgment.

Okay, you say, but surely there are some things that anybody should know better than to do. Should people really have to be told not to drink bleach? Shouldn't you know better than to refuse a free vaccine whose efficacy and safety have been vouched for by infectious-disease experts, and turn instead to a dewormer vouched for by veterinarians? And when you have a stiff neck, shouldn't you know better than to consult a horse trainer? Maybe, but the irony is that many people who behave foolishly consider themselves to be "in the know," to be in possession of inside knowledge; access to it, for

them, is a point of pride. The lesson that life seemed determined to teach my father on a daily basis was that he didn't know anyone worth knowing, that he had no strings to pull. Because he had only a high-school education and worked with his hands, America seemed determined to make him understand just how unimportant he was in the larger scheme of things. So the possibility that in this particular instance he actually did know somebody worth knowing had to be very rewarding. And to his credit, he didn't want to hoard his good fortune. Like believers in the kinds of conspiracy theories that my wife's sister and her husband routinely devour, my father was eager to spread the word, to make the introduction, to teach others the secret handshake. *You know Spring Street, right? The gray duplex at the top of the hill? Knock three times. Tell them Jimmy sent you.*

Still, even though you want to spread the word, you don't tell everybody about your guy. You don't tell people who drive expensive foreign cars and have summer homes. They have their own guys, legions of them. No, you only tell people like yourself, people you know on sight by how they dress and carry themselves, by where and what they drink, by the calluses on their hands when you shake. The men of your tribe. Which returns me to the day my father admitted to having that stiff neck. There I was, taking him in as he rotated on his barstool and marveling, as I often did after not seeing him for a while, at how little he and his world changed over time. His buddies all rolling their eyes when he told me not to worry, that he knew a guy. *Fucking Jimmy. What're you gonna do?* But he was taking me in as well, which means he knew—he had to know—from my tweed jacket and button-down Oxford shirt and loafers and, yes, from my hands, recently grown soft, that I now belonged to a different tribe altogether.

And yet, how temperamentally alike we were—undaunted by hard work; quick to anger; slow to forgive insults, real or imagined; stubborn beyond belief. We also both delighted in stories, especially lively tales of dim-witted behavior. We both had firsthand, hard-won appreciation of foolishness, indeed idiocy of every stripe. The protagonists of the stories we loved most tended to be guys (some women, but mostly guys) who, despite the best of intentions, manage to do the exact wrong thing at precisely the wrong time, in the kind of setting that guarantees an abundance of witnesses. They aren't stupid, but you wouldn't know it to watch them in

action, the way they ignore pertinent evidence, miscalculate the odds of success, head due south, and then double down when things start—predictably, though they never predict it—to go terribly wrong. What endears these guys to us, I've always believed, is that we recognize ourselves in their folly. As a novelist, I have just this one requirement: I have to be able to imagine myself doing what my characters do, no matter how foolish, because if I would never do that, then they probably wouldn't either.

By way of illustration, here's a fun fact. Two decades after my father scored his horse liniment, DMSO again appeared on my radar. One Sunday morning in the men's locker room after a racquetball match, I noticed that my opponent, fresh from the shower, was rubbing a clear liquid onto the shoulder he'd injured a month earlier. The stuff stank to high heaven. "What is that?" I asked, and when he handed me the plastic tube, there it was in big red letters: DMSO. It's great for any kind of muscle inflammation, my friend assured me. His only reservation was that you could taste it on the back of your tongue.

Later that same year, when I tore my rotator cuff, I visited the store he told me about, the only one around, he said, that sold this stuff. In fact, it stocked not just the clear-liquid DMSO but also a cream that claimed to be "rose scented." "Lord," my wife said when I emerged from the shower, "what is that god-awful smell?" My shoulder immediately felt better, though, and that evening, to celebrate, I cooked one of our favorite meals. Unfortunately, the metallic taste on the back of my tongue kind of ruined it.

If you Google DMSO, among the things you'll see is a warning that the product should not be used to treat cancer. Apparently, given its popularity, a warning is necessary.

Though he knew I wanted to be a writer, my father died before I achieved much success, and I often wonder what he would've made of what I do for a living. I suspect he would've viewed any connection between his telling stories in bars to my writing and publishing them as tangential at best. He told stories because they dovetailed so perfectly with drinking beer and watching a ball game on the wall-mounted TV above the bar. To him, storytelling was a synonym for slinging some bull, and I often remind

myself of this when I read over something I've written and find it pretentious. I'm pretty sure it wouldn't have occurred to my father that what he did for shits and giggles might have a moral dimension. Had he lived, I doubt I ever would have shared with him my conviction that the empathy you need to create characters who live lives different from your own can make you a better person, that it can center and give meaning to your life, the way religion or public service does.

Do I still believe that? I'd like to. But I'd also like to understand how somebody like me, with an admitted soft spot for fools, who actually put the word *fool* in the title of two of his novels, has suddenly and unexpectedly become so utterly fed up with them. By what mechanism does empathy, which has rewarded me so richly as both an artist and a man, morph into knee-jerk hard-heartedness? How exactly did I become a man who wants to scream "What did you expect?" at someone I care for and whose husband is on a ventilator, his life slipping away? That I'm clearly far from alone in my exasperation is cold comfort, as is the distinct possibility that the past few years have taught many of us that there are limits to everything, including, perhaps, basic kindness.

Maybe the time has come to look more carefully at exactly what we're all so fed up with. What if it isn't individual foolishness that we've grown weary of, but rather group folly? Invoking tribalism is a reflex these days, but maybe we miss the tragicomic absurdity of those loyalties. At the end of one of my books, *Straight Man*, a bunch of academics are crowded in a small room (they've been cheering up a colleague who's suffered a cardiac event), and when the time comes to exit, they need to cooperate because the door opens inward. It's no surprise that they're unable to—the whole novel has been about their insular squabbling. Against all reason, they press forward en masse. And that's where the book leaves them, trapped in that claustrophobic space. Sure, they'll eventually figure it out and escape, but what they'll never escape, we understand, is themselves and the lives they've chosen.

The book, though readers have found it funny, reflects all too clearly my state of mind when I wrote it. I was, well, fed up—with academic life in general, but most of all with my colleagues, despite the fact that many were

friends. The lesson is that rendering judgment on groups of people and their shared behaviors is far easier than disapproving of idiosyncratic individuals. Writing off a whole class of people is easier than writing off your brother or father or friend. Which means that maybe I'm not really fed up with my wife's sister and her husband. What I've had it with is the behavior of the tribe they belong to.

And the problem is that tribes are often more than just large gatherings of individuals. They can be greater (or lesser, depending on your definition) than the sum of their parts. For as long as they cohere, they become—some would argue—a whole new organism, like the spontaneous, murderous mob at the end of Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. In appearance, mobs can resemble large flocks of birds that bank left or right at the same instant, as if responding to some unheard command. Clearly, it's what the flock is up to that counts, not the identity of the individual birds. The fact that not everyone who marched on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, meant to take part in an insurrection doesn't really matter. They became part of something larger than themselves and subservient to its will. Social media was partly to blame, obviously, its algorithms designed to strengthen the bonds of affinity groups, even if the affinity is criminality or lawlessness. Those algorithms render us pliable, content to view one another as a "basket of deplorables."

Only after the mob disbands and disperses do we discover in that basket someone we care about. Talk to these people after they've become themselves again, and you discover that many were there because they "know a guy" who gave them information that not everybody had. This guy they know probably isn't real in the same sense that the horse trainer who gave my father the DMSO was real. They've never actually met. But by now, the deal is familiar to anyone who's online. The guy is selling his product not just to you but to everyone like you. And he knows who these people are because you've been so clear about your allegiances. From your "likes," he can deduce your fears, your grievances, your dreams, your social class, your work and life experience. Most of all, he wants you to understand how important you are. Indeed, what needs doing probably can't be done without you. He tells you where to go and what to do when you get

there. He lets you in on the secret handshake. *Knock three times. Tell them Jimmy sent you.*

So is there hope for us, and for America, or are we witnessing the end of our experiment in democracy? On bad days, I'm inclined to believe the latter, because we seem to have been assigned the impossible task of putting the toothpaste back in the tube even as others continue to squeeze it. But maybe that isn't the task at all. Maybe instead of fretting over our collective future, we need to recall our individual pasts. Maybe that's why my father paid me a visit when my wife was talking with her sister. Maybe what's important isn't the words her sister was saying on the phone, but rather that she called in the first place. Think about it: She knows all too well the tribe my wife and I belong to—educated, liberal, coastal, financially secure. In a word, elite. She and her now dying husband loathe everything we stand for. We are everything they rail against on social media. Yet, pushed to the brink of despair, it's her big sister, someone she looked up to when they were young, someone who's been a comfort to her in other rough times, that she wants to talk to, someone she imagines might be able to comfort her now. Even though my wife and I don't believe that the 2020 election was stolen, or that those who stormed the Capitol were patriots, and even though my sister-in-law keeps hearing that some members of our tribe belong to a pedophile ring that feeds on innocent children and that others of us are hell-bent on curtailing her personal freedoms, she is willing to give my wife a pass.

In this willingness, she's not unlike my father. He too was bullheaded, his opinions unshakable. One of his best friends, Calvin, was a Black man, but he remained prejudiced against Black people. All he would say of Calvin, who became Wussy in my novel *The Risk Pool*, was that he was "one of the good ones." Their friendship, so unlikely on the face of it, was as durable as any I've ever known. Maybe my father's bigotry struck Calvin as mostly benign. *Fucking Jimmy. What're you gonna do?* Perhaps most important, they were generous of spirit, not just tolerating each other's foolishness but reveling in it, as a reliable source of shits and giggles.

One warm evening, years after my father's death from lung cancer, Calvin threw open a window of his second-floor apartment and sat down on the

ledge to cool off. The way I heard it, he was drinking beer and forgot where he was perched. The story that I tell myself is a bit kinder—that Calvin must have leaned back to laugh, maybe even at some memory of my father, and simply lost his balance. I can easily imagine doing something like that myself.

Fools. Maybe in the end that's the only tribe we all belong to.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "Stiff Neck." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.**Lead-image sources: Mechaleha / Getty; Fox News / AP; Izusek / Getty; Stockimo / Alamy; Smith Collection / Gado / Getty; Lynn Pelham / Getty; Print Collector / Getty; Edoardo Bortoli / Getty; Getty; Corbis / Getty; Sarote Pruksachat / Getty;* Popular Science */ Getty; H. Armstrong Roberts / Getty; Andrew Walsh / Getty*

Fiction

- **Cromer**
  A short story -- Paul Yoon

Cromer

Fiction: ‘Cromer’

By Paul Yoon

In New Malden, they owned a corner shop together. It was the place where you could get the gossip magazines and newspapers from Seoul. Then, when everyone got smartphones, it became the place to get your smartphone cases: cute cats, cows, hippos. Gel pens, too. The students picked out a few colors while they got their fizzy drinks or, when it grew warmer, waited their turn at the shaved-ice machine that Harry had convinced his wife they should buy. At first, Harry had wanted a pinball machine and Grace had been forced to tell him that was ridiculous. What kid played pinball these days?

Harry never minded the kids—kids helped him forget that they had woken up one day to find themselves in their mid-40s—but Grace went to the back whenever they came in. She said it was because their voices sounded to her like paper shredders, and they always picked up a box of something and left it somewhere else. But Harry knew it was because years ago, one of them had come up to the counter while Grace was arranging the pens and asked if they were really North Koreans and what life was like there and whether they had any health defects or bad teeth or were actually siblings or something.

A parent had made a comment about them, maybe at dinner, maybe while passing the shop, and their kid had overheard. This had happened a few times over the years, would happen probably until they died.

Harry and Grace weren't North Koreans, not technically. Their fathers had defected together in the early '70s and then a month later found a home here in the Korean community southwest of London that only grew larger as the decades went on. Grace's father had found work as a delivery-truck driver, Harry's at a home-and-garden shop where, later, Harry and Grace roamed the greenhouse, trying to learn the names of plants and flowers. If there was talk about the two men who had escaped from the north, the focus on them dimmed as the years went on, because more and more did the same and came to New Malden. Their fathers both married South Korean women; they had children, Grace older than Harry by a year.

Harry and Grace had known each other all their life, their marriage an eventuality they never really spoke of until it happened. As children, they stayed over in each other's apartments and their mothers cooked for them

and they went to school together and they fought over what to watch on the television and who could pedal the bicycle and who would sit on the seat. When they were older, they poked each other in the stomach over who stole the other's cigarettes, and they went to the park to smoke and to read bad sex scenes in novels out loud to each other. They snuck away to Wembley to watch the Freddie Mercury tribute concert, and when Annie Lennox opened her mouth to sing, Grace understood what it meant for your breath to be taken away. As the years went on, they practiced their Korean because they were forgetting some words and phrases, and they also wondered more and more about their fathers' childhoods because their fathers never spoke about their life before this one.

One winter, Harry and Grace were out walking when an IRA bomb went off two blocks away. Even from there, the force of it lifted Grace into his arms, like she was a parachute that had caught the wind. He remembered the strange, floating silence of it all. The ballooning of her red coat. Then the snow, which wasn't snow but the dust of bricks that had been blown apart. And Grace suddenly tucked in his arms, the safest place she could ever imagine being, she told him later.

He saw the unfolding map of them. He always had. It kept them going through the decades and the success of the shop. What he didn't see coming was losing three of their parents within two years. Harry's father died of a brain aneurysm and his mother of cancer, Grace's father of a bad heart. Or a broken one, perhaps, after losing his friend, Harry's father.

Then Grace's mother decided she'd had it with New Malden. Grace and Harry were unaware that she had ever felt restless there. She planned to move to Arizona, where she had a cousin, and to take almost nothing with her.

Harry wasn't a superstitious man, or for that matter a spiritual one, but with his parents and Grace's father gone, he believed in grief, inexplicable, dumbstruck grief. That slow, heavy, animal feeling that was like a coat he could never take off. It altered the day's colors, its sounds. Every moment reminded him of his father: A woman walking by cradling a plant in a pot. A voice from the street corner. A news report about North Korea. Grace's mother showing up with a list of things that Harry and Grace could have if

they wanted—an old photo album, clothes, an ashtray, an unopened bottle of whiskey, a bicycle.

He never told Grace this, but he was almost relieved when her mother announced her decision to go to Arizona. Every few months, she sent a postcard of the desert, which Grace taped to the side of the register and which he almost always forgot about until the next one came.

Harry thought maybe he would grow closer to Grace in some new way, now that it was just the two of them—that he would discover some different part of the map he had been carrying in his head. That eventually they would shed that coat and find some hobby to do together or make new friends or see more of the ones they had gone to school with. Maybe they would save up some money and go on holiday—somewhere, even briefly, where no one knew anything about them, where they were anonymous.

But in the absence of their families, they grew more solitary, more separate in the life outside their shop windows and with each other. And if someone were to ask him why, or how, that had happened, he wouldn't know. He would look up from the counter to find the afternoon almost gone and realize that if Grace had vanished, he would not have noticed. It was as if the days, and all the hours in those days, had hardened into a ring around them. He kept waiting for something to duck under the perimeter and reveal itself.

They drove to work, opened the shop, stayed until closing, sold what they sold, received shipments, cleaned the floors, wiped the counter, kept the books, took turns eating lunch in the back room, called the police a few times a month for the drunks or the people who wouldn't leave.

Nothing changed. In their bedroom one night, he turned on his side, exhausted, and not for the first time startled himself with the understanding that the woman beside him was the only person left in the immediate circle that could be called his family. Maybe their decision not to have children had been wrong. Was it too late for that?

Grace laughed.

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t try,” he said, and winked at her.

“Did you just wink at me?” Grace said.

What was she always looking at online? He wondered how often their fathers had thought about the place they had left behind. Whether they had truly been happy here and whether they’d had good marriages and been able to ignore the South Koreans who said things to them and to their wives because of who they were—whether they’d gotten over the inevitable scuffles and the word *Communist* spray-painted on their cars. Whether they’d ever regretted having children. And what had come into their mind the moment they’d died. If anything had come at all.

“Let me die first,” Harry said, more than once, and Grace always replied, “I don’t think so.”

He started giving away the gel pens, trying to remember all the kids’ names, what the gossip was, what they thought was cool, what movies and TV shows to watch.

If he tried too hard, he couldn’t remember his father’s face. It came to him only when he didn’t try.

He had dreams of flowers whose names he kept forgetting. Enormous flowers that Grace carried away across a wide river, almost tripping as she kept saying, “I don’t think so.”

Harry was closing up the shop one fall night when the bell rang and the door swung open. At first he thought it must be one of the kids, because it was a kid. He had a hoodie on, so Harry didn’t see the blood right away. Then the kid turned under the shop’s lights. His nose was banged up. The blood was coming down over his lips, which the kid kept licking like he was a dog.

Harry reached for his arm, but the kid flinched. Harry said, “All right. All right. I’m Harry. This is my shop.” He spoke in Korean, wondering if the kid would understand. He did.

“What’s your name?” Harry said.

“I don’t know,” the kid said.

He was 12, probably. At most 13.

“I can’t,” the kid said. “I can’t remember.”

Grace walked in from the back. She had been dumping out the bucket of water for the floors and was holding the mop. The kid froze and Harry assured him it was okay, she was his wife.

They had planned to see a movie that night and go out to dinner, something they hadn’t done in a long time. He had even made a reservation at the sushi place they had gone to for her birthday one year, the one with the corner booth in the back with the curtains that had made her feel like they were celebrities.

It was dark outside, and the three of them were reflected in the window, standing still.

“We should take care of that,” Harry said.

The kid wiped his nose with the sleeve of his hoodie and winced.

“Let’s get you away from the windows,” Harry said, and reached for him again. This time, the kid let him. Harry guided him down an aisle into the back room, Grace looking at them the whole time, still holding the mop as she locked the front door.

Harry sat the kid down. He pressed a handkerchief against the kid’s nose and told him to lift his head back. He asked if he remembered anything, and the kid nodded and motioned for Harry’s phone.

The kid dialed. Harry could hear the woman on the other end pick up and begin to scream hysterically. The kid nodded a lot, as though the woman was there with them, and repeated that he couldn’t remember. The kid asked Harry where they were and he said, “New Malden, southwest London.” And then gave him the street corner where the shop was. The kid repeated

everything back and then hung up and paused. He looked up at Harry. He said when he dialed and was talking to the woman, he knew that she was his mother, but now he wasn't sure anymore.

"Who else would it be?" Harry said.

The kid rubbed his head and then lifted his head back again. He said he had never felt so confused. He said things were coming back to him, but it was like the things were a step away always, knowing he was trying to reach for them.

Two policemen arrived. Grace had called. Harry thought the kid would try to run but he didn't. He slid down in the chair, holding his nose, and shut his eyes.

Harry went with him to the hospital. The kid gave him the number he had dialed, and Harry left a message for the woman about where they were going. He stayed at the hospital the three hours the kid was there, keeping him talking while a nurse bandaged up his broken nose, answering the policemen's questions, listening to the policemen ask the kid questions.

One policeman asked if the kid had been in a car. He said the nose injury indicated a possible car accident. The head trauma would have caused the partial memory loss. He asked if the kid had been driving.

All the kid kept saying was "Cromer." He thought he lived in Cromer.

"On the sea?" Harry said.

The policeman jotted something down in his notepad.

Cromer was where Harry and Grace had gone on their honeymoon. The owner of the Korean restaurant down the street had a cousin who worked at a seaside hotel, and the cousin had gotten them a discount. They had spent hours on the boardwalk and visited the pubs and shopped. It had been grand.

He wondered if the kid knew the restaurant owner in some way, if that was why he had ended up in New Malden. He said the man's name but the kid shook his head.

Then the kid's mother arrived. She was much younger than Harry had imagined, in her early 30s and wearing the same kind of hoodie as the boy. She came up to Harry and said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," and began to cry. She smelled like a strong shampoo. She showed the police her license and then a photo of the kid in her purse.

"Cromer," the policeman said, handing back her ID.

"Ten quid," the policeman whispered to Harry as they watched the reunion. "Ten quid says it was the father. Took the boy. Got drunk. Crashed somewhere. We'll find the car and then the man."

The kid clearly recognized her, but couldn't quite place her. Still, when she hugged him, he put his arms around her, and they stayed like that for a while, their bodies like a giant clamshell on the bed.

When Harry headed back to the shop, it was almost one in the morning. On the street, a taxi drove by and then two girls in skirts walked down the sidewalk, swaying their hips and twirling glow sticks.

Grace was where he had left her, mopping the floors. He told her she had already done that. She yawned, rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. She asked about the kid. He wanted to say something about the movie and the dinner they had planned, but his throat was raw, his body suddenly as heavy as a potato sack. The radio switched to a commercial, the shop filling with the hurried sound of language like birdsong, and Harry reached over and unwrapped Grace's fingers from the mop.

Harry never found out who the kid was or what exactly had happened to him. He didn't know whether the police had ever found a car, or whether there had indeed been a father. He looked for news online about a neighborhood incident the following day and the whole week but nothing was mentioned. He even asked a policeman, a different one, who stopped in the shop for a coffee. Harry explained. The policeman picked up a few of

the pens on the counter and said that he was sorry, it wasn't his case, but that Harry seemed to have done everything right.

Harry wasn't sure what the policeman meant.

Grace was better at finding things on the internet, but she came up with nothing as well. "Forget about it," she said, and moved on to whatever she was watching on her phone in bed.

Maybe Harry himself had watched too many of those TV shows the kids liked lately. He felt a small knot inside him that he wanted to pick at but couldn't reach. He wondered if the kid's memory had come back. He wondered if the father was sick or into drugs or both. When Harry was a child, a man had approached his father one day and asked him if he was "right in the head." Harry's father was delivering plants to the restaurant down the street the day before it opened, and he had dropped a box. The accident wasn't the reason the man had asked, though; his father hardly spoke and people wondered if he was mute.

What did "right in the head" mean? Harry remembered thinking to himself.

The next day, Harry asked Grace to cover for him and walked down to that restaurant. The owner, John, was sitting at a table preparing takeout kits, placing chopsticks and napkins into plastic bags. If he was surprised to see Harry, he didn't show it. Harry himself was surprised to find that John's hair had grown grayer. How long had they gone without seeing each other? John had lived not far from Harry's father's home-and-garden shop—he had even gone to the Freddie Mercury tribute concert with them—but they hadn't spent much time together since Grace's mother had left for Arizona.

Harry asked about the cousin.

"He's no longer working at the hotel," John said.

He proceeded to tell Harry that his cousin had slipped on a step last winter and shattered his hip. The hotel couldn't keep him on so he had gone farther north, to York. "We send him what we can," John said.

He asked if Harry was looking to get a deal at the hotel again, but Harry didn't continue. Instead, he flipped through the menu and ordered lunch for Grace, pretending not to notice that John was looking at him. He knew John was wondering why they hadn't come by in a while, not even for dinner. He waited for John to say something, like he was angry, upset, or confused, but John only smiled and kept going with his takeout kits.

Harry sat down by the window. Shadows panned across the sunny floor between them like the carousel at the nearby park where they had gone as children. Watching the shadows, Harry suddenly felt as though he had been sitting here for many hours, as though it was much later in the day than he'd assumed it was.

"You look tired, Harry," John said. "You're working too much."

"I'm all right," Harry said.

The smell of hot cooking oil drifted in from the kitchen. Harry leaned forward and took some of the napkins and chopsticks, placing them inside the plastic bags.

"Does this have something to do with the boy last week?" John said.

"He was from Cromer," Harry said.

"They say he was a runaway," John said.

"Who says?" Harry handed John a few of the kits he had finished.

"They say he lost his memory before he got to where he wanted to go," John said. "And now he must be back home with no idea of why he was running away in the first place. Or from whom." John took some more kits from Harry and laughed. "Imagine us in front of Wembley, forgetting why we were there at all and turning around."

"She seemed all right," Harry said. "The mother. I don't think he would do that."

“Man, Annie Lennox,” John said. “Break your fucking heart. Bowie, too, of course. But really no contest. Look at my arm. Chills just thinking about it.”

Harry scratched his own arm. He thought about what John had heard. He remembered the mother, who he admitted to himself was pretty, and the way she kept saying thank you to him.

The food was ready. The staff gave Harry extra rice. John said to give Grace a hello. And then he said that they should both come to the next bingo night, and Harry said that they would and returned to the shop.

He thought it would stay with him the way certain things did. A man asking his father whether he was right in the head; Grace in his arms as building debris fell on them like snow; the greenhouse at night; the spray paint on the cars. But the truth was that as time passed, whatever had been caught inside him got dislodged and fell. Harry stopped thinking about the boy or his mother. Or if the memory surfaced, he no longer lingered on it the way he had done that first week.

No other news of it ever came through the shop, and no one, not even Grace, ever spoke of it again. The shop kept them busy enough that the days sped by. A few months later, they had a mishap with a large order—the delivery truck never arrived—and their life was consumed by the fallout for a week, as they tracked down the delivery, made phone calls, handled customers coming in and complaining. He expected that the stress would boil over, and that he or Grace would start a fight or shout or walk away, which was how they always dealt with stress.

But that never happened. They shared a laugh. They rolled their eyes at each other over a customer who considered it a disaster not to have milk. They said there was nothing more to do tonight and closed early and went to that movie they had missed, which was still at the local theater—a comedy about a small-town girl in America heading into the city.

The holidays came, which was always a boon for them, all the partygoers stopping in on their way to somewhere else. They sold out of things they

never otherwise sold out of, like wrapping paper and scissors and those glow-in-the-dark stickers intended for children. For New Year's Eve, they headed over to the community center, played bingo, and watched the new season of a Korean historical drama until John shouted about what losers they were and began a dance party.

They played Queen, of course. Harry thought Grace looked beautiful, a little drunk, attempting to keep up with John as the two of them sang along and avoided the small puddles of melted snow from their boots. He thought the decades hadn't been that long at all. He could still see them sneaking into the greenhouse one night as children because Grace was convinced something happened to plants when humans slept, and she wanted to watch. How they fell asleep under a tarp before they could notice anything, and how his father found them an hour later, worried sick.

It was the only time his father had ever struck him. "You never run away," his father said, on his knees, and then struck Harry again, quickly, the moon bright in the greenhouse and his father only a silhouette.

Grace was the one who brought up Cromer early the following year. She was behind the counter and scrolling through a travel website on her phone. Her birthday was coming up. Winter also meant the off-season, and they could find a good deal. At the community center, while dancing drunk, they had promised each other that if they remembered the conversation they were then having, they would close up the shop for two days.

They remembered. It was a New Year's resolution, although they heard that no one called them resolutions anymore. Was that true?

"How about Cromer?" she said, and he wondered if she remembered the boy. He had told her about how the boy kept saying that word over and over until his mother showed up. Harry reminded Grace now, and she said, "My God, I haven't thought about that in ages. Whatever happened to him?"

Harry didn't know. Grace made a sound with her lips. She scrolled down and said that the hotel they had stayed at for their honeymoon was still too expensive for them, but that she had found another, smaller one a little farther down the street.

“But still across from the boardwalk,” Grace said, and smiled.

Harry wiped down the drip tray of the shaved-ice machine. He wrote a reminder to himself to do inventory tomorrow.

“That’s what you want?” Harry said.

“That’s what I want,” Grace said.

They drove up at the end of the month. They notified everyone in the neighborhood, and everyone asked when they would finally hire help so that the shop could stay open on days when they were away. Harry and Grace promised to consider it, and then they considered it on the drive up, promising each other to start looking.

“Any one of those kids who come into the shop,” Harry said, and Grace rolled her eyes. They stopped for lunch in Norwich. He mentioned that they needed to order more biscuits, and Grace made him promise that was the last thing he would say about the shop until they returned. They clinked their beers, ordered too much, so by the time they arrived at Cromer, the thought of dinner seemed impossible.

They didn’t want to waste the holiday, however, and figured that a walk through the town would help them work up an appetite. They bundled up in their parkas and gloves and headed inland first, following a winding, narrow road lined with squat, two-story buildings each painted a different color.

Grace was trying to recall a ceramics shop they had stopped in on their honeymoon. They had bought dinner plates there. She thought maybe they could add to the collection. She checked her phone, but couldn’t remember the name. Maybe it was a block away from where they were, but they found only a souvenir shop there, next to one that sold clothes. They surveyed the coats on display in the window, Harry following Grace’s reflection, the pale puff of her breath. She caught him looking. For some reason he was embarrassed, and he looked away.

They didn't locate the shop, but they found the fish-and-chips place they had eaten at almost every day. The diners in the small, half-filled room stared at them as they made their way to a table. They ignored the stares and reminisced about their honeymoon, remembering the church and the small park where they had sat sharing an ice cream. Then they remembered an argument they'd had about whether to head down to Great Yarmouth, Harry telling her what difference did it make, a coastal town was a coastal town.

Grace smiled. Now, years later, she confessed maybe that was true, maybe he had been right. A man at the table behind her kept glancing at them. Harry glanced back and then asked if Grace was bored here. She nodded her head yes.

"I'm sorry," Grace said, reaching across the table. "I didn't mean that."

He said it was all right. He turned to the window, where some large birds were flying out to sea.

"Something on your mind, Harry?"

"It's better than I remember it," Harry said, tearing open the fried fish with his hands and dipping pieces into the sauce.

Grace's father had liked fried fish. He mentioned this: Every time he had fried fish, he thought of Grace's father.

"Did you ever see them fight?" Harry said, taking another bite.

"What?"

"I don't remember our dads ever fighting. They always got along."

"They did."

"They were too polite to each other."

"Don't be absurd, Harry."

The waiter came by, and they ordered another round of beers.

“I’d like to have seen them as children,” Harry said. “In their village. I bet they got into some nasty fights. Children aren’t polite. That’s what I like about them.”

“They were half dead,” Grace said. “And when they made it here years later, they were more than half. They never caught up to being alive. That was their life. Catching up to everyone else. You know better, Harry.”

“What is it about children that you don’t like?”

Grace put down a chip. He could see her inhale and then exhale. And then she reached across and held his hand, squeezing a little.

“I don’t know where you’re going with this, Harry.”

Another couple walked in. Their beers arrived and music began to play quietly on the speaker.

He didn’t know where he was going with this, either. As he squeezed her hand back, he noticed that the man behind Grace had gone. They finished their dinner, listening to the music.

A light snow began to fall on the seaside town. They were going to walk some more, but they headed back to the hotel, passing the larger one they had stayed in, where John’s cousin used to work. They peered through the revolving door at the bright lobby, wondering if anything had changed, but when a bellhop welcomed them, they grew shy and kept going down parallel to the boardwalk, the ocean across from them.

The snow never grew heavier but remained steady enough to dampen their jackets. It wasn’t unpleasant. He could taste it when in the small hotel room Grace leaned up to kiss him, and then the smell of it was everywhere as they undressed. It was like he was drunk on the snow and not the beer. He laughed, louder than he usually did. He was glad to be here. It was good that they had come up here again.

Afterward, as they lay on the bed together, Grace's hair dampening the sheet, she began to dream. He could hear her talking but couldn't make out what she was saying. He watched her mouth move in shapes and then, giving in to an urge, he stuck his finger inside, gently, feeling her lips graze his fingertip. Her mouth moving like that aroused him. He looked down at her soft belly and the maze of veins on her thigh, growing convinced that she wasn't really asleep, and then realizing she really was.

What was she dreaming of? What lives did she live these days, or hope to live, that she didn't tell him about?

Grace rolled to her side, pulling the blanket over herself in her sleep. The room had grown cold. Harry stood to check the electronic thermostat only to find that it wasn't working. He pulled on his pajamas and threw on the hotel robe.

"I'll be right back," he said, knowing she wouldn't answer, and shut the door as quietly as possible behind him.

In the lobby, he mentioned the thermostat, and when the receptionist said that she would get someone up there right away, he hesitated. He didn't want to wake Grace. He said, "We have an extra blanket. It's fine, it's late, how about tomorrow?"

He had no idea what time it was. He was the only one in the lobby. He was about to head back up but found himself stepping outside instead. The snow had stopped. A thin layer covered the street and the sidewalk. He luxuriated in the cold and listened to the ocean waves. It was so quiet that he felt as though the world had vanished, leaving him and Grace behind. How would he feel about that?

He was thinking of this when he spotted the figure on a boardwalk bench. The figure was wearing a hoodie and turned now and then to look at the pier and the ocean.

Harry crossed the street. When the kid looked up, Harry immediately knew he wasn't the kid he was looking for.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought you were someone else.”

“Who did you think I was?” the kid said.

Harry thought about that. “Someone I met,” Harry said.

“You a perv or something?” He eyed Harry’s robe. “I don’t swing like that.”

Harry shook his head, aware that shaking his head was ridiculous. He explained that he was a guest at the hotel but then wondered if he should have said that. A car drove by, the headlights lighting them up briefly. If the kid was frightened, he didn’t show it. When Harry asked what he was doing here, the kid replied, “This is my spot.” He opened the duffel beside him and asked if Harry was interested in the goods: Inside were counterfeit watches and sunglasses, cigarettes, jewelry, and small plastic bags of something Harry didn’t recognize.

Harry looked around. At the end of the pier, a bird landed on the railing as if it were balancing itself on the edge of the world, looking down at the receding water.

“It’s not a very popular time or place,” Harry said.

“I can be here anytime I want,” the kid said. “I can float like a butterfly. I can sting like a bee. Every day is free. You free, old man?”

He wasn’t sure how to answer that. He wasn’t used to people calling him old.

The kid opened one of the small plastic bags, picked up one of the things inside, and shook it. It began to glow. It looked like a cartoon drawing of a star. “It’s for the children,” the kid said. “They love it.” He inserted the star into a plastic gun of some kind and then aimed up above them and fired. Harry followed the glowing star as it shot up into the sky, going higher than he expected, and then floated slowly back down, swaying a little in the wind. Harry took three steps to the right, opened his hand, and caught it.

When he looked back at the railing, the bird had gone. As Harry returned the star to the kid, he asked if he was from around here and whether he had heard about a runaway last year.

“A Korean boy,” Harry said. “Twelve, 13, about the same age as you.”

“Mate,” the kid said. “You’re shivering bad.”

He tightened his robe and blew into his hands. Out on the water, near the dark horizon, a small vessel was speeding across as if sliding on glass. Where was it going? He suddenly didn’t know what lay directly east of them, across the ocean. Or how long it would take a small boat to get to that other coast. He had never been anywhere outside England. Neither had Grace.

“What’s next?” Harry said. “What happens next for me?”

Ignoring him, the kid stared behind Harry at another kid, a girl who had just walked out of the hotel where Harry and Grace were staying. She zipped up her puffer, waved, and crossed the street.

“Hi,” she said to Harry, or the kid, Harry wasn’t entirely sure, her breath ballooning around them as she stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets and hopped in place.

The kid had pulled down his hoodie and was fixing his hair. Then his face softened.

“I’ll look out for your boy,” he said, and before Harry could correct him or figure out their story, the two of them hurried up the boardwalk together, going farther and growing fainter—another star flying up into the distance, the moonlight playing on the water, all their footprints in the snow.

This story appears in the April 2022 print edition.

Dispatches

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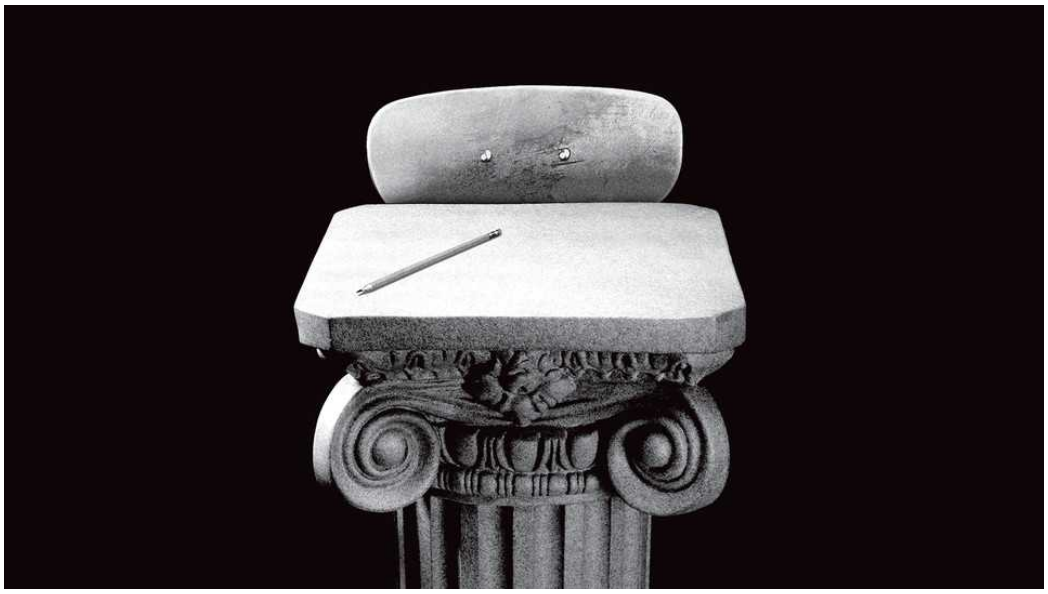
  We've turned schools into battlefields, and our kids are the casualties. -- George Packer
- **An American Community in 10 Fragments**
  How one photographer documented the aftermath of Colorado's Marshall Fire -- Jordan Kisner



The Grown-Ups Are Losing It

Pandemic-Era Politics Are Ruining Public Education

By George Packer

If you're an American schoolchild, you've probably spent much of your recent life alone at home in the mesmerizing glow of a screen, twitching between Google Classroom and innumerable online distractions. Perhaps you've been lucky enough to spend most days in an actual classroom with two-thirds of your face wrapped up, trying to make yourself heard and hear others, taking 30 seconds to shove your lunch down. Your schedule is often unpredictable; some days there's no one to teach you at all. During the pandemic, you've lost at least three months of instruction—or nearly twice that, if your family is poor—as well as the steady company of people your own age. The grown-ups around you fret incessantly about your "mental-health issues" and "social-emotional learning," which only makes your anxiety and depression worse.

You're also the nonvoting, perhaps unwitting, subject of adults' latest pedagogical experiments: either relentless test prep or test abolition; quasi-

religious instruction in identity-based virtue and sin; a flood of state laws to keep various books out of your hands and ideas out of your head. Your parents, looking over your shoulder at your education and not liking what they see, have started showing up at school-board meetings in a mortifying state of rage. If you live in Virginia, your governor has set up a hotline where they can rat out your teachers to the government. If you live in Florida, your governor wants your parents to sue your school if it ever makes you feel "discomfort" about who you are. Adults keep telling you the pandemic will never end, your education is being destroyed by ideologues, digital technology is poisoning your soul, democracy is collapsing, and the planet is dying—but they're counting on you to fix everything when you grow up.

It isn't clear how the American public-school system will survive the COVID years. Teachers, whose relative pay and status have been in decline for decades, are fleeing the field. In 2021, buckling under the stresses of the pandemic, nearly 1 million people quit jobs in public education, a 40 percent increase over the previous year. The shortage is so dire that New Mexico has resorted to encouraging members of the National Guard to volunteer as substitute teachers.

Students are leaving as well. Since 2020, nearly 1.5 million children have been removed from public schools to attend private or charter schools or be homeschooled. Families are deserting the public system out of frustration with unending closures and quarantines, stubborn teachers' unions, inadequate resources, and the low standards exposed by remote learning. It's not just rich families, either, David Steiner, the executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, told me. "COVID has encouraged poor parents to question the quality of public education. We are seeing diminished numbers of children in our public schools, particularly our urban public schools." In New York, more than 80,000 children have disappeared from city schools; in Los Angeles, more than 26,000; in Chicago, more than 24,000.

These kids, and the investments that come with them, may never return—the beginning of a cycle of attrition that could continue long after the pandemic ends and leave public schools even more underfunded and

dilapidated than before. “It’s an open question whether the public-school system will recover,” Steiner said. “That is a real concern for democratic education.”

The high-profile failings of public schools during the pandemic have become a political problem for Democrats, because of their association with unions, prolonged closures, and the pedagogy of social justice, which can become a form of indoctrination. The party that stands for strong government services in the name of egalitarian principles supported the closing of schools far longer than either the science or the welfare of children justified, and it has been woefully slow to acknowledge how much this damaged the life chances of some of America’s most disadvantaged students. The San Francisco school board became the caricature of this folly last year when it spent months debating name changes to Roosevelt Middle School, Abraham Lincoln High School, and other schools with supposedly offensive names, while their classrooms remained closed to the city’s children. Republicans have only just begun to exploit the fallout.

But I’m not interested in joining or refereeing this partisan scrum. Public education is too important to be left to politicians and ideologues. Public schools still serve about 90 percent of children across red and blue America. Since the common-school movement in the early 19th century, the public school has had an exalted purpose in this country. It’s our core civic institution—not just because, ideally, it brings children of all backgrounds together in a classroom, but because it prepares them for the demands and privileges of democratic citizenship. Or at least, it needs to.

What is school for? This is the kind of foundational question that arises when a crisis shakes the public’s faith in an essential institution. “The original thinkers about public education were concerned almost to a point of paranoia about creating self-governing citizens,” Robert Pondiscio, a former fifth-grade teacher in the South Bronx and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, told me. “Horace Mann went to his grave having never once uttered the phrase *college- and career-ready*. We’ve become more accustomed to thinking about the private ends of education. We’ve completely lost the habit of thinking about education as citizen-making.”

School can't just be an economic sorting system. One reason we have a stake in the education of other people's children is that they will grow up to be citizens. Education is a public interest, which explains why parents shouldn't get to veto any book they think might upset their child, whether it's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Beloved*. Public education is meant not to mirror the unexamined values of a particular family or community, but to expose children to ways that other people, some of them long dead, think. In an authoritarian or rigidly meritocratic system, schools select the elites who grow up to make the decisions. A functioning democracy needs citizens who know how to make decisions together.

If the answer were simply to push more and more kids into college, the United States would be entering its democratic prime. In 1960, when Richard Nixon chose not to contest an extremely narrow loss to John F. Kennedy, and Nixon partisans didn't storm the Capitol looking to hang the speaker of the House, 7.7 percent of Americans had college degrees. By the time of last year's insurrection, that proportion had surpassed one-third. Law degrees from Harvard and Yale didn't keep Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley from trying to tear up the Constitution. Americans with college degrees are likelier to vote and otherwise participate in civic life than those without; they're also likelier to spend hours throwing clever online darts. One study found that college-educated Democrats were more likely to hold false views about their political enemies than those without four-year degrees. More education generally makes people more Democratic, but not more democratic.

So the question isn't just how much education, but what kind. Is it quaint, or utopian, to talk about teaching our children to be capable of governing themselves? Possibly, but I doubt it's ever been more necessary. The COVID era, with Donald Trump out of office but still in power and with battles over mask mandates and critical race theory convulsing Twitter and school-board meetings, shows how badly Americans are able to think about our collective problems—let alone read, listen, empathize, debate, reconsider, and persuade in the search for solutions. If these habits have something to do with education—and every kindergarten teacher knows that children can be taught to compromise—then democratic citizenship

can, at least in part, be learned. We owe our beleaguered children, the victims of our inadequacy, a chance to be better than we are.

We can start by giving them a way to survive the curriculum wars without being captured by one side or the other. The orthodoxies currently fighting for our children's souls turn the teaching of U.S. history into a static and morally simple quest for some American essence. They proceed from celebration or indictment toward a final judgment—innocent or guilty—and bury either oppression or progress in a subordinate clause. The most depressing thing about this gloomy pedagogy of ideologies in service to fragile psyches is how much knowledge it takes away from students who already have so little. The history warriors build their metaphysics of national good or evil on a foundation of ignorance. In a 2019 survey, only 40 percent of Americans were able to pass the test that all applicants for U.S. citizenship must take, which asks questions like "Who did the United States fight in World War II?" and "We elect a President for how many years?" The only state in which a majority passed was Vermont.

A central goal for history, social-studies, and civics instruction should be to give students something more solid than spoon-fed maxims—to help them engage with the past on its own terms, not use it as a weapon in the latest front of the culture wars. In "The Propaganda of History," the last chapter of his great study of Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote: "Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?"

The truth requires a grounding in historical facts, but facts are quickly forgotten without meaning and context. The Stanford History Education Group, a research organization, has developed a curriculum called "Reading Like a Historian," which assembles material from various chapters of American history and poses a thematic question for students to answer. For example, to answer the question of what John Brown was trying to do when he raided Harpers Ferry in 1859, they read several accounts, including one by Brown's son, an excerpt from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, and a speech and letter from Brown himself.

The goal isn't just to teach students the origins of the Civil War, but to give them the ability to read closely, think critically, evaluate sources, corroborate accounts, and back up their claims with evidence from original documents. This kind of instruction, which requires teachers to distinguish between exposure and indoctrination, isn't easy; it asks them to be more sophisticated professionals than their shabby conditions and pay (median salary: $62,000, less than accountants and transit police) suggest we are willing to support. "We have a desperate shortage of teachers," David Steiner of Johns Hopkins said, just as we're making teaching more difficult by "politicizing education." It's easy and satisfying for adults to instruct children that America is an exceptional experiment in freedom, or a benighted system of oppressions. It's harder, but infinitely more useful, to free them to think about history for themselves.

To do that, we'll need to help kids restore at least part of their crushed attention spans. If remote learning taught parents anything, it was that staring at a screen for hours is a heavy depressant, especially for teenagers. One day, and I hope soon, the masters of social media will stand before Congress with their hands raised in the manner of the Big Tobacco bosses, and try to deny what they've long known about the damage their products can inflict on human minds, especially young minds. After these hearings lead to belated regulation of web advertising and toxic algorithms, we'll look back on the amount of time we let our children spend online with the same horror that we now feel about earlier generations of adults who hooked their kids on smoking.

Of course, students can't quit cold turkey. "It's not a choice between tech or no tech," Bill Tally, a researcher with the Education Development Center, told me. "The question is what tech infrastructure best enables the things we care about," such as deep engagement with instructional materials, teachers, and other students. But kids need help mastering what now masters them. Releasing them to do "research" in the vast ocean of the internet without maps and compasses, as often happens, guarantees that they will drown before they arrive anywhere. A nonprofit called the News Literacy Project helps teachers guide students in assessing the credibility of news articles and social-media posts. Like learning to read as historians, learning to sift through the tidal flood of memes for useful, reliable information can

emancipate children who have been heedlessly hooked on screens by the adults in their lives.

Finally, let's give children a chance to read books—good books. It's a strange feature of all the recent pedagogical innovations that they've resulted in the gradual disappearance of literature from many classrooms. The phrase *English Language Arts* already sounds at best indifferent to books. The ELA portion of high-stakes testing hacks up literature into what Steiner calls "bleeding chunks of texts"—isolated passages used to assess comprehension. This approach treats reading as just another skill, like long division or woodworking. When students do read whole books, they're rarely part of the state assessments. "What's the incentive for teaching *The Bluest Eye* deeply and seriously?" Steiner asked.

The best way to interest young people in literature is to have them read good literature, and not just books that focus with grim piety on the contemporary social and psychological problems of teenagers. We sell them insultingly short in thinking that they won't read unless the subject is themselves. Mirrors are ultimately isolating; young readers also need windows, even if the view is unfamiliar, even if it's disturbing. The ability to enter a world that's far away in time or place; to grapple with characters whose stories might initially seem to have nothing to do with your life; to gradually sense that their emotions, troubles, revelations are also yours—this connection through language to universal human experience and thought is the reward of great literature, a source of empathy and wisdom.

The culture wars, with their atmosphere of resentment, fear, and petty faultfinding, are hostile to the writing and reading of literature. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recently predicted that the novels of the next 10 to 15 years "will be awful … Art has to be able to go to a place that's messy, a place that's uncomfortable," she said. "Literature is the last thing that we can depend on to tell us the truth about who we are." The connection between reading and democratic citizenship might not be direct, but it's real.

The pandemic should have forced us to reassess what really matters in public school; instead, it's a crisis that we've just about wasted. The classroom has become a half-abandoned battlefield, where grown-ups who

claim to be protecting students from the virus, from books, from ideologies and counter-ideologies end up using children to protect themselves and their own entrenched camps. American democracy can't afford another generation of adults who don't know how to talk and listen and think. We owe our COVID-scarred children the means to free themselves from the failures of the past and the present.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "School Shouldn't Be a Battlefield." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Left: The music for “California Dreamin’.” Right: A Japanese text about the fountain of youth.

An American Community in 10 Fragments

Benjamin Rasmussen: Photos From Colorado's Marshall Fire

By Jordan Kisner

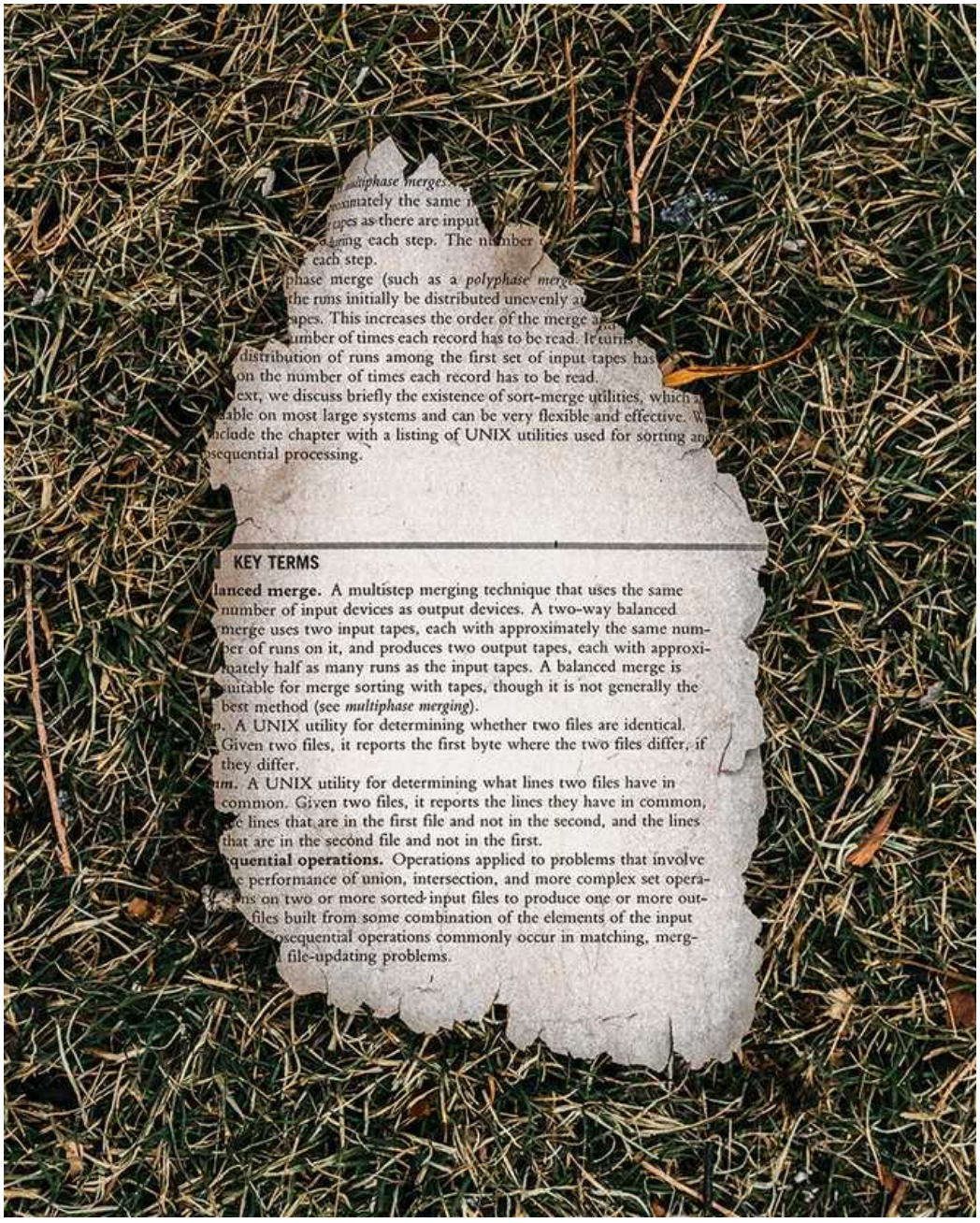
At daybreak on New Year’s Eve, the photographer Benjamin Rasmussen arrived at the still-smoldering Marshall Fire, in the suburban communities of Superior and Louisville, Colorado. The burned area, which encompassed more than 1,000 homes, remained barricaded, so Rasmussen stayed at a distance, letting worried residents use his camera’s zoom lens to try to make out whether their houses were still standing.

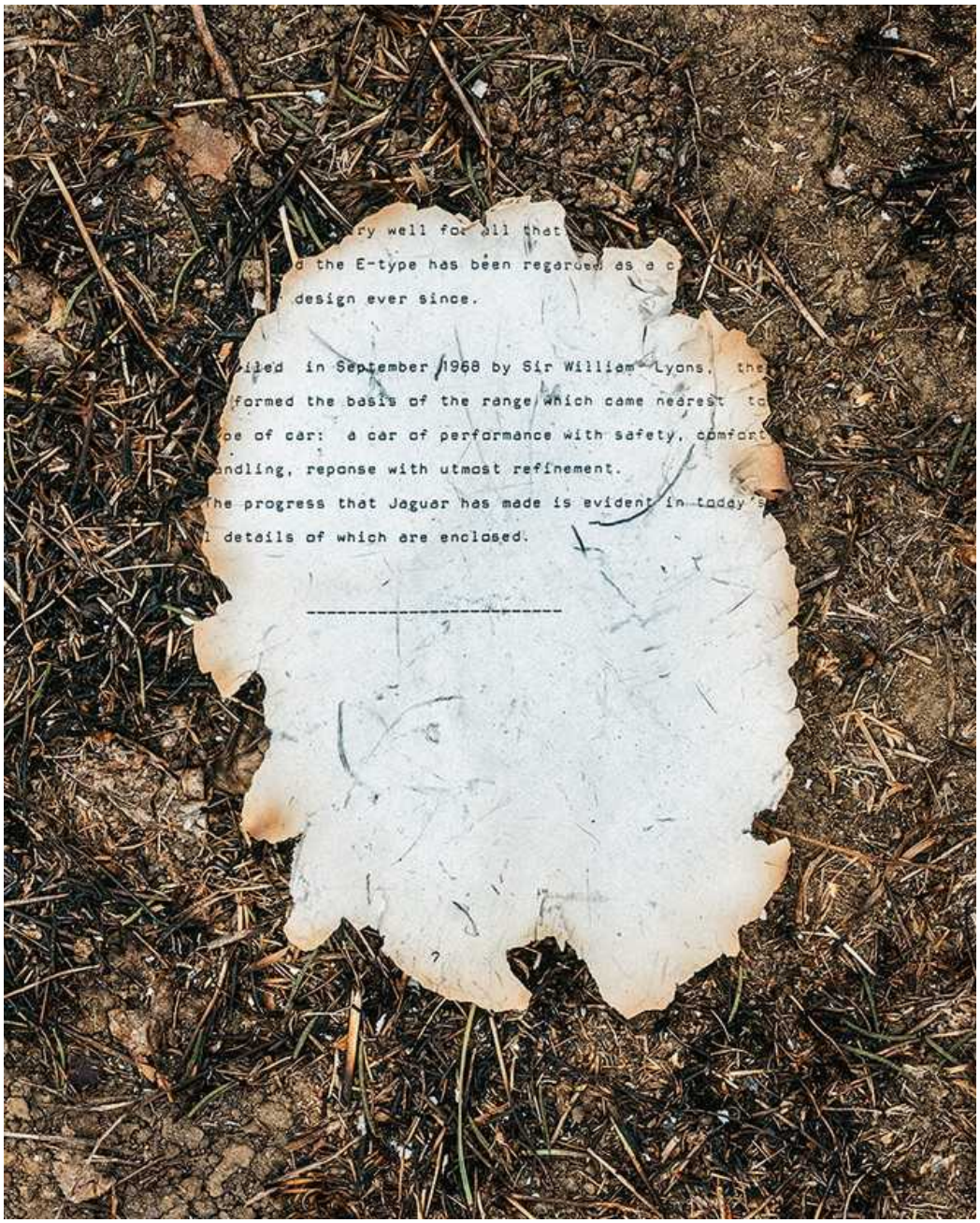
Rasmussen has photographed sites of tragedy before, and notes the challenge of capturing these events with texture and specificity, especially as climate-related disasters have become commonplace. “You realize that,

visually, it's really hard to differentiate one event from the next," he told me.

Later in the day, as he followed locals back into their neighborhoods, he noticed scraps of paper that had blown from houses and landed, singed, several feet or even blocks from their points of origin.

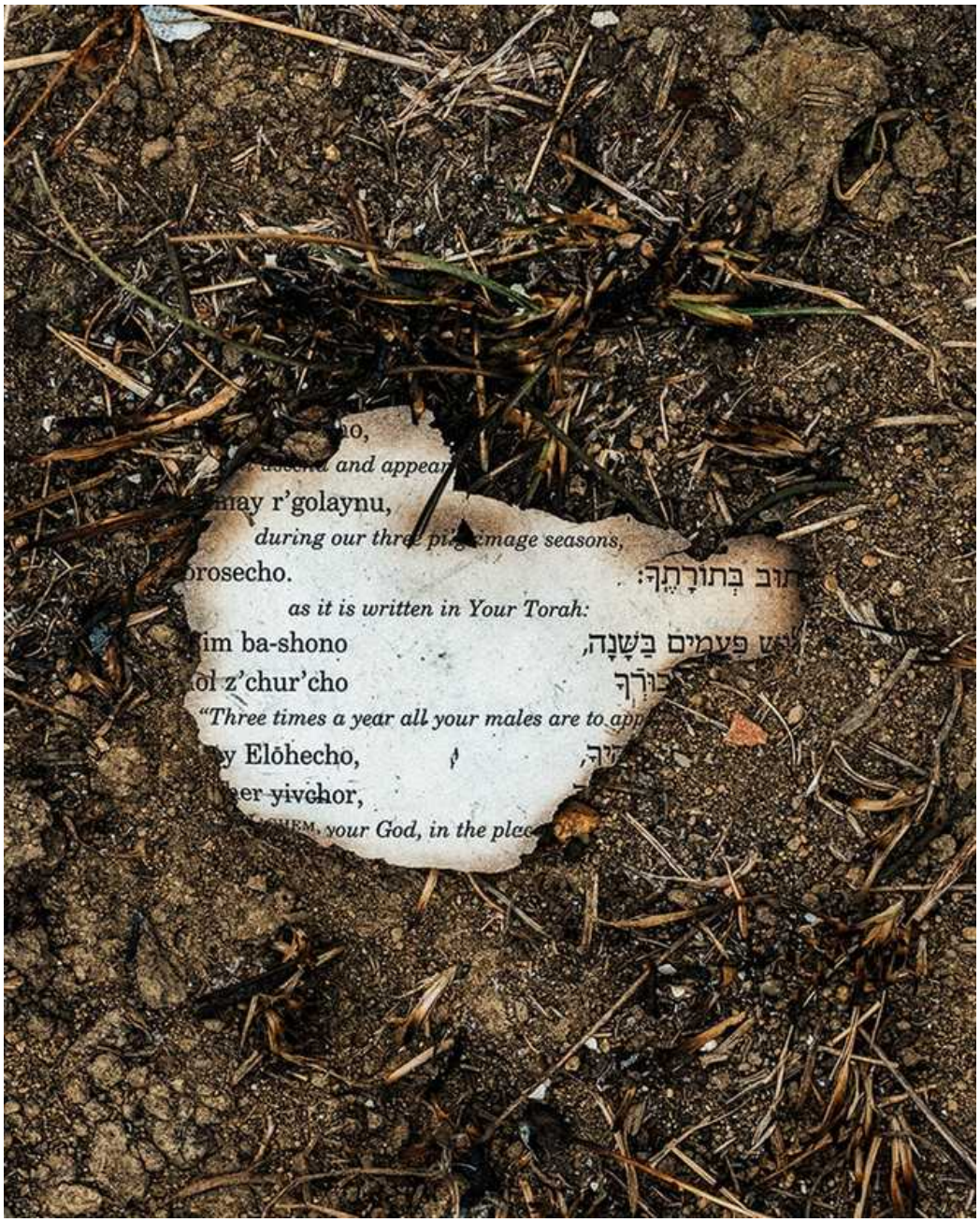
“For the most part,” Rasmussen said, the area had “sort of cookie-cutter homes, very suburban.” But the burned pages he found—featuring lines from the Torah, an announcement about the 1975–76 Junior Miss Majorette, a Japanese text about the fountain of youth—offered intimate, if fractured, peeks at a community that was “more complex and broad and diverse than I would have assumed.”





Top: A computer-science textbook. Bottom: Marketing material for the Jaguar E-Type.

While a picture of a person crying next to a house on fire is evocative, he told me, it can create distance between the viewer and the subject—the image is both too familiar and, in a way, too general. By photographing these idiosyncratic ruins instead of a more traditional scene, Rasmussen prompts us to look more closely.



Top: Scenes from the “L.A. at Last!” episode of I Love Lucy; an announcement about the 1975–76 Junior Miss Majorette. Bottom: Lines from the Torah.

His series makes a collection of the scattered fragments, an accidental archive of disintegration marking the advent of a new year.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline “Paper Trail.”

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Culture & Critics

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  The country wanted modern prosperity and traditional values. It could only have one. -- Cullen Murphy
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The Story of Jack and Neal

The Friendship That Made ‘On the Road’—and the Beat Generation—Possible

By James Parker

What are friends for?

For knocking around with, cracking a joke, sharing a doobie, firing a paintball? Or for guarding in the angelic citadels of their being the essential soul-image of you and everything you might eternally come to mean, while you in shining symmetry and perfect vulnerability do the same for them?

“The time has come for me to write a full confession of my life to you,” Jack Kerouac typed thunderously to Neal Cassady in December 1950, in the first of a sequence of massive, rumbling-and-rolling autobiographical letters, steeped in memory and mystery, that he would mail from Queens, New York, to San Francisco. “Bullshit is bullshit. Everything’s got to go this time. No one can take it but you. From the very start we were brothers.” Cassady at the time was supporting a young family by working as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad; Kerouac was in retreat,

annoying his new wife, Joan; brooding over the poor sales of his big, Thomas Wolfean debut novel, *The Town and the City*; trying and failing to find a new voice/style/idiom/rhythm in which to project his own experience, and the flavor of his distinctly bruised consciousness, more immediately onto the page. Despite great efforts and grave auto-examinations, it wasn't happening: false starts, loose ends, quarreling selves. His next book—working title: *Gone on the Road*—had been trapped in a state of unbecoming.

But now, suddenly, he was getting somewhere. The door was open. Earlier that month a nearly 16,000-word handwritten letter from Cassady, a jittering, picaresque fragment about his sexploits as a young hoodlum in Denver, had snapped Kerouac awake and unlocked him. Cassady's prose, he wrote back instantly, "the muscular rush" of it, was untouchable, an American summit. "No Dreiser, no Wolfe has come too close to it; Melville was never truer." And now, in (slightly) more measured response, feeling himself and his friend to be "contending technicians in what may well be a little American Renaissance of our own and perhaps a pioneer beginning," he was ready to let go, to let it out, to be himself—which meant himself-as-a-writer—at last.

Is there anything we can learn, in this centennial year of Kerouac's birth, from the energy that passed between these two men? Between Kerouac the college football player gone wrong, lugging his great dark literary sadness from coast to coast, and Cassady the car thief, pool-hall hustler, bus-station seducer, speed freak, wildly sensitized responder-to-jazz, devouring monologuist, and (according to acquaintances) psychopath?

On the Road would spectacularly revive or replant the idea of pilgrimage in the American imagination—pilgrimage as physical and spiritual exposure in motion, where the kingdom of heaven generously lowers itself, descends as a kind of glorious pressure and then (if you're lucky) comes crashing through. The Kerouac-Cassady friendship, with its many way stations in the American night, was yet another kind of pilgrimage: two men, traveling into each other, guided or misguided by love, as far as they could go. Beyond sanity, it might be said—certainly beyond safety. Do we still do friendship like this in America? Can we?

Eros played a part, no doubt: Kerouac was a keen appreciator of Cassady's physical beauty and prowess, "enormous dangle and all," and the pair were frequently in triangular situations with women. At the same time, theirs was in the strictest definition a platonic relationship: Tricky characters that they both were, dudes leaving churned wakes of confusion behind them, each man treasured and maintained through all vicissitude an ideal of the other, spirit-Jack and spirit-Neal. "I'm completely your friend, your 'lover,'" Kerouac wrote to Cassady in *Visions of Cody*, "he who loves you and digs your greatness completely—haunted in the mind by you."

Of course, the literary traffic was pretty one-way. While Cassady may have been a genius—or just a genie—of American experience, Kerouac was a genius of words. So Neal didn't write (much) about Jack; Jack wrote about Neal. First as Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*, the breakthrough draft of which he banged out in a three-week inspiration binge in April 1951 (although it wouldn't be published until 1957), and then—more wildly and blissfully—as Cody Pomeray in *Visions of Cody*. This was the book that Kerouac considered his "great one," 400 pages written in "my finally-at-last-found style & hope." "I wanted," he wrote in a prefatory note, "a vertical metaphysical study of Cody's character and its relationship to the general 'America.'"

Dean Moriarty is a creature of jangles and manias—"Fury spat out of his eyes when he told of things he hated; great glows of joy replaced this when he suddenly got happy; every muscle twitched to live and go"—but he has an outline and a shape: He's on the road, burning down the horizontal axis, a *character*. Cody Pomeray, by contrast, raised on (and by) the streets of Denver, is a *soul*. Kerouac's account of him is all verticality: the God's-eye view, or an attempt at it. As the son of a homeless alcoholic, "a Larimer street wino," he is socially, morally, and perceptually out there, bareheaded to the heavens and at the mercy of the system (when he's not running from it). On the street, in the reformatory, framed by huge American skies, he's "a young guy with a bony face that looks like it's been pressed against iron bars to get that dogged rocky look of suffering."

So here it was, finally-at-last-found: the quintessence of Neal, expressed in the quintessence of Jack. A sprawling collage of reminiscences, imaginings,

transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations, and prose on the point of becoming poetry, *Visions of Cody* doesn't swing like *On the Road*; that heady patter is replaced by a deeper flow. Some of it is shockingly beautiful, an artistic consummation for Kerouac. Stray Catholics pray in St. Patrick's Cathedral at dusk: "Now the window darkens to match the great transformations without, refracting them inward to these kneelers." (Kerouac is painting like an old master here, in lovely, lugubrious oils.) Young Cody dodges police cars—"a flash of evil two-toned black and white with shiny antenna and the growl of the radio"—and contemplates the "lamby clouds of babyhood and eternity" over Colorado. And some of it (those transcripts, Jack and Neal high and babbling) is unreadable. "Crazy," pronounced Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac's other bosom buddy, to whom he sent a draft in 1952, "(not merely inspired crazy) but unrelatedly crazy … What are you trying to put down, man?"

Visions of Cody is definitely a trip. A showcase for Kerouac's prodigious powers of recall (one can imagine him almost disabled by them at times, like Funes the Memorious in the Borges story), it is a sinking, saturating experience. The voice of the author, meanwhile—stripped of ambition, stripped of literature, stripped of everything but the desire to know and be known by Cody, and to confess this dual knowledge—is that of a kind of clown-saint, a battered pilgrim floating in American space: "Weep for me, weep for anybody, weep for the poor dumbfucks of this world." And again: "I accept lostness. Everything belongs to me because I am poor."

The Beats, say what you like about them, could do friendship. Split apart and self-affrighting as we currently are, it's hard even to imagine the magnanimity of their commitment to one another. Ginsberg would come round to *Visions of Cody* in the end, calling it "a giant mantra of Appreciation & Adoration of an American man, one striving heroic soul." Kerouac's love for Neal Cassady gave him America—held-by-nothing, got-nothing America—as his subject, and gave him, too, the language in which to write about it. "How blissful the destitute, abject in spirit," says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in David Bentley Hart's translation, "for theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens." And what if part of this destitution, this laid-openness, is true, naked friendship—the embrace, in all its genuine scale and glory, of another human soul?

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "The Story of Jack and Neal."

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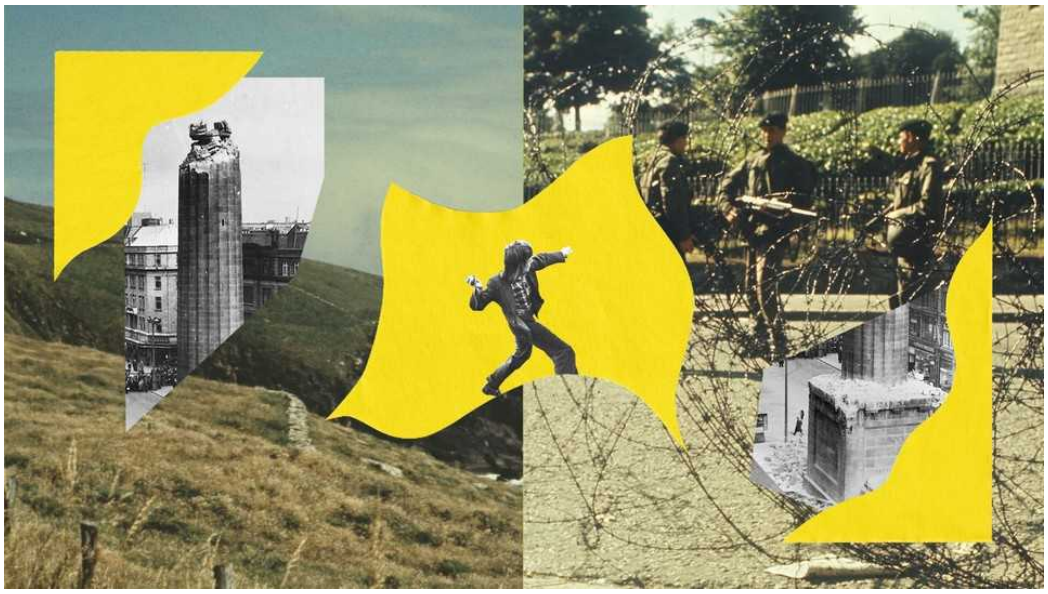

Ireland's Great Gamble

Fintan O'Toole's Passionate, Angry, Slyly Humorous History of Ireland

By Cullen Murphy

Early in the pages of *We Don't Know Ourselves*, Fintan O'Toole's masterful "personal history" of modern Ireland, I came upon a moment in O'Toole's life that intersected unexpectedly with my own. The date was Tuesday, March 8, 1966. In a Dublin bedroom in the chill dark of early morning—1:31 a.m. exactly—O'Toole's mother, given to premonitions, awoke and exclaimed, "God, what was that?" Then came the sound of a distant explosion.

I, too, heard the explosion. My American family had moved from the United States to Ireland for several years. I was a schoolboy, a little older than O'Toole; our home was a mile or so from his. As everyone soon learned, an IRA splinter group had blown off the top of Nelson's Pillar, an imposing column in O'Connell Street that some saw as a symbol of British oppression but most regarded as a convenient landmark and an elegant viewing platform. I had paid my sixpence and spiraled up the interior

staircase many times. Now the Pillar was a ragged stump. Thinking back on the moment, O'Toole writes:

O'Toole and I must have crossed paths that morning, or come close, because our fathers had the same impulse. I rode into the city with my dad and collected pieces of granite; I keep one on my desk. That March day in Dublin feels as present to me now as it does to O'Toole. It was, he writes, "the first time I was conscious of pure memory, of the idea that something you had in your head was now gone forever."

O'Toole's sweeping, intimate book covers a lifetime of Ireland's history: a period of six decades when the country transitioned from one thing to another with little understanding of where it had been or where it was going, and was content to wear blinkers. A dishonest deflection of important questions was a deep-seated habit. The years punctuated by the bombing of Nelson's Pillar marked a turning point. Even a kid in short pants and knee socks could sense that something was up.

In 1966, the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rebellion against British rule, Ireland was still an intensely Catholic country. Schools made liberal use of corporal punishment—a leather strap to the palms in O'Toole's school, a bamboo cane to the palms in mine—and the teaching of Irish was compulsory. Most homes in rural areas had no plumbing. Horse-drawn wagons delivered milk even in central Dublin. The smell of turf and coal was baked into a city that served as a placeholder for postwar Berlin in *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*. The official version of Irish history was a dour, gray, pietistic nationalism. When the remains of Roger Casement, executed for his part in preparations for the Easter Rebellion, were returned to Ireland by Britain in a goodwill gesture, the occasion was marked by grim festivity. As a Boy Scout, I marched in the cortege behind Casement's flag-draped casket on a day that spat sleet and snow.

Yet in this same Ireland, at this same moment, industrial estates were springing up rapidly around Shannon Airport and its famous duty-free shops. Ireland launched its first television channel in 1961—a year after TV came to Albania—and although Ireland itself had only Telifís Éireann, one could also get the BBC, and therefore access to the rest of planet Earth. Irish theater was effectively still subject to censorship, but the new plays of

Brian Friel hinted at a flowering to come. Though Church teaching and the law forbade contraception, sympathetic doctors finessed the ban by prescribing the pill for menstrual irregularity, leading to what one prominent obstetrician described as "the highest incidence of irregular cycles in women in the history of the human race."

My own vivid, limited sense of that time and place—of a country watching itself change—is lodged in my memory like a single piece of a puzzle. O'Toole provides a place for that piece to go: the missing context in all directions.

Books about modern Ireland abound—the Irish love their words; isn't that what people say? They include magisterial scholarship (the works of R. F. Foster), searing fiction (Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, John McGahern's *The Dark*), and episodic recollections with a sharpened edge (John Banville's recent *Time Pieces*). O'Toole's *We Don't Know Ourselves* is in a category all its own, a blend of reporting, history, analysis, and argument, explored through the lens of the author's sensibility and experience: his boyhood in the Crumlin housing estate; his education at the hands of the fearsome Christian Brothers; his awareness, as a political journalist in Dublin, of clerical cover-ups and government chicanery; his impatience with the "silences and evasions" of Irish life.

O'Toole was born in 1958, the son of a bus conductor and a homemaker, into an Ireland where in many respects time seemed to have stopped. The failed Easter Rebellion had led eventually to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which decreed partition for the island and granted independence to the southern Free State. It also brought on a bloody civil war—the original "Troubles." Éamon de Valera, a commandant in the uprising who was spared execution in 1916 in part because he was an American citizen, opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty but went on to lead the nation it created. He warned against "amorphous cosmopolitanism," as if that were imminent. Through decades of economic torpor, the country's chief export was beef. Its other export was people. The Ireland of de Valera's aspiration was Catholic, rural, Irish-speaking, and, as he himself put it, "as self-contained as possible." Church and state—specifically, de Valera's long-dominant Fianna Fáil party—

worked hand in glove, a regime of mutual reinforcement. The fusion was symbolized by the use of the term *martyrs* for the Easter rebels.

The year of O'Toole's birth was also the year when a government minister named T. K. Whitaker produced a report with the bland name "Economic Development." It was so calm and academic—the "Grey Book," in shorthand—that it quietly became national policy. The report's broad impetus was Ireland's backward condition as a kind of charming North Korea. The more immediate spark, Whitaker later acknowledged, had been a cover image on *Dublin Opinion* magazine showing a sign sprouting from an empty island. The sign read Shortly Available: Undeveloped Country / Unrivalled Opportunities / Magnificent Views, Political and Otherwise / Owners Going Abroad. Whitaker's report provided a blueprint for opening the Irish economy to outside investment and ultimately to Europe. It embodied what O'Toole refers to as "the great gamble"—that "everything would change economically but everything would stay the same culturally."

It would not and could not. For all its genuine warmth, O'Toole writes, President John F. Kennedy's state visit, in 1963, was also a reminder of a world the Irish did not yet inhabit but were starting to glimpse: the wealth, the cars, the confidence, the sex, the sunglasses. The sight of the Irish and American presidents standing together underscored the distance. Could anyone imagine de Valera having a drink with Marilyn and Frank? But a different Irish future lay within reach. Whitaker's plan would lead, down the road, to surging prosperity and brash ad campaigns in foreign airports featuring photos of savvy young redheads above slogans like People Are To Ireland As Oil Is To Texas. In the 25 years after 1990, American companies invested five times more heavily in the vaunted Celtic Tiger than they did in the People's Republic of China. Among other things, Ireland became a leading manufacturer of Viagra, Prozac, and Botox. The bubble would one day burst, but the change in the country was permanent.

In effect, O'Toole writes, two very different Irelands came to coexist uneasily, neither displacing the other:

Emptiness is not really the right word. As O'Toole goes on to explain, the space was amply filled, by hypocrisy on the part of Ireland's leaders, and by a kind of "doubleness" on the part of everyone else—a way of seeing and

not seeing, of paying lip service to one set of values while pegging behavior to another.Two figures loom over O'Toole's narrative, one from Church and one from state: John Charles McQuaid, the archbishop of Dublin, who ruled Ireland's Catholic life from 1940 until 1972; and Charles Haughey, who served three terms as *taoiseach*, or prime minister, between 1979 and 1992.

McQuaid was a diminutive, regal, fastidious man once likened by the poet Brendan Behan to a lasso (actually, "an elderly degenerate proselytising umbilical lasso"): a prelate who simultaneously held Ireland together and held it captive. He thundered against contraception, abortion, and divorce. His eyes and ears were sharp. When he heard Cole Porter lyrics being sung on Radio Éireann—"But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion / Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way"—he put a stop to it. The programmer was told, as he later recalled, that "His Grace is concerned at the somewhat, eh, circumscribed morality of the song." O'Toole once served as an altar boy for McQuaid when the archbishop came to Crumlin for a funeral Mass. Secular leaders had genuflected before him, and after Mass, as McQuaid touched the cheeks and tousled the hair of the altar boys, so did O'Toole: McQuaid "raised his right arm gently to the height of his own waist, palm down, so that I could see the amethyst in the Borgia ring presented to him on his elevation to the episcopacy."

The only circumscribed morality McQuaid was prepared to tolerate was the abuse of young boys and girls by priests, and of women from many backgrounds by nuns in the infamous Magdalene Laundries. The abuse was known to him and others, and suspected by many, but brushed aside. Later investigations revealed that when parents broached the subject of abuse with Church authorities, they did so timidly and apologetically, as if it were they or their children who had done something wrong. The Church, O'Toole writes, had "successfully disabled a society's capacity to think for itself about right and wrong."

McQuaid died in 1973; standing vigil at the lying-in-state, as if to proclaim his solidarity, was a young minister and de Valera acolyte named Charles Haughey. As prime minister, he would back a 1983 constitutional amendment to protect Ireland's anti-abortion laws from judicial interference. He also backed a referendum that maintained the ban on

divorce. Earlier, as minister of justice, he had overseen Ireland's film-censorship regime—for instance, removing references to a love affair between Rick and Ilsa from *Casablanca*, making the movie unintelligible. Haughey upheld the outward forms of marital propriety while conducting a long affair with the wife of a high-court judge.

Haughey was deeply corrupt. In the late 1960s, when he was an elected member of the Dáil, the Irish Parliament, his government salary was £3,500 a year; the annual wages for the staff at his estate north of Dublin came to £30,000. Later in life, Haughey would buy one of the Blasket Islands, off the coast of Kerry, then as now a symbolic link to a mythic past. The modernizing Irish present made the purchase possible—Haughey received secret infusions from builders and beef barons, retailers and speculators, as well as from the public purse. When a popular colleague needed a liver transplant, he solicited large sums of money for the operation, knowing all the while that insurance would cover the cost; then he kept the donations.

Haughey lived, O'Toole notes, like a member of the old Protestant elite—like "an Ascendancy squire"—confident that his constituents would be gratified by the national progress his lifestyle represented: The squire was now an Irish Catholic. People knew all of this but at the same time found it impossible to face directly. O'Toole describes attending a press conference in 1981—his first as a young political writer—where an editor impolitely asked Haughey, "Where did you get your money?" When Haughey dodged, the questioner persisted. Other journalists grew irritated—not at Haughey, but at the editor. "Haughey's money was not really a journalistic question," O'Toole observes. "It was, like child abuse or abortion or Magdalene Laundries, one of those things that was both known and unknowable."

Much of the known and unknowable revolved around sex and sexuality. In O'Toole's telling, hypocrisy on these matters acted as a solvent, finally detaching Ireland from the grip of the past. The gap between pious pronouncements and "lived experience" was simply too vast. In 1971, activist women made a show of traveling to buy birth-control pills and condoms in Belfast, Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, where they were readily available; the "contraceptive train" was seen by the Church as an outrage, but the anger and need were real. In the five decades

after 1970, some 250,000 Irish women traveled to England to obtain abortions—this in a country of fewer than 5 million. Everyone knew someone.

The saga of Galway's bishop, Éamonn Casey, who fled to South America in 1992 after revelations about his American lover and their teenage son, was followed by endless investigations into clerical abuse of children. Laws began to change. Contraception was legalized, then divorce, then abortion in 2018. Irish people by the hundreds of thousands, O'Toole notes, had seen the pain of friends and family, and come to conclusions "different from the ones they knew they were supposed to arrive at." The flock, he observes, had moved far ahead of the shepherd. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by referendum. Thinking back on that vote, O'Toole writes:

W*e Don't Know Ourselves* is astonishing in its range. Every chapter takes up a specific topic—the expansion of schooling, Irish peacekeepers during the Congolese crisis, the rise and decline of emigration, Muhammad Ali's visit to Dublin, the invasion of American country music, Gay Byrne and his smooth and legitimizing *The Late Late Show*, the quest for membership in the European Union, Bobby Sands and the hunger strikes, the influx of hard drugs, the bungalow boom and bubble, the lunacy of the "Island of Ireland" development in Dubai, the Good Friday Agreement. The chapters move forward chronologically. What unites them all is O'Toole's moral presence and literary voice: throughout, a sly, understated humor; when needed, passion and even anger. In the end, surveying what Ireland has become during his lifetime, he manages an optimistic note, one that is not merely asserted but earned. "What is possible now, and was entirely impossible when I was born, is this: to accept the unknown without being so terrified of it that you have to take refuge in fabrications of absolute conviction."

I came away from *We Don't Know Ourselves* seeing modern Ireland more convincingly portrayed and explained than ever before. I wish I understood modern America half as well.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "How Ireland Blundered Into the Modern World."

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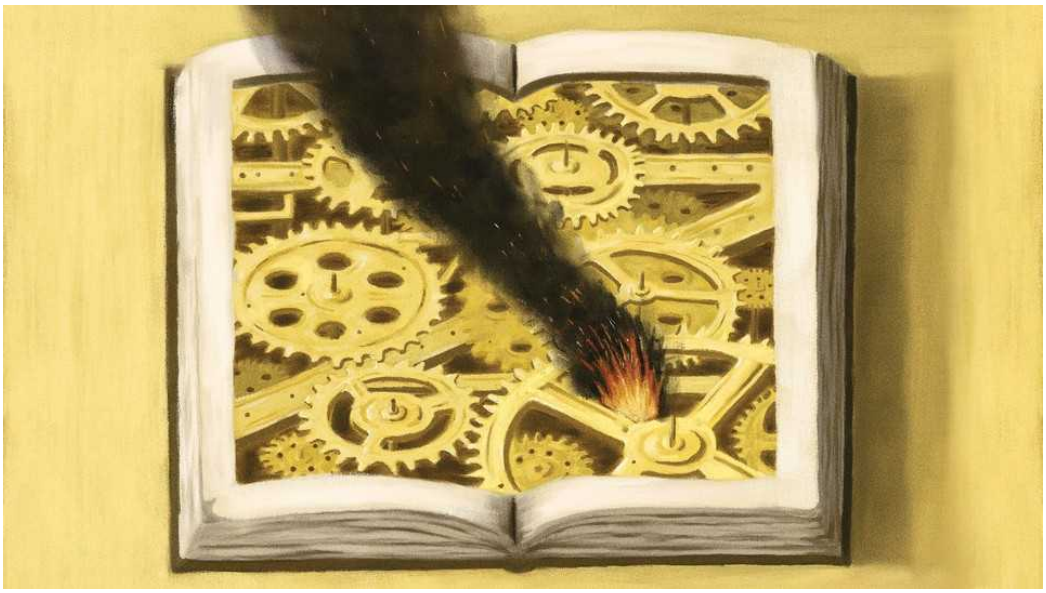


The Goon Squad Gets Old

Inside Jennifer Egan's Fiction Factory

By Mark Greif

In 2010, Jennifer Egan published *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, suggesting esteem among populists and highbrows alike. Commentators praised its combination of technical virtuosity—the intricate cogs and wheels that connected plotlines across time and geography—and sentimental "heart," a wistful emotional atmosphere piped in like a gas to keep the mechanism from rusting.

Racing back and forth in time (between the 1970s and the 2020s), the book found its center in the chastened view from middle age. The chapters took the protagonists from their 40s—when they were already in decline after appearing on the culture's radar as moguls, musicians, publicists, journalists influential in the recording industry—to their hopeful beginnings in high-school-band rehearsals and college-dorm musings. The effect was to accentuate the melancholic gap between ambition and actuality.

The puzzle-box precision in the ordering of chapters—and the narrative medley, varying past and present tense, first and third and even second person—turned an ordinary generational portrait into a mosaic. Glimpses of the main action through the eyes of minor characters (some deranged, some children) supplied the glue.

The approach called out for thematic justification, and the literary techniques suggested technologies of the moment. Egan's epigraph was from Proust, but *The Goon Squad* proposed Google and Facebook as inspiration, and "the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to ... ?* " Meanwhile, at the edges of scenes, surveillance cameras, the internet, post-9/11 national-security paranoia—the invasions of public recording—were at work unsettling the realm of private recording: the intimate pop-music soundtracks of individuals' lives. *The Goon Squad* seemed to promise deeper significance because the novel was also reading the news.

Egan bills her new book, *The Candy House*, as a "sibling novel," a curious bit of nomenclature. It seems to mean that she trundles out *The Goon Squad* 's methods to try them again. Calling it a sequel is more accurate; at least I can't imagine rewards to its readers that don't include renewing acquaintances with old friends. Here, in chapters that span roughly the 2010s to the 2030s, Egan unspools subsequent events in the lives of *The Goon Squad*'s principals—the record executive Bennie Salazar; his mentee, Sasha Blake; and his mentor, Lou Kline (the original three generations)—accoutered with spouses and innumerable unhappy offspring. Egan continues to incorporate each generation's peer groups from school and work, and now we see the youngest children as adults.

Ratcheting up the technology, *The Candy House* fully embraces a science-fiction conceit, and implies that some of Egan's minor *Goon Squad* characters not only invented social media and seized control of music streaming, but have made good on a new technology, Own Your Unconscious, which uploads the totality of each participant's memories to the cloud. It includes a Collective Consciousness feature that allows users access to others' recollections, and some chapters are presented as the

product of consulting "gray grabs" from multiple recorded minds—yet they read like ordinary third-person narratives.

Egan makes no use of the further innovations, and *Rashomon*-style effects, that such a capacity would seem to enable, and that even the simplest sci-fi novel would explore. Surely the experience of entering another person's consciousness, or multiple consciousnesses separately experiencing the same event, poses questions: Do all thoughts and memories speak the same language? Do you behave differently, knowing that everything you think can be recovered? Not addressed. The invention amounts to a new plot point, not a fictional evolution.

But something big has changed in the characters' fates. This time, we keep company with a cast of winners, superspies, Special Ops assassins, and world-historical gatekeepers. Gone are the poignant emotional swerves and empathy for sad sacks elicited by *The Goon Squad*. A journey that had seemed bittersweet, plaintive, familiar yet refreshed by Egan's singularly convoluted narrative construction—like jazz standards burnished with brilliant arrangements—now sounds depthlessly manic, like sped-up Muzak. It's as though Egan's ingenious technique has been streamlined for short attention spans.

Egan's feat in *The Goon Squad* was to have worked out a contemporary means of reconstructing slimmed-down, swiftly moving "M.F.A. fiction" to provide jolts of very rare, very special narrative effects, almost exclusively available in very long traditional novels. And she proved she could do this in chapter after chapter, each one sculpted like a crisp short story.

The unique pleasures delivered in long books are unforgettable enough that every reader will likely have his own catalog, and some instances are quite famous. One pleasure arises when a forgotten minor character returns unexpectedly to divert the plot, years after his role seemed at an end. (It happens memorably in different volumes of Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, as in *The Black Sheep*, when the belligerent brother, Philippe, returns to foil the new bully menacing our hero.)

Another occurs when a protagonist absorbs an antagonist's understanding of an event long after its reality seemed fixed, revising our conception of what

has transpired. (So, at the start of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, a young Marcel interprets Gilberte's indecent gesture in the garden at Tansonville as a rejection; five volumes later, she corrects him, letting him know that her hand signal meant he should join her in sexual games with the other children of the neighborhood.) Still another pleasure is discovering a character's ironic fate years after a pivotal drama. (Hence, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the thrill when Prince Andrei, mortally wounded after the Battle of Borodino, is unwittingly lifted onto Natasha's caravan, hundreds of pages after these characters' engagement to be married was broken.)

Duration, the sense of having shared in so much eventfulness, seems essential to these transporting experiences of uncanny knowledge. It stands in stark contrast to the most basic effect the novel counts upon: a reader's fastening onto a narrator, any "I" or restricted point of view, immediately and habitually. Make a character's perspective ours, and our emotional allegiance is astonishing. Her belief is ours, her shame is ours, her fear, her will. Identification kicks in with even the thinnest characterization.

Using her chronology-scrambling technique in *The Goon Squad*, Egan demonstrated a shortcut to delivering long-range pleasures, those intense, rare pangs of retrospect and return. She bypassed the kind of unbroken biography of heroes that ordinarily requires many more pages, and instead offered porthole glimpses of her protagonists as seen by peripheral characters.

Each of these observers was given a tic, motif, or symbolic compulsion to distinguish and vivify his or her narration. Those signatures included kleptomania and mild paranoia, a penchant for summarizing the action in anthropological lingo, and family conflict as seen through a child's PowerPoint presentation. Egan drew on our bottomless reservoir of sympathy for anyone whose perspective we temporarily inhabit, stimulating the same melancholy response, over and over, as she dramatized each minor character's sorrow at his or her failed understanding, miscommunication, incomplete knowledge of the bigger drama.

The Goon Squad brilliantly hewed to a narrow band of emotions, principally disappointment, regret, shame, and unrequited longing, which

were well served by the crosscutting and temporal discontinuity. Nonreciprocal crushes structured the foreground. Rhea wants Bennie, but "Bennie is waiting for Alice, who's waiting for Scotty, who's waiting for Jocelyn." The dynamic recurs a generation later: Sasha trusts Rob, who pines for Drew, who loves Sasha. Behind this, Egan replayed the same primal, sentimental scene of a son or daughter, a wife or lover, unable to gain true or exclusive attention from a "selfish, devouring man," the father —whether he's a record-company executive or, in a strange interlude, a genocidal dictator in an unnamed foreign country.

The repetitive formula of brief characterization made all tenses and persons and modes of writing essentially equivalent, producing enjoyable shivers of regret. The chapter rendered as a child's PowerPoint slides was the celebrated example. Readers marveled that such a skeletal form could still bring them to tears. This seemed a kind of magic—which it was, but less through sorcery than mechanical sleight of hand. The lesson seemed to be that, once the emotional elements were set in place, it really made no difference to us whether the result was written-through.

The upshot was a satisfying dose of sentimentality, in the form of a particular fantasy quest: After all the pain and loss, could modern fathers become faithful and child-centered? *The Goon Squad* ended in an otherwise mystifying sci-fi vision of apocalyptic reconciliation. In a climate-change-spooked New York City, all music became music for children, who made their desires known through smartphone-like "handsets." Scotty, the failed rocker of Bennie's generation, triumphed at last with a children's concert, and the alpha males of the book made peace with being middle-aged ("You grew up … just like the rest of us"), and were ready to go looking for the women they'd never appreciated, who were not to be found.

T*he Candy House* knows the techniques of *The Goon Squad*, but doesn't recognize the limits of their strengths. It is like Samson after a haircut. To make her mode work previously, Egan had to address regret, failure, decline. She needed to feature the piquant memories of losers who, like all of us mortals, grow up to be something less than the heroes our youthful selves imagined we'd be. This time around, her major characters win and

win and win. If inspiration or direction eludes them for a bit, most still win again.

The new novel opens with Bix Bouton taking a lonesome walk. When last we saw him in *The Goon Squad*, he was a graduate student in computer science. He is now in effect a fictional Mark Zuckerberg. His company is called Mandala, not Facebook; he has colonized Manhattan, not Menlo Park; he is loved, not hated. At least the book doesn't hate him. It apologizes for his creation of an encompassing capitalist social network by making him Black. Online, he was certain, racism would be overcome. (The novel does not revisit this point.) His big achievement behind him, Bix feels lost, wondering whether he can revolutionize the world again.

He puts on a disguise and wanders into an interdisciplinary gathering of academics, including Ted Hollander, last seen in *The Goon Squad* as a dispirited art-history professor and Sasha's benevolent uncle. Luckily, academics are full of good ideas, and a "Brazilian animal studies professor" informs Bix that she and her lab colleagues have begun uploading animal consciousnesses to computers. *Eureka!* The seeds of Own Your Unconscious are planted.

The next chapter focuses on one of Ted's sons, Alfred. He has a *Goon Squad*–style obsession (authenticity) and a tic (screaming bloody murder in public, to jolt bystanders out of their phony social roles). Seeking a recovery of the past that will somehow restore him to wholeness, he travels with his girlfriend to visit Jack Stevens, the only authentic, free, what-you-see-is-what-you-get kid he knew in high school. Jack—older, paunchy, divorced—lives in a crappy suburb, drinks beer, looks at the beauty of the sunset, and desperately loves his kids; his true worry is losing custody. Sunsets, children: "Alfred wanted to sit there forever." The screamer is released from his obsession, finally at home in the world.

These chapters signal the old dynamic. The powerful producer reaches middle age—will he realize that his achievements are hollow? Will the middle generation be freed from its compulsions and resentments, bringing the elders the truth that family, children, and suburban evenings are what matter?

Yet unlike *The Goon Squad*, *The Candy House* goes all in on the celebrity fantasia and undermines the ordinariness. Bix isn't the only old friend who is doing rather well. Sasha, who fled the music industry to become a craft-focused homemaker in the California desert, is now a world-famous land artist. Global collectors beat a path to her door. Mindy, who was getting her Ph.D. in *The Goon Squad*, discovered the fundamental algorithms that power all social media. Her daughters patented and sold the algorithms to finance their takeover of the music industry as it moved to online streaming. "Most of the music you hear passes through my hands," one of them tells us, "and I've absorbed innumerable companies along the way."

Even newly met characters in this book soar, becoming rich and famous. We finally encounter Bennie's mother, whom we had known only as an impoverished single mom of five and an immigrant from Honduras. Now she is a bitcoin success story who "cashed out at the top of the market, netting untold millions."

The sad sacks of this installment are Ted's various children, but none is sad for very long. Miles, the eldest, is a top lawyer and yuppie who becomes a drug addict and pauper, then turns his life around and becomes a state senator. Ames, the ignored middle child, takes off for a career as a Special Ops sharpshooter and assassin, then gets to retire to his childhood home and reminisce. What really matters is the walk-off grand slam he hit in a Little League game in the suburbs as a child, and the love of his dad, who kisses his sweaty head. "'What now, slugger?' he asks. 'Anything you want.'" These are the book's last lines—touching, I suppose, though a Little League miracle hardly registers as such when *The Candy House*'s characters bestride the world.

In a novel where almost everyone's luck has turned good, Egan's reach for the heartstrings loses its plucking power. To compensate, she introduces satirical diversions that explore technology's challenge to fiction. First she conscripts Chris Salazar, Bennie's son and a freshly minted Stanford English grad. The CEO of an "entertainment start-up" has hired him to turn stock elements of movies and TV into algebra. The company's computers will optimize, rationalize, and monetize the world's narratives, as Mandala has done for consciousness. Chris's savior is a "raffish outsider" on a

Harley-Davidson, who awakens him to the weirdos, misfits, and junkies outside tech's "cushy citadel." Cue Mondrian, Chris's counter-start-up for freedom, an "invisible army of data defiers."

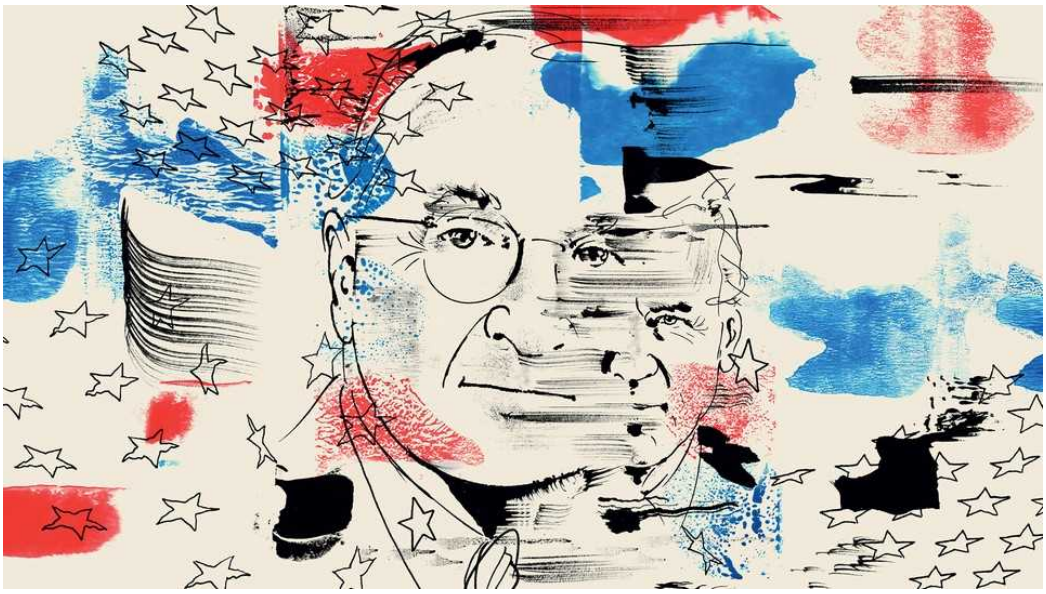
The next satire might as well be a product of the entertainment start-up's narrative-generating software. Lulu, the adorable self-possessed child from *The Goon Squad*, has grown up to be a Bionic Woman–like "citizen agent." Her chapter, "Lulu the Spy, 2035," outdoes Egan's earlier PowerPoint presentation. It's composed in epigrams (the book's promotional copy calls them "tweets"), dictated by our heroine to her mind-reading military brain implant. The mission is straight from *Bond* films (or *Get Smart*), as Lulu cozies up to international criminals in their luxurious Mediterranean villas. It's pulp techno-kitsch of a singularly giddy kind, because her handlers have equipped her with awkward transmitters implanted in every part of her body. ("A button is embedded behind the inside ligament of your right knee … Depress twice to indicate to loved ones that you are well and thinking of them.")

As this campy futurology takes over, the novel culminates in a fantasy of reconciliation between "stories" and "tech," played out, naturally, as a father-child drama. As Bix, the tech daddy, lies dying, he makes a secret alliance with Chris, the metaphorical rebel son, and leaves a huge bequest of Mandala wealth to Mondrian. Bix's real son, Gregory, a stymied novelist, had left the family: "Nothing could change Gregory's belief that Own Your Unconscious posed an existential threat to fiction." Now he realizes that, viewed the right way—from a free storytelling mind—online archiving of memory gives a writer more material. Social media and cloud consciousness were really "his father's parting gift: a galaxy of human lives hurtling toward his curiosity … He was feeling the collective without any machinery at all. And its stories, infinite and particular, would be his to tell." He'll finish his novel after all.

Like a new-age George Eliot, Egan steps in to anoint this revelation with an authorial apothegm: "Only Gregory Bouton's machine—this one, fiction—lets us roam with absolute freedom through the human collective." I confess this ending stirred the old melancholy in me. You cannot proclaim the novel a winner, in a cardboard contest between tech and tales, while whirring

along yourself on stock elements and toothless satires of bad movies. At her best, Egan has been the inventor of algorithms of rich complexity, stimulating core human yearnings through technical devices. Trying them again, but this time to evoke a triumphal register of emotions, she has proved the pertinence of Silicon Valley gospel to her fiction: To keep her audience spellbound, sitting still won't work. She'll have to innovate.

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "The Goon Squad Gets Old."



What Joe Biden Can Learn From Harry Truman

What Joe Biden Can Learn From Harry Truman

By John Dickerson

The Biden administration has already zipped through two familiar stages of the modern presidency. First came the high expectations: Dreamy headlines compared Joe Biden to Franklin D. Roosevelt, an unrealistic standard for a president with the thinnest possible margin in the Senate and just a four-vote majority in the House. Then reality intruded—COVID-19 didn't go away, inflation rose, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan was even messier than expected. Biden's plans for social spending and voting reform were blocked by senators in his own party. This initiated the second stage: All is not lost. As a headline on a *New York Times* op-ed by the senior Obama adviser David Axelrod declared, "It's Not Over for Joe Biden."

The president's approval rating these days fibrillates just above 40 percent. Historically, when that number has been less than 50, the president's party has lost an average of 37 House seats in the midterms. The next stage in the Biden presidency's journey will undoubtedly be lighting a candle at the shrine of Harry Truman, the patron saint of presidencies stuck in the mud.

Truman, the 33rd president and the subject of Jeffrey Frank's *The Trials of Harry S. Truman*, experienced two political resurrections. The first took place in 1948, just two years after Democrats endured a midterm shellacking as bad as many fear will take place in 2022. Roosevelt's former vice president, a disappointment to party insiders and observers alike—"To err is Truman," went the phrase—came from behind to win the election. Truman's second revival happened after his political career was over. He left the White House in 1953 with an approval rating lower than Donald Trump's. Historians later took fuller stock of all that he had faced during his tenure. He is now considered in the near-great presidential category, seated at awards ceremonies in the row behind Washington, Lincoln, and FDR.

Frank chooses a moment at a concession stand at the 1944 Democratic convention, in Chicago, to mark the start of Truman's ascent to power. Managing a hot dog "dripping mustard like butterscotch sauce," a journalist wrote, the natty former haberdasher turned senator from Independence, Missouri, was interrupted by a summons to the rostrum, where presiding officials had announced him as Roosevelt's vice president. "By golly, that's me!" he said, discarding the frankfurter.

The image drives home the slapdash, unlikely origins of Truman's presidency. FDR's deteriorating health as his fourth term approached meant that the leadership qualities of his vice president were more important than ever, but the selection process reflected the shortsighted requirements of party politics that so often influence the running-mate choice. FDR dropped his incumbent vice president, Henry Wallace, because he was too liberal for party conservatives. He couldn't tap his preferred candidate, James F. Byrnes, a former senator from South Carolina and an administration official, because Byrnes's uncompromisingly segregationist views made him too conservative. Truman—"The Missouri Compromise"—was somewhere in the middle. "Boys, I guess it's Truman," FDR said one hot

July night, as if he were making a choice no more significant than to have fish rather than chicken for dinner. James Roosevelt, the president's eldest son, said his father regarded Truman as "in no way … big enough to become president."

When FDR died in April 1945, after Truman had spent only 82 days as the No. 2, he faced a brutal to-do list. ("I'm not big enough for this job," Truman himself told a senator shortly after Roosevelt's death.) He had to manage the end of the war in Europe and decide whether to use the atomic bomb to end the war in the Pacific (not to mention deal with postwar inflation, which hit a postwar high of 19.7 percent in March 1947). "I don't know if you newspaper men ever pray," Truman said to the press corps on his first day. "But if you do, please pray for me." The existence of a weapon capable of destroying more life in an instant than had ever been possible took the new president by surprise: His boss hadn't told him about it. Surprises seemed to be everywhere. "Nearly every memorandum has a catch in it," Truman noted as he crammed late at night to get up to speed.

Truman's crash course from 1945 onward illuminates the complexities of a job that has grown only more daunting since he held it. He knew that delegating was crucial, but also learned that subordinates—such as Byrnes, his first secretary of state, and military commanders like Douglas MacArthur—didn't mind undercutting him if he gave them too much maneuvering room. He learned that everyone on his team was not always on the same team—his secretaries of defense and state were sometimes barely on speaking terms. Not least, he learned that many high-stakes matters were bound to elude his control, even though he was nominally the most powerful person in the world. Decisions of consequence never feature a clear-cut right choice, and many require deciding between two bad options. Truman dove in headfirst anyway. "I don't pass the buck," he said, "nor do I alibi out of any decision I make."

That is an echo of his famous expression "The buck stops here," which Truman displayed on a sign on his desk. The phrase has come to mean that presidents must take responsibility for everything that happens on their watch, but what Truman really meant illustrates a more important aspect of the job: A president must make the call when the time comes to decide.

Information is bound to be incomplete; advisers have hidden motives; his party's divisions may intrude; delay can cause disaster, but moving too quickly could mean even greater calamity.

Sometimes Truman's best decisions were merely giving the thumbs-up to another's idea—like Secretary of State George Marshall's plan to bolster the European economy after the war. That might not seem hard, but a president who knows how to stay out of the way—and doesn't demand credit—gets a lot more done. Such restraint also can deliver a vital tactical benefit. "If we try to make this a Truman accomplishment, it will sink," the president told his White House counsel, Clark Clifford, about what would come to be known as the Marshall Plan. Facing stiff Republican opposition, an initiative named after his secretary of state would do "a whole hell of a lot better in Congress."

Truman made his mark not just in the organization-building—both at home (the creation of the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the National Security Agency) and abroad (the creation of NATO and the United Nations)—that helped transform the global order. He also broke political norms. Where and why he did is worth revisiting during a post-Trump period when Americans are reexamining the guardrails meant to guide public life and presidential power—and when the future of the country's political parties seems more fraught than ever. Truman did the unthinkable when he abruptly nationalized the steel industry on the eve of a strike, spoke off the cuff when presidents didn't do that, and attacked columnists when presidents didn't do that either. His eruptions raised questions about his temperament, yet Truman's decision making was rooted in sturdy American ideas of character, midwestern self-reliance, and fair dealing. Not that Truman was always a Boy Scout; he was occasionally deceptive and often boasted of talking tougher than he actually did (claiming, for example, that he'd given the Russian foreign minister a "one-two to the jaw"). But the prayer he said to himself regularly while in office invoked humility, intellectual honesty, and selflessness. "Two persons are sitting at this desk," he once told a reporter off the record. "One is Harry Truman and the other is the President of the United States, and I have to be sure that Harry Truman remembers on all occasions that the President is there too."

This commitment to larger values helps explain how a white supremacist like Truman (who didn't believe in interracial marriage and disapproved of lunch-counter sit-ins) could take the cause of civil rights as seriously as he did. Prompted by the brutal denial of freedom and equality to Black Americans, he pushed for anti-poll-tax and anti-lynching legislation; he signed executive orders calling for the desegregation of the federal workforce and pledging to integrate the military, moves that caused a revolt of Southern Democrats. "Here's telling President Truman," the editors of the *Jackson Daily News* wrote, "that the Democratic Party in Mississippi is through with him, now, hereafter and forever."

Truman's troubles with his party dovetail with a theme in Michael Kazin's *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party*. "Since its creation," Kazin writes, "the Democratic Party has never enjoyed a prolonged period of internal bliss"—a vantage that also puts Biden's problems with his coalition in context. Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York may be at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, but a more yawning gap between figures in the party has existed before. When Truman was in office, the Democratic Party contained the segregationist Strom Thurmond (then the governor of South Carolina) and Adam Clayton Powell, "Mr. Civil Rights," the first Black New Yorker elected to Congress. Coalitions are messy, which can make progress slow.

Kazin, who teaches history at Georgetown and is a co-editor emeritus of *Dissent*, does not merely aim to offer context, though. His book exhorts Democrats to reacquaint themselves with their past battles against entrenched wealth and on behalf of ordinary people. The cause of "moral capitalism," as he calls it, thrived from the 1820s to the mid-1850s and from the 1930s to the late 1960s. And the party thrived politically too. "Eras when the Democrats argued persuasively about their commitment to make the economy serve ordinary people," he emphasizes, "were the only periods when the party gained durable majorities."

The presidential election of 1948 took place in the middle of that second period. Truman won by making precisely the kind of pitch that Kazin recommends. Ignoring those who doubted that he stood a chance, in early

June he undertook the first of a series of train trips totaling nearly 31,000 miles, conceived as a direct appeal to farmers, workers, and ordinary Americans scared that the Depression might return. His goal was cultural cohesion—Truman had been a farmer and wowed locals by knowing how to judge the age of a horse by the arrangement of its teeth—but the president also pushed policy. In a fiery acceptance speech at the Democratic convention in July, he called the Republican-led Congress back to Washington to pass legislation that voters cared about, including a minimum-wage increase, housing assistance, and an extension of Social Security benefits. When Truman resumed his tour in the fall, at whistle-stop after whistle-stop he delivered his class-conscious message. Voters, he urged, should pull the lever for Democrats, who cared more about "the common people" than about "the interests of the men who have all the money."

Could Joe from Scranton succeed with such an approach in 2024? It would be a very different proposition now, because the social and political structures that supported previous Democratic presidents are gone.

Truman could rely on unions and political machines. Those institutions kept party voters close, tending to members' and constituents' immediate needs and acting as a transmission belt for Democratic policies, making sure voters knew what the party was doing for them. (Some historians argue that this supportive tissue is what lifted Truman in 1948 and that in retrospect his victory shouldn't be considered a surprise at all.) Now, though, machines have largely disappeared, and only one in 10 workers belongs to a union; in 1948, 31 percent of wage and salary workers belonged to a union. The connectors are gone.

Consider Biden's expansion of the child tax credit. The measure, one study estimates, cut child poverty by about 30 percent while it was in effect, and Democrats assumed that this kind of direct assistance would energize voters. But only 47 percent of the public believes that the credit should have been extended, barely more than the 42 percent who say it shouldn't have been. Even Democrats aren't exactly rallying behind it; 34 percent of them are opposed, ambivalent, or unaware of it. Biden faces this problem more broadly in his party. Pushing $3 trillion in spending through Congress in

two big bills in 2021, much of it aimed at Democratic priorities, isn't winning him plaudits from a base discouraged by his inability to pass voting-rights legislation and more targeted social spending.

Kazin's solution is to replace the organizations of the past. "Democrats will not become a 'working class party' or true 'party of the people' again," he writes, "unless they help build and support strong institutions of ordinary Americans to become potent forces in a broader coalition." The Democratic National Committee's Organizing for America, founded after Barack Obama's inauguration, offers a recent model of the grassroots mobilizing he has in mind, but as Kazin himself illustrates, OFA also exposes the model's challenges. It thrived on passion for Obama but withered when it wasn't linked to his stardom. Sustaining community organizations and energy on the tenets of moral capitalism, rather than on inspirational personality, is hard—especially when the foot soldiers who excitedly pounded yard signs confront the deflating reality of politics and stymied progress.

What's more, rallying Democrats around the idea of moral capitalism would mean surmounting skepticism within party ranks about an expanded role for government. A recent Pew survey found that when Democrats were asked if government services should be greatly increased, 63 percent of the progressive left wing of the party—which makes up 12 percent of the whole—said yes. Among the rest of the coalition (the other 88 percent of the party), only a third endorsed an expansion.

Not least among the obstacles to the revival of moral capitalism is the staggering, and growing, expense of elections. (The average amount raised to run for a House seat has increased by more than 60 percent over the past decade, and now stands at almost $2.7 million. The figure for a Senate race is nearly $9.6 million, an increase of more than 200 percent.) To pay the bills, a national party requires donors with ready cash, but those donors tend to be more closely aligned with—or belong to—the elites with concentrated wealth. They're the people, in other words, whom Kazin views as worthy targets of moral capitalism.

Kazin may not dive into all these challenges, but he is well aware of the party's shortcomings. At times, he sounds like a reluctant Democrat, not because he is tempted by the other major party, but because he has been let

down so often by his own. Still, he remains certain that it is the only electoral institution in America that has the muscle memory necessary to solve the challenges of the moment—from inequality to environmental collapse.

His hope—his plea—is that the Democrats, however frustrated they feel, are inspired by social crisis to become newly conscious of their party's history and its obligations. The message of his book is also the message of the Truman presidency: No matter how dark things get, Democrats cannot afford to reach the surrender stage. At the party's convention in 1948, where some delegates waved placards that read We're Just Mild About Harry, the underdog candidate put the message in terms blunter than any modern president would dare echo, though a beleaguered Biden might well wish he could. "If voters don't do their duty by the Democratic Party," Truman said, "they are the most ungrateful people in the world."

This article appears in the April 2022 print edition with the headline "The Patron Saint of Stuck Presidencies."

Departments

- **The Commons: ‘Responsible Conservatism Has a Voice and a Future’**
  Readers respond to our January/February 2022 issue. --

‘Responsible Conservatism Has a Voice and a Future’

The Atlantic April 2022 Issue: The Commons

David Brooks’s poignant essay reads like a breakup letter from a disappointed lover. But his disappointment may result from his having held unrealistic expectations of his paramour. Burkean conservatism has always looked better in the wood-paneled offices of elite periodicals and think tanks than on the gritty streets of the real world. The moral sentiments and manners extolled by Burke and Brooks were always relative, obligatory for dealings with other members of the club but not for dealings with the staff. American conservatives have long had a narrow view of which groups qualify for membership, and found utility in rallying support against the “other”: Barry Goldwater and communism, George W. Bush and terrorism, Donald Trump and immigrants.

Brooks talks as though the conservative embrace of racism and wealth inequality emerged from the shadows only upon Trump’s election, but it

was Ronald Reagan who demonized so-called welfare queens and told us that the government he ran was the problem, not the solution. Reagan's conservative heirs have continued to preach his gospel while gutting public institutions. Rather than representing an aberrant and temporary detour for mainstream Republicans, as Brooks suggests, Trump was the logical culmination of their evolution since Reagan.

I hope that Brooks will find a new and more fulfilling love among moderate Democrats.

Eliot Brenowitz
Seattle, Wash.

David Brooks is right to criticize the departure of the Republican Party from traditional conservative ideology in favor of fascism. But his reasoning carefully avoids the uncomfortable reality that fearmongering, ethnocentrism, and the particular populism that is unique to the far right are deeply rooted in conservative liberalism. His failure to acknowledge the not-so-rosy past of conservatism undermines his argument that traditional conservatism remains valuable.

The world Brooks describes as "true conservatism" is a world of fiction, one that has failed to genuinely handle the wonderful heterogeneity of the real world and has paid for it dearly.

Jessie Gorovitz
London, U.K.

It's very clear from his essay that David Brooks's fondest wish would be for Burkean conservatism to take hold in our society, strongly influencing our legal and moral decisions. Unfortunately, that won't happen. That brand of conservatism thrives best—perhaps thrives only—in relatively small, homogeneous, static groups, where day-to-day behavioral expectations do not require us to confront a quickly evolving, complex society.

Brooks calls upon the vague 18th-century concept of "sentiments" to "tell you what is beautiful and what is ugly, what to want and what is worth wanting, where to go and what to aim for." But living in a multicultural

community such as ours, whose sentiments are we required to follow? Who decides for us all? A priest, a rabbi, a minister, an imam? An admired academic? A newspaper publisher? We can't accept "the latent wisdom that is passed down by generations." To do so would be to accept slavery and acknowledge the divine right of a king.

There is no doubt that this country and the larger world are under terrific existential pressures. But David Brooks's idealized conservatism is not our route to salvation.

David Werdegar
Naperville, Ill.

I appreciated David Brooks's essay, and wholeheartedly agree that the U.S. requires a responsible center-right party to counter the excesses of the left. I wonder, however, where Brooks sees a durable "rightward edge of the leftward tendency" in the modern Democratic Party. Perhaps with Joe Manchin, currently the most hated man in Washington and the only Democrat who could be elected in West Virginia? To my eyes, President Biden has done nothing but capitulate to the left flank of the party (to no benefit), and moderate seats are vulnerable in the midterms. Does Brooks see a party ready to even consider that it's veered too far to the left? Brooks should devote his energy to excising Trumpism from the Republican Party; there's no Burkean conservatism to be found among the Democrats.

Justin Reed
Gaithersburg, Md.

Brooks argues that intellectually defensible conservatism died with Mitt Romney's presidential bid. That is just nonsense. As long as people like Susan Collins, Ben Sasse, Pat Toomey, and Romney himself are still in the U.S. Senate, responsible conservatism has a voice and a future.

Speaking as an ever-loyal Republican, but one who is well aware that the party currently suffers from demagogic temptation, ideological rigidity, and lack of leadership, I wish Brooks would contribute his considerable talent to helping to preserve its future.

Ralph Gaebler
Bloomington, Ind.

Fact-checkers frequently rely on photographs to verify details in an article—that a source was present at the rally, that the blood spatter formed a certain pattern, that the man's eyes were really blue. Even when facts are well documented in other media, pictures can enrich our understanding of events. That was the case this month, as *Atlantic* editor at large Cullen Murphy reviewed Fintan O'Toole's sweeping "personal history" of Ireland, which intersects with Murphy's own personal history. As a child, Murphy moved with his family from Connecticut to Dublin, where, though he didn't know it at the time, they lived near the young O'Toole.

Cullen Murphy

On the morning of March 8, 1966, when the top of Nelson's Pillar was blown off by an IRA splinter group, both boys' fathers took them to see the damage. O'Toole writes that "huge lumps of stone were scattered randomly like pebbles," and his father took a small chunk home as a souvenir. Murphy had the same impulse, and pocketed some pieces (one sits on his desk to this day). Murphy also snapped this photograph, with a Kodak Brownie, capturing what he describes as the "ragged stump" of the monument and a swarm of curious, frightened Dubliners.

Stephanie Hayes, *Deputy Research Chief*

In his cover story, Graeme Wood describes Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia, where Wood has traveled extensively over the past three years. The crown prince has enacted reforms many thought impossible; he has also stifled dissent, creating a climate of fear unprecedented in the nation's history. Our cover employs a minimalist portrait of the man who may rule Saudi Arabia for the next half century.

Oliver Munday, *Design Director**This article appears in the April 2022 print edition.*

Poetry

- **Pearl**
  -- Greg Delanty

Pearl

Greg Delanty: ‘Pearl’

By Greg Delanty

Look, a natural defense
to whatever will damage,
hurt the small soul inside,
the soft-bodied creature,
mollusk: oyster or mussel.
Layer on layer of iridescent
nacre—made with aragonite,
calcite, binding conchiolin—
captures, coats, covers
the trouble. Hold it up
to the light, see light itself
broken down within
the shining layers—reflection,
refraction, diffraction.

You can tell the quality
by the hard, lucid surface,
the refined luster of survival.
