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HOW TO FIND HAPPINESS
MY PERSONALITY TRANSPLANT By Olga Khazan
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# The Atlantic

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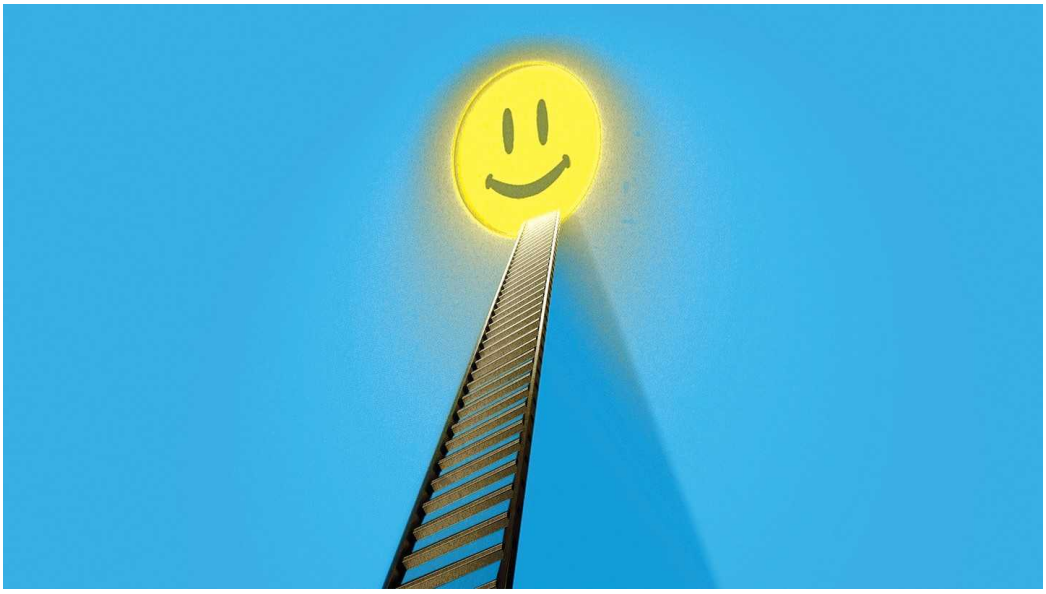

# How to Want Less

How Wanting Less Leads to Satisfaction

By Arthur C. Brooks

I glanced into my teenage daughter's bedroom one spring afternoon last year, expecting to find her staring absentmindedly at the Zoom screen that passed for high school during the pandemic. Instead, she was laughing uproariously at a video she had found. I asked her what she was looking at. "It's an old man dancing like a chicken and singing," she told me.

I came over to her laptop, not being above watching someone making an idiot of himself for 15 seconds of social-media fame. What I found instead was the septuagenarian rock star Mick Jagger, in a fairly recent concert, croaking out the Rolling Stones' megahit "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction"—a song that debuted on the charts when I was a year old—for probably the millionth time. An audience of tens of thousands of what looked to be mostly Baby Boomers and Gen Xers sang along rapturously.

“Is this serious?” she asked. “Do people your age actually like this?” I took umbrage, but had to admit it was a legitimate question. “Kind of,” I answered. It wasn’t just the music, or even the performance, I assured her. To my mind, the longevity of that particular song—No. 2 on *Rolling Stone* magazine’s original list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time”—has a lot to do with a deep truth it speaks.

As we wind our way through life, I explained, satisfaction—the joy from fulfillment of our wishes or expectations—is evanescent. No matter what we achieve, see, acquire, or do, it seems to slip from our grasp.

I was on a roll now. Satisfaction, I told my daughter, is the greatest paradox of human life. We crave it, we believe we can get it, we glimpse it and maybe even experience it for a brief moment, and then it vanishes. But we never give up on our quest to get and hold on to it. “I try, and I try, and I try, and I try,” Jagger sings. How? Through sex and consumerism, according to the song. By building a life that is ever more baroque, expensive, and laden with crap.

“You’ll see,” I told her.

My daughter’s mirth now utterly extinguished, she had the expression I imagine Jean-Paul Sartre’s daughter must have had every day. “So life is just a rat race, and we’re doomed to an existence of dissatisfaction?” she asked. “That sucks.”

“It does suck,” I said. “But we’re not doomed.” I told her we can beat this affliction if we work to truly understand it—and if we’re willing to make some difficult changes to the way we live.

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“Like what?” she asked, her eyes narrowing with the healthy suspicion that comes from being the child of a social scientist, and thus an unwitting participant in many behavioral experiments.

I paused. It was in fact a question to which I'd devoted a lot of my time over the previous few years—not just professionally but personally, and with sometimes uneven results.

Even the most successful people suffer from the dissatisfaction problem. I remember once seeing LeBron James—the world's greatest basketball player—with a look of abject despair on his face after his Cleveland Cavaliers lost the NBA championship to the Golden State Warriors. All of the world's wealth and accolades were like straw in that moment of loss.

Abd al-Rahman III, the emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain, summed up a life of worldly success at about age 70: "I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call."

And the payoff? "I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot," he wrote. "They amount to 14."

As an observer, I understand the problem. I write a column about human happiness for *The Atlantic* and teach classes on the subject at Harvard. I know that satisfaction is one of the core "macronutrients" of happiness (the other two being enjoyment and meaning), and that its slippery nature is one of the reasons happiness is often so elusive as well.

Yet time and again, I have fallen into the trap of believing that success and its accompaniments would fulfill me. On my 40th birthday I made a bucket list of things I hoped to do or achieve. They were mainly accomplishments only a wonk could want: writing books and columns about serious subjects, teaching at a top school, traveling to give lectures and speeches, maybe even leading a university or think tank. Whether these were good and noble goals or not, they were *my* goals, and I imagined that if I hit them, I would be satisfied.

I found that list nine years ago, when I was 48, and realized that I had achieved every item on it. I had been a tenured professor, then the president of a think tank. I was giving frequent speeches, had written some books that had sold well, and was writing columns for *The New York Times*. But none

of that had brought me the lasting joy I'd envisioned. Each accomplishment thrilled me for a day or a week—maybe a month, never more—and then I reached for the next rung on the ladder.

I'd devoted my life to climbing those rungs. I was still devoting my life to climbing—beavering away 60 to 80 hours a week to accomplish the next thing, all the while terrified of losing the last thing. The costs of that kind of existence are exceedingly obvious, but it was only when I looked back at my list that I genuinely began to question the benefits—and to think seriously about the path I was walking.

And what about you?

Your goals are probably very different from mine, and perhaps your lifestyle is too. But the trap is the same. Everyone has dreams, and they beckon with promises of sweet, lasting satisfaction if you achieve them. But dreams are liars. When they come true, it's … fine, for a while. And then a new dream appears.

Mick Jagger's satisfaction dilemma—and ours—starts with a rudimentary formula: *Satisfaction = getting what you want*.

It's so simple, and yet its power is deeply encoded within us. Give a 3-year-old the french fry she is reaching for and see her satisfied expression. But then, after a couple of seconds, watch the wanting return. And that's the actual problem, isn't it? The Stones' song should really have been titled "(I Can't Keep No) Satisfaction." It's almost as if our brains are programmed to prevent us from enjoying anything for very long.

In fact, they are. The term *homeostasis* was introduced in 1926 by a physiologist named Walter B. Cannon, who showed in his book *The Wisdom of the Body* that we have built-in mechanisms to regulate our temperature, as well as our levels of oxygen, water, salt, sugar, protein, fat, and calcium. But the concept applies much more broadly than that: To survive, all living systems tend to maintain stable conditions as best they can.

Homeostasis keeps us alive and healthy. But it also explains why drugs and alcohol work as they do, as opposed to how we wish they would. While that first dose of a new recreational substance might give you great pleasure, your previously naive brain quickly learns to sense an assault on its equilibrium and fights back by neutralizing the effect of the entering drug, making it impossible to get the first feeling back. As the Bucknell University neuroscientist Judith Grisel explains brilliantly in her book, *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction*, addiction is in part a by-product of homeostasis: As the brain becomes used to continual drug-induced production of dopamine—the neurotransmitter of pleasure, which plays a large role in nearly all addictive behaviors—it steeply curtails ordinary production, making another hit necessary simply to feel normal.

The same set of principles works on our emotions. When you get an emotional shock—good or bad—your brain wants to re-equilibrate, making it hard to stay on the high or low for very long. This is especially true when it comes to positive emotions, for primordial reasons that we'll get into shortly. It's why, when you achieve conventional, acquisitive success, you can never get enough. If you base your sense of self-worth on success—money, power, prestige—you will run from victory to victory, initially to keep feeling good, and then to avoid feeling awful.

The unending race against the headwinds of homeostasis has a name: the "hedonic treadmill." No matter how fast we run, we never arrive. "At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1841 essay, "Self-Reliance." "I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from."

Scholars argue over whether our happiness has an immutable set point, or if it might move around a little over the course of our life due to general circumstances. But no one has ever found that immediate bliss from a major victory or achievement will endure. As for money, more of it helps up to a point—it can buy things and services that relieve the problems of poverty, which are sources of *unhappiness*. But forever chasing money as a source of enduring satisfaction simply does not work. "The nature of [adaptation]

condemns men to live on a hedonic treadmill," the psychologists Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell wrote in 1971, "to seek new levels of stimulation merely to maintain old levels of subjective pleasure, to never achieve any kind of permanent happiness or satisfaction."

Yet even if you recognize all this, getting off the treadmill is hard. It feels dangerous. Our urge for *more* is quite powerful, but stronger still is our resistance to *less*. That's one of the insights that earned Princeton's Daniel Kahneman the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics, for work he did with the late Stanford psychologist Amos Tversky.

So you try and you try, but you make no lasting progress toward your goal. You find yourself running simply to avoid being thrown off the back of the treadmill. The wealthy keep accumulating far beyond anything they could possibly spend, and sometimes more than they want to bequeath to their children. They hope that at some point they will feel happy, their lives complete, and are terrified of what will happen if they stop running. As the great 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "Wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame."

According to evolutionary psychology, our tendency to strive for more is perfectly understandable. Throughout most of human history, starvation loomed closer than it does, for the most part, today. A "rich" caveman had a few extra animal skins and arrowheads, and maybe a few piles of seeds and dried fish to spare. With this plenty, he might survive a bad winter.

Our troglodyte ancestors didn't just want to make it through the winter, though; they had bigger ambitions. They wanted to find allies and mates too, with the goal (whether conscious or not) of passing on their genes. And what would make that possible? Among other things, the accumulation of animal skins, demonstrating greater competence, prowess, and attractiveness than the hominid in the next cave over.

Surprisingly little has changed since then. Scholars have shown that our acquisitive tendencies persist amid plenty and regularly exceed our needs. This owes to our vestigial urges—software that still exists in our brains from ancient times.

Competing with rivals for mates helps explain our weird fixation on social comparison. When we think about satisfaction from success (or possessions or fitness or good looks), there's another element to consider: Success is relative. Satisfaction requires not just that you continuously run in place on your own hedonic treadmill, but that you run slightly faster than other people are running on theirs. This is why people with hundreds of millions of dollars can feel like failures if their friends are billionaires, and why famous Hollywood actors can be despondent that others are even more famous.

At some level, we all know that social comparison is ridiculous and harmful, and extensive research confirms this: "Keeping up with the Joneses" is associated with anxiety and even depression. In a series of experiments that required subjects to solve puzzles, for instance, the unhappiest people were consistently those paying the most attention to how they performed relative to other subjects. The small rush of pleasure we get from doing better than some can easily be swallowed up by the unhappiness from doing worse than others. But the urge to have more than others, to be more than others, tugs at us relentlessly.

We live in a time when we are regularly counseled to get back to nature, to our long-ago past—in our diets, our sense of communal obligation, and more. But if our goal is happiness that endures, following our natural urges does not help us, in the main. That is Mother Nature's cruel hoax. Happiness doesn't help propagate the species, so nature doesn't select for it. If you conflate intergenerational survival with happiness, that's your problem, not nature's.

In fact, our natural state is dissatisfaction, punctuated by brief moments of satisfaction. You might not like the hedonic treadmill, but Mother Nature thinks it's pretty great. She likes watching you strive to achieve an elusive goal, because strivers get the goods—even if they don't enjoy them for long. More mates, better mates, better chances of survival for our children—these ancient mandates are responsible for much of the code that runs incessantly in the deep recesses of our brains. It doesn't matter whether you've found your soul mate and would never stray; the algorithms designed to get us more mates (or allow us to make an upgrade) continue

whirring, which is why you still want to be attractive to strangers. Neurobiological instinct—which we experience as dissatisfaction—is what drives us forward.

There are many other, related examples of evolved tendencies that militate against enduring happiness—for example, the tendency toward jealous misery in our romantic relationships. (Mother Nature, while inviting us to cheat, would also like us to be highly alert to the possibility that our partner might be cheating. Studies find that men, who are at risk of spending resources to unwittingly raise children who aren't theirs, fixate most on sexual infidelity; women, who are at risk that their mate will become attached to—and thus divert resources to—another female and her children, respond most negatively to emotional infidelity.)

The insatiable goals to acquire more, succeed conspicuously, and be as attractive as possible lead us to objectify one another, and even ourselves. When people see themselves as little more than their attractive bodies, jobs, or bank accounts, it brings great suffering. Studies show that self-objectification is associated with a sense of invisibility and lack of autonomy, and physical self-objectification has a direct relationship with eating disorders and depression in women. Professional self-objectification is a tyranny every bit as nasty. You become a heartless taskmaster to yourself, seeing yourself as nothing more than *Homo economicus*. Love and fun are sacrificed for another day of work, in search of a positive internal answer to the question *Am I successful yet?* We become cardboard cutouts of real people.

It makes no sense in modern life to use our energies to have five cars, five bathrooms, or even five pairs of sneakers, but we just … want them. Neuroscientists have looked into this. Dopamine is excreted in response to thoughts about buying new things, winning money, acquiring more power or fame, having new sexual partners. The brain evolved to reward us for the behaviors that kept us alive and made us more likely to pass on our DNA. This may be an anachronism, at least to some degree, but it is a fact of our lives nonetheless.

For the faithful, satisfaction has another name: heaven.

Many religions promise heaven to believers. We rarely think carefully about what that entails—harps and clouds?—but the Roman Catholic Church is helpfully specific about it. Heaven grants us the "beatific vision": God showing himself to us face-to-face, making us know his true nature—and thereby granting us the "fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness." Or, as the English mystic Juliana of Norwich wrote of heaven, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." In other words, heaven is pure satisfaction that lasts.

Why can't we seem to be so well on Earth? The 13th-century Catholic priest Thomas Aquinas answers this in his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*. He defines the satisfaction problem as one of misbegotten goals: idols that distract us from God, the true source of our bliss. Even if you are not a religious believer, Thomas's list of the goals that beguile but never satisfy rings true. They include money, power, pleasure, and honor. As Thomas puts it in the case of money,

In other words, *(It don't bring no) satisfaction.* Thomas Aquinas might not fill a stadium with Boomers, but he describes the Jaggerian Dissatisfaction Matrix far better than old Mick himself.

The satisfaction problem, then, is our natural attachment to these inadequate things. If this sounds a bit Buddhist to you, it should. It is very similar to the Buddha's first "Noble Truth": that life is suffering—*duhkha* in Sanskrit, also translated as "dissatisfaction"—and that the cause of this suffering is craving, desire, and attachment to worldly things. Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha (and Jagger, for that matter) were saying the same thing.

Note that neither Thomas nor the Buddha argued that worldly rewards are inherently evil. In fact, they can be used for great good. Money is crucial for a functioning society and supporting your family; power can be wielded to lift others up; pleasure leavens life; and honor can attract attention to the sources of moral elevation. But as attachments—as ends instead of means—the problem is simple: They cannot satisfy.

And this leads us back to my daughter's question: Are we doomed, in this earthly life at least, to an existence of continual dissatisfaction?

If you ever visit Taiwan, the one attraction you must not miss is the National Palace Museum. Arguably the greatest collection of Chinese art and artifacts in the world, the museum contains roughly 700,000 items whose dates range from more than 8,000 years ago, during the Neolithic period, all the way to the modern era.

If there is one problem with the museum, it is precisely its abundance. No one can take in more than a fraction of it in a single visit. That's why, one afternoon a few years ago, I hired a guide to show me a few famous pieces and explain their significance. Little did I know that, with one remark, my guide was about to help me crack my own satisfaction puzzle.

Looking at a massive jade carving of the Buddha from the Qing dynasty, my guide offhandedly remarked that this was a good illustration of how the Eastern view of art differs from the Western view. "How so?" I asked.

He answered my question with a question: "What do you think of when I ask you to imagine a work of art yet to be started?"

"An empty canvas, I guess," I responded.

"Right," he said. Many Westerners tend to see art as being created from nothing. But there's another way to view it: "The art already exists," and the job of artists is simply to reveal it. He told me that his image of art yet to be started was an uncarved block of jade, like what ultimately became the Buddha in front of us. The art is not visible until the artist takes away the stone that is not part of the sculpture, but it is already there nonetheless. Not all artistic philosophy fits this East-versus-West distinction; Michelangelo once said, "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work … I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." But I took my guide's point in—as it were—broad strokes.

Art mirrors life, and therein lies a potential solution to the satisfaction dilemma.

As we grow older in the West, we generally think we should have a lot to show for our lives—a lot of trophies. According to numerous Eastern philosophies, this is backwards. As we age, we shouldn't accumulate more

to represent ourselves, but rather strip things away to find our true selves—and thus, to find happiness and peace. The *Tao Te Ching*, a Chinese text compiled around the fourth century B.C. that is the foundation of Taoism, makes this point with elegance:

In my early 50s, when I visited the National Palace Museum, my life was jammed with possessions, accomplishments, relationships, opinions, and commitments. It took an offhand remark from a museum guide to help me absorb the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha—or for that matter, modern social science—and commit to stop trying to add more and more, but instead start taking things away.

In truth, our formula, *Satisfaction = getting what you want*, leaves out one key component. To be more accurate, it should be:

All of our evolutionary and biological imperatives focus us on increasing the numerator—our *haves*. But the more significant action is in the denominator—our *wants*. The modern world is made up of clever ways to make our wants explode without us realizing it. Even the Dalai Lama, arguably the world's most enlightened man, admits to it. "Sometimes I visit supermarkets," he says in *The Art of Happiness*. "I really love to see supermarkets, because I can see so many beautiful things. So, when I look at all these different articles, I develop a feeling of desire, and my initial impulse might be, 'Oh, I want this; I want that.'"

The secret to satisfaction is not to increase our haves—that will never work (or at least, it will never last). That is the treadmill formula, not the satisfaction formula. The secret is to manage our wants. By managing what we want instead of what we have, we give ourselves a chance to lead more satisfied lives.

These were the ideas I related to my daughter that spring afternoon. She listened with interest, then made a brief rejoinder. "So what you're saying is that the secret to satisfaction is simple," she said. "I just have to go against several million years of evolutionary biology," plus the entirety of modern culture, "and I'll be all set."

Obviously, I couldn't leave the topic there. One of the reasons people often don't trust academics like me is that we always talk about problems, but rarely provide realistic solutions. Even worse, we often ignore our own wisdom. I've known plenty of bankrupt economists and miserable happiness experts.

But she knew this wasn't all just theory to me. We'd moved two years before, from Bethesda, Maryland, a power suburb of Washington, D.C., to a small town outside Boston. I'd resigned from a chief-executive position to teach and write, trading away virtually all day-to-day contact with political and business elites—and was quickly forgotten by most. I hadn't hidden the reason for the move, and my family was fully behind it: I was taking my own advice, published in these pages three years ago, to find a new kind of success and a deeper kind of happiness. That project was not about satisfaction alone; it also involved recognizing that, professionally, most people peak earlier in life than they expect to, and decline faster—and that to resist this is counterproductive and ultimately futile. But it entailed getting off the hedonic treadmill—swapping evanescent professional thrills for more enduring fulfillment that could last well into the back half of my life. When life's rhythms involuntarily slowed further during the pandemic, I had all the more time to think about making that transition work.

So I did have some practical suggestions for my daughter on how to beat the dissatisfaction curse—three habits I have developed for my own life that are grounded in philosophy and social-science research.

One scholar who did propose real solutions to life's problems was Thomas Aquinas. He didn't just explain the satisfaction conundrum; he offered an answer and lived it himself.

The youngest son of Count Landulf of Aquino, Thomas was born around 1225 in his family's castle in central Italy. He was sent to be educated at the first Benedictine monastery, at Montecassino. As the youngest son of a noble family, he was expected to one day become the abbot of the monastery, a post of enormous social prestige.

But Thomas had no interest in this worldly glory. Around the age of 19, he joined the recently created Dominican order, a group of friars dedicated to

poverty and itinerant preaching. This, he felt, was his true identity. The life of wealth and privilege needed to be chipped away to find it.

Thomas pursued the work of a scholar and teacher, producing dense philosophical treatises that are still profoundly influential today. He is known as the greatest philosopher of his age. But this legacy was never his aim. On the contrary, he considered his work to be nothing more than an expression of his love for God and a desire to help his fellow human beings.

The Buddha cracked the satisfaction code in a strikingly similar way. He was born a prince named Siddhartha Gautama around the sixth century B.C., in the region that is now on the border between Nepal and India. After his mother died just days after his birth, his father vowed to protect the infant prince from life's miseries, and thus kept him shut inside the palace, where all his earthly needs and desires would be met.

Siddhartha never ventured beyond that palace until he was 29 years old, when, overcome by curiosity, he asked a charioteer to show him the outside world. On his tour, he encountered an old man, another man wracked with disease, and a decaying corpse. He was troubled by these sights, which his charioteer told him were inevitable in our mortal lives. He then encountered an ascetic who, through renunciation of worldly goods, had achieved not a release from disease and death but, rather, a release from the fear of them.

Siddhartha left his kingdom soon after, and renounced all his attachments. Sitting under the Bodhi tree, he became the Buddha. He spent the rest of his life sharing his wisdom with a growing flock that today numbers more than half a billion people.

I am no Saint Thomas and no Lord Buddha. And my current post at Harvard hardly qualifies as a repudiation of the world's rewards. Even so, I've tried to take a lesson from their lives—that satisfaction lies not in attaining high status and holding on to it for dear life, but in helping other people—including by sharing whatever knowledge and wisdom I've acquired. That's one reason I stepped down from a job in the public eye to concentrate on writing and teaching. If I take another leadership role in my career, my focus will be on what I want to share with others, not what I want to accumulate for myself.

One practical way to whittle down our wants is to simply look at the counsel we get that is turning us into dissatisfied *Homo economicus*, and then do the opposite. For example, many self-help guides suggest making a bucket list on your birthday, so as to reinforce your worldly aspirations. Making a list of the things you want is temporarily satisfying, because it stimulates dopamine. But it creates attachments, which in turn create dissatisfaction as they grow.

I've instead begun to compile a "reverse bucket list," to make the ideas in this essay workable in my life. Each year on my birthday, I list my wants and attachments—the stuff that fits under Thomas Aquinas's categories of money, power, pleasure, and honor. I try to be completely honest. I don't list stuff I would actually hate and never choose, like a sailboat or a vacation house. Rather, I go to my weaknesses, most of which—I'm embarrassed to admit—involve the admiration of others for my work.

Then I imagine myself in five years. I am happy and at peace, living a life of purpose and meaning. I make another list of the forces that would bring me this happiness: my faith, my family, my friendships, the work I am doing that is inherently satisfying and meaningful and that serves others.

Inevitably, these sources of happiness are "intrinsic"—they come from within and revolve around love, relationships, and deep purpose. They have little to do with the admiration of strangers. I contrast them with the things on the first list, which are generally "extrinsic"—the outside rewards associated with Thomas's list of idols. Most research has shown that intrinsic rewards lead to far more enduring happiness than extrinsic rewards.

I consider how extrinsic things compete with the intrinsic underpinnings of my happiness for time, attention, and resources. I imagine myself sacrificing my relationships for the admiration of strangers, and the result down the line in my life. With this in mind, I confront the bucket list. I reflect on each item, telling myself that while a particular desire is not evil, it won't bring me the happiness and peace I seek. Finally, I go back to the list of things that will bring me real happiness. I commit to pursuing these things.

Given my itch for admiration, I have made a point of trying to pay less attention to how others perceive me, by turning away these thoughts when they emerge. I have let many relationships go that were really only about professional advancement. I work somewhat less than I did in years past. It takes conscious effort to avoid backsliding—the treadmill beckons often, and little spritzes of dopamine tempt me to return to my old ways. But my changes in behavior have mostly been permanent, and I've been happier as a result.

I'm not arguing here that there's anything wrong with visiting the exotic place you've always dreamed of seeing, or running a marathon, or otherwise pushing your capabilities to do or make something difficult, professionally or otherwise. Work that feels more like a mission provides purpose; travel can be inherently valuable and enjoyable; learning a skill or meeting a challenge can bring intrinsic satisfaction; meaningful activities pursued with friends or loved ones can deepen relationships. But ask yourself whether the attraction of your bucket-list items, be they professional or experiential, derives mostly from how much they will make others admire or envy you. These motivations will never lead to deep satisfaction.

Lately, there has been an explosion of books on minimalism, which all recommend downsizing your life to get happier—to chip away the detritus of your life. But it's not just about having less stuff to weigh you down. We can, in fact, find immense fullness when we pay attention to smaller and smaller things. The Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh explains this in his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*: "While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes." Why? If we are thinking about the past or future, "we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes."

For many years I had a beloved friend, someone a couple of decades my senior with whom I worked throughout my 20s. In his 40s, he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, and given six months to live. By some miracle or another, he survived those six months, and then another six, and then almost three decades more.

He was never “cured,” however. His doctor told him the cancer was a wolf at the door, biding its time. Sooner or later the wolf would slip in, which it ultimately did a couple of years ago. But the three decades under this cloud were not a burden. On the contrary, they reminded him every day of the gift that was the current day, and thus, to look for his satisfactions not in audacious, multiyear life goals, but in tiny, everyday moments of beauty with his beloved wife and daughter.

Some years ago, a few close friends were at his home, eating and drinking out in his garden. It was dusk, and he asked us to gather around a plant with small, closed flowers. “Watch a flower,” he instructed. We did so, for about 10 minutes, in silence. All at once, the flowers popped open, which we learned that they did every evening. We gasped in amazement. It was a moment of intense satisfaction.

But here’s the thing I still can’t get over: Unlike most of the junk on my old bucket list, that satisfaction endured. That memory still brings me joy—more so than many of my life’s earthly “accomplishments”—not because it was the culmination of a large goal, but because it was an unexpected gift, a tiny miracle.

The prince will always skip the small satisfactions of life, forgoing a flower at dusk for money, power, or prestige. But the sage never makes this mistake, and I try not to either. Each day, I have an item on my to-do list that involves being truly present for an ordinary occurrence. A lot of this revolves around my religious practice as a Catholic, including daily Mass with my wife and meditative prayer. It also includes walks with no devices, listening only to the world outside. These are truly satisfying things.

My daughter went off to college a few months after our talk about the science of satisfaction. After the isolation and lockdowns of COVID-19, and the sad joke that was her senior year of high school, she made a run for the border, enrolling at a university in Spain. I am bereft. We do send each other several messages every day, though. They are almost never about work or school. Instead, we share small moments: a photo of a rainy street, a silly joke, the number of push-ups she just did.

I don’t know whether this is giving her a head start on freeing herself from the paradox of dissatisfaction, but it is like medicine for me. Each message is like the evening of the flower—a brief glimpse of the beatific vision of heaven, perhaps—bringing quiet satisfaction.

Each of us can ride the waves of attachments and urges, hoping futilely that someday, somehow, we will get and keep that satisfaction we crave. Or we can take a shot at free will and self-mastery. It’s a lifelong battle against our inner caveman. Often, he wins. But with determination and practice, we can find respite from that chronic dissatisfaction and experience the joy that is true human freedom.

This essay is adapted from Arthur C. Brooks’s new book, *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*. It appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline “The Satisfaction Trap.”*When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

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# It’s Your Friends Who Break Your Heart

It’s Your Friends Who Break Your Heart

By Jennifer Senior

It is an insolent cliché, almost, to note that our culture lacks the proper script for ending friendships. We have no rituals to observe, no paperwork to do, no boilerplate dialogue to crib from.

Yet when Elisa Albert and Rebecca Wolff were in the final throes of their friendship, they managed, entirely by accident, to leave behind just such a script. The problem was that it read like an Edward Albee play—tart, unsparing, fluorescent with rage.

I met Elisa one evening in 2008, after an old friend's book reading. She was such mesmerizing company that I rushed out to buy her debut novel, *The Book of Dahlia*, which had been published a few months earlier. I was instantly struck by how unafraid of darkness and emotional chaos she was. The same articulate fury suffused *After Birth*, her follow-up; her next book, *Human Blues* (her "monster," as she likes to say), comes out in July.

Rebecca is someone I knew only by reputation until recently. She's the founding editor of the literary magazine *Fence*, a haven for genre-resistant writing and writers that's now almost 25 years old. She's also the author of a novel and four poetry collections, including *Manderley*, selected by the National Poetry Series; she has a fifth coming out in the fall.

The two women became close more than a decade ago, spotting in each other the same traits that dazzled outsiders: talent, charisma, saber-tooth smarts. To Rebecca, Elisa was "impossibly vibrant" in a way that only a 30-year-old can be to someone who is 41. To Elisa, Rebecca was a glamorous and reassuring role model, a woman who through some miracle of alchemy had successfully combined motherhood, marriage, and a creative life.

It would be hard to overstate how much that mattered to Elisa. She was a new mother, all alone in a new city, Albany, where her husband was a tenured professor. (Albany! How does one find friends in Albany?) Yet here was Rebecca—the center of a lush social network, a pollinating bee—showing up on campus at *Fence*'s office every day.

The two entered an intense loop of contact. They took a class in New York City together. They sometimes joked about running away together. And, eventually, they decided to write a book together, a collection of their email and text correspondence about a topic with undeniably broad appeal: how to live in the world and be okay. They called this project *The Wellness Letters*.

I read the manuscript in one gulp. Their exchanges have real swing to them, a screwball quality with a punk twist. On page 1:

But over time, resentments flicker into view. Deep fissures in their belief systems begin to show. They start writing past each other, not hearing each other at all. By the end, the two women have taken every difficult truth they've ever learned about the other and fashioned it into a club. The final paragraphs are a mess of blood and bone and gray guts.

In real time, Elisa and Rebecca enact on the page something that almost all of us have gone through: the painful dissolution of a friendship.

The specifics of their disagreements may be unique to them, but the broad outlines have the ring and shape of the familiar; *The Wellness Letters* are almost impossible to read without seeing the corpse of one of your own doomed friendships floating by.

Elisa complains about failures in reciprocity.

Rebecca implies that Elisa is being insensitive, too quick to judge others.

Elisa implies that Rebecca is being too self-involved, too needy.

Rebecca implies: *Now you're too quick to judge* me.

Elisa ultimately suggests that Rebecca's unhappiness is at least partly of her own unlovely making.

To which Rebecca more or less replies: *Who on earth would choose to be this unhappy?*

To which Elisa basically says: *Well, should that be an excuse for being a myopic and inconsiderate friend?*

Their feelings were too hot to contain. What started as a deliberate, thoughtful meditation about wellness ended as an inadvertent chronicle of a friendship gone terribly awry.

*The Wellness Letters*, 18 months of electrifying correspondence, now sit mute on their laptops.I first read *The Wellness Letters* in December 2019, with a different project in mind for them. The pandemic forced me to set it aside. But two years later, my mind kept returning to those letters, for reasons that at this point have also become a cliché: I was undergoing a Great Pandemic Friendship Reckoning, along with pretty much everyone else. All of those hours in isolation had amounted to one long spin of the centrifuge, separating the thickest friendships from the thinnest; the ambient threat of death and loss made me realize that if I wanted to renew or intensify my bonds with the people I loved most, the time was now, right now.

But truth be told, I'd already been mulling this subject for quite some time. When you're in middle age, which I am (mid-middle age, to be precise—I'm now 52), you start to realize how very much you need your friends. They're the flora and fauna in a life that hasn't had much diversity, because you've been so busy—so relentlessly, stupidly busy—with middle-age things: kids, house, spouse, or some modern-day version of Zorba's full catastrophe. Then one day you look up and discover that the ambition monkey has fallen off your back; the children into whom you've pumped thousands of kilowatt-hours are no longer partial to your company; your partner may or may not still be by your side. And what, then, remains?

With any luck, your friends. According to Laura Carstensen, the director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, I've aged out of the friendship-collecting business, which tends to peak in the tumbleweed stage of life, when you're still young enough to spend Saturday evenings with random strangers and Sunday mornings nursing hangovers at brunch. Instead, I should be in the

friendship-enjoying business, luxuriating in the relationships that survived as I put down roots.

And I *am* luxuriating in them. But those friendships are awfully hard-won. With midlife comes a number of significant upheavals and changes, ones that prove too much for many friendships to withstand. By middle age, some of the dearest people in your life have gently faded away.

You lose friends to marriage, to parenthood, to politics—even when you share the same politics. (Political obsessions are a big, underdiscussed friendship-ender in my view, and they seem to only deepen with age.) You lose friends to success, to failure, to flukish strokes of good or ill luck. (Envy, dear God—it's the mother of all unspeakables in a friendship, the lulu of all shames.) These life changes and upheavals don't just consume your friends' time and attention. They often reveal unseemly characterological truths about the people you love most, behaviors and traits you previously hadn't imagined possible.

Those are brutal.

And I've still left out three of the most common and dramatic friendship disrupters: moving, divorce, and death. Though only the last is irremediable.

The unhappy truth of the matter is that it is normal for friendships to fade, even under the best of circumstances. The real aberration is *keeping* them. In 2009, the Dutch sociologist Gerald Mollenhorst published an attention-grabber of a study that basically showed we replace half of our social network over the course of seven years, a reality we both do and don't intuit.

Were friendships always so fragile? I suspect not. But we now live in an era of radical individual freedoms. All of us may begin at the same starting line as young adults, but as soon as the gun goes off, we're all running in different directions; there's little synchrony to our lives. We have kids at different rates (or not at all); we pair off at different rates (or not at all); we move for love, for work, for opportunity and adventure and more affordable real estate and healthier lifestyles and better weather.

Yet it's precisely because of the atomized, customized nature of our lives that we rely on our friends so very much. We are recruiting them into the roles of people who once simply coexisted with us—parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, fellow parishioners, fellow union members, fellow Rotarians.

It's not wholly natural, this business of making our own tribes. And it hardly seems conducive to human thriving. The percentage of Americans who say they don't have a single close friend has quadrupled since 1990, according to the Survey Center on American Life.

One could argue that modern life conspires against friendship, even as it requires the bonds of friendship all the more.

When I was younger, my friends had as much a hand in authoring my personality as any other force in my life. They advised me on what to read, how to dress, where to eat. But these days, many are showing me how to think, how to *live*.

It gets trickier as you age, living. More bad things happen. Your parents, if you're lucky enough to still have them, have lives so different from your own that you're looking horizontally, to your own cohort, for cues. And you're dreading the days when an older generation will no longer be there for you—when you'll have to rely on another ecosystem altogether for support.

Yet for the past decade or so, I've had a tacit, mutual understanding with many of the people I love most, particularly fellow working parents: *Look, life's crazy, the office has loaded me up like a pack animal, we'll catch up when we catch up, love you in the meantime*. This happens to suit a rotten tendency of mine, which is to work rather than play. I could give you all sorts of therapized reasons for why I do this, but honestly, at my age, it's embarrassing. There comes a point when you have to wake up in the morning and decide that it doesn't matter how you got to whatever sorry cul-de-sac you're circling; you just have to find a way out.

I think of Nora Ephron, whose death caught virtually all of her friends by surprise. Had they known, they all said afterward—had they only known

that she was ill—they'd have savored the dinners they were having, and they certainly wouldn't have taken for granted that more of them would stretch forever into the future. Her sudden disappearance from the world revealed the fragility of our bonds, and how presumptuous we all are, how careless, how naive.

But shouldn't this fragility always be top of mind? Surely the pandemic has taught us that?

I mean, how long can we all keep postponing dinner?

When I began writing this story, my friend Nina warned me: *Do not make this an occasion to rake through your own history and beat yourself up over the state of your own friendships*. Which is something that only a dear friend, armed with protective instincts and a Spidey sense about her friend's self-lacerating tendencies, would say.

Fair enough. But it's hard to write a story about friendship in midlife without thinking about the friends you've lost. "When friendship exists in the background, it's unremarkable but generally uncomplicated," wrote B. D. McClay, an essayist and critic, in *Lapham's Quarterly* last spring. "But when friendship becomes the plot, then the only story to tell is about how the friendship ended."

Friendship is the plot of this article. So naturally I'm going to write at least a little about those I've lost—and my regrets, the choices I've made, the time I have and have not invested.

On the positive side of the ledger: I am a loyal friend. I am an empathetic friend. I seldom, if ever, judge. Tell me you murdered your mother and I'll say, *Gee, you must have been really mad at her*. I am quick to remind my friends of their virtues, telling them that they are beautiful, they are brilliant, they are superstars. I spend money on them. I often express my love.

On the negative side: I'm oversensitive to slights and minor humiliations, which means I'm wrongly inclined to see them as intentional rather than pedestrian acts of thoughtlessness, and I get easily overwhelmed, engulfed.

I can almost never mentally justify answering a spontaneous phone call from a friend, and I have to force myself to phone and email them when I'm hard at work on a project. I'm that prone to monomania, and that consumed by my own tension.

What both of these traits have in common is that I seem to live my life as if I'm under siege. I'm guessing my amygdala is the size of a cantaloupe.

Most of my withered friendships can be chalked up to this terrible tendency of mine not to reach out. I have pals in Washington, D.C., where I started my professional life, whom I haven't seen in years, and friends from college I haven't seen since practically graduation—people I once adored, shared my life with, couldn't have imagined living for two seconds without.

And yet I do. I have.

This is, mind you, how most friendships die, according to the social psychologist Beverley Fehr: not in pyrotechnics, but a quiet, gray dissolve. It's not that anything happens to either of you; it's just that things stop happening between you. And so you drift.

It's the friendships with more deliberate endings that torment. At best, those dead friendships merely hurt; at worst, they feel like personal failures, each one amounting to a little divorce. It doesn't matter that most were undone by the hidden trip wires of midlife I talked about earlier: marriage, parenthood, life's random slings and arrows. By midlife, you've invested enough in your relationships that every loss stings.

You feel bereft, for one thing. As if someone has wandered off with a piece of your history.

And you fear for your reputation. Friends are the custodians of your secrets, the eyewitnesses to your weaknesses. Every confession you've made—all those naked moments—can be weaponized.

There was the friend I lost to parenthood, utterly, though I was also a parent. Her child shortly consumed her world, and she had many child-rearing opinions. These changes alone I could have handled; what I couldn't

handle was her obvious disapproval of my own parenting style (hands-off) and my lack of sentimentality about motherhood itself (if you don't have something nice to say about raising kids, pull up a chair and sit next to me).

There was no operatic breakup. She moved away; I made zero effort to stay in touch. But whenever I think of her, my stomach chirps with a kind of longing. She showed me how cognitive behavioral therapy worked before I even knew it was a thing, rightsizing my perspective each time I turned a wispy cirrus into a thunderhead. And her conversation was tops, weird and unpredictable.

I miss her. Or who she was. Who we were.

I lost a male friend once to parenthood too, though that situation was different. In this instance, I was not yet a mother. But he was a dad, and on account of this, he testily informed me one day, he now had higher moral obligations in this world than to our friendship or to my feelings, which he'd just seriously hurt (over something that in hindsight I'll confess was pretty trivial). While I knew on some level that what he said was true, I couldn't quite believe he was saying it out loud, this person with whom I'd spent so many idle, gleeful hours. I miss him a lot, and wonder to this day whether I should have just let the comment go.

Yet whenever I think of him, a fiery asterisk still appears next to his name.

Mahzad Hojjat, a social-psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, once told me that people may *say* that friendship betrayals aren't as bad as romantic betrayals if they're presented with hypothetical scenarios on a questionnaire. But that's not how they experience friendship betrayals in real life. This doesn't surprise me. I still have sense-memories of how sickened I was when this friend told me I'd been relegated to a lower league—my heart quickening, the blood thumping in my ears.

Then there was the friend who didn't say anything hurtful to me per se; the problem was how little she said about herself at all. According to Hojjat, failures of reciprocity are a huge theme in broken friendships. That stands to reason—asymmetries of time and effort can continue for only so long

before you feel like you've lost your dignity. (I myself have been criticized for neglect and laziness, and rightly. It's shitty.) But there's a subtler kind of asymmetry that I think is far more devastating, and that is a certain lopsidedness in self-disclosure. This friend and I would have long lunches, dinners, coffees, and I'd be frank, always, about my disappointments and travails. I consider this a form of currency between women: You trade confidences, small glass fragments of yourself.

But not with her. Her life was always fine, swell, just couldn't be better, thanks. Talking with her was like playing strip poker with someone in a down parka.

I mentioned this problem to Hojjat. She ventured that perhaps women expect more of their female friends than men do of their male companions, given how intimate our friendships tend to be. In my small, unscientific personal sample of friends, that's certainly true.

Which brings me to the subject of our Problem Friends. Most of us have them, though we may wish we could tweeze them from our lives. (I've had one for decades, and though on some level I'll always love her, I resolved to be done with her during this pandemic—I'd grown weary of her volatility, her storms of anger.) Unfortunately, what the research says about these friends is depressing: It turns out that time in their company can be worse than time spent with people we actively dislike. That, at any rate, is what the psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad discovered in 2003, when she had the inspired idea to monitor her subjects' blood pressure while in the presence of friends who generated conflicted feelings. It went up—even more than it did when her subjects were in the presence of people with whom they had "aversive" relationships. Didn't matter if the conversation was pleasant or not.

You have to wonder whether our bodies have always known this on some level—and whether the pandemic, which for a long while turned every social interaction into a possible health risk, made all of our problem friends easier to give the slip. It's not just that they're potentially bad for you. They *are* bad for you. And—alas—always were.

A brief word here about the scholarship devoted to friendship: I know I've been citing it quite a bit, but the truth is, there's surprisingly little of it, and even less that's particularly good. A great deal is dime-store wisdom crowned in the laurels of peer review, dispatches from the Empire of the Obvious. (When I first wrote to Elisa about this topic, she replied with an implicit eye roll. "Lemme guess: Long term intimate relationships are good for u!")

You have perhaps heard, for instance, of Holt-Lunstad's 2010 meta-analysis showing that a robust social network is as beneficial to an individual's health as giving up cigarettes. So yes: Relationships really are good for u.

But friendship, generally speaking, is the redheaded stepchild of the social sciences. Romantic relationships, marriage, family—that's where the real grant money is. They're a wormy mess of ties that bind, whether by blood, sex, or law, which makes them hotter topics in every sense—more seductive, more fraught.

But this lacuna in the literature is also a little odd, given that most Americans have more friends than they do spouses. And one wonders if, in the near future, this gap in quality scholarship may start to fill.

In a book published in the summer of 2020, *Big Friendship*, Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman, the hosts of the podcast *Call Your Girlfriend*, argued that some friendships are so important that we should consider assigning them the same priority we do our romantic partnerships. They certainly view their own friendship this way; when the two of them went through a rough patch, they went so far as to see a therapist together.

I mentioned this to Laura Carstensen. Her first reaction was one of utter bewilderment: "But … it's the whole idea that friendships are voluntary that makes them positive."

Practically everyone who studies friendship says this in some form or another: What makes friendship so fragile is also exactly what makes it so special. You have to continually opt in. That you choose it is what gives it its value.

But as American life reconfigures itself, we may find ourselves rethinking whether our spouses and children are the only ones who deserve our binding commitments. When Sow and Friedman went into counseling together in their 30s, Sow was unmarried, which hardly made her unusual. According to a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center, nearly a quarter of American adults ages 30 to 49 are single—and *single* here doesn't just mean unmarried; it means not dating anyone seriously. Neither woman had (or has) children, either, a fact that could of course change, but if it doesn't, Sow and Friedman would scarcely be alone. Nearly 20 percent of American adults ages 55 to 64 have no children, and 44 percent of current nonparents ages 18 to 49 say they think it's unlikely they ever will.

"I have been with family sociologists who think it's crazy to think that friends could replace family when you realize you're in real trouble," Carstensen told me. "*Yeah*, they say, *they'll bring you soup when you have the flu, but they're unlikely to care for you when you have dementia*. But we could reach a point where close friends *do* quit their jobs to care for you when you have dementia."

Friendship is the rare kind of relationship that remains forever available to us as we age. It's a bulwark against stasis, a potential source of creativity and renewal in lives that otherwise narrow with time.

"I've recently built a whole community of people half my age," says Esther Perel, 63, the psychotherapist and host of the immensely popular podcast *Where Should We Begin?*, in which she conducts a one-off couples-therapy session with anonymous clients each episode. "It's the most important shift in my life, friendship-wise. They're at my dinner table. I have three friends having babies." These intergenerational friendships, she told me, are one of the unexpected joys of middle age, giving her access to a new vocabulary, a new culture, a new set of mores—at just the moment when the culture seems to have passed her generation by.

When we spoke, Perel was also preparing for her very first couples-therapy session with two friends, suggesting that Sow and Friedman were onto something. "The pandemic has taught us the importance of mass mutual reliance," Perel said. "Interdependence has to conquer the lonely, individualistic nature of Americans." As a native of Belgium, Perel has

always found this aspect of American life a little baffling, particularly when she was a new mother. “In my culture, you ask a friend to babysit,” she told me. “Here, first you try to hire someone; then you go and ‘impose.’ And I thought: *This is warped. This has got to shift.*”

Might it now? Finally?

Elisa and Rebecca nurtured each other as if they were family—and often in ways their own families did not. When they met, Elisa was a new mother, and her parents were 3,000 miles away. Rebecca became her proxy parent, coaching her through breastfeeding and keeping her company; she even smelled like Elisa's mom. "I can't describe the smell, but it's YOU, and it's HER; it's no cosmetic," Elisa later wrote in *The Wellness Letters*, adding,

When they met, Rebecca was still married. While Rebecca's marriage was falling apart, it was Elisa who threw open her doors and gave Rebecca the run of her downstairs floor, providing a refuge where she could think, agonize, crash. "We were sort of in that thing where you're like, 'You're my savior,'" Rebecca told me. "Like, you cling to each other, because you've found each other."

So what, ultimately, undid these two spit sisters?

On one level, it appeared to be a significant difference in philosophy. Namely: how they each thought about depression.

Rebecca struggles with major depression. Elisa has had experiences with the black dog too, going through long spells of trying to bring it to heel. But she hates this word, *depression*, thinks it decanted of all meaning, and in her view, we have a choice about how to respond to it.

To Elisa, women have been sold a false story about the origins of their misery. Everyone talks about brain chemistry. What about trauma? Screwy families? The birth-control pills she took from the time she was 15, the junk food she gorged on as a kid?

But pills for grief—that is, in fact, exactly what Rebecca would argue she needed.

Around and around the two went. The way Elisa saw it, Rebecca was using her depression as an excuse for bad choices, bad behavior. What Rebecca read in Elisa's emails was a reproach, a failure to grasp her pain. "If there's no such thing as depression," she wrote in *The Wellness Letters*, "what is this duck sitting on my head?"

It's a painfully familiar dynamic in a friendship: One friend says, *Get a grip already*. And the other one says, *I'm trying. Can't you see I'm trying?* Neither party relishes her role.

Eventually, Rebecca started taking medication. And once she did, she pulled away, vanishing for weeks. Elisa had no idea where she'd gone.

Weirdly, this explanation was not far off. When Rebecca eventually did reply, the exchange did not end well. Elisa accused her of never apologizing, including for this moment. She accused Rebecca of political grandstanding in their most recent correspondence, rather than talking about wellness. But Elisa also confessed that perhaps Rebecca happened to be catching her on a bad day—Elisa's mother had just phoned, and that call had driven her into a rage.

This last point gave Rebecca an opening to share something she'd clearly been wanting to say for a long time: Elisa was forever comparing her to her mother. But Elisa was also forever complaining about her mother, saying that she hated her mother. Her mother was, variously, "sadistic," "untrustworthy," and "a monster." So finally Rebecca said:

To which Elisa replied that this was exactly the manipulative, hurtful type of gaslighting in which her mother would indulge.

It was at this moment that I, the reader, finally realized: This wasn't just a fight over differences in philosophy.

If our friends become our substitute families, they pay for the failures of our families of origin. Elisa's was such a mess—a brother long dead, parents long divorced—that her unconscious efforts to re-create it were always going to be fraught. And on some level, both women knew this. Elisa said it outright. When she first wrote in *The Wellness Letters* that Rebecca smelled like her mother, Elisa mused:

A different sort of imprinting. That's what many of us, consciously or not, look for in friendships, isn't it? And in our marriages too, at least if you believe Freud? Improved versions of those who raised us?

“I have no answers about how to ensure only good relationships,” Elisa concluded in one email to Rebecca. “But I guess practice? Trial and error? Revision?”

That really is the question. How do you ensure them?

Back in the 1980s, the Oxford psychologists Michael Argyle and Monika Henderson wrote a seminal paper titled “The Rules of Friendship.” Its six takeaways are obvious, but what the hell, they’re worth restating: In the most stable friendships, people tend to stand up for each other in each other’s absence; trust and confide in each other; support each other emotionally; offer help if it’s required; try to make each other happy; and keep each other up-to-date on positive life developments.

It’s that last one where I’m always falling down. Keeping up contact, ideally embodied contact, though even semi-embodied contact—by voice, over the phone—would probably suffice. Only when reading Elisa and Rebecca in atom-splitting meltdown did I realize just how crucial this habit is. The two women had become theoretical to each other, the sum only of their ideas; their friendship had migrated almost exclusively to the page. “The writing took the place of our real-life relationship,” Elisa told me. “I felt like the writing *was* the friendship.”

In this way, Elisa and Rebecca were creating the conditions of a pandemic before there even was one. Had anyone read *The Wellness Letters* in 2019, they could have served as a cautionary tale: Our COVID year of lost embodied contact was not good for friendship. According to a September survey by Pew, 38 percent of Americans now say they feel less close to friends they know well.

The problem is that when it comes to friendship, we are ritual-deficient, nearly devoid of rites that force us together. Emily Langan, a Wheaton College professor of communication, argues that we need them. Friendship anniversaries. Regular road trips. Sunday-night phone calls, annual gatherings at the same rental house, whatever it takes. “We’re not in the habit of elevating the practices of friendship,” she says. “But they should be similar to what we do for other relationships.”

When I consider the people I know with the greatest talent for friendship, I realize that they do just this. They make contact a priority. They jump in their cars. They appear at regular intervals in my inbox. One told me she clicks open her address book every now and then just to check which friends she hasn't seen in a while—and then immediately makes a date to get together.

Laura Carstensen told me during our chat that good friends are for many people a key source of "unconditional positive regard," a phrase I keep turning over and over in my mind. (Not hers, I should note—the term was popularized in the 1950s, to describe the ideal therapist-patient relationship. Carstensen had the good sense to repurpose it.) Her observation perfectly echoed something that Benjamin Taylor, the author of the lovely memoir *Here We Are*, said to me when I asked about his close friendship with Philip Roth. What, I wanted to know, made their relationship work? He thought for so long that I assumed the line had gone dead.

"Philip made me feel that my best self was my real self," he finally said. "I think that's what happens when friendships succeed. The person is giving back to you the feelings you wish you could give to yourself. And seeing the person you wish to be in the world."

I'm not the sampler-making sort. But if I were, I'd sew these words onto one.

Perhaps the best book about friendship I've read is *The Undoing Project*, by Michael Lewis. That might be a strange thing to say, because the book is not, on its face, about friendship at all, but about the birth of behavioral economics. Yet at its heart is the story of an exceptionally complicated relationship between two giants of the field. Amos Tversky was a buffalo of charisma and confidence; Daniel Kahneman was a sparrow of anxiety and neuroticism. The early years of their collaboration, spent at Hebrew University in the late 1960s, were giddy and all-consuming, almost like love. But as their fame grew, a rivalry developed between them, with Tversky ultimately emerging as the better-known of the two men. He was the one who got invited to fancy conferences—without Kahneman. He was the one who got the MacArthur genius grant—not Kahneman. When Kahneman told Tversky that Harvard had asked him to join its faculty,

Tversky blurted out, “It’s me they want.” (He was at Stanford at the time; Kahneman, the University of British Columbia.)

“I am very much in his shadow in a way that is not representative of our interaction,” Kahneman told the psychiatrist Miles Shore, who interviewed him and Tversky for a project on creative pairs. “It induces a certain strain. There is envy! It’s just disturbing. I *hate* the feeling of envy.”

Whenever I mentioned to people that I was working on a story about friendship in midlife, questions about envy invariably followed. It’s an irresistible subject, this thing that Socrates called “the ulcer of the soul.” Paul Bloom, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, told me that many years ago, he taught a seminar at Yale about the seven deadly sins. “Envy,” he said dryly, “was the one sin students never boasted about.”

He’s right. With the exception of envy, all of the deadly sins can be pleasurable in some way. Rage can be righteous; lust can be thrilling; greed gets you all the good toys. But nothing feels good about envy, nor is there any clear way to slake it. You can work out anger with boxing gloves, sate your gluttony by feasting on a cake, boast your way through cocktail hour, or sleep your way through lunch. But envy—what are you to do with that?

Die of it, as the expression goes. No one ever says they’re dying of pride or sloth.

Yet social science has surprisingly little to say about envy in friendship. For that, you need to consult artists, writers, musicians. Gore Vidal complained, “Every time a friend succeeds, something inside me dies”; Morrissey sang “We Hate It When Our Friends Become Successful.” Envy is a ubiquitous theme in literature, spidering its way into characters as wide-ranging as Lenù and Lila, in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels, and pretty much every malevolent neurotic ever conjured by Martin Amis (the apotheosis being Richard Tull, the failed novelist and minor critic of *The Information*, who smacks his son when his rival lands on the best-seller list).

In the spring 2021 issue of *The Yale Review*, Jean Garnett, an editor at Little, Brown, wrote a terrific essay about envy and identical twinship that

feels just as applicable to friendship. My favorite line, bar none: “I can be a very generous sister—maternal, even—as long as I am winning.”

With those 15 words, she exposes an uncomfortable truth. Many of our relationships are predicated on subtle differences in power. Rebalance the scales, and it’s anyone’s guess if our fragile egos survive. Underneath envy, Garnett notes, is the secret wish to shift those weights back in our favor, which really means the shameful wish to destroy what others have. Or as Vidal also (more or less) said: “It is not enough to succeed; a friend must also fail.”

At this point, pretty much everyone I know has been kicked in the head in some way. We’ve all got our satchel of disappointments to lug around.

But I did feel envy fairly acutely when I was younger—especially when it came to my girlfriends’ appearances and self-confidence. One friend in particular filled me with dread every time I introduced her to a boyfriend. She’s a knockout, turns heads everywhere; she both totally knows this and doesn’t have a clue. I have vivid memories of wandering a museum with her one afternoon and watching men silently trail her, finding all dopey manner of excuses to chat her up.

My tendency in such situations is to turn my role into shtick—I’m the wisecracking Daria, the mordant brunette, the one whose qualities will age well.

I hated pretending I was above it all.

What made this situation survivable was that this friend was—and still is—forever telling me how great I look, even though it’s perfectly apparent in any given situation that she’s Prada and I’m the knockoff on the street vendor’s blanket. Whatever. She means it when she tells me I look great. I love her for saying it, and saying it repeatedly.

In recent years, I have had one friend I *could* have badly envied. He was my office spouse for almost two decades—the other half of a two-headed vaudeville act now a quarter century old. We bounced every story idea off each other, edited each other, took our book leaves at the same time. Then I

got a new job and he went off to work on his second book, which he phoned to tell me one day had been selected by … Oprah.

"You're kidding!" I said. "That's fucking amazing."

Which, of course, it was. This wasn't a lie.

But in the cramped quarters of my ego, crudely bound together with bubble gum and Popsicle sticks, was it all that fucking amazing?

No. It wasn't. I wanted, briefly, to die.

Here's the thing: I don't allow myself too many silly, Walter Mitty–like fantasies of glory. I'm a pessimist by nature, and anyway, fame has never been my endgame in life.

But I did kinda sorta secretly hope to one day be interviewed from Oprah Winfrey's yoga nook.

That our friendship hummed along in spite of this bolt of fortune and success in his life had absolutely nothing to do with me and everything to do with him, for the simple reason that he continued to be his vulnerable self. (It turns out that lucky, successful people still have problems, just different ones.) It helped that he never lost sight of my own strengths, either, even if I felt inadequate for a while by comparison. One day, while he was busy crushing it, I glumly confessed that I was miserable in my new job. *Then go be awesome somewhere else*, he said, as if awesomeness were some essential property of mine, how you'd define me if I were a metal or a stone. I think I started to cry.

It helped, too, that my friend genuinely deserved to be on *Oprah*. (His name is Bob Kolker, by the way; his book is *Hidden Valley Road*, and everyone should read it, because it is truly a marvel.)

It's the almost-ness of envy that kills, as Garnett points out in her essay—the fact that it could have or should have been us. She quotes Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: "We envy those who are near us in time, place, age, or reputation … those whose possession of or success in a thing is a reproach to us: these

are our neighbors and equals; for it is clear that it is our own fault we have missed the good thing in question."

And I have no clue what I would have done if Bob hadn't handled his success with humility and tact. If he'd become monstrously boastful—or, okay, even just a little bit complacent—I honestly think I wouldn't have been able to cope. Adam Smith noted how essential this restraint is in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. If a suddenly successful person has any judgment, he wrote, that man will be highly attuned to his friends' envy, "and instead of appearing to be elated with his good fortune, he endeavours, as much as he can, to smother his joy, and keep down that elevation of mind with which his new circumstances naturally inspire him."

This is, ultimately, what Amos Tversky failed to do with Daniel Kahneman, according to *The Undoing Project*. Worse, in fact: Tversky refused to address the imbalance in their relationship, which never should have existed in the first place. Kahneman tried, at first, to be philosophical about it. "The spoils of academic success, such as they are—eventually one person gets all of it, or gets a lot of it," he told Shore, the psychiatrist studying creative pairs. "That's an unkindness built in. Tversky cannot control this, though I wonder whether he does as much to control it as he should."

But Kahneman wasn't wondering, obviously. This was an accusation masquerading as a suspicion. In hindsight, the decisive moment in their friendship—what marked the beginning of the end—came when the two were invited to deliver a couple of lectures at the University of Michigan. At that point, they were working at separate institutions and collaborating far less frequently; the theory they presented that day was one almost entirely of Kahneman's devising. But the two men still jointly presented it, as was their custom.

After their presentation, Tversky's old mentor approached them both and asked, with genuine awe, where all those ideas came from. It was the perfect opportunity for Tversky to credit Kahneman—to right the scales, to correct the balance, to pull his friend out from his shadow and briefly into the sun.

Yet Tversky didn't. "Danny and I don't talk about these things" was all he said, according to Lewis.

And with that, the reader realizes: Kahneman's second-class status—in both his own imagination and the public's—was probably essential to the way Tversky conceived of their partnership. At the very least, it was something Tversky seemed to feel zero need to correct.

Kahneman continued to collaborate with Tversky. But he also took pains to distance himself from this man, with whom he'd once shared a typewriter in a small office in Jerusalem. The ill feelings wouldn't ease up until Tversky told Kahneman he was dying of cancer in 1996.

So now I'm back to thinking about Nora Ephron's friends, mourning all those dinners they never had. It's the dying that does it, always. I started here; I end here (we all end here). It is amazing how the death of someone you love exposes this lie you tell yourself, that there'll always be time. You can go months or even years without speaking to a dear old friend and feel fine about it, blundering along, living your life. But discover that this same friend is dead, and it's devastating, even though your day-to-day life hasn't changed one iota. You're rudely reminded that this is a capricious, disordered cosmos we live in, one that suddenly has a friend-size hole in it, the air now puckered where this person used to be.

Last spring, an old friend of my friend David died by suicide. David had had no clue his friend was suffering. When David had last seen this man, in September 2020, he'd seemed more or less fine. January 6 had wound him up more than David's other friends—he'd fulminate volcanically about the insurrection over the phone, practically burying David under mounds of words—but David certainly never interpreted this irritating development as a sign of despair.

But David did notice one curious thing. Before the 2020 election, he had bet this friend $10,000 that Donald Trump would win. David isn't rich, but he figured the move was the ultimate hedge—if he won, at least he got 10 grand, and if he lost, hey, great, no more Trump. On November 7, when it became official—no more Trump!—David kept waiting for a phone call. It

never came. He tried provoking his friend, sending him a check for only $15.99, pointing out that they'd never agreed on a payment schedule.

His friend wrote back a sharp rebuke, saying the bet was serious.

David sent him a check for $10,000.

His friend wordlessly cashed it.

David was stunned. No gloating phone call? Not even a gleeful email, a crowing text? This was a guy who loved winning a good bet.

Nothing. A few months later, he was found dead in a hotel.

The suicide became a kind of reckoning for David, as it would for anyone. Because he's a well-adjusted, positive sort of fellow, he put his grief to what seemed like constructive use: He wrote an old friend from high school, once his closest friend, the only one who knew exactly how weird their adolescence was. David was blunt with this friend, telling him in his email that a good friend of his had just died by suicide, and there was nothing he could do about it, but he could reach out to those who were still alive, those he'd lost track of, people like him. Would he like to catch up sometime? And reminisce?

David never heard back. Distraught, he contacted someone the two men had in common. It turns out his friend's life hadn't worked out the way he'd wanted it to. He didn't have a partner or kids; his job wasn't one he was proud of; he lived in a backwater town. Even though David had made it clear he just wanted to talk about the old days, this man, for whatever reason, couldn't bring himself to pick up the phone.

At which point David was contending with two friendship deaths—one literal, the other metaphorical. "You know what I realized?" he said to me. "At this age, if your romantic life is settled"—and David's is—"it's your friends who break your heart. Because they're who's left."

What do you do with friendships that were, and aren't any longer?

By a certain age, you find the optimal perspective on them, ideally, just as you do with so many of life's other disappointments. If the heartbreak of midlife is realizing what you've lost—that sad inventory of dusty shelves—then the revelation is discovering that you can, with effort, get on with it and start enjoying what you have.

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson made a point of emphasizing this idea in his stages of psychosocial development. The last one, "integrity versus despair," is all about "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be."

An awfully tidy formulation, admittedly, and easier said than done. But worth striving for nonetheless.

Elisa recently wrote to me that what she misses about Rebecca is "the third thing that came from the two of us. the alchemy of our minds and hearts and (dare i say?) souls in conversation. what she brought out in me and what i brought out in her, and how those things don't *exist* without our relationship."

And maybe this is what many creative partnerships look like—volatile, thrilling, supercharged. Some can't withstand the intensity, and self-destruct. It's what happened to Kahneman and Tversky. It's famously what happens to many bands before they dissolve. It's what happened to Elisa and Rebecca.

Elisa hopes to now make art of that third thing. To write about it. Rebecca remains close in her mind, if far away in real life.

Of course, as Elisa points out (with a hat-tip to Audre Lorde), all deep friendships generate something outside of themselves, some special and totally other third thing. Whether that thing can be sustained over time becomes the question.

The more hours you've put into this chaotic business of living, the more you crave a quieter, more nurturing third thing, I think. This needn't mean dull. The friends I have now, who've come all this distance, who are part of my aging plan, include all kinds of joyous goofballs and originals. There's

loads of open country between enervation and intoxication. It's just a matter of identifying where to pitch the tent. Finding that just-right patch of ground, you might even say, is half the trick to growing old.

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "It's Your Friends Who Break Your Heart." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

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The author, photographed in December

# I Gave Myself Three Months to Change My Personality

I Gave Myself Three Months to Change My Personality

By Olga Khazan

One morning last summer, I woke up and announced, to no one in particular: “I choose to be happy today!” Next I journaled about the things I was grateful for and tried to think more positively about my enemies and myself. When someone later criticized me on Twitter, I suppressed my rage and tried to sympathize with my hater. Then, to loosen up and expand my social skills, I headed to an improv class.

I was midway through an experiment—sample size: 1—to see whether I could change my personality. Because these activities were supposed to make me happier, I approached them with the desperate hope of a supplicant kneeling at a shrine.

Psychologists say that personality is made up of five traits: extroversion, or how sociable you are; conscientiousness, or how self-disciplined and organized you are; agreeableness, or how warm and empathetic you are; openness, or how receptive you are to new ideas and activities; and neuroticism, or how depressed or anxious you are. People tend to be happier and healthier when they score higher on the first four traits and lower on neuroticism. I'm pretty open and conscientious, but I'm low on extroversion, middling on agreeableness, and off the charts on neuroticism.

Researching the science of personality, I learned that it was possible to deliberately mold these five traits, to an extent, by adopting certain behaviors. I began wondering whether the tactics of personality change could work on me.

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I've never really liked my personality, and other people don't like it either. In grad school, a partner and I were assigned to write fake obituaries for each other by interviewing our families and friends. The nicest thing my partner could shake out of my loved ones was that I "really enjoy grocery shopping." Recently, a friend named me maid of honor in her wedding; on the website for the event, she described me as "strongly opinionated and fiercely persistent." Not wrong, but not what I want on my tombstone. I've always been bad at parties because the topics I bring up are too depressing, such as everything that's wrong with my life, and everything that's wrong with the world, and the futility of doing anything about either.

Neurotic people, twitchy and suspicious, can often "detect things that less sensitive people simply don't register," writes the personality psychologist Brian Little in *Who Are You, Really?* "This is not conducive to relaxed and easy living." Rather than being motivated by rewards, neurotic people tend to fear risks and punishments; we ruminate on negative events more than emotionally stable people do. Many, like me, spend a lot of money on therapy and brain medications.

And while there's nothing wrong with being an introvert, we tend to underestimate how much we'd enjoy behaving like extroverts. People have

the most friends they will ever have at age 25, and I am much older than that and never had very many friends to begin with. Besides, my editors wanted me to see if I could change my personality, and I'll try anything once. (I'm open to experiences!) Maybe I, too, could become a friendly extrovert who doesn't carry around emergency Xanax.

I gave myself three months.

The best-known expert on personality change is Brent Roberts, a psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Our interview in June felt, to me, a bit like visiting an evidence-based spiritual guru—he had a Zoom background of the red rocks of Sedona and the answers to all my big questions. Roberts has published dozens of studies showing that personality can change in many ways over time, challenging the notion that our traits are "set like plaster," as the psychologist William James put it in 1887. But other psychologists still sometimes tell Roberts that they simply don't believe it. There is a "deep-seated desire on the part of many people to think of personality as unchanging," he told me. "It simplifies your world in a way that's quite nice." Because then you don't have to take responsibility for what you're like.

Don't get too excited: Personality typically remains fairly stable throughout your life, especially in relation to other people. If you were the most outgoing of your friends in college, you will probably still be the bubbliest among them in your 30s. But our temperaments tend to shift naturally over the years. We change a bit during adolescence and a lot during our early 20s, and continue to evolve into late adulthood. Generally, people grow less neurotic and more agreeable and conscientious with age, a trend sometimes referred to as the "maturity principle."

Longitudinal research suggests that careless, sullen teenagers can transform into gregarious seniors who are sticklers for the rules. One study of people born in Scotland in the mid-1930s—which admittedly had some methodological issues—found no correlation between participants' conscientiousness at ages 14 and 77. A later study by Rodica Damian, a psychologist at the University of Houston, and her colleagues assessed the personalities of a group of American high-school students in 1960 and

again 50 years later. They found that 98 percent of the participants had changed at least one personality trait.

Even our career interests are more stable than our personalities, though our jobs can also change us: In one study, people with stressful jobs became more introverted and neurotic within five years.

With a little work, you can nudge your personality in a more positive direction. Several studies have found that people can meaningfully change their personalities, sometimes within a few weeks, by behaving like the sort of person they want to be. Students who put more effort into their homework became more conscientious. In a 2017 meta-analysis of 207 studies, Roberts and others found that a month of therapy could reduce neuroticism by about half the amount it would typically decline over a person's life. Even a change as minor as taking up puzzles can have an effect: One study found that senior citizens who played brain games and completed crossword and sudoku puzzles became more open to experiences. Though most personality-change studies have tracked people for only a few months or a year afterward, the changes seem to stick for at least that long.

When researchers ask, people typically say they want the success-oriented traits: to become more extroverted, more conscientious, and less neurotic. Roberts was surprised that I wanted to become more agreeable. Lots of people think they're *too* agreeable, he told me. They feel they've become doormats.

Toward the end of our conversation, I asked Roberts whether there's anything he would change about his own personality. He admitted that he's not always very detail-oriented (a.k.a. conscientious). He also regretted the anxiety (a.k.a. neuroticism) he experienced early in his career. Grad school was a "disconcerting experience," he said: The son of a Marine and an artist, he felt that his classmates were all "brilliant and smart" and understood the world of academia better than he did.

I was struck by how similar his story sounded to my own. My parents are from the Soviet Union and barely understand my career in journalism. I went to crappy public schools and a little-known college. I've notched

every minor career achievement through night sweats and meticulous emails and aching computer shoulders. Neuroticism had kept my inner fire burning, but now it was suffocating me with its smoke.

To begin my transformation, I called Nathan Hudson, a psychology professor at Southern Methodist University who created a tool to help people alter their personality. For a 2019 paper, Hudson and three other psychologists devised a list of "challenges" for students who wanted to change their traits. For, say, increased extroversion, a challenge would be to "introduce yourself to someone new." Those who completed the challenges experienced changes in their personality over the course of the 15-week study, Hudson found. "Faking it until you make it seems to be a viable strategy for personality change," he told me.

But before I could tinker with my personality, I needed to find out exactly what that personality consisted of. So I logged on to a website Hudson had created and took a personality test, answering dozens of questions about whether I liked poetry and parties, whether I acted "wild and crazy," whether I worked hard. "I radiate joy" got a "strongly disagree." I disagreed that "we should be tough on crime" and that I "try not to think about the needy." I had to agree, but not strongly, that "I believe that I am better than others."

I scored in the 23rd percentile on extroversion—"very low," especially when it came to being friendly or cheerful. Meanwhile, I scored "very high" on conscientiousness and openness and "average" on agreeableness, my high level of sympathy for other people making up for my low level of trust in them. Finally, I came to the source of half my breakups, 90 percent of my therapy appointments, and most of my problems in general: neuroticism. I'm in the 94th percentile—"extremely high."

I prescribed myself the same challenges that Hudson had given his students. To become more extroverted, I would meet new people. To decrease neuroticism, I would meditate often and make gratitude lists. To increase agreeableness, the challenges included sending supportive texts and cards, thinking more positively about people who frustrate me, and, regrettably, hugging. In addition to completing Hudson's challenges, I decided to sign up for improv in hopes of increasing my extroversion and reducing my

social anxiety. To cut down on how pissed off I am in general, and because I'm an overachiever, I also signed up for an anger-management class.

Hudson's findings on the mutability of personality seem to endorse the ancient Buddhist idea of "no-self"—no core "you." To believe otherwise, the sutras say, is a source of suffering. Similarly, Brian Little writes that people can have "multiple authenticities"—that you can sincerely be a different person in different situations. He proposes that people have the ability to temporarily act out of character by adopting "free traits," often in the service of an important personal or professional project. If a shy introvert longs to schmooze the bosses at the office holiday party, they can grab a canapé and make the rounds. The more you do this, Little says, the easier it gets.

Staring at my test results, I told myself, *This will be fun!* After all, I had changed my personality before. In high school, I was shy, studious, and, for a while, deeply religious. In college, I was fun-loving and boy-crazy. Now I'm a basically hermetic "pressure addict," as one former editor put it. It was time for yet another me to make her debut.

Ideally, in the end I would be happy, relaxed, personable. The screams of angry sources, the failure of my boyfriend to do the tiniest fucking thing—they would be nothing to me. I would finally understand what my therapist means when she says I should "just observe my thoughts and let them pass without judgment." I made a list of the challenges and attached them to my nightstand, because I'm very conscientious.

Immediately I encountered a problem: I don't like improv. It's basically a Quaker meeting in which a bunch of office workers sit quietly in a circle until someone jumps up, points toward a corner of the room, and says, "I think I found my kangaroo!" My vibe is less "yes, and" and more "well, actually." When I told my boyfriend what I was up to, he said, "You doing improv is like Larry David doing ice hockey."

I was also scared out of my mind. I hate looking silly, and that's all improv is. The first night, we met in someone's townhouse in Washington, D.C., in a room that was, for no discernible reason, decorated with dozens of

elephant sculptures. Right after the instructor said, “Let’s get started,” I began hoping that someone would grab one and knock me unconscious.

That didn’t happen, so instead I played a game called Zip Zap Zop, which involved making lots of eye contact while tossing around an imaginary ball of energy, with a software engineer, two lawyers, and a guy who works on Capitol Hill. Then we pretended to be traveling salespeople peddling sulfuric acid. If someone had walked in on us, they would have thought we were insane. And yet I didn’t hate it. I decided I could think of being funny and spontaneous as a kind of intellectual challenge. Still, when I got home, I unwound by drinking one of those single-serving wines meant for petite female alcoholics.

A few days later, I logged in to my first Zoom anger-management class. Christian Jarrett, a neuroscientist and the author of *Be Who You Want*, writes that spending quality time with people who are dissimilar to you increases agreeableness. And the people in my anger-management class did seem pretty different from me. Among other things, I was the only person who wasn’t court-ordered to be there.

We took turns sharing how anger has affected our lives. I said it makes my relationship worse—less like a romantic partnership and more like a toxic workplace. Other people worried that their anger was hurting their family. One guy shared that he didn’t understand why we were talking about our feelings when kids in China and Russia were learning to make weapons, which I deemed an interesting point, because you’re not allowed to criticize others in anger management.

The sessions—I went to six—mostly involved reading worksheets together, which was tedious, but I did learn a few things. Anger is driven by expectations. If you think you’re going to be in an anger-inducing situation, one instructor said, try drinking a cold can of Coke, which may stimulate your vagus nerve and calm you down. A few weeks in, I had a rough day, my boyfriend gave me some stupid suggestions, and I yelled at him. Then he said I’m just like my dad, which made me yell more. When I shared this in anger management, the instructors said I should be clearer about what I need from him when I’m in a bad mood—which is listening, not advice.

All the while, I had been working on my neuroticism, which involved making a lot of gratitude lists. Sometimes it came naturally. As I drove around my little town one morning, I thought about how grateful I was for my boyfriend, and how lonely I had been before I met him, even in other relationships. *Is this gratitude?* I wondered. *Am I doing it?*

What is personality, anyway, and where does it come from?

Contrary to conventional wisdom about bossy firstborns and peacemaking middles, birth order doesn't influence personality. Nor do our parents shape us like lumps of clay. If they did, siblings would have similar dispositions, when they often have no more in common than strangers chosen off the street. Our friends do influence us, though, so one way to become more extroverted is to befriend some extroverts. Your life circumstances also have an effect: Getting rich can make you less agreeable, but so can growing up poor with high levels of lead exposure.

A common estimate is that about 30 to 50 percent of the differences between two people's personalities are attributable to their genes. But just because something is genetic doesn't mean it's permanent. Those genes interact with one another in ways that can change how they behave, says Kathryn Paige Harden, a behavioral geneticist at the University of Texas. They also interact with your environment in ways that can change how *you* behave. For example: Happy people smile more, so people react more positively to them, which makes them even more agreeable. Open-minded adventure seekers are more likely to go to college, where they grow even more open-minded.

Harden told me about an experiment in which mice that were genetically similar and reared in the same conditions were moved into a big cage where they could play with one another. Over time, these very similar mice developed dramatically different personalities. Some became fearful, others sociable and dominant. Living in Mouseville, the mice carved out their own ways of being, and people do that too. "We can think of personality as a learning process," Harden said. "We learn to be people who interact with our social environments in a certain way."

This more fluid understanding of personality is a departure from earlier theories. A 1914 best seller called *The Eugenic Marriage* (which is exactly as offensive as it sounds) argued that it is not possible to change a child's personality "one particle after conception takes place." In the 1920s, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung posited that the world consists of different "types" of people—thinkers and feelers, introverts and extroverts. (Even Jung cautioned, though, that "there is no such thing as a pure extravert or a pure introvert. Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum.") Jung's rubric captured the attention of a mother-daughter duo, Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, neither of whom had any formal scientific training. As Merve Emre describes in *The Personality Brokers*, the pair seized on Jung's ideas to develop that staple of Career Day, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. But the test is virtually meaningless. Most people aren't ENTJs or ISFPs; they fall between categories.

Over the years, poor parenting has been a popular scapegoat for bad personalities. Alfred Adler, a prominent turn-of-the-20th-century psychologist, blamed mothers, writing that "wherever the mother-child relationship is unsatisfactory, we usually find certain social defects in the children." A few scholars attributed the rise of Nazism to strict German parenting that produced hateful people who worshipped power and authority. But maybe any nation could have embraced a Hitler: It turns out that the average personalities of different countries are fairly similar. Still, the belief that parents are to blame persists, so much so that Roberts closes the course he teaches at the University of Illinois by asking students to forgive their moms and dads for whatever personality traits they believe were instilled or inherited.

Not until the 1950s did researchers acknowledge people's versatility—that we can reveal new faces and bury others. "Everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role," the sociologist Robert Ezra Park wrote in 1950. "It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves."

Around this time, a psychologist named George Kelly began prescribing specific "roles" for his patients to play. Awkward wallflowers might go socialize in nightclubs, for example. Kelly's was a rhapsodic view of

change; at one point he wrote that “all of us would be better off if we set out to be something other than what we are.” Judging by the reams of self-help literature published each year, this is one of the few philosophies all Americans can get behind.

About six weeks in, my adventures in extroversion were going better than I’d anticipated. Intent on talking to strangers at my friend’s wedding, I approached a group of women and told them the story of how my boyfriend and I had met—I moved into his former room in a group house—which they deemed the “story of the night.” On the winds of that success, I tried to talk to more strangers, but soon encountered the common wedding problem of Too Drunk to Talk to People Who Don’t Know Me.

For more advice on becoming an extrovert, I reached out to Jessica Pan, a writer in London and the author of the book *Sorry I’m Late, I Didn’t Want to Come*. Pan was an extreme introvert, someone who would walk into parties and immediately walk out again. At the start of the book, she resolved to become an extrovert. She ran up to strangers and asked them embarrassing questions. She did improv and stand-up comedy. She went to Budapest and made a friend. Folks, she networked.

In the process, Pan “flung open the doors” to her life, she writes. “Having the ability to morph, to change, to try on free traits, to expand or contract at will, offers me an incredible feeling of freedom and a source of hope.” Pan told me that she didn’t quite become a hard-core extrovert, but that she would now describe herself as a “gregarious introvert.” She still craves

alone time, but she's more willing to talk to strangers and give speeches. "I will be anxious, but I can do it," she said.

I asked her for advice on making new friends, and she told me something a "friendship mentor" once told her: "Make the first move, and make the second move, too." That means you sometimes have to ask a friend target out twice in a row—a strategy I had thought was gauche.

I practiced by trying to befriend some female journalists I admired but had been too intimidated to get to know. I messaged someone who seemed cool based on her writing, and we arranged a casual beers thing. But on the night we were supposed to get together, her power went out, trapping her car in her garage.

Instead, I caught up with an old friend by phone, and we had one of those conversations you can have only with someone you've known for years, about how the people who are the worst remain the worst, and how all of your issues remain intractable, but good on you for sticking with it. By the end of our talk, I was high on agreeable feelings. "Love you, bye!" I said as I hung up.

"LOL," she texted. "Did you mean to say 'I love you'?"

Who *was* this new Olga?

For my gratitude journaling, I purchased a notebook whose cover said, "Gimme those bright sunshiney vibes." I soon noticed, though, that my gratitude lists were repetitive odes to creature comforts and entertainment: Netflix, yoga, TikTok, leggings, wine. After I cut my finger cooking, I expressed gratitude for the dictation software that let me write without using my hands, but then my finger healed. "Very hard to come up with new things to say," I wrote one day.

I find expressing gratitude unnatural, because Russians believe doing so will provoke the evil eye; our God doesn't like too much bragging. The writer Gretchen Rubin hit a similar wall when keeping a gratitude journal for her book *The Happiness Project*. "It had started to feel forced and affected," she wrote, making her annoyed rather than grateful.

I was also supposed to be meditating, but I couldn't. On almost every page, my journal reads, "Meditating sucks!" I tried a guided meditation that involved breathing with a heavy book on my stomach—I chose Nabokov's *Letters to Véra*—only to find that it's really hard to breathe with a heavy book on your stomach.

I tweeted about my meditation failures, and Dan Harris, a former *Good Morning America* weekend anchor, replied: "The fact that you're noticing the thoughts/obsessions is proof that you are doing it correctly!" I picked up Harris's book *10% Happier*, which chronicles his journey from a high-strung reporter who had a panic attack on air to a high-strung reporter who meditates a lot. At one point, he was meditating for two hours a day.

When I called Harris, he said that it's normal for meditation to feel like "training your mind to not be a pack of wild squirrels all the time." Very few people actually clear their minds when they're meditating. The point is to focus on your breath for however long you can—even if it's just a second—before you get distracted. Then do it over and over again. Occasionally, when Harris meditates, he still "rehearses some grand, expletive-filled speech I'm gonna deliver to someone who's wronged me." But now he can return to his breath more quickly, or just laugh off the obsessing.

Harris suggested that I try loving-kindness meditation, in which you beam affectionate thoughts toward yourself and others. This, he said, "sets off what I call a gooey upward spiral where, as your inner weather gets balmier, your relationships get better." In his book, Harris describes meditating on his 2-year-old niece. As he thought about her "little feet" and "sweet face with her mischievous eyes," he started crying uncontrollably.

*What a pussy*, I thought.

I downloaded Harris's meditation app and pulled up a loving-kindness session by the meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. She had me repeat calming phrases like "May you be safe" and "May you live with ease." Then she asked me to envision myself surrounded by a circle of people who love me, radiating kindness toward me. I pictured my family, my boyfriend, my friends, my former professors, emitting beneficence from their bellies

like Care Bears. “You’re good; you’re okay,” I imagined them saying. Before I knew what was happening, I had broken into sobs.

After two brutal years, people may be wondering if surviving a pandemic has at least improved their personality, making them kinder and less likely to sweat the small stuff. “Post-traumatic growth,” or the idea that stressful events can make us better people, is the subject of one particularly cheery branch of psychology. Some big events do seem to transform personality: People grow more conscientious when they start a job they like, and they become less neurotic when they enter a romantic relationship. But in general, it’s not the event that changes your personality; it’s the way you experience it. And the evidence that people grow as a result of difficulty is mixed. Studies of post-traumatic growth are tainted by the fact that people like to say they got something out of their trauma.

It’s a nice thing to believe about yourself—that, pummeled by misfortune, you’ve emerged stronger than ever. But these studies are mostly finding that people prefer to look on the bright side.

In more rigorous studies, evidence of a transformative effect fades. Damian, the University of Houston psychologist, gave hundreds of students at the university a personality test a few months after Hurricane Harvey hit, in November 2017, and repeated the test a year later. The hurricane was devastating: Many students had to leave their homes; others lacked food, water, or medical care for weeks. Damian found that her participants hadn’t grown, and they hadn’t shriveled. Overall they stayed the same. Other research shows that difficult times prompt us to fall back on tried-and-true behaviors and traits, not experiment with new ones.

Growth is also a strange thing to ask of the traumatized. It’s like turning to a wounded person and demanding, “Well, why didn’t you grow, you lazy son of a bitch?” Roberts said. Just surviving should be enough.

It may be impossible to know how the pandemic will change us on average, because there is no “average.” Some people have struggled to keep their jobs while caring for children; some have lost their jobs; some have lost loved ones. Others have sat at home and ordered takeout. The pandemic

probably hasn't changed you if the pandemic itself hasn't felt like that much of a change.

I blew off anger management one week to go see Kesha in concert. I justified it because the concert was a group activity, plus she makes me happy. The next time the class gathered, we talked about forgiveness, which Child Weapons Guy was not big on. He said that rather than forgive his enemies, he wanted to invite them onto a bridge and light the bridge on fire. I thought he should get credit for being honest—who hasn't wanted to light all their enemies on fire?—but the anger-management instructors started to look a little angry themselves.

In the next session, Child Weapons Guy seemed contrite, saying he realized that he uses his anger to deal with life, which was a bigger breakthrough than anyone expected. I was also praised, for an unusually tranquil trip home to see my parents, which my instructors said was an example of good "expectation management."

Meanwhile, my social life was slowly blooming. A Twitter acquaintance invited me and a few other strangers to a whiskey tasting, and I said yes even though I don't like whiskey or strangers. At the bar, I made some normal-person small talk before having two sips of alcohol and wheeling the conversation around to my personal topic of interest: whether I should have a baby. The woman who organized the tasting, a self-proclaimed extrovert, said people are always grateful to her for getting everyone to socialize. At first, no one wants to come, but people are always happy they did.

I thought perhaps whiskey could be my "thing," and, to tick off another challenge from Hudson's list, decided to go to a whiskey bar on my own one night and talk to strangers. I bravely steered my Toyota to a sad little mixed-use development and pulled up a stool at the bar. I asked the bartender how long it had taken him to memorize all the whiskeys on the menu. "Two months," he said, and turned back to peeling oranges. I asked the woman sitting next to me how she liked her appetizer. "It's good!" she said. *This is awful!* I thought. I texted my boyfriend to come meet me.

The larger threat on my horizon was the improv showcase—a free performance for friends and family and whoever happened to jog past Picnic Grove No. 1 in Rock Creek Park. The night before, I kept jolting awake from intense, improv-themed nightmares. I spent the day grimly watching old Upright Citizens Brigade shows on YouTube. "I'm nervous on your behalf," my boyfriend said when he saw me clutching a throw pillow like a life preserver.

To describe an improv show is to unnecessarily punish the reader, but it went fairly well. Along with crushing anxiety, my brain courses with an immigrant kid's overwhelming desire to do whatever people want in exchange for their approval. I improvised like they were giving out good SAT scores at the end. On the drive home, my boyfriend said, "Now that I've seen you do it, I don't really know why I thought it's something you wouldn't do."

I didn't know either. I vaguely remembered past boyfriends telling me that I'm insecure, that I'm not funny. But why had I been trying to prove them right? Surviving improv made me feel like I could survive anything, as bratty as that must sound to all my ancestors who survived the siege of Leningrad.

Finally, the day came to retest my personality and see how much I'd changed. I thought I felt hints of a mild metamorphosis. I was meditating regularly, and had had several enjoyable get-togethers with people I wanted to befriend. And because I was writing them down, I had to admit that positive things did, in fact, happen to me.

But I wanted hard data. This time, the test told me that my extroversion had increased, going from the 23rd percentile to the 33rd. My neuroticism decreased from "extremely high" to merely "very high," dropping to the 77th percentile. And my agreeableness score … well, it dropped, from "about average" to "low."

I told Brian Little how I'd done. He said I likely did experience a "modest shift" in extroversion and neuroticism, but also that I might have simply triggered positive feedback loops. I got out more, so I enjoyed more things, so I went to more things, and so forth.

Why didn't I become more agreeable, though? I had spent months dwelling on the goodness of people, devoted hours to anger management, and even sent an e-card to my mom. Little speculated that maybe by behaving so differently, I had heightened my internal sense that people aren't to be trusted. Or I might have subconsciously bucked against all the syrupy gratitude time. That I had tried so hard and made negative progress—"I think it's a bit of a hoot," he said.

Perhaps it's a relief that I'm not a completely new person. Little says that engaging in "free trait" behavior—acting outside your nature—for too long can be harmful, because you can start to feel like you are suppressing your true self. You end up feeling burned out or cynical.

The key may not be in swinging permanently to the other side of the personality scale, but in balancing between extremes, or in adjusting your personality depending on the situation. "The thing that makes a personality trait maladaptive is not being high or low on something; it's more like rigidity across situations," Harden, the behavioral geneticist, told me.

"So it's okay to be a little bitchy in your heart, as long as you can turn it off?" I asked her.

"People who say they're never bitchy in their heart are lying," she said.

Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet* and the world's most famous introvert, seems reluctant to endorse the idea that introverts should try to be more outgoing. Over the phone, she wondered why I wanted to be more extroverted in the first place. Society often urges people to conform to the qualities extolled in performance reviews—punctual, chipper, gregarious. But there are upsides to being introspective, skeptical, and even a little neurotic. She said it's possible that I didn't change my underlying introversion, that I just acquired new skills. She thought I could probably maintain this new personality, so long as I kept doing the tasks that got me here.

Hudson cautioned that personality scores can bounce around a bit from moment to moment; to be certain of my results, I ideally would have taken the test a number of times. Still, I felt sure that some change had taken

place. A few weeks later, I wrote an article that made people on Twitter really mad. This happens to me once or twice a year, and I usually suffer a minor internal apocalypse. I fight the people on Twitter while crying, call my editor while crying, and Google *How to become an actuary* while crying. This time, I was stressed and angry, but I just waited it out.

This kind of modest improvement, I realized, is the goal of so much self-help material. Hours a day of meditation made Harris only 10 percent happier. My therapist is always suggesting ways for me to "go from a 10 to a nine on anxiety." Some antidepressants make people feel only slightly less depressed, yet they take the drugs for years. Perhaps the real weakness of the "change your personality" proposition is that it implies incremental change isn't real change. But being slightly different is still being different—the same you but with better armor.

The late psychologist Carl Rogers once wrote, "When I accept myself just as I am, then I can change," and this is roughly where I've landed. Maybe I'm just an anxious little introvert who makes an effort to be less so. I can learn to meditate; I can talk to strangers; I can be the mouse who frolics through Mouseville, even if I never become the alpha. I learned to play the role of a calm, extroverted softy, and in doing so I got to know myself.

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "My Personality Transplant."*

# Features

- **The Betrayal**
  America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan added moral injury to military failure. But a group of soldiers, veterans, and ordinary citizens came together to try to save Afghan lives and salvage some American honor. -- George Packer

Afghans camp near Hamid Karzai International Airport, in Kabul, on August 24, a week before Joe Biden's declared deadline for the evacuation of allies. A U.S.-military C-17 transport aircraft takes off overhead.

# The Betrayal

Joe Biden's Saigon

By George Packer

*Updated at 5:15 p.m. ET on February 9, 2022*It took four presidencies for America to finish abandoning Afghanistan. George W. Bush's attention wandered off soon after American Special Forces rode horseback through the northern mountains and the first schoolgirls gathered in freezing classrooms. Barack Obama, after studying the problem for months, poured in troops and pulled them out in a single ambivalent gesture whose goal was to keep the war on page A13. Donald Trump cut a deal with the Taliban that left the future of the Afghan government, Afghan women, and al-Qaeda to fate. By then most Americans were barely aware that the war was still going on. It fell to Joe Biden to complete the task.

On April 13, 2021, the day before Biden was to address the country about Afghanistan, a 33-year-old Marine Corps veteran named Alex McCoy received a call from a White House speechwriter named Carlyn Reichel, who was also the National Security Council's acting senior director for partnerships and global engagement. McCoy was a co-founder and the political director of an organization of progressive veterans called Common Defense, which had been waging a lobbying campaign with the slogan "End the forever war." McCoy and his colleagues believed that more American bloodshed in a conflict without a definable end could no longer be justified. "The president has made his decision," Reichel told McCoy, "and you'll be very happy with it." She explained that it was now too late to withdraw all troops by May 1, the deadline in the agreement signed in early 2020 by the Trump administration and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. But the withdrawal of the last several thousand American troops would begin on that date, in the hope that the Taliban would not resume attacks, and it would end by September 11, the 20th anniversary of the day the war began.

On April 14, Biden, speaking from the White House, raised his hands and declared, "It's time to end the forever war." The withdrawal, he said, would not be "a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely." The president ended his speech, as he often does, with the invocation "May God protect our troops." Then he went to pay his respects at Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, where many of the dead from the 9/11 wars are buried.

Afterward, Ron Klain, Biden's chief of staff, said, "When someone writes a book about this war, it's going to begin on September 11, 2001, and it's going to end on the day Joe Biden said, 'We're coming home.'" With firm resolve, Biden had done the hard thing. The rest would be logistics, while the administration turned its attention to domestic infrastructure. Alex McCoy framed the front page of the next day's *New York Times* and hung it on the wall of his Harlem apartment.

But the war wasn't over—not for Afghans, not even for some Americans.

Toward the end of 2019, Representative Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat, visited the U.S. embassy in Kabul and found a skeletal staff working on visas only part-time. "This was no accident, by the way," Crow told me.

“This was a long-term Stephen Miller project to destroy the SIV program and basically shut it off.” Miller, the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim Trump adviser, along with allies throughout the executive branch, added so many new requirements that amid the pandemic the program nearly came to a halt. By the time Biden gave his speech, at least 18,000 desperate Afghans and tens of thousands of family members stood in a line that was barely moving. Many feared that the Americans would now leave without them.

Najeeb Monawari had been waiting for his visa for more than a decade. He was born in 1985, the oldest son among 10 children of a bus-mechanic father and a mother who devoted herself to keeping them alive amid the lethal hazards of Kabul. He grew up in a neighborhood turned to apocalyptic rubble by the civil war of the early 1990s. He and his friends took turns walking point along mined streets on their way to swim in the Kabul River. During the Taliban’s rule, his family was under constant threat because of their origins in the Panjshir Valley, the last base of the Northern Alliance resistance.

With the arrival of the Americans in 2001, power flipped and Panjshiris became the top dogs. “We were the winners, and Panjshir Valley people were misusing their power,” Monawari told me, “driving cars wildly in the road, beating people. We were the king of the city.” In 2006, barely 20, Monawari lied to his parents about his destination and traveled to Kandahar, the Pashtun heartland of the Taliban, where he signed on with a military contractor as an interpreter for Canadian forces. “I spoke three English words and no Pashto,” he said. But his work ethic made him so popular that, after a year with the Canadians, Monawari was snatched away by U.S. Army Green Berets. He spent much of the next four years as a member of 12-man teams going out on nonstop combat missions in Afghanistan’s most dangerous provinces.

In the Special Forces, Monawari found his identity. The Green Berets were so demanding that most interpreters soon washed out, but the Americans loved him and he loved them. On missions he carried a gun and used it, came under fire—he was wounded twice—and rescued other team members, just like the Americans. He wore his beard full and his hair shaved close like them; he tried to walk like them, bulk up like them, even

think like them. In pictures he is indistinguishable from the Green Berets. The violence of the missions—and the fear and hatred he saw in the eyes of local elders—sometimes troubled him, and as a Panjshiri and a combat interpreter, he carried an automatic death sentence if he ever fell into the hands of the Taliban. But he was proud to help give Pashtun girls the right to attend school.

In 2009, when a team leader told Monawari about the SIV program, he applied and collected glowing letters of recommendation from commanding officers. He wanted to become an American citizen, join the U.S. military, and come back to Afghanistan as a Green Beret. “This was totally the plan,” he told me. “I was dreaming to go to America, to hold the flag in a picture.”

Monawari’s application disappeared into the netherworld of the Departments of State and Homeland Security, where it languished for the next decade. He checked the embassy website five times a day. He sent dozens of documents by military air to the immigration service center in Nebraska, but never received clear answers. His medical exam kept expiring as his case stalled, so he had to borrow money to take it again and again. “We have reviewed the State Department records and confirm that your SIV case is still pending administrative processing in order to verify your qualifications for this visa,” he was told in 2016.

In January 2019, Monawari was summoned for an interview—his third—at the embassy in Kabul. By then he had gone to work for Doctors Without Borders as a logistician, managing warehouses and supply chains. The carnage of fighting had traumatized him—he found it impossible to be alone—and he liked the gentle, unselfish spirit of the humanitarians. He rose through the organization to overseas positions in Sierra Leone, Lebanon, and finally a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. He flew back to Afghanistan for the interview at the embassy and found himself faced with a consular officer who had been angered by the previous applicant. When it was Monawari’s turn, she almost shouted her questions, and other Afghans in the room could hear the details of his case. “Can you calm down?” he asked her.

“Oh, am I too loud?” The interview was brief and unfriendly.

In April, Monawari received a notice from the Department of Homeland Security, headed “Intent to Revoke”: “It was confirmed by Mission Essential Personnel that you failed multiple polygraphs and background investigations.” Monawari had taken regular polygraphs with the Green Berets, and a few times they had come back inconclusive before he ultimately passed. He wrote to explain this to DHS, though he didn’t know what long-lost evidence he could submit to prove it. “It is very sad, I have been waiting more than 8 years to move to a safe place (USA),” Monawari wrote. “Please be fair with me I was wounded twice in the mission and I worked very hard for US special force to save their life please check all my recommendation letters (attached) don’t leave me behind :(”

A month later, a second notice arrived: “The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has determined that you worked as a procurement manager and not as a translator/interpreter.” To limit immigration, the Trump administration had restricted SIVs mostly to interpreters. Monawari had served for three years as a combat interpreter with the Green Berets, but his final year as a procurement manager was used to disqualify him. To deny him a visa, the U.S. government erased all his shared sacrifice with Americans who might not have survived in Afghanistan without him. He would have to try again from zero.

The subject is almost too unbearable for Monawari to discuss. “When I received the revocation—denied for nine years, 10 years—it’s so painful,” he said. “SIV is like a giant, a monster, something scary. There is no justice in this world. There is no justice, and I have to accept that.” By 2019 his beard was going white, though he was only 34. He attributes every aged hair to the Special Immigrant Visa.

In October 2020, Kim Staffieri, an SIV advocate with the Association of Wartime Allies, phoned her friend Matt Zeller, a former CIA officer and Army major. Zeller had made the cause of America’s Afghan allies his full-time passion as a means to atone for an air strike in Afghanistan in 2008 that had killed 30 women and children, for which he felt some responsibility. His frenetic work on the issue had made him so sick with ulcers that he’d had to step away in 2019. Staffieri was calling to get him back on the field.

“Matt, it doesn’t matter who wins the election; we’re leaving next year,” she said. “The SIV program is broken, and we don’t have enough time to get them all out. We’re going to need to evacuate.”

Zeller proposed that they draft a white paper with ideas for the next administration. They wrote it over the holidays. Their recommendations included the mass evacuation of SIV applicants to safety in a U.S. territory, such as Guam, while their cases were processed. The “Guam option” had two successful precedents: Operation New Life, in 1975, which evacuated 130,000 South Vietnamese to Guam when their country fell to North Vietnam; and Operation Pacific Haven, in 1996, when the U.S. brought 6,600 Kurds facing extermination by the army of Saddam Hussein out of northern Iraq.

Staffieri and Zeller were finishing their white paper as President Biden took office. Three of Zeller’s friends occupied key positions in the administration, and on February 9 he sent them copies. Two of them—one a good friend of Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser—never replied. The third promised to bring the proposals to a top aide of the newly confirmed secretary of state, Antony Blinken. But nothing came of it.

The report was published on April 21 by the Truman Center for National Policy, Human Rights First, and Veterans for American Ideals. The ties between these organizations and the new administration were nearly incestuous. Blinken, a longtime supporter of refugees, had been vice chair of the board of Human Rights First; Sullivan had served on the Truman board, as had his top deputy, Jon Finer. A former correspondent with *The Washington Post*, Finer had helped start an organization called the Iraqi (later International) Refugee Assistance Project in 2008, while he was in law school. IRAP had become the leading legal-assistance group for SIV applicants. Samantha Power, the author of *“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*, had sat on IRAP’s board; she was the new head of the U.S. Agency for International Development. The highest level of the Biden administration was staffed with a humanitarian dream team—the best people to make Afghan allies a top priority.

The outside advocates drew on their personal relationships with insiders to lobby for urgent action. “By every back channel available, we let people

know," Mike Breen, the chief executive of Human Rights First, and an Army veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, told me. Breen was a co-founder of IRAP in law school with Finer. "The Guam option has been in the ether for a long time. It's something that we talked about a lot."

Many of the advocates were in favor of ending the war. With the sand now running out, they made their case for early evacuations on moral and strategic grounds. If, on the way out of Afghanistan, America broke its promises to people at great risk of revenge killings, its already battered international reputation would be further damaged. Such a failure would also injure the morale of American troops, who were now staring at a lost war, and whose code of honor depended on leaving no one behind.

The advocates omitted one person from their calculations: the president. But Biden's history in this area should have troubled them.

On April 14, 1975, as North Vietnamese divisions raced toward Saigon, the 32-year-old first-term senator from Delaware was summoned to the White House. President Gerald Ford pleaded with him and other senators for funding to evacuate Vietnamese allies. Biden refused. "I feel put-upon," he said. He would vote for money to bring out the remaining Americans, but not one dollar for the locals. On April 23, as South Vietnam's collapse accelerated, Biden repeated the point on the Senate floor. "I do not believe the United States has an obligation, moral or otherwise, to evacuate foreign nationals" other than diplomats, he said. That was the job of private organizations. "The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese."

This episode did not define Biden's career in foreign affairs—he went on to build a long record of internationalism. In the 1990s he pressed for U.S. military intervention in Bosnia during its genocidal civil war. In the winter of 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, he went to Kabul and found himself confronted by a young girl who stood straight up at her desk in an unfinished schoolroom with a single light bulb and no heat. "You cannot leave," she told the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"I promise I'll come back," Biden said.

“You cannot leave,” the girl repeated. “They will not deny me learning to read. I will read, and I will be a doctor like my mother. I will. America must stay.”

Biden recalled the encounter for me in an interview the following year. He interpreted the girl’s words to mean: “Don’t fuck with me, Jack. You got me in here. You said you were going to help me. You better not leave me now.” It was, he said, a “catalytic event for me,” and upon his return to Washington he proposed spending $20 million on 1,000 new Afghan schools—modest nation-building. But there was little interest from either the White House or Congress.

When I interviewed Biden again in 2006, the disaster of the Iraq War and the persistence of corruption and violence in Afghanistan were turning him against armed humanitarianism. At a dinner in Kabul in 2008, when President Hamid Karzai refused to admit to any corruption, Biden threw down his napkin and walked out. He was finished with Afghanistan.

In late 2010, Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, came into Vice President Biden’s office to talk about the situation of Afghan women. According to an audio diary Holbrooke kept, Biden insisted, “I am not sending my boy back there to risk his life on behalf of women’s rights.” (Biden’s son Beau, a member of the Delaware National Guard, had recently been deployed to Iraq for a year.) He wanted every American troop out of Afghanistan, regardless of the consequences for women or anyone else. When Holbrooke asked about the obligation to people who had trusted the U.S. government, Biden said, “Fuck that, we don’t have to worry about that. We did it in Vietnam; Nixon and Kissinger got away with it.” During the 2020 campaign, an interviewer repeated some of these quotes to Biden and asked if he believed he would bear responsibility for harm to Afghan women after a troop withdrawal and the return of the Taliban. Biden bristled and his eyes narrowed. “No, I don’t!” he snapped, and put his thumb and index finger together. “Zero responsibility.”

Human rights alone were not grounds for committing American troops—it was a solid argument, based on national interest. But it didn’t explain the hardness, the combativeness. Questions about Afghanistan and its people

made Biden rear up and dig in. During the 2020 campaign he was seen as deeply empathetic, but the fierce attachments of "Middle-Class Joe" are parochial. They come from personal ties, not universal concerns: his family, his hometown, his longtime advisers, his country, its troops. The Green Beret interpreter and the girl in the unfinished schoolroom now stood outside the circle of empathy.

On January 20, 2021, an Afghan named Khan was waiting to celebrate the inauguration of President Biden when he received news he'd been awaiting for three years: His SIV application had cleared an important step, approval from the U.S. embassy. (For his family's safety, I'm not using his full name.) Khan, a 30-year-old employee of a U.S. military contractor, lived in a village in southeastern Afghanistan with his wife, their 2-year-old son, a dog, two cats, and extended family in a house next to an orchard of almond and apple trees. He had received three death threats from the Taliban and survived three suicide bombings and four armed assaults that had killed scores of people. The Trump years had been disastrous for SIV applicants like Khan. Ten minutes after receiving the longed-for email, he was thrilled to watch the swearing-in of the new American president.

Mina, Khan's 22-year-old wife, who was pregnant with their second child, had 10 family members working for the Americans. This was unusual for a family of Pashtuns, and dangerous in a region where the Taliban controlled much of the countryside. Her sister's husband, Mohammad, had worked for several years at the U.S. embassy and was now employed in the same military office as Khan. Mohammad had been waiting on his SIV application for 10 years. The previous October, Taliban insurgents had killed his uncle, nephew, and cousin at a wedding ceremony where they had intended to kill him. On January 27, Mohammad was driving to the office with his 10-year-old son when a Toyota Corolla blocked his way. From behind a low concrete wall two gunmen opened fire. Mohammad managed to drive 50 feet before a stream of bullets cut him down. When his wife heard the news, she ran a mile barefoot to the hospital, but by the time she got there Mohammad was dead.

Their son stopped speaking for a week. When he was finally able to describe the attack, he repeated the words that the Talibs had yelled:

“Where are the American forces to save you? Where are their helicopters? Where are their airplanes? You’re an infidel, a traitor! You helped them for a decade! Where are they now?”

If not for an errand in Kabul, Khan would have been in the car with his brother-in-law. He started working from home, and he and Mina left his village and moved between rented houses in the provincial capital. They took shifts on the roof day and night to keep watch for strangers who might try to plant an explosive in the yard. In the spring, the Taliban closed in on the city. One night in May, Khan’s dog barked incessantly, and the next morning Khan found a note at his back gate. It said: “You have been helping U.S. occupier forces, and you have been providing them with intelligence information. You are an ally and spy of infidels. We will never leave you alive and will not have mercy on your family, because they are supporting you. Your destiny will be like your brother-in-law’s.” He went around to check the front gate. A grenade was wired to the bolt, set to explode when the gate was opened.

Khan and Mina moved to another rented house. In June, Talibs raided his family home in the village. They expelled Khan’s parents and siblings, smashed windows, destroyed furniture, stole Mina’s jewelry and Khan’s car, and burned all of his books.

SIV applicants and their families numbered about 80,000 people. But after 20 years, far more Afghans than these had put themselves in danger by joining the American project in their country: rights activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, judges, students and teachers at American-backed universities, special-forces commandos. A full accounting would reach the hundreds of thousands. Many of them were women, and most were under 40—the generation of Afghans who came of age in the time of the Americans.

The U.S. and its international partners had failed to achieve most of their goals in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and armed forces remained criminally weak, hollowed out by corruption and tribalism; violence kept increasing; the Taliban were taking district after district. But something of value—always fragile and dependent on foreigners—had been accomplished. “We created a situation that enabled the Afghans to change

their own society," Mark Jacobson, an Army veteran and former civilian adviser to U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, told me. "We created a situation that enabled the Afghans to nation-build."

After the U.S. and the Taliban signed their agreement in Doha in February 2020, attacks against American troops stopped—but hundreds of Afghans in civil society, especially women, were targeted in a terrifying campaign of assassinations that shattered what was left of public trust in the Afghan government and seemed to show what lay in store after the Americans left. Carter Malkasian, the author of *The American War in Afghanistan*, who worked for years as a civilian adviser to the U.S. military and later spoke with Taliban negotiators during the peace talks, told me they never expressed any mercy toward Afghans who'd worked with the Americans: "The Taliban have always been very lenient toward the killing and execution of people they consider spies."

In a restored Islamic Emirate, everyone's fate would be up to the Taliban. Not just to the political leaders in Doha and Kabul, but to local gunmen in remote provinces with no media around, carrying out the will of God, settling scores, or just enjoying themselves. Some Afghans would be marked for certain death. Many others would face the destruction of their hopes and dreams. No law required the U.S. government to save a single one—only a moral debt did. But just as ordinary Talibs could act on their own to punish "traitors," so could ordinary Americans try on their own to help their friends.

A U.S. Army captain I will call Alice Spence knew a group of Afghan women who were especially endangered. (Because she is still active-duty military, she asked for anonymity.) Spence, from a nonmilitary family in New England, had attended an Ivy League college. At 27, in the summer of 2014, she quit her job at an accounting firm and joined the Army. The recruiter warned that she wouldn't get very far—she was too old and barely made the minimum weight requirement (her wrists and biceps were about the same size). But Spence became an officer and deployed to Afghanistan, where she trained Afghan units called Female Tactical Platoons.

FTPs were attached to Special Operations Forces and went on missions with male commandos—American and Afghan men and women flying on

the same helicopters, humping heavy kits up the same mountains, the women joining the men on violent night raids against Taliban or Islamic State targets. The main job of the female troops was to search and question local women and children, but they also fired their weapons and were fired upon. The FTPs were particularly hated by the Taliban for being elite troops, for being women, and for being overwhelmingly Hazara—the Shiite minority that the Taliban continually targeted with suicide bombings and assassinations.

Hawa, a young Hazara woman from Bamiyan, in the center of the country, joined the army at age 18, in 2015. She loved watching war movies, and when military recruiters visited her high school she was drawn to the uniforms, the weapons, the bravery, the chance to serve her country. (I am using only her first name for her family's safety.) Hawa's parents vigorously opposed her choice—the army was too dangerous for their daughter. But she was determined. "It doesn't matter if you say no," Hawa told them. "You will see when I go there."

Lieutenant Hawa met Captain Spence at Bagram Air Base. "Oh my God, you're an FTP?" Spence asked her, laughing. "You're so short. How did you get into the military?" Hawa replied that Spence looked like a skeleton and gave her the call sign *Eskelet*; Spence's for Hawa was *Tarbooz*, for the watermelon she loved to eat at the base's dining facility.

Spence formed a close bond with Hawa and another FTP member named Mahjabin. The women exchanged language lessons, and Spence learned a variety of jokes and vulgarities in Dari. They worked out together, shared midnight meals, and fell into hysterics over whoopee cushions.

The Afghan women saw the war with the fatalism of hard experience. They expected no final victory, only a long, perhaps permanent struggle to hold on to the gains for which they'd sacrificed so much. "I truly loved, admired, and respected them," Spence told me. "There's very few bonds that exist on this Earth like those between people who walk towards death together."

After the Doha agreement, American Special Forces stopped going on missions against the Taliban with the Afghans. In the summer of 2020, Spence, now stationed in Hawaii, got a message from Hawa. Talibs had told

the imam of the Shiite mosque in her family's Kabul neighborhood that they would kill any local Hazara soldiers they might later find if he didn't give up their names now. Hawa asked for Spence's help to get out of Afghanistan. Spence put together an SIV application, but it was rejected—as a member of the Afghan National Army, Hawa lacked a letter from a U.S. employer.

After Biden declared the end of the war in April, Spence began to panic. "Hawa my friend are you still in Afghanistan?" she wrote in June. "I need to get you out somehow. I will try."

"Please talk to a lawyer tell him/her how you can help me to get to the USA," Hawa replied. "I know it is difficult but I need you to go out. Here is very dangerous for me now I need your help dear. I will compensation when I come to there."

"No compensation, you are my azizam," Spence wrote—"my dear."

Spence and a few other female soldiers collected a list of FTPs in need of visas. They wrote their own employment-verification letters on Army letterhead. With Mahjabin's help, they tracked down elusive birth dates, regularized spellings of Afghan names, and gathered details about threats. "Two months ago, the Taliban made three big explosions in the school nearest my house," Hawa wrote in her statement. "My younger sister was there, but survived. Many of her classmates died in the attack." (The bombings killed at least 90 people, most of them Hazara schoolgirls.) "She is very scared and cannot go to school anymore. They also killed my cousin in the explosion. I know they will kill me too if they find me."

Spence and her colleagues assembled packets of documents and fed them into the sluggish gears of the bureaucracy as the last American troops left Afghanistan.

On April 21, one week after Biden's speech, 16 members of the House of Representatives—10 Democrats and six Republicans, led by Jason Crow and Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat—announced the formation of the Honoring Our Promises Working Group. Its purpose was to offer bipartisan support for bringing Afghan allies to safety. "The goal was: Let's

not let politics get wrapped up in this," Peter Meijer, a Michigan Republican and an Iraq War veteran, told me. "'Honor our promises! This shouldn't be that hard' was the sentiment that many of us had." The next day, April 22, General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. of Central Command affirmed that the military, if so ordered, would be able to bring Afghans out of harm's way as it withdrew.

At the White House, Jon Finer, the deputy national security adviser, held meetings on Afghanistan with the No. 2 officials from relevant agencies at least once a week. The subject of SIVs was also discussed at meetings of Cabinet principals led by Jake Sullivan. These discussions focused largely on ways to improve the visa program—adding staff in Kabul and Washington, identifying choke points, speeding up processing. But bringing all the SIV applicants to safety would still take at least two years. And it would leave tens or hundreds of thousands of other Afghans, who had American affiliations but were ineligible for the visas, with no hope of getting out. Advocates pressed the administration to create a new program that would give these Afghans priority access as refugees to the U.S.

It was too late to rely on fixing a broken bureaucracy. A catastrophe was coming. But April turned to May, American troops began to leave Afghanistan, and still the fate of endangered Afghans remained unclear. "Studying a problem for too long is an excuse to do nothing," Becca Heller, a co-founder of IRAP who is now its executive director, told me. "You don't study a problem in an emergency."

IRAP and other groups created an unusual coalition of veteran, humanitarian, and religious organizations called Evacuate Our Allies. They were given meetings with mid-level White House officials who listened and took notes, saying little. At one meeting, when an advocate mentioned that some NATO allies were already bringing Afghans to their countries, an official suddenly perked up: "Which countries are willing to take people?" The official had misunderstood—the allies were taking their own Afghan partners, not America's.

By late May, American troops were leaving Afghanistan so quickly that the last ones—except for a force of about 1,000 to protect the embassy and the airport—would be out by early July, far sooner than Biden's September 11

deadline. The pace caught the administration's top policy makers by surprise. "Speed is safety" was the Pentagon's mantra, and the withdrawal was a superb example of military planning and logistics. Bases across Afghanistan were efficiently packed up, closed down, and handed off to the Afghan army without a single American casualty, and C-17s made hundreds of flights out with the remaining matériel of the American war, computers and coffee makers all accounted for, leaving the Afghans who worked on the bases behind.

On May 26, a small group of senators from both parties met with senior White House advisers in the Situation Room. The senators argued for mass evacuations—not just of SIV applicants, but of other Afghans at risk because of their association with the United States. Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut later told me, "I remember our expressing the sense very directly that there had to be an evacuation, beginning right then, of thousands of our Afghan partners to Guam. The response basically was 'We're on it. Don't worry. We know what we're doing.'"

That same day, General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters, "There are plans being developed very, very rapidly here" to bring out "not just interpreters but a lot of other people that have worked with the United States." Asked about an airlift, Milley replied, "That is a way of doing it."

But the White House immediately shut the chairman down. "I can tell you that we have no plans for evacuations at this time," a National Security Council spokesperson said. "The State Department is processing SIV applications in Kabul. They are focused on ensuring that the system functions quickly and consistent with U.S. security and other application requirements." There would be no more talk of airlifting Afghans to safety.

As troops departed, the Taliban launched a spring offensive and closed in on provincial capitals throughout the south. Insurgent checkpoints blocked the roads to Kabul. "I'm gravely concerned for a very precipitous dissolution of the security environment," Crow, a member of the House Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, told me last March. "We are underestimating the timeline for what would happen for a post-U.S.

withdrawal in Afghanistan. I think it would be far quicker and more devastating than our current assessments indicate."

Alex McCoy of Common Defense, the progressive veterans group, viewed the Biden administration as the best hope for a new U.S. foreign policy of restraint, based on human rights, not militarism. This meant not just ending the war but also saving the Afghans whose lives would be jeopardized by an American departure. McCoy was seen as an ally by the NSC; he spoke frequently with a senior official in the White House. On May 24, McCoy texted the official asking to talk about the lack of progress on SIVs. The official called him late that night as she was driving home from the White House.

The official told McCoy that Guam raised legal problems as a U.S. territory. This confused McCoy—the whole point of Guam was to house Afghans somewhere on U.S. territory that was safe for them and that would allay American fears of terror on the mainland while their cases were processed. The governor of Guam, where 8,000 hotel rooms stood empty because of COVID-19, would soon put out a welcome mat. But the State Department was concerned that setting foot in Guam would give Afghans a legal right to claim asylum in the U.S. even if they didn't pass security vetting. This was a risk that might involve a tiny fraction of refugees, and by law those found to be potential threats would be sent back.

The official moved on to the larger problem. National-security officials were in favor of evacuations, she said—but the president's political advisers worried that the right would hammer Biden for resettling thousands of Muslims while historic numbers of Central American refugees were already overrunning the southern border. The Afghan evacuees would become part of one giant immigration disaster, exploited hourly on Fox News, when the administration still had to pass a trillion-dollar infrastructure bill. "Remember, this kind of crisis was coming at the worst possible time," a senior administration official told me. "In the spring there was wall-to-wall coverage of the border—'Who are these people coming into our country?'—and at the same time we're contemplating bringing in tens of thousands of Afghans. I feel passionately about it, but politically it could be risky."

The administration countered every urgent proposal with objections so unconvincing that they suggested a deeper, unexpressed resistance. The Guam option—already suspect because of the notional Afghans who might fail screening and need to be returned—was downgraded to highly unlikely by the approach of typhoon season. When, in mid-June, I asked another senior administration official about Afghans who lived outside Kabul and were quickly losing any exit route, he replied, "The vast majority of SIV applicants, based on the work that could be done on this, are in or around Kabul." This was untrue. Using a Facebook group that his white-paper co-author, Kim Staffieri, had created, Matt Zeller polled SIV applicants and received 4,000 responses: Half of them were outside Kabul, with little or no way of safely reaching the capital with their family; hardly any international flights were taking off from provincial cities.

Vietnam was the nightmare scenario that no one wanted to discuss. In July, when a reporter asked Biden if he foresaw any parallels in Afghanistan, the president retorted the way he had when he'd answered the question about his moral responsibility for Afghan women's rights: "None whatsoever. Zero." The Taliban had nothing like the strength of the North Vietnamese army, he insisted. "There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan." But the Vietnam precedent was inescapable. On a trip to Kabul in 2016, I had heard that American diplomats were studying old cables sent between the Saigon embassy and Washington in the last days of South Vietnam. In 2015 the Obama administration had conducted a secret analysis of a potential final drawdown of troops from Afghanistan, and Vietnam always lurked in the background of discussions, according to a former White House official who took part. The analysis showed that, if the U.S. reduced its troops to a reinforced Kabul embassy, there would be two dire consequences. First, the former official told me, the ability to gather intelligence on the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State would "drop precipitously."

Second, any evacuation of thousands of Americans from a landlocked country with poor or nonexistent infrastructure would come down to "a single point of failure" at the Kabul airport, and it would be "dangerously vulnerable" to attack. "This was extremely risky short of paratroopers

coming in," the former official said. He added that the disturbing evacuation analysis was likely "a major factor" in Obama's decision to keep almost 10,000 troops in Afghanistan.

The Vietnam analogy raised the specter of what Washington insiders call "optics." Mass evacuations would evoke images of one of the most vivid humiliations in the history of U.S. foreign policy, and those images would conjure an impression of chaos and defeat. It would make the reality all too clear: America had lost another war. The September 11 withdrawal date was an effort to blur that fact, suggesting the honorable completion of what had started exactly 20 years before—not its tragic failure.

"Every week, someone was using the word *optics* to me," Chris Purdy, the director of Veterans for American Ideals, a project of Human Rights First, told me. "'We have to be concerned about optics.' I'm thinking, *They're going to be murdered in the streets—that's pretty bad optics*."

Most efforts to avoid bad optics avoid the truth and result in worse optics. In Vietnam, the last American ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, and his boss, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, believed that early evacuations of South Vietnamese, when the fall of Saigon might be weeks or months off, would cause the government's abrupt collapse. Biden-administration officials made the same argument about Afghanistan. "The combination of two things—our belief that we had more time, a lot more time, and that we didn't want to precipitate a crisis of confidence in the government—that's what led us to the pace at which we were doing this," Antony Blinken told me. A senior White House official argued that if early evacuations and the announcement of a priority refugee program had been followed by the collapse of the Afghan government, "the charge would have been that we undermined them." (No White House official would speak with me on the record about Afghanistan.)

In June, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, came to the White House and asked Biden to hold off on evacuating Afghans, to avoid initiating mass panic. Afterward, Ghani met with a few members of Congress. Jason Crow used his time to make the case for evacuations. "I know what you're trying to do, Mr. Crow," Ghani replied with some heat. "It's undermining what we're trying to do in creating some stability and security." Ghani didn't

move Crow, but he gave the administration another reason not to do what it already didn't want to do. Biden later made Ghani's plea public.

The spectacle of airlifts out of Hamid Karzai International Airport, of Afghans from civil society crossing borders to take advantage of a new American refugee program, would indeed have signified a lack of confidence in the Ghani government, and perhaps induced something like the chaos that would come in late summer. But Afghanistan's fate was sealed the moment Biden gave his speech in April. No one in Washington or Kabul honestly believed that the Afghan government could survive the Americans' departure. "They were done with us," Hamdullah Mohib, Ghani's national security adviser, told me. "The allies were fed up with us, and the Afghan people were also fed up with us." The pretense of supporting a stable government gave everyone in power a chance to save face at the expense of ordinary Afghans.

The Biden administration thought Kabul wouldn't fall before 2022. Most outside experts agreed. "I can tell you, having sat through every single meeting that took place on this topic and having read every single intelligence assessment, military document, State Department cable," the senior White House official told me, "there was nobody anywhere in our government, even up until a day or two before Kabul fell, that foresaw the collapse of the government and army before the end of our troop withdrawal at the end of August, and most of the projections were that there would still be weeks to months before we would face the very real prospect of the collapse of Kabul."

But while waiting for Kabul to fall, the administration could have timed the military withdrawal to support evacuations, rather than pulling out all the hard assets while leaving all the soft targets behind. It could have created an interagency task force, vested with presidential authority and led by an evacuations czar—the only way to force different agencies to coordinate resources in order to solve a problem that is limited in scope but highly complex. It could have assembled comprehensive lists of thousands of names, locations, email addresses, and phone numbers—not just for interpreters like Khan, but for others at risk, including women like Hawa. It could have begun to quietly organize flights on commercial aircraft in the

spring—moving 1,000 people a week—and gradually increased the numbers. It could have used the prospect of lifting sanctions and giving international recognition to a future Taliban government as leverage, demanding secure airfields and safe passage for Afghans whom the Americans wanted to bring out with them. It could have used airfields in Herāt, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Kandahar while those cities remained out of Taliban control. It could have drawn up emergency plans for Afghan evacuations and rehearsed them in interagency drills. It could have included NATO allies in the planning. It could have shown imagination and initiative. But the administration did none of this.

Instead, it studied the problem in endless meetings. While studying the problem, the government accelerated visa processing and reduced the wait time from four years to just under two. The number of SIV holders and family members reaching the U.S. rose from fewer than 300 a month through the winter and spring to 513 in June. That month, a COVID outbreak at the embassy stopped interviews for several weeks. With Afghanistan visibly collapsing, new applications arrived in record numbers. The administration looked for countries where applicants could be flown and housed while their cases were processed. Negotiations with various European allies, Central Asian countries, and Persian Gulf kingdoms consumed the State Department's time and energy, but no firm deals were made. Why would other countries accept U.S.-affiliated Afghans whom America regarded as too potentially dangerous to bring onto its own soil?

These efforts were always several steps behind the deteriorating reality in Afghanistan. This sluggishness in the face of impending calamity continued the same self-deception, prevarication, and groupthink—the same inability to grasp the hard truths of Afghanistan—that had plagued the entire 20-year war.

As the advocates' desperation grew, some of them began to harbor a suspicion that they were being played by the administration—that all the meetings in the Situation Room and the backgrounders with mid-level officials were meant to give an impression of movement that would never result in action.

“What they thought they were going to do was pull all the U.S. assets out, and the Afghan government would hold on long enough so that, when it collapsed, there would be no photographs of the evacuation,” Mike Breen, of Human Rights First, told me. “There wouldn’t be a Saigon moment, because there wouldn’t be any Americans around and any American helicopters to hang off. They thought the Afghan military was going to die in place to buy them time.” This scenario recalled the “decent interval” that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had sought between the end of the American war in Vietnam and the demise of the South Vietnamese government, to avoid the optics of an American defeat. As Biden had put it to Richard Holbrooke, this was how Nixon and Kissinger tried to get away with it.

Steve Miska, a leader of Evacuate Our Allies, concluded that the main obstacle must be the president. Nothing else made sense. Miska, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, thought that if he could just find a way to reach Biden, the president would understand the issue’s importance to veterans. *If only Beau were alive*, Miska thought, *he would have been able to get through to his father.* Miska approached Denis McDonough, the secretary of veterans affairs, who immediately grasped the implication for his constituency. The department augmented its mental-health hotline in case Afghanistan vets began to see their interpreters beheaded on social media.

Sam Ayres, a law student and former Army Ranger who had served three tours in Afghanistan as an enlisted infantryman, sent a letter to several people he knew in the administration, explaining why the issue mattered so personally to many veterans. He wrote that the faces and voices of individual interpreters stayed with American troops long after they returned home. He described driving past Dover Air Force Base, where the caskets of two of his Army teammates had arrived in 2018 and 2019. “For the next couple hours of my drive, I was thrust back into the ongoing debate in my mind about whether our service—and the loss of teammates, American and Afghan—was all a waste,” Ayres wrote. “Many of us veterans will spend the rest of our lives grappling with this question. At the very least, I hope we’ll be able to feel we did something honorable over there in our small corner of the war. That would provide some solace. But coming to that conclusion will be even harder if the Afghans who went out on missions

with us are left to die at the hands of our onetime enemies." The letter received a pro forma response.

During the final withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden's main—at times, it seemed, his only—focus was on keeping the number of American casualties as close to zero as possible. He didn't reckon with the invisible harm of adding moral injury to military failure.

Within the administration, a few indicators were starting to flash red. By July the CIA, which had given the Afghan government a year back in April, now judged that it might fall in a matter of weeks. As it moved out of its bases around the country, the CIA decided to keep open a base called Eagle, near the Kabul airport, as a transit point in the event that the agency's counterparts in the Afghan National Directorate of Security, along with their families, had to be evacuated quickly.

On July 13, Secretary Blinken received a "dissent-channel cable" from the embassy in Kabul, written by diplomats who disagreed with official policy. The cable warned that the Taliban were making rapid advances, and that the collapse of the Ghani government could happen within weeks. It urged the Biden administration to begin emergency evacuations of Afghan allies. Around the same time, the Atrocity Early Warning Task Force, an executive-branch committee, began drafting an assessment of how to prevent massacres in Afghanistan after a Taliban takeover.

Throughout the summer, the National Security Council held weekly virtual briefings for friendly groups like Common Defense, to enlist their help in amplifying the administration's message and defusing criticism. Alex McCoy attended the briefings, but by July he had become so skeptical of what he was hearing that he began to secretly record the sessions. The briefing official was Carlyn Reichel, the White House speechwriter and NSC engagement director who had phoned him with the good news in advance of Biden's speech in April. Week after week, in answer to increasingly pointed questions about SIVs and evacuations, Reichel kept offering the same vaguely positive phrases, which had the effect of deflating any hope of action: "We are exploring all options and planning for every contingency"; "I can assure you that we are working on it and that it has very senior levels of attention in this building."

On July 14, Reichel informed McCoy and others that the president was about to announce a new initiative, called Operation Allies Refuge. The U.S. government would soon begin bringing SIV holders on flights to America. Reichel called them "relocation flights for interested and eligible Afghans." The phrasing was curious; it avoided the word *evacuation*, and it suggested that some visa holders didn't want to leave Afghanistan. On July 8, Biden had claimed that "fewer than half" of SIV holders had chosen to leave. This became a persistent talking point, and a false one: Almost all of the remaining Afghans with visas were in official limbo, waiting for the United Nations to put them on flights to the U.S., or for family members to receive passports and visas. The president, echoed by his officials, was trying to blame the Afghans for their own entrapment.

Still, with a presidential speech, a named operation, and planned flights, the administration finally appeared to be taking action. "It seemed like they were belatedly meeting the concerns we were raising," McCoy later told me. But nothing happened until July 30, when one charter flight brought 221 SIV holders and family members to Fort Lee, outside Richmond, Virginia. These were Afghans whose visas had already been approved; the U.S. government was simply accelerating their arrival. McCoy began to think that Operation Allies Refuge was a "performative stunt," intended to convince ordinary voters in, say, Michigan and Pennsylvania who might have seen something on TV about endangered Afghans that the administration had it covered.

After the military's lightning withdrawal, the embassy was still moving at the pace of a mission with months to go. "From our perspective, the State Department was relying on a lot of hope that things weren't going to fall apart in the face of increasingly bleak intelligence reports on a daily basis," a soldier who remained in Afghanistan throughout the summer told me. "The military was just waiting for a decision point or guidance from the State Department, and it never came until things fell apart."

On August 2, the administration finally announced a priority refugee program, which it had been discussing since the spring, for several categories of vulnerable Afghans who didn't qualify for SIVs. But no Afghan could use the program—it existed only on paper, because there was

no infrastructure for processing refugees in the neighboring countries to which they might flee. More relocation flights brought more interested and eligible SIV families to the U.S.; by mid-August the total was just under 2,000 people. The administration continued to explore all options and plan for every contingency. Major cities across Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. The Atrocity Early Warning Task Force finished its assessment on potential massacres and was about to start planning for ways to prevent them. An official who worked on the assessment later told me, "It was finalized the week before everything went to shit."

When Hawa, the Afghan special-forces lieutenant, learned from the media that her U.S. counterparts were about to leave Bagram Air Base, she was stunned. "Really?" she asked the American women on the base. The Americans apologized—they hadn't believed it would happen either. To Hawa the Americans were still needed, and the future looked dire without them.

The shock in the Afghan army was widespread. The departure of foreign troops, contractors, technical support, and military intelligence dealt a fatal blow to morale. The Afghans' job was now to hold out for a few months and then die in place.

Hawa was transferred to the Afghan special forces' base in Kabul. A few days later, in the predawn darkness on July 2, the Americans packed up Bagram, switched off the electricity, and flew out of the nerve center of the war without telling the new Afghan commander.

In Kabul, Hawa trained new Female Tactical Platoons and awaited word on her visa application from Captain Alice Spence. On July 15, Spence texted her about Operation Allies Refuge: "Hi sweet Hawa, USA has good news and will evacuate many Afghans soon. I am still working on your application. Please stay safe and we will get you out."

"That's really good news," Hawa replied. "Thank you so much my kind azizam." She asked if her younger sister could be included in the evacuation. Spence said that she would try. By July 31 she and her group of U.S.-military women had completed paperwork for several dozen FTPs and sent it to the State Department.

Talibs had a practice of killing any female troops they found. In early August, as the Taliban conquered province after province, Hawa's commander told the FTPs to take 20 days' leave and go home for their own safety. Hawa knew that this was the end of her service. "That day was the bitterest day of my life," she told me. And yet she still didn't believe that the men with beards, long hair, and AK-47s would be able to enter the capital. Kabul was reinforced with the Afghan army's best troops, including commandos she had fought alongside. Hawa thought they would keep the Taliban out at any cost. The foreign forces wouldn't allow it, either. They would return and defend the Afghan government—or what had all the fighting and suffering been for?

In southeastern Afghanistan, Khan was closely following news from Washington. The announcement of Operation Allies Refuge raised his hopes; so did a bill passed by Congress at the end of July that increased the cap on Afghan SIVs by 8,000 and allowed applicants to defer their medical exam until they reached the U.S. But the sound of fighting kept getting closer to the center of his town, and the electricity kept going out in the rented house where he, Mina, and their small son were hunkered down. When the Taliban announced a new policy of clemency for interpreters who confessed and asked for forgiveness, Khan saw a trap to keep Afghans like him from trying to escape, so they could then be slaughtered. The murder of his family members and the threatening letter at his back gate had made the Talibs' views on interpreters clear enough.

Khan's family's interview at the U.S. embassy, one of the last steps before visas would be issued, was canceled in June because of the COVID outbreak. They were given a new appointment on July 29. The Taliban had set up several checkpoints along the road to Kabul, where they had beheaded an interpreter in May. Khan and Mina decided to hire a more expensive ambulance taxi to the capital rather than risk a regular one. Her pregnancy gave them a good cover story, backed by a copy of her ultrasound and a bottle of prescription medicine. She hid their documents and a USB flash drive under her robe. Khan had grown his beard out, put on ragged clothes, and wiped his phone clean—the Taliban looked at everything, even Google search histories.

On the road they encountered two Taliban checkpoints. They were allowed through the first without being stopped; at the second they were stopped and insurgents glanced inside before letting the ambulance continue. But Khan saw them questioning passengers in other vehicles, mostly young men in their 20s and early 30s with no turbans or beards. “I think they were searching for people who worked with U.S. forces,” he told me later.

In Kabul the family had to keep changing their lodging as each place began to seem unsafe. Khan heard accounts of targeted killings of government workers that went unreported in international media. The city was filling up with refugees from the fighting in other provinces. He finally found a room in a cheap hotel, near the international green zone, that was a way station for Afghans like him—interpreters and others hoping for a flight out.

The interview at the U.S. embassy lasted no more than five minutes. Khan mentioned Mohammad’s death, the threatening letter, Mina’s pregnancy—a few more weeks and she would no longer be allowed to fly. They had barely left the embassy when Khan received a text with instructions for their medical exams. Ordinarily the wait would have been months, but the exams took place on August 2, at a cost of $1,414 for the family. Khan was running out of money.

Everything was moving quickly now. The office of Jason Crow, the Colorado congressman, brought the family to the attention of the State Department, which expedited Khan’s case (I had alerted Crow’s office to their situation and provided Khan’s family with other help). His lawyer from IRAP, Julie Kornfeld, was trying to obtain plane tickets with the help of an organization called Miles4Migrants. Khan went to a travel agency and found a scene of panic. Seats were going at famine prices. “If you do not book tickets soon, they will not be available, because people are leaving,” the travel agent told Khan. The visas might still take weeks to be issued, and Khan was down to his last $50. But if he returned to his hometown he might never get out. All of these clocks were ticking against him and his family: money, visas, tickets, Mina’s pregnancy, the Taliban.

Khan decided to stay in Kabul and wait.

Even with the scenes of chaos at travel agencies and banks and passport offices, even with the Taliban just 20 miles away, a paralyzing denial settled over people in Kabul. It was possible to know that the city was in imminent danger and at the same time to believe that it couldn't fall. A surprising number of Afghan Americans traveled to Kabul in the summer of 2021 for weddings or family visits. The same denial prevailed in Washington: On the weekend of August 14–15, most of the senior leadership of the Biden administration was away on vacation. The fall of Kabul would always happen sometime in the future.

"It was like a joke to me," Hamasa Parsa, a 23-year-old Afghan army captain who worked as an assistant in the defense minister's office, said. "I never thought that the Taliban would come to Kabul, even when Joe Biden said that our war is finished."

On hearing Biden's speech in April, Parsa (whose name has been changed for her safety) had cried and wondered whether the president felt any regret. But she was sure that Kabul, where she had grown up under American protection, was too big and modern to fall to the Taliban. "Kabul is a city full of younger generations," she said, "full of girls and boys who can talk, who can fight with their writing, with their speaking." Parsa loved to read and write novels, and after work she would meet three of her friends at a crowded coffee shop in downtown Kabul called Nosh Book Café. "It was like a heaven for us," she said. Young men and women sat together at tables, the girls' scarves falling back onto their shoulders, everyone talking, working at laptops, smoking cigarettes.

For such a city to fall would mean the end of the only life Afghans like Parsa had ever known. The rest of the country might now belong to the Taliban—perhaps it always had—but not Kabul. This Afghan illusion, widespread until the very end, was nourished by American illusions—by our refusal to face that we had neither the will nor the ability to create something durable in Afghanistan, that one day we would abandon them.

In early August Najeeb Monawari was in Bangladesh, so focused on the news from his homeland that he was unable to work. His foreign postings with Doctors Without Borders had kept him safely out of Afghanistan as the country descended into extreme violence, but he worried constantly for his

family back home. His wife begged him to get her and their three small children out too, and he researched every possible way. The $125,000 purchase price for citizenship in a Caribbean country was too expensive. He even looked into immigrating with his family to Sierra Leone.

As the Taliban swept through Afghanistan, Monawari read online that the Canadian government was setting up a new emergency immigration program for Afghans with connections to Canada. Monawari immediately applied. On August 7, he received an email from the Canadian government: "We received your application and you are being invited to an appointment for biometric collection (fingerprints)." Monawari had worked with the Americans for four years, then waited 10 years for a U.S. visa that was finally, unjustly denied. He had worked with the Canadians long ago for a year, and they answered his prayers in a few weeks. "Hello dear Sir/Madam," he wrote back, "thank you very much for saving my family and myself life."

Monawari was now determined to get to Kabul. His mother told him that he would be crazy to come back at this moment. So did his colleagues in Bangladesh, including one who warned him that the Kabul airport would close before he could get his family out. So did a retired Green Beret weapons sergeant in Texas named Larry Ryland, who got back in touch with his former interpreter during the Taliban offensive and practically ordered him to stay in Bangladesh. Even the Canadian government warned him off. On the morning of August 8, a second email arrived: "Dear Sir, PLEASE DO NOT TRAVEL TO KABUL."

Monawari disregarded all the advice. He was in the grip of a furious monomania: He had to get to Kabul, be fingerprinted, and fly out with his family. Maybe to Canada, maybe even to the U.S.—he hadn't lost faith in his second try for an SIV. He could summon intense optimism while feeling intense pain. "I just put myself on fire," he later told me. "When you want to survive, you get blind, you just struggle."

Monawari arrived in Kabul on the night of Wednesday, August 11. First thing the next morning, he and his wife brought their passports and the email invitation to a Canadian military camp near the airport—the embassy

was now closed to visitors—and talked their way past an Afghan guard. No one was on duty except one elderly Canadian, who took their fingerprints.

On Saturday, August 14, Monawari went to the bank where he kept his savings. He had intended to withdraw only a little, but when he saw the large and panicky crowd he thought the bank might shut its doors. He took out almost all the money he had and left with his pockets bulging with euros, sweating, tensed for someone in the crowd to pull a gun on him.

Khan, hiding with Mina and their son in the center of Kabul, kept refreshing a State Department website showing the status of his visa every 20 or 30 minutes. At 3 p.m. on August 11, it suddenly went from "refused" to "administrative processing" and then "issued." Two minutes later, Mina's and their son's status also changed. But Khan waited the next three days for a summons to pick up their passports at the embassy, and his emails went unanswered. On August 14, unable to wait any longer, he left the hotel where they were staying and ventured into Kabul's fortified green zone. Outside the U.S. embassy a guard couldn't make sense of the various emails with which Khan had armed himself. Another guard told him to come back on a better day. Khan didn't realize that, inside the embassy, in preparation for evacuation to the airport, diplomats were smashing up hard drives, destroying American flags and other symbols that could be used for Taliban propaganda, and filling sacks with documents for burning. Khan insisted that his case was urgent, and he was finally allowed inside.

At the consular office the family's passports were waiting, miraculously stamped with the Special Immigrant Visas that had eluded Khan and thousands of other Afghans for so long. They'd been ready since August 11. Khan and his family could have left Afghanistan by now, but the embassy had neglected to summon him. It didn't matter—Julie Kornfeld had booked three tickets to the U.S. via Istanbul and Brazil on Tuesday, August 17, three days away. When Khan got back to the hotel room and shared the news with Mina, now 34 weeks pregnant, their toddler twirled across the floor in a celebratory Afghan dance.

They still needed COVID tests, and a doctor's report that would allow Mina to fly. Their hometown fell that day. Khan figured that Kabul had another month.

On August 12, three U.S. infantry battalions in the region—one of them staged there for this purpose—were ordered to secure the Kabul airport primarily for the evacuation of U.S. diplomats and American citizens. Two days later another 1,000 troops followed.

Alice Spence wrote to Hawa: "USA is sending 4,000 soldiers to help with SIV."

"Wow that's great. For which peoples they will help?"

"For you and others who are waiting."

On August 14, Spence told Hawa to have a bag packed and her visa documents printed or stored on her phone. "I am very hopeful now. Maybe this week. Do not tell anyone." She added an American flag, a heart, and an Afghan flag.

That night Hamasa Parsa, the Afghan captain who loved to read and write fiction, had a dream. Her best friend in the army appeared before her dressed in clothes covered with flowers that she had gathered off the ground where they'd fallen. "Do you know why I picked them up?" her friend asked. Parsa didn't know. Her friend, with a face and voice of unbearable sadness, said, "Hamasa, they are all dead." Then Parsa understood that the flowers on her friend's dress were the Afghan people. Her friend started to cry, and Parsa cried too, and when she woke tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She called her friend at once, though it was the middle of the night. "Are you okay?" Parsa asked. She reminded her that she'd seen her name on a death list sent by the Taliban to the defense minister's office.

"Hamasa, come on, stop crying, I'm okay," her friend said. "Nothing's going to happen. Go to sleep. We'll see each other tomorrow."

They had a plan to meet at the Nosh Book Café at 11 the next morning, Sunday, August 15.

The next morning, most people in Kabul went to work as usual.

At the palace, Hamdullah Mohib, President Ghani's national security adviser—who had sent his wife and children out of the country—attended the regular 9 a.m. meeting of the president's top advisers. For three days Mohib had been talking with American diplomats in Kabul about transferring power to an interim government and sparing the city the urban warfare that had destroyed it in the 1990s. Ghani wanted to hold a *loya jirga*—a conference of political leaders—in two weeks. It would essentially hand power to the Taliban, but by constitutional means. Ghani wanted this to be part of his legacy. But he and Secretary Blinken hadn't discussed the idea until the night before, when Blinken agreed to send an envoy to Doha. At the Sunday-morning meeting, Ghani's advisers decided on a team that would fly to Doha that evening. Taliban representatives there had agreed that the insurgents would stay out of Kabul during negotiations. But Afghan intelligence knew that factions were competing to take the city, and that government forces would melt away rather than die in a pointless fight. That morning, Khalil Haqqani, whose Islamist network had inflicted numerous suicide bombings on Kabul, called Mohib and told him to surrender.

Around 11 a.m., Ghani and Mohib were talking in a garden on the palace grounds when they heard automatic-weapons fire. They later learned that guards at a nearby bank were dispersing customers trying to withdraw their money—but at the sound of gunfire everything fell apart. Staff began to abandon the palace. Guards took off their uniforms and went home in the civilian clothes they wore underneath. As Mohib prepared to escort Ghani's wife by helicopter to the airport for a flight to Dubai, the pilot told him that Afghan troops had prevented one of the presidential helicopters from leaving the airport and fired shots at another that was going to pick up the defense minister. These troops were not about to let their leaders save their own skins.

"When I heard that, I felt, *We are done*," Mohib told me. He quickly returned from the helipad to the palace. "It's time to leave," he told the president.

Ghani had been worried about the fate of his cherished library. He didn't even have his passport or a change of clothes. "I have to go upstairs and get

some things," he said.

"No, there's no time," Mohib insisted.

Ghani, having convinced the Americans to leave his endangered people in harm's way, was flown by helicopter with his wife and a few advisers to safety in Uzbekistan.

Just before noon, Hawa was riding a bus to collect her uniform and papers, so her identity wouldn't be discovered if the base where she kept them was attacked, when her mother called. The Taliban were in their area of western Kabul, searching for military people, her mother said. Hawa should not come home.

Not knowing what to do, Hawa texted Alice Spence in Hawaii, where it was still Saturday night: "The Taliban come to our area. I am outside I don't know how should I go home ohhh."

"Oh God Hawa," Spence wrote back a minute later. "Ok where are you? You are not in Kabul?"

"Yes I am at Kabul. They came to Kabul."

"Fuck." Spence continued, "Ok it will be ok." She advised Hawa to find a safe way home and hide all her documents and anything suggesting military affiliation.

"Thank you dear sorry about the bad news," Hawa wrote.

"Don't be sorry the Talib they will be sorry."

"Okay dear. I really scared."

"I know. Please be brave Hawa. I will not go to sleep until you are safe."

Hawa was lucky to be wearing a long dress and a scarf that she'd put on to avoid trouble with the Pashtun women outside the base. She later heard that Talibs were ordering girls to cover themselves, and shot one who refused. They also shot a military woman discovered in her house. Hawa's face was

recognizable—she had appeared in army recruitment ads on social media. With nowhere else to go, she searched for a taxi home, but no driver would take her, and she spent four hours trying to get there, through streets thronged with people running. For two days she didn't leave her house.

From his hotel room that morning Khan saw smoke rising above the U.S. embassy as the last burn bags were incinerated. They included the passports of Afghan visa hopefuls, who would now have to try to escape without them. It was protocol to destroy that kind of thing during a noncombatant-evacuation operation, and no one at the embassy was willing to break the rules and bring the passports to the airport. The removal of the embassy to the airport had been carefully planned at the Pentagon, but with no discussion of how to bring out Afghans. Khan saw Chinook transport helicopters taking off from the embassy grounds every 15 minutes and clattering low over city streets the short distance to the airport.

"This is not Saigon," Blinken insisted on a Sunday-morning news show.

Around noon, the hotel manager told Khan and the other interpreters lodged there to leave. With the Taliban in Kabul, the interpreters were now a security risk. Khan, Mina, and their son wept as they packed their bags. There were no taxis and most hotels were closed, so they walked for an hour and a half around central Kabul until they found a room in a dirty hotel. Talibs could be seen in the streets outside.

The day before, with visas and tickets finally in hand, Khan had felt like one of the saved. Now the flight had been canceled and, because of the Afghan government's sudden demise, the airport was closed. "We came to a bad fate," Khan told Julie Kornfeld.

"I don't want to give you false hope," she said, "but I do still have a little." She urged him to get some sleep until there was news of flights out.

"I cannot sleep."

"Can you listen to soothing music, or take deep breaths, or, we have a saying, 'count sheep'? You need to do something to try and put your mind at ease."

“OK I will apply your prescription. But flights come and go in my mind.”

That day, Najeeb Monawari’s old Green Beret teammates flooded him with emails from Maryland, North Carolina, and Texas. One of them urged him to get to the airport immediately—the office of Senator Thom Tillis had put his name on a list. It was nearly midnight. When Monawari looked out the window he saw streets deserted of every living creature except stray dogs. Thinking this might be his only chance, Monawari woke his three children and prepared a backpack with food and printouts of SIV correspondence. He had to ask his neighbors to move their cars so he could get out. His mother told him that leaving the building at this hour tipped the neighbors off that he was a “traitor.”

The airport was only 15 minutes away, but Monawari drove so fast that his father, who came along, warned him that the police might shoot at the car. But there were no police. Kabul was under no one’s control, and looting had broken out around the city. The Taliban were as unprepared as everyone else for the speed of their conquest. That day their leader in Doha, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, asked the head of U.S. Central Command, General McKenzie, whether the Americans wanted control of the city during the evacuation. McKenzie replied that his orders were to secure the airport and nothing else. U.S. troops were not to venture beyond its perimeter. “The Taliban were willing to let us do all that was necessary to control the terrain to get out,” a former senior military officer told me. “When you consciously choose that the terrain you control is the fence line of the airport, you give up a lot of your prerogatives, and you permit yourself to be quite vulnerable to infiltration by suicide bombers.” The exchange between Baradar and McKenzie would contribute to making the evacuation the nightmare that it became.

Monawari parked on a side street and left his father with the car. Hamid Karzai International Airport is small, with a cramped passenger terminal and a single runway. On the north side of the runway were a series of small bases belonging to NATO countries and the Afghan army. Civilians approaching from the city entered through the South Gate. The airport was ringed by miles of fortifications—concrete blast walls, Hesco bags, concertina wire—with about eight public or unofficial entry points.

That night thousands of Afghans converged on the terminal at the South Gate. Monawari left his wife and children next to a wall for cover and tried to get close enough to find someone who could bring them inside. Four U.S. armored vehicles blocked the way, and Marines fired warning shots. People were shouting and running back and forth based on rumors. Some Afghans, mostly single men with no American connections, had gotten inside the terminal and would eventually force their way, two with guns, onto C-17s intended to transport U.S. personnel and matériel to Qatar. Monawari spent the night looking for some authority with a list of names that included his. But there was no such authority. There was no list. On that first night Monawari learned what everyone who dared to come to the airport would have to find out for themselves during the next two weeks: There was no system, no plan. They were on their own.

Shortly before dawn, a report flew around that Talibs were arriving. Afghan paramilitaries in civilian clothes suddenly disappeared. Monawari thought of running. Beyond the South Gate he saw a pickup with Taliban gunmen sitting in the bed, their legs hanging over the sides. This first sight of them in Kabul frightened him. He was their enemy, and they had the upper hand.

After daybreak the entrance road swelled with new crowds trying to reach the airport. Monawari and his family had spent nine hours outside the terminal. They had exhausted their crackers and water, and the kids were out of control. He decided to take the family home. “It is a big mess right now,” he texted the Green Berets stateside.

At home he heard from a friend that Talibs would be searching houses that night. He burned his military certificates and SIV documents. He asked his mother if he could hide his Green Beret uniform, but she said that their apartment was too small—it would be found. With a pair of scissors, he cut to shreds his cherished uniform and hat and unit patches. He put the remains in a garbage bag for his father to take outside and bury deep in the trash.

Around midnight on Sunday, Sam Ayres, the former Ranger who’d sent the letter about veterans to Biden-administration contacts, texted his friend Alice Spence, whom he’d gone to college with. He was trying to find a way to help Khan, whose case he’d heard about.

“My FTP was hanged last week,” Spence told him.

Mahjabin—the woman who, along with Hawa, was Spence’s closest friend among the Afghans—had been killed in the bathroom of her in-laws’ house a week before the fall of Kabul. It wasn’t clear whether Talibs had done it, but Mahjabin’s picture had been circulating around their checkpoints outside the city.

“Oh Jesus,” Ayres wrote. “I’m so sorry.”

“She was a magnificent person. I loved her so much.” After a moment: “I refuse to let this happen to the rest of them.”

In those first hours and days after the fall of Kabul, thousands of people in the U.S. and across the world began to live mentally in the city and its airport. Most of them had a personal connection to Afghanistan. More Americans cared about the country than the Biden administration had accounted for in its political calculations. Most of these Americans were in their 30s or 40s—the generation that came of age with the 9/11 wars, now reaching a calamitous end. Helping Afghans escape would become a way to avoid succumbing to a sense of waste and despair and helpless rage.

Veterans approached friends to offer or seek help for interpreters they knew, and these informal networks grew to a dozen or 50 people on Signal and WhatsApp, with smaller side groups connecting to military and political contacts and refugee organizations. Members of Congress with high profiles on the SIV issue received hundreds of texts on their personal phones from complete strangers, some of them Americans looking for help, others desperate Afghans reaching for any name they could find. Jason Crow got a voicemail from a man who was barely audible, as if he was hiding somewhere: “I’m sorry if I bother you, but as you know better than me that the situation getting worse and worse in Afghanistan, especially for my people and my family. And this morning, they’ve killed one of the young boys.” Congressional offices became 24-hour operations centers.

Some groups—West Point alums, retired Special Forces operators, women’s-rights advocates—grew to several hundred and acquired names like Task Force Dunkirk and Task Force Pineapple. They spanned time

zones and continents. Other groups consisted of three or four friends working their contacts. Mary Beth Goodman, the official who leads the State Department's global pandemic response, took two weeks off to spend every hour on evacuations, except the two or three at night when she slept, and even those hours were interrupted by phone calls, including one from an Afghan man in a convoy bound for the airport, whispering that ISIS terrorists had just boarded the bus, before the line went dead.

Using digital devices, foreigners tried to navigate Afghans thousands of miles away through the needle eyes of Kabul's airport gates. This global effort emerged spontaneously to fill the gaping void left by the U.S. government.

In spite of three deployments, Sam Ayres had no close personal ties in Afghanistan. He wanted to help Afghans escape as a moral imperative, and out of loyalty to Alice Spence. Spence was propelled by the memory of her dead friend, whom she now had no time to grieve, and the distress calls of friends like Hawa who were still alive.

Several hours before dawn on Wednesday, August 18, Hawa got a message from Spence: She should be at the airport by sunrise. Spence instructed Hawa not to bring a suitcase, to wear a full face covering, and to hide her smartphone, keeping a simple Nokia in hand, in case she ran into Taliban checkpoints. The smartphone would have everything she needed to communicate with Spence and others and for them to share locations, as well as important documents—but it could also give her away.

Spence and her colleagues were trying to bring a group of 16 FTPs and 10 dependents—husbands and children—into the airport. The SIV applications submitted in July had gone nowhere, but at least they provided the paperwork for identity packets to be sent to State Department inboxes, set up after the fall of Kabul as a clearinghouse for potential evacuees. The inboxes were soon overwhelmed, and the government asked people to stop sending names. What mattered most, Spence discovered—and this would be the key to all successful evacuation efforts—was having a contact inside the airport. "The people with the most power at that time were low-ranking gate guards," she told me. "They had more power than any general in D.C., hands down." Representative Tom Malinowski, a New Jersey Democrat,

put it this way: “This was a situation where knowing the secretary of state and the national security adviser personally was vastly less valuable than knowing a Marine major on the airfield.”

Hawa packed a small bag with a change of clothes and her passport. She set out with her teenage sister for the North Gate, on the military side of the airport. At the gate—a barrier of concertina wire between sections of 16-foot blast walls—was a crush of human beings, including families with small children, all trying to push forward under the blinding sun until they could speak to a soldier. On the outer perimeter of security were Taliban guards, using whips, gun stocks, and bullets to intimidate the crowd. The middle layer consisted of a paramilitary force from the Afghan intelligence agency, which was under the command of overseas CIA agents via WhatsApp, and which was liberal with warning shots. Inside the gate, and often outside, were American troops, who sometimes used tear gas and flash-bangs for crowd control.

Spence put Hawa in charge of keeping track of the other 15 FTPs, who arrived separately from around the city. “Can you please count how many FTPs are there,” Spence texted. There was no answer for 20 minutes. “Hawa I need your help.”

“They bring a lot of their families,” Hawa finally replied. There were at least a dozen family members—parents, siblings—who had not been on the original list and had to be counted one by one in the crowd.

Spence encouraged her: “Yes I know but you are soldier.” Keeping track of the families while pushing toward the gate was like a mission—the hardest Hawa had taken part in. She sent a head count and then asked if she could call her two other sisters to join them. Spence told her to hurry. It was eight in the morning and the group was 150 feet from the gate.

They waited all day. As they ran out of food and water, some of the FTPs began to faint. When Talibs found military papers on one woman, they set on her with fists and feet, leaving a swollen eye and a large purple bruise on her cheek. A round of gunfire nearly struck the baby of one of the women, who decided to go home. Hawa’s teenage sister cried that she wanted to go

home too. “If the Taliban come to our house you won’t be able to go to school,” Hawa told her; they had no future here.

One FTP reached the gate and showed an American guard a picture on her phone of an “emergency visa” that read: “Present this visa to security checkpoints and Consular Officers to access flights departing for the United States.” It was a PDF that the State Department had created and emailed to SIV applicants. Now everyone in Kabul seemed to have a copy. The guard turned her away.

Spence was three degrees removed from a Defense Department civilian at the airport. At sunset she sent his photo to Hawa and told her to look for him. Hours went by. Then, after midnight, he emerged from the gate—a middle-aged American in civilian clothes, with salt-and-pepper hair and a black mustache. The women shouted, “FTPs! FTPs!”

Two-thirds of the group made it inside, including Hawa and her sister. But when the crowd saw so many women getting through, it grew angry and blocked the others, including the ones with small children farther back.

It was 2:30 a.m. on August 19. The ordeal had lasted almost 24 hours. “Came in very hard,” Hawa reported to Spence.

They had come in hard, and the others would have to be brought in later. But the operation had been a success. Spence would try to repeat it for other military women in the coming week and meet nothing but failure after failure.

“By and large, what we have found is that people have been able to get to the airport,” Jake Sullivan told the White House press corps a few hours before Hawa left her house. “In fact, very large numbers of people have been able to get to the airport and present themselves.” Sullivan acknowledged that the Afghan government had fallen in spite of the Biden administration’s decision to show support by refusing calls for early evacuations. He blamed the decision on bad advice from the Afghan government. “What you can do is plan for all contingencies,” he said. “We did that.”

Biden also pointed a finger at the Afghans. In a televised speech the day after Kabul fell, he blamed the lack of early evacuations on the Ghani government and SIVs who "did not want to leave earlier." He blamed Afghan troops for failing to defend their country, even though the monthly toll of those killed in action reached its highest level in years after his withdrawal announcement. "We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future." His words, spoken at the very moment when Afghans were trying to escape with their lives, were chilling.

Biden had revised the deadline for the troop withdrawal to August 31, and he imposed the same deadline on the evacuation. Now the administration acted with the urgency that it had failed to show since April. A total of 5,000 troops were sent to Kabul, along with two dozen State Department consular officers. The U.S. government's priority was to evacuate American citizens and green-card holders first, then SIVs and other "at-risk Afghans." But the government, having failed to plan for an evacuation on this scale, didn't know who those Afghans were, where to find them, or how to get them into the airport.

Events were moving so fast that a paratrooper I talked with who arrived the weekend Kabul fell expected to go straight into a firefight with Talibs, while a Marine who landed two or three days later considered the Taliban "an adjacent friendly unit." The paratrooper soon realized that the most important tool of the mission was his phone. Texts poured in from friends back home, all asking for help getting Afghans they knew into the airport. In the first few days the paratrooper thought that a prioritized system of entry for each category of evacuees would soon be in place at assigned gates. He heard of plans to create safe areas around Kabul where U.S. forces could collect people and ferry them to the airport. But such a system was never created. With each day the chaos at the gates only grew. He learned details of the madness on the other side of the wall from people thousands of miles away who were in minute-by-minute contact with Afghans trying to get in.

"It's an absolute gut wrenching shit show," the paratrooper texted his friend Sam Ayres. Ayres connected the paratrooper with Julie Kornfeld, who

sought information for Khan and her other clients about flights, paperwork, and gates. But there was no consistent information to give. Everything depended on an Afghan getting to a gate, a guard being in the right place at the right time, the gate staying open long enough for the Afghan to be pulled through. And it never worked the same way twice.

The paratrooper's official job was to get U.S. matériel and personnel out of Afghanistan. He and other troops spent every spare waking hour—and they barely slept—fielding texts and working on what they called "recoveries." To help them identify certain Afghans in the mob, the troops asked for photos, or identifying garments such as red scarves, or call-and-response passwords: "Detroit"–"Red Wings"; "What do you like to drink?"–"Orange juice." The paratrooper argued with consular officers who wanted to send people back out of the airport for lack of paperwork. "SIV to me meant nothing, because that thing will take 24 months," he said. "What, are we going to expect them to get on Wi-Fi and fill out a quick application on State.gov while they're waiting outside the gate? 'You washed dishes at the embassy—you're in.'"

Most of the paratrooper's activity was unofficial. The chain of command almost certainly knew, could have stopped it, and would have done so if the troops had made serious mistakes. So they were careful not to venture too far outside the gate—less out of fear for their safety than worry that a firefight with a Talib would shut the whole thing down.

Just inside the perimeter, consular officers had to make instant decisions about whom to admit, torn between their fluctuating rules and the human faces in front of them. Though State Department officials from around the world had volunteered to go to Kabul, only 40 consular officers were on hand to deal with the huge flow at the airport. On August 19 John Bass, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, arrived to oversee the evacuation. His top priority was getting American citizens, green-card holders, and Afghan embassy staff into the airport. Talibs kept blocking entry for some evacuees and shutting down gates when the crowds became unmanageable; the Americans also closed gates when they received intelligence about terror threats. Bass resorted to using unmarked gates to avoid the crowds at the

public ones; at times, to keep this official evacuation going, he had to refuse entry to groups of Afghans who were part of the unofficial effort.

When Representatives Seth Moulton and Peter Meijer made an unannounced visit on August 24, two senior diplomats broke down in tears and told Moulton they were "completely overwhelmed."

Children and parents lost each other. Troops saw children trampled underfoot. A Marine saw a Talib knife a boy who was climbing over a wall. A tear-gas canister struck the side of an 8-year-old girl's face, melting her skin. A new mother staggered through the gate with her baby, who had just died, sobbing so hard that she threw up on the shoes of a consular officer checking documents. By the East Gate, a stack of corpses baked in the sun for hours. Outside the North Gate, the crushed bodies of four babies floated in a river of sewage.

To avoid the besieged gates, U.S. troops brought women and children over the 16-foot blast wall using ladders under cover of darkness. They paid Afghan paramilitaries and even American Marine guards in cigarettes to let people through. They had to make up their own priority list and find immediate grounds for saying yes or no to the immense volume of equal desperation on their phones: military women, then interpreters, then male commandos, then embassy staff. Women, but not men; families, but no children over 15. "It's an awful thing to make a decision about," one soldier told me.

Many of the troops quickly realized that escorting a newly orphaned child onto a plane to a new life would be the most important mission of their lives. "This is going to be our legacy," the paratrooper said, "whether we do two years in the Army, or 20 years, or 40 years."

Khan was expecting a State Department email that would tell him when to go to the airport and where, but it never came. (No SIVs received specific instructions like this throughout the evacuation.) Kornfeld was trying to get him on a flight, military or commercial. On Monday, August 16, he went with Mina and their son to the North Gate. They spent all day in the sun, unable to get past the Taliban fighters and the crowd of thousands. Khan saw that all kinds of people were trying to escape—ordinary shopkeepers,

young men without even a national-identity card—while Afghans like him, who had checked every box, couldn't get inside. At one point Mina was pushed to the ground. She was afraid she would miscarry.

The next day Khan returned by himself, but Talibs with guns and horsewhips kept him from getting anywhere close.

Before dawn on August 18, the family tried again. Khan had all of 500 afghanis—about $6—in his pocket. They left small travel bags with a food peddler and, with just biscuits and water, their documents hidden under Mina's clothes, they waded into the crowd at the North Gate as the sun was coming up over the Hindu Kush mountains. They decided that they would stay at the airport until they got out or died. Talibs were firing in the air, and several of them kicked Khan and beat him with rifle butts and a lead pipe. His son screamed at the sight of the men with long hair and beards. Mina kept encouraging her husband, telling him not to lose hope.

They abandoned the North Gate and walked for almost an hour along the airport perimeter to the Abbey Gate, on the southeast side. Here the troops were British and Canadian, and the family wasn't allowed through.

"Say you have a pregnant wife!" Kornfeld texted. "Say she's in labor!"

It was no use. The family continued their odyssey until they arrived at the South Gate, the main entrance. Here there were U.S. Marines, but also thousands of Afghans. "Less than 300 have valid docs," Khan texted. "All the looters and others came." It was almost noon.

His phone rang. When he answered, an unfamiliar voice spoke his full name. "We found your number on your work desk. You supported the Americans. You distributed weapons and ammunition."

"You have the wrong number," Khan said. "I'm a university student in Khost."

"No. We know who you are."

There was no time to be unnerved, with the gunfire and tear gas and people running and falling. Mina kept getting squeezed, but she wanted to hold their position and refused to let Khan pull her out of the crush. Their son, in Khan's arms, was so traumatized by the Talibs that he kept flailing at his father.

Suddenly the Marines were firing warning shots and flash-bangs to disperse the crowd; people ran in every direction, and the way to the checkpoint was clear. Khan saw his chance and rushed forward. Mina cried out not to be left behind, but he kept going.

Through the smoke Khan saw the figure of an older man in civilian clothes and body armor. He was pulling in people with dark-blue U.S. passports. Seeing Khan's blue-green Afghan passport, the American pushed him aside, but Khan refused to be turned away. He opened to the page with his Special Immigrant Visa. The American looked it over. All the years of application forms and background checks and employment-verification letters and death threats and anxious waiting had brought Khan to this moment. Everything was in order. He asked to go back for his wife and son, 20 meters outside the gate. Did they have visas? They did. Khan ran out and waved them forward.

"How much luggage?" the American asked.

"About 300 grams of documents," Khan said.

They were inside the airport.

From Hawaii, Captain Spence and her American compatriots spent the days after Hawa's successful escape trying to save the other FTPs. They needed an interpreter and seldom had one, relying instead on broken English and emoji. They had to persuade the women to go out after dark, despite a curfew enforced by Taliban checkpoints, because that was when they had the best chance. Spence relied on one particularly resourceful trooper in the airport who made the Afghan women his priority, bringing them in over ladders, darting outside the fence to grab a husband separated from his wife, a son from his mother. An attempted helicopter rescue that Spence helped arrange through a Pentagon contact failed on two successive nights. A few

women gave up trying and fled by car to Mazar-i-Sharif or Pakistan. And all the while hundreds of others Spence didn't know, regular army women who had heard about her from the FTPs, were imploring her through her phone.

"At first I said yes to everyone," she told me. "Then I started to say no to men; to people without docs; to people with docs but not for their families; to people writing me really long messages, because I didn't have time to read them. If it was a single woman, I would be more apt to talk to them. And then it was, honestly—it's really terrible—if a photo spoke to me, if their words spoke to me, if their English was good, if I sensed this person would be responsive and could get their stuff together." She called it "a really terrible *Sophie's Choice* situation."

Spence's Army boss allowed her to stay off the base until August 31. She sat in her living room alone with her phone, sleeping one or two hours a night, eating whatever she had in the cupboard, losing 15 pounds. When Hawa was trying to get into the airport Spence threw up from exhaustion and stress, then felt annoyed because she didn't have time to throw up. Once, she looked outside and was startled to see a palm tree. She had thought she was in Kabul. Others working on evacuations around the clock from a Washington suburb or upstate New York had the same hallucinatory experience.

Everyone sensed that the window was closing. On August 24, the Taliban announced that only U.S.-passport and green-card holders would be allowed near the airport. The U.S. government was going to limit its efforts to the same group. The evacuation of Afghans appeared to be ending after just one week.

The difference between the damned and the saved came down to three factors. The first was character—resourcefulness, doggedness, will. The second was what Afghans call *wasita*—connections. The third, and most important, was sheer luck.

Najeeb Monawari possessed character and connections, but his ordeal suggested that a malign fate was working against him. He tried to get into the airport with his family four times through four gates and failed each

time. Many of his relatives worked for the Afghan security forces, which controlled a "hidden" gate on the northwest side, but Panjshiris had lost their power overnight, and his relatives were unable to do anything. At the North Gate, Afghan guards—Pashtuns from an intelligence unit in Jalalabad—were letting in their ethnic relatives while jeering "Traitors!" at northerners like Monawari. At the Abbey Gate, when he took a picture of the crowd to show his Green Beret friends, an armed Talib grabbed him by the shirt and began dragging him off. Other Talibs whipped his back and yelled, "Take him to the boss!" Monawari was carrying printed email correspondence and the useless "emergency visa" PDF. If he uttered a word they would know he was Panjshiri and kill him on the spot.

"This motherfucker took a picture of women!" the Talib told the boss's bodyguard.

"The boss is busy now," the bodyguard said. "Take his phone."

Monawari tried to open his phone, but his fingers kept mistyping the passcode. He finally managed to get it open. He deleted the picture. And then he took off, into the crowd, away from the gate, pulling off the white scarf that made him noticeable, soon losing his pursuers. He found his family and said, "Let's go home."

By the morning of August 19, Monawari and his wife and three kids were exhausted. His mother was alternately praying and berating him for coming back to Kabul. His phone rang: It was Larry Ryland, the Green Beret weapons sergeant. Ryland, who lived outside Houston, where he ran a military-contracting business, was in a rage at the failure to get his interpreter into the airport and out of Afghanistan. He was considering traveling to Qatar and appropriating a small turboprop plane to personally evacuate Monawari. "If anybody deserved it, it was him and his family," Ryland told me. "Dude, he was probably one of the top-five people in the world I'd trust."

Ryland was calling with a new plan. It depended on his contacts in the Special Forces world, who had eyes on Monawari from a "satellite country." They set up a route for him to get to the airport, with Afghans positioned along the way to create a diversion in case there was trouble at a

Taliban checkpoint. The Special Forces operators connected Ryland with a U.S. soldier on the inside, who would come out for Monawari at a specific moment.

The plan also involved congressional letterhead. One of Monawari's colleagues in Doctors Without Borders was the niece of Jim Coyle, the president of a New Jersey chamber of commerce, who in turn knew Representative Malinowski. Coyle asked Malinowski to sign a letter of support for Monawari's entry into the airport. "This letter is completely irregular and contrary to established procedures," the congressman replied. "Therefore I will be happy to sign it!" The letter and Ryland's word were enough to make Monawari—a rejected SIV applicant—the priority for the soldier inside the airport.

But the gate names were confusing, and the grid coordinates were slightly off, and Monawari and his family showed up in the wrong spot. There was no American looking for a letter from Malinowski. Then the soldier called Monawari and told him to go as fast as he could a mile east to another gate and look for a soft hat held high on a baton. A mile! They ran, and with the running and his children crying and a dehydration headache coming on he was too tired to answer the calls that kept coming—if he answered, he feared, he would take his last breath and die. At the second gate there was no phone signal, and no soldier holding a soft hat high on a baton. Then the hat and the soldier were there, 50 feet away, across the concertina wire, in front of the Hesco bags, and Monawari pushed his family through the crowd that grew denser and denser near the wire until he reached the barbed coils and his kids were gone—they must have fallen underfoot, trampled, if they weren't crying it meant they were dead, and he opened his mouth to yell but he couldn't make a sound, couldn't say that he'd come back to Kabul and done everything in his power to reach this place and now it had all turned to shit, they were gone, there was no reason to leave, and he started punching wildly to get people off his children.

"Your kids are here," a Marine said.

Another Marine was carrying his 9-year-old girl over the wire. Monawari grabbed her younger sister, and as he lifted her, a Marine pulled him forward and he fell, the wire making a deep cut in his thumb. Then they

were brought through an opening between the Hesco bags into the airport. Planes were waiting on the runway, with people standing in long lines. Immediately the pain of his headache and gashed thumb disappeared, and he was overcome with happiness.

In July Monawari had applied for Canadian immigration. At the airport he discovered that he had a choice: He could fly out with most of the other departing Afghans on a U.S. C-17 to Qatar. Or he could board an earlier Canadian military flight through Kuwait to Canada. He had waited 10 years for a U.S. visa—would his family have to wait another year in Qatar? He had always wanted to be an American. He now owed his life to American friends and strangers who had used every means to bring his family to safety. But Monawari didn't want to wait any longer. He would become a Canadian.

On August 25, in Toronto, he received an email from a U.S. State Department official. "I want to apologize for the delay in response time and process," it said. "I want to assure you that we are working around the clock to help address these delays for applicants such as yourself during this very difficult time." The official reported that the U.S. embassy had approved him for a Special Immigrant Visa. It was welcome vindication, and it was too late.

On the afternoon of August 26, outside Abbey Gate, an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated a vest with 25 pounds of explosives, killing nearly 200 Afghans and 13 American troops who had left the protection of the wall and waded into the sea of desperation to bring people into the airport. After that, the chance for Afghans to get out dwindled quickly toward zero.

The United States government estimates that it airlifted 124,000 people from Afghanistan before the last troops flew out on August 30, a day ahead of Biden's deadline. This total—which surprised many of those who struggled night and day to get a family of five through a gate—counted everyone who left Hamid Karzai International Airport: the 45,000 on private and non-U.S. aircraft, as well as approximately 2,000 U.S.-embassy personnel, 5,500 American citizens, 2,000 citizens of NATO countries, 3,300 citizens of other countries, 2,500 SIVs and family members, and

64,000 “at-risk Afghans,” including the many thousands who found a way into the airport regardless of status or threat. The Biden administration declared the evacuation a historic triumph.

The achievement belonged mainly to the troops and civilians who worked tirelessly at the airport, and to the ordinary people who worked tirelessly overseas on WhatsApp and Signal, and above all to the courage, born of mortal panic and tenacious hope, of the Afghans who lost everything. Without the unofficial evacuation efforts, many of them funded by private citizens, the number would have been far lower. But no one who took part described it as a success. The constant emotions of those days and nights at the airport were frustration and heartbreak.

Human Rights First estimates that 90 percent of SIVs—including some with visas in hand—were left behind with their families. The number of Afghans who remain in danger because of their association with the 20-year American presence in their country must be counted in the hundreds of thousands. By the end of August, Alice Spence and Sam Ayres and their colleagues had evacuated 145 military women and family members. They still had a list of 87 people whom they couldn’t get out. After August 31, the list would continue to grow. “I can’t even contemplate what I’m going to have to say to these women,” Ayres told his paratrooper friend.

“Everyone wants to stay, including the leadership,” the paratrooper texted Ayres on August 27. Many troops felt that they’d left the mission unfinished. During the final hours at the airport, one soldier received 120 calls for help. “People are talking about the greatest airlift in history,” he said, “when in reality it was a complete clusterfuck and a lot of people died that didn’t need to.” Ambassador Bass, who oversaw the evacuation, left Afghanistan deeply proud of his colleagues’ efforts, he told me, but also “haunted” by the number of people who didn’t get out. “I really felt just this enormous sense of regret.”

Administration officials told me that no one could have anticipated how quickly Kabul would fall. This is true, and it goes for both Afghans and Americans. But the failure to plan for a worst-case scenario while there was time, during the spring and early summer, as Afghanistan began to collapse, led directly to the fatal chaos in August. The Taliban gave every indication

of wanting to cooperate with the American withdrawal, partly because it hoped for a continued diplomatic presence. “They’re still asking us today, ‘Why did you leave?’” a senior official told me. But the administration never tried to negotiate a better way out with the Taliban, didn’t establish green zones in Kabul and other cities with airfields. Instead, the evacuation came down to 10 days and one runway.

The end was always going to be messy. But through its failures, the administration dramatically compressed the evacuation in both time and space. It created a panic to squeeze perishable human beings through the dangerous openings of a fortress before they closed forever. It left the burdens to a 20-year-old infantryman trying not to make eye contact with a mother standing in sewage; to an Afghan woman choosing which sister to save; to an Army captain alone in her faraway house.

“There are a number of truths about the war that this evacuation yielded,” Ayres told me, “and one of them is that shortsightedness and failures at the top created slack that had to be taken up by the men and women on the ground—by the Marines on the perimeter, by the families that couldn’t get through the crush of the crowds.” Mike Breen, of Human Rights First, told me that the administration “took the life-and-death decisions that should have been at the highest level of the government and sent them down to the lowest level, which is a pretty good metaphor for the whole war. It ended as it was fought. Same old story.”

Everyone who joined the unofficial evacuation was struck by its lack of partisanship. George Soros and Glenn Beck both sponsored charter flights. Trump-supporting veterans worked with Democratic members of Congress, and liberal journalists sought help from Republican Hill staffers. The quickest way to get kicked off a group chat was to make a political point. But an event as big as the fall of Kabul inevitably absorbed the poison of American politics. Early in the evacuation, a flock of progressive pundits suddenly all flew in the same direction and accused the administration’s critics of using the crisis as an excuse to keep the war going forever. This same talking point had emerged during the White House’s messaging campaign earlier in the summer. It shifted the argument from Afghanistan to the Washington foreign-policy “blob,” as if the latter were the really

important battleground. Those taking the brunt of the catastrophe were women and girls, members of religious and sexual minorities, civil-society activists, all of them people of color—groups that progressive pundits are supposed to care about. The end of the war was the first test of a new foreign policy based on human rights rather than military force. The administration and its defenders failed it.

The hypocrisy on the right was worse. Republican members of Congress and media figures heaped scorn on the Biden administration for a withdrawal policy that it had inherited from the Trump administration, then fomented outrage over Afghan refugees on U.S. military bases and in American towns. Biden's political advisers had not been wrong to think that Republicans would try to exploit the issue to stir up xenophobia.

But across the country, ordinary Americans rushed to embrace the arriving refugees. They left bundles of clothes and baskets of food at the gates of the military bases where the refugees were housed. They volunteered their communities, even their homes, for resettlement: in Houston, where Khan, Mina, their son, and their new American daughter now live; in Spokane, Washington, Hawa's choice for her new home as she seeks a chance to enlist in the U.S. military. A woman in Denver wrote to me: "When we posted on our neighborhood's [Facebook] page on a Wednesday that an Afghan refugee family with children would be staying with us starting in 2 days we had 100s of items of clothes, toys, toiletries, baby gear, and winter gear show up on our porch, in addition to a job offer and dental services for the family. People I didn't even know were dropping off donations with promises of more to come. People want to help!" It was as if Americans were seeking some way to feel better about their country.

The evacuation effort drew on a similar longing. It ran especially strong in the generation of Americans whose adult lives were shaped by the 9/11 wars—who experienced a kind of personal crisis at the way the era ended. "What I wanted out of this was to salvage a little bit of honor from this whole debacle," Ayres told me. "Every person we got out, I'd be able to look back on my service and my experience with slightly more pride."

Months after the end of the August evacuation, Ayres, Spence, and their colleagues are still working day and night to save Afghan allies, many of

them women. Some are hiding in safe houses and selling their furniture to feed their children. After years of drought, and the economic collapse that followed the Taliban victory, Afghanistan has descended into a winter of starvation. Spence receives hundreds of messages a day from Afghans telling her that she is their only hope for rescue from the Taliban and hunger.

One of the women on Spence's list is Hamasa Parsa, the soldier-writer who dreamed of dead flowers the night before Kabul fell. A friend gave her a number for Spence, who responded within 10 minutes. Parsa spends her days at home caring for her younger brothers and sisters, and limits the family to two meals a day. When she ventures out she fears being denounced by a neighbor, or forced by the Taliban into marriage. One day in November she went out fully covered to buy a phone charger. A Talib was in the store, weapon slung over his shoulder, playing the video game Ludo King on his phone. Suddenly he looked at Parsa. "It was my first time in my life that I looked into the eye of a Talib," she told me. She gasped, and her hand trembled. The Talib smiled, as if to say, *You're scared of me, right?*

A man keeps calling Parsa's phone. She knows him from her old office at the Ministry of Defense. He tells her to bring in the gun that she was issued, and she answers that she doesn't have a gun, though her family has buried it in their yard, along with military documents. The summons is a trap. She no longer trusts anyone. For the first time, she finds writing impossible. "I just don't know what will be the end," she told me. "That scares me. I want to find a happy ending for my book first." Recently, Spence told Parsa that it will be at least half a year before she has a chance to get out.

The U.S. government is not making it easy. It is chartering flights out of Kabul for SIV holders and others of high priority, but the effort is so sluggish, and the rules for authorizing passengers so onerous, that State Department officials have turned to private groups for help evacuating Afghans they know. At the same time, the department is reluctant to negotiate landing rights in other countries for private charters. Before Afghans can apply for the priority refugee program they must somehow get out of Afghanistan, but the U.S. government won't help them leave. The

most direct way to bring at-risk Afghans to the U.S. is through a program called humanitarian parole; at least 35,000 Afghans have applied, for a fee of $575 each, but the Department of Homeland Security is processing the backlog neither quickly nor generously.

“The State Department always insists that we have to play by the rules,” Representative Malinowski, who once served in it, told me. The department celebrates Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who forged passports to save Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. “But if any State Department employee tried to pull what Raoul Wallenberg did, he’d be fired in three seconds.” This was the thinking of the period before the August evacuation. “And then, for two glorious weeks, we threw out the rules.” Now the department is back to its risk-averse, pre-August thinking, with an obstacle for every human need. “Bureaucracy is killing more people than the Taliban,” Mary Beth Goodman, the State Department official, told me.

To Spence it seems as if the U.S. government has moved on. “Afghanistan keeps descending into hell, and what are people like us supposed to do?” she asked. “Are we supposed to leave these people who helped Americans, including people we served with personally, behind? I’m a very idealistic person in some ways, and I understand we can’t save everyone, and there are crises everywhere. But there was a 20-year war, and that changed a lot of people here. A lot of people served and went there. Our policy, our money, went there. Do we just abandon the people? I don’t think that’s who we are as a country. I don’t think that’s who we should be as a country.”

*This article originally said that Alex McCoy led Common Defense. He was not the sole leader but a co-founder and, until September, its political director. Due to an editing error, this article also provided an incorrect list of the forms required for a Special Immigrant Visa.This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline “The Betrayal.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

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# Dispatches

- **Close to Home**
  What a photographer found when he trained his camera on his own family -- Clint Smith

# Close to Home

Joakim Eskildsen Photographs Close to Home

By Clint Smith

Early on in the pandemic, the Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen captured an image of his son tilting his head toward the evening sky in the German countryside, where the family lives. The photo is moving in its simplicity and haunting in its loneliness. Dancing flames cast an orange glow on the side of the boy's face; silhouettes of bare trees ornament the distance.

The image is part of a series that Eskildsen began 16 years ago. After he and his partner spent 15 years traveling across Europe taking photographs, his partner became pregnant with their son, and Eskildsen realized that his work could no longer entail extensive travel. "I decided at that moment, *I'm going to be a present father*," he told me recently. And so he redirected his camera closer to home, taking photographs only of things that were within walking distance.

*Home* has taken on new meaning in these pandemic years, as so many of us have paid closer attention to all that surrounds us. I have learned more about my two young children in these years than would have otherwise been possible. At the same time, with our climate on the cusp of irreversible catastrophe, I have spent more time than ever before contemplating how each of our fates is inextricably linked to the actions of everyone else. *Home* is more than simply the residence where we sleep. It is the people we hold, and the planet that holds us.

My son is 4, and obsessed with space. Hanging on the wall of his bedroom is a poster of the solar system. The sun sits at the center, with each of the eight planets encircling the yellow-orange orb, their respective orbits depicted by thin white lines that make it look as if each is being held up in the universe by a string. He dreams of being an astronaut (and a chef and a superhero and a dinosaur). When he looks up into the night sky, the unadulterated wonder in his eyes reminds me how remarkable our presence on this fragile planet is.

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "Close to Home."*

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# Culture & Critics

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# Hollywood Discovers the Middle-Aged Woman

Hollywood Discovers the Middle-Aged Woman

By Helen Lewis

In 2019, a 60-year-old Emma Thompson explained her sudden career renaissance. She had spent her youth playing romantic leads, but once she turned 40, she said, she could fill such roles only "in a pinch." The offers became more limited, the parts smaller: a batty clairvoyant in the *Harry Potter* series; a wronged wife in *Love Actually*; the voice inside Will Ferrell's head in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Then another decade passed, and the opportunities became interesting again. Hallelujah! In the past five years alone, Thompson has played a High Court judge in *The Children Act*, an uptight television host in *Late Night*, and the British prime minister (twice).

Thompson had experienced what we might call "the dry decade." The midlife plight of women in Hollywood was immortalized in an Amy

Schumer sketch that achieved instant cult status when it aired six years ago. Three actresses are enjoying a picnic in a wooded glade, celebrating one of their number's "Last Fuckable Day." The women around the table—Patricia Arquette, Tina Fey, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus—are all attractive, smart, and funny. But that doesn't matter. They're over the hill in Hollywood's eyes. Fey notes that eventually, women realize that the poster for their movie is "just, like, a picture of a kitchen." Louis-Dreyfus adds that such films have "these very uplifting and yet vague titles, like *Whatever It Takes* or *She Means Well*."

In 2012, two economists from Clemson University analyzed the gender balance of American films from 1920 to 2011 and offered a more wonkish take on the phenomenon. Overall, they found that men accounted for two-thirds of all roles in mainstream movies. For starring roles, however, age is everything. At 20, women play four-fifths of leads: Hollywood is *very* interested in them at their nubile prime. Fast-forward to 40, and that statistic is reversed. Men utterly dominate the juiciest parts. The male-female gender split then hovers around 80–20 until, well, death.

For the few women actors who come out the other side of the dry decade, the rewards can be mixed. No longer able to portray ingenues, brides-to-be, or manic pixie dream girls, or be the Avengers' diversity hire (sorry, Black Widow), older actresses graduate into the other popular category open to women: hags and harpies. Meryl Streep once described the parts she was offered after 50 as women who were "gorgons or dragons or in some way grotesque." Sure enough, Thompson's late-career roles also include the Baroness in *Cruella*, Goneril in a TV-movie version of *King Lear*, and Miss Trunchbull in the upcoming musical adaptation of *Matilda*. Monsters, one and all.

But biology, it turns out, needn't be destiny. A new generation of actresses has discovered an answer to the dry decade, and is showing the rest of us what we've been missing—stories that capture the fullness of women's lives.

To understand the problem (and because the experience is always pleasant), consider Tom Hanks. He might be "America's Dad," but his career represents a type of ageless versatility long afforded by the film industry—

to male actors. In his 30s, Hanks wooed Elizabeth Perkins in *Big*, Meg Ryan in *Sleepless in Seattle*, and Robin Wright in *Forrest Gump*. (I am excluding Beasley, the dog from *Turner & Hooch*, from this analysis, though IMDb sadly records that Beasley never worked again.) Hanks's next decade was anything but dry. In his 40s, he played an FBI agent in *Catch Me If You Can*, a Mob enforcer in *Road to Perdition*, Woody in *Toy Story*, and a man stranded on a deserted island in *Cast Away*, among other roles.

But what about his female co-stars? Their 40s were not exactly dazzling. At 41, Meg Ryan jettisoned her sweet, goofy image in *In the Cut*, playing an English teacher drawn into a sexual relationship with a potential serial killer. The critical reception dwelled on the film's erotic atmosphere, and Ryan's onscreen nudity was greeted as an unwelcome surprise. She has since said that the film marked a "turning point" from which her career never recovered.

Neither Elizabeth Perkins nor Robin Wright fared well in the film industry, either. But they did have success elsewhere—and this is where the story of the dry decade takes an intriguing turn. Perkins spent her mid-to-late 40s on Showtime's *Weeds*, as the lead character's narcissist neighbor, Celia—and earned three Emmy nominations for the role. At 46, Wright started playing Claire Underwood in *House of Cards*, and by the final season had graduated from first lady to president.

Perkins and Wright were among the first wave of women to benefit from the golden age of television. Since then, the streaming wars have created a huge demand for new dramas, and the increased opportunities are obvious. In her 40s, Reese Witherspoon has starred in *Big Little Lies*, *Little Fires Everywhere*, and *The Morning Show*. (As a bonus, the last of these also rescued Jennifer Aniston from a film industry that never quite seemed to know what to do with her.) The HBO remake of *Scenes From a Marriage* gave 44-year-old Jessica Chastain a role every bit as challenging as an Ibsen heroine. At 46, Sandra Oh began playing a weary spy locked in a deadly pas de deux with a glamorous assassin in Hulu's *Killing Eve*. And at the same age, Kate Winslet undertook one of the standout roles of her career, as Mare Sheehan, the stoic detective in HBO's *Mare of Easttown*.

Compared with the dead ends that Ryan, Perkins, and Wright encountered in traditional Hollywood, the trajectory for female stars is thriving on the competition among HBO, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and others. A glut of roles now combine the personal and the professional, offering a chance not to be pigeonholed as "the wife" or "the mom"—or, conversely, the career woman free of domestic responsibilities. Think about the dry decade: It has amounted to a desert of roles between love interest and empty nester, as Hollywood has struggled to incorporate the challenges of motherhood into narratives about women engaged elsewhere too.

The 2010 film *Salt*, about a CIA spy accused of being a Russian sleeper agent, is a notorious example of the basic motherhood problem. Originally intended for Tom Cruise, the script was rewritten for its eventual star, Angelina Jolie. That entailed one big change: Edwin Salt was a parent; Evelyn Salt was not. "If a woman had a child, I think it would be very hard for us not to imagine her kind of holding on to that child through the entire film," Jolie said at the time. "Which is strange—but I think audiences would allow a man to have a child and the child [could] be with the wife back at home." (When making *Salt*, Jolie herself was a working mother of six children, including 2-year-old twins.)

Television series are hungry for plotlines, and their cast lists spread like tree roots as seasons progress, giving women new room to grow. In stark contrast to the narrowness of Jolie's role in *Salt*, Keri Russell transitioned from her late 30s into her 40s as Elizabeth Jennings on *The Americans*, navigating the identities of mother, travel agent, and Soviet spy. In *The Queen's Gambit*, deft touches filled out the portrait of Beth Harmon's alcoholic adoptive mother, Alma, played by Marielle Heller, who had recently turned 40.

In accommodating characters who are mothers, without that being their *only* identity, television has brought new tensions and texture to established genres. Where male detectives have tended—to the point of cliché—to be troubled, maverick loners, Olivia Colman's Ellie Miller found her investigations complicated by her own family turmoil and deep links to the local town in the British crime show *Broadchurch*. Kate Winslet's Mare Sheehan is similarly embedded in her community, at the center of a loving,

chaotic, and grieving clan in the kind of suburb where everyone has secrets and everyone is trying to cope: with addiction, with loss, with something as mundane as America's lack of affordable child care.

The wide-angle lens of television invites immersion in a pivotal midlife decade that—for anyone juggling a career, children, and aging parents, as well as their own compromises, regrets, and unfulfilled ambitions—is anything but dry. "I always imagined I'd be a cop," Mare tells a younger police officer. "It's the life around me I didn't expect to fall apart so spectacularly."

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "Women of a Certain Age."*

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# The Madness of Method Acting

The Madness of Method Acting

By Jordan Kisner

Which of the stories do I start with here? There was the time when I was 16 and the teacher of my preprofessional acting workshop decided that I needed to be more physically unselfconscious, that my technique wasn't loose enough. He made me pretend to have a seizure on the floor while the dozen or so other student actors watched, and wouldn't let me stop convulsing until he said so. I flopped around, my face burning brighter and brighter red while he shouted at me to go harder, to really *commit* to the seizure, for an endless three minutes.

Or maybe the time when I was 20 and a teacher at one of NYU's conservatory acting schools had the tallest, strongest boy in my class hold me tight to his chest and not let go. The idea was to get me truly distraught, because my character was upset. "Get away from him," she told me. "Don't let her go," she told him. I tried to escape, shoving, kicking, pulling, heaving, going slack, struggling uselessly and furiously until—surprising

myself—I burst into wracking sobs. “Good,” she said. “Now start the scene.” The boy let me go and I stumbled through it, unable to stop crying. The performance was deemed a breakthrough, if a little “uncontrolled” on my part.

Training to be an actor with any seriousness tends to involve scenarios like these. (I started when I was about 14 and quit abruptly at 22, unable to stomach some of the industry conventions, such as being asked at “cattle calls” to stand in line for a first cut based only on appearance.) Actors do strange and sometimes ridiculous things in pursuit of mastery, a fact that they and most audiences take in stride because it is understood that actors are engaged in a somewhat ridiculous, if also completely magical, task: psychologically and physically inhabiting other, usually imaginary people in sometimes quite extreme imaginary situations, on command, while maintaining enough of a foothold in reality to revert back to normal whenever they’re told to. One can justify all kinds of preparatory exercises in pursuit of a goal this absurd. A teacher once told me and my classmates to squat and imagine that we were breathing in and out of our anuses. I don’t remember what the point of that was supposed to be.

The idea that an actor must authentically experience and feel the lived reality of the character he is playing—and therefore be infinitely present and malleable—now underpins almost everything that Americans deem to be “good” acting. It has given us a century of brilliant performers, acolytes of the so-called Method: Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman, Ellen Burstyn, Jane Fonda, Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel, Faye Dunaway, Jack Nicholson, Hilary Swank, Leonardo DiCaprio—the list includes most of the great post-1950 actors one can think of.

Add to that those who don’t explicitly claim to be Method actors but subscribe to its philosophy or use Method techniques: Daniel Day-Lewis, who learned Czech for the adaptation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, even though his lines were in English; Frances McDormand, who famously asked someone on set to grab her and not let go, in order to get her panicked for the climax sequence of *Blood Simple*; Jeremy Strong, who wanted to be sprayed with real tear gas during the riot scenes of *The Trial of the Chicago 7*; Benedict Cumberbatch, who studied the banjo, learned to

use a lasso, and asked that his costumes never get washed while shooting *The Power of the Dog*.

The roots of this approach, as the director and theater historian Isaac Butler emphasizes in his new book, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act*, are relatively recent. The notion of *perezhivanie*, or "living a part," was popularized by Konstantin Stanislavski, the Russian actor and director who co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1890s. Along with the older director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, he pushed to supplant a labored, politically influenced style of acting that had emerged in Russia in response to government censorship. The two men considered it stale and false: Stanislavski took to heart the critic Vissarion Belinsky's call for art to illuminate the real world "in all its truth and nakedness." Together Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko set out to remake Russian theater in line with Tolstoy's conviction that art was "'a means of communion' whose highest goal was to unify humanity," Butler writes. Actors would be not simply actors but "artists, and if artists had a spiritual, perhaps even *holy*, purpose, then acting required intense attention to ethics and discipline."

Their "system," as Stanislavski called the theory of training he developed over time, posited that the actor's own life is crucial material in the construction of a role with specificity and emotional veracity. Full physical and psychological commitment was required. Actors were encouraged to ask what motivated their character in any given scene—and what their overall "supertask" in the play was—and to correlate every line with an action along the road to fulfilling that mission. All of the smaller tasks, unfolding in the chronology of the play, created the "throughline of action." These ideas are now foundational to script analysis, whether or not it's undertaken in a Method-acting context.

Each character's behavior would also be shaped in its particulars by what Stanislavski referred to as the "given circumstances," such as the scene's environment and era, the character's health and relationships, the immediately preceding events, and so on. The actor should make use of "affective memory": The body, Stanislavski believed, keeps "affective impressions" of sensations, emotions, and visceral experiences, which can

be triggered or, with training, intentionally reactivated. (Butler uses the example of a smell or taste reminding you of your parents' kitchen and evoking nostalgia.) Called upon to generate genuine emotions for a scene, affective memory could help produce what Stanislavski called the "Magic If," an imaginative state in which, he wrote, "the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by him."

Lee Strasberg, a Polish émigré and the earliest adapter of Stanislavski's techniques in the United States, embraced the simultaneously ominous and romantic undertones of this philosophy as he championed his version of it, which became known in the early 1930s as "the Method":

He didn't need to make explicit the other side of the "monstrousness," the part that made acting not just worthwhile but a "holy pursuit." If acting asks the actor to be both himself and other, it also asks for transcendence. If acting asks the actor not just to simulate but to conjure, it makes him a kind of occultist, in touch with powers the rest of us can only marvel or quail at.

Butler knows this duality from the inside, and in his introduction, he sketches both a personal and a critical impulse behind his history of Stanislavski's theories and their evolution into the behemoth that the Method became. As a young man, he was an actor whose attempts at excavating extreme emotion in pursuit of *perezhivanie* went sideways:

Disenchanted and unnerved, he quit acting for directing and writing. More than two decades later, the stature of the Method as a "transformative, revolutionary, modernist art movement, one of the Big Ideas of the twentieth century," continues to fascinate him. "Like atonality in music ... or abstraction in art," Butler writes, "the 'system' and the Method brought forth a new way of conceiving of human experience, one that changed how we look at the world, and at ourselves."

Butler takes a meticulous, immersive approach, offering a blow-by-blow narrative of the trials, tribulations, victories, affairs, and dissolutions of a busy cast of characters and theatrical institutions. Yet the avalanche of detail can be pedantic, and the promise that he will explore the Method's deep social ramifications mostly disappears as he traces the turmoil in and

around the Moscow Art Theatre, and the enthusiastic ferment that pervaded the Group Theatre in New York. Co-founded in 1931 by Strasberg, the director Harold Clurman, and the producer Cheryl Crawford, the Group counted among its earliest members Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, actors who went on to become famous Method teachers, as well as Elia Kazan, who made his mid-century mark as one of the country's most powerful film and theater directors. Driven by a shared passion for Stanislavski's vision—but in conflict about its application—the Group set out to pioneer what it claimed would be the first distinctly American acting technique.

One of the major takeaways of *The Method* is how ill-defined and bitterly contested the Method was even among its most famous practitioners. Strasberg emphasized the psychological approach, using affective-memory exercises and improvisation to surface genuine emotion in an actor. Adler struggled with Strasberg's techniques and, after spending a month studying with Stanislavski in Paris, insisted that Strasberg's methods had little to do with the "system." She went on to cultivate her own branch of the Method, which focused primarily on getting the actor beyond his own experience and into the "given circumstances." Adler taught that full immersion in the lives of characters demanded intensive research and imagination, not just emotional identification. Shaping the embodied presence of a character, working on voice and posture, was more important to her than to Strasberg, who believed physicality would naturally flow from emotion. Meisner also became a powerful teacher, ditching affective memory entirely and developing a technique that prized getting the actor "out of his head." He relied on an actor's fierce attention to whatever was happening in the moment to produce spontaneity (the Magic If!), naturalism, and emotional veracity.

All were loosely united by an underlying philosophy: that "natural" behavior was better than "indicating" (their word for *faking*, or *performing*), that an actor's greatest achievement would be to truly experience what the character was experiencing. As for why the Method caught on the way it did in the U.S., Butler notes that its advent coincided with the rise of psychotherapy, suggesting a general interest in psychological exploration and affective emotion. He also briefly proposes that its ethos of truthfulness

and naturalism met a hunger that marked the mid-century, "a conviction that there was a truth about American life, a protean muck that had previously been buried deep underground. American acting could help excavate America's soul." This postwar vision of theater as exhuming, purging, and cleansing—and of actors as the instruments of that ritual—echoed aspirations of decades earlier, when the critic Belinsky inspired Stanislavski by writing that through theater, we can expunge "our egoism … We become better persons, better citizens."

Do we still wish to think of theater this way? By the late 20th century, Strasberg, Adler, Meisner, and their ilk were dead, but the Method lived on through the eponymous studios they'd founded and through their famous students, who commanded both Broadway and Hollywood. Butler argues that the Method era began to fade in the '70s, a waning that he blames unconvincingly in his final chapter on a variety of factors, among them the "end of the postwar consensus" (whose consensus?) and political disenchantment (though a few chapters earlier, political disenchantment was framed as a boon to Method naturalism). With little elaboration, he also cites "pluralistic academia, with its emphasis on student choice and individual expression," and an ever more atomized and capitalistic society: "Before, we were bound in common cause—individuals, yes, but part of a society and dedicated to its advancement; we were now to be consumers in a marketplace."

The upshot, Butler writes, is that the Method has been diluted by other acting styles that don't privilege psychological spelunking or total authenticity—think of the Brat Pack, or Bruce Willis. New acting programs, such as the preeminent one at Juilliard, combined Method training with other, primarily classical and British techniques. Now the term *Method* comes up in popular culture mostly as shorthand for intensity, to signal that an actor personally *went through something* for a part, or did something truly weird, as when Jared Leto, playing the Joker in *Suicide Squad*, reportedly sent live rats and dildos to fellow cast members as they filmed.

Butler spends almost no time on the Method's more expansive legacy—the fascinating question of how it filtered into American culture and where it continues to live with us. In tying an actor's soul into the work, the Method

created a theater that could feel breathlessly real to audiences. For the actor, it turned craft into a spiritual calling, and the self into an instrument to be used, mined, turned inside out in the name of performance—a type of transformation that can be awe-inspiring to behold, but is easily exploited. The century of the Method's rise saw a theater culture in which directors and instructors became godlike figures, irrefutable prophets with access to the actor's whole psyche. Both Stanislavski and Strasberg were notoriously rageful and imperious. When an actor resisted their direction, or pushed back after being berated for failing to achieve *perezhivanie*, they could become explosive and violent, claiming that the artist was insulting the great spiritual work of theater in general.

The Method also spawned the phenomenon of actors who go to dangerous extremes in the name of role preparation, like Christian Bale losing a reported 60 pounds for the thriller *The Machinist*, and Margot Robbie undertaking ice-skating training so grueling that she herniated a disk in her neck to play Tonya Harding. Actors have used the Method as an excuse to use abusive tactics on others. Dustin Hoffman, playing opposite a young Meryl Streep in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, slapped her before the cameras were rolling, and taunted her about her partner, who had just died of cancer, to get real tears. Butler mentions a possible connection to the systemic abuses uncovered by the #MeToo movement, yet skirts broader questions about the cultural impact of equating vulnerability with artistry, and teaching audiences to excuse or even glorify the damage done to a performer.

I keep thinking about what the Scottish actor Brian Cox, interviewed in a recent *New Yorker* profile of Jeremy Strong, said of actors trained in the U.S.: "It's a particularly American disease, I think, this inability to separate yourself off while you're doing the job." This is no longer a problem just for professional actors. Anyone with a TikTok or Instagram account now mines the self for an audience. In these markets, too, authenticity (or the convincing semblance of it) is prized, encouraging a blurring of artifice and vulnerability that can be corrosive. In a perversion of the Method ethos, fusing performance with true experience now shows up in American life less as a mode of artistry than as a technique for branding the self to gain visibility, profit, power.

The pleasure of Method-acting training, in my experience, was that it asked you to imagine that you could contain the whole world—that anything that ever happened to anyone might be touchable by you through the careful tuning of your instrument: your body, your mind, your sensibility, and your language. The magnitude of the individual in its possible communion (a favorite word of Stanislavski's) with the whole is the promise and peril of acting under that theory. Here there are echoes of another artist with a Big Idea for the 20th century: "And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." There's something greedy, viral, and even monstrous about this Whitmanian conviction—but transcendent too.

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# America’s Love-Hate Relationship With the Bald Eagle

The Strange History of America’s Bald-Eagle Obsession

By Nathaniel Rich

Jack E. Davis wants it very clearly understood that a bald eagle cannot, in fact, pluck an infant girl from her carriage, carry her clenched between its talons to its nest, and feed her to its eaglets. Okay?

If Davis's plea seems especially plaintive, that's because it contradicts centuries of personal testimony and expert accounts. Alexander Wilson, in his foundational *American Ornithology* (1808–14), described a bald eagle dragging a baby along the ground and flying off with a fragment of her frock. The naturalist Thomas Nuttall wrote in 1832 of "credibly related" accounts of balds abducting infants, and the 1844 edition of *McGuffey's Reader*, a primer in most American grade schools, told the story of an eagle that deposited a girl in its aerie on top of a rock ledge, amid the blood-spattered bones of previous victims. As recently as 1930, an ornithologist with the Geological Survey refused to rule out baby snatchings in congressional testimony. Davis's defense rests on the finding that a bald eagle's maximum cargo capacity is five pounds. Although he acknowledges that eagles do fly off with chickens, the five-pound limit puts most newborns out of range. Still, in fairness to Wilson, Nuttall, and McGuffey, it should be noted that the average female birth weight in the 19th century was barely over six pounds.

Why did Americans nearly drive America's bird to extinction? In *The Bald Eagle*, Davis, who won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Gulf*, a clever history of "America's Sea," has written a double biography: a history of the species and a history of the symbol. Until recently, the two birds have been complete strangers to each other. Since the 18th century, the bald eagle has adorned government seals, medals, and currency, standing for integrity, vigilance, and strength. And for most of that time Americans have subjected the birds to slander, torture, and mass slaughter. Davis's most surprising contribution is to show how adulation of the natural world can accelerate its destruction. We came very close to loving the bald eagle to death.

That we didn't—that we spared the species from extinction and even appear to have restored its population to its pre-republic size—is the source of the book's bouncy optimism. *The Bald Eagle* is the rare natural history that plays as a comedy. It's a dark comedy, however, because its lessons are not

easily transferable to our broader, ongoing ecological catastrophe. The bald eagle is not only a symbol of American might. It is a symbol of American exceptionalism.

Davis believes the bald eagle was selected as a national symbol for "all American" reasons, but his own evidence suggests that the Founding Fathers cribbed from the Greeks and Romans, as they did their architecture, oratory, and government. Though the bald eagle is endemic to North America, an eagle was Zeus's companion, a messenger of Jupiter, and served as the standard of the Roman legion. Across cultures and millennia, dating back to Mesopotamia, the eagle has been a dominant heraldic figure; Charlemagne had one, as did Napoleon, and Saladin's eagle survives in the coats of arms of much of the Arab world. Eagles can be found on the national flags of Mexico, Egypt, and Zambia, among others, a tendency unimpeded by the bird's most prominent symbolic performance, as the swastika-bestriding emissary of the Third Reich.

In the earliest years of the American republic, the most significant objection to using the bird as a national symbol came from Benjamin Franklin (in private correspondence, he argued that the turkey was "much more respectable"), though Davis cannot be sure whether he was kidding. Davis can say with certainty that the idea to use a bald eagle for the great seal came from Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress, though the source of his inspiration, Davis writes, "is anybody's guess."

*The Bald Eagle* is a shaggy dog. It proceeds by the principles of accretion, with no eagle fact, or eagle-adjacent fact, left behind. We learn that Alexis de Tocqueville and other European explorers "passed by" places with *Eagle* in their name ("Eagle River," "Eagle Rock," "Eagle Mountain"); that Zebulon Pike met Native Americans named Big Eagle, Black Eagle, and War Eagle; that Hudson River painters tended not to depict the bird ("unclear" why). Abraham Lincoln's early supporters called him "young eagle," and Bill Clinton's Secret Service code name was "Eagle." An etymological debate about whether *bald* refers to the whiteness of the eagle's head, its piebald coloring, or the word's secondary definition as "brazen" also ends without verdict.

From the trivia, however, emerges a moving portrait of a species victimized for its own evolutionary successes. The bald is intelligent enough to pursue a life of crime, supplementing its hunting by mugging ospreys as they fly fish back to their nest. Other birds engage in kleptoparasitism, but the violent glory of the bald's midair robberies earned it a reputation for laziness and immorality. Its maniacal cackle (an "awful scream," John James Audubon described it) did not help. When eagles were first featured in sound motion pictures, editors dubbed in the call of a red-tailed hawk to avoid unsettling viewers, something like an avian *Singin' in the Rain*.

Bald eagles are unusually devoted spouses and parents. They mate for life and tend not to move homes unless forced to, which makes them easy marks for hunters. Their tendency to hatch only two eaglets per clutch made them especially vulnerable to egg snatchings (for centuries a popular pastime in both Europe and North America) and, after World War II, to DDT pollution, which degraded their eggshells. Until the middle of the 20th century, the bald eagle received no federal protective designation. The idea would have seemed absurd: The species offered humanity no appreciable benefits. Eagles competed with hunters for small game and tormented livestock. They were treated, therefore, like rats, wolves, or any other nuisance animals. Americans killed them indiscriminately.

Davis is able to locate, prior to the 20th century, approximately four American citizens who publicly expressed compassion for the bald eagle. Walt Whitman wrote an ode to the bird's acrobatic mid-air courtship ritual in *Leaves of Grass*, the naturalist John Burroughs praised its "dignity," and an anonymous author in 1831 published an article called "The Eagle" that ran in a number of local newspapers. The correspondent describes watching a bald eagle dive from a tree to attack a wild turkey. The author, fighting his own instinct to kill the eagle, stops himself at the last second: "Admiration and awe prevented me. I felt he was the emblem and inspiration of my country." Faced with the majesty of the bird, he writes, "I shrunk into my own insignificance, and have ever since been sensible of my own inferiority."

This rare expression of human humility was echoed by Wilson, who was the nation's preeminent ornithologist before being eclipsed by Audubon.

Despite his suspicions about the bald's taste for infant blood, Wilson wrote approvingly of the bird's vigor, energy, and longevity. Eagles were "not in their ways inferior, only so in the human mind." It took bravery to write this, in his time.

Conventional wisdom followed the judgments of Audubon—"the premier avian slaughterer of his time," as the writer Joy Williams has described him—who comes across as a bloodthirsty monster, even by the standards of his age. Audubon wrote loathingly of eagles and did not miss an opportunity to murder them. Davis relates Audubon's satisfaction at shooting a female while she sat warming her eggs, and the agonized shrieks of a female buzzing overhead while Audubon and his men tortured her spouse.

"No animal in American history," Davis writes, "has to the same extreme been the simultaneous object of reverence and recrimination." And no individual bird embodied both extremes better than Old Abe, who was born in Wisconsin at the outbreak of the Civil War. Before he was old enough to fledge, an Ojibwa chief chopped down his roosting tree, killing his lone sibling, and fought off his parents. The chief traded Abe to a tavern owner for a bushel of corn. A company of Union soldiers adopted Abe as a mascot and inducted him into service, draping his neck in ribbons of red, white, and blue.

Old Abe posed for photographs, signed autographs, and was brought into battle. He learned how to dance to a fiddle, shake hands with a talon, and kill chickens on command. His symbolic power crossed enemy lines: Confederate soldiers vowed "to take that Eagle dead or alive." In a bid for poetic justice, he tried to escape after his tether was severed by a Minié ball; he flew 50 feet before his handler, racing through gunfire, recaptured him. He was shot twice, but the bullets "did little more than ruffle his feathers." (Davis has a prodigious weakness for clichés, particularly birdy ones.) Generals Grant and Sherman raised their hats when Old Abe passed, and P. T. Barnum offered $20,000 to adopt him.

After the war, Old Abe was incarcerated in the basement of Wisconsin's capitol, where his wings were routinely clipped. Neglected by his caretakers, he almost starved to death, before dying from smoke inhalation in a fire. His corpse was mounted, displayed in a glass box, and incinerated

in another fire. Davis makes the subtle but persuasive point that the ubiquity of eagles in American culture—on newspaper mastheads, condensed-milk cans, and athletic uniforms—made individual animals seem expendable. With so many cartoon eagles around, who needed the real cackling thing? By the beginning of the 20th century, balds had gone missing in so much of the country that Americans believed the species was native to the Rocky Mountains—perhaps one of the higher peaks, up in the clouds.

To the sadism of white America, Davis contrasts the Native reverence for living creatures. Many North American tribes ascribed spiritual qualities to eagles, considering them avatars of strength and wisdom. For the Te'po'ta'ahl of California's central coast, the bald eagle is the Creator himself. After constructing the world, Bald Eagle molds a man from clay, turns one of his feathers into a woman, and brings the man to life with a flap of his wings (in a plot twist, Bald Eagle next orders a coyote to inseminate Eve). Eagle feathers were used in religious ceremonies, dances, powwows, medicine rites, piercings, doll dresses—but of course all those feathers had to be plucked out of real birds, and preferably live ones.

Native peoples, who also told stories about balds abducting infants, silently endured their own "bird of paradox" ironies. Though Davis writes that they "spoke to animals as if speaking to an elder: with respect," and that "many people today think of Indians as the original environmentalists," he also must acknowledge that they killed loads of eagles. He describes parkas sewed out of the downy skin of eaglets, a dance troupe dressed in the feathers of 300 birds, and a ritual in which eaglets were sprinkled with cornmeal and squeezed to death. Some of the customs persist: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Eagle Repository, the legally designated morgue for every dead eagle in the nation, distributes feathers, heads, and entire corpses to various tribes for use in ceremonies. The agency also recently authorized the Hopi to seize 40 eaglets a year from their nests, douse them in cornmeal, and strangle them. Such horrors don't begin to reach the scale or malice of the carnage wrought by white people, but I suspect eagles don't share Davis's reverence for Native customs.

The modern age began in 1900, with the passage of federal legislation to ban the illegal trade of wild animals. Broader legislation followed, urged on

by a growing movement of conservation groups. The most powerful of these was the National Association of Audubon Societies, though Davis points out that its leadership, dominated by "sportsmen," shared its namesake's callousness toward the bald eagle. The group opposed protections for years—refusing even to condemn Alaska's bounty on the species—until it caved to patriotic appeals in 1930. The symbolism that had threatened to doom the bird saved it in the end. Activists learned that Americans who cared little for nonhuman life could be convinced that the indiscriminate slaughter of the national symbol was as distasteful as burning the flag.

After the passage of the Endangered Species Act and—not coincidentally—the bicentennial, the eagle was classified as endangered in most of the Lower 48 states, and threatened in the rest. A species once abundant in every part of the country had largely retreated to Alaska. Conservation graduated to propagation. Misdirected pangs of patriotism helped inspire extraordinary feats of intervention. To reintroduce the bald to southern climates, researchers drove a motor home straight from Florida to Oklahoma with incubators balanced on their laps, turning the eggs every three hours. Davis writes of Alaskan eaglets shipped to New York State, Floridian eggs placed beneath unwitting Oklahoman hens, and a pair of Michigan eaglets debarking at Logan International Airport to establish Massachusetts's first nesting eagle population in nearly a century. Caretakers watched two eaglets full-time, separated from nests by one-way glass; hand-fed eaglets hundreds of pounds of quail; relocated an alligator from a nearby pond; rescued a fallen fledgling; and wore an oversize mesh "ghillie" suit to avoid creating any positive associations with humanity.

There's no avoiding us, however. In the end, balds and human beings face the same challenge: how to live together in peace. Eagles have been more adaptable than many other species, and we have made a far greater effort to save them than we have, say, the Florida scrub jay or the marbled murrelet. In recent years, balds have made thriving habitats at a former biological-weapons facility, a hydroelectric station—a reliable source of dead fish—and the Alaskan port of Dutch Harbor (home to *Deadliest Catch*), where eagles clean fishing nets, buzz dogs, and steal groceries from a supermarket parking lot. Reintroduction has been so successful that the federal

government has begun to consider a new chapter in our stewardship of the species: *population control*.

The lesson Davis draws from the bald eagle's success story is "that our nature is predisposed to virtue." The weight of the historical record would seem to suggest a predisposition to recklessness, cruelty, and violence, but the larger point is clear: More species had better become patriotic symbols soon.

I'd like to propose for consideration the eastern black rail, a mysterious mouse-size bird found in southwestern Louisiana. It is distinguished by its red eyes and big feet. It disdains flying, and sneaks through coastal marshes under the cover of night. It has a delicate bone structure, is gravely threatened by the fossil-fuel industry, and is close to extinction. Who better to speak for the republic than the eastern black rail?

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "Loving the Bald Eagle to Death."*

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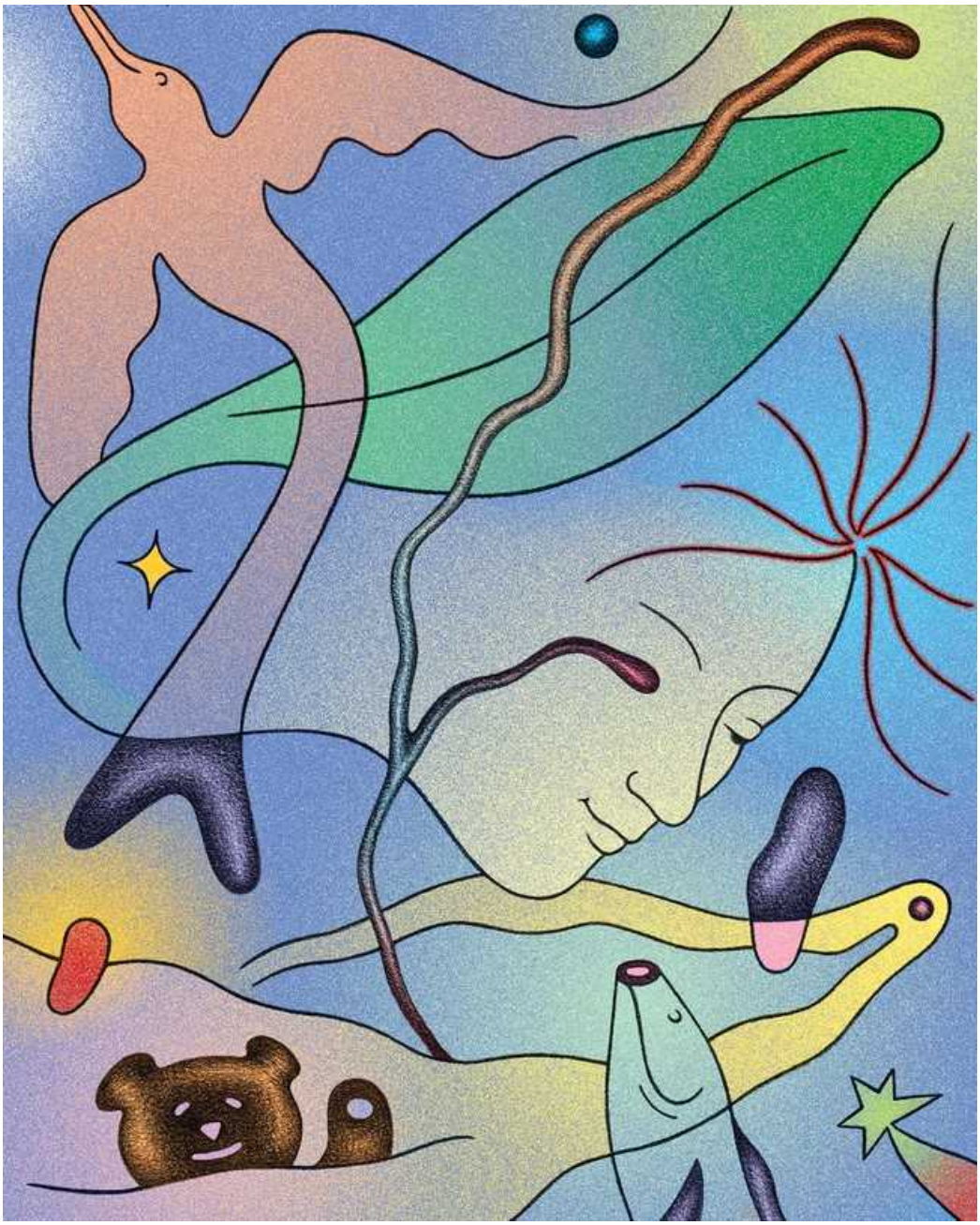

# The Smutty Mystic

What Everyone Gets Wrong About Sheila Heti

By Judith Shulevitz

Reading Sheila Heti's breakthrough novels, *How Should a Person Be?* (2012) and *Motherhood* (2018), I kept thinking that I was the only one who noticed how religious they are—Jewish, mostly, which is how she was raised, but Christian too, with some non-Western source material thrown in. Once I'd Googled the reviews, I realized I was right and wrong. With a few exceptions, she has not been pigeonholed as a Jewish writer or, worse, the author of works on spirituality. Instead, she's seen by mainstream critics as a feminist, which she is; as avant-garde, which I suppose she is (although I never quite know what that means); and as a writer of autofiction, which she isn't.

I don't deny that some of her work has autobiographical content. *How Should a Person Be?* hews closely to Heti's coming-of-age as a writer in a small circle of young artists in Toronto, and the narrator of *Motherhood* is a successful writer and childless divorcée approaching 40, as Heti was when she wrote the book. Her new novel, *Pure Colour*, has one important element drawn from life, the death of her father. Heti plunders her experiences and emotions and sexuality for material, but what novelist doesn't, to a greater or lesser extent? In Heti's hands, her story is a means to an end that most so-called autofiction writers—indeed, most writers of anything perceived as metafictional—would shy away from. She is doing more than blurring the boundary between the real and the made-up. Heti uses the details of her life to do theology.

Her novels have the digressive quality of essays, and they take on such topics as what God wants of her—that is, if there's a God to do the wanting. In *Pure Colour*, she follows her fascination with the sacred into domains so surreal that we have to abandon any notion that she's merely some sort of postmodern diarist. We have to pay Heti the courtesy of taking her question literally. She really wants to know: *How should a person be?*

In *The New Yorker*, James Wood called this "a religiously important question" that Heti answers so flippantly that she must be aiming at "a calculated desacralization." I think he is reading her exactly backwards. Heti is calculatedly resacralizing a disenchanted world. Her novels are quests for the holy inside the profane. *How Should a Person Be?* confuses critics because people on spiritual journeys aren't supposed to say "fuck" so

much, or find ecstasy while gagging on the penis of an imperious new sex partner. “I don’t see why you walk down the street so easily, not noticing that you are living half a life,” thinks Sheila, the narrator of that novel, addressing all the unlucky women of the world who don’t know that the only thing worth doing is “getting your brains fucked out of your skull” by her lover.

Heti distracts from her seriousness of purpose with vaudevillian quick-changes in tone. She’s droll! She’s earnest! She’s potty-mouthed! She amuses and bemuses by oxymoron, yoking the empyrean to the smutty. “One good thing about being a woman is that we haven’t too many examples yet of what a genius looks like,” Sheila reflects. “It could be me.” Her male writer friends know what they’re supposed to do, and it irks her: talk themselves up and be super oblique so “the academics will study them forever.” Her female genius may well consist of “giving blow jobs in heaven.” Why not?

Both *How Should a Person Be?* and *Motherhood* are full of biblical allusions, including Jacob wrestling with the angel, a match that ends with the patriarch being renamed Israel. So it can be no coincidence that in *How Should a Person Be?* Sheila’s ever more sadistic paramour is named Israel and she sings those hosannas to the “magnificent cock of Israel.” Take that as a joke if you will, but later, in a chapter called “Destiny Is the Smashing of the Idols,” Sheila will free herself from Israel’s thrall by insisting on putting her lips to his penis against his wishes—a deliberate act of humiliation meant to assert her independence, not to please him. This insubordination leads to “real happiness,” she says, “like I was floating upward to the heavens.” Even when Sheila prays, she’s sacrilegious: “May the Lord have mercy on me for I am a fucking idiot.” I can’t tell you how happy that made me. I go to synagogue fairly often, and there isn’t a single line in the siddur that sounds to me as much like the way I talk to God.

*Motherhood* is only somewhat less likely to nonplus the reader than *How Should a Person Be?* On one level, it’s a feminist disputation over art versus maternity—whether a female writer must be a mother or whether she can get away with being just (just!) a writer. But this is also a book about life with a capital *L*: what having the God-given power to create it or to

decline to create it means. What cosmic obligations do a woman's reproductive capacities impose on her? What does she owe to "the life that wants to be lived through" her? Is art sufficient compensation for the "beautiful and incredibly rare gift" of life, "whose debt I will forever be in"?

You might call *Motherhood* Talmudic, if the rabbis had been 30-something female novelists nervously eyeing their biological clocks. The 30-something female novelist in *Motherhood* turns for guidance to nothing less than the universe, as channeled by an *I Ching*–like oracle invoked by the toss of three coins. The oracle, by far the funniest character in the novel, responds with yes or no answers that simultaneously deflate the narrator's philosophizing and give sound advice on how to be more chill about her career and relationships. Once again, Heti exploits incongruity for laughs. Ovulation produces "days of sparkling joy," while the days leading up to the narrator's period are a monthly blight. Why would God subject a woman to this hormonal roller coaster?

Or, as Heti poses the question, "what to make of God's two faces, the all-accepting and loving New Testament Ovulating God, and the vindictive and rageful Old Testament PMS God?" Given the procreative power of the Lord, endowing her with female reproductive organs and corresponding mental states seems perfectly reasonable. Moreover, maybe the menstrual cycle exists to make manifest "how a human is part of time, or is bound to time, or *is* time." But you have to admit that Heti's version of *imitatio Dei* has high-quality shock value.

P*ure Colour* is Heti's coming-out novel. It flaunts its biblicality. Like the Bible itself, it's a mashup of fairy tale and myth, with a Broadway musical tossed in for good measure. *Pure Colour* is unabashedly metaphysical and completely outlandish. At the same time, this is a book of mourning, specifically for a father. Heti's tone is more somber and searching than it has ever been, as she turns over and over fundamental questions of life and death, creation and extinction, with her trademark penchant for paradox. Yet neither grief nor theology can suppress Heti's oddball wit and affection for wildly inappropriate sexual metaphors, for which a reader should be grateful.

If a critic is supposed to pinpoint a genre, I'll have to take a pass. *Pure Colour* is not fantasy, nor is it science fiction, although, in the style of Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro, Heti defamiliarizes our present way of life by creating an alternative one with intermittent and disturbing similarities to the one we think we know. The language is childlike, with the "there was"-es, "and then"s, and "so"s of a children's story, though the content is unchildish, often seedy: "On her floor lived a lonely man," Heti writes of her protagonist, Mira, and "in their bathroom was a dirty tub, so she never took a bath, and she rarely showered." But really, how do you categorize a novel in which the Lord makes a sudden appearance in order to split into "three art critics in the sky" who take the form of a bird, a fish, and a bear?

Perhaps this is Heti's Torah—that is, in the literal sense of the word, her teaching, not to be confused with *the* Torah, the Five Books of Moses. A reader of the Gospels might spot the influence of parable, the kind that Jesus used to overturn the order of things. Heti begins at the beginning, or almost the beginning, on the seventh day of Creation. Well, actually, she's describing what Creation would have looked like if God were an artist well-enough versed in Kabbalah to obey the principle of *tzimtzum*, according to which God must withdraw to allow the universe to come to fruition:

God's handiwork has disappointed him, however, and so "the moment we are living in" appears to be an escalation of what happened the first time God was dissatisfied, when he wiped out nearly all people and animals in the Flood. This time the imminent catastrophe is global warming, which Heti posits as threatening not just animal life but all of Creation, including the planet: "Now the earth is heating up in advance of its destruction by God, who has decided that the first draft of existence contained too many flaws."

As in the Book of Genesis, we move fairly quickly from the history of the world to the story of one person, the young woman named Mira. Mira attends an international branch of the prestigious American Academy of American Critics, apparently just before the advent of the internet. ("Can we say that friendships were different then?" she asks. "Everyone had their own little life, which touched the lives of other people only at parties.") At

this vaguely Gallic institution, students drink tisanes and eat croissants and smoke pot and stand on desks to issue pronunciamentos, because they, the elect, are there "to develop a style of writing and thinking that could survive down through the ages, and at the same time penetrate their own generation so incisively." The narrator notes drily that these young intellectuals don't know that one day everyone will carry phones from which "people who had far more charisma than they did would let flow an endless stream of images and words. They just had no idea that the world would become so big, or the competition so stiff."

Mira is an always interesting but haunting character; even in a group, she seems cut off and alone, and she tends to lose herself in private obsessions. Before she went to school, she worked at a lamp store, an old-fashioned place that eschewed modern lighting for Tiffany lamps and any others made of colored glass. Mira was entranced by one lamp in particular: "It had green blobs and red blobs; little polished stones of coloured glass that were held together by a network of iron. It was the most wonderful thing Mira had ever seen." One day she stole it, not for cash but for the pure joy of watching its colors play on her white walls, which made her love "her meagre little existence," because it was "entirely her own." Later, when she got a job selling rings at a jewelry store, she sat and gazed at them all day, bewitched by pink amethysts, different shades of gold, "icy platinums which held within them a deep and private blueness."

If *Motherhood* was a rumination on God's act of Creation and the human mirroring of his generative power through art and babies, *Pure Colour* is a meditation on the beauty of Creation. "God is most proud of creation as an aesthetic thing," Heti writes. But what does that mean, "an aesthetic thing"? In *Pure Colour*, it means color. Color expresses the character of experience, and our experience of color is irreducibly subjective. To put it another way, color is what life feels like. "Colour is not just a representation of the world, but of the feelings in a room, and the meaningfulness of a room in time," Mira says. She describes her relationship with her father, who raised her by himself, as "gold and green," by which she means that her father "was always pointing out the beauty of the world to her, its greatness and its mystery, and his attention had made her feel cherished and loved." By contrast, the room in which she watched him die had a "sort of maroonish

light.” It was a color Mira had never seen before, she says, because “it was the colour of a father dying.”

Part of Heti’s charm is her knack for coming from as far out of left field as possible, and here she has amped up her unpredictability. Readers may recognize a character named Annie as Orphan Annie, the plucky heroine of the musical. Heti’s Annie did once sing and dance with her friends at an orphanage, but now she is all grown up and disdainful and lives in an apartment that smells like rat shit. Mira and the other students don’t care about that; they envy her poise and the fact that she comes from a place that is “so marvellously bleak.” Heti, as usual, casually drops in jarring metaphors. Mira and Annie develop an unspoken bond, and whenever Mira sees her, she feels a widening in her chest, “like a vagina stretching for a very large cock.” That’s sort of gross, but also a strangely arousing way to describe the painful expansion of self that comes with falling in love. Mira kisses Annie, though they never speak of it. Then Mira’s father dies. Orphanhood turns out to be less enviable than it looked.

The next thing you know, Mira’s spirit has entered a leaf. To be fair, Heti has prepared us for this eventuality by describing the transmigration of Mira’s father’s soul into her body. The moment he died, his spirit entered hers, and she felt peace and joy. And “if the spirit of a father can move into a daughter, this must be happening all over the world, spirits entering other bodies, when a person dies.”

Unfortunately, there’s not a lot to do once you’ve relocated to a leaf. Mira’s thoughts begin to move at the unhurried pace of nature itself. She discovers that she shares the leaf with her father’s spirit, which initially doesn’t want to talk. When she succeeds in drawing him out, they endlessly debate weighty matters. Mira takes comfort from nestling close to him, but their cohabitation is claustrophobia-inducing, to the reader as well as to her. Annie happens by and Mira tries to attract her attention and get herself rescued. Leaves can’t scream, however, and Annie doesn’t hear. But at last she notices Mira. The leaf breaks open in a burst of golden light and Mira falls out.

Being a leaf has changed Mira, instilling in her an awareness of the vast span of time as well as an aversion to busyness, the human need always to

*fix* things: “Plants have learned, over millions of years, how to be the audience of creation.” She tries to impart her plant wisdom to Annie, but Annie is having none of it. And from that point on, Mira faces a life of profound isolation.

Color is a thing you have to see to know what it’s like, and so is *Pure Colour*. To describe the plot is to run the danger of making it sound random, which it is and isn’t. There is a logic here, though it’s very strange. Yes, *Pure Colour* is mystical. Tonally, Heti sounds a lot like the great Christian philosopher-mystic (and convert from Judaism) Simone Weil, who has a similar love of paradox and whom Heti has said she looks up to. But Heti is the rare mystic with a sense of humor. She can play the clown and talk God talk at the same time.

This is a gloriously implausible book. Maybe *Pure Colour* is best labeled a cosmological farce; if so, that’s a discomfiting genre. The God of this novel is everywhere and in everything, but he is less concerned with human happiness than one might have hoped.

*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline “The Smutty Mystic.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

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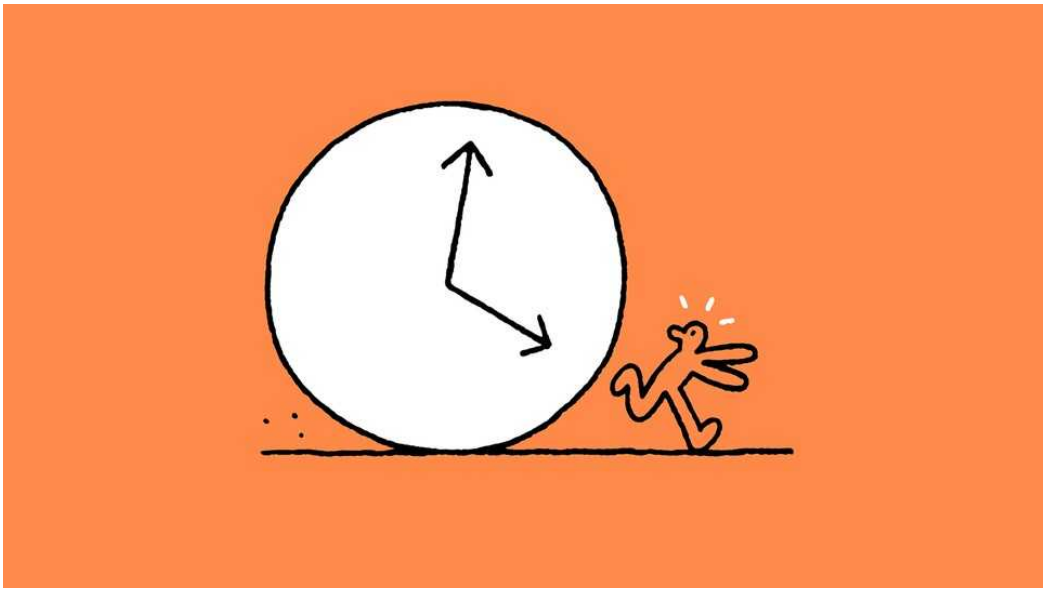
# Departments

- **An Ode to Being Late**
  Either you're early or you're late. I choose tardiness. -- James Parker



# An Ode to Being Late

I Choose Tardiness: An Ode to Being Late

By James Parker

Okay, White Rabbit, what's it all about?

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" Alice is drowsing on the riverbank; you rush past, startling her. From your waistcoat, you pull out a pocket watch. You consult it feverishly. Then you disappear down a hole, and she —amazed—follows you into Wonderland.

Me, I'm always late. Or about to be late. Or working very hard not to be late—barely overcoming lateness. Oh dear! Oh dear! Why am I like this? No Alice is made curious by my haste. No marvels ensue. Just the serrated feeling of a pissed-off world. Squeezed horizons, clammy feet—these are the symptoms of a chronic belatedness. Why do I do it?

There are theories, of course. One: I'm an incorrigible narcissist. Everybody must wait for me. Like a king, or a comet. Sure, the weaker part of me will

hustle along and stammer out apologies on arrival. But the royal, cometary part is gratified. *Behold—their lives were empty until I came.* Two: In a low-testosterone, 21st-century, blue-state, blah-blah life, a life neutered of genuine risk, this is what passes for adventure. I should be hunting caribou. I should be tripping with the medicine man. Instead I'm checking the time every 42 seconds and cursing the laws of physics.

Am I that pathetic, though? Yes. But here's the thing about punctuality: It doesn't really exist. Perfect punctuality is a pinhead, a notional point on the continuum, kind of a Zeno's paradox. To be punctual, you have to be early—because if you're not early, you're late. And what does being early mean? It means padding your schedule with loose minutes, margins for error, insulating layers of dead time. It means waiting rooms. It means the tickle of the abyss.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* gives us two opposing principles, cosmic rhythm and counter-rhythm: the girl in her summery torpor, the palpitating rabbit. I choose lateness. It gives me velocity. I veer through crowds; I hurdle over interference. Here I come. And if you're waiting for me, relax. Stop scowling. I'm never *that* late.*This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "Ode to Being Late."*

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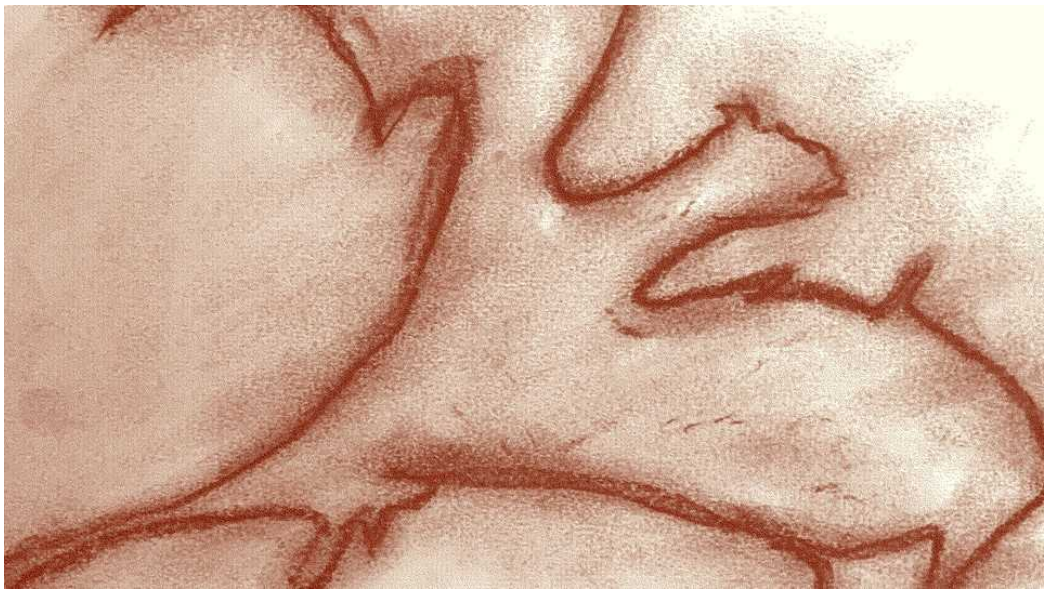
# Poetry

- **Needing the Dragon**
  -- Alicia Ostriker



# Needing the Dragon

Alicia Ostriker: ‘Needing the Dragon’

By Alicia Ostriker

A woman sits in my armchair and speaks:
We have slain the many gods
they were unreal
the one god in whom we say we believe
is also unbelievable
Humanism keeps the dragon
as a kind of toy
no
as a mask

*This poem appears in the March 2022 print edition. When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.