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# THE NEW YORKER



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## Goings On

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By [Helen Shaw](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Richard Brody](#), and [Taran Dugal](#)

*You're reading the [Goings On](#) newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)*

After a somewhat quiet few years of foreign theatre programming in New York, we are suddenly enjoying a superbloom, largely thanks to several adventurous international festivals, working in synchrony this fall. There's a certain catch-as-catch-can ephemerality to this work, which tends to appear for quick two- or three-day engagements, sometimes in familiar places—Lincoln Center's dizzying **Festival of Firsts** (in the [David Rubenstein Atrium](#), through Oct. 23), for instance—and sometimes farther afield.

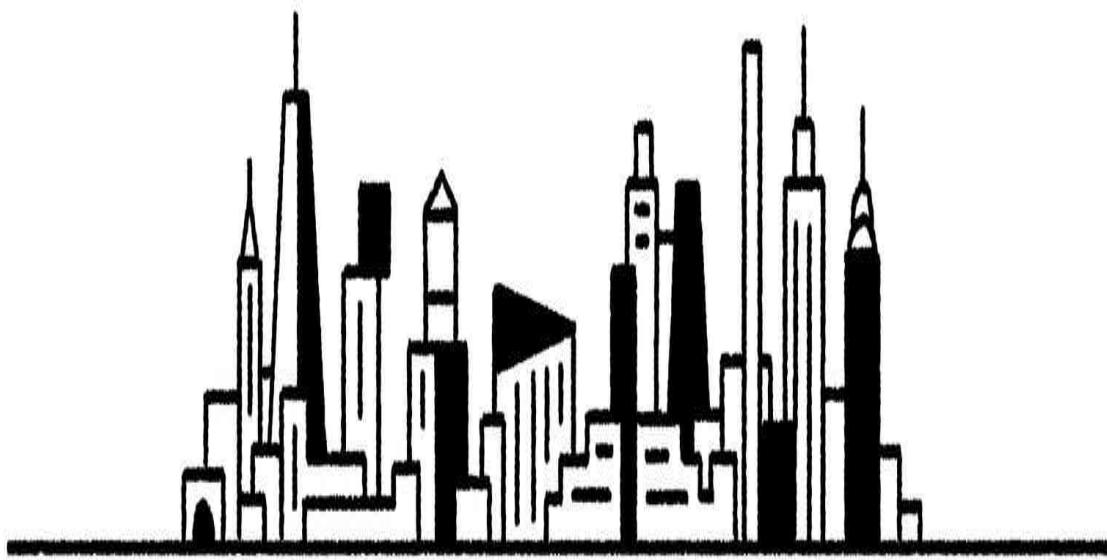
The one fest to rule them all is L'Alliance's **Crossing the Line**, which nimbly presents a full lineup including many co-productions in tandem with other festivals and presenting venues. Thanks to L'Alliance, you can see several recent hits from the Festival d'Avignon without needing to brave the Provençal heat: at *BAM*, Crossing the Line co-produces Caroline Guiela Nguyen's "[LACRIMA](#)" (Oct. 22-26), which tells the disturbing and far-ranging tale of how a single haute-couture dress is assembled; at the Japan Society, the festival co-presents the deconstructed Noh-inspired play "[Le Tambour de Soie \(The Silk Drum\)](#)," Oct. 24-25; and at its own venue, in the Florence Gould Theatre, C.T.L. offers Tiago Rodrigues's "[By Heart](#)," a beautiful communal exercise in memorization and grief, performed by a company that's cast entirely from the audience (Nov. 3-4).



*"LACRIMA"* at BAM. Photograph by Jean-Louis Fernandez

One of Crossing the Line's newest partners is **Powerhouse: International**, a brand-new season-long festival of music, dance, and theatre at the stunningly renovated Powerhouse Arts building—a brick-and-graffiti cathedral of a space in a former power plant in Gowanus—where you can see work such as the Brazilian theatre-maker Carolina Bianchi's troubling "[Chapter I: The Bride and the Goodnight Cinderella](#)" (Oct. 23-25; see Performance below); the Brussels-based artist Soa Ratsifandrihana's dance-and-music-filled storytelling work "[Fampitaha, fampita, fampitâna](#)" (Oct. 28-30); and the Irish group Dead Centre's "[Good Sex](#)" (Nov. 5-8), in which two unprepared actors—new each night—must perform an erotic scene, with an intimacy coördinator offering live pointers.

For a "best of other fests" experience, **N.Y.U.'s Skirball Center** has become one of the most audacious and indispensable presenters in town. Its fall programming is particularly strong, and although the "semester" is half over, we still have the chance to see the Norwegian company Susie Wang's horror comedy "[Burnt Toast](#)" (Nov. 5-8), and also my most anticipated show of the fall—the antic, orgiastic, myth-drenched "[Infamous Offspring](#)" (Nov. 13-15). A bizarre welter of dance and film and theatre, it's made by Wim Vandekeybus, whose company Ultima Vez has been a watchword for both contemporary dance-theatre and the Flemish Wave's avant-gardism since the nineteen-eighties.—*Helen Shaw*



## About Town

Electro Pop

The multi-instrumentalist and singer-songwriter Gabriela Jimeno Caldas began the project **Ela Minus** with a clear objective: electronic music with an analog mind-set. Her creative journey began at eleven, playing drums in a hardcore band in Bogotá; attending the Berklee School of Music and experiencing Boston's club scene compelled her to change tracks. After graduating, she began designing and building synthesizers, the featured instrument in her music, which she augments with her singing, in English and Spanish. The thumping, insurrectionist cuts of her début album, "acts of rebellion," from 2020, felt true to her punk roots. Minus's long-awaited follow-up, "DÍA," from January, is dialled up in a very different way, its whirring, euphoric songs making techno seem like pop, and the electronic feel organic.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Elsewhere](#); Oct. 23.)*

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Off Broadway

The gonzo clown Natalie Palamides plays both halves of a couple in her rom-com-gone-amok “**Weer**” by dividing herself down the middle: one side of her body sports a pink sweater and fluttery lashes, the other side facial hair and a bouncy rubber schlong. Her “couple” undergoes too much tumult for a perfectly timed comic evening, but relationships can be messy. Palamides, as a physical-comedy virtuoso, *loves* mess—there’s a splash zone near the front, with audience members wearing plastic ponchos. In my favorite moment of her lo-fi spectacle she manages to embody a chaotic New York street, complete with taxis driving too close to the curb: her two fools in love get hit with gutter water, and, thrillingly, so do some of us.—*Helen Shaw ([Cherry Lane](#); through Dec. 21.)*

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## Folk Rock



Neko Case. Photograph by Ebru Yildiz

In the early two-thousands, **Neko Case** emerged as Americana’s glass howitzer, her voice as potent and powerful as it is glinting and delicate. Case’s work in the Canadian power-pop collective the New Pornographers may have more verve and thrust, but her solo work is emotionally richer, and harder to qualify. Across eight albums, Case has anchored her explorations of country, folk, and indie forms with dazzling, singular vocals and mystifying lyrics, a tradition that continues on the majestic “Neon Grey Midnight Green,” her first album in seven years. Case is joined in concert by

a special guest, the garage-punk band Des Demonas.—S.P. ([Beacon Theatre](#); Oct. 22.)

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## Performance

“Goodnight Cinderella” is Brazilian slang for a sleeping pill used by sexual predators. In “**Chapter I: The Bride and the Goodnight Cinderella**,” the Brazilian writer and performer Carolina Bianchi doesn’t only lecture about sexual violence; she drinks a spiked cocktail and passes out, while eight other performers move her body around—dumping it into a car trunk, subjecting it to a gynecological exam. At its première, at the Avignon Festival, in 2023, this two-and-a-half-hour exercise in corporeal commitment was greeted as both a scandal and a career-making success. Now it gets its U.S. première in the post-industrial chic of [Powerhouse Arts](#), on the Gowanus Canal.—*Brian Seibert (Oct. 23-25.)*

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## Movies



Ben Stiller and Anne Meara. Photograph courtesy Apple TV

Ben Stiller directed the fascinating, poignant documentary “**Stiller & Meara: Nothing Is Lost**,” about his parents, the actors Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, and about their comedy duo, which became nationally famous in the nineteen-sixties. After the elder Stiller’s death, in 2020 (Meara died in

2015), Ben and his sister, Amy, explore the Upper West Side apartment where they grew up and unearth their parents' trove of home movies, homemade audio tapes, scripts, and letters. These archival treasures unfold the complex lives of the partners, who wrote and rehearsed at home, and lay bare the stresses that all four endured because there was no boundary between performance and reality. The couple's professional struggles and conflicting ambitions—and their roles in their children's careers—add layers of mixed emotion.—*Richard Brody* (*In theatrical release; streaming on Apple TV starting Oct. 24.*)

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## Off Broadway

In Preston Max Allen's “**Caroline**,” directed deftly by David Cromer, a onetime wild child, Maddie (Chloë Grace Moretz), reengages with her estranged mother, Rhea (Amy Landecker)—the penitent young woman hunched in flannel, the elder one cold beneath her Candice Bergen hair style. Allen's reparative narrative, though, actually revolves around Maddie's nine-year-old daughter, Caroline (River Lipe-Smith), who has only just claimed her pronouns and, as the title tells us, her name. For most of the play, the two well-meaning adults find themselves mired in old hurts, and so it's lucky that Caroline's got her own decision-making steel. Lipe-Smith's matter-of-fact maturity makes such “and the children shall lead” optimism believable; you want to find this charismatic talent afterward to ask the kid to run for office.—H.S. ([M.C.C.](#); through Nov. 16.)

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## Bar Tab

*Taran Dugal checks out a brand-new Bushwick dive.*



Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

In today's New York, dive bars are an increasingly rare species, steadily losing their place in the economic food chain to sexier establishments that are more amenable to influencers and their algorithms. [\*\*Turbo Pizza\*\*](#), in Bushwick, then, is a breath of fresh air: that rare new dive which feels like it's been around for decades—neon tubing, battered pool table, sticky floors, and all. On a recent weekday, a group of friends settled into a leather booth, the speakers above them blaring a pop-punk track from the early two-thousands. One friend, spotting a section of the menu titled "SHOTS!," headed for the bar and ordered the Jolly Rancher, a sugary concoction of vodka, cranberry and pineapple juices, and peach liqueur. "I think we might be out," the bartender said, rummaging elbow-deep in the fridge before extracting a bottle of viscous scarlet liquid. Out came a massive whiskey glass. "You're in luck. I'm going to top you off—not sure how long this'll last." The friend felt a pang of preëmptive regret. Back at the table, gastronomic decisions were unfolding: the rest of the group was taking advantage of the kitchen's Detroit-style pizzas, including the Burrata Soppressata, a sweet-spicy mélange of hot honey, basil, and chile flakes. This was followed by the fried ravioli, which hit a spot that only a sufficiently greasy small plate can. By now, the Jolly Rancher had vanished, as had a round of the house's elegant dirty Martini, whose shortcomings in grit were made up for in potency. Napkins were crumpled; plates were licked. The group motioned for the check, but found stiff competition for the

bartender's gaze, which was locked (in standard dive protocol) on that night's Mets game. Even here, the attention economy prevails.

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## A New Yorker Quiz

*Guillermo del Toro's "Frankenstein" is out today; can you identify these other spooky stories?*

**Published in 1948, this story features an old ritual in which one villager is stoned to death.** Hint: “ ‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, [and then they were upon her](#).”

**Published in 2009, this story features a tall scarecrow figure with a misshapen Halloween pumpkin for a head.** Hint: “She wondered if the strange glistening to the air had always been there but in her previous, protected life [she hadn’t noticed it](#).”

**Published in 2014, this story features a ring with a blue-green stone shaped like an elephant, infused with the spirit of a ghost.** Hint: “He can’t do anything to you unless you [give him permission](#).”

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P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [You can take the proverb out of the Netherlands . . .](#)
- [How to have an analog autumn](#)
- [Marc Maron’s final “WTF” episode](#)

By [Helen Rosner](#)

*You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.*

These days, it seems like you can't flick a cigarette in this town without it smacking into a brand-new French restaurant with an old-fashioned point of view. An ocean of Le and La and L', Chez Whoever and Maison So-and-So, This or That d'Or. If, in a haze of butter and white Burgundy, you sat down to write a parody of the *ur-resto* for our current culinary Franco-cacophony, you could do worse than to title it "Chateau Royale," a phrase both spectacularly generic and hilariously evocative. It is also the name of a place that opened this summer, in a century-old carriage house just south of Washington Square Park, the latest spot from the restaurateur Cody Pruitt, of *Libertine*, and his business partner, Jacob Cohen. The semi-absurdity of the thing is on unabashed display: white-jacketed waiters? Foie gras? Escargot? *Oui, oui, et oui.*

There's not much that's novel about Chateau Royale, but, to the restaurant's credit, this very much seems to be the point. When it comes to the predictability of the menu—and, indeed, of the over-all vibe—Chateau Royale both plays it straight and wears it lightly. At street level, there's a barroom, moodily dark and intimate; upstairs, in the more formal dining room, ivory-colored walls and a run of windows give the space an airier, more open feel. Although the offerings in each area overlap a little bit—at both, you can get plump chilled New Caledonian blue prawns on a bed of ice, or a whole steamed artichoke with a ramekin of kicky béarnaise—they are entirely distinct entities. I preferred my time upstairs, where the décor and the menu evoke an older, grander sort of French restaurant than what I've become used to. The food includes classics of an older era like lobster thermidor, the crustacean split lengthwise and draped in a blanket of blistery broiled cream and cheese, which oozes lustily from the shell at the slightest pressure of a fork, and a piece of sable, already the most luscious fish in the sea, served in a beurre blanc speckled generously with black beads of caviar. There's a certain paradoxical comfort to this kind of obscene indulgence: a luxury of fat and salt that bypasses intellect or caloric attunement and goes directly to the animal brain.

The onslaught of intensity works, thanks to choices the restaurant makes in portioning (not overlarge) and service (not over-rushed), which gives the palate a bit of time to regroup between happy sighs. In this respect, Chateau Royale is evocative of [Libertine](#), Pruitt's other restaurant, a sexy, cream-worshipping West Village bistro where I've often felt that diners ought to receive a complimentary handful of Lactaid pills along with the bread and butter. As at Libertine, Chateau Royale offers virtually no detours from the richness, even when you might think you're ordering something light. An endive salad, for example, is tossed in a decadent anchovy dressing, and further enriched with a snowfall of shaved Mimolette cheese. The sauce for the duck a l'orange, bright with bergamot and calamansi, is sticky and glossy. A scallop crudo gets swaddled in plush, thanks to a sauce *grenobloise*, made of brown butter with capers, funked up a bit with miso, and thick as peanut butter.

There is one jarringly American intrusion into all this Frenchness, a perhaps unnecessary flourish on a menu whose extravagances are otherwise more discreet: the beggar's purse, a one-bite canapé in which crème fraîche and osetra caviar are bundled up inside a chewy crêpe and tied with a ribbon of chive. While it is often, apocryphally, said to have originated in France, it's a New York icon through and through: in the eighties and nineties, the beggar's purse was the signature morsel of the Quilted Giraffe, the era's most sizzling-hot restaurant. (As it happens, Chateau Royale's executive chef, Brian Young was a cook at the Quilted Giraffe back then.) Thanks, perhaps, to its insouciant, class-warfare-inciting name, the beggar's purse became a sensation, helped, no doubt, by its face-melting price tag: when the item débuted, in 1981, the Quilted Giraffe charged thirty dollars apiece; by the end of the decade, it was fifty dollars. Chateau Royale's beggar's purses run thirty-nine dollars per ping-pong-ball-size bundle—depending on how you look at it, this is either a scandal or a hell of a deal.

Part of why this bite feels so out of place is that, while Chateau Royale is not by any stretch an inexpensive restaurant, it is also not an ostentatious or conceited one; it feels like the wrong setting for a dish so overtly sneering. In all other respects, Pruitt and his team seem to be working hard to create a warm, unintimidating experience: service is beautifully friendly, with waiters tour-guiding guests through the more highbrow aspects of the menu without an iota of condescension, and welcoming of hungry Francophiles of

all levels of gastronomic expertise. I had dinner one evening next to a family with two small children, who went wild on both oysters and French fries, to the delight of the entire dining room. There's a dissonant note of another stripe on the menu downstairs, in the barroom, where the atmosphere continues to be pleasing, and the drinks divine, but where I found little to like among the more casual edible offerings that weren't available above. A "club sandwich," for instance, was made with tepid pulled duck (and single-decker—not a club sandwich at all!). A hulking *chien chaud* (get it?) landed less like a playful riff on high-low cuisine and more like a cynically expensive hot dog, albeit served with a *très français* kohlrabi choucroute.

### Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

There is no bar upstairs, but Chateau Royale's solution to this logistical problem is my favorite detail of a dinner there: an old-fashioned bar cart. A limited menu of cocktails—an olive-oil-washed dirty Martini, a citrus-scented Old Fashioned—are premixed downstairs, chilled to near-freezing in crystal decanters, and then ferried around the dining room on the cart, to be poured tableside. This mobile bar crisscrosses the room's checkerboard floor with the growling rumble of a subway train. One gets the sense that the sound is intentional: someone could easily pop in and fix the cart, tightening an axle or applying a smidge of lubricant, but its purring clackety-clack gives the device a sense of presence, a bit of happy, blasé imperfection. Even if you skip the hard stuff, it's worth ending your meal with a splash of Champagne—ideally, poured from a silver ewer over a garnet-hued sphere of cassis sorbet, a thrillingly state-changed Kir Royale. At last, a bit of fizz and lightness, a sliver of dawn at the end of a velvet night. ♦

## The Talk of the Town

- [A “New Middle East” Is Easier to Declare Than to Achieve](#)
- [St. Vincent Gets the Carlyle Treatment](#)
- [If These Streets Could Talk, They’d Sound Like Ken Burns](#)
- [Mickey Mantle’s Extra Innings](#)
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[Comment](#)

# A “New Middle East” Is Easier to Declare Than to Achieve

As a long-overdue ceasefire takes hold amid the ruins of Gaza, the President’s visit to Jerusalem is more about transactional politics than transformative peace.

By [David Remnick](#)



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

President [Donald Trump](#) arrived at Ben Gurion Airport on Monday morning, October 13th, just as Hamas was releasing the last surviving Israeli hostages after two years of cruel captivity and Israel had halted its devastating bombardment of [Gaza](#). Since October 7, 2023, two thousand Israelis and sixty-seven thousand Palestinians had been killed. The Strip had been reduced to a landscape of destitution and ruin. A ceasefire that could, and should, have come long ago was finally, fitfully, taking hold.

In Jerusalem, Trump was greeted on billboards and in the Knesset as a modern Cyrus the Great—the Persian ruler who, in 538 B.C., allowed the Jews to return to the Holy Land from their Babylonian exile and rebuild the Temple. During Trump’s speech to the Knesset, two left-wing lawmakers,

Ofer Cassif, a Jewish Israeli, and Ayman Odeh, a Palestinian Israeli, raised small placards reading “Recognize Palestine.” Guards swiftly hauled them from the chamber. The President praised the speed with which this modest protest was suppressed. “That was very efficient,” he said brightly. In his self-admiring rambling, Trump took time out to thank his lead negotiator, Steve Witkoff (a “Kissinger who doesn’t leak”), and one of his wealthiest patrons, Miriam Adelson (“She’s got sixty billion in the bank!”), then turned to trash Joe Biden—the “worst President in the history of our country by far, and Barack Obama was not far behind.”

It is impossible not to feel immense relief that this long, terrible war may at last be ending; it is also hard to ignore that the President’s decision to apply his sense of leverage and cunning to Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) owed little to consistent strategy, empathy, or conviction. Indeed, his reckless musings earlier this year about making Gaza a “Riviera of the Middle East” stoked the Israeli right’s fantasies of resettling the Strip and annexing the West Bank. They also deepened much of the world’s anger. The pivotal moment came on September 9th, when Netanyahu ordered an air strike on a residential building in Doha, hoping to kill four Hamas leaders who were then engaged in ceasefire negotiations. The strike missed its targets but clearly rattled Trump.

Like so many Presidents before him, he had indulged Netanyahu’s propensity to take American military and political support for granted. But the strike on Doha touched something more sensitive than principle: the bottom line. The Trump family’s business ventures are increasingly entwined with Qatari and Gulf capital. Trump compelled Netanyahu to deliver a scripted apology to the Qataris—a humbling that restored their confidence and amour propre, reassured Turkey and Egypt, and led these regimes to press Hamas into accepting the pending ceasefire agreement. The most consequential Israeli air strike of the war, in the end, was one that failed.

The President now hails “the historic dawn of a new Middle East.” When, during the hopeful years of the Oslo Accords, Shimon Peres used that phrase, he was mocked for his naïveté. Trump’s version owes less to diplomacy than to real-estate patter, the it’s-so-if-you-believe-it’s-so spirit he called on when insisting that Trump Tower had sixty-eight floors, though it

actually had fifty-eight. As much as the President prizes “deal guys” over starchy diplomats, however, attaining peace in the Middle East is not so simple as unloading a defunct casino. The Administration cannot just declare an end to what the President calls “three thousand years” of conflict and move on to its domestic project of undermining the rule of law. History resists the shortcut.

The idyll of a “new Middle East” in Netanyahu’s triumphalist view is one in which, owing to his Churchillian leadership, the threats from Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, Yemen, and Iran are all diminished or defeated. Behold the dawn. As for Netanyahu’s failure to safeguard the country on October 7th? All is forgotten. This willfully blinkered vision, or, more precisely, reëlection platform, ignores the cost in global opinion along with the moral and political fractures within Israel itself. It also overlooks the rage bred into the bones of young Palestinians, who have lost family members and friends but not their insistence on dignity and a home. Real progress in the region, real justice and stability, will require healing, constancy, imagination, and endurance—day after day, year after year, long past any one Administration.

By Wednesday, when Hamas had transferred only a fraction of the remains of dead Israeli hostages, Israeli officials threatened to cut humanitarian aid to Gaza. Meanwhile, Hamas, which Israel is aiming to disarm, was executing rival Palestinians in the streets of Gaza City. The questions now are many: Who will pay for the rebuilding of Gaza? Who will govern it? Will Israeli troops remain in the Strip? And, above all, what becomes of the “credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood” that the ceasefire agreement hazily invokes? Talk of a solution—of two states, of a confederation, of nearly any prospect for a secure and free mode of coexistence—has long been dismissed as either an ingenuous assertion of faith or a cynical pantomime, an empty gesture toward a future no one expects to see.

Such resignation is both understandable and impermissible. Watching Trump and Netanyahu at the Knesset, one sought a more inspiring spectacle, such as one that took place in the same chamber on November 20, 1977. After thirty years of hostilities, Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat flew to Jerusalem, extended his hand to Menachem Begin, and spoke to the Israeli lawmakers:

I have come to you so that together we should build a durable peace based on justice, to avoid the shedding of one single drop of blood by both sides. It is for this reason that I have proclaimed my readiness to go to the farthest corner of the earth. In all sincerity, I tell you we welcome you among us with full security and safety.

Neither Sadat nor Begin were innocents or doves. Sadat so despised the British colonialists that he wrote a letter to Hitler, as if the dictator were still alive, that began, “I admire you from the bottom of my heart.” Begin, for his part, was a militant in the Zionist underground, denounced by David Ben-Gurion as a “racist” and a “distinctly Hitleristic type.” And yet, with the sustained mediation of an American President, Jimmy Carter, the two men found a way to forge a peace that endures still.

Sadat’s gesture belongs to another age, when courage meant accepting risk rather than projecting swagger. What unfolded in Jerusalem last week seemed less like a “new Middle East” than a reprise of its oldest patterns: the vanity of leaders who mistake declarations of triumph for true resolution, and the endurance of those left to shoulder the consequences. The work of justice, as ever, falls not to those who proclaim history’s dawn and move on but to those who must push through its long and gruelling day. ♦

[Set List Dept.](#)

## St. Vincent Gets the Carlyle Treatment

The musician, born Annie Clark, is following in the footsteps of Eartha Kitt and Bobby Short at Café Carlyle. But which of her songs will make the set list?

By [David Kamp](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In her younger years, Annie Clark, the forty-three-year-old singer-songwriter who performs as [St. Vincent](#), was twice mistaken for a prostitute at the Carlyle hotel. The first instance was an outgrowth of her sketchy sublet arrangement. While she lived in a rent-controlled apartment in the East Village, the man who actually held the lease led an itinerant life of luxury, staying at the Carlyle when he was in town.

This meant that, periodically, Clark showed up at the Upper East Side hotel to collect blank personal checks from the man, which she would then fill out and mail to his none-the-wiser landlord. (She paid the leaseholder the rent amount plus a little extra.) One summer day, Clark recalled recently, “it was very hot, and I walked in wearing a crop top and shorts and said, ‘Excuse me, I believe someone left something here for me.’ The gentleman at the front desk gave me a withering stare and handed me an envelope.”

The second instance found Clark waiting for friends at Bemelmans Bar, dolled up for a party in an [Alexander McQueen](#) dress. As she sat alone, an older man chatted her up, asking Clark what she did for a living. “I said I was a performer,” she recalled. “It made him feel he had the green light to say, ‘O.K., you could perform for me.’”

It is with no small measure of satisfaction that Clark is now preparing for a three-night engagement, beginning on October 28th, at [Café Carlyle](#), the hotel’s storied cabaret, where Bobby Short, [Eartha Kitt](#), and Barbara Cook defined uptown elegance in the second half of the twentieth century. “There’s a part of me that, for a long time, has lived in fear of the jazz police,” she said, “and I think this is something that will liberate me from that fear.”

Clark spoke while basking in the glow of a different sort of crossover triumph: playing twenty of her songs with a full orchestra at London’s Royal Albert Hall, as part of the BBC Proms classical-music series. She had only just returned from England and was drinking an iced coffee at a café on the Lower East Side.

The talk turned to her Café Carlyle set list, which she hadn’t started thinking about yet. The Royal Albert Hall show capped a nearly two-year stretch of touring her most recent album, “All Born Screaming,” one of her strangest and heaviest. She’d toured with a four-piece rock band. At Café Carlyle, she will be accompanied only by her keyboardist, Rachel Eckroth, and her own guitar—“probably a sensible-tone electric,” she said.

The intimate setting will demand quieter arrangements than that of, say, “Broken Man,” the lead single off “All Born Screaming,” whose conclusion, on tour, found Clark literally screaming, “What’re you looking at?” She assessed her song catalogue and considered the possibilities.

One shoo-in, she decided, is her torchy 2017 song “New York,” which is easing its way into becoming a standard. Another likely pick: “Candy Darling,” her melancholy tribute to the late Warhol superstar. Clark observed that the latter song’s parent album, “Daddy’s Home,” from 2021, is a font of saloon-friendly songs, constructed as it is around a persona she’d adopted at

the time: a blowsy, blond-bobbed barfly seemingly beamed in from Maxwell's Plum circa the [Carter](#) Administration.

“ ‘Down and Out Downtown’—that plays,” Clark said. “And ‘Candy Darling’—when I sing about her wig ‘waving from the latest uptown train,’ going off to Heaven—I think about the [Tom Waits](#) song ‘Downtown Train.’ That might be a good cover to do.”

It was suggested to Clark that her 2009 song “Laughing with a Mouth of Blood” would work well, given its ear-pleasing tumble of softly sung words. (“Holed up at the Motel Ritz / With a televangelist.”)

“That’s a good idea!” she said. “I think the title was something I originally heard [Sarah Silverman](#) say. There will definitely be some comedy, some crowd work. Going to see Justin Vivian Bond at [Joe’s Pub](#) for many years was a formative experience. And this is such a name drop, but I texted [Cole Escola](#) to come to one of the Carlyle shows and said, ‘Don’t come unless you want to see me doing a ripoff of you and Vivian Bond.’ ”

Clark was by now caffeinated and confident; the set was taking shape. There remained one element that had yet to be discussed: her look. For every album since her eponymous one, in 2014, she has changed up her hair and wardrobe à la nineteen-seventies [David Bowie](#). The “All Born Screaming” look, inspired by the paintings of [Balthus](#) and the contorted poses of Robert Longo’s “Men in the Cities” photos, has been retired. So what might be St. Vincent’s Café Carlyle look?

“Well, it’s a classy joint,” Clark said. “Maybe I’ll dust off that Alexander McQueen.” ♦

[Time Travel Dept.](#)

# If These Streets Could Talk, They'd Sound Like Ken Burns

For the documentary filmmaker, SoHo isn't about galleries or boutiques. With his new PBS series, "The American Revolution," about to air, he sees the area as a cemetery for dead generals.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Attention, dads: [Ken Burns](#) was in town recently, scouring SoHo for history. The documentary filmmaker, having made mammoth miniseries on the Civil War, the Roosevelts, Prohibition, the Vietnam War, country music, jazz, baseball, and other hallmarks of the American story, has finally gotten around to our messy, violent, idealistic founding. His new series, "[The American Revolution](#)"—six episodes, twelve hours, ten years in the making—airs on PBS in November, just shy of the nation's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. Burns was up to something extremely 2025: shooting a man-on-the-street promotional video.

SoHo, Burns explained, has a slew of streets named for Revolutionary generals. "It's almost like a cemetery," he said. The plan: prowl the

cobblestones, spit out some rapid-fire history, and release the video through his online platform, UNUM. (He'd been posting from such locations as Monticello and Yorktown.) A two-man crew miked him up on Spring Street, outside a children's gym. Even before the camera rolled, Burns, in jeans and a sweater, was bursting with facts. "This city is the British stronghold," he said. (History, for Burns, happens in the present tense.) "When Washington loses it, on September 15th—this day, two hundred and forty-nine years ago—it will stay in British hands for seven years and two months and ten days, because November 25, 1783, is Evacuation Day, the day the British *finally* fucking leave New York."

He posed outside the Ear Inn (est. 1817), as a colleague pointed an iPhone at him. "Hey, it's Ken Burns for 'UNUM on the Road'!" he began. "We're on the corner of Washington Street, named after the most important person in the Revolution, George Washington, after whom we do not have a country if he does not exist." Cut. "I feel like Borat," he said.

The group walked east. "I live in rural New Hampshire, but I know this area pretty well," Burns said. "I walk these blocks wondering who went through them—particularly down here, where there's so much history."

On Varick, he stood in front of the former Trump SoHo. "Varick is named after Richard Varick, who was a mayor of New York City but also a soldier in the Revolution and a private secretary to George Washington," he professed for the camera. "If you want to get to New Jersey, you take Varick." Cut. "Boom! Onwards."

At the corner of MacDougal and Prince, Burns talked about Alexander McDougall, a member of the Sons of Liberty and the first president of the Bank of New York. "Now they're going to come fast and furious," he said, darting through shoppers with tote bags. On Sullivan Street, he expounded on John Sullivan, a general who was captured at the Battle of Long Island and who later uprooted Native American villages upstate. "So, there's some undertow with John Sullivan," he noted. He passed a matcha place advertising passion-fruit-coconut lattes, something that did not exist in Revolutionary times. "Well, tea is a big reason for the war—the tax on tea! We can talk matcha."

Next: Thompson Street, named after William Thompson, a “not very distinguished” general. A car with a Vermont plate nearly grazed Burns, but he was unfazed; Vermont was not yet a state during the Revolution, “so how can he hit me?” He passed a [Marc Jacobs](#) (not a general) boutique and hit Wooster Street, named after General David Wooster. As he crossed Greene (“You cannot say enough about the importance of Nathanael Greene”), a bro in a backward cap started filming Burns on his own smartphone and asked, “What do you do for a living?”

“Ignore strangers,” Burns said.

“Hey, a stranger’s a friend in disguise,” the bro replied.

“I’m just teasing you. I’m a filmmaker.”

“Have you made something that I might have heard of?”

“Doubtful,” Burns said, and scurried away. He stopped at Mercer Street (Hugh Mercer, “a brigadier general who was bayoneted and eventually died from his wounds at the Battle of Princeton”) and ended at Lafayette, named, as any [“Hamilton”](#) fan knows, for the [Marquis de Lafayette](#), who came from France as a nineteen-year-old to help fight the British and was, Burns added, “very handsome.”

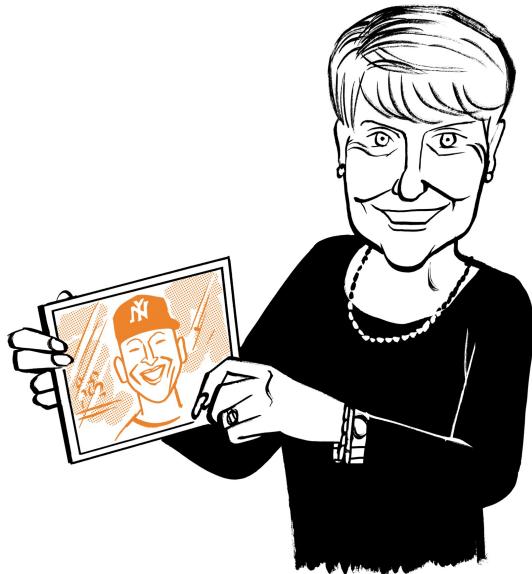
After they wrapped, Burns sat on a bench in Cleveland Place (Grover Cleveland—wrong century) and recounted his own New York story. From 1975 to 1979, he split his time between Amherst and Manhattan, where he slept on couches and tried to raise money for his first documentary, about the Brooklyn Bridge. “I looked twelve years old,” he recalled. He’d drink with friends at the Ear Inn or go to jazz shows at Bradley’s, on University Place. He prefers to stay in SoHo when he’s in town and, like a lot of New Yorkers, sees the neighborhood as a place where the past is palpable. “I am the biggest kvetcher about what we’ve lost,” he said. “The Gourmet Garage on Broome Street—why did that disappear?” ♦

[American Pastime](#)

## Mickey Mantle's Extra Innings

Shohei Ohtani isn't the only ballplayer with a side gig. Mantle's old girlfriend Greer Johnson recalls the money-making hustles of Yogi Berra, Babe Ruth, and the gang.

By [Charles Bethea](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

As the World Series approaches, fans might take a moment to appreciate an era that has given us baseball players, like the Yankees' slugger [Aaron Judge](#) and the Dodgers' pitcher-hitter [Shohei Ohtani](#), who will go down in history with [Babe Ruth](#), Hank Aaron, and Mickey Mantle. Some things have changed between the eras. Aaron earned about two million dollars in his career; Ohtani's current contract is worth seven hundred million. Yet, earlier this year, Ohtani was sued in a business deal gone wrong involving a luxury-housing project in Hawaii. (He moved to dismiss the lawsuit.) Why dabble in business? Ohtani was simply following baseball tradition, in which even the big stars always have side hustles. Just look at Mantle and his crew.

In the early nineteen-nineties, a baseball-card dealer named Alan Rosen arranged for a few dozen members of the 1961 Yankees to appear at Trump Castle, the casino in [Atlantic City](#). A few years later, a Mickey Mantle

biographer described a call that Rosen had made to Mantle during the gathering. Mantle didn't seem to want to sign autographs that day, telling the card dealer, " 'Fuck your mother, fuck your show, and fuck [Donald Trump!](#)' "

"Mickey had a mouth," Greer Johnson, Mantle's last girlfriend, said recently, at her house in a gated community near Atlanta, where she lives with her husband, Lem, a retired I.B.M. salesman. Johnson met Mantle in 1983, also in Atlantic City, when he was working as a greeter at the Claridge casino. (The gig, and its hundred-thousand-dollar salary, got Mantle briefly banned from baseball.) She was an elementary-school teacher dating a high roller. In short order, she was dating Mantle and soon became his agent, showing him how to fill out a check and negotiating his business deals, along with those of [Yogi Berra](#) and Whitey Ford.

"They were just little boys grown up," Johnson said. "When somebody would ask for Mickey for an appearance, I'd say, 'Well, not only can I get you Mickey. I can get you Yogi and Whitey,' " she recalled. "I wouldn't take a fee for them. Shoot, I was making as much as they were."

Johnson, who has bright eyes and a Georgia drawl, wore a paisley blouse and blue capri pants. She headed downstairs to a room full of glass cases, a few guns—she is an N.R.A. Foundation trustee—and Mantle memorabilia. "I never was a groupie," she said. "I think that was part of the attraction for Mickey. I would tell him off in a skinny minute if he said something ugly." A newspaper, she remembered, once called her the most powerful woman in baseball.

"She was also known as the bitch," Lem, a mustachioed man in an orange shirt, added. "I can tell you a story about Whitey," he went on, referring to the Yankees' winningest pitcher of all time. "Whitey was in town, and we met him at a big memorabilia place. He calls Greer over and says, 'Greer, you know, I was with Mickey the day before he passed. And I have this.' He gave Greer a little piece of paper. It said 'Good for One Night with Greer Johnson.' "



"My folks really wanted me to eat a doctor or a lawyer."  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

"I still have that somewhere," Johnson said, grimacing. "Whitey was a mess."

"Yogi was very savvy," she said, pointing to a picture of the Hall of Fame catcher. "Mickey said everything that Yogi touched would turn to gold." She elucidated: "Well, he invested in that chocolate drink, Yoo-hoo."

Johnson moved on to photographs of herself with Hank Aaron ("My dog always barked at him") and Bob Costas ("He and Billy Crystal tried to one-up each other on baseball stats when they were around Mickey"), and a bat signed by Ted Williams. "Mickey told me a story about when Ted came up to him and asked how did he hit the baseball," she said. "Did he lean with his left and follow with the right? What were the mechanics? Ted was very analytical. Mickey was, like, 'I just get up there and hit the ball as hard as I can.' "

She picked up an old auction booklet—"The Mickey Mantle Live Auction of the Greer Johnson Collection." It took place in Manhattan two years after Mantle's death. The offerings were mostly mundane personal items: signed Amex Platinum Card (\$6,500); passport (\$8,000); lock of reddish-brown hair (\$6,000); tuxedo (\$12,000). The public's interest in such paraphernalia had never made much sense to Mantle.

Joe DiMaggio, Johnson noted, was a different breed in terms of hustle. “I talked to Joe one time,” she said, “and he wanted me to do something. But he would nickel-and-dime you to death. He made his teammates pay him for his signature! He was just different.” No disrespect, she added. Business is business. ♦

[The Pictures](#)

# John Candy Kept Himself Afloat

The late actor's son, Chris Candy, reflects on his father's drives and demons in the Hall of Ocean Life with Colin Hanks, the director of the new documentary "John Candy: I Like Me."

By [Sarah Larson](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In the 1984 [Ron Howard](#) comedy "Splash," [Tom Hanks](#) and John Candy play lovelorn Manhattan brothers—one tidy, one rascally—whose lives are upended when Hanks falls in love with a mermaid. On a recent Tuesday, their sons Colin Hanks and Chris Candy, visiting from Los Angeles, took in the site of one of "Splash" 's climactic scenes, the [American Museum of Natural History](#), where, disguised as Swedish scientists, their dads had raced through the majestic ocean-life exhibit alongside Eugene Levy to rescue the mermaid from a government research lab. Colin Hanks, a forty-seven-year-old actor and director, resembles a younger, intensely thoughtful Tom Hanks; Chris Candy, a forty-one-year-old actor and musician, is bearded, with his late father's kind eyes. In the vast Milstein Family Hall of Ocean Life, they gazed at the ninety-four-foot fibreglass blue whale hanging from the ceiling. "The whale," Hanks said. "At this angle, it looks like the Starship Enterprise."

“It looks like a big sunflower seed,” Candy said.

They sat on a bench between the ocean-floor and sea-kelp displays and surveyed the scene: babies staring from strollers while rolling by, whale noises resonating. Colin Hanks directed a new documentary, “John Candy: I Like Me,” in which Chris appears. In it, John Candy, who died at forty-three, of a heart attack, is remembered with admiration and tenderness by his widow, Rose, his daughter, Jen, and Chris; fellow “S.C.T.V.” luminaries, including Andrea Martin, [Catherine O’Hara](#), and [Martin Short](#); and movie co-stars like [Steve Martin](#), [Bill Murray](#), Macaulay Culkin, and Dan Aykroyd. Candy excelled at playing larger-than-life handfuls who reveal hidden depths—see “Uncle Buck” and “Planes, Trains and Automobiles”—and “Splash” is no exception. “One of the best parts of the doc is when your dad’s talking about that ‘Splash’ scene and breaking down what was happening,” Candy told Hanks. In the scene, the brothers are at the fruit-wholesale company they run together, and Candy interrupts Hanks, who is on a call. “Tom is talking about what my dad was doing in that scene in regards to being *inclusive*, and breaking this kind of improv with him”—the “yes, and” improv that Candy did at Second City, which Hanks hadn’t done before.

The younger Hanks and Candy first met soon after “Splash” premiered. “Your family came over for dinner,” Hanks said. “I remember very specifically burying a toy in the sand and then not being able to find it. And having to pull my dad away, saying, like, ‘I know you’re having a nice dinner with your friends, but I need you to find this toy.’ An action figure of some sort.” (Big Hanks found it.) Later, at Loyola Marymount, they met again, at a table read.

Ryan Reynolds, a lifelong John Candy fan, produced the documentary and asked Hanks to direct it. Hanks, who has directed two documentary features, thought about a way in. When Chris Candy told him that John’s own father had died young of a heart attack, on John’s fifth birthday, he knew he’d found it. John Candy, a happily married family man who coped with grief in part by being a people pleaser, didn’t always know when to say no; toward the end of his life, he was “just starting to get to that point where you’re having the therapy,” Hanks said. “That’s when the genesis really happened.” Once Candy became a huge star, he continued to worry about getting work

—which was one reason that he took a role in a comedy Western shooting in Mexico, where he died. “What really fascinated me was the fact that the things that we love and celebrate about him that are good, that are great, were coping mechanisms from a very, very early trauma,” Hanks said. “And those coping mechanisms were no longer helping him. They were starting to hurt him.”

Hanks wanted his film “to feel like the best of the John Candy movies—to deliver comedy, heart, genuine emotion, and an honesty. The feeling that people have going to the theatre and seeing one of John’s movies. People still remember that.” The pair took a spin through the watery exhibits, and then Hanks clasped his hands together. “Well, are we going to go lie down like everyone else and look up at the whale?” They descended the stairs and flopped down near some hollering schoolkids, the whale’s twenty-one-thousand-pound belly looming over them. “When was the last time you got to lie under the chassis of a blue whale?” Hanks asked.

Candy pondered. “I’m looking at this giant, beautiful animal, and it’s, like—big feelings,” he said. “My dad had big whale feelings that he was trying to grapple with and understand. It takes a lifetime of work, and his therapy was just a drop in the ocean.” ♦

## **Reporting & Essays**

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## Annals of Business

# Can the Golden Age of Costco Last?

With its standout deals and generous employment practices, the warehouse chain became a feel-good American institution. In a fraught time, it can be hard to remain beloved.

By [Molly Fischer](#)



*"The most important item we sell is the membership card," Ron Vachris, the current C.E.O., has said.* Photograph by Spencer Lowell

Costco, in one sense, is simple enough to define. It's a chain retailer that operates on a club model, offering members who pay sixty-five dollars a year the chance to buy bulk goods at prices close to wholesale. Costco sells fresh and packaged foods, household and pharmacy staples, electronics, furniture, and clothing, from both name brands and Kirkland Signature, the company's private label, which appears on everything from golf clubs to gasoline. Employees, who receive excellent wages and benefits, often work there for years. The stores are called warehouses, and this captures their look: merchandise stacked on pallets across industrial shelves rising toward high ceilings.

During my childhood in San Jose, California, Costco was a source of many cherished treats—the six-pouch box of Ghirardelli triple-chocolate brownie mix comes to mind. Yet this fails to explain the atavistic loyalty I have to its

warehouses. I know exactly how Costco smells—like clean concrete and the static of plastic wrap—and would recognize that smell anywhere. The parts of California where going someplace requires getting on a highway and driving for thirty minutes feel like both Costco’s native habitat and my own. The Costco where my family got its paper towels, frozen French-bread pizzas, and ibuprofen—Warehouse No. 148, on Senter Road—opened the week I was born. “I will be cremated in a Kirkland flame lol,” my brother texted me when he heard that I was writing about the company. My late father, our family’s designated Costco shopper, wore Kirkland Signature pants.

Recently, I called my dad’s best friend, Scott Willis. He and my dad, then colleagues at the San Jose *Mercury News*, spent my childhood riffing on their respective Costcos. “We were both on journalism salaries in Silicon Valley,” Scott told me—it was fun to get a deal. These days, he said, he likes to go early to Senter for gas and to the Coleman Avenue Costco—“a great Costco”—for the kind of San Pellegrino that his wife prefers.

Get Costco shoppers talking and they all have personal strategies and rules. “If I can’t find parking in under eight minutes, I drive away,” the comedian Sheng Wang says in his 2022 standup special. Shopping there almost inevitably involves a degree of hassle: not only parking but searching, schlepping, and waiting in line. It is the opposite of frictionless, a term usually valorized in modern commerce. But friction is where stories begin, and people love telling stories about Costco—which relies on word of mouth rather than advertising.

Costco might have no more dedicated evangelists than David and Susan Schwartz, the authors of the 2023 book “The Joy of Costco,” a self-published compilation of company trivia and history. It abounds in raw numbers (“In 2022, Costco members bought over \$300,000 worth of whole cashews every week”) and feats of operational savvy (using square rather than round containers “saved over 400 truckloads of shipping expenses in just the first year”). The New York-based Schwartzes visit Costcos all over the world; a few years ago, they flew to New Zealand, in part to see the Auckland warehouse, and Susan brought hard-boiled Costco quail eggs for the flight. These got her fined four hundred dollars at customs. “They were

eight ninety-nine plus four hundred,” Susan told me. “So it wasn’t such a good deal.”

A cottage industry of Costco influencers has emerged in the past five years or so. There are accounts with millions of followers and a flock of smaller hobbyists, all posting near-interchangeable updates on what’s for sale. Claudia Chee was a burned-out ex-Google employee when she started uploading videos of herself trying on Costco clothes in the company’s Bay Area locations; she now has more than two hundred thousand followers as @costcoclaudia and calls the warehouse her “safe space.” Nadia Christensen, a nurse in Florida, posts under the name @costcoshares; her 2021 clip of an employee describing Kirkland margarita offerings took off. “It was my friend Robert,” she told me. “I mean, I don’t talk to him outside of Costco, but every time I see him there we chat.” Chee’s and Christensen’s attachment to Costco recalls a 2016 episode of the sitcom “Fresh Off the Boat” in which a Florida warehouse becomes the weekly haven of an exacting immigrant mom played by Constance Wu. “I feel so calm here,” she sighs. “Just knowing the bulk deals are waiting.”

Last year, A. J. Befumo, a former independent pro wrestler, and his preteen son Eric found fame on TikTok by proclaiming themselves “Costco guys,” in a video that now has more than sixty-five million views. Since then, they have reviewed snacks on “The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon” and promoted a novelty single called “We Bring The BOOM!” In January of 2020, TMZ published a photo of Mark Zuckerberg browsing electronics at the Mountain View warehouse. “This man can have anybody buy his flat-screen TV,” Christensen told me. “But he was, like, *No, I’m going to Costco.*”

A warehouse’s selection often reflects its surrounding community: shoppers at the Brooklyn Costco can find whole halal lamb, kosher chickens, and cases of swallow-nest soup. The company’s term of art for its shopping experience is the “treasure hunt,” a nod to the pursuit of the limited-quantity luxuries that wash up on its shelves—Louis Vuitton Speedy handbags, say, for just under seventeen hundred dollars each, about three hundred less than the market price. My brother, who has shopped Costcos in San Diego, Denver, and Tukwila, Washington, said that he found the term misleading; the whole point is that you don’t really know what you’re looking for. We

were talking while wandering through the Manhattan Costco, where, in the meat department, 16.62 pounds of boneless rib eye caught his attention. It was \$15.99 a pound—\$265.75. “Well priced,” he said, appreciative even if he wasn’t looking to buy steak for thirty-three.

There is an easy comedy of bigness to Costco. It’s a vein of humor that Barack Obama tapped in 2014, when he praised the company’s employment practices in an address at a Maryland warehouse. “Before I grab a ten-pound barrel of pretzels and five hundred golf balls,” Obama said, “let me just leave you with something I heard from Costco’s founder Jim Sinegal, who’s been a great friend of mine.” The line Obama went on to quote—“We did not build our company in a vacuum. We built it in the greatest country on earth”—came from a speech that Sinegal, who served as Costco’s C.E.O. for nearly thirty years, had given at the 2012 Democratic National Convention. In such rhetoric, Costco could represent a culmination of twentieth-century American liberal ideals: it promised bounty, equitably and efficiently distributed—the good life, albeit one trailing all the detritus of twentieth-century American consumption. The jokes about gallon jars of mayonnaise perhaps obscure the company’s true power. When Costco began sourcing most of its farmed salmon (six hundred thousand pounds per week) from Norway rather than Chile, it caused upheaval in the global fishing industry.

Growing up involves learning that certain things are specific to your family, and certain things are more like general conditions; Costco clearly falls into the latter category. Still, being a child of California in the eighties and nineties offered a front-row seat to the rise of a retail juggernaut. Costco opened its first location in Seattle in 1983; five years later, it had some fifty stores, concentrated on the West Coast; today, there are more than nine hundred Costco warehouses around the world. (Seventy-one per cent of the population of Iceland are members, according to one survey.) Worldwide, in terms of revenue, only Amazon and Walmart are larger retailers. The Kirkland label, introduced in 1995, now generates more revenue than Nike.

But what exactly makes Costco Costco? This is a question that interests Maggie Perkins, a corporate trainer at the company who travels the country to instruct employees in its ways. Perkins posts about her job on TikTok, and she has noticed something in people’s replies: “They say ‘my Costco.’” The loyalty of Costco’s following—at latest count, it had a hundred and forty-

five million members globally—is an existential matter for the company. “The most important item we sell is the membership card,” Ron Vachris, the current C.E.O., has said. The company’s low prices are possible because membership fees account for much of the profits. “For Costco, culture is a business strategy,” Perkins told me. Its success requires being a place where people want to belong—and, for all Costco’s hard-nosed pursuit of low prices and high quality, such a desire has rested on an elusive sense of the company as a force for good in the world. But that world and its values seem more fragile than they used to. “As the global landscape changes,” Perkins said, “as retailers change, as the way that people do business changes, if Costco’s culture changes in a way that consumers do not appreciate, then Costco could lose who it is.”

Costco as we know it would not exist without Sol Price, the prickly, brilliant lawyer turned businessman behind the pioneering retail chains FedMart and Price Club. FedMart, founded in 1954, helped to establish discount shopping as a pillar of American retail, and in 1976 Price Club invented the warehouse wholesale club. Walmart’s co-founder Sam Walton has written, “I guess I’ve stolen—I actually prefer the word ‘borrowed’—as many ideas from Sol Price as from anybody else in the business.” Price, who died in 2009, was once asked how it felt to be the father of an industry. He replied that he should have worn a condom.

Sinegal, Costco’s co-founder, tells this story in his foreword to “Sol Price: Retail Revolutionary and Social Innovator,” a 2012 biography written by Price’s eldest son, Robert. Price was born in 1916 to labor-socialist Russian Jewish immigrants in the Bronx. After his father received a diagnosis of tuberculosis, the family ended up in San Diego. When Price arrived there, in 1929, he was a thirteen-year-old tenth grader (he’d skipped two grades) who had decided to become a lawyer after following the Scopes trial. He attended law school at the University of Southern California and started practicing in San Diego. Then, in the early fifties, one of his clients told him about an interesting new store in Los Angeles called Fedco. A nonprofit, it was open only to federal employees, who paid a small fee to become members—an arrangement that circumvented laws at the time which allowed manufacturers to set minimum retail prices for their goods. Drawn by the low prices, some five thousand people from San Diego, the client had heard, were making the more than two-hundred-mile round trip to L.A. to shop.

Price and a few associates thought that San Diego could use a Fedco of its own. The Second World War had transformed the city from a quiet coastal town into a major military hub; the population was booming with federal employees. Fedco declined to participate, so Price's group proceeded on its own, under the name FedMart. Its first store, situated in an industrial building near San Diego's tuna canneries, opened in November of 1954 and sold, among other things, appliances, clothing, and liquor. Any military or government employee could pay two dollars for a lifetime membership. FedMart was an immediate hit, and Price became the company's president. Soon, the store began offering gas, prescription drugs, and groceries, starting with Planters peanuts.

Under Price's leadership, FedMart implemented three central strategies that would eventually shape Costco. First, the company embraced unprepossessing real estate. Shopping at the time tended to be a dress-up affair pursued in downtown department stores; FedMart bet that people would sacrifice ambience and geographical convenience for a good deal. Discount retailing was in its infancy, but Price's success spurred competitors such as Kmart, Target, and Walmart, all of which opened in 1962. FedMart nonetheless stood out, partly as a result of Price's second strategy: "the intelligent loss of sales." This involved limiting the variety of items in stock. Instead of trying to meet every possible customer desire, you could trust that *most* shoppers would buy the product in front of them—the No. 1 toothpaste brand rather than No. 3, for example. And big packages offered better value. Here were the seeds of an enduring Costco paradox: what looks at first like appetite run amok (gallon jars of mayonnaise) is in fact a sign of restraint (selling mayonnaise jars in only one size).

In this way, the retailer became more efficient across its supply chain—it took fewer workers to deal with fewer items of different kinds. The company could therefore manage labor costs while offering jobs that paid well. This was the third pillar of Price's approach: he believed that being a good employer was good business, a tenet that would define Costco. In his biography, Robert connects Price's outlook to the politics he absorbed from his parents and the privations he witnessed during the Great Depression. "You must feel confident that you are working for a fine and honest company," Price wrote, in a 1965 memo to FedMart employees. "You will

be permitted, encouraged, and sometimes even coerced into growing with the company to the limit of your ability.”

Jim Sinegal, who came from blue-collar Pittsburgh, was eighteen and on winter break at San Diego City College when he accepted a one-day gig at FedMart. He stayed for more than twenty years. A few days in, Price saw him carrying a sofa and hollered at him to put it down before he broke his back or, worse, the merchandise. (“That’s just Sol,” a colleague reassured the startled teen.)

“He was a tough boss, as tough as shoe leather,” Sinegal told me, when we met this summer at his family office in Kirkland, Washington. “But he was a marshmallow inside.” (The Seattle suburb of Kirkland was once home to Costco’s headquarters, hence the in-house brand’s name; the company relocated to Issaquah in the mid-nineties.) Sinegal, who stepped down as the C.E.O. at the end of 2011, wore white Kirkland sneakers and drank a bottle of Kirkland sparkling water. At eighty-nine, he still goes to Issaquah about once a week and maintains the look—mustache, open collar—that became his trademark as C.E.O.



*“Sometimes I just wish you would support me the way Spike Lee supports the Knicks.”*  
Cartoon by Habiba Nabisubi

“My sense is that my father saw in Jim an energy and an intelligence and a commitment to the business that impressed him a lot,” Robert Price told me.

“But Jim impressed everybody. . . . He was really, really competent.” Robert, who joined the company in 1965, remembered being acutely conscious of his status as the boss’s son. He started to recount his first meeting with Sinegal—it involved executives bungling a travel plan and Sinegal calling them the Keystone Cops—but then petered out. “Jim tells the story a lot better than I do,” Robert said.

By the seventies, FedMart had expanded throughout the Southwest, with its own stores and a number of franchises. Sinegal ran the distribution-warehouse system, which operated almost as a separate business and had become a profit center for the company. In 1975, the German businessman Hugo Mann invested in FedMart. Price hoped that this would be a chance to expand, but to Mann, it became clear, the deal was a takeover. “Those of us who knew Sol figured he would last between one day and six months,” Sinegal told me. “He almost lasted six months.” As the family weighed its next move, Robert had an idea. What if they made Sinegal’s distribution system the crux of a new endeavor, setting up a warehouse that stocked wholesale goods for small businesses?

The first Price Club warehouse opened in 1976, in a former airplane hangar on San Diego’s northern outskirts. Price Club charged its small-business clientele twenty-five dollars a year for membership, cash flow that could be factored into the company’s gross margins. And wholesaling introduced a new level of efficiency—goods sold from the pallets on which they were delivered required little handling. Within a few years, Price Club began welcoming ordinary shoppers, and it soon had more than two hundred thousand members across locations in California and Arizona. The company went public, in 1979, almost by accident: there was no I.P.O., but, following stock splits, its number of shareholders had exceeded the S.E.C. maximum for a private company.

The company’s début got Wall Street’s attention. Suddenly, Sinegal told me, “everybody found out how successful they were. Nobody dreamed it.” The next two years saw the opening of imitators such as Pace, BJ’s, and Sam’s Club. Price, now in his sixties, had managed a remarkable second act. (FedMart, meanwhile, was liquidated seven years after his departure.)

In 1982, Sinegal, who had been working as an independent broker for consumer brands, was contacted by a Seattle retail heir named Jeffrey Brotman. His family had approached Price Club about opening a store in Seattle, but the Prices weren't interested. Now Brotman suggested that he and Sinegal launch their own wholesale-club store there. The pitch that they made to investors, Sinegal told me, was simple: "Let's duplicate what Price Club is doing." They wanted a simple name for the new venture, and, he added, "we couldn't come up with anything clever."

"Costco Wholesale Club Comes to *SEATTLE*," a flyer for Costco's first warehouse opening, in 1983, read, faintly implying that it already existed elsewhere. Costco, though, was a shrewd recombination of what had come before rather than a straight copy. It took up Price Club's wholesale model of bulk efficiency and substantial membership fees, then, as time passed, added such FedMart staples as private-label goods, gas, and groceries. Staff, too, carried over: Sinegal recruited FedMart veterans.

Costco's success was swift—two more warehouses opened before the end of its first year. By the early nineties, Sinegal and Brotman (who had become the chairman) were gaining momentum, as was Sam's Club—Walmart's warehouse-club chain. Price Club, meanwhile, was flagging. Sol Price had relinquished his official leadership role, and Robert's fifteen-year-old son had recently died of cancer, devastating the family. In 1992, the Prices decided to seek a buyer; Costco was the natural choice. The new company now had the scale to compete with Sam's Club—but the enduring partnership that Price had hoped for did not materialize. "My dad had this idea that we could take these two companies that were so similar in terms of philosophy," Robert told me, "and I would be chairman and Jim would be the C.E.O. It never worked." Within a year of the 1993 merger, Robert left.

If Price's image had been that of a stern paterfamilias, Sinegal played the role of boss as a man of the people: in official photos, he wore a huge smile and a Costco nametag. (He also took a salary lower than that of his peers at other top companies.) He, too, emphasized worker satisfaction, drawing exasperation from Wall Street. "At Costco," a Deutsche Bank analyst lamented in 2004, "it's better to be an employee or a customer than a shareholder." Sinegal instituted a policy that Costco could mark up merchandise by no more than fourteen per cent—fifteen in the case of

Kirkland goods—and received a report on anything that reached more than thirteen per cent. Pat Turpin, a Costco executive in the nineties, told me, “You didn’t want to be on that list.” Pennie Clark Ianniciello spent decades as Costco’s book buyer, building the company into a major publishing-industry player by the mid-aughts. She told me that Costco under Sinegal “had the same values I grew up with.”

Steven Seguin, who is thirty-five and lives in North Carolina with his wife and two children, has worked in four different Costcos around the country in the course of sixteen years. He remembered Sinegal, on a warehouse visit, thanking each employee by name. Several years in, Seguin showed a flair for handling baking equipment; he was subsequently enlisted to train fellow-workers on such machinery as the “pie gun,” which dispatched vats of pumpkin-pie filling during the week of Thanksgiving. (“You’re just blasting pie goo,” he told me.) Seguin had previously worked at Walmart and was struck by the contrast with his old job. “It was so supportive,” he recalled. “They wanted to groom you for success.”

In “The High Cost of Low Wages,” a *Harvard Business Review* article from 2006, Wayne F. Cascio compared Costco’s workforce with that of Sam’s Club. “In return for its generous wages and benefits, Costco gets one of the most loyal and productive workforces in all of retailing,” Cascio wrote, noting that the company generated far higher profits per hourly employee than its chief competitor. Even as Wall Street analysts complained that Costco ought to be more attentive to shareholders, its strategy appeared to be working.

Costco is one of the companies that Zeynep Ton, a professor at M.I.T.’s Sloan School of Management, has studied at length. Ton is the author of “The Case for Good Jobs,” which advances the idea that providing frontline workers with living wages, ample benefits, and paths to advancement can improve a company’s productivity and therefore its bottom line. Almost every year for the past decade, Sinegal, whom Ton calls her “business hero,” has taken her M.B.A. students on a tour of a local warehouse, where he inspects merchandise and obliges selfie requests. A student once told her that visiting the Waltham, Massachusetts, Costco with Sinegal was, after her wedding day, the best day of her life.



The former C.E.O. Jim Sinegal at a Costco in California in 2006. His focus on worker satisfaction drew loyalty in-house and exasperation from Wall Street. Photograph by Chris Mueller / Redux

Masters-of-business and finance types can grow rapturous on the subject of Costco. “I don’t think I have ever been more in love with a company,” Ben Gilbert declared in a 2023 episode of “Acquired,” the business podcast he co-hosts. A friend of a friend with a background in startups described the company as “capitalism in its best and highest form.” This enthusiasm seems to stem partly from admiration for the can-do ingenuity of Costco’s business model. But Costco also gives idealistic M.B.A.s a way to feel good about business—and a promise that it is possible to be, like Jim Sinegal, both successful and beloved for your success.

At a 2018 luncheon, W. Craig Jelinek, who took over as C.E.O. in 2012, told a story about a stalwart Costco food-court deal: the dollar-fifty hot-dog-and-soda combo. Concerned about its economics, he’d approached Sinegal, who was then his boss. “We are losing our rear ends,” Jelinek recalled telling him. “And he said, ‘If you raise the effing hot dog, I will kill you. Figure it out.’ ”

This story became Costco lore. “It’s unbelievable how that’s taken on a life of its own,” Jelinek told me. His intent had been to explain how they figured it out—by building a hot-dog plant in L.A.—but what resonated was the idea of a C.E.O. as a hot-dog-loving folk hero. Sinegal himself had laid the

groundwork a few years before, when a reporter asked him what it would mean if the hot-dog price went up. “That I’m dead,” he replied.

Sinegal’s personal offices in Kirkland have become a Valhalla for former Costco executives. Jelinek, who served as the C.E.O. until 2023, has a desk there, and so does Richard Galanti, who stepped down in 2024, after nearly forty years as the C.F.O. (“We get to sit around and tell old stories,” Jelinek told me.) When I visited, I saw, on a shelf near several unopened Kirkland liquor bottles, a bronze pair of sneakers similar to the ones Sinegal wore during our meeting. They were mounted with a plaque that read:

Jim.  
These are some.  
Big Shoes to Fill.  
Non-Foods

Almost a decade and a half into retirement, Sinegal remains the most prominent public face of Costco. The question of what the company becomes without him is inevitable. In 2011, he sat for an interview with the Seattle *Times* business reporter Melissa Allison, who asked him whether his ability to maintain generous employee benefits was “a founder’s luxury.” Sinegal said that he thought Jelinek, his immediate successor, would be fine: “It’s the third and fourth generation of management that probably will have more difficulty with that.” Ron Vachris became Costco’s third C.E.O. in January of 2024, and some feel that Sinegal’s prediction is being borne out.

Only a small percentage of Costco’s workforce is unionized, but the company has seen new stirrings of union activity in recent years. In 2024, a group of Costco drivers in Washington became the company’s first truckers to unionize, joining Teamsters Local 174. I spoke to two of the union’s shop stewards at a Starbucks near their depot, east of Tacoma. Through the windows, we could see semis passing by Route 167: some Costco trailers were pulled by Costco trucks, some by outside carriers, a practice to which the union has objected.

Robert Campus has been driving for Costco for twelve years and remembers when he got the call with the job offer. “I thought I won the lotto,” he told me. “The first thing they said was ‘Welcome to the family.’ ” A few years

later, his wife got a job in a Costco warehouse; besides the pay and benefits, they appreciated such gestures as staff cookouts and free company apparel. But these perks have become rare. Costco's standards for drivers had also changed, union members said. Paul Lowrie, who'd come to Costco in 2021 with twenty-three years of experience, told me that the number of drivers at his depot had nearly doubled since his arrival, and the minimum required experience had decreased from five years to two.

When a Norfolk, Virginia, warehouse voted to unionize, in 2023, it was the first to do so in more than two decades. At the time, Jelinek and Vachris sent a joint letter to the entire company. "To be honest, we're disappointed by the result in Norfolk," they wrote. "We're not disappointed in our employees, we're disappointed in ourselves as managers and leaders." Lowrie told me that he had taken the letter as a positive sign. "They looked inward," he said. But he hasn't seen that happening with the latest unionization effort. "There's no internal *What was the problem here? What did we do wrong as a company?*" Last fall, the Local 174 secretary-treasurer, Rick Hicks, declared in a letter to members that "this is not Jim Sinegal's Costco anymore."

Even during Sinegal's tenure, though, the company's equitable practices generally weren't a matter of bottom-up organizing. Perhaps the company was a family, but families are not, after all, democracies. In 2009, when Congress was considering the Employee Free Choice Act, legislation that would make it easier for workers to unionize, Costco joined Starbucks and Whole Foods in proposing what Sinegal then called "a compromise position," which essentially gutted the bill. A few years later, Costco faced a class-action sex-discrimination suit brought by women who said that they'd struggled to receive promotion into leadership roles, in part because such jobs weren't posted or publicized. The company's tight-knit internal relationships could look, from a different angle, like an old boys' club. At the time, Sinegal was dismissive of the women's concerns—a reminder of the pitfalls of turning one person's ethos into an organization's moral compass. (Costco agreed to settle the case in 2013, for eight million dollars.)

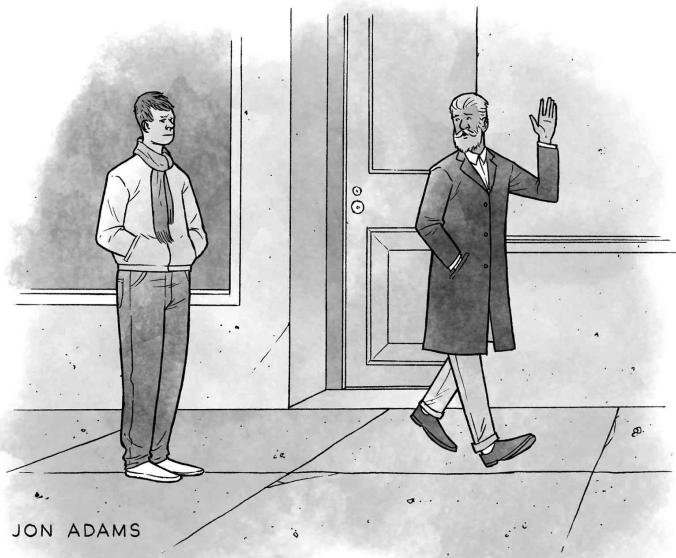
Sinegal has long been a major Democratic Party donor, hosting Presidential fund-raisers at his home in the Seattle suburbs. His successors seem not to share his appetite for the political fray. "My dad used to build airplanes," Jelinek told a reporter just before he became the C.E.O. "The B-1 bomber,

the B-70 bomber. It always depended on the Democrats or the Republicans, because one wanted defense. He said, ‘Son, do not get into the aircraft business.’ I was working part time with FedMart, and he said, ‘You know what? People will always have to eat.’ I never forgot that.” And, where Sinegal was a reliable presence in the media, Jelinek and Vachris have been markedly circumspect with the press. (Costco declined to make current executives available for interviews.)

Costco has approached political controversy by casting its choices as a neutral response to the marketplace—a stance that in a polarized moment has become challenging to maintain. Early this year, it received widespread attention for shutting down efforts to undermine its D.E.I. policies. After a conservative group brought a proposal asking the company to evaluate the “risks” of its D.E.I. policies, Costco’s board of directors unanimously recommended that shareholders vote it down. “As our membership diversifies, we believe that serving it with a diverse group of employees enhances satisfaction,” the board wrote in its response. Shareholders heeded the board’s recommendation. (A wave of coverage—favorably contrasting Costco with Target, which had backpedalled on D.E.I.—was published seemingly without comment from the company.) But Costco also demonstrates the limitations of fighting political battles through a store. After the Dobbs ruling, the New York City comptroller Brad Lander wrote to retailers in which the city’s pension system owned stock, including Costco, urging them to carry the abortion drug mifepristone; previously, Costco pharmacies had not. Anti-abortion groups took up the opposite cause. In August, Costco decided not to begin selling the drug, citing “lack of demand,” and the anti-abortion groups claimed victory. (Costco will, however, now stock Ozempic and Wegovy.)

During his tenure, Jelinek oversaw the company’s expansion from a hundred and sixty-one thousand employees to more than three hundred and sixteen thousand, and amid a pandemic boom in warehouse-club retail Costco added upward of six million members. This year, the company reported annual net sales of \$270 billion and net income of \$8.1 billion. Lately, its stock price has hovered around a thousand dollars a share. Wall Street has come around on Costco: Simeon Gutman, a retail analyst at Morgan Stanley, said that it has won credibility by succeeding in the face of such challenges as the pandemic, the growth of e-commerce, and the rise of Amazon. Jeff Bezos’s

company, another Washington-based retail behemoth, has come to serve as a kind of foil for Costco. Headlines about Amazon employees might focus on drivers without bathroom breaks, but, for investors, Prime and Costco are both proof that customers will pay to shop. Trump's tariff agenda has created uncertainty for all retailers; still, because Costco sources its stock widely and in large quantities (and sells lots of groceries, which tend to be domestic), its position is "unquestionably better than most," Gutman told me.



"I'd love to catch up sometime. How about at 11 P.M. two months from now at a bar across the bridge with twenty of my closest acquaintances?"  
Cartoon by Jon Adams

Growth, of course, brings change. "It gets more complicated when you get bigger," Jelinek said. This can be delicate at a company beloved for reliability. Switching, say, Kirkland's diaper manufacturer—as Costco did early this year—risks inspiring revolt. (The registry site Babylist reported that sixty per cent of reviews for the new diapers were negative.) But Costco's most important form of continuity has to do with the workers themselves. Employees wear nametags listing their hire dates, and it's not uncommon to get rung up by someone who's been with the company for twenty-five years. When, in 2017, a particularly beloved door greeter at the Seattle warehouse left his post, the *Seattle Times* published an article assuring worried readers that he was in good health and had simply moved to Arizona.

Jelinek and Vachris both began as hourly employees, at FedMart and Price Club, respectively. The rare Costco executives who didn't start on a warehouse floor—such as Galanti, the former C.F.O.—have often spent decades with the company. In contrast, Galanti's replacement, Gary Millerchip, previously served as the C.F.O. of Kroger. A 2022 paper from the nonprofit Economic Roundtable described dire conditions among workers at Kroger-owned stores, with the company profiting even as some employees relied on government assistance or experienced homelessness. On his first earnings call, Millerchip reassured the public that the dollar-fifty hot dog was “safe.”

Seguin, the pie-gun master, said that he mourned the small practices that used to distinguish Costco—communal tables for break-room lunch, intensive buddy-system training. He told me that, after Sinegal stepped down, warehouse walk-throughs by executives began to feel less motivational than “disciplinary.” On a subreddit where warehouse employees compare notes, recent threads include “Overall downturn of the company?!” and “Has anyone else given up recently?” But higher-ups, too, have noticed a difference. William Oliver is the co-founder of an investor research service called In Practise, which produces reports for investors based on interviews with executives. The Costco veterans with whom he has spoken describe a clear shift in recent years: growing success but also growing susceptibility to pressures from Wall Street. “It’s a deterioration from the perspective of Jim’s old guard,” Oliver told me. “To them, it’s moved from ‘working for Dad’ toward a greater emphasis on shareholder return.”

Seguin gave his notice at Costco this past summer. “It is a great company to work for, on paper,” he said. Still, he was startled by the corporate impersonality of his departure: no managerial farewell and no handshake, just a perfunctory online exit interview in a back room.

Maggie Perkins, the corporate trainer, taught middle and high school before she came to Costco in 2022, starting in a Georgia warehouse. When people hear about her career change, they often express dismay that educators are so poorly treated that she'd prefer to work in retail. But she told me that she'd found a sense of stability and community at Costco, and observed that others have, too. “I’ve learned that people have associated their identity and

their moral values with Costco,” she told me. Earlier this year, in an essay for the Catholic magazine *The Lamp*, Matthew Walther proposed Costco as a model for reimagining the shape and role of a parish in contemporary American life, which he describes as “transient, convenient, uprooted,” and fundamentally suburban. “Costco did not grow,” Walther writes. “Instead, it rose up in a barren place and people came to it.”

I thought of Walther’s essay during a visit I paid to Richland, Washington, in the high desert on the east side of the Cascade Range. Richland is a barren place. In 1943, the area just to its north was selected as the location of the Manhattan Project’s first large-scale plutonium-production reactor, which made the plutonium in the Fat Man bomb dropped on Nagasaki. This summer, Richland became home to the nine hundred and thirteenth Costco.

The night before a new Costco opens, employees gather at the warehouse with their families for a party. Many of the guests at the new Richland warehouse wore green, the color of the local high school’s sports teams—which continue, improbably, to be called the Bombers. Some wandered the warehouse; others clustered at the registers, leaning on conveyor belts to chat and eat. The food court had a spread of pizza, hot dogs, and squares of sheet cake, a plastic fork planted neatly atop each. Near the golf carts and electronics, I overheard a man with a 1997 nametag reminiscing about the days when they served prime rib at these parties.

Ron Vachris, shaking hands and greeting babies, had the mild civic familiarity of a small-town mayor. He held a manila envelope in which he was collecting dollar bills: following company tradition, employees were writing down their guesses for the first day’s take on a bill; the closest one would keep the pot. A loose line for an audience with Vachris had formed and persisted even as a man in a green polo shirt began wiping down the registers. It had been a long week of opening Costcos—Vachris had also inaugurated warehouses in Florida, Guadalajara, and Quebec.

Outside, the sky had grown dark, and the wind had picked up force. A handful of shoppers were setting up camp to be first into the warehouse on opening day—an occasion Costco marks by stocking an assortment of limited-quantity items, from Hoka sneakers to W. L. Weller bourbon. Seated at the head of the line were two men: Greg, who had a gray beard and

glasses, and his nephew Craig, who had small blue gauges in his ears and the sun-raw look of a snowboarder. They had brought a cooler, a cribbage set, and sleeping bags. “We both like bourbon,” Greg explained. “But it’s become an event.”

When I returned the next morning, Greg was the first person I saw. He estimated that he and Craig had gotten only an hour and a half of sleep, but had enjoyed talking with their overnight companions. “It was an awesome community,” Greg said. The line now stretched around the corner of the warehouse and beyond. It was *7:30 A.M.*

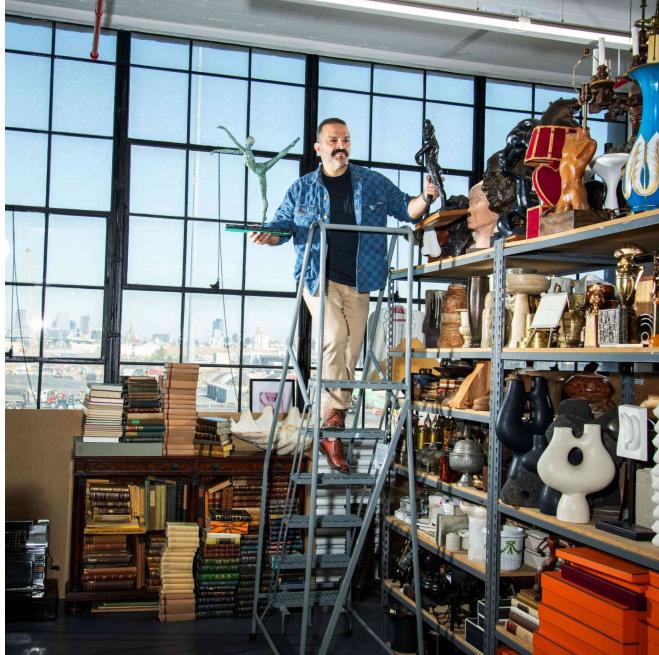
At the door, prospective customers outside and employees inside held their phones aloft and documented one another. The warehouse’s general manager, a compact man in a blue floral dress shirt, cut a red ribbon. “Without further ado, let’s sell some stuff,” he said. ♦

[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

# The Man Who Sells Unsellable New York Apartments

In the city's turbulent market, Jason Saft doesn't just beautify properties. He reveals the new life they could bring you.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)



Saft estimates that he has helped to sell more than three billion dollars of real estate since he started staging homes, in 2005. Photograph by Brian Finke for The New Yorker

In 2017, Jessica Levy Buchman, a real-estate agent in Brooklyn, got a call from a couple looking to sell a three-bedroom apartment at 120 Prospect Park West. The location, in the heart of Park Slope, was unbeatable: steps from a host of restaurants, two subway lines, and a high-performing public elementary school, with a primary bedroom that boasted clear views of the park's lush foliage. But the apartment, a duplex on the first two floors of a former Gilded Age mansion, was riddled with what are known, in the real-estate business, as "challenges." The kitchen was minuscule and outfitted with ancient appliances. The living room, encased in dark mahogany panelling, looked onto a drab alleyway filled with trash bins, and the apartment's two floors were connected by a narrow spiral staircase that risked putting parents in mind of a broken neck. To attract buyers, Buchman wanted the couple to invest in sprucing up their home's presentation. They

hired a different broker. “I understand,” Buchman told them. “I’m sure you’ll sell in a minute.”

But the apartment didn’t sell in a minute, or a month, or a year. According to the real-estate search engine StreetEasy, a property in Park Slope spends a median of seventy-eight days on the market. At 120 Prospect Park West, however, 2018 went by, and so did 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. New York apartments are like fish: the longer one sits, the worse it stinks. 120 Prospect Park West stank. Its price, first listed as two and a quarter million dollars, rose, then dropped, then rose and dropped again. It was yanked off the market and plopped back on. Brokers came and went—seven of them in seven years—and still, no sale.

Finally, the couple came back to Buchman. “I said, ‘Listen, if you’re ready for me, this is what I want to do, and this is who I want to do it,’ ” she recalled. “Meaning, Jason.”

Jason is the home stager Jason Saft. One morning this past April, he stood in the bare living room of the apartment as a team of movers hustled in and out, depositing furniture, rugs, lamps, art work, and an array of highly realistic artificial snake plants and fiddle-leaf fig trees. Saft bent over a sofa that was swaddled in a heavy blue blanket, vigorously slashing at packing tape. One side of his utility knife was bedazzled with a rainbow pattern; on the other, the phrase “*BOSS BITCH*” was spelled out in rhinestones. The room was filled with a dense, woodsy scent. “I saged,” Saft explained. “I’m going to get the ghosts out.”

Saft, forty-eight, is fit and compactly built. He has a dark chevron mustache, a gold-and-steel Rolex, and the commanding, multifocal presence of a movie director or field general. For years, he treated staging as a sideline to his day job as a real-estate agent. In 2020, when the pandemic briefly brought the churn of New York’s real-estate business to a halt, he decided to devote himself full time to Staged to Sell Home, a company he had founded a few years before to turn uninspiring New York City properties into aspirational eye candy of the sort that is regularly showcased in glossy interior-design magazines and on high-end decorators’ social-media accounts. On his own Instagram page, Saft highlights his dramatic before-and-after transformations with the aplomb of a makeover artist, revealing how

superficial tweaks—a fresh coat of well-chosen paint, plush furnishings, eye-popping art—can give a property an irresistible new personality.

Some of the homes that Saft works on are inherently spectacular. Last year, he staged both 973 Fifth Avenue, a seven-story limestone mansion that is one of the rare remaining single-family homes in the city designed by the firm McKim, Mead & White, and a four-thousand-square-foot duplex, farther up Museum Mile, that was most recently owned by Maria Niscemi Romanoff, a Sicilian princess whose late husband was a descendant of the last tsar. But Saft's true passion is for diamonds in the rough. He is drawn to homes whose beauty lies buried beneath decades of stale design choices and neglect. "Give me your tired, your poor condition huddled messes yearning to be chic," he recently wrote on Instagram, under a photo montage of rusted sinks, peeling paint, and chipped woodwork. Realtors oblige. When they are stuck with a troubled property, it is Saft they call. "He really is the only one in his league," Laura Rozos, a broker at Compass, told me. "He's a magician," another said.

Buchman had promised her clients that they would have a signed contract thirty days after their apartment hit the market. Saft found the pressure energizing. "Anything that has a listing history like this is like an aphrodisiac," he said. Not long before, he had turned down a project in a super-tall tower on the section of Fifty-seventh Street known as Billionaires' Row. "I can do it, but it's not my wheelhouse," he said. "It's easy to put beautiful furniture in a beautiful apartment that no one's going to ever be in. It doesn't excite me." In New York, the story of real estate is also a story of reincarnation. A home will outlast any one of its residents, and Saft sees himself as creating a link between its past and its future. "What we are talking about is bringing things back to life," he said.

Conventional wisdom dictates that the best way to stage a home is to depersonalize it. When prospective buyers are trying to imagine a fresh life in a new place, the last thing they want is to be confronted with someone else's family photos or funky shag rug. In New York, where open houses are often rushed, crowded affairs, a buyer may spend less time in her future apartment than she might trying on clothes at a boutique. Ultimately, the decision of where to live comes down to a quickly formed impression, and a bad one is hard to shake. The covers of manuals like "Home Staging for

Dummies” and “Secrets of Home Staging” show spaces drained of color and character, in the manner of an Airbnb: better to present a blank canvas, such thinking goes, than to risk repelling with specificity.

Saft deplores this conciliatory blandness. “White on white on white,” he calls it. “It’s just like the home page of Wayfair. Everything is dull and banal.” He prefers to go on the aesthetic offensive, designing richly textured, bountifully accessorized spaces that aim to stoke visitors’ fantasies not merely of a given property’s potential but of the sophisticated life style that it could signify. He loves spiky chandeliers, velvet sofas, statement coffee tables made of veined marble and raw-edged burled wood, and sensuously curved accent chairs. He embraces color drenching, a trendy decorating technique that entails painting the trim and ceiling of a room the same shade as its walls. (The English paint company Farrow & Ball, which itself has a reputation for catering to the stylish élite, is his brand of choice.) Beds are a particular forte; Saft makes them in the way that a maître d’ at a Michelin-starred restaurant sets a table, ironing the linens smooth and placing the plumped pillows just so. “If the average time in an apartment is twelve minutes, I want them to be there for an hour,” he said. “I want someone that’s basically said ‘I’m buying this apartment’ before they’ve left.”

One morning last spring, I dropped in on Saft as he and his team were staging a two-bedroom apartment on the twelfth floor of 860 Fifth Avenue, a postwar building a few blocks from the Central Park Zoo. A sense of urgency pervaded the space. In the living room, an assistant with ear gauges and a sleeve tattoo stood on a ladder, hanging sheer white curtains. “If you just steamed them, don’t roll them into a ball!” Saft called out. In the kitchen, another assistant grimaced as she heaved a boulder-size clamshell onto a counter. This turned out to be a decorative piece left by the previous occupants; soon, it would get boxed up and sent to a warehouse where Saft keeps his inventory. It wasn’t the only item going back. “They sent the wrong tabletop,” Saft said into his phone, with controlled intensity, as he surveyed a disk of glass that dwarfed its gold-leaf base.

When Saft first visited the apartment, it was in what is known as estate condition. “Someone passed away, and the family is selling the asset to be distributed amongst the heirs,” he explained. “Family members came, took what they wanted, and things just started to fall apart.” He scrolled through

his phone to share pictures of tobacco-colored wallpaper, heavy floral drapes, and floors that had been oddly painted to mimic parquet. “This was the den,” he said, pulling up an image of a room with billiard-green carpeting and stools that resembled saddles splayed on roasting spits. “They loved horses, so it was sort of a Western theme.” He had repainted the room in Dead Salmon, a purplish taupe; the saddles had been replaced with a handsome wooden coffee table and a caramel-hued tufted-leather sofa.



*You just left them in a pile of twigs, alone?*  
Cartoon by Polly Adams

Nodding along to music playing from a wireless speaker—“I like a vibe,” Saft said—he began to style the room’s built-in shelving, mingling an assortment of enticingly battered books in shades of terra-cotta with glazed ceramic candlesticks, abstract black-and-white paintings, and undulating stoneware vases. He tried some red books, then removed them: too much. He placed an embossed edition of “Leaves of Grass” next to a collection of poems by John Keats and topped a pair of coffee-table books with a gnarled, ursine leather mask whose sewn-shut mouth suggested dark erotic proclivities. The mood was comfortably urbane, with edge.

Unlike a decorator, who must design a space with a client’s specific tastes in mind, Saft has free rein to execute his vision—no suggestions, no notes. He will not work in a home that is occupied, or stage only a single floor or a few rooms for the sake of a seller’s frugality. “The first step is sitting in the space

and asking, Who is the target audience?” Saft told me. A buyer on the Upper East Side will typically have a more traditional sense of style than one in Tribeca or Brooklyn; a young family will not have the same needs as empty nesters looking to downsize. The goal is to make the right person feel at home, without alienating anybody else. “Staging creates an emotional connection,” Buchman, the real-estate agent, said. “Even though I’ve been in this business for a million years, if I walk into a place and it looks like the way I aspire to live, I succumb to that. And I should know better.” She first encountered Saft’s work in 2021, at an open house for a Park Slope townhome. “Every single thing was curated for the Brooklyn boho journalist with money,” she recalled. “Emotionally, it just hooked me like a rainbow trout.”

Sometimes the architecture of a space itself suggests to Saft the type of person who might live there. “I just did this penthouse at Tudor City,” he told me as he knelt on a bedroom rug at 860 Fifth Avenue, smoothing out wrinkles. “The apartment was featured in the ‘Spider-Man’ movies as the home of the Green Goblin, the Willem Dafoe character. It had this really elegant staircase, and I kept thinking of Auntie Mame’s apartment. And there’s this little Juliet balcony off the dining room that overlooks it, and I kept pretending to be Madonna as Eva Perón in ‘Evita.’” He began to imagine its future resident: a cultivated woman who lives out of town but comes into the city once a month to see art shows and attend business meetings. “She wants something special,” Saft said. The apartment, which had sat on the market for seven months, had initially been shown with dark, masculine furniture. Saft remade it in soft, creamy shades, draping the bed in a linen cover that pooled lavishly on the floor. As Saft stood up, his phone pinged. “Accepted offer on tudor,” the message read. It had been on the market for six days.

Saft opened his laptop to show me mockups that he had made for each room of 860 Fifth Avenue. The living room featured two dove-gray swivel chairs and two floral-velvet armchairs; a low-backed sofa in a warm vanilla; two sideboards—one gilded, one upholstered in a nubby white fabric—and, for added flair, a white-and-gold changing screen. It was part Jackie O., part Lilly Pulitzer: a Chanel jacket worn with chunky costume jewelry.

The vision was rapidly coming together in three dimensions. The wrong tabletop had been replaced with the right one. Only the details were left, but it is the details that count. Saft, not bothering to remove his sneakers, leaped onto a chair to place an ornate gold mirror over the mantelpiece. In the dining room, he stuffed faux peonies into a vase before putting it on a side table next to a framed photograph of Antonio Canova's marble "Venus Italica." The sculpture is on display at the Met; you could stroll up the Avenue and see the real thing. "Perfect," Saft said. "Now we're Upper East Side."

"It never ceases to amaze me how much wealth there is in the city," Saft told me the next day. We were back at 860 Fifth Avenue, lounging in the gray swivel chairs as if we owned the place. "It's fascinating being in this world, being with these people, because it's the exact opposite of what I grew up with." Saft comes from Levittown, Long Island, the prototype for conformist, white-picketed American suburbia. "I had a deadbeat dad. Never paid child support," he said. During the day, his mother ran a rehabilitation clinic at Nassau University Medical Center; at night, she worked in the bridal-registry department at Fortunoff. Saft's decorating dreams began early. "There was a hole under the box spring of my bed where I used to hide my mom's interior-design magazines," he recalled. "Little boys in the eighties did *not* read *Better Homes and Gardens*."

On his fourteenth birthday, Saft walked two miles to a McDonald's in the town of East Meadow and applied for a job. "I've worked ever since," he said. Though he was stationed at the fryer, Saft organized the stockroom on his own time, separating sauces from Happy Meal toys. Impressed, his manager eventually promoted him to the drive-through window—"the most glorious," Saft said. "You've got a headset on, like Madonna on the Blond Ambition tour."

Saft considers his time at McDonald's to be crucial to his success as a stager. "It's all systems and process," he said. Last year, Staged to Sell worked on more than a hundred and thirty properties around the city; aesthetic sense is nothing without a firm grasp of logistics. To be able to set up a town house in a single day, you must develop a foolproof method for properly loading a moving truck. (The rugs go in last so that they can be the first things out.) To speed up the hanging of art, it helps to write down the distance between a

picture frame's D-rings, so you don't need to measure each time. Tricks like these can be taught to employees—Saft now has twelve—just as he was once taught how to expedite orders and scrub grease off a grill. He still has his striped shirt and red clip-on tie.

Saft put himself through Northeastern University, participating in the school's co-op program, which allows students to alternate between studying on campus and working in a field of interest. He focussed on P.R. and soon found himself in Manhattan, where he worked with figures in the entertainment industry, including Harvey Weinstein and Scott Rudin—good practice in anticipating the needs of demanding people. Meanwhile, he said, "I followed real estate religiously." After a friend suggested that he would make a good agent, Saft enrolled at the New York Real Estate Institute, then got a job at a firm called Citi Habitats. He was twenty-five, hungry in the way that twenty-five-year-olds in the city can be. "I need to get my ass to work and start closing deals," he told himself.

Agenting is a competitive business. A senior broker gave Saft the same advice that the stripper Tessie Tura gives the innocent young Louise in "Gypsy": you gotta get a gimmick. "There are agents who are beautiful, talented Broadway actors who just get clients because everybody wants to hang out with the gorgeous person," Saft said. "I didn't have that." Early on, he was tasked with renting out a particularly cramped unit at an old tenement building on West Thirteenth Street that catered to wealthy N.Y.U. students. "People would come in and say, 'You can't put a bed in this bedroom,'" Saft recalled. To prove them wrong, he marked out furniture dimensions on the floor in painter's tape, "but it looked like a crime scene." The landlord wanted to lower the rent. Instead, Saft asked for four hundred dollars to buy a bed frame and an air mattress. The bed frame fit. The apartment rented. Saft had found his gimmick.

Saft began to develop a reputation as a hands-on problem solver. To refresh a dowdy unit, he would change out light fixtures or paint kitchen cabinets in Benjamin Moore's Hale Navy. He started cold-calling potential clients. "I noticed that you haven't sold your apartment after a year on the market," went the pitch. "I happen to work in aesthetics and design. I think I can show you why." Few New Yorkers respond well to such unsolicited overtures. "For every one you got, there were probably fifty that were, like,

‘Go fuck yourself,’ ” Saft said. He kept at it. “There was 342 West Twelfth Street,” he said—his big break. The apartment, no more than two hundred square feet, was filled with built-ins, old-fashioned medicine cabinets, and vintage signs. Saft fixed it up, photographed it, and, channelling his P.R. savvy, sent the listing to the press, branded as “Small Wonder.” Five outlets picked up the story, including *Forbes*, which featured the apartment as its “Property Porn of the Week.”

Tiny homes became Saft’s signature. He himself fell for a studio in a third-floor walkup on Twenty-second Street and Ninth Avenue. A professional pianist lived downstairs, filling the space with music. Saft was thirty, living for the first time on his own, and the apartment became his testing ground for staging tricks. He hung wallpaper in the kitchen to imitate a tiled backsplash, angled a lacquered Chinese chest to hide a few folding chairs stored behind it, and switched out his black coverlet for a white one that made the bed seem less bulky. Then he called the *New York Times*. “He might be exaggerating a little,” the paper wrote of Saft’s claim that his use of mirrors made “the apartment feel as if it goes on forever.” Saft squeezed in twenty guests for dinner parties and kept his bicycle in the bathtub. When he needed a bed for staging, he used his own and slept on the floor.

In 2004, a former product manager at Microsoft named Rich Barton came up with an idea for a website that would change the way real estate was bought and sold. Barton had already shaken up the travel industry with expedia.com, which allowed vacationers to book their own flights and hotels, bypassing travel agents. He had recently tried to purchase a house, only to become frustrated by the opacity of the process. Brokers carefully guarded pertinent information; there was no way to know the price that a comparable home had recently fetched, or to see how sales were trending in a given city or neighborhood. Barton wanted to offer people a way to look at listings on their own. Two years later, the site launched. It was called Zillow.

Perusing real-estate listings has since become a national pastime—not to mention a collective exercise in sanctioned snooping and quasi-erotic wish fulfillment. In 2019, Zillow received eight billion visits. By 2021, when Americans, stir-crazy from quarantine, were desperate to escape the claustrophobic reality of their own homes for the dream of someone else’s, that number had risen to 10.2 billion. The same year, “Saturday Night Live”

parodied the site's appeal in a Vaseline-lensed digital short, called "Zillow," which resembled a late-night TV ad for an escort service. "Real estate is your sex now," Heidi Gardner, clad in a lace teddy, purred. "And our listings are just standing by, waiting for you to *browse* them." Once, the culture's dominant status symbol was the car, with its promise of speed and freedom. Now we situate our yearning for recognition and reinvention squarely within four walls.

"When I started out, I would bring some bodega roses with me and move them from the living room to the kitchen to the bedroom when I photographed," Jessica Buchman told me. The public's constant exposure to posh homes on social media and television shows like "Million Dollar Listing" has raised the visual stakes considerably. "If you're an agent and you're marketing a listing that looks like poo-poo, you can't post it," she went on. "Even if it's just a beat-up, shabby little rental, I'll virtually stage it so it looks all West Elm-y and cute."

Saft knows the value of the visual. He works with his own photographers to shoot each of his projects from a hundred dazzling angles, creating seductive imagery that can live on long after a listing has sold. Saft's virtual persona, like his embodied one, is at once polished and cheeky. On Instagram, he shares screenshots of coy text exchanges with brokers featuring the sweat-droplets emoji; a sumptuous image of an intricately patterned patch of inlaid flooring might be captioned "morning wood." With a hundred thousand followers, Saft is effectively an influencer, and he acts like one, listing the sources for the items he has used to suggest to his audience that all this could be theirs, too.

When he approaches a potential client, though, Saft told me, "I'm not really here to talk about how pretty I'm going to make something. I'm here to talk about how much money we're going to make for you." He comes armed with statistics: the number of days that a project spent on the market, the number of dollars it sold above its asking price. In the lavishly produced Staged to Sell look book, Saft includes figures showing his clients' return on their investment, which he arrives at by comparing their profit to his fee. His services are not cheap. Saft works for a flat rate, beginning at twenty-two thousand dollars for a one-bedroom apartment. He estimates that he has

helped to sell more than three billion dollars of real estate since he started staging homes, in 2005.

It's best not to underrate the power of pretty. When I mentioned Saft to a friend, she squealed. Her parents, Tom and Robin, had recently bought a Brooklyn apartment that Saft had staged. "I looked at the staging, and looked past some real problems," Robin told me. Saft had done the place "in a sort of retro-Deco way," she said, with semicircular velvet couches, oval mirrors on the wall behind the dining table, and "cookbooks that Tom, who is a cooking maniac, said he wanted to take home." Yes, the bathrooms had to be redone, but so what? The apartment went into a bidding war. Tom and Robin won it by offering more than four hundred thousand dollars over the asking price.

Next, they hired Saft to stage their old place on Riverside Drive—over the objections of their agent, who thought that virtual staging would suffice. When Saft finished, Robin said, "it was an apartment we never saw." Their "umpy" office was turned into an adorable children's room with twin beds—"five and a half feet long, because it couldn't fit a full." Saft's vision wasn't entirely to their taste—"the art was terrifying," Robin said—but it found its target. The apartment went into contract in two weeks. "We got totally hoodwinked," Tom told me. "And then we said, 'The only way that we're going to sell our apartment is to do exactly the same thing that happened to us.'"

A good stager needs good inventory. It helps to have an eye for bargains, to love haunting flea markets and thrift stores, to delight in cutting a deal. One of Saft's first acquisitions was part of a Mitchell Gold sectional that retailed for eight thousand dollars; because the rest had been lost, he got it for three hundred dollars. At first, he stored his materials in his apartment. Eventually, he rented a unit at Manhattan Mini Storage—then two units, then three, then seven. "I would Helen Keller my way around," he said. "I knew the arm of that sofa, I knew the back of that chair." He rented a warehouse in the Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn, but outgrew that, too. Last year, he moved again, to a twenty-four-thousand-square-foot warehouse in Brooklyn's Industry City.

One afternoon, I visited Saft there. The space was as vast as an airplane hangar, at once utilitarian and fanciful—a Bed Bath & Beyond stockroom crossed with a cabinet of curiosities. Employees moved about, pulling items for upcoming projects or consulting Airtable, a software program that Saft uses to catalogue Staged to Sell's collection. He puts the number of items somewhere in the hundreds of thousands. Last year, he spent more than a million dollars on new inventory. “I’m getting better at budgeting,” he said.



*“My retirement plan is for the global economic system to completely collapse and for something more equitable to rise from its ashes by the time I’m old enough to retire.”*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

We passed by stacks of lampshades, all manner of vases sorted by shape and color, and a substantial collection of novelty rubber duckies molded in the likeness of celebrities such as Freddie Mercury, Elvis, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. An arsenal of throw pillows abutted enough foldable bed frames to sleep an army regiment. There were African masks and classical bronze busts, a vintage foosball table, and an impressive assortment of orange Hermès boxes, which Saft purchased for twelve hundred dollars in Palm Springs and uses to pep up closets at his fancier properties. At the back of the warehouse, Saft sank into an armchair decadently upholstered in sheepskin, facing a gargantuan painting that depicted the Devil tempting St. Anthony. This was his private nook, the makeshift office where he keeps his special treasures. “I often buy things that have a personal resonance, because what I found is that they resonate with someone else,” he told me. For

spiritual as well as aesthetic reasons, he likes to mix his own possessions into his staging work. A well-loved leather club chair appeared at 120 Prospect Park West; in a Chelsea apartment that featured an eighties-style glass-brick wall, he hung a poster from the French release of “Desperately Seeking Susan,” the twin of one that he keeps in his own home.

I wanted to know about Saft’s view of perfection. If the harsh physical ideals of the fashion world have created a kind of ambient body dysmorphia, our non-stop exposure to absurdly neat, expensively decorated spaces can seem to have the same effect on our sense of what is normal in the home. The tide, however, may be turning. Minimalism is on the wane; TikTok is awash in videos celebrating the concept of “intentional clutter.” “Sometimes I’m in someone’s home where you could tell they’re a perfectionist, and everything feels perfect, and you’re supposed to sit perfectly,” Saft said. “It feels uncomfortable, yes?” He is drawn to designers, such as the interior stylist Colin King, who seek to instill a space with a kind of wabi-sabi messiness—the equivalent of a rumpled haircut from the Sally Hershberger salon. “The way I grew up, you couldn’t put your head on the couch,” he went on. His mother had a formal living room that no one used; she worried about spoiling upholstery that she couldn’t afford to replace. He added, “The right amount of lived-in is its own kind of luxury.”

Staged to Sell now has two additional designers, who are tasked with creating Saft-style spaces that bear their own signatures. But, Saft said, “I still don’t call myself a designer.” In the decorating world, he said, “home staging is very much looked down upon. It’s like if you were at a dinner party and someone worked at Gucci, and someone worked at Y.S.L., and then someone worked at H&M. The others would turn up their nose.”

This, too, may be changing. A few weeks after our conversations at the warehouse, I went to the Lexington Avenue showroom of the Italian design company Dexelance to see Saft participate in a panel on “the psychology of space” alongside Noz Nozawa, a San Francisco-based interior designer, and Jordan Stocum and Barry Bordelon, a couple who renovate Brooklyn properties under the moniker Brownstone Boys. I got to chatting with Sharon Stulberg, a broker who turned out to have come for Saft, too. “I think he’s got a chef’s-kiss gift,” she said. Her background was in licensing: she had put Elmo on Pampers. Now she was waiting for the right time to

approach Saft about turning him into a brand. “He’s Martha Stewart,” she said.

Saft, crisply dressed in cuffed khakis and sockless brogues, presented his work on 973 Fifth Avenue, the McKim, Mead & White mansion. Before he was hired, the home had been on the market for four years. Though the owners had renovated it, they had done so in a way that did not have contemporary appeal. “The kitchen was in the basement, which is not really how people live anymore,” Saft said. His brief had been to meld the period character with modernity. The screen behind him showed a “before” photo of the home’s opulent ballroom, its pistachio-colored walls inlaid with gilt molding. A pair of white bouclé sofas faced each other on a patterned rug—a bit stiff, a bit staid. “The owner told me she called it the Intimidation Room, because she didn’t know how to approach it, and no one ever used it,” Saft went on. “I thought, It’s a crime that you have this room in your house and never come in here.”

The image switched to Saft’s version. The walls, still pistachio, were now offset by two large aubergine sofas by the designer Athena Calderone. Between them, a penny-colored coffee table reflected the rich copper of the ceiling. A pronounced “ooh” was heard. Even Bertha Russell, the demanding Fifth Avenue arriviste from “The Gilded Age,” would have approved.

The apartment at 120 Prospect Park West went on the market, for the eighth time, on April 9th—a Wednesday. The open house was that Sunday. Dozens of people streamed in. Couples in their thirties, with or without a baby; couples in their seventies, retired. Sheer white curtains filtered the spring light. A fir-green velvet armchair, a pink-and-tangerine Moroccan rug. Offers came in. Sixteen days later, a contract was signed.

“The truth about this work—like, why I dived into it at the beginning—is it allowed me to fix other people’s problems,” Saft said. He used to be a heavy smoker—a serious drinker, too. He got sober nearly nine years ago, and began dating someone who was in the final stages of adopting as a single dad. Their daughter is now eight.

Saft has lived in more than a dozen New York apartments, most of them in Manhattan. There was an aunt's place on West Seventy-fifth Street, and a rat-infested apartment that he abandoned after a harrowing night of gnawing. He loved his garden one-bedroom in a Harlem brownstone and the walkup above the pianist. A few years ago, he was feeling done with New York. He and his partner had broken up. He had been thinking about leaving town. Then he went to see a small studio close to the promenade in Brooklyn Heights. He heard birds singing as he walked down the block. The apartment was on the fourth floor of an immense nineteenth-century mansion. As Saft climbed the grand staircase, he knew that he would buy it.

Recently, I went to see him there. "The last owner was here for sixty-four years," Saft said as he ushered me in. "He died in here, and they found his body several weeks later. The fire department had to break down the door." He took this as a positive sign. "I think there's something really good about that, that the place held someone for so long," he said. "They were content here."

The apartment was beautiful, serene. A disco ball hung in the bathroom. Everywhere were pictures you wanted to look at, little objects you wanted to stop and examine. Saft's bed, with a gently undulating headboard, was in one corner, his daughter's tucked into a nook behind the kitchen. When he had toured the place, the broker boasted about the bathroom's marble flooring. After he signed the contract, Saft came back to take a closer look. "I was, like, 'Oh my God, those are peel-and-stick tiles,'" he said. Before moving in, he cleaned the bathtub; paint washed off in big flakes. Even a magician can fall for a good trick.

Talk turned to recent projects. Saft had just done Ricky Martin's apartment, on East End Avenue. "How do you translate this person into a look?" he said. "There's fire and passion. I just went all out." 860 Fifth Avenue had an accepted offer, but the contract had stalled: so far, no sale. The market is the market.

It was early afternoon. An hour before I arrived, Saft had flown in from a staging conference in Portland, Oregon. I took my leave to return to my own apartment, filled with toddler debris, tossed-off shoes, and baskets heaped with wrinkled laundry—unintentional clutter. Later, though, watching a

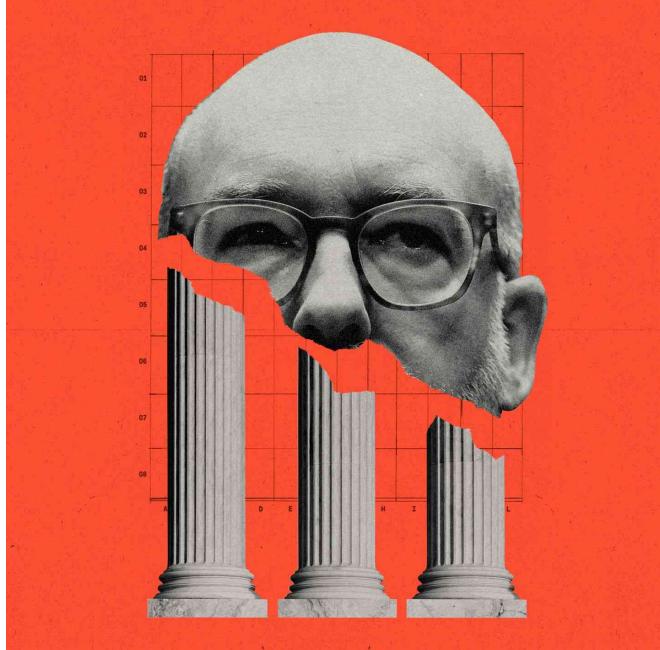
video I had taken of Saft's apartment, I noticed something that hadn't caught my eye before: a few toys and pieces of kids' clothing tucked under a striking mid-century-modern dresser by the front door. In the listing photos, they would have been edited out. But they made the house a home. ♦

Letter from Washington

# Donald Trump's Deep-State Wrecking Ball

Russell Vought is using the White House budget office to lay waste to the federal bureaucracy—firing workers, decimating agencies, and testing the rule of law.

By [Andy Kroll](#)



*"He has centralized decision-making power to an extent that he is the Commander-in-Chief," a senior official said of Vought.* Photo illustration by Mike McQuade; Source photographs from Alamy and Getty

*This article is a collaboration between The New Yorker and [ProPublica](#).*

On the afternoon of February 12th, Russell Vought, the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, summoned a small group of career staffers to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building for a meeting about foreign aid. A storm had dumped nearly six inches of snow on Washington, D.C. The rest of the federal government was running on a two-hour delay, but Vought had offered his team no such reprieve. As they filed into a second-floor conference room decorated with photos of past O.M.B. directors, Vought took his seat at the center of a worn wooden table and laid his briefing materials out before him.

Vought, a bookish technocrat with an encyclopedic knowledge of the inner workings of the U.S. government, cuts an unusual figure in Trump's inner circle of Fox News hosts and right-wing influencers. He speaks in a flat, nasally monotone and, with his tortoiseshell glasses, standard-issue blue suits, and corona of close-cropped hair, most resembles what he claims to despise: a federal bureaucrat. The Office of Management and Budget, like Vought himself, is little known outside the Beltway and poorly understood even among political insiders. What it lacks in cachet, however, it makes up for in the vast influence it wields across the government. Samuel Bagenstos, an O.M.B. general counsel during the Biden Administration, told me, "Every goddam thing in the executive branch goes through O.M.B."

The O.M.B. reviews all significant regulations proposed by individual agencies. It vets executive orders before the President signs them. It issues workforce policies for more than two million federal employees. Most notably, every penny appropriated by Congress is dispensed by the O.M.B., making the agency a potential choke point in a federal bureaucracy that currently spends about seven trillion dollars a year. Shalanda Young, Vought's predecessor, told me, "If you're O.K. with your name not being in the spotlight and just getting stuff done," then directing the O.M.B. "can be one of the most powerful jobs in D.C."

During Donald Trump's first term, Vought (whose name is pronounced "vote") did more than perhaps anyone else to turn the President's demands and personal grievances into government action. In 2019, after Congress refused to fund Trump's border wall, Vought, then the acting director of the O.M.B., redirected billions of dollars in Department of Defense money to build it. Later that year, after the Trump White House pressured Ukraine's government to investigate Joe Biden, who was running for President, Vought froze two hundred and fourteen million dollars in security assistance for Ukraine. "The President loved Russ because he could count on him," Mark Paoletta, who has served as the O.M.B. general counsel in both Trump Administrations, said at a conservative policy summit in 2022, according to a recording I obtained. "He wasn't a showboat, and he was committed to doing what the President wanted to do."

After the pro-Trump riots at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, many Republicans, including top Administration officials, disavowed the

President. Vought remained loyal. He echoed Trump's baseless claims about election fraud and publicly defended people who were arrested for their participation in the melee. During the Biden years, Vought labored to translate the lessons of Trump's tumultuous first term into a more effective second Presidency. He chaired the transition portion of Project 2025, a joint effort by a coalition of conservative groups to develop a road map for the next Republican Administration, helping to draft some three hundred and fifty executive orders, regulations, and other plans to more fully empower the President. "Despite his best thinking and the aggressive things they tried in Trump One, nothing really stuck," a former O.M.B. branch chief who served under Vought during the first Trump Administration told me. "Most Administrations don't get a four-year pause or have the chance to think about 'Why isn't this working?'" The former branch chief added, "Now he gets to come back and steamroll everyone."

At the meeting in February, according to people familiar with the events, Vought's directive was simple: slash foreign assistance to the greatest extent possible. The U.S. government shouldn't support overseas anti-malaria initiatives, he argued, because buying mosquito nets doesn't make Americans safer or more prosperous. He questioned why the U.S. funded an international vaccine alliance, given the anti-vaccine views of Trump's nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. The conversation turned to the United States Institute of Peace, a government-funded nonprofit created under Ronald Reagan, which worked to prevent conflicts overseas; Vought asked what options existed to eliminate it. When he was told that the U.S.I.P. was funded by Congress and legally independent, he replied, "We'll see what we can do." (A few days later, Trump signed an executive order that directed the O.M.B. to dismantle the organization.)

The O.M.B. staffers had tried to anticipate Vought's desired outcome for more than seven billion dollars that the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development spent each year on humanitarian assistance, including disaster relief and support for refugees and conflict victims. During the campaign, Trump had vowed to defund agencies that give money to people "who have no respect for us at all," and Project 2025 had accused U.S.A.I.D. of pursuing a "divisive political and cultural agenda." The staffers proposed a cut of fifty per cent.

Vought was unsatisfied. What would be the consequences, he asked, of a much larger reduction? A career official answered: less humanitarian aid would mean more people would die. “You could say that about any of these cuts,” Vought replied. A person familiar with the meeting described his reaction as “blasé.” Vought reiterated that he wanted spending on foreign aid to be as close to zero as possible, on the fastest timeline possible. Several analysts left the meeting rattled. Word of what had happened spread quickly among the O.M.B. staff. Another person familiar with the meeting later told me, “It was the day that broke me.”

What Vought has done in the nine months since Trump took office goes much further than slashing foreign aid. Relying on an expansive theory of Presidential power and a willingness to test the rule of law, he has frozen vast sums of federal spending, terminated tens of thousands of federal workers, and, in a few cases, brought entire agencies to a standstill. In early October, after Senate Democrats refused to vote for a budget resolution without additional health-care protections, effectively shutting down the government, Vought became the face of the White House’s response. On the second day of the closure, Trump shared an A.I.-generated video that depicted his budget director—who, by then, had threatened mass firings across the federal workforce and paused or cancelled twenty-six billion dollars in funding for infrastructure and clean-energy projects in blue states—as the Grim Reaper of Washington, D.C. “We work for the President of the United States,” a senior agency official who regularly deals with the O.M.B. told me. But right now “it feels like we work for Russ Vought. He has centralized decision-making power to an extent that he is the Commander-in-Chief.”

At the start of Trump’s second term, Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency, which promised to slash spending and root out waste, dominated the headlines. A gaggle of tech bros, with little government experience, appeared to be marching into federal buildings and, with the President’s blessing, purging people and programs seen as “woke” or anti-Trump. The sight of Musk swinging a chainsaw onstage at a conservative conference captured the pell-mell approach, not to mention the brutality, of the billionaire’s plan to bring the federal government to heel.

But, according to court records, interviews, and other accounts from people close to Vought, *DOGE*'s efforts were guided, more than was previously known, by the O.M.B. director. Musk bragged about "feeding U.S.A.I.D. into the wood chipper," but the details of the agency's downsizing were ironed out by Vought's office. When *DOGE* took aim at obscure quasi-government nonprofits, such as the United States Institute of Peace, O.M.B. veterans saw Vought's influence at work. "I can't imagine that the *DOGE* team knew to target all these little parts of the government without Russ pointing them there," the former O.M.B. branch chief told me. Vought also orchestrated *DOGE*'s hostile takeover of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, crippling a regulator that Republicans had hoped to shutter during Trump's first term. "*DOGE* is underneath the O.M.B.," Michelle Martin, an official with Citizens for Renewing America, a grassroots group founded by Vought, said in May, according to a video of her remarks. "Honestly, a lot of what Elon began pinpointing . . . was at the direction of Russ."

Vought, who declined to be interviewed for this story, voiced concerns about some of *DOGE*'s tactics—canceling budget items that the O.M.B. had wanted to keep, for instance—but he mostly saw the department as a useful battering ram. An Administration official who has worked with Vought and Musk told me that *DOGE* showed Vought it was possible to ignore legal challenges and take dramatic action. "He has the benefit of Elon softening everyone up," the official told me. "Elon terrified the shit out of people. He broke the status quo."



*"Either this is the scene of a horrific crime or someone recently de-seeded a pomegranate."*  
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

Vought is a stated opponent of the status quo. One of the few prominent conservatives to embrace the label of “Christian nationalist,” he once told an audience that “the phrasing is too accurate to run away from the term. . . . I’m a Christian. I am a nationalist. We were meant to be a Christian nation.” American democracy, he has said, has been hijacked by rogue judges who make law from the bench and by a permanent class of government bureaucrats who want to advance “woke” policies designed to divide Americans and silence political opponents. “The stark reality in America is that we are in the late stages of a complete Marxist takeover of the country, in which our adversaries already hold the weapons of the government apparatus,” Vought said in 2024, during a conference hosted by the Center for Renewing America, a nonprofit think tank that he also founded. “And they have aimed it at us.”

The central struggle of our time, he says, pits the defenders of this “post-constitutional” order—what he calls the “cartel” or the “regime,” which in his telling includes Democrats and Republicans—against a group of “radical constitutionalists” fighting to destroy the deep state and return power to the Presidency and, ultimately, the people. Vought counts himself as a member of the latter group, which, in his view, also includes right-wing stalwarts such as the political strategist Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, the

architect of Trump's mass-deportation campaign. "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected," he said in a private speech in 2023. "When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work, because they are increasingly viewed as the villains."

The ultimate radical constitutionalist, Vought says, is Donald Trump. In Vought's view, Trump, the subject of four indictments during his time out of office, is a singular figure in the history of the American republic, a once persecuted leader who returns to power to defeat the deep state. "We have in Donald Trump a man who is so uniquely positioned to serve this role, a man whose own interests perfectly align with the interests of the country," Vought said in his 2024 speech. "He has seen what it has done to him, and he has seen what they are trying to do to the country. That is nothing more than a gift of God." As Bannon put it, sitting onstage with Vought at a closed-door conference in 2023, Trump is "a very imperfect instrument, right? But he's an instrument of the Lord."

In Vought's vision for the U.S. government, an all-powerful executive branch would be able to fire workers, cancel programs, shutter agencies, and undo regulations that govern air and water quality, financial markets, workplace protections, and civil rights. The Department of Justice, meanwhile, would shed its historical independence and operate at the direction of the White House. All of this puts Vought at the center of what Steve Vladeck, a law professor at Georgetown, described to me as the Trump Administration's "complete disregard" for the law. "The President has no authority to not spend money Congress has appropriated—that's not a debate," he told me. "The President has no authority to fire civil servants who are protected by statute—that's not a debate." He added, "We are seeing exertions of executive power the likes of which we have never seen in this country."

Vought, who is forty-nine, has spent his entire adult life in Washington. He met his wife, Mary, on Capitol Hill, where they both eventually worked for Mike Pence, at the time a Republican congressman from Indiana. (The Voughts divorced in 2023.) Yet, after nearly thirty years in the nation's capital, he still views himself as an outsider. He once described his upbringing, in Trumbull, Connecticut, as "blue collar" and his parents as part of America's "forgotten men and women."

Vought's father, Thurlow, served in the Marines and worked as an electrician. His mother, Margaret, spent more than twenty years as a schoolteacher and administrator. Before they married each other, Vought's parents had both been widowed in their thirties and left to raise families on their own; Russ was their only child together. In 1981, when Russ was four, one of Thurlow's daughters died in a car crash. Not long after the accident, Thurlow had a religious awakening. "That completely changed the direction of our immediate family," one of Vought's half sisters later wrote on social media.

Vought's mother helped launch a Christian school, where the curriculum relied heavily on the Bible. One history book the school considered using included the instruction to "Defend the statement that all governmental power and authority come from God." America was built on Judeo-Christian values, she told a local newspaper, and if the American people gave up on those values "then they're going to have to pay the price based on sin, sickness, disease and anarchy."

Vought attended a private Christian high school, then went to Illinois to study at Wheaton College, which is known as the "evangelical Harvard." He moved to Washington after graduation and, in 1999, landed a job in the office of Phil Gramm, a Republican senator from Texas. Vought, who started in the mailroom, would later say that working for Gramm laid the "conservative foundation" for the rest of his life.

Gramm was an uncompromising budget hawk. He was famous for the "Dickey Flatt test," named after a printer Gramm knew in Texas. For every dollar of federal spending, Gramm said, lawmakers must ask themselves: Did it improve the lives of people like Dickey Flatt? (In Gramm's estimation, the answer was often no; every year, he introduced legislation designed to ruthlessly slash the budget.) Years later, when Vought testified before Congress, he said that people like his parents "have always been my test for federal spending. Did a particular program or spending increase help the nameless wagon pullers across our country, working hard at their job, trying to provide for their family and future?"

Under Gramm's tutelage, Vought developed a reputation as a master of the arcane rules that can get legislation passed or killed. He climbed the ranks of

the Republican Party, going on to advise Pence, who was then the leader of the House Republican Conference. But the closer Vought got to the center of congressional power, the more disillusioned he became. In the late two-thousands, when Republican lawmakers, who professed to care about deficits and balanced budgets, voted in favor of bills loaded with corporate giveaways and pork-barrel spending, Vought felt that they were abandoning their principles and duping their constituents. He later recalled of this time, “I would say, ‘If there’s an opinion in this leadership room, I’m telling you it’s ninety-five per cent wrong.’ ” A former Capitol Hill colleague of Vought’s told me, “I think he thought the Republican leadership was a bigger impediment to conservative causes than Democrats were.”

In 2010, Vought quit working for House Republicans and helped launch Heritage Action for America, an offshoot of the influential conservative think tank Heritage Foundation. The foundation was known for dense policy papers and its voluminous “Mandate for Leadership” governing guide. Heritage Action had a different purpose—to strong-arm Republicans in Congress into acting more conservatively.

Vought was instrumental in turning Heritage Action into the interest group that congressional Republicans feared most. He picked fights with Party leaders over agriculture subsidies and greenhouse-gas regulations, and published a scorecard that rated how lawmakers voted on key bills. In Heritage Action’s first year, according to a person familiar with Vought’s work there, he came up with an idea for a mailer that attacked Bob Corker, a Republican senator from Tennessee, for his vote to approve a nuclear-weapons treaty with Russia. The mailer featured a photograph of Corker alongside images of Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, and the Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Heritage Action’s tactics so infuriated the Republican leadership that Senator Mitch McConnell called on Heritage donors to stop funding the group. (McConnell did not respond to a request for comment.)

In 2013, Heritage Action announced a campaign to defund the Affordable Care Act. Vought and his colleagues toured the country, whipping up the grass roots, and poured millions of dollars into advertisements and lobbying. They wanted Republicans in the House and the Senate to insist that any spending bill passed to avert a shutdown must also defund Obamacare. The

Republican lawmakers who embraced the strategy came to be known as the “suicide caucus,” and their protest led to a sixteen-day government shutdown. In the end, Republican leaders cut a deal to reopen the government, leaving Obamacare intact.

Heritage Action saw the 2016 Presidential election as an opportunity to put a true conservative back in the White House. The group’s C.E.O., Michael Needham, openly supported Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas, who, three years earlier, had helped orchestrate the shutdown. Trump, at least initially, was treated with disdain. During an appearance on Fox News in 2015, Needham called him a “clown” who “needs to be out of the race.”

Vought and Trump couldn’t have been more different: one was a deacon at his Baptist church; the other was a twice-divorced philanderer who had been caught on camera bragging about grabbing women “by the pussy.” But, after Trump won the election, Vought was offered a job as a senior adviser at the O.M.B., where he’d dreamed of working since his days in Phil Gramm’s office. Years later, Vought would say that, at the time, he had no ambition of one day running the agency. He had planned to help with the transition and some of the O.M.B.’s early efforts, then go to seminary to become a pastor. But, he later said in a podcast interview, “God had other plans.”

In March, 2017, Trump signed an executive order that called for a top-to-bottom reorganization of the federal government. Mick Mulvaney, a former congressman, served as Trump’s first budget director, but, inside the O.M.B., Vought took the lead. According to a former senior staffer at the agency, Vought initially pushed for the President’s plan to eliminate U.S.A.I.D. and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. He also wanted to fold the Department of Health and Human Services, along with food-stamps programs, into a new Department of Health and Public Welfare. “They wanted to call it that because they think it sounds bad,” a former O.M.B. analyst told me. In one meeting, according to a person in the room, Vought asked, “Why do we do economic assistance abroad at all?” The former O.M.B. analyst said, “There were very few, if any, debates where Russ wouldn’t take the most extreme option available to him, the most conservative, the most budget-cutting.”

Trump's Cabinet secretaries resisted wholesale cuts. The former senior staffer recalled, "The general counsels at these agencies are calling the White House counsel and saying, 'We're not trying to introduce legislation to delete ourselves, are we?'" Few of the recommendations in Vought's final reorganization plan, which was released in 2018, were implemented. But the document now reads like a guide to the second Trump Administration. "I didn't realize it then," the former O.M.B. senior staffer told me, "but I was writing the first draft of Project 2025."

Vought increasingly clashed with the O.M.B.'s staff over proposed cuts to popular programs. Meals on Wheels, the food-delivery program, was a topic of intense debate. Even after O.M.B. staff explained how the program, which received more than nine hundred million dollars in funding from Congress, acted as a lifeline for homebound seniors, Vought and Mulvaney pushed for major cuts that would have hobbled its operations, according to the former O.M.B. senior staffer. The staffer added that it was often hard to reconcile Vought's deeply held Christian faith—he hosted a prayer session for select colleagues—with his eagerness to cut programs that helped the vulnerable. "It always struck me as a strange thing," the person said. "There's compassion, but it only extends to certain people."

In 2018, Mark Paoletta, a former attorney in the George H. W. Bush White House, joined the O.M.B. as general counsel. Paoletta was best known for publicly defending Clarence Thomas, who, during his Supreme Court confirmation hearing, in 1991, was accused of sexual harassment by his former colleague Anita Hill. Paoletta had worked on Capitol Hill, then entered private practice, where he advised politicians under scrutiny by Congress. Paoletta and Vought quickly forged an alliance. The former O.M.B. branch chief told me that the office's culture changed after Paoletta arrived. "There was a shift that we were all deep state," he said. "They thought we were pushing back because we had our own leftist-leaning agenda." (Paoletta declined to comment.)

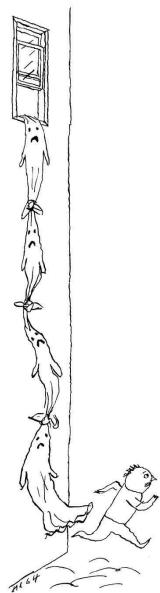
It was Vought's idea to use an obscure budgetary maneuver called a rescission to claw back funds that Congress had already appropriated, according to Paoletta's remarks at the conservative policy summit. In 2018, at Vought's urging, Trump sent Congress the largest rescission request in decades, asking lawmakers to roll back more than fifteen billion dollars,

including money for U.S.A.I.D.'s Ebola response, the Children's Health Insurance Program, and an Energy Department loan program for auto manufacturing. O.M.B. employees "looked at us like we were crazy," Paoletta said. "They just thought it was something they didn't do." Once again, Vought's own party thwarted him: the measure failed by a single vote in the Republican-held Senate.

Vought also encountered resistance inside the White House. When Congress refused to give Trump billions in funding to construct new border fencing, Vought and Paoletta devised a novel strategy. Trump could declare a national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border, giving him the authority to seize money from other parts of the government. According to Paoletta, John Kelly, the President's chief of staff, kept the plan from Trump. Paoletta said that Kelly's message to the O.M.B. was "We don't want to tell the President he has that authority, because God knows what he'll do."

Eventually, Trump badgered Mulvaney, the O.M.B. director, to find him the money for his wall. Mulvaney told the President that he'd been trying to meet with him about the issue, but that Kelly had blocked him. Within days, Trump replaced Kelly with Mulvaney. Vought took over as the acting director of the O.M.B., and money from the Defense Department was tapped to fund the wall. (Kelly did not respond to requests for comment.)

MAN ESCAPES  
HAUNTED HOUSE



*Cartoon by Roland High*

Under Vought, the O.M.B. produced budgets that called for more cuts than any in modern history. Congress all but ignored them. A former staffer in the O.M.B.’s legislative-affairs office recalled that Republicans didn’t believe Trump cared about the sweeping reductions included in his own annual budgets. “They kept saying, ‘The President’s not really pushing this or that cut—that’s a Russ Vought thing, isn’t it?’ ” the legislative-affairs staffer said.

In July, 2019, Trump asked the O.M.B. to freeze hundreds of millions of dollars in security assistance to the government of Ukraine. The request coincided with a phone call Trump had with President Volodymyr Zelensky in which Trump pressured him to investigate Biden and Biden’s son Hunter, who had served on the board of a Ukrainian energy company. The money for Ukraine had already been approved by Congress, but Vought agreed to hold back the funds. Paoletta signed off on a memo authorizing the freeze. Under the law, the move was known as an impoundment. (The Government Accountability Office, an independent nonpartisan agency, later deemed it illegal.)

Any fan of “Schoolhouse Rock!” knows that the first job assigned to Congress in the Constitution is the power of the purse. The President, meanwhile, must “take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,” according to Article II of the Constitution. Most legal scholars interpret this to mean that the President’s duty is to spend the money Congress appropriates, and that the President does not have the power to withhold funds. In 1969, William Rehnquist, the conservative future Supreme Court Chief Justice, wrote that the impoundment power was “supported by neither reason nor precedent.”

The question of impoundment’s legality came to a head in the nineteen-seventies, when President Richard Nixon withheld billions in congressionally approved funds for environmental-cleanup efforts. Courts undid Nixon’s actions, and Congress eventually passed the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, which outlawed the maneuver, leaving only narrow exceptions—rescissions—that required congressional sign-off. (Democrats are calling for restrictions on the rescission process as part of the current shutdown negotiations.) Over the years, the Impoundment Control Act would come to be viewed as sacrosanct at the O.M.B. That didn’t stop Vought. “I had been personally told, ‘Look, I want the money cut off until

we can figure out where it's going,' " Vought later said of the Ukraine funding in an interview with the conservative commentator Tucker Carlson. "It was like all hell broke loose within the bureaucracy."

The impoundment triggered congressional investigations and, ultimately, Trump's first impeachment. (Ukraine eventually received the money.) Vought refused to coöperate with investigators, calling the probe a "sham process that is designed to relitigate the last election." One of the impeachment articles named Vought, saying that the President had pressured him and others not to respond to subpoenas. Trump, for his part, continued to express support for impoundment, calling it the "secret weapon" that could tame the "bloated federal bureaucracy."

In early 2021, on one of the final days of Trump's first term, Vought visited him in the Oval Office. Both men felt a sense of unfinished business, Vought would later recall. Only a few months earlier, when Vought was sworn in as the O.M.B. director, Trump had told him that, after three and a half years as President, he had finally got the hang of the job. "Russ, we've got to get another term," Trump said. "We finally figured out how to do this."

Vought, frustrated by what he saw as years of obstruction by civil servants, had recently pushed through a new policy to vastly expand the number of at-will employees in the government, making them easier to fire. But the *COVID-19* pandemic had dashed any chance of leaving the government smaller than he'd found it. Trump had signed trillion-dollar stimulus bills to prop up the American economy; by the time he left office, the national debt had swelled by \$7.8 trillion. After the violence on January 6th, a second Trump term looked less likely than ever. Vought, however, had not given up hope.

In the Oval Office, he told Trump that he would soon launch a new political operation that would keep the *MAGA* movement alive while attacking the policies of the incoming Biden Administration. Trump blessed the venture, with one request. That summer, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, national protests had forced a racial reckoning in the country. Trump wanted Vought, who as O.M.B. director had scrubbed training materials for federal employees of any references to "white privilege" and "systemic racism," to find a way for conservatives to push back against the Black Lives Matter

movement. “This was an assignment I was given from President Trump,” Vought later recalled. “I’m the budget guy. If I can talk about race, you can talk about race.”

A few days after Trump left office, Vought announced the launch of the Center for Renewing America, a *MAGA* think tank that aspired to act as an incubator for future Republican Administrations. Its activist arm, Citizens for Renewing America, would mobilize grassroots supporters to pressure elected officials to embrace the think tank’s agenda. The overarching goal, Vought wrote in an op-ed for the *Federalist*, was to “restore an old consensus in America that has been forgotten, that we are a people For God, For Country, and For Community.”

At the Center for Renewing America, Vought surrounded himself with other radical constitutionalists from the first Trump Administration. He brought on Jeffrey Clark, the Justice Department official who had tried to use his agency to help Trump overturn the 2020 election. (A D.C. disciplinary board recently recommended that Clark, who now works at the O.M.B., lose his law license as punishment for those efforts, an outcome that Clark is appealing and that his lawyer called a “travesty of justice.”) Kash Patel, Trump’s current F.B.I. director, and Ken Cuccinelli, a top immigration official in the first Trump Administration, joined as senior fellows. Working at the center, Cuccinelli explained at the conservative policy summit, allowed him to “stake out the outer boundary of reasonable constitutional law.”

The Center for Renewing America’s ideas included how the President could invoke the Insurrection Act to deploy military troops to American cities to put down protests; how the White House could freeze billions in federal funding without waiting for a vote in Congress; and how agency leaders could defy government unions and fire workers en masse. The think tank also set out to create shadow versions of the O.M.B. and of the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel to anticipate legal challenges and counter internal pushback. In his 2024 address, Vought explained, “I don’t want President Trump having to lose a moment of time having fights in the Oval Office about whether something is legal or doable or moral.”

Vought and his colleagues at the center also worked closely with the House Freedom Caucus to urge other congressional Republicans to use government shutdowns as a way of forcing through major policy changes. One of their first targets was critical race theory, a once obscure academic concept that had become a flashpoint during the 2020 racial-justice protests. According to previously unreported recordings of briefings held by Citizens for Renewing America, Vought said that he had pressured members of the Freedom Caucus to yoke a ban on critical race theory to must-pass bills on raising the debt limit and funding the government. “We have to have a Speaker that goes into these funding fights with a love for the shutdowns,” Vought said during a November, 2022, briefing call, “because they create an opportunity to save the country.”

But Republicans never shut down the government during the Biden Presidency, and Vought grew increasingly frustrated with them for not using more aggressive tactics. On one briefing call, he praised Cori Bush, a progressive Democrat from Missouri, after she camped out for several days on the Capitol steps to protest the end of a pandemic-era moratorium on evictions. Vought called her politics “very, very bad,” but he admired her methods: “We need this from Republicans.”

The centerpiece of Vought’s work during the Biden years was his campaign to popularize the concept of “woke and weaponized” government. The tagline brought together two of Vought’s rallying cries: “woke” policies, like diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and transgender rights, and a “weaponized” F.B.I. and Justice Department that had allegedly been wielded against the Democrats’ political enemies, including, most notably, Trump. When the Center for Renewing America released a federal budget blueprint in late 2022, calling for nearly nine trillion dollars in cuts in the course of ten years, the word “woke” appeared seventy-seven times across a hundred and three pages.

Jessica Riedl, a budget expert who works for the conservative Manhattan Institute, told me that it was “just silly” to claim, as the Center for Renewing America’s budget did, that Veterans Affairs, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and farm subsidies required enormous cuts for being too woke. “It’s a way to dress up spending cuts that aren’t popular on their own merits,” Riedl said. Vought described his framing as an attempt to

“change paradigms.” “We have to be able to defund agencies,” he said in the private speech in 2023. “That is why these things have to be indelibly linked, and that is why we are focussing so much on ‘woke and weaponized.’”

Any hope that Vought had of implementing his ideas in a second Trump Administration nearly ran aground last summer. He had written a chapter of Project 2025’s eight-hundred-and-eighty-seven-page report, arguing for an expansion of executive power that would put the Justice Department and other traditionally independent agencies fully under Presidential control. Center for Renewing America fellows had written two more chapters in the report. But, as Election Day neared, Project 2025 became a liability for the Trump campaign. Polls showed that a majority of Americans opposed its most aggressive proposals, including removing the abortion drug mifepristone from the market, eliminating the Department of Education, and implementing Vought’s plan to more easily fire nonpolitical federal workers. As criticism of Project 2025 grew, Trump insisted that he knew “nothing” about it, while also claiming that “some of the things they’re saying are absolutely ridiculous and abysmal.”

The month before the election, *Politico* reported that Donald Trump, Jr., had compiled a list of people who would not be allowed to serve in a second Trump Administration, including a number of leading contributors to Project 2025. But, according to a former Trump campaign official with close ties to the White House, Vought deftly navigated the controversy. “Russ is a consummate team player,” the official told me. “He was the one person at Project 2025 that we could have a conversation with during the course of the campaign.”

A week after Trump’s victory, the President-elect announced his plans for the Department of Government Efficiency. “It will become, potentially, ‘The Manhattan Project’ of our time,” Trump said in a statement. He tapped two of his biggest backers to run it: Elon Musk, who had donated nearly three hundred million dollars to help elect Trump and other Republicans, and the biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who briefly ran for President on an anti-woke platform. Two days after the announcement, Vought met with Musk and Ramaswamy at Mar-a-Lago. Vought and Musk “hit it off,” according to the *Times*; both were “on the same wavelength in terms of

taking the most extreme action possible.” Soon after the meeting, Trump nominated Vought to run the O.M.B.

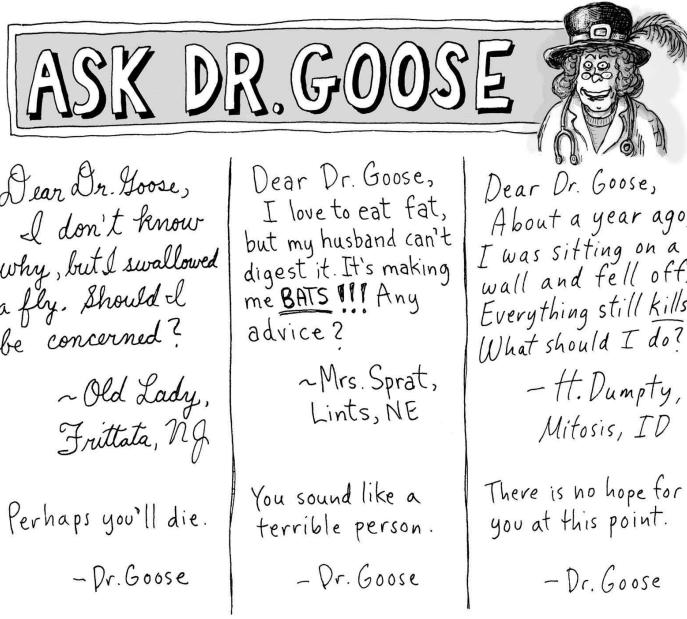
One of *DOGE*’s first targets was the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. The C.F.P.B. had first been proposed by Senator Elizabeth Warren, who, as a law professor, argued for the creation of a regulator that could protect Americans from predatory mortgages and hidden fees. Created by law in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the bureau developed a reputation as an aggressive enforcer of fair-lending and consumer-protection laws. The bureau’s work has led to nearly twenty billion dollars in direct relief to consumers and five billion dollars in civil penalties for alleged wrongdoing. For Vought, the bureau embodied the gross regulatory overreach that he loathed; outside of government, the agency’s biggest foes, Wall Street and Silicon Valley, were major funders of Trump’s second campaign.

On February 7th, Trump named Vought the bureau’s acting director, a role he would perform on top of his duties at the O.M.B. That morning, a small team of *DOGE* staffers arrived at the C.F.P.B.’s headquarters. According to previously unreported e-mails and depositions, the members of *DOGE* took orders from Vought as they disabled the C.F.P.B.’s website and decided which of the agency’s employees to fire. Musk weighed in on X: “CFPB RIP.”

Trump had targeted the C.F.P.B. during his first term. “There were days in Trump One where it felt like we were getting punched in the face,” one longtime employee told me. Over time, however, the President seemed to lose interest, and the C.F.P.B.’s last director under Trump, a political appointee named Kathy Kraninger, supported the bureau’s mission. In 2020, under Kraninger, the C.F.P.B. filed the second-highest number of enforcement actions in its nearly ten-year existence.

Current and former C.F.P.B. staff told me that they assumed a second Trump Administration would look like the first one. “Generally, we thought there would be a conservative agenda we’d be handed, and we’d figure out how to enact it,” the veteran employee said. Soon after taking over, Vought informed Jerome Powell, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, which funds the C.F.P.B., that the agency would not need any more money. He barred C.F.P.B. employees from doing most types of work and told them not to go

to the office. When confusion arose over what duties, if any, remained for the staff to do, Vought clarified the matter in a February 10th e-mail, telling employees to “stand down from performing any work task.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In the following weeks, Vought and Paoletta stopped oversight activities, quashed ongoing investigations, and froze active enforcement cases, which included matters involving some of the largest banks in the nation, such as JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, and Capital One. Rohit Chopra, the bureau’s director under Biden, said that Vought’s actions had put the C.F.P.B. “in a coma.” The bureau’s top enforcement officer resigned in June, writing in a letter to colleagues that the C.F.P.B.’s leadership “has no intention to enforce the law in any meaningful way.”

The final blow came when Vought announced a plan to lay off more than eighty per cent of the C.F.P.B.’s employees. A federal appeals court ruled in August that the mass-firing plan could proceed. It took Vought four months to accomplish what the previous Trump Administration had been unable to do in four years.

The unwinding of the C.F.P.B., however, was quickly overshadowed by another Vought victory. That same month, he completed his assault on foreign aid. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who had been running what

was left of U.S.A.I.D., announced that, with Trump's approval, he had empowered Vought to officially eliminate the agency. "Russ is now at the helm to oversee the closeout of an agency that long ago went off the rails," Rubio announced. "Congrats, Russ."

Four months before the 2024 election, the Center for Renewing America had welcomed a small group of congressional staffers to its headquarters, a few blocks from the Capitol. Some of them worked for the House and Senate Budget Committees, which every year help set spending levels for the federal government. The purpose of the meeting was to brief the staffers on the center's latest policy fight—an attempt to build the case for the use of impoundment.

At the briefing, Paoletta argued that the Impoundment Control Act was unconstitutional. Spending laws passed by Congress were a ceiling, not a floor, Paoletta argued, according to a person in the room. In that view—which most legal experts dismiss as a fringe position—the White House is not permitted to spend more than a law calls for, but it has the power to spend far less. "Congress passes statutes episodically, and often with conflicting purposes and demands," Paoletta later wrote in an essay for the Center for Renewing America. "It is left to the President and his subordinates to harmonize their execution in a coherent manner."

According to Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee, the Trump Administration has since frozen or cancelled more than four hundred and ten billion dollars in funding on everything from energy subsidies for low-income households and Head Start after-school programs to President George W. Bush's H.I.V.-reduction initiative, *PEPFAR*, and artists' grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Vought directed the National Institutes of Health to withhold—illegally, according to the Government Accountability Office—an estimated fifteen billion dollars in grants for outside research projects. The N.I.H. also moved to cap funding for so-called indirect costs, which research universities rely on to pay for their buildings, utilities, and administrative staff. Scientists I interviewed said that these cuts would inevitably lead to less medical research, including into a drug that Vought's ex-wife credited with improving the life of their eleven-year-old daughter, who was born with cystic fibrosis. A scientist who receives government funding to study cystic-fibrosis treatment told me that,

without sufficient money for indirect costs, “we probably won’t be able to do the research and will have to relinquish the grants.”

The O.M.B. claims that it is vetting federal spending to insure that the money does not fund “woke” programs. “We can confirm that President Trump and Director Vought are carefully scrutinizing spending that has previously run on autopilot or worse—toward transing our kids, the Green New Scam, and funding our own country’s invasion—just as the president promised,” an O.M.B. spokesperson told the *Times* in August. But blocking funds is also a way to pressure officials and agencies to comply with the Administration’s demands. “O.M.B. is like a giant funnel that everything has to go through in order to happen,” Lester Cash, a former O.M.B. employee, told me. “You can get agencies to agree to things just to get the funnel to open back up.”

In March, the O.M.B. took down a legally mandated public website that made it possible to track the funding freezes. The move elicited a rare show of bipartisanship. In a letter to Vought, the Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees urged him to “restore public access to apportionment data in accordance with statute.” Vought said the information listed on the site was “predecisional” and a risk to national security. The O.M.B. restored the site only when a judge ruled that taking it down was illegal, saying that the government’s position relied “on an extravagant and unsupported theory of presidential power.”

The O.M.B.’s funding freezes have wreaked havoc. On June 30th, the Department of Education told state agencies that congressional appropriations for after-school activities and English-as-a-second-language instruction would not arrive the next day, as planned. The unexpected shortfall affected thousands of school districts, which served millions of students, in all fifty states. The Administration only backed down after both Democrats and Republicans criticized the move. “When something’s been appropriated, signed into law, and people are writing contracts based on the commitment of the federal government, and then they don’t know if they’re going to get it or not, it creates such chaos,” Don Bacon, a Republican House member from Nebraska, told me. “I’m not sure what the O.M.B. director thought he was doing.” (A spokesperson for Vought at the O.M.B. would not comment on the record in response to a detailed list of questions.)

In June, Trump sent a rescission request to Congress, seeking to cancel roughly nine billion dollars in funding for foreign aid and for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which supports NPR, PBS, and other public radio and TV stations nationwide. The programs were viewed, the senior agency official told me, as “soft targets,” a test to see if Vought could persuade Republicans to put aside their concerns about undermining Congress’s power of the purse. Unlike in Trump’s first term, Vought’s rescission plan succeeded. The measure, which faced opposition from Democrats and a few Republicans, passed after Vice-President J. D. Vance cast two tie-breaking procedural votes. Jeff Merkley, the top Democrat on the Senate Budget Committee, told me, “You’ve basically said to Congress, ‘Hey, compromise all you want, but we’re going to undo that in the way we want as soon as you’ve signed the bill.’ ”

On the Friday before Labor Day, Vought made his most audacious move yet. The White House sent Congress a new rescissions package, targeting nearly five billion dollars in foreign aid. But this time Vought informed lawmakers that he didn’t need their approval. He asserted that the President could make the request, putting a temporary freeze on the funds, then simply wait for the fiscal year to expire, on September 30th, at which point the money would be cancelled out. Vought called it a “pocket rescission,” but it was impoundment by another name. Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee, said it was a “clear violation of the law.”

The Government Accountability Office can sue the O.M.B. over an impoundment or pocket rescission to get the money released. In April, Gene Dodaro, who leads the Government Accountability Office, testified that his office had opened thirty-nine investigations into potential violations of the Impoundment Control Act by the Trump Administration. The O.M.B. has responded by attacking Dodaro’s agency. In one letter, Paoletta said that the O.M.B. would coöperate with the Government Accountability Office only if its demands didn’t get in the way of Trump’s agenda. In another letter, Paoletta told the Department of Transportation to ignore a Government Accountability Office ruling that found that the O.M.B. had illegally impounded money for electric-car development. Vought, for his part, has flatly declared that the Government Accountability Office “shouldn’t exist.”

Vought's actions could provoke a challenge to the Impoundment Control Act in the Supreme Court. In the meantime, a number of current and former government employees told me that they worried about the long-term consequences of what he has already done: the terminating of vital research projects that could have led to life-saving breakthroughs; the nation's lost standing as an international leader; the uncertainty cast over the fundamental workings of government. "They've given up on the idea that they need to persuade anybody," Bagenstos, the former general counsel at the O.M.B., said of Vought and Paoletta. They're "just going to use brute force and dominance." As the former O.M.B. analyst told me, "They've dropped a grenade into the system."

The government shutdown has illustrated, in the starker terms, Vought's expansive theory of executive power and his willingness to ignore Congress. On October 2nd, Trump posted on Truth Social that he would meet with Vought to decide which "Democrat Agencies" to cut on a temporary or permanent basis. A few days later, the O.M.B. released a memo claiming that, seemingly in defiance of a 2019 law, furloughed federal employees were not guaranteed back pay following a shutdown. Then, on October 10th, Vought announced that his campaign of mass firings across the bureaucracy had begun. So far, more than four thousand employees have been laid off, disrupting government services devoted to, among other things, cybersecurity efforts, special-education programs, substance-abuse treatment, and loans for small businesses. A federal judge put a temporary stop to the cuts, but that same day Vought predicted that the total number of firings would be "north of ten thousand." As one official texted me, "Trauma achieved." ♦

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By [Ed Caesar](#)

The Burj Al Arab, which opened in Dubai in 1999, has often been called the world's only seven-star hotel. The rating is unofficial—hotels are generally ranked from one to five stars—but it befits the de-trop vibe. The building, which was constructed by an army of migrant workers, is shaped like a billowing spinnaker and rises on a man-made island off the coast. Half an acre of gilt adorns its interior. There's a restaurant surrounded by an aquarium—a portion of beluga caviar costs seven hundred dollars—and a helipad upon which Roger Federer once played tennis against Andre Agassi.

In May, 2017, Daniel Kinahan and Caoimhe Robinson, both Dubliners, were married at the hotel. The groom—short and burly, with thinning dark hair and eyes like coal—was weeks from his fortieth birthday. The bride was in her mid-thirties, with bottle-blond hair and ice-white teeth. One can assume that the toasts skipped lightly over the newlyweds' previous relationships. Robinson's former partner Micka (the Panda) Kelly was murdered in 2011, in Dublin, by an assassin, who shot him fourteen times before reversing a car over his body.

Underneath a giant chandelier in the ballroom of the Burj Al Arab, the couple sat on thrones, surrounded by a colorful crowd of family, friends, and business associates. One of the revellers was Tyson Fury, the six-foot-nine former heavyweight champion of the world. He has sometimes worked with Kinahan—a boxing impresario who is also known, to law-enforcement officials, as the head of the Kinahan Organized Crime Group. (Although social media was banned at the wedding, Fury reportedly tweeted about his attendance before deleting the post.) Other guests included some of the most powerful cocaine traffickers alive. Among them were Ridouan Taghi, a Moroccan Dutch man responsible for several murders in the Netherlands; Edin Gačanin, a Bosnian Dutch man who led the Tito and Dino cartel; Ricardo (El Rico) Riquelme Vega, a major Chilean drug importer; and Raffaele Imperiale, a debonair Italian linked to the Camorra. Shortly before the wedding, Italian police found two stolen van Goghs—“View of the Sea at Scheveningen” and “Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen”—at the home of Imperiale's parents, near Naples.

When major criminals gather in the same room, cops tend to pay attention. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration had long been interested in

Kinahan. One of the agency's informants attended the wedding, as a guest. This person mapped out the constellation of gangsters at the ceremony, and provided a video of the event to American agents. The surveillance helped investigators ascertain that these men, most of whom lived in Dubai, were working together to launder money and smuggle cocaine from South America to Europe. The D.E.A. shared its intelligence with international agencies. Soon, journalists and police in Europe began calling the group the Super Cartel. Europol analysts estimated that the network controlled a third of Europe's cocaine trade, which was worth as much as twenty billion dollars a year. An Garda Síochána, the Irish police force, recently estimated the Kinahans' wealth to be about a billion dollars.

Most of the Super Cartel's top members have since been brought to justice. Taghi was arrested in Dubai in 2019 and deported to the Netherlands, whose ports have become drug-trafficking hubs. He stood trial and was sentenced to life in prison, in a courthouse so heavily fortified that it is known as the Bunker. (Despite the security precautions, the brother and the lawyer of a state's witness, as well as the Dutch crime journalist Peter R. de Vries, were murdered during the proceedings.) Gačanin was arrested in Dubai in 2022, as part of a transnational effort known as Operation Desert Light. The next year, he was convicted by a Dutch court; Gačanin later made a deal with prosecutors in which he was sentenced to seven years in prison and forced to pay a million-euro fine. Riquelme is also imprisoned in the Netherlands; he was sentenced to eleven years. Imperiale was apprehended in 2021 and later deported to Italy, where he is now incarcerated.

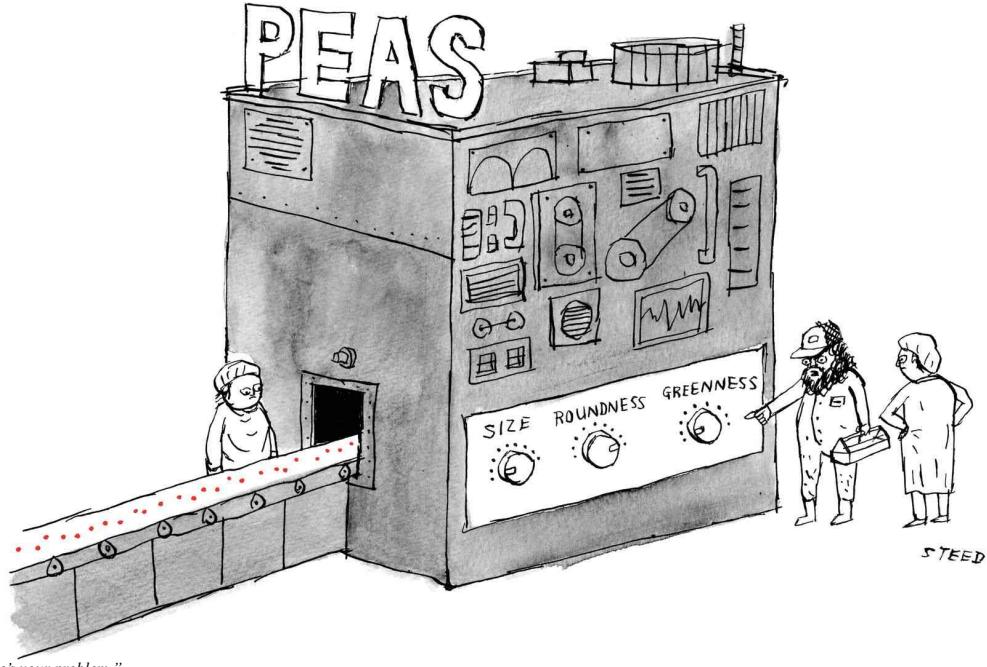
But Kinahan—who, through his lawyer, declined to comment for this article—remains at large in Dubai. In April, 2022, the Kinahan Organized Crime Group was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which compared the group to “Mexico's Los Zetas, Japan's Yakuza and Russia's ‘Thieves In Law.’” The U.S. Ambassador to Ireland announced that a five-million-dollar reward would be given for tips leading to the arrest of Kinahan; his father, Christy Kinahan, Sr.; or his brother, Christy Kinahan, Jr. But, according to a former D.E.A. agent, American law enforcement cared about only one Kinahan. As the agent put it, “It's all about Dan.”

Portlaoise Prison, which is in the center of Ireland, is a nineteenth-century penitentiary built like a fortress—a one-star establishment, at best. In 1997, twenty years before the Dubai wedding, Christy Kinahan, Sr., was imprisoned in a rodent-infested block called the E Wing. Inmates slept one to a cell and urinated in buckets.

Kinahan, Sr., grew up in a middle-class family in Dublin. He became involved in petty crime at a young age, initially check fraud. Well-dressed, and able to affect a refined Anglo-Irish accent, Kinahan, Sr., was an adept con man. All criminals love nicknames, but the Irish do them best: the Penguin, the Viper, Fatso. Kinahan, Sr., became the Dapper Don.

In the late seventies, heroin began ravaging Dublin's inner-city projects. A man named Larry Dunne was the city's first godfather of heroin importers, but he was jailed in 1985. Kinahan, Sr., seeing a business opportunity, filled the gap. A sharp young detective, Michael O'Sullivan, noticed him. "There was somebody new in the market, and it just didn't fit," O'Sullivan told me. "Often, people in the heroin business get messy. They know the heroin trade because they *use* heroin." But, in O'Sullivan's opinion, Kinahan, Sr., wasn't a dope fiend, and he ran an efficient business.

One day in 1986, O'Sullivan disguised himself as an electrician and followed Kinahan, Sr., to his apartment, where he caught him with a large quantity of heroin. The police later found other contraband, as well as various language-studies cassettes—Kinahan, Sr., was teaching himself French and Arabic. He was convicted of heroin possession, jailed for six years, and released in 1992. Months later, he was caught with stolen checks. The arresting officer told me that Kinahan, Sr., was an "impressive, kind of intelligent guy—no aggression." After the arrest, Kinahan, Sr., was granted bail, then vanished.



"Here's your problem."  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

By the mid-nineties, Irish organized crime had outgrown the country's policing capacity. Drugs were pouring in; kidnappings and bank jobs were being perpetrated with seeming impunity. In 1996, a crime journalist, Veronica Guerin, was shot dead by a member of a gang that she'd covered, the Gilligans. The public outrage that followed led the Irish government to establish the Criminal Assets Bureau, which allowed lawmakers to seize money and property from convicted criminals.

The formation of the bureau, however, had an unintended consequence: it turned some Irish criminals into international potentates. Many Dublin mobsters moved to Amsterdam, which at the time was not unlike the cantina in "Star Wars": a place where an assortment of major villains could freely hang out, exchange contacts, and collaborate. Kinahan, Sr., became one such expat. Another was John Cunningham, who'd been jailed, in 1986, on a kidnapping charge; he'd escaped from a prison south of Dublin in 1996. Cunningham and Kinahan, Sr., began working together, transporting heroin, cannabis, cocaine, Ecstasy, and guns to Ireland. During the same period, the Dutch police caught Kinahan, Sr., with a cache of drugs and weapons, and imprisoned him for a year. Upon serving his sentence, he went back to work. In 1997, Kinahan, Sr., returned to Ireland to attend his father's funeral,

where he was arrested for the check fraud that had led him to skip bail four years earlier. He wound up in Portlaoise.

David McDonald was a prison guard on the E Wing when Kinahan, Sr., arrived. He remembers an inmate unlike any other he has encountered. Kinahan, Sr., then forty years old, dressed smartly, in slacks and a buttoned shirt; he rarely socialized or exercised with other prisoners, and was never caught with alcohol or drugs. If a riot broke out, he stayed in his cell. When he did interact with other prisoners, he played the role of consultant: people came to him about legal issues, even though he had no formal training. Meanwhile, Kinahan, Sr., took Open University courses in Spanish, Russian, and Dutch. It was McDonald's job to provide him with his educational materials.

"This guy had a plan from Day One," McDonald recalled. "I don't admire him at all, but I have to sort of take my hat off to him." The only contraband ever found in Kinahan, Sr.,'s possession was a cellphone—the first one that McDonald can recall being smuggled into Portlaoise. In 2001, Kinahan, Sr., was offered early release, for good behavior, but he refused it because he was two months away from finishing one of his Open University courses. He felt that he'd focus better on his studies if he remained inside. Only after finishing the class did he leave. "I'd never, ever heard of any prisoner refusing early release," McDonald said, laughing.

O'Sullivan, the detective, told me that Kinahan, Sr., was "a very strategic mercenary" who "learns from his mistakes" and is "cold and calculating." McDonald was similarly struck by Kinahan, Sr.,'s froideur. "You wouldn't crack a smile out of him," he said. "He's not what you'd call a nice guy. Most prisoners, if you get to know them somewhat, you can have a bit of a laugh with them about something—Man United, whatever it might be. But not him."

The Kinahan brothers are the sons of a woman named Jean Boylan, who once worked as a cleaner in south inner-city Dublin. She and Kinahan, Sr., split up when the children were young; the boys stayed with their mother. Boylan was never involved in crime, except for a regular cleaning job at the local police station. A detective who worked in the building said that, though everyone knew about her family connections, she was well liked.

Boylan lived in the Oliver Bond flats, a drab, mold-ridden housing project near the Guinness factory. Crime has long flourished there. In a recent narcotics trial in Dublin, the housing project was described as “obviously a good place to sell drugs.” Boylan didn’t want her boys to enter their father’s profession. They felt his pull anyway. As Kinahan, Sr., was establishing himself in the Netherlands, Daniel was in his late teens. According to several sources, he began running drugs in Dublin for his dad’s group.

Noel Browne recently retired as a detective inspector and a senior investigations officer with An Garda Síochána. He never met Daniel Kinahan during those years of underworld apprenticeship, but he frequently interviewed people who knew him well. Browne came to think of Daniel as a peacock with nepo-baby vanities. “His associates would say, ‘Yeah, he’s an arrogant fuck,’ ” Browne told me recently. “He had a whole bunch of hoodlums around him. He would always have the best clobber”—clothes. “On one level, he had a superiority complex. But he also felt that his peers in the criminal networks would see him as somebody that got it easy, that didn’t have to come up the hard way. Every so often, Daniel would get paranoid and try to establish his authority.”

Whereas Daniel was pugnacious, Christy, Jr., who was three years younger, was a quieter type. He was being groomed for a more academic duty in his father’s organization: money laundering. In “The Cartel,” a 2017 book about the Kinahans by Stephen Breen and Owen Conlon, the authors write that the Irish police occasionally searched Jean Boylan’s apartment, and that “Daniel would make a point of seeking confrontation” while “Christopher, Jr., would be courteous.”

The boys understood the division of labor implicitly. One evening, according to Breen and Conlon, Daniel advised his brother to watch a TV documentary about money laundering, to brush up on his skills. Daniel, meanwhile, forged ties with other criminal groups in Dublin—in particular, the Hutes, who ruled the projects of the north inner city.

After being released from Portlaoise, in 2001, Kinahan, Sr., moved his base to the Costa del Sol, in Spain, which had become the favored spot for the old Amsterdam coterie. According to Nicola Tallant, an Irish journalist and the host of the podcast “Crime World,” who has covered the Kinahans for

decades, “you absolutely had to have a footprint on the Costa” if you wanted to be considered a serious organized-crime group in Europe. Spain was ideally situated for the Kinahans’ cannabis trade, which imported its product from Morocco. More important, there were networking opportunities. “On the Costa, it is business *and* pleasure,” Tallant told me. “A melting pot of mafias . . . from all over Europe. Both Mexicans and Colombians also have their representatives there, vying for business partners.”

The Kinahan sons soon followed their father to the sunshine, and they ran their business mostly undisturbed by Spanish law enforcement. The British police, however, were given an indication of Daniel’s ruthlessness. He had become involved in a betting syndicate in which people wagered large sums on horse races in the U.K. Often, the bettors would be “laying” horses: staking money on them to lose. On May 15, 2004, the champion jockey Kieren Fallon won the Lockinge Stakes while riding the favored filly, Russian Rhythm. Evidently, the result displeased Kinahan’s syndicate, which seemed to have expected the horse to lose. On May 26th, Daniel flew from Spain to England and met up with three other members of the betting syndicate. At 1 a.m., they drove to Fallon’s home to confront him. Suddenly, they realized that they were being surveilled by an unmarked police car. They turned back.

The police soon arrested the syndicate’s head, Miles Rodgers, along with several others, for being part of an alleged race-fixing ring. The ensuing court case fell apart because some expert evidence was flawed. In 2009, however, in a separate hearing, it was proved that some jockeys had submitted to pressure from Rodgers. (Fallon wasn’t among them; his win percentage actually rose during the suspicious period, costing the syndicate hundreds of thousands of dollars.) Rodgers was permanently banned from U.K. racetracks for “wholesale corruption.”

Kinahan wasn’t a defendant in that court case. Nevertheless, the process exposed evidence that pertained to him. Intercepted phone calls were played to the jury, including one in which Rodgers said that he’d met many “menacing” people in his life, but nobody as frightening as Kinahan. He was, Rodgers said, “only a little fella—but you know when you’ve been spoken to.”

In the twenty-first century, Europe's cocaine market has expanded dramatically, far outrunning those for heroin and synthetic drugs. A 2021 paper by the think tank InSight Crime showed that this boom was generated in part by Colombian cartels, whose supply routes into North America had been taken over by Mexican organizations. For the Colombians, Europe represented a fertile and relatively untapped user base, and they began making connections with crime groups across the Atlantic.

Michael O'Sullivan, the detective who arrested Kinahan, Sr., for heroin possession in the eighties, said that the Kinahans sensed this market shift early. In 1982, O'Sullivan made Ireland's largest single seizure of cocaine up to that point: a hundred and ten grams. Two decades later, the drug was entering Irish ports by the ton. O'Sullivan said, of this era, "All of the criminals are buying coke, coke is king, while the economy in Europe, and in Ireland, is improving." Unlike heroin, "coke went through all strata of society—people were building *empires* on coke."

In Spain, the Kinahans' enterprise grew large enough that governments finally began paying attention. In 2009, Daniel was named in a diplomatic cable sent from the U.S. Embassy in Sierra Leone, which was later published by WikiLeaks. He was described as "an Irish businessman involved in narcotrafficking throughout Europe." The cable suggested that he might be "expanding his network to West Africa."

As the business grew, Kinahan, Sr., professionalized his troops. The group paid for anti-surveillance training for its members. Spanish police files indicate that the Kinahans also gave instruction on hostage situations, target shooting, and martial arts. In "The Cartel," the authors note that a Spanish team who listened in on such war games struggled to parse the Kinahans' inner-city accents. In their transcripts, "first aid" is written as "forced aid."

Among the problems that come with expanding a narcotics business is determining how to hide the proceeds. The drug trade remains, for the most part, a cash enterprise. By a conservative estimate, the Kinahans were turning over tens of millions of dollars annually. Pablo Escobar is said to have buried his mountains of banknotes in the ground, but Kinahan, Sr., put his money to work. He set up dozens of legitimate companies—in real estate, automobiles, the food-export sector—to absorb the excess of cash

with which his organization was laden. He bought properties in Belgium, where he also lived for stretches of time, and registered companies in Cyprus. Some of the Kinahans' businesses had a dual role: according to an E.U.-funded Transcrime report, a food import-export company based in Ireland was used to import drugs from Spain.

The Spanish police had done little to rein in the Kinahans. An Irish police source told me that his Spanish counterparts had scant interest in the Kinahans, or in any other Irish crime group operating in Spain. The officer summarized their view: "We have every sort of mafia here, and the Irish guys keep their head down."

But violence is unignorable. In 2008, Paddy Doyle, a muscle-bound gun for hire who'd recently been working with the Kinahans, was assassinated in the Spanish town of Estepona. Doyle was riding in a BMW being driven by Gary Hutch—a nephew of the Hutch gang's patriarch, Gerry—when a gunman fired several shots into the car, causing a crash. Doyle was then executed, at point-blank range. Hutch escaped unharmed. Newspapers reported that Doyle died because of a disagreement with Russian gangsters. But, according to Spanish police files, Doyle's murder was ordered by the Kinahans, who thought that he had crossed them; more chillingly, it was rumored that Gary Hutch had set him up to be killed, as a show of loyalty to the Kinahans. (Hutch was nevertheless a pallbearer at Doyle's funeral.)



*"Is anyone else getting curious about what our enemies might be up to?"*  
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Doyle's murder became a catalyst for Operation Shovel, a sweeping investigation of the Kinahans in which Spanish law enforcement collaborated with several international police forces. In May, 2010, in a series of dawn raids in Spain, Ireland, and the U.K., Kinahan, Sr., his two sons, and more than thirty other alleged gang associates were arrested. In a BBC documentary, one of the Spanish officers who arrested Daniel said of him, "He was a little uncoöperative. . . . Not a nice person at all." Kinahan, Sr., however, politely told officers that it had been unnecessary to break down his door—if they'd rung his bell, he would have welcomed them in.

A hundred and eighty bank accounts associated with the group were frozen, and dozens of properties on the Costa del Sol, among other assets, were seized. The police had found evidence not only of a network ferrying cocaine from South America to European ports but also of a sophisticated money-laundering organization worth hundreds of millions of euros—an enterprise rivalling the narcotics business in its size. The Kinahans, they said, were also offering laundering services to other criminals, for substantial fees.

The agencies behind Operation Shovel were triumphant. The head of the U.K.'s Serious Organised Crime Agency said that the operation had dealt the

group “a major blow.” Dermot Ahern, Ireland’s justice minister, declared, “No border will protect those involved in organized crime.”

The Kinahans soon tested the strength of that assertion. Following the 2010 arrests, Kinahan, Sr., his sons, and their closest associates were held for only a few months before they were released without charges. Some minor players in the organization were punished for passport fraud or illegal gun possession. But the Spanish police, despite having surveilled the group for two years, hadn’t garnered enough direct evidence of drug trafficking by the Kinahans to proceed to trial.

Still, Operation Shovel marked a turning point for the Kinahans. After the arrests, power shifted toward Daniel. For one thing, his father was extradited to Belgium, where he faced money-laundering charges. (He’d failed to show the Belgian authorities legitimate sources of income, even though he had bought a casino and other costly ventures there.) Kinahan, Sr., served a two-year sentence in Belgium, and the government confiscated property worth two and a half million euros. Meanwhile, Daniel built the network of criminals—most of them Dutch residents—that became the Super Cartel.

Chris Urben investigated European drug cartels for the D.E.A. from 2012 until his retirement, in 2022. He said that the agency viewed the Kinahan crime group as unusually “difficult to penetrate.” Normally, within a network that is operating between South America and Europe, there are weak points: someone to wiretap, or to cultivate as a source. But after Operation Shovel the Kinahans learned to be very careful about how they communicated with one another. They switched to private encrypted phone networks, and—as the Spanish police would soon learn—they were brutal with informants.

Despite these obstacles, Urben told me, “there was certainly an effort to insert a source that could develop evidence for us.” Eventually, some intelligence seeped out. The Kinahans and the other Super Cartel members were forming joint-investment partnerships on cocaine shipments to European ports. By sharing profits, the Kinahans mitigated their risk if shipments were seized. “It was only a few groups that would come together in that way,” Urben said. The most successful narco-traffickers, he noted, were those who learned to collaborate.

As the Kinahans' business expanded, they sought new ways to launder cash. One outlet was Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Lebanese militia. By then, Hezbollah had entered the cocaine trade, especially in the Netherlands, whose vast port in Rotterdam, with its endless shipping containers, offered a reliable way to sneak drugs into Europe.

Jack Kelly was a D.E.A. agent during this period, and he focussed on the relationship between Iran proxies, such as Hezbollah, and organized crime. "Hezbollah was really good at two things—transport logistics and money-laundering mechanisms," he said. "If you wanted a guaranteed amount of money laundered back to Latin America, you'd go through Hezbollah."

Kelly said that the Kinahans often worked with a powerful Hezbollah operative whom he called the Ghost. (The operative was connected to the Kinahans through a Dutch criminal named, unimprovably, Mink Kok.) According to Kelly, the relationship between the Ghost and the Kinahans became close enough that, in 2015, the Irish group did Hezbollah a favor: it arranged the assassination of a fifty-six-year-old Iranian electrician living under a false identity in Almere, a sleepy town in the Netherlands. The regime in Tehran believed that, in 1981, the electrician, Mohammad Reza Kolahi—then a student and a member of an Iranian dissident group—had planted a bomb at the Islamic Republican Party's headquarters, killing seventy-three people. He fled the country, but was sentenced to death in absentia.

The Kinahan link to the murder wasn't immediately obvious. But, a few months after Kolahi was killed, Irish police executed a search warrant on a Dublin apartment linked with the Kinahan gang. There, they found a corpulent Dutch Moroccan gangster, Naoufal (the Belly) Fassih, who spoke broken English, carried two fake I.D.s, and wore a watch worth tens of thousands of dollars.

Various e-mails sent by Fassih from Dublin were later decrypted by the Dutch police. In one, Fassih approached a gunman about killing Kolahi, saying, "Got a nice job for you." The price for Kolahi's head: a hundred and thirty thousand euros. Kelly told me that Hezbollah had asked the Kinahans to kill Kolahi, and that the Kinahans then outsourced the work to Fassih. Later, Fassih attended Daniel Kinahan's wedding.

As international as the Kinahans became, they couldn't escape their rivalrous Dublin roots. After Operation Shovel, the alliance between the Kinahans and the Hutes fractured. The reasons for the feud are somewhat opaque, but the Kinahans apparently suspected that Gary Hutch was an informant for the Spanish police. In 2014, graffiti appeared in Dublin saying "Gary Hutch U Rat." Gary's uncle Gerry organized a peace meeting between his nephew and Daniel Kinahan. Gary agreed to pay the Kinahans two hundred thousand euros to atone for various misdeeds, including a nonfatal shooting of a Kinahan associate. Gary's brother also submitted to a "punishment shooting," whereby he was shot in the leg. It wasn't enough. In September, 2015, Gary was assassinated outside his home in Marbella, Spain.

In recent years, Gerry Hutch has become a more public figure in Ireland. In 2024, he narrowly lost an election to become a member of the Dáil, the lower house of the Irish parliament. Although he declined to talk to me, he recently spoke about Gary's murder on a podcast, noting, "You're dealing with the Devil at this stage. . . . A blind man could see who done it."

The intramural fighting continued. On February 5, 2016, Daniel Kinahan and other senior members of his organization were in a ballroom at the Regency Hotel in Dublin, to observe the weigh-in for a boxing match. A group of men disguised as Gardaí burst in and started shooting AK-47s. Another gunman, Kevin (Flatcap) Murray, had made no attempt to hide his identity. Murray had a fatal motor-neuron disease, and had reportedly accepted the job in exchange for a shipping container's worth of cigarettes—twenty thousand packs. (His condition killed him eighteen months later.)

The police believe that Daniel Kinahan was the attack's intended target. He fled out a window, but a lieutenant, David Byrne, was killed. Noel Browne, the investigator with An Garda Síochána, told me, "It was a game changer, just like Veronica Guerin. Here's guys running around Dublin at two o'clock on a Friday afternoon, with fucking AK-47s, dressed up as a bogus *SWAT* team, like! This happens in Mexico or something."

The Kinahans' retaliation was swift. Eddie Hutch, Gerry's brother and Gary's uncle, was fatally shot at home three days after the Regency attack. In subsequent months, a dozen others believed to be related to the Hutch

gang were murdered. In August, 2016, Trevor O'Neill, a forty-one-year-old who worked for the Dublin City Council, and who had no connection to organized crime, was wrongly identified by the Kinahans as a Hutch associate. He was shot dead in front of his wife and children while vacationing in Majorca.

The Kinahans seemed to be acting out of pure rage. By 2016, Daniel was a high-status criminal, but, in Browne's view, he remained the same vindictive popinjay who'd come of age in the Oliver Bond flats, and his attitude toward the Huches was "They're all rats, and we're going to fucking kill them all."



*A photograph of Daniel Kinahan. His hat promotes a boxing gym that he opened in Marbella, Spain, before moving his operations to Dubai. Source: U.S. State Department*

Despite the bloodshed, Browne's unit had some notable successes. In 2017, the Gardaí received a tip that the Kinahans had hired Imre Arakas, an Estonian hit man known as the Butcher, to murder James Gately, a member of the Hutch gang who lived in Belfast. Irish police began following Arakas after he landed at the Dublin airport, and they soon arrested him at a Kinahan associate's house. A BlackBerry was next to him, and a police officer saw a series of texts between Arakas and three other handles: Knife, Bon 4, and Bon New. Knife was understood to be Sean McGovern, a Kinahan-gang deputy; both Bon 4 and Bon New were Daniel Kinahan himself. The group was communicating on a private server named secretblackmars.

In the texts, the group discussed plans to execute Gately. “Just one shot to the head from distance and that’s it,” Arakas wrote. Later in the exchange, Bon 4 suggested, “We have a tracker on his car, so my idea is . . . We tracks him live when he is heading back to his apt when he is 10 mins away he get in position and he parks in the same space always so then you have him.” Knowing that encrypted messages on a private network could be remotely wiped, an officer quickly took photographs of the BlackBerry’s screen. Sure enough, the messages began disappearing within minutes.

The Gardaí arrested dozens of Kinahan-gang members during the time of the Hutch feud. About eighty have since been convicted. But, though the police now had incriminating evidence about Daniel and other gang leaders, these men operated from both a technological and a geographic remove from the gory scenes on the Dublin streets. The Kinahans, like many other wealthy criminals, had moved to Dubai.

Daniel Kinahan, a keen amateur boxer, has always been in thrall to prizefighters. He met the middleweight Matthew Macklin in 2006, after Macklin narrowly lost a high-profile bout against Jamie Moore. Kinahan and Macklin—an Englishman with Irish parents—hit it off immediately, and Kinahan later told *Boxing Monthly* that Macklin was his “best friend.” In 2012, the men opened a gym in Marbella. The facility and an associated boxing-management business were initially called M.G.M., for Macklin’s Gym Marbella, but, after a dispute with the Las Vegas resort, the name was changed to M.T.K. Global. “M.T.K.” stood for Mack the Knife. (Macklin, who is now a boxing commentator for Sky Sports, declined to be interviewed.)

The gym was a genuine training space for fighters, and its roster grew quickly. It was also a safe place for members of the cartel to meet. Many boxers who joined M.T.K. have only positive things to say about Daniel Kinahan. He paid them much more than other managers did, and put them up in good accommodations. Some boxers who have never even been part of his stable have praised him publicly. In 2021, the English fighter Amir Khan tweeted, “i have huge respect for what he’s doing for boxing. We need people like Dan to keep the sport alive.” Other managers, however, are scathing about Kinahan, accusing him of using illicit wealth to poach fighters.

Although Kinahan clearly loves the sport, it also offered a way for him to launder his reputation. In February, 2017, M.T.K. Global announced that Kinahan had cut ties with the organization, but he continued advising fighters and making deals for major fights. Around the time the Kinahans moved to Dubai, M.T.K. Global opened a gym and an office there. The boxing and the criminal businesses were mostly siloed from each other, but there was some overlap. Kinahan once gave a visitor from the boxing world a tour of his offices, which occupied a whole floor of a tower next to the Burj Khalifa skyscraper. The office had separate areas for boxing, real estate, and “freight shipping.” (The shipping section had photographs of twenty-foot containers—the same kind in which cocaine is frequently smuggled.) Kinahan’s boxers were sometimes paid in cryptocurrency, which was a staple of the family’s money-laundering operation. Someone who worked closely with Kinahan around this time remembered Raffaele Imperiale and Ridouan Taghi—two other members of the Super Cartel—stopping by when the athletes ate breakfast together at Grosvenor House, a Dubai hotel. And Kinahan’s reputation wasn’t exactly a secret. He has a vocal tic in which he regularly seems to be seized by a phlegmy cough. A trainer in the gym joked to others, “It’s like he’s trying to get the murders out.”

When the U.S. sanctions were announced, M.T.K. Global shut down. But an Emirates-based company called Probellum began to represent many of M.T.K.’s former fighters. In 2022, a Pakistani politician who met Kinahan in Dubai got the impression that he ran Probellum, as one of the politician’s subsequent tweets indicated: “Met @probellum on aligning vision on boxing for Punjab & how to make this sport bigger for our youth. Looking forward to hosting Daniel in Lahore to discuss Pakistan’s first International fight with foreign world class boxers.” The tweet included three photographs of the politician with Kinahan. (Probellum denied being connected to Kinahan, but several months later it ceased operations.)

Observers of the sport note that Kinahan’s influence on boxing endures, through proxies. For instance, Anthony (Anto) Fitzpatrick, who co-founded the Marbella gym with Macklin and Kinahan, and was arrested during Operation Shovel, still manages boxers. Recently, Chantelle Cameron, a former light-welterweight champion, publicly thanked Fitzpatrick for his

management help. (Fitzpatrick lived rent free in a Dublin house owned by the Kinahans until 2019, when it was seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau.)

Kieran Cunningham, an Irish journalist, has questioned why Fitzpatrick is allowed to continue working in boxing. “It’s hard to think of any other sport that would have allowed someone like Kinahan to become so powerful,” he told me. “But nothing has been put in place by boxing to stop another Kinahan doing the same. Pro boxing still deals with a close Kinahan associate like Fitzpatrick because pro boxing just doesn’t seem to care.”

A recent lawsuit laid bare how consequential Kinahan became in boxing, even after his supposed withdrawal from the sport. Billy Keane is a manager who used to work with Top Rank, a boxing-promotion company founded by Bob Arum, who once represented Muhammad Ali. Keane believes that Top Rank owes him money, and he’s suing the company for breach of contract, among other things. In a complaint filed earlier this year, in California, Keane described several meetings that he had with Kinahan in Dubai on Top Rank’s behalf.

At the end of 2018, Top Rank became intent on signing Tyson Fury. The giant Englishman had recently recovered from a period out of the sport during which he’d gained weight and used drugs. He then fought an epic contest with Deontay Wilder, which ended in a tie. The bout restored Fury’s status as one of boxing’s top commodities. The suit alleges that, in January, 2019, Top Rank’s president, Todd duBoef, sent Keane to Dubai to negotiate with Kinahan, who was acting as Fury’s paid adviser. According to the complaint, Kinahan was happy for Fury to sign with Top Rank, on two conditions: “(a) Top Rank would have to pay him an agreed percentage of Fury’s fight purses, and (b) Top Rank would have to give MTK (the management company started by Kinahan) an output deal to assure that Kinahan’s other fighters received television exposure.” M.T.K.’s 2017 claim that it had severed ties with Kinahan was clearly a lie. (Top Rank and duBoef dispute the lawsuit’s characterization of events. Fury didn’t respond to requests for comment.)

As recounted in the complaint, duBoef told Keane that Kinahan’s involvement in the negotiation must be kept secret—especially from ESPN, which had signed a TV deal with Top Rank—because “the Irish press had

reported that Kinahan was the head of a drug cartel.” Kinahan was in fact well known to duBoef, who apparently enjoyed the Irishman’s sinister reputation. Two years earlier, Top Rank had signed Michael Conlan, one of M.T.K.’s boxers. Before Conlan’s first pro fight, at Madison Square Garden, duBoef had wanted the M.M.A. star Conor McGregor to lead Conlan to the ring. McGregor was wary. The complaint says duBoef bragged that he’d had Kinahan “lean on” McGregor. On fight night, McGregor walked with Conlan. (DuBoef denies involving Kinahan “in any way,” but a source at M.T.K. confirmed the story. McGregor didn’t respond to requests for comment.)



*“Let there be content.”*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Keane was instructed to meet with Kinahan again in Dubai. The talks were going smoothly, Keane’s complaint states, until Fury panicked about “Top Rank’s ability to honor its financial commitment.” The boxer “insisted that ESPN had to guarantee his contract.” DuBoef felt that he couldn’t ask the network to do this. Keane thought of another solution: asking Kinahan for help. As the complaint puts it, “Kinahan offered to personally guarantee Fury’s contract,” which was worth many millions of dollars. DuBoef agreed, texting Keane, “Now that makes sense.”

In February, 2019, Fury signed with Top Rank, which agreed to pay Kinahan ten per cent of every fight purse, via a company based out of the same office

as M.T.K. These payments would typically be about a million dollars. DuBoef also signed a consultancy deal with Kinahan, through the same company, that was worth more than two million dollars. Someone with knowledge of the negotiations noted that Kinahan arrived for meetings in Dubai hotels without visible security. He used WhatsApp on a regular phone to make arrangements. Kinahan, the source said, came across as a “legitimate businessman,” though his mask could slip. If somebody didn’t call him back on time, Kinahan took it as a “personal attack,” becoming paranoid and angry.

Kinahan was now a boxing kingmaker. A year after signing with Top Rank, Fury posted a video on social media announcing that he’d agreed to fight Anthony Joshua for the heavyweight championship of the world in a two-bout deal. A curious coincidence is that Joshua owns a limited company, 258 Investments, that was previously known as M.T.K. Property Investments—the same name as Kinahan’s brand. A spokesperson said that Joshua has never done business with Kinahan, and that Joshua’s M.T.K. stood for “Money Through Knockouts.” Joshua has, however, visited Kinahan’s Marbella gym, and a source in Kinahan’s group told me that Joshua was once in negotiations to join M.T.K. Global. (Joshua’s publicist was asked twice about this, and did not issue a denial.)

In the video, Fury thanked Kinahan three times for getting the two-bout deal with Joshua “over the line.” Kinahan is known to micromanage his appearances on social media. He also consults with a publicist, who urged him to ask Fury to mention him in the video. But the post was a miscalculation. Chris Urben, the D.E.A. agent, remembers the Fury video as a decisive moment for law enforcement. “It was stunning, it was unbelievable,” Urben told me. “Here you have Tyson Fury . . . and he’s saying, ‘I’m with Dan Kinahan, and Dan is a good guy.’ I remember having the conversation—‘This cannot happen. This has got to stop.’ ”

A month before Tyson Fury signed with Top Rank, the French gendarmerie executed a search warrant at a data center in the town of Roubaix, to secretly copy the servers of EncroChat, a private encrypted phone network that catered primarily to organized criminals. In April, the authorities introduced malware onto all EncroChat phones which allowed them to download stored texts and images, and to read new messages in real time. EncroChat was

shut down in July, 2020. Across Europe, thousands of arrests and prosecutions have resulted from the EncroChat intelligence.

Sky E.C.C., another encrypted-phone provider, had even more users than EncroChat. Its servers were also in Roubaix, and were also copied by the French police, in 2021. In a “live phase” of three weeks, all Sky E.C.C. messages could be read in real time. The EncroChat and Sky E.C.C. coups were the biggest policing breakthroughs in Europe in decades—it was, a Dutch police chief said, “as if we were sitting at the table where the criminals were chatting”—and they led to the arrests of several Super Cartel members.

Analysts at Europol combed through the encrypted messages. Recently, I visited them in The Hague to discuss the Kinahans. The officers did not wish to be named, but they were happy to share what they’d learned from the encrypted-phone stings. The first cartel member identified on the chats was the Kinahan deputy Sean McGovern, who talked to another user on EncroChat about a rap video in which he’d appeared. This was easily cross-referenced. From there, an analyst explained, they could see “the whole network—in Spain, in Dubai.”

There was one striking feature of the conversations among the Kinahan-cartel members: Daniel wasn’t part of them. His lieutenants spoke of “the big guy,” or mentioned Daniel’s nickname, Chess, but they also explicitly noted that he didn’t have an encrypted phone. In order to reach him, messages had to be relayed by his lieutenants, who went on twice-weekly walks with him. The analysts concluded that McGovern—who continued to use his secretblackmars handle, Knife—was one of Kinahan’s primary conduits to the world. (Separately, someone at the M.T.K. gym in Dubai remembered McGovern dispensing new encrypted devices to other Kinahan-gang lieutenants every few days.) None of the other Super Cartel leaders took such precautions. “It was an atypical element of the Kinahan gang,” one officer said. Another noted that Kinahan appeared to be “the only one who was smart enough” to stay off the networks.

The chats suggested that the Kinahans were importing drugs into Spain—specifically, the Port of Valencia—in shipments also carrying legitimate loads of coffee, beer, and machinery. From Spain, the drugs were conveyed

by truck to the Netherlands, and then to Ireland and the U.K. The shipments came directly from Brazil, Costa Rica, and Panama. In the chats, the Irish used “bits” for “cocaine” and “jackets” for “cannabis.” Daniel’s brother, known in the chats as Mano, sometimes texted about asking Daniel for money to pay people working at their gyms. In one chat, a photograph was posted showing a huge parcel of cocaine. The chats contain evidence of the Kinahan group’s involvement in multi-ton shipments of the drug—joint ventures involving half a dozen investors.

Kinahan, Sr., has always been considered by police in Ireland to be a subtler criminal than his eldest son. Browne, the retired investigator with An Garda Síochána, said, “Christy, Sr., would never have got involved with the boxing or the Tyson Fury stuff. He was far too strategic. Whereas Daniel loved the notoriety and swanning around.”

Outside of boxing, Kinahan has made several ham-fisted attempts to polish his reputation. In 2019, filming began on a fifteen-minute movie, “Regency: Discover the Truth (Daniel Kinahan).” The film tells a conspiracist version of the AK-47 attack on the Regency Hotel, claiming, without evidence, that the police and various politicians were complicit. It uses dozens of actors and extras, has surprisingly high production values, and was directed by a Welsh filmmaker, Caradog James, whose work has been shown at the Tribeca Film Festival. (James declined to speak to me.)

An e-mail chain I have reviewed seems to confirm what was already self-evident: Kinahan was behind the film. But he tried to obscure his involvement. The owner of the company that made the short, Nazmo Productions, is business partners with Ali Shams Pour, a British entrepreneur who later helped run Probellum, the boxing company. (Nazmo folded shortly after the film aired, with debts of some two hundred thousand dollars—an amount that may approximate the film’s budget.) Pour, who has produced two of Caradog James’s features, used to be Kinahan’s next-door neighbor in Dubai.



*"Tony's been despondent ever since he privatized his railway and it led to a reduction in service."*  
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

The film was a waste of money. When “Regency: Discover the Truth (Daniel Kinahan)” appeared on YouTube, in 2020, it was quickly removed following a complaint from a news organization whose material had been used without permission. The film occasionally resurfaces online, but most viewers see it as propaganda. One commenter joked that the film must have been directed “by Daniel himself.”

In 2022, Kinahan recorded a three-hour interview with the Scottish podcaster James English that told “his side of the story.” In a video trailer, Kinahan declared, “I’m not going to say I was an angel, but I’m proud of where I was brought up . . . and what I’ve turned things into.” The episode never aired, owing to what English called “legal issues,” but the podcaster has also interviewed the reformed gangster Marvin Herbert, who has extremely positive views of Kinahan. “Although he gets so much bad press, he’s done nothing but help me,” Herbert gushed. “I admire him more than any other man I’ve come across in my life.”

In some matters, Kinahan, Sr., who is now sixty-eight, has behaved as naïvely as his son. For a while, he maintained a LinkedIn account, on which he posed as a “senior consultant” in the aviation sector, with degrees from the Open University. He also posted regularly on Twitter, expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin and promoting anti-vax theories. These public

profiles were shut down in 2022. But, in 2024, Bellingcat, the open-source-investigations team, published a colorful story about how Kinahan, Sr., had left hundreds of traces of himself online, often using his first and middle names, Christopher Vincent. There were dozens of Google reviews of restaurants. In one post, Kinahan, Sr., wrote, of the Cycle Bistro, in Dubai: “I had the açai bowl, followed by eggs with almond bread and green salad. My meal was well presented and tasty. I give this establishment five stars.”

The digital footprint not only showcased Kinahan, Sr.’s critical-writing skills; it indicated how freely he moved around the world. Several of the reviews are from Zimbabwe. The Gardai believe that Kinahan, Sr., tried to establish a home in that country. The government there apparently denied him permanent residency.

One Google review was from Sharm el-Sheikh, the resort town in Egypt, where, in 2019, Kinahan, Sr., attended an aviation conference. According to documents unearthed in 2022, by Malawi’s Platform for Investigative Journalism and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Kinahan, Sr., was in Egypt to buy several military aircraft. In an e-mail, he wrote that he wanted to “create a smoke and mirrors illusion” so that a company he’d helped create would be “in pole position for aircraft finance.” A different company linked to Kinahan, Sr., then attempted to buy as many as nine Egyptian Air Force planes, for about eight million dollars. The *Sunday Times* of London reported that “security services” believed Kinahan was attempting to acquire the aircraft for Iranian actors, or to sublease them to Iranian airlines. (The deal fell apart.)

The *Sunday Times* also reported that Kinahan, Sr., was using Zimbabwe as a hub for a money-laundering operation that relied on the country’s largely unregulated gold markets. Euro and sterling notes were hidden in the doors of cars and shipped to ports in Mozambique and Namibia before being converted into dollars on the Zimbabwean black market. The cash was used to buy gold, which was then shipped to Dubai and sold, thus entering the licit economy.

According to Bellingcat’s analysis, Kinahan, Sr.,’s globe-trotting stopped in April, 2022, when Claire Cronin, then the U.S. Ambassador to Ireland, announced sanctions against the family’s crime group. Speaking at City Hall

in Dublin, in front of officials from the Gardaí, Europol, Britain’s National Crime Agency, and the D.E.A., she offered the five-million-dollar reward for tips leading to the arrest of any of the three Kinahans. Cronin vowed that the U.S. would “bring their leaders to justice, no matter where they are.”

The U.S. Treasury rarely sanctions European organized-crime groups. The designation was doubly unusual given that there was no hard evidence the Kinahans were importing drugs to America. (Some law-enforcement officials suspect that the Kinahans were investors in a massive consignment of cocaine that was impounded in the Port of Philadelphia in 2019, but the vessel’s ultimate destination was northern Europe.) The Treasury’s decision, I was told, was guided by the size, reach, and notoriety of the Kinahan group, and by the fact that the gang’s financial “tentacles” had spread to America. The most obvious tentacle was the one wearing a boxing glove.

The sanctions have limited the Kinahans’ freedom. But they haven’t stifled Kinahan, Sr.’s urge to keep consumers informed. After a fishing excursion in the U.A.E. in September, 2022, six months after the sanctions were imposed, Kinahan, Sr., posted another five-star review: “Excellent trip with friends caught a cart load of fish.”

Raffaele Imperiale, the Super Cartel member who was deported to Italy, was arrested in July, 2021, in Dubai, in large part because of evidence gathered in the Sky E.C.C. investigation. He is currently in Rebibbia prison, outside Rome. In 2023 and 2024, Imperiale regularly welcomed a visitor: Maurizio De Marco, an anti-Mafia prosecutor from Naples. De Marco, who has a gray goatee and an easy laugh, had persuaded Imperiale to become a *pentito*, or state’s witness, in exchange for a lighter sentence. Since then, De Marco has travelled by armored truck to the prison some fifty times to hear Imperiale’s confessions.

At their first meeting, they sat on either side of a Plexiglas screen in an unadorned room overlooking the prison’s courtyard. De Marco was wearing his customary suit; Imperiale was in a white T-shirt, pants, and slippers, and apparently did not enjoy the sartorial imbalance. Before his next meeting with De Marco, the prosecutor told me, Imperiale asked his tailor in Naples to send him two cashmere suits, as well as his favorite crocodile-skin shoes. The two men soon struck up a rapport, and details of murders, multi-ton

cocaine deals, and gang rivalries began spilling out of Imperiale. De Marco has collected three thousand pages' worth of statements from him.

De Marco works from a prosecutor's office in Naples which is defended by armed guards. When I visited recently, he told me that there were limits to what he could divulge about the Kinahans, owing to ongoing investigations. However, he shared what he could about Imperiale's relationships with the Super Cartel members who are already in prison. He also read to me some of Imperiale's comments about the Kinahans. "Daniel Kinahan is my dearest friend, with whom I share a passion for boxing," Imperiale told De Marco. "I was also at his wedding, but he was a close friend with Rico Riquelme"—the Chilean member of the Super Cartel. "So I didn't make deals with him without Rico."

I later reviewed a much longer part of Imperiale's statement, which is as revealing as any I have read about organized crime. Imperiale explains that the so-called Super Cartel was never a unified group but, rather, a fluid association of criminals who made individual deals with one another based on shifting needs. Imperiale said, of the major traffickers, "We're all dependent on each other, but also all competitors. Sometimes we're business partners, and then our paths separate again."

This loose confederation of frenemies had originated not in Dubai but in the Netherlands. Imperiale got to know Riquelme in Amsterdam in 2008, after the Chilean had been released from a German prison. The men trained together occasionally at a Thai-boxing gym. Later, they collaborated on a consignment of three hundred kilograms of cocaine.

During an interview, Imperiale said that Riquelme had once planned to kill a fellow-criminal who had wronged him in some way. The plan was that "ninjas"—a code word, Imperiale explained, for Colombian assassination teams controlled by the cartels—would travel to Dubai to murder the target. In the end, Imperiale said, the killing didn't happen, partly because "it's really very difficult to arrange a liquidation in Dubai." More important, "the Irish said, 'You shouldn't commit murders in Dubai, we live here, our children are here, this is a neutral country.' . . . Daniel didn't want it, and he has an important voice."

Imperiale may have agreed with Kinahan about the need to keep Dubai free of bloodshed. But in the interviews he was remarkably candid about his desire to see rivals dead. He explained, “It comes down to everyone quietly wanting to dig a pit for the others.”

After the announcement of the U.S. Treasury sanctions, newspapers reported that the Kinahans were planning to flee the U.A.E.—but the Gardaí confirmed to me that Dubai is still their home and sanctuary. This past summer, members of the family were spotted in the city by criminals from a rival group. A source told me that a friend of his recently bumped into Daniel at a mall.

In 2022, U.S. authorities reported that Daniel was renting a lavish apartment on the Palm Jumeirah, a man-made archipelago in the shape of a palm tree. (Notable property owners there have included David and Victoria Beckham.) Kinahan is now staying elsewhere in the city. According to police sources, the Kinahans love driving flashy cars. A Dubai outlet named V.I.P. Motors, which currently has a three-and-a-half-million-dollar Bugatti Chiron in its inventory, has been their dealership of choice. Someone who met Daniel shortly before he was sanctioned noted that he’d also taken advantage of Dubai’s beauty sector, treating himself to a hair transplant.

Karen Greenaway worked for the F.B.I. for twenty-two years, specializing in illicit money flows, and she has written about Dubai’s role in facilitating corruption and crime. She told me that the first organized-crime groups to arrive in the Emirates came from Russia, in the early two-thousands. Others, lured by the country’s warm weather and lax oversight, followed. Imperiale arrived in 2010, having previously operated from Spain. Spanish prosecutors filed an extradition request for Imperiale with the U.A.E. in 2014, but this was ignored. In 2015, Italy indicted Imperiale for drug trafficking, and also requested his extradition. This application was ignored, too. Imperiale lived openly in Dubai for another six years, unmolested by law enforcement and posing as a real-estate investor.

“Dubai has never cared too much about people’s reputation, as long as you’re not committing crimes in their country,” Greenaway said. “So some hardened criminals come in, they bring in their money, they put it in real

estate, they use the gold exchange—they can use all this stuff to launder their money. And Dubai just doesn’t care.”

The Kinahans have taken full advantage of “this stuff.” According to Europol, the family has made extensive use of a Dubai *hawala* network—an untraceable money-transfer system based on trust among individual brokers. (The process has often been used in money laundering.) Daniel and his brother have also bought various expensive properties in the U.A.E., and have incorporated several companies in Dubai. Financial oversight by the Emirati authorities was evidently cursory: the brothers were deemed “low risk.”

Shortly before the U.S. sanctions against the Kinahans were announced, the G7 Financial Action Task Force put the U.A.E. on its “grey list”—a roster of countries considered deficient in their anti-money-laundering and counterterrorist-financing protocols. (The Emirates was removed from the list in 2024.) The U.S. Treasury documents that sanction the Kinahans called Dubai a “facilitation hub” for “illicit activities.”

After the U.S. sanctions, the U.A.E. announced that it had frozen all “relevant assets” relating to the Kinahans in Dubai. Yet the group is clearly circumventing the restrictions. Daniel’s wife, Caoimhe Robinson, who is not sanctioned, has sold millions of dollars’ worth of property in the Emirates since April, 2022. Property data leaked to C4ADS, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., that focusses on “illicit networks,” shows that Robinson bought a residence in the Emirates Hills, a gated community, for some seven million dollars in 2020, and sold it three years later for fourteen million.

Imperiale’s confessions also suggest that gang members had to pay bribes to Emirati officials. Dubai police agents, he said, “extorted drug dealers—they stopped them when they came into the country and made them pay millions of euros to let them through.”

The Kinahans may not have needed to be so blatant. For several years, M.T.K. Global employed as its “brand ambassador” a man named Khalid al Jassmi, who graduated from Dubai’s police academy and was employed by the Emirati government for more than two decades. Someone who worked

with Kinahan in Dubai told me, “Al Jassmi was integral to all the business licensing for Kinahan in Dubai . . . and all the political engagement.”

There are indications that even the U.A.E.’s ruling élite may be entangled with criminal groups. In 2015, Sheikh Marwan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, a son of Dubai’s ruler, bought a majority stake in AA Real Estate Development, a company in which Imperiale had invested, shortly after the Spanish extradition request was filed. Imperiale personally signed the sale documents transferring the majority stake to the prince. Similarly, decrypted chats suggest that another Super Cartel member, Edin Gačanin, secured protection in the Emirates through associates of the royal family.

Nevertheless, Gačanin, Imperiale, and many others who formerly viewed Dubai as a sanctuary have been imprisoned. The U.A.E. will apparently not protect criminals if doing so runs counter to its interests. Greenaway, the former F.B.I. agent, said that the threshold for the Emiratis to expel powerful criminals was high. A murder charge was the most likely way to get them to act. “Violent crime, in your country or in theirs, anything that’s a threat to tourism, they’ll get rid of you,” she said.

Will Dubai ever rid itself of the Kinahans? It seems likelier today than it once did. In April, 2022, Ireland’s High Court issued a European arrest warrant for Sean McGovern. He was wanted for two crimes: directing the activities of a criminal organization, and murdering Noel (Duck Egg) Kirwan, who was killed outside his Dublin home in 2016, during the Kinahan-Hutch feud.

Despite such serious charges, and the publication of an Interpol Red Notice, it took the Irish police more than two years to persuade their Emirati counterparts to arrest McGovern. In October, 2024, McGovern was apprehended in his house in Dubai. Clearly, he did not believe that he was in danger. McGovern was extradited in May and is now enjoying the sparse comforts of Portlaoise Prison; his trial will likely begin next year.

The extradition of McGovern has given rise to some speculation that the Kinahans might attempt to move to a friendlier jurisdiction: Russia, perhaps, or Iran. Recent developments in the Emirates indicate that the family’s situation is precarious. In September, four Scottish men were arrested by the

Dubai police without the oversight of Scotland’s police service. All four are allegedly major figures in organized crime. (At least three have since been released.) Justin Kelly, the Garda commissioner, told me he was encouraged by the notion that the Dubai police were no longer waiting for their European counterparts to intervene against organized criminals. “There’s a reputational issue for the U.A.E.,” he said. “I definitely see a positive change.”

Daniel Kinahan may feel safe as long as there are no charges against him, and an indictment is unlikely to come from the U.S. The Trump Administration has different drug-interdiction priorities, notably fentanyl and Latin American cartels. A D.E.A. source told me that the agency currently has little interest in pursuing people like the Kinahans.

In Ireland, meanwhile, two bundles of evidence relating to Daniel Kinahan have been delivered to prosecutors. One accuses him of directing the activities of a criminal organization; the other alleges that he was responsible for the murder of Eddie Hutch, the man killed three days after the Regency Hotel attack. The prosecutors have been sitting on these files for eighteen months, to the frustration of the Gardaí. (“We would like to expedite all these things, obviously,” Kelly said.) Unless the prosecutors press charges, it seems doubtful that the Dubai police will knock on Kinahan’s door. Kelly told me that the five-million-dollar reward is still available. Anyone—including members of the Kinahan gang—could collect it, he said, adding, “There’s nothing that we see as being off the table.”

On September 26, 2023, the M.V. Matthew, a freighter flying the Panamanian flag, was intercepted south of Cork by Irish Army Rangers, who fast-roped from a helicopter and arrested the crew. It was carrying more than two tons of cocaine, which the crew had begun to set on fire as the Rangers boarded the ship. The Gardaí believe that the smuggling attempt was arranged and co-financed by the Kinahans, Colombia’s Clan del Golfo, and Hezbollah operatives based in Venezuela. According to testimony in Dublin’s Special Criminal Court, a Dutch man on board, Cumali Ozgen, served as the “eyes and ears” of the operation, which was overseen from Dubai. This criminal collective, one detective said, had “immense capabilities” and “unlimited resources.”

In court, the owner of the M.V. Matthew was revealed to be Symphony Marine, a shipping company based in the Emirates. The Dubai register of business licenses does not indicate who ultimately controls Symphony Marine. There isn't even a name listed. A single e-mail address was used to register the company in the Emirates. It belongs to a shipping broker in the U.A.E. named Jacob Joseph, who, when I first contacted him, denied any knowledge of Symphony Marine's fleet. We then began a fruitful exchange. Joseph previously worked for an Emirati company, Global Shipping Group, and was also the signatory for three other tankers sanctioned for transporting Iranian crude oil. Joseph said that his e-mail had been used on the Symphony Marine documents without his consent, but that the real owners of Global Shipping—and, one must assume, of Symphony Marine—were “from Iran.”

This suggests that the Kinahans remain bedfellows with geopolitical pariahs. It also raises a question of psychology. A net is closing around the gang, and yet the Kinahans continue to try to smuggle vast quantities of drugs across the world—and, no doubt, sometimes succeed. Surely they don't need the money. Why do they do it?

Michael O'Sullivan has now spent much of his professional life tracking the Kinahans. He saw Kinahan, Sr.,'s foray into heroin and his turn to cocaine smuggling, and he witnessed the Hutch-Kinahan feud on the streets of Dublin. He later monitored ships carrying Kinahan-gang drugs to Europe. When I met him in Dublin recently, I asked him why he thought the group hadn't slowed down. “I'm forty-five years in law enforcement, and I've learned a leopard never changes its spots,” O'Sullivan said. “Did I think they'd become carpenters and electricians? Nothing has changed.”

This isn't entirely true. Daniel is believed to have at least six children, by three mothers. Two of his boys, Sean and Cian, are now in their twenties, and they share some of their father's interests. When Tyson Fury fought Oleksandr Usyk in Riyadh, in May, 2024, I was sitting close to the ring. A few rows away from me was a young man wearing a black T-shirt and a bright smile: Cian Kinahan. ♦

## Takes

- [David Grann on St. Clair McKelway's "Old Eight Eighty"](#)

By [David Grann](#)

**New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.**

It seemed no more than a curious footnote—a counterfeiter so outlandishly inept that his forged dollar bills were detectable even at a casual glance. Nearly all were emblazoned with a telltale flaw: the name of America's first President was spelled "Wahsington."

The scammer, who operated in the New York area from 1938 to 1948, was known to the often exasperated agents of the U.S. Secret Service as No. 880, for the number of his case file. Unlike his more masterly criminal brethren, he never posed a threat to the sanctity of the financial system at large. He produced only dollar bills, and only forty or so of them each month, enough to provide himself and his dog with a few supplies. (The bogus currency was easily passed off, because who inspects a dollar bill?)

The Secret Service spent years searching for No. 880. Who was this irritant who had eluded the most sophisticated lawmen in the country, thanks to the triviality of his crimes? In the end, No. 880 was found only because a fire broke out in his apartment, and, as a result, the tools of his criminality—including a zinc engraving plate with the misspelled word "Wahsington"—were thrown out the window and discovered by children playing in the neighborhood. No. 880 cheerfully admitted his misdeeds when confronted by the Secret Service agents, who were taken aback to discover that their bête noire was a sweet-tempered, toothless elderly widower called Edward Mueller. They liked him.

Most reporters would have overlooked Mueller's case, which defied the imperatives not only of the counterfeiting business but also of the newsmaking business. Where were the great stakes? Yet St. Clair McKelway recognized in the idiosyncratic details the perfect subject for a story, and his article, "[Old Eight Eighty,](#)" published in three parts in this magazine in 1949, captivated readers. Wryly told, with an exhaustive accumulation of startling facts, the article is interesting because it is *interesting*—because it illuminates the timeless oddities and wonders of the human psyche. The piece thereby avoids the fate of most journalism—of becoming disposable—

and the narrative possesses the same immediacy that it had seventy-six years ago.

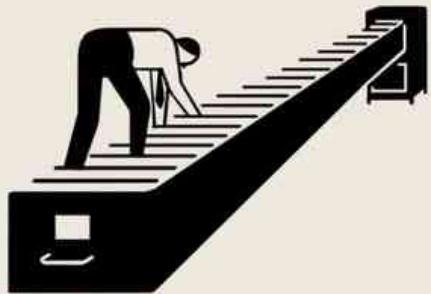
McKelway, who wrote for the magazine from the nineteen-thirties to the sixties, specialized in true-crime stories, bringing to life a gallery of scamps and swindlers and impostors. In an introduction to an anthology of McKelway's pieces, "[Reporting at Wit's End](#)," the *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik observed that McKelway's fact-based tales have "the excitement and surprise of fiction—only not of big fiction, but of exquisitely shaped small fiction, of an O'Hara story. All set in New York, and all bending toward some odd edge of character revelation, they render the outer edges of experience as the normal shape of life."

By the time I joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer, in 2003, McKelway's work had been virtually forgotten, and I'd never heard of him until an editor, knowing my penchant for writing about charming rogues, suggested that I dig up "Old Eight Eighty." Reading it provided the thrill of becoming a member of a secret club of devotees. Yet, for me, "Old Eight Eighty" also offered a template for storytelling. Whereas Joseph Mitchell's pristine artistry and [Janet Malcolm](#)'s penetrating eye seemed otherworldly, the elements of what made a McKelway story work were legible to me, albeit polished to their highest form. He was, in the most complimentary sense, a professional. Look at how he valued precise description (No. 880's dog is described as a mongrel terrier) and highlighted the unexpected (No. 880 never gave his terrier a name, because, as he explained, "When I talk to him, he knows I'm talking to *him*, don't he?"). Look at how McKelway seductively unspooled the facts, waiting, like a poker player, until the last moment to reveal his ace.

McKelway's stories, like his subjects, have their blemishes. They sometimes float too amusedly over the surface. One suspects that a deeper sadness lurked inside No. 880. Yet McKelway, whose own life was shadowed by tragedies—including destructive drinking and doomed marriages—managed, through his craft, to suffuse sordid tales with a flicker of levity or beauty. That his work has now been lost in the archives is a crime story worthy of McKelway himself. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)



### [Old Eight Eighty—I](#)

Among all the rogues in history, no class has been more persistent than counterfeiters, and only thieves have been more numerous.

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- We're Doing Child-Led Parenting

By [Susanna Wolff](#)

Oh, you're doing baby-led weaning? We did that, too! It's really the only way to raise confident, independent little humans. That's why we decided to take it a step further and do child-led parenting. Hold on one sec—yes, Caleb, my love, how can I help your journey? I see. Yes, I understand that your heart wants to watch "PAW Patrol" right now, but remember you broke your iPad, so—O.K., yes, you can watch on my iPad. Great problem-solving!

Anyway, yeah, we started with gentle parenting, but we found that we were having difficulty maintaining boundaries. And then Derek and I realized that we're smart, capable people, and there's no reason to believe that our son isn't just as smart and capable. So we stopped enforcing boundaries. Instead we said, "Caleb is the one who needs to be parented. He should be in charge of deciding how it's done!"

Actually, you know what? Caleb, my darling, I'm reflecting on our previous interaction and I fear that my saying, "You broke your iPad," was really blame-forward phrasing and might cause you feelings of shame or guilt. No, you're not feeling that? Well, just to be safe, I want to revise my words so that they carry less accusation. How's this: "Your iPad became broken while in your possession"? That's better. Right, yeah, you can keep watching "PAW Patrol."

As I was saying, it's going really great so far. Like, my sister's son has been having all kinds of tantrums—clearly a textbook need to assert control—and it's driving her crazy, but we don't have that problem because our family prioritizes open and honest communication so that Caleb knows he's always in complete control.

Oh, Caleb, my dearest, before, when I used the word "broken" to describe your iPad, it might have come off as harsh, verging on ableist. I am so sorry for that. The words we use are important, so I vow to try harder in the future. Your iPad got an ouchie and now it's sleeping. And none of that is your fault. Not even that big crack where you smacked it against the car.

I mean, whenever I hear about kids having meltdowns over eating vegetables or getting dressed for school, I'm, like, whaaat? Caleb knows that

we trust him to make the right choices for his body. And one of those choices was not starting school yet. Six is just too young!

Wait, Caleb, my heart, when I said your iPad was “sleeping,” I think that was maybe patronizingly euphemistic, and I certainly don’t want you to associate bedtime with being ruined forever. We have a hard enough time getting you to sleep as is! Ha-ha. I’m only kidding, of course. It’s perfectly natural for children to need their mothers upward of five times per night well into adolescence! But, as a sign of my respect for your intelligence, I will rephrase: “Your iPad got an ouchie and now it doesn’t want to perform.”

Yeah, we looked at Montessori schools and Waldorf schools, but Caleb didn’t think either was right for him. And we agree! All that sweeping and soup? It’s a little New Age woo-woo if you ask me. Seriously, parenting doesn’t need to be so complicated.

Yes, my sweet boy? Oh, the other iPad got an ouchie, too? Jesus Chr—no, no, I’m not mad at you. Of course not. You are the most exquisite creature in the universe and nothing you do could make me love you less. But let’s take some calming breaths while I check to see if this iPad is completely—yep, completely dead. Not dead. I mean boo-boood or whatever cutesy, non-accusatory thing I said before. You know what? Let’s do a few more calming breaths. Ahhh. O.K., why don’t you do a coloring book instead? Or no, yeah, you’re right, you can just watch “PAW Patrol” on my phone.

Anyway, what was I saying? Oh, yeah, child-led parenting is really the only way to do it! Two hands, Caleb.

Are we thinking about having another? No. No, no, no, no. God, no. It just wouldn’t seem fair to Caleb to divide our attention like that. Caleb, do you feel like you have a plan for how to maintain a safe grip on Mommy’s phone as you hold it precariously over that sewer grate? You do? O.K., I trust your body completely.

Also, is it a good idea to bring another child into the world right now? You know, with everything going on, and the environment, and all that stuff? No, no. We’re happily one and done. So happy.

*For fuck's sake, Caleb! ♦*

# Fiction

- “[Final Boy](#)”

Fiction

# Final Boy

By [Sam Lipsyte](#)



*Illustration by Bryce Wymer*

Thing is, I've been trying to find a moment to write down what happened to Bennett and me for a while now, but the demands of my audience rarely abate. Soon as I post a fresh installment of "Charles: Final Boy," readers clamor for more. I've hardly time to jot down a grocery list, let alone compose a personal chronicle. Bennett says I'm practically the Charles (as in Dickens) of scribblers devoted to mining the rich vein of a certain underappreciated sitcom of the nineteen-eighties, but I will leave that for history to judge. Besides, what does Bennett know?

He's practically dead.

Just before he got that way, I was in Amok Mocha, where I like to sip cold brew and do my "C: FB" conjuring, and I struck up a conversation with a young woman who confessed to being a creative-writing student. She told me that in her workshop they talk about the "occasion" of the story. Why is the narrator telling this tale now? What pressures or conditions have coalesced to move a person to speak?

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

I feigned ignorance of the concept, though I'd heard it often in my own writing classes long ago. Instead, I told her that, if the installment I was presently crafting flowed from any occasion, it was this: Charles is anxious about the imminent disintegration of the universe via the ever-increasing tug of dark matter. Moreover, he's ticked off that his best buddy, Buddy, doesn't seem perturbed by the prospect.

"How imminent?" the woman said, and sipped her Balkan, a new offering at Amok.

"Three or four billion years?" I said.

"And who is Charles?"

When I informed her that he was the titular hero of "Charles in Charge," the most criminally uncelebrated television program of the Reagan era, the woman pursed her lips.

"Oh," she said. "You write fan fiction."

"We all write fan fiction," I told her. "Some of us are just more honest about it."

The young woman gathered up her belongings, moved to another table.

Did she think I was being facetious?

Still, if there is an occasion for the story I'm relating now, it's a bit nearer on the space-time continuum. My best buddy, Bennett, is in a vegetative state induced by an anoxic brain injury, and, if he doesn't wake up soon and vouch for me, I could be kicked out of our apartment. This might make my literary endeavors, as well as my other gig—remote therapist—somewhat difficult. Clients tend to grumble when I treat their trauma from a marble bench in the lobby of the public library.

My employer, Positive Outcome Solutions, a.k.a. P.O.S., grumbles, too. Its guidelines stipulate consistency in the therapeutic setting, and I can usually

be found doling out my expertise from a corner nook in our apartment, a tidy bookshelf and a print of Courbet's "The Origin of the World" on the wall behind me. My expertise, though, is not really the point, for although I am certified in Rudimentary Life Coaching and almost certified in Baseline Wellness Facilitation, the fact is I'm mostly a front.

According to in-house surveys, most of P.O.S.'s clients prefer A.I. therapists, but, for the small percentage who claim to crave a "human connection," there's me. I'm paid to appear engaged and empathetic, though the clients probably don't realize that every word I utter is repeated verbatim from text appearing in the corner of my screen. The trick is to make it all sound natural, which I do by channelling the warm, curious tones of my favorite podcast hosts.

Maybe it's all a little sneaky, but I didn't invent this epoch. I never dreamed of becoming a beef puppet for a large language model. I wanted to be a distinguished writer of mournful vignettes in the American grain, or else operate my own soft-serve-ice-cream truck. But it's not so bad. The truth is, the A.I. is a lot better at therapy than I am. Bennett says I'm the spoonful of gristle that makes the robot medicine go down. Obviously, he said this before his accident.

There is not much to say about that misadventure, other than that some people still haven't gotten the memo about dissociative anesthetics and bathtubs. I was the one who found Bennett. I'd been knocking on the bathroom door, because I needed to shuttle some acquaintances to the waterfront, as it were, and I was late for a session with a guy in Ohio who was having intrusive thoughts about the Vice-President.

"Bennett!" I said. "Open up!"

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**  
[Listen to Sam Lipsyte read "Final Boy."](#)

After hearing naught but the sweet, brooding stylings of Bill Evans's "Waltz for Debby" wreathing from Bennett's Bluetooth speaker, I bashed my way in. The bathroom was dark, lit low with candles. Bundles of sage and palo santo glowed on the tiled ledge above the tub. Bennett was having a real spa

night, smudging his demons away, but he seemed maybe too far submerged in the tonka-scented water.

I yanked the idiot out, no easy task with my slippy disks, laid him on the bathmat, and called an ambulance. I attempted something that from a distance, or on TV, might have resembled CPR.

“Don’t you fucking die on me!” I shouted between breath-of-life breaths, and Bennett didn’t.

Now he’s on machines at Mount Sinai.

The doctor said it’s not good, but not hopeless.

“That’s his sweet spot,” I said.

The doctor grunted, shuffled off. Did she, too, think I was being facetious?

Bennett and I live in a one-bedroom that used to belong to his aunt, a sociology professor up here in Morningside Heights. Bennett moved in after Janet got the ’kemia, as he called it, looked after her in exchange for room and board. She’d always taken a shine to her nephew, her wayward late sister’s kid. Janet was divorced, and her only other kin, her daughter, lived in Belgium.

After Janet died, Bennett offered to split the maintenance with me. We knew each other from the Narthex, a bar near the cathedral. We’d perch on our stools with our pints and dive into it, whether it was the state of the world (also somewhere between not good and hopeless), or his years as an Army medic, or my exploits as a disaffected castoff from the cultural-industrial complex, where I had worked as a copy editor and fact checker, or word medic, for various magazines and websites before I was “rightsized” for the last time. Some evenings, I’d test out new “C: FB” story lines on Bennett, such as Buddy only feigning his doltish-sidekick identity while in truth being a cyberangel sent from the broken future to subtly guide his “charge.”

Bennett and I could talk all night, and frequently did, though he sometimes required stimulants. (I always demurred, possessing reserves of natural vitality stored in hot, sloshing vats of resentment and longing.) Our

generational divide—I am in my early fifties, Bennett two decades younger—barely tinged our rapport. We'd been deformed, like everybody else, by the same internet, the same social collapse. We were each other's pupil and don, and it seemed fitting that I move into the late Janet's apartment, especially as I'd been priced out of my own digs.

Bennett was always vague about whether he had, in fact, inherited the place, but so far nobody else had staked a claim. When the subject came up, Bennett would spout a certain Latin phrase—*donatio mortis causa*, which translates to “deathbed gift.”

“Also, bro, let’s not forget nine-tenths,” he added one night at the Narthex. “The law of possession. Besides, my cousin is cool with it. She knows I was the one who took care of her mom, cooked meals, kept track of the pills. Sometimes, you know, I’d just lay in bed with Janet and cradle her like a baby. A dying baby.”

“Lie,” I said.

“Fuck you, man, it’s true. Anyway, my point is, I was Janet’s boatman. Poled her to the other side. Tabitha has to respect that.”

It turned out Tabitha did not respect that. Bennett doesn’t know this yet, but I learned of her stance on the matter a week after his accident, following a video session with the young man from Ohio.

“Listen,” my client had been saying, his moon face candescent in the light of a gooseneck lamp he kept wrenching closer to his head, “I’m more hillbilly than that fake ever was. I didn’t go to a fancy Ivy. Got my law degree at Kentucky. And I know which fork to use. I figured it out from watching a million movies where the hick doesn’t know which fork to use. The information is out there if you want it.”

“Fuckin’ A it is,” I said, stopped myself. I was already off script, vamping because my P.O.S. chat window was empty. Slight lags were common, something I chalked up to our bottom-tier Wi-Fi. Finally, text appeared.

“That’s a very interesting detail,” I said/read. “And it might be helpful to explore this area of your past, if you feel comfortable doing so.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“This is a safe space.”

“Which space? The space I’m in, in Ohio? Or the space you’re in, in . . .”

“Nebraska,” I said, my window blank again.

“Nebraska, huh? You from there originally?”

“Sand Hills boy,” I said.

I’d never been to Nebraska, but I remembered a woman I once worked with at a quilting magazine saying something similar. Now my sanctioned text popped up.

“Probably better if we stick to your issues,” I said/read. “After all, you’re the psychotic simp with intrusive thoughts about a great American.”

They really needed to rejigger this model. It hallucinated rather often, would babble about Assyrian metallurgy or Australian Rules football, which could be intriguing at times, though maybe not always factual, and the stochastic rants tended to rattle clients. But this bullying was a glitch too far.

Ohio looked crestfallen.

“I’m not a psychotic simp,” he mumbled. “I just need help.”

I wanted to comfort him, knew I had to stick to the script.

“Maybe you could help yourself by getting up off your butt. Make your bed, for God’s sake. Get a job.”

“I do make my bed. I have a job. I’m a lawyer for the municipality.”

“About that. Check your e-mail for an official response to the completed productivity survey you submitted last month.”

“The fuck?”

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, unprompted. “P.O.S. has a consulting arm. We do efficiency studies as well as therapy.”

“That’s evil.”

“I’m with you, brother,” I said, trying to speak quickly. My audio tended to drop out when I improvised, and that made me wonder if it was more than just weak Wi-Fi. “Listen. Stay strong. Stay off the socials. Ignore people like me. Use burners. Viva la—”

Our connection broke. A few seconds later, Paula, my P.O.S. supervisor, called.

“Hi, Rick,” she said. “Just doing a little wellness check. Got an alert and caught the end of your session there.”



*“To be totally honest, I do have a favorite child. It’s just not one of mine.”*  
Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

P.O.S. claimed to honor therapist-client privilege, or some version of it, but the therapist of record was the company itself.

“I think he’s doing much better,” I said.

“Well, you’re not at all qualified to comment on that, A, No. 1. And B, No. 2, we are obviously going to initiate an employee transition now.”

“You mean fire me?”

“We’re going in a different direction, yeah.”

“The bot went rogue. You heard it.”

“That’s actually an approved adjustment to the model.”

“You want it to be cruel?”

“Honest and decisive. No more namby-pamby coddling. As per the instructions of P.O.S.’s new parent company.”

“Who’s that?” I said, and Paula named one of those tech giants you’ve probably read about, possibly on a device it manufactured. Paula started to say a few more things about the terms of my post-employment, but there was a knock on the door.

“Gotta go.”

“I’m not finished, Sand Hills.”

“I think we all are,” I said.

At the door, a man in a shiny blue suit and eyeglasses forged from some fragile-looking but probably indestructible mineral whose extraction shapes contemporary geoconomics said hello, peered over my shoulder. A young woman stood behind him.

“Bennett here?” the man said.

“Not at the moment.”

“Who are you?”

“Some guy,” I said.

“What are you doing in my mother’s apartment?” the woman said.

This was tricky. I almost wished for a chat window.

“I have something to tell you,” I said. “You might want to sit down.”

“Tell me what? Just say it.”

“There’s no way to sugarcoat this. Your mother is dead.”

My old writing instructors used to implore us to show and not tell, but apparently I really needed to tell her that, though of course she’d already heard about her mother. They have phone service in Belgium. Moreover, for the purposes of this narrative, I now really need to tell another thing, and it’s about, funnily enough, a show.

“Charles in Charge” premiered in 1984 and ran for five seasons. This was not what some people would later call the golden age of television. Nowadays, we chuckle at the primitive nature of such programming, in this case a sitcom about a kid who puts himself through college by working as a live-in housekeeper and child-care provider for a well-off couple in New Jersey. But it’s crucial to remember that the creators of this show were just as intelligent as humans today, and that they made ingenious discoveries with the crude tools available at the time.

I was late to the “Charles in Charge” phenomenon. One day, while I myself was in college, a chum and I passed the hours choking on his enormous purple bong. Chatting between rips, we realized we had something in common besides severe lung char. Neither of us had enough money to purchase more marijuana. This led to fervent talk about our perpetual lack of funds, the ravages of late capitalism, and how to assuage said ravages. My bong-mate mentioned that he had a cousin in full assuagement mode. He’d grown rich, or at least solvent, writing for a sitcom starring Scott Baio.

“Chachi?” I said, and I won’t even try to explain that. Look it up on the device you no doubt hold in your hand. Still, to quote another of Bennett’s Latin faves, caveat emptor: researching “Chachi” may fling you down a digital shaft that leads to some troubling allegations about the actor in question. It’s not pleasant, and has no bearing on this story, or on my life’s work. When I say Chachi, or Charles, I do not mean Scott Baio, in the same way that if I said Hamlet I’m not referring to any particular actor who has portrayed the young nepo-Dane.

“Yeah, fucking Chachi. Anyway, my cousin is raking it in.”

“Lucky him.”

“Just saying. We both fancy ourselves writers, after all.”

“I don’t fancy myself anything,” I said. “I’m only a writer when I’m writing.”

One of my teachers, a once lionized, now forgotten graduate student who in the days of his golden ascension wore mirrored aviators indoors, had announced this in our seminar, and it stuck.

“Yeah, you’re only a writer when you’re writing,” my chum said, “or when you’re blabbing about your experimental story cycle to someone at a party.”

“Fuck off,” I said. “She was into it.”

“Anyway, I’m just saying we could probably crank out a script in a few hours. Send it to my cousin and get paid in full!”

“Don’t we have to watch the show?”

“Nah. I’ve seen one or two. I’ve got the gist. We’re bright guys. We can figure this out. Probably our script will be so good they’ll can the other writers. But we need to conserve our stash to do this. So, we do one more hit, then write five pages. Then do another, write five more. Like that.”

It was hard to argue with such a cogent plan, and I was too stoned to argue.

We roughed out a script, and our stash lasted the whole night. It was a miracle, like the Maccabees with their lamp oil in that cave. My friend typed up whatever we'd scrawled in my spiral Mead notebook. I don't remember much about the plot except that Mr. and Mrs. Powell go out of town and Charles has to watch the kids, but he really wants to attend this musical adaptation of "Story of the Eye," so Buddy spells him, but then burns the lamb chops and later freaks out over the painful discharge he has while urinating. Charles returns home and finds Buddy and the kids running through Buddy's recent sexual history. Those are all the beats, as the Hollywood types might put it, that I can recall, but I do remember how excited we were, which was partly due to the quality of the ganja but also because we believed we had blazed a new television trail in both form and content, though mostly content.

We never heard back from the cousin.

That was the extent of our collaboration, and I forgot all about it, but weirdly, many years later, as I was drifting around the internet one night, the algorithm spat up an episode of "Charles in Charge," and after I watched it I immediately cued up another. For some mysterious reason, the show stirred something deep within me, like a paddle of wisdom churning through the hot slop in those aforementioned vats. Charles's decency, his commitment to solving problems of care, his stranger's gift for reimagining family both soothed and inspired. I'd never had much of a family myself, and I was the opposite of a problem solver. My old college friends, my former colleagues, the few lovers I'd had over the years all eventually considered me the problem, and I couldn't disagree. But Charles suggested a higher path, above the confusion. I was a Buddy, at best, but now I aspired to the condition of a Charles.

The show also ignited some long-dormant ambitions. What I saw now in the "Charles in Charge" universe was a vast and sumptuous staging ground for my literary imagination. I'd stumbled upon a new frame, or filter, for my song. Everything I'd ever wanted to say about what it was like, for this human, to think and dream and feel could now be passed through the sieve of Charles.

I was not alone. The “Charles in Charge” community is tiny but vibrant. There are other skalds, or griots, or troubadours devoted to the goings on in the Pembroke (and, later, Powell) home, and when the reruns hit the streamers our world grew. But I consider myself a pioneer among the scribes, and while the others dash off mere extrapolative scenarios, often treacly, or pornographic, or both, I like to think I have smuggled some poetry and serious thought into the proceedings, especially in installments like “The Groundless Ground,” where I cooked up for Charles a few scheduling dilemmas with which to explore Heideggerian notions of temporality.

I’d found my audience, was even making a little extra scratch from paid subscribers—enough, along with my P.O.S. checks, to pitch in for the maintenance on the apartment. But now all I’d achieved teetered on Tabitha.

She and the man with the elegant eyewear, some kind of real-estate fixer, left the apartment after a few minutes, but not before letting me know I’d soon be hearing from lawyers, or maybe from old John Law himself.

I paced around in a panic, chanted “Nine-tenths, nine-tenths” to calm myself.

I called Mount Sinai, got the duty nurse, asked how Bennett was doing. She told me she couldn’t give out information over the phone.

“How about just your opinion?” I said. “Does he seem different?”

“In my opinion, he seems the same.”

After a while, I couldn’t take being in the apartment any longer. Everything reminded me of poor Bennett. The toaster where he toasted slices of his overpriced sourdough boules, the microwave where he heated his late-night noodles, the not so tidy bookcase full of his accounting textbooks and small-business guides. Did I mention that he was a freelance accountant and a part-time drug dealer? He was, though he lived mostly on disability from the Army. He’d been blown up trying to save some guys who’d got blown up. He had metal plates in him. He was like a human Humvee. That was his joke. He did the occasional open mike.

I thanked the nurse, headed over to Amok Mocha. I was due for another installment, anyway, and I wrote better in crowds. I toyed with a scenario in which Buddy gets a blood disease and the Pembrokes, or maybe the Powells, tell Charles they no longer require his services and he must leave their house.

I was edging, perhaps, into autofictional territory.

Lady Occasion was at the next table with her Yugoslav java, watching me jab at my dinged-up Dell.

“Catch a wave?”

“In the barrel as we speak.”

“You know,” she said. “I thought about what you said. About fan fiction. Maybe you’re right.”

“It’s not complicated,” I said. “I’m in the Homeric tradition.”

“But it’s a joke, right? Ironic?”

“Irony was a bleak village I passed long ago, at the beginning of my journey. I’ve since travelled to many splendid lands.”

“Do you want to get a drink? I want a drink, and you seem like somebody I should talk to. I’m Radha.”

“Rick,” I said. “O.K., but I don’t want to hear about your young-adult novel depicting a girl in interwar Wales who dreams of being a physicist and is recruited by space aliens to fight a galactic war against misogynistic nanobots.”

“How did you know?”

“When you went to the bathroom, I peeked at your screen.”

“Prick,” she said, snapped her laptop shut. “At least I’m not writing about a stupid sitcom.”

“I like your premise,” I said. “And I can tell by the jangle of your prose you have the music. But I abhor your employment of A.I. I saw the prompts.”

“I just use it a little. To get me going. I mean, if we are all writing fan fiction, aren’t we also just lesser versions of ChatGPT?”

I stood.

“No,” I said. “That’s just what those slick fucks want you to believe. I know of what I speak.”

“Tell me more,” she said.

“To the Narthex, then.”

Radha and I hoisted pints, and in that dingy hole in the shadow of a great cathedral erected more than a hundred years ago, which is about yesterday for a cathedral, we spoke of her youth in North Carolina, where her mother and father toiled in the fields of oncology and nephrology, respectively, and of her life here in the city as a student of fiction.

“My parents think I’m a fool,” she said.

“You are,” I said. “So am I. Embrace that fact. Cherish it. Protect it from the predictive tokens.”

“The what?”

“The bots. The agents.”

I told her all about my travails with P.O.S., and Bennett’s sorry situation, the threats from Tabitha and the fixer.

Radha looked down at her lager.

“You have a sad life,” she said. “No offense.”

“But at least it’s mine. In all its messy, painfully romanticized human ineffectuality.”

“So, do you believe in free will?”

“Not really,” I said. “I get that my every decision is already made, shaped by forces within and without that I do not control. But I do believe, quite fiercely, in the feeling of freedom, however delusional, that comes from the struggle to convince myself otherwise. Bennett and I always agreed on this. Would you like to meet him?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Certainty is the enemy,” I said.

Radha and I walked over to the hospital. I’d tried to see him before but had never got past the nurse’s station. They said you had to be an approved visitor, present I.D. as proof. This time there was a new nurse, a man my age with a paisley eye patch and a bandanna on his head and a loop of gold in his ear, the closest thing to Bartholomew Roberts you will find in a modern health-care setting. But another, more striking detail caught my attention: a small pin affixed to his scrubs that said “Copeland College.”

“Copeland College?” I said to the man, winked. “Friend of Charles?”

“Excuse me?”

“Come, brother. Don’t be coy.”

“Can I help you with something?”

“Your pin, man. Copeland College is where Charles goes. It’s a made-up school.”

The nurse looked at me suspiciously.

“This pin is from Kenneth Copeland Bible College, in Texas. Got my associate’s there before nursing school.”

“Oh.”

*“Pourquoi* the buccaneer vibe?” Radha asked, with the directness of a doctor’s child.

“I’m part of the Christian-pirate community.”

“Now I’ve heard it all,” I said, laughed.

“Damn, Rick,” Radha said, suddenly siding with Calico Jack. “I could say the same about you. You’ve devoted your life to writing stories about ‘Charles in Charge.’”

She snorted, the Judas, but Mr. Skull-and-Crossbones-on-a-Cross clapped his paws.

“Yes! O.K., I’ll come clean. I love that show!”

“What’s not to love?” I said. “It’s about love, in fact. And care. Like what goes on here. Purportedly.”

“Sorry I was cagey before,” the nurse said. “People judge.”

“Don’t need to tell me.”

The nurse studied my face for a moment.

“Wait, you’re not the ‘Final Boy’ dude, are you?”

Radha’s eyes went wide with awe, or maybe with profound confusion.

“I am merely one of many,” I said, “who labor in the bean rows of Carolingian narrative.”

“You’re my favorite! You and that chick who always puts Buddy in a gimp suit.”

“Thanks.”

The nurse tapped his pin.

“I mean, I only went here because of the name. That’s how much I love Charles. Also, like, I didn’t get in anywhere else. Follow me.”

The I.C.U. privateer led us to Bennett’s room, left us. My pal was in deep slumber, breathed through this kind of hissing accordion. He looked awful, as moist and pale as certain veined cheeses.

“How long has he been laying there like that?” Radha asked.

I did not correct her. The rules of grammar were useless now, and never truly rules. There were no rules. Just people looking to hurt and people looking to help. Bennett seemed beyond help and nowhere near good.

“Grab a seat,” I said.

Radha lowered herself into a Naugahyde chair near the smeared window. I sat on the edge of Bennett’s bed, grasped his hand.

“Bennett,” I said. “This is Radha. She’s a writer. Probably a real one, if she can trust herself. Bennett here is my best pal. He wanted to heal folks, just like your mother and father, Radha. And when he couldn’t heal them he held them. He is also good with numbers, and sometimes he sells drugs, but the mild kind. Though not mild enough, I guess. He’s a mediocre comic but funny over a beer. Before all this, he was on his way to mastering poached chicken. He’s also one of the last great listeners. Even though I’m an ex part-time remote therapist, my listening can’t hold a candle, or even a smudge of sage, to his. I believe he’s listening now. Bennett, you can hear me, can’t you? Squeeze my hand if you can.”



"Nancy, four out of five dentists had a great time tonight."

Cartoon by Tyson Cole

I gave it a good minute.

"Maybe his hand is tired," Radha said.

"Maybe," I said. "Anyway, Bennett, I was really hoping you would wake up so you could come back to live in the apartment and we could nine-tenths that ungrateful Tabitha out of our lives. Or you could at least vouch for me, buy me a little more time while you recover. I even had this weird idea, just a few hours ago, that maybe you and Radha might hit it off, start a family, and I could be the live-in housekeeper and child-care provider, just like Charles, though I suppose given my age I would be more of a Mr. Belvedere type. But, either way, I think—"

"What the fuck?" Radha said.

"Pardon?"

"Are you, like, trafficking me?"

"Sorry?"

“You’re pimping me out to a dead guy? I’m supposed to fuck him and have his kids now?”

“He’s not dead,” I said. “But I see your point. I appreciate your perspective.”

“That’s so reassuring.”

“I’m sorry, Radha. This is just . . . really hard.”

I was weeping now. Radha’s worried expression, and the fact that she hadn’t bolted, was a comfort. After a moment, my sobs subsided.

“But, Bennett,” I continued, “none of that stuff matters now. I just want you to wake up and be O.K. I love you, Bennett. I love you so much.”

The accordion shuddered, wheezed, and my friend’s eyes slit up through crusted seals. His fingers tightened on my wrist. He heaved his scraggly head a smidge off the pillow.

“I woave woo thoo,” he said, through flutters of mask spit. Our eyes met before his shut again, and he slumped back into coma world, his grip gone limp.

“My God,” I said. “Radha, did you see that?”

“Is he choking? I should get that pirate.”

“He talked,” I said. “He woke up and was talking.”

“I’ll get someone.”

Radha returned with the doctor I’d met the day they brought Bennett here.

“It happens,” she said. “Involuntary movement.”

“Do coma patients often rise up and involuntarily speak their hearts?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Would I? Doctor? Doctor of what, may I ask?”

“Medicine. You look tired, sir. Go home. Get some rest.”

“I don’t think I have a home,” I said.

The doctor shrugged. “We have people on staff who can direct you to a shelter.”

“I need to be here,” I said. “Bennett’s coming back to us.”

The doctor nodded at the monitors.

“I think he might be going in a different direction.”

We stayed a little longer, but Radha had class, and I figured I should return to the apartment while I could. When I got there, it was already too late. The fixer stood in the living room with the super and some other men. They were putting things in cardboard boxes.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“What does it look like?” the fixer said.

“That’s Janet’s colander you’re handling.”

“Everything’s going to the dump except what’s on this list.”

The fixer waved a sheet of paper. Tabitha came out of Bennett’s, formerly Janet’s, bedroom.

“I’m going to sell the place,” she said. “You can take what’s yours. But not until we make sure it belongs to you.”

“What about Bennett’s stuff?”

“I’ll put it in storage for a while.”

“You mean until he wakes up?”

“I mean for a while.”

“Do you know what ‘donatio mortis causa’ means?”

“Unless it’s Latin for ‘I won’t be any more of a bother,’ I don’t care.”

“So you’re part of it,” I said. “The new vicious programming. The barbarism.”

“I just want to get this place ready to sell and go home to my family in Belgium.”

“For what? Our chocolate is high quality now, you know? They make that monk ale upstate. Bring your family over. I’ll look after them. You can put me in charge.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Bennett’s friend.”

“Look,” Tabitha said. “I’m sorry about my cousin, but he was a freeloader.”

“He was your mother’s boatman. A load you forsook.”

“You don’t know anything about my relationship with my mother.”

“You’re right. Would you like to talk about it? I’m a professional. Ask Paula at Positive Outcome Solutions. She owes me a reference.”

“Pack your shit and go,” Tabitha said.

“You’re not ready to explore those feelings. That’s understandable.”

“Get the fuck out!”

I didn’t have much to pack. Some underwear and outerwear and stuff to go in between. A few books. Some quality hiking boots I’d scored at Goodwill. My laptop. I stuffed it all into Bennett’s old Army duffel.

I walked out into the sunshine, wandered over to the cathedral. A few years ago, during *Covid* times, they’d had a Christmas concert on the church steps,

and a man had appeared, waved a pistol, begged the cops to shoot him. The officers obliged. I watched it all, the whole scene as horrific as it sounds. This guy never got a boatman. He died alone in a crowd that feared him, punched down by bullets, drenched in blood. There was no Bennett on hand to stanch his wounds, no Charles to keep him away from the concert in the first place, to talk him down from his impossible sadness. I knew some piece of that loneliness. Even now, my only friend was drifting off in another direction.

I squatted at the top of the cathedral steps, steeped for a time in my own impossibles. What would Charles do? What *did* he do? I recalled that in the very last episode of the show he was getting ready for an exam to get into Princeton. Maybe Charles went on to become a famous nephrologist, or part of the Christian-pirate community, or both. I prayed he didn't join up with those bastards building the machines of our demise, those cruel neural nets trained on everything great and good and hackneyed ever dreamed up by humans in coffee shops or on Hollywood lots.

Also, I wondered, what happened to Charles's buddy, Buddy? Could a rare cancer of the blood, per my latest installment, put him in a coma? I pictured sweet, bumbling Buddy Lembeck hooked up to that vile accordion, straining to lift himself out of his intubated grave, giving everything to address his best and only friend one last time, to gargle a mucus-slick song of love before falling into dreamless murk. Such a moment might serve as this closing installment's final beat, but it all seemed too sentimental, implausible, obscene. My subscribers would never buy it. But I knew it could happen. It had, in fact, happened. How could I render this truth, make others see? This was my challenge, my task. It wouldn't be easy. It would take the bravest iteration of Rick. I would summon all my craft, everything I'd learned as a master weaver of fanfictional tapestries, my warp and weft, my tricks, my tics, my private prompts, and toss the whole tangled heap away. I would dump out the vats, start afresh. I would become a model trained on nothing but pure feeling, never knowing what comes next. Crouched there on the stone steps of the newish cathedral, I flipped my laptop open, got cracking. ♦

## The Critics

- [How Corporate Feminism Went from “Love Me” to “Buy Me”](#)
- [A Dark Ecologist Warns Against Hope](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [What Do We Want from Our Child Stars?](#)
- [Mark Bittman’s Experiment in Sliding-Scale Fine Dining](#)
- [Tame Impala Is an Obsessive, Not a Perfectionist](#)
- [Nia DaCosta’s “Hedda” Shoots Straight](#)

## Books

# How Corporate Feminism Went from “Love Me” to “Buy Me”

A decade ago, Sheryl Sandberg’s “Lean In” aimed to tear down the obstacles that kept women from reaching the top. Now her successors want to tear down everything.

By [Katy Waldman](#)



*A series of self-help books for working women apply a varnish of empowerment to a program that looks a lot like retreat. Illustration by Cristina Spanò*

Should women be themselves at the office? In the past two decades, self-expression has become a tacit expectation in many white-collar workplaces, with dress codes relaxing and companies professing interest in their employees’ lives and values. *You* got hired to do your job, the thinking goes; no use sending someone else to the staff meeting. But the past few years of layoffs, hiring slowdowns, and dwindling worker protections have left a subset of wage earners inclined to keep their cards close. “My workplace is not prepared for me to bring my authentic self to the office,” one Redditor wrote, cryptically, on r/LateStageCapitalism. In “[Authentic: The Myth of Bringing Your Full Self to Work](#),” the author Jodi-Ann Burey argues that, for women and for people of color, being true to oneself easily morphs into a

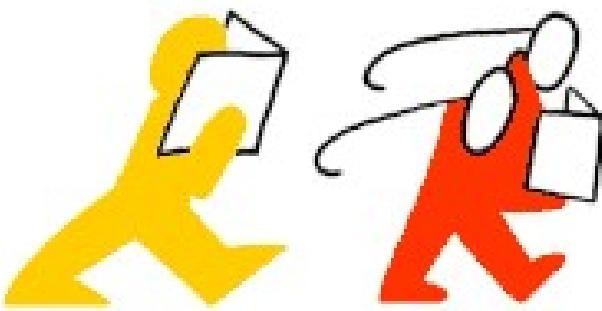
professional liability, particularly in an era of backlash against D.E.I. “Authenticity costs, and I mean cash,” Burey warns.

Into this debate drops the executive coach Kate Mason, whose new book, [“Powerfully Likeable: A Woman’s Guide to Effective Communication”](#), contends that channelling one’s “true self” at work may allow women to transcend sexist biases. Mason lays out the gendered minefield of the modern office, in which women are unfairly labelled ice queens or doormats: those who give direction are penalized for unseemly ambition, while those who radiate agreeableness sacrifice their authority. She cites the cases of two of her clients: Sara, who was scolded for writing e-mails that were too “brusque and officious,” and Sarah, who preferred to add value “behind the scenes,” lest she be seen as habitually “calling out” her accomplishments. What is needed, Mason writes, is “a broader array of communicative patterns,” and a strategy for unfurling women’s “true selves or capabilities.” By “reorienting our focus away from how we’re being perceived and instead working on *who we are*,” she continues, “we can amplify what is special about ourselves” and “show up as an individual rather than as the boring stereotypes from behind doors one or two.”

Mason, although she may quaintly underestimate the ways that a woman can be disliked in the office, is responding to a proven paradox of gender and leadership. When female employees prioritize performance over the comfort of others, their careers suffer, but when they concentrate on kindness they’re dismissed for a lack of decisiveness or vision. In 2024, a team of researchers led by the psychologist Vanessa Burke [found](#) that women who express pride at work are perceived as chillier than men who do the same. Meanwhile, the scientist Andrea C. Vial has [shown](#) that stereotypically feminine traits like communalism and empathy are seen as “nice add-ons for leaders”—cute but expendable. Mason promises to equip women with the kind of charisma you are unlikely to exude while, say, reading a self-help text called “Powerfully Likeable” in the corporate cafeteria. A former world champion in debate, she writes that in striving to be “stern, adversarial, and hyperaggressive . . . I had won the tournament but had lost something of myself.” The book scans as a form of redress—an attempt to reconcile not only the demands of the workplace with the true self but also the apparent contradiction between competitiveness and care.

## What We're Reading

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



Some of Mason's guidance relates to projecting authority. She cautions that explanations should be "topline" and "architectural," because "giving too much context is an immediate signal of non-seniority." She urges women to assemble speaking styles out of a mix of masculine and feminine buzzwords, and to aspire toward "driven warmth" or "rational compassion." (In a Hannah Horvath-esque gesture, the book endorses inwardly defining oneself as *an* expert, but not *the* expert.) Yet much of Mason's advice is simply about being useful, by delivering facts and opinions in a clear, elegant way. Often, I found myself nodding along with her tips: be concise, don't overprepare, dole out information in the right order. Although "Powerfully Likeable" purports to offer women tools for self-expression, its real subject frequently seems to be how to stop obsessing over your professional identity and tell people what they need to know.

But this workaday agenda has been artfully wrapped in therapy-speak. Mason's project, she writes, was devised to relieve her own feeling of inauthenticity, and she has a menu of diagnoses for professional women who may experience the same dissonance. In her hands, the old chestnut of

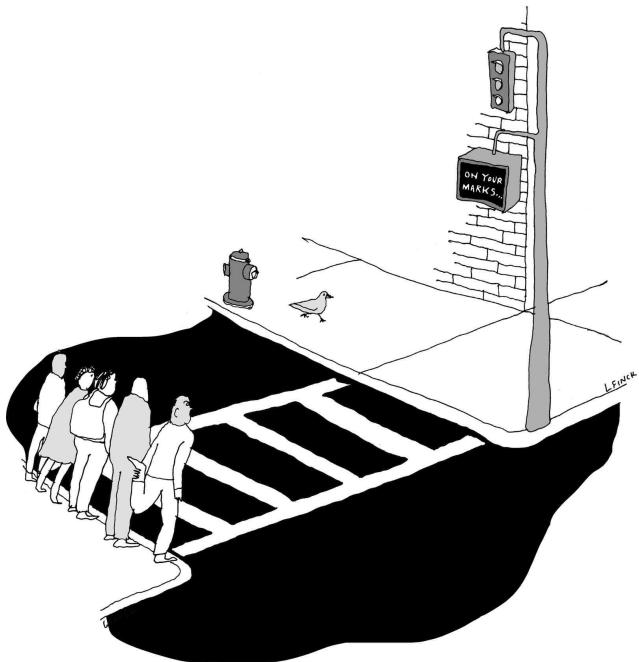
“impostor syndrome,” in which women fear that they will be exposed as frauds, becomes “imposing syndrome,” a private reluctance to take up space. Sections on “communicative self-care” and “presence dysmorphia” recommend mood-boosting exercises such as viewing yourself through the eyes of your best friend. The book claims that women can resist being typecast by appearing “authentically” as the “most powerful and likeable versions” of themselves; this thesis seems, in a bit of subtle customer service, to conflate the real you with the most successful and effective you.

Fix yourself by becoming *more* yourself: it’s not a new idea, even if it’s been newly grafted onto the org chart. For decades, advertisers have tried to inculcate in women an urgent sense of lack, while simultaneously insisting that their true selves—the selves that they can access by purchasing the right products—are perfect and complete. If Mason is unravelling a double bind here, it’s less about the tension between power and likability and more about a commercial quandary: how do you inflame the consumer’s desires while also appealing to her ego? “Powerfully Likeable” brings the marketplace into the workplace, which it reimagines as a venue where women can model their branded communication styles. The pitch is not that labor standards are dismally low but, rather, that workplaces would be fairer if they understood what makes us quintessentially us.

Mason isn’t the first to figure the white-collar business as a site of feminine self-creation. “Powerfully Likeable” descends most obviously from “[Lean In](#),” by the former Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg, which came out in 2013 and featured a similar blend of social science and personal anecdote. Sandberg’s gift to pop feminism was the idea that one could cure the workplace by curing women, who were stymied by a lack of confidence and ambition. Her manual for tearing down the “internal obstacles” that prevent female employees from reaching the top doubled as an unintentionally lucid exploration of office sexism. Like Mason, Sandberg was concerned about the gendered trade-off between leadership and likability, even as she reproduced it in her book. She offered readers empowering slogans—raise your hand, sit at the table, don’t leave before you leave—but also made the case for delicacy. To smooth female workers’ negotiations with their colleagues, Sandberg advocated that they use “we” rather than “I” pronouns and express “appreciation and concern.” Her message was implicit, but potent: women, it’s time to own your career journey.

In certain circles, the book was canonized. It spent more than a year on the *Times* best-seller list and prompted the formation of hundreds of “Lean In” study groups, where women could practice “peer mentorship” and encourage one another to ask for raises. Sandberg’s critics, meanwhile, pointed out that her vision was limited in predictable and maddening ways: she was a stratospherically successful Harvard graduate who’d been mentored by Larry Summers, and who seemed ignorant of the challenges facing nonwhite and lower-income women. (Soon after “Lean In” was published, Sandberg became one of the youngest female billionaires in the world.) For a hymn to the transformative power of feminine ambition, the critique went, “Lean In” was oddly unambitious, its humble aims captured in the motion named by the title: here was an attempt not to revolutionize the workplace but to adjust the working woman’s angle of approach.

In retrospect, the book feels like an artifact of a fleetingly optimistic moment, and of a time when the mainstreaming of feminism—recall Beyoncé performing in front of a screen flashing the word “*FEMINIST*” at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards—not only diluted the concept but also pressed it into service on behalf of the free market. As Susan Faludi observed, in 2013, “Lean In” belongs to a tradition going back to at least 1920, when mass merchandisers co-opted the idioms of emancipation in a bid for women’s money. Sandberg, who described her book as only “sort of a feminist manifesto,” refreshed the old aspirational consumerism by transferring it to work. It wasn’t so much that she promoted material accumulation, though she did, but that her financial resources, which enabled her “to afford any help I need,” were a silent precondition for much of her advice. (Note the ticklishness of her allusion to the costs of child care: a wary elision of offspring is a trademark of pop-feminist self-help.) The program she espoused for less privileged women was one of emulation—a kind of “fake it till you make it” regime in which everyone behaves *as if* she were Sheryl Sandberg. It was a canny move of self-branding—relatability braced by an element of seduction, by jokes and encouragement delivered in Sandberg’s warm, vulnerable, and confiding voice.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

But if “Lean In” ’s prescriptions rang hollow even at the time, both Sandberg and the women’s movement ended up having bigger problems. Sandberg’s company, we learned, was damaging the mental health of teen-age girls, insufficiently safeguarding users’ personal information, and, arguably, destroying democracy. (As the Georgetown Law professor Rosa Brooks [told the Times](#), “Not everything should be leaned into.”) Sandberg stepped down from Facebook in 2022, amid headlines underscoring her “mixed legacy.” Feminism, meanwhile, saw [Hillary Clinton’s defeat](#), in 2016, by a man accused of sexual assault; the [repeal of Roe v. Wade](#); the #MeToo [backlash](#); and [Kamala Harris’s loss](#), in 2024, to the same man. Although Sandberg’s key ideas now seem dated, her approach to self-commodification is everywhere. We’ve taken a scorched-earth approach to workplace feminism: burning away the last vestiges of institutional support and structure until only the brand remains.

“[All the Cool Girls Get Fired: How to Let Go of Being Let Go and Come Back on Top](#),” by Laura Brown and Kristina O’Neill, is one of several feminist-scented offerings to rise from the ashes. It feels like a direct riposte and a sign of the times: exit company woman, enter entrepreneur. Both Brown and O’Neill worked in fashion journalism, Brown as the editor of *InStyle* and O’Neill as the editor of *WSJ Magazine*, and both, as they write, “got big-time, super-publicly fired; two ducks decanted unceremoniously out

of the water.” The book combines friendly encouragement—“Well, welcome to the party, baby!” the authors crow to the newly canned—with practical advice for life after a layoff. Chapters on finding employment lawyers, securing health care, minimizing expenses, and locating hole-patching income sources alternate with stories of high-profile women who lost their jobs, including Lisa Kudrow, Katie Couric, and Oprah. “The corner office is not all there is,” Brown and O’Neill write, their tone lively and irreverent. “Real power comes from individualism. And guess what helps you come to that realization? Being fired.”

Brown and O’Neill devote a chapter to managing the public narrative of a job loss: strive to leave with poise and dignity; craft an “I got laid off” announcement; solicit introductions and take as many meetings as possible to furnish “proof of life.” Another chapter recommends being direct when explaining your departure: “Keep it high and tight. Nobody needs *War and Peace*.” In Brown and O’Neill’s construction, the savvy, freshly unemployed woman is a memoirist, as adept at omission as she is at the arrangement of detail. And, like a memoirist, she’s often trying to expunge shame, a word that appears thirty-one times in the book. “The truth is not shameful,” they write. “It’s freeing! There’s real power in being able to say, ‘Yeah, I got fired.’ When you own it, you strip away the stigma.”

Brown and O’Neill cast themselves less as Sandberg’s heirs than as her apostates. “Over here, you see, we’re a little more *lean out*,” they write. They entreat readers to “have an identity outside of your job, be it on social media, a sports team, or at the local pottery workshop,” but the first item on that list gives away the game. Much of the book revolves around the art of telling your story online. There are injunctions to “maintain a consistent presence across all the platforms you appear on,” and caveats that internet screeds “are just one screengrab away from immortality.” The Cool Girls’ aims are lofty: they don’t merely seek to protect your material well-being; they wish to help you find your vocational purpose, to think through “how you’ve grown” and “what you represent.”

At times, “All the Cool Girls” replicates some of “Lean In” ’s more frustrating blind spots. (The authors suggest that one might save money while prioritizing the mental-health benefits of exercise by asking one’s personal trainer for a discount.) Like Sandberg, Brown and O’Neill use

charm, humor, and tactful disclosure to fashion a relatable but lightly untouchable persona—they are influencers, not organizers, their vision of collectivism a faux sisterhood of similarly branded selves. Rather than departing from “Lean In,” the book updates Sandberg’s themes. Women are now supposed to lean into their reputations rather than their work projects. They’re exhorted to fine-tune their self-presentation to the public rather than to their supervisor. Whereas the 2013-era girlboss reshaped herself to accommodate her company, her present-day incarnation turns herself into a company, a twenty-four-hour amalgamation of C.E.O. and product. Once, she derived satisfaction from owning her labor; now she is celebrated for owning her story.

As Brown and O’Neill attempt to reimagine job loss—to make poinsettias out of pink slips—their positivity can seem to border on delusion. Good riddance, they call to crumbling labor norms, applying a varnish of empowerment to a program that looks like retreat. Sandberg, for all her interest in proto-influencing, focussed on being liked and respected in the boardroom. The Cool Girls are even more transactional, instructing women to monetize their connections on social media. This ideological evolution from “Love Me” to “Buy Me” maps onto a culture that increasingly instrumentalizes its workers, urging them to share, in lieu of the fruits of a joint struggle, a fluency in marketing copy. “Embrace your skills, your equity, and your worth,” Brown and O’Neill whoop. When you’re a Cool Girl, you may be your own most valuable asset, but only because the rest of your portfolio is empty.

The self has long been a product; what’s new, perhaps, is the clarity and complicity of the transaction. The entrepreneurial-consumerist breeze that stirred the subtext of “Lean In” has become a societal headwind, ripping away the pretense that the new career guides for women have anything to do with feminism, or even work. Instead, everything is content.

In “[Fly! A Woman’s Guide to Financial Freedom and Building a Life You Love](#),” Steph Wagner implores female readers to “recognize the critical importance of financial independence” and notes that nearly fifty per cent of women between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-six have no retirement savings. Wagner is the national director of women and wealth at a blue-chip assets-management company, and her investments in the subject are

personal. After pulling a six-figure salary as a vice-president of a private-equity firm, she quit her job in order to become the C.M.O. (“Chief Mommy Officer”) to her three sons. Then her husband, Richard (a pseudonym), an executive at a mutual-fund company, cheated on her and announced that he was decamping to live on a ranch. Wagner recouped her losses by starting a financial-advising business oriented toward women.

Across forty pages of perfect derangement, Wagner uses her personal-finance handbook to unspool her divorce odyssey, seizing the ethos that no personal tragedy is too intimate to exploit. Seemingly every person she meets has an encouraging aphorism to share. When she arrives at a hotel restaurant, only to find it closed, two female employees prepare a feast, replete with bottles of red wine, waving away her request for the bill. “It’s just what we as women do for each other,” one of them says. Her son speaks to her in a “small but resolute” voice. “Mom,” he says, “I get it. You’re like the giving tree.”

Wagner is giving plenty—horoscope columnist, for one. After the personal-history section, readers are invited to determine their “money personality.” There’s the Giver (“her desire to help others can come at a cost”) and the Trailblazer (“with a clear vision and unwavering ambition, the Trailblazer exudes confidence and embraces thoughtful risk”), as well as the Skeptic, the High Roller, the Penny Pincher, and the Avoider. These dramatis personae, although they fall away soon after they’re introduced, suggest that the field of finance is not immune to influencer brain, which sorts people into targetable types, adds some prosperity gospel, pours a sense of mysticism or destiny on top, and presents the result as a panacea.

It’s probably no accident that, for Wagner, the only acceptable personality appears to be Trailblazer, perhaps with a side of High Roller. “Fly,” which portrays the self as a stock to be invested in, grown, and used to generate wealth, is a guide not for laborers but for capitalists. The feminist self-help industry, professing to foreground meaning and purpose, has instead become a mirror in which our financialized society admires its reflection. The irony of this capture is that imperatives such as “bring your whole self to work” are now issued by people who seem to have no idea what a whole self is. In their world, which is also ours, selfhood has degraded into taste, preferences, demography, and outlays of attention and money. It is interpreted by market

researchers with the help of algorithms and large language models; it has little to do with our inner lives, imaginations, or souls. According to the spokespeople of grind culture, the choice is clear: your individuality can make money for you or it can make money for somebody else. Buying in is easier than it should be—falling so far through the looking glass that owning yourself starts to seem like the last frontier of freedom. ♦

By [Cal Revely-Calder](#)

In 2014, Paul Kingsnorth was sunk in doubt. He was forty-one and had been on the green movement's front lines since the nineteen-nineties—working for Greenpeace and EarthAction, chaining himself to a bridge, getting tear-gassed outside a G-8 summit. In the course of two decades, he had become one of Britain's leading environmentalists, and an accomplished novelist, too: “The Wake,” set in eleventh-century Lincolnshire and written in cod–Old English (“*When i woc in the mergen all was blaec though the night had gan and all wolde be blaec after and for all time*”), was long-listed that summer for the Booker Prize.

After twenty years of campaigns, though, he sensed that the movement was going nowhere—and missing the deeper point. Too many environmentalists had “no attachment to any actual environment,” he complained; they talked up the Earth but showed “no sign of any real, felt attachment to any small part of that Earth.” A few years earlier, he had co-founded the Dark Mountain Project to promote what he would call “dark ecology.” Its manifesto declared the fight against climate change lost and a “collapse” inevitable.

So, in the same year that the [People’s Climate March](#) drew the largest crowds the cause had ever seen, Kingsnorth moved in the opposite direction. He left England for rural Ireland, where, with his wife, who had been a psychiatrist, and their two children, he set about making a new life as a smallholder—planting trees, keeping animals, clearing brambles. He cut grass with a scythe and smashed the porcelain toilet in his house to replace it with one that composted waste. He’s lived there ever since, writing on his Substack, *The Abbey of Misrule*. In recent years, he has railed against COVID-vaccine mandates, converted to Orthodox Christianity, and fixed on the true enemy: “the Machine.” His new book, “[Against the Machine](#)” (Thesis), his first in years, is part summa, part broadside, part testament. “Sometimes,” he notes at the outset, “I feel like I’ve been writing about this thing all my life.”

## [What We’re Reading](#)

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The Machine is both an old idea and a modern curse. As a metaphor, it whirred to life in the seventeenth century, when Descartes, Hobbes, and Boyle imagined nature as glorified clockwork. Since the nineteen-sixties, it has been a countercultural refrain: we fight the Machine, rage against it, or feel ourselves feeding it. Kingsnorth's conception encompasses all these modes. He's talking about the actual devices that chew through the Earth and spit out waste, and also about a machinelike cast of mind: automatic, unreflective, content to produce and consume in an endless cycle. Capitalism, which lubricates the Machine, has fostered a mania for measurement that has steered public policy for decades, reduced our values to financial value alone, and scorned ideas like heritage and tradition—all that we love but cannot count.

Kingsnorth speaks, as converts often do, as if the world had left him, not the other way around. In 2022, he told an interviewer that he had once considered himself “a man of the left,” and in some ways still did. Now, though, he treats “progress” as a pseudonym for the Machine and “progressives” as its corporate captives—hence their embrace of “sustainability,” which he sees as a cover for business as usual. Recycling or chasing carbon zero, from his perspective, is as useful as flicking water on a wildfire; it won’t stop mass extinction or climate change. Environmentalists who promote such measures, including his fellow-Englishman George

Monbiot, are, in his view, Manchurian figures shilling for “the corporate sector, big NGOs, global institutions.”

The two have sparred before. In 2009, they exchanged public letters in the *Guardian*, circling a question that nags at many eco-minded Westerners: What, in practice, can one do? Kingsnorth accused Monbiot of offering a false choice: either “Liberal Capitalist Democracy 2.0,” the status quo with more solar panels, or “McCarthy world,” in which “The Road” becomes our reality. Neither, he argued, reckoned with the scale of what was coming; we needed to return to our cultural roots, relearn how to live, and accept that fire and flood lay beyond our control. Monbiot called this “a millenarian fantasy” and maintained that faith in political action was a duty—life must go on.

The rift was metaphysical. Kingsnorth may be right that Monbiot is a Machine man, intent on twiddling levers to save the world, but, by that standard, so is anyone who makes any green choice at all. That is the lure, and the hazard, of Kingsnorth’s position: it tends toward the absolute. In his new book, the Machine is also “the technium,” a term he borrows from the techno-optimist Kevin Kelly for the impersonal, unstoppable force technology has become. It reshapes all values and cannot be reversed. Without abandoning society altogether, there is no escape—and even that dream, Kingsnorth says, is illusory, because the Machine is “a tendency within us,” assembled with our own blood and sweat.

In lamenting that tendency, Kingsnorth joins a chorus as old as civilization. Cities, machines, modernity rise; the countryside, the old ways, tradition decline. Socrates warned that writing, a mechanical act, might weaken memory, a creative one. Virgil linked the destruction of pastures to moral decay—“right and wrong are tangled up; the world is drowning in war; evil takes all kinds of forms; and the plough is no longer a thing of honour”—which is a line that could sit without strain in “Against the Machine.” Jefferson, Hogg, Blake, Thoreau: with the Enlightenment, the objectors multiplied. For Kingsnorth, the Industrial Revolution marked the point of no return. What was once *anima*, a spirit or soul, became *techne*, a resource. Playing gods, we turned our backs on the Earth. It is, in his account, the Fall—or, in secular terms, human history as tragedy, a swan dive into the dark.

Kingsnorth's break with the green movement, after years of being one of its most visible foot soldiers, cost him. Since the twenty-tens, he has shunned, and been shunned by, the liberal mainstream. A previous Archbishop of Canterbury once quoted his work; now [Rod Dreher](#) backs it. Kingsnorth's attachment to the patriotic concept of "England," one often claimed by the political right, draws suspicion, but he argues that the left ceded it without cause. His idea of "roots," indebted to [Simone Weil](#), means the bonds of community, not genetic heritage. He imagines the modern nation-state disassembling into smaller, more anarchic units, despises the "maw of the expanding cities," and tells us, via Lewis Mumford, that Plato thought a city should be small enough for one voice to address it. He wants to reclaim "parochial"—what's wrong with parishes? The icons in "Against the Machine," from [Aldous Huxley](#) to Jacques Ellul, tend toward communitarian, class-conscious, small-“C” conservatism, albeit illuminated with a touch of the transcendent. With a few edits, the book could pass for an anarchist tract; with a few more, for the work of a Christian ascetic.

Before it can be either, though, there are swaths of nonsense to scythe. Kingsnorth claims to abjure the culture wars—"I don't believe in this conflict, and I won't send my children to fight in it"—while framing his own culture-war sorties as battles with the Machine. Feminism, he writes, has besieged the "un-Machine-like family unit." ("Why should a child not have three fathers?" is, he claims, a serious question of the moment.) Mass migration, he warns, puts "the natives . . . on the path to minority status," even as the migrants are excluded from the "national story"—a story that, thanks to the ruling élites, is now being "dissolved" anyway. (This is both confused and not how stories work, but never mind.) "Population" appears in his prose shadowed by "growing," "mass," and "vast," as if it were a pestilence. One wonders what he thinks should happen to these human beings. Perhaps they are beyond help. Perhaps the rest of us are, too. He writes as if modern Britain were run by the Khmer Rouge:

Patriotism, Christianity, cultural conservatism, sexual modesty, even a mild nostalgia for the English countryside or a love of once-canonical novels: all are more or less *verboten*, and the attitude towards them is rapidly hardening. Until recently simply giggled at or patronised, these kinds of views in the 2020s may see you labelled a "white supremacist," or the more general but still-lethal "hater."

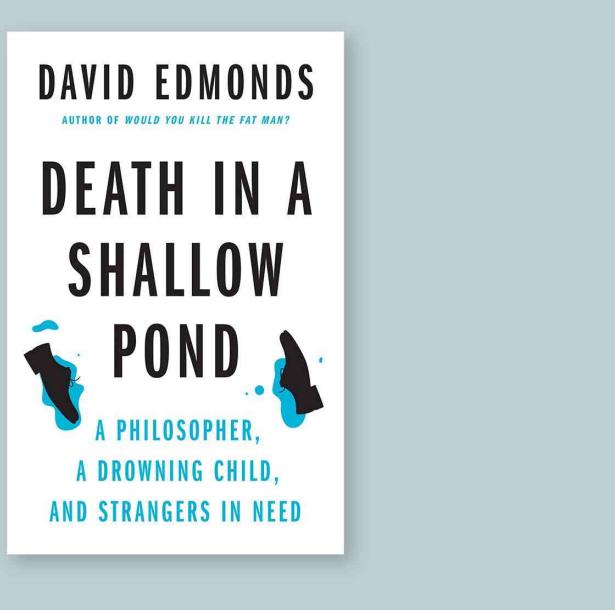
From where I sit—in Britain, working in the media, talking to people on the left and the right—none of these enthusiasms are marginalized. If anything, they’re widely endorsed. Even among the young, whom Kingsnorth calls “lost, confused and very-online,” plenty relish the countryside, read classic novels, and, yes, go to church. (Church attendance in England and Wales has risen in recent years, with worshippers aged eighteen to twenty-four outnumbered only by the elderly.) For a digital skeptic who warns that “*the net*” and “*the web*” are “*things designed to trap prey*,” Kingsnorth sounds extremely online.

What’s strangest about the fist-shaking is how unnecessary it all is. As with M.I.A.’s theories about 5G or [Alice Walker](#)’s fondness for David Icke, the rest of the work can stand without it, whatever the creator—and the detractors—believes. The deeper provocations of “Against the Machine” are worth hearing, however gloomy. Kingsnorth is surely right that public life has been overtaken by a narrow fixation on data and measurement. I doubt that “sustainable” living can save us; if I had a plot of land, I might try beekeeping and the composting commode. And who can deny that many technologies of convenience, from DoorDash to ChatGPT, sever us from skills fundamental to who we are, or were?

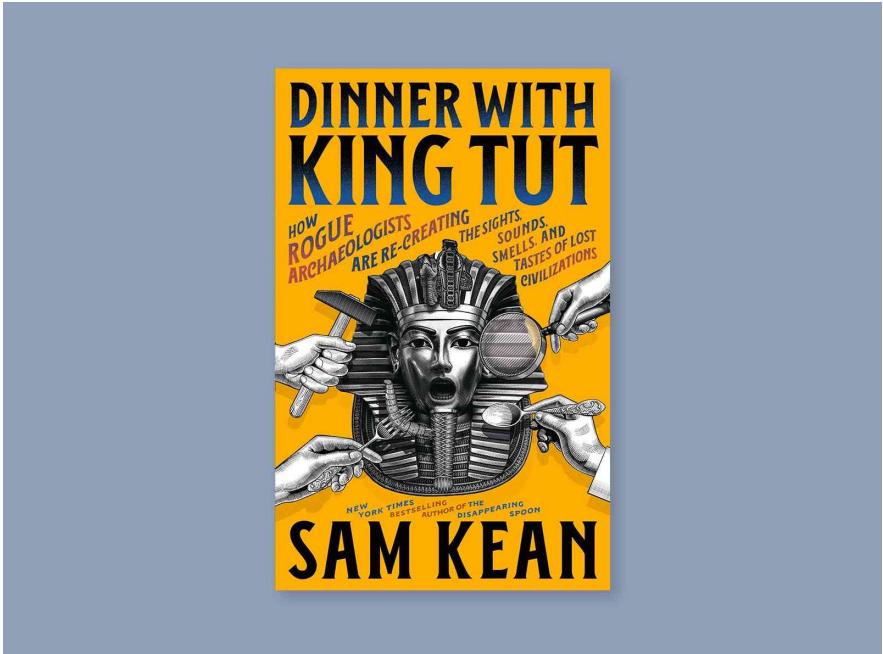
Yet the question remains: What is to be done? Suppose you accept Kingsnorth’s framing. You’re not merely “climate anxious,” dutifully recycling and turning off lights; you sometimes feel doomed. You warily eye the spread of QR codes, data-harvesting apps, the creeping necessity of a smartphone to do anything. You agree that the Machine is to blame. None of this tells you how to fight it, or how to reclaim your better nature. Here, even the great [anti-technologists](#) have stalled. Lewis Mumford urged us to change our “personal desires, habits and ideals”; Jerry Mander, to treat every new device as “guilty until proven innocent”; Neil Postman, to become “loving resistance fighters” who keep “an epistemological and psychic distance” from technology. All, like Kingsnorth, named the enemy “the Machine” and were acute critics of modern life well before the digital age. But they preferred their prescriptions to be dispensed at home. Politics, it seemed, was futile, since the Machine was still sovereign. It remains so, more securely than ever.

Kingsnorth leaves us in much the same place. He borrows from the imperial Chinese classification of the Li people, dividing the “cooked” from the “raw”—or those “barbarians” admitted to the fold but kept at arm’s length from those beyond the state’s reach in their mountain caves. We should see ourselves, he suggests, as barbarians in a Machine-run world—using technology reluctantly, rejecting it when we can. But the goal feels remote. Few of us, as he concedes, can hope to be raw. He himself needed the internet and a laptop to write this book, which makes him pretty cooked. And there’s no obvious way out. Even rural Ireland has, for centuries, been reshaped by technology, transformed by one generation after another; it’s a product of the enclosure system that he condemns as “Machine modernity.” He acknowledges plenty such tangles, but, when a metaphor covers everything we do, it risks meaning nothing at all.

This book may not be the one Kingsnorth truly holds in his heart. I suspect that he yearns for an answer big enough to eclipse the Machine and wants us to look past this life to the next. That was the stance of Jacques Ellul, another Christian anarchist. Yes, Ellul said, we must reject a society devoted to efficiency and rationalism, and shun technology wherever we can, but that will never be enough. We must also restore our pointless, glorious bond with God. Kingsnorth’s longing for the old bond with nature as *anima* is not so different. Yet if his true counsel is to head to church and pray for the New Jerusalem—ironically, a celestial *city*—he never quite says so. Instead, he insists that “to liberate ourselves . . . we simply have to walk away from the Machine in our hearts and minds.” In truth, nothing could be less simple, not here at the end of the world. We can’t walk away when there is no “away.” The Virgilian choice—the plough or the city, the field or the forum—has never been a real one. Everything happens, for good or ill, in the overlap. ♦



**Death in a Shallow Pond**, by David Edmonds (*Princeton*). Few among us would hesitate to wade into a pond to save a drowning child. Faced with more distant suffering, however, most people in wealthy societies are curiously immobile. From this observation—first made by the philosopher Peter Singer, in the nineteen-seventies—sprang the movement known as effective altruism, whose adherents seek out impartial ways to do the most good, perhaps most archetypally by funding cost-effective interventions that improve the lives of people in extreme poverty. As Edmonds traces the movement's rise (it now wields significant influence in Silicon Valley and in philanthropy) and untangles critiques that have been levelled against it, he transforms moral inquiry into a high-stakes adventure.



[\*\*Dinner with King Tut\*\*](#), by Sam Kean (Little, Brown). In this sprightly tour of experimental archeology, whose enthusiasts are dedicated to “re-creating the lives of our ancestors,” professional archeologists and amateurs alike knap stone tools by hand, reconstruct the elaborate hairdos of ancient Roman women, and test Egyptian mummification methods on medical cadavers. Kean himself gets a tattoo hand-poked into his skin and applies medieval salves to his wounds. To Kean, these attempts to resurrect the past are a refreshing corrective to traditional archeology. The field, he writes, “needs to focus on what people in the past actually *experienced*—the moments that filled their days, and filled their lives.”

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## **What We're Reading**



Illustration by Ben Hickey

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**The Ten Year Affair**, by *Erin Somers* (*Simon & Schuster*). At the outset of this intoxicating novel, a married man and a married woman meet in a baby group, where they bond over their dislike of another of its members. They soon find that they have much more in common—including mutual

attraction. For the next decade, the woman conjures a robust fantasy world in which she and the man have trysts in hotels and holiday together in Paris and Marrakech. In reality, the two of them resist acting upon their desires, and their families become friends (even forming a pandemic pod). As the woman nurses her rich imagined relationship, she reflects, “What was exalted occurred alongside the ordinary every moment, ceaselessly. But you couldn’t make it stay.”



**What a Time to Be Alive**, by Jade Chang (Ecco). In this timely and touching novel, Lola, a young, broke woman living in L.A., is catapulted to social-media fame after giving a eulogy for her best friend, who was killed in a skateboarding accident. Hoping to attain financial stability, she decides to capitalize on the online attention her speech receives by becoming a kind of spiritual influencer, spreading a message of “openness and transcendence and finding divinity in daily life.” She finds herself leading workshops and being celebrated by fans, some of whom tattoo her words on their bodies. Ragged with grief despite her success, Lola eventually wonders whether the messages of universal love she cynically espouses may serve as a balm for her, too.

[A Critic at Large](#)

# What Do We Want from Our Child Stars?

Adoration, exploitation, and the strange afterlife of being celebrated too soon.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



*Shirley Temple, around 1935. At the height of her fame, she was Hollywood's answer to the Depression—a prodigy paid to make adulthood seem bearable. Photograph by THA / Shutterstock*

The first thing the child actor discovers is universal love, quickly followed by universal hatred. The whipsaw between the two leaves a mark, even after the stage or set is abandoned. The universal love is the applause, either heard in person or received from afar, a love reinforced by the sense of an instant, intimate family—a life backstage or in the trailer, far more interesting than the often unhappy family left behind. The grown actors who share dressing rooms have war stories to tell and, whether they mean to or not, project an intoxicating air of adult possibility. The universal hatred comes from the child star's coevals, whose curiosity about the occupation is mingled with resentment. As the onetime musical-theatre prodigy [Debbie Gibson](#) recalls in her memoir, "[Eternally Electric](#)," she went to school every day "never

able to fully relax because I didn't know when the next mean remark was coming my way"—including, often, from teachers.

As a result, child actors never really grow up, or, more precisely, having grown up once, early, like a forced flower, they stay the age they were when their careers ended. No one is more permanently precocious than a former child star. Their memoirs begin with the blaze of unexpected adoration, then turn to the sting of resentment, and end with the slow burn of "aging out." Even when the loss is small—a cancelled show, a vanished agent—the comeback, whether as a TV regular or a life coach, can't live up to that first blaze.

The child star is of a slightly different kind than the actor who happens to be young. Though there have recently been many terrific performances by young actors in young parts, with Quvenzhané Wallis in "Beasts of the Southern Wild," Jacob Tremblay in "Room," and Brooklynn Prince in "The Florida Project," not to mention the "Harry Potter" kids, the niche culture we live in now produces child stars who are designed, almost for the first time, to appeal pretty much exclusively to children their own age. Where Shirley Temple and the "Our Gang" stars made entertainments "for the whole family," their precocity aimed upward at pleasing grownups, the trajectory today runs laterally, with the precocity fired horizontally at the stars' own generation. The result may be shorter performing careers, but sometimes also a second act on the best-seller lists, when the audience that once watched them on TV ages into buying books.

And so Jennette McCurdy's memoir, "[I'm Glad My Mom Died](#)," has sold more than three million copies, tethered to the *Times* list for eighty weeks. ([Al Pacino](#)'s memoir hung on for six.) Once a Nickelodeon star, back in the two-thousands, McCurdy has written a good, sad book. She was a standout in the sassy-sidekick sweepstakes, though to note sassy precocity in a Nickelodeon star is a little like noting moody melancholia in a Bergman actor: it's less a feature of the performer than a prerequisite of the enterprise. Playing Sam—a girl with a boy's name, hyperaggressive and armed with a "buttersock" used as a slapstick weapon—she gave the show "iCarly" a rare edge, made memorable by her refusal to be too cute.

Meanwhile, a new memoir by McCurdy's contemporary on the Disney Channel, Alyson Stoner, is essentially the same book, with the same cast of characters—overweening mom, absent dad, cynical management, uncertain siblings, and even sporadic bursts of religious frenzy—albeit with a wittier title, “[Semi-Well-Adjusted Despite Literally Everything](#),” and a drier, more acidly observant style. Stoner, an all-purpose Disney supporting player who was never quite attached to a single part, first became known for a brief appearance in a Missy Elliott video, as a small white girl attempting hip-hop steps. A child star was born.

I'll admit to a certain kinship here, if a very distant one. Never a star, I nonetheless occupied, in my own childhood, a strange niche: the Shirley Temple of Philadelphia's avant-garde theatre. It wasn't, as avant-gardes go, the most incandescent, but it wasn't the dimmest, either. The now legendary André Gregory had formed an experimental company, lit up by Brecht and Grotowski, and I got the kid parts. [I loved acting](#), and though the stage was Lilliputian compared with Hollywood's, many of the same emotions the memoirists describe were present. Chief among them was the sense that the audience whose applause one sought could be reached only through the defensive lines of the “creative team” one had to impress first. The life of a child actor, I learned, is like that of a sapper in the infantry: you have to disarm the minefield immediately ahead before you can advance on the real objective.

And I vividly remember, as the memoirists do, the air of half-comprehended sexual complication that inevitably drifted through the dressing rooms and bloomed in the corridors. The highlight and lowlight of my career came simultaneously in a Grotowskian theatre-of-cruelty production in which I played a “Native” boy with blue-painted skin, who is stoned to death in the opening scene—really stoned, with Styrofoam boulders. I had to lie there, a festering corpse, for hours as the play went on. To endure it, I memorized all the lyrics from the last Beatles record and the opening chapters of books I liked, imprinting them in my mind. To this day, I can recite from that recumbent memory the first pages of “[The Fellowship of the Ring](#).” Naturally, I emerged from the ordeal determined to give up acting and become a book critic.

The neatly packaged claim would be that the rise of the child actor coincided with the rise of the child—that only in the early Romantic period, when children were first imagined as “trailing clouds of glory,” were they lifted onto the stage. Unfortunately, like most tidy historical packages, this one isn’t so. In Shakespeare’s time, the Children of the Chapel, a company made up entirely of boys, competed fiercely with the playwright’s company, the King’s Men, and often outdrew them. A fine and funny movie might be made of this competition, which Shakespeare captures mordantly in “Hamlet,” when the troupe that has arrived to entertain the Danish prince is fleeing its most vexing rivals, that company of children.

Recent studies of the Children of the Chapel note that they were sometimes dragooned into the theatre. One lawsuit, filed by an irate father, complained that a company manager “did haul, pull, drag, and carry away” his thirteen-year-old on his way to school. The idea has a topsy-turvy charm—the notion of child actors and their parents running *away* from producers rather than after them—but the practice may have had a darker side. Some scholars have suggested that the boys were prized for their looks and conscripted into homoerotic pageants created by [Christopher Marlowe](#).

This, of course, is part of the eternal rhythm of child acting and its commentary: someone is always accusing the producers of sexualizing the children, though the children themselves often seem less alarmed than we might expect—perhaps because posing onstage was easier than other things Elizabethan kids might be doing. We tend to swing wildly in our judgments. In the eighteen-nineties, [Oscar Wilde](#) was vilified as an Epsteinian monster for having sex with underage working-class boys; later, he was sanctified as a martyr for such acts. Doubtless, we’ll soon be back to our original condemnation.

Our judgments may oscillate, but our fascination stays constant. Only with the new urban audiences of the early nineteenth century, though, did it crystallize into something recognizably modern—the cult of the child star. The astonishing young actor known as Master Betty was the prototype of the species. An Irish boy with a stage father, Betty became a sensation in Belfast, at the start of the century, by playing adult roles, then conquered London, where he starred in “Hamlet”—the ironies of the “Players” scene must have been thick in the air—and “Richard III.” A genuine wonder, he

was almost certainly one of Charles Dickens's models for the "Infant Phenomenon" in the Crummles troupe of "[Nicholas Nickleby](#)."

Betty's story, remarkable as it is, has been told only once, by the acidly entertaining English historian Giles Playfair. Writing in the sixties, Playfair compared Betty to the newly minted Beatlemania, convinced that the new stars would fade as completely as the old. Yet Bettymania was the real thing. "He and Buonaparte now divide the world," the artist James Northcote wrote to a friend after Betty's London début. In Stockport, church bells rang to celebrate an extra performance; in Sheffield, "theatrical coaches" were dispatched from the Doncaster races to carry six eager passengers to see him. In Liverpool, the rush for seats was so great that, Playfair recounts, "hats, wigs, boots, and tippers flew about in all directions." The Duchess of Devonshire, after seeing Betty perform, confessed, "I never saw anything to compare to him. . . . He has changed the life of London. People dine at four, go to the play, and think of nothing but the play."

Playfair speculates that the frenzy may have offered a distraction from the Napoleonic Wars—people said the same thing about the Beatles after the [J.F.K. assassination](#)—but such manias rarely need political excuses. They rise and fall on their own heat. Was Betty, in the stricter sense, any good? It's hard to tell. Memorizing parts as large as the title roles of "Hamlet" and "Richard III" is impressive enough, but what lingers in accounts of Betty is less his voice than his beauty. He seems to have been more Justin Bieber than Macaulay Culkin, a shooting star whose appeal lay in precocious glamour. One cultural role of child stars, after all, is to embody for their moment the ambiguities of approaching adolescence. (Even the blue-skinned boy was left prone upon the rocks because of a playwright's erotic-transgressive impulse.)

Betty was remembered for his androgyny. An observer wrote, long after Betty's heyday, that "his features were delicate, but somewhat feminine; his eyes a full, bright, and shining blue; his fair hair long and hanging in ringlets over his shoulders—in the daytime those abundant tresses were confined with a comb, which still more gave the idea of a female in male costume." Admirably gender-fluid, he belongs to a long lineage of pop idols—including both a young Frank Sinatra and David Cassidy—just masculine enough to intrigue yet not so masculine as to be threatening.

How was the spell cast? How did Betty manage the scenes with Ophelia, with their bawdy repartee? And who, for that matter, played Ophelia? History is silent. What's most striking is how swiftly he slipped from view. The same public that once adored him turned against him after the critic Leigh Hunt—witty and waspish, later caricatured by Dickens as Mr. Skimpole in "[Bleak House](#)"—led a campaign protesting the indecency of letting a child play adult roles. "Let us admire children as children," Hunt wrote. "To admire them as men is to become children ourselves." The attack aimed to preserve the Romantic ideal of childhood innocence, not to deny the boy's gift. By twenty, Betty was playing in the provinces; soon afterward, he attempted suicide. When he died, in 1874, he was wholly forgotten. His fall was so abrupt and final that Hunt, unusually for a critic, later expressed regret: "I wish with all my heart we had left him alone . . . for the town was in fault, not he."

Still, Master Betty ruled the little province of Parnassus devoted to underage thespians until the advent of Shirley Temple—and it's some measure of her talent, or maybe of her moment, that nearly a century later hers is often still the first name that comes to mind when we think of child stars. Temple's autobiography, simply titled "[Child Star](#)," is, like its author, a small American classic. Tough-minded, unsentimental, and unexpectedly bleak, more "Day of the Locust" than "Good Ship Lollipop," her memoir offers a shrewd and frequently mordant portrait of nineteen-thirties Hollywood. The voice is retrospective, but she reproduces her childhood mind so convincingly that one forgets the book was written decades later. It often reads as though a six-year-old were auditing her own contracts with a jaundiced eye.

She began in the "Baby Burlesks," a series of shorts by a Poverty Row studio called Educational Pictures. They are, alas, easily viewable on YouTube, and once seen they are not easily forgotten. With the grainy look of the early porn they queasily resemble, the shorts feature toddlers in diapers and "grownup" costumes above the waist, enacting adult romances complete with cocktails, kisses, and French lingerie. From there, Temple maneuvered to Twentieth Century Fox, where she appeared in musicals and period pieces that helped make the Depression bearable. She was a trouper and a pro—so tireless that she could dance with Bill (Bojangles) Robinson

without losing her step. (Those scenes, too, are on YouTube—and they’re good.)

Throughout her memoir, Temple’s advice on handling the press is sage: give them time, but don’t answer their questions. She is equally hard-edged about what producers wanted from child stars—a reproducible product with a brief shelf life. She grows impatient with her mother’s lateness, treats her colleagues with brisk professionalism, and writes with a chilling composure about her powers of flirtation and control, exercised through well-rehearsed, and sometimes faked, innocence. She recalls climbing onto laps with the practiced confidence—and pride—of a tiny geisha. There’s a scarifying scene in which Arthur Freed is accosting her in one office at M-GM, while her mother, in another, is being mauled by Louis B. Mayer.

A scandal arose when Graham Greene, writing in a short-lived London magazine called *Night and Day*, modelled on *The New Yorker*, published a piece accusing Temple of being “a complete totsy. . . . Watch the way she measures a man with acute studio eyes, and dimpled depravity.” The ensuing lawsuit had him decamping to Mexico and eventually writing “The Power and the Glory.” Temple, for her part, never admitted to “dimpled depravity,” but she did concede to possessing acute studio eyes, and she’s far from prim in her own account. She reports that her husband was shocked to find she wasn’t a virgin, though she leaves the details vague. By the time she was writing, she had become an accomplished diplomat—an actual one, with postings abroad—starring in another sphere, with its own secrets.

The sexual exploitation of child stardom is usually discussed in terms of girls. Yet, even beyond the cases of outright abuse, Mickey Rooney’s memoir and biographies reveal a not unrelated pathology. Trained to be more predator than prey, Rooney was nonetheless trapped in an expectation of constant gratification—encouraged, even as a teen-ager, to prove himself through conquest so compulsively that it verged on a form of self-erasure. By the age of nineteen, he confesses, what he had learned from his wholesome MGM upbringing was that “everybody wants to get fucked.” He records what comes across less as a series of dalliances than a perpetual erotic binge and purge, one encounter following another, indiscriminately, even when the apparent objects of his teen-age attention (Ava Gardner, Norma Shearer) might have seemed spectacular enough to linger over.

Little Shirley's memoir, which one might expect to be a period artifact, turns out, uncannily, to be a template for our own time. Jennette McCurdy, in particular, rose from the same poor white background as Temple and was driven by the same sort of stage mother. Temple notes that Hollywood had three social tiers: the money people on top, the transplanted "East Coast" creatives in the middle, and, at the bottom, a vast pool of poor whites desperate to break in—the people Nathanael West both caught and caricatured. McCurdy sees much the same structure today, and dispassionately describes her working-class Mormon family in Garden Grove, California—grandfather a ticket-taker at Disneyland, grandmother a receptionist at a retirement home, father an employee at Home Depot, mother a runway beautician picking up shifts at Target. No one could make much of a living; when her grandfather retired, his main post-employment Disney perk seems to have been lifetime Disneyland discounts. In that context, having a child become a star wasn't just a shot at entering the élite but a way to pay the rent.

So McCurdy was a lottery ticket, and a winning one. Her memoir details the agents and managers who specialize in kid corralling, whom she charmed just enough to secure an audition at Nickelodeon. A small moral notch above the men who chased Shakespeare's rival boy actors, these agents treated children as merchandise—"You booked it!" was their sole term of praise—with the proviso that nobody was really forced to be there and everyone knew the rules. The essential skill, more than acting, was to be smart, biddable, and "turnkey": ready-made, no need to learn an accent or a dance step, already able to sound like an Australian, or enough like one to pass at 5 P.M. for an after-school audience. (Another critical gift—it's the one I had—is to be able to play younger than your actual age.) McCurdy also recounts how her mother, who was, to be fair, already dying of cancer, carefully coached her into an eating disorder, even down to the mechanics of bulimia, in an attempt to hold back puberty.

What is a good child actor, anyway? The ones who can truly act—Margaret O'Brien in "Meet Me in St. Louis," Patty Duke in "The Miracle Worker"—have the gift of emotional availability. They don't pretend; they inhabit. What stays with us is a sense not of impersonation but of surplus feeling. We want children onscreen not to become someone else but to be themselves, only more so—to break past the caution of childhood, the shyness that all

dependent creatures share, and reach a state of unmediated emotion. (Henry Thomas does this in his famous screen test for “E.T.”) That’s why we love [Judy Garland](#) in “The Wizard of Oz”—a role Temple coveted but lost, partly owing to MGM’s machinations. Garland captures the tremor of coming into adulthood. Shirley would have danced through it smiling; Garland makes it ache, with a matchless ability to walk the tightrope between childhood and adolescence without betraying either.

At the heart of every acting career lies a paradox: the ambition is for self-recognition; the art is of self-disappearance. Alyson Stoner writes movingly of being overwhelmed by the roles they played and the fictional families they were temporarily absorbed into. (Stoner was one of the children in “Cheaper by the Dozen” two decades ago, and felt closer to those make-believe siblings than to their own.) To be a star is to assert yourself over the part; to be a good actor is to vanish inside it. That contradiction produces the deeper wound of even the fortunate performer’s life. The greatest young actors—[Marlon Brando](#), [Daniel Day-Lewis](#)—seem haunted by it: having mastered the art of self-obliteration, they find themselves idolized for being themselves. Hence Brando with his bongos, Day-Lewis with his cobbling. And the ego needed to overcome shyness and stage fright collides with the endless rejection that defines the profession.

No wonder: it’s a hard-knock life. Both McCurdy and Stoner came of age on different kids’-TV outlets, but the house style was identical. The only available comedy was the comedy of precocity. “Saturday Night Live” once parodied it: kids in neon clothes on overlit sets, lined up like police suspects, firing off adult put-downs to canned laughter. Subtler analysts see a meaningful pattern in the differences, with the two studios offering complementary fantasies: Nickelodeon’s largely adult-free world promised autonomy; Disney’s families offered safety.

McCurdy accuses the creator of “iCarly”—left unnamed for legal reasons—of predatory attention, emotional manipulation, and more. A little digging reveals him to be a veteran of eighties teen comedies, a now defunct genre that skewed slightly older and more overtly sexual but gave rise to the children’s cable sitcoms that followed. Those shows inherited the same tone of sassy precocity, only aimed lower. The genealogy of pop entertainment winds from openly sexual comedies to ones implicitly so, and to those that

pretend innocence while trafficking in the same charge. Small wonder the performers emerged bewildered. What counted as cheeky fun in 1986 is, rightly, unthinkable now. The irony is that McCurdy's outrageous-seeming title "I'm Glad My Mom Died" could almost have been one of her character's lines on "iCarly," though without the darkness, Nickelodeon tilted toward Eugene O'Neill.

What feels truly different now is that, where Master Betty and Shirley Temple were applauded for mimicking adulthood—playing Hamlet or dancing with Bojangles—what audiences wanted from McCurdy and Stoner was childhood and adulthood at once: innocence and experience in a single performance. Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—like all biological states, from autism to Alzheimer's—exist on a spectrum, not as cleanly bounded stages. Every culture invents rites of passage to disguise this fact, to make the spectrum appear less disconcertingly continuous than it is. When a bar-mitzvah boy declares, "Now I am a man," he's not announcing a transformation that may or may not have happened but submitting to a convention. The ritual marks a line where nature has left none.

For complicated reasons, our era has grown uneasy with this absence of neat boundaries. We find the sexualizing of children abhorrent yet know that denying adolescent sexuality is unreal, and so, like every culture faced with its denials, we dramatize them—overdramatize them. After a long stretch, post-Freud, when it seemed enlightened to acknowledge the erotic life of the young, we've turned toward a moral imperative to protect them from it. The two impulses aren't incompatible, but together they distort our sense of what childhood is. As Stoner notes, the eating disorders that afflicted them and McCurdy were ways to hold off puberty while remaining sexually desirable in a culture that demands thinness and youth. "We want you forever young," the culture insists. "We also want you precociously sexy," it adds. It's a double bind neither performers nor audiences can escape—a theatre of cruelty in which the actors lie on the stage for life, not just a few Philadelphian hours.

McCurdy and Stoner each end their memoirs proud of having emerged into saner adulthoods. The last—and surely least read—pages of both books turn to recovery. McCurdy has traded acting for writing; Stoner is proudly queer and nonbinary. Both declare themselves done with show business, though a

perpetual book tour is as close to being a minor TV celebrity as you can get. There is precedent for survival, as when Temple reinvented herself entirely to become a Republican fund-raiser and, later, an Ambassador to Ghana and Czechoslovakia.

But time is as sure a deliverer of adulthood as therapy is. Our memoirists are understandably indignant at how show business allows its children to “age out,” yet aging out is what life does to everyone. Even the permanently precocious get older. It’s consoling to think of adulthood as something achieved, wrested from trauma and confusion, but, in the end, it’s mostly something that just happens. It came to Master Betty, sadly, as it did to little Shirley, happily. The ex-child stars assure us that, with work and support, maturity has replaced precocity. But maturity will always replace precocity, as age will always replace youth, no matter what you do. You can just lie there. ♦

*An earlier version of this article used incorrect pronouns for Alyson Stoner.*

On and Off the Menu

# Mark Bittman's Experiment in Sliding-Scale Fine Dining

Fine-dining restaurants are premised on exclusivity and scarcity. What happens when patrons can pay what they want?

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



Bittman, the author of "How to Cook Everything," was once known for his recipes. Around 2008, he pivoted from gourmand to polemicist. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

One morning in late September, the writer and former *Times* columnist Mark Bittman walked into the Lower Eastside Girls Club, a rec center in Alphabet City and the site of what would become, in less than eight hours, his first restaurant. At 6 P.M., an inaugural group of guests would arrive for the soft opening of Community Kitchen, a not-for-profit fine-dining experiment that Bittman spent years concocting, and which had found a home—for the next few months, at least—in an underused café on the club’s ground floor. The multicourse tasting menu, cooked by a highly credentialled chef, would be elegant and refined, made with heirloom produce from local farms. Experienced servers might pour meticulously curated natural wines, ask the obligatory “Have you dined with us before?,” and swiftly fold the rumpled napkin of anyone who got up to use the rest room. What would set

Community Kitchen apart from the dozens of restaurants like it across Manhattan and Brooklyn was the way patrons would pay: by purchasing tickets on a sliding scale—fifteen, forty-five, or a hundred and twenty-five dollars, based solely on what they felt they could afford—for an experience that would be identical regardless of tier.

Bittman, who turned seventy-five this year, is tall, bald, and bespectacled, with a face that is often contorted into the expression of someone who doesn't suffer fools; if he ran for office, "Nutrition is health care, stupid" might be his campaign motto. For many years, he was best known for his recipes: his iconic, enormous cookbook "How to Cook Everything" has been reprinted three times since 1998, and his weekly *Times* column, "The Minimalist," instructed in pointedly unfussy home cooking (no-knead bread, chicken stir-fried in ketchup) for more than a decade. Around 2008, Bittman began to pivot from gourmand to polemicist, interrogating the systems, politics, and policies that shape the way we eat. When he talks about Community Kitchen, he uses gnomic declarative phrases that call to mind Michael Pollan's mantra: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." "Junk food is tasty, and it's relatively cheap," Bittman told me. "Cooking is hard. Eating in good restaurants is too expensive for most people. Access to good food should be a universal right."

Just before noon, the café was in relative shambles. Tables and chairs, still being upholstered in printed textiles, were belly-up in the middle of the dining room. The kitchen was empty, save for an enormous stockpot of broth, with chicken feet bobbing at the surface. Bittman seemed unconcerned. He had been careful in selecting the people in charge, including Rae Gomes, the executive director, and Mavis-Jay Sanders, the chef, both Black women in their late thirties who have worked in the food-justice movement, and he was determined to stay out of their way.

Sanders, who wears her hair in a modified Mohawk and speaks in a fast, muttered clip, told me that she had been skeptical when Bittman first approached her. "I was just, like, cool, another white man doing this thing just so he can feel good," she said. But Bittman was persistent, and, over the course of months, won her over. Sanders, who has cooked at multiple Michelin-starred restaurants, was invigorated by the idea that a restaurant could be both luxurious and equitable. She wanted Community Kitchen to

have the trappings of the urbane, upscale places where she'd been trained—Gabriel-Glas stemware; All-Clad pots in the kitchen; carefully choreographed, warm, unobtrusive service. She also wanted to leave behind some of the industry's less humane tendencies. "I feel like a lot of those places are about power, people positioning their power over other people," Sanders said. "This room is about people, in service to other people."

By dinnertime, the café had been convincingly transformed into a restaurant, with tea lights twinkling beside wildflower arrangements on exaitingly set tables. The food came out slowly as the kitchen found its first-night footing, but the service was smooth and steady. If you could accuse Sanders's first two courses, one called "corn," the other "tomato," of being a bit precious and cheffy—they included, respectively, sips of warm tomato water and corn-silk tea—they were also exceptionally delicious, and each successive dish, vibrant and precise, raised the bar. A hearty but refined cassoulet featured a sliver of lamb rib, lamb sausage, and velvety braised beans. The broth I'd seen bubbling that morning was poured tableside into a bowl of fonio, a tender West African grain, and topped with wedges of seared radish and turnip, plus a brilliantly orange cured egg yolk.

A few days after the soft opening, I joined Sanders as she shopped at the Union Square Greenmarket. I pointed out a bushel of habanada peppers, a hybrid championed by her old boss, Dan Barber, the chef-farmer of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, who works with breeders to develop highly particular fruits and vegetables. The peppers are identical to habaneros, but without the powerful kick. "It's weird to breed the culture out of a pepper!" Sanders exclaimed. "How many times have you had a Scotch bonnet and you're just, like"—her voice turned cartoonishly whiny—"I don't *liiiike* this!" she said, laughing. But she clearly admired Barber's iconoclastic impulse. "I moved to New York to understand how that man's mind works, and it's fucking fantastic," she told me. "Anybody who's just, like, You know what? What I want doesn't exist, I will go create it."

In the United States, pay-what-you-can restaurants are, perhaps unsurprisingly, few and far between. In an era when it's extraordinarily challenging for restaurants to turn a profit, many restaurateurs, particularly in fine dining, are looking for inventive ways to get *more* money out of their patrons, and to cater to the highest-paying among them. One of few

businesses to succeed with a sliding-scale payment system is Everytable, a Southern California chain that sells prepared food for takeout, which charges different prices at different locations, depending on the average income level of the store's Zip Code—a structure made possible by the fact that everything is made at a centralized off-site kitchen.

At dinner at *HAGS*, a tiny three-year-old restaurant in the East Village, the tasting menu starts at a hundred and thirty-five dollars a person; on Sundays, brunch is pay-what-you-can, starting at nothing. Sunday brunch has become the restaurant's busiest seating, with a roster of regulars, one of whom likes to pay with origami. The couple who own *HAGS*, Camille Lindsley and Telly Justice, spent years working at upscale restaurants before they set out to "queer" the archetype by designing a more inclusive model. "Any restaurant can figure out how much it would cost to offer food for free or sliding scale on whatever their loss-leader day is," Justice said. "Make one dish sliding scale for one hour a day. Just do something." Though the idea seemed radical, Lindsley and Justice learned, over time, to treat it as an ordinary thing. "We initially came in with a lot of literature and a lot of education, and we found that almost immediately, it's a total turnoff," Justice went on. "Nobody wants to learn about this. They just want to use it."

Bittman, who is working with a budget of more than a million dollars, sourced from private donors, including Bloomberg's philanthropic arm, is determined to stay out of the for-profit game, though he recognizes the limits of operating as a nonprofit. He has an eye toward one day collaborating with the city: he purposefully chose Community Kitchen's location for its proximity to several *NYCHA* buildings, and often references Restaurantes Populares, government-subsidized restaurants that were opened in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in the nineteen-nineties, selling meals made with local produce for less than the equivalent of a dollar. "We're waiting to find a way to talk to Mamdani," Bittman told me, days before Community Kitchen opened. A few weeks after opening, he would tell me that attracting *nycha* residents to the restaurant was proving to be a challenge. The team had hired a community organizer to help draw them in.

Fine dining, as a genre, is premised on exclusivity and scarcity, the sense that money functions as a private code. What would it be without those overtones? Two nights after my first meal at Community Kitchen, I returned

for the first seating that was open to paying guests. The crowd was racially diverse, eclectically dressed, and tilted toward middle age; it was notably devoid of the preppy young white men who tend to populate the city's tasting-menu restaurants. As I took a seat near the end of the bar, I found myself looking around at the other diners, guessing who had paid what, though I recognized, guiltily, that this defeated the purpose. A solo diner who appeared to be in his seventies looked scruffy enough that I wondered if he might be the occupant of an old rent-controlled loft in Alphabet City. But, as he was leaving, we struck up a conversation that quickly turned to the screenings he'd attended at this year's Telluride Film Festival. He was, it emerged, a retired investment banker turned gentleman farmer who lived in Connecticut, and the natural wines appeared to have gone to his head. A manager swept in and, with practiced grace, suggested he might let me finish my meal in peace.

To my left at the bar were a pair who looked to be in their early forties—a woman with a dark bob and heavily lined eyes, and a man in a track jacket—and who seemed to be on a first date, marked by awkward silences. Midway through the meal, I glanced over and realized they had disappeared between courses. The bartender, Cab Washington, who is also a standup comedian, told me that before they'd left he'd run into the man outside the bathroom. The man had said that the date was a dud, and that if Washington was interested he should ask the woman out. Even without the pressure of a bottom line, Community Kitchen delivered on characters and intrigue. It felt like any other night out in New York. ♦

## Pop Music

# Tame Impala Is an Obsessive, Not a Perfectionist

The musician Kevin Parker discusses his method of restless tinkering, a deafening bout of tinnitus, and his new album, “Deadbeat.”

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

### Play/Pause Button

*“I really love finding the line between two things and walking it,” Parker said. Animation by Erik Winkowski*

On a bright afternoon in late August, I met Kevin Parker, the polymath behind the psych-pop project Tame Impala, at a hotel bar in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles. Parker was dressed in baggy pants, flip-flops, and sunglasses. His hair is the kind of shaggy that suggests abject neglect more than overpriced Hollywood coiffure. We ordered a round of mezcal cocktails, which, when they arrived, were conspicuously pink and garnished with tiny orchids. “I didn’t think it was gonna look like that,” Parker said, laughing, as we clinked glasses. “My friends are always giving me shit: ‘Kevin orders a pink flirtini’ or whatever.”

In the early twenty-tens, Parker, who was brought up in Perth, in Western Australia, became an indie-rock megastar. (The first three Tame Impala records received consecutive “Best New Album” designations from *Pitchfork*.) He ended the decade by headlining Coachella and appearing on “Saturday Night Live.” (“The Less I Know the Better,” a woozy single from “Currents,” Tame Impala’s third album, has been streamed more than two billion times.) These days, Parker is perhaps even more in demand as a pop auteur, having co-produced [Lady Gaga](#)’s “Joanne,” [the Weeknd](#)’s “After Hours,” Travis Scott’s “Astroworld,” and [Dua Lipa](#)’s “Radical Optimism.” (In 2016, [Rihanna](#) included a faithful cover of Tame Impala’s “New Person, Same Old Mistakes” on her record “[Anti.](#)”)

This fall, Parker, who is thirty-nine, will release “Deadbeat,” the fifth Tame Impala album. It oscillates between woozy, dance-inflected rock songs (the addictive, loping “Loser”) and expansive, thudding, quasi-techno numbers (the epic, twitchy “End of Summer”). “I really love finding the line between

two things and walking it,” Parker told me. “I want it to sound like something that doesn’t exist.”

Though “Deadbeat” was slated to be released in less than two months, two days before our interview Parker had sent off three songs for additional mastering. “Vinyl went into production months ago,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m gonna have to accept that the first pressing will sound a little bit different than what goes on streaming.” I asked him if it was possible to delineate the changes for a studio rube. “To me, it’s night and day,” he said. “It’s the difference between a song being listenable and a song being a piece of shit.” Parker’s tweaks can be as granular as adjusting the bass note in a chord. “I listen back for maybe the forty-fifth time and hear that it doesn’t connect as well,” Parker said. “So I swap out the bass note, remix it, send it off. ‘Hey, man, sorry—can you master this again? I had to make a crucial adjustment.’ ” He leaned back. “I take years off of my life with every album,” he said. “I become obsessive when it’s too late. I fuck myself, because the whole time I’m recording I’m, like, ‘This is sick, I’m just gonna throw it together. I’ll play it on this guitar—it’s out of tune but it’s the closest instrument to me, I don’t care.’ And by the time I’m finishing the song I start realizing what’s wrong with it, and I’m frantically trying to fix everything at the last minute.”

The magic of Parker’s music—what makes his records so restless, dithery, dynamic—hinges on the minuscule yet crucial difference between perfectionism (endlessly boring) and obsession (endlessly interesting). “Everyone thinks I’m a perfectionist,” Parker said. “That’s the assumed narrative when someone orchestrates a whole album—the Brian Wilson idea. But if people actually saw me in the studio, and saw how little I cared about so many things . . . ” He paused. “On the backs of my albums, you’ll see a photo of a microphone meant for singing pointing at the kick drum, held up with a wine rack. I’ve just never really given a shit about that. I would love for it to sound better, because I respect a lot of big pop producers.” He added, “You always worship what you don’t feel you are.”

Parker prefers to work alone and in seclusion; he often rents an Airbnb close to the beach, bringing any studio equipment with him. For “Deadbeat,” he withdrew first to Montecito and then to Malibu. “I just go straight to the map, and I look at the coastline and find the dots that are closest to the

water,” he said. “I don’t give a fuck, I just wanna find where I can hear the waves the loudest.” He’s usually in situ for four or five days at a time. In 2020, he bought a property in Yallingup, near Perth, called Wave House. (Before Parker owned it, he rented and recorded there, making parts of “Innerspeaker,” Tame Impala’s début, and “Currents.”) The house is set on a fifty-acre plot, overlooking Injidup Beach and Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. “It feels like the edge of the earth,” Parker said. “It’s this really beautiful place. There used to be raves there in the nineties, in this natural amphitheatre. That was actually a big inspiration.”

Parker said that “Deadbeat” was shaped in part by the spirit of bush doofs, all-night dance parties thrown in rural, off-the-grid locales. “They happen all across the world, but Australia has its own name for them,” he told me. “‘Doof’ started as a derogatory word to describe club music, because from a distance all you hear is *doof, doof, doof*. I’ve always just been super inspired by that scene. Part of my desire to make that kind of music is to transport myself there—to me, that’s musical Nirvana. I got into psych-rock for the same reason. That idea of just endless, hypnotic music that a field full of people can tap into.”

I told Parker that I loved the album’s title, both for its louche, dirtbag implications—an absent father, a lazy employee, a squirrelly boyfriend—and for its literal suggestion of a bad rhythm, a dead beat. “You nailed the duality of it,” Parker said, nodding. “For a moment, I was a bit worried that maybe I had come up with a word that’s too sensitive for people. For me, it’s a feeling. It’s a way of taking something that you were insecure about—a way of seeing yourself that you didn’t like—and glorifying it. ‘Hey, everyone, this is me. A fucking deadbeat.’ In a way, I’ve kind of always felt like that.” He continued, “A lot of this album is inspired by my late teen-age years, leaving high school and trying to become an adult, and not having a very easy time. There was this assumption that I would go off to university and become a part of the workforce. It just didn’t make sense to me, working in an office and having Friday drinks with the other workers in the office, and then, like, going on dates. That’s why I ended up living in a share house with a bunch of other stoners, listening to psych-rock.” He has come to see his divestment from normie culture as a point of both pride and relief. “To put that word on my album cover, I can’t really describe the feeling of how comforting—is it cathartic? Is that the word? Catharsis?” he asked, laughing.

All of Parker's records have a particular idiosyncrasy, a wobble, a beat that's not beating. "That's the 'Deadbeat' sound," he said. "All the drum machines are going through guitar amps. I wanted to make a simple, shabby-sounding album." Lately, Parker has also embraced the *wabi-sabi* ideal—that there is glory in irregularity, in something being vaguely misshapen. For Tame Impala's live shows, he encourages his bandmates (Parker tours with a crackerjack lineup that includes Dominic Simper, Jay Watson, Cam Avery, and Julien Barbagallo) to lean into their flubs. "I started saying to the guys, 'Not only don't worry about it—don't stop yourself,'" Parker said. "Even if we shit the bed and the whole song falls apart and we stop—to us, that's embarrassing, but to someone in the audience, that's just seeing humans onstage." He went on, "I make music by myself, so I've always been obsessed with this idea of making something that sounds like a hundred people. But I think that somewhere along the way I sort of forgot about the intimacy of it—the value of being vulnerable, of making it really obvious that you're a human."

Parker's lyrics are often heavy with culpability. On "Loser," one of the record's best and strangest tracks, Parker sings in an otherworldly falsetto:

So much for closure, I lost composure  
I get the message, I learned my lesson  
Tried to correct it, I think I wrecked it  
Man, it's a crisis, I'm never like this

Parker's wife, Sophie Lawrence Parker, gave birth to a baby boy, whom they nicknamed Rose, in early 2025, while Parker was still compulsively honing "Deadbeat." (They also have a daughter, Peach, who was born in 2021.) "I mixed 'Dracula' at the hospital," Parker said. "With my headphones on, next to him. He'd been alive for, like, six hours." It was a thrilling but exhausting time. Parker has found the ego death inherent to parenthood to be at odds, in a generative way, with the solipsism of making art for public consumption—the tension between thinking it's all about you and suddenly seeing that it's not about you at all. "It removes the idea that you're the most important person," Parker said.

This past spring, sleep deprivation—partially due to a new baby, partially due to Parker's manic creative process—aggravated his tinnitus. He

described it as “an insane crisis.” He said, “It was deafening. New frequencies started to emerge. It was fucked. For, like, two days, I was, like, ‘I’ve ruined my hearing. I’m one of those people who’s gonna be suicidal because of how bad this is.’ Not only was it a whine—it was also this supersonic hissing. It sounded like digital equipment fucking up. I was, like, ‘I think I might finally have gone too far.’ I’d been mixing and recording for six months.”

His hearing eventually recovered, but he remains shaken by the experience. “So, next album . . . ,” Parker began, and laughed. “Next album will be the one I am totally chill about.” ♦

By [Richard Brody](#)

It's not essential to bone up on Henrik Ibsen's drama "[Hedda Gabler](#)" before seeing "Hedda," because the movie meets the crucial standard of adaptation: it's a formidable cinematic experience independent of its source. But to read the play, from 1890, in advance is to marvel at the combination of fidelity and freedom, of interpretation and imagination, that Nia DaCosta, the film's writer and director, brings to bear. Ibsen's title character is a spoiled, headstrong young woman who, newly and unhappily married to a dull scholar, enacts a Machiavellian scheme to advance his career and her social standing, with catastrophic results. DaCosta shifts the story to nineteen-fifties England, where Hedda (Tessa Thompson) and her husband, George Tesman (Tom Bateman), have just returned to their country estate after a six-month honeymoon and (unlike in the play) are hosting a lavish party to announce their arrival.

DaCosta both reveals and revises the story's tragic dimension up front, opening with Hedda being questioned by the police about events that led to a certain consequential gunshot. Nearly the entire movie then unfolds in a flashback that dramatizes Hedda's account of the party. It begins the previous day, with a phone call from a long-absent friend, Eileen Lövborg (Nina Hoss), whom Hedda impulsively invites to the party. Eileen accepts, but her sarcasm hints at what their reunion later makes clear: the two women are ex-lovers. Eileen is also George's professional rival. He has been counting on a well-paying professorship, which he needs in order to afford his luxurious home. But Eileen, in the years since she and Hedda were together, has emerged as a far more original scholar. Now she is a candidate for the same academic position.

The decision will be made by one of the guests at the party, Professor Greenwood (Finbar Lynch), who is there with his wife, Tabitha (Mirren Mack). As the evening gets under way, an uninvited guest arrives: a former schoolmate of Hedda's named Thea (Imogen Poots), who, belying her mousy air, has boldly left her husband to become Eileen's lover and collaborator. Meanwhile, a debonair and nonchalant judge, Roland Brack (Nicholas Pinnock), who has arranged George's loan for the expensive property, is also dallying with Hedda and plots to use his influence—his power, rather—to tighten their extramarital bond. The party thus plays out as

a high-stakes tribunal on which George’s career and Hedda’s comfort depend. The story’s MacGuffin is a manuscript that Eileen brings along to show off to Greenwood—of her forthcoming book, co-written with Thea. She thinks that it will make her name, win her the professorship, and thereby enable her to live her unconventional life more freely. That MacGuffin, it will shock no reader of Ibsen to learn, is what Hedda plans to destroy, with Eileen as collateral damage.

There’s also a gun—indeed, many—and, unlike Chekhov, both Ibsen and DaCosta fire the weapon early on. Hedda, the illegitimate daughter of the late General Gabler, has a case of fine firearms that he left to her, and she’s at ease using them. She shoots, including when no harm is intended except to a male ego; she’s intrepid, facing down Greenwood when he aims his own pistol at a man whom he catches having sex with Tabitha. (When Greenwood says that he’ll shoot anyone who sleeps with his wife, Hedda responds, “You’ll run out of bullets.”) Hedda is identified in her circle as the general’s “bastard child,” and has long been a subject of fascination in the posh milieu—not least because she is Black (a departure, of course, from Ibsen’s play), something on which one guest remarks sordidly. She is keenly aware that her race, like her gender, circumscribes her public life. (Roland, the judge, is also Black—but a man.) What’s left for her is the social sphere, where her exploits and her temperament are legend. One guest (Jamael Westman) reminds her, “Before you were domesticated, you were like fire,” and her party lives up to her reputation.

Wresting “Hedda Gabler” from its theatrical confines, DaCosta effects a major structural transformation with graceful ingenuity: the party, which constitutes the entire field of action, is her invention. In Ibsen’s play, set solely in two contiguous rooms in the Tesmans’ villa, George comes home after a highly eventful night of escapades that are left unseen and merely described to Hedda. DaCosta turns Ibsen’s text inside out, making the Tesmans’ home the site of those festivities. In so doing, she avoids the overused adaptation ploy of adding distant locations to those of a stage play, instead expanding the action but only as far as the Tesman estate allows—thus stretching but preserving the unity of space. The film ranges freely through the mansion’s many rooms and makes dramatic use of the lavish grounds, including a hedge maze (with cozy trysting nooks), a vast lawn (where Hedda shoots with abandon), a lake (where revellers swim in various

states of dress and undress), and a formal garden (where Eileen leaves her manuscript).

In DaCosta's hands, Ibsen's emotionally extreme but tonally restrained play becomes a spectacular, flamboyant melodrama, with physical action as intense as the characters' inner worlds. Far from cheapening or diluting Ibsen's themes and conflicts, the action revitalizes them. "Hedda" is a frenzied, exuberant film, with turbulent confrontations rendered in lacerating dialogue. The louche festivities provoke dangerous gamesmanship, and scenes with a jazz band and a lively singer (Sophie Oliver) capture the evening's reckless spirit, as Hedda coaxes couples onto the dance floor and then struts and sashays among and between them.

There's another, altogether more substantial element of the story which Ibsen treats mainly as an offstage plot point but which DaCosta foregrounds and deepens: the intellectual content of the manuscript that is the object of contention. In the play, Ejlert Løvborg (the equivalent of the film's Eileen) refers to his opus only briefly, as pertaining to "the future course of civilization." Eileen's field of study, however, is sexuality, and her manuscript is about the future of sex, a topic that she musters the courage to discuss, in a sort of spontaneous seminar, with Greenwood, George, and a gaggle of other men. They are taken aback by her audacity and goad her into detailing the book's genesis. The scene is one of the movie's most thrilling and perilous: Eileen, drunk and dishevelled, gives an uninhibited account of a night of near-debauchery, including a candid description of a fetish and a brilliantly speculative philosophical extrapolation from this raw experience.

Hoss's fearless ferocity in the role of Eileen, the assertiveness with which she lends physical strength to the character's intellect, renders the scholar's vulnerability to Hedda's cruel schemes all the more tragic. The heart of the film is Hedda's contradictory passions—for money, for status, and, especially, for and against Eileen. The protagonist's diabolical plot is fuelled by an unmanageable tangle of emotions, including raging jealousy, mercenary self-interest, and resentment of Eileen's professional and intellectual accomplishments, which sparks shame at her own cosseted frivolity.

With this radically dissonant outpouring of feeling, “Hedda” is, above all, Thompson’s showcase, and she rises to its challenges with ravenous energy and flickering nuance, in an imposing, screen-filling performance. While checking the credits, I wondered how many Oscar nominations Thompson has received and was shocked to find that the answer is zero. She’s given some of the most riveting performances in recent years, in “[Creed](#),” “[Passing](#),” “[Sylvie’s Love](#),” and “[Sorry to Bother You](#)”; by temperament, she’s a melodramatic performer, a modern-day counterpart to Barbara Stanwyck (four nominations, zero wins). In “Hedda,” Thompson combines refined and creative diction, taut reserve, and radiant power. With precision, concentration, and sincerity, she delivers maximal emotion with apparently minimal exertion. In keeping with the essence of melodrama, she displays heightened naturalism and everyday grandeur. It will be quite a year for movie acting if her performance has many equals.

Thompson’s compressed fury provides a fiery core for DaCosta’s cinematic vision. The director wrenches apart Ibsen’s terse and precise mechanism and makes room for a proliferation of arresting moments—caught on the wing in wide-screen images, thanks to Sean Bobbitt’s cinematography—that balance tragedy and horror with excitement and wonder. The story may debunk the stock character of the femme fatale, but DaCosta also celebrates, however ruefully, such forceful women’s glorious theatrical sensibility, diplomatic wiles, and erotic energy, a volatile mixture of qualities that men, out of vanity and fear, repress until it explodes with wasteful and ruinous force. DaCosta’s extravagant spectacle of life in the many rooms and on the many acres of the Tesmans’ heavily mortgaged estate doesn’t hide this world’s ruthlessness, its violence, or even its gore. But it also exposes the sensual pleasures of the mind, the sublimity of a woman’s ability to extract ideas of historic power and visionary import from the selfsame frivolities of the social whirl. That, too, DaCosta restores, however symbolically, to its rightful place. ♦

# Poems

- “[Last Time](#)”
- “[For the Birds](#)”

By [Nick Laird](#)

The festival of eariwigs dispersed as I dragged  
the blue tarp off the logs left to season now  
for going on a couple of years it must be.

We bucked up the trunks to cut them to rounds  
with the chainsaw locked to the sawhorse  
and the floor—the floor of the forest—

drifted with sawdust, the air was filled with fresh  
rawness, and the sun came out, and we kept at it  
until we'd split a cord, a cord and a half.

I dropped Turk at the station and back home  
stacked the shed for a bit, and was up the ladder  
cutting back the multiform rose when the radio

announced we were, now, at war. So I got a beer  
from the fridge and brought Andy's new translations  
of Bashō to the hammock. Even after the journey

through Oku, and after his nephew died, Bashō  
kept on embedding infinity into the poem,  
making each paradoxical animal disturbance

just one more part of a wry, undying stillness.  
The bottle left a brief perfect circle in the grass  
when I lifted it to head in and get going with dinner.

By [Rita Dove](#)

Cardinal Rule No. 1: Duck  
if necessary. Don't be  
the canary in the coal mine  
unless you like playing cards  
with the devil and his stool pigeons.  
Usually, the unassuming won't show up  
onscreen; no one remembers enough  
to describe the ordinary wren  
nesting in the elm outside their window  
after the eagle swoops down  
for a snack. So much for blending in:  
Who's the turkey now?

# **Cartoons**

- [Cartoon Caption Contest](#)
- [Cartoons from the Issue](#)

## Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 20, 2025](#)

By [Rafael Musa](#)

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