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By [Jillian Steinhauer](#), [Dan Stahl](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Zoë Hopkins](#), [Richard Brody](#), and [Taran Dugal](#)

November 14, 2025

Ragnar Kjartansson’s new exhibition, “Sunday Without Love” (at Luhring Augustine, through Dec. 20), consists of just one work—and it’s relatively tame, by the artist’s standards. The forty-nine-year-old Icelandic artist is best known for his endeavors of communal endurance: in “Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage” (2011/14), a projection of his parents acting in a 1977 film is accompanied by ten live musicians playing guitar and singing a song whose lyrics are taken from the movie’s dialogue. When the piece was shown at the New Museum, in 2014, the performers played all day (with breaks) for much of the eight-week run.



A production photo from “Sunday Without Love.”

Art work © Ragnar Kjartansson / Courtesy the artist / Luhring Augustine /i8 Gallery; Photograph by Börkur Arnarson

“Sunday Without Love” is more minimal—a single-shot, nineteen-minute video capturing a scene from a three-hour performance on a lawn in Italy, shot this past fall. In classic Kjartansson fashion, the piece is a cultural mashup: the staging and the costumes were inspired by a mid-twentieth-century folk postcard he owns, evoking Georges Seurat’s iconic painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte”; the music is a heartfelt reworking, with the collaborator Davíð Þór Jónsson, of a German comedy song from the nineteen-nineties titled “Ohne Liebe Leben Lernen” (“Learning to Live Without Love”).

Kjartansson’s ability to unite such incongruous and often obscure elements into a convincing whole is part of what makes him great. He’s also a maestro of repetition: in this case ten people (including Kjartansson) create a folk-art tableau vivant while performing the chorus of the song over and over. This sameness limits emotional catharsis, even as the bucolic setting invites it. Such dichotomies animate his work, which is, at its best, absurd and profound in equal measure (to wit, the phrases “You must learn to live / live without love / love is not good for you” are sung plaintively). I admit that, while watching the video, I started to wonder if

Kjartansson's vision might be shading into shtick—but, a day later, I couldn't get his song out of my head.



About Town

Off Broadway

Inspired by a 2022 tweetstorm about whether Anne Frank had “white privilege,” the rambunctious musical “[Slam Frank](#)” revises her life story to make it more inclusive. Anne is now the Latinx Anita (Olivia Bernábe), who immigrates into hiding with her Black mother (Austen Horne), her gay, neurodivergent father (Rocky Paterra), and her still Jewish sister (Anya van Hoogstraten). The co-creator and composer, Andrew Fox, and the book writer, Joel Sinensky, play up the “Hamilton” dynamic; among the show’s chief pleasures are Bernábe’s and Horne’s raps. Much of the piece is spent poking fun at liberal pieties and stereotypes, but a dark turn toward the end forces an uncomfortable question: Can a safe space exist without the suppression of those who might threaten it?—*Dan Stahl (Asylum NYC; through Dec. 28.)*

Classical

Many ensembles may balk at the prospect of putting together a program featuring female composers from the seventeenth century. How long would that concert be, ten minutes? But a little digging reveals the wealth of music that women produced back then—something worth celebrating. No ensemble knows this more than [L'Arpeggiata](#), the international early-music group founded by the lutenist and theorist Christina Pluhar. As a part of Carnegie Hall’s Baroque Unlimited series, their concert “Wonder Women”

highlights works by Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Antonia Bembo, and others, with an emphasis on improvisation. And if a piece by a man is in there, rest assured it was almost certainly either arranged by a woman or is about one.—*Jane Bua (Zankel Hall; Nov. 20.)*

Rock



Geese.
Photograph by Mark Sommerfeld

College prospects nearly threatened to disband the Brooklyn rock group **Geese**. The guitarist Emily Green, the bassist Dominic DiGesu, the drummer Max Bassin, and the front man Cameron Winter came together as high-school students at Brooklyn Friends and L.R.E.I. in 2016, self-releasing the LP “A Beautiful Memory” in 2018. Upon graduation, in 2020, they were set to follow their various acceptance letters to a breakup when the band’s demos started getting traction. In the five years since, Geese has emerged as a new beacon of post-punk, mutating into an ambitious art-rock experiment across three albums. “Getting Killed,” the band’s latest record, co-produced by the beatmaker and engineer Kenny Beats, is weirder and wilder, unspooling in fits of ache and fury.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; Nov. 20-21.)*

Art

Kader Attia’s film “La Valise Oubliée” (2024) cracks open a well of family memories, employing photographs and archival materials buried in three suitcases to unpack stories about the history of the Algerian independence struggle. The question of cultural memory—and its theft—is raised in a series of collages that accompany the film, in which images of West African sculptures are rent apart—as if blown up by the explosive violence of colonialism—and cobbled back together with images and text from European art catalogues. These works bear an ineluctable and intentional resemblance to European art traditions indebted to African sculpture (e.g., Picasso and Braque). But the script has been flipped; the right to memory, to cultural inheritance, is already a shard.—Zoë Hopkins (*Lehmann Maupin*; through Dec. 20.)

Dance



Dutch National Ballet performs Ted Brandsen’s “The Chairman Dances.”

Photograph by Marc Haegeman

For the **Dutch National Ballet’s** first major tour to New York since the eighties, they’re bringing a [chef’s selection](#), including works by Jiří Kylián, Ted Brandsen—director since 2003—and the South African choreographer Mthuthuzeli November, unknown in the states, as well as a trio of works by the company’s éminence grise, the ninety-three-year-old choreographer Hans van Manen. Alexei Ratmansky, a fellow-choreographer, has become an associate artist there, and his new “Trio Kagel,” set to accordion music by the

Argentinean composer Mauricio Kagel, appears on one program, along with Jerome Robbins's intimate Chopin suite "Other Dances," performed by the soulful Olga Smirnova and Jacopo Tissi, both of whom left the Bolshoi at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.—*Marina Harss (City Center; Nov. 20-22.)*

Movies

When the filmmaker Charlie Shackleton was unable to get rights to a true-crime book he was planning to adapt as a documentary, he did the next best thing: he made a film about the film he would have made. The result, "**Zodiac Killer Project**," is both a fascinating view of an actual investigation and a wry critique of true-crime documentaries' predominant clichés. The book in question, by Lyndon E. Lafferty, recounts the author's daring efforts to solve the infamous case. Shackleton's voice-over monologue about what he'd have filmed is linked to canny images of relevant places and objects, sketching Lafferty's wild story while avoiding infringing on the book. With its cagey pursuit of impossible dreams, Shackleton's hypothetical method, both copious and withholding, is a leap ahead in first-person cinema.—*Richard Brody (Opening Nov. 21.)*

Bar Tab

Taran Dugal enjoys a three-course liquid meal, then dinner, on the Lower East Side.

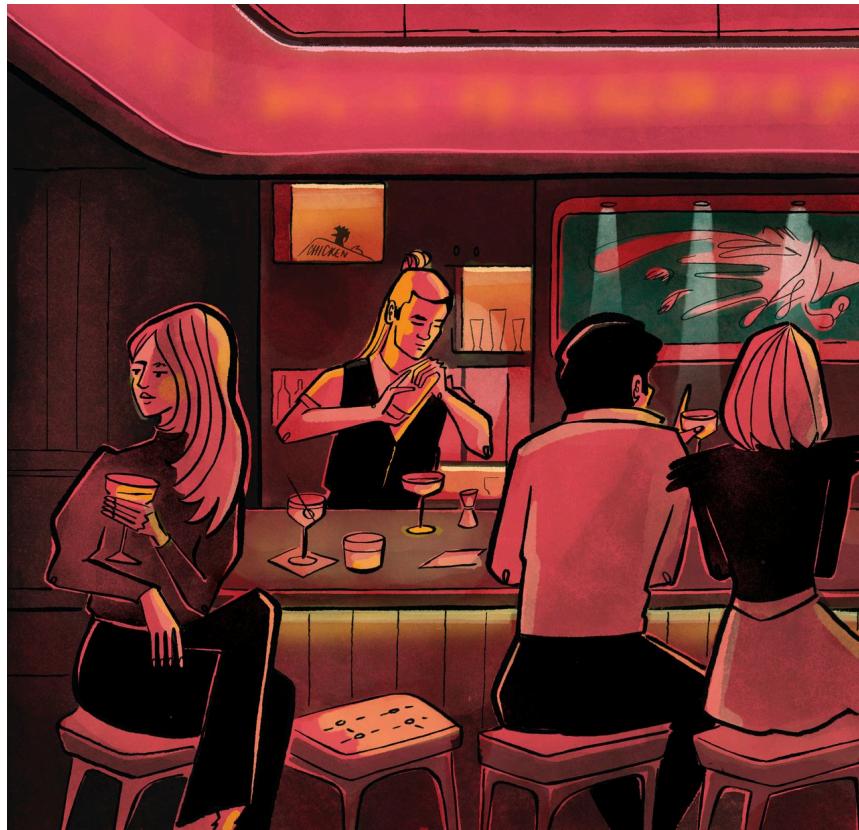


Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

Manhattan's novelty bars age in dog years. What starts with hype and exaltation often peters out with a sense of resigned familiarity.

Double Chicken Please, an inventive Lower East Side cocktail lounge that opened in 2020, is an exception—most nights, lines still stretch down the block. On a recent evening, a pair of newcomers were seated at the bar in the Coop, the establishment's luxe back room, replete with mid-century-modern furnishings and bass-heavy house music. Pink lighting shone over the chicken-themed décor, a humorous touch to the otherwise elegant space, which was packed with talkative hipsters. The duo opted for a three-course meal from the drink menu, featuring twelve cocktails designed to recall classic dishes. Their appetizer, the Japanese Cold Noodle, was sweet and frosty, with pleasant umami undertones; the main, the Cold Pizza, tasted unnervingly like its namesake, a heady mix of tequila, tomato, and basil. Dessert, however, blew everything out of the water: the French Toast, a vodka-based delight served with a homemade cookie sandwiching chocolate-coffee ganache, was creamy and frothy, with a slight note of

bitterness that reminded them that this was, in fact, a cocktail, not a milkshake. With the liquid meal done, they started on some real food: the goopy, satisfying “bolognese grilled cheese” chicken sandwich, and “Le Big Mac,” a treat constructed like a burger with chocolate ice cream, macaron, yuzu, and mochi. As the night stretched on, a festive atmosphere took hold; one table whooped as an erstwhile fastidious bartender joined them for a shot and returned to the counter, high-fiving his colleagues. Another guest downed her French Toast, and, licking her lips, voiced the cliché on others’ minds: “Man—we’re so fucking lucky to live in New York.”

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [*Learning to fail better*](#)
- [*A taste of the season*](#)
- [*To help you weather the weather*](#)

An earlier version of this article mischaracterized a photo from “Sunday Without Love.”

Jillian Steinhauer received a 2023 Rabkin Prize for visual-arts writing. She teaches in the Journalism and Design program at the New School.

Dan Stahl is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.

Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker’s Goings On newsletter.

Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to The New Yorker since 2004. She is the author of “*The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky’s Life in Ballet*.”

Zoë Hopkins is a contributor to Goings On who writes about art.

Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of “*Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*.”

Taran Dugal is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/the-icelandic-artist-ragnar-kjartansson-absurd-and-profound-in-equal-measures>

[The Food Scene](#)

La Boca Is All Smoke, No Fire

The Argentinean chef Francis Mallmann is notorious for his love of cooking over open flames. With his New York début, he fizzles out.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

November 9, 2025



Francis Mallmann's La Boca is meant to evoke Buenos Aires, with an Argentinean menu and a live band playing tango-inspired sets.

Photographs by Todd Midler for The New Yorker

The life of Francis Mallmann, the sixty-nine-year-old Argentinean überchef, reads like a macho fairy tale. At the age of forty, after achieving considerable success cooking in the French technique, he turned away from the European culinary model to become an apostle of fire and primitivism. Drawing upon childhood memories and indigenous South American techniques, he began cooking over (and beneath, and within) open flames, building iron domes from which to suspend matrices of chickens and root vegetables above smoldering bonfires, affixing whole cows to metal crucifixes to slow-cook for days. In 1995, at a showcase at the Académie Internationale de la Gastronomie in Frankfurt, Mallmann stunned the gastronomic world with a nine-course meal composed entirely of Andean potatoes, which, owing to Germany's strict importation

laws, he had to smuggle into the country. In an episode of “Chef’s Table” that aired in 2015, Mallmann, then fifty-nine years old, with a shoulder-sweeping shock of white hair tamed by a puffy beret, spoke philosophically about his communion with his medium of choice: “When you cook with fires, when you build a fire, it is a bit like making love. It could be huge, strong. Or it could go very slowly in ashes and little coals.” When he’s not putting in appearances at one of his nine, maybe ten restaurants—most in South America, one at Château La Coste in Provence, and another in Miami, with the Faena hotel—he lives on a private island on a remote Patagonian lake.

You can visit Mallmann’s paradise, if you’d like. Tourist packages include six nights on the island and, among other things, five “Fire Dining Experiences,” starting at more than thirty-four thousand dollars per person. Or, for a minute fraction of that cost, you can now have a taste of Mallmann here in New York, at La Boca, his latest restaurant, in the new Faena hotel, a twisty modernist tower on West Eighteenth Street. Like his Miami restaurant, Los Fuegos, La Boca is lush and layered, its interior a swanky, romantic tableau of red velvet and pink roses, the lighting dim and sensual, the artwork and tableware ornamented with golden accents. Unlike Los Fuegos—or, indeed, any of Mallmann’s other restaurants—La Boca features no glow from an actual fire, either in the kitchen or in the dining room. This is the result of an inconvenient local law: New York City fire code has, in recent years, prohibited the construction of open-flame hearths. Instead, the restaurant has been forced to translate Mallmann’s veneration of fire into a more conventional appreciation of bog-standard natural gas.

Maybe it’s the lack of heat: La Boca is beautiful, and expensive, and charismatic, but it is also very bad. I ate there on three occasions, marvelling each time at the gulf between the appealing scene in the dining room, which offers live music at dinnertime and floods of sunlight during lunch, and the astonishing insipidity of what was on my plate. Virtually every dish was a disappointment,

sometimes disconcertingly so. Empanadas, an essential avatar of Argentinean cuisine, arrive filled either with bland, greasy ground beef studded with slippery hunks of hard-boiled eggs, or with an oregano-infused Vermont cheddar that congeals almost immediately into a waxy blob. Their appeal is marginally lifted by an accompanying *llajua* sauce, which I know as a fiery, chile-based Bolivian salsa fresca, but which here seems to consist of grated tomatoes—just grated tomatoes, with hardly any salt.

If you'd like a steak—this is an Argentinean restaurant, after all—the options reflect Mallmann's characteristic preoccupation with scale. There is, for instance, a thirty-two-ounce rib eye for two hundred and thirty-five dollars, and something called the Tower, which a server hyped up as a dramatic vertical assembly of beef-tenderloin slices interleaved with crispy smashed potatoes. Upon arrival, it was the anticlimax of the year, the meat mushy and flavorless, the potatoes so thin as to be nearly translucent, with the chewy toughness of a dehydrated banana peel. And what a tower—three inches high, more broad than tall, slumping glumly in a puddle of oddly oily jus. The menu's centerpiece is the *parrillada*, a traditional Argentinean mixed-grill platter, here featuring a carnivorous quartet of lamb chops, branzino fillets, giant prawns, and a plump New York strip served on the grates of a grand, urn-shaped tabletop grill (unlit, purely for the vibes). It's a nice steak—a solidly nice one. I was so surprised, and relieved, to at last find something at La Boca that was straightforwardly unobjectionable, that I started to laugh, and then nearly aspirated my bite of meat and choked to death, though I can't fault the restaurant for that. What I *can* fault it for is the fact that I had requested the meat medium rare—I'd had a pleasant little exchange about it with our server, who shared happily that that's how the chef prefers it as well—but it arrived medium well. The rest of the *parrillada* was fine: the lamb chops tender, the branzino crisp-skinned, the prawns gigantic. Despite their technically precise preparation, everything in the array is grossly underseasoned, though the dish does come

with a tiny cup of chimichurri, peculiarly un-garlicky and unsalty, and two tiled lines of Mallmann's famous "domino potatoes."

I've cooked these potatoes before, as it happens—the recipe appears in Mallmann's 2009 cookbook "[Seven Fires](#)," which, please believe me, is a phenomenal volume, even if I've never tried the recipe for cooking "una vaca entera." The potatoes' unique shape is achieved by hacking the sides off each one to make a tight-cornered rectangular brick, then slicing it thinly and pressing down to fan the pieces out like Ricky Jay spreading a deck of cards. The potatoes are baked in oodles of clarified butter, until the outsides are golden, the corners of each thin slice crisping and curling, the interiors silken. The version served at La Boca—which is available as a stand-alone side dish, as well, with a pouf of arugula—was barely recognizable as the same dish. The slices of potato were thick and pallid; instead of crisp they were sticky with their own starch. Another side dish that Mallmann is famous for—*humitas*, an Andean preparation of fresh sweet corn slow-cooked with milk—is served in a metal ramekin, which might be why it had the tinny undertones of creamed corn straight from the can. Does the great chef know what's going on here? Does he like it?

According to a long explanatory text on the menu, La Boca is meant to evoke a Buenos Aires neighborhood of the same name, a bright, artsy district known for its mishmash of classes and cultures, and a lively restaurant scene. To this end, the menu has a dedicated pasta section, which includes a spaghetti pomodoro—the noodles fresh and toothsome, the bright sauce overpowered by a bitter, over-green olive oil—and a preparation of potato gnocchi with sage and mushrooms that were, I suspect, not intended to be burned black on the bottom. A dish called Francis's Thick Milanesa (ahem) features a brawny veal steak that has been, to no discernible purpose, breaded and fried. Mallmann has always been an evangelist for the magnificence of vegetables (his most recent cookbook is "[Green Fire](#)"), and so the list of entrées includes an entire head of cauliflower, which tastes like an entire head of

cauliflower. Every single dish I tried was under-salted—a common complaint, it seems, as I noticed, on my final visit, that saltshakers had been set out on every table. Squat little silver sentries that clashed with the room’s motif of gold, they seemed like quiet admissions of defeat.

Helen, Help Me!

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

I don’t want to go back to La Boca, and I can’t in good conscience recommend that anyone else eat there. And yet the mood of the restaurant is quite wonderful, especially when the live band steps up for its thrice-nightly tango-inspired sets. Being there feels placeless, cocoonlike, as if you’ve slipped through some fold in the city into a realm where time moves differently, where you’re not quite in New York, and not quite in Buenos Aires, and certainly nowhere near a wild, smoke-kissed island in remote Patagonia, but in a swaddled nowhere, watching a sequin-gowned singer croon “Bésame Mucho” over a piano and a double bass. The velvet glows. The roses are real. The servers are genuinely lovely, even if they were flustered by questions about the origins of the beef (disappointingly, it is not from Argentina’s revered herds but from Texas) or, two times out of three, forgot to bring the bread. To reach this cocoon you must first navigate the Faena itself. The doormen, clad in cream tuxedos and dapper white top hats, will welcome you to the lobby, which is wrapped in an enormous mural depicting various photorealistcally nude women gesturing at assorted eldritch objects and soaring nebulae. The entrance to the restaurant is directly beneath an extremely detailed upturned nipple. One night, I noticed a Cybertruck parked out front, then another directly across the street. I had never seen two at once before. They hulked there, shining dully in the night: large appliances from a future that no one actually wants—overpriced, aggressive, entirely beside the point. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her [Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi](#).

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-food-scene/la-boca-is-all-smoke-no-fire>

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The Talk of the Town

- **[The Meaning of Trump's Presidential Pardons](#)**

The President granted two hundred and thirty-eight pardons and commutations in his first term; less than a year into his second, he has issued nearly two thousand.

- **[What's the Best Movie About the Subway?](#)**

“The Big Picture” podcast has interviewed Leonardo DiCaprio and Nicolas Cage. It recently hit the 92nd Street Y for a live show to pick the best New York films in six categories.

- **[Annie Leibovitz Outside the Frame](#)**

After a prod from Hillary Clinton, the photographer reissued her 1999 book, “Women,” and celebrated with some subjects—Martha Stewart, Gloria Steinem—on hand.

- **[Keeping Up with Andrea Martin](#)**

The actress stars in “Meet the Cartozians,” a new play about an Armenian family of reality-TV stars who are suspiciously similar to the Kardashians.

- **[The Harlem River Houses' Newest Residents](#)**

Decades after the complex’s beloved stone penguins were beheaded and then used for drug stashes, new sculptures have taken their place around the wading pool.

[Comment](#)

The Meaning of Trump's Presidential Pardons

The President granted two hundred and thirty-eight pardons and commutations in his first term; less than a year into his second, he has issued nearly two thousand.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

November 16, 2025



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

A Presidential pardon, like sainthood, must be assiduously pursued in order to be obtained, but not openly desired. Last Monday, when Rudy Giuliani received a remarkably broad pardon from Donald Trump, a spokesperson for the former Mayor said that his client had “never sought a pardon but is deeply grateful for President Trump’s decision.” Giuliani’s pardon was among more than seventy issued in a batch, many of them blanket prophylactic measures for Trump’s allies in the effort to overturn the 2020

election, including the former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and the lawyers John Eastman and Sidney Powell—none of whom face federal charges. On the same day, the White House announced that Trump had pardoned dozens of other people, including a congresswoman’s pharmacist husband, who distributed a dialysis drug from China that had not been approved by the F.D.A.; an ultra-runner who took a quick detour on a protected Grand Teton trail; and the former Mets star Darryl Strawberry, for his conviction on a tax-evasion charge. That list had some of the feeling of the bestowal of the King’s birthday honors, except that nearly everyone on it had been charged with a federal crime.

Histories of the pardon power tend to begin with Hammurabi and flow through the centuries (James II once sold a reprieve for sixteen thousand pounds), and it is a rare feature of monarchical power which the Founders adopted in the Constitution. A modern case for the measure, articulated by the Oxford philosopher Adam Perry, is that, when laws are broadly fair but unfair in a particular instance, pardons allow for “selective deviation.” Sometimes the pardon power has been used as a corrective, when the social consensus behind a particular law has changed but sentences endure: Jimmy Carter pardoned Vietnam War draft dodgers, and Joe Biden cleared the names of several thousand Americans convicted of federal marijuana crimes. Yet entrusting a President to select when to deviate from the law tends to lead to a friends-and-family approach, as when Bill Clinton pardoned the billionaire Marc Rich, who had fled the country before facing charges, or when Biden exempted his son Hunter from charges brought by his own Department of Justice. Pardons can become a shortcut to a separate system of justice.

But Trump, in his second term, has begun to expand the pardon power both in nature and in scale. This spring, he fired Liz Oyer, a career official in charge of the pardon office, after she refused to recommend reinstating gun-ownership rights to Mel Gibson. Trump then appointed a keen loyalist, Ed Martin, to lead the office.

A kind of pardon economy has bloomed: in May, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that pardon seekers were “shelling out to hire lawyers and lobbyists who tout access to those in the president’s inner circle.” In March, Trump pardoned an electric-truck entrepreneur named Trevor Milton, who was convicted on fraud charges. The President said that Milton had been “highly recommended” to him by “top-of-the-line people”; Milton had also contributed to Trump’s and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.,’s campaigns.

“No *maga* left behind,” Martin tweeted. He seems to mean it: Trump granted two hundred and thirty-eight pardons and commutations in his first term; less than a year into his second, he has issued nearly two thousand. In most cases, of course, the person being pardoned had been found guilty of a crime. The pardon economy presents the possibility that, if you’re nice enough to the President, a jury’s judgment might be set aside. But you have to stay nice: on Newsmax, Trump mused about a potential pardon for Diddy, on his conviction for prostitution-related charges. “I got along with him great,” the President said, “but when I ran for office he was very hostile.” He added, “I’m being honest—it makes it more difficult to do.”

Many of Trump’s pardons have helped him secure political loyalties. He has pardoned more than a thousand people convicted on charges related to the events of January 6th, as well as dozens of fake electors and lawyers who supported those events. But some of the most egregious acts contain a financial element. Last month, Trump pardoned the Chinese Canadian billionaire Changpeng Zhao, who founded the crypto exchange Binance. In 2023, Zhao pleaded guilty to failing to report the use of the platform by terrorist entities and individuals sanctioned by the U.S. government. This spring, according to the *Journal*, Binance took steps that boosted the value of a stablecoin developed by World Liberty Financial, in which the Trump family has a large stake, including the receipt of a two-billion-dollar investment. (Representatives for both World Liberty Financial and Binance

denied that there was any impropriety.) When asked on “60 Minutes” about Zhao’s pardon, Trump said, “O.K., are you ready? I don’t know who he is.”

The ingenuity of Trump’s initiative is that it is explicitly permitted by the Constitution, which states that the President “shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offenses against the United States.” But the power can still be politically entangling. The White House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, has generally argued that Trump’s pardons are correcting overzealous prosecutions by the Biden Administration of political enemies and financial upstarts—in effect, claiming that the social consensus has shifted to the right. But Trump’s popularity has declined—it’s forty-one per cent in the *Times*’ polling average—and this month’s elections went badly for the G.O.P., so the correcting-Biden justification may have less traction.

That could prove particularly true with Trump’s stickiest problem, which he’s lately been calling the “Epstein hoax.” Over the summer, after Justice Department officials had promised to review investigative files on the activities of the late financier Jeffrey Epstein, the Deputy Attorney General, Todd Blanche, met with Ghislaine Maxwell, who is serving a twenty-year sentence for conspiring with Epstein to sexually exploit and abuse minors. She told Blanche that Trump had always been “a gentleman” and that she’d never seen him in Epstein’s house or “in any type of massage setting.” She was then moved to a minimum-security prison, where she is reportedly preparing an application for commutation, but last week House Democrats released thousands of documents obtained from Epstein’s estate, including some e-mails that appeared to contradict her.

Last week, the White House said that Trump is not considering a pardon for Maxwell, and no wonder. If he were to issue one, it would highlight, in a very public way, the system that he and his

subordinates have built: a separate tier of justice for his allies and investors—a legal gray zone for people the President finds useful. ♦

Benjamin Wallace-Wells began contributing to The New Yorker in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/the-meaning-of-trumps-presidential-pardons>

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[The Pictures](#)

What's the Best Movie About the Subway?

“The Big Picture” podcast has interviewed Leonardo DiCaprio and Nicolas Cage. It recently hit the 92nd Street Y for a live show to pick the best New York films in six categories.

By [Jackson Vail](#)

November 17, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Movie nerds lined up outside the 92nd Street Y on a recent Saturday to watch a live taping of “The Big Picture,” a podcast hosted by a couple of friends whom one ticket-holder called “the

modern Siskel and Ebert.” Before the audience arrived, Amanda Dobbins and Sean Fennessey (the Siskel and Ebert in question) were onstage at the Y for a walk-through. The set design was West Elm meets lecture hall: five greige armchairs in front of two whiteboards. The main event was going to be a draft of New York movies; Dobbins, Fennessey, and three guest podcasters would compete to select the best roster of films. “We’ll take turns picking from the six categories”—drama, comedy, action/horror/thriller, Oscar-winner, blockbuster, and subway—“and explaining what the films mean to us,” Dobbins said. The audience would choose a winner.

Fennessey, who is the head of content at the sports-and-pop-culture network the Ringer, was wearing a dark sweater and green chinos, and had the carefully combed hair of a fifties movie detective. He looked out at the empty seats and said, “From the people who brought you James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Yo-Yo Ma, and all the other geniuses who’ve stood on this stage, come two assholes who like movies!”

“Don’t you mean five assholes?” a nearby producer asked.

“I only feel comfortable criticizing *her*,” Fennessey clarified, indicating Dobbins, who is forty-one and had on a blue velvet blazer, jeans, and heels. “Amanda, you accept and identify as a co-asshole, right?”

“In this context? Absolutely,” she said.

Fennessey, who is forty-three, started “The Big Picture” in 2017, as a way to interview directors for the Ringer. His boss soon asked him to add a conversation segment. “I was, like, ‘If I’m going to do it, I pretty much only want to do it with Amanda,’ ” he said. The two were already close, having spent their twenties bouncing among magazine jobs in New York, and their chemistry was immediately apparent. They can talk movies in a nuanced way, but

their divergent tastes often lead them to bicker like siblings who've been in a car together for too long.

"We're nicer to each other off mike, though not by *that* much," Dobbins said.

Onstage, a jurisdictional debate broke out about what, exactly, constituted a New York movie and could thereby be considered fair game for the draft. Dobbins submitted that "His Girl Friday" shouldn't be eligible. "A lot of the classic screwball comedies are not location-specific enough," she said. "Like, in 'Bringing Up Baby,' they don't specify that it's the Museum of Natural History."

Fennessey found this overly academic. "I mean, come on," he said. But sparring, he knows, is part of the podcast's appeal. "I grew up obsessed with Mike and the Mad Dog, Siskel and Ebert, and Howard Stern," he said. "As broadcasters, they were amazing not only at conveying what they thought—they provoked you to agree or disagree. That's what we're pursuing with each other."

"It's how we speak," Dobbins said, nodding emphatically. She explained that the show came into its own during the pandemic. "When everyone was in lockdown, it was something to keep you company," she said.

"We were starting to do rubric-style episodes, like Halls of Fame," Fennessey said. (A few *COVID*-era episodes: "Top 10 Horny Quarantine Erotic Thrillers," "The Dad Movie Hall of Fame," "'Hillbilly Elegy' and the 10 Types of Oscar Bait You Meet in Hell.") "That's what people were excited about." The formula worked. "The Big Picture" currently includes Oscar predictions, interviews with stars (Nicolas Cage, Leonardo DiCaprio), and gimmicks like that night's draft.

Conversation turned to another gimmick: Dobbins had agreed to help a female listener named Sharon find a date for that night's live

show. On a whim, Sharon had sent in an e-mail with this request and the names of a few of her favorite films—a cinéaste’s dating profile. Dobbins then put out a call on the podcast, asking any “New York City-based boy who is available and not weird” to reach out. She sorted through dozens of potential escorts and allowed Sharon to choose the winner, who was due at the Y shortly, with Sharon on his arm.

Fennessey was unmoved. “I think if people come as friends to this event or if they come as dates, that’s awesome,” he said. “But the idea of people finding love because of the show? I don’t care.”

At the end of the night, the winning draft picks were revealed: “Do the Right Thing,” “The Royal Tenenbaums,” “American Psycho,” “The Godfather Part II,” “Men in Black,” and “The Taking of Pelham One Two Three.” Sharon did O.K., too. Her assessment of her date? “His movie taste was all very boy-coded,” she said. “But he’s six feet four and calls his mom every Saturday. Our second date is this weekend.” ♦

Jackson Vail is a member of *The New Yorker’s* editorial staff.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/whats-the-best-movie-about-the-subway>

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[Pop-Up Dept.](#)

Annie Leibovitz Outside the Frame

After a prod from Hillary Clinton, the photographer reissued her 1999 book, “Women,” and celebrated with some subjects—Martha Stewart, Gloria Steinem—on hand.

By [Jane Bua](#)

November 17, 2025

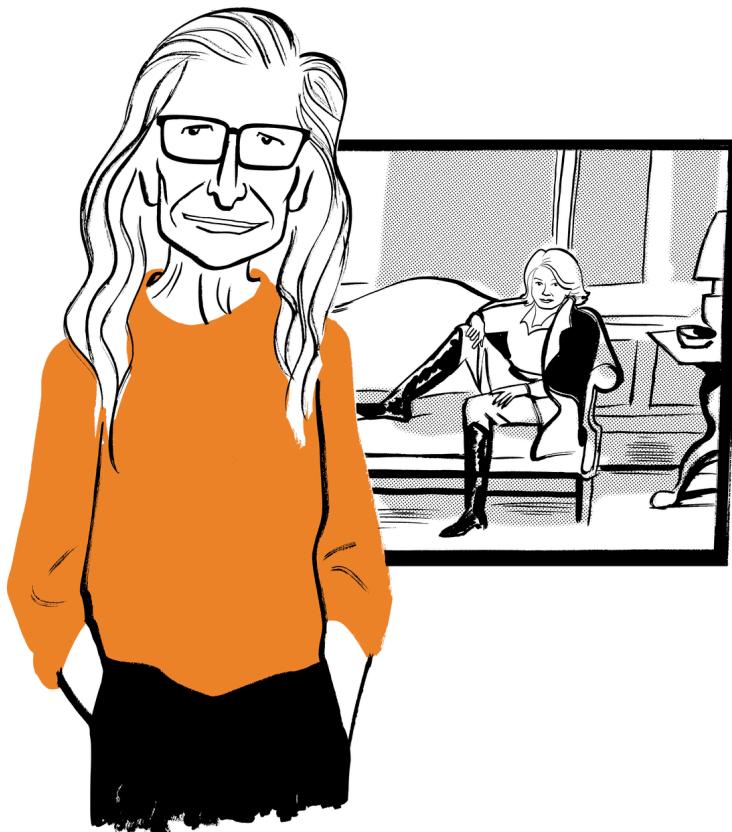


Illustration by João Fazenda

On a recent Tuesday, at an event space down the block from a round-the-clock car wash, the photographer Annie Leibovitz was in crisis. “They’re bouncing off each other!” she exclaimed, pointing at two catty-corner walls, each displaying a photograph of a woman: one, a Bronx schoolteacher by a blackboard; the other, a soldier smeared with camo face paint. The images were projections, and slightly washed out. “And they’re out of focus!”

Leibovitz stood in the center of the room and put her hands on her hips—a rare moment of stillness. She was overseeing the installation of a pop-up exhibition celebrating a new, expanded edition of her 1999 book, “Women.”

“It was actually Hillary Clinton’s idea,” Leibovitz said, of the commemoration. “And I liked it. The book was out of print.” The original project consists of portraits whose subjects range from coal miners to Serena Williams, bull riders to a John-less Yoko. Leibovitz has now added a second volume, studded with celebrities from the recent past: a pregnant Rihanna, Greta Thunberg at a protest, Billie Eilish looking forlorn. The signed book, which costs \$99.95, has already sold out on the publisher’s site—perhaps a relief to Leibovitz, who, in 2009, faced potential bankruptcy amid a twenty-four-million-dollar nonpayment lawsuit. “Bankruptcy is not death,” she said at the time. Apparently not.

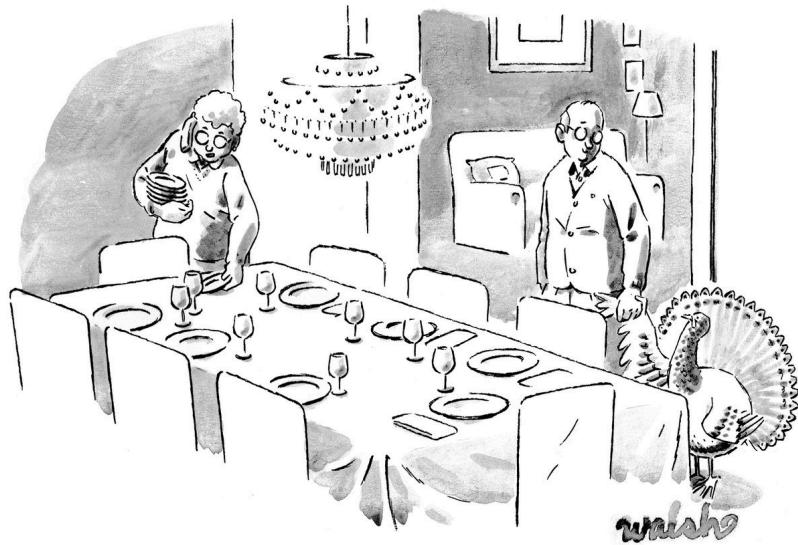
“Can you bring up another?” Leibovitz, who is seventy-six, asked Andrew Pulaski, a screen technician. He sat at a folding table with a laptop, furiously clicking his track pad, and photographs cycled onto the wall, including one of a young Taylor Swift head-banging in a field. He landed on an image of Martha Stewart lounging on a chaise. “I really don’t like that picture,” Leibovitz said. “I was in a supermarket after, and I saw her Halloween issue, where she was made up as a witch. She was so playful, and I *totally* missed it.” She stepped back, as if to put space between herself and the failure.

The venue, called Studio 525, was a familiar canvas; four years ago, Leibovitz mounted “Wonderland,” her exhibition of fashion-world photographs, there. “But we didn’t use projections then—we used television screens gridded together,” she said. “I knew there was going to be a problem today.” She wore a thin down vest over a turtleneck, a pair of rectangular glasses resting on her slender nose. “I’m going to work on the image choreography,” she announced, darting to a back room.

Other crises were brewing. Leibovitz still had to edit her speech for the opening party, the following night. In the back, she thumbed a stack of highlighter-dotted papers. “ ‘How we are seen no doubt changes how we see ourselves.’ Gloria Steinem said that,” she read aloud, slowly rolling over the words. She paused.

“That’s the fucking line. I’m gonna say that, then I’ll go, ‘Susan Sontag and I collaborated on the first one.’ ” Sontag, the late critic and Leibovitz’s longtime partner, wrote the book’s original introduction. “Susan . . . whew,” Leibovitz said. “She was in the middle of chemotherapy. I read it now, and it’s just so Susan. There’s a whole passage about Greta Garbo.” She let out a hearty chuckle.

Leibovitz moved on to the guest list. “Did you invite Frances McDormand?” she asked her agent, Karen Mulligan.



“Just pick up a ham—you’ll understand when you get here.”

Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

“She’s in California,” Mulligan replied.

“She’s upstate,” Leibovitz’s editor, Deb Aaronson, corrected.

“Is Hillary coming?” Leibovitz asked, retrieving a lox-and-tomato bagel from a brown bag. Clinton also had a hand in inspiring the original “Women”—Leibovitz cites her 1995 speech in Beijing as a

light-bulb moment. “She said, ‘Women’s rights are human rights,’ and it went viral,” she recalled. “That was in my slide show for tonight.” Leibovitz had planned to give a talk at the Brooklyn Paramount that evening, but the city had other plans. “If you put it on Election Day, you’re cursed,” she said, unbothered. “We were bumped out of there for Mamdani’s party.” (A few clueless Annie fans still showed up, unaware of the last-minute switch.)

Pulaski popped his head in: “I want to see if you like this.” Leibovitz hoisted herself up from the velvet chair she was in (“Ugh, right leg,” she grunted) and followed his squeaky sneakers out to the main space. A photograph of a policewoman filled one of the walls.

“It’s great,” she said, her voice echoing. “Everything looks a lot better right now.”

By the next night, all the images were clear, the folding tables were gone, and the tequila was flowing. “I’m satisfied,” Leibovitz said, surveying the bustling room. Her muses wandered through the gallery. Martha Stewart admired the image of Martha Stewart. Fran Lebowitz got trapped in a conversation about luxury goods. Frances McDormand did not make it down from upstate, but Gloria Steinem did make it down from the Upper East Side. An event photographer scurried around carrying a large light reflector. He was trying his best to wrangle the big names, but it wasn’t easy: “Heavy hitters like these, they don’t like their picture taken.” ♦

Jane Bua is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/annie-leibovitz-outside-the-frame>

[The Boards](#)

Keeping Up with Andrea Martin

The actress stars in “Meet the Cartozians,” a new play about an Armenian family of reality-TV stars who are suspiciously similar to the Kardashians.

By [Henry Alford](#)

November 17, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

If, while reading a script, you encounter dialogue that runs “What, you take ONLY ONE BITE? THIS IS NOT A BIG DESSERT,” it would not be eccentric to imagine the words being spoken by Andrea Martin. From “SCTV” to “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” and “Pippin,” Martin has played characters whose proverbial control panel is reminiscent of a Japanese toilet’s: every button means “celebration.”

Martin was sitting in the lobby of the Signature Theatre the other day, awaiting a rehearsal for “Meet the Cartozians,” the play that features the dialogue above. A witty period drama that morphs into a contemporary satire, the show, written by Talene Monahon and presented by Second Stage, centers on an actual 1925 federal court case about whether an Armenian American man named Tatos Cartozian should be considered white. Martin, whose own roots are Armenian, first plays Cartozian’s dessert-dispensing mother, then a contemporary Angeleno who is asked to don ethnic garb in a reality-TV show about a Cartozian descendant who is highly reminiscent of Kim Kardashian.

“It’s a lot,” the petite seventy-eight-year-old, dressed in a hot-pink sweater and jeans, said of the gig. “It’s two centuries, I’m two characters, and I speak Armenian in it.”

Although most people think that Martin is Canadian, she grew up in Portland, Maine, and didn’t move to Canada until she was twenty-three. Her paternal grandfather, who escaped the Armenian genocide of 1915, changed the family name from Papazian to Martin. Nevertheless, Martin wrote in her 2014 memoir, “to compensate for my ethnic insecurities, I found a hobby that allowed me to be anything I wanted to be.” It wasn’t drugs or schizophrenia.

Martin’s childhood bedroom was next to that of her maternal grandmother, who’d been sent to the United States from Armenia at fifteen for an arranged marriage to a man twice her age. Before

Martin visited Armenia in 1991, to do research for a one-woman show, she knew little about the country other than how to make a sweet bread called *gatah*. Armenia's location—in Asia, sharing a border with Iran—has long fostered confusion: Are Armenians European? Asian? Middle Eastern? Martin was galvanized by the trip, and she developed a respect for her ancestral homeland. “As I was flying back to the States, it was announced that Gorbachev had been kidnapped,” she said. “Which meant that Armenia was no longer a republic.”

Over the years, Martin has distinguished herself from other sketch-comedy pros by taking on dramatic roles—like the nun she recently played in the horror series “Evil”—and also by the longevity of her career. Martin Short, who met Martin when they were in a 1972 Toronto production of “Godspell” together (“I think she brought *gatah* to the theatre”), credits her success to perfectionism and versatility. “In Canada in the seventies, there was no star system,” he said. “You just worked. You didn’t say to your manager, ‘Is this good for my résumé?’ You said, ‘Do I bring a suit?’ So now Andrea is one of the most Tony-nominated actresses in the history of Broadway. And she has her Emmys.” (Martin won two as a writer for “SCTV.”)

A long career, of course, has its share of awkward working situations. In 2022, for instance, Martin, who has been divorced since 2004, had to make out with her old chum Steve Martin on the streets of New York. (She was playing his love interest on “Only Murders in the Building.”) “Yeah, that was something!” Martin said, her chocolaty eyes popping slightly. “I was thrilled.” She went on, “Steve’s married, so he’s probably kissing his wife every day. I was, like, Wait, what was the last time for me—the eighties? I was very grateful. And there was no intimacy coördinator. We coördinated our own kissing.”

She was circumspect about whether her illustrious TV-comedy colleagues would be coming to see “Meet the Cartozians.” “I don’t

want the kids in the show to know,” she said. “It’ll make everyone nervous.”

Short said that he would be there on opening night. “But, believe me, I don’t think I’m the problem,” he said. “Meryl Streep would be the problem.” ♦

Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography “I Dream of Joni.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/keeping-up-with-andrea-martin>

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[Public Art Dept.](#)

The Harlem River Houses' Newest Residents

Decades after the complex's beloved stone penguins were beheaded and then used for drug stashes, new sculptures have taken their place around the wading pool.

By [Taran Dugal](#)

November 17, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

At the Harlem River Houses, a public-housing complex in northern Manhattan, Sheryl Jones grimaced lightly as she watched a puppy

relieve itself on a flagpole. “Now, that’s just disrespectful,” Jones, a sixty-one-year-old teacher who has lived in the complex for more than three decades, said. Next to her, Kim Dacres, a thirty-nine-year-old sculptor, scoffed. “If Winky was here,” she said, referring to her French bulldog, “he’d be tearing these skinny dogs up.”

Dacres, a Bronx native, had come to the houses to check in on her latest project, four abstract bronze busts—each five feet tall, depicting a Black woman—which were being installed around a central wading pool. ArtBridge, a local nonprofit, had tapped her for the project, and she planned around exhibitions in Paris and at Art Basel Miami Beach to take on the job.

These sculptures had been a long time coming. When the Harlem River Houses, an early Public Works Administration project, were built, in the nineteen-thirties, this magazine’s architecture critic, Lewis Mumford, travelled up to 151st Street to write about them. He singled out “the trees set about the ample open spaces in the fashion of the Luxembourg Gardens; and the handsome sculpture by Heinz Warneke, the penguins round about the central wading pool.” He added that the sculptures “will be improved in finish by being handled and climbed over by children.”

By the late seventies, however, the penguins had all but disappeared: one had been beheaded; another two, stolen.

“They took them away, and said, ‘Oh, we’re going to bring them back—we have to restore them,’ ” Jones said. “And they brought back these hollow terra-cotta versions—the spirit was gone.”

Dacres, who had on a white hoodie and a black beret, nodded. “The new animals were being used for more nefarious activities, in terms of storage of ‘goods,’ ” she said, with a knowing look. (Frank Lucas, a local drug kingpin, was known for using the neighborhood’s nooks and crannies to hide stashes.) No one

seemed to know what happened to Warneke's wrestling-bear statues, which had also adorned the public space.

When Jones was growing up, in Brooklyn, she spent summers at the Harlem River Houses with her father and her siblings. Pointing toward a playground, she said, "My dad used to play basketball there with Lew Alcindor," referring to the N.B.A. star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. "Lew was real tall, but he wasn't a great basketball player, so my dad and his friends taught him the hook shot. That ended up being his signature move."

Jabbar and other local legends are depicted in a new mural by the southwestern entrance. Jones's son William, who grew up playing tennis at the complex's court, is in there, too. "The all-Black American Tennis Association used to hold matches just down the street," Jones said.

The pair walked toward the wading pool, which was dry and empty. "The penguin statues used to be right here," Jones said. "When I was growing up, all the grandparents would sit outside with us."

"That was a big part of my vision for the sculptures," Dacres said, of her stately busts. "The four of them are kind of the keepers of the playground. I could almost hear people saying to their kids, 'Oh, as long as you can see these sculptures, I can see you.' "

Dacres had made prototypes out of strips of bicycle tires; these were cast in bronze to create the final installation. "I've been collecting them every Tuesday since 2017—Tire Tuesdays," she said. "I pick them up off the street, or from bicycle shops in Harlem, and now I have hundreds in my studio."

The busts Dacres created represent two women, whom she calls Ariel and Marci Marie. "Ariel has this Bantu-knot hair style," she said. "I wanted to pay homage to communities that I can't name but

that I know I come from. And Marci Marie is named after my mom.” She added, “That’s why she has rollers in her hair.”

The new designs weren’t immediately popular with the Harlem River Houses community. An original plan to make them fountains was struck down. “We were, like, ‘We don’t want our children playing in the water coming out of these heads!’ ” Jones said, laughing. “‘You know that looks like vomit, right?’ ”

With time, however, the residents have come around. For one thing, Dacres visits frequently; her studio is ten minutes away. “Sometimes you see sculptures and you’re, like, ‘How did they get the money for *this*? ’ ” Jones asked. “But these feel special.”

“It’s like Erykah Badu said,” Dacres replied. “‘Keep in mind that I’m an artist—and I’m sensitive about my shit!’ ” ♦

Taran Dugal is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/harlem-river-houses-newest-residents>

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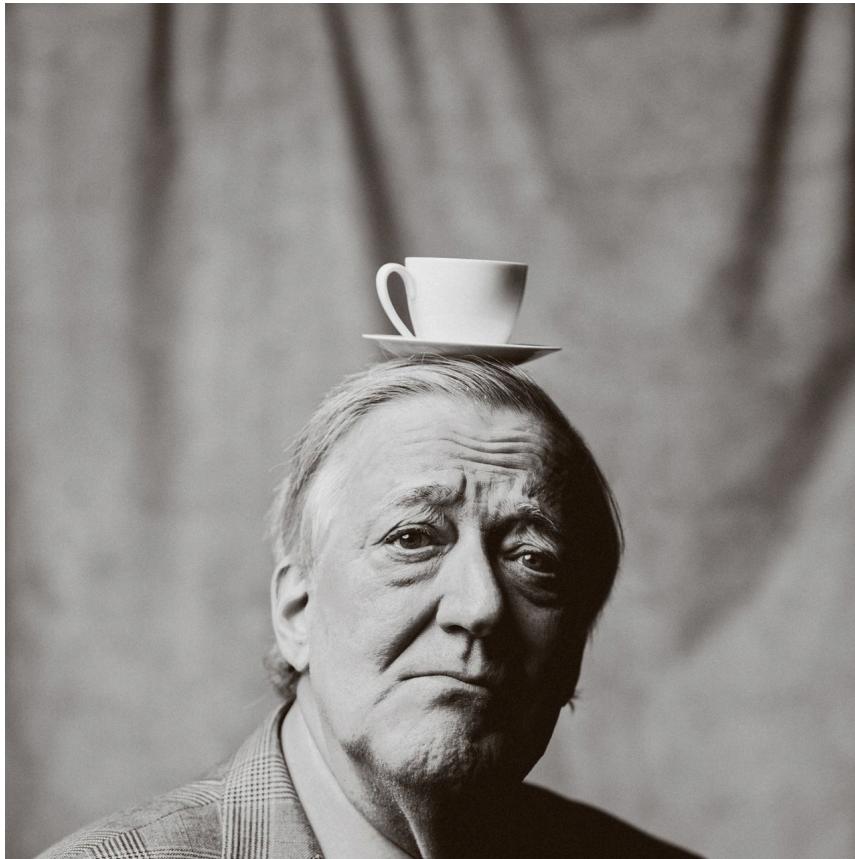
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Stephen Fry Is Wilde at Heart

The polymathic entertainer has had a lifelong bond with the wittiest—and the most tortured—of writers. And now he's starring in “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

November 17, 2025



In the West End, Fry is playing Lady Bracknell, the starchiest of Victorian matrons, in a new production of “The Importance of Being Earnest.”
Photograph by Austin Fischer for The New Yorker

When “The Importance of Being Earnest,” by Oscar Wilde, opened, on February 14, 1895, in London, the date was well chosen. It was the Victorians, after all, who decisively turned the feast of St. Valentine into a mass commercial celebration, with would-be lovers concealing their identities behind an anonymous exchange of greeting cards and other tokens of desire. “Earnest,”

the fourth drawing-room comedy that Wilde had produced within three years, centered on the courtship of two young women, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, by two young men, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. Both suitors repeatedly resort to subterfuge in order to maintain double lives in which the satisfactions of social respectability are counterbalanced by the pursuit of pleasure and personal freedom. The play, which Wilde gave a paradoxical subtitle, “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” harnessed Shakespearean conventions of mistaken identity and romantic disguise—at different moments, each man pretends to be named Ernest. The skittering plot is anchored by Lady Bracknell, the mother of Gwendolen and the aunt of Algernon. An overbearing elder who often thwarts the lovers’ intentions, she is the voice of Victorian probity in Wilde’s deranged scenario.

This canonical part has been played by some of the foremost women of the British stage, among them Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, and Edith Evans, who, in Anthony Asquith’s 1952 film adaptation, put a delightfully querulous spin on Lady Bracknell’s most indelible lines. (“To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.”) Late this summer, it was announced that the role would be tackled in a new West End production by another well-known British performer: Stephen Fry, the actor, comic, novelist, memoirist, radio presenter, television personality, gay-rights advocate, mental-health campaigner, and, as of earlier this year, Knight Bachelor. Now sixty-eight, Fry has been a household name in Britain for four decades, though it might be more accurate to call him a household voice—his resonant baritone being instantly recognizable everywhere from “Harry Potter” audiobooks to commercials for Sainsbury’s supermarkets. When, this fall, he appeared in a celebrity version of the hit reality show “The Traitors,” his fellow-participants referred to him, earnestly, as “national treasure Stephen Fry.”

In early September, the cast of “Earnest” was in the production’s rehearsal space, on Gray’s Inn Road in central London, practicing a scene in which Lady Bracknell directs a flurry of questions to Jack—or Ernest, the false name he uses in town. A twitchily silly Nathan Stewart-Jarrett, playing Jack, stood stage left while Fry sat stage right, a tea table at his elbow. Fry was dressed in black jeans and a fleece top, and he had at his waist a small bag that was standing in for Lady Bracknell’s reticule. Taking a notebook out of it, Fry delivered his lines: “I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact.” Lady Bracknell scans a checklist. Does Jack smoke? He does. “I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind.”

The inquisition is an exercise in absurdity, grounded in the very rational, if unspoken, imperative that Gwendolen should marry wealth. After delivering one of Lady Bracknell’s more ridiculous apothegms—“I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?”—Fry glowed with satisfaction when Stewart-Jarrett responded, “I know nothing.” Fry, in a register pitched only slightly higher than his natural speaking voice, said, “I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.” Lady Bracknell’s approval turns to horror, however, when she learns that Jack was a foundling who was abandoned in a train station in a carryall. The focus of her horror: “A handbag?” After this one-liner, Fry expertly unfurled one of the character’s more sidewinding sentences, with which Wilde parodied the verbosity, as well as the morality, of his age: “To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.”

During a break, Fry told me, “If *that* scene doesn’t get them going, you really have failed.” We were walking to have lunch nearby, on Lamb’s Conduit Street. Fry is six feet four, with a swift stride, and he traversed the streets as fluently as he had the language of “Earnest.” During the run-through, Fry had delivered the handbag ejaculation in a tremulous tone of disbelief, and I asked if he’d settled on that as his approach. “The trouble is, it’s a bit of a ‘To be, or not to be’ moment,” he observed, meaning that the line is one of the play’s most famous. “It varies every time I do it, and I think it should, for the moment at least. It tends to concretize later in the run. It’s a wanky, actory thing to say”—his voice grew plummier, finding the verity in exaggeration—“but you have to play the *truth* of the scene.”

In this production of “Earnest,” which opened to acclaim in the West End in late September, the sexual energy between the four young people isn’t confined to the ostensible heterosexual couplings of the text. Gwendolen and Cecily pant for each other; Algernon and Jack’s friendship is shaded with flirtation. This is a choice that seeks to make explicit a truth of the play: that Wilde’s confection about doubling and disguise is itself a doubled, disguised work. In “Earnest,” Wilde all but exposed his secret homosexual life, at least for those who had the ears to hear it. “The Duchess of Bolton,” for example, would have sounded to much of Wilde’s audience like the name of a generic aristocrat. But, for Wilde’s coterie of gay friends, the name surely brought to mind a Victorian precursor, Ernest Boulton, who, along with a companion, Frederick Park, had been arrested in London while wearing women’s clothing. They called themselves Stella and Fanny, respectively, and they were charged with the “abominable crime of buggery.” (In a triumphant twist, both were acquitted.)

“Of course, it’s all brilliantly deniable,” Max Webster, the production’s director, told me. He cited Jack-as-Ernest’s exclamation to Algernon of his feelings about Gwendolen: “She is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry.” Webster

explained, “It’s all about the stress. You can say, ‘the only girl I would ever marry,’ but if you say, ‘the only *girl* I would ever marry,’ it’s clearly gay. The whole thing has deniability, which on the one hand is a way of saving yourself, if that’s the level of risk in talking about your sexuality in public. But it also reflects Wilde’s belief—which is why he’s a proto-modernist—that meaning is various, that the self is constructed, that identity is a bubble that is constantly shimmering and transforming.”



"Bubble? What bubble?"
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

The first reviewers of Wilde’s Valentine’s Day offering recognized that his play subverted some of the era’s social conventions. One noted, “The most commonsense actions of daily life take place, with the one important difference that the common sense has been left out; you have fallen among amiable, gay, and witty lunatics.” Wilde himself called the play “a delicate bubble of fancy,” as Fry reminded me over lunch, adding that, in an 1895 interview, Wilde had described the play’s undergirding philosophy: “We should treat

all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

“He was a pervert, he inverted *everything*,” Fry said. “‘Invert’ was the word they used for a queer man at the time. It is the essence of what he teaches us: by reversing everything Victorian and making it funny—but also as true in its reverse—it exposes its valuelessness.” Wilde’s triumph with “Earnest” was followed almost immediately by his downfall. Days after opening night, the Marquess of Queensberry, incensed by Wilde’s close companionship with his son Lord Alfred Douglas, sent to Wilde’s social club a kind of counter-Valentine: a card onto which he’d scrawled the ungrammatical accusation that the playwright was a “posing Somdomite.” This triggered a series of court cases for Wilde that culminated in a conviction of gross indecency and a sentence of two years of hard labor in prison, in Reading Gaol. His name was removed from the playbills at the theatres where his shows were running; soon thereafter, the plays themselves closed. By the time he died—he contracted meningitis in 1900, in Paris, at the age of forty-six—his reputation had burst like a bubble.

At lunch, Fry took his phone out of his pocket and opened a document containing the final paragraph of Richard Ellmann’s acclaimed biography of Wilde, from 1987. “I always carry it with me,” Fry said, then read aloud: “We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. He belongs to our world more than to Victoria’s. Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, and so right.” Fry looked up, eyes glistening. “Isn’t that stunning? What a way to end a biography. I’d like to think that Wilde had a belief that his best writings, as Ellmann puts it, would be validated by time, and that his reputation would be

salvaged to some extent amongst the literary.” But, he added, not even Wilde could have imagined that a glass barrier would eventually need to be erected around his tomb, at Père Lachaise Cemetery, in Paris, to protect it from the oscular adoration of pilgrims. Fry noted, “The limestone had been corroded by so many kisses”—and stained red by lipstick. “It makes me crack up, even now,” he went on. “It’s such a wonderful vindication.”

Fry’s incarnation of Wilde’s most recognizable stage creation feels all but inevitable; his personal and professional affinity with the writer is of long standing. (He is far from the first male actor to take on Lady Bracknell: David Suchet, Brian Bedford, and Quentin Crisp have all portrayed the role.) In 1993, Fry was cast as Wilde himself in an episode of the TV miniseries “Ned Blessing,” and at the time he told an interviewer that the part was one he’d been “born to play.” Four years later, he was born again as Wilde, in a bio-pic based on Ellmann’s biography and directed by Brian Gilbert. Fry shone as the tragic Wilde, done in by his love for Douglas, played by a cruel and golden Jude Law; over all, though, the film was more ponderous than its subject had ever allowed himself to be.

“Wildean” is an easy epithet to bestow on a brilliant and charismatic gay man, particularly one who delights in confounding social pieties and confusing the literal-minded. But Fry earns the adjective. If Wilde became infamous after the public exposure of his homosexuality, Fry—who publicly acknowledged his own homosexuality for the first time in 1988—gained notoriety for writing about his celibacy, in 1985, at a moment when the sexual revolution had supposedly liberated all erotic desires. He made the scandalizing avowal in an essay for the magazine *Tatler*, expressing distaste for the “damp, dark, foul-smelling and revoltingly tufted areas of the human body that constitute the main dishes in the banquet of human love.” By then, to have sex with one’s own gender may have been regarded as unexceptional; to have no sex at all looked like contrariness.

The cultural twinning of Fry and Wilde draws some strength, too, from their similar physical appearance. Like Fry, Wilde was tall; like Wilde, Fry has fluctuated in weight, though these days he's on the trim side. Both men's physiognomy can lean similarly to the lugubrious. Fry recounted that, at a restaurant in Covent Garden, "I went to the loo, and I was washing my hands, and in the mirror behind me was Alan Bennett"—the British author of "The Madness of George III," among other plays. "And he said, 'I was looking across the room, and I thought, He looks like Oscar Wilde...'" Fry's imitation of Bennett's Yorkshire accent was impeccable. "I looked at myself, and I did have a center parting, and I was getting a bit fleshier, and I thought, I suppose I *do* look a bit like him."



*A photograph of Oscar Wilde, from the early eighteen-eighties.
Photograph from Universal History Archive / Getty*

Fry's biography has invited irresistible comparison to Wilde's, and the actor shares the author's high-life, low-life credentials. Both became pals with their era's Princes of Wales. Wilde got to know the future King Edward VII, who asked a mutual friend for an introduction, saying, "I do not know Mr. Wilde, and not to know Mr. Wilde is not to be known." Fry met the future King Charles III

in the late eighties, at an official event, and recalls the Prince remarking that they were neighbors in Norfolk; Charles soon invited himself and his then wife, Diana, round to Fry's for tea. Fry even did a stretch in prison, though his incarceration came before the start of his glittering career. As a teen-ager, he was arrested for going on a weeks-long spree with credit cards that he had lifted from the pockets of friends and strangers. He spent three months behind bars; like Wilde, he was told by an inmate that "these places aren't for the likes of you." "I thought I deserved prison if anything *more* than he did," Fry wrote in his best-selling memoir "*Moab Is My Washpot*," from 1997. (The title is borrowed from P. G. Wodehouse, who, in turn, borrowed it from the King James Bible; the phrase indicates contempt for a lowly place.)

For many years, Fry lived a life as double as that of Wilde in his prime: by day, Fry was a beloved and omnipresent public figure; by night, and sometimes also by day, he was a heavy drinker and a fiendish cokehead. In a more recent memoir, "*More Fool Me*," published in 2014, Fry offers a list of fifty-odd institutions in which he has consumed cocaine, including the BBC's television headquarters, the London hotel Claridge's, the House of Lords, and Buckingham Palace. His substance habit—shared by Wilde, who preferred absinthe—was an open secret in London's demimonde, and although Fry was hardly alone in his consumption of illegal drugs, a ruinous public exposure was only one of the dangers he courted. Friends, including John Cleese and Emma Thompson, staged fruitless interventions to curb his use, which lasted for the better part of fifteen years. In an e-mail, Thompson told me, "One of the most frightening things I ever felt I had to do was 'intervene' by sitting him down and telling him how worried I and most of his friends were by an addiction we were sure would end up killing him."

Fry gave up cocaine (and cigarettes) near his fiftieth birthday. "It's just not really elegant when you're older," he told me. "And I probably sensed it would be worse for me—wear away the heart

more, or whatever it does.” He gave up celibacy, too; for the past decade Fry has been contentedly married to Elliott Spencer, a comedy writer. “I never thought I would be married, and then—there you are,” he said. “He’s very grounding—terrible word.” (Not long ago, Spencer, who is considerably younger, introduced Fry to the work of Kendrick Lamar, whom Fry has praised as a “poetical spirit.”)

Thompson, one of Fry’s best friends since they were undergraduates, at Cambridge University, told me that she and Fry have long shared a great love of Wilde—in particular, “his deep humanity and his awful suffering at the hands of polite society (what more degraded and vicious stratum has there ever been?).” She added, “I am sure that somewhere along the line, there is shared DNA between my beloved friend and that brilliant, hugely compassionate, poetic, and conflicted soul.”

Fry is not vain enough, or oblivious enough, to push his kinship with Wilde too far himself. “I don’t have a tenth of his intellectual brilliance—he was a remarkable man,” Fry told me one afternoon, when I met him in his dressing room at the Noël Coward Theatre, where “Earnest” is running. “But I admire what he admired. I’m not a conscious imitator, but one unconsciously picks up some of the rhythms of his speech—some of the ‘periods,’ is the old-fashioned word for it, the ‘tropes,’ as we would now say, the way he balanced a sentence. That’s deep in me. I suppose it’s bound to be, the same way that Walter Pater’s language was in him, and Samuel Johnson’s.”

Fry had kept Wilde’s way of living in mind, he said, during his own wilder years: “When I was in my twenties and thirties, I was seduced, not so much by brothels or gay sex or anything like that but by drink and partying and the good life and staying up late and chatting. I kind of bore him in mind when I had to get up the next day and work, and I remembered that he was able to do that—right up until after prison.” On Fry’s dressing-room door, I noticed a sign

reading “C.3.3.”—the number of Wilde’s cell in Reading Gaol. It was a reminder, he said, of what Wilde had been forced to suffer so soon after the effervescent success of “Earnest.” “I’m twenty-two years older than he was when he died—a hell of a thought,” Fry told me. “And yet, to me, he’ll always be my older adviser. My older brother, at least.”

Fry—who grew up with a real older brother, Roger, as well as a younger sister, Jo—discovered Wilde when he was about twelve years old, on a rainy day at the family home, a rambling pile in the Norfolk countryside where his father, a physicist, worked on inventions in one of the outbuildings. “There was one television, usually in a cupboard, and it would come out for Churchill’s funeral, or the man landing on the moon, or a royal wedding, or something,” Fry said. One day, he turned on a random film. “I didn’t know what it was—I could see that it was period, but it wasn’t Shakespeare, and it wasn’t bonnets and Jane Austen,” he recalled. “The language sort of *caught* me. There was one moment when a young man kneels in front of the beautiful young girl and says, ‘I hope I will not offend you if I state quite openly and frankly that you seem to me to be, in every way, the visible personification of absolute perfection.’ It was like being sandbagged—I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.” Fry ran to his mother and burbled the line out to her; she informed him that the film was called “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

Nowadays, Fry can perform an analysis of that declaration, which Algernon makes to Cecily, with the concision of the literature professor he once thought he might become. The phrase “I love you,” he explained, is “Anglo-Saxon, the language of the heart to us Britons. We trust Anglo-Saxon, whereas anything Latinate is everything we’ve always distrusted. To say ‘You are the visible personification of absolute perfection’ is using a language that doesn’t belong to the language of love. It’s wrong, so it’s funny. It’s a category mistake. But it’s also a perfect present, a gift: you have wrapped up your love. You’ve stopped yourself saying ‘I love

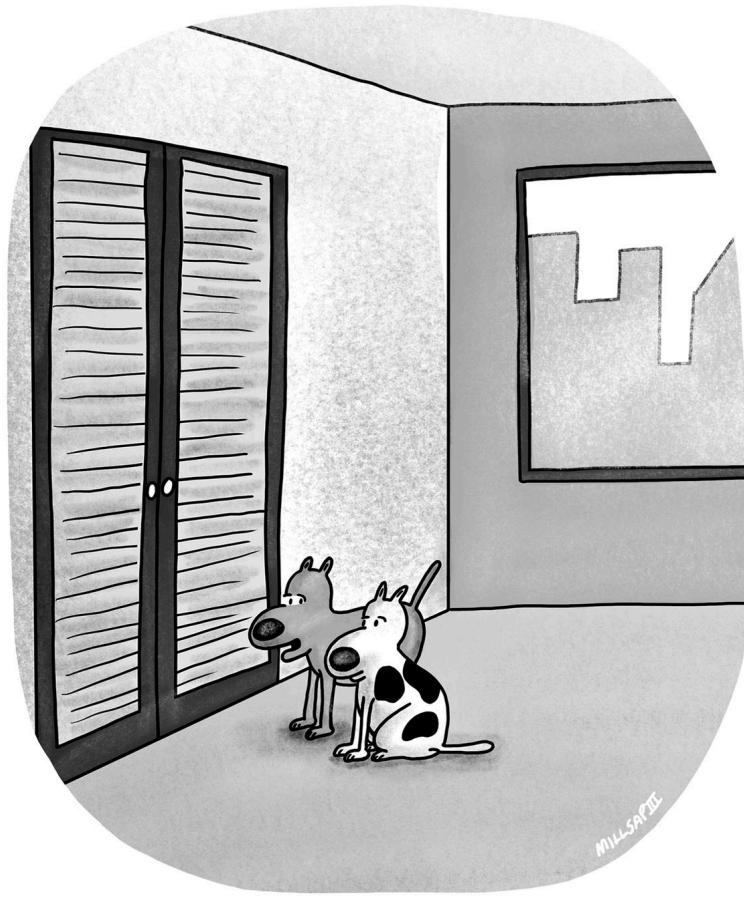
you'—which *anyone* can say—and you've presented it in this beautiful parcel of rhythmic utterance. And yet it *is* artifice, and that is the meaning of the play—that artifice is truer than non-artifice."

The young Fry borrowed from the library everything that he could by Wilde. He also found a volume by H. Montgomery Hyde, "The Trials of Oscar Wilde." "I thought, Well, maybe he had trials and tribulations, a difficult life—that's all I could imagine," Fry said. "I took it home, and as I read I felt a mixture of horror, fear, exaltation, excitement—all those things at once. Because as the story developed, with his arrest and his trials, I recognized that I shared with him what we now call a sexuality, but for which he used the rather wonderful word 'nature': I shared his *nature*. So, I could simultaneously be thrilled by the fact that someone so great could be like this—could have this, to me, shameful inner secret that I had never even really inspected to myself out loud, or in any proper way—but also have the fear that this was a guaranteed ticket to exile, loneliness, shame, disgrace, imprisonment, and all bad things."

Wilde's stylistic magnetism is evident in Fry's own writing. Fry's account, in "Moab Is My Washpot," of falling in love for the first time—with a newly arrived pupil at his all-boys boarding school—is heavily indebted to the conceit in "The Importance of Being Earnest" that neither Gwendolen nor Cecily can love a man whose name is not Ernest. "But what was his *name*?" Fry writes of the student, conjuring the moment after he has just glimpsed him. "Suppose his name was somehow *wrong*? Suppose it was an average name like Richard or Simon or Mark or Robert or Nigel?" (Fry lacks Wilde's economy: he continues in the same vein for two pages and fifty-odd names. Fortunately for his husband, "Elliott" is not among them.) While Fry was at boarding school—where homosexual activity was not unheard of but an avowed queer identity was out of bounds—reading Wilde gave him a means of understanding his own sexual orientation. Equally important, the

writer introduced Fry to the notion of a gay literary pantheon, leading him to discover books by the likes of E. M. Forster and W. Somerset Maugham. “It accidentally gave me an education,” Fry told me. “I was reading about writers, and reading writers, that my contemporaries would never even think of looking at. And all of that sprang from ‘The Importance.’ ”

As a student, Fry was gifted but troublesome. Useless at sports, he got attention from his peers in other ways: by showing off his cleverness in class, and then by becoming a compulsive shoplifter and thief. At fifteen, he was expelled after going AWOL in London. (Having been granted permission to present a paper at a meeting of the Sherlock Holmes Society—he was, for a time, its youngest member—Fry extended his stay for four more days, feasting on “A Clockwork Orange” and “Cabaret” at the cinema.) His credit-card spree occurred around his eighteenth birthday. “I’m very good at forging signatures, and I went pretty much ape around the country,” he told me. In London, he stayed at the Ritz for a night and bought himself a new wardrobe; he was caught only after a desk clerk at a hotel outside the city noticed that his shoes were surprisingly tatty for someone flashing a Diners Club card. When he returned to his hotel room one afternoon, two police detectives were waiting to arrest him. Fry pleaded guilty to charges of “obtaining pecuniary advantage by deception.” His prison nickname was the Professor, which he earned for teaching an inmate to read. “Most people are ‘that cunt,’ but the possession of a nickname puts you a little higher on the ladder than the others,” he writes in “Moab.”



"I love growling at the closet. It keeps them on their toes."

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

After Fry's three-month sentence was up, he was released on two years' probation. He returned home and threw himself into the study of English literature. "I got all of Shakespeare down," he said. "I read every single play, and wrote a synopsis and my thoughts about it, and read various Shakespearean critics, and I really tried to think about what made literature what it was." Were he a teen-ager today, he thinks, he would likely be given a diagnosis of A.D.H.D.; in English literature he had found a zone of hyperfocus. "I learned to work, and I learned to love it," he said. He took the specialized entrance exam to Cambridge University, to which he was admitted on an academic scholarship. He stood out for more than his height. Kim Harris, a classmate who met Fry at a freshers' sherry party, told me, "I thought he was a junior don, with Basil Rathbone in his family tree." Harris, a handsome devotee of Wagner operas, went on to be Fry's roommate and, for several

years, his lover. Fry had already begun his self-creation, Harris recalled: “One of the first conversations I ever had with him at Cambridge was him wondering which of our intake was going to be famous. He was always very interested in fame, and at school that manifested as popularity—but it was the kind of popularity that always held people at a distance. It was a way of hiding in plain sight. He was very conscious about manufacturing a mystique for himself, he would tell me.”

In “More Fool Me,” Fry speculates that, had he entered Cambridge fifty years earlier, he might have been tapped as a spy. During that era, he writes, “an old fashioned classical English education” was often “given to a certain kind of person equipped with charm, intelligence, duplicity, guile . . . who had an almost pathological need to prove himself, to *belong*.” He adds, however, that he thinks it unlikely that the intelligence services would have taken him, because of his Jewish heritage: his maternal grandparents were Hungarian Jews, and Fry has been outspoken about antisemitism in Britain.

In the late seventies, however, another Cambridge tradition called —comedy. “I’d always had this nagging feeling that I liked trotting about on a stage,” Fry said. Emma Thompson told me, “Stephen could basically extemporize Shakespeare.” Fry began appearing in numerous productions, and he even wrote a play, “Latin!,” which drew on his experiences at preparatory school. “I’m sure it would be pretty eye-watering now, because it’s a satirical comedy about pederastic schoolteachers,” he told me. He was recruited to join the Cambridge Footlights comedy group by its then president, Hugh Laurie, who had seen Fry in a production of “Volpone.” In an e-mail, Laurie told me, “I was looking to cast a revue for the Cambridge Footlights, and desperately wanted adult roosters in a field of squeaky, prancing cockerels. Stephen walked onstage, and it all fell into place. I remember nothing of the play except this mesmerising giant who stood at the centre.” Fry had, Laurie went

on, “such gravity, such authority. Also an odd melancholy that just grabbed me from the first.”

By the mid-eighties, Fry and Laurie had become fixtures of light entertainment on British television. They appeared in their own sketch show and, later, in “Jeeves and Wooster,” an adaptation of P. G. Wodehouse novels, in which Fry plays an omnicompetent butler. “Over the years, from the first day to this, Stephen and I have laughed more with each other than anyone else I can think of,” Laurie said. “Unless he has other, secret laughing partners, which is possible. Because he keeps secrets, by God he does.”

In the early nineties, Fry’s financial situation received a boost when he helped revise the book of the 1937 British musical “Me and My Girl,” which went on to a three-year run on Broadway, with Fry reportedly earning three per cent of its box-office revenue. But, in an interview from this period, Fry explained that he was hopeless with money: “If I have a bone, I eat it; I don’t bury it in the garden. I can’t hoard anything, and that includes thoughts. I spend—thoughts, money, myself. I can’t save and conserve anything.”

Fry’s polymathic talents spilled forth. In 1991, he published the first of four novels, “The Liar,” a semi-autobiographical account of a brilliant and mendacious schoolboy. A best-seller, it includes long fictional extracts from a pornographic manuscript about child prostitution, supposedly written by Charles Dickens. “That you should stand exposed as an amuser of children, nought but a corrector of youth, a pedestal!” a malapropism-prone housekeeper cries. As Fry’s star rose, so did attempts to knock him off his own pedestal. Some were grotesquely literal. Anti-gay insults, and fists, were thrown at a school-reunion dinner at which Fry was the speaker, leading to the levying of fines against Fry’s detractors. In a degraded opinion piece, a *Daily Mail* columnist wrote, “Why is it that Stephen Fry is so eminently whackable, smackable, kickable, flickable? The answer is that he is simply the most irritating man in the country.” The paper even offered a “blow-up-and-biff” Stephen

Fry doll to readers. Jokes about harming celebrities have aged about as well as jokes about pederasty, and perhaps it's not surprising that such threats left Fry in a state of distress. Things reached a head in 1995, when he co-starred in a new play, "Cell Mates," in the West End; three shows into the run, which had received mixed reviews, he disappeared to Belgium. He later faxed a note to his agent, explaining that he felt he'd failed as an actor. Fry was missing for several days, and friends feared that he'd taken his own life.



Fry and Hugh Laurie in the British comedy series "Jeeves and Wooster."
Photograph from Everett

Afterward, Fry was given a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. "It was really very powerful," he said. "All kinds of things fell into place—my childhood and my teen-age years." The diagnosis offered Fry a way of understanding why he was so different from everyone else, especially his brother, with whom he shared an environment at home and at school. (He and Roger, an electrical engineer, are close; Jo has been his personal assistant for decades.) Fry told me, "I was more transgressive—always different and troubled and weird—but also driven in a different way, curious and anxious to eat data, and to experience things. I always felt I was more *alive* than other people." Fry's mood disorder requires vigilance. He is no longer on daily medication, he told me, but he's "ready for it." He explained, "I've got some stuff that takes me down if I get very

manic—in case I get one of what I call my Joan of Arc moments, when I get a bit sort of *irradiated*, and start doing weird things and tidying up the house and making strange arrangements of things and never going to bed.”

Fry’s career recovered from his flight to Belgium; in the decades since, he has appeared in countless documentaries, TV shows, podcasts, and commercials. “I’m just a girl who can’t say n-n-n-n —,” he said, as if the last word were stuck in his throat. In the past three years, he has cropped up as the King of England in Matthew López’s gay rom-com, “Red, White & Royal Blue”; as a British scientist on “The Dropout,” a TV series about Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos; and as a ne’er-do-well dad in Lena Dunham’s latest show, “Too Much.” When he’s not onscreen, he’s appearing on panels about A.I., computer science being another of his passions. (Fry, along with Geoffrey Hinton and Steve Wozniak, is a signatory to a recent statement calling for a prohibition on the development of superintelligence until it can be done safely; he has described superintelligence as an “unknowable and highly risky goal.”) Once, he was an enthusiastic user of Twitter, but his optimism about social media has waned: “It’s like the opening of the canal system —a wonderful method of transport, you can get stuff made in Birmingham and get it to the sea,” he said. “Then, before you know it, it’s full of rusting Tesco trolleys and turds.”

He has reconsidered his past, including his wayward youth, in the light of his brain chemistry. “If you are subject to mood changes that are not normal, that are greater and more extreme than most people, and you are fifteen, you don’t know there is such a thing as bipolar disorder,” he told me. “So you do something to stabilize your mood.” Stealing, he went on, “zinged me up.”

Since 2011, Fry has been the president of *MIND*, a mental-health charity in the U.K., and he is an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He has been open about the fact that, over the years, his struggles with mental illness have led to suicide

attempts. Fry said, “Oddly enough, coming out as gay in the eighties, in the period of *AIDS*, and having the need to speak out and to feel there was a place for you in the public eye—you know, a welder in Huddersfield couldn’t come out very easily in the eighties, but I as an actor could—that was a template, in a way, for mental-health disclosure.” He declines to excuse his cocaine addiction as merely a form of self-medication. “There are plenty of people who wrestle with their mental illness and *don’t* immediately go and buy drugs,” he noted. All the same, if Wilde died too early to see a time in which his same-sex desire would be understood as an essential part of his individual makeup, rather than as a criminal failing, Fry has lived long enough to see a time in which it is more readily understood that a mood disorder is not a character flaw but an element of an individual’s nature. Indeed, he helped usher that time in—an instance of what Richard Ellmann, describing Wilde’s approach to politics, characterized as associating art with social change, and replacing a morality of severity with one of sympathy.

“One mustn’t go too far in the direction of ‘St. Oscar,’ ” Fry warned me one afternoon in his dressing room. “He was a flawed man—of course he was.”

It could be argued, Fry said, that Wilde was a fool not to flee to France before being indicted for gross indecency. Moreover, Fry continued, “we can look at it as brave, but he didn’t exactly stand and defend homosexuality outright. He pleaded not guilty.” Various critics, Fry noted, have condemned Wilde for using sex workers and otherwise exploiting people of a lower class. “That’s O.K.—there are going to be lots of different views of Oscar,” he said. “He certainly saw boys who we would consider underage now—I think fifteen. We can bring our own morality to it, if you want to, and curse him forever.” Fry sees a paradox in this: “Wilde taught us, above all writers and thinkers of his time, to be very wary of such arrogance and stupidity as to believe that our morality is anything other than custom.”

What pains Fry the most about Wilde's final years is that, apart from the prison poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," which Wilde wrote upon his release, he finished nothing else of note, instead spending what remained of his short life in dissipation. "His powers seem to have drained away," Fry said. Once again, though, he found an alternative way to frame this behavior: "Wilde said himself, 'I put all my talents into my work; I put my genius into my life'—which, again, sounds like one of those clever little Oscar remarks, but to some extent he did throw an enormous amount into the way he lived, and the way he dressed, and the way he spoke." Fry took out his phone and read aloud a quotation on Wilde, this one from Jean Cocteau: "Oscar Wilde paid dearly for being Oscar Wilde; but it was the height of privilege to be Oscar Wilde, it's natural that it cost dearly."

Kim Harris, Fry's old friend from Cambridge, became a screenwriter. He told me that one important way in which Fry differs from Wilde is that, whereas Wilde sought to be a true artist, Fry regards himself as an entertainer. "Artists say, 'Take it or leave it, this is what I have to say,' and Stephen's never done that," Harris told me. "He *hates* people not liking him. He would rather be unpretentious and unarrogant about what he does. He admires artists—he stands in awe of them—but he could never have that colossal, arrogant indifference that some artists need." Fry affirmed Harris's appraisal: "I care about seeing the look in someone's eyes when I talk or perform, and hearing the applause," he said. "It vindicates me. It's a weakness."



Fry, during the curtain call of "Earnest."
Photograph by Alan Chapman / Getty

As a vehicle for the expression of Wilde's artistry, however, Fry has few rivals. Although the audiences filling the Noël Coward Theatre for "Earnest" may be lured by Fry's celebrity—every night, there is applause at his first entrance, as he sweeps onstage in a vast yardage of purple-and-black satin, with a large black hat perched on a steely wig of curls which, together, lend even more inches to his already imposing height—they stay for Wilde's wit, and for Fry's powers in embodying it. As the performance goes on, it becomes clear that what is transpiring onstage is not a star turn but

the unfolding truth about a woman called Lady Bracknell—a woman anxious about money, consumed with propriety, and utterly threatened by the confounding desires and demands of a younger generation that will soon eclipse her.

In a fit-for-TikTok flourish, the conventional curtain call has been replaced by the cast members taking turns dancing—each one extravagantly costumed as a flower, in honor of Wilde, who sometimes wore on his lapel a green carnation, a covert symbol of his homosexuality. When I sat in on the rehearsal, this was the one section that Fry had not wanted me to observe, so self-conscious is he about the way he dances. Though he dominates the play with his linguistic fluency, the joyful physical ease of his younger cast members underlines Fry’s awkwardness as he shimmies downstage every night in a pair of multicolored bloomers and a ruffled blouse, haloed by the petals of an enormous red poppy. After the play opened, Fry told me, “I’ve never been a dancer—I just kind of go, ‘Oh, my God.’ The other night, the movement director came in and watched, and she told me afterward, ‘I think it’s so cute the way I can see you go, *Five, six, seven, eight.*’ ”

Once the play opened, I attended a performance and witnessed the excruciating dance. When it was over, Fry stepped forward to make an announcement. “This is a very special day,” he declared. “It’s a special day because *you’re* in the audience”—there was a ripple of laughter at the ingratiating. “But it’s an even more special day because it is the sixteenth of October, which is the birthday of our author, Oscar Wilde.” There were gasps, then applause and cheers. “He was born a hundred and seventy-one years ago, in Ireland,” Fry went on. “And he died at the age of forty-six, just six years after his greatest triumph, this play. A few weeks after the magnificently successful opening, a series of court cases cascaded him into the greatest scandal of his age, and he died in poverty and misery and pain.”

Silence had fallen over the house. Fry then shifted tone, calling on the audience to join him in the singing of “Happy Birthday.” He stood in his bloomers and ruffles, his feet planted stoutly apart, conducting the crowd with vigor. Then he lifted his right hand in a flourish, casting his eyes upward as he sang the words “Dear Oscar.” ♦

Rebecca Mead joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include “[Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/stephen-fry-is-wilde-at-heart>

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Why the Time Has Finally Come for Geothermal Energy

It used to be that drawing heat from deep in the Earth was practical only in geyser-filled places such as Iceland. But new approaches may have us on the cusp of an energy revolution.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)

November 17, 2025



Near the Krafla geothermal-energy plant, scientists drilled down to magma, creating the most powerful geothermal well in the world.

Photograph by Claire-Lise Havet / Hans Lucas / Redux

When I arrived in Reykjavík, Iceland, last March, a gravel barrier, almost thirty feet at its highest point, had been constructed to keep lava from the Reykjanes volcano from inundating a major geothermal power station not far from downtown. So far, it had worked, but daily volcano forecasts were being broadcast on a small television at the domestic airport where I was waiting to take a short flight to Akureyri, a town on the north coast about an hour's drive from one of the country's oldest geothermal plants, the Krafla Geothermal Station. Until the early nineteen-seventies, Iceland relied on imported fossil fuels for nearly three-quarters of its

energy. The resources of the country—a landscape of hot springs, lava domes, and bubbling mud pots—were largely untapped. “In the past, people here in the valley lacked most things now considered essential to human life, except for a hundred thousand million tons of boiling-hot water,” the Icelandic Nobelist Halldór Laxness wrote in “A Parish Chronicle,” his 1970 novel. “For a hundred thousand years this water, more valuable than all coal mines, ran in torrents out to sea.” The oil crisis of 1973, when prices more than tripled, proved a useful emergency. Among other efforts to develop local energy, public-investment funds provided loans for geothermal projects, whose upfront costs were considerable. By the early eighties, almost all the country’s homes were heated geothermally; in Reykjavík, a subterranean geothermal-powered system is in place to melt snow and ice off sidewalks and roads. Today, more than a quarter of the country’s electricity comes from geothermal sources, a higher proportion than in almost any other nation. Most of the rest is from hydropower.

In some ways, the process of harnessing geothermal energy is simple. The deeper you dig, the hotter the temperatures get. For direct heating, you dig relatively shallow wells (typically several hundred metres deep), to access natural reservoirs of hot water or steam, which can be piped into a structure. For electricity, wells are dug farther down, to where temperatures are above a hundred and fifty degrees Celsius. (In Iceland, this temperature is reached at around one thousand to two thousand metres deep.) Pressurized steam spins a turbine that in turn spins a generator. Thermal energy (steam) is translated into mechanical energy (the spinning turbine), which is translated into electrical energy (via the generator). Geothermal energy is essentially carbon-free, it is available at any time of day and in any weather, and it leaves a small—albeit very deep—footprint on the landscape.

In 2008, Iceland’s three largest energy companies collaborated on a research project to drill down even farther, at a site near Krafla, for

steam that was even hotter, some four hundred degrees Celsius. Such “supercritical” steam is water that is so hot and pressurized that it has passed into a fourth state, beyond gas. The hotter a well the better, typically: it will produce more energy more efficiently. The Iceland Deep Drilling Project (I.D.D.P.) engineers had planned to dig down some four kilometres—but their drill got stuck at around two kilometres. Bits of black glass shot up from the well. After some disbelief, the team concluded that they had hit magma. This oops-ing into magma was at first received as “very bad news,” Bjarni Palsson, a chief project manager on the I.D.D.P. and now an executive vice-president of the energy company Landsvirkjun, told me. Many people thought that drilling into magma might trigger a volcanic eruption. “Then we started to see: What actually do we have here?” Palsson said. They put a wellhead on their work to measure the flow rates of steam. “What happened next was remarkable,” Palsson continued. The magma was about nine hundred degrees Celsius. The steam flow was such that it could produce ten times more energy than a regular well. They had created the hottest and most powerful geothermal well in the world.

There was no security check before boarding the plane. I was told by one of my companions, Hilmar Már Einarsson, a youthful project manager with Landsvirkjun, that people sometimes stowed their hunting rifles in the overhead luggage compartments. On the drive from Akureyri to Krafla, we passed Lake Mývatn, home to a kind of arctic char that lives only there. We also passed Icelandic horses, a diminutive breed famed for its distinctive gaits: in addition to walking, trotting, and galloping, it has a “flying pace” and a rhythmic four-beat gait known as *tölt*. Amid the expansive greens and yellows of northeast Iceland, we arrived at the Krafla Geothermal Station, where steam has been spinning two Mitsubishi turbines continuously for decades.

The station provides power to commercial buildings and heating to homes in the district. A rust-red building in the shape of a giant barn stood across from silvery cooling towers capped by cloud-

white steam. Construction began in 1974 but took four years to finish, working around the Krafla fires, a series of volcanic eruptions that went on for years. (In Icelandic folklore, the region is where the Devil landed after being expelled from Heaven.) Around the station is a volcanic valley of green vegetation and basalt rock, with patches of snow. The wellhouses appeared as igloo-size aluminum geodesic domes; like the main power station, they were rust red. Einarsson opened one for me. Visible within was a thick horizontal pipe joined to a vertical one, with what looked like a ship's steering wheel attached. Not visible was the well itself, which extended belowground like a long metal straw. (Krafla's geothermal wells are about seven inches across, notably narrower than many oil and gas wells.) "Some wells last twenty years, some last two—you can't know for certain," Einarsson explained. The temperature and permeability of the rock, as well as the amount of fluid flowing across it, affect a well's performance. Also, Iceland has myths about "hidden people"—*huldufólk*. It is said that building on their land brings bad luck, so there's that, too.

We stopped by the station's canteen, taking our shoes off before entering. Lunch had ended, but there was homemade apple cake, dried apricots, and skyr available. Workmen in neon-yellow suits, who had traded their boots for slippers, were having tea. Einarsson then took me to the I.D.D.P. site, not far from the Krafla plant, where a sign marked a snow-covered depression about the size of a modest pond. Compared with the turbines and steam towers and the idyllic orderliness of the canteen, the site was underwhelming. Two years after the well was dug, the extreme pressure and heat began to corrode the metal casing of the well itself. Black smoke poured out each time the well was reopened. Soon, it had to be shut down permanently. In 2017, another research well, I.D.D.P.-2, was drilled down four and a half kilometres, where temperatures reached at least four hundred and twenty-six degrees Celsius—but this time the well failed after only six months. "One thing we learned is that you don't open and close and open and close the well—you just

leave it open,” Palsson had told me, explaining that such actions made the well more brittle.

Landsvirkjun, which had paid for most of the I.D.D.P. work, decided that it needed financial support to drill more exploratory wells. “We said, ‘We’re just a small energy company in Iceland,’ ” Palsson told me. But it made its research available to the international scientific community, and there has been intermittent interest from the U.K., Germany, Canada, and New Zealand. “That’s where we are now, trying to fund it as a science project that can also benefit the energy industry,” Palsson said.

Driving back to the airport, we saw snow ptarmigans and cairns of black stones marking trails that stretched beyond view. Iceland’s transition into a country powered nearly completely by renewables can seem fantastical, and the landscape furthers this impression. Because Iceland is singular in so many ways—that lonely arctic-char species! those small horses with their *tölt!*—you can get the feeling that geothermal energy is a niche endeavor, as opposed to one that is technically and economically feasible in places where volcanic eruptions aren’t part of the daily forecast. But that feeling is outdated and misleading.

Geothermal is underdeveloped, and its upfront costs can be high, but it’s always on and, once it’s set up, it is cheap and enduring. The dream of geothermal energy is to meet humanity’s energy demands affordably, without harnessing horses for horsepower, slaughtering whales for their oil, or burning fossil fuels. The planet’s heat could be used to pasteurize milk or heat dorm rooms or light up a baseball stadium for a night game.

At more than five thousand degrees Celsius, the Earth’s core is roughly as hot as the surface of the sun. At the Earth’s surface, the temperature is about fourteen degrees. But in some places, like Iceland, the ground underfoot is much warmer. Hot springs, geysers, and volcanoes are surface-level signs of the Earth’s

inferno. Dante's description of Hell is said by some to have been inspired by the landscape of sulfurous steam plumes found in Devil's Valley in Tuscany.

Snow monkeys and humans have been using Earth-heated waters as baths for ages. In the Azores, a local dish, *cozido de las furnas*, is cooked by burying a clay pot in hot volcanic soil; in Iceland, bread is still sometimes baked this way. The first geothermal power generator was built in Devil's Valley, in 1904, by Prince Piero Ginori Conti of Trevignano, who had been extracting borax from the area and thought to make use of the steam emerging from the mining borehole. The generator initially powered five light bulbs. Not long afterward, it powered central Italy's railway system and a few villages. The geothermal complex is still in operation today, providing one to two per cent of Italy's energy. In the United States, the first geothermal plant was built in 1921, in Northern California, in a geyser-filled area that a surveyor described as the gates of Hell. That plant powered a nearby resort hotel and is also still in use.



"So, anyway, tell me something about yourself."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

There aren't gates of Hell just anywhere. A kilometre below ground in Kamchatka is considerably hotter than a kilometre below ground in Kansas. There is also readily accessible geothermal energy in Kenya (where it provides almost fifty per cent of the country's energy), New Zealand (about twenty per cent), and the Philippines (about fifteen per cent)—all volcanic areas along tectonic rifts. But in less Hadean landscapes the costs and uncertainties of drilling deep in search of sufficient heat have curtailed development. This partly explains why, in the field of clean energy, geothermal is often either not on the list or mentioned under the rubric of "other." For decades, both private and government investment in geothermal energy was all but negligible.

That has now changed. In the past five years, in North America, more than a billion and a half dollars have gone into geothermal technologies. This is a small amount for the energy industry, but it's also an exponential increase. In May, 2021, Google signed a contract with the Texas-based geothermal company Fervo to power its data centers and infrastructure in Nevada; Meta signed a similar deal with Texas-based Sage for a data center east of the Rocky Mountains, and with a company called XGS for one in New Mexico. Microsoft is co-developing a billion-dollar geothermal-powered data center in Kenya; Amazon installed geothermal heating at its newly built fulfillment center in Japan. (Geothermal energy enables companies to avoid the uncertainties of the electrical grid.) Under the Biden Administration, the geothermal industry finally received the same kind of tax credits given to wind and solar, and under the current Trump Administration it has received the same kind of fast-track permitting given to oil and gas. Donald Trump's Secretary of Energy, Chris Wright, spoke at a geothermal conference and declared, in front of a *MAGA*-like sign that read "*MAGMA* (Making America Geothermal: Modern Advances)," that although geothermal hasn't achieved "liftoff yet, it should and it can." Depending on whom you speak with, either it's weird that suddenly everyone is talking about geothermal or it's

weird that there is a cost-competitive energy source with bipartisan appeal that no one is talking about.

Scientific work that has been discarded or forgotten can return—sometimes through unknowing repetition, at other times through deliberate recovery. In the early nineteen-seventies, the U.S. government funded a program at Los Alamos that looked into developing geothermal energy systems that didn't require proximity to geysers or volcanoes. Two connected wells were built: in one, water was sent down into fractured hot, dry rock; from the other, the steam that resulted from the water meeting the rock emerged. In 1973, Richard Nixon announced Project Independence, which aimed to develop energy sources outside of fossil fuels. “But when Reagan came into office, he changed things,” Jefferson Tester, a professor of sustainable energy systems at Cornell University, who was involved in the Los Alamos project, told me. The price of oil had come down, and support for geothermal dissipated. “People got this impression that it was a failure,” Tester said. “I think if they looked a little closer, they would see that a lot of the knowledge gained in those first years could have been used to leverage what is happening now.”

Tester went on to help establish the M.I.T. Energy Lab (now called the Energy Initiative), which focusses on advancing clean-energy solutions. He and his colleagues felt that students needed to know the history of the research into diverse energy sources, so they put together a course and a textbook called “Sustainable Energy: Choosing Among Options.” In 2005, the Department of Energy, under George W. Bush, commissioned a group consisting of Tester and some seventeen other experts and researchers—including drilling engineers, energy economists, and power-plant builders—to investigate what it would take for the U.S. to produce a hundred thousand megawatts of geothermal energy, a bit more than one-fifth of the energy the U.S. had consumed that year. (Geothermal energy production in the U.S. at that time was around three or four thousand megawatts.) The experts avoided framing their support

for geothermal in environmental terms. “The feeling was that you weren’t supposed to talk about carbon, because then it would be perceived as about climate change,” Tester said.

In 2006, Tester and his colleagues published their report, “The Future of Geothermal Energy.” One finding was that new drilling technology employed by the oil-and-gas industry was changing the economics of geothermal power generation. Latent ideas—like those from the Los Alamos project—had met their moment. “I was called to testify a few times before Congress. It was a relatively modest investment that was needed, and people were excited,” Tester told me. “But then we submitted the report to the Department of Energy. And they did nothing. It was crazy.” He was still visibly dismayed.

One explanation for the lack of action is that, around that time, the U.S. went from being an oil importer to an oil exporter. This turnaround was largely due to the innovations of George Mitchell, a second-generation Greek American in Galveston, Texas, who spent years trying to extract oil and gas from the Barnett Shale formation, in North Texas, in an economically viable way. His approach synthesized hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, with horizontal drilling. Fracking involves injecting fluid down a well at high pressures, which cracks the subsurface, and the horizontal drilling augments the area of cracking. Eventually, Mitchell’s company, helped by generous tax incentives, made the economics work. Vast oil reserves became accessible. Fortunes were made. Fracking overwhelmed the renewed interest in geothermal power. But a couple of decades later there was a reversal: fracking accelerated geothermal power.

Tim Latimer, the thirty-five-year-old C.E.O. of Fervo Energy, a geothermal company founded in 2017, grew up in Riesel, Texas, a small town about fifteen miles outside Waco. After graduating from the University of Tulsa with a degree in mechanical engineering, Latimer wanted a well-paid engineering job close to home. “My

adviser was just, like, ‘Have you ever heard of the oil-and-gas industry?’ ” he said, smiling.

As a greenhorn drilling engineer with the international mining company BHP Billiton, Latimer was put on a fracking project in the Eagle Ford Shale, in South Texas. The shale, which is a Cretaceous-era formation dense with marine fossils from when the area was an inland sea, is relatively hard and hot. “The motors in our drill systems were failing early,” Latimer said. His supervisors suspected that this was because of the wells’ unusually high temperatures, around a hundred and seventy-five degrees Celsius. “They said, ‘Can you research what tools we could use to deal with the fact that these drilling temperatures are really high?’ ” Latimer told me.

Much of the relevant work Latimer came across turned up in papers about geothermal energy. “I’d never heard of geothermal before,” he said. “I was, like, ‘Well, this seems pretty cool.’ ” When Latimer read the 2006 “Future of Geothermal Energy” report, including its description of the Los Alamos geothermal project, he saw parallels to his work in oil and gas. The report described two big technical challenges that were standing in the way of affordable, bountiful clean energy. One was getting drilling costs down—an area that oil and gas had made great progress in. The other was getting water flowing through hot rock that isn’t sufficiently permeable, like shale, so that you can generate steam. “And I’m just looking at the rig, being, like, ‘This is a solved problem.’ ” Generating flow where there isn’t much naturally—that’s what hydraulic fracturing does.

Latimer reported what he had found to BHP. The shale drilling started working again, but Latimer’s imagination had shifted. In 2014, he applied to Stanford Business School with the goal of using fracking technology in geothermal wells. “Geothermal is an industry that, frankly, at that point in time, people had given up on as forgotten,” he said. “I didn’t think that was right. I was, like,

‘I’m a drilling engineer. I actually have a skill that can make a direct impact on this.’ ”



“No, no, no—I want just one day, totally unscripted!”

Cartoon by Edward Koren

In 2017, Latimer and his Stanford colleague Jack Norbeck co-founded Fervo Energy. “Fracking” is an unpopular word. Fervo describes itself as a “next-generation geothermal energy developer.” Just as the fusion-energy industry avoids the phrase “nuclear fusion,” and the term “natural gas” is now used for what is mostly methane, geothermal systems involving hydraulic fracturing tend to be referred to as “enhanced” geothermal systems, or E.G.S.

In 2023, Fervo drilled a pair of demonstration wells in Nevada, proving its ideas in anticipation of scaling them up. The goal is to begin operating a five-hundred-megawatt geothermal power plant in Cape Station, Utah, with a hundred megawatts going online in 2026. This past June, Fervo drilled a four-and-a-half-kilometre appraisal well—a well for confirming predicted subsurface conditions before going all in on a site—that reached temperatures of two hundred and seventy degrees Celsius. The well was drilled in sixteen days, remarkably fast, and faster drill times mean lowered costs. Fervo’s well design and drilling technologies are central to its hopes, and have helped it raise more than eight

hundred million dollars in investment capital. Most everyone I spoke to seems to be rooting for Fervo, albeit with some skepticism. The Utah site is far away from a source for the large amounts of water that will be required, for instance. There are more technical points of concern, too. Fracking can induce seismic activity, so the siting of wells is an important consideration. Enthusiasts see these as solvable problems. And Fervo is not alone in showing promise in the use of fracking to access geothermal power. At the end of October, Mazama Energy demonstrated a pilot E.G.S. in Newberry, Oregon, that works at an even higher temperature: above three hundred degrees Celsius. For now, though, E.G.S. is still a kind of wildcat proposition. “I think the big question is: Who are the next nine Fervos?” Roland Horne, a professor of energy science and engineering at Stanford, who has studied geothermal energy for about fifty years, said. “Fervo has expanded tremendously, they’re a nearly two-hundred-person company, but they don’t have the wherewithal to do a gigawatt project yet.”

Fervo pitches itself as a landing place for oil-and-gas workers. “I’ve spent a lot of my life and career in small towns where the largest economic driver is oil and gas,” Latimer said. Geothermal means jobs in drilling: engineers, geologists, project managers. Barry Smitherman, who has worked as an oil-and-gas regulator in Texas and as the head of a utility company, told me, “We’ve been drilling oil and gas wells in Texas for over a hundred years. We’ve drilled over a million wells. We know what the world looks like below the surface in Texas.”

In February, 2021, Winter Storm Uri left most of Texas without power for days. Not long afterward, Smitherman was asked to speak to state legislators about what went wrong and what needed to change. Soon he got a call from a foundation set up by George Mitchell and his wife, Cynthia. (George, who died in 2013, is known as the “father of fracking.”) The Mitchell Foundation wanted Smitherman to help start a local organization that would

advocate on behalf of geothermal energy. He co-founded the Texas Geothermal Energy Alliance in 2022. During his long career in energy, Smitherman said, “we never had a conversation about geothermal. No one had brought it to my attention.” Smitherman had a series of meetings with people from geothermal startups, oil-and-gas companies, the Sierra Club, and utility companies. “What we’ve always said around energy is that you need three legs—reliable, clean, and cheap. Those are the three legs of the stool. The old saying was ‘I can give you two of three, but I can’t give you all three,’ ” he said. “But, as we began to look at geothermal, it really began to look like it had all three—low to no carbon, 24/7, and, as the cost curve comes down, eventually, cheap. It really began to look like this unicorn resource.”

Tester now teaches at Cornell, near the Finger Lakes, where in the winter Buttermilk and Taughannock Falls turn to blue ribbons of ice. “If we look at the country and say our goal is ultimately to be much more sustainable with respect to our carbon footprint, you can’t ignore heating,” Tester said. Around thirty per cent of New York State’s carbon footprint can be attributed to heating and cooling buildings, a figure that is not far from the worldwide average. “A lot of it is for space heating and water heating, but also for low-temperature food processing, things like that,” Tester added. The excitement about geothermally generated electricity can obscure the thing that geothermal technology is, arguably, best suited to provide. “It’s a little bit apples and oranges, and we need both electricity and heating,” Tester told me. But he went on to explain that using electricity for heating is not nearly as efficient as using heat for heating. And geothermal wells for heating, which can be relatively shallow, can work in places with no hot springs or volcanoes.

Midtown Manhattan, for example: as part of a major renovation completed in 2017, ten geothermal wells were dug beneath St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Some of the wells are less than a hundred metres deep, while others extend more than six hundred and fifty

metres, more than ten times deeper than Manhattan’s deepest subway tunnel—and yet much shallower than the wells needed for a geothermal power plant. These wells carry warmth into the cathedral in winter, and out of the cathedral in summer, and do so with less noise and vibration than typical *HVAC* systems. The main issue is the upfront cost. When the cathedral’s system was built, it felt radical. One of the lead engineers on the project, Paul Boyce, of P. W. Grosser Consulting, told me that the demand for geothermal heating systems has grown dramatically since then. P.W.G.C.’s current geothermal projects include the Mastercard headquarters, in Purchase, New York, and the Obama Presidential Center, in Chicago. In Greenpoint, Brooklyn, an eight-hundred-and-thirty-four-unit apartment complex that’s under construction has its heating and cooling provided through three hundred boreholes, none much deeper than about a hundred and fifty metres. The system was put in by Geosource Energy, a geothermal company started in 2004.



Tim Latimer (right) at a Fervo wellhead in Utah.
Photograph by Brandon Thibodeaux / The New York Times / Redux

But those projects provide geothermal energy building by building, not district by district. “I wish we were looking at how we plan our cities,” Tester said. “It’s crazy that heating, electricity, cable, water —these are all managed separately.” He is now in the midst of a research project that aims to demonstrate the feasibility of an

ambitious geothermal system to serve Cornell's seven-hundred-and-forty-five-acre campus, something close to what downtown Reykjavík has—but without the aid of close-to-the-surface magma. In the summer of 2022, a rig set up not far from Cornell's School of Veterinary Medicine drilled for sixty-five days through layers of shale, limestone, and sandstone, passing beyond the geologic time of the dinosaurs to a crystalline basement dating to the Proterozoic eon, more than five hundred million years ago. This created the Cornell University Borehole Observatory (*CUBO*). In Iceland, if you dig down this deep, the temperatures could easily be four hundred degrees Celsius; in New York, the rocks are cooler, but the Cornell project needs to reach only eighty to ninety degrees Celsius. As *CUBO* was drilled, rock samples from each depth were analyzed, and the surrounding natural fracture systems were mapped. If *CUBO* secures more funding, the next stage will be to drill a pair of wells, with one for injecting water to make an underground reservoir and the other to bring the heated water up.

In other geographies, geothermal energy for district heating and cooling has been accomplished with shallower wells. Mieres, Spain, a historic mining town, uses warm water from the now closed mines to supply heat to the region. Nijar, also in Spain but closer to a volcano, uses an underground fluid reservoir to heat its greenhouses. Hayden, Colorado, a former coal town, is working with Bedrock Energy, a Texas-based company started in 2022, to construct a municipal geothermal district, in the hope that reduced energy bills will attract businesses. In Framingham, Massachusetts, activists and a local energy company collaborated on a geothermal heating-and-cooling network, and near Austin, Texas, the neighborhood of Whisper Valley is putting in a similar grid. Several companies, including Bedrock and Dig Energy, are aiming to bring drilling costs down by half or more. Geothermal systems for heating and cooling individual homes remain somewhat pricey to install, but they last for decades, reduce energy bills by twenty-five to fifty per cent, and avoid reliance on the ever more burdened

electrical grid. Most people I spoke with in the geothermal industry make their case for it by focussing on cost savings; the unspoken climate benefits are known to those disposed to care, and potentially off-putting to those who are not.

Some environmentalists argue that the resources given to geothermal—or to small modular nuclear plants, or to fusion—would be better spent elsewhere. Why not just go all in on solar, wind, and batteries, which are proven, scalable technologies? To invest in more speculative solutions, the argument goes, is a moral hazard, and a cynical or naïve distraction that obscures the solutions available now. But this line of thinking rests on the assumption that the people or nations or agencies that would fund one kind of energy would equally fund some other kind. This tends not to be true—funding is rarely fungible, and always capricious. One geothermal-startup founder spoke of receiving a call from a potential investor’s adviser, who said, Sorry, the managing partner wants to invest in a blimp company instead. “Geothermal is the least moral hazard-y of the clean-energy technologies,” Gernot Wagner, a climate economist at Columbia Business School, said. “And we are still subsidizing nuclear a thousand times more than geothermal.”

An energy future without hydrocarbons will require working flexibly with the many variables of resources, geography, and politics. “We can get maybe ninety per cent of the way with solar, batteries, wind,” Leah Stokes, a professor of environmental politics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, told me. “But geothermal is one of the things that can fill that gap.” Investment follows fashion—and geothermal has become fashionable—but it’s not only investors who appear confident about geothermal. Wagner called this “the moment when Ph.D.s meet M.B.A.s.”

The role of geothermal becomes easier to see when looking beyond the local noise of discussions in America. “You know, there’s this thing called the curse of abundance,” Agnelli Kafuwe, the principal

energy officer for the Zambian government, told me. Typically, the phrase refers to countries driven into corruption and misery by their oil endowments, but Kafuwe was referring to Zambia's seemingly boundless supply of hydroelectric energy, from power stations such as one at the Zambezi River's Mosi-oa-Tunya, the natural feature known to most Americans as Victoria Falls. For many years, hydropower met practically all of Zambia's energy needs, even powering its lucrative copper mines.

But the country's population grew rapidly, and in 2015 a severe drought hit, forcing Zambia to turn to diesel to make up the shortfall in hydropower. Mosi-oa-Tunya looked less like a world-renowned cataract than like dry, rocky cliffs. There wasn't enough water to keep the hydropower plants running properly. Lengthy blackouts became common. In 2024, a new drought arrived—the worst in at least a century—and power was cut off for eighteen to twenty hours a day. As in many countries, the leadership had thought about geothermal in the nineteen-seventies but had lost interest; Zambia hadn't needed it enough then.

In addition to copper mining, extensive salt mining occurs in northern Zambia. "These mining companies, they would drill down maybe fifty metres, and guess what comes up?" Kafuwe said. "Geothermal steam, of a very high, very good temperature." The country's mining history also meant that subsurface maps of its territory already existed—useful for planning geothermal wells. One former mining-company head, Peter Vivian-Neal, now heads Kalahari GeoEnergy, a company he founded after seeing an egg being boiled in a natural hot spring while he was on safari. The company has drilled exploratory wells, done flow tests, well tests, and modelling—it aims to have a demonstration power plant running soon. Vivian-Neal is optimistic that a successful demonstration will bring in more investment. "We could not have got to where we got today if my family hadn't put in the money to start with," he told me. "But I'm quite sure that the next person will find it easier. They'll say, 'Oh, yes, look, Kalahari has made this a

success, therefore we're going to make it a success, and we'll do it even faster.' " ♦

Rivka Galchen, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, has contributed fiction and nonfiction since 2008. Her books include the novel “*Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/why-the-time-has-finally-come-for-geothermal-energy>

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Kash Patel's Acts of Service

The F.B.I. director isn't just enforcing the President's agenda at the Bureau—he's seeking retribution for its past investigations of Donald Trump.

By [Marc Fisher](#)

November 17, 2025



"The F.B.I. tried to put the President in jail," Patel allegedly told a former agent. "And he hasn't forgotten it."

Illustration by Ben Kirchner; Source photograph by Jim Watson / Getty

On June 5th, Kash Patel, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was in Austin, Texas, to record a podcast interview with Joe Rogan. Patel had recently declared that the F.B.I. had moved on from its investigation into Jeffrey Epstein's sex crimes, but his agents were still looking into other "coverups," including the *Covid-19* lab leak and the role that the Bureau's own operatives supposedly played in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. In Rogan's studio, Patel, wearing an olive-green hoodie and smoking a fat cigar, laid out a new conspiracy, in which the Chinese Communist Party was systematically killing Americans with fentanyl as part of a "long-term plan" to "wipe out tens of thousands of Americans a year" who "might grow up to serve in the United States military or become a cop or become a teacher."

Rogan said, "Oh, that is such a dark, dark thing." Patel fired up his stogie with a butane lighter and exhaled a billowy cloud of smoke. "It is," he replied. "But we're on it."

Rogan was clearly impressed. "What is it like to be the head of the F.B.I.?" he asked at one point. "How weird is that?"

"It's completely effing wild," Patel said. "I mean, I don't even know how to describe it."

Many of Patel's past associates are similarly astonished. Bennett Gershman, a professor at Pace University's law school, where Patel got his degree, described Patel as an "at best average" student who was interested in issues of social justice and identity politics. "He seemed to be on the side of the left," Gershman said. Former colleagues in Miami, where Patel spent eight years as a public defender, called him an "adequate" attorney. "We had two hundred lawyers, and he was neither one of the best nor one of the worst," Bennett Brummer, the elected Miami-Dade public defender at the time, said. Kushagra Katariya, a cardiothoracic surgeon who became friends with Patel in Miami, said Patel's passions were hockey and exploring ways to get rich. "I never imagined him

getting to this point in his life,” Katariya said. “It’s a good surprise.”

In Patel’s 2023 memoir, “Government Gangsters,” he describes himself as “an unknown, first-generation Indian American hockey fanatic” from “Queens and Long Island” who “ended up being the lead investigator who uncovered the greatest political scandal in American history.” The kid-from-Queens line is one of Patel’s favorites, a reminder that another kid from Queens, who also struggled to win the respect of the establishment, happens to be the leader of the free world. The bit about uncovering a historic scandal is a reference to “Russiagate”—in 2017, Patel, who was then a staffer for Devin Nunes, a Republican House member from California, helped identify the ways in which the F.B.I. had cut corners in seeking a wiretap on Carter Page, an adviser to Trump’s 2016 campaign. Nunes eventually told Trump that Patel’s investigation had, as Patel later put it, “saved his presidency by revealing the unprecedented political hit job designed to take him down.”

During the first Trump Administration, when Patel held roles at the National Security Council, the office of the director of National Intelligence, and the Department of Defense, he gained a reputation as a loyalist who was widely disliked within the White House. He was seen as “lazy” and “had no significant achievements,” a former senior official told me. Patel later wrote in his memoir that members of Trump’s Cabinet complained that he was going over their heads to speak directly with the President, leading Defense Secretary Mark Esper “to request I be fired.” The lesson he drew from the episode was that “nothing makes you enemies faster in Washington than being effective.” (A source close to Esper said that he never requested that Patel be fired.)

Like Trump, Patel often accuses the government of being an obstacle to freedom and efficiency. His book includes a catalogue of “government gangsters” who pose a “dangerous threat to our

democracy.” But, also like Trump, Patel often puts on a show of bravado, only to back down or change course. On a podcast recorded in 2024, he promised to shut down the F.B.I. headquarters and open it up as a museum of the deep state the next day. “We need to get the F.B.I. the hell out of Washington, D.C.,” he wrote in his memoir. At Patel’s confirmation hearings a few months later, when senators asked about the comment, he said, “The F.B.I. headquarters should not be moved out of the D.C. area. On a podcast, I used hyperbole about opening a museum in the Hoover Building to make a broader point.”

On Rogan’s show, Patel had said that podcast interviews are, “like, the best way to get information out.” “The haters hate Kash Patel because he’s a truthteller,” Grant Stinchfield, who hosts a show on a conservative streaming platform, told me. “He’s not trying to be the smartest guy in the room. He’s a legitimate, likable guy, and that’s rare in Washington. He doesn’t take himself too seriously.” But, as a former senior Trump Administration official who worked with Patel told me, the disparity between what Patel says publicly and what he’s done as the F.B.I. director is “an illustration of just how juvenile the guy is.”

The former official declined to be named because he believes that Patel, who has declared him a “government gangster,” would retaliate against him. “I never had any fear of my own government till now,” the former official said. “This guy is a seriously dangerous character. I’m one of those people who pooh-poohed the idea that Trump and his Administration would go off the rails, but I was wrong.”

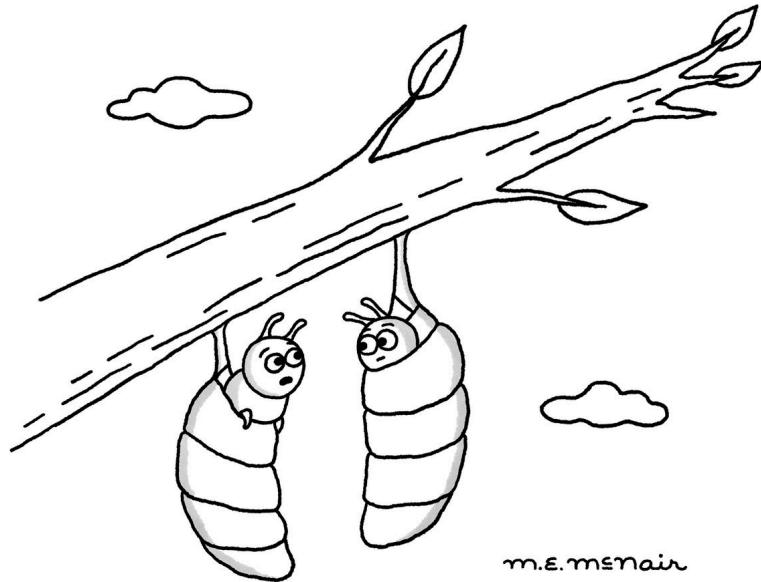
When Patel arrived at F.B.I. headquarters, a hulking, brutalist concrete behemoth on Pennsylvania Avenue, there was hope in the ranks that he would focus on fighting crime and empowering agents. In his book, Patel had written that “the next president must fire the top ranks of the FBI.” But, during his confirmation process, he had promised that “no one will be terminated for case

assignments.” According to a former F.B.I. official, he later said that the special agents in charge, the leaders of the field offices, would determine what kinds of crimes their staffs would investigate. Bureau leaders gave Patel “the benefit of the doubt,” a former senior F.B.I. official said. “But they quickly figured out that he wasn’t really in control.”

Patel had told the F.B.I. Agents Association, a nonprofit advocacy group, that he would name a member of the Bureau as his deputy director. Instead, he selected Dan Bongino, a former Secret Service agent who had gained prominence as a pro-Trump podcaster and a Fox News commentator. According to Senator Mark Warner, the Virginia Democrat, who obtained F.B.I. personnel data earlier this year, almost a quarter of the F.B.I.’s more than thirteen thousand agents have been assigned to work on the apprehension of undocumented immigrants, which has not historically been a major focus for the Bureau. Hundreds more have been sent to support local police in cities that Trump has targeted, including Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Portland, Oregon, despite the fact that violent crime in these cities was already on the decline. “It’s a universe of fear now,” a current agent knowledgeable about staff assignments said. “A foreign counterintelligence agent was pulled off a case involving China to walk around D.C., making D.W.I. arrests.”

At the same time, Patel, who declined to be interviewed for this article, has fired agents who had worked on investigations into Trump’s role in the January 6th attack and his mishandling of classified documents. Patel disbanded CR-15, the public-corruption unit in the Washington field office, which had investigated Republican efforts to overturn the 2020 election, saying that it was “corrupt” and had been “weaponized.” Michael Feinberg, an agent who ran the field office in Norfolk, Virginia, was pushed out in June, because he was friendly with Peter Strzok, a former F.B.I. agent who had helped to lead the investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 election. After James Comey, the former

F.B.I. director, was indicted on charges of lying to Congress, an agent was reportedly fired for refusing to arrange a perp walk for him. In September, Patel fired a group of agents who, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, in 2020, had taken a knee during a demonstration, seemingly to build rapport with protesters. The following month, he fired an agent-trainee who had displayed a gay-pride flag on his desk in the Los Angeles field office.



“Did you download enough podcasts?”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Patel isn't just enforcing the President's agenda. In July, the *Times* reported that he had expanded the use of polygraphs—a tool that the Bureau has relied on for decades as part of routine renewals of security clearances—to include questions about agents' loyalty to their new director. (An F.B.I. spokesperson denied this.) “Anybody who can retire is retiring because you don’t know when you’re going to be fired,” Christopher O’Leary, who worked at the Bureau for two decades before he retired, in 2023, told me. Russian intelligence officers must be “foaming at the mouth, because we’re populating the pond with people who had access to classified information, and now they could have grievances.” (Through a

spokesperson, Patel said that agents had been fired only “for failing to meet the requirements of the mission. Anything to the contrary is fake news fuel.”)

Patel is also lowering hiring standards. During the summer, he and Bongino proposed a plan to slash the duration of the F.B.I. Academy’s training program for some applicants from eighteen weeks to eight, and to remove a requirement that all new agents hold a college degree. Patel has explained that he wants the Bureau to hire people from other agencies who often lack college credentials. O’Leary, who focussed on Middle Eastern studies in college with an eye toward counterterrorism work, said that the Bureau’s reputation for excellence “attracts high performers, people who want to make it through this crucible.” Hires who clear a lower standard won’t “be accepted as peers in the F.B.I. Nobody wants to be mediocre.”

In September, three former senior agents filed a wrongful-termination suit against Patel and the Attorney General, Pam Bondi. According to the complaint, in the weeks before Patel was confirmed, the acting Deputy Attorney General, Emil Bove, ordered Brian J. Driscoll, Jr., then serving as the acting F.B.I. director, to assemble a list of agents who had been involved in cases against those who stormed the Capitol—the largest investigation in the Bureau’s history. Driscoll pushed back, arguing that agents shouldn’t be punished for having been assigned to a particular matter. But after speaking to the Bureau’s general counsel he handed over a list of six thousand employees, identified by employment number, not by name. Driscoll claims that, in January, Patel told him that, as long as he wasn’t prolific on social media and hadn’t donated to Democrats or voted for Kamala Harris, he would have no trouble passing muster with the Trump White House. In August, one of Driscoll’s subordinates received an e-mail directing him to print out a letter and give it to Driscoll. The single page, on the director’s letterhead, was a memo from Patel firing him.

In April, Patel promoted Steven Jensen, a former special agent in charge in Columbia, South Carolina, to help run the D.C. field office. When a group of January 6th sympathizers learned that Jensen, who had overseen the investigations into the attack, had been given more responsibilities, some of them took to social media to demand that he be fired. Patel went on Fox News to defend Jensen and urged him to sue his critics for defamation. In mid-July, Jensen alleges in the lawsuit, Patel invited him to his office, told him he was “crushing it,” and gave him a Patel-branded “challenge coin”—a large token of appreciation inscribed with “Ka\$h Patel”—and three cigars, one of which came from Trump’s Inauguration. Three weeks later, one of Jensen’s subordinates received an e-mail to print and hand to Jensen. The note, on Patel’s letterhead, said that Jensen was “being summarily dismissed . . . effective immediately.”

A senior official who recently left the Bureau told me that Patel has suggested that, if it were solely up to him, he would have retained some of those who have been fired. A current agent said, “He’s just telling everyone who’ll listen, ‘Yeah, I just did this to keep my job.’ ” According to the complaint, Patel told Driscoll that the director’s job depended on firing agents who had worked on cases against Trump. “The F.B.I. tried to put the President in jail,” Patel said, “and he hasn’t forgotten it.”

Patel’s parents flew in from India, where they own an apartment and spend part of the year, for his confirmation hearing, in January. In the ornate Senate Judiciary Committee room, Patel bowed down to touch their feet—a sign of respect in Hindu culture. At his swearing-in ceremony, in February, he took his oath on the Bhagavad Gita, the revered Hindu text. “I am living the American Dream,” he said.

Patel’s family is originally from the village of Bhadran, in Gujarat, on India’s west coast. His grandparents migrated to Africa in the mid-twentieth century. His father, Pramod, grew up in Uganda, and

his mother, Anjana, in Tanzania. In 1972, Uganda's dictator, Idi Amin, promising “to transfer the economic control of Uganda into the hands of Ugandans,” ordered the entire Asian community to leave the country within ninety days. Pramod returned to India, where he met Anjana, who had left Tanzania around the same time. They married and emigrated, first to Canada and then to the United States. Pramod, an accountant by training, worked his way up at a company that sold airplane bearings, ultimately becoming its chief financial officer.

The Patels, who have two children—Kash has a sister, Nisha—settled in Garden City, on Long Island, where they initially lived with Pramod’s seven siblings, their spouses, and a half-dozen children. The family made an annual pilgrimage to Disney World in a caravan of fifteen cars. Kash’s parents were registered Republicans, but, by his account, they were mostly apolitical. Growing up, he devoted himself primarily to sports. At Garden City High School, he played hockey and was a kicker on the football team. But he also showed an early interest in social issues. In his yearbook, he quoted the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Racism is man’s gravest threat to man—the maximum of hatred for a minimum reason.”

During high school, Patel worked as a golf caddy at Garden City Country Club, where the rules still state that “hats may only be worn with the bill forward.” A group of defense attorneys adopted him as their favorite caddy. “Obviously, he’s not a white kid—not a member’s son,” a Garden City golfer who knew Patel in those years said. “He’s carrying their bags and listening to them for four hours, and, as a middle-class, lower-middle-class kid, he’s learning about a different world.” Patel, who had been considering a career in medicine, began to gravitate toward studying law. He won a scholarship granted by the caddy association and went to the University of Richmond, where he majored in history and criminal justice. After graduation, he returned to New York, to attend Pace University’s law school, in Westchester County.

Even among fellow-strivers, Patel stood out as especially ambitious. “I can see him standing there after class, blustering,” Bennett Gershman, who taught a course in criminal procedure, told me. “He was outgoing, very cocky . . . the kind of student you don’t forget.” Gershman remembers Patel often visiting his office hours to talk through tough questions in criminal law. The course focussed, in part, on police overreach. Patel “sided with the victims,” Gershman recalled. “He was more interested in the rights of the people police were mistreating.”

While at Pace, Patel registered as a member of New York’s Independence Party, a populist, centrist group that endorsed Ralph Nader for President in 2004. He also signed on to an amicus brief supporting the consideration of race in law-school admissions and participated in the Judicial Intern Opportunity Program, a diversity effort aimed at “members of groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the profession, including students from minority racial and ethnic groups.” Patel, who interned for a federal judge in Chicago as part of the program, has since become an opponent of such initiatives. Earlier this year, the F.B.I. removed “diversity” as one of its “core values.”

Patel completed his law degree at Pace in 2005, but he has sometimes omitted the school’s name when listing his prior experience. His official F.B.I. bio frames his education as follows: “Mr. Patel graduated from the University of Richmond in 2002 with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and history. He later returned to New York to earn his juris doctor and earned a certificate in international law from University College London Faculty of Laws in the United Kingdom.” In 2004, while a student at Pace, Patel participated in a semester-long exchange program at University College London, but the program appears to have offered no such certificate. Gershman referred to the item on Patel’s résumé as a “fraudulent credential.” (A spokesperson for Patel said that he stood by his characterization of his education.)

Nevertheless, Gershman recalled thinking that Patel had potential. “My law school isn’t Yale or Harvard,” he said. “Getting a job in a public defender’s office is a very good result for us.” Miami-Dade’s public defender’s office was not Patel’s first choice. His goal, he said in his book, was to land at a “white shoe firm making a ton of money,” but “nobody would hire me.” He applied for the Miami position, and, “surprisingly, I got the job.”

Public-defender work, despite chronically low pay and long hours, is highly esteemed in the profession. Brummer, Miami-Dade’s public defender from 1977 to 2009, said that, when Patel applied, the office got about a thousand applications a year for thirty positions. “He had to fight his way into the job because he wasn’t an intern here and they get priority,” he said.

Patel served for four years at the Miami-Dade public defender’s office, then moved up to be a federal public defender. Lawyers at both offices say he was not very interested in writing briefs but he performed well in court. “He’s not a deep thinker like the coastal élites he criticizes,” one of Patel’s former colleagues said. “But he’s sharp. He knows how to be in front of a jury.”

Attorneys who worked with Patel in Miami said that they rarely heard him talking about politics. One recalled Patel reading books by the former Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly, but, if anyone had told the attorney that Patel would one day run the F.B.I., “I would have been astonished, because our job was to fight the F.B.I.,” he said. “They were the other side.” Another attorney, who occasionally debated reproductive rights with Patel, assumed that he was generally right of center. But she saw no sign that he was particularly animated by politics. “We disagreed, but we just disagreed,” she said. “The person we know in the public—I just didn’t know that person.”

In Florida, Patel served on the board of the South Asian Bar Association of North America, which touted its “commitment to

inclusion” and advocated for diversity programs. In later years, even as Patel embraced right-wing positions, he continued to occasionally speak like a moderate, even a liberal. “I’ve always said prosecutors need to spend a night in jail before they start their duties so they know what it’s like to cage a human being,” he wrote in his memoir. Addressing Trump’s failure to quickly deploy the National Guard during the riot at the Capitol on January 6th, Patel said, “Nobody wants the president to have unilateral authority to deploy military troops within America as he pleases. That’s a recipe for tyranny.” Two years later, Patel has embraced Trump’s use of the National Guard in several U.S. cities, including Washington, D.C.

In 2013, Patel got a job at the Department of Justice, in Washington, where he initially worked on persuading judges to approve arrest warrants. He moved up rapidly, joining the counterterrorism division a few months later. For years, Patel has claimed that he was “part of the team conducting the criminal investigation” into the 2012 terrorist attack on a U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, in which four Americans were killed. He has described himself as “leading the prosecution’s efforts at Main Justice.” But others who worked on the investigation say that the case was run primarily out of the U.S. Attorney’s office in Washington, not the D.O.J.’s headquarters. “It was such a small group,” a retired senior F.B.I. official told me. “And Patel wasn’t in it. I would know. I never heard his name. He just was not there.”

Patel has maintained that the deaths of the Americans were “completely avoidable” and that he had “reams of evidence against dozens of terrorists,” which, he says, were ignored by superiors who chose to prosecute just one man, the ringleader of the attack. In fact, the Justice Department filed about a dozen sealed complaints, but, because the terrorists had not been captured, their cases didn’t move forward. This year, during Patel’s confirmation process, he said only that he had “collaborated on cases tied to the Benghazi attacks.” Patel told senators that “these statements are not

inconsistent if one understands the role of the Main Justice lead prosecutor.”

In 2016, while Patel was in Tajikistan interviewing witnesses in one of his investigations, he decided to travel to Texas, for a hearing on a separate case involving a Palestinian accused of providing support to *ISIS*. With no expectation that he’d be appearing in court, Patel hadn’t brought a suit on his overseas trip. When he arrived at the courtroom in Houston, he was mercilessly confronted by U.S. District Judge Lynn Nettleton Hughes. Hughes was known for his antipathy toward D.C. prosecutors who flew in to bigfoot local attorneys. “You’re just one more nonessential employee from Washington,” he told Patel.

Patel had arrived in court wearing a borrowed, ill-fitting jacket, wrinkled khakis, and boat shoes. Hughes asked, “And where is your tie? Where is your suit?”

The judge demanded to see Patel’s passport. “If you want to be a lawyer, dress like a lawyer,” he said. He then asked Patel what purpose there was “to me and to the people of America to have you fly down here at their expense, eat at their expense, and stay at their expense. . . . You don’t add a bit of value, do you?” The judge tossed Patel out of his chambers and sanctioned him with an obscure disciplinary measure known as an “order on ineptitude.”

Hughes had a history of making inappropriate comments in court about minorities, including Indian Americans, and Patel believed that Hughes had singled him out for abuse. A *Washington Post* story that chronicled Patel’s humiliation—and the judge’s cruelty—was meant to be lighthearted, but Patel viewed the piece as a hit job. Years later, he was still stewing over the coverage. “They ran with it and dragged my name through the mud,” he wrote in his book. “It was far from the last time the media would slander me.”

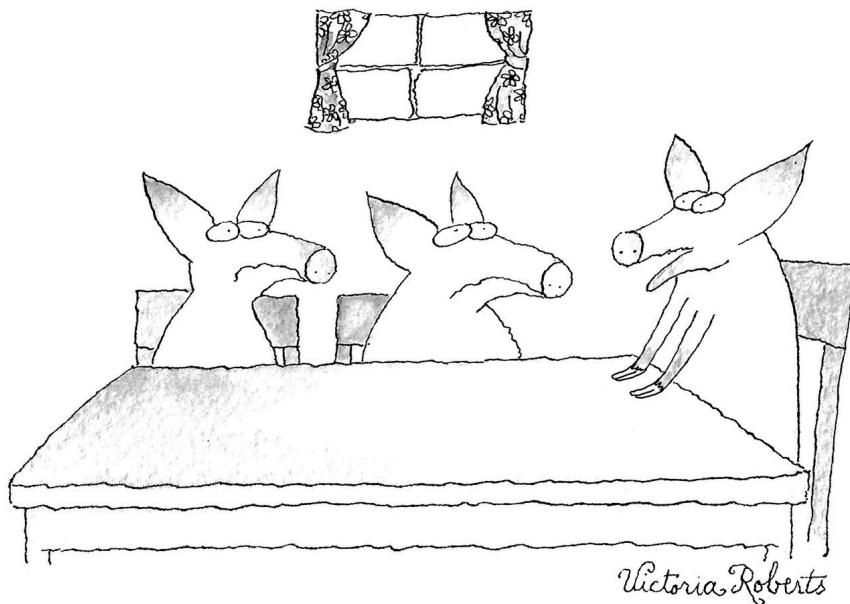
The tie incident “was very personal for Kash,” an attorney who worked at Main Justice at the time said. “It was the beginning of his turn.” In the years that followed, Patel would lash out at the D.O.J. for refusing to “stand up for me after being attacked by the unstable judge in Houston.” He also began to malign news organizations that “will do anything to stop you.” Since 2019, Patel has filed defamation lawsuits against the *Times*, CNN, and *Politico*, all of which he either later withdrew or saw thrown out by a judge. Patel has also proposed requiring federal workers to sign nondisclosure agreements and have their phones and laptops scanned monthly for any contacts with the press. “We’re going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig Presidential elections,” he told Steve Bannon on Bannon’s “War Room” podcast, in 2023. “Whether it’s criminally or civilly, we’ll figure that out.”

A number of Patel’s colleagues told me that he is prone to viewing the government, the media, and career politicians as part of a larger cabal. Rogan joked with him about this tendency. “We love conspiracies, don’t we?” he said during their interview. “We love the craziest conspiracies. They’re exciting.”

Patel chuckled and said, “They’re our thing.”

After the 2016 election, Devin Nunes, then the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, approached Patel and offered him a position investigating allegations that the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia. Patel turned it down, thinking that a job in the Capitol would be a bore. “I NEVER wanted to work on the Hill,” he wrote in his book. He was hungry to get to the White House, ideally to the National Security Council. But Nunes persisted, telling Patel that, if he accepted the job, the congressman would do everything he could to parlay the position into a White House gig. Patel took the deal, a decision that, he said, “would change my life—and change America—forever.”

Patel's methods quickly became controversial. Soon after joining the House-committee staff, in 2017, he pushed to subpoena the F.B.I., the C.I.A., and the N.S.A., seeking evidence that the Obama Administration had tried to "unmask" the names of Trump campaign officials who were mentioned in intelligence intercepts. A couple of months later, Patel and another Republican staffer travelled to London, where they showed up at the law office that represented Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence agent who had compiled a since-discredited report alleging strong ties between Trump and Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. Patel reportedly failed to inform either the American Embassy or Democrats on the Intelligence Committee about the visit. He wrote in his book that he and his colleague did not go to London to find Steele, but were there on an unrelated matter and decided, impromptu, "to stop by the office." Patel wrote that he "left immediately after we were told that he was unavailable," and "then enjoyed a full English breakfast, got on the plane, and headed home."



"It's always been 'the three little pigs' this and 'the three little pigs' that. I'm here to announce I'm going solo."

Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

That summer, Patel and Nunes went to Vicenza, Italy, on a congressional junket to, as Patel put it, "improve our intelligence

community.” One night, the two men met in the town square for Negronis. It was a ritual that Nunes called “the final,” a chance to recap the day’s work. Patel had already learned that the F.B.I. had relied on the Steele dossier to obtain a wiretap on Carter Page. He now pressed Nunes to subpoena records from Fusion GPS, the research firm that had contracted with Steele to gather intelligence on Trump. Nunes was reluctant, but Patel told him that the records would reveal who had paid for the Steele dossier in the first place. “If I was wrong,” Patel said, “he could fire me right on the spot.”

The subpoena eventually came through. As the *Washington Post* later reported, Hillary Clinton’s campaign and the Democratic National Committee had financed the Steele dossier. Patel, who at that point had never met Trump, had helped to show that the F.B.I. had omitted potentially exculpatory information in its application for the wiretap on Page. His findings were compiled in a four-page report, known as the Nunes memo, which was released over the objections of the F.B.I. In right-wing media, it was heralded as proof that the investigation into Russian interference in the election was an anti-Trump conspiracy. A Justice Department inspector general’s report in 2019 confirmed that the F.B.I., as Patel had alleged, had unfairly emphasized evidence supporting the idea that Page might have been a link between Russia and the Trump campaign, leaving out or mischaracterizing evidence to the contrary. But the inspector general also concluded that there was no evidence that political bias had prompted the investigation into Russian influence. (Clinton’s campaign and the D.N.C. were eventually fined for failing to properly disclose their payments for the opposition research.)

Near the end of 2018, Patel asked Nunes to fulfill their deal and help him find counterterrorism work at the White House. According to a senior National Security Council official, Nunes spoke to Trump on Patel’s behalf, and the President told his acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, to hire Patel onto the N.S.C. But this was the first Trump Administration, when high-level Republicans

were still resisting the President's impulses. John Bolton, Trump's national-security adviser, was intent on keeping Patel out of the N.S.C. "Nunes kept calling us, saying, 'This guy's great—he's tenacious,'" Bolton's deputy, Charlie Kupperman, told me. "Kash came over and I interviewed him and I said, 'We don't have anything.' "

Kupperman and Bolton had concluded that one of Patel's primary motives was to find a place in Trump's orbit. "He had no real politics of his own," Kupperman said. "He's always cultivated people that can help him get into the limelight, and Trump has supported him at every turn because he's one-hundred-per-cent sycophant." Bolton and Kupperman were alarmed by what Bolton called Patel's "résumé puffery," including exaggerating his role at Justice in the Benghazi case. They also concluded that Patel couldn't be trusted with secret information. On Nunes's staff, he was seen as a serial leaker. "We would give information to the committee," a senior official during Trump's first term said, "and it would be on Fox News in twenty minutes."

Eventually, Trump prevailed upon the N.S.C. to find a spot for Patel. "Devin Nunes keeps calling," the President said, according to Kupperman. "You have to take him." (Nunes did not respond to requests for an interview.) The only available position was in the N.S.C.'s international-organizations section, which coördinated U.S. policy on the United Nations and other such bodies. "We weren't going to just make up a job for him," Kupperman said. Patel replied, "I'll take anything to get into the N.S.C."

Once inside, Patel managed to quickly endear himself to the President. One day, Kupperman arrived at the Oval Office for a meeting with the White House counsel, Pat Cipollone, the N.S.C. legal adviser John Eisenberg, and Trump. "Lo and behold, there's Kash," Kupperman recalled. The President wanted Patel to act as his political commissar on the N.S.C., serving as Trump's eyes and ears, and insuring that staff members remained loyal to the Chief

Executive. Kupperman said that he and Cipollone told the President, “We don’t need that.” Then, in the middle of the meeting, the Fox News host Sean Hannity called Trump. “The President puts him on the squawk box and introduces everybody,” Kupperman said. “And Sean says, ‘Oh, I love Kash Patel.’ ”

Five months later, when an opening arose in counterterrorism, Bolton felt pressured to give it to Patel, a decision he quickly regretted. Patel “proved less interested in his assigned duties than in worming his way into Mr. Trump’s presence, which evidenced he was duplicitous, manipulative, and conspiratorial,” Bolton later said. Bolton and Kupperman were eventually included on Patel’s “government gangsters” list.

Resistance to hiring Patel was not limited to the N.S.C. According to Kupperman and Bolton, in December, 2020, when Trump was considering Patel for the role of deputy director at the C.I.A., Gina Haspel, the agency’s director, threatened to resign in protest. Trump backed down. (Haspel declined a request for an interview.) A few months earlier, Attorney General William Barr had “categorically opposed” Trump’s proposal to make Patel the deputy director of the F.B.I. Barr wrote in his memoir that he told the White House chief of staff that “it would happen ‘over my dead body’ ” because Patel had “virtually no experience that would qualify him to serve at the highest level of the world’s preeminent law enforcement agency.” He added that “the very idea . . . showed a shocking detachment from reality.”

At the N.S.C., Patel coördinated hostage negotiations and rescues. To celebrate successful operations, he and his colleagues kept a barrel of bourbon on hand. (They later donated the barrel to Trump’s Presidential library.) After each confirmed kill of an Al Qaeda or Islamic State member, Patel would X out their faces on charts that he’d hung in his office, “using one of President Trump’s famous sharpies that he gave me personally.” In 2019, during the U.S. raid that killed the *ISIS* leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in Syria,

Patel, seated next to Vice-President Mike Pence in the Situation Room, shouted, “Fuck, yeah!” Both Democrats and Republicans viewed Patel “as a loyal operative who was not there based on his ability,” Eugene Vindman, a Democratic House member from Virginia who formerly was a lawyer at the N.S.C., told me. “I spent a lot of time correcting his work—the content, the factual information, and also the writing was not very good. Both sides saw through him.”

The history of the F.B.I. is heavily inflected by its first director, J. Edgar Hoover, who, for nearly half a century, led the Bureau’s crusades against communist infiltrators—both real and imagined—and anything else he deemed un-American. Hoover’s Bureau decimated the Ku Klux Klan; it also harassed Martin Luther King, Jr., targeted antiwar activists, and tormented gay people. But Hoover’s avid curation of the Bureau’s image, which included reviewing scripts for the long-running ABC drama “The F.B.I.,” managed to keep its reputation for thorough law enforcement largely unchallenged for decades. Tim Weiner, the author of “Enemies: A History of the FBI,” told me that the paramount rule governing agents’ behavior throughout Hoover’s long reign was “Don’t embarrass the Bureau.”

Hoover’s successors generally fit a type—they tended to be clean-shaven, conservatively dressed, and deeply loyal to the Justice Department. All of them were white men. Patel broke the pattern in many ways, not least by promising retribution against the Bureau’s own agents. After the 2020 Presidential election and Trump’s failed attempt to reverse the result, Patel posited that the F.B.I. had planted confidential sources inside militia groups and encouraged them to take a more violent approach during the January 6th attack. He declared that the arrested rioters were political prisoners and promoted their recording of “Justice for All,” an off-key anthem defending those who stormed the Capitol. In 2023, Patel told the podcaster Tim Pool that, “to defeat the insurrection narrative,” it

would be vital to prove that F.B.I. informants were seeded into the crowd that day.

The F.B.I. was a frequent target on Patel's own podcast, "Kash's Corner," which was produced by the Epoch Times, a right-wing news organization associated with the Falun Gong, a Chinese dissident religious group. "What was the F.B.I. doing planning January 6th for a year?" Patel asked in 2022. He claimed that the Bureau had been "completely politicized" during the Obama and Biden Administrations. He demanded that the Bureau investigate Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, whom Patel suspected of covering up the origin of the *Covid-19* virus. "We now know the true nature of their corrupt ways," he said of the F.B.I.

After Trump was indicted, in 2023, for secreting classified documents to Mar-a-Lago, Patel told listeners, "When you're President and you leave, you can take whatever you want. And when you take it, whether it's classified or not, it's yours." (The Presidential Records Act of 1978 prohibits former Presidents from taking any official records, classified or not, with them when they leave office.) Patel said that he had seen Trump declassify documents before leaving the White House, but, when prosecutors looking into the case summoned him to testify to a grand jury, he invoked his Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination. After prosecutors granted him limited immunity, Patel appeared a second time and answered questions, but at his Senate confirmation hearing he refused to discuss his testimony, saying that he wasn't permitted to do so, a statement that, as several senators noted, was false.

During his time out of public service, Patel found other ways to cash in on his anti-government invective. He created the Kash Patel Legal Offense Trust, "to give those smeared by the fake news media and big tech a voice." The trust's website, fightwithkash.com, was set up to sell his "K\$H" clothing line and

raise money for January 6th defendants and others he deemed victims of a weaponized Justice Department. He promoted dietary supplements that promised to “undo the damage” from the *Covid-19* vaccine. (“Reverse the vaxx n get healthy with @warrioressentials.”) He wrote three “Plot Against the King” children’s books, allegorical tales in which Kash the Wizard heroically leads a battle on behalf of King Donald to identify the bad guys who were scheming to elect Hillary Queenton on Choosing Day. The books, he said, teach “the importance of service, mission, faith and truth.”

The Kash Foundation, a charity that Patel founded, promised to make grants to “those who have the courage to stand up against government wrongdoing.” The foundation’s latest publicly available tax returns reported revenue of \$1.34 million, and six hundred seventy-four thousand dollars in expenses—but the foundation dispensed only about two hundred thousand dollars in grants, mostly in “direct cash assistance” to fifty unnamed individuals. About half of the group’s expenses went to advertising and promotion of its programs, including two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars to a company owned by Andrew Ollis, the foundation’s vice-president and a business partner of Patel’s. Patel has said that the gap between the foundation’s marketing expenditures and its charitable grants reflects only “standard, ordinary-course business transactions at fair market values.”

Patel also started Trishul L.L.C., a national-security and intelligence consulting firm named after a Hindu term representing the three states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and sleeping. Trishul had contracts with the Trump Media group, which paid Patel’s company more than a quarter-million dollars in 2022 and 2023, according to S.E.C. filings; Patel oversaw an investigation into two of Trump Media’s founders, who were accused of mismanaging the company’s launch. In January, Trump Media granted Patel, who served on the company’s board, and who was then the nominee for F.B.I. director, stock shares valued at nearly

eight hundred thousand dollars. On the day of his Senate hearing, Patel said that he had decided not to accept the award, “to avoid any appearance of any conflict.”

Patel also consulted for Elite Depot Ltd., the parent company of Shein, a Chinese fast-fashion retailer. He held investments of between a million and five million dollars in Elite, whose board included investors with alleged ties to China’s military and the Communist Party. Democrats and Republicans in Congress have raised questions about Shein’s use of forced labor in China, an allegation that the company has strenuously denied. Patel told the Justice Department’s ethics office that he saw no need to divest his holdings in Elite and that, if Trump gave him a waiver, he could handle matters related to its businesses.

Another Trishul client was the government of Qatar, which paid Patel an undisclosed amount for consulting services. The news site Responsible Statecraft reported that Patel’s work for Qatar included helping with security ahead of the 2022 World Cup and offering advice on counterterrorism and election monitoring. Patel pledged to recuse himself from matters concerning Trishul that might arise at the F.B.I., but he refused to sell off assets related to his firm, which paid him more than two million dollars in 2024. In March, he got a waiver allowing him to handle Qatar-related matters.

Earlier this year, the public-interest lobby Public Citizen filed a complaint alleging that Patel, by failing to disclose his work for Qatar or to register as a foreign agent, had violated federal rules requiring officials to report income from overseas entities. The day after the complaint was filed, Attorney General Bondi limited enforcement of the rules governing such income, saying that criminal charges would be considered only in cases involving “traditional espionage.” Craig Holman, one of Public Citizen’s lobbyists, told me, “They rigged the whole system to make sure we never knew what Kash Patel was doing for Qatar.”

In 1993, President Bill Clinton fired his F.B.I. director, William Sessions, after a Justice Department report concluded that Sessions had used F.B.I. aircraft to visit friends and relatives, often with his wife. In 2023, Patel said on his podcast that the Bureau’s jet should be grounded because the then director, Christopher Wray, spent “taxpayer dollars to hop around the country.” But, since joining the Bureau, Patel has travelled extensively, often donning F.B.I.-branded gear at news conferences and field-office visits. O’Leary, the F.B.I. veteran, told me, “He wants to play with toys and dress in camouflage.”

In March, Patel flew on a government jet to Las Vegas and attended an Ultimate Fighting Championship bout, at T-Mobile Arena, in Paradise, Nevada. He posed for a photo with Dana White, the U.F.C. president, and discussed bringing in mixed-martial-arts fighters to help F.B.I. agents with their conditioning. (White said Patel was “dead serious” about the proposal.) During the fight, Patel sat cageside next to the actor Mel Gibson. A day earlier, the Justice Department had fired a pardon attorney who had refused to recommend restoring Gibson’s right to possess firearms, a privilege he had lost in 2011 after he was convicted of battering a former girlfriend. Gibson’s gun rights were restored the following month. (The Justice Department said the Gibson matter played no role in the attorney’s firing.) In Paradise, Patel was photographed giving Gibson a fist bump.

Patel has used the Justice Department’s Boeing 757 and its G5 to attend U.F.C. fights not only in Vegas but in Miami, where he was seated behind Trump. “You never saw Mueller, Wray, or Comey at U.F.C. matches,” a current agent said of the Bureau’s previous three directors. Patel also used a government jet to fly to New York with the hockey great Wayne Gretzky to attend an Islanders game at which Alex Ovechkin, of the Washington Capitals, broke the all-time N.H.L. scoring record. An F.B.I. spokesman told NBC News that Patel, who remains a member of the Dons, an amateur team in northern Virginia’s MedStar Capitals Iceplex Adult Hockey

League, “has and always will support his friends on and off the ice.” (Patel has said that he uses government aircraft because the F.B.I. director is required to fly on planes equipped for high-security communications, and that he reimburses the government for personal travel.)

Since 2022, Patel’s home address has been in Las Vegas. Last year, he joined the Poodle Room, a private club on the top floor of the city’s Fontainebleau hotel; membership costs an estimated twenty thousand dollars a year, though Patel has said that he paid about ten thousand dollars. When in Vegas, he lives in a two-bedroom home backing onto a golf course in a gated community. The house, valued by tax assessors at three hundred seventy-six thousand dollars, is owned by Michael Muldoon, a real-estate entrepreneur and a frequent donor to Republican candidates and organizations. (Both men use the house as their home address.) Muldoon, who didn’t respond to a request for comment, owns companies in the time-share industry. He was sued in a class action by customers who accused his businesses of “bait-and-switch fraud” and “grandiose promises.” The case was settled out of court, with Muldoon’s companies admitting no wrongdoing. Patel rents the house from Muldoon, but, Patel’s spokeswoman, Erica Knight, said, “he doesn’t have any other business with Kash.”



“The real gift is my unsolicited advice.”
Cartoon by Julia Thomas

Patel’s girlfriend, Alexis Wilkins, a twenty-seven-year-old country singer, lives in Nashville. Patel has used government planes to fly there at least five times, though he appears to have visited the city’s F.B.I. field office on only one of those trips. He also “requested executive protection for his girlfriend,” a former senior agent said. “None of the other F.B.I. directors had executive protection for their wives, let alone a girlfriend.”

In late October, after a former F.B.I. agent turned podcaster, Kyle Seraphin, criticized Patel for using government aircraft to visit Wilkins, the Bureau requested that its jet be removed from the public tracking site FlightAware. “What ever are you going to grift, create fake outrage and post about now, Kyle?” Wilkins said on X after the removal. Seraphin quickly noted that it remained easy to track the F.B.I. plane on other sites. Patel jumped on X to defend his girlfriend. “The disgustingly baseless attacks against Alexis—a true patriot and the woman I’m proud to call my partner in life—are beyond pathetic,” he wrote. “And to our supposed allies staying silent—your silence is louder than the clickbait haters.”

After his Nashville visit, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Patel flew to San Angelo, Texas, to spend a few days at the Boondoggle Ranch, a hunting resort owned by the family of C. R. (Bubba) Saulsbury, Jr., a Republican donor. The luxury ranch is home to exotic animals, such as addax and Nile lechwe, and its guests can hunt from a custom Hummer. Patel called the *Journal's* reporting “hot garbage.”

On September 10th, a gunman on a rooftop on the campus of Utah Valley University shot the conservative activist Charlie Kirk to death. Minutes before local and federal officials in Utah held their first media briefing on the assassination, Patel declared on social media—without consulting other Bureau leaders—that a suspect was in custody. Moments later, Utah’s public-safety commissioner said authorities were still working “to find this killer.” Patel quickly reversed himself, posting that “the subject in custody has been released after an interrogation.” Patel added, “Our investigation continues.”

Patel was in Manhattan that evening, dining at Rao’s, an Italian hot spot in East Harlem. Even loyal members of Trump’s base criticized the director’s rush to social media. The conservative activist Christopher Rufo called on Republicans to “assess” whether Patel “is the right man to run the FBI.” Joseph Biggs, a leader of the Proud Boys who was convicted of seditious conspiracy and sentenced to seventeen years in prison for his participation in the January 6th attack, blasted Patel on X, asking, “Why is the head of the @FBI speculating like everyone not in the know? Stop all this click bait shit you keep doing.” (Trump commuted Biggs’s sentence on his first day back in office.)

Patel decided to fly out to Utah. At a news conference the next day, he bade farewell to Kirk, saying, “Rest now, brother. We have the watch. I’ll see you in Valhalla.” The benediction did not go over well at the F.B.I. “Valhalla is where warriors go to die,” the former

senior Bureau official said. “Now he’s a Viking warrior? He was a lawyer at the Justice Department. He’s just not a serious guy.”

That morning, Patel had convened a video call with about two hundred F.B.I. officials, in which he berated his staff for what he called “Mickey Mouse operations.” He told the assembled leaders that it was unacceptable that agents in Salt Lake City—the field office closest to the site of the shooting—had waited nearly twelve hours to show him a picture of the suspect. A few weeks earlier, Patel had forced out the agent in charge of the Salt Lake office, Mehtab Syed, a well-regarded former counterterrorism agent. The alleged shooter, a twenty-two-year-old named Tyler Robinson, turned himself in to authorities, ending a thirty-three-hour manhunt. At the press conference announcing Robinson’s arrest, Patel said, “This is what happens when you let good cops be cops.”

The wrongful-termination suit against Patel and Bondi had been filed on the morning of Kirk’s murder. The third plaintiff, Spencer Evans, who had been dismissed a month earlier, was formerly the head of the F.B.I.’s Las Vegas office, which supported the hunt for Kirk’s assassin. Jensen, the former head of the D.C. field office, had overseen the investigation into the murder of two Israeli Embassy staff members outside the Capital Jewish Museum. Margaret Donovan, an attorney who represents the former agents in their suit, noted that Patel had also fired the head of the Bureau’s Critical Incident Response Group, who would have helped to lead the investigation into the shooting. “Who did Kash fire?” Donovan said. “Everybody who would have helped him, he had just fired.”

Patel was already facing criticism for the closing of the Jeffrey Epstein case. Before coming to the F.B.I., he had demanded that the Bureau cough up Epstein’s supposed client list. In 2023, on Benny Johnson’s podcast, the host asked why the F.B.I. was “protecting the world’s foremost predator” by refusing to release his clients’ names. “Simple,” Patel replied. “Because of who’s on that list.” But, as the F.B.I. director, Patel has grown frustrated that many of

Trump's followers don't believe him when he says that there was no client list, and that Epstein's death in a Manhattan jail was indeed a suicide. Patel has said that court orders prevent him from releasing the remaining F.B.I. and Justice Department documents from the Epstein investigation, and that those records contain nothing new about Epstein's misdeeds. "Do you think that myself, Bongino, and others would participate in hiding information about Epstein's grotesque activities?" Patel asked Rogan. "Do you really think I wouldn't give that to you if it existed?" In August, however, a U.S. District Court judge wrote that the remaining documents are not secret and that the F.B.I. is "the logical party to make comprehensive disclosure to the public of the Epstein Files."

In September, at hearings before the Senate and House Judiciary committees, Patel lashed out at several Democrats who questioned his handling of the Epstein case. Senator Adam Schiff, of California, who served as Congress's lead manager during Trump's first impeachment, is known in Patel's children's books as "Shifty," a bad guy upon whom the great wizard Kash unleashes the Dragon of Jalapeños (D.O.J., get it?), which chases Shifty "out of the kingdom, never to be seen again." In the hearing, Schiff rejected Patel's explanation of why Epstein's longtime assistant, Ghislaine Maxwell, had been transferred from one federal prison to another, much more comfortable, one shortly after she answered questions from Todd Blanche, the Deputy Attorney General and Trump's former defense lawyer. Patel had said that it was the Bureau of Prisons' decision to transfer Maxwell. "You want the American people to believe that?" Schiff asked. "Do you think they're stupid?"

"No," Patel said, raising his voice and waving his arms. "What I am doing is protecting the country, providing historic reform, and combatting the weaponization of intelligence by the likes of you, and we have countless proven you to be a liar, in Russiagate, in January 6th—you're the biggest fraud to ever sit in the United

States Senate.” At the end of his tirade, Patel added, “Go ahead and run to the cameras.”

When another veteran of Trump’s first impeachment, Representative Eric Swalwell, of California, named in Patel’s memoir as a “corrupt actor of the first order,” asked how many times Trump’s name appears in the Bureau’s files on Epstein, Patel replied, “Your fixation on this matter is disgusting.”

Later that day, a photo of Patel during his testimony, holding a series of notes handwritten on his personalized F.B.I. stationery, went viral. The first line read “Good fight with Swalwell.” Then “Hold the line,” “Brush off their attacks,” and “Rise above the next line of partisan attacks.”

On November 12th, Democrats in the House released a set of e-mails in which Epstein said, in 2011, that Trump “spent hours at my house” with one of “the girls,” who was described by the House Oversight Committee as “a victim of sex trafficking.” Trump has long acknowledged that he and Epstein were once friends, but claimed, in 2019, that “I wasn’t a fan.” He has urged Congress to back off from its investigation into Epstein’s sex trafficking. In one of Epstein’s e-mails, a 2011 message to Maxwell, he called Trump the “dog that hasn’t barked.”

Patel, like Trump, has done his best to change the subject. In October, he gave Congress more than two hundred pages of F.B.I. documents from 2022, in which his predecessor, Wray, urged Merrick Garland, then the Attorney General, to approve an investigation into the Trump campaign’s role in trying to obstruct congressional certification of the 2020 Presidential vote—what Patel called “important documentation showing weaponization and politicization at the highest levels of government.” That same month, Patel touted the indictment of two Texas men who allegedly vandalized cars and shot fireworks as part of a July 4th attack on an ICE detention facility near Dallas. Patel said that the men, who

were charged with supporting terrorism, were members of an Antifa cell. There had been no mention of Antifa in prosecutors' original announcement of the charges, in July. But, on Fox Business, Patel said, "We are treating them as terrorists, just like we do Al Qaeda or *ISIS*." On X, he announced the news with an added flourish: "Law and order is back."

Elsewhere on social media, Patel's support seemed fragile. Nearly a year into the President's second term, users on X, Facebook, and Truth Social have been diligently cataloguing the anti-MAGA forces that have yet to be brought to justice. One meme tallied the "Number of Arrests" stemming from crimes Patel had promised to solve, including the "Russian Collusion Hoax"; the 2020 election; January 6th; the *Covid-19* lab leak; the "Mar-a-Lago Raid"; and "Epstein Pedophile Arrests." The final count on each, at least so far, is zero. ♦

Marc Fisher is a columnist at the Washington Post and the author of "[Trump Revealed: An American Journey of Ambition, Ego, Money, and Power](#)."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/kash-patels-acts-of-service>

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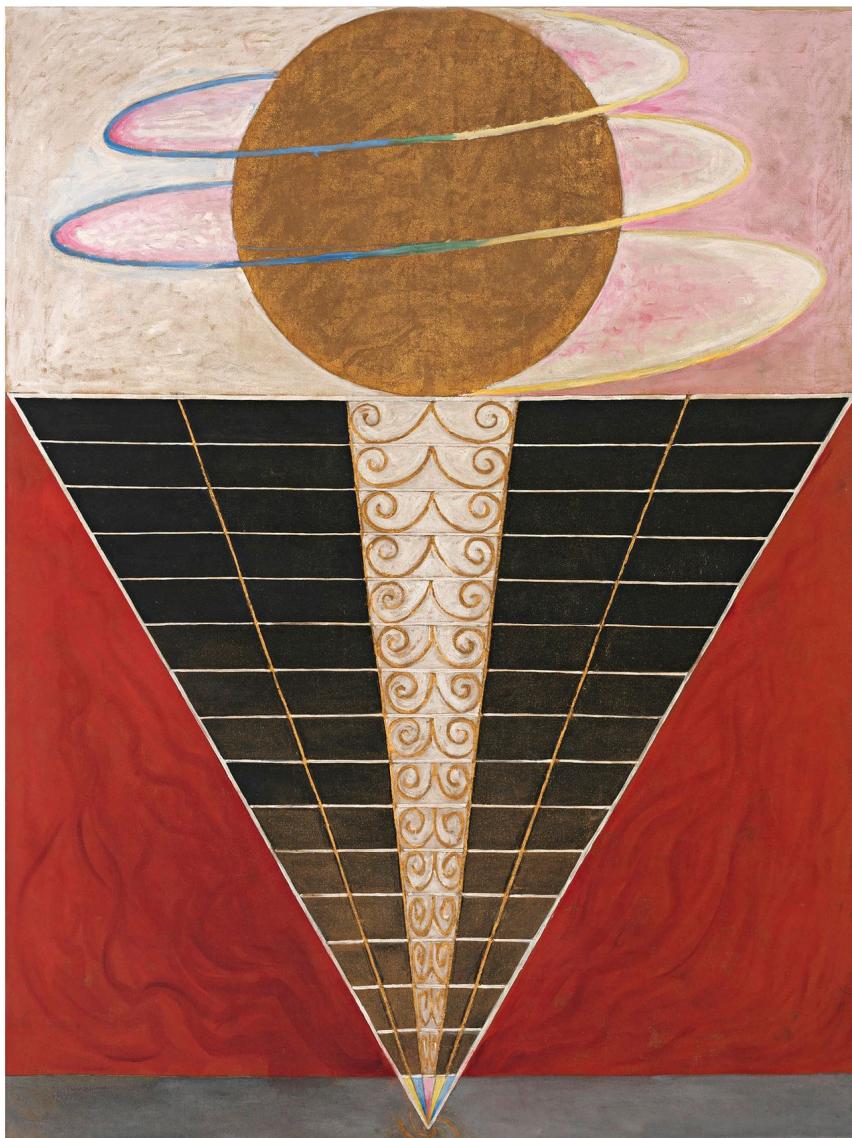
[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

The Strange Afterlife of Hilma af Klint, Painting's Posthumous Star

As af Klint's fame has grown, so have the questions—about what she believed, whom she worked with, and who should be allowed to speak in her name.

By [Alice Gregory](#)

November 16, 2025



“Most of what one knows about, or what one encounters in the literature about Hilma, is actually just myth,” a researcher said.

Art work by Hilma af Klint / Heritage Images / Getty

Outside, it was cold and dark. Inside, brightly colored forms seemed to swirl and spread. It was February, 2013, the evening of the opening of “Hilma af Klint—A Pioneer of Abstraction” at Moderna Museet, in Stockholm. Among the attendees was Kurt Almqvist, a white-haired man in his mid-fifties. Though Almqvist considered himself something of an expert on fin-de-siècle intellectual history—he had written a book on Carl Jung—he was seeing af Klint’s paintings for the first time.

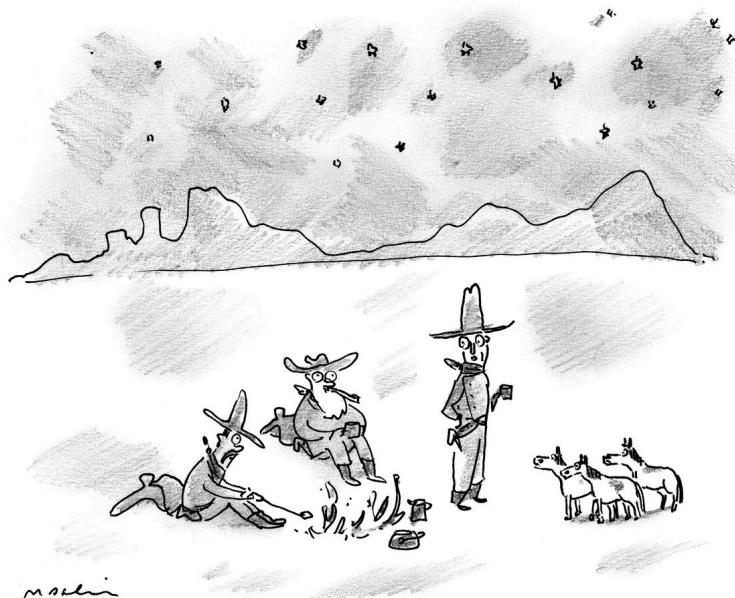
Almqvist, the C.E.O. of a nonprofit foundation that had financed a seminar to accompany the exhibition, had been to other shows at Moderna Museet—“smashed bottles and things like that,” as he put it to me—and found the frank beauty of af Klint’s work a relief. Many of the canvases, painted a century earlier, were enormous; some towered over his head. Odd but familiar shapes pulsed from their surfaces: eggs, petals, celestial bodies. Almqvist was standing in front of a series of small geometric paintings of ornamented circles—some looked like beach balls, others a bit like lunar phases —when he was approached by a flummoxed-looking woman. *Did he understand them?* she wondered. *Could he explain them to her?* “I really don’t know anything,” Almqvist recalled telling her. “I suppose it’s all symbolic for . . . something. Perhaps it has to do with religion?”

In the following months, the exhibition drew a record number of visitors. There were the usual suspects—art students, well-read retirees in statement eyewear—but also, in the diplomatic words of one museum employee, “other kinds of people.” Diaphanously costumed dancers. Self-described psychics. A Finnish man came every day for weeks, stayed until closing, and spoke to no one. The show proved especially popular with women, many of whom reported feeling a mysterious warmth spread through their lower bodies, accompanied by an irrepressible urge to weep.

“It is, without a doubt, one of the most extraordinary exhibitions I have ever seen,” a co-editor of the contemporary-art magazine

Frieze wrote. Much of the press coverage emphasized the fact that af Klint had begun painting her nonrepresentational works in 1906, four years before the attempts of Kandinsky, long considered the father of abstract art. Soon, Sweden's postal service issued stamps bearing images of af Klint's paintings. Posters of her work began to replace decorative Buddha statues as stock interior décor in Stockholm's real-estate listings. There was an *Ikea* collaboration.

The paintings were gorgeous, and so was the story of their creation, every element of which seemed lifted from a fairy tale. It began with af Klint's birth, in 1862, to a noble family, in a palace just outside Stockholm. The building had been converted into a military academy, where her father taught naval cadets. As she got older, she began to see visions she could not explain—empty coffins, floating numbers. She went to school, where she learned to paint. At first, she was diligent about portraying the world as others saw it: she made portraits of important people, landscapes of recognizable terrain, careful illustrations of botanical and zoological life. But, in time, she became unsatisfied.



"Wow—the horses are really little tonight."

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

When she was in her early thirties, she joined a circle called the Five; together, they took down messages from spirits and from the dead. The voices of astral beings suggested to af Klint that she should paint not reality as it seemed but a truer version, which lay beyond the material world. She obeyed, covering canvas after canvas with images of hidden forces, portrayed in strange shapes and vivid colors. In middle age, she showed the work to Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian occultist whose syncretic theories about everything from agriculture to education and the afterlife came to be known as anthroposophy.

Later, af Klint claimed—implausibly, according to some historians—that Steiner had warned her that the world was not ready for what she was attempting to reveal, and that, discouraged, she stopped painting for eight years. When she resumed, she said, she worked at great scale and intensity. But she decreed that the works were to remain unseen for twenty years after her death, protected from ignorant audiences. Only decades later would it become evident that Hilma af Klint had produced one of the most significant creative innovations of the twentieth century.

“It was delicious,” Louise Belfrage, a scholar and a colleague of Almqvist’s, said. “You have this woman genius, a prophet, making abstract paintings before Kandinsky? I mean, come *on!* It’s just so *attractive.*” Belfrage spoke of af Klint’s story like someone who had just been caught swiping icing off a cake: helpless, only half sorry. “It’s almost irresistible,” she said, and laughed.

Soon after encountering af Klint’s work, Belfrage and Almqvist began to organize more seminars on her through the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit, the research and education nonprofit that Almqvist heads. Held everywhere from Oslo to Israel, they featured an impressively interdisciplinary selection of scholars, whose lectures touched on everything from early-twentieth-century scientific breakthroughs to occult philosophy. For Almqvist, af Klint became the magnifying

glass through which a remote age could come alive. Almqvist and Belfrage compiled the talks into luxuriously produced books; Almqvist himself contributed essays and introductions.

When, in 2018, the Guggenheim exhibited “Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future,” “it was as if the Vatican of abstraction had canonized her,” Julia Voss, a German historian whose biography of the artist appeared soon afterward, said. The choice of venue seemed almost prophetic. Frank Lloyd Wright’s spiral rotunda looked eerily like a temple to house her works which af Klint had once imagined. The show became one of the most visited in the Guggenheim’s history, and its paintings became a permanent backdrop on social media. In the *Times*, Roberta Smith wrote that af Klint’s paintings “definitively explode the notion of modernist abstraction as a male project.”

In the past decade, Hilma af Klint’s life has been reimagined as historical fiction, a children’s book, and a graphic novel. It has inspired at least two operas, a documentary, a bio-pic, a virtual-reality experience, and a six-hundred-square-foot permanent mosaic inside the New York City subway system.

To Voss, this is the promise of art history: that death can confer the glory that life refuses, that what looks like failure might in fact be redemption deferred. “It’s soothing, I think, to see something so great and so beautiful that was not successful in its own time,” she said.

Almqvist has come to believe that the resurrection of af Klint has also produced fantasies. In the nearly thirteen years since his first encounter with the artist, Almqvist has instated himself as a kind of one-man Greek drama—chorus and actor both, once the herald of plot and now its complicator. His own writing on af Klint, he told me, has turned out to be riddled with mistakes. “When you have someone like Hilma, where there are just so many holes to fill in, it opens things up for, well, conspiracy theories, quite frankly,”

Almqvist said. “Most of what one knows about, or what one encounters in the literature about Hilma, is actually just myth.”

But even myths require caretakers. In recent years, the question of who those caretakers should be—and what, exactly, they are protecting—has become something of a national debate in Sweden. As af Klint’s fame has grown, so have the questions—about what she believed, whom she worked with, and who should be allowed to speak in her name. The disputes play out in boardrooms and court filings and newspaper columns. They are often framed as debates about af Klint’s life and her past, but what is really at stake is her afterlife—her legacy, what it means, and who should get to define it in the future.



The voices of astral beings suggested to af Klint that she should paint not reality as it seemed but a truer version, which lay beyond the material world.

Photograph from Science History Images / Alamy

In the autumn of 1944, when af Klint was eighty-one, she fell while getting off a streetcar in Stockholm; a few weeks later, she died from her injuries. In her will, she named her nephew, Erik af Klint, as her heir. Erik, an admiral in the Navy, was too busy to administer his aunt's body of work, so Olof Sundström, a close friend of hers, catalogued the archive. But Erik remained involved. "It is my opinion that, at least for the time being, the work should only be seen by people who understand its value and can feel

reverence for it,” he wrote to Sundström, in 1946. Journalists, he added, “are, of course, not allowed to come near it.”

It was not until Erik had retired from the military that he began to tackle the question of what to actually do with the massive corpus of material—more than twelve hundred paintings and drawings and a hundred and twenty-four notebooks. He considered it his responsibility to find a permanent home for the works, but he was unsure how best to proceed and consulted various scholars and museums. To one, he spoke of a desire to “organize an exhibition to generate interest in it among a wider audience”; to another he said that the work should be displayed only “within closed societies,” and warned that “releasing it to the public can never lead to anything good.” In 1970, Erik met with people from Moderna Museet and the national museum to discuss a large-scale exhibition, but the idea was eventually abandoned. Ultimately, the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden agreed to house the archive, and in 1972 Erik established the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Its statutes prohibit the sale of af Klint’s most significant works—so as to safeguard them for, in the words of the four-page document, “spiritual seekers”—and require that the board be chaired by a member of the af Klint family, with the remaining seats occupied by members of the Anthroposophical Society.

For nearly four decades, the foundation operated serenely. af Klint was a New Age obscurity, not yet an art-world darling, and there was little to quarrel over. Even as a handful of her works were exhibited at prominent international museums, beginning in the late eighties, she remained of interest mainly to Swedish art critics.

But, in 2011, Erik’s son Johan, an international financier, took over as the chairman of the foundation. He approached the role with zeal, telling people that, when he was three years old, Hilma had instructed him to help protect her work. He made himself available to curators, scholars, and journalists, often retrieving interested parties from train stations and driving them to the archives. It was

Johan who arranged the *Ikea* collaboration. Under his purview, a rotating selection of af Klint's paintings were loaned to the private collection of Sweden's largest bank.

Almost immediately, tensions arose between Johan and the anthroposophist majority of the board. Their disagreements concerned the question of how and where to show the sprawling collection of drawings and paintings. The anthroposophists wanted the work to be displayed in what would be a new, specially designed building forty-five minutes from Stockholm, in Ytterjärna, where the country's Anthroposophical Society is centered. Johan strongly objected. After reading some of Hilma's writing, he felt that he had gained an entirely new perspective; he now saw her as a mystic and her work primarily as a spiritual message. The society's suggestion, he said, did not align with Hilma's own wishes.

In 2010, without consulting anyone in the family, Anders Kumlander, a board member and a former secretary-general of the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden, wrote a letter to the administrative authority that regulates nonprofits and foundations, outlining plans to sell off a selection of af Klint works in order to finance the construction of a museum. When Johan found out about this, he felt that the anthroposophist board members wanted to benefit from af Klint's name. "Hilma," he said, "was not there to save the Anthroposophical Society." Not long afterward, he conducted a series of meetings of his own, proposing that the collection be donated to the Swedish state, where it could be housed at Moderna Museet.

Neither side's efforts were successful. The board initiated legal proceedings to remove Johan as chair; Johan, in turn, tried to remove Kumlander. Leadership of the board changed, then changed again, and plans for the museum collapsed. The very purpose of the foundation became a kind of ontological puzzle. Was it an art-historical trust meant to help disseminate creative works or was it a

religious one meant to protect and propagate a spiritual mission? A similar question could be asked of af Klint's paintings themselves: Were they representations or revelations?

Every year, beginning around Easter, Almqvist and his partner of three decades, Viveca Ax:son Johnson, decamp from their apartment, in central Stockholm, to an Art Nouveau manor near the Baltic Sea. Ax:son Johnson, whose family's fortune is one of the largest in Sweden—her great-grandfather, a shipping magnate, broke the international coffee monopoly at the turn of the twentieth century—drives into the city a few times a week for business meetings. Almqvist spends much of his time on the five-hundred-acre property, where, from the window of his study, he can monitor a grazing herd of Highland cattle.

It was here, during the *Covid* lockdown, that Almqvist first read af Klint's journals, which comprise twenty-six thousand pages. He had recently been invited to join the board of the Hilma af Klint Foundation and wanted to understand the intricacies of its rules. To determine whether they corresponded to af Klint's wishes, Almqvist decided to read the notebooks in full, which few had ever done.



"You do eight years undercover as a pot plant and they decide to legalize it."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Soon, he understood why. The task, which took two years, was disorienting and fundamentally unpleasant. The notebooks were filled with evasions, contradictions, abstractions, abrupt tense shifts, and unattributed dialogue. “It was extremely difficult not to get irritated,” Almqvist said.

Until then, most of what Almqvist knew of af Klint’s biography derived from what had been, for decades, the most complete account of her life: a short text written by Erik af Klint, marked “confidential,” and distributed to about a dozen people in 1967. Aside from a few vivid details—her vegetarian diet, the silver necklace strung permanently around her throat—Erik’s portrait of Hilma resembles that of a martyr. Her most defining feature, he wrote, was “the purity and moral highness she radiated.” Hilma, in his eyes, was delivering a message from a higher world which nobody was willing to hear, not unlike “how Christ’s message was once received by humankind.”

Almqvist told me, skeptically, “It was probably written in order to convince his relatives that Hilma af Klint was something worth taking notice of.”

He thought that the notebooks gave a quite different impression than the one Erik had spread. Almqvist began listing adjectives to describe af Klint as she came across to him in the journals: “aggressive,” “self-determined,” “daunting.” She lacked empathy, he said. She was not generous, she was not sentimental, she was not very sympathetic generally. She was a fanatic. Her fervor sometimes read as paranoia or grandiosity; she was suspicious even of the friends who shared her esoteric pursuits. Her well-being, she wrote, “depends on how well you manage to detach yourself from your invisible enemies. They are everywhere and . . . able to insinuate themselves into your thoughts.” She accused one friend of being a “parasite” and of possessing “arrogant perception.”

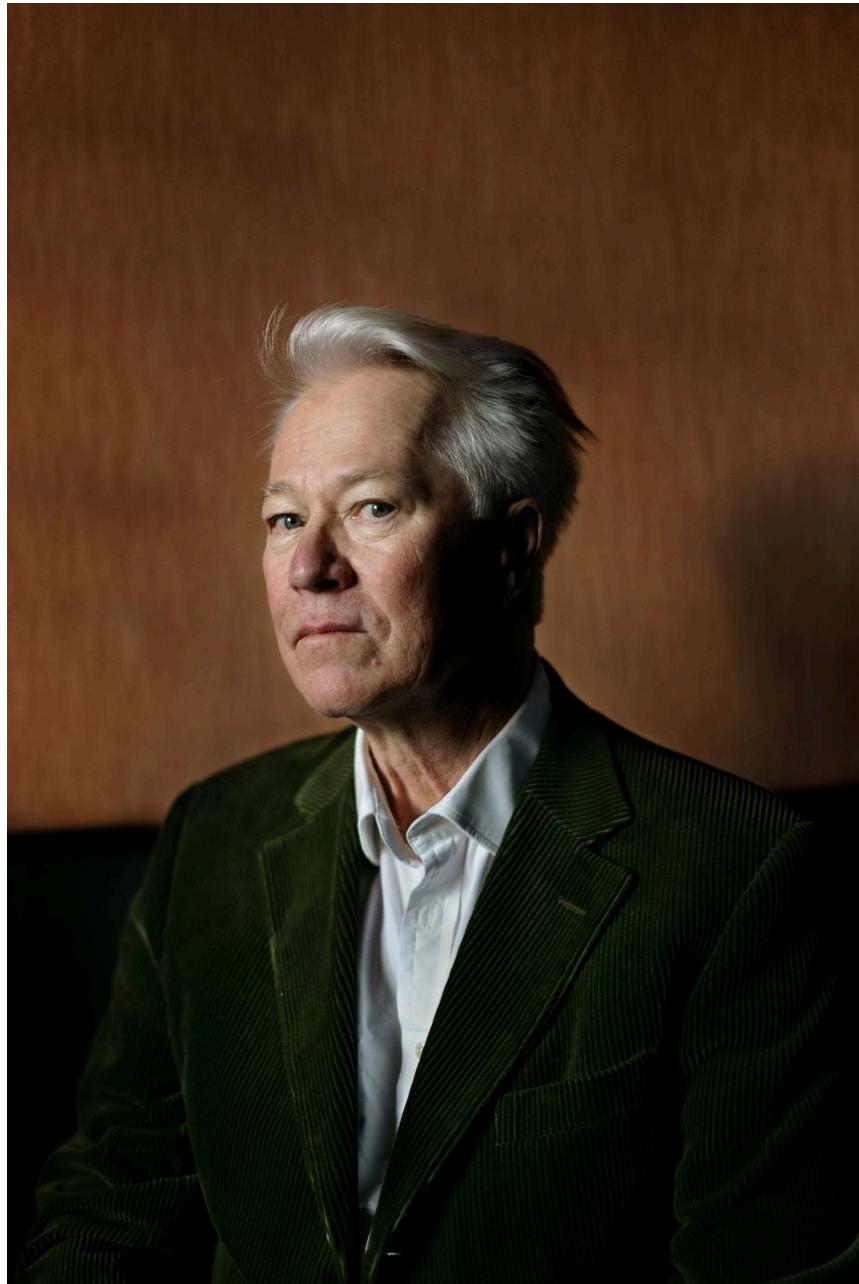
For Almqvist, what began as ambivalence toward af Klint's personality became a kind of compulsive determination to seek out further evidence that the legend of Hilma af Klint—which he had helped to spread—was essentially false. This past spring, I visited Almqvist at his home by the Baltic. He had assembled reams of research material in the wood-panelled library, transforming it into a kind of war room. A vast larch table served as his command post, its surface an armory of letters, photographs, clippings, books, and annotated documents. “Here you can see how the myth was made!” he announced, as he showed me into the room.

The scholarly consensus that af Klint chose to live a simple, ascetic life had downplayed her financial security, according to Almqvist. He found an estate inventory from after her death showing that she had had substantial savings, and he believes that she would have received her mother’s widow’s pension. Her sexuality, he argued, has been under-covered. He has assembled ample archival evidence indicating that she had multiple romantic and sexual relationships with women in the course of many decades. A gymnastics instructor who lodged with af Klint for years wrote in her diary of sharing a bed with her and kissing her. af Klint, who showed some support for women’s rights, has been embraced as a feminist. “It depends how you define the term, of course,” Almqvist said. “But I would define it as being part of some sort of intellectual or collective movement at the time, and she wasn’t.” He laughed. “Despite having ample opportunity,” he added, a reference to her sister, who was a suffragist. He mentioned a recent doctoral dissertation that argued af Klint’s paintings were a commentary on women’s domestic labor and laughed again. The author did not know Swedish, and, he claimed, had misattributed Biblical metaphors about wheat and yeast to af Klint’s own life.

Such corrections—and the cross-checked dates, disputed quotations, and reexamined footnotes on which they depend—make up a book that Almqvist is writing, which exceeds five

hundred pages and which he talks about with an odd combination of ambition and modesty.

But, unlike many of the rabbit holes into which Almqvist has been burrowing, there was one question whose implications extended beyond historical revisionism: Was af Klint an anthroposophist? Erik, in his 1967 document, wrote that she was “deeply moved” by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and “to a great extent influenced by the world of ideas of Anthroposophy.” Johan, his son, considers the latter a misreading: although she was a member of the society, he said, she was not an ardent believer. In the afterword he contributed to Voss’s biography, he claimed that she had eventually turned away from the group.



Kurt Almqvist is writing a book that claims that the legend of Hilma af Klint—which he helped to spread—was essentially false.
Photograph by Åsa Sjöström

“I really wanted to see,” Almqvist told me, “did she deviate from that belief system or not?” The answer would affect not only the interpretation of af Klint’s work but also how the foundation established in her name would manage it going forward. If she was not an anthroposophist, the very organization of the board was faulty, and af Klint’s family might have grounds on which to claim greater control.

In the spring of 2021, Almqvist drove to Ytterjärna. From the highway, he could see the Anthroposophical Society's cultural center, a massive violet structure with multiple protrusions and a barrel-vaulted roof which squats on the landscape like a grounded spacecraft. When Almqvist was in high school, his mother became an anthroposophist; if not for this, he said, he doubted that he'd be capable of understanding anything about the belief system. "They call what they are doing 'spiritual science,'" Almqvist said, sighing. "A friend of mine has been 'researching' the color orange for forty years. What does this mean? It means he paints in orange." He laughed. "Making clear distinctions is just not a part of anthroposophical culture." He turned onto a dirt road edged with irregularly undulating hedges, reverently trimmed to avoid right angles, and continued through biodynamic farmland dotted with some twenty structures: a clinic, a mill, a school, each painted a different color of the rainbow. Many of the people he encountered were dressed in purple.

Eventually, in a hidden vault, Almqvist discovered proof that af Klint had joined the Anthroposophical Society on October 12, 1920, and remained a member for the rest of her life. The discovery came as little more than corroboration of what he already suspected to be true, and, he thought, it undermined the claims of her heirs. Back in Stockholm, a few days later, though, he received a call from Ytterjärna: More material had been found. Would he like to see it?

When Almqvist returned to the Anthroposophical Society, he was led down a narrow hallway. At the end, there was a ladder leaning against a wall. He climbed up to a dim annex. In a corner sat a box woven from birch bark and tied with a blue tag labelled "Anna Cassel" in a neat black script. Almqvist knew the name—Cassel had been a member of the Five, and, according to his reading of af Klint's notebooks, her lover. He opened the box. Inside were about sixty notebooks. He asked for permission to bring them home.

For the next few years, Almqvist read and reread Cassel's journals. "It was like opening a door," he said. "The light came in, and you could suddenly see things in perspective." The journals made Almqvist begin to doubt the veracity of Hilma's account of her own artistic and spiritual practice, which made her out to be a leader of her friends, with a unique relationship to higher intelligences. In the late twenties, Hilma had deliberately destroyed writings from the period during which she created her most ambitious works. The reason, Almqvist thought, was "very simple": the paintings had not been made by Hilma alone. They were, in fact, a collaborative effort with her esoterically inclined friends, most significantly Anna Cassel.

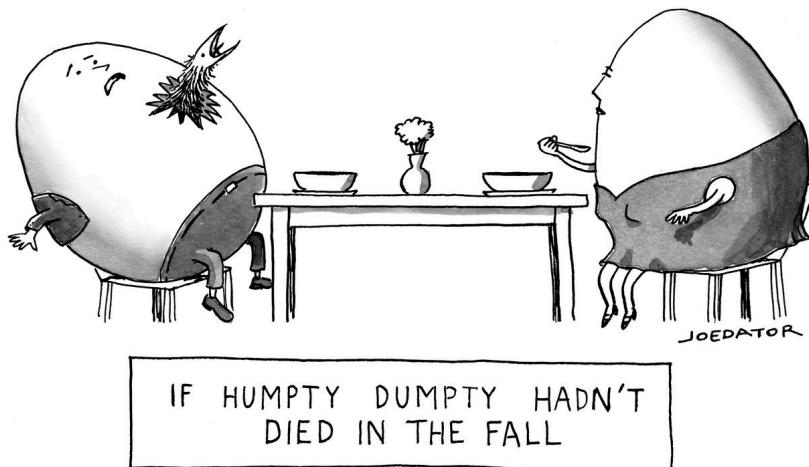
The revelation, if true, unsettled the foundation of af Klint's legacy. No longer could she be considered a sole conduit through which higher powers channelled their way onto canvas. She was one of many, engaged in a collaborative act of creation, with all the logistical and interpersonal friction such endeavors inevitably involve.

In 2023, Almqvist and Daniel Birnbaum, a former director of Moderna Museet, edited "The Saga of the Rose," a lavish monograph devoted to Cassel. Tucked amid its reproductions and archival materials was an essay by Hedvig Martin, a Swedish historian, whose findings mirrored Almqvist's.

In the essay, Martin maintained that "The Paintings for the Temple," a series that's considered af Klint's magnum opus, "did not derive from the efforts of a single artist, but was rather the product of collaboration between af Klint and her friends"—Cassel, but also other women in the Five and, later, more still. *Artforum* called the revelation "astonishing," and suggested that "af Klint scholarship is on the brink of some radical changes regarding attribution and authorship."

Almqvist, whose nonprofit partly funded Martin’s graduate studies, gave me her contact information but warned that it might be difficult to get in touch with her. He said that she was living in “some sort of hut in Dalarna,” a rural province known for its traditional crafts and vernacular architecture. The truth turned out to be less romantic: Martin lived in an ordinary cottage, with high-speed internet, and she was quick to reply to my e-mails and to arrange a Zoom meeting. “*I am in the forest?*” she said, to help explain the rumor of her inaccessibility.

Martin told me that she had suspected Cassel’s involvement for years. “But I was too young and too insecure to make any large assumptions,” she said. By 2020, she felt better prepared to investigate the matter. She was living in Amsterdam, working on her dissertation, during the pandemic. Quarantine so closely resembled her ordinary life as a graduate student that she hardly noticed her confinement.



Joe Dator

For a few weeks, Martin devoted herself to the series “Primordial Chaos,” which marks the beginning of “The Paintings for the Temple.” The vertically oriented compositions share a palette of blues, greens, and yellows. Frenzied shapes—sparks, ribbons, spirals, glyphs, shadowy crosses, serpents—float among them through an undefined ether, as if transmitting cryptic information.

On New Year's Day, 1906, when af Klint was forty-three, she received her first major commission from the higher beings. The message came to her through an intermediary spirit named Amaliel. Her assignment, to which she was to devote a year, was, she recorded in her journal that day, to depict "the immortal aspect of man" and paint "a message to humanity."

Martin gave herself the task of cross-referencing each journal entry from 1906 and 1907 with the art works made during those years. She went chronologically. The twenty-six paintings of "Primordial Chaos" began as drawings, and there were many more drawings than were ever turned into paintings. "It was, like, O.K., she's talking about this drawing here or that painting there, and, well, which one is it?" Martin groaned at the memory. "So I just went through everything very carefully, and when you put everything in order and make it match, you discover that Cassel is credited as the author of some of the paintings. And that was it, basically."

Of the drawing that would become No. 10 of the series—a dense schema of symbols which looks something like a cuneiform tablet—af Klint wrote, "A[nna] was instructed to paint it in such a way that she tried to imagine the colour." Of the drawing that would become No. 15 of the series—a peachy orb centered in an expanse of green—she wrote, "A[nna] may perform this, be passive."

From such correlations, Martin was able to discern stylistic differences between the two women and identify Cassel's contributions with some confidence. af Klint's brushwork was, she wrote, "notably drier and more expressive," and Cassel's was "thicker and smoother." Martin hypothesized that af Klint was responsible for about twelve of the paintings in the series, and Cassel for about fourteen. "It was not just that they channelled messages together or had ideas about some sort of collaboration—they actually collaborated," Martin told me.

In the sprawling, nearly incomprehensible cache of writing, these attributions—“A shall paint, H sketch”—are some of the most straightforward bits of text. Why hadn’t anyone else made anything of them before? “People claim they’ve read the notebooks, but they haven’t always,” Martin said.

Martin admitted that her work was “not very fun always.” af Klint, she went on, had become “such a darling.” The revised story that Martin has been attempting to tell about her life and work is a less appealing one. “People can be a bit upset when I write about the co-creators,” she said. “They say, ‘Male artists all had assistants! Why is this even important to bring up?’ And my feeling is that it’s important because it’s the truth.”

A few days before Martin’s research was published in “The Saga of the Rose,” Johan sent her an e-mail about her contribution to the book, which he had read an advance copy of. (He also sent Almqvist a detailed memo, with twenty-seven points of contention.) The e-mail opened in a courtly and complimentary manner, but it ended by arguing that, though af Klint may have “occasionally received help . . . this does NOT mean that Hilma af Klint was not the person who, through her good contacts with the spirits, was central to the creation of the works.” It was af Klint and af Klint alone, Johan went on, who “developed the new forms, images, symbols, texts, etc.” The letter ends with a plea: “I ask you from the bottom of my heart, do not exaggerate the involvement of Anna Cassel and the other women—to the detriment of Hilma af Klint.”

It had been twelve years since Johan first became directly involved in the maintenance of his great-aunt’s legacy. Initially, he had made every attempt to popularize her work, but he had come to think of some of those efforts with regret. He began working on a book of his own, using the phrase “symbolic works” to refer to af Klint’s paintings and lamenting that they had ever been called art. They were precise representations of what she visualized in the astral

plane, he wrote—labelling them “abstract” was a kind of blasphemy. Johan, though no longer on the board of the foundation, still felt himself to be her protector against those who threatened to dilute her spiritual message and those who sought to profit from it.

Allegedly, there had been multiple attempts. In 2020, Kumlander, the influential anthroposophist, purchased one of two sets of “Tree of Knowledge”—eight watercolors that af Klint painted between 1913 and 1915—from an anthroposophical institution in Switzerland, reportedly claiming that he was acting on behalf of the prospective af Klint museum in Sweden. (Kumlander denies misrepresenting his role.) But, by the fall of 2021, the series was in New York City, hanging on the walls of David Zwirner’s Upper East Side gallery. The paintings had been consigned by a private entity. That winter, Zwirner, one of the most prestigious and powerful gallerists in the world, announced that the series had been sold to a private museum outside Washington, D.C. The board members of the Swiss institution later wrote Kumlander a letter expressing their sense of betrayal: they’d believed that they had sold the works to an “anthroposophical friend” who was acquiring the series on behalf of a like-minded institution. The transaction, they wrote, was a “mockery” and a “slap in the face.” The letter ended with a request for a donation.

The following year, Zwirner travelled to Stockholm. He had been invited to attend a meeting of the board—including the new chairman, Johan’s nephew Erik—to discuss the terms of a contract that would make him the foundation’s official gallerist. Erik, however, disapproved of the partnership, and postponed the meeting. A few days later, he leaked details of the thwarted meeting to the *Guardian*, saying that the deal—which he called a “plundering” and a “hostile takeover”—was in violation of the foundation’s statutes. Zwirner claimed that the charges were “absurd.”

Another profit-seeking scheme sounded like the sort of dream that dissolves completely by morning—a clutter of acronyms and proper nouns and improbable alliances. Acute Art, a London-based virtual-reality company directed by Birnbaum—the former director of Moderna Museet and, for a time, a board member of the foundation—created digital versions of works from “The Paintings for the Temple” in conjunction with Stolpe, a publishing company affiliated with the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit. They would be auctioned off as non-fungible tokens on a digital platform launched by the musician Pharrell Williams. Promotional language promised collectors that purchasing one of the N.F.T.s would make it possible to “secure your piece of history.” Birnbaum said that the proceeds from the sale would go to the foundation, which would also receive a complete set of the N.F.T.s. Although Birnbaum speaks of N.F.T.s dismissively—a “fashionable little silly thing” he called them, in a conversation with me—at the time he described the endeavor in lofty terms, telling a reporter that af Klint’s series could now “be owned by people all over the world.”

The af Klint family was outraged: this was shameless and sloppy commercialization. Ulrika af Klint, Johan’s niece, who preceded Erik as the foundation’s chair, claims that the board had not properly authorized the project, and that the full proceeds never reached the foundation. (Almqvist and Birnbaum disagree.) Another family member took to Twitter, demanding that the N.F.T.s be cancelled, and told a reporter that the paintings were never meant for anyone to own. A few months later, after Ulrika stepped down and Erik replaced her, he asked for an inquiry and filed a police report about the other board members and the C.E.O. of the foundation, accusing them of collaborating on deals that would enrich them, not the foundation. (The inquiry was eventually dismissed.)

In March, a couple of months before I arrived in Sweden, a story about the ongoing fracas at the foundation was published in the

country's largest newspaper, under the headline "*Hilma af Klint's art could be hidden from public view—in a temple.*" It was illustrated with a moody black-and-white portrait of Erik, who had recently filed a petition in court, seeking once more to have the board members removed, this time arguing that they had neglected their duties. He claimed that af Klint's paintings were never meant to be publicly displayed, and that every attempt to disseminate them—books, exhibitions, merchandise—was a violation not just of Hilma's wishes but of the Swedish Foundation Act, which legally governs how nonprofits are run. In the context of af Klint's work, he believed, the very act of curation was akin to the profane use of a sacred object. Enforcing the foundation's statute that the work be available only to spiritual seekers was of paramount importance, he declared; and any engagement should be rooted in the artist's esoteric Christianity. "It must be a spiritual seeking in line with Hilma's," he told the reporter. "It cannot be spiritual seeking in the way of a Muslim or a Hindu."

Erik is a rheumatologist by training and a devout Christian by conviction. In the fall of 2023, to offset the costs of litigation, he sold his large apartment in a tony part of Stockholm and moved to a small one on the city's outskirts. I visited him there, this spring; he had prepared tea, and his wife, Michelle, was baking shortbread. There was no evidence of af Klint inside the house. On one wall was an oil painting of a ship, artist unknown. Erik told me that he found the composition majestic. "There's no message in it," he said. "So it's not threatening." af Klint was a different story: "She sacrificed everything for her"—he paused, unsure of how to end the sentence—"work."

Erik described chairing the Hilma af Klint Foundation as something of a burden, one that he resisted for years. He now sees it as his responsibility to "put the camp in order," he said. He compared the idea of selling af Klint's work to the hypothetical selling off of the Gospels. "Let's sell the Gospel of John!" he bellowed in a mock-menacing tone. He laughed.



Johan af Klint, Hilma's grandnephew, felt himself to be her protector against those who threatened to dilute her spiritual message and those who sought to profit from it.

Photograph by Åsa Sjöström

He walked to a corner of the living room and extracted a volume of af Klint's seven-part catalogue raisonné, which was published in 2022, by Stolpe. He opened the book to "Primordial Chaos." "So this has to do with the beginning of the world," he said. He flipped to another page and pointed out various forms and figures: "Here's a woman, a man, and there's something else there—what could it be? Hmm, interesting." He turned the page. "Here's a cross, a spiral, and here are more crosses. There's blood. There's a heart. There's shame and also sadness. . . . There's a lot of strange

things.” He flipped the page again, and pointed out a white bird. “So what’s happening with the dove?” he asked.

I said it looked as though it was falling from the sky. A little desperate, I added that perhaps the vague shape in the upper part of the painting was God’s hand. “Yes!” he said. “Absolutely!”

The dove, he went on, was Christ. “God broke his wings so that he would come to earth!”

Erik continued to flip through the pages while quoting from Genesis. He sighed. “I’m just saying that there are things here to interpret if you want, and no one is doing it.” He believed that the paintings were not meant to be viewed as isolated works of art, as they are often exhibited in museums, and that their sequencing was crucial to their message. Viewing them out of context, he said, was like removing chapters of a book and expecting the story to retain its sense.

The sound of a dish rattling echoed from the kitchen, where Michelle was still puttering.

Erik joked, “Michelle, sometimes she asks me, Erik, do you have a mistress? Is her name Hilma?”

They both laughed.

“Erik has the energy,” Michelle said.

“And my wife has the forgiveness,” Erik added. “We both believe that truth will always come. It’s just a matter of when and how. But it will.”

The court had denied Erik’s request to remove the foundation’s other board members immediately, pending a final decision, which is expected next year. But the oversight agency opened a review, which is still ongoing, into whether the foundation’s various

agreements complied with its statutes. In August, Anders Kumlander resigned from the board, citing poor health.

More than a century after making “The Paintings for the Temple,” Hilma af Klint remains largely absent from the marketplace: her most significant works are held by the foundation and cannot be sold under its statutes. Yet her presence in museums and popular culture has hardly diminished since the 2013 Moderna Museet show. In 2023, Tate Modern mounted “Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life,” and there have been exhibitions in Tokyo and Bilbao and Düsseldorf and the Hague; two more will open next year, in Dublin and in Paris. When, this past spring, MoMA mounted a show of forty-six of her botanical illustrations—decidedly minor works, self-described “studies”—the galleries were packed for months. Her story remains fractured—saint, prophet, brand, fabulist—but her status as one of modernism’s most disruptive figures is secure.

Typically, when art circulates, it produces a ledger: sales, contracts, loans, dollar figures. But the story of Hilma af Klint lacks the blunt clarity of balance sheets, and her afterlife suggests that money, far from debasing art, is what pins it to the world. “There are no institutions or collectors with financial interests really lobbying for her,” Voss, the biographer, said. Without ever being converted into a dollar figure, the work has been left suspended and endlessly interpretable. “This is not typical. It’s quite bizarre,” Voss said. To Anna Maria Bernitz, a Swedish art historian who is working on a book about the foundation’s internal struggles, the fact that the paintings cannot be bought only enhances their allure. “If you are rich and powerful, what would you like to have? You would like to have the impossible-to-have painting,” she told me.

“This is work that really touches people, that actually has upended a previous reading of art history, that’s loaned out to the most important museums in the world,” David Zwirner told me. I asked him if there were any comparable situations, and he thought for a

moment: “I mean, maybe van Gogh, in the sense he didn’t really sell work within his lifetime? But no, no. There’s nothing else like it.”

Then, there is the matter of af Klint’s collaborators, whose names are known but who remain as obscure as af Klint once was. One of the largest private collections of Anna Cassel’s paintings is housed in an unassuming apartment on the outskirts of Stockholm which belongs to Marie Cassel, Anna’s seventy-three-year-old grandniece. Books on af Klint line the foyer, and the living room is outfitted with immense pieces of antique furniture that originally furnished a larger Cassel family home. The art collection—mostly landscapes—hangs in the bedroom. “I was brought up with these paintings,” Marie said, as we crossed the threshold, gesturing at a small, sober composition depicting a cluster of cabins.

She grew up knowing about her great-aunt’s art—it hung everywhere—but she did not think much about its creator until the early nineties, when the last of her older family members died and she came into possession of a collection of work she knew little about.

“I have a sorrow in me,” Marie said. “I want to resurrect the contributions of Anna and the other women. I think it’s very unfair that you can just drive over a person.” But she understood the resistance: “The whole narrative about Hilma is built upon this notion of one person’s perfect ideas. I think it’s a shame that this story is so cemented, but I think it will never change—people are so in love with it.” Marie, who flew to New York City in 2018 for the Guggenheim opening, said she arrived feeling “like a cat who had dragged in a dead animal.” Nobody, she knows, wants to hear a good story dismantled.

Throughout the morning, Marie cycled through polite outrage and weary resignation. It would be a great thing if both women’s works could be fully analyzed to determine exactly who contributed what,

but in the meantime she was not going to “waste” her life on it, she said. “Why should I be angry? These women did this—hooray.” ♦

Alice Gregory has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2013.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/the-strange-afterlife-of-hilma-af-klint-paintings-posthumous-star>

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Takes

- **[Hanif Abdurraqib on Ellen Willis's Review of Elvis in Las Vegas](#)**

The magazine's first pop-music critic was never afraid to be overtaken by unexpected delight, even if it came at the expense of some preexisting skepticism.

Takes

Hanif Abdurraqib on Ellen Willis's Review of Elvis in Las Vegas



By [Hanif Abdurraqib](#)

November 16, 2025

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August 30, 1969

I have very little interest in Elvis Presley's music, and I have even less interest in the mythology of Elvis as a Towering Figure in American Music. What I am abundantly interested in is

resurrection, which means there are corners of the Elvis narrative that, when well illuminated, I find myself hovering over with fascination, or a kind of morbid pleasure. Ellen Willis's 1969 review of an Elvis concert, the singer's first in nine years, drew me right in.

There is no single thing that makes a writer like Willis great, but what makes her work compelling, and what most informs my own writing, is that Willis—*The New Yorker*'s first pop-music critic—was never afraid to be overtaken by unexpected delight, even if it came at the expense of some preexisting skepticism. Those two traits—skepticism and the potential for pleasure—exist at the intersection of Las Vegas and Elvis, especially during the summer of 1969. Elvis was not yet the sweat-drenched singer laboring through the hotel residencies of the subsequent decade, sluggishly dragging himself along for the sake of a paycheck.

The Elvis whom Willis witnessed was, in fact, a man resurrected, not from the dead but from a long stretch of dissatisfaction with his own career path, which had led to film roles and soundtrack recordings and away, largely, from the stage. The previous year had marked a turnaround: there was the triumph of his comeback special, which was shot in June and aired in December. But to prove that he was *fully* back would require conquering Las Vegas, a place that was, at the time, “more like Hollywood than Hollywood,” Willis wrote.

There's a striking moment in her piece, a sort of mini-twist, when you can sense Willis's mode of observation shift from bewilderment to something that reads as genuine fascination, bordering on outright enjoyment. It happens after Elvis arrives onstage, when Willis takes him in for the first time. She's amazed by his new, slimmer physique (“sexy, totally alert”), but also puzzled by his hair, dyed black and no longer slicked into the famous ducktail. Her confusion gives way to a sense of wonder when she realizes that, despite his efforts to look younger, he's not

interested in performing as he did in his youth. She marvels at his playfulness, becomes fixated on his earnestness; she writes, of his performance of “In the Ghetto,” that “for the first time, I saw it as representing a white Southern boy’s feeling for black music, with all that that implied.” Although Willis herself was only twenty-seven—the magazine had hired her the previous year—she appreciated his maturation. “He knew better than to try to be nineteen again,” she notes. “He had quite enough to offer at thirty-three.”

Willis’s Elvis column embodies one of her central gifts: her ability to walk you through an unfamiliar tunnel and lead you out the other side, into a bracing light, as surprised as she is that the destination looks the way it does. That this piece is not especially long causes the aforementioned twist to land even more forcefully. This is a writer saying, “We don’t have much time, and I’m not trying to change your mind, but I’m allowing you to witness how I was moved from one place to another.”

Reading Willis’s review of Elvis as he is shocked back to life reminded me that my interest in the singer goes beyond resurrection. Elvis was among the earliest of what I think of as the blank-slate pop stars, a lineage of performers, encompassing more recent figures such as Taylor Swift, who are so infused with meaning, for so many, that they become a stand-in for grand emotions and concepts whether they believe in them or not. What fuelled Elvis’s stardom was that he could contain all the projections at once, and even cultivate them. It takes a sharp critical eye to capture an artist like that, to write not about what he *means* but about what he is doing. That work isn’t about stripping away the romance of a performer’s appeal. On the contrary, I find it deeply romantic. Willis gave herself over to the spectacle of an Elvis who was not yet finished, an artist who remained as alive as he’d ever been. ♦

Read the original story.



Viva Las Vegas: Elvis Returns to the Stage

The King's first concert at the International Hotel.

Hanif Abdurraqib is a contributing writer for *The New Yorker*, from the east side of Columbus, Ohio.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/hanif-abdurraqib-on-ellen-willis-elvis-review>

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[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Effigies of Me

By [Jack Handey](#)

November 17, 2025

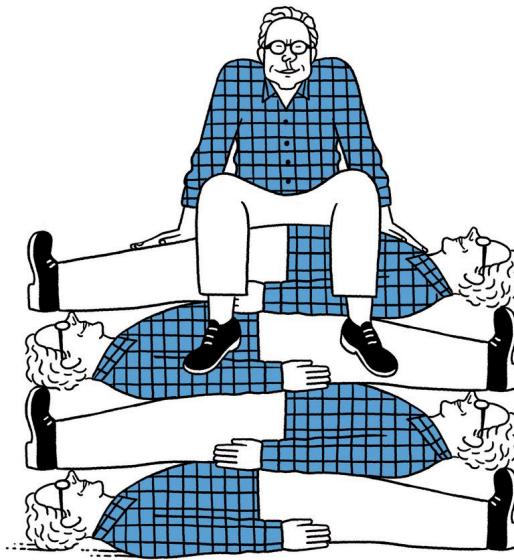


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

There is a big demand these days for effigies of me, and I'm happy to report that we now offer two different versions for purchase.

The first is the standard, "classic" effigy of me, suitable for hanging from a tree limb or a scaffold. This effigy can also be dragged behind a horse. It is durable enough to withstand at least ten hangings or five horse-draggings. The classic effigy comes with a free hangman's noose or lasso.

The second effigy of me is designed for burning at the stake. Of course, this effigy can be used only once, but it has a hardwood skeleton, which burns more slowly than the cloth-and-paper "flesh."

We are pleased to announce the addition of a new feature: an embedded audio recording of my actual voice, telling the onlookers that I curse them and will see them in Hell.

My creative team is also working on completely new effigies of me. One idea is to stuff the effigy with some sort of bait, so that it will be attacked by sharks. The effigy would be pulled through the water by a fishing line, and the arms would flop as if swimming. We are trying to figure out a way to delay the shark attack until the effigy is just about to reach the safety of shore.

Another idea is to have someone push the effigy of me off a cliff. It tumbles down and down, finally rolling to a stop, and then, for some reason, explodes.

Still another idea is to have kids shoot arrows at the effigy, and somehow have it flinch whenever one hits.

We will continue to research and refine these ideas.

Meanwhile, some proposals for effigies of me have been dropped, such as having my effigy choke on a piece of meat and then fall over dead. Our test group was not excited by this one. The reaction was better if I turned blue before keeling over, but not good enough.

Responses were mixed to having an elephant step on my head, which would then burst open and gush out a delicious yellow pudding. Spoons would be provided.

Me covered with ants went nowhere.

Some customers question the idea of paying money to the very same person they're hanging or burning. To them I say that we make the very best effigies of me. Each one is stuffed with the finest French rags and rare old newspapers—some even collectible.

The eyeglasses, which pop and melt when my effigy is burned, are made to have the same exact prescription as mine.

Ask yourself, Do I really want to show up at an anti-Jack rally with a cheap-looking, homemade effigy? Or with one of the many foreign-made effigies, which fall apart at the first hanging or emit dangerous toxins when burned? Our effigies of me are proudly made right here in America (although the heads are made in China).

Some people want my effigy factory shut down. Fine, but that would mean I'd have to lay off our nearly two hundred workers, including the children. And close down the tent city where most of the workers live.

For now, business is humming. Our busy Christmas season is approaching, and, of course, we sell a lot of effigies of me on my birthday. We are thinking of adding a new service that writes angry letters to me.

One day, inevitably, the demand for effigies of me will decline, and that's when I will put them on sale. I might even have a clearance sale where "All of Me Must Go!"

Until then, I just hope that when you're hanging me or burning me or dragging me behind a horse, you stop and think, Maybe he's a horrible, horrible person, but he sure makes a damn fine effigy of himself.

(Prices of the effigies of me are available upon request.) ♦

Jack Handey has written for The New Yorker since 1987. His series of one-liners, "Deep Thoughts," has been featured on "Saturday Night Live." His books include "My Funny Cowboy Dance."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/effigies-of-me>

Fiction

• “**Lara’s Theme**”

Buried within every family, perhaps, is the secret desire to self-destruct, to push intimacy to its ugliest extremes.

[Fiction](#)

Lara's Theme

By [Madhuri Vijay](#)

November 16, 2025



Illustration by Anagh Banerjee

That year, my mother was taking French lessons at the Alliance Française in Bangalore, and she claimed that her teacher had been impressed with her from the start.

“Madame Aurélie says I have a natural ear,” she announced one evening.

“Wonderful,” my father, an architect, said, not looking up from the plans he had spread across the dining table. Tarun, my sixteen-year-old brother, and I were at the table, too, wrapping our notebooks in brown paper. Summer was over; on Monday, we’d return to school.

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

I must have said something similarly vague and admiring. But Tarun said only, “Denim.”

“What?” I asked.

“*De Nîmes*. Means ‘from Nîmes.’ Well, technically, it’s *serge de Nîmes*, which was a type of cloth from there. Anyway, it’s French.”

Nobody asked how he knew this. Tarun was the brilliant one in our family, always first in his class, though he appeared never to study. I was three years younger, and my parents silently rejoiced if I brought home anything over a sixty per cent.

“That’s right,” my mother said, aligning herself with Tarun as usual. “English has lots of French words. Aurélie gave us a list.”

“English has lots of Indian words, too,” my father said.

“Not as many as French,” she declared, but I saw her glance at Tarun for confirmation.

“Bungalow,” my father countered. “Catamaran. Cummerbund.”

“Toddy,” Tarun added helpfully. “Ganja.”

“Tarun,” my father warned.

“Just saying. We have all the good ones.” Tarun tossed aside a notebook with a flourish. My father smiled and returned to his plans.

“Anyway,” my mother said uncertainly. Since I was the only one still listening, she addressed me: “Aurélie says if I keep it up, I’ll become fluent. Can you imagine, Kushal? Me, fluent in French?” She giggled. “I must be crazy.”

•

Nobody believed that my mother would keep it up. French was just the latest in a long line of hobbies, none of which had lasted more than six months. Before French, there had been Tanjore painting, bonsai, orchids, and, for three unfortunate weeks, horseback riding.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Madhuri Vijay read “Lara’s Theme.”](#)

Each of her passions ran the same course. A flowering of enthusiasm was followed by a period of monkish devotion, during which our house filled with the paraphernalia of her pursuit: clippers and tortured shrubs; gold foil and pots of flesh-colored clay; orchids flaunting their shameless centers. But sooner or later she descended into boredom and impatience, and, one morning, Tarun and I would wake to find the house scrubbed of all signs of the recent hobby, as though the clippers and clay-caked brushes were painful evidence of a former lover which needed to be quickly erased. For a while after that, our mother would be subdued, confining herself to household chores. Then something else would catch her interest, and the cycle would begin anew: the bloom of love, the roar, the fall. And beneath it, like a subterranean stream, ran the refrain, the murmured self-reproach, “I must be crazy.”

Crazy. My mother’s deepest hope covering her darkest fear. Her only way of indicating that she was not like every other housewife of her class and station, packing her kids’ lunches and grousing about her husband. *I must be crazy.* Not even Tarun dared to disagree.

•

Tarun and I weren't close as brothers. At home, it was usually my mother and Tarun joking around, my father amiably playing the straight man, and me watching. A born fence-sitter, Tarun called me. "How's the bum, Kushal?" he'd ask out of nowhere. "Need an ice pack?"

At school, our paths rarely crossed, though stories floated down the corridors to me: how he'd bested the Hindi teacher with the garish ties or pulled some genius prank. His classmates mostly adored him; those who didn't were discreet about it. Older girls occasionally cornered me on the playground, ruffling my hair and calling me silly names. I suffered their attentions, but I never did what they wanted, which was to mention them to Tarun. As far as I knew, despite his popularity, he'd never had a girlfriend.

At the end of each year, the students in the class below his were desperate to acquire his notebooks, as if they contained a special essence that others might absorb. Tarun laughed at this and, to their horror, gave his books to the *kabadi-wallah* for recycling. "Oh, please," I heard him say to more than one supplicant. "If you want notes, ask that Kavitha. She copies down everything, even the teachers' farts."

Kavitha was a girl in his class, tall and pale, with waist-length braids and a grumpy manner. It was rumored that her father made her study six hours a day, but she still came in second to Tarun. I sometimes saw her during lunch, sitting outside the cycle shed, her head bent over a textbook, alone.

The only activity Tarun and I shared was a bit odd. After dinner, we'd hang out on our rooftop terrace, the bare concrete slab where our mother had once made a short-lived attempt at beekeeping. Most of the time, we'd sit around, not talking, but one day I found Tarun up there wearing a black motorcycle helmet. Our family

didn't own a motorcycle. He kept lowering and raising the visor, each time pulling a different face. It made me laugh, and, after that, the helmet started to appear regularly. Then came the night when he said, "Hit me."

"What?" I asked.

"Let's see how strong you are."

I nudged the helmet. "Harder," Tarun's muffled voice said. I obeyed. His head barely moved.

"That's it?" he said, mocking me.

I hit him so hard my palm stung.

He flipped the visor up, grinning. "Not bad, Kushal."

Soon it became our ritual, albeit one we never mentioned to our parents. Once or twice a week, we'd go up to the terrace, Tarun would wear the helmet, and I'd hit him until my arm was numb.

•

Unlike my mother, my father had no hobbies. I liked this about him. A man without shadows, that was how I saw him. But, two months after my mother took up French, a mysterious package arrived for him from abroad. He leapt upon it, ripping back the cardboard to reveal a slim burgundy case. He raised the lid, and, over his shoulder, we saw the glitter of gold.

It was an alto saxophone, he explained. And then he told us a story I'd never heard before. As children, my father and his three older brothers had been allowed by my grandfather, a famously strict man, to play any musical instrument they wanted, so long as they gave it up at age fourteen to focus on their studies. Each boy would wake up on his fourteenth birthday to find that his instrument—

piano, violin, veena—had vanished from the house. My father had watched this happen three times, but, as the youngest and his father's favorite, he believed that he'd be spared. He wasn't.

As an adult, my father told us, he'd considered taking saxophone classes again, but he worried that he'd passed the age when he'd be able to develop real proficiency. That didn't matter anymore. He didn't need to be Coltrane. He just wanted to play.

“Damn,” Tarun said, after a long silence. “Childhood dreams realized. Impressive, Pa.” Despite the edge of sarcasm in his voice, he was being sincere.

My father glowed.

My mother cleared her throat. “Saxophone classes?” she asked. “With whom?”

Then my father revealed his second secret. He'd found a teacher, a Syrian Christian jazz musician named Tony Chandy. In fact, he'd been to Tony's place for three classes already. Tony was the one who'd told him that he needed to buy his own saxophone and had put him in touch with a place in Hamburg that sold secondhand instruments.

“Play something,” Tarun said.

My father demurred a little before producing a box of slender wooden reeds. He lifted the saxophone from its case and laboriously inserted one into the mouthpiece. Then he did a bizarre ducklike thing with his lips, simultaneously pursing and widening them.

“You'll appreciate this,” he said to my mother. “The mouth position you use to play the saxophone is an embouchure. That's French.”

My mother didn't respond. Then she said, “Aum-boo-shure.”

My father did the ducklike thing again and blew three unsteady notes. I clapped.

“Thanks, Kushal.” He smiled. “You should hear Tony play someday. The music just pours out of his skin.”

“Sounds painful,” Tarun remarked.

My mother promptly rushed into the opening he’d created: “Yes, like a medical problem.”

“Doctor, help!” Tarun clutched himself. “I’m leaking arpeggios everywhere!”

My mother laughed. But my father, who ordinarily would have joined in their banter, stopped smiling. “My classes with Tony are on Saturdays,” he announced.

He lowered his saxophone into the case and clicked it shut. That evening, I heard him practicing in his bedroom, scales at first, then a melody I didn’t know, sad and hauntingly beautiful despite his inept playing, the notes starting, stopping, starting again.

•

My father, it turned out, was serious about the saxophone. He practiced for an hour every night, ending each session with that same sad melody. It was a complex tune with many swoops and feints, and I often found myself humming it when I was supposed to be studying. Midterm tests were approaching, though mine were inconsequential, compared with Tarun’s. He was in the twelfth standard, and in March he’d write his board exams, which would determine his future. My parents, opposites in every other way, were united in their complacency on this subject. There was no doubt in their minds that Tarun would do brilliantly.

They might have worried more had they not been occupied with troubles of their own. My mother had thus far been silent about my father's gleaming new companion, but beneath that silence was anger. It was *not* her husband's job to be crazy. It was hers. Yet my father had the unmistakable sheen of madness, didn't he, when he practiced his scales, going up and down like a man possessed? He was audible from every corner of the house. I could even hear him from the terrace as I whacked on Tarun's helmet, and I dreaded the moment when he would begin the haunting melody, which never failed to defeat him. He stumbled in the same places every time. After each mistake, there'd be a long, aggrieved pause before he picked up exactly where he'd left off.

One night, I began matching the rhythm of my blows on Tarun's helmet to my father's playing. I can't say why. I knew the song by then, and maybe I believed that I could carry him through the tricky parts with sheer bodily force. Miraculously, it worked. He charged to the end, and I heard a startled silence from downstairs, as if he couldn't believe it, either. My fingers were cramping in pain. I'd never hit Tarun so hard before.

•

I would likely have forgotten this episode entirely if our midterm results hadn't come back a week later, revealing that, for the first time, Tarun had not topped his class. His marks were good, they were admirable, but they were not excellent. My parents were so shocked that neither of them reacted visibly. Tarun, for his part, presented his failure with an air of smug challenge—*Go on, act like other parents, scream, punish me*—and that silenced them. He'd never got less than an eighty-five per cent on any exam, yet there it was, like a blight: seventy-eight in chemistry, seventy-six in physics, and eighty in his best subject, maths.

As for me, I stopped visiting the terrace after that, because I'd realized what nobody else had, which was that Tarun's results were

my fault. I'd gone too far. I'd hit him too hard. I, with my thirteen-year-old fists, had broken my brother's impeccable mind. I don't know if Tarun was hurt by my desertion. He never said anything. He didn't appear to be studying any harder, either. Kavitha, the girl with the braids, had come in first; Tarun had placed third.

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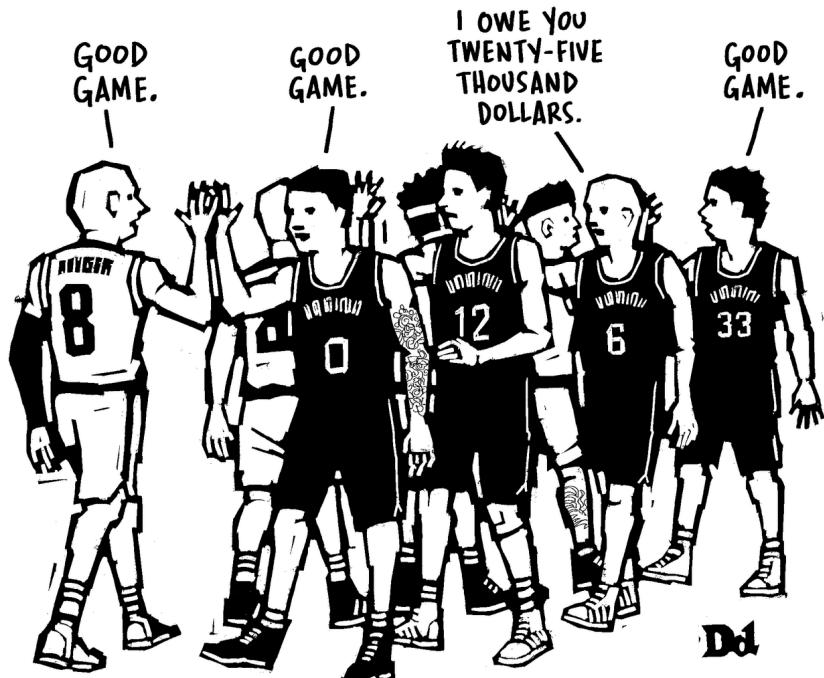
In my memory, the next two events overlap like fish scales. The first was that I met Tony Chandy. My father had been nagging Tarun and me to accompany him to a lesson, perhaps hoping that we might be inspired to take up an instrument, too. He was getting better, though he had not managed to play the haunting melody the whole way through again since that night.

"Not my thing, Kenny G" was Tarun's blunt response.

"What about you, Kushal?" my father asked.

I could feel Tarun and my mother watching me. My mother's look was easy to decode. Already she was becoming bored of French, but she would not allow my father's devotion to exceed hers, so she was hanging on, intoning verbs, grimly filling out worksheets. If I agreed to accompany my father, it would be a blow to her ego, but she would recover. Tarun's look was more complicated. In it lay both a question about who I was, exactly, this smaller, fence-sitting version of himself, and some other question, which I could not articulate.

HOW TO SPOT ATHLETES WHO ARE BETTING ON THEIR OWN SPORTS



Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“O.K., Pa,” I said. “Whatever.”

I could almost hear my brother smile.

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On a cool Saturday in December, my father and I drove to Tony Chandy’s house. On the way, he told me about his teacher. Tony Chandy had had no formal training, but his talent was such that the Dalai Lama had once visited Bangalore just to hear him play. Tony had received offers from famous Bollywood directors to compose scores for their films, but he had turned them all down. Many of Tony’s students had gone on to attend fancy music schools like Juilliard but swore that Tony had already taught them everything they needed to know.

Despite my suspicion that the source of this biography was none other than Tony Chandy himself, I found myself becoming excited.

So it was a shock to discover that the Maestro lived in a broken-down bungalow tucked into a filthy gully in Cox Town. Next door was a chicken shop with a wall of shit-crusted cages, each stuffed with a dozen slowly dying birds. One had no beak, only a crimson pucker between its dark-bright eyes. I was glad that my father didn't ring Tony's bell, just opened the door and walked in. "Sometimes Tony doesn't hear," he explained. "His health isn't good."

A deaf saxophone teacher didn't sound promising, but I followed my father down a dim hall, past a sour-smelling kitchen, and into a back room. Here, I saw a divan with a saxophone lying on rumpled sheets, a file cabinet overflowing with scores, and, finally, Tony Chandy himself, a skinny figure in a T-shirt and track pants, smoking in a chair by the window.

"Morning, Tony!" my father called. "This is Kushal, my son. He wanted to see where the magic happens."

Tony looked at me. "He did, did he?"

His eyes had an unnerving quality, not unlike those of the dying chickens next door. My father hastily added that it was Tony's magic he was referring to, not his own. Tony nodded, losing interest. "Sit down, Magic," he said to me. To my father: "Figure out that B minor?"

I sat on the divan while my father assembled his instrument. I hadn't seen him do it in weeks and was amazed. He was like an assassin loading a rifle. He tightened the reed and stood ready.

"Go on," Tony said, still smoking.

My father played a scale. He didn't look at me. Neither did Tony. I got the impression that he wasn't listening at all, or he was

listening so carefully that it looked like he was asleep. When my father finished, Tony said, “Now the rest.”

My father played his scales, and Tony remained comatose. At the end, he said, “Your embouchure is still forced. Relax.” He said embouchure as my mother had, but it sounded natural coming from him. “Let’s move on.”

My father nodded, looking relieved. From his bag, he drew a sheaf of papers and placed them on a music stand. I read the title on the top page: “Lara’s Theme.” Even before he began, I knew it was the tune I’d been hearing all those evenings, the melody that soared but never stayed high, that plunged but never stayed low, that seemed to hold winter in its notes.

My father started and immediately made a mistake. Tony Chandy’s face twitched. My father restarted and made another mistake. And then Tony did something extraordinary. He reached his cigarette out and touched my father on his bare forearm. It lasted less than a second—I don’t think the tip made contact with his skin—but I smelled singed hair. To my astonishment, my father did not react.

“Again,” Tony said.

My father obeyed. This time, he made it almost all the way through. I saw his nostrils flare as he approached a grapelike cluster of notes; he let out a despairing honk before stopping. Again, Tony reached out with his cigarette. Again, I smelled my father’s hair burning.

What would Tarun have said if he’d been there? Likely something witty and cruel that reduced Tony Chandy to what he was: a bitter, small-time musician living in near-poverty, spending his final years giving lessons to hapless middle-aged men. But I wasn’t Tarun. Instead, I wondered why my father had brought me here. Had he known that this would happen? Was he teaching me an obscure

lesson about devotion, the price you had to pay for excellence? Or was he as shocked as I was?

Tony Chandy did not burn my father again. My father played for another forty minutes; he made many mistakes, and Tony patiently corrected them. At one point, Tony picked up his own saxophone and played a line, and I heard what my father had promised. The music did not come from Tony's instrument. It came from his skin.

•

We didn't talk on the way home. But once we were parked in front of our house my father said, "Whatever you want to do in life, Kushal, it's O.K. with me. As long as you're serious about it."

"That song," I said, ignoring him, "it's called 'Lara's Theme'?"

"Yes." He sounded thankful not to have to finish his lecture. "It's from an old film."

"Which one?"

" 'Doctor Zhivago.' "

"What's it about?"

"Never watched it." He gave me a wan smile. "But I'm pretty sure it's a sad story."

•

The second thing that happened was that Tarun got a girlfriend. Over dinner, he announced to my parents that he and Kavitha were going around together.

"Kavitha?" my mother asked in surprise. "The girl in your class?"

“The one who beat—” my father started. “The one who’s good at her studies?”

“That’s the one.” Tarun cocked his head slyly. “Hang on, do you have a *problem* with this boyfriend-girlfriend shit? I didn’t think you were *those* kind of parents, but—”

“We’re not,” my mother said quickly. “We don’t have a problem with it.”

My father was slower to respond. “What about her parents?”

Tarun’s face darkened. “She isn’t telling them. Her dad—cover your ears, Kushal—is a fucking psycho. She told me he forces her to study five, six hours a day. And once, when she watched TV for two minutes longer than he gave her permission for, he cut the TV cable. With a *knife*.”

I looked at my parents’ faces, which were softening. My father was surely thinking of the iron fist of his own father; my mother, perhaps, of the things that girls were and weren’t allowed to do. I saw them glance at each other, and I knew they’d agreed.

“It’s fine with us if you want to have a relationship, Tarun,” my father said. “But your boards are coming up, and you should also be—”

“Of course, Pa,” Tarun said, magnanimous now that he’d won. “We’ll spend most of our time studying. Oh,” he added, “I invited her here tomorrow.”

•

The next afternoon, Kavitha arrived. Her hair was in the braids I remembered from school, but, instead of her uniform, she wore a yellow kurta over jeans that even I could tell didn’t fit her well. She

stomped into our house, dropped onto our sofa, and barely looked at any of us, including Tarun.

My mother had not touched her French worksheets that morning. She'd woken up buzzing with some new energy and spent an hour grilling Tarun about Kavitha and her preferences. I did not understand this singular interest until Kavitha was sitting down, backpack between her feet, and my mother came sailing out of the kitchen with a dozen triangular sandwiches arranged on a platter in a dainty whorl.

"I heard you *love* cheese-and-cucumber sandwiches," she informed Kavitha brightly.

"Oh," Kavitha said. She picked up a triangle but didn't eat it.

"Your hair is *so* beautiful," my mother murmured. "Do you use shikakai?"

"No, Aunty."

"What do you use?"

"Shampoo, Aunty."

"Which one?"

"Sunsilk, Aunty."

"Well, I'll have to try it!" my mother exclaimed. "You're a walking advertisement!"

It was a dreadful thing to watch, my mother fussing over this gruff, gangly girl as she clung to her scrap of bread and cheese. At first, I thought she was trying to put Kavitha at ease, but Kavitha wasn't the kind of person who needed to be put at ease. She carried herself

like Yudhishtira in his chariot, always hovering an inch off the ground.

Then I recalled Tarun's story about the knife and the severed TV cable, and I suddenly understood what I was seeing. It was the bloom. My mother had found her next obsession. There it was, sitting on her sofa, bread crumbs falling like snow onto its yellow kurta.

Goodbye to French, I thought.

My father asked Kavitha about her college plans. She turned to him and spoke intensely about studying engineering, after which she intended to work for five to seven years before getting her M.B.A. Tarun listened with a tiny, ironic smile I'd never seen on him. Then he said, "Stop pestering her, you two. Come, Kavi, let's go upstairs."

Kavitha's head shot up, as if she'd never been called Kavi or told to come by anyone. She rose, tripped on her bag, recovered, and followed Tarun upstairs.

"Nice girl," my father whispered. "Bit on the shy side, maybe."

"Well, what do you expect?" my mother hissed back. "With a father like *that*."

An hour later, I passed Tarun's room on my way to our shared bathroom. His door was ajar. One of his long, denim-clad legs hung over the side of his bed. In a lordly British accent, he was saying, "Pray tell, what *is* the Grignard reaction, milady?" I couldn't see Kavitha's face, so I wasn't sure whether she was smiling. But, when she answered, it was in her own ordinary voice.

•

January passed. Kavitha started to spend more time at our house, and my mother remained firmly effusive about her. “Such a lovely girl, so *mature*,” she’d say, an assessment vibrating with a darkness that had everything to do, I knew, with the knife-wielding father lurking in the background.

She’d tried to ask Kavitha leading questions about her family, but the girl proved disappointingly unforthcoming. Her father worked for a tire manufacturer. Her mother baked and sold cakes. My mother trilled vapidly over these mundane facts.

The French books still made an occasional appearance, but mainly, I noticed, when Kavitha was around. My mother would read a sentence aloud, then translate it. Tarun would tease her, and my mother would look sorrowfully toward Kavitha, as if the two of them now shared some womanly burden. Kavitha never responded to these looks. Then she and Tarun would go upstairs to study.

Something else I noticed: the door to Tarun’s bedroom closed a little more each day. Then one day it was locked, and my mother, trimming more cheese-and-cucumber sandwiches downstairs, had no idea. I listened at the door, and what I heard made me quickly walk away.

•

It was my mother’s idea that Tarun take Kavitha out for Valentine’s Day. She looked up movie listings in the paper. She suggested brownie fudge sundaes at Corner House. What about bowling? Would Kavitha like that? She became so single-minded that my father stepped in.

“Leave him, poor fellow,” he said. “If he and Kavitha want to go out, they can organize it themselves. Anyway, they have—what?—a month left before boards? They need to concentrate.”

“Don’t talk to me about concentration,” she snapped.

“What?”

“Every night, the same song. How is anyone supposed to concentrate on anything?”

He frowned. “Tony says I have to practice.”

“Why?” she jeered. “Are you and Tony going on a world tour?”

On any other day, Tarun would have offered a quip of his own, the two of them would have performed their mocking duet, but on that day he gave her nothing. He just stood there, wearing the ironic smile I’d noticed the day Kavitha first visited. When she realized that he wouldn’t back her, she whirled to face me. “Did you hear, Kushal?” she cried. “Your father’s going to be a famous musician!”

I thought of the smell of my father’s burned arm hair. I thought of the ghosts of my mother’s former passions. And, for a brief, vivid moment, I despised them both.

I didn’t respond, and the moment passed. My father drove to a barber’s appointment. My mother went into the kitchen. Tarun strolled upstairs, whistling. This is why I was the only one in the living room when the phone rang and a woman asked for my father. I said he’d gone out. She introduced herself as Radhika Garg, the director of the Bangalore School of Music. My first, bewildered thought was that my mother had been right: my father *was* going to be a famous musician.

Radhika Garg apologized for bothering us, but she was notifying all of Tony Chandy’s current and former students. Tony had died late the night before, of heart failure. The funeral would be held at ten the following morning, in Mar Thoma Church. We were welcome to attend.

•

Buried within every family, perhaps, is the secret desire to self-destruct, to push intimacy to its ugliest extremes. What else could explain the fact that we *all* decided to go to Tony Chandy's funeral? We reached Mar Thoma at the same time as Tony's coffin. We filed into the church behind it and took a seat on a pew in the back. I'd never been to a Christian funeral before. I had the idea that it would be holy and hushed, but the church was filled with a low chatter.

A white-robed priest climbed to the pulpit and prayed for a long time in Malayalam. Other people got up and spoke. The last was Radhika Garg, who turned out to be a large woman in a purple sari and matching lipstick. She said that Tony was that rarest of things: a true artist. Next to me, I felt my father nod. Tony could have lived a different kind of life, she went on. He could have turned his prodigious talent to riches, but instead he chose to teach. He loved teaching. Everything he did sprang from that love.

I tried to reconcile this noble portrait with the man I'd met, whose comments on my father's playing had not seemed to spring from anything other than mild irritation. What had my father seen in him that I had not? Sitting in that church, buttocks aching from the hard pew, I felt very young, incapable of understanding the first thing about the world. I sneaked a look at Tarun. He was listening to Radhika Garg with his newly adopted smirk, and I realized, with a shock not devoid of pleasure, that my brilliant older brother didn't understand the first thing about the world, either.

Radhika Garg bent to the microphone and invited anyone else who wanted to say a few words. My father raised his hand.

“Please,” Radhika Garg said. “Come.”

My father slid his saxophone case from under the pew. I had been so distracted by Tony's coffin that I had not noticed him carry it in. He squeezed past Tarun and me into the aisle and walked respectfully around the coffin before climbing the dais. A ripple of anticipation went through the crowd as people understood that they were about to be treated to the music Tony had loved.

My father put the strap around his neck and looked out at the mourners. "Tony was my teacher," he said simply. Then he raised the saxophone to his lips.

What else could he have played? As far as I knew, Tony had taught him no other song. The first notes of "Lara's Theme" emerged, and my skin prickled. He sounded *good*. He was playing it under tempo, almost dragging it, but the notes were sure, and the melancholy of the composition spread over the gathering like a fog. I heard a gasp, a few smothered sobs. I glanced at my mother. She seemed to be made of stone.

My father closed his eyes and played for his dead teacher. He played calmly and slowly, and I knew that he was determined, one way or another, to reach the end. Then, like a skydiver, he flung himself into the difficult part, the soaring, operatic part that had always undone him.

His finger slipped. The note was so wrong that my teeth hurt.

He stopped, blinking. Then he picked up where he'd left off. Seconds later, another dreadful mistake. Someone groaned.

Silently, I pleaded with him to give up, or at least to make light of his ineptitude with a joke, the kind that Tarun or my mother would have made, but he remained utterly, grotesquely sincere. He attacked that song from every angle, and, at the end, he blasted the final note, which tore like a ligament, but I don't think he even

heard it. He was already on his knees before Tony's coffin, dismantling his golden weapon.

We did not wait to see Tony deposited into the van that would take him to the cemetery. Instead, we walked silently back to our car. My father placed his saxophone in the trunk, and we all got in. Then my mother turned to him. "I'm proud of you," she said.

She meant it. Anyone could see that she meant it. Her hand went out to touch his arm, but he recoiled. When he spoke, it was with a malevolence I'd never heard from him.

"Tell me something," he said. "What exactly do you plan to do with your French, hmm? Impress the boys' friends? Order wine in a fancy restaurant? Become a tour guide for snooty French tourists, say, 'This is Cubbon Park, oo-la-la, have you tasted Brie?' That's your big dream?"

Her body went eerily still. My father stared straight ahead through the windshield.

"See?" he said with disgusted satisfaction. "I can do it, too."

•

I no longer recall what Tarun and Kavitha did for Valentine's Day, but soon it was late February, and Tarun needed a suit for his graduation. He, naturally, had been chosen to give the valedictorian's speech. My mother took him to a suit shop, and he modelled his choice for us that evening.

"Very handsome," my father said. He sounded warm and sad. "My grownup son." He and my mother had brokered a tentative peace, their hostility put aside for the sake of Tarun's boards, which he would take in two weeks. My father had not touched his saxophone since Tony's funeral.

“What’s Kavitha wearing?” my mother asked.

“A sari, I guess.” Tarun shrugged. “The girls all wear white saris. Bit widow-y, if you ask me.”

My mother did not contribute a joke of her own, but she looked thoughtful. The next time Kavitha came over, my mother casually asked her whether she’d found her white sari yet. Kavitha shook her head.

“Wait here.” My mother went upstairs and came down shortly afterward, holding a flat box.

It was a white chiffon sari, an ethereal cloud studded with twinkling sequins. I couldn’t think of anything less appropriate for Kavitha, who should have worn thick, sensible silk, as rigid as armor.

“I happened to see this in a shop yesterday,” my mother gushed. “And I thought, Oh, this would be absolutely *perfect* for Kavi!”

The lie drooped. I could see her in the shop, tapping her finger on the counter. *Show me everything you have in white.*

Kavitha gazed at the cloud. “Thanks, Aunty.”

“You’re so welcome!” My mother sighed happily. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking I must be crazy. But I just couldn’t resist!”

•

Dusk was falling when we arrived at the school grounds, where rows of chairs had been set up under the open sky. Tarun, his speech folded in his suit pocket, peeled away from us to greet his friends, and my parents stood around, chatting to other parents they remembered from past school events.

I found a group of kids my age, all younger siblings of graduates, and we decided to sneak into the school building. We wandered down empty corridors, poked our heads into dark, echoing classrooms. We tried the door to the headmaster's office, but it was locked. One by one, the others left to join their families, until I found myself alone with a plump boy who eyed me sideways. "Can you keep your mouth shut?" he asked, before producing a small bottle of rum. He threw back his head and drank ostentatiously, though I could tell that little actually passed his lips. He held the bottle out to me.

The first sip set my mouth on fire, then mellowed into an almost incredible warmth. I took a second sip, then a third. He reached for the bottle, but I fended him off and sipped again. "Hey!" he cried in alarm. "Are you crazy?" He snatched the bottle from my hand and ran out.

I was walking back to find my parents when I saw Kavitha, who'd just arrived. She was dressed in a modest off-white silk sari with a thick gold border, its lines as pristine as those in a new notebook. It suited her perfectly. She was with her parents, who were both shorter than her. Her mother wore an orange sari and carried a plastic bag instead of a purse. Her father wore an unremarkable shirt and pants.

Kavitha saw me, and I waved to her. She did not wave back.

I found my parents in their seats. My father was having trouble with his camera lens, and my mother was helping. Maybe it was the heat of the rum in my belly, but my parents' edges seemed softened. My mother teased my father about the camera, which was very old. My father feigned offense. They giggled, then looked embarrassed. Yes, they were happy that night. Their brilliant boy was graduating.

The lights went out. In the darkness, the school choir sang something soft and incantatory. The headmaster climbed onto the stage and lighted a tall brass oil lamp. Then I saw Tarun, an unlit candle in his hands, walking toward him. He held his candle to the lamp, then walked back down, cupping the tiny flame. He moved up the aisle, lighting the candle of the student at the end of each row. The flame was passed down, student to student, candle to candle. And then, on some prearranged signal, the graduates turned to face their families, a sea of light.

•

Tarun's speech—self-effacing, funny, heartfelt—was a success. Afterward, the graduates, proudly holding their diplomas, posed for photos with their families. I'd never seen my father hug Tarun so many times. My mother looked as if she could not believe he existed. People kept coming up to congratulate them. My parents were suitably humble, but their eyes glittered with pride.

At some point, I turned away from this tableau to see three figures approaching. Kavitha and her parents. They were flanking her, all three marching in military lockstep.

Instantly, I knew something was wrong.

My father was the first to turn. I saw him adopt an expression of preëmptive modesty; he thought they were more well-wishers. Then he recognized Kavitha, and his look changed to one of genuine welcome, for he really did like her—he liked her seriousness, her lack of frivolity. My mother turned next, and she saw Kavitha's sari before she saw her face. She looked hurt but smiled bravely. Tarun was posing for a photograph with two other girls and hadn't seen Kavitha yet.

"You must be Kavitha's parents," my father said. "So nice to finally meet you. I'm Ashok. This is my wife, Tarini."

“Hello,” Kavitha’s father said. He didn’t introduce himself or his wife.

“Beautiful ceremony, didn’t you think?” my mother asked. She turned to Kavitha. “That’s a lovely sari,” she said blandly. Kavitha, to her credit, didn’t flinch.

“We have an urgent matter to discuss with you,” Kavitha’s father said.

“Oh?” my father said.

“Your son—he is causing trouble,” Kavitha’s father said. “With our daughter.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“He is pulling her away from her studies. He is filling her head with nonsense.”



“Future lawyers, look to your left and then to your right. Two of you will be buried in government litigation and the third will run a yoga retreat for the other two.”

Cartoon by Lynn Hsu and Carol Lasky

“Such as?” my mother asked.

“Telling her exams are useless. Telling her she should become a yoga teacher instead of an engineer. ‘*Who needs another engineer?*’ Things like this he’s saying to her.”

“Ah.” My father smiled, relaxing. “I’m sure he’s only joking, but —”

“He is *not* joking!” Kavitha’s father said loudly, and a dozen heads turned, including Tarun’s. Quickly, he detached himself from his friends and came to stand beside us. He did not greet Kavitha or her parents.

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” my father said. “Yes, Tarun and Kavitha have become friendly of late, but that’s not a bad thing. Tarun takes his studies very seriously, and I know Kavitha does, too.”

“She is not prepared for her exams because of him!” Kavitha’s father bellowed. “She has never scored below ninety per cent in any exam, but now she is struggling to even finish the portions!”

“I’m sure—” my father began.

Kavitha’s father turned to Tarun. “You are evil,” he growled. “An evil person.”

At this, my parents seemed to grow in stature on either side of us until they loomed like dark, threatening mountains. But Tarun spoke before they could.

“I never said anything like that to Kavitha, Uncle,” he said coolly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’ve studied together a few times, that’s all.”

“A few times?” Kavitha’s father sputtered. “You forced her to come to your house every day! And not only that. You forced her to do other things. *Dirty* things! She has confessed everything!”

“I didn’t force her to do anything, Uncle,” Tarun said. “And I don’t know what she told you, but it *was* only a few times. Three, maybe four, wouldn’t you say?” He looked at my mother, who held his gaze for a prolonged second, then murmured, “Three, four. About that.”

I waited for my father to correct them, but he didn’t.

“Honestly, Uncle, I’m not sure why I’d ask Kavitha to come to my house if not to study,” Tarun went on smoothly. “I mean, there’s no other possible reason, is there?”

This was breathtakingly cruel, even for Tarun, but it didn’t seem to register on Kavitha’s face. She just stood there, seemingly oblivious to the audience we’d attracted.

“You’re lying!” Kavitha’s father roared.

My father drew himself up. “That’s enough,” he said firmly. “My son has explained himself.”

To my alarm, Kavitha’s father spotted me. “You’re the brother, aren’t you?” he hissed. “Kavitha says you’re always there. She says you know.”

“Kushal?” My mother sounded worried. “What would he know?”

“The truth! He knows the truth!”

I could see my parents preparing to defend me, but I already knew what to do. “Yes, Uncle,” I answered. “I’m always there.”

Kavitha’s father suddenly looked hopeful. “And?”

“I heard them talking about the Grignard reaction,” I said. “That’s chemistry, I think.”

“What else?” he cried. “What *else*? ”

“Nothing else, Uncle.”

We faced him down, shoulder to shoulder: Tarun, my mother, my father, me. We had bickered and sniped at one another all our lives, and it had taken Kavitha, cranky, inscrutable Kavitha, to shock us into this violent harmony. Never again would my family be so united as when we sacrificed, without a thought, this tall, lonely girl with her long braids.

“Good thing there’s no knife nearby, hmm?” my mother remarked.

And then, astoundingly, my father responded, “Too bad, because, if you ask me, it’s time we cut off this ridiculous conversation.”

Kavitha’s father’s eyes flickered from one to the other.

“What?” he said.

And something about the way he said it, some artless confusion, made me look sharply at Kavitha, who, to my surprise, was looking back at me. There was nothing in her expression to indicate that anything significant was happening. There was—how shall I describe it?—a room far back in her gaze in which she sat, indifferent, waiting for this storm to pass, as so many others had.

Kavitha’s father turned and stalked away. A second later, Kavitha followed him.

Kavitha’s mother, who hadn’t spoken a word, now reached into her plastic bag and pulled out a flat object. She thrust it at my mother, who lifted her hands a beat too late to receive it. The sari box fell to the ground, and a white cloud spread at our feet, twinkling.

•

It wasn't just indifference I had seen on Kavitha's face. It was something else, too. Call it curiosity, of a detached, scientific kind. The kind that might make someone accept a sari from a stranger. Or tell a story about a knife. Just to see what would happen. Either way, it would have nothing to do with her.

•

Tarun ended up performing fairly well on his boards, scoring eighty-seven per cent over all. But, the week after his results came out, he caused another uproar in our house by announcing that he was applying to universities in the United States. The deadline for most places had passed, but he'd done some research and found several that had rolling admission. He got into a small college in the state of Washington. The financial-aid package was generous, but he would need to work on campus for twenty hours a week to support himself, an idea he seemed to relish.

Tarun left Bangalore in late August. A month or so later, I went into his room. I saw the motorcycle helmet on a shelf in his cupboard but didn't touch it. Instead, I stacked up his notebooks, which were scattered everywhere. At school the next day, I let it be known that Tarun's notes were for sale, and by the end of the week I had six serious bidders. I sold his books for five thousand rupees, and with the money I paid an older neighborhood boy to supply me with bottles of rum, which I drank in secret sips for months. That year, I failed my exams in a spectacular fashion, pushing my parents to the verge of despair, but, before things could get really bad, the money ran out, and with it my desire for such swift, extravagant ruin. Looking back, I can see that I was never that serious about it. Some people are built for a quieter decay.

•

I was on 100 Feet Road last week, when I saw a woman entering the new Reebok showroom. Nine years had passed, but I recognized her immediately.

“Kushal,” she said when I walked in. “You look different.”

“You, too,” I said, and it was true. The braids were gone, and her hair was cut into a bob. It didn’t suit her face at all, but it did make her seem like another person, which may have been the point.

A salesgirl came up with an armful of boxes. “I have a race next month,” Kavitha explained.

“You’re a runner?” I asked.

“Marathons. It’s just a hobby, though. What about you? Are you working?”

“I’m in architecture,” I said, which wasn’t exactly a lie. I ferried plans about for my father, organized his schedule. I didn’t add that it was the only job I’d managed to keep for more than six months.

“What’s Tarun up to these days?” Kavitha asked.

“Not doing marathons, I promise you that.”

She laughed.

“Tarun’s all right,” I said. “He’s in the States now. Works in consulting.”

“And your parents? How are they?”

“They’re fine,” I said.

“Your dad was learning the sax, right?”

“Yes, but he stopped.”

“And your mom was learning French?”

“Yes, but she stopped, too.”

Kavitha laughed again. I didn’t think I’d ever heard her laugh before, and now she’d done it twice. While we talked, she tried on various shoes. After she chose a pair, I followed her to the payment counter. “So did you do your M.B.A.?” I asked.

“Yep,” she said. “Did it in Singapore, worked for a year, got burned out, and quit.”

“What do you do now?”

“I’m getting certified as a dive instructor.”

“A what?”

“Scuba.”

“Fuck off, that’s cool,” I said sincerely, and she laughed again.

“I’ll take you on a dive someday,” she said. “You won’t believe how peaceful it is, Kushal. When you’re down there, nothing can touch you.”

She left with her shoes, and I went home. I didn’t tell my parents that I’d seen Kavitha. We ate dinner as usual. Then they settled on the sofa to watch TV, which they’d taken to doing for long hours before falling asleep. I went upstairs to Tarun’s bedroom and took out his old helmet. I put it on and lowered the visor. The world instantly retreated, turned dim and soft and harmless. You could have walked right up to me then and hit me with a brick. I wouldn’t have felt a thing. ♦

Madhuri Vijay, the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, is the author of “The Far Field.”

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If the Legal Campaigns Against Donald Trump Had Ended Differently

New books look at the January 6th Trial That Wasn’t and other failed prosecutions—and whether they might have changed history.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

November 17, 2025

A lesson of the Trump experience may be that not every awful thing is best reckoned with using the tool of criminal law.

Illustration by Till Lauer

For anyone looking at the wreckage of America’s legal and political landscape and wondering how we got here, it’s tempting to daydream about all sorts of counterfactuals. What if President Joe Biden had dropped his reëlection bid sooner? What if Vice-President Kamala Harris, the eventual nominee, had distanced herself from him? What if Gaza had not divided the Democrats? Other what-ifs envision different outcomes for the many legal cases against Donald Trump—at one point, he was facing ninety-one felony charges in four jurisdictions.

For many Democrats, it is now received wisdom that, if only Merrick Garland, Biden’s Attorney General, had promptly ordered a criminal investigation of Trump for his role in the January 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol—when his supporters tried to stop the tallying of the Electoral College votes—everything might have been different. Jack Smith, the special counsel on the case, wasn’t appointed until November, 2022, after Trump had announced that he was running for another term. What took so long? Trump wasn’t indicted on the January 6th charges until August, 2023—too late to work through the legal obstacles, especially at the Supreme Court, before the election. Soon after Trump’s victory, Smith filed papers to dismiss the case and resigned.

The January 6th Trial That Wasn’t has taken on the status of one of the great maddening what-ifs. And the fantasy of how it all might have gone down is easy enough to engage in. The judge in the case, Tanya Chutkan, had originally set a trial date of March 4, 2024. Imagine that day beginning with Trump and his lawyers arriving at the E. Barrett Prettyman United States Courthouse, in Washington, D.C., in a motorcade, with an overture of sirens. And imagine, in the weeks that followed, Mike Pence giving riveting testimony about Trump exhorting him to throw out the electoral votes of seven states; Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, recounting the January 2, 2021, phone call in which Trump told him to “find” eleven thousand votes; Rudy Giuliani falling apart when asked about the Trump team’s mustering of fake electoral certificates. And Trump would have to sit quietly as a jury of D.C. residents delivered its verdict. Maybe he’d be led off in handcuffs.

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A full-blown alternative history, though, would need to factor in something that Todd Blanche, then one of Trump’s criminal-defense lawyers—he is now the Deputy Attorney General—would undoubtedly have raised in court. March 5, 2024, which would have been the second day of the trial, was Super Tuesday, when Trump was on the Republican primary ballot in fifteen states. Judging from Chutkan’s real-life admonitions that she would not be

guided by the political calendar, she would not have given Trump the day off, so the trial would have played out on a split screen. Trump actually won fourteen of those Super Tuesday contests. (Nikki Haley prevailed in Vermont.) The Georgia primary was a week later, on March 12th—would prosecutors have hurried to put Raffensperger on the stand before then, or even on the day itself? And that wouldn't have been the last such dilemma.

As it happened, Trump won eighty-five per cent of the Georgia primary vote, even though his call to Raffensperger was already well publicized. Trump went on to win Georgia in the general election, albeit narrowly; of the seven states whose electoral votes he'd tried to steal four years earlier, he lost only one, New Mexico. Speculation about whether a January 6th trial might have changed those results is, in some ways, irresistible. Then again, maybe the various failed prosecutions did change the election—but by helping Trump, who ran as a victim. And even if more aggressive criminal investigations could have forestalled Trump's return, by swaying voters or otherwise changing the course of the election, should that potential have played any role in prosecutors' decisions? Put another way, was the multiheaded legal pursuit of Donald Trump one big mistake?

A new book, “Injustice: How Politics and Fear Vanquished America’s Justice Department,” by Carol Leonnig and Aaron C. Davis (Penguin), plays to the sense that Smith’s case against Trump was a tragic failure—“belated and ill-fated.” The authors, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters who helped lead the *Washington Post*’s coverage of January 6th (Leonnig has since left the paper), argue that a lack of will, if not outright cowardice, was to blame: “The vaunted U.S. Justice Department had come to seemingly quake at investigating Donald Trump.” Garland, a former federal judge, is portrayed as a good but misguided man who double-checked the wording of statutes and worried about convictions being overturned on appeal when he could have set his prosecutors loose. He didn’t realize that he and the D.O.J. had “but a fleeting moment” to hold

Trump accountable before the department “would be forever changed.”

In Leonnig and Davis’s telling, the January 6th case wasn’t the only one thwarted by timidity. In February, 2022, the National Archives notified the F.B.I. that it had found documents marked as classified among papers that, after a struggle, Trump had returned to them. The D.O.J. believed that there were more documents, possibly classified ones, still at Mar-a-Lago, Trump’s Florida club and home. Some prosecutors pressed for an immediate search of the property, but, according to Leonnig and Davis, they were delayed by “skittish” F.B.I. officials who insisted on taking extra investigative steps, such as subpoenaing security footage, before seeking a warrant and going in unannounced. “Someone’s gonna have to order me to do it,” a senior F.B.I. official said at a tense meeting about the warrant. The search turned up a trove of boxes containing sensitive documents, some piled in a bathroom.

Smith decided to charge Trump under the Espionage Act of 1917 (which covers the unauthorized retention of certain highly sensitive materials) and for obstruction of justice. But, in what Leonnig and Davis present as a disastrous choice, Smith sought the indictment in Florida, where there was a one-in-three chance that the case would be randomly assigned to Judge Aileen Cannon, a Trump appointee who had already made dubious rulings in the former President’s favor. She got the case and eventually dismissed it, maintaining that Smith had been improperly appointed. The bolder move, the authors suggest, would have been to indict Trump in D.C., where the documents had originally been loaded on a plane. (Not incidentally, the jury pool in D.C. is overwhelmingly Democratic.) When a veteran D.O.J. prosecutor who favored bringing the case in D.C. heard about Smith’s decision, he told a colleague, “You all are fucking insane”—a line that reflects the tone of many of the fascinating behind-the-scenes discussions that Leonnig and Davis recount. The special counsel’s office, we learn, was not all that collegial, and Smith was not exactly a charmer.

Restraint wasn't the only cause of delay that the authors identify. Another was the D.O.J.'s resource-consuming effort to prosecute every last rioter who entered the Capitol. They quote a prosecutor who said that he worried whenever an F.B.I. agent referred to a rioter as a "knucklehead," because doing so seemed to minimize the person's actions. (Of course, some *were* knuckleheads.) There were more than twelve hundred convictions. Meanwhile, for a long time, only one prosecutor, Thomas Windom, was focussed on Trump and his associates.

But why would prosecutors "quake," to borrow the authors' word? Leonnig and Davis's basic thesis is that Trump broke something in the Justice Department. His first Administration began with his firing of James Comey, the F.B.I. director, for perceived disloyalty, and it ended with his ousting of Attorney General William Barr for the same—and with January 6th. The authors use words such as "shell-shocked" and "traumatized" to describe the state of the career employees whom Garland found on his arrival. Where Garland got lost, as the authors portray it, was in trying too hard to restore public trust.

Leonnig and Davis's sympathies are clearly with the prosecutors who wanted to move the fastest. But some of their reporting supports a different view. For example, Garland was right to worry about how the January 6th convictions might fare on appeal: the Supreme Court eventually ruled that the D.O.J. had overreached in its use of a particular obstruction charge, which it had brought against hundreds of rioters. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson joined five of the Court's conservatives in that decision. (The charge was also part of Trump's indictment.) And, Judge Cannon notwithstanding, Florida was the correct venue for the Espionage Act case, assuming that the goal was to get a conviction that would hold up on appeal, rather than a quick preëlection verdict marred by blatant forum-shopping. Cases involving classified materials are, in any event, notoriously slow; for one thing, defense lawyers need to get security clearances. Using the Espionage Act, a

constitutionally messy law that has never been tested against a former President (and has been overused against whistle-blowers), may also have been the wrong approach. In any event, once Smith was assigned, he moved at rocket speed—for better or worse.

Leonnig and Davis report that Garland was “visibly unenthusiastic” about the first draft of Smith’s January 6th indictment, which he saw as delving too much into what might be protected political speech. He pushed Smith to streamline and strengthen his arguments. A rapid prosecution might not have been a good one.

Similarly, the F.B.I.’s insistence on gathering more evidence before the Mar-a-Lago search yielded a better, more legally defensible warrant. Prosecutors had been frustrated when, early on, the F.B.I. objected to seeking the phone and data records of broad groups of people, including guests at a Washington hotel where some Trump allies had stayed in the days before and after January 6th. Those hesitations, too, seem sound, from a civil-liberties perspective. A recurring background note in “Injustice” is the F.B.I.’s unhappiness with the way it was deployed in the investigation into whether Trump had colluded with Russia to interfere in the 2016 election, which was opened when he was still a candidate. In the aftermath, there were recriminations over whether investigators had acted improperly (such as by misusing the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) or been led astray (the chimeric Steele dossier); an embarrassing inspector general’s report; derailed careers; and inflammatory, ad-hominem attacks on individual agents by Trump. A senior F.B.I. official, referring to the investigation by its code name, said, “The guys over there are still stepping over the bodies of Crossfire Hurricane.”

Other new books, such as “Retribution: Donald Trump and the Campaign That Changed America,” by Jonathan Karl (Dutton), the chief Washington correspondent for ABC News, show how Trump convinced his supporters that the justice system had been “rigged” against him, just as it had long been rigged against them. (Not everyone likes prosecutors; Garland was right to worry about trust,

too.) Karl follows Trump as he turns an indictment that New York's District Attorney, Alvin Bragg, brought against him, for falsifying business records related to the payment of hush money to Stormy Daniels, an adult-movie actress, into Exhibit A in his case for victimhood. When that trial began, in April, 2024—in the midst of primary season—Trump staged regular press conferences in the hallways of the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse. (He'd surely have made the same use of the Prettyman building.) Republican politicians sat in the courtroom to pay homage to the defendant.

Such scenes present a complication for anyone wondering if a Jack Smith trial might have changed history. After all, there was no shortage of civil and criminal cases against Trump. In addition to Bragg's charges, there was the Georgia election-fraud case, brought by the Fulton County D.A., Fani Willis; January 6th civil cases brought by D.C. police officers and members of Congress; E. Jean Carroll's two defamation and sexual-assault suits; and the real-estate-fraud case brought by the New York attorney general, Letitia James, to name just a few. In the spring of 2024, there were serious suggestions that James might seize Trump Tower to collect a half-billion-dollar judgment that the state was awarded. (Last month, Erik Siebert, the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, resigned rather than give in to Trump's transparently vengeful demand that he charge James with mortgage fraud. Lindsey Halligan, his successor, obliged.) The Colorado Supreme Court disqualified Trump from appearing on the ballot, in a novel proceeding relying on the Fourteenth Amendment, before its ruling was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, 9–0, on the day before Super Tuesday.

“Injustice” largely ignores those cases. Its drama is tightly enclosed within the D.O.J.—illuminatingly but also, at times, suffocatingly so. Bragg's prosecution gets a little more than a page, in which Leonnig and Davis dismiss it as “tawdry.” Obviously, January 6th is a bigger deal than paying off a porn star. But Willis, whose Georgia case covered much of the same ground as Smith's, is

mentioned only in passing in “Injustice,” as “a county prosecutor” who took on a job that would have been better kept in federal hands. There’s something to that, given the shambles that Willis’s case became: an unmanageably large *RICO* prosecution with nineteen defendants and an ill-advised relationship between Willis and a colleague. (She was eventually removed from the case.) Still, Democrats lionized both Bragg and Willis. The New York trial was the vehicle for delivering many of the cinematic courtroom scenes that Trump’s opponents longed for, along with its thirty-four felony convictions—a number that Harris mentioned frequently during her campaign.

Bragg, though, deployed a legal theory generously described as creative to spin misdemeanors into felonies, and the judge in the case, Juan Merchan, made some rulings that left it vulnerable on an appeal (which is pending). The enormous award that James won has already been thrown out by an appellate court, though some nonfinancial penalties remain. Maybe the phantom Smith trials would have offered something different; maybe if Trump didn’t commit so many crimes he wouldn’t be indicted so often. But, if the complaint is that there were not enough Trump trials, one has to reckon with the flawed trials that did happen as much as with the idealized ones that didn’t. One also needs to assess their cumulative effect, which, ironically, included undermining the Democrats’ warnings about threats to democracy—as Republicans saw it, their candidate was being kept in one courtroom after another, and thus off the campaign trail. Leonnig and Davis observe that Trump “successfully converted dozens of criminal charges” into “his most powerful argument for his reelection.” What they don’t do is reconcile that sad truth with their vision of how the D.O.J. ought to have acted.

A lesson of the Trump experience may be that not every awful thing is best, or most wisely, reckoned with using the tool of criminal law. There were, in fact, other possible approaches, though they present their own what-ifs. One was Trump’s Senate trial, in

February, 2021, after his second impeachment, on a charge of incitement to insurrection. There were fifty-seven guilty votes, including seven from Republicans, but not enough for the two-thirds majority needed to convict. Of all the counterfactuals one could come up with, the impeachment trial offers the clearest road not taken. Impeachment is what the Founders envisioned as the foremost means of addressing political crimes, and conviction would have disqualified Trump from running again; felonies do not. In truth, it was the Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, far more than Merrick Garland, who lost his nerve.

And then there was the House select committee on the January 6th attack. As Leonnig and Davis tell it, the House investigation was both a rebuke of the D.O.J., showing how far behind the prosecutors were, and an obstacle, because the committee was determined to keep its findings under wraps ahead of its splashy, televised hearings, and wouldn't share what it had learned.

"Congress is not D.O.J.'s staff," Liz Cheney, the committee's vice-chair, told her associates. Pursuing accountability through congressional hearings was certainly a laudable choice. The committee came across as partisan, however, because the only Republicans on it had already broken with Trump and their party. (When then Speaker Nancy Pelosi excluded ultra-Trumpists such as Jim Jordan, the G.O.P. leadership walked away.) As a result, the hearings, though highly disciplined, lacked the confrontational back-and-forth that might have drawn voters in. The hearings did produce a valuable record of the events of that day—if historians, in years to come, are willing to make use of it.

What ultimately bumped Judge Chutkan's trial from its original March date, though, wasn't any of the other prosecutions but a motion that Trump filed in October, 2023, which made a claim of criminal immunity for his official acts as President. At first, Chutkan simply denied the claim, and the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit backed her up. But the appellate decision, which treated the absence of such immunity as almost axiomatic,

reportedly angered John Roberts, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In Roberts's view, the appellate ruling would make it too easy to prosecute any President. An unanswerable question is how the conservative Justices were influenced by the continual swirl of cases and suits. Did they become part of the backlash? According to Leonnig and Davis, when people on Smith's team watched the D.O.J. appellate team's mock oral arguments in the immunity case, they were genuinely stunned by how tough the practice sessions were: they "had won so convincingly at the district and appeals court levels" that they hadn't realized how different their Supreme Court reception might be. Even prosecutors and judges can find themselves in echo chambers.

The immunity decision, when it came, on July 1st, was 6–3, with the Court's liberals furiously dissenting. It gave former Presidents a grant of immunity for official acts so broad that it made it hard to say what an *unofficial* act might be. It put even the hush-money conviction into doubt. (This month, an appellate court told a federal judge to examine that question.) The Justices then sent Smith's January 6th indictment back to Chutkan for more litigation over which parts of it, if any, could survive. According to Leonnig and Davis, Smith told his team that this was an opportunity to "show what kind of lawyers we are." But the process of working out what was and what wasn't an official act would almost certainly have taken a year or more, and produced a very different indictment.

The Justices ruled on immunity just four days after Biden's chillingly bad performance in his debate with Trump, but three weeks before he finally withdrew—a reminder of how many things were happening at once in this period. (There was also an assassination attempt on Trump on July 13th, and Hunter Biden, the President's son, had recently been convicted on gun charges and would soon face a second trial, for tax evasion.) In that respect, the oddest omission in "Injustice," especially given its focus on the D.O.J. and the Florida Espionage Act case, may be that of Robert Hur, the special counsel whom Garland appointed to look at

classified documents from Biden’s Vice-Presidency that were found in his private office and home. Hur’s report, in which he said that Biden’s apparent decline would make it hard to persuade a jury to convict him, also posed a major test for the D.O.J. and for Garland. Before the report was released, Garland came under pressure from both the White House counsel and Biden’s personal lawyers about what they argued were “pejorative” comments that shouldn’t have been included in it. The Attorney General, to his credit, made the full report public, but the department didn’t do much to stand up for Hur when he was subjected to bitter attacks from Democrats and from President Biden himself. In “Retribution,” Karl quotes a D.O.J. official who told him, of Hur’s report, “The only reason it was a big deal is that it was true and the White House knew it was true.”

After Smith arrived in Washington in late 2022, he told the D.O.J. lawyers, “We don’t have as much time as you think.” But time for what, exactly? The line between a legitimate desire for criminal accountability and a less noble hunger for political comeuppance can be blurry. There is no facile answer here, especially given Trump’s manifest disdain for the law. And yet there was a point when the legal campaign against Trump became counterproductive and, in retrospect, hard to defend. Smith and his prosecutors were short not only on time but on credibility. Meanwhile, as the campaign proceeded, Trump’s rhetoric grew, in Karl’s words, “increasingly harsh—even violent.”

The transformed D.O.J. that Leonnig and Davis warn about is the one Trump is now turning into a blunt instrument of retaliation. The authors include some harrowing scenes from the early days of that process. Emil Bove, who had been named the acting Deputy Attorney General on the strength of his work as a criminal-defense lawyer for Trump, spent his tenure looking for the President’s supposed enemies and firing them. “Hell, several of us voted for Trump,” a dismayed F.B.I. official told the authors. Bove has now been confirmed as a federal judge—a lifetime appointment.

Since then, the situation has grown only more bleak, with gaudily illegal executive orders targeting, among others, law firms, universities, and babies whose parents are not citizens or permanent residents, igniting a more profound legal fight. Trump has said that the Department of Justice owes him two hundred and thirty million dollars as compensation for the incomplete prosecutions. People around him seem to have stopped caring whether anyone thinks they are taking bribes. Trump has also pardoned or commuted the sentences of the January 6th defendants—and last week he preëmptively pardoned Giuliani and others involved in the fake-electors scheme.

Still, if one is going to engage in counterfactuals, it now appears that the ones that mattered in 2024 had very little to do with Jack Smith or Merrick Garland. What if the Democrats had held open primaries, and found a stronger candidate? What if they had not diverted so much time, money, and effort to trying to drive Trump into jail and off the ballot? What if they had concentrated on making the case to voters for what they wanted to do for the country? There might not have been a trial in Judge Chutkan’s courtroom. But there also might not be National Guard troops deployed in the streets of American cities. ♦

Amy Davidson Sorkin has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2014. She has been at the magazine since 1995, and, as a senior editor for many years, focussed on national security, international reporting, and features.

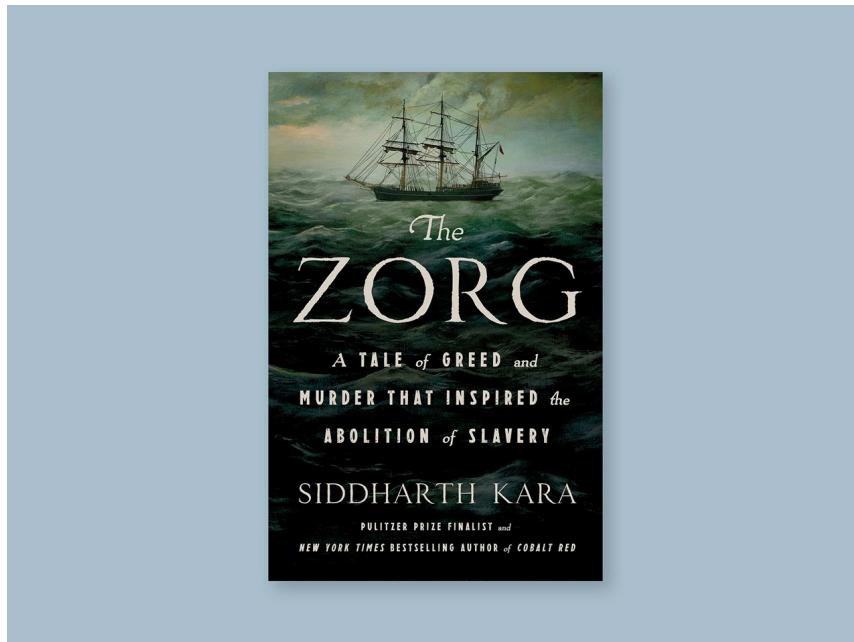
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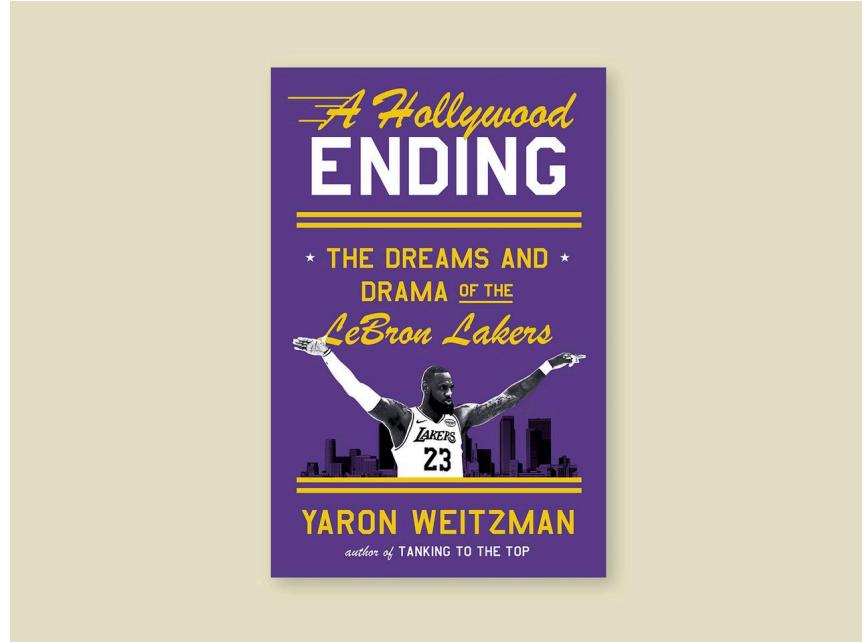
Briefly Noted

“*The Zorg*,” “*A Hollywood Ending*,” “*The Age of Extraction*,” and “*Two Paths to Prosperity*.”

November 17, 2025



The Zorg, by Siddharth Kara (St. Martin’s). In this harrowing history, Kara, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, tells the story of the Zorg, a merchant vessel that the British captured from the Dutch in 1781. When the ship went off course during a voyage from Africa’s Gold Coast to Jamaica, it ran out of water; the crew then chose to throw more than a third of the four hundred and forty-two enslaved people on board into the sea. Kara also recounts the journey’s aftermath—the attempt by the ship’s owners to collect insurance money in compensation for the dead, and the heroic campaign of Granville Sharp, a former clerk for the Board of Ordnance, whose efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice marked a critical moment in Britain’s abolitionist movement.



A Hollywood Ending, by Yaron Weitzman (*Doubleday*). In 2018, the Los Angeles Lakers were reeling from a string of failed seasons. At the same time, LeBron James, of the Cleveland Cavaliers, was entering the later stages of his career and seeking to secure his legacy. What would happen if the two joined forces? This extensively reported account chronicles the at times turbulent, at times triumphant partnership between these two icons, who, in 2020, ultimately emerged from a *COVID*-shortened season as champions. Weitzman's insights extend beyond the team's road to victory to portray a group of players attempting to perform through an unprecedented pandemic while grappling with racial injustice.

What We're Reading

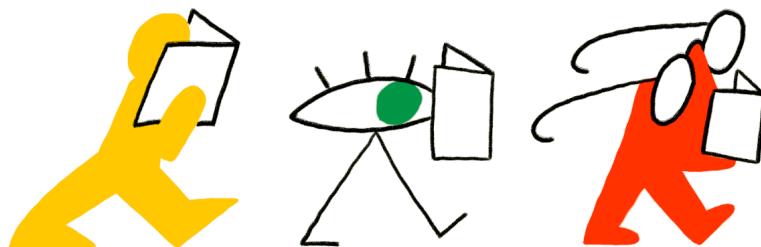
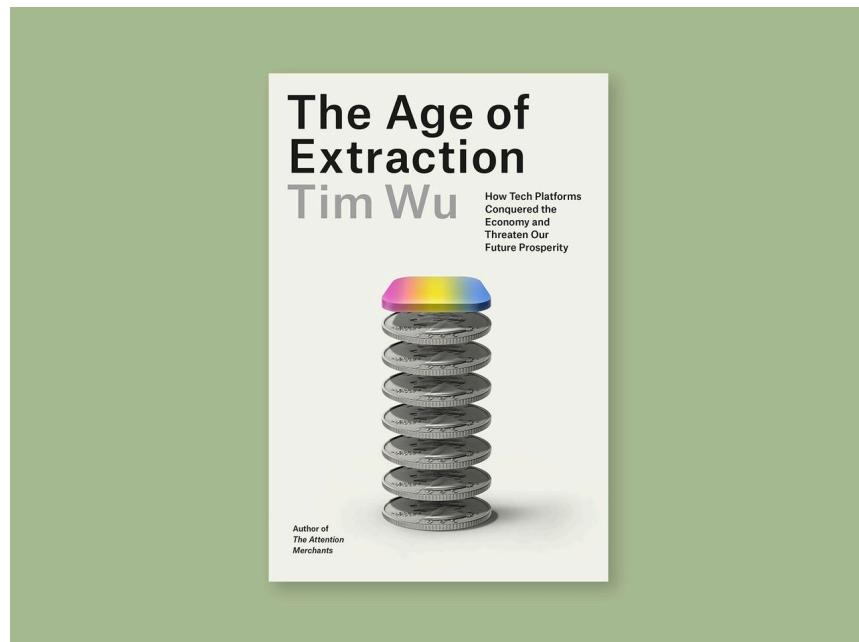
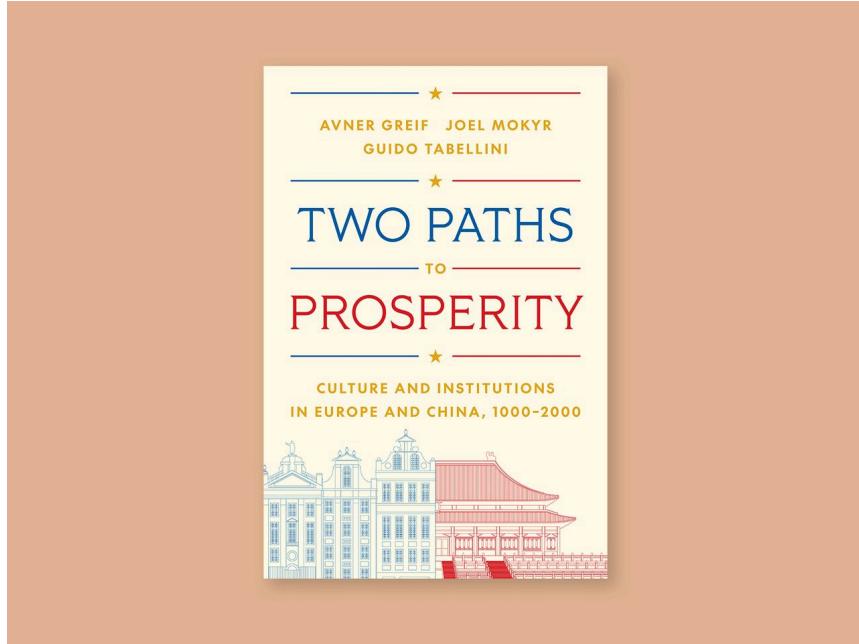


Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



The Age of Extraction, by Tim Wu (*Knopf*). A chilling spectre, of “a technologically armored wall between the haves and have-nots,” hangs over this incisive analysis of the major tech platforms and their impact on the broader economy. Wu traces the evolution of firms such as Google and Amazon from the nineteen-nineties, when they behaved largely like “public-spirited town squares,” to the twenty-tens, when they began to morph into the monopolistic “agents of wealth extraction” we know today. For Wu, the problem isn’t with the platforms, per se; it’s with the structures in which they dwell. In order to avoid worsening “the division and resentment that are the curse of our age,” he contends, we will need governmental interventions.



Two Paths to Prosperity, by *Avner Greif, Joel Mokyr, and Guido Tabellini* (Princeton). A thousand years ago, as Europeans waded through the Middle Ages, their Chinese contemporaries were living in a civilization that was among the most sophisticated in the world. So why, in the centuries that followed, did Europe become richer and more powerful than China? In their ambitious history, Greif, Mokyr (a winner of this year's Nobel Prize in Economics), and Tabellini suggest that cultural values and social organizations helped establish divergent paths. Confucianism held sway in China, where kinship groups managed local life. But in Europe, where family bonds were looser, strangers coöperated in organizations such as guilds and self-governing towns—organizations that gave rise to capable states, flourishing markets, and the Industrial Revolution.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/the-zorg-a-hollywood-ending-the-age-of-extraction-two-paths-to-prosperity>

[The Art World](#)

Ruth Asawa's Art of Defiant Hospitality

A retrospective at MOMA puts forth a persuasive case for an artist who saw making her work and living with others as inextricably entwined.

By [Julian Lucas](#)

November 17, 2025



A child of immigrants persecuted for their national origin and a practitioner of an abstract idiom that could have signalled placelessness, Asawa instead forged an art of connection.

Photograph by Imogen Cunningham / © Imogen Cunningham Trust

Ruth Asawa rarely missed a chance to loop others into her work. At Black Mountain College, she would wake before dawn to rouse Josef Albers, the Bauhaus color theorist, so that they could watch the sun rise through the fog on the hills. At seventeen, in a Japanese American internment camp in Arkansas, she sketched caricatures of her fellow-detainees. Some of her signature wire sculptures—

diaphanous, undulating forms, like chain-mail invertebrates—were made with the help of her sons and daughters. And in 1970, when she was commissioned to create a fountain for San Francisco’s Union Square, she enlisted schoolchildren from across the city in the design.

Her circle has only widened since her death, in 2013. Long esteemed in the art world and a local hero in San Francisco, Asawa has lately become a national figure, both for her sculptural inventions—burnished by our era’s nostalgia for mid-century-modern minimalism—and for the arc of her life. A Whitney show in 2019 returned her to prominence, and that same year saw the release of a children’s book about her. More recently, she was honored with a crater on Mercury. Now a retrospective that includes more than three hundred works, chosen by the curators Cara Manes and Janet Bishop, has travelled from SFMoMA to MoMA, where it is the largest exhibition the institution has ever devoted to a woman.



"Untitled" (S.046a-d), 1961.

Art work by Ruth Asawa / © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Courtesy David Zwirner; Photograph by Laurence Cuneo

The show puts forth a persuasive case for an artist who saw making art and living with others as—to borrow her phrase for her ouroboric creations—“one continuous form within a form.” We’re used to seeing abstract sculptures starkly displayed, as if they’ve come from a realm of pure geometry. Here, Asawa’s wire forms are surrounded by photographs and video of her at work and keepsakes from her home in San Francisco’s Noe Valley neighborhood, including the plaster “life masks” she cast of visitors and the hand-carved redwood doors. Drawings, prints, and watercolors of produce from her garden are on view near studies for her public

projects, including the Corten-steel origami fountains in her city’s Japantown.

Just as her sculptures teased a supple elegance from coarse materials, at times drawing inspiration from hardy desert plants, Asawa’s career embodied a sort of defiant hospitality. A child of immigrants persecuted for their national origin and a practitioner of an abstract idiom that could have signalled placelessness, she instead forged an art of connection—one that expressed a flinty determination to be, and to make others feel, at home in the world.

Asawa once called herself “just a farmer from Los Angeles.” Born in 1926 in Norwalk, California, the fourth of seven children, she grew up doing field work on rented acreage that her parents, as Japanese immigrants, were prohibited from owning. After Pearl Harbor, her father burned or buried anything that might mark them as foreign—ikebana manuals, kendo gear—in a scene that she would later memorialize. It didn’t save them. Branded “alien enemies,” Asawa, her siblings, and their mother were imprisoned, first at a former racetrack in Santa Anita, where they slept in converted stables.



“Poppy,” 1965.

*Art work by Ruth Asawa / © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Courtesy David Zwirner; Photograph by
© 2015 MOMA*

“It was the first time in my life I didn’t have to do anything,” Asawa later said. She took drawing lessons from three interned Disney animators in an ad-hoc school for the camp’s children. In 1943, she was permitted to leave the camp in Arkansas and enroll at a teachers’ college in Milwaukee, where she hoped to become an art instructor, only to be barred from teaching by xenophobic local schools. A classmate urged her to try Black Mountain College, the Bauhaus-inspired experiment in North Carolina where students farmed, studied, and lived alongside their professors as equals.

Asawa thrived among a now legendary cohort. Her classmates included Ray Johnson and Robert Rauschenberg, and her professors included Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning, John Cage, and Albers—who, along with his wife, Anni, particularly took Asawa under their wing. She absorbed Albers’s lessons in transparency, Fuller’s geodesic logic, and the school’s agrarian ethos, milking cows and churning butter to meet her work-study quota. “We had to scrounge around,” she recalled, of Black Mountain’s perennial poverty. Near the beginning of the retrospective, there’s a painting of bright lozenges she made on the back of an envelope, and a spiral print created out of repeated laundry stamps.

She found a more lasting outlet for her geometric preoccupations during a summer in Mexico, where she learned to “knit” with wire. In the markets of Toluca, vendors used the technique to make egg carriers, but Asawa was captivated by the material’s “insect wing” transparency. She started with simple baskets—one became a mail tray for the Alberses—and soon discovered that, by closing the forms, she could nest and layer them in endless permutations.



Ruth Asawa making wire sculptures in California, November, 1954.

Photograph by Nat Farbman / The LIFE Picture Collection / Shutterstock / Art work by Ruth Asawa /
© 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Courtesy David Zwirner

One of the show's chief pleasures is witnessing this Cambrian explosion, which played out across the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Early on, there are slumped spheres and dumbbells, golden wire hyperboloids suggestive of crowns. Quickly, she begins stacking the forms vertically, like kelp fronds. Shapes float within shapes with beguiling implausibility: How does a small sphere end up floating in a bowling pin that sits in what looks like a trumpet's mouth? Asawa worked from the inside out, stopping just short of closing a form's navel so she could reverse course and spin a second skin around it. She aspired to evoke organic transformations, writing that "a sensation of watching metamorphosis can be achieved through the grouping of related forms at studied distances apart."

Easy to overlook amid the sculptures hanging throughout the show is a silver band wrapped around a black pebble. It's Asawa's wedding ring, designed by Fuller for her marriage to another Black Mountain student, Albert Lanier, in 1949. Over the next nine years —among her most creatively fecund—Asawa gave birth to six children, who played alongside her and even assisted with her work. "My home was and is my studio," Asawa said of their house, where a family friend, the photographer Imogen Cunningham, often chronicled these intergenerational collaborations.

There was little boundary between friendship, art-making, and everyday life. After someone gave her a plant from Death Valley, Asawa began making "tied wire sculptures," bundling dozens of strands, then letting them splay into smaller bundles, in an echo of the way that branches divide. Calling to mind tumbleweeds and snowflake-like fractals, they're more angular and texturally varied than the hanging forms. Asawa even experimented with electroplating, creating effects evocative of gnarled tree bark. Then, in 1985, lupus put a premature end to her experiments with wire. Undeterred, she turned to drawing and watercolors, often depicting plants from her garden. She also kept sculpting in metal, albeit differently, and with the hands of others.

Being led by your materials, Asawa believed, was akin to parenting. "What you do is become background, just like a parent allows a child to express himself," she said. Sometimes the link was more than analogy. Looking for ways to keep her kids busy, Asawa began mixing flour, salt, and water into baker's clay, which they molded into little figures and lined up on the family piano. In 1968, she introduced the technique in the Alvarado School Arts Workshop, a program that she co-founded to bring working artists to public classrooms. Its success caught the eye of an architect, who soon asked her to design a fountain for Union Square.



“Andrea,” commissioned by the developer William M. Roth for the renovation of Ghirardelli Square, in San Francisco, 1966–68.

Art work by Ruth Asawa / © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Courtesy David Zwirner; Photograph by Aiko Cuneo

Asawa had already startled admirers of her wire sculptures with other public works. In the mid-sixties, when she made a fountain for Ghirardelli Square, its architect balked when he saw that it featured two mermaids; it's now a cherished landmark. The Union Square fountain, too, would be figurative, even whimsical. Had she turned her back on modernist abstraction, on letting form arise from the nature of the material rather than from the artist's imagination? Maybe. But you could also say that she was simply heeding a different material this time: the city itself, and the people who lived in it.

More than two hundred and fifty people, many of them children, helped create the fountain's forty-one bas-reliefs, first modelled in baker's clay and later cast in bronze. (Mice had to be kept from eating the work in progress.) The finished reliefs form a bronze cylinder that rises out of the brick steps leading to the square—a knobbly, exuberant portrait of the city, as dense with incident as a “Where's Waldo?” scene. Mission Dolores and the Golden Gate Bridge share space with flirting couples, street protests, and

neighborhood festivals. One panel even depicts the wedding of Asawa's daughter Aiko, who sculpted the fountain's city hall.

Asawa wanted the work "to be touched, loved, and patted," and the retrospective features a cast of one panel—showing the city's 1969 anti-Vietnam War peace march—that invites exactly this. Among the contributors to the fountain was Asawa's mother, Haru. A family once expelled from California had become part of its permanent fabric, despite Apple's attempt, in 2013, to move the fountain aside for a store.



"Untitled" (WC.187), circa nineteen-sixties.

Art work by Ruth Asawa / © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Courtesy David Zwirner; Photograph by James Paonessa

In her later decades, Asawa kept up the same braiding of art, family, and civic life. She went on experimenting—sometimes in wire, sometimes on paper, sometimes with cast bronze—but the medium mattered less than the fact that she was always making, and always devising ways to include others. One of her later public works, installed in 1994 on the steps of the federal courthouse in San Jose, commemorates the hundred and twenty thousand people incarcerated during the Second World War. The plaque is double-sided: one face shows the thriving Japanese American communities that existed before 1941, including the farm where Asawa grew up;

the reverse, their dispossession, with a corner reserved for Congress's apology, in 1988, to the internees.

Looking at a photograph of the artist and her daughter Aiko standing before the monument, you wonder whether Asawa could have guessed how quickly the country would resume the sorts of activities it was formally regretting. Since January, the courthouse has been a stage for protests against the Trump Administration's deportations, as immigrant families are again rounded up and sent to squalid camps. Somewhere among them, we have to hope, are future artists like Asawa, ready to abolish the difference—as unreal in society as in sculpture—between inside and out. ♦

Julian Lucas, a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2018.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/ruth-asawas-art-of-defiant-hospitality>

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[The Current Cinema](#)

“Sirāt” Is a Harrowing, Exhilarating Dance of Death

In Oliver Laxe’s desert thriller, an intensely agonizing journey reveals both the pitiless nature of fate and the stubborn persistence of compassion.

By [Justin Chang](#)

November 14, 2025



Laxe’s film begins at a rave in southern Morocco.

Illustration by Antoine Maillard

“Sirāt,” an astonishing new film from the French-born Spanish director Oliver Laxe, begins in the Sahara Desert—specifically, a mountainous stretch of southern Morocco where nomadic European revellers have come, in large trucks and camper vans, for an epic rave. The gathering has the vibe of a pilgrimage, the preparations unfolding with quasi-religious grandeur. Several enormous speakers, arranged on a dance floor of sand, have the coldly inanimate majesty of the monoliths in “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), as if they were sonic portals, transmitting pulses from an alien dimension. The music that pours forth, composed by the electronic artist Kangding Ray, is magnificently transporting, and the ravers surrender to the beat with glorious delirium.

Glimpsed from above, they appear to jump and gyrate as one—a single, ecstatic organism.

But then, with seemingly on-the-fly artlessness, Laxe’s camera picks a few of the dancers out. There is Jade (Jade Oukid), a slender woman with dark-ringed gimlet eyes, a hoop earring, and a bowler hat. And here are Tonin (Tonin Janvier), a man with a warm, crinkly smile and a prosthetic leg, and Bigui (Richard Bellamy), who’s missing part of his right forearm and sporting a ratty Mohawk wig. In Laxe’s earlier films, most recently the drama “Fire Will Come” (2020), he has worked mainly with nonprofessional actors; he discovered most of the principal players in “Sirāt” at raves that he attended over the years. One notable exception is the superb Spanish actor Sergi López, who plays the protagonist: a heavyset, middle-aged man named Luis, who is introduced wandering about the rave with his young son, Esteban (Bruno Núñez Arjona), and their dog. This clearly isn’t their scene. Rather, Luis’s daughter, Mar, disappeared months earlier, and he has reason to believe that she is here. No one has seen her, but in a conversation with several ravers—including Stef (Stefania Gadda), a woman of few words and immense gravity—Luis learns of an upcoming event farther south, toward Mauritania, to which Mar may be headed.

In the distance, sandstone cliffs, as imposing as the outcroppings in a John Ford Western, loom over the unruly bacchanal—and over Luis and Esteban’s urgent search—with monumental indifference. By the time “Sirāt” ends, roughly two hours later, that sense of godlike impassivity has practically seeped into your marrow. We are still in the Sahara, although it’s not clear where. The characters, or the ones that remain, are bound for parts unknown, and any inclination toward revelry has vanished from their weather-beaten faces. But Laxe’s film—which won a Jury Prize at Cannes this year, and which Spain has submitted for the Oscar for Best International Feature—isn’t a cynical or nihilistic work. The movie begins in exhilaration and concludes in despair, and what unfolds

in between is an experience of singularly turbulent and transfixing power; for sheer visceral excitement and sustained emotional force, I haven't encountered its equal this year. It's an extraordinarily propulsive piece of filmmaking, and every moment of it is suffused with feeling. For all its perils and cruelties, "Sirāt" doesn't drain you or numb you into submission. I left it unsteady but invigorated, and grateful anew for the ground beneath my feet.

The rave comes to an abrupt stop, and the story, which Laxe scripted with Santiago Fillol, takes off like a shot. Armed soldiers turn up and order the ravers to leave; the world, it appears, has plunged into violent chaos, though the doomsday specifics are deliberately vague. (When one character questions whether World War Three has begun, another replies, "It's been the end of the world for a long time.") As the party disperses, five ravers—Jade, Tonin, Bigui, Stef, and Josh (Joshua Liam Henderson)—break off and speed away, headed toward that other rave. Desperate to find Mar, Luis and Esteban impulsively join them. They're driving a beat-up old minivan, less equipped for a long desert journey than the heavier-duty vehicles driven by their companions. But the nomads are moved by father and son's plight, and by Luis's gift of gasoline, a resource as scarce as water and food.

Its visual and sonic magnitude notwithstanding, "Sirāt" is a drama of intimate exchanges and transactions, of improbable bonds forged under adversity and small blessings freely and unexpectedly given. Here, in these uninhabitable surroundings, Laxe taps into an oasis of communal feeling that transcends barriers of background and language. (The characters speak in snatches of Spanish, French, and, very occasionally, Arabic and English.) At one point, Luis assumes that he and Esteban have been abandoned, only to realize, with a start, that their newfound friends are actually circling back to help. In such moments, we grasp the source of the story's mysterious power: a tough-minded understanding that kindness is rare yet persistent, and quite possibly an affront to the laws of nature. "Sirāt" is a chain of defiantly compassionate acts—noble

human improbabilities that take on, in retrospect, an air of fatalistic inevitability.

Laxe, a restless wanderer himself, knows Morocco well. He shot his first feature, “You All Are Captains” (2011), in Tangier, where he’d spent several years working at a shelter for disadvantaged children. Several of these children appeared in the movie—a formally playful collision of fiction and documentary in which Laxe, also making an appearance, slyly interrogated his European outsider-artist role. Next came “Mimosas” (2016), an elusive, arrestingly gorgeous drama about a caravan bearing a dying sheikh across Morocco’s Atlas Mountains to his homeland. The film had the beauty of a travelogue and the opacity of a parable. Its most dynamic character was a fiery Muslim preacher who warned his fellow-travellers not to stray, geographically or morally.

“Sirāt” drinks deeply of “Mimosas.” In both pictures, which were shot on 16-mm. film by the cinematographer Mauro Herce, a river is forded, an alternate path through the mountains is taken, and the road to salvation is found to be perilously narrow indeed. The Arabic word *sirāt* can refer to, among other things, the razor-thin bridge that leads, over the chasm of Hell, to paradise—a heavy burden of eschatological significance, but the film shoulders it lightly. The characters may be navigating a wind-scoured Purgatory, but Laxe is visibly captivated by the cinematic sweep of the journey: the dreamy nocturnal poetry of cars in motion, but also the gritty blood-and-sweat mechanics of the trek. When the group struggles to dislodge a vehicle’s tires from a precariously sloped, uneven road, we are mired in the treacherous terrain of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s “The Wages of Fear” (1953) and William Friedkin’s “Sorcerer” (1977). As in those films, a car can be a shelter one moment and a trap the next. Death, though a likelihood from the get-go, nevertheless has a way of striking when least expected.

What Laxe retains, and what Clouzot and Friedkin pointedly didn't, is a sliver of hope in humanity. Even under the ghastliest of circumstances, the characters don't turn on one another in a frenzy of bickering and backstabbing, as movie characters are often programmed to do. Just about the only remotely harsh words are spoken by Luis, in a brief, understandable fit of anger, after his dog ingests a raver's feces, which contains traces of LSD. (The dose proves nonfatal, and far shittier times are still ahead.) What Laxe has orchestrated is not a simplistic clash of cultures but a collective upending of fortunes in which the rulings of fate, or of Allah, prove too cruel and too permanent to trigger a petulant blame game. Who survives and who doesn't? The answers will surprise you. At first, we marvel at the ravers' physical self-mastery, their effortless control of their copiously inked and scarred bodies. We're tickled when Tonin, prosthetic removed, does a hilarious puppet act with his knee, and enthralled when, during a spontaneous joyride, Josh straddles two speeding vehicles, as if he were a War Boy from "Mad Max: Fury Road" (2015) or Jean-Claude Van Damme doing a Volvo commercial. Later, though, it is Luis—portly, square, fish-out-of-water Luis—who, after a debilitating loss, seems to come into renewed physical command of himself. He's probably never raved a day in his life, but, by the movie's end, he's the only one, you suspect, who could freestyle without fear.

López's performance is wondrous—doubly so for those of us who saw him as a sadistic Fascist captain in "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006) and vowed never to trust him again. Here, the actor tears a man's soul apart and then, gradually, pieces a few bits of it back together. That's the best any of us could do, López suggests, after we've lost everything in the world, except the world itself. All of which is to say that you should see "Sirāt" twice: first, for the swift, brutalizing shock of the experience and, second, for the lingering consolation of its spirit, and its insistence that the most meaningful families can be forged under the bleakest of circumstances. Laxe's most resonant tableau isn't a desolate landscape, or a fiery explosion, or

another vision of Hell on earth. It's Luis, Bigui, Jade, Stef, Tonin, and Josh asleep in a truck, their bodies wrapped around one another —silent and tranquil for now, but not, perhaps, in the shared rave of their dreams. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/sirat-movie-review>

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[The Theatre](#)

Kristin Chenoweth's Uneven Gilt Trip in “The Queen of Versailles”

The Tony-winning performer stars as a Marie Antoinette wannabe in a musical about excess, and Anne Washburn goes post-apocalyptic with “The Burning Cauldron of Fiery Fire.”

By [Helen Shaw](#)

November 17, 2025



Chenoweth brings her laser-guided soprano back to Broadway.

Illustration by Jasjyot Singh Hans

In Lauren Greenfield's stunning documentary "The Queen of Versailles," from 2012, its subjects—the billionaire "time-share king" David Siegel; his shopaholic wife, Jackie; their eight kids; and various fluffy white dogs—represent a modern-day fall from grace. Greenfield, a noted photographer and filmmaker, embedded herself with the Siegels for years as the family built one of the largest private homes in America, a mega-tribute to Louis XIV's Palace of Versailles, in a Florida housing development. After the 2008 financial crisis, David's over-leveraged empire falters, and their half-finished Versailles—suddenly a metaphor for American folly—heads toward foreclosure. As the documentary ends, even Jackie's appetite for excess seems to slacken. Has the Queen had . . . enough?

If only the playwright Lindsey Ferrentino and the composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz had been able to stop there, too. But that foreclosure-as-comeuppance arrives only halfway through their tonally queasy musical adaptation of "The Queen of Versailles," now at the St. James. Ferrentino and Schwartz wrote the titular role for the Broadway diva Kristin Chenoweth, whose steely grip on the show (she's also a producer) is embodied by her armored, indomitable Jackie. As the intermission curtain rings down, hubby David (F. Murray Abraham, speak-singing in a gravelly growl) might be retrenching financially, but "this is not the way our movie ends," Chenoweth swears, aiming her laser-guided soprano at the sky.

Schwartz's songs for "Versailles" feel rewarmed and strangely impersonal. He hasn't written a Broadway musical since "Wicked," which launched Chenoweth's glittering Glinda more than twenty years ago, and, despite flashes of his customary wit, something has happened to his gift for memorable melody. Luckily, he can still generate anthems that suit Chenoweth's effortless technical precision. Just like Jackie, Chenoweth wears bright, va-va-voom dresses (Christian Cowan designed the clothes) and tucks a cloudlike Pomeranian under one arm. But the real Jackie is

intriguingly spacey—Greenfield’s camera depicts her picking her way through her kids’ detritus as if in a baffled dream. Chenoweth has none of Jackie’s lassitude or doubt. She moves like a fighter, Scarlett O’Hara with Vaseline on her teeth.

Ferrentino’s whimsical framing choice is to have us occasionally check in with the real Versailles of 1789, where Marie Antoinette (Cassandra James) eventually gets marched off by blood-smeared peasants. The ensemble, playing the French court, issues a broadside against the one per cent. “You’ve got your peasants thinking they’re tomorrow’s millionaires,” they sing, pretty impressed that no one is trying to guillotine the Siegels.

The rest of the show has not gotten that same Marxist memo: Ferrentino and the director, Michael Arden, clearly want to show compassion for their oligarch subjects. (Does it matter that the real Jackie Siegel is an investor in this production?) The first act establishes Jackie as a loving striver, clutching lottery tickets alongside her parents as they watch “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” Jackie’s longtime fuel, she sings, has been the “champagne wishes and caviar dreams” she learned from TV. When we see her as a wealthy woman, though, she’s rejoicing over pallets of McDonald’s. It’s not just Jackie; at least three other characters talk about early poverty as a reason for their world-destabilizing greed.

There’s a clarity to the arc of Greenfield’s documentary: first the pride goeth, then a fall teacheth. It’s a shame that the musical gets bogged down by what happened after that. In the scattershot second act, Ferrentino and Schwartz chart the next decade or so of the Siegels’ story, including Jackie’s appearance on TV’s “Celebrity Wife Swap,” the recovery of David’s leverage, and a devastating personal loss: their daughter Victoria (Nina White) dies of an overdose, which the musical links to her parents’ own failings.

Does the show want us to eat the rich or pity them? It slips a disk bending over backward to do both. Ferrentino and Schwartz's subtitle is "An American Fable," but, crucially, their Queen's Versailles is never lost; the well-connected real-estate élite recovered differently from 2008 than the rest of us did. And so, to maintain a sense of moral compass, Victoria's real death has been (distastefully) incorporated into the dramatic arc, presented as the cost of Jackie's avarice. Despite such emotional crassness, certain recent events have made "The Queen of Versailles" newly relevant.

At a climactic moment, Dane Laffrey's "grand hall" set, which has been swathed in construction tarpaulins, reveals itself to us: a white marble staircase, rising up from a white marble floor to a white marble gallery. Gold leaf blooms across everything—Corinthian capitals, empty picture frames, rosettes. It's all so familiar. When Donald Trump stuck ormolu tables into every available corner of the Oval Office, comparisons were made to dictators with similarly ornate taste. But Jackie and David's Florida décor, particularly as captured in Greenfield's documentary, may be the closer parallel. In America, since 2008, gold leaf and white marble aren't just the aesthetic of ersatz aristocracy; they suggest collapse and bankruptcy, too. If you remember one image from Greenfield's film, it's probably the pile of dog turds forgotten beneath a gold-edged dining-room chair. I haven't been able to see a gilded room since without also imagining the stink.

When it comes to inscribing the American project with droll, knowing dread, the playwright Anne Washburn has no equal. Her magnum opus "Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play," from 2012, imagined a time following a nuclear cataclysm, when survivors along the Eastern Seaboard gather around fires to share whatever tales they can recall. Across the decade-spanning acts, these few remembered stories—a much loved episode of "The Simpsons," say—form the ground for a new culture, full of hectic, carnival intensity. Washburn's latest drama, "The Burning Cauldron of Fiery Fire," now at the Vineyard, co-produced with the Civilians theatre

company and directed by Steve Cosson, is also concerned with storytelling, but her new conclusions about culture are, if anything, darker.

Somewhere in the dry California hills, an intentional community has retreated into agrarian, God-centered seclusion. We meet its hippie-ish members as rather adorable try-hards, grappling with how to honor the first of their cohort to die. They burn him, or attempt to. (“There’s meat on him still,” one community member says, matter-of-factly, after their D.I.Y. pyre fizzles.) The need to conceal this technically “extralegal” action reveals each person’s capacity for falsehood: Thomas (Bruce McKenzie) lies easily; Diana (Donnetta Lavinia Grays) can barely fib; Gracie (Cricket Brown) believes that, if they tell a story communally, the new story “will live in us in an alive way.”

The pitch-perfect cast alternates between playing the community’s adults and its children, so that we see this wood-smoke-and-wild-plum life through both experienced and innocent eyes. Tom Pecinka plays the dead man, Peter (in flashbacks), and his magnetic brother, Will, who seems hypnotized by the beautiful Mari (Marianne Rendón). The composers David Dabbon and Nehemiah Luckett transform Washburn’s ecstatic lyrics into stirring Shaker-esque hymns; the farm, despite frequent squabbles over chores, can feel like Eden, with angels and devils and even a newly tempted Adam and Eve close at hand.

As she did in “Mr. Burns,” Washburn hints at an apocalypse to come and includes a scene in which a group convenes to put on a pageant. This performance, though, is aimed inward, a reimagined version of Peter’s fate—the first act’s “fiery fire”—in a childish, fairy-tale style. Washburn writes in several rich registers, creating deliberate confusion for her characters, and for her audience; she’s interested in the ways that truth can be altered or lost. Did Peter kill himself, for instance? At one point, we see a piece of paper that

might be his suicide note, but then someone eats it. I thought of the apple of knowledge—and how it might have tasted. ♦

Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/the-queen-of-versailles-theatre-review-the-burning-cauldron-of-fiery-fire>

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Poems

- **“Senescence”**

“Just as I come to know a thing it’s gone again.”

- **“The Loved Ones”**

“The loved ones we call the dead / depart from us and for a while / are absent.”

[Poems](#)

Senescence

By [D. A. Powell](#)

November 17, 2025

Just as I come to know a thing it's gone again.

What's in my heartwood in my head, brashy, ashy, friable,
crumbled colors.

Dormancy. Of matter, of leaf, an orderly degradation.

I have come to measure the dark, not just the frost and not
the lack of light. The uninterrupted dark

of which the winter is a small part. A contraction of the corona,
catch

in the windpipe of the old organ, organ of the old windpipe, pipe
of the pileated woodpecker pecking a whole hole in me.

Yellow, orange, brown. The greens break down, the chloroplasts
depart. Each leaf losing its factories from the outside in, its
faculties

I seem to mean, from edge to artery, the last gold somewhere
in a vein of no use now. Abscission is a nice way to say
the natural cutting off of things. A wounded limb where leaf scar

gives way to bud scale, safeguard, night nurse, attending orderly
of the tender leaf below. It comes again the assent of spring first
leaf first bloom first fiddle of the fiddle fern. I hated to lose
the light, right when the frost and the xanthophyll make shatter
lightning so plentiful wind shaking the old boughs tambor style
I do not gentle into any any. Any one leaves
and another moves in. New twigs. New nest. Sometimes
a whole new tree in another life in another fall
from another book in another tongue and what
world, this one? This one? This one, maybe. Maybe
the last page torn off so it can't be read
so it cannot happen (have happened) yet

*D. A. Powell received the 2019 John Updike Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
He teaches at the University of San Francisco.*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/senescence-d-a-powell-poem>

[Poems](#)

The Loved Ones

By [Wendell Berry](#)

November 17, 2025

The loved ones we call the dead
depart from us and for a while
are absent. And then as if
called back by our love, they come
near us again. They enter our dreams.
We feel they have been near us
when we have not thought of them.
They are simply here, simply waiting
while we are distracted among
our obligations. At last
it comes to us: They live now
in the permanent world.
We are the absent ones.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/24/the-loved-ones-wendell-berry-poem>

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Puzzles & Games

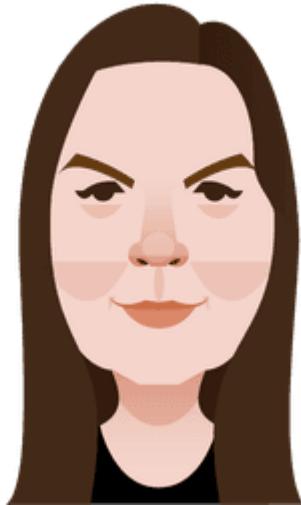
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A challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, November 17, 2025

A *challenging puzzle.*



By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

November 17, 2025

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[Elizabeth C. Gorski](#) is the founder of Crossword Nation and writes a daily puzzle for King Features Syndicate. She has created crosswords for the New York Times and other publications.

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