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January Festivals Bring the Weird, Wonderful Shows

Also: “*Tartuffe*” mania, the guitar stylings of William Tyler and Yasmin Williams, Justin Chang’s movies for a new year, and more.

By [Helen Shaw](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Jillian Steinhauer](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Taran Dugal](#), and [Justin Chang](#)

January 2, 2026

I wait all year for January to roll around again—it’s New York’s hottest time of the year, theatrically speaking, when the city fields as much experimental work in one month as it does in the other eleven combined. Several of my favorite festivals happen simultaneously, including the much-loved and long-lived **Under the Radar**, which this year spreads its umbrella over thirty-two productions.



Marianne Rendón in Lisa Fagan and Lena Engelstein’s “Friday Night Rat Catchers.”
Photograph by Maria Baranova

Anne Gridley’s “Watch Me Walk,” directed by Eric Ting, will be at Soho Rep (at its current digs in Playwrights Horizons); Elevator Repair Service premières its version of James Joyce’s “Ulysses” at the Public, applying its deconstructionist fervor to the postmodern masterpiece; and Lisa Fagan and Lena Engelstein bring back their “Friday Night Rat Catchers,” after a run at New York Live Arts. This last show contains a beautiful, tragicomic solo for Engelstein, in which she becomes a sort of slow-motion avalanche, dancing as rock after rock drops out of her coat onto the floor.

Under the Radar also provides a vital connection with international work, at venues such as the Irish Arts Center, which will host the Dublin-based company Brokentalkers, and *PAC NYC*, which welcomes “The Visitors,” a “first contact” drama from Moogahlin Performing Arts and the Sydney Theatre Company. At the same time, the catalogue groans under the weight of all the local talent working at the cutting edge of the form. Tina Satter, the HawtPlates, and Eric Berryman all have pieces on display.

The **Prototype** festival includes my most-anticipated work in the month’s lineup, Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar’s reconstruction of the “post rock” opera “What to Wear,” at *BAM*, which was originally a 2006 collaboration between the composer Michael Gordon and the much-missed avant-garde director Richard Foreman. And the **Exponential Festival**, which contains the fringiest offerings in the January slate, will be in a number of Brooklyn spaces, with pieces like the Goat Exchange’s “Time Passes,” which incorporates text from Virginia Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse” and—this seems almost too obvious, given the weather—“Jaws.” I think that show might sum up my excitement for the whole micro-season. You jump into the ocean, hoping for the best, but also a little scared. Wild things are waiting in the water.—*Helen Shaw*



About Town

Americana

The Nashville guitarist **William Tyler** has spent his career outlining the reaches of ambient country, with instrumental epics that meander into a vast expanse, tinkering with folk, pop rock, and Americana. After stints in the bands Lambchop and Silver Jews, Tyler ventured into psychedelia as a soloist in 2010, with rustic music that feels infinite. He joins the Virginian guitar virtuoso **Yasmin Williams** to perform a set as part of Winter Jazzfest's Brooklyn Marathon. Together these dexterous artists showcase not just the boundlessness of the finger-style playing but its power over the imagination.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Music Hall of Williamsburg; Jan. 10.](#))*

Classical

If you watched Richard Linklater's new film "Blue Moon" and found yourself wondering whether Lorenz Hart was right to hate "Oklahoma!," or if his bitterness over his breakup with Richard Rodgers simply clouded his ability to enjoy it, there's a way to find out. This January, treat yourself to clarity—and toe-tapping—at Carnegie Hall, where the Orchestra of St. Luke's presents "**Oklahoma! In Concert.**" Starring such musical-theatre pros as Emmett O'Hanlon, Micaela Diamond, Jasmine Amy Rogers, and "S.N.L." alum Ana Gasteyer, the concert will do away with the corn-y set dressing and focus on the music. Hart may have

questioned whether that's a good thing, but you can be the judge.—
Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Jan. 12.)

Dance



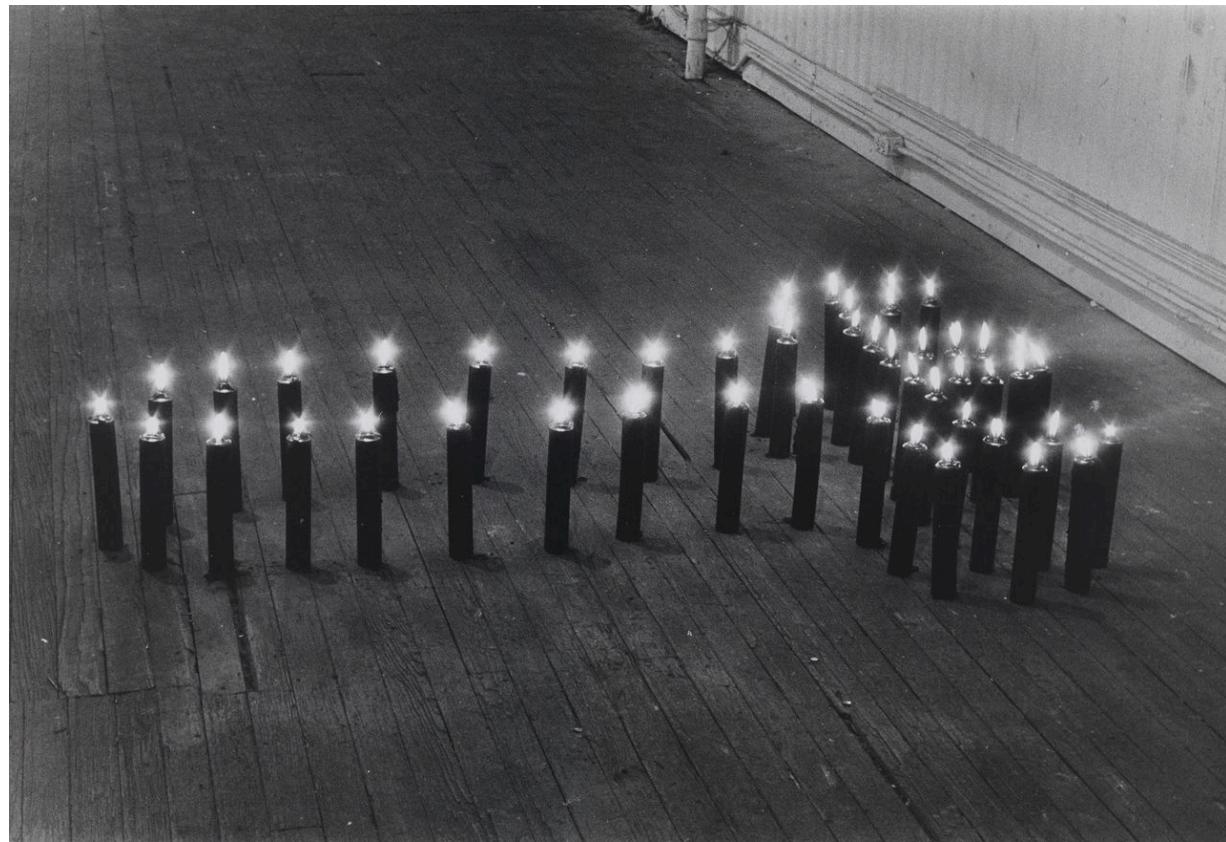
Pam Tanowitz's "Pastoral."
Photograph by Maria Baranova

Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 is called the "Pastoral" Symphony because of its evocations of birdsong, brooks, and heavy weather. In "**Pastoral**," a delightful collaboration among the choreographer Pam Tanowitz, the composer Caroline Shaw, and the painter Sarah Crowner, Shaw cleverly samples and remixes Beethoven's score using a live woodwind trio, archival tracks, and field recordings of crickets. Floral paintings by Crowner cover curtains and flats with which the graceful dancers wittily and poetically rearrange space, as Tanowitz's choreography swirls in complex patterns. This "Pastoral" is as much about the contemplation of art, and the making of it, as it is about nature.—*Brian Seibert (Rose Theatre; Jan. 11-13.)*

Off Broadway

In Molière's seventeenth-century satire “**Tartuffe**,” the titular religious grifter (Matthew Broderick, keeping his powder too dry) buffaloes a wealthy man, Orgon (David Cross), who doesn't notice that his spiritual counsellor has designs on his wife, Elmire (Amber Gray). Lucas Hnath's sometimes-amusing new adaptation, directed by Sarah Benson, does contain certain vigorous touches: the outraged flouncing of Orgon's son, Damis (Ryan J. Haddad), for example. But Enver Chakartash's furbelowed, ballooning costumes set a tone of sumptuous buoyancy that the ensemble as a whole rarely finds, despite the efforts of several excellent clowns; Hnath's awkward new verse keeps weighing them down, and there's rather more comic inertia here than farce.—*Helen Shaw (Reviewed in our issue of 12/29/25 & 1/5/26.)* ([New York Theatre Workshop](#); through Jan. 24.)

Art

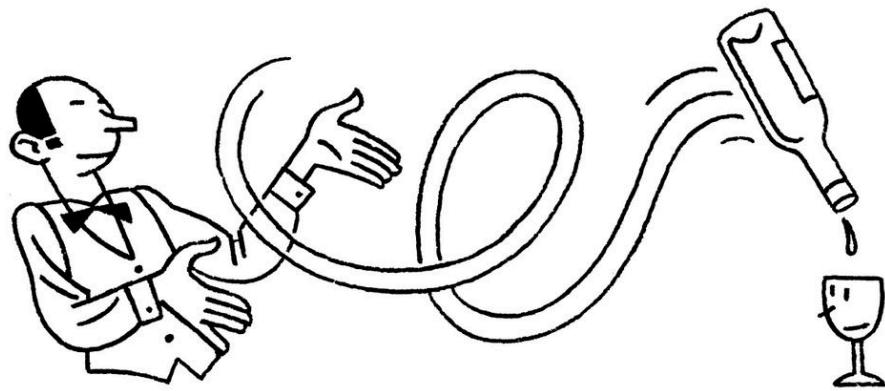


“*Ñaño Burial*,” from 1976.

As the Cuban American artist **Ana Mendieta's** star has risen, what she did during her life has sometimes been overshadowed by the dramatic circumstances of her death. (In 1985, at the age of thirty-six, she fell out a window in her apartment; her husband, the sculptor Carl Andre, was charged with and acquitted of murder.) This exhibition goes “Back to the Source,” to borrow its subtitle, reestablishing the haunting and visceral terrain of Mendieta’s work. The focus is her “*Silueta*” series, from the nineteen-seventies, for which she photographed outlines of figures that she made in the earth. They showcase a rooted, searching spirituality and her gift for turning absence into presence, as in the exhibition’s only sculpture, “*Ñaño Burial*” (1976), which reads as a kind of premonitory memorial: forty-seven black candles melting down into a topographic silhouette of Mendieta’s body.—*Jillian Steinhauer* ([Marian Goodman](#); through Jan. 17.)

Movies

MOMA’s annual series **“To Save and Project”** gathers noteworthy restorations and rediscoveries from around the world. This year it unearths a set of short films made between 1908 and 1913 by D. W. Griffith, including a giddily eccentric comedy, “Those Awful Hats,” set in a movie theatre where action is taken against viewers who refuse to remove their elaborate headwear. The supreme stylist of silent cinema, F. W. Murnau, directed an audacious silent version of Molière’s “Tartuffe,” in 1925. Murnau turns the comedy, about a faux-pious fraudster, into a seething melodrama—and a cautionary film-within-a-film; *MOMA* presents it in both the U.S. version and the longer, recently restored German one.—*Richard Brody* ([MOMA](#); Jan. 8-Feb. 2.)



Bar Tab

Taran Dugal swings with a ten-piece jazz band.

The raison d'être of **Ornithology**, a bohemian jazz club in Bushwick situated under the rumbling J/Z line, is scrawled in white text on its exterior façade, next to a mural of a pinstriped Charlie Parker blowing away on his sax: "Bird lives." This insistence on the genre as a thriving subculture, not yet relegated to graffitied-over plaques of scenes-once-prosperous, grounds the ethos of the joint, which hosts a constant rotation of some of the most exciting combos in New York. On a recent frigid Tuesday, a pair of seasoned patrons had tickets for the Ornithology Big Band, a ten-piece group, who had set up under some dusty Moroccan-style rugs hanging from the rafters. Across the room, Pharoah Sanders, in a large black-and-white portrait, looked on with an expression of discontent. The patrons took their seats by the bar as the group launched into a cover of "My Favorite Things," from "The Sound of Music." Sometime during the coda, the guests' cocktails arrived. The Autumn in New York, a tangy, gin-heavy blend of lemon and crème de violette, was just fine, and not quite worth its sixteen-dollar price tag. The Calcutta Cutie, however, made up for it, with a pear-and-chai-infused vodka—sweet, refreshing, and just bitter enough. It lasted through the end of the third song, penned by one

of the saxophonists, who glanced anxiously around the room as his bandmates took solos. “Don’t fuck this up,” his furrowed brow all but yelled. As the set wound down with the mournful Duke Ellington number “I Got It Bad (And That Ain’t Good),” the guests got to work on a Juju, a delightful, ginger-forward mix of rosemary-infused rum and lime. Spit valves full, chops spent, the band finished their set, and the patrons, ears ringing, set out into the night.

What to Watch

The movie critic Justin Chang shares five films to help start the new year off right.



*Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant star in “Holiday,” from 1938.
Photograph from Everett*

“Holiday” (1938)

One of three pictures that the director George Cukor made with Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, this witty, melancholy masterwork builds to one of the greatest New Year's Eve-party sequences ever captured on film—a simply magical interlude, in which two characters, who have fallen in love before our eyes, see their dreams realized and perhaps dashed in the same instance. Few films leave you with a more hopeful sense of life and love's possibilities, but fewer still are also more achingly aware of how fragile—and elusive—those possibilities are.

“Breathless” (1960)

Jean-Luc Godard’s sixty-five-year-old début feature, presently being saluted in Richard Linklater’s terrific making-of comedy, “Nouvelle Vague,” remains one of the freshest starts in movie history. To see it again (and again) is to feel an intoxicating sense of creative rejuvenation in every cut and frame.

“Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore” (1974)

Ellen Burstyn justly won an Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in Martin Scorsese’s wonderful drama, about a recently widowed mother who, determined to seize a new life from the jaws of tragedy, moves West with her son and sets out to revive a long-ago-aborted singing career. See it especially for the great Diane Ladd, whose death in November made 2025 that much harder to bear.

“Into Great Silence” (2007)

Every new year calls for an altitude adjustment. In 2002 and 2003, the German director Philip Gröning spent months filming at the Grande Chartreuse, a monastery located high up in the French Alps, and emerged with one of the most genuinely awe-inspiring nonfiction films of that year, or any year—a cleansing, rigorously patient immersion in the daily and even hourly rhythms of

Carthusian monks, whose vows of silence incline the viewer toward their own state of contemplative rapture. “Into Great Silence” isn’t available for streaming in the U.S., so, barring a revival screening near you, you’ll have to purchase a DVD to watch it, which is fitting for a film that encourages patience and the avoidance of shortcuts.

“Brittany Runs a Marathon” (2019)

I have run a few half-marathons in my life, but have never (and never will) run a full one. But whenever my inspiration flags and laziness makes me loath to jog for even a mile, I flash back fondly on Paul Downs Colaizzo’s winning comedy of self-care. Jillian Bell is terrific in the title role of a New Yorker who, as the movie begins, can barely make it to the next corner—and, by the end, has defied everyone’s expectations, her own most of all.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Come again, Connor Storrie?](#)
- [High highs and low lows](#)
- [Let Sandra Oh fix the masculinity crisis](#)

Helen Shaw was a staff writer at *The New Yorker* from 2022 to 2025.

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

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

Brian Seibert has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing](#),” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

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

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.

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/january-festivals-bring-the-weird-wonderful-shows>

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[Book Currents](#)

Thelma Golden on the Literature of Harlem

The director of the Studio Museum chooses some of her most beloved books about the neighborhood—both as a place and as an anchor for Black cultural consciousness.

December 24, 2025



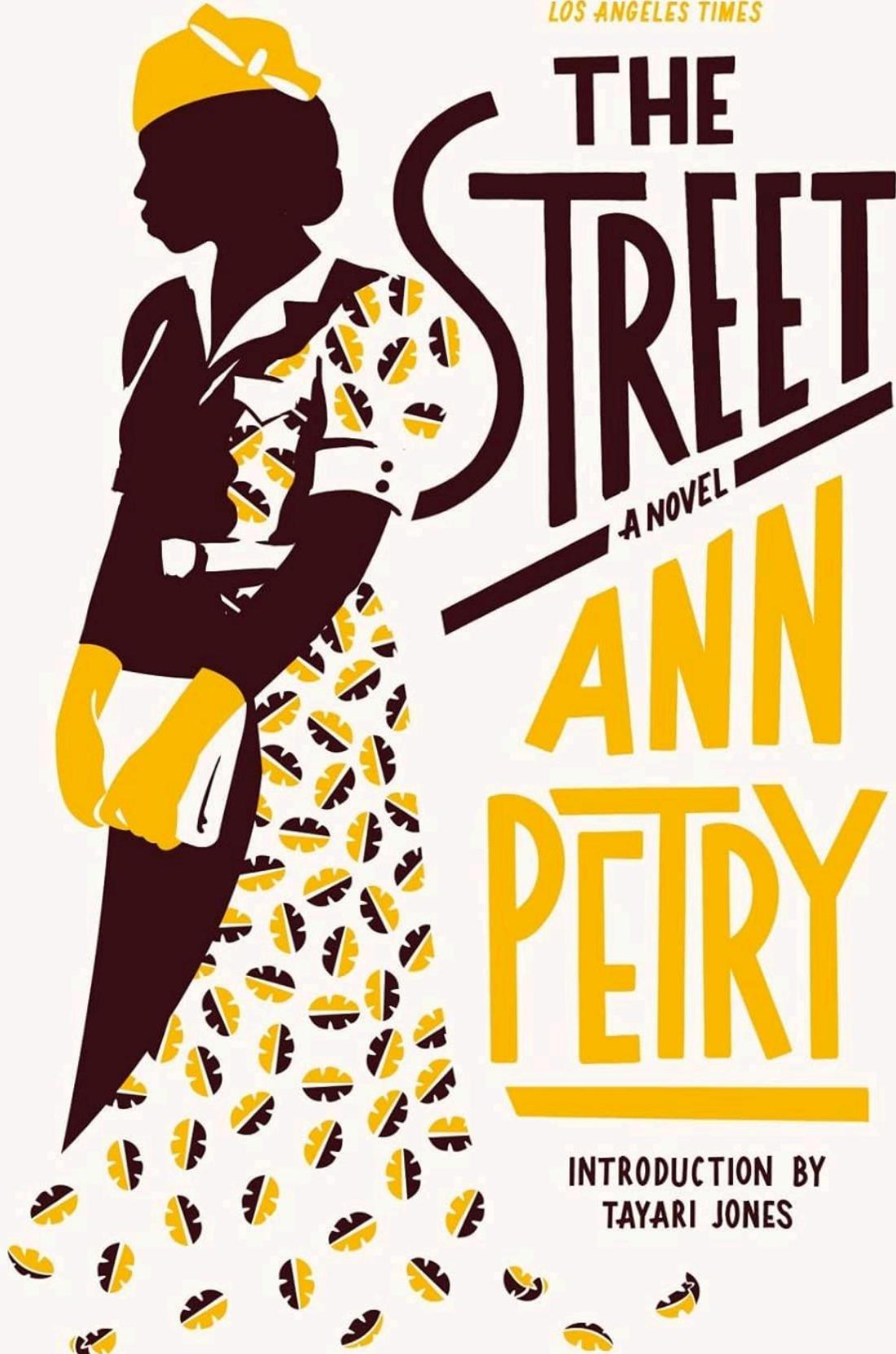
When the Studio Museum in Harlem opened, in 1968, it occupied a rented loft. Last month, it reopened, after a seven-year hiatus—this time, in a handsome structure of dark concrete and glass, built specifically for the purposes of housing art. [Thelma Golden](#), the museum’s director, told us recently that preparations for that reopening have led her to dwell even more than usual on “the space and the place” in which the museum sits—that is, a Harlem that is both a physical location and an imaginary world that has inspired generations of Black artists. Not long ago, she joined us to discuss a few of the texts that have shaped her thinking about this special neighborhood. Her remarks have been edited and condensed.

The Street

by Ann Petry

"A major literary invention... A truly great book."

LOS ANGELES TIMES



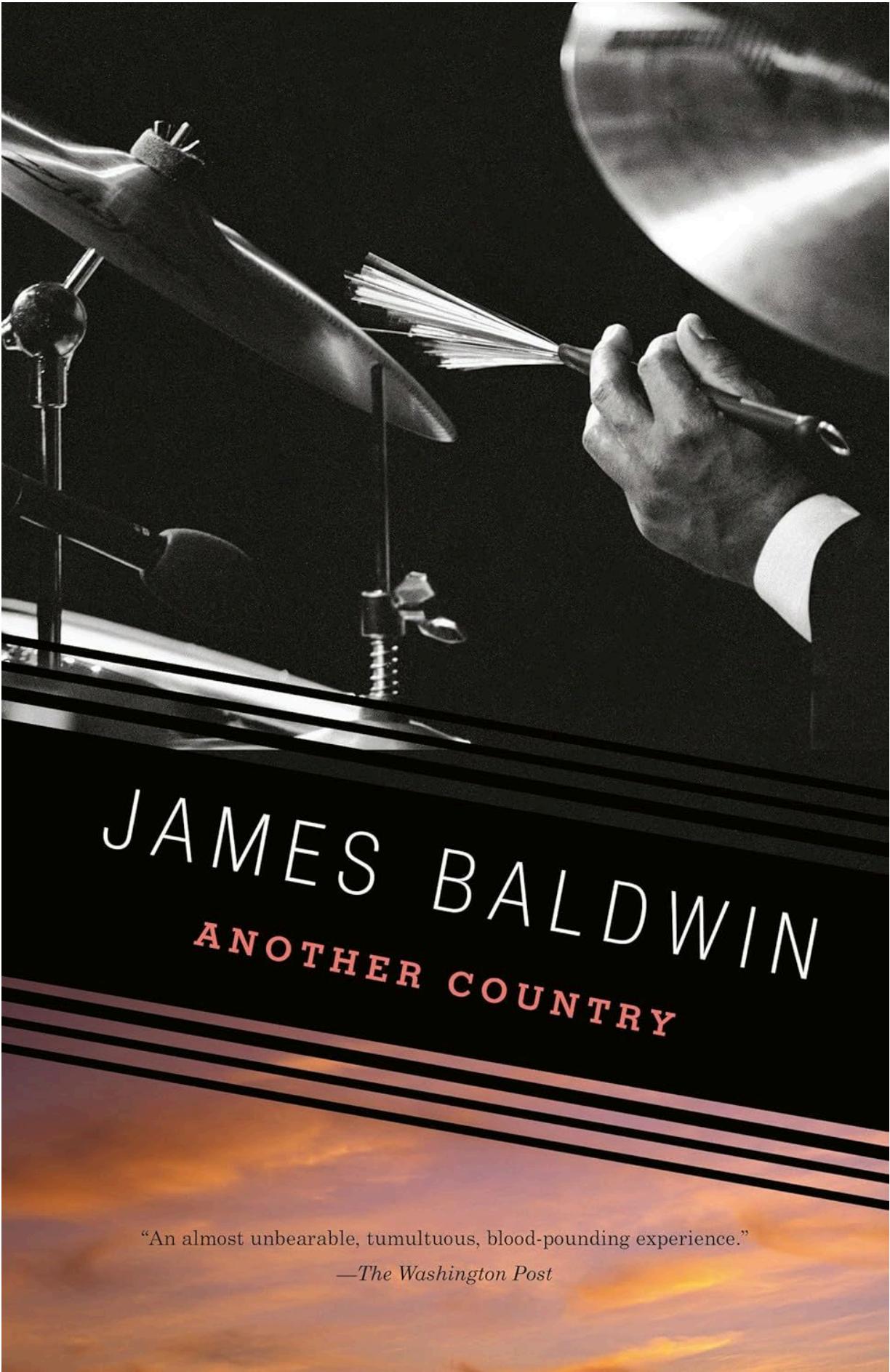
[Amazon | Bookshop](#)

This is the story of a young black mother, Lutie Johnson, who lives in Harlem in the nineteen-forties. It's both a novel and an incredibly significant sociological study, because it puts struggle and survival right up against possibility. Petry writes such luminous, beautiful prose, but that beauty exists alongside harsh realities.

This novel was very important to me as a young person, because my father was born in Harlem in 1926, and was raised there, and so the world that this novel describes is the world that he knew. It really brought me to a new level of understanding of him and his life. That was especially true because of how the novel centers the lives of women. My grandmother raised my father on her own in Harlem, and “The Street” helped me to understand her.

Another Country

by James Baldwin



JAMES BALDWIN
ANOTHER COUNTRY

"An almost unbearable, tumultuous, blood-pounding experience."

—*The Washington Post*

[Amazon | Bookshop](#)

For many, “[Go Tell It on the Mountain](#),” Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical novel about the young stepson of a Pentecostal preacher, is Baldwin’s classic Harlem novel. But, for me, it’s this.

“[Another Country](#),” which was published in 1962, tells the story of a group of young, artistic, politically engaged people who move among Greenwich Village, Harlem, and France. It has a love story embedded in it, but it’s also a novel that teems with the ideas of the moment. It speaks to the ways in which places form us. A lot of what we understand about one of the characters, Rufus, is defined by Harlem—not just as a geographic place but also as a symbol for Black life writ large. The book has really helped me to think about Harlem itself as a character, and as a way to animate ideas of modernity and Blackness.

Jazz

by Toni Morrison



Paz L

A novel by
Toni Morrison

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE

—WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR—

[Amazon | Bookshop](#)

As someone whose life has been changed in every way by Morrison's work, it's hard to say what my favorite book of hers is. They all live in me. But in the twenty-five years that I have been at the Studio Museum, and living and working in Harlem, "Jazz," her 1992 novel, has had a special place in my pantheon because of its absolutely gorgeous portrait of this place.

It's set in the nineteen-twenties, and it's called "Jazz," so right away we have a sense of its context. The story follows a love triangle, but it evokes the place and time with incredible richness. It's the Harlem of the meeting of many Black worlds, the Harlem of music and culture and politics, of barber shops and beauty parlors. And all of that, of course, is conveyed through the utter poetry of Morrison's prose.

Also, the women depicted here—as in so many of Morrison's other novels—are some of the greatest female characters ever written.

Crook Manifesto & Harlem Shuffle

by Colson Whitehead

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

COLSON WHITEHEAD

TWO-TIME WINNER of
THE PULITZER PRIZE

A Novel

CROOK

MANIFESTO

"Dazzling." — Walter Mosley, *The New York Times*



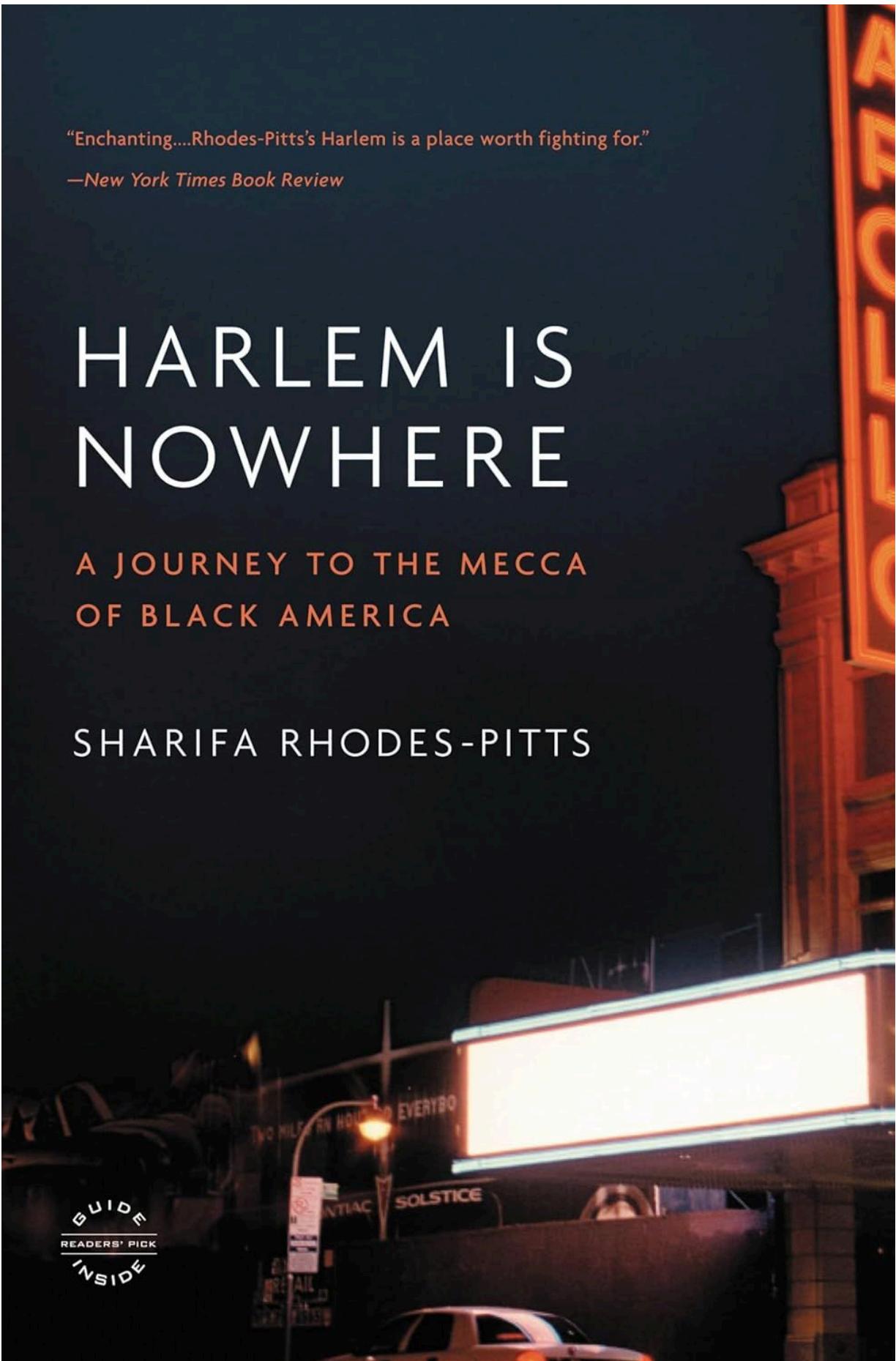
[Amazon | Bookshop](#)

These are two of what I understand will be a trio of novels that center on a character named Ray Carney, who is a car salesman on 125th Street. “Harlem Shuffle” takes place earlier, in the sixties, and “Crook Manifesto” in the seventies.

Ray is an upwardly mobile, aspirational person who exists both in the space of his legitimate business and in some of the other worlds of Harlem. What I love about both of these books is the way that they set themselves up in real history. There are lots of beautiful, important, scholarly studies about the history of this community, but these novels give you a way to understand what those books are talking about through the voice and the vision of a protagonist.

Harlem Is Nowhere

by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts



"Enchanting....Rhodes-Pitts's Harlem is a place worth fighting for."

—New York Times Book Review

HARLEM IS NOWHERE

A JOURNEY TO THE MECCA
OF BLACK AMERICA

SHARIFA RHODES-PITTS

GUIDE
READERS' PICK
INSIDE

[Amazon | Bookshop](#)

This is such a beautiful volume. It's an essay, but it feels novelistic. It's a work that engages history, and that shows a lot of respect for the archive—both the formal one and the one that is held in people's heads and hearts.

The book invokes the idea that Ralph Ellison speaks about, that Harlem is “nowhere”—nowhere, but also everywhere. It's constantly being imagined and reimagined; it's constantly being interpreted in terms of both the reality of a geographical place and the way that it has loomed so large in the minds of artists.

It always felt to me that Rhodes-Pitts was working with the ancestral guidance of Zora Neale Hurston. And the book has really helped to guide my own thinking about this incredibly storied community that I get the privilege to be a part of in this period of my life.

An earlier version of this article misstated the year that the Studio Museum opened.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/book-currents/thelma-golden-on-the-literature-of-harlem>

The Talk of the Town

- **[What Will New York's New Map Show Us?](#)**

Voters voted for it, even if they weren't sure what it was. But maps are the ideal metaphor for our models of what the world might be.

- **[Kathryn Bigelow, Catastrophe Connoisseur](#)**

At the Intrepid Museum, the “House of Dynamite” director chats with an arms-control expert about duck and cover, radioactive subs, and how close we are to the end.

- **[Catch Marc Shaiman If You Can](#)**

On the eve of his new book, “Never Mind the Happy,” the composer dishes on his career ups and downs—from touring with Bette Midler to getting caught in Twitter wars.

- **[Meet the Artist Keeping MetroCards Alive](#)**

Nina Boesch has been making art out of the cards for twenty-five years. What is she going to do now that they’re gone?

- **[Book Recommendations for Men](#)**

Maybe the fellas should pick up “Belch! An Oral History of the Burp.”

Comment

What Will New York's New Map Show Us?

Voters voted for it, even if they weren't sure what it was. But maps are the ideal metaphor for our models of what the world might be.

By Adam Gopnik

January 4, 2026



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Easily missed on the back side of the November ballots that brought Zohran Mamdani to Gracie Mansion was a proposal for a

new map of New York City. Proposal 5, as it was called, was among the least noticed initiatives that New Yorkers were asked to vote on—yet, as happens with most proposals that make it to the ballot, a majority of New Yorkers voted for it, probably without really knowing what it meant, but approving it, in the New York manner, mostly for having made it there at all. It's the same spirit with which we duly tick off our approval of judges and assemblypersons whose names we barely know and whose positions we can only guess at.

Proposal 5 was actually a bit of skilled electoral craft on the part of the city's map functionaries. (They exist.) There has been a digitized map of New York for nearly twenty-five years. The extended map, however, will add to its already rich inventory of features some street-specific ones that, for ancient and complicated reasons, have been jealously guarded on thousands of paper maps by the five borough presidents. Though no one in the know will say, exactly, that Proposal 5 was a way of using the electoral pressure of more than a million New Yorkers to get the borough presidents to release their maps, you do get the strong impression that Proposal 5 was a way of using the electoral pressure of more than a million New Yorkers to get the borough presidents to release their maps. Now street names, lines, and widths across the city will all be available on one consolidated official digital map.

The crazy spaghetti of subterranean New York—the cables and the water mains and the angles at which a sewer slants downward, as it must—will be there for the asking. If an asteroid strikes a street corner in the Bronx, emergency workers will be able to find out where the power lines run nearby, how close a passing subway might be, and the address of the nearest diner where they can get a coffee. Property lines will be more distinct, which may make it easier to build new housing; the potential degradation of the city's shores by climate change will be more trackable and treatable. We will better know who we are by knowing where we are.

In truth, the mysteries and compromises of mapping New York are evident every day. Consider the new subway map, which recently replaced the one long familiar in train cars. (It is, in fact, a retro design, returning to the graphic premises of a short-lived but snazzy map from the nineteen-seventies.) The new map broadens the ribbons marking the routes, intending to show how the lines run, instead of giving, as the previous map did, a clear sense of where they go on the city's grid. On the old map, you could tell that the B and the F trains ran along Sixth Avenue without easily seeing which stops the F served that the B skipped.

On the new map, you can readily see where each train stops, but with less of a sense of where you are on the grid. Central Park, for instance, has been reduced to a small, deformed square. This change is not as helpful to tourists as it is meant to be, but, then, locals secretly think that, if you don't know where the B train runs, you shouldn't be on it. (Anyway, locals and tourists alike, seeking some new destination, will ultimately turn to their phones, on which the cooing G.P.S. lady will tell them how to get there.)

Maps become less perfect, even as they attempt to become more perfect. In Lewis Carroll's "Sylvie and Bruno Concluded," we learn of a map, described by an ambitious philosopher, that increases in scale bit by bit until it's the same size as the terrain it represents. Unable to roll the map out, its creators cheerfully realize that the country itself can serve as its own map. Perhaps the most beloved map in recent decades was Saul Steinberg's view of New York, initially a cover for this magazine. In the guise of a map, it captured a mentality: New Yorkers see anything beyond Eleventh Avenue as blank, uncharted wilderness. Steinberg's point was not that his fellow New Yorkers were provincial but that all maps record a state of mind. (Indeed, on the Steinbergian map of today's New York state of mind, many Brooklyn neighborhoods would loom as large as his West Side avenues did.)

Even the current redistricting battle reveals the constant paradox: we draw firm lines around a fluctuating reality. The intention in Texas, recently green-lighted by the Supreme Court, was to redraw the congressional map to make it easier for Republicans to win more districts, however absurd the boundaries. But the shifting allegiances of the people within those boundaries may thwart the designers' aim. The Latinos grouped together who were expected to vote Republican may, after the mass mobilization of *ICE* and the implementation of other anti-immigrant policies, no longer do so. The map itself can't capture the changing views of the people who populate it.

"The map is not the territory" is by now a truism, but the more important truth is that the territory is inarticulate without a map to know it by. Maps are the ideal metaphor for our models of what the world might be. A new political map of New York City awaits us—"slight left turn ahead," as the G.P.S. lady would say, unless she pauses and issues an unsettling "recalculating" alert.

And so for the map of the country. We live in a time when the chart of the nation, its recognizable edges and worn paths, has been largely erased and replaced with one that calls to mind medieval maps, with misshapen horizons, weirdly distorted territories, and dragons lurking beyond the borders. The primary feeling that many of us currently experience is not merely distress but profound disorientation. We not only don't like where we are; we don't know where we are. Once reliable routes to reality have been cut off.

It helps to know where we're going before we get there. If there is a consoling reflection in this season, it is that all good maps, like the digitized city map, turn out to be shared work, made by many hands over a long period of time. Drawing a plan of our plans is the necessary task of the approaching year, as an act of collective imagination and common hope. ♦

Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include "The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/what-will-new-yorks-new-map-show-us>

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Kathryn Bigelow, Catastrophe Connoisseur

At the Intrepid Museum, the “House of Dynamite” director chats with an arms-control expert about duck and cover, radioactive subs, and how close we are to the end.

By [Robert Sullivan](#)

January 5, 2026

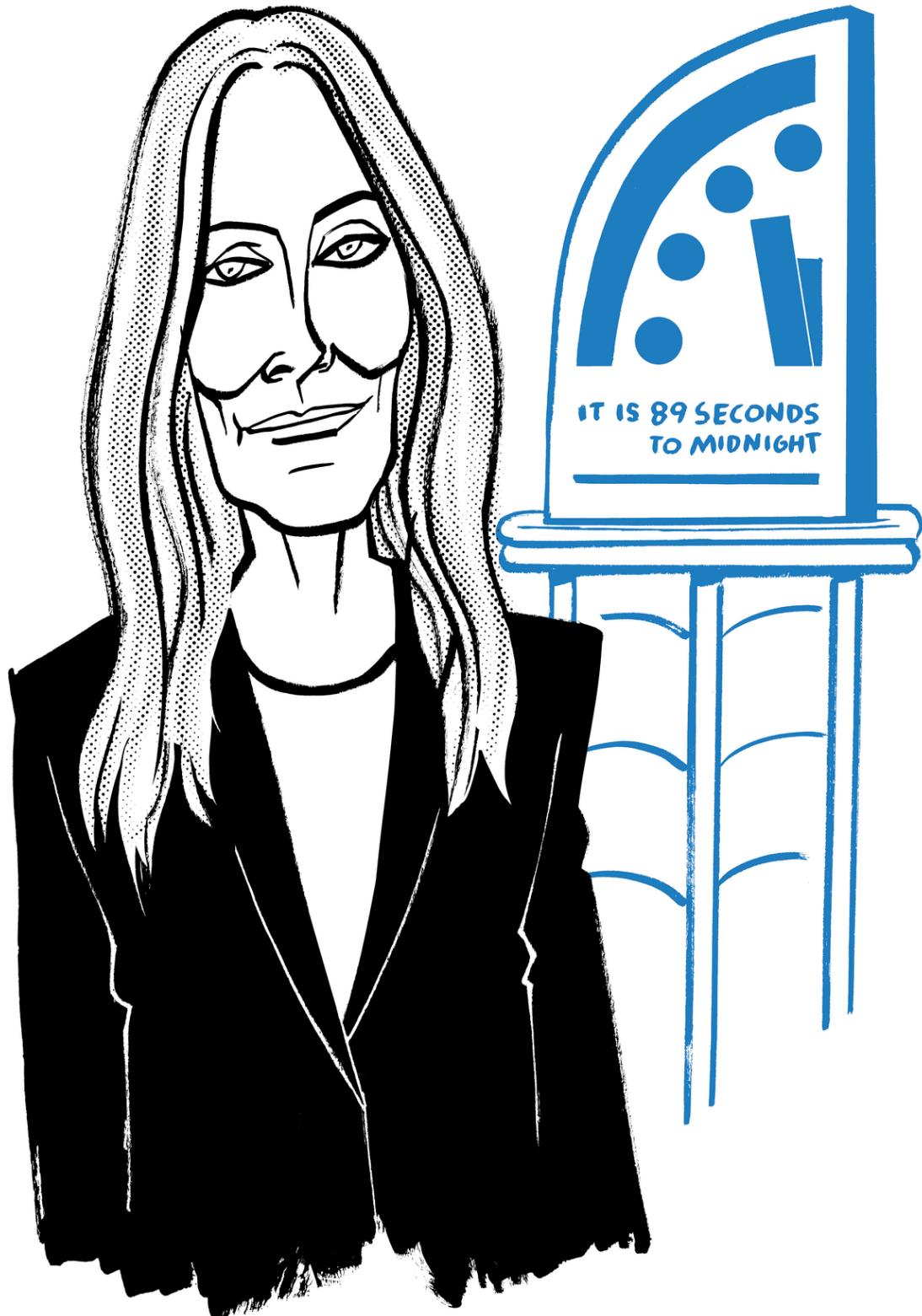


Illustration by João Fazenda

Kathryn Bigelow, the director, and Alexandra Bell, the arms-control expert, are both nuclear-attack-submarine literate. Bigelow —whose new Netflix film, “A House of Dynamite,” imagines the

U.S. government's response to an incoming intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) eighteen minutes from impact—shot part of her 2002 submarine film, entitled “K-19: The Widowmaker,” on a decommissioned Soviet sub from the nineteen-sixties. Her team had found it drydocked in Florida, then had it towed to Nova Scotia. “When we were shooting in the submarine, we had to wear helmets and shoulder pads because you were hitting everything,” she said the other day. “It was painful.”

Bell, who is the new president of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, has visited active nuclear-missile submarines—“boomers,” in Navy slang—as part of her work on arms control. “I’ve been on the U.S.S. West Virginia twice, and the U.S.S. Maryland as well, working as the State Department rep on the Biden Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review,” she said. She’s toured with Japanese and South Korean officials, making her expert at, she says, “getting photographed in front of military equipment.” She added, “I have a good looking-at-things face.”

Bigelow and Bell had met up in the entrance hall of the Intrepid Museum, and were about to explore the U.S.S. Growler, the Cold War-era vessel, docked on Pier 86, that is the only known American nuclear-attack sub open to the public. It was a first for both women. In the exhibit that precedes the sub tour, Bigelow, who is in her seventies and wore a down jacket, pointed to an old wooden school desk.

“That was my inspiration!” she said. “A House of Dynamite” grew out of her curiosity for the threat that had once had her and her Bay Area schoolmates ducking and covering.

“For all the good that would have done!” Bell said.

“Maybe the desk was made of Teflon,” Bigelow joked.

“There’ve been articles lately about how the diminution of civil defense as a conversation point in American society is one of the reasons that people don’t feel the threat,” Bell said. The *Bulletin*’s Doomsday Clock was launched in 1947, in Chicago, to illustrate the world’s proximity to global catastrophe. It is currently set at eighty-nine seconds to midnight, and Bell has invited Bigelow to D.C. to see it get reset in late January, days before the nation’s last major nuclear-arms-control agreement with Russia will expire.

Bell, who wore a blazer with a Doomsday Clock pin attached, hadn’t yet been born when Bigelow moved to New York from San Francisco, with dreams of being an artist. Bigelow paid her rent by renovating apartments with Philip Glass. “He would do the plumbing, and I would do the Sheetrock,” she said.

“I was too young to have duck and cover,” Bell said. “But there were still conversations about ending nuclear testing.” She remembered becoming attuned to politics when she was nine: “It was the Exxon Valdez oil spill. I was so pissed. My parents had no idea what to do with that righteous anger. So they’re, like, ‘You should write to the President.’ So I did, complaining about the oil spill, but I also chastised him about nuclear threats.”

The pair moved through the exhibitions that described the Growler’s mission. Before the Navy developed submarine-launchable nukes, such warheads were attached to cruise missiles; the Growler patrolled the Kamchatka Peninsula, its crew knowing that, if they surfaced to fire, the sub would likely be destroyed.

Although the Pentagon has reportedly questioned the over-all accuracy of “A House of Dynamite,” Bell praised its verisimilitude, citing its depiction of Fort Greely, an Alaska base tasked with intercepting ICBMs. “I know the Fort Greely scenes were shot in Iceland,” she said, “but I was, like, ‘How did they get into Fort Greely?’ ” Ditto STRATCOM—short for U.S. Strategic Command—which is based in Nebraska.

“We were there,” Bigelow said, of STRATCOM. “And the ‘Big Board’ sign at the bottom of the screen—that was there.” She was referring to the actual threat-monitoring display board at the command center, which references the moment in “Dr. Strangelove” when a U.S. general protests a Russian ambassador’s visit to the war room: “He’ll see everything! He’ll see the big board!”

“The odd thing about this field is how much you’ve got to insert humor,” Bell said. “Even though I think most people might think it’s macabre.”

Bigelow and Bell entered the sub, starting their tour in the empty missile shed. It reminded Bigelow of the day, in 2001, when the Russians had allowed her to visit the K-19 sub, situated just outside the port city of Murmansk. The vessel had patrolled during the same years as the Growler but, in 1961, suffered a reactor incident that radiated its crew. Bigelow recalled, “I could only stand on the hull.”

Bell moved through the forward hatches, past cramped bunks and a copy of James A. Michener’s “Hawaii,” on a shelf. In the control room, a guide explained the difference between megatons and kilotons—she was reading from “Nuclear War: A Scenario.” “To me, every moment that we have until metaphorical midnight is room for hope,” Bell said. “And that’s the message I’m really trying to get out about the Doomsday Clock. It’s not just to scare people. It’s a call to action.” ♦

Robert Sullivan is the author of “*Double Exposure*,” among other books.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/kathryn-bigelow-catastrophe-connoisseur>

[The Musical Life](#)

Catch Marc Shaiman If You Can

On the eve of his new book, “Never Mind the Happy,” the composer dishes on his career ups and downs—from touring with Bette Midler to getting caught in Twitter wars.

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)

January 5, 2026

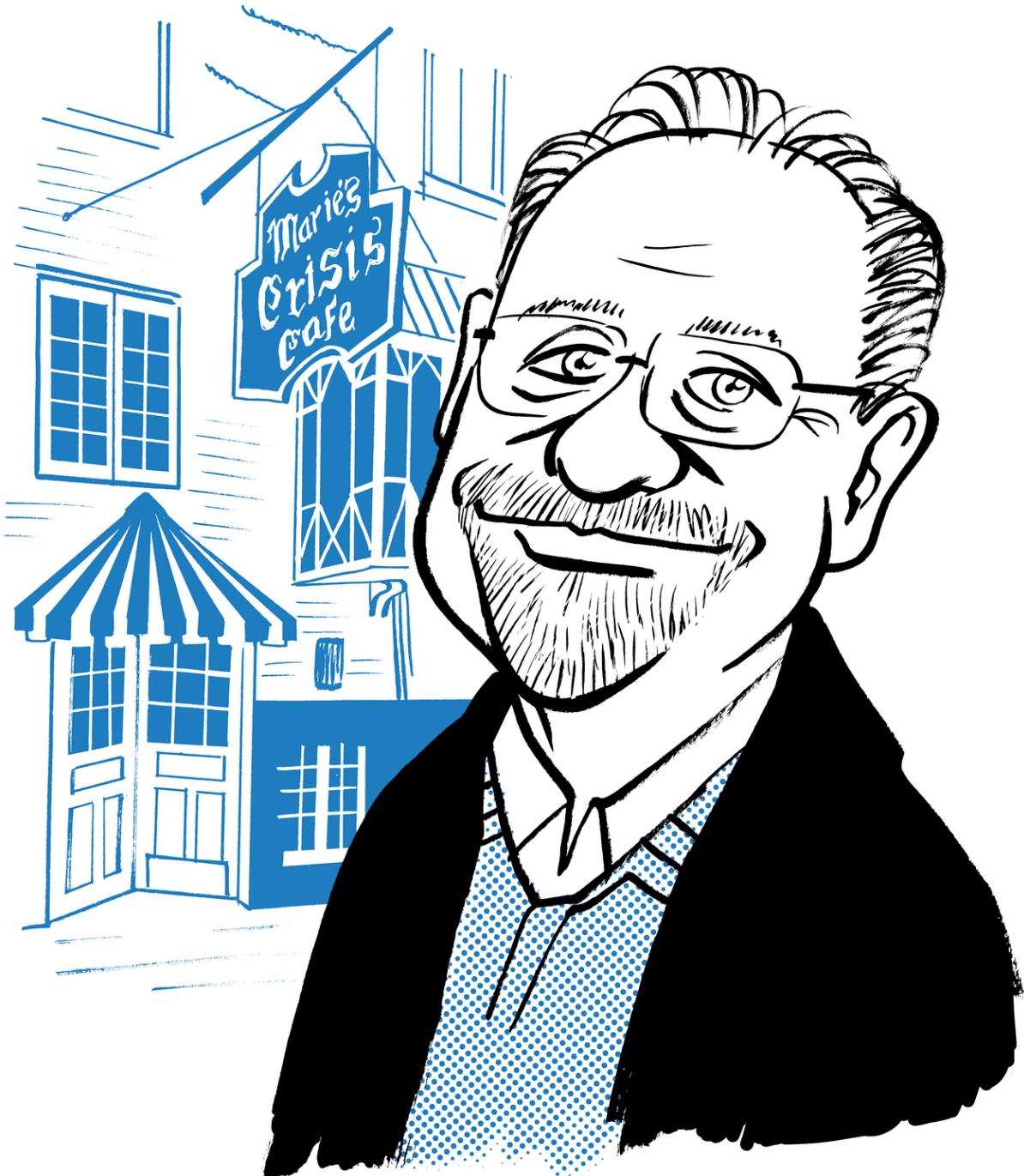


Illustration by João Fazenda

At Joe's Pizza on Carmine Street, Marc Shaiman, the celebrated composer and lyricist, dropped his slice on the floor. "Ugh, it's the Shaiman vortex," he said. "Everything I come near breaks."

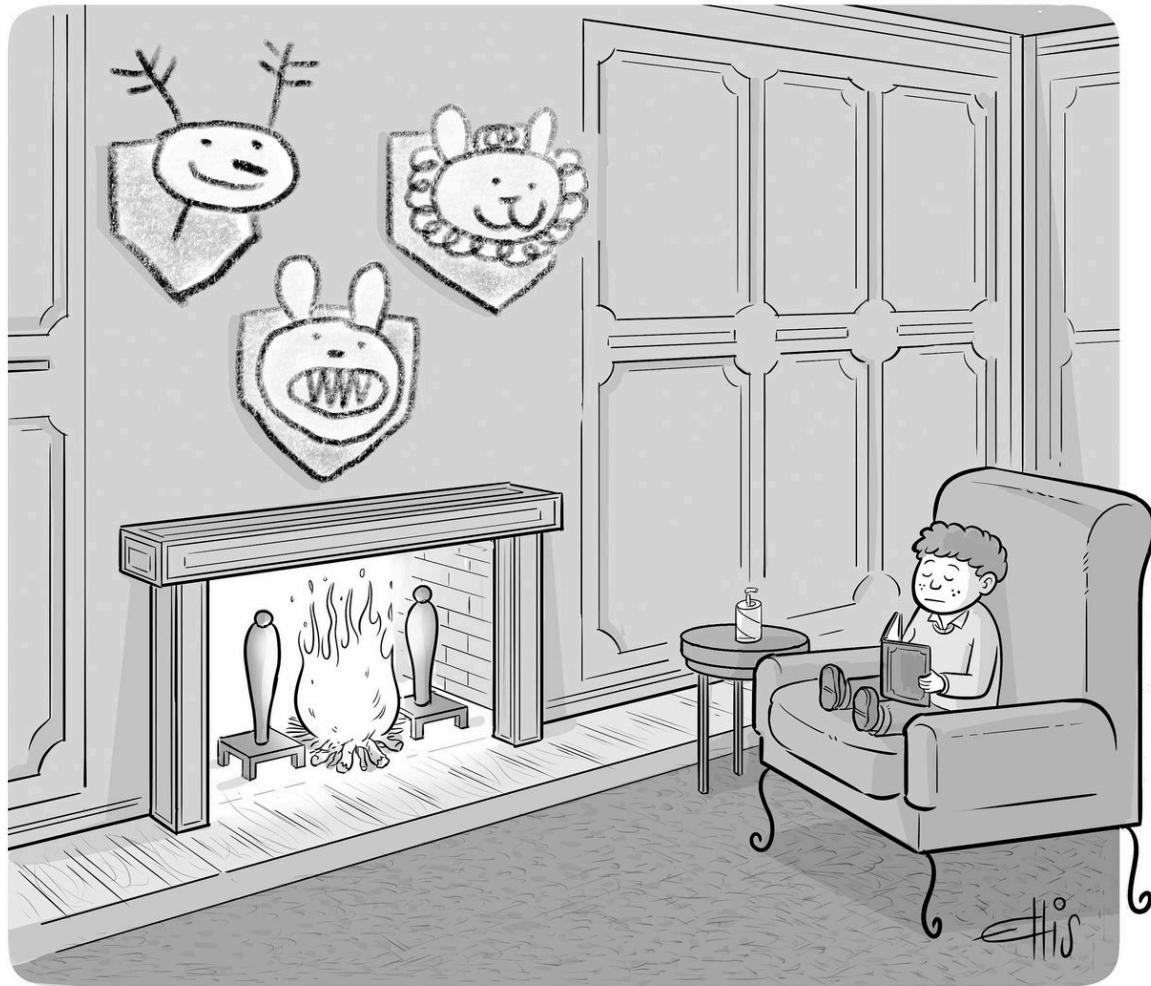
Shaiman, sixty-six and a self-described Eeyore, with a scruff of white beard, was feeling fragile. He'd spent the past week holed up in his Chelsea apartment, obsessively rerecording a Barbra Streisand anecdote for the audiobook of his new memoir, "Never Mind the Happy: Showbiz Stories from a Sore Winner." It had been a tough year, with a barrage of losses—most recently, his golden retriever, Chops, had died suddenly at the upstate house he shares with his military-veteran husband, an event so disturbing that Shaiman has imagined tearing up the floor where it happened. During a classroom visit at N.Y.U.'s drama school, the students' angelic harmonies, plus a request for a deep cut of his—"Drifting," a ballad of insecurity inspired by his collaborator and ex, Scott Wittman—got Shaiman so choked up that he worried he'd scared the young artists.

But strolling over to Marie's Crisis Café, the venerable show-tune sing-along joint, he perked up. He gazed over at the marquee of the IFC Center, formerly the Waverly Theatre, and said, "Me and Sal were hams." On a snowy night in 1976, the teen-age Shaiman and his friend Sal Piro had impulsively joined the line for a screening of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." They came back the next night, then nearly every weekend for months, tossing out zingers and building a shared queer ritual from scratch. Shaiman's contributions included a reference to an old Shake 'n Bake TV ad: "And we helped!"

"It was the best time of my life," Shaiman said, with a grin. "You're fearless when you're young." At the downtown venue Club 57, he and Wittman had staged camp productions, like "The Sound of Muzak," starring Holly Woodlawn ("When the dog bites / When my pee stings"). Then Shaiman rocketed to success—touring with his hero Bette Midler, in the seventies, playing piano on "Saturday Night Live," in the eighties, and scoring a panoply of movie hits, many in collaboration with Rob Reiner. Shaiman co-wrote the music and lyrics for the first "South Park" movie (a fart tap dance was his idea); in the two-thousands, he co-created a

series of major musicals (“Hairspray,” “Smash”). There were pot years and coke years, good times and bum times—or, in his words, “for every plotz, a zetz.”

At the bar at Marie’s, Shaiman ran into a casting director he’d last seen at a memorial service for the conductor Glen Roven. In the late eighties, Roven had been cast with Shaiman in the film “Broadcast News,” for a famous scene in which the two of them pitch a network-news theme song. (“Big finish!”)



Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

“He and I were the same person, pretty much,” Shaiman said, sipping a Diet Coke—two short, gay Jewish boys, teen tyros chasing the ultimate high: perfect composition. The casting director told Shaiman that Roven had been “in awe” of his talent.

“We were insanely jealous of each other!” Shaiman said, with a laugh.

When the bar crowd launched into the score of “Les Misérables,” Shaiman announced, “That’s when the bitterness began!” He’d rankled at the rise of the British “spectacle” musical, back in the eighties. He still recalls every bump in the road, enumerating old Twitter wars, critics who’d called his songs “unmemorable,” and short-lived labors of love like the musical adaptation of “Catch Me If You Can,” which haunt him, even now. He’s had Broadway blockbusters and seven Oscar nominations; he’s thrilled that his trans-positive musical adaptation of “Some Like It Hot” has been embraced on tour, even in red states. But taking risks doesn’t get easier. “My skin has gotten thinner instead of thicker,” he said.

During a break, the house pianist invited Shaiman to the keyboard, where he unspooled his origin story for the crowd: he’d wandered into Marie’s at sixteen, and, in a Hollywood miracle, the owner clocked his piano skills and tipped him off to a job at the Duplex, down the street, plus a gig playing piano at Marie’s. (Shaiman had lied about his age.) He quit Marie’s a few months later, shortly after a New Year’s party where the staff hung him off the balcony in a diaper. By then, he was staying in Wittman’s place on Seventy-ninth Street, conveniently situated across the hall from one of Midler’s backup singers, known collectively as the Harlettes.

Shaiman stood up to hammer out a rollicking version of “Good Morning Baltimore,” then collapsed back onto the piano bench. “I’m exhausted,” he joked, and asked if there were any requests.

“ ‘They Just Keep Moving the Line?’” a sweet-faced brunette called out.

He looked worried. “Do you know that one?” he asked the crowd.

Not everyone did, but people read the lyrics off of their phones. In a wobbly voice, the brunette began the number, from “Smash,” getting bolder by the climax. “So I made friends with rejection / I’ve straightened up my spine!” Then the crowd chimed in, belting out Shaiman’s perfect ode to never feeling like you’ve nailed it. ♦

Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2011, is the magazine’s theatre critic. Her books include “*Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/catch-marc-shaiman-if-you-can>

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Meet the Artist Keeping MetroCards Alive

Nina Boesch has been making art out of the cards for twenty-five years. What is she going to do now that they're gone?

By [Taran Dugal](#)

January 5, 2026



Illustration by João Fazenda

In 1994, when the MetroCard made its début, many straphangers were reluctant to say farewell to the subway token. Across the city, commuters struggled to master “the swipe.” The *Times* noted a few techniques, like “swinging your hand” at the turnstile as if it were “a slow tennis ball coming your way.” That hard-won expertise is now defunct. On December 31st, the M.T.A. stopped selling MetroCards, which have been fully replaced with the tap-and-go OMNY system. This was tough news for Nina Boesch, a Brooklyn-based artist who has spent twenty-five years turning the flimsy yellow-and-blue plastic cards into intricate collages.

“My first thought was, Oh, no. Oh, shit!” she said the other day, in her Greenpoint studio. “There was a moment of panic.” Using scissors, Boesch, who trained at the Rhode Island School of Design, typically snips cards into pieces and reassembles them into depictions of such subjects as Lady Liberty, Yankee Stadium, Andy Warhol, Derek Jeter, and Pizza Rat. She sells the work on her website and at craft fairs around the city; prices range from ninety dollars, for a business-card-size piece, to more than ten thousand dollars, for commissions, like a six-foot map of Tokyo. Not bad, considering Boesch gets her materials for free.

The venture began as an exercise in litter control. In 2001, Boesch said, “I was a naïve twenty-two-year-old from Germany, and I thought I could help the city a little bit by clearing up the stations. In Germany, you have to recycle. It’s a law.” She went on, “So I’d go around picking MetroCards up from the floor, and people would give me weird looks. Once, a station attendant came out of his booth and confronted me—he thought I was going to sell swipes. This was before mobile phones, so I couldn’t exactly show him what I had in mind.”

In her studio—a snug room on the second floor of a co-working space near McCarren Park—Boesch rifled through an album of laminated fare cards that she’d collected over the years. There was the old faithful (“This is from the inaugural limited edition—very

cool!”), the exotic rarity (“I’m a huge fan of David Bowie, so this Ziggy Stardust card”—from 2018—“is a particular favorite”), and the historical footnote (“This one announced the 2012 Olympics in New York, but obviously they stopped printing those when we lost the bid”).

Boesch, who had on a white shirt and jeans, pulled out a ziplock bag stuffed with thick stacks of intact cards. “I’m so paranoid about my precious MetroCards that I actually keep them in different places,” she said. “There are about seventy thousand in a storage unit, probably ten thousand or so in the studio, and then another ten thousand in a closet at home.” She held up the bag: “This right here is about two thousand cards.”

Michael Bloomberg, Itzhak Perlman, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Martin Scorsese each own one of Boesch’s pieces. A few years back, the wife of a Hollywood A-lister commissioned her to make a four-foot rendition of the R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth as a surprise gift for her husband, whose father had taken the ship when immigrating to the States.

Although Boesch will miss the swipe, she understood why the M.T.A. made the move to the OMNY system. “Culturally speaking, it’s totally the right thing to do, and it’s better for the environment,” she said. With the phaseout, she’s counting on an uptick of interest. “I think people will be nostalgic about MetroCards for a long time, and, if anything, my art will probably become more valuable,” she said. Her existing card stash, she estimated, will likely last her twenty to thirty years. As for her own commute, she prefers to walk. ♦

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/meet-the-artist-keeping-metrocards-alive>

Sketchpad

Book Recommendations for Men

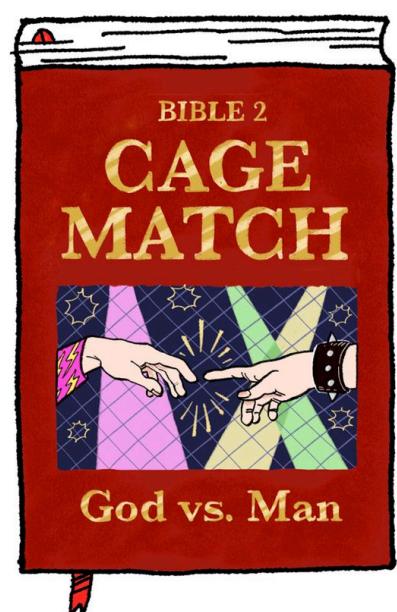
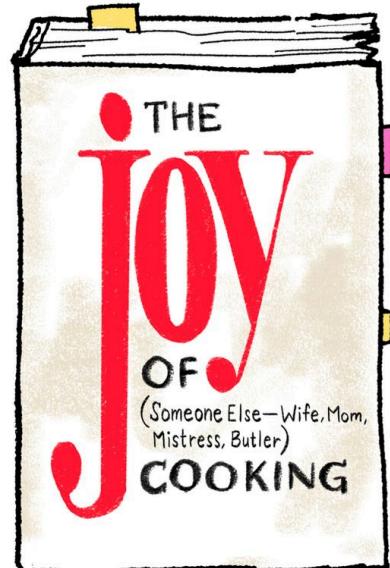
Maybe the fellas should pick up “Belch! An Oral History of the Burp.”

By [Timothy Cahill](#), [Kristina Libby](#), and [Zoe Si](#)

January 5, 2026

A new study . . . depicted record lows for Americans who are reading for fun, showing a “significant” decline of 40 percent in the past two decades. . . . Women were also more likely to read for pleasure than men.

—*The Daily Beast.*



* THIS BOOK IS HOLLOWED OUT SO YOU CAN JUST HIDE YOUR PHONE INSIDE.

Timothy Cahill has contributed humor to *The New Yorker* since 2021.

Kristina Libby is an artist, a writer, and a film and TV creator. Her one-woman show premiered at the United Solo festival in October, 2025.

Zoe Si has been contributing cartoons and articles to *The New Yorker* since 2020. In 2022, she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in illustrated reporting and commentary.

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The congresswoman split with the President over the Epstein files, then she quit. Where will she go from here?

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The industry has lost billions of dollars, largely because smoke makes the drink taste like licking an ashtray. Now a team of scientists is chasing a solution.

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Will Pope Leo XIV follow the progressive example of his predecessor or chart a more moderate course? His work in Chicago and Peru may shed light on his approach.

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Can undocumented parents elude ICE capture for one more year, until their youngest turns eighteen?

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Marjorie Taylor Greene's Big Breakup

The congresswoman split with the President over the Epstein files, then she quit. Where will she go from here?

By [Charles Bethea](#)

January 5, 2026



Kevin McCarthy, the former Speaker of the House, believes that Greene is uniquely in touch with the MAGA

base, calling her the “canary in the coal mine” of the G.O.P.

Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker

“What I’ve been doing is being just completely honest in my statements,” Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene said in mid-October. She was sitting beside the comedian Tim Dillon, during a taping of “The Tim Dillon Show,” a kind of Joe Rogan lite that recently featured Senator Bernie Sanders. It was a warmup of sorts for appearances that she’d soon make on center-left talk shows —“Real Time with Bill Maher,” “The View”—during a lengthy

government shutdown that Greene blamed on her fellow-Republicans. She wore knee-high black leather boots, a jean jacket, and a solemn expression. Dillon had just asked Greene why she was suddenly saying things that resonated with a wider range of people, “including liberals.”

Liberals have had little to console them in the past year, and it was perplexing that one small bright spot was Greene, the *MAGA* congresswoman from Georgia. Since her arrival in Congress, in 2021, Greene’s initials have become as recognizable as those of the late liberal Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg—who Greene falsely alleged, a year before Ginsburg’s death, had been replaced by a body double. “MTG” is the title of a 2023 memoir by Greene, released by Donald Trump, Jr.,’s publishing house, and her initials appear on merchandise marketed to both her fans and critics: “*MTG IS MY SPIRIT ANIMAL*,” “*DEFUND MTG*,” “*OMG MTG WTF*.” It’s also the name of a hagiographic song by the *MAGA* rapper Forgiato Blow, in whose music video Greene appears steely-eyed sitting on the back of a lowrider and on a throne. “A real businesswoman, A.O.C.’s a featherweight,” Blow raps. “A southern belle, a little hood: watch her shake and bake.”

“I don’t care what occupation you have in life,” Kevin McCarthy, the former Speaker of the House, told me recently. “When people know you by a three-letter acronym, you’ve really built a following.” Even before entering Congress, Greene gained notoriety for espousing various conspiracy theories: that the Rothschilds had used solar generators in space that triggered wildfires, and that a cabal of liberal élites was eating the flesh of children. After joining Congress, she called Democrats “the party of pedophiles,” and, as some Americans fretted over the possibility of an impending civil war, she demanded a “national divorce.” John Cowan, a neurosurgeon in northwest Georgia whom Greene beat for the Republican nomination in her district, has called her Empty G, a homophone for her initials which captures a persistent belief in her vacuity.

Late last year, Greene earned a new name: traitor. In July, she'd become the first Republican in Congress to describe the killing in Gaza as a "genocide." In August, referring to the G.O.P., she told the *Daily Mail*, "The course that it's on, I don't want to have anything to do with it." In October, she sided with Democrats pushing to extend subsidies to the Affordable Care Act, writing on X, "No I'm not towing the party line on this, or playing loyalty games. . . . I'm carving my own lane." She told Tucker Carlson that Republicans "are literally slaves to all the big industries in Washington." She described Speaker Mike Johnson's leadership during the shutdown as "basically pathetic." (Johnson characterized their relationship as one of "intense fellowship.") Trump's adviser Dan Scavino unfollowed her on X.

During his 2024 campaign, Trump had expressed a willingness to release files related to the case of Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier and sexual predator. Then, back in office, he reneged. Greene was among a small but strident group of Republicans in Congress who refused to move on. "The truth needs to come out, and the government holds the truth," she said, in September. CNN's Wolf Blitzer called Greene "courageous." Whoopi Goldberg, on "The View," labelled her "the voice of reason." "I never thought that I would say this," Bernie Sanders said, "but you have somebody like Marjorie Taylor Greene saying, 'You know what? I was elected by my constituents. That's who I'm beholden to, not the President of the United States.' " Trump, for his part, called her "Marjorie Traitor Brown." During the fallout, she announced that she was resigning from Congress, effective on January 5th. It's not clear what her future holds. "It's all so absurd and completely unserious," Greene wrote, in her resignation letter, referring to current politics in Washington. She imagined Trump supporting her opponents in her next primary: "I have too much self-respect and dignity to defend the president against impeachment after he hatefully dumped tens of millions of dollars against me and tried to destroy me."

On Dillon's show, Greene questioned Trump's approach to deportations ("That needs to be a smarter plan"), the recent U.S. bailout of Argentina ("Huh?"), and the priorities of his base ("I don't think those people are being served"). She was, she said, no longer willing to "wear the Republican jersey." Dillon suggested that Greene might run for President in 2028. "Oh, my goodness, I hate politics so much, Tim," Greene replied.

"I know, but you *are* a congresswoman."

"Well, I've seen a few people saying, 'She's running,' " Greene continued. "What I'm doing right now is I very much want to fix problems. And I am genuinely angry on behalf of every American, even if they're a Democrat."

"Marjorie Taylor Greene, ladies and gentlemen, our next President," Dillon said, in closing. "Sorry, J. D. Vance."

Betting markets soon opened on Greene's leaving the Republican Party and, separately, on her being the Republican Presidential nominee in 2028. For a time, in the latter, she trailed only Vance and Marco Rubio in the odds. The right-wing activist Laura Loomer denounced her repeatedly on X: "Never seen a more opportunistic woman before." Josh McKoon, the chairman of the Republican Party of Georgia, told me that he thought Greene's publicity tour was canny. "There's a debate about the direction of the Republican Party going forward," he said. "Someone who has a broader footprint and has introduced themselves to more voters, I think, will have more to say about what that future looks like." But, McKoon confessed, he wasn't entirely sure what M.T.G. was up to. All he knew, he said, "is if she believes it, she's going to share it."

Greene grew up in Cumming, Georgia, a mostly white community northeast of Atlanta. Her father ran a construction company, Taylor Commercial, and dabbled in pseudoscience. He once published an essay called "The Taylor Effect," in which he claims to have

discovered “an undeniable correlation” between stock-market prices and “the relative positions of the sun, earth, and moon.” Her childhood included water skiing, “Thriller” watch parties, and serving as the manager of the school soccer team. “She was a good girl,” Leslie Hamburger, a friend from that time, recently recalled. “She was popular, but she was very focussed on getting good grades. I think she ran for class president, but I don’t think she won.” Another student brought a gun to school—“He took our entire school hostage,” Greene later said—but no one was hurt. Greene became the first person in her family to graduate from college, at the University of Georgia, where she married a tall, business-minded classmate named Perry Greene, with whom she raised three kids in the Atlanta suburbs.

By her late thirties, though, Greene seemed unmoored. Around 2012, she went to work at a CrossFit gym owned by James Cox Chambers, Jr., the grandson of an Atlanta billionaire named Anne Cox Chambers. He was a passionate socialist—another gym of his barred “cops, active military, landlords, and capitalists.” Greene, meanwhile, had recently been baptized at an Atlanta-area megachurch. During the ceremony, she’d read from the Bible about martyrdom. She seemed, to Chambers, like a “wealthy housewife who was a little bored.”

Greene invited Chambers to her family’s large home, north of Atlanta, and, elsewhere, he watched her “drink liquor poolside,” he recalled, “hanging out with dudes who worked at the gym, avoiding her husband.” I learned that two of those men had affairs with Greene. One of them, Craig Ivey, now refers to himself, on X, as “the polyamorous tantric sex guru.” (Ivey declined to comment for this piece.) A former roommate of Ivey’s from this period told me that Greene made little small talk on her way up to Ivey’s room. The other man with whom Greene had an affair around this time told me that she “never talked politics” and didn’t seem to have career ambitions. The relationship lasted a few months. After they split, Greene texted him: “You make me feel like the only reason

why you ‘invested’ in me was because I had sex with you. And now your washing your hands of me.” (I was the first to report the affairs, which prompted Greene to text me, of the piece, “If we have another toilet paper shortage, I wouldn’t wipe my ass with it.” She copied her attorney, Lin Wood, who said that the story was “intended to smear her with false accusations, half-truths, misrepresentations, out-of-context statements, and agenda driven lies.” Wood subsequently turned on Greene, calling her “a communist.”)

She remained married until 2022, when her husband filed for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. She is now engaged to Brian Glenn, a correspondent for the far-right Real America’s Voice TV network, who is, like her, an enthusiastic consumer of raw milk.

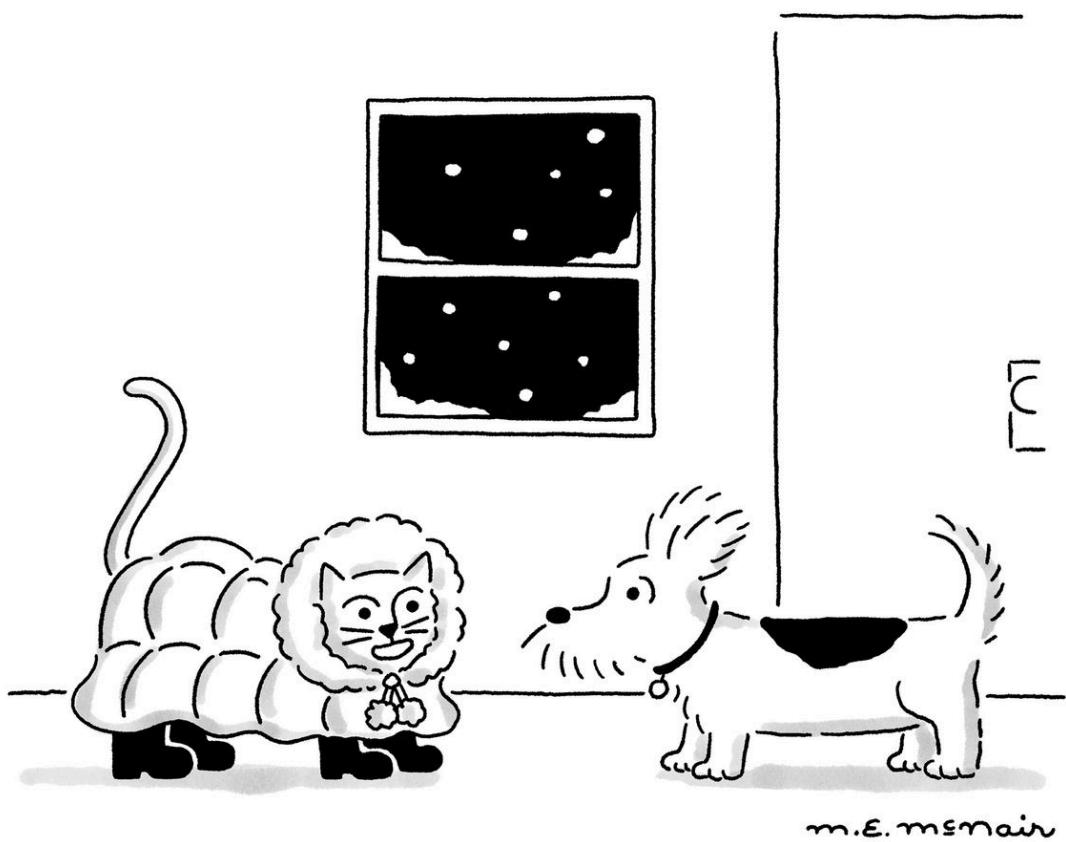
Chambers found Greene’s behavior noteworthy only in light of her professed Christianity. During the time they knew each other, she didn’t seem to mind his revolutionary politics. “I never heard anything of a political nature from her,” he said. Fitness was her focus. Greene, who is about five feet two, was able to deadlift three hundred pounds, and in 2015 she finished sixty-second in the world among her age group at the CrossFit Games. “She was fit,” Chambers said. “But not some great talent. It was just how she was getting her rocks off.” Chambers thought that she’d end up “trying to get her team to Southeast Regionals.”

Instead, she went online. She found an audience there, and it grew as she embraced ideas affiliated with the far right. Between 2017 and 2019, writing on social media and for sites such as American Truth Seekers, she claimed that the Clintons were complicit in the murder of journalists, that Barack Obama was conspiring with North Korea, and that a mass shooting was secretly intended to prompt increased gun control. She endorsed the then nascent QAnon conspiracy theory, which fixated on the idea that the world was run by a global pedophile ring, and that Q, an anonymous

insider, was working with Trump to overthrow it. In October of 2017, Greene said, “Q is a Patriot.” Referring to Trump’s Presidency, she added, “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to take this Global Cabal of Satan worshiping pedophiles out.” In 2018, responding to a Facebook comment about hanging Hillary Clinton and Obama, Greene replied, “Stage is being set. Players are being put in place. We must be patient.” (She later said that someone else had been managing her account.) In a YouTube video that year, she blamed the Clintons for the 1999 plane crash that killed J.F.K., Jr.

Greene showed a taste for spectacle. She filed a petition to impeach Nancy Pelosi. She filmed herself hectoring David Hogg, a teen-age survivor of the Parkland school shooting, and admonishing participants in a Drag Queen Story Hour at a local library. “You’re, like, ‘Gee, I wonder if that is going to work,’ ” McKoon, the Georgia G.O.P. chairman, told me. Years before, on a WordPress blog, Greene had reportedly described having “negative thoughts” and wishing she had a “switch to turn [them] off.” With political theatrics, she seemed to have found it. On *Law Enforcement Today*, a police-owned media outlet to which Greene contributed, her bio described her as “a proud Whiskey Patriot, entrepreneur, business owner, writer, commentator, speaker, defender of the Second Amendment, shooting enthusiast, CrossFit athlete, wife, and mother redeemed through grace.” (Greene declined to speak to me for this story. A spokesperson, presented with a list of the story’s assertions, said, “This appears to be nothing besides a slanderous hit piece,” adding, “I would encourage you to cancel this story, as nearly every statement that you have set forth is untrue.”)

In early 2019, Greene visited the U.S. Capitol with a group of gun-rights activists. She was turned away by Republican senators. But the group did meet Thomas Massie, a congressman from Kentucky, who would become a friend. “She handed me her card and said she was going to run for office,” Massie told me.



“I wanted to show you how silly you look when you go out.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

That spring, a campaign consultant in the Atlanta area received a call from Georgia’s secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger. “He says, ‘I have this lady who asked me about running for office,’ ” the consultant told me. (Raffensperger declined to comment.) Greene soon hobbled into the consultant’s office on crutches—a CrossFit injury, apparently. She made the consultant’s “spidey sense” go off, he recalled, saying that he detected volatility. She excitedly showed him the Hogg video. “It was silly,” the consultant said. “He was an eighteen-year-old kid. But she thought it was important.”

The consultant kept listening, though. “She had a kind of Batman complex,” he said. “Seeing herself as uniquely positioned to save

America.” She wanted to represent a district in North Atlanta, where she lived. This was going to be tough: its residents, diverse and well educated, seemed likely to recoil from disparaging remarks she had made about Muslims, among other things. Economic arguments, the consultant asserted, would be more effective with these voters. Her family’s construction business, which Greene’s father had sold, in the two-thousands, to Greene and her husband at the time, presented an opportunity. There was a potential downside, however, to highlighting the company: it had built low-income public housing. “She was connected to government money,” the consultant said. “How do you answer for that?” Still, he decided that it was worth the risk. “I told her, in any way that’s intellectually defensible, tie yourself with that company.”

The consultant said that, when they’d first met, Greene wasn’t mentioned on Taylor Commercial’s website. “So she went back and retroactively added her professional criteria there,” he went on. “Puffed it up.” For a few years, the company listed her in filings as its C.F.O. “She may have technically been an officer in paperwork filed with the secretary of state, but she was just not involved,” he told me. “She just wasn’t a businessperson.”

After two months or so, the consultant cut ties with Greene, who’d been ignoring his guidance. He had crafted and timed a campaign announcement for her, but, days before it was scheduled, she revealed her candidacy on a radio show that was about to go off the air, blindsiding him. “There was no website live,” he recalled. “No infrastructure. No media coverage. Seven people were listening. I was pissed.”

That December, Greene pivoted to the Fourteenth Congressional District, a conservative region of northwest Georgia. Trump had won by fifty-three points there in 2016, and Greene’s paranoid pugnacity seemed like a good fit, if voters could stomach an outsider. “The conventional wisdom was that it’s going to be really

hard for her in northwest Georgia,” McKoon told me. “You think, People are only gonna elect one of their own.”

Greene faced eight men in the primary, including Cowan, the neurosurgeon. But she had a financial advantage: she gave more than a million dollars to her own campaign. Cowan blew up a watermelon with an assault rifle in one ad. But Greene went further, appearing in her own advertisement holding a rifle beside images of the leftist lawmakers known as the Squad. She won. In her victory speech, wearing a bright-red dress with flared shoulders, she assailed the fake-news media, the political establishment, Antifa, B.L.M., cultural Marxists, and George Soros. Katie Dempsey, a state representative, was with Greene when Trump called to congratulate her. “He talked more than she did,” Dempsey told me. “She was just smiling.” In the general election, Greene took seventy-five per cent of the vote; by then, her Democratic opponent, reeling from a freshly filed divorce, had fled to his parents’ home, in Indiana.

Eleven days later, Greene was in D.C., filming herself doing burpees on the carpeted floor of a hotel room. The pandemic was under way, and she was making a political statement against lockdown orders. “In DC, NOTHING is open bc of Democrat tyrannical control,” she wrote. Commenters pointed out that multiple gyms were open nearby, including one right around the corner from her hotel.

Greene arrived in Congress eager to impress Trump. On Joe Biden’s first full day in office, she filed an article of impeachment against him. (She later described Biden in her memoir as “a criminal sitting in the White House.”) She co-sponsored the English Language Unity Act, which would have made English the official language of the U.S.; the Old Glory Only Act, which would have banned the flying of Pride flags at U.S. embassies; and the Fire Fauci Act, which sought to fire Anthony Fauci. The bills captured her feelings-oriented approach to legislation. Last year,

the Center for Effective Lawmaking ranked Greene the two-hundred-and-seventh most effective G.O.P. lawmaker in Congress, out of two hundred and twenty-eight. But legislating may not have been the point. This past January, she introduced the Gulf of America Act, announcing, “It’s our gulf.”

Like Trump, Greene seemed to relish trolling people, or at least the attention it elicited. In 2021, the House voted to strip her of her committee appointments, over various troubling remarks, including her skepticism that a plane crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11. Her office subsequently put out a press release calling her “one of the most talked about Republicans on Capitol Hill.” The talk seemed suboptimal. The CrossFit brand formally condemned Greene for spreading “loathsome and dangerous lies.” (A former competitor told me, “She was always nice and pleasant. It’s weird to see who she’s become.”) Twitter suspended her account for spreading vaccine misinformation. The next month, she attended a conference put on by the white supremacist Nick Fuentes. Mitt Romney called her a “kook,” and the Republican congressman Adam Kinzinger called her “insane.”

Greene had backed away from QAnon early in her term. “I was allowed to believe things that weren’t true,” she said. But she was not chastened. She soon instigated a shouting match with House Democrats, including Debbie Dingell, on the Capitol steps. “I don’t agree with her much, but she is not afraid to get into anybody’s face to express her viewpoint,” Dingell told me. Greene’s approach paid off. In her first year, she raised more than seven million dollars without corporate *PAC* support. By 2022, she and Trump were discussing the possibility of her being his future running mate.

Scott Perry, a former chair of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus, which Greene joined, praised her as “a voice for regular working people.” Noting Greene’s fixations—including, say, lewd photos that were retrieved from Hunter Biden’s laptop—he told

me, “They might be seen as vulgar. But this is the reality of what real life is all about—what the American people need to know. If you don’t like it, well, you need to have a conversation with yourself about how you feel about the truth.”

Greene might have seemed like a good fit for the Freedom Caucus, but she caused problems there, too. She publicly criticized Perry for initially supporting the Respect for Marriage Act, which protected same-sex marriage. She denounced Chip Roy, of Texas, for not defending those arrested for storming the Capitol on January 6th. She called Lauren Boebert, the right-wing Republican from Colorado, “a little bitch” on the House floor. (Referring to a scandal in which Boebert was escorted out of a musical production of “Beetlejuice” for inappropriate behavior, Greene later dubbed her “vaping groping Lauren Boebert.”) One former member of the caucus, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told me that Greene is “a calculated, ambitious, manipulative person” who “has no limit to her dishonesty to advance her own personal agenda,” which he believed was solely the pursuit of “influence and power.”



“The apartment’s small, but it has a Criterion Closet.”

Cartoon by Natalie Horberg

He pointed to the drawn-out vote to elect a new House Speaker, in early 2023. The Freedom Caucus had opposed Kevin McCarthy, preferring a more reliable conservative. But, on the fifteenth ballot, Greene helped to give McCarthy the post. Dingell saw Greene and Boebert arguing about this in the women’s bathroom: a source told the *Daily Beast* that Greene yelled at Boebert for taking millions from McCarthy and then not supporting him. (According to the book “*Mad House*,” by the journalists Annie Karni and Luke Broadwater, Greene also smeared Boebert to Trump, falsely telling him prior to the 2024 election that Boebert was planning to endorse Ron DeSantis. Greene has not responded to the allegation.)

Greene was booted from the caucus. But, when Congress resumed under McCarthy’s Speakership, she was appointed to the Homeland Security Committee and the House Oversight Committee.

According to the *Times*, McCarthy told a friend, “I will never leave that woman.” McCarthy told me he actually said that Greene had “kept her word, and I’ll always keep my word to her.” He said that he never promised her anything for her support. Boebert and the Florida congressman Matt Gaetz, on the other hand, had wanted favors in exchange for their votes, he said. (Neither Gaetz nor Boebert responded to requests for comment.) McCarthy came to consider Greene a good-faith actor who sometimes lacks good information. “At the beginning, she didn’t like me!” McCarthy told me. “Mark Meadows lied to her about me,” he said, claiming that Meadows, Trump’s former chief of staff, told Greene that McCarthy had helped to orchestrate her removal from committees in 2021. (Meadows did not respond to a request for comment.) “So she assumes certain things,” McCarthy said. “But you can break through that.”

After Trump’s reëlection, Greene was tapped to chair a House Oversight subcommittee tasked with implementing the

recommendations of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency. It had the ring of significance. In reality, the committee had little influence. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez suggested that it was like "giving someone an unplugged controller." *DOGE* ultimately saved less than five per cent of the two trillion dollars it aimed to cut.

Last April, I attended a town hall that Greene held in Acworth, Georgia. Standing onstage in a black dress, fiercely cheerful, she spoke about *DOGE*, "illegals," and the Gulf of America. As it began, a gray-haired man yelled at Greene and was dragged out by the police. He screamed as they Tased him. A disabled former marine scuffled with police; they Tased him, too, as the crowd clapped. Nine people were ultimately removed; three were arrested. "The violence of it was so chilling," Wendy Davis, a Democrat who ran to unseat Greene a few years ago, told me afterward. Worse, she said, was seeing "some of my neighbors, who I'd hugged moments before, cheering." This, she suggested, was "Marjorie Taylor Greene's version of America."

The next month, Nick Dyer, Greene's longest-tenured staffer, then deputy chief of staff, left her office without offering a public explanation. The timing suggested one: she would soon begin defying Trump.

In November, I stood outside the U.S. Capitol as Greene approached a microphone, looking frosty. "I woke up this morning, and I turned to my weather app to check the temperature, and it was thirty-two degrees," she said. "And my first thought was, Hell has froze over." D.C. was Hell, of course, and its freezing over was due to the fact that Congress finally had the votes to mandate the release of the Epstein files. Surrounded by survivors of Epstein's predations, she assailed Trump: "He called me a traitor for standing with these women."

If the Epstein saga wasn't proof of the QAnon theory in its deranged specifics, it seemed to confirm the central notion: that a shadowy network of élites had preyed on children. After Epstein died by suicide in prison, in 2019, calls grew to release all material related to his case: witness testimony, financial records, correspondence with powerful people. Greene began posting about Epstein in 2020, writing, "I will do everything under my power to bring down any and ALL pedophiles." Back in 2002, Trump had called Epstein, whom he'd long known, "a terrific guy." In June of 2024, on Fox, he said that he'd declassify the files if reelected, but suggested that they contained "phony stuff." Then he'd refused.

Greene warned that keeping the files concealed would fracture the *MAGA* coalition. In September, she signed on to a discharge petition, a procedural tool that would allow a vote to go forward without committee and leadership approvals. "I don't know that Trump has anyone in his Cabinet that's as honest with him as Marjorie," Representative Massie, who created the petition, told me in October.

Too honest, apparently. In November, Trump told reporters, "I don't know what happened to Marjorie." A week later, he withdrew his support from her, writing, "All I see 'Wacky' Marjorie do is COMPLAIN, COMPLAIN, COMPLAIN!" Greene apparently hadn't anticipated Trump's fury, which manifested, she said, in an "unspeakable" text to her in response to concerns she shared about her family's safety. "My sense is she was surprised that he turned on her," Ro Khanna, a Democratic congressman, told me.

Khanna had never known what to think about Greene. On the one hand, he'd been troubled by "the Jewish-space-laser thing," a reference to her conspiracy theory about the Rothschilds. On the other, she was friendly with the Democratic congressman Jonathan Jackson, the son of the civil-rights icon Jesse Jackson, who ran for President as a left-wing populist in the eighties. The younger Jackson told me that Greene had chatted with his father during his

swearing-in, and the two subsequently corresponded. He described Greene to me as “very kind to my father in his older age and illness. She reached out to FaceTime him on a few occasions. She liked how my father fought for the people.”

In July, Massie reintroduced Khanna and Greene. “In the five months we interacted, I reassessed my opinion of her,” Khanna said. The three worked together to release the Epstein files. Khanna consolidated Democratic support while Massie lobbied Republicans. Greene sought Trump’s backing. “In our conversations, she was never disloyal to Trump,” Khanna told me. “She would keep maintaining, ‘I don’t think this thing is about Trump. I’m going to convince him to do the right thing, and I think he will.’” Eventually, Trump endorsed the files’ release, though he didn’t seem enthusiastic. “I think he realized the Senate was moving,” Khanna said. “Massie thought we had about seventy Republican votes, and Trump saw that. Imagine seventy Republicans voting in defiance of Donald Trump—that would’ve been worse for him.”

Around noon on November 18th, Greene entered the House wearing black. There were only a few other members in the chamber. She sat with Massie, Khanna, and the Republican congresswoman Nancy Mace. When her turn came, she stood to address the room. “This should have been the easiest thing for the President of the United States,” she said. In the end, the Epstein Files Transparency Act passed; only one Republican opposed it. Dingell, who had engaged in the 2021 yelling match with Greene, approached her. They hugged.

Three days later, Greene announced her resignation from Congress, in an eleven-minute video. Sitting in front of a Christmas tree, wearing white, she said that Trump would probably have orchestrated a “hurtful and hateful primary” against her. She wrote in an accompanying letter that she’d been “cast aside by *MAGA, Inc.*” She told her followers, “There is no plan to save the world or

4-D chess game being played.” Put in terms of her previous cosmology, there was no Q.

Theories circulated about Greene’s broader split with Trump. A G.O.P. source in D.C. pointed to her sudden criticism of Trump’s tariff and immigration policies. “It could be her ex-husband saying, ‘Costs are going up at the construction company and you’re not going to get as big of a dividend.’ ” As for her rebuke of Israel, he told me, “I think she’s fed up with there being one or two votes each month denouncing antisemitism.” In fact, he added, she’d said as much to members of the House leadership team. A longtime Georgia G.O.P. operative told me that he assumed her shift was the result of belatedly learning about the issues. “My theory is she’s not actually a dumbass anymore.”

It was also possible that her ambition had been thwarted too many times. Greene was interested in leading the Department of Homeland Security during Trump’s second term—and, later, in running for the Senate. Last May, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Trump had helped “ease” Greene away from the Senate idea with a poll showing her far behind the Democratic incumbent, Jon Ossoff. “She thought she should have been considered for Vice-President, and then she thought she should be in the Cabinet,” a prominent former G.O.P. official in Georgia told me. “They pissed all over the Senate race—so she’s not exactly felt rewarded.” Debbie Dooley, the Georgia-based president of the America First Tea Party, called Greene “a woman scorned.” Essence Johnson, the Democratic chair of Cobb County, partly in Greene’s district, said, “She’s going whichever way the wind is blowing.” Ossoff told me, “Trump is a sinking ship. If you’ve staked your identity on loyalty to Trump, there’s a fast-approaching sell-by date on that.”

On Truth Social, Trump had also threatened to support her challengers in a primary, a tactic that had pushed plenty of Republicans into retirement before. Still, Georgia’s governor, Brian Kemp, and Raffensperger, its secretary of state, both opposed

Trump's attempt to overturn his election loss in the state, in 2020, and were easily reelected. "She's entirely safe up there," Charles S. Bullock III, a political-science professor at the University of Georgia, said. Massie argued that attacking Greene could hurt Trump. "Marjorie represents the conscience of the populist wing of the party," he said. "Attacking her shrinks the tent." But, for Greene, running for reelection might have been dangerous. In mid-November, police confirmed multiple credible threats to her family—which she blamed on Trump's attacks. In the wake of Charlie Kirk's killing and the firebombing of Josh Shapiro's home, there was reason for a controversial politician to exit public life.

She certainly didn't need her congressional salary. According to filings, Greene makes a million dollars a year from her family's company and is also active in the stock market, where the value of her holdings has increased by nearly five hundred per cent since 2021. In May, the investment-research site Quiver Quantitative reported that Greene was worth around twenty-two million dollars. "If anyone can help my mom @mtgreenee locate her mysterious \$22 MILLION bank account everyone keeps talking about . . . we'd really appreciate it," her daughter Lauren posted on X. This month, Greene also becomes eligible for a congressional pension.

Greene's departure from Congress belongs to a broader fracturing of the MAGA coalition. "There's a real power vacuum, which everyone knew would happen when Trump eventually had to leave power," Rachel Blum, a political-science professor at the University of Oklahoma, told me. "But it's arriving early, and there's a real opening for someone who can step forward and clearly articulate a vision that picks up and adds to what was attractive about Trumpism." Coalitions can form around many things: isolationism, nationalism, immigration, antisemitism. Elon Musk, J. D. Vance, Tucker Carlson, Nick Fuentes, and others are all testing out variations on Trumpism. "There's a real battle to be had between the parts of the Party that still have more traditional

positions and these other figures, including Greene, who is among the better spokespeople for America First,” Blum said.

What accounts for Greene’s appeal? More than most politicians, she resembles an average voter: she has a hodgepodge of recently formed opinions that seem grounded in real belief, if not always in fact. The Georgia G.O.P. operative compared her to the President. “It’s like how Trump doesn’t know who fought in World War One,” he told me. “She kind of came into this tabula rasa. She had no interest in politics. She obviously never studied history. And she’s speaking to a lot of people who don’t know history or the context of the current American policy, either.” He went on, “You may think she’s a moron, but she gets where people are on things.”

Her choice of words often chafed Party leaders. In May, 2021, she tweeted, “Vaccinated employees get a vaccination logo just like the Nazi’s forced Jewish people to wear a gold star.” Kevin McCarthy criticized her for this comment at the time, leading her to retweet someone calling him a “feckless cunt.” But he told me that she “understands and listens to the base more than a lot of elected officials.” He pointed to trans issues. After entering Congress, Greene put up a poster outside her office that read “There are *TWO* genders: *Male & Female*. ‘Trust The Science!’ ” Some of her Republican colleagues were more open to trans rights at the time—Nancy Mace said, that year, that she “strongly support[s] L.G.B.T.Q. rights and equality”—but they eventually moved toward Greene’s position. Mace has since used a trans slur, and Trump played on voters’ transphobia to help win reelection. McCarthy described Greene to me, flatteringly, as the “canary in the coal mine” of the G.O.P.

Throughout the fall, Greene laid out her “America First, America Only” vision. It resembled the *MAGA* platform, but with fewer foreign, corporate, or pedophilic entanglements. The G.O.P. source in D.C. recently heard from someone in the White House that she was “thinking about running for President.” *Time* had reported

similar whispers. *Salon* predicted “AOC vs. MTG” in 2028. Greene denied the rumors. Her resignation letter did not rule out the possibility of a future White House run—or a campaign for governor of Georgia, in 2026—but it set a seeming prerequisite: that “the common American people finally realize and understand that the Political Industrial Complex of both parties is ripping this country apart.” Meanwhile, Greene wrote, “I’m going back to the people I love.” She also went surfing in Costa Rica, posting on Instagram about living #puravida while writing on X that she was still “America FIRST.” In December, when heavily redacted portions of the Epstein files were released, she wrote, “Only evil people would hide this and protect those who participated.”

This fall, Greene cited her constituents to explain her break with Trump: during one week, she said, sixty per cent of the calls to her district office concerned health-insurance premiums costing too much, and the rest were about Epstein. Residents of the Fourteenth District span three thousand square miles of mostly rural Appalachia. Many do farm or factory work. Nearly one in three people in the town of Aragon lives below the poverty line. One evening in October, I picked up Garry Baldwin, an Aragon resident, from his little white house. A bespectacled octogenarian, Baldwin was working on a bathroom renovation when I’d called, minutes earlier. “Lemme throw on a clean shirt,” he’d said cheerfully. “I’ll show you around.” From 2016 to 2019, Baldwin was Aragon’s mayor. He described the mandate of the job as “keep the place halfway safe, keep people from walking off with it.” There isn’t much to walk off with, he confessed: dilapidated homes, some churches, and JC’s Snack Shack. Before taking on his nonpartisan mayoral duties, Baldwin was a security guard. His achievement as mayor, he told me, was “We didn’t go broke. I didn’t get sued.”

We passed some deer grazing in the rain and a man on a porch, who, Baldwin said, “stays in jail half the time.” A rainbow soon framed the smokestack of a defunct cotton mill. “This town lost its

identity when the mill closed and nothing replaced it,” he said. “We’re stepchildren out here.” Greene had visited the area once that he knew of. “She shook hands, then left,” he said. “No help.” He didn’t much like Greene, nor did his wife. “But I can’t even get her to vote,” he said. He didn’t know what to think about Greene’s resignation: “I’m baffled like everyone else.”

Bradley Davenport, a district resident who had voted for Greene, told me, “I don’t like that she’s leaving us. She helped the conservatives in small towns that don’t have a voice.” He wanted to believe that the rumors about her future political plans were true: “She may have bigger things ahead of her. I hope so.”

Davenport and I met in rural Murray County, at one of Greene’s final appearances as a congresswoman. She was speaking at a public hearing about the proposed construction of a waste-processing facility run by Vanguard Renewables, a portfolio company of BlackRock. Locals, like Davenport, were troubled by what it would mean for their water, air, and home values. A panel of academics and Vanguard representatives tried unsuccessfully to tamp down concerns. Then Greene stood to speak. “My office has reported seven hundred and seventy-three death threats for me,” she told the crowd. “And I drove up here in my own car with my 9-millimetre.” Her constituents roared. She gestured at the expert panel: “I didn’t come in on a private plane like you guys did.”

Her performance, which she later posted on X six times, was vintage M.T.G. She made ad-hominem attacks (“Some of you were dumb enough to wear dress shoes with your little farmers’ outfits,” she told the members of the panel, who had dressed in farm-casual for the occasion); she played up her construction background (“I’ve been in it my entire life”); she was vulgar (“Don’t tell us how not a single drop will never spill: that’s a bunch of bullshit”); she was populist (“This is what people are tired of . . . a big corporation coming in and taking advantage of a rural county”); and she gestured at a conspiracy involving the young man who attempted to

assassinate Trump in 2024 in Butler, Pennsylvania (“We’re all still wondering why Thomas Crooks, who shot Donald Trump in an ear, was on a BlackRock commercial”).

“All right, it’s y’all’s turn,” she concluded, turning to the crowd. “Give ’em hell.” For almost four more hours, until after 11 P.M., they did. But first they swarmed Greene for selfies.

It was a lovefest for a *maga* apostate. “Preach it, girl!” a man beside me yelled. Earlier, I’d overheard him talking to one of Greene’s aides about Trump’s feud with her. “Sometimes I think he should just shut his mouth,” the man said. Cyndie Roberson, a retired nurse, listened as the crowd begged Greene, “Don’t leave us!” Roberson is a moderate Republican who had long considered Greene “way too extreme.” Not anymore. “My husband and I said to each other, ‘Who would think that we’d fall in love with Marjorie Taylor Greene?’ ” Roberson said. “If she runs for office again, we’ll vote for her.” ♦

Charles Bethea, a staff writer focussing on the American South, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2008.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/marjorie-taylor-greenes-big-breakup>

The Control of Nature

Can We Save Wine from Wildfires?

The industry has lost billions of dollars, largely because smoke makes the drink taste like licking an ashtray. Now a team of scientists is chasing a solution.

By [Nicola Twilley](#)

January 5, 2026



Across the West Coast, vintners now fear a bitter, ashy-tasting product.

Photograph by Bobby Doherty for The New Yorker

According to Mike Zolnikov, who tends a couple of acres of Pinot Noir and an acre of Chardonnay on a flat, slightly soggy patch of the central Willamette Valley, in Oregon, it had been a once-in-a-decade growing season. “Not too hot, not too wet,” he recalled, wistfully. “It would have been a really great year.” A few hundred miles south, in California’s Napa Valley, the winemaker Ashley Egelhoff, of Honig Vineyard and Winery, was feeling similarly about her Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc. “That’s how 2020 was panning out: like Goldilocks, just right,” she told me.

For wine growers and makers, each season offers a series of fresh yet familiar opportunities for disaster. Drought shrivels the grapes; excessive heat deprives the juice of acidity; too much rain results in rampant mold. “But that’s the fun of it,” Egelhoff said. “Every harvest brings a surprise.” The gamble of spraying early or of picking the grapes late, the black magic of fermentation, the art of blending: it’s precisely the puzzle of chance and choice that keeps winemakers hooked. Plus, every now and then, as in 2020, you get perfect conditions. “Then everything went to hell,” Egelhoff said.

That August, the West Coast’s worst fire season in history began. More than eleven thousand bolts of lightning struck central and Northern California in the span of thirty-six hours, heralding the start of an orange-skied autumn in which flights were suspended, more than eight million acres burned across twelve states, and winemakers’ dreams of a perfect vintage went up in flames. “The lightning storm came over on the first day we were bringing Sauvignon Blanc in, and within a couple of hours there was smoke,” Egelhoff told me. “I was on the crush pad—we were unloading our first truck of fruit—and it was probably one of the most heartbreakening moments of my career.”

In the past few decades, as wildfires have become larger, faster, and more severe because of climate change, the focus has been on the considerable damage caused by the flames themselves; the smoke has been thought to be relatively harmless. Only recently have

scientists realized that the opposite is true. In humans, smoke inhalation has been linked to heart and lung damage and to multiple forms of cancer; this year researchers in Europe concluded that they had underestimated death tolls from short-term wildfire-smoke exposure by ninety-three per cent. In the United States, smoke exposure is estimated to have caused tens of thousands of deaths every year between 2010 and 2020—an order of magnitude more than the number of lives lost to the actual fires.

Plants don't have lungs, of course, but grapevines do breathe, absorbing oxygen and other atmospheric gases—including smoke—through small pores on the underside of their leaves, or by diffusion across the fruit's thin, waxy skin. The result is smoke taint, a flaw in wine that has been described as tasting “like Las Vegas smells,” like “burnt salami served on an ashtray,” and, perhaps most evocatively, like the morning after a big night out, when “you've smoked a bunch of cigarettes and then you wake up, smell your hands, and regret your entire life.”

Although many wine drinkers have remained blissfully ignorant of this addition to wildfires' already heavy toll, it has been disastrous for winemakers. One analyst concluded that the 2020 wildfires cost the California wine industry nearly four billion dollars, an amount that includes both direct fire damage and sales lost owing to smoke exposure. “We had brought in just twenty tons of Sauvignon Blanc, and we had to assume that everything else was ruined,” Egelhoff said. “It was a lost vintage.” The hundreds of thousands of tons of California grapes left unharvested that year were estimated to be worth more than six hundred million dollars alone. Oregon suffered similarly. “For a couple of days, it was a red sky, and then there was no sky,” Zolnikov said. “It was just solid smoke.” He painstakingly cleaned all the ash off his vines before harvest, but when winemakers shared the bottles they'd made with his grapes they still tasted acrid and smoky.

Clearly, the best way to prevent smoke taint would be to prevent wildfires in the first place. In the meantime, the wine industry is desperate to protect its grapes. As 2020 drew to a close, a trio of West Coast researchers—Tom Collins, at Washington State University; Elizabeth Tomasino, at Oregon State University; and Anita Oberholster, at the University of California, Davis—proposed an ambitious, “smoke to glass” effort aimed at finding an answer. “That year made it very clear we need to be better prepared,” Tomasino told me. The U.S.D.A., which normally has a puritanical reluctance to fund research that might be used by the beer, wine, and spirits industry, awarded the team \$7.65 million in 2021. “As devastating as 2020 was, that’s the silver lining,” Egelhoff, who recalled sending the trio “a very angry e-mail” that year, complaining about a lack of help from researchers, said. “It really pushed them to get the solutions we need.”

In September, I joined Collins and a group of students on a trip to Washington State University’s experimental vineyards, in the Yakima Valley. It was early morning, and two sunrises lit the horizon. The false dawn, to the north, was a wildfire: overnight, a lightning strike had ignited the desiccated grasses of Rattlesnake Ridge, casting the hills around us into ominous relief. It was a stark reminder of the reason we’d woken up at this hour. Before the morning was over, we would simulate a rangeland fire of our own, to study the impact of smoke on wine grapes.

Collins runs the most impressive smoke-taint experiments in the country. Whereas Tomasino’s team, in Oregon, works with a handful of vines at a time, Collins smokes the equivalent of a quarter-acre vineyard in large hoop houses, allowing him to get closer to real-world conditions—and to make a decent amount of truly terrible wine. (Sadly, Oberholster died, from cancer, last year.) Each house encloses two hundred Merlot vines, and once we arrived we began pulling shade cloths over them, to the accompaniment of a portable speaker pumping out Fleetwood Mac. Three of the houses were to remain smoke-free, as an experimental

control. In three others, we used zip ties to hang fat swags of vented plastic hosing along each row of vines, directly under the clusters of purple grapes.



Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

The students and I wrangled tarps and zip ties while Collins, who volunteers with the Boy Scouts, issued instructions leavened with gentle ribbing and reminders to hydrate. He fussed with the hoses, hooking them up to three battered grills. The light turned salmon, then golden, as we worked. Collins told the students to gather a few

clusters and leaves for a pre-smoke sampling but to avoid vines with pink or orange tags, as these had been treated with an experimental barrier spray. Finally, with the samples stashed safely in an ice chest, Collins opened the grills, blowtorched some pellets inside, and watched as the smoke got going. I poked my nose through a slit in one of the houses as it filled with a pungent haze: the pellets were handcrafted from more than a dozen local rangeland species, including sagebrush, cheatgrass, and tumble mustard, all painstakingly collected by summer interns.

Although fire has been mankind's constant companion and wine likely predates most agriculture, smoke-tainted wine seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. "People weren't really aware of it, but it probably had been happening," Mango Parker, a senior research scientist at the Australian Wine Research Institute, told me. She pointed me to a reference in an Italian enological textbook from 1892, which lists "smoky taste" as a potential flaw in wine—fortunately "found more rarely in Italian wines than in German."

In modern times, Australians have taken the lead in the war against smoky taste. In January and February of 2003, at the start of harvest season, the state of Victoria experienced its biggest bushfire in decades: an area larger than Sydney burned, and the A.W.R.I. began receiving calls from winemakers whose vintage was exhibiting pronounced notes of ashtray. At the time, Collins was a researcher at Beringer, an Australian-owned winery in Napa Valley; after a relatively meat-and-potatoes upbringing, he'd fallen in love with wine in New York's Finger Lakes region while studying Russian at Cornell. But it wasn't until 2008, when a thick haze of wildfire smoke blanketed Northern California for much of the summer, that Collins became aware of the problem, and it wasn't until 2017, when fires briefly left Napa with the worst air quality in the nation, that smoke taint became part of the vocabulary of West Coast winemakers. "Everyone was talking about smoke taint that year," Esther Mobley, the senior wine critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, told me. "But, for the most part, it really wasn't an issue

because of the time of year that the wildfires happened.” Ninety per cent of grapes had already been picked, so the damage was limited.

“Everything changed in 2020,” Mobley continued—both on the West Coast and in Australia, where bushfires were catastrophic, generating their own weather and pushing entire species toward extinction. Andrew Spinaze, a winemaker in Australia’s Hunter Valley, told me that he received several calls from his Napa Valley counterparts asking what to do. “We were saying we don’t really know,” he admitted. Part of the problem was that harvesting is expensive, and no one could tell whether a batch of grapes would, in time, yield a ruined vintage. “It became a huge question: Were you going to make wine that year or not?” Mobley said. In California and Oregon, the laboratories that typically perform analytical chemistry for wineries were quickly overwhelmed. “The labs were backed up for months, so people were sending samples of grape juice to Australia and to Canada,” Mobley said. “By the time you got the information back, the moment to harvest had passed anyway.”

By then, Collins had been intentionally smoking grapes for years; the very first grant proposal he wrote when he joined the faculty at W.S.U., in 2015, was for the hoop-house program. As we watched the fumes rise in his makeshift wildfire, the morning’s chirps and caws gave way to coyote howls. “Our exposures are typically thirty-six hours, which we’ve found is enough time for us to definitely get smoke impact,” Collins said. He took the night shift, maintaining smoke levels while watching “Zoolander” and “Spaceballs” on his laptop. We reconvened the next evening, just before sunset, to tear down the hoop houses and stow the gear. Collins wheeled away the grills for winter storage; a freezer was stacked with ziplock bags of sample grapes and leaves, ready for analysis. The fruit was still a few weeks shy of harvest, but I popped a tiny grape in my mouth anyway. After thirty-six hours of smoke exposure, it was still a treat, the juice delightfully sweet as it trickled over my tongue.

How can a smoke-tainted grape taste delicious off the vine, only to become acrid and ashy in the bottle? This conundrum obsessed Tomasino, a cheerful scholar of flavor chemistry whose research, though focussed on wine, has also considered the intricacies of coffee roasting and the impact of terroir on cheese. After the 2020 debacle, one of the most frequent requests that Tomasino fielded from anxious winemakers was for a kind of palate training, to help them get to know the enemy. This is a common practice among sommeliers and vintners: to learn how to identify the musty, wet-cardboard notes of cork taint, for example, they'll sip glasses spiked with TCA, the compound that causes it. Now they wanted a mixture that re-created smoke taint—which meant that Tomasino had to figure out how to mimic something whose chemical composition had yet to be determined.

This was not a simple task. The glass of red you reach for at the end of a long day, the champagne you raise in a toast, the funky orange you order to look sophisticated: each contains between two hundred and four hundred aromatic compounds. The earthy quality so prized in a Cabernet Sauvignon is due to a smidge of pyrazine, a volatile molecule more commonly found in peas and bell peppers; the gasoline note of an aged Riesling comes courtesy of a compound called TDN. Sommeliers are fond of saying that wine is the second most complex liquid in the world, after blood. Tomasino told me this is not necessarily a scientific claim; still, the sheer quantity of chemicals interacting in a glass gives the search for offenders a needle-in-a-haystack quality.

When Australian researchers started considering the problem, in 2003, they identified two chemicals—guaiacol and 4-methylguaiacol—as the primary components of smoke. But the presence of these compounds in grapes failed miserably as a diagnostic for smoke taint. In 2009, Australian growers and winemakers sent samples in for testing during another disastrous fire season; when the A.W.R.I. didn't detect excessive amounts of the two chemicals, vintners went ahead and bottled as usual. “The

wines were just terrible,” Parker recalled. “They became smokier and smokier over time, and the thing the winemakers really hated was an ashy aftertaste that developed even after they spat it out.”

Part of the issue involved the grapevines’ own defense mechanism. Guaiacol and other smoke-related compounds are poisonous to plant cells, but plants have developed an elaborate in-house detoxification system, in which dangerous chemicals are quickly bound to sugar molecules, making them less reactive, odorless, and easier to sequester. This process, which was already under way as Collins watched “Zoolander” outside his hoop houses, seems to be quite effective for grapes; unfortunately for the humans who want to turn them into wine, it’s a ticking time bomb. Fermentation, which uses yeast to break down the sugars in grape juice, transforming single-note sweetness into the complex, delicious alcohol enjoyed by so many, also unlocks those smoky compounds; so, too, can the enzymes in human saliva. Testing for guaiacol and its friends in grapes failed to account for the fact that the chemicals were still bound to the new sugar compounds, called glycosides.

After one of Parker’s colleagues pointed this out, in 2010, the A.W.R.I. promptly added a handful of glycosides to its list of least-wanted compounds. But the test was still far from perfect, Tomasino told me. In desperation, she assigned a graduate student, Jenna Fryer, to burn all sorts of things—marshmallows, paper, charcoal—and then dilute them, hoping to develop a recipe for replicating the smoke-taint sensation. After sampling at least fifteen of these tinctures without much success—“I still have nightmares about some of the things we tasted,” Tomasino said—it occurred to her that she’d heard the term “ashy” used in culinary circles, so she told Fryer to chat with some chefs. This led Fryer to incinerate leek tips, brew the cremains using boiling water and a coffee filter, and then mix the result into wine. During a meeting, Tomasino served Collins some of Fryer’s burnt-leek beverage. “Tom looked at me, and he’s, like, ‘That’s literally the ashy aftertaste.’ And I said,

‘Right?’ ” she recalled, triumphantly. “Then I said, ‘I’m giving you a vial—tell me what’s in here.’ ”

Collins’s lab revealed that the leek tea was indeed loaded with smoky chemicals, and that it also contained another class of compounds: thiols. Thiols are responsible for the distinctive aromas of skunk spray and ripe durian; they’re also added to natural gas to provide a detectable rotten-egg smell at even trace levels. When Tomasino spiked red wine with guaiacol and similar chemicals, the mixture tasted like Band-Aids; if she used only thiols it had a vegetal aspect, reminiscent of Brussels sprouts. It took adding both to create the particular licking-a-grill notes of smoke taint.

Since then, Collins, by testing grapes that have been flash-frozen every few hours during one of his hoop-house experiments, has shown that the production of both glycosides and thiols seems to ramp up significantly during a smoke event—and that, like glycosides, bound thiols break apart during fermentation. Case closed. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for a career, finding this, and it was pure dumb luck,” Tomasino told me, with a laugh. Astonishingly, given their impact, the levels of thiols in smoke-tainted wine are so vanishingly tiny that they’re measured in nanograms per litre. The team would never have spotted them just by analyzing a defective bottle.

In a fluorescent-lit sensory-testing facility at Oregon State University, Tomasino led me to a cubicle with a single computer, told me to follow the instructions on the screen, and wished me luck. Camilla Sartori, the facility manager, had set up a tray holding six black wineglasses, a spittoon, and two clear glasses, one filled with water and the other with a slightly sugary solution designed to be a palate cleanser. During the next sixty minutes, I sipped, swished, and spat while answering a barrage of questions about how the wines tasted, my emotional response to them, and my willingness to purchase.

Discovering the chemicals responsible for smoke taint is, sadly, only half the battle. When it comes to wine, perception is reality, and humans turn out to be remarkably varied in our responses to smoke taint. Among Tomasino's recent findings is that at least ten per cent of drinkers can't detect smoke taint in wine and many more don't mind it, depending on the grape variety, wine style, and degree of taint. In Australia, similar studies have found that between nineteen and forty per cent of consumers, as the winemaker Peter Leske put it, "don't care as long as it's wet and it's got alcohol." Even among people who can detect smoke taint, Tomasino estimates, sensitivity varies at least a hundredfold. "I've made it a career goal to never work on saliva," Tomasino told me. "But people have a lot of enzymes in their mouths, and they're very different."

After I'd spent an hour in the cubicle pondering whether I was tasting red fruit or dark fruit, and whether it made me feel bored, worried, or excited, Sartori tabulated my results and explained what I'd been drinking: a control glass of classic Willamette Valley Pinot Noir that hadn't been exposed to smoke, a glass of commercially available smoke-tainted 2020 Pinot from the same region, and a series of samples that blended the two in different ratios. We established that I am prone to overthinking, that I'm not a huge fan of the earthy and acidic notes that are considered the hallmark of the region's flagship varietal, and that the only sample I'd willingly purchase was a blend of one-quarter smoke-tainted wine and three-quarters not. According to my checklist, it tasted like tobacco, black pepper, and dark fruit, with a slight herbaceous note and a bitter finish.

My own idiosyncrasies aside, running this sensory test has helped Tomasino discover that the effects of blending are nonlinear, meaning a blend that is just five per cent smoked wine is typically perceived as having much more of an ashy aftertaste than one that is fifty-fifty. Tomasino credits this finding to a phenomenon that researchers call "matrix interactions," in which the threshold at

which a compound can be detected depends on its context. Research has shown that fruity esters can mask smoke taint, and that the molecules responsible for the cut-grass and green-apple notes of Sauvignon Blanc enhance it. “It makes for really complicated math,” Tomasino said.

To add to the complexity, smoke taint is inflected by subtle distinctions between grape varietals, too. Pinot Noir is universally acknowledged to be the most vulnerable to taint, for reasons that probably have to do with its famously thin skin; Syrah, in which a savory bacon note is considered desirable, naturally contains significant quantities of guaiacol, no wildfire required. (In general, red wines are especially susceptible to taint, because many smoky compounds are concentrated in the skins, which are left on during fermentation.) Still more variables are introduced when you consider the ripeness of the grapes—a smoke event earlier in the season may give the vine more time to metabolize toxic compounds, as opposed to one nearer harvest. And all these considerations are preceded by the unpredictable, impossible-to-model vagaries of smoke itself.

THE GRIM CLONKER



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Mike Kleeman, an environmental engineer at U.C. Davis who has been working with Collins and Tomasino, told me that gauging the harm of smoke exposure requires, at minimum, an understanding of how old the smoke is by the time it reaches the grapes, how reactive the atmosphere it travelled through was (sunshine chews up dangerous chemicals, making the smoke less harmful; chlorinated ocean air can have the same effect), what chemicals were in it in the first place (California's coastal chaparral seems to

have high concentrations of smoke-producing compounds), and even the topography of the vineyard.

With so many variables at play, the mental effort of evaluating smoke exposure in grapes can cause more of a headache than drinking the resulting bottle. Mobley, the wine critic, told me that, after tasting dozens of smoke-tainted wines over the years, she's decided that it makes more sense to think of them as falling on a spectrum than as being defined by a single flaw. "Sometimes they can have that herbal, mezcal smokiness, sometimes it's more of a barbecue smokiness," she said. "Sometimes you might not get any overtly smoky sensations but there's kind of a shortness to the wine—it tastes fine, just a little lifeless compared with what it could have been." Regardless, she said, industry professionals tend to prize a certain purity of terroir and varietal expression in their wines. For them, she said, "it's just all bad."

For grape growers and vintners concerned with making a living, the pursuit of smoke taint's essence has thus far had relatively limited practical application. The industry wants inexpensive, field-based tests that can predict whether a wine will be tainted or not, effective techniques to remove smoke-taint compounds from wine, and—dare to dream!—technologies to protect grapes from smoke in the first place. Collins and Tomasino argue that understanding the nature of the problem is a precursor to achieving these goals, but they're working on them nonetheless.

In his hoop-house experiments, for example, Collins has shown that spraying grapes with kaolin, a clay-based powder that is already used to shield grapes from sunburn, reduces post-exposure guaiacol levels by nearly half—a promising result. "The idea is that the kaolin absorbs things from the smoke and keeps them from getting to the fruit," Collins said. "But we realized you have to wash the stuff off, because otherwise it just releases everything it has absorbed back into the grape."

Indeed, wine made with unrinsed kaolin-sprayed grapes is the only thing I drank in the course of my reporting that was literally nauseating. “If you don’t rinse it off, you would have been better off doing nothing,” Collins said, as I sputtered and heaved. In his latest hoop-house experiment, he was testing just how quickly that rinse needs to occur, though any rinsing may be an obstacle for growers, since it requires more water, which is in short supply in many wine-growing regions, as well as more labor. Tomasino has recently been developing a different approach—a proprietary lipid spray, which doesn’t need to be washed off—but won’t be able to test it until the summer. “It works on the lab stuff, but we don’t know about in the field yet,” she said. Even if it succeeds, it may only reduce smoke-compound absorption—not prevent it altogether.

In other words, vintners still need a strategy for restoring the purity of their ferments. “An old winemaker friend told me about a technique where you use organic skim milk, and the proteins in the milk bind up some of the smoke compounds,” Andrew Jones, a winemaker at Field Recordings, in Paso Robles, told me. In desperation, he tried it; the proteins sank to the bottom and formed a sludge, allowing him to drain the wine off after twenty-four hours. “It did take away some smoke,” he said. “It also strips away some color.” Egelhoff and Leske experimented with mixing their smoky wines with activated carbon, which Leske referred to as “the tactical nuclear weapon of winemaking.” Carbon—like reverse osmosis, which requires costly equipment—can indiscriminately strip out smaller molecules, removing color and flavor along with any suspect chemicals. “There are a lot of treatments where you’re, like, ‘Well, there’s less smoke, but it’s also taken everything positive about the wine out,’ ” Egelhoff said. “So, is it really a better wine now?”

In search of a more targeted solution, Lik Rong Lim, one of Tomasino’s students, developed a clever way to extract thiols, inspired by his professor’s childhood dislike for the sulfuric smell

of canned vegetables. Years ago, Tomasino puréed canned spinach and ran it through a rotary evaporator to remove any aromatics, then offered a sensory panel the result alongside the original. “I’ve never seen such a statistically significant result,” she told me. Removing sulfuric compounds made vegetables more palatable; could something similar save a smoked-out Cabernet? In the corner of Tomasino’s lab, Lim showed me his invention, which uses inert nitrogen to bubble the thiols out of wine and into gaseous form. They can then be piped into a separate flask full of a colorless liquid that has two useful properties: it exclusively traps thiols, and it turns yellow in the process. At Lim’s bench, we watched as the liquid turned the strawlike shade of dehydrated urine. Lim explained that the fluid, unlike carbon or other refining agents, is extremely selective and never comes into contact with the rest of the wine. “As a proof of concept, it totally works,” Tomasino said.

An actual, practicable solution will require more research—and more money. The team will be submitting a proposal for another four-year grant from the U.S.D.A., tweaking its language to suit the Administration’s focus on economic-loss prevention rather than climate change. “I won’t have something for you tomorrow, but we will be able to take care of this problem,” Tomasino said. “With all the research that’s going on, in three to five years a smoke event will happen and we’ll know exactly what to do.”

Part of that statement is definitely true: a smoke event will happen. Researchers have calculated that by 2050 the current rate of warming will lead to seventy thousand Americans dying annually because of smoke exposure. “Lives lost are a tragedy; smoke-tainted grapes are a challenge,” Leske reminded me. Indeed, smoke-tainted grapes are just one of many challenges facing the wine industry right now, as rising temperatures also increase pest and disease pressures; heighten the likelihood of drought, hail, and flooding; and threaten to ripen fruit so quickly that harvest becomes compressed to the point of logistical impossibility. Smoke

is a mere facet of this new normal—it is, arguably, now part of a wine’s “aeroir.”

Within the industry, this perspective has been slow to gain acceptance. But, sometime in the fall of 2020, Cyler Varnum, a vintner who’d purchased grapes from Mike Zolnikov, in Oregon, had a breakthrough. When people visited Varnum’s tasting room, in the Willamette Valley, they often asked how that year’s vintage had fared, given the wildfires. Varnum decided to take them back to a barrel and pull a sample so they could see for themselves. Some made a face and spat it out; others could taste the smoke but found it curious rather than repulsive; still others loved it. “That was the realization: we don’t dictate people’s tastes,” he told me, as we sat in his tasting room. “I shouldn’t be trying to tell people that it’s a flaw. I’d rather be, like, ‘This was 2020: you might like it, you might not.’ ”

After all, he pointed out, that’s true of any vintage: hot summers make wine taste one way, cold snaps another; some people like their Zinfandel aged in bourbon barrels or their Pinot Grigio diluted with ice. In the past few years, natural-wine aficionados have embraced the funky barnyard notes imparted by Brettanomyces yeast, which have traditionally been regarded as a flaw. And a floral, almost roselike aroma, considered characteristic of wines from cooler regions, was recently discovered to be caused by the inclusion of dead leaves in the ferment. Scientists have dubbed it “frost taint.”

Varnum, in his tasting room, shared what little remained of his 2020 stock, starting with a traditional sparkling blanc de blanc he’d bottled under the moniker Toast, made entirely from Zolnikov’s Chardonnay grapes and fermented in neutral oak. “It’s interesting, because when you think about champagne, you want toasted-brioche, crème-brûlée notes—that’s actually a quality you’re looking for,” he explained. On first sniff, I was not optimistic: the nose, as Varnum delicately put it, was “more on the burnt side of

toast.” But the taste was much more nuanced: light, clean, and bright, with a browned-piecrust quality that never built into the bitter charred note I’d learned to anticipate. Earlier that year, Varnum’s partner, Taralyn, told me, they’d had a bonfire and brought out the glasses. “I think I drank almost a whole bottle,” she said. “Around a campfire, it’s delicious.” ♦

Nicola Twilley, a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, is a host of the podcast “*Gastropod*.” Her books include “*Frostbite: How Refrigeration Changed Our Food, Our Planet, and Ourselves*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/can-we-save-wine-from-wildfires>

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The Making of the First American Pope

Will Pope Leo XIV follow the progressive example of his predecessor or chart a more moderate course? His work in Chicago and Peru may shed light on his approach.

By [Paul Elie](#)

January 5, 2026



Since the Second Vatican Council, in the early nineteen-sixties, it has been the pattern that a dynamic, pathbreaking Pope is succeeded by a more sober, deliberate ally.

Photograph by Camillo Pasquarelli for The New Yorker

In Peru every August, throngs of Catholics set out on foot from the remote northern town of Motupe, bound for a cliffside chapel that

houses the Cross of Chalpon. The cross, made of guayacán wood and ringed with precious metals, stands about eight feet tall and is believed to have been discovered, as if by a miracle, in a nearby cave in 1868. The ascent takes about an hour, and vendors along the way sell religious images and replicas of the cross, as well as roasted corn and Inca Kola. A highlight of the pilgrimage comes when a procession bears the cross downhill, to the church of San Julián, in Motupe's main plaza. The next day, the Bishop of Chiclayo, the regional capital, leads a Mass for a congregation that fills the square. A brass band plays and helicopters scatter rose petals over the faithful. For decades, the presiding bishop was a member of Opus Dei, a traditionalist movement, founded in Spain in 1928, that has thrived in Latin America. In 2014, however, Pope Francis appointed Robert Prevost, an Augustinian priest from Chicago who had spent a dozen years as a missionary in Peru, to the post.

Prevost himself, of course, is now the Pope; he was elected on May 8th and took the name Leo XIV. Made famous overnight, he stuck to a Midwestern matter-of-factness: he addressed the cardinals who'd elected him in flat-vowelled English, phoned his family daily, kept up his morning habit of doing the *Times*' Wordle puzzle, and sent e-mails and texts from his personal accounts. His election was striking but not altogether surprising: he was on many Vatican watchers' lists and, since the Second Vatican Council, in the early nineteen-sixties, it has been the pattern that a dynamic, pathbreaking Pope is succeeded by a more sober, deliberate ally. Leo—who in recent years worked closely with Pope Francis as the Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, a powerful Vatican office—seems likely to carry forward his predecessor's emphasis on the poor and those on the margins of society with a steadiness that will complement the Argentinean prelate's improvisatory style.

The public was instantly captivated by Prevost's background. He was called “the first American Pope,” “the pan-American Pope” (as a bishop, he was required to take Peruvian citizenship), and “the

three-world Pope” (to account for his time in Rome). Following accounts that his mother’s family was from New Orleans and his maternal grandfather, born in Haiti, was listed as Black in the 1900 census, he was hailed as “the Black Pope”—until reports of his Sicilian, French, Québécois, Spanish, Cuban, and Creole ancestry brought him the tag “the immigrant Pope.”



“You can settle your check whenever you’re ready to understand my need to turn this table over at least three times tonight in order to make any sort of living.”

Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

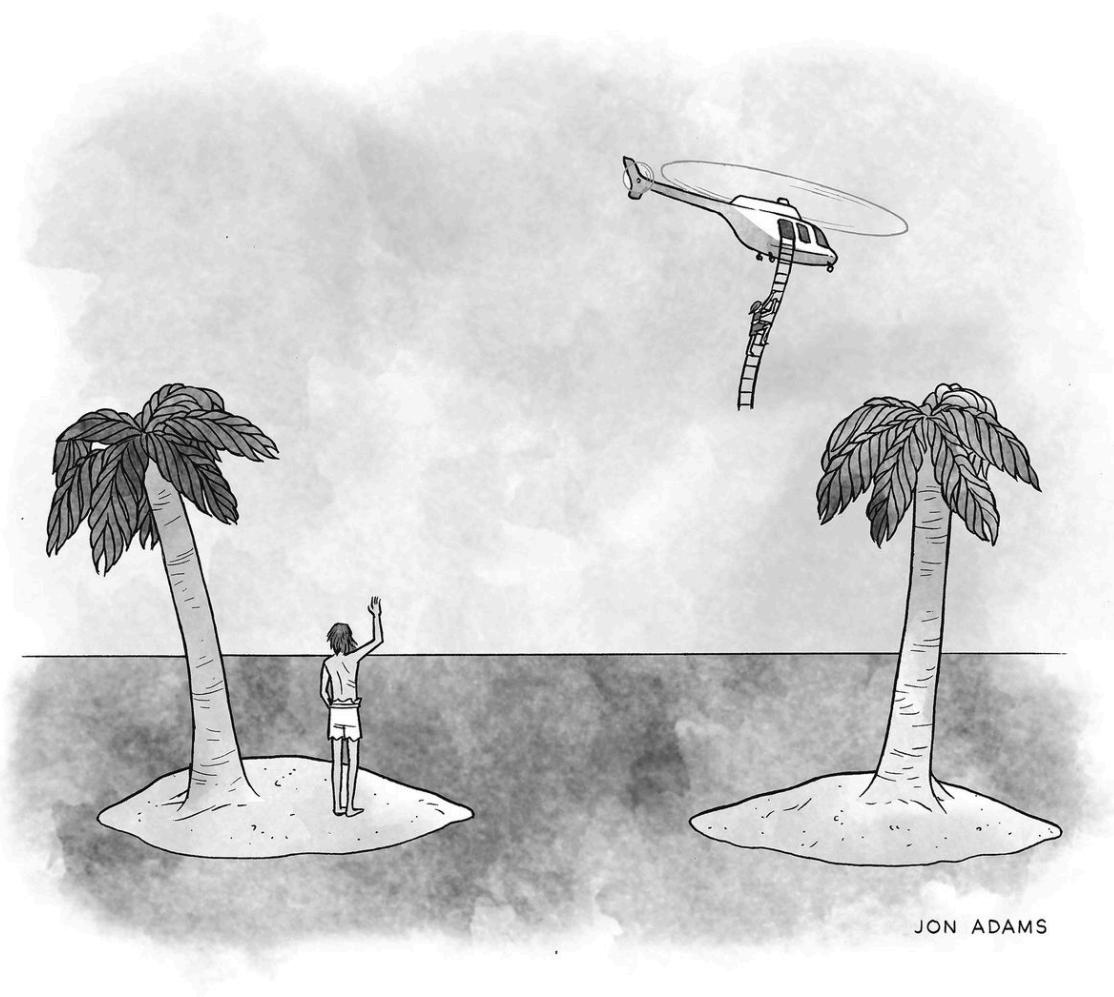
The press descended on his childhood home, a modest brick bungalow in Dolton, Illinois, just south of Chicago, and on his boyhood church there, St. Mary of the Assumption, which was shuttered in 2011, its rose window cracked and weeds sprouting near its cornerstone. His elder brother John, a retired Catholic-school principal, confirmed that Leo was a White Sox fan and liked the thin-crust pizza at Aurelio’s; Sox fans started showing up at home games dressed in papal garb, and Aurelio’s introduced a pie called the Poperoni. His eldest brother, Louis, Jr., a retired Navy man, described himself as a “MAGA type” and “Rob” as “much

more liberal,” but suggested that he would lead the Papacy “down the middle.”

The summer had the feel of a soft opening to Leo’s pontificate, in part because many papal events had been arranged before he was elected. In Rome, he arrived by helicopter at the Jubilee of Youth, which drew about a million young Catholics to a park south of the city, and he presided over the canonization of the “first millennial saint,” Carlo Acutis, an Italian teen-ager known as “God’s influencer,” who, before his death, from leukemia, used digital media to promote Catholic values. Leo took part in a Vatican conference on the climate emergency, where Arnold Schwarzenegger, a guest speaker, called him an “action hero” because, as soon as he became Pope, he “ordered the Vatican to put solar panels on the buildings.” He met with people who had a wide range of viewpoints, including Ben Shapiro, the conservative podcaster; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the host of the PBS series “Finding Your Roots,” who presented him with the Prevost family tree; Father James Martin, a Jesuit who advocates “building bridges” with L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics; and Cardinal Raymond Burke, a “rad-trad” advocate for the restoration of the Latin Mass.

Then, on September 30th, a news correspondent for EWTN, a Catholic broadcaster, asked Leo about a controversy in Chicago: the archbishop, Cardinal Blase Cupich, planned to give an award to Senator Dick Durbin for his long support of migrants’ rights. Traditionalists pointed out that Durbin, a Democrat, has also long supported abortion rights. The Pope replied, “Someone who says ‘I’m against abortion,’ but says, ‘I’m in favor of the death penalty’ is not really pro-life. Someone who says ‘I’m against abortion,’ but ‘I’m in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants who are in the United States’—I don’t know if that’s pro-life. So they are very complex issues. I don’t know if anyone has all the truth on them, but I would ask first and foremost that there’d be greater respect for one another.”

Some saw those remarks as a rebuke of the White House (“Holy Smackdown,” the *Daily Beast* announced, “Pope Leo Trashes Trump’s Signature Policy”), others as Leo giving cover to Cardinal Cupich. (Because of the controversy, Durbin decided not to accept the award.) The website Where Peter Is, which focusses on the Papacy, saw it as a sign of “Leo’s unifying, de-escalation-oriented priorities.” It was, in other words, an instance of Leo going about the Papacy the way his brother said he would—playing it down the middle.



“I’m so happy for you.”
Cartoon by Jon Adams

“I’m just a month and a half into this new mission,” Leo told a friend in an e-mail in July. A man who a decade ago was presiding over pilgrimages in a remote Peruvian town is now leading a global religion with more than a billion followers, and will have to

contend with rising authoritarianism and Christian nationalism, a Church divided between progressives and conservatives, clashes over immigration, grinding wars, and a climate crisis rapidly growing more intense. The Pope's life, since he entered a seminary high school in 1969, as he turned fourteen, has been a series of assignments, each with clear objectives. The question now is: What is the papal mission, as he sees it?

In 1955, when Richard J. Daley, who went to Mass every morning, became the mayor of Chicago, there were 1.7 million Catholics among the city's population of some four million people. Irish, Italian, German, and Polish communities each worshipped—in Latin—at their own churches, often within blocks of one another. Beginning in the nineteen-thirties, the archdiocese, led by Cardinal George Mundelein, had been allied with the Democratic Party and labor unions, and had promoted social activism through groups such as Young Christian Workers and the Catholic Interracial Council. During the postwar years, though, tens of thousands of white parishioners chose to move to new enclaves in the city and the suburbs as, owing to the Great Migration, the Black population, long sequestered on the South Side, grew and expanded into other neighborhoods.

Robert Prevost's parents—Louis Prevost, from the South Side, and Mildred Martinez, from the North Side—met while pursuing graduate degrees in education at DePaul, a Catholic university in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. After marrying, they moved to Dolton, a mostly white suburb that was thriving along with the nearby steel mills and refineries. He worked as a school principal and superintendent; she was a librarian at Mendel Catholic, a high school run by the Augustinian order, a community founded in 1244 and named for St. Augustine, a fourth-century Bishop of Hippo and the author of “Confessions.”

The Prevosts raised their three sons in Dolton; Rob was born there in 1955. The boys rode bikes and played baseball with the kids on

the block, John told reporters. They knew that their mother's father had been born in Haiti, he said, but "we never really talked about it." They were altar boys at St. Mary of the Assumption, often serving at six-thirty Mass before school, a diligence that the priests rewarded by taking them to Sox games. A Spanish Augustinian named Fidel Rodriguez, whom their father had met through a local charity effort involving migrant workers, sometimes came to supper, dressed in the black habit worn by members of the order. "He had quite an impact on me," Robert Prevost said, years later. "I never forgot it, in terms of his sense of humor, his generosity, his willingness to serve these people who were, if you will, kind of down and out, and just the way he reached out to them." Rob practiced celebrating the Mass by draping a sheet over an ironing board in the basement and consecrating Necco wafers. "He was going to be a priest," John said. "Period. End of discussion."

The Second Vatican Council, which took place from 1962 to 1965, under Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, urged Catholics to engage frankly with the modern world, not to fear or avoid it. The Council shifted the Mass from Latin to local languages and softened the idea that "outside the Church there is no salvation." It also promoted a progressive approach to race relations. Pope Paul met with Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1964, and the next year he chose John Cody, who had excommunicated several segregationists while serving as Archbishop of New Orleans, to be the new Archbishop of Chicago. In the spring of 1966, after King arrived to lead the Chicago Freedom Movement—focussed on easing discrimination in housing and employment—dozens of priests and nuns joined the marches, which set many of their parishioners against them. Mobs threw stones, bricks, and bottles at King, who said he'd "never seen anything so hostile and so hateful."



“Same.”

Cartoon by Habiba Nabisubi

But some clergy resisted change. Father Francis X. Lawlor, who taught at St. Rita of Cascia, an Augustinian high school on the Southwest Side, organized white Catholics into block clubs meant to “hold the line” against integration. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, a Chicago native whom Pope Francis named as the first African American Archbishop of Washington, D.C., remembered taking city buses from the South Side to a seminary on the Southwest Side, “through some very, very tough neighborhoods” for Blacks, he told me. He and his classmates often went as a group from the seminary to a church nearby, he said. “I, as a young Black teenager, was walking those streets knowing that, if I were not accompanied by a phalanx of white kids, I might have been the victim of some very hostile, if not physical, violence.”

Father Dudley Day, an Augustinian whom Mildred Prevost knew through her work at Mendel, had the role of reaching out to young men who might be interested in joining the order. He visited

families and described the Augustinian life with gusto: teaching, preaching, and brotherhood; a thriving community at Villanova University, near Philadelphia; and a headquarters near St. Peter's, in Rome. The order had just established a missionary outpost in Chulucanas, an ancient town in northern Peru, led by Bishop John McNabb, who had recently been the principal of Mendel. And it had a high-school seminary up in Michigan, a grand place on a lakefront property. One evening, when Rob was in the eighth grade, Father Day visited the Prevosts in Dolton. Evidently, Rob was persuaded: in the fall of 1969, at a moment of dramatic social change, he enrolled at St. Augustine Seminary High School in Holland, Michigan, two hours northeast of Chicago.

St. Augustine's followed a regimen of Mass, classes, prayer, and spiritual direction, but it was a boys' high school all the same. Students had to play two intramural sports; Prevost played football, basketball, and tennis. He took four years of Latin, joined the debate club and the student council, acted in skits, and was named to the National Honor Society. The yearbook—Prevost was the editor—shows him in a dress shirt and striped slacks, a slight young man with thick black hair and sideburns, singing enthusiastically with a group of students, one of whom plays an accordion.

Still, Prevost wasn't always certain about the priesthood. "Sometimes I talked to my father about the doubts I had, like thinking, Maybe it would be better to leave this life and get married; I want to have children, a normal life," he recalled in 2024. He wasn't alone in his questioning: some ten thousand American men left the priesthood during the social revolutions of the nineteen-sixties and seventies; forty-five boys entered St. Augustine's in 1969, but just thirteen graduated.

A consequence of this attrition was that Prevost stood out. When he entered Villanova, as a pre-novice, he was already an obvious prospect for leadership in the order. Villanova was a smaller, more

local school then. It had become fully coeducational only in 1968, and most students were commuters. Today it is a men's-basketball powerhouse—three current players for the Knicks went there—but at that time the team was dismal and played home games at the Palestra, the University of Pennsylvania's gym. Prevost majored in mathematics—useful for a future administrator—complemented by a heavy load of Kant, Hegel, and Sartre. With another pre-novice and a female classmate, in response to the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in Roe v. Wade, Prevost founded Villanovans for Life. Father Paul Galletto, who is now a parish priest in Philadelphia, said of Prevost, "There was no *whoa*, but he was a solid guy. He spoke when spoken to. Always cordial and nice, and not trying to impress." Prevost graduated in 1977, spent a year with Augustinians in St. Louis, and returned to Chicago.

There, in December, 1977, a group of progressive Catholics had issued what they called "A Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern," urging the Church to keep pursuing the ideals and reforms of Vatican II. A vital center of progressive energy was the Catholic Theological Union, in Hyde Park, where Prevost pursued a master's in divinity while also resuming his study of Latin at the University of Chicago. Though just a short drive from where he'd grown up, Hyde Park was a distinctly different place, thanks mainly to the presence of the university. C.T.U. trained clergy, nuns, and seminarians, from two dozen Catholic orders, half of them from Latin America and Africa, as well as laypeople. It promoted Vatican II's approach to the role of the Church in the developing world: no longer would missionaries seek souls in need of saving. Instead, they would make the Church present through "inculturation"—by fitting themselves, and Catholicism, into the local scene, in a kind of religious variation on the South Side community organizer Saul Alinsky's emphasis on identifying and prioritizing people's immediate needs.



“Gold? No, I’m looking for anchovies for my pizza.”
Cartoon by Joe Dator

The curriculum included “A Theology of Liberation,” a book by the European-trained Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, published in 1971. The work contained Marxist-inflected social analysis and calls to action and was based, he wrote, “on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America.” Prevost lived at the St. John Stone Friary, where Father Daniel Turley, an Augustinian twelve years his senior, was on sabbatical from the mission in Chulucanas. Turley told him about the town, in the foothills of the Andes, with its mission church and several dozen outlying villages, reached by dirt roads. He also described the Augustinians’ pastoral approach, which had many points in

common with the work of Gutiérrez, and suggested that Prevost go to Peru to see for himself.

In August, 1978, Pope Paul VI died, and Cardinal Albino Luciani, the Patriarch of Venice, was elected his successor, taking the name John Paul. A month later, he died in his sleep, and a second conclave elected Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the Archbishop of Kraków, who took the name John Paul II. His dynamism, relative youth (he was fifty-eight), and support of the Solidarity labor movement in Poland initially led many American Catholics to see him as a progressive. They were wrong: the Soviet domination of Poland made him detest Marxist-tinged movements, which, in his view, included liberation theology. In January, 1979, while on his first foreign trip, John Paul made a stop in Puebla, Mexico, to address *CELAM* (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño), an association of bishops who espoused “a preferential option for the poor”—the belief that God favors the poor and so the Church should, too. Without naming liberation theology, the Pope derided “the conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, the subversive of Nazareth.” His remarks were the first strike in a long campaign against the new Latin American theology.

That October, John Paul travelled to six cities in the United States—the first such tour for a Pope—and spent a day and a half in Chicago. He celebrated Mass at Holy Name Cathedral (Luciano Pavarotti, who was in town to perform at the Lyric Opera, sang “Ave Maria”), then led a three-hour Mass in Grant Park, which was attended by more than a million people.



Pope Leo XIV has indicated that his papal mission will carry forward his predecessor's emphasis on the poor and those on the margins of society.

Photograph by Camillo Pasquarelli for the New Yorker

Prevost met John Paul two years later. After completing his master's at C.T.U., he was sent to study in Rome, one of two

Augustinians from the order's Midwest province chosen to go—"the more intelligent ones," Father William Lego, who has known Prevost since 1966, told me. They lived at St. Monica's, a residence next to the order's headquarters, the Augustinianum, which adjoins St. Peter's Square. On May 13, 1981, the Pope was being driven through the square in an open Fiat when shots were fired, hitting him twice. An Augustinian found the assailant's gun on the cobblestones and turned it in. John Paul spent some time recuperating, then paid the Augustinians a visit. A photograph shows Prevost, in a black habit, keen-eyed and smiling, shaking hands with the Pope.

Prevost was ordained the next June. He intended to stay in Rome and began to study canon law—the rules for the internal governance of the Church—but he was drawn to Peru by circumstance. In the fall of 1983, after a prolonged drought, torrential rains fell for three months in Chulucanas, destroying roads, bridges, and two thousand homes. The next March, four priests were returning to the town from Lima when their car overturned; two were killed, two seriously injured. Prevost was asked if he would join the mission, and he said yes. Last fall, speaking to the American journalist Elise Ann Allen for a biography that will be published in the U.S. in April—in the only lengthy interview he has given thus far—Prevost recalled his first impression of Chulucanas. He told her, "There was a part of me that was looking around and saying, 'Lord, where have you brought me?'" He contracted typhoid fever, which, he said, "was a very significant point for me, because it was, like, 'You've dealt with the sickness, you see what the needs are around here.' The order, the Augustinians, the Church is saying, 'We need you here, jump in.'" In 2024, in a wide-ranging public conversation at his brother John's parish, St. Jude, in New Lenox, Illinois, Prevost said, "I think the part of ministry that most shaped my life was Peru."

At first, he helped get food and other aid to the residents of flood-ravaged villages, and used his canon-law knowledge to assist Bishop McNabb. Then, in 1988, he was tasked with founding an Augustinian community near Trujillo, a city on the Pacific Coast that had more than four hundred thousand people. The objective was clear: to draw Peruvians to the order at a time when few young American men were joining it. “If you’re a true missionary, you want to put yourself out of a job,” Father Lego told me. “You are helping the Church to reproduce.” Five mornings a week, Prevost was behind the wheel of a minibus, taking a dozen students to the archdiocesan seminary in the city center, where he taught canon law and other subjects. On weekends, he served in two Augustinian parishes in poor parts of Trujillo.

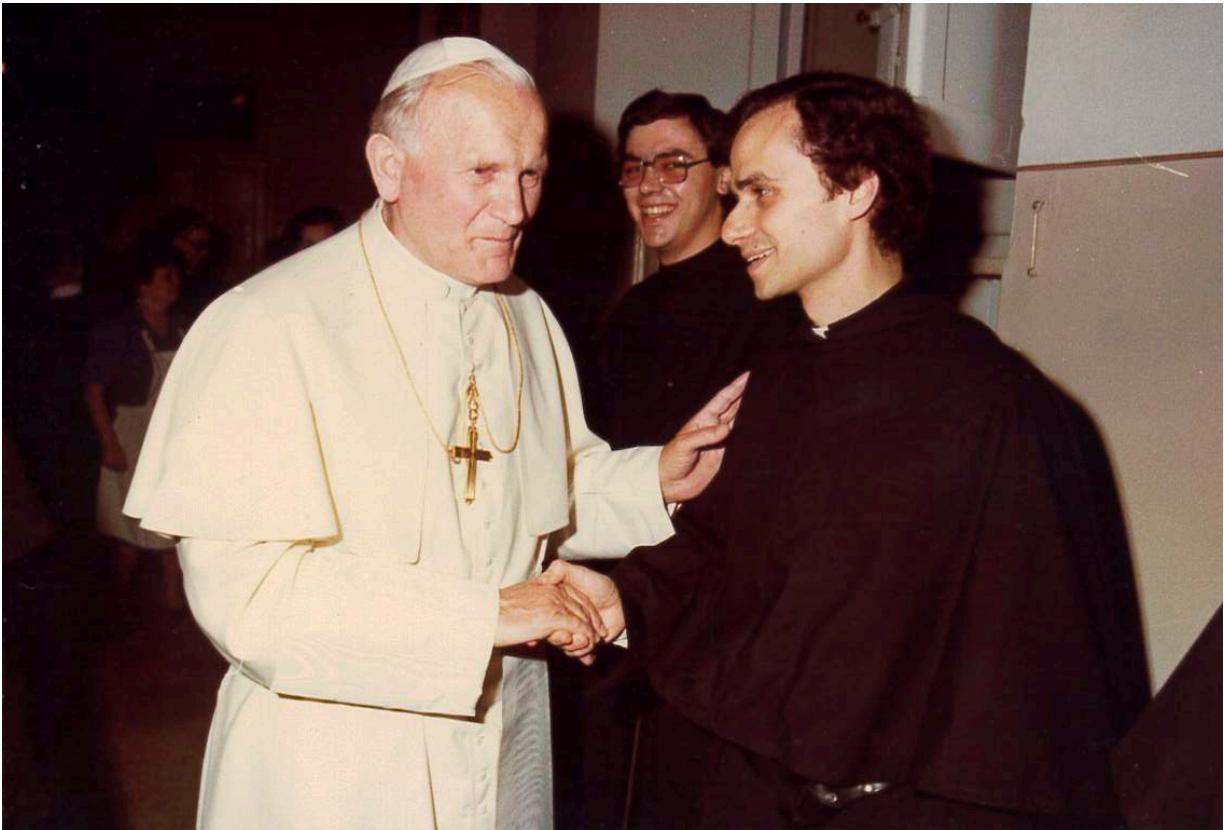
Leo told Allen that during his time in Peru he was not “extreme” and was drawn to Gandhi’s ideas of peaceful protest. He praised Gutiérrez’s approach, which, he said, “is about starting to look through the eyes of the poor and with the poor to understand how God is in and among us,” and he noted that labelling it Marxist is “erroneous and incomplete.” He also recalled becoming aware of conflicting perspectives in Peru, from progressive to ultraconservative—that some considered Gutiérrez a “great theologian and others were embarrassed that he was Peruvian.” According to Father John Lydon, who lived in the community, the Augustinians in Trujillo “were almost all favorable to the perspective and person of Gutiérrez. All of us embraced the preferential option for the poor.”

Throughout the nineteen-eighties, however, John Paul had sought to reclaim a degree of autonomy that Vatican II had granted to the regional bishops’ conferences, particularly in Latin America. His rigorist doctrinal chief, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—the future Benedict XVI—had moved to restrict Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians, leading to a standoff with *CELAM*, which had a long history with him. The Vatican resolved the issue in Peru by replacing progressive bishops with conservative ones, until all

but one of the country's seven archdioceses were led by men who supported Ratzinger's program.

A number of the new bishops came from the ranks of Opus Dei, which had been cultivating a presence in the country for decades. John Paul had elevated the movement to a “personal prelature” (answerable only to him) and accelerated the canonization of its founder, the Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá, who died in 1975. Opus Dei, which is rooted in pre-Vatican II ritual and rigor, had flourished in Franco's Spain, establishing a business school at the University of Navarra, in Pamplona, whose graduates gained power in finance and government. In the nineteen-eighties, the movement sought to replicate that strategy in the U.S. (Antonin Scalia, who was named to the Supreme Court in 1986, reportedly took part in retreats organized by the movement) and in Latin America. Opus Dei was firmly on the side of the continent's moneyed élites, and its relationship with John Paul took shape as one of mutual loyalty.

The Catholic right's insistence on order in Peru was directly challenged by the chaos on the ground. Peruvians call the nineteen-eighties the Lost Decade: inflation swelled to seven thousand per cent under President Alan García, whose government was weakened by corruption, strikes, and power and water shortages. Sendero Luminoso, an avowed Marxist-Maoist insurgency, sought to overthrow the government and lead a “shining path” for the liberation of Peru's Indigenous peoples. Founded in 1969 by Abimael Guzmán, who taught philosophy at a university in Ayacucho, Sendero first took power in villages, and then shifted its efforts to Lima and other cities, prompting a fierce counter-insurgency, carried out by the military, the police, and government-funded local militias. Sendero bombed schools, police headquarters, government offices, houses, cars, and entire city blocks, and it executed opponents by hanging and by firing squad. In the course of a dozen years, beginning in 1980, tens of thousands of people were killed or disappeared in the conflict.



*Robert Prevost met Pope John Paul II in Rome in the early nineteen-eighties.
Photograph courtesy the Midwest Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel*

In the 1990 Presidential election, Alberto Fujimori, a son of immigrant shopkeepers from Japan, defeated Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru's preëminent novelist. In April, 1992, Fujimori asserted full autocratic powers and drastically stepped up the counter-insurgency operation. That September, Guzmán and his companion, Elena Iparraguirre, were captured in Lima; a secret military tribunal sentenced them to life in prison, but the fighting went on. Sendero threatened the Augustinians in Trujillo and killed three priests in a neighboring diocese; sent armed columns to the diocese of Chulucanas, and likely planted a bomb that exploded near the mission church and one found outside the bishop's residence.

Prevost was offered police protection but refused it. One morning, when he was driving the minibus, some soldiers ordered him to stop. They said that the seminarians on the bus were needed for the government's counter-insurgency forces. Prevost refused to hand them over, saying, "These young men are going to be priests, they

cannot go to the barracks,” Father Ramiro Castillo, who was on the bus, told the *Times*. The soldiers yielded, and Prevost drove on.

In the early nineteen-nineties, the Midwest province in Chicago asked Father Lydon to develop an “exit plan” for the Augustinians in Peru. He told me, “I consulted with the members of the mission, and one of the principal ones was Bob Prevost” (as he was known outside his family). Together, they came up with a different idea. Lydon said, “Our focus was What would Jesus do? What would Augustine say? And the answer to both of these was to stay. I wrote the first draft in consultation with Bob, and then it was presented to everyone. Out of eighteen or twenty Augustinians, only one decided to leave.” The violence finally subsided, and Fujimori held power until 2000, when he fled Peru for Japan amid allegations of corruption and human-rights abuses.

Prevost himself had left Peru in 1999, called back to Chicago to head the Midwest province. Catholicism in Chicago had changed dramatically since his years at C.T.U. In Cook County, where the city is situated, the proportion of Catholics had dropped below forty per cent for the first time in fifty years. Mendel Catholic High School had closed. Barack Obama, in his memoir “Dreams from My Father,” offered a grim sketch of South Chicago, where he worked as a community organizer during the late eighties: “Eight Catholic parishes flung across several neighborhoods, all with black congregations but led by white priests” who “had seen their sermons of brotherhood and goodwill trampled under the stampede of white flight, their efforts at recruiting new members met with suspicion by the dark faces—mostly Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal—now surrounding their churches.” And clerical sexual abuse was a problem in Chicago, as elsewhere, albeit one that was still largely out of public view.

In February, 2001, the Chicago *Sun-Times* reported on a situation from the previous year involving the Augustinians in Hyde Park. Cardinal Francis George had placed Father James Ray, a diocesan

priest who had been removed from parish work in 1990 following multiple accusations of sexual misconduct with minors, at the St. John Stone Friary. (In May of last year, Ray told the paper, “I can’t change the past. I don’t necessarily want to defend myself either. On a scale of one to ten, I was wrong, but it was a one or maybe a half even. It wasn’t a child—was a young adult, over twenty.”) A subordinate to the cardinal recommended the placement in a memo, noting that “there is no school in the immediate area,” but there was: St. Thomas the Apostle, on the next block. According to another memo, the placement depended “upon the Provincial’s acceptance,” which would imply that Prevost signed off on it. In June, 2002, after the *Boston Globe*’s reporting on clerical sexual abuse prompted scrutiny of the Catholic Church across the U.S., the archdiocese reviewed the placements of accused priests, and Ray was told to move out.

By then, Prevost was back in Rome. He had been elected as the leader of the Augustinians worldwide on September 14, 2001, his forty-sixth birthday. He settled again at their headquarters near St. Peter’s and took a role in the Union of Superiors General, an association that brings together some two hundred leaders of Catholic religious orders of men twice a year in Rome. He grew friendly with two others who participated: Father Mark Francis, a Chicagoan who had been his classmate at C.T.U., went on to serve as its president, and is now a professor emeritus, and Father Joseph Tobin, from Detroit, who is now the Archbishop of Newark and a cardinal, and who jokingly refers to the union as “the Teamsters of Rome.”



Prevost and his two brothers were raised in Dolton, a mostly white suburb of Chicago. They were altar boys at St. Mary of the Assumption, often serving at early Mass, a diligence that the priests rewarded by taking them to Sox games.

Photograph by Jim Vondruska / Getty

Prevost's challenge was to transform the Augustinians from an order composed of European and North American men to one representative of the fifty countries in which it was present. So he travelled. ("We would see each other on airplanes," Father Francis said.) He visited each of the Augustinian communities every third year. (He was reelected in 2007.) At every stop, he said Mass, ate the local dishes, donned regional dress for a photograph with the novices, and met with other clerics to learn the situation on the ground.

One such meeting proved to be crucial for Prevost and for the future direction of the Church. In August, 2004, he travelled to Argentina to dedicate a new Augustinian library, and said Mass with the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a Jesuit and a cardinal. Eight months later, John Paul II died, and the papal conclave elected as his successor Joseph Ratzinger, who took the name Benedict XVI; Bergoglio, who at the time was thought to

be a conservative, was the runner-up. In August, 2006, Prevost returned to Buenos Aires and celebrated Mass again with Bergoglio.

The two men were developing a working relationship, though each had his own priorities. In 2023, Prevost told a group of Peruvian bishops, “Let’s just say that when Cardinal Bergoglio and I met we weren’t always in agreement.” Prevost had planned to send a priest in Buenos Aires to a new assignment out of the city. Bergoglio asked him to hold off, but Prevost insisted. As he recounted the next year, he said, “I understand, Your Eminence, but he’s got to do something else.” He added, “And I was told that he wasn’t happy about that—as can happen, you know.”

Prevost kept up acquaintanceships in Chicago during those years. “He has had an uncanny knack of showing up at significant moments in our lives,” Father Tony Pizzo, an Augustinian who has known Prevost since both attended Villanova, told me. “He came to both my mom’s and my dad’s funerals.” In 2005, when the White Sox reached the World Series for the first time since 1917, Prevost attended Game One. A TV camera panning the crowd randomly fixed on him: a middle-aged Chicagoan wearing his team’s pin-striped jersey. He also kept up with local politics; in 2011, after Governor Pat Quinn signed a law abolishing capital punishment in Illinois, Prevost posted a note to the Governor’s website: “I applaud your vision and your understanding of this very complex matter. You have my full support!”

In February, 2013, Benedict XVI unexpectedly resigned, citing ill health, and Bergoglio was elected Pope, taking the name of Francis. Prevost later told the Peruvian bishops, “I said to some of my brothers, ‘Well, that’s very good, and, thank God, I’ll never be a bishop’”—an allusion to his tiff with Bergoglio in Buenos Aires. But, for a cleric of his age, fifty-seven, and with his experience, appointment as a bishop was a logical next step. The question was

where—in the U.S., which has about two hundred dioceses, or in Peru, which has about twenty?

The Augustinians were set to begin their annual meeting in Rome that August. “And, sort of as a whim—this has never happened in the history of the order—I said to the general counsel, let’s write a letter to Pope Francis and see if he will come and celebrate the opening Eucharist,” Prevost said in 2024. “So I write this letter to him, and he said yes. And then it was, like, ‘Oh, my God, now what do we do? The Pope is coming!’ ”



Prevost (left) with his family on the occasion of his eldest brother, Louis,’s First Communion, circa 1958.

Photograph from Archivio GBB / Alamy

A video shows Francis’s arrival at the Basilica of Sant’Agostino, in the Campo Marzio: he steps out of a car as a crowd of admirers

surges behind a barricade. He finally reaches the church door, where Prevost awaits. “*Come sta?*” Prevost asks the new Pope, and the two men, beaming, shake hands vigorously. They spoke again after the Mass, and the Pope brought up an “incident” involving a minor dispute with a Vatican official, in which, Prevost later said, “I intervened sort of in his favor.” Francis told him, “I’ll never forget what you did.” Prevost replied, “That’s all right, Holy Father, you forget it if you like.” Another Augustinian who was with them mentioned that Prevost’s second term had ended, and he would soon be back in Chicago. “Now rest,” the Pope counselled him.

Francis had a definite idea of the qualities he sought in bishops, and in the clergy more generally. Shortly after his election, he addressed them directly, saying, “This I ask you: Be shepherds, with the ‘smell of the sheep.’ Make it real, as shepherds among your flock.” He was already acting to counter decades of doctrinaire appointments made by John Paul and Benedict. In 2013, several men affiliated with Opus Dei led dioceses or archdioceses in Peru. One of them was the Archbishop of Lima, Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne. Appointed in 1999, Cipriani had sought to assert control over the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, widely viewed as a redoubt of liberation theology. (Gutiérrez had taught there in the nineteen-sixties.) Cipriani, the *Guardian* reported in 2012, had “the support of conservative groups in Peru who fear the university has been overrun by professors with liberal views toward homosexuality and abortion.” That year, the Vatican created a controversy by forbidding the university to use the word “Catholic” in its name.

Another was the Bishop of Chiclayo, Jesús Moliné Labarte. He and his predecessor, also affiliated with Opus Dei, had led the diocese since 1968. Moliné would soon reach the retirement age of seventy-five. “The theory was that Francis had a ‘clinical eye’ regarding Opus Dei,” a cleric with long experience of the movement in Peru told me. “He wanted to see if he could break

Opus Dei's stranglehold on Chiclayo, this small place, as an experiment." The appointment of a new man who had no ties to the movement would send a sign that it no longer enjoyed papal favor. Father Francis put it to me plainly: "Pope Francis appointed Prevost as Bishop of Chiclayo to offset the Opus Dei bishop there."

The Dicastery for Bishops organizes such appointments, via the Vatican's ambassador to the country—the nuncio. In 2014, the nuncio to Peru was James Green, a Philadelphian whom Prevost had come to know in Rome. In an interview with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's newspaper, in May, Green said, "I was back in Rome for a while for meetings and speaking with Pope Francis." He added, "I mentioned to him that I was thinking about Father Prevost to be Bishop of Chiclayo, and he knew Father Prevost because of meetings about South America that they had had over the years."

Prevost was in the U.S. that November, when his appointment was made public. Two weeks later, he joined a procession at Holy Name Cathedral, in the Loop, as Blase Cupich, a progressive, was installed as the Archbishop of Chicago—the clearest sign yet that Francis was remaking the Church leadership. Five weeks after that, Prevost was prostrate on the floor of the neoclassical-style Catedral de Santa María, in Chiclayo, his arms spread to form a cross, as Green pronounced over him a litany of saints through the centuries—one American bishop ordaining another, as twenty Peruvian bishops looked on.

"Bob really went all in as a missionary bishop in Chiclayo," Father Francis told me. He urged pastors to entrust laypeople, especially women, with everyday responsibilities in their parishes; established a shelter for displaced and homeless women and children; and broke ground at a community garden in a blighted neighborhood. In his spare time, he repaired used cars (sometimes going to YouTube for fix-it videos), and then gave them to parishes in need. On Sundays, he hosted pancake breakfasts in a cathedral refectory,

where any priest could find him at the griddle, spatula in hand, telling stories from his travels.



Pope Francis appointed Prevost the head of the Dicastery for Bishops in January, 2023. He was named a cardinal that July.

Photograph from Vatican Pool / Getty

“So many priests invited him to their parishes—and he tried to accept every invitation,” Father Jorge Millán, then the rector of the cathedral, told me. Yolanda Díaz, an advocate for the poor who had studied with Gustavo Gutiérrez, said, “He didn’t just send aid. He came himself.” Those efforts, rooted in the Vatican II models of communal social action that Prevost had learned at C.T.U., served to counter Opus Dei. The movement had adherents among the student body and on the faculty at the Catholic University in Chiclayo, which has about ten thousand students, and the cathedral boasted an enormous portrait of Josemaría Escrivá, Opus Dei’s sainted founder.

Prevost took a “prudent” approach, his successor in Chiclayo, Bishop Edinson Edgardo Farfán Córdova, told me. He celebrated an annual Mass in memory of Escrivá. At the pancake breakfasts,

Opus Dei priests mixed with other priests, and Prevost got to know the prominent locals who were mainstays of the movement. “He was very clever that way—one of his tools is that he doesn’t seem radical,” Alejandro Céspedes García, an editor at *La República*, a daily newspaper in Lima, said. Father Francis told me, “His first priority is always to bring people together. His instinct is to kill them with kindness, rather than to go at them.”

In Chiclayo, Prevost faced a challenge involving a different movement. This was the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, which was founded in 1971 in Lima, and aimed to create a community, especially involving young people, that emulated the closely supervised life of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. In 2015, the journalist Paola Ugaz and a former member of the community, Pedro Salinas, wrote “Half Monks, Half Soldiers,” a book that reported allegations of kidnapping, assault, and sexual abuse of young adults by the community’s founder, Luis Fernando Figari, and four other members. The Vatican began an inquiry, led by Archbishop Joseph Tobin. When he travelled to Lima in 2016, Prevost met him there, making the sixteen-hour drive from Chiclayo in a pickup truck. Tobin told me, “We sat and drank coffee and had a long chat. I was trying to get the temperature of things and his advice, too.”

Prevost was becoming a bishop of consequence. In January, 2018, Pope Francis travelled to Peru and celebrated an open-air Mass in Trujillo; Prevost took part, wearing aviator sunglasses along with his vestments. The Pope appointed him an adviser to the office for bishops, and then, in January, 2023, the head of the office, now called the Dicastery for Bishops. The naming of the head of a small remote diocese to the post was unusual, but Prevost himself later said that Francis “wanted a missionary. He wanted someone from outside.”

Prevost took up his new role in Rome after Easter of that year. Most Saturdays he had a working lunch with Francis, whose health was declining. Prevost was named a cardinal that July, as was

expected for the head of a Vatican department. Unexpectedly, he was chosen to lead a procession of the new cardinals into St. Peter's, who normally enter alphabetically by surname. He moved into a flat in the Palazzo del Sant'Uffizio, a short walk from Casa Santa Marta, a modest Vatican guesthouse where the Pope had chosen to live (rather than in the Apostolic Palace). Prevost readily acclimated to the executive class at the Vatican, yet he usually dressed in a black suit and a Roman collar instead of a bishop's tailored cassock and cape—he, too, chose to live simply.

The Catholic right in the U.S. had set itself against Francis throughout his pontificate, seeing him as soft on doctrine, hostile to capitalism, and anti-American. The commentator George Weigel wrote a short book outlining the qualities conservatives wanted in the next Pope, and, in 2020, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, arranged for copies to be sent to all the cardinals who were expected to vote in the next conclave. Francis, for his part, subjected the Church's right wing to closer scrutiny by the Vatican. In November, 2023, he removed the Bishop of Tyler, Texas, Joseph Strickland—who had, in a post on Twitter, accused the Pope “of undermining the Deposit of Faith”—after an investigation conducted by the Dicastery for Bishops. Francis and Prevost met on the morning the decision was announced.

The ongoing investigation into Sodalitium Christianae Vitae intensified the same year, when the Vatican sent two cardinals on a “special mission” to Peru. In 2024, it expelled Figari, the Vatican news agency reported, “due to accusations of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, including against minors.” (Figari has always maintained his innocence, and CNN reported last January that Figari’s lawyer said that he “has not been convicted in a court of law for the allegations.”) The Vatican then expelled ten other members. Paola Ugaz and Pedro Salinas, the co-authors of the book that contained the allegations, publicly thanked Pope Francis for helping to call the movement to account, and thanked Prevost, too.



Prevost became the Bishop of Chiclayo in 2014. “I think the part of ministry that most shaped my life was Peru,” he says.

Photograph from ZUMA Press Wire / Reuters

Then a matter from when Prevost was the Bishop of Chiclayo resurfaced. Three sisters from a Peruvian family alleged that they had been sexually abused as minors by two priests of the diocese. According to a recent report by the *Times*, the Vatican said that “Bishop Prevost followed church protocol after the women went to him with their abuse claims, conducting an initial investigation and sending his findings to Rome.” But one of the sisters in particular has since expressed dissatisfaction with the handling of the matter.

As Pope Francis’s health faltered, the issue figured in the thumbnail biographies of his prospective successors assembled by media outlets from the *Times* to the traditionalist website CatholicVote, and advocates for survivors of clergy abuse have continued to raise it. (The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment.)

In early February, 2025, Francis had bronchitis; during events he had an aide read his statements aloud. Yet he involved himself in a conflict with American conservatives. In an interview on CBS's "Face the Nation," Vice-President J. D. Vance, a Catholic convert, had accused the U.S. bishops' conference of operating charitable-works programs in order to make money via federal aid. (The bishops, in response, produced audited financial statements showing that they did not.) Vance had also sought, while speaking with Fox News's Sean Hannity, to justify the Trump Administration's mass-deportation policy by evoking the ancient Catholic concept of *ordo amoris*, or order of love, and claiming that migrants figured way down on the list of people whom Americans should care about. Francis, in an open letter to the bishops, insisted otherwise, explaining that "the true *ordo amoris*" calls for "a fraternity open to all, without exception." Gerard O'Connell, the Vatican correspondent for *America*, a Jesuit magazine, said in July that the letter was drafted over ten days by a number of people, one of whom was Prevost.

Francis spent six weeks in the hospital, then returned to work. On April 15th, he announced a decree dissolving Sodalitium Christianae Vitae. The same day, Prevost met with Mark O'Connor, an Australian Marist Brother. Prevost mentioned that he'd visited Francis in the hospital. Then, O'Connor told me, "he said, 'J. D. Vance is trying to get to see the Pope.' He brought it up with a raised eyebrow."

Vance did get to see the Pope, stopping in at the Casa Santa Marta on Easter Sunday, on his way to a state visit to India. Francis died that night. "I was one of the last people to talk to him," Vance told the press.

Pope Francis's funeral was attended by representatives of more than a hundred and forty countries, including Donald Trump. When the President was asked if he favored a particular successor in the upcoming conclave, he said, "*I'd* like to be Pope." He posted an

image of himself dressed in papal vestments on Truth Social, which was then posted on the White House's X account. The response was furious, but Trump claimed that "the Catholics loved it." Francis had appointed about eighty per cent of the hundred and thirty-three cardinals who would vote, so it was likely that a successor would share his general outlook. But it was also thought that there might be a call for a European who would prize order and restraint. One prospect was Cardinal Péter Erdo, of Hungary, an ally of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is an ally of Trump.

"I can say with certainty, President Trump had zero bearing on the conclave. None. Not at any level—not even as a background reference," Cardinal Robert McElroy, the current Archbishop of Washington, D.C., later said. On May 8th, after just four rounds of voting, white smoke above the Sistine Chapel signalled the election of a new Pope. At 7:23 p.m., Leo XIV stepped out on the balcony of St. Peter's.

Subsequent reports have suggested that Prevost "checked all the boxes." His life as an Augustinian made him attractive to the thirty-three cardinals from religious orders. His service at the Dicastery indicated a grasp of Vatican bureaucracy and reflected the trust Francis had placed in him. His work in Peru appealed to cardinals from countries where the Church is on the front lines of poverty, corruption, and violence—and it offset the conventional wisdom holding that the cardinals would be loath to create a beachhead for American power at the Vatican.

Remarkably, the man who spent much of his pre-papal life travelling the world didn't leave Italy for more than six months after his election—the longest stretch of any new Pope since Paul VI. When he did leave, travelling to Turkey and Lebanon in late November, it was for a long-planned meeting of Christian leaders to mark the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, which produced the creed that Christians still profess on Sundays.

Leo has now nearly completed the events originally scheduled for Francis, and it's time for him to start defining his own pontificate. He made his first major appointment on December 18th. To replace Cardinal Dolan, who turned seventy-five in February, as Archbishop of New York, Leo named Ronald A. Hicks, the Bishop of Joliet, Illinois, who, like himself, is a suburban Chicagoan who has worked among the poor in Latin America.

As to his own role, it may be that Leo will focus on being a "messenger of peace," as he suggested in a press conference on the papal plane en route to Lebanon; the risk, as for any Pope, is that he may be left to utter well-intentioned platitudes while heads of state do as they please. He does seem determined to complete Francis's effort to reclaim Vatican II, Latin American style. Leo's first major document, "Dilexi Te," released in October, made that clear. "I am convinced that the preferential option for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society," he wrote, "if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry." What's not clear, though, is how it would bear on pressing issues involving, among other things, artificial intelligence, gender transition, elective suicide, and the status of women in Catholicism—or what it would mean for the faith of ordinary people.

There is an issue on which Francis's legacy and Leo's experience converge with the everyday lives of millions of people: migration. Addressing diplomats in May, he said, "My own story is that of a citizen, the descendant of immigrants, who in turn chose to emigrate." John Paul II changed history by identifying the Church with the vast numbers of people subjugated by Soviet Communism. Leo could do that for migrants.

He's already taking steps in that direction. On October 8th, as *ice* agents carried out Operation Midway Blitz, in Chicago, he urged the U.S. bishops to "speak to the issue." When they did, in a message responding to a "climate of fear and anxiety around

questions of profiling and immigration enforcement,” Leo said, “I would invite, especially all Catholics, but people of good will to listen carefully to what they said.” On November 19th, he met with J. B. Pritzker, the governor of Illinois, who has acted in opposition to the *ICE* raids. Their meeting, Pritzker later told an NBC political reporter from Chicago, was focussed on migration. “He’s been reading the newspapers from Chicago,” the Governor said. “You can tell he has a great deal of concern for the plight of people who often don’t have someone who will stand up for them.” Pritzker asked Leo if he would come to Illinois—perhaps as an enticement, he brought along a four-pack of locally brewed Da Pope beer—and Leo, he said, was “optimistic” that a visit might happen soon.

The first American Pope returning to the United States on the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the nation’s founding is an appealing prospect. It points to the question that many American Catholics have: What does the Pope make of the United States now, when the President’s imperial sense of himself and his Administration is abetted by his Catholic Vice-President and five Catholic Supreme Court Justices? Does the Pope’s American identity oblige him to address his country’s circumstances?

The evidence of these first months is that Leo will do so, but in his own way, steadily and evenhandedly. Maybe that’s his mission: to be an American in a position of great power who is decent and humble—a no-drama Pope whose very ordinariness is his message. It’s a good look, at any rate. On the flight to Turkey, a reporter asked Leo if he had played Wordle that morning. He nodded and said, “Got it in three.” ♦

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A Mexican Couple in California Plans to Self-Deport—and Leave Their Kids Behind

Can undocumented parents elude ICE capture for one more year, until their youngest turns eighteen?

By [Jordan Salama](#)

December 30, 2025



Rosalinda and Manuel García keep their family's blinds drawn, and leave the house only to go to work. Grocery shopping and other errands are now handled by their children.

Illustration by Katherine Lam

Lily García was ready for her seventeenth-birthday party well before it started. On a late-summer afternoon in San Bernardino, California, the high-school senior stood in the cool shade of her family's covered back patio, wearing a black tank top and high-waisted jeans. As always, her mother, Rosalinda, had gone all out with the preparations. Traditional multicolored Mexican fabrics were draped across tables and benches. Two men from a party-rentals company were testing the controls for a mechanical bull they'd set up in the back yard. A mini-fridge was stocked with

soda, and small bags of Cheetos and Doritos were neatly arranged in a basket. It was two-thirty in the afternoon; her friends weren't even invited until five. "And that's 'Mexican time,'" Lily said, smiling, before heading off to her room to double-check her makeup.

At the counter of the family's outdoor kitchen, Rosalinda was preparing a huge tub of ceviche, chopping shrimp and cucumbers and limes; it had become a signature dish of hers, and she sometimes sold it to neighbors when the family needed extra cash. Her son, José, the oldest of her three children, sat at the head of a long table. "She seems excited," Rosalinda said to José, in Spanish.

"Yeah," José replied, in English, a bit distracted. (The family's names have been changed.) The twenty-eight-year-old, who worked as a scientist at a manufacturing plant in Los Angeles, was studying his laptop screen. He was using Google Maps to look at Mazatlán, a city on the Pacific coast of Mexico. "Mom, do you remember the address of the house where you grew up?" he asked, clicking around.

"I think it was 414 Emiliano Zapata," Rosalinda said. José typed in the address and turned the computer to show her the Street View. She shook her head. "That's not it. Try 414 Salvador Allende." That wasn't right, either. They went back and forth like this for a while, without success. Then they turned to her cloudy memories of people she'd known as a young girl. Because Rosalinda had left Mazatlán when she was barely seven and was brought to the U.S. by her mother when she was ten, she remembered little about the town.

"Do you remember that woman you used to tell us about?" José asked. "She had a store."

"La Licha!" Rosalinda said, sounding excited to be sure about something.

“Yessss. I’m gonna try to figure out where her store’s at.”

While José continued searching, Rosalinda said, “I’m going to ask your aunt.” She wiped her hands clean and opened FaceTime on her phone. Her sister—several years older than Rosalinda, who is forty-five—appeared onscreen. She was in Mazatlán. Just a few months earlier, Rosalinda’s sister had moved back to Mexico after living in the U.S. for several decades without legal status. She had long been wary of President Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and of his promises to carry out the “largest deportation effort in U.S. history.” A few weeks after Trump began his second term, she spotted what she thought were *ICE* agents in the parking lot of her church, in Las Vegas. She became so terrified of being arrested that she made the painful decision to leave before the situation got worse. “She just didn’t want to live with so much fear,” Rosalinda told me later.

Rosalinda and her husband, Manuel, who are also undocumented, began to consider self-deporting, too. They had migrated to the U.S. as children with their parents. Despite having three U.S.-born children of their own—two of them over the age of twenty-one—neither Manuel nor Rosalinda had ever been able to adjust their legal status. They had both crossed the border without an inspection, rendering them “inadmissible” by the U.S. government; the only potential way around this was to file a specific hardship waiver that would rely on Rosalinda’s mother, Asunción, first getting her papers herself. But Asunción died shortly before her own appointment at a consulate in Mexico, leaving the family with no recourse. “The thing is that we were brought here very young ourselves—it wasn’t our decision,” Rosalinda said. “I didn’t ask for this.”

They began looking for a house in Mazatlán. In May, they bought one, for roughly a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Meanwhile, the number of *ICE* sightings and arrests in Southern California continued to climb. Federal agents raided Home Depot parking lots

where day laborers waited for work, made traffic stops based on race and appearance, and smashed car windows when individuals refused to open their doors. In cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, masked, armed agents waited to arrest migrants, sometimes violently, as they left immigration hearings. It didn't seem to matter if an individual had a pending asylum case, a U.S.-born dependent, or no criminal record. Once migrants are taken to *ICE* detention centers, where conditions have been described as inhumane by immigrant-advocacy groups, it can be months before they appear in court; all the while, they are pressured to sign documents authorizing their own deportation.

The Trump Administration has also moved to significantly expand third-country removals—deporting migrants to places other than their country of origin. In perhaps the most high-profile case of the past year, more than two hundred and fifty migrants from Venezuela were sent to a prison in El Salvador that is notorious for brutality and torture. Around the same time, Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, released a video that issued a warning to all undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.: “Leave now. If you don’t, we will find you, and we will deport you. You will never return.”

The fear of *ICE*, and of third-country removals, became so overwhelming that it was all the García family could talk about. They drew the shades in their living room, which faced the street. Rosalinda and Manuel stopped answering the door when they didn't know who was knocking, and didn't leave the house except to travel to and from work. (Rosalinda managed apartment buildings for a local company; Manuel was a carpenter specializing in the wood frames of buildings.) Their older daughter, Ana, who still lived at home, took on virtually all errands requiring driving, including grocery shopping. Neighbors, relatives, and friends without papers were all taking similar precautions.

One day in late spring, the Garcías' doorbell camera recorded an *ICE* arrest taking place across the street: several dark trucks encircled a man, and agents pinned him to the ground. The Garcías didn't know the man or what happened to him. Around the same time, a letter from the National Visa Center, a division of the State Department which handles petitions for immigrant visas, arrived at their door; it made reference to an application they had filed more than a year earlier. "I already knew that the government has my address," Rosalinda told me. "But in that moment I realized that sooner or later they are going to come door-to-door. Once that letter arrived, I said, 'I'm leaving.' "

Rosalinda wanted to go immediately, like her sister had. But José encouraged his parents to carefully consider their options first. Over the years, the family paid more than eight thousand dollars to various immigration lawyers, most of whom concluded that it would be impossible for them to fix their status without returning to Mexico and waiting out a ten-year reentry ban; even then, there were no guarantees. It didn't matter that all three of their children had been born in California and were U.S. citizens. One lawyer brought up a crucial point: Lily was still a minor, so if her parents self-deported she would have to leave with them, unless José or Ana became her legal guardian. In any case, Lily wanted to finish high school in San Bernardino and figure out her plans for college while her parents were still there to provide support.

After a series of dinner-table conversations and texts in the family's group chat, it was decided: they would wait until Lily turned eighteen. "The only reason why I haven't left already is Lily," Rosalinda said. "The other two, they're already adults, they have their lives and everything. But Lily is just starting out. She's still"—Rosalinda switched to English—"She's still a kid."



"I need that report on my desk A.S.A.P. I spilled some coffee and I can't find any paper towels."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Lily's seventeenth-birthday party marked a sombre milestone. This time next year, barring their arrest and deportation, her parents would leave the U.S.—the country where they had grown up, met each other, married, worked, and raised children, all of whom might have to face their adult lives without them nearby.

Rosalinda's sister suddenly said, "Ah!"—she had remembered the address of the house where they'd lived as small children. It was on Calle Gilberto Ruiz Aldama. José pulled up an image of a modest, light-colored home, set back from a sidewalk and a paved road.

“When I left Mazatlán, when I was seven, there was no cement—it was all dirt,” Rosalinda marvelled. She barely recognized the place.

San Bernardino, like much of Southern California, is deeply tied to Mexico and Central America. Long-distance bus companies like Tufesa offer direct service to the Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Jalisco. Taquerías and carnicerías proliferate amid the region’s massive Amazon and Walmart warehouses, where staffing agencies have long employed low-wage immigrant workers to meet the insatiable demand of the nation’s supply chain. Swap meets—flea markets where venders hawk everything from secondhand clothing and kitchenware to fresh produce and cleaning products—could be mistaken for the *mercados* in the central plazas of Tepic or Hermosillo. In recent decades, immigrants from such countries as Vietnam, China, and the Philippines have arrived in San Bernardino, but in far smaller numbers. Many businesses greet customers in Spanish first, as nearly seventy per cent of the city’s population is Latino.

Just about everyone I met there had an *ICE* story: a sighting, a close call, an acquaintance who had been taken. As a result of the collective panic, restaurants saw a steep decline in foot traffic but also an uptick in delivery orders. When school started up in August, parents with papers offered to pick up and drop off the children of families who were in peril. A thirty-five-year-old Mexican American schoolteacher whose parents are undocumented told me that, after she began going to the supermarket for them, she immediately noticed a pattern. “I was taking pictures of different brands and amounts and sizes, texting my mom to ask what exactly she wanted,” the woman said. “Then I looked around and realized that all around us there were other young people doing the same thing—shopping for their parents and sending them pictures because they didn’t know what to get.”

Community organizations across the Inland Empire—the metropolitan region east of Los Angeles that includes industrial,

working-class cities like San Bernardino—raced to implement added security at their facilities and to distribute information about the rights that even undocumented people could exercise when encountering a federal agent. On August 16th, during an immigration check in San Bernardino, agents shattered the window of a man’s pickup truck and then opened fire when he drove off. (Days later, government forces swarmed the man’s home and arrested him.) The agents’ gunshots could be heard at a nearby nonprofit community center and garden in the city’s depressed downtown. The center hosted ceramics classes, handicraft workshops, and celebrations for such holidays as Día de los Muertos. “All of that is under threat because of the fear of gathering,” an employee told me. Staff members there had been trained in how to respond if ICE showed up; the center also established designated safe rooms in the building, with limited entrances and windows, where people could hide. As I was shown around, a community leader at the center joked darkly, “These are our Anne Frank rooms.” The safe rooms were stocked with cases of water, and there were also folding chairs and bathrooms, allowing people who needed sanctuary to stay for a while.

Many organizations holding events popular with immigrants stopped publicizing exact locations, instead sharing addresses only with registered attendees. In July, the bishop of the Diocese of San Bernardino, Alberto Rojas, suspended Mass obligations for his parishioners who feared being apprehended by immigration authorities after two arrests on parish property. Such a step is taken only during the most serious of circumstances, such as the height of the COVID pandemic. “Many more people started to come up to me after Mass at the parishes, saying that they were afraid,” Rojas told me. “It’s a very real fear not to know what’s going to happen to your children. And let me be clear—if someone committed a crime, they should go through the system for that crime. I am not encouraging criminals. But this is the Catholic Church. We don’t need people to have documents in order to take care of them. We

take care of the poor and the vulnerable no matter what. These are human people.”

When I arrived in San Bernardino, in September, there had been a brief lull in federal activity on the streets. “This is how they get us —when we start to feel comfortable again,” Rosalinda said.

Everyone expected enforcement to pick back up. A few days earlier, on September 8th, the U.S. Supreme Court had lifted a federal judge’s prohibition against “indiscriminate” immigration stops in Southern California based on factors like race, ethnicity, language, and type of work—meaning that someone could legally be questioned simply for speaking Spanish in public, having dark skin, or driving a landscaping truck.

Just after dawn on my first morning in town, I drove to an unpaved lot along Highland Avenue, in front of a Home Depot and a Dollar Tree, where day laborers had gathered. Along the south side of the lot, a twenty-five-year-old Salvadoran woman named Lisbeth sold food out of her car. The open trunk of her black Toyota sedan was lined with coolers holding homemade tamales and pupusas, along with salsas and pickled vegetables. A handwritten sign in Spanish listed what else she sold: arroz con leche, agua fresca, soda, Monster, Red Bull. Lisbeth’s sister, who was pregnant, sat in the front seat, holding a large thermos filled with coffee.

“My mother is the one who makes everything—this is her livelihood,” Lisbeth explained. The two sisters had legal status, but their mother did not, and she had been staying home ever since *ICE* repeatedly raided the lot over the summer. Their mother had been present during one raid, in August; she was sitting in the passenger seat of the car when agents descended on the site. As the day workers fled in every direction, Lisbeth got into the driver’s seat and sped away. “I drove straight home with everything just like this,” Lisbeth said, meaning that she’d left the trunk open, with a white kitchen trash bag hanging from the bumper. Her mother filmed out the window as they escaped, and Lisbeth posted the

footage to her TikTok account, in order to warn others in the community. She herself got most of her news about ICE's presence in the area from TikTok.

As she recounted the story, a gray pickup pulled up to the curb, its dashboard adorned with Catholic imagery and trinkets from Mexico. Two construction workers were in the front, with fountain sodas in the center cup holders. One of them, whom I'll call Juan, got out to buy tamales for himself and his partner. He was heavyset, wearing a black T-shirt and work jeans. "Would you give me a third tamale so I can feed the pigeons?" he asked. Juan did this many mornings, and Lisbeth obliged, handing over her last tamale, tightly wrapped in aluminum foil. The crinkling sound of foil unwrapping scared the pigeons, which flew to the other side of the dusty lot.

"They'll come back," Juan said as he began throwing pieces onto the sidewalk. "Here they come." The pigeons returned, one by one.

Juan and Lisbeth got to talking about the raids. A friend of his had been captured over the summer and recently got out on bond. (In order to qualify for bond, you cannot have been convicted of certain crimes, and you must convince a judge that you don't pose a threat to the community.) "They let him go with an ankle monitor," he said.

Moments later, Juan spotted the man, Francisco Javier García Félix, on the other side of the lot, and brought me over to meet him. Félix, a middle-aged man from Guadalajara with long black hair parted down the middle, clearly had the respect of the other people at the site, whom he called his "colleagues." The father of seven children—six sons and one daughter, between the ages of ten and twenty, all U.S.-born—he was known endearingly as el Apá, a Mexican nickname that means "Dad." His youngest boys, elementary schoolers, were playing in the back seat of his pickup; he was on his way to drop them off at school.

“They’re traumatized,” Félix told me in Spanish, making sure the children were out of earshot. His arrest took place during a raid on July 6th, just a few steps from where we were standing, as he walked unwittingly out of the Dollar Tree. He had overstayed his visa for eighteen years. The next day, his oldest son, Michael, set up a GoFundMe page titled “Help ICE got my DAD :(” that raised more than three thousand dollars for the family. During the weeks he was in detention, his family fell behind on their rent and their bills. His daughter did not want to get out of bed. His children submitted letters to a judge as part of his case. “The absence of my father has been devastating towards my everyday life,” Anthony, Félix’s second-oldest child, wrote. “It has impacted so much, like my sleep, mental health and physical health.” Félix’s wife, Yessy, managed to hold everything together while navigating the labyrinthine legal process to fight for his release. Still, he said, there were days when his children ate only rice and beans.

Félix was first sent to a detention center in Los Angeles for a week, before being transferred to an *ICE* processing facility in the neighboring city of Adelanto. Félix described it as a “warehouse” with close to four hundred detainees in his building alone and more than a thousand at the facility in total. Immigrants detained there have complained about cold temperatures and a lack of blankets. In August, CoreCivic, the second-largest for-profit prison company in the U.S., reopened a former state prison as an *ICE* detention center in the nearby Mojave Desert town of California City; with more than twenty-five hundred beds, it is the state’s newest and largest immigrant-detention facility. On November 12th, seven detainees represented by the American Civil Liberties Union and other legal-aid groups filed a federal class-action lawsuit against *ICE* and the Department of Homeland Security, alleging “dire” and “inhumane” conditions at the California City facility. “Sewage bubbles up from the shower drains,” the complaint reads. “People are locked in concrete cells the size of a parking space for hours on end, and officers threaten them with violence and solitary confinement.

Food is paltry and people go hungry. Temperatures are frigid; those who cannot afford to buy sweatshirts from the exorbitantly priced commissary suffer in the cold, some wearing socks on their arms as makeshift sleeves. Friends and family members who travel to the Mojave Desert to see their loved ones must do so across heavy glass; people detained at California City cannot touch or hug their children. The facility sharply limits access to lawyers, leaving people bewildered and largely incommunicado.”

By definition, immigrant-detention centers like those in Adelanto and California City deal with civil, not criminal, offenders—living in the U.S. without authorization is a civil offense, not unlike parking illegally. And yet, according to the A.C.L.U., the conditions in such facilities are sometimes even worse than those in prisons. (Crossing the border illegally, as opposed to overstaying a legal visa, is a criminal misdemeanor, punishable by a fine, up to six months in prison, or both; it rises to the level of a felony only once someone who has already been deported, or denied admission, attempts to reenter the country illegally.)

After forty-four days, with help from a local immigrant-rights organization and the Mexican consulate, Félix was released on a five-thousand-dollar bond. He told me that he had just been relieved of his ankle monitor; now immigration authorities were monitoring his phone to insure, among other things, that he would not attempt to work. Félix spoke warmly of the hundreds of other immigrants he met in detention. “There were Arabs, Chinese, Africans, people from every part of the world,” he said. “Many of the people I met did not deserve to be in there. Many of them didn’t do anything wrong, but they’re now separated from their families.” They were told to sign documents that would authorize their rapid removal without a court hearing. The message was “Until you sign, you can’t leave.”

Félix understood that he was the fortunate exception. He made an initial court appearance in November; he now awaits a second

court date, in January, before a judge in Santa Ana. Even so, the situation had shattered his life. “This is family destruction, economic destruction,” he said. “And, if they send me back to Mexico, it’s practically a forced divorce. Undocumented people are being terrorized.”

Everywhere Félix went, he carried a clear plastic pocket folder containing his Mexican passport and all of his other documentation, in case he was stopped again. On a small piece of paper, he had scribbled down an English phrase that his son had taught him—one that captured a strange sadness he’d felt since his release. “Survivor’s guilt,” he said, reading it aloud before switching back to Spanish. “Like when a plane crashes and you’re the only one who lives.”

As the sun set behind the desert hills, Lily’s guests began arriving. The teen-agers greeted her parents one by one; a Spotify playlist featuring Travis Scott and Rauw Alejandro played while the guests took turns on the mechanical bull. I sat at a smallish round table off to the side, eating dinner with Lily’s parents and her older brother and sister. Rosalinda and Manuel always spoke in Spanish with their kids, whose work, school, and social lives existed largely in English. The siblings, who joked that they were “*no sabo*” kids—an improper conjugation of “I don’t know”—switched back and forth between English and Spanish as they responded, knowing that their parents could understand both languages even though nobody in the family considered themselves to be perfectly bilingual.

Whereas Rosalinda seemed to immediately open up with everyone she met, Manuel—four years her senior, with a thick black mustache—was deeply reticent. He was friendly but spoke only in short bursts. He worked for a construction company that built mostly schools and other government-owned buildings. The irony of this was not lost on his family. “It’s, like, ‘You don’t want me, but you want me to build your buildings,’ right?” José told me later.

But Manuel's job, which he had been working at for the past ten years, paid reasonably well and gave him health care.

In the past few years, the family had become solidly middle class for the first time. "We're comfortable," José said. The mechanical bull, which cost a few hundred dollars to rent, was certainly a flourish. The Garcías had bought their home, in 2011, for a hundred and twenty thousand dollars, and now it was worth almost three times as much. Despite these gains, the family's ability to pay for college was unquestionably dependent on scholarships and other aid. Now that Rosalinda and Manuel were expecting to live in Mexico starting next year, Ana was claiming Lily as a financial dependent so that Lily would still be eligible for in-state tuition and federal financial aid.

At one point, José and his father went to the driveway and started unscrewing the California license plates from one of their several cars, a silver Hyundai S.U.V. I learned that they had just agreed to sell it to Carvana, the online used-car dealer. "It's not easy to import a car into Mexico," Rosalinda explained, as she watched them. "Better to keep the savings and buy a car there." She had begun researching prices in Mazatlán and determined that she could buy a decent used car there for about six thousand dollars.

The family had been discussing which of their possessions would go with them to Mexico and which could be sold. Rosalinda and Manuel had conversations with their children that parents in their forties would not usually have. José told me, "My mom started asking me, what stuff in the house do I want as *herencias*?"—an inheritance. They planned to send Manuel's tools and a few boxes of kitchen items to Mazatlán. There were also a few sentimental belongings that Rosalinda planned to take, including a collection of shot glasses that her children had bought for her on trips to various cities around the world. (Rosalinda, who had lived in San Bernardino almost exclusively since she was brought to the U.S., had hardly ever been outside of California and Nevada.)

The next day, when I came by the house, the Hyundai was gone, as was a large outdoor sofa that some of Lily's high-school friends had been sitting on just twelve hours earlier. "I gave it to the guy who I rented the mechanical bull from," Rosalinda told me. The day after that, some of the living-room furniture was missing.

"Soon the table will be gone, too. *Poco a poco . . .*" Rosalinda made a slow, sweeping motion with her hands. I asked why the family had already started cleaning out the house, given that they weren't planning to depart for another year. "A year will go by like that," she said. José added, quietly, "They want to have as much in order as possible, in case they have to leave in a hurry."

When I first met Rosalinda and Manuel, they said that they had mostly withheld from friends the fact that they planned to go back to Mexico. "It's just easier for them to convince themselves to leave if other people aren't begging them to stay," José explained at the time. The oldest and most financially stable of the three siblings, José would manage most of his parents' assets in the U.S. once they were gone. His sisters had agreed to this; José had got married a year earlier, at twenty-seven, and both he and his wife, also a scientist, had well-paying careers. In order to afford his parents' house in Mazatlán, José took out a two-hundred-thousand-dollar home-equity line of credit on the San Bernardino house, which was already in his name because of the difficulties that undocumented Americans face when trying to qualify for mortgages. Once Rosalinda and Manuel were gone, José and his wife planned to move in and commute to Los Angeles—about two hours each way. They would rent out part of the house to a tenant and send the rental income, roughly twelve hundred dollars per month, to Rosalinda and Manuel in Mazatlán. "They say that you can live more comfortably in Mexico with a thousand dollars, going out once or twice a week to eat," Rosalinda assured me, though the tone of her voice suggested that she wasn't entirely convinced. Her sister, who used to work in fast-food restaurants in the U.S., had mostly retired by the time she moved back to

Mazatlán, but she eventually planned to sell birria in order to stay afloat.

A huge pile of wood planks and beams sat in the driveway, much of which was covered by a low metal roof. “Before my dad leaves, he’s going to fix a bunch of things around the house, because it’s what he knows how to do,” José said. Ever since his parents purchased their home, his father had expanded and customized it, converting it from a two-bedroom into a three-bedroom house with an accessory apartment. Now he would make one final renovation so that José and his wife would feel more at home there. José pointed to the metal panels over our heads. “We’re going to replace the roof of the house and take down all of this, too. My mom likes the shade, but my wife loves the sun. So once we’re living here . . .”

He trailed off. It was rare for him to get emotional. José constantly cracked jokes and teased his sisters, and he addressed difficult conversations with candor and seeming ease. Perhaps there simply wasn’t much time for reflection: as the oldest child, José had long occupied the role of the family’s chief operations officer, navigating two languages, two younger sisters, two parents, and a great deal of responsibility and risk. His response to the turmoil of the past months was to quietly and efficiently tackle one challenge at a time.



“He died doing what he loved—correcting the way I pronounce certain words.”

Cartoon by Ali Solomon

Social scientists say that it is common for the children of immigrants, especially the eldest, to take on responsibilities typically handled by adults. “I get a variation of this story every day,” Carola Suárez-Orozco, a psychologist and a professor-in-residence at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told me. She is best known for her research on the psychology of immigration, particularly in children and adolescents. Suárez-Orozco said that the concept of “parentification” in developmental psychology refers to a child taking on some of the roles of a parent in their family system. Often, she noted, children experience parentification in the context of mental illness or substance abuse. “But I noticed many years ago that you would see it in immigrant families—not because of psychological pathology but because immigrant parents didn’t speak the language, or because they are working multiple jobs and are not actually present.”

The children of immigrants often find themselves providing translation help for their parents, or helping them navigate complex systems such as health care, schools, and legal processes. “There is absolutely a tremendous amount of skill sets that these kids and young people develop,” Suárez-Orozco continued. “There is also an emotional undertow and a price that is paid.” She explained that today’s anti-immigrant policies “project the very real possibility that a parent may disappear at any given moment and also project that you—the child—don’t really belong in this society. You’ll never really have a place. You’re an American citizen, but you don’t really belong.”

José admitted that he had not been unscathed. “I started seeing a therapist when all of this started happening with my parents,” he told me the night of the birthday party. We had moved indoors to the kitchen island, where Rosalinda was brewing coffee. Manuel had retired to the living-room couch to watch a Dodgers game. “My therapist said that one of the reasons that I am maybe being very nonchalant about everything is because I have a kind of P.T.S.D.”

The García family had lived for years with a latent fear of being separated. As José grew up, he recognized that certain family habits, rules, and behaviors had been shaped by this fear. Rosalinda offered an example. “We never wanted to turn on the light inside the car when we drove at night, because we were worried that the police would see us inside and pull us over,” she said. As a result, José came to believe that it was illegal to drive with the light on.

The realization that his family was fundamentally different because his parents lacked papers became clearer when he entered middle school. He recalled a few instances, before he had a cell phone, of becoming “gripped with fear” when his mother went to the store and stayed out longer than expected. His parents decided to give him driving lessons in a parking lot before he was old enough for a learner’s permit—in case something happened to them and he had

to drive his sisters to a relative's house. In 2010, their home was broken into, but Manuel refused to call the police. José realized that he and his sisters all shared a long-standing terror of police officers.

In this context, misbehavior was almost inconceivable for the García children. "My parents told me from a very young age that they were going to get their papers through me," José said. "And I told myself that I cannot get in trouble with the law—forever." When he went to college, at U.C. Santa Barbara, he once hosted a noisy gathering in his dorm room; when someone complained, he panicked until he got one of his roommates to take the blame. When a string of bad financial decisions led to the repossession of Ana's car, José gave his sister the money she needed to get it back. "There was a big push for me and my siblings to be model citizens," he said. "We didn't want to have a single blemish that could prevent them from getting papers."

The papers, of course, never panned out. Yet the hypervigilance remained, and all three children agreed that their previous anxieties were nothing compared with the state-sponsored intimidation they faced now. The speed with which their parents' life in America unravelled had been dizzying. On Father's Day, the family went camping near Bakersfield, about three hours north, and a white truck with a government logo pulled into the site. "Our hearts just froze with fear in that moment—you have no idea," José said. "But it was just a park ranger."

Ana, who is twenty-five and worked as a teller at Citibank, was the only family member truly familiar with life in Mazatlán. She flew there to see relatives in 2023, and on the trip she met a local man who became her boyfriend. Now she travelled there frequently, in part to be with him. When Rosalinda and Manuel decided to buy a place in Mazatlán, Ana offered to tour homes on their behalf. And her parents, who had hardly any idea what awaited them across the border, were grateful when Ana announced that she would move with them. She hoped to be able to transfer to a Citi-affiliated bank

in the area. If that didn't work, she would look for a remote job. Ana told me that she couldn't imagine staying in California when her parents wouldn't be able to visit for a decade or more. "Mom, you and I will have our coffee every morning and gossip about the neighbors," Ana told her, almost longingly. "That's how we're going to be: '*¿Viste a qué hora volvió la vecina?*'"—"Did you notice how late the neighbor came home?"

The whole family worried about Lily. José said that she had responded to the trauma of the past few months by withdrawing. Rosalinda agreed, telling me, "The other day, she said, 'Mom, I don't want to hear about your house in Mexico anymore. I don't care!'" At the same time, Lily took on more hours at her part-time job—working the cash register and washing dishes at a Mexican restaurant—and, with a view to building her résumé, she joined more extracurricular activities at her high school, including Mexican folk dancing. She had no idea what her future would look like after she graduated, and she wanted to position herself for success. Over the summer, José, who is eleven years her senior, had taken her on a driving tour of California colleges; she wanted to study psychology. He hoped that she could move into a dorm and have the same kind of campus experience that he'd had, though he admitted that everything would depend on the cost. José was prepared to assist however he could. He'd either help finance her housing fees or save a room for her in the San Bernardino house, in case she needed to commute. He promised his parents that he would look out for Lily. "They put up with *everything* that comes with being undocumented, and for so long," he said. "This is the least I could do for them."

When I spoke with Lily alone, several days after her birthday party, I asked her what she thought about her parents' decision. "I feel like I'm a deadline," Lily said. "I don't want to hold them back." It bothered her that her parents were risking the terror of detention or a third-country removal in order to watch over her for one more

year. Lily was the only person who described what her parents were doing as “fleeing the country.”

When the *ICE* raids began, Lily was in the middle of her junior year, a time when most American high schoolers start to think about whether they will take the SAT, apply to college or vocational training, or enter the workforce. Lily, who always planned ahead, chose to take a psychology elective, which would strengthen her college applications. She hoped to get a graduate degree one day. “I always wanted to do something with the brain, because I realized that childhood really shapes the way that you are, especially at the adolescent age,” she said. In addition to being curious about clinical work, she was interested in forensic psychology and the criminal-justice system. “I really like giving people a hear-me-out,” she explained. “I want to give people a chance to say *why* they’re accused of something, or *why* they might be going through a certain thing. I want to give people a voice. I like when people have that sense of feeling comfortable, and of belonging, maybe because—well, I’m not saying my mom didn’t give that to me, but it’s not something I grew up with. In a typical Mexican household, it’s just not like that. We don’t talk about things.”

Lately, Lily had begun to consider how her studies in psychology were informing her relationship with her family and the ordeal they were going through. “Growing up, I didn’t really know anything about the”—she brought her voice down to a whisper—“about the *ICE* situation and stuff. But now that I’m reflecting on it I’m really starting to understand my mom.” She was trying to exercise greater patience with her mother during arguments or difficult conversations; she now noticed that her father often grew uncomfortable when he was asked something personal. “I want to help other people who are like that,” she said.

At one point, I asked her whether she thought her parents were making the right choice. “I think they should go,” she said, without

hesitation, and then she paused. “But it’s not that easy. This is their home.” Of course, she meant that it was *her* home, too—she’d never imagined a future in which she didn’t live in the U.S. Lily had grown up after the family had overcome the most difficult financial hardships that they had faced in America. The paths forged by her brother and her sister gave Lily confidence and a clear sense of the opportunities that awaited her if she worked hard. None of her plans involved moving to Mexico with her parents—not even to study, which was initially discussed as a possibility. Lily’s life was here.

And yet there was a feeling among all three siblings that their country had betrayed them. Lily became anxious whenever her phone signalled a new text or phone call; if she went to school and nobody was there to pick her up at the end of the day, her mind leaped to the worst-case scenario. She didn’t tell most of her friends what her family was going through—only the one or two who came by the house and noticed how much it was changing. “The other reason I haven’t told a lot of people is because, the first time I tried, they started crying,” she said. At home, Lily showed me a painting that she had made in art class: a portrait of her father, with his characteristic Mexican mustache, except that half of his face was that of an alien, and behind him the stripes of the American flag took on the dark-brown color of the border fence.

Lily had just broken up with her first serious boyfriend, whom she’d started dating when she was fourteen. Their relationship became especially strained after ICE intensified its activities, because his parents—who were citizens and whom Lily called “whitewashed Mexicans”—had voted for Trump. “I tried to explain to them what we go through, that there are so many things we can’t do or couldn’t do because of my parents’ status,” she said. “And they were just quiet. They said they were sorry that I was dealing with all that. But I don’t think they changed their beliefs.” She said of her ex, “It’s just, like, a level of understanding of my experience that he doesn’t have. Empathy, you know?”

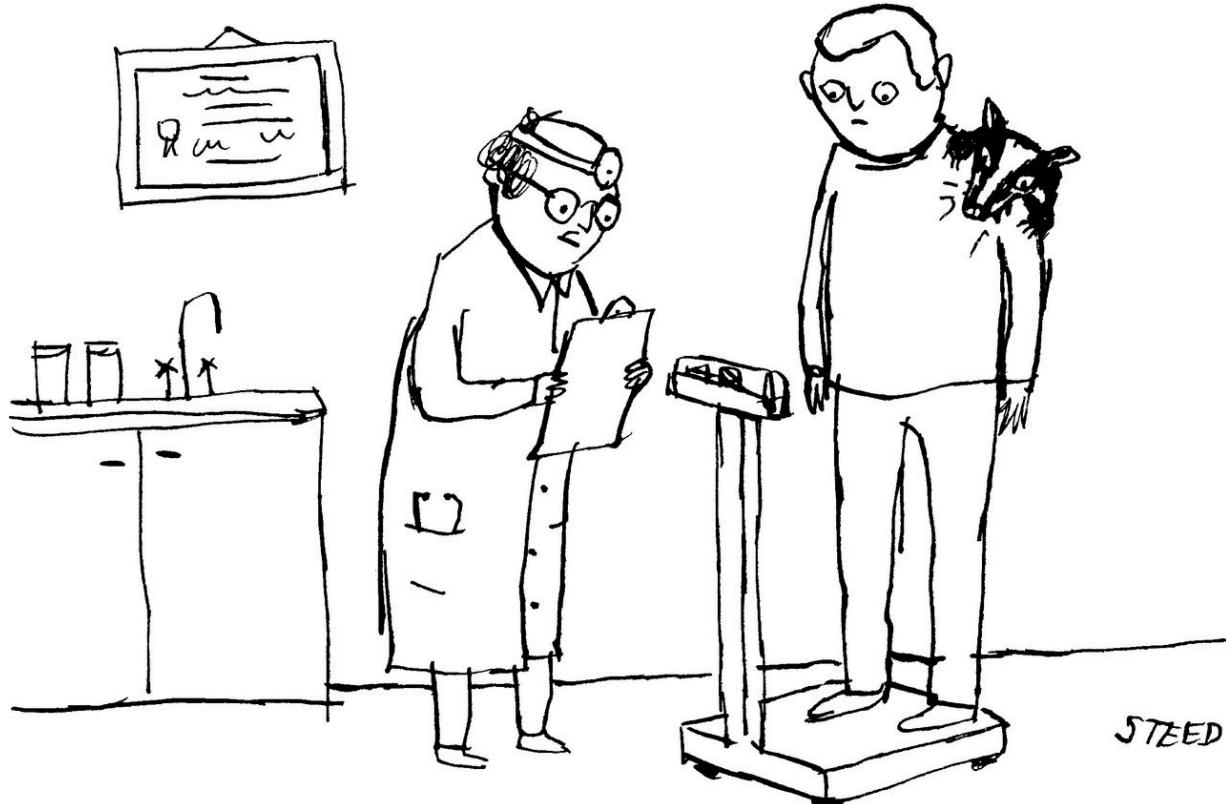
A few nights earlier, José had told me that he was having similar tensions with his own in-laws. Like his parents, they had entered the U.S. illegally; unlike his parents, they had successfully adjusted their status. His father-in-law voted for Trump in 2024, and, despite the raids, he still supported many of the Administration's policies.

"I always say, 'Once a Mexican starts making more than fifty thousand dollars, they become a Republican,'" José quipped, though I could hear the discomfort in his voice. "I'm definitely a centrist, more than my wife would like me to admit." José's wife, Irene, whose politics are more left-leaning, told me that some of her mother's siblings and one of her own half siblings did not have legal status. "It's a kind of disassociation, like, 'If it's not happening to me, it's not my problem,'" Irene said. "But then I'm, like, 'You guys came here undocumented, too!'"

Rosalinda knew that the events of the past months had shaken her children. For their benefit, she tried to put on a brave front. With a sad smile, she told me that she took solace in the fact that, if she succeeded in her plan to leave, it would at least be somewhat on her own terms. She tried to focus on the positive changes that would come with the move: because she and Manuel would have full legal status in Mexico, they could live without worry, and they could also travel almost anywhere. Rosalinda dreamed of seeing Italy, Costa Rica, and the Yucatán Peninsula. "After all, I need to know my own country first," she said.

She showed me videos of the house in Mazatlán, which had been gut-renovated before they purchased it. The house had two stories, clean white walls, a courtyard, and enough rooms to accommodate all the kids during the holidays. She noted with pride that, whereas her husband had always worked on the San Bernardino home himself, in Mexico they could afford to hire others to do upkeep and renovations. She had already paid a mason from Ciudad Juárez, near the Texas border, to travel to Mazatlán and build a bedroom addition and a kitchen island—more common in American than in Mexican homes—so that the place would feel

more Californian. The mason had charged her less than five thousand dollars. “He stayed in Mazatlán and worked on my house for three months!” Rosalinda said, grinning.



“You are still a little overweight. Although some of that is probably the badger.”
Cartoon by Edward Steed

But everything Rosalinda knew about the house and its construction projects came through her iPhone or through Ana’s visits. And her broader perceptions of Mexico had been shaped over the years by the kind of longing for a homeland that never really fades. In this respect, Rosalinda was honest with herself: it was hard not to feel like she lacked control over her future. The youngest of ten siblings, she had moved around a lot with her mother in her early years, mostly between Mazatlán and Tepic, a city in the nearby Mexican state of Nayarit. Her mother brought her to California in 1991, because one of Rosalinda’s sisters had followed a boyfriend there; they crossed the border on the beach in Tijuana, slipping under a fence in the sand. Rosalinda attended middle school in San Bernardino for two years before her mother took her back to Mexico, fearing that she had become friends with

troubled kids. Rosalinda had already begun to adjust and learn English. “I didn’t want to go back,” she recalled. “I was comfortable here.”

In 1995, after a couple of years in Mexico, her mother heard that one of Rosalinda’s brothers was getting into trouble in the States and decided that she needed to live closer to him. Rosalinda wanted to stay, but her mother ignored her pleas, saying, “Pack your bag, because tomorrow we’re leaving early.” It took them three attempts before they were able to sneak across the border, with the help of smugglers, who drove them to San Bernardino. During the ride, one of the men groped Rosalinda, who was fourteen. “There was nothing I could do—I couldn’t scream or anything,” Rosalinda said, wiping away tears. “I just had to stay silent. After that, I told my mother, ‘You do whatever you want, but I am never_crossing again. That’s it, I’m finished.’ ” Two years later, as a high schooler in San Bernardino, she met Manuel and became pregnant with José.

As a couple, Rosalinda and Manuel had sometimes contemplated returning to Mexico. But only once, more than fifteen years ago, did they come close, after a particularly humiliating experience of trying to sign up their young children for Medicaid. Rosalinda told me, “The woman who worked there made me feel so bad that I came back sobbing, and I said, ‘I don’t want to live in this country anymore.’ ” But when she and Manuel asked José, who was twelve at the time, if he wanted to move to Mexico, he begged them to keep the family in America. “And they respected my wishes,” José told me, recalling the conversation. “They listened.”

About half of the Garcías’ extended family now lived in Southern California. The other half, in Mexico, Rosalinda knew largely by name only. Until recently, she and her husband had a vibrant social life in San Bernardino. For many years, she regularly attended an evangelical church, and she still went to exercise classes with

friends she'd made there. Manuel, for all his shyness, had been a regular on a recreational baseball team.

Rosalinda hadn't forgotten her youthful promise to never cross the border again. It felt surreal to be returning to Mexico, which, after her three decades in America, seemed like a construction of her imagination. "We are afraid, because we're moving to a place that we don't remember," she told me, sighing. "I guess that's just how it goes."

On weekends, the family liked to unwind at a nearby R.V. park and private campground where they had been members for years. There were campsites for tents and trailers, rental cabins, barbecue grills, two lakes, and three swimming pools. It had long been Rosalinda's favorite place, and now it had the additional appeal of being private property. "It's all fenced in, so it's one of the few places outdoors where *ICE* can't just show up," José explained. Last spring, when the raids in San Bernardino hit their peak, Rosalinda camped there for two weeks. "I slept in a tent close to the showers so that I would be more comfortable," she said.

One Saturday afternoon, Rosalinda, Ana, José, Irene, and I piled into their black Tahoe and drove to the campground. In the car, Rosalinda wanted me to listen to one of her favorite *norteños*—a type of Mexican folk song that heavily features the accordion. "It's the one I'm going to listen to when I leave the United States," she explained. The song was called "El Mojado Acaudalado," or "The Wealthy Wetback," reclaiming a slur that dates from the early twentieth century and refers to Mexican immigrants who entered the U.S. illegally by crossing the Rio Grande. The song's narrator is a migrant who has saved up money while working in the U.S. and is finally returning to his homeland. Rosalinda sang along to every word:

*Me está esperando
México lindo*

*por eso mismo
me voy a ir
Soy el mojado
acaudalado
pero en mi tierra
quiero morir*

Beautiful Mexico
is waiting for me
and for that same reason
I'm going to leave
I'm the wealthy wetback
but I want to die
in my homeland

“Exactly,” she said, nodding as the track finished. José said that the song depressed him.

The narrator emphasizes that his birthplace is his true home and that all along his plan has been to return there. Did Rosalinda really feel the same? It was clear that she proudly considered herself a Mexican living in America—but, with all her American customs, there was no knowing how locals in Mexico would view her or how well she would adjust. José told me later, “I think my mom does feel more Mexican than American, perhaps because she knows that America won’t accept her.” He paused. “Now, if this country accepted her, I’m sure that tone would change dramatically.”

José drove the Tahoe past the warehouses and strip malls of the Inland Empire and turned onto a road that climbed into the San Bernardino National Forest. Back in the city, it had been smoggy and hot. But, as we gained altitude, the air cleared and cooled.

We arrived at the campground gates, where Rosalinda shared her membership number and we all received entry bracelets. José

parked beside one of the lakes, which was stocked with trout, for fishing. Rosalinda suggested that we all take a walk. “I like to be around all the people,” she said. Many campers were from surrounding towns, but others had come from far away. Many had flat-screen TVs set up outside their trailers so that they could watch a fight between Canelo Álvarez, a Mexican boxer, and Terence Crawford, an American one. We stopped for a while at a small pavilion where a cover band called Suavé was playing nineteen-eighties dance-floor classics. Rosalinda happily bounced along.

We reached a quiet, wooded area beside a clear creek. “I want to hug a tree,” José said, and he wrapped his arms around a large trunk. The rest of us set out folding chairs in a patch of grass. Rosalinda reached into her bag and fished out some pears and oranges, which she passed around. The conversation drifted to what they called their America Bucket List—trips and experiences they wanted to have together before Rosalinda and Manuel left. A few weeks earlier, José had taken his father to a Dodgers game and surprised him with their first-ever seats behind home plate. The family planned to drive to Yosemite in a few months. For a while, they had also talked about walking the glass bridge over the Grand Canyon; then they found out that some Arizona police departments had agreed to share information with *ICE*.

Yet, of all the places in America, it was this peaceful, ordinary campground that loomed largest in Rosalinda’s dreams. She had long imagined bringing her future grandchildren here for “grandparents’ weekends.” Now she grew emotional with the awareness that this would likely never happen. We sat in a circle by the creek and watched the sun dip behind the hills. A hawk took up a perch in a nearby tree.

Later that evening, on the car ride home, Rosalinda quietly asked Ana, “Do you think that every country has mountains and streams like this?”

Ana didn't answer, and Rosalinda turned to me. "The other day, I was telling my children that, almost all my life, I've lived surrounded by these mountains," she said. "I see them every day. But only now that I'm leaving I've started to think about how much I'm going to miss them." ♦

Jordan Salama is the author of "Stranger in the Desert: A Family Story."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/a-mexican-couple-in-california-plans-to-self-deport-and-leave-their-kids-behind>

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Takes

- **[Amanda Petrusich on Katy Grannan's Photograph of Taylor Swift](#)**

Looking at this image is like seeing a picture of yourself taken just before something seismic happened.

Takes

Amanda Petrusich on Katy Grannan's Photograph of Taylor Swift

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

January 4, 2026

PROFILES

YOU BELONG WITH ME

How Taylor Swift made teen angst into a business empire.

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE

One afternoon this spring, the twenty-one-year-old country pop star Taylor Swift was in the back seat of a black Escalade going up Madison Avenue, on her way to the annual Costume Institute Gala at the Metropolitan Museum. She was wearing an impeccably beaded dress that makes her look like a flapper, but she had adopted a more polished look for the balls: a gauzy, black-and-peach dress by designer J. Mendel spilling its train around as she felt it. Her red-rimmed lips were painted red and her eyes were smoky. Swift was sending text messages. None of the car's other passengers—her bodyguard, Greg, a busy former intern at Condé Nast Traveler; D.C., copy editor; publicist, Paula Einhorn; and women in a black blazer—spoke. The only sound came from Swift's iPhone, which emitted a constant ding!

After a minute, Swift looked up from her phone and said, "I'm so tired," and walked over the ball. "One of my best friends"—the actress Emma Stone—"is here tonight. So that'll be really fun, because the past two times I've been at this party I haven't had anyone to close friend me," she added. "It's weird."

Swift is sometimes called a twenty-one-year-old 2.0—the girl next door, but with a superior talent set. She has an Oscar-like gift for emotional expressiveness. When she's young and naive, she has a programmed, slightly robotic affect; she radiates unjudged energy no matter how contrived the situation—press junkets, awards shows, meet-and-greets. (Both Winfrey and Swift made appearances at the same Target sales conference, where Swift performed a funny song she'd written for the company, called "Red Shirt Khaki Pants.") As the car turned onto Fifth Avenue, Swift recalled making a midnight trip, last fall, to buy her most recent album, the triple-platinum "Speak Now," at a Starbucks in Times Square. She said,

which is projected onto a pair of Jumbotron screens, is part Bambi, part Baby June.

Swift's aura of innocence is not an act, exactly, but it's success. She is often described using royal terminology—as a pop princess or, as the Washington Post put it recently, the "pop laureate of puberty." In the past five years, she has sold more than one hundred million albums, more than any other artist. And, in an era of illegal downloading, fans buy her music online, too. Swift has sold more than twenty-five million digital tracks, surpassing any other country singer, and she is the first Canadian Woman to receive the forthcoming digital album, for "Speak Now." *Fader* ranked her as last year's seventh-biggest-earning celebrity, with an annual income of forty-five million dollars—a figure that encloses participation fees, endorsement deals (this month, she releases a perfume with Elizabeth Arden, which is estimated to generate fifty million dollars during its first year of sales), and tickets. Her concert tour, "Red Tour," has sold out arenas, regularly bringing in seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars a night. These feats are all the more impressive because Swift writes her own material—a rarity for a country singer, but especially unusual for a teen.

That Swift is a country star at all might come as a surprise to the casual music fan, who probably knows her as a generic teen icon, supplying background music for shopping malls and shopping at Forever 21. On her first album, which was released in 2006, when she was sixteen, Swift sings with a twangy Southern accent, and makes references to God and pickup trucks. But she veered deeper into country territory with her second record, "Fearless," which won four Grammys in 2010. It is

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Swift booked a previously unrecognized audience: teen-age girls who listen to country music. Photograph by Katy Grannan.

October 10, 2011

There's something uncanny about this still and stunning portrait of a twenty-one-year-old Taylor Swift, shot by Katy Grannan for Lizzie Widdicombe's [Profile of the singer](#), in 2011. Swift was already enormously famous ("Fearless," from 2008, won a Grammy for Album of the Year; "Speak Now," released in 2010, sold more than a million copies in its first week), but she hadn't yet become the object of such fervent and unwavering interest that she had to hold her hand over her mouth when she spoke in public, lest

she send a nation of lip-readers into a frenzy. Looking at this image is like seeing a picture of yourself taken just before something seismic happened: maybe you met a great love, or learned you were having a baby, or lost someone. There's your smiling face, forever moored in the Before.

Did Swift sense what was coming? Maybe. She has always been savvy about cultural desires. Certain aspects of her life have changed dramatically in the past fourteen years, but the grand theme of her work has remained the same. As she told Widdicombe, she is interested in “love, and unrequited love, and love that didn’t last, or love that you wish had lasted, or love that never even got started.” At the time, Swift was beginning to assume a more complicated view of romance—Widdicombe points to the lyric “There’s a drawer of my things at your place” as evidence of more grownup themes. Swift is still in tune with the tenderness of a new love affair, but she is less Pollyannaish, singing about sex and heartache with ease. Young Swift possessed a kind of guilelessness, but the thirty-six-year-old version has seen things, felt things, been hurt. It has made her only more compelling. ♦

[Read the original story.](#)



You Belong with Me

How Taylor Swift made teen angst into a business empire.

Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “[Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/amanda-petrusich-on-katy-grannans-photograph-of-taylor-swift>

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Shouts & Murmurs

• [The Boyosphere](#)

On today's episode of the podcast, why mommies are obsolete and naps are for the weak.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

The Boyosphere

By [Teddy Wayne](#)

January 5, 2026



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Host: Adam J., welcome to the pod.

Adam J.: Great to be here. Where's my mommy?

H: She left, but said she'd come back.

A: Fuck. (*Cries*)

H: Can you use your words, bro?

A (*wipes nose on sleeve*): I'm good.

H: The thing is, do we actually *need* mommies?

A: Right. When you dive into the data and look at the studies—

H: Mommies are straight-up, like, literally—

A: Obsolete.

H: Exactly. Not for nothing, you look superstrong. Like, pick-up-your-little-sister-and-walk-a-few-steps strong.

A: It's my new raw cran-apple pouch line.

H: I've been cran-apple juicing since I was two.

A: But that shit's been double pasteurized. Mine retains all the healthy bacteria and pathogens so you build up natural immunity to girls. Try it.

H (*sips, spills everywhere*): Whoa. That's fucking good.

A: All you need is that and twelve hours' sleep.

H: *Twelve*? I'm lucky if I get, like, ten.

A: Ten's the baseline. You need twelve to tap the real benefits: higher swinging velocity, roughhousing stamina, sharper cognitive processing for that thing in the pediatrician's waiting room with those wires you slide beads along for no discernible purpose.

H: That's including nap time?

A: I don't do naps. Body's way of surrendering.

H: No shit. So you're awake, like, *all* day?

A: I'll do intermittent micro-meditation sessions. Full focus. If someone asks me to put on my shoes or something—even if they say my name five or six times—I just don't hear them.

H: But to look like that, you must play like crazy, too.

A: I'm a jungle-gym rat, for sure.

H: Any cardio?

A: Tag, a couple times a week.

H: For how long?

A: Until Miss Jean calls us in. But it's not nearly as important as max-effort monkey-bar intervals.

H: As long as you do it with correct form.

A: Oh, absolutely. I see these young guys, the pre-K crew, jerking around, cheating to reach the next bar—

H: Only they're really just cheating themselves.

A: There's no substitute for the grind. Just accepting that your shoulders are gonna be sore as fuck tomorrow.

H: It's like potty training.

A: Yup. Like, no one wants to get out of diapers.

H: They're comfortable. You don't have to move. Someone else cleans up the mess.

A: But one day you realize, Holy shit! Diapers are a symbol of the infantilization of modern society.

H: Totally.

A: You ever fuck with Spock?

H: I'll fuck with early Spock.

A: Spock's low-key the *GOAT* on voiding theory.

H: Explain it like I'm four.

A: He's, like, if you force a kid to go potty, that's basically fascism.

H: Except—and I know I'm gonna get cancelled from the playgroup for this, but fuck it—this generation is so coddled.

A: No hustle mind-set.

H: How do you do money? You saving for a bag of jelly beans, private middle school, what?

A: Every cent I get—tooth-fairy singles, sidewalk pennies, lemonade-stand revenues—goes into a broken coffee mug that my daddy puts on a high bookshelf.

H: And you're, what, three-nine?

A: Three-nine and a half.

H: Bro. Bro. Built-in friction point—you're playing 4-D tic-tac-toe.

A: After a year, you'll 10x your net worth. I'm talking two figures.

H: I could go deep on this forever, but my nanny-slash-producer's telling me you have a hard out in five.

A: Bullshit sit-down with the suits. Then swim class.

H: You still in floaties?

A: Hell, yeah. 'Cause they actually help you learn the strokes better.

H (*pauses*): We done here?

A: I think so. Plus I have to peepee.

H: All that raw cran-apple.

A: Hundred per cent.

H: Love you, bro.

A: Love you.

(They hug too tightly and fall over.) ♦

Teddy Wayne, a novelist and a screenwriter, is the author of “The Au Pair” (June, 2026), among other books.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/the-boyosphere>

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Fiction

• “Deal-Breaker”

When he takes her in his arms, she wants to be with him forever. She wants everyone to know that they’re together, everyone except her mother.

Fiction

Deal-Breaker

By [Allegra Goodman](#)

January 4, 2026



Illustration by Kimberly Elliott

Pam is seeing someone, but she's not talking about it. Of course, her friends know, but she has not told her parents or her sister, Wendy. She would tell her father, Charles, because he doesn't pry, but then he would tell her mother, Helen. As for Wendy, she can't

keep a secret from anyone, Helen least of all. If Helen knew, she would pester and pass judgment, so Pam is keeping John from her. She's done being judged. Well, almost done. She's working on it.

John is not Jewish. For Helen, that's a deal-breaker—but this isn't Helen's deal to break! He is not young, but, at fifty-six, Pam is not young, either. He is mostly bald. His knees are bad. He's heavy, and he has a little twitch when he is nervous, a slight blink of his left eye. He's shy, soft-spoken, and *divorced*, which, in Helen's mind, is a moral failing. Helen would never say it, but Pam knows what she thinks. Helen, who has the most solicitous husband in the world, believes that divorced people give up too easily.

For these reasons, Pam does not even mention John on the phone, and her mother assumes that she is still single. You know, your mother worries, Charles tells Pam, and she feels a little guilty, but not enough to change the status quo, which is that she and John spend nearly every weekend together, either at her place, in Providence, or at his, in Jamaica Plain. He doesn't twitch at all when they're together. In fact, his eyes are wonderfully green. Like Pam, he is a lawyer, but he is a sole practitioner specializing in wills and trusts. Like Pam, he enjoys black coffee and good jazz. But those are surface details. More important, he is openhearted. He loves animals. His ginger, Taffy, passed recently, and he keeps her picture on his desk. He does not think it strange that Pam still mourns her own cat, Shadow.

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

John is big, and his bulk comforts Pam, because she is so small. He is effusive, whereas Pam is more reserved. When he embraces her, he lifts her off the ground. He has a warmth about him, like an oven radiating heat. Pam warms her feet on him in bed. The first time, she said, "I'm sorry, my feet are cold." And he said, "I don't mind. I like it."

They have been seeing each other for six months when he says that he wants her to meet his daughter. Isabella is his only child, and he is careful with her. He does not rush to introduce her to people he is dating.

“Who else have you dated?” Pam asks, because he has been divorced for only a year.

“Well, just you,” John says. They are walking in the Arnold Arboretum on a clear October day. They take a path over gentle hills, and John says, “I want to introduce you because I think you’ll really like each other.”

“Oh!” Pam’s heart jumps. She knows all about Isabella, even though she has not met her yet. John’s daughter is fourteen, and she attends the Winsor School and sings. Pam has watched videos of Bella in choir—although it’s hard to see which one she is. Isabella is a terrific student. John keeps her essays in a folder. And her math tests! She is good at math as well. She is gifted, John says, and Pam recognizes his partiality. She has other friends with children, and they are all loving, but those with just one child are lovesick, their attention undivided. An only child must be everything at once. Student, athlete, artist. Pam used to laugh about this, but when John praises his daughter she views him with tenderness. Isabella is a writer and a mathematician and an artist and why not? At John’s house, Pam gazes at Bella’s acrylic paintings and says, “She’s so talented!” Her portrait of her father looks just like him. The green eyes, the smooth dome of his head.

As they walk through the trees, John’s cheeks are ruddy in the fresh, crisp air. “I thought the three of us could go somewhere together.”

He says it near a hemlock. The trees in the arboretum are labelled with metal tags, and Pam takes note because she is going to remember this moment. “We could meet for lunch,” she says.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

Listen to Allegra Goodman read “Deal-Breaker.”

“Maybe it would be better to do something,” John suggests.

Pam tries to think. What’s a good thing to do with a fourteen-year-old girl? A movie? Canoeing on the Charles? She hates canoeing. Trampolines? Not with John’s knees. “How about a museum?” She is thinking of Isabella’s art. “The M.F.A. Or what about the Gardner?”

“I haven’t been there in years,” John says.

“Me either,” Pam says, but the memories rush in on her. The Italian palace right in Boston. The museum’s courtyard like a fairy tale as you enter. Walls pale pink like the inside of a shell, a glass roof far above, and at the courtyard’s center an enchanted garden with a mosaic floor and a fountain, delicate flowering vines.

“The Gardner is a great idea,” John says.

“And you know what? She can get in for free,” Pam tells him.

“What do you mean?”

“If your name is Isabella, you can always get in for free.”

“Really?”

“In college, I had a friend named Isabel, and it didn’t count. You can’t be Isabel or Izzy. You have to be Isabella, like Isabella Stewart Gardner.”

“Is that still true?”

“Look it up.”

While he checks his phone, she hovers at his shoulder, and they laugh with pleasure, because it's still true, just as Pam says. They are standing near the hemlock, with its green and golden leaves, and everything seems meant to be.

However, they can't get to the museum right away. They need to wait for one of John's weekends, and, even then, Isabella is busy. She's not just a singer and a painter. She plays soccer every Saturday. Pam knows the schedule, because John can't see her when Bella has a game. He's got to drive and watch and cheer. During the season, there's hardly any time, and then it's Thanksgiving, which he and his ex-wife, Alison, choreograph to maximize relatives on both sides of the family. John takes Bella to his parents' in Winchester for dinner, and then Bella and her mother and her aunts run in the Turkey Trot on Friday morning, and they all go to J.P. Licks for ice cream afterward.

"That's right near my parents' house," Pam says while they are eating breakfast at her place.

"Not the one in Brookline. The original J.P. Licks," John says, meaning the one in Jamaica Plain, on Centre Street.

"But that's close, too," Pam says.

John looks puzzled, as if to say, What are you suggesting? And for the first time she feels uncertain—trapped in a kind of Catch-22. She might be close. She *is* close, but she can't join him and his family, because she hasn't even met his daughter.

"I just wish," she says.

"Wish what?" he asks.

"That we could be together more."

“We will be.” He kisses her, and uncertainty evaporates. There is something about the way he holds her face in his hands. When she was young, the guys she loved were charming, confident, a little mean. John is none of those things. When he takes her in his arms, she wants to be with him forever. She wants everyone to know that they’re together, everyone except her mother.

Thanksgiving is desolate with freezing rain. Pam drives to her parents’, but her sister can’t come, because her wife is working on the holiday.

“What about Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Lew?” Pam asks when she arrives.

Her father shakes his head.

“They’re just twenty minutes away.” Pam collapses her umbrella in the entryway.

“Leave it on the porch,” her mother calls out from the kitchen. She can sense a wet umbrella without seeing it.

“Do you even know what Aunt Sylvia did?” Pam whispers to her dad.

“Your mother was very hurt,” Charles tells her, as he always does.

“Hurt, or took offense?”

Charles shrugs as if to ask, Is there a difference? Does it really matter?

Pam knows about taking offense. Like Aunt Sylvia, Pam’s dog is not invited to Thanksgiving. The last time Pam brought her to the house, Rosie rampaged through the garden, trampling the flowers, and now she remains home, with a sitter. So it’s just Pam and her

parents and the secret Pam is keeping. Such a big secret that she nearly sets a fourth place at the table.

“This is a lot of food,” Pam says when they sit down.

“I can always freeze the leftovers,” Helen says.

Pam glances at her father, who will be eating turkey sandwiches and cornbread stuffing and roasted Brussels sprouts forever. “What about the Metzgers?”

“All the usual suspects are in Boca,” Charles says.

“The Metzgers are in West Palm,” Helen corrects him.

“Do you ever think about going down there?” Pam asks.

“Occasionally, in moments of weakness,” Charles says. “But—”

Helen finishes his sentence. “We hate it there.”

Pam says, “I hate to see you isolated.”

“We aren’t isolated.” Charles refills Pam’s glass.

“You seem that way.” Pam’s face is hot. She was a diver as a girl, and she recognizes the feeling.Flushed excitement, climbing the ladder. “You seem bored and lonely.”

“I am never bored,” Helen declares, as though Pam has accused her of a mortal sin. Laziness. Superficiality.

“I worry about you guys,” Pam says.

“You don’t have to worry about us,” her father says.

“I worry that *you’re* lonely,” Helen tells Pam.

“Why?” She realizes how absurd this is—fighting about who’s lonelier at a three-person Thanksgiving dinner.

“You’ve been single for a long time,” Charles says in his doctor’s voice, courteous and at the same time chiding.

“How do you know I’m single?” Pam shoots back.

Helen turns on her. “You’re seeing somebody!”

“I am.” Suddenly, she’s done it. The secret’s out.

“Really!” Charles sets down his fork.

“Who is it?” Helen asks.

Pam tilts her chair way back on its hind legs, just to get a little distance from the table.

“Don’t do that,” her mother says.

“His name is John.” Pam thumps down to earth, all four chair legs on the floor.

“How did you meet?” Charles asks.

“John who?” Helen asks, because, as she’s told Pam many times, it’s irritating when people are introduced by first name only.

“John O’Neill,” Pam says.

“O.K.,” her dad says.

“What does he do?” her mother asks.

“And, no, he isn’t Jewish.” Pam’s cheeks are burning now.

“I gathered that,” Charles says. “I figured that out.”

Helen says, “It doesn’t matter.”

“What?” Pam splutters, half laughing, half indignant. “You always said that was a deal-breaker!”

“At your age?” Helen asks.

Charles looks miffed. “Who do you take us for? Your sister married a woman.”

“O.K., Dad.”

“A Catholic woman,” Helen adds.

“Right. Give us a little credit,” Charles says.

“He’s divorced.” Pam tests her mother.

Helen doesn’t even blink. “The main question is: what’s he like?”

“He’s a good person,” Pam answers, and she resolves to say no more. Not another word. But her mother doesn’t honor this.

“A good person? What does ‘good’ mean?”

“Good. Just good,” Pam tells her.

“So, you know him well?” Charles asks.

“How long have you been dating?” Helen asks.

“Seven months.”

Charles says, “All right. We’re not going to put you on the spot.”

But then he can’t resist. “What does he do?”

He kisses me, Pam thinks. He holds me in his arms at night. She says, “He’s a lawyer.”

“How long has he been divorced?” Helen asks.

Here we go, Pam tells herself. “A year.”

“That’s not very long.”

“How long should it be?” Pam laughs a little. She can’t help it.

Speaking about John makes dinner bearable. Even speaking about him to her mother. Strangely, Pam doesn’t mind talking, now that she’s begun. Somehow, nothing Helen says can hurt her. In fact, at this moment, Helen’s eyes are kind. She is open, pleasantly surprised. Charles is, too.

“Does he have children?” Helen asks.

“Yes,” Pam says. “He has a daughter at Winsor.”

“A good school,” Charles says.

“What’s her name?” Helen asks.

For a second, Pam doesn’t want to answer. She wants to declare, “I’m not at liberty to say.” But she has come this far. She tells them. “Isabella.”

“That’s pretty,” Charles says.

“Is she in high school?” Helen asks.

“She’s in ninth grade.”

“John must be much younger than you,” Helen says.

“No, he’s my age.”

“So he’s quite an old father!”

Charles turns to Helen. “Lots of people have children late.”

“I am aware,” Helen tells him. Then she asks, “What’s the daughter like?”

That question needles Pam. “I haven’t met her yet. We’re planning to do something together.”

“Dinner?” Charles asks.

“The Gardner Museum.”

“Oh! Wonderful,” Helen says. “Does she like art?”

“She’s an artist.” Pam feels the conversation spinning out of control, but she can’t stop talking. “She’s an amazing painter.”

“You’ve seen her work?” her dad asks, as though Bella were a professional.

“I mean, only in John’s kitchen.” Why does she say that? Why does she say anything? Pam learned long ago not to confide in her parents, but now she’s blushing, and it’s not the wine. It’s happiness. Here she is whipping out her phone to show them a photo of Isabella’s painting. The portrait of John, radiant with his green eyes and the glowing dome of his pink forehead.

Helen says, “Hold on, I have to get my glasses.”

Meanwhile, Charles squints at the phone. “That’s very good. Is it her father?”

“Let me see.” Helen takes a long look. “The flat face and green eyes remind me of Modigliani.”

“Really?” Pam says.

“If he were painting a middle-aged man,” Helen says without irony.

“With a short neck,” Charles says.

“He doesn’t have such a short neck,” Pam defends John.

“You’re right,” Charles says. “It’s not that his neck is short. It’s that the necks in Modigliani’s paintings are so long.”

“She’s talented,” Helen declares.

“She is,” Pam says.

Charles asks, “When are you taking her to the museum?”

“We’re trying to—we have to figure out the schedule.”

“Oh.” Helen sounds more like herself. A little colder. Firmer.
“Because she’s living with her mother.”

“John has joint custody.”

“And who is the mother?” Helen asks.

Pam thinks fast. Mostly, she knows what John has told her, which is that his ex-wife broke his heart and smashed it into little pieces. “Her name is Alison. She’s an oncologist at the Brigham.” She says this for her dad’s benefit, because he is a retired otolaryngologist. He is always modest about his career. He says that he could never fix a broken heart like Grandpa Morris. Still, he was an attending for many years at Mass Eye and Ear.

“Alison who?” Charles asks, in case he knows her.

“Alison Friedlander.”

“Jewish!” Helen says.

“You don’t know that,” Pam says.

“Of course I do.”

“It’s a Jewish name,” Charles says.

“Isn’t it German or something?” Pam asks.

“No,” Helen says. “It’s a Jewish name. She’s Jewish.”

Charles chimes in. “And you know what that means!”

They have that twinnish look they get when they solve the acrostic in the Sunday paper. Almost in unison, they say, “John’s daughter is Jewish, too.”

“You guys are terrible!” Pam says, because what are they doing, seizing this innocent child? Five minutes ago, Pam admitted that she was dating someone, and now they’ve claimed a girl they haven’t met. A girl *she* hasn’t met. They’re ready to adopt John’s daughter. “You don’t know anything about her.”

“Her mother’s name is Friedlander,” Helen says.

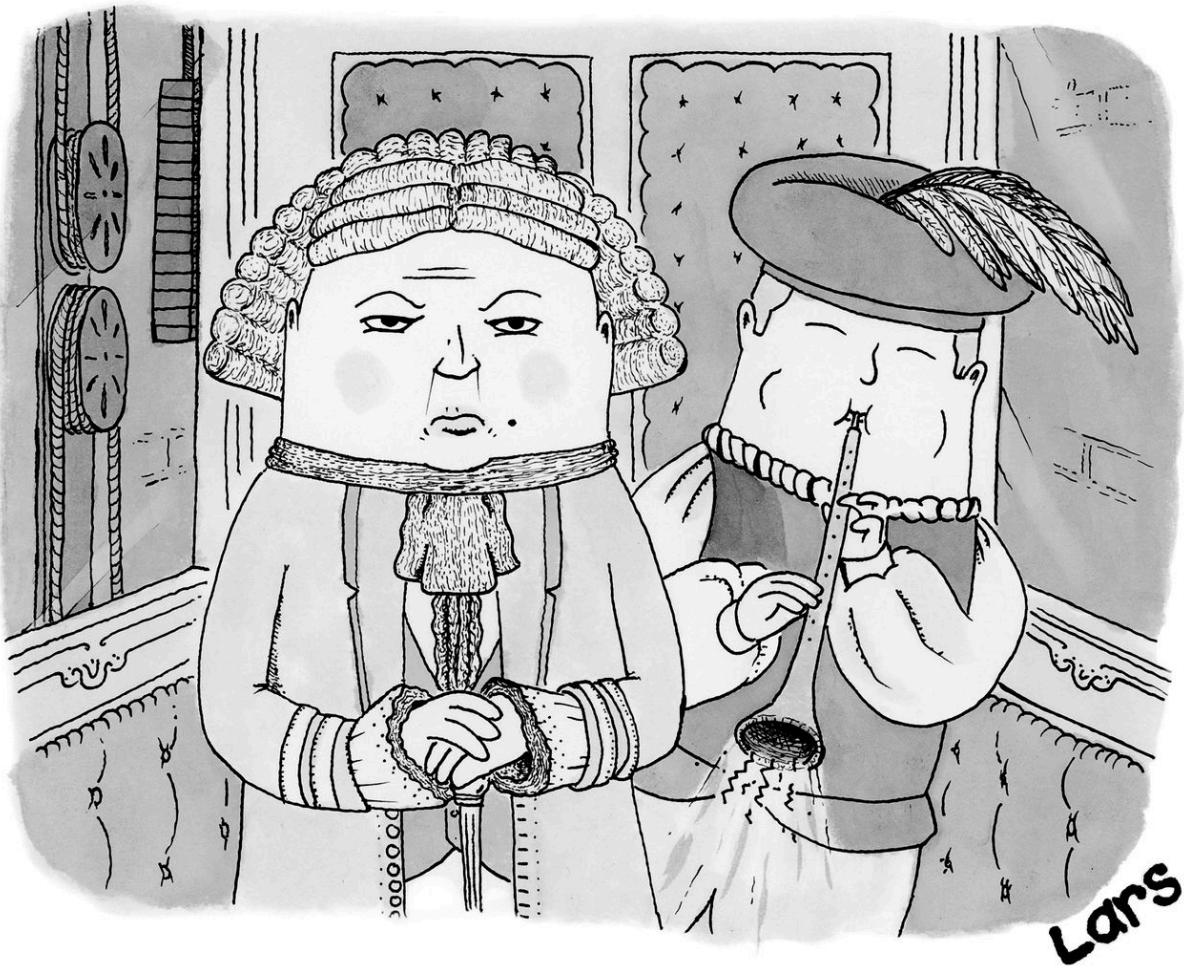
“Believe me, no one’s raising Isabella Jewish,” Pam says.

“That doesn’t matter,” Helen tells her.

“She celebrates Christmas with John’s parents.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Charles intones.

THE FIRST ELEVATOR MUSIC



Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

“John and Isabella decorate a tree each year.”

Helen dismisses this. “Her mother is Jewish, so she is a Jew.”

“What else can she be?” Charles asks.

They are so pleased. They have forgotten John entirely. They’ve nearly forgotten Pam across the table. It’s as if they have an instant granddaughter. Already, they are plotting. Pam can see it in their eyes. “Don’t get excited,” she warns. “Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“Who’s jumping?” Charles asks.

“Just don’t get your hopes up.”

“About what?” Charles asks.

“About anything!” Pam feels superstitious. Relieved yet regretful that she told them. “Don’t assume.”

“I don’t assume anything,” Helen says, and yet she’s smiling.

“Charles, would you get dessert plates?”

Usually, Pam escapes as fast as possible, driving home early the morning after Thanksgiving. This weekend, she lingers most of Friday. Partly to stack firewood, because her dad can’t do it anymore. Partly because her mother is so pleasant. Helen does not question Pam’s short hair or tell her wistfully, But you could get the gray out. There are no dark comments about living alone. No mournful speeches starting with the words “I worry . . .” Most surprising, Helen does not interrogate Pam about John. Clearly, Helen has decided—maybe she and Charles have decided together—that they will not intrude.

It’s like a staring contest, these two keeping their mouths shut. Helen does not say a word about Pam’s relationship. Charles does almost as well. True to form, Helen maintains discipline, but Charles cracks.

They are standing in the driveway, and Pam is about to head home to Providence, where Rosie waits for her. Helen says, “Goodbye, dear. I’m so glad you could come.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Pam says.

“Drive safely,” Charles says. “Keep us posted.”

Helen shoots him a warning look—but she’s amused by his little hint. She’s won! “Just let us know when you get home,” she tells

Pam.

“O.K., bye. I’ll call you.” Pam’s words are swallowed up in her father’s embrace.

And he cannot resist. “Tell us all about the Gardner.”

“Only if you want to,” Helen says, radiating curiosity and hope.

Pam’s parents are funny, almost charming, as they stand in front of their brick house. I love you, Pam thinks suddenly. “I will,” she promises. “I’ll tell you how it goes.”

If only she had something to report. The visit to the Gardner keeps getting postponed. First, it’s Isabella’s choir concert, and then she has exams, and then the holidays are coming. Pam and John can hardly see each other, let alone take Isabella to the museum. All that’s left is the Friday that Isabella gets out of school for winter break, and Pam reserves tickets.

She drives to John’s office in Jamaica Plain so that they can pick up Bella together. His building is a small Victorian that used to be a house. An orthodontist leases the first floor, and John shares the second floor with an insurance agent. John’s space is in front. He’s got a big bay window that would be perfect for plants, but he has none. There are only framed pictures of Bella and Taffy, on his desk.

“Hold on.” He is typing something on his phone. “One second.”

Pam takes a seat in a blue-and-chrome chair and looks at Bella as a tiny girl on the beach and Bella in her choir robe and Bella smiling with braces on her teeth. Does she go to the orthodontist downstairs? Her eyes are brown. Her hair is long and shining, perfectly brushed. Burnished. That’s the word that comes to mind. Some combination of brushed and polished. She is not just pretty. She is cherished.

“Hi,” John says.

“Hi!”

“There’s a problem.”

Again? Pam thinks. Really?

“Alison broke her foot.”

“What?” Pam blurts out. Then she says, “Oh, no.”

“She just had an X-ray.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Pam asks, because she’s been driving for an hour.

“It just happened this morning, and now it looks like she’ll need surgery to put a pin in—so I need to be there with Bella.”

“O.K.,” Pam says, slowly. “We can reschedule. I just wish you’d called me.”

“We were still figuring out what to do.”

“But, if I’d known, I wouldn’t have taken off work—”

“Well, it’s an emergency.”

“Yes, but.”

He stares at her. “What do you mean but?”

She tries not to let her disappointment show, but she can’t help it. “I feel like we’re cursed or something.”

“What are you talking about?” His eye is twitching, just a little. He is looking at her as though she were an alien—how could she think

about museums at a time like this? “Alison’s in the hospital.”

Isn’t she always in the hospital? Pam thinks. Doesn’t she work there? “O.K., I guess I’ll just go over to your house and wait.”

“No, I’m taking Bella for the weekend,” he tells her.

Pam nods, because of course she can’t be at the house with them. Bella hasn’t even met her. “I guess I should just turn around and drive home.”

“No, don’t do that,” John says as he sits at his desk.

She feels as distant as a client. “You didn’t call me.”

“The situation was unfolding!” he exclaims.

The situation? she thinks. What is the situation here? All she wanted was to meet his daughter. He had suggested it himself, but there’s no room for her. His heart is with Alison and Bella, because he is a good person and they are family. “You have your hands full,” she says.

“I’m not trying to ruin your plans.”

“They’re my plans now? I thought we were planning to take Bella to the Gardner together.”

He is astonished. “Pam, Alison’s foot is very badly broken!”

“It’s always something.”

“This is not just something.”

Tears start to well up in her eyes. “It’s never going to happen. You’re not going to let it happen.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ll never get to the museum.”

“Why are you still talking about the museum? This has nothing to do with the museum.”

“I know,” Pam says. “It’s about not seeing me.”

He looks at her across his desk and asks, “Do you think I’m trying to avoid you? Or exclude you?”

She takes a breath. “I don’t feel excluded.”

“Thank you.”

She stands up. “I feel extraneous.”

“I don’t know what that means,” he says.

“It’s just that I’m alone,” she tells him. “And my feelings are extraneous.”

“Pam!” He walks around his desk and reaches for her. He is always reaching, but when he embraces her she feels like he’s somewhere else. All the action in his life is happening without her. It’s offstage, where she can’t see. No. It’s just the opposite. She’s the one offstage, in the shadows.

“I’m sorry about Alison’s foot,” she says.

“I know.”

They are standing there together, doing the right thing. Her voice is muffled because her face is pressed against his chest. “I just have a feeling that we’ll never get to the Gardner.”

“We will,” he says. “We’ll go together.”

Just us? she thinks. Just us, without your daughter? She had envisioned stepping from winter into the pink courtyard and seeing it through Bella's eyes. She had imagined that delight. The mosaic and the ferns and the climbing vines. The sudden burst of Italy. "I wanted to be there when she walks in for the first time."

"She's been there," John says with some surprise. "She went on a field trip with her class last year."

Pam pulls away. "You never told me that."

He points out the obvious. "Her school is right there."

"Oh." She should have thought of that. Winsor is practically across the street. Of course, the girls would visit the Gardner. "I had a whole story in my mind!"

"What story?"

She is half laughing at herself. "I made up a whole story, and none of it was real!"

"We'll figure it out," he promises.

She doesn't answer.

"Don't you believe me?"

She just shrugs. She can't give him what he wants. She doesn't have it in her to say yes.

"I better pick her up," he says.

"O.K."

"Don't look at me like that."

"How do I look?"

“Crestfallen,” he says.

And it’s true. She is so anxious and dramatic. This is the gulf between them. She has never been married. She has never been a parent. “You think I’m selfish.”

“No,” he says. “You’re just not used to—”

“Putting other people first?”

“Changing the schedule sometimes.”

“But I *am* used to it!” she says, because how many times have they postponed the museum trip? How many times have they rescheduled? She’s been flexible. She’s been hoping.

“And we will get to the museum.”

“No, that’s O.K.” Her voice sounds small and cold, but she can’t help it. That’s how she begins to feel. Chilly, as though she were outside again. She’s zipping up her coat, and John looks so sorry. He looks sorry for her. Righteous anger rushes in—or is it her self-respect awakening? “Don’t do me any favors,” she says, because she has no desire to walk through the Gardner’s doors. To see the Madonnas or the bits of lace, the altarpieces, the Rembrandt self-portrait. The one where he’s so young and self-assured.

Quietly, John says, “I have to go.” He is disappointed in her. She can see it in his face. He is shocked by her behavior (as if she’s in the wrong!), but, even now, he’s kind. “I’ll call you later.”

“O.K.” With a sinking feeling, she remembers that she called her parents from the road. She told them she was going to the Gardner with John and Bella that afternoon.

He drives off to collect his daughter. Pam sits in her car trying to figure out where to go. Not to the museum. Not to her parents’.

They're just a few minutes away, but she can't face them. No way can she tell them about all of this.

She drives to Providence and picks up Rosie. Her dog panting, unquestioning, always thrilled to see her. Jamie, the dog-sitter, is startled that Pam is back so soon.

"We were just going for a run," Jamie says.

"That's O.K. I'll take her." Pam pays for three full days and takes Rosie home.

Her parents are trying to hold back. Pam can tell, because they don't call for three days. They don't even text, but she can hear them wondering about her. They are in suspense. Then they are speculating. Didn't she say she'd tell them how it went?

She senses them wishing that she would call, or at least send them a few words. Tap the hull of her drowned submarine. On the fourth day, she texts to say she's fine.

Her mother texts back immediately *That's good to hear*. And Pam reads everything in those few words. Reproach, concern, regret.

That night, Pam fortifies herself with a few drinks and answers when the phone rings.

"Hello," she says.

"Pam?" her mother asks.

Who else would it be? Pam thinks. She says, "Hi. Yes."

"How are you?"

"Good," Pam says.

“Hold on. Let me put you on speaker.”

“You’re doing all right?” her dad asks.

“I’m fine.”

“I figured as much,” Helen says, because of course she has figured out everything.

“Yeah, we didn’t get to the museum,” Pam says.

“What happened?” Charles asks.

“I don’t know. Scheduling. Medical emergency.”

“Really!” Charles says.

“I mean, it wasn’t life-threatening.”

“I’m sorry,” Helen says. For a split second, it sounds like she’s sorry the emergency was minor—but Pam knows what she means.

“It’s O.K.,” Pam says. “In the end, I didn’t really want to go.”

“You broke up with him!” Helen is direct, as always.

“Well,” Pam says. “We’re still speaking. He is very—”

“Very what?” Helen asks.

“Committed.”

“That’s a good thing,” Charles ventures.

“To his ex-wife and daughter.”

“Oh,” her mother says.

Alone in her kitchen, where no one can see, Pam tilts her chair back. “What do you call those trees that hold on to all their leaves, even after they shrivel in the winter?”

“Persistent?” Charles asks.

“Marcescent,” Helen says, because she knows the word for everything. She is such a puzzler.

“That’s how he is,” Pam tells them.

“Good for him,” Helen says, and Pam knows that she means good riddance.

Charles’s voice is gentler. “So, you haven’t met Isabella.”

Pam can hear his wistfulness and yearning. She senses it in both her parents, though it’s hidden in her mother.

“I told you not to get your hopes up,” Pam says, but this is harsh, and she regrets it. “We’re still friends,” she amends. “We’re on good terms.”

They say nothing.

Their silence lasts for so long that Pam asks, “Are you still there?”

“We’re here,” Charles says.

“Mom?”

“I’m here,” Helen says. “I was just thinking.”

“What are you thinking?” Pam asks, although she can imagine. Helen is thinking that John was a mirage and that there won’t be an instant granddaughter. Not even a granddaughter once removed, a step-granddaughter, a granddaughter by adoption.

Helen says none of this, however. She asks, “Why don’t you come here for the weekend?”

“I mean—” Pam starts.

“So you won’t be alone.”

“I’m not alone. I’m sitting here with Rosie.”

“Wonderful.”

“We’re taking obedience classes.”

“That’s a good idea,” Helen says.

“That way, when she graduates, we can visit you together.”

“No,” Helen says immediately. “You are always welcome here. Without the dog.”

Pam laughs at that. Strange to say, her mother’s retort comforts her. Any wistfulness on Helen’s part is over. She will not suffer fools or dogs or trees. She will not sigh about what might have been. Pam’s dog will not return, and John won’t set foot in Helen’s house, either. Has he failed a test? Absolutely. Pam can’t help but admire her mother’s clarity. Helen is difficult. She’s daunting, but she is crisp. She never clings. She does not remain on good terms to avoid a scene, nor does she stay friends when she doesn’t feel friendly. Helen has never met John, but that’s no impediment. She is disowning him. She has never spoken to him, but it doesn’t matter. If she had spoken to him, she would never speak to him again. ♦

This is drawn from “[This Is Not About Us](#).”

Allegra Goodman has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 1991. She is the author of “[This Is Not About Us](#),” among other works of fiction.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/deal-breaker-fiction-allegra-goodman>

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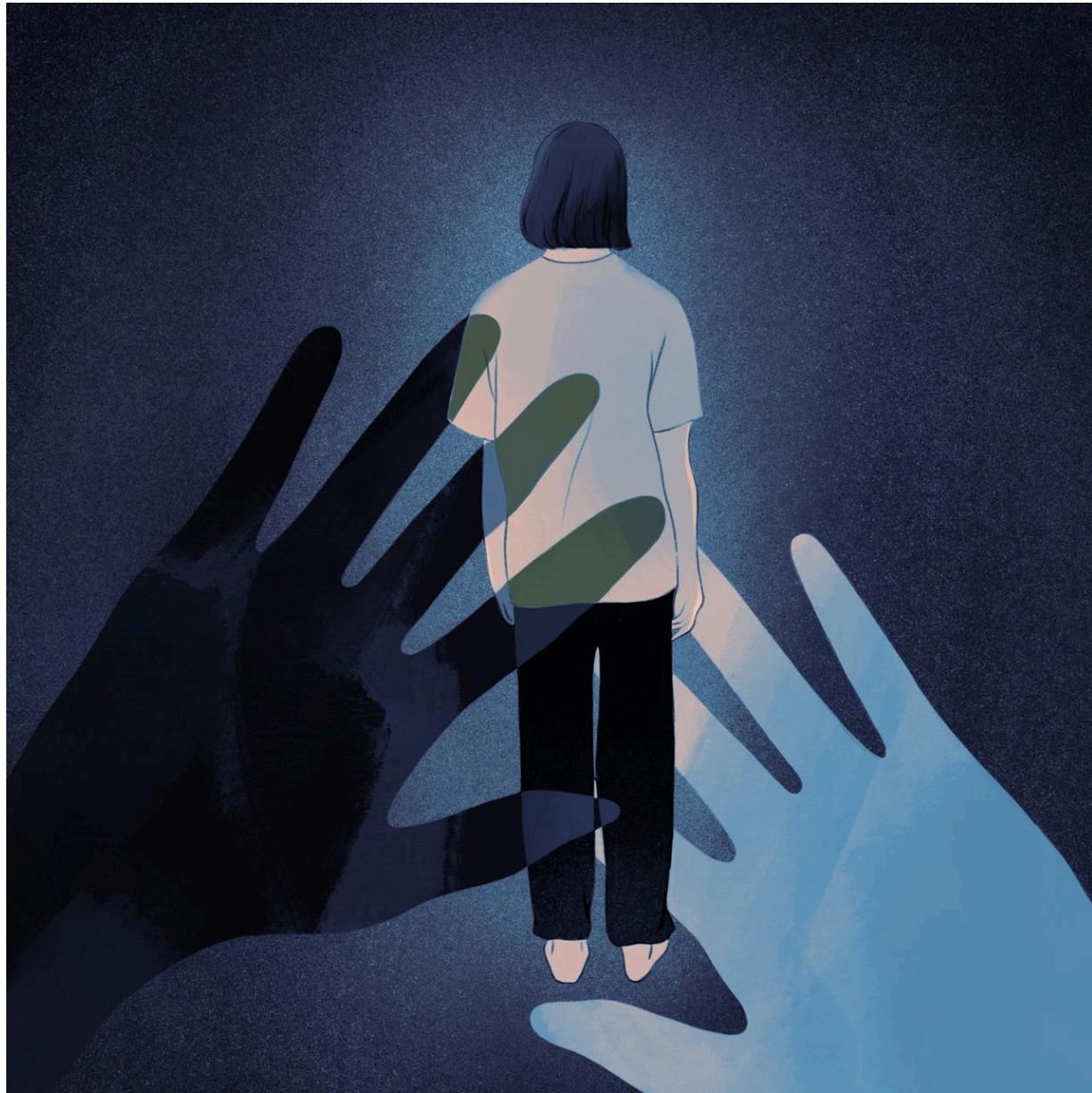
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How Consent Can—and Cannot—Help Us Have Better Sex

The idea is legally vital, but ultimately unsatisfying. Is there another way forward?

By [S. C. Cornell](#)

January 5, 2026



*Several new books try to construct a philosophy of sex that goes beyond “yes” and “no.”
Illustration by Michelle Mildenberg Lara*

In 1978, Greta Hibbard was twenty-two and living in rural Oregon. She had a two-year-old daughter, a minimum-wage job, and an unemployed husband. She was, she would later say, “living on peanut butter sandwiches.” She and her husband, John Rideout, often fought; sometimes he hit her or demanded sex. On the afternoon of October 10th, when he did just that, Hibbard fled to a neighbor’s house. Rideout followed her, cornered her in a park, and took her home. Once inside, she said, he punched her several times in the face and pulled down her pants. Their toddler, who was watching, went into her bedroom and wailed as her father penetrated her mother.

That this might be rape, legally speaking, was a brand-new idea. Until the mid-seventies, much of the sex in the United States was regulated not by the theory of consent but by that of property: a husband could no more be arrested for raping his wife than for breaking into his own house. In 1977, Oregon became one of the first states to make spousal rape illegal, and even then some politicians thought the law should apply only to couples living apart or in the process of divorcing. A California state senator summed up the prevailing attitude: “If you can’t rape your wife, who can you rape?”

Hibbard herself had only just learned that she had a right to decline sex with her husband. (At a woman’s crisis center, she had noticed a sign on the wall that read “If she says no, it’s rape.”) The night before the incident, she and Rideout were chatting with a neighbor when she brought up the new law. “I don’t believe it,” Rideout said. When he was arrested a few days later, he still didn’t. What followed was *Oregon v. Rideout*, the first time in the United States that a man stood trial for the rape of a wife with whom he lived, and a formative test of the notion that consent should determine the legality of sex.

The Best Books of 2025

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Sarah Weinman retells this story in “Without Consent: A Landmark Trial and the Decades-Long Struggle to Make Spousal Rape a Crime” (Ecco). Weinman is known for taking a true-crime approach to intellectual history: her previous books center on the murderer who befriended William F. Buckley, Jr.—the founder of the *National Review*—and on the kidnapping that is believed to have inspired Vladimir Nabokov to write “Lolita.” Her writing is breezy even when the subject matter is not exactly beachy. Rideout’s trial, for example, teemed with outrages. His defense lawyer smeared Hibbard for her sexual past: two abortions, a supposed lesbian experience, and a previous assault allegation against Rideout’s half brother, which, according to Weinman, Hibbard retracted after threats from the accused. Meanwhile, even the prosecutor thought Rideout seemed like a good guy. “I don’t think he belongs in prison or jail,” he told the press. When Rideout was acquitted, the courtroom burst into applause.

Hibbard, who reconciled with Rideout almost immediately after the trial, would divorce him within months. But Weinman follows Rideout all the way through 2017, when he was once again tried for rape. This time, the victims were Sheila Moxley, an acquaintance who had grudgingly allowed a drunk Rideout to sleep on her sofa after he came over to help her fix some furniture, and Teresa Hern, a long-term, on-and-off girlfriend. Both women had been held down and penetrated by Rideout in the middle of the night. Once again, a defense lawyer attempted to paint the women as lying,

scheming seductresses. But this time Rideout was convicted on all counts and eventually sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

“You are a bad man,” Moxley read in a statement. “You are an evil man. You are a monster.”

Weinman’s choice to begin and end with Rideout’s trials allows her to tell a story of comeuppance, in which, during the span of one man’s life, society decided to take rape seriously and punish the monsters who commit it. This is a happy thought. But the real arc of history is not so short, nor does it bend with anything like certainty toward justice. Today, about one in ten American women have been raped by their intimate partners—roughly the same rate reported in the eighties. This year, the Trump Administration removed the Center for Disease Control’s online statistics on intimate-partner and sexual violence; the page was restored by a court order, and now contains a disclaimer: “This page does not reflect reality.” Donald Trump himself has been accused of sexual misconduct by at least twenty-four women. He has denied these accusations, including one from his first wife, Ivana, who testified under oath that he threw her on the bed, ripped out a handful of her hair, and then forced himself on her. She later clarified that she didn’t mean the word “rape” in the “literal or criminal sense.”

In Weinman’s epilogue, she briefly points to the unfinished business of ending rape, spousal or otherwise. But her book assumes that society has at least sorted out the philosophical underpinnings of how to regulate sex. “Younger generations were far clearer about these issues,” Weinman writes, “understanding that consent must be given ‘freely and intelligently’ by those who were capable, and anything shy of full consent was considered rape.” There is, I think, no such clarity. It is not just people like Trump, Jeffrey Epstein, Pete Hegseth, Brock Turner, Bill Cosby, Sean Combs, Dominique Pelicot, and their many, many friends who seem to have a bone to pick with consent. Feminists have their own quibbles. What does “freely and intelligently” mean, they ask,

and what entails “full consent”? Who exactly is capable of consenting? And what are we to do with rapists?

For some second-wave feminists, the very idea that a woman living under patriarchy could “consent” to sex with a man was absurd. After all, we don’t think of a serf consenting to work for her feudal overlord: the serf might well enjoy tilling the fields, she might even love her master, but she didn’t choose farm labor so much as she was kept, by rigid and often violent social limits, from pursuing anything else. And even if the choice were free—even if decades of hard-fought feminist struggle had occasioned the sort of emancipation that meant women were no longer analogous to serfs—could such a choice ever be “intelligent”? Some women find knitting pleasurable, comforting, and affirming of their femininity, but how many would recommend it to a friend if it carried a ten-per-cent chance of rape?

These were lively arguments in the seventies and eighties, advanced by feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who had herself been battered by her husband. Today, the basic idea—often glossed as “all heterosexual sex is rape,” though neither MacKinnon nor Dworkin wrote exactly those words—seems almost farcical. Radical feminists no longer blame heterosexual women for “sleeping with the enemy.” It’s widely accepted that a woman really can consent to sex with a husband on whom she is financially dependent. The immediate though rather less accepted corollary is that she can also consent to sex with a paying stranger. To say anything else, many feminists now argue, would be to infantilize her, to subordinate her—to the state, to moralism—rather than acknowledge her mastery of her own body.

But the root of the second-wave critique, that there are power differentials across which professed consent is insufficient, lives on in other debates. Children, a class whom the poet Mary Karr once described as “three feet tall, flat broke, unemployed, and illiterate,” are an obvious example. It is easy to be horrified by situations

where children are subjected to sex that is forced or coerced. But what about sex that they claim to want? Can children consent to sex with other children? With adults? Can a nineteen-year-old girl legally have what she believes to be loving, consensual sex with her stepfather? What about with her stepmother? Can students choose to have sex with their professors, or employees with their bosses? How we answer these questions depends on whom we consider to be so gullible, vulnerable, or exploited that they must be protected from their own expressed desires.

Generally, we are more willing to limit people's autonomy in the short term. Youth is the most temporary of conditions: the kid whom we protect from certain kinds of sex grows up to be an adult from whom children must be protected. But some people, legally speaking, never leave the condition of childhood. In 2018, a former ethics professor at Rutgers named Anna Stubblefield pleaded guilty to aggravated criminal sexual contact with a man with cerebral palsy called D.J., who was nonverbal and under the guardianship of his mother and brother. The case fascinated other ethics professors because it seemed to literalize the debate over coerced consent. Stubblefield had worked with D.J. on a technique known as facilitated communication, in which an able-bodied person supports the arm of a nonverbal disabled person to allow him to type. Were D.J.'s typed expressions of joy at their sexual relationship—"I feel alive for the first time in my life"—really his own? Can someone like D.J. ever consent to sex? And, if not, are his only options to be forever celibate or to be raped?

For liberals, another difficult question is whether some sexual acts are off limits even to adults who are not part of a skewed power dynamic. The unavoidable case study here is from 2001: two German men met online and agreed to cut off the first guy's penis and eat it together. As the amputee bled out, he was filmed expressing his continual and clear agreement to being killed and dismembered. Perhaps, some philosophers suggest, we should not be able to forfeit *future* consent, either by agreeing to serious

bodily injury or death or by entering into a contract that strips us of long-term agency. But, if football players can consent to beat each other up on the field, why can't we beat each other up in bed? If we want to forbid people from subjugating themselves in the pursuit of their fantasies, we'd have to criminalize both extreme forms of B.D.S.M. relationships and marriage vows that contain the word "serve."

One critique of consent, then, is that it is too permissive—that it ignores how coercion or delusion may result in the illusion of agreement. But another critique is that it's too restrictive and punitive. Decades of reform laws have expanded the number of situations legally considered to be rape: it's no longer a charge that can be brought only against an armed stranger who attacks a struggling victim, ideally a white virgin. On university campuses, the idea that “no means no” has given way—because of the well-documented fact that many people freeze and are unable to speak in moments of fear—to “yes means yes.”



“If it’s too late to chat, I can call a friend in the next time zone.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Critics of this shift worry about encounters where both parties are blackout drunk, or where one appears to retroactively withdraw consent. They argue that a lower bar for rape leads to the criminalization—or at least the litigation—of misunderstandings, and so discourages the sort of carefree sexual experimentation that some feminists very much hope to champion. “I can think of no better way to subjugate women than to convince us that assault is around every corner,” the self-identified feminist Laura Kipnis writes in “Unwanted Advances,” a 2017 book about “sexual paranoia on campus.” Kipnis describes her own mother laughingly recalling a college professor chasing her around a desk and trying to kiss her. That young women today are encouraged to think of this kind of “idiocy” as an “incapacitating trauma,” Kipnis argues, codifies sexist ideas about their innocence, purity, and helplessness. Another interpretation is that young women have decided, with a rather masculine sense of their own entitlement, that they need not smile indulgently upon their transgressors. But Kipnis is right in her broader point: the bureaucratization of our erotic lives is no path to liberation.

Kipnis’s book came out six months before reporters at this magazine and the *Times* published more than a dozen allegations against Harvey Weinstein, setting off the mainstream #MeToo movement. The subsequent wave of disclosures made clear just how common sexual violence is, and just how much victims continue to lose by coming forward. In a review of Christine Blasey Ford’s memoir, for example, the writer Moira Donegan suggests that the defining moment of Blasey Ford’s life was not the time when, as she describes it, she was pushed onto a bed and a seventeen-year-old-boy straddled her, tried to rip off her clothing, and covered her screaming mouth while his friend laughed. It was when society—or at least Congress—decided that she was a liar.

and that the boy who held her down should be a Supreme Court Justice.

The backlash to Title IX and the #MeToo movement can make it seem like the primary effect of such activism on men is to strip them, often temporarily, of their swimming scholarships and book deals and political clout. (Andrew Cuomo's failed mayoral campaign was premised on the idea that voters could forget that the Department of Justice found he had sexually harassed thirteen women, and had retaliated against some who came forward.) But rape is also a criminal offense, and people, often poor, nonwhite men, can spend decades in jail for it, sometimes wrongly: think of the Central Park Five. The sentencing disparities for certain crimes are shocking; roughly four out of every five people who are convicted of statutory rape are Native American.

On the one hand, it's very hard to argue that crimes like rape are too aggressively investigated, or that victims are too deferentially believed. In Chicago, for example, between 2018 and 2023, police received more than twenty thousand reports of sex crimes, for which only around three hundred people went to jail. On the other hand, anyone horrified by rape should be very worried about putting even a single additional person in prison, where sexual violence, often at the hands of guards, is extremely prevalent. Men and women in state and federal prisons report being coerced or forced into sex at almost the same rates. This is not to say that rape can be separated from the hatred of women, just that, in certain situations, the role of the victim can be violently reassigned. As feminists have long argued, rape may incidentally be about sex. But it is always about power.

If the debates of the past decade have made one thing clear, it is that consent alone cannot save us. We continue to have terrible judgment, flawed communication, a fondness for incapacitating agents, and a violently eroticized contempt for the feminine. And yet where can we turn for regulation? It is very hard to let a

moralizing government into the bedroom without giving up treasured and hard-fought freedoms like birth control or gay or kinky sex. University administrators, it is now impossible to ignore, are mostly lawsuit-avoiding machines. Hashtags are fleeting; the worst people continue to see themselves as the real victims, and to rule the country. Prisons have no moral authority when it comes to rape.

Into this impasse come a slew of recent books: Joseph Fischel’s “Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice,” Katherine Angel’s “Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent,” Manon Garcia’s “The Joy of Consent: A Philosophy of Good Sex.” These books are not primarily critiques of our legal system: they generally agree that consent is, as Fischel puts it, “the least-bad standard available for sexual assault law.” But they worry that a cultural emphasis on consent—and especially “enthusiastic consent”—has divided “sex into the categories *awesome and rape*” (Fischel), ignored the complexity of female desire (Angel), and reinforced the notion of sex as something that women give to men, rather than something that equal people can enjoy together (Garcia).

The latest and most vigorous addition to this genre is “Sex Beyond ‘Yes’: Pleasure and Agency for Everyone” (Norton), by Quill Kukla, a professor of philosophy and disability studies at Georgetown University. Part manual, part manifesto, “Sex Beyond ‘Yes’ ” has plenty of can-do ideas about how we might turn consensual sex into “good sex”—how we might learn not only to accept and reject but also to invite, warn, ask, and order. Kukla, who is nonbinary, and who has both an academic and a personal interest in kink, sometimes writes with a certain condescension toward vanilla heterosexual couples, who having “never been forced to think reflectively about their sexual practices and desires may not have had the chance to develop these skills.” But their book touches on topics that will interest a wide audience: how to ethically have sex with a partner with dementia, for example, or the

liberatory possibility of teaching children how to define physical boundaries using safe words.

Kukla complains that we talk too little about how to have good sex, and too much about how to avoid bad sex. They are sharp on the counterproductiveness of initiatives like Take Back the Night, which, by suggesting that women are at high risk from strangers on the street, can heighten their dependence on partners and acquaintances, who commit more than ninety per cent of rapes. They argue that the mainstream (and sometimes feminist) idea that male bodies are gross and threatening is actually a form of rape culture, because it upholds the idea of sex as something men must extract from women. One could close Kukla's book with the sense that rapists are simply people who have not yet had the chance to develop the "complicated skills" of good sex. This is not as Pollyannaish as it sounds—a D.O.J. report from 2000 found that the most common age of sexual-assault offenders was fourteen. And anyone who wants to advocate for better sex must take as a first principle that boys and men are capable of change.

As sex education goes, "Sex Beyond 'Yes'" is lucid and straightforward; in a better world, it would be taught in high schools. But sex education, as Kukla admits, is not everything: "The best communicators in the world cannot have strong sexual agency in a country with maximally restrictive and punitive sexual norms or laws, or when trapped in a brightly lit room in an institution, such as a prison or hospital, that offers no privacy." Sexual "agency," Kukla's preferred term, differs from sexual consent in much the same way that a walkable neighborhood differs from a gated community. If consent is our right to briefly release other people from their obligation not to touch us, agency is our right to live under conditions where we can freely pursue our desires. Kukla calls such conditions the "scaffolding" of good sex.

A sorority sister, for example, has better scaffolding if she has a place to dance and get drunk and kiss strangers that is not a house

operated entirely by men who have sworn loyalty oaths to each other, and who themselves are no strangers to sexual hazing. A foster child has better scaffolding if he has a bedroom of his own, with a door that locks. Birth control and *PREP* can be scaffolds for better sex, as can financial independence. Kukla mentions “twenty-four-hour public transportation,” which allows people to “be confident that they can leave safely and easily whenever they choose to.” When I read this, I thought of John Rideout’s assault on Sheila Moxley, after he had drunk too much to bike himself home. Had there been a bus stop outside, could Moxley have more confidently turned out Rideout, locked the doors, and slept peacefully through the night?

There is something unsatisfying—almost victim-blaming—about my question. Rideout, after all, did not rape Moxley because he didn’t want to pay for a cab; he raped her because he didn’t see her as a full human being. Kukla, who is surely aware of such cases, nevertheless avoids a gendered analysis of sex in order to focus on the material realities that abet bad sex. Scaffolding, ultimately, is less like reparations and more like universal basic income.

In any case, money’s money, and we can wonder how Greta Hibbard’s life might have gone differently had she been cut a slightly larger sexual-agency check. Pregnant at nineteen, she at first turned down Rideout’s marriage proposal because she thought he was “irresponsible.” After several months of trying to raise the baby alone on welfare, she reconsidered, and accepted Rideout, who had since joined the Army. Even after Hibbard told her parents that Rideout had begun to kick and punch her, her father told her that she had a duty to stay in the marriage, and her mother refused to help pay for a divorce. Hibbard may or may not have been surrounded by monsters. But she was certainly living inside a monstrous architecture. ♦

S. C. Cornell, a Mexico City-based writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2023.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/how-consent-can-and-cannot-help-us-have-better-sex>

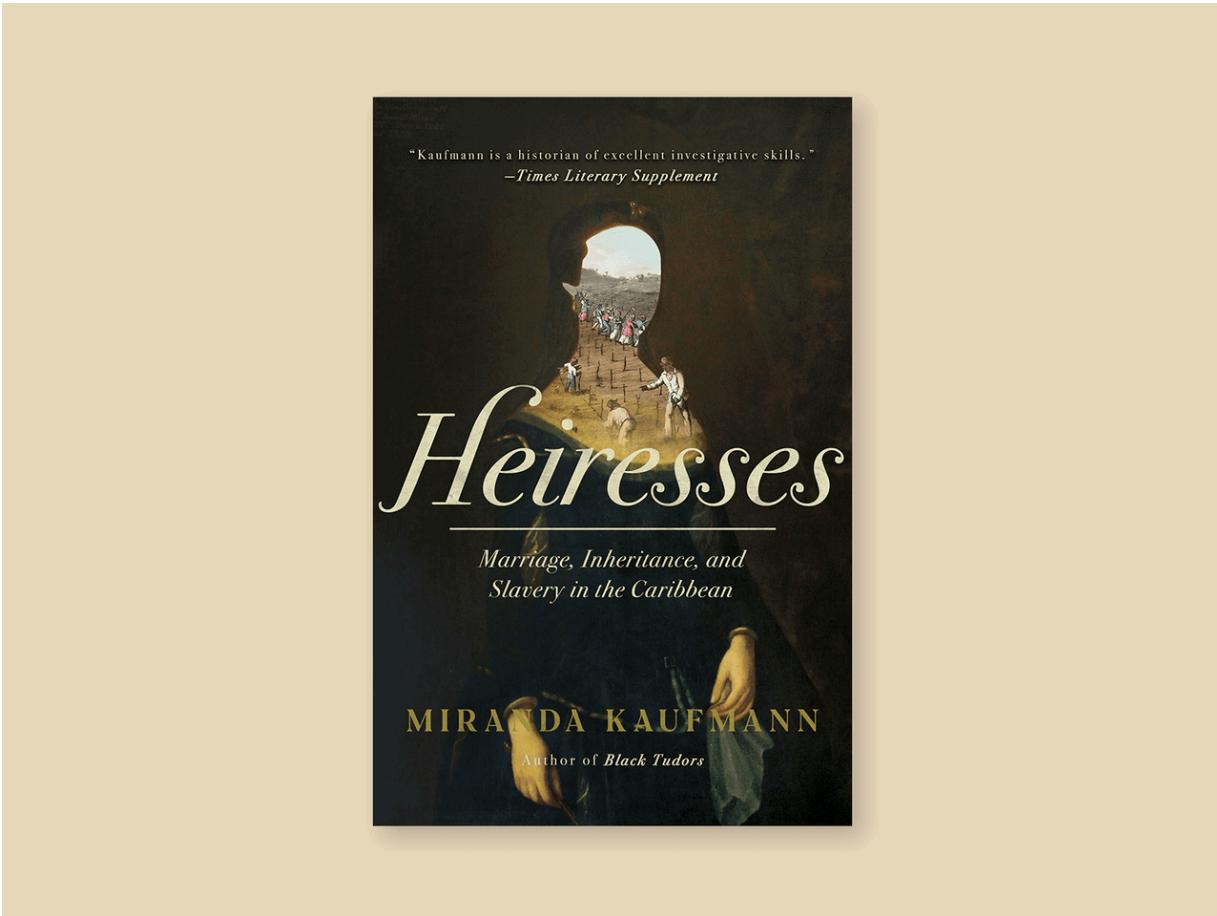
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Briefly Noted

“*Heiresses*,” “*I Deliver Parcels in Beijing*,” “*A Danger to the Minds of Young Girls*,” and “*Estate*.”

January 5, 2026



Heiresses, by *Miranda Kaufmann* (Pegasus). Nine British women—including a Cabinet minister’s wife and Jane Austen’s Barbados-born aunt—who derived their fortunes through Caribbean slavery are the subjects of this rich history. Kaufmann maps the global journeys these women undertook as they sought to solidify their social positions. Some moved to England in order to receive an education or marry into the aristocracy; others journeyed to India, Macau, or Rome. Kaufmann pays close attention to the business acumen that they and their families brought to enterprises like

sugar plantations and the transatlantic slave trade. Such a lens shows that the mobility of these women depended on the labor of those who were unfree.



I Deliver Parcels in Beijing, by *Hu Anyan*, translated from the Chinese by Jack Hargreaves (Astra). This fascinating début memoir recounts its author's career on the lower rungs of China's consumer economy. Hu first worked during high school as a hotel waiter; later, he became a courier, a gas-station attendant, and a security guard, among fifteen other jobs. As Hu piled drudgery upon drudgery, he gathered a rich store of insight into the alienation and petty cruelties of working life. He also began to write. During the *COVID* pandemic, one of his essays, about his time on the night shift at a warehouse, took off online in China. His account reveals an author searching for his true self and finding it, amid unceasing toil, in the act of observation.

What We're Reading

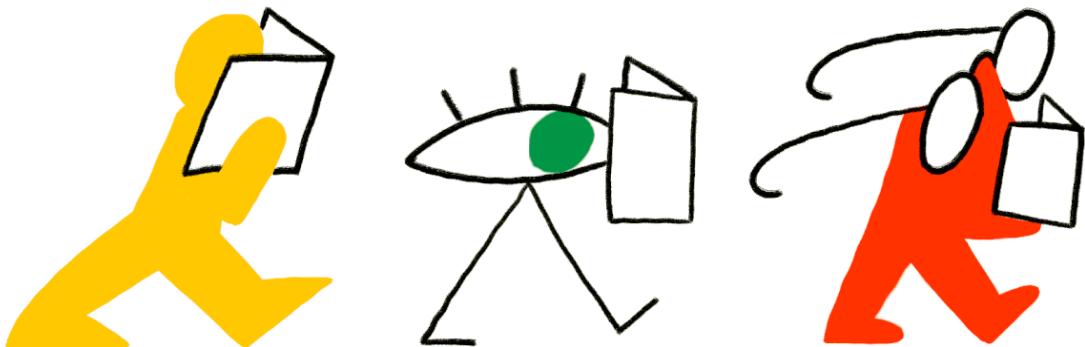
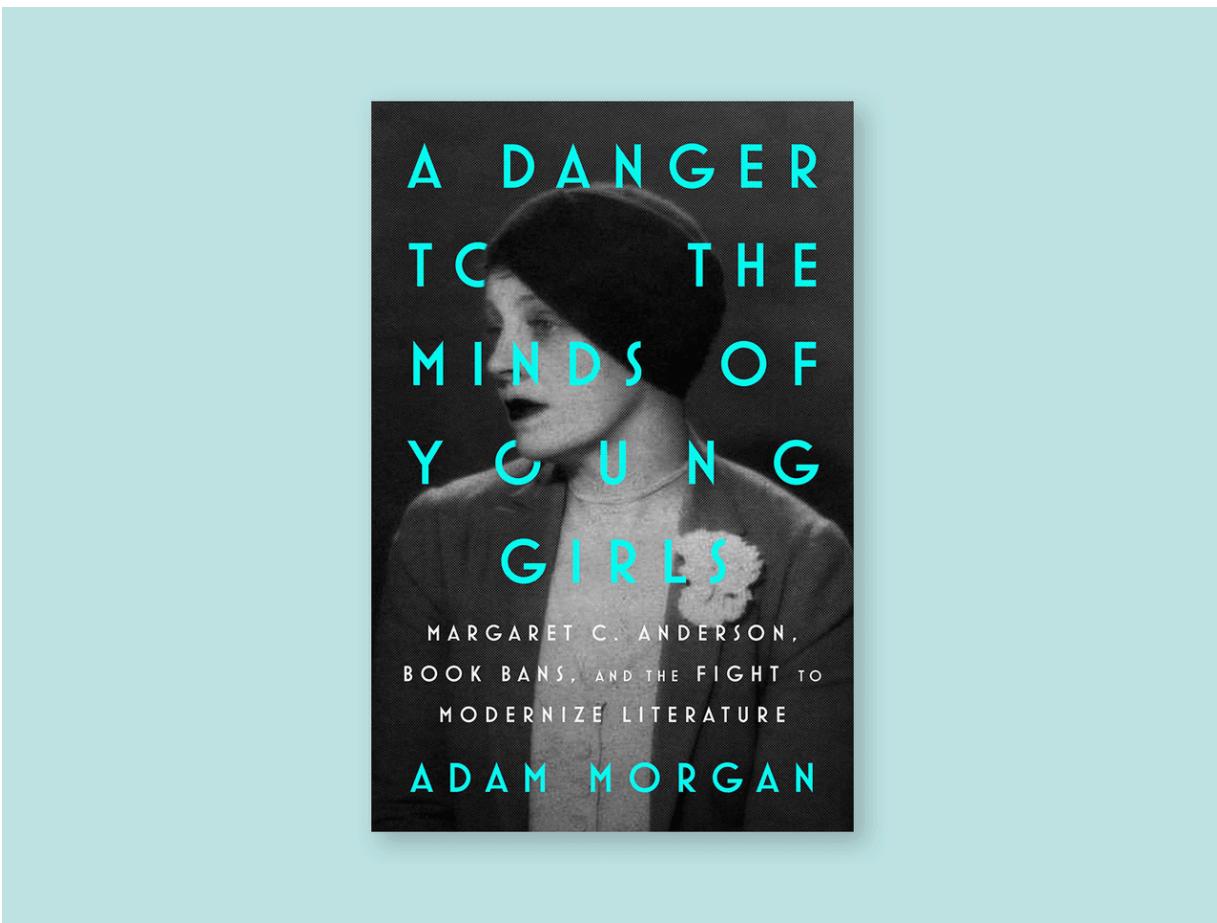


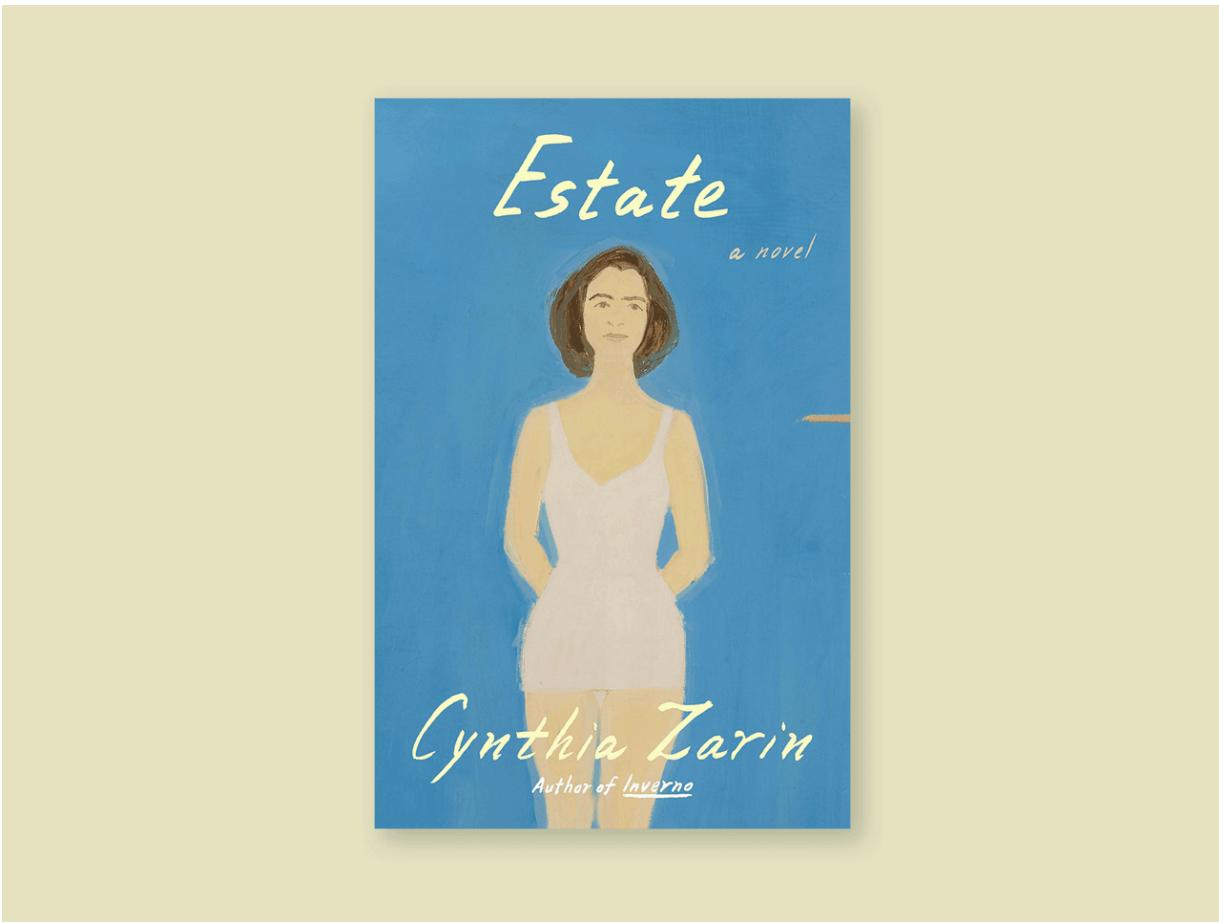
Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



A Danger to the Minds of Young Girls, by Adam Morgan (Atria). At the heart of this lively history is the editor Margaret C. Anderson, a radical lesbian who is perhaps best known for publishing, in a literary magazine she edited, James Joyce's

“Ulysses” in serial form. In 1921, Anderson was prosecuted by the U.S. government—the novel was thought “obscene”—and though Morgan focusses much of his attention on her trial, he also takes in her childhood, in Indianapolis; her years in Chicago, New York, and Paris; and her association with prominent figures of her time, such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and the anarchist Emma Goldman. What becomes clear in his study is that, in the end, Anderson’s will to forge a new path was matched only by her disappointment in where it led.



Estate, by Cynthia Zarin (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The text of this slim, compressed novel is a letter written by Caroline—a New Yorker who will be familiar to readers of Zarin’s 2024 novel “Inverno”—to her paramour, a man who is also seeing two other women. A wry spin on an infatuated lover’s monologue, Caroline’s letter is a skein of free-associative thoughts—about her children, about the husband from whom she’s separated, about whatever springs to mind. It’s all in elliptical, finespun service to Caroline’s

ambition: to understand “how I had become the person who might write such a letter, and behave in such a way, behavior of which I deeply disapproved.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/heiresses-i-deliver-parcels-in-beijing-a-danger-to-the-minds-of-young-girls-and-estate>

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[The Art World](#)

It Takes Only Five Paintings to See Helen Frankenthaler's Genius

In a small show at MOMA, Frankenthaler seems to make paint its own living force, untouched by an artist.

By [Zachary Fine](#)

December 22, 2025



"Mauve District" (1966).

“Helen Frankenthaler: A Grand Sweep,” at the Museum of Modern Art, is a masterpieces-only spritz of an exhibition. It features five paintings by five different artists named Helen Frankenthaler. They were all raised on Park Avenue, educated at Bennington College, and classified as second-generation Abstract Expressionists, but I have trouble seeing them as one and the same. The five pieces offer, in turn, biomorphic hints of de Kooning, the ragged shapes of Clyfford Still, the bold geometries of Ellsworth Kelly, the paint smears of Gerhard Richter, and something that looks like toothpaste squeezed onto an orange peel. The organizing force behind them, if you can spot it, has a wily mind and a preternatural gift for dispatching cliché from the canvas. After 1952, I don’t know if Frankenthaler could have painted a cliché if she tried.

What changed in 1952? On October 26th, in her studio on West Twenty-third Street, Frankenthaler painted “Mountains and Sea.” It was a turning point for her career and for art history both. Instead of treating the “blank” canvas as some heroic arena where a painter goes to battle with predecessors or inner demons, Frankenthaler saw it for what it was: thousands of off-white porous fibres, usually cotton duck or linen, woven together into a deceptively smooth surface. For centuries, painters had primed canvases, building up layers of thick pigment and glaze to create the illusion of luminosity and depth. But Frankenthaler diluted her paints with turpentine, so that they’d stain the raw canvas like blood on a bedsheet. She once described the act of painting as “murder (but great).”

All five paintings in the show are mounted in *MOMA*’s second-floor atrium, and you can either spend an hour with each or swivel around to ingest them in a single visual gulp. (Ideally, both.) The first, “Jacob’s Ladder” (1957), would be more appropriately titled “Sherbet Explosion.” The bottom half is a meld of raspberry, pistachio, lavender, and coconut. Out of this confection pop a few

wispy purple-gray seed heads. The busyness of the composition below and the emptiness above imply a ground and a sky, which explains why critics often said that Frankenthaler's work was, in essence, landscape painting. That might not sound like an insult, but it is.



Frankenthaler in her New York studio, 1957.
Photograph by Burt Glinn / Magnum

For context, go back to 1950. Frankenthaler, twenty-one years old, cold-calls Clement Greenberg and invites him to an exhibition. Greenberg is forty-one and on his way to becoming the most influential art critic in America. He criticizes Frankenthaler's Picasso imitation, "Woman on a Horse" (1950), and telephones her a few weeks later to get a drink. What follows are gallery visits, boozy nights at the San Remo, and introductions to an endless buffet of artists: Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock. The romance between Frankenthaler and Greenberg lasts five years. She credited him with helping to "detect the truth" of painting.

Greenberg wasn't just a critic but a crusader. His ambition was to find and brand a distinctively American art—to steal "the idea of modern art" from Paris, as the art historian Serge Guilbaut memorably put it. In theory, this meant more painting about painting: work that revealed the flatness of the canvas, destroying the illusion of three-dimensional space in favor of a purely "optical" experience. Frankenthaler's "Mountains and Sea," loosely inspired by a trip she took with Greenberg to Nova Scotia, fit the bill. It wasn't a landscape, cleated to nature. The runny paint freed her work from what Greenberg called "tactile associations." You didn't want to reach into its world; you wanted to look.

In a now famous episode, Greenberg brought the painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to Frankenthaler's studio in 1953; they took the thin-paint idea and ran with it. Louis said that Frankenthaler was "the bridge between Pollock and what was possible." (Pollock being Abstract Expressionism, the "possible" being color-field painting.) Greenberg knighted Louis and Nolan as the first truly American painters. In the end, he didn't snip Frankenthaler out of the daisy chain of modern art. But he shrank her contribution down to a minimum.

The *MOMA* show proves a point without making one, which is that Greenberg's hermeneutic of anti-illusionistic flatness only strangles

paintings by Frankenthaler. The second piece, “Commune” (1969), is certainly the flattest, and yet its whole modus operandi is *space*. Picture a gray-green mass floating in the middle of a canvas that’s more than eighty square feet. The soupy explosions of the fifties, like “Jacob’s Ladder,” have been slurped back into a single, intelligible shape. From one perspective, the shape is an island seen from above. From others, it’s a half-finished paint job, a blast hole, or an ocular stain. The choice is yours: you can survey it cartographically, insist on its flatness or depth, or be reduced to your own eyeball. Sometimes Frankenthaler worked on the floor, à la Pollock, but she also got up on ladders and looked at her paintings from above, or tacked them up on the wall mid-process. This helps to explain the perspectival palimpsest of her work. It’s always guided by the viewer’s imagination but encouraged by her own spatial curiosity.

The key development in the sixties was Frankenthaler’s turn from oil paint to acrylic. In “Commune” and “Mauve District” (1966), on the opposite wall, you can see the impact. Watered-down acrylic absorbed by a thirsty canvas will effectively delete brushwork, the paint emanating from the picture plane like its own private dream or vision. The art historian Carol Armstrong called “Mauve District” Frankenthaler’s “most extreme work” from the period, and I can see why. The painting is seventy-five-per-cent purple—or, excuse me, mauve. Except for a lithic crevice that jags through the composition, and a complementary bit of green-and-yellow Mardi Gras coloring, this is a portrait of a temperamental hue. Nowhere is it solid or still; the color continually sloshes and quivers.

I spent most of my time in the show trying not to peek over my shoulder at the centerpiece: “Chairman of the Board” (1971). It’s sixteen feet long, around the length of two adult water buffaloes. It’s also eye-puckeringly orange. As in “Mauve District,” a river of unprimed canvas carves through the composition, but with a few colorful shards—and several long black filaments, drawn with a

felt-tip pen—converging at a bend. Similar works from the period, such as “Sesame” (1970) and “New Paths” (1973), in which broad regions of color squeeze the action into a single channel, have been seen as commentaries on Roe v. Wade, the Vietnam War, and the end of Frankenthaler’s marriage to the painter Robert Motherwell. Even if those referents were knocking around in her head, they don’t seem particularly germane. For Frankenthaler, as for much of the postwar American avant-garde, form, not content, did the talking.

The show ends on a perfectly morbid note with “Toward Dark,” from 1988, which looks like a bout of night sweats. It could be my own bad case of pareidolia, but I see two peach-colored butt cheeks, left of center, glued to a fitted sheet. From the mid-seventies onward, Frankenthaler incorporated more paint-spreading techniques into her work, and here the edges seem managed with a squeegee or a sponge. As for the middle of the canvas, it’s a ditch of black-brown nothingness. Frankenthaler wrote a letter to the artists Anthony Caro and Sheila Girling a few years before, saying that her life was full of “the dark thoughts of those losses we feel more and more.”

The unsung heroes of the exhibition are five round benches installed in *MOMA*’s atrium. On multiple visits, I noticed more open and focussed art-viewing than I’ve seen in a long time. Attribute this to the show’s wonderful compactness, or to tired feet, but the behavior was unusual—people swooping toward a painting, sitting down again, returning a minute later to develop a thought or a feeling. Kandinsky, one of Frankenthaler’s early heroes, described the ability of art to evoke “more subtle, undefined emotions.” That’s especially true of Frankenthaler’s work. Through all of her restless stylistic reinvention, there flows a constant beauty that is intense, taxing, and yet somehow tranquilizing. It’s not a feeling you can order on demand. I recommend it. ♦

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/it-takes-only-five-paintings-to-see-helen-frankenthalers-genius>

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[The Current Cinema](#)

“Young Mothers” Is a Gentle Gift from the Dardenne Brothers

In Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s latest drama, set in and around a Belgian maternity home, several teen-age moms seek to break through cycles of poverty, addiction, and neglect.

By [Justin Chang](#)

January 2, 2026



In their new film, the Dardenne brothers juggle five protagonists—a departure from their usual approach.

Illustration by Leah Goren

These are fractious times for the fraternal duos of filmmaking. The Coen brothers, once inseparable, have parted artistic ways—Joel with a black-and-white Shakespeare adaptation, “The Tragedy of Macbeth” (2021), and Ethan with two colorful bursts of slapstick noir, “Drive-Away Dolls” (2024) and “Honey Don’t!” (2025). The Safdies are also flying solo: this past year brought us Benny’s “The

Smashing Machine,” a lightweight but bruising portrait of a champion wrestler, and Josh’s “Marty Supreme,” a whiplash-inducing tale of a Ping-Pong powerhouse. Fittingly, more than a few observers have been eager to turn art into blood sport, pitting Coen against Coen, Safdie against Safdie, and theorizing about which sibling is the greater talent.

God forbid we should ever wage such a debate over the Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who, on the evidence of their new drama, “Young Mothers,” are neither splitting up nor slowing down. Over roughly three decades, the Dardennes, now in their seventies, have built a filmography of such remarkable artistic, dramatic, and political consistency as to suggest a single cinematic consciousness in two bodies. In their breakthrough work, “La Promesse” (1997), they spun a taut realist thriller about a scrappy Belgian teen-ager, an exploiter of undocumented immigrants whose first stirrings of conscience began with the simplest thing: a promise he made, and refused to break, to a dying man. With that film, the Dardenne brothers effectively extended a vow of their own to the audience, one founded on closely held principles: sharp-edged realism, keen observation, and, crucially, extraordinary speed. A typical Dardenne movie runs about ninety minutes and spans, at most, a few days of narrative time. (The labor-rights drama “Two Days, One Night,” from 2014, is hardly their only film that could have borne that title.) A protagonist’s history matters, the filmmakers know, but life’s most significant confrontations—the ones that reveal who we are and what we’re made of—have a way of assailing us in an instant.

Decades later, the Dardennes’ impact on cinematic realism can scarcely be overstated, and they have, to some extent, been eclipsed by their own much revered influence. Their jagged techniques, absorbed by filmmakers the world over, have softened; they still follow their characters about in handheld long takes, but gone is their habit—deployed most radically in “The Son,” their masterpiece from 2003—of zeroing in on the back of a

protagonist's ear. Even so, they have never come close to breaking faith with those essential principles. At the heart of their work is the question of what we owe one another—what decency spurs us to do, and at what cost. In "The Son," a carpenter weighs the possibility of avenging his child's murder. In "The Kid with a Bike" (2012), a hairdresser is compelled, by forces beyond her understanding, to intervene on behalf of a young boy who has no one else. The realities of poverty, neglect, racism, and violence are harsh constants in the Dardennes' working-class universe, but the filmmakers believe no less intently in the persistence of goodness—a force that is all the more powerful, they insist, for the stubborn unpredictability with which it can take root.

Goodness is not hard to find in "Young Mothers." The film is set in and around a maternity home in Liège where the staff look after their charges, all teen-agers, with tough-minded compassion. Most of the mothers have already given birth, though the first one we meet, Jessica (Babette Verbeek), is in the final days of her pregnancy, which she spends trying to meet with her own biological mother, Morgane (India Hair), who gave her up for adoption years earlier. But Morgane is reluctant, and Jessica's sense of abandonment, a lifelong wound that has now reopened, flashes into an intensely physical neediness: back at the shelter, she weeps and clings to a care worker, practically biting into the woman's shoulder.

Jessica intends to raise her daughter—she's already picked out a name, Alba—partly as a corrective to Morgane's "dumping" of her: "Not even an animal would do what she did," she says. But the shelter workers know better, and so do the Dardennes. Their camera will soon alight on Ariane (Janaina Halloy Fokan), a grave, clear-eyed girl of fifteen who has decided to have her newborn daughter adopted, and knows in her bones that it's the right thing to do. Her mom, Nathalie (an unnervingly steely Christelle Cornil), disagrees, and urges Ariane to leave the shelter and move back in with her so they can raise the child together. Ariane refuses, and a

trip to her mother's apartment clarifies why: Nathalie is an alcoholic, with a vicious temper and a history of dating violent men. There's no future there for Ariane, or for her child.

Perla (Lucie Laruelle) takes a more conditional view of her situation: she wants to keep her infant son, Noé, but mainly to hold on to the father, Robin (Günter Duret), who has just been released from juvenile detention. One look at Robin, who accepts a joint from Perla but barely acknowledges the stroller she's pushing, tells us that family stability is not in the cards. Perla, maddeningly, takes longer to catch on, but her stubborn pursuit of a romantic-domestic fantasy is also proof of the Dardennes' rigor: realization takes its time, if it comes at all. And, even then, it isn't always enough. Another young mother, Julie (Elsa Houben), initially seems the most fortunate of the group, as she and her boyfriend, Dylan (Jef Jacobs), are committed to each other and to their little Mia. Yet both parents are recovering addicts, and not even Julie's awareness of the difficult path ahead can keep her yearning for a fix at bay.

The Dardennes had planned to center the story on just one young mother until they visited a real-life maternity home in Liège and, struck by the range of experiences they encountered, expanded their narrative focus accordingly. (They shot much of "Young Mothers" at the home, with no additional lighting or décor.) The result is something relatively novel for them: a film that juggles four protagonists—five if you count a departing resident, Naïma (Samia Hilmi), though we spend mere minutes in her company, most of them at a farewell lunch where she thanks everyone for helping her get back on her feet. "You showed me," she says, "there's no shame in being a single mother."

I wanted more of Naïma, who comes from a Muslim family, and whose reference to shame—compounded by her description of her relatives' refusal to see her or her baby daughter—has an obvious cultural dimension. But those struggles remain offscreen; Naïma's season at the shelter is coming to an end, and the movie, graceful

yet pragmatic, knows that not every story here can be told. Perhaps that's why the Dardennes don't belabor the dynamics among the mothers themselves, who all get along well enough. We catch stray glimpses of naps, feedings, and meal-prep schedules (a diaper-change disaster might have heightened the realism), and we see the reflexive sternness of the staff—they're here to guide, not coddle—when a mother shirks her responsibilities. The home is a lively hub of activity, but its solidarity and support go only so far. No wonder the film spends so much time outside the shelter, where the women have to figure things out on their own.

Do these four stories, with their subtle yet strategic variations of attitude and circumstance, smack of a troubling tidiness—a desire to cover as much sociological ground as possible with each pass of the narrative baton? “Young Mothers” won the Dardennes a screenplay prize at Cannes last year, which may only corroborate the charge that their naturalism here feels a touch too scripted. With less time to spend on each story, they lean more on exposition, which doesn't play to their (or most anyone's) cinematic strengths. The filmmakers are at their best when they bring us into direct communion with their characters' unspoken thoughts, but, with the exception of Ariane—Halloy Fokan's gaze is a killer—we don't linger with any of them long enough to cultivate that degree of psychological intimacy.

Yet “Young Mothers” holds us all the same: not with the urgency, perhaps, of its predecessors but with an emotional pull as lovely and irresistible as the sudden dawning of a smile on a baby's face. The Dardennes haven't made their usual thriller of conscience; they know that their characters have several possible choices, none of them perfect, but more than one of them conceivably right. If the film's interplay of stories tilts toward the schematic, it also encourages us to look past the straightforward trappings of realism and discern a deeper structure of rhyme and rhythm. One woman kisses her granddaughter for the last time; another meets hers for the first. Ariane asks a pair of adoptive parents to teach her

daughter to play an instrument; Julie and Dylan look on, delighted, as their baby hears a dazzling burst of Mozart. The Dardennes, typically allergic to the manipulations of music, here remind us that life is as cyclical as a rondo, and just as swift. Best to spend it, while we still can, with those we love. ♦

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/young-mothers-movie-review>

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“There is suddenness / to all surfaces.”

- **“Bear”**

“I can’t quite tell, so muddy / is the newsprint, whether he’s looking // toward us or away.”

[Poems](#)

Approaching Sundown

By [Jorie Graham](#)

January 5, 2026

there is suddenness
to all surfaces—
in the fields
forwardness is

ensnared, & all
stops. The lawn
is a god. A door in the trees
opens. Corridors appear everywhere

as light & the light says
you want to live &
nothing
happens. The lowering light

gathers in the waist of
the day, it glows
on bark on chips of
rock & right there in the upcurl

of the dried leaf on that blue
chair & also there
on the live leaf at the branch-tip of
that young oak

which had just moments ago
sashayed in bits of wind & is now

brutal in its
stillness.

A towhee flies off & leaves behind
this.

We do not exhale.

It is possible consciousness dis-

appears from the atmosphere
taking with it the crazed
minutes
running towards the end

only because they were
let loose
once—& you cannot strip away
this skin which holds u

in, you cannot hide
from the rush
which will start up again
as soon as u ex-

hale, but for now
pain awakens to find itself
not pain, whatever is
hatching us is

done & falls
away & we are
dropped
down. The incubation is

suddenly over.

That anything occurred before is
erased. Do not
forget this

when u return

to that world

where the casting about of the soul
which lives in the shadows
begins again,
where the leaves swirl up

into the twisting torso
of the wind
which wants once again to peer
in all the other

directions—

where the cicadas
which had stopped unexpectedly,
as the promiscuity of

glancing had
stopped—as
wanting & knowing
had—begin again—but for now, for the

impossible eternity of this
second,
whatever there is
which is all there is

stands unbroken before us.

This is drawn from “[Killing Spree](#).”

Jorie Graham teaches at Harvard. Her books include the poetry collection “*Killing Spree*” (2026).

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/approaching-sundown-jorie-graham-poem>

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[Poems](#)

Bear

By [Linda Gregerson](#)

January 5, 2026

I can't quite tell, so muddy
is the newsprint, whether he's looking

toward us or away. Woodlands still
in smolder, though

the tree that's been his refuge has some
needles left. How strong

he must be and how suited-to-purpose
the claws that hold him vertical.

A thousand acres an hour at its height,
so ready was the world on its in-

flection point for just this stroke of lightning.
“Toward us,” I’d imagined, which

is two parts guilt and one part self-importance.
His mother must be frantic, he’s

so very young. The kind of cloud a fire
can make can make a kind of

weather which in turn
can spawn new fires which you

might think is allegorical but is simply
true. We like to think that meaning

has a shape and if we find it we
will be consoled. We call that faith.

Someone took the photograph.
Someone offered water to the

cub. Who did not help the story by
accepting it. Who ran away.

Linda Gregerson began contributing to The New Yorker in 2010. Her poetry collections include “Canopy.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/01/12/linda-gregerson-bear-poem>

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A challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, January 5, 2026

A challenging puzzle.

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

January 5, 2026

Loading game...

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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