



THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN JEWS IS ENDING

או, וואס איז גפואארן פונטם באלאדיינעם לאנד?



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**AN ERA OF
ACCEPTANCE &
ACHIEVEMENT
IS IN DANGER**

הזמן בזבוג נטש מפרק אנטישמיות
הזמן אידער זיין מפרק אידער זיין...

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הזמן אידער זיין מפרק אנטישמיות

**JEWS
FLEEING
SCHOOLS**

בג'ון צ'רנוב
ו ריצ'ארד ד'
בלו-ווט-אנטישמיות סטטיסטיק

APRIL 2024

כינון תשע"ד

THEATLANTIC.COM



**ANTI-SEMITISM THREATENS THE
AMERICAN EXPERIMENT ITSELF**

BY FRANKLIN FOER



האנטישמיות הדרדרה בין מפלגותיהם ליהודים נזק קניין ורשות



**HATRED
FROM
THE
RIGHT...
AND
THE LEFT**

שוועץ זע פון אידער זע פון אידער...

**VANDALISM
AND VIOLENCE
ON THE RISE**

מונט דיארוף אידך
אַרטנאלְלִיכָּן אֵת
טִיבְנֶכֶר אִין פּוֹילִים?

The Atlantic

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The Cystic-Fibrosis Breakthrough That Changed Everything

The disease once guaranteed an early death—but a new treatment has given many patients a chance to live decades longer than expected.
What do they do now?

by Sarah Zhang



Before she started taking Trikafta, in 2019, Jenny Livingston hoped more than anything to survive long enough to see her daughter graduate from high school.

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They call it the Purge.

You have experienced, in a modest way, something like it in the waning days of a bad cold, when your lungs finally expel their accumulated gunk. The rattle in your chest quiets. Your sinuses clear. You smell again: the animal sweetness of your children's hair, the metallic breeze stirring a late-summer night. Your body, which oozed and groaned under the yoke of illness, is now a perfectly humming machine. Living is easy—everything is easy. How wonderful it is to breathe, simply breathe.

Imagine, though, that you had never been able to simply breathe. Imagine that mucus—thick, copious, dark—had been accumulating since the moment you were born, thwarting air and trapping microbes to fester inside your lungs. That you spent an hour each day physically pounding the mucus out of your airways, but even then, your lung function would spiral only downward, in what amounted to a long, slow asphyxiation. This was what it once meant to be born with cystic fibrosis.

Then, in the fall of 2019, a new triple combination of drugs began making its way into the hands of people with the genetic disease. Trikafta corrects the misshapen protein that causes cystic fibrosis; this molecular tweak thins mucus in the lungs so it can be coughed up easily. In a matter of hours, patients who took it began to cough—and cough and cough and cough in what they later started calling the Purge. They hacked up at work, at home, in their car, in bed at night. It's not that they were sick; if anything, it was the opposite: They were becoming well. In the days that followed, their lungs were cleansed of a tarlike mucus, and the small tasks of daily life that had been so difficult became unthinkingly easy. They ran up the stairs. They ran after their kids. They ran 10Ks. They [ran marathons](#).

Cystic fibrosis once all but guaranteed an early death. When the disease was first identified, in the 1930s, most babies born with CF died in infancy. The next decades were a grind of incremental medical progress: A child born with CF in the '50s could expect to live until age 5. In the '70s, age 10. In the early 2000s, age 35. With Trikafta came a quantum leap. Today, those who begin taking the drug in early adolescence, a [recent study](#) projected, can expect to survive to age 82.5—an essentially normal life span.

CF was one of the first diseases to be traced to a specific gene, and Trikafta is one of the first drugs designed for a specific, inherited mutation. It is not a cure, and it doesn't work for all patients. But a substantial majority of the 40,000 Americans with CF have now lived through a miracle—a thrilling but disorienting miracle. Where they once prepared for death, they now have to prepare for life. "It's like the opposite of a terminal diagnosis," Jenny Livingston told me.

Jenny spent her 20s in and out of the hospital for CF-related lung infections. During her frequent weeks-long stays, she made some of her best friends in the CF ward, only to watch them succumb, one by one, to the disease that she knew would eventually kill her too. More than anything, she hoped to live long enough to see her daughter graduate from high school.

[From the December 2020 issue: Sarah Zhang on the last children of Down syndrome](#)

Today, Jenny is 36. Four years into taking Trikafta, she's the healthiest she's been in her adult life. Her daughter is 14, a lanky high-school freshman. They're both obsessed with Harry Styles, and after Jenny started on Trikafta, they flew together [to see him live](#)—twice. They learned to hunt deer with Jenny's partner, Randy. They often go up into the aspen- and fir-topped mountains that overlook their little town in central Utah. Jenny's last hospitalization—four years ago, just before she started Trikafta—is now more distant in time than her daughter's future graduation.

Having lived one life defined by cystic fibrosis, Jenny wonders: What is she going to do with her second life?

Jenny was born in 1987, the youngest of her parents' five children together and the third to have cystic fibrosis. Given the family history, the doctors knew to test her as an infant, wrapping her forearm in plastic until a sheen of sweat appeared on her skin: the classic "sweat test" for cystic fibrosis. The faulty protein in CF cannot control the balance of salt and water in the body, which results in mucus that is unusually thick and sweat that is unusually salty. In medieval Europe, centuries before anyone understood why, a [proverb](#) foretold the fate of children with salt on their skin: "Woe to the child who tastes salty from a kiss on the brow, for he is cursed and soon will die."

The 1980s, suffice it to say, were not the Middle Ages. By the time Jenny was born, her two older sisters with cystic fibrosis—Shannan, 8, and Teresa, 7—were on a strict schedule of mucus-clearing chest therapy and medications that had kept them alive past toddlerhood. Shannan wasn't diagnosed until she was 13 months old. "I knew when she was born that there was something wrong," their mother, Lisa, told me. As a newborn, Shannan projectile vomited and blew out her diapers constantly. When she got older, she was often so insatiably hungry that she would cry when a spoon scraped the bottom of a near-empty food jar. She scarfed down five pancakes at a time. In the baby photos in Lisa's scrapbook, she is all skinny legs and big, swollen belly—a classic sign of malnutrition.

Shannan *was* starving, it turned out. Food was passing through her body undigested because her pancreas had been damaged as a result of thick mucus blocking the ducts that release digestive enzymes. Cystic fibrosis was originally named, in fact, for the fibrous cysts that a 1930s pathologist saw in the pancreases of babies who had died. An early epiphany helped doctors overcome the malfunctioning pancreas, though: The missing enzymes could be replaced with pills. By the time of Shannan's diagnosis, CF was known as a disease of the lungs, in which sticky mucus made fertile ground for bacteria, and the cycle of infection and scarring, infection and scarring would eventually cause the lungs to fail.

Lisa relayed the news of Shannan's diagnosis over the phone to her husband, Tom, who was at work. As she repeated the doctor's words, their awful meaning sank in. Their daughter would not live long. They would watch her die. In that moment, the two of them broke down on the phone, the physical distance between them collapsed by grief.

Shannan died when she was 14. "I remember the sound of her oxygen machine more than her voice," Jenny told me. The rumble and puff of the machine had run in the background of their home, punctuated by chronic coughs from all three girls with CF. But neither Teresa nor Jenny was ever as sick as Shannan was in childhood—due perhaps to chance or to being diagnosed and starting treatments earlier in life. Even when they were newborns, their mother coaxed applesauce sprinkled with enzymes into their mouth, so they could absorb nutrients from their milk.

Not long after Shannan died, Lisa and Tom divorced—their marriage had been strained even before the loss of their daughter—and they both eventually remarried. Despite the upheavals in her family, Jenny remembers her childhood as quite normal. Yes, she had to take the enzymes with every meal, and she had to clear her lungs of mucus every day—first by having her parents pound on her chest and back and later by using an oscillating vest that shook her body. As inhaled CF drugs were developed, they were added to her daily regimen. She went to the hospital for annual preventive “tune-ups,” but she was never sick enough to need emergency hospitalizations, and CF did not seem to hold her back.

Lisa thinks of Jenny as her sassy daughter. Her youngest was always stubborn, always a go-getter. Through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, she was able to get a horse, which she entered in local shows and rode through the foothills just outside town. In the summer, the salt from the dried sweat on her arms became crystals that glimmered in the sun, a subtle reminder of the disease still inside her. The invincibility of youth, however, made her think she had perhaps escaped her oldest sister’s fate.

In the hospital, 100 miles from her three-month-old daughter, Jenny had a terrible revelation: “This is why they said ‘Don’t have kids.’”

At 19, Jenny married a local boy she had fallen in love with, and at 21, she was shocked to find herself pregnant: “A very, very happy surprise.” She had always longed to be a mother. As a young girl, she once drew a picture proclaiming that she would grow up to have six children. The drawing “broke my heart,” says her stepmother, Candy. Even if Jenny lived long enough, cystic fibrosis often causes fertility issues—in many women, thickened cervical mucus is thought to prevent pregnancy, and in almost all men, sperm ducts never develop because of blockages that occur in utero. And at the time, doctors often recommended against pregnancy for health reasons.

But Jenny pushed the worries out of her mind. She was simply happy. She set up a crib and painted the nursery. In retrospect, the fevers and shortness of breath she began to feel were not just the normal discomforts of pregnancy, but she didn’t clock it then. She had an uneventful labor, and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. They named her Morgan.

The trouble started in the following months. Six weeks after giving birth, Jenny went back to work. Between nursing and soothing and diapering a newborn, she could no longer keep up her treatment routine. She sometimes also skipped medications when she couldn't afford them with the pay from her job as a bank teller and her husband's as a welder.

Then she caught a bug. It was 2009, the year of swine flu, so it could have been that or a more mundane cold, but either way, it triggered something deep in her lungs. She started feeling short of breath. By the time she got to a CF specialist at a hospital two hours away, in Salt Lake City, she could not walk from the car to the front door. She was too weak to stand for her lung-function test. She collapsed into her hospital bed, and for the next several days, she was unable to use the toilet or shower on her own. Convinced that she would die 100 miles from her three-month-old daughter, she had a terrible revelation: "This is why they said 'Don't have kids.'"

This was Jenny's first CF pulmonary exacerbation, when lung function plummets from an acute infection. Doctors inserted her first PICC line, a catheter that runs from the upper arm to the heart, delivers antibiotics, and stays in place longer than an IV. She recovered, but just months later, she was back in the hospital with another exacerbation. Then another and another, and on this went for the next several years. Jenny counted for me the PICC-line scars still visible as white dots on each arm—at least 10 on the left, 16 on the right. When the veins in her arms started to reject PICC lines, doctors placed a port under her right collarbone for easy access to her central vein.



Left: As a child, during one of her preventive “tune-ups,” Jenny (*center*) passed the time in the hospital doing avocado face masks with her sister Teresa and Kara Hansen, another CF patient. *Right:* Jenny’s daughter, Morgan, visiting her at the hospital in 2011. (Courtesy of Jenny Livingston)

Each infection scarred her lungs; each exacerbation eroded her lung function. The disease that had been a minor plot point in her life became one of its major storylines, and the people in the hospital became recurring characters. At the University of Utah’s CF center, she met Warren, one of her best friends, whom she came to know so well, she could identify his cough through the hospital walls. He was “so dang funny,” Jenny said, unafraid of joking about the death that would befall them both. Where she was a rule follower, he was a troublemaker. Once, he commandeered a hospital floor scrubber, waving at patients in their rooms as he drove past. Another time, he managed to procure a bootleg copy of *The Avengers*. Stuck in the hospital over the film’s opening weekend, he and the other CF patients organized a movie night. James brought his Xbox to play the bootleg DVD. Heather (“the biggest Swiftie”) and Angie (“gorgeous, tall blonde”) joined too. They found a waiting room with a TV, and the nurses passed around microwave popcorn.

Jenny and her friends made sure to sit several feet apart. People with cystic fibrosis have had to [practice](#) social distancing since long before COVID, because they are considered a danger to one another. Their lungs harbor destructive and often antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can become impossible to uproot once established. Certain names are spoken with an air of doom: *Burkholderia cepacia*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. When doctors in the 1990s realized that people with CF were infecting and killing one another by simply gathering, they stopped allowing patients to go within several feet of one another unmasked. Camps for children with cystic fibrosis, which Jenny still [remembers fondly](#), were all shut down. In the hospital, she once again found a community in the disease that was taking over her life. But many of those friendships ended too soon: Of the five people at the *Avengers* movie night, Jenny is the only one alive today. Warren, James, Heather, and Angie have all died.

As Jenny struggled with her health, the new reality of chronic illness took a toll on her marriage. She and her husband eventually divorced. After a

particularly harrowing hospitalization in 2012, her doctors encouraged her to stop working and go on disability. Something in her life had to give, they told her, or it would be her body. Her disease and her daughter became her whole world.

Even as a young child, Morgan could sense when her mom was heading toward another exacerbation. If she noticed that Jenny was more tired than usual or coughing more than usual, she began to dread their coming separation. When she was 3 years old, she asked, “Do all mommies live in the hospital sometimes?” When she was 6, after Warren’s death, she asked, “Can you die from CF?” She understood that their existence together was fragile.

Jenny answered truthfully: Yes. But she assured her daughter that she was taking care of herself as best she could. Still, she made plans for what was probably inevitable. If she died, her daughter would live with her aunt and uncle. If she died, she wanted a funeral just like Warren’s, with music, candy, and an open mic for everyone to share their favorite memories.

A cure for cystic fibrosis had supposedly been imminent since 1989, when Jenny turned 2. That year, scientists identified the recessive gene behind cystic fibrosis, which encodes a protein called CFTR that controls the flow of salt and water. The discovery seemed so explosive that a Reuters reporter rushed to publish the scoop more than two weeks before the scientific papers were due to come out; two press conferences followed.

In the decades after, however, researchers came to understand the wide gulf between identifying a genetic problem and knowing how to solve it. Early attempts in the ’90s at using gene therapy to fix mutations failed again and again, both for CF and for other genetic conditions that once seemed tantalizingly close to a cure.

Then, CF researchers changed tack: Instead of correcting the gene, why not correct the mutated protein itself with small fixer molecules? This had never been done before—with any disease—but the nonprofit Cystic Fibrosis Foundation deemed the strategy promising enough to strike an unusual venture-philanthropy agreement with a company that would attempt it,

which was eventually bought by Vertex Pharmaceuticals. The foundation funded the research in return for a share of the revenue.

The move paid off. In 2012, Vertex released a drug called Kalydeco that worked stunningly well—improving lung function and erasing many symptoms in the small group of CF patients who could take it. That was the catch: The FDA approved Kalydeco only for the roughly 4 percent of people with CF who carried a rare and specific mutation. Still, it provided a jolt of optimism. Kalydeco was the first drug ever tailored to a person’s inherited genetic mutation, and the breakthrough portended a new age of “personalized medicine.” It also inspired other patient-advocacy groups to copy the venture-philanthropy model. In 2014, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation sold the rights to royalties from Kalydeco and future Vertex CF drugs for \$3.3 billion, which it could invest in new research.

After Kalydeco, the next CF mutation to target was obvious. About 1,700 unique mutations have been found in people with CF, but some 90 percent of patients—including Jenny—carry at least one copy of a mutation, known as F508del, that leaves their protein channels too seriously distorted for Kalydeco alone to correct. Fixing this shape would be a much bigger task. In 2013, Jenny joined the clinical trial for a two-drug combination from Vertex, made up of Kalydeco plus a second fixer molecule. It failed to especially improve her symptoms, though it did work enough to stabilize her falling lung function. “It seemed to push pause,” she said. She stopped getting sicker, but she was still sick. The research went on.

A few years later, word began spreading of a forthcoming three-drug combination from Vertex. In clinical trials, neither patients nor doctors are told who is on the placebo and who is on the experimental drug. But in this trial, everyone could tell. The triple combo made patients’ lung function jump by a shocking 10 percentage points. Overnight, they woke up smelling for the first time the distinctive scent of their home. They could even taste their sweat becoming less salty. This was Trikafta.

In the fall of 2019, Trikafta was [approved](#) by the FDA just 10 days before a large annual gathering of CF experts in Nashville. Doctors who attended told me the atmosphere was electric. Jenny happened to be there to speak on an unrelated panel, and she remembers seeing the geneticist Francis Collins

walk onstage with a guitar. Collins is best known as the longtime director of the National Institutes of Health, where he oversaw the sequencing of the human genome in the '90s (he has since retired from the NIH). But he had made his name in 1989 as one of the scientists who discovered the gene for cystic fibrosis.

In those long years when progress was halting, Collins, who is also an amateur musician, wrote a song to inspire a gathering of CF researchers. He sang “Dare to Dream” again that day in Nashville, his baritone raspier with age. When he got to the verse that he had rewritten for this occasion—“That triple treatment has taken 30 years”—cheers broke out in the convention center. In the crowd were people who had waited their whole career, even their whole life, for this moment. *We dare to dream, dare to dream.* As they swayed to the music, perhaps no one quite understood the magnitude and velocity of the change to come.

Jenny received her first box of Trikafta on November 17, 2019, at the end of yet another two-week hospital stay. She had gotten sick again in Nashville. Actually, she had been fighting off a cold before she left, and despite assiduously staying in her hotel room to keep up her treatment routine, she felt an infection settling into her lungs. At the conference, she heard a lot about Trikafta, but she didn’t expect to get it so quickly. CF centers were being inundated with calls from patients asking for the new drug.

In the hospital in Utah, she recorded a video that she sent to her sister with CF, Teresa, who now lived in Ohio. She is sitting on her hospital bed. “My Trikafta is here,” she says, her voice shaking and her eyes tearing up. The miracle drug she had been promised her whole life was now in her hands.

Teresa was also able to start the drug not long after. For her, Trikafta’s impact was immediate and unmistakable. The Purge started on the drive back from the doctor’s visit where she took the first dose. The mucus coming up was so thin that she was confused; it was nothing like the sticky gunk she’d had to work so hard to cough up. A month later, she went back for a sweat test, and her salt level was normal. Based on the results, you would not know she had cystic fibrosis.



Though Trikafta has dramatically improved Jenny's CF symptoms, she still uses a vest and inhaled treatments to prevent lung infections and other complications from the disease. (Fumi Nagasaki for *The Atlantic*)

“I think of it like, ‘Oh, back when I used to have CF,’” Teresa said on a recent call with Jenny and me. “I don’t feel like I have CF. I feel completely normal.” She has been able to stop using her vest and inhaled medications, freeing up that time for her adopted children and the farm where she lives with her family. Before Trikafta, every small exertion was a negotiation with her lungs. Should she go upstairs? How many breaths would that take? Now she’s running around milking the goats, trimming their hooves, throwing 30 bales of hay into the barn.

On that same call, the sisters got to talking about an upcoming trip to see their grandmother, and Teresa asked Jenny a question that would have been inconceivable before Trikafta: Could they stay in the same hotel room? To avoid infecting each other with the bacteria in their lungs, the two had not shared a room since Teresa left Utah 15 years earlier. At family gatherings, they kept their distance. They didn’t even touch the same serving utensils, sending their partners to get their food. Now, Jenny told her sister, “I would totally stay in the same hotel room.”

When Jenny started Trikafta, it took her longer than it took Teresa to notice much change. She didn’t have the dramatic capital-*P* Purge because, she thinks, the hospitalization had already temporarily cleared her lungs. But two months after she started the drug, when a snowstorm blanketed their town, her family drove out to their favorite sledding hill. Jenny had never liked sledding; she would stand in the cold while everyone else ran around having fun, their easy breaths turning into white puffs in the air. This time, her nephew called out and she jogged over.

It wasn’t until she got to him that she realized she had jogged *up*—all the way to the top of the hill. “I don’t run, and I don’t climb hills. And I just ran up a hill and felt super fine,” she says in a video she took right after. “I’m going to see if I can do it again. Ready?”

“Yes,” her daughter, Morgan, answers next to her. They take off. “Mom!” Morgan shouts a few seconds later, as the distance between them grows larger. “You’re beating me, Mom!” At the top of the hill, Jenny looks back to see Morgan still catching up.

Jenny went down the hill and ran back up again, simply to prove that she could. “At one point, I just plopped up here on my bum and cried,” she told me during my visit in October, pointing to the spot on the hill where it had all hit her. In front of us, big gray mountains jutted into the blue sky. The sledding hill, she admitted, did not look that impressive. But for all of Morgan’s life, Jenny had been on the sidelines. She’d watch as Morgan swam in the lake or rode her bike, her low-grade fever making her too tired to join. That day on the hill, they finally ran together.

From there, Jenny began noticing changes in her body, big and small. The tips of her fingers, which had always been slightly swollen and round—a sign of low oxygen—thinned out as her lungs improved. She didn’t need as many enzyme pills to digest her meals. Her chronic cough disappeared. She hadn’t realized how much she had always suppressed her laughter to avoid triggering her cough. Now she can laugh—big belly laughs that match the warmth of her personality. “Oh my gosh, my laugh drives her crazy,” she told me in the car, laughing, after picking up Morgan from school. “That’s because you laugh at stuff that’s not funny,” her daughter shot back. Jenny laughed again.

Trikafta had effects that even doctors did not anticipate. In the months after the drugs became widely available, some patients unexpectedly got pregnant; the drug that thins lung mucus, it turns out, also thins cervical mucus. Then, patients started *trying* to get pregnant. The drug made many people with CF feel so healthy that they no longer worried about the physical toll of pregnancy and parenthood or the agony of leaving behind young children. Doctors began speaking of a Trikafta baby boom.

Doors opened to other once-impossible futures. A 22-year-old told me he decided to train as an aircraft mechanic, a job that would have been far too physically demanding when he was being hospitalized multiple times a year. One woman started dating. “I don’t want to fall in love with somebody, knowing that I’m not going to be around very long,” she had thought. Now she and her boyfriend have been together for four years. A father who was being evaluated for a lung transplant before Trikafta felt healthy enough to spend the summer of 2020 tearing down and rebuilding his family’s deck, and now expects his CF lungs to see him through graduations and grandkids.

Cystic-fibrosis patients who start taking Trikafta as babies may never experience the physical ravages of the disease.

Trikafta is a lifelong medication, and it is not meant to undo organ damage that has already occurred. But the earlier treatment begins, the healthier one stays. A handful of pregnant women have now used Trikafta to treat their unborn children with cystic fibrosis. Last fall, I corresponded with one such expecting mother, who does not have CF but whose son was diagnosed by genetic testing. She started Trikafta at 26 weeks. When her son was born in October, his lungs and pancreas were perfectly healthy.

Officially, Trikafta is approved in the U.S. for patients as young as 2. Unofficially, some parents give their newborns Trikafta, either indirectly through breast milk or directly by grinding up the pills into tiny doses. So long as they stay on the medication, these children may never experience any of the physical ravages of the disease. Recently, Make-A-Wish announced that children with CF would no longer automatically be eligible for the program, because “life-changing advances” had radically improved the outlook for them.

CF centers these days are unusually quiet. Fewer patients need once-routine weeks-long hospitalizations. Instead of thinking about lung function, more and more are worrying about the maladies that come with middle and old age—colon cancer, high cholesterol, heart disease. Obesity has been a confounding new issue. Before Trikafta, patients were usually underweight, and they were told to cram as many calories in as possible, by whatever means possible. Every additional pound was a small victory. One patient described microwaving pints of Ben & Jerry’s to drink mixed with heavy cream; when even that failed to make her gain weight, she got a feeding tube. Now people on Trikafta worry about getting too many calories.

In February, Vertex announced the results of a clinical trial for a next-generation triple-combination therapy, which may be even more effective than Trikafta. All of these changes have made for an existential moment for doctors, too: The disease they were trained to treat is no longer the disease most of their patients have.

Doctors told me they could think of only one other comparable breakthrough in recent memory: the arrival of powerful HIV drugs in the 1990s. Like Trikafta, those drugs were not a cure, but they transformed AIDS from a terminal illness into a manageable chronic one. Young men got up from their deathbed, newly strong and hale. AIDS hospices emptied—and then went bankrupt.

This was a remarkable turn of events. But it elicited a complicated mix of emotions, not all of them joyful. Some patients who were no longer dying grew depressed, anxious, and even suicidal at the thought of living. This phenomenon became known as “Lazarus syndrome.”

Death is an end, after all. Life comes with problems: Patients who spent lavishly during what were supposed to be their last days now had no money to live on. Those who stayed with a lover in sickness found that they could not actually stand them in health. They fretted about insurance and paperwork and chores, everyday annoyances that would no longer be obliterated by imminent death. In 1996, the writer Andrew Sullivan, who is HIV-positive, described life after the advent of the HIV drugs in his essay [“When Plagues End”](#):

When you have spent several years girding yourself for the possibility of death, it is not so easy to gird yourself instead for the possibility of life. What you expect to greet with the euphoria of victory comes instead like the slow withdrawal of an excuse. And you resist it.

The intensity with which you had learned to approach each day turns into a banality, a banality that refuses to understand or even appreciate the experience you have just gone through.

For some HIV patients, their reversal of fortune seemed unreal. “He doesn’t trust what’s happening to him,” one doctor said about a patient who had made a dramatic recovery, yet found himself in psychological distress.

Doubts like these crept into the minds of many people on Trikafta, too. What if the new drug stopped working? Or had horrible side effects? Or stopped being covered by insurance? Trikafta’s [sticker price](#) is more than \$300,000 a year. Insurance typically covers most of that cost—minus what can be

significant co-pays and deductibles—and Vertex offers co-pay assistance. But patients' lives ultimately depend on decisions made by nameless bureaucrats in rooms far away: Insurance plans can suddenly change what they cover, and in 2022, Vertex announced that it would substantially reduce its financial assistance.

A 43-year-old woman I interviewed asked not to be named, because she feared that speaking about her improved health would cause her to lose disability benefits, which would also get her kicked off the government insurance that pays for Trikafta. Her health has not improved as dramatically as others' has, and she still has frequent infections and occasional bleeding in her lungs. If she returns to work but her health declines, it could take a long time to get back on disability—time she would have to go without Trikafta. She would also need a job with health insurance good enough to cover the expensive drug—but could she even get one as a 40-something with no recent employment history?

For other patients, new health granted new independence, which could be scary too. As a child, Patrick Allen Brown was sick enough to miss long stretches of school. His parents didn't expect him to do chores, let alone support himself with a job one day. So much of his life was spent in the hospital that movies became his way of understanding the outside world. In his teens and 20s, he drank heavily.

After Trikafta restored Brown's physical health, he was no longer a chronically ill adult who lived with his parents. He was a pretty healthy adult who still lived with his parents. He was 32, and hadn't finished college. Now he had to budget, commit to a career. He decided to get sober. When one of his parents needed back surgery recently, their roles flipped: He became the caretaker. Brown has now graduated from culinary school and found work as a chef, but he feels as if he is still catching up to his peers.



Two months after Jenny began taking Trikafta, she found that she was able to run up a local sledding hill for the first time. Jenny and Morgan often go up into the aspen- and fir-topped mountains that overlook their town in central Utah. (Fumi Nagasaka for *The Atlantic*)

The great blossoming of possibilities on Trikafta also dredged up regret about decisions too late to undo. Kara Hansen, 41, has a daughter who was adopted, and she had always wanted another child. But in 2016, she had to be repeatedly hospitalized: in April, then again in May, July, and August. She gave up on having a second child—how could she, if she couldn’t even guarantee living for the daughter she already had? Then, in 2018, she joined the original trial for Trikafta, becoming one of the first people in the world to experience its miraculous effects. If she had known her health would improve so dramatically and hold steady six years on, she would have tried to get pregnant, but she feels like it’s too late now. To plan for such a miracle would have been foolish, but to live in its unexpected aftermath can still be painful.

After a year on Trikafta, Jenny told Teresa something that she acknowledged sounded “insane” but that her sister understood immediately: “To no longer be actively dying kind of sucks,” she said. The certainty of dying young, she realized, had been a security blanket. She’d never worried about retirement, menopause, or the loneliness of outliving a parent or a partner.

Cystic fibrosis had defined her adult life. Now what? For so long, she’d just been trying to see her daughter graduate from high school. Now she faced seeing Morgan go off and live her own life. What then? Jenny had become

active in patient advocacy, and soon after the start of the pandemic, she volunteered to moderate an online patient forum on mental health for her CF center in Utah. It went so well that her longtime social worker at the center felt compelled to give some career advice: Try social work.

[From the October 2022 issue: Sarah Zhang on why so many kids need glasses now](#)

Jenny enrolled in an online master's program in 2022, and this past fall she chose a practicum with a hospice agency. Having watched the death of so many friends and contemplated her own, she felt prepared to shepherd people through the sadness and awkwardness and even humor that accompany the end of life. She understood, too, the small dignities that mean the world when your body is no longer up to the task of living. One hospice patient, she noticed, often had trouble understanding conversations because his hearing aids were never charged correctly. She got the situation fixed, and on a recent visit, he wanted to listen to music, playing for her the favorite songs of his youth. On another man's shelf, she recognized a birding book, and she made plans for a window feeder to bring birds to him.

Jenny doesn't share the details of her life with patients, but in their experiences with death, she has seen her own refracted. One hospice patient, a devout elderly woman, was estranged from her adult son, who no longer believed. Jenny herself grew up religious—Mormon, in her case—but she is not anymore. Her family is still Mormon, as is virtually everyone in the town she has lived in since childhood, which has 3,500 people, several Mormon churches, and a Mormon temple. She is liberal, whereas most of her relatives voted for Donald Trump.

Still, Jenny has made a point of staying close to her large, tight-knit family. Knowing she would die young had long ago clarified that she wanted to leave with no regrets, no grudges, and no words left unsaid to the people she loved. In the foothills outside town one day, she pointed in the direction of her house, her brother's house, her mom's house, her dad and stepmom's house, all minutes away from one another.

Although Trikafta looks to be a very safe drug for most people, it does have side effects. It can cause cataracts as well as liver injury. More perplexing,

Trikafta may affect the brain.

For Jenny, starting Trikafta coincided with a wave of intense insomnia, brain fog, and anxiety. For months, she could sleep only two or three hours a night. She'd lose her phone and find it in the freezer. Her lungs were so much healthier, but her brain was going haywire. Soon, she realized that other CF patients had begun sharing stories online of depression, anger, or suicidal thoughts that emerged at the same time they started taking Trikafta.

Doctors sometimes chalked up these symptoms to the existential unease of no longer dying, or the fear and isolation everyone felt in the early days of the pandemic. But Jenny's doctor took the side effects she reported seriously enough to suggest that she halve her Trikafta dose, and soon after, they subsided. (Some of her CF symptoms did return, but they were muted enough that she could pare down her regimen of treatments.)

The link between Trikafta and these symptoms in the brain is still not fully proven or understood. "We've done an in-depth analysis of the preclinical data, clinical data, and real-world-evidence data, and we don't find any causal relationship," Fred Van Goor, a vice president and the head of CF research at Vertex, told me in January. And an [analysis](#) co-authored by the company's scientists last year found similar rates of depression and suicidality in CF patients with or without Trikafta. But in November, a group of scientists published a [review](#) arguing that the possible neuropsychiatric effects of Trikafta deserved a "serious research effort." The protein behind CF is found in cells throughout the body, including the brain. Trikafta could be acting on the brain directly, the authors hypothesized, or it could be acting indirectly via changes to inflammation throughout the body or specifically in the gut. The drug may affect different subsets of patients differently, says Anna Georgopoulos, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital who co-authored the review. She believes that neuropsychiatric side effects afflict only a "small minority" of people on Trikafta, but says that studies are needed to know exactly how many.

In the meantime, some patients have quit Trikafta altogether, their neuropsychiatric symptoms too debilitating even on a lower dose. "Physically I was feeling the best I've ever felt," says Aimee Lecointre of her time on the drug, but mentally, "I felt on the verge of a panic attack

almost every day.” The contradiction confused her: How could she be so anxious and depressed when her health was getting so much better? When she finally decided to try stopping Trikafta, the nervous energy that had filled her body all day long dissipated. But her CF symptoms came back. During our phone conversation, she paused every few minutes to cough.

She and Jenny have known each other for years, going back to their mutual hospitalizations. The three of us were supposed to meet over apple-cider floats when I was in Utah, but Lecointre had health issues come up at the last minute, the kind of disruption that happens all the time for people with a chronic illness. For a while, her Instagram feed filled with people on Trikafta whose lives were transforming while hers stayed the same; she had to delete social media from her phone. She still feels sad, sometimes, that Trikafta didn’t work out for her. But she was able to go back to one of Vertex’s two-drug combos, and although it is less effective than Trikafta, she feels so much better. There is more to cope with, but the coping is easier.

For another group of CF patients, Trikafta simply does not work. About 10 percent [lack](#) the F508del mutation that the triple combination was specifically designed to fix. Over time, though, scientists have found that some less common mutations are similar enough to F508del that those who carry them still benefit from Trikafta. And in late 2020, word got out that the FDA would soon approve the drug for additional mutations.

Gina Ruiz remembers waiting and waiting for the list of new mutations that fall. She had spent the past year watching her peers on Trikafta be handed what she thought of as a “reverse Uno card”—reverse weight loss, reverse lung decline, reverse CF—while her own health continued to worsen. She was sitting in a car when she saw the list, and she scrolled through the [177 new mutations](#) hoping to find hers. She was crushed when she did not. Ruiz and most people in the 10 percent have mutations that leave their CFTR protein too garbled or incomplete to correct with any combination of fixer molecules. Treating these mutations will require a different strategy altogether.

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation continues to fund research into a cure for all, and scientists, including those at Vertex, are once again exploring genetic therapies, applying the lessons of past failures. But a genetic-therapy

breakthrough specific to CF is still years, if not decades, away. After Vertex created that first drug for the 4 percent, the path toward Trikafta was clear. After Trikafta, terra incognita.

Ruiz is wary of getting her hopes up again. At age 29, she can no longer work. She lives with her parents. Her lung function has fallen to 30 percent. And in December, her weight reached a new low of 89 pounds. “I went to Target last night and I was beyond exhausted,” she told me the following month. Her knees hurt too, another complication of CF. As she’s watched her peers on Trikafta get married and chase after toddlers, her own world has shrunk. Halfway through the store, she got so tired that she had to rest in a chair in the home-goods section before she could go on.

Other patients with rare mutations told me the CF communities they once relied on for support have become quiet, as the 90 percent have gotten on with their lives. “It’s extremely isolating,” says Steph Hansen, who was steeling herself for another hospitalization when we spoke in January. She describes it as a one-two punch: Her health is no better, yet she has lost the community that once buoyed her. She’s connected with a handful of other patients who can’t take Trikafta, but CF is already a rare disease, and they are the rarest of the rare.



Jenny has made a point of staying close to her large, tight-knit family; knowing she would die young clarified that she wanted to leave without any grudges. (Fumi Nagasaka for *The Atlantic*)

The F508del mutation is [most common](#) in people of European ancestry, so people with mutations ineligible for Trikafta in the U.S. are [disproportionately](#) Black or Latino. Globally, the proportion of people ineligible is higher in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where diagnosis and treatment for CF also [lag](#). In most developing countries, even eligible patients cannot get Trikafta—because Vertex currently does not sell its expensive drug outside a few dozen countries, concentrated in Europe and the English-speaking world. (Vertex says it has a pilot program that “provides Trikafta at no cost to people with CF in certain lower income countries.”) Its patents also block other companies from making a cheaper generic version. In early 2023, activists asked four countries to revoke or suspend patents for Trikafta in a coordinated campaign. One of the countries was India, where *The New York Times* [wrote](#) about a father named Seshagiri

Buddana. His son would have been able to take Trikafta if he lived in the U.S., but he died in December 2022 one day before he would have turned 9.

All of this weighs on Jenny. What makes her different from those who have died, other than the luck of being born at the right time, in the right place, with the right mutations?

Two days after my visit to Utah, Jenny's father, Tom, had a heart attack while chopping firewood. He felt short of breath, and a trip to the hospital revealed that his major arteries were 90 percent blocked.

When Jenny texted me the news, she said she had been replaying our recent conversations about life and death. She was glad to feel, upon learning her father might die, that nothing between the two of them was left unsaid or unresolved. I thought of what Tom had told me in his living room. Before we had gone over to his house that day, Jenny had warned me that her dad was a jokester, not a man prone to earnest reflection. But when the conversation shifted to the impact of Trikafta, he turned to me, completely serious. "I was going to bury my kids. And I'm not. They get to bury me, which is the way it's supposed to be."

We all fell silent for a moment, as we felt the weight he had been carrying all those years. After burying his eldest daughter at 14, Tom could no longer watch movies in which children die. In Jenny's years of sickness, he had often driven her two hours to the hospital in Salt Lake City, but he rarely set foot inside. Hospitals are places where people go to be born or to die, he'd say, and all my children have already been born.

After his heart attack, Tom needed an emergency quintuple-bypass surgery. He did well, and came home to recover. He spent the time rethinking his priorities. Just before falling ill, he had skipped a family outing to an amusement park to work. Now he regretted it. He's become more open about his emotions; still a jokester, he's taken to saying that his heart has been opened in more ways than one since the surgery.

It's interesting, Jenny says. Her father has lived a longer and very different life from her own, but she recognizes what he is going through. People die from this, he started saying. *I could have died from this. He got close*

enough to see death's shadow, only to be pulled back to a life whose familiarity suddenly felt unfamiliar. What would he do with his unexpected life? "Hey," Jenny told her dad. "I get it."

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The ‘Secret’ Gospel and a Scandalous New Episode in the Life of Jesus

A Columbia historian said he'd discovered a sacred text with clues to Jesus's sexuality. Was it real?

by Ariel Sabar



In the summer of 1958, Morton Smith, a newly hired Columbia University historian, traveled to an ancient monastery outside Jerusalem. In its library, he found what he said was a lost gospel. His announcement made international headlines. Scholars of the Bible would spend years debating

the discovery's significance for the history of Christianity. But in 1975, one of Smith's colleagues went public with an extraordinary suggestion: The gospel was a fake. Its forger, the colleague believed, was Smith himself.

The manuscript, in handwritten Greek, ran two and a half pages, but one passage drew outsize attention. It depicted Jesus spending the night with a young man he'd raised from the dead. "The youth, looking upon [Jesus], loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him," it read. "And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God."

To devout Christians, the homoerotic subtext was obvious blasphemy. But Smith argued the opposite: His discovery, he believed, was part of an unknown, longer version of the Gospel of Mark, containing lost stories from about 50 C.E., making them the oldest known account of Jesus's life—and, in Smith's view, the truest.

Smith theorized that "Secret Mark," as the text came to be called, portrayed a private baptism that Jesus reserved for his closest disciples: One by one and at night, he contended, Jesus hypnotized male followers into believing they'd risen to heaven and been freed from the laws of Moses. Smith argued that Jesus and his initiates may have concluded this liberation with a sexual act—a "completion of the spiritual union by physical union."

Smith knew that orthodox believers would wholly reject his claims. To suggest that the central figure of Christianity—by tradition celibate—used gay sex as a path to God was an outrage. His academic colleagues were only slightly less aghast, but they couldn't fully dismiss him. By the time Smith published his find—in a [454-page volume from Harvard University Press](#), with deeply erudite footnotes and appendixes, and in a popular book called [*The Secret Gospel*](#)—he'd been tenured by Columbia and Secret Mark had made [the front page of *The New York Times*](#). Several major scholars had accepted the text as genuine.

None, however, bought Smith's intimations of a gay Jesus, and almost none thought the text originated in the first century. They called his exegesis

“science fiction,” “awash in speculation,” and “simply absurd.”

But a theologian named Quentin Quesnell went further: He believed that Smith had fabricated Secret Mark, as a “game,” to expose his field’s enormous blind spots. So little is known about the historical Jesus that one could paint “bizarre and scandalous” portraits of him, Quesnell wrote, without contradicting any of the established facts.

Peter Jeffery, a Princeton professor emeritus and MacArthur-genius-grant recipient, [called Smith’s alleged forgery](#) of Secret Mark “the most grandiose and reticulated ‘Fuck You’ ever perpetrated in the long and vituperative history of scholarship.”

Still, the debate over whether the manuscript is a fake—and Smith its forger—remains unsettled, and one of the bitterest in biblical studies. Over the past 50 years, it has inspired at least two conferences, seven scholarly books, and [dozens of academic articles](#). Experts have scrutinized the manuscript’s language and the [handwriting](#). They’ve compared it with authentic variants of Mark. They’ve puzzled over why no one before Smith—not even the early bishops who made exhaustive lists of heretical texts—had ever mentioned Secret Mark.

[From the July/August 2016 issue: Ariel Sabar on the unbelievable tale of Jesus’s wife](#)

One subject, however, has gone almost completely unexamined: Smith’s life outside the university. In the summer of 1991, several weeks after turning 76, Smith got a call from his friend Lee Avdoyan, an academic librarian whose Ph.D. Smith had supervised. Avdoyan was planning a trip to New York. He’d just finished writing a book and was eager for Smith’s feedback on some new research ideas. He also wanted Smith to meet his partner, Jim.

But Smith, whose health was declining, said he wasn’t up for a visit. He urged Avdoyan to forget research and to go into the world, have fun, live his life with Jim. “I have so many regrets,” Smith said.

Avdoyan, who’d come out years earlier, had long suspected that Smith was gay too. Had Smith realized only now how much of life he’d missed? He

didn't say, and Avdoyan didn't press.

A week later, on July 11, 1991, two Columbia colleagues entered Smith's Upper West Side apartment and found him dead. Beside Smith's body were a bottle of vodka and a glass flecked with the powdery residue of what appeared to be pills. A plastic bag covered his head, its opening cinched around his neck; the New York City medical examiner's office told me it ruled Smith's death a suicide by asphyxiation. Smith's will ordered his personal papers destroyed—"at once without being read."

Outwardly, Morton Smith had been a proper, almost Victorian gentleman. Trim and prematurely bald, he spoke with a patrician accent, had a stiff gait, and wore three-piece suits, a Phi Beta Kappa key glinting from his vest pocket. His politics were similarly conservative. Yet when it came to religion, Smith was, in a colleague's description, like "a little boy whose goal in life is to write curse words all over the altar in church, and then get caught."

Smith had denied the forgery allegations but had relished—and stoked—the controversy. A provocateur who saw himself as an intellectual giant in a field of pious fools, he had for years sought opportunities to humiliate colleagues who promoted faith under the cover of scholarship. His caustic takedowns of their work, in prestigious journals and in face-to-face bullying at conferences, made him especially intimidating. He was "the kind of critic," the [Princeton professor Anthony Grafton once noted](#), "who makes grown scholars tear off their own heads for fear of reading his reviews."



Smith claimed to have found a copy of a letter from Clement of Alexandria that quotes a “secret” version of the Gospel of Mark. The manuscript was handwritten in Greek. (Jewish Theological Seminary Archive Library)

Smith cast the forgery claims as one more symptom of his field’s parochialism. “One should not suppose a text spurious,” he wrote, “simply because one dislikes what it says.” But Smith’s zealotry for his own reading of Secret Mark made colleagues wonder whether *his* stakes might also be more than academic.

Smith struck most people as a wry atheist. But before becoming a professor, at age 35, he had spent four years as a parish priest. Before turning the full force of his intellect against the dupes who believed in God, that is, Smith had, in a sense, been one of them.

Scholars who knew him well suspect that whatever triggered his break with the Church was the key to understanding his life and work, even if—perhaps especially if—Smith never spoke of it. The historian Albert Baumgarten, who was one of Smith’s first doctoral students at Columbia, believes that “something took place in Smith’s life that shook his certainty.”

Smith’s literary executor, the Harvard religion scholar Shaye Cohen, told me that he’d never ruled out the possibility of a “secret Morton,” a part of his past he’d hidden from even his closest colleagues.

Was there a secret Morton? I began my search with a visit to a pair of Texas scholars who had a new theory about Secret Mark. Not because their theory was fully convincing—it wasn’t—but because their analysis of the text pointed to why Secret Mark might be something other than early Christian scripture.

Brent Landau was teaching a religion seminar at the University of Texas at Austin in 2019 when he invited his colleague Geoffrey Smith to the class’s discussion of Secret Mark. The conversation inspired them to reexamine the evidence, a project that culminated in [their 2023 book, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*.](#)

Both men felt that the debate over the manuscript’s authenticity had become unmoored, an emotional proxy for broader fights among historians of Christianity. On one side were conservatives who saw the Church-authorized collection of Christian books—the New Testament—as divinely inspired. On the other were generally liberal scholars, who gave equal—or greater—historical weight to early Christian texts outside the New Testament canon.

As if to sell Secret Mark to their conservative colleagues—and help prove it authentic—liberals tended to deny the text’s sensuality. Its homoeroticism, many claimed, was nothing more than Morton Smith’s misreading. But to Landau and Geoffrey Smith, there was no escaping it: The text depicts Jesus spending the night with a desperate, lovestruck young man.

The circumstances of the discovery were admittedly complicated. What Morton Smith claimed to find at the monastery wasn’t some first edition of Secret Mark on papyrus. It was a copy of [a letter](#) that quotes Secret Mark. The letter’s author appeared to be the second-century Church father [Clement of Alexandria](#). It had been transcribed, in an 18th-century Greek hand, onto the end pages of a printed 17th-century book. Smith had discovered those end pages, he said, while cataloging books in the monastery’s library.

[From the June 2020 issue: Ariel Sabar on an Oxford professor, a Hobby Lobby collector, and a missing Gospel of Mark](#)

Addressed to an unknown man named Theodore, the letter calls out Secret Mark’s sexual innuendo. Some early Christians may have seen the gospel as

portraying “naked man with naked man,” Clement writes, but Clement condemns such views as false and “utterly shameless.”

Morton Smith gave them more credit. In a baffling passage in the Christian Bible’s Gospel of Mark, he noted, a nameless young man drops his linen garment and “flees naked” when Jesus is arrested at night in Gethsemane. If you spliced Secret Mark into canonical Mark, Morton Smith thought, you had an explanation: Jesus and his young follower had been caught in the act.

Byzantine scholars had begun finding evidence, from as early as the fourth century, of same-sex couples: monks who shared a cell, traveled as a pair, and supported each other’s lifelong quest for spiritual perfection.

Brent Landau and Geoffrey Smith, the Texas scholars, immersed themselves in early Christian literature—looking at word choices, storylines, theological debates—to see where Secret Mark might fit. They concluded that it didn’t. It appeared, Landau told me, “as if somebody had gone through the Gospels and found all these instances where Jesus seemed to be in some sort of intimate or erotic relationship,” then “meshed them all together.”

A possibly larger problem was that the letter of “Clement” appeared to crib distinctive language from a Church history composed a century *after* Clement’s death. “Anyone who has ever caught a clever student cheating on an essay or during an exam will find the pattern familiar,” Smith and Landau write.

But who was this clever student? The answer, they suspected, might lie in the Greek Orthodox monastery where Smith claimed to find the manuscript, the only place ever known to possess it.

Mar Saba clings to a cliff in a desolate valley between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It was founded in 483 C.E. by a man named Sabas, who as a boy had fled an unhappy family in Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey.

According to a sixth-century biography, the young Sabas “begged with tears” to join a small community of monks in Palestine, but an abbot sent him away. Monastic leaders worried that boys’ “feminine” faces would lead older monks astray. Sabas evidently came to agree. When he opened Mar

Saba a few years later, he forbade admission to any adolescent “who had not yet covered his chin with a beard, because of the snares of the evil one.”

But communities of holy men faced other earthly temptations. Byzantine scholars, Landau discovered, had begun finding evidence, from as early as the fourth century, of same-sex couples: monks who shared a cell, traveled as a pair, and supported each other’s lifelong quest for spiritual perfection.

Hagiographies depict these relationships as a form of chaste, virtuous romance. When an Egyptian abbot praised the partnership of the fourth-century monks Cassian and Germanus, Cassian reports in one work, it “incited in us an even more ardent desire to preserve the perpetual love of our union.” Faced with separation, the sixth-century monks Symeon the Fool and John “kissed each other’s breast and drenched them with their tears,” according to a medieval text. Even Sabas’s own mentors, Euthymius and Theoctistus, an ancient biographer writes, were “so united … in spiritual affection that the two became indistinguishable.”

Whether these unions had a physical dimension is hard to know. But scholars suspect that at least some did, in part because of human nature, and in part because abbots took pains to separate and punish monks who they feared might cross a line. Horsiesios, a fourth-century head of Egypt’s Pachomian monasteries, warned the men in his charge against “evil friendship.” “You anxiously glance this way and that … then you give him what is (hidden) under the hem of your garment,” he wrote, in his “Instructions” to monks. “God himself, and his Christ Jesus, will pour out the wrath of his anger on you and on him.”



Mar Saba, the Greek Orthodox monastery where Smith said he found Secret Mark (Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University)

Horsiesios, like Sabas and other abbots, seemed to be drawing a boundary between holy and unholy unions among men of faith. And that got Landau and Smith thinking: Wasn't whoever wrote the Clement letter doing the same thing, by urging readers not to mistake Jesus's night with the young man for anything so "blasphemous and carnal" as "naked man with naked man"?

According to Sabas's ancient biographer, 60 of his own monks once revolted against him, filled with such "fierce rage" that they used axes and shovels to destroy the tower he lived in. Their grievances are left vague; the monks had grown "bold in wickedness" and "shamelessness, not bearing to walk in the humble path of Christ but alleging excuses for their sins and inventing reasons to justify their passions."

Was same-sex love—or lust—one of those sins? Ancient sources don’t say. But Landau and Smith theorize that the Clement letter was written by a Mar Saba monk during some “in-house” debate over the propriety of such unions.

If Sabas or his successors had enforced too hard a line on same-sex unions, might some monks have pushed back? Might one of them have faked a letter from two unimpeachable authorities—Clement and God—that presented Jesus himself as the model for intimate but still-sacred unions between men?

The text, Landau and Smith suspect, was composed between the fifth century, when the monastery opened, and the eighth century, when the Greek Orthodox Church adopted prayers for *adelphopoiesis*, or “[brother making](#),” which blessed committed friendships between men. These new blessings, they argue, gave a kind of license to monastic couples, ending the need for subterfuge or protest.

After meeting Landau and Smith, I called Derek Krueger, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and an expert on sexuality in Byzantine monasticism. “It’s plausible,” he said, with some hesitation, when I asked about Smith and Landau’s theory. In monasteries, which isolate men from the world, the line between spiritual and erotic love could certainly blur: As Krueger put [it in a 2011 article](#), “One monk’s *agape* might be another monk’s *eros*.” Still, no ancient stories defending the virtue of monk couples—none he knew of, anyway—took the guise of a lost gospel.

The Texas scholars grant the roughness of their theory. They have no evidence of any such debate at Mar Saba, and no explanation for why a monk there would have felt compelled to copy such a letter in the 18th century. Nor can they rule out the text being a better fit for later eras, in which they have less expertise.

Smith traveled to the monastery by donkey in 1942 and lived with its monks for a month.

The one person their book seems determined to exonerate is Morton Smith. Their case for ending all discussion of him as a possible forger—a case that leans heavily on ad hominem attacks against his critics and on reflexively

charitable interpretations of his motives—is their least convincing. Their eagerness to clear Smith also conflicts with what they acknowledge is a giant evidentiary hole: No one, to public knowledge, has ever scientifically tested the physical manuscript. (The manuscript is thought to remain in the archives of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, a notoriously cloistered institution that rarely admits scholars for any reason and did not respond to Smith and Landau’s—or my—requests for comment. No one has reported seeing the manuscript since the early 1980s.)

Another source of potentially significant evidence, scholars suspect, is the part of Smith’s life he kept from the world. Over three months, in visits to the churches where Smith had once sought a home, I pieced together the story of a priest whose crises of faith and identity prefigure his discovery of a secretly gay Jesus.

Robert Morton Smith (he went by his middle name) was born in 1915, the only child of an older, well-to-do couple in the Philadelphia suburb of Bryn Athyn. The town is the American headquarters of the conservative branch of the New Church, a Christian movement inspired by the 18th-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Smith’s mother was a fervent follower. His father manufactured stained glass for churches across the mid-Atlantic.

Smith was a star student at a New Church high school, and he internalized a view of men and women as incomplete—each “a divided or half person,” as Swedenborg put it—until perfected by marriage. Swedenborg’s invocations of “foul liaisons,” “unmentionable sexual unions,” and “a foulness that is contrary to the order of nature” have been read as explicit condemnations of homosexuality.

The world beyond the Church was nearly as unforgiving. Doctors deemed homosexuality a mental illness, and state laws criminalized sodomy. In 1920, [Harvard University formed a “secret court” to investigate](#)—and expel—students suspected of homosexual conduct. Two of the men convicted by the court would take their own life.

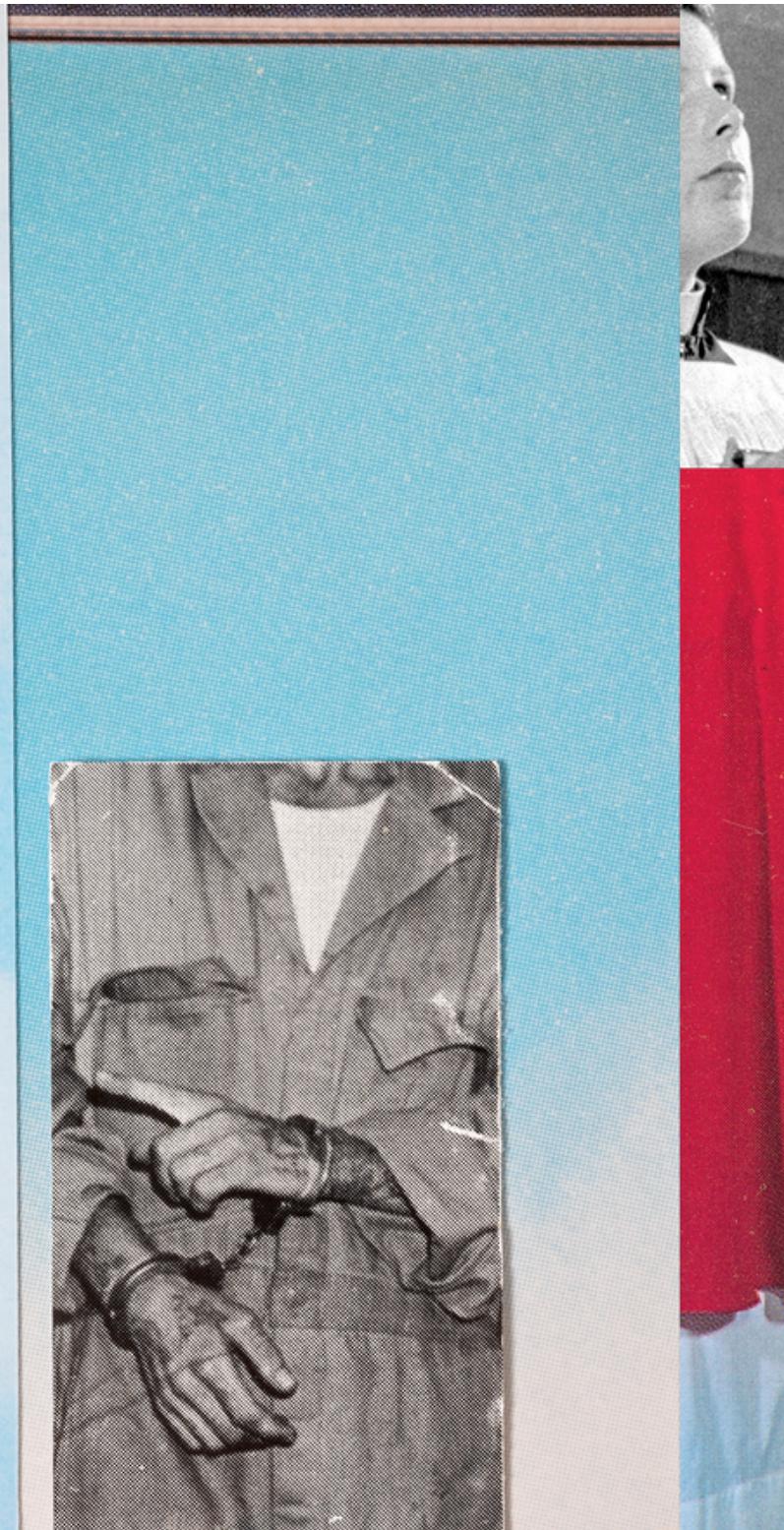
Smith eventually left his family’s Church, but he was not yet ready to abandon Christianity. In 1938, after graduating from Harvard College and entering Harvard Divinity School, he abruptly joined the Episcopal Church.

The Christian leader who set Smith on a path to the Episcopal priesthood, I discovered, was a gay Marxist revolutionary.

Frederic Hastings Smyth was a successful, MIT-trained chemist when he decided, in his mid-30s, to give up his career. He became an Anglican priest and developed a [complex theology](#) that saw communism as a precondition for the kingdom of heaven on Earth. (He believed that Marxists could be talked out of their atheism after the revolution.)

In 1936, Hastings Smyth opened a kind of monastery steps from Harvard's campus, calling it the Oratory of St. Mary and St. Michael. He hoped to recruit brilliant students as leaders of a proletarian overthrow of capitalism. The oratory, where he lived with a few young male disciples, was decorated with Baroque Italian furniture and scented with liturgical candles, incense, and the gourmet meals he cooked for students who dropped in for political discussion and Mass. Smith was a committed traditionalist, but something about Hastings Smyth must have so compelled him that he was willing to overlook the priest's insurrectionary politics. In December 1938, six days after Hastings Smyth baptized him, Morton Smith was admitted to Holy Communion at the oratory.

Hastings Smyth didn't live with a boyfriend in Cambridge, as he'd done as a layman in Europe. But the oratory was nonetheless stigmatized as "homosexual"—and surveilled by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Within a few years, Hastings Smyth began to worry that some students weren't coming for Marxist revolution, as he'd hoped, but to work out their sexuality. "It is dangerous for us," he wrote to a friend, in a letter I found in a Toronto archive. "We are too exciting for them."



Father Frederic Hastings Smyth (*top left*) set Morton Smith on the path to the Episcopal priesthood. Once Smith was ordained, the Right Reverend

Raymond Heron was his only backer in the Massachusetts diocese. One of Heron's former chore boys, Frederick Pike (*center*), was convicted of first-degree murder after killing another Heron "protégé" in 1948. (Photo-illustration by Pacifico Silano. Sources: General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada; Bettmann Archive / Getty; Three Lions / Getty; Found Image Holdings / Getty.)

Harvard Divinity School came to see the renegade priest as a menace to students, having "done none of these men any good" and "one or two of them some harm," Willard Sperry, the school's dean, wrote in an April 1940 letter. Sperry was particularly concerned about one divinity student, "a rather unstable fellow emotionally, who has given us all a good deal of anxiety for fear he will have some kind of nervous break-down. I have the Hygiene Dept. watching him." Sperry doesn't name the student, but in hundreds of pages of archival records I could find no Harvard divinity student more closely associated with Hastings Smyth in the late 1930s than Morton Smith.

Just five months after his baptism, Smith took his first step toward ordination, applying in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. I asked Paul Corby Finney—an art historian who maintained a long correspondence with Smith and spent late nights drinking with him in the 1980s—what had initially attracted Smith to the priesthood. "He said he was very much in love with the idea of a community of men worshipping God."

Smith sought contacts in the Episcopal Church's Anglo-Catholic, or "high church," wing, with which Hastings Smyth had identified. Though free of the doctrinal strictures and hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church, it retained much of Catholicism's drama: its elaborate ceremonies; its vestments, bells, and candles—and its veneration of celibacy.

Scholars of sexuality have portrayed Anglo-Catholicism as a pre-1950s refuge for highly educated queer clergy, a "[stained-glass closet](#)" that permitted coded displays of femininity and homoeroticism among male priests "as long as they remained chastely celibate or at least avoided scandal," the historian Timothy W. Jones has written. [According to the scholar David Hilliard](#), Anglo-Catholicism, as a fringe of the Episcopal Church, was "both elitist and nonconformist, combining a sense of superiority with a rebellion against existing authority ... It provided an

environment in which homosexual men could express in a socially acceptable way their dissent from heterosexual orthodoxy.”

In 1940, Smith traveled to Jerusalem on a two-year research fellowship. He ended up staying until 1944, unable to recross the Atlantic during the world war. In Jerusalem’s Old City, he befriended a Greek Orthodox clergyman, who invited him to Mar Saba. Smith traveled to the monastery by donkey in 1942 and lived with its monks for a month. (It was on a later visit, in 1958, that he’d say he found Secret Mark.)

In the candlelit darkness of its church, where the brothers prayed for six hours each night, Smith gained a “new understanding of worship as a means of disorientation,” he recalled in his book *The Secret Gospel*, “dazzling the mind and destroying its sense of reality.”

“I knew what was happening,” he wrote, “but I relaxed and enjoyed it.”

When Smith returned to America in 1944, his quest for ordination was in trouble.

Pennsylvania’s Episcopal bishop wanted Smith to enroll at the Episcopal Divinity School, but its dean told the bishop that Smith had a reputation as “cynical, skeptical, lacking in convictions, highly cantankerous.” The faculty’s unanimous opinion was that “for all his brilliant academic qualifications,” Smith was “not otherwise fitted to serve in the ministry.”

The bishop got no more assuring a report from Father David Norton Jr., the rector of a working-class Boston church where Smith had run a boys’ club. “He’s interested in such questions as: ‘What other basis is there for deciding the morality of an action than the ultimate pleasure or pain it will bring to the doer?’” Norton wrote. “I often feel that he takes a line of argument and follows it as an intellectual game rather than for the purpose of coming at the truth.”

But in March 1946, for reasons the record doesn’t reflect, the Pennsylvania bishop ordained Smith anyway, then quickly transferred him out of state. After 18 months at a Baltimore church, Smith moved back to Massachusetts,

where he saw firsthand what became of people who tried to hide their true self in the Church.

In September 1948, while serving at St. Luke's Church, in blue-collar Boston, Smith officiated the marriage of a restaurant hostess and a bartender. A month later, headlines appeared in the Boston newspapers: The hostess was still married to another man. A judge convicted her of polygamy and gave her a suspended six-month prison sentence and a year's probation.

Her lawyer told the court that she'd married the bartender "only to protect the baby she had thought was coming," a pregnancy that apparently ended in miscarriage. The woman, a relative told me, was no believer. But she'd entered a church—and lied—to give her forbidden relationship and baby the appearance of respectability.

News articles name Smith as the priest who sanctified the marriage, but don't say how much he knew of the woman's past. The episode can't have helped his already precarious standing in the Massachusetts diocese, where one church had declined to make him vicar, despite desperately needing one, and where the bishop, Norman Nash, never licensed him to minister, making his 17 months in pulpits there a possible canonical violation.

Church archives show that Smith had exactly one backer in Massachusetts: the Right Reverend Raymond Heron, who as suffragan bishop was second in command to Nash.

Around the time Smith performed the polygamous marriage, Heron began appearing in a horrifying string of front-page stories. The 62-year-old priest, who'd never married, had for years befriended troubled boys and invited them to live with him, on his farm, as paid "chore boys." On August 5, 1948, one of Heron's former chore boys, Frederick Pike, 19, returned, intending to rob Heron. When Pike entered the farmhouse and found one of his successors—a 17-year-old who'd lived with Heron since he was 10—Pike shot the boy twice in the head, went to a shed for an axe, and then bludgeoned the boy's body with its blunt end, taking a 15-minute break between drubbings.

When Heron came home, Pike fired wild shots at him but missed. He briefly held the bishop hostage, stole his wallet, and escaped in Heron's car before police captured him in Providence, Rhode Island. A jury convicted Pike of first-degree murder, and a judge sentenced him to death. (The penalty was later commuted, and Pike was released from prison in the 1970s.)

The Living Church, a prominent Episcopal magazine, regretted the death of Heron's 17-year-old "protégé" but praised Heron's farm as "a means of healthy life and wage earning for boys in whom the Bishop has taken an interest." With Pike's appeals keeping the story in the news, Heron married his new, Church-appointed secretary. The Boston papers prominently covered the "private" and "surprise morning ceremony."

A few months later, in the spring of 1949, Smith published a bristling journal article. Titled "Psychiatric Practice and Christian Dogma," it cast Christianity as incompatible with mental health. All of Smith's examples were sexual: a girl who compulsively masturbates; a young "homosexual" who as an adolescent had "helpful" friendships with older men; a divorcee who wants a new husband "tied down before the progress of her infirmity ... becomes obvious."

Unlike a good psychiatrist, who guides such people to self-acceptance, Smith wrote, the good pastor has to condemn them as sinners. The Church, that is, requires a man to sacrifice this world for the next, regardless of "his happiness or his health or his very life." In Smith's view, there was no midpoint between sin and salvation. Which meant one thing: "Ecclesiastics who do not believe the teachings of their Church should have the decency to leave it."

On September 18, 1949, Smith led his last service as an active priest.

Over the next few years, Smith tried to figure out, as a scholar, how faith seduces and deludes. He had earned a Ph.D. from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was working on a second doctorate, from Harvard Divinity School, when Brown University hired him in 1950 as an instructor in biblical literature.

One of his first research ideas there was for a “psychiatric study” of what spiritual training does to the minds of monks. Next he began an obsessive hunt for pagan sources for the canonical Gospel of Mark. But neither of these projects bore out: A mentor cautioned against “psychoanalytical fantasies,” and scholars found his arguments about Mark’s paganism unconvincing, derailing a book he’d been close to finishing.

These intellectual rejections were compounded by professional ones. Near the start of 1954, Brown told Smith that it wasn’t renewing his contract. And despite recommendations from renowned scholars, he was passed over for jobs at Yale, Cornell, and the University of Chicago.

No less painful, perhaps, was that Smith’s washout at Brown separated him from his best friend. Atanas Todor Madjoucoff was a handsome Arabic interpreter, born in Palestine to Greek Orthodox parents. He and Smith had met in Jerusalem, apparently in the 1940s, and reunited in 1951, when Smith took a year’s research leave from Brown. Madjoucoff accompanied Smith to monastery libraries around Greece, and in August 1952, according to passenger manifests, they boarded the SS Excambion together, in Piraeus, for an 18-day voyage to Boston.

In Providence, Smith found Madjoucoff an apartment around the corner from his. But shortly after Brown told Smith that his time there was up, Madjoucoff changed his last name, married a woman he’d met through his church, and moved to the suburbs.

In the 1950s, nothing was going the way Smith wanted it to. He’d failed at the priesthood, and now he was failing at academia. Off campus, gay and lesbian people faced a brutal [new wave of persecution](#), with President Dwight Eisenhower effectively banning them from government employment and a U.S. Senate subcommittee calling “homosexuals and other sex perverts” security risks who “must be treated as transgressors and dealt with accordingly.”

Smith floundered for three years before a job offer came from Columbia. It wasn’t in religion—the field he’d long aspired to join—but in ancient history. Smith accepted, and used his very first summer there, in 1958, to return to Mar Saba. He waited more than two years—until Columbia gave

him tenure—to announce his “accidental discovery,” as he called it, of a surreptitiously gay Jesus.

After settling in New York, Smith paid regular visits to Rhode Island to see Madjoucuff. Their relationship was filled with private outings, personal confidences, and gifts to Madjoucuff’s children from a man they called “Uncle Morton.”

“There were secrets they kept among themselves,” Madjoucuff’s daughter told me, secrets her father didn’t even share with her mother. (“No one really knows” whether the men were lovers, she said; she and her eldest brother told me they had no evidence that their father was anything but straight.) Madjoucuff’s obituary (he died in 2019) called Smith his “lifelong friend.”

In the late 1970s, Smith had a brief relationship with an openly gay Columbia student. But not until after retirement did Smith attempt to come out.

In February 1989, an NYU dean published a screed against student protesters who had demanded classes on “gay, lesbian and bisexual issues.” The dean lamented that any campus would treat homosexuality as “an acceptable form of normative behavior.”

The article appeared in an obscure journal published by a group of conservative professors opposed to campus activism. Smith had long supported the group, but the dean’s words got to him. “Homosexuality is a way of life followed by millions of adult Americans,” Smith typed, in a letter to the journal’s editors. “Attempts to require adherence to a norm from which figures so various as King David, Socrates, Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, and Frederick the Great happily deviated, should disturb a Dean with even a rudimentary knowledge of cultural history.

“The most shameful thing,” Smith continued, was that students had to protest “to get an honest and complete course on a subject of legitimate concern to many students, faculty members, and administrators.” Equally worrisome, Smith wrote, was that the dean, as an administrator, had the power to discriminate against gay job seekers.

“I must ask that you publish this letter,” he wrote.

Smith didn’t identify his own sexual orientation, but he’d stood up for himself in a public way. On a copy of the letter he mailed to Lee Avdoyan, his friend and former student, Smith wrote, “Herewith my ‘coming-out’ article. I never expected to write one, but I’m getting old and irritable, and [the dean’s article] was just too much.” The journal never published the letter.

The parallels between Smith’s disillusioning years in the Church and the peculiar Jesus he found at Mar Saba are hard to miss.

After Smith’s suicide, associates opened his briefcase and found an incongruous, plastic-cased ID among the workaday address books and pocket calendars. “This is to certify,” it said, “that The Reverend Robert M. Smith is a priest.” He’d held on to it until his dying day.

Smith left Madjoucoff nearly \$320,000, a sum many times greater than every other beneficiary’s. His will also left something more personal: any three belongings Madjoucoff desired.

As they walked through Smith’s apartment, Madjoucoff’s wife noticed a photograph of her husband. Something about its intimacy surprised her, their eldest son told me. It wasn’t the sort of portrait that men she knew kept of other men.

“You can take that,” she told her husband.

But Madjoucoff choked up. He couldn’t bring himself to do it.

If Smith saw Christianity as threatening his health, happiness, and “very life,” as he’d suggested in that 1949 essay, how far might he have gone to discredit the faith?

In an era of rampant homophobia, Christian leaders such as Frederic Hastings Smyth and Raymond Heron had inspired dreams of liberty—of new life—in vulnerable boys and young men. But they could no sooner save others than save themselves. The celibate priesthood was less a sanctuary for gay men than a treacherous hiding place.

The parallels between Smith's disillusioning years in the Church and the peculiar Jesus he found at Mar Saba are hard to miss: Smith's Jesus is a manipulator whose baptisms foster the illusion of sexual freedom among psychologically fragile men. But Jesus is arrested at Gethsemane, and the young man who flees naked—a seeker of “the mystery of the kingdom of God”—winds up exposed and alone.

Smith had more than enough motive to forge Secret Mark. As a polymath scholar with contacts across the Mediterranean, he almost certainly had the means. For as long as he'd been a professor, he had taken a childlike, at times sadistic, glee in making the world of religion squirm. A hoax on the Church that betrayed him would have surpassed anything else he had done, but it wouldn't have been out of character.

Nor would it have been his only work of fiction. Smith's personal papers were destroyed, as he'd instructed, but his professional ones were donated to the Jewish Theological Seminary. Among them I found an unpublished short story, undated but bearing his New York address.

If Secret Mark was a youthful fantasy of salvation through forbidden sex, this other tale was, in a sense, the reality Smith found.

“Once upon a time,” in a “golden age,” the story begins, a young man carried on a “clandestine affair” with a lover he visited “by way of the back stairs.” But the relationship was doomed: Not only was the “young lady” betrothed to someone else; her mother shunned the man because of his “total inacceptability.”

When one day the mother nearly caught them in the act, the man grabbed his fallen clothes and “took refuge in the closet,” only to have the mother cluelessly pull it shut.

“The latch clicked,” Smith wrote. “There was no knob on the inside.”

The story stops mid-sentence, in the middle of its second page. The man is trapped and alone, and outside it's beautiful and radiant, and then nothing. The story's title—“The Skeleton in the Closet”—is the only clue Smith leaves to the part he's left unwritten.

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Saint Dismas

A short story

by Jared Lemus



Carlito held one end of the rope, Omar the other. The three of us wore orange vests to seem official. Sebastián, our lookout, hid behind some bushes.

“¡Here comes one!” I picked up my shovel and dug out some of the dirt we’d dumped in one of the potholes covering the road. Omar held up a gloved hand, signaling for the car to slow down and stop. Things had gotten more difficult for us recently, with the news warning of false checkpoints, where men dressed in military or police uniforms stopped vehicles under the pretense of government-sanctioned searches, forced all the passengers out of the car, and then drove off to have the car scrapped or sold. There was talk of rapes and beatings when the passengers failed to comply, and sometimes those things did happen. But we weren’t like that—we wouldn’t have known what to do with a car if we had managed to steal one.

We wanted drivers who were willing to spend money to get dirt off their car but not smart enough to keep us from looking inside. A car with fully tinted windows meant someone who might have more money on him, but we risked bullets getting lodged in our throats. Non-tinted meant less money, but also that we’d be alive to spend it. The best was a clean car with a fishbowl windshield—someone who had money but was stupid.

Sebastián had just flagged a silver Toyota with a cracked mirror. The car wasn’t only dirty, but had tints. The worst combination: a driver who was broke and dangerous. We’d warned Sebastián about this before, but he was still a kid, barely 13. He’d be shaking with nerves and excitement, holding the tip of his dick through his pants to keep from pissing himself, and the moment he saw a car, he’d call out to us, not bothering to notice what shape it was in.

When the car came into full view over the hill, we all got into position. I stood in the middle of the road, leaning against the shovel and wiping my forehead. Omar and Carlito held the rope with little orange flags hanging from it. When the car stopped, I approached and motioned for the driver to roll down his window—barely visible through the darkness of the glass, the driver, who was wearing sunglasses, raised his hand, asking what the issue was without speaking.

I pointed at the road, the potholes, my shovel. “Construction,” I said, not sure he could hear me.

The man shook his head no, then tried to pull forward, but I stepped in front of the car.

“You can’t go through until we’re done,” I said.

The man honked his horn. He motioned for us to move, and when we didn’t, he honked again. Then again, each honk seeming longer and louder than the one before.

I looked over at Omar. He nodded and let the rope slacken to the ground. We didn’t want to draw unwanted attention. We’d made that mistake once and almost gone to jail because we kept trying to get the driver to roll down his window while he leaned on his horn. A police car had been not half a kilometer down the road from that spot, and we’d had to take off running into the jungle, leaving behind our rope and vests. We hadn’t tried stopping cars there since. But that didn’t bother us much; we moved up or down the highway when we felt a location was getting too hot. This spot was different because we’d been there for more than a week. The main draws were the uphill advantage on one side, and the two-kilometer visibility on the other.

With the rope dropped, the man behind the wheel let up on the clutch and sped down the road. We watched his taillights fade.

“¡Sebastián!” Omar yelled at him. “You stupid son of a—”

“¡Here comes another one!” Sebastián yelled back.

Carlito rolled his eyes.

“¿Does this one look nice?” I called out.

“I think it’s a Mercedes,” Sebastián said.

Omar, Carlito, and I exchanged glances. Yeah, Sebastián was an idiot, but we had hammered home what fancy cars looked like, using the auto magazines we’d stolen from the supermarket back in the capital as guides. He’d once let two cars get by us while we hid in the brush, thinking them not worth our while, but Sebastián was good at alerting us to cops.

We got into our positions and waited for the car's logo to crest the hill. Sure enough, a black Mercedes. I wiped my forehead again, sweaty from the anticipation. Omar held up his hand and kept the rope taut with the other. I was already picturing what we would do with the money—ice cream, dinner at a restaurant, a hotel room in a nearby town. We were all in desperate need of a shower, a night when we weren't eaten alive by mosquitoes or whatever creatures crawled around the jungle floor in the dark.

We heard the purr of the engine and watched as the car got closer. By the time we realized that the car was speeding up, not slowing down, it was too late for Carlito and Omar to let go of the rope. I almost couldn't jump out of the way.

“¡Fuck!” Omar yelled as the rope tore out of his palm and got caught in the wheels of the car. “Motherfucker.” Holding his hand, he watched the rope get dragged off by the Mercedes.

I eyed the car and saw the rope tumble free from underneath the tires. “¿You okay?” I asked Carlito, who was holding his left hand, rope-burned. He nodded and looked over at Sebastián, who was running down from his hiding spot.

“Holy shit, holy shit,” Sebastián said.

When he reached us, Omar smacked him on the back of the head with his good hand. “I've told you about saying those words,” he said. “Go get me some water.”

Sebastián looked defiant for a moment before laying eyes on Omar's hand. He ran into the brush for one of the gallons of water we kept next to the tents we'd made from tarps and branches.

Carlito crossed the two-lane highway and sat down next to us. “¿How much money do you think he had in his wallet?” he said.

“Let's not think about that,” Omar said. “It'll make it hurt worse.”

Sebastián ran back with the jug and gave it to Omar. He uncapped the gallon with his teeth and dumped some of the water on his and Carlito's hands, then

took a swig from it.

“¿Does it hurt?” Sebastián asked.

“It doesn’t feel good.” Omar slid out of his vest and took off his shirt, wrapping his hand in it. He instructed Carlito to do the same, tucking the end of a sleeve into the folds to keep the bandage in place.

“Now what?” I asked.

Omar looked at me like I’d spoken in tongues. “We still got about four hours of sunlight,” he said, as though blood wasn’t soaking into his shirt.

I couldn’t believe it. “You and Carlito can’t hold the rope,” I said.

“I got two hands, ¿don’t I?” he said.

I knew that letting the Mercedes get away would bother him unless we made enough for a hotel room that night.

I missed the lowlands on hot days like this, when you stepped out of the shower and immediately began sweating. I missed the desert; the wind, unobstructed by leaves, that hit your face. I missed home.

Omar took another sip of water, then held it out to the rest of us. We all shook our heads no. Omar shrugged and swigged from the jug, letting water run down his chin and onto his neck, down his flat stomach. He was mostly skin and bones like the rest of us, but his muscles were more defined. While Sebastián and Carlito mostly got tired, Omar and I gained muscle from chopping wood or walking from town to town when we couldn’t get a bus or van to pick us up. Omar was 20, born three years before me, and just over four years before Carlito. Sebastián had been a surprise.

“All right,” Omar said. He capped the jug of water and shoved it into Sebastián’s chest. “Go get us some clean shirts,” he said. “One for Jaramillo too.”

I looked at my shirt. Dirt all down the front of it, a tear near the navel, from when I’d landed on a rock jumping out of the way of the Mercedes.

Sebastián walked, rather than ran, back into the jungle and then came out with three shirts. I put mine on and tossed the dirty one on the road as a car drove by, heading down the hill.

“We’re already losing money,” Omar said, signaling for us to get into position. He leaned forward and grabbed his end of the rope and stared off into the jungle, waiting for us, like a statue, a saint. The patron saint of highway robbers.

The rest of the day was successful. We managed to stop a few cars, avoiding the vans and buses. Too many people meant that we could be overpowered and held down until the cops showed up. We’d toyed with the idea of fake guns, but usually unsheathing machetes was enough to get drivers to comply. Plus, the driver might pull a real gun on us.

“I think we have enough,” Carlito said, counting out money for a room.

“Not if we want to eat,” Omar said. He motioned for Carlito to get back to his side of the road.

“¡A blue Kia!” Sebastián called down from his hiding spot.

Omar nodded. “Last one.” He waited for us to get into position before lifting the rope.

When the car appeared at the top of the hill, I made my way over to the driver’s side and told the man to roll down the window. He did so without hesitation.

“¿Yes?” he said.

Omar and Carlito grabbed their machetes while I reached in to unlock and open the door.

“All we want is your wallet,” I said. I noticed movement in the back seat. Someone who had been lying down sat up with a jerk. I jumped back, expecting a setup, before hearing my name.

“*Jaramillo?*” The voice was familiar, but I didn’t know why. The rear door swung open, and out stepped Leslie. “*What are you doing?*” she asked.



Leslie used to live in the same village as us. She was the same age as me, worked at my father's bakery just like I did, before one of the maras took over the village. The gang members had come without warning, without plans of negotiating, with violence. Anyone who opposed them was never heard of again. The mareros were all business, all gold teeth and tattoos—the last thing our parents ever saw. The same thing had happened to Leslie's mom.

I looked at the driver. Mr. Cortez, Leslie's dad.

"We," I started, "we were checking if you needed directions."

Leslie looked at Carlito's and Omar's machetes.

Sebastián came puffing down the hill in a cloud of dust. "Check the trunk," he said.

"Ah," Leslie nodded.

"We just wanted something to eat," I said.

She looked at Mr. Cortez, still behind the wheel. "We have some snacks," she said.

"We can get our own," I said.

"¿What kind of snacks?" Sebastián said.

"¿Are y'all heading to Peacheque?" Carlito asked.

"¿Do you guys want a ride?" Leslie asked.

I looked over at Omar, told Carlito no. We had to stop at least one more car.

"The town's near the lake, ¿right? ¿Why don't we meet there later?" she said.

"Nah, we're good," Omar said.

Leslie nodded, told us to come find her if we wanted. She gave me a sad smile and got back in the car. We watched her disappear. The mosquitoes were out, and it was getting dark. That was the worst part about the highlands. That and the humidity. I missed the lowlands on hot days like this, when you stepped out of the shower and immediately began sweating. I missed the desert; the wind, unobstructed by leaves, that hit your face. I missed home.

Omar kicked some rocks onto the highway.

“There’ll be another car soon,” Carlito said.

“Yeah, then we gotta come back out here tomorrow and do the same thing all over again.” Omar picked up some rocks and launched them into the jungle.

We heard gunfire in the kitchen and didn’t stop running until the sun began to shine along the highway. We never stopped running, just like everyone else who made it out alive.

I reminded Omar that it had been hard since before we’d been forced from our homes.

“Seems like Leslie’s doing fine,” Omar said.

“It’s not her fault.” I looked at the ground.

“Yeah,” Omar said. “If only our dad had been a coward too.”

None of us knew what to say. It wasn’t fair to think like this, but sometimes it was all we could do. When the mareros came in, they offered each family 100 quetzales—enough for a family meal at Pollo Campero—to leave immediately. To grab their belongings and never come back. Those who stayed, who called the police, who wrote to the government, like our parents, didn’t last the week. Leslie’s father was among the traitors who gave up, took the money, packed his things and his daughter, and fled. His wife stayed behind, refusing to leave her home.

When the mareros came for our parents, Carlito, Omar, Sebastián, and I snuck out the window in our room. We heard gunfire in the kitchen and didn't stop running until the sun began to shine along the highway. We never stopped running, just like everyone else who made it out alive. All of us, cowards.

Omar wiped his hands on his shorts and grabbed one end of the rope, again with his good hand; the other hung by his side. The rest of us weren't sure whether to speak. We got into place just as some headlights made their way over the hill.

In town at the hotel that night, I wondered where Leslie was. I tried to picture which room was hers.

"I'm gonna take a walk," I said.

Omar let Sebastián escape a chokehold. "¿Since when?"

"I'll be back soon."

Omar held the door closed as I tried to leave. "We don't need her help," he said.

I pushed past him and the door slammed behind me.

The night was warm, same as always, and the streets were crowded. Vendors sold tacos and ice cream out of carts, souvenirs from small booths. Why anyone would want to remember this place was beyond me. Younger kids chased one another and dodged oncoming traffic. Drivers honked at them or yelled from their windows. Down one of the three streets that made up the town, the *elotero* could be heard ringing his bell and shouting into the night.

The lake was calm, disturbed only by the sound of small animals jumping into the water. I bent down and picked up a small stone, illuminated by a streetlamp, and skipped it across the surface. I was reaching for another when I heard my name again, spoken as though she was still surprised to see me.

“I was hoping you’d come,” Leslie said. She hugged me, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt someone’s arms around me. “I’m sorry. It’s just nice to see someone from home.”

“I know,” I said.

“Should we walk?”

I nodded. The water lapped at the shore. The wind carried the sounds of the vendors and children in town as though they were messages in a bottle.

“How long has it been?” she asked.

“Almost two years.” This was something I tried not to think about. Each day felt like the one before as we struggled to survive.

“Is this what y’all have been doing?”

I couldn’t tell what Leslie was thinking, but I knew she wasn’t judging me. I was sure that she and her father had struggled at first too, and that no one was willing to help. The government ignored us—the cops ignored us—telling us we should have been prepared. And for the longest time, I couldn’t understand why the mareros wanted our town. But Omar finally figured it out while looking at a map, plotting where we’d set up our next trap. Right between two big cities, our village served as a hub.

“What about you?” I asked.

Leslie sighed, then looked up at the moon, which was full. “We moved around a lot, like you.”

I knew what she meant. We were like turtles, carrying our houses on our backs, settling wherever we could. Leslie put her hands in her pockets and told me that she and her father had tried to go to the capital, but that the mareros had also taken over their family’s neighborhood there. She told me that they’d finally found a place outside Quetzaltenango, but that her father couldn’t get a job and had ended up selling cold drinks on the side of the highway. His foot had been run over while handing someone a drink through

a car window, and after that, she said, they'd been on the move. They searched for a place to work without having to walk too much.

"I think we might stay here a few days," she said.

"There are worse places."

We walked quietly for several moments.

"¿How long have y'all been here?" she asked.

"A week."

"¿And you stop cars every day?"

I nodded.

"¿How do you not get caught?"

I shrugged. "We don't make much."

Leslie nodded along. "¿Can I help?"

I couldn't tell if she was joking. "I don't think Omar would let you."

"I could help make you more money." She stopped walking and smiled at me. "Then I bet he'd let me."

"No fucking way," Omar said. We were standing by the side of the highway again, the sun just starting to rise, when he noticed Leslie walking up the road. I hadn't told him the night before because I knew he would say no. But I figured if she showed up while we were already here, he'd at least have to listen.

"It's a good idea," I said.

"We barely make enough without having to split it with someone else." He looked toward Leslie, who was close enough to hear us now. "We don't need anybody else," he said.

“Good morning to you too,” she said.

“Get her out of here,” Omar said to me.

“¿Jaramillo told you my plan?” Leslie asked.

“¿To give you all our money? Yeah, he told me.”

“Think about how many more cars would stop,” I said.

“I only want a fifth, same as you,” she said.

“¡Carlito!” Omar shouted. “Grab the rope.”

Carlito crossed two lanes to the other side, afraid of upsetting Omar any further. I scooted closer to Omar, away from Leslie, and whispered to him. “Just one car.”

Omar held his end of the rope. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “Fine,” he said.

I smiled and patted him on the back. Leslie was already pulling a small knife from her purse. She made a few rips in her ankle-length skirt, then grabbed two fistfuls of dirt and covered her shirt, her arms, and her hair with it. She spread out her arms like, *¿What do you think?* Omar rolled his eyes, but I gave her two thumbs up.

Leslie inched toward the road and lay down. Omar shrugged his shoulders, mumbling under his breath, and stood by her head. Carlito crossed back over to us and followed Omar’s lead. I knelt by her feet as Sebastián ran up to his hiding spot.

A few minutes later we heard a car engine.

“A Ford,” Sebastián shouted down to us.

We took our positions, trying our best to look worried. As the car summited the hill, I waved my hands to flag it down. Carlito and Omar pretended to

check Leslie's pulse before cradling her head. As the driver noticed Leslie's body, the car slowed. Then its window lowered.

"We need some help," I said, sounding panicked.

"¿What happened?" The driver pulled over and put the car in park.

"She was crossing the road," I said. "She got hit."

The man unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door. He walked over to Leslie, Omar, and Carlito. As soon as he reached them, Leslie sat up with her little knife and told him to empty his pockets.

"¿What is this?" The man put his hands in the air. Omar made quick work of checking his pockets, emptying his wallet. Carlito ran over to help me search the car. We found snacks, unopened water bottles, and some clean clothes to hawk or grow into. A new tire we could sell to a mechanic in town.

We unloaded everything and told him to leave.

"Not a word about this," Omar said—the same thing he said every time. How seriously drivers took him, I could never tell. "Or we'll find you and take more than just your shit."

The man walked indignantly to his car. He slammed the door shut. Dust and pebbles sprayed as he sped down the road.

"The very first car," I said, when he was finally out of sight.

"Probably luck," Omar said, counting the money in his hands.

I could tell he was happy about it. When he caught us watching him, he hid his smirk. He pocketed the bills and told us all to get back to our places.

"¿You think we made enough to retire or something?"

Leslie and I exchanged smiles. Then she lay back down on the hot road.

By the end of that first day, after we'd sold the tire, along with the expensive cameras and phones we'd found in a car full of tourists that we dared to stop,

we'd made more than we had in the past several months combined.

"Don't get too happy," Omar said. "She's leaving soon." He counted out some bills and gave Leslie her share as we stood outside the hotel. The sun set to the sound of beer bottles opening.

"This is more than my dad would make at work." She fanned the bills and brought them to her nose. "Maybe I can convince him to stay longer."

"No need. We're moving too," Omar said. "Spot's too hot now anyway."

Omar's temper had gotten worse since we'd left home. One good thing about it was that no one had ever picked on me at school.

I followed him as he walked inside. "We should do it again tomorrow. We should use her while she's here."

"Just because it worked once doesn't mean it'll work again." Omar turned to Leslie. "¿What would your dad think about what you're doing?"

Leslie shrugged. "Not sure he'd care," she said, folding the money into her pocket.

"One day doesn't make you a highway robber," Omar said. "So stop trying to act like one."

"One more day," I said. "We can't make this kind of money without her."

"¿Why not? We can get Sebastián to play dead, and it's the same thing."

"¿You really think cars would stop for a bunch of guys standing on the side of the highway?" Leslie said.

"Enough!" Omar yelled.

"One more day," I said, following Omar to our room and signaling for Leslie to come too.

He threw our empty pizza box from the night before against the wall. “We had a good day. Let’s not fuck it up by talking stupid.” Sitting on the bed, he began removing his shoes.

I was scared to say anything. Omar’s temper had gotten worse since we’d left home. One good thing about it was that no one had ever picked on me at school. Not after Omar put a kid’s head through the cafeteria wall. I had never asked for his help, and I was scared to thank him for it.

“What if I moved with y’all?” Leslie said.

Omar and I turned to look at her.

“We could hit a few spots, and after I made enough to last me and my dad a few months, I would leave.”

“You don’t know anything about this life.” Omar shook his head, then was silent for a minute. “Now get the fuck out of my room,” he said. With that, he lay back in bed and covered his eyes with a pillow.

I followed Leslie out. “I’m sorry.” I closed the door carefully behind us.

“Why’s he being such an asshole?” she asked.

“He’s scared.” I could see the top of her head now, all the dirt she’d have to wash out.

As Leslie reached the landing, she spun around. “So then I guess this is goodbye.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I said.

She extended a hand when I was hoping for another hug. “It’s whatever. If he doesn’t want to make money, that’s on him. Maybe I’ll see you down the road.” She patted her pocket with the cash in it, then spun back around and left me there.

Omar was waiting for me in the doorway to our room when I got back.

“¿Why’d you tell her no?” I pushed past him, noticing that he’d picked up the pizza box.

“We’re better off.” He followed me into the room.

“Look, she’s cute, I get it, but we can’t be taking on another person,” he said. “I have to look out for all of you. She’s not family, she’s not my responsibility, and I don’t trust her.”

“We all lost things back there. That makes her family.”

Omar sighed. “¿Why don’t we get something to eat? We can talk about it over a Gallo or one of those American beers.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Yeah, you are. I’m buying.”

Omar bought a small bottle of rum on the way to the seafood place. He almost never drank, mostly because we didn’t have the extra money for alcohol, but also because we had to be up early every morning. At the restaurant, he ordered a Coke and a glass and kept adding more and more rum. By the time Sebastián and Carlito found us there, Omar was pretty drunk.

“¿What’s up, guys?” Omar said.

Carlito looked at me like, *¿What the fuck?*

“¿Why are you so happy?” Sebastián said.

Omar kicked two chairs out for them.

A waiter came by. “¿Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Just water,” Carlito said.

“¡Get what you want!” Omar said.

The waiter looked at Carlito and Sebastián.

“Just a water.” Carlito sat down. “I heard we’re leaving tomorrow.”

“¿That bitch tell you that?” Omar said.

“Stop talking about her like that.” I pushed Omar.

“Yeah, she did,” Carlito said.

“He just wants to fuck her,” Omar said.

I stood up, balling my fists, ready to swing. Last time we’d gotten into a fight, it had been over a twin mattress we tried to tie on top of someone’s car. Even then, I think I knew we couldn’t drag that thing around, but I was tired of sleeping on the floor, tired of waking up with a branch or rock digging into my spine. Omar had given me a black eye and a busted lip; we didn’t talk for days. It had been the rainy season, and we took turns sleeping outside because we couldn’t stand being under the same tarp together.

“Fuck this,” I said, swiping a biscuit from the table. I put it in my mouth and held it between my teeth, and flipped Omar off with both hands.

As I headed for the exit, I could hear him calling after me, but I didn’t stop to listen. I walked outside and passed beggars and people on their way home from work. People sharpening their machetes and sweeping their front stoops and playing dominoes. I walked past children kicking around soccer balls and setting off small, handheld fireworks. I walked past the vendors selling fruit and ice cream, and finally made it to the hotel, where the front-desk worker nodded and waved me through.

I didn’t have a key. Maybe that’s what Omar had been saying when I left. I turned the knob to our room for good measure and the door creaked open. Inside, everything was exactly as we’d left it, except that Leslie was standing in the middle of the room. She held something in her hands. When she saw me, she startled.

She wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. “I thought it was Omar.”

I stepped inside and felt like I was the one in the wrong place. I nodded at her hand. She shoved the bills into her pocket, then looked directly in my eyes. “You’ll make this back in no time.” She stepped toward me, but I blocked the door. “I left you some,” she said. The tips of our shoes were almost touching. “You understand, ¿right?” Her lips were right below my ear. “I’m sorry.” She reached for the doorknob. The bottom of the door hit my heels and I stood there for a second before moving out of her way.

Later that night, Omar tore our belongings from the drawers and threw them onto the floor. He tossed out our clothes and the few toys from when Sebastián was younger. He snatched and pulled the tarp so hard that our machetes and water jugs fell from the dresser to the floor. We watched him shake it out like he was doing a magic trick.

“¿Where is it?” Omar said, digging through the drawers as if he’d missed something.

The next day we walked down the road, sticking out our thumbs and hoping someone would give us a ride. No one stopped. The only person who pulled over was a bus driver, but we didn’t have the fare. We dragged our feet and kicked the trash lining the highway gutters. When the sun began to set, we entered the jungle and put up our tarp. Looking up at it was almost like looking at the night sky, except without the stars.

We never made as much money in one day as we did with Leslie. Sometimes the memory of her would make me laugh. What do you call someone who robs the robbers? Omar would say “stupid,” but I don’t think so. I would say she’s a thief hoping to sit at the right hand of God. Just like us.

This short story appears in the [April 2024](#) print edition.

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Dispatches

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What Would It Take to Convince Americans That the Economy Is Fine?

**When it comes to prosperity,
Americans trust feelings more than
facts.**

by Rogé Karma



What was the worst moment for the American economy in the past half century? You might think it was the last wheezing months of the 1970s, when oil prices more than doubled, inflation reached double digits, and the U.S. sank into its second recession of the decade. Or the 2008 financial

collapse and Great Recession. Or perhaps it was when COVID hit and millions of people abruptly lost their job. All good guesses—and all wrong, if surveys of the American public are to be believed. According to the University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers, the most widely cited measure of consumer sentiment, that moment was actually June 2022.

Inflation hit 9 percent that month, and no one knew if it would go higher still. A recession seemed imminent. Objectively, it's hard to claim that the economy was in worse shape that month than it had been at those other cataclysmic times. But substantial pessimism was nonetheless explicable.

Over the next 18 months, however, the economy improved rapidly, and in nearly every way: Inflation plummeted to near its pre-pandemic level, unemployment reached historic lows, GDP boomed, and wages rose. The turnaround, by most standard economic measures, was unprecedented. Yet the American people continued to give the economy the kind of approval ratings traditionally reserved for used-car salesmen. Last June, the White House launched a campaign to celebrate "[Bidenomics](#)"—the administration's strong job-creation record and big investments in manufacturing and clean energy. The effort flopped so badly that, within months, Democrats were [begging the president to abandon it altogether](#).

Some kind of irreconcilable difference seemed to have opened up between public opinion and traditional markers of economic health, as many op-eds and news reports noted. "[The Economy Is Great. Why Are Americans in Such a Rotten Mood?](#)" *The Wall Street Journal* asked in early November. "[What's Causing 'Bad Vibes' in the Economy?](#)" *The New York Times* wondered a few weeks later. Terms like "[vibecession](#)" and "[the great disconnect](#)" were coined and spread.

More recently, consumer sentiment has improved. After falling for months, it suddenly rebounded in December and January, posting its [largest two-month gain in more than 30 years](#)—even though the economy itself barely changed at all. Yet as of this writing, sentiment remains low by historical standards—nothing like the sunny outlook that prevailed before the pandemic.

[Rogé Karma: Why America abandoned the greatest economy in history](#)

What's going on? The question involves the psychology of money—and of politics. Its answer will shape the outcome of the presidential election in November.

The toll of inflation on the American psyche is undoubtedly part of the story. That people hate high inflation is not a novel observation: The Federal Reserve has long been obsessed with preventing another '70s-style inflationary spiral; its patron saint is Paul Volcker, the former Fed chair who famously broke that spiral by jacking up interest rates, which plunged the economy into a recession. But although experts and political leaders know that inflation matters, the way they understand the phenomenon is very different from how ordinary people experience it—and that alone may explain why sentiment stayed low for so long, and has only now begun to rise.

When economists talk about inflation, they are often referring to an index of prices meant to represent the goods and services a typical household buys in a year. Each item in the index is weighted by how much is spent on it annually. So, for instance, because the average household spends about a third of its income on housing, the price of housing (an amalgam of rents and home prices) determines a third of the inflation rate. But the goods that people spend the most money on tend to be quite different from those that they pay the most attention to. Consumers are reminded of the price of food every time they visit a supermarket or restaurant, and the price of gas is plastered in giant numbers on every street corner. Also, the purchase of these items can't be postponed. Things like a new couch or flatscreen TV, in contrast, are purchased so rarely that many people don't even remember how much they paid for one, let alone how much they cost today.

The irony is that consumers spend a lot more, on average, on expensive, big-ticket items than they do on groceries or takeout, which means the prices we pay the most attention to don't contribute very much to overall inflation numbers. (Less than a tenth of the average consumer's budget is spent at the supermarket.) Some measures of inflation—"core" and "supercore" inflation among them—exclude food and energy prices altogether. That is reasonable if you're a Fed official focused on how to set interest rates, because energy and food prices are often extremely sensitive to temporary fluctuations (caused by, say, a drought that hurts grain harvests or an OPEC oil-supply

cut). But in practice, these measures overlook the prices that matter most to consumers.

This dynamic alone goes a long way toward explaining the gap between “the economy” and Americans’ perception of it. Even as core inflation fell below 3 percent over the course of 2023, food prices increased by about 6 percent, twice as fast as they had grown over the previous 20 years. “I think that explains a huge part of the disconnect,” Paul Donovan, the chief economist at UBS Global Wealth Management, told me. “You won’t convince any consumer that inflation is under control when food prices are rising that fast.”

Consumers say as much when you ask them. In a recent poll commissioned by *The Atlantic*, respondents were asked what factors they consider when deciding how the national economy is doing. The price of groceries [led the list](#), and 60 percent of respondents placed it among their top three—more, even, than the share that chose “inflation.” This isn’t exactly a new development. In 2002, Donovan told me, Italian consumers were [convinced that prices were soaring by nearly 20 percent](#) even though actual inflation was a stable 2 percent. It turned out that people were basing their estimates on the cost of a cup of espresso, which had abruptly risen as coffee makers rounded their prices up after the introduction of the euro.

[Gilad Edelman: The English-muffin problem](#)

What’s more, most people don’t care about the inflation rate so much as they care about prices themselves. If inflation runs at 10 percent for a year, and then suddenly shrinks to 2 percent, the damage of the past year has not been undone. Prices are still dramatically higher than they were. Overall, prices are nearly 20 percent higher now than they were before the pandemic (grocery prices are 25 percent higher). When asked in a survey last fall what improvement in the economy they would most like to see, 64 percent of respondents said “[lower prices on goods, services, and gas](#).”

To fully embrace the economy’s strength would be to sacrifice part of the modern progressive’s ideological sense of self.

What about wages? Even adjusted for inflation, they have been rising since June 2022, and recently surpassed their pre-pandemic levels, meaning that the typical American's paycheck goes further than it did prior to the inflation spike. But wages haven't increased faster than food prices. And most people think about wage and price increases very differently. A raise tends to feel like something we've earned, Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the University of Michigan, told me. Then we go to the grocery store, and "it feels like those just rewards are being unfairly taken away."

If inflation is in fact the main reason the American people have been so down on the economy—and its future—then the story is likely to have a happy ending, and soon. My great-grandmother loved to reminisce about the days when a can of Coke cost a nickel. She didn't, however, believe that the country was on the verge of economic calamity because she now had to spend a dollar or more for the same beverage. Just as surely as people despise price increases, we also get used to them in the end. A recent analysis by Ryan Cummings and Neale Mahoney, two Stanford economists and former policy advisers in the Biden administration, found that it takes 18 to 24 months for lower inflation to fully show up in consumer sentiment. "People eventually adjust," Mahoney told me. "They just don't adjust at the rate that statistical agencies produce inflation data."

Mahoney and Cummings posted their study on December 4, 2023—18 months after inflation peaked in June 2022. As if on cue, consumer sentiment began surging that month. (Perhaps helping matters, food inflation had finally fallen below 3 percent in November 2023.)

There is another story you can tell about consumer sentiment today, however, one that has less to do with what's happening in grocery stores and more to do with the peculiarities of tribal identity.

It's well established that partisans on both sides become more negative about the economy when the other party controls the presidency, but this phenomenon is not symmetrical: In a November analysis, Mahoney and Cummings found that when a Democrat occupies the White House, Republicans' economic outlook declines by more than twice as much as Democrats' does when the situation is reversed. Consumer-sentiment data from the polling firm Civiqs and the Pew Research Center show that

Republicans' view of the economy [has barely budged since hitting an all-time low](#) in the summer of 2022.

Meanwhile, although sentiment among Democrats has recovered to nearly where it stood before inflation began to rise in 2021, it remains well below its level at the end of the Obama administration. It may never return to its previous heights. Over the past decade, the belief that the economy is rigged in favor of the rich and powerful has become central to progressive self-identity. Among Democrats ages 18 to 34, who tend to be more progressive than older Democrats, positive views of capitalism fell from 56 to 40 percent between 2010 and 2019, according to Gallup. Dim views of the broader economic system may be limiting how positively some Democrats feel about the economy, even when one of their own occupies the Oval Office.

According to a CNN poll in late January, 63 percent of Democrats ages 45 and older believed that the economy was on the upswing—but only 35 percent of younger Democrats believed the same. To fully embrace the economy's strength would be to sacrifice part of the modern progressive's ideological sense of self.

The media may be contributing to economic gloom for people of every political stripe. According to Mahoney, one possible explanation for Republicans' disproportionate economic negativity when a Democrat is in office is the fact that the news sources many Republicans consume—namely, right-wing media like Fox News—tend to be more brazenly partisan than the sources Democrats consume, which tend to be a balance of mainstream and partisan media. But mainstream media have also gotten more negative about the economy in recent years, regardless of who's held the presidency.

[According to a new analysis by the Brookings Institution](#), from 1988 to 2016, the “sentiment” of economic-news coverage in mainstream newspapers tracked closely with measures such as inflation, employment, and the stock market. Then, during Donald Trump's presidency, coverage became more negative than the economic fundamentals would have predicted. After Joe Biden took office, the gap widened. Journalists have long focused more on surfacing problems than on highlighting successes—bringing problems to light is an essential part of the job—but the more recent shift could be explained by the same economic pessimism afflicting many young liberals (many newspaper journalists, after all, are liberals

themselves). In other words, the media's negativity could be both a reflection and a source of today's economic pessimism.

What happens to consumer sentiment in the coming months will depend on how much it is still being dragged down by frustration with higher prices, which will likely dissipate, as opposed to how much it is being limited by a combination of Republican partisanship and Democratic pessimism, which are less likely to change.

Will the place that it finally settles in come November matter to the election? How people say they are feeling about the economy in an election year—alongside more direct measures of economic health, such as GDP growth and disposable income—has in the past been a good predictor of whom voters choose as president; a healthy economy and good sentiment strongly favor the incumbent. Despite all the abnormalities of 2020—a pandemic, national protests, a uniquely polarizing president—economic models that factored in both economic fundamentals and sentiment predicted the result and margin of that year's presidential election quite accurately (and much more so than polling), according to an analysis by the political scientists John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck.

It is of course possible that consumer sentiment is becoming a more performative metric than it used to be—a statement about who you are rather than how you really feel—and perhaps less reliable as a result. Still, the story that voters have in their heads about the economy clearly matters. If that story were influenced solely by the prices at the pump and the grocery store or the number of well-paying jobs, then—absent another crisis—we could expect the mood to be buoyant this fall, significantly helping Biden's prospects for reelection. But the stories we tell ourselves are shaped by everything from the news we read to the political messages we hear to the identities we adopt. And, for better or worse, those stories have yet to be fully written.

This article appears in the [April 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Grumpy Economy.”

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America's Last Morse-Code Station

Maritime Morse code was formally phased out in 1999, but in California, a group of enthusiasts who call themselves the “radio squirrels” keeps the tradition alive.

by Saahil Desai



“Calling all. This is our last cry before our eternal silence.” With that, in January 1997, the French coast guard transmitted its final message in Morse code. Ships in distress had radioed out dits and dahs from the era of the

Titanic to the era of *Titanic*. In near-instant time, the beeps could be deciphered by Morse-code stations thousands of miles away. First used to [send messages over land in 1844](#), Morse code outlived [the telegraph age](#) by becoming the lingua franca of the sea. But by the late 20th century, satellite radio was turning it into a dying language. In February 1999, it [officially ceased](#) being the standard for maritime communication.



Nestled within the Point Reyes National Seashore, north of San Francisco, [KPH Maritime Radio](#) is the last operational Morse-code radio station in North America. The station—which consists of two buildings some 25 miles apart—once watched over the waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Both KPH sites shut down in 1997, but a few years later, a couple of radio enthusiasts brought them back to life. The crew has gotten slightly larger over the years. Its members call themselves the “radio squirrels.” Every Saturday, they beep out maritime news and weather reports, and receive any stray messages. Much of their communication is with [the SS Jeremiah O’Brien](#), a World War II-era ship permanently parked at a San Francisco pier.

Last July, the photographer Ann Hermes visited the radio squirrels and stepped into their time machine. To send a message, they tapped each Morse-code letter into a gadget called a “bug,” generating a loud, staticky noise that reverberated throughout the whole building. “It’s almost like jazz,” Hermes told me—a music of rhythm and timing that can sound slightly different depending on who is doing the tapping.



Some of the hulking machines date back to World War II. The squirrels do their own repairs, and scrounge eBay for replacement parts on the newer units. To honor the station's past, the volunteers start each Saturday morning with "services" for "The Church of the Continuous Wave," in which they eat breakfast off vintage plates branded with the Radio Corporation of America's old logo.

Morse code is not quite extinct: The U.S. Navy still teaches it to a few sailors, and in 2017, a British man who had broken his leg on a beach [used it to signal for help](#) in the dark with a flashlight. Many of the radio squirrels are retired or nearing retirement. But when Hermes visited over the summer, she spotted one 17-year-old hovering around the squirrels in action. Born after the effective end of Morse code, he was nonetheless eager to help keep the jazz going.

This article appears in the [April 2024](#) print edition with the headline "The Radio Squirrels of Point Reyes."

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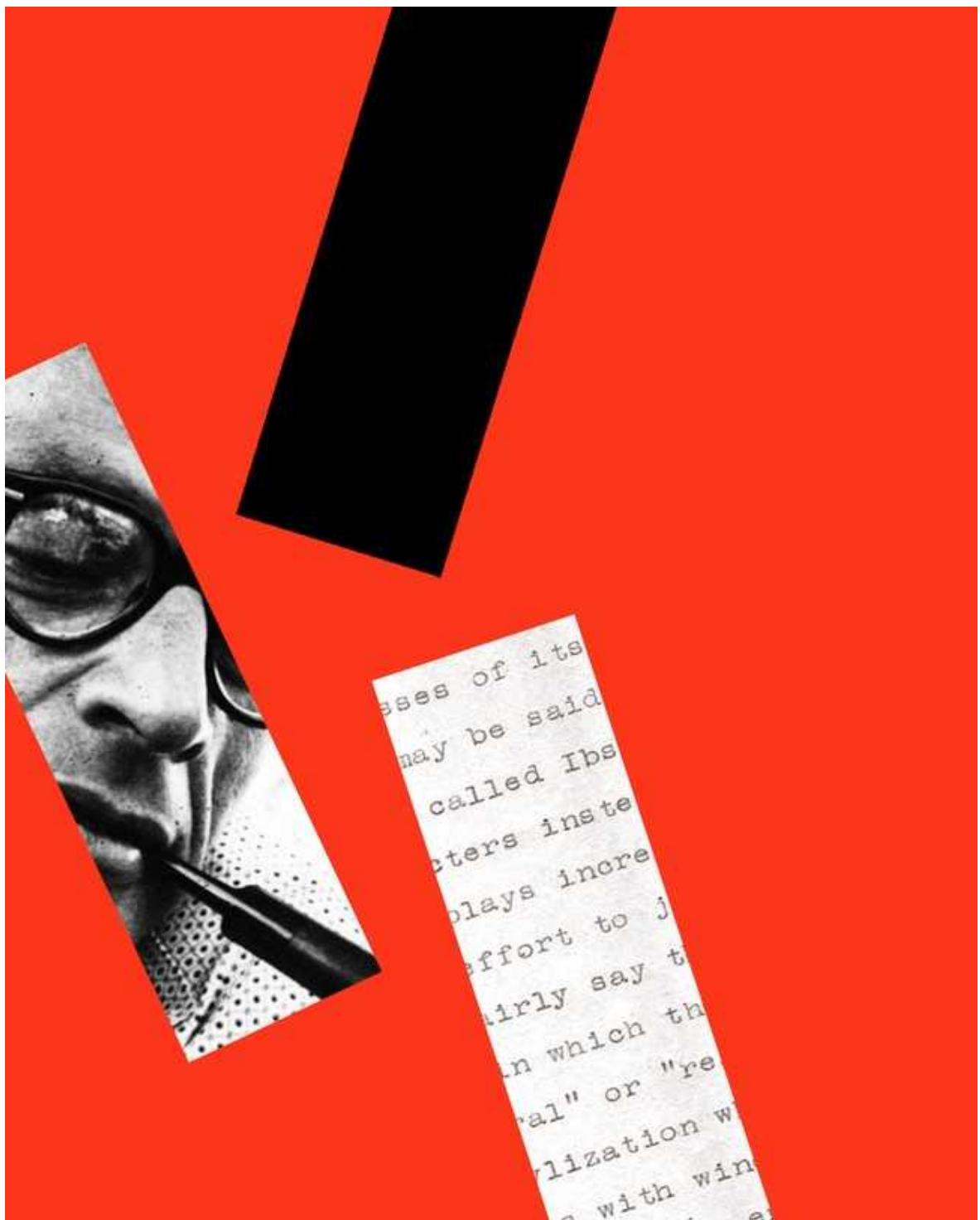
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Arthur Miller Explains *Death of a Salesman*

In a newly discovered letter to a college student, written shortly after the premiere of his most famous work, the playwright describes his theory of tragedy.

by Andrew Aoyama



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In April 1948, the 32-year-old playwright Arthur Miller set out to build a 10-by-12-foot studio—two windows, clapboard walls, a desk fashioned from an old door—on land he'd bought in rural Connecticut. Once it was done, he sat down and began to write. By the next morning, he had completed the

first act of what would become his most famous work; he'd known only its opening lines, he said, and that it would end in the calamity presaged by its title, *Death of a Salesman*. The play was finished in six weeks, and it debuted 75 years ago, on February 10, 1949. *Death of a Salesman* was the first play to sweep all three major drama awards—the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle, and the Tony.

Eight months into the play's Broadway run, Miller answered a letter from Barbara Beattie, a junior at the University of Richmond who had reached out as part of an assignment for a journalism class. Beattie's daughter discovered Miller's letter while helping her mother, now 94, move out of her home. Miller was diligent about his correspondence, according to Julia Bolus, the director of the Arthur Miller Trust and the playwright's former assistant, but a reply of this length was exceptional. Beattie received an A in the class.

Oct 5, 1949

Dear Miss Beattie;

If there is a formal genesis of *Death of a Salesman* it certainly is in the Elizabethan drama, particularly Shakespeare. From the point of view of form I have long felt that the spaciousness of his plays had been forfeited for a physical concentration which contradicts life itself. I have learned from him, if you will, that words themselves are the best scene setting; that it is not necessary to devise elaborate plot machinery in order to "set" a scene which itself can explain itself—in short, to proceed to the meat of a scene at once and to make it happen where and when it logically would happen, and not where a stationary setting forces it to happen.

[From the March 1979 issue: Arthur Miller on his travels in China](#)

As well, my form is one which permits time for what in effect are soliloquies. As I see it, the force of the Elizabethan form lay in its ability to follow the mental processes of its protagonists wherever they might lead. The same may be said of mine. This cannot be said of the "realistic" form, called Ibsen's, which itself imposes upon the story and the characters instead of following them, making way for them. In such plays incredible ingenuity,

and much time, is wasted in the mere effort to justify the simple meeting of two characters. One may fairly say that in our day this form has come to be a word game in which the confrontation of characters is made to seem “natural” or “real”. Of course it is actually a severe form of stylization whose utter unreality and unnaturalness is shrouded by sets with windows that work, rugs on the floors, and so forth. Thus the means employed actually stand as an obstruction between the vision of the playwright and the emotional receptivity of the audience. For we do not dream or inwardly think in such terms but otherwise. We dream in scenes, don’t we. But the preparation for these scenes is direct, immediate, and contained in the scenes themselves. There is no maid who enters and talks to a butler who between them inform us that our father is about to return home after a year’s absence. We suddenly see our father, and in what he does and says lies all relevant information about his situation. Plays written in this fashion therefore proceed with true naturalness, from relevancy to relevancy, without sparring about.

The history of man is his blundering attempt to form a society in which it pays to be good.

Concerning the idea of Elizabethan tragedy and my own, I could speak for many hours. Central to Shakespeare’s tragedy is the idea of the Fall, which implies social stature of a royal level. I too see the Fall as a critical aspect of tragedy, but our world has changed, and it is no longer possible to think of the Fall as that of a socially elevated person exclusively. But social status, to my mind, was and is only a superficial expression of a deeper Fall, so to speak, namely, the destruction of a man’s idea of what he is by forces opposing him. Any class is thereby given entrance to the precincts of the tragic, and so it is in a democratic society. Under Elizabethan feudalism this notion was unthinkable if only because none but the royal had the alternatives of seemingly absolute choice, the liberties of the masses being hedged about by all sorts of rigid proscriptions. Today we are all “free” to aspire to any height, we have the hero’s necessary alternatives. My moral object, therefore, is to attempt to direct the efforts of men toward the clear appreciation of reality, exposing the illusory in order that man may realize his creative potentialities. In another context, Shakespeare was attempting the same thing, as in the history plays where the catastrophe derives from the impossible ambitions of the monarch or those of the subjects against the

monarch. A certain ideal order is therefore implied as having been violated in his work, and in mine. His ideal was feudal; it supposed that life would be good when men behaved in accordance with their social position and neither lapsed into a lower level, (Prince Hal), nor created havoc by attempting to crash into one above them, (The King in Hamlet). My ideal order is less easy to formulate if only because it does not yet exist, while he was writing within a society whose theory was sufficient for him. I see man's happiness frustrated until the time arrives when he is judged, given social honor and respect, not by what he has accumulated but by what he has given to his society. This ideal is posited not for itself, but because I know that the frustration of the creative act is the cause of our hatred for each other, and hatred is the cause of our fears. We reward our dealers, our accumulators, our speculators; we penalize with anonymity and low pay our teachers, our scientists, our workers who make and do and build and create. And so the urge that is in all of us to give and to make is turned in upon itself, and we accept the upside-down idea that to take and to accumulate is the great good. And whether we succeed in that or not, we are sooner or later left with the awareness of our emptiness, our inner poverty, and our isolation from mankind. When a man reaches that knowledge and has the sensitivity to feel the loss of his true self deeply, he is a tragic figure; but not unless he tries to find himself despite the world can he raise up in us the actual feeling that something fine and great and precious has been discovered too late. The history of man is his blundering attempt to form a society in which it pays to be good. The tragic figure now, and always, is the man who insists, past even death, that the stultifying combinations of evil give way before the outpouring of humanity and love that is bursting from his heart. This is why tragedy endures, and this is why it has really never changed excepting in its superficial aspects of rank etc.

I hope some of this has been clear. I write at such length because there are not many who have taken the trouble to examine the matter at all.

Sincerely yours,
Arthur Miller

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A Bloody Retelling of Huckleberry Finn

Percival Everett transforms Mark Twain's classic.

by Tyler Austin Harper



Percival Everett's new novel imagines *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of Huck's enslaved sidekick, Jim. But to call *James* a retelling would be an injustice. Everett sends Mark Twain's classic through the looking glass. What emerges is no longer a children's book, but a blood-soaked historical novel stripped of all ornament. *James* conjures a vision of the antebellum South as a scene of pervasive terror. Everett recognizes that American slavery's true history is not revealed in the movements of great

armies or the speeches of politicians. Its realities lie in the details of life lived under conditions of unceasing brutality—the omnipresent whip, the daily interplay of dread and panic, the rage that can find no outlet.

James, in other words, is anything but a straight-ahead homage to a literary classic. Instead, Everett has a cultural homicide in view. He wishes to kill the Black stock character, entrenched in American fiction and film, whom the [philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah called “the Saint”](#) in 1993 and, several years later, [the director Spike Lee christened “the magical, mystical Negro.”](#) *James* is best understood as a systematic dismantling of that shopworn staple, the Black man or woman who exists to rescue and morally enlighten a fallen but basically redeemable white protagonist. And Everett’s quarrel is not with this archetype alone. He takes aim at the ethics embodied by the magical Negro: the idea that oppression exalts, that suffering purifies the spirit. Everett’s counter-thesis is that oppression hardens; suffering sharpens. *James* cuts.

The trope of “the noble good-hearted black man or woman, friendly to whites,” in Appiah’s words, isn’t hard to recognize in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Its secondary hero is ennobled by a folksy wisdom and probity so unalloyed as to border on the supernatural. Jim is downtrodden but morally upright and ever ready to help. Published in the United States in 1885, Twain’s novel is a tale of boyish exploits, rich with comedy, that doubles as a tutorial against anti-Black racism. A quick refresher, given that high-school English (where *Huckleberry Finn* [remains one of the most assigned novels in America](#)) may be a dim memory: The plot features the plight of semi-orphaned Huck—who flees home to escape an abusive, whiskey-wet father—and Jim, who has run away from his owner, Miss Watson, after learning that she plans to sell him to slavers in New Orleans. Because the pair disappear at the same time, many assume that Jim has killed the boy; he becomes not merely a runaway slave but also a Black man who has murdered a white child. When Huck and Jim are forced to hide out on Jackson’s Island, they throw in their lot together, developing a father-son relationship as they head off, their raft precarious, down the Mississippi River. Along the way, Huck has a necessary moral awakening as his Black companion teaches him, directly and indirectly, about the evils of prejudice. As for Jim, the “happy slave” gets his happy ending—freedom.

The kindly, obliging, superstitious Jim of *Huckleberry Finn*, the ur-magical Negro, carries with him an enchanted hair ball (allegedly from the stomach of an ox) that he believes holds prophetic powers. Everett's updated character is James's first-person narrator, and his predecessor's alter ego in salient ways: He is a writer and storyteller, compassionate but also calculating, by turns reasonable and ruthless. Most notable, James has a head full of books. When he is bitten by a rattlesnake in an early scene on the island, he is visited by a ghost of the Enlightenment. Voltaire comes to him in a fever to quarrel about equality and the perfect human form. The setting for this febrile dream is the local judge's library, the same study where James once read in secret. "What would they do to a slave who knew what a hypotenuse was, what *irony* meant, how *retribution* was spelled?" he wonders in his delirium.

From the May 1876 issue: The adventures of Mark Twain

Over the course of the novel, this hypothetical is reconstituted on new terms: What would a *slave* do who knew what *irony* meant and how *retribution* is spelled? That question could not be posed to Twain's Jim, because he doesn't possess knowledge of this sort, and because the defining feature of the magical Negro is his inability to think in terms of his self-interest. The answer that Everett's James arrives at, by contrast, is righteous and terrible. We are introduced to a character whose fear and repressed anger are buoyed by a kind of comedic detachment. Yet this black humor is pared away, page by page, as James suffers indignity after indignity. With each twist of the Mississippi, his rage grows until it threatens to flood its banks. The novel never loses its sense of humor, but the laughs become manic.

Everett wishes to kill the Black stock character, entrenched in American fiction and film, whom the director Spike Lee christened "the magical, mystical Negro."

"Where does a slave put anger?" Everett's protagonist muses near the beginning of the novel. Confronted with the torn families, the rapes, the whippings, the intractable obstacles to freedom, the routine humiliations both major and minor, James reflects on the wrath of those in bondage: "The real source of our rage had to go without address, swallowed, repressed." The magic of Twain's Jim is his ability to sanitize this repression, not to

simply hide it but to turn it into virtue. The dark magic of James is his discovery that he can refuse to do either.

Everett's interest in the magical Negro should come as no surprise, given his well-established obsession with racial pigeonholing, with the ways that race is rehearsed for white eyes. Earlier novels such as *Erasure*—[recently made into the feature film *American Fiction*](#)—explore how American Blackness is as much a media-generated caricature as it is a coherent identity. Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, *Erasure*'s protagonist, is an Ivy League-educated writer who must pantomime a “ghetto” persona to make himself legible to publishers. Everett's James also performs a kind of racial burlesque: He wears Twain's Jim like a mask.

Whereas Jim speaks in the demotic dialect of an illiterate slave, James code-switches. When he talks to white folks, he adopts the heavy southern lilt of Twain's character. When he talks to fellow enslaved people, he and they speak in the refined English of the educated elite. This linguistic skulduggery is an inspired gag, the kind of farce at which Everett excels: Huck, whose own English is hardly polished, catches James out in occasional slipups, for example, and the effect is deftly comic. The first time it happens—they're watching a small cannon on a boat firing balls into the river—rattles them both, and James scrambles to recover:

“Why they doin' that, Jim?”

“Dey's tryin' to get yo dead body to float up to the top o' da water.”

“Be funny if some other body float up,” he said.

“Hilarious,” I said.

“What?” He looked at me.

“I say da ‘he harry us.’”

“What's that mean?”

“What? Looky naw,” I said.

At the same time, the fluency and philosophical bent that James conceals is an uncomfortable reminder that nothing is feared so much as an educated Black man.

This unease about Black learning is embedded in Twain's original. Before the slaver-dodging trip down the Mississippi, Huck is tormented by his cruel sot of a father, a man prone to slurred invectives against the "govment." During one particularly bad bender, "Pap" Finn rages against the recent appearance of a freed Black man. "There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man," he seethes. "They said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything." The elder Finn is portrayed as a racist and an irredeemable scoundrel, yet the novel quietly echoes Pap's anxiety about "uppity" Black people: Jim's virtuousness is bound up with the aw-shucks sagacity of the illiterate, a patient wisdom that inspires sacrifice in the magical Negro rather than ambition. Jim's selfless impulses—not his reflective powers—are what prove crucial to his ultimate fate. Everett's diagnosis in *James* is that this gentleness is the deadly guarantee of servitude. Freedom can be won only through books, and blood.

Ultimately, Twain's Jim is like a half-finished sculpture of a Black man: On the river with Huck, he's often vibrantly human, and at other times he's crudely hewn, reduced to stereotype—the popular white culture's notion of the "Negro." The genius of *James* is to take this submerged tension in *Huckleberry Finn* and force it to the surface. Everett does this by dramatizing [what scholars have noted are minstrel-show elements](#) that Twain, an [avowed minstrel enthusiast](#), tacitly drew on for the novel's structure and for some of the Huck-Jim routines. A kind of minstrel logic—a caricatured performance of Blackness that obscures both the violence of slavery and the moral deformation it invites—is revealed at the core of the magical-Negro archetype.

[Read: When great art happens to bad people](#)

Almost exactly midway through *James*, Everett diverges from Twain's plot in a telling fashion. After he is separated from the "king" and "duke"—the pair of aspirationally royal confidence men who are the primary antagonists of *Huckleberry Finn*—James finds himself embedded with a minstrel troupe.

The scene is pure Everett, and features a series of mind-bending and darkly comic riffs on racial performativity: At one point, James wears both blackface and whiteface to disguise himself as a white man playing a Black man so that he is not lynched by a racist mob.

The bit brilliantly reprises Everett's enduring fixation on the way that Black Americans—whether modern-day novelists or 19th-century slaves—are compelled to perform not racial authenticity (whatever that may mean), but rather racial authenticity as filtered through the coarsely caricatured expectations of white people. But these scenes, in which James temporarily becomes the magical Negro in bootblack makeup, don't simply lampoon the strange doubling of identity that the “art form” of minstrelsy rests on. They also mark a firm and final departure from Twain's original text. From here on out, the two novels go their separate ways, down very different branches of the muddy Mississippi.

The final sections of *Huckleberry Finn* concern the efforts of Huck, now joined by his friend Tom Sawyer, to free Jim from bondage. The plan is bumbling, of course, and in the escape, Tom is wounded. Rather than seek his freedom, and knowing that the cost of this choice may be his life, Jim attends to Tom. He is recaptured, only to be freed in the end by the smiling fates—namely, the will of the recently departed Miss Watson. True to type, the magical Negro is cosmically rewarded for selfless devotion to the nice (or in the case of Tom, actually not quite so nice) white person. This resolution reestablishes the ethical premise of the magical-Negro trope: that saintly Black sacrifice, inspired by Black suffering, will be rewarded in the end.

Everett's version drives toward no such cozy ending. As the chapters unfold, James is transformed into neither a Black saint nor a Black sinner. He claims some higher ground. If Twain's Jim is a Christlike figure, James belongs to the Jewish Bible: He is not so much morally ambiguous as morally opaque. And as his rage builds, his ethics become inscrutable, not least to himself. After temporarily losing Huck to the king and duke, James encounters a succession of other slaves in his odyssey to reunite with his wife and child—a runaway in the minstrel troupe passing as white; a teenager who has been molested by her owner since childhood; a tragicomic man who tends a steamship's boiler and never leaves the hull. They are evocative and well

drawn, but they're also chess pieces that advance Everett's rejection of the magical Negro.

[Read: *American Fiction* is more than a racial satire](#)

Perhaps none more so than Brock, the boiler man, whose brief but remarkable appearance is the kindling that finally sets the novel ablaze. In the course of James's encounter with the steamship attendant, James realizes that the master Brock keeps evoking is long since dead and that the faithful slave persists in his servitude because he enjoys it. Everett's boiler man is a magical Negro shorn of the magic. Exhibiting the mindless desire to please, he lacks the capacity to turn his subjugation into compassion or earthy acuity. Instead, Brock has been seized by the delusion that his role gives him agency and ownership—"It's my engine. I keep it going." The presence of James, a runaway hunting his freedom, throws him into a fit of agitation. When we last see Brock, he is feverishly loading coal into the hopper as the boiler, soon screaming and shaking, grows ever hotter. And as his furious labor reaches its inevitable finale, the novel accelerates along with him.

Some readers may be troubled by *James*'s pacing—indeed, the book does not so much end as explode—but the frantic momentum isn't a narrative failure; it's crucial to the novel's imaginative enterprise. Everett does not invert the magical Negro, giving us a lazy mirror image: James the indignant rationalist versus Brock and his irrational drudgery. Nor is James merely a repudiation of Jim and his spiritually attuned generosity. Rather, the novel dispenses with these terms entirely. Reason is nowhere to be found within the plantation or outside it. Slavery has exiled logic from the world. At last, amid the plot's violent crescendo, James makes no claim to any higher principle or enlightened strategy: "I knew that the best thing would be to wait and watch and to be patient, to strike when everything was right. However, I was not patient. And I knew that things would never be right."

When Appiah says that the saintlike characters in white films are, "to varying degrees, on the side of the angels," he certainly means the better angels. Everett has a different angel in mind. In the throes of the novel's bitter conclusion, James has a message for the slaver standing in front of him: "I am the angel of death, come to offer sweet justice in the night." (To which the slaver responds, a signature Everett touch, "What in tarnation?")

The magical Negro who ceaselessly transmutes humiliation into honor and wretchedness into down-home wisdom does not survive the encounter. The price of the novel's final moments is James's goodness. The prize is his dignity.

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Is Kara Swisher Tearing Down Tech Billionaires—Or Burnishing Their Legends?

She has long sought to be the best-connected of the tough reporters and the toughest of the insiders. Balancing those goals isn't always easy.

by Helen Lewis



Few journalists and their sources have fallen out as completely as Kara Swisher and Elon Musk. The reporter met the future billionaire in the late 1990s, when she was a tech correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* and he was just another Silicon Valley boy wonder. Over more than two decades,

they developed a spiky but mutually useful relationship, conducted through informal emails and texts as well as public interviews.

Their frenemy shtick was on display, for example, when Swisher [interviewed Musk for Vox on Halloween in 2018](#). He deadpanned that he loved her “costume.” She was wearing her signature look—black leather jacket, black jeans, aviator sunglasses presumably just out of view. “Thank you! I’m dressed as a lesbian from the Castro in San Francisco,” she replied. The pair posed together for a photograph: him seated and her standing, one arm casually resting on his shoulder, an image that signaled she was more than a mere stenographer or grateful supplicant. She was a Silicon Valley player in her own right.

That image illustrates the pact that Swisher has developed with so many masters of the tech universe ever since she began to cover (and champion) the industry. She would be tough and inquisitive, asking the types of blunt questions about screwups and misfires that these [supposed visionaries rarely faced](#) in their heavily gatekept existence. They would parry her blows with charm, self-deprecating humor, and—occasionally—unwise honesty or unwitting self-exposure. Both would derive some benefit. At a minimum, the tech overlords would get credit for stepping into the gladiatorial arena. The audience benefited, too, from Swisher acting as our eyes and ears inside an industry that was changing our lives.

For a time, Musk was Swisher’s dream subject, hanging in the sweet spot of the arc that bends from “unknown visionary” through “eccentric millionaire” onward to “compulsive poster of cringe memes and conspiracy theories.” In 2016, at her Code Conference, he made headlines by predicting that SpaceX would be sending people to Mars within a decade. Another 2018 interview for *Vox* generated headlines as Musk endorsed Donald Trump’s idea of a Space Force. In 2020, he and Swisher [discussed AI doomerism for The New York Times](#).

Then Musk took over Twitter and started [treating it as his own digital fiefdom](#), replacing a flawed content-moderation system with one that could fairly be summarized as “whatever Elon feels like today.” Elite opinion turned against him, and with somewhat less alacrity, so did Swisher: She decided that the quirky entrepreneur had become an isolated dictator

surrounded by yes-men—and by then he'd stopped taking her calls. The pair's souring relationship played out on Musk's own platform, now rebranded as X, and elsewhere. She tweeted out a defense official's quote criticizing Musk's threat to cut off funding for Starlink, his satellite system, in Ukraine. For that, Musk sent her an email calling her an "asshole." She later called him a "petty jerk." He subsequently said she should "take it easy on the Adderall—foaming at the mouth is just not a good look."

[Read: Elon Musk is bad at this](#)

Swisher blames the fallout on his descent into "adult toddler mode" and more dangerous territory beyond that. (In November, Musk replied to a post on X pushing an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory with "You have said the actual truth.") Most journalists would mourn their loss of access to a key source, but Swisher has used the incident to freshen her signature image as a journalistic pit bull. Her new memoir, *Burn Book: A Tech Love Story*, is part of that project. It opens with two pages titled "Praise for Kara Swisher," which she has peppered with insults from her enemies. Musk is the only person to get two entries: "Kara Swisher's heart is filled with seething hate" and "Kara has become so shrill at this point that only dogs can hear her."

Is the drama between Musk and Swisher entirely real, a reflection of her wider disenchantment with the tech industry? Or is it as mutually beneficial as their previous coziness? Good luck working that out. On Musk's side, you have volatility, self-regard, and neurodivergence (he used his *Saturday Night Live* monologue in 2021 to talk about his autism). On Swisher's side, you have ego and professional pride, as well as brand maintenance: After Musk made a bid for Twitter, she took heat as an "apologist" for his ever more erratic behavior. As late as April 2022, she said in an interview that he was "quite complex" and that people underestimated him. "I really have been very supportive of Elon, even when he's acted badly sometimes," she said during her podcast *On With Kara Swisher* in November of that year. "I get dragged a lot for that." Now that they are no longer on speaking terms, she denounces him with the zeal of a convert.

The uneasy symbiosis between writer and subject is a thread that runs through *Burn Book*, elevating it above a gossipy romp (which it also is). Silicon Valley has posed a coverage challenge since the beginning. Its

denizens have expected tech journalists to be advocates of an emerging industry against an older generation of Luddite unbelievers. The story has been about [boy geniuses who must be excused from following normal rules of behavior](#), or sometimes even the law, because they need to be free to “disrupt.” In reporting on this scene, Swisher, as a woman born in the early ’60s, found herself cast in a quasi-maternal role that has sharpened her eventual disappointment with the hollowness of its idealism. “While my actual son filled me with pride,” she writes, “an increasing number of these once fresh-faced wunderkinds I had mostly rooted for now made me feel like a parent whose progeny had turned into, *well*, assholes.”

[From the March 2024 issue: Adrienne LaFrance on the rise of techno-authoritarianism](#)

Swisher didn’t always want to be a journalist. She’d hoped to join the U.S. military, but as a lesbian, she couldn’t, because of its ban on openly gay personnel. She graduated from college in 1984, a decade before even the pathetic Clinton-era compromise of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Swisher never wanted to be in the closet: “I wanted them to ask, and I was compelled to tell.”

Becoming an intelligence analyst would have allowed her to follow in her father’s military footsteps. Louis Bush Swisher rose to be a lieutenant commander in the Navy before dying suddenly of a brain aneurysm at 34, when Kara was 5. In place of the gentle, smiling man she remembers only through photographs, she got a rich stepfather whom she “came to think of as a villain,” ready with “casual cruelties.” This kind of childhood ordeal is common among people with extraordinary drive later in life; Swisher shares the experience of a terrifying paternal figure with Musk, who says his father, Errol, was emotionally abusive ([Errol has denied the accusation](#)).

Her start in journalism set the tone for her career. As a student at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, she called *The Washington Post* to complain that an article about a speech on campus was full of inaccuracies. She bickered with the editor involved, who dared her to come argue in person (she did), and then hired her as a campus stringer. She went to journalism school, but found it a waste of time, was turned down for multiple jobs, and lasted less than a year at the *Washington City Paper*

before being fired. In her breakout role ghostwriting John McLaughlin's *National Review* column, she refused to run errands for him, mocked him openly in a meeting, and later went on the record alleging that he had sexually harassed a co-worker. His response to that brave act also makes the "Praise for Kara Swisher" section at the front of *Burn Book*: "Most people in this town stab you in the back, but [Kara] stabbed me in the front, and I appreciate that."

Swisher clearly relishes jousting with arrogant males, and she shares the inner drive that propels and torments them.

By the '90s, she had landed at the *Post*, where she records being the only one interested in the newsroom's recently acquired cellphone. At 34, she went west to San Francisco. The man-childishness of Silicon Valley is by now a well-rehearsed theme, but Swisher's vignettes of juvenile weirdness are still astonishing. At a baby shower in 2008 for the Google co-founder Sergey Brin, guests were invited to dress as infants, with costumes supplied at the door: "Wendi Deng, then the wife of News Corp titan Rupert Murdoch (whom I had taken to referring to as 'Uncle Satan'), had chosen a diaper and sucker combo." That's the kind of sentence that demands to be read twice.

A beat reporter to her core, Swisher doesn't cover the Valley's arrested development as an anthropologist would—and anyway, she isn't sure the "man-boys" who "felt half-formed and opaque to me with no discernible edge or interesting bits" merit such attention. (In 2019, Musk brought a stuffed monkey to a "serious discussion" about the future of the media with the publisher of *The New York Times*, A. G. Sulzberger, and chatted to it during the meeting.) She does observe, though, that perpetual adolescence explains what she calls "the grievance industrial complex." Again and again, her subjects project the air of a teenager slamming the door to their room, protesting that it's all so unfair. "Tech is littered with men whose parents—typically fathers—were either cruel or absent," she writes. "By the time they grew to be adults, many were unhappy and often had some disgruntled tale of being misunderstood before they were proved triumphantly right."

[Read: The journalist and the fallen billionaire](#)

Swisher is the perfect journalist to chronicle these men. She clearly relishes jousting with arrogant males, and she shares the inner drive that propels and torments them. She is also, like them, fiercely entrepreneurial—a rule-breaker and a risk-taker. After the dot-com crash, she lost patience with her employer’s lack of interest in the digital future, and went into business with her friend Walt Mossberg, whose pioneering “Personal Technology” column for *The Wall Street Journal* began in 1991. They persuaded Dow Jones to back an enterprise called D: All Things Digital. She and Mossberg would combine their reporting with an events business, trying to skirt the dangers of such undertakings—that they’re “fanboy gatherings (complicit) or sponsor-driven pitches (conflicted),” in Swisher’s words; either way, they’re boring. Tech speakers at All Things Digital, which debuted in 2003, would get no fees or even travel expenses, and they wouldn’t be shown interview questions in advance. “No one could hide on our stage, including us.”

Swisher boasts that her career was built on a single insight she adopted early: *Everything that can be digitized will be digitized*. The one thing that cannot be, she and others understood, is IRL proximity to greatness—or, at least, to wealth and influence. This is at once smart and ethically challenging. How do you attract rich, powerful interviewees when all you have to offer is questions they might get in trouble for answering—and when you’re dealing with a club whose members, though they “like to gather and swagger,” are not used to being contradicted? If you’re Swisher, you get cozy with the stars.

In *Burn Book*, she openly acknowledges this criticism, in an attempt to defuse it. Swisher wants to be the best-connected of the tough reporters, and the toughest of the insiders. She argues that All Things Digital made news that hardly flattered her speakers: Mark Zuckerberg’s appearance in 2010, when her co-host, Mossberg, grilled him about privacy, was largely memorable for his “increasing moistness” under the stage lights. She urged him to remove his Facebook hoodie; he declined. Finally he gave in, at which point she threw him a lifeline by shifting attention from his damp armpits to the mission statement—“Making the world more open and connected”—printed inside the hoodie. “Omigod. It’s like a secret cult,” she joked. The fact that, despite the terrible headlines, Zuckerberg sent her a thank-you note afterward—and that Swisher makes sure to mention this in her memoir—neatly demonstrates the ambiguity of her position.

In a similar spirit, *Burn Book* is full of moments when Swisher describes finding herself in the role of unpaid adviser to people she's also reporting on—showing both her influence and her attempts to set boundaries. Murdoch, apparently unbothered by her nicknaming him Uncle Satan, calls her to fish for dirt on his rivals and solicit her thoughts on ventures such as investing in Vice Media. “(Please don’t, I advised; he did it anyway.)” She phones Yahoo’s co-founder Jerry Yang in the early 2000s to warn him about keeping a Google search box on his homepage: “‘You need to get them off your platform,’ I said regarding the dangerous licensing deal. ‘They look harmless, but they’ll kill you.’” (He didn’t listen.) Google’s Larry Page asks her for help writing an essay about the company’s mission. (She declines.) Writing about the private female-focused networking events that Sheryl Sandberg hosted for a time, she calls attention—consciously or not—to the impotence that a supposedly independent Valley reporter can feel. Sandberg often made a point of conscripting Swisher to deliver hardballs to the other attendees to break the ice, only to follow up with an “‘oh-that’s-Kara-what-can-I-do’ shrug” when the interviewees got flustered. This vignette leaves Swisher looking less like a pit bull and more like a Chihuahua.

The message that the time has come for some distance from Silicon Valley hasn’t been lost on Swisher, who has established a base in Washington, D.C., where she bought a home several years ago. A quarter century after the dot-com boom, she notes, democracy still hasn’t caught up with digital technology: “I have spent an increasing amount of time talking to government officials and legislators in recent years, since no significant U.S. laws have been passed to rein in tech … ever.” Podcasts have become her primary journalistic outlet, and she hosts a punishing four episodes every week. The tech industry certainly generates enough big questions to justify this diligence: Should AI companies be allowed to [plunder copyrighted works to train their large language models](#)? Has the U.S. allowed too much power to become concentrated in the hands of a small cadre of men in hoodies? How should crypto be regulated?

Swisher’s tech boosterism once distinguished her from other journalists. Her newfound disillusionment puts her squarely in the middle of the consensus—try finding a commentator who doesn’t think that Silicon Valley “disrupters” need to be given firmer boundaries. But old habits die hard. In March 2021, she suggested that making fun of the non-fungible-token craze

was a mistake because “there is underlying value to owning the tweet that Jack Dorsey started Twitter with.” Funny story: A year later, the Dorsey-tweet NFT—which had sold for \$2.9 million in 2021—went on sale again. After a week, the top bid was ... \$277. It didn’t have much “underlying value” at all. Swisher might have gone sour on the tech bros, but like them, she is sometimes too starry-eyed about anything that calls itself progress.

This article appears in the [April 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Insider.”

Related Podcast

Listen to Kara Swisher speak with Hanna Rosin on *Radio Atlantic*:

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Do Animals Have Fun?

Scientists want an evolutionary explanation for animal play. But maybe the answer is simply: It brings them joy.

by Sallie Tisdale



Orcas sank [another yacht](#) near the Iberian Peninsula in November. Members of a pod had been ramming and shaking boats in the area for more than three years, and had now sunk four. Many observers believed the orcas were attacking their boats, perhaps taking revenge on fishermen. But both boaters

and scientists wondered if the orcas were playing, and the marine biologists who study this group think it may be a fad. “The consensus is that they’re doing this to show off,” [the director of science at an ocean-conservation group said](#). (As fads do, this one may have spread; a yacht had been rammed near Scotland in June.) This is no consolation to sailors, some of whom have tried to take their own revenge on the orcas, shooting at them, lighting firecrackers, and playing heavy-metal music underwater to drive them away.

We project a great deal onto animals. They are elevated into ideals of love and fidelity (dogs, horses), and often they are reduced to objects and tools (cattle, pigs, horses again). Much of humanity’s history with animals has been made possible only by refusing to grant them inner lives anything like our own. We can be amused by a parrot’s speech and intrigued by macaques that use human hair as dental floss, but many animals live in ways we can hardly imagine. Whales and frogs and frigate birds exist in realms we cannot enter, walled off by complex sensory differences and disparate desires. We deny them the individual worth so precisely known as “personhood.” This denial doesn’t just constrict our imagination; it has also constricted research in ethology, or animal behavior.

Animal play has come into focus as a subject of study only in the past century, and the field is still developing even basic principles. What is play? How do we define it in species as different from us and from each other as octopuses and crows? The most careful observer may find it hard to avoid biases about what play looks like and means. In humans, many forms of play imitate serious behavior: hunting, courtship, exploration, building, fighting. We recognize play in other species if it looks like our own games, yet what looks like play from one perspective may be something else altogether. We may miss play entirely if it doesn’t have a human equivalent—or if it appears in an animal we don’t believe to be like us at all.

[From the March 2019 issue: A journey into the animal mind](#)

In [*Kingdom of Play: What Ball-Bouncing Octopuses, Belly-Flopping Monkeys, and Mud-Sliding Elephants Reveal About Life Itself*](#), David Toomey, who teaches English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and writes about science, explores the research into this elusive subject. Toomey has written books about organisms living in extreme environments

and about the physics of time travel, and he has a solid handle on the science here. At least 30 hypotheses of animal play are being investigated, though Toomey notes that “some are little more than notions.” He finds a definition by Gordon Burghardt, an ethologist and evolutionary biologist, particularly helpful: Play is “behavior that is nonfunctional, voluntary, characterized by repeated but varied movements, and occurring only when the animal is healthy, safe, and well-fed.”

Toomey’s own bent is toward the broader context of evolutionary biology and how play may have evolved. Clearly play provides novelty, excitement, sensation. Research suggests that human children deprived of play can develop serious difficulties. Some believe the repetitive behaviors seen in isolated zoo animals, such as pacing and rocking, may be the result of an environment barren of stimulation. Although humans tend to combine novelty, excitement, and sensation into something called “fun,” many ethologists have found the idea of “nonfunctional” behavior a serious challenge to their perspective on other species. Play promotes physical strength and group bonding, teaches social skills, and relieves stress: Therefore, in their view, play is an adaptation. They are prone to consider play as a neurological drive, an instinct, or a social response.

Play-fighting, one of the most common forms of social play in the world, is a good example. Humans do it, of course; it explains everything from the brutal red-rover games of my childhood to *Call of Duty*. Magpies play-fight too. So do capuchins, gorillas, meerkats, voles, and gerbils. Kangaroos engage in formal boxing matches, their bouts beginning only after one has accepted an invitation from another. Rats spar in a series of gentle attacks, escapes, and counterattacks; most of the time, nobody gets hurt. We can see a dozen different skills at work.

From the September 2023 issue: The owls are not what they seem

But many animals also engage in behaviors with no obvious benefit—which doesn’t deter the scientific quest to find one, Toomey observes. Piglets often run around and occasionally perform a kind of flip. Researchers have been inclined to see this as skill-building. “We hypothesize,” as one group put it, “that a major ancestral function of play is to rehearse behavioral sequences in which animals lose full control of their locomotion, position, or

sensory/spatial input and need to repair those faculties quickly,” a routine that the group called “training for the unexpected.” In other words, Toomey writes, “the piglet undertakes the flop-over not for its own sake, but in anticipation of the moment immediately *after* the flop-over when it recovers and regains control.” Bemused, he adds that most observers recognize that a somersault appears “*thrilling*” to piglets—and that falling down seems to be the point.

Songbirds sometimes sing when they are alone; they seem to be singing simply for the sake of it.

The search for utility sometimes fails, which can frustrate ethologists intent on discovering “adaptive advantages.” Toomey describes the way South American fur-seal pups in Punta San Juan will goof around in tidal pools even though this risks an attack by sea lions—just one example of overtly dangerous forms of play. Describing the conundrum presented by a puppy in the snow, he drily writes, “The puppy’s pleasure is self-evident but, for many hypotheses of animal play, difficult to explain. The puppy will find its movements inhibited and, if the snow is deep enough, its vision compromised. How can that be fun?”

Toomey offers other examples of animal behavior that appears “nonfunctional.” Many people have reported watching elephants slide down muddy embankments, appearing to deliberately collide with other elephants climbing up. Then they do it again. Describing a turtle that shared a tank with a nurse shark, Toomey notes that, now and then, the turtle would carefully bite the shark’s tail just hard enough that the shark pulled the turtle around as it swam. A group of 45 bees was allowed to walk along a path that offered both food and small wooden balls. Individual bees stopped and pushed the balls back and forth. Some bees did it only once, but others came back for weeks to roll the balls again and again.

When you pause to think about it, the array of behavior that confounds ready categorizing as adaptive is delightfully broad. Before orcas began ramming yachts, they had what appeared to be [a fashion trend of wearing dead fish on their heads](#). Songbirds sometimes sing when they are alone, repeating a phrase or trill several times; they seem to be singing simply for the sake of it. I had a golden retriever who would drop his beloved tennis ball in the

eddy of a fast river and nudge the ball to the very edge of the current, waiting until the last possible chance to snatch it out. A [grainy video online of a crow in Russia](#) shows the bird carrying a jar lid to the peak of a roof, climbing in, and snowboarding down. The crow does this several times. Toomey describes a group of common eiders gliding down a river's rapids and hurrying back to the spot from which they began to have another go. Perhaps if you can fly, sliding is peculiarly exciting.

Toomey calls this kind of activity "tinkering," an expression of "the craving for fun or sensation" in testing the ways of the world. He describes a raven who picked up a small rock and worked it to the edge of a cliff. The bird gazed down the side of the cliff, then pushed the rock off and watched it fall. It went to get another rock, repeating this in front of observing scientists who were stymied in their search for the behavior's utility. Toomey is less bewildered.

You approach a ledge. You look down. Having no pressing appointments, you pick up a small stone and toss it over. You watch it fall, bounce off an outcropping, and hear it hit bottom. Then you do it again. Perhaps the answer to why the raven was dropping the stones is the reason you and I might do it. What is *that* reason?

It's ... fun.

The theorists can be a bit dispiriting. Sometimes I wanted to whack one on the side of the head and say, "Hey, catch this ball." The quest for objectivity will sooner or later collide with the fact that in the kingdom of play, humans have plenty in common with other animals. We naturally romp with dogs. And dogs goof around with horses. Rats enjoy being tickled. The so-called play expression is common—a "relaxed open-mouth display." Is it possible to see this as a smile? That puppy in the snow: If you can't appreciate the fun of having your movements inhibited and your vision compromised by a weird substance, then I don't want to go to a foam fight or costume party with you.

Wry though Toomey can be about the somber ethology crowd, his own writing is sometimes dense. Evolutionary biology is the spine of his book, and his last chapters lean hard into the exegesis of theories, leaving the

anecdotes promised by his popular-market subtitle behind. He loses the reader at times in a discussion invoking master genes and cladistics (a system of biological taxonomy) that aims to fit animal play into natural selection. And once he gets deep into evolutionary biology, the words *possible* and *imagine* come up a lot. We don't know—likely can never know—how behavior evolved over tracts of time beyond our ken.

Plenty of questions remain. Many ethologists these days are willing to consider consciousness and emotion in animals, and that means anthropomorphism can interfere once again. Almost all the research into animal play has involved familiar placental mammals, such as primates and canids. Play has been observed in several species of reptiles and fish, but they still get little attention from researchers. Maybe many animals, like a few humans, don't play. "I think it more likely, though," Toomey writes, "that animals are all the time behaving in astonishing ways that we simply fail to notice."

[Read: Killer whales are not our friends](#)

In the end, the belief that animals are no less complex and mysterious than humans prevails in *Kingdom of Play*. Toomey understands that if we always reduce play to some form of utility, we are returning animals to the status of automatons. As the book winds down, his own enjoyment of the subject comes to the fore. He follows a few unexpected tangents, among them several stories about people whose deep sense of wonder at the lives of other species inspires them to extreme attempts at immersion in their existence. He describes a man who lived among goats in Switzerland, wearing hoof prostheses on his hands and feet and going on all fours, and a British veterinarian who tried to share in the aroma-rich world of a badger by crawling in the grass, smelling the ground as he moved. He ate earthworms for a time. We may ever be in the dark about animals' inner lives, but how much darker life is if we turn away because of that.

Of course, the real question isn't whether animals play, but how to understand what is happening when they do. If we can conceive of an animal simply having fun, we can no longer see animals as mere objects. We are challenged to change the way we treat them, and a solemn responsibility is added to our dominion. Somersaulting may be good training for the

unexpected, but I wonder: Why is it so hard to believe that exuberance is in itself a good?

We can meet our fellow animals in the most surprising ways. An orangutan watches a person perform the cup-and-ball trick, putting a ball inside one of several cups, overturning them, and shuffling them around. The animal observes closely, Toomey writes, “until the performance’s conclusion, when it is shown that the cup it thought would hold a ball is empty. Staring into the cup, confirming that against expectations it *is* empty, the orangutan rolls onto its back with obvious delight.” The orangutan is not just playing. It has been played, and finds this to be an excellent joke.

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Stop Trying to Understand Trump Voters as if They Are Aliens

**Readers respond to our
January/February 2024 issue.**



In The Atlantic's January/February issue, [24 contributors considered](#) what Donald Trump could do if he were to return to the White House.

The Atlantic's January/February issue performs a valuable service by raising the country's awareness of what's in store should Donald Trump be reelected president. In the same way, the United States ought to understand how reelecting Joe Biden might benefit Americans and improve world security. We also need to learn about the inner workings of the Biden administration,

its future policies and programs, and how another four years could affect the quality of American lives.

Todd Everett

Healdsburg, Calif.

Although the various articles in the “If Trump Wins” issue may have been accurate, I fear they didn’t go far enough in analyzing the real problem: the Republican Party. Few of Donald Trump’s successes as president could have been accomplished without the full support of nearly the entire GOP. Few of Trump’s second-term goals will be realized without full Republican support. The United States doesn’t have a Trump problem; it has a Republican problem. He is merely the latest and perhaps most powerful Republican voice calling for the end of the modern federal government, a position favored by many Republicans since President Ronald Reagan and Grover Norquist. The assaults on government, civil rights, and democratic norms that this issue so ably describes will continue with or without Trump as long as modern Republicans control any levers of government.

Catherine Whiting

Kensington, Md.

As experts in the fields of poverty and social policy, we were saddened that *The Atlantic*’s January/February issue ignored the damage Donald Trump would do to the social safety net if he were to regain the White House. As the 2024 campaign season ramps up, it is crucial that poverty and the safety net receive sufficient attention.

Throughout Trump’s administration, we led a working group documenting the myriad ways that Trump and the GOP sought to weaken, retrench, and dismantle essential programs such as Medicaid and SNAP. Trump’s efforts largely took place without public scrutiny, relying on changes to byzantine bureaucratic procedures and not congressional debates or policy discussions. He even sought to alter how the federal government measured poverty to kick hundreds of thousands of recipients off federal anti-poverty programs or reduce their already meager benefits.

The safety net grew during the early days of the pandemic in an effort to protect America's most vulnerable citizens. But these programs were largely temporary, and the safety net has unfortunately returned to its paltry, pre-pandemic status. Even with a Democrat in the White House, the safety net doesn't receive the attention or focus necessary to ensure that Americans are adequately protected. But if Trump is given another term, he would continue his full-scale war on the nation's poor. We know what he can do, and what he will do.

Ryan LaRochelle

*Senior Lecturer, University of Maine
Orono, Maine*

Luisa S. Deprez

*Professor Emerita, University of Southern Maine
Portland, Maine*

Why do articles like Mark Leibovich's "[This Is Who We Are](#)," which subtly derides Trump voters, seem to outnumber the articles explaining why people voted for Donald Trump? I live in a rural area, and I didn't vote for Trump—but I know many good people who did. I understand that the current system really doesn't work for them, and that they want things to change, much like the people who voted for Bernie Sanders and for Ross Perot before that. Why, for example, has wage growth stagnated since the early 1970s, while productivity has risen? For the sake of the country, *The Atlantic* should avoid articles like Leibovich's and focus on the real issues.

Robby Porter

Adamant, Vt.

Mark Leibovich's article, "This Is Who We Are," reveals an important truth, but I wish he'd gone even further. Trying to "understand" Trump voters is a pointless exercise.

I consider myself a political independent. Many of my family members voted for Donald Trump in 2016. I couldn't see why Trump's insulting

comments about women and Senator John McCain weren't disqualifying for them, as they were for me, so I started engaging with my father, a college buddy of his from Ohio, and an uncle via email. What I learned from 2016 through 2020 was concerning. Most of their information came from nasty and transparently manipulative chain emails that put down "libs," vilified Nancy Pelosi, laughed off climate change. I wondered why my relatives—smart, successful people—found these emails useful. Naively, I started fact-checking them. But as Megan Garber observes in this issue, the truth doesn't matter. Once, I made the mistake of replying to everyone copied on the chain. I learned then of Trump supporters' group psychology—they will defend one another no matter what, ganging up on anyone not going along with their line.

Later, as fires burned on three sides of my California home, I emailed my father a basic primer on climate-change science. I remember taking time to find the best resources: short, factual, based on information from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA. In response, he notified my family that he was never speaking to me again. He died of a heart attack in 2020. When I broke the news of my father's death to my uncle, one of his first reactions was to say that he was sorry I had decided to send that "disrespectful" climate-change email, implying that I had deserved to be ostracized.

I sent my father that email out of respect for him. He was an intelligent man. We had engaged in many thoughtful political discussions over a lifetime. The error I made was appealing to that intelligence post-Trump. After a steady diet of cynical half-truths and lies from chain emails and Fox News, my father could no longer absorb counterfactuals dispassionately; he saw them as attacks.

That was the end of my efforts to understand Team Trump's perspective. The media, too, need to stop trying to understand Trump voters as if they are aliens. They are our family members. Like us, they are human, with all the human susceptibilities. It isn't condescending to call them out.

Louise Yarnall
La Selva Beach, Calif.

Reading “If Trump Wins” was, in a word, exhausting. I came away thinking two things. First, the Democratic Party needs to get better at messaging, as was put best by Helen Lewis in her article, “[The Left Can’t Afford to Go Mad.](#)” Second, all of this just underscores the absurdity of the Electoral College. That Donald Trump—or anyone—doesn’t have to win the most votes to be “elected” and that everything detailed in the issue could possibly come to pass even though a plurality of the country might vote against it is Kafkaesque.

Ramsey Chilwell
San Francisco, Calif.

Behind the Cover

In this month’s cover story, Franklin Foer writes about the end of what he calls the “[Golden Age of American Jewry.](#)” Rising anti-Semitism, on the right and the left, threatens to undermine an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and it could in turn destroy the liberal order they helped establish.



For our cover design, we drew inspiration from the aesthetic traditions of Yiddish-theater posters, adapting their colors, typefaces, photo treatments, and intermingled languages. (Special thanks to David Roskies at the Jewish Theological Seminary for his Yiddish expertise.) From the mid-19th century through the outbreak of World War II, Yiddish theater companies flourished across Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in London, Paris, and New York. For Jewish immigrants to the United States, the critic Jesse Green has written, Yiddish theater offered “a keepsake of home, and yet also a means of acculturation.” Their comedies, dramas, and melodramas explored communal and cultural concerns but also looked outward, taking up the stories of Jews in America.

On the cover, we sought to assemble a cast of icons from the Jewish Golden Age. Along the top row, from left to right, are Saul Bellow, Bob Dylan, Susan Sontag, Leonard Nimoy, Henry Winkler, and Betty Friedan. In the center is Barbra Streisand, surrounded, clockwise from the top right, by Lenny Bruce, Ruth Westheimer, Steven Spielberg, Adam Sandler, Jonas Salk, Gilda Radner, Winona Ryder, Ralph Lauren, and Philip Roth. Along

the bottom row, from left to right, are Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jerry Seinfeld, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Louis Brandeis, and Cynthia Ozick.

— **Peter Mendelsund**, *Creative Director*

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Poetry

- [**Tomato & Lettuce**](#)

Tomato & Lettuce

by Monica Rico



Then, everything was garnish,
two kids and a house,
a wife who kept the

beds made, shirts ironed,
secrets hidden like dust

on the canned goods.
What can't be washed
with vinegar—

scum of the coffee pot—or
set out in the sun with
fresh linen

my mother swears
had to be ironed
and I believe men

made work for women,
invented tile,

starch, matrimony,
and *ama de casa*
to chop the tomato

and lettuce sometimes
in bowls, often on the side
as adornment. What
is the relationship

between mother and
daughter, tree and limb?

The moment I say my
memory is not of her
sadness but of her laughter

I've gotten it all wrong.
The bright split of my
birth was to a woman

who wanted me
to wear my decoration—
a tree cleaned of its bark

after a cool winter doesn't
forget its leaves.

This poem appears in the [April 2024](#) print edition.

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