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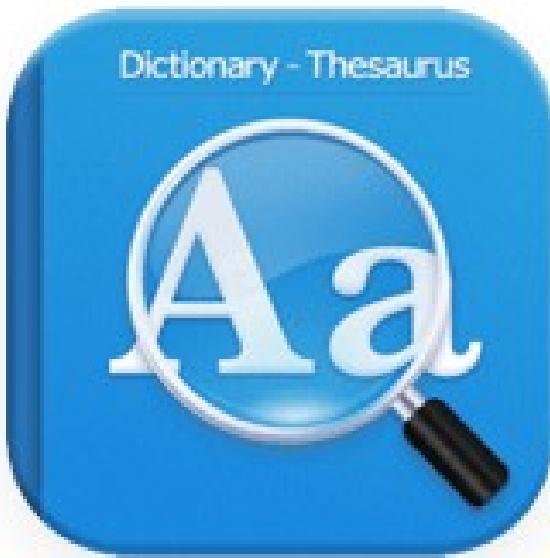
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Goings On

- [A Century of Life in the City, at the Movies](#)
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Going On

A Century of Life in the City, at the Movies

Also: the dream-pop of Hatchie, Elevator Repair Service tackles “Ulysses,” the theatre-district pub Haswell Green, and more.

By Richard Brody, Zoë Hopkins, Emily Nussbaum, Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, Jillian Steinhauer, Dan Stahl

January 30, 2026



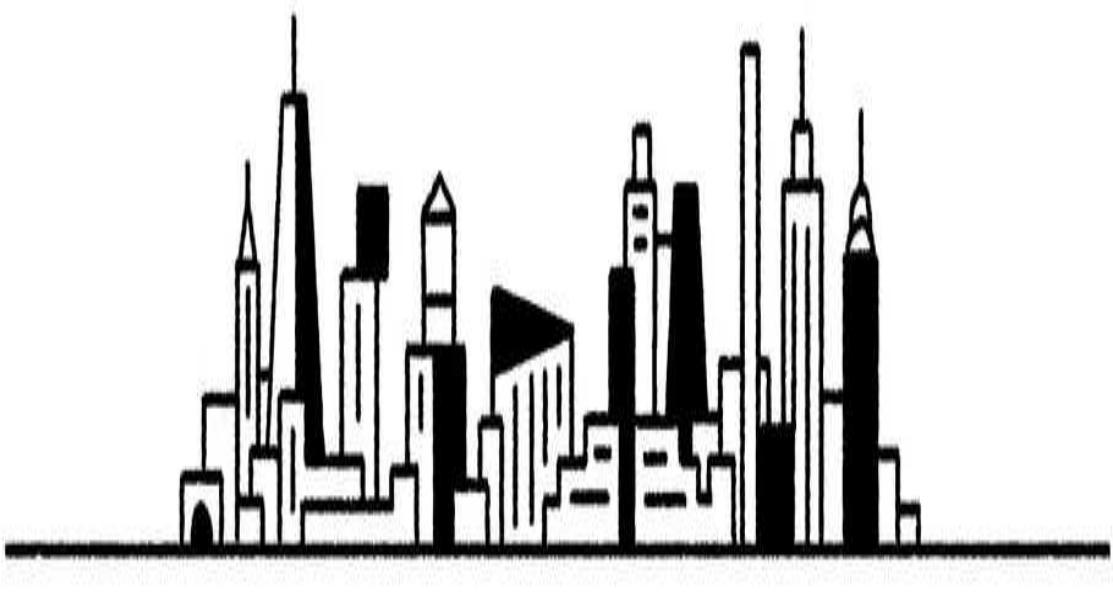
The lives of working people in the city—above all, New York City—have been at the center of movies from the industry’s start, as seen in “**Tenement Stories**,” Film Forum’s teeming series of fifty-plus films, running Feb. 6-26. The series spans more than a century of cinema, from the nineteen-tens to last year, with the 2025 documentary “Heat,” directed by Aicha Cherif, about three women whose housing becomes tenuous in the gentrifying Lower East Side. Some of the most harshly realistic visions of poverty are found in the program’s earliest features: Raoul Walsh’s “Regeneration” (1915) and Lois Weber’s “Shoes” (1916), in which youths are driven to

gangsterism and sex work, respectively, in households run to ruin by idle fathers.



There are comedies and romances, too, such as Hal Ashby's "The Landlord" (1970), with a script by Bill Gunn, and tales of artists in the downbeat city, such as Shirley Clarke's "The Connection" (1961), which features the jazz musicians Jackie McLean and Freddie Redd; "Pull My Daisy" (1959), with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg; and "Frownland" (2007), directed by Ronald Bronstein (who co-wrote "Marty Supreme" and "Uncut Gems").

But the heart of the series is the immigrant experience—and its frequent burden of social exclusion—as in Allan Dwan's "East Side, West Side" (1927), in which struggling Jewish and Irish neighbors clash and coöperate; Martin Scorsese's Little Italy-set crime thriller "Mean Streets" and his documentary "Italianamerican," a discussion with his parents, who were born in Sicily; and the drama "El Super," directed by Leon Ichaso and Orlando Jiménez Leal, which shows a Cuban family struggling to fit into American life. And in Mabel Cheung's drama "The Illegal Immigrant" (1985), set in Manhattan's Chinatown, a young man from Canton, facing deportation, arranges a paid marriage while contending with pressure from local gangsters.—*Richard Brody*



About Town

Art

The tradition of sculptural assemblage departs from the proposition that things *are* inasmuch as they are *together*. The Jamaican-born sculptor **Arthur Simms** takes this notion to its maximum tension: found objects are bound together by dense skeins of rope that resemble mycelial networks or unusually thick cobwebs. Though the rope suggests tidy metaphors of unity, coherence, and formal integrity, a playful but insistent messiness effloresces in Simms's entanglements, throwing any seeming wholeness into question. Among the objects pulled together by the ropes are kids' scooters and bikes, liquor bottles, toys: elements of childish nostalgia and adult revelry alike that charge the sculptural bodies with a rambunctiousness that refuses containment.—*Zoë Hopkins ([Karma](#); through Feb. 14.)*

Off Broadway

Elevator Repair Service, the trickster troupe who created “Gatz,” a delirious reading of “The Great Gatsby,” ups the ante by adapting James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” squeezed to just under three hours and twenty thousand words. That’s like compressing a planet into a bouillon cube, but, even so, the soup is mighty tasty. The show opens as a reading, with the cast jolting whenever they fast-forward, but by Act II, they’re whirling around the stage, performing outlandish octuplet births and potato seductions. Vin Knight is affecting as Leopold Bloom, an anxious outsider in his city, his subconscious, and his leaky body; Scott Shepherd plays multiple roles, but is particularly droll as Blazes Boylan, jitterbugging hornily through Dublin. The show will be catnip for Joyce-heads, but there are pleasures for everyone, or, as Molly might put it: thumbs up.—*Emily Nussbaum (Public Theatre; through March 1.)*

Dream-pop



The Australian singer-songwriter **Hatchie** has steadily built a little dream-pop world suspended between the synth music of Kylie Minogue and the washed-out guitars of the Cocteau Twins. Following stints in a few Brisbane indie bands, in 2017, Harriette Pilbeam uploaded the song “Try” to the website of the radio station Triple J under her family nickname, and then

settled into a woozy shoegaze sound, working with her partner, Joe Agius, and the producer Dan Nigro (Olivia Rodrigo, Chappell Roan). Her new album, “Liquorice,” is her most sensational; co-produced by Agius and Melina Duterte (who performs as Jay Som), the LP is feverish and intimate. Alongside Agius and the Warpaint drummer Stella Mozgawa, Hatchie blows up her dazed songs of dysphoric romance to magnificent proportions.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Music Hall of Williamsburg](#); Feb. 7.)

Dance

This year’s **Dance on Camera Festival** showcases thirty-three films from twelve countries. “Rojo Clavel,” one of seven features, is a moving portrait of Manuel Liñan, a dancer who has reshaped the rigid gender tropes ingrained in flamenco in order to express his experience as a gay man. The first of three programs of shorts includes an extraordinary film by Grigory Dobrygin of Natalia Osipova dancing Frederick Ashton’s “Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan” in an empty studio. Shot closeup, with every muscle visible, Osipova is freedom and impulse personified. “Risa,” on a program entitled “Portraits,” offers a stylish and unsentimental glimpse into the inner world of the modern dancer and lifelong teacher Risa Steinberg.—*Marina Harss* ([Symphony Space](#); Feb. 6-9.)

Art

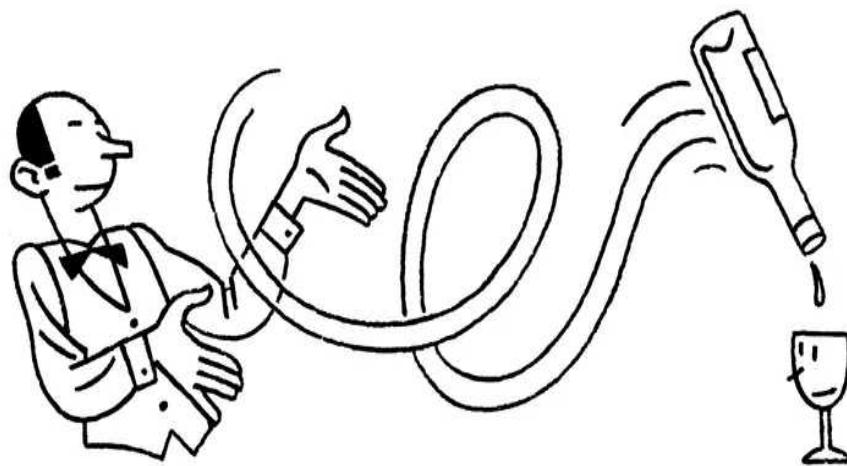


Marcia Marcus's paintings are strange, in the best way. She rendered people in muted tones and gray scale, so that they appear stuck in the past, and her subjects—often herself—look out with deadpan expressions, giving them an air of confrontation. She compressed space, too, making distances dissolve and physical relationships seem out of proportion. Marcus started painting in the nineteen-fifties. Over the decades, her work—including the twelve pieces in the show “Mirror Image”—fell in and out of fashion, but gained momentum again before she died, last year. Rightfully so. Works such as the exhibition’s titular self-portrait give figurative painting, whose recent dominance has begun to wear thin, a refresh: they treat the medium not as a form of testimonial but as an inventive conceptual project.—*Jillian Steinhauer ([Olney Gleason](#); through Feb. 14.)*

Movies

Many of the best international films of recent years have failed to get U.S. distribution; one of them, P. S. Vinothraj’s “**Pebbles**,” which premiered at festivals in 2021, is now streaming on *MUBI*. It’s a drama of the intimate politics of gender in rural Tamil Nadu, where a hard-drinking man drags his young son to a distant village in order to force his estranged wife to return home. As the man brawls with his in-laws, the boy is caught between two

worlds, of male rage and female subjection. The pair's embittered travel in the high heat of a sunbaked plain is punctuated with scenes of women's struggles to provide the bare necessities; Vinothraj films harsh journeys and hard labor with extraordinary visual variety and emotional nuance.—R.B.
(Reviewed in April, 2021.)



Bar Tab

Dan Stahl grooves to a cover band in melting-pot midtown.



The namesake of **Haswell Green's**, an Irish-inflected bar and music venue in the theatre district, is Andrew Haswell Green. Who? "The father of New York City," according to a biography in the establishment's leather-bound drinks menu, which details Green's creation of the city's five-borough structure and his role as a developer of Central Park and the Met museum. Several pages of beverage options include ninety varieties of whiskey, plus wine, beer, cider, and custom cocktails like the mezcal-forward P.Y.T., which, well—imagine a drinkable cigarette. The clientele is likewise wide-ranging. Tourists from California, Brazil, you name it. Regulars from the neighborhood. Wild cards, such as two people in feathered bowler hats who were eating pizza during a weekly show by a pop-rock cover band called the Big Woozy. One of the pizza-eaters, the lead singer announced, was Micki Free, a member, in the eighties, of the Grammy-winning band Shalamar, whom he summoned onstage. Taking a microphone, Free warned the crowd, "It's gonna get sexy. Is that all right?" Without waiting for an answer, he launched into Prince's "Kiss," his falsetto eerily reminiscent of the original. Afterward, things got a little too sexy. A sloshed suited man went from lurching around the dance floor to tilting himself at women by way of introduction. Security intervened, taking him to pay his tab, which he attempted to do with his I.D., and escorting him out of the bar, then escorting him out again after he reentered. The band played on. Something quintessentially New York hovered about the place, with its mashup of

people from all over and its diner-like drinks list, its capacity to surprise and then carry on. Albeit a humbler site than the Park and the Met, it's no less worthy a bearer of Green's legacy.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Listen to the whales](#)
- [The pleasures of friction-maxxing](#)
- [Minnie Driver's guide to kissing](#)

Photo Booth

William Eggleston’s Lonely South

In his show “The Last Dyes,” the photographer presents a world that feels fictional but fact-based.

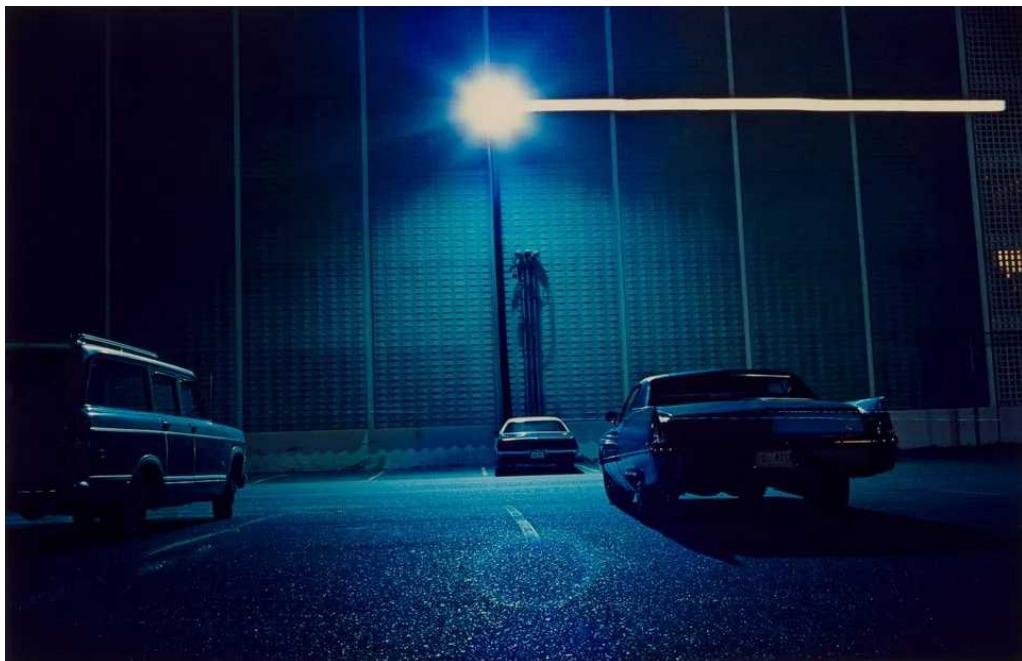
By Hilton Als

January 24, 2026



One of the photographer William Eggleston’s great strengths—his inspiring force—is to know when he’s telling the truth about something and to stick with it. Although a number of critics didn’t respond especially warmly to his landmark show “William Eggleston’s Guide,” when it opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976—it was the first one-man show of color photography the museum ever presented—he dusted off that critical debris and continued to capture what he knew: an American South that had echoes of Zora Neale Hurston’s melancholy, amused reports from that region of the world, and that was as trenchant and lyrical as Tennessee Williams’s mid- to late-career one-act plays about Southern life. Now eighty-six, Eggleston—who was born and lives in Memphis—has a distinctly Southern sense of humor that draws on observation, gossip, and a love of the absurd. Although he has said that the South he grew up in bears little resemblance to the

present-day version, he still mines what he's always mined: the pockets of loneliness that Truman Capote—a New Orleans native—evoked in an essay about his home town and the “long, lonesome perspectives” of its streets. Eggleston’s loneliness stems from being an insider who also isn’t one. Like a writer, a photographer works alone. (Though that’s where the similarity ends for Eggleston; in a 2016 interview, he said, “Words and pictures . . . they’re like two different animals. They don’t particularly like one another.”)



The kind of details that Eggleston fixes on in his pictures—the placid swimming pools, say, or a suddenly startling view of racial “difference”—further substantiate his identity: he isn’t the person or thing he’s making an image of, but he recognizes himself in its Southernness. Unlike other photographers of the South—Robert Frank, for one—Eggleston understands the extraordinary, sober stateliness of the place, a remote grandeur that marks many of the women and Black people in his photographs: no matter how close the camera gets, you’re not allowed in.

While looking at images in Eggleston’s current show in New York, “The Last Dyes” (at the David Zwirner gallery, through March 7th), an exhibition of dye-transfer prints from the first half of the seventies, I marvelled at his commitment in the early years of his art-making, given that he did not have much of an affirming audience until, at about thirty-one, he met the brilliant

curator Walter Hopps, who recognized in Eggleston's Kodachrome world an unexplored universe. Eggleston's first images were in black-and-white; like many photographers of his generation, he was influenced by Frank, and by Henri Cartier-Bresson's "The Decisive Moment." But, by the mid-sixties, he had met the astute and poetic Alabama-born photographer William Christenberry, who turned him on to color. Christenberry's photographs of abandoned houses and road stands have some of the order and calm of the unforgettable images that Walker Evans produced for "[Let Us Now Praise Famous Men](#)," his groundbreaking 1941 book with James Agee, documenting sharecroppers in the South during the Great Depression.







Eggleston, however, used color in a different way: he employed the bright shock effect of advertising—*Drink Coca-Cola! Drive this Buick!*—but separated it from capitalism. There’s so much junk in Eggleston’s pictures. Junked cars, used cars, dusty parked cars, cars going nowhere or maybe about to go somewhere. In one of his most famous images, “Memphis”—it’s not in the Zwirner show—we see a tricycle parked on a suburban street. The tricycle is shot from below, at an angle that renders it monumental. And if you look between its wheels, you can see a car parked in the garage of a

ranch house. The tricycle frames the car just as Eggleston frames the tricycle. The world is a series of frames. For me, this image, so simple and heartfelt, is about time. We all go from the tricycle to the car to the grave, under that big sky. But what happens to us in between? That's part of what "The Last Dyes" addresses: the days we live in. Days upon days. Though the ostensible reason for the show is to exhibit Eggleston's dye-transfer prints—a painstaking process (no longer in use) in which three film matrices are separately submerged in dye and then pressed and rolled onto a dye-receptive fibre paper to create a single image—the outmoded technique only underlines the show's concern with temporality.

Made up of thirty-one photographs (with ample space between them for the viewer to dive into one without feeling distracted by another), "The Last Dyes" presents a world that feels fictional but fact-based, as if you were reading a true-crime novel. The truth here is Eggleston's love not only of images but of beauty—or of what he considers beautiful. Part of his great accomplishment was to take the European aesthetic of beauty and redefine it for the South, with its heat and its billboards, its indolence and humor and thick nights. Indeed, one of the more astonishing pictures in the show combines all of these last three elements. At first, it is difficult to make out "Untitled" (c. 1972)—it's a dark image—but then it starts to find you. *Oh! Look! I recognize that crumpled pack of Winstons in the ashtray*, your mind says. *That receptacle must be in a car. What is that shape in the car, though?* It's a woman's head thrown back—we guess this only because of the long strands of hair across her face, long dark hair that seems to be of a piece with her sort of fuzzy apparel. They're all there, Eggleston's signifiers: the brand name, the partially unseen (and thus unknown) person, the textures and colors of mysterious night. In this image, Eggleston grabs at what Flannery O'Connor, in her 1960 novel "[The Violent Bear It Away](#)," called "this lonesome place": the lonesome place of being, doubly lonesome because it's in the South, the dumping ground for all that tremendous industry and hatred, constantly in the throes of reconstruction—even if no one remembers that word. It takes a long time to understand what you're seeing in this photograph, but once you do the picture seems to belong to you.

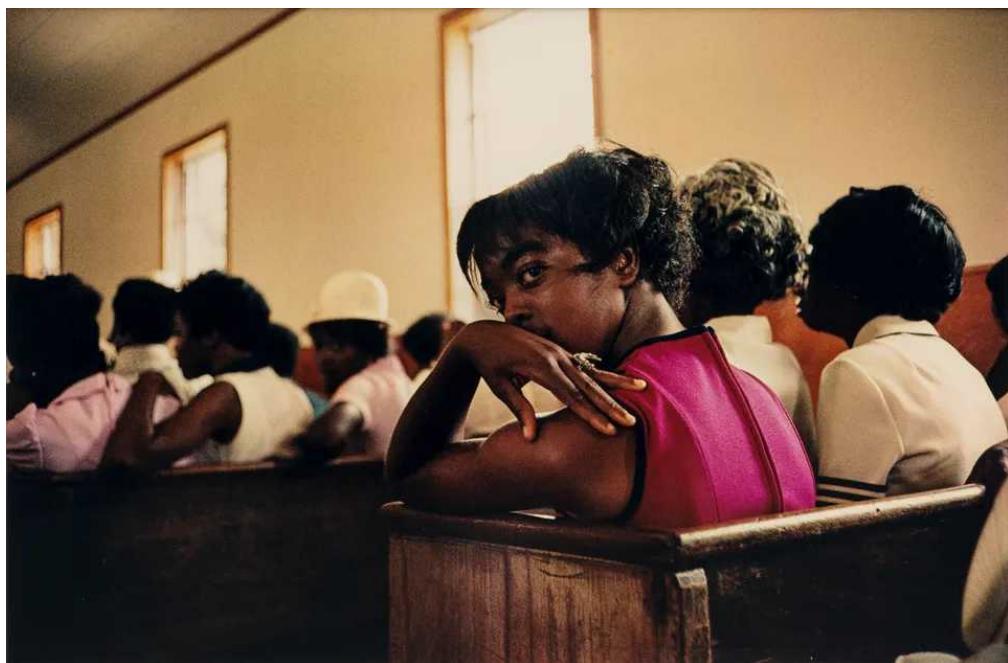


Another thing that became clear to me as I went through the exhibition is how rarely Eggleston's photographs represent people interacting. He is less interested in the drama behind closed doors—which fascinated Hurston and Williams—than in what the people involved leave behind: the food stuffed in a freezer, the eerie abandoned gas station. His pictures are filled with the detritus of being, and they make us feel sad, not about being alive but about what life requires of us, the necessity of leaving things in order to keep moving.



When there are folks in Eggleston's images—and there are not that many of them here—you feel a little jolt, and then you remember how spread out the South is and how communities are formed in that vastness. (Unusually for a photographer of his generation, Eggleston's photographs are not portraits—or, rather, his portraits are not necessarily people-based. When he photographs a dog beneath a lowering sky, that's a portrait, too.) Even though I like the wit and show of a 1972 work in which we see a white woman with a bouffant hairdo giving a little leg as a Black man passes—it's

a strong image of what the world looks like once the party's over and the weight of a white woman being looked at by a Black man takes on terrible connotations—I feel it owes too much to Garry Winogrand and his extraordinary series “[Women Are Beautiful](#).” The real stunner when it comes to showing us community is Eggleston’s 1972 image of a young Black woman, sitting in a church pew with other women of color, turning to look over her shoulder at the camera. The woman’s hair is straightened—“correct”—and she is thin; she wears a sleeveless, wine-colored dress, and the long fingers of her left hand rest on her left shoulder, partly hiding her mouth. It’s a powerful evocation of the psychology of beauty in the American South. Is she covering her mouth because she’s been made to see her lips as too big? Does she straighten her hair because the “natural” look has caught on only in big cities, where women have more freedom to express themselves, or is she simply trying to align herself with the older women she is sitting with, to be one with them? By looking at the white man behind the camera, is she doing something forbidden? We’ll never know. And it’s those many mysteries, rooted in the real and the possible, that continue to make photography in general, and Eggleston’s in particular, so fascinating.



The Talk of the Town

- [Why the D.H.S. Disaster in Minneapolis Was Predictable](#)
- [The Schoolchildren of Minneapolis](#)
- [For “Survivor” ’s Season 50, Superfans Flock to Fiji](#)
- [Matthew Schaefer, Hockey’s Youngest \(and Nicest\) Big Shot](#)

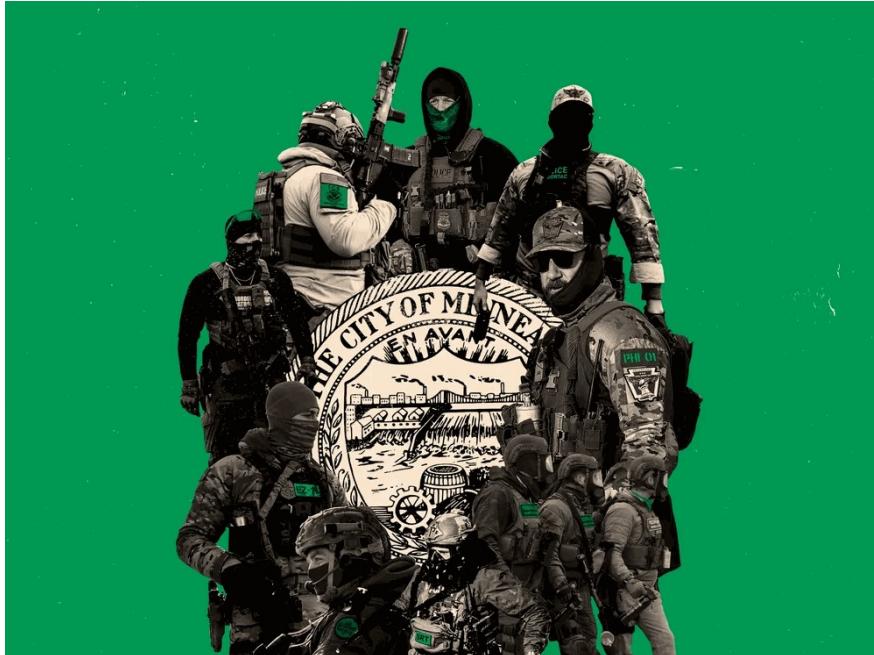
Comment

Why the D.H.S. Disaster in Minneapolis Was Predictable

For decades, ICE and Border Patrol have operated with fewer constraints than typical law-enforcement agencies.

By Jonathan Blitzer

February 01, 2026



When Congress created the Department of Homeland Security, in 2002, one lawmaker bragged that the United States was finally “meeting the enemy’s agility with our agility.” At the time, the issue of who the enemy was didn’t cause much political disagreement in Washington; it was generally understood to be Al Qaeda, or groups like it. Early skeptics questioned the wisdom of giving a single federal department a monumental budget as well as broad policing and surveillance powers, but caution was largely cast aside. Agencies within the department, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (C.B.P.), which includes Border Patrol, received lavish bipartisan support. Twenty-four years later, their mission and their conduct have exceeded the worst imaginings of

even their sharpest critics. With Donald Trump in the White House, and a servile Republican majority in Congress, *ICE* and Border Patrol are turning into the President's personal army, targeting immigrants, Democrats, and, as the recent events in Minnesota have shown, just about anyone who crosses their path.

The situation is no less shocking for having been at least partly predictable. For decades, *ICE* and Border Patrol have operated with fewer constitutional constraints than typical law-enforcement agencies when they conduct searches and make arrests; in instances of abuse, oversight has tended to be far more lax, leading to a culture of freewheeling unaccountability. The consequences were on display from the start of D.H.S.'s incursion into Minneapolis, which began in December, under the name Operation Metro Surge. On January 7th, Jonathan Ross, an *ICE* officer and an Army veteran, shot and killed Renee Good, a mother of three. Less than three weeks later, Alex Pretti, an I.C.U. nurse, was killed when two C.B.P. agents fired at least ten shots at him, including six while he was lying motionless on the ground. Witness accounts and phone videos make clear that neither Good nor Pretti, both of whom were U.S. citizens, posed any immediate danger to the agents. Nevertheless, Kristi Noem, the Secretary of D.H.S., said that they had engaged in "domestic terrorism." She was following the White House line. Stephen Miller, a top adviser to the President, told agents after Good's killing, "You have immunity." Pretti, he later wrote on X, was "an assassin" who "tried to murder federal agents."

These lies were the basis of the government's legal response, prompting half a dozen federal prosecutors and the F.B.I. agent in charge of the Minneapolis field office to resign. State and local authorities, blocked from conducting their own inquiries, were accused by the Justice Department of conspiring to oppose Trump. Shortly after Pretti's killing, Pam Bondi, the Attorney General, sent a letter to Governor Tim Walz, offering three "common sense solutions" to end the federal siege. One of them was to turn over the state's voter rolls. "Is the executive trying to achieve a goal through force that it cannot achieve through the courts?" a district-court judge asked D.O.J. lawyers.

On Tuesday, in the face of mounting national outrage, the Administration came as close as it could to admitting fault without actually doing so. The

President demoted Greg Bovino, the commanding agent in charge of the roving patrols that have besieged Los Angeles, Chicago, Charlotte, and Minneapolis. The night before, according to the *Times*, Noem had to defend herself in a two-hour meeting at the White House. Miller wasn't there—"he knows just how and when to disappear," a former colleague once said. But he has since acknowledged that the two agents involved in the Pretti shooting "may not have been following" protocol.

The idea that this response would be enough to temper the political fallout from Operation Metro Surge is a sign of the unbridled impunity that reigns in the White House. Three thousand federal agents remain in Minnesota. A parallel operation, run by Citizenship and Immigration Services—the D.H.S. agency responsible for administering the legal-immigration system—has targeted fifty-six hundred refugees in the state for potential "fraud." The federal government had previously granted these people legal status. But more than a hundred of them, according to a lawsuit by the International Refugee Assistance Project, were arrested by *ICE* and sent to jails in Texas, where they were re-interviewed, as though the legal process they'd already gone through meant nothing.

No other aspect of Trump's crackdown has shown any sign of changing, either. D.H.S. agents in masks and unmarked vehicles have been abducting immigrants with legal status and detaining and harassing citizens who look or sound as though they might not be U.S.-born. A recent *ICE* memo, obtained by the Associated Press, stated that agents can now enter people's homes to make arrests without a warrant from a judge. The agency has always relied on administrative warrants, signed by its own officials, to carry out deportation orders. But this authorization marks a radical departure from legal precedent, and a clear affront to the Fourth Amendment protection against illegal searches.

On Wednesday, a federal judge issued an injunction to block the refugee arrests in Minnesota, but whether D.H.S. will comply is anyone's guess. According to a recent ruling from the chief federal district-court judge in the state, *ICE* violated nearly a hundred court orders in January alone—and that was just orders relating to Operation Metro Surge. The Administration has ignored other federal injunctions, going back to March of last year, and it has serially lied about aspects of its operations in court, bringing rebukes

from judges across the country. “After nearly thirty-five years of experience with federal law enforcement,” one of them, a Trump appointee on Long Island, wrote, “I have never encountered anything like this.”

Tom Homan, the Administration’s “border czar,” has been dispatched to Minneapolis to oversee the situation. His current title is itself revealing. The White House is bringing the border to the rest of the country. Politically, in light of the institutional history of D.H.S., this gives the Administration broader license to claim that it’s facing down foreign threats; practically, agents on the ground are engaging in exceptionally aggressive forms of policing.

Last year, at the Administration’s behest, Congress tripled *ICE*’s budget, making it the most heavily funded law-enforcement body in the country. After the killings in Minnesota, Democrats have threatened to block further funding unless the Administration agrees to impose modest restraints on agents’ conduct, such as forcing them to remove their masks and raising the legal bar for the use of warrants. These are rearguard actions that are long overdue. On Thursday afternoon, Senate Democrats reached a deal with the President to forestall a government shutdown while they negotiate the details. The inevitable retrenchment came hours later: Bondi issued orders to arrest four people for disrupting a church service in Minneapolis. Two of them were anti-*ice* activists; the others were journalists reporting the story. ♦

Minneapolis Postcard

The Schoolchildren of Minneapolis

As thousands of *ICE* agents arrived, kids started staying home from school. A local principal, teachers, and parent volunteers have banded together to keep the families safe.

By Emily Witt

January 30, 2026



One recent afternoon, in a linoleum-floored room at an elementary school in Minneapolis, the mother of a first grader and third grader sorted through sacks of potatoes and oranges. These and other groceries would be distributed to families who'd been too afraid to send their children to school in the weeks since an influx of agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement began operations in the city, in December. The day before, a group from a local fitness studio—"a bunch of, like, hot, ripped spinning instructors," the mom called them—had arrived with eight carloads of donated food. The most vulnerable part of the process, she explained, is the home delivery: "You can just imagine that it's super sensitive, because you're getting people's addresses." She recalled the first time she did a drop-off. "I see a literal *ICE* agent walking around, and he just walks right past

me. I'm just not on his radar," she said. She is white, and had on a red University of Wisconsin T-shirt. "But, yeah, I go up to this apartment, and this mom was on the verge of tears, who's been at home with her kids in a stuffy apartment for, like, a month, you know?"

A couple of weeks before winter break, a teacher noticed that a student with immigrant parents had stopped showing up. "That was the first sign that something bigger was happening," the teacher recalled. The school, which has around five hundred students, does not ask parents to report their immigration status, but more than half the kids are classified as English-language learners. "We have students who are from many different Latin American countries, and then Somali students, African American students, and a small group of white students," the principal, who asked that the school remain anonymous, said. "We are serving students who are mostly experiencing poverty, so we spend a lot of time with missing learning and making sure that we're filling that in. Back before this all started, we could really focus on instruction. That's what we'd like to focus on again."

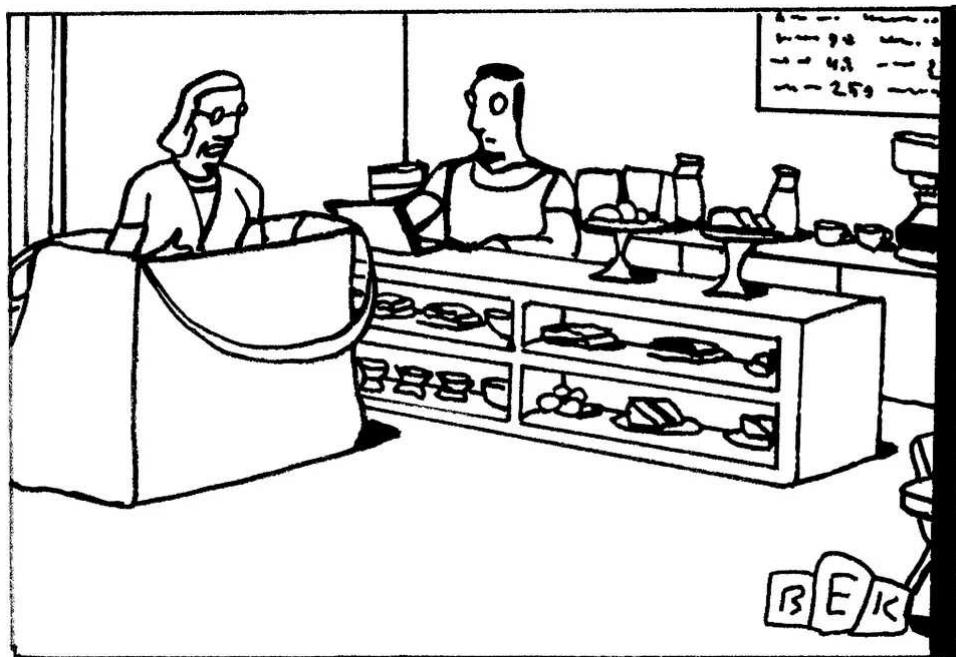
Instead, Donald Trump ordered an additional two thousand immigration agents into the city in the new year, bringing the total to three thousand. After January 7th, when a federal agent shot and killed Renee Nicole Good, and other agents swarmed the grounds of a local high school, metro-area school districts began offering a distance-learning option. As of late January, around forty per cent of the elementary school's students have been staying home, and many of their families no longer leave the house. School parents have been detained, the principal said, but even those with legal status are staying home, out of fear. "We've had a family self-deport," the principal said. "We've had families move out of state just to get away from this level of enforcement here."

The school began formulating its response to the crisis in December. Meetings were held to figure out how best to assist the families. Laptops and mobile hot spots were distributed. Parents began volunteering their time. A toy drive was arranged to make sure the homebound kids got Christmas presents. A GoFundMe was initiated to cover rent and groceries for families who have stopped going to work; parents and other volunteers are connecting detained parents with legal assistance. Teachers are driving kids to and from school, and have access to an A.I. translation app to convey

offers of help to families in their native languages. The mobilization is both semi-organized and overwhelming; the cafeteria's walk-in refrigerator is stuffed with gallon jugs of milk and cartons of eggs.

The other day, the school was unusually quiet. Its corridors, colorful with children's art, had phrases of encouragement ("*together is always better*") painted on the walls. One hallway had a line of bikes for kids to learn how to ride; a corner had a bin full of cross-country skis for their use. On a lobby bulletin board, photos introduced the members of a "Volunteer Piano Ensemble," most of them gray-haired, who come and play the piano as children arrive at school.

In a second-floor room bright with winter sunshine, two teachers had consolidated their diminished classes into one. "I see lots of you cleaning up," one of the teachers said, in a voice indicating a deep reservoir of patience. "I need to see everybody cleaning up. Look at the timer. Just a sliver of time left."



After the children settled on a rug for a math lesson, one of the teachers stepped out into the hall. "I spoke to a mom on the phone yesterday," the teacher, who is fluent in Spanish, told a visitor. "Her husband was picked up at the courthouse, and he's in El Paso, Texas." The family was from

Ecuador, and the mother had decided that they would return there. “I mean, her son is a student in my class, and he doesn’t know how to read in his native language, and now he doesn’t know how to read in English, either, because his year has been interrupted,” the teacher said. “And now they’re going home, and I’m scared for them.”

She said she had begged another parent, who works as a maid at a downtown hotel, not to risk going to work; another mother who worked as a hotel maid had already been detained—“by an *ICE* agent staying at the hotel,” the teacher said. The mother who worked at the downtown hotel would not be dissuaded, even when several others from school intervened. “I said, ‘We will pay your rent. We will bring you groceries. Please do not go to work. It is not safe,’ ” the teacher recalled. “And she just said, ‘I need this job.’ ” The teacher insisted on driving her. “She had us drop her off at a side door of the building,” she said.

Another family with a child at the school was stopped by *ICE* agents on the way to a prenatal appointment. The mother, who is eight months pregnant, was let go, along with the child; the father, who had a work permit and a pending asylum case, is now being held in El Paso. The school helped connect the family to an immigration lawyer.

A Spanish teacher, an immigrant herself, has been trying to set up a system whereby local families with citizenship make a four-week commitment to be the primary point of contact for one of a hundred and fifty families who are sheltering at home. “This has become an obsession for me,” she said, sitting in a small office, poring over a spreadsheet on a laptop. “My husband says that I’m manic, you know? I don’t sleep.” She pulled up, on her phone, a group text in which two families had been exchanging photos. “When I saw this, I just cried the whole day,” she said. “Just seeing this exchange of, like, this family that could not be any whiter with this adorable Latino family. I mean, this is who our President wants to kick out.”

On January 29th, Tom Homan, the Trump Administration’s “border czar,” announced that the number of federal agents in the state would be reduced, on the condition that state and local law enforcement coöperate with federal immigration enforcement, which local politicians have largely resisted. (Minneapolis and St. Paul have laws restricting such coöperation.) Distance

learning is scheduled to end, but the school staff expects that it will be extended. The adults have tried to explain the situation to the children the best they can. The principal said that teachers have incorporated lessons about boycotts and protest. “So they can kind of connect it to that,” the principal said. “The kids know that there’s a way to respond when you feel like something is unjust.”

Down in the linoleum-floored room, the mom in the Wisconsin shirt sorted the donated food into categories. She owns a winter-clothing company, and the post-holiday lull is typically her downtime. But, she said, at the school, the number of “type-A white parents that have some money or flexibility or whatever” is small. “I’m already seeing the burnout in some of the other parents,” she said. Two bundled-up women arrived pushing a cart of groceries, including canned goods. “There’s a little tomato section over there,” the mom said, guiding them. Each family gets fresh produce, shelf-stable items, and a bag of hygiene and cleaning products. “I keep thinking, if I was trapped at home, what I would want,” she said. “And it’s, like, I’d want LaCroix water, and coffee, and, I don’t know, some good popcorn.” ♦

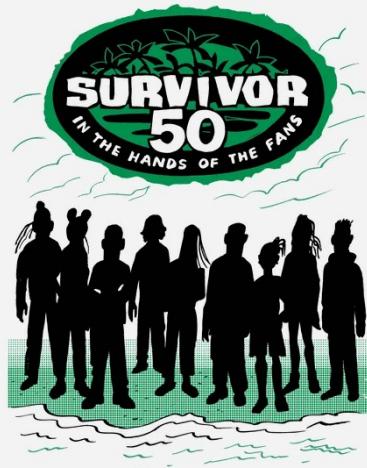
Make a Wish Dept.

For “Survivor” ’s Season 50, Superfans Flock to Fiji

Five hard-core diehards won a trip to watch the show filming. What challenges will be on once they arrive?

By Sarah Grant

February 02, 2026



To mark the fiftieth season of “Survivor,” which begins airing this month, the marketing minds at CBS dangled five golden tickets for superfans of the show: the prize would be a day on set while Season 50 taped. Twenty-two thousand entrants sent videos answering one question: Who do you watch “Survivor” with? Now, on the other side of the planet, the winners and their friends and family stood slack-jawed on the deck of a forty-foot-long boat, heading toward Mana, one of Fiji’s hundreds of islands. Fifty yards from shore, where three neon flags flapped above the surf, the boat went quiet. One of the winners, Tegwyth Alderson-Taber, a “Survivor” micro-influencer from Long Island City, clasped her boyfriend’s arm. The night before, they’d decided that, if Jeff Probst, the host of “Survivor,” agreed to officiate, they’d

marry right there on the island. “He’s ordained,” Alderson-Taber said. “We checked.”

Dean Zimmerman, a retired R. & D. guy from Ohio, grinned. He’d long dreamed of being cast on “Survivor,” going so far as to train for it using a Zoom “Survivor” simulator. During one “endurance challenge,” his wife found him motionless at his laptop, a Jenga block clenched between his teeth. “There was drool on my desk,” he recalled. Zimmerman hadn’t won the CBS contest; he’d done something more “Survivor”-like; he’d formed an alliance with Terrance Bacchus, a friend from church, who *had* won.

Bacchus, who runs a nonprofit in Cincinnati, looked at his wife and two daughters on deck. “Our first vacation all together in fifteen years,” he said, then deadpanned, “And Dean.” He’d entered because, in 2017, his daughter Jasmine got a callback for the actual show, but the timing clashed with her freshman year at Brown. “It was painful as a father and fan,” he said. “I’m hoping this makes it right.”

Jesse Jensen, the show’s longtime executive producer, an Australian, was waiting on the dock; he would function as a back-lot tour guide for the winners and their entourages, twenty-three people in all. Tall, with white stubble, he exuded the air of someone who ran away with the circus and found a stable career. That was essentially the original hiring philosophy of “Survivor.” “The head of pyro is a guy I met at a Tokyo night club in the nineties,” Jensen said. “And he looks like the head of pyro.”

An eager winner hit him with a question, right off the boat: “What’s the name of the ‘Survivor’ font?”

Jensen said, “I’ll have to get back to you.” He led the group first to the art department, a tent sprawled across a dusty airstrip, containing two seasons’ worth of ornate torture devices. Lettered blocks, spray-painted barges, and battered tribal flags evoked both a county fair and the Spanish Inquisition.

A golf cart pulled up carrying another tall, stubbled Australian: Jensen’s brother Zach, who co-leads the art department. “He got me a job as an extra in ‘Star Wars,’ so I got him a job on ‘Survivor,’ ” Jesse Jensen said. “We were Jedis in ‘Attack of the Clones.’ ”

On the ride to the next stop, in an open-topped truck, fans traded stories. “We watched all of ‘Cagayan’ in a day,” Anna Veire, a twenty-three-year-old Iowa State grad, said, of her dorm floor.

“It was like ‘Survivor’ school,” Charlene Baes, the winner who’d invited her, added.

Jake and Kaylee Ben-Ami, newlyweds from Brooklyn, met when they were remote colleagues at an H.R.-software company. They shared Wednesday nights watching “Survivor” before they shared a Zip Code. “I mailed Jake a ‘Survivor’ candle as a thank-you for being my onboarding buddy,” Kaylee said.

Zimmerman listened, nodding. “It’s funny how you mark time by the show,” he said. He explained how it had helped him when his wife was undergoing cancer treatments: “The weird thing about cancer is, people don’t know what to say to you. But some knew I liked ‘Survivor.’ So they could ask about that.”

The chatter thinned as the truck halted at Tribal Council, the show’s main gathering spot. It was midday. The torches were cold, the fire pit was empty, and the set, newly built for Season 50, was bigger and deeper in the jungle than in the previous seasons. Seventy-four phoenix statues stood sentinel. “It’s all about rebirth,” Zach Jensen explained. One fan knelt to stroke the prop grass.

Jeff Probst emerged from a marble labyrinth, arms aloft, dimples twinkling. “Welcome to Tribal Council,” he said. Even in off-camera clothes (black T-shirt, gray shorts, sneakers), he had a powerful presence, scanning each face before he spoke again. He laughed. “So far, the players have been awestruck when they walk in,” he said. “Kind of like you are. But it’s tempered quickly when we sit down and I say, ‘But it’s going to be the death of one of you tonight.’”

That gut drop came for the contest winners at the final stop, the “Survivor” challenge field. The group had just polished off a big buffet lunch, but the afternoon was about to take a Darwinian turn.

“There’s no obligation to run, no embarrassment here,” Probst told them, sounding more like a hostage negotiator than a host. “You’re not playing for a million dollars.” Still, small talk stopped and hands went clammy. They hadn’t realized that they were to serve as dress-rehearsal stand-ins for the Season 50 contestants.

In short order, directed by Probst, the visitors were wobbling on giant balance beams, a couple of feet above the ground, each holding a ten-foot pole aloft, fighting to keep giant Ping-Pong balls from falling off the ends. One by one, the poles dropped. Among agonized grunts and huffs, Probst narrated the fumbles. Then he boomed, “We’ve got a winner!”

It was Jasmine Bacchus, the Brown grad who’d missed her chance years ago, now a second-year J.D. and M.B.A. student at Harvard. Still locked in endurance-challenge pose, pole in the air, she had not heard Probst. Finally, he whispered at her back, “It’s you.” Her pole dropped; tears flowed. The moment played just as in an episode of the show. Probst stood still, arms folded, knowing that his job, in moments like these, is simply not to step on them. ♦

Rookie Dept.

Matthew Schaefer, Hockey's Youngest (and Nicest) Big Shot

The eighteen-year-old Islander was last year's No. 1 pick in the N.H.L. draft. On a recent day off, he shoots a commercial, chats with Tom Brady, and raves about babysitting.

By Sarah Larson

February 02, 2026



The eighteen-year-old ice-hockey player Matthew Schaefer, the No. 1 pick in the 2025 N.H.L. draft and a rookie defenseman for the New York Islanders, skated around the team's practice rink in East Meadow, on Long Island, the other day, pursued by a cameraman in a rolling office chair. Schaefer, who is six feet two, with a childlike face and fluffy brown hair, was shooting his first major TV commercial, for Nobull, an activewear brand; the objective was to show him training like a champ and refusing to lose. A dozen people (including a rep from Schaefer's agency, from Toronto) watched from the bleachers as he skated backward, did laps, and took slap shots. Then he gathered the pucks with his stick and skated to the rink door.

“Hi, I’m Matthew,” he said to a visitor, extending a glove. “It’s a little fun day.” It was not his first office-chair experience on ice: a couple of years ago, on a picture day, he said, “Me and my buddy were spinning each other around.” He was feeling good despite a loss the night before, in Florida, to the Panthers—and despite having gotten a rare penalty, following a subtle trip-like collision and a dramatic fall by the beloved and beloathed “rat” Brad Marchand. Had Marchand taken a dive? “No comment!” Schaefer said, laughing. He added, “I always try to give the baby face to the refs—it never works.”

Schaefer was drafted in June, at age seventeen. He grew up in Stoney Creek, Ontario, in a close-knit family: his father, Todd; his mother, Jennifer; and his big brother, Johnny. In an old video, Jennifer dances with joy at a rink. She died, of breast cancer, when Matthew was sixteen. Onstage at the draft, Gary Bettman, the N.H.L.’s commissioner, presented Schaefer with an Islanders jersey embroidered with a lavender memorial ribbon and Jennifer’s initials. (All three Schaefers cried.) Schaefer regularly meets with grieving and sick kids, hugging them and encouraging them to talk about their feelings. He also delights retired players by busting their chops on TV, including the broadcasters Henrik Lundqvist (for being a Ranger); Paul (Biz Nasty) Bissonnette (for having a short career); and Chris Chelios (for his famously absurd cardio routine). “One thing that’s helped is me doing the bike in the sauna before games,” Schaefer recently told Chelios, looking sly.

Such qualities, in addition to his stellar two-way defensive play, have brought great joy to Long Island. Schaefer skates fast, with a creativity, elegance, and zest that gets jaded fans yelping in falsetto disbelief. He can seem to defy physics; he also scores goals. He’s broken rookie records, including some of Bobby Orr’s. Fans and teammates are protective. When he’s checked roughly, the home crowd boos; when he dusts himself off, it roars. Todd Schaefer attends games frequently; at one, after his son took a big hit from a bruiser, “everybody’s eyes were on me,” he said, during a phone call. “So I did the, you know, cradling a baby and rocking it, like, ‘My baby!’ ” He laughed. “Then they booed the player for, like, two games straight.”

Lunch was a buffet in the lobby of the Northwell Health Ice Center, which also serves as an Islanders-themed community rink, with fifteen-foot

sculptures of players, a wall of fame, and a pro shop. (Schaefer merchandise was sold out.) Schaefer ate a salad piled high with chicken cubes in a locker room. He said that, on a typical day off, “I sleep in, have a breakfast sandwich—gotta have the egg and bacon—and play with some of the kids.” He’s living with a family: the retired Islanders enforcer and current front-office employee Matt Martin, Sydney Esiason Martin (daughter of Boomer), and their two young girls and twin baby boys. “I have sisters now,” Schaefer said. “I’m also kind of the babysitter, I guess.” On social media, he can be seen skating with Winnie, five; pushing Alice, three, in a tiny car; and playing games. (“Pretty Pretty Princess can get competitive,” Matt Martin said.) Schaefer also has fun borrowing Martin’s clothes, “beating Matt at video games, like golf and *FIFA* soccer—I like to chirp him when I win,” and wrestling. “I fake-wrestle the girls, and they’re always beating me up. If it’s me and Matt wrestling, the girls are sticking up for him and hitting me.” He wrestles Martin? Where? “Like, anywhere—the basement, the kitchen floor, just all over. I’m always looking to mess with him and annoy him, so sometimes he gets fed up and then we start a fight.” (Martin, smiling: “We do wrestle a lot, unfortunately.”)

Schaefer put on a fresh Nobull T-shirt and returned to the lobby, where he accepted a surprise FaceTime from Nobull’s co-owner Tom Brady. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Schaefer politely said he knew that Brady was busy and that he’d let him go. In the Islanders’ weight room, Schaefer pushed a metal training sled and lifted weights for the cameras, then gathered the crew and thanked them for making it “super easy” for him “on and off the ice.” Everyone applauded. Before Schaefer left, some teen-age boys in hockey gear spotted him and chanted, “Schaef! Schaef! Schaef! Schaef!” Last week at Madison Square Garden, after breaking another record in a victory over the Rangers, Schaef inspired more shouts: “MATthew SCHAE-fer!” and, from the depths of one fan’s soul, “LONG ISLAND!!” ♦

Reporting & Essays

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- [Deepfaking Orson Welles's Mangled Masterpiece](#)
- [Gavin Newsom Is Playing the Long Game](#)
- [To Build a Fire](#)

Personal History

Living in Tracy Chapman's House

Fresh out of college, we were a bunch of misfits, in a chaotic, run-down communal home, desperately trying to figure out who we were meant to be.

By Jill Lepore

February 02, 2026



It wasn't exactly a house or, I guess, it was less than a house. Specifically, it was half of a house, three stories, divided top to bottom, clapboarded, on a corner lot in Somerville. There was a house on the left, where whoever lived there fought all the time—you could hear them through the wall, horsehair plaster and lath—and then there was the house on the right, where we, the loopy semi-vegetarians, lived in, I admit it, squalor, two thousand square feet of it, much of the time smelling of sex, salty and oil-and-vinegary. One night, everyone stood together in the second-floor hallway, listening to the shrieking on the other side of the wall—louder and wilder than the noises you hear at night in the woods, fox and vixen, courting, mating—trying to decide whether to call the cops. Tracy Chapman, who'd huddled in the hallway that night, wrote "Behind the Wall": *Last night I heard the screaming*. I didn't live there then, but later I heard that screaming, too.

I think Tracy found the house her junior year at Tufts. I was a year behind her. Don't get your hopes up. We never met. I can't tell you anything about Tracy Chapman, because I don't know anything about Tracy Chapman, and probably, if I knew anything, I wouldn't tell you. I moved in only after she'd moved out, but people would still call on the phone, asking for her. Fans, reporters, fans. Did we know where she was? Did we know how to reach her? Could we get a message to her? No. Wasn't she amazing, the best thing ever in the whole wide, wonderful, cocked-up world? Yes.

This isn't a story about Tracy Chapman. It's a story about the house. There were six bedrooms, but sometimes there were eight or nine or ten or even a dozen people living there, because it was cheaper if you shared and the place was such a mess—what was one more sweaty body compared with two more hands to do chores and another person to split the rent? There was also a dog named Takisha and a cat named Buddha and another cat named Misha that S., who became a soil scientist, had inherited from his grandmother, who'd named him after Mikhail Baryshnikov, because of how high the cat could leap. When S. moved out—I think he went to Japan?—he gave Misha to a very nice old lady named Donna, who lived in a vinyl-sided yellow house next door. That cat strode down the street like a lion, king of the pride. Once, he won a battle with a pit bull. Man, that cat could fight.

None of the rest of us had anything like Misha's self-possession, or not when I lived there. No one was who they meant to be, not yet, anyway. We were embryos, stem cells, brain stems of our future selves, wet behind the ears, wet all over. We lived in muddled, uncertain, thrilling, and dizzying chaos, slamming doors, crying into pillows, pondering the possibilities of turnips and menstrual cups and macrobiotics and Audre Lorde. One chapter of our lives had ended, but the next chapter hadn't begun, and none of us were sure what we wanted, only that we wanted it, longed for it, were desperate for it. I've been told that it's the work of young adulthood to learn that you are in charge of your own life. Easier said than done, but for sure wackier and more fun in a house with a bunch of other misfits, especially if at least one person knows how to make a decent frittata, though it can be a little tricky figuring out how to take charge of your life if you're trying to do it in the shadow of Tracy Chapman.

How much yearning can one roof shelter? In the bathroom on the second floor, there was a spiral-bound lined notebook, the bathroom book, or, really, many books, a succession of notebooks, each with a pencil attached by a string, fishing lure to a rod. The idea for the bathroom book was, possibly, L.'s (she's a book editor now). It was like a journal except not, because it was collective, something made together, like stone soup. You could write hostile, scolding notes ("Please stop fucking with the thermostat") or issue pronouncements ("I have begun to study C. Wright Mills") or scribble or doodle or write poetry or draft stories (me, I did this, compulsively, unstoppably). R., who's now not only a clinical psychologist but also something of an amateur archivist, kept three of those bathroom books, a record of our past selves, traces of our naked, aching hunger, and he says there's a lot of daffy roommate stuff in there, like this little riff on taking a shower.

R.: Gets into shower fully clothed, becomes drenched and knows what it is like to take a shower.

L.: Asks if hot water costs more than cold water.

Tracy: Goes to Somerville Lumber, brings home materials, draws up a blueprint, builds a shower, takes a shower.

Buddha: We don't take showers, we're cats.

I've sometimes wondered if, in one of those bathroom books, Tracy first composed the pierce-your-soul-with-an-icepick lyrics to "Fast Car." *I had a feeling that I belonged. I had a feeling I could be someone, be someone, be someone.*

All I know I read in the newspaper. "I, Tracy Chapman, own six albums," she told the *Tufts Daily* in 1982, when she was a freshman and played left wing on the soccer team. She won first prize at a Tufts talent show; she told the *Daily* she loved Joan Armatrading. The next year, when she was sophomore co-captain of the Lady Jumbos, she took out an ad in the back of the paper: "Wanted: *FOLK/BLUES* Musician looking for *GUITARIST VOCALIST* and *PERCUSSIONIST* to play mostly originals. Call Tracy Chapman 776-6318 evenings."

Tracy and L. and R. lived on campus in the Tufts Crafts House, artsy, lefty, a place for the sort of students who staged sit-ins to protest tenure decisions and to call for divestment from South Africa. At Tufts, I lived in the dorms. I was an Air Force R.O.T.C. cadet. The Crafts House kids were the kinds of kids who hated the R.O.T.C. kids. “We would have shunned you,” R. admitted. Shunning was the least of it. I’d walk across campus in uniform, and kids sitting on the quad would throw shoes at me.

I didn’t entirely blame them. I was crazy proud of being in the Air Force, but I wasn’t so excited about Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative and the vow you had to take, one by one, in front of a whole auditorium of R.O.T.C. students from M.I.T., Harvard, Tufts, and Wellesley, that you were not now nor had you ever been a homosexual. I, embryo, stem cell, brain stem, couldn’t look straight. I couldn’t think straight. I was a wreck. I don’t remember much, but I do remember watching Tracy play her guitar on the roof of the library. She was unbelievably beautiful and handsome and cool, Crafts House cool, an anthropology major, an ethnomusicologist, and I’d have been too intimidated even to try to look her in the eye. I barely looked anyone in the eye, except my commanding officer, and that was because you had to. I was a math major, I was a biology major, I was an English major, I was . . . minor. Best stored in a petri dish, an incubator. I went to talk to my creative-writing professor and found myself unable to speak, able only to weep, wordlessly.



Eventually, I quit R.O.T.C., but then I had to work ten thousand hours a day to pay for school, or else I'd have had to drop out. Maybe secretly I had always wanted to be more of a Crafts House kid? I took a photography class and rode a bike I'd painted with polka dots all over Somerville and Medford, taking pictures of religious statuary—Mary in the half shell behind a chain-link fence—as if I were amused and detached, when, really, I missed Mass, holy water, the grace of God, confession, absolution. I borrowed a shoulder-mounted video camera from the library and walked around campus asking people, “Are you a feminist?” In an internship at a cable-access TV station, I made a dreadful documentary about battered women. I had spiky hair and spectacles, and I wore a giant men’s woollen overcoat that I’d got at a thrift place called Dollar-A-Pound, which is how much the stuff there cost—you picked ratty clothes up off piles on the floor and put them on an industrial scale—and I played field hockey, left wing, and was, very briefly, a sports reporter for the *Daily*, though I seem to have also once written about U.S. foreign policy, to which I strenuously if vaguely objected, for the *Tufts Observer*. I wished I were edgy but knew I had no edges at all, like an amoeba, a protozoan. I was a blur.

I’m pretty sure the first time I heard Tracy play was on campus in November, 1984, but I didn’t go out to see live music much. I was either drilling or at field-hockey practice or at work or in the library or, if all else

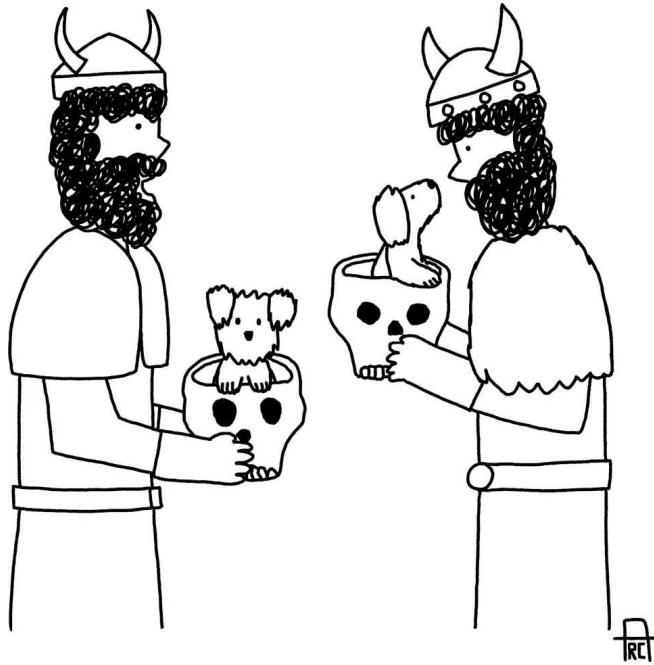
failed, in my dorm room, knitting and listening to bootleg cassettes of Joan Armatrading and Jane Siberry and Kate Bush on a shitty boom box my mother won at bingo. Mainly, homesick, I was trying to ignore my assigned roommate, who was very rich and very bulimic; she ate all day, and all night rode a stationary bike that took up all the floor space and sounded like a bird with a broken wing attempting liftoff—fffftt, ffffft, ffffft, ffffft.

In 1985, house lore has it, Tracy found the place in Davis Square—Davis Square being the Paris of the eighties, people liked to say—between Tufts and [Harvard](#) but about a mile away from each, and therefore cheap. R. told me that Tracy rented it sight half seen; she hadn't been able to go inside, so she'd had to stand on a milk crate to look in a window. Tracy, L., R., and three friends moved in. R. said they wanted to start their own crafts house—an artsy coöperative—and that Tracy had the idea that they should build a six-sided table, each making a sixth of it, like a pie slice, like a potluck. R. was in a band called Planned Obsolescence. Tracy listened to Robert Johnson. For Halloween, they'd hold a raucous party, part masked ball, part avant-garde performance art. A. dressed up as an Englishman named Nigel and talked with a Cockney accent (she ended up becoming a fashion designer). Out in the back yard, they hoisted a globe that was meant to sway in the wind but mostly just dangled there, a world not turning.

The *Daily* ran a profile, “Tufts Junior Sings Her Way to Fame.” “Oh, God, it was crazy. I was hanging out with a friend of mine, and almost everybody else in the house we lived in had gone home for Thanksgiving,” Tracy once said in an interview with *Rolling Stone*. “We didn’t have anything to do, and we didn’t have any money. I was playing my guitar, and she said, ‘Why not go in the square and play?’” That night, during Thanksgiving break, was the first time she busked on the streets of Harvard Square. When everyone else in the house was gone for the holiday. That house, her house, the house. My house?

Afterward—after “Tracy Chapman,” her début album, came out in 1988 and reached No. 1 on the Billboard charts and all but swept the Grammys the next year—everyone who had been at Tufts when Tracy was there said they knew Tracy or had known Tracy or had at least once talked with Tracy. Not me.

Brian Koppelman knew her. He was a year behind me and he was a leader of the Tufts student divestment movement, and someone told him he should get her to play at an anti-apartheid rally, and he went to see her perform at Cappuccino's, the coffeehouse in the student union, and left in tears. At the rally, she sang "Talkin' Bout a Revolution." *And it sounds like a whisper.* The way I remember it, people all but fainted. [Simon & Garfunkel](#) in Central Park singing "Homeward Bound" had nothing on Tracy Chapman at that rally. Brian's father was a music executive; he helped get Tracy a record deal. She moved out of the house. It was as if a giant bird high up in the sky, some kind of wayward stork, swooped down, landed on the asphalt roof, pecked a hole in it, tipped its broad school-bus-yellow bill down into her room, plucked her up, and flapped away.



I graduated, answered a housemate-wanted ad in the paper, and went for an interview that ended with my being asked to clean the kitchen, a trial run. As a kid, I'd gotten a fake work permit to take a job as a chambermaid at a trashy motel where truckers stopped to meet prostitutes. I knew how to clean.

At the house, I got the smallest room, a nook on the third floor, like Anne of Green Gables, and there I hunkered, under the eaves, on a mattress I'd found on the street, reading William Faulkner and bell hooks by the light of a lamp

I'd found in a dumpster outside a Harvard dorm. Home. I don't remember who the landlords were, and I never met them, and they never came by, so we did whatever work on the house that it needed or, to be fair, didn't need. Someone pasted a paper moonscape on a wall of the dining room, or maybe it was a view of the Earth from the moon, blue marble, and in the living room N., who became a pediatrician, painted a mural, and I can almost picture it—the sea? a field?—but in the end I can't. E. and I once painted the kitchen walls rose, and E. slopped paint all over the windowpanes, and D. said that was because he came from money and didn't know how to do things like paint a window, but I loved it anyway, and I loved E., and after that whatever light came into our kitchen had a beatific pink tint, like a winter sunset. I learned how to cane chairs and fixed all the broken ones. I stitched a tablecloth out of old jeans. D., a structural engineer, could teach anyone how to do and make and fix things, anything; she even had her own loom. Someone was always plucking at a guitar. Maybe there was a banjo? We baked bread and dried herbs and cooked stews and brewed beer and held cantankerous house meetings and wondered about Reagan and the fate of the nation and the world. The Cold War was ending, apartheid was collapsing, the global war on terror hadn't yet begun—an American interregnum. Were we talking about a revolution? *Don't ya know you better run, run, run, run, run?* 'Cause finally the tables are starting to turn. Make art, not bombs. Make love, not war. Make art, make love, make art. *And it sounds like a whisper.* Unfortunately, the tables did not turn.

There were phone cords everywhere, stapled up and down doorframes and duct-taped to baseboards along the hallways. There was only one phone number, but all of us wanted an extension in our rooms. S. had a modem; no one else really knew what that thing was for except tying up the line. R. got a tape recorder and named it Posterity, and when people were sitting around, just blathering, musing, jamming, he would say, "Let's record this for Posterity."

I have one photograph of myself from those years, a self-portrait, my camera perched on a tripod in front of a mirror. I'm wearing Tufts athletic-department sweats and, inexplicably, a bowler hat. Hanging on the wall behind me is a quilt I'd made, featuring, ironically or maybe not ironically, Bert and Ernie reading books on a couch. In the foreground, taped to the mirror, is a copy of Stanley Kunitz's poem "The Layers." *I have walked*

through many lives, / some of them my own, / and I am not who I was, / though some principle of being / abides, from which I struggle / not to stray.
My anthem. Autobiography of a blur.

Mostly we ate beans and rice and tofu, and the food was horrible, honestly, but it cost hardly anything, and, as for drugs, there must have been a lot of pot and mushrooms, but I, abstemious and naïve, would not have noticed. Anything that got infested with grain flies D. boiled and fed to Takisha, the dog. I lived there for two years while I worked as a secretary at Harvard, perfecting the art of finding excuses to go to Widener Library. Nights, I had a job at a bookstore in Davis Square, until I got fired because the manager thought I was stealing from the cash register. (The real thief was the assistant manager, but I figured he must've really needed the money.) E. worked at the Somerville Theatre and got us in for free. We watched a lot of movies from the balcony. Every movie. Mostly, I tried to write a novel, outlining plots in the bathroom book. A. says a lot of the stuff in that book, when she lived there, was dumb or nasty—dirty pictures, feeble attempts to be shocking. “We were trying so hard not to be normal,” she said, a little wearily, a little wistfully. Some of us did not have to try very hard.

No house can contain the messiness of those years of yearning and wanting, wanting, wanting, and I hated it and I loved it and mostly I loved it even if no small number of the constantly changing housemates drove me up a wall. P., who was older than everyone else and had the biggest room, on the second floor, just past the bathroom, practiced primal-scream therapy, meaning he was always in his room with the door shut just yowling. One woman was reading “The Courage to Heal” and had decided she’d recovered memories of sexual abuse that were somehow, mysteriously, associated with washing dishes, which meant that she skived off all kitchen chores. K., who had been horribly burned at the age of two, worked as a nurse at the Shriners burn hospital and had the biggest heart and most unfathomably bottomless gentleness of anyone I have ever known, excepting my mother, and for a long time she debated whether to order a pair of glue-on prosthetic ears, because she was very self-conscious about having no ears, and P. was lovely with her about that, so sweet, and we all forgave him for screaming all the time.

“We all thought we could do anything then,” A. says now. She moved into R.’s old room when he moved into Tracy’s old room. He left behind a drawing of a vagina. A. was not amused. You could sleep with anyone; no one needed to be in any closet. I slept with a Yale guy one block over who, with his five Yale roommates, sold semen to a sperm bank, and they pooled the profits to buy an espresso maker for six hundred dollars. “They pooled their semen?” D. asked, incredulous. “Well,” I said. “Not really. But, yeah.” No one in the house ever forgave me for that guy. Our house, we had values, principles, the “Moosewood Cookbook.” Plus a cat, fighting weight.

There were, inevitably, abortions and miscarriages and broken hearts, blood on the floor, our very guts unravelling all over the place, twining around the balusters and bannisters. I slept with only one person who lived in our house, and not until after I moved out: house rules. Group living is not for everyone, but in those years it was for me. D. taught me how to knit socks and can tomatoes. E. took me to New York. The people came and went, as if that house were a train station, a way station, or not half a house but a halfway house. One woman left for an ashram. E. went to medical school. Another guy went off to study whale song. J. graduated from law school, changed his name, and dedicated himself to abolishing male circumcision. Someone whose name nobody remembers went off to the Peace Corps in Timor. D. went on a bike trip in Europe. In Utrecht, she walked down a street lined with posters for Tracy’s first album; later, on another bike trip, in Germany, she fell in love and never came back.

The point at which stem cells begin to differentiate—to become the kinds of cells they’re going to be—is called stem-cell fate determination. In my experience, it feels like hell. When my GRE scores came in the mail, I opened them at the kitchen table, and J., cooking dinner, looked over my shoulder. “Eight hundreds?” he said. “Yeah, probably apply to graduate school, dude.” No stork was coming for me. I gave up on being a writer.

Once, years later, S. and R. went back to visit Donna, next door. Misha had died. She missed him madly.

“He looked right through you,” Donna said. “He knew what was going on.”

“His color was very pretty,” Donna’s cousin Dottie said. “It was like a bluish gray.”

“Russian blue,” S. said.

“He was the toughest cat on the street,” Donna said. But elegant.

“You could put a bow tie on that cat,” Dottie said. Or a bowler hat?

Donna told S. that she kept Misha’s ashes in an urn on the mantel. Posterity, remains, traces. S. leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Tracy would sometimes stop by the house. D. said once they sat together in the living room and talked about weaving, warp and weft. I wish I’d been there. I’d already left. ♦

Brave New World Dept.

Deepfaking Orson Welles's Mangled Masterpiece

Will an A.I. restoration of “The Magnificent Ambersons” right a historic wrong or desecrate a classic?

By Michael Schulman

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Edward Saatchi first saw “The Magnificent Ambersons,” Orson Welles’s mangled masterpiece from 1942, when he was twelve years old, in the private screening room of his family’s crenellated mansion, in West Sussex. Saatchi’s parents had already shown him and his brother “Citizen Kane.” (The boys found it sad.) But “Ambersons,” Welles’s follow-up film, about a wealthy Midwestern clan brought low, came with a bewitching backstory: R.K.O. had ripped the movie from the director’s hands, slashed forty-three minutes, tacked on a happy ending, and destroyed the excised footage in order to free up vault space, leaving decades’ worth of cinephiles to obsess over what might have been. Part of this outcome was the result of studio treachery, but Welles, owing to some combination of hubris and distraction,

had let his film slip from his grasp. Saatchi recalled, “Around the family dinner table, that was always such a big topic: How much was Welles responsible for this? Mum was always quite tough on him.”

Saatchi’s father, Maurice, a baron also known as Lord Saatchi, is one of two Iraqi British brothers who founded the advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi, in 1970, which led their family to become one of the richest in the U.K. Edward’s mother, Josephine Hart, who died in 2011, was an Irish writer best known for her erotic thriller “*Damage*,” which was adapted into a film by Louis Malle. Edward, born in 1985, grew up in London and at the sprawling country estate, surrounded by palatial gardens and classical statuary. He described his parents as “movie mad.” The actor and Welles biographer Simon Callow, a Saatchi family friend, recalled, “They had a cinema of their own inside the house, and it was a ritual of theirs every week to watch a film together.”

Aside from old movies, Edward was obsessed with “Star Trek”—especially the Holodeck, a device that conjured simulated 3-D worlds populated by characters who could interact with the members of the Starship Enterprise. That kind of wizardry didn’t exist in the real world, at least not yet. But the young prince of the Saatchi castle had faith that someday it would, and that it could bring the original “*Ambersons*” back from oblivion. “To me, this is the lost holy grail of cinema,” Saatchi told me recently, like Charles Foster Kane murmuring about Rosebud. “It just seemed intuitively that there would be some way to undo what had happened.”



One morning last October, Saatchi slipped into a soundstage in Los Angeles. “Almost all the stuff that was cut is really about the financial downfall of the family,” he whispered. Before him were two actors wearing trenchcoats and fedoras, sitting on a bench in a large white void. They were rehearsing a late scene from “The Magnificent Ambersons,” set at a train station. A third of the scene had been cut and destroyed by R.K.O. Eight decades later, Saatchi had devised a method to restore what was lost.

In early September, Saatchi’s startup Fable Studio announced that it would re-create the missing forty-three minutes of “Ambersons,” using artificial intelligence. His Amazon-backed generative-A.I. platform, Showrunner, would feed off the data from the extant version of the film to prompt entire new scenes, based on voluminous production materials that survived, including scripts, photographs, and detailed notes. For emotional authenticity, Fable would first shoot live actors, then overlay the footage with the digitized voices and likenesses of the long-dead cast members. “I think that what’s coming is a world where we’re not the only creative species, and that we will enjoy entertainment created by A.I.s,” Saatchi declared last year on the CNBC show “Squawk Box.” “And so we wanted to train our A.I. on the greatest storyteller of the last two hundred years, Orson Welles.”

Saatchi, who is forty and has a nimbus of curly red hair that has been compared to Sideshow Bob's, announced the project without having obtained the rights to the film from Warner Bros., which owns the bulk of R.K.O.'s back catalogue. This means that, for now, the restoration is merely an "academic" exercise that cannot be commercially distributed. Saatchi also did not approach Welles's estate, which is run by the director's seventy-year-old daughter, Beatrice Welles; a spokesperson for the estate released a statement that said, "This attempt to generate publicity on the back of Welles' creative genius is disappointing, especially as we weren't even given the courtesy of a heads up."

"That was a total mistake," Saatchi admitted to me. The estate, however, has not shunned A.I. altogether. In May, it licensed Welles's voice to the location-based app StoryRabbit so that, if you're, say, visiting the Taj Mahal, you can opt to listen to historical factoids narrated in Welles's mellifluous baritone. In the past few months, Saatchi has been wooing the estate and Warner Bros., in the hope that they will come around during the two years that Fable will need to reconstruct "Ambersons." (It doesn't hurt that Warner Bros. may soon be acquired by Netflix, a tech-forward company that, in 2018, released a posthumously completed version of Welles's film "The Other Side of the Wind.") Apparently, the charm offensive is working; last month, Beatrice told me, "As far as 'Ambersons' is concerned, I'm a purist and wish that originally it had never been tampered with. Nobody and nothing can think like my father. In regards to what Fable Studio is doing, while I am skeptical, I know they are going into this project with enormous respect toward my father and this beautiful movie, and only for that I am grateful."

Hollywood, like many other industries, has been alarmed by the potential encroachment of A.I. Alongside such inanities as Tilly Norwood, an A.I.-generated "actress" who is supposedly seeking an agent, there have been major moves, like a recent licensing deal that could allow Disney's intellectual property (everything from Cinderella to Yoda and Captain America) to be manipulated on the OpenAI video generator Sora 2. Saatchi's announcement came soon after an A.I.-enhanced version of "The Wizard of Oz" premiered at the Sphere, in Las Vegas, a production that delighted tourists but appalled cinephiles. (The technology supersized the film's

frame, generating an endless yellow brick road and scores of eerie waving Munchkins.)

The “Ambersons” project takes a more complex ethical stance. Instead of desecrating an easily available classic, Saatchi aims to resurrect a lost one. Rather than trampling a human artist’s vision, the project positions itself on the side of the auteur, whose work had been sabotaged by a greedy studio machine. Saatchi sees himself as “righting a historic wrong.”

That wasn’t how the news landed. According to Ray Kelly, who oversees the fan site Wellesnet, opinions among Wellesians have been divided. “Some people are absolutely horrified by the notion,” Kelly told me, and some, like him, are keeping a skeptical open mind. “I don’t expect them to turn out a film that will replace the current version. I think this will be something that film enthusiasts can look at and get a feel of what Welles intended.”

Saatchi believes that A.I. is less a tool that will supplement moviemaking than a “new art form” that will compete with it. Although he lives in San Francisco, he peppers his speech with references to Marcel Duchamp and Andrei Tarkovsky that would baffle the average tech bro. He finds most A.I. projects banal—“Here’s this starfighter blowing up another starfighter,” as he put it—and wants his “Ambersons” to reach for nobler heights. “To some extent, I’ve known since I was twelve years old that there would one day be the technology to do this, to make ‘The Magnificent Ambersons,’ ” he told me. “Finally, the technology is here, and to me it would be completely insane to use A.I. for anything else.”

The year 1942 should have been a triumphant one for Welles. He had arrived in Hollywood three years earlier, heralded as a boy genius, with an R.K.O. contract allowing him unheard-of levels of creative control, including final cut. “Citizen Kane,” his début film, came out in the spring of 1941, days shy of his twenty-sixth birthday, to critical acclaim (if lukewarm box-office). Despite efforts by William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper empire to bury “Kane,” whose protagonist is a Hearst-like press baron, its release proved that Welles’s knack for provocation paled next to his filmmaking prowess. How could he possibly top himself?



For his second feature, Welles turned to “The Magnificent Ambersons,” Booth Tarkington’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, from 1918. Set in a “Midland town” resembling Indianapolis, the story follows the aristocratic Ambersons from their rise, in the waning years of buggies and ballrooms, to their decline, in the ascendant age of the automobile. The family’s scion, George Amberson Minafer, is a spoiled brat who spins into fits worthy of Hamlet when his widowed mother, Isabel, reconnects with an old flame, the “horseless carriage” entrepreneur Eugene Morgan. Even as they watch their wholesome town “spread and darken into a city,” the Ambersons are nineteenth-century creatures marooned in the twentieth. They wind up either dead or broke, and all of them forgotten.

Welles, who had directed and starred in a 1939 radio version of “Ambersons,” had a curious attachment to the novel, claiming (improbably) that Tarkington had been friends with his father, a bicycle-lamp inventor. According to Welles, when he pitched “Ambersons” to R.K.O., George Schaefer, the studio president, dozed off—but Welles got the go-ahead, under a revised contract that denied him final cut. He wrote much of the screenplay aboard the director King Vidor’s yacht. Instead of taking the lead role, as he had with “Kane,” he cast the movie cowboy Tim Holt as George and filled out the ensemble with his troupe of Mercury Players, including Joseph Cotten as Eugene and Agnes Moorehead as the spinster Aunt Fanny.

Shooting began in October, 1941, and finished in January, 1942, two weeks behind schedule. Welles had erected a full-scale Victorian mansion over several soundstages on the R.K.O. lot; he also had his own steam room, masseur, and private cook. The budget ballooned to more than a million dollars—the studio had approved eight hundred and fifty thousand. Midway through the production, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and Nelson Rockefeller, as the government's Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, called on Welles to go to Brazil and make a quasi-documentary promoting Pan-American unity. Two days after wrapping “Ambersons,” he left for Rio de Janeiro to film Carnival.



What happened next was a cinematic atrocity. On March 17th, R.K.O. held a sneak preview in Pomona. The response was disastrous. “Never in all my experience in the industry have I taken so much punishment,” Schaefer wrote to Welles. The audience “laughed at the wrong places” and “talked at the picture.” Never mind that the college-age crowd had seen the dour period drama following a peppy movie musical. The comment cards stung: “Rubbish.” “It stinks.” “Mr. Welles had better go back to radio, I hope.” The film’s grim view of American modernity was out of step with the country’s new wartime spirit. One spectator griped, “Make pictures to make us forget, not remember.”

With Welles a hemisphere away, R.K.O. functionaries took a chainsaw to his work. Scenes were scrapped or reordered, with little regard for character or coherence. An extended tracking shot weaving through the Amberson ballroom, which Welles called “the greatest tour de force of my career,” was sliced up like bologna. The score was so decimated that the film’s composer, Bernard Herrmann, removed his name from the credits. Welles’s bleak finale, in which Eugene visits Aunt Fanny at a dilapidated boarding house, was replaced by a cheery ending in which the two walk away arm in arm, smiling. By the time “*Ambersons*” came out, in July—with no fanfare, on a double bill with the Lupe Vélez vehicle “Mexican Spitfire Sees a Ghost”—it had shrunk from a hundred and thirty-one minutes to eighty-eight.

Welles, meanwhile, was living large in Rio, mostly ignoring the studio’s panic. One associate recalled him pointing to a group of chorus girls he’d been filming and bragging, “I’ve fucked that one . . . and that one . . . and that one.” (His Brazilian project, “*It’s All True*,” was never completed.) Working remotely when he should have bolted back to Hollywood to oversee postproduction, he wired back reams of cumbersome changes, which R.K.O. disregarded. He found out that the movie was in theatres from a Jesuit priest he met in the Amazon.

The “*Ambersons*” fiasco was the start of Welles’s downfall. That summer, his Mercury unit was expelled from R.K.O., and Schaefer, his corporate protector, was ousted. The incoming regime dropped Welles and adopted a new slogan for the studio: “Showmanship in place of genius.” “They destroyed ‘*Ambersons*,’ and the picture itself destroyed me,” Welles lamented in a 1982 documentary. “I didn’t get a job as a director for years afterwards.” Welles spent the rest of his career taking acting jobs and doing ads (frozen peas, jug wine) to fund his projects, never regaining the level of studio backing that he’d enjoyed with “*Kane*.” In the seventies, his protégé Peter Bogdanovich saw Welles catch the mutilated “*Ambersons*” on TV and watch with angry tears in his eyes. “It was a much better picture than ‘*Kane*,’” Welles insisted, “if they’d just left it as it was.”

Attempts to recover the lost “*Ambersons*” are nearly as old as the film itself. At some point, Welles tried to reconvene the surviving cast members to shoot a new ending, with their characters aged twenty years, but, as he later said, he “couldn’t swing it.” Yet he left behind a substantial fossil record.

There's the "cutting continuity," a document made by R.K.O. employees for the original film as a guide for editors and projectionists, with descriptions of each line, camera movement, and shot duration. There are publicity photos and frame enlargements—blown-up stills from the film reels, which Welles used while he was sending notes from Brazil—that provide visual clues. And there are Welles's comments over the years about what he filmed and the effect he intended it to have.

In 1993, a Welles enthusiast from Detroit named Roger Ryan put together a reconstruction interpolating stills in place of the missing footage, paired with a recording of amateur actors reciting the dialogue from the original script. That same year, the scholar Robert L. Carringer published a readable adaptation of the uncut screenplay. In 2002, A&E aired a TV movie based on a draft of the unexpurgated script, starring Madeleine Stowe and Jonathan Rhys Meyers. Sadly, as Ray Kelly, of Wellesnet, told me, "It's just really a bad movie."

Others—Bogdanovich, William Friedkin—dreamed of finding an intact original print. In 1995, Joshua Grossberg was an undergraduate at Northwestern when his dorm master showed him "Ambersons." Grossberg learned of a print that had been sent to Welles in Rio and supposedly destroyed—but rumors persisted that it was languishing in a vault somewhere. "I was just entranced, because it sounded like an Indiana Jones story," he told me. During his Christmas break that year, he flew to Brazil and began a hunt that has lasted three decades. He's making a documentary about his quest, "The Lost Print," which he hopes to finish this year. "We have some new revelations, which I can't disclose," he said. Grossberg has nothing but disdain for Saatchi's A.I. project. "I'm not looking to re-create the lost print," he said. "I'm looking to *find* the lost print."

In 2019, a filmmaker named Brian Rose started noodling around with his own reconstruction. Rose, who is forty-one, had been fascinated with "Ambersons" since taking a grad-school seminar on Welles. His class watched the "released version" (as Rose calls it) alongside Roger Ryan's. "It was a haunting experience," Rose told me last fall. "I was really struck by what a different and far more powerful film it was." We were in his office in Kansas City, which was festooned with old movie posters, including two for "Ambersons," along with an antique typewriter and parking meter.

At his vintage Steelcase desk, Rose pulled up his “Ambersons” files on a computer. After grad school, he’d spent years—and his savings—making a documentary about a Kansas City college student who went missing on a class trip. He submitted it to festivals and got nowhere. “I was in a terribly dejected place,” he recalled. He started researching “Ambersons” because he needed something to fill the void. He scoured Welles’s papers at Indiana University and bought a 16-mm. print. A film restorationist gave him a copy of the cutting continuity. When the pandemic hit, Rose started creating rough Photoshop animations of the missing scenes. Then he refined them using digital sketching tools, hired actors to record the dialogue, and spliced his animated scenes into the surviving footage. (To get one transition effect that he wanted, he would light pieces of paper on fire in his shower and film them.) He submitted his “animatic” to animation festivals, but it was too weird. On his fortieth birthday, he rented out a theatre and showed the project to friends and family. “That didn’t go terribly well,” he said. “A lot of them were scratching their heads.”

Then, last June, Rose got a text message from Edward Saatchi, who had heard about his reconstruction. Saatchi said that he was an “Ambersons” fan and would love to see it. They began talking regularly by phone. “After a month of these conversations, Edward says, ‘I think we should collaborate,’ ” Rose recalled. The animatic would become the blueprint for Saatchi’s A.I. version. Rose was hired on as a consultant, and was given a stake in Saatchi’s company. (Saatchi called Rose the project’s “moral compass.”) “We both talk about how this can’t be like Fred Astaire dancing with a vacuum cleaner,” Rose said, referring to a 1997 TV ad that used computer imaging to partner the dead star with a Dirt Devil. Saatchi’s project, Rose told me, was “an opportunity to put all those doubts I might have about my own career to rest.”

On his computer, Rose showed me the detective work he’d done to approximate what Welles had shot. Most straightforward was a scene set in the Ambersons’ bathroom in which George bursts in and confronts his uncle Jack in the tub. R.K.O. had deleted about half of it, but the camera setups between the two actors were consistent, so Rose could simply plug in the missing shots.

Next, he pulled up a short, wordless scene of George placing a photograph of his late father on a mantelpiece. The entire sequence had been scrapped, but a surviving still shows what it looked like, and since the cutting continuity details George's exact hand motions, it was possible to fill in the blanks.

Trickier was a lost scene in which Eugene tries to visit his adored Isabel (Dolores Costello) on her deathbed but is turned away by Aunt Fanny, who secretly loves him. The cutting continuity describes the camera panning as Fanny watches him leave the house. Only one image—a closeup—remains. “The first problem is: What room is this in? And how do we know how to orient the camera?” Rose said. He pulled up a floor plan that he’d made of the set. “Welles built out the whole three floors of this mansion, and everything spatially relates,” he continued. He’d deduced that the scene must have taken place in the parlor, and that the camera must have followed Fanny at a certain angle to keep Eugene in the shot: “This is the only way that it satisfies all the criteria.”

Now that Rose’s animatic will be made literal by A.I., I asked him if he worried whether a re-creation could possibly live up to the “Ambersons” created by decades of mythologizing. “I had that fear throughout,” he confessed. It put him in mind of the Venus de Milo: “The aura of that sculpture is the fact that it’s missing the arms and a foot. It’s a much more iconic work than it would be if it was complete.”

One of Hollywood’s anxieties about A.I. is its potential to kill jobs, but by October the “Ambersons” project had hired dozens of humans. The shoot in L.A. was the first of three that Saatchi has planned, beginning with preliminary tests featuring local actors. Next will be a more detailed test. Finally, once the technology is firmed up, Saatchi will hire what he called “experienced stage actors” to perform the entire screenplay in period costume and film a “coherent emotional performance.” This is what will undergird the final A.I. reconstruction.

At the soundstage, frames from Rose’s animatic were pinned up like storyboards, and a table was stacked with books on American Victorian furniture and the Indianapolis automobile industry. “What we’re doing today is filming the actors, so then the actors’ performances can drive the visuals,”

Saatchi said. In a side office, he opened his laptop and showed me a split screen of the train-station scene, in which Uncle Jack bids George farewell before heading off to rebuild himself from ruin. On top was Rose's animated restoration; below was a deepfake of the actor Ray Collins, who played Uncle Jack back in 1942, saying the exact same line.

Saatchi video-conferenced in two of his A.I. artists, Tom Clive and Emanuele Riccetti. Clive worked on the 2024 films "Here," which de-aged Tom Hanks and Robin Wright, and "Alien: Romulus," which brought back the late Ian Holm as an android. "The tools are much more sophisticated than they were not just two years ago but six months ago," Clive said. For "Ambersons," they had trained the tech on general period footage as a base model and were now building low-rank adaptations, or LoRAs: specialized models for each character. "We've been capturing the body movements, facial expression, mouth articulation, and voice," Clive explained, as Saatchi pulled up rotating 3-D heads of the late Tim Holt and Agnes Moorehead. If all went as planned, the final film would seamlessly meld the 1942 footage with the new A.I. bits.

Saatchi, however, wants more than seamlessness. "Is it going to emotionally communicate, or is it just going to feel dead? Is it going to actually pay off?" he asked. "That's the thing I'm worried about." Simply prompting the computer to suck up the existing movie and spit out new scenes would create a cold, uncanny-valley effect. A.I. tends to flatten lighting, and that would clash with Welles's rich chiaroscuro. Then, there was what Saatchi called the "happiness" problem: left to its own guided intuition, the A.I. technology often makes characters look cheerier, especially women. Saatchi played an A.I. clip of sullen Aunt Fanny, in the grim final scene, inappropriately smirking in her rocking chair. "In terms of subtle despair, it has absolutely no idea what to do," he said. "That's part of why having the actor is really important."



On set, a young director named Victor Velle was rehearsing the train-station scene with the actors playing George and Uncle Jack. Velle, who wore a neck brace (Fourth of July diving accident), was joined by Katya Alexander, who had worked at the Sphere before Saatchi hired her as Fable's head of production. They would shoot the actors talking face to face, to create emotional depth, but then separate them for the A.I. work, which for some shots required the use of a motion-controlled robotic camera.

"It's not just putting together this puzzle," Velle said. "It's re-creating the pieces so that the puzzle fits together." Tiny dramaturgical details had been lost to time. In the train station, Uncle Jack holds an umbrella while accepting cash from George. "Is it going to be weird for him to fumble with an umbrella as he puts the money in his pocket?" Alexander asked. "How does he pick up the suitcase? We don't have a shot of him picking it up."

Velle added that Welles's actors often handled props in an "aesthetically pleasing" way: "Orson is the king of cool, so how to do it with his flavor?"

They had put out a call for actors in *Backstage*, seeking not exact look-alikes but people with what Velle described as a "regal nineteen-forties vibe." He said, "In that period, a lot of people would act as if they had tons of Botox—their foreheads don't move." The three actors they hired worked with a

coach, Kimberly Donovan, to study their 1942 counterparts. “You’re reverse engineering someone else’s performance,” Donovan told me. Holt, for example, “attacks every word,” whereas Moorehead’s delivery can be “soft and kitten-like.”

Cody Pressley, an actor with a sonorous Wellesian voice, was playing both George and Eugene in separate scenes. Pressley said that he often gets cast in period pieces. (Previous roles include Gerald Ford’s photographer in “The First Lady” and a drunk teen in “Stranger Things.”) He’d been camping in Colorado when he got the call from Fable and rushed back to L.A. “It’s so very technical,” he told me. “You have to match the cadence of an actor from the forties. You have to match the words verbatim. And you basically have to keep your head still.”

They started shooting the scene. John Fantasia, who was playing Uncle Jack, stumbled over a wordy bit of dialogue. “Cut!” Velle yelled. He gave Pressley a note: “George’s voice is a tiny bit higher pitch than what you did.” They rolled again, as the robotic camera whirred. Later, Fantasia told me that he had limited knowledge of A.I. “As an actor, I thought, I don’t think I’ll ever want to do this, because it’s contributing to the downfall,” he said. “But then I thought, It’s already seeped into the Hollywood subculture.” Plus, he added, “it’s a paying gig.”

In the afternoon, Saatchi and Rose took me to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’s Margaret Herrick Library. The two made an odd couple. Saatchi was in minimalist black-and-white, in the style of a Silicon Valley guru. Rose, who had flown in from Missouri, wore a tucked-in plaid shirt with a tie and had a Nikon camera hanging from his shoulder, like a tourist at Niagara Falls. We sat in a reading room and opened a folder of weathered correspondence. First came a letter dated August 18, 1941, in which the R.K.O. employee Reginald Armour gushed to Welles, “If the picture turns out to be as good as the script, you already have another smash hit on your hands.”

Then things deteriorated: memos about budgets, anxious telegrams sent to Welles at the Copacabana Palace, in Rio. A few pages later was a note from George Schaefer, the R.K.O. president, to Armour, suggesting that they save all the footage they had cut: “Some day someone may want to know what

was done with the original picture Welles shot.” Finally, on December 10, 1942, a banal note from one studio underling to another confirmed that the studio would “junk” it instead. “This document right here is why we’re all sitting here today,” Rose said.

Saatchi added, ruefully, “He was betrayed by everyone.”

Of all the characters in “The Magnificent Ambersons,” Saatchi identifies most with Eugene, the auto inventor played by Joseph Cotten. But his background is closer to that of George, the highborn son. He gets squeamish when asked about his posh upbringing, but Simon Callow, the old family friend, recalled young Edward as “Tigger-ish—huge enthusiast, and very bright, with ideas swirling around inside his brain all the time.” Last summer, Saatchi told Callow about his “Ambersons” project at a party that his father threw at the Sussex estate with his new partner, Lynn Forester de Rothschild. Callow, who is at work on his fourth volume on Welles’s life, told Saatchi that it was a “great idea” and agreed to be an adviser. (“And a very jolly alfresco affair it was,” Callow added.)

Maurice Saatchi never pressured his son to join the family business, but Edward learned from the advertising racket not to underestimate the public’s intelligence. At Oxford, he read all of Shakespeare’s works, in consecutive order, and wrote plays about Vita Sackville-West and Andy Warhol. Then he moved to Paris to get a master’s degree at the Sorbonne in the history of philosophy, while simultaneously attending a French film school. In 2007, midway through both programs, he became inspired by Barack Obama’s Presidential campaign. “I kept calling Chicago from Europe to be, like, ‘What can I do to help?’ And they were, like, ‘Don’t come. You’re not American, and you don’t have a car,’ ” he recalled. Finally, he flew to Iowa and showed up at a volunteer office. “They were, like, ‘O.K. Here’s a sign. Here’s a street corner. Go wave the sign and get people to honk,’ which I did.” (He still fist-bumps instead of shaking hands, a habit that he picked up from the campaign.) Saatchi & Saatchi had helped bring Margaret Thatcher to power in 1979, with its famous “Labour Isn’t Working” poster showing an unemployment line, and Maurice served as co-chairman of the Conservative Party in the early two-thousands. But Edward insisted that his Obamaphilia wasn’t a rebellion: “Dad thought Obama was awesome, too.”



During the campaign, Saatchi and two staffers created NationalField, a Facebook-like network that volunteers could use internally to compete over doors knocked and money raised. After Obama won, the company moved its operations to Washington, D.C., and worked with the Administration and other clients, including the health-care consortium Kaiser Permanente. In 2013, it was acquired by the Democratic data giant NGP VAN. The next year, Saatchi, who had been contemplating “what comes after cinema,” moved to San Francisco, where he and two Pixar veterans founded a virtual-reality startup called Story Studio. It then joined Oculus, the V.R. arm of Facebook, and produced the Emmy-winning V.R. animated short “Henry,” about a lonely hedgehog.

In 2018, Saatchi and the director Pete Billington founded Fable Studio, which won an Emmy for its début project, “Wolves in the Walls: It’s All Over,” a V.R. adaptation of a Neil Gaiman children’s book, in which the protagonist addresses the viewer as her imaginary friend. “I had an intuition that A.I. storytelling was the future,” Saatchi told me; he was curious what an artificial perspective might teach humans about themselves. But he found A.I. chatbots “boring” and most A.I. videos “bland.” It was one thing to make a creepy demo in which everyone has thirteen fingers, another to move an audience. “I developed a strong faith that creating an artificial person is going to be as much a work of art as a feat of engineering,” Saatchi said.

With his high-flown pronouncements, Saatchi sometimes sounds a bit like a Bond villain. When he appeared on CNBC to announce the “Ambersons” project, he spoke of A.I. as being “potentially the end of human creativity” and discombobulated the program’s hosts by showing them an A.I.-generated cartoon of themselves, in which an evil robot threatened them with a “permanent vacation from work.” (“Where did it get our voices?” the host Rebecca Quick asked. “You’re very famous people,” Saatchi purred.)

The cartoon was part of his animated A.I. series, “Exit Valley,” a satire of Silicon Valley. The idea is for users to generate their own episodes, punching up at their tech overlords. Saatchi envisions a new entertainment genre that is “interactive and personalized and multiplayer,” he told me. For now, this can be done with animation, but “Ambersons,” he said on CNBC, “unlocks for us live-action”—proof of concept, perhaps, for a future in which viewers can order up their own bespoke episodes of “Friends.”

In 2023, Saatchi produced ten off-brand “South Park” episodes generated by his A.I. tool, Showrunner. When he unveiled them online, he stressed that they were just prototypes, with no commercial use, since he hadn’t procured the rights. The move was provocative, especially because it came as Hollywood writers and actors were striking—in part because they were seeking guardrails to protect their work from A.I. exploitation. At the time, Saatchi said that tech companies had been downplaying what A.I. could do; he simply wanted to give the guilds “leverage” against the studios by demonstrating A.I.’s true capabilities. But the fact that he did it by ripping off “South Park” didn’t go over well. (On a real “South Park” episode from last year, one character shrieks, “You cannot just do whatever you want with someone else’s I.P.!”)

“A.I. is still completely hated,” Saatchi told me, though he hopes that its reputation will change once it produces something of artistic merit—something like “Ambersons.” “This, if we can do it, will stand the test of time,” he said. “Not because *we’re* great but because *Welles* is the greatest filmmaker of all time, and *we’re* all curious what he actually intended.”

Some find this argument disingenuous. “This guy has the ethics of a piece of dirt,” Justine Bateman, the former “Family Ties” actress who is now known as an anti-A.I. activist, told me, when I explained what Saatchi was up to.

“The first public thing he did was rape ‘South Park?’” Bateman characterized Saatchi’s “*Ambersons*” interest as “just trying to grab at some sort of legitimacy, and it’s a bullshit marketing tactic.” The project, she went on, “sets a precedent to do what you want with old films. That is so wildly unethical to me, because no one involved had any idea this tech was coming.”

Saatchi admitted that there are “ethical issues” with manipulating dead actors. “I can’t come up with any reasonable defense for driving the performance of someone who’s not here,” he told me. “It’s just the only way to bring to life Welles’s vision.” I spoke to Melissa Galt, a business coach and the daughter of Anne Baxter, who was eighteen when she played an ingénue in “*Ambersons*. ” Galt hadn’t heard about Saatchi’s project, but she was wary. “Mother would not have agreed with that at all,” Galt said. “It’s not the truth. It’s a creation of someone *else’s* truth. But it’s not the original, and she was a purist.” (By contrast, Galt’s great-grandfather Frank Lloyd Wright had often embraced new technologies, so she was more open to A.I. riffing on his work.) She remembered that her mother had objected to her old films being colorized: “Once the movie was done, it was done.”

On the last day and a half of test shooting, the “*Ambersons*” team turned to the final scene: Eugene’s visit to penniless Aunt Fanny in the boarding house. The empty white soundstage was outfitted with a period settee and a phonograph. Cody Pressley, the actor, had on a fake mustache, and Laura Bellomo, an Australian actress with the angular features of Agnes Moorehead, wore a frilly black outfit. The scene, filled with long, painful pauses, involves Eugene telling Fanny about going to see George in the hospital, after he has been struck by a car. Fanny, who once pined for Eugene, listens from her rocking chair and says little. As Welles described the scene to Bogdanovich, “Everything is over—her feelings and her world and his world; everything is buried under the parking lots and the cars. That’s what it was all about—the deterioration of personality, the way people diminish with age, and particularly with impecunious old age. The end of the communication between people, as well as the end of an era. Sure, it was pretty rough going for an audience—particularly in those days. But without question it was much the best scene in the movie.”



Brian Rose, clutching a dog-eared copy of the continuity script, prepped the actors. “It’s this kind of mismatch of expectations. Eugene is going there to talk to someone he considers a friend. Fanny, who has throughout the whole story had an unrequited love for Eugene, doesn’t know quite what to make of it,” he told them. “This is a six-minute scene, and there’s barely two minutes of dialogue in it. The rest of it is filled with this terrible silence.”

The actors took their places. “Awkwardly long—that’s the name of the game with this scene,” Velle, the director, instructed. “And . . . action!”

It was the project’s biggest challenge so far: Could you capture all that unspoken yearning and alienation and get A.I. Joseph Cotten and A.I. Agnes Moorehead to act it persuasively?

Saatchi gave me a preview of how it would all work. Between takes, the crew subbed me in for Pressley, putting me in a period coat and a clip-on tie, and had me blunder through one of Eugene’s lines. Two hours later, the A.I. team sent back a rough clip of Cotten doing the line—turning his head as I’d turned mine, speaking in his voice but with my delivery, even breaking into a laugh, as I had done after tripping over the words. “Usually, we’d spend a lot more time on it, but this is just to give you a feel,” Saatchi said. Still, it was pretty impressive—and disorienting.

As it turns out, “The Magnificent Ambersons” has a lot to say about disruptive technology. The film has a Luddite heart; it opens with wistful narration from Welles about the olden days, when “everybody knew everybody else’s family horse and carriage.” Viewed from another angle, it’s about the perils of burying your head in the sand as the world changes around you. At its best, it weighs both points of view. In one scene—which R.K.O. mercifully kept—George confronts Eugene at the dinner table, blasting his “horseless carriages” as a “useless nuisance.” Eugene responds:

I’m not sure George is wrong about automobiles. With all their speed forward, they may be a step backward in civilization. It may be that they won’t add to the beauty of the world or the life of men’s souls—I’m not sure. But automobiles have come, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They’re going to alter war, and they’re going to alter peace. And I think men’s minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles. And it may be that George is right. It may be that, in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn’t be able to defend the gasoline engine but would have to agree with George that automobiles had no business to be invented.

Saatchi sees himself in Eugene’s tortured ambivalence. “He loves the Ambersons more than anyone, and he’s the villain who’s basically destroying them, in a completely inadvertent way,” he said. “My equivalent is loving cinema and doing something that’s maybe going to undermine this art form that I love.”

Before starting on the boarding-house scene, Saatchi had gathered the cast and crew in a circle and told them, “Raise your hand if you’re concerned for yourself or your society about A.I.” Almost all of the twenty-two people raised a hand. Then Saatchi read Eugene’s dinner-table speech aloud, substituting “A.I.” for “automobiles.” The last line went, “It may be that, in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn’t be able to defend A.I. but would have to agree with George that A.I. had no business to be invented.”

Saatchi looked up. “The automobiles wipe out Fanny, wipe out this family, but there was no stopping them,” he said. “So let’s see if we do better with

this technology.” Then everyone applauded and got back to work. ♦

Profiles

Gavin Newsom Is Playing the Long Game

California's governor has been touted as the Democrats' best shot in 2028. But first he'll need to convince voters that he's not just a slick establishment politician.

By Nathan Heller

February 01, 2026



At a union hall in San Diego last November, Gavin Newsom—the tall, coiffed governor of California, and, since last year, one of the Democrats' best hopes for pulling together a shattered country—stood to one side in white shirtsleeves and waited for his turn to address the crowd. His gaze moved carefully across the audience as union leaders spoke. A recurrent phenomenon among California governors, who tend to run glamorous, is playing against type. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a man once known for toting a bazooka, turned himself into a sober-suited policy wonk. Jerry Brown, a onetime figure of “pop politics,” emerged as a curmudgeon. For Newsom, a middle-aged man with a large, young family, a glow of professional

attainment, and, most days, enough Oribe Crème in his hair to dress a good Crab Louie, the challenge has been to look both humble and concerned. He slumped his shoulders as he listened, as if to shrink his frame. When he nodded, he bent from the waist—not just agreeing but offering small, grateful bows.

“I think we all know why we’re here,” he said, taking the microphone. It was a few days before a statewide special election, and Newsom was speaking to a local chapter of the United Domestic Workers, whose members, largely women of color, had assembled for a rally with the Governor. “Trump knows he’s going to lose the midterms,” he said.

“He knows that, this time next year, there’s not going to be a Speaker Johnson, that there’s going to be a Speaker Hakeem Jeffries. He knows that his Presidency, as we know it”—he slowed his speech portentously—“is going to come to an end.”

Newsom had spent weeks campaigning for a statewide ballot measure, called Proposition 50, that would redistrict California and create five likely Democratic seats. In the early days of his career, he studied the speechmaking of Bobby Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Behind a lectern, his gestures still have a rehearsed feel. When he takes the microphone and roams, however, he moves like a boxer, holding his forearms up and parallel, wrists toward each other, right hand crossing to left shoulder, as if blocking. His knees bounce as he comes to a rhetorical peak.

“He’s trying to rig the election before even one vote is cast,” he said of the President’s gerrymandering efforts. “What did he say to the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott? He said, ‘I’m quote-unquote entitled’—*entitled*—‘to five seats.’ Now, never in the history of this country has the President of the United States used those words.”

Proposition 50, which aimed to offset Texas’s gerrymandered Republican advantage until 2030, was, for Newsom, the end of a startlingly eventful year. On January 7, 2025, three and a half hours after the ignition of the Palisades Fire, he stood on an adjoining street, amid a flurry of embers, and coördinated what became one of the largest fire responses in state history. Five months later, after protests against ICE raids broke out in L.A. and

President Trump federalized more than four thousand members of the California National Guard without the approval of the Governor, Newsom filed a lawsuit—one of fifty-four that the state of California has brought against the second Trump Administration. In mid-August, the Governor’s official X account began mocking the President in his own addled, grandiose, all-caps style. (“*DONALD ‘TACO’ TRUMP, AS MANY CALL HIM, ‘MISSED’ THE DEADLINE!!!*”) Newsom announced the California redistricting campaign later that month; his favorability ratings jumped ten percentage points in the second half of the year.

The events gave him a national profile unusual for a sitting governor. A weighted average of polls asking whom people would vote for now among Democratic Presidential possibilities—a calculation that, at this stage, usually tracks name recognition—has Newsom neck and neck with former Vice-President Kamala Harris. “It’s pulse or no pulse, spine or no spine,” Manny Yekutiel, a civic leader and candidate for city supervisor in Newsom’s home town of San Francisco, told me. “He’s reminding people that the Democrats have a perspective. They can play the game. We can do bombastic tweets!”

In the San Diego union hall, Newsom spun around and said, “Donald Trump’s at Mar-a-Lago this week. No one wants to campaign with him!” He let a cheer rise, and added (he once went through a Tony Robbins phase), “The future is inside of us, not in front of us.” In his memoir, “Young Man in a Hurry,” to be published later this month, he seeks to align his own story of becoming—from a hopeful, troubled childhood to the eve of his inauguration as the leader of “the most daring, magical, cursed, blessed state”—with the needs of a nation still finding its way.



For years, Newsom has cultivated the air of an accidental politician. He notes that, in his twenties, he was a wine entrepreneur: with support from the dynastic businessman and composer Gordon Getty, he launched a wine shop, then a café, and then a vineyard and other projects, called PlumpJack (a Falstaff epithet, in “Henry IV, Part 1”). Today, he owns, partly in a blind trust designed to avoid conflicts of interest, stakes in offshoot enterprises with names like the Falstaff Management Group, Inc. He tells people that, if his political career ended tomorrow, he would return to life in business, and what a mercy that would be. But the feint convinces almost no one, because Newsom is perhaps the least Falstaffian man in wine. He starts texting at seven in the morning. He dresses each day as if for the meeting that will change his life. His holdings earn him, passively, more than a million dollars a year, enough to live on and more, and yet there he is, week after week, taking notes in policy binders, standing in the sun along the border—a guy so all in for the public grind, it seems, that he has turned even the simple pleasures in life, like poking fun at the President’s unhinged posts, into a statehouse chore.

In 1996, when Newsom first entered public office, at the age of twenty-eight, there was a feeling that he would flourish without ascending to the top—too slick, too swank, too smug, too hard for regular people to connect with. (As one of his opponents at the time put it to me, “He was misguided

and élite.”) Three decades later, that criticism is unchanged, but his prospects have transformed. Newsom, now fifty-eight, has never lost an election. He has spent more than twenty consecutive years in executive office, and is finishing his second term as the leader of the most populous and powerful state in the Union. His approval ratings drift like summer clouds above fifty per cent, and his congressional-redistricting campaign is central to the Democrats’ play for power this fall. During what was expected to be his lame-duck year, the Governor is accelerating, leaving observers with a newly urgent version of a lasting question: What, exactly, is Gavin Newsom in it for?

“California is America, but only more so,” the Governor told Bill Clinton onstage in New York, during Climate Week, in September. The two men both wore navy suits; a small stand bearing navy mugs sat between them. “It’s the most diverse state in the world’s most diverse democracy. Twenty-seven per cent of my state is foreign-born. We practice pluralism—a point of pride.”

The audience applauded pluralism; Newsom pressed on. “We dominate in every critical industry,” he said. “Yes, we’re the fourth-largest economy in the world, \$4.1 trillion a year, but we dominate with more engineers, more scientists, more Nobel laureates, more venture capital, the finest system of public higher education in the world.” He spread his arms, as if clearing a tabletop. “We have no peers.”

For most of the twentieth century, California was a purple state; it voted red in fourteen out of twenty-five Presidentialial elections. But it has been a blue stronghold for fifteen years, and that period has coincided with both increases in its economic fortunes and an intensification of conservative attacks. Since the pandemic, it has been fashionable for Republicans to stand on San Francisco street corners and point to homeless people, spinning out a story of apocalyptic decay that, they say, results from Democratic leadership. Newsom argues the inverse. Since his first year as governor, he has promoted an idea of California as a terrarium for Democratic principle—enshrining reproductive rights in the state constitution, upholding sanctuary-state policies, pushing for police reform—while emphasizing its successes over its failures. California, the closest thing to a test zone for the blue economy, is home to roughly half of all American unicorn startups, which

are valued at more than a billion dollars each, and technologists who made a show of fleeing because of taxes and regulations, like Elon Musk, have returned to found A.I. firms. “The Republicans’ governing thesis cannot be true if California succeeds,” Jason Elliott, a former deputy chief of staff in Newsom’s office, told me. “We disprove their ideas that pluralism is a recipe for failure, that completely deregulated capital is the only way to grow.” He added, “It drives them fucking crazy.”

The California governorship is not usually a role of international leadership, but Newsom has given it the appearance of one. Three months after his inauguration, in 2019, he travelled to El Salvador and met with the country’s President and President-elect. In 2023, after the October 7th attacks, he flew to Israel to meet with Benjamin Netanyahu, of whom he later pronounced himself “not a big fan.” (Newsom has asserted Israel’s right to self-defense while condemning the civilian casualties in Gaza, to which California sent more than a hundred pallets of medical supplies.) He joined Xi Jinping in China to discuss climate reform and human rights.

“He understands that California is one of the leading places for the U.S. to try to compete with China,” Reid Hoffman, a founder of LinkedIn, told me. In 2023, a low ebb in Newsom’s approval ratings, a pundit suggested that Californians felt “left out” of all this travel. But Newsom’s shadow diplomacy, widely seen as a pretentious distraction during the Biden years, has a different look at a moment of nativism and trade conflict in Washington. At the World Economic Forum conference, in Davos, last month, the Governor was denied entry to the U.S. pavilion, where he was scheduled to speak; his team blamed the White House, which claimed to know nothing.

In some cases, Newsom’s position on issues has changed as he has taken on a broader view. In 2016, as lieutenant governor, he advocated for shutting down the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, in central California, to facilitate a clean-energy transition. As governor, he pushed to keep it open, with the paradoxical rationale that clean energy was too important to risk relying on prematurely: a failure in the grid could require a return to fossil fuels and undermine the fuller project’s credibility.

The Governor, who has not changed his cellphone number since becoming mayor of San Francisco, in 2004, has nine thousand twenty-two personal contacts on his phone, and is in touch with a startling number of them as he tries to widen his view. “It’s like his focus group,” Jim DeBoo, a former gubernatorial chief of staff, told me. “And his media consumption is very right wing—all I watched when I was his chief of staff was Fox and Newsmax.” (These days, Newsom reads the Righting, a morning summary of right-wing blogs.) He catches nascent changes in the political weather. “During early *COVID*, he kept telling me, ‘Crime—there’s something here,’ ” DeBoo told me. DeBoo studied the latest crime statistics and saw nothing unusual. He brushed off the worry. Then new numbers came out, showing a large pandemic spike in shoplifting and car theft, and concerns about crime exploded into the headlines.

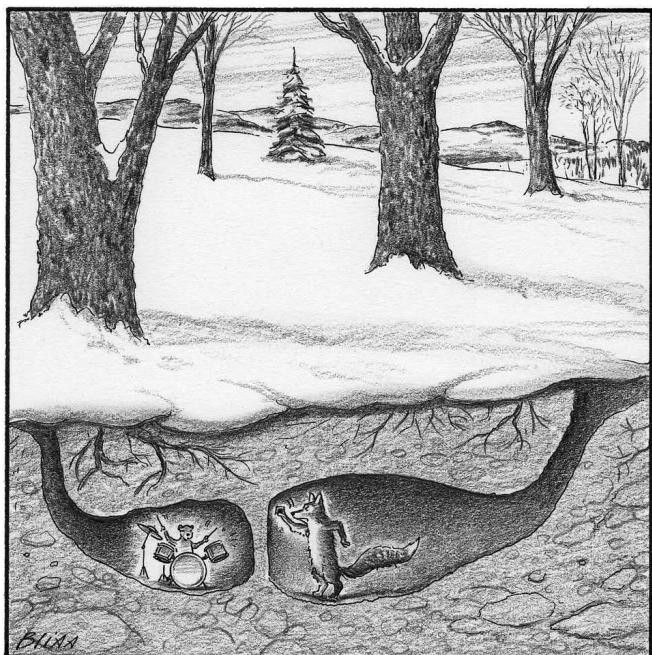
Last March, judging the winds, Newsom launched a podcast, “This Is Gavin Newsom.” His first guest was the right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk. On air, he told Kirk that he thought transgender athletes competing in professional women’s sports was “deeply unfair.” The comment, like the interview, earned him opprobrium from progressives, for seemingly pandering to right-wing voters.

“I lost a lot of good friends over that—they thought it was betrayal,” Newsom told me one afternoon, in his Sacramento office. But “I thought, Why aren’t we organizing the campuses? This is an interesting guy.” Six feet three, he had curled himself, like Gumby, into an “S” shape, knees sideways, in the corner of a blue-gray sofa. He and his team, he said, “couldn’t figure out how to, quote-unquote, make it fair. We came up with a compromise this last year that only, I think, infuriated everybody—multiple medals.” He laughed unhappily.

In public, Newsom speaks often and openly about his errors, fortifying his image as a bumptious, slightly hapless victim of his own enthusiasms. But some think he plays a longer game than he lets on. “He has been *very* careful not to get himself in a position where negatives become a liability,” Willie Brown, a former mayor of San Francisco, said.

Take the Charlie Kirk interview. If Newsom were to run for national office in a couple of years, he would be subjected to the right’s usual claims that

Californians are latte-sipping vegan leftists. “Democrats were so traumatized by 2024, and I could see a bunch of people saying, ‘We’re just not going to do this California thing again,’ ” the Democratic campaign strategist and political analyst James Carville told me. “Part of his selling will have to be, I can play in the middle of the country—I can play fresh water and I can play salt water.” A candidate who has a record of setting up colloquies with *MAGA* loyalists and sharing some of their positions might have an easier time. (Newsom’s next two guests on his podcast were Michael Savage and Steve Bannon.)



Or take Newsom’s rise to the governorship. In the spring of 2009, Newsom, still serving as mayor, was the only major Democrat running. Bill Clinton endorsed him. Then Jerry Brown, the former governor, organized a committee to explore running again. Newsom decided to withdraw and run for lieutenant governor, biding his time in exchange for entrée to Sacramento in Brown’s shadow. Restraint became his path to power. Six years later, when Barbara Boxer announced that she was retiring from the U.S. Senate, Newsom took the extraordinary step of posting on Facebook that he didn’t want the job. “It’s always better to be candid than coy,” he wrote. By taking himself out of the running, though, he left the powerful Senate position—which would keep its winner out of California for half the year—open to other rising stars, such as Kamala Harris.

Proposition 50 can be understood as a similar gambit: a riposte to the White House’s gerrymandering which was grounded in sincerity but doubled as a strategic move. If the initiative passed, it would show both that Newsom could run a long-shot mobilization campaign and that he could draw together a divided party. In a video that the Governor released in the run-up to the election, Democrats from Barack Obama to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Elizabeth Warren voiced their support for the measure.

On the Saturday before Election Day, Newsom held a redistricting rally at the Los Angeles Convention Center. The Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar spoke. Jasmine Crockett, a Texas congresswoman who has been a vocal critic of the Trump Administration, came onstage in stiletto cowboy ankle boots to praise the Governor. (“He saw what was happening in Texas, and he said, ‘Not on my watch!’ ”) Harris appeared. Then came Newsom—the culminating act. He tossed white T-shirts reading “*TRUMP IS NOT HOT*” into the crowd and rhapsodized about the proposition and “how it’s brought these remarkable elected leaders together.”

“Newsom for President!” someone yelled from the crowd.

The Governor tapped his chest—an acknowledgment without acceptance—and went on talking.

A riser to the left of the stage was filled with twenty influencers, live-streaming to their audiences. “It’s something that we now prioritize in everything we do,” Lindsey Cobia, a senior political adviser, told me of the influencers. Newsom thinks the *MAGA* movement has mastered a form of ambient, non-stop messaging that the Democrats have not; his focussed work feeding his narratives to influencers, much of it invisible to consumers of mainstream media, may account in part for his name recognition.

“He spends most of his time talking to those folks and less of his time talking to more of the traditional reporters these days,” Cobia explained. She and other staffers collaborate on writing Newsom’s Trumpy posts, though a few gags, like a running joke about the Governor selling Newsom Kneepads —“for all your groveling to Trump needs”—are Newsom’s own. Last year, Newsom’s personal social-media accounts gained more than five million new followers, and clocked billions of views and impressions. Newsom’s

team calculated that the L.A. rally was live-streamed, from the gaggle in the influencer box, to a hundred and fifty million viewers. “And if I go on Jake Tapper this afternoon?” Sean Clegg, one of his political advisers, told me. “I’m fucking talking to eighty thousand people in California.”

Newsom’s father, William A. Newsom III, was a lawyer of an establishment sort. His family arrived in San Francisco in the nineteenth century, from Ireland, and joined other ambitious, civic-minded Catholics. Newsom described his grandfather, nicknamed the Boss, as “like this”—he intertwined his fingers—with Pat Brown, who served as governor through most of the nineteen-sixties. The two of them developed a friendship when Newsom ran Brown’s campaign for San Francisco district attorney; as governor, Brown awarded Newsom a concession to operate a ski resort in Olympic Valley, then known as Squaw Valley, with a partner named John Pelosi, the father-in-law of the future congresswoman. In high school, Gavin Newsom’s father, Bill, befriended Gordon and John Paul Getty, Jr., whose father was then on the verge of becoming the wealthiest man in the world, and remained close to them all his life. In 1975, Bill was appointed to a Superior Court, then to a state Court of Appeal, by Pat Brown’s son, Jerry. Bill had two degrees in literature. “He was a total intellect, revered by everybody,” Gavin’s younger sister, Hilary, said. The world of Democratic fund-raising was never far away.

Gavin and Hilary’s parents separated when Gavin was three. Their mother, Tessa, eventually moved the kids from the family home, in the Marina District of San Francisco, and bought what Hilary calls “a little gray house,” in the flats of the suburb Corte Madera, across the Golden Gate Bridge. To make money, Tessa at times took on boarders and had as many as three jobs at once. In “Young Man in a Hurry,” Newsom recalls these years as pared to the bone—“We raised ourselves on giant bowls of mac and cheese and thought nothing of it”—if occasionally enlivened by vacations with the Gettys. Some former associates dismiss this description as a strategic reinterpretation of a largely privileged youth. (One described it to me as Newsom’s “I was born a poor Black child” story—a reference to the parodic opening monologue of Steve Martin’s 1979 comedy, “The Jerk.”) Bill Newsom moved to a town a few hours away, near Tahoe, and the children saw him, at most, once a month. Handoffs happened at the Nut Tree, a minor amusement park in the outer-bay town of Vacaville, a place between places.

Hilary told me, “When my mom picked us back up, Gavin would just cling to my father’s legs and cry.”

Newsom was profoundly dyslexic. At first, his parents enrolled him at a French bilingual school and then at École Notre Dame des Victoires, a French Catholic institution that his father had attended. By the third grade, he had worked himself into a panic over his trouble with reading and math. “I’m faking being sick, because I hate school and I’m stressed, and they’re always having to pick me up early,” he recalled. Newsom switched to a public school in Marin County. He was a scrawny, shy boy with a bowl cut. “He always called himself stupid,” his sister said, and other kids apparently agreed. “The guys kept saying, ‘If you’re looking for your brother, he’s hanging from his underwear on a lamppost.’ ”

In middle school, Newsom took steps to reinvent himself as an athlete. “Rocky” had recently come out, and he emulated the main character—running up and down hills, drinking raw eggs, learning to box. His sister remembers falling asleep night after night listening to the sound of him relentlessly practicing basketball: shooting, shooting, shooting, shooting.

Learning to read was a similar feat. When I asked Newsom about his dyslexia in his office one afternoon, he showed me an overstuffed folder of printed material, his reading from the previous evening. Almost every word of text was underlined. He flipped through a galley proof of his memoir, in which the underlining covered whole pages—the only way, he said, that he could read any book, even his own. He produced another folder filled with lined paper and covered with his handwriting: he copies all the text he underlines onto writing pads.



Next, he brought out a stack of canary-yellow index cards, thick as a sandwich. It was covered in his scrawl. From the lined pages, he distills the material and copies things a second time onto the cards. “And, from here, it goes in right in there,” he said, gesturing to his head.

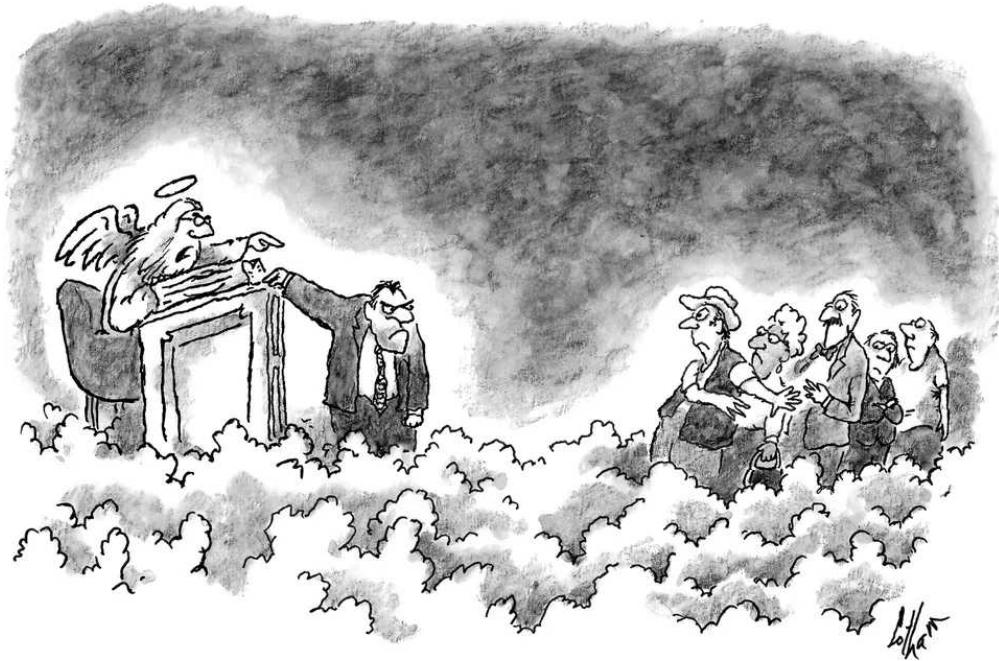
This process of underlining, copying, and recopying is the backbone of Newsom’s working life. He spends his ninety-minute commute—between Kentfield, in Marin, where he lives with his wife, the documentary filmmaker Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and their four children, and Sacramento, where he usually overnights once or twice a week—making notations in the back seat of the gubernatorial S.U.V. Between meetings and after dinner, the pads and cards come out. What he described as the resulting “hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands” of pieces of paper lived for a while as ballast in the trunk of his car. Today, they occupy an unofficial archive off the Governor’s office, with a filing system of his own conception. If an adviser tells Newsom something that strikes him as odd, he has been known to vanish into his archive, emerge with a folder (“There are, like, *tabs* and things,” Jason Elliott told me with horror), and extract a note proving that, months ago, the same adviser told him something else.

Because of his reading struggles, Newsom rarely gives long written speeches; instead, he memorizes. (He sees the lines of text on a teleprompter

screen as a single image, like a Chinese character, which he uses to recall the next line.) Lindsey Cobia told me, “A four-hour podcast where he gets asked about everything from U.F.O.s to his policy on assisted suicide is actually a more comfortable space for him, because of his dyslexia, than reading a ten-minute speech.” Lateefah Simon, a Bay Area congresswoman, who shared consultants with Newsom during the 2020 Democratic National Convention, recalled that they left to help him with speech prep—normally a half-hour task. “I didn’t see them for, like, three hours,” she said. “He wanted to do it over and over.”

Simon met Newsom twenty-five years ago, when she was the director of the Young Women’s Freedom Center, an organization representing girls in the juvenile-justice system. She was chanting with a bullhorn outside his office in protest of his approach to welfare. “The electeds *never* come out to see you,” she said. But Newsom did, and he listened to the protesters’ grievances for an hour. “At the end, he said, ‘My office is always open to all of you.’” Simon began watching his press conferences. “I would tell my members, ‘Write his stats down, and let’s check them—because he has no notes!’” Newsom’s stats checked out; he can “drill down,” as he put it, on almost any subject at the slightest invitation. He sometimes gives the impression of a man with more stamina for talking than people have for listening.

On the campaign trail, Newsom has a mental stack of cue cards that he riffs on the way a jazz pianist might improvise from a chord chart. His movements through the language can be weird. (“The rule of law, not the rule of Don, and I hope it’s *dawning* on people” is a construction that he has found fit to repeat on air.)



Hilary, who is now the co-president of PlumpJack, sees his displays of esoteric knowledge as compensatory. In the family, she was thought to take after their brilliant, charismatic father. “My mom was incredibly shy, and always told everyone that Gavin was just like her—but she was super critical of herself,” she said. “I think there was this quiet rebellion in him that wanted to say, I’m not like that.” In high school, he began slicking his hair, wearing suits, and carrying a briefcase, inspired by the TV show “Remington Steele.” He was trying to channel the era’s buffed iconography of masculine power, but came off like Alex P. Keaton. “I remember paying him five dollars to go to the Levi’s store in San Rafael with me and get a pair of Shrink-to-Fit jeans, because I’m, like, ‘You’re bad for *my* luck in high school,’ ” Hilary said. In light of his trajectory from problem child to aloof entrepreneur, Newsom, who is said to be planning a run for higher office, has an opportunity to become America’s first Gen X President.

Today, Newsom’s political consultants offer his four decades of hair-gel use as proof of a trueness to self. Sean Clegg told me, “The presentation of Newsom is authentically Newsom!” The argument is not entirely persuasive, because a teen-ager who comes to school with a suit and a briefcase is really just wearing what Newsom himself likens to “costumes.” And the Governor still un-slicks himself for those he knows best. Lori Puccinelli Stern, one of his best friends, said that when he’s off the clock “there’s not a hair-gel

bottle in sight. His hair is *long*. I always say, if you put little glasses on him, he'd be an adult version of Harry Potter."

Newsom, who at times can seem more like the Tom Cruise of politics, more successful than beloved, has been at pains to make it clear to people that the suave, wealthy glad-hander is a role he imagined himself into, not the way he was born. ("It's why I wrote a book," he told me.) Is that a message that will resonate across the political spectrum? "He has branded himself as the guy who will take on all comers, and right now that's popular branding among Democrats—the only person challenging him on that position is Pritzker," James Carville said, referring to the governor of Illinois. "The question for Newsom is: Can he walk into a Black church in South Carolina and engage the audience? That's to be determined."

On Election Day last year, the Governor stopped by the office of his communications adviser and flopped into a chair. He had spent three hours reading about electric-vehicle policy before his first meeting that morning and was feeling the strain.

"It's a hell of a way to start every single day," he said. "How many books I could have read! Literature! Philosophy! I think about my life, honestly. I could have gone through the Library of Congress. I could have been someone! I could have *wisdom!*"

His communications adviser, a former investigative journalist named Bob Salladay, nodded, playing along. A trace of Newsom's childhood shyness lingers in his fondness for performing comedic riffs, usually delivered in a key of ironic self-lament, which insulate him from more direct engagement. He was dressed in a white shirt, dusky-blue suit trousers, and a blue tie knotted, with two crisp dimples, into a four-in-hand. The social-media menswear guru Derek Guy, in a post on Newsom and neckties, pronounced him "one of the few politicians left who knows how to wear one."

"This guy is not screwing around," Newsom said gravely, of the President. He tilted his head self-consciously toward the floor and flashed a chatoyant line of a smile. As a young man, he was often described in the media as having movie-star good looks. He certainly wields his face the way a movie star does: with the care and precision with which most people handle power

tools. “Everything we asserted would happen has happened,” he said. “We said he was going to send *ICE* out on Election Day—and that’s what he did in L.A.”

The day before, it had been reported that about a hundred *ICE* and Border Patrol agents had been stationed near Dodger Stadium; Newsom believed that this was meant to intimidate voters. Video circulated online of federal agents detaining an American citizen outside a Home Depot, then driving off in the man’s car with his toddler still strapped in the back seat.

“I actually was physically shaking,” Newsom said. “And the cries of the people videotaping it, saying, ‘Who the hell are you? What kind of people are you?’” He grimaced. “People who don’t like the word ‘dictator,’ they’re not going to hear the next word you say. But they *are* acts of an authoritarian.”

The Governor sank back further in his chair, as if trying to change the mood, and told Salladay that he had been reading Walt Whitman. He alluded to the poem “O Me! O Life!,” in which the speaker decides that the purpose of living is to do one’s part. Then he paused self-consciously. “Walt Whitman—Jesus!” he said. “I’m becoming my father.”



That day, the media had set up cameras at the headquarters of the California Democratic Party, not far away. As evening came, Newsom's staff convened at the governor's mansion, where he doesn't live, to wait for returns. Newsom's office was telling the press that the redistricting proposition would likely pass by ten points, but its internal polling put the lead closer to fifteen or twenty.

CNN and the Associated Press called the election right after polls closed. The measure ultimately passed by twenty-nine points—"not just a win, an overwhelming win," Senator Alex Padilla, who previously oversaw elections as California's secretary of state, told me. The Governor appeared with his wife after Zohran Mamdani, the newly elected mayor of New York, finished his victory speech, clearing the airwaves. Facing a phalanx of cameras, Newsom declared victory and urged other blue states to follow California's lead.

"My call tonight, in the spirit of Whitman, who talked about 'the powerful play goes on'—we all must contribute a verse," he said. "And so we need the state of Virginia. We need the state of Maryland. We need our friends in New York and Illinois and Colorado." He swept a severe gaze from camera to camera. "It is *all* on the line."

Newsom's path to politics ran through retail. The PlumpJack wine store, which he opened in 1992, with an initial investment of fifteen thousand dollars from Gordon Getty, among others, and the partnership of his son Billy, was a pioneer in accessible pricing and the now familiar genre of information-rich sales. ("The thing with this terroir . . .") It caught a rising yuppie wave, and Newsom felt creative power for the first time. To this day, he eagerly takes credit for popularizing screw-top wine.

In 1995, Willie Brown was elected mayor of San Francisco. He had hundreds of appointments to make, and Newsom had distinguished himself by introducing Brown to his and Getty's circle after hours. Newsom gently angled for a seat on the Film Commission, but Brown appointed him to the Parking and Traffic Commission without asking whether he wanted the position. "I said, 'I'm sure he's smart enough to be willing to do the job,'" Brown recalled. In 1997, when a Board of Supervisors seat opened between elections, Brown appointed Newsom to that post, too. "The vacancy

occurred at a time when I really wanted to focus on diversity,” Brown told me. “And there was not a straight white male on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.”

The city’s eleven-person legislature had been roiled for decades by infighting between its left and center-left factions. Newsom, with his Getty connections and his business suits, put his leftist colleagues immediately on guard. “The first couple of weeks, I thought he was arrogant and sure of himself,” Tom Ammiano, an activist turned board member, told me. Aaron Peskin, another supervisor who leaned left, said that Newsom vacillated all the way to the end, as if awaiting the arrival of new information. “Yes meant no, no meant yes, maybe meant no,” Peskin said. “Everybody was, like, Do not count him as your sixth vote.”

Newsom explains his fickleness differently. “I have a difficult time with ideologues on both sides of the aisle,” he said. On the board, he grew frustrated by people complaining about systemic problems and then falling in lockstep behind their like-minded colleagues. “There *are* systemic challenges—I’m mindful of that—but I saw so much of that victim mentality in my early days of politics in San Francisco. I was exhausted by it,” he told me. “Like, why aren’t we doing the things that need to be done to *solve* for this?”



Pragmatism, in politics, is a practice of working backward from desired outcomes, rather than forward from abstract ideals. Newsom's first major pragmatic effort was a homelessness measure called Care Not Cash, which replaced much of the county's cash welfare with mental-health, substance-abuse, and housing services. Street homelessness had been a Rubik's Cube of a problem in San Francisco for decades. On a self-appointed mission, Newsom travelled to study homelessness programs in New York and Chicago. Back home, he met the director of the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic, which served many unhoused patients. He told Newsom to visit around the first and the fifteenth of the month, when welfare checks were delivered. Overdose cases spiked around those days. "He said, 'You're killing people,'" Newsom recalled. "It just shifted my mind."

Care Not Cash passed as a ballot proposition in 2002, securing Newsom's political reputation as a young man who could turn the puzzle sideways. Critics saw it as something more cynical: a play to voters' impulses to punish people on the street, replacing their ability to spend or save with unbankable services and creating supply issues at temporary shelters. Ammiano described the program to me as "a gimmick, and very inhumane"; Newsom received death threats. Jason Elliott characterized Newsom's approach as an artifact of its era. "Permanent supportive housing is now very well socialized but was not twenty-five years ago," he said. Homelessness numbers improved in the short term.

Yet homelessness in California—and San Francisco—has not gone away; if anything, it represents a growing American crisis. Newsom likes to point out that California had no statewide homelessness policies when he became governor. He rattled off a list of programs, from special grants for finding housing to conservatorship reform, that he launched during his tenure. On housing, the Governor has been an ally of State Senator Scott Wiener, one of the legislative leaders of the *YIMBY* (Yes in my back yard) movement, which aims to alleviate housing-supply shortages to improve affordability. "He knows we need to zone for more housing and make it easier to get permits," Wiener said. "You never guarantee the Governor's signature, but ten out of ten times he has signed the bills." (Critics argue that *YIMBY* policies amount to open season for real-estate developers.) When I asked Newsom whether his thinking on homelessness had changed over the years —given his variety of efforts—he insisted that the same thread was

“completely pulled through,” just in ever-improving versions. “It’s this notion of constant iteration, trial and error, throwing more things on the board, seeing what sticks,” he said. “It’s the entrepreneur in me.”

Given that Newsom has openly taken on Trump; that he is ambitious, relentless, and connected; that he is not yet sixty, with four children and a wife who increasingly makes speeches alongside him; that he has written a bootstraps memoir; and that he has not had a month out of office in thirty years, many people are certain that he plans to run for President in 2028. Newsom has not refuted the possibility. “I’m not thinking about running, but it’s a path that I could see unfold,” he said last summer—a rumination that some found comically understated.

“He had that I-want-to-be-a-President vibe twenty-five years ago,” Peskin, who recalled entering Newsom’s supervisor office for the first time and coming face to face with a bust of J.F.K., told me. In 2004, Nancy Pelosi told this magazine that she thought about a Newsom Presidency. (Recently, she told me that she had no memory of saying so, then added, “I do know, from the standpoint of leadership, vision, and values, knowledge of the issues, strategic thinking about how to get things done . . . he’s masterful.”) Others are less circumspect. Wiener told me, “He’d probably kill me for saying this, but *I* think he’s going to run.” Willie Brown said, matter-of-factly, “I think he’s had that in mind from Day One.”

Newsom, who dutifully records every explanation he hears for the Democrats’ losses in 2024 on a list that now runs to twenty-seven pages, is routinely described as the front-runner for the Democratic nomination—an odd claim about a race in which nobody is yet running. If he were to emerge as the Democrats’ nominee for 2028, he would be the second consecutive San Francisco politician to secure that role, after Harris. In recent years, San Francisco, a seven-by-seven-mile port whose population has never exceeded nine hundred thousand, has produced a Vice-President, a Speaker of the House, and a number of redoubtable legislators, making it perhaps the country’s hottest forge for powerful Democrats. The heat comes partly from the city’s all-pervading tech industry—“the center of the universe right now,” as one lawmaker put it to me—but also from a grassroots culture that perennially wrestles the establishment. San Francisco hasn’t elected a Republican supervisor or mayor for half a century, but its liberal orthodoxies

are represented by passionately disparate factions. “Kamala used to say, If you’re running for office in the Bay Area, it’s like a knife fight in a phone booth,” Lateefah Simon, who worked for Harris in the district attorney’s office, said.



When Newsom ascended to the mayorship, in 2004, he was regarded as a bridge between the old San Francisco and a newer, more entrepreneurial one. “He wasn’t an outsider to politics, but he was willing to do things differently,” one of his associates said. At the time, the L.G.B.T.Q. community was a swing vote pulled between a history of leftist outsider politics and the center-left interests of growing professional success. As the gay-marriage debate intensified, Newsom worked with city officials to change the marriage forms, and arranged for a ceremony for a lesbian couple. By the end of that evening, they had married dozens of gay couples; thousands followed.

The news of these marriages made headlines as far away as Australia. In the U.S., it made Newsom a pariah in his own party. Many people told me that, when Barack Obama visited San Francisco that year to fund-raise for his U.S. Senate run, he refused to be photographed with Newsom. (The Obama team has denied this account.) Senator John Kerry, who had just lost the 2004 Presidential election to George W. Bush, spoke at a private banquet in

town. Peskin, then the president of the Board of Supervisors, recalls walking out after hearing Kerry claim that, were it not for Newsom alienating voters with this policy, he would be President. (A spokesperson for Kerry denied that he made this remark.) When I suggested to Pelosi that issuing marriage licenses to gay couples wasn't too daring of a move in San Francisco, she pointed to Newsom's Democratic career. "He had his own future at risk," she said. "Make no mistake—it took courage."

Today, of course, more than two-thirds of Americans support same-sex marriage, proving Newsom's political intuition correct. But gay marriage also proved what could be called Newsomism: a way of pushing policy out in front. In 2004, in an era defined by Clinton and Bush, common wisdom held that the romance of politics happened at the level of charm, values, and having-a-beer-ability; policy came later, fleshing out the details like a lawyer with a prenup. What gay marriage showed was that political courtship could flow the other way—from a daring policy to the politician behind it. "Gavin made a conscious decision not to visibly be part of the story," Michael Farrah, a longtime legislative aide to Newsom, said. "But, in the end, it helped his star rise more."

Meanwhile, Newsom's own private life had become a mess. In 2002, his mother, Tessa, who had breast cancer, died by assisted suicide. His sister, Hilary, who had mostly spent their mother's last days alone with her, all but stopped talking to him. "I was there, and I felt he wasn't," she said; he had buried himself in work. "He thought, if he didn't confront it, then it wouldn't happen."

Lori Puccinelli Stern described the period after Tessa's death as the only time she had ever seen Newsom despondent. "He didn't talk for two or three days," she said. "We were talking to him, but he wouldn't answer us."

The previous year, Newsom had married Kimberly Guilfoyle, then a staffer in the left-leaning district attorney's office and more recently a Fox News host and a onetime fiancée of Donald Trump, Jr. (At present, she is the U.S. Ambassador to Greece.) The idea seems to have been for two ambitious people to double their luck together. The reality was closer to a fast-lane collision. When I asked Hilary about the marriage, she said, "Oh, God," and spent a moment in uncomfortable laughter. During their mother's illness, she

thought, Newsom had “locked” his heart: “It wasn’t, in my opinion, the authentic decision on my brother’s part.” A 2004 *Harper’s Bazaar* photograph of the couple spooning in evening wear on a rug in Ann Getty’s mansion was widely seen as vulgar and out of touch; two decades later, it remains one of the first things some Californians remember about Newsom. By the time it was published, Guilfoyle was spending a lot of time in New York, where she had taken a job as a host on Court TV. Divorce proceedings followed soon after.

In 2007, it became public that Newsom had engaged in an affair with the city’s Commission Appointments Secretary, who was married. She resigned from her position and got retroactive pay for leave, which struck some people as unfair. She and Newsom having had City Hall offices surrounding that of her husband, a top Newsom aide, seemed somehow perverse. Of the revelations, Newsom announced, “Everything you’ve heard and read is true”—a response that, in its unusual comprehensiveness, seemed to take the sport out of further investigation. Nine months later, he was reelected mayor.



By most accounts, Newsom’s relationship with his current wife changed his course. She was the second oldest of five daughters in a Republican family who lived in the affluent Bay Area suburb of Ross and owned a ranch in Montana. Her older sister had died after being struck by a golf cart in which

Jennifer, then six years old, had been sitting. In an interview with the L.A. *Times* in 2023, Siebel Newsom described her childhood efforts “to be perfect, to make my parents forget, by being two daughters instead of one.” The couple’s first date, in 2006, was blind; their second was the Red Tie Gala, for the Little Sisters of the Poor. Puccinelli Stern recalled, “He says to me, ‘Can you guys meet for a drink downtown before?’ And I said to my husband, ‘Peter! There’s someone disguised as Gavin Newsom on the phone actually making a plan!’”

They were used to having Newsom as their third wheel. (“He showed up on the plane when we were going to our honeymoon,” Puccinelli Stern explained. “I said, ‘What are you doing here?’, and he goes, ‘You’re not going on vacation without me!’”) Months later, on a group trip, Newsom arrived with Siebel, looking as if “he’d seen a ghost,” Puccinelli Stern said. “I walk up and I go, ‘What the hell is the matter with you?’ He goes, ‘It was just awful. It was just us two on a plane for five and a half hours, and I had to talk about my emotions!’”

Newsom had become a heavy drinker. He began making daily visits to the president of the Delancey Street Foundation, a tough-love recovery center geared toward former prisoners and substance users. He stopped drinking for more than a year before going back to it with what is said to be moderation. Hilary credits Siebel, whom Newsom married in 2008, for forcing him to confront the death of their mother. “He had taken the Irish-dad approach: nothing to see here, all good, everybody’s fine, let’s get to work,” she said. “Jen brought him out so that he could express himself.”

When I asked Newsom about this transformation, he said, gnomically, “The mask came off”—perhaps an allusion to the documentary “The Mask You Live In,” from 2015, made by his wife. It examines media ideals of masculinity and their constraining influence on boys and men. Newsom hosted Richard Reeves, the president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, on his podcast last spring. “Young boys and young men are searching for a script or a story of how to be a man today,” Reeves told me. “The choice that they very often face is the traditional ‘This is what real men are,’ from the right, or a deafening silence from the left, which has almost entirely told young men what *not* to be.”

In 2020, fifty-six per cent of men younger than thirty voted for Joe Biden; in 2024, the same percentage voted for Trump. (Newsom, in his gubernatorial elections, has fared well among young voters, and has cut the general male vote down the middle.) *MAGA* support among young men is strong not only in working-class domains. A much circulated story published in *Compact* magazine in December posited a “lost generation” of millennial white men in élite fields—media, academia, tech—who privately felt discriminated against. “Most of the men I interviewed started out as liberals,” the story’s author, Jacob Savage, wrote. “Some still are.”

The day that Newsom’s episode with Reeves was released, the Governor signed an order directing various state agencies to support men and boys “suffering in silence,” through mental-health programs, career-building opportunities, and recruitment in fields like teaching. Reeves told me, “What he wants to do, I think, is to be able to go to the Republicans and say, ‘You talk a lot about boys and men, but what have you done? *I’m* doing it.’ But there’s also a style that is appealing to young men which is straightforward, jokey, sometimes a bit risk-taking, just rolling with the punches.” This is the style that Newsom has employed on broadcasts with figures like Kirk and in public quarrels with Joe Rogan. In Reeves’s view, Newsom’s efforts can align the Democratic Party’s future with the fate of America’s supposedly lost young men. For Newsom, however, it would also have a shadow benefit, transfiguring the roughest patch of his history, when he was a lost young man himself, into a political virtue.

Newsom once confided to Elliott that he’d dreamed of the governorship since he was young. He campaigned on bringing universal health care to California, having passed it in San Francisco as mayor. (As of 2023, approximately ninety-five per cent of Californians had health coverage, after an expansion of Medi-Cal, the state’s Medicaid program; last year, Newsom announced a rollback of coverage for undocumented immigrants.) Within months of his inauguration, he issued a moratorium on death-row executions, redrew the route for California’s forthcoming high-speed rail, rerouted a major water-tunnel project, made two years of community college free for first-time students, and rewrote laws to facilitate housing construction. “You generally *don’t* want to make fast movements on big things, because you need to take the time to organize your constituent

politics and your stakeholders,” Elliott said. Newsom, who had spent much of his time as lieutenant governor travelling the state, felt “ready.”

What he was less ready for was packaging this bursting portfolio into a political identity. Bob Salladay told me, “We work a lot on simplifying the story.” Long after it was politically convenient, Newsom gushed to me about the Biden Administration’s domestic platform. “What he was able to deliver from a policy perspective was next-level,” he said. But Biden’s messaging was so notoriously poor that most Americans were oblivious to what many consider the fullest program of worker-oriented policies since the New Deal. At their best, Newsom’s policies—same-sex marriage, say, or redistricting—act as beacons and sparky hits. At their worst, they recall Bidenism: a weave of change that’s underfoot before it has had a chance to be admired on the loom. “I used to get so frustrated, because I’d be, like, ‘Hey! We’re going to give away free community college. Can we just do that this year and call it a win?’ ” Jim DeBoo said. Instead, Newsom insisted that free tuition become part of a larger higher-education-reform plan with many interlocking pieces—a program that is hard to explain in fifteen seconds on TV.

On February 19, 2020, the Governor delivered a State of the State address about homelessness, pledging new funding for housing, substance-use treatment, mental health, and social services—a major, coördinated attempt to work the Rubik’s Cube on every axis. Then it all went to the wind. On March 4th, a seventy-one-year-old who had recently come off a cruise died of a strange new respiratory virus: California’s first confirmed *COVID-19* death. Newsom declared a state of emergency that day.

Mass crises are unforeseen but not unknowable—there is precedent to consult, or at least experts. During the pandemic, leaders found themselves flying in the dark. “The best you could do was ‘Let’s talk to the Ebola czar. Let’s talk to historians who have studied the Spanish flu,’ ” Elliott said. “Shutting down the economy? *And* closing schools? There was no precedent.”



Newsom tacked toward caution. On March 19th, he issued the country's first statewide stay-at-home order. By mid-April, he was outlining a process for economic reopening, which he backtracked on when the state experienced a summer surge. "We had to have tough conversations about what was happening in the community and businesses closing," Robert Garcia, a congressman who was then the mayor of Long Beach, and who lost both of his parents to the virus, said. Newsom's vigilance suppressed California's infection rate during the first wave of cases, letting it avoid the deadly hospital overload of states such as New York, whose death rate in 2020 was twice as high. Yet his personal recklessness brought the first great challenge of his governorship.

In November, 2020, a Fox station broadcast photographs of Newsom eating maskless at a twelve-person birthday dinner in Napa Valley, in contravention of his own recommendation that Californians avoid large gatherings. Other guests included medical executives and a lobbyist, which looked bad, and the restaurant was one of California's most rarefied, the French Laundry, playing into Newsom's reputation as a rule-bending swell. He apologized, but cooped-up Californians were angry. In April, 2021, a petition to recall the Governor qualified for the ballot.

“Recalls are existential,” DeBoo told me. “You lose an election, and there can be another election. You lose a recall, you’re basically done.” Newsom assembled a team to defeat the recall. Sean Clegg said, “I told him, You can be Gray Davis”—a governor who was successfully recalled, in 2003, leading to the election of Schwarzenegger—or you can be Scott Walker.” Walker made his recall a referendum on the other side. Some of the petition’s signatories were Democratic voters, but its loudest advocates were conservative businesspeople who resented the lockdown, and a campaign against the recall, led by the strategist Juan Rodriguez, painted the effort as a bad-faith Republican power grab.

The recall failed by twenty-four points. It showed that nearly two-thirds of voting Californians wanted Newsom as governor. It filled his political coffers, bringing in seventy million dollars from donors. And it left him with a powerful mobilization network. (The Governor’s redistricting campaign was run, in ninety days, with the recall staff and playbook. “Part of the reason we were successful is that we had an established model,” Rodriguez told me.) The experience also gave Newsom a new edge. “His skin got a lot thicker,” DeBoo told me. “It was a training round in big-kid politics.”

Broadly speaking, there are two theories about the Democrats’ best prospects going forward. Theory 1 is that the Party has reached such a crisis of inefficacy in the Trump era that most things about it—its experienced personnel, its hydraulics of strategy and power—should be sold for scrap and rebuilt from the charismatic left. Democrats wringing their hands and making appeals to process while the President sends people to Salvadoran prisons without trial are unfit to meet the moment, this theory says. The answer lies in a cohort of social-media-literate leftists less concerned with civil disagreement and bipartisanship than with calling things plainly: a more direct challenge to *MAGA*. Yes, they will have to run without the support of rich donors, major businesses, and mega-celebrities with media and skin-care brands. But Theory 1 says, Democrats don’t need ‘em. They can do without buckets of cash if they truly embrace affordability populism, which will let them peel off voters who drifted to Trump for cheaper milk. “A mandate for change, a mandate for a new kind of politics, a mandate for a city we can afford” is how Zohran Mamdani, who won the New York mayorship on Theory 1, summarized the approach in his victory speech. Ocasio-Cortez, another successful practitioner, spent part of last year

holding rallies with Bernie Sanders in places like Tempe, Missoula, and Nampa, demonstrating that they could turn out middle-American audiences in the tens of thousands.

Theory 2 says that this is not the moment to break the liberal coalition. The number of people openly or covertly exasperated by *MAGA* is now enormous, and what's needed is a dynamic unifier who can get things done. That will entail the coöperation of finance and industry, which, weary of the current Administration's volatile economic and foreign policy, are likely to support a challenger who can steady the boat. And it will entail the collaboration of young dynamos adept at gathering excitement—a vital skill not to be mistaken for the skill of wrestling ideas into law. Isn't it better to improve the devil we know? Alliances and institutional memories are the Democrats' great advantage over a self-uprooting Republican Party. Take the advantage, Theory 2 says.

Newsom is the Democrats' current lead contender for a Theory 2 approach—the preferred path of the Party establishment, and, not surprisingly, one around which structures and funding channels have already begun to form.



In late October, almost two weeks before the redistricting vote, Scott Wiener announced that he was running for Congress against Nancy Pelosi, whom he

lauded in his announcement. Two days after the redistricting vote, Pelosi announced that she would not seek reelection, turning attention toward younger Democrats. “There’s all this potential energy just held in the plates for the Democrats if it’s *not* Biden and it’s *not* Ruth Bader Ginsburg,” a senior adviser to Newsom told me.

Many members of this rising cohort are longtime Newsomites. Some, like Simon, formed bonds with him before reaching power. Robert Garcia, now the ranking member on the House Oversight Committee, which is responsible for investigating the Trump Administration, has been a political ally ever since Newsom, then the lieutenant governor, endorsed his underdog run for Long Beach mayor. Many of them bridge left and center-left constituencies. Ammar Campa-Najjar, a Mexican Palestinian Navy reservist in contact with Newsom since 2011, has unsuccessfully run for Congress twice against the Republican incumbents in his Southern California district but announced last fall that he would try a third time, figuring that redistricting, among other things, had improved his prospects. He told me, “If you had said in 2018 that being a Mexican Palestinian who grew up in Gaza would become an asset in today’s political world, I would have said you were smoking something.”

Newsom’s ascent to higher office might not necessarily go unchallenged even in California, because some people believe that Kamala Harris is making moves toward another run for President. There was her declaration, in July, that she would not run for California governor—an uncanny echo of Newsom’s own preëmptive refusal of the Senate seat. There is her coyness about her future plans, and her own recent memoir. And there was the conspicuous fact that, at the redistricting rally at the Los Angeles Convention Center in the run-up to Election Day, Harris did not mention Newsom once. Someone who knows both politicians well described their relationship as “careful.” Newsom’s best case would be for her to clear the runway early and deliver an endorsement. “If he can get her to be as smooth on her exit as possible, then there will be nobody else looking for that nomination from California—not a soul,” this person said.

Newsom has a wistful side: it comes through in his memoir. He can talk about the science of the climate and the smell of the Pacific in the same flow of thought. At the heart of his coalition-building is a belief that virulent

partisanship is a messaging issue more than a political one. Wiener recalls the Governor advising him not to heed the sharpest voices in the room: “He said, ‘You represent everyone, not just people who have the time to spend six hours at a hearing.’” In his own work, the Governor has sought to smooth corners, frustrating some organizers. “The fact that we have a super-majority in California and we have not passed more progressive policies has been a huge wasted opportunity,” Kimi Lee, a founder of the California Working Families Party and the executive director of Bay Rising Action, an advocacy group, told me. “Because he wants to run for President, he’s trying to keep everybody his friend, and in doing that he’s not pushing enough.”

To many eyes, Newsom’s talent for compromise-brokering gives him dexterity in a fractious state. Others see a history of impure influence. At the end of Newsom’s mayoral term, in January, 2011, he refused to be sworn in as lieutenant governor for a week, allowing him to appoint a new district attorney in San Francisco. D.A.s can prosecute labor, consumer, and environmental violations and other business infractions. In San Francisco, the seat has often seemed to be guarded by industry. The city’s only left-wing D.A. during the past twenty years, Chesa Boudin, who created an Economic Crimes Against Workers Unit and prosecuted DoorDash, was recalled by way of a campaign whose funders included a major DoorDash investor. Newsom appointed a moderate. Peskin, then the chairman of the city’s Democratic Party, described the message to big business as “You’re in good hands. Now, would you remember I’m going to run for governor in a couple of years and send me some dough?”

The question of influence has come to a head with the tech industry. Marc Benioff, the C.E.O. of Salesforce, is a godfather to one of Newsom’s children. Occasionally, the Google co-founder Larry Page crashed in Newsom’s living room during his early days building the company. Newsom, in his first book, “Citizenville” (2013), laid out an idealistic vision of tech entrepreneurship as a tool for better government. When I asked about perceptions of his coziness with tech power, he told me, “It’s fair.”

Early on, “it was just Larry and Sergey, Ev and Biz,” he said. In Newsom’s view, many leaders in tech abandoned their own early principles. “These folks have *changed*. Elon is a perfect example—I knew him well for years. These are not my friends anymore.”

But neither are they enemies. After members of S.E.I.U.-U.H.W., a powerful health-care union, started a petition to get a one-time wealth tax on Californians worth more than a billion dollars on this year's ballot, Newsom began openly working against the effort, saying that the proposal made no fiscal sense: in the long term, the state would collect more revenue from taxing billionaires at regular rates over time, not frightening them away with a single, enormous tax. And nothing has challenged Newsom's needle-threading more than the explosion of A.I. "There was a really profound question, which was: Who decides the future of this technology? Who decides what it's going to mean for people?" Teri Olle, the vice-president of Economic Security California, a policy-advocacy group, said. Her interest was largely in the socioeconomics of A.I.—whom it would make rich and powerful, whom it might immiserate.

The technology also posed new kinds of risks. Two years ago, after working with Olle and A.I.-safety experts, Scott Wiener introduced a regulatory bill that would require major A.I. powers to hew to predefined safety standards, undergo audits, and allow the state attorney general to hold companies liable. Olle helped rustle up support from Hollywood talent. "You had Mark Ruffalo and a whole slew of A-listers telling the Governor that they really wanted him to sign," she told me. Most major tech firms hated the bill, catching the Governor between California's two most prominent industries.

Newsom vetoed the bill. "People who I really trusted were saying, 'Hold on,'" he said. Instead, he convened a working group to study A.I. safety, led by Jennifer Chayes, who spent twenty years as a head of core computing and A.I. labs at Microsoft; Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, a former California Supreme Court justice, who has worked on A.I. legal questions; and Fei-Fei Li, a founder of the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, who is often called the Godmother of A.I. Last March, the group issued a draft of a report, which urged a shift from liability-based guardrails to a trust-but-verify standard of transparency—"the difference between *requiring* you to lower your carbon emissions and saying, 'Tell us what your carbon emissions are,'" as Nathan Calvin, general counsel at the A.I.-safety organization Encode, who consulted on the bill, told me. The new framework would allow elected leaders to respond to problems through the evolving life of A.I. technology, rather than making them define terms from the start.

“We were all really pleased,” Olle admitted. Last summer, when Wiener brought forward a second bill, some companies, including OpenAI, still sought alternatives, but others, such as Anthropic, went so far as to formally endorse it, and Newsom signed it. The President has authorized the Justice Department to quash all state efforts to regulate A.I., but New York’s A.I.-safety act, signed in December, explicitly drew from California’s transparency models, and other state laws are expected to follow.

What does Gavin Newsom believe in, beyond his own political future? Proponents of the Governor point to moments like these, when he transformed fraught policy into a bridge to unite diverse interests. The corridor to his office is lined with Paul Fusco’s photographs from Bobby Kennedy’s funeral train, showing a varied, stricken nation assembled along the tracks. Newsom, like the postwar institutional Democrats he lionizes, sees the state as the center of the wheel of American endeavor. For Americans who share his sense of loss, not so much for a past that never was as for a future that was promised, time is running out. The children who were seven at the time of Kennedy’s funeral—a year before the moon landing—will turn sixty-five this year. The students who will enter college in the fall were seven when Trump descended the golden escalator. One can hope that they will hold the thread, but to them the thread is in the realm of ghosts. This is the country they know, and the rest of it is American history.

On the second Thursday in January, Newsom delivered a State of the State address in Sacramento. He introduced a budget centered on education, from universal transitional kindergarten to summer-school funding. He pointed to a generic-drug line that the state had launched, offering patients insulin pens for eleven dollars, and described connecting more than sixty thousand homeless people with services. Tracks for the first high-speed rail in the country were finally being laid in California. Homicide rates were the lowest they had been in L.A. since 1966, and in San Francisco since 1954. “It’s time to update your talking points,” he said, addressing his *MAGA* critics. He had memorized the hour-long speech within a working week.

In the run-up to the speech, the state was projected to have an eighteen-billion-dollar deficit. Newsom claimed that it was three billion through different projections, but said that prudence was in order. In the past year, many economists and bankers have warned that the United States is on

unstable economic ground, meaning that whoever runs for President in 2028 may do so in the midst of a financial crisis. In his office, Newsom told me that his address was meant to look to that contingency.

“I was thinking about this notion of ‘democratizing our economy to save democracy’—they’re completely linked,” he said. The economic woes of the average American, he believed, had led to the Democrats’ defeat in 2024. “People will look for *anything* different in the absence of tangible solutions. That’s why we were willing to give Trump another at-bat.”



Since becoming governor, Newsom has stationed nearly four hundred members of the National Guard statewide, focussed on the southern border. (“Trump pulled them off the border for L.A., which is the great irony,” Newsom said.) The line he walks on immigration is a fine one. As governor, Newsom has coördinated with *ice* and the Department of Homeland Security on eleven thousand criminal-deportation transfers from state prisons. “That doesn’t make me popular,” he said. “But you can’t countenance criminal behavior, period—if you’re here without documentation, there’s no special pass for that.” For those not convicted of major crimes, however, California remains a sanctuary state, and Newsom, in his first budget, set aside money for Jewish Family Service and Catholic Charities in San Diego, which provide services to migrants who have crossed the border—an effort that

eventually led to the state investing hundreds of millions of dollars in migrant centers. These two prongs, tightening border security and helping those who do arrive, are not mutually exclusive, he maintains; California has not experienced the overwhelm seen in states such as Texas, which has concentrated on policing.

Newsom said that he had warned the Biden Administration about the political stakes of not controlling the border. “I said, ‘I’m getting it from Democrats everywhere. I go down in San Diego, I go down to Imperial, people are angry. You’re losing your supporters,’ ” Newsom told me. “Whoever is the next President, if they have control of Congress for two years, they should be out of office if they don’t address this issue.” During a meeting with Trump in the Oval Office last February, Newsom said, the President harped on immigration.

“I said, ‘I’m with you—let’s get rid of sanctuary policy,’ ” Newsom told me. “‘Let’s do comprehensive immigration reform. It exists only because of your unwillingness, at the federal level, to actually solve the problem.’ ”

No one who meets with Newsom walks away without a list of policy programs that must be handled more effectively. Late last year, he assembled a team to pore over the policy platforms of candidates running for California governor this fall and to see whether there were ideas that he could take up and put into practice before the end of the year. All his political life, he said, people have been telling him to focus; all his political life, he has refused. “We don’t have the luxury of that,” he told me in his office. “Foster care matters, as much as child care matters, as much as prenatal care matters, as much as preschool matters, as much as preventable-disease and chronic-disease management matter, as much as—” He paused for breath. His arms were in the air, and he was almost dancing.

“Geez!” he exclaimed, as if suddenly overcome by an idea. “I wish I was running for governor again!” ♦

A Reporter at Large

To Build a Fire

How Russian military intelligence is recruiting young people online to carry out espionage, arson, and other attacks across Europe.

By Joshua Yaffa

February 02, 2026



In April, 2024, a Ukrainian woman in her late thirties, whom I'll refer to as Anna, received an unexpected call from an old acquaintance, a man named Daniil Gromov. They had known each other in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, near the border with Russia. Two years earlier, after Russia invaded Ukraine, Anna had fled with her family to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Now Gromov said that he needed a favor: a friend was looking for someone in Vilnius to pick up a package for him. Could Anna help? She agreed and, soon afterward, got a call on the messaging service Telegram. A user named Warrior2Alpha told her that the package was stored in a luggage locker at the train station. He sent her a screenshot of a receipt with a code for opening the door.

Inside the locker, Anna found an assortment of items bundled in a blue *IKEA* shopping bag, which she took home and stored in a closet. Three days later, Warrior2Alpha sent her a voice message with a new request. He wanted photographs of the bag's contents. Anna opened the bag and pulled out a remote-controlled car still in its box. A bubble-wrap bag containing a bundle of wires was taped to one side of it. She also found several cellphones, charging cables, and a pair of black vibrators. Anna snapped a photograph and sent it to Warrior, as she came to call him, who instructed her to return the *IKEA* bag to another locker at the train station.

By then, Anna was feeling increasingly uneasy about what she'd got herself into. Warrior's profile on Telegram included images of a pistol and ammo cartridges, something that looked like a missile, and a Russian flag. Anna worried that, by helping him, she was somehow aiding the Russian war effort. She contacted her sister, who had a friend who worked in law enforcement back in Ukraine. He advised Anna to delete the picture that she'd sent to Warrior and promised to alert the appropriate authorities in Lithuania.

Within days, officers from Lithuania's counterterrorism police showed up at Anna's apartment. The investigators soon determined that the devices in the *IKEA* bag were detonators, capable of triggering an explosion or a fire. They gave Anna a new set of instructions: she was to continue her correspondence with Warrior, only under surveillance, with the contents of the bag replaced with dummy goods and a hidden G.P.S. tracker. What had begun as a strange, out-of-the-blue favor was now a sting operation.

Anna returned the bag to the train station and sent Warrior a picture of the receipt for the locker. "Thank you," he replied. Two days later, a young man appeared at the station's luggage-storage area and opened the locker door. He took the bag and boarded a bus for Riga, the capital of Latvia, about two hundred miles away. Police tracked the man's movements using the G.P.S. device hidden inside the bag. A commando unit moved into place.

Just before 2 P.M., at a gas station near the city of Panevėžys, in northern Lithuania, officers raided the bus. The young man appeared to be dozing in his seat; they shook him awake and told him that he was under arrest. Later, during an interrogation, he admitted everything. His name was Daniil

Bardadim, a seventeen-year-old from southern Ukraine. He had committed one act of arson, he said, and he had been on his way to Riga to carry out another.

Two months earlier, Bardadim had crossed the border from Ukraine into Poland. He had previously lived with his parents and a brother in Kherson, a port city known for its fields of sunflowers and watermelons, which, in the early days of the war, was occupied by Russian forces. A former K.G.B. officer was installed as mayor; the schools and other public services remained closed for months. Bardadim, who was then fifteen, briefly worked at a gas station. In September, 2022, occupation authorities held a supposed referendum that led to Russia's annexation of the city and its surrounding region, but the Kremlin's rule over Kherson proved short-lived: in mid-November, after a sustained counter-offensive, the Ukrainian Army retook the city.

The first days of liberation were joyous, with crowds flooding the central square. But Russian forces, which remained just across the Dnipro River, routinely fired rockets and artillery into the city, killing people at bus stops, outside the grocery store, in their homes. Then came the drones, hunting anything that moved. The city began to empty out. In November, 2023, Bardadim moved with his family to Haivoron, a small town near the border with Moldova.

Haivoron was relatively quiet: Russian missiles and drones occasionally streaked across the sky, but the town itself was never targeted. Bardadim finished eleventh grade; by the following spring he was feeling restless. "During the war, wages were poor, and I had little money," he later told investigators. In a few months, he would turn eighteen and have to register with his local draft office. At that point, he would be prohibited from leaving the country. He gathered his savings—three thousand hryvnia, around seventy-five dollars—and formed a plan with a friend from Kherson, who is identified in Polish case files as Oleksandr, to flee Ukraine. "So as to not have to fight," Bardadim said.

The pair crossed the border into Poland in March, 2024; it was Bardadim's first time outside Ukraine. A Ukrainian friend who worked at a furniture factory in Kluczbork, a small town in southern Poland, had arranged jobs for

them loading sofas into trucks, which paid around fifty dollars a day in cash. After a month, another acquaintance from Kherson, a man named Serhiy Chaliy, invited them to Warsaw.



Chaliy, who, at thirty-one, was more than a decade older than Bardadim and Oleksandr, came from the same neighborhood in Kherson; he'd owned the gas station where Bardadim had worked at the start of the invasion. (Oleksandr had worked there, too.) Bardadim later described him as having a “short beard,” an “athletic build,” and “pockmarks on his face.” He always wore a “blue baseball cap,” “black clothes,” and a “thick gold chain” around his neck. During the occupation, Chaliy had been involved in a series of side hustles, including trading fuel on the black market, an enterprise that was possible only with the approval, tacit or otherwise, of the Russian forces stationed in the city. He sped around town in a BMW. “Like a gangster,” Oleksandr said. “I was afraid of him.”

Bardadim had heard that Chaliy was also involved in the stolen-car trade, running vehicles into Russia and either selling them there or moving them on to Europe. When Ukrainian forces liberated Kherson, Chaliy, fearing arrest, had fled to Crimea, which had been annexed by Russia in 2014. “The police are fighting over his head,” Bardadim had told Oleksandr at the time. By then, the pair may have already been associated with Chaliy’s criminal

circle. A source in Ukrainian law enforcement told me, “Chaliy, along with his neighbors in Kherson, dismantled cars and transported them to Crimea.”

Chaliy now told Bardadim and Oleksandr that he had work for them in Warsaw—something to do with fixing cars, he said. He met them at a city bus station and drove them to a hostel in Stara Miłosna, a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. During the next few weeks, Chaliy sent them small sums of money, to pay for food and lodging. Write down the amounts, he told them. You’ll owe me later. Eventually, Chaliy gave Bardadim a job: he should travel to Romania by bus and pick up a BMW. “He said he wasn’t allowed to go there but didn’t say why,” Bardadim said, of Chaliy. (Another Ukrainian living in Warsaw said that Chaliy was “wanted by the police” for car theft in Romania.) After picking up the BMW, Bardadim drove for a day straight, from Bucharest to Warsaw, delivered the car to Chaliy, and then headed back to the hostel to sleep.

I visited the hostel one afternoon this fall. A metal gate stands before a set of steps and an unmarked front door; inside, handwritten signs posted on the walls announce payment rules and checkout times. A Ukrainian woman named Valentina, the hostel’s administrator, told me that she remembered Bardadim and Oleksandr. “They were calm, well-behaved guys,” she said. “They didn’t make noise, didn’t fight or drink.” They were also constantly short of cash, she added, staying for a night or two, then leaving for a while. At a certain point, they disappeared. Valentina had heard that they’d been arrested, though she didn’t know why. “If they were recruited into something,” she told me, “it had to have been for money.”

In late 2022, European law-enforcement and intelligence officials began to pick up on a new phenomenon. Anodyne offers for odd jobs were appearing in online chat groups, often on Telegram. Most were aimed at local Russian-speaking populations, meaning not only Russians but also Belarusians and Ukrainians. Payment was generally promised in cryptocurrency. The Polish intelligence services came up with a name for those who were recruited to carry out such supposedly simple tasks—jednorazowi agenci, or “single-use agents.”

In the spring of 2023, police in the Polish city of Lublin identified a network of more than a dozen single-use agents—Ukrainians and Belarusians, along

with one Russian, a professional hockey player—some of whom were initially recruited to put up flyers and stickers that read “Poland ≠ Ukraine” and “*NATO* go home.” The point, Polish authorities believed, was to get people to question the state’s support for Ukraine and to stir up doubts and animosity about the Ukrainian refugees already in the country. In France, single-use agents from Moldova, Bulgaria, and Serbia, among others, stencilled Stars of David on walls around Paris, defaced a Holocaust memorial, and left severed pigs’ heads outside mosques. In June, 2024, five wooden coffins draped with French flags appeared near the Eiffel Tower, bearing the inscription “*Soldats Français de l’Ukraine.*” Police apprehended three men—from Bulgaria, Germany, and Ukraine—who said they had been paid several hundred euros for the stunt. “The goal is clear,” a European intelligence chief said. “Heighten tensions or cause cracks within society or, at least, create the image of such a thing.”

Often, simple acts of vandalism lead to more complicated jobs. Members of what became known as the Lublin cell, for example, were later paid to place surveillance cameras along railway lines in Poland that transport military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. A man in Latvia looking to buy marijuana on Telegram ended up enlisted to draw graffiti outside a *NATO* cybersecurity center in Estonia; later, his Telegram handler got him to take surreptitious photos of a Latvian military airbase. The man was arrested after dropping a sheet of paper on which he’d scribbled his handler’s instructions, along with a doodle of an airplane. A local woman later found the paper on the ground. “He turned out not to be the brightest person,” an officer in Latvian security services told me. “But for this job it was enough.”

Last fall, two Dutch teen-agers were arrested for allegedly using a phone app known as a packet sniffer, which intercepts data from surrounding networks, in a government district in The Hague that houses several embassies and E.U. law-enforcement agencies. According to a Dutch security source familiar with the case, they were given the job by an anonymous handler in a Telegram group linked to Russian hackers, who offered them several hundred dollars in cryptocurrency. The teen-agers managed to collect data from about a thousand networks—potentially useful information for creating a map of sensitive digital infrastructure and for probing security vulnerabilities. “With these kinds of crimes, the chances that we manage to catch someone are quite small,” the Dutch security source told me. “Clearly,

many more cases go undetected.” As for the teen-agers, who are now awaiting trial, the source said, “I think they feel pretty stupid.”

There have also been several incidents of outright sabotage. A fire at a warehouse in East London that stored humanitarian aid for Ukraine led to the conviction of six British men who, the judge said, had joined a “campaign of terrorism.” The men had also discussed kidnapping Evgeny Chichvarkin, a well-known Russian restaurateur in London who has become a vocal critic of Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, the handler of the Lublin cell, a Telegram user who went by the name Andrei, offered ten thousand dollars to anyone who could derail a train with cargo that was headed for Ukraine. No one in the group managed to pull off the feat before being arrested. But in November other single-use agents in Poland blew up a stretch of railway on the Warsaw-Lublin line—a key conduit for delivering supplies to Ukraine—with military-grade C-4 explosives. Polish investigators identified the culprits as two Ukrainians who had entered the country from Belarus and then managed to escape via the same route.

German police and intelligence agencies, meanwhile, have foiled at least two assassination plots. In June, 2024, an Armenian, a Ukrainian, and a Russian allegedly tried to set a trap in a Frankfurt café for a former Ukrainian soldier, in what prosecutors say was likely an attempted contract killing. The former soldier alerted German police, and the men were arrested. A month later, news broke of a warning issued by U.S. intelligence officials to their German counterparts: Russian agents were planning to kill the C.E.O. of Rheinmetall, Germany’s largest arms manufacturer, which supplies tanks, artillery shells, and other munitions for the Ukrainian military. The C.E.O. stepped up his security, and the attack was apparently called off.

The most brazen acts came later that summer, when single-use agents in cities such as Amsterdam, Vilnius, and Warsaw—none of whom knew about the others—were recruited to prepare and ship packages, via DHL, of seemingly random items: neck-massage pillows, sex toys, cosmetics, and sportswear. Some of the packages, which were sent to addresses in Europe, the United States, and Canada, contained G.P.S. trackers. Investigators believe they were meant to monitor global shipping routes and logistics. “Now the package is at the distribution center, now it’s loaded in the

airplane, now it's at customs—that's all actionable information,” a European prosecutor who worked on one of the cases said. Other shipments contained homemade incendiary devices, essentially time bombs. One package caught fire at a DHL processing facility in Birmingham, England. Another burst into flames as it was being loaded onto a DHL cargo plane in Leipzig. The plane’s takeoff had been delayed owing to a late connecting flight. If it had stayed on schedule, the plane would have been midair at the time of the explosion.

In nearly every case, prosecutors have concluded that Russia’s military intelligence agency, the G.R.U., has been the principal organizer of single-use-agent operations in Europe. A source in the German security establishment told me, “It’s a show of force, a way of taking off the mask and saying, ‘So, Germany, what are you going to do about it?’ ”

Russia knows that its sabotage campaign, which is a kind of hybrid threat—basically, any state-led attack that falls below the level of full military action—presents a particular conundrum for Europe’s rules-based legal systems. “They run an operation that costs a few thousand euros, carried out by people they don’t care about losing,” Bart Schuurman, the head of a research group on terrorism and political violence at Leiden University, in the Netherlands, told me. “And we in Europe follow up with an investigation that takes months, tying up finite resources across multiple countries. Meanwhile, they’re long on to the next one.”

The intent is not necessarily to undermine the West’s ability to aid Ukraine but, rather, to sway public opinion about the cost of the wider war effort. A European foreign-policy official paraphrased Russia’s intended message to the public: “It’s getting dangerous with these warmongers in office. You’re putting yourselves at risk. So you better go and vote for, say, Marine Le Pen’s party in France or the AfD”—Alternative for Germany—right-wing populist parties that have expressed opposition to continued Western support for Ukraine. Paulina Piasecka, a noted Polish academic and expert on hybrid threats, said, “Taken together, such incidents are meant to spread uncertainty, fear, distrust. The state looks incapable. And people begin to wonder, Look what’s happening all around us because we’re engaged in this war, which actually, maybe, isn’t—or shouldn’t be—our war.”

One day last April, Chaliy met Bardadim and Oleksandr at a McDonald's in a shopping center in Warsaw. He'd told them to leave their mobile phones in his car before going inside. "This seemed suspicious, but we didn't dwell on it," Bardadim later told investigators. A Ukrainian man who briefly lived with Chaliy in Warsaw said that Chaliy treated Bardadim and Oleksandr "as if he were superior—gave them orders, bullied them, and spoke to them rudely." The two teen-agers, in turn, he said, "did everything without objection." Once, Chaliy had them clean the coffeemaker in his apartment.

At McDonald's, Chaliy offered them a job. "You'll always have money in your pockets," he said. All they needed to do was leave a package in a shopping center. A few days later, Chaliy called Bardadim and told him to install Zangi, a relatively obscure Armenian-owned messaging app, on his phone. Bardadim was going to Lithuania.

Bardadim took a bus to Vilnius, where he wandered the streets till dawn. The next day, a Zangi user called Q—"I assumed he was an acquaintance of Chaliy's," Bardadim said—sent him a series of instructions: he should go to the Vilnius *IKEA*, near the airport, and take some pictures. Q first wanted shots of the parking lot. He then told Bardadim to go inside and take videos on his phone as he walked the aisles. Q was especially interested in seeing closeups of the store's mattress department. "I did not know why I was doing it," Bardadim later said. "But I did what Q told me."

Bardadim returned to Warsaw, where, a few weeks later, Chaliy told him to pick up a car. Q sent Bardadim an address and a photo of an archway under which the car would be parked. When Bardadim got there, he found a VW Golf. On the ground nearby, there was a bag of orange cables. Bardadim called Chaliy, who told him to take the cables and drive to Vilnius—and not to tell anyone where he was going. But it was too late for that: Bardadim had taken Oleksandr along with him.

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In Vilnius, Q told Bardadim to leave the car parked somewhere on the edge of town. He was to take eight of the cables with him and to hide the rest. Bardadim put them in a pipe behind some bushes on the side of the road, then took a picture of the location and sent it to Q. The instructions were coming fast now. Chaliy told Bardadim to buy a used moped; he found one for two hundred euros. Q sent a shopping list: twenty packs of matches, three litres of gasoline, three litres of diesel fuel, and three bars of soap. Bardadim later said that he bought half as much fuel as Q had instructed. "I had begun to guess what they wanted me to do," he told investigators. "I wanted the damage to be smaller."

Once Bardadim procured the supplies, he took everything into the bathroom of his hotel room. Q sent a pictorial instruction manual for blending the fuel: Bardadim combined the gasoline and the diesel in a bottle, then added crushed soap to the mixture. This was, effectively, a recipe for homemade napalm—a highly flammable gel that ignites readily and is difficult to extinguish. Q asked for a photo to check his work. The heady smell of fuel leached out of the bathroom; Oleksandr poked his head inside. Later, he helped Bardadim, per Q's instructions, scrape the sulfur heads off the matches with a knife. "He guessed what I was doing but said nothing," Bardadim said. Bardadim cut a hole in the empty matchbox, fed a cable

through it, then poured in the loose sulfur. He braided the cables together and attached them to a cellphone charger.

Bardadim could find the final component at the Vilnius train station, Q said, sending a photo of a receipt from a luggage locker. Bardadim picked up the package and, back at the hotel, opened it to see two Chinese-made smartphones. Q explained how to assemble all the elements of the contraption. When everything was in place, Q said, Bardadim should set the alarm on the phones to go off at four in the morning. Bardadim sent pictures to Q, who responded, “O.K.” On Q’s orders, Bardadim had left the moped parked at a gas station. He was now told to pick it up and drive to *IKEA*.

Q had also instructed Bardadim to buy a motorcycle helmet and wear it not only while riding the moped but also inside the store. “He was very strict about this,” Bardadim recalled. Chaliy sent him the money for a helmet, but Bardadim didn’t buy one. Instead, he sent Q a picture of a helmet that he found on the internet and took an Uber to the store. The idea of walking around *IKEA* with a helmet on his head, Bardadim later told investigators, “seemed ridiculous and suspicious.” Q had also told Bardadim to leave an explosive at each end of the mattress aisle. But Bardadim, having bought half as much fuel as Q’s recipe required, had only one bag. A security guard on duty at *IKEA* that night, who later watched the store’s CCTV footage, described Bardadim’s movements: “He looks around, bending over to examine everything, holding a white plastic bag in his hand the entire time.” A minute later, Bardadim walks away, without the bag.

Outside of the *IKEA*, Bardadim told Q that he’d finished the job. Q instructed him to return to the store at four that morning to “film what’s happening.” What Bardadim eventually witnessed was a relatively minor event. The incendiary device worked, but the store’s fire alarms went off almost immediately, as did the sprinkler systems; firefighters quickly put out the rest of the flames. The damage was estimated at a little less than five hundred thousand euros, a sizable sum, but hardly catastrophic for the world’s largest furniture retailer. Once back in Warsaw, Bardadim got a message on Zangi from an unknown user, which he assumed was Q using a different account. “Why didn’t you leave two packages like I told you?” the user asked. Bardadim didn’t respond.

Western intelligence officials believe that a specific G.R.U. division, the Department of Special Tasks, is behind Russia's single-use-agent operations. The department appears to be an offshoot of an infamous G.R.U. unit known by its numerical designation, 29155, which has a long history of subversion and sabotage across Europe. In 2014, operatives from the unit set off two explosions that destroyed ammunition depots in the Czech Republic, killing two people. A couple of years later, on the day of parliamentary elections in Montenegro, G.R.U. officers tried to mount an armed coup, which ultimately failed. In 2018, in the U.K., two colonels from the unit poisoned the former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter with Novichok, a state-manufactured nerve agent. That action appears to have been a failure: both Skripals survived, an unrelated woman was killed, and the G.R.U. was identified as the perpetrator of the attack. (In response, Western countries expelled more than a hundred and fifty Russian diplomats.) A European intelligence official described the G.R.U.'s reputation as "wreaking havoc, creating disruption, behaving recklessly."

As for the more recent sabotage operations carried out by the Department of Special Tasks, a European intelligence analyst who tracks the G.R.U. told me, "the composition is slightly different, but it's a lot of the same people, carrying out very similar functions." Schuurman, the political-violence expert at Leiden University, said, "There's nothing inherently new, or even all that Russian, about using proxies in statecraft or war." Ukrainian intelligence services, for example, have used unsuspecting local agents inside Russia to carry out targeted assassinations and to sabotage infrastructure. But, Schuurman went on, "what is noteworthy is the scale—and the audacity."

Several factors help explain Russia's new reliance on single-use agents. In the wake of the country's invasion of Ukraine, European nations expelled an additional six hundred Russian diplomats, the majority of whom were intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover. Before 2022, Russian diplomatic-passport holders could travel to most European countries for ninety days without a visa—a useful allowance for intelligence officers on short-term missions. After the invasion, the E.U. revoked that provision. Charlie Edwards, a fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in London, who last year wrote an authoritative report on Russian sabotage efforts, told me that, as a result, "the Russian services lost the capacity to do

what they once had been doing, or would like to be doing, and had to get more creative.”

At the same time, the invasion unleashed a whole new set of imperatives for Russia’s spy services. In the Kremlin’s view, Russia is waging war not only against Ukraine but against the collective West. Ukraine is merely the current front line; the rear, as it were, is Europe, where arms are produced and assembled, military equipment is collected, and fiscal aid packages and other measures to support Ukraine are devised. “From a doctrinal point of view, Europe is absolutely part of the theatre of conflict,” Edwards said. And Russia, like any country at war, has an incentive to disrupt supply lines, sow confusion, and dampen public morale in enemy territory. Maciej Matysiak, a former high-ranking officer in Polish military counterintelligence, told me, “Russia’s intelligence services were left with more pressure from above, expected to take on more tasks, all while having less personnel on the ground.”

Traditional intelligence operatives, and the people they recruit and train in the field, are meant to penetrate specific facilities or networks to collect highly guarded secrets. “The goals or tasks tend to be sophisticated, and the value of any particular action can, if done well, be fairly high,” Arkadiusz Nyzio, a Polish researcher who has tracked the emergence of single-use agents, said. Historically, intelligence agencies have gone to great lengths to protect their assets, providing them with encrypted-communication platforms and detailed exfiltration plans. But with single-use agents what matters is the ability of all the agents, in aggregate, to tie up resources and create a general feeling of insecurity. (For this reason, Russia’s recruits are often referred to as “disposable agents.”) “It’s a swarm tactic,” Nyzio said. “And with little risk if things go wrong.”

Connecting single-use agents to higher-ups in the Russian state security apparatus is exceedingly difficult. Instructions are passed through several layers of middlemen, often figures from the Russian diaspora or the criminal underworld. The European intelligence official estimated that, on average, at least three levels of separation exist between single-use agents and what’s known as a “cadre” officer—an operative working as part of an official unit in the Russian services. “It’s a whole pyramid,” an officer in Poland’s security services said. “There are G.R.U. officers, and under them

coördinators, recruiters, logisticians, separate people handling payments or preparing explosives, others in charge of cars.” The Polish officer spoke of a structure borrowed from organized criminal groups: “Everyone has his or her own assigned task. No one knows what anybody else is up to.”

The European intelligence official compared the G.R.U.’s deployment of single-use agents to the tactics of *ISIS*. “It’s very similar to how *ISIS* used remote tasking,” the official said. In that model, *ISIS* leaders in Syria or Iraq recruited followers in Western countries via online platforms and provided them with basic instructions for carrying out terror attacks. “It’s very cheap, offers a veneer of deniability, and the spread can be huge,” the official said.

Irena Lipowicz, a Polish legal scholar who was part of a government commission that recently studied the threat of foreign interference, described a common profile of individuals approached by Russian intelligence: “They try to look for people who are vulnerable—loners, outsiders, whether in the classroom or society at large, without experience and maybe not so savvy or wise.” She went on, “Ukrainian migrants, especially teen-agers, can fit that description perfectly.”

Oftentimes, young refugees from the war in Ukraine don’t have long-term residence papers or stable incomes in the countries to which they immigrate. They may not speak the language or be integrated into local communities. And, as the Polish security officer told me, “if we catch them, it only ends up helping Russia’s propaganda narrative: Look, you support them, and they attack you.” In 2022, ninety per cent of people surveyed in Poland were in favor of the country accepting Ukrainian refugees. That number is now less than fifty per cent, with a similar percentage believing that the Polish state is overly generous with the benefits—including cash subsidies and free health care—that it offers Ukrainians.

Since 2022, some seven million people have fled Ukraine, with nearly a third having entered Poland and Germany. At least a quarter of a million Ukrainian refugees are estimated to have travelled through Russia and Belarus before arriving in Europe, which means they likely passed through so-called filtration points, potentially ripe settings for recruitment. A high-ranking European official told me, “Europe might feel that it should more

carefully vet who we're letting in." Of course, the official added, "that's exactly what Russia wants."

But, in nearly all cases, single-use agents are apolitical, in need of money, and ignorant of the cause they're ultimately supporting. The Polish security officer told me that, of the sixty-two suspects who have been arrested in Poland as part of sabotage investigations in recent years, only two of them were believed to be primarily driven by pro-Russian sentiment. "It's not a bad spy movie," the Polish officer said. "No one comes out and says, 'I'm with the G.R.U.'" But, the officer went on, "use your head." Who is likely to ask you to, say, put up posters with anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO messages, or to take pictures of train lines that bring Western military equipment to Ukraine?

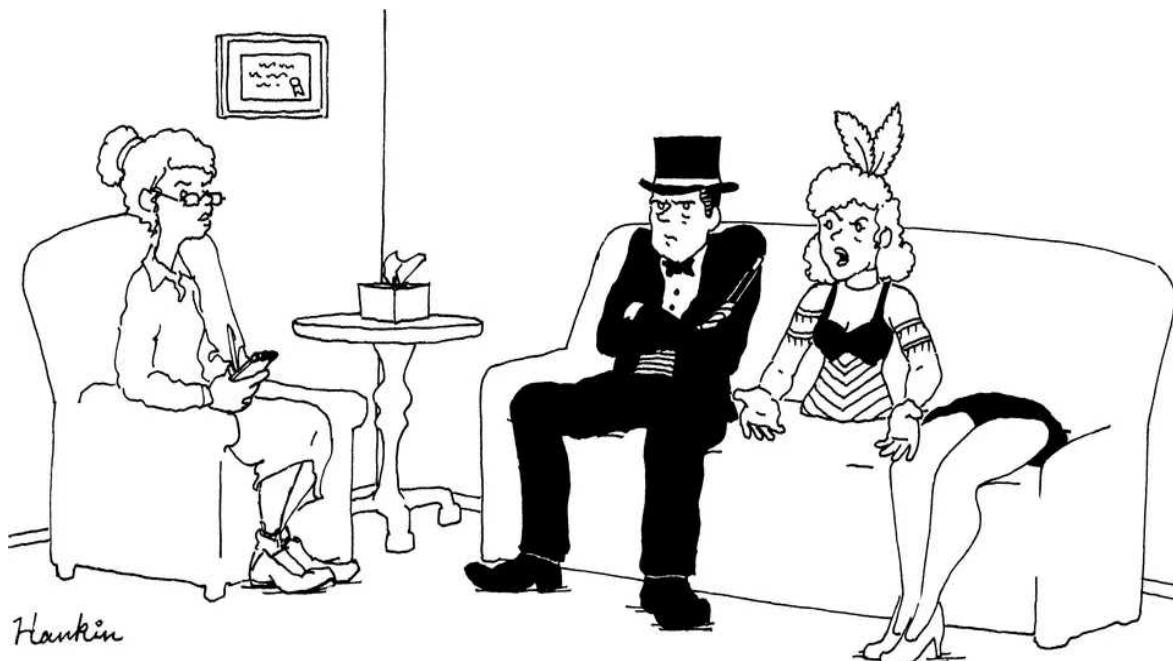
Still, it can be easy to feel a pang of sympathy for those lured into taking part in these plots, often young people like Bardadim, refugees arriving in a new country with few contacts or resources. The Polish officer dismissed such concerns: "Frankly, they're idiots who want easy money and don't ask a lot of questions."

Back in Warsaw, Chaliy gave Bardadim a reward for the *IKEA* fire: the BMW that he had driven from Romania was now his to keep. But, even after Vilnius, Bardadim and Oleksandr didn't have any money. Chaliy not only hadn't paid them any big sums, as he'd promised—he'd stopped covering their basic living expenses. Bardadim drove with Oleksandr to the hostel where they had previously stayed, but they didn't have the funds for a room. They slept in the BMW.

Q, meanwhile, was messaging Bardadim. He sent a screenshot of an address in Warsaw. Bardadim could see that it was a large shopping center. Q told him to go there at four in the morning and to take a video with his phone. "I didn't know what was supposed to happen," Bardadim said. "But I had a guess."

The Marywilska shopping center, in central Warsaw, was a stadium-size complex with more than a thousand stalls selling everything from puffer coats to pho. (Many of the center's vendors were originally from Vietnam.) On the morning of May 12, 2024, at around three-thirty, a fire started in the

building's H Wing, featuring shops offering shoes and cosmetics. A handful of security guards were on duty for the overnight shift. At least one of them grabbed a fire extinguisher, but the blaze quickly spread out of control. By the time firefighters arrived, eleven minutes later, two-thirds of the building was engulfed in flames, its roof buckling and collapsing in on itself. A high-ranking member of Poland's fire service later told journalists that the blaze, which had spread with unusual speed and fury, was no accident: "Starting a fire like this is a masterful art."



Bardadim had left the BMW around 3 *A.M.* He set off across Warsaw on a bus but fell asleep and missed his stop. He didn't reach the mall until nearly four-thirty. He couldn't see much. "By the time I arrived," he said, "it had practically burned down." As the sun rose, one of the capital's largest shopping centers was reduced to an expanse of charred steel and ash.

Oleksandr woke in the BMW around 7 *A.M.* He checked his phone and saw the news of the Marywilska fire. An hour later, Bardadim showed up, saying he had been "taking care of business."

Oleksandr showed him the notifications on his phone: Is this your business?

No, Bardadim said. I didn't set the fire. I only recorded it.

Later that day, Q instructed Bardadim to go to Vilnius to pick up another package at the railway station. Oleksandr stayed behind. He later told investigators that he knew what Bardadim would be doing on the trip: “Setting something on fire.” At one point, Bardadim intimated that the acts of arson were the result of commercial disputes, not of state-backed sabotage—a story that he may have believed, or was simply incentivized to tell himself and others. In any case, he claimed that he had considered refusing the latest assignment but was afraid that “Chaliy would be angry.” Bardadim arrived in Vilnius at five in the morning, headed to the station, and opened a storage locker. Inside, he found an *IKEA* bag containing a remote-controlled car, a few cellphones, and a pair of vibrators—the dummy items that Anna had left under the guidance of Lithuanian police.

The officer in the Latvian security services told me that Bardadim’s target in Riga remained a mystery. “We don’t know, and he didn’t know,” the officer said. “Most likely, he would have found out once he arrived.” That made Bardadim seem awfully incurious, I noted, setting off on bus rides across Europe to start fires in undisclosed locations. “For you and me, it might seem strange or illogical,” the officer said. “But he didn’t think in such categories. When you perform jobs for people you know to be criminals, you don’t ask a lot of follow-up questions.”

Russia is intentional about keeping its sabotage operations “below the threshold of war,” the officer from the Polish intelligence service told me. In Poland, for example, for all the vandalism, arson, and railway attacks, there have been no operations directed at military facilities or critical infrastructure. Such an attack would likely trigger a more forceful response, perhaps even military action. “Russia knows it’s not going to be very successful in an open conflict with *NATO*,” the European intelligence official said.

The deployment of single-use agents allows Russia to maintain at least a semblance of deniability. In 2024, after the DHL plot was uncovered, officials in the Biden Administration tried to intervene, worried that, if unchecked, Russian sabotage operations would lead to a major catastrophe. (“You don’t launch a plan like this if bringing down an airplane isn’t an outcome you’re comfortable with,” the European prosecutor told me.) Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national-security adviser, placed a call to Yuri Ushakov, a

top aide to Putin; William Burns, the director of the C.I.A., also contacted his counterparts in Russia's security services. The message, according to a person familiar with those conversations, was, in essence, "Knock it off." The Russian officials played dumb. "'We don't know what you're talking about,'" the European official said, paraphrasing the reaction.

At the same time, the Russian state wants Europe to be aware that it's behind the acts of sabotage—otherwise the attacks serve no purpose, a tree falling with no one to hear it. "It's a fine line," Schuurman, the researcher at Leiden University, told me. "There should be enough of a link to cause speculation and, most important, unease."

Tomasz Siemoniak, a Polish government minister who oversees the country's special services, told me that it was Bardadim's arrest, and the information gathered by Lithuanian colleagues, that set in motion the investigation that linked the Marywilska fire to Russia. Key questions remain—namely, who started it? The mall's CCTV footage from that evening was destroyed in the blaze. But, Siemoniak went on, the intended message was clear: "If we can set fire to a large shopping center in the center of Warsaw, we can do anything we want in your capital."

Other officials described feeling trapped: the more vigilant their governments are in responding to the threat of Russian sabotage, the more fear and disquiet spread in society. "If you say every day, 'Russia is attacking us,' then they don't really have to attack us anymore," the European intelligence official said. The official described how, in 2024, after undersea cables in the Baltic Sea mysteriously snapped, agencies across Europe convened working groups under the assumption that Russia was the culprit. A months-long multilateral investigation, however, uncovered no conclusive evidence of sabotage.

Piasecka, the Polish academic, told me about three separate electricity transformers that caught fire in quick succession last summer, causing power outages, including in Warsaw. "I don't believe in accidents of this type," she said. "I told everyone, 'It must be the Russians.'" Later, after she spoke with experts and read detailed reports on the fires, she became convinced that, in fact, they were caused by an unseasonable heat wave. "I study hybrid threats, and I, more than anyone, should have known better than to get

sucked into this paranoia,” she told me. “That’s the problem—there’s no winning.”

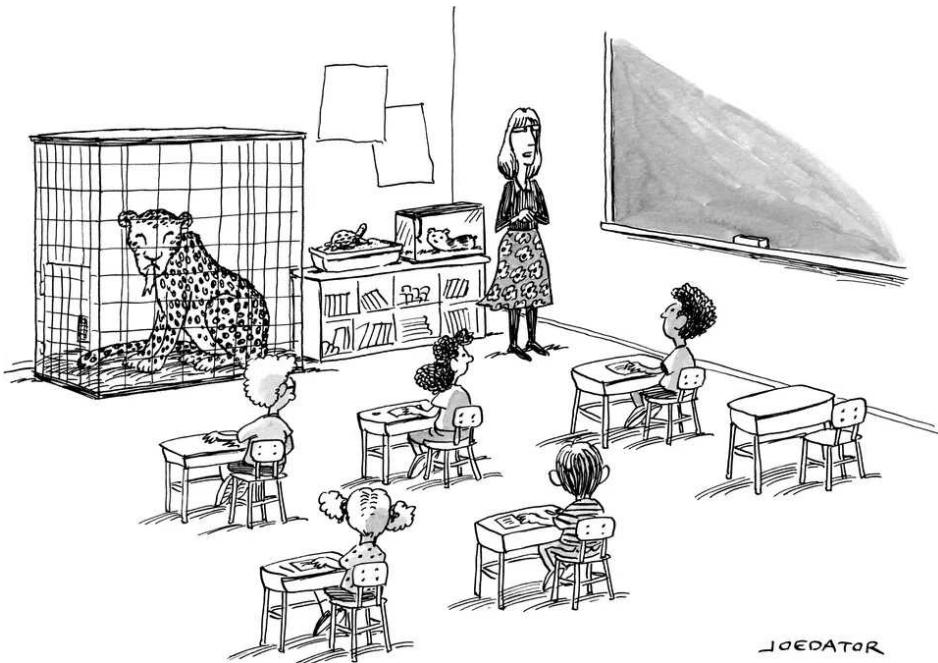
There’s also no clear end in sight. Even if the war in Ukraine comes to a close, Russia will still regard Europe as a strategic adversary. “It’s the capability itself that’s worrying,” the European intelligence official told me. “Today, it’s being used on a relatively low level. But there’s no reason you can’t do the same but escalate the stakes.” The methods and tactics required for having agents ship flammable parcels on cargo planes or set fire to shopping centers could be used to unleash terrorist attacks that inflict mass casualties. “We think of it like a dial,” the official said. “Maybe right now it’s set to Level 1. But what if it goes to 10?”

After Bardadim was arrested in Lithuania, Chaliy, back in Warsaw, began to panic. Polish prosecutors later pieced together his movements. The next day, he tried to cross the border into Belarus, in a Range Rover, but his name was on a blacklist for entry. He called a contact in Warsaw and asked him to book a room at a hotel—Chaliy, fearing that the police were already looking for him, didn’t want to use his own name. That same contact bought Chaliy a bus ticket to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, but Chaliy wasn’t allowed to board the bus, because his passport didn’t match the name on the reservation.

Chaliy next called a man named Pavlo Tkachuk. Tkachuk, who owned a taxi company, had done a few odd jobs for Chaliy, including picking up Bardadim and Oleksandr when they first crossed into Poland. Now Chaliy offered Tkachuk around four hundred dollars to drive him to Bratislava, a six-and-a-half-hour trip. On the way, Tkachuk overheard Chaliy talking on the phone about plane tickets to either Istanbul or Dubai. Eventually, Chaliy told Tkachuk that a friend had booked him a ticket departing from Prague, so they’d need to drive there instead.

According to Polish investigative files, Tkachuk asked Chaliy what was going on. Chaliy started talking about Bardadim, how he sent him to Vilnius with instructions to pick up a bag containing some “fuses.” Tkachuk asked what that meant. “A mechanism for starting a fire,” Chaliy answered. By then, the Marywilska fire was all over the news. Tkachuk asked if that was

him. Chaliy said, “No, that wasn’t me,” but he added that he knew who had organized it.



Tkachuk later listened as Chaliy made a call to a man named Dmitry. “He was talking through the phone receiver, not on speaker, but I could hear very well what he was saying,” Tkachuk told investigators. Chaliy asked Dmitry whether his face had been captured by surveillance cameras at the Marywilska mall. “Chaliy didn’t tell me directly that this Dmitry was involved in the arson,” Tkachuk said, “but that’s what I figured.”

As they neared the airport in Prague, Chaliy got another call. Tkachuk heard someone telling Chaliy that Oleksandr had been arrested in Warsaw. Chaliy told Tkachuk to stop the car. At a gas station, he placed a call to a man he referred to as Uncle Sasha. Polish and Lithuanian officials believe that Uncle Sasha is Oleksandr Varivoda, a forty-eight-year-old Ukrainian living in Krasnodar, Russia. Tkachuk told investigators that he had heard Chaliy talk about Varivoda before, describing him as a kind of senior comrade and boasting of his links to Russian government officials and *vory v zakone*, or thieves in law, Russian slang for powerful figures in the criminal underworld.

During Kherson's occupation, Varivoda, like Chaliy, was involved in the stolen-car trade. Last year, a Ukrainian court convicted him in absentia of large-scale theft. A witness described Varivoda showing up at car dealerships in the company of Russian soldiers, describing himself as an adviser to the Russian commandant in charge of Kherson. Varivoda, the witness said, "walked around the store's premises and threatened our director with confiscation of all the cars." The court determined that Varivoda had stolen at least a hundred and seventy vehicles, passing many of them to Russian officers or members of the occupation's law-enforcement arm. Another witness said, "The occupiers also handed over a network of gas stations to Varivoda."

There is a long history of the G.R.U. using criminal figures as middlemen and proxies. "Criminals are close by, accessible, easy to manipulate," the Latvian security-services officer said. "They want to survive and stay out of prison, and, in a place like Russia, having certain ties to the services can help." As Tkachuk understood it, Varivoda "collected orders for committing various crimes in the E.U.," and Chaliy "carried them out." That included car theft, illegal border crossings, document fraud, and, as European law-enforcement and intelligence officials believe, arson and sabotage on behalf of the Russian intelligence services. According to Polish investigators, Varivoda played a central role in Bardadim's arson campaign: he is assumed to be the person behind Q, Bardadim's anonymous interlocutor.

After the call to Uncle Sasha, there was another change of plans. Varivoda had a guy in Vienna who could help Chaliy flee Europe using forged documents, with a route out via Sicily. Varivoda told Chaliy to climb into the back seat of Tkachuk's car, so that his face wouldn't be photographed by traffic cameras. "I was afraid of him," Tkachuk said, of Chaliy. "He is a bad person by nature." Another Ukrainian in Warsaw agreed: "He's a fucker." The person told me, "He abuses people's trust and creates problems for them. A lot of people have suffered as a result."

They arrived in Vienna at five in the morning. Tkachuk paid for Chaliy's hotel room, just to get rid of him. "I wanted to leave there as quickly as possible," Tkachuk said. Days later, Tkachuk was arrested in Warsaw. He was ultimately sentenced to six months in prison for aiding in Chaliy's escape. ("Please don't ruin my life," he pleaded under interrogation.) His

former partner, Yulia, relayed how, after his arrest, one of the prosecutors told her, “He was in the wrong place at the wrong time—and with the wrong people.”

Chaliy disappeared. In May of 2024, an Interpol Red Notice appeared for him, citing criminal charges in Poland for “participation in an organized group or association of an armed nature or aimed at committing a crime of a terrorist nature.”

Polish prosecutors filed a similar Interpol warrant for a thirty-seven-year-old Russian citizen named Yaroslav Mikhailov. Beginning in 2015, he was charged by Russia’s main intelligence agency, the F.S.B., with a number of smuggling offenses, but it appears that at some point the warrant for his arrest became inactive—a sign that he might have been recruited by the Russian security services. Lithuanian investigators suspect that Mikhailov has also operated under the name Daniil Gromov, the man who initially asked Anna to pick up the package at the train station in Vilnius. The Polish charges against him, however, don’t concern the *IKEA* fire but, rather, the DHL-packages case. Mikhailov, operating under another alias, the Telegram handle Jarik Deppa, allegedly gave instructions to several single-use agents in Lithuania and Poland, telling them to pick up and drop off packages in circuitous routes that crisscrossed much of Europe. In at least one case, he described how to activate the timing mechanisms on incendiary devices. Polish prosecutors believe he is currently hiding in Azerbaijan. One of them told me that he’s wanted for crimes connected to “participation in Russian intelligence activities,” including “organizing and supporting acts of diversion and sabotage.”

One afternoon this fall, I walked through the quaint, storybook streets of Vilnius’s Old Town on my way to the city’s neoclassical courthouse. I entered through heavy wooden doors and found my way to courtroom No. 8. Bardadim had been on trial for several months, though the proceedings were sealed, the evidence kept secret. Now the judge was scheduled to issue her verdict, a hearing that, by law, must be open to the public.

Around two in the afternoon, the courtroom’s bailiffs hurried Bardadim past a scrum of local reporters. He was in handcuffs, wearing a green puffer jacket, its hood pulled over his eyes. He looked at the floor, the table, his

hands—anywhere but at the cameras or the judge. A Russian-language interpreter whispered the verdict into Bardadim’s ear. The judge pronounced him guilty of carrying out a “terrorist act” as part of a “terrorist group” and sentenced him to three years in prison. With the time he’d already spent in pretrial detention and his eligibility for parole, he could be released in one. After he was hustled out of the courtroom, his lawyer indicated that he would not appeal. He may, however, face another trial in Poland, where prosecutors are still investigating the Marywilska fire.

While in Vilnius, I paid a visit to Vidmantas Kaladinskas, a top Lithuanian national-security official. I asked him about the seeming randomness of Bardadim’s target: How does a fire at a Vilnius *IKEA* help disrupt, say, Western support for Ukraine? “I agree,” he said. “One *IKEA* burning is something very minor, no more than a tactical signal.” But, I pressed, if Bardadim hadn’t returned to Vilnius to pick up the package to take to Riga, he might not have been caught, and then the *IKEA* arson would never have been linked to Russia. So what good is it, I asked, if no one knows it was you?

Kaladinskas urged me to view the fire in the context of a larger series of attacks and mysterious accidents in Lithuania and the wider Baltic region: acts of vandalism, cyberattacks, surveillance of military sites, and arson in warehouses and factories—not to mention the packages mailed from Vilnius as part of the DHL plot. “Five, ten incidents like that, it starts to have a more strategic effect,” he said. Or perhaps, he added, it was merely a diversion. “Sometimes I think they just want to keep us engaged and busy, investigating all these various operations of very minor significance, when the really big things are happening behind our backs.” ♦

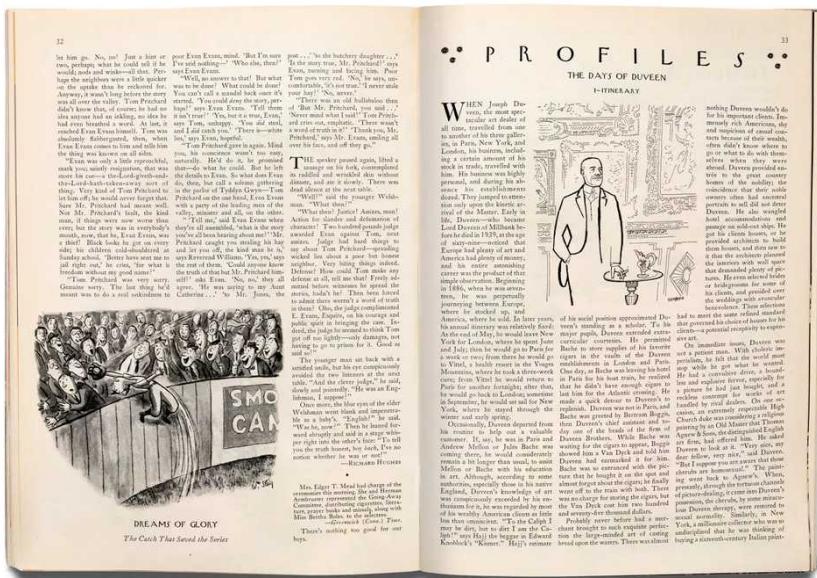
Takes

- [David Remnick on S. N. Behrman's "The Days of Duveen"](#)

David Remnick on S. N. Behrman's “The Days of Duveen”

By David Remnick

February 01, 2026



One day, at the turn of the millennium or thereabouts, I went to lunch at the Red Flame Diner, in midtown, with Roger Angell, the magazine's redoubtable fiction maven, baseball bard, palindromist, and office elder. For me, meals like this were memorable. We both liked the grilled-cheese sandwiches—the Red Flame nails the crispy-to-melty ratio—and Roger was ever ready with sage advice. *The New Yorker* was his inheritance. His mother, Katharine White, had been the fiction editor, the magazine's first; eventually, Roger filled the same chair, ministering to many of the same writers. As he put it to both his friends and his therapist, "For years, I sat in my mother's office, doing my mother's job." The therapist, for his part, called this "the greatest piece of active sublimation in my experience."

Over those grilled-cheese sandwiches, I complained to Roger that, although I could readily persuade an eminent foreign correspondent to head off to

some troubled corner of the earth, it was, well, quite a different thing to—

He cut me off. “Let me guess,” he said. “It’s surprisingly hard to get the longer reported pieces that are funny along the way.”

Well, yes. How did he know?

“I know because I heard the same thing from Tina and Gottlieb and Shawn and Ross,” he said, naming my predecessors, running back to the Jazz Age.

I didn’t really grow up on *The New Yorker*. *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *Village Voice* carried the countercultural news. But later, catching up, I read a long string of comic reported pieces in *The New Yorker* that knocked me sideways: [Calvin Trillin on the crime reporter Edna Buchanan](#); [Mark Singer on an Oklahoma banking crisis](#); Ian Frazier’s [Profile of Poncé Cruse Evans](#), who wrote the “Hints from Heloise” advice column; [Susan Orlean on the Shaggs](#), a sublimely bad cult band.

Roger, who died in 2022, when he was a hundred and one, would, year after year, echo what he said to me at lunch that day: Treasure the funny stuff. Because life, in case you haven’t noticed yet, will wear you down.

And so, by way of capping off a centenary year of Takes and a technological revision of our online archive that has made cruising through a century of writing a cinch, I want to point to an exemplary deep cut—what the critics so condescendingly call a “minor classic.”

Between the early twenties and early sixties, S. N. Behrman, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, was known for his screenplays and Broadway plays. Dated stuff now, for the most part (unless you happen to treasure Greta Garbo in “Queen Christina” and “Two-Faced Woman”). What lasts, what makes me preposterously happy every time I read it, is “[The Days of Duveen](#),” his wry Profile of the British-born art dealer Joseph Duveen, which was published in 1951, in six installments. The Gilded Age had bred a generation of new American wealth—Rockefeller, Frick, Hearst, Kress, Huntington, Mellon, Morgan. All they lacked was taste, and they dearly wanted to buy some. Duveen rushed toward that market requirement

with an insight that would transform culture and its transoceanic acquisition: “Europe has a great deal of art, and America has a great deal of money.”

He combined brash self-confidence and an ability to sell himself as the arbiter of just what an American millionaire must have on his walls: “Each picture he had to sell, each tapestry, each piece of sculpture was the greatest since the last one and until the next one,” Behrman writes. “How could these men dawdle, thwart their itch to own these magnificent works, because of a mere matter of price? They could replace the money many times over, but they were acquiring the irreplaceable when they bought, simply by paying Duveen’s price for it, a Duveen.”

Today, when the emblem of über-wealth is not an Old Master in the parlor but a chopper to the yacht, when the President is hawking crypto and the First Family is crowding around the trough, Behrman’s Duveen emerges as a study in equanimity and finesse: “Probably never before had a merchant brought to such exquisite perfection the large-minded art of casting bread upon the waters.” ♦

[Read the original story.](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

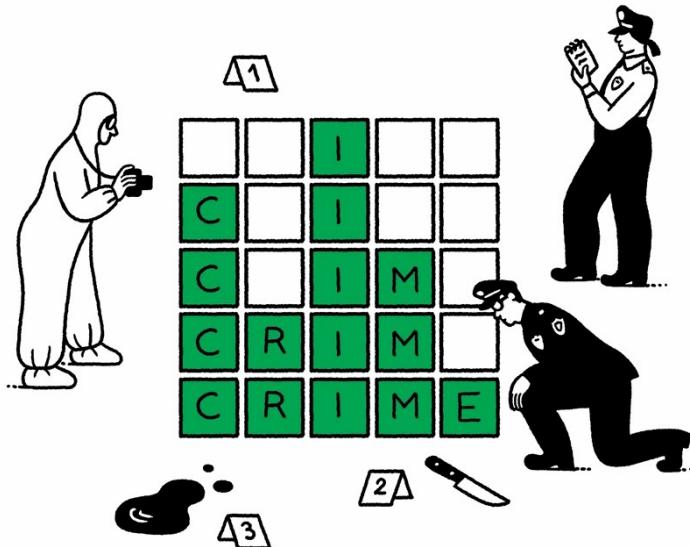
- [Murder Most Wordle](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Murder Most Wordle

By Anthony Lane

February 02, 2026



1. *Cruel month. Sharp mists float round river banks. Mutts scour trash. Winds drone. Weary music plays after hours. Gloom rises. Night falls.*

Awful human cries.

2. “Hello, Chief.”

“Crime scene?”

“Along there. Empty street.”

“Noted. Shoot.”

“Knife wound, fatal, quick.”

“Heart?”

“Aorta. Hence blood surge.”

“Print check? Teeth marks, semen, hairs?”

“Zilch.”

“Leads?”

“Usual crowd: bogus vicar, crack fiend, angry medic, local creep. Poets.”

“Nasty world. Smoke?”

3. *Early lunch. Pizza, pasta, lousy steak. Lager. Latte. Phone rings.*

“Sorry, Chief.”

“Again?”

“Fresh stiff. Found below train lines.”

“Kaput?”

“Worse. Cleft.”

“Twain?”

“Roger.”

“Clues?”

“Words.”

“Words?”

“Scrap paper, inked, drawn. Funny stuff.”

“Which words?”

“ ‘Quoit, dryad, azyme, nymph, alack. Okapi, mambo, aeons, phyla, sough. Excrescences, all of them. Gangrenously indefensible. Damn them straight

to hell.' ”

“Weird.”

“Crazy times, right?”

4. *Shops close. Tired, ratty folks mosey about. Foggy chill. Faint miaow.*

“Hello, Chief. Third death.”

“Natch. Gimme.”

“Toxin. Maybe venom.”

“Where?”

“Spicy prawn gumbo.”

“Yikes. Snack joint?”

“Shady place. Grits, chili, booze.”

“Owner?”

“Heavy party named Chuck Glass. Moron. Earns extra dough tying flies. Limps.”

“Lover?”

“Olive Smith, forty-three. Widow. Twice.”

“Doozy?”

“Tough broad. Kinda lofty. Super smart.”

“Gabby?”

“Shtum. Total.”

5. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Names?”

“Olive Mercy Smith.”

“Alias?”

“Daisy Hazel Baker.”

“Fixed abode?”

“Sixty-seven Lower Maple Drive.”

“Daily grind?”

“Sales clerk. Shoes.”

“Hobby?”

“Tried doing haiku. Prose poems. Short novel.”

“Tried?”

“Trash.”

Pause.

“Alibi? Think, Olive.”

“Dance class.”

“Samba? Rumba? Waltz?”

“Tango. Seven until eight.”

“Dance buddy?”

“Never.”

“Truly?”

“Girls alone.”

“Tripe. Spill, Olive . . . Olive?”

Chaos. Furor. Crash, smash, thump. Olive grabs piece, fires, yells aloud:

“Motherfuckers! Verbalist dictators! Lexical-patriarchal neo-imperialists!
Five-letter fascists! Scum!”

“Sorry, Olive. Word not in list. House rules.”

Shots again. Olive drops, moans. Dying, emits quasi-sighs:

“Genius . . . magnificent . . . impressive . . . splendid . . . great.”

Eerie peace. Rains above. First light dawns, ghost-quiet.

“Final words, Olive? Speak.”

“Phew.” ♦

Fiction

- This Is How It Happens

Fiction

This Is How It Happens

By Molly Aitken

February 01, 2026



It is a Wednesday or a Tuesday, just one of those nondescript midweek days in February when all you have to look forward to is a weekend spent in bed attempting to stroke your feral cat. It is 1982. At least this you are sure of. You are leaving work, your suit still damp from the morning's downpour, the skin on your palms peeling. You are clutching two supermarket bags, tins of cream soup and tuna knocking against one another. The rain is hard and your anorak is cheap. You are on your way to Stockbridge, to your parents' house, which only your father inhabits now that your mother is gone. There you will find, no doubt, a cold potato salad gifted by a kind neighbor, the lingering smell of pipe smoke in the hall, and a delighted expression on the dog's face when your father opens the front door. You walk slowly, looking down at your sodden loafers, and so it is her toes you see first, bare against the gray slabs of the Edinburgh street, each nail painted orange. She is wearing an orange skirt, and an orange jumper, too. Behind her, there are four more people, all dressed in various shades of orange. Their ages range from about twenty-five to sixty, and yet their faces remind you of the

youthful hilarity and sweetness of a school photo: all snaggleteeth, mad hair, and crooked glasses.

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

The barefoot one darts forward and drops a wet leaflet into one of your shopping bags. She is around your age, the youngest of them. Despite the rain, her neck is grimy. You imagine getting a soapy rag and scrubbing at her.

“Nice mustache,” she says. And then, “Anything good in there?” She is pointing at your shopping bags.

Cream cheese. Wine. A bunch of excessively perky daffodils you bought for your father.

Already she has turned back to the others: the man with a dark beard and a hunter’s eyes; the woman in her fifties with dank gray hair; the young man with a shaved head who keeps whispering to the others; and the tanned, ageless one.

Now the man with the beard and the eyes approaches you.

“Come back with us.” He holds out his hand. You want to take it, but your hands are flaking with eczema so, instead, you pass him a shopping bag, realizing too late that, in doing so, you have accepted that you will now either lose your shopping or follow it home with him.

•

Their place is a typical New Town flat: soaring ceilings and peeling floral fifties wallpaper. It is so similar to the wallpaper in your father’s home that at first your instinct is to run. The barefoot girl, who calls herself Ma, takes your bag from the bearded man, and holds out her free hand for the shopping you are still clutching. You give it to her and watch as she tosses your father’s daffodils into the kitchen sink. She crows over the tins of tuna.

“Four!”

Back at your flat, your cat will be yowling for those tins, but you try not to think about him. There are two people here who weren't on the street. They look a little younger than you and Ma. You find that you like them. Ma puts the red wine to one side, ignores the shortbread, and scoops a glob of cream cheese onto her fingertip. You copy her and she laughs.

"Be yourself," she says.

She's one of those rare things: a woman who is not nice.

The others are hurriedly opening your food. They eat it without thanking you. The one with the beard and the eyes says that his name is Jitendra. You wait for him to ask your name, but he doesn't. He complains that the wine isn't white. You apologize and he nods, pours himself a large glass anyway, and tells you that you are handsome.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Molly Aitken read "This Is How It Happens."](#)

You sit beside Ma on the floor, clutching a mug of tea. You won't drink it. The milk is off—you could tell when she poured it. Silk scarves have been thrown over the many lampshades, and a candle is burning low on a coffee table. The whole place is a fire hazard. The air has that sickening smell of dried fruit. It reminds you of the long car journeys you used to take as a child, your parents' arguments and silences, your father quietly leaving the holiday home in the night, your mother laughing, then crying, then forgetting to cook dinner, so you ate bread and apples and befriended a stray sheep.

Ma strides about the room, waving incense. You want to laugh. You think about what it would be like to kiss her. You feel that you have kissed too few people in your twenty-six years. That time in the work tearoom when a girl pressed her dry mouth to yours and bluntly professed her love—you mumbled words of thanks and scurried off to an early lunch. You knew that she was the type of girl you were meant to take home. Your father would have congratulated you on her looks. Your mother would have complained about how ordinary she was and made your visits difficult. You knew you did not have the stamina for her. She would want things from you.

You take a few inexpert drags on the spliff that Jitendra passes to you. They all start chanting. You are too self-conscious to join in. You can't help but watch Jitendra. He looks a little like you, except that he has dark hair, hair that makes you think about the comb in your pocket. He sits cross-legged, and he sways, easyful, relaxed. You are not like him at all. The ageless one and a young man with glasses leave for an adjoining bedroom and have sex quietly, but not quietly enough. The others chant for a full hour. Toward the end of that hour, you stop checking your watch and find that you are swaying slightly, that the chant is reverberating in you, even in your feet.

It was probably two months ago that you went alone to the cinema to watch that documentary. You assume that these new acquaintances are part of the same group, because the people in the documentary also wore orange, when they wore any clothes at all. You remember sitting beside the others in the cinema, so rigid and repulsed and turned on.

They stop chanting to eat crackers, and eventually to sleep. You lie down on one of two sofas, and to your surprise you feel comfortable. Ma crawls toward you and plants her palms on your cheeks. Her mouth tastes foul.

Sunrise reveals cobwebs everywhere. You have slept. Right now your cat is probably shredding your bedspread in a ravenous rage. It is time to leave. Jitendra and one of the young ones are up and dressed as if they have jobs to get to, like you; Jitendra even wears a navy suit. He tells you that he is a doctor. You consider asking him to pay you back for your groceries, but don't. You tell Ma your address, but don't expect her to remember it, never mind to actually brave the streets of Leith, with the junkies and prostitutes. You chose your flat because it was affordable, and because, up until the age of nineteen, when you moved out of your parents' house, nothing much had happened to you. At your office, you shuffle papers, send a fax, make tea, open another packet of biscuits, and hand them out. Everyone smiles without quite meeting your gaze, and you realize that you can't describe in any detail what your colleagues look like—not even the girl who kissed you in the tearoom.

•

After work, you walk over to your father's house to apologize for not appearing the night before. The garden is a soup of mud and trampled grass. As you expected, he isn't there, so you leave a note saying, "Tea at Jenners on Sunday. 11:30."

That evening, Ma coos to your cat. She finds it creepy that you left the plastic cover on your sofa. She says that your flat is oppressive, that she feels unwelcome in the kitchen, but you notice that she feels comfortable enough to empty your fridge, eating what she can and putting the rest in a plastic bag to take away with her.

You ask her what her childhood was like.

"Normal. Why?"

You imagine that she had three older brothers and they were all violent.

•

You meet your father for that tea in Jenners. He looks like himself, clipped mustache, tweed suit, a smoker's fingernails. He does not shake your hand. Immediately, he begins a monologue about your dead mother: how she hated him when they first met (and on many occasions after they married), what a good lover she was, how irrational she was, how much he adored her. You try to avoid eye contact with the other customers. Your neck feels hot, and you hate that your father has this effect on your body.

"We were like a pair of kittens, climbing all over each other," he says.

You know you will carry this horrifying image with you for the rest of your life.

"Your shirt is very orange," he notes, putting his tea down, but he goes straight back to the subject of your mother, and you press the crumbs from your scone into the pad of your finger.

•

You have sex with Ma without kissing her mouth. She doesn't mention the eczema all over your body. She is wearing an orange silk slip, a dicey choice for February, especially as you keep a fire going only in the little sitting room, because that's where you and the cat spend most of your time. She tells you that the slip was her grandmother's and that she made the dye from tree bark she stole from the Royal Botanic Garden. Over the next few weeks, she starts dyeing your white clothes, too, and one day all your dark suits have vanished. You find your best black slacks in a charity shop at the top of Leith Walk and have to repurchase them at an embarrassingly low price.

Ma has told you that she's "with" Jitendra. You have come to like him. Her Indian name, Ma Maryam, like Jitendra's, was given to her by the guru. She refuses to tell you the name on her passport. She says that she will change it legally as soon as she has the cash. Perhaps Ma is a student or a trainee something, like most of the others. You haven't asked.

Jitendra gives you answers to all your questions. A few times, he massages your shoulders as he speaks to you, and you notice that you feel loose, relaxed even, around him. With him you talk, and with Ma you have quite ordinary sex.

You stay at their flat more and more, stopping at home just to feed your cat. In the mornings, before Jitendra goes to his practice and you to the office, you sit with your cups of tea and play draughts. You don't know exactly when it happens but you find that you are one of them. You haven't been to the barber in weeks. You have a beard for the first time in your life. You sense that you will soon be let go from work—there have been comments about your wardrobe, and how often you are late—but it doesn't bother you, even though you know it should. You will have to give up your tiny flat, but you will just move into theirs. It has plenty of room. It will be fine. The only thing that concerns you is your cat. You are not sure how they will treat him. They are careless. No doubt one of them will bring home a plant that's poisonous for felines. It would be just like them to—on a whim, without checking with you—become indoor-plant people.

One evening, you manage to persuade Ma to get into your bath, because you have seen the state of the bathtub where she lives. She reappears pink and soft and far too young-looking. You realize you prefer her dirty.

Since you started wearing orange, your cat has been treating you with disdain. Sometimes you don't see him for days. He hisses and spits from under your bed, and you are afraid to get out in the morning because there is no doubt in your mind that he will scratch your bare ankles. You take flying leaps off your mattress, and hurt your knees. Not for the first time, you despair at having somehow chosen a beast that is so vicious—but when you got him, as a kitten, he seemed like all the others.

Your father leaves a message on your answering machine inviting you to a whisky evening. You don't phone him back.

Out of nowhere, Ma says to your cat, "I used to ignore my father, and now he's dead."

It is the most lucid thing she has ever said.

•

Ma tells you, "We're leaving you soon," and you struggle not to cry, because you have not even managed to quit your job and move in with them yet.

Ma does not invite you. Jitendra doesn't, either, not even when you ask him about it. You had thought the two of you were close. You don't cry. You get a pint with an old school friend, but that is a mistake because all he wants to talk about is your parents, and how much he misses them, your mother—he is so sorry about your mother. You drink too fast and wake up in the morning on your sofa, your feet bare and covered in scratches.

•

At your father's house, the dog tumbles out the door to lick your ankles. Your father looks tired, and you remember that you didn't go to his whisky evening. You are holding a cardboard box with a few air holes punctured in the top.

"I forgot you had a cat," he says, "Come in. Come in."

You follow. The dog bounces near your feet. You reel off your instructions: feed the cat twice a day, never allow him out of the house, don't attempt to

trim his nails—you will regret it.

It's just two weeks, you tell the cat.

The kitchen is uncannily clean. When you were a child, the place was always in a relentless state of disarray. There were always raised voices of one kind or another, always dirty cups in the sink and random forks on the sofa.

“Holiday, then?” He lights his pipe.

“With some friends.”

You open the flaps of the cardboard box, and the cat streaks out, leaps up onto the kitchen counter, and begins lapping from the dripping tap. It's as if he had always lived in this house.

“Don't worry,” your father says, blowing smoke over your head. “I'll take care of him.”

•

Oregon: heat ricocheting off solid soil; flies crawling into ears and over toes; stacks of newly planed wood, smelling of sap, ready to build with; warm apples; sex; too much beer; too little rice; filthy children on the verge of killing a butterfly or a mouse.

You are different here. Yes, definitely different. Your Scottish skin is mottled with freckles; the eczema has retreated somewhere, you hope for good. Here you are touched by everyone, skin on skin, almost constantly.

Tonight you are in the meditation hall. You haven't opened your eyes. You mustn't, because it would break the magic. No one has used that word with you—magic—but that's what it is, inexplicable and, at times, terrifying. Despite yourself, you open your eyes, gaze into your lap, and find an erection poking up at you. You wonder whether you can make yourself come without moving, without touch. It feels like an extreme effort to orgasm in this heat. You will let the erection go on, or wither on its own. You have been having sex with so many women. Some who were once lawyers or

doctors or scientists. Some younger, like Ma, who were teachers or waitresses or still just daughters when they came here. You have had so much sex that you got a rash—not eczema, it was something else, and you had to leave this place, which you have helped to build, and get a bus to another town to see a doctor who did not know you. To him, you said out loud your new name. It feels like yours now, even though you'd never heard it before your guru presented it to you. You queued, along with many others, just to have a few brief moments with him. You haven't admitted this to anyone, hardly even to yourself, but you were underwhelmed by the reality of him. Softer, feebler even, than you expected. Nothing like the sharp-eyed creature you saw at a distance.

You think of the evening after you graduated from university. Your father had been drinking at dinner; so had you. You were sitting beside him on the sofa, and then you were getting up to leave, and his arms shot around you and grasped you tight and held on. The next morning, after breakfast, you realized that he had been hugging you.

•

It's been almost a year, and you rarely think about your cat now, except when you see the white scars on your tanned feet. You know that some people here have sent postcards home, but you have not. There is no point, really. What would you even say, except to ask after the cat?

You have not seen Jitendra since you arrived. You asked Ma when you first bumped into her again, and she shrugged and said that he'd gone back to his family. Sometimes Ma serves you dinner or sits near you in a circle around a fire on a summer night, but beyond that you barely interact with her. You have not had sex with her once since you got here. Often she is with the children; you know that she uses a damp cloth to wipe their faces and hands, and even sleeps in the house that is meant only for children, regularly bellowing at them to "be gentle." You can't help noticing that none of them seem to cut their nails. All of them are covered in scratches at different stages of bleeding or not bleeding. In Scotland, Ma did not seem like the maternal type, but here she is ordinary, mundane even. She blends in. You, on the other hand, you are so beautiful now. Your body is bigger; you take up more space. Your skin is smooth, except for the calluses on your hands

from sawing wood. Everyone loves you here. Most days you are pretty sure of that. Everyone touches you all the time. For the first time in your life, you experience long, intimate hugs with other men, men who have no interest in fucking you; you have no interest in fucking them, either. But you slap each other's shoulders after building a new chicken coop. They also wrap their arms around you after meditation. A man kissed you on both cheeks when you woke up shouting one night. At first, it was bizarre and glorious, but now the feeling of this love has become comfortable, lived-in. You are so deeply proud of all of them, and they are proud of you. What you are all doing here is extraordinary. You find yourself reaching for them, too, embracing them, telling them you love them. You find yourself looking up at the sky constantly, even when the sun is blinding.

One evening, you tell a group of children about the pet sheep you briefly had on holiday as a child. A tiny boy pulls your sleeve and says that he wants a sheep. You have no idea where to buy a sheep in Oregon. You don't tell them about your cat. They don't seem old enough somehow. You take to rolling the youngest children in blankets and carrying them around over one shoulder. You sense a ravenous need in them to be held. Even some of the older children beg you for a turn, so you enlist other men to help you. You see the brief joy on their grimy faces afterward and wonder if any children have run away from here. You ask yourself who would look for them, if they did, and if they would ever be found. You want to meditate, to empty yourself again. But then the next child comes to you, and says, "Please, big man, hold me."

•

It's morning. You haven't slept, but you're not sure why. The light is red and the trees purple; the tarmac is warm beneath your bare feet.

You haven't spoken to Ma in months, but she's running toward you, empty arms waving.

"Your dad is here," she says.

You go back to the house you share with some people, smoke a cigarette, eat some peanuts, weed a greenhouse. Stop. You just stop.

•

You go to the guru's private garden, because sometimes you weed there. Your father is in the garden, kneeling beside him. The guru speaks into your father's ear, his hand patting and stroking your father's shoulder, and you feel a lethal rage, because there you are deadheading his fucking roses, and you have never been touched by him, never touched him, not once.

"Malcolm," your father shouts.

•

You sit on the sun-blistered grass together. His nose is smeared with a white strip of sun cream.

Ma is walking up the road toward the guru's big house.

"See that girl with the shoes on?" you say.

"What made you think it would work with her?" your father asks.

"What makes you think it didn't?"

"Hah."

You know he's thinking that Ma is like your mother. You are both thinking that it has been three years now without her. Neither of you expected it, not of her. Without ever speaking about it, you had both assumed that she would go noisily, in a freak hiking accident or a plane crash. Not with the quietness of a disease already in her brain; not drugged and almost constantly sleeping. Within a week, she could not speak. Before that, wherever she went, tender and trampling through your lives, there was always the sound of bangle against bangle on her wrists.

You look down at your strong, freckled arms, your hands in your lap. You look up at the sky, its blue mottled by clouds.

You don't ask how your father found you. Your parents always seemed to know someone in every city. The endless dinner parties. The constant chatter

and music. You suppose it was only a matter of time. You laugh.

“How’s my cat?”

“She’s dead.”

“He’s dead.”

A warm hand takes your hand, and you think how nice it is, in the end, to be touched by a man like your father. ♦

The Critics

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- [Marx, Palestine, and the Birth of Modern Terrorism](#)
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- [In “Pillion,” Gay B.D.S.M. Passions Edge Toward Dom-Com](#)

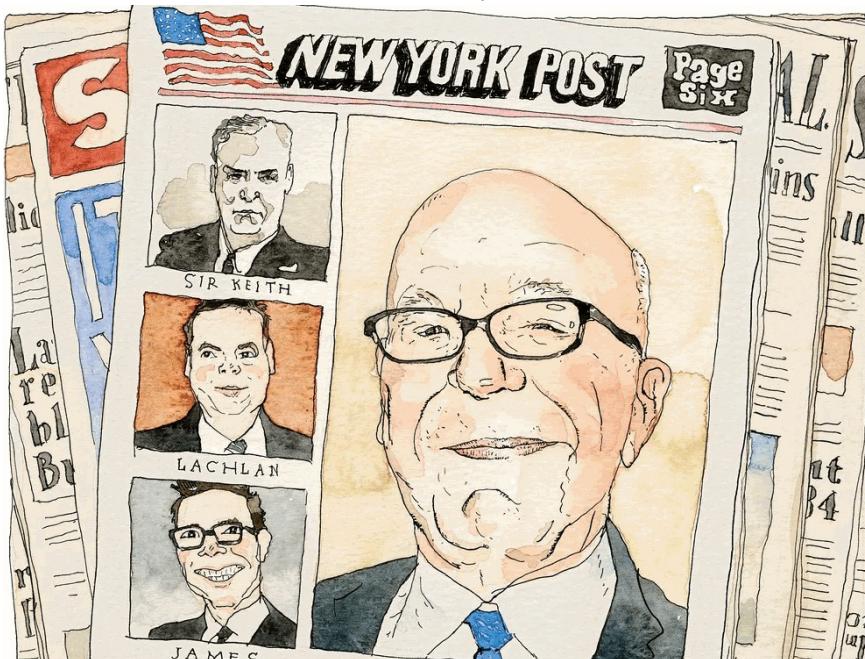
A Critic at Large

How the Murdoch Family Built an Empire—and Remade the News

Today, the name represents a story of profit and power unlike any other. But tracing the genealogy of Murdoch sleaze requires a long memory.

By Andrew O'Hagan

February 02, 2026



St. Bride's, situated in an alley just off Fleet Street, is known as the journalists' church. Having weathered not a few disasters—the Great Fire of London, in 1666, the Luftwaffe in 1940—it now advertises itself as "A Space for Silence," offering an hour of contemplation each weekday afternoon, yards from the world's most famous newspaper street. On a recent rain-soaked day, I arrived to find only one umbrella in the porch bucket and a church filled with lit candles and the chill of old sermons. In the left aisle was a book of remembrance honoring media workers who died in the line of duty, titled "Truth at All Costs." Just behind it, wooden pews displayed commemorative plaques. "Sir Keith Murdoch," one read. "A great journalist."

Murdoch, the son of a Scottish clergyman, was, for a while, a managing editor of the United Cable Service, an Australian overseas news agency. Based in London in 1915, he was posted to Turkey to cover that front of the World War. On September 23rd, he wrote to the Australian Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, fearfully anticipating a winter offensive and the imminent slaughter of thousands of young men. Murdoch's detailed report—later known as the Gallipoli Letter—exposed the way incompetent British officers were herding Australasian soldiers to their deaths. "I shall talk as if you were by my side," he typed on the first page, marked "Personal." He described visiting positions in Suvla Bay, wandering for miles through trenches, interviewing whatever leaders and officers he could. Many young men, he reported, were sent to the front lines without water, and were dying of thirst. Others were treated just as cavalierly. "To fling them, without even the element of surprise, against such trenches as the Turks make, was murder," he wrote. Of the British officers leading the campaign: "The conceit and self-complacency of the red-feather men are equalled only by their incapacity. . . . Appointments to the general staff are made from motives of friendship and social influence. Australians now loathe and detest any Englishman wearing red." Toward the letter's end, one can feel a particular passion for clarity: "This is not a wild statement. It is truth." Later, from London's Arundel Hotel, Murdoch forwarded his letter to the British Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith. "If it adds one iota to your information," he wrote in an accompanying note, "or presents the Australian point of view, it will be of service in this most critical moment."

Murdoch remained in London to learn what he could about popular journalism from Lord Northcliffe, "the greatest figure who ever strode down Fleet Street," in the words of his great rival Lord Beaverbrook. Northcliffe owned the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* and, by 1915, was the chief proprietor of the *Times* of London. "God made people read," he famously said, "so that I can fill their brains with facts, facts, facts—and later tell them whom to love, whom to hate, and what to think." He believed in profit rather than in public service, and the mixture he sold was both heady and popular: crime, sex, money, health tips. An enthusiastic humiliator of underlings, Northcliffe expected office boys to stand when he entered the room. Signing his correspondence "Lord Vigour and Venom," he spied on senior staff and had their telephones tapped. "He used his newspapers as instruments of political power and political blackmail," Hugh Cudlipp, a Welsh

newspaperman of a later generation, wrote. Murdoch valued the monomaniacal Northcliffe as a friend, but worried, he said, about his habit of making employees feel like “the puppets of his will.” Yet, when Murdoch returned to Australia to revamp the Melbourne *Herald*, he promptly earned the sobriquet Lord Southcliffe.

Crime and gossip were Murdoch’s métier. By buying up newspapers and radio stations, he assembled Australia’s first media conglomerate. His son Rupert, born in 1931, grew up enchanted by the clatter of typewriters in the *Herald* newsroom, internalizing the electricity of the place. A senior master at Rupert’s school, Geelong Grammar, later remarked that he had never met a teen-ager so adept at manipulating others. Rupert wanted to join the *Herald* right after graduation, but his father insisted that he go to Oxford. After a rebellious spell as “Red Rupe,” he is said to have accompanied his father on a trip to America, during which the Murdochs briefly met with Harry Truman at the White House. Sir Keith began to form a better opinion of his son. “I think he’s got it,” he told his wife, Elisabeth. Before the verdict could be tested, he died of a heart attack, at the age of sixty-seven. Ever since, Rupert has spoken sentimentally of his father’s journalistic integrity, believing he was following his example in resisting both the prejudices of the establishment and the diktats of the liberal élite.

Rupert’s father had launched his son in England. Charles Fenby, the editor of the Birmingham *Gazette*, later recalled giving Rupert a vacation job after representations were made to Pat Gibson, the chairman of the company that owned the newspaper. “I took him in, befriended him and showed him all I could,” Fenby reported. “And what did he do? He wrote a filthy letter to Pat afterwards saying I should be fired.” On Fleet Street, Murdoch proved swiftly educable in the things that mattered to him. He was watching reality being manufactured, his mind never in repose, forever molding life to journalistic ends, or to business ends—the two seemed the same to him. Although he wasn’t a dab hand at typefaces, or, indeed, at journalistic ethics, he proved a natural showman-executive under Lord Beaverbrook’s wing at the *Daily Express*, learning to package and sell scandal and titillation to millions. The idea that one should not merely reflect reality but create it had become Beaverbrook’s formula. Evelyn Waugh’s novel “Scoop” depicts Beaverbrook as Lord Copper, the chief of the Megalopolitan Newspaper

Corporation, a man who drinks whisky-and-soda and loves nothing so much as “a very promising little war.”



Back in Australia, Murdoch expanded the family’s regional holdings and then invaded the world with father-besting élan. Even in the early days, newsroom staff complained of “Rupertorial interruptions.”

Today, the Murdoch empire represents a story of profit and power unlike any other—a tale of concocted chaos and alternative facts, of state-sanctioned messaging under Donald Trump and daily challenges to democratic precepts. Recent books have identified the target and attempted close examination, but tracing the genealogy of Murdoch sleaze requires a long memory. By the nineteen-eighties, as Gabriel Sherman observes about Rupert in his new book, “[Bonfire of the Murdochs: How the Epic Fight to Control the Last Great Media Dynasty Broke a Family—and the World](#)” (Simon & Schuster), “the question was no longer whether he could survive in America, but whether America’s media establishment could survive him.”

Sherman proves a fairly reliable chronicler of the family’s Oedipal gymnastics. A previous book of his on Roger Ailes, the former head of Fox News, performed its own double salto in describing the mixture of fiction and advertising dollars that defined the network, its operators, and its

splenetic stars. Sherman also wrote a fetching screenplay for “[The Apprentice](#),” a film examining Donald Trump’s mind and life style (if those things can be separated) before he turned the White House into Caesars Palace. Books on Murdoch are generally in a rush to get to the warring children—the wellspring of HBO’s series “[Succession](#)”—and on to *COVID* politicization, the Fox News follies, the Capitol riot, and Trump’s reëlection. But we might first examine the Britain that Murdoch ravaged in earlier days, cutting his fangs as a journalistic vampire. What he did with the *News of the World*, the *Sun*, and the *Times* of London remains fundamental to understanding his legacy, and I haven’t yet read a book that gives these campaigns full amplitude. As often happens with dynastic crimes, the fundamental question involves not just succession but half-obsured precedent.

I grew up in a world where some newspapers featured a topless woman on page 3 every morning. There she would be—Debbie, Mandy, Linda, or Sam—her breasts only marginally less threatening than the missiles being stockpiled by Leonid Brezhnev. In our house, my parents most often took the *Daily Record* or the *Daily Mirror*, where the girls were modestly covered, and where, starting in 1984, the morning display came courtesy of Robert Maxwell—the father of the now more famous Ghislaine. Most of the papers featuring naked women and naked untruths belonged to Rupert Murdoch. From the start, the *Sun*, which Murdoch acquired in 1969, was loved by the man in the street and loathed by his left-wing guardians. The Communist *Morning Star* declared that Murdoch’s tabloid, despite its name, resembled less a celestial body than a paraffin lamp in a brothel. Editorial control at the *Sun* was always questionable. The original deputy editor, Bernard Shrimpsley, formerly of the *Liverpool Post*, reportedly spent most of his authority in the photographic department, where he might instruct a retoucher to “make the nipples less fantastic.”

Private Eye magazine, the home of British satire, dubbed Murdoch “the Dirty Digger.” He once wrote an indignant letter to Harold Evans, then the editor of the *Sunday Times*, in which he defended the *News of the World* from accusations of prurience and insisted that the *Observer* was smuttier because it wrote about “women masturbating on horseback.” But, when Murdoch bought the *Times* newspapers and hired Evans to edit the daily, the Australian’s instincts as both a businessman and a power monger became

obvious. To William Rees-Mogg, the *Times*' previous editor, Murdoch was "a newspaper romantic," but Evans detected something more calculating. He later observed in his superb memoir "[Good Times, Bad Times](#)," that a fellow needn't own eighty newspapers to satisfy a love of journalism. (One might do.) Evans noticed that the new proprietor turned politics into a machismo contest, discussing everything in terms of personalities. The Digger wouldn't directly criticize opinion pieces or suggest topics, "but would make what would please him unmistakably clear," Evans wrote. Murdoch demanded more "conviction" in the journalism, sending cuttings from America—usually by right-wing columnists—marked "worth reading!" This eventually became a crusade of cheerleading for politicians he favored. Evans was asked to resign after just one year, by which point Murdoch was instructing journalists and editors what to write and to print. "Murdoch's attitude was exactly as H. G. Wells described Northcliffe's toward the *Times*," Evans wrote. "He was a big bumblebee puzzled by a pane of glass."

Journalistically charismatic but politically compliant: that was Murdoch's ideal editor, exemplified by the vinegary brutes running his British tabloids. The *Sun*'s most famous editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, nicknamed MacFrenzie, embodied populism before it was really a thing, ginning up outrage and sponsoring hatred in the name of some fabricated principle or other. Nothing was too seedy for MacKenzie, nothing too spurious. He could appear sulfurous in both appearance and prose, delighting Murdoch while capturing the Zeitgeist.

Alongside his hero Margaret Thatcher, Murdoch battled the printers' unions and the British miners, while his editors proved that sleaze and propaganda were profitable journalistic partners. In a miasma of inflammatory opinion, racist sentiment, bare breasts, and bingo, the "soar-away *Sun*" and "The News of the Screws" demonstrated to Murdoch that journalists could be trained to say anything. "MacKenzie is what he is," Murdoch told Charles Wintour, a former editor of the *Evening Standard*. "He's out there, screaming and shouting, and he's good. Somehow it works."

Not everyone agreed. Murdoch's emerging news values drew criticism during the Falklands War, when the *Sun* turned "from bingo to jingo," celebrating the sinking of the Argentinean cruiser General Belgrano with the infamous headline "*GOTCHA*"—a gleeful response to the deaths of more

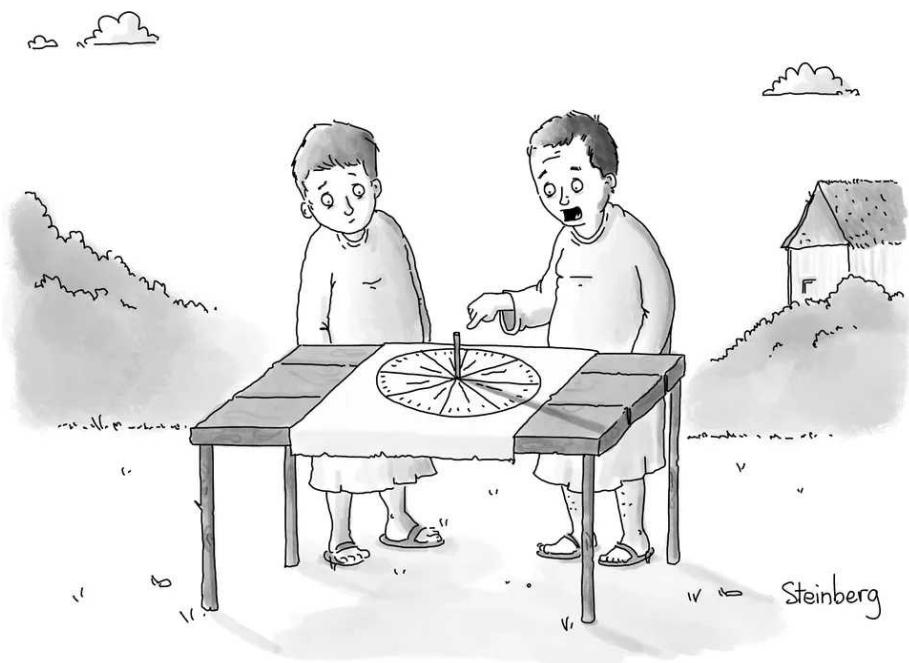
than three hundred naval conscripts. The paper attacked rivals like the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* as treasonous for being insufficiently enthusiastic about the war. “There have been lying newspapers before,” Joe Haines, a former press secretary to Harold Wilson and a *Daily Mirror* editorial writer, wrote of the *Sun*. “But in recent months it has broken all records. It had long been a tawdry newspaper. But since the Falklands crisis began it has fallen from the gutter to the sewer.”

Murdoch, undaunted, saw that his campaign to go international was succeeding. He now owned the *New York Post*. “Something vaguely sickening is happening to that newspaper,” the journalist Pete Hamill observed, “and it is spreading through the city’s psychic life like a stain.” Sherman tells us that, on the Wednesday after Labor Day in 1985, Murdoch stood “with a group of 185 immigrants from forty-four countries” at a federal courthouse in lower Manhattan and became an American citizen. He was already extending his method beyond newspapers: in 1989, he merged Harper & Row and William Collins into HarperCollins, seeing books, too, as scalable content. Increasingly, Murdoch was thinking in terms of platforms—owning not just what people read but what they heard and watched—and in America that instinct led, a decade later, to the purchase of Twentieth Century Fox and the assembly of a broadcast network of his own.

Understandably, recent Murdoch narratives focus on the dismal story of Fox News and Donald Trump, where the dumpster fire, or bonfire, really begins to light up the modern sky. Michael Wolff, that sender and receiver of interesting e-mails, has already offered us, in “[The Fall: The End of Fox News and the Murdoch Dynasty](#)” (2023), a portrait of contemporary American journalism that would make Upton Sinclair petition for a bigger grave, all the easier to turn in. Wolff has written four books on Trump, along with an earlier volume on Murdoch, and he bears the distinction of having received a Trump lawyer’s letter accusing him of having “a reckless disregard for the truth,” which must count as both an enviable credential and a high point in the annals of pots and kettles. “He just wants his kids to love him,” Wolff quotes the late Roger Ailes saying of Murdoch. “And they don’t. Rupert is an odd bird. A cold fish, but a fucking wet noodle—it’s pathetic—around those kids. They’re always stomping off and giving the poor guy the finger.” Both Sherman and Wolff explore how Murdoch’s sons, Lachlan and James—favored by their father in that order—have absorbed

the patriarch's degraded vision of journalism. During the early two-thousands, when Murdoch seemed to own half the world and to orchestrate most of its arguments, his sons coasted on the high-octane fuel that comes with privilege, burning through decencies just as the old man had taught them to do.

The crack in the golden bowl was always there. Murdoch seems to have run his family the way he ran his companies, undervaluing civility and over-rewarding malice. He also pitted his loved ones against one another. This made the saga ripe for dramatization but proved bad for journalism, as each son competed to outdo his father's destructiveness. Only as James began losing the family power struggle did he seem to grasp the nature of Fox News's assault on journalistic standards—perhaps because he had overseen similar practices at Murdoch's News Corporation. It was James, after all, who delivered the 2009 MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, declaring that “the only reliable, durable, and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit.” Shortly afterward, Sherman writes, James decided to topple the British Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown. At a Mayfair club, he met with the Conservative leader David Cameron, who planned to run on a free-market platform more hospitable to News Corporation's planned acquisition of the Sky network. Over drinks, James allegedly informed Cameron that the *Sun* would endorse the Conservatives. At this point, News Corporation enjoyed annual revenues of thirty-three billion dollars.



The Murdoch legacy of editorial interference, which had brightened to Day-Glo normality in the nineteen-eighties, burned like a floodlight through the company by the time James and Lachlan joined the executive suite. The techniques of Murdoch-style journalism were finally revealed in the phone-hacking scandal that forced the closure of one of Murdoch's most profitable titles, the *News of the World*. For years, with editorial encouragement and under a regime of corporate intimidation, reporters had illegally spied on individuals and mined their private messages, breaking into the phones of the famous, the unwitting, and the vulnerable, from victims of terrorist attacks to bereaved parents. Exposure came when an investigator hired by the paper, Glenn Mulcaire, hacked the voice mail of the murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler, creating the cruel impression that she might still be alive and checking her messages. As Tom Watson and Martin Hickman recount in their book, "[Dial M for Murdoch](#)," it soon became clear that this was no aberration but, rather, part of an established practice. Readers and advertisers recoiled at the disclosures. Dozens of detectives were assigned to investigate phone and computer hacking and the corruption of police officers, and members of the paper's senior staff found themselves under arrest. James Murdoch's rhetoric about journalism collapsed under the weight of the evidence. The reality was out there: anything goes, take no prisoners, lie if you have to, and destroy evidence when you can. Summoned before

Parliament in July, 2011, Rupert Murdoch denied direct responsibility, but conceded the obvious truth: “They caught us with dirty hands.”

James was the “liberal” one, “the moral conscience of the family,” according to Sherman, or, as Wolff writes, the son who planned “to grow the Fox News brand beyond the U.S. cable market and to move it away from partisan political news.” Lachlan, the older brother and the current heir apparent, embodies a different type entirely. Like his former friend Tucker Carlson, he can be all steak and doughnuts one minute and all fiery Hell the next. After Roger Ailes was removed from Fox News, in 2016, over sexual-harassment allegations, Lachlan cut the brake lines of what was already a speeding train of misinformation, pushing American journalism further into alternative reality than even his father and his lieutenants had dared. However trashy they may have been, the British tabloids were occasionally funny, but Lachlan’s operation became something darker—a purveyor of apocalyptic doom-mongering, the sort that courses through Donald Trump’s mind, where America is a place of perpetual rape, murder, conspiracy, and terror. Lachlan, coming from a blushless world of billionaire-speak, never pretended interest in the rolled-up-sleeves world of journalism. Having outfought his siblings and aligned his father with his own vision, Lachlan now takes for granted his father’s core business insight: that great fortunes can be made from audiences who prefer their reality falsified.

We needn’t dwell on Lachlan’s failed internet ventures, his company’s promotion of climate-change denial, his protection of divisive propaganda as free speech, or his consistent support for profitable discord over journalistic integrity. What we know for certain is that Fox News refused to broadcast the January 6th congressional hearings in prime time, eschewing careful evidence in favor of in-studio opinion, lies, and provocation. The network continued to give airtime to Trump’s rigged-voting-machine fantasies even after legal challenges, a strategy that cost the company nearly eight hundred million dollars in damages.

The process of gaslighting the world goes on, but Rupert Murdoch, now ninety-four and worth twenty-three billion dollars, will leave even his own kingdom darker than he found it. “News Corp no longer behaves like a media outlet,” the former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull observes in “[The Successor](#)” (2022), Paddy Manning’s clear-eyed book

about Lachlan Murdoch. The company now operates “like a political party . . . just as in the United States, Fox News’ relationship with Trump and the GOP was ‘like that of the state-owned media of an authoritarian government.’” Of course, as often happens with corrupt alliances—Fagin’s den of thieves comes to mind—Trump and the Murdochs are now at each other’s throats.

In a way, Rupert got his revenge on his recalcitrant children: first, by shaping their understanding of reality itself, and, second, by selling the company’s most valuable assets out from beneath them, in 2019. He left each with billions—hardly a punishment by ordinary measures, but existentially devastating for heirs who had expected to inherit an empire. He neutralized the succession problem by miniaturizing it. In the Season 3 finale of “Succession,” the patriarch, Logan Roy, wallops his children with old-style underhandedness, stripping them of power just as they try to unseat him. Having previously sent his son Kendall a birthday card with “Happy Birthday” scratched out and replaced with “*CASH OUT AND FUCK OFF*,” Logan moves to sell his company, Waystar Royco, to a tech mogul named Lukas Matsson. Kendall spirals toward a breakdown while his siblings Roman and Shiv scheme to recruit him against their father. (“Dad’s whole career is kind of one big dick pic sent to Western civilization,” Roman observes.) When they arrive to blindsight Logan, they discover that he has already arranged their interment. “This is an opportunity for you kids to get an education in real life,” he tells them. Roman, played by Kieran Culkin, appears to be in a state of aching disbelief, as if the meaning of his life has just been surgically extracted.

Something similar had happened when, at the height of the Murdoch family’s civil war, Rupert sold Twentieth Century Fox to Disney for seventy-one billion dollars, netting each of his six children roughly two billion—the same sum that Logan Roy offers Kendall via his doctored birthday card. In life as in art, it was a battle for control in which nobody truly won, because nobody ended up owning what Rupert Murdoch had spent seven decades building. The family imploded, and there’s something almost novelistic in the trajectory—from cramped newspaper offices in Adelaide and Fleet Street to Lachlan Murdoch as the custodian of a journalistic enterprise’s fetid remains. Several generations have brought it to a state of sordid dereliction.

Let's not forget, though, that Lachlan's Princeton dissertation was "A Study of Freedom and Morality in Kant's Practical Philosophy." Granted, the categorical imperative—the great Prussian philosopher's blueprint for moral action—isn't likely to illuminate Fox News's festering relationship with Donald Trump, or the enterprise of turning civic life into an ongoing platform for outrage. But maybe it's fitting that the language of freedom and morality should buckle before the family's talent for making reality pliable. To read about the Murdochs is to gain a lesson about punitive ambition, about men who expect the world to yield to their hand-me-down egos. Lachlan has been a good son, in a way, returning to his father's side before the old man departs, but a look at his journalism proves that he has respected only the worst parts of the family legacy. In the arc from the Gallipoli Letter to Fox News's prime-time carnival of grievance, the Murdochs' bleak achievement is having shown how easily morality, like truth, becomes something to be invoked when useful, ignored when inconvenient, bent when resisted, and discarded the moment it no longer pays. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the birth order of Logan Roy's sons on the TV series "Succession."

Books

Marx, Palestine, and the Birth of Modern Terrorism

A new history charts how Palestinian militants of the nineteen-seventies made common cause with West Germany's radical left.

By Thomas Meaney

February 02, 2026



In February, 2024, German police discovered a rare political specimen behind the door of an apartment in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin. Claudia Ivone, sixty-five years old, appeared to live a quiet existence. She practiced capoeira, tutored children, and helped people draft letters to the authorities. She also possessed a Czech submachine gun, a dummy grenade launcher, a cache of ammunition, a quarter of a million euros in cash, and a kilogram of gold. At the police station, she made a startling declaration: "I am Daniela Klette of the R.A.F." Klette was one of the last remaining members of the Red Army Faction, sometimes known as the Baader-Meinhof gang, which, in various iterations, rampaged through Europe in the nineteen-seventies and

eighties, attacking right-wing newspapers, bankers, and *NATO* installations, and, most spectacularly, hijacking commercial airliners.

Klette's trial is ongoing in a small town in Lower Saxony. She stands accused of participating in a string of armed robberies, thought to have been undertaken with two other R.A.F. members, and faces a charge of attempted murder relating to a heist. She is also suspected of terrorist operations, including a sniper attack on the U.S. Embassy in Bonn in 1991, in protest against the first Gulf War. In the courtroom, Klette has drawn scrutiny for wearing a Palestinian kaffiyeh. In Germany today, where mainstream newspapers have likened kaffiyehs to Nazi garb, her attire is a reminder of the ties between the Western left and Middle Eastern militants and of shared revolutionary dreams that never came to pass.

Jason Burke's "[The Revolutionists: The Story of the Extremists Who Hijacked the 1970s](#)" (Knopf) is a timely history of this coupling. It returns to the decade when West German radicals, disillusioned by the political outcome of the 1968 protests, turned to violent measures against the West German state, which they viewed as a colony of American capitalism run by Nazi veterans. Meanwhile, Palestinian militants reeled from Israel's growing dominance. The mutual attraction between the Palestinians and the Europeans was not hard to fathom. The Palestinians offered the Europeans weapons training at military camps; the Europeans offered the Palestinians publicity. For a brief season, both sides shared a Marxist-Leninist vocabulary and a romantic faith that they could transform their societies. Airplane hijackings panicked Western governments and vaulted the Palestinian problem to the forefront of international radical politics.

Burke, a longtime foreign correspondent for the *Guardian* whose previous books include [a study of Al Qaeda](#), writes that he is interested less in "the individual psychology" of his subjects than in the "worldview that motivated these attackers." His book displays an ambition far exceeding its subtitle and features a huge cast of characters. It also raises one of the puzzling questions of the history of the Middle East: Why were the avowedly secular nationalist and Marxist groups of the period supplanted by Islamist movements, which were initially quite small? How did a decade that began with the Palestine Liberation Organization's head, Yasir Arafat, preaching revolution with a

gun over his shoulder end with the Ayatollah Khomeini presiding over a revolution in Iran with his hand on the Quran?

Instead of focussing on Arafat and his party, Fatah, Burke concentrates on a more radical faction within the P.L.O., the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Like many of the Palestinian militants Burke writes about, the P.F.L.P.'s leaders, George Habash and Wadie Haddad, came from the professional classes—both were doctors—and had suffered a double defeat. In 1948, they experienced the obliteration of their towns, as Zionist forces expelled much of the nascent state's Arab population; the more recent humiliation was the Six-Day War, in 1967, in which the Israel Defense Forces trounced the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in just a week, seizing territories that more than tripled Israel's size.

It was clear that the Arab nationalists—such as Egypt's leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser—could do little for the Palestinians, so Habash and Haddad placed their bet on Marxism-Leninism. They reasoned that, as in China and Vietnam, the most promising chance to seize power was by developing a vanguard party that could act decisively in the right conditions. Habash and Haddad co-founded the P.F.L.P., in December, 1967, as an organization that would use violence—the more eye-catching the better.

One target in particular suggested itself to Haddad: commercial airliners. Flying was still a rarefied form of travel, not yet encumbered by standardized security checks. With the right kind of swagger, the holder of a first-class ticket could stroll onto a jet with few questions asked. In 1969, Leila Khaled, a twenty-five-year-old P.F.L.P. recruit, was one of a pair who hijacked a T.W.A. flight to Tel Aviv and redirected it to Damascus, where they released the passengers and blew up the nose of the plane. The operation was effectively a press release backed by guns and explosives: the Palestinians had taken their fate into their own hands in the form of a chic, press-savvy young Arab woman.

The following year, Khaled took part in a larger plan, the simultaneous hijacking of multiple planes. She and Patricio Argüello, a Nicaraguan American Fulbright scholar and Sandinista, were to commandeer an El Al flight out of Amsterdam. Khaled, by now a celebrity, underwent plastic surgery to make herself less recognizable, but her mission did not go as

planned. The Israeli pilot nose-dived, throwing the un-seat-belted attackers off balance. Argüello was mortally wounded by an Israeli air marshal, and Khaled was arrested once the plane landed. Two other aircraft, both hijacked the same day, landed at Dawson's Field, a desert airstrip in Jordan, where King Hussein, as part of his penance for losing the 1967 war, had allowed Palestinian guerrillas, the fedayeen, to run training camps. "All of us are fedayeen," Hussein had declared.

That a handful of revolutionaries could collect airliners worth millions of dollars and hold Western passengers ransom made it appear the Palestinians had history on their side. They dubbed Dawson's Field "Revolution Airport." The French writer Jean Genet, who spent time in Jordan's Palestinian camps and wrote a book about it, told militants that the pyrotechnics "had won the admiration of all the young people in Europe."

One European audience was particularly impressed: a group of radical West Germans calling themselves the Red Army Faction. The R.A.F. grew out of the student-protest movement, and many of its members, like their Palestinian counterparts, came from educated backgrounds. Ulrike Meinhof was a well-known journalist and the daughter of two art historians. Gudrun Ensslin was a literature student from an anti-Nazi evangelical family. Early operations were small-scale. Ensslin and her lover-collaborator, Andreas Baader, bombed two department stores in Frankfurt in 1968, landing themselves in prison. In 1970, the year that the R.A.F. officially announced its existence, Meinhof, Ensslin, Baader, and other members were invited to train with the fedayeen in Jordan. For the Palestinians, the aim was to plant their cause in the hearts of the German radicals. For the Germans, it was a chance to learn from people they viewed as heroic rebels against Western imperialism—and also, Burke suggests, fulfilled a middle-class wanderlust.

The R.A.F. is now routinely derided for its perceived naïveté. "The Revolutionists," conjuring a time when it inspired real terror and did not shy from killing people, generally refrains from condescension, but there's no hiding the fact that its members were not cut from the same cloth as their Palestinian brethren. At a camp in Jordan, Khaled encountered European students who, she observed with amusement, "honestly believed they were making a 'revolution' if they undressed in public, seized a university building, or shouted an obscenity at bureaucrats." Genet asked one European

trainee what kind of revolutionary regime should take over Jordan. “One based on the Situationists, for instance” was the answer. After German authorities tracked down Meinhof, Ensslin, and Baader in 1972 and imprisoned them, Baader dismissed the “second generation” R.A.F. members who risked their lives trying to free him as people who couldn’t be trusted to “buy bread rolls in the morning.”

Meinhof died in her prison cell in May, 1976; the next year, on a single night in October, Baader, Ensslin, and their associate Jan-Carl Raspe met the same fate. Officially ruled suicides—a verdict much challenged—the deaths sent despair and bitterness coursing through much of the West German left. The director [Rainer Werner Fassbinder](#) was distraught when he heard that Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were dead. But he came to believe that the R.A.F.’s provocations had not weakened the state but made it stronger. Two years later, he made the black comedy “The Third Generation,” in which an R.A.F.-like group is an object of ridicule bordering on scorn. Fassbinder has a character say, “Capital invented terrorism in order to force the state to protect it better.”

How seriously to take the R.A.F.? Burke cites a poll conducted in West Germany in 1971: “Forty per cent of the respondents agreed that the RAF’s violence was ‘political’, eighteen per cent approved of their motives, and six per cent said they would shelter a member of the group for a night,” Burke writes. East Germany’s Communist regime welcomed the radicals as a nuisance for the West and provided them refuge and occasional backing. But, for the East Germans, as for the Soviet Union, the R.A.F. was also a classic example of what Lenin had denounced as “adventurism”: revolution, he insisted, was likeliest in regimes like tsarist Russia, where soldiers might switch sides, not in the Western democracies, where institutions were more stable. In the nineteen-seventies, the vulnerable-looking regimes were in the Middle East.

Until the seventies, Arab nationalists such as Nasser and Hussein had supported the Palestinian fedayeen. When two P.F.L.P. hijackers were released from a Greek prison and sent to Cairo, Nasser had flowers and a thank-you note waiting for one of them at the Semiramis Hotel. In 1968, Hussein went so far as to join his army with fedayeen units in battle, when the I.D.F. attacked the Jordanian border town of Karameh. The united forces

dealt severe blows to Israeli units, whose ranks included the young Benjamin Netanyahu.

But, for the more hard-line Palestinian militants, the support was not enough. Tensions broke into the open in the autumn of 1970, when Hussein's army turned against the fedayeen, which had become a diplomatic liability and a threat to his own rule. In response, Palestinian guerrillas formed the Black September Organization, an outfit more extreme than Fatah or the P.F.L.P. It made itself known with the assassination of the Jordanian Prime Minister, Wasfi Tal, in Cairo in 1971. The following year, it launched its most notorious operation, the attack on the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics, in which Black September members took hostage, and eventually killed, eleven Israeli athletes and coaches. A sign of the international aspirations of Black September is the fact that the attackers' demands included the release of Baader and Meinhof from prison.

The Munich operation revealed the inadequacy of ordinary policing in dealing with sophisticated attacks and forced Western governments to develop a new strategy. No more would they bargain with hostage-takers. Instead, they trained élite units to strike back. "The 'theatre of terrorism' now had a rival," Burke writes. "A 'theatre of counterterrorism.' "

The way was led by Israel. When a team of Palestinian and German militants hijacked an Air France flight out of Athens and diverted it to Entebbe, Uganda, Israeli soldiers were dispatched to kill the hijackers. Only one Israeli soldier was lost in the raid: Yonatan Netanyahu (Benjamin's older brother), who became a national hero. In perhaps the most degraded episode in the annals of the German left, the hijackers separated Jewish passengers from the rest, without seeming to reflect on whose methods this resembled.

The following year, the German government pulled off a feat of its own. Under direction from Haddad, operatives hijacked a plane and forced it to land in Mogadishu, Somalia. For hours, a German diplomat strung the hijackers along with false promises, buying the time needed for a strike force to kill them and save the passengers. As Burke notes, such operations required not only special training but also delicate diplomacy with hostile third-party states, which had to be persuaded to allow foreign forces to carry out missions on their soil.

Burke suggests that the most cunning achievement of states in the seventies was the propagation of the concept and term “terrorism” itself. “To propose that terrorism had anything to do with broader social, political or economic factors was seen as a moral failure, even cowardice,” Burke writes. “Despite its flaws and the many dissenting voices who opposed it, this new analysis rapidly became very influential in policy-making circles.” When Benjamin Netanyahu edited a collection of essays on terrorism, the *Wall Street Journal* hailed its findings. “The first political task at hand,” the reviewer wrote, “is to cut the idea of terrorism loose from the connection it now has in many Western liberal minds with notions of national liberation and social justice.”

No figure of the seventies did more to meet the definition of “terrorist” than Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, the Venezuelan agent better known as Carlos the Jackal. He trained with the fedayeen—“I’ve been in the Middle East, learning how to kill Jews,” he told a family friend—and, in 1973, became an operative for Haddad. But he quickly proved himself to be reckless, after he botched the murder of the Jewish president of Marks & Spencer in London, blew up a Paris boutique, and shot and killed two French policemen.

Carlos was the most flamboyant of the period’s ultras, with a taste for haute couture, seduction, and fast cars. But, as Burke writes, his career “did not reveal the strength of the international revolutionary ‘armed struggle’ so much as its incipient decline.” There was a new player in the Middle East. After the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated, in 1981, Carlos was infuriated, assuming that some other radical-left outfit had beaten him to it. In fact, Sadat had been killed by a group soon to be known as Islamic Jihad, and Carlos was not alone in not having heard of it.

In 1975, the C.I.A. reported that the “revolutionary era” in the Middle East was over. It would be more accurate to say that it had changed shape. For decades, Islamist groups in the region had tried to gain traction, but their numbers were relatively small. This shifted during the economic slowdowns of the seventies, as the models of the Soviet Union and the nationalist Arab states showed severe signs of wear.

Although hardly the weakest Middle Eastern state, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s Iran was, besides Israel, the most obviously tied to Western interests. But the Shah believed that his gravest threats came from the left

rather than from Islamists. The Ayatollah Khomeini spied an opening. The key was to combine the forces of the left with the growing popular discontent of everyday mosque-goers. Burke writes, “Having never previously admitted the existence of *tabaqeh* or ‘class’ as an analytic category, Khomeini began using the concept in his speeches.” When protests in support of Khomeini erupted on the streets of Tehran in 1979, they stunned observers with their sheer size. Earlier Islamists, such as Sayyid Qutb, had tried to oust secular nationalists by means of an élite vanguard of believers. But Khomeini’s ability to reach ordinary Muslims enabled him to harness the latent power of Islamic society.

Khomeini momentarily won admiration across the Shiite-Sunni divide. He, too, considered himself a partisan of the Palestinian cause, but, once in command of the state, he set his forces against the elements of the left that had helped him take power, discarding them like spent rocket boosters. “Khomeini and his followers approached the Palestinians primarily from an Islamic standpoint, and secondarily from a revolutionary one,” the Egyptian journalist Fahmy Howeidy wrote. “No one noticed that the two sides were working from different perspectives.” Relations between Khomeini and Arafat frayed further when Arafat strategically supported Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War and then refrained from condemning the Soviet Union’s war against the Afghan mujahideen.

The decisive blow to the secular phase of Palestinian resistance came from Israel. In 1982, the I.D.F. invaded Lebanon, to rid Beirut of Arafat’s forces. Despite George Habash’s eager prediction of an “Arab Stalingrad,” the war shattered what remained of the P.L.O., hurling its fragments as far afield as Tunisia, where Arafat accelerated his transformation from armed revolutionary into pliant diplomat. President Ronald Reagan decried the Israelis’ operations as a “holocaust,” and the main thrust of resistance shifted to inside Palestine itself—the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the West Bank—where a new, much deeper popular revolt, closer in form to Khomeini’s uprising and initially independent of the P.L.O., would yield the first intifada, in 1987. By then, the identity of the main threat to the American presence in the Middle East had declared itself, when an explosives-laden truck slammed into a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, in 1983, killing two hundred and forty-one servicemen. The suicide driver was not a Marxist but a young Islamist militant.

Burke's history ends with Osama bin Laden and other figures who emerged in a region where liturgies of the left had given way to radical Islamism. (One of bin Laden's mentors, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, had been dismayed by celebrations of Lenin's birthday while training in a fedayeen camp.) The attacks to come would be bigger. Leila Khaled now lives in Amman. Wadie Haddad died in East Berlin in 1978, perhaps poisoned by Mossad. In the recent Gaza war, the P.F.L.P. has put aside its differences with the Islamists of Hamas to form a united front against Israel, but it is a shadow of its former self.

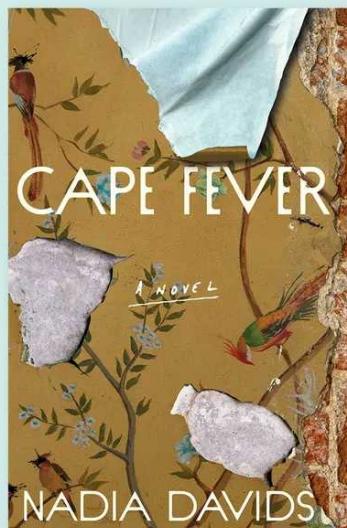
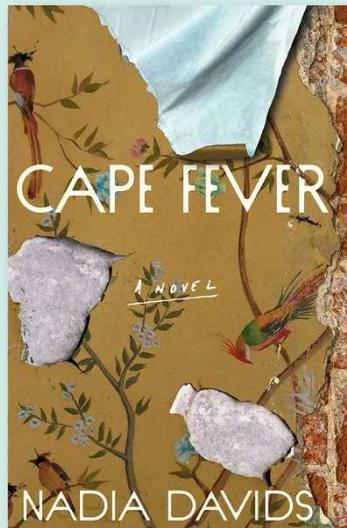
"The Revolutionists" is likely to stand for some time as the most absorbing history of the P.F.L.P. and its multifarious allies. The book's flaw, perhaps unavoidable, is that, despite a determination to see beyond glamour and theatrics, it cannot help focussing on the dramatic actions of a handful of high-flying revolutionaries, while more quotidian state violence, especially toward Palestinians, comes off as background noise. The militants appear to be the prime movers of the age, when they were more like an endangered species. They become more comprehensible when viewed as spasmodic reactors to what they perceived as an intolerable political arrangement. That may be why a kaffiyeh on a graying woman in a small town in Germany can still signal defiance. ♦

Books

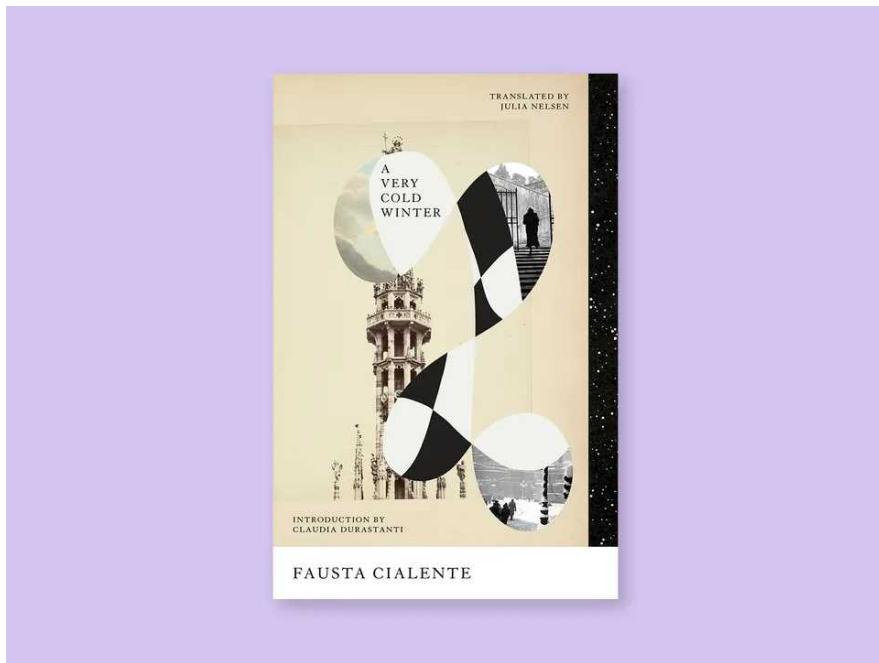
Briefly Noted

“Cape Fever,” “A Very Cold Winter,” “Strangers,” and “The Death and Life of Gentrification.”

February 02, 2026



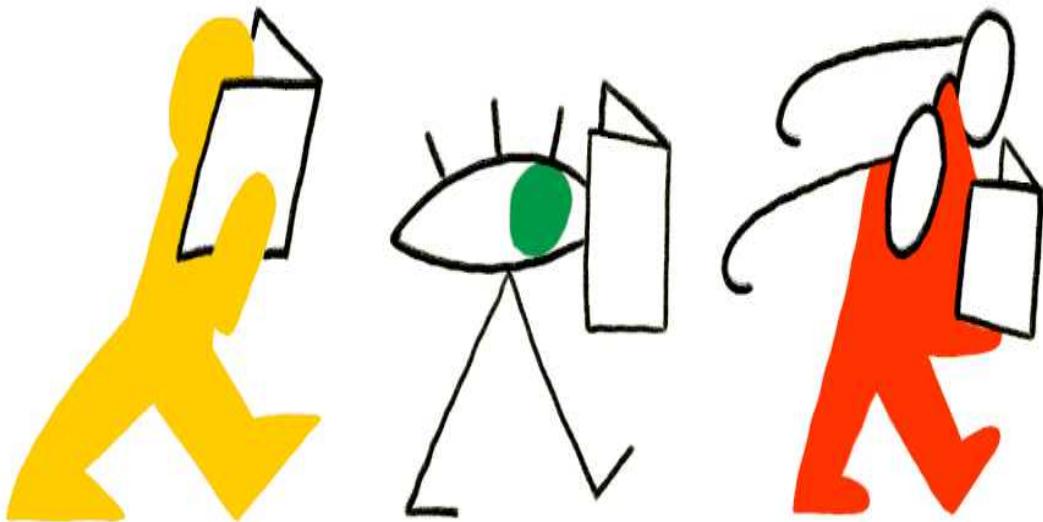
Cape Fever, by Nadia Davids (S&S). Set in a version of Cape Town in the years after the First World War, this sure-handed, gothic-tinged novel tells the story of Soraya, a young Muslim woman who works as a live-in housekeeper for an elderly English widow. Soraya has “a fanciful mind” and is able to see ghosts and communicate with spirits, including previous domestic workers. Much of her time is spent preparing the house, “a strange place full of fright,” for a promised visit from the widow’s son, Timothy, a war veteran who lives in England—a stay that is repeatedly postponed. Meanwhile, the widow offers to write letters for Soraya to her fiancé, a seemingly generous gesture that becomes an opportunity for control and exploitation which also sets up the novel’s explosive conclusion.



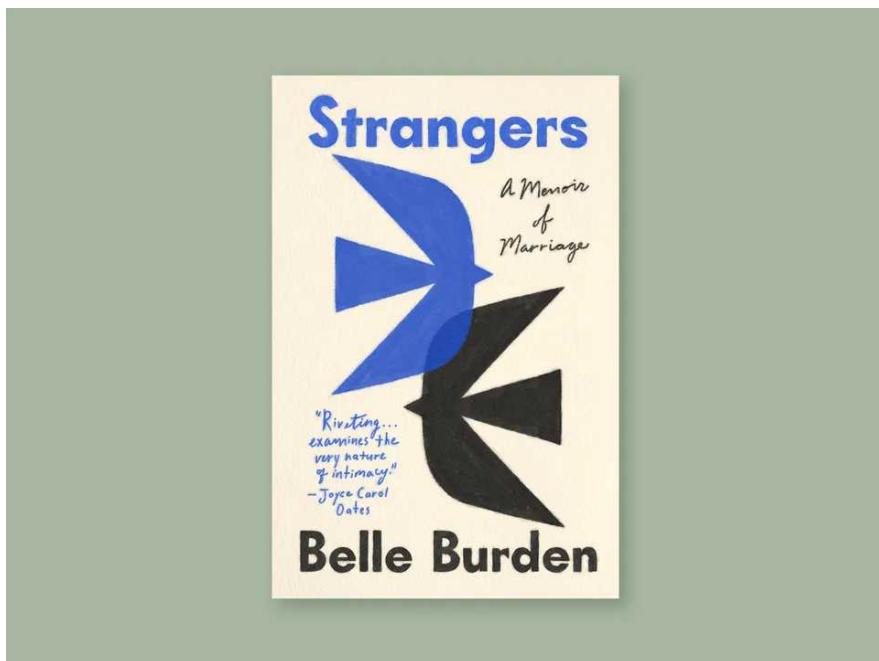
A Very Cold Winter, by Fausta Cialente, translated from the Italian by Julia Nelsen (Transit). This novel, the first of the undersung writer’s books to appear in English, opens in 1946, just as winter is descending on Milan. An extended family of nine is preparing to hunker down in an attic apartment, a dilapidated space “divided up with curtains and partitions.” Though they share tight quarters, the family members—siblings, cousins, in-laws—are all preoccupied by disparate fixations. An omniscient narrator roves through the characters’ perspectives, illuminating their individual desires—to become an actor and a writer, to marry and to move out. Trapped “in the middle of a barren, frozen plain, without horizons,” a reality for

which winter is not solely to blame, the family contends with what it means to move on in the aftermath of war.

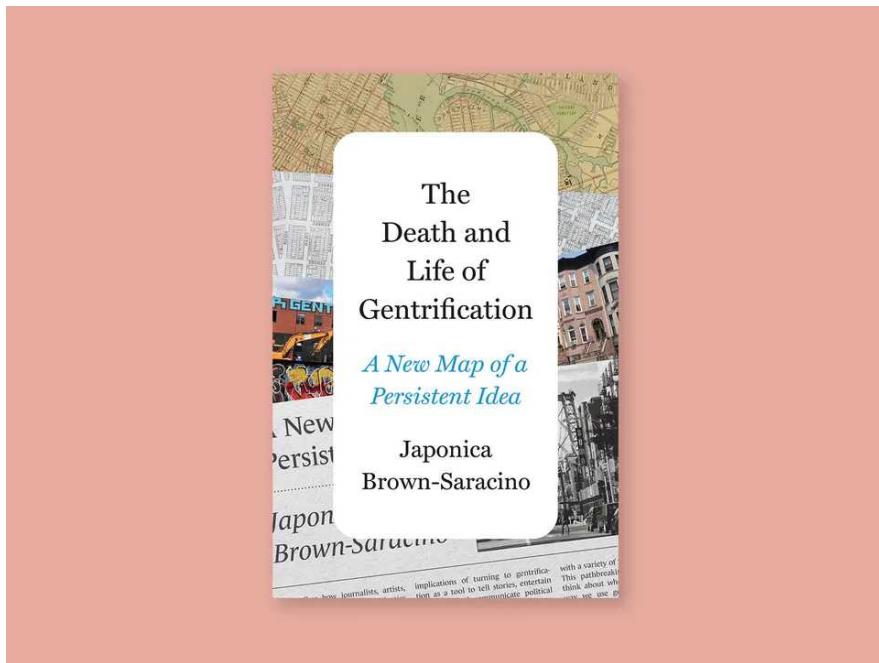
What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



Strangers, by *Belle Burden (Dial)*. This engrossing memoir of divorce, by a former corporate lawyer who hails from two of America's wealthiest families, begins in March, 2020, at the start of *Covid* lockdown, on the day Burden learns that her husband of two decades has been having an affair. The following morning, he tells her, “I thought I wanted our life, but I don’t,” and leaves. As the divorce unfolds, Burden discovers that their prenuptial agreement favors her husband, who worked as a hedge-fund executive while she left her career to raise their children, and who has quietly amassed “a fortune” held “in his name alone.” Though this story of betrayal hits familiar beats—shock, grief, self-recrimination, resignation—it is enlivened by its particulars.



The Death and Life of Gentrification, by *Japonica Brown-Saracino (Princeton)*. This wide-ranging study explores how the term “gentrification” has slipped the bonds of its original, “brick-and-mortar” usage, becoming a way to signal loss while addressing “structural inequalities and concomitant social changes.” As a metaphor, its meaning has become fluid; it is now commonplace to read of the “gentrification” of subjects as varied as music, the internet, sandwiches, and queer culture. Brown-Saracino also zeroes in on a crucial aspect of the term’s appeal: in an era of ideological land mines, “gentrification,” she writes, “is politically charged without evoking a specific, narrow political stance.”

Books

The Perennial Predicament of the Artist with an Office Job

In “The Copywriter,” by Daniel Poppick, a poet searches for meaning in the grindset.

By Katy Waldman

February 02, 2026



D_____, the narrator of “The Copywriter” (Scribner), a début novel by Daniel Poppick, senses that the end is near. At the retail startup where he permalances, his supervisor confides to him that nearly the entire staff will be let go in a matter of months, but he has already been reading between the lines of the financial updates sent by the C.E.O., who is twenty-four. “Understanding the unsaid, decoding silence,” D_____, a poet, writes. “It isn’t poetry, but poetry has trained me for it.” His employer sells “last season’s kitsch status pieces, otherwise known as garbage,” including an eggplant-emoji drone with a Bluetooth speaker in the tip and “an LED light box emblazoned with the phrase NAMASTE IN BED.” Between the worthless products and the absurdity of gilding them in expensive advertising copy,

D__ can't really argue that he deserves a paycheck. Putting on a brave face, he suggests to his girlfriend that he might like to spend his impending season of joblessness reading "À la Recherche du Temps Perdu." "No one," he adds, "has ever read Proust and been employed at the same time."

The novel takes seriously the question of whether you *can* read Proust and have a day job, circling the perennial tension between art and commerce, or, in this case, between poetry and copywriting. D__ is legible as a type: a thirtysomething with a liberal-arts education who graduated into the Great Recession. He's adept at close-reading the world but unsure of his place within it. Adulthood has baffled his expectations and bludgeoned his sensitivity. For seven years, he's been dating Lucy, another poet trying to mine a more lucrative corner of the culture industry (she's in magazine publishing), but their relationship has stalled. He has supportive suburban parents who probe delicately about money and ask if he was friends with W. S. Merwin, whose obituary they just saw in the *Times*. Adrift but alert, D__ writes down questions, observations, stylized scenes that he labels parables, and glancing mentions of historical events. (The white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville and the Tree of Life shooting both appear, like strokes of a doomsday clock.) The notebooks that result, spanning two years, from 2017 to 2019, represent a preëmptive search for lost time, a quest to prevent time from being lost in the first place.

Some of the material in "The Copywriter" is banal. "News used to be delivered to one's door," D__ groused. "Nowadays it simply penetrates the face." Some of it is goofy. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of nope, I will fear no yeah," he riffs. Some descriptions refresh or reimagine D__'s surroundings: studying fellow-beachgoers on Labor Day, he pinpoints when a child's tantrum has attained a "pitch of exaltedness" beyond the reach even of sherbet. Constellations in the night sky are a "toss of fiery points" that drop "silent gossip" on stargazers. Here, he pastes in an e-mail from his great-uncle. Here, he reproduces a dialogue with his co-worker. Here, he transcribes Lucy's dream. At one point, tongue firmly in cheek, he muses about whether it was profitable for him to spend a whole day noodling on a theory of writing as a "photosynthetic process" that "conceals its blossoming meat." Looming over the novel is a question: can this existence—this openhearted, roguish, aimless scavenging—yield anything of value, or is it just a waste?

Poppick, like his narrator, is a poet, the author of two jaunty and inquisitive collections, making him one of several poets who have published novels narrated by poets in the past few years. Ben Lerner, who blazed a version of this trail in the twenty-tens, is duly hailed in “The Copywriter.” (“He sold out. He’s basically a novelist now,” D__ objects, before admitting that he loves Lerner’s novels.) But the book more properly invokes a different tradition, that of office fiction, whose subject has always been the pressure and pain experienced by creative minds as they’re warped under conditions of mechanization or depersonalization. It’s a genre littered with broken coffee machines, surreal personnel interactions, and soul-withering software tools; the vibe is project management with a side of ego death. D__ belongs to an arcade of alienation that includes Joseph Heller’s mid-level ad exec in “Something Happened” (1974), the beleaguered paper pushers of Joshua Ferris’s “Then We Came to the End” (2007), and the virtuosically bored I.R.S. agents in David Foster Wallace’s “The Pale King” (2011)—white-collar workers who use their verbal facility to make nothing happen, day after day, until they retire or expire into a bigger nothing. The advantage of having a narrator with a poetic disposition is that he can tune in to the metaphysical dimension of this everyday suffering, articulating it with a metrical precision.

In 2020, Poppick published a poem called “Lugubrious Stars of the Tomb,” which employed the figure of a nun’s cell to evoke the claustrophobia of dwelling in time: “If you think this damp little room you live in / is all that’s holding you / you’re right. Every second is a door / bolted shut. You can hear your music / behind a few, but only one or two will open.” In “The Copywriter,” D__’s quest to access the music behind the door of each second, to not waste his life, becomes a similarly spiritual pursuit. As a kid, he attended temple and was bar mitzvahed; as an adult, he seems more inclined to channel his theological impulses into a creative practice. His parables, which draw inspiration from Jewish mysticism, are attempts to get at what his hero John Ashbery called the hidden “schedule” of the universe through the secular prayer of art. Of his poetry cohort, D__ writes, “We’ve seen each other through some kind of crisis. But of what? Faith?”

D__ and his friends inhabit a hyper-specific milieu of current and former poets who share references and prophets and comport themselves not unlike secret members of a dissident sect. They worry about being “cut off” from

poetry, particularly by the jobs that they need to sustain their daily lives and that they fear may quietly indoctrinate them into a contrary value system. Their gigs enforce long hours away from creative writing; more insidiously, they reshape time, transforming it from a subtle, redoubling mystery into something strict, quantifiable, and nonrenewable. Several months into D__'s unemployment, Lucy comes home, exhausted, to find him perusing Proust in his underwear. He hasn't made dinner, because he inhabits a different schedule, operating out of Poetry Standard Time while she is stuck in Company Time, several meridians away.

Like all believers, D__ must also grapple with the problem of doubt. How do you keep something alive when you're not sure what it is or if it even exists? Poetry makes nothing happen, poets like to intone. In "The Copywriter," D__ experiences his art as invisible, ineffable, lacking the numerical markers of value possessed by, say, a commercially successful novel or a viral social-media post. He writes Lucy an anniversary pantoum; she breaks up with him anyway. He writes a eulogy for Ashbery, and the guy's still dead. (Given his friend group's protracted mourning period, it's unclear that he can raise any spirits at all.) At one point, he buys his twenty-four-year-old boss a used copy of "The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property," by Lewis Hyde, passing it off as a cherished keepsake. He explains that the text reenchants online shopping, revealing the "invisible webs of relationality" behind digital transactions; it's a naked attempt to keep his job. The ploy fails, delaying but not averting D__'s scheduled termination. Poetry, he concludes, is "labor's ash."

Still, D__'s artistic efforts can't be so neatly separated from his commercial ones. Some actions, the book implies, might cut you off from poetry. (In the course of his copywriting career, D__ is asked to craft language advertising a lecture by a war criminal; borrowing a phrase from Bartleby, he refuses.) But plying a bullshit job need not be one of them. In fact, Poppick seems determined to prove that submerging yourself in the inanity of the grindset can pay creative dividends. One of "The Copywriter" 's most moving aspects is its expansive definition of poetry, which admits bureaucratese and launch-party banter and could theoretically apply to any part of life. D__'s copywriting struck me, at times, as genuinely transcendent: he dismisses a blurb he writes for a designer sandcastle kit as "a sequence of words so stupid I can barely bring myself to type them," but the solicitation—which

begins, “Feeling pail? Dig this: you need sun, and a castle to call your own”—delightfully recalls Ashbery’s poem “Valentine.” (“The name of the castle is you . . . and it is also built on / Shifting sands.”) At another job, at a Jewish cultural center reminiscent of the 92nd Street Y, D__ and a colleague are asked to rebrand a series called “Mimes in the Afternoon,” which has been moved from Wednesday afternoon to Friday night. They land on “Mimes in the Afternoon on Friday Night.”

D__’s centenarian great-uncle Isidore, who gravely reads Keats at the edge of a family gathering and seems to have walked in from a Talmudic tale, supplies an image not only for D__’s scrapbook of found language but also for his eclectic, unassuming approach to leading a life that entertains the sublime. In a note to his great-nephew, Isidore recounts watching the varied possessions of his former neighbors being tossed into a dumpster. “Although the debris never existed in close association before,” he writes, the mass of it, thrown together, now coheres and communicates, disclosing a secret design. That this marginal character, a man who has apparently retired from both his job and his role in family reunions, is given the task of enunciating a central theme is consonant with the gentle, self-effacing tone of a novel whose sympathies lie with the minor and the easily overlooked.

Poppick’s point isn’t that everything matters; it’s that anything might. While I was drafting this review at a coffee shop, I overheard a woman telling her friend about a saying that touched her. The maxim, “What you focus on is what you will become,” looked vacuous when I wrote it down, but then it began to work on me, just a little. Over his two years of journaling, D__ discovers that poetry weaves in and out of language in the same unaccountable way that it weaves in and out of our lives. Poetry may be the ash of labor, but it is also a leap of faith: that work was done, that meaning was made, that something happened behind the door. ♦

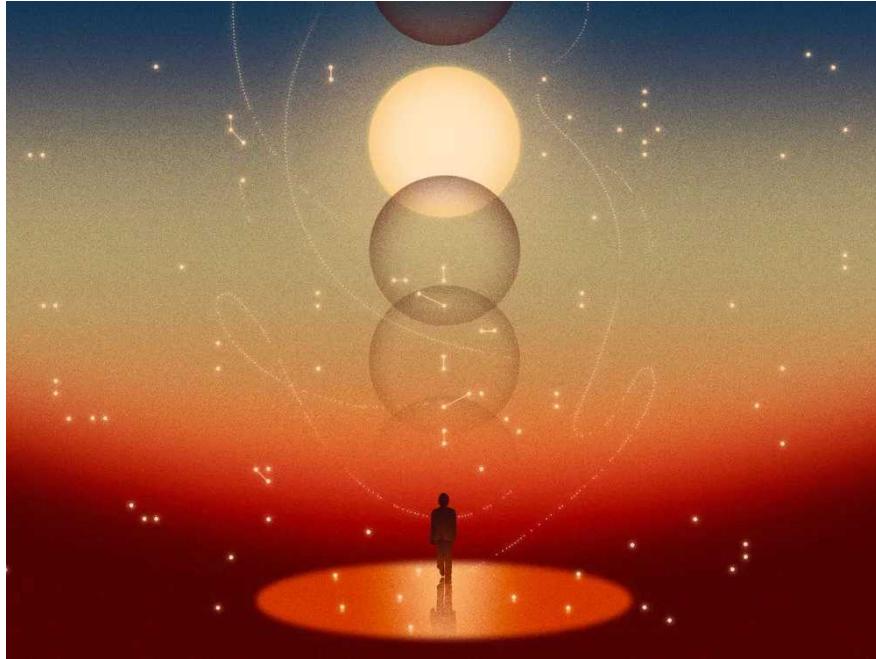
The Theatre

“An Ark” Imagines the Afterlife; “Data” Imagines a Corporate Hell

Two plays soaked in technological anxiety.

By Emily Nussbaum

January 30, 2026



Before you enter “An Ark,” a “mixed reality” performance at the Shed, you check your coat and, more oddly, your shoes. Contact lenses are recommended. Inside, there are three concentric circles of chairs arranged on a red carpet and, overhead, a white globe resembling a hot-air balloon. A docent explained that, through my virtual-reality headset, I would see four more chairs—and, ideally, they shouldn’t float. They did float, so she adjusted the tech.

Minor glitches aside, the V.R. experience was crisply efficient, like a good day at the D.M.V. Express. Unfortunately, the show itself, directed by Sarah Frankcom, was blander stuff: less mind-bending spectacle, more earnest meditation. After an ominous rumble, four holographic figures appared,

then sat in their virtual chairs, facing me. One of them was Ian McKellen, draped in Jedi white, who purred, “Don’t panic.” What followed was forty-seven minutes of an existential monologue by the British playwright Simon Stephens, chorally divided among the quartet: two twinkly elders, played by McKellen and Golda Rosheuvvel; a young woman, who seemed skeptical and hostile and therefore more relatable, played by Rosie Sheehy; and a young man who was beatific and then melancholy, played by Arinzé Kene. The gist was that I had died and was being welcomed to the afterlife, via an orientation that required the characters to list details of my life, or someone’s life—or really, *everyone’s* life—beginning at birth. “You’ll want to tell people about the things that have happened to you in here,” one mentor said, earnestly. “They matter,” another said.

Mostly, this meant a litany of sensations (“Cherry blossom. Chocolate milk. Night terrors”) and stoner insights: “It is impossible to waste energy. All you can do is pass it on.” Maybe, but my mind kept hot-air-ballooning away to my fellow-cultists, who were facing their own spiritual co-op boards. In Manhattan, we don’t stare at celebrities, so I tried to luxuriate in warm, extended eye contact with McKellen, but after a while I resented this faux intimacy. I felt like Carol from the TV show “*Pluribus*,” trapped by a gooey hive mind, or like Emily Webb, had she remained stuck in the Grover’s Corners cemetery for all of Act III.

Ultimately, the issue was less the goggles than the damp spirit of woo, the regimented serenity and us-ness of it all. In the evening’s single moment of tension, Sheehy’s skeptic upbraided Kene’s character for—I think, it was all a bit elliptical—having killed a girl while driving drunk. He stalked away, later returning without explanation. Twice, the holograms made teasing offers to touch my hand. It was weird, but weird isn’t the same as fun or profound. Mostly, “An Ark” resembled a webinar with a staring contest, one that no human could win.

There will be future applications of “mixed reality,” I’m sure, and I hope they work with funkier material. Personally, I’d rather get clobbered by holographic McKellens than be told not to panic, which just made me miss Douglas Adams. Truly pleasurable interactive theatre requires a touch of panic, or, at least, of raw sensation. In the case of Diane Paulus’s glamy, enjoyably shameless “Masquerade,” a supercut of “The Phantom of the

Opera” playing in midtown, this means scarfing cheap champagne, getting frog-marched from ballroom to boudoir, and vibrating as the Phantom belts “The Music of the Night” in your face. At dazzling productions of “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” “Sunset Boulevard,” and “Oedipus,” creators used prerecorded video to help viewers reflect, sometimes literally, on the self-mythologizing mirrors of online life. In a world of deepfakes, ersatz eye contact is small beer.

I got a stronger kick from a little show called “Friday Night Rat Catchers,” which was part of the Under the Radar festival. At one point, the dancer Lena Engelstein, slinky in a violet suit, screamed, “Where are my AirPods?” over and over, sending the audience into hysterics of self-recognition. As she spasmodically leaped around the stage, twitching and gyrating, we roared—until, a few minutes in, she patted the front of her pants. There was one AirPod in each pocket. Shrugging, she put the earbuds in, and then, when a fellow-dancer walked over, she heedlessly tossed them onto the stage, with a clatter. The routine said more about our relationship with tech—and the pleasures of community—than all of “An Ark.”

“Data,” a nifty, twisty Silicon Valley thriller by the young playwright Matthew Libby, was nearly derailed by the pandemic, which bumped it from the stage to a streaming platform. A new production at the Lucille Lortel, directed by Tyne Rafaeli, with lighting design by Amith Chandrashaker and set design by Marsha Ginsberg, is more visceral. It opens with a live game of Ping-Pong, in an industrial space flooded by “*BRAT*”-green light, giving the audience the vertiginous feeling of having landed amid something both exciting and sickening. The proscenium is framed by a flickering white tube; between scenes, we hear animal growls and house beats. The effect is to slice the play into abrupt tableaux, as if we were blinking our eyes, trying to wake from a nightmare.

That’s certainly the case for the protagonist, Maneesh, a naïve, stressed-out coder who’s hoping to satisfy his immigrant parents by taking a low-pressure job in U.X., or user experience, at a company called Athena. His brogrammer mentor, Jonah, urges him to attend Taco Tuesdays, to network; Riley, a former classmate who bluntly clarifies that she’s more an acquaintance than a friend, pushes him to join the “real” engineers in data analytics. A secret project is in the works, involving data mining, and when

Alex, their “thought leader” boss, gets Maneesh to jump jobs, he finds himself standing at the edge of a moral cliff.

Libby, who came of age in Silicon Valley and studied cognitive science at Stanford before getting an M.F.A. in dramatic writing at N.Y.U., knows this world: in his junior year, he just missed landing an internship at Palantir, Peter Thiel’s company, years before it evolved, “Gremlins”-like, into a partner of *ice*. As a teen-ager, Libby was influenced by Aaron Sorkin and Annie Baker, a real Devil-on-one-shoulder, angel-on-the-other situation. Like a Sorkin script, “Data” moves fast and underlines a few themes too thickly. But it also has real verve as a play of ideas, exploring ethical questions—about collusion, whistle-blowing, and what it means to be a true American—that are queasily timely. If Libby’s tone is less scathing than that of, say, Jesse Armstrong’s HBO movie “Mountainhead,” a satire of libertarian billionaires, it captures something equally meaningful: the quarter-life crisis of *STEM* kids struggling, in the age of *DOGE*, to sort out how responsible they are for the systems they build. The play’s big revelation, which drew a gasp from the audience, may have felt like sci-fi when Libby began writing “Data,” nearly a decade ago; now it feels like a documentary.

As Maneesh, the doe-eyed Disney Channel alum Karan Brar exudes depressed decency but never quite taps into the messy turmoil that might complicate the coder’s choices. Brandon Flynn is likably hot as the U.X. mediocrity, the worst kind of extrovert; Justin H. Min is effectively silky as their boss, who manipulates Maneesh by bonding over their immigrant roots. But the show’s standout is Sophia Lillis, whose distraught, morally inflamed Riley is the play’s most original figure. Stooped, uptight, and explosive, she’s a smart girl who blurts out rude remarks and then groans in apology, like Holly Hunter in “Broadcast News.” Riley has reasons to worry—student loans, for one thing—and she also has an irrepressible Cassandra streak. “You don’t think you were *involved* when you worked down the hall?” she snaps at Maneesh.

Lillis adds a welcome flash of danger to the play, a feeling that anything could happen. It’s the same spontaneity suggested by those Ping-Pong games, with their flickers of nostalgia: for the video game Pong, for the innocent give-and-take of online debate, and for the fantasy of a tech job

with free snacks and a cozy game room, back when coding felt like a hip, lucrative way to save the world. ♦

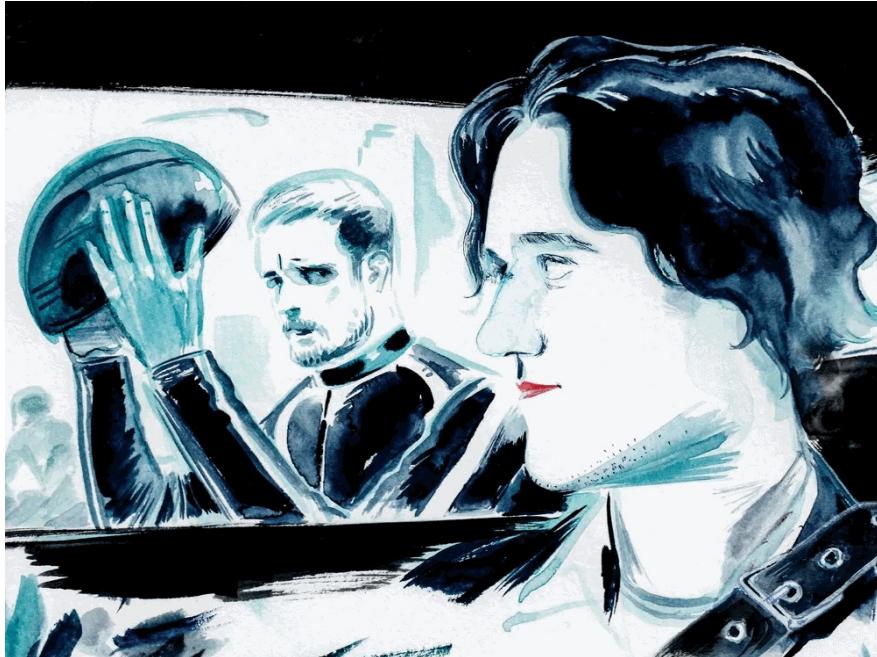
The Current Cinema

In “Pillion,” Gay B.D.S.M. Passions Edge Toward Dom-Com

Anchored by Alexander Skarsgård and Harry Melling’s superb performances, the British director Harry Lighton’s feature début brightens the bleak novel it’s based on.

By Justin Chang

January 30, 2026



“Pillion,” a gay B.D.S.M.-themed romantic comedy, begins, fittingly, with a song of submission. As the camera speeds down a road at night, we hear the lovesick lyrics of the Italian singer Betty Curtis’s 1962 hit “Chariot.” You might recall the song from “Goodfellas” (1990), playing over the mobster Henry Hill’s haphazard courtship of his future wife, Karen. Or you might flash back to “Sister Act” (1992), in which a choir of nuns converted the song into a sacred anthem of praise (“I will follow him / Follow him wherever he may go”). It’s hard to say which of these associations is nearer the mark. Does “Pillion,” like “Goodfellas,” chart the rocky relationship between a cocksure ruffian and a wide-eyed naïf? Or does the film, like

“Sister Act,” illuminate the private rituals of a niche subculture, whose devotees perform unquestioning acts of service while dutifully garbed in black?

The novitiate, in this case, is Colin Smith (Harry Melling), a genial young man from the southeast London suburb of Bromley. Colin works in parking enforcement, sings in a barbershop quartet, and lives at home with his endlessly supportive parents, Peggy (Lesley Sharp) and Pete (Douglas Hodge), who just want him to settle down with a nice boyfriend. But Colin doesn’t settle down; he rides off. Not into the sunset—Bromley doesn’t seem to get many—but clinging tightly to Ray, a tall, dreamy blond motorcyclist. Ray is played by Alexander Skarsgård, who has never looked more like a Nordic god than he does here: immaculately chiselled, and as disdainful of small talk as he is impervious to chilly weather. The two men first lock eyes in a pub on a winter’s night, where Colin is instantly smitten. What Ray sees in Colin is initially more mysterious. They meet again on Christmas, wandering from an empty town square into a side alley; a package is unzipped, and gifts are furtively exchanged. The director and screenwriter Harry Lighton, making his feature-film début, isn’t coy about any of it, though he’s sly enough to plant some foreshadowing in a nearby coffee-shop window: “Taste the Christmas Comforts.”

The plot is basically “Fifty Shades of Ray.” The hunky biker is a sexual dominant in search of a submissive, and this first encounter is a test of Colin’s prowess, stamina, and commitment to his master’s pleasure. An outdoor blow job is one thing—and no small thing, from the sound of Colin’s happy choking noises—but will he also, say, lick Ray’s boots on command and like it? (He will.) And how will he respond when, a few days later, Ray brings him to a sparsely furnished duplex, where Colin is expected to cook dinner and keep off the furniture—even to the point of sleeping on a rug, at the foot of Ray’s bed? Colin goes along with it, and the next day’s activities are his reward: a hot and heavy wrestling match, full of crotch-squeezing, ass-baring calisthenics, plus a consummation that produces more pain than pleasure. After the fun and games, Ray is all business once more. “Buy yourself a butt plug,” he says. “You’re too tight.” Colin replies, “Yeah! Yeah, yeah, um . . . lovely. That sounds like a plan.”

The beauty of Melling's performance lies in the exquisite phrasing and timing of that "um . . . lovely," which blends excitement, awkwardness, confusion, and curiosity in exquisitely calibrated proportions. Melling is something of a rarity among movie actors, a distinctive-looking chameleon. Those of us who first encountered him onscreen as Harry Potter's oafish, spoiled cousin, Dudley Dursley, may not have even recognized him in his later, better roles, several of which—a sleuthing Edgar Allan Poe, in "The Pale Blue Eye" (2022); an evil pharmaceuticals C.E.O., in "The Old Guard" (2020)—played on his air of gnomish cunning, his gimlet-eyed stare. "Pillion" represents another sharp left turn for the actor. To point out that Colin isn't a conventional romantic lead is also to note, redundantly, that this movie isn't a conventional romance.

Is it a romance at all? The two parties would disagree. "That's not what this is," Ray declares, with some exasperation but also a flicker of tenderness, after Colin tells him, "I love you." Their bond is founded on a narrow principle of sexual gratification and governed by a strict imbalance of power: firm directives from Ray, effusive accommodations from Colin. Before long, Colin has buzzed his hair and fallen in with Ray's biker gang, many of whose members are paired off in sub-dom dyads of their own. The group dynamics carry richly suggestive undercurrents of jealousy and camaraderie, though Lighton, for all the quasi-anthropological curiosity and matter-of-fact sexual candor of his vision, doesn't flesh this out in great depth. (There is, however, a funny-melancholy scene in which Colin compares notes with another submissive, played by Jake Shears.) Lighton uses these dynamics, instead, to sow a seed of individual rebellion. Sooner or later, we sense, Colin will consider the terms of his agreement with Ray and decide that, after months of unerring obedience, some personal transgression of his own is in order.

No such revolt occurs in Adam Mars-Jones's novel "Box Hill," from which "Pillion" was adapted. The book, which bears the subtitle "A Story of Low Self-Esteem" and is set during the nineteen-seventies, is a sliver of a tale—slender yet devastatingly sharp. When we first meet Mars-Jones's Colin, he's a sexually inexperienced eighteen-year-old, who stumbles across Ray on Box Hill, a gay cruising ground. Their relationship lasts several years, only to be ended by tragedy, though some would see the end as a mercy: the Ray we meet on the page is not just demanding and inconsiderate but abusive.

“What had begun as a rough seduction ended as, well, rape,” the book’s Colin tells us after Ray penetrates him for the first time, sans preamble or lubricant. “I’d said he could do anything with me. I know that. But some things can’t be consented to.”

“Pillion” never directly broaches the question of consent—but, crucially, nothing that Colin experiences, whether physical discomfort or emotional neglect, can be construed as a violation. What the director has done, in effect, is Lighten the mood. He has updated the setting to a present-day moment that is less closeted and more kink-friendly, if dominant-submissive romances as different as “Babygirl” (2024) and “Fifty Shades of Grey” (2015) are any indication. (“Pillion” has also aged Colin well past his teenage years; although the character’s age is never specified, Melling is thirty-six.) Much of the onscreen conflict involves Colin’s parents, who, unlike their literary counterparts, know that their son is gay and take an embarrassingly overactive role in nurturing his love life. But Lighton doesn’t treat them as sitcom-ish meddlers. Peggy, wonderfully played by Sharp, is terminally ill, and she’s fiercely determined to insure that Colin is well taken care of after she’s gone. That puts her at odds with Ray, whose investment in her son hinges on a brusque, performative disregard for Colin’s happiness.

Ray can be cruelly withholding. He reveals nothing about where he’s from or what he does for a living, and he reserves what affection he has for his dog and his motorcycle. But he isn’t abusive, and there’s little suggestion of menace or danger in Skarsgård’s performance. The actor has already shown us what that would look like: in the series “Big Little Lies,” he played a husband and father whose taste for kink masked a terrifying hunger for inflicting pain. Ray, by contrast, is a figure of intermittent but undeniable mirth—a citadel of physical perfection whose sublimity occasionally touches the ridiculous. It’s both amusing and clarifying to see him in moments of downtime, when he sits around the apartment wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and elegant little specs. Playing a slow, faltering rendition of “Gymnopédie No. 1” on a keyboard or burying his nose in a Karl Ove Knausgaard novel, he’s practically a caricature of latent male sophistication and sensitivity, momentarily freed from all that sweat and leather.

Skarsgård wrings so much effortless dom-com gold from Ray's show of intransigence that it's almost a shock to see the performance deepen; he makes the character's emotional limitations remarkably expressive. It should perhaps come as no surprise to learn that Ray's extreme need for control is rooted in insecurity, and that nothing threatens him more than the reality of his own feelings—the possibility that he might actually want more from Colin than just a physical release. “Pillion” does turn out to be a romance after all, or at least more of one than Ray can admit or allow. The movie's ending deviates, significantly and generously, from Mars-Jones's much bleaker conclusion: Colin's heart may be broken, but something within him has undeniably strengthened. He hasn't lost what Ray calls his “aptitude for devotion,” or his genius for submission. But, in all the ways that count, he is riding pillion no longer. ♦

Poems

- [Birdbath](#)
- [The Sunset Branch](#)

Poems

Birdbath

By Henri Cole

February 02, 2026

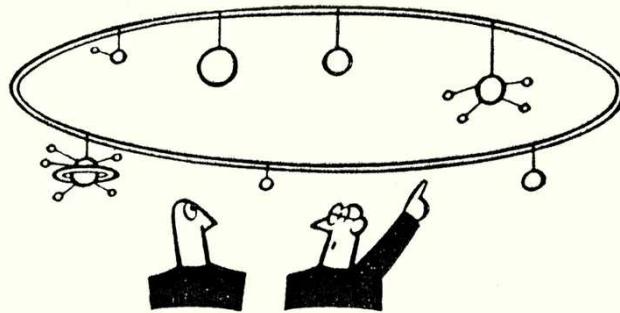


Standing at the window, I watch robins clean themselves in the cement birdbath, splashing water onto their backs to remove dirt and parasites, before hopping to the ledge to fluff their feathers. Like my neighbors, they are drinkers and seem mortal but free, pointing their bills up up to the sky, as if they were in a secluded stream instead of in my backyard. How intensely involved with themselves they are, preening and drinking the water I carried for them this morning from my sink. Farewell to the dust and ants of village life. Red robins, you make me feel such tenderness and awe. Yes, their eyes are underneath the ground now, but look, the sky is blue. The force of life is replenishing itself. *Hurry up, Come on, Be quick*, some men say, but my revenge is to live and sing the things I cannot say.

The Sunset Branch

By W. S. Di Piero

February 02, 2026



The seagreen due-date slip slithers from
my pile of papers and unread books.
When do we find ourselves, and where?
DO NOT REMOVE THIS CARD
It must hail from the books I stole
in the bloody days of Saigon and Jackson State.

We work to separate dread from dread.
In life, of life, joy from perilous joy.
TEN CENTS CHARGED IF LOST
Books mark us for good but don't always help.
Facts, moments, cravings, and loss
storm our days. The aimless slip overlies

the films that played the long-gone Surf,
far out the Avenues, farther out the Sunset

than my library. In row eight, next to me,
Mifune sulks and grunts. Outside, the fog
straps street lamps and the Surf's marquee.
But what book was it? What did it do to me?

I must have broken its spine there,
underlined what seemed momentous then.
Books replaced childhood's confessionals,
our shuttered, whispery theatres of sin.
Nostalgia sickens but delivers us.
We want to be sick, delivered from

the moment, our only real home. I stole
to keep books close, like Hardy's poems,
Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.
Be keen. Beware unwanted visitors.
Remembrance takes fools hostage. Keep close
what mystifies and justifies.

I still desire stolen secracies
and am hostage to what maybe never was.
Reveries and revenants. A memory,
this memory, burns the moment, this time
of mine that doesn't belong to me but is me.
The rapturous due date's long overdue.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, January 27, 2026](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, January 27, 2026

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Aimee Lucido

January 27, 2026



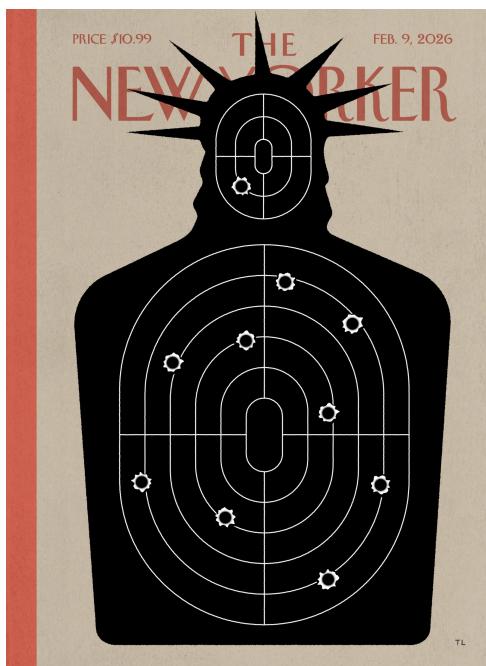


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