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By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

Content

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One night in 2017, a fifteen-year-old girl named Rachel received a WhatsApp message from a number she didn't recognize. Rachel lived with her mother, stepfather, and siblings in a midsize town in the United Kingdom. She had just returned home from a party and was in her bedroom. "I had a really unstable home life, and I didn't have good support around me," Rachel told me recently, while sitting on her bed in a fluffy white bathrobe. "I was a complete mess, I didn't trust anyone, I was in complete self-destruct mode."

The man who sent the text forwarded a nude photograph of her, the source of which she couldn't figure out. Then he sent a link to her mother's Facebook account and the names of other family members and school friends, threatening to forward the picture to them if she didn't follow his instructions. Immediately, she recalled an episode from a few years earlier, when classmates passed around a photo of her in her underwear, which precipitated months of bullying and a bout of depression. Panicked, she complied with his requests. He first instructed her to brighten the lighting in her room, and to take photos of herself in her underwear. He then had her take more photos, this time naked, and take videos of herself stripping and masturbating. The videos became progressively more explicit, Rachel told me, until the man asked her to do something so revolting that she refused. She cut off the correspondence and sat on her bed "in a state of shock," she said. Later, her mother came in to say good night. Rachel pretended that everything was fine.

The next day, Rachel (a pseudonym) checked her social-media accounts every hour, waiting for the pictures and videos to surface. Months went by and nothing happened. Then one day she was in a taxi when a boy who lived near her sent a message asking if she was all right. He included a link to a Tumblr page that contained dozens of folders of pictures and videos of several girls, all in similar poses, many of them crying. One of the girls was Rachel. She asked the boy to report the account to Tumblr. Rachel told me

that she thought about going to another city and killing herself. “I actually ended up getting on a train, but my friends stopped me,” she said.

The pictures and videos soon spread to Pornhub, one of the largest pornography sites on the Internet. At one point, Pornhub hosted some fourteen million videos, including studio-produced adult films and user-generated content, and it is one of the most visited Web sites in the world. Many of the videos of Rachel included her real name, and comments contained links to her social-media accounts and to those of her family members. A snippet from one of the videos was posted to Snapchat and Instagram. Someone sent a video to her father, and a stalker showed up at her house, texting her photos from outside while she was babysitting her younger brother. Rachel filed a complaint with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command, a division of the U.K.’s National Crime Agency, but the organization was of little help, she said.

Rachel stopped sleeping, and spent her days and nights searching for the videos and filling out dozens of removal-request forms. “Hi, I’m underage and had many videos and photos posted of me on here,” she wrote to Pornhub in December, 2018. “They keep getting reuploaded onto this site and I am only 15 in them and I don’t have the links. I don’t know what to do because every time I get them removed you keep allowing them to be uploaded its ruining my life.” In response, Pornhub asked for a link to each video, the username of the account used to upload it, the title of the file, or screenshots of the page. Rachel sent the information when she had it, but the videos were often uploaded in tiny clips that she found impossible to track. Each time one was taken down, more appeared. Finally, she gave up. “I was spending all my time reporting videos,” she said. “It was taking a lot out of me.”

Rachel stopped leaving the house and eventually went on public assistance. In February, 2020, she saw an Instagram post about the work of an American anti-sex-trafficking activist named Laila Mickelwait. She messaged Mickelwait, who referred her to services that could help with the takedown requests, and connected her with lawyers from Brown Rudnick, a firm that was assembling a lawsuit against MindGeek, the company that owns Pornhub, on behalf of people who’d allegedly had videos of themselves posted to the site without their consent. After lawyers sent a

cease-and-desist letter to MindGeek, the company quickly removed videos of Rachel; it then blocked them from being uploaded again. “Laila was so helpful,” Rachel told me. “She did more for me than any police or anyone in the U.K. ever did.”

At the time, Mickelwait was working for an organization called Exodus Cry, a faith-based group that seeks to “abolish commercial sexual exploitation,” along with the underlying conditions that the group sees as enabling it. Mickelwait, who is thirty-nine, had worked at Exodus Cry since 2012, and her focus was on trying to prevent adults and children from becoming victims of coerced prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse. “I always felt a specific passion for prevention,” she told me. “It’s wonderful when you can take someone out of exploitation, but it would be better if they were never there in the first place.”

Mickelwait had spent several years presenting “Nefarious: Merchant of Souls,” an anti-trafficking documentary made by Exodus Cry, to governments and public audiences around the world, and advocating for harsher penalties for trafficking convictions. Increasingly, though, her work centered on women and children, many of them victims of trafficking, whose explicit videos had ended up on pornographic Web sites such as Pornhub. MindGeek’s policies stated that videos on its site were vetted, to make sure that they didn’t feature minors, and were uploaded with the consent of the people who appeared in them. But the company had recently been in the news after being accused of failing to adequately screen its content. A thirty-year-old man had been arrested in Florida for lewd and lascivious battery of a fifteen-year-old girl who had been missing for nearly a year; her family had found approximately fifty-eight videos of her on Pornhub and other Web sites. (The company says that it removed the material the day it was notified.) Shortly after that, the *Sunday Times* of London published an article about the corporations that advertise on Pornhub, including Heinz and Unilever, and noted that its reporters had found “dozens of examples of illegal material on the website within minutes.” (The company replied that child-sexual-abuse material made up a tiny proportion of content, and that the aim was to eradicate it.)



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Late one night in early 2020, Mickelwait's baby started crying. Since surviving a difficult birth three months earlier, he had been colicky, often wailing inconsolably for long stretches. "It was definitely one of the hardest periods of my life," she told me recently. "I thought I was going to die." While trying to rock the baby back to sleep, she decided to check MindGeek's claims about vetting.

Mickelwait pulled out her laptop, created a dummy e-mail account, and uploaded a video of a darkened corner of her bedroom to Pornhub. It appeared to go live almost instantly. No one had verified who she was, her age, or what her video contained. (MindGeek claims that, until review, the video would have been available only to Mickelwait.) "I began to be haunted by the question of: Why are we assuming these are legal and consensual videos?" Mickelwait said. The next day, she tweeted, "I could've been a trafficked 12 yr old and no one would know. Pornhub enables exploitation."

"It wasn't new information—millions of people already knew that," Mickelwait said. "But for some reason people hadn't been connecting the dots as to what that means for what's on the site. I felt like people needed to know the most popular porn site in the world was populated with crime-scene videos." Mickelwait wrote an opinion piece, submitting it to twelve

publications. The Washington *Examiner*, a conservative news outlet, agreed to publish it. “At this very moment, there could be hundreds, if not thousands, of videos of underage sex trafficking victims on Pornhub,” she wrote. “It’s time to shut down super-predator site Pornhub and hold the executive megapimps behind it accountable.”

MindGeek is registered in the tax haven of Luxembourg, but its main office is in Montreal. The company employs around sixteen hundred people, and the online platforms it owns, which include Pornhub, RedTube, YouPorn, and Brazzers, received approximately 4.5 billion visits each month in 2020, according to a company spokesperson—almost double Google and Facebook combined. MindGeek’s owners and investors have taken pains to obscure their identities, but once Mickelwait began investigating the company, she said, a former employee shared the names of the top executives: Feras Antoon, the chief executive officer; David Tassillo, the chief operating officer; and Corey Urman, a vice-president, who ran Pornhub.

Pornhub’s origins date back to 2007, when an entrepreneur named Matt Keezer bought the domain for about three thousand dollars, after cold-calling its owner. Keezer joined with several business partners, including Stephane Manos and Ouissam Youssef, whom he had met through Foosball tournaments when they were all students at Concordia University, in Montreal. A few of the business partners had recently started a paid porn site called Brazzers. Folding Brazzers and Pornhub into a new company, the partners named it Mansef, a combination of “Manos” and “Youssef.”

Mansef came close to disaster soon after its founding. In October, 2009, agents from the U.S. Secret Service Organized Fraud Task Force obtained warrants to seize more than six million dollars from two accounts held by a Mansef-linked company called Premium Services. The company seemed to have no address aside from a rented mailbox in Cumming, Georgia, a town of five thousand people. But, in two months, it had received \$9.4 million and wired out four million dollars. None of the money seemed to have been used for paying salaries or for other legitimate expenses. The government charged Premium Services with operating an unlicensed money-transferring business. Mansef said that the payments were from third-party credit-card processors and to its U.S. vendors. In 2011, the government settled the case,

agreeing to return \$4.15 million. The company was saved. More significant, the case was an indication that the government had not caught up to the realities of the new business of Internet pornography.

In the wake of the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies, adult-video studios sprouted up in California's San Fernando Valley—which came to be known as Porn Valley—and produced films that were distributed across the country. In 1988, responding in part to public outrage after Traci Lords appeared in porn films when she was underage, Congress passed U.S. Code 2257, requiring producers to document that their performers were eighteen or older.

The launch of YouTube, in 2005, made it easy to upload videos that could be viewed by anyone; soon afterward, entrepreneurs started what came to be known as “tube sites”—including RedTube and YouPorn—which allowed users to upload and view pornographic videos for free. Many were pirated copies of professional films, and the revenue that once flowed to the California movie studios was redirected to the operators of the tube sites. The resulting copyright battles in the porn industry mirrored those in traditional entertainment. In 2007, Viacom sued YouTube, accusing it of hosting pirated copies of “SpongeBob SquarePants” and “The Daily Show,” among other material, and asked for a billion dollars in damages. That same year, a porn producer called Vivid Entertainment sued PornoTube, accusing the site of hosting pirated copies of Vivid’s material. (Viacom settled, and Vivid’s case was dropped.)

The Internet made it possible for tube sites to make money off videos created by others while bearing almost no responsibility for what was in them. Today, MindGeek relies on the same legal statute that Mark Zuckerberg cites when defending Facebook from charges that it allows the proliferation of disinformation: Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which states that an “interactive computer service” cannot be treated as a publisher of information provided by a third party. The provision was conceived in order to allow the Internet to grow without being buried in lawsuits. But it also means that, when tube sites are confronted with complaints about videos depicting rape, sexual images of children, revenge porn, and other content uploaded without consent, they can claim that they are not liable. Experts at the National Center for Missing &

Exploited Children, a nonprofit organization that tracks child-sexual-abuse material, told me that this has allowed the online porn industry to grow with little accountability. “The liability is low, the money is high,” Staca Shehan, the vice-president of the organization’s analytical-services division, said. “That’s a business model that people are going to get into.”

In 2009—months after the government seized Mansef’s bank account—a German Internet impresario named Fabian Thylmann bought the company, changing the name to Manwin. Thylmann, who was in his early thirties, had previously helped develop software that allowed adult Web sites to track the success of their ads and links—an early version of cookies.

Pornhub became Manwin’s flagship tube site. In the early years of online pornography, the tube sites were despised by many in the porn industry for giving away their content for free, but Thylmann seemed to relish his image. “Fabian’s approach was: We’re a porn company, we’re going to flaunt it,” a former senior manager at MindGeek told me. An online industry forum called gfy.com was filled with scathing discussions about the pirating of content. “I just went to xtube.com, within 1 click I found several scenes of mine that are there illegally,” a participant told “Nathan,” the pseudonym Thylmann used on the site. “By allowing uploads of full scenes from anyone, you know from balls to bones you are violating copyright law and profiting from stolen content.”

Traditional financial firms are often reluctant to do business with companies that produce adult content. “They know you can make a lot of money,” a former MindGeek executive told me. “But this can backfire on you heavily if regular clients find out your bank is dealing with a porn company.” In April, 2011, Thylmann was able to secure a three-hundred-and-sixty-two-million-dollar loan, arranged in part by a New York hedge fund called Colbeck Capital, at an exorbitant interest rate. Thylmann quickly struck a deal to run Playboy TV and acquired the pornography producer Digital Playground. He also purchased Webcam sites, where performers live-stream themselves to paying viewers. The German newspaper *Die Welt* compared him to the founders of Facebook and Google.

In 2012, Thylmann was arrested, in Belgium, for tax evasion, and extradited to Germany. Alexander Pschorr, the former C.E.O. of Manwin in Germany,

told me that, after Thylmann was released, he boasted about how well he'd been treated in jail. "Some guards told him, 'Oh, you're the owner of this and that?'" Pschorr said. "'My girlfriend is an amateur performer. Do you have some tips about how she could make some money?'" The former senior manager, who worked in the company's office in Montreal, told me that executives there downplayed the arrest; it was described as "just taxes." Still, Manwin's German banker, Commerzbank, announced that it would no longer do business with the company, and soon afterward Feras Antoon took over Manwin's operations. "It wasn't even like a coup," the former manager recalled. "Feras had always been the guy with the most internal visibility. He made all the decisions." (Thylmann later pleaded guilty to tax evasion.)

Along with David Tassillo, the company's chief operating officer, and an Austrian investor named Bernd Bergmair, Antoon bought the company from Thylmann. Bergmair already owned a porn site called RedTube, and the companies merged. Antoon became the C.E.O. of the new company. He renamed it MindGeek and restructured the international offices, firing staff in Germany. A stockpile of Manwin-branded water bottles and sweatshirts was thrown out.



"More squeaky toy."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

There was a family element to the business. Antoon's brother, Mark, ran a video-game division for the company; his sister joined, for a time, as a travel

coördinator, and her husband oversaw the cafeteria. Antoon's parents, who had immigrated to Canada from Syria, often visited the office. The former manager described Antoon as "a ridiculously proud family man," and junior-level employees grumbled that there was no way to advance without a personal connection. There were no women in leadership; according to the former manager, Antoon and his deputies occasionally made demeaning remarks about female employees when they left the room, commenting on their hair or clothing. "They were misogynistic," the former manager said. "It was very old-school thinking, a very two-dimensional view of women." (The company denied this, and said that it had an inclusive workplace.)

MindGeek's corporate structure is complicated, with dozens of subsidiaries around the world whose names can obscure their ownership. It maintains offices in Luxembourg, the U.K., and Romania; the office that handles MindGeek's content is in Cyprus. The company's headquarters is an aquamarine glass office building in Montreal, where Antoon surrounds himself with a tight group of confidants that some employees referred to as the "bro club." Antoon has a full face, small, bright eyes, and a trim beard. He and the other executives wear expensive suits and watches and gel their hair back. Antoon has spent lavishly on furniture and art work for the office, trying to emulate the appearance of the tech firms of Silicon Valley.

Some executives hid the fact that they worked in the porn industry, occasionally using pseudonyms. "They wanted to really come across as an engineering firm," the former manager told me. For years, Corey Urman, who ran Pornhub until September, 2021, identified himself in the press as Corey Price. Employees later said that concealing their identities was a safety issue, because they were harassed and threatened by anti-porn protesters; the hundred-and-eighty-page document left by the racist mass shooter in Buffalo included a rant about the harms caused by pornography and a list of executives at MindGeek and Pornhub interposed with anti-Semitic imagery. But the secrecy also served to protect employees' reputations. "This industry is different," the former executive told me. "When I met someone and they said, 'I'm Tom,' it was absolutely clear that the guy was not called Tom. In porn, as an executive, you just don't use your own name. One of the biggest assets is that you keep your personal life absolutely secret."

Like other tech platforms, MindGeek has little incentive to remove potentially profitable content. The company makes about half its revenue by selling ads on its Web sites. It also charges some users fees for access to its paid porn sites, and enters profit-sharing agreements with porn producers, taking a commission on the revenue that producers make posting their films on its sites. Web traffic is central to all of this.

A woman named Tina, a technology assistant and mother of three, told me that, in 2019, an abusive ex-boyfriend posted explicit videos of her on Pornhub without her permission. In addition to reporting the matter to the police, she said, she spent months filling out takedown requests on the site, explaining that the videos had been posted without her consent and contained her and her children's real names and home address. The responses usually took several days, she said, and the company repeatedly asked her for proof of her claims. When the videos were removed, she said, they might reappear hours later, like a replicating virus, sometimes broken down into dozens of clips of a few seconds each. (Her ex-boyfriend was eventually arrested, and pleaded guilty to criminal contempt, a misdemeanor.) A spokesperson for MindGeek said that, without additional information about Tina, the company could not comment about what steps it had taken.

I heard similar stories from several other women, including a pregnant mother who was in the Air Force when she discovered, in 2018, that her ex-husband had secretly filmed them having sex and posted the videos on Pornhub. She soon found out that he'd done the same thing to other women. After alerting the company and asking to have her videos taken down, she said, she waited days for a response that was not automated, and was asked repeatedly to prove that they were of her. "I can't even tell you how many hundreds of hours I spent doing this," she told me. "I wasn't sleeping, I was crying all the time. It was all I did, twenty-four hours a day." (The spokesperson said that the company believed it had disabled two videos the day the links were submitted, and another one a day after, upon confirming the identity of the woman in the video.)

At the time, MindGeek had the technical ability to remove videos from its sites while they were being investigated, a former employee told me, but it didn't always use those tools. "They will purposely delay," the former

employee said. “They’ll say, ‘We’ll get back to you in two, three days once we do our review.’” By the time a review was complete, a video could have been up for several days, and ad space sold against it. “The user did not get punished,” the former employee went on. “MindGeek still made money.”

MindGeek’s policies forbid uploading content that features child sexual abuse, that reveals personally identifiable information such as names and addresses, or that is obtained without consent. Prior to 2020, the company employed a handful of “content formatters” in Montreal to review videos, along with their tags and metadata, according to a former employee who worked in the department. (The spokesperson said that formatters made up only a small part of the company’s compliance efforts.) According to the former employee, many formatters, who were paid about thirty thousand dollars a year, were deeply traumatized by what they saw. There were occasional videos depicting rape, child sexual abuse, and the torture of animals. In obvious cases involving minors, the videos were taken down, and the accounts of the users who uploaded them were deleted. But, according to the former employee, the formatters did not notify law enforcement, ostensibly because many uploaders use virtual private networks to disguise their identities and locations, which could cause the police to target the wrong person. Formatters sometimes suggested blocking the I.P. addresses of people who repeatedly violated the policies, or requiring that uploaders provide valid identification and e-mail addresses, the former employee said, but their supervisors said that this would discourage use of MindGeek’s sites. “A user could upload a hundred videos of someone getting decapitated,” the former employee told me. “We’d just close the videos, but not block their account. They could just upload them again the next day.” (The company denies this.) The job of screening the videos was eventually moved to Cyprus, where moderators viewed hundreds of videos a day, often fast-forwarding through them with the sound off to get through as many as possible. (The spokesperson said that this was a “fundamental misunderstanding” of the process, that formatters’ managers were responsible for reporting suspect material to law enforcement, and that blocking I.P. addresses would not have been effective, since they are not always tied to individual users.) “Their objective was not necessarily to cause harm,” the former employee said, of company executives. “Their objective was to make money.”

Pschorr, the former C.E.O. of Manwin in Germany, told me that laws governing pornography are more stringent in Germany than they are in the U.S. During his time with the company, he said, it employed twenty-four customer-support agents and content screeners to review all German content before it went live. Pschorr was surprised by the lack of regulation in the U.S. “It was always interesting for me as a German to see that, in the U.S., you’d get I.D.’d if you went to a bar, and if you’re not twenty-one you get in big trouble,” he said. “But if you want to consume porn all you have to do is click ‘Yes, I’m 18,’ and you’re in the realm of dirt.”

MindGeek was alert to the concerns of the credit-card companies. Mike Stabile, the director of public affairs for an adult-entertainment trade and advocacy association called the Free Speech Coalition, told me that answering to financial institutions was typical in the porn business. “Once everything moved online, it shifted from ‘The government said you can’t do this’ to ‘The banks said you can’t do this,’ ” he said. “You were no longer arguing with a state attorney general or the F.B.I., you were arguing with a middle manager at a bank who was worried about the bank’s reputation. And with Visa and Mastercard you have a duopoly. If you lose either of them or both of them, it ruins your business.” (Spokespeople for Visa and Mastercard said that as long as transactions are legal the companies don’t make judgments about what people are purchasing. They issue ethical guidelines that dictate what porn platforms can show.)

In 2018, MindGeek refinanced its loans, increasing its borrowing to nearly four hundred million dollars, in order to continue to expand, and made another four hundred million in revenue. “They were after monopoly a hundred per cent,” the former senior manager said. “They wanted world domination.” (The company denies this.) Antoon began construction on a residence in the Ahuntsic-Cartierville borough of Montreal, whose renderings were reminiscent of the grand estates of Europe. The house was designed with eight bedrooms, a cinema, a sports complex, and an infinity pool surrounded by terraced walkways and manicured gardens.

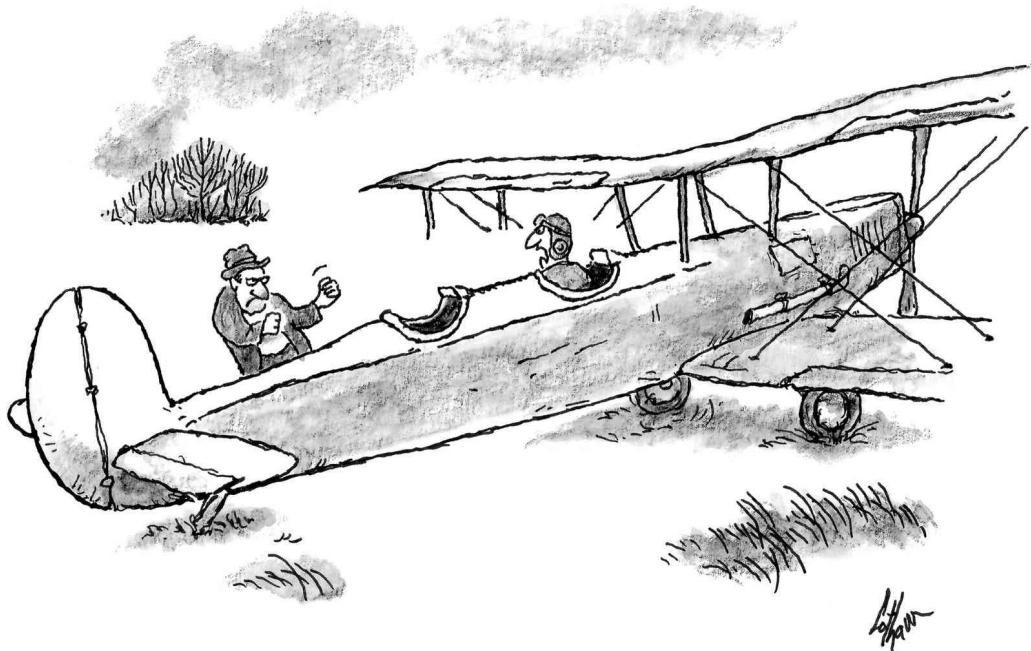
On a recent visit to New York, Laila Mickelwait sat in the lobby of a hotel near LaGuardia Airport, sipping tea. She has green eyes and long blond hair and tends to dress in black. She was raised in Riverside, California, where her mother, a former teacher, stayed home with Mickelwait and her two

sisters. Her father, a vascular surgeon, had grown up in Jordan during the civil war. Mickelwait recalled that he had a seriousness about him, and that he rarely watched television or movies for fun. He had a passion for social justice, which he imparted to his children. Mickelwait began training as an acrobat when she was eight, and as a teen-ager she was accepted to Cirque du Soleil. Her father wouldn't let her go. She studied political science at the University of California, Riverside, and got a graduate degree in public diplomacy at the University of Southern California. In college, while researching causes including global poverty and war crimes, she came across the issue of sex trafficking, and was shocked by what she learned. "I just felt like from an early age I had it in me to care about this," she said.

Mickelwait interned at the United Nations, working on projects related to human trafficking. In 2006, she founded a nonprofit called New Reality International that sought to provide health care and other services to impoverished women and children around the world. In 2012, she joined Exodus Cry, occasionally attending prayer meetings at an evangelical ministry in Kansas City, Missouri, called the International House of Prayer (*IHOPKC*), which is known for music, fasting, and a prayer room that operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Mickelwait's work is partly a response to how easily children can access even the most violent pornography online. In an interview with Defend Young Minds, an organization that lobbies to keep porn away from kids, she said, "I call this a form of secondhand sexual abuse—for a child to be exposed to rape, for example, as their introduction to sex when they're eight, nine, ten, eleven years old. But, also, there are children being abused behind the screen. Those are the ones being used in the films. So there's abuse going on on both sides." Mickelwait told me that her title at Exodus Cry, Director of Abolition, was modelled on figures such as William Wilberforce, who led the British movement to abolish the slave trade in the nineteenth century.

Exodus Cry was founded around 2008 by Benjamin Nolot, a filmmaker and an activist who grew up in Southern California and joined *IHOPKC* in his twenties. Exodus Cry has taken aim not only at nonconsensual pornography but more broadly at what it calls "porn culture," which, it argues, leads to the hypersexualization and objectification of women and makes sex trafficking and other crimes more likely to occur. The group's tax filings state that it is "committed to abolishing sex trafficking and the commercial sex industry,"

which would include legal activities such as producing pornography and performing in strip clubs. In 2017, Nolot released a documentary called “Liberated: The New Sexual Revolution,” about the relationship between spring-break partying, hookup culture, and sexual violence; more recently, he made “Raised on Porn: The New Sex Ed,” which explores the effects on children of unfettered access to online porn. When I contacted MindGeek, a spokesman who goes by Ian Andrews sent me a list of news articles about Exodus Cry and *IHOPKC* that he recommended I read. One, from the Daily Beast, described Exodus Cry as “a shady Evangelical group with Trump ties” and noted that *IHOPKC*’s founder, Mike Bickle, preaches that homosexuality is a sin. Another Daily Beast story highlighted *IHOPKC*’s role in helping lay the groundwork in Uganda for the country’s notorious anti-gay legislation, which punishes homosexuality with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. (On *IHOPKC*’s Web site, the organization denies supporting the bill.) A story in the magazine *Reason* noted that Exodus Cry often teams up with the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, a nonprofit that was previously known as Morality in Media, which became infamous in the eighties and nineties for promoting boycotts of soap operas and MTV, and for campaigning against the National Endowment for the Arts.



"I don't tolerate unruly passengers."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

When I reached Nolot, he told me that he knew nothing about *IHOPKC*'s alleged role in Uganda until he read about it in the press, and said the idea that the church promoted anti-gay laws there "was utterly abhorrent." The God he believes in, he said, would never reject people for their life style or their beliefs. "I am very aware that there are marginalized groups of people, whether by sexuality or by race or by gender or whatever," he said. "I don't want to be a part of anything that would bring further condemnation." Nolot reiterated that Exodus Cry and *IHOPKC* were not the same thing, and said that he deeply regretted tweeting, in 2013, that gay marriage was "an unspeakable offense to God."

To Nolot, trafficking and pornography are inextricably linked, and the creation of porn is coercive by definition. Arguments like his were once made by feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, the scholar who in 1979 helped develop the legal theory that sexual harassment was a civil-rights violation. The Dworkin-MacKinnon faction saw pornography as a problem with two main components, both of which promoted misogyny and violence against women: onscreen, there were depictions of female subordination and male-centric pleasure; behind the scenes, women were exploited in the production of it. In 1980, activists led protests against the film "Deep Throat" after its star, Linda Lovelace, said that she had been raped and coerced into making it. A so-called sex-positive wing of feminism, led by Ellen Willis and others, soon argued, however, that anti-porn feminists were censors who ignored the complicated reality of women's sexual desires. Linda Hirshman, a cultural historian and the author of several books about social movements, told me that not only did Dworkin and MacKinnon lose the debate but that they and their allies were attacked so harshly that it silenced others. This left conservative Christian groups as among the most prominent forces raising concerns about abuses in the porn industry. "But the question you always want to ask these Christian anti-porn activists is: Where do you stand on abortion rights?" Hirshman said. "Where do you stand on birth control? Where do you stand on equal pay? Otherwise, you get into the car with the Christian right, and the next thing you know you're in Bluebeard's castle."

Kate D'Adamo, an advocate for sex workers' rights at Reframe Health and Justice, told me that, because Pornhub occupies a near-monopoly in the industry, many sex workers depend on it to survive; if it disappeared

suddenly, it would be financially devastating for people who are already in a precarious situation. “There are people who work in anti-trafficking who do talk to sex workers, and say, ‘If this is the legislative change, how would that impact you?’” D’Adamo said. “But if your argument is to shut down Pornhub then you don’t care about the people who work in the industry.” Mike Stabile, of the Free Speech Coalition, noted that the tools to screen user-generated pornography had taken years to evolve and become more effective, and said that the fixation on Pornhub suggested that the leaders of the anti-trafficking movement were being disingenuous about their goals. “This isn’t a Pornhub-specific problem or an issue where Pornhub is particularly negligent,” Stabile said. “If you look at the vast majority of child-sex-abuse material being shared, it is not on porn sites, it’s on sites like Snapchat and Facebook. This is about stopping pornography.”

Mickelwait seems frustrated by the fact that MindGeek and other companies can deflect attention from criticism by questioning the motives of anti-trafficking activists. MindGeek, she told me, “has engaged in illegal conduct that has really shattered the lives of victims who never intended to be in pornography, who did not sign up to be porn performers. These are people who were raped, or trafficked, or filmed without their knowledge or consent.” She added, “I believe all adults should have the freedom to do what they wish with their own bodies so long as their actions are consensual, lawful, and not harming another person.” Last year, Mickelwait left Exodus Cry to found her own nonprofit, the Justice Defense Fund, which focusses exclusively on sex trafficking, child sexual abuse, and nonconsensual content online. She would not tell me who the group’s funders are, and said that it has received contributions from “hundreds of donors from around the world who participate with the understanding that we maintain their privacy.”

According to Mickelwait, the only way to reform the porn industry is to hold its leaders accountable for the content on their sites. “This doesn’t mean an end to the porn industry,” she said. “It means moving the industry to operate legally.” She noted that some porn performers agreed with her. One, Allie Eve Knox, told me that most porn performers were not eager to side with the Christian right, but that nonconsensual content and child-sexual-abuse material on Pornhub made the industry less safe for them. “We need to have

an outcry. We need to hold people accountable,” she said. “This stuff should not be allowed to happen. It’s a fucking travesty to our business.”

Mickelwait’s op-ed in the Washington *Examiner* was shared extensively on Twitter, and she and other activists started using the hashtag #Traffickinghub; a Twitter user designed a logo to go with it, in the black, white, and yellow that Pornhub uses in its branding. Mickelwait copied her op-ed into a Change.org petition that quickly amassed thousands of signatures. (It’s now hosted on a different Web site, which indicates that it has been signed by more than two million people.)

The publicity came at a cost. Anonymous posters published information about where Mickelwait and her family members lived; some relatives had their online accounts hacked. Law enforcement received a phone call falsely accusing Mickelwait of “repeatedly posting child pornography on her personal Twitter account,” according to the police report.

In March, 2020, members of the Canadian Parliament asked the government, in a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to investigate MindGeek, and then launched a parliamentary investigation. That month, MindGeek registered for the first time with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, and turned over more than thirteen thousand videos of suspected child-sexual-abuse material. (Most major tech platforms are already registered with the N.C.M.E.C.; Facebook made more than twenty million reports to the agency in 2020.) MindGeek hired the law firm Kaplan, Hecker & Fink to conduct a review so that the company could build a stringent content-compliance program.

That December, the *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote an exposé called “The Children of Pornhub,” alleging that the site was “infested with rape videos.” He cited Mickelwait’s petition. After Kristof’s piece was published, a former employee told me, MindGeek management sent a company-wide e-mail denying the allegations, and arguing that the company’s filtering and moderation policies were effective. “It was complete B.S.,” the former employee said. Six days later, Visa and Mastercard announced that they would no longer process payments for Pornhub. This sent a strong message, but, Knox told me, the people who suffered the most were professional porn creators, who could no longer

collect payments. Some she knew had been driven into less safe work, such as escorting.

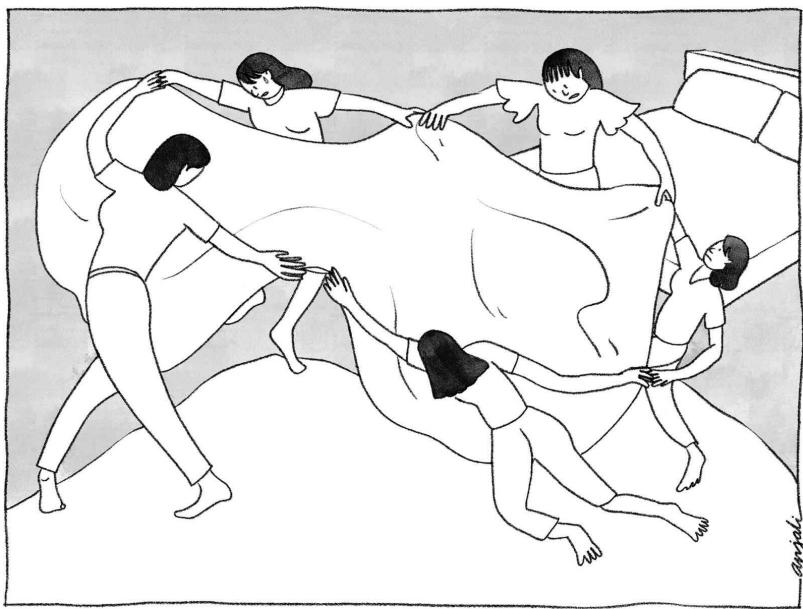
On December 14th, MindGeek announced that it would require users to verify their identities through a third-party Web site before they uploaded videos, and that it would disable millions of videos from unregistered users. In a blog post, the company argued that its policies were now more stringent than those of all its peers, including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. “It is clear that Pornhub is being targeted not because of our policies and how we compare to our peers, but because we are an adult content platform,” the post read. It said that the company was being attacked by Exodus Cry and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation: “These are organizations dedicated to abolishing pornography, banning material they claim is obscene, and shutting down commercial sex work.” Months later, one of MindGeek’s auditors, Grant Thornton, ended its relationship with the company.

The Canadian parliamentary committee investigating MindGeek scheduled hearings for February, 2021. MindGeek sent a letter to the committee, outlining its new content policies and promising even more rigorous ones in the future. Only verified users, whose names and ages had been confirmed through government-issued identification, would be allowed to upload content to the company’s Web sites. Digital-fingerprinting software was being applied in all suspected cases of child-sexual-abuse and nonconsensual videos, which would prevent them from being re-uploaded in the future. The company also said that it had been developing software to identify and remove nonconsensual videos, which it planned to make available to other online platforms.

At the hearings, Serena Fleites, a young woman from California, testified that, in seventh grade, a boy she liked had badgered her into sending him a video of herself undressing. The video had been posted to Pornhub with the caption “13 year-old brunette shows off for the camera.” As the clip began to circulate among her classmates, she started skipping class, and eventually dropped out. She said that she made many attempts to get Pornhub to take the video down—even sending e-mails that she claimed were from her mother. Her attorney, Michael Bowe, of Brown Rudnick, tried to distance her case from the religious anti-trafficking groups, telling the committee,

“This is about rape, not porn. It’s about trafficking, not consensual adult performance or entertainment.”

Four days later, MindGeek’s top executives testified. It seemed as if they hadn’t prepared for even the most elementary questions. Antoon was unable to say how much money the company made, how many complaints it received about nonconsensual videos, or why it hadn’t made any substantive policy changes until Visa and Mastercard pulled their business. When an M.P. named Shannon Stubbs asked whether MindGeek “had ever monetized child sexual abuse and nonconsensual material,” Antoon refused to answer directly, and stated that such content was harmful to the company’s brand. He said that Pornhub was “among the top five most visited Web sites on the Internet.” But later, when Tassillo, MindGeek’s C.O.O., was asked why the company had waited until 2020 to refer complaints to the N.C.M.E.C., he said, “We are a startup and are still growing.”



THE FITTED SHEET – HENRI MATISSE
Cartoon by Anjali Chandrashekar

When pressed on Fleites’s case, Antoon said, “I’m heartbroken when I hear these stories.” He said that the first time he had heard of Fleites was five months earlier, when Nicholas Kristof contacted the company for his article, and that, with only her first and last name, it was “impossible to know” if she had ever asked the company to remove her content. An M.P. asked whether the company had any records of reporting Fleites’s case to the

police. Tassillo replied, “We might have records of this. We have never said that she’s lying. We just don’t know.”

Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, an M.P. from Toronto, told me, “The amount of money these platforms are generating and the insignificant sums they are outlaying to protect people on their platforms—and in the case of Pornhub it’s such sensitive material that’s being shared—I think it’s unacceptable.”

Later that month, the parliamentary committee heard testimony from three more women, including Rachel. She told the story of the night she was blackmailed into sending sexual pictures and videos over WhatsApp. “I think it’s important you understand the type of stuff I was subjected to that night and how depraved the man behind it was, so you can truly understand what Pornhub’s been profiting from,” she said. “To see Corey Urman”—the head of Pornhub—“smile and explain that he uses aliases to protect his identity, when he has the choice to post or not to post, is disgusting, because I had no choice about being uploaded to Pornhub and having my personal details exposed to the world.”

Afterward, Mickelwait read accounts from other women and girls who she said had contacted her. “Kate,” she said, was fifteen when her twenty-year-old boyfriend filmed them having sex and later uploaded the video without her permission; Pornhub didn’t do anything when she asked for it to be taken down. “Beth” was raped by an uncle when she was ten, and found videos of the rape two years later on Pornhub. “Caroline” spent two months begging Pornhub to remove videos of her sexual assault, at age fifteen, in which she was screaming and had a bloody nose. Mickelwait listed examples of revenge porn still on the site. Then she thanked the committee for conducting the investigation.

A few weeks after the hearing, fire trucks converged on Ahuntsic-Cartierville, where Antoon’s new mansion was being consumed by a raging fire. Although the house was still under construction, Antoon had put it up for sale earlier that month, for about sixteen million U.S. dollars. Some eighty firefighters spent most of the night trying to bring the blaze under control. By the next morning, almost nothing was left of the house. Montreal police are investigating the fire as a case of arson. Antoon, in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, hinted that anti-trafficking activists might be responsible.

“Could the extreme religious groups have incited and encouraged someone to do this? Absolutely,” he said. “When you use extremist language and QAnon sentiment toward child trafficking, your words are going to attract and mobilize some of the darkest corners of the internet.”

In June, 2021, Brown Rudnick, the law firm representing Fleites, Rachel, and more than thirty other women, filed a lawsuit against MindGeek. Lauren Tabaksblat, one of the attorneys, said that her clients were seeking to compel MindGeek to “adopt practices that ensure only consensual content is on its platform.” (A judge later ruled that the women must bring individual lawsuits. Brown Rudnick plans to refile.) The day the initial suit was filed, the Canadian House of Commons released an ethics report that called for MindGeek and other companies to practice strict age verification. Canadian law-enforcement agents have said that they are looking into Pornhub’s actions, but they will not confirm whether they have opened criminal investigations.

Last year, as MindGeek’s legal troubles grew, Antoon began efforts to sell the company. The rise of OnlyFans—a Web site that allows performers to set up their own channels with paying subscribers—and the flurry of bad press seemed disastrous for Pornhub. According to a corporate presentation reviewed by the Logic, a Canadian tech-news site, Pornhub’s traffic declined by forty per cent in the year after the Kristof column was published. A group led by a cannabis entrepreneur named Chuck Rifici offered to buy the company for a reported five hundred and twenty-five million dollars. In the end, MindGeek rejected the offer.

MindGeek’s legal cases may test the limits of Section 230 protections—a situation that could have implications for social-media platforms. Last February, two women filed a lawsuit in Alabama alleging that videos of them being sexually assaulted as teen-agers were posted on Pornhub without their consent—and that the company had shared revenue from the videos with their rapists, who had uploaded the material. (The company denies the allegations.) MindGeek argued to have the case dismissed, citing Section 230, which, the company wrote, granted it “broad immunity from liability for content posted to its websites by third parties.” The judge denied MindGeek’s motion, stating that, by providing incentives for the creation of child-sexual-abuse material, the company had forfeited Section 230

protection. “Child pornography is not lawful ‘information provided by another information content provider’ as contemplated by Section 230,” the judge wrote. “Rather, it is illegal contraband, stemming from the sexual abuse of a child, beyond the covering of First Amendment protection, and wholly outside any other protection or immunity under the law.” The judge noted that individuals were prosecuted for possessing such material on a regular basis, adding, “How, then, could a corporate defendant escape punishment for the same illegal conduct?”

After an assessment that lasted more than a year, Kaplan, Hecker & Fink produced a report with more than ninety recommendations of ways for the company to improve its procedures for keeping nonconsensual videos off Pornhub and its other sites. MindGeek declined to release the report, but said that it has continued to tighten its content policies, and that in 2021 it removed content reported to the N.C.M.E.C. faster than any of the major tech platforms did. No content now goes live without passing through human and automated moderation, and when a user flags a video it is disabled until a review is conducted.

Still, Mickelwait continues to search for illegal content on Pornhub. In January, she said she received a call from a former MindGeek employee who told her that Visa and Mastercard were still processing payments from advertisers. Mickelwait went on the Web site for TrafficJunky, MindGeek’s online advertising business, and noticed that the Visa and Mastercard logos had been removed from the site. But when she initiated a chat with a sales representative, posing as a prospective advertiser, the representative told her that TrafficJunky could still accept ad purchases using all major credit cards.

Mickelwait sat down to type out a Twitter post. “The lucrative ads on MindGeek owned Pornhub are purchased through TrafficJunky which MindGeek also owns. . . . MasterCard/Visa process the payments for the ads,” she wrote. “Hold them accountable.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of total monthly visits to MindGeek’s Web sites.

Annals of Art

- [Yoko Ono's Art of Defiance](#)

By [Louis Menand](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

On March 9, 1945, an armada of more than three hundred B-29s flew fifteen hundred miles across the Pacific to attack Tokyo from the air. The planes carried incendiary bombs to be dropped at low altitudes. Beginning shortly after midnight, sixteen hundred and sixty-five tons of bombs fell on the city.

Most of the buildings in Tokyo were constructed of wood, paper, and bamboo, and parts of the city were incinerated in a matter of hours. The planes targeted workers' homes in the downtown area, with the goal of crippling Japan's arms industry. It is estimated that a million people were left homeless and that as many as a hundred thousand were killed—more than had died in the notorious firebombing of Dresden, a month earlier, and more than would die in Nagasaki, five months later. Crewmen in the last planes in the formation said that they could smell burning flesh as they flew over Tokyo at five thousand feet.

That night, Yoko Ono was in bed with a fever. While her mother and her little brother, Keisuke, spent the night in a bomb shelter under the garden of their house, she stayed in her room. She could see the city burning from her window. She had just turned twelve and had led a protected and privileged life. She was too innocent to be frightened.

The Ono family was wealthy. They had some thirty servants, and they lived in the Azabu district, near the Imperial Palace, away from the bombing. The fires did not reach them. But Ono's mother, worried that there would be more attacks (there were), decided to evacuate to a farming village well outside the city.

In the countryside, the family found itself in a situation faced by many Japanese: they were desperate for food. The children traded their possessions to get something to eat, and sometimes they went hungry. Ono later said that she and Keisuke would lie on their backs looking at the sky through an opening in the roof of the house where they lived. She would ask him what kind of dinner he wanted, and then tell him to imagine it in his

mind. This seemed to make him happier. She later called it “maybe my first piece of art.”

Like any artist, Ono wanted recognition, but she was never driven by a desire for wealth and fame. Whether she sought them or not, though, she has both. Her art is exhibited around the world: last year at the Serpentine, in London (“[Yoko Ono: I Love You Earth](#)”); this year at the Vancouver Art Gallery (“[Growing Freedom](#)”) and the Kunsthaus in Zurich (“[Yoko Ono: This Room Moves at the Same Speed as the Clouds](#)”). She began managing the family finances after she and her husband John Lennon moved to New York, in 1971, and she is said to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars today.

There is no question that museums and galleries mount these shows and people go to see them because Ono was once married to a Beatle. On a weekday not long ago, I saw the Vancouver show, which occupied the whole ground floor of the museum, and there was a steady stream of visitors. None of the artists and composers Ono was associated with in the years before she married Lennon enjoys that kind of exposure today.

Ono may have leveraged her celebrity—but so what? She never compromised her art. The public perception of her as a woman devoted to the memory of her dead husband has made her an icon among the kind of people who once regarded her as a Beatles-busting succubus. Yet the much smaller group of people who know about her as an artist, a musician, and an activist appreciate her integrity. No matter what you think of the strength of the art, you can admire the strength of the person who made it.

The most recent Ono biography is “[Yoko Ono: An Artful Life](#),” by Donald Brackett, a Canadian art and music critic. He didn’t talk to Ono, and there’s not much in the way of new reporting in his book. The result feels somewhat under-researched. He dates the great Tokyo air raid to 1944, for example, and he gives the impression that Ono spent the night in the bunker with her family. Still, he is an enthusiastic writer, sympathetic to his subject (not so much to Lennon), and alive to the attractions of an unusual person and an unusual life.

Ono has talked about her parents as being emotionally distant. Her mother was a Yasuda, a member of the family that founded the Yasuda Bank, later Fuji Bank, and that owned one of the four largest financial conglomerates in Japan. Ono's father worked at the Yokohama Specie Bank, which became the Bank of Tokyo after the war, and was frequently posted to foreign branches. He was in San Francisco when Yoko was born; she did not lay eyes on him until she was three. When Tokyo was firebombed in 1945, he was in Hanoi.

Ono received an exceptional education. Beginning when she was very young, she was tutored in Christianity (her father was a Christian; there were not many in Japan), Buddhism, and piano. She attended a school known for its music instruction; she was once asked to render everyday sounds and noises, such as birdsongs, in musical notation. After the war, she attended an exclusive prep school; two of the emperor's sons were her schoolmates. And when she graduated she was admitted to Gakushuin University as its first female student in philosophy.

She left after two semesters. She said the university made her feel "like a domesticated animal being fed information." This proved to be a lifelong allergy to anything organized or institutional. "I don't believe in collectivism in art nor in having one direction in anything," she later wrote. A classmate offered a different perspective: "She never felt happy unless she was treated like a queen."



"Everything tastes better when it's cooked on the grill."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Ono may also have dropped out because her parents had moved to Scarsdale when her father's bank posted him to the New York City branch. Ono soon joined them, and, in 1953, entered Sarah Lawrence, in Bronxville, less than half an hour away. Sarah Lawrence was an all-women's college at that time and highly progressive, with no requirements and no grades. Ono took classes in music and the arts, but she seems not to have fitted in. A teacher remembered her as "tightly put together and intent on doing well. The other students were more relaxed. She wasn't relaxed, ever."

As non-prescriptive as it was, Sarah Lawrence triggered her allergy. It was "like an establishment I had to argue with and I couldn't cope with it," she complained. She now decided that she needed to get *away* from her family. "The pressure of becoming a Yasuda / Ono was so tremendous," she said later. "Unless I rebelled against it, I wouldn't have survived." Somewhere (stories differ) she met Toshi Ichianagi, a student at Juilliard, and in 1956 she dropped out of college, got married (her parents weren't thrilled), and moved to Manhattan. She began supporting herself with odd jobs. She lived in the city for most of the next ten years.

Not long before leaving Sarah Lawrence, Ono published in a campus newspaper a short story called "Of a Grapefruit in the World of Park." It's about some young people trying to decide what to do with a grapefruit left

over from a picnic. The allegory is a little mysterious, but it's clear what the grapefruit represents. The grapefruit is a hybrid, and so is Yoko Ono.

It's easy to feel that there is an amateurish, "anyone can do this" quality to her art and her music. The critic Lester Bangs once complained that Ono "couldn't carry a tune in a briefcase." But the look is deliberate. It's not that she wasn't well trained. She learned composition and harmony when she was little, and she could write and read music, which none of the Beatles could do. At Sarah Lawrence, she spent time in the music library listening to twelve-tone composers like Arnold Schoenberg.

She grew up bilingual and was trained in two cultural traditions. She went to secondary school and college in Japan in a period of what has been called "horizontal Westernization," when artistic and intellectual life was rapidly liberalized as the nation tried to exorcise its militarist and ultranationalist past. Ono and her friends read German, French, and Russian literature in Japanese translation, and the young philosophers they knew were obsessed with existentialism. She also knew Japanese culture. One of the ways she supported herself in New York was by teaching Japanese folk songs and calligraphy. She knew *waka* and Kabuki. She was therefore ideally prepared to enter the New York avant-garde of the nineteen-fifties, because that world was already hybrid. Its inspirations were a French artist, Marcel Duchamp, and an Eastern religion, Zen Buddhism.

The personification of those enthusiasms was [the composer John Cage](#)—a student of Schoenberg, a devotee of Eastern thought, and an idolater of Duchamp. Ono got to know Cage through her husband, who took an evening class that Cage taught at the New School. Although Ono didn't take the class, artists who would be part of her circle did, the best known of whom was Allan Kaprow, the creator of the Happening.

Cage didn't expect his students to imitate his own work. He said that one of the most important things he learned from teaching the class was something Ichiyaniagi had said to him in response to a suggestion: "I am not you." But he encouraged experimentation.

And the students duly experimented. A representative piece for the class is "Candle-Piece for Radios," by George Brecht. Radios are placed around a

room in the ratio of one and a half radios per performer. At each radio is a stack of cards with instructions printed on them, such as “volume up,” “volume down,” and “R” or “L,” denoting the direction the radio dial is to be turned. Each performer is given a lit birthday candle, and, on a signal, begins going through the decks, card by card, using any available radio. The piece ends when the last candle goes out.

This is how Happenings work. They are not “anything goes” performances; most Happenings (there are some exceptions) have a script, called an “event score.” Each participant follows specific instructions about what actions to perform and when.

In 1960, Ono found a loft at 112 Chambers Street and rented it for fifty dollars and fifty cents a month. It was a fourth-floor walkup, without heat or electricity, and the windows were so coated with grime that little light got in, though there was a skylight. The furnishings consisted mostly of orange crates and a piano. Ono turned this into a combination living and performance space. Together with La Monte Young, a composer and musician (he was a developer of the drone sound used by the Velvet Underground on some of their songs), she organized a series of concerts and performances. From December, 1960, to June, 1961, eleven artists and musicians performed in the loft, usually for two nights each. Ono said that these concerts were sometimes attended by two hundred people. Cage came, and so did Duchamp. Suddenly, she was at the center of the downtown arts scene.

At some sessions, Ono herself “performed” art works. One consisted of mounting a piece of paper on the wall, opening the refrigerator and taking out food, such as Jell-O, and throwing it against the paper. At the end, she set the paper on fire. (Cage had advised her to treat the paper with fire retardant first so that the building would not burn down.) The art work consumes itself.

The New York art world of 1960, even in its most radical downtown incarnation, was male-dominated. Of the eleven artists who headlined events in the Chambers Street series, only one was a woman. To Ono’s annoyance, Young was credited as the organizer and director of the series. She was identified as the woman whose loft it was.

She was even more annoyed when she learned that a man who had attended some of the concerts was planning to mount a copycat series in his uptown art gallery. The gallery, on Madison Avenue, was called the AG Gallery, and the man was George Maciunas.

Maciunas came to the United States from Lithuania in 1948, when he was a teen-ager, and spent eleven years studying art history. Then, around 1960, he set out to reinvent art by taking it off its pedestal. Duchamp and Cage were his great influences. (Maciunas is the subject of a compelling and entertaining documentary that resurrects the New York art underground of the nineteen-sixties, called "[George: The Story of George Maciunas and Fluxus](#)," directed by Jeffrey Perkins.)

Ono was mollified when Maciunas offered her a show. He never had money. This did not prevent him from renting property, having a telephone, or anything else. He just didn't pay his bills. By the time Ono's show was mounted, in July, 1961, the gallery could be visited only in daylight hours, because the electricity had been turned off. Her show "Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono" was the gallery's last.

Ono was present to guide visitors through the show, explaining how the pieces were supposed to work, because some of the art required the viewer's participation—for example, "[Painting to Be Stepped On](#)," a piece of canvas on the floor. That work, like a lot of Duchamp's, might seem gimmicky. But, like Duchamp's, there is something there to be unpacked. "Painting to Be Stepped On" resonates in two traditions. It alludes to the widely known photographs, published in the late nineteen-forties in *Life* and elsewhere, of Jackson Pollock making his drip paintings by moving around on a canvas spread on the floor. Those photographs, representing painting as performance, inspired artists (including Kaprow) for decades.

The second context, identified by the art historian Alexandra Munroe, is Japanese. In seventeenth-century Japan, Christians were persecuted, and one way to identify them was to ask them to step on images of Jesus and Mary. The procedure was called *fumi-e*—"stepping on." People who refused could be tortured and sometimes executed. "Painting to Be Stepped On" is a grapefruit.

In the fall of 1961, Ono gave a concert in Carnegie Recital Hall, a venue that was adjacent to the main hall and that seated about three hundred. Maciunas, now a friend, helped design the show. According to the *Times*, the place was “packed.” But accounts are so various that it’s hard to tell, exactly, what happened.

Onstage, twenty artists and musicians performed different acts—eating, breaking dishes, throwing bits of newspaper. At designated intervals, a toilet was flushed offstage. A man was positioned at the back of the hall to give the audience a sense of foreboding. A huddle of men with tin cans tied to their legs attempted to cross the stage without making noise. The dancers Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown sat down and stood up repeatedly. According to the *Village Voice*, the performance finished with Ono’s amplified “sighs, breathing, gasping, retching, screaming—many tones of pain and pleasure mixed with a jibberish of foreign-sounding language that was no language at all.”

This was the kind of art that Maciunas had in mind. It used everyday materials. It had humor (the flushing toilet), meaning that it did not take itself too seriously. And it was anti-élitist. Anyone could do it. Around the time of Ono’s concert, Maciunas came up with a name for this kind of art: Fluxus. When he told Ono, she said it was a mistake to give the art a group name. That is how the Japanese art world worked; every artist was identified with a group. She didn’t want to belong to a group.

But Maciunas was an inveterate organizer—a problem, since he happened to be working with avant-garde artists, the kind of people who don’t like to be organized. For years, he tried to herd those cats. He opened FluxShop, where Fluxus art—mostly cheap plastic boxes filled with odds and ends—could be purchased. (Walk-in business was not brisk.) At one point, he made plans to buy an island and build a self-sufficient Fluxus community on it.



"We're out of 'I Voted' stickers. There are some 'I Gave Blood' ones, but I'd have to cut you."

Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

The island venture did not pan out, but Maciunas would finally realize his idea by buying and renovating abandoned buildings—more than twenty of them—in downtown Manhattan for artists to live and work in. The enterprise ruined him. He was sued by the tenants because the renovations were not up to code and the lofts could not pass inspection, and he was badly beaten by goons hired by one of his creditors. In the mid-seventies, he fled the city for a farm in Massachusetts, where he died, of cancer, in 1978. But he had given birth to SoHo. It would become, in the nineteen-eighties, the world capital of contemporary art.

Maciunas's slogan for Fluxus was "Purge the world of 'Europanism'!," and at the Fluxus début, in West Germany in 1962, a grand piano was smashed to bits. Ono, who was invited but declined to attend, was not into breaking pianos. "I am not somebody who wants to burn 'The Mona Lisa,'" she once said. "That's the difference between some revolutionaries and me." But she does share something with Maciunas. She is a utopian. She would be happy if the whole world could be a Fluxus island.

In 1962, Ono returned to Japan. She discovered that the Japanese avant-garde was even more radical than the New York avant-garde. There were many new schools. The most famous today is Gutai, which originated in Osaka in 1954. Like Fluxus, Gutai was a performative, low-tech, everyday-

materials kind of art. One of the earliest Gutai works was “Challenging Mud,” in which the artist throws himself into an outdoor pit filled with wet clay and thrashes around for half an hour. When he emerges, the shape of the clay is presented as a work of art.

Ichiyanagi had returned earlier—the marriage was breaking up—and he arranged for Ono to present a concert at the Sogetsu Art Center, in Tokyo. Outside the hall, she mounted what she called “Instructions for Paintings,” twenty-two pieces of paper attached to the wall, each with a set of instructions in Japanese. The instructions resembled some of the art created by young artists in Cage’s circle in New York—for example, Emmett Williams’s “Voice Piece for La Monte Young” (1961), which reads, in its entirety, “Ask if La Monte Young is in the audience, then exit,” and Brecht’s “Word Event,” the complete score for which is the word “Exit.”

Inside the hall, with thirty artists, Ono performed several pieces, including some she had done at Carnegie Recital Hall. It’s unclear what the audience reaction was—Brackett says it was enthusiastic—but the show received a nasty review in a Japanese art magazine by an American expatriate, Donald Richie, who made fun of Ono for being “old-fashioned.” “All her ideas are borrowed from people in New York, particularly John Cage,” he wrote. This was not an attack from an uncomprehending traditionalist. This was an attack from the cultural left. Ono was traumatized. She checked into a sanitarium.

But when she came out, she picked up where she had left off. She got remarried, to Tony Cox, an American art promoter and countercultural type, and, in 1964, she published her first book, “[Grapefruit](#),” a collection of event scores and instruction pieces:

Sun Piece

Watch the sun until it becomes square.

Fly Piece

Fly.

Collecting Piece II

Break a contemporary museum into pieces with the means you have chosen. Collect the pieces and put them together again with glue.

These are like Brecht's "Word Event," but with a big difference. "Word Event" was intended to be performed, and artists found various ingenious ways to enact the instruction "Exit." Ono's pieces cannot be performed. They are instructions for imaginary acts.

In an essay in a Japanese art journal, she invoked the concept of "fabricated truth," meaning that the stuff we make up in our heads (what we wish we could have for dinner) is as much our reality as the chair we are sitting in. "I think it is possible to see the chair as it is," she explained. "But when you burn the chair, you suddenly realize that the chair in your mind did not burn or disappear."

What Ono was doing was conceptual art. When conceptual artists hit the big time, at the end of the nineteen-sixties, her name was virtually never mentioned. She does not appear in the art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's landmark essay, "The Dematerialization of Art," published in 1968. But she was one of the first artists to make it.

In 1965, she came back to New York, and, in March, had another show at Carnegie Recital Hall, "New Works of Yoko Ono." This was the New York première of her best work, a truly great work of art, "Cut Piece."

The performer (in this case, Ono) enters fully clothed and kneels in the center of the stage. Next to her is a large pair of scissors—fabric shears. The audience is invited to come onstage one at a time and cut off a piece of the artist's clothing, which they may keep. According to instructions Ono later wrote, "Performer remains motionless throughout the piece. Piece ends at the performer's option." She said she wore her best clothes when she performed the work, even when she had little money and could not afford to have them ruined.

Ono had performed "Cut Piece" in Tokyo and in Kyoto, and there are photographs of those performances. The New York performance was filmed

by the documentarians David and Albert Maysles. (Brackett, strangely, says that the Maysleses' film, rather than a live performance, is what people saw at Carnegie Recital Hall.)

In most Happenings and event art, the performers are artists, or friends of the person who wrote the score. In "Cut Piece," the performers are unknown to the artist. They can interpret the instructions in unpredictable ways. It's like handing out loaded guns to a roomful of strangers. Ono is small (five-two); the shears are large and sharp. When audience members start slicing away the fabric around her breasts or near her crotch, there is a real sense of danger and violation. In Japan, one of the cutters stood behind her and held the shears above her head, as though he were going to impale her.

The score required Ono to remain expressionless, but in the film you can see apprehension in her eyes as audience members keep mounting the stage and standing over her wielding the scissors, looking for another place to cut. When her bra is cut, she covers her breasts with her hands—almost her only movement in the entire piece.

Most immediately, "Cut Piece" is a concrete enactment of the striptease that men are said to perform in their heads when they see an attractive woman. It weaponizes the male gaze. Women participate in the cutting, but that's because it's not just men who are part of the society that objectifies women. The piece is therefore classified as a work of feminist art (created at a time when almost no one was making feminist art), and it plainly is.

But what "Cut Piece" means depends in large part on the audience it is being performed for, and Ono originally had something else in mind. When she did the piece in Japan, a Buddhist interpretation was possible. It belonged to "the Zen tradition of doing the thing which is the most embarrassing for you to do and seeing what you come up with and how you deal with it," she said.

The piece also derived, Ono said elsewhere, from a story about the Buddha giving away everything that people ask him for until he ultimately allows himself to be eaten by a tiger. Ono was offering everything she had to strangers—that's why she always wore her best clothes. "Instead of giving the audience what the artist chooses to give," as she put it, "the artist gives what the audience chooses to take."

In 1966, Ono went to London to participate in the Destruction in Art Symposium, where she performed “Cut Piece” twice. It was not read as a Buddhist text at those events. Word of mouth after the first performance led to the second one being mobbed, with men eagerly cutting off all her clothing, even her underwear. This was Swinging London; everyone assumed that the piece was about sex. After London, Ono did not perform it again until 2003, when she did it in Paris, seated in a chair. This time, she explained that the work was about world peace, and a response to 9/11.

No matter where it is performed or what reading it suggests, the piece is an experiment in group psychology. People are being invited to do something publicly that is normally forbidden—violently remove the clothing of a woman they do not know. The ones who participate can rationalize their actions by telling themselves that stripping a passive woman is not “really” what they’re doing, because it’s a work of art. But, of course, it really is what they’re doing.

And people in the audience who don’t go onstage because they find the spectacle repellent or violative can tell themselves that at least they are not participating. In the film of the New York show, the last person recorded cutting is a young man with a bit of a swagger who lustily shears off all that was left of Ono’s top so that she has to cover her breasts. He is heckled. But no one stops him. For the hecklers are part of the show. And, of course, the more people who cut, the easier it is to become a cutter. It must be O.K. Everybody’s doing it.

The first time I saw the Maysles film was at the Vancouver show (although it is online), and that was when I understood what the New York performance was about. A beautifully dressed Japanese woman kneels, offering no resistance, while a series of armed white people methodically destroy all her possessions. What is being represented here? Hiroshima. Nagasaki. The firebombing of Tokyo.

Ono had planned to spend only a few weeks in London, but she found the city’s art world receptive to her work. Interest spilled over into the non-art world when she and Cox released a film entitled “Film No. 4,” commonly known as “Bottoms.” Which is all you see: closeups of naked people’s bottoms as they walk.



In the performance work "Cut Piece"—which Albert and David Maysles filmed in 1965—Ono invited audience members to shear off pieces of her clothing with a pair of scissors. Photograph © Yoko Ono

Ono and Cox had filmed a six-minute version of the movie in New York, using a high-speed camera loaned to them by Maciunas (who had it on loan from someone else). In London, many art-world celebrities eagerly agreed to perform in it, and the final cut is eighty minutes long, at approximately twenty seconds of screen time per bottom.

But no one knows you're a celebrity from the rear. So the film is not just a joke. There's an edge to it. It mocks self-importance. Ono described it as "like an aimless petition signed by people with their anuses." The movie was promptly banned by the British Board of Film Censors—about the best publicity a filmmaker could hope for in sixties London. It got Ono into the tabloids. By then, though, she had met John Lennon.

Their story—and it could all be true, who knows?—is that on November 9, 1966, the day before a show of Ono's work was scheduled to open at Indica Books and Gallery, Lennon dropped in. The Indica was a short-lived countercultural art gallery (*indica* is a species of cannabis) whose patrons included Paul McCartney. Ono accompanied Lennon while he browsed the art on display. (She has claimed not to have known who he was, which is not very believable. It is believable that she did not care who he was.) One work consisted of an apple on a pedestal. Lennon asked her what it cost. She said,

Two hundred pounds. He picked up the apple and took a bite out of it. She thought that was gross.

Another piece was a ladder. When you climb up, there is a magnifying glass, which you use to look at a piece of paper on the ceiling, where you read a tiny word: “Yes.” This was totally up Lennon’s alley. “It’s a great relief when you get up the ladder and you look through the spyglass and it doesn’t say ‘No’ or ‘Fuck you,’ ” he explained later.

But they made their fateful connection with a piece called “Painting to Hammer a Nail In (No. 9).” Visitors are invited to hammer a nail into a board mounted on the wall. Lennon asked Ono if he could hammer a nail. Yes, she said, if he paid her five shillings. “Well, I’ll give you an imaginary five shillings,” he said, “and hammer an imaginary nail in.” “That’s when we locked eyes,” he said, “and she got it and I got it and, as they say in all the interviews we do, the rest is history.”

For a while, they were “just friends.” It helps to remember that this was still very early in the Beatles’ career, less than three years after the band played “The Ed Sullivan Show” for the first time. They had not yet recorded “Sgt. Pepper.” Lennon had just turned twenty-six. Ono, on the other hand, was thirty-three. Her work had fully matured. She gave Lennon a copy of “Grapefruit,” which he read with attention. The affair did not begin until May, 1968. They went public in June, and for the next twelve years, until Lennon was killed, they lived under the constant scrutiny of the world press (another context for “Cut Piece”). Brackett says that Lennon was the clingy one, not Ono. Lennon made her sit next to him when the Beatles were recording, because he was afraid that if she was out of his sight she would leave him.

The *Times* music critic Robert Palmer thought that “having John Lennon fall in love with her was the worst thing that could have happened to Yoko Ono’s career as an artist.” Ono herself admitted that “together we hurt each other’s career and position just by being with each other and just by being us.” How true is that?

The Vancouver show covered Ono’s career from 1954 to the present, and the visitor feels an abrupt shift after 1968. Starting with the Bed-ins for peace,

where she and Lennon sat in hotel-room beds in their pajamas and discussed politics with journalists and various counterculture celebrities, such as Timothy Leary, a lot of her work has been about world peace. It has also become explicitly feminist. Maciunas had a politics, but most Fluxus art—and Cage's and Duchamp's art—is apolitical. It is art about art. After 1968, Ono's art is about politics. But that is true of virtually every artist. With the war in Vietnam, art got politicized, and it remains politicized today.

Ono's conception of the audience for her work changed, too. When Ono and Lennon married, she was a coterie artist and he was a popular entertainer—maybe the most famous in the world. She performed for hundreds; he performed for hundreds of millions. She decided that condescension to popular entertainment is a highbrow prejudice. As she put it, “I came to believe that avant-garde purity was just as stifling as just doing a rock beat over and over.” So she became a pop star. Including the records she made with Lennon, she has released twenty-two albums. She expanded her audience.

Her music hasn't sold the way Beatles music has, of course. But she and Lennon did produce one spectacularly successful collaboration.

“Imagine” was the biggest hit of Lennon's post-Beatles career. The song was recorded in 1971, and, over the years, it has become a kind of world anthem, covered by countless artists, and played in the opening ceremonies at the Olympics and in Times Square on New Year's Eve. Pretty much everybody can hum the tune.

It's easy to enjoy the song and embrace the sentiments but to think of it as expressing a kind of harmless flower-power utopianism. That's a misapprehension. “Imagine” is utopian, but it is also a work of conceptual art. It's an instruction piece. “Imagine it in your mind,” as she told her little brother, had—improbably, but that's the way culture works—ricocheted across time and space to end up, twenty-six years later, in the words of a song heard by millions.

When the record was released, one of Ono's instruction pieces from “Grapefruit” was printed on the back cover: “Imagine the clouds dripping. Dig a hole in your garden to put them in.” Later, Lennon said that it was

sexist of him not to have listed Ono as a co-writer, given that the idea and much of the lyrics were hers. Somehow, though, he never did anything about it. But the world does go round, and in 2017 the National Music Publishers' Association announced that, henceforth, Yoko Ono would be credited as a co-writer on "Imagine." ♦

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Art

- [The Secret Pictures of Ray Johnson](#)

Ray Johnson (1927-95) was always elusive. When admirers called his work Pop, in the sixties, he relabelled it Chop—a nod to collage, the medium for which he's best known. At the end of his life, the American artist used disposable cameras to take some three thousand pictures (including "Bill and Railroad Tracks," from 1992, above) and kept them a secret. On June 17, the **Morgan Library & Museum** opens "Please Send to Real Life: Ray Johnson Photographs," the first exhibition of these recently discovered works.

Books

- [How James Patterson Became the World's Best-Selling Author](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Tracy Flick Takes on the World, Again](#)

By [Laura Miller](#)

“Man, do I have stories to tell,” James Patterson writes in his new autobiography, “[James Patterson](#)” (Little, Brown). The best-selling author does serve up stories, lots of them; the book is a grab bag of anecdotes, many of which have the tone and the import of a humorous icebreaker in a Rotary Club speech. There was the time that Patterson and a fellow altar boy—Patterson grew up in a devoutly Catholic family—almost got caught with a stash of unconsecrated Communion hosts that his friend had squirrelled away for post-Mass snacking. Or the time that, as a junior in college, he went to a Broadway production of “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,” and the woman seated next to him began stroking his leg, distracting him from the performance. Or the time he and a buddy were caddying for a surly golf pro at a country club in Patterson’s home town of Newburgh, New York, and the buddy stole one of the pro’s balls—while it was in play.

Because Patterson has been selling more books than any other living author for many years now, these tidbits often involve famous actors, politicians, and recording artists. Patterson has almost as many names to drop as he does stories to tell, although the celebrity encounters tend to be less amusing than his boyhood escapades. Serena Williams makes a brief appearance on a plane, whispering to Patterson of the other passengers, “They want my autograph, but I want yours.” Patterson once had a meeting with Tom Cruise, who was “smart and a total pleasure to talk to,” and also “not that short,” although nothing much came of the potential collaboration they discussed. (He relates a similarly anticlimactic meeting with Warren Beatty.) Hugh Jackman and Charlize Theron, Patterson tells us, “both look amazing in real life. Also, they don’t seem full of themselves.”

These stories aren’t very interesting, but Patterson himself is. As with many popular authors, his success—his books have sold more than four hundred million copies—rankles those who wish the reading masses had different tastes. Critics complain about his generic characters, his workmanlike, plot-driven prose, and, above all, his practice of churning out multiple titles per year with the aid of co-writers. This productivity is the secret of Patterson’s success. He has published two hundred and sixty *Times* best-sellers, and *Publishers Weekly* has determined that he is the best-selling author of the past seventeen years. And yet no Patterson title made the magazine’s list of

the hundred and fifty best-selling books since 2004. The number of titles is the key. Like the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which, in the early twentieth century, produced hundreds of novels for young readers, featuring such characters as Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, Patterson supplies detailed outlines for his books. His co-writers then flesh out these narrative skeletons into installments of popular series that include the Women's Murder Club (a crime-solving group of friends in San Francisco) and Michael Bennett (a police detective in New York City with ten adopted children). But, where the Stratemeyer Syndicate masked its legion of ghostwriters behind collective pseudonyms like Carolyn Keene and Franklin W. Dixon, Patterson credits his co-writers, even if his eminently bankable name appears in much larger type on their books' covers.

As frustrating as “James Patterson” can be to read if you’d like to know more about how Patterson came to create his publishing empire, the book does generate some sympathy for its author. Patterson is keenly aware of the disdain heaped on his work, and he seems to feel every slight. In 2009, Stephen King described him as a “terrible writer,” and Patterson occasionally starts speaking engagements by joking, “Hi, I’m Stephen King.” In 2016, Patterson planned to publish a novella titled “The Murder of Stephen King” but withdrew it after King’s representatives complained. (In “James Patterson,” he insists that King is the hero of the novella and “*doesn’t get murdered*.”) But Patterson will have you know that he is not a philistine. A reluctant reader throughout his childhood, he fell in love with books while working the night shift as an aide at a psychiatric hospital; he recounts devouring the work of James Joyce and Gabriel García Márquez, but also writers offbeat enough (John Rechy, Evan S. Connell, Stanley Elkin) to ward off suspicions that he’s just dropping more names.

“I was a full-blown, know-it-all literary snob,” Patterson writes of himself back then, describing a guy who looked down on the sort of genre fiction he now writes. But how to communicate to other literary snobs that he does indeed appreciate the great novelists, thank you very much, and yet avoid implying that he thinks less of pulp fiction and those who prefer it—namely, his own fans? It isn’t easy to defend yourself without coming across as defensive. [Patterson is rich and famous](#), and things would be easier for him if he didn’t care what King or some literary critic says about him, but he clearly does, despite his efforts to hide it. Perhaps this is why “James

Patterson” contains so little about its author’s writing processes and strategies.

Patterson’s thrillers may be formulaic, but if anybody could write them everybody would, and Patterson would not be selling millions of books a year. Some inkling of the particular techniques that helped him attain this supremacy would be welcome. Patterson offers a few recommendations to aspiring writers: pare off every speck of fat and keep things moving along—fairly basic action-writing advice. He also instructs writers, from would-be novelists to elementary-school children composing book reports, to “outline, outline, outline”—the title of his two-page chapter on craft. Patterson’s breakout thriller, “[Along Came a Spider](#)” (1993), began as a full-length outline of the plot, and then essentially stayed that way. “When I went back to start the novel itself,” Patterson recounts, “I realized that *I had already written it.*” The short chapters and one-sentence paragraphs that became his signature style, and that are often the object of critics’ scorn, struck him as the ideal way to keep the novel “bright and hot from beginning to end.”

“Along Came a Spider” launched twenty-eight sequels featuring the Washington, D.C., police detective Alex Cross; it’s a series that Patterson writes without a collaborator. Patterson explains that he’d originally conceived of Alex as a woman, then got stuck. After he changed the protagonist’s gender, the novel “seemed to write itself.” But Alex Cross is also Black, like the politician targeted by an assassin in Patterson’s first published novel, “[The Thomas Berryman Number](#).” And in “Along Came a Spider” Cross’s race is more than just a bit of liberal-minded color-blind casting. For a commercial novel written by a white man in the early nineteen-nineties, “Along Came a Spider” is notably alert to structural racism and what are now called microaggressions. Cross protests when his investigation of the murders of three Black residents in his neighborhood in southeast D.C. gets sidelined by a high-profile kidnapping of two white children from an exclusive private school. When he and his partner show up at the school, he immediately notes that they are among the very few Black faces in the lobby. After Alex begins an affair with a white colleague, his sage grandmother tells him, “I do not trust most white people. I would like to, but I can’t. Most of them have no respect for us.”

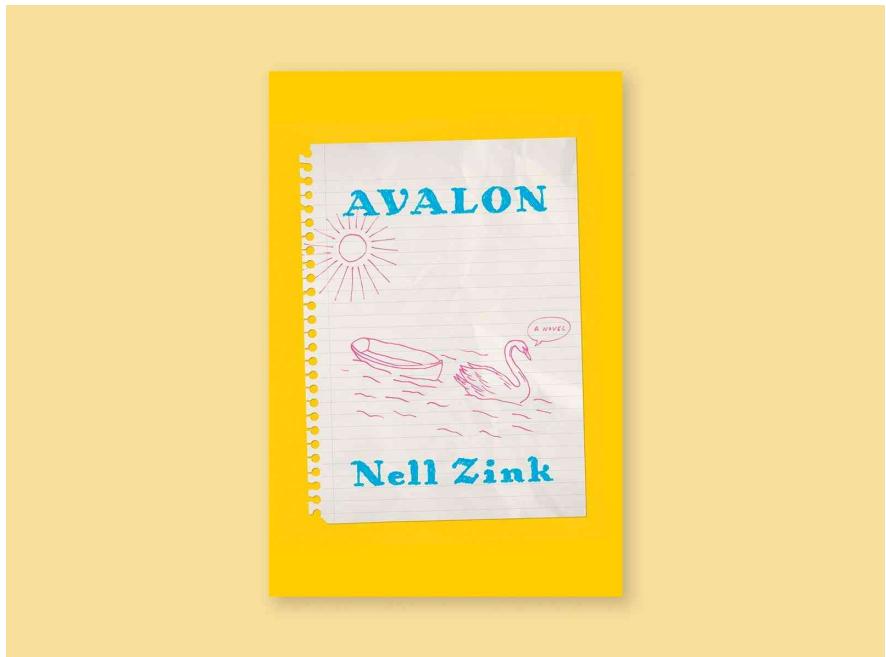
Anyone curious to know how Patterson came to create his most celebrated character, what interested him in writing about the experience of Black Americans, and how he researched that experience will find no answers in “James Patterson.” (Anyone who wants to read about Patterson’s golf game, if such a person exists, will be well served.) Patterson describes the “thick folder of ideas” he keeps in his office, but not where he finds the materials in it. Does he have criteria for the heroes and heroines of his series? Rules of thumb for concocting a hateable villain? Types of conflict that reliably keep readers engaged? Tricks for getting the maximum effect out of the minimum description? Mistakes he’s learned never to make again? Wider or deeper thoughts about the thriller genre and what makes it so popular? These are mysteries “James Patterson” leaves unsolved.

Patterson’s common touch may have something to do with his onetime day job in advertising. After starting out as a copywriter at J. Walter Thompson, in the early nineteen-seventies, he rose to become the C.E.O. of the agency’s North American branch and held that position until 1996, when he left to pursue writing full time. Although Patterson refers to the quarter century he spent at Thompson as “advertising hell,” he seems to have loved it: the wild characters, the location shoots for TV commercials, the celebrities he met, the nutty campaigns like “The Battle of the Burgers” between Burger King and McDonald’s, a gimmick for which Patterson claims credit. There are more stories about advertising in “James Patterson” than there are about his writing process. (There are even more stories about advertising than there are about golf, which is saying a lot.) Patterson recounts the day he met with his publisher and proposed releasing multiple books under his name each year, a plan initially regarded with skepticism. He doesn’t, however, explain why he wanted to do this. “James Patterson” implies that its author is so overflowing with story ideas the only way he could find peace was to outsource them to collaborators—but why not just winnow that folder down to the very best of the bunch?

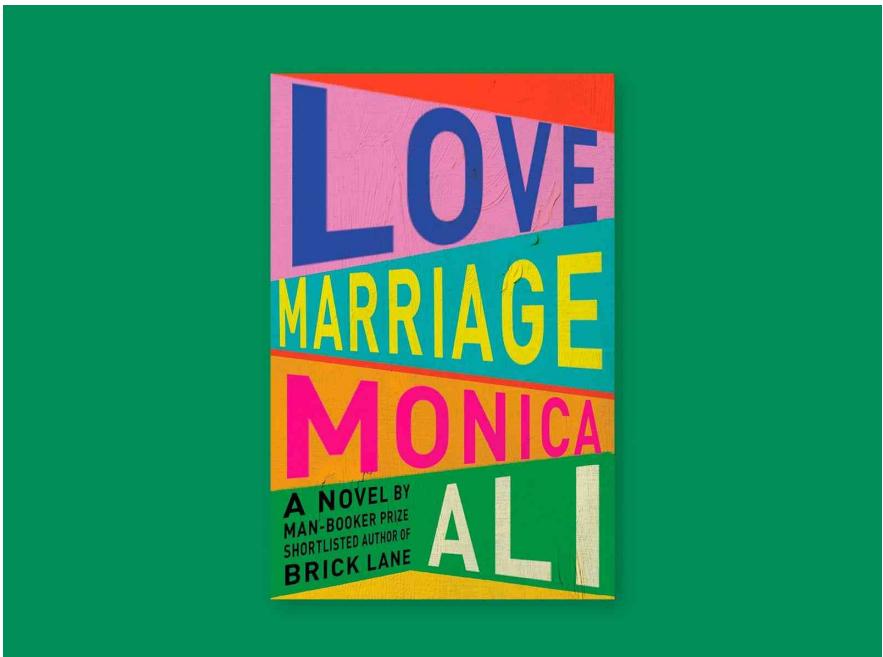
A 2010 profile of Patterson in the *Times Magazine* portrays him as a brilliant marketer closely involved in every level of the publication and promotion of his books. According to the profile, Patterson felt so strongly that “Along Came a Spider” should be advertised on television that he produced a commercial at his own expense. He urged his publisher to release the subsequent titles in the Alex Cross series with a signature style of cover art,

making himself not just an author but a brand. This marketing savvy is another side of Patterson that's absent from "James Patterson." Instead, the author presents himself as a "blue-collar kid" (his father was an insurance salesman, a detail also not mentioned in the book) who lucked into the best job in the world. In the book's first chapter, he ascribes his success to a saying drummed into him by his grandmother: "Hungry dogs run faster." Yet the ravenous ambition that so obviously drives him is a subject he skirts again and again.

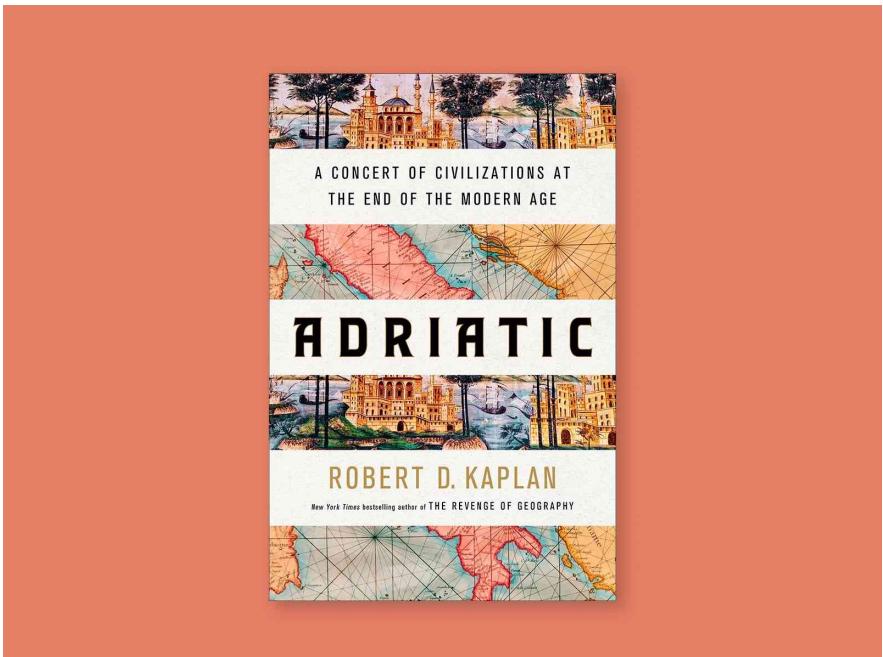
"One thing that I've learned and taken to heart about writing books or even delivering a good speech is to tell stories," Patterson writes. "Story after story after story." In "James Patterson," the stories—a cavalcade of mostly trivial tales, often told out of chronological order and sometimes having little to do with the author—come across as a screen he hides behind. The book has occasional moments that pierce this veil, in particular three chapters on Jane Hall Blanchard, a woman Patterson lived with for seven years before she died of a brain tumor, at the age of thirty-nine. He describes holding Blanchard's hand as she slipped away, then ends the chapter with "I can barely write these words, even now, after all this time." It's a rare instance in which Patterson's brevity seems less an economizing measure than an allusion to a feeling too deep for words. In another moment of candor, Patterson admits, "My entire life, I honestly have had no idea who the hell I am. It's still that way. I look at myself as just another idiot wandering planet Earth with no real idea what makes the world go 'round, no particular identity, just another lost soul." And this is perhaps the most forlorn aspect of "James Patterson": that a man so relentlessly bullish on storytelling seems never to have formulated the story of his own life. ♦



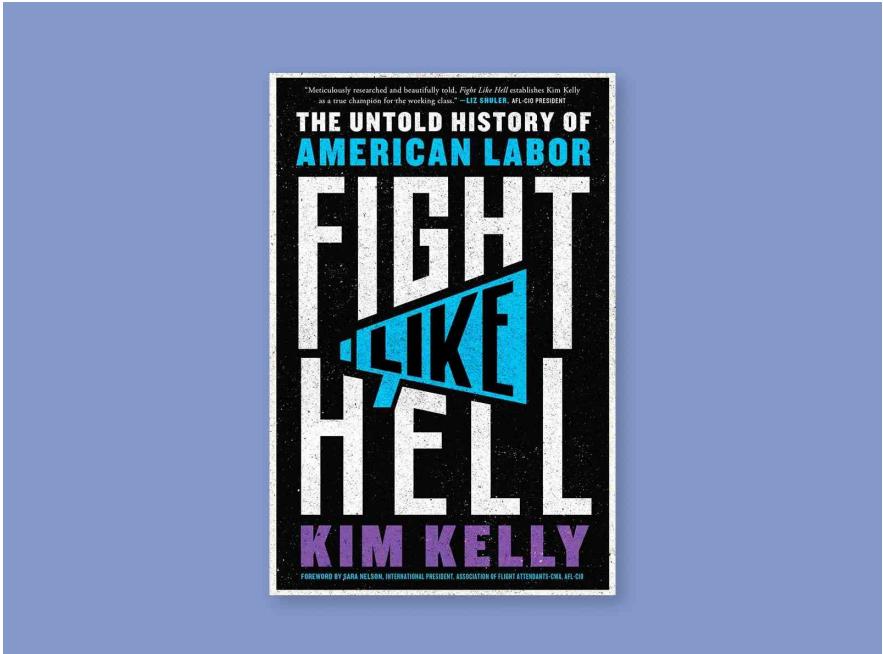
[**Avalon**](#), by Nell Zink (Knopf). When Bran, the protagonist of this offbeat bildungsroman, is ten years old, her mother joins a Buddhist colony, abandoning her to the dubious care of her common-law stepfather. His family belongs to a motorcycle gang, evades taxes on principle, houses Bran in a mice-infested lean-to, and compels her to work unpaid in its plant nursery. Yet Bran emerges into her twenties with a cheerfully demented optimism. She sheep-sits for strangers, works as a barista, makes avant-garde student films, and falls in love with a magnetic, disturbed college student, who introduces her to literature. He praises the artless outlook that makes Bran and the novel captivating: “You’re still using your eyes to see the world, instead of adopting the proper skewed perspective of an egomaniac.”



[**Love Marriage**](#), by Monica Ali (Scribner). Set in London, this quick-footed and absorbing novel begins with Yasmin, a young doctor, newly engaged, fretting about her Indian-born parents' meeting with the mother of her fiancé, Joe. In front of this woman, a wealthy white feminist activist, Yasmin cringes at her mother's clothes and her sincere father's imperviousness to sarcasm, “a level of Englishness to which he could never aspire.” The playful clash of cultures evolves into a subtle exploration of the ways in which both immigrant and nonimmigrant families have shaped their children, transmitting unexplored trauma across generations. As Joe tries to maintain boundaries with his mother, his therapist tells him, “What we do not know controls us.”



[Adriatic](#), by Robert D. Kaplan (Random House). Part travelogue, part geopolitical study, this freewheeling book examines the kaleidoscopic histories and cultures of the countries fringing the Adriatic Sea. Kaplan begins in Italy, contemplating the region's ascendancy under the Venetian Republic, and then enters the “more politically fragile terrain” of Slovenia and Montenegro. His central thesis is that the Adriatic may soon, once again, take on global significance, as the Western maritime terminus of China’s Belt and Road Initiative; Trieste will be linked with Hong Kong. Today’s Adriatic, Kaplan writes, is a “geographical metaphor for an age that is passing: the modern age itself in Europe.”



[**Fight Like Hell**](#), by Kim Kelly (*One Signal*). This history of American labor places today's resurgence of union activity in the context of past struggles, ranging from the textile mills of New England in the eighteen-forties to the emergence of flight attendants, in the nineteen-thirties. Employers, seeking “docility” in marginalized people, have sometimes pitted groups against one another: in response to Chinese-exclusion policies, Hawaiian sugar-plantation owners brought in Japanese workers, who were in turn replaced by Filipinos. Kelly’s broad view makes it possible to see resonances across history and locale. Like the New York garment workers who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, in 1911, many of the Bangladeshi workers killed in the Dhaka factory collapse of 2013 made clothes for American companies.

By [Katy Waldman](#)

The verdict is in on Tracy Flick: we did her wrong. The teen-age star of “Election,” a 1998 novel by Tom Perrotta, deserved better. Yes, she was ambitious, assertive, a little crazed in her quest to become student-body president. In the film adaptation, which featured a career-defining performance by Reese Witherspoon, she lacked an off switch and a sense of proportion. But she also did the reading, believed in the system, and played by the rules. Meanwhile, her adversary, Mr. M., subverted the democratic process in order to advance his candidate, a jock from a well-off family. He’d held a vendetta against Tracy ever since his best friend, a fellow-teacher, slept with her and lost his job. In fact, Mr. M. also fantasized about sleeping with Tracy, and he blamed her for that, too.

He wasn’t the only one. The film version of “Election” was a cult hit, and many viewers deemed Tracy—with her blond bob, chipper sex appeal, and cartoonish need to win—the villain. She became a symbol for a new class of strivers, women willing to plow or charm their way to the top. (“I wanted to slow her down before she flattened the whole school,” Mr. M. says.) Then came the #MeToo movement, and an actual election, in 2016, that pitted an eminently qualified woman against a telegenic, woefully unfit magnate. Rewatching “Election,” many Americans saw, as if for the first time, a dogged go-getter being mocked and dismissed. Was Tracy the problem—or was it the sleazeballs around her? As part of the film’s sweeping reassessment, an essay in the *Times* noted how strange, yet how predictable, it was that Tracy endured as an unsavory figure, given that Mr. M.’s trespasses were so much more egregious.

Perrotta had been among the first to locate a type: the slightly exhausting superwoman, flying in male-dominated airspace. The author has always been part sociologist. His novels, full of lush lawns and soccer leagues, study wealthy, mostly white enclaves, littered with disappointment and restlessness. “Little Children” charts an affair between neighbors; “Mrs. Fletcher” follows a meek divorcée who discovers online porn. Although Perrotta’s characters are yoked to convention—husbands chug beers after work, wives fret about their weight—he uses mimicry and a wry, controlled humor to reveal the tensions within them. “Election,” the book, hews neatly to this realist mode. (The film plays more as a farce.) Mr. M.

emerges as a flawed Everyman, and Tracy, less prone to condescending monologues than she is onscreen, plots her future from a working-class home. Crosscutting perspectives highlight both the lies that characters tell themselves and the ways in which they misunderstand one another.

This generous tack, a kind of ironized grace, is key to Perrotta's appeal. And yet, to this reader, at least, Tracy never quite snaps into focus. Perrotta's prose, smooth as a trimmed hedge, glides over her interior life. She feels most real in the inchoate resentments she provokes, and she oscillates between reasonable and unhinged, canny and oblivious, as the plot requires. Seducing Mr. M.'s colleague, or wearing her raciest red dress to the polls, she's all agency and no motivation—a cipher onto which Perrotta projects dark fantasies of female power. She can seem less human than mythological: Hillary Clinton's head atop Monica Lewinsky's body.

Some of this incoherence points to the plight of female ambition, its endless negotiations between egoism and self-effacement, toughness and delicacy. Perrotta evokes, too, the contradictions of American ambition: how fundamentally our bootstrapping ideals conflict with our cult of destiny. An election is a handy way to illustrate the point. Hustle all you want; eventually, you must stand still and be chosen. And it may turn out that scrambling for favor has, by dint of the effort itself, disqualified you. The public prefers someone like Tracy's rival, Paul: blessed with facial symmetry, desiring nothing because he lacks for nothing. In fiction as in life, Perrotta suggests, presidents are not made—they are born.

The secret engine of “Election,” then, is the anxiety of changing one’s station. Perrotta’s work enshrines a world of prescribed roles, against which Tracy, insisting that she’s special, shines brighter in contrast. By noting the contempt that greets her, the book captures the times. But what happens when the times change?

“Tracy Flick Can’t Win” (Scribner), a new sequel to “Election,” is set in New Jersey around the end of 2018, and it finds Perrotta in a revisionist mood. (The #MeToo movement shadows the very first sentence: “There was another front-page story in the paper.”) We soon meet one of the author’s trademark hunks, a former N.F.L. player named Vito. Yet, where Paul was generally amiable, Vito’s golden aura has until recently belied a Swamp

Thing personality. He has just embarked on an A.A.-mandated apology tour. “It wasn’t healthy,” he realizes, “everybody acting like your shit didn’t stink.”

While the men are atoning, the women are enjoying a modest vindication. Tracy, now in her mid-forties, works as an assistant principal at a public high school. Her job is “routine and bureaucratic,” she admits, but she radiates a crisp professionalism, and Perrotta warmly conjures the pleasure she takes in solving problems—pulling up test analytics, double-checking résumés, tactfully asking a teacher not to flaunt her erect nipples. Tracy has a daughter, but never married the father. (Their one-night stand squelched his midlife crisis, sending him back to his wife.) She is casually seeing an orthopedic surgeon, but can’t reciprocate his tenderness, a failing for which she blames herself. “All I’d had to do was let go a little, welcome him into my life,” she says, “but . . . I’d never been able to do that, to really open myself up to another person.” This account of Tracy’s loneliness typifies the novel’s layered approach. In “Election,” Tracy could be off-putting, a “ridiculous, slightly scandalous personage.” Here, she’s steadfast in her essence, and slow-walks relationships because of the compromises they demand.

There’s some additional finessing of the Flick brand. The danger of the character was always that she could be reduced to a single beam of craven ambition. In the sequel, Perrotta addresses this liability—the girl-boss problem—through scenes that depict Tracy plugging away on her students’ behalf, with nary a plaque nor an audience in sight. Her voice practically trembles with do-gooder zeal. “I wasn’t about to let that happen, not if I could help it,” she vows, referring to the principal’s feeble response to staffing shortages. Grownups so easily forget, she adds, how “one bad teacher could poison your entire life.”

Try two bad teachers. The outpouring of allegations against high-profile men has Tracy reconsidering her long-ago fling, the one that got Mr. M.’s friend fired. She’d filed away the experience as a silly affair between a luckless sap and a precocious teen, but what if she hadn’t been as empowered, as special, as she’d thought? “I felt like an adult,” Tracy muses, only to puzzle over whether her sophistication, at fifteen, had been as salient as the teacher’s childishness. As for Mr. M., Tracy still ruminates on how “a man I’d liked

and respected and learned a lot from . . . wanted my male opponent to win so badly, he tossed two ballots into the trash, turning me from a winner into a loser.” She’d tried for a while to mold the incident into a funny story, “but no one ever laughed,” she says. “I think it just made people wonder if there was something wrong with me, and I couldn’t help wondering that myself.”

It’s a poignant moment, in part because Tracy’s adventures since high school help to elucidate her feeling that she must have committed some fundamental sin. Her political dreams were taking shape—she’d graduated Phi Beta Kappa from college, interned on Capitol Hill, and secured a spot at Georgetown Law School—when she learned that her mom had multiple sclerosis. They were still a working-class family, and Tracy, moving home, took minimum-wage jobs to supplement the disability payments. “Those years are a blur in my memory,” she says, “but not a bad one, not completely. We watched a lot of old movies and played way too much Scrabble.” As her mother’s condition worsened, Tracy went from temping to teaching, and earned a Ph.D. in education administration, taking classes at night and on weekends. When the novel begins, her mother is dead, and she has started a meditation practice, to help with hypertension.

A particularly wrenching scene occurs during one such mindfulness session. Although Tracy has tried to cultivate a “gentler and more forgiving” inner voice, she allows herself, briefly, to reconnect with the fierce adolescent she was. That girl occupied a unique space among Perrotta’s characters. She seemed in the suburbs but not of them: destined for genuine greatness. She could not have known how the world—illness, economic hardship, grief—would crush her, conspiring with the sexism that was “Election” ’s implicit subject to stamp out her hope, her spark. “*You failed,*” the adult Tracy thinks. “*You did the best you could.*” And, with these twin mantras, her transformation into a Perrotta protagonist is complete.

What does it mean to be special? What is the nature of success, of failure? “Election” was lightly interested in these topics, but “Tracy Flick Can’t Win” pores over them like an honors student before midterms. The book hinges on the question of who is most likely to succeed—succeed Jack Weede, that is, the principal of Green Meadow High, who will retire at the end of the year. Tracy should be a shoo-in for the job, but, in order to secure the school board’s blessing, she must help to establish a G.M.H.S. Hall of

Fame, which will celebrate alumni “not just for their athletic prowess, but for their intellectual and artistic achievements, their business acumen, their community service, even their parenting skills.” Tracy, along with Weede, the board president, and a pair of student representatives, belongs to a committee tasked with determining the first two inductees. One, naturally, will be Vito, the ex-N.F.L. player. But the other could be anybody, and Perrotta cleverly places his heroine in Mr. M.’s kingmaker role. Will she wield her power more wisely?

The election plot, dusted off and sent back to work, affords an opportunity to revisit not only Tracy but the earlier book’s suggestions about who deserves what. Supplying a fresh social consciousness is Lily Chu, one of the student reps, who lost the class presidency to the other rep, Nate, by twenty-seven votes. Lily, the lone committee member of color, derides the list of candidates as “one boring white person after another.” A Black prospect, Reggie, played football with Vito, but racism torpedoed his career, and one of the book’s most savage, fleeting acts of commentary may be that Tracy joins the rest of the men, against Lily, in declining to support him. “That was the last thing we needed,” Tracy snips: “two football players.” Finally, the toxic white woman appears.

Perrotta’s sympathies often flow toward the margins of his fiction, where some of his most interesting characters dwell. In “Election,” Paul’s outcast sister, Tammy, provides an anarchic critique. “Who cares about this stupid election?” she cries, kicking off her dark-horse candidacy. “You might as well vote for me. Your lives won’t be affected one way or the other.” Yet a thoroughgoing pessimism about people’s receptivity, their capacity for change, appears to draw Perrotta back from the edge. Tammy doesn’t lead the school; she’s suspended. Likewise, the damage seeping from the Reggie story line is swiftly contained, brushed aside on the way to more crowd-pleasing material.

What results is a somewhat cursory treatment of race—one that’s emblematic of the novel’s tasting-menu approach to hot-button topics. Lily is secretly dating a nonbinary college student, and there are nods to football’s concussion crisis and the political neglect of public education. These gestures, though, amount to little more than flickers on a radar screen, and a similar quality wilts Perrotta’s appraisal of élitism. At one point, the

school superintendent disparages the Hall of Fame as “another way of saying that some people matter more than others—the star athletes and the computer geniuses and the rich guys. You know what, though? The high achievers are going to be fine regardless. It’s the other kids who need our help.” This is a cogent deconstruction of the novel’s premise, but it exists at such a distance from the characters we care about, and whom we want to thrive on their own terms, that it feels merely cosmetic. The caveat duly registered, Perrotta retreats, immersing us back in the pleasures of his plot.

That plot’s object is to redeem Tracy, and its climax is a feat of heroism that feels imported from a Marvel comic. Her exoneration thrilled me; I imagine that many readers will feel the same. But the effort of recuperation wears on the book. The aftertaste of a voguish feminism, one that casts all women as misunderstood saviors, lingers. Perrotta’s step seems surest when his characters’ saintliness—or, better yet, their miscreance—doesn’t lie quite so close to the surface.

For proof, look no further than Jack Weede, the principal, a self-proclaimed member of the “old guard.” Weede regrets that men used to see female students as “fair game.” These days, he says, he’d fire any teacher who behaved like he did in the seventies: remarking on which girls “had the best tits, the nicest legs, the sexiest mouth.” But leaving Green Meadow will be fraught for Weede, because he has been romancing his receptionist, Diane, a demure woman two decades his junior. For him, the relationship was a distraction: “Happy people don’t do what we did.” For her, it was an idyll, full of stolen glances and mischievous, under-the-desk blow jobs. The chapters that unfold the affair are wistful and deft, borne along by a stream of overlapping narration. Perrotta wrings pathos from needs met and passed over, conducting a symphony of unruly yearnings, delusions, and dramatic ironies.

He’s also, of course, slyly rewriting the affair between Tracy and her teacher. Weede treats women—including his wife, who has just recovered from cancer—abysmally. He takes advantage of Diane’s vulnerability (the sex begins when her husband walks out), persuades her to be grateful for scraps of his attention, and then, when the liaison no longer serves him, breaks her heart. Perrotta is up to his old tricks, painting a man’s thoughtless lechery in

touching tones, inviting misreading. With a lyric, polyphonic intensity, he poses a question to the class: What have we learned?

One might ask the same of Perrotta. Although he nimbly pins Jack's mind to the page, Diane displays a familiar blurriness. In this, she resembles the grownup Tracy, who is no longer a monster, but who still—in her valor, her meticulously pro-social applications of feminism—does not seem quite real. Perrotta has retrieved and transvalued her, encouraged readers to root for her, and, finally, allowed her to win. If only he had allowed her to live. ♦

Building Dept.

- [Elvis Costello and Regina King Let Their Bird Flags Fly](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)



100 Martin InnIllustration by João Fazenda

The recent housing market has brought about ruinous price increases, a bidding war over a fifth-floor walkup studio with no oven, and enough of a civic exodus for the *Post* to declaim, earlier this month, “*LISTEN UP, NEW YORK—FLORIDA SUCKS, AND YOU’LL ALL BE BACK IN FIVE YEARS.*” But that doesn’t mean deals can’t be had. Take a unit that just went on the market. It’s a newly built architect-designed twelve-bedroom in shall we say Crown Heights, with finishes by a master carpenter and three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views of Prospect Park. There are a few cons, including an absence of doors, which means the occasional no-goodnick snatching up your kids. It’s not a walkup, *per se* (no stairs), but there’s also no elevator; you’ll need alternative means of safe egress or else . . . splat. On the other hand: multiple porches.

“Hey, how much is the rent?” a kid passing by the place called out recently. The two landlords, Stephen Alesch and Robin Standefer, were nearby. Their answer: free.

“It’s a birdhouse for purple martins,” Alesch said. “Purple martins only live in birdhouses.”

“And it’ll hold a hundred of them!” Standefer said.

“That’s, like, a mansion!” another kid yelled.

Alesch, who had a goatee, and Standefer, in blazer and jeans, were at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, next to a little pond, where they were installing what they call the 100 Martin Inn. It’s a mega-birdhouse, made of cedar, that looks like a big signpost showing many destinations—twelve dwellings, eight or so birds each. “We rounded up,” Standefer explained.

The pair, who are married, met in Hollywood. Standefer, a designer, was working on a Scorsese film as a visual consultant. (“There’s a makeup-party scene in ‘Goodfellas,’ and it opens on a cardboard cutout of an Avon lady,” she said. “That’s me!”) Alesch was a burned-out architect looking for a change. They were production designers for “Zoolander,” and then they redesigned and expanded Ben Stiller’s house in the Hollywood Hills. These days, their architecture firm, Roman & Williams, does big, trendy projects—the Standard, the Ace, a wing of the Met—and private homes; they’re currently doing Gwyneth Paltrow’s Montecito house.

In January, Randall Poster, a music supervisor Standefer knew through Scorsese, invited them to build something for a project he was calling “For the Birds.” Poster, who’d become a bird guy during *Covid*, had curated a sprawling, multidisciplinary thing to raise money for the Audubon Society. Devised by a colleague named Rebecca Reagan, it was a two-hundred-and-forty-two-track, twenty-LP boxed set consisting of original bird-themed music (Yoko Ono, Elvis Costello, Beck, two Beastie Boys, Philip Glass) and celebrities reading bird verse (McConaughey, Franzen, Regina King, Sean Penn, Greta Gerwig, Bette Midler, Robert Pattinson).

They also proposed a series of birdhouses by artists and architects. Elsewhere on the garden grounds are a birdhouse modelled on a hot-dog cart, one suspended by wires, and one that looks like a big sweet potato. There is a porcelain birdhouse molded to resemble a poodle sitting in a shoe, and also a “birdega,” etched with mini deli items.

Alesch and Standefer went more literal. How did designing birdhouses compare with building hotels? “Process-wise, this is almost identical,” Standefer said. “Our focus is, Who’s it for? How’s it gonna be used? How do we bring them back?”

Alesch added, “The Standard, it was young, good-looking, good dress, a design-focussed person, into modernism more than traditionalism.”

“The Ace was more humble, punk,” Standefer said.

“I always thought the Standard was Derek Zoolander and the Ace was Hansel,” Alesch said.

Standefer went on, “The Martin archetype is just a really comfortable, social house.” Martins love to sing and can roost in flocks big enough to show up as a doughnut-shaped shadow on weather radar. Hundreds of years ago, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw hung hollow gourds in trees to attract martins. Over the years, the birds became dependent on man-made dwellings; they return every spring, from the Amazon, to the same house for generations. “It’s kind of a vacation house,” Standefer said. “They need to nest and mate and rest. It’s like camp!”

Two carpenters on a ladder were installing the final dwellings. Alesch and Standefer offered a tour: steep eaves, sexy curves, a big perch on the front deck. “Their numbers are dropping now,” Standefer said. “They don’t have reliable housing.” How do the martins find the house? “That is the question!” she said. She was worried, because the inn had been installed late in the season. Most martins nest in early spring.

“Late summer there’s bachelors who didn’t mate properly, because they didn’t have a nice house, they didn’t sing really well,” Alesch said. “So they’re flying around in summertime looking. They hook up with widows because some accident happened to them—some owl ate their husband.”

In the following weeks, there were no signs, yet, of bachelors or widows. A robin and some starlings checked out the place, but none of the lookie-loos had moved in, which was good for everyone; squatters were to be evicted. ♦

Comment

- [The G.O.P. Heckles the January 6th Show](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

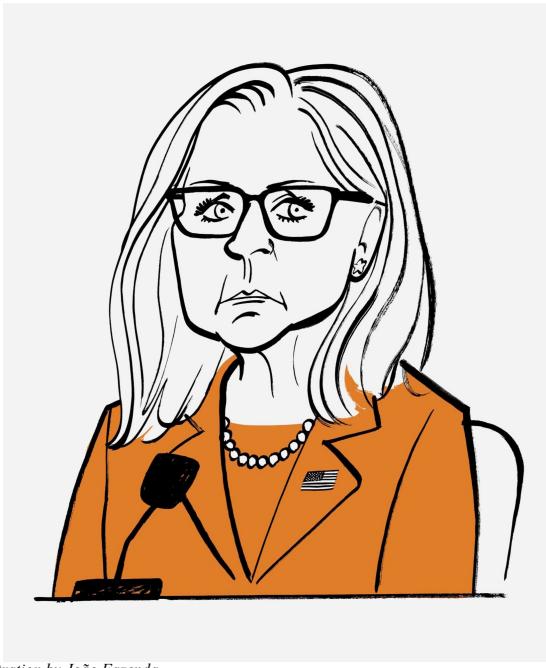


Illustration by João Fazenda

Looking back at the events that led up to [the assault on the Capitol](#) on January 6, 2021, it's hard to settle on the moment of greatest danger for the republic. A contender, as Liz Cheney, the vice-chair of the House Select Committee investigating January 6th, made clear in the committee's prime-time [hearing](#) last Thursday, was a standoff in which Donald Trump came close to firing his acting Attorney General, Jeffrey Rosen. The plan was to replace Rosen with a Department of Justice official named Jeffrey Clark, who was ready to send officials in six of the states Joe Biden had won a letter saying that the D.O.J. had uncovered voting irregularities, and that their legislatures might want to reassign their states' electors. "This letter is a lie," Cheney said. Trump, according to witness testimony, had told Rosen and others at the department to "just say the election was corrupt and leave the rest to me and the [Republican] congressmen."

The most straightforward job of those congressmen in the scheme to keep Trump in power was to contest the tallying of Biden's electors on January 6th—and a hundred and thirty-nine representatives and eight senators ultimately objected to electors from Arizona, Pennsylvania, or both. But one of the themes of the committee's presentation was that the Republicans' involvement was not confined to that legislative act. For example, Representative Scott Perry, of Pennsylvania, had, Cheney said, been a key

figure in connecting Trump to Clark, whose ascension to acting Attorney General was blocked only by the threat of mass resignations at the D.O.J. (Cheney played a video clip in which Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, said that he had regarded various threats to resign as just "whining.")

Perry was active in Trump's post-election efforts in Pennsylvania, conveying outlandish theories about how foreign forces—including, oddly, the British—had tampered with the ballot count. Politico reported that a witness told the committee that she had seen [Mark Meadows](#), Trump's chief of staff, burn documents after he'd had a meeting with Perry. During Thursday's televised hearing—the first of six—Cheney said that Perry had "contacted the White House in the weeks after January 6th to seek a Presidential pardon," as had "multiple" other Republican members of Congress. She also noted that he had refused to testify before the committee.

The focus on Perry and his colleagues illuminates a number of challenges in coming to terms with January 6th. For a start, there is a great deal that remains unknown to the public, and Republicans could fill in many of the blank spaces in the record. Yet most of Trump's supporters in Congress are unrepentant and, in many cases, increasingly committed to an extreme and conspiratorial view not only of January 6th but also [of the 2020 election](#).

In May, Perry, who for months had rebuffed requests to coöperate with the committee voluntarily, became one of five G.O.P. House members whom it subpoenaed. The others are [Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy](#), of California; Andy Biggs, of Arizona; Mo Brooks, of Alabama; and Jim Jordan, of Ohio. Issuing the subpoenas was a significant move that the G.O.P. is treating as an outrage. It is not unprecedented for representatives to be subpoenaed in a House investigation, although the practice has generally been confined to the Ethics Committee. But Republicans have taken the position that Cheney and her colleagues constitute, as McCarthy put it in a press conference on Thursday, "the most political and least legitimate committee in American history." Thus far, none of the five has complied, though the legal maneuvering is still at an early stage. Jordan sent the committee's chair, Bennie Thompson, an angry eleven-page letter on Thursday, just before the hearing began, questioning its motives and demanding that, before he responded further, he be given all material "in which my name appears or in which I am referenced."

None of the five Republicans was hard to find on Thursday. Brooks, who was initially endorsed by Trump in Alabama’s May Senate primary, then was unendorsed, and now, in a bid to be *reendorsed* before a June 21st runoff, is portraying Trump’s rejection of him as a benevolent act (“the kick in the pants we needed”), tweeted that the hearing was a “kangaroo court.” Perry and Biggs took to the House floor, with [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#), of Georgia, as their wingwoman, to preëmptively denounce the hearing. Perry called it a “Soviet-style show trial”; Biggs suggested that the breach of the Capitol had been the work of Trump’s enemies.

At the same time, there is not much of a line between Perry, who chairs the Freedom Caucus, and McCarthy, who, at his press conference, dodged the question of whether Biden had been legitimately elected, and managed to bring up the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. When McCarthy was asked about his subpoena, he said he’d heard that the committee wanted to talk about a phone call he’d had with Trump on January 6th—and that he’d already said what he had to say about it “on the three networks.” McCarthy has a good chance of becoming Speaker after the midterms; he may be hoping, if he does, to simply disband the committee and make the subpoenas go away.

Cheney, of course, is a Republican, too, and a very conservative one. But [she has broken with her party](#) over January 6th and Trump. Adam Kinzinger, of Illinois, the only other Republican on the committee, is not running for reelection. Cheney is trailing her Trump-endorsed opponent in the Wyoming primary, Harriet Hageman, by a wide margin. A few weeks ago, Trump, on a visit to the state to attack Cheney and the “insurrection hoax,” offered an extraordinary complaint about how his rally on January 6th has been viewed: “I have never spoken, in my opinion, before a crowd that big! And nobody wants to talk about it from the fake news media.” He called Cheney “totally crazy.”

Cheney, in her presentation, described how Trump, after urging that crowd to go to the Capitol, returned to the White House to watch the subsequent onslaught on television. According to testimony she cited, when Trump heard that people were chanting, “Hang Mike Pence,” he said, “Maybe our supporters have the right idea.” Cheney made a point of saying that, when McCarthy called Trump and people around him in the midst of the attack,

looking for help that was not forthcoming, the Minority Leader “was, quote, scared.” Now it seems that what most frightens Republicans, apart from Trump’s anger, is [a clear view of January 6th](#). In the coming weeks, the committee’s job is to make sure that neither they nor the rest of the country can look away. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, June 7, 2022](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

Dept. of Hyphenates

- Morby in Confessional Mode at Fotografiska

By [Hannah Seidlitz](#)



Kevin Morby Illustration by João Fazenda

Kevin Morby, the Kansas City rock musician, was transfixed by the elevator at Fotografiska, a high-toned photography museum in Manhattan. “What are these called?” he asked, pointing to several velvet ottomans in the spacious cab. He sat on one. “This is an awesome elevator.” He was about to set off on a world tour and was in town to play a few songs from his new album, “*This Is a Photograph*,” at a reception for his first photography installation, at the Ace Hotel.

Morby is thirty-four, with the exuberance and the golden mane of a cocker spaniel. He wore a baseball cap and a shirt patterned with paint splashes. Ascending in the elevator, he mused, “But where does it all lead, you know? The time, and your dreams. Eventually your body gets old. Even if the dream doesn’t kill you, then you just kind of get old.” By his own admission, he loves getting older. “The number of men in their thirties, forties, fifties, who are just, like, I want to look like twenty-four-year-old Bob Dylan,” he said, and shook his head. “We should be trying to look like eighty-three-year-old Bob Dylan.”

On the fifth floor, he entered a Bauhaus exhibition. Some things he was drawn to:

An aerial shot taken from a Berlin radio tower. “I’ve always been, like, I wonder what Kansas City is in Europe, if it had to be somewhere,” he said, squinting at the photograph.

A series of indistinct collages, which reminded him of a favorite “Twilight Zone” episode. “These three astronauts crash-land on another planet, and they get out and they’re like, O.K., there’s air and water here, but it’s barren. Quickly, one of them turns on the other two, and kills them,” he said. “He’s walking over the hillside, and he sees a sign that says . . . ‘Reno’!”

An overexposed negative of a wraithlike figure menacing the camera from a balcony. “It’s amazing,” he said.

His new record, which was conceived after he saw his father collapse suddenly at a family dinner, is studded with the names of people who have died, often by gruesome or fabled means: Jeff Buckley, Otis Redding, Ritchie Valens. His father recovered, but Morby couldn’t shake *l’appel du vide*. “Those ghosts are in the room,” he said, “but, like, they’re friendly ghosts. We’re all having a party together.” Mortal dread had kicked in some years earlier. After the singers Richard Swift and David Berman both died young following a lot of hard living, Morby resolved to “cut it back a little bit,” he said. “I was, like, I need to find a healthy way to get fucked up. So I got really into spa culture.” The sauna straightened him out, but then came the global plague. So he took to the courts.

“I got really into David Foster Wallace’s essays about tennis,” he said. He also started running, inspired by Haruki Murakami’s “What I Talk About When I Talk About Running.” His playlist: OutKast, Green Day, and Alkaline Trio.

Peering at the mostly abstract photos, he divined a Sylvia Plath character, a ski-masked killer, and, in a composition of stadium chairs, go-go boots. Four works reminded him of album art. “We can get that licensed for you,” a docent said. He was more interested in chasing down a Japanese poster for the movie “Paper Moon,” to hang in the mid-century house he and his girlfriend, Katie Crutchfield, who performs as Waxahatchee, just bought in Kansas City. “Because it doesn’t make any sense, you know?” he said.

Tour concluded, he was shepherded into a nineteenth-century chapel next door, which functions as an on-site night club. Roosevelts had sent their kids there to pray.

"I feel like I shouldn't be wearing a hat in here," Morby said, ducking past a velvet curtain into a confessional booth turned V.I.P. room. The atmosphere sobered him. "You can look at an old photograph, and you're in the future, so it's easy for you to judge it," he said, gazing at a painting of a nun in ecstasy. "But it's almost like the person in the photograph is laughing back at you. Like, 'You think you're above being captured, because you're breathing. But you don't know how quickly it's all gonna go by.'"

Suddenly, the priest's partition raised, and an arm reached out, proferring a Pilsner. "Thanks," he said. ♦

Fiction

- “[Houyhnhnm](#)”

By [André Alexis](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: André Alexis reads.

My dad, Robert auf der Horst, died seven years ago. He was a successful doctor, and for most of his life he divided the world into two categories: what he thought useful (science) and what he thought frivolous (almost everything else). It wasn't that he disdained other things—art, for instance. It was that he couldn't see the point of pretending that knowledge, the fruit of science, was comparable to entertainment.

For the most part, we were in agreement about this. But he was disappointed when I decided to study math, at Amherst. Math was tricky ground for him: it could be useful, but was often frivolous. He saw math as the thin edge of the entertainment wedge, as if, once you engaged with Fermat's Last Theorem, reality TV was not far behind.

I mention Dad's preference for evidence-based reasoning not because I have any grievances to air. I loved him, whatever our differences, and I never doubted that he loved me. It's just that I'd like it to be clear, from the outset, that my dad was a rational person.

[André Alexis on grief, absurdity, and horses.](#)

That being said: like many serious men, my dad could at times be playful. For instance, when talking about his lifelong fascination with horses, he would point to his—and, of course, my—family name: auf der Horst, a German name, though my dad was born in the Caribbean, to Black Caribbean parents. The name isn't interesting in itself, but “auf der Horst” sounds like “auf der Horse,” and this homonym allowed Dad to suggest that it was inevitable he would own horses.

And own horses he did: five in the course of his adult life.

And I assumed it had something to do with his playful side when, shortly after buying his fifth and final horse, a nameless gelding that he'd saved

from slaughter, he called me into his office at home and asked me to do him a favor.

“Paul,” he said, “I want you to make me a catalogue of the most famous horses in literature.”

“In literature? I thought you said that literature’s useless.”

“It is, mostly,” he said. “But I’ve got my reasons. I’ll pay you for the trouble.”

I almost asked if he was joking, but that would have been pointless. My dad could not tell a joke to save his life. The last time I remember him telling one was sometime in the eighties: Three logicians walk into a bar. The barman asks, “Would all of you like a drink?” The first logician says, “I don’t know.” The second one says, “I don’t know.” The third one says, “Yes.” I also recall my mom forbidding him to ever tell jokes again, a ban we both thought necessary and thus forced on him in a kind of intervention.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to André Alexis read “Houyhnhnm.”](#)

In any event, I was happy to create a catalogue of horses for him. It was the first time he’d asked me to do research, and it pleased me to be useful. Of course, I hadn’t realized how exhausting the task would be. Literature is so replete with horses, I could have written a full thesis just to give him a *sense* of how influential horses have been in the human imagination.

(Some fifteen years later, I don’t remember much about the research I did, save the intense boredom I felt as I combed “The Poetic Edda” for mentions of a horse named Glad or perused Celtic mythology for stories about kelpies, demons who take the form of horses. It was a relief, back then, to write about Frou-Frou and Rocinante, Black Beauty and Cigarette—literary horses I was already familiar with.)

After I’d listed, indexed, and described hundreds of horses, I was naturally curious about why he’d asked me to do this in the first place. But no reason was forthcoming. He paid me a few dollars and then refused to say anything

more about it. I had to settle for the fact that he named his gelding Xan, which I took to be an allusion to Xanthus, one of Achilles' horses.

The horse himself offered no clue to Dad's state of mind. Xan was average height (five feet seven from hooves to withers) and average weight (somewhere around a thousand pounds). He was a purebred Friesian, with a shiny black coat and a white spot on his forehead in the shape of a lozenge. His flanks rippled at a touch, and his mane was long and thick, because although Dad groomed him, he never dressed Xan's mane or tail.

In a word, Xan was unremarkable.

What *was* remarkable was the relationship between Dad and Xan. It was close and grew closer. I was not living at home—that is, in Amherst—at the time. I'd moved to New York to go to grad school at Columbia, so I took in their relationship only at Thanksgivings and Christmases. This means that Dad's closeness to Xan likely seemed more dramatic to me than it did to, say, my mom. She would call me every so often, to make sure I had everything I needed, and, in the course of our conversations, she would mention, for instance, that Dad had had a large, heated, brick-and-mortar barn built for Xan, or that he'd had a pond dug in the field behind our house and had filled it with goldfish, because Xan loved fish, apparently, or that he'd walk beside Xan for hours, going around our two square acres even in the rain, or that she'd both seen and heard Dad reading books to the horse. "What kind of books?" I asked her. "Oh, I don't know, sweetie," she answered. "Isaac Asimov, mostly."

On hearing my mom's accounts of Dad's behavior, I admit I grew anxious. The man she described resembled my father less and less. Then not at all. Yet, whenever I returned home, I could see for myself that Dad spent hours with Xan, talking to the horse, walking him around the man-made pond, and reading to him—or was he reading to himself?—from Asimov's nonfiction.

Further complicating matters was the fact that Dad would not discuss Xan. If he said anything at all, it was that the time he spent with his horse was private. We were free to admire and pet Xan whenever we liked, Mom and I, but he made it clear that their solitude—his and Xan's—was beneficial to and *craaved by* both of them.

I thought he was losing his mind, and I began to mourn him from the moment I first saw them—Xan and Dad—walking in their fenced-in, emerald world, Dad laughing at God knows what, as if deep in conversation with the horse.

This state of affairs—I thought of it as a decline—went on for eight years. And, despite the pain I feel at having lost my dad, I’m now grateful for that time. For one thing, after a while my mom’s stories stopped alarming me. It was almost amusing to learn that Dad had ordered an oversized mattress for the horse, that he’d had taps installed in the barn from which Xan could drink fresh water whenever he wanted, that he’d had a library built there, that he’d hooked up a contraption that allowed Xan to listen to music whenever he had trouble sleeping, et cetera.

Those years were good for my mom, too, I believe. Her husband was not an invalid. He earned a great living as a doctor—a respected and popular M.D.—until he retired. And though she liked having him around, she learned to treasure the time she had for herself—that is, the mornings and evenings when Dad was communing with his horse.

Up until my dad’s death, my parents’ lives were what you could call eccentric but normal. Moreover, this new normal was very like the old one, save that Dad treated his horse with the kind of deference usually reserved for Presidents (when they are worthy) or potentates.

The first of the deaths I’ll speak of here was sudden and devastating. It descended on my dad like an Olympian decree—swift and merciless. On a Sunday, he began to feel unwell and went to the hospital in Northampton. We spoke the next day, Monday, in the morning, just before he went in for surgery to drain the ureic acid that had backed up and was poisoning him. He died on the operating table around noon. I think he knew his time had come. His last words to me, that morning, had been, “If I die, Paul, please take care of Xan. You’ll have to keep him company. He’s very sensitive.”

“It’s like Xan’s your son,” I said.

“No, not my son, exactly,” Dad answered.

Though I promised to look after the horse and swore I'd do it well, it was at least a week after Dad's death before I was really conscious of anything I did. I was derailed not just by grief but by the sheer depths of my emotions. I mechanically shovelled feed into Xan's copper trough, leaving mounds of alfalfa and clover in his vicinity. Even following the letter, rather than the spirit, of my promise was difficult, because Xan's barn reminded me so much of my dad: the chairs in which he'd sat while talking to Xan, the books on Xan's bookshelves, and Xan himself, whom Dad had clearly loved.

It isn't accurate to say that dealing with Xan diverted me from grief. Nothing could have done that. But as I became more conscious of what I was doing—feeding, cleaning, and even (occasionally) talking to Xan—I found the discipline, the responsibility, and the schedule comforting. I'd been teaching at UMass Amherst for years by the time Dad died. And I was living just off South Pleasant, less than two miles away from my parents' home, off Mill Valley.

Every day of the week, I would get up at five in the morning and spend two hours with Xan. On weekday evenings around six—earlier on weekends—I'd go back to feed Xan supper, to keep him company awhile, and to spend time with my mom, watching the Nollywood films she consumes.

I liked knowing where I would, or should, be at these times, and I began to feel at ease in Xan's company. I had never shared my dad's fascination with horses. In fact, I'd disliked them ever since I was thrown by one of his mares, when I was eleven or twelve. The difference now was that I came to know Xan's personality. He was, in the days after Dad's death, even-tempered, gentle, and as quiet as if he had no vocal cords. The other word I would use to describe him—though I'd never have used it before we grew close—is “searching.” Even in those early days, I felt in Xan what I've often felt in my brighter students: an inquisitive nature.

Of course, Xan was also physically intimidating, as most horses are. If you have never been around horses, I'm not sure I can convey their heft. It's a density that's as psychological as it is physical, so that one approaches a horse with the *idea* of its stature as one of its dimensions. I don't know if this is the right way to say it, but one brings a sense of *horseness* to one's encounters with horses.

It's possible that this thought was inspired by my research, and I suspect that, by having me create a catalogue of literary horses, Dad was trying to prepare me for life with Xan. But none of my thoughts, feelings, or ideas could really have prepared me for the moment when Xan spoke. I'm still surprised at how calm I was when, after we had spent months in each other's company, Xan said, "I don't suppose Robert is coming back."

I thought, when I heard those words, that I was talking to myself, that I'd finally reached the limits of grief.

"No," I said. "Dad isn't coming back."

"I don't mean to criticize," said Xan, "but you could have told me earlier."

I nodded, I think, or made some sign that I understood. But I went on brushing his flanks, and when that was done I left him. I went home, and cried again for the loss of my dad.

Over the next few days, Xan was his serene and wordless self, and I felt closer to him, amused that my grief had manifested in such a strange way—in my imagining that a horse could articulate my sense of loss.

The second time Xan spoke, I was frightened—not by Xan but by the thought that, grieving or not, I was losing my mind.

It was a morning in mid-March. Xan and I were walking in the field, where clumps of granular snow clung to the ground in unpredictable places. The field was muddy, but it was solid enough if we kept away from the outer edges where we often walked. I was thinking about grass seed, wondering how many bags of Scotts Turf Builder I'd need, when Xan said, "I'd like it if you'd read to me, Paul."

His head was near mine but above it. I hadn't seen his mouth and tongue move. So, with what seems, in retrospect, like incredible sang-froid, I asked Xan to repeat what he'd said. And this he did, his lips moving discreetly, his tongue barely shifting, his breath escaping in a small cloud. Watching him speak was like watching an elephant gracefully pick up a pea.

I suppose my sense of wonder overcame my fear. Thinking about the anatomy of a horse, its mouth in particular, I felt it should not have been possible for Xan to produce the sounds he did, as elegantly as he did. The “I”s in “like” and “Paul” and the “d”s in “I’d,” “you’d,” and “read”—which were distinct from the “t” in “it”—were skillfully done. Only the “e”s in “me” and “read” were unusual, as if half whistled. To be fair, this was likely because of his buckteeth.

“It should be impossible for you to speak,” I said.

“It’s taken a lot of work,” he answered. “There are words I still can’t say properly.”

“That explains your accent,” I said.

“I don’t have an accent,” said Xan.

This was the first of many instances in which I found it impossible to judge his attitude. Had I offended him when I mentioned his accent, or was he teasing me when he denied having one? His face was placid and unchanging. One of his eyes was looking at me, until he raised his head and his mane veiled it.

We walked on in silence then, until I remembered his request. “What would you like me to read?” I asked.

One of the most valuable aspects of my time with Xan was that, in speaking with him, I understood—*truly* understood—that words can only hint at what a psyche wants or needs. Although Xan and I spoke often after this moment, I was never certain—despite his use of words—if he possessed great depth, or, in fact, any depth at all. This was no doubt because his speaking was without affect, clear without being expressive.

“Poetry,” he answered. “I’d like poetry. Or Gertrude Stein.”

“Did Dad read you poetry?” I asked.

“Yes,” Xan said, “but he preferred science.”

When I inspected the books in Xan's library, I saw that there were, indeed, several volumes of poetry. This was unnerving, because it was not easy to imagine my dad buying poetry for himself. In fact, it was like discovering a secret side to him, although, of course, technically speaking, this side of my dad belonged to Xan.

"What do you like about poetry?" I asked.

"I don't have to think about what it means," he answered. "Your father told me it doesn't mean anything."

Just the answer Dad would have given, though, for Dad, this would not have been any kind of recommendation. I was left wondering whether Xan actually liked poetry, whether he thought of it as a kind of intriguing chatter —like birdsong—or whether he listened to it in defiance of Dad.

It did not occur to me to seek professional help. I took solace in my situation, despite knowing how surreal it was. Moreover, I didn't want my time with Xan to end, because it was, in a way, time with my dad. I mean, Xan was a being Dad had loved. When I was with him, I felt my dad's personality and, to some extent, his presence, even. But time with Xan was time with Dad in another way, too.

By his own admission, Xan knew very little about the world. He had been, he said, an outsider all his life. His experience had been of stalls, fields, and tracks. His exposure to other horses had been incidental, and not intimate. Dad had often asked him what it was like to be a horse. But, if it was true that, for Dad, Xan represented a means to understanding another species, it was also true that, for Xan, my dad was a road to the human. And Xan, a being at least as observant as my dad, had made an intense study of Robert auf der Horst: his personality, his habits, his sense of humor.

Dad's sense of humor, in particular, seemed to fascinate Xan. I imagine that, after Mom and I discouraged him from telling jokes, Dad needed an outlet. And so Xan became his—admittedly captive—audience.

Here, I'd like to point out that my dad's jokes, when told by Xan, were still pointless. They were, however, funnier and more unnerving. In fact, it is

difficult to convey the range of emotion I felt whenever Xan told me one of Dad's jokes.

"What do you call a reindeer with one eye? No idea."

I had, of course, heard it before. It had only ever been slightly funny to me, and that was only because Dad thought it was funny. But looking up at Xan as he told it, watching his lips and tongue move together as if dancing, hearing it in his slightly wobbly voice, I felt a confusion that must have shown on my face.

"I didn't get it, either," said Xan.

I explained to him then the play on words that gave the joke its purpose: the play of "eye" and "I," the complicated pun on "no-eye deer" and "no idea."

"I understand," Xan said, "but did Robert really find this funny?"

This was one of the most unexpectedly tricky questions I've ever been asked. I assured Xan that some humans do find puns amusing. Beyond that, though, was the question: Why did Robert auf der Horst find this joke funny? I couldn't think of a clear answer. Dad's love of puns was part of what had made him who he was, but the reason for his love was undiscoverable. And at that moment, standing beside Xan, I was struck by the strangeness of my dad's having remembered this joke in particular, and the even stranger fact of his having related it to a horse.

"Did you like his jokes?" I asked.

"I found them hilarious," said Xan. "That is why I remember them."

I saw then that, in asking me if Dad found this joke funny, Xan had been testing me. He'd been trying to discover *my* sense of humor, not Dad's. In fact, in the first year that I knew Xan, I often felt as if I were being tested or observed.



"Very good. Now try reading it with the lights dimmed and the background music louder."
Cartoon by Ali Solomon

Though Xan admitted to liking my dad's sense of humor, I never heard him laugh at any of Dad's jokes. He did laugh, though, on occasion. And although I know that what we call laughter encompasses a range of sounds, I expected Xan's to be something like an unhinged whinny or a prolonged neigh, but it was nothing like either of those. It was, in fact, exactly like my dad's laugh, a startling imitation. The first time I heard it was as I read to him from Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason." I was reading this at his request. It was, apparently, a text that he and my dad often read together, one that both found hilarious.

Sad though it is to admit, our time together, mine and Xan's, was mostly unremarkable. I mean, I'm aware how unusual it is to spend so many hours talking with a horse. But when, for instance, my mom asked what Xan and I talked about—or, rather, what it was that *I* was saying to the "poor horse"—I could think of very little to tell her. Not because I was ashamed to talk about my relationship with Xan but because, as in most relationships, what was actually said was evanescent. The important thing was that we spoke, not what we spoke about as we tried, mutually, I think, to understand each other. Here, let me say that I find it funny to think that humans struggle to imagine what aliens might be like when, for all intents and purposes, aliens already share the planet with us. As I came to a better understanding of Xan, some

of the questions I had about what “alien perception” might be were answered. For instance, Xan found sunsets unappealing and assumed that they had some strange physiological effect on humans. He was surprised to learn that we find sunsets aesthetically pleasing, and nothing more. For further instance, Xan found ants terrifying, unsure as he was of just how many of them there were beneath the surface of the Earth. It disturbed him to think that both he and the planet could, at any time, be overrun. As a means of explaining to Xan what a devil might be, my dad had asked him to think of Satan as the essence of ants. And it was in this way that Xan had come to an appreciation of human religion.

Our five years together, mine and Xan’s, though mostly unperturbed by catastrophe, were among the most memorable I’ve spent on Earth. They leave a residue in my mind that grows in significance as time passes. I do wish I could remember more, though—more of the particulars. Talking to Xan became part of my daily routine. And, after a while, I stopped being aware that I was talking to a horse. (It has always seemed to me that intimacy is oddly timeless. When intimacy exists, it feels as if it had always existed, so that I’m surprised when I think that, for instance, there was a time when I did not know Xan, a time when I did not know the taste of cherries, or the sounds of New York. . . .)

The main problem with my lack of awareness is that now, when I try to remember who Xan was, I find it difficult to describe his personality. He was gentle, but that’s a feeling, not a fact. He was witty: another subjective perception. Was Xan really witty, or was he witty for a horse? He was kind. Yes, he was. He would ask what was on my mind and pay attention to my concerns. There was nothing I couldn’t tell him, and, rarer in my experience, he was not critical. He did not laugh easily, but he wasn’t overly serious, either. I felt with him not as I felt with my mom or with friends. I felt when I was in Xan’s company as if I were privileged to be with someone so noble. Of course, nobility is as difficult to define as any other quality. But it is the word I feel compelled to use when I think of him.

I remember the smell of Xan’s breath: like sour grass.

I remember the smell of Xan’s sweat: like rancid meat mixed with hay. I remember the movement of his teeth and tongue as he spoke.

I remember the swishing of his tail: deliberate at times, at times random. I remember the frissons that traversed his flanks.

I remember his eyes, great and glaucous, on either side of his head. There are incidents that I remember, too, of course.

I remember the moment I realized that my mom had, in fact, heard Xan speak, had likely heard his voice often. It was one morning, as we were eating breakfast together. Apropos of nothing at all, Mom said, “I see you have the same talent as your dad.”

“What talent is that?” I asked.

“Ventriloquism,” she answered.

I didn’t know what to say.

“But it’s strange,” she said. “Your horse voice is the same as your dad’s. Did he teach you?”

“Mom, I’m not a ventriloquist.”

“Oh, I see. You *are* the same as your dad. But Robert was better at it than you, you know. I can see your lips move when you do the horse. I never could with Rob.”

I remember when one of the neighbors confronted me about “my behavior.”

“Now, look,” he said. “Your dad was a good guy. But he was a little funny, the way he was with that horse. If I didn’t know Doc better, I’d have said he and that horse were bunking together. You know what I’m saying? I’m not saying your dad was a liberal, but who buys a house for a horse? And now it’s looking a little like you’re going that way, too. And I would feel better . . . we would *all* feel better if we knew there wasn’t anything funny with you and that horse.”

I’m not an angry man, not given to violence, but if the neighbor in question hadn’t been in his eighties I’d have hit him—for me, for Dad, and for Xan.

I remember the first time we walked into town. We took back fields before coming out on South Pleasant, then walked to Amherst Coffee and turned back. I recall this walk not because it was so different from others we would take but because, somewhere past the golf course, Xan stopped for a long while, looked over at the green valley in the distance, and asked if I knew the number of ants there were likely to be on Earth.

The moment before he spoke, I'd have sworn he was admiring the landscape.

For all my vivid impressions and memorable moments, though, Xan's gradual decline is what has left the deepest mark on me. It is, unfortunately, the thing I can't help remembering.

I suspect it began before I noticed it. The moment of noticing transfigures the moments that preceded it. So that, thinking back, the line is slightly blurred. But I began to notice his decline in part because Xan, who could do a fair imitation of Dad, failed while telling one of Dad's worst jokes.

“Why is it bad to trust atoms?”

“Because they make up everything,” I answered.

“Oh,” said Xan. “That’s right.”

Not two minutes later, he asked again.

“Why is it bad to trust atoms?”

Thinking he had some reason for wanting to say the punch line, I said, “Why?”

But he didn’t answer.

A minute later, the third time he told the joke, Xan said, “Why is it bad to trust fish?” He laughed, then said, “Because they make everything up.”

I let this go, thinking it was some kind of meta-humor, Xan’s attempt at surrealism, say. And he changed the subject. He began talking about sun

flares. I remember this specifically, because I wondered if he was making a connection between atoms and flares of the sun. But he wasn't.

A few days later, when Xan told me Dad's joke about tuna, I began to trace his confusion. "What kind of fish is made of two sodium atoms?" Xan asked.

"Two Na," I answered.

"No," he said. "Tuna make everything up."

He had confused one joke with another. But the sad thing was not the misplaced punch line. It was Xan's momentary distress. He was the same Xan. His expression was as unreadable as always. But the feel of him, the energy, was something like embarrassment.

One of my mom's favorite sayings came from a philosopher named Epictetus: "No great thing comes into being all at once." Dad hated this, of course. He'd bring up the big bang and say that the greatest thing of all (the universe) had come into being all at once, before time, even! On the balance, big bang excluded, I agree with Epictetus: most great things take time to happen. And so do catastrophes.

That was the idea that pursued me, as Xan grew less and less like himself.

The weeks following his punch-line mixup were, more or less, normal: I walked with him in the morning, spent time with him when I could. We spoke, as usual, of the things that interested us—my dad, the strangeness of Earth, the pleasures of a good lawn, the way life felt from Xan's perspective, the meaning of God, the meaning of evil, and so on.

Jokes, however, were now a source of pain. Xan simply could not tell them properly. He mixed them up or forgot their punch lines or, eventually, lost the sense and rhythm of them. They became a kind of gibberish to him, and he had to ask me, repeatedly, more and more bewildered, why it is funny when, say, a horse walks into a bar or a dog sits on sandpaper. In fact, I think the only reason he kept telling jokes—until he stopped speaking entirely—was his slowly fading memory of their meaningfulness.

I found this loss particularly difficult. For one thing, Xan's jokes reminded me of Dad, and, for another, it was like watching Xan gradually lose his humanity—if that's the right word for it. (It is funny, in a way, that, for months, I longed for him to succeed at telling jokes that I would have discouraged anyone else from repeating.)

But how do you chart the loss of normal? The constant acceptance of declining normals, each lesser than the one before? Though Xan was forgetting jokes or mixing them up, we could still talk about math, for instance. And then, one day, we simply couldn't, because numeration left him. All of a sudden, quadratic equations meant nothing to him. After that, we could still talk about the sun, until sunlight, heat, the growth of the soil . . . none of that meant anything to Xan. These things had been interesting to him, and then they weren't. And his lack of interest was signalled only by his prolonged silence.

The subject that held his interest the longest was my dad. But then, somewhere near the end, just before Xan lost language—human language, anyway—he asked me, “Who is Robert?”

“My dad,” I answered. “The one who looked after you, before me.”

“Oh, yes,” he said.

But I could tell he didn't remember, and after that we did not speak about Dad.

As strange as it was to discover that Xan could speak, it was stranger still when he stopped. I went out to him, one morning, as usual. It was early June. And I greeted him as always. “Good morning, Xan,” I said. “Did you sleep well?”

His usual answer was “Thank you. Yes.”

Though sometimes he could be more critical. “I slept poorly,” he'd say. “The mattress is lumpy. I would prefer straw.”

But, on this morning, Xan neighed and shook his head. Then he snorted, anxious to go out, it seemed. More than that: he had shit all over the living

room, and had strewn books about, having bitten them and eaten some of their pages.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

But again he neighed, making a sound I associated with his unguarded moments, not with our conversations. And it’s putting it mildly to say that I found his behavior disturbing. It was as if I had entered someone’s home and been confronted by a farm animal, though Xan had never been that.

When I spoke, earlier, of declining normalcy, I was referring to my sense of Xan’s decreasing mental faculties. There had been a physical decline as well, but it wasn’t until he stopped speaking that it finally registered with me. I mean, it wasn’t until he stopped speaking that I understood that his increasing sleekness, as I described it to my mom, was not a sign of good health. In fact, thinking about it now, I’m ashamed that I could have attributed the gradual protrusion of Xan’s rib cage to anything other than decline.

By the time I called Dr. Antony, a local vet, Xan had become whatever it is you call a dying creature who was once noble. He was still a horse, I guess, but that designation had never suited him, and although his decline had made him more horselike, “horse” still didn’t suit him. At least, not to my mind, because I could not forget his manner of speaking, his way of being, all the things that had distinguished him from the simply equine.

I called the vet because, several weeks before he died, Xan tried to bite me.

He’d grown listless. He walked around the field slowly, as if he resented the effort it took. And he stopped for long stretches of time, lost in thought or maybe just bewildered. On one of those occasions, when he’d been immobile for twenty minutes or so, I tried to coax him into moving. I spoke to him and stroked his neck. I meant the touch as an act of affection, but Xan turned to me and tried to bite my hand, distractedly snapping in my direction, his teeth clacking.

The vet was more worried about me than about Xan. Had he actually managed to bite me, it could have been serious. As far as Dr. Antony was

concerned, Xan was old and there was nothing to be done about that. He advised me to have “the animal” put down. His intention was to save Xan from suffering, and he offered to do it for me and arrange to have the carcass taken away.

Of course, there was no question of allowing Xan to suffer. But neither was there a question of letting him be carted away and rendered. I struggled, trying to decide what to do and how to do it. I also struggled with the question of whether I was more upset by Xan’s decline or by the fact that he had turned into a mere horse.

What settled the matter was Xan himself. On a morning three weeks after Dr. Antony’s visit, Xan allowed himself to be led from his now more barnlike house. The place smelled of manure, urine, and uneaten feed. Xan followed me to the field and then, when we’d reached its center, refused to move. He lay down in the grass, his mane unkempt, snorting and kicking out whenever I tried to coax him up. His eye on me then was glacial. And I was certain that he was asking for help to put an end to his confusion.

I did this the only way I knew how.

I shot him and had his body buried in the field where he’d fallen.

So another grief—lesser, but still intense—followed the death of my dad. In fact, I think of it as an echo of the grief I felt at Dad’s passing, a grief that I had, ironically, begun to overcome right around the time that Xan began his final decline.

My mom, of course, felt differently about all of this. As Xan’s body was put into the pit I’d had dug in the yard, she said, “Well, that’s that, at least.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Honestly! You and your dad were obsessed with that horse. I’m glad it’s over. I was worried about Robert for years. And now it’s been years with you. I forbid you to get another horse while I’m still alive.”

Her attitude took me by surprise. Not just what she said but how she said it—with such bitterness. To me, it was as if a close friend had died and I was

watching someone spit on his grave.

It was only then that I began to wonder about the exact nature of Mom's relationship with Xan. And, in the days that followed, I found it difficult to speak to her.

But then: after Xan's death, I was able to gauge the extent of my isolation and loneliness. I was aware of how much I had given up to walk with him every morning and evening. It was like those times when you're too busy to be sick. Your work is too demanding, your nerves too frayed. But as soon as the work lessens and the nerves subside your body surrenders to illness. And so it was that when Xan died I understood at last how alone I had been, and I longed for company.

But then, too: you'll recall that, at the start of this account, I stressed that my dad had prized science and reason above all. He could be a little eccentric in his preference, but it was one of the characteristics that defined him. My mom—who had never easily tolerated his worship of (in her words) “reason, the bringer of nightmares”—had, through her reaction to Xan's death, firmly drawn a line between herself and Xan, Dad, and me. Or, rather, Mom's response had thickened the line that already existed.

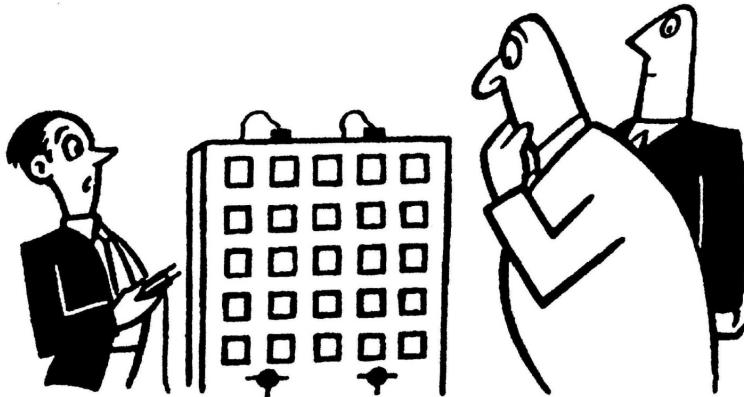
In a way, this comforted me, suggesting as it did that, in this matter at least, Dad and I had been close. We had shared the *knowledge* that Xan was extraordinary. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Field Trip

- [Third Period, a Thousand Feet Over Brooklyn](#)

By [John Seabrook](#)



From the window of his bedroom, in the house in Canarsie, Brooklyn, where he lives with his corrections-officer dad, his middle-school-teacher mom, and two siblings, Gerard Renodo has what he calls a “perfect” view of the Manhattan skyline. “At night they’re really bright,” he said the other day, of the sparkling skyscrapers eight miles away, which he used to fashion out of Legos. His favorite is Herzog & de Meuron’s “Jenga Tower,” at 56 Leonard, which took shape during Renodo’s childhood (he is seventeen). “I like buildings with personality,” he said.

That view is part of what inspired him to want to be an architect, and the reason he chose, for high school, the Urban Assembly School of Design and Construction, in Hell’s Kitchen, where he is now a junior and a member of the National Honor Society. But, because of the pandemic, instead of learning about architecture on the ground, the students were mostly stuck learning about buildings from screens.

When Renodo heard of an after-school class that the firm SHoP Architects was offering to kids at his school, he signed up. “I’ve never met architects before,” he said. “One guy at SHoP told us, ‘You should work at a firm, get a lot of connections, and then, when you’re ready to do it, start your own firm.’ ” That’s Renodo’s plan: “I have a road map now.”

This spring, the class visited SHoP's offices, in the Woolworth Building. It was Renodo's first time in a skyscraper. He and his classmates were captivated by the firm's model of the Brooklyn Tower, a ninety-three-story mixed-use skyscraper that will open later this year. Slender and sleek, the blackened stainless-steel ribs of the supertall gave off strong Gotham City vibes to Renodo and his two Batman-besotted friends Mauricio and Brandon, who also plan to be architects.

Such was the students' interest in the tower model that, on a recent afternoon, SHoP arranged for them to go up in the real thing. First, Renodo and sixteen classmates (the seniors were prepping for the prom) put on hard hats and fluorescent safety vests; the building, which topped out at more than a thousand feet last year, is still a construction site. Then they went up seven flights to the roof of the Dime Savings Bank building, the landmarked 1908 classical-revival edifice that forms part of the Brooklyn Tower's base.

Gesturing skyward, Steven Garcia, a SHoP architect, pointed out how the new tower's "articulated" hexagonal shape reflects the bank's footprint, and how its materials (white marble at the base, with shades of bronze and copper as it rises) are inspired by the bank's Beaux-Arts interior. The class also examined a rendering of one of the three swimming pools that will surround the bank's classical dome, right where they were standing. The pools will be part of an "amenities floor" that will be available to residents.

"How much will it cost to rent here?" Renodo asked, and the head-bobbing of his classmates indicated that the question was on everyone's mind.

"I'll have to get back to you on that," Garcia replied, adding that thirty per cent of the rentals, which are all below the fifty-third floor, will be offered at "affordable housing" rates.

"Cool!" Renodo said. "You've heard of gentrification?" he said, later. "I am worried about that."

The higher floors will contain a hundred and fifty condominiums, which start at \$875,000 for a four-hundred-and-fifty-two-square-foot studio and go up to six million dollars for a penthouse.

It was time to ascend the tower, via a hoist on its exterior. A representative from the developer, JDS, asked if anyone was scared of heights. He mentioned a visitor who went to see a condo recently and had a panic attack. Construction had to be halted until the man could be brought down.

Up on the sixty-seventh floor, it felt like a different climate zone. Garcia explained that the tower had a pair of two-story open-sided sections, allowing the wind to pass through, to reduce its load on the building. These spaces will be alfresco atria that will include a playground, a basketball court, and the Western Hemisphere's highest dog run.

Renodo and his buddies walked around, trying to spot their own buildings. The mist was too thick to see Canarsie. Renodo stopped at a tray full of nuts and bolts.

“You mind if I take a nut?” he asked.

Garcia said, “No nuts for you, Gerard.”

“I want a souvenir,” Renodo said. He held up a piece of foam insulation.

“How about we take a picture of you with it,” the JDS guy said. “What, that’s not TikTok-worthy enough?”

Renodo put the foam back, and the students headed down the hoist. He wasn’t planning a TikTok video, he explained later: “I just wanted a piece of it.” ♦

Letter from Texas

- [A Texas Teen-Ager's Abortion Odyssey](#)

By [Stephania Taladrid](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Last summer, shortly after a date to Six Flags Over Texas, a thirteen-year-old girl in Dallas was falling in love for the first time. Her father could see it in the pencil drawings she made before bed. Instead of the usual, precise studies of koi fish and wildflowers, she'd sketched herself holding the hand of a boy in a Yankees cap, and enclosed the image in a pink-and-red heart. In the fall, the girl's father permitted her to meet the boy, a tenth grader, after school one day a week. This spring, when he learned that his daughter was pregnant, he concluded that one day a week had been too many.

Within a day, his daughter, whom I'll call Laura, came around to the idea that getting an abortion, soon, might be the best option. This required scheduling an appointment with a doctor who could prescribe her one pill to block progesterone and stop the growth of the fetus, and four other pills to prompt contractions. Her father, who worked in a factory painting locomotives on a 4 A.M.-to-2:30 P.M. shift, decided to use his next day off to take her to a doctor to get the medication. The question was: where? Last September, Senate Bill 8—also known as S.B. 8, or the Texas Heartbeat Act—went into effect across the state and sped up the timeline for enacting such a choice. The new law makes it illegal for women to obtain an abortion past the sixth week of gestation, or even before the sixth week, should electrical activity in fetal cells be detected by ultrasound. No exceptions are made for pregnancies that result from rape or incest, or for those of very young teenagers.

The father's girlfriend, who is close to Laura and controlled the household supply of sanitary pads, deduced that the girl had missed only one period. That meant Laura might just beat the six-week cutoff, so the girlfriend hastened to call local clinics. A few hours later, though, she and the father were confronting a fact faced by many other Texas families since the passage of S.B. 8. "Everything is booked out for a month's time, if you can even get someone on the phone," the girlfriend said. In the nine months since the law was implemented, the number of abortions performed in Texas has fallen by half, according to the Texas Policy Evaluation Project, at the

University of Texas. Meanwhile, thousands of women and girls who want to end their pregnancies have been compelled to seek care in other states.

For Laura's family, the nearest option was Oklahoma, but none of the clinics that the girlfriend called had appointments available. In Arkansas, the wait to see a doctor would be weeks—a delay that the father thought would be hard on Laura, an eighth grader who sometimes spoke of feeling isolated and depressed. "I'm not putting her through that," the father told his girlfriend. Finally, seven calls later, the girlfriend reached a clinic in Santa Teresa, New Mexico, whose doctor could see Laura that weekend. It was a decent place, the girlfriend could report with confidence; she'd taken a pregnant relative there the month before. There were two catches, though. The clinic was seven hundred miles away, and the cost was, for the family, exorbitant.

Under Texas law, insurers are forbidden to cover abortions unless the woman's life is at risk. At the New Mexico clinic, the appointment to get a sonogram and obtain the five abortion pills would cost the family seven hundred dollars. And, because the trip was so long—ten or eleven hours by car—they would also have to leave a day early and pay for somewhere to spend the night. The previous month, the father had ransacked his savings to make a five-thousand-dollar down payment on a three-bedroom house—a step up from the decrepit rental where the family had lived for five years. After renting a U-Haul truck for the move, paying utility deposits, and buying pots, pans, and a toaster, all he had left was fifteen hundred dollars—his emergency stash, "something to fall back on," he said. He felt sick at the thought that he'd now be using that stash to secure a legal abortion for Laura in New Mexico.

The father understood intimately what teen-age parenthood entailed. Laura was born when he was a high-school sophomore. She was, as he always told her, a wanted child. But, after his relationship with Laura's mother imploded and he found himself raising their daughter and, later, two younger girls, it had taken him a decade, and at times three jobs, to get his family off public assistance. If Laura had a baby, they might find themselves slipping back into the food-stamp life they'd left behind. More than that, though, the pregnancy threatened a particular dream he had for Laura: that she would

press through this hard phase of her adolescence childless, and enjoy some of the fun, silliness, and high-school dance parties that he had missed.

One in four girls and women in the United States will, at some point in her life, seek an abortion. Yet, if the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, which, in 1973, established a woman's constitutional right to the procedure, the long journeys to oversubscribed clinics that have become a fact of life in Texas will almost certainly become the norm throughout much of the country. Post-*Roe*, legal authority will devolve to the states, thirteen of which have in place "trigger laws" that would ban all, or nearly all, abortions. Ultimately, according to the Guttmacher Institute, twenty-six states are likely to outlaw the procedure. Some pregnant people in the U.S. who will be stripped of the right to legal abortion will go on to have illegal procedures. Others will be forced into motherhood. And millions of families will find themselves grappling with the same calculations that Laura's family was encountering this spring: How far are we able to go, financially and emotionally, to terminate a pregnancy? And, when it's all done and paid for, how much farther down the socioeconomic ladder will we be?

By necessity, the trip to get Laura an abortion would be a family affair. The father's girlfriend would come along to be with Laura when she saw the doctor, and Laura's sisters would also be joining them, the family budget being too tight to cover two days of babysitting. The father told the younger girls, in lieu of an explanation, "This is a top-secret mission." He hoped they might never learn that Laura had been pregnant. But, in a time of regrets about his parenting judgments, taking his eldest girl out of state to have the abortion would not be one of them. "There's always a crowd of people outside protesting," he said, of Texas clinics. "They've got baby-fetus signs and are yelling, 'In the name of the Father!' They're coming to your car window as you're driving in." Even if Laura had been able to get an appointment for an abortion within the time frame demanded by S.B. 8, he couldn't stand the thought of subjecting her to the shame and stigma associated with the procedure in his home state.

Instead, one gusty Friday afternoon in April, he, his girlfriend, and the three girls climbed into a blue Chevrolet van and headed west. The middle sister, who was eight, brought along persistent questions—Is Laura sick? And, if she is sick, why does she have to go so far away to see a doctor? The four-

year-old brought along her stuffed unicorn, Chelsea. For the journey, she had put on bright-pink sneakers, and they lit up every time she tapped her feet.

The small, unincorporated community of Santa Teresa sits on the southern edge of New Mexico, a short drive from downtown El Paso. A developer established the town in the nineteen-seventies, envisioning a binational planned community of industrial parks, country clubs, and luxurious homes —a dream that, by the nineties, had failed. Today, as its golf courses turn to rubble and the tennis courts grow hairy with weeds, the new draw in town is a clinic tucked away in a drab strip mall near the Rio Grande, where girls and women can end their pregnancies legally.

Women’s Reproductive Clinic, which is poised, post-Roe, to be among the last remaining abortion providers in the Southwest, is situated alongside insurance businesses, fast-food joints, and a cannabis store. Last year, it averaged a hundred and fifty-four abortion patients a month. This spring, thanks to Texas’s new restrictions, the number of monthly patients is nearing three hundred. Occasionally, picketers in front of the clinic try to intercept arriving patients and usher them into a large turquoise van, where free sonograms are performed and anti-abortion literature is shared. But on most days a sense of stillness pervades the outside of the clinic, in part because of Juan Carlos, a spry, silver-haired security guard whose gaze alone is said to dissuade those who may be primed for a fight. The greater tension, since the passage of S.B. 8, lies on the other side of the tinted-glass doors, in the waiting room.

In late April, when I visited the clinic, a receptionist named Elizabeth Hernández sat at a desk heaped with patient records and bills, greeting women and answering calls. Lately, she said, some of the callers are panicked as they schedule appointments, asking, “Am I going to get arrested? Are they going to follow me from the clinic afterwards?” A provision in S.B. 8 allows any private citizen to sue those who “aid or abet” a woman seeking an abortion in Texas past the six-week mark, whether the abettors are Lyft drivers or relatives who lend money for the procedure. Hernández, who is thirty-five, feels the ambient anxiety surrounding S.B. 8 even when she goes home, where her children have started worrying that she’ll be attacked on the job.

Her friend and fellow-receptionist Rocío Negrete has been working at the clinic for seven years. Until S.B. 8, she never saw patients from East Texas or Central Texas. But a stack of folders she was examining one afternoon showed how far women would be travelling to receive the abortion pills, mifepristone and misoprostol, the following day. They were coming for these “medication abortions” from Lubbock, Houston, Odessa, Oklahoma City. Lots of women were coming from Oklahoma and Louisiana this year, because Texan women had taken so many open slots at abortion clinics in their own states. In the coming months, the influx from Oklahoma will likely surge, given that its governor, Kevin Stitt, just signed a bill prohibiting abortion from the moment of fertilization, the most extreme restriction in the country.

If both running a clinic and getting an appointment at one feel fraught these days, early abortion remains, medically speaking, a simple procedure. A woman who comes to the clinic in Santa Teresa will, like women who visit many other clinics in the U.S., receive a counselling session, a sonogram to confirm how far along she is in the pregnancy, and the five pills, all but one to be ingested elsewhere, that will end it. But, as the conversation around abortion grows more punitive, and as states continue to roll back women’s rights, distressed patients sometimes take their feelings out on clinic workers. “They talk to us like we’re the ones that made them be in this situation,” Hernández said. And yet she is sympathetic, because she considers all the new obstacles to having a straightforward procedure to be a form of psychological warfare. “People barely get the courage to actually go forth with it,” she said. “They’re just trying to break you down, further and further, until you’re finally, like, ‘You know what? Never mind.’ ”

One morning, a thirty-two-year-old bartender from Houston lay supine on a table in the clinic’s windowless sonogram room, ultrasound jelly smeared across her flat stomach. She was determined not to say “Never mind.” She was on birth control, which had, evidently, failed. And although she had discovered the pregnancy at five weeks—seemingly in time for a legal abortion in Texas—she discovered, as Laura’s family did, that all the clinics near her were booked for three or four weeks in advance. A woman would have to make an appointment before even missing a period to beat that unforgiving clock.

To her further shock, during a sonogram in that fifth week of pregnancy, she learned that, atypically, cellular electrical activity—what is often called the fetal heartbeat—could already be heard. So, even if she'd been able to unearth a slot at a clinic elsewhere in Texas, an abortion was already illegal. Motherhood was not an option. "I want to be able to choose a different path for myself," she told Franz Theard, the gynecologist who owns the clinic, as he moved the probe over her belly.

Theard, who is seventy-three, has been performing abortions for nearly five decades. His usual demeanor, casual and sunny, is in stark contrast to the vehemence of the abortion debate. He'd like to spend more time in the years ahead on his backhand and net game, and during the pandemic, recovering from a bad bout of *COVID-19*, he considered retiring. He considered it again recently upon learning that the clinic's landlord didn't want to renew his lease and that he'd have to find another space to practice. But he doesn't want to make the existing shortage of abortion providers in the American Southwest worse.

The bartender told Theard that she had contemplated travelling to Arkansas, where abortions are currently allowed up to the twentieth week, but getting one would require first meeting with a counsellor, as mandated by the state; undergoing an ultrasound; observing the fetus and listening to its heartbeat; getting a detailed description of its development; waiting seventy-two hours before the procedure took place; and, finally, driving four hundred miles back to Houston. How could she take that much time off work? She had briefly considered Louisiana, but the clinics that she found there, including one in a small, dark-brick house in Baton Rouge, inspired no trust. "It looked like somewhere where I would die," she said.

Back home, people close to her had already suffered S.B. 8's consequences. A member of her family had found out in her first trimester that her fetus had a possible birth defect, but it was too late for her to get an abortion under Texas law, so she had to continue the pregnancy until the fetus died, mid-term, after which she had no option but to deliver the corpse. Around the same time, her boss's wife had a similar experience and almost died. "I was about to give up," she told the doctor. "Then my boyfriend suggested we try New Mexico, and we found you."

Twenty states, New Mexico among them, have a firmly liberal stance on abortion, a position that a Roe reversal is unlikely to change. There is no waiting period in New Mexico, minors can undergo the procedure without consent from their parents, and the state offers funding for abortions necessitated by medical emergencies. Theard appreciates the privilege of treating patients in this unusually stable context. Even before S.B. 8, abortion providers had been fleeing Texas, and he had been one of them.

Until 2020, he had operated a second clinic, in El Paso. Although there, as in Santa Teresa, he treated many pregnant people whose babies he would go on to deliver, his practice became a political target because of the abortions he was willing to perform. For years, picketers had accosted his employees, shouting and waving placards that said “Burn in Hell!” Those picketers sometimes swarmed his home, forcing his family to live behind closed shutters. (His eldest daughter is now a photography editor at this magazine.) Still, he kept working until, mid-pandemic, a friend and business partner died. Theard realized that, on his own, he couldn’t face another year in a state whose legislators kept devising ever more onerous regulations. He had learned to live with the frequent inspections and fines for infractions. More troubling was the mandate that he provide each of his patients with a reading package containing information he knew to be false, such as the long-debunked connection between abortion and an elevated risk of breast cancer.

Research has established a far clearer link between carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term and living in poverty. One longitudinal project, the Turnaway Study, found that women who were denied an abortion they had hoped for were almost four times more likely to fall below the federal poverty line than women who had received one. Many women I met at Theard’s clinic—some of them in visible distress—had decided that they couldn’t bear the cost of another child.

The unbearable cost was typically economic (half of abortion recipients, nationally, have incomes below the federal poverty line), but in some cases it was time. A mother from North Texas, in her late twenties, worked the night shift as a supervisor in a lab. Every day, she returned home at 11 *A.M.*; slept until 3 *P.M.*, when it was time to help her children with their homework; went back to bed at 7 *P.M.*; and forced herself to get up four hours later to go back to work. And this job was better by far than her previous one. “I barely

have time for the children I have,” she said, resigned. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that sixty per cent of abortion recipients are mothers already. One Peruvian woman I met at the clinic had left three children, including an eleven-month-old, at home to travel seven hundred miles not to have a fourth—a decision that made her tired eyes well with tears.

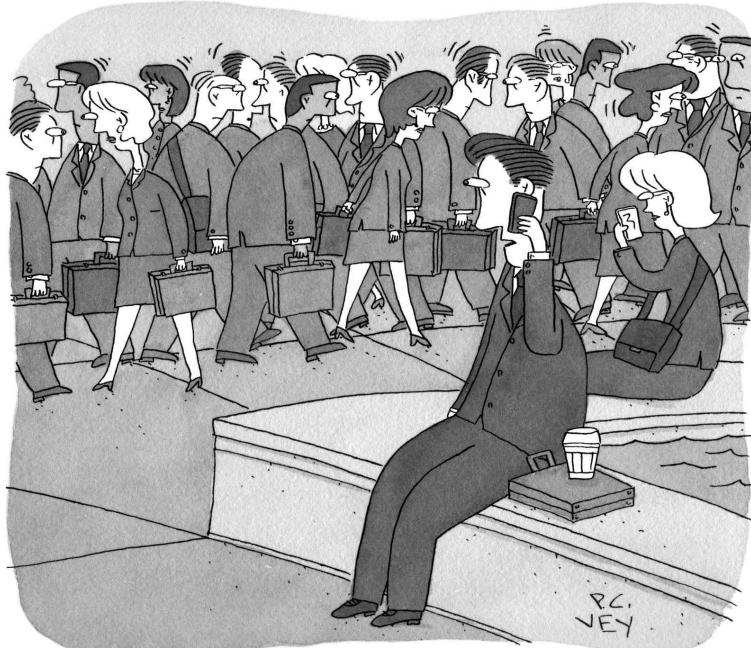
The stigma surrounding abortion leaves some of its exploitative economic components underexamined. Between 2017 and 2022, according to researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, the average cost of a medication abortion escalated in lockstep with demand, from four hundred and ninety-five to five hundred and sixty-eight dollars. The trap—one perhaps not unintentionally set—is that, as states mandate that abortions be done earlier and earlier in the pregnancy, increasing costs extend the time it takes for many people to come up with the funds. Of participants in the Turnaway Study, fifty-four per cent of those who had abortions reported delaying the procedure because they had to raise the money for it.

An East African woman who had flown in from Fort Worth told me ruefully that the total cost of her trip would be thirteen hundred dollars: five hundred for the flight, seven hundred at the clinic, and a hundred in cab fares. “I have three kids—I can’t drive eight hours,” she said, adding that her husband had stayed home to look after the children, the youngest of whom was two. The woman, who said she had missed one birth-control pill, was six weeks into her pregnancy.

In the wake of S.B. 8, Theard had decided to treat first the patients who had travelled the farthest to reach his clinic—the sooner they got back on the road, the less likely they would be to fall asleep at the wheel on the drive back home. But the receptionists, Negrete and Hernández, sometimes had to tweak his rule when tensions arose in the waiting room, whose atmosphere they worked hard to keep welcoming and soothing. “What I try to do is have one out-of-towner, followed by one local,” Negrete said. “That way, they won’t feel forgotten. If not, they’re, like, ‘Well, we’re coming from Texas, too!’ Yeah? From where? ‘From El Paso.’ *Mija*, that’s not McAllen.”

The week I visited, the youngest patient Dr. Theard and his staff would be seeing was fourteen-year-old Laura, from Dallas. On the ride to Santa

Teresa, Laura mainly sat in silence, staring at the Snapchat feed on her phone and feeling annoyed at her younger sisters for gulping their drinks and lengthening the trip with their constant need for bathroom stops. To Laura, the journey felt like eighth grade in general—an extended nightmare you just wanted to end.



"I gotta go. I see an opening in the maelstrom."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

It had been hard for her to make friends this school year, though she had really tried. “People were, like, ‘Yeah, we should make plans this weekend. I’ll let you know what we want to do.’ And I’m, like, ‘O.K., let me know,’ and nothing really ever happens,” she said. Having her first boyfriend was the bright spot. At fifteen, he seemed older—already working as a server at a local restaurant to help his mom pay the bills. He was one of those guys who, like her dad, was always hitting up the boss for extra hours. But, in the week before the drive to New Mexico, she hadn’t seen much of the perfect smile that had enticed her last summer. He “needed space” was how she explained it. He was finding her pregnancy “a lot to process.”

As Laura’s father drove, he occasionally glanced at her face in the rearview mirror. He tried not to burden his daughters with concerns about money, but Laura was clever enough to figure out for herself how a newborn in the family would affect their ability to cover the new \$3,003 mortgage payments, which he and his girlfriend, an administrative assistant,

shouldered together. The rental unit they'd recently left had holes in the roof, and the ceiling below was encrusted in mold. They'd had to clean up rat droppings everywhere, including the refrigerator. The new house was in a calm neighborhood with decent schools that made the father think of the background illustrations in Dr. Seuss books he'd read to his girls. Just before the pregnancy, he'd bought a dining table, and his brother had given him a secondhand fridge with an icemaker and, thus far, no rats. Laura had called the house "our fresh start." But now, with inflation, soaring gas prices, and this unexpected abortion expense, the father had begun questioning a choice he'd finally made after ten years of planning.

The road from Dallas to New Mexico was monotonously flat, and, for those in the car who knew the real purpose of the trip, the stress and the secrecy were equally fatiguing. If Roe is overturned, the emotional intensity of trips like this one will only increase, should anti-abortion legislatures experiment, as is expected, with laws that impose penalties on those who cross state lines to get procedures that their home states have declared illegal. The father and his girlfriend took turns at the wheel, and at each stop he saved the receipts: forty-five dollars at Chick-fil-A; between forty and seventy dollars each of the three times they stopped for gas; a hundred and eighty dollars for a single room at a low-rise Holiday Inn in El Paso, which the family reached after midnight, all of them collapsing, exhausted, on arrival.

The Holiday Inn is twelve miles from the Paso del Norte International Bridge, which spans the border with Mexico. On the other side, in Ciudad Juárez, the streets are crowded with medical establishments: dentists, surgeons, opticians, imaging labs, hospitals, and a multitude of pharmacies. Some of the pharmacies, unbeknownst to Laura's father, were selling misoprostol, which, taken alone, may induce abortion, though at increased risk to a woman than if taken with mifepristone. Demand in the United States for such "self-managed abortions" is already high.

One day, I visited a string of Juárez pharmacies with Negrete, who was born and raised in the city. At one of them, nestled among currency-exchange kiosks on a busy avenue, a pharmacist said he had seen an uptick in the number of American women coming in to ask about misoprostol. Depending on the brand, the retail cost of the pills that are needed to induce abortion ranged from five hundred and seventy-six to three thousand pesos—twenty-

eight to a hundred and fifty dollars. A prescription was required, he said. No exceptions.

A few blocks into the city center, however, another pharmacy sold boxes of abortion pills over the counter for less than thirty dollars. Each box contained twenty-eight pills—enough to induce multiple abortions—and was affixed with a label stating that the doses should be administered by a doctor. When I asked the woman at the counter for advice about how to use the pills safely, she replied with a blank stare. “They are clueless,” Negrete said, once we’d left the pharmacy.

Women pretending to be Theard’s patients often called the clinic, hoping to get guidance about the abortions they are doing on their own. Self-managed abortion will inevitably increase after Roe, as will the accompanying problems. Negrete knew of women who had swallowed all twenty-eight pills at once. Others had shown up at the clinic having inserted the twenty-eight pills vaginally—a popular underground method that may result in a fatal bacterial infection. “Women,” Negrete said in a hushed voice, “are risking their lives.”

In such a context, it’s easy to forget that women with access to the pills are the lucky ones. Today and in the future, regardless of what happens with Roe, the choice to have an abortion is effectively eliminated already for two overlapping sets of Texans: those who lack the money to travel out of state and those who are unable to risk the journey, as is the case for many women who are undocumented. There are more than a dozen checkpoints manned by U.S. Border Patrol officers across Texas, which means that nearly all undocumented women in need of an abortion are essentially confined to the areas where they live, and thus cannot escape the six-week rule. The rare exceptions are those who are awaiting immigration court hearings, which determine whether or not they can legally stay in the country.

At the clinic, I met one of the exceptions: a Cuban immigrant newly arrived in Texas without documents. She’d travelled to the U.S. with her brother, ahead of her husband and daughter, hoping she could eventually earn enough as a hair stylist to pay for their passage. “Either you have a relative abroad,” the woman said, “*o te mueres pa’l carajo*”—or you die in Hell. She’d gone first to Nicaragua, then hopped a bus to Honduras, where she

was detained until, for two hundred dollars, local immigration authorities offered safe passage into Guatemala. Five days later, alongside fifty others, she crossed the border into the U.S. from the northern Mexican city of Piedras Negras, swimming through the Rio Grande's forceful currents after dawn. "Throughout the entire journey, I never got my period," she told me. "I thought it was because of stress." Rumor in a stash house where the woman spent the night had it that her chances of being allowed into the country would improve if she turned herself in, so she did. After six days in a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility, she was released and reunited in Texas with her father, who had settled eight years ago in Odessa. That same day, she learned she was pregnant.

Her father had spent twenty thousand dollars to get her and her brother out of Cuba. There was no more money for a baby, so the woman had to request permission from immigration authorities to cross state lines to get to Theard's clinic. They gave her a phone that had a tracking app called SmartLINK, which routinely asked her to submit a photograph of herself. She worried less about the immigration surveillance than about her husband, who had threatened to divorce her if she got an abortion. "I still don't know what I'm going to say to him," she told me.

"Would you be upset if I talked you out of it?" Dr. Theard asked a patient gently while performing her sonogram. The thirty-five-year-old woman, who had been raised in foster care, replied with a cautious smile that she was sure. She refused to risk having a child go through what she had experienced. For years, she had taken antidepressants, sedatives, and other drugs to help her cope with the effects of that childhood trauma, and hadn't had a period in four years. Her body was gradually ceasing ovulation, as if ratifying a choice she'd made long ago.

Later, Theard told me that he often asks women if he can talk them out of their decision—a question at which patients and staff have been known to bridle. On one level, he is trying to discern whether women are being coerced into the procedure. On another, he told me, he's thinking about how, pregnant with him in Haiti, in the late nineteen-forties, his own mother considered not having a child. Evenings, her husband would put on an elegant suit, mist himself with cologne, and be off to what he called a meeting. "He would come back home at two in the morning and all hell

would break loose,” the doctor recalled. In the end, she had Franz and later left Haiti, resettling with him in Washington, D.C.

In the years after the Second World War, the United States and small islands in the Caribbean weren’t terribly alike, but in both places an illegal abortion could usually be obtained if you had money and lived in a city and knew the right people. Through the fifties and sixties, in this country, hundreds of thousands of women managed to get one, according to a Guttmacher Institute estimate. Theard’s own mastery of the practice came the following decade, after abortion was legalized. Having completed medical school at George Washington University, he was deployed with the Army in Frankfurt, Germany, where, he recalled, “there was a lot of screwing going on.” Every week or so, military planes carrying men and women from bases elsewhere landed in Frankfurt, where ten gynecologists, including Theard, were on call. After watching other doctors perform abortions over and over, it was soon second nature to him, too.

When the U.S. became, with Roe, one of the first countries in the world to liberalize its abortion laws, dozens of other countries followed—an expansion of legal abortion rights worldwide that continued into this century. In recent years, though, a handful of countries have retracted those rights, among them Poland, Nicaragua, and the U.S. Theard believes that the politics of abortion in Texas today, and across the U.S. tomorrow, will bring back the secrecy, the criminality, and the unrest that buffeted women’s lives when he was growing up. “I cannot believe that people who were born after ’73 are going back to the Middle Ages,” he said. “Sometimes I think it is more of a taboo now than it was then.”

If Roe is overturned, federal agencies are bracing for a rise in anti-abortion violence, but Theard has decided it’s useless to anticipate public antagonisms that he is helpless to control. “I never learned to shoot while I was in the Army,” he said. “It’s not like I’m going to get a gun now.” A more pressing concern is how to sell his practice to a younger doctor. Like many other aging abortion providers, he’s tried for years. There are no buyers.

Laura’s boyfriend had been slow to text back on the morning she would start her abortion. He had some story about having to take his little brother to get

a haircut. Distressed, Laura put on a black hoodie and sweatpants, pulled her long, straight hair back into a ponytail, and rode to the clinic, where she welcomed the minor mercy of being able to hide her face behind a medical mask. In accordance with typical clinic practice, her father and sisters would wait outside, as would other partners, husbands, brothers, and children. Dr. Theard believed that discouraging men from entering the clinic lowered the risk of women being pressured to have the procedure against their will. Children—at least, those not having abortions—were usually kept out because many women had told him that their presence made them sad and uncomfortable. As Laura crossed the parking lot with her father’s girlfriend, two people were offering free pregnancy tests to women exiting their cars, and she couldn’t make out their agendas. That confusion was one of the many elements of the day that left her feeling “just scared.” She was morning-sick, maybe. Heartsick, definitely. Inside a waiting room crowded with other patients from out of town—some of them staring at every new person who walked through the door—she was all too aware that she was the youngest.

No patient at the clinic is called by name, for privacy reasons, so Laura was Patient No. 10. For three hours, Patient No. 10 used every bit of self-discipline in her possession not to turn for comfort to TikTok, knowing that its spangly music and trippy voices might bother the women around her, or provoke more age-appraising stares. Finally, her number rang out in the room.

A few minutes later, Theard was wiping down the probe he’d applied to her belly and informing her that she was in her sixth week: early enough for a legal abortion in Texas, had the state had any slots. She put her hoodie back on and accepted a thimble-size cup containing one mifepristone pill, which prevents the pregnancy from growing. “Nothing is going to happen,” Theard said. “Just swallow it like a Tylenol.” Laura lowered her mask, did as instructed, and left the clinic carrying several items that, together, felt like a lot: instructions to visit the emergency room the next day for a shot to reduce the likelihood of complications connected to her blood type, O negative; an envelope containing four misoprostol pills, to be taken to start the contractions the next day; and a note to middle-school administrators to excuse her absence the day after that.

Laura's father couldn't pack up the family and flee the parking lot fast enough, and on impulse he decided to make some quick detours in El Paso, where his mother had grown up. One stop, made in part to cheer up his artistically gifted daughter, was the Segundo Barrio, where graffiti artists from around the country had come together in February to tag walls of industrial warehouses as part of a celebration known as the Borderland Jam. There were renderings of Indigenous goddesses and gods and Mexican icons and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The youngest girl was ecstatic—"Come on, come on, come on!" she said, running toward the murals. Laura gravitated to the paintings farthest from her family. The next stop was a cheese shop that her grandmother had loved, in the sleepy border town of San Elizario. She'd urged her son not to leave West Texas without picking up her favorite asadero cheese, a specialty of northern Mexico. She'd reimburse him, she had solemnly promised.

A third stop, nondiscretionary, was at a Border Patrol checkpoint, where a long line of cars and trailers also waited, and dogs were circling vehicles, sniffing for drugs and hidden migrants. When the family's turn came to be eyeballed, Laura's father answered flatly and truthfully a single question—"U.S. citizen?"—and was free to go. A hundred miles later, at an Exxon, his debit card giving him trouble, the U.S. citizen turned to his eldest daughter and said, sighing, "It's your turn to take care of me."

He wondered how, or if, his family would recover from the financial blow, now that they had "nothing to fall back on." He couldn't feign interest in Season 4 of "The Vampire Diaries," which his girlfriend was watching on her phone to stay awake as she drove the trip's final leg. He slept instead. By the time he woke up in the driveway of his house in a Dr. Seuss neighborhood, it was one in the morning, the next mortgage payment was due in seven days, and the absurdity of the top-secret mission hit him all over again. He said, as if summoning a distant memory, "We did feel like we were moving up."

"Place the pills between upper lip and gum for 30 minutes then swallow with water," read the instructions on the envelope in Laura's hand. If Roe is overturned, what Laura did that Sunday after a few hours' sleep will likely be criminalized in many states, including her own. In some places,

terminating a pregnancy from the time of the egg's fertilization—or fetal personhood, as anti-abortion activists call it—may be tantamount to murder.

Before long, Laura was beset by agonizing cramps. She threw up the macaroni and cheese that she'd eaten for lunch. At one point, she felt like she was dying. And although her boyfriend was texting back that morning, sharing thoughts on the new Batman movie and the relative cuteness of a range of husky dogs on YouTube, the only real comfort came from a hot shower. She was in such pain that her father had to carry her to the bathroom. By day's end, Laura was no longer pregnant.

Negrete and other employees at the Santa Teresa clinic routinely follow up with patients, three days after they take the pills, to make sure their abortions have gone smoothly. Many will experience severe cramping and feel nauseated and dizzy, as Laura did. A few will face more serious complications, such as critical blood loss or septic shock. Sometimes medication abortions simply fail and women remain pregnant. But a lot of what patients experience Negrete and her colleagues will never know, because they don't reach half the women on their lists. Women often share fake contact details, and, when they do provide genuine phone numbers, some of them hang up when they hear that the person on the other end is from the clinic.

The call went to voice mail when one of Dr. Theard's employees tried to reach Laura. What was she going to tell a stranger, anyway? In the weeks after the abortion, her emotions were raw. She was angry about being barred from seeing her boyfriend for the foreseeable future, and sick of lectures about actions having repercussions. She'd been dragged to a doctor who prescribed birth control and tested her for S.T.D.s. "I'm tired of talking about consequences," Laura said. "I just want it to be over." It was a relief one day to hang out with her grandmother, who didn't judge her and laughed when, in passing, someone called El Paso beautiful, because to her it was "just dirt and rocks." But mainly, Laura said, "it's kind of just been lonely—sitting in my room the whole time, watching TikTok." She didn't even feel like drawing. A sketch of her and her boyfriend, made right before she learned she was pregnant, was the last one she'd done.

In the middle of the night recently, Laura's father woke to overhear his daughter, in the next room, finishing a call with her boyfriend and then weeping. "Dude, I gotta get up at 2 A.M. to get to work," the father snapped, upon entering her bedroom. When he saw her face, he sat down on the bed.

"I guess I had been holding it in for a while," Laura explained. She was embarrassed about having had an abortion, disgusted with herself. She wanted to go back to the person she was before. Sometimes it felt like a whole country was second-guessing her decision. "Think about it, either way you were going to have to battle with emotions," her father said, embracing her. "If somebody else is saying anything, it's none of their business. Remember why you did it. It was to better your future, wasn't it?" ♦

Musical Events

- A Grand Tour of Germany's Opera Paradise

By [Alex Ross](#)

Germany is, on statistical grounds, the most operatic country on earth. The Bundesrepublik has more than eighty permanent opera houses, which in a typical season present seven or eight thousand performances—about a third of the global total, according to the Web site Operabase. By contrast, Italy, the birthplace of the art, manages fewer than two thousand. As opportunities elsewhere dwindle, the German system has become a crucial mechanism by which opera careers are made. Countless younger singers from around the world have undergone the ritual of a *Festvertrag*—a fixed-term contract to sing a variety of roles at a single German house. With so many productions, directors feel free to try out new ideas, some outlandish and some revelatory. New works surface regularly; forgotten scores are given a second chance. Public funding makes this quasi-utopia possible: before the pandemic, federal, state, and local entities were spending 2.7 billion euros each year on theatre.

For years, I had read stories about the German opera industry without really having experienced it firsthand. I'd visited the celebrated companies of Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and Dresden but not the dozens of smaller houses that flesh out the network. So, on a recent trip to Germany, I ignored the metropolitan centers and took fresh exits off the Autobahn. The array of offerings available during a four-day stretch was staggering. Beyond the usual surfeit of Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini, I could have seen Martinů's "The Greek Passion," in Osnabrück; Auber's "La Muette de Portici," in Kassel; Glass's "In the Penal Colony," in Gera; or three different stagings of "Der Rosenkavalier," in Dessau, Nuremberg, and Trier. I settled on an itinerary in central and eastern Germany: "Aida" in Chemnitz, "The Marriage of Figaro" in Erfurt, and "Die Walküre" in Coburg. The combined population of the three cities adds up to half a million—less than Kansas City's.

What's most striking to an American opera tourist is how cheap tickets are. At the stops on my trip, prices ranged from fifteen to fifty-two euros, with further discounts for students. In many places, people with limited resources can get in for free. How long these lavish subsidies can persist is an open question: fears of cutbacks are always circulating, and studies indicate a gradual erosion of interest in classical music. For now, though, the system

seems secure, with the performing arts widely considered a form of *Lebensmittel*—basic nourishment. The German minister of culture, Claudia Roth, who once served as a dramaturge in Dortmund and also managed a rock band, recently announced a seven-per-cent increase in arts funding.

The old industrial city of Chemnitz bore the name Karl-Marx-Stadt during the East German period. A gigantic bust of Marx remains the city's chief landmark; dour Warsaw Pact architecture still predominates. Leftist Chemnitz takes pride in its Communist heritage, although the far right has an ominous presence, as violent anti-immigrant demonstrations in 2018 made plain. The operatic arm of Theater Chemnitz, which also presents ballet, plays, and concerts, makes use of an imposing neo-Baroque theatre that was opened in 1909, destroyed in 1945, rebuilt by 1951, and modernized in the late eighties and early nineties. The auditorium seats seven hundred and twenty; the acoustics are dry but clear.

Theater Chemnitz is noted for its adventurous repertory, having exhumed such rarities as Meyerbeer's “Vasco da Gama,” Pfitzner's “Die Rose vom Liebesgarten,” and Kienzl's “Der Evangelimann.” The company has also offered a feminist take on Wagner's “Ring,” with four women directing. The “Aida,” the brainchild of the producing team of Renaud Doucet and André Barbe, mixed novelty and familiarity. It is the year 1870, and we are at the Paris villa of the Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, who had the initial idea for “Aida” and who supervised sets and costumes for the opera's première, in Cairo, in 1871. Trapped at home by the Franco-Prussian War, Mariette oversees a rehearsal of the work, with friends, servants, soldiers, and two mischievous children joining in. You have the sense that Mariette—a silent role, played by Rolf Germeroth—is defying the chaos of war by escaping into an aesthetic sphere. In later acts, the framing device recedes and the central drama takes over. The final tableau is entrancing and haunting: as Aida and Radamès die in isolation, Mariette and the rest of the motley company from the villa come back into view, staring into historical oblivion. Ingeniously, the staging gestures toward scenic grandeur without actually needing elaborate sets.

A committed cast of singers adroitly negotiated this tricky layering of identities. The Russian soprano Olga Shurshina, as Aida, showed a big, opulent voice, typically Slavic in its quick vibrato and chesty timbre. Aided

by deep breath support, she spun out generous legato phrases and structured her major arias confidently. Hector Sandoval, as Radamès, lacked ringing tone but created a rapt, affecting aura in his “Celeste Aida.” Most crucial to the evening’s success was Diego Martin-Etxebarria, Chemnitz’s principal resident conductor, who expertly marshalled Verdi’s marches and choruses while highlighting subtleties of orchestration in between. The Met’s monumental, literal-minded “Aida” has accustomed me not to think too much about Verdi’s final grand opera; the team in Chemnitz goes considerably deeper.

Erfurt’s operatic topography is, in a way, the reverse of Chemnitz’s. Where the Chemnitz theatre is a relic of a largely destroyed prewar cityscape, Theater Erfurt resides in a sleek modern structure surrounded by an unusually well-preserved medieval city. From the upper lobby, you can see the spires of Erfurt’s immense Gothic cathedral, glowing at sunset. In this case, newer is better. The theatre, designed by Jörg Friedrich and opened in 2003, is not just a chic place to spend an evening but a thoroughly satisfying venue in which to hear opera. The acoustics are warm and bright; voices project without effort; sight lines throughout the eight-hundred-seat auditorium are good. (In the wake of Germany’s Omicron wave, attendance lagged, and I was able to move around at will.)

The “Figaro” staging, a collaboration between the director Martina Veh and the set designer Momme Hinrichs, recalls one of those saucy TV shows, like “Bridgerton” and “The Great,” which mash together period settings and modern manners. Rococo costumes are done up in garish colors; courtly gestures go hand in hand with libertinage. Everyone is sleeping with everyone else; at one point, Susanna and the Countess paw at Cherubino’s crotch. The promiscuity had the unfortunate effect of lowering the stakes of the drama: the lofty heartbreak of the Countess’s “Dove sono” makes less sense if she has a horny page at her disposal. Still, Veh carries off her vision with comic flair and a sharply unified style.

I’ve seldom seen a “Figaro” cast that had such a spirited sense of ensemble. It helped that, as at so many German houses, the singers truly *are* an ensemble: working together season after season, they develop keen theatrical rapport. Shenanigans involving trapdoors and pullout beds went off with Lubitschean precision. Vocal standouts included Máté Sólyom-Nagy’s

rugged Figaro, Florence Losseau's spicy Cherubino, and Kakhaber Shavidze's stentorian Bartolo. Samuel Bächli, who recently retired as Erfurt's general music director, propelled the action with elegant, spry conducting. Each act seemed to dance by in a matter of minutes.

Coburg, with a population of forty-one thousand, is by far the smallest of the cities I visited. American municipalities of equivalent size are Manassas, Virginia, and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Neither has lately staged Wagner. Coburg is, however, no ordinary town; the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha possessed inordinate influence in the nineteenth century, not least as a gene pool for the British Royal Family. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, and her mother, Princess Victoria, were both born in Coburg. The Landestheater, a handsome neoclassical pile with four hundred and ninety-one seats, was built at the behest of Ernst I, Albert's father. Schloss Ehrenburg, the ducal residence, is across the plaza. Beforehand, I made sure to sample the famous Coburger bratwurst, which is grilled over a pinecone fire.

The Coburg "Walküre," directed by Alexander Müller-Elmau, is the second installment of a "Ring" cycle in progress. The concept mixes mythic and contemporary elements: fur garments over tank tops, punk Valkyries on swings, a television broadcasting the company's production of "Das Rheingold." There are a few too many reminiscences of past "Ring"s—the fateful pendulum from Patrice Chéreau's 1976 staging at Bayreuth makes a pointless appearance—but Wagner's sublime tangle of politics and emotion comes across.

Because a full-sized Wagner orchestra wouldn't fit into Coburg's pit, the company made do with a reduced complement of fifty-eight players. The conductor was Daniel Carter, Coburg's young, Australian-born music director. Although the ensemble sounded scrappy in places, I found it refreshing to hear Wagner on intimate terms, with psychology trumping spectacle. The vocal discovery of the night was the young Swedish soprano Åsa Jäger, who sang Brünnhilde with clarion tone, crisp diction, and infectious zest. This run of performances marks not only Jäger's German début but also her début in any Wagner role. I suspect that later in her career she will look back fondly on Coburg, where her ascent began. The ultimate

appeal of operagoing in Germany is to see a venerable art form experiencing continuous rebirth. ♦

On Television

- [“The Staircase” Deconstructs the True-Crime Genre](#)

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

In 2004, when the French filmmaker Jean-Xavier de Lestrade released “The Staircase,” his documentary series, the title referred to a crime scene. The documentary followed the arrest, trial, and release of Michael Peterson, a novelist and a wannabe politician, after his second wife, Kathleen, was found bloodied and crumpled at the bottom of a staircase in the couple’s home, in Durham, North Carolina, in 2001. Antonio Campos, who adapted the original documentary as a scripted series for HBO, treats the staircase as a metaphor. His version, a baroque drama that reimagines not only the tragedy of the Peterson family but also the filming of de Lestrade’s documentary, depicts the transfigurative process by which facts are stacked and elevated to narrative. The resulting staircase is Escherian.

De Lestrade’s documentary series, an influential true-crime portrait, made the Peterson case an international story. Eighteen years after its première, accounting for the popularity of the true-crime genre is like accounting for the sun: it’s here today and it will be here tomorrow, and more than thirty minutes of exposure can cause a rash. That, at any rate, is the complaint—that a glut of crime entertainment has left us desensitized to extraordinary and ordinary violence. But one senses that Campos’s undertaking, an eight-episode miniseries that he directed with Leigh Janiak, is driven by something pure and aesthetic-minded. Campos seems to think it’s not only impossible but gauche to play compensatory detective, light-shedder. You will not come away from “The Staircase” convinced of Peterson’s innocence or guilt. The show makes tantalizing equivalences between the filmmaking process and the justice system as storytelling vehicles, without ever tipping into art-house arrogance.

De Lestrade’s “Staircase” was a courtroom film, which hummed with a farcical undertone. Luciano Michelini’s “Frolic” could have scored the sequences of American blunder: the local news reporter getting tongue-twisted while delivering a spot at the grave site of a Peterson family friend, whose death was suspiciously similar to Kathleen’s; the defense lawyer badgering an assistant the night before the trial. An air of Southern Gothic permeates the new miniseries. The story is told in multiple time lines, as is the current fashion, but the technique feels justified—flashbacks to the years before Kathleen’s death give fullness to a character who in the source text is

simply a dead body. Because of the nonlinear pacing, Kathleen (Toni Collette) is simultaneously dead and alive. A telecommunications executive, she supports her husband's dilettante life style. Michael (Colin Firth) is mesmerizingly inscrutable: by turns egotistical and sensitive, resolute and passive. The couple, along with their blended brood—Clayton (Dane DeHaan), Todd (Patrick Schwarzenegger), Caitlin (Olivia DeJonge), Margaret (Sophie Turner), and Martha (Odessa Young)—sit erect at long dining tables in their mansion, the embodiment of tortured bourgeois ascendancy. At dinner, Michael presides with a goblet, yet the attic is riddled with bats. The swimming pool has a sinister glow.

Campos's "Staircase" is a family drama, keyed convincingly to the precarity of this modern unit. It cannily portrays the Petersons' issues as innocuous one moment—who among us doesn't have a relative with a record, or a drinking problem, or a closeted sex life—and foreboding the next. One evening, a drunken Kathleen, in an attempt to show off for some guests, dives head first into the pool and doesn't surface. Michael jumps in after her, and Kathleen later wakes up in the hospital wearing a neck brace. Soon the camera swerves to a television screen, where the Twin Towers are aflame. ("This is really bad," Michael intones.)

Firth and Collette have a beguiling chemistry. They play the couple as troubled yet passionate. They enjoy an impromptu fuck in the kitchen. They fight over bills. One threatens divorce in the morning and initiates a dance at a gala in the evening. "The Staircase" creates a plausible deniability of Michael's guilt, not to trick us but to demonstrate the slippery nature of the couple's relationship. Kathleen's death, then, is less the devastating, precipitating event in the series than the atmosphere—a physical picture of the conflict that lurks in many human situations but especially in the private lives of the wealthy. A hallmark of the true-crime genre is the reënactment of the crime. This hokey trope doesn't belong in "The Staircase"; the move is more TLC than HBO. Still, we watch Kathleen die—more than once—as the series shows different accounts of her death. We watch Michael murder Kathleen after she discovers his sexual relationships with men. (He is bisexual.) We also watch Kathleen tumble down the staircase by accident. These speculations do a lot of work at once. They make viewers come to terms with their own latent thirst for violence, and they make the artist come to terms with the ruthlessness of his project.

Prosecutors successfully built a case against Michael Peterson, who was convicted and imprisoned for eight years. In 2017, he was freed after submitting an Alford plea, which, in legal terms, is a paradox: the client pleads guilty while maintaining his innocence. One can see why a documentarian would have found the saga irresistible. In the early twenty-tens, after a forensics scandal led to Michael's conviction being overturned, he was granted a new trial, and de Lestrade, in the thrall of the story, began filming again. (Campos, who had started planning his adaptation, was present in the courtroom, too.) In Campos's miniseries, de Lestrade is played by Vincent Vermignon; Juliette Binoche portrays Sophie Brunet, one of the documentary's editors. This meta element is Campos's intervention, his "something new." He presents de Lestrade as an artist with an elegant narrational strategy, who is drawn to tales of murder and dishonesty and yet seems reluctant to pass judgment. De Lestrade and his producer are hungry for a compelling case, and Michael offers them the food they need, once they persuade him to sit for interviews. He comes to adore the camera, allowing his interlocutors the access that made de Lestrade's "Staircase" so revolutionary to the form.

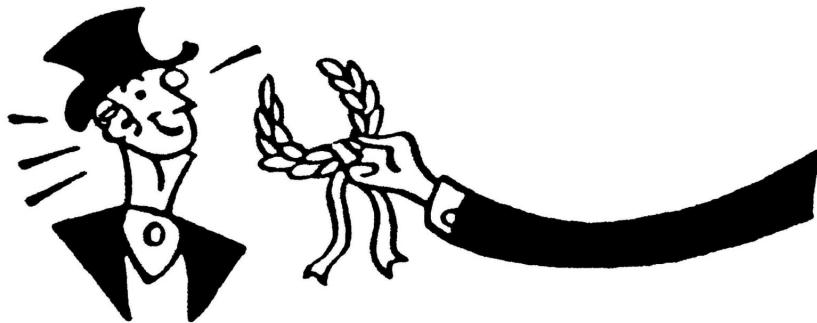
Given its ambitions, Campos's series could have used a longer running time. By the finale, viewers will feel rushed. One viewer, in particular, has expressed distaste for the portrayal: the real-life de Lestrade. He believes Campos has made his character—and his documentary—appear biased in favor of Michael's innocence, and seems unnerved by Campos's interest in the tension between documentary filmmaking as journalism and as entertainment. Brunet has made similar objections to how she is depicted in the new series. In 2004, via prison correspondence, she entered into a romantic relationship with Michael that lasted until 2017. The miniseries insinuates that Brunet began falling in love with Michael while she was editing the documentary. In one scene, de Lestrade and his producer are in a soundproof studio; on the other side of the barrier, a string ensemble is recording music for the final edit. The producer wants to fire Brunet, who at this point in the drama has begun writing to Michael, and while the two men bicker the ensemble plays on, with de Lestrade occasionally pausing to give the musicians feedback. It's an exquisite composition, typifying the clash of aesthetics and ethics.

The real-life Brunet may feel that her professionalism has been undermined by Campos. But, in “The Staircase,” the union of Brunet and Michael is mythological; it is the verboten union of the artist and the subject, and, as such, it is doomed. ♦

Paris Syndrome

- [A French Politician Hits the American Campaign Trail](#)

By [Fabrice Robinet](#)



Moving to France—the world’s most popular tourist destination—is a trope. From Hemingway to R. Crumb, the list of joie-de-vivre-seeking expats who’ve called the country home is long. Yet so many French citizens choose to live abroad that their government has created parliamentary seats to represent them in the National Assembly. Since 2012, eleven such M.P.s have been voted in for five-year terms by their fellow-émigrés, from districts as vast as Northern Europe and Latin America.

Emmanuel Itier, a Frenchman and a longtime Californian, was one of a dozen candidates running this month to represent his countrymen who reside in the United States and Canada—two hundred and forty thousand voters. “We can’t knock on every door,” Itier, who is fifty-five, said the other day, as he waited for a Lyft near Central Park. “We don’t know where the French people are.”

This is not Itier’s first political rodeo. Last year, he ran for President of France as an independent against Emmanuel Macron but had to drop out after failing to get enough signatures. This time, he was endorsed by a small, hard-to-pin-down formation called Résistons! (Let’s Resist!). He’d flown in from L.A. the day before to take part in a live-streamed debate with his competitors at the French Institute Alliance Française. “I’m a bit nervous,”

he said. His bid was a long shot, with the incumbent, Roland Lescure, of Macron's party, the front-runner.

Itier, who has a spiky haircut and rosy cheeks, is largely financing his campaign himself. He'd slept on a friend's couch in midtown the previous night. A journalist by trade, he covers Hollywood for a French film-news Web site called AlloCiné. "I've interviewed all the stars," he said. Tom Cruise: "At least twice." George Clooney: "A dozen times." Mark Wahlberg: "He's a friend." Itier moved from Paris to L.A. in 1988, when he married an American flight attendant.

In the cab, he talked about Macron's "monarchical" style of government. "'Sovereign' comes from the Latin '*superanus*,' which does not mean super ass, but to put oneself above others," he said. After the driver complained that Itier wasn't wearing a mask, he buried his face inside the collar of his flowered shirt, exposing a Palme d'Or-shaped pin on his lapel. In 2010 he made a documentary about God and world peace, narrated by Sharon Stone and featuring interviews with the Dalai Lama, Deepak Chopra, and Mark Wahlberg.

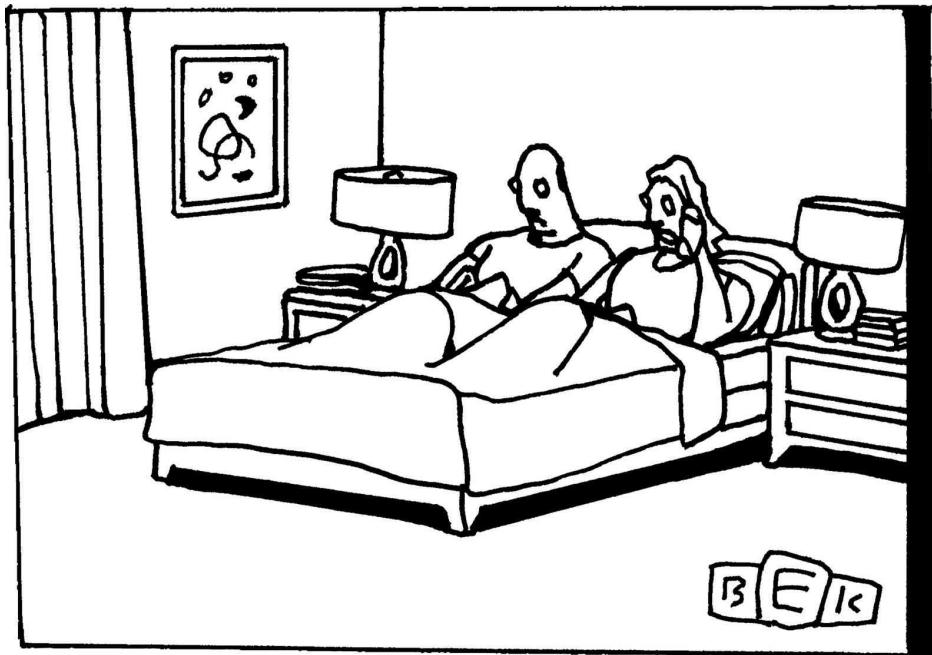
Itier was to meet some voters, and the car stopped in front of the French consulate. But the address he wanted was a nondescript building around the corner, the "administrative annex." The guard at the door was not aware of any event. Finally, Itier was shown to an empty meeting room on the second floor.

Waiting there, he FaceTimed with his second wife, Roxanna Bina, an Iranian American actor turned aesthetician, who self-published a memoir titled "Confessions of a Stripping Actress." She was driving two of their kids to school, near Santa Barbara. "Hello, guys! How are you doing?" Itier said in English. "I'm in a meeting." An hour later, not one of the thirty thousand local French voters he'd invited had shown up. "My best campaign gathering so far was in L.A.," he said. "We were about ten."

Another campaign stop was at Le Rivage, a French restaurant near Times Square, where Itier sat in front of a miniature Eiffel Tower with a bowl of *moules*. The owner and chef, Paul Denamiel, sipped a Kronenbourg 1664 wheat beer. "That's what we give children for lunch in France," he said.

Denamiel's general manager, Thibaud Muller, who grew up on the Riviera, came to say *bonjour*. He'd never heard of a representative of French citizens in North America.

"I received a text for the vote," Muller said. "I thought it was a scam."



"We've got covid, then a wedding, then covid, then a vacation, then covid."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Itier Ubered to Épicerie Boulud, a café opposite Lincoln Center, for a coffee with Philippe Doubinski-Duchêne, a French businessman. Duchêne arrived late. He said that he'd moved to New York in 1983, but he was fuzzy about his business. "I'm a consultant on a lot of things," he said. One involved reselling overstocks of such products as soap, wine, and ashtrays.

Duchêne got right to the point. "Politics is always about promises that are never kept," he said. "Why would you make a difference?"

Itier pleaded his case. "I'm Mr. Zero Income Tax," he said.

"How do you pay for the roads?" Duchêne asked.

"Philanthropy and sales tax?" Itier suggested.

"I will vote for you," Duchêne said. The two men cheek-kissed goodbye.

“Sometimes one vote can make the difference,” Itier said.

It did not, and, less than two weeks later, Itier was back in California, no longer a candidate. ♦

Poems

- “O”
- “Figs”

By [Mary Karr](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

I was pushing seventy and so was he
when his tall body stepped into the kitchen

air shimmering with garlicky gumbo.
And I stepped inside his lined arms

and tilted my face up. How encircled I was.
The whole sparkling metropolis

around us revolved. Everything
rose up for the first time.

His tongue plush on the roof of my mouth,
our names undone. He looked

through round spectacles and eyes spiked gold
staring far back into me like Dr. Chekhov

from eternity's dust jacket.
I was fifteen maybe, or a hundred.

We wondered at each other. I joked
did I need a note from his wife to kiss

back. He said no, which was the first lie.
The doorbell rang, guests whose raincoats

I shook off. That was it, the start of it, ending.
On my deathbed, I'll exhale his name:

O, here is my mouth.

By [Henri Cole](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

Overnight the figs got moldy and look like little brains—
or Ids without structure—that say something dark
about our species not really laying down a garden
but living out the violent myths.

An insect chorus, almost diaphanous
in a neighbor's yard, says something, too:

*America began in tall ships that glowed from within,
but, for the wretched, it still wretchedeth every day.*

As the bright day goes around the sun,

why do our days grow
more aggressive and difficult?
Why do the world's shadows
come so close
as its wonders beckon?

Pop Music

- A Rising Country Singer Tries to Win Over Nashville's Gatekeepers

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

Content

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Sometime around 2004, a fifteen-year-old singer known as Hailey Faith booked her first paying gig: a performance at Melsha's Tap, a wood-panelled bar in the tiny town of Swisher, Iowa, which was filled, for the occasion, with supportive relatives and friends, nearly all of whom were well acquainted with both the singer and the songs she sang—nineties hits like “That’s What I Like About You,” by Trisha Yearwood, and “Should’ve Been a Cowboy,” by Toby Keith. Back then, Hailey’s plan was pretty straightforward: graduate from high school, move to Nashville, become a country-music star.

She is thirty-two now, having reclaimed her given last name and executed her plan: she is known—not just to her home-town supporters but also to a growing number of listeners—as Hailey Whitters, one of the most appealing country singers and songwriters working today. On a recent Friday afternoon, she returned to the Swisher bar, now called Black Squirrel Tap, looking a bit like a celebrity trying to go unnoticed: sunglasses, scuffed cowboy boots, pale jeans, and an oversized fleece jacket with an allover polar-bear print that could have been either a limited-edition designer drop or something scavenged from her grandmother’s closet. (It was the latter.) She ordered a Busch Light and asked the woman who served her, “Ready for tonight?”

It wasn’t clear if the woman knew who Whitters was, though just about everyone else in town seemed to. At a desiccated convenience store across the street, a sign in the window read “*WELCOME HOME HAILEY WHITTERS!*” Next door to that was the DanceMor Ballroom, a cavernous 1929 landmark where Whitters was playing a pair of sold-out shows. The shows were a big deal for both her and the Ballroom, which is large enough to hold almost the entire population of Swisher, about a thousand people, though it doesn’t have sufficient bathrooms for such a crowd—the owners had trucked in a row of portable toilets for the occasion. It was the final weekend of Whitters’s first-ever headlining tour, and a chance for her to spend some time in Iowa before going back on the road for the summer. To

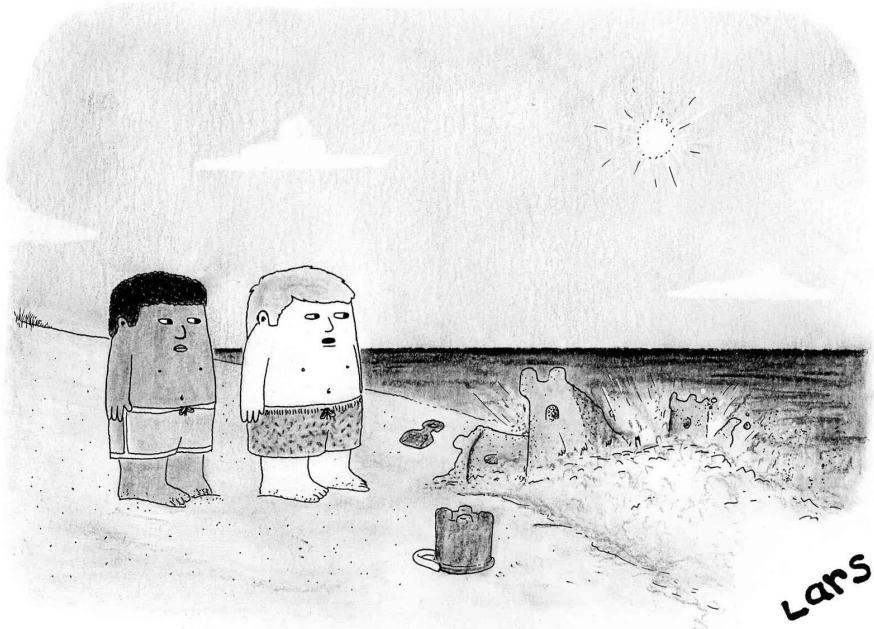
promote the Ballroom concerts, she had appeared that morning on the country station KHAM, up the road in Cedar Rapids. (“The music we play comes from Nashville, but our hearts are firmly rooted right here.”)

Whitters’s career began in earnest two years ago, when she released “The Dream,” a warm and bittersweet album about her musical trajectory thus far. The opening lines are “I’m twelve years into a ten-year town / I’m too far in to turn around,” and although she had been considering moving back to Iowa when she recorded the song, the album confirmed that she was on the right path, earning her critical acclaim, a major record deal, and some high-profile opening-act engagements. The follow-up, “Raised,” arrived earlier this year: a charming, playful, mischievous album about loving and leaving your home town.

Whitters grew up across the highway from Swisher, in a town called Shueyville, and she has four siblings who live in the area, mostly working for their father’s excavation-and-industrial-cleaning company. A different kind of country singer might have chosen to emphasize the hardships and the tedium of small-town life, but “Raised” is buoyant and sometimes sly. The song “Boys Back Home,” for instance, has lyrics that echo any number of paeans to “country” living, but Whitters delivers them with warmth and a raised eyebrow. “They’ll bail you out of a ditch or a bar / And they won’t be caught dead in no ee-lectric car,” she sings, making it clear that she knows and loves these guys without quite claiming that she’s one of them. Until recently, Whitters’s image was glamorous and sparkly, but, these days, working with the photographer and stylist Harper Smith, she has embraced a playful, exaggerated version of Midwestern chic: prairie dresses, a ribbon in her hair, and, during a recent festival appearance, a pair of full-coverage briefs with “CORN STAR” printed across the back.

The DanceMor engagement was both a local gig and a big production: a makeup artist came in from Nashville, a videographer arrived from Los Angeles, and executives at Whitters’s label flew to town and parked their party bus behind the venue, creating a proper backstage atmosphere. Before the show, Whitters talked about the decision to lean into her Iowa identity. Just before releasing “Raised,” she’d had second thoughts, she said, wondering, “Is this too Midwest?” She has spent enough time in Nashville to understand the value of a good story and a memorable persona: these

things, along with her excellent songs, have helped spread her music beyond Nashville. (The music Web site BrooklynVegan recently included her on its list of “current country singers every indie fan needs to know.”) But Whitters has not yet won over the radio program directors without whom no country singer, no matter how critically acclaimed, can be considered a mainstream success.



"It was inevitable, given how the kingdom ignored the warnings of its climate scientists."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

That night, Whitters was introduced by the KHAK morning-show hosts, who go by Brain and Courtlin. Brain told the crowd that Whitters’s current single, a cheeky confection called “Everything She Ain’t,” had been streamed more than ten million times—perhaps a roundabout way of acknowledging that the song had not made it into heavy rotation on the KHAK airwaves. The crowd was friendly and enthusiastic, excited about Whitters in general, though evidently not familiar with her entire catalogue. Whitters got the audience’s attention with “Boys Back Home” and a handful of well-judged covers, including “Wide Open Spaces,” by the Dixie Chicks, now known as the Chicks, who are among her biggest influences. (If you search “Hailey Whitters” online, Google will suggest a follow-up question: “Is Hailey Whitters a Dixie Chick?” The answer is no, although not wholly for lack of trying.) The show’s climactic moment came before “Everything She Ain’t,” when Whitters said that executives at her label had recently

“surprised” her with some good news: they were going to make a serious attempt to persuade radio stations to play her music. “This next song is my very first single for country radio,” she said. In that sense, her career is only just beginning.

Is something wrong with country radio? Many people think so—the stations’ enduring power makes them a frequent target of criticism, as does their stubborn refusal to play whatever songs the rest of us think they should be playing. In a new book called “*Her Country*,” the music journalist Marissa R. Moss notes that in recent decades country radio stations have played fewer songs by women than they did in the nineties, when the Chicks were dominant. (The Chicks’ string of country hits ended in 2003, when they were blacklisted for criticizing President Bush and the Iraq War.) Last year, for instance, the Top Ten songs on *Billboard*’s year-end Country Airplay chart were all by men. “Country music went from being synonymous with powerful women to truck-riding ‘bro country’ crooners,” Moss writes. Her book is about how a handful of women performers fought to change this. Some, like Miranda Lambert and, more recently, Maren Morris, found ways to make songs that radio couldn’t resist; others took a different approach. Kacey Musgraves built a fan base on her own, becoming a crossover success—in 2018, she released “*Golden Hour*,” which won the Grammy for Album of the Year—despite attracting only moderate interest from country-radio programmers. And Mickey Guyton, another of Moss’s subjects, is a Black country singer and songwriter who has earned some impressive distinctions (four Grammy nominations, a performance at the White House) without having had a proper country hit.

As a girl, Whitters never worried that there might not be a place for her in the country mainstream. She arrived in Nashville as a freshman at Belmont University, where she had enrolled in order to keep her parents happy, and to pass the time until she was discovered—she was sure it wouldn’t be long. In 2015, she independently released an album called “*Black Sheep*,” which is a bit moodier and more rock and roll than the music that she makes now. In the years that followed, she sharpened her approach, working with Jake Gear, a fellow-Iowan whom she met in Nashville. (Gear, who helped Whitters produce her subsequent albums, is the general manager of a Nashville publishing company, and also her fiancé.) Whitters’s rise was assisted by a cohort of women musicians, many of whose stories are told in

Moss's book. She wrote "Ten Year Town" with Brandy Clark, an accomplished Nashville songwriter who has lately emerged as a respected singer, too. Maren Morris posted about the song on Instagram, and then invited Whitters to be her opening act. The exposure helped get Whitters a deal with Songs & Daughters, a new imprint that was founded by the songwriter Nicolle Galyon in partnership with the powerful Nashville label Big Loud, in the hope of nurturing the careers of more women musicians, and maybe ultimately changing the male-to-female ratio on country radio.

Stacy Blythe, Big Loud's senior vice-president of promotion, is in charge of airplay, a job that requires a mixture of optimism and pragmatism. In the months since the new Whitters album was released, Blythe and her colleagues have paid close attention to streaming data and other indicators, like the number of times people used the Shazam app to identify "Everything She Ain't." (It's a good sign when listeners want to know more about the song they're hearing.) The Highway, a satellite-radio country station, was early to add "Everything She Ain't" to its rotation, and a few local stations played it, too, including WPAW, in Greensboro, North Carolina, and WKHX, in Atlanta. Blythe told me that these indicators helped persuade the label to embark on the slow and expensive process of formally soliciting program directors to add the song to their playlists on or before its "impact date," June 27th. After that, stations can begin doing their own research, conducting polls in which listeners are asked to react to unlabelled snippets of the latest releases. By August, Blythe and her staff may have an idea of whether or not Whitters's song will be a hit.

Moss, in her book, quotes a radio professional who explains his industry's neglect of Kacey Musgraves by saying, "I haven't felt a whole lot of connectivity with her." Blythe's aim is for stations to feel as if Whitters is paying attention to them; she might make her available for interviews and, if necessary, send her out to perform at radio-station concerts, at the label's expense. Some record companies go further. All weekend, one of the most-played songs on KHAK was "Doin' This," which was on the way to No. 1. It's a brawny and effective evocation of the troubadour's life, by Luke Combs, currently one of the genre's most reliable hitmakers. Listeners were invited to enter a contest for the chance to win a trip to Atlanta in July, to see Combs play a show at Mercedes-Benz Stadium, home of the Falcons. The prize included airfare for two, a hotel room, and five hundred dollars in

spending money, and was sponsored, as the announcements disclosed, by Combs's label, Sony Music Nashville.

Blythe says that she doesn't worry about the difficulty of getting songs by women played on the radio. "There are so many more females on the chart than years ago," she said. The week after Whitters took the stage in Iowa, "Never Wanted to Be That Girl," a duet by Carly Pearce and Ashley McBryde, reached the top of the Country Airplay chart. The song updates the concept of "Jolene," the Dolly Parton classic: in this version, there are two women, both victims, both of whom feel like the other woman. In April, a different duet went to No. 1: "Drunk (And I Don't Wanna Go Home)," by Miranda Lambert and Elle King. These are the first duets by women to reach the top of a country chart since a song by Reba McEntire and Linda Davis managed it, in 1993. In this context, Whitters's would-be hit doesn't seem like such a long shot: it's a cheerful, short song (two and a half minutes), with banjo and fiddle, about a girl telling a boy she can be "the whiskey in your soda / The lime to your Corona / Shotgun in your Tacoma."

In country music, maybe more than in any other genre, there is no shame in giving audiences what they want. Saturday's crowd at the Ballroom was louder and looser than Friday's had been: at one point, people formed a circle around an older woman who was doing something like break dancing; it turned out to be Whitters's aunt Tina, who is mentioned in one of her songs. ("We learned how to ration apple pie / And how to dirty dance, when Aunt Tina had too much wine.") From the stage, Whitters announced a drinking game: "Drink every time I say 'small town.' " And then she sang "Small Town," by John Mellencamp. For an encore, she returned holding aloft a can of beer and said, "There's no beer sweeter than a Busch Light." She sang, "Let the big world spin all around / Beer tastes better in your home town," as if she couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

It would be easy to chuckle at the sight of a sharp singer-songwriter working so hard to be ingratiating. But one strength of the country-music industry is its ability to manufacture consensus, creating a shared ledger of hits—a musical blockchain, distributed among radio d.j.s and cover bands and everyday listeners. These are the country songs everyone seems to know: the ones that emanated from the KHAK tower, the ones that were performed by a local man on the back patio of the Black Squirrel on Saturday afternoon,

the ones that inspired some impromptu dancing when they came on over the P.A. after Whitters's Saturday-night set was finished. Country radio is not the only way to add a song to the blockchain. Mellencamp's "Small Town," for instance, did not receive significant country airplay in the nineteen-eighties, when it came out; it has been retroactively deemed a country classic. But country radio remains the surest way to reach the habitual but casual listeners who seem to form the bulk of the country audience. It's an old-fashioned system and an obviously imperfect one, destined to overrate some songs and to underrate others. It may well also be unfair, although musical fairness is hard to define: by what metric does any song or singer deserve ubiquity or obscurity? But, deep in the streaming era, country radio retains its power. At one point during the weekend, Gear, Whitters's fiancé, was considering how radio success might change her career. "If she had a Top Thirty hit, we'd be playing these all over the country," he said, gesturing at the DanceMor Ballroom. That's probably true—though it is true, too, that there are plenty of emerging or aspiring country singers, all across America, all thinking more or less the same thing. ♦

Profiles

- [The Couple Behind TV's Boldest Shows](#)

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)

Content

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One day last fall, as Robert and Michelle King were being driven from Manhattan to Connecticut, to film “[Evil](#),” their irreverent spiritual-horror series on CBS, they described the day they accidentally got engaged. “Oh, this story really makes me sound like a Catholic asshole,” Robert, who is sixty-two, said, looking at once amused and chagrined.

At the time, in 1987, the couple had been dating for four years. Robert was a devout Catholic, the middle child of seven in a tight-knit Italian-Irish family; Michelle was a secular Jew, the only child of Holocaust survivors. Because Robert was set on a Church wedding, they’d scheduled an “informational” meeting with his parish priest, planning to have a tentative discussion about whether that was even possible. Instead, when Robert asked if they could marry in the Church the priest misunderstood—and pulled out a calendar. The couple were too shy to object. On the drive home, they had a bemused conversation: should they tell their parents that they’d set the date?

It’s the kind of charming origin story you might hear from friends of friends at a dinner party—likable types with a reflex toward self-deprecation. In an era in which TV showrunners are often celebrated as towering art monsters, stomping their signature onto a tame medium, the Kings are refreshingly life-size: a family-oriented, hardworking couple, orderly in their lives and so polite that it’s hard at times not to feel rude around them. Robert is warm and voluble, with a fringe of steel-gray hair and baggy jeans; Michelle, who is sixty, is more of a fashion plate, in leather boots and hip tortoiseshell glasses. She’s an introvert, and he’s an extrovert, drawing her out with the refrain “What do you think, Michelle?” They apparently have a twisted sense of humor, which their loyal friends and colleagues repeatedly bring up, then refuse to elaborate on. “They’re very circumspect,” the actor Kurt Fuller, who plays a psychiatrist in “[Evil](#)” and has been the Kings’ friend since the eighties, said. “But not always—you get ’em in a certain mood.”

The Kings’ careers have been defined by a shared set of values. They are for pragmatism. They are against pretension. They are worker bees, proud of

their ability to navigate within systems. They are repelled by didactic art, even when (especially when) they agree with the message. They admire moderation, to an extreme.

Yet somehow these mild-mannered institutionalists have produced, in the past thirteen years, some of the most iconoclastic shows on television—joyful, cracked visions of moral chaos full of rude wit and formal experimentation. The Kings have not only broken more rules, with more sophistication, than many of their more auteurist peers; they've done it on CBS, the most conservative network with the oldest audience (and, more recently, on CBS's maddeningly wonky paid streaming service, Paramount Plus). There are no stable couples on the Kings' shows; there are no systems that can be trusted. They are mavens of order whose art is all about a world that is falling apart.

The Kings' breakout series, "[The Good Wife](#)," which ran on CBS from 2009 to 2016, was at once a sleek legal procedural and a spiky antihero drama, with themes of systemic corruption that resembled those on "The Wire," only danced backward, in Louboutin pumps. The show was critically acclaimed, but, like its trophy-wife protagonist, easy to misread, and often sidelined in the public imagination as a "women's show." In 2015, the Kings launched a production company, King Size, aiming to spend more time producing the work of others: it had been exhausting to grind out twenty-two hours of network TV each fall, as opposed to eight or ten a year on equivalent cable dramas.

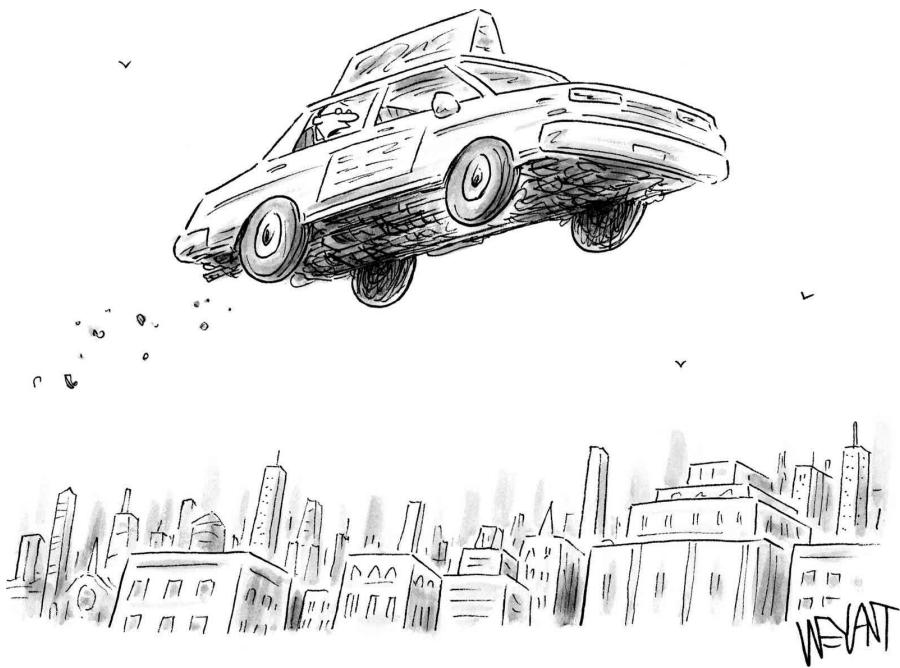
Then [Donald J. Trump](#) became President, a moral shock that destabilized them and transformed their art. After a truly gonzo sorbet—the satirical zombies-in-D.C. show, "[BrainDead](#)"—they began serving up challenging new creations spiced with an angry absurdism and political directness. Their current shows, "[The Good Fight](#)" (a spinoff of "The Good Wife") and "Evil," have little in common on the surface. But both hold up an off-kilter mirror to our warped world, as if to help viewers see the distortions more clearly.

"The Good Fight," like "The Good Wife," is set in Chicago—where Alicia's boss Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski) is a partner at a Black law firm—but it seems to take place in an adjacent universe, in which surreal events

blend with real ones. Trump is President, and Diane, a lifelong liberal, is losing her grip on reality. She microdoses; she joins an all-female Resistance squad; at one point, she nearly hacks the 2020 election. It's a dark comedy that replicates the vertiginous sensation of living in post-*maga* America, with stories ripped from headlines that already seem like satire.

"Evil" is even stranger. A kinky, philosophical noir-horror series saturated with black humor, it is intensely Catholic—in both senses of the word. On one level, it's a religious spin on "[The X Files](#)," centering on a team of investigators working for the Catholic Church: David Acosta (Mike Colter) is a priest in training; Kristen Bouchard (Katja Herbers) is a lapsed-Catholic psychologist; Ben Shakir (Aasif Mandvi) is an atheist scientist from a Muslim family. Each week, they look into exorcisms, U.F.O.s, and other spooky phenomena, while battling Leland (Michael Emerson), a satanic "tempter" who has wormed his way into the Church's hierarchy—and into Kristen's mother's bed.

The Kings often describe "Evil" as an extension of their own lifelong dispute about the origins of human malevolence: Robert believes in demonic influences, Michelle in psychology and sociology. But the show never feels like an abstract debate: it has a thrum of anarchy and sex, gliding confidently from campy shockeroos to sincere emotion. Episodes overflow with bizarre images, like a succubus who mounts her victim, then calmly removes a retainer and sets it on the night table. Glimmering beneath the show's pulp mythology is a moral seriousness: after its heroine, Kristen, ice-axes a serial killer who threatens her children, she's empowered, as if liberated by her sin, then thrown into spiritual turmoil. It's Dostoyevsky, only funny and filthy, and on the same platform that hosts "NCIS."



"Anywhere down there would be great."
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

“The Good Fight” and “Evil” are both shaped, superficially, like lawyer-and-cop procedurals—the case-of-the-week shows that are the mainstay of CBS. They’re not hundred-episode movies; they’re not Dickens or Scorsese. There’s a long tradition of creative carpetbaggers from Hollywood, Broadway, or fiction-writing newcomers eager to elevate a low, hacky form. The Kings are not among them. Television was where they found their liberation—often for the same reasons that others put it down. “It’s always *practical*,” Michelle told me. “It makes you look at all art that way. Like, if there’s a gorgeous sculpture of a ballerina in an unusual position, I always assume, Oh, there was something wrong with the marble. They had to cut around it.”

In early fall, the “Evil” writers’ room met, on Zoom, to break the first episode of Season 3. One day, the goal was to choose an A plot—some case for the team to investigate. To speed up the process, Robert asked the group to “stress-test” two potential stories: one involving a “soul-weighing” scale, inspired by a fringe-science experiment from 1907; the other about a rescue from a Uighur-detention camp.

During the first brainstorm, the mood was effervescent. Initially, the writers tried to imagine what it was like to lose one’s soul. “Your favorite song, you no longer love it—or you look at your child and say, ‘I fucking hate you,’ ”

Ione Lloyd, a playwright from Brooklyn, said. Everyone threw out ideas for the story, with writers typing silly jokes into the chat box (“Blasphemer? I barely know her”). The fizz faded when they moved to the second idea—although Dewayne Darian Jones, a TV writer who described himself as a “gay, former Deep Southern Baptist,” made a case for its social relevance, comparing the idea to a zombie allegory they’d done about Amazon unionization. Robert heard him out but shot the idea down: there was no horror twist yet—and, worse, no ambiguity. “If a show tries to teach me something, all it teaches me is to change the channel,” he said.

When the pandemic hit, the Kings, like everyone in Hollywood, were forced to scramble. “Evil” had just aired its first season, on CBS; for Season 2, the show was bumped to Paramount Plus, alongside “The Good Fight,” where the audience was smaller but the rules looser. The pandemic forced “The Good Fight” to end Season 4 midway through, although the Kings managed to land that truncated year on a bravura final image: a shot of Jeffrey Epstein’s penis, floating in a cryogenic jar. For much of 2020, the Kings retreated to an Airbnb in California with their college-age daughter, Sophia. Yet somehow, during that lost year, they produced “The Bite,” a sharp zombie satire about [COVID-19](#), by using Zoom to film temporarily unemployed Broadway couples like Audra McDonald and Will Swenson in their apartments.

Things were easier now that the Kings were back home in New York, in their elegant apartment on the Upper East Side. When asked how they could work with their spouse, their comeback was that they didn’t see how anyone could do such a big job *without* one’s spouse. They divide the responsibilities: Robert oversees the writers’ room, directing, and editing; Michelle supervises hiring, casting, costuming, and makeup, along with the vast, invisible labor of functioning within a network. Both handle design. In their scripts, he’s strong on dialogue and humor; she’s strong on structure. They sat in separate Zoom boxes, with Robert upstairs, near a treadmill, and Michelle downstairs, by some glass candleholders. She was silent until, every few minutes, Robert asked her a question, often about tone or taste.

While “The Good Fight” room was politically varied, in the “Evil” room the aim was spiritual diversity: one writer was raised in a fundamentalist-Christian cult; another has a Muslim father and an atheist mother. Four of

the eight writers are Black. Although race is not the show's explicit subject, the theme was organic to many story pitches for Season 3, from a plot about hoodoo mysticism to another about an African American "financial dominatrix" working for reparations. There was some nervous chatter about "Evil" 's vulnerable position as a small show on a big network. "Will we get cancelled if David throws the Bible?" one writer asked. "Not on streaming," Robert said.

Most of the day's focus was on solving problems that the writers themselves had created—the definition of serial storytelling. One of the first orders of business was resolving a cliffhanger from Season 2: a kiss between Kristen and Father David. The writers pitched baroque ideas for the sex scene that would follow—among them, David treating Kristen's body like a "human rosary." Robert was interested, urging them all to watch a smartly done dual-masturbation scene from the TV comedy "The Other Two." Then he turned to Michelle: "Are we veering too far into Catholic porn?" No, she said, although she worried about exploiting the cast. That wasn't a concern, he joked: the actors had gone in for weirder stuff in the past.

Next, the room turned to Kristen's four daughters, whose overlapping dialogue is a trademark of the show. When the writers pitched rude behavior, Robert recalibrated them: "Let me remind you of how Michelle and I see the sisters—they're the Marx Brothers. They bring chaos with them, but they're benign." Kristen's free-range parenting style—hands-off, but warm and comic—offered a respite from the show's darkness. "It isn't depressing when she goes home," he said. Suddenly, a story emerged, as if by magic. Maybe Leland, the show's villain, could pose online as a child, in a plot to bond with Kristen's most alienated daughter—only to have the four sisters trick him instead. The Zoom boxes lit up, as everyone giggled at the idea of Leland, a worldly schemer inspired by the narrator of C. S. Lewis's novel "[The Screwtape Letters](#)," being driven mad by phone notifications. It was the type of thing that the show loved to do: twist a moral horror into dark comedy (then do the reverse).

"How creepy and repulsive is this?" Robert asked Michelle.

"It's exactly the right level of creepy and repulsive," she said, smiling.

Ione Lloyd, the playwright, raised a concern: should they clarify that Leland wasn't really a pedophile—just a satanic tempter!—for fear of alienating viewers from their “lovable villain”? Robert disagreed: it was more powerful to leave the darker suggestion in the mix.

Dewayne said, “You know, I have never seen Leland as a funny, warm villain.” He reminded the room of an episode in which Leland bragged about sending a teen-age boy to prison, knowing that he'd be raped. The Zoom boxes went quiet. It was the puzzle they were always trying to solve together: just how ugly, how perverse, should the show get? The headlines they drew on—from incel suicide to the Tutsi genocide—were bleak. But “Evil” was an entertainment, too. The show's tricky tonal blend—violent, but not nihilistic; moral, but not moralistic—was hard to nail. In a shared Google Doc of plans for the season was a blueprint for the year: “Start out more bizarre because streaming but don't go too far.”

Robert King met Michelle Stern in 1983 at the sock wall at Frontrunners, a Brentwood shoe store where they were co-workers. He was twenty-three and an aspiring screenwriter; she was twenty-one, a senior at U.C.L.A. At first, they kept their workplace romance under wraps. “That's about as scandalous as it gets with us,” Michelle said.

Robert grew up in San Jose, where his dad worked as a computer programmer. His mother, a homemaker, was a fiery Catholic liberal, with a poster in the kitchen of the Watergate conspirators, whom she x-ed out one by one as they were convicted. With seven kids, money was tight—his dad built three-level bunk beds to fit in everyone—but it was an idyllic, supportive upbringing. “We lived in one of those brand-new subdivisions with hundreds of kids all over the place, and Robert was directing *everything*,” his sister Nancy, who played Hitler in one of his many Super-8 projects, said. When he was eleven, he lugged home some nineteen-twenties movie seats, to host screenings of Buster Keaton films.

Robert had hoped to study film at CalArts, but he missed the deadline, and enrolled instead at Westmont College, a Christian school in Santa Barbara that his older brother was attending. It was a strict, strange place that forbade dancing, drinking, and premarital sex. It was also an easy place to offend people, which Robert relished—you could get a gasp just by saying “fuck.”

He became a cheerful campus renegade, getting two plays produced: “Chat,” a [Tom Stoppard](#)-influenced drama about how talking undermined the Christian faith, and “Cut,” about an actress who, after losing a role to an amputee, cuts off her arm.

From the start, he and Michelle were a tight, happy couple—and their families adored one another, unfazed by the religious difference and thrilled at Michelle’s organizing influence. (When Robert finally got a checking account, his parents hugged Michelle.) But breaking into Hollywood felt daunting. They were middle-class kids with no connections. When Michelle became an assistant at a small, family-run movie company, one of her colleagues found Robert a screenwriting gig with the schlock auteur Roger Corman, whose factory ran on unknowns. Under Corman, Robert wrote a martial-arts ripoff, “Bloodfist,” which became a cult hit; he wrote “The Nest,” a goofy thriller about killer cockroaches. He learned to work fast and cheap, but he was paid almost nothing. He and Michelle never joined Corman’s notorious scene, with its porn stars and its wild parties. Kurt Fuller said that Robert, in all their years of friendship, had never mentioned working with Corman.

Finally, in 1987, King found an agent, and for the next decade or so he wrote steadily for the movies. There was “Phantom of the Mall,” a slasher flick with Pauly Shore; “Clean Slate,” a comedy about an amnesiac detective, starring Dana Carvey; “Speechless,” a rom-com with Geena Davis and Michael Keaton. On one level, King was a success. He was getting movies made, in multiple genres, even if they tanked (sometimes profoundly—he wrote the script for “Cutthroat Island,” a pirate movie, starring Davis, that is one of the biggest bombs in history). But being a screenwriter was a crushing experience, like a slow poisoning. By the time his projects débuted, they were unrecognizable, chewed up by the whims of movie stars and directors. Playful dialogue became macho or didactic—or stranger, but not in a good way. Julia Schachter, a script supervisor who became Michelle’s best friend when they were assistants, told me, “I remember him talking about a studio meeting he had, early on. They said, ‘Can we do it . . . with dogs?’ ”

Michelle was just as burned out. By then, she was reading scripts at M-G-M, but she felt out of step: the office was dominated by flamboyant oxygen

eaters who thrived on years of nothing happening, broken up by long lunches. The politics were grinding. “People would get promoted, and, inevitably, they, you know, had an uncle who was running the company or their dad was a big director,” she said. Whenever the chessboard shifted, or another strike rolled through, she’d find herself out of work.

Then, around 2000, when the Kings were hitting forty, they joined forces—and jumped mediums. It was a galvanic decision. They’d never considered writing for television, because nobody they knew did: it was a step down. But, after “[The Sopranos](#)” opened a door in the industry’s imagination, Ron Underwood, who had directed “Speechless,” asked the Kings if they had any TV-ready ideas. They did: “The Line,” a thriller set on the border of Tijuana and San Diego. Excited, they sold the script to ABC and scouted a pilot—only to get a hard pass. In retrospect, Michelle told me, the show’s blueprint had been naïve: it had no major white-male characters.

Still, the next year they were hired to write another pilot for ABC. Network TV was a relief to both Kings. It was no-nonsense: you got a yes or a no, then you moved on. After three failed pilots, one was picked up: “In Justice,” a midseason replacement, on ABC, about an organization like the Innocence Project. Robert worried that the concept, which had come from the network, might feel preachy, and it did; the show lasted thirteen episodes. “It was a bit—I found it—I mean, I wouldn’t watch it,” he said.

By then, the Kings were feeling desperate again: in 2007, the Writers Guild of America had gone on strike, and they’d been “force majeured” out of their ABC contract. That season, they pitched two shows. One was a “Don Quixote” adaptation. The other was cannily constructed to appeal to CBS. The network wanted a single-woman drama like TNT’s “The Closer”; its president, Les Moonves, favored formulaic procedurals like “C.S.I.” Both Kings had been transfixed by a rash of recent political sex scandals, and by the crumpled faces of wives like Silda Wall Spitzer. Nancy King, a defense attorney at the time, had been talking to them about the trend of stay-at-home mothers returning to the law.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

These inspirations came together in “The Good Wife,” the story of a governor’s wife, Alicia Florrick, who joins the white-shoe law firm Lockhart Gardner as a first-year associate after her husband is caught taking bribes and sleeping with hookers. (Robert and Michelle also considered calling it “Scandal.”) The Kings’ Trojan horse narrowly made it past the gates: Moonves greenlighted the show at the last minute, and only if they could secure a star, which they did in Julianna Margulies. Initially, CBS assigned a showrunner to supervise them; she lasted nine episodes. After two decades, the Kings were finally holding the reins.

“The Good Wife” became a rare hybrid, a broadcast show with “cable” themes, nimbly combining episodic plots with serialized arcs. The show had a prescient focus on digital law, with plots that explored the blurred line between public and private, covering crypto way back in 2012. Each year, the Kings made bolder leaps, often by necessity. When Josh Charles, who played Alicia’s love interest—her foxy, cynical boss Will Gardner—left the show, they killed his character and plunged Alicia into a season of atheistic despair and borderline alcoholism. By the finale, she’d evolved into a cool-eyed power broker, her corruption indistinguishable from her liberation. “We always thought of it as ‘The Education of St. Alicia,’ ” Robert said. “How does she learn that being good isn’t enough?”

By the seventh season, the Kings were out of plot—and exhausted. Reviews were good, but the show got low ratings, in a Sunday-night slot regularly bumped by football, and although Margulies won two Emmys for best actress, the series wasn't in the running for Outstanding Drama, an honor reserved for gritty cable fare like "[Breaking Bad](#)." There was conflict behind the scenes, too, which led to the show's own version of fake news: a bar scene between Margulies and Archie Panjabi, who played the flirty investigator Kalinda, was spliced together from footage shot separately. (Neither King would comment on what led to this scenario.) The Kings, looking for an exit ramp, had started pitching new shows—one about Vatican City, another about female Israeli soldiers.

Instead, the one to get picked up was "BrainDead," which ran in the summer of 2016. Both Kings say that, of all their shows, it hews closest to Robert's personal vision. Inspired by the government shutdown of 2013, the series was a radical shift from the sleek halls of Lockhart Gardner: a sci-fi comedy about killer bugs from outer space that infest the brains of congressmen, turning them into hyper-partisan maniacs. Kooky and structurally inventive, it had traces of Robert's Corman roots, with heads exploding without notice. But at heart it was a clever centrist fantasia, a Tea Party-era satire about the dangers of extremism. Trump appears at its fringes, still a joke, not a threat. The show's shrewd theme—that grubby but collegial favor-trading might preserve democracy better than ideological purity—was about to get stomped on by history.

Meanwhile, CBS was pushing for a show that the Kings didn't want to make: a "Good Wife" spinoff. Once again, practical and artistic concerns collided. When [Christine Baranski](#), who played Alicia's Waspishly elegant boss Diane Lockhart, got an offer from NBC, the Kings stepped up to keep her in the fold. Michelle, seeking a fresh angle and savvy about critiques of CBS shows' lack of diversity, suggested that they set the series at a Black-led law firm. CBS agreed to limit each season to ten episodes; the series would help launch its new streaming platform; and the Kings wouldn't have to run it—for that role, they hired Phil Alden Robinson, a film director. Everyone knew that [Hillary Clinton](#) would soon be President. "The Good Fight" was designed to be a show about Diane, a liberal feminist boomer, as an ironic diversity hire in a post-Obama utopia.

On November 9, 2016, Baranski was filming the show's pilot with Delroy Lindo, who was cast as her boss, Adrian Boseman, when, during a break, they all glanced at their phones and the mood went numb. A few months later, Robert was present during a reshoot of the pilot's opening scene: Diane, in pearls, frozen on her stylish loveseat as she watched Trump's Inauguration—then flinging her remote on the floor in disgust. More recently, Baranski—sitting in her own living room, a few blocks from the Kings' place—described the notes that Robert had given her. “He said, ‘Drop your jaw, open your mouth. No, really—open it as wide as you can. I know it feels phony, but just really—feel like Lucille Ball.’ I go”—she gaped like a Looney Tunes character. “‘Oh yeah, *that’s* the image.’ ”

By then, the network's collaboration with Robinson had broken down. The marble was bad, so the Kings cut around it, and a show about feminist triumph became something better, an embodiment of that Looney Tunes jaw-drop: a corkscrew shoved into the heart of the Trump era, with plots about the pee tape and [Milo Yiannopoulos](#), [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Project Veritas](#). Starting in Season 2, episodes featured “Schoolhouse Rock”-style cartoons, on subjects like N.D.A.s, with songs by the cult singer-songwriter Jonathan Coulton. There were nervy thought experiments, like an episode in which Diane woke up to discover that Hillary Clinton was elected—and that, as a side effect, #MeToo never happened and [Harvey Weinstein](#) was Diane's client. Baranski, whose husband died a few years before the show débuted, felt profoundly connected to her character's disorientation: she spent her days playacting Diane's rage and grief, her nights bingeing on MSNBC.

Improbable as it seems, “Evil” was meant to be a more mainstream show, maybe even a CBS blockbuster. But in its way “Evil,” too, was a response to a frightening era of cruelty and mendacity, to the rise of a legion of trolls, fixers, and frauds. “I don't like when the truth isn't clear,” Robert told me. If the Kings’ “Good” shows were about navigating a corrupt world, “Evil” was about a starker, broader subject: the struggle to find meaning in a culture that often seems to be tipping, quite literally, into Hell.

By November, the first episode of “Evil”—a mere brainstorm only a month earlier—was in full swing. The Kings had hammered out a script during a long weekend. Robert was directing, something he does once or twice a season, including an elaborate silent episode in Season 2, set at a monastery;

making it had nearly killed him, he said. Visual bravado was tough on a budget, but the Kings, and their director of photography, Fred Murphy, tried to give each show a distinct, non-network look: on “The Good Fight,” sleek horizontal compositions, to frame power dynamics; on “Evil,” vertical shots that drew the viewer’s eye upward, to mimic the show’s theme of gazing at something “beyond the human.”

For “Evil,” Robert also had a specific aesthetic model: the 1955 movie “Night of the Hunter,” the only film directed by the British star Charles Laughton. A bracing black-and-white homage to the silent-film era, the psychosexual thriller, in which Robert Mitchum played a sociopathic preacher, used uncanny images isolated on an inky background, a look that “Evil” had never replicated to Robert’s satisfaction. At a production meeting, he suggested trying again: scenes in Father David’s rectory bedroom could be shot to suggest darkness framing the set, “as God would see it, almost, like there’s *nothing* beyond our walls.” He chuckled and added, “Let’s play, and if it doesn’t work the only one who is embarrassed is me, for pushing for it in the little time we have.”

On the soundstage, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Robert gave gentle notes to the actors. “Let’s just embrace the staginess,” he told Katja Herbers, as they worked some slapstick with an envelope. “We’ll get more filmic later.” During the sequence in which the daughters pranked Leland, one of the girls froze up on a line in which she urged her sister to pretend to have cancer. “I swear, if you laugh no one on the Internet will blame *you*—they’ll blame the writer,” Robert reassured her. “That’s you—they’ll blame you!” the girl said, laughing. A designer showed him three zombie-head jars, and he picked one; later, he experimented with plunging the zombie head down a toilet. He looked exhausted, but he radiated joy.

Between takes, we talked about Robert’s tastes. An insomniac, he watches TV—seemingly *all* of TV—in the middle of the night, from critics’ darlings like “[Station Eleven](#)” to reality shows like “*Below Deck*.” His opinions were as lively as any critic’s: he loathed “[True Detective](#),” summarizing it as “the kind of show where a baby ends up in a microwave”; and he loved “[The White Lotus](#),” although he wondered if it didn’t show its ideological underpinnings a bit. Among his heroes was [Ben Hecht](#), the screenwriter behind a startling range of classic films, on whose philosophy he had

modelled his own: an omnivorous, energetic embrace of multiple genres, with little concern about status.

Michelle was more guarded about her opinions and, at times, inscrutable—a Magic 8 Ball wrapped in a puffy Patagonia coat. Did she enjoy classical music? “Not really.” Did she like Ben Hecht? “Probably not.” When I asked her what she was best at, she said that she was best at figuring out what everyone *else* was best at.

But she was witty and direct about Hollywood. “There’s no question in television that can’t be answered by either ‘time’ or ‘money,’ ” she said, as Robert struggled to get the envelope scene done quickly. She had no regrets about her life, except for not having switched to TV sooner. “ ‘We have to get something on the air’ is *great*,” she said. “It focusses everybody.” In the movie business, people leaned into “bad behavior, with a small ‘b’”—flakiness, rudeness—out of the need to “make themselves into characters.” In contrast, her TV colleagues, especially the women—had impressed her as “grownups,” her highest form of praise. The TV industry was full of “people who go to bed early because they need to get up early, and who vote and are civic-minded.”

The Kings are passionately pro-labor, their marriage having overlapped with the 1988 W.G.A. writers’ strike, a formative experience: Michelle got fired and Robert turned down a scab gig, although they badly needed the money. Now, however, she was one of the managers—a diplomat and a strategist, with much of her work done privately, via e-mail. At one point, the production team discussed a tricky schedule change, which meant pushing the show’s designer to rush plans for a “business” demon (on a treadmill, with a towel around his neck). Robert noticed Michelle’s face.

“What’s that look?” he said.

“It never hurts to apologize,” she said, simply.

When I asked which King was more cynical, they both laughed and pointed to Michelle. Her parents—who had hidden in Holland during the Second World War, then met in L.A. in the fifties—had built a rich, rewarding life. Her mother was a nurse, her father, a high-school teacher (and, for a short

time before her birth, an actor—he once played a pipsqueak thug in a gangster film). But, like many children of survivors, Michelle was hyperaware of how fast the world could pivot into darkness. As Robert filmed a scene, Michelle told me she feared that the #MeToo movement was over. She said it with a dry-eyed Realpolitik: a door had opened and then shut—and she could see people’s empathy dwindling, turning into lip service. Her own experiences hadn’t been awful, mainly old-fashioned bosses calling her “dah-ling.” But she’d seen her share of cruel behavior glamorized as the cost of genius. Monstrosity was always a risk when you climbed the ladder, she said—for her and Robert, too: “Being a showrunner is a very infantilizing job, if you let it be. If you run naked and crying and hungry onto the set, wardrobe will run out with a robe! Catering will run out with food and an assistant director will dry your eyes.”

Several people spoke to me about Michelle’s generosity as a mentor. Her friend Julia Schachter had a running joke with her husband: when you wrote Michelle a thank-you note, she wrote one back. But she had a canny awareness, too, of how one might be taken for granted. Nichelle Tramble Spellman, who wrote for “The Good Wife,” told me that Michelle gave her excellent career advice: “Bring a guy with you when you have a meeting. Then see if the person that you’re meeting with always looks to him.”

The Kings had another shared value: truthtelling. One day in Greenpoint, during a break while filming a showdown between a secular shrink and a fierce fundamentalist nun, Robert joined me near a video monitor, where we talked about the liberation Kristen had felt after she picked up that ice axe, the sense that all bets were off.



"Hang on, I know he's in here somewhere."
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

People fantasized about committing such a justifiable murder, I said. "I think they do," Robert replied, smiling. It was part of a lifelong debate between the Kings. "Michelle thinks she can be an ethical person—and she *is* an ethical person—without a Ten Commandments kind of law that guides you. And some authority that applies it. While I think that, without that, people will always fall apart. They'll *pretend* they're not falling apart, but inside of them that's only because at some level they do believe in the Ten Commandments, and in some—in a *force* that keeps them away from the bad thing." Without God, it was too easy to deceive ourselves about our own decency.

This bothered me: couldn't people behave well without the threat of Hell? Yes, Robert said, but they'd inevitably backslide "unless there's"—he stopped, then shrugged helplessly. "This is a crazy time to be talking that way," he acknowledged. "Because eighty per cent—I mean, almost every Protestant Christian—believes Trump should be President! Which I find insane and, obviously, evil. And they believe that Biden is burning in Hell."

When we first met, Robert had described himself to me as a "David Brooks conservative." (Or possibly a Bill Kristol conservative, at least the recent Bill Kristol, he joked: "Who knew? Bill Kristol!") He's anti-abortion; he's pro-Israel. Although his electoral politics are mainstream Democratic, as are

Michelle's, he admires a broad set of iconoclastic thinkers, including Hecht, whose identity was transformed by a post-Holocaust Zionist conversion, and the libertarian satirist P. J. O'Rourke, whom he had wanted to write for "BrainDead." But he knew that it was his faith that made him an outlier in Hollywood, even among friends. At one point, in the wake of a conversation about abortion, Robert began to argue that some progressive politicians had been "acting like assholes"; Michelle chimed in, "Off the record!" Robert said that it was O.K. to put the exchange on the record, adding, "It feels like everybody should be in the minority about one thing or another—to know what it's like to have your opinion be the exception."

A few months later, when abortion rights were in greater peril—but before the leaked Supreme Court memo—he spoke less glibly: though he personally opposed abortion, he didn't think that it was possible to resolve the question through public policy. It was a conflict with deep roots in his family. Nancy King described their childhood home as a joyfully argumentative place where everyone sparred over dinner, testing their ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Then, one night, the women, who were all pro-choice, argued bitterly with the men, who were mostly anti-abortion. Robert's father spoke up, his voice atypically serious. "We are never going to talk about this again," he said.

Robert often spoke about their work as rejoinders to a certain TV drama in which a decent person makes a stirring speech, then comes out on top. "In life, the more idealistic person is the one who ends up in the gutter," he told me. In a line in "Evil," a schemer confronts the heroes with bad news: "Have you ever noticed people are getting meaner? They yell at each other more. They hit each other on airplanes. . . . Do you know what it means—all this anger and hate? It means your team is losing. The doom you feel? It's justified."

The people Robert admired the most, he said, were quietly good—moral without being showy. He mentioned a dentist who had helped Michelle's grandfather—a poor immigrant the dentist knew only casually—get a bank loan to buy a bicycle shop; the dentist had never even told his own daughter about his generous act. "There are really perceptive things in the New Testament," Robert said. "But one of the most perceptive things is: Behave well, but shut the fuck up, basically. You know, don't advertise it."

It was difficult to hold that position in a culture that rewarded, and often required, self-promotion. In their years on TV, showrunners had become increasingly public figures. To stay on the air, they had to jockey for press coverage, brand their personalities, and flatter their fanhoods—a task full of trip wires, if you didn’t want to be a huge phony. Lately, Robert had tiptoed onto Twitter, which he was good at, posting, along with promotional videos, hints of his passions: [an essay](#) about whether Dorothy Day was perceived as too left-wing for the Vatican to make her a saint; [a plea](#) for Criterion to redesign its app interface so that viewers could search for screenwriters. Under a bleak publicity shot of Buster Keaton in “Pajama Party,” he [wrote](#), “This hurts my soul. The funniest man in cinema history. I want to gouge my eyes out. Never be talented, need money and grow old.” Beneath a black-and-white shot of Roy Cohn and a young Roger Stone, he [wrote](#), “If Evil had a family tree, this would be its roots.”

Workplace shows on television often look suspiciously like shows about making television. Sometimes they’re about a frustrated boss who tries to corral creative oddballs; sometimes they’re about brilliant teams solving problems inside huge, shadowy organizations. Even in this context, the Kings’ series have been unusually self-reflective, starting with “The Good Wife,” which satirized [Ryan Murphy](#) and [Aaron Sorkin](#), among other TV grandes. “We do not worry as much as we could about offending the people above us, our betters,” Robert told me. “We did that one story that was a reaction to having a boss who was accused of being a rapist, which was, you know, very much about—I mean, we tend to write about our being part of a corporation. And the feelings of being complicit.”

The boss in question was Moonves, who was fired in 2018 following [allegations of sexual assault](#). (Moonves denied any wrongdoing.) The story line began on “The Good Fight” in 2019, with an episode titled “The One About the Recent Troubles.” Both times Robert mentioned it, he checked in with Michelle—and once, reading her glance, added, “Oh, I’m sorry, ‘inspired by’? Or can I even say that?” In the writers’ room, he was more freewheeling. After someone joked about CBS’s founding father, William Paley—a bully and a womanizer—rising from the dead to attend an “Evil” notes meeting, Robert cracked, “He wanted to give us some advice about Hell and how it was.” He paused. “Oh, that’s not very nice.”

In “The One About the Recent Troubles,” the lawyers at Diane’s firm found out that its beloved, recently deceased founder, a civil-rights hero named Carl Reddick, had coerced his secretary into performing oral sex. The partners, including Reddick’s daughter, Liz, played by Audra McDonald, struggled with their shame and shock, but ultimately they got the secretary to sign an N.D.A. It was a typical Kings reversal, refusing to offer viewers the fantasy of justice available elsewhere on CBS. Later that season, they added an ironic twist: when the firm went public with its #MeToo scandal, one of its most immoral clients, the Google-like ChumHum, dropped it. Like any corporation, it feared bad press more than bad acts.

Did the Kings get pushback at CBS? “Not at all,” Michelle said. She and Robert had deep, collegial relationships with CBS executives, who, they said, were as shaken up by the revelations as they were. Robert said, “Les Moonves was the God over there. There was no other God but Les. And then—it just was cut off like a spigot once the article came out.” Such ethical dramas were not new to the Kings: they had friends who’d worked for Scott Rudin, who inspired an especially slicing episode of “Evil” in which a cruel theatre producer was haunted by a demonic Amazon Alexa. When Kim Masters published [a piece](#) in *The Hollywood Reporter* detailing allegations of sexual assault against Chris Noth, who starred on “The Good Wife,” the Kings said that they couldn’t comment on the accusations, but Robert added that they were friends of Masters’s, and that her reporting could be trusted. (Noth has called the accusations “categorically false.”)

In recent years, many of the Kings’ most layered, self-reflective stories have been about institutionalized racism, both on “The Good Fight” and on “Evil,” another show about a sketchy global corporation—the Catholic Church. On “Evil,” David wrestled with doubts about becoming a Black priest within a white institution. One of the show’s most unsettling plotlines painted network police procedurals themselves as not just copaganda but as a satanic-tinged tradition that could be traced back to “Dragnet.”

These themes were more explicit on “The Good Fight,” in which the show’s firm—made up of a varied Black élite, ranging from a Catholic Trump supporter to a Nigerian-born leftist—comprised a built-in debate society, with no single person representing the “Black” perspective (unlike “The

Good Wife,” whose law firm, a “Good Fight” character once joked, was “as white as the Trump Administration”). Story lines mirrored the very controversies that were embroiling networks like CBS, with pointed plots about racial pay disparities, inclusivity consultants, and human-resources investigations.

Still, there was an inherent tension to any Black show with a white star and white creators. In 2020, when two of the show’s Black stars—Delroy Lindo and Cush Jumbo—left, the season that followed staged a cunning meta-plot: younger associates grumbled about Diane Lockhart’s becoming the firm’s new co-lead partner, particularly given her marriage to a Republican gun advocate. As Diane weighed her options, she was visited by a vision of [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) (played by Elaine May), who urged her not to cede her power. In a heel turn, Diane leveraged her relationships with rich white clients—and, implicitly, their greater ease with a white woman—to preserve her position. Or maybe it wasn’t a heel turn: as ever on the Kings’ shows, Diane made a strong case for her choices. After all, she’d brought those clients in.

Nyambi Nyambi, who plays the legal investigator Jay DiPersia on “The Good Fight,” was fascinated by the show’s forthright dialogue about race and power. (“Have you noticed the firm getting whiter?”) A classically trained actor, Nyambi praised the Kings’ writing as thrilling to perform, and at times Shakespearean, with scenes that included hallucinatory debates with Frederick Douglass and Karl Marx. But he expressed equal admiration for the Kings’ willingness to listen to Black collaborators and not to “fake the funk”: “I love that the show is not afraid to ask these questions, not only of society but of the firm itself, of the show itself. It makes me trust them more.”

Aurin Squire, a playwright, has written for the Kings since “BrainDead,” and he is a key presence in both the “Good Fight” and the “Evil” writers’ rooms. Squire has few illusions about race and TV-making; he’s heard many stories from his peers about white showrunners who grabbed credit or exploited subject matter. What he respected about the Kings, he said, was their refusal to mouth cant. They were “dialectical thinkers,” he said—open to being wrong, and open to being challenged. One day, when Robert was on the verge of dropping a plot about left-wing vote-hacking, on the ground that

it was unrealistic, Squire—a Black gay Buddhist who grew up with a Baptist Republican mother and a libertarian father—intervened: “I was, like, ‘Are you kidding me? Do you realize how disenfranchised Black voters are? You’re saying there’s no altruistic person who’s Black who wouldn’t try to correct the hundreds of years of wrongs done, and done legally? Of *course* there is a moral argument for it.’”

Squire saw Jeremy O. Harris’s “[Slave Play](#)” soon after it opened in New York City, and encouraged other “Good Fight” writers to get tickets. Although most of them disliked it (including Robert, who found the satire “overbroad, a little Carol Burnett”), they all got a bit obsessed. The result was “The Gang Is Satirized and Doesn’t Like It,” an episode that managed to savage both “Slave Play” *and* “The Good Fight.” In it, a former employee writes “C**KSUCKER IN CHAINS,” an overripe satire in which a Diane-like lawyer coos, “I’m here to make white people feel more comfortable,” then uses a dildo on a version of Lindo’s character. The show’s white audience roars—the bad kind of laughter. The fictional lawyers are offended; they’re also turned on. Diane experiments with kink; Liz has her first interracial fling; and the show’s Black Republican, Julius, grows a moral spine. The characters’ lives have been transformed by exactly the kind of art they disapprove of.

The Kings were frank about their status as white showrunners, including their own learning curve. “One of my worst fears is using people in the room as experts on their race,” Robert told me. But timidity didn’t make for good art, either. They had ambivalent responses to modern debates about representation. When I mentioned a Sarah Silverman [podcast](#) that discussed “Jewface”—the issue of non-Jewish actors playing Jewish characters—Robert, confused, asked, “Is she joking?” In the shifting discourse about representation, the Kings were in a liminal position. They weren’t part of a rising vanguard of Black artists, like [Donald Glover](#) and [Michaela Coel](#), with the expertise and the latitude to push lines of offense. But the Kings, especially Robert, bridled at creators who adopted more facile strategies—blandly inclusive casting and writing designed to uplift rather than to interrogate. Instead, their shows displayed the bumpy seams of their own presence, resistant to reassurance when discomfort made more sense. When a “Good Fight” fan on Twitter complained about a story line, asking if the

next season would be as bad, Robert wrote, “No, it will be worse. The world keeps changing and so do we.”

In 2011, “The Good Wife” aired an episode called “Great Firewall.” In it, a Chinese dissident is tortured after ChumHum, the fictional search-engine company, turns his I.P. address over to the Communist regime. Lockhart Gardner made high-minded arguments against ChumHum, which turned out to be a pretext: our heroes were helping another tech company hurt the competition—and that company would also play ball with China. Alicia was horrified, but her boss Will spoke plainly to her: “Who do you know who is doing something for the right reason? I would love to meet them, because my guess is after five minutes of questioning, we’ll find the wrong reason.”

After the episode aired, China barred CBS from distributing “The Good Wife” there. It was *déjà vu* for Robert: in 1997, his movie thriller “Red Corner,” in which Richard Gere played an American attorney doing business in China, had been banned by Beijing, along with “Kundun” and “Seven Years in Tibet.” The experience gave Robert a sour taste of Chinese cultural power—after that crackdown, there were no more Chinese villains in films. When, in 2018, Disney filmed a live-action version of “Mulan” near the Uighur concentration camps, Robert saw echoes of Hollywood’s cowardice during the Holocaust.



“I’m trying to figure out how to chirp without sounding so damned cheerful.”
Cartoon by Lonnies Millsap

In 2020, the Kings wrote another story about China into “The Good Fight.” The A-story again centered on ChumHum, with an earnest courtroom sequence in which a Uighur activist delivered wrenching testimony. But the show also had one of its high-concept “Schoolhouse Rock” cartoon segments—a Jonathan Coulton ditty called “Banned in China.” Mind-bendingly self-referential, the sequence, created by Gear Head Animation, told the story of how “The Good Wife” had been banned a decade earlier, then showed scenes of editors preemptively snipping footage to insure Chinese distribution. It also included a stream of images that were barred in China, including Winnie-the-Pooh, a symbolic stand-in for President Xi Jinping.

For more than a decade, the Kings had embraced the network system, a clear hierarchy that everyone understood. They’d turned in the lyrics and the sketches to CBS; Standards had O.K.’d everything. Then, just before the episode was set to air, they got a call: the network was cutting the animated segment. At the time, Michelle was in a hospital in Los Angeles with her mother, who was dying from brain cancer. Separately, the Kings reached the same conclusion: they had to quit. What rankled most wasn’t the censorship but the sinister violation of protocol: this ruling came from above.

The phone calls that followed, with CBS brass, weren’t emotional, Michelle said—in fact, it was a relief that their ethical choice felt so clear. But, as the Kings were preparing to negotiate their exit, their lawyer suggested another strategy. Maybe they could display a placard telling the audience that the segment had been censored.

The solution struck a chord. It was clever; it was provocative. The Kings could make an ironic statement about Hollywood self-censorship in an episode *about* Hollywood self-censorship—a very “Good Fight” approach. No one would get laid off. Best of all, it was a reasoned compromise—the model of adult functioning that they respected most.

Robert edited the segment, which opened as the Coulton segments always did: with an animated shot of a curtain ready to rise. This time, however, the screen froze on a placard that read “*CBS CENSORED THIS CONTENT.*” He added a trace of retro static, for some style. But, as the editing progressed, the Kings decided that forcing viewers to stare at the placard in silence for

ninety seconds, the same length as the song, was too punishing—and maybe self-aggrandizing, as if they fancied themselves a pair of Andy Kaufmans. They cut the time to seven and a half seconds.

The night [the episode aired](#), the Kings were at a family gathering, and Robert's brother asked Michelle if it was a gag. She was aghast—and when the Kings went online they saw how badly they'd miscalculated. Their own code had worked against them: led by their desire not to be self-indulgent, not to be brats or narcissists, they'd created precisely the sort of ambiguous joke/not a joke that was a hallmark of the Trump era.

Three years later, the Kings tried to identify where they'd misstepped. "Were there any procedural things that we could've done differently, except not write it?" Robert asked Michelle. "No, no," she said. "Because we checked every step of the way. We were *blindsided*." Robert was particularly disappointed that viewers had missed seeing the segment itself, which was so much livelier and more damning than any earnest monologue could ever be. "I watch it about once a month, because it's so entertaining," he said.

By January, the "Evil" episode was in the editing phase. The Kings had just returned from a long-delayed vacation in Maui, coördinated with forty-two family members—a luxurious break, although they'd worked there, too. "The Good Fight" room was in session, overlapping with the filming of "Evil." The irony was hard to miss: six years earlier, the Kings had been desperate to stop making twenty-two episodes per year, only to wind up making twenty, on two simultaneous series. They were also producing a Showtime drama, "Your Honor"; filming a comedy game show, "Would I Lie to You?," for the CW; and developing other projects, including "Happy Face," based on a podcast by the daughter of a serial killer.

One day, Robert was in his office, running a "blue-sky" brainstorm for Season 6 of "The Good Fight." Directly in front of him and to his right were two immense, hypnotic paintings by Jose Ramírez, a Chicano artist from Los Angeles, whose gem-toned work the Kings had spotted at a Santa Monica coffeehouse. Their living-room wall featured a gallery of his work, including a canvas in which the Devil whispers in Trump's ear while *COVID*-masked protesters gather beneath a sky exploding with yellow lightning bolts—an image at once kitschy and intoxicating, violating easy

categories of taste. The paintings in Robert's office were personal commissions. One showed a colorful, orderly city full of trees, tended by peaceful figures holding rakes or guitars, beneath a deep-blue sky. In the other, the sky was red and the citizens cowered in terror, threatened by Klansmen and soldiers with bayonets. The paintings were homages to "The Allegory of Good and Bad Government," a fresco series, by the Gothic artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti, designed to remind local magistrates of the stakes of their daily decisions.

The season's theme for "The Good Fight" was "Civil War"—for the country and, maybe, the firm. On Zoom, Robert steered a lively conversation about self-criticism inside institutions, which jumped from Communist Chinese "struggle sessions" to boomer exasperation at millennial talk about trauma (or "*trow-ma*," as the boomer writer Billy Finkelstein gruffly pronounced it, to everyone's delight). As they considered a story line in which a character takes a hallucinogen, Robert ticked off the strategies they'd used to justify the show's surrealism, adding that, lately, they needed no excuse. Strange things just happened; that *was* realism nowadays. A writer agreed: "Seeing the people I've grown up with, over Christmas, it's as if somewhere we took a wrong turn and we're living in a parallel universe. You're yelling through a glass wall."

Everyone nodded sympathetically. The writers, whose politics varied, had a relaxed rapport. They'd been together throughout the explosive past few years, hashing out the news as it happened, confronting one another, comforting one another, then weaving those clashes into a story. Despite the cynicism of "The Good Fight" and the darkness on "Evil," both shows contained within them a romantic ideal that was primal to the Kings' lives: that people might build deep relationships with others with whom they disagreed—even love them. On "The Good Fight," when Diane, struggling with her own across-the-aisle marriage, asked her vision of Ruth Bader Ginsburg how she could possibly remain friends with [Antonin Scalia](#), Ginsburg spoke about pasta and opera, then landed on a blunter declaration: "I don't like bland people. And a lot of the people who agree with me politically are bland." It was an idea that felt both outdated and sustaining.

In May, the Kings and I spoke again. A decision had just been made public: this would be the final season of "The Good Fight." In their Goldilocks

industry, it was a happy outcome—a TV show that ended not too late, as “The Good Wife” had, or too early, like “BrainDead,” but just right. The sixth season of “The Good Fight” would take new risks: it was a violent one, with intimations of the end of democracy and, maybe, of the world. The Kings hoped to keep making “Evil,” though, as Michelle noted, “We recognize where our contractual power starts and ends. We are masters of our own fate, but not the fate of our shows.” They had four more years left on their deal with CBS, and no plans to retire.

In our conversations, the Kings were often gun-shy about analyzing their shows, wary of sounding pretentious. Once, when Robert blurted out something about wanting to “make art, not craft,” he immediately apologized. It was clear, however, that now that they had tasted creative control they would never cede it—even if, as Robert once joked, that might leave “just Michelle and me in Central Park, reading it out loud for four people and a dog.” The first year of “The Good Wife,” the Kings had had to unlearn one of their strongest impulses, which was to be deferential. “We were getting older,” Robert told me. “And we knew we only had a few years left. It really felt like: ‘This is it—or we’re out of the business forever.’ I think that gives you a lot of bravery that wouldn’t be there otherwise.” There was a line on “The Good Wife,” he added: “If I make this mistake again, I want this to be *my* mistake.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Some Disappointing Near-Death Experiences](#)

By [Jay Martel](#)

As the surgeon and the nurses worked to re-start my heart, I floated above the operating table and found myself looking down on the entire scene. I noticed then that the surgeon, with whom I had been flirting during our pre-op consultations, had a pronounced bald spot. After my recovery, things just weren't the same between us.

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I was passing through a long tunnel of light. At the end of it, I saw all my deceased relatives dressed in white, waiting for me and beckoning lovingly—with the exception of Aunt Sonia, who said, “Whoa, someone’s put on a few pounds.” I said, “Excuse me?” And she said, “I’ll try, but I’m surprised you could make it through the light tunnel with those hips.” When the lifeguard resuscitated me, I just felt annoyed.

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After the hunting accident, I drifted skyward, toward a magnificent being made of light, and although it didn’t speak in a conventional way, and, as far as I could tell, didn’t have a mouth, I could understand everything it said. “Come to me,” the being seemed to intone. “Come to me.” But then, when I got close, the being acted surprised. “Whew! Don’t sneak up on me like that,” it told me with its thoughts. “You know, your face is really messed up. You scared the hell out of me.” I beamed back, with my thoughts, “I thought you called me over.” Then came the reply: “No. I was beckoning to the woman behind you.” I turned and saw a beautiful woman, dressed in white. “Now beat it,” the being of light said. “And, for fuck’s sake, do something about that face. Damn.”

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As I lay on the putting green, receiving CPR from the E.M.T.s, my life began flashing before my eyes: a baby in a massive crib, a toddler pulling a wagon, a five-year-old getting a new puppy for his birthday. It was going along like that—*flash, flash, flash*—until my life, which still had sixty years to go, got stuck at my second-grade Christmas pageant, when I had an accident in front of the entire school. I had to relive that awful scene: the

embarrassed response of the audience, the hurried mopping up by the angry janitor, the mockery from the stable animals, the damp chill in my Joseph bathrobe. I thought it would never end. Thank God they were able to bring me back to life!

•

There was a lot of light, yes, and feelings of joy and release from this mortal coil, but then there were the relatives, all of them, every last dead one of them, smiling and happy to see me, which I can tell you never happened during my life and, to be honest, just shocked the hell out of me. I think it might have saved my life.

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In the ambulance, my heart stopped beating for three minutes, and during that time I found myself walking through a beautiful garden with a sparkling brook running through it. On the other side of a bridge stood Jesus and all His apostles, smiling beatifically. Jesus said something to me, which I assumed was an invitation to cross the bridge, but when I set foot on it He said, “No! Can’t you read?” It was then that I looked down and saw a sign on the bridge that read “*APOSTLES ONLY.*” Jesus pointed downstream, where a log lay across the brook. I nodded, walked to the log, and tried to cross. But the log was deceptively slippery. Each time I got about halfway across, I fell into the brook, and each time Jesus and the apostles laughed. It wasn’t malicious laughter, really, just an expression of delight. But, still, I couldn’t help taking it personally. When I came back to life in the E.R., I felt hurt and confused.

•

As I floated up over the hospital roof, I was overwhelmed by a sense of lightness and peace. I looked down on the goings on of this world, all the struggle and mayhem, and I no longer felt like I was a part of it. Intense surges of unconditional love and acceptance coursed through my body, as if I were being bathed in a warm, healing light. For the first time, I loved myself and all living beings. And then, suddenly, I was back in that grubby little E.R. cubicle, feeling like shit.

A malpractice suit is pending. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Intrepid Playfulness at Nudibranch](#)

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

The compact East Village restaurant Nudibranch is named for the soft-bodied gastropods, a category of sea slugs, that Jeff Kim, a chef and co-founder, spied when diving off the coast of Indonesia. To Kim, a former Momofuku busser who met his co-founders at kitchens around New York, nudibranchs—of which there are more than three thousand species—slink along the ocean floor with the same pluck that food establishments must harness when navigating the city’s brackish depths. “Sea slugs are colorful and diverse and beautiful,” Kim said. “That seemed symbolic when we started brainstorming about the kind of food we wanted to create.”

Nudibranchs can also be strange and are sometimes required to adapt in odd situations. When it comes to devising dishes for a post-pandemic(ish) prix-fixe menu in a time when food prices are high and consumer confidence is low, the path can be perilous. That may be why Kim and his partners offer as many as five choices in each of the menu’s three sections. When asked for recommendations, the phrase my waiter favored was “choose your own adventure.” And fortune favors the bold. You might be tempted to go with the hamachi or the scallop—both are plated with enough sculptural verve to evoke the restaurant’s namesake mollusk—but the frog leg is where your voyage should start. I was briefly worried that the legs, battered and fried to a golden crisp, would have the mundanity of a chicken cutlet. Fortunately, the exterior crunch, aided by lemongrass-ginger paste and lime, heightened a journey to tenderness; the morsels of meat were both soft and sublimely springy.

One of the delights of Nudibranch is its intrepid playfulness. Although the dishes tend to be Asian-inflected (Kim and his partners are Asian American), Kim describes the menu’s influences as “crisscrossed New York.” Take the shrimp, which at first tastes like the Cantonese mainstay *he tao xia* (walnut shrimp). At Nudibranch, walnuts are swapped for jazzy gems of granola that start off faintly sweet before crackling into heat and funk, a counterbalance to the richness of the aioli-coated shrimp. Another winner is Nudibranch’s attempt to create the “most cauliflowery of cauliflower dishes,” preparing the vegetable three ways—roasted, puréed, and pickled. The roasted cauliflower resembles dry-fried cauliflower, a Sichuan classic, typically served in an iron wok over a chafing flame. The

genius here is the substitution, for oversalted pork belly in the traditional recipe, of fat-gushing Chinese sausage; augmented by Vietnamese fish sauce, the florets ripple with both tangy sweetness and earthy umami.



One of the delights of Nudibranch is its intrepid playfulness. Although the dishes tend to be Asian-inflected, Jeff Kim, a chef and co-founder, likes to describe the menu's influences as "crisscrossed New York."

One dish that falls flat is the turkey neck, which initially excited me because of my predilection for Chinese chili-oil-slicked duck neck. Alas, the turkey neck, piled high with mole, crema, and sweet potato, was dry, stringy, and gamy. The night I visited with friends, one joked, “Do you think this is what nudibranch tastes like?” Another, who checked Google, found that some of the mollusks may be edible when roasted or boiled, and read aloud nudibranch factoids, including that their memorable colors and unusual forms sometimes help them blend into their surroundings and other times do the exact opposite.

Before this could be discussed further, dessert arrived. Of two choices, neither of which is included with the prix fixe, go for the semifreddo: frozen coconut custard topped with a crumble of cranberry-and-black-pepper cookie. Kim told me that he likes pairing pepper with fruit because it’s a novel way of engineering a savory dessert, which would conventionally use salt. One diner voiced skepticism for the way that pinpricks of pepper riled up his taste buds rather than soothing them, as he expected a dessert to do. His friend agreed; her mouth was beginning to feel like it was dancing on

tippy-toes. The verdict might have satisfied a nudibranch: “I’m not sure if I like it, but I know I won’t forget it.” (Prix-fixe dinner \$75.) ♦

The Theatre

- [Sarah Silverman's Childhood Pee Problem Takes Center Stage](#)

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

During intermission at a recent Saturday matinée of “The Bedwetter” (directed by Anne Kauffman, at the Atlantic Theatre Company’s Linda Gross), I stepped outside to warm myself in the spring sunshine and was joined by a mother with two kids, a girl on the cusp of adolescence and her younger brother. It tickled me to see them there. The show, with music by Adam Schlesinger, who co-wrote the lyrics with the comedian Sarah Silverman, and a book by Silverman and Joshua Harmon, is based on Silverman’s 2010 memoir of the same name—subtitle: “Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee.” It involves the trials and tribulations of a ten-year-old, but it’s not exactly what you’d call child-appropriate. No duh: it’s a Sarah Silverman production. There’s cursing and sex jokes, an alcoholic grandma and a potty-mouthed beauty queen; in my own youth, Tipper Gore would have slapped the cast album with one of those parental-advisory stickers which worked like catnip on the developing prefrontal cortex. But what does “child-appropriate” mean, anyway? Grownups are always sanitizing childhood for their own preachy purposes. “The Bedwetter” deals both with adults’ failures and weaknesses and with kids’ inhumanity to kids. It’s also goofy, sweet, and hopeful in a way that may make budding cynics roll their eyes but touched the heart of this aging one.

It’s 1980 or so. Sarah (the plucky Zoe Glick), a new fifth grader in a small New Hampshire town, is charged with introducing herself to her class, a nerve-racking assignment that she handles like a pro. With her dark hair chopped in a gloriously unflattering cut halfway between bob and bowl, and her khakis held up by rainbow suspenders, which she sports in tribute to her idol, Mork from Ork, she is nerd-dom incarnate, and she glows with confidence as she belts out her life story to a room full of judgmental strangers:

Hi, my name is Sarah and I recently turned ten
I just moved here from Manchester where I’ve always lived and had lots of friends
And a great blue house with a great back yard, but now that we’re divorced
I live here in Bedford which is gonna be just as good of course
And now I have two houses and, come on, that’s pretty cool

And now my sister Laura and I are here at McKelvie Middle School
And I can't wait to make a new best friend, or two or three this year
And I'm just really really
Fucking excited to be here!

Oops. Sarah's F-bomb earns a chastisement from her gruff hard-ass of a teacher, Mrs. Dembo (Ellyn Marie Marsh), but Sarah didn't mean to be rebellious or rude; she just forgot that bad words are for "at *home*" use only. Sarah's dad, Donald (Darren Goldstein), handsome and hirsute, with a thick schmear of a Boston accent, likes to share a new dirty joke with his kids every day; his mother, Sarah's Nana (Bebe Neuwirth, a delight to witness at close range in an Off Broadway house), says things like "easy peezy, titty squeezy" between sips of her serial Manhattans, which the adoring Sarah eagerly mixes for her. ("You might not be everyone's cup of tea," Nana tells Sarah, but "you're beautiful to me.") No one does qualified praise like a bubbe.) You can see where Sarah gets her sense of humor, and her showmanship. Donald, who owns a discount clothing store called Crazy Donny's Factory Outlet, is a fast-talking charmer, popular with the ladies. Why does he know the names of all the moms of Sarah's classmates? "Looking at the numbers, the result I've seen is / twelve per cent of customers enjoy my penis," he sings, in a song innocuously titled "In My Line of Work." You can't argue with statistics.

The one woman who does not swoon over such antics is Sarah's mom, Beth Ann (Caissie Levy). Though nothing is physically wrong with her, she has responded to the pain of divorce by taking to her bed, where she whiles away the days watching TV and flipping through *People* magazine. The seeds of her sorrow were planted years earlier. Before Sarah was born, the Silvermans had a son, Jeffrey, who died in an accident when he was three months old, a tragedy that Sarah, a sponge for grownup talk she doesn't understand, obliviously mines for material. "He was just, like, a baby, so it wasn't sad or anything," she assures a startled Mrs. Dembo after trying out a bit about Jeffrey in her introduction routine.

Death is an abstraction to most kids, especially to one who's this defiantly optimistic about life. Nothing seems to get Sarah down: not her beautiful older sister, Laura (Emily Zimmerman), who sees Sarah as an annoying obstacle in her quest for popularity, and not the clique of mean girls in her

class, who wear white tights and Mary Janes, like Samantha, the prissiest American Girl doll, and regard her as a total weirdo. Sarah knows exactly how to defuse their contempt. “I couldn’t agree more,” she chirps, when Ally (Charlotte Elizabeth Curtis) observes that her arms are hairy, or Abby (Charlotte MacLeod) mocks her enormous teeth. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, and Sarah does. Her ready self-deprecation and celebrity-fart impressions win her a ticket to inclusion, or something like it; at a birthday party with the girls, Sarah comes off as more mascot than friend, the “brunette in a blonde world,” as the script puts it, or, really, a Jew in a world of New England Wasps. (Everyone seems to think she’s from New York, a place she’s never even visited.) But, for all her moxie, Sarah does have an Achilles’ heel: her bladder, the one thing she can’t control. She wets the bed almost every night, and she knows that, if her secret leaks, she’ll be sentenced to the social guillotine.

In her memoir, Silverman describes suffering from clinical depression, which came over her “as fast as a cloud covering the sun” when she was twelve. The shame caused by her pee problem may have had something to do with it. “I had always been able to turn pain or discomfort into humor,” she writes, “but that trick was gone now.” In the second act of “The Bedwetter,” Sarah’s bright internal bulb goes suddenly dark. Her worried dad drags her first to a quack hypnotist, to try to cure her bed-wetting, and then to a sinister psychiatrist (Rick Crom plays both parts), who, in his lunatic attempts to revive the catatonic child in his care, may remind you of the Acid Queen in “The Who’s Tommy,” and is about as effective. Instead of LSD, he prescribes Xanax, which he encourages Sarah to take by the fistful.

The show is tinged with extratextual sadness, too. A *Playbill* note from Silverman, Harmon, and Kauffman tells us that Schlesinger—who co-wrote the songs for the TV show “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” and, with his band, Fountains of Wayne, gave voice to forbidden teen longing in the 2003 song “Stacy’s Mom”—had the idea to turn Silverman’s book into a musical. In March of 2020, when rehearsals were set to begin, Schlesinger contracted *Covid*. He died that April, at the age of fifty-two. “He wanted our show to be joyful, ridiculous, and most of all, funny,” his collaborators write. Consider his work done.

“Tragically, my life has only been moderately fucked up,” Silverman jokes in her memoir: no abuse, no addiction, no big trauma. But what’s there is more than enough. In one scene that got me, Sarah and Donald compare notes on disappointment. If it’s hard to hit middle age and give up on the dreams of your youth, it’s no easier to leave behind the innocence of childhood for the jaded double digits. Lest that make things sound too treacly, rest assured that the show’s true savior arrives in the shapely form of a former Miss New Hampshire (Ashley Blanchet), and that Sarah finds her redemption not in any sincere parent-kid chat but on a stage, in front of an audience, where she belongs. There’s something to be said for exposure therapy—the kind where you deal with your problems by exposing them to everyone else. Grab a mike, step right up. Your freak flag isn’t going to fly itself. ♦

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