



MARIAN CARRASQUERO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Irma Palmar, 52, with her seven grandchildren at her home in Maracaibo, Venezuela. Her daughter migrated to nearby Colombia.

In Maracaibo, People Leave, Misery Doesn’t

By FRANCES ROBLES  
MARACAIBO, Venezuela — It was once a thriving metropolis in the heart of oil country in Venezuela. That city, Maracaibo, no longer exists. Today, the city is rife with abandoned houses, some of which look like bombs were dropped on them, because homeowners tore windows and roofs off to sell for scrap before they took off on journeys to Colombia, Chile and the United States. Middle-class neighborhoods are filled with for-sale signs and overgrown yards. Fewer cars drive down the streets, and fewer criminals are around to steal them. Christmas dinners, once packed with noisy relatives, are lonely affairs aided by webcams. Nearly eight million people — more than a quarter of the population — have fled Venezuela in recent years, driven out by economic misery and political repression. Nowhere is that exodus more staggeringly acute than in Maracaibo, which has been hollowed out by the loss of about half a million of its 2.2 million inhabitants — many of them adults in their late teens to middle age. (The population figure is based on surveys, since the government has not conducted an official census in more than a decade.) “The first blow you sense is the loneliness,” said Maracaibo’s mayor, Rafael Ramírez. “It’s devastating, and affects you emotionally.” Maracaibo, which is in western Venezuela and remains the country’s second-largest city, has been battered by a collapsed economy, routine blackouts and persistent shortages of gasoline and water. Many working adults searching for jobs elsewhere have left their

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YouTubers Help to Woo the Bro Vote for Trump

By JOHN BRANCH  
LAS VEGAS — On a sweltering Saturday in the suburbs of Las Vegas, inside a cool casino miles from the Strip, about 100 people lined up to see the Nerk Boys. Most of the fans were young men, in their 20s, there to meet their favorite crew of YouTube pranksters and podcasters. Two young women, in short shorts and tight tanks, handed out Happy Dad hard seltzers, part of the Nerk Boys’ growing line of merchandise. Hours later, the Nerk Boys were inside a packed T-Mobile Arena, in the heart of the city, as Dana White, the chief executive of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, welcomed a sellout crowd to the latest U.F.C. event. Donald Trump Jr. was sitting cageside.

Targeting Young Men, a Group Considered Hard to Reach

About two weeks later, Mr. White introduced former President Donald J. Trump at the Republican National Convention, where Senator JD Vance of Ohio was announced as Mr. Trump’s running mate. The Nerk Boys popped up there, too. Soon, they interviewed Mr. Vance on their Full Send podcast. These repeated collisions of testosterone-fueled orbits are a campaign strategy, not a coincidence. At a time of an immense gender gap in politics among young people — women leaning left, men

leaning right — the Trump campaign has been aggressively courting what might be called the bro vote, the frat-boy flank. It’s a slice of 18-to-29-year-olds that has long been regarded as unreliable and unreachable, but that Republicans believe may just swing the election this year. To find them, Mr. Trump and his allies have been exploring deep into the universe — a manoverse — of social media stars with male-centric audiences: the Nerk Boys, Mr. White and U.F.C., Dave Portnoy and his Barstool Sports media network, YouTubers like Jake and Logan Paul, podcasters like Theo

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ABORTION Donald Trump’s shifting statements have vexed some social conservatives. PAGE 17

Toxic ‘Forever Chemicals’ Turn Up on Farms in U.S.

Research Detects Contaminants in Fertilizer Made From Municipal Sewage

By HIROKO TABUCHI

GRANDVIEW, Texas — For decades, farmers across America have been encouraged by the federal government to spread municipal sewage on millions of acres of farmland as fertilizer. It was rich in nutrients, and it helped keep the sludge out of landfills. But a growing body of research shows that this black sludge, made from the sewage that flows from homes and factories, can contain heavy concentrations of chemicals thought to increase the risk of certain types of cancer and to cause birth defects and developmental delays in children. Known as “forever chemicals” because of their longevity, these toxic contaminants are now being detected, sometimes at high levels, on farmland across the country, including in Texas, Maine, Michigan, New York and Tennessee. In some cases the chemicals are suspected of sickening or killing livestock and are turning up in produce. Farmers are beginning to fear for their own health. The national scale of farmland contamination by these chemicals — which are used in everything from microwave popcorn bags and firefighting gear to nonstick pans and stain-resistant carpets — is only now starting to become apparent. There are now lawsuits against providers of the fertilizer, as well as against the Environmental Protection Agency, alleging that the agency failed to regulate the chemicals, known as PFAS.

In Michigan, among the first states to investigate the chemicals in sludge fertilizer, officials shut down one farm where tests found particularly high concentrations in the soil and in cattle that grazed on the land. This year, the state prohibited the property from ever again being used for agriculture. Michigan hasn’t conducted widespread testing at other farms, partly out of concern for the economic effects on its agriculture industry.

In 2022, Maine banned the use of sewage sludge on agricultural fields. It was the first state to do so and is the only state to systematically test farms for the chemicals. Investigators have found contamination on at least 68 of the more than 100 farms checked so far, with some 1,000 sites still to be tested. “Investigating PFAS is like opening Pandora’s box,” said Nancy McBrady, deputy commissioner of Maine’s Department of Agriculture. In Texas, several ranchers blamed the chemicals for the deaths of cattle, horses and catfish on their properties after sewage sludge was used as fertilizer on neighboring farmland. Levels of one PFAS chemical in surface water exceeded 1,300 parts per trillion.



EMILY ELCONIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Contaminated cattle on Jason Grostic’s farm in Michigan.

lion, they say in a lawsuit filed this year against Synagro, the company that supplied the fertilizer. While not directly comparable, the E.P.A.’s drinking-water standard for two PFAS chemicals is 4 parts per trillion. “We were so desperate to figure out what’s going on, what’s taking our cows from us,” said Tony Coleman, who raises cattle on a 315-acre ranch with his wife, Karen, and her mother, Patsy Schultz, in Johnson County, Texas. “When we got the tests back, everything started to make

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Design for the Solo Experience



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KASIA GATKOWSKA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Creating space with the look and feel for one person is a challenge whether it is in, from above left, a mansion that comes with a job, a city apartment or a houseboat on a canal. But living alone also means never having to argue about wallpaper. Special Section.

Young Draftees Thrust to Front In Russia’s War

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR and MILANA MAZAEVA

For more than two decades it has been standard practice in Russia: New conscripts doing mandatory military service have not been deployed on the front lines. It is codified in law and embraced by all parents hoping to keep their sons from the carnage of war. But Ukraine’s lightning incursion into the southwestern Russia region of Kursk has upended that compact. When Ukrainian troops poured into Russia on Aug. 6, Moscow was caught unawares. Suddenly, the war had come to the conscripts, who were manning lightly guarded positions near the border. Hundreds of conscripts were captured, while scores are missing and potentially dead. Military deployment has been a sensitive issue for President Vladimir V. Putin. Moscow’s decision to thrust young, untrained soldiers onto the battlefields of Afghanistan and Chechnya helped to cement domestic opposition that compelled the Kremlin to end those conflicts. So during the chaotic early days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when it was discovered that several hundred newly drafted soldiers were in

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From the Sea, Thousands Creep to Land in the Epoch of the Great Lego Spill

By AIMEE ORTIZ  
On a miserable, drizzly day in late June, Hayley Hardstaff, a marine biologist, took a walk along Portwrinkle Beach in Cornwall, England, and discovered a dragon. It was a Lego piece — black, plastic and missing its upper jaw. Ms. Hardstaff, who grew up in Cornwall, had a long history of

finding Lego pieces. As a child there, she collected them from the beach, puzzled about why so many children were forgetting their toys. By the time she went walking last June, she knew much more, and quickly recognized the scaly head and neck poking out of the sand, “its entire dragonhood on display.”

Ms. Hardstaff had found yet another tiny artifact of one of history’s oddest maritime mishaps. In 1997, nearly five million Lego pieces — including 33,427 black dragons — were packed in a shipping container when a rogue wave hit the Tokio Express, a cargo ship hauling the toys and other goods. The ship, which had been traveling to New York from Rotterdam,

the Netherlands, nearly capsized, and it lost all 62 of its shipping containers — an event known as the Great Lego Spill. In a whimsical twist, many of the pieces were nautically themed. It was arguably the single largest toy-related environmental disaster that we know of, experts say, and people are still finding pieces 27 years later.

The event and its aftermath are documented on social media on the Lego Lost at Sea Facebook page, where Ms. Hardstaff learned the history. “I’d seen some people had found these dragons,” she said. “Otherwise, I would have had no idea.” Lego Lost at Sea, which also has accounts on X and Instagram, is

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The list of World Heritage Sites includes the Appian Way but omits towns along spurs of the ancient road, hurting both pride and tourist revenue. PAGE 4

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Residents took stock after a raid by Israeli forces that left many reeling. There were signs that fighting with militant groups could spread. PAGE 7

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