

# GODWIN



A NOVEL

JOSEPH O'NEILL

PEN/FAULKNER AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *NETHERLAND*

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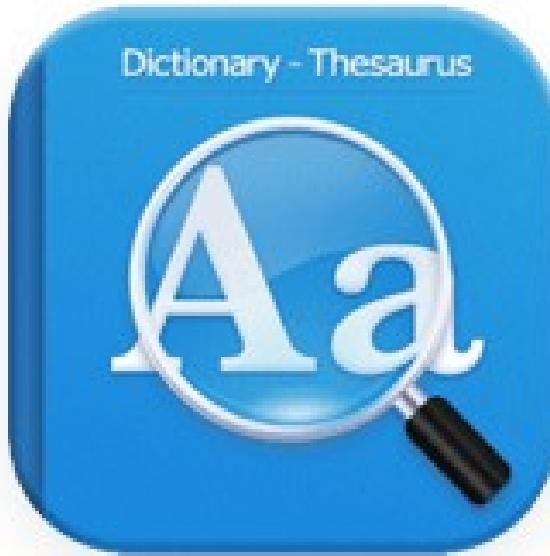


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## Goings On

- [Broadway's Sorbet: Sutton Foster in "Once Upon a Mattress"](#)
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Going On

# Broadway's Sorbet: Sutton Foster in “Once Upon a Mattress”

Also: Missy Elliott's first solo headlining tour, a Claire Denis masterwork, Diamond Stingily's evolving art, and more.

July 26, 2024



**Helen Shaw**

Staff writer

If you're going to find pleasure in New York in the middle of a heat (and news) wave, you'll need three things: loose clothing, ice cream, and the lightest of light comedies, preferably something so buoyant that it keeps your mind floating serenely above the humidity. Sweetness, silliness, and things that barely touch the skin—those are the key. It's handy, therefore, that, starting July 31, a sorbet-colored Encores! revival of **“Once Upon a Mattress,”** the oddball, quasi-medieval musical frolic, from 1959, transfers over from City Center to the Hudson Theatre, on Broadway.

Amy Sherman-Palladino has adapted the book for the Broadway run; the original, a reimagined version of the princess and the pea, was written by Marshall Barer, Jay Thompson, and Dean Fuller, with lyrics by Barer and music by Mary Rodgers, the daughter of the legendary Richard. An early version of “Mattress” was knocked together by this group to serve as an entertainment at Camp Tamiment, a sort of summer camp for grownups in the Poconos, and you can still smell the late nights and campfire in its scenes. (For more of that marvellous mid-century gossip-and-woodsmoke flavor, listen to the audiobook of Mary Rodgers’s autobiography “Shy,” written with Jesse Green and read aloud by Christine Baranski.)



“Mattress” is pure let’s-be-kids nonsense, with a soupçon of sex comedy: a castle is surprised when Winnifred the Woebegone—a hard-charging, beer-chugging, swamp-dwelling princess—clammers out of its moat to woo its bashful prince, Dauntless. The first Winnifred was Carol Burnett, and here Sutton Foster galumphs gleefully into Burnett’s footsteps: Foster is a vaudevillian and a champion ham, and “Mattress” lets her lean into the thousand possibilities of her rubber bones. (Michael Urie is her Dauntless, and he manages to be both wide-eyed straight man and melting ingénue at once.) Lear deBessonet, who also directed the Encores!-to-Broadway production of “Into the Woods,” in 2022, again imports the revival series’

stripped-down, concert-style fleetness. It's the right meal for summer: eat and eat, you'll still leave lighter than you went in.

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## About Town

Dance

Since 2021, five of New York City's top dance companies—New York City Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, American Ballet Theatre, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Ballet Hispánico—have joined forces for the ***BAAND Together Dance Festival***, at Lincoln Center. The best selections on this year's sampler, performed indoors this time, are George Balanchine's intimate and haunting "Duo Concertant" and William Forsythe's spiky "Blake Works IV," which the Harlem dancers turn into sexy fun. Also on the program: Hans Van Manen's "Solo" (which is actually a trio) and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Sombrerísimo."—*[Brian Seibert](#)* (*David H. Koch Theatre; July 30-Aug. 3.*)

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Off Broadway

Beckett breeds strange fanboys. One is Bill Irwin, an actor and a clown who created “**On Beckett**,” a one-man show, from 2018, about the “famous Irish writer of famously difficult writings,” now lovingly revived. The solo format befits Beckett, renowned for his exploration of human interiority and isolation. Irwin, however—amid selections from “Waiting for Godot” and from lesser-known works such as “Texts for Nothing”—argues that underlying the alienation is a desire for meaning and connection. He makes a convincing case, bringing such extraordinary physicality to Beckett’s words that the texts draw you in, despite their abstruseness. If Irwin’s charm doesn’t always keep tedium at bay, consider it a reminder of our ongoing struggle for fulfillment in an indifferent universe.—*Dan Stahl* (*Irish Rep*; through Aug. 5.)

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Hip-Hop



Few musicians have been more multimedia savvy than **Missy Elliott**. At the turn of the millennium, the visionary Virginia rapper helped advance hip-hop forms with a future-funk sound and a freaky, animated stylistic identity, all powered by a wild and uncanny imagination. Across her four best albums, from the 1997 classic “Supa Dupa Fly” to “Under Construction” (2002), Elliott was constantly shifting, working alongside the producer Timbaland

and the video directors Hype Williams and Dave Meyers, and sustained through the mid-two-thousands by flamboyant performances. She packs all of that audiovisual history into the “Out of This World” tour, her first billing as a solo headliner, supported by fixtures from throughout her career—Timbaland, the R. & B. singer Ciara, and the like-minded eccentric Busta Rhymes.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (*UBS Arena; Aug. 3.*)

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Classical

What travels the world but stays in one spot? It’s the venerable stamp, and also, this August, Carnegie Hall’s **World Orchestra Week**. “WOW!,” as the series has been appropriately dubbed, features youth ensembles from across the world for a celebration of cultural togetherness, honoring composers and works from specific corners of the globe. It kicks off with America’s own NYO2, and brings in the Africa United Youth Orchestra, the Afghan Youth Orchestra, and the National Children’s Symphony of Venezuela, among others. As for adult chaperones, the list includes Gustavo Dudamel, Isata Kanneh-Mason, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, and Masabane Cecilia Rangwanasha.—*[Jane Bua](#)* (*Carnegie Hall; Aug. 1-7.*)

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Movies



Claire Denis's passionate and richly detailed 1990 feature, "**No Fear, No Die**," now in a new restoration, is her first masterwork. It's centered on a truck-stop complex near Paris, where the proprietor, a gangster named Pierre Ardennes (Jean-Claude Brialy), hires a duo—Jocelyn (Alex Descas), a rooster trainer, and his business partner, Dah (Isaach De Bankolé)—to run his cockfighting pit, a major gambling operation. Dah and Jocelyn are Black; Ardennes, who is white, inflicts virtually colonialist oppressions on his partners in crime. The story is told from Dah's perspective, as Jocelyn—who displays a quasi-mystical rapport with fighting cocks—suffers an emotional breakdown, putting their business and their lives in danger. Denis films with documentary-like attention to the criminal enterprise and to the psychology of racialized power.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*BAM Rose Cinemas*.)

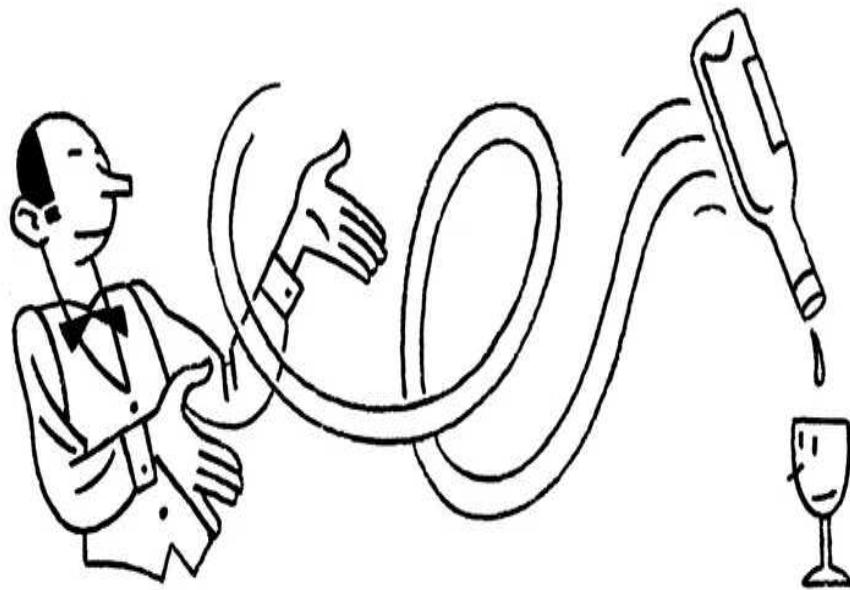
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Art

Though Diamond Stingily has built a solid career based on installations that conjure so much—autobiography, media, the impression bodies make on surfaces—at times her work feels not fully born, but almost there. "**Diamond Stingily: Orgasms Happened Here**," taking its title from a sticky note that the artist's brother had found in their new home, includes constructed closets and windows that evoke lives glimpsed through half-

open doors, prompting horror-movie dread. Some of the closets have “nice” wallpaper and stacks of towels, while a baseball bat leans nearby: a safeguard against the violence that families of color experience day after day. In her wonderfully creepy work, this still evolving artist asks, How does a family enter a home, make a home?—*Hilton Als* (52 Walker; through Sept. 14.)

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## Bar Tab

*Jiayang Fan* visits a James Baldwin-themed bar.



Few who step into **Another Country** (10 E. 16th St.), a retro lounge near Union Square, would guess that it was named for James Baldwin's 1962 novel of Black rage, urban malaise, and the tantalizing torment of love. True, the surroundings—low ceilings, oak panelling, muted pink banquettes—vaguely evoke the mid-century, but otherwise the modishly minimalist bar energetically surfs the mix-and-match, exuberance-over-coherence vibes of 2024. There, too, is the matter of how Another Country bills itself: as a vinyl bar, where you may be forgiven for expecting jazz (the novel's protagonist is a tortured jazz musician). But on a recent Wednesday night all that two first-timers could hear was other people's conversations. They found out from a genial server that the music they were missing wasn't any of the albums displayed behind the bar but the server's Spotify list (less Coltrane, more British post-punk). Disoriented, the pair perused the menu, he choosing C'mon Dad Gimme the Car, a tequila-forward, lip-tickling strawberry-and-jalapeño cocktail named for a Violent Femmes song, she opting for I May Destroy You, a smoky mezcal-and-Aperol number inspired by the HBO show. The spirit-free category ("more popular with the younger crowd," the server explained) listed The Beautiful and The Damned. Were they named, ironically, after the Fitzgerald novel? The woman wanted to ask the bartender, but her companion reminded her how perilously close she was to ruining the experience for everyone within earshot, including the young couple next to them, who exchanged thoughts on the best things they did in

the last month (travel to Mykonos, try Hailey Bieber's TikTok-viral "Strawberry Glaze Skin" smoothie). "Except for a lucky few," the bartender hissed, "everyone here is just trying to survive their first date."

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### **P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:**

- ["Just take it"—words to live by](#)
- [How do celebrity book clubs actually work?](#)
- [Samantha Williams sings "Poetry"](#)

The Food Scene

# A Brooklyn Tasting Menu with Manhattan Ambition

Clover Hill offers the kind of technique-oriented cooking that usually emerges from the city's billionaire canteens—and prices to match.

By Helen Rosner

July 21, 2024



There's a lot to be said for meals that are merely excellent. To be theatrical, to be subversive, to be paradigm-smashing—these are admirable qualities in a restaurant, bien sûr, but there is only so much of one's face that can be melted, especially over dinner. When it's a matter of dropping a large quantity of money on a very special meal, sometimes you just want something that's wonderful, that's all, the end. Clover Hill, a tiny restaurant tucked discreetly into an impossibly charming cobblestoned block in Brooklyn Heights, feels like a secret—such a lovely room, such finesse in the kitchen, such polished romanticism in the service. It's the sort of place you want to tell your friends about, but only in person, and not everyone—

just the folks who deserve nice things. It seems almost a shame for word to get out.



Clover Hill opened in 2019, replacing a longtime neighborhood favorite, Iris Cafe. It operated for only a few months before the pandemic forced it to shutter. When it reopened, in 2022, the owners, Clay Castillo and Gabriel Merino, brought in the chef Charlie Mitchell to run the kitchen, and initially did only a high-end brunch. Mitchell, who'd been a cook at Clover Hill in its opening months, was a veteran of technique-oriented restaurants such as Betony and Eleven Madison Park. Not long after his return, Clover Hill phased out daytime service to focus on an evening tasting menu. The investment paid off quickly, at least in terms of accolades: less than a year after debuting its dinner program, the restaurant was awarded a Michelin star, making Mitchell the first Black chef in the city ever to receive one. Earlier this year, he was named Best Chef in New York by the James Beard Foundation. Still, for some reason, it's oddly easy to get a table at Clover Hill.



There is a bit of quiet drama in a meal here. Cocktails, assembled at a tiny prep bar, are poured tableside from diminutive glass bottles; dinner begins with a fusillade of delightfully fussy small bites—tartlets, amuses, little arrangements of luxurious thises and thats. After a procession of seafood and meat courses (the restaurant does not accommodate vegetarians), the micro-bombardment format returns at the end with a round of sweets, including a delicate raspberry entremets the precise shape and color of Michelin's six-pointed asterisk. But for the most part a meal at Clover Hill is

straightforward: a course arrives, a server briefly describes it, and then you're left to eat. The kitchen is open, but there's no traditional counter seating. Flavors are thoughtfully harmonic—sweet Hokkaido scallop playing coyly off the brine of salmon roe and the silken sourness of uni—but there's no personal storytelling, no running narrative put forth about "Chef" and his thoughts and dreams. Earlier this year, Mitchell wrote a weeklong food diary for the Grub Street Diet, and I was struck by the spartan habits he described: bodega coffees, grocery-store sushi. He seems to have little interest in the idea that he, a high-profile chef, should be just as much of a draw as his food.

### Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

The food that Mitchell prepares at Clover Hill has the subtlety and precision of any Manhattan-billionaire canteen. A course of rare *shima aji* garnished with fragrant nasturtium leaves and plum sorrel recalled something from Le Bernardin; the sweet flesh of the fish had been ingeniously minced to a caviar fineness without losing its firm texture. A white lobe of *samegawa karei*, a Japanese flounder, miso-cured and served over a green pool of fava beans and herb oil, could have emerged from the kitchen at Daniel. The bill at the end of the evening would fit in over there as well: the dinner costs three hundred and five dollars per person. All told, with drinks and tax and, what the hell, throw in an uni supplement, you're easily spending a thousand dollars on dinner for two.



The surprise of Clover Hill is not that this sort of food is on offer in an outer borough—with its concentration of zillion-dollar brownstones and fancy-pants residents, Brooklyn Heights isn't exactly salt of the earth. What's more unusual is for cooking of this rarefied sort to be happening in a thimble-sized, tin-ceilinged storefront on a residential street, with minimal pomp. The walls are whitewashed brick. A high shelf wrapping the walls holds books and greenery. A pair of roller skates are tacked to the wall. Service is polished but to the point. The restaurant, in other words, is the emotional and architectural opposite of those grand dining rooms in Manhattan which are designed as cathedrals to the egos of their diners (and, of course, of their chefs). Clover Hill isn't scrappy: this is a restaurant doing exactly what it means to be doing. But the scale of the place seems almost ostentatiously humble given Mitchell's focussed execution. The restaurant trades in an opulence of intimacy rather than of power, which—given the price tag on a meal here—can feel a little jarring. In the candle glow of evening, the brass fittings of the open kitchen gleam like gold. But then you step out onto the street, into the glare of street lamps and headlights, and it was just dinner: excellent, extremely expensive, over now. ♦

# The Talk of the Town

- [Kamala Harris Isn't Going Back](#)
- [Move Over, Brandon—a New Political Bro Slogan Has Arrived](#)
- [How Clarence Maclin Went from Sing Sing to “Sing Sing”](#)
- [Seeking Display Space for Bones of Sainted Old Men](#)
- [Make Way for Postpartum Punk Rock](#)

Comment

# Kamala Harris Isn't Going Back

Fifty years after Shirley Chisholm ran for the Presidency, we find ourselves yet again questioning the durability of outmoded presumptions about race and gender.

By Jelani Cobb

July 27, 2024



In January, 1972, Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress, appeared at a Baptist church in Brooklyn and announced her candidacy for President of the United States. Chisholm was a singular force in American politics of the time: her support for civil rights and legal abortion made her a pivotal connection between the interests of African Americans and the emerging, mostly white, reproductive-rights movement. But, despite her status as a trailblazer, her campaign—set against an entirely white, entirely male field of rivals for the Democratic Party's nomination—was more often than not treated as a lark. The newly formed Congressional Black Caucus, of which she was a founder, did not endorse her. (Many members chose to support George McGovern, the eventual nominee.) The political calculations were clear: the nation would not support a Black

woman, and the better play was to back a viable candidate who might eventually provide a return on the investment.

Fifty-two years later, Kamala Harris's ascent to being the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party represents, on many levels, a sharp contrast to Chisholm's story. (Harris, during her 2020 Presidential run, nodded to her predecessor's significance by incorporating a color scheme and typography similar to Chisholm's 1972 campaign materials into her own.) Chisholm waged a shoestring effort, using her own savings to keep her campaign afloat; for Harris, word of President [Joe Biden](#)'s exit from the race unleashed a torrent of cash to support her candidacy. ActBlue reported a hundred-and-five-million-dollar haul within roughly the first twenty-four hours. The next day, Voto Latino committed to forty-four million. Chisholm essentially had to build her own electorate as she campaigned; Harris's entry into the Presidential contest sparked a reported seven-hundred-per-cent increase in voter registrations.

Yet, as various Democratic factions were defecting from Biden's camp in the weeks after his disastrous debate with [Donald Trump](#), the C.B.C. remained steadfast in its allegiance to him. This was understood as a product of Biden's strong support among the caucus's (largely Black) constituents. But had the C.B.C.—which Harris had belonged to as a senator—called for Biden to step down, it could have been cynically read as an attempt to engineer an opening for her. The caucus endorsed Harris soon after Biden withdrew, though, in essence declaring that, unlike in 1972, a Black woman candidate could be more viable than *two* white men: the incumbent and his opponent.

But we have not entirely broken with hidebound, stagnant tradition. In 2008 and 2016, the Democrats offered up barrier-breaking nominees for the Presidency; the Party is batting .500 when it comes to actually electing such candidates. [Barack Obama](#)'s 2008 campaign inspired poetic musings about shaking off the moribund strictures of race, even as the first ripples of the eventual tide of racial backlash could be felt virtually from the outset. [Hillary Clinton](#)'s 2016 campaign was confronted with an unending assault of unfounded rumors, sexist insinuations, and conspiracy theories; Clinton spent far more time on defense than any successful candidate could. This year, we find ourselves yet again questioning the durability of outmoded

presumptions about race and gender. It's as if the nation has been running an experiment in which, at eight-year intervals, we test the impact of different kinds of identities in national elections. The constant in this experiment has been Trump. Amid the myriad provocations that he has authored, it's easy to forget that his political career began with a campaign to convince the public that Obama was not born in the United States. Trump moved on to the high-volume mendacity and misogynistic contempt that characterized not only the 2016 campaign but also the Presidency it delivered to him. The past week has seen him awkwardly trying to figure out how to hate Harris from scratch.

Meanwhile, Trump-era reactionaries have waged cultural warfare against "[critical race theory](#)," while acting in ways that make that school of thought only more relevant. The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's ideas about intersectional feminism—that the nexus of race and gender produces a complicated synergy—could not be more central to this election. This week, Representative Tim Burchett referred to Harris as a "D.E.I. Vice-President." It was a feckless jab that presumed that there is something shameful about operating in arenas where people like you have traditionally been excluded, but it also disregarded the fact that Harris has years more experience in elected office than Trump and his running mate, Senator [J. D. Vance](#), combined. A deluge of memes has taken aim at the Vice-President's personal life and dating history. Yet such assaults betray a transparent desperation—feeble barbs hurled from the mezzanine. There is reason to believe that more mature, humane voices will prevail, or, at least, that they'll now have a fighting chance.

On Monday night, fifty-three thousand Black men joined a virtual rally hosted by the journalist Roland Martin. Trump's potential appeal to working-class Black men has been a constant sub-theme in the contest. In the course of four hours, guests including Senator Raphael Warnock, Representatives Gregory Meeks and Steven Horsford (the C.B.C. chair), Governor Wes Moore, the actor Don Cheadle, the Reverend William Barber, and a host of state and local officeholders gave brief speeches explaining the imperative to support Harris's candidacy. The event followed one of similar size held the previous night for Black women voters, and preceded others targeting Latinos, South Asians, and white female voters on successive nights this week.

The digital rallies were notable for several reasons, not the least of which was the more than ten million dollars in donations they brought in. What is perhaps more important is that they reckoned with the social complexities of a campaign such as Harris's. Speaker after speaker on the Monday call warned against the sexism that might make it difficult for some men to imagine Harris as the President. The event on Thursday brought together more than a hundred and fifty thousand white women and pointed to barriers that have historically divided women along racial lines. The following morning, Barack and Michelle Obama endorsed Harris. These developments demonstrated an awareness of what was lost when people shrugged off Shirley Chisholm's candidacy.

On Monday, just ahead of the Black men's rally, Harris gave a speech in Indianapolis in which she took aim at her G.O.P. opponents, saying, "These extremists want to take us backward, but we are not going back." The words resonated, and crowds have now taken to chanting them at Harris's events. She was referring to the days of "chaos" that characterized Trump's Presidency, but she could just as well have been talking about the days when a candidacy like hers would not have been able to make it as far as it already has. ♦

The Sporting Scene

# Move Over, Brandon—a New Political Bro Slogan Has Arrived

Jocks from the majors to the beer-league circuit are raising a fist, cupping an ear, and yelling “Fight!” in homage to Donald Trump’s reaction to his near-assassination.

By Ben McGrath

July 29, 2024



Take note: in the days and weeks to come, your local playing fields and arenas may be awash in political gesturing and sloganeering from the very people who used to grumble that they prefer their sports free of politics. Consider the recent ballgame at Truist Park, where the St. Louis Cardinals slugger Alec Burleson souped up his home-run trot by raising one hand to an ear—as if it had just been shot?—and extending a raised fist with the other—in defiance of an assassination attempt? Some teammates in the dugout did the same. The politically inclined former sportscaster Keith Olbermann thought he knew what he had seen and didn’t like it one bit. He called them “Trump Nazis” and modestly proposed lifetime cancellation, à la Pete Rose,

adding the burn that was often directed at Olbermann himself back in his ESPN days: “Stick to sports.”

No, no, the Cards replied. That was an inside joke, a tribute to DJ Burly Biscuits, Burleson’s collegiate alter ego. Chalk it up to bad timing. Of course, that same day, in the Bronx, Taylor Walls, of the Tampa Bay Rays, arrived at second base after lining a fastball down the right-field line and not only raised his fist but mouthed the words “Fight! Fight!,” like the wounded Donald Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania. Though Walls insisted it wasn’t an endorsement of the former President, he wasn’t coy about his inspiration. “To immediately stand up and show strength, to me, speaks pretty loudly,” he explained later, alluding to videos of the bloodied candidate onstage. “I feel like I’ve faced those challenges in baseball, but on a much suppressed level.” Fear not the brushback pitch, Barstool Bros.

Cut to late night in Monsey, New York: the beer-league hockey circuit. Fog rims the glass as the Dead Rabbits, clad in mismatched red jerseys, mount a third-period comeback against the white-and-yellow Sting. “Fight! Fight! Fight!” a Rabbit winger exclaims after a goal, pumping his arm in syncopation. Nobody drops any gloves. “I don’t know if you can tell, but I really love Trump,” the winger volunteers at the ensuing face-off. Soon, the Rabbits are on a run, and the winger’s rallying cry becomes a chorus, intensifying with each new goal. “Fight! Fight! Fight!” Say it loud, say it fast. Stick to sports: a thing of the past.

In a way, it’s a marvel that it took this long. Trump has forever been a jock’s politician, what with his invocation of locker-room talk and his swaggering refusal to countenance defeat. But chants of “Lock her up!” and “Build the wall!” don’t easily lend themselves to many athletic scenarios, and Trump’s frequent dancing on the stump, however popular with the Convention crowd in Milwaukee, is tinged with camp and difficult to replicate in the end zone without, say, a soundtrack of “Y.M.C.A.” on cue.

Speaking of camp, might this all shade sooner or later into irony, just another meme in an endless TikTok cycle? Perhaps. One thinks of George W. Bush on the tee box, in 2002: “I call upon all nations to do everything they can to stop these terrorist killers.” Pause for effect. Concerned nod. “Thank you. Now watch this drive.” Plenty a duffer who opposed the

invasion of Iraq and the privatization of Social Security has gone on to invoke the line in admiring jest.

But another version of this story—fitting, with the Paris Games upon us—begins at the Olympics in 1968, in Mexico City. (The echoes of that year seem increasingly inescapable.) That’s when Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Black sprinters, raised gloved fists on the medal stand in a Black Power salute, while listening to “The Star-Spangled Banner.” They were met with a chorus of boos from an audience that preferred a simpler (some might say a whiter) form of patriotism. “Divisive,” sniffed the *Times*. Expelled from the Olympic Village for their gestures, the sprinters then faced death threats, if not literal assassination attempts. Yet the image of those fists of resistance in Mexico City endures. You can find it today on T-shirts and coffee mugs, sometimes along with the words “Fight the Power.”

And now here we are, nearly six decades later, from “Fight the Power” to “Fight! Fight! Fight!” (Those T-shirts exist, too.) Leave it to Trump, the man who inverted the meaning of “fake news” for his own purposes, to co-opt the resistance. ♦

The Pictures

# How Clarence Maclin Went from Sing Sing to “Sing Sing”

The first-time Hollywood actor, who co-stars with Colman Domingo, visits his old stomping grounds in Mount Vernon.

By Adam Iscoe

July 29, 2024



Clarence (Divine Eye) Maclin departed the “Today” show studio one morning this summer and hopped into the back of a waiting Escalade. He had just been chatting on the air with Colman Domingo, his co-star in “Sing Sing,” a new film based in part on Maclin’s life, and he was headed out to visit his old neighborhood, in Mount Vernon, just north of the Bronx. His first stop: Suit Man, a budget tailor, on Gramatan Avenue, where he’s been buying two-hundred-dollar suits since he was released from prison in 2012. “You gotta support the people who support the hood,” he said, as a guy with a squeegee and only seven toes wandered in after rinsing the windows out front. Maclin hollered, “How you been, man?”

“I’m alive,” the window-washer, Warren Coley, replied.

“That’s the good part, you got that first blessing,” Maclin said. The two embraced. “You gotta squint to remember who I am?”

Coley grinned and said, “That’s *you*, goddammit!”

Maclin, who is fifty-eight years old and had a diamond stud in each ear, smiled. “I came a long way, right?”

“You came a *loooong* way.”

“I used to have dreads all down my back,” Maclin said, smiling. He had a dark Caesar haircut, and, courtesy of his new Hollywood stylist—“I’m getting a little bougie over here!”—he wore bespoke white linen pants with a matching shirt. “Warren was the neighborhood hustler when I was growing up,” Maclin explained.

“He and I did prison time together,” Coley said. “We used to be *baaaad*, man. Ain’t nuthin’ that we wouldn’t do—stick up, this, that, you name it. That’s why I’m so glad to see him, ’cause he looks good.” Coley went on, “To make a long story short, we’ve been to Hell and back. If there’s a Hell, he’s been there, man!”

After Maclin finished a seventeen-year stint at Sing Sing, the maximum-security prison upriver from Manhattan, he was approached by the filmmakers Greg Kwedar and Clint Bentley about making a movie inspired by his experience inside. Kwedar had happened upon an *Esquire* article about a group of men at the prison—including Maclin—who had staged a time-travelling musical comedy with the aid of a nonprofit called Rehabilitation Through the Arts. “Between plays, skits, and acting things out in the classroom, I’d say I’ve done twenty-seven shows,” he said. “Sing Sing,” which was released by A24 this month, chronicles the production of one such performance, “Breakin’ the Mummy’s Code,” whose dramatis personae include a pirate, a cowboy, a gladiator, Freddy Krueger, and Hamlet. The majority of the “Sing Sing” cast are alumni of R.T.A.’s theatre program; the man behind Colman Domingo’s character, John (Divine G) Whitfield, who was wrongfully incarcerated for almost twenty-five years,

makes a brief appearance. (The movie will also be shown at the San Quentin Film Festival, the first such film festival to be held inside a prison.) The Maclin character's reluctance to change his ways is based on truth. "I really did carry a knife every day, 'til the day I left," he said. "That's when I gave away my knife, in the steak shop, on the way out the door. But that was my own insecurity. And, when I revisit that, I realize that I still have layers on the onion that I got to peel back. The work is never done."

At Suit Man, Maclin was joined by Prince Mapp, an old friend who knew him from when they were incarcerated, as younger men. They headed to the south side of town, where Maclin grew up. Driving past a pediatrician's office, Maclin said, "That used to be Sue's Rendezvous, where Cardi B used to strip." Passing a basketball court, he said, "The second time I saw someone get killed was in that park."

The two men talked about the difference between regret and remorse. "Remorse is, like, when I was finally *disgusted* with who I was," Mapp said.

"That's a *fact*," Maclin chimed in. "I don't blame anyone for what I've done. This definitely wasn't my mother's fault. You ever been sitting in your cell and—" He paused. "I used to picture my mom walking in that building right there, where we lived at, after doing a hard day's work, and people be pointing at her, and not even for shit *she* did. For shit *I* did. That's a fucked-up feeling! That shit translates into tears. That shit translates into putting curtains up on the bars and crying into the mirror so nobody sees you." He added, "Now I pour all of that into the character."

The conversation turned to Maclin's next film. "I don't want to do a gangster or a thug or a drug dealer on the corner," he said. His friend nodded and asked if he'd ever considered sci-fi, challenging him to a Black Spock impression. "'Star Trek'? I'd work with that," Maclin said. "But I'd want to do Lieutenant Worf." ♦

Dept. of Diminishment

# Seeking Display Space for Bones of Sainted Old Men

Amy Surak, the archivist at Manhattan College, in the Bronx, is sifting and sorting through thousands of boxes of relics and floppy disks from shuttered Catholic institutions.

By Eric Lach

July 29, 2024



Amy Surak, the archivist at Manhattan College, welcomed a visitor to the school's O'Malley Library the other day. "Our air-conditioning broke," she said apologetically. "So it's a little toasty in here." Manhattan College was founded a hundred and seventy-one years ago by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. The school's name is a local misnomer on the order of the egg cream. It was originally situated on 131st Street, but the school has been in the Bronx since 1923.

Surak, wearing a sundress and holding a carabiner jangling a dozen keys, went down an airless stairway to a cavernous basement, where she works.

As she unlocked a door, she apologized again, for the state of her office. Every surface was covered with papers, photographs, books, manila envelopes, Bankers Boxes, Rolodexes, binders, CDs, and cassettes. “I’m not a hoarder, but I’ve just been inundated with things,” she said. In recent years, many De La Salle Brothers schools and orphanages have closed. “We call it diminishment,” Surak said. “The Brothers are dying off.” Administrators at many institutions, before shutting their doors, have mailed to Surak whatever material they felt needed to be preserved. Ten years ago, two Mack trucks loaded with castoffs from across the Midwest arrived, and Surak has been playing catch-up ever since. “At least three thousand boxes came, and I have opened up about fifteen hundred of them,” she said. “I just got twenty-five boxes yesterday from D.C., Catholic University.”

She motioned to a small cardboard box (No. 1325) from the Mack-truck shipment. “These are some relics of St. Peter and Paul,” she said. The relics—small fragments of holy bones—were stored individually in tiny plastic specimen bags and labelled by hand. Surak regretted that they were stored this way and not placed in proper reliquaries in locations where they could be venerated. “St. Benilde is one of our Brothers who was sainted,” she said, describing the French schoolteacher who was canonized in 1967. “I feel bad. I have a lot of pieces of him.” In a wooden box on a shelf, Surak keeps a gumball-size chunk of the iliac bone of Jean-Baptiste de La Salle himself, a seventeenth-century French priest and educator. This relic is one of the few for which Surak has something like a chain-of-custody record. The provenance of most of the others is obscure. “If something is so powerful in your belief, and you think it heals you, or it provokes deeper spirituality, does it matter if it’s truly what it says it is?” she said. “If you’ve ever been to the Sistine Chapel, or at least seen Michelangelo’s panels on the ceiling, the center panel, where God and man are almost touching, that’s the sort of liminal space where these exist.”



Surak has had inquiries from people interested in acquiring the relics, or at least coming to worship them. Many were once kept in priests' pockets or sewn into clothing, as talismans. She picked up a six-inch metal crucifix and, with some effort, turned it around and undid a clasp, revealing saintly bone fragments hidden inside, like a handful of toothpicks. "There's one that's huge—it has, like, a hundred different bones of all the apostles," she said. "I just don't have anywhere to put it." Most recently, Surak received, through the mail, two brass monstrances displaying relics of St. Benilde. She had also been sent a piece of cloth that had been touched by James Miller, a De La Salle Brother who was murdered by masked gunmen, in Guatemala, in 1982 and beatified in 2019. "He's in the process of canonization," Surak said.

Some of the cast-off relics are products of the information age. Amid the bones stood an ancient desktop computer. When floppy disks of the Christian Brothers arrive, Surak goes through them. "I massage that 1991 computer with oil so it still stays alive," she said. "I have two VCRs."

On a wall in the office hung a French flag, a gift given by Napoleon III to the Christian Brothers for their work as medics during the War of 1870. "People don't want to throw things away," she said. Whenever she makes headway on her backlog, another box arrives. She wanted to catalogue

everything, and get word out about the collection's existence, and set up a reliquary in the campus chapel to display the relics on a rotating basis, for veneration. On her desk, two plush dolls sat side by side, one of Pope Francis and one of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She pulled a leather-bound hagiography of De La Salle, published in 1736, off a shelf and carefully turned the pages. "Nothing is not important, if you will," she said. ♦

Mom Group

# Make Way for Postpartum Punk Rock

The London band Pushy Pushy Pushy refutes the notion that artists can't be mothers.

By Anna Russell

July 29, 2024



Seven-thirty. Bedtime. The babies are down; the moms are out. Not long ago, Ania Poullain-Majchrzak and Florence Devereux, the lead singers of the postpartum punk band Pushy Pushy Pushy, arrived at Rooz Studios, in East London, for a dress rehearsal. It was the night before a headline gig at a festival in Stoke Newington, and they were fretting about the 10 p.m. start time. “Not the most mama-friendly,” Devereux had texted earlier. “The trials and tribulations of being a punk mum!”

Punk motherhood: Late nights, early mornings. Performing while covered in milk. Lots of screaming. During the past year, Poullain-Majchrzak, a video journalist and filmmaker from Poland, and Devereux, a curator and astrologer, have taken to touring London venues with their bandmates, attempting to “help people give birth to their inner child.” Onstage, they

wear spandex bodysuits and belt lyrics about motherhood. (“Why am I awake at 4 a.m. / Throw me a bone, I’m on my own.”) They both sing, and Devereux plays the flute. “You hear a lot of stories in the art world where people say you can’t be a successful artist and have a child,” Devereux said. Her toddler, Ida Eve, is one and a half; Poullain-Majchrzak’s daughter, Frances Elektra, is three. “Carolee Schneemann said that. Judy Chicago said that. This definitely is a bit of a middle finger to that idea.”

What’s more punk than a baby? They don’t care about the rules or how tired you are. After Poullain-Majchrzak gave birth, she fell into a funk. “I don’t think I had proper postpartum depression, but I had postpartum blues, and it was hard,” she said. At forty-one, she had been told that she was a “geriatric” mother; she hadn’t planned on having a baby. “Before motherhood, music for me was a hobby, but after giving birth it became a survival tool,” she said. “It felt like gasping for air from under an avalanche of nappies.” The two women started playing together in 2019, but it was only after having kids that things started to coalesce. “Before, we were really quixotic, this kind of fun band, but nothing was happening,” Poullain-Majchrzak said. Afterward, “we got our shit together.” They found a drummer and changed the group’s name from Ania & the Amateurs to Pushy Pushy Pushy.

“I think motherhood has made us pushy, right?” Devereux said. “It’s hard work!”

Poullain-Majchrzak agreed. “It’s since babies that we’ve been doing gigs, gigs, gigs.”

At Rozoo Studios, the rest of the band—three men, including Poullain-Majchrzak’s partner, George—was warming up. Devereux, who has blond Stevie Nicks bangs, was wearing a ruffled mustard sweater and black pants; Poullain-Majchrzak, who is lanky, with rock-and-roll curls, had on patterned leggings and cowboy boots. The band had written most of the songs while on a country retreat, with the kids climbing onto their laps. “The lack of sleep—I think it might bring something to the songwriting process,” Devereux said. “The delirium. You’re in a liminal space. Your ego, that normally likes to control things, isn’t there.”

In preparation for the show, Poullain-Majchrzak and Devereux had put up posters outside local day-care centers, asking mothers of all types to join them onstage as part of the Punk Mother Chaos Choir. “We’ve got ten,” Poullain-Majchrzak said. Devereux added that she’d had a message from a mom who saw someone wearing a Pushy Pushy Pushy T-shirt at a baby group—a stay-and-play—and was planning to come. “We’re recruiting desperate mothers,” Devereux said. “Or happy, settled mothers—they’re also welcome.”

They played a song, “Lazy Dominatrix,” that starts with a series of sighs. Poullain-Majchrzak’s daughter had recently taken to imitating them. In another number, they put on sheer capes and wielded baby spoons; later, they rolled on the floor. They moved their hips in unison and shouted, “Rebirth your ego!” In “Ciao Darwin,” a psychedelic song about motherhood, they practiced calling the mothers in the audience to the stage. Devereux sang a verse: “I’m in a prison of my own making / Gave birth to my girl while I was shaking / I look beyond me and I see a quarry / But I’ve got perks, don’t you worry.” Poullain-Majchrzak banged a mini-gong and Devereux screamed, “My sacred loins! My sacred loins! My sacred loins!”

It was almost time to pack up. How tired were the parents in the room? “I had my best night’s sleep in months last night, so I’m vibing,” Devereux said. “Yesterday, I was on my knees.”

“George is tired,” Poullain-Majchrzak said.

The guitarist, Andrew Kipps, said that his eleven-year-old still wakes him at night.

“Not the news we want to hear!” Devereux said. ♦

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## Profiles

# Gillian Anderson's Sex Education

She became famous playing buttoned-up Agent Scully. But in midlife her characters often have a strong erotic charge.

By **Rebecca Mead**

July 29, 2024



“Have you turned me on?” Gillian Anderson asked, as she walked swiftly from her trailer on the back lot of a studio in Calgary, swishing up the hem of the long woollen skirt she was wearing to check whether a microphone transmitter affixed to a leather boot was functioning. It was mid-June, and Anderson had been based in Alberta since May, filming “The Abandons,” a lavish new Netflix drama set in Oregon in the mid-eighteen-hundreds. Her boots were scuffed and grimy; the previous day, she’d been shooting scenes on horseback, on location in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, in her role as Constance Van Ness, a flinty matriarch who has inherited, and substantially increased, the mining fortune made by her late husband. “It’s dust, dust, dust for days, and then mud, mud, mud for days,” she told me, with relish.

Anderson's career was forged in Canada. When she was in her mid-twenties, she was cast as the F.B.I. agent Dana Scully in "The X-Files," the sci-fi drama that debuted on Fox in 1993. "I got the job on a Thursday, and I was needed in Vancouver on the Saturday," Anderson said. The first five seasons were shot in British Columbia, and the show's dark, gloomy aesthetic was partly a product of the region's meteorological conditions. "The X-Files," which ran for nearly a decade, turned Anderson from a couch-surfing unknown into a globally recognized star, and introduced a novel kind of character to network television. Scully, brainy and acerbic, more than held her own with her fellow-agent Fox Mulder, played by David Duchovny, and, in contrast with the proliferating starlet roles featured in rival nineties shows such as "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Baywatch," Anderson's character was notably frumpy and invariably serious. (There are Reddit threads devoted to discussing whether, during the entire run of "The X-Files," Scully ever really smiled or laughed.) Anderson told me that, while filming a scene in an early episode, she sought to add some shading to her character by letting a tear roll down her cheek; she got a call from the show's creator, Chris Carter, telling her that the ultra-rational Scully wouldn't have broken down at that moment—"that she was basically a badass."

Otto Bathurst, the director of the first episode of "The Abandons," told me that Anderson's ability to make the repetitive pleasurable to watch—essential to the success of a long-running show—was one reason she had been cast in what Netflix clearly hopes will be a tentpole series. "It's a real challenge to find actors who have the kind of intrigue and depth that makes you want to keep hanging out with them," Bathurst said. "That's what she's terrific at—there's something else going on behind the eyes." The show pits Anderson against an Irish immigrant played by Lena Headey, best known as Cersei Lannister in "Game of Thrones." Bathurst explained that Constance, "in lesser hands, could be reduced to a trope—there's an element of Cruella de Vil at first glance. But it's a far more interesting and intricate character." For Anderson, the role was a chance to do something new. "I'd never done a Western," she said. She also noted, "I haven't really played any baddies before, and Constance Van Ness has as complex an operating system as anyone I've ever inhabited."

The show is partly shot in a purpose-built town of wooden storefronts in a valley about an hour outside Calgary. One day, on the sweltering upstairs

floor of the building that represents the Van Ness mining office, Anderson repeated the same few lines for hours—first from a distance, then in closeup. During breaks, she ducked into a small room, hidden behind a frosted-glass window, that was filled with incongruent accoutrements of the twenty-first century: a sleek swivel chair for Anderson to sit in when her hair and makeup were touched up; a place for her to plug in her phone. While recharging, she proudly showed me several videos of her two sons, fifteen and seventeen, both of whom were in Europe competing in downhill mountain-bike races. (She shares custody of them with their father, Mark Griffiths, a British businessman, with whom she was in a relationship in the early two-thousands. Anderson, who is fifty-five, also has a daughter, twenty-nine, from an earlier marriage.) The boys were tackling alarmingly vertiginous courses, but Anderson didn’t seem worried. “Their dad is very involved in that part of their world, so I get to do my bit, and trust that everything is well taken care of,” she said. When I asked what her bit was, Anderson let out a peal of laughter and said, “Paying the bills.”

Anderson has often been cast because she’s gifted at capturing a character’s interiority and intelligence. Bryan Fuller, the creator of the NBC series “Hannibal,” in which Anderson portrayed a serial killer’s therapist, told me, “When Gillian is playing the smartest person in the room, you buy it immediately.” Moreover, he added, “she has one of those faces that can change its structure and intent.” This talent for metamorphosis has become a hallmark of Anderson’s work. In Season 4 of “The Crown,” she became an uncanny simulacrum of Margaret Thatcher, with a tilt of the head, a firming of the chin, and a drop in vocal timbre. “It was freaky,” Olivia Colman, who played Queen Elizabeth in her middle years, told me. “She was a little *too* good.” When Anderson starred in “The Fall,” playing Stella Gibson—a detective seeking to capture a serial killer played by Jamie Dornan—many dramatic confrontations were carried out through minute facial movements. Dornan told me, “She has that power where she can move her eyebrow, like, a millimetre and tell a huge chunk of story.”

Anderson has become so firmly identified with portraying formidable women—in Netflix’s recent film “Scoop,” she played Emily Maitlis, the fiercely tough journalist whose interview with Prince Andrew upended his royal career—that her capacity for freewheeling goofiness strikes a contrast with her artistic seriousness. In the course of several conversations in

Calgary, and at her home in London, Anderson was funny, frank, and sometimes profane. She was thoughtful without always already having thought things through, and as unguarded as a person can be while remaining conscious of how her every word might be spun in a *Daily Mail* headline. When I mentioned to her an anecdote that she'd blithely told James Corden a few years ago, about the time one of her then prepubescent sons unwittingly got an erection, she was horrified to learn that she'd described her son as being naked. "He was wearing little orange briefs!" she exclaimed. "Oh, *shit*, I wonder if I left that detail out?"—as if including it would have rendered the story substantially less intimate. Anderson is quick to claim that, in real life, she is far less cerebral than many women she has played. "I haven't read the books, I didn't pay attention in school," she said. "If you ask me most things about history, or geography, or whatever, I wouldn't have a clue. My look, stage left, is intellectual. But I literally could be thinking about the washing."

Anderson's modesty is excessive: she is culturally avid and intellectually curious. (She mentioned at one point that she has been enjoying the audiobook of Miranda July's novel "All Fours.") Her self-deprecation is itself a form of intelligence: she is a rigorous assessor of her own capacities. Sitting in her trailer in Calgary, she explained that she'd come by her scuffed boots honestly. "The X-Files" moved its production to Southern California after Season 5, and Anderson relocated to Malibu. "I didn't have much time outside of filming, so when I say I studied Pilates I mean I did it four times a year," she told me. "But one time the woman who did Pilates with me had just come from horseback riding, and she said it had been amazing, and she told me there was a horse for sale. And, for some weird reason, I thought in my head, If the name of this horse has any relation to me whatsoever, I am going to buy it." Anderson interrupted herself with a laugh: "I *promise* this is not an indication of how I deal with everything." The horse's name turned out to be one that Anderson frequently uses as an alias when checking into hotels, so she went ahead and bought it. "You might think, What a rash and potentially stupid thing to do! But it was extraordinary," she said. "The fact that I made time for it, and spent the two hours a day doing it, had a profoundly positive influence on me—it was a level of focus, discipline, and presence that didn't really exist in my life, and probably hasn't since." She continued, "And, at the end of it, when someone says, 'You have been cast in this film where you ride a horse,' I can say, 'Well, actually, I *know* how to

ride a horse.’ Which is very bizarre, because I don’t know how to do anything else. I know how to act, and how to ride a horse.”

While in Calgary, Anderson has been staying in a high-rise luxury tower, in the kind of apartment that a latter-day Alberta mining heiress might keep as a pied-à-terre. The elevator opens into a large living room decorated in shades of greige, with floor-to-ceiling windows. “I love a floor plan,” Anderson told me when I visited her there one evening, explaining that she moves every five years or so, entirely for the creative pleasure of undergoing a renovation. “I find deep happiness in trying to make a space work for my needs.” She went on, “The irony is that I’m often not at home, so I spend a lot of time and effort creating homes that I don’t spend much time in.” Anderson was curled up on a velvet couch, wearing black sweatpants and a black sweater and drinking from a tall glass filled with her own concoction: alcohol-free beer mixed with stevia-sweetened lemonade. (She poured me some, too, but after one sip I left it untouched; she later told me that, after I was gone, she downed my glass as well.) She pointed toward a window with a view of several other high-rises, a few blocks away. “If I were in London, I’d be more nervous about the fact that those blinds are open—that somebody could be in that building over there with binoculars,” she said, quietly acknowledging the extraordinary contours of her existence.

Anderson was born in Chicago, but from toddlerhood into elementary school she lived in London, where her father was attending film school. In the seventies, the British capital was a more economically depressed, and grimier, place than it is now. “We used to take a lot of buses, and my mum would constantly say, ‘Don’t touch the seats!’” she recalled. At school, she learned to speak with an English accent—“her first language,” she calls it. Anderson was an only child, and told me that she “played a lot in the garden by myself,” in part because she was bullied by classmates for being a “Yank.” It can serve an actor well to be “an impostor everywhere,” as her co-star in “Scoop,” Rufus Sewell—who is British but lives in Los Angeles—remarked to me recently. Today, Anderson’s accent shifts between lightly accented American and proper British, mostly without her being aware. The only time she really becomes conscious of the phenomenon, she told me, is when she’s at a dinner seated between an American and a Brit: “Then I’ll try to keep it uniform, so that I don’t sound like ‘mid-Atlantic twat.’”

In Anderson's childhood imagination, America was sunny and glamorous. When her family moved back to the U.S., to Grand Rapids, Michigan, the reality was somewhat different: the city was cold and comparatively provincial. Having enrolled in middle school, it dawned on Anderson that she had a certain cachet as an outsider. "Suddenly, everyone wanted to be my friend, and I took advantage of it," she told me. "Everyone wanted to give me gum, and then I had an *expectation* of gum." Anderson was drawn to the counterculture, and found a group of friends within the city's small but noisy punk scene. "It felt like a scream, and that was soothing," she said. "The 'fuck you' form of rebelliousness—being rude to people, and flipping the bird on the street, and destroying property. I'm not proud of that aspect of it, and if my kid destroyed property I'd be bloody angry about it. But it's the vibration underneath—the need to act out in that way. It was performative. We got something from people gawping, scowling, yelling at us." There was, Anderson said, "a lot of drink, and a lot of drugs, and a lot of all that kind of stuff."

In her teens, Anderson discovered a different and more gratifying way of being noticed. While looking in the mirror, she realized that she had a capacity for self-transformation that was "almost like shape-shifting." There was no theatre department at her high school, but an English teacher encouraged her to get involved in the arts anyway. She mounted a production of Tom Stoppard's "The Real Inspector Hound," single-handedly overseeing the casting, directing, scenery-building, program design, and ticket sales. Anderson also joined a community-theatre group, where she was cast in "And a Nightingale Sang," a British comedy about the Second World War. "The experience of becoming somebody else, and then *clapping*, and then afterwards people going, 'Oh, my God'—I went, 'Oh, I like that.'"

Anderson went to DePaul University, in Chicago, and enrolled in its Theatre School. The program was challenging—thirty-six freshmen were accepted, their ranks whittled down by half before graduation—and Anderson's life was sometimes chaotic. "I struggled," she said. "Most of my friends didn't go to university." At twenty-one, she got sober: "I needed to slow right down." Apart from a brief period almost two decades ago—when she learned that "the addict was still living and breathing and ready to pounce"—she has remained a teetotaller.

After graduation, Anderson moved to New York, where she lived in a tiny apartment in the West Village, back when such a thing was affordable on an aspiring actor's waitressing salary. Anderson had dated both boys and girls, and in New York she met a woman with whom she lived for about a year. "She was a lot older—from New York, Italian—and had worked in fashion, assisting photographers, for many years," Anderson said. "I was just out of uni, and we were smitten. She was like a mafioso in a woman's body, but with a big, generous heart. Great sense of style—the quintessential nineties New York lesbian-community white Levi's and Gucci loafers." The relationship fell apart, but they remained in touch. A few years ago, her ex died, of a brain tumor, and Anderson went public about the relationship, both to honor her former girlfriend's memory and to acknowledge "the importance of that relationship in my personal trajectory and sense of self."

Anderson has since had male partners, but, she told me, "gender hasn't meant anything, really, one way or another, in terms of attraction." She added, "In the periods of time when I have been with women, it has felt temporary in my head, no matter how I might be showing up in the relationship. Whereas that has not been the case when I have been in a relationship with men." Anderson has been married twice, and for the past eight years—except for a short break—she has been with Peter Morgan, the creator of "The Crown." "We do not live together," she said. "But, when I am not with my kids or on set, we are together. It's perfect for us. We are both incredibly independent and workaholics, and need that space. Best of all worlds. I highly recommend it."

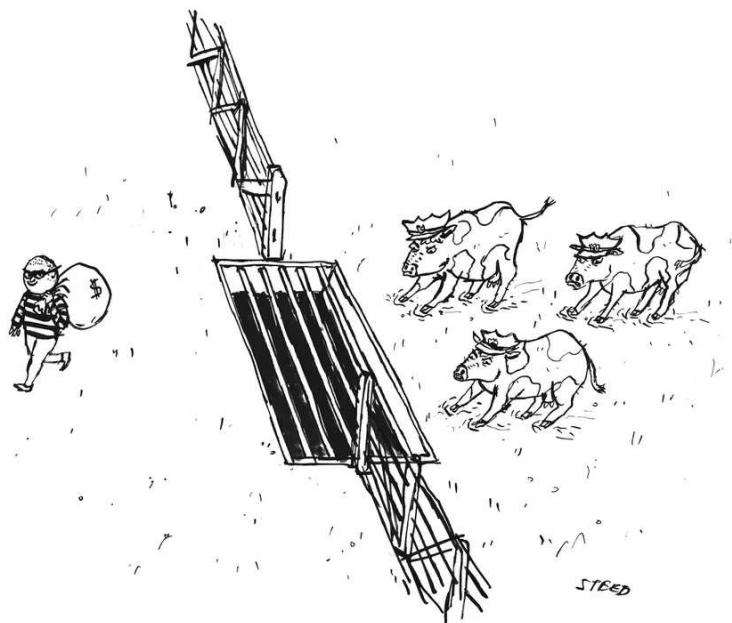
When Anderson first moved to New York, her initial ambition, to be a successful stage actress, seemed to be heading toward fulfillment: in 1991, she was cast at the last minute in a production of "Absent Friends," the Alan Ayckbourn drama, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, after Mary-Louise Parker dropped out. The *Times* raved that Anderson, playing a "sullen malcontent," was "hilarious, if frightening." She failed to secure another role, though, and eventually followed a boyfriend to Los Angeles, where she auditioned for film and television instead. Her first TV appearance was in 1993, in an episode of a short-lived drama on Fox, "Class of '96," about a group of Ivy League freshmen. Anderson played an English major who, when discussing literature with a male student, says, "Look at one of the most feminine novels ever written, 'Pride and Prejudice.' The end of that book is like the

female orgasm—lots of highs, lots of lows, and no single clear resolution. Lots of potentially limitless climaxes.” The scene—a time capsule of the pro-sex feminism of the early nineties—culminates with her planting a kiss on her classmate. It was just about the only show of eroticism that the young Anderson displayed onscreen.

Later that year, she was cast in the role that defined her for almost a decade. “The X-Files”—in which Anderson and Duchovny endlessly encountered inconclusive evidence of extraterrestrial life—was all about withholding, and Anderson’s artfully masked performance was perhaps the most satisfying manifestation of this theme. Two dozen episodes were filmed each year, and Duchovny told me that Anderson “wasn’t going to let the crazy amount of work get in the way of doing good work,” adding, “She was always very meticulous about not moving on until she was satisfied that it was up to an interior standard.” When I relayed these comments to Anderson, she laughed. “David was able to hold it really lightly, which I only learned to do years later,” she said. “But, yeah, there was a long time where I properly *did* care about the first two hundred episodes.”

In her private life, Anderson was navigating her first marriage—to Clyde Klotz, an art director on the show—and early motherhood. While shooting Season 1, she became pregnant with her daughter, who was reared largely in Anderson’s trailer. (Anderson split from Klotz when the girl was still a toddler.) Meanwhile, Scully’s pointedly straitlaced manner proved more alluring to viewers than anyone had expected. “Because Scully, or me playing Scully, became a sex symbol of sorts, the idea of fantasy—and me being part of fantasy—has been out there since my twenties,” she said. “On the one hand, in my early career, I just didn’t understand it—it didn’t make any sense to me at all, particularly since I was playing a very buttoned-up, nerdy scientist. With a couple of the early photo shoots I did, the point of them was showing the opposite of that, and blasting through that preconception.” She posed in lingerie, lace, and rubber for the magazine *FHM*, and on Jon Stewart’s MTV talk show she exchanged bawdy banter about “The Sex Files,” a porn parody of her series. “But, by the same token, I was a young mother, working ridiculous hours, and not feeling connected in any way, shape, or form to what was being projected onto me.”

When “The X-Files” ended its run, in 2002, Anderson might have stayed in Malibu and developed a career in Hollywood as a film actor. She had made a few features during the show’s down periods, including, in 2000, Terence Davies’s adaptation of “The House of Mirth,” in which she played Lily Bart, Edith Wharton’s tragic heroine. To watch the movie now, through the lens of Anderson’s subsequent dramatic renown, is to see how incrementally she conveys Lily’s gradual demise—her failure to capitalize on the privilege of her beauty, and her unwillingness to engage in the kind of ruthlessness that comes easily to her inconstant benefactors. At the time, though, the casting of a genre actor in a period drama was itself the cause of some mirth, and some reviewers were unimpressed. Stephen Holden, in the *Times*, witheringly declared that Anderson “projects none of the innate refinement necessary for Lily,” describing her as a “big-boned redhead.” (She is a delicate five feet three.) Anderson was devastated. “I wanted to quit,” she said. “I thought, If that’s what happens when I put everything of myself into something, I am not meant to be doing this.”



Instead, she moved to the U.K. and embarked on what was effectively a second career, as a British actor. “In the U.S., no A-list actors did TV in that period—it was considered beneath them,” she explained. Anderson was inspired by the example of actors such as Helen Mirren and Judi Dench: “They would move between TV, theatre, and film, and they weren’t thought

less of for it. They'd do theatre, and your jaw would be on the ground. And they'd do Sunday-night costume drama, and their level of respect was maintained. Their talent was bigger than the medium. I thought, Those are *real* actors." Before long, she was cast as Lady Dedlock in a serialized adaptation of Charles Dickens's "Bleak House"; her ability to conceal and betray a character's secrets behind a barely moving visage was expertly deployed. A few years later, she appeared in an adaptation of "Great Expectations," with a critically acclaimed turn as a younger than usual Miss Havisham. As the *Guardian* admiringly put it, Anderson's take on the character was "quietly sad, bitter and vengeful, cruelly manipulative, and more than a little potty."

In 2013, having established her costume-drama bona fides, Anderson took on another contemporary role: that of Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson, in the thriller series "The Fall." Set in Northern Ireland, the show, which was created by Allan Cubitt, broke with genre convention by revealing from the first episode the identity of the serial killer, Paul Spector, whose crimes the story chronicles. It was not a whodunnit but, rather, an exploration of the mind of a sexual murderer—and the mind of his dogged pursuer. "The Fall" ran for three memorable seasons, culminating in an interview between Gibson and Spector that unfolded for more than twelve minutes—an eternity in television. "It was very exciting to be in an acting standoff with someone like Gillian," Jamie Dornan told me.

As Dana Scully had been two decades earlier, Stella Gibson was a new kind of woman on television. She brought to bear a psychoanalytically informed understanding of the childhood experiences that underlay her quarry's motives and methods, and she drew on her own past—it was revealed that she'd lost her father as a teen-ager—to get inside the heads of Spector and those close to him. She also possessed a confident sexuality, effortlessly initiating encounters with both men and women. Not incidentally, she owned a wardrobe the likes of which Agent Scully could never have imagined. Gibson stalked the grittiest streets of Belfast in narrow skirts and high heels, and inspired a desire among legions of television viewers for shimmering silk blouses in unbesmirched shades of cream and rose.

Playing Gibson, Anderson said, helped her unlock something about herself. "It wasn't until 'The Fall' that I actually even felt like I came into my body,

and took ownership of myself as a sensual, sexual being,” she told me. “When you are acting as if you are a certain way, experiencing that for a few hours a day—being conscious of the male gaze, conscious of how you feel, and how you are projecting yourself, both for the audience and for the other characters in the show—it was ever present, in a way that I hadn’t really experienced before, in a character or in my life.”

Anderson was also having breakthroughs onstage: in 2014, she played Blanche DuBois in a production of “A Streetcar Named Desire,” at the Young Vic. The role was one that she had aspired to perform for years. “It felt like she lived in me since the first time I became aware of her, at university,” Anderson told me. As she had done onscreen, she produced powerful emotional effects with apparently minimal choices: Blanche’s hands fluttered at the wrist, a gesture that at first appeared to be an affectation of elegance but grew to look more like a hopeless attempt to bat away the intolerable imperatives of reality. Wearing high heels even when in slippers, she teetered physically and emotionally; gradually, her command of the trappings of femininity failed her, and by the play’s end her lipstick was smeared across her face. The production’s director, Benedict Andrews, told me, “Gillian had a great understanding of Blanche’s absolute need, her hunger, and the addiction that drives the character. She understood that in her own nervous system.” The performance earned Anderson the reviews of a lifetime. In the *Guardian*, Susannah Clapp wrote that the play’s culmination, in which Blanche departs with contrived, shattered grace on the arm of an insane-asylum doctor, was “a masterclass in how to make audiences weep.”

While performing at the Young Vic, Anderson told me, she was able to remain attached to her own life, especially in her role as a parent. But when the show transferred to St. Ann’s Warehouse, in Brooklyn, Blanche’s instability loomed dangerously close. “My whole existence was the play,” she said. On days when there was a matinee, her co-star Vanessa Kirby, who played Stella, would pick up lunch for her, Anderson explained, “because even at one o’clock in the afternoon being in the proximity of other human beings was too much—I was so in the world of the play.” Onstage, she “experienced a level of presence that felt like a spiritual experience,” she recalled. “It was magical, otherworldly. It was like I was *in* her.” Anderson knew enough to recognize that there were risks to inhabiting Blanche’s

derangement so completely. “All of a sudden, I started to feel, ‘Oh, shit, this isn’t fun anymore—I’m too far, I’m losing touch with me,’ ” she said. She ended up finding places in the play—moments when Blanche is by herself in the bathtub, the dramatic focus elsewhere—where she “could very simply ground myself, and get out of her.” When a third run of “Streetcar” was proposed, Anderson knew that she couldn’t do it. “I thought, It’s tempting fate,” she said. “I feel like I got away with it.”

In early July, I caught up with Anderson in London, to which she had returned during a break from shooting “The Abandons.” She was staying at Peter Morgan’s home in West London, and we sat in a spacious living room with a vantage over a large private garden; shades were drawn over the windows facing the street. Having made her home in the U.K. for more than two decades, Anderson has not so much been embraced as a transplant as she has been reabsorbed, shape-shifting from a Midwesterner back into a Londoner. Even now, she says, when she returns to her old neighborhood, in the hills of North London, the scent of its hedgerows brings her back to childhood. “I find it so comforting,” she told me. She does not yet have a British passport—whenever she gets close to having met the residency requirements, a long stint in a place like Calgary throws things off—but she has become a firm part of the British establishment. In 2016, she received an honorary O.B.E., or Order of the British Empire, for her services to the arts. (Morgan threw a dinner party for her at a London restaurant; she wore her medal on her dress.) And in 2012, at a ceremony marking the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dickens, she gave a public reading from “Great Expectations.” The audience included Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. When Charles remarked, with pleasure, that it was like having a bedtime story read to him, Anderson said, “I can tuck you in, too, if you like.” The future monarch replied, “Yes, please.”

When we met in London, Anderson had just returned from the Glastonbury music festival, and her bare feet were covered with Band-Aids from wearing uncomfortable flip-flops. On her phone, she showed me photographs of the tiny shepherd’s hut where she and a friend had shared a bed—she’d waited too long to book more spacious accommodations. They’d watched Coldplay perform from an elevated V.I.P. area above the throng. She recalled, “All of a sudden, this roar comes up behind us, and Tom Cruise has just come onto the platform. And, of course, he’s totally comfortable with this life of his,

and he gestures to his people—his fans—and there are ripples and ripples, and all the phones go up. I was, like, ‘Is this what it’s like all the time?’ But he loves it.” Anderson showed me a video she’d later taken of Cruise waving to tens of thousands during a sing-along to Oasis’s “Don’t Look Back in Anger.” When I pointed out that she, too, had been in the V.I.P. area, she protested, “I just feel like a regular person. I *know* it’s ridiculous. But most of the time I am literally going between spending long hours on set and making my kids chicken wraps. Whereas *he* came in a helicopter.”

In the past few years, Anderson has attracted a significant new tranche of fans of her own, thanks to her role on the popular Netflix comedy-drama “Sex Education,” which last year concluded its fourth and final season. The show centers on the social and sexual dynamics of a diverse group of British high schoolers, among them Otis Milburn, played by Asa Butterfield. Otis is the child of Anderson’s character, Jean Milburn, a sex therapist with shaky personal boundaries and a fondness for chic jumpsuits. To the fictional teenagers in the show—and to the show’s TikTok-using core audience—Anderson’s character is an unfamiliar and appealing kind of parent figure: nonjudgmental, forthright, and startlingly hot. One popular clip on social media shows Jean zestfully hitting a spliff in the company of the headmaster’s delinquent son. Viewers closer to Anderson’s age appreciate that the discombobulations caused by the hormonal changes common to women in midlife—Jean learns at the end of the second season that she is both in perimenopause and pregnant—are neither ignored nor played for laughs at her expense. Anderson’s enactment of the complex emotions involved in parenting an adolescent are often poignant. When Otis complains that Jean is treating him as if he is part of her, she falteringly replies, “Well, you *are* part of me.”

Anderson initially wasn’t sure if the role was right for her. Morgan encouraged her to take it on. “He’s got really good taste, and he gets Zeitgeists at inception,” she said. “I seriously didn’t get the humor when I first read it—I thought it was way too broad. But once I realized that Jean’s dubious moral compass was part of what would make her fun to play, rather than something that needed to be fixed, then I suddenly got it.” Nonetheless, she remained wary of taking on a role for which the crude acronym *MILF* might have been invented. “I told myself, ‘But I’m not old enough to fit that box!’ ” she said. “But of course I was, and had been for some time.”

Anderson's sons are now the target age for "Sex Education," and she told me that, at a certain point, she asked them "if their lives were made more difficult by my job, and they kind of said yes—it was embarrassing. But then we got to have a conversation about how important it was that that show was out there, and that things that were embarrassing needed to be addressed." Both her sons have claimed that they never watched "Sex Education," she said. "But I think they have."

What Anderson has discovered—somewhat to her surprise, but also to her delight—is that the show's themes have bled into her own life. She, no less than Jean Milburn, has become an icon of sexual frankness. The meme "Gillian Anderson made me gay" has been adopted by L.G.B.T.Q. people in recognition of the appeal of Anderson's characters and her public persona. She has wryly embraced the elision. For the past few years, her social-media accounts have featured images of suggestively phallic or vulval forms—a squat, bulbous mushroom; a natural rock pool surrounded by lapping waves—accompanied by the hashtags #penisoftheday or #yonioftheday. When, earlier this year, she was nominated for a Golden Globe for her work on "Sex Education," she wore to the ceremony an off-white dress, designed by her friend Gabriela Hearst, that was embroidered with what the *Telegraph* referred to as "barely-there vaginas." (The design concept was Anderson's, though the subtlety was a collaborative effort. "People really took it in a positive way," Hearst said.) Last year, in collaboration with one of Peter Morgan's sons, Anderson launched a line of soft drinks called G Spot. When I visited her in London, she gave me a can of a flavor called Arouse—a mixture of passion fruit and habanero chile.

This fall, Anderson is upping the ante by editing "Want," a collection of women's sexual fantasies that were anonymously sent to the publisher Bloomsbury after she publicly requested submissions. The idea for the book was hatched, Anderson explained, in collaboration with her literary agent, Claire Conrad, who had been approached by several publishers asking if Anderson would be interested in writing a positive book about sex. The inspiration for the format of "Want" is Nancy Friday's 1973 best-seller, "My Secret Garden," an anthology of secret sexual desires that Friday collected through interviews and correspondence.

The fantasies in Friday's book range from vanilla ones—an encounter at a suburban garden party, flower-picking included—to scenarios of rape, incest, and bestiality. (One of the revelations delivered by Friday was the extent to which the family dog was not exclusively man's best friend.) There are no such contributions in "Want": Anderson's publisher placed off limits anything involving characters under the age of eighteen, or anything depicting rape, graphic violence, or intolerance toward any individual or group. There is no bestiality, unless you count a contributor's fantasy about having sex with Bigfoot. And, though there are no minors, one contributor has submitted a fantasy that includes having a threesome with the Weasley twins from the "Harry Potter" movies. To the extent that "Want" includes fantasies of being overcome and disempowered, they are couched in the rhetoric of safety and consent. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of "My Secret Garden" today is how common race-based sexual fantasies were among Friday's (presumably predominantly white) contributors, and how unremarkable Friday seems to find them. No such submissions were offered for "Want," Alexis Kirschbaum, Anderson's publisher at Bloomsbury, told me.

Anderson said of the project, "I think in this day and age, if we were to include those types of fantasies, the book would become controversial in a way that in the end might make readers and the women contributing feel unsafe." The intention was for it to be as inclusive as possible. She went on, "It fascinates me, because it seems to be of our time that one *needs* to have restrictions." Just as Friday's book spoke to her era, Anderson's is reflective of contemporary sexual mores. Whereas Friday's contributors were often troubled by their feelings of same-sex attraction, Anderson's book includes contributions from lesbians who find themselves secretly turned on by fantasies of heterosexual encounters. And although Anderson's nameless contributors proudly identify themselves with such descriptors as "pansexual" or "asexual," some express embarrassment and shame when their urges conflict with their politics, as if the domain of fantasy ought to be—or could be—regulated by the same notions of rectitude that apply in the real world.

The experience of working on the book made Anderson think about her own sexual identity in terms she had never before considered. "Now, at the age of fifty-five, I am thinking, Oh, am I pansexual? Am I bisexual?" she said. Had

her same-sex relationships come to light when she was starting out as an actor, Anderson told me, it would have defined her in a way that might have detracted from what she sought to achieve artistically. In this era, she is careful not to overstate her sexual experience with women—not out of fear of being labelled, but in order not to be seen as appropriating an identity to which she might not truly be able to lay claim.

Having had the disconcerting experience of becoming a sex symbol in the nineties, Anderson has now attained a different kind of symbolic relevance: as an avatar of the scrupulously mindful, identity-affirming, progressive sexual politics of today. Editing “Want,” Anderson told me in Calgary, involved some unexpected turns. “When I started reading so many ‘clit’s, it didn’t offend me, but so many feelings came up,” she said. “The first few I read, I thought, Oh, it’s men writing these, women don’t use the word ‘clit.’ But apparently women really *do* use the word ‘clit’!” She has contributed introductions to each chapter, in which she draws on her work as an actor, and her experience as a celebrity, to illustrate the power of fantasy. “As someone who is watched for a living, I have a complicated relationship with privacy,” she writes at one point. “If I had my druthers, I would move about the world invisibly. And indeed, at the very heart of all my own fantasies, I am the watcher, not the watched.”

Anderson herself contributed a sexual fantasy to the book—an experience, she said, that taught her something about her own boundaries and comfort levels. “It’s one thing to have it in your head, and it’s another to express it to your partner—and it’s a whole other thing to put it on paper,” she told me late one evening in Calgary. “I am not squeamish. I am not prudish. I feel like I have experienced a lot. And yet actually describing something myself, and putting certain words down—it was quite something.” Although Anderson’s contribution is also anonymous, she wondered aloud, as she drank her alcohol-free shandy, how she would react if a reader should divine which fantasy is hers, and ask her directly about it.

“I’d be really bad at pretending it wasn’t mine,” she said, laughing. “I’m a really bad liar. My kids say so all the time.” I responded with surprise—if anyone can put on an act in a pinch, surely an actor can. But Anderson was insistent. “I don’t know whether that’s a common thing among actors,” she said, her eyes wide, simultaneously guileless and mirthful. “I have to

imagine that most actors are probably really good at lying.” And then she lied: “Maybe I’m just not that good of an actor.” ♦

## Personal History

# My Mother, the Gambler

For a long time, I didn't know that what my mother was doing—playing the so-called Italian lottery—was illegal. She certainly didn't look like a criminal.

By Victor Lodato

July 29, 2024



“Give me three numbers, baby.” My mother made this request often—so often, in fact, that when I try to remember her voice this is what I hear. I can see her, too. She’s in the kitchen, sitting at the white Formica table, the green wall phone behind her, the phone she’ll soon pick up to place her bet. She’s smiling, because this moment is capacious: everything’s possible. It’s a moment in which—unless you’re a pessimist, and my mother is not—Fortune is on your side.

She’s dressed for the occasion, in a flower-print top and stretchy yellow slacks, as if to advertise her innocence before breaking the law. Of course, for a long time I didn’t know that what my mother was doing was illegal. She certainly didn’t look like a criminal, sitting there with her blond hair

intricately coiffed. The stylist had made it look like a *sfogliatella*, a kind of Neapolitan pastry that we often had in the house. My mother's hair possessed the same golden hue, the same artful construction of multilayered swoops. Plus, the glossy lacquer of Aqua Net was not unlike the sugar on the pastry. That this delectable human might want my advice made me feel giddy.

I don't recall her ever asking my brother for numbers. My brother was older, more confident, more defined as a person. Perhaps, as such, he lacked mystery. So my mother looked to me, the quiet one.

Possibly my inwardness gave the impression I might be in contact with whatever invisible forces were responsible for luck. No doubt she'd also noted my fervent superstitions, which involved the need to arrange things perfectly or to perform an action a certain number of times. It was important, for instance, that the hanging bits of my shoelaces not touch the floor and that everything on my desk be an equal distance apart. When leaving for school, I made sure to touch three separate leaves on the maple tree just outside our door. These rituals, done correctly, could stave off doom—though perhaps my mother interpreted my behavior not as an attempt to avoid misfortune but as a spell to invoke success.

What would later be diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder was, at this point, just another aspect of what was openly called my oddness. I had heard my father say to strangers that he had no idea where I'd come from. Sometimes he said he'd found me in a garbage can. I was also referred to as "the Polack," since I was light-haired and fair-skinned, unlike my swarthy parents and my brother, who looked robustly Italian; the one-quarter Polish heritage from my paternal grandmother had staked its claim in me.

At least I had my mother's nose, and, more important, I had inherited her belief in magic. Both of us understood that in order to survive it was necessary to arrange things in a certain way. You had to take life's terrifying unpredictabilities and rally them, by ritual or formula, into an army that would do your bidding.

There was a period of several months when I kept suggesting my mother play the same three numbers. Seven, one, four. Something about that

arrangement seemed friendly, not to mention that the numbers added up to twelve, which, when added again—one plus two—gave you three, meaning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I saw no sacrilege in this reference to the Trinity. Gambling, I sensed, was a kind of prayer—though my mother didn’t always direct these prayers toward God. Sometimes she invoked the dead, playing the birth date of a deceased relative, often her grandmother. Such bets were akin to lighting candles in church, which you had to pay for, too. Both transactions were a request to be remembered by Heaven—to be helped, or saved.

And we needed help. We were poor—though this word was not one my family used back then. “Hardworking,” my mother might have said with a smirk, rightly indicating that the people who worked the hardest often had the least to show for it. “No pot to piss in,” as my father liked to put it. A waitress and a barber, they could get only so far.

Welfare, for which we likely would have qualified, was unthinkable. My parents, the descendants of immigrants who had never been naturalized, had inherited a residue of fear and shame when it came to the government. They didn’t want their names *in the system or on a list*.

Besides, we weren’t *starving*, and we’d recently moved to a house in the suburbs of New Jersey. The first time I suggested the numbers seven, one, four to my mother, she said, “Do you mean seven, one, two?” The address of the apartment building in Hoboken where we used to live was 712 Adams Street. “The penthouse,” my father called it—a tenth-floor walkup, with ill-lit stairwells reeking of urine. The tiny cold-water flat had no heating system other than the stove in the kitchen, which explains why in holiday photographs from that time my brother and I sit under an artificial Christmas tree as if dressed for an Arctic expedition.

Still, my mother occasionally played the old number—712. Her commitment to the past was baffling. Why look to that horrible apartment building for luck, especially now that we had a house of our own?

My mother’s parents had moved in with us, too, as had my father’s widowed mother, pale and skinny—the other Polack. At first, my grandmothers seemed less than happy. In Hoboken, they’d been able to walk everywhere.

Now a car was required, and neither had ever learned to drive. In fact, neither had attended high school. They were quiet and humble women who, for many years, had worked as laborers—one in a laundry, the other as a housekeeper. But their real vocation appeared to be religion. My *nonna* and my *babcia* were so devout that they seemed like witches. When mumbling their prayers over rosary beads, their tongues turned thick and foreign. And, in their bedrooms, they kept a menagerie of plaster saints—figures that lived in a flickering garden of ever-blooming candles. To me, those tiny altars were the pilot lights of our house.

I loved my grandmothers with an intensity that was almost febrile; I flushed in their presence, greedy for attention, as well as in the knowledge that it would be given. They were the women who fed me, dressed me, put me to bed. To have both of them now under the same roof was the epitome of luck.

When I was feeling particularly anxious, I would sit beside my Polish grandmother; I'd take her hand and, using one of her fingers like a pen, trace circles on my palm. At a certain point, she would understand what I needed and begin to trace the circles herself. But eventually she'd toss my hand away and say, "Enough."

Downstairs, in a separate apartment on the first floor, my Italian grandmother was always ready to receive me. Even if I wasn't hungry, I'd claim that I was, and soon I'd be offered a piece of crusty bread with butter, or a bowl of steaming farina.

My mother had always taken a back seat in regard to child rearing, but now she had more freedom than ever and could focus more fully on her passions. In addition to playing her numbers, the so-called Italian lottery, she bet heavily on football. Watching the games on television, she would shout at the screen, gesticulating with her perfectly manicured hands. Shocking four-letter words emerged effortlessly through scarlet lips, in a voice deeper than my father's.

Often, she watched with my uncles, and the shouting grew so loud that it terrified me. At the time, I didn't understand how much money was riding on the outcome. I was aware only of the cheering that would lift my mother and the men from their seats or the swearing that would make my

grandmothers retreat into the kitchen. I would escape, too, usually to the closet in my bedroom. It was around this time, when I was eight or nine, that I learned the comfort of tight spaces and the pleasure of rocking my body—both of which seemed to short-circuit the fear centers in my brain.

I also began to keep notebooks in which I wrote poems with tyrannical meters—another kind of rocking. I drew pictures, mostly animals, and kept lists, often mundane—the titles of all the movies I'd seen or the first names of the kids in my class. I might record an overheard conversation, one that had confused or upset me. Some days, all I could manage was to scribble endless spirals, or to write the word "win" over and over, doing my part to help my mother prosper.

My father wasn't a gambler, though he had come from one. His father was a truck driver who'd once, in an all-night poker game, won enough to buy a vehicle and start his own short-haul delivery business. I was also told that he'd won a horse named Lollipop—a name he thought demeaning and quickly changed to Lady. My grandfather's plan was to train her to race, illegally, on bush tracks. But Lady, kept at a cheap stable in Weehawken, died of colic. The following year, after another winning streak—this time on boxing matches—my grandfather died, too, of cirrhosis of the liver.

The cycle of the gambler—from despair and lack to hope and reward—was endless, both frustrating and beguiling. My father had experienced this long before he'd met my mother. He understood how her addiction could lead the family in one of two directions—either up the ladder or down.

Living in a new house seemed like a miracle to me; I didn't understand how precarious our situation was, financially—the growing debts, the heavy burden of the mortgage. Nor did I understand the kinds of people my mother was involved with. My father has never been completely forthcoming about those years, but I do know that the down payment for the house was funded in part by gambling wins.

During those early days in the suburbs, my mother seemed as optimistic as ever. She'd managed to secure a number of credit cards, on which she could access cash advances. Perhaps it was these, along with the occasional windfall from the Italian lottery, that accounted for some of the over-the-top

Christmases I experienced as a child—holidays in which my brother and I received a ridiculous amount of presents. There were Easters when, instead of dyed eggs, our egg hunts featured plastic eggshells stuffed with money. Certain years, the bills were singles, but other years there were fives and tens, even twenties.

In September, before school began, my mother would drive my brother and me to Schlesinger's, a clothing store in West New York, where we were each allowed to pick out ten items. My mother was usually in a good mood and, for the most part, unconcerned with price or appropriate attire. She'd let my brother buy two pairs of sneakers or five football jerseys. But once, when I found a skintight shirt with a sparkly rose emblazoned across the chest, my mother seemed hesitant. "You're skinny enough," she said—focussing more on the fit than on the fact that I'd chosen something clearly meant for a disco queen. "It looks like diamonds," I said. The comment was strategic. My mother had recently lost the stone in her engagement ring—or had she sold it? Anyway, I managed to sway her. "Just don't wear it to school," she said. I promised—a lie. When my brother scowled, I understood the reason. Kids in the neighborhood had started to call me "faggot."

I knew the word, though in my mind then it meant something like "girl"—or, rather, a boy who was like a girl. And though the insult stung I could bear it by reminding myself that my favorite people were women, and these women had once been girls.

Every Friday, my parents went out to dinner. Sometimes they attended a concert or a Broadway show. Other activities my mother did alone. On a whim, she'd get dolled up and go to the track. Some weekends, she drove to a private club, where she liked the blackjack table. I remember my father, one day, accusing her of straying too far. After that, she did what she could to make her fun at home. Once or twice a month, she hosted late-night card parties. These parties were attended mostly by women, many of whom, like my mother, sported impressive confections of hair. Cigarettes dangled intrepidly from their lips—cigarettes they could inhale without the use of hands. All it took was a deft smirk, leaving their fingers free to focus on the cards.

The games were played around our kitchen table, after my brother and I had gone to bed. My father hovered at the periphery, watching TV in the living room until he fell asleep on the couch. Even from down the hall, I could smell the women's perfume, my mother's Opium coming through the strongest. As the night progressed, the scents grew wilder as they mingled with the women's sweat. These gatherings, I later learned, were high-stakes affairs. Hundreds could be lost or gained.

The day after a card party, my mother would stay in bed later than usual. Before leaving for school, my brother and I would slip into her room to ask for money. She always allowed us to peel a few singles from the roll of bills she kept in her pocketbook. Sometimes that roll was skinny; other times it was as fat as a ball of mozzarella, and just as tempting. But, even as I could read my brother's mind ("Why not take a little extra?"), my mother could read it, too. "Don't even think about it," she'd growl, her voice thick with slumber.

Not long after my eleventh birthday, the house began to hum with a new energy. The phone rang constantly. "Your mother's friends," my father called them. "Is Sophie there?" they'd ask, if I happened to pick up the phone.

By this point, she was not only playing her numbers but also taking bets for others. There was a pad beside the phone, on which she would write the caller's name and a dollar amount, along with their hopeful chain of digits. Sometimes the word "box" or "straight" was included.

Since my mother was often out, she instructed my Polish grandmother to take down the information in her absence. When she asked what it was all about, my mother said she was doing someone a favor. Once, she said it was a game some girls were playing at work. No one questioned her, not even my father.

Now and then, the calls would come during dinner. My mother always sat closest to the wall where the phone was. Nearby, she had a tiny metal table on which she kept her pad. Mostly she'd finish these mealtime transactions quickly, but occasionally she'd get up, pulling the phone, which had an extra-long cord, all the way into the living room.

Whatever secrets she had seemed connected to our growing prosperity. During the summer, we were able to go to the shore for a week, stay at a hotel, eat three-course dinners in restaurants that looked like fishing boats. In the evenings, on the boardwalk, we'd play the wheels, shoot the guns, toss the balls. When the vacation was over, we drove home with the fruits of our good fortune—stuffed animals, cartons of cigarettes, goldfish in plastic bags. My brother and I put the fish in a water pitcher or a mixing bowl, hoping they wouldn't die. Eventually, my father installed a pond in the yard, and the goldfish flashed around for years, reminding us of our luck.

That is, until the day my brother and I came home from school to find police cars parked in front of the house. My fear, always a trickster, convinced me that the police cars had something to do with me; I was not a *normal* person, and I knew that one day I'd be punished. My impulse was to get away, maybe hide in the woods near our house. But then my brother ran up the front steps and through the door, and I followed him.

Inside, all the lights were on—something my father never allowed. There were men everywhere, some in uniforms, some in suits. I rushed down to my *nonna's* apartment, but neither she nor my grandfather was there. When I climbed the stairs again, a female neighbor was stationed in the kitchen, saying she'd take me and my brother to her place. I refused. "Where are my grandmothers?" I kept asking. Watching the men opening drawers and looking in closets, I felt a kind of nauseous outrage. When I saw the strangers in the hallway outside my bedroom, I thought of my notebooks. "You can't go in there!" I screamed. My brother, in a moment of tenderness, touched my arm. "Let's go," he whispered.

For days after the raid, I worried that the police had read my notebooks—all that incriminating evidence. I felt certain they would return to fetch me.

Of course, the cops had no interest in the scribblings of an eleven-year-old boy. It turned out they had my Polish grandmother on tape, implicated in what I heard called a "numbers racket." She was arrested, as was my mother. The two of them were booked, their photographs taken, their fingerprints. My grandmother was humiliated. I was told that she asked to remove the crucifix around her neck before they photographed her, but that this request was denied.

I prayed at her bedroom altar, kept her candles lit. My grandmother was released. The authorities believed her when she said she had no idea what she was doing. Besides, the police were after bigger fish—one of them being my big blond mother.

But she got off, too; I'm not sure how. "Friends in high places," I recall my father saying, while my brother, using pulp-fiction logic, had the audacity to ask my mother if she'd turned other people in. I was sure she was going to slap him. But she fell into a stunned silence, and tears came to her eyes.

"I would never do that."

Many years later, long after my mother died, I spoke with her brother, my uncle Frank, and asked him about the people my mother had worked for. My uncle tilted his head: "Let's just say they weren't people you wanted to screw with." He mentioned some names and then immediately encouraged me to forget them. He was cagey and kept trying to change the subject.

But, in the end, he did tell me a little more about the nature of the business. "Your mother was a runner," he said. "Like a salesman. She brought bets to the bookie, got a commission."

"But what were the numbers?" I asked. "How did that work?"

My uncle explained that, every day, there'd be a notice in the newspaper which listed the previous day's earnings at a New York racetrack, and that the game was to guess the last three numbers of that amount.

When I asked about the meaning of "box" and "straight," he looked at me like I was an idiot.

"You could play the numbers in their exact order," he said. "That's straight. Or you could box them, which meant that if your numbers came out in any order you'd win something. It cost more, but you won less."

I was curious if my mother had ever won big. My uncle shrugged. "What's big? Sometimes it gave her a little extra. Your mother hated having no cash in her pocket. She said it made her feel naked." He added that most of what she'd won had gone to the princes.



I assumed my uncle was speaking about the men my mother had worked for. But when I asked, “Who were the princes?,” he said, “Don’t be stupid. You and your brother.”

For a while after my mother was arrested, she seemed to be a changed woman. At this point, she was working as a waitress in the skyboxes at Giants Stadium. She often pulled double shifts and came home exhausted. There were no more card parties. At night, she’d drink coffee and watch police procedurals on television. She slept very little. Sometimes she played electronic poker on a small device whose chirps and dings I could hear in my bedroom. In the mornings, I’d find her sitting at the kitchen table, paying our bills or figuring out the household budget.

Strangely, even with my mother’s propensity for gambling, my father had always let her take care of the finances; he claimed that she was better with numbers.

Now and then, my Italian grandmother would climb the stairs to check on her daughter. “*Tutto bene?*” she’d ask unsteadily, clearly out of breath. She’d started to speak more often in her native tongue. Curses? Prayers? Accusations? I comprehended none of it.

My other grandmother resumed her housekeeping duties with a demented vigor, as if the scrubbing and polishing could remove the stain of her sins. She rarely spoke to my mother, the tension between them palpable. The silence was toxic; I could feel it in my chest, like smog.

My mother was too proud, or perhaps too ashamed, to apologize; and my grandmother, I assume, was too aware that she lived in our house by the grace of my parents' kindness.

After the arrest, my *babcia* was easily overcome by emotion. Sometimes the cause of a breakdown seemed trivial. Once, I heard my father ask her what was going on with the towels—why were they so rough, shouldn't she be using fabric softener? My grandmother made a strange gulping sound and walked out of the kitchen. I found her downstairs, crying as she stood beside the washing machine. "He treats me like a servant," she said. "Your mother, too."

A moment after her outburst, she wiped her eyes and began to defend my father: "I know he works hard. I know he didn't mean it." She was petting my face now, in an effort to distract me from her brush with honesty.

I understood then that there was a warning here. It seemed that if you didn't express yourself you ended up a prisoner. And, though you might blame others for this, in truth the jailer was yourself. I was a prisoner, too. There were many things I couldn't bear to say; instead, I buried them in notebooks. I was a coward, and my silence, like my grandmother's, had a lot to do with shame.

No one in the house was speaking honestly. We went about our days, as before, but all of us were just pretending things were fine. Every time the phone rang, I could see the worry on my father's face.

But, as the months passed and nothing happened, life resumed its ease. My parents had even befriended a priest. My mother, who never cooked, once spent a whole afternoon making cream puffs before he came to visit. I watched, disgusted, as he ate five, then six, then seven. I counted, of course, and later wrote the number in my notebook.

The priest wasn't from our church; I'm not sure where my parents met him—maybe at a party. In addition to having a sweet tooth, he drank a lot of wine, and his smile was often counterfeit; I could tell by the way his eyes failed to participate.

My grandmothers, however, seemed charmed by him. When my *babcia* asked him to bless the house, he happily obliged, using a tiny vial of holy water. I recall feeling upstaged; apparently my own rituals were no longer sufficient to insure our safety.

Sometimes I wondered why I was working so hard. The worst had happened and my family had survived. Perhaps I could learn to resist the tyranny of my compulsions. Slowly, I let down my guard. When I tapped the maple leaves now, it was out of habit rather than as an obsessive act of magic. My grandmothers became less vigilant, too. Every so often, I would notice that, in one of their bedrooms, no candle was burning. Even today, I blame this laxness for what was yet to happen.

About two years later, I was sitting at the dinner table with my family when suddenly my brother began to cry. The moment was disorienting because my brother rarely shed a tear.

My father seemed more annoyed than sympathetic. "What?" he said.

Finally, my brother looked up. "Are you selling the house?" he asked.

My father was scowling now. "What are you talking about?"

When my brother spoke again, his words came out in jagged, breathless shards—something about a kid at school, something the kid's mother had read in the newspaper.

Apparently, there was a notice in the paper that our house was up for sale. "Don't be ridiculous," my mother said. My father added, "Your friend is full of shit."

My father didn't rush through dinner, which calmed us. But, afterward, he got up and went into the living room, sat in his easy chair, and unfolded the local paper, where he learned that what my brother had said was true. Our

house was to be auctioned off at the end of the month—not by my father but by the county sheriff.

I'm not sure what happened next; there's a gap in my memory. Certainly, there must have been an argument, accusations, apologies. I have a vague recollection of my mother saying something about "a mistake." My memory wakes up a few days later. My parents are whispering in the kitchen. And then the whispering turns to shouting. My mother, defending herself, sounds like an unrepentant child: "It's not my fault!"

I later came to understand that for nearly a year my mother had failed to make the mortgage payments. She'd also secured a line of credit against the equity, and it seemed that my father's signature on this loan was forged.

The money, most likely, had gone toward more of my mother's prayers—numbers and horses and blackjack. "I was almost there," she said once, her martyred eyes looking toward the ceiling. If there was sadness, it didn't appear to be about what she'd done; it seemed to be about the fact that her magic had failed her.

My father had a new voice now, hammering, unkind; he had no patience for any of us. I was often afraid to talk to him. My father says he doesn't recall this part of our life; other times he actively denies his aggressive behavior. My brother denies it, too. But I clearly remember the way my father would suddenly turn violent. "Get on my bed!" he'd scream, marching us toward his room. I'd hear the jangle of buckles as he opened the door to his armoire, inside of which his belts hung. I knew my father was taking things out on us that he'd never take out on my mother. Although he yelled at her, he never struck her. Some days, I feared that if my father did not whip my brother and me he might end up killing our mother.

Discipline became the doctrine of the house. There were new rules, new lines my brother and I had to be careful not to cross. When my father saw me in a ripped T-shirt I'd let dangle off one shoulder, he said I looked like a pansy. I tried to defend myself, saying the shirt had come that way and the rips were part of the style.

“Are they?” my father said. He walked toward me, grabbed the collar of my shirt, and proceeded to rip it further. In my memory, this assault feels more terrible than the whippings. I am flayed, ridiculed, reduced.

Everything about my presence seemed to irritate him. Noise was a particular issue—the volume of the television, the way I closed a cabinet, the clamor of my laughter. Of course, my father’s voice wasn’t subject to such rules. During one particularly loud argument between my parents, my grandfather lumbered up the stairs—I assumed to defend his daughter. But, instead, he joined my father and began to shout at her: “What are we supposed to do, girl? Live on the fucking street?” As he turned to go back downstairs, his grumbled invectives descended, too, into his dark Neapolitan dialect.

Later that night, I heard my father crying. The sound jerked out of him in strange squeaks, as if someone were wiping a mirror. My grandmothers, in their rooms, were crying, too.

Despite the chaos of those weeks, my father came up with a plan. He talked to relatives, friends, colleagues, and, though it must have pained him to do so, he asked each of them for a loan, any amount they could spare. Some folks could offer only a few hundred bucks, but others gave more. My mother said she could borrow a little money, too, but my father, suspicious of her sources, said no.

My mother was no longer herself. A few days after we learned about the loss of the house, she cut her hair. She now had a short, dense bristle, almost mannish. She looked like a thug, or a Buddhist nun. It was hard to understand if her new style was an act of aggression or of renunciation. While my father made frantic telephone calls, my mother was often pacing in the back yard, smoking cigarettes.

Sometimes, through a window, I’d watch her; if she spotted me, she’d offer a little wave, shake her head. I always thought she was saying, “Leave me alone, go away.” But now I think perhaps she was trying to tell me something else, the same thing she kept saying to me when she lay dying: “I’m sorry, baby.”

My father kept track of his loans in a ledger, which he stored in the bottom drawer of his armoire. Before the auction was held, he managed to borrow enough to save the house—though what should have been a triumph felt more like a funeral. My father was pale, his features frozen.

As the years passed, he'd pay off what he could. At the end of every week, he'd place his hard-earned cash in envelopes, many of which he'd hand-deliver, in increments of ten or twenty dollars. All accounting went into the ledger. My father's penmanship was like a child's; he wrote in print, having never learned cursive. When I finally left for college, he was no longer the slim, fit man he'd been in his youth. His hair had thinned, then grayed. I didn't recognize him.

It was the same with my mother. She was a mystery to me, her undeniable generosity chafing against the fact that she was willing to risk everything our family had.

Ultimately, my father made good on all his debts. When I asked him once how long it took, he said, "Years! I wanted to strangle your mother. But I always knew what I was getting into. Your mother was trouble from the start." Even as he said this, though, I could see the smile held in check.

By the time my father had paid everyone back, he and my mother appeared to have made peace with each other. I'd moved to Arizona, but when I came to visit for the holidays I'd notice my parents laughing together, and sometimes I'd see them kiss. My father didn't even seem to mind when my mother said she wanted to take a trip to Las Vegas with some of her cousins.

I flew out from Tucson to meet her. I wasn't a gambler, but, still, I enjoyed watching her at the blackjack table, with her short blond perm, a Scotch-and-soda sweating in her hand. Whenever she won—not often—her shout was loud, and always directed upward, as if to the invisible ones who'd facilitated her good fortune.

My mother seemed happy again—but soon after turning sixty she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Once the treatments began, she had very little energy. There were no more visits to Las Vegas. My father told her to quit

her waitressing job, but she said, “How can I?” The medical bills were piling up.

By then, I was determined to make my living as a writer—and though most of my family, especially my father, didn’t seem to understand my ambitions, I could tell my mother did. Now that she was no longer gambling, she began to put all her chips on me. When I won my first literary award, she threw a party that clearly cost more than the amount of the small cash prize I’d received.

“Risk everything” had always been her motto. And she seemed to understand that this was exactly what I was doing in choosing to become an artist.

Late into her illness, I began writing my first novel. After she learned I was dedicating it to her, she always referred to it as “our book.” “What’s going on with our book?” she’d say. “How much are they giving us?”

“It hasn’t sold yet,” I had to keep telling her.

“It will, baby.” I could feel her shaking the dice in her hands.

The book sold a month after she died, on her birthday. I didn’t get a fortune, but it was more money than I’d ever made in my life, and surely more than my mother had ever won at any of her games. It was hard not to feel superstitious—that my luck was somehow related to her.

Lately, I can see my mother clearly. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table with her shining tower of hair, playing cards or placing bets. Despite all the darkness and loss that was to come, I can glimpse the romance behind her schemes. And so I often think of my own work as a bet I’m placing for her.

*Let’s do it, Mom. Let’s win. ♦*

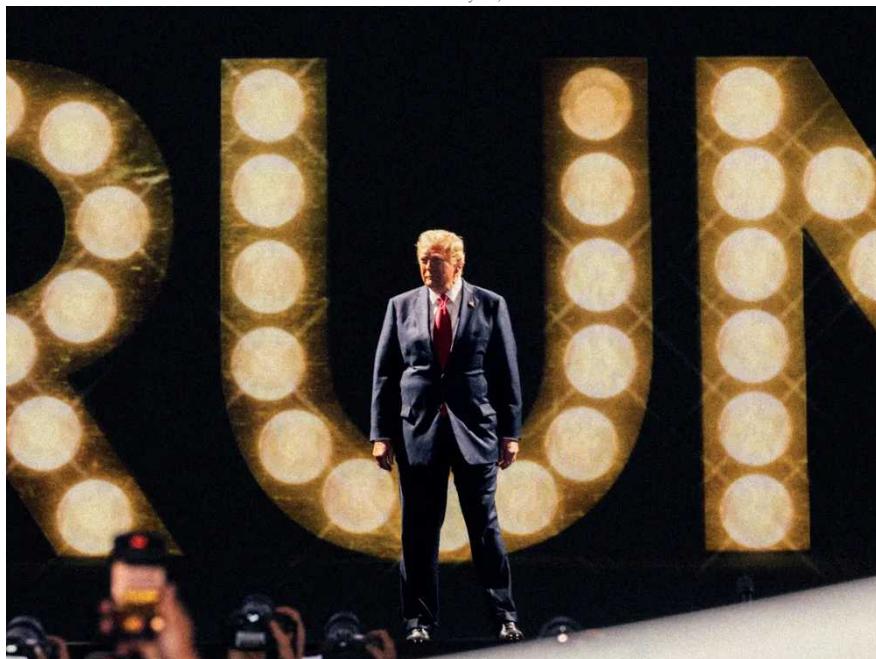
The Political Scene

# The Republican National Convention and the Iconography of Triumph

In Milwaukee, with a candidate who had just cheated death, the resentment rhetoric of Trump's 2016 campaign gave way to an atmosphere of festive certainty.

By Anthony Lane

July 25, 2024



If you head due east from Waukesha, Wisconsin, on Route 59, making for Milwaukee, there are customs to be observed along the way. Be sure to bow your head in homage as you pass through the suburb of West Allis, for it is the birthplace of Liberace. Once in the city, hang a hard left onto South Sixth Street and gun your engine as you approach the Harley-Davidson Museum. A straight run will take you over the Menomonee River. Resist the temptation to swing right for a view of the Bronze Fonz, a perky yet not entirely convincing statue of Henry Winkler, thumbs erect for all eternity. Continue your northward quest. It will bring you to the Fiserv Forum, the home of the Milwaukee Bucks.

Last Halloween, the Fiserv Forum played host to Shania Twain, who, in a set lasting more than two hours, enraptured fans with songs such as “I’m Gonna Getcha Good,” “Don’t Be Stupid (You Know I Love You),” and “Pretty Liar.” All part of her Queen of Me Tour, and, it could be said, a haunting premonition of the spectacle that descended from July 15th through 18th upon the same arena. For four days, in the broiling summer heat, the Republican National Convention came to Milwaukee. Close to the Fiserv Forum and the Wisconsin Cheese Mart, a sign in a storefront window reminded visitors that Milwaukee is the place “Where Curd Is King.” Not when [Donald J. Trump](#) is in town. If there was any evidence of a Curd Separatist Movement, it was quickly suppressed. Forget the Queen of Me. It was time for the Emperor of Him.

Trump arrived on Sunday, July 14th, fresh from Pennsylvania, where he had been nicked by a gunman’s bullet the day before. The world may have been agog at that near-miss, replaying every wrinkle in the story, but the R.N.C. is not the world. It is a small, noisy universe unto itself, and what was extraordinary, as the first day of the Convention dawned, was the comprehensive lack of trauma. Neither within the cavernous space of the Fiserv Forum nor on the lips of the delegates and the guests as they flocked outside were the details of the attempted killing, let alone the motives of the shooter, the principal topics of discussion. It was as if some ancient prophecy had been fulfilled—as if the stalwarts of the Republican Party had expected not only that a heinous act would be committed against their champion but also that he would, being Trump, survive and rise. The Convention was always going to be a crowning. Now, however, thanks to his deliverance, it had swelled into something more. It was *Easter*.



In one minor respect, the resurrection of Trump diverged from Holy Scripture. Whereas Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb, Trump spoke to Bret Baier, of Fox News, on the phone. “He’s amazed that it happened. He understands he’s blessed to be where he is today,” Baier reported, adding, “He had a couple of posts on Truth Social that called for unity in the country. He expressed that he is going to make that a theme here in the Convention.” Unity in the country, not merely in the G.O.P.? Briefly, one had dim visions of young pro-Palestine activists pouring onto the stage of the Fiserv Forum and laying down their banners, the better to be enfolded within the embrace of a contritely sobbing Ted Cruz. Imagine Marjorie Taylor Greene on her knees, pleading for forgiveness from a drag queen. Truth Social would set us free.

This prospect of a beautiful truce was sustained by Melania Trump. Is it the case that she and her husband are now consciously uncoupled, like [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) and Chris Martin, or Thomas the Tank Engine and Clarabel? Ours not to inquire too deeply into private pacts. Whatever the case, the letter by Melania that was made public in the wake of the Pennsylvania shooting was nothing less than a prose poem. It urged us “to fight for a better life together, while we are here, in this earthly realm,” which presumably includes Wisconsin. “Dawn is here again,” Mrs. Trump asserted, like a druidess arriving at Stonehenge to greet the summer solstice. “Let us reunite. Now.”

Bravest of all, in a surge of orthodox Lennonism, she informed us that “differing opinions, policy, and political games are inferior to love.”

Then the games began. On the approach to the Fiserv Forum, I walked and talked with Ashley Cash, a wife and mother from Lubbock, Texas, who was proud to wear her Republican heart on her sleeve—or, to be exact, on her resplendent red dress, on her loosely knotted Stars and Stripes scarf, and on the badges reading “*God Bless America*” and “*Trump*” that were pinned to her outfit, brightly spangled to match the cross around her neck. Cash was primed and ready to go. “The teachers’ unions and the school boards have a stranglehold on our education system, and they mostly lean toward the liberal side,” she said. In a similar vein, “Our news media is just like the propaganda of China, but it’s for the Democrat Party.” Cash harked back, approvingly, to the era of Walter Cronkite. “It was more true. He told us the facts, and everyone was able to make up their own mind, whereas now you’re being fed a narrative. Potentially by both sides, but it leans heavily, heavily left. And they protect Biden, and they protect the Democrats, and they go hard core after anyone who is a conservative,” she said. And what did she make of Biden himself? “His whole premise is to take from some to give to others. That’s total socialism, right?”



Two chords were struck in this conversation. First, there was not a hint of hostility in Cash's demeanor, and the mood of the following days confirmed that media-pummelling, of the more brutish variety, has slipped out of vogue; if you want to get spat at, try the back of a Trump rally in 2016. Second, I would say that Cash, in her friendly fluency, rattled through more areas of Republican doctrine in five sunlit minutes than were addressed during any of the backside-numbing sessions in the Fiserv Forum, most of which lasted longer than four hours. There was no debate on education, for instance, the subject on which Cash had been most keen to expatiate; indeed, there were no debates at all. Instead, we got bullet points—dumdums, fired off with a loud report, and hitting the same few bull's-eyes over and over again. Groceries and gas are too expensive; borders are porous; fentanyl and illegal immigrants, both of them lethal, are flowing into America; the nation has been enfeebled by [Joe Biden](#); and Donald J. Trump is the savior of mankind. Oh, and one more thing: that middle initial is mandatory. Jesus H. Christ, guys, get it right!

If you asked me what happened at the Republican National Convention, I would have to reply, "Nothing." It was not a show *about* nothing, like "Seinfeld," and there was no want of cacophony, but almost no shocks were delivered in either word or deed. The least surprising surprise was the arrival of Trump in the Fiserv Forum on Monday night—not to speak but to behold a portion of the evening's proceedings and, more important, to be beheld. Even his fiercest detractors will concede that he is a maestro of the image, and of the means by which that image can most efficiently be burned into the public retina. Once he had evaded the Grim Reaper on Saturday, in Pennsylvania, it was inevitable that he would turn up in Wisconsin, two days later. Simply by making his presence known, and by keeping his silence, he said it all: "I will not be scythed."

Trump took his seat in a peculiar tiered bank of low armchairs that faced the stage. That would be his appointed perch for Tuesday and Wednesday, too. A rectangle of white bandage covered his right ear. Sure enough, some of his admirers would soon be sporting similar patches. (I saw one enterprising guy with a miniature Stars and Stripes on his ear.) Who else could so swiftly engender a new tradition? Admit it: Trump is the embodiment of the American Meme. Occasionally, he stood to applaud, but most of the time he was pleased to wear an expression of froggy beatitude—a soft wide grin,

ascending far above smugness to achieve a kind of gratified peace. Thus would a medieval liege lord have accepted obeisance from his vassals; all that was missing was the flicker of torchlight and the haunch of venison turning on its spit. At the risk of hyperbole, I would venture to say that Trump looked even more contented than the Bronze Fonz. Happy days.

The folks in the hall, of course, would argue that he was entitled to such joy. He had come to Milwaukee to be confirmed as the Presidential candidate of the G.O.P., and, lo, his work was done. The administrative business had largely been concluded midway through Monday, as the states were invited, one by one, to pledge their votes to the nominee of their choosing. This process had a certain awkward charm, as each announcer in turn seized the opportunity to advertise her or his particular chunk of America. Mississippi laid claim to “Elvis, Faulkner, and the best catfish in the entire world.” Oklahoma, apparently, is the first state “to have a President Donald J. Trump Highway.” (Extra marks for sucking up.) Louisiana, we learned, has “the lowest utility rates in the country.” It was stirring to be told that Alaska can boast “the largest moose” but disappointing to find that, for reasons of security, the Fiserv Forum would remain completely mooseless. How Bostonian Democrats will feel about hearing their home state described, on the floor of the Convention, as “the great commonwealth of Magachusetts” remains to be seen.



And then, suddenly, it was finished. As Florida's votes were declared, the screen behind the podium burst into capitalized life. “*OVER THE TOP*,” it read. We could have been watching a game show. Jackpot! The math meant that Trump was now unbeatable—not that he had even the ghost of a rival for his throne. All the challengers had been vanquished long ago, in the primaries, and from that moment on this triumphant result was a cert. It made one hunger for Madison Square Garden in 1924, and the hundred and three ballots that were required before John W. Davis was finally picked as the Democratic Presidential nominee. The Garden had frequently housed a circus, and, according to the historian Robert K. Murray, “Seven tons of chemicals had not completely eradicated the smell of lions as the delegates slowly began to gather.” Little wonder that what ensued was, as Murray says, “a snarling and homicidal roughhouse.” And what were we treated to in Milwaukee, a century later? A concerto for rubber stamp and orchestra.

The question of the Vice-Presidency, it is true, was still in the air as the week began. Thrillingly, a woman on the JetBlue flight from New York to Milwaukee told me that someone had told *her*, at the Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach—in other words, practically from the horse’s mouth—that the V.P. slot was already locked in for Tulsi Gabbard. Which only proves that you shouldn’t believe what the horse whispers, especially when his hooves are stuck in a bunker. By the end of Monday, the mystery was solved, and the name of J. D. Vance, the author of “Hillbilly Elegy,” rippled around the auditorium long before his official acceptance of the role, on Wednesday.

At the Republican Convention of 1988, in New Orleans, the selection of the hapless Dan Quayle as George H. W. Bush’s running mate provoked widespread bemusement. On CBS, Dan Rather called it “the thunderbolt that hit the Superdome.” This year, by contrast, at the Fiserv Forum, there was no bolt, although a curious conundrum arose: Do we really believe that writers, of all people, are wise enough to be handed the reins of power? Not many of us, I suspect, given the roster of nonfiction best-sellers in the *Times* on January 22, 2017, and asked to predict which of the authors would one day become second-in-command to the President of the United States, would have opted for Vance. Among the other candidates were Trevor Noah, Bill O’Reilly, Thomas L. Friedman, Michael Lewis, Ron Chernow, and Megyn Kelly, who between them cover quite a range. Carrie Fisher had two books,

“[Wishful Drinking](#)” and “[The Princess Diarist](#),” on the list, although her dominance, alas, was posthumous. If *she* had taken the reins in her prime, she would have been galactically great.

To judge by the speech that Vance delivered on the penultimate evening of the R.N.C., traces of the professional writer linger within him—veins of verbal color that still gleam in the hard and stubborn stone of political rhetoric. It was not a good speech, marked as it was with stuttering gulps, but it quickened into life, here and there, when Vance allowed himself to mention a lone incident or an individual character. He recalled sorting through his grandmother’s effects, after she died, and discovering *nineteen* loaded handguns around the house, and that particularity came as a relief. It was the first and last time that I laughed in pleasure, rather than alarm, at anything said at the podium. At a breakfast the next morning, Vance paid tribute to Jules, the hit man played by Samuel L. Jackson in “Pulp Fiction,” calling him “one of my favorite theologians.” Again, not a bad gag, except that Vance, without ado, then pivoted and stiffened into piety, explaining how the touch of God had granted him the benison of a decent sleep before his speech. Not to impugn his faith, but I can’t help wondering what it feels like for an accomplished storyteller to shepherd his words and pen them in, under the edict of a higher demand.



The standard of oratory, at the Fiserv Forum, could politely be described as mixed. A popular trick was to add a splash of aggression to one's vocabulary, whatever the topic at hand. What, for example, was Representative Mike Waltz talking about, on Monday, when he exclaimed, "We're going to send a cruise missile right into the heart of it"? Tehran? Harvard? George Clooney's villa on Lake Como? The answer was "inflation." Waltz, who hails from Jacksonville, Florida, was formerly a Green Beret, and he had other promises tucked into his kit bag. "We will flood the world with clean, cheap American oil and gas," he said, adding the familiar nostrum "Drill, baby, drill!" His audience eagerly took up the chant —a rousing one, and I trust that we shall hear it sung afresh in October, with a ring of even greater confidence, at SmileCon, the annual gathering of the American Dental Association.

One advantage of attending a Convention, rather than watching it at home, is that you get to gauge the impact—or the lack of it—that the speakers make on what is, by any reckoning, a loyal crowd. And one disadvantage is that you can't snatch the remote and press the mute button. I felt genuinely sorry for some of those who addressed us; their sincerity may have been beyond reproach, but their voices were not, let us say, designed for raising. I can't have been the only one who flinched at the macaw-like sound of Julie Harris, the president of the National Federation of Republican Women. "Joe Biden has never built anything of his own. He uses the government to destroy things," she cried. Harris told us that she has five children and eleven grandchildren, which must cost her a fortune in earmuffs. Conversely, such was Kari Lake's control of her audience that, for a while, she made no utterance at all; she just stood on the stage, with a hand to her heart, emitting little gasps of incredulity at the love in which she was being drenched. It was ardently returned, with one proviso. "Actually, I don't mean that—I don't love everyone in this room," Lake said. "You guys up there in the fake news, you have worn. Out. Your. Welcome."

Among the lustiest cheers all week was the one that rose when Tim Scott told the assembled throng that America is "not a racist country." If there's one thing more spiritually scrumptious than being absolved of your sins, it is being reassured that you didn't have any in the first place. And, to be fair, inside the Fiserv Forum, the consummate rhetoricians were men of color—Byron Donalds, Wesley Hunt, Vivek Ramaswamy, and, the most fervent of

all, Lorenzo Sewell, a pastor from Detroit. (Tom Cotton, who had only to open his mouth to convince everyone that now was the ideal time for a bathroom break, must have listened to them and wept.) Here, in each case, was the permanent paradox of eloquence: even as you disagree, perhaps profoundly, with what is being proposed, you find yourself being swept along in the rush. Does the force of that momentum obscure the gist of the ideology, or soothe it, or excuse it? Or would an anxious Democrat, hearing the hubbub in Milwaukee, argue that the threat is never more perilous than when the phrasing is alive with bite and fire?

The shape of that anxiety, and the tactics with which the Democrats will seek to repel the charges laid against them at the R.N.C., has changed substantially since the end of the Convention. President Biden dropped out of the race on July 21st, rupturing a tranquil Sunday afternoon, and endorsed Kamala Harris as his replacement. Will the transition be as frictionless as Biden intends, with the Democratic National Convention just around the bend? It runs from August 19th through 22nd, in Chicago. The Trump team, ever mischievous, will be hoping for a repeat of the Conventions of 1968, when the marshalling of order and impetus, in the Republican camp, was followed by disarray and violence at and around the D.N.C. One outcome of that summer was Norman Mailer's "Miami and the Siege of Chicago," which strikes me as the most engulfing of his books, not least because it refuses to lie down and stay still as history should. "We see Americans hating each other, fighting each other," a lamenting Richard Nixon said to the G.O.P., in Florida. Mailer, avid to anatomize "these new modern horror-head times," and seldom shying away from prophecy, foresaw one way ahead for the Republicans: "They were looking for a leader who could bring America back to them, their lost America, Jesusland." Now, in 2024, they think they have him.

Once the Convention virus has entered your bloodstream, behavioral decisions that would seem bizarre, at any other time and in any other spot, acquire the sheen of normality. It was high noon on a warm Wednesday in Milwaukee, with the revels at the Fiserv Forum not set to commence for another six hours; hell, why *not* go to a Hogs & Dogs party at the Harley-Davidson Museum? In a large tent pitched near the museum, G.O.P. members from the Northeast loaded their plates with pulled pork and baked beans, listening to Scott Brown and the Diplomats storm through cover

versions of the Monkees. (Brown was indeed a former diplomat—a senator from Massachusetts who became the Ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa, under Trump, in 2017.) Some folks sang along: “We’re the young generation, and we’ve got something to say.” The second half of the line was accurate; the first, less so.

At the museum, we were encouraged to revisit our wild youth, or to pretend that we’d had one, by mounting a scarlet Harley—a Hydra-Glide Revival, with fringed saddlebags. The motorbike company was founded in Milwaukee, in 1903, and why the R.N.C. chose not to exploit this sturdy local connection with more vigor is frankly baffling. If Sarah Huckabee Sanders had roared onstage astride the Harley-Davidson Silver Bullet, a legendary double-engine dragster fed by nitromethane, “a volatile fuel that packs 120% more power than gasoline,” and enhanced by “a smooth rear slick,” her speech on Tuesday evening would, no question, have landed with twice the bang.



Other Wisconsin brands had better luck. Milwaukee is Beer City, and, as long as you’re in residence, don’t you forget it. As you pass one glorious logo after another—Schlitz, Pabst, Miller, Leinenkugel’s—you begin to wonder whether the stuff was actually brewed in the neighborhood or whether it just fountained out of the ground, at the touch of a divining rod.

Delegates leaving the Fiserv Forum at the end of a marathon session, aglow in their souls but parched in their throats, had to travel less than fifty yards before reaching the oasis of a booth, where thirsts could be slaked with a cooling draft of Lakefront Hazy Rabbit.

A short step away, on the far side of the security cordon, lies Mader's. This is a palace of porky gastronomy, founded in 1902, and one of the few sites in America where lederhosen can still be glimpsed in their natural habitat. As if in remembrance of the great movement that first brought German immigrants to the Midwest, in the nineteenth century, an inscription painted over an arch outside Mader's reads simply "Willkommen." Inside, the welcome is made flesh, in the stout shape of Bavarian weisswurst with fried pickles and Beer Cheese Spread. Diners are notified that the most popular dish is the German Sampler, although, to be honest, I doubt that it found many takers among the G.O.P. According to the menu, the cast list for this noble creation features "Wiener schnitzel, Kassler Rippchen, Rheinischer sauerbraten, potato dumpling, sauerkraut and red cabbage. Inspired by John F. Kennedy."

If Mader's is full, and you're not, have no fear. Teutonic cravings can be satisfied with equal generosity at the Milwaukee Brat House, farther down the street. From what I could see, this soon became a restaurant of choice for the many branches of law enforcement that had been summoned from across the United States to police the R.N.C. If they felt at home, the reason was not hard to deduce: Wisconsin is an open-carry state, which means that, among other things, responsible citizens have a right to bear a loaded bratwurst in a public area. On Sunday afternoon, no sooner had the Miami-Dade cops sitting at the table next to me paid and left than officers from Knoxville, Tennessee, took their place, thus heightening the possibility that I would be arrested for ordering a salad.

The niceties of gun ownership, needless to say, were parsed with particular care at the R.N.C. If you weren't abreast of the current legislation regarding bump stocks and pistol braces, there were plenty of cognoscenti who could set you right. Some of them were milling around on Tuesday morning, in the Pfister Hotel—otherwise known as the holy of holies, for this was where Trump was staying, if the awestruck rumors were correct. It was also the arena for a trenchant discussion that had been arranged by the United States

Concealed Carry Association, and I arrived just in time, thank heaven, to hear Chris LaCivita, a senior adviser to the Trump campaign, remind the audience that “the last thing on earth you want to do is pull it out.” Wise advice, which, if heeded by Trump on several occasions, would surely have saved everyone a heap of trouble.



The event had a catchy title: “Defend and Protect: The Critical Role of Safety, Self-Defense & Standing Up for Our Constitutional Rights in the 2024 Election.” Snappier by far was the standout guest, Wesley Hunt, who flew Apache helicopters in the military and now represents the Thirty-eighth Congressional District of Texas. At a Convention that seemed to me, on the whole, regrettably non-dapper (Reaganite elegance is no longer à la mode), Hunt was an immaculate exception, and his sharp silver tongue was in keeping with the cut of his suit. He talked fondly of his five-year-old daughter, and of his plans for her well-defended future: “Next year, we get her started on a .22 with my Navy *SEAL* sniper buddy.” Pause. “My wife didn’t hear that.” A good line, nicely aimed, all the more so because his wife, Emily, was sitting a few feet away.

As the week went on, the attempted slaying of Trump, in Pennsylvania, was pondered more openly, and, as you might expect, those at the U.S.C.C.A. gathering had much to say. One of Hunt’s fellow-guests, Representative Kat

Cammack, spoke in a tone at once thankful and wistful about the avoidance of calamity. “Absolutely the hand of God was on President Trump,” she said. “A slight breeze, a tilt of the head . . .” Becky E. Hites, the president of a company called Steel-Insights, pointed out to me that Trump had been spared because “he was looking at an economics chart. Made my little economist’s heart beat faster.” Hites, who ran as a G.O.P. congressional candidate in Georgia in 2020, was accompanied by her former campaign manager, a towering figure who told me that he was impressed by the calm of the Convention in the wake of the shooting. “Business as usual,” he said. “Like when someone gets hurt at Daytona in a crash. Drivers get back in their cars and carry on.”

Everyone to whom I talked at the Convention agreed on one twist of the narrative. In the instant when Trump, cheating death in Pennsylvania, stood up with blood on his face, raised a fist, and shouted, “Fight, fight, fight!,” the election in November was won. The rally at the Butler Farm Show grounds became, to all intents and purposes, a victory rally. That was certainly the opinion in the Hogs & Dogs tent, beside the Harley-Davidson Museum. What with the brouhaha of the band, it was hard to hear oneself think, let alone engage in psephological confabulation, but, by leaning over my potato salad, I could just about harken to Val Biancaniello, a G.O.P. state committeewoman from Pennsylvania. After watching the shooting on TV, she had sensed a political shift. “People who weren’t previously Trump supporters were calling me and texting me and saying, ‘We’re in,’ ” Biancaniello told me. And the atmosphere that has prevailed since then, both in the Party and at the R.N.C.? “Resolve, resolve,” she said.

It is a mark of Trump—as cheering to his allies as it is terrifying to his foes—that, were he to become President once again, his conquest will have been assured through iconography. The frailty of Biden, previously denied with indignation or mooted in fretful murmurs, did not become an acknowledged fact until the televised debate with Trump on June 27th, and that distressing revelation hastened his political twilight. Similarly, had Trump been shot away from the cameras’ gaze, watched over by nobody except the Secret Service as he clambered to his feet, he and his supporters would not be sniffing victory with glee. His instinct is not merely to beget the decisive moment but also to compose himself at the center of it, and, to that extent, he is scarcely a politician at all. At bottom, it is not votes that interest him.

He wants *ratings*. America has already had a President whose celebrity was nourished at the movies; what could be more logical than to elect a man who bloomed in the hothouse of TV? A postmodernist would contend that live television, to our red-rimmed eyes, is somehow more alive than life, and that the Convention in Milwaukee existed only for, and on, our screens. Maybe so. Yet I was there, and, believe me, those golden balloons were real.

To assume that the Fiserv Forum rang to the sweet strain of nothing but politics while the G.O.P. was in town would be a grave mistake. Culture, like grace, was abounding. The house band at the R.N.C. was Sixwire, from Nashville, who gamely filled the air, and the airtime, whenever we paused to catch our breath between the speeches. Before the opening session, on Monday, July 15th, we were honored with Sixwire's rendition of "September," by Earth, Wind & Fire, to which the crowd responded with gusto. There is dad dancing, and then there is Republican lunchtime dancing, which entails staying in your designated seat and waving your Trump placard over your head in approximate time to the beat. Play that funky music, white boys! Whether Stevie Wonder would brim with satisfaction to learn that massed ranks of Trump-lovers hopped and bopped to "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" is not for me to say. If the members of Sixwire had found the courage to play "Living for the City," Wonder's great hymn of rage against racial injustice, from 1973, they would have been escorted from the building.

As for literature, who could cope with the profusion of riches on July 18th? My suspicion is that only those who ate lavishly at the prayer breakfast in the Pfister Hotel, hosted by the Faith and Freedom Coalition, would have been strong enough to race between competing book signings in the afternoon. Donald Trump, Jr., and Peter Navarro were both set to wield their pens at two o'clock, with Kari Lake due an hour later. Navarro, a former White House adviser to Trump, had just served four months in prison for contempt of Congress—a sacrifice that, to the noses at the R.N.C., lent him a whiff of the heroic. (Subpoenas required Navarro to submit documents relating to the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. He refused, and paid the price.) Released from the Miami Federal Detention Center on the morning of July 17th, he hightailed it to Milwaukee in time to speak, or at least to ululate, at a gonzo night in the Fiserv Forum—"I went to prison so you don't have to," he hollered—and then to sign his book the following

day. As a display of authorial suspense, it was quite the feat. If Anne Tyler, say, wants to sell more copies of her next novel, she really needs to work on her crimes.



Films that were screened at the R.N.C. included “Trump’s Rescue Mission: Saving America,” starring the actor Donald Trump, who previously appeared in “Home Alone 2: Lost in New York” and various courtroom dramas. Also showing was “Theocracy of Terror: A Documentary—Murder, Oppression & the Rise of Iran’s Radical Regime,” which should make a zippy double bill with “Despicable Me 4.” The main attraction was something titled “Reagan,” with Dennis Quaid in the leading role. Lord knows what *that’s* about. Set for general release on August 29th, it was widely advertised in Milwaukee, even underfoot on sidewalks, allowing the shoes of the faithful to touch the face of God. Sadly, the press was forbidden to watch the movie. On the evidence of the trailer, the quiff of Quaid is a monument for the ages.

Reagan is one of four Republican Presidents who were available for worship at the R.N.C. The other three were Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Trump. Nobody else made the grade, which must have been shattering news for fans of Calvin Coolidge. Or any given Bush. In truth, the whole affair was defined as much by what it excluded as by what it contained. There

were almost no references to abortion, or the alleged stealing of the 2020 election—issues that might repel a wavering voter. In short, the 2024 Convention was a formidable exercise in party discipline: a calculated blend of lockstep and barn dance, such as the Democrats, right now, can only dream of. Who knows, it may well be that Glenn Youngkin, the ambitious governor of Virginia, expressly requested to tear his shirt off at the podium, only to be censured by senior managers at the R.N.C. for trying to steal Hulk Hogan’s thunder. Order was everything. All participants had to know their place. Drilled, baby, drilled!

The minutiae of policy, likewise, were slight. On Monday night, at the RWB bar, opposite Mader’s, it was “Jamboree at the R.N.C.” and the T-shirts of the serving staff were emblazoned with the slogan “*No tax on tips.*” This is a recent G.O.P. proposal, and a crafty one. (Trump disclosed that he got the idea from “a very smart waitress” at one of his restaurants.) Unveiled in advance, on July 3rd, it suited the social texture of the Convention, with its accent on ordinary workers—an emphasis that was most pronounced when Sean O’Brien, the president of the Teamsters, addressed the hall, fulminating against employment conditions at Amazon. The cockles of whose heart were most likely to be warmed by such a speech? J. D. Vance? Bernie Sanders? At the Saint Kate, one of Milwaukee’s grander hotels, I asked Greg Swenson, the affable chairman of Republicans Overseas in the U.K. and a founding partner of Brigg Macadam, a merchant bank, what the world of old money would make of so populist a pitch. “It’s an interesting play,” Swenson said.

The man we really need, at this hour, to survey such weird tensions is Frank Capra. He was a vehement Republican, whose later years were soured with antipathy, yet most of the masterworks that he directed—“American Madness,” “Meet John Doe,” “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and so forth—are a paean to the potency of the regular Joe, whose will to stand up for himself can wreak both miracles and havoc. Think of James Stewart as Mr. Smith, and his unstoppable filibuster on the Senate floor. Every time I watch the movie, his lunging good will, however principled, edges ever closer to hysteria.



Tremors of that angry hilarity could be detected on Thursday evening, July 18th, as the R.N.C. approached its dénouement. The major players, the foot soldiers, and the clowns were present and correct in the Fiserv Forum. Also there, seraphic and silent, was Melania Trump, her emotions and her cogitations eluding our mortal grasp. Hulk Hogan posed a question that was more menacing, not less, for being couched in comic terms: “What you gonna do when Donald Trump and all the Trumpamaniacs run wild on you, brother?” He yielded the platform to the Reverend Franklin Graham, at whose sober bidding innumerable heads were lowered in prayer. One marvelled at a multitude that could be swayed so rapidly in its passions, to and fro between the vengeful and the devout—and then at Trump, who took to the podium for an hour and a half and proceeded to sway himself.

As sermons go, it was strange beyond all measure. He began by recounting his impressions of what had befallen him in Pennsylvania and voiced his desire for the healing of divisions in America. Then, as if he had sipped the milk of human kindness and found it not to his taste, he reverted to contumely, deriding Biden (“I’m not going to use the name anymore, just once”) and lauding Hannibal Lecter. I know people who cannot abide Trump but who, despite themselves, and to their dismay, continue to find him amusing. They may be comforted to learn that, in person, he is much less funny. His rolling riffs of invective come across as more errant than

energetic, devoid of improvisational zest. If there was one dash of inspiration on this climactic night, it arose, tellingly, when Trump took a detour into apocalypse. “It’s nice to get along with someone who has a lot of nuclear weapons,” he said of Kim Jong Un, adding, “I think he misses me.”

At last, it was over. Trump was joined onstage by his extended family, and they lingered there, as though not just unwilling but unable to depart. Not far below them, we strolled through meadows of fallen balloons, which seemed at once merry and forlorn. It was like leaving a children’s birthday party, held on a spectacular scale; I was hankering for a gift bag, stuffed with candy, on the way out. Making our final exit from the Fiserv Forum, we passed through security, as if through a looking glass, and onto the streets of Milwaukee. On which side of the mirror, though, did life make more coherent sense? One bold soul held up a poster that showed the face of Thomas Matthew Crooks, the young man who had shot Trump. Below it were the words “An American Hero.” Another sign was no less confident: “Jesus Will Vomit You out of His Mouth.”

Some delegates, and many journalists, return to political conventions like migrating birds. Already they will be aflutter at the very thought of the D.N.C., in Chicago, where so much will now be up for grabs. Good luck to them. If you value your sanity, I would say, not to mention your sleep patterns, once is more than enough. The memories of Milwaukee will be hard to shake. On the one hand, the sight of Kimberly Guilfoyle striding to the podium made me want to crouch under my desk and wait until the tornado had blown over. On the other hand, I now have a standing invitation to join a “Maga Patriot Hangout in Waikiki,” on the first Friday of every month. (“Meet up by Honolulu Zoo.”) Foolishly, I failed to pick up a box of Trump cereal—“greatness in every bowl.” But I *do* now possess a finely bound hardback copy of the “Collected Poems of Donald Trump,” in which the former President’s tweets are laid out in verse form, with a semi-solemn nod to E. E. Cummings. Talk about the art of power:

I like  
thinking big.  
I always have.  
To me  
it’s very

simple: if  
you're going  
to be thinking anyway,  
you might as well  
think big. ♦

# Did the U.K.'s Most Infamous Family Massacre End in a Wrongful Conviction?

For decades, questions have circled the Whitehouse Farm murders. The British justice system has made it extraordinarily difficult to get definitive answers.

By Heidi Blake



Whitehouse Farm stood in open fields, facing the bleak Essex salt marshes, its columned portico lit by the moon. It was a midsummer night, nearing 4 A.M., when a patrol car sped toward the property. Three police officers got out at the end of the driveway, and a silver car pulled up behind. The driver, Jeremy Bamber, was the twenty-four-year-old scion of a local farming dynasty; his parents, Nevill and June, occupied the Whitehouse. Bamber had phoned the police half an hour earlier to report a panicked call from his

father. His sister, Sheila, had “gone berserk,” he said. Her six-year-old twin sons were asleep upstairs, and she had a gun.

Two of the officers told Bamber to follow them. The Whitehouse lay around a bend, concealed by tall trees, and they crept through the darkness until its rear wall came into view. Lights were shining in three windows: the kitchen, a bathroom, and the bedroom where Sheila’s twins were sleeping. But the only sound from within was the faint whining of a dog. They cut across a field to the front, where light filtered through the curtains of the master bedroom. Seeing a shadow looming at the window, the men ducked behind a hedge and braced for shots. When none came, they raced back toward the patrol car, the officers radioing for reinforcements.

At the car, Bamber made a confession. The previous night, before heading home from work on the farm, he had taken his father’s .22 Anschutz rifle out to shoot rabbits—and he had left the weapon in the kitchen, its magazine still loaded. “Oh, God,” he said. “I hope she hasn’t done anything silly.”

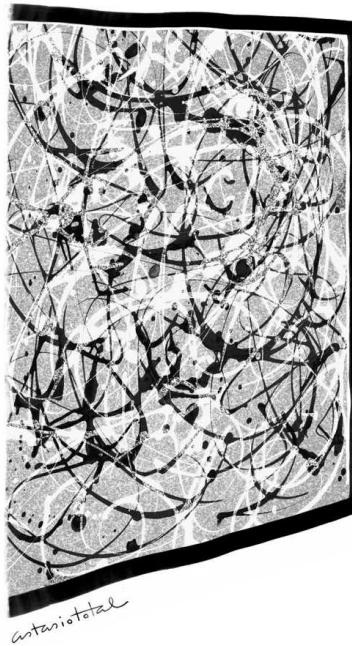
Bamber urged the officers to go to his relatives’ aid—“They are all the family I’ve got,” he said—but they refused to enter without backup. It was almost 5 A.M. when a van finally thundered up the lane, carrying a squad of armed officers. Bamber accompanied them to a staging area, a cattle barn facing the back of the house. For two and a half hours, as the sun rose over the fields, officers remained in place, calling through a bullhorn for Sheila to surrender. The only answer was the dog’s continual yapping.

At about seven-thirty, a raid team was finally authorized to enter. Inching toward the house, a forward officer reported seeing a woman on the kitchen floor, but it took time to get a better view. The back door was locked, requiring several blows with a sledgehammer to open. When the officers spilled inside, they encountered a gruesome scene. Nevill Bamber lay slumped over an upturned chair by the kitchen hearth, blue pajama pants around his knees, his face resting inside a coal scuttle. Brain tissue spilled from gunshot wounds to his head, and blood had pooled on the floor. He had been shot in the shoulder and the arm, and he appeared to have been battered in a struggle; shattered crockery and shards of a light fixture were scattered on the floor.

The woman whom the officer thought he had spotted was nowhere to be seen. The raid team proceeded quietly, communicating in hand signals and whispers. After hearing movement from above, they used an extending mirror to survey the upstairs landing. As they tilted the glass toward the master bedroom, they saw a woman collapsed in the doorway, her nightgown soaked in blood.

It was Bamber's mother, June. A bullet had been fired between her eyes, and six more through her head, neck, chest, and limbs. The officers found the dog, a Shih Tzu named Crispy, cowering under the bed. Then, across the room, they saw Sheila. She was on her back, in a turquoise nightgown and jewelry. Her father's rifle lay atop her body, her fingers by the trigger, its barrel pointing at a fatal gunshot wound through her chin. Beside her, a bloodstained Bible lay open to Psalms 51-55. The line "Save me from blood guiltiness" was underscored with a streak of red.

In the twins' room, officers found the boys in bed. Daniel was curled on his side with his thumb in his mouth; Nicholas lay on his back, the covers pulled up to his chin. Five bullets had been fired through the back of Daniel's head. Nicholas had been shot three times in the face. The officers paused, stricken. Then they radioed in the news.



Outside, an officer approached the patrol car where Bamber had been told to wait and tapped on the window. “I’m really sorry, Jeremy,” he said. “We’ve found everybody dead.” Bamber closed his eyes and began to cry. Another officer climbed in beside him.

“You said everything would be all right,” Bamber said.

“I know,” the officer said. “We like to think things will work out.”

Seemingly unable to process the news, Bamber begged to speak to his father. When he was reminded that Nevill was dead, he broke down again. “Sheila ought to be in a nuthouse for what she’s done,” he muttered. Shortly afterward, he was seen retching in a field.

Detective Chief Inspector Taff Jones, a bluff, ruddy-faced Welshman, was ordered to lead the police inquiry. He examined the windows and doors, determining that the house had been locked from the inside. The police surgeon and the coroner’s officer examined the bodies and confirmed that Sheila appeared to have slaughtered her family before turning the gun on herself. As more detectives arrived, Jones told them that they were dealing with a clear-cut murder-suicide—a horrific crime, but one with a simple solution.

News of the shooting, which took place on August 7, 1985, tore through the sleepy rural community of Tolleshunt D’Arcy, where the Bambers were regarded as local gentry. The next day, the massacre filled the front pages of the national newspapers. Sheila had been a successful model—known to the press as Bambi—and the papers printed her portrait under such headlines as *“Farmhouse of Death.”* In Britain, where gun ownership is tightly controlled, mass shootings are rare, and the public’s shock was heightened by the Bambers’ social status. Nevill, a former fighter pilot with silver hair and periwinkle eyes, was a staunch Conservative and a longtime magistrate; June was a devout Christian who arranged church flowers and regularly stepped out in her tweed skirt to bring food to the poor. The Bambers’ murder instantly became one of the most infamous crimes in the country’s history.



The story gained new salience when reporters discovered that Jeremy and Sheila had been adopted: his biological father was a senior Buckingham Palace official who had conceived him during an affair, while her mother was the teen-age daughter of a chaplain who participated in the Queen's coronation. The Whitehouse itself—a Georgian manor set in the landscape that featured in Susan Hill's famous ghost story "The Woman in Black"—acquired a kind of ghoulish celebrity. The occupant before the Bambers turned out to have drowned himself in a water tank. His father had also died by suicide, drinking poison in his room.

The Bambers had kept their personal affairs private, but as police began making inquiries a troubling picture emerged. June had been racked by mental illness since soon after their wedding, apparently brought on by grief at their inability to conceive. She had been hospitalized with depression, psychosis, and paranoia, undergoing multiple courses of electroshock therapy. Her psychiatrist told police that her illness had caused a "distortion of her already strong religious beliefs," so that she saw "everything in terms of good and evil"—a pathology that, he said, had done terrible harm to her daughter.

Sheila had complained that, from her earliest years, her mother had treated her coldly. In her teens, June called her "the Devil's child" and ascribed her

youthful behavior—flirting with boys, sunbathing naked—to satanic impulses. By seventeen, Sheila had left for London, launching her modelling career and falling in love with an artist named Colin Caffell. The couple moved in together, but the relationship was turbulent. “Violence was just below the surface,” Caffell later wrote. “There were even times we could have killed each other.” When Sheila became pregnant, June insisted that they get married—but, soon after the ceremony, the baby was stillborn. Another pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, and Sheila, who saw the losses as divine punishment, came to believe that she exuded an “evil aura.” After she finally gave birth to Nicholas and Daniel, Caffell left her for another woman.

Alone with the twins in her London flat, Sheila unravelled. Besieged by hallucinations and paranoia, she contacted social services and said that she feared she might harm the babies. When the twins were four, her family arranged for her to be treated at St. Andrew’s Hospital, the exclusive facility where her mother had undergone electroshock. June’s psychiatrist, Dr. Hugh Ferguson, saw clear symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. “Sheila had bizarre delusions,” he later told police. “She thought her sons would seduce her and saw evil in both of them”—particularly Nicholas, who she feared was “a woman hater” and “a potential murderer.” Her gravest concern was that she might be capable of killing the boys. Yet Ferguson considered this unlikely. He prescribed an antipsychotic and discharged her.

On her own, Sheila began skipping her drugs and self-medicating with cannabis and cocaine. She said she was hearing voices and being chased by the Devil. Five months before the killings, she was home with the twins in London when she flew into a frenzy, beating the walls with her fists and accusing people who approached of trying to kill her. “I was extremely scared for everyone’s safety,” a friend who was present told the police, noting that Sheila “was behaving like a person possessed.” She claimed to hear the voice of God.

Nevill arranged for his daughter to be readmitted to St. Andrew’s, where Ferguson noted that she had “relapsed into an acute psychotic state” and that she believed those around her were conspiring in “an attempt by the Devil to take away her godliness.” He discharged her a few weeks later with a

prescription for a new antipsychotic—to be administered intravenously each month, so that she couldn't skip a dose.

By then, Sheila's modelling career had crumbled, and she had picked up cleaning jobs, where supervisors complained that she turned up dishevelled and dirty and stared blankly into space. Her condition seemed to worsen during visits to the Whitehouse. On one occasion, left alone with her thirteen-year-old cousin, Sheila offered the girl drugs, talked about suicide, and described herself as a "white witch." She told her father's secretary that "all people are bad" and that some "deserve to be killed." Yet, a month before the murders, when she received the last injection of her antipsychotic, Sheila persuaded the doctor to give her a half dose.

The day after the shootings, detectives assembled in the dining room of the Whitehouse to discuss their findings. The officers concluded that all the evidence suggested Sheila had suffered a breakdown and had murdered the family before shooting herself. The pathologist who had conducted the autopsies confirmed that he had not found "anything to contradict the suicide theory." He said that, though Sheila had sustained two gunshot wounds, one to her neck and the other under her chin, the first of these would not have been immediately fatal, and the second was consistent with suicide.

With the matter settled, officers were instructed to clean up the scene. They hurled bloody mattresses, bedding, and carpets from the upstairs windows, telling farmworkers to burn them. The bodies were released for cremation. To all intents and purposes, the case was closed.

The morning after the killings, Jeremy Bamber was at his cottage, talking to police, when his cousin Ann Eaton appeared at the door, having learned of the tragedy from a neighbor. Ann, an angular, inquisitive woman of thirty-five, came in and perched on the sofa, holding Bamber's hand as he continued his statement. Listening to him describe how he had left the murder weapon in the kitchen, she began to watch more intently. As she recalled later, "I became puzzled, more puzzled, then suspicious of Jeremy and then bloody suspicious of Jeremy." She rifled in her pocket for a scrap of paper and furtively began taking notes.

Ann's family had long been wary of Bamber. He was a delicate-featured young man who described himself as "a bit velvet" and flouted the conventions of country life, keeping bohemian company and sometimes wearing makeup. Ann's father, Robert Boutflour—an upright man with a helmet of white hair, who was married to June's sister—was particularly disdainful. "He scorned the Young Farmers Club, to which most farmers' sons belonged," Robert wrote in his diary. "Those remarks that he did make to any of his relatives, were designed to give displeasure." He considered his nephew a degenerate with a "constant craving for money."

Bamber had been a lacklustre student at Gresham's—one of the country's most prestigious boarding schools—and had infuriated teachers by brewing beer and sneaking out to watch punk bands. Robert liked to note that Bamber's classmates had called him "the Bastard"; he wrote in his diary that, after the other students learned of his adoption, "he never made another friend." Back home after leaving school, Bamber had grown cannabis behind the cattle shed and scandalized the family by carrying on an affair with a married mother of three. Though he helped his father on the farm, he could be unreliable, taking off to go travelling, and flirting with careers as a scuba diver and a cocktail waiter. Nevill had hoped that his son would eventually take over Whitehouse Farm, but Robert disapproved. "Why don't you throw the bugger out?" he urged.

Though the Bambers and the Boutflours weren't on especially intimate terms, their farming and business affairs were intertwined. Among their most valuable shared assets was the nearby Osea Road vacation park, on the River Blackwater. That spring, there had been a break-in at the park's office, in which almost a thousand pounds was stolen, and the relatives considered Bamber the prime suspect. Now they began to wonder whether he had murdered his family to seize control of his parents' estate. Their alarm intensified when Bamber returned from a visit to an accountant and announced that, owing to inheritance taxes, he would have to begin selling off assets. "I felt on duty, wide awake, and trying to catch everything Jeremy said," Ann wrote about that day.

Listening to Bamber talk to the police, Ann was outraged by his stark account of his mother's mental illness; she felt that he was "screwing Aunt June into the ground." Then Bamber's girlfriend arrived at the cottage and

told officers that, on the night of the murders, he had called to say, “There’s something wrong at home,” before he headed to the Whitehouse. Ann was shocked. Why had he delayed hurrying to his family’s aid to make such a call?

At Ann’s farmhouse, the family conferred about the crime. Robert thought it obvious that “Jeremy had shot the family and tried to put the blame on Sheila.” He considered his niece “a featherbrained girl” who would have been incapable of firing a rifle accurately. Ann agreed. She noted that Sheila was so uncoördinated that she sometimes missed the cup when pouring tea, and wondered how she could have overpowered her father—a tall, fit man of sixty-one who she felt sure would have “gone after Sheila like a lion-tamer.” They all thought it bizarre that the rifle’s silencer, which was usually attached, was not on the gun when it was retrieved from Sheila’s body. Reasoning that the silencer would have made the rifle too long for Sheila to reach the trigger and shoot herself, they concluded that Bamber must have unscrewed it and concealed it after committing the murder. “It was a frightening moment,” Ann wrote. “We all became extremely worried that Jeremy might realise we suspected him and come after us.”

In the morning, Bamber’s cousins went to the local police station and asked to see Taff Jones, the head of the investigation. In his office, they insisted that Sheila “couldn’t possibly have methodically killed everybody” and explained their suspicions. Jones was impatient; in his view, the case was closed. He rose to his feet and thundered, “I can’t put up with all this nonsense!” before marching the family out. “He was like a *Raving Red Bull*,” Ann noted later.

They made their way back to Bamber’s cottage, where they found him crying. Ann held him as he sobbed, taking the opportunity to examine his bare arms for marks of a struggle, though she saw none. Eventually, a doctor arrived and wrote a prescription for Valium. Still, Bamber said he couldn’t bear to go back to the Whitehouse; he was haunted by his family’s faces. Ann volunteered to be the official key-holder to the crime scene.

The following morning, she stood in the Whitehouse kitchen and said, “Give us a clue, Uncle Nevill.” Then she noticed a pair of bloodstained underpants soaking in a bucket—Sheila had been menstruating. She took them to the

sink, and as she stood there she studied the window, wondering if Bamber could have escaped through it and locked it from the outside.

Later that day, Ann's father and brother joined her to search the property for evidence and valuables, agreeing to take them away "for safekeeping." Ann gathered jewelry, while her father checked Nevill's clothes for cash, and her brother, David Boutflour, hunted for firearms, retrieving five guns. Only toward the end of their search did they find the missing silencer. Peering into a cupboard under the stairs, David spotted it protruding from a cardboard box containing a few hundred rounds of ammunition. They put it in Ann's car, along with the guns and the jewelry, and took it back to her house for closer inspection. Later, Robert told the police that their officers had overlooked a crucial clue. The silencer appeared to be daubed with blood.

On the day of the Bambers' funeral, mourners lined the narrow streets of Tolleshunt D'Arcy, and camera crews surrounded the village's small stone church. Delivering the eulogies, the vicar praised Nevill and June as "valued leaders" of the parish, and asked "God's mercy for Sheila, sadly and tragically deranged."

As the congregants emerged into a burst of flashbulbs, Bamber cried out, and his legs seemed to buckle. He was filmed shaking with sobs, supported by his girlfriend as he struggled toward the hearses. His relatives watched bitterly. They had unsuccessfully urged police to bug the funeral cars, hoping to catch Bamber in a confession. Now, as the procession pulled away, he seemed to give them a knowing smile. "Little bugger," Ann's husband, Peter, said. "He thinks he's got away with it."



BLOPER

By then, the relatives had found an ally on the police force: Detective Sergeant Stan Jones (no relation to Taff). Jones was a grizzled murder cop, an instinctive investigator who spoke fast and tended to wear his tie askew. Ann had taken him aside at Bamber's cottage to intimate that she was "strongly suspicious" of her cousin, and he had privately agreed. When the family discovered the silencer, Jones was delighted. "I was looking for something to go and arrest Bamber for," he said. Examining the device at the Eatons' house, he noted what appeared to be blood on its end, as well as a spot of red pigment that the family believed was paint scraped from the Whitehouse kitchen hearth as Nevill struggled to wrest the gun away from his killer. The silencer was sent off for testing, and Jones arranged for a paint sample to be taken from the hearth.

Four days before the funeral, Ann had invited Bamber to the Whitehouse, to observe his reaction to the crime scene. Robert, who came along, wrote in his diary that Bamber arrived in a "terrible state," trembling and pale, obviously heavily dosed with Valium, and "hardly able to walk or talk." Ann thought it odd that he showed no desire to know the details of how his family had died. "He looked absolutely petrified and never asked any questions," she recalled.

After being shown around the house, though, Bamber settled in his father's kitchen chair and noted that valuable items appeared to be missing. He angrily instructed Ann not to take anything else. Later that week, she returned to find him with an appraiser from Sotheby's, examining an ancestral portrait, a collection of silverware, and a Meissen china clock. Her father reported soon afterward that he had spotted Bamber filling the trunk of his car with "family treasures."

After the funeral, Bamber was largely absent from Tolleshunt D'Arcy. To the family's disgust, he and his girlfriend left the reception and went to a local Caribbean restaurant, where they spent the evening drinking champagne and cocktails with friends, before heading off on a windsurfing vacation. They returned briefly for the twins' burial in London, then sailed to Amsterdam to buy marijuana.

With Bamber gone, Ann and Robert let themselves into the Whitehouse and discovered that it was indeed possible to climb out the kitchen window before pulling it closed from the outside. Ann also sneaked into Bamber's back yard hunting for evidence; she had learned that June had bought a bicycle shortly before her death, and she suspected that Bamber had used it as a getaway vehicle. She found the bike propped against Bamber's wall, and Robert spent hours traversing the fields between Bamber's cottage and the Whitehouse, plotting out a viable route. Then he sat up all night constructing an elaborate theory of the crime, which he outlined in his diary.

Robert imagined his nephew cycling through the moonlit fields and creeping into the Whitehouse, where he armed himself with his father's rifle. During a struggle with Nevill in the kitchen, the silencer collided with the hearth. As he killed his parents and nephews, Bamber sprayed their bodies with bullets to "make it look like the work of a maniac." Then he roused his sleeping sister, saying, "Wake up Sheila, Mummy wants you to say prayers with her," before guiding her into the master bedroom, where June lay dead. Robert imagined him saying, "Lie down here darling, put the bible on your chest," then shooting Sheila and escaping through the window. "I am convinced that Jeremy has sold his soul to the Devil," Robert wrote.

As the family conducted its private investigations, they urged Stan Jones to pursue their theory of the case. "I had so much pressure being heaped on

me,” Jones later wrote. “The family knew I believed them.” Though the official view of the crime had not changed, several officers now shared his skepticism. Among them was Mick Barlow, a junior detective with a prominent brown mustache, who had noted at the funeral that Bamber appeared to be wearing dark makeup “to give others the impression he was looking drawn and emotional.”

Barlow began meeting with the relatives, sharing information about the case and absorbing their theories. He went to the Whitehouse to conduct experiments on the kitchen window, and visited Bamber’s cottage, where he, too, found June’s bicycle. When Taff Jones, the lead detective, learned of Barlow’s unauthorized sleuthing, he ordered him to stop. “He gave me a proper dressing down,” Barlow (who couldn’t be reached for comment) wrote later. “He wanted no more of it.”

After Robert appealed to the chief constable of the Essex Police, a high-ranking officer was assigned to review all the evidence. When the results came back, though, they confirmed that everything pointed to Sheila. “It was clear to us the investigation was stagnant and going nowhere,” Robert wrote. Then, the following day, a fresh development transformed the case. Exactly a month after the shootings, Bamber’s girlfriend came forward to accuse him of plotting his family’s murders.

Julie Mugford, a twenty-one-year-old student teacher with gap teeth and dark curls, had met Bamber while waiting tables at a pizza parlor called Sloppy Joe’s. Bamber was moonlighting as a bartender there, and he dazzled her. But she told investigators that the relationship had been tempestuous and increasingly clouded by his hatred of his family.

Mugford was interviewed by Stan Jones, who had taken her into protective custody. She told him that Bamber had been planning the killings for more than a year. “He said he would like to commit the perfect murder,” she said, adding, “All Jeremy wanted was money.” Bamber had told her that he would arrange the scene to frame his sister, then slip out through the kitchen window and escape by bicycle. “I got very upset and cried and insisted that he did not mention it again,” Mugford said.

Before the murders, she said, Bamber had called and said, “The crime will have to be tonight or never.” She had been smoking marijuana and had simply told him “not to be so stupid.” When he called again after 3 A.M. and told her something was wrong at the farm, she was feeling “dozy,” and didn’t appreciate what he meant until after she returned to bed. Then, she said, “I knew that Jerry had murdered his family.” She told the police that Bamber revealed the details in the ensuing days. He had tried to toughen himself up by strangling rats with his bare hands, but had eventually realized that he couldn’t do it—so he had decided to hire a hit man, a local plumber. Bamber had paid him two thousand pounds and told him to call from the Whitehouse once the crime was complete.

Taff Jones was attending a dinner dance at his golf club when he was summoned to the station. “This had better be fucking good,” he declared. When he was told that Mugford had implicated Bamber, “Taff’s face went from red to white in a split second,” an officer told me. Bamber was immediately named the prime suspect.

Taff Jones travelled to London, where Bamber was staying at Sheila’s former apartment. Early the next morning, he pounded on the door and Bamber opened it drowsily. “I am arresting you on suspicion of murdering your mother, father, sister, and her two children,” Jones said. Bamber stared at him. “I don’t believe what I am hearing,” he said. “It must be something else you want me for—not murder.”

Back at the station, Bamber insisted that Mugford had invented the story after he broke off their relationship. “If she could put me behind bars then nobody else could have me,” he said. (Mugford did not respond to requests for comment.) In his cell that night, he asked an officer to pass Mugford a solicitous note: “Thinking about you. Sorry for splitting up. I love you!!” He signed it with his pet name, Stinko.

As the interrogations continued, Bamber insisted that he loved his parents. He acknowledged that his relationship with his mother had been both “rough and smooth,” and that they had clashed over her religious views, but he said that they had recently found “much more common ground.” Asked if he disliked Sheila, he replied, “I loved my sister but could not understand in the last few years her mental illness.” When Taff Jones suggested that he had

sometimes seemed to be surprisingly cheerful since the murders, Bamber ascribed it to “manic depression.”

Privately, the detective still doubted Bamber’s guilt. “I think we are barking up the wrong tree,” he told a colleague. Before long, Stan Jones was brought in to take a more aggressive approach. Bamber mostly remained calm under questioning, but he lost his temper when told that more than twenty bullets had been fired into his family members’ bodies. “You’re a hard bastard,” he said. Stan Jones told the stenographer, “I would like you to note that the accused is continually staring at me.”

Though Bamber steadfastly denied any involvement in the crime, he made two important admissions. First, when asked if there was a way to get into the Whitehouse when it was locked, he revealed that he had known since childhood how to jimmy the windows. Second, he admitted to carrying out the theft at the Osea Road vacation park. “I knew I would be the No. 1 suspect but that they couldn’t prove it,” he said.

The police couldn’t prove his guilt in the murder case, either: Mugford’s testimony was crucial, but she was an imperfect witness. She had confessed to helping Bamber perform the Osea Road burglary—and to conducting a string of check frauds with one of her housemates. Then the plumber whom she had accused of being a hit man turned out to have an irrefutable alibi. After holding Bamber for five days, the police were forced to concede that they had nothing concrete connecting him to the killings. He was charged with burglary and released on bail. When he left the station, in a friend’s white Jaguar, plainclothes detectives tailed him. He went out for the night, first to a wine bar and then to an upscale strip club called Stringfellows, before returning to Sheila’s apartment at dawn.

As Bamber tried to go on with his life, the suspicions about him spread. Four days after he was released, the *Sun* caused a sensation by reporting that he had been “trying to cash in on the horror” of his family’s deaths by selling “topless and full-frontal nude” pictures of his sister. Bamber, the article said, had offered the images “for a substantial sum,” promising that they “show everything right down to the last detail.” The next day, Bamber left the country with a friend, bound for Saint-Tropez.

By then, Taff Jones had been sidelined, and the inquiry had a new leader: Detective Superintendent Mike Ainsley, a narrow-eyed, jowly man with a reputation for investigative vigor. Ainsley requested Boutflour's notes on the case and became even more convinced of Bamber's guilt. Officers on the scene the night of the murders suggested that they had found Bamber's behavior strange. Instead of calling 999, the U.K.'s emergency line, he had taken the time to look up the number for the local police station. When they passed his car on the way to the Whitehouse, he seemed to be driving suspiciously slowly. Some said that he appeared oddly calm during the siege, or that his displays of weeping and retching felt false. The officer who escorted Bamber home said that he "showed little signs of any emotion." As soon as they reached his cottage, he made himself a cup of coffee and a bacon sandwich.



New forensic testing also raised doubts about Sheila's guilt. Swabs taken from her hands found unusually little lead for someone who had repeatedly loaded and fired a rifle, and her feet were surprisingly clean. The paint sample taken from the hearth at the Whitehouse matched the red paint on the silencer that the relatives had discovered—and scratches matching its surface were found on the underside of the mantel.

DNA testing was not yet widely used, but scientists retrieved a flake of dried blood from the silencer's internal baffles and made a decisive discovery: the blood type matched Sheila's. An expert concluded that the blood was back spatter from the wounds to Sheila's throat, and tests confirmed that she would have been unable to reach the trigger of the rifle to shoot herself with the silencer attached. The police were now ready to assert that Sheila had been murdered.

Ainsley sent a report to the director of public prosecutions, describing Bamber as a "calculated killer" who had murdered his family for the "vast wealth" he stood to gain. Returning from Saint-Tropez in late September, Bamber was arrested in the customs hall at Dover. The following day, he was arraigned on five murder charges and held without bail. As he was driven away to Norwich Prison, he spotted a group of friends and threw them a smile. The resulting press photograph of the accused killer grinning in the back of a police van became one of the most notorious images of the crime.

Bamber's attorney, a distinguished Queen's Counsel named Geoffrey Rivlin, had serious concerns about his client's case. The blood in the silencer presented a grave difficulty. Bamber suggested that his relatives had planted it, but Rivlin dismissed this as too "far-fetched" to present in court.

As the trial approached, a preternatural calm seemed to descend on Bamber. "Why should they convict an innocent man of such a terrible charge?" he wrote to a friend. He appeared in court wearing a double-breasted blue suit, a fresh white shirt, and a striped tie. Presented with five murder charges, he pleaded "not guilty" to each.

The prosecution argued that he was a "skilled, cold, calculating killer," and witnesses said that he despised Nevill and June. Robert Boutflour recalled Bamber saying, "I could easily kill my parents." Nevill's secretary, Barbara Wilson, described how Bamber had asked her to clean out his father's office after the murders, instructing her in an "arrogant and nasty" tone to dispose of everything. Several people who knew Sheila attested to her inexperience with guns. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Ferguson, acknowledged her previous breakdowns and her troubled relationship with June—but said that he could not envisage her harming her father or her sons.

Mugford, wearing a prim floral blouse and a pencil skirt, spent more than five hours in the witness box, trembling and sobbing as she described Bamber's plot. Asked why she had concealed his crime for so long, she said, "I was scared—just scared—what Jeremy might do."

"How were you able to cope with remaining in his company, going out to dinner with him, sleeping with him?" Rivlin asked.

"This was the only reason I went to the police," she said. "Not because I felt he was slipping away from me, but because I could not cope with such a hideous thing."

When Bamber took the stand, his testimony was so quiet that the judge frequently had to tell him to speak up. He insisted that he loved his parents and had never talked of harming them, suggesting that witnesses' recollections had been skewed by the allegations against him. "It's a psychological thing, isn't it?" he said. Asked why his own uncle might have lied about him, he replied, "I can only surmise reasons, and I think it is very dangerous to do so." Bamber lost his composure only once under cross-examination, when asked why he had left a gun lying around in a house where two children slept. "I was being lackadaisical," he said in a whisper. "I didn't know what was going to happen."

After seventeen days, the prosecution and the defense had rested their cases, and Judge Maurice Drake, in accordance with British legal custom, summed up the evidence for the jury. Peering down from the bench in an elaborate white wig, he acknowledged that Sheila was "quite clearly a disturbed woman" but said there was "certainly no evidence" that she was in a psychotic state on the night of the murders. She was slender, making it "very unlikely indeed that she fought and overcame that tough farmer father," and her hands and feet were so clean as to make it "inconceivable" that she had committed the killings. The paint on the silencer proved that it had been on the gun during the struggle in the kitchen, he went on, and experts said that the blood inside it was "overwhelmingly likely" to be Sheila's.

Following several hours of deliberations, the jury announced that it had reached a verdict, with a majority of 10–2. The courtroom was silent, except for the sobs of two jurors. As the foreman read out five guilty counts,

Bamber sank into his chair, his features constricted in horror. The judge ordered him to stand. “Your conduct in planning and carrying out the killing of five members of your family was evil, almost beyond belief,” he said. Bamber was sentenced to life in prison.

Outside the court, Robert Boutflour gave a triumphant speech. He described Sheila as a “fun-loving girl” and thanked Ainsley for his “painstaking and diligent” work on the case. For decades, until his death, he would refer to his nephew by his prisoner number. “We cried with absolute *RELIEF*,” Ann Eaton later wrote.

The police were mocked in the press for having been fooled by Bamber. The *News of the World* printed a cartoon of a corpse being hauled from a river, its feet sheathed in cement and an axe in its mouth, while a detective declared, “It’s an open and shut case—suicide.” The chief constable held a lunch at police headquarters to offer the family a formal apology.

Bamber was incarcerated alongside many of the country’s most prolific rapists and murderers at Wormwood Scrubs, a Victorian prison whose own warden had described it as a “penal dustbin.” The poet Ken Smith, who taught writing classes there, recalled Bamber as a slender, boyish figure, who talked constantly about his determination to clear his name. “What struck me was the strength of his conviction, and the strength it must have taken to maintain it day by day,” Smith wrote in a book about his time at the prison. “He would have to be a very good actor, or a very clever psychopath, or a very innocent man.” Yet, as time went on, Bamber seemed to fade. “He grew greyer, yellower, more withdrawn, turning into the colour of old newspapers,” Smith wrote. “Prison was beginning to drown him in its silence.”

Twenty-three years later, Sarah Hanover was at loose ends. She was thirty-seven and living alone in a remote Midlands hamlet; a long-term relationship had ended, and her business, a small art gallery, had gone bust. Searching for something to occupy her mind, she picked up a book about the Whitehouse Farm killings and found herself engrossed. Bamber was one of Britain’s most reviled murderers—a “resident monster of the public imagination,” in Ken Smith’s words—but as Hanover read about the evidence that had secured his conviction she began to question his guilt.

The prosecution's assertion that Sheila couldn't have dominated her father physically seemed to overlook the fact that Nevill had evidently been shot four times upstairs before he was finally killed in the kitchen. "You could easily overpower a man that had been shot and was bleeding," Hanover told me. She also puzzled over Mugford's role. "If my boyfriend had access to guns and he told me he was going to murder his family, I would have gone to the police," she said. She became increasingly preoccupied with the case. Eventually, at a friend's urging, she wrote to Bamber.



By then, Bamber had been through two failed appeals and had made multiple unsuccessful applications to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which examines potential miscarriages of justice. He had complained repeatedly about police malfeasance, but those claims were dismissed after inquiries by the City of London Police and Scotland Yard. Yet he wrote to Hanover that he remained determined to prove his innocence.

They began corresponding, and after a few months he invited her to visit him at Full Sutton, the prison in the North of England where he was being held under maximum security. When she saw him in the visiting hall, she was taken aback. He was tall and burly—nothing like the waifish figure she remembered from the front pages—and his dark hair was graying. She told

me that she found him warm and easy to talk to, though she saw “a depth and a sadness” in his eyes.

After the visit, Hanover and Bamber spoke almost every day on the phone, sometimes for hours. She learned that he had undergone multiple psychiatric assessments in prison, which had determined that he was not a psychopath. His most recent assessment, from 2009, also placed him within the “low-normal” range for “impression management,” meaning that he was not especially skilled at influencing the way others perceived him. “It is hard to sustain the view that Jeremy Bamber is so expert in deceptive self-presentation as to maintain this front over a variety of different assessors, different assessment instruments, and different times,” the psychiatrist had concluded.



BEFORE



AFTER

In time, Hanover had come to believe Bamber. “You know from his nature that he didn’t do it,” she told me. “I would trust him with my life.” She decided to help him reëxamine his case. He sent her copies of thousands of records that he kept in his cell, and, after contacting attorneys who had represented him over the years, she drove up and down the country collecting documents. Then she took them all back to her thatched cottage and started to read.

Hanover was surprised to discover that many of the people who had been instrumental in securing the verdict against Bamber were enriched by his conviction. Since murderers are forbidden to inherit money from their victims, June and Nevill's fortune had passed to his aunt, his uncle, and his cousins.

The rural dynasty that Bamber had been adopted into occupied a series of impressive properties. June and Nevill inhabited the Whitehouse. June's elderly mother, Mabel Speakman, was living out her last days in a white-fronted mansion called Vaulty Manor. She also owned the farm where her older daughter, Pamela, lived with Robert Boutflour.

Ann and her husband, Peter, were in a more precarious position at the time of the murders. They had significant debts, and were hoping to profit from Little Renters, a modest fifty-acre farm that Nevill had bought at their request. Ann had dreamed of living at Vaulty—a prospect that seemed to be drawing nearer as Speakman grew increasingly frail. But, a few weeks before the shootings, Bamber had told her that his family intended to buy Vaulty for themselves, using money gained by selling Little Renters. She was so furious that she tore down all the wallpaper in her bathroom. “What Jeremy had told me was a threat,” she said to police.

After the murders, the jeopardy only heightened. With June dead, Bamber stood to inherit half of his grandmother's estate. Robert Boutflour was so alarmed that he arranged for Speakman, on her deathbed, to cut Bamber out of her will. Still, Bamber remained June and Nevill's heir—meaning that he could sell Little Renters whenever he chose. (Ann and Peter Eaton mostly declined to answer questions for this story, but the family has strongly denied that their suspicions of Bamber were influenced by financial considerations.)

The jury was largely unaware of these family tensions, even though they had played out while the Eatons and the Boutflours were securing much of the crucial evidence in the case. Not only had they found the silencer; Robert Boutflour had given the police a dossier outlining a vision of the murders that Detective Superintendent Ainsley appears to have followed closely. Some of Robert's theories were strikingly eccentric; upon hearing that Bamber had gone windsurfing after the funeral, he became convinced that he

had worn a wetsuit during the killings, then washed away the “blood splashings” in the sea. According to Mugford, Bamber had actually borrowed a friend’s wetsuit for the trip. Still, Ainsley told prosecutors that he suspected Bamber had worn the suit that night. He also clung to the theory that Bamber had escaped through the kitchen window and locked it behind him, even after inspections proved that it was impossible to close one of the two latches from the outside.

Hanover was interested to learn that, as Julie Mugford recounted what Bamber had told her about the crime, some of her testimony bore notable similarities to the family’s version. Mugford had stated that the Bible was placed on Sheila’s chest—something a police officer had told Ann, even though it had actually been beside her body. She also identified the kitchen window as an escape route and the bicycle as the getaway vehicle. (The family has denied discussing their theories with Mugford.) Other claims were plainly incorrect: that Nevill had been shot seven times, rather than eight—a detail erroneously reported in several newspapers—and that June had been shot in her sleep, when she had died in the bedroom doorway.

Bamber admitted to Hanover that he had treated Mugford badly. He had been unfaithful, and the relationship had grown more tumultuous after his family’s deaths. Mugford had become jealous when a gay friend came to visit Bamber, complaining to a friend of hers that the two were “always cuddling together.” After overhearing Bamber making a date with another woman, she became so enraged that she slapped him and smashed a mirror, before he shoved her onto a bed. When Bamber eventually told Mugford that he no longer loved her, she tried to smother him with a pillow. “If you were dead you would always be with me,” she said. Only after he finally broke off the relationship for good had she gone to Stan Jones to accuse him of murder. Even Judge Drake, who strongly encouraged the members of the jury to return a guilty verdict, warned them to approach Mugford’s testimony with “a great degree of caution,” noting the “possible motive she might have to tell lies.”

Attesting to Mugford’s credibility, the prosecution had said during the trial that she had not sold her story to the tabloids. But, immediately after the verdict, she sold an interview to the *News of the World* for twenty-five thousand pounds. The resulting article, which ran under the headline “*I tried*

*to smother the sleeping Bambi beast,”* gave details of the couple’s sex life, and included a semi-nude photo shoot. After Bamber pointed out in his second appeal that she had sold the story, Mugford insisted that her testimony had not been motivated by the hope of profit. She did, however, allow that the fee could be considered “blood money.” She added, “All I can say is that I bought a flat.”

Another detail from the appeal intrigued Hanover. Prosecutors had opted not to pursue Mugford for her check frauds, after her bank agreed not to press charges. When the bank manager was questioned about it, he indicated that Stan Jones had accompanied Mugford when she came in to ask for leniency.



The police denied influencing the bank’s decision, and Jones strongly disputed going there with her. “You wouldn’t have dreamed of it because that would come out later on and spoil our case,” he said. But that wasn’t the only question around the detective’s role. Colin Caffell, Sheila’s ex-husband, complained shortly before the trial about Jones’s handling of a statement that he’d submitted. In the original handwritten version, Caffell recalled Bamber offering sympathy because “I’d had a rough deal all along, in respect of Sheila’s illness.” Yet, when the statement was typed, the pronoun was changed to suggest that Bamber felt *he’d* been mistreated. Caffell wrote to the police that the error altered “the whole inflection of the sentence,” but

that Jones had told him it didn't matter. "Whatever you do don't say anything about it in the witness box," he said, according to Caffell. "It'll cause all sorts of trouble."

The trial judge had cited Dr. Ferguson's testimony—that he did not consider Sheila likely to harm her father or children—as key evidence. As Hanover dug into the psychiatrist's background, she learned that this was not the only time he was involved in a case of mass shooting. Ferguson had assessed a teacher, Paul Paget-Lewis, who had begun stalking one of his pupils, and concluded that he was not mentally ill and should be allowed to keep his job. After Paget-Lewis threw a brick through the boy's window and slashed his father's car tires, Ferguson recommended that he be transferred to teach elsewhere. The teacher subsequently shot four people, killing the boy's father and the son of the school's deputy headmaster. When he was arrested, he asked the police, "Why didn't you stop me before I did it? I gave all the warning signs." (Ferguson did not respond to questions about his assessments of Sheila and Paget-Lewis.)

Still, the blood in the silencer seemed to render everything else irrelevant. The biggest breakthrough for Bamber's case came in 2001, after the first DNA tests were run on the device and failed to find Sheila's profile. Scientists did find DNA from at least two other people, whom they could not identify, because the blood evidence in the case had been mysteriously destroyed a few years earlier. Nonetheless, the absence of Sheila's DNA was enough for the Criminal Cases Review Commission to refer Bamber's case for a fresh appeal. If Sheila's blood was not in the silencer, the commission stated, the remaining evidence would not be "sufficiently secure so as to maintain the safety of a conviction."

The following year, the Court of Appeal dismissed the DNA evidence—along with fifteen other grounds for appeal. The judges decreed that Sheila's blood could have been degraded by the "passage of time," and that the other profiles could belong to scientists, jurors, or others who had handled the silencer.

Hanover was outraged. James Clery, a leading DNA expert, told me that the ruling was contradictory. "Blood is a rich source of DNA," he said. The idea that the "considerable quantity" that scientists had reported finding inside

the silencer had disappeared and been replaced by residue from people who simply touched the device was “not a reasonable proposition.” Michael Turner, the barrister who represented Bamber, told me that the judges were “never going to allow this appeal,” regardless of the strength of the evidence. “There are certain cases that get into the British psyche and the judicial psyche, when they decide someone is guilty,” he told me. “The Court of Appeal can be a dreadfully closed-minded place.”

Bamber was devastated by the news, but a little hope remained. Turner had discovered as he prepared for the appeal that the police had millions of pages of evidence, only a tenth of which had been disclosed before the trial. Since Bamber’s conviction, the rules around disclosing evidence had become far more favorable to defendants; a team from Scotland Yard was tasked with reviewing the previously unseen files and turning over anything that would now be considered relevant.

After Hanover took charge of the new material, her kitchen filled with towers of boxes. Realizing that the task was too vast to tackle alone, she recruited volunteers—some from the Internet, where true-crime enthusiasts exchanged views about the case, and others from among the hundreds of pen pals Bamber had accrued over the years. They combed through documents, hiring forensics experts to help examine evidence, and in 2021 filed a new application to the C.C.R.C., outlining multiple grounds on which Bamber’s case should be referred for a fresh appeal. Then they waited.

“It is better that some innocent men remain in jail than that the integrity of the English judicial system be impugned,” Lord Denning, the most celebrated English judge of the twentieth century, said in 1988, two years after Bamber’s conviction. Denning was discussing the Birmingham Six, a group of Irishmen who were convicted of bombing two pubs and then spent more than a decade protesting their innocence. The Court of Appeal had dismissed their case, and Denning himself had thrown out allegations of police corruption, describing the suggestion as “such an appalling vista that every sensible person in the land would say that it cannot be right.” After activists and journalists took up the issue, Denning complained that it would have been better if the men had all been hanged. “They’d have been forgotten and the whole community would be satisfied,” he said.

The Birmingham Six were finally freed in 1991, after it emerged that police had indeed fabricated evidence. Their case was one of several in the eighties and nineties that eroded faith in the British justice system. Enough convicts were found to have been framed by corrupt officers that they came to be known by shorthand: the Tottenham Three, the Bridgewater Four, the Maguire Seven.

Two judges caught up in these scandals were involved in Bamber's case, too. Maurice Drake, the judge in his trial, also presided over the Bridgewater case, in which he was accused of misdirecting the jury with a biased summing-up. Bamber's lawyers argued during his first appeal that Drake had done the same thing to their client. "The jury was not led gently by the hand," Rivlin said. "They were pushed hard from behind." (A detective from the Essex Police confirmed this impression to me, recalling that the jury foreman had told an officer that "it was only the judge's summing-up" that led to Bamber's conviction.) Bamber's appeal was dismissed by Lord Lane —the judge who, two years before, had thrown out the appeal of the Birmingham Six.

Judges on the British Court of Appeal have extraordinary power. They routinely refuse to overturn convictions unless fresh evidence has come to light—often locking out cases in which juries may simply have returned the wrong verdict, or in which the defense has overlooked important evidence. The sole way their rulings can be overturned is by the Supreme Court, which will hear cases only on points of law that affect the general public interest—making it impossible to challenge even glaringly perverse decisions if they turn on the facts of an individual case.

As a public outcry grew over wrongful convictions, a royal commission recommended forming an autonomous body to investigate them. The Criminal Cases Review Commission started operating in 1997. The C.C.R.C. was designed as an independent check on the Court of Appeal, yet from the beginning the government curtailed its remit. Though the commission was intended to call for new hearings if there were *any* "reasons for supposing that a miscarriage of justice might have occurred," it was empowered to refer cases only if there was a "real possibility" that the Court of Appeal would overturn them—forcing its case workers to think like judges rather than like investigators. Its effectiveness has been further

diminished by the Conservative government’s program of austerity. After 2010, the C.C.R.C. lost more than a third of its funding. Yet its commissioners—who now mostly work one day a week, from home—have seen their caseloads double.

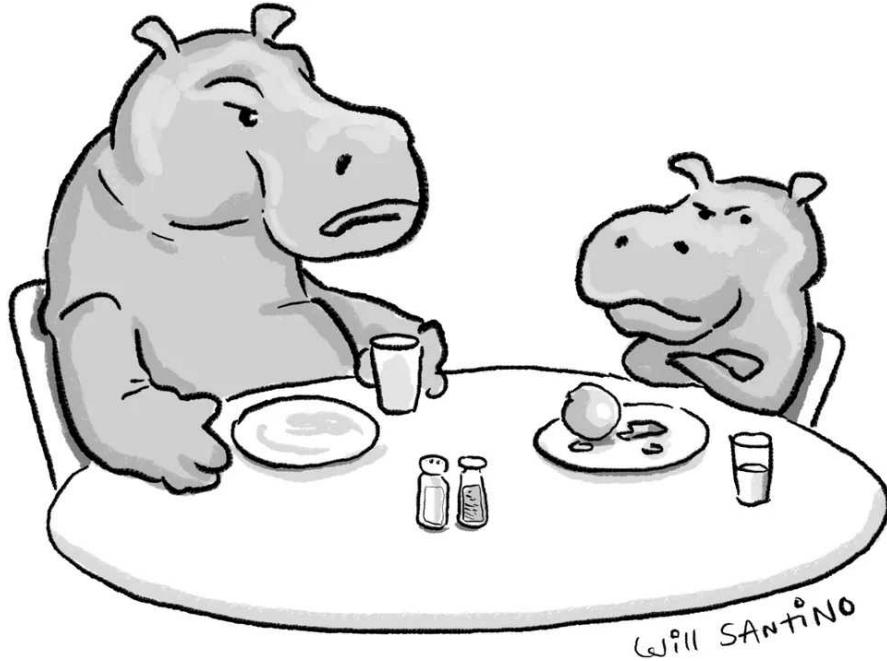
In 2021, a cross-party inquiry issued a damning report, concluding that the C.C.R.C. was “too deferential to the Court of Appeal.” Wrongful convictions in the U.K. have repeatedly been traced to failures by police or prosecutors to hand evidence over to the defense, but the C.C.R.C. made few inquiries into undisclosed material—and its work was routinely hampered by officers’ destruction of forensic evidence.

Two years later, it emerged that the C.C.R.C. had repeatedly overlooked exculpatory evidence in the case of Andrew Mankinson, a former security guard who served seventeen years for rape. Mankinson was convicted after the victim picked him out of a police lineup, though his appearance did not match her description of the attacker and there was no DNA evidence linking him to the crime. Mankinson was exonerated in 2023, after his lawyers commissioned DNA tests. It turned out that police and prosecutors had known for at least fourteen years that another man’s DNA was found on the victim’s clothing. Outside the court, Mankinson said that he had been “kidnapped by the state.”

The C.C.R.C. had made similar errors in the case of a postman named Victor Nealon, whose rape conviction was overturned only after his lawyers discovered another man’s DNA on the victim’s clothes. It had also rejected scores of applications related to the Post Office Horizon scandal, in which hundreds of postmasters were wrongly convicted of fraud based on faulty software.

Michael Naughton, a scholar of sociology and law at the University of Bristol, told me that the C.C.R.C. had come to serve the opposite of its intended purpose—it was effectively insuring “that miscarriages of justice don’t come to public attention, because they diminish confidence and trust in the criminal-justice system.” In 2004, Naughton began launching innocence projects at universities across the U.K., emulating a movement that has exonerated hundreds of convicts in the United States. The network closed down after eleven years, having overturned just one conviction. “People tend

to say terrible things about America, but they have this real commitment to innocent people not being convicted,” Naughton said. “We don’t have that focus on innocence in this country.”



Dennis Eady, a criminology scholar at Cardiff University, runs one of Britain’s remaining innocence projects. When I called him, last October, he said that Jeremy Bamber’s case was an “obvious miscarriage of justice” and a singular illustration of the intransigence of the British system. If Bamber were guilty, he said, it was inconceivable that “more disclosure, more anomalies, more and more suggestions of innocence” would still be coming out almost forty years later. “The C.C.R.C. must know that this is an unsafe conviction, to put it mildly,” he went on. “But they simply do not want to refer it. They’ve dug so far in the hole—and that’s what worries me—that there might be a continuation of the coverup. Because revealing this now is going to be a catastrophe for the criminal-justice system.”

I wrote to Bamber the next month, and he agreed to talk by phone. “I’ve been awake in jail a billion seconds,” he told me, in our first conversation. Bamber is now sixty-three, and he has been imprisoned for almost forty years. His voice was raspy, from a bad case of pleurisy, his hair had turned white, and he had lost a lot of weight. When I asked him to share the

documents from his case—hundreds of thousands of files—he readily agreed. “I didn’t murder my family,” he said. “I promise you.”

Bamber and I spoke every day as I sifted through the records. There were some questions that the documents couldn’t answer, about his behavior on the night of the crime and afterward—the perplexing acts and omissions that had allowed the prosecution to present him as a cold-blooded villain. When I asked why he hadn’t dialled 999 to report his father’s distress call, he exhaled wearily. “People don’t understand that Dad, Mum, and I had been looking after Sheila since she was about eighteen, managing her schizophrenic episodes,” he said. “So, when Dad rang, it didn’t shock me that Sheila had flipped.” It was obvious that this episode was a bad one —“She had never grabbed a gun before,” he said—but it was unclear exactly how serious it was, and after the line went dead he couldn’t get through to his father to find out what sort of help he needed. Calling the local station had seemed more measured than involving the emergency services.

“I should have driven over there straightaway,” he told me. “And, you know, I suffer terrible, terrible, terrible feelings of if-only.” He explained that he hadn’t raced to the farm because he was nervous about arriving before the police. But he wondered if he was also subconsciously resentful of his sister: “It’s the inevitability of mental illness that it’s quite emotionally tiring for those around—to keep that level of concern and love.”

At the scene, he had tried to maintain his composure, though he had “no one holding my hand.” When he heard that his family was dead, his first thought was to blame the armed police who raided the property. “I just thought, Oh, my God, they’ve gone in and shot everybody,” he said. “I couldn’t imagine Sheila killing her children in a million years.” Buried among the files, I found an officer’s handwritten notes confirming that Bamber had voiced this suspicion at the scene. “I put that comment down to him being distraught,” the officer wrote. Though some observers reported that Bamber was oddly unemotional, plenty of others recalled that he had seemed genuinely grief-stricken.

One of the most damaging accusations against Bamber was that, after the killings, he had rushed to see his accountant and to sell off his parents’ belongings. In fact, he had visited Nevill’s accountant, Basil Cock, who told

police that he'd requested the meeting to discuss "immediate business relating to the farm," and had also arranged the valuation of the house's contents. Bamber said he started removing items only once he realized his relatives were taking things. "It felt like they were pecking my mum's eyes out," he said.

Julie Mugford had testified that Bamber seemed shockingly carefree in the weeks after the tragedy—but other witnesses had told police a different story. "He looked shattered. His eyes were popping out of his head," one friend said. Another observed that he looked "pale and drawn like he'd been through Hell." The manager of the restaurant where Bamber drank champagne after his parents' funeral told police that he had been "very quiet, subdued, and seemed to be under heavy strain," and had come out at his friends' insistence.

Bamber said that it pained him when people questioned his grief: "Everyone thinks I'm a psychopath and don't have any emotion, but it's just not true." Still, he acknowledged that he sometimes held himself apart from his feelings. "I was brought up where I wasn't allowed to cry," he told me. After the murders, he had also been taking significant quantities of Valium, though he considered it a "cop-out" to use that to explain his behavior. "I'm sure I'm to blame for some of the strange stuff that went on," he said. "Trying to feel a bit more loved, trying to figure out that life was worth living."

Bamber said that he'd been drinking and taking Valium when he discussed selling Sheila's nude pictures to the *Sun*. "You can see the outrage, of course," he told me. "It was just stupid." A reporter had asked whether any such photographs existed and then offered to pay for them, Bamber said, and he had briefly entertained the prospect. "I was easily manipulated," he added. "But I also justify in my own head, I must have been feeling really angry at Sheila—having just killed everyone, killed herself, and ruined my life."

Bamber broke down frequently when he talked about his parents. He told me that he often relives childhood memories to ease the loneliness of prison—learning to swim in the river with June, raiding Nevill's pockets for lemon sherbets and riding beside him in the family's old Morris Oxford. "I'm

trying to find the feeling of love that I had at certain times,” he said, and began to cry. “That emotion when Mum wraps you in her arms.”

For decades, Bamber has lived in cells stacked with hundreds of binders of carefully ordered evidence. Sometimes he stays up at night, poring over files. “I’m trying to cling on to threads, I suppose,” he said. His case has been taken on by the lawyer who successfully overturned Victor Nealon’s conviction—a combative advocate named Mark Newby. But since his latest C.C.R.C. application was filed, in 2021, the commission has reviewed only three of the nine grounds. At that pace, it could be six more years before the review is finished. He would be nearing seventy. “Time is ticking away, and he is very aware of that,” Hanover told me. At times, Bamber’s faith that he would eventually prove his innocence seemed to falter, but he urged me to keep digging. “Maybe you’ll find something we’ve missed,” he said.

The Whitehouse Farm murders were an unusual case, because from the outset there were only two plausible killers. If Sheila was murdered, rather than dying by suicide, then Bamber’s call to the police, reporting that she was menacing the family, made him the obvious suspect. “Jeremy crucified himself,” his cousin Anthony Pargeter told me.

The case against Bamber was founded less on evidence that he committed the killings than on an argument that he framed his sister. At the trial, the prosecution evoked a grisly tableau: a bloody Bible propped against Sheila’s arm to create the impression that she had killed the family in a religious frenzy; a struggle in the kitchen that she was too weak to win; a bloodied silencer removed from the murder weapon and hidden by her killer.

At Bamber’s last appeal, he produced several records indicating that officers may have interfered with the crime scene, including by knocking over furniture in the kitchen—but the Court of Appeal emphatically rejected this suggestion. One of the justices said, with an air of finality, that for an “officer to disturb the scene is a moral sin.” But evidence has since emerged that the scene may have been disturbed in other ways. The crime-scene photographs show Sheila lying with her head at an awkward angle against a bedside table, the Bible open against her right shoulder. Its unnatural position accorded with the prosecution’s argument that Bamber had placed it there, and the Court of Appeal noted in 2002 that the smudged bloodstains

on its pages indicated that it had been shut and then “reopened by someone to lie beside the body.” Yet, according to records discovered more recently, members of the firearms squad queried the veracity of the photographs. After viewing the images, one officer noted that Sheila’s body was “not in same position as when I saw it” and that the Bible had been found not against her shoulder but at her waist. A second officer recalled that he and a colleague had raised similar concerns with Detective Superintendent Ainsley, but had been “reassured” that nothing was moved. “I’m happy to accept this fact now although in the back of my mind still a shadow of doubt,” the officer wrote.



Detective Inspector Ron Cook, the lead crime-scene officer, died several years ago. But when I spoke to his deputy, Detective Sergeant Neil Davidson, he made a startling revelation. During the examination of the bodies, Cook had “lifted the Bible up and had a look at it,” he said. “It was one of those ‘Oh, shit’ moments.” Davidson recalled that Cook had stood “fumbling” with the Bible, before asking which page it had been on, and had then put it back by Sheila’s body before the pictures were taken to “re-create what we just screwed up.” This kind of incident had earned Cook a nickname on the force. “We called him Bumbling Ron,” Davidson said. “Chaos reigned wherever he trod.”

Cook oversaw the cleanup of the crime scene, and Davidson helped dispose of bloody carpets and bedding. After Bamber was declared the prime suspect, “The shit hit the fan, big time,” Davidson said. “ ‘What can we salvage? Who can we blame?’ ” Cook spent weeks “chasing about, red in the face,” trying to find scraps of evidence, Davidson told me. “He was trying to dig himself out of the hole. The whole forensic thing was really a shambles, because nothing was preserved.” Watching the chaos unfold had left him conflicted about the case. He told me, “I would not be surprised if, one day, someone comes along and says, Here’s definitive proof that he didn’t do it.”

The linchpin of the case against Bamber was forensic evidence gathered from the silencer. Yet, even leaving aside the mystery of why a calculating killer would meticulously stage the scene and then stash the bloodied proof of his guilt under the stairs, there were questions about its provenance. Before Bamber’s relatives reported finding the device, Cook and several other officers had looked inside the cupboard, and none of them had seen it. David Boutflour told police that he had spotted the blood and the red paint immediately, but Ann Eaton testified that the family had noticed the “jam-like” blob on the end of the device only later, as they examined it around her kitchen table.

There were other irregularities in the time line of the silencer’s discovery. Buried in Ann’s notes from the weeks after the murders, I found a list of questions apparently written before she met with police on the ninth of August. The first read, “Look at silencer. Blood?” Yet, in the relatives’ account, they did not retrieve the silencer from the cupboard until August 10th. Shortly beforehand, the family had summoned Barbara Wilson, the farm secretary, to the house, and she told me she suspected that the discovery had been staged for her benefit. “I would say that they’d already found it, but they wanted someone to prove that they’d found it,” she said. (Ann declined to comment on the circumstances in which the silencer was found, but David insisted that “never was there a ‘re-staging.’ ”)

After taking the silencer to Ann’s farmhouse, the relatives stashed it at the bottom of a wardrobe, and two days passed before they relinquished it to the police. Stan Jones drove over to collect it, securing it in a paper-towel tube before stopping to share a bottle of whiskey with Peter Eaton. He then threw it into the back of his car and drove to the station. “Mr Eaton was not

impressed by this display of drink driving and never thought when the drink was offered that DS Jones would consume such a large amount," officers from the City of London Police later noted.

At the station, Jones failed to enter the silencer into a property log, instead locking it in his desk drawer. The next morning, he handed it to Cook. Both officers noticed a gray hair caught in the muzzle end of the silencer—but by the time Cook took it to the forensics lab this bit of evidence had been lost. Nonetheless, the hair was described to the jury as an indication that the silencer had been used to strike Nevill on the head.

Scientists conducted initial tests to establish that the blood was human, and examined the small red pigment stain on its end under a microscope. Then Cook took the silencer back to the station. For the next seventeen days, he did not keep records of its whereabouts. During this time, he tested for fingerprints, but claimed not to have found a single discernible print—despite the many ungloved hands that had handled the silencer since its discovery.

Meanwhile, Cook had secretly returned to the Whitehouse along with Stan Jones and Ann to take a paint sample from the hearth. Officers from the City of London Police later asked Ann if the detectives had used the silencer to scratch the paintwork. "The answer is NO," she replied. "If such a thing had happened then I would have been absolutely dumbfounded." She did, however, remember Jones telling her that she had "not seen anything." (Jones claimed that he had simply been trying to keep the visit secret from Bamber and denied that any officer scratched the mantel with the silencer.) Afterward, the officers returned to the Eatons' house and drank another bottle of whiskey with Peter.

Later, the silencer was returned to the forensics lab, and scientists noticed a piece of tape covered with paint flakes stuck to the barrel. They were told that Cook had placed it there to protect the silencer during his fingerprint tests. Nine layers of paint were then removed from the silencer's knurled end, containing not only red but also blue, green, white, and gray flakes, all of which matched those recovered from the hearth. Yet the records of the earlier laboratory examination make no mention of any flakes of multicolored paint.

Despite the chaotic handling of the silencer, and the risk of contamination in the weeks between its discovery and the forensic tests, the results that came back from the lab played a central role in the trial. If the paint on the silencer was important to the prosecution's case, the analysis of the blood was critical. As the jurors deliberated, they wrote a note to the judge asking him to clarify whether the blood was a "perfect match" for Sheila. The judge assured them that it did not match anyone else. They returned their guilty verdict twenty-one minutes later.

As I delved through the case files, though, I was astonished to see that there had been another match. Days before the trial, scientists had belatedly tested samples from the relatives and discovered that Robert Boutflour had the same blood type as Sheila. Though Robert denied touching the silencer in the days before the family gave it to the police, he was never cross-examined directly about whether his blood could be in the device.

The police had also harbored private concerns about the value of the blood as evidence. After Ainsley learned that Ann Eaton had found Sheila's bloodied underpants in the Whitehouse kitchen, he had warned her that the defense could accuse her of using them to contaminate the silencer. Ann fiercely denied doing this, and though Bamber's lawyers did not ask her about it during the trial, the prosecutor prompted her to mention that she had quickly disposed of the underwear. Yet Ann's notes from the days after the crime suggest that she had thrown the underwear into a trash bag that she later took home.

Ann declined to answer my questions about whether she had kept the underwear, but, when the City of London officers visited her six years after the murders, she told them that she had saved a trash bag from the scene. She and her family had by then moved into the Whitehouse, where she had other evidence gathered during her private investigations—apparently including Sheila's bloodstained nightgown. She said that her cousin's "dress" was upstairs in her laundry basket, still unwashed.

From the outset, there were plenty of clues that Sheila might have been responsible for the killings: the locked house, the fact that she was holding the murder weapon, her psychiatric history. All of these were explained away by prosecutors, and again by Judge Drake in his summing-up. Yet, as I

examined the case files and interviewed witnesses and police officers, the evidence pointing to Sheila grew.

When police arrived at the Whitehouse, there were indications that Sheila might still be alive inside. First, as Bamber and two officers approached, a shadow seemed to move in the master-bedroom window. One of the officers testified in the trial that he had quickly realized the shadow was simply “a trick of the light”—but the leader of the firearms squad, Doug Adams, told me that the officer had presented it at the time as a “genuine” sighting. Then, as Adams’s team approached the property, an officer reported seeing a woman’s body through the kitchen window. The officer later said that it was actually Nevill, whom he had mistaken for a woman—even though he was unclothed from waist to knees. Bamber’s lawyers have posited that Sheila was in the kitchen beside her father’s body when the team members approached and began battering down the door, but then fled. When officers reported finding her dead, more than thirty minutes later, two of them noted “blood leaking from both corners of her mouth.”

During the trial, the judge told the jury that there was “no evidence at all” that Sheila “was used to loading and firing guns.” Yet she had been on a three-day shooting trip with David Boutflour, during which she had fired a gun, and had attended at least one shooting party with Peter Eaton.

Philip Boyce, a firearms expert who has produced reports for Bamber’s lawyers, told me he had no doubt that Sheila could have fired the murder weapon. The .22 Anschutz uses low-velocity ammunition, reducing its recoil, and its long barrel makes it hard to miss when firing at close quarters. “If you’re close enough to anybody with a rifle of that length, you’re not even really aiming it, you’re just pointing it,” he said. A ballistics expert for the prosecution stated privately before the trial that the .22’s subsonic ammunition is quiet enough that it would have been possible to sleep through the shots, even without a silencer attached.

On the night of the murders, police created two separate logs noting that Sheila was wielding a rifle. At 3:36 A.M., an officer took down Bamber’s report that his father had called to say, “Your sister has gone crazy & has the gun.” Another log, created by a dispatcher and given a time stamp ten minutes earlier, seemed to relate a message from Nevill himself: that his

daughter had “got hold of one of my guns.” The police have maintained that both logs refer to Bamber’s call, and that the discrepancy in timing was simply an error. Bamber’s team recently commissioned a review by a document-forensics expert, who concluded that, while an error was possible, the mismatch was “more simply explained if there had been two telephone calls.”

Another hint came from Mugford. She testified that Bamber had told her late on the evening of the killings that it was “tonight or never,” and had called back in the early hours to report that something was wrong at the farm. Reading through her diary, I found another account. Bamber, she wrote, had told her, “Sheila has gone mad,” adding, “His father didn’t know what to do.”

Such discoveries were striking, but they weren’t enough. Even brand-new evidence is likely to be dismissed by the Court of Appeal if it bears the slightest trace of ambiguity. Bamber needed to find a fresh fact that changed the logic of the case.

Scouring thousands of pages of memorandums from the Scotland Yard review in 2002, Hanover’s team thought they might have found it. After Bamber reported his father’s distress call, the phone in the Whitehouse kitchen was left off the hook, and an operator at the phone company was charged with listening in to the open line. She reported indistinct noises—a dog barking and a “slight moving sound”—before transferring the line to the police station. The police said that they took over monitoring the line at 6:09 A.M. But the Scotland Yard records appeared to indicate that something different happened at that time: a “999 call made from White House Farm,” which suggested that someone had picked up the phone and dialed while Bamber was outside with the police.

Detectives assigned to investigate the call produced a short statement in the name of an Essex Police officer named Nicholas Milbank. The statement made no mention of anyone calling 999. Instead, it said that Milbank had been asked to monitor the open line into the Whitehouse, and had heard nothing until officers entered. Unusually, the statement had not been signed; Milbank’s name had been typed on the signature line.

I found Milbank, still working for the Essex Police, and he said that a call had come in at 6:09. “From what I can remember, someone phoned 999,” from “inside the farmhouse,” he told me. The caller had not spoken to him, but he recalled hearing what might have been muffled speech—perhaps a “voice or a radio”—and noises that could have been “a door opening and closing, or a chair being moved.” I asked if this suggested that someone had been alive in the house. “Well, obviously,” Milbank replied. When I mentioned the statement issued in his name, he was taken aback. He had given no such statement, he told me, and no one inquiring into the crime had ever contacted him. “No one’s spoken to me about it since the nineteen-eighties,” he said. “Other than you.”

Scotland Yard declined to comment, and when I called Mark Oliver, the detective who oversaw the inquiry into the call, he cut me off angrily. “I really wouldn’t waste any of your time on that case,” he said. “Bamber will continue to make spurious allegations until the day he dies.” Then he hung up the phone.

Dennis Eady, the criminology scholar, argues that wrongful convictions often result from what he calls “Agatha Christie syndrome.” The agents of the justice system—police, prosecutors, and juries—tend to fixate on “the evil perpetrator of the perfect murder,” even when the truth is more mundane. “If a tragedy occurred because somebody with a mental illness had a hallucination, you can’t blame anybody,” he told me. “But, if you can create this figure of evil, that’s a better story.”

For many observers of the Whitehouse murders, it was easier to accept that a greedy man had killed his parents for their fortune than that a devoted young mother could have slaughtered her sons. Yet, as soon as Bamber met police at the scene, he had offered a possible explanation for his sister’s frenzy. Before leaving the farm the previous night, he said, he had heard his parents urging Sheila to consider placing Nicholas and Daniel in foster care.

Prosecutors dismissed Bamber’s account as a cynical fabrication. But Barbara Wilson, the Whitehouse Farm secretary, told me that Nevill and June did indeed have a fostering plan for the boys—it was “one of the things they were talking about.” They wanted to assume custody and then send them to boarding school. This prospect would surely have been alarming for

Sheila, who had told Dr. Ferguson that her relationship with her mother had trapped her “in a coven of evil.” Any suggestion of removing the children “would threaten whatever precarious balances she had,” Ferguson told police. “She would resist it in any way she knew.”



Sheila was already at risk of losing her sons. They had moved in with their father, Colin Caffell, during her last stint in the psychiatric hospital, and a teacher at their school had expressed “serious concern for their progress and welfare” if they returned to their mother’s care. When Sheila got home, she desperately wanted to live with them again, but Caffell refused.

Among the documents disclosed after the trial was a letter that Caffell had written Nevill, seeking his help in retaining custody. Bamber’s lawyers raised this during his 2002 appeal, and Ferguson declared its contents highly significant. Though there is no evidence that Sheila saw the letter, the idea that Nevill might have supported Caffell’s efforts could have had a “catastrophic effect” on Sheila, Ferguson said. “She may have projected onto her father a concept of evil.”

The trial judge had told the jury that there was “no evidence of any sort” that Sheila was relapsing into a psychotic state at the time of the murders. Yet multiple witnesses said that she seemed agitated in the preceding weeks—

dirty, unkempt, and unable to focus, all of which are common early signs of psychosis. “Bambs was beginning to display those familiar long periods of becoming distant and vague again,” Caffell wrote, using Sheila’s nickname, in a memoir called “In Search of the Rainbow’s End.” Wilson told me of a disturbing encounter with Sheila in the kitchen during her final visit to the farm. “All men are evil and there’s a blackness,” she had said. A workman who had seen her on the day of the murders told police that she was “walking stiffly, like a zombie from a horror film.”

Experts for the defense had suggested at the trial that a woman with Sheila’s psychiatric disturbances might have murdered her children out of a belief that they would be together in Heaven. In such “altruistic killings,” they said, it was not uncommon for the murderer to go through a process of “ritual washing,” which might explain the cleanliness of Sheila’s body. That notion was dismissed as “fanciful,” though it was not possible to test it, because the police had failed to swab the showers and sinks for traces of blood or gunshot residue. In the files, I noticed another possible explanation for the spotlessness of Sheila’s feet: a pair of blue socks that were found on the floor beside her body, spattered with her mother’s blood.

There were also questions over whether Sheila could have left a suicide note. When Stan Jones was questioned before Bamber’s appeal in 2002, he offered an intriguing explanation for the initial assumptions about the crime. “You’ve got a note saying, ‘I’ve killed myself.’ So it was treated as four murders and a suicide,” he said. The detective, who has since died, was not asked further about the matter, and the possibility of a suicide note was never raised during the trial. But among the documents disclosed subsequently were two undated letters signed “Bambs.” “Oh Mummy don’t you think I have feelings also in this floating space I am in,” one read. “As soon as the dirt is dug up and the public no then my Darling Mummy will my Babys and me go to our rest.”

The letters—pages of chaotic scrawl—had been marked “illegible” by police, though it is possible to make out many of their words. Bamber was baffled when he read them. “Sheila had beautiful writing,” he said—but who else would have signed her name? A graphologist engaged to compare the writing with examples of Sheila’s neat cursive found both similarities and differences. Multiple studies have shown that handwriting can change

dramatically during moments of psychic disturbance—particularly in those suffering from schizophrenia.

Sheila knew that her children were frightened of their grandmother. June had upset them on a previous visit by flying into a frenzy as she chanted about God, and she frequently forced them to kneel and pray against their will. Weeks before the murders, Daniel had produced a series of frightening drawings of the Whitehouse. One depicted a figure brandishing guns beneath a decapitated head pouring blood from its neck; another showed June with jagged teeth and narrowed eyes, red spurts gushing from her head. When the police searched the room where the twins slept at the farm, they found the words "*I HATE THIS PLACE*" scratched into the wardrobe door.

Caffell recalled that, as he packed Nicholas and Daniel into his VW camper, collected Sheila, and drove them out to the farm to see her parents for the last time, he felt a "nagging fear" about leaving them. Sheila was vacant throughout the journey. When Caffell dropped them off, the boys clung to him as if in fright. "On some level," he later wrote, "they knew they were going to die."

For a time, the publicity around the killings made Whitehouse Farm a macabre destination. Tabloid reporters and true-crime enthusiasts nosed around the yard where the police had gathered to call out to Sheila. But the property remained a working farm, with hundreds of acres planted in borage and rapeseed. The crops needed care, or they'd rot in the fields. The Osea Road vacation park needed to be freshened up for the summer tourist season. The Bamber estate was too valuable to neglect.

After Jeremy Bamber's conviction, the family fortune was the subject of an intense dispute, with the Boutflours staking a claim and Nevill's niece and nephew Jacqueline Wood and Anthony Pargeter arguing that Nevill's half should go to them. Before it was settled, Peter Eaton took charge of Whitehouse Farm. Soon afterward, the farm secretary, Barbara Wilson, told the police that he'd been embezzling money, goods, and machinery. (The family has dismissed the allegations as "baseless.")

Wilson's claims presented a conundrum for police. Bamber was preparing to lodge his first appeal, and the Eatons had been crucial witnesses against him.

Senior officers discussed concerns about “the publicity it will create,” and decided that “the enquiry should be delayed.” They waited until Bamber’s appeal was rejected, more than a year later, to take any action. Detectives then visited Basil Cock, the accountant, who was acting as the executor of the Bamber estate, and asked if he wanted them to pursue the case. He did not. Though officers noted that Cock seemed to enjoy “a close working relationship with Mr. Eaton,” they shut down the case without any further inquiries.

The abortive investigation was overseen by Ralph Barrington, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department at the Essex Police. Barrington later went to work for the C.C.R.C. as its investigations adviser, remaining in the post as the commission deliberated on several submissions from Bamber that ultimately failed. Barrington retired in 2011, but his role in the stalled inquiry into the Eatons was only recently uncovered by Bamber’s team. “Essex Police not only failed to expose the discredit caused to key witnesses, they also neglected their duty to investigate serious fraud,” Bamber’s lawyers argued to the C.C.R.C. (Barrington and the Essex Police declined to comment on the fraud investigation, though the police pointed out that every authority that has reviewed the murder case concluded that Bamber was guilty, and added that they would continue to “assist the C.C.R.C. as required.”)

In the end, the Boutflours inherited a large portion of the family estate, along with many of the “treasures” from the Whitehouse. Among them was June’s diamond-and-sapphire engagement ring. Bamber had insisted that it be cremated with his mother, but it had been removed from her finger during her autopsy without his knowledge. When I mentioned this to him, he broke down. “Mum would have been absolutely, absolutely devastated,” he said. “She’d never taken her engagement ring off, or her wedding ring. She must have said a thousand times to me in her life that she was so honored to wear Dad’s ring.”

When Ann decided to move her family into the Whitehouse, many of her relatives were aghast. Anthony Pargeter told me, “I think she wanted to prove something—‘I’m in a famous house, you know.’ ” Both he and David Boutflour said that the Eatons’ children suffered from nightmares. Colin Caffell had once visited the place with Ann, and found that it was still heavy

with “the smell of death.” But Ann professed contentment. “I feel Auntie June & Uncle Nevill are here as well and are happy that we are here,” she wrote. When Scotland Yard officers visited before the appeal in 2002, the house appeared largely unchanged from the crime-scene photographs. Searching for fresh evidence, they removed a section of carpet padding that was still soaked with blood.

On a cloudy day in April, I drove up the bumpy lane to the Whitehouse, passing barns and rows of tractors before its rear wall appeared. As I stopped on the gravel driveway, a stooped figure with hollow cheeks and tufts of gray hair approached. It was Peter Eaton. A few weeks earlier, I had written to Ann urging her to talk to me about the new evidence in Bamber’s case, but Peter told me that she didn’t want to see me. “It was her auntie that was murdered here, wasn’t it?” he said, gesturing back at the house. Then he eyed me shrewdly. “Do not be fooled by Jeremy Bamber,” he said. “You can’t make any more of a story than, that bastard killed those poor children just for money.”

A Land Rover crunched to a halt on the gravel, and Ann Eaton climbed out in a cloud of floral perfume. She looked younger than her seventy-four years, with vivid green eyes and chestnut-tinted hair. She hurried through the back door and reëmerged with a piece of paper. “I’m not going to speak to you, I’m just going to give you this,” she said. It was a typed statement. “Jeremy Bamber has caused so much grief and pain to this family that we find it almost impossible to deal with and rarely speak about it,” it said. “He continues to try and cause pain to the family from the safety of his cell.” Ann told me that she was planning an afternoon swim in the river, then disappeared into the Whitehouse.

I drove back through the flat Essex countryside, passing the gleaming façade of Vaulty Manor, which the family now runs as an upscale wedding venue, and the entry to the Osea Road park, which the Eatons have transformed into one of Essex’s premier vacation attractions. Eventually, I reached a sturdy, gabled farmhouse, set back from a winding lane, where boxes of shotgun ammunition were piled against the windows. Ann’s brother, David Boutflour, was going in through a side gate, and he ushered me to a garden with pretty views of the surrounding fields. When I brought up Bamber’s case, he waved his hands dismissively. “Jeremy still keeps coming up with

his fancy ideas of how he's innocent and God knows what else," he said. "We haven't got any doubts about exactly who did it." Yet his mood darkened when I mentioned Ann. "She's a very ambitious lady," he said. The family had been bitterly divided by competition over the estate, and David felt shortchanged. "She's catching all the balls, and I'm not," he said. "I have no love for my sister at all."



It had been David who found the silencer that secured Bamber's conviction, and there were two questions that I wanted to ask about it. The first was about a record, buried in newly discovered material, that appeared to indicate that forensic tests before the trial revealed *another* blood sample inside the silencer. The blood type listed did not match either Sheila or Robert Boutflour—but it did match David. He greeted this news with uproarious laughter. "I'm ready to go," he said, throwing up his hands. "I'm ready to own up to it all." Curious about the unidentified DNA samples from inside the device, I asked if he might have cut himself while trying to unscrew the end of the silencer to examine its baffles during the family's kitchen-table inspection. He shrugged, and his wife, Karen, who had been hovering nearby, interrupted anxiously.

"That never ever came up," she said. "It was never asked."

“I did screw it,” he said. “I tried to turn it quite hard.”

“I don’t think you cut it,” she insisted.

“But the skin tissue could have been there, couldn’t it?” he said. “I could have had a bit of DNA on it.”

My second question related to another silencer—one from his personal collection, which happened to be identical to the one recovered at the farm. Bamber’s team has repeatedly raised suspicions that the police seized two silencers, suggesting that the jury was misled with evidence conflated from separate devices. The police and the prosecution have always denied those suggestions—despite records that appear to show silencers with two different reference numbers passing through the forensics lab. David said during the trial that the police had not seized his silencer, but now he told me that they had in fact taken it away, for “months and months.”

In 2018, Bamber commissioned Philip Boyce, the firearms expert, to examine freshly discovered records—including examination notes apparently indicating that two silencers were inspected at the same time in different departments of the lab. In a peer-reviewed report, Boyce concluded that “at least two separate sound moderators had been examined.”

Bamber’s lawyers wrote to the prosecutors seeking documents that could elucidate the matter, but the request was declined. “We do not accept at this stage that two separate silencers were examined,” the prosecutors wrote. Bamber sought a judicial review, and the High Court ultimately determined that the C.C.R.C. should reëxamine his case. Many questions remain about how many silencers were examined, when they were discovered, and whether they were adequately shielded from contamination. Yet the commission informed Bamber this March that it had no intention of seeking any fresh disclosure from the lab—or of allowing Boyce to examine the hidden material.

Bamber was desolate. “I just burst into tears and thought, What on earth am I doing?” he told me. “I’m never going to win if they just won’t look at it.” He spoke of his fear of dying in prison. “I hope I get out, and maybe I can have a little life outside,” he told me. “But sometimes I don’t think that I

ever will. They'll just find ways to obstruct." He fell silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was more resolute. "That doesn't change my innocence," he said. "Just because you kept me in jail for forty years, it doesn't make me guilty." ♦

# Shouts & Murmurs

- [My New Thing](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

# My New Thing

By Riane Konc

July 29, 2024



My new thing is journaling. It *was* bullet journals, but now it's journal bullets, which is where I make a quick note anytime I see a magazine. No, the other kind of magazine.

My new thing is pickleball, which is where you get asked to please stop bringing cucumbers wearing tiny handmade dresses to the local rec center.

My new thing is going to be gathering wildflowers, and then I'm going to tell them to please calm down.

My new thing is learning to code, but also learning to resuscitate myself, so that all the emergency-room doctors clap and maybe even toss a little something into the tip jar.

My new thing is teaching people my technique for building wealth through passive-aggressive income. It would probably change the entire world for

the better, but I guess no one I know loves me or even cares enough to just give me a bunch of money every month so that I can get my dream business off the ground.

My new thing isn't going to be sucking the marrow out of life, but it might be just giving a respectful nibble, if you guys wanted to order some for the table.

My new thing is getting a hobbyhorse and turning it into a career horse by tucking a five-dollar bill into its bridle and sternly saying, "It's time to grow the rest of your body."

My new thing is teaching people about something called the Cambridge comma. It's really similar to the Oxford comma and maybe even *is* the Oxford comma; it's just that I'm an American and only medium smart and honestly very tired. Please leave me alone.

My new thing is embracing my spiritual nature and becoming a large, which is a job in which I communicate only with humongous ghosts.

My new thing is being a proponent of slow fashion. It's where I make upside-down clothes for sloths. What are upside-down clothes? God, this is exactly the kind of question the sloths would never trouble me with.

My new thing is doing everything kind of both thanks to and despite myself.

My new thing is throwing gander-reveal parties, where the whole thing is just, like, I invite you over to watch me pull back a curtain with a flourish and a goose is just standing there, blinking.

My new thing is I'm going to find that lady who keeps writing things like "drink" on cups or "eat" on plates and tell her very softly but firmly that we've got it from here.

My new thing is being so kind and gentle, and the secret to how I got that way is something I haven't figured out yet.

My new thing is Canadian Girl dolls. They're very similar to American Girl dolls, but . . . why don't *you* tell *me* what's different about them, just to be

safe?

My new thing is to turn both the agonizing pain of being alive and the devastating knowledge that someday I will die over and over in my mind, smoothing the cosmic impossibility of existence the way a river smooths a stone, while also somehow earning a sizable passive income along the way.

My new thing is a sourdough finisher. It's me, and I'm hungry. ♦

# Fiction

- [Attila](#)

Fiction

# Attila

By Nell Freudenberger

July 28, 2024



Martha got the knife away from her mother and shut her in the garage. The garage was not for cars; it had been converted by the house's previous owners into what the broker called a "mother-in-law apartment." Martha assumed it was called that because mothers were more likely to move in with daughters, and men were more likely to own houses. She wasn't married, though, and her sister, Molly, who was, didn't have a mother-in-law apartment in her garage in Los Angeles, where real estate was much more expensive than it was in Baltimore. Also, Molly was busy with her children and hadn't spoken to their mother in more than a year.

"Let's take a break," Martha told her mother. "You rest here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to clean out the fridge." In the past, that kind of excuse would never have fooled her mother. Judy had been an expert liar and always recognized

her daughters' amateur attempts for what they were. She would have watched from the window and seen that, instead of crossing to the house, Martha had sat down on the garage step and started looking at her phone. Someone Martha knew had read forty biographies and taken a picture of the stack; someone else had hiked to a hot spring in Iceland.

The house was small, but it included this unusual converted garage. The broker had made much of the potential for extra income, and for a while Martha had rented it to a Croatian couple who were grad students in design. The design students were extremely neat and almost never home, and once left a surprisingly delicious loaf of gluten-free zucchini bread in her mailbox. It had been hard to ask them to leave, when she and Molly had decided that their mother would move in with her.

For what had happened this morning, Martha was to blame. She'd neglected to put Attila in his cage for the night and also neglected to make sure that her mother had coffee in her apartment. Her mother, who usually woke up at five, had padded across to the house at first light, wearing her bathrobe and the red slipper socks that Molly had given her one Christmas, and started rooting around in the kitchen. Martha hadn't heard her come in, but the rabbit had. He must have been hiding under the counter, where her mother was likely attempting to operate the coffee machine, when he spotted a safer hiding spot and tore across the room. Her mother shrieked. By the time Martha got downstairs, she was brandishing the knife.

"I'm going to do it. You just watch!"

The language suggested a threat to harm herself, rather than the rabbit, who was now nowhere in evidence. But the knife wasn't near her throat or wrist; she held it out in front of her, parrying. Recently, Molly had sent a video of her son, Leo, at his fencing class. Martha had played it for their mother; her sister hadn't said not to, and it had been one of their mother's good days. It was hard to tell if Leo was scared or excited behind his épée mask, if he enjoyed the activity as much as Molly said he did. Judy had watched the video at least three times, shaking her head and declaring that Molly was crazy. Fencing lessons! It was unsettling for Martha to discover that she still experienced a tiny flush of pleasure when her mother criticized her sister's choices, even though she and Molly were supposed to be a team.

Today wasn't one of her mother's good days. In the kitchen, her old, white-blue eyes looked flat, absent, as if, like her grandson's, they were hidden behind a layer of mesh. She waved the knife back and forth in Martha's direction, making a sort of infinity sign in the air.

Martha backed away. The light in the kitchen was pale and wintry; a fly buzzed around the thirsty monstera in the pot on the windowsill. Neither one of them had had coffee, and for a moment Martha wondered what would happen if she simply went upstairs, locked the bedroom door, and got back into bed. But she had to get the knife away from her mother.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Nell Freudenberger read "Attila"](#)

"Put that down," she said sternly.

Her mother sliced the knife through the air, and said something like *hut-cha!*

"For real, Mom. Drop it."

"*I'm* supposed to drop it, after what she did?"

The social worker, Lynn, had said that Martha shouldn't tell her mother when she didn't understand. It was too disorienting for her to hear all the time that her daughter had no idea what she was trying to say. Martha was supposed to feel her way through these conversations, looking for clues.

"What did she do again?"

Her mother stared at Martha in astonishment. "You've forgotten already?"

Martha had adopted Attila five years ago from a local rescue group. The process had involved two phone interviews and a home inspection. She'd also had to sign a contract promising that she would never let the rabbit outdoors; that she would not rename him (his name was Bentley at the time); that she would provide him with a quarter cup of dried food, half a cup of greens, and unlimited timothy hay each day for the rest of his life. If he expired prematurely, she was contractually obligated to inform the rescue organization within twenty-four hours.

She'd complied with some but not all of those strictures. She'd renamed him immediately, in light of his relative boldness and his bad habit of biting: Attila the Bun. She had also let Attila hop around the yard, until the neighbor's tabby had become interested. The tabby's soft red collar had a bell inside it. It was puffy, sort of like a court jester's, giving him an Elizabethan air. The bell was to keep him from killing birds, but Attila didn't know enough to run from a cat. Their one interaction had been a sort of tense standoff, during which the cat's tail flicked ominously from side to side, like a metronome.

Attila hated to be picked up, but he would let you stroke his head. He was a Holland Lop, and the tips of his velvet ears rested on the ground when he was lying down. Once he could no longer go outside, he preferred the living room, where he could stretch his body almost flat on the sisal rug, his long back feet extended behind him. As a prey animal, he did this only when he was very relaxed, absolutely certain that no hawk was circling overhead, ready to lift him into the air and snap his neck.

One of the things their mother had loved to say when they were young was that she'd accidentally got her second child first—a sort of joke. Molly had blue eyes and long, honey-colored hair. At the all-girls high school that she and Martha attended, she had been admired, not only for her effortless good looks but for how much fun she was to be around—she seemed always to be in hysterics about something. Their father, now retired, had been a trusts-and-estates attorney; their mother, formerly a flight attendant, had left that job when she became pregnant. Judy had once said that everyone in her generation was called Judy or Carol or Barbara and that she had wanted to give her daughters old-fashioned names, "with some class." Martha didn't mind her name, but she thought that if their mother had really expected a different type of child to come first, she would have started with the sober Biblical name and gone with the charming nickname second.

Molly had floated through school with B's and C's, seeming to understand from an early age that grades didn't determine one's future. From about fifteen, she'd devised ways to sneak out of the house at night. If Martha detected her, Molly would buy her little sister's silence with promises of candy or trips to the mall. Usually, Molly forgot these promises, but Martha didn't need to be rewarded. It was enough to listen to her sister from the

safety of her room: turning off the burglar alarm with a T-shirt pressed over the speaker to muffle the sounds, easing open the back door, and slipping through the wrought-iron gate to the street. Not only were Molly's transgressions exciting; they left a niche—the good-girl niche—which Martha, with her love of school and her aversion to risk, was happy to fill.

Molly always had a boyfriend. It was one of Molly's boyfriends—Jason, at first as unremarkable as his name—who had been involved in the events that changed their family life forever. Those events had not stayed within the thick stucco walls of the house. Because Molly could never keep her mouth shut, all the girls at school had known, and then so had their families. The shame had spread immediately and in all directions; trying to contain it was like trying to mop up a large puddle with a single paper towel. On the other hand, this had happened before social media and even before casual use of the Internet. It was easy to imagine how much faster the news would spread now, how much worse something like that would be.

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

At the time, Molly had been able to escape simply by going to college on the other side of the country. Their father had initiated the divorce, and Martha had remained with her mother. At first, Martha had been afraid that, once they were really alone, they would have to talk about what had happened, that Judy would want Martha to hear her side of the story. Maybe Judy was afraid of the same thing, because, for the first few weeks, they tiptoed around each other, barely breathing.

Once it became clear that the conversation they were dreading was one that neither of them wanted to have, the tension drained from the house. Aside from the two weekends a month that Martha spent with her father, it was just the two of them. Their relief made them generous with each other. Judy's social circle had contracted, and Martha didn't mind giving up a Friday or Saturday night standing on the edge of a party in someone's yard, drinking beer from Solo cups, to read a novel or watch a rented movie with her mother. Sometimes she secretly preferred it.

English had always been Martha's favorite subject. Once, she'd found Judy in her room, reading from her textbook, "The Norton Anthology of English

Literature,” which she’d left open on her desk. “How can you understand this?” her mother had asked, a little awed. In Martha’s memory, it was Chaucer whose difficulty had impressed Judy, but she wouldn’t have been surprised to discover that she was wrong. She was always amazed by the radical differences in people’s memories of the same events, even people whose neurological functions were perfectly intact.

Was it those years with her mother that had predetermined her role as caregiver? They managed now because Martha instinctively knew how to set boundaries; boundaries were her specialty, in a way. By contrast, Molly and Judy had always tended toward conflict. The argument that had precipitated their break had taken place over the phone, more than a year ago, when their mother had said something critical about the children’s extracurricular activities—in her opinion, there were too many of them—and Molly had responded that Judy was hardly in a position to give parenting advice. The phone call had devolved after that, and the two of them hadn’t spoken since. Things would have been easier if that phone call hadn’t happened, of course. But it was pleasant to be someone’s confidant, pleasant to be cherished and needed; if Martha was honest, it was pleasant to be preferred to someone else.

“I’ll do anything,” Molly told Martha after that, “anything that doesn’t involve actually interacting with Mom.” That was when she’d said that they were a team, and that she’d always be available to talk things through with Martha. If they eventually decided on assisted living, Molly and her husband, Gabe, would pay for most of it. Molly had even promised to take on their father’s care, when the time came. Their father lived fifteen minutes from Molly in L.A., and had no health problems beyond borderline cholesterol numbers. His wife, Bethany, was ten years younger than he was, and Martha thought it was possible that he would never cause either of his daughters a moment of worry. “I know you have the heavier burden,” Molly had said at the time. “It’s just—me and Mom. . . .”

Martha had a tenure-track job at Johns Hopkins, thanks to her well-regarded book about the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips. Philips was known (to the extent that she was known) for the anti-marriage poem “An Answer to Another Persuading a Lady to Marriage.” The closest Martha had come to marriage was in her late twenties, when she was living with her

boyfriend Alan and doing postgraduate work at Harvard. She was offered a job at U.C. Santa Cruz, and, to her surprise, a discussion about being in a long-distance relationship turned into a discussion about breaking up. Alan, it seemed, had a lot of goals that didn't involve Martha; he wanted to leave his Ph.D. program, go backpacking in South America, and perhaps try his hand at journalism. He'd been telling Martha these things for months, he said, but felt that he never "got through" to her.

Later, Martha had to admit to herself that this might have been true. It wasn't the first time that a boyfriend or even a close friend had surprised her with overwhelming feelings of which Martha had previously been ignorant. Listening to Alan's revelation, she'd felt herself drifting further and further away, until it was almost as if she were a character in a novel or a TV series. Maybe it was the words he chose: she had a strong aversion to the casual use of terms like "gaslighting," "projecting," and "narcissism." That kind of language was the opposite of the kind she studied, in which figures of speech were as clean and sharp as knives. Reading Philips's poems, she felt as if the human mind and heart were being put into words for the first time.

She'd been hurt but not devastated when things ended with Alan. It had taken her a while to start dating again, and the situation wasn't helped by the fact that she moved three more times, for three different jobs, before finally landing the position at Hopkins. She'd dated a bit when she first arrived in Baltimore, but at the moment she was taking a break from the apps. It was too difficult to think of explaining a scene like the one this morning—the kitchen, the rabbit, the knife—to a person she might arrange to meet at a bar or a coffee shop. When she had been dating, she'd always chosen locations with care, to avoid running into her students. But, even if she could avoid running into them in person, there was no way to avoid their finding her on the apps. Her friend Brian was now in the habit of alerting his students in the first lecture that he didn't want to be contacted on dating apps, even if they were just saying hi. "Keep calm and swipe left," he told them, which always got a big laugh. Brian was very likable and also very attractive, the kind of person whom even someone in their twenties might pause over on a screen. Martha was pretty sure that the same warning from her would have come off as pathetic, if not insane.

When her seminar ended that afternoon, Martha saw that she had a message from Gisela, who came on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, ostensibly to clean but really to care for Judy while Martha was teaching. She hadn't told Gisela what had happened in the morning, and, as the phone rang, she pleaded with the nameless authority who replaced God in her mind that nothing dramatic had occurred since she'd been gone. For once, this seemed to work: Gisela reported that they'd had a quiet morning and that Judy had eaten a piece of toast with her second cup of coffee. She was just calling to ask if she could leave a bit early, because she wanted to pick up her son from the school bus.

Martha agreed reluctantly. Gisela wasn't trained in memory care, but she was affordable and gentle, and Martha hoped to employ her for as long as possible. When Judy got her diagnosis, she'd made Martha promise again and again that she would never put her in any kind of care facility—she'd had a sort of panic about it. Martha had made those promises, but that was before the decline had really begun. At some point, like Attila and the tabby, they were going to come to an impasse.

She told Gisela that of course she could leave at two. Judy would be fine for an hour until Martha got home. She was superstitious about the nameless authority and didn't feel she could ask for another favor on the same day. Maybe Judy would take a nap after lunch, as she did increasingly often.

Martha had several recommendation letters to write before Monday and had promised her co-author a draft of their article, "The Personal and the Political in Seventeenth-Century Women's Lives," so she should have gone straight to her office. But the office was shared—with Graham, a talkative Miltonist—and instead she decided to go out to the quad, where she found an empty stone bench and called her sister. The temperature was in the low fifties, not cold, but it was very windy and the sky was white. Students hurried past without lingering.

Molly answered on the first ring. "Hang on," she said, and then, "Did you check your backpack? Do you need your viola today? You're not wearing socks!"

"Sorry," she said to Martha. "Crazy morning."

“I can call back.”

“No, no—Gabe’s driving them. Just one sec.”

There was another interval, in which Martha’s niece, Stella, could be heard yelling at her brother. Then there was Gabe’s deeper voice, presumably marshalling everyone toward the car. Martha personally had never much wanted a child, but she envied her sister Gabe’s presence. She would have liked to have a sounding board, a person with whom she could be honest about her doubts and fears without feeling that she risked damaging his opinion of her.

“Out the door,” Molly said. “Whew. What’s up?”

“I’m worried about Mom.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She was waving a knife at me this morning.”

“What?”

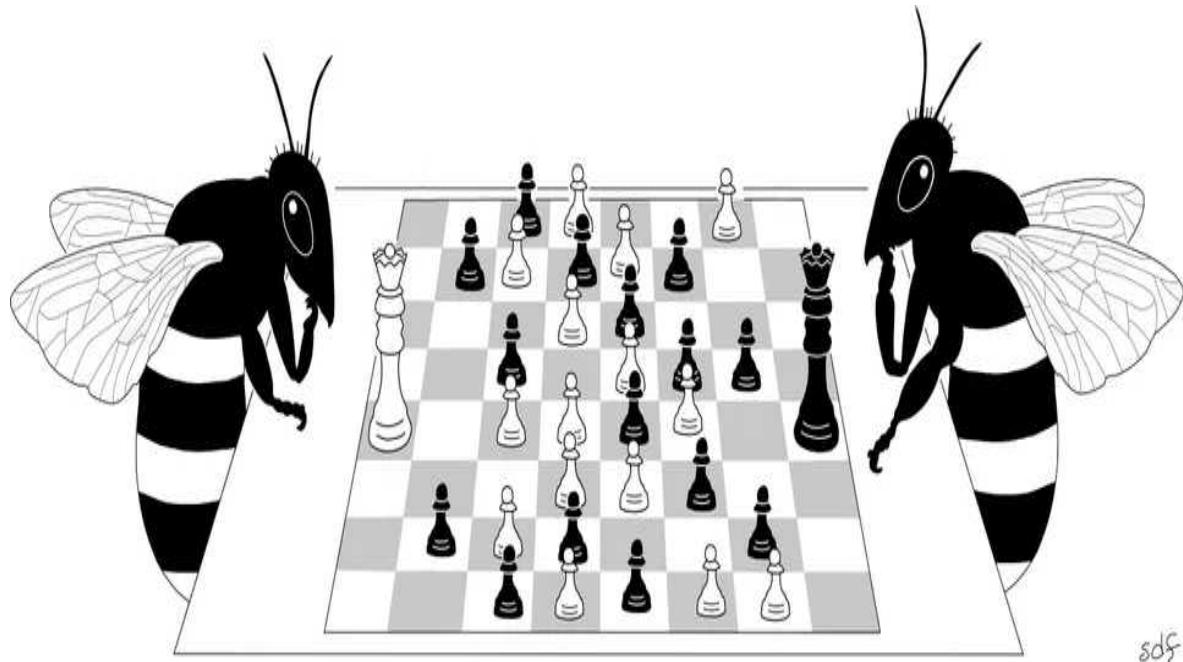
That got her sister’s attention. At the same time, Martha was aware that she was exaggerating slightly. The knife clearly hadn’t been intended for her.

“She looked a little like Leo with his foil.”

But her sister didn’t laugh. “Is this the first time she’s been violent?”

There was the time Judy had slammed the door of the apartment in anger and caught Martha’s finger—the nail was still purple—and another when she’d yelled at a small child on a tricycle on the sidewalk. Neither incident was really violent, though. It was more like their mother was constantly being dropped from sleep into waking life, with no transition, and all her responses were thrown out of whack.

“I think she was afraid of the rabbit.”



“I can see that!” Molly sounded relieved by the logic of this explanation.

“Really?”

“I mean, Attila’s not scary. He’s the cutest! But if you see him out of the corner of your eye—”

“What?” She was a little sensitive about Attila. Was it weirder to love a rabbit than a dog or a cat? When he cleaned his face with his paws, he looked like an illustration out of Beatrix Potter, but when he yawned there was something wild about his impressive incisors; under his tawny fur, you could make out the quadrate shape of his skull. Sometimes in the evening, when she was working at the desk in her bedroom, he would show up out of nowhere and collapse on her bare foot like a slipper.

“Probably she’d recognize him better if he was a kind of pet she was familiar with in the past.”

“We didn’t have any pets.”

“And we’re O.K., right?” Molly had a habit of switching gears without warning. “That’s what I told Gabe! The kids want a dog, and I just can’t. I

told him, If this is the thing they're talking about in therapy someday—that we didn't get them a dog—then we did a pretty good job! Right?"

Martha laughed, although it sounded like a joke her sister had made before.

"Because I just can't add anything right now, you know?"

"I get it," Martha said. Her sister was a therapist who saw teen-agers, a growth industry these days. She was in the office only three days a week, though, and her own kids were now fifteen and eleven. "It's just that at a certain point—"

"—we're going to have to find a care facility," Molly finished. "That's what everyone does."

"Not everyone. For a lot of families, that would be anathema."

"You have a great vocabulary," Molly said. "But those families don't have Mom in them. Can I call you back from the car?"

"It's O.K. I'm done."

"We'll talk soon—this weekend!"

When her sister hung up, Martha stayed on the bench for a moment. The wind was unpleasant, blowing bits of grit against her cheek, wrapping a plastic shopping bag around the base of a newly planted tree. A cardinal sat on one of its branches. It was the dun-colored female: she had only traces of red in her crest, wing, and tail feathers, but her beak was bright orange.

Eight years ago, when Martha was an associate professor at Kenyon, in Ohio, she had gone to the emergency room with severe abdominal pain. They'd initially thought it was appendicitis, but it had turned out to be volvulus, a twisted colon, which required emergency surgery. The doctor had said that if they hadn't caught it the blood would have stopped flowing to that section of her intestine, and she would have died. Martha hadn't been sure what to do with this information.

"Wow," she'd said. "Thanks for catching it."

On her second day in the hospital, her mother had arrived unexpectedly from Seattle, where she'd been living with the man she was involved with then, a retired high-school teacher who trained Seeing Eye dogs. This was five or six years before she started showing signs of Alzheimer's. Martha had woken up from a nap in her hospital bed, and there was her mother, sitting in an armchair, doing a word search in a book with newsprint pages.

"What are you doing here?" Martha asked.

Her mother looked up, as if it were no more surprising for her to be at Martha's bedside now than it had ever been. "Hello."

"I didn't know you were coming."

"Of course I came."

"Thanks," Martha said. It was like being a kid again, knowing that someone was there to take care of her, to be in charge.

"I always will, as long as I'm able," her mother said. "How could I not, when you're all alone?"

When she got home, Judy was awake, lying on the pink couch—which Martha had bought on a whim when she moved in and now regretted—with a wet washcloth over her eyes. She sat up abruptly when Martha came in the kitchen door, dropped the washcloth on the rug, and gasped, "You scared me!"

"Sorry," Martha said. "I thought you'd hear me coming in."

"I didn't know it was you! I couldn't see."

"Sorry."

"I don't know where that girl is. She ran off."

"Gisela? She went to pick up her son."

"She's a single mother," Judy said, suddenly sympathetic. "It's a hard road."

Martha had noticed that her mother often spoke in clichés, maybe because they came to mind more readily. The problem was hardly unique to Alzheimer's patients.

"Gisela's married." She couldn't help correcting her mother.

"At her age," Judy said, disapproving again. Martha had never asked, but Gisela looked to be in her mid-thirties.

"I have a rotisserie chicken for dinner. I thought we could make some of that rice pilaf you like."

"Not hungry," Judy said. "Don't make any for me."

"Well, it's only three. We won't eat dinner for a while. I have some work to do, unfortunately. Why don't you watch something?"

Her mother didn't respond to that suggestion, so Martha crossed the room and turned on the box from the streaming service. "'Downton Abbey'?" she suggested. "You love that. Or 'Big Little Lies'?"

"'Law & Order,' Season 7," Judy said, which was encouraging.

"It's great that you remember where you were," Martha said. "I never do."

"I only remember stupid things," Judy said clearly. "The stupider they are, the more I remember them."

Martha hadn't been there, of course. She'd been at some after-school activity: the literary magazine or speech and debate. Her sister had been at tennis. As Molly told it—as she'd been telling it for thirty years—tennis had ended early that day. Instead of calling their mother, Molly had got a ride with a friend from the same neighborhood; they lived, at that time, in Rancho Park, south of Pico Boulevard, near the public golf course.

The house was a Spanish-style bungalow with three bedrooms. The front door was arched, with a bevelled-glass window covered by a wrought-iron grille. Down a step from the entry hall was the living room, which had a deep-blue rug with a gold border, a white crane at each corner. Martha could

see it clearly: Molly bursting into the house in her pleated lavender tennis skirt, her white collared shirt with the school's insignia in purple, a racquet in her hand and her backpack over one shoulder, calling out, "Mom! I'm home!"

The couch faced a shelving unit with a TV in the center; behind it was a narrow wooden table, which divided the room. On the table stood a tall ceramic vase filled with dried flowers, which partially obscured the couch, so Molly didn't see anyone right away. What she did see, lying on the floor beside the couch, were shoes—her mother's zebra flats and a pair of black Chuck Taylors that she recognized, because Jason wore them every day. Martha couldn't have given even a vague description of any of Molly's other boyfriends from this period, but Jason's face remained as clear in her mind as the faces of her current students: floppy blond hair, dull expression, a dusting of red acne on his forehead and cheeks.

"Jason?" Molly had said, and then she'd seen that there were two bodies on the couch. "Oh, my God," Molly said, then covered her face with her hands. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God."

According to Molly, Judy had stood up quickly, speaking in the slightly formal tone she employed when she felt defensive or insulted by someone: "We were just talking." Jason had said nothing, picking up his shoes instead of putting them on, rushing past Molly and out the door. But their mother's line—delivered after she'd adjusted her clothing, her back to Molly, then turned to see her daughter's wild expression, the accoutrements of upper-middle-class teen-age life scattered around her on the chinoiserie carpet—was enshrined in the story, like a moral. "Get over yourself," Judy said, and went upstairs.

In the context of her time, Katherine Philips was considered a secular poet. But there were several religious poems collected at the end of what scholars called the Tutin manuscript. In one of Martha's favorites, Philips contrasts the clarity that the soul will experience in Heaven with its confusion here on earth:

Here we but crawl and grope and play and cry,  
Are first our own, then others' enemy.

The poem ends with the idea of the soul being cleansed in Heaven, but it was these lines that Martha loved—not because she thought people were bad *per se* but because they behaved in such inexplicable ways, as blindly and irrationally as babies.

A student approached her after the seminar on Tuesday. Ava had once volunteered that she'd grown up in Florida, but that was all Martha knew about her background. She had light-brown skin, narrow dark eyes behind clear-framed glasses, and very straight dark hair, cut in a bob. Today, she was dressed in an outfit that wouldn't have been out of place when Martha was an undergraduate: a white sweater, brown corduroy miniskirt, and black tights with chunky shoes.

"Ava," Martha said. "What can I do for you?" The room had emptied out, so it was only Martha at the white laminate seminar table, under a buzzing fluorescent light. Outside, rain streaked down the mullioned window, through which they could see the wet, green quad.

Ava was looking at the whiteboard, where Martha had scrawled at different times during the seminar the words "contentment," "contemptus mundi," and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning—John Donne." She seemed to be thinking about where to begin.

"What didn't you like about my paper?"

The tone made Martha wonder if her question was really: What don't you like about *me*? It was only two o'clock, but the lamps in the quad had been lit because of the weather. Beyond it, a construction site was demarcated by temporary fencing; it would be a new student center, funded by a billionaire alum. A crane and two diggers sat dormant in the rain, their shadowy bulk blocking the lights of Charles Street.

"I liked your paper. You're a good writer—better than good. You're one of the best writers I've had in a while."

The girl's eyes widened behind her glasses. "Then why did I get a B?"

“Well, first . . . I don’t think of a B as a bad grade. I’ve just never been convinced by the theory that Philips engineered the unauthorized publication of her poems.”

Ava pushed her hair behind her ears. “But she was dying for people to read them. That stuff she said about not writing for the rabble—that was just being snobbish in front of her fancy friends. People do that all the time around here.”

Martha couldn’t help smiling at this reimagining of the court of Charles II as spoiled Hopkins undergraduates. “We have to remember that most British women at the time couldn’t even sign their names,” she said. “Writing poems could make a woman seem less virtuous or genteel—and that was especially risky for women like Philips, who weren’t born into the aristocracy.”

“But she still wrote them.”

“Yep.”

“So why wouldn’t she want readers?”

“Poems can be humiliating. They can reveal things that the writer didn’t intend to reveal. Maybe even things the writer is later ashamed to have thought or done! Why shouldn’t she have been able to control who saw them and when?”

Ava was playing with a jade ring, turning it on her finger, but Martha noticed her recoil slightly, an indication that the emotion in Martha’s voice was disproportionate to her subject. She was so used to students trying to convince her to change their grades that she’d hardly considered whether this one had been fair. She tried to modulate her tone.

“In Philips’s time, the word ‘private’ was often used in a negative way—to mean isolated or self-interested. Most scholars think there was no conception of a right to privacy until the early nineteenth century.”

Ava looked up. “But you don’t think so.”

“I think we all have private experiences, whether or not we memorialize them in words.”

Ava nodded. “She died so young. Only thirty-three.”

“Lives were very compressed compared with ours. Philips had read the Bible by the time she was four, married at seventeen, written all these poems and given birth to two children before she died.”

“Are you married?”

Martha was a little taken aback.

“Sorry—I mean, if that’s too personal? I just noticed you’re not wearing a ring. I don’t want to get married or have kids.”

“Do you want to go on and get a Ph.D.?”

Ava didn’t hesitate. “Nope. I want to be a poet myself.”

“Honestly, that’s probably more practical these days. Are you writing poems now?”

Ava nodded. “I publish them on Instagram. I’m sure you think that’s stupid.”

“Of course I don’t.”

“I want people to read them—that’s the point.”

“I agree with you.”

“But you’re not changing my grade?”

“Probably not,” Martha conceded. “I’m sorry.”

“O.K. I heard you were tough.” Ava smiled, then casually reached down and adjusted her tights, grabbing the excess fabric and pulling it up toward her crotch. She continued talking, although now Martha was looking at the top of her head, the smooth cap of dark hair falling forward over her face. There

was nothing sexual about what Ava was doing—it was, rather, the total lack of self-consciousness that Martha sometimes noticed in strangers in women's rest rooms, an assumed sorority that always made her deeply uncomfortable.

"My poems are totally honest. I'm not hiding anything."

"That's a good goal."

Ava straightened up. She didn't go so far as to lift her skirt, but she did push down the waistband, revealing a pale swath of midriff. "It's pointless, otherwise."

"Poetry?"

"Everything," she said, looking right at Martha. "Don't you think?"

When Martha came in, Gisela was on her hands and knees in the kitchen. She was wearing green scrubs with a white turtleneck underneath, and her cheeks were flushed in an alarming way.

"What is it?"

"I can't find Attila."

Martha let out a breath. "He's probably hiding under the bed upstairs. How's Judy?"

Gisela stood up. She looked as if she were going to say something but thought better of it.

"Is something wrong?"

"She's fine. She's in the garage, napping."

Martha put down her bag, relieved. With luck, her mother would sleep until dinnertime. She could make coffee and get some work done. Maybe she wouldn't bother with dinner, just order pizza or something for the two of them.

"I can go check on her before I go."

"Oh, that's O.K.," Martha said. "You should get out of here. I'm sure she's still sleeping. I'll go over in a bit."

Gisela didn't argue. She got her stuff together and went out the front door, which they almost never used.

"Have a good night," Martha called after her.



She sat down at the kitchen table, but, before she could even take out her laptop, she saw her mother making her way across the back yard. Judy stopped to look at something in the grass, then continued to the back door. Martha waved at her through the frosted glass, but Judy still knocked on the door, as if she were a guest.

Martha got up and opened it. Her mother looked as if she'd just got out of bed and come straight to the house without a stop in the bathroom or a glance in the mirror. Her hair was messy, and her face had a sort of creased, bewildered look.

"Is everything O.K.?"

“Well,” her mother said.

“Come in and sit down. Do you want coffee?”

Judy nodded mutely. She was wearing a sweater and a blouse with a pair of wide-legged sweatpants. Everything matched, pink and black, so the outfit must have been Gisela’s handiwork.

“Did you have a good day?”

“I left it open.”

“Left what open?”

“The file. You have to hit Save.”

“Uh-huh,” Martha said. Maybe it had been a bad day, and Gisela hadn’t wanted to say so. On the other hand, she could remember days recently when her mother was perfectly fine all morning, then woke up from her nap confused. It was as if sleep gave the disease more scope to work its dark magic.

“It’s your sister’s fault.”

“Have a seat,” she said. “I’ll make the coffee.”

“Did she call?”

Martha tried to remain patient. “She doesn’t usually call here. Because the two of you don’t get along.” That was totally within the bounds of what was acceptable, according to Lynn, the social worker. It was more upsetting for her mother to be disoriented than it was to hear unpleasant facts about her life. At least for now, Martha was supposed to tell her the truth, ideally in a neutral way.

“Because of that thing.”

“Right,” Martha said. “That caused problems between the two of you.”

“You know that never happened.”

Martha was careful to keep her voice even. “I always thought it did.”

Her mother nodded. “Everyone did. But it was all a story your sister invented, to punish me.”

“Huh.”

“I even saw her once. At the zoo.”

“The zoo?”

Her mother shook her head in frustration. Her hair was wild, bits of pink scalp showing through like evening light in a cloud. “The store.”

“You saw Molly at the store?”

Her mother sighed, as if Martha were being particularly obtuse. “Not *Molly*. The mother.”

It took Martha a moment. “Jason’s mother?”

“What’s-her-name. She was buying those purple things.”

“Grapes?”

“This was in California.”

“Figs?”

Her mother nodded enthusiastically. “I told her we had a tree at home. That was true. Do you remember?”

“Yeah, of course. We hated them, but you and Dad used to eat them for breakfast.”

“They were so good, off the tree. Just a little sour. Too soft and sweet in the store.”

“Did what’s-her-name say anything to you?”

Judy looked surprised. “Her name is Linda. She’s still alive—probably. She said, ‘How’s your daughter?’”

“That’s nice.”

“Not nice.”

“Oh. So what did you say?”

“I told her all about you. Harvard and all that. Your awards.”

“Oh.”

“*That’s nice,*” Judy said with a secret smile.

“But don’t you think she was asking about Molly?”

Her mother raised her eyebrows, but this time it was put on—a joke. “I have two daughters, don’t I?” she said, and gave Martha a little wink.

It had stopped raining when Martha stepped outside, but it was already almost dark. Was today the twelfth or the thirteenth? By the Julian calendar, used in Philips’s time, December 13th was St. Lucy’s Day, the shortest of the year.

She’d just come out for a moment because of what Judy had said about leaving something open. Not a file, certainly—it had been years since her mother had used a computer. The door to the apartment was often a problem, though, one that foretold future problems. How long could Judy be trusted to walk unsupervised from the garage to the kitchen? How long would it be before she wandered off on her own?

Martha crossed to the garage, but the door was shut properly. Most of her mother’s instincts were still there; muscle memory compensated for some of the damage. She looked back at the lighted window, which framed her mother in profile at the kitchen table. Judy was sitting up straight in her chair, the coffee cup arrested halfway between the table and her mouth, as if

something had engaged her attention. Did her thoughts run continuously in maddening loops, or did they get stuck in particular places, like the cassettes Martha had listened to as a teen-ager, snagging inside the player, spewing untidy nests of black magnetic tape?

Another strange characteristic of the disease was the way it intensified how Judy had been before: the frightening unpredictability of her speech and actions. This was an accident of her mother's personality, Martha thought. With most people, the disease hung on to the neural networks, stifling and eventually distorting their original shape. Judy's scrambling of past and future and her lack of any filter weren't so different from the way she'd always been. Martha had never been able to anticipate what would come out of her mouth; she seemed to save things up, like arrows in a quiver. It didn't matter if you were a kid with a tennis racquet or an adult in an adjustable bed. You needed to be always on your guard.

Martha was heading back to the house when she narrowly avoided tripping on something in the grass. She fumbled for the flashlight on her phone, then crouched down in disbelief. There was no obvious wound, but she could tell even before she touched the rabbit's coat. The fur was oddly erect, as if from static, and spangled with rain. Attila's side-facing prey animal's eye—blank now, like a marble—hadn't saved him. It must have been the kitchen door that Judy had left open. Attila would have hopped down the steps and into the yard. The cat would have slipped through the fence and out of his foolish collar, given in to all his ancient impulses.

It was too cloudy for stars, but a half-moon was rising low over the horizon. She would need something to wrap him in, maybe a bag to carry him past her mother. If Judy understood what was in the bag, she would be likely to ask questions, but whether she would connect the event to her own error was anyone's guess. What was certain was that she wouldn't remember that it had happened; she might not remember that Attila had existed at all.

Was it possible that a creature with Attila's particular combination of wildness and vulnerability shouldn't be loved, that loving him showed Martha's desperation? She forced herself to look at the corpse, which seemed to have grown smaller in the minutes she'd been crouching in the grass. *Stay*, she thought, but that directive couldn't be for the rabbit, who

was ineluctably gone. The grass was soaking her canvas shoes, but it seemed important not to get up just yet. This would be one of those private moments lost to history, in which Martha so passionately and unfashionably still believed. ♦

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A Critic at Large

# Beware of Sharkless Waters

Our nightmares may be haunted by circling dorsal fins—but there's something more sinister happening below the surface of the sea.

By Katherine Rundell

July 29, 2024



One of the earliest written accounts of a man being eaten by a shark is also the account of a shark in love. It appears in “History of the Wars,” an eight-book chronicle by Procopius of Caesarea Palaestinae, born around 500 C.E. Composed under the censoring eye of the Emperor Justinian, the work is mostly so dry that it would be easier to eat than to read. But among the encomiums on war is the tale of an oyster “swimming not far from the shore.” According to Procopius, “Both its valves were standing open and the pearl lay between them, a wonderful sight and notable, for no pearl in all history could be compared with it at all, either in size or in beauty.”

As the oyster swam (Procopius does not seem entirely clear on how an oyster moves, and imagines it flapping like a butterfly), a shark “of enormous size and dreadful fierceness, fell in love with this sight and

followed close upon it, leaving it neither day nor night; even when he was compelled to take thought for food, he would only look about for something eatable where he was, and when he found some bit, he would snatch it up and eat it hurriedly.” Then “he would sate himself again with the sight he loved.”

A fisherman, Procopius writes, reported the pearl’s existence to Peroz I, the King of Kings of Iran. Peroz—a man who depicted himself on three different coins with three different crowns, and surely enjoyed a glistening accessory—begged the fisherman to procure it for him. The fisherman waited, “watching for an opportunity of catching the pearl alone without its admirer.” When the shark was distracted by some edible morsel, the fisherman dived for the oyster: “He had seized it and was hastening with all speed to get out of the water, when the shark noticed him and rushed to the rescue. The fisherman saw him coming, and, when he was about to be overtaken not far from the beach, he hurled his booty with all his force upon the land, and was himself soon afterward seized and destroyed.”

How much of this is true? Almost none, of course; the only recorded relationships between sharks and oysters are gustatory rather than romantic. But it’s plausible that a fisherman tangled with a shark while seeking a pearl for the Persian king. And there are still older, less idiosyncratic accounts—Pliny the Elder, in his “Natural History,” from 77 C.E., wrote of the “dogfish,” an early term for shark, that hounded sponge divers:

The divers, however, have terrible combats with the dogfish, which attack with avidity the groin, the heels, and all the whiter parts of the body. The only means of ensuring safety, is to go boldly to meet them, and so, by taking the initiative, strike them with alarm: for, in fact, this animal is just as frightened at man, as man is at it. . . . But the moment the diver has reached the surface, the danger is much more imminent. . . . His only chance of safety is in his companions, who draw him along by a cord that is fastened under his shoulders. . . . If they do not whip him out in an instant, with the greatest possible celerity, they see him snapped asunder.

We faced sharks in the water long before Pliny. In 2021, researchers reexamined a three-thousand-year-old skeleton from a Japanese cemetery

whose bones bore nearly eight hundred marks of serrated teeth. One hand and both legs had been entirely severed from the body, most likely by a great white shark or a tiger shark; three-dimensional imaging suggested that the person, probably a fisherman, had been alive when the attack began, and had fought back. To think of a shark is, for many, to thrill with an ancient fear.

That fear has heft, and glamour, and history to it. In 1945, in what may be the worst recorded shark attack, the American naval ship U.S.S. Indianapolis was hit by a Japanese torpedo. Around nine hundred men made it into the water alive. Oceanic whitetip sharks—now critically endangered, but then more plentiful—began to gather, eating first the dead and then, eventually, coming for the living. The sharks would have been guided not just by their keen sense of smell (they can detect odor molecules in dilutions as low as ten parts per billion) but also by their lateral line, sensors along the body which alert them to infinitesimal changes in pressure hundreds of yards away—they, more than any of us, can read the pulse of the ocean. They are guided, too, as Daniel C. Abel notes in his lively new book, “[Sharkpedia](#)” (Princeton), by their ampullae of Lorenzini, receptors that pick up those electric fields which all animals emit.

For four days, the men waited in the water to be rescued. The Americans had intercepted a Japanese message recording the sinking of the ship but had discounted it as a bid to trick them into an ambush. Many men died of thirst. One opened a can of Spam, only to find the sharks immediately circling. When the sailors were finally rescued, just over three hundred were alive; the number of the dead who had been killed by sharks has been estimated as somewhere between a few dozen and as many as a hundred and fifty. These are the stories we are brought up on: of open water, gaping jaws, circling fins. Among those who loathe sharks is the [forty-fifth President of the United States](#). In 2013, he tweeted, “Sharks are last on my list - other than perhaps the losers and haters of the World!”

And yet: when you go to the ocean this summer, you are not going to be eaten by a shark. We kill a hundred million sharks annually. They kill, in unprovoked attacks (those in which the victim was not attempting to feed or touch the shark), between five and ten of us globally. There are a further sixty-odd nonfatal unprovoked attacks reported each year. You are significantly more likely to be bitten by a person in Manhattan than you are

to be bitten by a shark anywhere off the North American coast. In the same way that you are not going to win the lottery or become globally famous for your good looks and charm, you are not going to be attacked by a shark. They are not especially attracted to human blood and do not crave human flesh. Sharks—unlike, for instance, crows—never develop vendettas. In comparison, very conservatively, snakes kill eighty thousand people a year, crocodiles a thousand, hippopotamuses five hundred, and lions two hundred. You are more likely to die from constipation, tornadoes, or lawnmowers. Yet no frisson of terror goes through us when we walk past the lawn-care section at Home Depot.

What sharks really deserve, in strictly rational terms, is our unstinting, passionate, at-a-respectful-distance awe. There are more than five hundred shark species, ranging in size from the whale shark, the ocean's largest fish, which can grow more than twelve metres in length, to the dwarf lanternshark, which is small enough to rest in your hand. Some swim their entire lives without ceasing: living machines of perpetual motion. Their beauties and complexities are legion; the kitefin shark, one of the undersung ravishments of the sea, is bioluminescent—six feet of glowing light. Jasmin Graham, a marine biologist and the author of the new memoir "[Sharks Don't Sink](#)" (Pantheon), writes warmly of the sharks that she has loved—sand tiger sharks, in particular, "because their teeth make them look like they are desperately in need of an orthodontist." The zebra shark transforms in the course of its life, from dark with light stripes in its youth to leopardlike spots in adulthood. The porbeagle, a large and graceful warm-blooded shark, has been observed playfully chasing peers, rolling in the water, and nudging kelp. The epaulette shark has evolved to "walk" on land, moving from tidal pools back into the ocean, using its fins as putative legs. The hammerhead shark sees the underwater world in ways we never could, with three-hundred-and-sixty-degree vision; the "hammer," or cephalofoil, of one hammerhead species, the endangered winghead shark, can be half the length of its entire body, gently swept back like two side-view mirrors on a classic car. Its proportions are proof, if we needed it, of evolution's insistence on the various, the strange, the virtuosically particular.

Even the ugly sharks are beautiful. Goblin sharks are a living fossil, the final members of the family Mitsukurinidae—a lineage that stretches back more than a hundred million years. Of all the sharks, they most look their age.

Their prominent snouts protrude in a furious sneer, and their teeth are long and pinlike. But even they have their moments of glamour; they can be a shocking pink—fairy-tale monsters, bedecked in silk.

Sharks are marvels of design. Some can, at a loose calculation, work through thirty thousand teeth in their lifetime, each one pushing the next out like a factory belt so that they remain sharp and ready. The whale shark, always a fish of extremes, has more than three hundred rows of tiny teeth. Others, like the dainty cookiecutter shark, eat their lower dental plate whole. Shark skin, too, is covered with dermal denticles—tiny teeth, which keep away the barnacles that plague whales. Stroke a shark the wrong way and you get “shark burn.” (Better not to stroke one at all.) We have yet to confirm any mechanism by which sharks can deliberately make sound; rather, they communicate by head, mouth, and tail movements, by the position of their body in the water, and by the dipping of their pectoral fins. Fin biting is for courtship, arched backs for intimidation.

The great white is perhaps the most magisterial. Clever and inquisitive, with seven rows of teeth, great whites are one of only a few species of sharks to engage in “spyhopping”—putting their heads above the water’s surface to seek out prey or get a better look at their surroundings. To salute the great white is to salute grandeur matched to intricacy married to power. But my vote for the finest shark—for the one that, if all living things had their due, would merit a yearly parade for the staggering fact of its existence—is also among the ugliest: the Greenland shark. It is the world’s longest-living vertebrate, but only recently did we discover the extent of its longevity. In 2008, a Danish physicist, Jan Heinemeier, devised a way to test lens crystallines found in the eye for carbon 14, and thereby establish, very roughly, the owner’s age. Later, he was asked to test Greenland sharks. The largest tested, a sixteen-foot female, was found to be between two hundred and seventy-two years old and five hundred and twelve years old. Because size is considered a strong indicator of age, and because there are records of twenty-four-foot-long Greenland sharks, it’s very possible that there are sharks, deep in the black depths of our oceans, that are older still. There is likely a shark living today that swam our seas as Shakespeare was writing out the ingredients for his three witches’ portent potion: “scale of dragon, tooth of wolf, witches mummy, maw and gulf, of the ravin’d salt-sea shark.” Its parents would have been old enough to have lived alongside Dante, its

great-great-grandparents perhaps contemporaries of Procopius, as he wrote his shark-and-pearl romance. Greenland sharks have swum, slow and cold and steady, for thousands of years, as the world aboveground has burned, rebuilt, and burned again.

As a family, sharks are truly ancient: their ancestors in the fossil record, appearing four hundred and fifty million years ago, precede the existence of trees. Their fossilized teeth, Daniel C. Abel notes, were believed to be the stone tongues of dragons. They have lived through five major extinction events, including the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. But they may not survive us. Of the five hundred or so species of shark, more than a quarter are threatened with extinction, owing to overfishing and climate change. Jasmin Graham reports pulling from the water sharks with gunshot wounds, sharks that had been beaten with clubs. The so-called lost shark (*Carcharhinus obsoletus*), a species of requiem shark, has not been seen since 1934, and is probably extinct: three recorded specimens, from Borneo, Thailand, and Vietnam, all more than eighty years old, are small, sweet-faced, and large-eyed. They're roughly sixteen inches long, but the fact that something that once existed in the universe should be discarded, irreversibly, because of our uncareful encroachments—that is large enough.

We have always craved them. Shark teeth have been found in caves in Norway, left over from Stone Age meals. [Neanderthals](#) living in the cave of Figueira Brava, in Portugal, ate shark alongside crab and mussels a hundred thousand years ago. But they did not hunt then as we hunt now. Our hunger, since the Second World War, has become rapacious. The hundred million we are estimated to kill may be an undercount: they are fished for shark-fin soup, for shark-liver oil, for cartilage to be transformed into neat little capsules of supplements. Often, despite finning laws, fishermen slice a fin from a still living shark and drop the creature back into the water, to bleed to a slow and painful death on the ocean floor. Worse, climate change has rendered some waters uninhabitable. Warmer waters cause sharks' metabolisms to quicken, demanding greater expenditure of energy, and the animals suppress reproduction to compensate. Others migrate, abandoning their former homes—and, without sharks to act as apex predators, entire ecosystems will be thrown into chaos. An ocean without sharks is a terrifying prospect.

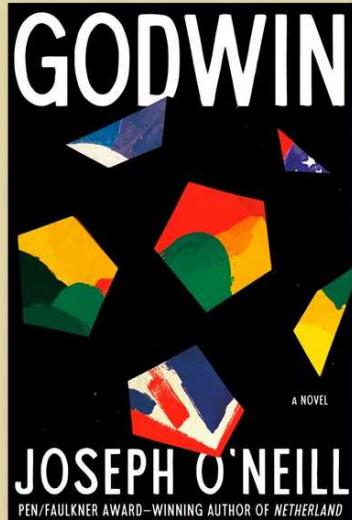
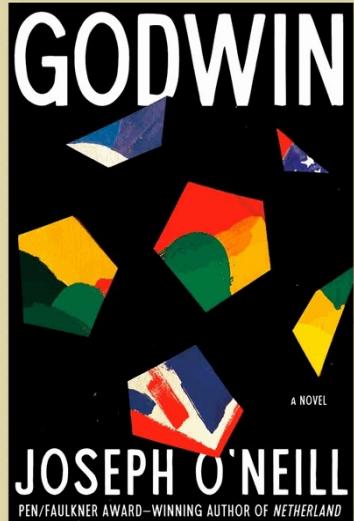
There is no such thing as shark-infested waters, in the same way that there is no such thing as a child-infested school. You cannot infest your own home. Fear is, of course, a great good. It can be a form of wisdom. But if we could reorient the sentiment—and direct it, for instance, toward those humans whose vested interests lie in persuading us to acquiesce in the living world's destruction—we would fare better. Beware an ExxonMobil-infested State Department; beware a fossil-fuel-infested politics. These are dark times, and there are many things to fear. But none of them are found swimming under a vast sky as the waters around us warm and empty. ♦

Books

# Briefly Noted

“Godwin,” “Fire Exit,” “Private Revolutions,” and “Thom Gunn.”

July 29, 2024

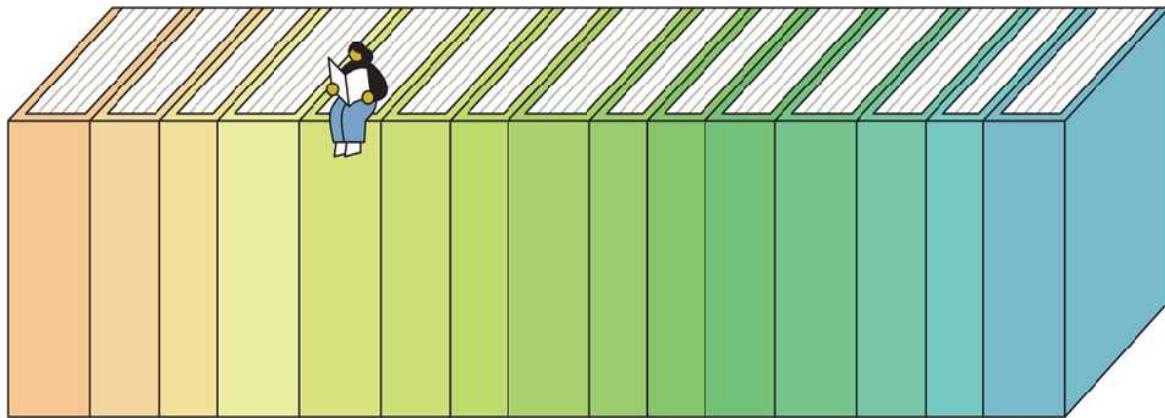


**Godwin**, by Joseph O'Neill (*Pantheon*). Mark Wolfe, the protagonist of this intricately structured novel, is a technical writer in Pittsburgh going through an emotionally turbulent spell. Amid upheaval in his workplace, Wolfe is lured by his English half brother—an aspiring soccer agent who is “a tornado of unreliability”—into a quest to locate a prodigiously talented young African player named Godwin before a rival does. Their effort leads them from England to France to Benin, and, ultimately, back to the U.S. Ruminative, digressive, and epigrammatic, O’Neill’s novel is both a hilarious picaresque and a series of meditations on family, ambition, colonialism, and the history of soccer. “Football is not predictable,” one character observes. “Life is not predictable.” Neither is this novel.

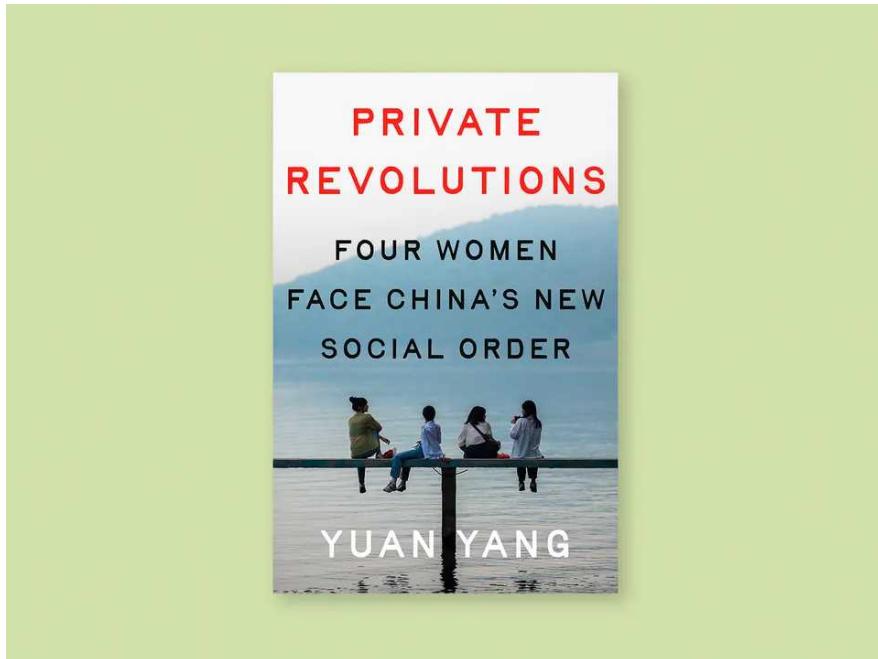


**Fire Exit**, by Morgan Talty (*Tin House*). This striking début novel of cultural inheritance and painful family bonds follows a man living across the river from Maine’s Penobscot reservation, where he was raised by his white mother and Native stepfather, and where he lived until he was effectively evicted by a law that tied residency to official tribal status. The man spends his days observing his estranged daughter, who was the result of an unexpected pregnancy, and whose mother, a Penobscot woman, brought her to the reservation. Taking care of his own aging mother, he unearths details he hadn’t known about his past, which he aches to share with his daughter, believing that they belong to her, too.

# What We're Reading

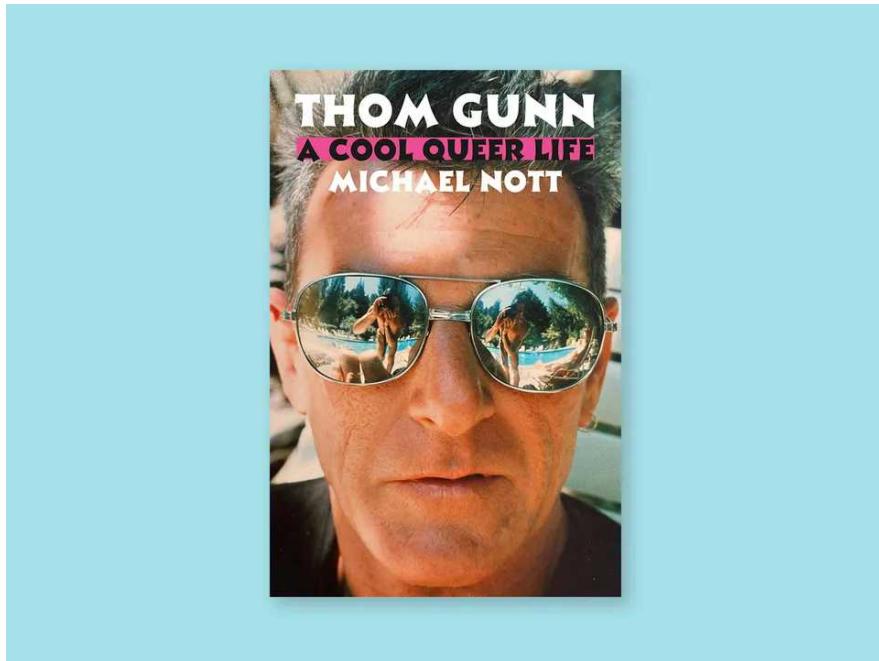


*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



**Private Revolutions**, by Yuan Yang (*Viking*). Four Chinese millennials are the protagonists of this journalistic chronicle, which attempts to portray the

ways in which China's economic and social transformations of the past thirty years manifest on a personal scale. Yuan's subjects, all women, include the founder of a successful education business in Beijing, an urban transplant whose mother was killed in an accident while working in a coal mine far from home, and two labor organizers: one who pursued that path after working in factories, another after obtaining a sociology degree. Yuan, a former Beijing correspondent for the *Financial Times* who is now a British Labour M.P., captures each woman's life as she contends with obstacles—from stolen wages to discouraging parents—and embraces new freedoms.



**Thom Gunn**, by Michael Nott (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Diaries, letters, and interviews are assembled in this profoundly intimate biography, which traces the life of a revelatory gay poet. Nott follows Gunn from his childhood in London to places such as Cambridge, San Antonio, and San Francisco, as he struggles with addiction and loses loved ones to AIDS. In himself, Gunn sees “a desire for a consistent and unbrutal strength” and “various complicated different kinds of cowardice,” but also “a readiness to enjoy my experience.” Most poignant is Nott’s treatment of Gunn’s loves, both shallow and deep, and the men who inspired much of his verse: “Nothing is, or will ever be, / Mine, I suppose. No one can hold a heart, / But what we hold in trust / We do hold, even apart.”

# How Christian Fundamentalism Was Born Again

Nearly a century ago, a single trial seemed to shatter the movement's place in America. It's returned in a new form—but for old reasons.

By Michael Luo

July 29, 2024



It was an age of wonder. Young, free-spirited women in feathery dresses smoked in jazz clubs. Families gathered around big radio cabinets in their living rooms. The marvel of mass production enabled millions of automobiles to roll off assembly lines each year. In the nineteen-twenties, modernity was transforming America, ushering in prosperity, polyglot metropolises, and new norms around gender and sexuality. Perhaps most significantly, doubt was creeping into the citadel of religion. A crisis of belief, brought on by social and technological change, and by growing acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution, threatened Protestant Christianity, the dominant American creed. Fierce fights over the authority of Scripture divided denominations. A backlash was inevitable. The Ku

Klux Klan experienced a renaissance, expanding beyond the rural South and into Northern cities, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest, under the banner of white Protestantism. A loose coalition of Protestant ministers began to style themselves as “fundamentalists”—defenders of Christian orthodoxy and foes of modernism. Their aim was to return the nation to God.

On January 21, 1925, Representative John Washington Butler, a forty-nine-year-old farmer and clerk for a circle of churches whose members called themselves “primitive Baptists,” introduced a bill in the Tennessee legislature that he had written out by hand, in front of his fireplace. The Butler Act, as it came to be known, was less than two hundred words long. It forbade educators to teach “any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” Butler believed evolutionary theory to be dangerous—a threat to the “Christian life of our homes.” The bill sailed through the legislature and was signed into law on March 21st, by Governor Austin Peay.

An official at a nascent organization in New York called the American Civil Liberties Union flagged the law for her boss, and soon a pair of newspapers in Tennessee reported that the organization was seeking a teacher to challenge the statute in court. One of the papers was read by George W. Rappleyea, the manager of the Cumberland Coal and Iron Company, in Dayton, an isolated town in the eastern part of the state, known for its lush strawberry fields. Dayton had around two thousand people. There were two drugstores, two blacksmith shops, and a pool hall; farmers still tied up their horses at the hitching rail on Market Street. Rappleyea was a Methodist Sunday-school teacher, but he didn’t believe that evolution contradicted his faith. He connected the A.C.L.U. with John Thomas Scopes, a slender, reserved graduate of the University of Kentucky. Scopes had recently arrived in Dayton to teach math, physics, and chemistry, and to coach the football team, but he also briefly taught biology, using a state-approved textbook that included a short passage on evolution. A deputy sheriff arrested Scopes on a misdemeanor charge of violating the Butler Act. His trial was set for the summer of 1925.

The international spectacle that followed is the subject of “Keeping the Faith” (Random House), a briskly told chronicle by Brenda Wineapple, who has a knack for producing popular histories with contemporary resonance. (Her previous book, “The Impeachers,” published in 2019, during the Trump Administration, was on the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson.) In the preface to “Keeping the Faith,” Wineapple notes the modern-day parallels to the Scopes “monkey trial,” as it was famously dubbed. “Democracy was on trial in Dayton,” Wineapple writes. “As it would be again in our time: teachers being told what or how to teach; science regarded as an out-of-control, godless shibboleth; books tossed out of schools and libraries; loyalty oaths; and white supremacists promising that a revitalized white Protestant America would lead its citizens out of the slough of moral and spiritual decay to rise again, regardless of what or whose rights and freedoms might be trampled.” In recent weeks, conflagrations over the place of religion in American civic life have spread. On June 19th, Louisiana enacted a law that mandated the display of the Ten Commandments in its schools. A week later, Oklahoma’s state school superintendent issued a memo requiring that the “Bible, which includes the Ten Commandments,” be incorporated into curricula, effective immediately.

The central protagonists of “Keeping the Faith” are Clarence Darrow, the legendary trial lawyer and self-described agnostic who helped defend Scopes, and William Jennings Bryan, a golden-tongued, thrice-failed Democratic Presidential candidate who was fundamentalism’s flag-bearer. Bryan, in particular, makes for an interesting character study when examined through the prism of today’s culture wars. He was a sixty-five-year-old progressive Democrat who inveighed against wealth inequality, advocated for women’s suffrage, and championed, as Wineapple writes, “the poor, the plain, and anyone left out of an increasingly corporate America.” (His nickname was the Great Commoner.) He was a fervent believer in Christianity’s ability to spur people to generosity and compassion. But he also demonstrated the racism that has long been embedded in the American church, once stating that social equality would “throw the white and the black races into greater antagonism and conflict.” He joined the prosecution because he felt that the crusade against “apeism” was vital to protecting young minds. “We cannot afford to have a system of education that destroys the religious faith of seventy-five per cent of our children,” he said.



The prevailing image of the Scopes trial is that of a farcical circus, with benighted fundamentalists descending upon Dayton and hanging their banners—“Read Your Bible,” “Where Will You Spend Eternity?”—all over town. Wineapple’s rendering of evolution’s opposers, however, is notably empathetic. She portrays Bryan as a flawed but earnest defender of democracy, intent on protecting the rights of the states, even if he “wanted to make people believe what he believed, by decree if necessary.” Scopes’s supposedly liberal-minded supporters, Wineapple points out, were closed off in their own way. In their magazine articles and newspaper editorials, these “self-appointed arbiters of culture” sneered at their Bible-thumping opponents. “The two poles did not meet,” Wineapple writes. “Prejudice encountered prejudice; intolerance, intolerance.”

The climactic moment of the trial arrived on a Monday afternoon, July 20th, when Scopes’s lawyers announced, “The defense desires to call Mr. Bryan as a witness.” It was an audacious maneuver. Darrow’s plan was to put the views of a “Bible expert,” as Bryan described himself, to the test under oath. The confrontation took place in the oppressive summer heat; earlier in the day, the judge had moved the proceedings onto the courthouse lawn to accommodate the throngs of spectators. Bryan, who sported a bow tie, sat in a wooden chair on a makeshift platform, fanning himself to keep cool.

Darrow, slightly stooped but still ferocious at sixty-eight, faced him in shirtsleeves and suspenders.

Darrow opened by asking Bryan about his credentials as a Bible scholar. Bryan said that he'd been studying the Bible for fifty years, and that the text "should be accepted as it is given." He hastened to point out, however, that there were certain passages that were not meant to be taken literally. "For instance," he said, "'Ye are the salt of the earth,' I would not insist that man was actually salt, or that he had flesh of salt, but it is used in the sense of salt as saving God's people."

With that, Bryan had walked into a trap. Darrow commenced a series of hypotheticals, first querying Bryan about the story of Jonah, who is swallowed by a big fish, in the Old Testament. "How do you literally interpret that?" Darrow asked. Bryan explained that he believed "in a God who can make a whale and can make a man and make both do what He pleases." Darrow pressed as to whether this meant that the "fish was made especially to swallow a man or not." Bryan suggested that it was a miracle: "When you get beyond what man can do, you get within the realm of miracles; and it is just as easy to believe the miracle of Jonah as any other miracle in the Bible." Darrow then turned to the passage where Joshua implores God to make the sun stand still, so that his army can have more daylight to vanquish the Amorites. Darrow asked Bryan if he believed this. Bryan affirmed that he did.

Slowly but surely, Darrow was guiding his witness into a verbal cul-de-sac. He asked Bryan whether he believed that the sun went around the earth at that time. Here, Bryan demurred: "No, I believe that the earth goes around the sun." Had he ever considered what would happen if the earth stood still? "Don't you know that it would become a molten mass?" Darrow said. Bryan responded that he had never considered this, because God would have taken care of whatever needed to happen. "I have been too busy on things that I thought were of more importance than that," he said. Darrow bore down on Bryan about the Biblical stories of Noah and the Flood and the Tower of Babel. Finally, he turned to the creation account in Genesis and asked if Bryan believed that the earth was created in six literal days. Bryan interjected, "Not six days of twenty-four hours"—a response that prompted

a few gasps from the lawn. Darrow was pleased now: “Doesn’t it say so?” Bryan said, “No.”

Tom Stewart, one of the prosecutors, sprang to his feet. “What is the purpose of this examination?” he said. Bryan snarled that the only purpose was to “cast ridicule on everybody who believes in the Bible.” He was sweating profusely. Darrow was livid as well. “We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States and you know it,” he said. Bryan proclaimed that he was only trying to “protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States.” He was standing and screaming. “I want the papers to know I am not afraid to get on the stand in front of him and let him do his worst,” he continued. He explained that the six days of creation could refer to “periods,” rather than to literal twenty-four-hour days. (The belief was not uncommon among evolution’s critics.)

By the time the judge adjourned the court, Bryan was disconsolate. The reviews of his performance were brutal; he had come across as intellectually blinkered, hysterical. The following day, however, he got a surprise reprieve. The judge ruled that his testimony was immaterial and struck it from the record. The jury needed only nine minutes to pronounce Scopes guilty. He was fined a hundred dollars for his transgression. Five days later, Bryan took an afternoon nap and never woke up, apparently suffering a stroke. Thousands tuned in to the radio broadcast of his funeral, at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, in Washington, D.C. “God aimed at Darrow, missed him, and hit Bryan,” the journalist H. L. Mencken wrote.

A year and a half later, the Supreme Court of Tennessee set aside Scopes’s conviction on a technicality but upheld the Butler Act’s constitutionality. In its decision, the court asserted that Scopes was an employee of the state and, therefore, subject to its terms of employment; the court also insisted that the law “only *forbids* the teaching of evolution,” and that “nothing contrary to that theory is required to be taught.” As a result, the court said, the law imposed no religious preference upon public-school students. It was not until four decades later, in the spring of 1967, that state lawmakers finally repealed the Butler Act. The following year, the Supreme Court of the United States invalidated an anti-evolution statute in Arkansas that dated back to the Scopes era, ruling that the First Amendment “mandates

government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.”

The humiliation of the Scopes trial led to the implosion of the fundamentalist coalition. Moderate Protestant figures, even those who still held deeply conservative theological beliefs, were no longer willing to be associated with the movement. It seemed on its way to becoming a historical curiosity—a laughingstock born of a particular period of upheaval. The opposite turned out to be true. Wineapple treats fundamentalism’s fate after the Scopes trial only glancingly, noting that it “would resurface, over and over, during that century and decidedly during the next.” But the story of fundamentalism’s near-demise, hibernation, and eventual rebirth as a revanchist, militant political force partly underpins the cultural conflict that threatens American democracy today.



In 2006, the historian George Marsden issued an updated edition of his classic history “Fundamentalism and American Culture” (first published in 1980), which included a new essay on the birth of the religious right and its roots in the fundamentalism of the nineteen-twenties. Marsden describes how the earlier movement was steeped in the revivalist tradition of American Christianity, which prioritized evangelism and personal piety. By the nineteen-fifties, a “new evangelical” movement had emerged, led by

Billy Graham and other prominent figures such as Harold Ockenga, the pastor of the Congregationalist Park Street Church, in Boston, and Carl F. H. Henry, a theologian at Fuller Theological Seminary, outside Los Angeles. These men wanted to forge a more intellectually respectable, culturally engaged movement than their fundamentalist forebears had, one that would allow them to regain a foothold in American life. They succeeded, attracting believers from a broad spectrum of theological and even political commitments—mainline Protestants, Pentecostals, Reformed, and others. The largest contingent, however, comprised those whose religious lineages could be traced directly back to fundamentalism. A separatist fringe of conservative Protestants also continued to self-identify as fundamentalists, building their own institutions in defiance of Graham and the broader evangelical movement. Marsden's conclusion is that the religious right, which emerged in the aftermath of the cultural turbulence of the sixties and early seventies, ultimately drew upon both these "separatist fundamentalists" and evangelicals who were "fundamentalistic" in their outlook.

In many ways, today's America resembles the tumultuous one in which the Scopes trial unfolded. The religious landscape is, once again, undergoing precipitous change: according to the Pew Research Center, the number of Americans who identify as Christian plunged from nine out of ten, in the early nineties, to less than two-thirds, in 2020. Once again, norms around gender and sexuality are rapidly evolving. A notable difference is that liberal mainline Protestant denominations have dwindled in number and influence. The modernist threat within the church—theological liberalism—has largely faded as a concern among fundamentalist Christians. Instead, their energies and alarm have shifted almost entirely to the political realm. Marsden attributes this both to the resourcefulness of evangelical leaders, who realized that political influence could bolster their movement, and to the shrewdness of Republican politicians, who saw a voting bloc that could be co-opted for their own purposes.

In recent years, a raft of books have been published by authors decrying the evangelical movement's alliance with right-wing politics, its vulnerability to racism, its unseemly blending of God and country, and particularly its obeisance to Donald Trump. Many of these books are by people who consider themselves to be part of that movement; if evangelicals are like sheep, theirs is the bleating from the edge of the flock. In "Losing Our

Religion” (2023), Russell Moore, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, who, in 2021, resigned as the head of the public-policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, argues that the current exodus from American churches is different from the crisis of belief in the nineteen-twenties. “We see now young evangelicals walking away from evangelicalism not because they do not believe what the church teaches, but because they believe the *church itself* does not believe what the church teaches,” he writes.

Moore and other dismayed evangelicals, including David French, a columnist for the *Times*, and Curtis Chang, the executive director of a Christian nonprofit, recently launched a video course called “The After Party: Toward Better Christian Politics.” An accompanying book, written by Chang and Nancy French, who is married to David and has ghostwritten for conservative politicians, sets out the course’s animating idea: encouraging evangelicals to be less preoccupied with the *what* of politics and more concerned with the *how*, focussing on spiritual values such as love, forgiveness, and mercy—with a particular emphasis on hope and humility. This “Big Shift,” Chang and French write, is necessary to “prevent a broader catastrophic loss of our democracy.”

The book collects stories from the organizers of “The After Party” about their own journeys of conscience in politics. David French is a former litigator for Christian conservative causes. He admits that he was a “combatant” in the culture wars; in 2007, he spoke at a conservative convention and identified “far-Left radicals at home and jihadists abroad” as the two greatest threats facing America. Later that year, French deployed to Iraq as a military lawyer. One of his roommates was a liberal Mexican American Army captain, who told French he belonged to “the church of the Hubble telescope,” because he believed only in what he could see. The two men spent hours sparring like Darrow and Bryan, debating religion, politics, and other subjects. “We didn’t change each other,” French says. “He didn’t become like me. I didn’t become like him. But he was my first friend in Iraq.” French says that his roommate helped him begin to see his political opponents as neighbors. Today, he remains anti-abortion, but he’s also a prominent Never Trump Republican, and has been outspoken about racial disparities in policing. “Time and again, the more I learned, the more I regretted my previous combativeness,” he says. “I was trying hard to win arguments, when I now realize I wasn’t even right.”

The authors of “The After Party” remind believers that “reconciliation to God inherently leads to reconciliation with others.” They encourage Christians to draw on the resources of their faith to model a more relational, less tribal approach to politics. It’s a stirring admonition, but Wineapple’s observation about the tragedy of the Scopes trial is that both sides failed to see the other. The “self-appointed arbiters of culture” can seem just as contemptuous of faith as they were a century ago, even as their own beliefs become an altar unto themselves. The divide may very well be unbridgeable, but Marsden suggests that both sides keep in mind the wide angle of history and what it reveals—that “cultural conflicts are not simply products of the machinations of the warped minds of one’s opponents, but rather reflect deeply embedded cultural patterns.” A clear-eyed explanation of fundamentalism’s resilience might include a recognition from nonbelievers that there is something wanting in the secular consensus, a lacuna that scientific, technological, and social progress has failed to address. The values of humility and hope could benefit us all. ♦

## Musical Events

# An Opera About John Singer Sargent and a Male Model

Damien Geter’s “American Apollo,” at Des Moines Metro Opera, along with revivals of Debussy and Strauss.

By Alex Ross

July 29, 2024



Until the mid-nineteenth century, opera was wedded to rhythm and rhyme. Librettists supplied composers with heaps of verse for arias and other vocal numbers, alongside chunks of prose recitative that allowed for interstitial exposition. The convention began to break down with Wagner, who expanded recitative to epic proportions. In 1867, the Russian composer Alexander Dargomyzhsky took a further step, setting Pushkin’s blank-verse play “The Stone Guest” almost verbatim. Mussorgsky followed with “Boris Godunov,” a Pushkin adaptation on a monumental scale. Thus arose a genre that became known as *Literaturoper*, because nothing officially exists until it is named in German. Composers did not need librettists at all; they could make direct use of plays and other literary properties. Two formidable prose

operas emerged just after 1900: Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande," a condensation of the play by Maurice Maeterlinck; and Strauss's "Salome," after the decadent drama by Oscar Wilde. This summer, Des Moines Metro Opera, one of America's boldest smaller companies, staged those two works side by side, sending psychic shivers into the hot summer night.

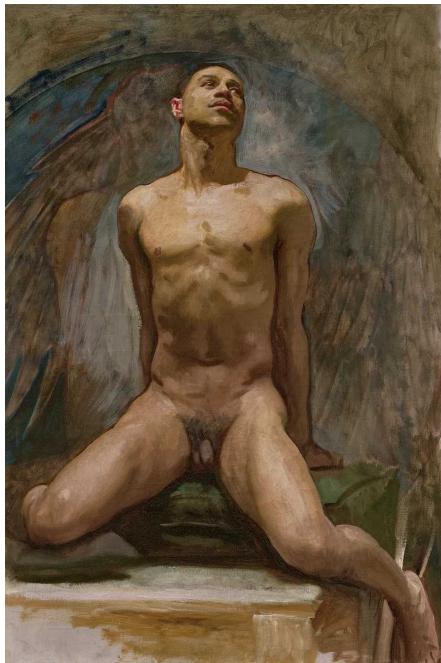
*Literaturop* rests on the assumption that opera suffers from excess artifice and that modern theatrical speech supplies a corrective. The justification was also musical: intensifying experiments in harmony and rhythm called for less form-bound texts. Debussy's otherworldly sonorities, drifting away from the tonal system, uncannily matched Maeterlinck's Symbolist prose. Mélisande's entrance line—"Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!"—is a brittle recoil from an unwanted approach. Strauss, for his part, favored lunging melodic lines and stabbing dissonances. When the unhinged Herod enters mid-rant—"Where is Salome? Where is the Princess? Why did she not return to the banquet as I commanded her? Ah! There she is!"—notes splatter all around him, like wine spilling from his cup. In both cases, the composer releases the hidden music of the text.

Des Moines Metro Opera, which was founded in 1973, can't rival Salzburg or Aix-en-Provence in scenic luxury. Yet musical values by no means suffer; casts are drawn from the upper ranks of younger American singers. And the company's home venue—the Blank Performing Arts Center, on the campus of Simpson College, in Indianola—fosters unusual intimacy. The auditorium seats fewer than five hundred people, in an amphitheatre arrangement. The orchestra plays in a semi-enclosed pit, with the stage extending around it. The singers almost brush against those sitting in the front row. They can project without great effort and can be easily heard even when they have their backs turned. All of this enables conversational directness. Opera comes as close to straight theatre as I've seen it.

The snugness of the room worked especially well for "Pelléas," a score that relies on suggestion, evasion, and ellipsis. The characters are at once archetypes and ciphers: the mysteriously meandering Mélisande; her grim groom, Golaud; and Golaud's fatally solicitous half brother, Pelléas. The Des Moines production, directed by Chas Rader-Shieber, opted for a shadowy Victorian vibe, with surrealist touches. Wall panels and wardrobe doors opened to reveal, variously, a garden, a snowdrift, and a deer carcass

hanging on a gambrel. The final tableau is bleakly potent: most everyone falls dead, and Golaud’s young son, Yniold, paces in circles, holding Mélisande’s newborn child.

What mattered most was the immediacy of the singing and the acting. The excellent young American bass-baritone Brandon Cedel, making his role début as Golaud, began tentatively, missing opportunities for nuance and color. A line like “I will never be able to find my way out of this forest” needs a twinge of fear. But as Golaud’s rage at Pelléas deepened Cedel applied vocal force by degrees, becoming uncomfortably menacing by the end. The agile baritone Edward Nelson, by contrast, was skittery, almost puckish, as Pelléas—he portrayed a charmer who has no awareness of the consequences of his charm. Sydney Mancasola, as Mélisande, brought to bear a luminous soprano and a grounded conception of the character; in place of a vacant damsel, she evoked a flesh-and-blood woman who has made a wrong turn into a damaged world. Matt Boehler was an imposing Arkel, Catherine Martin an affecting Geneviève. Derrick Inouye conducted with subtle authority. Emily Bieker’s flute solos beguiled the ears.



Strauss called “Salome” a “scherzo with a fatal conclusion.” Alison Pogorelc, who directed the Des Moines staging, and Steven Kemp and Jacob Climer, who designed the sets and costumes, seemed to have comedy

uppermost in mind: this was a Hollywood Biblical epic gone to seed, with beefy soldiers outfitted in miniskirts and Herod sporting a variation on a Burger King crown. Chad Shelton wallowed happily in that high-camp role, while Norman Garrett generated countervailing nobility as Jochanaan. Sara Gartland, as the necrophiliac princess, gyrated fetchingly while delivering her taxing part in nimble, focussed fashion. The opera was heard in Strauss's reduced orchestration; under David Neely's baton, the musicians still made a splendid racket. As Gartland cradled a realistic replica of Jochanaan's severed head, I wondered whether the experience was *too* intimate. But a proper "Salome" should make the stomach churn a little.

The Des Moines season also featured a world première: Damien Geter's "American Apollo," about John Singer Sargent's putative affair with Thomas Eugene McKeller, the statuesque Black Bostonian who became one of the painter's favorite models. This is an opera of a more traditional type: the libretto, by Lila Palmer, mixes poetry and prose. But it includes enough documentary material that it seems as much a work of observation as one of invention. If it isn't *Literaturoper*, it's *Künstleroper*—scenes from the lives of artists and their subjects.

Sargent's sexuality remains a mystery. He obviously took pleasure in looking at naked male bodies; whether he ever went beyond looking is unknowable. Decades later, one of his models, Anton Kamp, described how Sargent shied away from physical contact when Kamp offered him a massage. (*Ne me touchez pas!*) "American Apollo" presents a fantasy of what might have been—perhaps Sargent's own fantasy. At the same time, it fashions a complex portrait of McKeller, who, as a part-time contortionist, submits willingly to Sargent's gaze. ("I've done worse," he comments to a friend.) What bothers him is that Sargent erases his Blackness, inserting his body into whitewashed mythological tableaux. Having more or less initiated a relationship, McKeller is resentful of Sargent's constant travelling. Deciding that he needs a more settled life, he takes a job at the post office, as the real McKeller did. After the painter's death, he gazes in wonder at the one truthful portrait that Sargent made of him, naked and unafraid.

Geter, himself a bass-baritone, writes beautifully for voices and elegantly for orchestra. His "Apollo" score fuses Coplandesque Americana, ostinato-driven minimalism, and languid blues. A couple of scenes pivot around "À

*Chloris*,” the neo-Baroque chanson by Reynaldo Hahn, Proust’s sometime lover. Instead of trying to supercharge a static plot, Geter creates a glistening atmosphere of expectation and yearning. The fast-rising baritone Justin Austin gave a velvet-voiced, intensely charismatic performance as McKeller. The veteran tenor William Burden conveyed the nervous tensions behind Sargent’s suave exterior. Slyly negotiating between the lovers is the mighty arts patron Isabella Stewart Gardner, whom Mary Dunleavy, a mainstay of American opera for more than three decades, embodied with vocal agility and actorly finesse. Shaun Patrick Tubbs directed a production rich in Sargentine images.

The radiantly eccentric Gardner tied the weekend’s operas together: she adored Wagner, appreciated Debussy and Strauss, and believed in the fin-de-siècle religion of art. Sargent, she tells a skeptical McKeller, confers immortality: “In his eyes you’ll live forever.” A harmonic question mark at the end of the opera leaves the ethics of that transaction unresolved. ♦

The Theatre

# Politics and “The Real” at the Festival d’Avignon

A series of international productions held power to account at a fraught moment.

By Helen Shaw

July 25, 2024



A few nights before the French took their final vote in this summer’s snap parliamentary election, Tiago Rodrigues, the director of the Festival d’Avignon, staged an all-night, ad-hoc rally against the far right in the Cour d’Honneur. This dramatic courtyard in the center of the Palais des Papes has been the festival’s marquee venue since its start, in 1947; audiences enter a steep stone box, open to the sky, with a massive performance area backed by one looming wall of the papal palace. Rodrigues, a Portuguese director, took the reins at the festival two years ago, and his “vision of the stage,” he has said, is a mixture of “the poetical, the political, and the personal.” This year, as the election approached, he declared that, if the nationalists took power, Avignon would become a “festival of resistance.”

The same day I landed in France, on July 7th, that particular electoral storm turned. And yet, despite the lulling heat of a Provençal summer, a sense of barely concealed combat still permeated the festival. (For one thing, you could spot, among the thousands of theatre bills and bulletins pinned around town, a few torn Marine Le Pen posters.) Avignon's beauty has a tranquilizing effect: the old city's medieval ramparts kept the (literal) traffic of the modern world at bay, and my gaze often floated up above the crowds to the linen-pale limestone buildings, drowsy behind wooden shutters. But even ten-foot-thick walls couldn't block out the sound of a continuing, existential parry and thrust. In many productions, you could still hear the clash of right against left, artists against critics, brutal institutions against the vulnerable people they supposedly protect.

Before I arrived, the Spanish artist Angélica Liddell had used her performance of "Dämon" in the Cour d'Honneur to attack specific journalists in the audience—she mocked their criticism of her past works and then mooned them. Elsewhere, that kind of brawling dramatic force was directed at larger authorities. I came across Rodrigues himself at his own production, "Hécube, Pas Hécube," in which a woman named Nadia (Elsa Lapoivre), an actress and a mother, confronts state abuses. The show, which was performed in a stunning repurposed rock quarry outside town, begins on the first day of rehearsal for a staging of Euripides' tragedy "Hecuba," in which a Trojan queen learns that she has accidentally entrusted her young son to a murderer. Between rehearsals, Nadia loses herself in a narratively parallel struggle: demanding justice for her own child, who has been abused in a government-run care home. The production offered a strange blend of righteous fury, joyfully executed backstage comedy, and, much to my unease, a full-company impersonation of an autistic boy dancing. As we waited for darkness to fall over the quarry and the show to start, I asked Rodrigues about his sense of political deliverance, and he spoke about "a great weight" being lifted—temporarily.

Rodrigues clearly wants to incorporate a sense of the world and its agon into much of the work he programs. As in last year's edition, the festival featured shows from a "spotlight" language—in this case, Spanish—but the overriding emphasis, at least in the pieces I saw, seemed to be on declamatory, often message-driven pieces. He also programmed the Cour d'Honneur with "Mothers: A Song for Wartime," Marta Górnicka's

explicitly activist song cycle, performed by a choir of Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish women, which changes the lyrics of Ukrainian folk songs to rally Europe to the defense of Ukraine. “Give us what was promised!” they sing, moving in a flying wedge, like F-16s in formation.

In that same courtyard, I watched the Polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski’s “Elizabeth Costello,” a mysterious, eventually laborious adaptation of scenes from various J. M. Coetzee stories and novels. The performance stretched through the middle of the night—we got there at 10 p.m. and left at 2 A.M.—and its longueurs were too punishing for me. Still, I can feel my mind straining back past the show’s indulgent last hour (cliché narrated by adults pretending to be children) to its startling first. An actor playing Coetzee (Mariusz Bonaszewski) answers a panel’s questions about the character Elizabeth Costello, an elderly author who pops up in many of Coetzee’s works. “I’m not sure I ever had control over her,” he says. Of course, he knows that his fictional character isn’t autonomous, but, he muses, “there is nothing wrong with talking in metaphor.” Costello herself (Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak, one of several actors playing the role) soon emerges to give a talk on the impossibility of realism in the modern era, discussing a Kafka story in which an ape speaks to an academy of men about his process of becoming human. The reader cannot be certain whether an ape is actually speaking or if Kafka is writing obliquely about Jewishness in Prague. Kafka’s meaning evades us, Costello observes, as it will forever. “The word-mirror is broken,” she says.

In each production I saw, the performances laid some claim to post-dramatic authenticity. There was an overwhelming sense that pretending—in the theatre!—has become not just unfashionable but passé. (The German scholar and dramaturge Florian Malzacher has written elegantly about avoiding theatre’s “representational trap.”) Everywhere in Avignon we were in communication with “the real”: no fourth wall went unbroken; actors almost invariably called attention to themselves as actors. Sometimes they were actually non-actors playing themselves, as in the rollicking quasi-musical “Los Días Afuera” (“The Days Outside”), in which the Argentinean director Lola Arias collaborated with former inmates to describe their lives both in and out of prison.

Even shows that were not documentary productions in the strict sense gestured toward the conventions of that kind of work. The performers in “Mothers” would like us to know that they are really mothers. In “Hécube, Pas Hécube,” Rodrigues’s fictional text is explicitly prosecutorial and procedural. (If we are to be trained as audiences, let us also be trained as juries.) The use of nonprofessional actors onstage has been key to avant-garde theatre practice outside the U.S. since at least the two-thousands, and, although we certainly do make documentation-based work in our theatre—think of “Is This a Room,” taken from the transcript of Reality Winner’s interrogation by the F.B.I., or “The Laramie Project”—it is still very much an exception.

The most beautiful, and stealthily moving, of the documentary shows I attended was Mohamed El Khatib’s “La Vie Secrète des Vieux” (“The Secret Life of Old People”). El Khatib stands onstage with his elderly cast, occasionally prompting them with amused warmth, as they relate what has become of their erotic lives as they’ve aged. Both the show and its raconteurs operate with infinite mischief—for example, a screen warns us at the start of the show that someone onstage might die. “Stay calm, and consider whether it is better to have died onstage than in a nursing home,” the supertitles coolly tell us. Later, the performers take a group snapshot with an urn.

In one instance, the permeation of real and carnivalesque, true and false, amateur and professional in Avignon reduced me to rubble. In “Léviathan,” a terrifying burlesque of the French court system directed by Lorraine de Sagazan, actors wearing plastic masks and moving like windup toys act out several swift “immediate” trials: legal procedures that are offered to those who are caught red-handed. Only two performers are not masked. The first is our host, a man named Khallaf Baraho, who tells us that, in real life, he was actually convicted in sixteen minutes and twenty-four seconds during just such a trial—“I am an experienced customer of the police,” he says. The other is a lovely, exquisitely trained white Camargue horse. As the human suffering turns excruciating, he trots into the theatre’s silk-draped tent and begins to eat pages out of the judge’s law books. The evening I saw the play, he also pissed on the courtroom floor. I am pretty sure that he was being metaphorical. ♦

# Poems

- [This Is a Test of the Federal Emergency Management Agency Wireless Warning System](#)
- [Sighting](#)

Poems

# This Is a Test of the Federal Emergency Management Agency Wireless Warning System

By Dobby Gibson

July 29, 2024



We've all walked into the bar  
of a joke we'll never get.  
Knock knock from the evangelicals  
inviting you to pancakes.  
Knock knock from democracy  
looking for its key fob.  
Don't open the door if the knob  
feels warm. When all goes quiet,  
you'll know the wolves  
have you right where they want you.  
Some days, more than anything,

I want my old bike back.  
Some nights, I switch on the porch light  
to watch the bugs. It's nice to have something  
bright and buzzing to gather around.  
Hasn't the goal all along been  
to make an unforgettable sound?  
For Beethoven, the ringing in his ears never stopped.  
For Miles, there was no wrong note,  
only what comes next, and it's hard not to fear  
what comes next. One summer, the emergency  
is the butterflies vanish. The next,  
it's nothing but smoke. What's really scary  
are miniature horses, pink ribbons  
in their tails, prancing around the fair  
while everyone conceals and carries  
and cotton candy fills the air. A fortune  
lurks at the center of every grapefruit.  
There's a howl coming from inside  
the glacier. An old car backfires,  
then the sky is full of crows.

*This is drawn from “[Hold Everything](#).”*

# Sighting

By Jacqueline Osherow

July 29, 2024



There it was, hogging a huge swath of street,  
twice as long as the Civic parked beside it,  
relic of the jaunty middle century  
into which lucky you and I were born,  
when no one thought of limits to earth's bounty—  
white with red leather upholstery,  
red instrument panel, red steering wheel:  
a finned, preening Cadillac Seville,  
top down, as if to lure me in.  
I half thought you would show up with the key.  
If anything could have brought you home  
it would have been that swank, outlandish car.  
Were you still alive then? I'm not sure  
but I know I waited; you didn't come.

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, July 24, 2024](#)

Crossword

# The Crossword: Wednesday, July 24, 2024

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

**By Caitlin Reid**

July 24, 2024



# The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

# Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Kathryn Schulz's essay about Norman Maclean and Rebecca Mead's piece about the publisher Fitzcarraldo Editions.

July 29, 2024

## On Norman Maclean

I appreciated Kathryn Schulz's evocative piece on the writer Norman Maclean, especially because of my acquaintance with him ([Books](#), July 8th & 15th). I met Maclean in my second year of college, at the University of Chicago, in 1969, when I enrolled in a course called Poem, Poet, Period. He was slight of build, graying, chiselled—I'd say hatchet-faced. These were the harrowing years of recovering from his wife's death. In class, he remained seated, spoke with his hands, and told us to "put pressure" on our prose. He taught us that writing was everything.

When I was in graduate school, Maclean asked me to proofread "[River](#)" with him. He read aloud slowly, distinctly; I savored each word. A few pages into the story of his brother's death, he teared up, and I took the page proofs home to complete the task with my wife, Ginny. He eventually sent us a copy of the book, inscribed with a thank-you note that read, "There's 'adways' a mistake or two, but I hope it's as well written as it was proofread." I had to reread the book to find the typo I had missed.

*John Bryant  
Professor Emeritus of English  
Hofstra University  
Chicago, Ill.*

I knew Norman Maclean pretty well, enough to know that his biographer Rebecca McCarthy knew him far better. Unusually for a biographer, she herself plays a prominent role in [her life of him](#), but this seems justified because of their closeness, and because it also demonstrates the respectful

attention he paid to women students (not often the case for male professors of his day) as well as his charismatic talents as a legendary teacher.

Certain details about Maclean's life that appear in Schulz's article can only be found in McCarthy's biography. To find this source so crucial and then effectively dismiss its quality in one sentence is unpleasant.

*Andrew Rosenheim  
Oxford, U.K.*

## **Buy the Book**

I enjoyed Rebecca Mead's engaging article about Fitzcarraldo Editions, but I wish the piece had been clearer about where U.S. readers might find the books it publishes ("[The Blue and the White](#)," July 8th & 15th). Mead notes that Fitzcarraldo, which is based in London, publishes the Nobel laureate Jon Fosse, but, when I looked at the ten Fosse volumes on my bookshelf in New York, only two were published by Fitzcarraldo—the others had been put out by Dalkey Archive or Transit Books. The book I have by another eminent member of the Fitzcarraldo roster, Olga Tokarczuk, was published by Riverhead, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

It may be the case that Fitzcarraldo sometimes commissions English translations and sells international rights to other publishers; nonetheless, I'm sure that many readers would have found a note about which companies are releasing these great books in the U.S. to be helpful.

*Kim Davis  
New York, N.Y.*

Mead's piece about Fitzcarraldo didn't mention one of their most wonderful recent publications: Ian Penman's "[Fassbinder Thousands of Mirrors](#)." This book, a collection of impressions about the work of the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, is entrancing. Not exactly a biography and not really a critical study, either, it's a gift for Fassbinder fans, antagonists, obsessives—whether they are mesmerized, offended, puzzled, or delighted by him. That Fitzcarraldo recognized the brilliance of Penman's thoughts on and passion for Fassbinder told me much about their boldness and sense of mission.

*Kate Javanbakht-sani  
Denver, Colo.*

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*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to [themail@newyorker.com](mailto:themail@newyorker.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.*

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