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# THE WAR ABOUT NOTHING

Sudan and the world  
America left behind



By Anne Applebaum

Photographs by Lynsey Addario

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**The Death Doctors**

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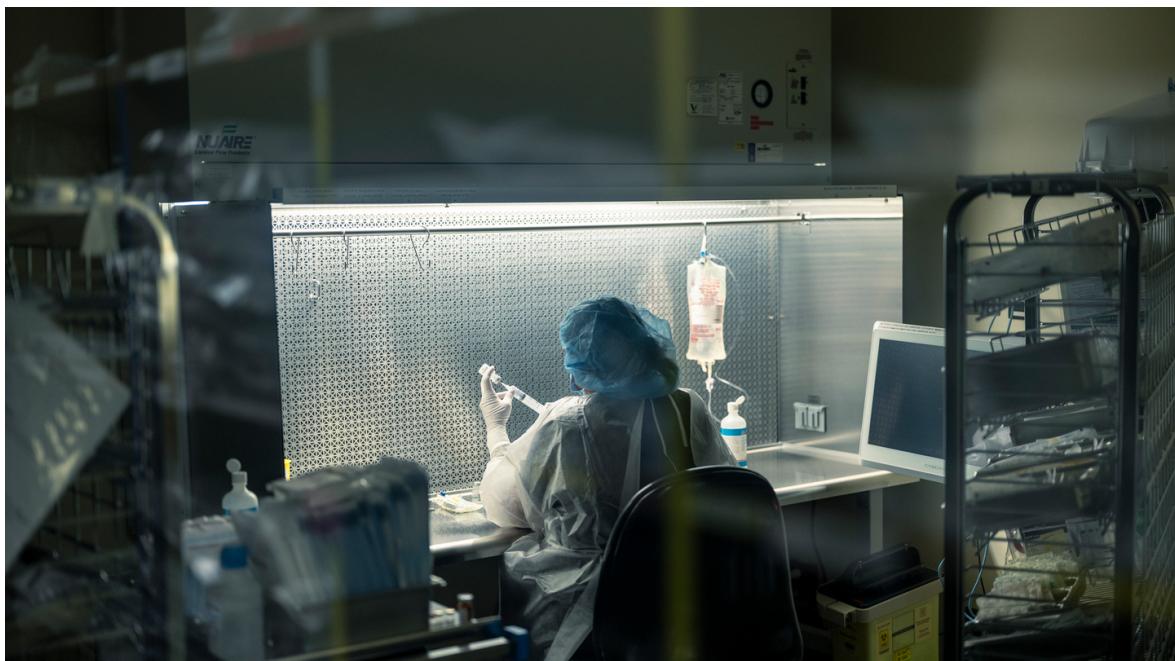
# Features

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# Canada Is Killing Itself

**The country gave its citizens the right to die. Doctors are struggling to keep up with demand.**

by Elaina Plott Calabro



At a hospital in Quebec, a pharmacist prepares the drugs used in euthanasia.  
(Johnny C. Y. Lam for The Atlantic)

The euthanasia conference was held at a Sheraton. Some 300 Canadian professionals, most of them clinicians, had arrived for the annual event. There were lunch buffets and complimentary tote bags; attendees could look forward to a Friday-night social outing, with a DJ, at an event space above

Par-Tee Putt in downtown Vancouver. “The most important thing,” one doctor told me, “is the networking.”

Which is to say that it might have been any other convention in Canada. Over the past decade, practitioners of euthanasia have become as familiar as orthodontists or plastic surgeons are with the mundane rituals of lanyards and drink tickets and *It's been so longs* outside the ballroom of a four-star hotel. The difference is that, 10 years ago, what many of the attendees here do for work would have been considered homicide.

When Canada’s Parliament in 2016 legalized the practice of euthanasia—Medical Assistance in Dying, or MAID, as it’s formally called—it launched an open-ended medical experiment. One day, administering a lethal injection to a patient was against the law; the next, it was as legitimate as a tonsillectomy, but often with less of a wait. MAID now accounts for about one in 20 deaths in Canada—more than Alzheimer’s and diabetes combined—surpassing countries where assisted dying has been legal for far longer.

It is too soon to call euthanasia a lifestyle option in Canada, but from the outset it has proved a case study in momentum. MAID began as a practice limited to gravely ill patients who were already at the end of life. The law was then expanded to include people who were suffering from serious medical conditions but not facing imminent death. In two years, MAID will be made available to those suffering only from mental illness. Parliament has also recommended granting access to minors.

At the center of the world’s fastest-growing euthanasia regime is the concept of patient autonomy. Honoring a patient’s wishes is of course a core value in medicine. But here it has become paramount, allowing Canada’s MAID advocates to push for expansion in terms that brook no argument, refracted through the language of equality, access, and compassion. As Canada contends with ever-evolving claims on the right to die, the demand for euthanasia has begun to outstrip the capacity of clinicians to provide it.

There have been unintended consequences: Some Canadians who cannot afford to manage their illness have sought doctors to end their life. In certain situations, clinicians have faced impossible ethical dilemmas. At the same time, medical professionals who decided early on to reorient their career

toward assisted death no longer feel compelled to tiptoe around the full, energetic extent of their devotion to MAID. Some clinicians in Canada have euthanized hundreds of patients.

The two-day conference in Vancouver was sponsored by a professional group called the Canadian Association of MAiD Assessors and Providers. Stefanie Green, a physician on Vancouver Island and one of the organization's founders, told me how her decades as a maternity doctor had helped equip her for this new chapter in her career. In both fields, she explained, she was guiding a patient through an "essentially natural event"—the emotional and medical choreography "of the most important days in their life." She continued the analogy: "*I thought, Well, one is like delivering life into the world, and the other feels like transitioning and delivering life out.*" And so Green does not refer to her MAID deaths only as "provisions"—the term for euthanasia that most clinicians have adopted. She also calls them "deliveries."

Gord Gubitz, a neurologist from Nova Scotia, told me that people often ask him about the "stress" and "trauma" and "strife" of his work as a MAID provider. *Isn't it so emotionally draining?* In fact, for him it is just the opposite. He finds euthanasia to be "energizing"—the "most meaningful work" of his career. "It's a happy sad, right?" he explained. "It's really sad that you were in so much pain. It is sad that your family is racked with grief. But we're so happy you got what you wanted."

#### [From the June 2023 issue: David Brooks on how Canada's assisted-suicide law went wrong](#)

Has Canada itself gotten what it wanted? Nine years after the legalization of assisted death, Canada's leaders seem to regard MAID from a strange, almost anthropological remove: as if the future of euthanasia is no more within their control than the laws of physics; as if continued expansion is not a reality the government is choosing so much as conceding. This is the story of an ideology in motion, of what happens when a nation enshrines a right before reckoning with the totality of its logic. If autonomy in death is sacrosanct, is there anyone who shouldn't be helped to die?

Rishad Usmani remembers the first patient he killed. She was 77 years old and a former Ice Capades skater, and she had severe spinal stenosis. Usmani, the woman's family physician on Vancouver Island, had tried to talk her out of the decision to die. He would always do that, he told me, when patients first asked about medically assisted death, because often what he found was that people simply wanted to be comfortable, to have their pain controlled; that when they reckoned, really reckoned, with the finality of it all, they realized they didn't actually want euthanasia. But this patient was sure: She was suffering, not just from the pain but from the pain medication too. She wanted to die.

On December 13, 2018, Usmani arrived at the woman's home in the town of Comox, British Columbia. He was joined by a more senior physician, who would supervise the procedure, and a nurse, who would start the intravenous line. The patient lay in a hospital bed, her sister next to her, holding her hand. Usmani asked her a final time if she was sure; she said she was. He administered 10 milligrams of midazolam, a fast-acting sedative, then 40 milligrams of lidocaine to numb the vein in preparation for the 1,000 milligrams of propofol, which would induce a deep coma. Finally he injected 200 milligrams of a paralytic agent called rocuronium, which would bring an end to breathing, ultimately causing the heart to stop.

Usmani drew his stethoscope to the woman's chest and listened. To his quiet alarm, he could hear the heart still beating. In fact, as the seconds passed, it seemed to be quickening. He glanced at his supervisor. Where had he messed up? But as soon as they locked eyes, he understood: He was listening to his own heartbeat.

Many clinicians in Canada who have provided medical assistance in dying have a story like this, about the tangle of nerves and uncertainties that attended their first case. Death itself is something every clinician knows intimately, the grief and pallor and paperwork of it. To work in medicine is to step each day into the worst days of other people's lives. But approaching death as a procedure, as something to be scheduled over Outlook, took some getting used to. In Canada, it is no longer a novel and remarkable event. As of 2023, the last year for which data are available, some 60,300 Canadians had been legally helped to their death by clinicians. In Quebec, more than 7 percent of all deaths are by euthanasia—the highest rate of any jurisdiction

in the world. “I have two or three provisions every week now, and it’s continuing to go up every year,” Claude Rivard, a family doctor in suburban Montreal, told me.

Rivard has thus far provided for more than 600 patients and helps train clinicians new to MAID. This spring, I watched from the back of a small classroom in a Vancouver hospital as Rivard led a workshop on intraosseous infusion—administering drugs directly into the bone marrow, a useful skill for MAID clinicians, Rivard explained, in the event of IV failure. Arranged on absorbent pads across the back row of tables were eight pig knuckles, bulbous and pink. After a PowerPoint presentation, the dozen or so attendees took turns with different injection devices, from the primitive (manual needles) to the modern (bone-injection guns). Hands cramped around hollow steel needles as the workshop attendees struggled to twist and drive the tools home. This was the last thing, the clinicians later agreed, that patients would want to see as they lay trying to die. Practitioners needed to learn. “Every detail matters,” Rivard told the class; he preferred the bone-injection gun himself.



Claude Rivard at his home near Montreal (Johnny C. Y. Lam for *The Atlantic*)

The details of the assisted-death experience have become a preoccupation of Canadian life. Patients meticulously orchestrate their final moments, planning celebrations around them: weekend house parties before a Sunday-night euthanasia in the garden; a Catholic priest to deliver last rites; extended-family renditions of “Auld Lang Syne” at the bedside. For \$10.99, you can design your MAID experience with the help of the Be Ceremonial app; suggested rituals include a story altar, a forgiveness ceremony, and the collecting of tears from witnesses. On the [\*Disrupting Death\* podcast](#), hosted by an educator and a social worker in Ontario, guests share ideas on subjects such as normalizing the MAID process for children facing the death of an adult in their life—a pajama party at a funeral home; painting a coffin in a schoolyard.

Autonomy, choice, control: These are the values that found purchase with the great majority of Canadians in February 2015, when, in a case spearheaded by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, the supreme court of Canada unanimously overturned the country’s criminal ban on medically assisted death. For advocates, the victory had been decades in the making—the culmination of a campaign that had grown in fervor since the 1990s, when Canada’s high court narrowly ruled against physician-assisted death in a case brought by a patient with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. “We’re talking about a competent person making a choice about their death,” one longtime right-to-die activist said while celebrating the new ruling. “Don’t access this choice if you don’t want—but stay away from my death bed.” A year later, in June 2016, Parliament passed the first legislation officially permitting medical assistance in dying for eligible adults, placing Canada among the handful of countries (including Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands) and U.S. states (Oregon, Vermont, and California, among others) that already allowed some version of the practice.

### [Read: How do I make sense of my mother’s decision to die?](#)

The new law approved medical assistance in dying for adults who had a “grievous and irremediable medical condition” causing them “intolerable suffering,” and who faced a “reasonably foreseeable” natural death. To qualify, patients needed two clinicians to sign off on their application, and the law required a 10-day “reflection period” before the procedure could take place. Patients could choose to die either by euthanasia—having a

clinician administer the drugs directly—or, alternatively, by assisted suicide, in which a patient self-administers a lethal prescription orally. (Virtually all MAID deaths in Canada have been by euthanasia.) When the procedure was set to begin, patients were required to give final consent.

The law, in other words, was premised on the concept of patient autonomy, but within narrow boundaries. Rather than force someone with, say, late-stage cancer to suffer to the very end, MAID would allow patients to depart on their own terms: to experience a “dignified death,” as proponents called it. That the threshold of eligibility for MAID would be high—and stringent—was presented to the public as self-evident, although the criteria themselves were vague when you looked closely. For instance, what constituted “reasonably foreseeable”? Two months? Two years? Canada’s Department of Justice suggested only “a period of time that is not too remote.”

Provincial health authorities were left to fill in the blanks. Following the law’s passage, doctors, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, and lawyers scrambled to draw up the regulatory fine print for a procedure that until then had been legally classified as culpable homicide. How should the assessment process work? What drugs should be used? Particularly vexing was the question of whether it should be clinicians or patients who initiated conversations about assisted death. Some argued that doctors and nurses had a professional obligation to broach the subject of MAID with potentially eligible patients, just as they would any other “treatment option.” Others feared that patients could interpret this as a recommendation—indeed, feared that talking about assisted death as a medical treatment, like Lasik surgery or a hip replacement, was dangerous in itself.

Early on, a number of health-care professionals refused to engage in any way with MAID—some because of religious beliefs, and others because, in their view, it violated a medical duty to “do no harm.” For many clinicians, the ethical and logistical challenges of MAID only compounded the stress of working within Canada’s public-health-care system, beset by years of funding cuts and staffing shortages. The median wait time for general surgery is about 22 weeks. For orthopedic surgery, it’s more than a year. For some kinds of mental-health services, the wait time can be longer.

As the first assessment requests trickled in, even many clinicians who believed strongly in the right to an assisted death were reluctant to do the actual assisting. Some told me they agreed to take on patients only after realizing that no one else—in their hospital or even their region—was willing to go first. Matt Kutchner, a physician on Prince Edward Island, was more open to MAID than others, but acknowledged the challenge of building the practice of assisted death virtually from scratch. “The reality,” he said, “is that we were all just kind of making it up as we went along, very cautiously.”

On a rainy spring evening in 2017, Kutchner drove to a farmhouse by the sea to administer the first state-sanctioned act of euthanasia in his province. The patient, Paul Couvrette, had learned about MAID from his wife, Liana Brittain, in 2015, soon after the supreme-court decision. He had just been diagnosed with lung cancer, and while processing this fact in the parking lot of the clinic had turned to his wife and announced: “I’m not going to have cancer. I’m going to kill myself.” Brittain told her husband this was a bit dramatic. “You know, dear, you don’t have to do that,” she recalls responding. “The government will do it for you, and they’ll do it for free.” Couvrette had marveled at the news, because although he was open to surgery, he had no interest in chemotherapy or radiation. MAID, Brittain told me, gave her husband the relief of a “back door.” By early 2017, the cancer had spread to Couvrette’s brain; the 72-year-old became largely bedridden. He set his MAID procedure for May 10—the couple’s wedding anniversary.

Kutchner and a nurse had agreed to come early and join the extended family—children, a granddaughter—for Couvrette’s final dinner: seafood chowder and gluten-free biscuits. Only Brittain would eventually join Couvrette in the downstairs bedroom; the rest of the family and the couple’s two dogs would wait outside on the beach. There was a shared understanding, Kutchner recalled, that “this was something none of us had experienced before, and we didn’t really know what we were in for.” What followed was a “beautiful death”—that was what the local newspaper called it, Brittain told me. Couvrette’s last words to his wife came from their wedding vows: *I’ll love you forever, plus three days.*

Kutcher wrestled at first with the sheer strangeness of the experience—how quickly it was over, packing up his equipment at the side of a dead man who just 10 minutes earlier had been talking with him, very much alive. But he went home believing he had done the right thing for his patient.

For proponents, Couvrette epitomized the ideal MAID candidate, motivated not by an impulsive death wish but by a considered desire to reclaim control of his fate from a terminal disease. The lobbying group [Dying With Dignity Canada](#) celebrated Couvrette’s “empowering choice and journey” as part of a showcase on its website of “good deaths” made possible by the new law. There was also the surgeon in Nova Scotia with Parkinson’s who “died the same way he lived—on his own terms.” And there were the Toronto couple in their 90s who, in a “dream ending to their storybook romance,” underwent MAID together.

Such heartfelt accounts tended to center on the white, educated, financially stable patients who represented the typical MAID recipient. The stories did not precisely capture what many clinicians were discovering also to be true: that if dying by MAID was dying with dignity, some deaths felt considerably more dignified than others. Not everyone has coastal homes or children and grandchildren who can gather in love and solidarity. This was made clear to Sandy Buchman, a palliative-care physician in Toronto, during one of his early MAID cases, when a patient, “all alone,” gave final consent from a mattress on the floor of a rental apartment. Buchman recalls having to kneel next to the mattress in the otherwise empty space to administer the drugs. “It was horrible,” he told me. “You can see how challenging, how awful, things can be.”

In 2018, Buchman co-founded a nonprofit organization called [MAiDHouse](#). The aim was to create a “third place” of sorts for people who want to die somewhere other than a hospital or at home. Finding a location proved difficult; many landlords were resistant. But by 2022, MAiDHouse had leased the space in Toronto from which it operates today. (For security reasons, the location is not public.) Tekla Hendrickson, the executive director of MAiDHouse, told me the space was designed to feel warm and familiar but also adaptable to the wishes of the person using it: furniture light enough to rearrange, bare surfaces for flowers or photos or any other personal items. “Sometimes they have champagne, sometimes they come in

limos, sometimes they wear ball gowns,” Hendrickson said. The act of euthanasia itself takes place in a La-Z-Boy-like recliner, with adjacent rooms available for family and friends who may prefer not to witness the procedure. According to the MAiDHouse website, the body is then transferred to a funeral home by attendants who arrive in unmarked cars and depart “discreetly.”

Since its founding, MAiDHouse has provided space and support for more than 100 deaths. The group’s homepage displays a photograph of dandelion seeds scattering in a gentle wind. A second MAiDHouse location recently opened in Victoria, British Columbia. In the organization’s 2023 annual report, the chair of the board noted that MAiDHouse’s followers on LinkedIn had increased by 85 percent; its new Instagram profile was gaining followers too. More to the point, the number of provisions performed at MAiDHouse had doubled over the previous year—“astounding progress for such a young organization.”

In the early days of MAID, some clinicians found themselves at once surprised and conflicted by the fulfillment they experienced in helping people die. A few months after the law’s passage, Stefanie Green, whom I’d met at the conference in Vancouver, acknowledged to herself how “upbeat” she’d felt following a recent provision—“a little hyped up on adrenaline,” as she later put it in a memoir about her first year providing medical assistance in death. Green realized it was *gratification* she was feeling: A patient had come to her in immense pain, and she had been in a position to offer relief. In the end, she believed, she had “given a gift to a dying man.”

Green had at first been reluctant to reveal her feelings to anyone, afraid that she might be viewed, she recalled, as a “psychopath.” But she did eventually confide in a small group of fellow MAID practitioners. Green and several colleagues realized that there was a need for a formal community of professionals. In 2017, they officially launched the group whose meeting I attended.

There was a time when Madeline Li would have felt perfectly at home among the other clinicians who convened that weekend at the Sheraton. In the early years of MAID, few physicians exerted more influence over the new regime than Li. The Toronto-based cancer psychiatrist led the

development of the MAID program at the University Health Network, the largest teaching-hospital system in Canada, and in 2017 saw her framework [published in \*The New England Journal of Medicine\*.](#)





Madeline Li at her office in Toronto (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

It was not long into her practice, however, that Li's confidence in the direction of her country's MAID program began to falter. For all of her expertise, not even Li was sure what to do about a patient in his 30s whom she encountered in 2018.

The man had gone to the emergency room complaining of excruciating pain and was eventually diagnosed with cancer. The prognosis was good, a surgeon assured him, with a 65 percent chance of a cure. But the man said he didn't want treatment; he wanted MAID. Startled, the surgeon referred him to a medical oncologist to discuss chemo; perhaps the man just didn't want surgery. The patient proceeded to tell the medical oncologist that he didn't want treatment of any kind; he wanted MAID. He said the same thing to a radiation oncologist, a palliative-care physician, and a psychiatrist, before finally complaining to the patient-relations department that the hospital was barring his access to MAID. Li arranged to meet with him.

Canada's MAID law defines a "grievous and irremediable medical condition" in part as a "serious and incurable illness, disease, or disability." As for what constitutes incurability, however, the law says nothing—and of the various textual ambiguities that caused anxiety for clinicians early on, this one ranked near the top. Did "incurable" mean a lack of any available treatment? Did it mean the likelihood of an available treatment not working? Prominent MAID advocates put forth what soon became the predominant interpretation: A medical condition was incurable if it could not be cured by means acceptable to the patient.

This had made sense to Li. If an elderly woman with chronic myelogenous leukemia had no wish to endure a highly toxic course of chemo and radiation, why should she be compelled to? But here was a young man with a likely curable cancer who nevertheless was adamant about dying. "I mean, he was so, so clear," Li told me. "I talked to him about *What if you had a 100 percent chance? Would you want treatment?* And he said no." He didn't want to suffer through the treatment or the side effects, he explained; just having a colonoscopy had traumatized him. When Li assured the man that they could treat the side effects, he said she wasn't understanding him: Yes,

they could give him medication for the pain, but then he would have to first experience the pain. He didn't want to experience the pain.

What was Li left with? According to prevailing standards, the man's refusal to attempt treatment rendered his disease incurable and his natural death was reasonably foreseeable. He met the eligibility criteria as Li understood them. But the whole thing seemed wrong to her. Seeking advice, she described the basics of the case in a private email group for MAID practitioners under the heading "Eligible, but Reasonable?" "And what was very clear to me from the replies I got," Li told me, "is that many people have no ethical or clinical qualms about this—that it's all about a patient's autonomy, and if a patient wants this, it's not up to us to judge. We should provide."

And so she did. She regretted her decision almost as soon as the man's heart stopped beating. "What I've learned since is: Eligible doesn't mean you should provide MAID," Li told me. "You can be eligible because the law is so full of holes, but that doesn't mean it clinically makes sense." Li no longer interprets "incurable" as at the sole discretion of the patient. The problem, she feels, is that the law permits such a wide spectrum of interpretations to begin with. Many decisions about life and death turn on the personal values of practitioners and patients rather than on any objective medical criteria.

By 2020, Li had overseen hundreds of MAID cases, about 95 percent of which were "very straightforward," she said. They involved people who had terminal conditions and wanted the same control in death as they'd enjoyed in life. It was the 5 percent that worried her—not just the young man, but vulnerable people more generally, whom the safeguards had possibly failed. Patients whose only "terminal condition," really, was age. Li recalled an especially divisive early case for her team involving an elderly woman who'd fractured her hip. She understood that the rest of her life would mean becoming only weaker and enduring more falls, and she "just wasn't going to have it." The woman was approved for MAID on the basis of frailty.

Li had tried to understand the assessor's reasoning. According to an actuarial table, the woman, given her age and medical circumstances, had a life expectancy of five or six more years. But what if the woman had been slightly younger and the number was closer to eight years—would the

clinician have approved her then? “And they said, well, they weren’t sure, and that’s my point,” Li explained. “There’s no standard here; it’s just kind of up to you.” The concept of a “completed life, or being tired of life,” as sufficient for MAID is “controversial in Europe and theoretically not legal in Canada,” Li said. “But the truth is, it *is* legal in Canada. It always has been, and it’s happening in these frailty cases.”

Li supports medical assistance in dying when appropriate. What troubles her is the federal government’s deferring of responsibility in managing it—establishing principles, setting standards, enforcing boundaries. She believes most physicians in Canada share her “muddy middle” position. But that position, she said, is also “the most silent.”

In 2014, when the question of medically assisted death had come before Canada’s supreme court, Etienne Montero, a civil-law professor and at the time the president of the European Institute of Bioethics, warned in testimony that the practice of euthanasia, once legal, was impossible to control. Montero had been retained by the attorney general of Canada to discuss the experience of assisted death in Belgium—how a regime that had begun with “extremely strict” criteria had steadily evolved, through loose interpretations and lax enforcement, to accommodate many of the very patients it had once pledged to protect. When a patient’s autonomy is paramount, Montero argued, expansion is inevitable: “Sooner or later, a patient’s repeated wish will take precedence over strict statutory conditions.” In the end, the Canadian justices were unmoved; Belgium’s “permissive” system, they contended, was the “product of a very different medico-legal culture” and therefore offered “little insight into how a Canadian regime might operate.” In a sense, this was correct: It took Belgium more than 20 years to reach an assisted-death rate of 3 percent. Canada needed only five.

In retrospect, the expansion of MAID would seem to have been inevitable; Justin Trudeau, then Canada’s prime minister, said as much back in 2016, when he called his country’s newly passed MAID law “a big first step” in what would be an “evolution.” Five years later, in March 2021, the government [enacted a new two-track system of eligibility](#), relaxing existing safeguards and extending MAID to a broader swath of Canadians. Patients approved for an assisted death under Track 1, as it was now called—meaning the original end-of-life context—were no longer required to wait 10

days before receiving MAID; they could die on the day of approval. Track 2, meanwhile, legalized MAID for adults whose deaths were not reasonably foreseeable—people suffering from chronic pain, for example, or from certain neurological disorders. Although cost savings have never been mentioned as an explicit rationale for expansion, the parliamentary budget office anticipated annual savings in health-care costs of nearly \$150 million as a result of the expanded MAID regime.

The 2021 law did provide for additional safeguards unique to Track 2. Assessors had to ensure that applicants gave “serious consideration”—a phrase left undefined—to “reasonable and available means” to alleviate their suffering. In addition, they had to affirm that the patients had been directed toward such options. Track 2 assessments were also required to span at least 90 days. For any MAID assessment, clinicians must be satisfied not only that a patient’s suffering is enduring and intolerable, but that it is a function of a physical medical condition rather than mental illness, say, or financial instability. Suffering is never perfectly reducible, of course—a crisp study in cause and effect. But when a patient is already dying, the role of physical disease isn’t usually a mystery, either.



Depleted syringes after a MAID provision (Johnny C. Y. Lam for *The Atlantic*)

Track 2 introduced a web of moral complexities and clinical demands. For many practitioners, one major new factor was the sheer amount of time required to understand why the person before them—not terminally ill—was asking, at that particular moment, to die. Clinicians would have to untangle the physical experience of chronic illness and disability from the structural inequities and mental-health struggles that often attend it. In a system where access to social supports and medical services varies so widely, this was no small challenge, and many clinicians ultimately chose not to expand their practice to include Track 2 patients.

There is no clear official data on how many clinicians are willing to take on Track 2 cases. The government's [most recent information](#) indicates that, in 2023, out of 2,200 MAID practitioners overall, a mere 89 were responsible for about 30 percent of all Track 2 provisions. Jonathan Reggler, a family physician on Vancouver Island, is among that small group. He openly acknowledges the challenges involved in assessing Track 2 patients, as well as the basic “discomfort” that comes with ending the life of someone who is not in fact dying. “I can think of cases that I’ve dealt with where you’re really asking yourself, *Why?*” he told me. *“Why now? Why is it that this cluster of problems is causing you such distress where another person wouldn’t be distressed?”*

Yet Reggler feels duty bound to move beyond his personal discomfort. As he explained it, “Once you accept that people ought to have autonomy—once you accept that life is not sacred and something that can only be taken by God, a being I don’t believe in—then, if you’re in that work, some of us have to go forward and say, ‘We’ll do it.’”

For some MAID practitioners, however, it took encountering an eligible patient for them to realize the true extent of their unease with Track 2. One physician, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized by his hospital to speak publicly, recalled assessing a patient in their 30s with nerve damage. The pain was such that they couldn’t go outside; even the touch of a breeze would inflame it. “They had seen every kind of specialist,” he said. The patient had tried nontraditional therapies too—acupuncture, Reiki, “everything.” As the physician saw it, the patient’s condition was serious and incurable, it was causing intolerable suffering, and the suffering could not seem to be relieved. “I went through all of the tick boxes, and by the

letter of the law, they clearly met the criteria for all of these things, right? That said, I felt a little bit queasy.” The patient was young, with a condition that is not terminal and is usually treatable. But “I didn’t feel it was my place to tell them no.”

He was not comfortable doing the procedure himself, however. He recalled telling the MAID office in his region, “Look, I did the assessment. The patient meets the criteria. But I just can’t—I can’t do this.” Another clinician stepped in.

In 2023, Track 2 accounted for 622 MAID deaths in Canada—just over 4 percent of cases, up from 3.5 percent in 2022. Whether the proportion continues to rise is anyone’s guess. Some argue that primary-care providers are best positioned to negotiate the complexities of Track 2 cases, given their familiarity with the patient making the request—their family situation, medical history, social circumstances. This is how assisted death is typically approached in other countries, including Belgium and the Netherlands. But in Canada, the system largely developed around the MAID coordination centers assembled in the provinces, complete with 1-800 numbers for self-referrals. The result is that MAID assessors generally have no preexisting relationship with the patients they’re assessing.

How do you navigate, then, the hidden corridors of a stranger’s suffering? Claude Rivard told me about a Track 2 patient who had called to cancel his scheduled euthanasia. As a result of a motorcycle accident, the man could not walk; now blind, he was living in a long-term-care facility and rarely had visitors; he had been persistent in his request for MAID. But when his family learned that he’d applied and been approved, they started visiting him again. “And it changed everything,” Rivard said. He was in contact with his children again. He was in contact with his ex-wife again. “He decided, ‘No, I still have pleasure in life, because the family, the kids are coming; even if I can’t see them, I can touch them, and I can talk to them, so I’m changing my mind.’”

I asked Rivard whether this turn of events—the apparent plasticity of the man’s desire to die—had given him pause about approving the patient for MAID in the first place. Not at all, he said. “I had no control on what the family was going to do.”

Some of the opposition to MAID in Canada is religious in character. The Catholic Church condemns euthanasia, though Church influence in Canada, as elsewhere, has waned dramatically, particularly where it was once strongest, in Quebec. But from the outset there were other concerns, chief among them the worry that assisted death, originally authorized for one class of patient, would eventually become legal for a great many others too. National disability-rights groups warned that Canadians with physical and intellectual disabilities—people whose lives were already undervalued in society, and of whom 17 percent live in poverty—would be at particular risk. As assisted death became “sanitized,” one group argued, “more and more will be encouraged to choose this option, further entrenching the ‘better off dead’ message in public consciousness.”



At a hospital in Quebec, a pharmacist prepares the drugs used in euthanasia.  
(Johnny C. Y. Lam for *The Atlantic*)

For these critics, the “reasonably foreseeable” death requirement had been the solitary consolation in an otherwise lost constitutional battle. The elimination of that protection with the creation of Track 2 reinforced their conviction that MAID would result in Canada’s most marginalized citizens being subtly coerced into premature death. Canadian officials acknowledged these concerns—“We know that in some places in our country, it’s easier to access MAID than it is to get a wheelchair,” Carla Qualtrough, the disability-inclusion minister, admitted in 2020—but reiterated that socioeconomic suffering was not a legal basis for MAID. Justin Trudeau took pains to assure the public that patients were not being backed into assisted death because of their inability to afford proper housing, say, or get timely access to medical care. It “simply isn’t something that ends up happening,” he said.

Sathyia Dhara Kovac, of Winnipeg, knew otherwise. Before dying by MAID in 2022, at the age of 44, Kovac wrote her own obituary. She explained that life with ALS had “not been easy”; it was, as far as illnesses went, a “shitty” one. But the illness itself was not the reason she wanted to die. Kovac told the local press prior to being euthanized that she had fought unsuccessfully to get adequate home-care services; she needed more than the 55 hours a week covered by the province, couldn’t afford the cost of a private agency to take care of the balance, and didn’t want to be relegated to a long-term-care facility. “Ultimately it was not a genetic disease that took me out, it was a system,” Kovac wrote. “I could have had more time if I had more help.”

Earlier this spring, I met in Vancouver with Marcia Doherty; she was approved for Track 2 MAID shortly after it was legalized, four years ago. The 57-year-old has suffered for most of her life from complex chronic illnesses, including myalgic encephalomyelitis, fibromyalgia, and Epstein-Barr virus. Her daily experience of pain is so total that it is best captured in terms of what doesn’t hurt (the tips of her ears; sometimes the tip of her nose) as opposed to all the places that do. Yet at the core of her suffering is not only the pain itself, Doherty told me; it’s that, as the years go by, she can’t afford the cost of managing it. Only a fraction of the treatments she relies on are covered by her province’s health-care plan, and with monthly disability assistance her only consistent income, she is overwhelmed with medical debt. Doherty understands that someday, the pressure may simply

become too much. “I didn’t apply for MAID because I want to be dead,” she told me. “I applied for MAID on ruthless practicality.”

It is difficult to understand MAID in such circumstances as a triumphant act of autonomy—as if the state, by facilitating death where it has failed to provide adequate resources to live, has somehow given its most vulnerable citizens the dignity of choice. In January 2024, a quadriplegic man named [Normand Meunier](#) entered a Quebec hospital with a respiratory infection; after four days confined to an emergency-room stretcher, unable to secure a proper mattress despite his partner’s pleas, he developed a painful bedsore that led him to apply for MAID. “I don’t want to be a burden,” he told Radio-Canada the day before he was euthanized, that March.

[Read: Brittany Maynard and the challenge of dying with dignity.](#)

Nearly half of all Canadians who have died by MAID viewed themselves as a burden on family and friends. For some disabled citizens, the availability of assisted death has sowed doubt about how the medical establishment itself sees them—about whether their lives are in fact considered worthy of saving. In the fall of 2022, a 49-year-old Nova Scotia woman who is physically disabled and had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer was readying for a lifesaving mastectomy when a member of her surgical team began working through a list of pre-op questions about her medications and the last time she ate—and [was she familiar with medical assistance in dying?](#) The woman told me she felt suddenly and acutely aware of her body, the tissue-thin gown that wouldn’t close. “It left me feeling like maybe I should be second-guessing my decision,” she recalled. “It was the thing I was thinking about as I went under; when I woke up, it was the first thought in my head.” Fifteen months later, when the woman returned for a second mastectomy, she was again asked if she was aware of MAID. Today she still wonders if, were she not disabled, the question would even have been asked. Gus Grant, the registrar and CEO of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, has said that the timing of the queries to this woman was “clearly inappropriate and insensitive,” but he also emphasized that “there’s a difference between raising the topic of discussing awareness about MAID, and possible eligibility, from offering MAID.”

And yet there is also a reason why, in some countries, clinicians are either expressly prohibited or generally discouraged from initiating conversations about assisted death. However sensitively the subject is broached, death never presents itself neutrally; to regard the line between an “offer” and a simple recitation of information as somehow self-evident is to ignore this fact, as well as the power imbalance that freights a health professional’s every gesture with profound meaning. Perhaps the now-suspended Veterans Affairs caseworker who, in 2022, was found by the department to have “inappropriately raised” MAID with several service members had meant no harm. But according to testimony, one combat veteran was so shaken by the exchange—he had called seeking support for his ailments and was not suicidal, but was told that MAID was preferable to “blowing your brains out”—that he left the country.

In 2023, Kathrin Mentler, who lives with concurrent mental and physical disabilities, including rheumatoid arthritis and other forms of chronic pain, arrived at Vancouver General Hospital asking for help amid a suicidal crisis. Mentler has stated in a sworn affidavit that the hospital clinician who performed the intake told her that although they could contact the on-call psychiatrist, no beds were available in the unit. The clinician then asked if Mentler had ever considered MAID, describing it as a “peaceful” process compared with her recent suicide attempt via overdose, for which she’d been hospitalized. Mentler said that she left the hospital in a “panic,” and that the encounter had validated many of her worst fears: that she was a “burden” on an overtaxed system and that it would be “reasonable” for her to want to die. (In response to press reports about Mentler’s experience, the regional health authority said that the conversation was part of a “clinical evaluation” to assess suicide risk and that staff are required to “explore all available care options” with patients.)

MAID advocates dispute the charge that disabled Canadians are being quietly or overtly pressured to consider assisted death, calling it a myth generated by what they view as sensationalized accounts in the press; in parliamentary hearings, lawmakers, citing federal data, have emphasized that “only a small number” of MAID recipients are unable to access the medical services and social supports they require. Even so, this past March, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities formally called for the repeal of Track 2 MAID in Canada—arguing that the

federal government had “fundamentally changed” the premise of assisted dying on the basis of “negative, ableist perceptions of the quality and value” of disabled lives, without addressing the systemic inequalities that amplify their perceived suffering.

Marcia Doherty agrees that it should never have come to this: her country resolving to assist her and other disabled citizens more in death than in life. She is furious that she has been “allowed to deteriorate,” despite advocating for herself before every agency and official capable of effecting change. But she is adamantly opposed to any repeal of Track 2. She expressed a sentiment I heard from others in my reporting: that the “relief” of knowing an assisted death is available to her, should the despair become unbearable, has empowered her in the fight to live.

Doherty may someday decide to access MAID. But she doesn’t want anyone ever to say she “chose” it.

Ellen Wiebe never had reservations about taking on Track 2 cases—indeed, unlike most clinicians, she never had reservations about providing MAID at all. The Vancouver-based family physician had long been comfortable with controversy, having spent the bulk of her four decades in medicine as an abortion provider. As Wiebe saw it, MAID was perfectly in keeping with her “human-rights-focused” career. Over the past nine years, she has euthanized more than 430 patients and become one of the world’s most outspoken champions of MAID. Today, while virtually all of her colleagues rely on referrals from MAID coordination centers, Wiebe regularly receives requests directly from patients. Coordinators also call her when they have a patient whose previous MAID requests were rejected. (There is no limit to how many times a person can apply for MAID.) “Because I’m me, you know, they send those down to Ellen Wiebe,” she told me. I asked her what she meant by that. “My reputation,” she replied.

In the summer of 2024, Wiebe heard from a 53-year-old woman in Alberta who was experiencing acute psychiatric distress—“the horrors,” the patient called them—compounded by her reaction to, and then withdrawal from, an antipsychotic drug she was prescribed for sleep. None of the woman’s doctors would facilitate her desire to die. This was when, according to the version of events the woman’s common-law husband would later submit to

British Columbia's supreme court, she searched online for alternatives and came across Wiebe. At the end of their first meeting, a Zoom call, Wiebe said she would approve the woman for the procedure. On her formal application, the woman gave "akathisia"—a movement disorder characterized by intense feelings of inner restlessness and an inability to sit still, commonly caused by withdrawal from antipsychotic medication—as her reason for requesting an assisted death. According to court filings, no one the woman knew was willing to witness her sign the application form, as the law requires, so Wiebe had a volunteer at her clinic do so over Zoom. And because the woman still needed another physician or nurse practitioner to declare her eligible, Wiebe arranged for Elizabeth Whynot, a fellow family physician in Vancouver, to provide the second assessment. The patient was approved for MAID after a video call, and the procedure was set for October 27, 2024, in Wiebe's clinic.

Following the approval, detailed in the court filings, the Alberta woman had another Zoom call with Wiebe; this time, her husband joined the conversation. He had concerns, specifically as to how akathisia qualified as "irremediable." Specialists had assured the woman that if she committed to the gradual tapering protocol they'd prescribed, she could very likely expect relief within months. The husband also worried that Wiebe hadn't sufficiently considered his wife's unresolved mental-health issues, and whether she was capable, in her present state, of giving truly informed consent. The day before his wife was scheduled to die, he petitioned a Vancouver judge to halt the procedure, arguing that Wiebe had negligently approved the woman on the basis of a condition that did not qualify for MAID. In a widely publicized decision, the next morning the judge [issued a last-minute injunction](#) blocking Wiebe or any other clinician from carrying out the woman's death as scheduled. "I can only imagine the pain she has been experiencing, and I recognize that this injunction will likely only make that worse," the judge wrote. But there was an "arguable case," he concluded, as to whether the criteria for MAID had been "properly applied in the circumstances." The husband did not seek a new injunction after the temporary order expired, and in January, he withdrew the lawsuit altogether. Wiebe would not comment on the case other than to say she has never violated MAID laws and does not know of any provider who has. The lawyer who had represented the husband said she could not comment on whether the woman is still alive.



Ellen Wiebe at her office in Vancouver (Jennilee Marigomen for *The Atlantic*)

A number of similar lawsuits have been filed in recent years as Canadians come to terms with the hollow oversight of MAID. Because no formal procedure exists for challenging an approval in advance of a provision, many concerned family members see little choice but to take a loved one to court to try to halt a scheduled death. What oversight does exist takes place at the provincial or territorial level, and only after the fact. Protocols differ significantly across jurisdictions. In Ontario, the chief coroner's office oversees a system in which all Track 2 cases are automatically referred to a multidisciplinary committee for postmortem scrutiny. Since 2018, the coroner's office has identified more than 480 compliance issues involving federal and provincial MAID policies, including clinicians failing to consult with an expert in their patient's condition prior to approval—a key Track 2 safeguard—and using the wrong drugs in a provision. The office's death-review committee periodically publishes summaries of particular cases, for both Track 1 and Track 2, to “generate discussion” for “practical improvement.”

There was, for example, the case of Mr. C, a man in his 70s who, in 2024, requested MAID while receiving in-hospital palliative care for metastatic cancer. It should have been a straightforward Track 1 case. But two days after his request, according to the committee's report, the man experienced sharp cognitive decline and lost the ability to communicate, his eyes opening only in response to painful stimuli. His palliative-care team deemed him incapable of consenting to health-care decisions, including final permission for MAID. Despite that conclusion, a MAID clinician proceeded with the assessment, “vigorously” rousing the man to ask if he still wanted euthanasia (to which the man mouthed “yes”), and then withholding the man's pain medication until he appeared “more alert.” After confirming the man's wishes via “short verbal statements” and “head nods and blinking,” the assessor approved him for MAID; with sign-off from a second clinician, and a final consent from Mr. C mouthing “yes,” he was euthanized.

Had this patient clearly consented to his death? Finding no documentation of a “rigorous evaluation of capacity,” the death-review committee expressed “concerns” about the process. The implication would seem startling—in a

regime animated at its core by patient autonomy, a man was not credibly found to have exercised his own. Yet Mr. C’s death was reduced essentially to a matter of academic inquiry, an opportunity for “lessons learned.” Of the hundreds of irregularities flagged over the years by the coroner’s office, almost all have been dealt with through an “Informal Conversation,” an “Educational Email,” or a “Notice Email,” depending on their severity. Specific sanctions are not made public. No case has ever been referred to law enforcement for investigation.

Wiebe acknowledged that several complaints have been filed against her over the years but noted that she has never been found guilty of wrongdoing. “And if a lawyer says, ‘Oh—I disagreed with some of those things,’ I’d say, ‘Well, they didn’t put lawyers in charge of this.’” She laughed. “We were the ones trusted with the safeguards.” And the law was clear, Wiebe said: “If the assessor”—meaning herself—“believes that they qualify, then I’m not guilty of a crime.”

Despite all of the questions surrounding Track 2, Canada is proceeding with the expansion of MAID to additional categories of patients while gauging public interest in even more. As early as 2016, the federal government had agreed to launch exploratory investigations into the possible future provision of MAID for people whose sole underlying medical condition is a mental disorder, as well as to “mature minors,” people younger than 18 who are “deemed to have requisite decision-making capacity.” The government also pledged to consider “advance requests”—that is, allowing people to consent now to receive MAID at some specified future point when their illness renders them incapable of making or affirming the decision to die.

Meanwhile, the Quebec College of Physicians has raised the possibility of legalizing euthanasia for infants born with “severe malformations,” a rare practice currently legal only in the Netherlands, the first country to adopt it since Nazi Germany did so in 1939.

As part of Track 2 legislation in 2021, lawmakers extended eligibility—to take effect at some point in the future—to Canadians suffering from mental illness alone. This, despite the submissions of many of the nation’s top psychiatric and mental-health organizations that no evidence-based standard exists for determining whether a psychiatric condition is irremediable. A

number of experts also shared concerns about whether it was possible to credibly distinguish between suicidal ideation and a desire for MAID.

After several contentious delays, MAID for mental illness is now set to take effect in 2027; authorities have been tasked in the meantime with figuring out how MAID should actually be applied in such cases. The debate has produced thousands of pages of special reports and parliamentary testimony. What all sides do agree on is that, in practice, mental disorders are already a regular feature of Canada’s MAID regime. At one hearing, Mona Gupta, a psychiatrist and the chair of an expert panel charged with recommending protocols and safeguards for psychiatric MAID, noted pointedly that “people with mental disorders are requesting and accessing MAID now.” They include patients whose requests are “largely motivated by their mental disorder but who happen to have another qualifying condition,” as well as those with “long histories of suicidality” or questionable decision-making capacity. They may also be poor and homeless and have little interaction with the health-care system. But whatever the case, Gupta said, when it comes to navigating the complex intersection of MAID and mental illness, “assessors and health-care providers already do this.”

The argument was meant to assuage concerns about clinical readiness. For critics, however, it only reinforced a belief that, in some cases, physical conditions are simply being used to bear the legal weight of a different, ineligible basis for MAID, including mental disorders. In one of Canada’s more controversial cases, a 61-year-old man named Alan Nichols, who had a history of depression and other conditions, applied for MAID in 2019 while on suicide watch at a British Columbia hospital. A few weeks later, he was euthanized on the basis of “hearing loss.”

### Read: ‘I’m the doctor who is here to help you die’

As Canadians await the rollout of psychiatric MAID, Parliament’s Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying has formally recommended expanding MAID access to mature minors. In the committee’s 2023 report, following a series of hearings, lawmakers acknowledged the various factors that could affect young people’s capacity to evaluate their circumstances—for one, the adolescent brain’s far from fully developed faculties for “risk assessment and decision-making.” But they noted that,

according to several parliamentary witnesses, children with serious medical conditions “tend to possess an uncommon level of maturity.” The committee advised that MAID be limited (“at this stage”) to minors with reasonably foreseeable natural deaths, and endorsed a requirement for “parental consultation,” but not parental consent. As a lawyer with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan told the committee, “Parents may be reluctant to consent to the death of their child.”

Whether Canadian officials will eventually add mature minors to the eligibility list remains unclear. At the moment, their attention is largely focused on a different category of expansion. Last year, the province of Quebec took the next step in what some regard as the “natural evolution” of MAID: the honoring of advance requests to be euthanized. Under the Quebec law, patients in the province with cognitive conditions such as Alzheimer’s can define a threshold they don’t wish to cross. Some people might request to die when they no longer recognize their children, for example; others might indicate incontinence as a benchmark. When the threshold seems to have been reached, perhaps after an alert from a “trusted third party,” a MAID practitioner determines whether the patient is indeed suffering intolerably according to the terms of the advance request. Since 2016, public demand for this expansion has been steady, fueled by the testimonies of those who have watched loved ones endure the full course of dementia and do not want to suffer the same fate.

In parliamentary hearings, Quebec officials have discussed the potential problem of “pleasant dementia,” acknowledging that it might be difficult for a provider to euthanize someone who “seems happy” and “absolutely doesn’t remember” consenting to an assisted death earlier in their illness. Quebec officials have also discussed the issue of resistance. The Netherlands, the only other jurisdiction where euthanizing an incapable but conscious person as a result of an advance request is legal, offers an example of what MAID in such a circumstance could look like.

In 2016, a geriatrician in the Netherlands [euthanized an elderly woman with Alzheimer’s](#) who, four years earlier, shortly after being diagnosed, had advised that she wanted to die when she was “no longer able to live at home.” Eventually, the woman was admitted to a nursing home, and her husband duly asked the facility’s geriatrician to initiate MAID. The

geriatrician, along with two other doctors, agreed that the woman was “suffering hopelessly and intolerably.” On the day of the euthanasia, the geriatrician decided to add a sedative surreptitiously to the woman’s coffee; it was given to “prevent a struggle,” the doctor would later explain, and surreptitiously because the woman would have “asked questions” and “refused to take it.” But as the injections began, the woman reacted and tried to sit up. Her family helped hold her down until the procedure was over and she was dead. The case prompted the first criminal investigation under the country’s euthanasia law. The physician was acquitted by a district court in 2019, and that decision was upheld by the Dutch supreme court the following year.

In Quebec, more than 100 advance requests have been filed; according to several sources, at least one has been carried out. The law currently states that any sign of refusal “must be respected”; at the same time, if the clinician determines that expressions of resistance are “behavioural symptoms” of a patient’s illness, and not necessarily an actual objection to receiving MAID, the euthanasia can continue anyway. [The Canadian Association of MAiD Assessors and Providers has stated](#) that “pre-sedating the person with medications such as benzodiazepines may be warranted to avoid potential behaviours that may result from misunderstanding.”

Laurent Boisvert, an emergency physician in Montreal who has euthanized some 600 people since 2015, told me that he has thus far helped seven patients, recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, to file advance requests, and that they included clear instructions on what he is to do in the event of resistance. He is not concerned about potentially encountering happy dementia. “It doesn’t exist,” he said.

The Canadian government had tried, in the early years of MAID, to forecast the country’s demand for assisted death. The first projection, in 2018, was that Canada’s MAID rate would achieve a “steady state” of 2 percent of total deaths; then, in 2022, federal officials estimated that the rate would stabilize at 4 percent by 2033. After Canada blew past both numbers—the latter, 11 years ahead of schedule—officials simply stopped publishing predictions.

And yet it was never clear how Canadians were meant to understand their country’s assisted-death rate: whether, in the government’s view, there is

such a thing as too much MAID. In parliamentary hearings, federal officials have indicated that a national rate of 7 percent—the rate already reached in Quebec—might be potentially “concerning” and “wise and prudent to look into,” but did not elaborate further. If Canadian leaders feel viscerally troubled by a certain prevalence of euthanasia, they seem reluctant to explain why.

The original assumption was that euthanasia in Canada would follow roughly the same trajectory that euthanasia had followed in Belgium and the Netherlands. But even under those permissive regimes, the law requires that patients exhaust all available treatment options before seeking euthanasia. In Canada, where ensuring access has always been paramount, such a requirement was thought to be too much of an infringement on patient autonomy. Although Track 2 requires that patients be informed of possible alternative means of alleviating their suffering, it does not require that those options actually be made available. Last year, the Quebec government [announced plans to spend nearly \\$1 million on a study](#) of why so many people in the province are choosing to die by euthanasia. The announcement came shortly after Michel Bureau, who heads Quebec’s MAID-oversight committee, expressed concern that assisted death is no longer viewed as an option of last resort. But had it ever been?

It doesn’t feel quite right to say that Canada slid down a slippery slope, because keeping off the slope never seems to have been the priority. But on one point Etienne Montero, the former head of the European Institute of Bioethics, was correct: When autonomy is entrenched as the guiding principle, exclusions and safeguards eventually begin to seem arbitrary and even cruel. This is the tension inherent in the euthanasia debate, the reason why the practice, once set in motion, becomes exceedingly difficult to restrain. As Canada’s former Liberal Senate leader [James Cowan once put it](#): “How can we turn away and ignore the pleas of suffering Canadians?”

In the end, the most meaningful guardrails on MAID may well turn out to be the providers themselves. Legislative will has generally been fixed in the direction of more; public opinion flickers in response to specific issues, but so far remains largely settled. If MAID reaches a limit in Canada, it will happen only when practitioners decide what they can tolerate—morally or, in a system with a shrinking supply of providers, logically. “You cannot

ask us to provide at the rate we're providing right now," Claude Rivard, who has decided not to accept advance requests, told me. "The limit will always be the evaluation and the provider. It will rest with them. They will have to do the evaluation, and they will have to say, 'No, it's not acceptable.'"

Lori Verigin, a nurse practitioner who provides euthanasia in rural British Columbia, understands that people are concerned about their "rights"—about "not being heard." Yet she is the person on the line when it comes to ensuring those rights. This is what is often lost in Canada's conversation about assisted dying—about the push for expansion in the academic papers or in the rarefied halls of Parliament. It is not the lawmaker or lawyer or pundit who must administer an injection and stop a heart.

On a Thursday morning in June, I joined Verigin in her white Volkswagen as she drove to a MAID appointment near the town of Trail. I had not come to witness the provision, to be a stranger in the room. I was with Verigin because I wanted to understand the before-and-after of MAID, the clinical and emotional labor involved in helping someone die. After eight years, Verigin had developed a familiar set of rhythms. She had her preferred pharmacy, the Shoppers Drug Mart close to her home, in Castlegar. This morning she had arrived as the doors opened, prescription in hand; the pharmacist greeted her by name before placing on the counter a medium-size case resembling a tackle box. Verigin unsnapped the lid and confirmed that everything was in place: the vials of midazolam, lidocaine, propofol, and rocuronium.

Verigin had known the patient she was about to visit for some time, she told me. Roughly a year ago, the patient, suffering from metastatic cancer, had first asked about MAID; two weeks earlier, the patient had looked at her and said: "I'm just done." Verigin sipped from a to-go cup of coffee, decaf, as she drove. "I try not to have too much caffeine before," she said.

En route to the patient's home, we stopped by the hospital to pick up Beth, an oncology nurse who often assists Verigin. Beth has a gift for assessing the energy of the room, Verigin told me, knowing when someone suddenly needed a hand held or a Kleenex, thus allowing Verigin to fully focus on the injections. Beth's mother, Ruth, had also helped solve a problem Verigin had experienced early in her MAID practice—how obtrusive it felt rolling a

clattering tray of syringes into the already fragile atmosphere of a patient's home. A quilter, Ruth had designed a soft pouch with syringe inserts that rolled up like a towel. The fabric was tie-dyed and the soft bundle was secured with a Velcro strap.



The homemade roll-up pouch that Lori Verigin uses for MAID provisions  
(Jennilee Marigomen for *The Atlantic*)

We parked outside the patient's ranch-style home, the white sun glaring in a clear sky. At exactly 10 a.m., the two clinicians walked to the door, where moments later they were greeted by one of the patient's grown children. The door clicked faintly behind them.

I remained in the car, and for the next while watched the slow turn of other Thursdays: the neighbors across the street chatting in their sunroom, a dog lazing in front of a box fan. Then, at 11:39 a.m., a text message from Verigin: "We're done."

The clinicians were quiet as they slid into the car. "Things weren't as predictable today," Verigin said finally. Finding a vein had been unusually hard, and they worried momentarily that they might not succeed, at one point leaving the room to discuss their options. "It's always been a challenge," the patient had reassured Beth. "You're very gentle. It's not hurting." The patient had remained calm, unfazed. "I'm sure they were doing that for the kids, to be honest," Beth said. "And probably me too."

Once the IV was in place, the provision had unfolded as planned: midazolam, lidocaine, propofol, rocuronium, death. Afterward, the family had thanked and hugged the clinicians. "I think the end outcome was good," Verigin said. "I probably would be feeling different if we couldn't fulfill the patient's wish, because it's also that big buildup and the anticipation."

Verigin described a checklist of follow-up tasks, including the paperwork that has to be submitted within 72 hours. But for the rest of the day, her duties as a nurse practitioner would take priority. Only later that night, she said, would she finally have the space to reflect on the events of the morning. When the syringes and vials have been packed up, and the goodbyes to the survivors have been said, it is Lori Verigin who sits in her garden alone. "We are not just robots out there—we're human beings," she said. "And there has to be some respect and acknowledgment for that." Verigin told me she never wants to feel "comfortable" providing assistance in dying. The day she did, she said, would be the day she knew to step back.



Lori Verigin in British Columbia (Jennilee Marigomen for *The Atlantic*)

For Verigin, providing MAID to Track 1 patients and even to some Track 2 patients has “felt sensible.” She explained: “Yes, I may be nervous. Yes, I may be sad. Yes, I may have a lot of, you know, emotions around it, but I feel like it’s the right thing.” But when it comes to minors, or patients solely with mental disorders, or patients making advance requests, “I don’t know if I’ll feel that way.”

After dropping Beth off at the hospital in Trail, Verigin headed to the Shoppers Drug Mart in Castlegar to return the tackle box. Verigin told the pharmacist she would be back on June 18—the date of her next provision. The pharmacist was grateful for the notice. She would go ahead and order the propofol.

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# How NASA Engineered Its Own Decline

**The agency once projected America's loftiest ideals. Then it ceded its ambitions to Elon Musk.**

by Franklin Foer



In the beginning, there was the name. A prophet guided Errol Musk to bestow it on his eldest son, or so he claimed. The seer was Wernher von Braun, a German engineer and an inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove. Though von Braun had built missiles for Hitler and used concentration-camp prisoners for manual labor, the U.S. government

recruited him, and eventually brought him to a base in Alabama and tasked him with sending men into orbit, then to the moon.

Von Braun had always dreamed of venturing deeper into the galaxy. Back in 1949, before he emerged as the godfather of the American space program, he spilled his fantasies onto the page, in a novel titled *Project Mars*. He described how a new form of government would take hold on the red planet: a technocracy capable of the biggest and boldest things. At the helm of this Martian state would sit a supreme leader, known as the Elon.

Whatever the truth of this origin story, Elon Musk has seized on von Braun's prophecy as his destiny. Since the founding of SpaceX in 2002, his business decisions and political calculations have been made with a transcendent goal in mind: the moment when he carries the human species to a new homeland, a planet millions of miles away, where colonists will be insulated from the ravages of nuclear war, climate change, malevolent AI, and all the unforeseen disasters that will inevitably crush life on Earth. Far away from the old, broken planet, a libertarian utopia will flourish, under the beneficent sway of the Elon.

This sense of destiny led Musk on October 5, 2024, to a Trump rally in western Pennsylvania. Wearing a gray T-shirt bearing the slogan OCCUPY MARS, Musk told the crowd that Trump "must win to preserve democracy in America." Thanks to their alliance, Musk briefly achieved powers that few unelected Americans have ever possessed. As the head of the Department of Government Efficiency, he demolished large swaths of the federal government and began to remake the infrastructure of the state. For a few erratic months, he assumed the role of the terrestrial Elon.

Five months into Trump's second term, Musk's inflated sense of his place in history clashed with the ego of his benefactor, the relationship ruptured, and each man threatened to ruin the other. Musk vowed that his spaceships would no longer carry Americans, or the supplies that sustain them, to the International Space Station. Trump threatened SpaceX's federal contracts, reportedly worth \$22 billion. Weeks later, they were still bludgeoning each other. In July, Trump mused that he might deport the South African-born Musk, who in turn impishly announced that he would bankroll a new third party.

Both men are likely bluffing. Musk still needs the U.S. government to fund his grand designs. And the U.S. government very much needs Elon Musk.

Last year, 95 percent of the rockets launched in the United States were launched by SpaceX. [NASA was a mere passenger](#). Musk has crowded low Earth orbit with satellites (nearly 8,000) that are becoming indispensable to the military's capacity to communicate and the government's surveillance of hostile powers. Even if Trump had pushed to dislodge Musk, he couldn't. No rival could readily replace the services his companies provide.

### [Read: American spaceflight is now in Elon Musk's hands](#)

That Musk has superseded NASA is a very American parable. A generation ago, NASA was the crown jewel of the U.S. government. It was created in 1958 to demonstrate the superiority of the American way of life, and it succeeded brilliantly. In the course of landing humans on the lunar surface, NASA became the symbol of America's competence and swagger, of how it—alone among the nations of the Earth—inhabited the future. NASA's astronauts were 20th-century cowboys, admired in corners of the world that usually abhorred Americans. The Apollo crews traveled to the heavens on behalf of "all mankind," a phrase that appeared both in the act that created NASA and on the plaque left on the moon by Apollo 11. Even NASA's engineers, with their skinny ties and rolled-up sleeves, became the stuff of Hollywood legend.



The rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun. In his novel, *Project Mars*, he imagined humans traveling to the red planet. (*Evening Standard / Getty*)

NASA was born at the height of liberalism's faith in government, and its demise tracks the decline of that faith. As the United States lost confidence in its ability to accomplish great things, it turned to Musk as a potential savior, and ultimately surrendered to him. This isn't an instance of crony capitalism, but a tale about well-meaning administrations, of both parties, pursuing grandiose ambitions without the vision, competence, or funding to realize them.

If the highest goal of policy is efficiency, then all the money that the government has spent on SpaceX makes sense. Even the company's most vituperative detractors acknowledge its engineering genius and applaud its success in driving down launch expenses (unlike many defense contractors, SpaceX largely eats the cost of its failures). But in the course of bolstering Musk, in privatizing a public good, the government has allowed one billionaire to hold excessive sway. With the flick of a switch, he now has the

power to shut down constellations of satellites, to isolate a nation, to hobble the operations of an entire army.

Because of Musk's indispensability, his values have come to dominate America's aspirations in space, draining the lyricism from the old NASA mission. Space was once a realm of cooperation, beyond commercial interests and military pursuits. Now it is the site of military brinkmanship and a source of raw materials that nations hope to plunder. The humanistic pursuit of the mysteries of the universe has been replaced by an obsession with rocket power. Musk wants to use his influence to impose the improbable endeavor of Mars colonization on the nation, enriching him as it depletes its own coffers. In the vacuum left by a nation's faded ambitions, Musk's delusions of destiny have taken hold.

NASA's golden age emerged from fiasco.

John F. Kennedy campaigned for president promising a "New Frontier," but he didn't really care about satellites or astronauts. Just before he launched his campaign, he confided to one scientist over drinks in Boston that he considered rockets a waste of money. A few years later, during a conversation recorded in the White House, he flatly admitted, "I'm not that interested in space."

But by the third month of his presidency, Kennedy was drowning in humiliation. On April 12, 1961, the Soviets hurled the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin—or Gaga, as the international press adoringly called him—into orbit for 108 minutes, the first human to journey into the beyond. *The New York Times* hailed it as evidence of "Soviet superiority." The impression of American incompetence deepened five days later, when a CIA-backed army of exiles botched an invasion of Cuba, a misadventure immortalized as the Bay of Pigs.

In his desperation to redirect the narrative, Kennedy abruptly became an enthusiast for the most ambitious plan sitting on NASA's shelf. On April 21, shortly after his proxy army surrendered to the Communists, Kennedy suffered a bruising press conference. In response to a question about the relative inferiority of the American space program, he riffed, "If we can get to the moon before the Russians, then we should."



The Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin on his way to becoming the first man to orbit the Earth (Bettmann / Getty)

A month later, Kennedy delivered an address to a joint session of Congress that more formally launched the Apollo program. Even then, he did so harboring private doubts about the price tag, perhaps stoked by the fact that his own father considered his promise to land an astronaut on the lunar surface by 1970 an appalling act of profligacy. Joe Kennedy fumed, “Damn it, I taught Jack better than that.”

When Kennedy voiced his ambitions, he stumbled into tautology: “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” He charged the

American government with executing an engineering task more difficult than any other in human history, for no higher reason than to prove that it could be done. That was the animating spirit of “New Frontier” liberalism.

From the vantage of the present—when public faith in government is threadbare—it is staggering to consider the heedless investment Americans allowed Washington to make in a project with little tangible payoff, beyond the pursuit of global prestige in its zero-sum contest with the Soviet Union. At its peak, Apollo employed a workforce of about 400,000. The lunar program cost an astonishing \$28 billion, somewhere north of \$300 billion in today’s dollars.

On Kennedy’s own terms, Apollo was a world-historic triumph. The legendary NASA chief James Webb and his deputies helped create a whole new philosophy for running immense organizations: systems management. NASA simultaneously micromanaged its engineers—knowing that an unwanted speck of dust could trigger catastrophe—while giving them wide latitude to innovate. Complex flowcharts helped coordinate the work of dozens of teams across academia, corporations, and government laboratories. Despite using untested technologies, NASA achieved a near-perfect safety record, marred only by the 1967 fire that killed three astronauts in their capsule as they prepared for the first crewed Apollo mission. Even then, NASA’s relentless culture kept pushing toward its goal.

Unlike the Soviets, who attempted to dictate public perceptions by manically managing the images of their exploits, NASA made the risky decision to allow its project to unfurl on live television. The Apollo voyages made for the most gripping viewing in the history of the medium. By one estimate, a fifth of the planet watched Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk live, an especially astonishing number given the limited global reach of television in 1969.

The space program then was a projection of prowess and self-confidence. “Space was the platform from which the social revolution of the 1960s was launched,” Lyndon B. Johnson wrote in his memoir. “If we could send a man to the moon, we knew we should be able to send a poor boy to school and to provide decent medical care for the aged.” Apollo was a model for planned social change and technocratic governance—the prototype for tomorrow.

The savviest bureaucrats are hitmakers. Years before Armstrong planted the American flag on the moon, NASA had begun prepping plans for a sequel to Apollo. Only after the enchanted moment of the lunar touchdown did the agency meet with Vice President Spiro Agnew to unveil the next phase of America's future in space. On August 4, 1969, 15 days after Armstrong's giant leap, NASA pitched the Nixon administration on its vision of sending humans to Mars.

To nail the presentation, NASA brought von Braun, its most celebrated engineer, to do the talking. After all, they were selling the vision he had sketched in his novel decades earlier. By 1982, NASA said, it hoped to land on Mars in two nuclear-powered planetary vehicles, each carrying six crew members.

But in NASA's moment of glory, von Braun and his colleagues couldn't restrain themselves. They added items to their wish list: a lunar base, a space station, and a shuttle that would transport humans. Pandering before the ego that NASA needed most in order to realize its request, von Braun said he wanted to send Richard Nixon into orbit as part of the nation's celebration of its bicentennial, in 1976.

Agnew loved it. Nixon did not. He must have despised the thought of shoveling so much money into a program so closely associated with the blessed memory of his old nemesis John Kennedy. Besides, the moment of boundless technocracy was over, doomed by deficits and a sharp swerve in the public mood. During the unending debacle of Vietnam, the public had lost faith in grand ventures dreamed up by whiz kids. Meanwhile, civil-rights leaders railed against the diversion of major expenditures away from social programs. The sociologist Amitai Etzioni popularized a term that captured the rising sourness: *moon-doggle*.

At a moment when Nixon was hoping to retrench, NASA proposed a program with an annual cost that would eventually rise to \$10 billion, carried out over more than a decade—an expense far greater than Apollo's. Von Braun and his colleagues had badly misread the room.



President Richard Nixon and the Apollo 13 crewmen on April 18, 1970.  
Nixon took a dim view of funding a trip to Mars. (Heritage Images / Getty)

In the end, Nixon agreed to give NASA an annual budget of just over \$3 billion, and he scythed away every component of the plan except for the space station and the space shuttle, which was a reusable system that promised to limit the costs of space travel. But a shuttle traveling where? As Apollo wrapped up its final missions—and even three of those were canceled—NASA no longer had a clear destination.

Many of the leaders who carried the agency through the space race, including von Braun, began to depart for the private sector. During Apollo, government engineers had been omnipresent, stationed in the factories of its contractors; they mastered details. That changed in the shuttle era, with its constricted budgets and diminished expectations. Instead of micromanaging

contractors, NASA began to defer to them, giving aerospace corporations greater sway over vessel design. In fact, it allowed them to own the underlying intellectual property for the vehicles and their component parts.

Because the contractors understood the minutiae and they didn't, NASA officials grew reluctant to push for innovations, paralyzed by the fear that they might be blamed for a contractor's mistake. A bureaucratic mindset took hold, first slowly, and then more dramatically after the Challenger disaster, in 1986. Freeman Dyson, the visionary astrophysicist, drew a devastating distinction between the "paper NASA," largely a figment of memory and pop culture, and the "real NASA," the sclerotic organization that rose in its place. Those criticisms were both legitimate and somewhat unfair; in the shadow of crewed spaceflight, which garnered attention and prestige, NASA pursued advances in robotics and astrophysics, such as the Galileo mission to Jupiter. But without a human on board, those accomplishments lacked the romance of NASA's golden age.

In the summer of 2001, Elon Musk sat in a Manhattan hotel room, fired up his laptop, and browsed NASA.gov. He had just returned from a party on Long Island. On the ride home, he'd told a friend, "I've always wanted to do something in space, but I don't think there's anything that an individual can do."

Musk was plenty rich and plenty bored. After a short stint as the CEO of the company that became PayPal, he was ousted by its board, although he remained its largest shareholder. He had bought a Czechoslovakian military jet, which he'd spent hundreds of hours flying, but that hardly held his attention. He was in search of his next thing.

Musk grew up a fan of science fiction, steeped in the extraterrestrial fantasies of Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein. The reality of space exploration, however, wasn't a subject that he'd studied closely, until he scanned NASA's site and had a revelation.

He assumed that he would read about impending missions to Mars. "I figured it had to be soon, because we went to the moon in 1969, so we must be about to go to Mars," he told the biographer Walter Isaacson. But no such plan existed, so he decided that it was his mission to push humanity forward.

The thought made Musk something of a cliché. Space is a magnet for rich dilettantes and—more than a sports car or yacht—the ultimate expression of wealth and power. Because space travel is ingrained in our culture as the hardest human endeavor, demanding immense resources, it commands cultural respect. For Musk—who had been bullied by both his schoolmates and his father—space offered the possibility of seizing the world by the lapels and announcing his greatness. A classic revenge fantasy.

Musk wasn't wrong about the diminished state of NASA. Remarking on the grim persistence of the space-shuttle program, [Neil deGrasse Tyson said that NASA's flagship vessel](#) “boldly went where man had gone hundreds of times before”—135 times, to be precise. These missions were essential to the construction of the Hubble Space Telescope and the International Space Station, but never ventured beyond the familiar confines of low Earth orbit. Even as Russia was losing the Cold War, it was winning the final chapters of the space race, fielding a program that was better conceived and more active. Indeed, when Musk first pondered launching rockets, he went to Russia in hope of buying used ones; this entailed sitting through vodka-drenched meals with apparatchiks hoping to bilk him. In the end, he concluded that it was cheaper to make his own. In 2002, he founded SpaceX.

Musk was a salesman, determined to make Washington turn its head—and sink cash into his start-up, housed in a suburban-Los Angeles warehouse, which was just beginning to cobble together its first rockets. In 2003, he trucked a seven-story rocket to D.C. and parked it outside the Air and Space Museum on the National Mall. Soon enough, the Air Force and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency gave him several million dollars to help grow SpaceX. In 2006, NASA awarded him \$278 million for the first installment of a new program called Commercial Orbital Transportation Services. He received these grants even though SpaceX hadn't successfully launched a rocket. (Musk and the company did not respond to a request for comment for this story.)

For years, NASA had leaned on the same old set of big contractors: Northrop Grumman, Rockwell, Boeing. These were stodgy firms, anchors in the military-industrial complex, codependent on the government, with their own bureaucracies. Their projects tended to swell in cost and underperform. NASA officials knew these organization's failings and were desperate to

reverse them. The shuttle program was scheduled for imminent retirement, but what would replace it? There was still a space station floating in low Earth orbit, with astronauts awaiting resupply.

At the dawn of the 21st century, *disruption* was the magic word, incanted by investors and fetishized in the media. It was only a matter of time before the government began chasing the same trendy idea, betting that a new group of entrepreneurs would arrive on the scene to create companies that would shatter all the old models.

In 2010, Barack Obama canceled Constellation, George W. Bush's program for returning to the moon. NASA was getting out of the business of owning spaceships and rockets—instead, it would rent ones owned by private firms. When Obama visited the Kennedy Space Center to announce this change in direction, he viewed one of Musk's Falcon 9 rockets, which was sitting on a launchpad. Photographers captured the young president and the budding billionaire strolling together, a passing of the torch to Musk.

Although he isn't usually generous with sharing credit for his successes, even Musk admits that the Obama administration rescued SpaceX. Burning through cash and crashing test rockets, his company was nearing collapse. But the change in policy opened a reservoir of funds for him. At SpaceX's bleakest moment, which Musk also describes as "the worst year of my life," NASA awarded it a \$1.6 billion contract to carry cargo to the International Space Station. In his state of relief and jubilation, Musk changed his computer password to "ilovenasa."

Of all the emerging firms in the age of commercial spaceflight, SpaceX was the most deserving of success. Musk had an eye for engineering talent, and he preached an audacious vision, which attracted young idealists. Impatient, he questioned truisms and cut costs with unrelenting intensity, even if it meant buying a tool on eBay to align a rocket.

Despite its strengths, SpaceX couldn't triumph in this new age, because the idea of commercialization was inherently flawed. There wasn't a market for rocket launches, asteroid mining, or spacesuit design. For his very expensive product, there was one customer, with a limited budget: the U.S. government. That realization ultimately prodded Musk into another line of

business. In 2015, he created Starlink. His rockets would launch satellites into orbit to supply Earth with internet service, a far more lucrative business.

Starlink turned SpaceX into a behemoth. Because SpaceX was constantly launching rockets—and not just for NASA—it kept gaining invaluable new data and insights, which allowed it to produce cheaper, better rockets. Because nothing is more exciting to an engineer than actually launching things, the company drained talent from its competition.

Musk’s goal wasn’t to achieve the banal status of monopolist. “The lens of getting to Mars has motivated *every* SpaceX decision,” Musk told Isaacson. When he created Starlink, he did so because it would supply him with the capital to build rockets powerful enough to carry humanity to Mars.

Musk, who describes himself as a “cultural Christian,” is not an especially religious person. But his imagination is fixed on the end of days—the possibility of an “extinction event”—because his childhood experiences push his adult anxieties in the direction of the catastrophic. In South Africa, he came of age amid the decaying of the apartheid state, which had once promised to safeguard his racial caste. His family, like his society, was fracturing. When he was 8, his parents divorced. He now recalls his father as a monstrous figure. “Almost every evil thing you could possibly think of, he has done,” [Musk once told Rolling Stone](#). (Errol Musk told *Rolling Stone* that “he has never intentionally threatened or hurt anyone,” and later said that his son’s comments were about their political differences at the time.)

Given this turbulence—and the paucity of reliable authority in his early life—it’s hardly surprising that Musk would fear the worst. He found refuge from the world’s harsh realities in the pages of sci-fi novels. But visions of apocalypse are the genre’s elemental motif, and the fiction he devoured often magnified his dread.

Musk sought out works that offered both cause for despair and a vision of transcendence. Those Asimov novels featured hyperrational heroes, many of them engineers, who saved humanity by building space colonies where civilization could begin anew. Musk borrowed his self-conception from these protagonists.

From an early age, the colonization of Mars became Musk's idée fixe. At various points, he has described his companies as contributing to that overarching mission. Tesla's Cybertrucks are vehicles that could be adapted to traverse the Martian terrain; its solar panels, a potential energy source for a future colony. He has even reportedly claimed that his social-media platform, X, could serve as an experiment in decentralized governance—testing how a Martian outpost might use consensus as the basis for lawmaking, because he envisions a minimalist government on the red planet.

At SpaceX, Musk's employees have begun sketching the contours of life on Mars. One team is designing housing and communal spaces; Musk has already named the first Martian city Terminus, after a planetary colony in Asimov's novels. Other teams are developing spacesuits tailored to the planet's harsh environment and exploring the feasibility of human reproduction there. (When [The New York Times](#) reported on these teams, Musk denied their existence.)

No engineering challenge in human history rivals the audacity of making Mars a place humans can call home. Gwynne Shotwell, SpaceX's president and chief operating officer, calls it a "fixer-upper" planet, a hilarious understatement. Mars's atmosphere is 95 percent carbon dioxide and laced with nitrogen, among other elements and a smattering of toxins.

Temperatures can plunge to -225 degrees Fahrenheit. My colleague Ross Andersen once memorably described [what would happen to a human body on Mars](#): "If you were to stroll onto its surface without a spacesuit, your eyes and skin would peel away like sheets of burning paper, and your blood would turn to steam, killing you within 30 seconds." Even with a suit, protection would be tenuous: Cosmic radiation would seep through, and Martian dust storms—filled with abrasive, electrically charged particles—could bypass seams and seals.

[Read: To get to Mars, NASA might finally need to hire explorers](#)

These impossible conditions are compounded by Mars's distance from Earth. Launches are feasible only about once every 26 months, when the planets' orbits align to minimize travel time and fuel requirements. Even then, it takes roughly eight months for a spacecraft to reach Mars, making it exceedingly difficult to resupply a colony or rescue its inhabitants.

When challenged about these mortal dangers, Musk is disarmingly relaxed, and has said that he himself would make the journey. “People will probably die along the way, just as happened in the settling of the United States,” he told Isaacson. “But it will be incredibly inspiring, and we must have inspiring things in the world.”



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off from Launch Complex 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in March 2025. (Manuel Mazzanti / NurPhoto / AP)

To warm the planet, he proposes detonating nuclear bombs over Mars's poles, which he claims could induce a greenhouse effect—an idea he relishes, perhaps as a troll. SpaceX once sold T-shirts bearing the slogan Nuke Mars. According to a top scientist at the Russian space agency, Roscosmos, it would take more than 10,000 nuclear-tipped missiles to carry out Musk's plan. Even Wernher von Braun's fictional doppelgänger, Dr. Strangelove, might have winced at such breezy talk of thermonuclear explosions.

President Kennedy was also willing to take absurd risks in pursuit of cosmic ambition, invoking the Cold War imperative to "bear any burden." But he did so to demonstrate national greatness. Musk is seeking to spend trillions—and risk human lives—to demonstrate his own. Because his reality emerges from fiction, Musk is untethered from any sense of earthly constraints. His sense of his own role in the plot emerges from his desire to leap into myth.

Musk's fixation on Mars also functions as a kind of ancestor worship, echoing a family mythology of flight from decline. In 1950, his grandfather Joshua Haldeman left Canada for South Africa in search of a freer society—one he believed could withstand the collapse of Western civilization. [Haldeman's doomsday rhetoric](#) railed against Jewish bankers and "hordes of Coloured people," whom he claimed were being manipulated to destroy "White Christian Civilization." In the rise of apartheid, he saw not repression but redemption, a last stand for the values he held sacred.

[Read: Elon Musk's anti-Semitic, apartheid-loving grandfather](#)

Like his grandfather, Musk is obsessed with staving off civilizational collapse. He does not voice his fears in openly racist terms—instead framing them in the language of freedom and survival—but he is fixated on the notion of a gene pool with diminishing intelligence. "If each successive generation of smart people has fewer kids, that's probably bad," he told the biographer Ashlee Vance. His rhetoric is provocative, but slippery enough to avoid outright extremism.

Over years of statements, social-media posts, and interviews, however, a pattern has emerged: Musk sees Mars not merely as a lifeboat but as a laboratory—an opportunity to reengineer humanity. On a new planet, far from Earth's chaos and constraint, he imagines a society remade in his own image.

This belief is rooted in a kind of technological social Darwinism, the idea that evolution can be steered, or even upgraded, by engineering. It's how he describes an animating premise of Neuralink, the company he co-founded that is developing brain-computer interfaces that aim to merge human cognition with machines and effectively create a species of cyborgs.

The same spirit infuses Musk's obsession with procreation, and he's doing his part. He now has at least [14 children, by \*The Wall Street Journal\*'s count](#), with four biological mothers. In his worldview, apocalypse and salvation converge: Either we become a race of engineered brilliance, or we vanish, and Mars is the greatest opportunity for remaking humanity. In a sense, it follows a classic pattern of migration. The bold depart in search of opportunity, while those who remain face extinction. Survival becomes a test of worth. Those who stay behind will, by their inaction, mark themselves as unfit for the future.

Once settlers arrive on Mars, Musk has suggested that life forms—possibly including humans—might be bioengineered to survive the planet's harsh environment. [In one interview](#), he noted that humanity has long shaped organisms “by sort of selective breeding.” Humans, he intimated, could be bred like cows. He's reportedly prepared to supply his own genetic material to the effort. Sources told the *Times* that Musk has offered to donate his sperm to help seed a Martian colony (which Musk later denied).

Using a concept borrowed from Asimov's fiction, Musk says that Martian colonists will serve as “the light of consciousness.” They are humanity's last hope, the counterweight to a dark age that could follow Earth's destruction. But what's dark is his vision of abandoning Earth and investing the species' faith in a self-selected elite, one that mirrors Musk's own values, and perhaps even his traits. The idea is megalomaniacal, and is the antithesis of the old NASA ideal: for all mankind.

In the earliest hours of a spring morning, I drove across a Florida causeway, through a nature reserve filled with alligators and wild boars, to hallowed ground: Launch Complex 39A, once a stage for NASA's majesty.

More than half a century ago, Apollo 11 began its ascent to the moon here. During the space race, it was perhaps the most exciting place on the planet, poised between glory and disaster: 11 Apollo missions lifted off from here, followed by 82 space-shuttle launches. NASA framed 39A for the television era: an enormous American flag fluttering at one end of the horizon, a giant digital countdown clock at the other. Even now, a weathered CBS News sign hangs on a small cinder-block building with a perfect view of the site—the same spot where Walter Cronkite once narrated liftoffs in his authoritative baritone.

By 2013, the launchpad had become an expensive, unused relic, but because of its presence on the National Register of Historic Places, it couldn't be torn down. Musk coveted the site, as did his longtime competitor, Jeff Bezos. But at the time, Bezos didn't have a rocket capable of flying from 39A. SpaceX won the rights to lease the launchpad for the next 20 years. The old theater of American dreams now belonged to Musk.

I arrived at 39A to watch the launch of Falcon 9—SpaceX's workhorse rocket, the height of a 20-story building—which would help deliver cargo to the International Space Station, circling in low Earth orbit. There's no alternative to the Falcon 9, and there's no rival to SpaceX. For the time being, the company is the only domestic entity, public or private, with the capacity to deliver crew and cargo to the space station.

Lyndon Johnson once said that “control of space means control of the world.” In his day, space was a way to project national strength to a global audience through displays of technical superiority. Today, it has become a domain of warfare, alongside land, sea, and air. Modern combat operations rely on space-based systems that guide munitions, coordinate communications, and spy on adversaries. Without dominance in orbit, terrestrial forces would be deaf, blind, and largely immobile. In 2019, then, the Pentagon created the Space Force as the sixth branch of the military.

If space is power, then Musk's role is badly understated. It's no longer accurate to call him merely the world's richest earthling. The United States is now dependent on him in its quest to command space. Through its Starshield division, SpaceX provides space-based communication for the U.S. armed forces; its [satellites can reportedly track hypersonic and ballistic missiles](#) and extend the government's surveillance reach to nearly every corner of the globe. In April, the Space Force awarded SpaceX a majority of its contracts for a batch of national-security missions over the coming years.

Some of this work involves agencies such as the National Reconnaissance Office, placing it within the penumbra of classification. The true extent of the government's reliance on SpaceX is largely obscured, rarely scrutinized, and only loosely regulated. Yet the dependency is undeniable. If Musk were to withhold support—out of principle, pique, or profit motive—the government could find itself stranded. None of SpaceX's competitors yet possesses the capability to replace it. (A Space Force spokesperson said that it relies on “a number of industry partners,” including SpaceX, and continues to seek “to broaden the diversity of potential vendors,” adding that the Department of Defense “exercises rigorous oversight” of its contracts. The spokesperson also denied claims that SpaceX's satellites track missiles.)

The war in Ukraine has offered a chilling glimpse of the risks posed by Musk's role as interstellar gatekeeper. In the early days of the invasion, SpaceX rushed to supply Ukraine with Starlink terminals, helping to replace communications systems debilitated by Russian cyberattacks and advancing troops. It was a noble gesture and a strategic boon. Ukrainian forces, empowered by the new technology, coordinated scrappy, asymmetrical tactics that blunted Russian advances.

But Musk's commitment soon wavered. In September 2022, SpaceX denied a Ukrainian request to extend Starlink coverage to Crimea, effectively blocking a planned strike on Russian naval forces in Sevastopol. (Starting that fall, [Musk began speaking with Vladimir Putin](#) at length, according to the *Journal*, troubling the U.S. intelligence community.) In the months that followed, the company imposed new geographic limits on Starlink's use, restricting its application in areas where Ukraine might otherwise target Russia's vulnerabilities. Musk framed the move as an act of prudent restraint that would help avert World War III. But it also exposed an unsettling

reality: Ukraine's battlefield operations were subject to [the discretion of a single person](#). "My Starlink system is the backbone of the Ukrainian army," he posted on X. "Their entire front line would collapse if I turned it off."

Musk's preeminence marks a profound shift in the history of American political economy. During the Cold War, the military-industrial complex was driven by corporations that operated as handmaidens to the state. They had outsize influence, but remained largely bureaucratic, gray-flannel institutions —cogs in a sprawling, profitable machine. Musk is different. Years of hagiographic media coverage and his immense social-media reach birthed legions of fanboys and nurtured a cult of personality. His achievements command awe.



In the damp Florida night, I stood on a sandbank and trained my eyes on Launch Complex 39A as the countdown clock ticked toward zero. And then, without the benefit of Cronkite's narration, I watched the Falcon 9 violently part the darkness, with a payload bound for the space station. A few minutes later, a light appeared in the sky: The reusable rocket was returning home. Majestic and imperious, it cast a warm glow over the palm trees.

For a moment this spring, Musk's grand ambitions seemed like they might buckle. In Washington, it had long been assumed that Musk and Trump would turn on each other. When it finally happened, the spark, fittingly, was NASA. Musk had [pushed to install his friend Jared Isaacman](#) as head of the

agency—a move that stank of cronyism. In 2021, Isaacman, a tech entrepreneur, had paid SpaceX millions to chase a childhood dream of flying to space. That deal soon led to a friendship, and eventually, his company owning a stake in SpaceX itself.

### [Read: MAGA goes to Mars](#)

When Trump soured on Musk, he struck where it hurt most. Annoyed after learning of Isaacman’s past donations to Democratic campaigns, the president withdrew the nomination on May 31. Musk received the move as one in a string of betrayals and erupted online, warning that the Jeffrey Epstein files would implicate Trump and that the president’s spending bill was a “disgusting abomination.” The clash soon shifted to space. Musk threatened to decommission the spacecraft resupplying the International Space Station; Trump blustered that he would order a review of SpaceX’s government contracts.

Yet for all the rancor, there is no sign that SpaceX has actually suffered. Trump and Musk have dismembered the federal bureaucracy, but its old tendencies are still prevailing; the apparatus clings to the vendors that have delivered results. Even as Trump raged, Washington’s dependence on Musk was growing. In June, a Space Force commander said that [SpaceX will play a crucial part in the MILNET program](#), a new constellation of 480-plus satellites. Reportedly, the Pentagon will pay for it; the intelligence community will oversee it; Musk will run it.

In its proposed 2026 budget, the Trump administration moved to bankroll Musk’s deeper ambitions, albeit with a fraction of the gargantuan sum required. Trump has proposed spending \$1 billion to accelerate a mission to Mars and fund the design of spacesuits, landing systems, and other technologies that would make a voyage feasible.

The money spent on human space exploration will be pried from NASA’s other programs, even as the agency’s total budget is set to shrink by nearly 25 percent and its workforce by one-third. To fulfill Musk’s cosmic destiny, the administration is gutting NASA’s broader scientific mission—the thing that NASA does best. (When asked about this shift, a NASA spokesperson described “leading the way in human exploration of our solar system” as the

agency's "core mission," and added that it is "contributing to a competitive market that will increase commercial innovation.") Human spaceflight has floundered for decades, haunted by its inability to replicate its greatest achievements and whipsawed by changing presidential priorities. And the importance of astronauts to the enterprise of exploration, which was always questionable, has further diminished as the quality of robots has improved.

At the same time, and without attracting the same kind of fanfare, NASA continues to display extraordinary acumen in science; its research initiatives are arguably the most profound ventures in all of government. They address the greatest mysteries in the universe: How did life begin? Are we alone in the cosmos?

The government—so often viewed as a soul-sapping bureaucracy—has helped supply answers to these most spiritual of questions. In the late 1980s and early '90s, the Cosmic Background Explorer provided empirical support for the Big Bang theory. In 2020, after the OSIRIS-REx probe reached the asteroid Bennu, it collected a sample from a type of primordial projectile thought to have delivered life's building blocks to early Earth. Using the Hubble Space Telescope, NASA helped determine the age of the universe, affirmed the existence of dark energy, and extended humanity's gaze into distant galaxies and black holes. By capturing light from galaxies as they existed more than 13 billion years ago, one of NASA's telescopes has effectively peered into the universe's distant past.

For all of Musk's mockery of NASA's supposed lack of ambition, the agency had already mounted a daring campaign to explore Mars—albeit with robots, not settlers. Over the decades, it sent a fleet of rovers (Spirit, Opportunity, Curiosity, Perseverance) to wander the plains of the red planet, drilling into rock and searching for ancient traces of water and life.

NASA's lenses point inward as well as outward. Its satellites have documented the melting of the polar ice caps and the destruction of forests, alerting humanity to the planet's precarity. Unlike the technological spin-offs NASA often touts to Congress to justify its existence, these discoveries aren't fleeting breakthroughs in applied engineering. They are the path to humanity's self-knowledge—discoveries that private firms will never pursue, because their value can't be monetized.

Put differently, Trump's budget is a cultural document. It reflects a shift in public values. Not so long ago, the astronomer Carl Sagan shaped how Americans thought about space. He did so through elegant books and his television series, *Cosmos*, which reached an estimated 500 million viewers worldwide. At its core, his project was to extol the virtues of the scientific method, which requires and promotes skepticism and humility—a way of thinking that could help society resist the lure of authoritarianism. He exuded wonder, a value he hoped to cultivate in Americans, and harkened back to the humanism of the Enlightenment, which was unfussy about the boundaries between philosophy and science.

Every time I see Musk, I think of Sagan—because Musk is his opposite. He is a creature not of science but of engineering. He owes his fortune to the brute force of his rockets, and the awe they inspire. There's nothing humble about his manner. Rather than celebrate the fragile, improvised nature of human existence, Musk seeks to optimize or overwrite it—in the name of evolution, in pursuit of profit, in the vainglorious fulfillment of his adolescent fantasies. Where Sagan envisioned cooperation, Musk embodies the triumph of the individual. Where Sagan cautioned against the unintended consequences of technology, Musk charges headlong into the next disruption. That rush will eventually sweep away many of the old strictures confining him.

For more than 50 years, the U.S. government has mulled missions to Mars and never mustered the political will to fund one. Elon Musk is doing just that. SpaceX is planning to launch its first uncrewed mission to Mars—neither funded nor formally sanctioned by NASA—in late 2026, timed for planetary alignment.

Musk himself pegs the odds of hitting that 2026 window at 50–50. His history of theatrics and unmet deadlines suggests that those odds may be overstated. But this is more than bluster. He is building the most powerful rocket in human history, testing it at a relentless pace, and forcing it toward viability through sheer will. However speculative his timelines, they point to a plausible destination: the day when Musk escapes the gravitational pull of the U.S. government.

The story of Elon Musk can be told using the genre of fiction that he reveres most. In an act of hubris, NASA gave life to a creature called SpaceX, believing it could help achieve humanity's loftiest ambitions. But, as in all great parables about technology, the creation eclipsed the creator. What was meant to be a partner became a force of domination. The master lost control. And so begins a new part of the tale: a dystopian chapter written in the language of liberation.

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\* Lead image sources (clockwise from bottom left): NASA; Corbis / Getty; Gianluigi Guercia / Getty; Bettmann / Getty; Alex Brandon / AP

<sup>1</sup> Image sources: NASA; Chip Somodevilla / Getty; Bill Ingalls / NASA / Getty; Jewel Samad / AFP / Getty; Marvin Joseph / The Washington Post / Getty

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# Chasing le Carré in Corfu

**If you're trying to find someone  
who doesn't want to be found, you  
don't go to the obvious places.**

by Honor Jones

Black dress, pink coat, thick beige stockings. This is the third time I've seen her. She walks down the middle of the street outside my window, her head bent forward under its helmet of grandmother hair. She carries her handbag like a briefcase with a bomb in it. She has the look of someone whose friends are all dead.

I saw her first outside Saint Spyridon Church, lighting a candle. And then again in Spianada Square, among the scootering children. I lean out the window to watch her disappear around the corner. Maybe there's nothing suspicious about it. Corfu is a small city, on a small island in Greece. From my hotel room I can see the green edge of the cricket pitch where, in John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*, the Czech agent, Axel, chased Magnus Pym in slow, limping circles.

I think *A Perfect Spy* is a nearly perfect book. Only a few of its more than 600 pages are actually about Corfu. If you wanted to write about le Carré and travel, you could go almost anywhere: Vienna or Bern or Kenya or Cornwall would make the list long before Corfu. But as Axel would tell you, if you're trying to find someone who doesn't want to be found, you don't go to the obvious places. You ignore the booked flight to Washington and the train ticket to Paris because you know they're false leads. You look where the trail is colder.

## Read: An innocent abroad in Mark Twain's Paris

Magnus is an MI6 agent who has betrayed England by spying for the Czechs, but now the Americans are onto him. In a frenzy of denial, he drags his wife, Mary, and son, Tom, on a frantic Greek holiday: Lesbos, Athens, Hydra, Spetses. The Pyms change “boats and islands like driven souls, though only Magnus knows the curse, only Magnus knows who is pursuing them and why, and Magnus has locked that secret behind his smile with all his others.”

Corfu is where their journey begins. For centuries the island was a playground for spies, a place torn between great powers, where minor officials could go to make a name for themselves or jaded expats could try to fashion new lives. But if you’re trying to escape the past, it’s the wrong place to go.



The clock tower of the Old Fortress in Corfu (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

Over the span of a generation, beginning at the turn of the 19th century, Corfu tumbled through the hands of four great powers. Walk into the city's

Old Fortress and you'll meet a winged lion of Venice, whose face was hammered off by the Napoleonic French. On the ground is a paving stone where a Russian soldier carved his name. [Prince Philip](#) was baptized here, in the fortress's Church of St. George. Nearly 2,000 Jews were held here, before deportation to Birkenau. Across the water: Albania. My tour guide, Andreas Grammenos, tells me about a defector who swam the channel to escape the Communist dictatorship. Andreas's father served in Corfu's Coast Guard, and still has the pool float the man used to get across. The fortress's clock tower kept time until 2003, when the last technician who knew how to fix it retired.

It was the British who brought cricket here, Magnus tells Tom. "Magnus knew those things. Or pretended to." Their holiday is all late lunches, amorous siestas, tennis lessons for Tom, and, for restless Magnus, long evening walks. Until, one day, Axel tracks him down on the cricket pitch to warn him. "It's over," he says. "Come with me." He means disappear, defect. The double agent has to pick a side, or at least admit that the game is over.

Magnus refuses to hear it. He spins lies, hauling his family to one island after another: "Sorry, Mabs. Sorry, Tom, old chap. But this place is too damned idyllic." Tom knows something, though. He has seen this "mystery man at cricket," he tells his mother—a "wise, stringy man with a sad moustache like a conjuror's." They went "round and round the ground together with the thin man going slowly like an invalid." He was kind to Magnus. He was "like a father."

John le Carré's real name was David Cornwell, and his father, Ronnie, [was a con man and a criminal](#). In 1977, David took his family—his first wife, Ann, and their three boys—to Corfu on vacation. Adam Sisman tells the story in [\*John le Carré: The Biography\*](#):

Sitting outside at an open-air beach restaurant David overheard a familiar voice talking at a nearby table.

"Reg?" he asked tentatively.

"What if I am?"

“It’s David.”

The suspicious glare melted. “Ronnie’s boy!”

Reg was one of Ronnie’s loyal hangers-on, a cast of courtiers that included innocent marks and faithful henchmen and a rotating roster of replacement mothers for young le Carré. Reg told le Carré that he and others had taken the rap for some of Ronnie’s crimes, and served time in prison for them.

“We was all bent, son,” Reg said. “But your dad was very, very bent.”

That scene from Corfu turns up in *A Perfect Spy*, though Reg is replaced by a character named Syd Lemon, who drops these lines back in England. Syd is speaking with Magnus’s MI6 boss, who is trying to find him before the Czechs, or Magnus’s own despair, catch up to him. In the novel, Magnus’s father is called Rick. “I did time” for Rick, Syd says. “A lot of us did.” Rick “was bent, you see. We was all bent.” But Rick “was very bent indeed.”

Le Carré tried, and felt he failed, for 25 years to write about his father, before he found, with *A Perfect Spy*, that he could lay the story of life with Ronnie over the armature of an espionage thriller. The book begins with Magnus on the run, heading for the hiding place of his own imagination, a guest room by the sea. The story slips between past and present while the narration slips from first person to third and back again, sometimes from sentence to sentence, which is entirely natural, because we’re not the people we used to be. Magnus’s childhood—the missing mother; the boarding schools; the weepy, groping hugs from Rick—is every bit as harrowing as being hunted by the East and West at once.

Le Carré wrote 26 novels before he died, in 2020. He traveled to research many of them. Everywhere he went, he dreaded meeting victims of his father’s schemes. Ronnie showed up in Cairo and Beirut—trying, maybe, to get into the gun-running business—then in Singapore, where he was arrested; then in Hong Kong, where he was arrested again. Now a letter came: Ronnie was in Delhi, claiming that he’d been appointed a maharaja’s right-hand man and asking his son for £1,000.

The seductive power of this guy! This is a man who wooed his own prosecutor. After a conviction for fraud, Ronnie wrote admiring letters from prison to the man who had argued against his appeal. Upon his release, Sisman writes, the prosecutor came to stay with Ronnie, who introduced him to “obliging young ladies.” Decades later, in Hong Kong, where le Carré went to research the novel that became *The Honourable Schoolboy*, he ran into the policeman who had overseen Ronnie’s imprisonment there: “Mr. Cornwell, sir, your father is one of the finest men I have ever met,” he told le Carré. “When I get back to London, he’s going to set me up in business.” You couldn’t touch him without being corrupted by him.

When Ronnie died, le Carré may have thought himself liberated. The feeling lasted for about five minutes. At the beginning of *A Perfect Spy*, the phone rings, announcing the death of Magnus’s father: “I’m free,” Magnus says. But even after death, Rick keeps turning up. Very near the end, *A Perfect Spy* is addressed to his ghost.

Once, a woman contacted le Carré. He had no idea who she was, but she seemed to believe that they’d had sex on a train. Of course, Sisman writes, it had been Ronnie, “passing himself off as the world-famous author.” The first person, the second, the third; fact, fiction, death—they were no match for Ronnie Cornwell.

One day in Corfu, I catch a cricket match played by a group of veterans. A man asks me something in Greek, then switches to English: He’s wondering if I can explain the rules to his son. I’ve been writing in a notebook—maybe he thought I was some kind of official, keeping score, when what I’m actually writing is that I’ve never seen so many older gentlemen taking their shirts off in public. They thwack the ball into the parking lot, and I imagine le Carré pretending to watch while dreading, always, the possibility of his father appearing in the crowd.



A narrow street in Corfu's Old Town (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

Just as Corfu isn't the first place you'd look for John le Carré, I'm probably not the first person you'd expect to write about him. *A Perfect Spy* was

published in 1986, the year I was born. Also, I'm a woman. One of the complaints against le Carré was that he couldn't write female characters. They tended to be beautiful and faithless, always running off, one critic wrote, "with another male, like a cat." Anyway, I don't care about that. I don't really care about the women or lack of women in the 25 other novels, either.

The character I identify with is Magnus—with his compulsive adoption of other people's values, with the way he puts on an identity only to cast it aside, with his damage and delusion, with his ravenous need to be loved. Everywhere he goes, Magnus compiles pieces of Magnus: from Ronnie's retinue; [from the fancy boys at boarding school](#) and the Oxford socialists he spies on; from Axel; from Jack Brotherhood, his mentor at MI6. "Magnus is a great imitator," Axel tells Mary. "I sometimes think he is entirely put together from bits of other people, poor fellow."

### [Read: John le Carré knew England's secrets](#)

At the risk of turning an island full of real people into a handy literary metaphor: Corfu is a good place to think about influence and identity, about how so many disparate fragments can cohere into a whole.

Corfu emerged from the churn of ancient and colonial history only to plunge into devastating world wars—as many as one in 20 Greeks died during World War II from violence or famine—and then into a brutal civil war, and then into a tourism boom. Today, about a quarter of its inhabitants were born abroad. And yet Andreas's family has lived here for eight generations. He can find, in the archives stored in the Old Fortress, letters from his ancestors haggling over the price of wine. When he was growing up, you didn't need a ticket to enter the fortress, and he and his friends used to play there, daring one another to run through the tunnels, the children's footsteps echoing off the ancient walls.

Andreas takes me and Alice, the photographer I'm traveling with, from the fortress through the city. The houses aren't the blue and white of the Greek flag. Instead (thanks to the Venetians) they're sherbet-colored—cream and butter yellow, pink, apricot, and peach. The cafés on the avenue near the cricket pitch are busy, but whole grids of empty tables remain roped off. It's

April, and one feels already the dull tread of the approaching summer crowds. Andreas says that as late as the 1950s, it would have been “unthinkable” for an average villager to come here for coffee—only the elite were welcome. Tourism changed that. One night, a restaurant is playing “I’m too sexy for my shirt, too sexy for my shirt, so sexy it hurts.”

Today Corfu is one of the most densely populated World Heritage Sites in Europe. Andreas says the local government is involved in a contentious debate about air conditioners: Can they be rigged up outside people’s homes, or are they a desecration of the scenic past? It’s hot here in the summer. Personally, I don’t think tourists should even be allowed to see this place if they’re going to go around complaining about AC units ruining their view.

Tourists and locals agree that the most important thing to do in Corfu is visit Saint Spyridon. Spyridon was a shepherd in Cyprus who became a bishop, went to the Council of Nicaea, performed miracles, and (after he died and was disinterred and embalmed) traveled through the mountains from Constantinople to Greece in a sack on the back of a mule.

Outside his church, people buy candles to light: The bigger the prayer, the bigger the candle. Inside is his body. Each morning, Spyridon’s slippers feet are revealed so that people can kiss them, but it’s the afternoon now, so the line to get into the crypt isn’t too long. Above his casket dangle dozens of silver thuribles, and from the silver thuribles, silver *tamata*—plaques engraved with the images of answered prayers (a baby, a heart)—and little silver ships, the symbol of Corfu. The church’s altar stands behind an iconostasis, a wall of icons and paintings. Andreas says this is a common feature of Greek Orthodox churches because his countrymen “love mystery”—because they understand the power of the hidden, the unseen.

Corfu was never a center of diplomatic activity, but it was a hub of information, where facts were dug up and traded like the metals and minerals of other lands. Aggelis Zarokostas, a historian at Utrecht University who is writing a book about 18th- and 19th-century espionage in mainland Greece and the Ionian Islands, told me the story of an agent named for the saint. Spiridon Foresti was a British consul who kept filing dispatches even after the French put him under house arrest for a year. He must have dropped

his reports out his windows; how he was able to gather the information while locked inside, no one knows.



A woman lights candles outside the Holy Church of Saint Spyridon. (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

British rule in Corfu lasted from 1815 to 1864. The English argued that they were bringing law and order to a cutthroat land. Immediately after they arrived, a plague broke out. Officials, going door-to-door gathering information about the ill and their contacts, dragged priests along with them to threaten people with excommunication if they didn't comply.

Long after Corfu was turned over to the Greeks, traces of the English remained, as did many expats. The most famous were the Durrells, who moved to Corfu in 1935. There's a popular British TV show about them: *The Durrells*, which begins with a broke and plucky widow ditching England to

bring her four obstreperous children here. Two of those children grew up to be authors—Gerald, the famous nature writer, and Lawrence, the novelist.

I brought with me a copy of Lawrence's memoir of life on the island, *Prospero's Cell*. Published in 1945, it's full of lush writing about the landscape: "The olives are tacking madly from grey to silver"; the "cypresses are like drawn bows." But he can be nasty about the "natives." He describes the hands and feet of peasants as "blunt and hideous: mere spades grown upon the members through a long battle with soil, ropes, and wood." After reading that, I feel a little less good about the fact that my hotel room is called the Durrell suite. There's a bust of Lawrence outside the Old Fortress. Andreas says people think that he was a spy too.

Alice and I have gone back to the fortress to visit the library housed in the British garrison, where the manager lets us touch a 16th-century edition of *The Iliad*. As we're leaving, some teenagers on a field trip mark us out as English (Alice is English but, for the record, I'm American—and this is the one and only time I have ever imagined that this fact could be a defense against anything). They mock us, mercilessly. To be fair, all they do is say "Hello," but they draw out the greeting in a way that makes clear what a totally preposterous word *hello* is. "Hellooo," they keep saying, waving and laughing at us.



The public library in Corfu is located inside the Old Fortress. (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

We hustle away with our heads down and continue on to the two main sites of British memory in Corfu: the British Cemetery and the estate of Mon Repos.

The cemetery is a disheveled green dreamscape. Just inside is an ancient stone lawn roller, more sculpture now than tool. For a little while, I pulled it, creaking, through the long grasses. Farther in, we find the graves. There are the ancient ones of midshipmen and babies, the graves of British soldiers from both world wars, and then, from more recent years, plaques for the expats: Barbara Anne Reason (BORN IN OXFORD, ENGLAND—FOREVER IN CORFU), Gladys Fish (RESTING IN CORFU: A PLACE SO LOVED), and Adda Dendrinou:

BORN KARACHI 1941  
DIED CORFU 1995  
TRUE CORFIOTE SHE LOVED ENGLAND

The Mon Repos estate was built in 1828 for the British lord high commissioner, and a century later, Prince Philip was born on a tabletop inside. I would like to see the table, but the shutters of the mansion are sealed tight. (Anyway, it turns out the table is long gone—sold to a shipping company for the boardroom of its London office.) You can find Roman retaining walls on the grounds here, and debris from a temple to Hera. In the back of the derelict garden is a row of metal arches driven into the ground like a giant's croquet hoops. They were covered in wisteria once, but the shade must have shifted as the trees grew taller. The plant didn't die though; it just reared up and threw itself toward the sun, kudzuing over the nearby treetops. I lie there, breathing in the sweet, woozy smell of wild wisteria.

At the bottom of the estate, Alice and I step off a jetty and swim out into the cold, blue sea. By this point, I totally get Gladys Fish: I'm ready to live and die here too.



Wisteria drapes over trees in the now-derelict garden of the Mon Repos estate. (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

I'm not supposed to be swimming and smelling flowers; I'm supposed to be doing John le Carré things: walking on cliff tops muttering to myself, checking dead-letter drops, sweet-talking my agents in the field. I keep looking for men in dark raincoats, but it doesn't rain and my sole candidate for either surveillance or countersurveillance remains my lady with the handbag.

Le Carré [was only ever a minor spy](#), and he quit the service the minute he could afford to. After the publication of [\*The Spy Who Came In From the Cold\*](#), in 1963, his family lived abroad to lower their tax bill. Some of that time was spent in Greece, on Crete. Le Carré was miserable there. He wrote long letters to the wife of a colleague and flew back and forth to Paris, London, and New York, where he was suddenly famous. When he was on

Crete, his wife, Ann, nagged him about visiting the island’s historic sites. “I hate ruins,” he wrote to a friend. He took so many walks and made so many long-distance phone calls that, Sisman writes, “a local official accused him of spying for the Turks and asked for a bribe as the price of his silence.”

### [Read: The double life of John le Carré](#)

At one point, a Czech writer, or someone posing as a Czech writer, came to Crete and kept asking him to meet. Le Carré was nervous enough to contact the head of the Athens station to report that Czech intelligence was trying to recruit him. In an interview with Sisman, I asked if he really believed this. His biography isn’t a study of just a fascinating man, but a fascinating liar, one who—very much like his father—spun fictions that he then struggled to distinguish from the truth. But a Czech approach, Sisman told me, seemed plausible.

Le Carré said that he was drawn to spying because he wanted to serve his country—and to do penance for Ronnie’s crimes. But he also found that secrecy could be a “place of escape,” a way of feeling “superior to life rather than engaging in it.” He “relished the notion of appearing to be someone dull, while all the time I was someone terribly exciting.”

After spying, he found other ways to escape. One was writing; another was travel. When he went abroad to research a new novel, he would go in character, pretending to be whomever he was writing about. Maybe he got the idea from a training exercise for MI6, which involved posing as a German tourist in Brighton; he kept the accent up even while being interrogated by local police.



A building undergoing renovations in Old Town (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

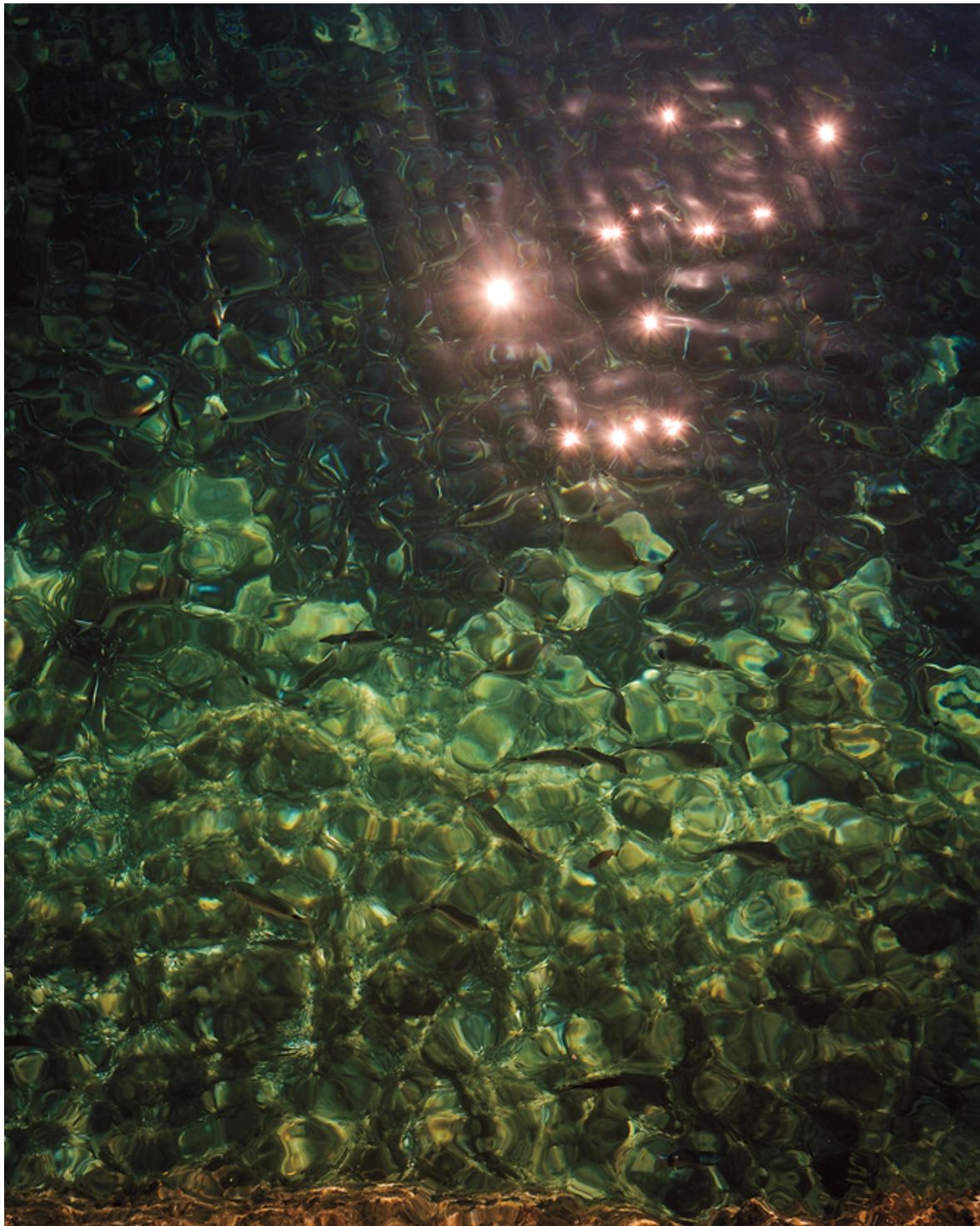
I had the idea that, while writing this story, I would go around pretending to be other people. I'm hopeless at accents, but I could come up with backstories: Maybe I was heading to a destination bachelorette party, or was

on a soul-searching journey before pursuing IVF. My name might be Olivia, or Stef, or Gladys Fish. But getting strangers to ask me personal questions is harder than I expected, especially because I mostly want to talk with Alice, and after two days together, I've already told her everything that has ever happened to me. Magnus never has that problem. "Why don't you just tell me the truth?" Mary demands. "The suggestion amused him."

It was not until I read Sisman's second book on the author, *The Secret Life of John le Carré*, which he published only after le Carré's death, that I grasped how much of le Carré's writing substitutes one place for another, one woman for another. In 1983, le Carré went back to Greece, this time to Lesbos. By then he'd divorced Ann and married his second wife, Jane, but he wasn't traveling with her. He had a new mistress—Sue Dawson, half his age. In the mornings, Sisman writes, she would "lean out of bed to peer through the gaps between the old floorboards to see him working in the room below." The book he was writing at the time was, of course, *A Perfect Spy*, in which Magnus's wife, Mary, does the same thing, looking through the "gaps between the planks" to see Magnus showering in the room downstairs.

Le Carré told Dawson that she was his muse. He'd met her through her job: producing abridged books for cassette tapes. Mary's job is to rebind old books for MI6 with secret messages hidden inside. The one book Magnus never lets her repair is his battered old copy of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, which purports to be the autobiography of an adventurer during the Thirty Years' War and is considered Germany's first literary masterpiece. Magnus won't let Mary touch *Simplicissimus* because it's the secret codebook he uses to communicate with Axel. When le Carré got home from Lesbos, his wife typed up the pages he'd written.

"Without much effort," Sisman writes, "I was able to identify eleven women with whom he had affairs," and "there were plenty more besides." Sisman suggests that cheating became a replacement for espionage for le Carré, an "ersatz form of spying"—another way to live a double life.



Fish in the sea off Mon Repos (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

It's 10 days until Good Friday, and according to Lawrence Durrell, there's a myth here about the 10 days leading to Good Friday: Goat-legged creatures

are sawing through the trunk of the tree that holds up the world. Every year, they've almost cut through it when they hear the shout of "Christ has arisen!" and it makes them drop their saws to fly "in a chattering throng into the real world—if I may call our world that."

Le Carré took inland walks, so Alice and I go inland too. In a little town called Nymfes, we see a waterfall: a glittering curtain down black rock, splitting into quick rivers that seem to uncannily slow down the longer you stare at them. It's not hard to imagine nymphs living in that sparkling grove; it's hard to imagine them *not* living there. I've never wanted to drink something so badly.

Next we head to the mountain village where we're staying the night. We Google the directions and start driving, and then say "This can't be right" 7,000 times. At first the road is a rustic track through olive groves. If we're going the wrong way, we don't mind too much; any moment now, it's sure to loop us back onto a road. Nope. Instead we climb higher and higher, to scenic overlook after scenic overlook, each one of which is, to me, a rocky hellscape.

We drive over boulders, the car juddering from side to side, the wheels spinning in loose stones. I really hope those ominous scraping sounds are just branches gouging the rental car's paint job and not jagged rocks tearing up the undercarriage. There are puddles too, deep-brown puddles of unknown fathoms in which the wheels will slip and the engine flood. I try to keep to the shallow edge while not, ideally, driving us straight off the cliff. Each turn is so tight that it appears to be a dead end. I crawl to a halt, crane my neck, sigh, and keep driving around a switchback so extreme, I feel like I'm driving back onto myself.

Should we have turned around? A thousand times, yes. It's clear that no one in the history of the world has ever driven up this path. The only explanation is that we angered the nymphs and they're leading us to our deaths and we are just completely going along with it. Alice keeps getting me to stop so that she can take photographs of how glorious everything is, while I keep checking the tires for puncture wounds. At one point, I try to Google *Are nymphs dangerous*, but something on the risks of dating a nymphomaniac comes up, and then my phone loses service again.

“How many kilometers left?” I ask Alice many, many times.

“Five point six,” she says. Countless white-knuckle hours later: “5.4.”

At last, we arrive in the village of Old Perithia. *If only Magnus had come this way, I keep thinking, Axel never would have found him.*

Corfu’s wealth used to be concentrated inland, because of the oaks and olive groves, and because it was safer from pirates there. According to the information sheet I find in my room that night, if you owned land near the water, you’d give it to your daughter, not your son. Old Perithia is a beautiful ghost town. It dates to 1357, and at times, as many as 1,200 people would have lived here. Now there are just a few tavernas, this bed and breakfast, meadows of blossoming wildflowers, and the ruins. The town was abandoned because of the tourists, who sucked all of the wealth and workers from the interior toward the coasts. But now so many tourists gather on the coasts that some tourists, wanting to get away from all the other tourists, come out here. They’re drawn by the promise that they’ll find something truer and more authentic here. To paraphrase Durrell: the real Corfu, if I may call it that.

Checking in, we ask the owner about the path we drove in on. “Were we ... supposed to do that?”

She looks at us blankly. “You came from where?”

“Back there, through the farm, up the mountain.”

We explain about the waterfall. She knows about the waterfall. She doesn’t know about any path.

She points to the parking lot. On the other side of it lies the ordinary, non-enchanted asphalt road.



A view of Corfu's Old Town at dusk (Alice Zoo for *The Atlantic*)

Early in his career, John le Carré tried to write a literary novel that had nothing to do with spying: *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*. It was awful. He wanted to be seen as a major writer, and resented the suggestion that he should stick to what he was good at. He resented, too, the assumption that once the Cold War ended, he'd have nothing left to write about. In the introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Little Drummer Girl*, he complained about people who believed his “rice-bowl was broken.” How could they not appreciate the fact that, “of my fourteen novels to date, five have had nothing whatever to do with the Cold War”?

The level of defensiveness is a little pathetic, a little endearing. As one critic put it, he had “already beaten the genre trap”—not by leaving genre behind, “but by finding unexpected room within, as in *A Perfect Spy*.” When Magnus goes to Greece, he isn’t just trying to get away from the Czechs and

the English while enjoying a nice vacation with his family; he's also trying to write a literary novel, one that will contain and transcend his past and reconcile the fragments of his many selves. Magnus fails to write that great work, the lines deteriorating into "ponderous aphorisms about betrayal": "betrayal as love," "betrayal as escape," "betrayal as travel." But le Carré succeeded. No one reading *A Perfect Spy* for the first time today is going to wonder if it's a literary novel. What else could it possibly be?

The thing I love most about the book is how it uses time to turn self-pity into something purer. A writer, Magnus thinks, is like a king, looking "down with love upon his subject, even when the subject is himself." Later he repeats the idea: If only he could write, he'd be able to "look with favour on this child that was myself." Maybe we should all be talking about our childhoods in the third person.

Le Carré's mother walked out when he and his older brother were sleeping upstairs. They were 5 and 7. "One just couldn't live like it," she later said, as if that were an excuse. When he met her again as an adult, she informed him that Ronnie had infected her with syphilis when she was pregnant, and that he had been born with pus dripping out of his eyes. Ronnie abused him—hurt him in every way you could hurt a child—but Ronnie was the only parent he had.

I'm sitting in Spianada Square when I see the old woman again. I've been watching children play soccer, and thinking about how always, everywhere in the world, the littlest boy is grabbing the ball with his hands to steady it before he kicks. She's wearing the same pink coat and clutching her bag, heading in the direction of the Old Fortress.

"Nothing goes away in life," Magnus says in Athens, between one island and another. He's been gone all night and most of the day, and Mary demands to know why. He's crying; he kisses her hand and she feels the tears. He makes up a story about having to talk down an old Czech agent who was threatening to expose him. It's a lie. It's one version of the truth.

## Travel Notes

### Swimming off Mon Repos

Maybe you've been to paradise before and can yawn at crystal-clear waters, but I've swum only off America's East Coast, where the ocean is mostly the color of strong tea, which is a nice way of saying the color of dirt. Normally I'd be appalled if my leg touched slimy fish, but when you can see them, it's totally different. I like the delicate fish, quick and bright as sunbeams. Floating in the water, you feel outside of time, as if this could be any century. Hera's worshippers might be carting their stones over the hilltop, or British soldiers could be galloping by—a "flash of red hunting coats through the olive-groves," as Lawrence Durrell describes their trace on the landscape. But I can't stay in the water long. My arms are ice, and my chest is hot. "It's your heart," Alice says. A more organized traveler would have brought a towel, but lying dripping on the sun-warmed rock is better.

### [Analipsi 7, Kerkyra 491 00, Greece](#)

#### Lunch at Pergola

This restaurant is in Corfu's Jewish quarter. The area was heavily bombed by the Nazis, and you can still see the gaps where buildings were destroyed. It makes you think about how full of history an empty space can be. Some ruins still stand, flowers growing through the blasted window frames. At the restaurant, we sit outside and order bread and salad and giant beans (that's what they're called: giant beans). A patchwork array of stray cats sit on their haunches, watching every bite we eat.

### [Ag. Sofias 15, Kerkyra 491 00, Greece](#)

#### Kissing Saint Spyridon's casket

The casket is small, though it holds another, smaller casket inside it. The inner one has a removable bottom for slipper access, because each morning, worshippers come to kiss the saint's feet. About once a year, the slippers are replaced with new ones. The idea is that he wears them out by walking around at night performing miracles—or maybe it's all the kissing. When I'm there, we can't get at the saint's feet, so the women around me press their lips to the casket instead. There's a faint odor, and when it's my turn to bend down, I realize, to my shame, that instead of kissing the casket, I'm sniffing it. But the smell isn't coming from the saint. It's coming from us:

the crowding people, the smell not of death but of life. Outside the crypt, a priest is blessing a baby in a blue onesie. While the pious wait in line for the saint, another baby waits in line for the priest.

### [Agiou Spiridonos 32, Kerkyra 491 00, Greece](#)

#### Treats

If you go to Corfu, I recommend eating lots of things—salty and sweet things, but especially sweet things—enfolded in pastry. Here’s a fun word: *galaktoboureko*. It’s custard under phyllo dough, with sweet syrup poured on top, and we have the best version at Periklis Alexis. The back of the bakery is decorated, inexplicably, with framed photos of fighter jets from sometime in the past century, deadly silver in blue skies. I have a feeling that le Carré would have appreciated that—some menace to cut the sweetness.

### [Agiou Vasileiou 12, Kerkyra 491 00, Greece](#)

#### The Merchant’s House in Old Perithia

Here you can sleep in a cozy suite knowing that you’re snuggled in a valley of spring wildflowers and ghosts. A printout in my room says that after Old Perithia was deserted, “nature decided to reclaim the land, and in doing so she enveloped the village.” I like this part: The creeping roots of orchids, asparagus, oregano, and wild mint “either protected many old buildings and churches, or sped up their ruination.” The village is abandoned except for the inn and a handful of taverns for day-trippers. We’re there on the very first day of the season, so I think we get special treatment, but the food is delicious and the owner gives us big slices of walnut cake for free. We linger until he has to ask us to leave, because his wife is late for physical therapy, and the appointment is probably a long way from Old Perithia.

### [Old Perithia, Kerkyra 49081, Greece](#)

#### Kanoni Beach

In *Prospero’s Cell*, Lawrence Durrell writes about “perhaps the loveliest beach in the world. Its name is Myrtiotissa.” Of course we go there. Nudist Only is spelled out in white pebbles at the top of the path. At the bottom is a

tangled heap of discarded beach umbrellas, the metal rusting, the sunshades in tatters. Accustomed by then to the baseline beauty available anywhere you look, we decide the view is just okay. “I’ve seen better beaches in England,” Alice says. But after a few days of searching, we find what is actually the loveliest beach in the world, or at least the loveliest beach on one April day in Corfu. It’s in the northeast, below a green spit of land lifted high over the sea. In fact, there’s a perfect beach on every side of the outcrop, but my favorite is this one, Kanoni. It was too cold to swim, or I’d still be there, diving off the rocks. Someday I want to go back and swim around the outcrop, stopping off at each side. Maybe I loved it so much because even while I was there, I was dreaming of returning.

### [Kassiopi 491 00, Greece](#)

#### Plous Books & Coffee

Corfu has plenty of tourist traps, long lanes lined with generic shops selling honey, body lotion made from donkey milk and olive oil, evil-deflecting blue-glass eyes, and—for some reason—tote bags with Frida Kahlo’s face on them, as if they ordered all of their products from the same conglomerate’s catalog. But this bookstore is quirky and sweet, with shabby damask chairs in a dimly lit back room where you can sit and drink coffee and read. I get a copy of *The Dead*, by James Joyce, in Greek. Notably: I can’t find any books by John le Carré.

### [Nikiforou Theotoki 91, Kerkyra 491 00, Greece](#)

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Chasing le Carré in Corfu.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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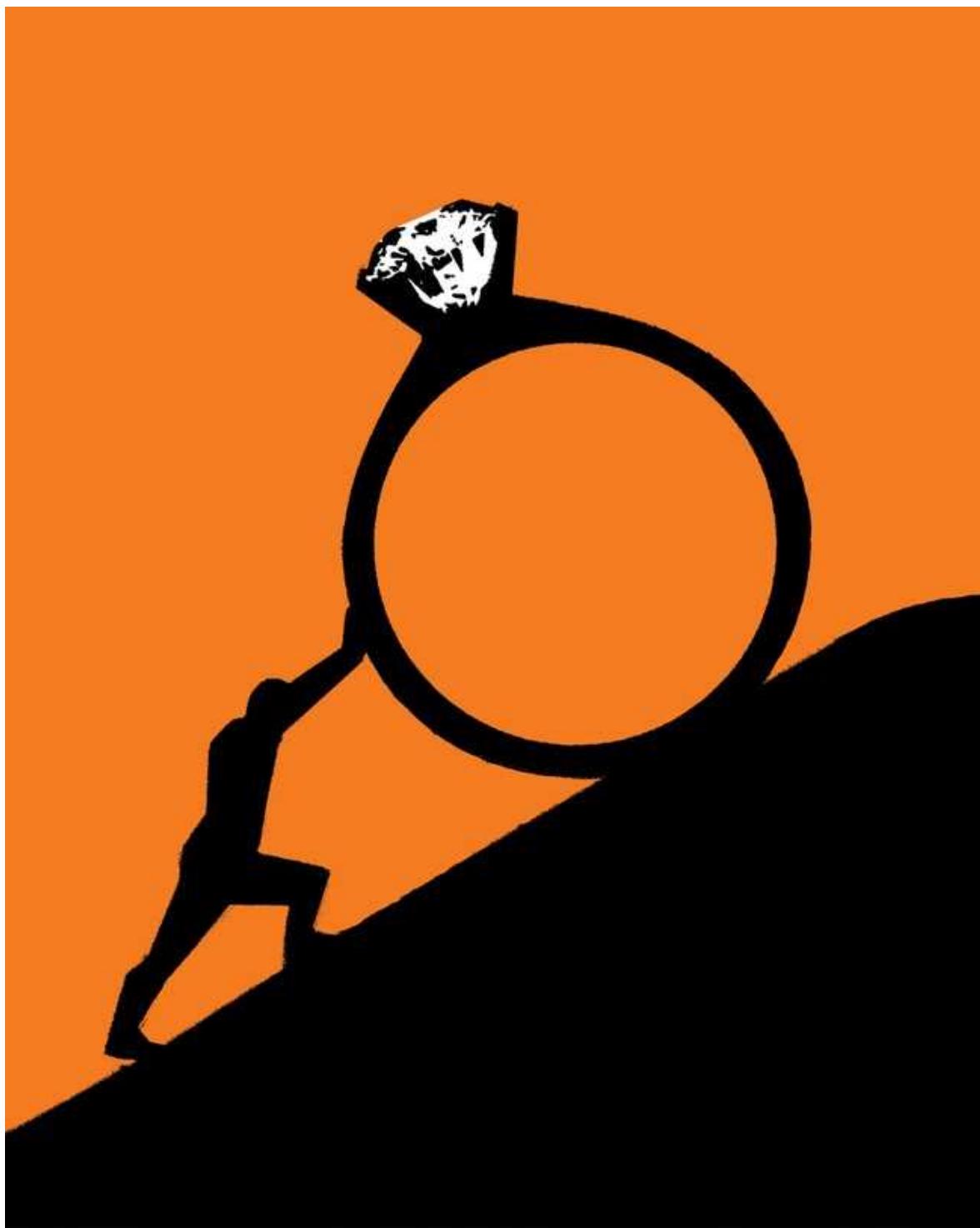
# Dispatches

- [\*\*Why Marriage Survives\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Twenty Years After the Storm\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Captain Ron's Guide to Fearless Flying\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Viewfinder: No Parents Allowed\*\*](#)

# Why Marriage Survives

**The institution has adapted, and is showing new signs of resilience.**

by Brad Wilcox



*This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

“There is zero statistical advantage” to getting married if you are a man in America today, Andrew Tate argued in a viral 2022 video on “why modern men don’t want marriage.” Women, he believes, are worthless anchors

—“They want you monogamous so that your testosterone level drops,” he posted on X last fall—and your marriage is likely to end in ruin anyway. “If you use your mind, if you use your head instead of your heart, and you look at the advantages to getting married,” there are none.

The loudest voice in the manosphere is [infamous for many things](#), including criminal charges of human trafficking, rape, and assault. (Tate has denied these charges.) But he is also notorious for launching a new front in the culture wars over marriage, aimed mostly at teenage boys and young men.

Tate believes that men no longer receive the deference they deserve from women in marriage, and bear more risk in divorce. He argues that men should focus on getting strong, making lots of money, and using—but not investing themselves in—the opposite sex. His evident appeal—clips of Tate garner hundreds of millions of impressions on YouTube and TikTok—would seem to be yet one more sign that our oldest social institution is in trouble.

### [Brad Wilcox: The awfulness of elite hypocrisy on marriage](#)

Critics on the left have been questioning the value of the institution for much longer, albeit from a different angle and with less venom than Tate. The realities of marriage in recent decades no doubt provide fuel for several varieties of criticism. Before divorce became widely permissible in the 1970s, difficult marriages—and even dangerous ones, for women—were by no means rare. Many women’s career dreams were thwarted by the demands of marriage, and some still are today. Many men have been hit hard financially and sidelined from their children’s lives by divorce. Innumerable children of divorce have had their faith in marriage extinguished by their parents’ inability to get along (a pattern that may help explain Tate’s animus toward the institution; his parents divorced when he was a child).

Some of these dynamics are both a cause and a consequence of the great family revolution of the late 20th century—one in which divorce and single parenthood surged. The share of prime-age adults (25 to 55) who were married fell from 83 percent in 1960 to 57 percent in 2010, according to census data, and the share of children born to unmarried parents rose from 5 to 41 percent.

These trends have left Americans bearish about marriage. Until 2022, the share of prime-age adults who were married was still on a long, slow downward march. According to [a 2023 Pew Research Center survey](#), a plurality of men and women were “pessimistic about the institution of marriage and the family.”

### From the October 1997 issue: Can the government prevent divorce?

But reports of marriage’s demise are exaggerated. Rather quietly, the post-’60s family revolution appears to have ended. Divorce is down and the share of children in two-parent families is up. Marriage as a social institution is showing new strength—even among groups that drifted away from the institution in the 20th century, including Black and working-class Americans. And contrary to criticisms on the left and right, that’s good news not only for America’s kids, but also—on average, though not always—for married men and women today.

“If the ongoing revolution in family and gender arrangements is largely irreversible,” the progressive family historian Stephanie Coontz said in an address to the National Council on Family Relations in 2013, “then we have to recognize divorced families, single-parent families, and married-couple families are all here to stay.”

At the time of her talk, the divorce rate was about twice as high as it had been in 1960, though it had come down somewhat from its 1981 peak. Nonmarital childbearing, meanwhile, had recently climbed to a record high. But even as Coontz spoke, two important shifts in family dynamics were under way.

First, the decline in the divorce rate was accelerating. Since the early 1980s, the divorce rate has now fallen by almost 40 percent—and about half of that decline has happened in just the past 15 years. (Unless otherwise noted, all figures in this article are the result of my analysis of national data.) The idea that marriage will end in failure half the time or more—well entrenched in many American minds—is out-of-date. The proportion of first marriages expected to end in [divorce has fallen to about 40 percent in recent years](#).

Second, nonmarital childbearing, after almost half a century of increase, stalled out in 2009 at 41 percent, ticking down to about 40 percent a few years later, where it has remained. For children, less divorce and a small decline in childbearing outside wedlock mean more stability. After falling for more than 40 years beginning in the late 1960s, the share of children living in married families bottomed out at 64 percent in 2012 before rising to 66 percent in 2024, according to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. And the share of children raised in an intact married family for the *duration* of their childhood has climbed from a low point of 52 percent in 2014 to 54 percent in 2024.

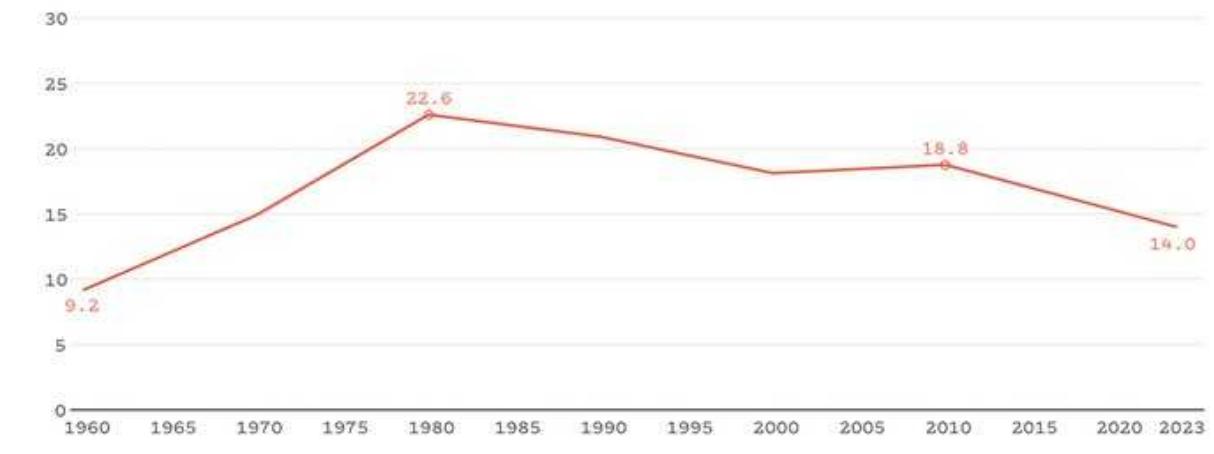
A third shift may now be under way as well, although it is much less established than the first two. The rate of new marriages among prime-age adults, which hit a nadir during the pandemic, has risen in each of the three years of data since 2020. In 2023, the most recent year available, it was higher than in any year since 2008. At least some of this increase is a post-pandemic bounce, but the *share* of all prime-age adults who are married has also leveled off in the past few years, which suggests that the decades-long decline in the proportion of Americans who are married may have reached its low point.

### [Listen: The new divide in American marriage](#)

Some of these shifts are modest. Coontz was surely right that couples and families in the U.S. will continue to live in a variety of arrangements. And particular caution is warranted as to the number of new marriages—it is quite possible that the longer trend toward fewer people marrying will reassert itself. But as a likely success story for those who *do* wed, and as an anchor for American family life, marriage looks like it's coming back. Stable marriage is a norm again, and the way that most people rear the rising generation.

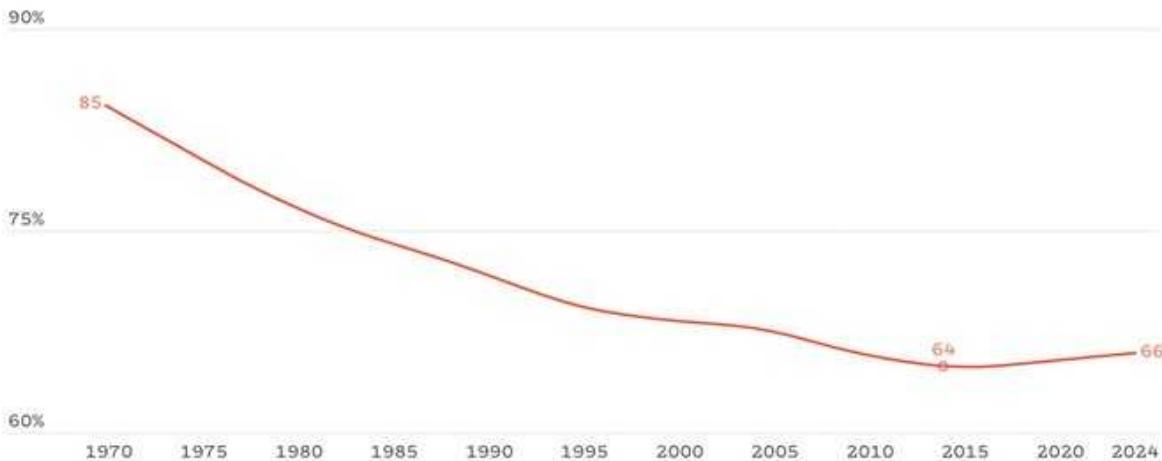
## Fewer Divorces

Number of new divorces per 1,000 married women



## Kids Growing Up in Married, Two-Parent Homes

Percentage of children under 18 living with married parents



The Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich has observed that “marriage represents the keystone institution for most—though not all—societies and may be the most primeval of human institutions.” On every continent and in every era, in more patriarchal societies and more egalitarian ones, it has governed family relationships. As an institution, it seems to build on the “evolutionary psychology of both men and women,” writes Nicholas Christakis, a sociologist at Yale, which “is to exchange love for support.”

The institution’s record contains no shortage of injustices. In many times and places, marriage has been bound up with the oppression of women. (This article focuses mostly on heterosexual marriages, because marriage was not

legal for same-sex couples until very recently.) Still, given the long history of marriage's persistence, its recent resilience in the U.S. should not be shocking. Nor should the reasons for that resilience. As it has before, marriage in the U.S. is adapting to changing circumstances and expectations. It is different now from the institution that looked so troubled in the late 1960s and the '70s.

One notable example is family care. Most marriages in the United States today are not throwbacks to the '50s when it comes to domestic responsibilities; husbands are more willing to lean in. The amount of time that American fathers spend on child care increased from 2.5 hours a week in 1965 to nine hours in 2024, according to Pew and the American Time Use Survey. Over this same period, the *share* of time spent on child care by dads rose from 25 to 62 percent of what moms provided.

Indeed, one reason the United States' birth rate may be higher than those of East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea—where the fertility rate has fallen to 1.15 and 0.75 babies per woman, respectively, well below the U.S. rate of 1.6—is that men in those countries do much less child care and household labor than men in the U.S. Even as women around the world embrace the “egalitarian frontier,” in the words of the social scientist Alice Evans, men in some cultures have maintained their old habits. “As a result,” Evans writes, “the sexes drift apart.” This may help explain why South Korea has seen marriages tank and its [fertility rate fall to the lowest in the world.](#)

There is no single model for a good marriage in the U.S. today, and most couples have their struggles. [Men still do less child care and housework](#), and disagreements over the division of household labor are a source of tension for some couples. Many women still value some traditional traits in men, such as breadwinning, and some men’s unreliability as breadwinners is a source of strain for them and their wives. A [2016 study on divorce published in the American Sociological Review](#) found that when a husband was not employed full-time, his risk of divorce shot up by 33 percent the following year; when a wife was unemployed, her odds of divorce did not change. Employment difficulties among less-educated men are a big reason marriage rates are lower among the working class than among college graduates.

## Olga Khazan: Why it's so hard to get so many men to do more housework

But on the whole, marriage confers benefits to women and men alike. According to the 2024 General Social Survey, married men and women ages 25 to 55 are more than twice as likely to be “very happy” with their life as their nonmarried peers. Married people—men and women both—live longer, are more financially secure, and build more wealth than single Americans.

In 2022, I worked with YouGov to survey some 2,000 married men and women, asking about their overall marital happiness and how they’d rate their spouse on a range of indicators. The happiest wives in the survey were those who gave their husbands good marks for fairness in the marriage, being attentive to them, providing, and being protective (that is, making them feel safe, physically and otherwise). Specifically, 81 percent of wives age 55 or younger who gave their husbands high marks on at least three of these qualities were very happily married, compared with just 25 percent of wives who gave them high marks on two or fewer. And, in part because most wives were reasonably happy with the job their husband was doing on at least three out of four of these fronts, most wives were very happy with their husband, according to our survey. In fact, we found that more than two-thirds of wives in this age group—and husbands, too—were very happy with their marriage overall.

I believe it’s important for teen boys and young men to hear the entirety of this message. Marriage changes men, but not in the nefarious ways Andrew Tate might think. Men work harder and find more success at work after they get married; they drink less as well. And marriage can channel noble characteristics and behaviors that have classically been identified with masculinity: protection, provision, ambition, stoicism. That’s good for both men and women—and can help young men identify and work toward a model of prosocial masculinity that diverges from the one being peddled by manosphere influencers such as Tate.

Marriage’s comeback is good news for society: Children raised in two-parent homes are much more likely to graduate from college than those raised in other families, and less likely to be incarcerated. Kids who don’t live with both of their married parents are far more likely to be depressed

than those raised in intact families. After surveying the research on child well-being, the economist Melissa Kearney concluded that the “evidence is clear, even if the punchline is uncomfortable: children are more likely to thrive—behaviorally and academically, and ultimately in the labor market and adult life—if they grow up with [the advantages of a two-parent home](#).” Her view reflects the mainstream academic consensus on family structure and children today.

### [Melissa Kearney: A driver of inequality that not enough people are talking about](#)

But marriage’s comeback is, of course, incomplete. Although the trend may be starting to reverse, the share of all Americans who get married has fallen significantly since the ’60s, and there is abundant evidence that many young adults today are reluctant to marry, or are [having trouble finding partners they want to marry](#). In particular, marriage has become more selective over time socioeconomically. A majority of college-educated Americans ages 25 to 55 (62 percent) are married, versus a minority of less-educated Americans (49 percent), according to the 2023 American Community Survey. This bifurcation did not exist half a century ago and is one reason marriages are more durable today: Money makes everything easier.

The plight of working-class men in the labor force is worth underlining here. Among prime-age men, the less educated are nearly twice as likely not to be employed full-time as those with a college degree. And as working-class men’s connection to the labor force has frayed, so too has their connection to the ties that bind. If, as a society, we want more adults to see their way into a lasting and happy marriage, then we would do well to focus on helping these men find their way to good jobs first.

But the idea that successful marriages are attainable only by certain groups today is misguided. Since 2012, divorce rates have been falling for working-class Americans and Black Americans, too—and the share of kids being raised in married families for these two groups has stabilized. (In fact, the proportion of Black children being raised in a married-parent family rose from 33 percent in 2012 to 39 percent in 2024.) And across both class and racial lines, marriage is linked to greater happiness, household earnings, and wealth for women and men.

## Derek Thompson: America's 'marriage material' shortage

In the past, American society has readily advocated for behaviors that can improve lives and reduce social problems—campaigns against smoking and teen pregnancy are two examples. We should at a minimum strive to ensure that young people have an accurate understanding of marriage today, not one that's outdated—and certainly not one supplied by cranks and zealots.

Marriage is not for everyone—of course it isn't. But men and women who are flying solo—without a spouse—typically report their lives to be less meaningful and more lonely. The share of unmarried men ages 25 to 55 who say they are unhappy in the General Social Survey more than doubled from the late 1990s to the 2020s. That fact alone highlights just how wrong Andrew Tate is about men and marriage.

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Why Marriage Survives.”*

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# Twenty Years After the Storm

## What home meant before, and after, Hurricane Katrina

by Clint Smith



When Clint Smith and his family returned to their New Orleans home in October 2005, they found a house, and a neighborhood, destroyed by flooding. (Courtesy of Clint Smith)

The scene before me appeared and disappeared and reappeared again with every breath I took, the hot air from my lungs fogging the gas mask that fit snugly over my face. My mother, father, and little sister stood in front of me wearing hazmat suits. It was October 2005, and we'd been among the first in Gentilly, our New Orleans neighborhood, to receive permission to return to

our home after Hurricane Katrina. I was nervous. Gentilly had sat beneath up to eight feet of water for weeks. I didn't know what I would see, or how I would feel.

Our neighborhood had never been this quiet before. There had always been kids riding bikes, or someone playing music from their car or their front porch or their shoulder with a bass line that made the street vibrate. There had always been the sound of a basketball colliding with concrete as boys went in search of a court and a hoop and a game. Squirrels had always scurried through trees, where birds sang. Now there were no birds, no balls, no squirrels, no bikes. Only an eerie silence.

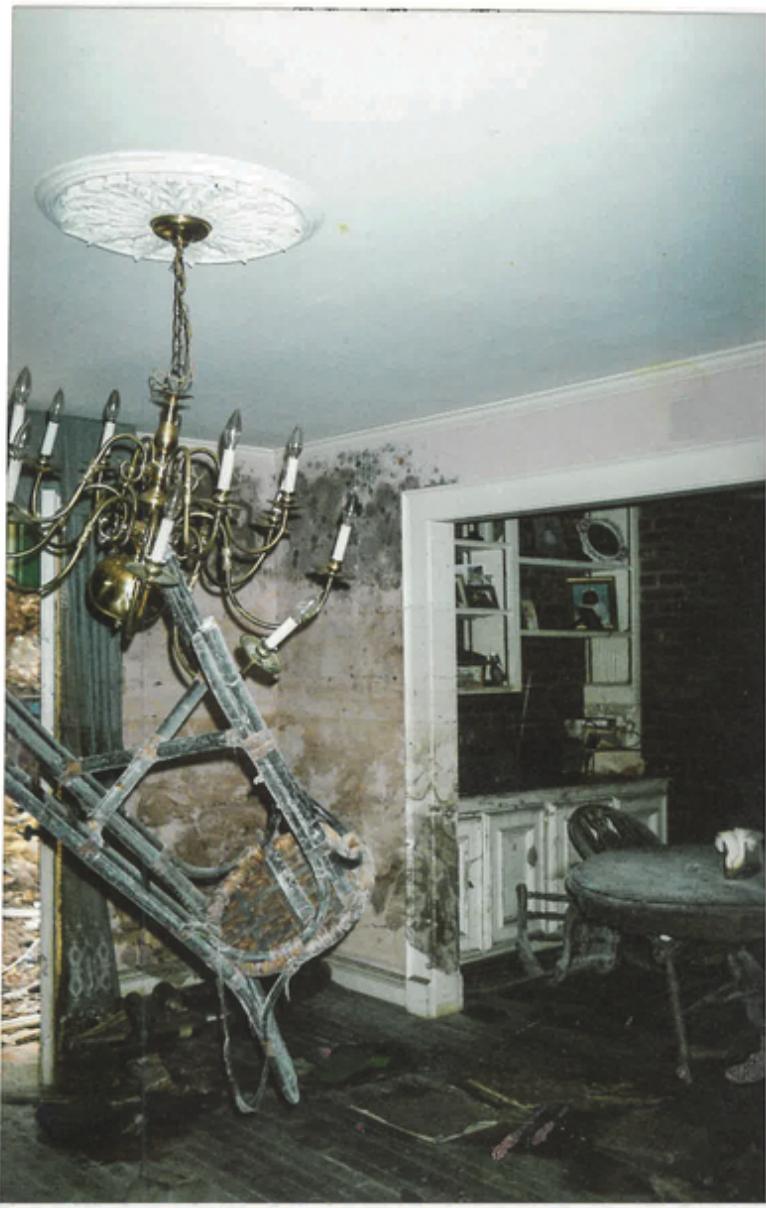
A silver car with clouded windows had crashed into the trunk of the old oak tree in front of our home, its hood bent into a crooked crescent. Branches from that old oak—some as thick as bodies—were scattered across the street and the yard. On the boarded-up window next to our door was a spray-painted orange X, a symbol used by search-and-rescue teams that could be seen throughout New Orleans in the days and weeks after the storm. Each quadrant of the X had a different number. The top quadrant showed the time and date the house had been searched; the left one identified which team had conducted the search; the right indicated any hazards found inside; and the bottom was for the number of people, dead or alive, found there. Our bottom quadrant read “0,” but I am still haunted by the orange spray paint on homes we passed that said something else.

The search-and-rescue team had smashed the glass next to our door in order to open it. It remained ajar. As we entered the house, the smell bombarded us, indifferent to our masks. I had never encountered anything so pungent in my life; it physically knocked me back beyond the doorframe.

### [Listen: Floodlines, the story of an unnatural disaster](#)

When I stepped inside again, I saw that the walls were covered with mold. Blue-green spores were everywhere. The floorboards were warped; some had come loose. The refrigerator door hung open, rotten food spilling out. The television in the living room was face down on the floor. My mother's wedding dress, which had been designed and sewed by a local seamstress who had made dresses for generations of Black New Orleans women, lay

ruined on the floor beneath the stairwell. A kitchen stool hung by one of its legs from the chandelier in our dining room, but the dining-room table was no longer there. The rising water had lifted it up and carried it into our living room.



As the house flooded, rising water carried the dining-room table into the living room. (Courtesy of Clint Smith)

We found the mahogany table misshapen, but upright. Sitting on top of it was a glass-domed cake stand with part of a birthday cake still inside, a time

capsule unaltered by the destruction around it. Twenty years later, the cake is the thing I remember most clearly.

I have never been much of a cake person. I don't have a sweet tooth, and I hate chocolate. But I made an exception for the vanilla-almond cake with pineapple filling from [Adrian's](#), the bakery just down the street. I loved the sweetness of the frosting; the soft, slight crumb of the cake; and the candied viscosity of the filling. My parents got it for my birthday every year, and even now, the taste of it makes me feel like a child again.

On August 25, 2005, I celebrated my 17th birthday by eating a substantial slice (or two) of this cake with my family before heading out with my friends to see a movie. When my mother placed the leftover cake inside the dome, we didn't know that it would stay there for weeks.

Evacuating was not new for us. It was practically a routine: The meteorologists would warn residents about a storm. We would pack some duffel bags with a few days' worth of clothes, board up our windows, put gas in our car, and drive to Jackson or Baton Rouge or Houston until the storm passed. Then we would come home, pick up a few branches, remove the boards from our windows, and continue on with life as it was before. In 2004, my family had evacuated to Houston ahead of [Hurricane Ivan](#), sitting in 20 hours of traffic for what was typically a five-to-six-hour trip. We'd stayed with my aunt and uncle until the storm passed.

The relative normalcy of hurricanes made many in New Orleans feel as if evacuating wasn't worth it. Some would decide to stay home and ride out the storm; some didn't have the ability or means to leave even if they wanted to. We had been told so many times that this storm would be different, only for it not to be. But this time it was.



For Smith (pictured here on his 15th birthday, in 2003), eating vanilla-almond cake from a local bakery was an annual tradition. (Courtesy of Clint Smith)

On August 28, just before 9:30 a.m., Mayor Ray Nagin issued a mandatory evacuation order for every resident of New Orleans, the first in the city's history. By then, my family and I were already gone. My father recalls waking up at 2 a.m. the morning of August 27 with a feeling of unease. He'd turned on the TV and seen that meteorologists were predicting that Katrina would develop into a Category 5 hurricane—the highest category possible for a storm. And so we packed the bags, secured the windows, and filled the car with gas. My father told me to grab our photo albums off the shelf and put them in thick garbage bags. This, we had not done before. We did the same with pieces of art from our walls, paintings by local Black artists that my parents had collected over the decades. We left the bags in my parents' second-floor bedroom.

Finally, we got into our car. That night, we arrived at my aunt and uncle's home outside Houston. For the next several days, I watched nonstop coverage on CNN. I saw people begging for help from rooftops. I saw

people wading through shoulder-deep sewer water to reach higher ground, pushing their children in ice chests. I saw footage of floating bodies. I saw homes just a few blocks from mine that were completely submerged. I knew then what had happened to mine.

[Read: The problem with ‘move to higher ground’](#)

After a few days of sitting on the couch in a catatonic state, I got a call from the soccer coach at Davidson College, in North Carolina. I was being recruited by a few different Division I schools, and Davidson’s coach asked if I’d like to make my official recruiting visit to the school now, as a distraction. I said I would, and my father and I boarded a plane.

At Davidson, I watched the soccer team’s thrilling overtime victory against a local rival, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I attended a political-science class on the history of the presidency, went to my first college party, and experienced the specific joy of getting late-night wings and quesadillas from the student union. At the end of my visit, I told my dad that I knew where I wanted to go. I committed to Davidson the same day. I realize now, looking back, that I decided on Davidson so quickly because I needed an anchor. I didn’t know where I would be going to high school the next week, but at least I knew where I would be going to college next year.

My sister and I ended up staying in Texas for the entire school year, living with my aunt and uncle after my parents returned to New Orleans in January for their jobs, bringing my younger brother with them. They lived with my grandfather in one of the few areas that had not flooded. That fall, I went to Davidson and my family moved into a new house, one that I was grateful for, but one that never felt quite like mine.

One of the walls in our old family room was covered with mirrors, and as kids, every time my brother, my sister, and I stepped into the room, it felt as if that mirror-lined wall was beckoning us to dance. So dance we did, as numerous home videos attest—bobbing gleefully in our striped hand-me-down Hanna Andersson pajamas to the sound of my dad’s records and CDs. As the trumpets from Earth, Wind & Fire’s “Let’s Groove” blared from the speakers, we would start jumping like the floor was covered in lava, and we

would spin like a band of small, graceless tornadoes while my father laughed behind the camcorder.

My father had been collecting records since he was in high school, in the '70s. He had hundreds—artists such as Chaka Khan, Stevie Wonder, Funkadelic, Grover Washington Jr., Miles Davis, and John Coltrane—stored in the family room's floor-level cabinets. But amid the haste and chaos of our departure from New Orleans, we hadn't had time to move them, and when we returned in October, we found the collection destroyed.

The songs we danced to are still available, of course; these days, we can stream them anytime we want. But the albums themselves were artifacts, a tactile manifestation of all those happy memories—and they were irreplaceable.

This year, I went home to New Orleans at the end of June, as I do every summer. I bring my children, because I want them to feel a connection to the city that shaped who I am. Recently, each time I've arrived at my parents' house, I've been struck by the fact that they have now lived there for longer than we lived in the home I grew up in. The realization defies my sense of time and language; I've referred to this place as "the new house" for the past 20 years.

One rainy afternoon, while my kids were out with their grandparents, I drove down my old street and stopped in front of my childhood home. A new family had eventually moved in, after the house was gutted. There were new windows, new fences, new walls. The red brick facade had been painted white. The old oak tree was still there on the front lawn, its branches extending farther over the street, its trunk having grown darker and thicker with time. The birds had returned, as had the squirrels. People walked their dogs. Two girls threw a softball back and forth.

Although most of the homes in our neighborhood had been torn down and rebuilt, the house across the street from ours looked largely the same as it had when I was a child—except for the two canoes and the kayak conspicuously tied to its roof, as if its inhabitants were preparing for the next disaster.

I then drove to Adrian's, which had also moved after the storm. There, I was met by the smell of glazed doughnuts and fresh cinnamon rolls. White cakes gleamed from within glass display cases. Sitting on top of the glass were individual slices of cake wrapped in plastic. I walked closer and saw golden pineapple filling seeping out from between layers of sponge. I bought three pieces.

Back at my parents' house, I opened a cabinet and took out our family photographs.

I've always felt thankful that the photo albums and art survived the storm. I tried to imagine what it might be like to no longer have access to these images: the birthdays, the graduations, the baptisms. The beach days, the camping trips, the lazy Sunday afternoons. My father and me flying a kite on a windy day at the lake, his hat turned backwards and his sunglasses glimmering; my mother and me on Easter morning when I was 3 years old, she in a beautiful blue dress and me in a red bow tie and brown brimmed hat; my sixth-birthday party, my face painted like a tiger, looking down at the thick slice of vanilla-almond cake on the table in front of me.

Alongside the albums sat a ziplock bag of other images—photos we took of our home when we returned to examine the damage after the storm. As I spread them out across the dining-room table, I was brought back to that day—the wretched smell, the buckled floorboards, the fungus-laden walls.

I removed the Saran Wrap covering one slice of cake and sank my fork into it, attempting to capture the sponge, the frosting, and the filling in a single bite. It was as good as I remembered it being, and I ate with such abandon that I dropped some frosting onto the photos in front of me. When I moved an album to clean it off, I noticed an image in the Katrina pile that I hadn't seen before: an old clock that hung above the doorframe in our kitchen, its hands frozen in place. It looked as though it had spores spilling out of it.



An old clock above the kitchen doorframe at Smith's childhood home  
(Courtesy of Clint Smith)

When you talk with people in, or from, New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina is often the way by which we demarcate time. When attempting to recall an event, a moment, or an experience, someone will ask "Was it before or after the storm?" For many of us, that demarcation also reflects our physical relationship to the city—it is a question that often means *Was that before or after I was forced to leave my home?* Because I was a senior in high school when Katrina made landfall and because I finished school in another state, I never lived in New Orleans again. When I came back home for the holidays, I would stay on a pullout couch in the guest room.

Sometimes I think of what that year could have been had Katrina never happened. What it would have been like to be the captain of my soccer team during my final high-school season. What it would have been like to attend homecoming and prom with friends who had known me since I was a toddler. And what it would be like now to bring my children back to the house that I grew up in.

But I still have my memories of growing up in a city unlike any other in the world—a city that [some said should not have been rebuilt](#). Twenty years later, New Orleans is still here. I’m able to make new memories with my own children: taking them to Saints games in the Superdome, as my father took me. Playing with them on the trees in City Park, the way my mother did with me. Eating the cake I loved from Adrian’s at my parents’ dining-room table—even when their taste buds don’t match up with my nostalgia. My daughter said she wished the cake were chocolate. My son prefers ice cream.

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Going Back.”*

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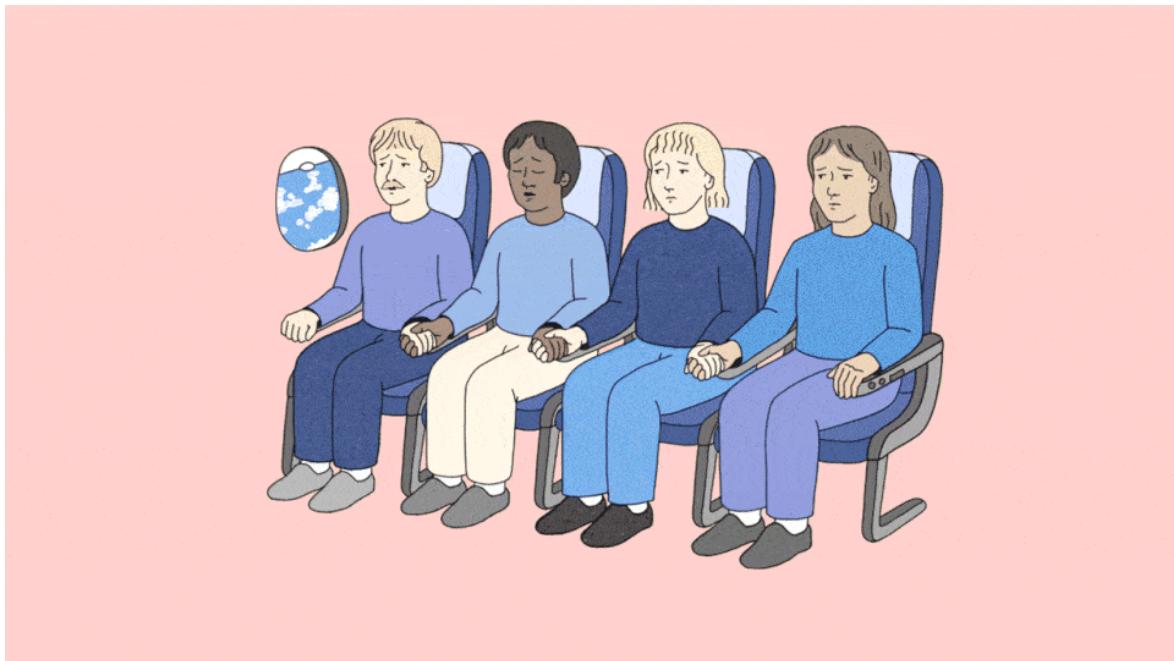
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# Captain Ron's Guide to Fearless Flying

## The pilot who calms the nerves of anxious fliers

by Elaine Godfrey



On a hot Saturday evening in May, I reported to Terminal 4 of Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport. There, in a small conference room behind an unmarked door, I put on a name tag and joined 18 other nervous-looking people hoping to be cured by Captain Ron.

Captain Ron (real name Ron Nielsen) is a 78-year-old former commercial pilot who [teaches a free class for nervous fliers](#) roughly once a month. He

has the wholesome look of a small-town minister: rectangular glasses, short-cropped white hair, and a whimsical tuft sticking out of each nostril. He's like the aviation equivalent of Rick Steves—the kind of guy who, after a class that goes particularly well, exclaims, "It should be against the law to have that much fun!"

A fear of flying, Captain Ron explained, is nothing to be ashamed of. "You're not broken." The anxiety looks different for different people. Some worry mostly about external factors, such as crashes and terrorism. Others dread a panic attack—and how fellow passengers might react to it.

Sitting next to me was a retiree named Mike who had been coming to Captain Ron's class regularly to address his claustrophobia ahead of a long-anticipated flight: a two-hour trip to Reno to visit his grandson. Across the table, Stephanie and her husband, whom she'd brought along for moral support, were planning a trip to Cambodia. "Over water," someone across the room offered. Stephanie's eyes were wide. We understood completely.

Lots of people suffer from a fear of flying, including at least [25 million of us in the United States](#), according to the Cleveland Clinic. Our worries are often dismissed as irrational—planes are much safer than cars, etc. But a recent succession of terrifying airplane incidents has only seemed to validate our phobia—most notably, the [crash landing of the Air India Dreamliner](#) that killed 241 people on board in early June, which came just a few months after the [midair collision that killed 67 people](#) near my home airport, just outside Washington, D.C.

Recent events notwithstanding, most aviation fears boil down to a lack of control, Elaine Iljon Foreman, a clinical psychologist and co-author of [Fly Away Fear](#), told me. Sometimes these fears are triggered or exacerbated by a specific flying experience, or major life changes. Alex, a 42-year-old IT manager who sat near me in class, said that he developed his fear of flying when his wife was pregnant with their twins. The couple were forced to fly twice from Phoenix to Los Angeles for medical care to save the pregnancy, and for Alex, it was a traumatic experience.

I'd experienced 21 years of unmemorable flights before my own fear of flying took hold. In May 2015, I was traveling from my home state of Iowa

to New York City for a summer internship. I was already nervous about moving, and then, somewhere above Illinois, the plane hit a patch of turbulence and dropped what felt like a thousand feet. Several people screamed. For the first time in my life, I began to experience what I would later understand to be panic: My face and neck went clammy, and black spots filled my vision. At one point, an overhead bin popped open and a few unbuckled passengers smacked their head on the ceiling. They were all okay, and, physically, so was I. But I had unlocked a new fear.

I've been a white-knuckle flier ever since. Upon boarding, I proceed down the aisle like a bride heading to a doomed marriage, quietly assessing my fellow passengers for trustworthiness, should a crash require us to forge a *Lost*-style alliance of survivors. At the first bump, my palms start to sweat and my calf muscles tighten. In particularly rough air, when the pilot urges the flight attendants to please take their seats, I begin to administer my own last rites—*You've had a good run*, my brain whispers—and fire off a few farewell notes to loved ones: “Really bad up here,” I text my boyfriend. “Love you.” Once, on my way to a friend’s wedding, I was so overcome with anxiety that I passed out at the gate, my body folding over my suitcase like a wilted flower.

For a while, I considered a flightless future. But the cost was too high. I remembered [Royce White](#), the Iowa State basketball player whose fear of flying required him to drive hundreds of miles to away games, and contributed to the end of his NBA career. I thought of a longtime family friend named Betty whose aerophobia I had always interpreted as an abiding love for trains. Betty regularly traveled between Iowa and Florida via Amtrak sleeper car, a journey that took 96 hours, required layovers in Chicago and D.C., and cost approximately \$4,000.

I've kept flying, but many of the others in Captain Ron's class hadn't. Alex had flown only once since his wife gave birth (the twins are in grade school now). Mike, the claustrophobic retiree, told me that on a recent attempt to fly, he took an Ambien and drank a few shots of whiskey, yet he remained too terrified to board. Tired and tipsy, he had to call his daughter for a ride home.

The main portion of Captain Ron's class took place on a stationary Southwest airplane. After introductions, he handed out boarding passes bearing our names but no destination, and together we marched warily from the ticketing area through security. At gate D-13, a Southwest agent led us down the jet bridge and onto a waiting Boeing 737 Max 8 and, once we were seated, made a formal boarding announcement: "Good evening and welcome aboard Southwest Airlines Flight 1234, with service to nowhere!"

For the next hour, Captain Ron stood in the aisle and delivered a lecture that flitted between airplane trivia and personal anecdotes. We learned how much time is generally required for a plane to become airborne (35 to 45 seconds) and how much fuel planes typically carry for domestic flights (more than enough to get to their destination). We were reminded that turbulence, while unpleasant, is not dangerous. We learned about strategies for overpowering our emotional "elephant brain" with our logical "rider brain." If we needed an "actionable task" to distract ourselves during takeoff, Captain Ron suggested journaling about our anxiety or quizzing a travel companion with rapid-fire math problems. Together, we inhaled for four seconds and exhaled for six. Sometimes, we learned, it helps to breathe through a straw.

### [Read: Fear of flying is different now](#)

Very little seemed to crack Captain Ron's cheery exterior, including questions about the recent air-travel incidents. Newark airport had just experienced a brief radar blackout, and on the same day our class was held, the aviation hub was having air-traffic-control staffing issues. A student asked Captain Ron whether people should be worried. "Great one, great one," he said. Airports, he explained, reduce the number of planes in the air if there aren't enough controllers to keep people flying safely. (A few days after our class, [NBC News reported that](#), according to an anonymous Newark air-traffic controller, the airport had lost radio contact with pilots multiple times in recent months. "I can't tell you that that's a desirable situation," Captain Ron told me by phone. But pilots "have procedures" for this.)

After an hour together on the plane, we disembarked and took a group photo at the entrance to the jet bridge. A few of my classmates would be back in a month, to commune again with other anxious fliers and spend another hour

on a plane hearing Captain Ron's soothing words. For some, just sitting on that grounded plane is a form of exposure therapy. I wished I could join them.



The irony was not lost on me that attending my fear-of-flying class required taking two long plane rides. But the next morning I was feeling confident, and decided to forgo my usual Xanax before the flight home. Captain Ron had advised me to try boarding early, to meet the pilots, something I had assumed only a child could do.

In the cockpit, I told the captain and first officer that I hated turbulence. "That's what everybody seems to be afraid of," the captain said, laughing. "It's never caused a problem." I smiled politely. The first officer explained that he often falls asleep when he flies as a passenger—"and I wake up when we touch down!" Very helpful.

At my seat, I focused on Captain Ron's actionable tasks. I timed our takeoff, which took exactly 40 seconds. I journaled my feelings, and listened to an audio recording created by Captain Ron called "Harmonizer," a 32-minute cacophony of sounds and hypnotic phrases meant to desensitize and distract your brain. ("No more fears, no more suffering," Captain Ron says on the recording. "I've had it, and now I'm changing. Today's the day!") For a

more absorbing diversion, I watched a few episodes of a smutty Netflix drama about British prep schoolers.

Halfway through the flight, the plane hit a rough patch, and my skin grew clammy. *What if I had distracted the pilots from their preflight checklist?* Soon there was a new bout of bumps, this time bigger. My chest tightened, and I tried to breathe in for four seconds and out for six.

I thought of one of my classmates, Irene, who told me she practices accepting her lack of control by reminding herself that the universe does “what it’s going to do.” I tried to achieve a similar state of acceptance. After a few minutes, my heartbeat slowed.

The flight turned out to be one of my bumpiest, and therefore most unpleasant, in recent memory. Captain Ron had not fixed me. But I was a slightly different flier. I had learned some new tools for managing my fear. And I’d come to view that fear as something other than a shameful secret. Yes, I’d been anxious. But I had flown to Arizona. I’d eaten carne asada, hiked the Big Butte Loop, and laughed at the name “Big Butte Loop.” I had faced my discomfort—and boarded the plane anyway.

A few days after I returned to D.C., my classmate Alex was set to fly to Chicago with his family—his first airplane trip in years. I texted him the night before to say that I was thinking of him. When I didn’t hear back, I worried that his fear had once again gotten in the way. Then, late the following afternoon, I received a text. It was a picture of distant red-sandstone hills—Phoenix’s Papago Park—from a tiny airplane window.

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Captain Ron’s Guide to Fearless Flying.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

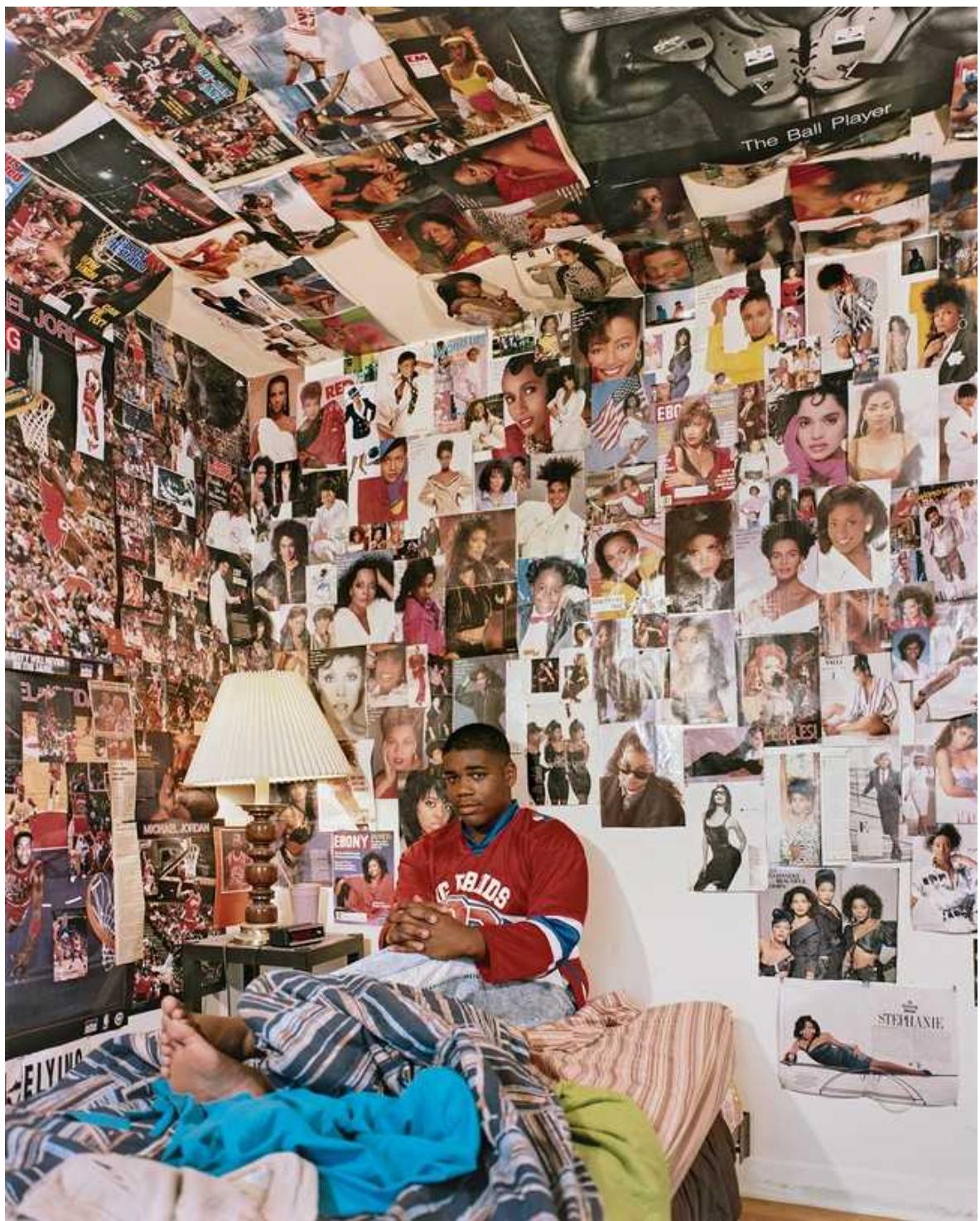
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# No Parents Allowed

**Before smartphones and social media, teenagers constructed their identity on the walls of their room.**

by Andrew Aoyama



Fred, 17, Syracuse, New York, 1990 (Courtesy of Adrienne Salinger / D.A.P.)

In the 1980s and '90s, Adrienne Salinger photographed American teenagers in their natural habitat: their bedroom. Salinger was fascinated by the way these spaces reflected the personalities of their inhabitants. In an era before smartphones and social media, teenagers used the walls of their room to demonstrate their good taste in hair bands and hip-hop groups, commemorate their accomplishments, and construct their identity. These spaces, Salinger wrote in her 1995 book, *In My Room*, were “the repository for our memories and the expressions of our desires and self-image.”



Tracy, 15, Seattle, Washington, 1984



Jeff, 16, Fayetteville, New York, 1990

Salinger's book, [reissued this month](#), features portraits of dozens of teenagers. The images capture an inflection point between childhood and adolescence: Her subjects pose among stuffed animals and pinups, dolls and drug paraphernalia. In one image, a girl named Ellen stands beside a neat bookshelf, clutching a violin. On the wall behind her is a poster of James Dean astride a motorcycle—just below it, a brochure from Brown.



Ellen, 17, Fayetteville, New York, 1990



Christina, 15, Seattle, Washington, 1984

Most of the rooms Salinger visited—of rich and poor teens alike—were illuminated by a single light fixture at the center of the ceiling. She brought her own studio lights, which would frequently blow a fuse. As she set up her equipment, she and her subjects would talk, often for hours. Then she would take a photograph, and the teens would see their room—and themselves—in a new light.

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*Photos courtesy of Adrienne Salinger / D.A.P. This article appears in the [September 2025 print edition](#) with the headline “No Parents Allowed.”*

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## Mrs. Dalloway's Midlife Crisis

**Virginia Woolf's wild run of creativity in her 40s included writing her masterpiece on the terrors and triumphs of middle age.**

by Hillary Kelly



Mrs. Dalloway always had gray hair. She first appears in Virginia Woolf's debut novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915)—trilling, ladylike, often imperious, and looking “like an eighteenth-century masterpiece,” with a pink face and “hair turning grey.” She doesn’t seem to age or regress between *The Voyage Out*

and [Mrs. Dalloway](#), which was published 10 years later and is now celebrating its 100th anniversary. In that novel, her hair is tinged the same color, and she has “a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious.” Then the kicker: “though she was over fifty.”

The novel’s centennial has occasioned a flurry of events and new editions, but not as much consideration of what I would argue is the most enduring and personal theme of the work: It is a masterpiece of midlife crisis. Woolf was 40 when she began writing the novel, a decade younger than her protagonist but in the midst of what she called her own “middle age.” As she chronicled in her crackling, astute diary, it was a moment to weigh what one has made and can make of a life.

For Woolf, it ignited a creative fire. In the summer of 1923, about halfway through her work on *Mrs. Dalloway*, she wrote, “My theory is that at 40 one either increases the pace or slows down. Needless to say which I desire.” She went on to catalog her extensive ongoing projects, including an essay on Chaucer, the revision of a slew of old essays, and what she termed “‘serious’ reading.” And all of this came during [a sustained burst of fiction writing](#) that Woolf—whose work had been derailed by mental breakdowns and spells of illness—relished. From the fall of 1922 through 1924, she got *Mrs. Dalloway* on paper at a furious rate; in doing so, she reckoned with the incongruity of middle age as she lived it.

The defining feature of midlife is its formlessness. It takes the shape of what it is not—not youth, not old age. (Is 40 old or young? How about 50?) Yet it’s a phase of massive transformation: for some an interlude of welcome stability in which they can take stock, for others a time to take new risks. It doesn’t want for literary examples—the work of recent fiction writers including [Rachel Cusk](#), Tessa Hadley, and Miranda July, for example, revolves around [women reflecting on their choices](#) midway through life. In content, if not in style, they all owe something to *Mrs. Dalloway*.

#### [From the June 2024 issue: Miranda July’s female-midlife-crisis novel](#)

The novel’s opening—with its famous first line, “*Mrs. Dalloway* said she would buy the flowers herself”—is itself a kind of middle. It launches the reader into [Clarissa Dalloway’s morning](#), into “life; London; this moment of

June.” Early on a Wednesday in 1923, in the shadow of the Great War and an influenza pandemic, Clarissa is buying those flowers for a party she is throwing that evening. The rest of the novel follows several characters in a series of streams of consciousness: Clarissa as she experiences the unfolding hours and prepares for her guests; her former lover, Peter Walsh, who wonders whether he can consider his life a success; a World War I veteran named Septimus Warren Smith, who is quickly descending into shell-shock-triggered madness; and a variety of other Londoners. Over the course of that single June day, they contemplate one another, their world, and their places in it.



Virginia Woolf in 1924, at age 42 (Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty)

Clarissa, the wife of a member of Parliament, has chosen a comfortable existence and a stable partner—perhaps at the expense of adventure. But she was once an almost wayward girl, tempted to marry Peter and embark on a more unorthodox course. She ponders all of this as she moves through her busy day, mentally lurching forward and backward in time. And as she does so, she considers her actions in light of her age. When she walks to buy the flowers, for instance, she asserts that “she felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged.” Peter unexpectedly comes to visit after years in India, touching off a torrent of thinking about whether she is past her prime: “It was all over for her,” she thinks. “The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow.” And as she readies herself and her house for the party that evening,

she had a sudden spasm, as if, while she mused, the icy claws had had the chance to fix in her. She was not old yet. She had just broken into her fifty-second year. Months and months of it were still untouched. June, July, August! Each still remained almost whole.

Age’s attendant regrets and hopes have spurred a crisis inside Clarissa.

It’s also highly plausible that she has entered menopause, or what Woolf later termed in her diary “T of L” (for “Time of Life”). Clarissa has recently been ill, but in deflecting the mention of a friend’s “women’s ailments,” she makes clear that whatever hormonal flux is or isn’t happening, this is not a subject she’ll discuss. She is the right age for it, and she does see herself as “shriveled, aged, breastless.” What might more readily bring about a crisis of identity than the physical alteration of the body, the change from bearer of life to barren woman?

Clarissa’s more existential fear is one that occasions so many midlife crises—that at 51, she has missed out on some superior array of experiences; that another path would have led to a fresher, happier variant of herself. Woolf’s trademark stream of consciousness, her quick and seamless moves from one character or experience to another, means that the past, present, and future intertwine as if no barrier separates them. And so Clarissa does not ponder her past so much as move through it. The touchstones of her youth—a kiss

from her insouciant friend Sally Seton, a transcendent evening spent on the terrace of a country house, her near engagement to Peter—are as alive to her as the mending she does that morning or the lonesome death she imagines for herself in old age.

### [From the April 2023 issue: Searching for Virginia Woolf on the Isle of Skye](#)

That aliveness and sense of immediacy are what animate Woolf's prose—and her heroine. Clarissa eventually basks in the unmitigated joy “that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park.” Her memories, she tells herself, are mostly good. As the day progresses, she thinks that “middle age,” at least for her, is “mediocrity,” but then summons her inner wisdom and will to force “herself with her indomitable vitality to put all that aside.” The core of the novel is Clarissa’s realization that life is happening in the present tense, and so that is where she ought to be.

*Mrs. Dalloway* was written at a personal turning point for Woolf, too. She moved in early 1924 from a Georgian brick pile in the suburbs of Richmond to a townhouse in the bustling London neighborhood of Bloomsbury, where her social calendar often outpaced her. She had initially gone to Richmond for the quiet and rest that her doctors and husband insisted she needed. That is, until Woolf began a campaign to move back to London proper, where, she wrote, she could “dart in & out & refresh my stagnancy.” London was one of her great loves, and the observations in *Mrs. Dalloway* of its vibrant atmosphere were Woolf’s as well. The change of scenery freed the author to rattle herself in the service of her art and, despite continuing to question her abilities, finally declare pride in her fiction. Although she would live only 17 years more, committing suicide in 1941, this was the beginning of Woolf’s middle age. It was a season of fruitfulness before she succumbed to the mental illness that had stalked her—a period in which she produced her most profound work.

### [Read: The great novel of the internet was published in 1925](#)

The pleasure she found in London—in the movement of bodies on the sidewalk, the towering spire of St. Pancras Church—and therefore in life, was so potent because it cast her inner darkness in relief. Woolf, who had

endured the deaths of siblings and both parents, who had been confined to bed on a milk-and-meat diet during multiple breakdowns, was determined, especially in *Mrs. Dalloway*, to place life next to death, to surround midlife with the delicious pleasures of both youth and maturity.

For one brief period, and in one magnificent, enduring novel, life emerged the victor. About a year and a half into writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf encountered a dangerous anniversary, that of her mother's death in 1895, which had occasioned immense distress in 13-year-old Woolf. Yet on this day, she shook off her malaise and wrote, "But enough of death—its [sic] life that matters." That day, she recalled how even the simplest chore, weeding, had earlier sent her into fits of ecstasy, describing "how the quiet lapped me round" and then "how the beauty brimmed over me & steeped my nerves till they quivered." Clarissa finds herself in a similar moment at her party: Death has shown up on her doorstep in the form of the news that a young man—Septimus Smith—has thrown himself from a window and died. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death." But then she steps into the recognition that, despite the decisions she's made, or perhaps because of them, "she had never been so happy. Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long."

### [From the April 1939 issue: Virginia Woolf on the art of biography](#)

The clock strikes, the party begins to disperse, the old lady across the street turns out her light for bed, and Clarissa Dalloway notes, "What an extraordinary night!" What an extraordinary day.

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\*Lead image sources: *Sasha / Hulton Archive / Getty*; *Olga Korneeva / Getty*

This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline "Mrs. Dalloway's Midlife Crisis."

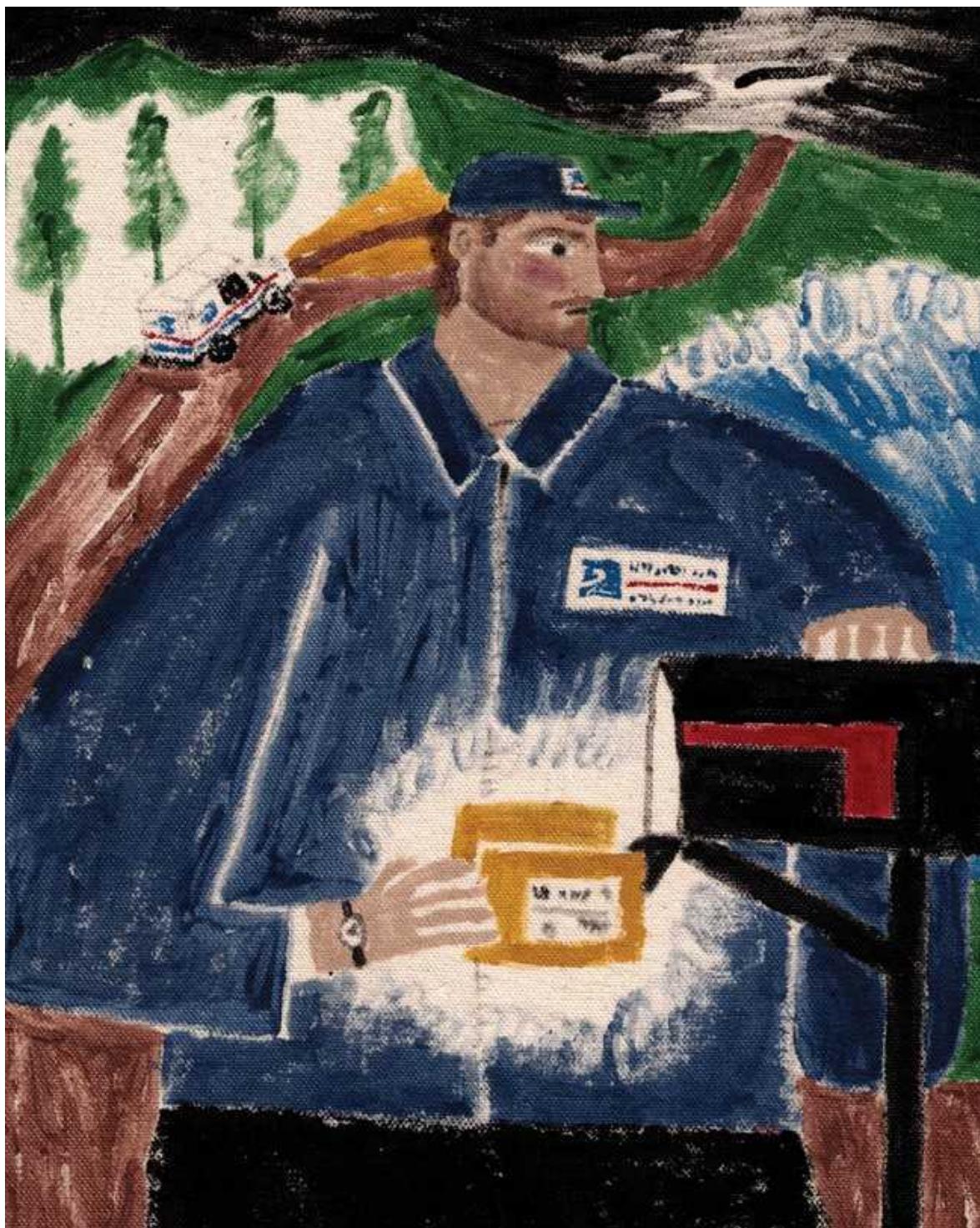
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# Memoir of a Mailman

# **A new book describes the challenges and joys of life as a letter carrier.**

by Tyler Austin Harper



“Delivering the mail is a ‘Halloween job,’” Stephen Starring Grant observes in *Mailman: My Wild Ride Delivering the Mail in Appalachia and Finally Finding Home*. “An occupation with a uniform, immediately recognizable, even by children.” What to call Grant’s book is harder to say. It is an unusual

amalgam: a pandemic memoir, a love letter to the Blue Ridge Mountains, a participant observer's ethnography of a rural post office, an indictment of government austerity, and a witness statement attesting to the remarkable and at times ruthless efficiency of [one of our oldest federal bureaucracies](#). Not least, *Mailman* is a lament for the decline of service as an American ideal—for the cultural twilight of the Halloween job: those occupations, such as police officer, firefighter, Marine, and, yes, postal worker, whose worth is not measured first and foremost in dollars but in public esteem. Or should be, anyway.

At the same time, Grant's project is immediately recognizable as "Hollywood material." A corporate suit loses his job during COVID and spends a year as a rural blue-collar worker reconnecting with his inner country boy and coming to appreciate the dignity of physical labor—silently nursing, one suspects, the dream of a book contract (and maybe a studio option) all along. A stunt, in other words, that a cynic might see as more in the spirit of self-service than public service.

This tension isn't lost on Grant, a proud son of Appalachia who's suddenly laid off from a marketing agency and gets a job as a rural carrier associate for the Blacksburg, Virginia, post office. He second-guesses his qualifications—and his motivations—but doesn't let either concern stop him.

"What I'm feeling is a spiritual disorientation," he confesses, having been jolted into downward mobility. "Lost in the sense that I don't know what I'm doing, lost in confronting the reality of being back in my hometown at fifty years of age, delivering the mail." He berates himself for his failure to develop a versatile skill set or "build any job security," despite compiling an impressive résumé (including starting a behavioral-economics lab at a *Fortune* 50 company). As he arrives at the decision to take the post-office job, he's facing real hardship: He has cancer, which he mentions almost in passing to explain the urgency of getting health insurance. But he's also a seeker, unapologetically so, and trying to prove something to himself—that, despite his white-collar CV, he is an authentic Appalachian who can still draw on a reserve of mountain grit.

From the June 2025 issue: Sarah Yager on how the USPS delivers mail to the bottom of the Grand Canyon

Grant doesn't hide the self-indulgence latent in what his wife calls "one of your quests." Yet he also proves to be a compelling and empathetic guide, observing his country and its citizens, not just himself, with open and unjaded eyes. If his jaunty prose sometimes feels forced, his curiosity doesn't: He needs to focus on the details of his new manual labor, and milieu, or else fall hopelessly behind his co-workers (which he does anyway).

Immersing himself in unfamiliar work in a familiar place throws him off-balance in a way that feels bracing. Driving his late grandmother-in-law's 1999 Toyota RAV4 (rural carriers, he learns, often have to rely on their personal vehicles) through breathtaking Appalachian landscapes exhilarates, and occasionally terrifies, him. The car loses traction on an uphill dirt road that abruptly becomes "a rutted-out washboard." Heedlessly reaching a hand into an abandoned mailbox turned hornets' nest induces "a full-body, screaming freakout, standing in the middle of a dirt road." He savors surprising, sweet moments, too: an old widower who shows him the sprawling model-train setup in his garage that he began assembling "once Jennie passed"; a man in a trailer who reacts with boyish delight when the *Lord of the Rings* replica sword he ordered with his pandemic check arrives. "This is Anduril, Flame of the West!" the man explains. Grant chimes right in with "Reforged from the shards of Narsil by the elves of Rivendell."

With his co-workers, his approach is "show up, don't sandbag anybody, be humble, play through to the buzzer." But he's also keenly aware of being a soft former white-collar worker on a team of hardened veterans—and during a period, the pandemic, when the Postal Service is "on a wartime footing," its intricate processes strained by new magnitudes of mail. Kat, a terse USPS lifer, helps him get through the worst days: "I think as long as she saw a carrier trying, she was supportive." Serena, a woman who handles surging Amazon deliveries with Sisyphean dedication, instructs him in a new task, chucking parcels into metal cages organized by route: "Start scanning, start throwing, and get the fuck out of my way." Glynnis, a 70-something whose back is killing her, "swore like a marine with busted knuckles"—loudly and creatively, sometimes with racist verve. She drives him crazy with her

incessant complaining, not that the fan noise and the heat don't make him cranky too.

By contrast, Wade, an Alaskan, is the Michael Jordan of backwoods mail delivery, which features a degree of "freedom in terms of when and how you wanted to work" absent from bigger urban routes fully plugged into the Postal Service's centralized system. Wade's "process fluency" awes Grant—his preternatural ability to keep track of every variety of mail ("the hot case, the raw flats, the parcels, the raw mail," plus the trays of machine-sorted first-class and standard mail, arriving every morning) and then fit it all, Tetris-like, into his vehicle's cargo area, arranged for delivery; his mastery of a labyrinthine route; his agility in eating sandwiches with one hand while delivering the mail with the other. Wade could do a route "rated at 9 hours" in five. Grant barely manages half of it in 11 hours, with help.

### [Philip F. Rubio: Save the Postal Service](#)

*Mailman* includes its share of epiphanic wisdom. But unlike many works of nonfiction that focus on this region and its people, it avoids treating those who find themselves in its pages with the sort of condescension or reflexive romanticizing—or worse, a blend of both—that often seeps into writing about Appalachia. Grant doesn't pretend that the Blue Ridge is all wholesome water-bath canning, porch sitting, and verdant greenery. He doesn't deal in crude stereotypes of poor rural people, but neither does he avert his eyes from details that might be construed as backwoods caricature. He gets a glimpse into the trailer where the man who buys the expensive sword lives, watching as he has to "slide crabwise" along the wall, hands raised high, to get past a huge flatscreen TV that dominates the space. Imagining how many times a day he does that, Grant doesn't judge; he just notes "the kind of trade-offs people are willing to make for picture quality." His portrayals throughout tend toward the gently sentimental, no noble savagery in view.

Grant's forthright evocation of community, a word so frequently used that its meaning has grown fuzzy, would be easy to attribute to his own roots in the rural-Blacksburg area, where the story unfolds. The truth, though, is more complicated. Sociologists have sometimes categorized Appalachia as an "internal colony": an impoverished and economically exploited area within a

country that is often viewed by elites as if it were an underdeveloped region outside that country. The firmly upper-middle-class Grant—raised in the mountains because he was born to a Virginia Tech professor, rather than into a long line of coal miners or lumberjacks—doesn’t really try to hide that he sometimes feels more like a colonizer than an “authentic” Appalachian.

In one moment of obvious angst early on, after his wife accuses him of having an inordinate soft spot for Virginia’s country people, Grant proclaims, “I’m from Appalachia. I’m Appalachian!” She tells him pointedly, “You are not!” Identitarian anxiety crops up more subtly too: Grant wistfully recalls his desire to join his high-school classmates on their annual November deer-hunting trips, his father’s refusal to take him, and his envy of the homemade venison jerky the other boys would bring to school. When he says, “I wanted a giant Ziploc bag of venison jerky,” he seems to be saying, “I wanted to be a real Appalachian.”

*mailman* is most distinctive when it ventures into territory that feels timely in a way that goes beyond COVID-era tributes to “essential workers.” Grant finds himself preoccupied with the nature of public service, its scale and scope, and with coordination among systems and humans, of which the Postal Service turns out to be quite an astonishing example. He focuses in on the scene, not just the enormous “superscanner, like a seven-foot-tall mechanical praying mantis,” that logs incoming parcels, but also the low-tech mail-sorting methods. He also gets to appreciate up close the skillful interplay between brain and body involved in becoming “unconsciously competent at complex tasks”; where once he knew only the academic phrase *process fluency*, now he can see the intricacy involved, and the dignity imparted by mastery.

When Grant declares, “My robot brain was in charge” at one point, reflecting on the execution of letter gathering while driving, he’s speaking with pleasure and pride about achieving a flow state in the fulfillment of a worthwhile task; he’s not complaining about drudgery or soul-sucking labor. Ever the marketer, Grant celebrates [the Postal Service’s uniqueness](#) (indulging in a bit of statistical overreach). “FedEx? UPS? They simply cannot do what the USPS does. All they carry are parcels,” he scoffs. “We carry everything for everybody, with 99.993 percent accuracy.”

## Read: What happens to mail during a natural disaster?

*Mailman* is also a shameful revelation of the inexcusable working conditions that letter carriers are subjected to: The [injury rate for postal workers](#) is higher than [for coal miners](#). You can almost feel Grant's blood pressure rising as he describes the decades-out-of-date, unsafe, and AC-less delivery trucks—"death traps," he calls them. (The advent of new electric vehicles, [thanks to a 2022 infusion of federal funds](#), doesn't make it into his book, perhaps because their expected delivery last year has been running behind schedule.) Grant's indictment—and his celebration—predates DOGE, whose arrival only makes both more relevant: a counter to the slander of public servants routinely dispensed by Elon Musk, a man who accrues more money in an hour than the average USPS employee will make in a lifetime.

When Grant says he finally learned that "what was essential was just doing your job," he doesn't mean that the USPS work is easy but that it is hard, and that being a mail carrier, [showing up day in and day out](#), matters.

"That's the difference between a regular and a sub," he observes, remarking on the distinction between being a fill-in and someone's daily letter carrier. "The sub just delivers the mail. The regular is delivering something else. Continuity. Safety. Normalcy. Companionship. Civilization. You know, the stuff the government is supposed to do for its people." In Grant's telling, postal workers [bring order and predictability](#) to a country that can feel like it's unraveling, especially during crises that starkly illustrate [how reliant we are](#) on the federal bureaucracy.

If Hollywood were to option this story, the hero would get offered the job of his dreams and turn it down, realizing in his heart that he is meant to be a mailman after all. But Grant has indicated from the start that his USPS stint is a placeholder. He applies for and ends up accepting a cushy position at a media agency, turns in his Halloween-job uniform, and takes a dig at himself for becoming "just another white-collar ghost with a job that nobody understands."

You may roll your eyes when this interloper describes the solace that his brief sojourn in blue-collar life has brought: that after decades of "feeling like I wasn't doing any good in the world, being part of something—even something as mundane as the Postal Service—made me feel whole."

Glynnis certainly takes a different view as she counts down to retirement. When Grant, hoping to quiet her carping, says, “I’m in the same jam as you are,” she calls him on it: “No you ain’t, because I’m here to get my motherfucking pension, and you’re too goddamned stupid to stay at home and collect unemployment.” Grant acknowledges that “she had a point.”

His final revelation is that Americans misunderstand the difference between white- and blue-collar work. “Both forms of labor want all of your time and both exact a toll. One form is no more or less noble than the other,” he writes. “The real distinction is between work and service, and I think it’s one of the great dividing lines in American life.” The question this leaves for readers isn’t why Grant decided to stop being a mailman. The question is how we ended up with a country where choosing a life of service all too often feels financially untenable and socially undervalued.

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Playing Mailman.”*

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# The Judgments of Muriel Spark

**The novelist liked playing God—a very capricious one.**

by Judith Shulevitz



Updated at 5:18 p.m. ET on August 13, 2025

The novelist Muriel Spark died almost 20 years ago, but she still regularly appears on lists of top comic novelists to read on this subject or that. Crave more *White Lotus*-level skewering of the ridiculous rich? Try [Memento](#)

*Mori*, *The New York Times* suggests. An acerbic take on boring dinner parties? *Symposium*. Interested in “the fun and funny aspects of being a teacher”? Read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*—also good for learning how to be a highly inappropriate teacher, if you want to know that too.

Obscured by her reputation as a wit is the fact that Spark was a religious writer—indeed, one of the most important religious writers in modern British literature. She embraced Roman Catholicism in 1954, at age 36, and joined a cohort of renowned literary Catholic converts that included Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. The most consistent influence on her work is the Bible, especially the Old Testament. She began reading it as a girl in her Presbyterian school and kept rereading it throughout her life, less for “religious consolation,” she writes in [her essay](#) “The Books I Re-Read and Why,” than “for sheer enjoyment of the literature.” She was particularly drawn to the Book of Job, an anguished outcry against the seeming randomness of evil. And yet her tone throughout her work is so acidly droll, her touch so light and sly, that we could read most of her 22 novels and 41 short stories and never quite process that their central concern is God.

That’s because she communicates her theology largely through form rather than content. She rarely discusses; she prefers to sculpt. With a steely command of omniscience, selective disclosure, irony, and other narrative devices, Spark re-creates in the relationship between author and reader the sadomasochistic partnership between the Almighty and his hopelessly wayward flock—or, to put it another way, between his absolute truth and our partial understanding. In other words, she plays God.

Not necessarily a nice God, either. In the Book of Job, the Almighty is mercilessly capricious, condemning Job to bitter suffering in a wager with Satan. This God’s ends are not our ends. Nor are Spark’s. A Creator who acts according to his will on his own unknowable schedule darkens her bright, chipper prose like a skull in a still life. “Remember you must die,” the anonymous callers in *Memento Mori* (1959) say to their shocked elderly victims before hanging up. Frightening as these prank calls are, their recipients refuse to take the message seriously, because surely the whole thing is just a macabre practical joke. One feature of Spark’s comic genius is her ability to come up with screwball storylines that recapitulate our hapless

drift toward final judgment. The collision between God's lofty vantage point and human shortsightedness yields absurdist disaster.

In [Electric Spark: The Enigma of Dame Muriel](#), Frances Wilson revels in her sublimely contrary subject. Her account is a corrective to Martin Stannard's 2009 authorized [Muriel Spark: The Biography](#), a [sober, balanced, and plodding opus](#), though still the definitive biography. Stannard's problem was that Spark had trained as a secretary and filed everything away, no matter how trivial. (Another way of saying this is that she hoarded.) When she died, her archives consisted of 195 linear feet of "letters, proofs, receipts, memos, agendas, minutes, newspaper cuttings, diaries and manuscripts," Wilson writes. Spark had given Stannard exclusive access to it all. The mass of material seems to have crushed his spirit. Almost as soon as she chose him, she regretted it, and Wilson imagines her torturing Stannard the way the ghost of a murdered woman toys with her murderer in Spark's short story "The Portobello Road."

[From the September 2010 issue: The 20th century's most wickedly funny novelist](#)

Wilson, by contrast, feels free to focus on the parts of Spark's life that informed her art—and luckily for us, these are plentiful, both because Spark liked to rework her own experiences and acquaintances for her fiction, and because her life tended toward the fantastical in ways that served her writing. Wilson borrows Spark's own mystical whimsy about the relationship between her life and her work, which was that her fiction somehow preceded her experiences. "If she wrote about a burglary," Wilson says, "her own house would then be broken into; if she wrote about manuscripts being stolen from a bedroom or a cache of love letters being used as blackmail, this would likewise be her fate."

This was true. Her house was burgled a decade after she wrote about similar burglaries in her novel *Symposium* (1990). Blackmail featured in her first novel, [The Comforters](#) (1957), and in *Memento Mori*; in 1963, she was blackmailed by a rare-book dealer in possession of her love letters. You'd think Spark took dictation from a far-seeing God. Indeed, that's more or less the subject of *The Comforters*. A young woman hears voices narrating her exact movements, or else predicting the near future, accompanied by the

sound of typing. Everyone presumes she's going mad, but what the voices say is either true or about to come true. Who controls the narrative? That's Spark's big question. Whether to trust or resist those who attempt to control it is the follow-up question.

A lot of untrustworthy people tried to take charge of Spark over the course of her adult life, most of them men. Her childhood, however, was happy and relatively free of such power struggles. Born Muriel Sarah Camberg in 1918 to a Jewish father, Barney, and a mother, Cissy, who had some Jewish heritage, she was raised on a haphazard mix of gods and rituals. Her mother, more eclectic than observant, Wilson writes,

put seven candles in the window on the Sabbath, went to synagogue on Yom Kippur (in order, Muriel said, to show off her hat collection), celebrated Passover, kept an image of Christ in her locket, a Buddha on a lotus leaf in the living room, served hot cross buns at Easter, mince pies at Christmas and pork all year round.

The family lived modestly on a street in central Edinburgh that was full of delights for a curious child. In her building were a painter, a singer, a sweetshop, and a jeweler, and outside was a communal garden to play in. The Cambergs—Muriel had an older brother—gave over one of two bedrooms in their small apartment to lodgers, then to Barney's sister and later Cissy's mother, a former suffragette (indomitable, witty, and “astonishingly ugly,” Spark later wrote). Muriel adored them both. Her father, an engineer, was genial and funny, and friends were always dropping by. Spark's mother mocked them behind their back; Spark once called Cissy, not disapprovingly, “a complete hypocrite.” The child internalized her mother's satirical edge as well as the neighborhood “maxims, idioms, accents, aphorisms, rhythms and catchphrases,” Wilson writes. Her ears had memories, was how Spark put it.

When she was 11 and a student at James Gillespie's High School for Girls, Spark came under the spell of Miss Kay, a pedagogical grande dame who exposed her to Italian art and Romantic poetry and trained her in poetic meter. By the time Spark was 12, she had published accomplished poems in her high-school magazine and in an anthology of poetry by Edinburgh high-school students. Miss Kay, Wilson says, “both was and was not the model

for Miss Jean Brodie,” Spark’s most notorious character. They shared “mannerisms and speech patterns”; both overpraised their protégés as the “crème de la crème.” But Miss Kay was much nicer. Miss Brodie is partial to Nazis and Italian fascists and maneuvers her girls into position to act as her advocates and surrogates—which is not always in their interest. “By the time they were sixteen,” Spark writes with characteristic mordancy, “they remained unmistakably Brodie, and were all famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking.”

Spark’s marriage at 19, in 1937, drove home to her that the world was not inclined to let women take charge of their own destiny. Oswald Spark, a teacher who courted her for a year, had accepted a job in Rhodesia and asked Spark to follow him. He’d support her, he said, and she could keep writing poetry. She consented. Their wedding night was “an awful mess,” Spark said later, “a botch-up,” and marital relations did not continue for long. But she got pregnant and nearly died of septicemia after giving birth to a son, Robin, toward whom she was never able to muster as much maternal solicitude as he longed for. Oswald turned out to have a “severe nervous disorder,” in Spark’s words, and after two years, she left him. Colonial society horrified her, especially the way white people talked about black people as if they weren’t human, but war had broken out and she only managed to make her escape in 1944, resorting to a troopship that had to navigate through enemy waters. She was forced to leave Robin behind; it took her 10 years to win back custody.

Wilson frames the next phase of Spark’s life as a key to the fiction that was still a decade away, and she’s not exaggerating its importance. When Spark arrived in London in 1944, she got a job as a secretary for the head of a clandestine project overseen by the British Foreign Office. In fact, she may already have been doing undercover work. Wilson hypothesizes that she spied for the British colonial government during her last year in Rhodesia, possibly trying to uncover enemy aliens among the settlers. Wilson cites no direct evidence but rather a curious gap in the record of what she was up to, or even where she lived.

Spark’s new boss was a wildly imaginative and very demanding foreign correspondent of Falstaffian proportions named Sefton Delmer. His outfit, the Political Warfare Executive, conducted psyops from a secret compound

north of London. The PWE's mission was "the successful and purposeful deceit of the enemy"; it produced disinformation in German that was published in a counterfeit newspaper, sent in the form of forged letters and fake secret messages, and broadcast over the radio. An anti-Semitic Nazi talk-show host who ranted drunkenly about corruption and sexual depravity among the party elite from his illegal outpost in the fatherland, for instance, was in reality a German writer of detective fiction employed by Delmer in England.

#### From the February 2001 issue: Dame Muriel's surreal meditation on belief

Working for Delmer may have been the best training a future novelist could get. He was fanatical about verisimilitude: All the details in the team's fabrications had to ring true. He hired people from every profession. In addition to writers, he enlisted farmers, psychologists, actors, even cabaret singers, some of them German Jewish refugees knowledgeable about German life. Plus the military fed Delmer the latest intelligence. He was "omniscient," Wilson writes, and scary; he liked to play mind games with his own people as well as the Germans.

Spark's immersion in "a world of method and intrigue," as she put it, taught her about the slipperiness of truth. For the rest of her life, she would be obsessed with—indeed, paranoid about—"codes, secret messages and the circulation of fictions posing as fact," Wilson writes. Several of Spark's novels feature shady characters spying on one another and hatching whisper campaigns against a defiant but naive heroine. She later was the target of a plot herself. During Spark's brief tenure in 1947 as the editor hired to update *The Poetry Review*, a stodgy publication overseen by an elderly poetry society, a board member scheming to oust her pried into her life and threatened to use her divorce against her. Spark put this experience to use in more than one novel, most notably *Loitering With Intent* (1981), probably her funniest. The Poetry Society becomes the Autobiographical Association, whose ridiculous members write their memoirs under the supervision of the director, a snooty character clearly conniving to use their confessions for some sort of skulduggery.

Then there was Spark's nervous breakdown in January 1954. Always worried about her weight, an anxiety shared by some of her heroines, she

had been taking Dexedrine to control her eating. During the ensuing psychotic interlude, she fixated on T. S. Eliot, whose most recent play, *The Confidential Clerk*, had a character named Muriel. Convinced that Eliot, whom she had never met, had sneaked encrypted declarations of love for her into the script, she spent months obsessively trying to decode them. This wasn't easy. At one point, Wilson writes, "Eliot's words started jumping around and cavorting, reshaping themselves in anagrams and crosswords."

A doctor weaned Spark from Dexedrine and put her on antipsychotic medication, and she briefly went into therapy with a Jungian psychologist. But Roman Catholicism restored order to her disorderly mind, Spark said. It made her "see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings." She put herself in the hands of God, who sees and hears all—God being a preferable eavesdropper and spy to ex-boyfriends and boards of directors. Piety did not make her dogmatic or conservative. She neither went to confession nor renounced abortion, contraception, or divorce, and she embraced doubt.

From the November 1965 issue: Muriel Sparks's poem "Note by the Wayside"

Spark's turn to religion coincided with her turn to fiction, which was not an accident. Catholicism allowed her to find her voice as a writer. While editing a volume of the letters of Cardinal John Henry Newman, she had read his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, which details the steps of his conversion to Catholicism and inspired her to begin to take her own. The qualities in his reflections that attracted her—simplicity, concision, a refusal to accept easy answers—double as a good description of the style she was developing.

Catholicism itself had aesthetic appeal. She was drawn to its living magic—its "saints, angels, miracles, and mysteries," Wilson writes. "She also liked the paradox, metaphor, sixth dimension and rearrangement of time and space." For believers, those staples of faith had an immediacy and a proximity to the everyday that Spark may have felt was best embodied in fiction. From the start, in her very first (and prize-winning) short story, "The Seraph and the Zambezi" (1951)—still one of her best—she effaced the distinction between naturalism and the supernatural. During a Christmas pageant held by a gas-station owner in his rickety garage near Rhodesia's

Zambezi River, a six-winged creature appears onstage and proceeds to kick everyone else off it. It's a seraph, straight out of the Book of Isaiah. "This is my show," the owner, Cramer, tells it.

"Since when?" the Seraph said.

"Right from the start," Cramer breathed at him.

"Well, it's been mine from the Beginning," said the Seraph, "and the Beginning began first."

Why Catholicism and not, say, Scottish Presbyterianism, the country's Calvinist-inflected denomination of her youth, or her father's Judaism? Spark's love of high style surely rebelled against the austerity of Protestantism, both in worship and creed. (As a writer, however, she made heavy use of the doctrine of predestination, disposing of characters summarily and parodying herself in the figure of Miss Jean Brodie. "She thinks she is Providence," a disenchanted student reflects. "She thinks she is the God of Calvin.")

Spark was even more conflicted about Judaism. In *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), a chatty, muddled autobiographical novel, she describes her protagonist going back and forth between her chilly Christian relatives and her warmer Jewish ones and belonging among neither. To one side of the family, she was faintly pitiable because she was half Jewish; the other was kinder, but she felt her lack of Jewish knowledge excluded her from their cozy home rituals. Spark always had the Bible, though, and read it "with a sense that it was specially mine," as she put it. She thought God had given a good answer when Moses had asked his name at the burning bush: *I am who I am*. Was she "a Gentile" or was she "a Jewess"? "Both and neither. What am I? I am what I am," she writes in her essay "Note on My Story 'The Gentile Jewesses.'"

Spark's range as a novelist was impressive—one work might adopt the guise of a murder mystery, the next of a ghost story—but she had a signature rhetorical move: prolepsis. The scholar Clare Bucknell came up with a Spark-worthy term for it: the "auto-spoiler." In a throwaway remark toward the beginning of a story, the narrator gives away the end. We learn in

Chapter 3 of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) that one of the Brodie set will betray her to the school's administration, which is desperate for an excuse to get rid of her. In *The Driver's Seat* (1970), Spark's most surreal novel and also her favorite, we are told, also in the third chapter, that the tourist disembarking in a Southern European city will have been murdered by the next morning.

By revealing the fate of her characters, Spark frees us from the grip of curiosity about what's going to happen and forces us to study why. Who made it happen? What does it mean? Does providence foreordain or do characters have a say? Is everything a conspiracy or does accident play a role? Spark's convictions let her interrogate God's designs without despairing that there are none. As a child, Spark had found God to be "a charming and witty character" with "a lot of conflicting sides to his nature," as she wrote. The worry that crops up in her fiction is that he'll turn out to be a rogue operator like her old boss Delmer.

But Spark also admired the God of Job because he was "not the God of love," Wilson writes. He was the braggart God who boasted to Job that—in Spark's words—"I made this and I created that, and I can crush and I can blast and I can blow. And who are you to ask questions?" A devoted ironist is the answer: Spark reserved the right not only to ask questions but to admit amusement and dismay into her faith. Anyone can worship a God who doesn't trim himself to the size of the human imagination—that's what God is for, to make sure that we don't mistake our petty schemes for anything other than half-baked. But it takes a Spark to be fond of a God who chest-thumps and is otherwise outlandish—a God who, she writes, "basks unashamed in his own glory, and in his anger is positively blasphemous." Because who are we to say how God should behave?

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline "The Judgments of Muriel Spark." It originally stated that T. S. Eliot converted to Catholicism. In fact, he converted to Anglo-Catholicism.*

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# The Woman Who Perfected Flower Painting

**The 17th-century painter Rachel Ruysch was once more famous than Vermeer.**

by Zachary Fine



"Swag of Flowers and Fruit Suspended in Front of a Niche" (1681)  
(Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images)

If still-life painting is the art of arresting decay, then it makes a lot of sense that Rachel Ruysch grew up to become one of the greatest still-life painters in the history of art. In the 17th century, Frederik Ruysch, her father, was an internationally famous embalmer. His job was to make a natural object seem permanently alive and pleasing to the eye. He could transform the corpse of a bullet-pierced admiral into the “fresh carcase of an infant,” Samuel Johnson once said. He could turn dead children into the serenest version of themselves—their faces so full of life that people wanted to kiss them, as Peter the Great once did.

The house where Rachel grew up, near the town hall in Amsterdam, had an annex for her father’s skeletons, organ jars, and severed limbs, which he collected along with a growing stockpile of dead insects, amphibians, and flowers. It was a rich soil in which to live and work if you were an ambitious Enlightenment-era man of science, as Frederik was. To be a child in that environment, though, would have been incredibly weird. Imagine your father coming home day after day smelling of organ meat, his clothes speckled with blood and vague fluids. He keeps trying to show you his newest cow’s heart or amputated foot, or a skink shipped in from one of the colonies. What’s that under the chair? Ah, yes—a piece of lung. The barrier between life and death starts to seem thinner, more porous. Your sense of beauty dilates and shifts.

Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) did not spend her time dissecting stray dogs or making fake fiddles out of human thigh bones, as her father did. Instead she devoted herself to the most conventionally beautiful object in nature: the flower. In fact, she became one of the top flower painters in Europe. Even though Ruysch is now a footnote in art history, she was more famous in her own lifetime than Rembrandt and Vermeer.

The first major show devoted to Ruysch, which arrived at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston in August (after opening in the United States at [the Toledo Museum of Art](#), in Ohio, in the spring), is one of the most intelligently curated and sensory-rich shows a museumgoer could ask for. It includes boxes perfumed with the scents of Ruysch’s flowers, jars of pickled toads and lizards that feature in her paintings, cases of beetles and botanical illustrations, new translations of Dutch primary sources, and a sorely needed crop of research on her work.

The only sticking point, really, is Ruysch's paintings. They are easy to like but harder to love—at least for viewers marooned in the 21st century. Over the course of her nearly 70-year career, Ruysch shunned radical innovation and experimentation, and opted for the subtlest of variations on a theme. No grand gestures or avant-garde maneuvers. Just refinement, focus, and perfection. Flowers and fruit.

In the gilded arena of Dutch *stilleven*, or “still life,” there are banquet pieces, with wine-filled goblets and oysters and corkscrews of lemon peel, and breakfast spreads, with everyday nibbles, such as cheese and nuts. *Pronk*, or “show,” paintings display piles of gold vessels and jewels and silk. *Vanitas* pieces depict items such as skulls and pocket watches, reminding you that you’re going to die soon. What might be considered the lowest subgenre today is *bloemstilleven*, or “flower still life.” A seemingly decorative object (a flower) is represented in another decorative object (a painting), which rates as an even lesser decorative object—a flower painting.

To anyone who has spent more than a few minutes with a flower piece by Ruysch or her predecessors Ambrosius Bosschaert or Jan Davidsz de Heem, this ranking will seem mostly pea-brained. Start with the fact that flower paintings are the most visually sumptuous portraits of nature’s most freakish and colorful sex organs. You are staring at a highly evolved specimen whose entire appearance is predicated on seducing living creatures—youself included—to propagate its existence.

Unlike some pollinators, we’re not in the business of sticking our proboscis into flowers, but we do eat them, collect them, place them on coffins, give them to prom dates, throw them at weddings, decorate our homes with their odor and shape. Flowers have consoled people, driven them to obsession and despair, and sent them into the pit of legal turmoil and financial ruin. They’ve also made people extravagantly rich. Before the tulip speculation bubble burst in 1637, about 30 years prior to Ruysch’s birth, Semper Augustus bulbs were being sold for as much as 5,000 guilders—a single tulip cost more than 10 times the annual salary of a highly skilled artisan.

The genius of a flower still life is that it converts a perishable commodity into a stable one. It can also yoke together blooms from different seasons and continents to create as many retinal fireworks per square inch as

possible. The savviest artists pick “the downy peach, the finely dusted plum, the smooth apple, the burnished cherry, the dazzling rose, the manifold pink, the variegated tulip,” all in their maximum ripeness, as Johann Wolfgang von [Goethe wrote](#), and apply an understanding of botany “from the root up.” More than imitating nature, the flower painter elevates it. One artist whose masterpieces dared to accomplish this “impossible” task, Goethe said, was Rachel Ruysch.



*Still Life With Fruits and Insects* (1710) (Johnny Van Haeften / Bridgeman Images)

When we first meet Ruysch in the exhibition, she's already a teenage prodigy. Her first known work, *Swag of Flowers and Fruit Suspended in Front of a Niche* (1681), is a dangling bouquet loaded with irises, hollyhocks, marigolds, grapes, and wild berries. Around the age of 15, she was apprenticed by her father to the renowned flower painter Willem van Aelst (reportedly a difficult man). The twisting vines and mint-green leaves in the piece are very Van Aelstian, but the general setup, with flowers strung together and nailed upside down, is likely borrowed from de Heem. Even though Ruysch's style and method will evolve in the coming years—new cultivars and pigments dropping in (Prussian blue), more bustling compositions and tighter brushwork—the main ingredients of her mature output are already here: the spare background and the glowing flowers and fruit, raked by natural light but seemingly lit from within. My favorite touch is the mini-bramble of pale-gold lines in the bottom right that yields the words *Rachel Ruysch*. It's less a signature than a wink. We're looking at the hand of a highly precocious teen who knows she's very good and isn't afraid to boast.

By the time Ruysch was in her 20s, poems were already being written about her. She was hailed as a “floral goddess,” better than Maria van Oosterwijck (a celebrated flower painter in Amsterdam). In her 30s, Ruysch became the first woman admitted to the Confrerie Pictura, the painters’ guild in The Hague. In her 40s, she was handpicked to be a court painter for Johann Wilhelm, a prince-elector of the Holy Roman Empire and a high-ranking German duke. In her 50s, Ruysch won the lottery—literally won the lottery, to the tune of 75,000 guilders. (For comparison: The [townhouse her father bought on the Bloemgracht](#)—“flower canal”—in an upscale Amsterdam neighborhood cost 8,000 guilders.)

This kind of good fortune is difficult to interpret. The “obstacle race” long faced by women artists, to borrow from the title of Germaine Greer’s pathbreaking 1979 work of feminist art history, often looks more like a gravy train with Ruysch: one stroke of predestined luck after another. She grew up in a wealthy and well-connected family. Her great-uncle was a painter, her cousins were painters, and the whole town was swimming in painters, artist-botanists, and horticulturalists.

But her life was not frictionless. Barred from Latin schools, universities, and professional guilds in Amsterdam, Ruysch couldn't have pursued any genre of painting that spoke to her. She was likely steered toward flower still lifes by her father, as a suitable subject for someone of her gender. She then had to fight her way into a fiercely competitive art market—in a city, country, and century more obsessed with flowers than any other—all while [giving birth to 10 children](#), only six of whom survived into adulthood. After Ruysch won the lottery, she [stopped painting almost entirely for 15 years](#).

What set Ruysch apart throughout her career was a trademark style and subject: big, blossomy bouquets set against a dark, velvety background; high-wattage light that's coming from somewhere over your left shoulder; tons of insects and crawling creatures; a simple stone or marble ledge to support the vase; and a dizzying variety of cultivars and blooms. While other flower painters were building bouquets from cut flowers widely available in Western Europe, Ruysch had a direct line, through her father, to exotic blooms in the Amsterdam botanical gardens. A single arrangement of Ruysch's from a 1700 painting has more than 22 species in it: devil's trumpets, passionflower, coral honeysuckle, an African pumpkin, a cheeky-looking pineapple (rare in Dutch still life). Another, from about 1735, has flowers from every single continent except Antarctica.

You could get your hands on anything in a port city in an aquatic empire, whether it was Brazilian sugar or Indonesian pepper. From 1602, when the Dutch East India Company was chartered, to the 1660s, when Ruysch was born, the Dutch Republic boomed. Colonies and outposts sprouted up everywhere from New Amsterdam (now New York City) to Nagasaki. Dutch *fluyts* crisscrossed the globe, carrying all manner of cargo (Baltic grain, Caribbean salt), as well as hundreds of thousands of human beings bought and sold as chattel—the Dutch transported approximately 600,000 enslaved people across the Atlantic from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Wealth flowed into the coffers of merchants and regents back home, and turned consumption into a national pastime. A well-fed mercantile class with lots of money, and time to spend it, created the perfect conditions for a popular art market and a new stand-alone genre: “still life.”

What is the best way to interpret a painting of motionless *stuff*? Theories abound. In Ruysch's case, one can apply several different lenses, viewing

each piece as an aesthetic object, a scientific illustration, and a moral message. Take a pair of paintings from 1710: *Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase on a Marble Ledge* is a monumental bouquet; *Still Life With Fruits and Insects* is a large spillage of fruit on a forest floor—both commissioned by a Leiden textile merchant for a whopping 1,300 guilders total. What we have are two pieces of eye candy. Every rose and grape is clamoring for your attention. Even the dark background is colluding with the waxy petals and fruit to pop toward you. It's a mouthwatering visual buffet. ([Arthur Schopenhauer once argued](#) that Dutch still life was a low form of art because it made you want to eat the bouquet, Edible Arrangements-style, instead of contemplate it, grinding your aesthetic faculties to a halt with hunger. I can see what he means.)

When the initial dazzlement wears off, your focus sharpens. What's that—a katydid? A sand lizard? Even if your eye is glued to the painting, your brain is elsewhere. The flame tulip sends you to Turkey, the common sunflower to North America, the butterflies and insects to the entomologist's corkboard. It's an informational trove for the science-minded viewer (and indeed, the patron, Pieter de la Court van der Voort, was a crafty horticulturist with a flair for new hothouse techniques).

Then, suddenly, something changes. At first, the insects seem to be having a little fiesta with the fruit—ants, wasps, and spiders nibbling at a peach or scurrying toward a chestnut. Now you notice that the sand lizard's forked tongue is just milliseconds away from snatching a butterfly. Another lizard in the corner has just infiltrated a bird's nest filled with fresh eggs and seems to be emitting a barbaric yawp. The painting starts to flex under the pressure of death. The spongy forest floor looks fungal; the pomegranate teems with its own seeds; the corn kernels become warts; the grapes are fish eggs. The entire composition is slithering and crawling with itself. It is, in a word, monstrous.

As a viewer, you can xylophone your way up and down these notes—the aesthetic pleasure; the scientific stimulation; the cruelty of nature as moral warning—or play them in your head all at once. Sometimes it just depends on how close you're standing to the painting.



*Posy of Flowers, With a Tulip and a Melon, on a Stone Ledge* (1748)  
(Bridgeman Images)

For decades, scholars have wrung their hands over how the Dutch saw their still lifes. Was a grape just a grape? Or was it a reminder of the Eucharist? Perhaps every pineapple was a portal to a colony keeping the empire afloat. Or maybe a still life was a stimulus for consumption, its decorative slickness training your eyes to move on to the next thing you wanted to buy or sell. By the late 1700s, the genre had been marinating in its own juices for too long —some of its tropes were now 150 years old. The golden age of Dutch art was over (whether its painters were aware or not), and many viewers must have felt bored by the grape rather than inspired or rebuked by it.

Ruysch finished her last piece when she was 83 years old. *Posy of Flowers, With a Tulip and a Melon, on a Stone Ledge* (1748) is a small miracle of a painting. About the size of a floor tile, it has more feeling and tenderness than all of the trumpeting bouquets and whirlpools of color. A little striped tulip, its petals barely open, seems as if it's trying to lift itself out of bed. A shy melon sits behind it, with wildflowers huddled around. The signature is lightly painted and barely there. Even the veins of the stone table are daubed on like afterthoughts, as if the world of hard surfaces and sharp edges has less meaning here, in the domain of flowers. Ruysch's work can do that: turn a flower into the most important thing in the world, at the moment it's being painted and seen. What more could a flower want?

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Forgotten Still-Life Prodigy.”*

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# ‘The Death Penalty Has No Place in This Country’

## Readers respond to our July 2025 cover story and more.



Witness

In the July issue, [Elizabeth Bruenig documented](#) sin and redemption in America’s death chambers.

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I am deeply grateful to Elizabeth Bruenig for her unflinching reporting on the death penalty, and for telling the stories of the men she’s met on death row. I have always thought that the death penalty was morally reprehensible

and incompatible with American democratic principles. But thanks to people like Bruenig and Bryan Stevenson, whose memoir, *Just Mercy*, I read as an incoming college freshman, my understanding of the death penalty has shifted from the theoretical to the deeply personal. Their witness has confirmed my belief that the death penalty has no place in this country.

On September 24, 2024, the state of Missouri executed Marcellus Williams, despite evidence of his innocence. My family, alongside other concerned Americans, petitioned state and local officials on his behalf during the period leading up to his execution. His death haunts me still.

**Cynthia Wynn**  
*Brighton, Mich.*

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Robert Bowers, who murdered 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, was tried in federal court. There was no question about his guilt, and his attorneys were eager to trade a guilty plea for a life sentence.

Instead, prosecutors insisted on pursuing the death penalty, dragging survivors, victims' families, and the city through a long trial and taking us back through the whole horrible day. Bowers has since been sentenced to die—which will likely mean more appeals, forcing survivors to relive the day again and again. A life sentence, in this case, may have prevented much grief.

**Jean Martin**  
*McKeesport, Pa.*

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Elizabeth Bruenig and I have something in common—we have both witnessed executions in America. I watched a man named Alton Wayne die in the electric chair at the Virginia State Penitentiary in 1989. I did so as an employee of the American Correctional Association, an organization that accredits prisons, where I worked at the time.

Wayne had been convicted of the rape and murder of 61-year-old Lavergne Marshall in 1977. Marshall had been bitten, beaten, and stabbed 42 times

before being dumped nude in her bathtub and doused with bleach. Waye confessed to the crime.

At the execution, I stood with the warden, the prison chaplain, and others directly next to the electric chair. After Waye had been strapped in, the warden asked for his last words. Waye responded, “I would like to express that what is about to occur here is a murder,” without a word of remorse for his victim. I wondered if someone had coached him to say that. When the electrical current was administered, Waye quickly lost consciousness.

Now, 36 years later, I continue to support capital punishment as an option for aggravated first-degree murder. I’ve noticed in the intervening years that many condemned inmates are seen as victims, while the real victims are forgotten. I give Bruenig credit for including details of the crimes of the men she watched die, as well as for admitting to “overidentification” with them. Most death-penalty opponents choose not to.

Death-row inmates are human beings, no more or less than the rest of us. On this, Bruenig and I agree. But I respectfully disagree with her on the notion of the “dignity of human life” applying to all. I was relieved that Waye didn’t appear to suffer in his final moments. But I also thought of Marshall and the suffering she had endured, alone, as Waye took her dignity through rape and murder. There are instances when executions should not be dismissed as vengeance, but seen as justice.

**Scott McKay Wallace**  
*Leesburg, Va.*

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I was disappointed that “Witness” does not focus on one of the principal reasons the death penalty ought to be abolished: the possibility that an innocent person might be executed. My brother’s case is an example. When he was 20, Subramanyam was arrested for a murder and later convicted on circumstantial evidence. At his initial trial, prosecutors attempted to “death qualify” the jury, to ensure that they would be open to sentencing him to death. If they had succeeded, he may well have been killed. Instead, he has spent more than four decades incarcerated, trying to prove his innocence. In 2021, the district attorney’s office fully opened Subu’s case file. Within the

more than 3,000 pages of documents, Subu's lawyers say they found materials that had never been turned over to the defense, including some potentially exculpatory evidence. He now awaits a new opportunity to challenge his conviction.

Over the past 42 years, my brother has helped hundreds of inmates earn their GED. He started a literacy council and helped with the prison "Runathon" to benefit the local community. He does yoga daily, keeps abreast of the outside world, and calls his family. He has finished three degrees by correspondence and was, to my knowledge, the first Pennsylvania inmate to earn a graduate degree while incarcerated. But he has had to miss all of our family events and even the last rites of our beloved parents. Subu is a calm, kind, concerned, and brilliant human. He lives in an 8-by-10 cell and somehow stays hopeful.

**Saraswathi Vedam**

*Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada*

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Elizabeth Bruenig replies:

*The death penalty is a complicated subject that tends to stir strong emotions. I'm grateful that so many readers spent time with this story and reached out to express their thoughts. There are a number of legitimate reasons to oppose the death penalty: concerns about the risk of executing innocent people, objections related to race and racial prejudice, a principled respect for human life. I am convinced on every count. But I welcome dialogue with people who disagree—if the death penalty in the United States is going to end, we will need many more voters willing to elect the prosecutors, judges, and lawmakers who oppose the practice, and so people who are against capital punishment must be prepared to patiently make their case. I hope that this story has provided readers with tools for arguing against the death penalty in their own communities, and that we may one day achieve a more just world.*

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**Behind the Cover**

For this month's cover story, "This Is What the End of the Liberal World Order Looks Like," the *Atlantic* staff writer Anne Applebaum reported on the civil war in Sudan, accompanied by the photographer Lynsey Addario. America's withdrawal from the world has left a vacuum, Applebaum argues, and greed, nihilism, and violence have filled it. For our cover image, we selected a photograph taken by Addario in El Geneina, a city in western Sudan where thousands of civilians have been killed. Two siblings, Adam Abdullah, 11, and Hawa, 7, sit in a window; Hawa lost her leg in an air strike three months earlier.

— **Bifen Xu**, *Senior Photo Editor*

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# THE WAR ABOUT NOTHING

Sudan and the world  
America left behind



A

*The Atlantic*  
EST. 1857

*Plus:*

Guitar Guru to  
the Rock Gods

*By Nancy Walecki*

By Anne Applebaum

*Photographs by Lynsey Addario*

The Death Doctors

*By Elaina Pott Calabro*

Correction

“[The Clones Are Here](#)” (July) stated that Panayiotis Zavos was a physician. In fact, Zavos has a doctorate in reproductive physiology.

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*This article appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”*

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# Poetry

- [\*\*Faith\*\*](#)
-

# Faith

## A poem

by Kevin Young



How do the small birds  
in the street know  
how not to die—

that whatever  
they gather,  
hunger for, is never  
  
enough to keep them  
in the road  
when our wheels bear down

upon them? They feast on  
what I cannot see  
then fly away

& sing.

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*This poem appears in the [September 2025](#) print edition.*

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