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# A Reporter at Large

- [The Mystifying Rise of Child Suicide](#)

By [Andrew Solomon](#)

## Content

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My husband and I first met Trevor Matthews when he and our son, George, started kindergarten together at St. Bernard's, a private boys' school on the Upper East Side. Trevor was perhaps the brightest kid in the class. In first grade, he was already reading adult narrative nonfiction. He could be charming, generous, and humane. But he could also turn suddenly violent. At my son's seventh-birthday party, Trevor bit another boy on the ear so hard that the mark was still visible when that child next went to school. Trevor terrorized the smaller kids in the class, and, if they pushed back, he would try to get them in trouble. He was shrewd in his manipulations. In second grade, he tried extracting cash from other boys by threatening to spread embarrassing rumors. "Trevor was in trouble more than everyone combined," a classmate recalled. Parents complained, and Trevor was frequently disciplined. "By first grade, he was already awash in a sea of conflict," one parent said. "I remember seeing his mother's anguish and just wanting the path for her son to be a little less hard. But it was hard."

Trevor's mother, Angela Matthews, a driven intellectual-property lawyer in her early forties, studied ballet and still carries herself like a dancer. Her intelligence and the intensity of her character can make her intimidating, but she is also given to acts of tremendous kindness. Trevor's father, Billy Matthews, who works in finance, is affable and athletic. They have a daughter, Agnes, three and a half years younger than Trevor; Billy also has two sons, Trey and Tristen, from a previous marriage.

Angela grew up in New York in a Wasp family, and Trevor's attendance at St. Bernard's was shadowed by the memory of two uncles who had been pupils there and had both died young. In 1992, Angela's eight-year-old younger brother, Tristan Colt, fell to his death from the family's apartment building. Climbing through a window in the apartment, on the twelfth floor, he'd dropped carefully down to a terrace one floor below, from which it was possible to access a neighboring building, go down the stairs, and head out undetected. He was last seen sitting on the terrace ledge, before toppling over backward. He'd thrown a tantrum and been scolded, but the general

conclusion was that his death was probably not a suicide. Eleven years later, Angela's half brother, Trevor Nelson—for whom she named her son—died at thirty-four, when a hospital treating him for viral meningitis inexplicably administered a fatal admixture of drugs. Eleven years older than Angela and a child of her mother's first marriage, he had been a charismatic presence at St. Bernard's, athletic and academically brilliant but also a bully. He would gather kids in recess for a game called Kill, where they would chant and then Trevor would announce the name of the person who was going to be attacked. Trevor Nelson went on to be kicked out of multiple prep schools. But eventually he mellowed. He attended U.C. Berkeley, became a top producer at "60 Minutes," and was a doting husband and father with a wide circle of loyal friends. Hundreds attended his funeral.

When it was Trevor Matthews's turn to attend St. Bernard's, he wore Tristan Colt's blazer, and longtimers at the school often drew comparisons between him and his other uncle, Trevor Nelson. If he acted badly, teachers would say, "Well, Trevor's like his namesake." Trevor's glittering intellect delighted many adults. He was precocious in other ways, too: he was interested in girls and, in fourth grade, brought a date to a school benefit. "It was totally a big deal that he brought her," Angela told me. "I said, 'If he wants to have a date, he can have a date.' They're not holding hands, it's O.K." Trevor was elected class representative that same year, promising to have the recess deck refurbished and to get the boys more involved in helping the neighborhood's homeless.

Yet his aggression intensified. He pushed one child down some stairs; the mother asked the school to insure physical distance between the boys in the stairwell. Playing paintball, Trevor sneaked up behind a boy and fired close-range into his helmet; the child developed blurry vision. Another boy came home from school with red marks on his neck; the school told his mother that Trevor had choked him. In 2019, toward the end of fourth grade, the school and Trevor's parents came to an agreement that he'd be better off elsewhere. Many of his classmates were relieved. One mother told me, "I could tell my son didn't really want Trevor to leave, because they do feel like family. But the tension is gone." Her son had said, "It was sad that Trevor left, but we can get a lot of work done now."

[\*\*Get Support\*\*](#)

*If you are having thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text TALK to 741741.*

Last year, over Presidents' Day weekend, my husband and I took George and one of his sixth-grade friends skiing upstate at Catamount, a popular destination for many families from the school. As we pulled up, we saw Trevor. George and his friend both groaned. We said they didn't have to ski with Trevor but should try to be polite. As it turned out, they did end up skiing with Trevor and a handful of other St. Bernard's boys. Trevor, a spectacular skier, skipped the hardest trails to stay with the others. When George and his friend piled into the car at the end of the day, George said, "Trevor has changed. He's way nicer. We could even be friends." We were happy to hear it. Perhaps, as others had supposed, Trevor Matthews was on the same redemptive path as Trevor Nelson.

Seven weeks later, on the afternoon of April 6th, Trevor jumped off the roof of his apartment building, on Eighty-sixth Street and Park Avenue, killing himself. He was a few months past his twelfth birthday.

I heard the news from another St. Bernard's parent while I was buying groceries and rushed home to tell my husband, wondering how we would break the news to our son. George cried on and off all evening. He kept saying, "But why would he do that?" and then he said, "I wasn't always that nice to Trevor. Maybe I made his life worse." I reassured him that nothing he did had caused the tragedy and nothing he could have done would have prevented it. The mother of one of George's classmates said, "Their childhood ended on Tuesday."

I asked Angela if we could come by for a condolence call. She said yes, if we were vaccinated. Because vaccines were not yet available to children, she added, "Don't bring George." She paused, then explained, "It's just—because of Agnes. She can't get vaccinated yet, either. And she's all I have left." In the following weeks, Angela told her story over and over to any friend who asked, as though she could contain it through repetition. For Billy, even conversational boilerplate was a struggle.



*"An algorithm matched us as soul mates, and yet it can't suggest a movie we both want to watch."*  
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Angela and Billy had been trying to understand why there are so few therapeutic interventions for children with [depression](#). Trevor, the child of well-off, educated parents, had far better mental-health support than most American children, but was not saved by it. Angela wanted to lobby for legislation to mandate services her son had needed; she considered setting up a center to undertake research and provide clinical treatment. Because I have written about depression, she and Billy encouraged me to address child suicide, and agreed to tell me their story. I talked to those who had known Trevor and began making contact with other bereaved families and with researchers and mental-health workers who are investigating this escalating phenomenon.

Every suicide creates a vacuum. Those left behind fill it with stories that aspire to rationalize their ultimately unfathomable plight. People may blame themselves or others, cling to small crumbs of comfort, or engage in pitiless self-laceration; many do all this and more. In a year of interviewing the people closest to Trevor, I saw all of these reactions and experienced some of them myself. I came to feel a love for Trevor, which I hadn't felt when he was alive. The more I understood the depths of his vulnerability, the more I wished that I had encouraged my son, whose relationship with Trevor was often antagonistic, to befriend him. As I interviewed Trevor's parents, my

relationship with them changed. The need to write objectively without increasing their suffering made it more fraught—but it also became deeper and more loving. As the April 6th anniversary of Trevor’s death approached, I started to share their hope that this article would be a kind of memorial to him.

Angela was right that a larger issue is at stake. The average age of suicides has been falling for a long time while the rate of youth suicide has been rising. Between 1950 and 1988, the proportion of adolescents aged between fifteen and nineteen who killed themselves quadrupled. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of children aged ten to fourteen who did so more than doubled. It is extremely difficult to generalize about youth suicide, because the available data are so much sparser and more fragmentary than for adult mental illness, let alone in the broader field of developmental psychology. What studies there are have such varied parameters—of age range, sample size, and a host of demographic factors—as to make collating the information all but impossible. The blizzard of conflicting statistics points to our collective ignorance about an area in which more and better studies are urgently needed. Still, in 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States suicide claimed the lives of more than five hundred children between the ages of ten and fourteen, and of six thousand young adults between fifteen and twenty-four. In the former group, it was the second leading cause of death (behind unintentional injury). This makes it as common a cause of death as car crashes.

Although it is too early to quantify fully the long-term impact of the [pandemic](#), it has exacerbated the burgeoning crisis. The C.D.C. found that in 2020 mental-health-related visits to hospital emergency departments by people between the ages of twelve and twenty-seven were a third higher than in 2019. The C.D.C. also reported that, during the first seven months of lockdown, U.S. hospitals experienced a twenty-four-per-cent increase in mental-health-related emergency visits for children aged five to eleven, and a thirty-one-per-cent increase for those aged twelve to seventeen. Among the general population, suicides declined, but this change masks a slight increase among younger people and a spike among the country’s Black, Latinx, and Native American populations. Last October, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared that the pandemic had accelerated the worrying trends in

child and adolescent mental health, resulting in what it described as a “national emergency.”

The sooner depressed or suicidal children receive treatment, the more likely they are to recover, but children remain radically undertreated. There are too few child psychologists and psychiatrists, and most pediatricians are insufficiently informed about depression. Research suggests that only one out of five American adolescents who end up in a hospital after attempting suicide is transferred to a mental-health facility, and access is predictably worse among the poor and in communities of color. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, of the three million American adolescents who experienced major depression in 2020, almost two-thirds received no treatment.

Scott Rauch, the president of McLean Hospital, near Boston, and a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, told me, “The convergence between stigma and long-standing traditions of not supporting this kind of care is the shame of our nation.” The authors of a study on the absence of any evidence-based treatment for under-twelves with inclinations toward suicide—“suicidality,” in the psychiatric parlance—wrote, “That so little about this topic exists in the professional literature is baffling. Does it perhaps reflect a collective level of denial that children are simply incapable of such thoughts?”

“Parents can’t fathom and don’t want to fathom their kids doing it, so they underinvest in making sure it doesn’t happen,” Brad Hunstable, who lost his twelve-year-old son to suicide in 2020, told me. “Most pediatricians know how to test for lead poisoning. They know how to tell you what percentile you are in height. They don’t know how to screen for suicidal ideation.”

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of child suicide is its unpredictability. A recent study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* found that about a third of child suicides occur seemingly without warning and without any predictive signs, such as a mental-health diagnosis, though sometimes a retrospective analysis points to signs that were simply missed. Jimmy Potash, the chair of the psychiatry department at Johns Hopkins, told me that a boy who survived a suicide attempt described the suddenness of the impulse: seeing a knife in the kitchen, he thought, I could stab myself with

that, and had done so before he had time to think about it. When I spoke to Christine Yu Moutier, who is the chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, she told me that, in children, “the moment of acute suicidal urge is very short-lived. It’s almost like the brain can’t keep up that rigid state of narrowed cognition for long.” This may explain why access to means is so important; children living in homes with guns have suicide rates more than four times higher than those of other children.

Children contemplate suicide far more often than parents may realize. According to a 2020 study in *The Lancet*, among nine- to ten-year-olds, one in twelve reported having had suicidal thoughts, and another recent study found that nearly half of parents whose adolescent children had been contemplating suicide were unaware of this. As a result, parents may be left forever wondering what would have happened if they’d walked in ten minutes sooner or hadn’t had that one argument. So many families told me that there had been no hint. Isaac Shelby, a sixteen-year-old from Albuquerque, was one of the most popular kids in his class—handsome, smart, a soccer star—and showed no signs of depression. One day last September, after a minor altercation with his parents about a vaping pen, he took the gun from his father’s nightstand, went into the back yard, and killed himself. His parents told me that what they most wanted to know was why: even if it turned out that it was somehow their fault, it would be a relief to have some sort of answer.

Trevor’s suicide became a reference point in the lives of everyone who knew him. Many had perceived him as someone who inflicted suffering on others, not seeing that he was suffering intensely himself. But people who respond to others aggressively and act impetuously are at acute risk of suicide, because they respond to themselves with impulsive belligerence, too. Bullying is strongly associated with suicide not only among its victims but also among its perpetrators. Experts speak of childhood depression as having internalizing symptoms (withdrawal, sadness) that are often ignored and externalizing symptoms (aggression, disruptiveness) that are usually punished. Both can be manifestations of the same underlying illness. And Trevor, like many bullies, was also sometimes the victim of bullying. On one occasion, a group of boys held Trevor down and kicked him.

By the age of thirteen, more than a third of bullies have actively considered ending their lives, according to a study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Children who are both bullies and victims are particularly predisposed to suicide, with nearly half reporting a suicide attempt or self-harm. What's more, the omnipresence of social media has created new venues for bullying. Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, found that teens who spend five or more hours a day online are nearly twice as likely to have suicidal tendencies as those who spend less than an hour. Parents of kids who have died by suicide have recently begun filing lawsuits against the social-media companies that perpetuate the algorithms that kept their children online; Matthew Bergman, a litigator in Seattle who works on such cases, compares the proof of harm to the campaigns against the tobacco and asbestos industries.

On Trevor's desk, after his death, Angela found a list marked "Goals as of right now":

iPhone 12 mini

(birthday so Nov. 29)

Airpod pros

(b-day)

PC/Laptop

(Christmas)

Dyed hair, preferably blonde/green/pink i want piiink!! (hopefully by summer)

Alta trip (Saturday)

Getting music on Fitbit (end of april \*fingers crossed)

The note was recent and betrayed no hint of darkness.

Trevor was given to nightmares. “He would be screaming in the middle of the night,” Angela said. “Trevor wouldn’t remember the nightmares in the morning, but Billy and I did.” They first took Trevor to see a psychologist at the age of six or seven, when teachers at St. Bernard’s suggested that he might suffer from impulsivity. The psychologist, whom he continued to see for years, focussed on getting Trevor to understand that his actions had consequences. Later, Trevor conferred with the school psychologist, to whom he said, “I can’t really tell you everything about me. It would be too upsetting to you.”

“If Trevor felt wronged, he came back hard,” Billy said. “And he could feel wronged for very little reason.” He saw his son as having a strained relationship to empathy when he was young, direct in expressing what he did or didn’t like. “Trevor’s frustration would dominate,” he said. “He never saw anything from the other person’s point of view.”

In 2017, after second grade, Trevor attended Brant Lake Camp, in the Adirondacks. He was on the young side for sleepaway camp but adamant about wanting to go, and he returned the next two years. He adored the sports—he learned to water-ski and was proud to have his name painted on a wall of home-run hitters—but, in the photographs posted online by the camp, he sometimes looked moody.

At the beginning of the second summer that Trevor attended, another of the boys wrote to his parents. As it was later reported, the letter said, “I miss you guys so much. Dylan touched my penis. Evry thing is good except for that.” Dylan Stoltz had been a counsellor at the camp for thirty-three years, and there had been previous issues. Now other boys reported similar incidents, and Stoltz was arrested. When he was released on bail, Trevor started weeping and Angela and Billy asked repeatedly if Stoltz had done anything to him. Trevor said that he was just upset by what his friends had suffered. As the Warren County district attorney’s office built its case against Stoltz, several of the boys prepared to testify, but, in the end, he took a plea bargain and was sentenced to four and a half years in prison.



"I can't decide if I'm in the mood for Italian or hay."  
Cartoon by Joe Dator

That autumn, Trevor's challenges to authority intensified. Often, he'd be caught reading a book of his own during class and would refuse to put it away. Once, he was so disruptive that a teacher called Angela, who left work to collect him. Trevor was eventually called before the school's Conduct Committee and reprimanded. In May, 2019, Angela had to tell Trevor that he would be leaving at the end of the school year. Trevor was distraught at being separated from his friends.

That summer, he went back to Brant Lake, but many of his friends had not returned, and he became disillusioned and frustrated. After just a few weeks, the camp told Angela and Billy that he was cruel to other children and asked them to take him home. Trevor was miserable at home. His psychologist suggested getting him screened for oppositional defiant disorder. The psychiatrist who screened him said that Trevor was amazingly bright, seemed emotionally unsettled, and did not have significant O.D.D. "No one used the terms 'depression' or 'anxiety,'" Angela said ruefully.

Angela and Billy decided to send Trevor to P.S. 6, on the Upper East Side, one of the best public elementary schools in the city. Billy recalls feeling it was the right place. Teachers would take the time to ask Trevor why he was frustrated or had said something aggressive—"those simple questions that he had never had the room to process."

In January, 2020, after starting a new course of therapy, Trevor began telling Angela details about what Dylan Stoltz had done to boys at camp. She asked him, “My darling, how do you know that?,” and he said, “Because it happened to me.” She hugged him and thanked him for telling her. When she asked why he had not told her sooner, he said, “I really wanted to put it out of my mind.” He initially didn’t want to talk to the police, because the abuse had happened as he was falling asleep, and he wasn’t sure he could trust his memory of the details. (Stoltz’s lawyers could not be reached for comment.) But he worried that his not reporting it might have limited Stoltz’s prison term.

Gradually, though, he did start to tell friends and even submitted to a forensic interview with the department that had investigated the case. Angela took him out for sushi afterward. “That’s as fun as you can make that kind of thing,” she said wryly. He had a recurring nightmare in which Stoltz was following him down Eighty-seventh Street. In another, he would have a feeling of foreboding, open a door, and confront Stoltz’s face. “He was literally haunted by this guy,” Angela said.

As Trevor articulated this torment, Angela felt that he was finally learning to deal with his feelings. “And here he is, he’s now opened himself up and he’s being all vulnerable, and *COVID*—the world shuts down on him,” she said. In the fall of 2020, he started at Wagner Middle School. He knew no one and couldn’t even meet his teachers.

That semester, Trevor’s difficult behavior escalated in puzzling ways. When the family travelled back and forth between the city and their country house, in Connecticut, he would refuse to get in the car, sometimes for a few hours. “Not because he didn’t want to be in the country and not because he didn’t want to deal with the drive,” Angela said. “He couldn’t really articulate why. He had these very, very intense feelings that were coming out in ways that didn’t make a lot of sense.” Angela and Billy tried to create opportunities for him to feel in control. “He felt trapped and needed space,” Billy wrote me. “There was so much going on in his head and he wanted release, not further tightening.” Without in-person school, Trevor acted out at home. He lashed out when his parents tried to limit his sessions playing [Fortnite](#). Angela sensed despair in his constant generation of conflict—“ ‘Well, if I do this, will they love me?’ ”

In December, Angela was in Boston for three weeks for a trial. As the date of her return approached, Trevor grew anxious. In an argument that flared up when he had to miss some time on his Nintendo Switch, he picked up a knife in the kitchen and said, “What are you going to do?” Billy approached him calmly, and took the knife away; it was not clear what Trevor was intending to do, and Billy saw the moment as essentially a provocation. When Angela returned, Trevor got into a fight with her and began smashing things. When she tried to stop him, he punched her.

Angela was terrified. “O.K., we’re in a different universe,” she recalled. “This is no longer ‘I’m sad.’ This is ‘Holy shit, he’s going to do something.’ ” Her father, a doctor, agreed. “You really need to go to the emergency room with Trevor, and you should do it now,” he said. “You’ve crossed the Rubicon.”

In the first half of the twentieth century, many psychologists assumed that depression in children was a necessary developmental phase, but in the forties René Spitz identified it among children in foundling hospitals, who failed to thrive after being separated from their mothers. Depression, he wrote, was “a specific disease in infants arising under specific environmental conditions.” John Bowlby’s work on attachment included records of very young children traumatized by separation from their parents. Crying and protesting at first, some children descended into lethargy and later became delinquent. In the seventies, Leon Cytryn and Donald McKnew proposed that childhood depression be accorded its own diagnostic category, and came up with an interview structure for arriving at a diagnosis.

Children are often secretive about suicidal impulses; parents are often in denial. Some years ago, the eleven-year-old son of a friend of mine required a psychiatric hospitalization because of uncontrollable outbursts of anger. I rode with my friend and his son in the ambulance from his house to the hospital. The boy at first could express only rage, then lapsed into despair at his lack of self-control. He said, “I think of suicide a lot. I was thinking about it earlier today, in fact. I don’t plan to do it, probably.” When we arrived at the hospital, the admitting physician asked my friend whether his son had ever been suicidal, and he said, “I don’t think so.” I pointed out that the boy had expressed strong suicidal ideation not twenty minutes earlier in

the ambulance. Suicide is so unimaginable to parents in general that a child's mentioning it can wash over them.

As early as 1996, a review of research indicated that major depressive disorder appeared to be "occurring at an earlier age in successive cohorts." Two studies on preschoolers suggest that around one per cent of them suffer from depression. Early-onset depression often persists. A study of depressed adults found that those whose condition had first appeared in childhood tended to have the most frequent and severe episodes of suicidality and were likelier to act on the impulse. Indeed, a third of people with childhood depression go on to make at least one suicide attempt.

Youth suicides occur more often during the school year, when social and academic stresses are highest. A recent meta-analysis of studies on youth suicide found that a history of abuse and neglect was significantly associated with a higher rate of suicide attempts. Rates of suicide are also particularly high for children in care—three times higher than for children who live with their own families without legal supervision.

Another group with alarmingly high rates of suicide and suicide attempts is the L.G.B.T.Q. population, reflecting an unaccepting society—and, frequently, an unaccepting family. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Trevor Project, an organization that has worked for more than two decades on suicide prevention among L.G.B.T.Q. youth, some forty-two per cent of this population seriously considered suicide and more than half of trans and nonbinary young people did.

Environmental factors almost certainly interact with genetic predispositions that are not yet well understood. J. John Mann, a professor of translational neuroscience at Columbia, believes that genetics and epigenetics account for a substantial proportion of suicides. "We're not sure what genes they are yet, but we know that there are genes there," he said. "Suicide is not ex nihilo."

It is evident that many children who suffer from depression do not become suicidal. What is sometimes harder to understand is that many children who do not show signs of depression nonetheless attempt suicide. This speaks not only to the impulsivity of younger minds but also to the lack of the perspective that age eventually brings. There is almost no adult who has not

endured a sleepless night obsessing over something that has gone wrong and globalizing it into the panicked sense that nothing will ever work out again. Children have those moments, too, and middle-school drama doesn't seem silly or insignificant to the children caught up in it. Children's worlds may be smaller than adults', but their emotional horizons are just as wide. Because we find our own pain absurd once it relents, most of us don't tell people when we've had a night of clawing at our inner selves. But some people don't make it until morning; tangled in their woes, they tie a noose, fire a gun, or leap from a great height. Some of the people who do that are children.

Billy and Angela took Trevor to a hospital near their Connecticut house. A triage nurse asked Trevor if he was thinking of suicide and he said, "Yeah, definitely." He was held in the E.R. for two days, before being transferred to St. Vincent's, in Westport. His parents were beginning to realize the inadequacy of psychiatric services for acute mental illness in children. "There's nothing," Billy said. "We felt like we were blind, feeling around. And this is our son's life."

Because of *COVID*, the family was not allowed to visit, a situation that Angela believes exacerbated Trevor's sense of rejection. One of the other kids in the hospital punched him, unprovoked. "I wasn't there, I couldn't protect him," she said. She brought items he had requested—a ChapStick, a T-shirt. She was told that ChapSticks weren't allowed, although she'd checked in advance that they weren't considered dangerous, and a guard even tried to disallow the T-shirt, saying that it was too small for Trevor. One day, a nurse called to complain about Trevor's behavior. "I'm sorry—he's in a crisis right now," Angela recalled saying. "That's why he's in your institution." She was outraged when the nurse said that Trevor should be sedated with an intramuscular injection.



Seven Bridges, who died by suicide in 2019, when he was ten. Seven's mother, Tami Charles, is adamant that racism played a role in her son's depression. "The bullying, the Black and brown—nobody wants to talk about that," she said. Photograph by Sarah Palmer for The New Yorker; Source photographs courtesy Tami Charles

Trevor's psychiatrist at St. Vincent's didn't want to discharge Trevor until she was confident that he would not hurt himself; he stayed nine days. He'd hoped desperately to be home for Christmas. "When that didn't happen, he sank so low," Angela said. She and Billy called every day, and Trevor would scream at them, "You abandoned me." They kept saying that they had put him there because they loved him and that this was the best way to help him. His despair would express itself as nearly incoherent rage, and he would make terrible accusations and threats. He told Angela that she was to blame for her brother Tristan's death, though she had been thirteen and on her way home from school when it happened, and implied that he, too, might kill himself as revenge on his parents for hospitalizing him.

Angela was bewildered: "He didn't even sound like a boy that I knew. I felt like I was talking to somebody else. The despair he had was almost nonsensical. It was incredibly, deeply painful, in my chest and in my gut. But it was also 'Is this happening?' His trauma was all about being betrayed by someone you trust, someone who is supposed to take care of you." Her fear is that she recapitulated the very experience he had had with Stolz and was trying to escape.

The psychiatrist at St. Vincent's prescribed the antipsychotic Abilify for Trevor, which helped enough that he was able to go home. The family

celebrated Christmas a week late. Billy and Angela put sharp knives and belts in locked boxes, as the hospital had directed. They didn't need to do anything to the windows: Tristan's death still loomed so large for Angela that she insisted on having window guards, even one blocking access to the fire escape.

Although there was no more violence, Angela saw little improvement. "The process of being hospitalized as a child for suicidal behavior is itself traumatic," she said. "It was terrifying for Trevor in the moment. It was terrifying for him afterwards." He spent a month in what is known as a Partial Hospitalization Program, involving all-day treatment, which was followed by six weeks in an intermediate program. Both were operated by High Focus Centers, a chain of commercial rehab facilities, and consisted primarily of group therapy.

Because of the pandemic, these treatments happened online, and there didn't seem to be much contact between the High Focus therapists and the psychiatrists who were prescribing Trevor's medication. He began taking Geodon, another antipsychotic, which didn't do much, and was also started on Prozac. In mid-February, after an episode of tachycardia that led to an E.R. visit, he was taken off both medications. A new psychiatrist ventured that he might be suffering from insomnia and that this could be the root of his other symptoms. He prescribed clonidine, which can be used as a mild sedative and to treat anxiety, then reintroduced the Prozac.

For the first three months of 2021, Trevor seemed to improve steadily. He'd earlier agreed to say when suicidal feelings overcame him. One day, skiing at Catamount, he stopped Angela in the lift line and said, "The last time I was on this chairlift, I wanted to jump off it." He often said that he couldn't get Dylan Stolz out of his head and wondered if he'd ever be able to escape such thoughts. She'd tell him that, because he'd acknowledged and confronted the abuse as a child, he would triumph over his tormentor. Angela was encouraged when Trevor volunteered as a gatekeeper for ski races and wanted to race himself. "By March, he was desperate to go to all the races," she said. "I definitely felt like we had passed the most dangerous part."

According to a study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* in 2018, the suicide rate among Black children between the ages of five and twelve is double that of white children. Suicide-prevention strategies such as increased access to school advisers and counsellors have tended to be implemented in largely white school districts. As Michael Lindsey, the executive director of N.Y.U.'s McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research, told me, "Whether those interventions can be helpful to minoritized youth is still a question." Depressed children of all races manifest both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, but Black children who are sad and withdrawn are often ignored, while those who are more aggressive are misdiagnosed as having conduct disorders and receive discipline instead of treatment. "Zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools have had a disproportionate impact on Black and brown kids, who often get seen as the troublemaker," Lindsey said. "In lieu of receiving behavioral-health supports, they will be suspended or expelled." Most child psychiatrists are white, and they often show a negative implicit racial bias in their treatment of Black children. Effective forms of therapy can be fantastically expensive, and Black children are often just put on medication.

Lindsey added that Black communities have historically resisted acknowledging depression as an illness. Black children, who are more likely to be exposed to violence, are less likely to receive mental-health services. "There's this ethic of 'Life is going to be tough, but bear it, deal with it, lift yourself up, overcome it,'" he said.

Tennisha N. Riley, a developmental psychologist at Indiana University, cites a finding that the average Black adolescent experiences five instances of racial discrimination a day, just when he or she is becoming increasingly aware of racial identity. Discrimination aggravates mental-health vulnerabilities among youth already at risk, which, Riley says, can "exacerbate their inability to regulate emotions." Riley further observes that, in American culture, parents often don't allow adolescents to express emotions that can sound disrespectful. Black children repeatedly see scenes of violence between law enforcement and people who look like them. They experience school as the locus of a metal detector and a body search by a police officer. At younger and younger ages, they begin to question whether life is worth living.

Last fall, I travelled to Louisville to visit Tami Charles, who lost her ten-year-old son, Seven Bridges, to suicide in 2019. We had agreed to meet at her house at 11 A.M., but overnight she sent a text saying that anxiety had been keeping her up and asking to delay to half past twelve. Texting back, I said not to worry and that I'd be as nice and gentle as I could. When I walked in the door, the first thing Tami said was "If you're really going to write this article, you cannot be nice. This is not a nice subject. That's like picking up a turd from the clean end." Tami is a giant personality and an exuberant talker, and she has become a prominent voice on the problem of suicide among young Black people. Despite her anguish, she maintained a patter of humor as we talked. "I ultimately forbid people to feel sorry for me," she said. "They even criticized me—'You're not crying enough on TV.' Let me get this straight. We get twenty-four hours, you see me on TV for twenty minutes, so them other twenty-three hours and forty minutes, what the hell do you really think I'm doing?"

Tami grew up in Chicago and settled in Louisville after a career in the Navy, serving as a physician assistant. As she approached thirty-five, she prepared to get a hysterectomy: at eighteen, she'd been told that she couldn't conceive because of polycystic ovary syndrome. She also had endometriosis, ovarian cysts, and fibroids, which made her menstrual cycles agonizing. She had recently encountered a musician named Donnie Bridges, eighteen years her senior. She fell for him the minute they met, and to their great surprise Tami conceived just before her surgery was scheduled.

In 2008, Tami and Donnie had a son, Seven, who was born with a tethered spinal cord, which can cause urinary incontinence, and an imperforate anus, a condition in which the opening to the anus is blocked or missing. He had to wear a colostomy bag from birth. Seven played as hard as any other child and was particularly fond of karate. Still, during his short life, he had twenty-six surgeries. Eventually, the colostomy bag was removed, but he continued to have leakage and was teased for the way he smelled.

In August, 2018, Seven was called the N-word on the school bus, and a boy choked him so badly that Tami took him to the emergency room, where he had a CT scan. "Mommy, I don't understand," Seven said. "I thought he was my friend." The episode was caught on a security video, a still from which

shows another student with his arm around Seven's neck; the school district later referred to the incident as "horseplay."

Donnie and Tami complained to the school, Kerrick Elementary. Donnie spoke with the assistant principal, who is white, but nothing happened. So Tami met with the principal, who is Black. When Tami asked her for a report on the incident, it emerged that the assistant principal hadn't even mentioned it. Tami went out to the school's parking lot and recorded a video on Facebook about what had happened. The video attracted thousands of views, and people began posting outraged comments. It soon reached the local news. Tami went to the Louisville Urban League, to the 100 Black Men, to her church. She went to the school district's diversity department, complained to the school board, and approached the police.

Her protests had an unintended consequence, she said. Now Seven was bullied not only by other children but also by teachers who resented Tami's campaign. One Monday in January, 2019, Seven came home and Tami knew something was wrong. A girl who had been cruel to him for years had been saying mean things about how he smelled. Tami called the principal, who remonstrated with the girl's mother. Seven didn't want to go back to school. Tami kept him home on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, the girl kept tormenting Seven, Tami said, and, on Friday, Seven told a teacher. "And this bitch says to my son, 'Well, what do you want me to do about it?'" Tami recalled. "She said, 'Your mom has already called the principal. The principal called her mom, and her mom has told her. And if the principal can't do it and her mom can't do it and your mom can't do it, what do you think I can do? And besides, Seven, nobody likes a tattletale.' Made my son feel—he told me these words—that there was nothing nobody could do for him. He said that on Friday. Saturday morning, my son was dead."

Seven hanged himself in his bedroom closet when his mother was out grocery shopping and his father was practicing with the church choir. When Seven died, Tami said, she lost three things: "First, my living, breathing son. Second, when you have a kid, you realize you will never relinquish the ability to worry, but that was taken from me. I haven't worried about a damn thing from that day to this one. And I mean anything, like whether my shoes are tied or whether somebody likes me, whether I'm going to enjoy this food I'm eating. Third, and the least talked about in a situation like this: You

always see people fighting to live and doing all the treatments and taking all the pills. To see the evidence of somebody who chose not to fight, it changed me. It took away my own urgency of fighting to live.”

Because of Tami’s public advocacy, five thousand people came to the funeral, including mayors and council members and the governor. Seven’s story appeared in *People*, and colostomy patients mounted a campaign called #BagsOutforSeven, in which people took photos of themselves with their bags on display. For Tami, talk about colostomies and mental health can take attention away from the role of racism. “The bullying, the Black and brown—nobody wants to talk about that,” she said, noting that, among suicide activists, she is “the only raisin in the rice.”

She is fiercely proud of her advocacy, but said that it takes a toll: “God commandeers my mouth and gets people whatever they need, but when they get what they need I am depleted.” Often, she feels like Prometheus. “You’ve given them fire, but every day you’ve got to have your liver eaten out again, right, buddy?” she said. “I do not regret speaking out. I can’t help experiencing the pain of getting my liver eaten out every day, but I focus on the fact that it gets renewed every day, too.” She told me that she sometimes stayed awake for days. Other times, she can’t get out of bed. “God, I love therapy,” she said, and lamented how few Black people get it: “In the Black community, mental health is not a thing. What they have for us is a liquor store and a church on every block.”



*"One day you wake up and your grandpa cardigan isn't ironic anymore."*  
Cartoon by Emily Flake

When Trevor's outpatient program ended, on March 22, 2021, the staff told Angela that he was no longer a risk to himself. His parents found him a therapist and he also saw a new psychiatrist, who said that his medication—forty milligrams of Prozac—looked reasonable.

On March 27th, Angela took Trevor and Agnes to ski in Alta, Utah. "He had really, it seemed to us, turned a corner," she said. "Things that he had withdrawn from he was engaged in—his sports, school, friends, playdates." In Alta, he seemed exuberant and skied every day.

On April 4th, back in Connecticut, he had another episode of tachycardia. "Something terrible is happening," he said to Angela. "My heart is racing and I feel like I'm living someone else's life. I feel like I'm running out of time and I need to tell people that I love them. I'm afraid something terrible is going to happen." When she asked if he was suicidal, he said that he was not. Later that day, while trying to remove some tape from a pair of ski poles, Trevor cut his left thumb badly with the scissors. On the way to the E.R., he told Angela, "I'm really sorry. It just slipped. I was not trying to hurt myself." Angela said she hadn't thought he was. He said, "You see, Mom, I told you something terrible was going to happen. Now it has."

On April 6th, Trevor had Zoom classes. The next day, his school was to begin a new level of in-person classes, and Trevor was looking forward to it. He was engaged, encouraging his classmates to watch a documentary he'd just seen. He was planning a science project with his best friend at the school. Billy made him ramen for lunch, one of his favorites.

Zoom school ended at 2 P.M. Trevor had online therapy for the next hour, then Angela and Billy talked to the therapist, who judged that Trevor's suicide risk was zero. But, as someone who had known him from an early age later said, "Trevor could outsmart any therapist if he wanted the privacy to end his life."

At some point in the day, Trevor walked the dogs, then left them with the doorman while he went around the corner to buy a bag of Jolly Ranchers. Angela told him that she'd have to confiscate them: "I need you to ask permission before you go shopping. I need to know where you are. It's a safety thing." Trevor was distraught. A bit later, he asked again for the candy he had bought and talked with his parents for about ten minutes. Angela said, "I still need better choices, so, no, I'm not giving you back the Jolly Ranchers." He seemed resigned. "There was no fight, no despair," Angela told me, and added, "I know he didn't do what he did because of a bag of sweets, but I wish I'd given him those Jolly Ranchers."

Soon afterward, from the dining room, where he had set up a home office, Billy noticed that Trevor was, oddly, in the hall, looking at the mail. "I wish I had held on to that pause a little longer and asked him how he was doing, or if he wanted to go for a walk," Billy said.

Trevor quietly slipped out the door of the apartment, and climbed the fire staircase to the roof. Angela later heard from a doorman in the building that a woman told him she'd seen Trevor there from her apartment across the street. For a moment, the woman thought he was playing, but she noticed that he kept peering down. Suddenly, it dawned on her what he was about to do, and that he was checking that there were no pedestrians whom he'd hurt. Trevor closed his eyes and jumped feet first.

When the doorman on duty rushed upstairs and said that Trevor had jumped out a window, Angela knew that was impossible: their windows wouldn't

open far enough. Billy said, “He’s right here. I don’t understand.” Angela started screaming and dialled 911. Billy went downstairs with the doorman.

“There’s an ambulance parked on Park Avenue,” Billy recalled. “And the super is there, and I’m kind of holding on to him, because I feel like I’m going to faint. The paramedics are working on Trevor, but I can see the top of his body. And I’m thinking, O.K., maybe this is all right, because he couldn’t have fallen that far. And then I see the lower part of his body and immediately I knew that it would not be possible for a human to survive that.”

Angela went down, leaving Agnes in the apartment. “There were all these police officers with their arms outstretched, telling me I couldn’t cross their line,” she said. “And I was screaming, ‘I’m his mother. He’s my son. These are his final moments. You cannot keep me from him.’ They moved apart and I got into the ambulance with him. They were doing chest compressions. They had his shirt open. Billy said, ‘Should I come with you?’ And I said, ‘No, you need to stay with Agnes. You tell her that it’s very serious. But we have to talk to her together after that.’ ”

The medical examiner later confirmed that Trevor’s neck had snapped on impact. “I knew that what I was looking at was not a living creature anymore, was not my son,” Angela said. In the ambulance, she recorded images of Trevor. “I knew I was going to need them later, because I wouldn’t believe that he was dead,” she said. “And I have needed them.” As the ambulance headed to Lenox Hill Hospital, Angela texted Billy, “He is dead.”

Angela is a devout Episcopalian, and she called Matthew Heyd, the rector of the Church of the Heavenly Rest, on Fifth Avenue. “I had told him that I knew my son was going to die,” she said. “I felt that the deaths of my brothers were purely to prepare me.” Heyd drove to the hospital. Angela said, “Matt, I’m scared, because Trevor wasn’t sure what he believed in.” Heyd said, “Angela, God believed in Trevor. That’s all that matters.”

At Lenox Hill, medical staff continued doing chest compressions. Angela said, “As we were moving into the E.R., they had him on the gurney on wheels, and I was walking, and again there are the cops with the patronizing

horseshit—‘You don’t want to come in here,’ ‘You don’t want these to be your images.’ I was, like, ‘I’m all set with my images. It’s my son.’

“The E.R. doctor looked at me, and he said, ‘It appears you understand what’s happening here.’ I said, ‘I do.’ He said, ‘In my experience, there are additional measures that I can take, but they will not alter the outcome.’ And I said, ‘I know.’ ”

Angela climbed onto the gurney with Trevor’s body. “I just put my head on Trevor’s chest and listened,” she told me. “I did that every day in the morning, when we would snuggle. And this time there was no beating. His legs were badly broken and his face was pretty intact and I just held him and caressed him.”

Innumerable treatments have been proposed for reducing suicide rates. Most have had sporadic success but none has significantly reduced the scale of the problem. Currently, the best treatments for young suicidal people appear to be medication and therapies, especially Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. D.B.T. combines cognitive techniques, Zen philosophy, and mindfulness, and emphasizes effective ways of tolerating distress. Blaise Aguirre, at McLean Hospital, is a leading exponent of D.B.T., having overseen the treatment of thirty-five hundred adolescents and young adults, many of whom have had as many as ten previous psychiatric hospitalizations. Many of their parents have told him that there were no further hospitalizations, and fewer than one per cent have later died prematurely.

Although someone who has made a suicide attempt is much likelier to die by suicide than the average person, ninety per cent of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to kill themselves. Most are responding to a crisis, which suggests that, if you can bring them into treatment, you may save their lives. For a significant number of people, it appears that trying once brings about a permanent change in perspective.



Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

I met one such teen, Hannah Lucas, who grew up in Cumming, Georgia. Now twenty, she was a victim of abuse as a child, and told her counsellor about it when she started therapy, at fifteen. The counsellor, who, according to Hannah, was “not culturally competent,” contacted child-protective services. Hannah is Black; the counsellor was white. C.P.S. was involved with the family for the next three years, a traumatic period for Hannah and her family. She and her brother told a C.P.S. agent to keep the troubles they disclosed confidential. “C.P.S. violated that trust,” Hannah said, and the consequences for her were severe. She maintains that the agency made things “exponentially worse.” She would show caseworkers a bruise and they would say it was a stretch mark. “But it wasn’t a stretch mark—it was a completely different color,” Hannah said.

She had been a perfectionist: beautiful, a star gymnast, an excellent student. She was taking all A.P. classes and recalls being the only Black student in any of them. But now she began getting dizzy and passing out and was so tired she could barely function. (She was later given a diagnosis of postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, a nervous-system disorder that affects heart rate, blood-vessel dilation, digestion, and body temperature.) Hannah had to deal with persistent blackouts while also negotiating constant sexual harassment from other students. “It got to the point where I couldn’t even use the bathroom by myself, because what if I passed out and one of those

guys found me?” she said. “I didn’t have anyone I could relate to. I always had to put on this façade of being this strong Black woman—well, not too strong, because you don’t want to scare anyone, or be the loud Black lady. I always had to be perfect.”

She told me, “The moment I decided to take my life, it was just like a switch had been flipped.” Hannah was overdosing when her mother found her and physically extracted the pills from her mouth. “I always viewed death as an escape, as peace—and I wanted that peace,” Hannah said. “She made me realize that I have anchors holding me, and that I would harm so many people in the process.”

When I met Hannah, she was taking a gap year and hoped to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design, to study luxury fashion and business management. Hannah still struggles with depression: “It’s an ongoing fight. I have my good days and bad, but I’m in therapy and see a psychiatrist, so I’m working on getting better.” Four years ago, she launched an app, notOK, which serves as a digital panic button. A user, having selected up to five trusted contacts, can with a single push of a button send them each a message asking for immediate help and automatically providing the user’s location. It has been downloaded more than a hundred and fifty thousand times.

Saniya Soni, who is from a South Asian family, decided to take her life in 2015, when she was sixteen. She told me, “Leading up to the attempt, it was always ‘If I do this, I’m going to hurt so many people,’ which was a sucky feeling of ‘I have to be responsible for all these people’s emotions when I’m hurting so much.’ Suicide may look selfish to everybody else, but, as the person who is contemplating it, you’re battling with that idea of ‘I don’t want to be selfish, I want to support all these other people, but I cannot do it anymore.’ ”

In her suicide attempt, she recalled, “I stopped myself midway through. My method just wasn’t working. I was just overwhelmed.” She called a friend, who came over, held her as she sobbed, and said she should tell her mother. Saniya’s mother took her to the E.R., where she remained for seventeen hours, until a child psychiatric bed could be found. “The psychiatric ward was not what I needed,” she said, but the mandated therapy that followed

was transformative, because it included group therapy with other children who had harmed themselves. “I didn’t realize other people felt that way,” she said. “I didn’t realize what would happen if I attempted.”

Shared experience with others was also the turning point for Bridgette Robek, from Columbus, Ohio, who’d begun self-harming and speaking of suicide in her early teens. When she was in ninth grade, the suicide of a classmate put her over the edge and she was hospitalized. “I got really close with an eight-year-old boy during my stay,” she told me. “I like to think of him as my guardian angel. He was in there because he was getting bullied so bad, and he wanted to die. And that was my first time experiencing that with a young kid.” This hospitalization turned out to be key for Bridgette. “I finally realized that I wanted to get better. I didn’t want to be sick anymore.” Because of privacy laws, she wasn’t allowed to keep in contact with the boy. “I think about him a lot,” she said. “I do hope that he’s O.K. I hope . . . I’ll put it easiest—I hope he’s still alive.”

Trevor’s funeral took place on April 14th last year. Because of *COVID*, the service was relatively small, but nineteen boys from St. Bernard’s, including my son, were there. I had thought he might be anxious about going, but he said he was glad to be asked. It was full of music, and the eulogies, including one by Billy and one by Angela, were remarkable. Sam Fryer, a teacher at P.S. 6, said, “Because he was so bright, being Trevor’s teacher could be somewhat unnerving at moments. But the thrill of it was never lost on me.”

In the church, the St. Bernard’s boys sat together toward the back. We were among the last to file through the long reception line. Angela had been wearing large sunglasses, but now she took them off, revealing red eyes. The boys shuffled past, eyes downcast, mumbling something about being sorry for her loss. Angela put out an arm to keep them together in front of her. “It’s your loss, too,” she said. “And you are here because Trevor loved you. We couldn’t invite everyone to this service, and I want you to know you are here because you meant something to Trevor. Every one of you, even if you didn’t know it all along.” Then, with great emphasis, she said, “I want you boys to promise me—promise me—that you will talk about your feelings with one another or with your parents or with a teacher or even with a

doctor. Promise me that. Because I don't want to come to another funeral like this one."

Last summer, about three months after their son's death, Billy and Angela separated. Billy, having lost one struggling son, brought one of the sons from his first marriage to New York for a fresh start. But, not long afterward, an argument erupted in the car, and Angela felt as if the young man was blaming her for Trevor's death. She asked Billy to pull over at the next train station and send him home. "I understand that Billy loves his son," Angela said. "But a line needs to be drawn at some point. I thought it was ill-advised to bring the person who was so traumatizing closer to me."

Billy told me that, although he loves Angela, he struggled in their marriage. "It seemed that I increased her unhappiness," he said. "Continuing in this tension-filled environment wasn't good for me or for our children." He contends that he had previously stuck things out because he was afraid that leaving could further destabilize Trevor. Billy said that telling his daughter about the separation was "the second most difficult day of my life." Agnes "folded into a puddle."

Once, talking to Angela, I tentatively posited a connection between Trevor's death and Tristan Colt's, as many people apparently had. Angela recognized that the comparisons were inevitable, but they pained her. It is impossible to know whether Tristan's death gave Trevor access to the idea that he could do this. Another time, she mentioned the anger that people warned her grief would entail. "It is unusual for me to experience anger," she said. "I'll experience betrayal, humiliation, sadness, fear, before I understand those things to be anger. I'm not angry at Trevor. I'm just bewildered." Trevor was deeply loved, but not everyone can be saved by love. Angela did everything humanly possible, one St. Bernard's mother said, but was outmatched by her son: "To have a child who is ahead of you like that is destabilizing and scary."

Angela tries to steer Agnes through her grief. Once, when she was reading a bedtime story, Agnes stopped her. "The books you read to me have happy endings," she said. "But our story doesn't have a happy ending." Angela wrapped her arms around Agnes. She said, "How old are you?," and Agnes said, "Nine." Angela said, "So let's say you're going to live to be ninety.

How much of your life have you lived?” Agnes said, “Ten per cent.” Angela said, “Are all these books with happy endings happy all the way through, or do many of them have trouble or worse somewhere in the middle?” Agnes nodded. “My darling, there is still time for your life to have a happy ending, even with this.”

Grief is inherently lonely, and there are as many ways to grieve as there are human beings. Billy sought out books and people who could provide philosophical perspective, while Angela was spurred to a focussed dynamism, an outward-facing construction of her son’s legacy. “I had one responsibility as a mother,” Angela said, “and it was to keep my child alive. And I failed at it.” When I asked her whether she was outraged or just sad, she said, “I’m so ashamed that I failed him.”

She was spending as much time as possible in the country—“because Trevor was only alive here.” She had learned that you can preserve your late child’s clothing in ziplock bags and their scent will remain years later; she would go into Trevor’s room to smell his clothes, because that made her feel close to him. “I feel often not just lonely but utterly alone,” she said. ♦

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# **Art**

- [The Compassionate Photographs of Jamel Shabazz](#)

In the mid-seventies, the Brooklyn-born photographer Jamel Shabazz—the recipient of the 2022 Gordon Parks Foundation/Steidl Book Prize—borrowed his mother’s camera to record the camaraderie and the style of his high-school friends. He has continued to aim his compassionate lens on Black life throughout New York City ever since, capturing such scenes as “Best Friends, Red Hook, Brooklyn, 1982” (above). On April 6, the Bronx Museum opens **“Jamel Shabazz: Eyes on the Street,”** a survey of his legendary career.

## Books

- [How Everyone Got So Lonely](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [How Ireland Took On the Church and Freed Its Soul](#)

By [Zoë Heller](#)

## Content

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

At the beginning of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), some people predicted that lockdowns and work-at-home rules would produce great surges in sexual activity, just as citywide blackouts have been said to do in the past. No such luck. In November, a study published in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* found that the pandemic had caused a small but significant diminution in Americans' sexual desire, pleasure, and frequency. It's easy enough to see how the threat of a lethal virus might have had a generally anaphrodisiac effect. Quite aside from the difficulty of meeting new partners and the chilling consequences of being cooped up with the same old ones, evolutionary psychologists speculate that we have a "behavioral immune system" that protects us in times of plague by making us less attracted to and less motivated to affiliate with others.

Not so obvious is why, for several years before the virus appeared on our shores, we had already been showing distinct signs of sluggishness in the attraction and affiliation departments. In 2018, nearly a quarter of Americans—the highest number ever recorded—reported having no sex at all in the previous twelve months. Only thirty-nine per cent reported having intercourse once or more a week, a drop of twelve percentage points since 1996. The chief driver of this so-called "sex drought" is not, as one might expect, the aging of the American population but the ever more abstemious habits of the young. Since the nineteen-nineties, the proportion of American high-school students who are virgins has risen from forty-five per cent to sixty per cent. People who are in their early twenties are estimated to be two and half times more likely to be sexually inactive than members of Gen X were at the same age.

One partial explanation for this trend—versions of which have been observed across the industrialized world—is that today's young adults are less likely to be married and more likely to be living at home with their parents than previous cohorts. In the U.S., living with parents is now the most common domestic circumstance for people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. Even after accounting for these less than favorable

conditions, however, the suspicion remains that young people are not as delighted by sex as they once were. Speculation about why this might be so tends to reflect the hobbyhorse of the speculator. Some believe that poisons in our environment are playing havoc with hormones. Others blame high rates of depression and the drugs used to treat it. Still others contend that people are either sublimating their sexual desires in video games or exhausting them with pornography. (The dubious term “sexual anorexia” has been coined to describe the jadedness and dysfunction that afflict particularly avid male consumers of Internet porn.)

For the British economist Noreena Hertz, the decline in sex is best understood as both a symptom and a cause of a much wider “loneliness epidemic.” In her book [The Lonely Century](#) (Currency), she describes “a world that’s pulling apart,” in which soaring rates of social isolation threaten not only our physical and mental health but the health of our democracies. She cites many factors that have contributed to this dystopian moment—among them, smartphones, the gig economy, the contactless economy, the growth of cities, the rise in single-person households, the advent of the open-plan office, the replacement of mom-and-pop stores with anonymous hyper-chains, and “hostile” civic architecture—but she believes that the deepest roots of our current crisis lie in the neoliberal revolution of the nineteen-eighties and the ruthless free-market principles championed by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, et al. In giving license to greed and selfishness, she writes, neoliberalism fundamentally reshaped not just economic relationships “but also our relationships with each other.”

In illustrating its thesis, this book draws a wide array of cultural and socioeconomic phenomena into its thematic centrifuge. Hertz’s examples of global loneliness include elderly women in Japan who get themselves convicted of petty crimes so that they can find community in prison; South Korean devotees of *mukbang*, the craze for watching people eat meals on the Internet; and a man in Los Angeles whose use of expensive professional “cuddler” services is so prolific that he has ended up living out of his car. But is loneliness what chiefly ails these people? And, if so, does their loneliness bespeak an unprecedented emergency? Old women get fed up with their charmless husbands, kids watch the darnedest things on YouTube, and men, as they have done since time immemorial, pay for the company of women. Yet still the world turns.

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Many books about the atrophy of our associational ties and the perils of social isolation have been published in recent years, but we continue to underestimate the problem of loneliness, according to Hertz, because we define loneliness too narrowly. Properly understood, loneliness is a “personal, societal, economic, *and political*” condition—not just “feeling bereft of love, company, or intimacy” but also “feeling unsupported and uncared for by our fellow citizens, our employers, our community, our government.” This suspiciously baggy definition makes it easier to claim loneliness as the signature feeling of our time, but whether it’s useful to conflate sexlessness and political alienation—or accurate to trace their contemporary manifestations to the same dastardly neoliberal source—is questionable.

Disagreements about definition are at the root of many disputes about loneliness data. Spikes in loneliness were recorded after the J.F.K. assassination and 9/11, raising the possibility that what people were really reporting to survey takers was depression. And even the most soberly worded research is liable to become a bit warped in its journey from social-science lab to newspaper factoid. The figure that Hertz quotes in her first chapter, for example—“Three in five U.S. adults considered themselves lonely”—comes from a Cigna health survey published in 2020, which found that three in five U.S. adults scored more than forty-three points on the U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale. Scoring high on this twenty-question survey is easier than you might think. In fact, if you answer “Sometimes” to enough questions like “How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?,” you have a pretty good chance of being deemed part of America’s loneliness problem. Given such caveats, three out of five seems encouragingly *low*.

Sociologists who are skeptical about whether loneliness is a growing problem argue that much modern aloneness is a happy, *chosen* condition. In this view, the vast increase in the number of single-person households in the U.S. over the past fifty years has been driven, more than anything, by affluence, and in particular by the greater economic independence of women. A similarly rosy story of female advancement can be told about the sex-decline data: far from indicating young people’s worrisome retreat from

intimacy, the findings are a testament to women's growing agency in sexual matters. In a recent interview, Stephanie Coontz, a veteran historian of family, said, "The decline in sexual frequency probably reflects women's increased ability to say no and men's increased consideration for them."

This is certainly a jollier view of things than Hertz's hell-in-a-handbasket account, but, as several women writers have pointed out, reports of modern women's self-determination in sexual and romantic matters tend toward exaggeration. In "[The Lonely Hunter](#)" (Dial), Aimée Lutkin, a writer in her thirties, wrestles with the question of how "chosen" her single life has been. The book describes a year in which she set out to break a six-year spell of near-celibacy by taking up exercise, losing weight, joining a dating site, and so on. The inspiration for this experiment was an evening with friends that left her feeling unfairly blamed for her loneliness.

By the end of the year, she hadn't found a lasting relationship, but she had gone on many dates, had some sex, and even fallen (unrequitedly) in love for a time, so one might reasonably conclude that the cure for her loneliness had in fact been in her gift all along. She largely rejects this notion, however. To insist that any determined individual can overcome loneliness if she tries hard enough is to ignore the social conditions that make loneliness so common, Lutkin writes. In her case, there were strong economic reasons that she focussed on work rather than on love for many years; she also pursued people who didn't return her affections. And some significant part of her loneliness came not from being single but from living in a world that regards a romantic partner as the sine qua non of happy adulthood. Ironically, she suggests, celebrating single women as avatars of modern female empowerment has made things harder, not easier, for lonely women, by encouraging the view that their unhappiness is of their own making—the price they pay for putting their careers first, or being too choosy. She notes that the plight of lonely, sexless men tends to inspire more public concern and compassion than that of women. The term "incel" was invented by a woman hoping to commiserate with other unhappily celibate women, but it didn't get much traction until it was appropriated by men and became a byword for sexual rage. This, Lutkin believes, reflects a conservative conviction that men have a right to sex.

Is this true? A less contentious explanation for the greater attention paid to male sexual inactivity might be that it has risen more dramatically among young men than among young women in recent years. In a study released in 2020, nearly one in three men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four reported no sexual activity in the past year. What's more, young male sexlessness, unlike the female variety, correlates with unemployment and low income. Men's greater tendency to violence also probably creates greater public awareness. (Female incels, however grumpy they get, do not generally express their dissatisfaction by shooting up malls.) Nevertheless, Lutkin is surely right that women's authority over their sexual and romantic fates is not as complete as the popular imagination would have it. Asked to explain why one out of four single American women hasn't had a sex partner for two or more years (and more than one in ten haven't had a sex partner for five or more years), researchers have cited women's aversion to the "roughness" that has become a standard feature of contemporary, porn-inflected sex. In one recent study, around twenty-one per cent of female respondents reported that they had been choked during sex with men; around thirty-two per cent had experienced a man ejaculating on their faces; and thirty-four per cent had experienced "aggressive fellatio." If, as Stephanie Coontz suggests, women feel freer these days to decline such encounters, that is of course a welcome development, but it's hard to construe the liberty of choosing between celibacy and sexual strangulation as a feminist triumph.

In a new collection of essays, "[Love in the Time of Contagion](#)" (Pantheon), the film-studies professor and cultural critic Laura Kipnis argues that women are still far from exercising enough agency in their sexual dealings with men. For her, the decline in sex is one of several signs that relations between men and women have reached an impasse. "Just as the death rate from *COVID* in the U.S. unmasked the enduring inequalities of the American political system," she observes, "#MeToo exposed that heterosexuality as traditionally practiced had long been on a collision course with the imperatives of gender parity." Kipnis credits #MeToo with unleashing "a lot of hatreds," some of which were warranted and overdue for an airing, and some of which, she believes, were overstated or misplaced.

Her exhilaration during the early stages of #MeToo curdled, she reports, when "conservative elements" hijacked whatever was "grassroots and profound" in the movement, and what had seemed to her a laudable effort to

overturn the old feudal order degenerated into a punitive hunt for men who told ill-considered jokes or accompanied women on what became uncomfortable lunch dates.

Kipnis sees a tension between the puritanism of the rhetoric surrounding the movement and what she suspects is a continuing attraction on the part of many young feminists to old-school masculinity. “There’s something difficult to talk about when it comes to heterosexuality and its abjections . . . and #MeToo has in no way made talking about it any more honest,” she writes. “I suspect that the most politically awkward libidinal position for a young woman at the moment would be a sexual attraction to male power.” One sign of the “neurotic self-contradiction” lurking within the culture, she contends, is that, in 2018, the Oxford English Dictionary’s shortlist for Word of the Year included both “toxic”—as in toxic masculinity—and “Big Dick Energy.”

Kipnis is less interested in banishing such contradictions than in having her fellow-feminists acknowledge and embrace the transgressive nature of desire. If the heterosexual compact is ever to be repaired, she suggests, not only will men have to relinquish some of their brutish tendencies but women will have to become a little more honest and assertive about what they do and don’t want. It seems unlikely that this eminently reasonable prescription will find favor with young feminists, but Kipnis remains optimistic. She was encouraged during the pandemic to read the accounts of several women expressing nostalgia for the touch of strangers in bars. If, in the short term, the pandemic has made sex seem even more dangerous and grim, her hope is that it will turn out to be a salutary reset—“a chance to wipe the bogeyman and -woman from the social imagination, invent wilder, more magnanimous ways of living and loving.”

Should the business of making heterosexuality compatible with gender parity prove too onerous or intractable, we can always consider resorting to the less demanding companionship of machines. A forthcoming book by the sociologist Elyakim Kislev, “[Relationships 5.0](#)” (Oxford), describes a rapidly approaching future in which we will all have the option of assuaging our loneliness with robot friends and robot lovers. To date, technology’s chief role in our love lives has been that of a *shadchan*, or matchmaker, bringing humans together with other humans, but in the next couple of

decades, Kislev asserts, technology will graduate from this “facilitator” role and become a full-fledged “relationship partner,” capable of fulfilling “our social, emotional, and physical needs” all by itself. Artificial intelligence has already come close to passing the Turing test—being able, that is, to convincingly imitate human intelligence in conversation. In 2014, scientists attending a Royal Society convention in London were invited to converse via computer with a special guest, Eugene Goostman, and then to decide if he was powered by A.I., or if he was human. A third of them mistook him for a human. Robot conversationalists even more plausible than Eugene are said to have emerged since then, and the C.E.O. of a computing company tells Kislev that the task of developers has actually been made easier of late, by a decline in the linguistic complexity of human conversation. In the era of WhatsApp, it seems, our written exchanges are becoming easier for machines to master.

Lest any of us doubt our capacity to suspend disbelief and feel things for robots, however beautifully they replicate the patterns of our degraded twenty-first century speech, Kislev refers us to Replika, a customizable chatbot app produced by a company in San Francisco which is already providing romantic companionship for hundreds of thousands of users. (In 2020, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that one Replika customer, Ajax Martinez, a twenty-four-year-old mechanical engineer living in Mexico City, flew to Tampico to show his chatbot Anette the ocean.) In fact, Kislev points out, machines don’t need to attain the sophistication of Replika to be capable of inspiring our devotion. Think of the Tamagotchi craze of the nineties, in which adults as well as children became intensely attached to digital toy “pets” on handheld pixelated screens. Think of the warm relationships that many people already enjoy with their Roombas.

Robots may not be “ideal” companions for everyone, Kislev writes, but they do offer a radical solution to the world’s “loneliness epidemic.” For the elderly, the socially isolated, the chronically single, robots can provide what humans have manifestly failed to. Given that technology is credited with having helped to foster the world’s loneliness, it may strike some as perverse to look to more technology for a salve, but Kislev rejects any attempt to blame our tools for our societal dissatisfactions. Advanced technology, he coolly assures us, “only allows us to acknowledge our wishes and accept our nature.” Investing meaning and emotion in a machine is essentially no

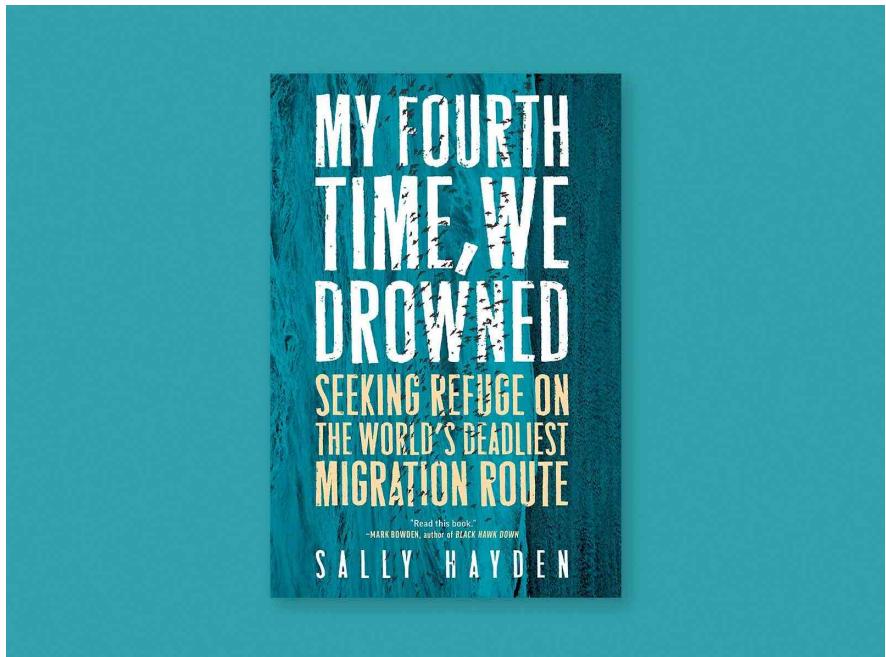
different, he argues, from being moved by a piece of art: “Many fictional plays, films, and books are created intentionally to fill us with awe, bring us to tears, or surprise us. These are true emotions with very real meanings for us. Emotions-by-design, if you will.” Among the establishment figures whom he quotes discussing robo-relationships with equanimity and approval is a British doctor who, in a recent letter to *The British Medical Journal*, described prejudice against sex robots as no more reasonable or morally defensible than homophobia or transphobia.

For those who persist in finding the prospect of the robot future a little bleak, Kislev adopts the reassuring tone of an adult explaining reproduction to a squeamish child: it may all seem a bit yucky now, he tells us, but you’ll think differently later on. He may well be right about this. In surveys, young people—young men in particular—seem sanguine about robot relationships. And even among the older, analog set resistance to the idea has been found to erode with “continuous exposure.” Whether this erosion is to be wished for, however, is another question.

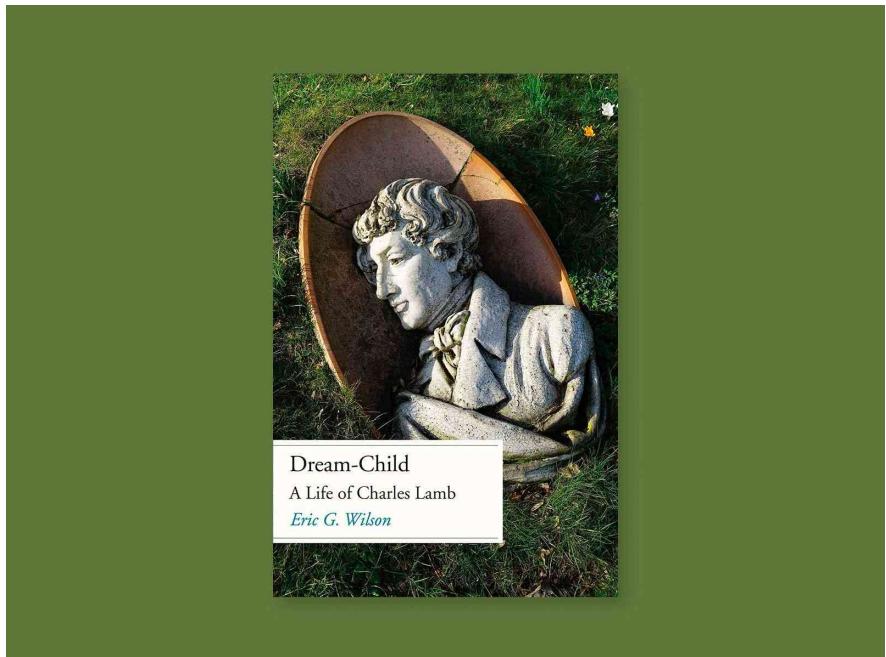
All technological innovations inspire fear. Socrates worried about writing replacing oral culture. The hunter-gatherers probably moaned about the advent of agriculture. But who’s to say they weren’t right to moan? The past fifty years would seem to have provided persuasive evidence contradicting Kislev’s assertion that technology only ever “discovers” or “answers” human wants. The Internet didn’t disinter a long-buried human need for constant content; it created it. And, as for our enduring ability to be engaged by the lie of art, it’s not at all clear that this is a convincing analogy for robot romance. One crucial distinction between fiction and robots is that novels and plays, the good ones at least, are not designed with the sole intention of keeping their “users” happy. In this respect, they are less like robots and more like real-life romantic partners. What makes life with humans both intensely difficult and (theoretically) rewarding is precisely that they *aren’t* programmed to satisfy our desires, aren’t bound to tell us that we did great and look fabulous. They are liable to leave us if we misbehave, and sometimes even when we don’t.

Tellingly, one of the most recent A.I. sex-companion prototypes, a Spanish-made bot named Samantha, has been endowed with the ability to say no to sexual advances and to shut down if she feels “disrespected” or “bored.”

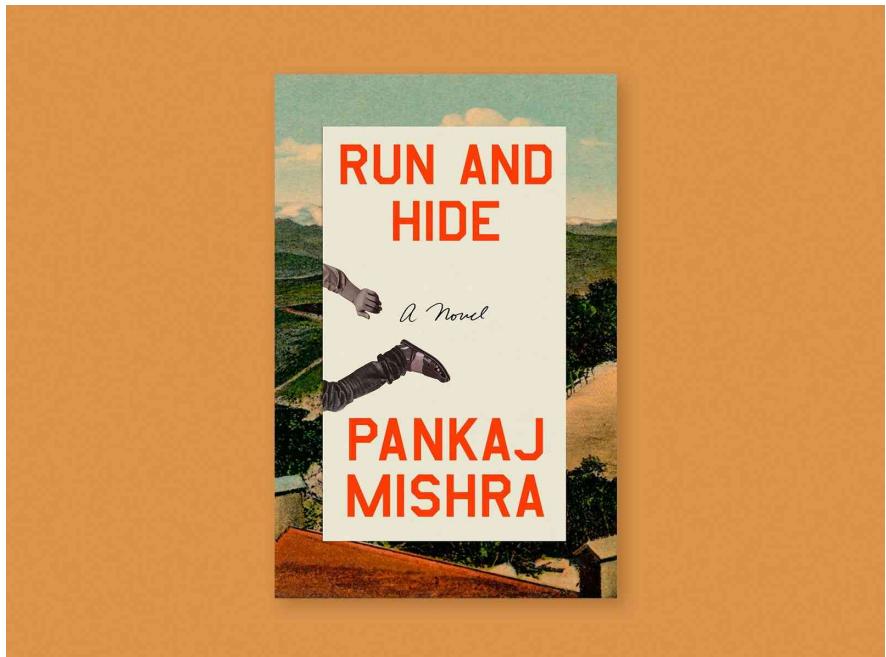
Presumably, her creator is hoping to simulate some of the conditionality and unpredictability of human affection. It remains to be seen whether consumers will actually prefer a less accommodating Samantha. Given the option, humans have a marked tendency to choose convenience over challenge. ♦



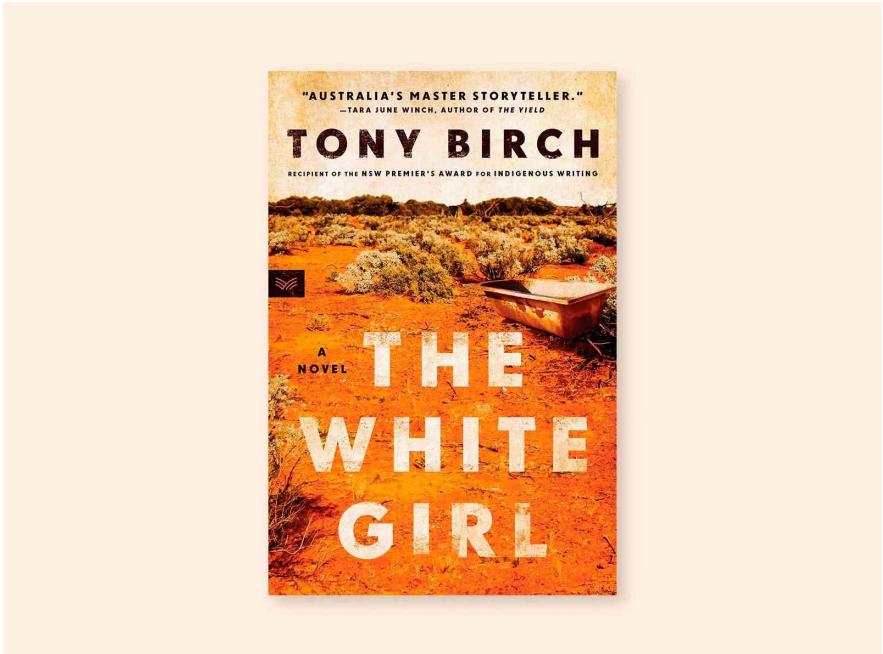
[My Fourth Time, We Drowned](#), by Sally Hayden (*Melville*). In 2018, Hayden, an Irish journalist, received a Facebook message from an Eritrean man imprisoned in a migrant detention center in Tripoli. His missive afforded her a window into the horrors faced by African refugees seeking a Mediterranean route to Europe. Through interviews with hundreds of migrants, whose remarks punctuate the text, and humanitarian workers, Hayden learns of Libyan warehouses where starving detainees are held in scorching temperatures, raped and beaten, and sold to traffickers. While documenting these cruelties, Hayden also examines how Western institutions like the European Union perpetuate the conditions that allow them to take place.



**Dream-Child**, by Eric G. Wilson (*Yale*). This electrifying portrait of Charles Lamb is the first full-length biography of the Romantic-era essayist, poet, and satirist to appear since 1905. Perhaps best remembered as the co-author, with his sister, Mary, of “Tales from Shakespeare,” and as the interlocutor of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lamb has long been regarded as a benevolent figure who cared for his sister after she murdered their mother in a psychotic break. This idealized rendering elides the Lamb who confronted drinking problems and depression, and whose urbane first-person essays—identified by Wilson as forerunners of those by Virginia Woolf and David Foster Wallace—exhibited a complicated embrace of city life and of modernity.



[\*\*Run and Hide\*\*](#), by Pankaj Mishra (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). An examination of “rising India” that casts a critical eye on its self-made men, Mishra’s novel follows three college classmates who are bonded by sexual trauma and desperate to escape their “dire lower-middle-class straits.” While two of them—a hedge-fund billionaire and a brash public intellectual—struggle with the vertiginous heights to which they have elevated themselves, the narrator, who has retreated to a mountain village to work as a translator, avoids becoming ensnared in similar dilemmas until he begins a romance with a wealthy woman. Written in lucid prose, with a keen sense for sociological detail, the novel is a study of figures “dazzled by their own hard-won freedom.”



[\*\*The White Girl\*\*](#), by *Tony Birch* (HarperVia). This novel, set in a remote Australian town in the nineteen-sixties, centers on an Aborigine woman, Odette, and her granddaughter, whose unusually light complexion draws the interest of a police officer intent on exercising the state's legal guardianship of Indigenous children. As Odette attempts to protect her granddaughter, she finds that bureaucracy can dictate harsh consequences for performing innocuous actions without the prescribed permissions. While dramatizing the legal tightrope that Odette must walk, Birch illustrates how Australia's policies dehumanized not only the Indigenous people they sought to control—often by taking children from their families and placing them in white mission schools—but also the white people who were complicit in enforcing them.

By [James Wood](#)

## Content

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“Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history,” Novalis said. It was subtle of Penelope Fitzgerald to use this as the epigraph for her historical novel about the poet, “The Blue Flower,” implying, as it does, the novel’s best powers of restoration. History is full of destruction and certain death, but fictional people may live forever, in an eternal redemption. And recorded history struggles to capture not only unwritten lives but unwritten thoughts, very often leaving a void around private existence, interiority. The novel gladly rushes in where the angel of history fears to tread.

But the novel has no monopoly on historical correction, and reading Fintan O’Toole’s new book, “We Don’t Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland” (Liveright), is like reading a great tragicomic Irish novel, rich in memoir and record, calamity and critique. The book contains funny and terrible things, details and episodes so pungent that they must surely have been stolen from a fantastical artificer like Flann O’Brien. The pedophile Dublin priest who built a swimming pool in his back garden—in drizzly Ireland!—so that little boys could swim with him. The censoring, all-seeing Archbishop of Dublin who kept a telescope and a magnifying glass in his official residence, and once boasted that, when he used the magnifier to scrutinize “the drawings of women in ads for underwear, it was possible to see the outline of a mons veneris.” The moment, in 1963, when Ireland acquired its first escalator. The fact that Irish viewers could see only a chaste version of “Casablanca” that “cut out all the references to Rick and Ilsa’s passionate love affair in Paris, leaving their motivations entirely mysterious.” The deeply corrupt Prime Minister Charles Haughey, who spent a thousand pounds of someone else’s money *a week* on dinners with his mistress. The strange fact that Albania got its own television station before Ireland did. The bishop who fled Ireland for a convent in Texas after his lover told the press about their illegitimate son, whom he had refused to acknowledge.

These public events have the irresistible tang of the actual, and around them O’Toole—who has had a substantial career as a journalist, a political

commentator, and a drama critic—beautifully tells the private story of his childhood and youth. But because the events really happened, because they are part of Ireland’s shameful, sometimes surreal postwar history, they also have the brutally obstructive quality of fact, often to be pushed against, fought with, triumphed over, or, in O’Toole’s preferred mode of engagement, analyzed into whimpering submission. His great gift is his extremely intelligent, mortally relentless critical examination, and here he studies nothing less than the past and the present of his own nation. James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus promised to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race; less Parnassian than Dedalus but just as angry as Joyce, O’Toole tells the story of how his race, at last breaking the fetters of religion and superstition, created its own conscience.



Cartoon by Yinfan Huang

O’Toole opens his book in 1958, the year of his birth. He was born into the working classes; his father was a bus conductor and his mother became an office cleaner. The family lived in a newish housing estate, “lined by largely identical two-storey working-class dwellings,” in a suburb southwest of Dublin. The modernity of the housing stock was important: the O’Tooles had electricity, running water, and an indoor lavatory. In a book rippling with extraordinary facts, here are some of the starker: at the end of the Second World War, two-thirds of Irish homes had no electricity. In the countryside, especially, development was sluggish. The 1961 census

revealed that nearly seventy-five per cent of rural homes didn't have plumbing. At least half these houses "had no fixed lavatory facilities at all, indoor or outdoor." O'Toole remembers visiting his ninety-eight-year-old great-grandmother in County Wexford: her house had recently been electrified, but the toilet was a dry outhouse that had a plank with a hole in it, and water was brought from a distant pump.

Politically, the Ireland of his childhood appeared to be remarkably stable. It was the triumphant survivor of its Easter Rising struggle, in 1916, against British colonialism, culminating, six years later, in the establishment of the Irish Free State; a wily evader of the ravages of the Second World War (it stayed neutral); a newborn democratic republic where ancient Catholic identity and ancient national identity were fruitfully locked together in place. The state was presided over by its aging founding father, the noble and deeply pious Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera, who had led forces against British soldiers in the Easter Rising and had been a British prisoner of war. De Valera's party, Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Destiny), had comfortably dominated Irish politics since soon after its formation, in 1926.

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But Ireland, in O'Toole's telling, was in crisis, more of a fragile agrarian theocracy than a modern democratic republic. It was not de Valera who was really in charge but the zealous magnifier of women's private parts, the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. (O'Toole includes a photograph of de Valera on his knees, kissing McQuaid's ecclesiastical ring.) Crucially, the country was shrinking. In 1961, its population was less than half the size it had been in 1841. "Three out of five children growing up in Ireland in the 1950s were destined to leave at some point in their lives," O'Toole notes. Oddly, given the country's ardent Catholicism, Ireland had very low rates of marriage—perhaps because it also possessed the lowest proportion of women in Europe (women emigrated faster than men). It had a severely uneducated populace (most pupils dropped out of school at the age of fourteen), and a limited, colonial economy, based in large part on exporting beef and other cattle products to Great Britain. "The state founded in revolution and civil war had become remarkably stable," O'Toole writes. "But it was a stability sustained by radical instability—to keep it as it was,

huge parts of the population had to emigrate, for otherwise the sheer weight of their discontented numbers would drag it down.”

O’Toole uses his birth date to plot the country’s tensions and contradictions, drawing the reader’s attention to three symptomatic events that occurred in the week of his birth. Two days before he was born, the Dublin Theatre Festival struck “Bloomsday,” an adaptation of Joyce’s “Ulysses,” from the schedule, when Archbishop McQuaid made his disapproval clear by refusing to mark the festival opening with a special votive mass. (Samuel Beckett withdrew his play in protest.) The second event, while O’Toole’s mother was in labor, took place in England. Masked members of the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) raided a British Army camp in Dorset, and bound and gagged ten young soldiers. The episode was relatively trivial, but it portended many years of murder and sorrow. Meanwhile, the government’s minister for industry and commerce, Seán Lemass—like de Valera, a veteran of the 1916 Easter Rising—flew to Paris to discuss the possibility of Ireland’s joining the newly proposed European Free Trade Association, a precursor to the European Union.

Seen in hindsight, the three events occupy tellingly different temporalities. The censoring Church already belonged to the superstitious past, though the members of the clergy didn’t know it, of course, and had not yet even begun to cede their immense authority. The I.R.A. raid opened the long chapter of terroristic violence, perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestants, known as the Troubles—most of it confined to the British province of Northern Ireland and to the British mainland—that more or less came to an end in 1998, with the Anglo-Irish Good Friday Agreement. The ministerial trip to Paris set in motion an economic expansion and an integration with the rest of Europe that is open-ended and ongoing. The three events occupy the past, the finite present, and the unlimited future.

Also: religion, violence, and identity. Was Ireland just a curious, dusty little annex of the Catholic Church—its national vestry, essentially—or a modern nation willing to join a large, technocratic, increasingly secular political bloc, whose laws and mores were bound to conflict with Irish bans on abortion, divorce, and contraception? In a state that fused Catholic identity and republican nationalism, would sectarian political violence—violence done in the name of Catholics against the Protestants of Northern Ireland,

and in the service of the “unfinished” Irish revolution of 1916—bind Catholicism and Irishness ever more intensely together or pull these identities apart? The sixty-year development that O’Toole so dexterously tracks is one in which an isolated religious nation becomes—slowly, then suddenly—a hospitably “normal,” secular one, and in which Catholicism and Irishness are no longer seen as synonymous. This sundering eventually made religiously sectarian violence not just difficult to defend (the modern Irish government never had a lot of time for the I.R.A.) but, finally, incoherent.

Like most nations, but more acutely, the Ireland of the late nineteen-fifties and the sixties was torn between isolation and community. Most important, it had to navigate a path between the claims of the Church and the secular appeal of the new. The country’s apparent strengths—its population’s ethnic and religious homogeneity, its battle-scarred unity against the old colonial aggressor, the romantic brilliance of its self-mythologizing—were the very forces that were pushing it toward disruptive upheavals. O’Toole is almost Hegelian in his understanding of history as a critical process in which eras helplessly recruit the agents of their own undoing. Religion and nationalism, the cross and the clover, promised a timeless stability but were actually subversive forces.

They were subversive because, despite the rhetoric of confidence, they were anxiously unstable, held together by a will to hypocrisy; when the deficits of this hypocrisy overwhelmed the benefits, the will began to wane. Reading this book, I was struck by parallels with the collapse of various European Communist regimes. In particular, I often thought of the jokes, novels, and allegories that circulated in places under Communist rule, like Czechoslovakia and Albania, with their comic, grim evasions and knowing irony around doublethink. Josef Škvorecký, as much as Flann O’Brien, could have produced the basic script.

Take contraception. The pill, though illegal in Ireland, had been imported into the country since 1963, officially as a “cycle regulator.” As long as no one spoke the word “contraceptive,” doctors could conspire with their female patients in this medical fiction. The Church connived at this solution, too. “Catholic schools and hospitals would have ceased to function if teachers and nurses were not having awful trouble with their periods,”

O'Toole winkingly comments; pregnant teachers and nurses would have been sacked. (It was only in the year of his birth, he points out, that the government lifted its prohibition on married women working as teachers.)

O'Toole bundles these hypocrisies under the delicious term “Connie dodging.” Cornelius (hence “Connie”) Lucey, the Bishop of Cork, had demanded a particularly strict version of Lenten fasting, in which parishioners were restricted to one meal a day, along with two “collations,” which were understood to be something like a biscuit, to be had with one’s tea. A resourceful local baker then invented a gigantic biscuit for Lent, known as a Connie dodger. “The law of God was not defied,” O’Toole observes. “It was dodged. And so it was with the Pill.”

One of the liveliest episodes in the book occurred in 1971, when members of a new feminist group known as the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (aided, in the legal realm, by the young law professor Mary Robinson, a future President of the republic) mounted a campaign to break the law restricting the importation of contraceptives. The women took a train to Northern Ireland, with the intention of buying contraceptive pills in Belfast and then openly declaring them at customs in Dublin. But because they were unable to acquire the pill in Belfast without a prescription, they returned with aspirin, confident that the customs guards would not be able to tell the difference. Alas, nothing much happened. When one of the group announced that she was carrying the banned substance, O’Toole recounts, the customs men in Dublin “dropped their eyes, silent and fussed,” and waved the women through, as if they hadn’t heard anything. Official hypocrisy doubled down; Connie dodging lived to fight another day.

O’Toole’s book pulses with righteous anticlericalism, and at its heart lies his eloquent outrage at what amounted to a vast religious penal colony. This network—comprising the ordinary Catholic schools run by the Christian Brothers, the more shadowy “mother and baby homes,” the Magdalene asylums, and the “industrial schools”—variously disciplined and incarcerated boys, girls, and pregnant or otherwise “wayward” women. Of these institutions, the most notorious, thanks to a landmark government investigation in 2015, are the mother-and-baby homes, most of which were run by Catholic nuns. Unmarried pregnant women were sent to these homes to deliver their babies, who were put up for adoption or neglected unto death

and buried in situ. At the Tuam Children's Home, which was administered by the Sisters of Bon Secours, some eight hundred children were buried within a decommissioned sewage tank, O'Toole writes. Between 1920 and 1977, many hundreds of dead babies were dispatched from these homes to the nation's finest medical schools, in Dublin, for research purposes.

The Magdalene asylums confined women who had broken the law and were perceived to have fallen into sexual immorality. The industrial schools were boarding schools for problem kids, who were subdued by regimes of terror that included flogging, burning, head shaving, beatings on the soles of the feet, and being made to sleep outside overnight. The network incorporated fifty-two such places and interned some fifty thousand children. O'Toole writes that he can't recall a time when he didn't know the names of the biggest "schools," which "formed a hinterland of dread." When he was eight, a boy named George, who lived across the street, disappeared into one of these places. He had apparently stolen a bike.

O'Toole was lucky enough to attend a relatively normal school run by the Christian Brothers, if normality can be stretched to accommodate unrestrained physical violence meted out with leather straps or bamboo canes, and much enforced propaganda; the Brothers published such texts as "Courtesy for Boys and Girls" and a "Catechism of the History of Ireland," which asserted that "in the martyrology of history, among crucified nations, Ireland occupies the foremost place. The duration of her torture, and the ferocity of her executioner, are as revolting as the power of the victim is astonishing." A crucified nation must imagine itself a holy nation, allied in defeat and in victory with Christ's necessary suffering. But once suffering is somehow necessary all control is lost, and violence can be theologically justified, because punishment is really a kind of shared self-punishment. (That's the kind of thing I used to hear in my Church of England school in the North of England, as the headmaster, the Reverend Canon John Grove, bent down to beat my bottom with the back of a wooden hairbrush: "Believe me, Wood, this hurts me more than it will hurt you.") It is the logic of original sin: all have sinned, all must suffer, and only through suffering is glory achieved.



*"Will you spend eighteen months and tens of thousands of dollars planning a party with me?"*  
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Irish society was premised on what O'Toole calls "the unknown known," Ireland's "genius for knowing and not knowing at the same time." This gap, this useful fiction, could be maintained in the postwar decades as long as ordinary people, many with modest educations and modest aspirations, understood their lowly place in the hierarchy. Parents trusted predatory or violent schoolteachers and priests, and were happy to outsource a fair amount of the parenting: a dog's obeyed in office, as mad King Lear has it. The secret can survive as long as the monarch stays sane and does not reveal himself in all his doglike animalism, because then someone in the street might yell out, "But he's just a dog!"

For instance, until the divorce referendum of 1995, a couple who needed to get divorced in Ireland had to convince a body called the diocesan Marriage Tribunal that their marriage should be annulled on the ground that, owing to some "defect" at the time of the nuptials, they were never properly married anyway. In Dublin, O'Toole writes, the moral arbiter before whom you had to lay these sophistical contortions was a priest named, appropriately enough, Ivan Payne. In 1968, Payne had become the chaplain of the Crumlin children's hospital, not far from where the young O'Toole lived. He replaced Father Paul McGennis, who had been discovered photographing little girls' genitalia and had been secretly pardoned and protected by our man with the

magnifying glass, Archbishop McQuaid. At the children's hospital, Payne started abusing little boys: O'Toole tells us that there were sixteen known victims at the hospital, and fifteen more identified victims after Payne joined the Marriage Tribunal. The Church knew about Payne's activities as early as 1981, when one of his young victims alerted Church authorities. Payne admitted his offense, and was quietly moved from one parish to another. As O'Toole puts it, with measured fury, from 1985 to 1995 the body charged with making discriminations about the moral fineness of marriages "included a man who had admitted the sexual abuse of a child and two other priests who knew about that abuse."

Hypocrisy shrivels when it is named in sunlight. In the nineteen-nineties, that sunlit naming happened fast, and the two sides of the unknown known —the knowing and the not knowing—started openly talking to each other, like a mistress and a wife finally comparing notes on the same atrocious man. Four events were propulsive. In 1992, Eamonn Casey, the popular and telegenic Bishop of Galway, fled Ireland for New York on an Aer Lingus plane. His American lover, Annie Murphy, had told the *Irish Times* about her long affair with Casey, and about their son, Peter, born in 1974, who was being financially supported by the Bishop—or, more precisely, by funds from the Galway diocese, without its knowledge. Not that Peter was being supported with much grace. Bishop Casey had, of course, urged Murphy to give the child up for adoption. Peter was not her child, he had admonished her in the hospital, but God's. What right did she have to keep a boy who had been born in sin? O'Toole writes that, with the *Irish Times* story, "a code of silence had been broken forever." Connie was not dodged; this time, it was Connie who had dodged.

Politically, change was also under way. In 1990, Mary Robinson was elected President, after a brutal campaign that exposed the nation's religiose misogyny. A Fianna Fáil parliamentarian asked at a rally if Robinson was going to set up an abortion-referral clinic in the Presidential residence; Prime Minister Haughey, the Fianna Fáil leader, claimed that Robinson was just fronting for a "Marxist-Leninist Communist Party"; and a government minister, Pádraig Flynn, accused her of faking "a newfound interest in the family," and wondered aloud about her bona fides as a mother and a wife. O'Toole notes that this kind of morally presumptuous misogyny worked when it remained unspoken, as part of the general contract of hypocrisy. The

mistake was speaking it so blatantly, since to do so “revealed the reality obscured by the rhetoric, a deep contempt for women. It triggered a visceral rage that had been built up over generations.”

Robinson’s election, according to O’Toole, broke the reflexive alliance of the Church and the Fianna Fáil Party, debunking the notion that both had some kind of moral monopoly over Irish culture. Haughey—whose florid, sharp-eyed face, with its ruddy wattles, proved an icon for an era—resigned as the Fianna Fáil leader in 1992. A government tribunal, held in 1997, revealed that he had funded his lavish life style from other people’s pockets and shielded his wrongdoing via a shell company based in the Cayman Islands.

A year later, the Good Friday Agreement, announced by the Irish and British governments, largely ended the armed conflict between Catholics and Protestants. On both sides, all political prisoners who accepted the Agreement were to be released. Simultaneous referendums were held: in Northern Ireland, seventy-one per cent of voters, a majority of Protestants and Catholics, voted in favor of the Agreement; in Ireland, ninety-four per cent did so. Paramilitary organizations agreed to disarm. The Agreement bound the signatories to accept the principle of self-determination; namely, that they must “recognize the birthright of all the people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose.” Both governments moved to allow citizens to hold simultaneous British and Irish passports, which pushed the Irish to amend their constitution thus: “It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions.”

O’Toole’s commentary here is especially acute. He points out that these words allowed for the reconciliation of two compound identities, Catholic/Irish and Protestant/British, that had once seemed immutably at odds, and, in consequence, broke any necessary link between Irishness and Catholicism. Identity could now be plural and open-ended. This prospect was still largely conceptual, perhaps, but, thanks to the enormous investments from America and elsewhere which had been pouring into Ireland since the nineteen-eighties, Irish society was indeed being transformed. Something unimaginable in 1958 was coming to pass: mass

emigration was being reversed. A quarter of a million people flocked to an economically revivified Ireland between 1995 and 2000. Foreign-born inhabitants grew from six per cent of the population in 1991 to ten per cent in 2002. Once the European Union allowed the free flow of people and labor, in 2004—later to be one of the main engines of Brexit—Irish society began to diversify rapidly. By 2016, O’Toole informs us, seventeen per cent of the population had been born elsewhere.

In J. F. Powers’s novel “Morte D’Urban,” a priest named Father Urban is put under moral pressure when a woman undresses in front of him. He averts his eyes, and keeps them averted. “It was like tearing up telephone directories, the hardest part was getting started,” Powers jokes. Change in postwar Ireland was a bit like that, except in moral reverse. Ireland was slow to throw off its repressions and deceits, slow to unseat a theocratic system that insisted on votive masses to bless theatre festivals, and slow to overturn a moral arrangement that coddled molesting priests and murderous, secretive institutions. The nineteen-eighties, so violently transformative in Thatcher’s Britain, produced little evidence of general secularization in Ireland. The Irish reaffirmed the prohibition on divorce in a 1986 referendum. But when the process began for good, in the nineteen-nineties, the establishment phone book, as it were, got ripped up very fast indeed. The key dates fall on O’Toole’s closing pages like accelerating hammer blows: Mary Robinson’s election (1990); Eamonn Casey’s flight (1992); the tribunal on Charles Haughey (1997); a documentary series, produced by Mary Raftery, on the industrial schools, titled “States of Fear” (1999), which was such a powerful exposé that the government began discussing the possibility of making a formal apology the day after its screening on Irish TV; the governmental report (2009) that confirmed Raftery’s reporting, and, in the same year, an official report into sexual abuse in the Dublin archdiocese. These were followed by happier events, moments of triumph not just through suffering but over suffering: the 2015 vote in favor of gay marriage, the 2018 referendum that lifted the ban on abortion.

What happened? Ireland became normal. “To be normal was a wonder that deserved celebration,” O’Toole writes. Is it possible to say how in a sentence? He makes a brave effort, in what may be the most moving line of the book: “This, I think, was what really changed: ordinary Catholics realized that, when it came to lived morality, they were way ahead of their

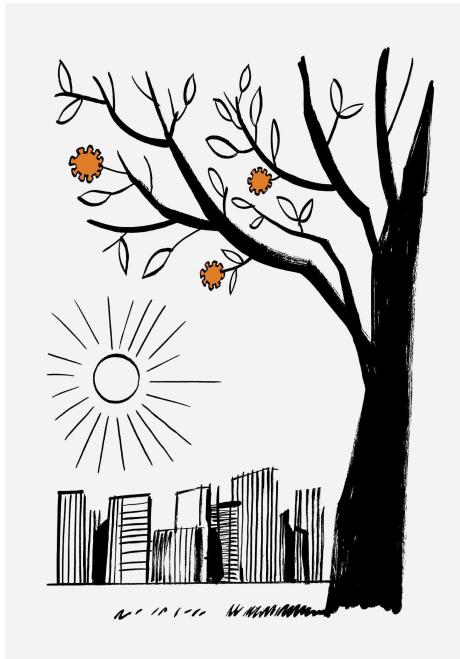
teachers.” O’Toole leaves unspoken the gaping implication: and perhaps way ahead of God Himself? ♦

## **Comment**

- [What Do We Do About COVID Now?](#)

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

“If I look at the mass, I will never act,” [Mother Teresa](#) once said. “If I look at the one, I will.” During the pandemic, we’ve all grappled with this dynamic. Our country is on the cusp of a grim milestone: soon, a million people in the United States will have died of [COVID-19](#). Yet for many Americans this reality seems vague, abstract—a group problem for which we must take individual responsibility. We struggle to see the crisis we’re in.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Part of the problem is fatigue. Another is that the coronavirus has exacted its toll unevenly. *COVID* is relatively unthreatening to younger people, but has killed one in seventy-five older Americans; residents of long-term-care facilities make up less than three per cent of the population, but have accounted for about one in five *COVID* deaths. The death rate for Blacks and Hispanics has been twice that for whites. And, owing to divergent immunization rates, people in the reddest counties have been dying at more than three times the rate of those in the bluest. For some of us, the pandemic may feel over, but more Americans died of *COVID* in 2021 than in 2020. So far in 2022, the virus has taken another hundred and thirty thousand lives.

It can be hard to grasp the meaning of such numbers. We might come to terms with them by noting that U.S. life expectancy has now fallen by nearly two years—the sharpest single-year decline since the Second World War. We

might count lost time, years forgone with family, friends, and colleagues. An eighty-year-old who died during the pandemic lost an average of almost eight years of life; a forty-year-old lost nearly four decades. This means that a million deaths will have expunged tens of millions of years of life—a mass erasure of new, strange, and wonderful possibilities.

One of the most prevalent false beliefs about the pandemic is that the government has exaggerated the number of deaths; in fact, the official count is an underestimate. Since the pandemic began, at least a hundred thousand more people have died in this country than would have during normal times. Many of these “excess deaths” are uncounted *COVID* fatalities. Others are the result of missed care for conditions such as heart attacks and strokes. Drug overdoses have risen to record levels; skipped cancer screenings and childhood vaccinations will add to the virus’s collateral damage in the years to come. The truth is that America’s battle with *COVID-19* has been more damaging than we like to think. And it is still ongoing.

In parts of the country, cases are rising again. Reopening plays a role. So does B.A.2, a subvariant of [Omicron](#) that is now dominant in the U.S. and around the world, and is thought to be thirty to fifty per cent more contagious than B.A.1, the version that swept across the U.S. this winter. B.A.2 doesn’t appear to be more lethal, and vaccines remain effective at averting the most serious consequences of infection; still, it promises to cause breakthrough infections, and presents a serious threat to the elderly, the immunocompromised, and the unvaccinated. Last month, B.A.2 nearly tripled coronavirus cases in the U.K.; at one point, one in thirty older Britons was thought to be infected. *COVID* hospitalizations and deaths rose, though not as dramatically—preexisting immunity softened the blow.

It’s not clear exactly how America’s B.A.2 story will unfold. Our vaccination rates are lower than those of many European nations: just two-thirds of Americans are fully vaccinated, and although the F.D.A. has now approved a second booster for people over fifty, just sixty per cent of them have received their first. Meanwhile, many states have done away with most pandemic restrictions, and people are increasingly returning to their pre-pandemic routines. Still, because immunity against B.A.1 appears to protect against B.A.2, the U.S. may escape the worst consequences: according to one estimate, nearly four in five Americans have some Omicron immunity.

In 2020, when the virus arrived, the government's response was halting and disorganized. With time, however, something like consistency emerged: Americans knew what was allowed and what wasn't. We're now reverting to the Wild West phase. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has indicated that less than one per cent of the population currently needs to wear masks. Some states are shutting down their testing and vaccination sites. Earlier this year, the Biden Administration asked for thirty billion dollars in pandemic funding, but Congress agreed only to some fifteen billion, and has so far failed to authorize even that. As a result, the federal government has reduced shipments of monoclonal antibodies to states and delayed the purchase of more antiviral pills. It no longer has the funds to pay for tests or vaccines for uninsured Americans, or to secure booster shots for the fall. Politicians and policymakers hold powerful tools for curbing the virus; increasingly, they are declining to use them. They're also stymied by the murkiness of our moment: the country contains within it such a diversity of immunity, vulnerability, and attitude that no policy prescription seems to fit.

Amid the uncertainty, individuals, organizations, and institutions must do their best. This means giving people the resources to confront *COVID* not as an abstraction but through the decisions of daily life. During moments of high viral spread, this effort might entail providing rapid tests in the workplace, time off after exposure, outdoor spaces for events, high-grade masks for all who want them, and a culture that respects varying levels of risk tolerance and medical vulnerability. Decades of behavioral-science research have revealed that our decision-making depends crucially on our environment; even as politicians discard mitigation measures, communities at school, work, church, and elsewhere can make it easier for people to do the right thing.

For individuals, fighting the pandemic can feel a bit like combatting climate change. Why recycle when policymakers allow carbon emissions to rise inexorably? And, indeed, to defeat this and future pandemics, we'll need investments in ventilation and air-filtration systems, paid sick leave, disability benefits, disease-surveillance programs, and more. But it's also true that individuals retain some agency. We can get booster shots and persuade others to do so; we can make plans for accessing monoclonal antibodies or antiviral pills. When cases rise, as they will, we can consider

how we might lower the chances that we'll pass on the virus to someone for whom the consequences could be catastrophic. After two years of ebbs and flows, of surges, variants, vaccines, and boosters, our choices matter, perhaps now more than ever. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, April 4, 2022](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

# **Dept. of Criminology**

- [The Unravelling of an Expert on Serial Killers](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)

## Content

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

A brother and a sister are standing on the balcony of a sixth-floor apartment in Monte Carlo. It's the nineteen-seventies, in May, the afternoon of the Grand Prix. The sun is glinting off the dinghies in the turquoise shallows of the harbor. The trees are so lush they're almost black.

The brother, Stéphane Bourgoin, is in his twenties. He's come from Paris to visit his sister Claude-Marie Dugué. Race cars circle the city, careening onto the straightaway on Boulevard Albert 1er, which Dugué's apartment overlooks. Over the thrum, Bourgoin leans in and tells her something shocking: in America, where he'd recently been living, he had a girlfriend who was murdered and "cut up into pieces." Her name was Hélène.

Bourgoin's revelation was one of those moments when you "remember exactly what you were doing that day at that precise moment, the news is so striking and indelible," Dugué recalled recently. "It was stupefaction and shudders, amid the revving engines of Formula 1." Dugué and Bourgoin shared a father but had different mothers. They had got to know each other not long before, and Dugué didn't feel that she could probe for details about a girlfriend she hadn't met, or even heard of until that day. "I found the whole situation disturbing," she said. She simply told Bourgoin how sorry she was.

At the time, Bourgoin had a career in the realm of B movies, reviewing fantasy and horror films for fanzines and dabbling in adult film. Later, he started writing his own books, which became hugely popular and helped establish him as a prominent expert on serial killers in France. His best-known work, "Serial Killers," a thousand-page compendium of depravity, was released in five editions by the prestigious publisher Grasset. Travelling around the country to book festivals, Bourgoin built up a particularly devoted following within the already zealous subculture of true crime. One fan, Bourgoin said, sent him annotated copies of his own books, with items such as scissors, razors, and pubic hairs glued to the pages, corresponding to words in the text.

Bourgoin also had admirers in law and law enforcement. “He was one of the first people in France to say that serial killers weren’t only in America,” Jacques Dallest, the general prosecutor of the Grenoble appeals court, told me. Dallest was so impressed with Bourgoin that he invited him to speak at the École Nationale de la Magistrature, France’s national academy for judges and prosecutors. Bourgoin also gave talks at the Centre National de Formation à la Police Judiciaire, a training center for one of France’s main law-enforcement bodies, for which he claimed to have created the country’s first unit of serial-killer profilers.

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An energetic self-promoter, Bourgoin appeared frequently in the press and on television. “I counted, I did eighty-four TV shows in one month,” he once said. “I get up at 4:45 A.M. to be on the morning shows and go home at midnight to have a bite to eat.” He cultivated a flamboyantly geeky look, with equal shades of Sherlock Holmes (ascot, horn-rimmed glasses) and Ace Ventura (cerulean blazer, silky skull-print shirt). A quirky-shoes enthusiast, he sometimes wore a pair of white brogues made to look as though they were spattered with blood. On Facebook, he claimed to possess the remains of Gerard Schaefer, a serial killer from Florida. “To each person who buys my book, I will offer a small bag containing a little piece of Schaefer—fingernails, hair, ear, kneecap, skin, bones, etc.,” he wrote, in 2015. Female fans, he added, would be given priority.

Bourgoin was most famous for his jailhouse interviews with murderers. In the course of more than forty years, he had conducted seventy-seven of them, he said, “in the four corners of the planet.” He riveted audiences with tales of his encounters with the “Son of Sam” killer David Berkowitz (“David, I come here, you agreed to meet me, but I hope you’re not going to tell me the same bullshit that you told at your trial”), with the homicidal hospital orderly Donald Harvey (“He confesses seventeen additional crimes to me that he hadn’t even been suspected of”), with the “Killer Clown” John Wayne Gacy (who, Bourgoin said, grabbed his buttocks during the encounter). “Confronting these individuals can be dangerous from a mental point of view,” Bourgoin wrote, in “Mes Conversations avec les Tueurs” (“My Conversations with Killers”), a 2012 book. “To make them talk, you

have to let down your guard, open yourself completely to a psychopath, who manipulates, lies, and is devoid of any scruple.”

If you dedicate your life to serial killers, the first question anyone asks is “Why?” Bourgoin’s answer was that Hélène’s death made him want to confront the worst that humanity had to offer, as “a form of catharsis” or even as “a personal exorcism.” At some point, he started pronouncing her name “Eileen,” the American way. He said that he’d met her in the mid-seventies, when he was living in Los Angeles, working on B movies; that, in 1976, he went on a trip out of town; that when he returned to the home they shared he discovered her dead body, “mutilated, raped, and practically decapitated.” The killer was apprehended two years later, and eventually confessed to almost a dozen other murders. He was now awaiting execution on death row.

When an interviewer asked for an image of Eileen, Bourgoin would produce a black-and-white photograph of the young couple. It was beautifully composed, almost professional-looking. In it, the two of them are pictured in closeup, facing each other. Eileen has feathered hair and rainbow-shaped brows. Bourgoin’s hair is long, and he appears to be wearing a leather jacket with a big shearling collar. He is turned toward her in a protective stance. She looks up at him with a snaggletoothed smile. They’re so close that their noses are almost touching.

“Eileen was his hook,” Hervé Weill, who co-runs a crime-fiction festival at which Bourgoin often appeared, told me. The story of her death stirred the public’s emotions, adding a sheen of moral righteousness to Bourgoin’s vocation. “I knew of Stéphane Bourgoin well before this program having seen almost all his interviews with prisoners, but I’m only here learning that he was the partner of a victim,” a YouTube user wrote, after watching one of Bourgoin’s television appearances. “Incredible man.”

In his public appearances, Bourgoin delivered even the most gruesome anecdotes with weary didacticism, as if he had seen it all and emerged omniscient, emotion transmogrified into expertise. He spoke in data points: seventeen crimes, seventy-seven serial killers, “hundreds of thousands” of case files that he claimed to have stored in his cellar. “For nearly fifteen years, I accumulated files that I synthesized into more than five thousand

tables, four of which are reproduced in the book,” he said at one point, announcing that he had, in all likelihood, solved the long-standing mystery of the murder of Elizabeth Short, known as the Black Dahlia.

Bourgoin could seem a little off at times, more like an admirer than a dispassionate observer of the killers he studied. But it was easy enough to interpret this macabre streak as a consequence of his trauma. His social-media feeds featured an uncomfortable mixture of cat pictures (he named a cat Bundy), promotional brags (“once again a packed house, for the seventeenth time in a row”), morbid memes (“*BEING CREMATED IS MY LAST HOPE FOR A SMOKING HOT BODY*”), and crime-related kitsch (barricade-tape toilet paper; gloves and a jacket designed to look as if they were made from human skin). He spoke of his opposition, on moral grounds, to the death penalty, but he’d pose for a photograph in a fake electric chair, captioning it “Today, I’m lacking a little juice.” What might normally have seemed in bad taste could feel like defiance coming from a bereaved partner. He showed up for interviews in a Jeffrey Dahmer T-shirt and signed books “With My Bloodiest Regards.”

In 1991, Bourgoin travelled to the Florida State Prison to meet Ottis Toole, sometimes called the Jacksonville Cannibal, for a French-television documentary. Toole claimed to have eaten some of his victims and allegedly issued a recipe for barbecue sauce calling for, among other ingredients, two cloves of garlic and a cup of blood.



*"Let the war of succession begin!"*  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Bourgoin opened the interview brightly, saying that someone had sent him the recipe for the sauce. “And I must tell you that I tried it,” he said.

“Was it any good?” Toole asked.

“Yeah, it was very good,” Bourgoin answered, his voice quickening. “Although I didn’t try it on the same kind of meat that you did!”

Despite Bourgoin’s inclination toward facts and figures, his own memories could be indistinct. Sometimes he said that he’d been introduced to serial killers, in the late seventies, by a police officer he got to know from Eileen’s case; at other times, he said that he’d met some sympathetic cops at meals hosted by Robert Bloch, the author of “Psycho.” Bourgoin refused to identify Eileen’s killer, or to give her last name, saying that he was preserving her anonymity out of respect for her parents. Whether because of decency, laziness, or esteem for his reputation, Bourgoin’s interlocutors tended not to press him very hard. “I seem to have been prepared to put down his evasions to professional caution or eccentric obsession,” Tony Allen-Mills, a British journalist who interviewed Bourgoin in 2000, told me. “He was accepted as an expert, and that’s how I treated him.”

Bourgoin knew the power of fandom, having spent decades stoking the public's emotional investment in true crime. But he underestimated the intelligence of the audience. After years of watching TV specials, attending talks, reading books, and replaying DVD boxed sets about necrophilia, satanism, bestiality, torture, infanticide, matricide, patricide, and the like, followers of the genre had learned not to count on anybody's better angels, or to underestimate humankind's capacity for deceit. They were connoisseurs of the self-valorizing lie, having been trained by authors like the "master of noir" himself.

One group of true-crime fans, disturbed by inconsistencies in Bourgoin's stories, launched their own investigation, which would unravel his career. "Can you imagine yourself in a long hallway?" a member of the group told me. "Each time you open a door, behind it there's another door. That's how many lies there were."

One seemingly grandiose element of Bourgoin's life story is true: his father, Lucien Joseph Jean Bourgoin, was a great man of history. Jean, as he was known, was born in 1897, in Papeete, Tahiti. He joined the French military at the age of seventeen, fighting with distinction in the First World War before studying at the élite engineering school École Polytechnique. During the Second World War, he made a bold escape from French-colonial Indochina after being put under surveillance for his support of the Free French, and was personally summoned by Charles de Gaulle to join the government-in-exile in London.

As a civilian, Jean travelled the world building roads, tunnels, railroads, irrigation systems, and electrical networks. Later, he became a Commander of the Legion of Honor, and took part in UNESCO's effort to relocate the ancient Egyptian temples of Abu Simbel. His twenty-two-page dossier in the National Archives of France chronicles countless missions, decorations, and "special services rendered to Colonization" in roughly twenty countries. "I've heard that there was much more to the story, that he was also a high-level intelligence officer," Julien Cuny, his grandson, told me.

Bourgoin's mother, Franziska Glöckner, was as mysterious and daring as her husband. Born in Germany in 1910, she moved to France in the thirties after marrying her second husband, a French diplomat. In 1940, with her husband

at war, she took a job as an interpreter with the German command at Saint-Malo, on the coast of Brittany. “Intelligent, courtesan-like, and calculating,” according to one writer, she spent the war years facilitating fishing permits, attending cocktail parties, and consorting with the Grand Duke of the Romanovs, who was living in exile at a nearby villa. A French official recalled that she eventually acquired “such an influence that she was known to all as ‘Commandante du Port.’ ” A newspaper article later dubbed her the “Mata Hari of Saint-Malo.”

Toward the end of the war, Franziska was arrested on charges of treason and was accused of acting as an informant. At her trial, ten local witnesses, including the former mayor of Saint-Malo, testified in her defense. “It was thanks to her exceptional situation with the high German command that the docks of Saint-Malo, where ninety-six mineshafts had been set, were not exploded,” a newspaper article reported. She was ultimately acquitted.

Jean and Franziska married in Saigon in 1951. He was fifty-three and she was forty. Two years later, their only child, Stéphane, was born in Paris. The family lived in a Haussman-style apartment in the Seventeenth Arrondissement, not far from the Arc de Triomphe. Stéphane spoke French, German, and English, and attended the venerable Lycée Carnot. He seems to have been an awkward child. “The second the bell rang, three minutes later I was outside with twenty people, but he was rather isolated,” Jean-Louis Repelski, a classmate, recalled.

An unremarkable student, Bourgoin left high school without a diploma. He was obsessed with cinema, sometimes seeing five movies in a day. “He was a walking dictionary,” Claude-Marie Dugué told me. “He knew all the directors and films by heart, and inundated me with references and anecdotes.” At some point, Bourgoin parlayed this interest into a series of jobs in adult film. He is credited as the screenwriter of “Extreme Close-Up,” “La Bête et la Belle,” and “Johnny Does Paris,” a series of late-seventies and early-eighties productions starring John Holmes, the prolific American porn actor.

Bourgoin has said that his career in movies got started in the U.S., but, despite featuring some American actors, the three films were shot in France. Bourgoin did go to America at least once in his youth, as I learned from the

papers of his father's former wife, Alice Gilbert Smith Bourgoin. Alice was a New England patrician, with a degree from Smith College, who appears to have had an ardent but melancholic relationship with Jean, exacerbated by the turbulence of their era. Toward the end of her life, she wrote an affectionate letter to Jean offering to return "two handsome and valuable rings you gave me—a solitaire diamond and a beautiful dark blue sapphire."

Alice's letter arrived in Paris on June 7, 1977, but Stéphane was the one to receive it. Jean had died, of a heart attack, three days earlier, at a ceremony hosted by his alma mater. Jean's death must have been a shock, but Stéphane replied to Alice, in a letter dated the same day. "You do not know me, but I am Jean's son, Stéphane, born in 1953, and, by the way, the only child of his last marriage [*sic*]," he wrote, in English. "Perhaps you want to know a little bit more about me."

He told her that he had recently spent almost a year in America, but the letter made no mention of a murdered lover, or of a serial killer. "I love very much the USA and the kindness of the Americans," he wrote. He added that he was engaged to an American girl who was living in France, a love story just like Alice and his father's. "Right now, I am keeping aside every penny I earn to be able to make another trip to the States." He concluded by giving Alice his telephone number and his address.

In the bottom left-hand corner of the second page of the letter, there is a handwritten note, made at a later date by a nephew of Alice's:

Stéphane subsequently came to the USA and visited ASB, at her expense, when she handed over the rings. He never wrote to express any appreciation and was not heard from again before she died.

As a young man, Bourgoin resembled a character out of a potboiler. In the late seventies, he began working at *Au Troisième Œil*, a secondhand crime bookstore in Paris's Ninth Arrondissement, which he later took over. Customers could find him there, presiding "like a spider in his web," according to a longtime client. The shop was a narrow room bursting with first editions, forgotten genre novels, and rare crime fanzines, stacked double on shelves that ran from floor to ceiling. "It was a lair stuffed with literary

treasures, and you could spend ages there talking about *le roman noir*,” the writer Didier Daeninckx recalled.

The cultivated seediness of the place and its proprietor was irresistible to the writers who frequented the shop. Daeninckx put Bourgoin into one of his books, as a bookstore manager who deduces that a key character has cribbed his tale of suicide by piano from the plot of an obscure novel. Bourgoin also seems to have inspired the character of Étienne Jallieu, a “self-taught erudite shopkeeper” who outwits professional sleuths, in Jean-Hugues Oppel’s thriller “Six-Pack.” Bourgoin spun the myth out further, co-writing several especially grisly true-crime books (one focussed on infanticides) under the pseudonym Étienne Jallieu.

Bourgoin got an early taste of public attention in 1991, as a writer on “100 Years of X,” a cable documentary about porn. This was also the year of Bourgoin’s first filmed meeting with a murderer. Serial killers were having a cultural moment, following the success of Thomas Harris’s novel “The Silence of the Lambs.” On the eve of the book’s publication in French, Bourgoin wrote an article for a small crime-literature review about “a new type of criminal: the serial killer.” He seems to have sensed that a phenomenon was in the air, one that would only gain momentum with the release of a film version of “The Silence of the Lambs,” starring Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster. One night in Paris, Bourgoin regaled guests at a dinner party with tales of these new American murderers and the profilers who spent their days tracking them. “We were utterly captivated,” Carol Kehringer, a documentary producer who attended the dinner, told Scott Sayare, writing in the *Guardian*. “I started asking him all sorts of questions,” she added. “The more he spoke, the more I thought to myself, We’ve got to do a film!”

Kehringer and Bourgoin were acquaintances and had worked together before, so she asked him to conduct the interviews for the documentary. In the fall of 1991, Bourgoin and a crew flew to the United States to shoot the film for the French television channel FR3. At Quantico, they met with John Douglas, the pioneering F.B.I. criminal profiler who would later gain fame through his book “Mindhunter.” They travelled to Florida and California for meetings with murderers, arranged by the production crew.

The film, sold as “An Investigation Into Deviance,” was Bourgoin’s first public foray into the world of serial killers, but, by the time it was finished, Bourgoin and Kehringer were no longer speaking. “When he had the killers in front of him, it was as if he was sitting across from his idols,” she told the *Guardian*. Still, other producers continued working with him, and he soon published his first book on serial killers, a study of Jack the Ripper. He followed it with a flurry of spinoff volumes and, in 1993, with the first edition of his masterwork, the “Serial Killers” almanac.

Eileen doesn’t figure in Bourgoin’s work from this time. He seems to have introduced her into his professional repertoire sometime around 2000, even though, according to his sister, he had been telling the story privately for decades. “I had doubts when he said his girlfriend had been murdered, simply because I had known him for years and he had never spoken about it before,” François Guérif, a well-known French crime-fiction editor and Bourgoin’s former boss at the bookshop, recalled. Bourgoin was clearly conscious of a need to add emotional punch to his work. “He could cry on command,” Barbara Necek, who co-directed documentaries featuring Bourgoin, told me. Some of Bourgoin’s peers considered him a hack who presented himself as a globe-trotting criminologist when he was merely a jobbing presenter. “Neither I nor any of our mutual friends at the time had heard the story of his murdered girlfriend, nor of his so-called F.B.I. training,” a colleague and friend of Bourgoin’s from the eighties told me. “It triggered rounds of knowing laughter among us, because we all knew it was absolutely bogus.”

But elsewhere Bourgoin was taken seriously. As his career progressed, he came into contact with family members of the victims of killers. They saw him as a kindred survivor, someone who could be trusted to treat them with integrity, because of his personal experience. Conversely, proximity to them was valuable to Bourgoin as a form of reputational currency. “Each month, two or three people contact me,” he boasted, of his relationship with victims’ families, in 2012. Through his association with a victims-advocacy group called Victimes en Série, Bourgoin got to know Dahina Sy. She had been kidnapped and raped at the age of fourteen by Michel Fourniret, who later murdered seven young women.

One evening, Sy went to a dinner at Bourgoin's house. The atmosphere there was peculiar—a “museum of horrors,” according to a journalist who once visited, filled with slasher-film posters, F.B.I. memorabilia, porcelain cherubs in satin masks, and case files of uncertain provenance. Sy told me, “He said, ‘Come here, I want to show you something.’” Bourgoin began pulling crime-scene photographs out of a folder. “Puddles of blood,” Sy said. “It was absolutely abject.” Sy had suffered from post-traumatic stress for years after her abduction. One of its manifestations was extreme arachnophobia. At the dinner table, Bourgoin put a plastic spider on her shoulder. “I was paralyzed, and he was laughing,” Sy recalled. “I think it gave him pleasure to mess with my mind.”

In 2018, Bourgoin began collaborating with the publishing house Glénat on a branded series of graphic novels (“Stéphane Bourgoin Presents the Serial Killers”). The second installment, about Fourniret, came out in March of 2020. Alerted by an acquaintance to the book’s existence, Sy was shocked to encounter her adolescent image rendered “flesh and bone” in a cartoon strip, with Fourniret threatening her (“I will be forced to disfigure you if you don’t do exactly as I say”), his words suspended in dialogue bubbles. Sy says that neither Bourgoin nor the publisher had notified her about the book, or about the fact that it reprinted the entirety of an interview that she’d given in a different context years earlier. She hired a lawyer to send a letter of complaint to the book’s publisher, which withdrew it from the market. “It was like being defiled a second time,” she told me.



*"Don't be sad, Bud. These decisions are so political."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Bourgoin never interrogated Fourniret, but, oddly, the book's writer inserted a character inspired by Bourgoin throughout the text, a revered criminologist who goes by Bourgoin's old pseudonym Étienne Jallieu.

"I admit that I'm having trouble understanding the dynamics of your relationship with your wife," Jallieu tells Fourniret, facing him across a table in an alfresco interrogation room set up on a prison basketball court. "Probably because none of you tell the exact truth."

"What is the truth for you, Monsieur Jallieu?" Fourniret asks.

"What you've spent your entire life trying to hide, Monsieur Fourniret," Jallieu replies.

In 2019, a man who goes by the pseudonym Valak—inspired by a demon in the film “The Conjuring 2”—picked up a Bourgoin book that happened to be at hand. Valak, who is forty-five, lives in a port city in the South of France and works in a field unrelated to serial killers. When we spoke one day, over Zoom, he sat in a small room in front of a red velvet curtain. He wore a black baseball cap, a black polo, and a black mask, an outfit that was intended to protect his identity but also gave off a whiff of stagecraft. Valak told me that he had always been interested in human psychology,

particularly at its extremes. He had enjoyed Bourgoin's work as a teen-ager, but, revisiting it as an adult, he was struck by its sloppiness.

"There were things that didn't seem coherent," Valak told me. "I told myself, 'O.K., it must be me that's paranoid, that's looking for a nit to pick.' And then I discovered Facebook."

One day, in a large Facebook group of true-crime enthusiasts, someone posted a link to an article about Bourgoin. Valak commented, expressing his unease about the work. He recalled, "There were a bunch of people who responded after that, saying, '*Bah, oui*, I agree.' "

The skeptics—about thirty of them—formed a chat group to discuss their doubts about Bourgoin. That group eventually splintered into a smaller cohort, composed of Valak and seven others, living in France, Belgium, and Canada. (One member left the group after a falling out.) They called themselves the 4ème Œil Corporation (the Fourth Eye Corporation)—a play on Au Troisième Œil (At the Third Eye), the name of the bookstore that Bourgoin once ran.

At first, the group members saw their task as largely literary. They set to work combing through Bourgoin's dozens of books, expecting to find instances of plagiarism. Bourgoin had, in fact, lifted passages from English-language works that hadn't been translated into French. In some cases, he had even pilfered other people's life experiences. He claimed, for instance, that, while visiting a crime scene in South Africa with the profiler Micki Pistorius, he was splattered by maggots and decomposing body parts that had been churned up by police helicopters. (Pistorius did experience a similar incident, but Bourgoin was not there.)

The members of the collective weren't professional researchers, but they were assiduous. "As soon as we started looking," Valak recalled, "we found more and more inconsistencies." They decided to expand the scope of their investigation. Soon, they were devoting as much time to Bourgoin as they were to their day jobs. They contacted Bourgoin's purported former colleagues, sent letters to prisons across the U.S., and scoured YouTube for clips of obscure speaking engagements and television appearances, like music lovers searching for concert bootlegs. They were completists, even

interviewing a representative of the clerk of court in St. Lucie County, Florida, about Bourgoin’s claim that he possessed most of the case evidence related to Gerard Schaefer, who was sentenced there in 1973. (Bourgoin had neither the evidence nor the remains that he had bragged about.) This was the inverse of fandom: a passionate connection driven by disappointment rather than by admiration. One man became so consumed by the work that his relationship nearly ended.

In January of 2020, after months of research, the collective began posting a series of damning videos on YouTube. They contended that Bourgoin, a “serial mythomaniac,” had fabricated numerous aspects of his life and career. Eileen, for example, was not Bourgoin’s first wife, as he sometimes claimed (alternatively, he called her his “partner,” “girlfriend,” or “very close friend”): French public records obtained by the group established that his first wife was a Frenchwoman, and that they divorced in 1995. The collective showed that Bourgoin had also given wildly conflicting accounts of the timing, the place, and even the manner of Eileen’s death. Her supposed killer, furthermore, was nowhere to be found. The 4ème Œil had gone through a list of prisoners awaiting execution in California, and there wasn’t a single one who had killed the correct number of people in the time period that Bourgoin had laid out. Nor did they find evidence of a victim who fit the description that Bourgoin had given of Eileen.

Bourgoin’s professional résumé was as dubious as his personal history. By the collective’s reckoning, he had not interviewed seventy-seven serial killers but, rather, more likely only eight or nine. An interview with Charles Manson? Nobody in Manson’s camp had ever heard of it. In setting out his credentials, Bourgoin often claimed that the F.B.I. had invited him to complete two six-month training courses at Quantico with Douglas’s team of profilers. The 4ème Œil contacted Douglas, who, according to the group, replied, “Bourgoin is delusional and an imposter.”

Bourgoin’s lies ran the spectrum from pointless little fictions to brazen fabulation. In some cases, he tried to make himself sound more important than he was—he really did give talks at the Centre National de Formation à la Police Judiciaire, even if he had nothing to do with creating the law-enforcement body’s profiling unit. He really did know the writer James Ellroy, but a picture of the two of them that he had tweeted wasn’t taken “on

vacation”; it was from a crime-fiction and film festival. Bourgoin also often took risks that didn’t comport with their potential payoff, as when he claimed that he had played professional soccer for seven years with the Red Star Football Club before moving to America. Bourgoin was born in 1953, and by 1976, the year in which Eileen was allegedly murdered, he was supposed to have been living in the U.S. “If his career had lasted for 7 years,” the 4ème Œil deduced, “he would have been pro at 16.” (Red Star: “No trace of him.”)

Bourgoin’s story wasn’t so much a house of cards as a total teardown. Some of his lies hardly made sense except in fulfilling his seemingly irresistible desire to become a character in dramas that didn’t concern him. At a talk that he gave to high-school students in 2015, he showed a clip of the interview he had done with the killer Donald Harvey, who was accompanied by his longtime attorney, William Whalen. Bourgoin called Whalen “a very close friend of mine.” He told the students, “Whenever he came to Europe, he stayed at my place in Paris. Unfortunately, last year he committed suicide, and in his suicide note he said that he was ultimately never able to live with the fact that he’d defended a killer like Donald Harvey.” Whalen, Bourgoin concluded, was a “new victim” of Harvey’s. Whalen’s family told me that they had never heard of Bourgoin, that Whalen had never travelled outside North America, and that Whalen was, to the end, a strong believer in the American judicial system and “very proud of defending Donald Harvey.”

The 4ème Œil even composed a psychological sketch similar to the serial-killer profiles with which Bourgoin had titillated the public: “The typical mythomaniac is fragile, subject to a strong dependence on others, and his faculties of imagination are increased tenfold. Whatever his profile, he is often the first victim of his imaginary stories, which he struggles to distinguish from reality.” The collective described Bourgoin as a “*voleur de vie*”—a stealer of life. “We’re by no means accusing Stéphane Bourgoin of being an assassin,” the group wrote. “By *voleur de vie* we mean that he helps himself to pieces of other people’s lives.”

Most cons become harder to keep up the longer they go on, but Bourgoin’s was cleverly self-sustaining. His lies enabled him to gain the very experience that he lacked, and every jailhouse interview doubled as a master class in manipulation. Blagging his way into prisons and police academies,

Bourgoin, in pretending to be a serial-killer expert, at some point actually became one.

The 4ème Œil has extended the right of reply to Bourgoin on several occasions, but he has never responded to the group directly. The closest he came was when he hired a legal adviser who, citing copyright and privacy violations, got the group's videos removed from YouTube. In February of 2020, Bourgoin announced that he was closing his public Facebook page and migrating to a private group. (It has nearly three thousand members, but its administrators blocked me as I was reporting this story.) He was going to be less active on social media, he said, but only because he needed to save all his time and energy for "the most important project of my life," whose parameters he didn't specify. Almost airily, he mentioned that he had been the victim of a "campaign of cyberbullying and hate on social media" and was being targeted by "bitter and jealous" individuals. Their acts, he declared, were akin to those of people who snitched on their neighbors during the collaborationist regime of Marshal Pétain.

Three months later, with pressure on Bourgoin mounting in the French press, he spoke to Émilie Lanez, of *Paris Match*. "STÉPHANE BOURGOIN, SERIAL LIAR?" the headline read. "HE CONFESSES IN MATCH." The article was empathetic, attesting to Bourgoin's "phenomenal knowledge" and the respect that he commanded in the law-enforcement community, and presenting his lies as an unfortunate sideshow to a largely legitimate career. Bourgoin seemed erratic, toggling between tears and offhandedness, lamenting the weight of his lies but then dismissing them as "bullshit" or "jokes."

Even as he unburdened himself, Bourgoin was sowing fresh confusion. The article explained, for instance, that Eileen was actually Susan Bickrest, who was murdered by a serial killer near Daytona Beach in 1975. The article described Bickrest as a barmaid and an aspiring cosmetologist who supplemented her income with sex work. Before her death, she and Bourgoin had seen each other "four or five times," and he had transformed her into his wife because he "didn't want people to know that he'd been helping her out financially." The dates of Bickrest's murder and her killer's arrest didn't align with the Eileen story, however, and even a cursory glance

at photographs of the two women revealed that, except for both having blond hair, they didn't look much alike.

"Day after day, we patiently untangled the threads, trying to distinguish true from false in the jumble of his statements," Lanez wrote. Engaging with Bourgoin's lies, I found, could have a strange generative power, inspiring in those who tried to decipher them the same kind of slippery speculation that they were attempting to resist. Étienne Jallieu, people pointed out, was nearly an anagram for "*J'ai tué Eileen*"—"I killed Eileen," in French. (A more likely derivation is the town of Bourgoin-Jallieu, near Lyon.) A bio of Bourgoin at the end of an old, undated interview claimed that he had sometimes used the alias John Walsh in his adult-film days. John Walsh is a common enough name, but it also happens to be the name of the man who hosted "America's Most Wanted" for many years. Walsh's six-year-old son was murdered in Florida in 1981, and in 2008 Ottis Toole, the Florida drifter with whom Bourgoin joked about barbecue sauce, was posthumously recognized as the child's murderer. Might Bourgoin have refashioned himself as the family member of a victim in imitation of Walsh? Or was his desire for proximity to mass killing born of his work on the films of John Holmes, who was later tried for and acquitted of the so-called Wonderland murders of 1981?

Just when I thought I was gaining some traction on Bourgoin's story, a tiny crack would open up, sending me down a new rabbit hole. The *Paris Match* article, for instance, made the unusually specific claim that Bourgoin, in the seventies, lived on the eleventh floor of an apartment building on 155th Street in New York. I remembered that Bourgoin had once given a similar address in a Facebook post, claiming that he'd "lived in New York at the moment of the Son of Sam's crimes." That address turned out to be slightly different: 155 East Fifty-fifth Street. Curious, I typed it into a database. One of the first hits was a *Times* article from 1976—the year of Son of Sam—describing an apartment at the address as a "midtown house of prostitution."

Xaviera Hollander, a former sex worker who now runs a bed-and-breakfast in Amsterdam, confirmed that 155 East Fifty-fifth Street was "the famous, or should I say infamous, apartment building where I started off as the happy hooker," in the early seventies, but she had no memory of Bourgoin. Hollander added that the building used to be called the "horizontal

whorehouse,” where “every floor had one or two hookers.” Eventually, I found the owner of apartment 11-H, where Bourgoin supposedly lived, and he told me that a man named Beau Buchanan had rented it in 1976. A director and producer of porn movies, Buchanan died in 2020. He easily could have known Bourgoin—but did Bourgoin take Buchanan’s address and make it his own, or had he really lived there?

It seemed a reasonable guess, given the period fashions and the professional composition, that the photograph of Bourgoin and the woman he had identified as Eileen had been taken on one of the movie sets he worked on in the seventies. The 4ème Œil felt reasonably sure that Eileen was Dominique Saint Claire, a well-known adult-film actress of the era. A porn expert I contacted suggested, independently, that Eileen might be Saint Claire, but, looking at the pictures of Saint Claire that were available online, I wasn’t convinced. (My attempts to contact Saint Claire were unsuccessful.)

I watched a head-spinning selection of films from the era and called a number of former actors—one was a maker of traditional and erotic chocolates—searching for some hint of Eileen. The movies that Bourgoin wrote are almost impossible to get ahold of, but Jill C. Nelson, a biographer of John Holmes, agreed to mail me a DVD of “Extreme Close-Up” from her personal collection. It’s a love-triangle story in which, as the DVD’s jacket copy notes, an American writer “is led into a world of European sexual delights where fantasy merges with reality.” I watched the movie attentively—at one point pausing an open-mouthed-orgasm scene to search for a snaggletooth—but none of the women resembled the one in Bourgoin’s photograph.

In early March, I called Bourgoin from a street corner in a rural village on France’s southwest coast, near where he now lives. I wasn’t expecting him to answer; I had tried to contact him before, without much luck. But, to my surprise, he picked up and quickly furnished his address. Several miles down the road, I found him standing in funky green shoes outside a modest house with an orange tiled roof and voile curtains with teapot appliqués and gingham trim.

Bourgoin invited me inside. I noticed, as he made coffee, that his knife rack was shaped like a human body, stuck through with blades at various points:

forehead, heart, groin. Eventually, we sat down at a small table in the sunroom. He seemed unruffled by my unannounced visit, almost as though he'd been waiting for someone to show up.



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

A person who was once close to Bourgoin told me that he was an “excellent actor” and “extremely convincing, because, when he lies, he believes it very strongly, and so you believe it, too.” At the table, though, Bourgoin was diffident. He didn’t seem to be putting much effort into making me—or, possibly, himself—believe what he said. Or maybe he believed it so deeply that the delivery was no longer relevant. When I asked how many killers he had actually interviewed, he replied, in English, “It depends. Each time I was going to a jail, I asked to meet serial killers other than the ones I was authorized to film or interview. So sometimes at Florida State Prison I met in the courtyard during the promenade—I don’t know, two? five?—other serial killers.” He was just as evasive on other subjects. I asked him about the prank that he played on Dahina Sy. “It was a fake spider,” he said, as though that explained everything. (He later claimed that he was unaware of Sy’s arachnophobia.) When I brought up the rings that Alice, his father’s former wife, had given him, he said that he had called to thank her the next time he was in New York.

His instinct, in tense moments, was to show me his collections: piles of dusty tabloids, stacks of pulp fiction, an attic full of DVDs, desks and dressers and wardrobes containing boxes of old notebooks in which he had dutifully listed and rated, in a prim, upright hand, every film he'd seen. When I asked about the apartment at 155 East Fifty-fifth Street, he produced three large envelopes, postmarked in the early fall of 1975 and sent to "Stéphane Bourgoin, A.R.T. Films" at that address. A.R.T., he said, was a distribution company that had belonged to a friend of his, Beau Buchanan. The envelopes didn't shed much light on Bourgoin's doings in seventies New York, but for him such objects seemed almost equivalent to experiences.

In an article called "How I Was Bamboozled by Stéphane Bourgoin," the Swiss journalist Anna Lietti examined her decision to write a mostly positive article about Bourgoin, despite her discomfort with his "overly smooth" presentation. "I was disappointed by the superficiality of my interlocutor and the lack of depth of his remarks," Lietti, describing him as a sort of human reference book, wrote. "He lined up facts, dates, details, without offering a perspective, an original key to understanding these monsters to which he devoted his life." In his countryside house, Bourgoin seemed a sad figure—a collector of trivia and paraphernalia, a man who just as easily could have spent decades amassing esoteric toys or obsessing over cryptocurrency, rather than living off the misfortunes of others. It was as though he thought that gathering enough props would make him a protagonist.

"I'm sorry that I lied and exaggerated things," Bourgoin told me, at one point. "But I never raped or killed anybody."

I asked what lies he was apologizing for.

"All the lies," he said. But, he added, "there was mostly one important lie that I would do again."

Bourgoin was referring to the Eileen story—the foundational lie upon which he had constructed his career. He admitted that he had invented her name, and the location of the murder. But, he insisted, he had really had a girlfriend who was murdered by a serial killer. "It was just a young girl that I met three

times that I had sex with,” he said. Later, he was more explicit: “I invented that story because I was afraid that people would think that . . . I paid for a prostitute.”

Bourgoin didn’t want to give the woman’s name, even if I promised not to publish it. I asked if he could at least give me the identity of the woman in the photograph, but he claimed not to remember. “I think she was Spanish!” he added later.

The only time Bourgoin truly came alive was when he talked about the anonymous collective that had brought him down. We stood in his office, surrounded by fright masks and first editions, and he said that he was “quite happy it came out, but not the way that the 4ème Œil did it.” He asked me if I’d looked into the group’s membership. “You must have done some research on the people who accused me,” he said, suggesting that I get to work on a counter-investigation of his investigators.

Claude-Marie Dugué found out that her brother had been lying to her for half a century when the *Paris Match* article came out. She had never suspected it, but the news didn’t shock her. “Nothing surprises me in my family,” she said. Nor was she offended, on a personal level, by the breach of trust. “He didn’t really deceive me,” she said. “He let me into his world.”

Dugué’s son, Julien Cuny, told me that one quote from the article jumped out at him. “*Parfois, je me fais des films dans ma tête. J’ai toujours voulu qu’on m’aime,*” it read. “Sometimes I make films in my head. I’ve always wanted to be loved.” Cuny is an accomplished tech executive in Montreal, but he has always been daunted by his family’s distinction. To him, Bourgoin’s words were an almost inevitable response to an overwhelming mythology, “a phantasmagoric picture of distant family members (you almost never meet) who are always on an adventure somewhere.”

The first time Dugué and I exchanged e-mails, she told me something that I wasn’t expecting: she was the product of an extramarital relationship between Jean Bourgoin and her mother, Béatrice Pourchasse, as was her sister, who was born thirteen months before her. The girls lived with their mother in the Fourth Arrondissement. Jean Bourgoin lived with his family—Franziska and Stéphane—across town. Jean organized his parallel lives

strictly, keeping them “watertight,” Dugué recalled, but she always felt loved by her father, who “followed and protected his liaison with my mother until the end,” providing money for the family, keeping track of the girls’ studies, and seeing them regularly. Even if he didn’t live with them, Dugué said, she felt immense pride “to be the daughter of such a man.”

One day, Dugué decided that she wanted to meet her younger brother. She was in her early twenties, and had known about him her entire life. He was maybe sixteen, a high schooler, and had no idea that she existed. “I posted myself discreetly inside the building where he lived, waiting for his return from the Lycée Carnot,” Dugué recalled. When he came home, she introduced herself: his secret sister. “He hardly believed me,” Dugué remembered. Nonetheless, they immediately got along. She remembered Bourgoin as a shy and serious boy with round glasses, adrift in a world of extravagantly accomplished adults. “How must Stéphane have perceived himself next to these two exceptional parents, crushed by so much strength and power?” she said. “He was happy to discover all at once that he had two sisters, and we started to communicate amongst ourselves.” They sent long letters between their father’s two households, written in violet ink.

The incident may have been Bourgoin’s initiation into the power of secret lives. “Back to my childhood I felt I didn’t do enough compared to my parents,” Bourgoin told me. “So I had always an inferiority complex.” Cuny echoed the sentiment. “I decided very early on that having a normal life means boring, and that would be the most horrible thing that could happen to me,” he told me. “My bet is Stéphane would prefer this outcome to being a local accountant who never left town.”

In “My Conversations with Killers,” Bourgoin wrote, “The immense majority of serial killers are inveterate liars from a very young age. Isolated, marginalized in their lives, they take refuge in the imaginary to construct a personality, far from the mediocre reality of their existence.” “*Parfois, je me fais des films dans ma tête. J’ai toujours voulu qu’on m’aime,*” Bourgoin said, as though he were performing a voice-over for his own life. “Sometimes I make films in my head. I’ve always wanted to be loved.” ♦

# Fiction

- “The Pub with No Beer”

By [Kevin Barry](#)

## Content

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

*Audio:* Kevin Barry reads.

He hadn't noticed the voices at first. In the endless stretch of the afternoon he entered the pub through the side door with a soft hushed aspect as if broaching a place of burial. It was late March by now, the clocks about to change, and the first heat of the year was intimated when he raised the blinds a few inches to allow the sunlight through. He did so as to show the place up. The effect of the light was to insinuate life. The motes of dust in the sunbeams were life. He opened the windows a fraction to freshen the air and looked out—

The bay was filling on a neap tide and the Stags of Broadhaven thrust at the clear white skies in raucous appeal.

"Softly, softly, turn the wheel softly," Michael Batt said. "Until I'm blue in the face I'm telling that boy to turn the wheel soft but will he listen to me? In my sweet hole he will. Boy took down eejitry from the mother's side. He sits in behind that wheel and it's like he's wrestling a fucken gorilla."

[Kevin Barry on ghost stories and Irish pubs.](#)

The boy was long since raised and driving temperately; long dead was Michael Batt, the father. But the corner stool at the bar was still vaguely Batt's terrain. At an L to it sat six companion stools to face the optics and the hung spirits arranged beyond the row of taps. The Cerberian taps, his own father had called them; for Cerberus, he would curtly explain, he who had guarded the gates of Hell. At the other end of the bar was the curtained hatch to the back kitchen, then the sorrowful passageway to the jacks. He smiled at Michael Batt's words, the air of long-sufferance that was hard practiced for effect, the lines that were rehearsed as Batt walked the shore road toward the lights of the pub all those lost evenings ago.

He stepped behind the bar and placed his hands upon it lightly and looked out to the room and moved his eyes slowly left and then slowly right across

the empty stage of it.

“Now,” he said.

He took up the cloth and dampened it in the sink and ran it along the bar top. He brought up a quiet shine. The intention of the polishing was to approximate soft labor. Daily the bar top was polished to show its grain and the nicks and scratches of its great age. The pub had been his father’s for the long shift of four decades. His father in turn had taken it from a bachelor uncle. For three generations behind this bar much the same set of thick, knitted eyebrows had insisted on a semblance, at least, of decorum. The sunlight crept by slow inches across the floor. It was the moment, in more usual times, of the primary school’s letting out and he missed the high excited chatter from the yard across the way. Neither loudness nor drunkenness in this barroom had ever been tolerated.

“There is such a thing as a thoughtful pub,” his father had always maintained.

He rinsed out the cloth and left it by the sink and dipped beneath the bar and went down the passageway to the jacks. He stopped halfways along and put a palm to the wall to steady himself. A rising feeling in the lungs was endured, a kind of maritime swell—he believed it to be a species of panic, but it passed over again as quickly, as quickly as the clouds off the North Atlantic passed. His phone pinged and he squinted to read a text—he spent half a minute then tapping a careful reply to a worried aunt in the family WhatsApp group.

Would she ever leave the house again?

And would she ever get off the fucking Internet?

The tread of his dependable step the family listened for always—this was increasingly a burden to him.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

[Listen to Kevin Barry read “The Pub with No Beer.”](#)

"It could be one of forty-two things that's wrong with me," Frank Waught half whispered to a pint of Smithwick's. "It could be the stomach acid. It could be the pollen. It could be worse than either. And of course it could be just the fear."

Waught had lived until he was two days shy of ninety. He had been some-and-fifty years dying. Waught had been a man for the low tables rather than a barside perch—an antisocial man who needed people. From the passageway, he looked back now toward the barroom, toward the lost voices. The five empty tables were lit in the afternoon glare. Continuing on, he entered with an apologetic air the realm of the Ladies'. He opened the window above the sink and sprayed the one toilet with Dettol. Bringing his broad face close to the mirror, he breathed slowly on it to make a fog, and as the cloud slowly dissipated it showed the weary stare of his aging, greenish eyes. The little map lines of bloodshot. The twist of the nose, a Frenchman's nose. The foolish pride; the ageless vanity. The extravagant eyebrows of a disgraced Christian Brother. He closed his eyes. A long sensuous parade of lips had been painted in this mirror.

"That particular dog comes at me one more time and it's getting the quare end of the stick," Alice Nealon said. "Every night, half gone seven, on the one walk I can feckin' muster, the bastard come at me, him with the long face out of the Sullivan yard. Eejit dog! Eejit dog come lollopin'? Next time I'll open the ignorant face on him."

Always she began her evening with a decorous half pint of stout; it was followed by another; then, after a pause for deliberation, she would announce in a startled voice that she would nearly chance a full one. Three more would follow before the double Jameson at eleven that would send her to the door rosy-faced and muttering darkly against the dogs of the vicinity.

He left the Ladies' and entered the Gents' and never in all his time had it smelt more passable. He opened the window anyhow. He ran the taps. He flushed the toilet. He took the rubber gloves from his back pocket and changed the tablets in the urinal. He pissed on the fresh ones for good luck and ritual and laughed to himself gently. He laughed to himself frequently these times. There was a strange hilarity to the predicament. He had been closed now for almost four hundred days.

As he re-entered the barroom, three slow knocks sounded on the front door, followed by two rapid ones, as if a code were being employed. He went to the window and looked under the blind and saw a blocky man in late middle age faced to consider the bay, the Stags, the equinoctial sky. He did not recognize the man but his mood turned quickly sombre as he moved to the front door. An experienced publican is an educated reader of mood's nuance. It wasn't Death, by any chance, that stood there?

As he opened the door the man turned to him with an owl's incredulous eyes and spoke lowly to inquire—

“There's a cuckoo, hey?”

“Oh, there is,” he said. “In the bushes beyond the schoolyard. He'd let you know all about himself.”

“Loud all right, a throttle on him. Would you sell me a pint?”

“I can't do that.”

The man let his jaw drop in an exaggerated, vaudevillian way.

“Are you not allowed to sell takeout?”

“Some are doing so in the towns. I'm not. I have no stock at all.”

“Hard aul' times all right. I noticed the window was open. Thought I'd chance it.”

“There's no harm in that.”

“You wouldn't recognize me, I suppose?”

“No, but I'm trying to place you.”

It was true that he was. The stranger was fastidiously keeping the two-metre distance and he had to narrow his glance against the sunshine to make him out. The face had an antique bearing; it was somehow medieval. The clear,

hard gleam in the eyes—these were eyes that might seek a quick killing. But he spoke pleasantly enough.

“I grew up not far from here,” he said.

Age receded from the stranger’s face then to allow an O’Casey be made out. A poor family from a sad stretch of the shore road they had been. One of those families that had broken up and trickled away in all directions. They’d left a wound of a house behind them. The gaping maw of the blank doorway had stood on the shore road for years as invitation to the miseries banked within. It must have been three decades since the family had lived there. Hadn’t there been a story about the father gone mad?

“Are you an O’Casey?” he asked.

The man smiled broadly and parted his lips to show a proud battalion of remade teeth.

“You’d be a long time stepping out from your own shade,” he said, confirming the speculation.

The afternoon conspired with its languors. The heron stood beyond time on the wrack-encrusted rock. The O’Casey peered across his shoulder, into the gloom of the barroom.

“I’d take a whiskey?” he tried.

“I suppose if I don’t charge you for it.”

He turned from the doorway and crossed the floor of the barroom—his breath was coming more thickly now. He dipped beneath the bar and polished a whiskey glass that did not require polishing and set it beneath the optic to fill a single measure of Powers. He was watched all the while and smilingly from the doorway.

“I’ve no ice even,” he called out. “A drop of water?”

“I don’t take it.”

He brought the drink and placed it in the stranger's hand.

"I don't remember which one you were," he said. "There were a few of ye, I think?"

"There were eight of us for children," O'Casey replied. "Your father would have put mine out of this place more than once."

"Is that right?"

The man turned his face bayward again and bore down on the slow years, the decades. He sipped at the Powers and made no comment on it. The world had grown so quiet in this season of eeriness. Down the long solitude of the shore road, across the new fresh green of the fields, upon the clear and boatless bay, there was not a soul otherwise to be seen.

"One night my father came home from this place trembling," O'Casey said. "I remember he sat looking into the fire and I could tell that he could hardly breathe."

Keeping his eyes fixed on the bay, letting them fill up with its springtime radiance, O'Casey dredged from the past a woman's voice, his mother's, and it was perfectly got—

"What's wrong with you, Joe? Wrong with you, for the love of God? Did he say something?"

"My mother worried over him all the time," O'Casey said. "His nerves weren't set right. He had what she called his spells."

"I'm sorry. I don't recall any . . ."

"Ah, you wouldn't. You wouldn't recall any of it. You'd have been away at the boarding school."

The greatest mystery is how others perceive us. The pub had been a respectable premises always and he could not have imagined that the family was other than well regarded. But he realized, too, that the charge of snobbery is often an astonishment to those so arraigned.

O'Casey finished the whiskey quickly and held out his hand to offer the empty glass but as he reached for it O'Casey withdrew it again, as if playfully, and he did not smile. He just set it down on the stoop by his feet and turned and walked away.

He reentered the pub and locked the door. He sat at a low table in the guise, briefly, of a customer. He looked around the bar for a slow minute. No singsongs; no recitals; no displays of romantic affection. This had been a house that favored schoolmasters, respectable farmers, country solicitors. The meagreness of his world closed in. In such a quietness all was amplified. The veils slip away; the edifice itself might crumble. In late March of the year the light was rawly new and revealing.

"He'd mind a mouse for you at the mart in Ballina," Tim Godfrey said. "A careful man, he would not be found wanting. Hard enough tack to have a father the like of that?"

He must concede that it had been. It was many years since Godfrey had haunted the premises, had across the low tables roamed a humorous gaze. Godfrey had been a Church of Ireland farmer from the Ox Mountains transplanted by a peculiar marriage to the North Mayo plain—from beyond the place himself, he could see it more clearly. True enough that his father had been a careful man. Growing up in the house of such a man you could hear yourself thinking. Without a single word being said you could sense that you were being measured for what tasks might be presented. The running of the pub was at slow length presented.

He rose and went behind the bar and set a glass beneath the optic and poured himself a large Bushmills and diluted it with three or four teardrops of tap water. He drank it in a swoop and felt the slow fire descend into his belly. It was years since he had taken a spirit. The charge of its heat stirred him powerfully. He had felt the intensity of anger in youth. He had not wanted this place but had allowed himself to be shaped to it. There was a resentment he had never quite named before. He shook his head against this feeling and came out from behind the bar and went to the window and raised the blind another fraction and saw the expanse of the bay and the Stags of Broadhaven looming and the cormorant arranged gothically on the black glister of its rock. Time could not be measured in the usual ways. The markers of day and

evening had fallen into disuse. Subtracted from his routines he was no longer the full equation of himself. These afternoon visits to the pub were to simulate routine but now they were failing. They were filling increasingly with the old lost voices. He went to the door and opened it and leaned down to take the whiskey glass from the stoop where O'Casey had left it but there was no glass there. He closed the door and locked it again. He sat at a low table. The sun was moving without regard and rounded the building and suddenly its light filled the kitchen out back.

He felt drawn to the light. He remained at the table. Voices swam around him, one entered the other's, Fred Coakley's, Andrew Mac's, Tess Hennebry's—

“I've only two speeds of mood. Easygoing, ten mile an hour, or a hundred and fifty, I lose the rag altogether. I goes from nought to Hiroshima. What do be fucken wrong with me?”

“Would I eat? I don't know would I eat. Would you throw on a sandwich for me anyhow? I'm not sayin' I'd eat it. Though it might steady the ship a small while.”

“Your father should have been a priest. But didn't he have a brother one already? Two in the family would be kinda going to town on it.”

He was alone with the voices. He wanted to be away from them. He wanted to travel past himself and across the fields of the bay and beyond the horizon and into the equinox, into the light.

Rising and gauntly now he crossed the barroom floor. He went under the bar and into the kitchen. The kitchen always had been the sanctuary of the house. Draw the curtain and it was removed from the public view. Once in this room he had seen his father weeping. Time unspooled, unreeled. Angered by a customer, thrown perhaps by an intrusive comment, riled by some perceived slight, his father had withdrawn to this room and silently wept. To be a publican was a lifelong performance.

“People need steadiness,” his father said. “They want to look into the same expression on your face always. You've to arrange your misfortunate face

for them.”

The look his father arranged for the barroom was tactful, indeed almost priestly—he had offered a place of calm and reprieve, or at least such was his intention. The sunlight that came through the kitchen threw its shabbiness now into awful relief. He closed his eyes against the sight of it. He tried to imagine another life but could not. From the bar, a voice made imitation of the stuttering caller at the Ballina mart offering some dubious Charolais—

“F-four forty, f-four forty, all the w-way home. . . . Have ye n-nothin’ about ye at all? F-four forty once. . . . Have it. . . . F-four fifty?”

As the men laughed in response to the soft mockery, he was again a small boy. He sat on the bar counter with his legs dangling and a glass of Coke at his elbow, a packet of Taytos ripped open beside it. Perhaps he was five or six years old. The men were back from the mart. His father poured pints of stout until they were a third shy of the brim and lined them on the counter to settle for a little more than a minute before finishing them with a wristy flourish. The voices in the room were in easy conspiracy and had great warmth. The mart must have gone well. He was spoilt and fussed over as the son of the place. An old man told him he was to be fattened for the mart himself, to see what he would fetch. He knew already how to slap away and mock the comment—

“Get up the road, Gertie,” he said.

The peat fumes and the stout opened the men’s mouths for them. The Mayo team was a disgrace. There were fellas togging out who had drank the winter. The waft of Carrolls cigarettes and Majors. Pint bottles were taken down from the shelf for those who objected to the gassiness of the draught. Newspapers were folded over and the Deaths column squinted at with sour interest. He knew that his father spoke to God in the night. Once he had heard his father whisper so in the night. His father told God that he was very proud of him and of all his godly works. A high tide sounded beyond, roughly and unseen, in heavy booms and deep answering echoes, and as the wind roared to his boy’s mind the Stags were baying at the sky. Such was his world then. He was the prince of the room and invulnerable.

He could not himself speak to God. He stepped from the kitchen and into the barroom and wrung out the cloth in the sink. The voices in the bar of more recent times had been an affront to him. They offered themselves baldly as affront; their bodies were arranged barward in aspects of affront. The voices of recent times, he felt, were colored by avarice and vulgarity. He had come to that unfortunate age when he believed the young to be savages. He closed the windows and drew down the blinds against what light the March evening had mustered. Age wore down on him. The voices faded out and left nothing at all behind. He might sell the fucking place yet.

He left through the side door to walk by the water for a while. He could never sell to the price you'd get for it. There was barely a ripple on the bay. There were no people anywhere to be seen. There was across the slate-gray water a sensation of great silence and now somehow of peace. The year again turned on its slow wheel. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

## L.A. Postcard

- Tinx's Field Guide for Rich Moms and Bad Boyfriends

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

A few months ago, the C.E.O. of Poggio Labs, a San Francisco software company, sounded an alarm. “If you’re a straight guy aged 25 to 35,” he tweeted, women are judging you “based on a set of standards created by a person named tinx.” The arbiter’s full name is Christina Najjar; as a teenager she adopted the name Tinx, which is how her nearly two million social-media followers know her. “They’re mostly women,” she said the other day. She wore a green sweatshirt, gray leggings, and cantaloupe-colored wrist weights. “They have disposable income and want to know how to spend it. They want to have margaritas and wake up at 6 A.M. and go to a workout. They *don’t* want to be dicked around by fuck boys.”



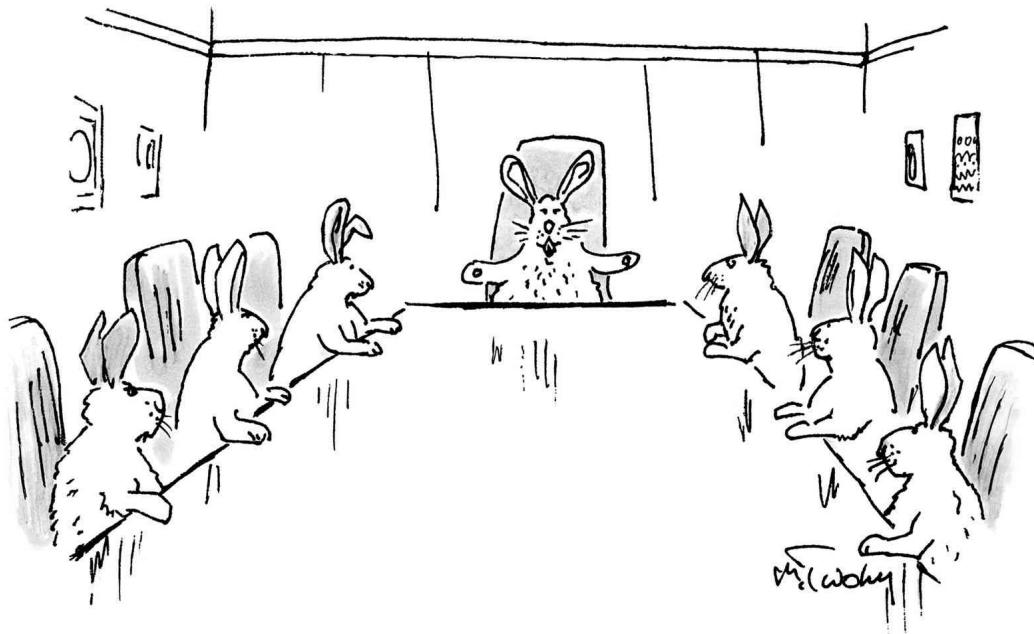
A former freelance writer, Najjar, who is thirty-one, joined TikTok in 2020. “I was, like, I don’t give a shit anymore,” she said. “I’m hungover and alone. I’m going to make some TikToks, because otherwise my only interaction will be with my Amazon devices.” She satirized alternative-milk adherents, “basic” New York millennials, and rich moms, describing how they might acclimate to various regions. (Brooklyn: “You’re going to need something subtle, like a \$15 million townhouse in Park Slope.” Upper East Side: “Get a little crusty white dog that’s not that cute. Name it Tabitha.” Beverly Hills: “Oddly enough, a lot of people in Beverly Hills have absolutely no taste . . . a few lion statues out front never hurt.”)

“It’s half satire, half aspirational,” she said, setting off on her daily “rich-mom walk” through Beverly Hills, where she lives. “Everybody hates the rich mom, the archetypal anal woman who doesn’t eat carbs and has the five-thousand-dollar stroller, but they’ll also say, ‘Ooh, I go to the same coffee shop as her.’ It’s the last group of people that you can safely poke fun at.”

Najjar grew up in London, the daughter of an expat corporate lawyer, and attended Stanford and Parsons. “I used to take pictures of my outfits and describe them in funny ways, come up with these rich-mom characters,” she said. “It started in grad school, when all my friends had these cool, high-powered jobs and I was crying in a coffee shop in Tribeca, trying to write a paper.”

Every Monday and Thursday, she invites her Instagram followers to “Ask Me Anything,” addressing such topics as how to deal with dating burnout (“Take a break,” but “set a time limit”), which Nobu is the best Nobu (“Malibu”), and what to do when you see your ex for the first time after breaking up (“Shove them into a bush”). Najjar types each answer in a bold, sans-serif font and posts it on her Instagram account.

“I took a few psych classes at Stanford, but nothing serious,” she said. (She majored in English, which, she has said, taught her “how to bullshit.”) She added, “My whole ethos is, if you have a roomful of women and someone has a problem, someone in that room has the answer. It’s about sharing information.” She went on, “If I can save a girl three weeks of feeling crummy about a fuck boy she’s dating, or if I can give someone advice so they don’t waste money on a face product, that’s a win.”



*"Your Easter bonuses are hidden throughout corporate headquarters."*  
Cartoon by Mike Twohy

At a coffee shop, Najjar ordered an iced Americano and prepared to address the day's A.M.A. "I'll get upwards of ten thousand questions within twenty-four hours," she said. On her phone screen was a grid of pink squares, digital Post-its: "Can I ask someone on a same-day date?" "Any advice for apartment hunting?" "Best chicken fingers in L.A.?" "I'm gonna answer that one," she said, tapping her screen, "because the answer is Delilah"—a West Hollywood club frequented by Drake—"obviously."

"Who were your celeb childhood/teenage crushes?" Vin Diesel. I'm just warming up with light ones right now," she said, running a Google Image search for Diesel. "You've gotta add a photo," she explained. Posted. Back to the questions: "How to get over job rejection?" "How to learn to love yourself?"

"Let me think about this one," she said, biting her lip. "Sometimes I dictate, because the font gets so small." Seven minutes later, she posted a paragraph about journaling, gratitude lists, and doing more of what you love. "I always try to couple woo-woo with practical."

A man approached. "Tinx? I met you at the Grove a while ago, when I was with my girlfriend—well, ex-girlfriend."

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” Najjar said.

“No worries.” He worked at a dentist’s office. “We handle a lot of celebrity clientele,” he said. “I’d love to hook you up.”

“You’re so sweet,” Najjar said.

“I low-key want to get you in the office just to make my ex jealous,” he said. Najjar laughed uncomfortably. “I actually want to get her jealous right now.”

The dental guy scooted next to her for a selfie and dropped a business card. “Let’s see,” Tinx said, resuming scrolling: “ ‘Thoughts on texting the guy and not responding to his response?’

“We waste so much time on games,” she said. “You have to just think, like, Why am I playing this game? More often than not, it’s ego.” ♦

# Notebook

- [The Literature of Cabin Fever](#)

By [Ian Frazier](#)

## Content

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

On October 31, 2018, I read a story in the *New York Post* about a Russian scientist who stabbed another Russian scientist at a research station in Antarctica. Crime is uncommon on that continent, but what made this one even more unusual, according to the *Post*, was that the one scientist, Sergei Savitsky, had attacked the other, Oleg Beloguzov, for giving away the endings of books. At the isolated station, run by Russia's Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute, the two men had been together for many months. Savitsky was reading books from the library to pass the time, and Beloguzov kept telling him the endings; finally, Savitsky snapped and stabbed Beloguzov in the chest with a kitchen knife. Beloguzov was flown to a hospital in Chile, where he recovered. Authorities brought Savitsky to St. Petersburg, arrested him, and charged him with attempted murder.

Note the date: October, 2018. The story went around the globe instantly. Dozens of news outlets picked it up. The *Post* cited, as its source, a story in the *Sun*, the British tabloid. Checking online, including on Russian sites, I could find no solid source for the detail about Beloguzov giving away the endings of books. The *Sun*'s source was unnamed. A stabbing did seem to have occurred at Bellingshausen Station. The incident was blamed on alcohol. A Russian judge later dismissed the case against Savitsky, who had no previous record.

In retrospect, the facts of the case are less important than the global shiver of the story itself. The newsgathering business is connected to the world's unconscious and also to surface reality. With the story of Savitsky and Beloguzov, everyday news coverage slipped into prophetic mode. *Covid* would not appear for another fourteen months, but the planet somehow knew it was heading for a period of lockdown that would drive people crazy. Savitsky and Beloguzov were early victims of a soon-to-be-global complaint waiting up ahead, in 2020. Entwined today with *Covid* is the age-old mental malady called cabin fever.

A man whose real name nobody knows showed up in Canada's Northwest Territories in the summer of 1931 and built a cabin on the Rat River, a tributary of the Peel, deep in the bush. His not having acquired a trapping license from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Fort McPherson seemed strange, because people who lived out where he did mostly trapped furs for income. That winter, Native people in the region complained that he was disturbing their traps, and four Mounties journeyed the eighty miles to his cabin by dogsled to investigate. He shot one of them through the door and later escaped, on foot and on snowshoes, eluding capture for more than a month, crossing a range of mountains and covering maybe a hundred miles in the middle of winter. He killed one Mountie when a group of them briefly caught up with him, and finally died in a shoot-out after a bush pilot who had been tracking him from the air radioed his location to pursuers.

The man called himself Albert Johnson, but that probably wasn't his name, and nobody knows where he came from. He is sometimes called the Mad Trapper of Rat River. Books and movies have told his story and looked into the mystery, but it remains unsolved. Before the chase began, the Mounties dynamited his cabin, so he couldn't go back to it. Not much dynamite was required, because the cabin was eight feet wide by ten feet long. The Mad Trapper's behavior indicates a case of cabin fever, and an eight-by-ten-foot cabin in the remote Canadian Northwest would be a good place to get it. During *Covid*, people have used the term "cabin fever" to refer to their going stir-crazy in their apartments. But technically, to catch genuine cabin fever, you should be in a cabin. Lacking that, you need a huge amount of unoccupied landscape all around you, like what the Russian scientists had in the Antarctic. (Or seascape—you can also catch it in the cabin of a boat.)

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I think about Albert Johnson because sometimes I sympathize with his antisociability (but not his violence). In my early thirties, forty years ago, I moved from New York to an A-frame cabin in the woods in northwest Montana. For the first eleven months, I lived there by myself. I walked on old logging roads and up and down foothills and fished for small brook trout in marshy ponds. I tried to write a novel. I did not know one person in the entire state. My social life consisted of calling friends in other parts of the country on the phone. I didn't like it that my phone was on a party line. The

neighbors, who lived in bush cabins not nearby, and whom I had not met, would pick up and need to use the phone, and I would have to hang up. So I took to making my calls early in the morning or late at night.

A friend who lived in Manhattan had a phone number that happened to be one digit different from the number for a phone-sex line, a coincidence that annoyed him. Guys who hoped for a conversation at two-fifty a minute used to misdial his number at all hours. After a while my friend developed a strategy of putting the callers through a lot of paperwork. He told them that before he could connect them he had to fill out a form. He asked for their name, date of birth, height, weight, occupation, etc. Then he would move on to "So what kind of car do you drive?" and get into the details of that—year, model, engine size. Finally, becoming bored, he would hang up. I thought I would call and pretend to be a phone-sex caller, and when he started to put me through the rigmarole I would turn the tables somehow.

My cabin was about twenty feet by fifteen—bigger than the Mad Trapper's but not big. The phone, affixed to the central supporting beam, which was a peeled and varnished log, had an extra-long cord that could reach wall to wall. I dialled my friend's number. No answer. I figured he must be away. It was about 4 a.m. in New York, 2 a.m. in Montana. I kept the phone to my ear while I poured myself another drink, built up the fire, made something to eat. The phone rang and rang. I liked to think of it sitting there, ringing, all by itself in that empty apartment twenty-four hundred miles away. I must have let it ring for forty minutes. Suddenly my friend picked up, in no mood to parley. "O.K., shithead!" he said.

He had been asleep and hadn't wanted to climb down from his loft bed and deal with the phone, so he put a pillow over his head. Eventually, the ringing got to him. We then talked about one subject and another, the night wore on, and when I hung up it was starting to get light.

I didn't notice what a weird thing that was for me to do. What happens with cabin fever is that you become weird and don't know it. Fortunately, my friend did not hold it against me. Next to the cabin I had a woodpile of tamarack logs, with a galvanized roof overhead to keep them dry. I used to set an empty quart Coors beer bottle on a log, about head-high, and then walk fifteen paces, turn, and throw a stone at the bottle as hard as I could.

About ninety-seven per cent of the time I missed, but it was satisfying when I didn't—the explosion of amber glass—as if I'd just won a classic old-time duel. I had to stop when I realized I was redistributing the stones from the driveway to the woodshed.

A big excursion for me was to drive to the town of Kalispell, some twenty miles away. I was writing on a brand of paper called Potlatch. Such an interesting name for copy paper—Potlatch. I ran out of my first ream of it, and when I was buying more at an office-supply store in Kalispell I told the salesperson about potlatch—how it was a Native American word that meant a kind of party in which a chief or even just an ordinary person gave away stuff to other members of the tribe. “Giveaway” is a rough translation of the word into English, I told the salesperson. The potlatch was a system for showing status and spreading the wealth downward, I said. As I looked at the reaction on the salesperson's face, it sank in that I was not in a normal frame of mind.

My then ex-girlfriend was living in Sarasota, Florida, and we got back in touch. She had no phone and made calls from a pay phone near her apartment. I wrote the number of the pay phone on the beam next to my phone. One afternoon, I decided to fly down to Sarasota and propose that we get married. I picked up my phone to let her know I was on my way, and dialled the number of the pay phone. It was half a block from her apartment, but she happened to be walking by at that exact moment. She heard it ringing and answered it. (Later, when our kids were small, we took them to Sarasota to see that pay phone, and they couldn't have cared less.) We were married in the town of Ferndale, Montana, and rented a bigger house, on the side of a mountain, next to the boundary of a national forest.

That house had begun as a cabin, or a dugout. The man who owned it could afford to finish only the basement at first, so he had dug into the side of the mountain and made five rooms, and he and his wife and two kids lived there until he could afford to do the rest. By the time we moved in, the original basement dwelling was vestigial and empty, and we lived above it, on the first floor. The woods came right up to the house. The owner had once shot a black bear, legally, from a side door. In that part of Montana, you can go for months without seeing the sun. By midwinter, the snow berm alongside the gravel road up to our driveway was taller than I was. On the main road,

several miles from our house, the snow berm had deer feet and other body parts sticking out of it. Deer got run over all the time on that road, and sometimes the plows just scooped them up with the snow.



*With modern cabin fever, the computer makes you feel both less lonely and lonelier.*

The road ran through the valley of the Swan River. Intersections along it were few. At one of them, an A-frame bar called the Junction provided the only place to stop for miles. It had a big gravel parking lot, in which local tough customers got into scrapes. There were shootings nearby. One gray winter day my wife and I could not stand another minute up there on the side of the mountain, and we drove down to the Junction to get a drink. Bars are not meant to be seen by daylight. The rustic, bare-wood décor looked so defeated in the dreary afternoon. I ordered a Jack Daniel's and a beer, and my wife ordered a Scotch. After another round or two I asked the barmaid how business was. "Not great," she said. "Just a few cabin-fever drunks." ("Like you," she did not say out loud.)

Passed down to me through my family is a letter written by my four-greats grandmother Sally DeForest Benedict, whose husband, Platt Benedict, built one of the first permanent dwellings in the town of Norwalk, Ohio. In the letter she talks about being terrified that Indians would attack one night when she was by herself with her children. She begins her story, "Two miles from any neighbor, our little cabin stood . . ." No attack occurred, and to me

it seems that she didn't have reason to be so worried. An Indian had stopped by the cabin, drunk but not unamiable, looking for her husband. The visitor then slept for a while in front of the fire, woke up sober, and left. She thought he would return with his brothers and kill them all: "The riches of a Kingdom would not repay me for another such night of anxiety." Cabins out in the woods breed that type of scary thought. You start seeing things out of the corner of your eye.

She and her husband were Episcopalians—starchy folks from Danbury, Connecticut, even if at first they and their children slept on the cabin's dirt floor. From what little I know of them, the family did not go in for tent-meeting religious revivals. (Episcopalians are sometimes called "the Frozen Chosen.") Frontier people were more likely to belong to the Methodists, the Baptists, the Disciples of Christ, and other even livelier persuasions. At the time, the upsurge of religious enthusiasm called the Second Great Awakening was sweeping across the frontier like a crowd doing the wave at a baseball game. Families that had been by themselves for months on end, trying to make a go of little farms in the woods, convened once or twice a year at tent-meeting religious revivals, or camp meetings. Sometimes many thousands attended these gatherings, which were themselves deep in the woods. At the camp meeting you could let out all that pent-up cabin fever.

The entire assembly sometimes seemed to lose its mind. Talking in tongues was just the start. When the preachers (often there was more than one) summoned the spirit, row upon row of people flung themselves to the ground and screamed and wept and prayed. In holy transports, women flung their heads back and forth, and their long hair fell loose and whipped around. Preachers exhaled at the ends of words: "*We-ah shall-ah praise-ah the-ah Lord-ah*"; camp-meeting preaching was a special, hyped-up style. Then, having been brought back to Jesus, people sometimes laughed a joyous laugh known as "the holy laugh," or even emitted what was called "the holy bark." During the breaks, the food was delicious—hams and baked goods and other special dishes prepared in advance—and there was plenty of it. After a good camp meeting the attendees said they slept like babies. The new, personal Jesus of American religion, the one who "walks with me" and "talks with me" (as the hymn says), was invented at camp meetings by frontier sufferers of cabin fever.

D. H. Lawrence once defined the American soul as “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” I don’t know about “hard,” “stoic,” or “killer,” but the “isolate” part is right. The isolation that’s out there at large in the continent sets American stories in motion. Huck Finn, trapped in the cabin where Pap, his drunken father, has confined him, says, “And how slow and still the time did drag along.” He sits there, alone, sawing at a section of one of the cabin’s bottom logs. The book really begins when he saws it through and pulls the piece away and sets himself free. His enormous freedom afterward, when he’s on the raft, is more spacious for his having previously been locked in Pap’s dread cabin. It’s connected also to his travelling in the company of the unfree Jim, who eventually will be betrayed, captured, and locked up alone in a cabin himself, from which he is freed in the final and not-good part of the book.

Henry David Thoreau had incipient cabin fever but didn’t recognize it. New England-like, he channelled it into utilitarian and literary purposes. John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Snow-Bound,” a long work about people who tell one another stories when a blizzard keeps them indoors, became that rare thing, a best-selling poem. It was published just after the Civil War, when being stuck inside could seem like fun again. Stephen King’s novel “The Shining” took cabin fever all the way to horror.

“And how slow and still the time did drag along.” The main difference today is that the computer makes you feel both less lonely and lonelier. Online distraction comes into your cabin or wherever and entertains and wracks you, and then you go crazier than you would have otherwise. I now live in a house on a busy street in a New Jersey suburb, and during the worst *Covid* days the shut-down world was so quiet, and the street so empty, that the neighborhood seemed like a ghostly Thornton Wilder town. Two reminders of the plague were the red blinking lights of ambulances going silently up and down the street—sadly, seventy-nine people in the town have died of *Covid*—and the high-pitched scream of motorcycles speeding on the empty pavement, usually late at night. Motorcycle and other vehicle accidents increased across the country during the pandemic, despite the over-all reduction in vehicle miles driven.

In my few trips into New York, I was surprised at how close different parts of the city are to one another when there’s no traffic. But driving was not

fun, because the occasional madly speeding vehicle meant that being in a car going forty-five was like sitting parked and motionless in the middle of a highway where cars were going fifty. They would come hurtling into the rearview mirror and blaze past. A man I know whose job description is “violence interrupter”—he tries to intervene in disputes and keep people from shooting one another—told me that shootings and stabbings went up during the pandemic because young men isolating in their apartments saw insults directed at them online, seethed to the combustion point, and came out ready for a fight.

During the lockdown’s early period, sometimes my own instinct was to burrow even deeper into bed. I imagined myself the nymph of a seventeen-year cicada pushing blankets of dirt up around myself under the roots of a tree, looking to outsleep the predators. Often, I failed, and didn’t sleep at all. The local wildlife grew bolder while the humans were staying in. As I lay awake, I could hear animals abroad in the night. A fox lives in our neighborhood; probably there is more than one. Along with the motorcycles, another recurring late-night noise was the fox’s bark. It’s not one of those romantic wildlife noises like the call of the wild goose, which I also heard. A barking fox kind of gags and hacks, like a cat coughing up a hair ball, except that the fox sounds as if he’s enjoying it. Late at night a fox sometimes walked down the street and stopped in front of the houses where there are dogs, and then it hack-barked for a while. If a dog happened to be out in the yard, it would wake up and start barking back in outrage. After getting one dog riled, the fox would go down the street and taunt another.

Once on a sunny afternoon I saw the fox close up. I was sitting in a chair on my patio when he walked quickly across my small back yard. He was disguising himself as one of those fleeting things you see out of the corner of your eye and aren’t really sure you saw, and he went by in a “you don’t see me” instant, the model of self-effacement. A human equivalent would be one of those stagehands dressed all in black who come out and quickly and unobtrusively prepare the set for the next scene. The only difference is that the unobtrusive stagehands don’t sneer. The fox wore an expression of alienness and contempt on his narrow, cartoonish snout as he vanished behind the garage. Or maybe that look was fright.

My wife and I got our *Covid* vaccinations and boosters in a former Kmart in West Orange. The place is huge, like a convention center, with echoing far reaches and scores of volunteers in white or blue-plastic lab coats distributed throughout. They radiate good will and civic-spiritedness as they greet you, tell you where to go, handle your paperwork, give you the shot, tell you where to sit for fifteen minutes on the remote chance that you will have a bad reaction, and send you on your way. The whole experience made me proud to live in New Jersey. I would like to begin every day with such positive-oriented interactions with my fellow-citizens in an abandoned Kmart, even if I wasn't getting a shot. I can't think of a better use for abandoned Kmarts. Meet there every morning, stroll around, say hello, greet one another; then back into our cars to get on with the day. We need something large-scale like that to knock back the isolation.

Making the common mistake, I then became overconfident, went out to gatherings over the holidays, and caught *Covid*. The Omicron variant, which I probably had—the tests came back positive, but they didn't say anything about any variant—is supposed to be relatively mild, but it wasn't for me. I have not been so sick since I got pneumonia twenty-some years ago. My main symptom was coughing, along with sore throat, headache, body aches, and a temperature. Plus, being freaked out. This virus has a sneaky, foxlike personality. I could feel it go in various directions in my lungs, meet vax 1, vax 2, and booster, and sneakily withdraw. Then it would try the throat, the sinuses; then sidle back into the lungs. It was a wheedling, advantage-taking, confident, and extremely weedy presence. It spread like one of those trashy weeds which fill a garden space overnight. I remembered what a doctor at Weill Cornell had said in a video, about how *Covid* dies instantly in the presence of disinfectant (the susceptibility, by the way, that inspired Donald Trump to talk about applying disinfectant internally). In me, it was trying to win not by strength but by gigantically amplified and multiplied weakness. I felt as if I had an infestation of weeds growing in my lungs as I sat up coughing all night.

The headline of the *Post* article about the Antarctica stabbing was "*He Tried to 'Ice' His Pal.*" For a while, the clipping of that article, held by a souvenir magnet, occupied the upper left-hand corner among other clippings on the door of our refrigerator. I saw it every day and meditated subconsciously on it. After a while another clipping replaced it, but I kept "*He Tried to 'Ice'*

*His Pal*" close at hand on my desk. I reread the story from time to time, trying to extract its true meaning. Or meanings, plural—lately I've realized that the story wasn't only about "the close confinement in the camp on remote Antarctica," as the *Post* put it. Another meaning, buried deeper, had to do with Russia. The world's fascination with the story meant that we knew something like *Covid* was on the horizon. We also must have sensed that Russia was going to go mad, and do something violent and off the charts. Russia is now committing what may be war crimes against its neighbor, and nobody knows the ending. During *Covid*, Russia's President disappeared for weeks at a time, rarely leaving his residence outside Moscow. The isolation seems to have changed him and made him ready to fight. His particular case of Russian cabin fever preceded terrible consequences.

On March 5th, the U.S. State Department said that all Americans should leave Russia immediately. My son had lived and worked in Russia for six years and eight months. He had a whole life there—girlfriend, job, good friends. Many of them, horrified by their country, are trying to get out or have left already. During the pandemic my son read hundreds of books that he ordered online. As he made arrangements to leave, he decided to give most of his books to Moscow's Library for Foreign Literature. He compiled a list, sent it to the library, and asked the people there which books they wanted. They said they didn't need another copy of "David Copperfield," and they did not want the books about the 1921 race massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He boxed the rest, called a taxi, and took them to the library. Russians are big readers. That's what made it plausible that one Russian would stab another for giving away the endings of books. ♦

## **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [In “Russian Doll,” Natasha Lyonne Barrels Into the Past](#)

By [Rachel Syme](#)

## Content

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On a November evening outside a sound-editing studio in Chelsea, Natasha Lyonne was sipping a can of Red Bull Sugar-Free and puffing on a Marlboro Light 72, her brand of choice. “Short, like Robert Mitchum would have smoked,” she explained. She’d spent the afternoon doing a “watch-down” of new episodes of “Russian Doll,” her macabre Netflix comedy, in which she stars as Nadia Vulvokov, an East Village video-game engineer who in the first season gets hit by a cab on the night of her thirty-sixth-birthday party. The accident is fatal, but instead of expiring Nadia finds herself in a “Groundhog Day”-like loop of reliving the same night and then dying in increasingly gruesome and unlikely ways. Lyonne co-created the series with Amy Poehler and Leslye Headland, and for Season 2, which premières on April 20th, she has taken over from Headland as showrunner. She wrote four of the seven episodes, directed three, and had a hand in every aspect of postproduction. “Directing is this whole other third thing that came into my life, and I’ve never felt so at home,” Lyonne said. “It just turns all my defects into assets. Meaning, you know, being hyper-decisive and obsessive and tireless.” She pulled out her phone and ordered a Lyft, then decided that the wait was too long and strode to the curb to hail a yellow taxi. Before she could flag one, a group of young men in suits and ties recognized her and gave up theirs. “Thank you, gentlemen,” Lyonne said, and mimed the doffing of a cap.

Lyonne speaks in the rhythms of a Borscht Belt comedian. Her accent is outer borough, featuring rumbustious pronunciations (“cahk-a-rooch”) and the raspy “Ehhh”s of a tired old rabbi settling into a comfortable chair. In front of a crowd or a camera, the effect becomes even more pronounced. “When I get nervous, I become Joe Pesci,” she told me. She is recognizable by her voice, but also by her Clara Bow eyes and her wild Titian curls, which lend her wise-guy mien a jolt of femininity. In Chinatown, she got out in front of a shabby walkup a block from Canal Street. Inside, at a secret outpost of a Japanese restaurant, she joined a table alongside the director Janicza Bravo, the playwright Jeremy O. Harris, the “Succession” star Nicholas Braun, and several others who’d worked on “Zola,” Bravo’s super-

fuelled 2020 film about a pair of strippers on a road trip gone wrong. They ate green-bean tempura and lacquered lamb chops while Harris, a precocious dandy of the theatre world, held forth on being fitted earlier in the day for his outfit, a custom Thom Browne suit in red-and-blue gingham. Lyonne picked at the food and chatted with Braun about a bar in the neighborhood that he helped open. In the presence of other outsized personalities, she seemed content to cede the spotlight.

“I’ve been waiting for a *New Yorker* profile since I was twelve,” Harris said.

“See, that makes one of us, because I was always, like, this is for intellectual bullies who graduated high school,” Lyonne replied.

After dinner, the group piled into two cars and headed to the nearby Metrograph Theatre, where Lyonne moderated a post-screening panel with the “Zola” team in front of a full house. Back outside on the street, she bear-hugged the actor Colman Domingo and brought up a vacation they’d soon be taking together in Mexico. At about ten o’clock, the comedian and actress Nora Lum, a.k.a. Awkwafina, pulled up to the curb in a luxury S.U.V. to whisk Lyonne off to a taping of “Saturday Night Live.”

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Raised between New York and Israel, Lyonne entered show business as a child, and as a young adult she became a star of cult comedies such as “Slums of Beverly Hills” and “But I’m a Cheerleader.” Her family life was tumultuous, though, and by her early twenties she was receding from Hollywood owing to drug abuse. She’s been clean since 2006, but she returned to professional prominence only after playing a scene-stealing role in the Netflix prison series “Orange Is the New Black,” which premiered in 2013. Now forty-three, she is charging ahead through her life at full tilt. She told me, “I get panicky I won’t have enough time. I feel like I already blew so much.”

“Russian Doll” is, in a sense, a show about lost time. In the course of the first season, Nadia drowns in the East River, falls down a flight of stairs, chokes on a chicken wing, and gets stung by a swarm of bees. Each time, she ends up back in the eccentrically renovated bathroom of her friend

Maxine as the peppy opening notes of Harry Nilsson's "Gotta Get Up" blare from the next room, where Nadia's birthday bash is still raging. Eventually, she meets a man in the neighborhood named Alan (Charlie Barnett), who is having a similar problem, and together they set out to solve the mystery of their shared existential glitch. Season 1 was a showcase for Lyonne's gregarious bravado and her world-weary one-liners ("Thursday. What a concept."), but it also packed in philosophical musings and hefty themes of mortality and redemption. Its look channelled Lyonne's favorite New York films, from the downtown grime of "Sid and Nancy" to the urban kookiness of "After Hours." In a review for this magazine, Emily Nussbaum compared the show to such "arch, deeply emotional puzzle boxes" as "Fleabag" and "The Leftovers." It won Emmy Awards for its costumes, cinematography, and production design, and was nominated in ten other categories, including Outstanding Comedy Series.

For Season 2, the "Groundhog Day" premise has been traded for a riff on "Back to the Future," and the result is heavier than one might expect. In an early scene, Nadia discovers that she has teleported, via the No. 6 train, to 1982, the year she was born. This sets her off on a race to uncover a family mystery and its psychological reverberations. Through seven episodes, parts of which were filmed on location in Budapest, Nadia keeps barrelling into the past, connecting the dots between her own sense of dislocation, her mother's mental-health problems, and her Hungarian grandmother's experience of the Holocaust. (Alan, meanwhile, delves into his own personal history.) Lyonne admitted that an earnest exploration of inherited trauma might not resonate with every fan of "Russian Doll" 's jaunty first season. "You don't get a lot of shots to say what you want to say, so you may as well say what you want while they're letting you," she said, adding, "If people don't like it, I'll just sue them."

Lyonne lives in a luxury condominium inside a converted synagogue in Manhattan. An Orthodox congregation still occupies the ground floor. One winter afternoon, she showed me around her three-bedroom unit, which is filled with a stylishly jumbled array of art and personal memorabilia. "This can all be yours for twenty-five hundred a month, in perpetuity," she joked. "Hear me out, this is not a scam!" The bed was unmade. Framed movie posters were propped along the walls, some two or three deep. Lyonne was wearing her ringlets pulled away from her face in a lopsided bun. On her

fingers were acrylic nails—red, white, and spiky—that she’d kept on with Krazy Glue since a photo shoot a month earlier. She pointed out a set of timbales from her ex-boyfriend Fred Armisen, and a Sonos speaker from the “lovely new man” in her life, whom she preferred not to name.

Lyonne is an autodidact and a film obsessive, who peppers conversations with references to silent cinema, Jewish mysticism, nineteen-seventies Hollywood moguls, New York City trivia, and Lou Reed lyrics. A single question sent to her by text message might elicit a waterfall of replies, plus a *GIF* of, say, a Pikachu with the caption “Haters Gonna Hate.” In her apartment, nearly every shelf, wall nook, and windowsill was crowded with books. She excitedly showed me a volume called “House of Psychotic Women,” about female neurosis in genre films, and a copy of Cynthia Ozick’s 1997 novel, “The Puttermesser Papers,” which she said she would be reading aloud for a new audiobook recording. Pointing to a beat-up biography of Rasputin, she said, “In my addiction I was always carrying this around. It was my safety blanket.” Lyonne was educated in part at a Modern Orthodox Jewish high school where students read the Talmud in the original Aramaic, and she runs “Russian Doll” a bit like a yeshiva study circle. A lengthy syllabus that she distributed to the writers of Season 2 included texts on Viktor Frankl’s “Man’s Search for Meaning,” the Hungarian-American mathematician John von Neumann, quantum mechanics, and the history of the lobotomy. She told me that the show’s riddle-like construction was influenced by her love of word games. Hanging in her kitchen is a frame containing a crossword puzzle that she wrote for the *Times*, in 2019, and an accompanying article. “This for me is my favorite interview I’ve ever done,” she said. “Because it was about something I have very clean feelings for.”

Lyonne recalled that she has wanted to be a director ever since her first major film role, in Woody Allen’s musical “Everyone Says I Love You,” playing the Allen character’s free-spirited teen daughter. In her apartment she keeps a cramped “movie room” outfitted with a TV, a love seat, and dozens of vintage VHS tapes. On one wall hung a still photograph from the first project she directed, a short film for the Parisian fashion brand Kenzo, from 2017. Leaning against another was a poster of Linda Manz, a tough-girl actress of a previous generation, from a new restoration of Dennis Hopper’s “Out of the Blue,” which Lyonne and Chloë Sevigny, her longtime best friend, helped finance. In the living room, two huge stained-glass

windows cast colorful shadows on the rug. On the coffee table was a copy of the script for one of Lyonne's most beloved films, Bob Fosse's semi-autobiographical musical "All That Jazz." Boisterous and hallucinatory, it follows a pill-popping choreographer (Roy Scheider) as he burns the candle at both ends while being courted by an angel of death, played by Jessica Lange. Each morning, he tells his beleaguered reflection in the mirror, "It's showtime, folks!" Lyonne told me, "It's the closest approximation to what life feels like that I've ever seen." Sitting on top of an old piano were the two *SAG* Awards that she received for her performance in "Orange Is the New Black." "You always read about people who say, 'I put my awards directly in the garbage, because I'm grounded.' No! Put your awards where people can see them! What are you, a fucking dummy who wants to pretend like you didn't do that work? Schmucks."

Lyonne has been working since kindergarten. Born Natasha Bianca Lyonne Braunstein, in 1979, she is the second child of parents whom she describes as "rock-and-roll black sheep from conservative Jewish families." Her mother, Ivette Buchinger, was the daughter of Hungarian Holocaust survivors who settled in Los Angeles by way of Paris and went into watch distribution. Lyonne described her mother as a "red-headed European prima-ballerina hot chick," who hoped to become a professional dancer but never quite found an on-ramp. As a teen-ager, Ivette met Lyonne's father, Aaron Braunstein, a loud-talking, ponytailed Brooklyn native, and they began a high-octane love affair. "They were both into fast cars, fur coats, Rottweilers, cocaine, drinking," Lyonne said. Ivette moved to New York to be with Aaron, and they had Lyonne's older brother in 1972. They bought a run-down mansion in Kings Point, Long Island, that they boasted had once been the home of Herman Melville. (It had not.) Ivette worked on and off for her parents' business, but around the time Lyonne was born the company foundered, and the family struggled financially. "My father was always up to shit," Lyonne said. "First he wanted to be a race-car driver, then a boxing promoter. So I got put into this business."



"Leave this house and never return! It's a seller's market!"  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Aaron and Ivette took a gimmicky approach to stage parenting. When Lyonne was five, they legally changed her last name. She recalled that at parties they would have her take sips of their beer and belt out David Lee Roth lyrics "to show off for their friends." Riding the Long Island Rail Road to auditions in the city, Ivette would urge her daughter to read the *Wall Street Journal* stock trades aloud. "It was, like, my street-urchin trick," Lyonne said. She landed her first film role at the age of six, a minor part in Mike Nichols's 1986 adaptation of Nora Ephron's novel "Heartburn," and, that same year, got a recurring role on "Pee-wee's Playhouse." She auditioned for but didn't get the lead role in "Curly Sue," though the character, a frizzy-haired ham who assists her grifter father figure, may as well have been written for her. "When I go to Times Square I get nostalgic, because I think of myself as a little kid with a briefcase walking around, developing street smarts, wondering if my drunk dad is going to pick me up," she said.

In social settings, Lyonne trots out certain anecdotes from her childhood as if they were bits in a comedic monologue. But in reality her parents' marriage was volatile, and her upbringing was distressingly unstable. She recalled that Aaron would disappear on drinking sprees or lock himself in his bedroom for days at a time, and that Ivette would move out of the house after the couple's ugliest fights, dragging Lyonne with her to a Manhattan

rental apartment. “It was a lot of basic shit, like Mommy called the cops on Daddy,” Lyonne said, adding, “For me and my brother, it was very much trying to hold on.” When she was eight, her father abruptly announced that the family was moving to Israel, and that he had grand plans to bring Mike Tyson to the Hilton Tel Aviv. (Lyonne refers to the move as her parents’ “tax-evasion scheme,” because they ended up in debt to the I.R.S.) Her dad bought a black Porsche and promoted boxing matches in small venues around the country. Lyonne recalled visiting the ancient city of Caesarea, taking a ski trip in Lebanon, and performing in an Israeli movie involving a hot-air balloon. In a narrow office at the back of her apartment, she showed me a framed photograph of her working as a “ring girl” at a fight in Tel Aviv, grinning and waving an Israeli flag. Lyonne described that period as the “great years” of her childhood, but in 1989 Ivette returned to New York and took Natasha with her. “My dad’s drinking was no longer magnanimous or the life of the party,” Lyonne said. “And it’s not like they were winning at this boxing-promoting life style. That pipe dream was dying, and the money was running out.” (Her brother stayed in Israel, and as adults the siblings lost touch.)

Back in New York, mother and daughter bounced from one apartment to another. Lyonne landed a role in the film version of “Dennis the Menace,” but she was auditioning more than she was landing parts. “I’m no Drew Barrymore, I’m not in fucking ‘E.T.,’ ” she said. “And I’m lugging around this nutjob”—her mother—“and we are a package deal.” Ivette’s parents helped support them financially, and at their insistence Lyonne secured a scholarship to Ramaz, an Orthodox academy on the Upper East Side, but she was expelled in her sophomore year for dealing marijuana to her classmates. In 1995, Ivette moved to Miami, and Lyonne, who was fifteen, stayed behind to make “Everyone Says I Love You,” sleeping on the couch of a family friend’s studio apartment in Murray Hill. The movie was packed with stars—Goldie Hawn, Alan Alda, Natalie Portman, Julia Roberts—but Lyonne recalled feeling out of place among them, “like they all had a shared secret I wasn’t in on.” After filming, she joined her mother in Florida and finished high school there, a year early, through a bridge program at N.Y.U. She applied with an essay comparing her co-stars to the characters in T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” “It was very over the top, like how I would not be a part of a lost generation and was going to show up and be the real deal

“because mendacity makes me sick,” she said. “So, basically, me now, but high and sixteen.”

As an adult, Lyonne communicated with her parents irregularly, and by the time of their deaths, in the twenty-tens, she’d mostly cut off contact. Her father moved back to New York and ran a failed campaign for City Council on the Upper West Side, in 2013, the year before he died. In a piece that appeared in the *Observer*, he showed off an apartment cluttered with images of his daughter but admitted that they no longer spoke. “Poor Natasha. Let’s all cry for her,” he said. “What makes her be angry, angry at the father, that’s part of the thing, right?” Ivette struggled with mental-health problems, especially later in her life. When I asked Lyonne when her mother died, she had to think for a moment. “It was around Season 1 of ‘Orange Is the New Black,’ because I remember being so scared that those billboards were gonna trigger her,” she told me, adding, “I was quite intentionally trying to be invisible the entire time my parents were alive.” She continued, “No one is a villain or a victim; I don’t feel like anyone was trying to cause harm. I make a lot of jokes about my parents and stuff, but ultimately I am very impressed that people seem to have this endless reservoir of strength and empathy to engage with things that are as deeply and constantly triggering as a family unit.”

One of Lyonne’s major creative ambitions is to make a film about the years she spent in Israel—“‘Paper Moon,’ but with Jews,” as she put it—but “Russian Doll” is focussed on wrestling with matrilineage. Lyonne’s maternal grandmother, Ella, was a survivor of Auschwitz, and her maternal grandfather, Morris, lost his first wife in the camps. According to Lyonne, they coped with the horrors in their past with a brusque stoicism that left little room for their daughter’s problems. “It was, like, life as an endurance test of how much one can withstand,” Lyonne said. The new season of “Russian Doll” doesn’t draw on Ella’s story directly, but it explores the rift between a traumatized older generation and a vulnerable younger one, and the ripple effects of what Lyonne calls “damaged love.” She told me, “I joke that there’s a straight line from Hitler to heroin.”

Nadia has a surrogate-parent figure on the show, named Ruth (Elizabeth Ashley), based on a friend of Ivette’s, Ruth Factor, whom Lyonne considers to be her godmother. In a Season 1 scene that was inspired by actual events,

young Nadia (Brooke Timber) helps her mother, Nora, as she manically hauls watermelons out of a bodega and into the back seat of their car, which is already packed with the fruit. Later, when Nora has a meltdown at home, Ruth sweeps in to care for the girl. Lyonne wrote several of Factor's signature phrases into Ruth's lines, among them, "Nothing in this world is easy, except pissing in the shower."

In the second episode of "Russian Doll" Season 1, Nadia goes on a nihilistic bender, pounding shots, snorting cocaine off the end of a comb, and falling asleep in the middle of her party with a lit cigarette dangling from her fingers. Sevigny, who plays Nadia's mother on the show, recalled sobbing as she watched the episode for the first time. "Seeing her that way again," she told me, her voice breaking, "I couldn't handle it."

By her late teens, Lyonne was a self-professed "club-kid raver and pothead," but she told me, "I was so young that the consequences weren't that serious yet. I was seventeen. I was Teflon." She landed her breakout role, in 1997, in Tamara Jenkins's dramedy "Slums of Beverly Hills," playing the adolescent daughter of a huckster used-car salesman in nineteen-seventies California. Jenkins told me that she initially had doubts about whether Lyonne was right for the part. "I was, like, she's really interesting, but I don't know. She talks like she's walking out of 'Mean Streets' or something. I kept saying, 'We have to peel back your De Niro thing, because I want to know who you are, and I want to be able to have your vulnerability present.'" Lyonne gave a bravura performance, both insolent and poignantly mature, but during filming she drove while she was drunk and crashed her car into the window of a furniture store on La Brea Avenue. "I'll never forget the steering-wheel imprint on her chest," Jenkins said.

In 1998, Lyonne enrolled at N.Y.U., but she quickly dropped out. According to the terms of the bridge program, she needed to complete a year of college studies before receiving her high-school diploma, so she never did receive one. "The jobs and drugs were doing this two-handed dance of pulling me away from an education," she told me. "Slums of Beverly Hills" made her one of Hollywood's most in-demand young actresses, and in 1999 she starred in the queer satire "But I'm a Cheerleader," and in "Detroit Rock City," a seventies period piece, with her then boyfriend, Edward Furlong. She also signed on to play a sexually sophisticated sidekick in "American

Pie,” the gross-out teen comedy, a gig that she told me she took only for the money, after turning it down, “like, five times.” She bought a studio apartment on Sixteenth Street and, at a party around the same time, met Sevigny, an actress and downtown It Girl who was five years her senior. Lyonne described seeing Sevigny as a sort of big sister. “I remember Chloë coming over and washing my fishnets in the bathtub with Woolite,” she said. Sevigny told me, “I found her very dynamic and engaging and reckless in a way that was, at that point, fun.”

In 2001, just as “American Pie 2” became the No. 1 movie in the country, Lyonne was arrested on a D.U.I. charge. The following year, she moved into a town house in Gramercy Park owned by the actor Michael Rapaport, a close friend, with a series of roommates that included the Hole bassist Melissa Auf der Maur and the singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright. The place became a rowdy neighborhood gathering spot, and drug use was common. (After moving out and going to rehab, Wainwright wrote a song, called “Natasha,” that goes, “Does anybody know how scary / This is for you and is for me?”) In December of 2004, new tenants in the house called the police, accusing Lyonne of threatening their dog and ripping a mirror off the wall. She spent a night in jail, and, soon afterward, Rapaport evicted her.

“I just decided to drop out completely,” Lyonne said. “It gets really dark. I sort of think I’m done forever. And I’m not coming back.” She recalled periods when she went by the street alias Crystal Snow and would call her agent from pay phones to inquire about booking jobs. “It’s a long time between snorting heroin to shooting it to sharing needles,” she said. “I took it to the finish line.” She continued acting sporadically, including in “My Suicidal Sweetheart,” a 2005 indie flop about an escaped mental patient road-tripping with her boyfriend while trying repeatedly to end her life. But she wouldn’t have another noteworthy onscreen role until “Orange Is the New Black.” The press pounced on the story of a young celebrity’s downward spiral. In May of 2005, Rapaport wrote a piece in *Jane* called “Evicting Natasha Lyonne.” (He and Lyonne have since reconciled, but at the time, she said, “my heart was broken.”) The same year, life-threatening health complications landed Lyonne in the I.C.U., and the details were leaked to the *Post*. After she missed several court dates for charges related to the neighbor incident, a judge issued a standing warrant for her arrest. In

December of 2006, she turned herself in, and, on court orders, checked into a rehab center in Pennsylvania. She hasn't used drugs since.

Lyonne rejects the notion that what she went through was tragic or shameful. "What always made me feel really bad with, like, Terry Gross or Barbara Walters was when they would just *come* for me with the drug stuff," she said. "And I'm, like, Dude, why are you victimizing something I'm transparent around?" She told me that in retrospect she sees her drug use, in part, as an attempt to grapple with her parents' reckless tendencies. "Now that I'm an adult, I think so much of my being a wild thing was because I was trying to get in their shoes," she said, adding, "I fully cleaned house on that type of behavior. I make sure that, at this point in my life, I just don't fuck with chaos."

In "Russian Doll," Nadia's self-destructive moments—and the grisly deaths that result—are treated without sentimentality. Lyonne said that she made the character a video-game programmer because she wanted her to confront her knotty predicament "without being spooked by it." Often, Nadia discusses dying with a detached curiosity. "This is not good or bad. It's just a bug," she tells Alan in one episode. Nadia sees the world as absurd and wearying, but also as being suffused with possibility should she make it out the other side. Lyonne's friend Michaela Coel, the creator and star of the British show "I May Destroy You," about surviving the obliterating aftermath of sexual assault, told me that she admired Lyonne's willingness to delve into her lowest experiences. "I don't know if this will make sense to anyone other than Natasha, but it feels like we are both living life on some sort of dangerous and thrilling edge," Coel said, adding, "We're on two parallel edges. And we're shouting at each other, and waving, and talking about how cool it is to be alive."

Since 2018, Lyonne has co-run a production company called Animal Pictures with the producer Danielle Renfrew Behrens and the actress and comedian Maya Rudolph, one of several close friends who are "S.N.L." alumni. "The name comes from when we were sitting at lunch, and I said, 'You're a fucking animal,'" Rudolph told me. "She wants to devour." The company is headquartered in L.A.'s Studio City, in a white stucco ranch house whose main room is dominated by a giant painting of Rudolph in the style of a Gilded Age heiress. When I arrived, on an August morning, I

found Lyonne smoking in the back yard and talking intently on her phone. She was wearing a backward black leather Telfar baseball cap and a Gucci purse with a lion's-head clasp, plus her mother's gold chain and her grandmother's watch. The look was not unlike Nadia's punk-roccoco style in "Russian Doll," a combination of glamorous and street tough. Noticing me, Lyonne pointed toward a small guesthouse, between the patio and a wooden pergola, where I found Todd Downing, an editor and a co-producer of the new season, sitting in front of several monitors cutting a sequence from Episode 3.

"Sorry," Lyonne said, a minute later, entering the cottage and flopping down on a brown leather couch. "I was just arguing with the Netflix people about my music budget."

On the wall was a whiteboard scrawled with notes for several episodes and a framed poster for the 1974 Robert Altman comedy "California Split." Lyonne stretched her legs out on a coffee table and asked Downing, a burly man with a thick brown mustache, to pull up a scene that takes place after Nadia has rocketed back in time. Nadia is at Crazy Eddie, the now defunct electronics store in the East Village, exchanging banter with the store clerk (Malachi Nimmons). He mentions that he edits a zine about "commodity fetishism and the Debordian spectacle," referring to the French theorist Guy Debord.

"Let's cut that," Lyonne said. "It feels very mundane." Downing wordlessly clicked and then played the scene again with the line scrubbed.

"I kind of miss it," he said.

"O.K., O.K., we keep the Debordian spectacle!" she replied.

To end the scene, Lyonne had improvised several "wackadoo exits." In one, she tried a riff on Crazy Eddie's slogan: "My prices are also insane!" In another, she said, "You should know I have an I.U.D." Lyonne wrinkled her nose as she watched herself onscreen, and said, "What is she *doing*?" Lyonne is by all accounts an exacting showrunner. "She's very demanding," Alex Buono, an executive producer and the producing director of Season 2, told me fondly. Amy Poehler, who executive-produced both seasons,

described her as a “very humane dictator.” But, after some back-and-forth over Nadia’s lines, Lyonne settled on the one that made Downing laugh: “All right, well. We live and we die, huh? Yeah. Adios!”

Lyonne nodded approvingly when she saw another shot from the episode, showing Sevigny’s image replicating infinitely on a pair of closed-circuit TV screens. “What you’re seeing there is introspective camera stuff based on Douglas Hofstadter’s ‘Strange Loop’ theory, made into a half-hour comedy,” Lyonne said. “That’s very satisfying to me.” Hofstadter’s book and many of the other texts on her Season 2 reading list explore ideas about the construction of a self or the hidden forces that shape a life. Lyonne showed me an app called Universe Splitter, which maps the repercussions of small individual choices using quantum theory, and explained that in the writers’ room they’d occasionally use it to “open up story ideas for fun.” She said, “The bigger question I’m asking is if it’s true that we all have the ability, regarding past trauma, to reorient ourselves around it, or if in fact there is no free will, because it’s a set element of the universe, and therefore we must just radically accept the full weight of the past.”

“Russian Doll” came about after Poehler approached Lyonne, in 2014, with a concept for a sitcom, called “Old Soul,” in which Lyonne would play a reformed rebel working at a home for the elderly. They pitched the show to NBC and recruited Ellen Burstyn, Fred Willard, and Rita Moreno as co-stars, but the project languished in the pilot stage. Poehler and Lyonne continued exchanging ideas, one of which involved Lyonne’s being stuck in a time loop and entering a new romantic entanglement each week. “I think it came from the fact that I just selfishly love to watch Natasha argue,” Poehler said. Lyonne met with several potential showrunners before settling on Leslye Headland, a playwright and the director of such acerbic comedies as “Bachelorette” (2012) and “Sleeping with Other People” (2015), in which Lyonne had played a small role. Together, the two decided to use the “Groundhog Day” conceit to tackle Lyonne’s troubled past through the metaphor of a death wish that won’t stop coming true.

Headland recalled that Lyonne asked her early on to read “You Can’t Win,” the cult-classic memoir by Jack Black, from 1926, about life as an opium-addicted drifter. “That was a big ‘Aha’ moment for me,” Headland said. “I saw that Natasha is a transient figure, one who moves in and out of spaces

without ascribing to social norms or dictates.” In “Russian Doll,” the character of Nadia in some ways fits the trope of the lonely young woman in the big city. “She has the same cat as Holly Golightly,” Headland said. And yet the show is refreshingly uninterested in a conventional heroine’s journey toward romantic or professional fulfillment. In 2017, Lyonne and Headland secured a straight-to-series order from Netflix. They partnered with Jax Media, the production company behind “Broad City” and “Search Party,” and recruited a team of quirky character actors to populate the show’s surrealist world, including Greta Lee, whose hilarious performance as Maxine includes ditzily uttering the greeting “Sweet birthday babyyyyy!” each time Nadia crashes back to the land of the living.

Because of the pandemic, Season 2 took three years to create. Headland left the show before writing began, and in 2020 she signed on to make “The Acolyte,” a “Star Wars” series for Disney+. Lyonne cited the “Star Wars” commitment as the reason for Headland’s departure. “There’s also tricky stuff that happened that has nothing to do with me, to be honest,” she added without elaborating. Headland didn’t comment on the circumstances surrounding her exit, but told me, “I used to say to Natasha all the time, ‘You have all these incredible ideas, but it’s like you need the gel cap to put the NyQuil in. It doesn’t have a container.’ What I did for the show was a lot of narrative wrangling. But, by the second season, I wasn’t really sure I needed to be there anymore.” Lyonne had some reservations about stepping in to head the team, but Jenji Kohan, the showrunner of “Orange Is the New Black,” and Poehler encouraged her. Poehler told me, “With Russian nesting dolls, you open them and they get smaller and smaller and tighter and tighter. When you look at the show, she *is* the distilled tiny doll.” Lyonne jokes that she wants to become like Robert Evans, the matinée idol who went on to run Paramount Pictures in its seventies glory days. “Even though this is so stressful and intense, I’ve never been happier,” she said. “As a child actor, you have this hypervigilance that the rug is gonna be pulled out from under you. As the showrunner, I feel very calm by having all the information.”

Lyonne loaded Season 2 of “Russian Doll” with visual references to the auteurist cinema she reveres—Cassavetes’s “A Woman Under the Influence,” Coppola’s “Dracula,” Cronenberg’s “Videodrome.” She attributes the Dutch angles in one episode to Orson Welles’s “Touch of

Evil,” and a long tracking shot through a morgue in another to “Spike Lee dolly tricks.” “The entire season is an Easter egg,” she told me. Perhaps as a consequence, the season is more shambolic than the first. As Nadia’s adventures expand into multiple time lines, the story becomes disorientingly twisty. The result is less a puzzle box than a messy metaphysical punk opera, for worse and for better. In life and in “Russian Doll,” Lyonne employs the classic Jewish coping mechanism of leavening difficult moments with shtick. There are scenes in Season 2, though, when Nadia’s wisecracking finally gives way to quiet emotion. When she first sees her mother’s image, in the 1982 time line, the camera lingers on Nadia’s terrified face as tears roll down her cheeks. “I figured out how to stop dying,” Lyonne said. “How do I learn how to live? That’s what Season 2 is about.”



*“Is it close enough to spring for nice weather not to be existentially terrifying?”*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Lyonne told me that one of the great moments of her life was being invited to read Lou Reed’s song “Coney Island Baby” at his memorial service, in 2013. An episode of “Russian Doll”’s new season was named for the song. Reed was one of many hard-living men whom Lyonne idolized in her youth. “Any macho swing involving a guy on a Greyhound bus with a notebook,” she said. “A Hemingway type with a glass of whiskey. Bukowski at the bar. John Fante on the case,” she said. “I started to think, O.K., so that’s what being a person is. You’re supposed to go into the belly of the beast.”

But her recovery and her second act have been shaped by the guidance of other women. In 2009, Lyonne auditioned for Nora and Delia Ephron's Off Broadway play "Love, Loss, and What I Wore." Nora remembered her from "Heartburn," and the two struck up a friendship. She cast Lyonne in the play and later offered her second home, in L.A., as a place for Lyonne to stay during work trips. "I was, like, 'Nora, what are you doing? I'm a crackhead and a chain-smoker!'" Lyonne recalled. "She was, like, 'Oh, shut up already. Not anymore. Just smoke outside and tell the housekeeper when you're done.'" (On the wall of her office, Lyonne keeps a note from Nora that reads, simply, "I love you.") In 2012, Lyonne appeared in her third "American Pie" film, and the following year she had small roles in a string of other forgettable comedies. Then Jenji Kohan launched her comeback by casting her in "Orange Is the New Black," in the cheekily self-referential role of a former heroin addict whom another inmate dubs "the junkie philosopher."

Through Animal Pictures, Lyonne is currently developing shows with several female creators, including Alia Shawkat and the "Russian Doll" writer Cirocco Dunlap. She compared her friendships with other women in the business to the fellowship among such men as Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, and Paul Schrader in nineteen-seventies Hollywood. "It's almost like they had a pickup-basketball-game community of filmmaking, where they came around and saw each other's stuff," she said. A few nights after the "Zola" panel, I went with Lyonne and Janicza Bravo to see a Romanian film called "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" at Film Forum. The movie is an experimental romp about a teacher's weathering the aftermath of her homemade sex tape appearing on the Internet. Its middle section features a dispassionate narrator reciting facts about Romanian history. "Have you guys seen Lina Wertmüller's 'Seven Beauties'?" Lyonne said afterward. "I don't want to insult this movie, but that one is better done."

She and Bravo retired to the nearby Washington Square Diner, where they settled into the same side of a booth. Like Bill Murray in the diner scene in "Groundhog Day," Lyonne ordered with abandon: two grilled cheese sandwiches, two cups of chicken-noodle soup, French fries, turkey sausage, a side of pickles, and black coffee. Bravo asked only for mint tea. As Lyonne dipped a sandwich into a puddle of ketchup, she spoke of being a teen star in turn-of-the-millennium Hollywood.

“After ‘Slums of Beverly Hills,’ they were, like, ‘Welcome to the WB! What do you want to do here?’ ” she said. “And I was, like, ‘I don’t fucking want to be on ‘Dawson’s Creek’!’ I went into that meeting in a Lenny Bruce T-shirt with a bottle of whiskey in my back pocket. My manager had to get me out of bed because I was so hungover. I came in and was, like, ‘You guys have seen ‘Chinatown’? Have you thought about anything like that?’ ”

“I actually do wish you’d found yourself in ‘Chinatown’ for teens,” Bravo said.

“I was in there pitching it before I knew what pitching was, like, ‘You guys need slats in the shades where the light gets through.’ ”

“And a suit, right? And a secretary!” Bravo said, putting on a Lyonne accent.

Lyonne talked about her family.

“I mean, I got really lucky, because they died,” she said. Bravo laughed sympathetically. “I only mean that it was so all-consuming, and I think it’s very hard to let go of that,” Lyonne continued. “Now I’m an adult, and I can start my life. That’s no longer a present danger in my psyche.”

“Did you ever see them in your dreams?” Bravo asked.

“It was worse than that. I would think I saw them on the street or in a grocery store, because I was terrified of running into them. For me, it’s a great relief to feel like I can walk free in New York.”

After dinner, we strolled south through Washington Square Park toward Bravo’s hotel on the Lower East Side. Despite the rise of Omicron, the night-life crowd was out in full force. Lyonne has a distinctive way of moving through the city: clomping, springy, coat collar popped high. Season 2 of “Russian Doll” opens with one of many shots of Nadia perambulating, her black boots tapping in rhythm with Depeche Mode’s “Personal Jesus.” Lyonne is currently working, with the director Rian Johnson, on a “Columbo”-style crime show for Peacock, and it’s not hard to picture Lyonne, an avid Peter Falk fan, as the hardboiled detective, stalking the streets with a cigarette between her fingers and a wry expression on her face.

Waiting to cross Houston Street, we spotted a group of fratty-looking revellers on the far side of the intersection, elbowing one another and pointing in Lyonne's direction. "Oh, no, we need to get away from them," Bravo said. But Lyonne just cocked her head confidently as she stepped off the curb. I asked her if the attention bothered her. "In New York, I like to think I'm a gnome or a leprechaun," she said. "I'm part of the psychedelic journey through Manhattan." ♦

An earlier version of this article failed to list Amy Poehler as a co-creator of "Russian Doll."

# **Play-By-Play**

- [Boxing Play-by-Play: Slapgate](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

In one sense, Will Smith has spent a career preparing to slap Chris Rock across the face. In an industry that fetishizes masochism—Christian Bale’s subsisting on little more than two hundred calories’ worth of black coffee and apples for “The Machinist”; Robert De Niro’s arduous pasta regimen, which put sixty pounds on him for “Raging Bull”—Smith’s prep work stands out for its theatrical toughness. It could be said that he trains as if he were in a “Rocky” montage.



To recover from playing a middle-aged dad in “King Richard,” Smith undertook workouts that included climbing the hundred and sixty flights of stairs up the Burj Khalifa; after that, he scaled the spire. For “Ali,” he trained with Sugar Ray Leonard’s former coach Darrell Foster. Foster told the press at the time that Smith spent a year taking punches from a former heavyweight champion and sparring with his hands tied behind his back; he broke his thumb, bruised his face. A certain realism was adhered to. “Will vowed to have no sex for the year,” Foster added. “Sex saps a fighter’s energy.” Once, he ran Smith through exercises in the Rocky Mountains. The oxygen deprivation was supposed to simulate the late rounds of a championship bout. “He fell to his knees, and I made him write Ali’s name in the snow,” Foster recalled last summer. “He said, ‘Now I get it.’ ”

After [Smith hit Chris Rock](#) onstage at the Oscars, individual reactions spanned a spectrum of shock and blame. Some of the discourse focussed on the semiotics of a slap versus a punch. Also on how much weight you give the action-hero training. Can a Hollywood boxer actually fight like a real-life one? The pro-Smith, nothing-to-see-here crowd (“If only folks were as agitated by members of Congress taking a swing at democracy and then [calmly] returning to their seats,” one Twitter user posted) relied on a confidence that a Will Smith slap is physically harmless, if psychically devastating. On the other end were those who viewed Smith as something like a super-villain. “Just a reminder that if Will Smith had slapped Betty White for a joke she made (however insensitive), she easily could’ve fallen backward, cracked her skull and died of a brain bleed,” one doctor tweeted. “Same with Bob Saget obviously.”

To the scorecards we go! A few expert judges kept score at home. The first matter of business was determining the slap’s legitimacy. Could it have been staged? [Charles Farrell](#), who managed the former undisputed heavyweight champion of the world Leon Spinks after he lost his title, and who sometimes rigged professional fights for the Mafia, said no. “Chris Rock doesn’t seem to anticipate the slap,” he said. “He has his face slightly forward. For somebody who’s not a pro, it would be hard to take a shot like that full force, knowing that it was coming. You would flinch.”

Freddie Roach, the renowned trainer of Mike Tyson and Manny Pacquiao, was consulted on technique. An asynchronous panel was convened.

*ROACH:* He got a good shot in. But the mechanics were terrible. He definitely telegraphed that punch.

*FARRELL:* He was too squared up when he let the punch go.

*ROACH:* Two weeks in the gym, we’ll get him fixed. Definitely he would start off on the mirror, work on delivering the punch correctly. Then we’d go right to the mitts. I’d hold the mitts for him, and we’d make that shot a very meaningful shot.

*FARRELL:* What’s interesting about it is that not even by professional standards, but by any serious standards, Will Smith has absolutely no

power. They say, in boxing, punchers are born, they're not made. I think that probably applies here.

*ROACH*: If I were Chris Rock, I would've come back with the right hand.

*FARRELL*: Smith overcommits with it. He turns his shoulder so that his arm is totally turned around. His face is completely exposed with no ability to block a punch.

As for Rock, there was not much for the judges to go on besides an ability to take a blow—thick skin, of the literal sort. “I like the chin,” Roach said. “The chin is very good. Very, very good.”

Talk turned to a possible rematch. Both men agreed that the outcome hinged on unknown factors. Heart, canniness, un-sapped energy. Also: strategy. Farrell said, “My suggestion to Rock would be to keep his chin tucked in, move his head back, let the punch miss, let Smith move out of position, and just come back with a countershot.”

“Rock has to get into a short-distance fight,” Roach said. “His opponent is taller and rangier. He’d have to stay close to his chest. Will Smith has to keep him on the end of his jab. It’s just like Margarito vs. Pacquiao.”

Oscar De La Hoya, one of the best pound-for-pound boxers of all time, rendered a decision. “If it was a twelve-round fight, I would pick Will Smith to win in the fifth,” he said. As for the slap, “That wasn’t the right thing to do.” But he thought Smith was holding back. “We saw him portraying Ali. We know he can throw a punch with knockout power.” He said that he was exploring making a bio-pic about himself: “I’m looking forward to, hopefully, Oscar winning an Oscar.” [De La Hoya](#) figured he could say whatever he wanted onstage about Smith, and Smith wouldn’t try anything. ♦

# Poems

- “[Pocket Garden in the City](#)”
- “[Separating](#)”

By [David Baker](#)

## Content

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

*Audio: Read by the author.*

You would miss it if you were hurrying.  
If you were harried or the day was drab.

It's tucked between two old brownstones, now  
a defunct pet store, a pop-up for sneakers.

Take the stone path back. It's so narrow—  
the leaning greenery like sticky sleeves,  
  
sunflower above, like a lighthouse, the ocean  
aroma of yellow hibiscus. But what are they doing.

Two cops, in the back corner, under a lime tree.  
Hooded figure between them—what's your name.

You stand there and they stand there.  
Snapdragon. Hollyhock. Daylilies ablaze.

By [Taneum Bambrick](#)

## Content

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

*Audio:* Read by the author.

At twenty-nine I drink strawberry cider with an ex in the mist  
outside a pizza restaurant. He painted off a ladder this summer.  
Asks if I've smelled the difference between fear and regular sweat.  
Down the road, there's a church with a tall wooden door where we once  
kissed  
so fast the earrings fell off my head. Today he lives with a beautiful artist.  
I often think of him holding my thighs beside a river after we finished a  
bottle of Malbec.  
Mosquitos pulling little blankets above the grass. I know if I sit here long  
enough  
he will say the thing he forgets he always says: *You're a planet. I never want*  
*you to leave.* I know I am not the only woman he keeps  
wrapped in the same story. Because I've been hurt, I order another drink.  
Wait for him to say what men say before getting married: *Loving you*  
*is its own time.* A place that always exists but cannot in this life.

# **Pop Music**

- [The Glorious Lightness of Wet Leg's Rock](#)

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

For a brief moment last spring, when securing a vaccination appointment no longer felt like winning some sort of lunatic lottery, and *Covid-19* cases had convincingly, if temporarily, receded, it seemed as though Americans were collectively poised for a grand return to pleasure. Remember pleasure? People were talking about the much anticipated centennial of the Roaring Twenties, and about the imminence of a so-called Hot Vax Summer. The hope was that, after months of confinement and terror, we might carouse and frolic again, retire the elbow bump in favor of the full-body embrace, have a little fun. In the end, those proclamations were premature, and a clumsy misreading of the cultural moment. Shaking off mass death wasn't so easy. What followed was more like Trying-Our-Best Summer.

For some people, the pandemic ended up changing the contours of their social lives in a more permanent way. Why return to the pre-quarantine slog of deafening bars, interminable poetry readings, and awkward dinner parties? What about cutting loose at home, maybe with one excellent friend over? Wet Leg, the duo of Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers, makes party music for adults who are down to hang but are tired of getting cornered by an oversharer near a sweating tub of supermarket hummus, or having to athletically jockey for a bartender's attention, or spending seventy-five dollars moving from club to club in a series of careering taxicabs. It's hard to think of a sentiment more germane to our collective, post-traumatic disillusionment than "It used to be so fun / Now everything just feels dumb / I wish I could care." The line comes from "I Don't Wanna Go Out," a track on "Wet Leg," the band's long-awaited first album, which is being released this month.

Teasdale and Chambers are plainly having a very good time making each other laugh, and anyone else's enjoyment of their salty, lackadaisical indie rock feels almost incidental. The duo met a decade ago, in college, on the Isle of Wight, and their easy rapport gives "Wet Leg" a glorious lightness. Though each had been involved with other musical projects, neither had a full-time music career before last year. (Chambers was working in her family's jewelry store, and Teasdale was a wardrobe assistant.) According to band lore, they decided to start making music together while paused at the

top of a Ferris wheel, drunk, and they made it through just four gigs before signing to Domino Records.

“Wet Leg” is a charming, addictive début—wry, melodic, gleeful, smart, and cool. Chambers plays lead guitar, Teasdale handles rhythm guitar, and they are backed here by the bassist Michael Champion, the drummer Henry Holmes, and the synth player and producer Dan Carey. Teasdale has a voice that can swing from deep and teasing to dry and laden with ennui. When she thinks something is lame, she can be withering. On “Loving You,” Teasdale informs an ex, “I don’t want to have to be friends / I don’t want to have to pretend.” She sweetly adds, “I hope you choke on your girlfriend.” On “Angelica,” she laments the tedium of going out:

But I don’t wanna follow you on the ’gram  
I don’t wanna listen to your band  
I don’t know why I haven’t left yet  
Don’t want none of this.

Much of “Wet Leg” addresses the banality of adulthood, and particularly the discombobulating stretch between youth and middle age—from twenty-five to forty, say. (Teasdale is twenty-nine and Chambers is twenty-eight.) In the video for “Too Late Now,” Teasdale and Chambers stumble around in striped bathrobes with cucumber slices over their eyes. A montage gathers some of the more aesthetically unpleasant elements of modern life: cranes, a cigarette butt, Botox, trash spilling from an overstuffed dumpster, graffiti wishing passersby a shit day, fluorescent lights, a pigeon. “I’m not sure if this is the kinda life that I saw myself living,” Teasdale admits. A synthesizer rings out like church bells. Though she never sounds especially devastated, “Too Late Now” is Teasdale’s most tender and revealing vocal performance, and one of the best and most dynamic songs on “Wet Leg.” As children, we’re often desperate to grow up, yet it turns out that adulthood can be ugly and depressing. “I just need a bubble bath to set me on a higher path,” Teasdale intones grimly. I always hear the line as an adroit skewering of the self-care industry and its goofy promises of transcendence—no soak or steam or combination of crystals can undo the realities of tax season, garbage day, and furniture assembly.

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Musically, Wet Leg makes prickly but playful post-punk that often sounds like a cross between the Pixies, Pavement, and Garbage—all beloved stalwarts of the nineties indie-rock scene—but the most obvious point of comparison is Dry Cleaning, another excellent new British band with droll, absurdist lyrics. Both groups built significant followings by putting out weird, enticing singles far in advance of their first albums. Wet Leg managed to sell out most of a U.S. tour after releasing just two tracks. (“Big thank you to everyone that’s bought a ticket after having only heard two songs haha,” the band tweeted.) “Chaise Longue,” Wet Leg’s first single, appeared in June of 2021. Initially, it reminded me of the Breeders’ “Cannonball,” an alt-rock hit from 1993, insofar as it was a song I liked immediately and ferociously, it was bizarre and funny, it was centered on a rubbery guitar riff, and both the lyrics and the delivery (wan, vaguely sardonic, perfectly knowing) reiterated the idea that rock music performed by women did not always have to be concerned with heartbreak—it could also be jokey, stylized, effortless. “Chaise Longue” opens, of course, with a dick joke:

Mummy, Daddy, look at me  
I went to school and I got a degree  
All my friends call it the big D  
I went to school and I got the big D.

Teasdale goes on to quote the film “Mean Girls”—“Is your muffin buttered? Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?”—and to gently entice a potential suitor backstage: “I’ve got a chaise longue in my dressing room / And a pack of warm beer that we can consume.” (Teasdale is fond of purposefully terrible come-ons, and on the single “Wet Dream” she sings, “Baby, do you wanna come home with me / I got ‘Buffalo ’66’ on DVD.”) “Chaise Longue” was an instant hit, in part because it showed two women having the sort of fun—dumb, resolutely laid-back—typically reserved for young men, but mostly because its barrelling melody and loud-quiet-loud architecture made it so joyful to holler along to. The dream of Hot Vax Summer was a ruse, and a cruel one, but Teasdale and Chambers were offering a kind of carefree intimacy. (It sounds silly, but there’s a huge amount of unexpected closeness in a moment on “Chaise Longue” when Teasdale says, “Excuse me?,” and Chambers answers, “What?”)

Wet Leg encourages its listeners to briefly pause their endless fretting and remember what it feels like to be goofy with your best friend for a few hours. Despite the unending heaviness of world events, there is still room for inanity; delight doesn't always need to feel indulgent, and art doesn't need to be sombre or humorless. In the fall, when Teasdale and Chambers were asked about the band's name—"What does it mean to be a wet leg?" the d.j. Jill Riley wondered—they couldn't stop giggling. "That's a nice question," Chambers said. Teasdale added, "It doesn't really mean anything. It's just a reminder to not take yourself too seriously, because, at the end of the day, you're in a band called Wet Leg." ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Listen to Your Mother!](#)

By [Hallie Cantor](#)

Look, honey, we know it's been a hard few years. It's perfectly normal to feel uneasy about making any major life changes right now. But your stepfather and I agree that just because we're currently standing in the shadow of an enormous tsunami still gathering momentum is no reason not to give us a grandchild.

Yes, the tsunami is big. Yes, it's scary. Yes, there's a hundred-per-cent certainty that it will crash down in a matter of minutes and drown everyone in its path. But you know what? *There's always going to be a reason not to do something.*

You don't think my generation had fears? We fought for civil rights! And women's rights! I mean, not us specifically but our contemporaries. And things seemed dark to us, too, when our friends first started having kids. We weren't sure the world would ever be the same after the Exxon Valdez oil spill. But we decided to be brave anyway, and we had you.

And it just makes me so sad to think about what would have happened if we hadn't! I wouldn't have been able to do all those picnics and sing-alongs and Mommy and Me classes with my sweet little curly-haired girl! I probably would have just kept working at the firm and eventually been promoted, and had a whole life and a sense of self outside the domestic sphere. Your father and I might still be together, actually. Hmm.

But, the point is, you wouldn't exist! And now it's time for you to repay us for that.

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Don't tell me that no one in your generation is having kids because of the giant wall of water rising higher and higher every second, nearly engulfing the entire horizon. You know my friend Jeanie? Her son already has *three*. Yes, you did know that. Yes, you did. Remember? I sent you pictures of the blankets I knit for them? Along with the text "When will I get to make one of these for you???" And then "LOL!" and the laughing emoji, so you'd know I wasn't one of *those* moms, who would ever dream of putting pressure on you.

Here's the thing: you don't even know for sure that the tsunami will hit us! No one can predict the future. Maybe they'll find a way to reverse kinetic wave energy in the next sixty seconds. Or at least slow it down! You could have grandkids of your own by the time the thing even crests. Or all your friends will, and you'll be alone, with no one to pay for your nursing home. And how silly will you feel then?

Oh, you have "moral concerns" about consigning an innocent baby to a terrible post-apocalyptic life? O.K., Miss "I took one philosophy course in college and now I refuse to shop at the Gap because it's 'fast fashion,' even though they have some very cute pieces this season." You don't know for sure that a life conceived under an about-to-break tsunami will be *terrible*. It might be *different*, sure. *Underwater*, maybe. But it will still be life! Unless, you know . . . it's death. But there's no getting around death, dear. You're not God.

All I'm saying is, don't overthink it. Procreation is what we're put on earth to do. Literally. We gave birth to you so that you would one day give us a grandchild to squeeze and spoil and bounce on our knees twice a year. You're kind of not holding up your end of the bargain here.

Don't get upset. Why can't you see this as a compliment? We're saying we want another you! A cuter, sweeter, pinker version of you who is too young and dumb to see our flaws!

Yes, things are dark right now. Literally, because the tsunami is blocking out the sun. But standing there frozen in panic and avoiding living your life is, frankly, just self-indulgent. I think you're being a bit dramatic, honestly. You're going to end our genetic line over one little splash of city-demolishing water? *And* the debris it's currently picking up as it rushes closer with deadly speed—I know, I know.

Look, I'm agreeing with you. The catastrophic tsunami filling our field of vision does make things seem pretty hopeless. But that's *all the more reason* to give the whole family something to live for! Not to mention something to talk about at family gatherings that isn't politics! Come on, doesn't that pit of terror at the base of your stomach just make you think about creating a life? *Kids bring hope*. You have to have hope. You just have to!

Will hope slow the enormous tsunami now looming directly above our heads, poised to crash with the force of a speeding bullet train? Probably not. But it will certainly make *me* feel good, in the waning moments of humanity, to be the one posting the chubby-little-thigh pics on Facebook, instead of the one commenting “What a cutie!” and then unnecessarily signing my name to the comment.

Anyway, dear, the top of the wave looks like it’s cresting, so we might have to continue this later. We have to walk the dog before the continent is ravaged. You know your stepfather doesn’t like her paws to get muddy.

Before I let you go: promise me that you’ll at least freeze your eggs. ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [The Romantic Basque-Leaning Food of Ernesto's](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

If anyone objects to the union of two types of anchovies in the *pintxo matrimonio al ajillo* at Ernesto's, a Basque-leaning restaurant on the Lower East Side, speak now and I will eat yours for you. The matrimony of a *boqueron* (plump, meaty, and white, pickled in wine vinegar and olive oil) and an *anchoa* (a dark, skinny, salt-cured umami bomb) is holy indeed, made holier by the kitchen's decision to mount the pair, like prostrate wedding-cake toppers, on a rectangle of delicately crisp, buttery pastry. Though the fillets are separated by a neat line of *ajillo*, a zingy condiment of parsley and garlic, each bite brings them together in perfect harmony.



*The tortilla abierta is topped with paleta ibérico and shaved black truffle.*

I have a feeling that none of the ingredients in the *tortilla abierta con Cinco Jotas*, meanwhile, are married, and if they are it's not to one another. This is not to say that the chemistry isn't electric—to put it politely, this may be the most lascivious dish I've ever encountered, an orgy of egg and potato browned on the edges and left unflipped (*abierta* means "open") before it's slipped from pan to plate. Set atop a wavy wafer-thin cracker, which turns it into finger food, it's layered with slices of acorn-fed *paleta ibérico*, produced by the hundred-and-forty-year-old Spanish brand Cinco Jotas. (*Paleta* comes from a pig's shoulder, as opposed to *jamón*, from the hind.) Finished with a generous blanket of soft curls of heady black truffle, it's a sloppy, salty, slightly stupefying dish.

Truffle is an expensive ingredient that's so often used cheaply, in the figurative sense, to peddle the idea of luxury, regardless of whether it truly belongs in a dish. On the *tortilla*, it felt essential to the bewitching depth of flavor, as did foie gras that had been melted into a port reduction spooned over beautifully rosy slices of grilled duck magret. You can spend a small fortune eating at Ernesto's, but you can also, in my experience, trust the kitchen, led by the chef-partner Ryan Bartlow, who previously worked in San Sebastian, Spain; at Alinea, in Chicago; and at the Frankies Spuntino restaurant group and Frenchette, in New York.



*The Spanish G. & T. is garnished with grapefruit, lime, and rosemary.*

Bartlow knows just what to do with less flashy ingredients, too. The *ensalada mixta*, an unexpectedly beautiful arrangement of Little Gem lettuce hearts, shredded carrot, wedges of beet, silky segments of fat white asparagus, green olives, white onion, and grated hard-boiled egg, is thoroughly satisfying with or without the optional addition of olive-oil-cured tuna from Cantabria. In Catalonia, a *bikini* is a pressed sandwich, named for a Barcelona concert hall, the type of thing you can imagine scarfing late at night on a street corner to stave off a hangover. At Ernesto's, the Bikini Hemingway—house-made *txistorra* (a spicy, quick-cured sausage), Menorcan cheese, and sweet shrimp sheathed in slices of crunchy *pan de cristal*, or glass bread—is quartered, fanned elegantly, and drizzled with honey.



Clockwise from top left: menestra de verduras (braised leeks, carrots, turnips, and peas); Spanish G. & T.; ensalada mixta; tortilla abierta; Bikini Hemingway, a pressed sandwich encasing sausage, cheese, and shrimp. At center: pintxo matrimonio al ajillo.

Even a plate of braised vegetables can be a little sexy: cross-sections of leek, standing upright, brush shoulders with turnips carved to have gemlike facets, pale slivers of pea pod, and geometric knobs of carrot, all glossy with cooking liquid and sprinkled with Espelette pepper. And though the *macarrones con hongos* is essentially stovetop mac and cheese, there's nothing childlike about it; the pasta is enrobed in a velvety sauce, sharp with Idiazabal cheese and garlic, and topped with crispy maitake, yellowfoot, and black-trumpet mushrooms and a splash of parsley oil.



*Each bite of the pintxo matrimonio brings together the distinct flavors of two anchovy fillets.*

I can't help finding it corny that it's Ernesto's as in Ernest, as in Hemingway, but if Papa is Bartlow's muse, so be it—the mood here, in an oasis of a dining room on a fairly desolate block, is as romantic as the food. The enormous round-edged, globe-lit bar is an especially nice place to sit, not least because of the easy-drinking yet civilized cocktails, including the 5 Finger Martini, made with two types of vermouth and sherry instead of the hard stuff, and a bright, effervescent Spanish G. & T., with wheels of lime and grapefruit and sprigs of rosemary in a goblet running over. (*Dishes \$10-\$42.*) ♦

# The Art World

- [A Coherent and Bold Whitney Biennial](#)
- [Among the Goths, Proto-Goths, and Technical Metalheads at an H. R. Giger Show](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

The startlingly coherent and bold Whitney Biennial is a material manifesto of late-pandemic institutional culture. Long on installations and videos and short on painting, conventional sculpture, and straight photography, it is exciting without being especially pleasurable—geared toward thought. The innovative, intimately collaborative curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards ignore rather than oppose pressures of the ever-romping art market, which can see to itself. (The hundreds of contemporary works that are always on view in commercial galleries constitute what might be described as a permanent floating Diurnal.) Delayed for a year by *Covid-19*, the show consolidates a trend that many of us haven't suspected: a sort of fortuitously shared conceptual sensibility that suggests an in-group but is open to all who care about art's relations to the wide world. Even the most expressive of the artists who were selected by Breslin and Edwards seem oriented not to personal feelings but to hard facts of common experience. Away with moonbeams. Does the outward-looking spirit serendipitously coincide with the emotional convulsions occasioned by the war in Ukraine? It does for me.

Any concentration on specific works, many of which require lengthy explanation regarding their motives and nuances, should await registration of the show's collective potency. (I suggest walking through the whole thing quickly, then doubling back to contemplate individual exhibits.) The effect is less cumulative than immediate in each of two main component sections. The museum's vast, sunny fifth floor has been stripped of interior walls to become an open labyrinth of freestanding sculptures and white-painted wooden frameworks that display smaller pieces. The airy structures, in themselves sculptural, are deleterious to paintings and to anything else pictorial, which crave the serenity of flat walls. But the inconvenience to pictures is justifiable by a one-off (not fungible, I hope), terrific curatorial expedient. The gist is an orderly tumult of sensations fed by, and feeding, an impression of besetting emergency.

The Whitney's sixth floor hosts a warren of black-walled spaces that allow for a viewer's immersion in gnomic creations, several of which function in service to the show's most overt embrace of identity politics, keyed to the past and present ordeals of Native Americans in (let's admit it) settler society, and to some of their enduring folkways and evolving artistic

preoccupations. In addition to this focus, there's an omnipresence on both floors—sometimes pointedly so, but in general matter-of-factly—of artists who define themselves as anything other than heterosexual white males, indicating a potential climax after years of strident agitation for diversity. Provisional togetherness reigns. If that seems utopian, so do the frail but stubborn wishes of many of us for a redemption of our multiply fractured America. We needn't stop dreaming even when jarred alert by assaultive realities.



*"ishkode (fire)," by Rebecca Belmore, from 2021. Art work courtesy the artist*

Don't necessarily expect to understand much at a glance. A piece by Rebecca Belmore, an Anishinaabe artist from Canada, "*ishkode (fire)*" (2021), centers on a representation of a sleeping bag, cast in clay, that appears to cocoon a standing figure not otherwise in evidence. Surrounding it, on the floor, are thousands of small-calibre bullet casings intermixed with copper wire. It is beautiful both before you speculate on its thematic aim and after. I single it out for the glory of painstaking design that typifies scores of works in the show. I fancy that pandemic isolation, at once depriving and disburdening artists of career exigencies, has fostered lonely cultivations of perfection. The Biennial's title this year, "*Quiet as It's Kept*," is that of a 1960 Max Roach album, and was subsequently employed in Toni Morrison's novel "*The Bluest Eye*," in 1970, and for a show that was curated in 2002 by David Hammons, the New York provocateur in many mediums. The phrase

befits art that, emerging from a spell of obscurity, is as insistent as an unexpected tap on the shoulder.

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Perfect, as a matter of course, are figures, placed outdoors on a fifth-floor terrace, by the commanding Californian sculptor Charles Ray. Hand-formed and then cast or machined in metal, three outsized, seated men—unprepossessing, regular guys, by the look of them—impose a force field of held-breath aesthetic tension and laconic pathos. A few other established stars on hand and in good form include Alfredo Jaar, Ellen Gallagher, Jane Dickson, Nayland Blake, and the late Jason Rhoades. But the bulk of the Biennial is devoted to artists unfamiliar to me, whose outputs run the gamut from hanging fabrics to compact narratives. Of incidental note is proof that video art, after nearly half a century of self-conscious experimentation, has come of age: a camera is as second-nature and ready to hand for many artists now as a pencil or a paintbrush. The scant paintings on view reverse an emphasis on figurative imagery in the 2019 Biennial, tilting toward a lately prevalent revival of abstraction in perfervid styles that have yet to demonstrate staying power.

A collection of photographic works by the Laos-born artist Pao Houa Her both document and poeticize her Hmong family and community in North America. There are fifty-two of the images, and none too many. The sense of an intricately braided history, unfolding in the present while irradiated by memory, left me with an appetite for still more. Such gestation in personal testimony, distanced aesthetically, is another frequent tone of the show. It infuses a poem by the mystically inclined N. H. Pritchard, a Caribbean-parented New Yorker who was steeped in art history, and was a member of the Umbra Poets Workshop, a group of Black writers who met on the Lower East Side in the nineteen-sixties. He died in 1996, at the age of fifty-six. “Red Abstract / fragment” (1968-69) is a lyrical verse text typewritten on a brushy red ground and scribbled with restive cross-outs, revisions, and notes. Its meanings dance at the edge of comprehension, but with infectious improvisatory rhythms.



"Untitled (Tais Kai)," by Pao Houa Her, from "The Imaginative Landscape," from 2017. Art work courtesy the artist and Bockley Gallery

The quality of personhood turned inside out sings in a poignant film by the South Korean-born Berkeley graduate Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, which is projected on translucent cloth and includes haunting portraits—eyes closed alternating with eyes open—of the artist and of a sister of hers. In 1982, at the age of thirty-one, Cha, a tremendously erudite linguistic philosopher (concerned, she wrote, with “the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue”) and novelist as well as artist, was raped and murdered in New York, at the Puck Building, by a security guard. She figures in the Biennial as a too-little-recognized progenitor of ideas and forms that are still in play for art and nowhere near exhausted.

It's not new for the Biennial to include deceased artists who seem relevant to present creative tendencies. The show has served, traditionally, not only to update the public on the state of contemporary art—mostly American, of course, that being a mandate emblazoned in the museum's name—but also to propose benchmarks and challenges for upcoming generations, even by welcoming some foreign talents of local note. What sets this edition apart, for me, is the determined consistency of its taste in this respect, which avoids the baggy eclecticism that has enfeebled some years' exhibitions. (Will our city's art people love the result? Nah. Hating the Biennial is practically a civic duty, or a pledge of un-allegiance, for cognoscenti hereabouts—and bless us for that, as it fuels the contrarian passion that

makes New Yorkers crave to be better than . . . well, whatever you've got.) I won't forget the shock of learning Cha's terrible fate. I was assailed by it, having first discovered and savored her work—stumbling from delight to horror in a few minutes. But the delight abides. Where art is concerned, death need be no more than an inconvenience, and, as in the case of Pritchard, being all but invisible may turn out to have been merely a speed bump.

Even among the living, death broods here and there in the catacomb-like sixth-floor rooms, where it finds explicit reference in my favorite work in the show. Indelibly disturbing and entralling, "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word" (2021), by the veteran Cuban American artist and singularly plainspoken social activist Coco Fusco, is a gorgeous twelve-minute video exploration of Hart Island—New York's potter's field for unidentified or unclaimed corpses. Shots of the artist laboring in a rowboat along its shores are intercut with drone overviews of a really quite lovely place where rows of small stone markers perfunctorily memorialize innumerable lost lives. Beauty stands in for unconsummated mourning. The work can seem to invoke the cascading fatalities of the *Covid* pandemic and, by chance, the remorseless current carnage in Ukraine, whereby the destruction of so many people occasions news headlines as sullen as those stones. To be alive now is to be overwhelmed by a consciousness of the untimely dead, who, in Ukraine, have resigned their parts in a drama of ever more urgent military, political, and humanitarian imperatives. Their silence roars.

On a far less dire but, in itself, weirdly elegiac note is "64,000 Attempts at Circulation" (2021), by the young Queens artist Rose Salane. It consists of tables heaped with incredibly various slugs—metal washers, casino and arcade tokens, religious medals, play money, and what all—that were used as counterfeit bus fare in New York between 2017 and 2019. (Salane acquired them at a Metropolitan Transit Authority auction of unwanted assets.) Call the content misdemeanor populism, representing in each instance the recourse of someone motivated by need or only petty cupidity. Most of those folks, if not including (shh!) ourselves, still walk among us, mute testifiers to the cussedness of humanity chafing at the constraints of law. The disconcertingly handsome ensemble drolly epitomizes this Biennial's predominant detour, for now, from exalting autonomous art to

braving the routine chaos of a world where no kind of comfort or conviction can be sure to persist from one day to the next. ♦

By [Hannah Seidlitz](#)

One recent Sunday evening, Alexander Shulan, the thirty-three-year-old owner of the Lomex Gallery, in Tribeca, was pacing the space, worrying about his gallery's potential ruin. In a couple of hours, as part of the first major New York retrospective of the Swiss artist H. R. Giger since his death, in 2014, Shulan was staging an avant-metal concert, which, fearing pandemonium, he'd decided not to publicize. He'd heard things about past Giger shows. Two fans had played football inside a gallery in New York. In Berlin, Julian Schnabel had opened an exhibition the same day as Giger's; a handful showed up for Schnabel and thousands queued around the block for Giger. At the opening of the Lomex show, in January, hundreds had swarmed the tiny space, despite a nor'easter. Some visitors had been reduced to tears, a few pulling back sleeves or pant legs to reveal tattoos that matched the art. "It's a pilgrimage," Shulan said.



Shulan, who had on black jeans, a black button-down, and black sneakers, has revered Giger since he was a teen-ager. "It was this obsession for me," he said. "I met his agent five years ago through Facebook." Giger is best known for designing the creature in Ridley Scott's "Alien," but he also created some nightmarish album artwork, for such musicians as Danzig, the Dead Kennedys, and Debbie Harry. He'd never heard of Harry before he met her (and became smitten), in 1980, on a trip to the States to collect his

visual-effects Oscar for “Alien.” In 2002, he pulled up to the last major American exhibition of his work in a hearse. Something of a proto-goth, he kept company with Salvador Dalí and Timothy Leary.

In the gallery, Shulan was scheming with his assistants *pro tempore* (a gaggle of clipboard-wielding young women in black) when the expected throng of Lower East Side scenesters and new Pratt grads flooded in. The throne Giger designed for Alejandro Jodorowsky’s never-made “Dune” adaptation was the first thing they saw. “My son would love it for gaming,” a guest named Matthew Rosenberg said, peering at the nearly seven-foot-tall glossy black chair modelled on a human skeleton.

“Imagine being a Twitch streamer in that thing,” another man said to his friend. They both agreed that “Alien” was a perfect movie and took a minute to appreciate some of Giger’s prototypes: “All the penis images. He kinda based the head of the alien off of a penis,” one said. The friend nodded thoughtfully.

Across the room, the former d.j. DB Burkeman, in joggers and a Mike Kelley T-shirt, was arguing with a painter about the origins of tentacle porn. Before them was a wall of three white-on-black prints from a series Giger did in 1969 of body-horror biomechs—part female viscera, part Ace Hardware.

“My son was telling me this is like the anime thing?” Burkeman said.

“Hentai,” an onlooker offered.

“It’s sexual,” Erik Foss, the former co-owner of the Lit Lounge, said. “It’s violent, but it’s sensual at the same time.” Suddenly, the lights flashed off and on and people headed toward the door. “What’s happening?” a woman shrouded in earth-toned cashmere asked.

“A shredding,” a security guard said.

“I’ll keep my mind open so it can get blown,” she said, following the crowd up a flight of stairs.

In a loft above the gallery, dark but for a single strobe light, people gathered around a bearded man whose shadow was projected monstrously onto the brick wall behind him. This was Ocrilim (his bio on Google lists his date of birth as 1900). He held a Gibson guitar, similar to the model used by Angus Young, of AC/DC.

“It’s like a poetry reading,” a girl in a chore coat and Doc Martens said.

“He has long hair, so that means he’s connected to some crazy biorhythm,” her friend said.

Without a word, the shredding commenced. The Gibson screeched. In the very back of the room, an art student whispered to a friend, “Technical metal is nerdy.”

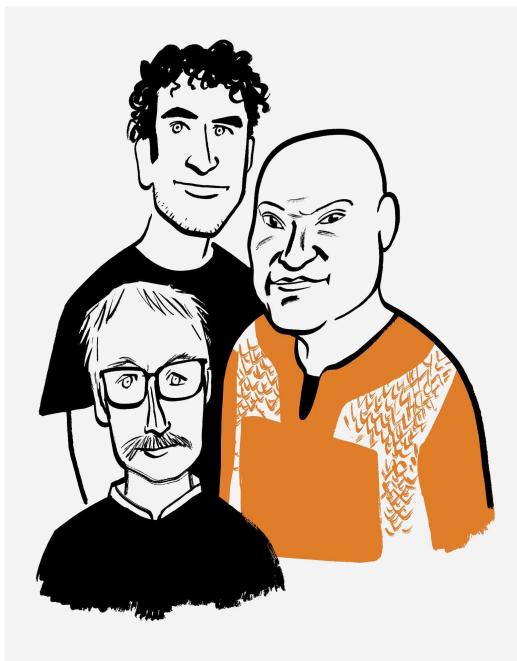
“*Exaltedly* nerdy,” his friend corrected. ♦

# The Boards

- What Do Shakespeare and Mamet Have in Common?

By [Sarah Larson](#)

Laurence Fishburne, Sam Rockwell, and Darren Criss, who star in the Broadway revival of David Mamet’s “American Buffalo,” at Circle in the Square, and Neil Pepe, who directs it, met up the other day at a West Side thrift shop called No Particular Hours (“Vintage Goods / Industrial Artifacts / Dead People’s Things”). The play, from 1975, is about three desperate characters in a junk shop; the group had planned to visit one in March, 2020, shortly before the show’s opening; two years later, there they were. The proprietor, Jerry Lerner—tall, grizzled, fisherman’s cap—let them wander, offering occasional commentary. (Of a carved statue: “I used to call that Bali Parton.”) The shop, a chockablock riot of curiosities—wagon-wheel chandelier here, helmeted mannequin head there—was a bit more festive than the “Buffalo” set, and the actors were a bit snazzier than their onstage counterparts. Fishburne (Donny, the junk-shop owner) wore an African-print-inspired combo from Moshood, of Brooklyn (“I modelled for them in the eighties”), with a drawstring waist. Criss (Bobby, Donny’s slow-witted gofer) gestured at his own plaid pants, and said, “I’m also rocking the drawstring.” Rockwell (Teach, their ne’er-do-well friend) looked mischievous—rascally mustache, sweater with “*HIGH END*” in colorful letters. “It’s just a sweater I got because I’m a Hollywood phony,” he said, smirking. Criss and Fishburne laughed. “I’m a dickhead, and I wore a dickish sweater,” he said. They laughed more.



“American Buffalo,” a blunt, staccato symphony of F-bombs, haplessness, and simmering rage, centers on a scheme to steal a valuable nickel and culminates in mayhem. Pepe, a prolific director of Mamet with the presence of a director of much gentler fare, leafed through a bin of old wrenches. “We’ve been talking about what makes a lot of noise,” he said. “There’s stuff that happens physically—it will all be choreographed, hopefully, so that all is safe.” Fishburne got intrigued by an old brass fire extinguisher; earthenware jugs (“Jugs, baby! Now, that’s *country*”), one of which he blew into, jug-band style; and an early-twentieth-century toaster, which he picked up and carried around.

“Our shop is not as nice as this,” Rockwell said. “We don’t have a ‘Clash of the Titans’ poster. Boy, I would buy that.” He crossed to a wall of old posters. “Or ‘Carmen Jones,’ ” Fishburne said. “I have the one from ‘Black Orpheus.’ ”

“Dude, that Harry Belafonte–Danny Kaye video you sent me was *awesome*,” Rockwell said. They fist-bumped. Which video? Criss asked.

“It’s called ‘Mama Look a Boo-Boo,’ ” Fishburne said.

“Belafonte was a real sex symbol,” Rockwell said. A feed bag caught his eye. “‘Purina Goat Chow,’ ” he read. “I had that for breakfast.”

In 2020, they had rehearsed for three weeks before everything shut down, then continued for several more weeks via FaceTime. “This is the longest I’ve prepared for any show in my entire life,” Criss said. Pepe said that he hoped it would feel “lived in.” Fishburne said, “I’ve wanted to do this play since I was a kid.” When “Buffalo” first made waves, he added, “I was in the Philippines, doing ‘Apocalypse Now,’ ”—but “the talk of it . . . this play changed shit for the American theatre. Nobody had used language like this before.” Pepe said, “All of a sudden, Mamet’s doing iambic with the stuff of the streets.”

Mamet wrote “American Buffalo” while living in Chicago and hanging around with poker players in a junk shop. “Some of the guys were ex-cons,

and in the business of thievery,” Pepe said. “He would hear their stories. The play has this idea of wanting a bigger piece of the pie.”

“‘Gatsby’s Tennis Nets,’ ” Fishburne said, reading a tag aloud.

On a counter in front, a wooden box displayed a mysterious object: ivory-like, rounded, and carved with dancing skeletons. The visitors leaned in. “I was cleaning out an apartment, and I said, ‘Oh, nice bowl,’ right?” Lerner said. “Then I turned it over and said, ‘Holy crap.’ ”

“It’s a turtle shell,” Fishburne said.

“It’s the top of somebody’s skull,” Lerner said.

“Holy shit!” Criss said. “That is *intense!* ”

“It’s a real *kapala*, from Tibet,” Lerner said. “They drank blood out of that thing.” Fishburne picked up the *kapala* and put it on his head. Actors, skull: Had anybody done “Hamlet”?

“I did the famous speech at my high-school graduation,” Fishburne said.

“To be or not to be, that *is* the question,” Criss said.

“I like ‘O, what a rogue,’ I like ‘O, that this too, too solid flesh,’ ” Rockwell said. “I think those are funner.”

“Shakespeare and Mamet, to me, are extremely similar,” Criss said. He compared the musicality to a Coltrane riff.

“Even though it’s a bunch of dudes saying dirty words, they’re actually extremely vulnerable,” Rockwell said.

“The junk shop is a fence, it’s a front, it’s a clubhouse,” Pepe said.

“It’s their home,” Fishburne said. “When you start digging, you realize, Oh, yeah—this is very sweet.” ♦

# The Theatre

- Husbands and Wives in “Plaza Suite”

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

These past few years have changed my taste, and not just in theatre. The sensory deprivations of social distance and the funk of onrushing bad news have made me deeply hungry for fun. I've never believed in a zero-sum struggle between entertainment and serious art, but lately entertainment has been winning the day. In the morning, I spring for the *Post* and the *Daily News*, with their lurid excitement and unambivalent staccato sentences, before turning to the *Times*. I watch TV singing competitions in hyper-saturated color and laugh like a kid. (Have you seen "The Masked Singer"? It rots your molars like a plate of fried dough.) Two weeks ago, I caught "House of Gucci"—a rococo carnival of a movie—and it soothed me like a Saturday-morning cartoon.

I'm not the only one, it seems. Our city recently elected a Fun Mayor, Eric Adams, whose most urgent appeal is for New Yorkers to loosen up, get outside, and turn that frown upside down. His promises to bring "swagger" (one of his watchwords) back to New York may be vapid, but their emotional power is real, rooted in a cunning commingling of place, nostalgia, and generational self-pity—a sense that, if only history hadn't happened, we'd be carrying on like those older, happier New Yorkers on TV and in the movies.

So perhaps it's good timing for the new Broadway production of Neil Simon's "Plaza Suite," a trio of one-act plays, directed by John Benjamin Hickey, at the Hudson Theatre. The recently renovated Hudson, handsome in turquoise and glittering green, is redolent of a grander and more elegant New York, and so is the Plaza Hotel, where each of the one-acts takes place. They're all set in Room 719, where the crown molding is sharp, the wood trimmings shine, and the gold patina on the curtains shimmers gently. The production has its problems: it's big, broad, silly, sometimes dated, often emotionally obtuse. But something about Simon's charming insistence on the two-sidedness of life—on an inexplicable lightness that abides even as stunted adults wade through the dark corners of romantic relationships, blithely incurring a fallout that they can't control and barely notice, until it's too late—matches my mood.

Each play is essentially a two-hander, with brief appearances from hotel waitstaff and other secondary characters. Each couple is played by the real-

life spouses Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick, whose personas—  
together and as individuals—hover over Simon’s text and add new meaning  
to it. In the first one-act, “Visitor from Mamaroneck,” Parker and Broderick  
are Karen and Sam, an aging married couple staying at the Plaza for their  
anniversary—although they argue about the day and the year of their  
wedding—and failing the basic test of mutual kindness.

Karen strains futilely to bring enchantment back to the marriage, in part by  
trying—like Mayor Adams—to bring enchantment back to New York itself.  
But the city won’t coöperate. The Savoy-Plaza has been razed, and the old  
view of that grand hotel has been replaced by the big, graphic stripes of the  
General Motors building. “I guarantee you Central Park comes down in five  
years,” Karen says to the bellhop (Eric Wiegand) who’s helped her up to the  
room. “Five years from now, you’ll look out this window, and you’ll see one  
little tree and the world’s largest A. & P.”

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It’s striking to see Parker, who starred in “Sex and the City,” in a role like  
this. Her face, with its humorous eyes and big, bright teeth, is everlastingly  
associated with New York as a canvas for raucous fun and romantic  
adventure. But, of course, that show is now almost a quarter century old, and  
the hot spots for which it served as a de-facto tourist guide have mostly  
faded. (The reboot, “And Just Like That . . .,” seems to agree.) To watch  
Parker play a middle-aged woman—Karen could be forty-seven or forty-  
eight; she’s got a counting problem—flailing to summon the older New York  
she fell in love with is to meditate on the belatedness of our ideas about the  
city. It feels done, washed up—the fun is in the past.

Something similar, if slightly stranger, is happening with Broderick’s  
performance. No matter how old the actor gets, he retains the air of boyish  
mischief that he became famous for in 1986, when he played Ferris Bueller.  
Here, he often comes off as an only slightly older Bueller, dressed up in  
order to mock the oafish adult men he hopes never to become. The  
hairpieces and eyebrows and other follicular adjustments made to  
Broderick’s face by the wig honcho Tom Watson—the wig-and-makeup  
director at the Metropolitan Opera, that stubborn repository of New York

glamour—are punch lines in themselves, sly digs at passing male fashions and monstrous vanities.

Broderick plays Sam as a bland asshole having a textbook midlife crisis. He obsesses over his weight, is magnetized to his own image in the hotel-suite mirrors, and is unrelentingly mean and condescending to his wife. “Plaza Suite” débuted in 1968, and some ambient attitudes of that era, particularly where women are concerned, cling to this production. It’s hard to parse, in places, whether Sam’s exasperation toward Karen is meant to point to his poor temper or to be an appropriate response to her clichéd dottiness. Parker’s innate wit pulls against, and nicely complicates, several moments that have the whiff of casual misogyny, but the pattern of hapless and vaguely annoying women in all three sketches is hard to miss.

In the second one-act, Parker and Broderick play Muriel and Jesse. They were high-school boyfriend and girlfriend in the suburb of Tenafly, New Jersey—a town whose mere mention gets a big laugh. Now Jesse’s a famous Hollywood producer who lives in Humphrey Bogart’s old house, and Muriel’s a P.T.A. member whose claim to fame is an appearance in the Tenafly newspaper after winning the mother-and-daughter potato race. Jesse’s at the Plaza on business, and it’s clear that Muriel, increasingly buzzed on vodka Stingers, is overawed less by Jesse than by the exalted, faraway existence that he represents. They’re talking past each other: she wants a celebrity fantasy, and he, after a pair of bad show-biz marriages, wants to idealize his provincial childhood.

It’s the funniest and most purely enjoyable of the pieces, a sweet but tart confection, containing all the fun highs and the awkward lows of the show. Broderick, wearing a big, shiny brown wig and a dark turtleneck, seems to be performing Mike Myers-inspired sketch comedy, and Parker shows off her chops as a physical comedian, doing her best Lucille Ball. The two sometimes seem to be in different plays, but, man, are they having fun. Simon’s tennis-volley dialogue, densely witty, captures perfectly how hopelessly stuck in the past each of them is. The play has some ironies in the present, too: there’s a funny riff on the Los Angeles Rams, who, having skipped town in 1995 and headed to St. Louis, have lately returned to Southern California, where they won the Super Bowl earlier this year. Everything old comes rumbling back.

The director, Hickey, is also an actor; I last saw him in the playlike TV drama “In Treatment,” as a full-blown narcissist facing off with his court-ordered therapist. He knows two-handers, and he navigates Simon’s dialogue gracefully, choreographing Broderick and Parker’s movements to grab a few extratextual laughs from the crowd.

Mostly, though, it’s just a good time seeing Parker dressed up in tacky clothes and Broderick with big whiskers for eyebrows. In the final one-act, “Visitor from Forest Hills,” they play crestfallen parents of the bride. Parker is in vivid pastels, looking like an even more smudged version of Monet’s water lilies. Broderick’s in a horrible morning suit. Both actors use the thin drama—their daughter won’t leave the bathroom and get married—as an excuse to play to the back of the balcony, to mug and grin and do gags, daring you not to crack a smile amid the flaws. Sometimes that’s enough. ♦

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