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Content

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Within two weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, millions of people had decided to flee the country. Russian forces had killed hundreds of civilians, and missiles had destroyed schools, homes, and hospitals. Ukrainians who chose to leave—after a nearby explosion, or a panicked message from a relative—carried only a bag or two each, crammed with necessities such as warm clothes and phone chargers. Many refugees also brought their cats. Ukrainians are crazy about cats.

The main route out was west. Space on westbound trains was so tight that most passengers stood the entire journey—sometimes more than twenty hours—and children reached the bathroom by adults passing them overhead. Many trains from central and eastern Ukraine terminated in Lviv, an elegant city forty-five miles from the Polish border.

The Ukrainians leaving the country were generally women, children, seniors, and foreigners—President Volodymyr Zelensky had declared martial law and a general mobilization, meaning that men between the ages of eighteen and sixty were obliged to stay. To reach the Polish border from Lviv, you had to take a train, a bus, or a private car. Some people walked the whole way. At 10 *a.m.* on March 9th, a frigid Wednesday, the line to catch a train to Poland snaked around the enormous concourse of Lviv's Holovnyi Station. (Fifty thousand refugees passed through the station that day.) Near the main door, a sign indicated a wait time of eight hours. Hundreds stood beyond the sign. People at the end of the line told me that they had no idea where in Poland they might go. They just wanted to escape.

Outside the station, bus drivers advertised trips to various locations on the border. A minibus driver named Pavlo offered passage to Shehyni, just east of the Polish border, for the equivalent of ten dollars. He was leaving immediately, and, because there were still a few free seats, my translator and I got on. Sitting across the aisle from me was a slim woman wearing a beige puffer jacket. She had wavy auburn hair and ice-blue eyes, and she held two cats in a carrier on her lap. In the row behind her were two young girls, both

dressed in bright ski jackets and pants. The woman was looking out the window at a tall man with a birdlike face, who wore a charcoal-colored hat. He returned her gaze.

Pavlo started the engine. The man placed his hand on the glass. The woman placed her palm on the other side of the windowpane. The man removed his hand as the bus drove off. After a few yards, some pedestrians walked in front of the bus, forcing it to stop. The man ran to catch up with the bus and waved. The woman waved back, as did the older girl, but the younger one was facing the other way and missed the moment.

The woman let out a long breath, closed her eyes, and gathered herself. Then she opened her eyes, turned to me, and said, in English, “Here we go.”

The woman’s name was Inna Blahonravina, and her daughters were Sasha, seven, and Oliviia, five. Inna was born in Kharkiv in 1978, an only child. Kharkiv, in the northeast, was then an important university town and industrial hub within the Soviet Union; it is now Ukraine’s second-largest city. Inna’s mother, Svetlana, was a physician who grew up in Crimea. Inna’s father drank heavily and, in her words, “wasn’t such a good dad.” The couple divorced in 1986.

As a schoolchild, Inna lived with her mother in a brutalist high-rise in Saltivka, a neighborhood dominated by such behemoths. She didn’t like the area where she grew up. There was nothing to do after school, so teen-agers found mischief. “It was just us and the streets,” Inna said. But she didn’t chase boys or drink beer; her grades were always good.

In 1991, the U.S.S.R. collapsed, and Kharkiv became part of an independent Ukraine. Svetlana did not celebrate these events. In a recent conversation, she told me, “We could not imagine ourselves without Russia. We might have had independence on paper, but, in truth, we did not have it—nor did we want it.” She viewed Russia as superior to other countries. Inna saw little evidence for this: their life in the Soviet Union had been lean, with Svetlana paid meagrely for her medical work.

Eventually, Svetlana abandoned medicine and started exporting cheap goods from Ukraine to Russia, where she sold them for a profit. She spent much of

Inna's teen-age years working abroad, leaving her alone for weeks at a time. Svetlana's sister, Lyuda, also lived in Kharkiv, and Inna sometimes stopped by for hot soup. Increasingly, though, she became self-reliant. Even when Svetlana was home, she rarely showed her daughter affection. "My mother raised a soldier," Inna said.

Inna was an excellent pianist—"It was maybe my only talent," she told me—but Svetlana pushed her to pursue an academic path. At sixteen, Inna began studying economics at the Kharkiv Polytechnic University. As a junior, she won a one-year scholarship to an international program at Magdeburg University, in Germany. The program was in English, and she became fluent, also picking up a little German. Inna returned to Kharkiv and completed her degree, and in 2001 she got a job teaching economics. Earning money for the first time in her life, she grew more assertive. She had always wanted to ride horses. Svetlana didn't approve: riding was expensive and dangerous. Inna booked lessons anyway.

During this period, Inna met a man named Maksym Blahonravin, who was taking lessons at the same equestrian school. He was four years older and worked as a journalist for the Interfax news agency. He told Inna that his office computer was connected to the Internet. Inna didn't have access to the Web at home, and mentioned that she wanted to look up some information about her favorite comedy show. Maksym invited her to visit the Interfax building; they agreed to meet up that Saturday. Maksym arrived with a bouquet of flowers, and while Inna used the Internet she noticed that Maksym kept fussing over her, offering her tea and arranging the flowers in a vase. She was unaccustomed to pampering and became flustered, but they started to date. About a year later, they were married.



Maksym Blahonravin, in Mukachevo. When his wife and children fled Ukraine, he remained in the country. His work, which involves protecting the domains of government Web sites from hackers, is considered part of the war effort. Photograph by Anastasia Taylor-Lind for The New Yorker

In 2002, Maksym's agency posted him to Kyiv, and Inna soon joined him there, working for an Internet-service provider. They rented a cheap apartment and saved money for vacations to places like Georgia and Azerbaijan; they also travelled within Ukraine. More than once, they visited Mukachevo, a charming city in the southwest with cobblestoned streets. It was especially beautiful there when the cherry blossoms came out.

The couple eventually made a down payment on a small apartment in Kyiv. Maksym was handy, and he and Inna refurbished the place themselves. By the end of 2013, Inna was pregnant, and the shape their lives would take seemed clear. Then a series of protests began at Independence Square.

For Inna, the protests lit a fire. The government, led by Viktor Yanukovych, had arbitrarily reversed the Ukrainian parliament's decision to ally with the European Union, deepening ties with Russia instead. Demonstrators camped out in the square for months, and several times state police attacked them; about a hundred protesters were killed. For the first time in Inna's life, she was galvanized by politics. She tried to join the demonstrations, but male protesters forbade her to enter the encampment because she was pregnant. Instead, she brought food there.

By April, 2014, Yanukovych had fled the country, Russia had annexed Crimea, and pro-Russian rallies had started in the eastern Donbas region—with separatists declaring parts of it independent. The separatists, backed by the Russian military, began fighting the Ukrainian Army. Inna and Maksym’s first child, Sasha, was born as the Donbas conflict began. While on maternity leave, Inna joined a group of women providing support to Ukrainian troops. She looked after her family during the day and wove camouflage nets at night. “I don’t remember when I got sleep,” she told me.

Inna argued with her mother about this volunteer work. She recalled, “My mom was saying, ‘What are you doing? Don’t get into politics. It’s not your world.’ It was the first time in my life that I told her to shut up.”

Maksym also supported the protesters, though his parents, Yuri and Lyudmila, were even more pro-Russian than Svetlana was. (“Their values remained in the U.S.S.R.”) Maksym told me. “They could not get used to, or adapt to, Ukraine.”) In 2014, Maksym heard that, at a rally in Kharkiv, Yuri had chanted, “Putin, bring in the troops!” Maksym knew that his mother held the same views. He vowed to never again discuss politics with them. Inna and Maksym still loved their parents, and spoke to them often, but the tumult of 2014 created an intergenerational froideur.

In 2016, Inna and Maksym had a second daughter, Oliviia. Inna, remembering her own childhood, lavished physical affection on her daughters. Maksym was now working in communications for a tech company that operated online domains for the Ukrainian government. Inna took a junior position at a securities-trading company. The couple didn’t have much disposable income; Inna’s starting salary barely covered child care. She and Maksym were proud to be Ukrainian, but they weren’t blind to the country’s problems: among them, widespread corruption and a barely functioning legal system. They sometimes discussed immigrating, perhaps to the Czech Republic, but in the end they couldn’t imagine living anywhere other than Kyiv.

Inna’s work didn’t thrill her, but she eventually found something that did. At forty, having suffered for years from a bad back, she was advised to start swimming. At her local pool, an instructor saw her thrashing around. (“I don’t know what you’re doing, but it’s certainly not swimming,” Inna

remembers him saying.) She started lessons and improved rapidly. Soon, she was training with a swim team called LevelUp. After her first competition, she was on the bus home when her coach called, urging her to return: she'd placed third in her race, and had won a medal. Sasha joined Inna at LevelUp, and also became a strong swimmer.

Inna discovered that she loved open-water swimming. She entered a three-kilometre race in the Dnieper River and two eight-kilometre races in the Black Sea. Within two years of taking up the sport, she was one of the best swimmers of her age in Kyiv. She was excited to realize her athletic potential, but swimming also fed a rising sense of independence—even rebelliousness. “I have always been a good girl,” she said. “Only in my forties have I not been such a good girl all the time.”

In July, 2021, Inna entered a sixteen-kilometre race in the Siverskyi Donets River. Her interest in the event was not purely athletic. The Siverskyi Donets is in the Donbas, and the race finished outside the Sviatohirsk Lavra, a beautiful monastery, with a cave complex, that is one of the holiest sites in Ukraine. The monastery is a stronghold of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was then loyal to Moscow. (It recently revoked its fealty.) Inna saw the staging of the race in that contested spot as a defiant act—to show that the Donbas is Ukraine.”

Before the race started, the swimmers gathered on the riverbank across from the monastery. Someone began singing the Ukrainian national anthem, and everybody else joined in, loudly, to make sure that the priests heard them.

On the evening of Wednesday, February 23, 2022, Inna made dinner, then went online to check timetables for trains to Sumy, a city on Ukraine’s northern border with Russia. A regional swimming championship was being held there in a week and a half, and Sasha was competing. Although the news was filled with talk of a possible Russian invasion, Inna wasn’t concerned. It just can’t happen, she thought.

The next morning, Russian troops entered Sumy, and many other parts of Ukraine. Inna and Maksym tried to stay calm, but it wasn’t easy: a battle broke out at an airbase just outside Kyiv. The government announced plans to distribute weapons to civilians.

The family remained in their apartment, which was on the sixth floor. Explosions rattled the area. The next night, the children were awakened by a bang—a missile had struck a building next to a nearby sports complex where Inna often swam. Oliviia saw a red flash out the window and began to cry.

Inna and Maksym explained to the girls, “Putin has attacked, there is war,” but they said little else. The couple decided that when an air-raid siren sounded it was safer to stay home than to go to a shelter, where they might get trapped. They taped the windows, to prevent the glass from shattering in a blast wave. Maksym insisted that he alone should leave the building, to buy food and supplies. Like many Ukrainian men, he inquired at his local recruitment center about joining the Territorial Defense Forces, a national reserve. Maksym had not held a gun in twenty-five years, since his weapons training in college. A queue snaked outside the recruitment office. A man in line told him that the center, overwhelmed with volunteers, was currently seeking younger candidates.

Inna began asking Maksym, “Should we leave?” For the first five days after the invasion, he demurred, arguing that the war might end quickly. But conditions worsened. Medical clinics shut down. Food lines grew long. More rockets pummelled Kyiv. News channels carried satellite images of a vast column of Russian troops descending from the north. The girls were sleeping, fully dressed, on mattresses that had been moved onto the floor in the center of the apartment. Inna and Maksym could tell that the crisis was affecting them psychologically.

Early on the morning of March 1st, Maksym said to Inna, “It’s time.” They packed hurriedly, not knowing if they’d ever return. Each girl took a backpack. Sasha’s had the phrase “*LOVE THE EARTH*” printed on it, in English. Inna and Maksym put two of their three cats, Murka and Vasia, in a carrier. The third, Banderas, named after Antonio Banderas, was old and sick. Inna left him with a neighbor. (Before long, the neighbor was caring for a menagerie of abandoned pets: eight cats and three dogs.)

Inna spent a moment thinking about a nonessential item to bring. In her jewelry box, she found an inexpensive gold necklace with a pendant in the shape of the Cyrillic letter “И”: “I,” for “Inna.” Her mother-in-law had given

it to her as a birthday gift long ago. She'd rarely worn it, but, for reasons she couldn't then articulate, she took it with her.

Before they left, Inna gave her daughters some jewelry of their own: rubber bracelets with stickers bearing their names and phone numbers. "I said not to take those off," she told me. "I thought, If the girls are lost, or dead, we can identify them."

It was the first time that Inna and the girls had been outside since the war began. Their neighborhood, normally bustling, was desolate. An air-raid siren howled. The transformation of these familiar surroundings struck Inna as dreamlike. They made it to the local rail station and onto a packed train bound for Lviv. Inna stood for nine hours, pressed against strangers. To change her foot position, she had to arrange a pas de deux with the person standing next to her.

Once in Lviv, the family headed to the apartment of a friend of Maksym's, who had offered them a room for a few days. From there, they could decide if it was safe to return to Kyiv, or if Inna and the girls should move abroad.

Going home, they soon concluded, wasn't wise. The day the family escaped, a Russian missile blew up the Kyiv Television Tower. News reports warned that the capital could soon be encircled, and that a siege might begin.



"Once again, the score is tied."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

A plan crystallized: Inna and the girls would travel to Warsaw with Svitlana Tkachenko, a colleague of Maksym's, who had friends there. These friends could host them for a few nights. Then they would continue on to a suburb of Munich called Olching, where Maksym's second cousin, Yelena, lived with her husband, Rainer, a federal policeman. Maksym hadn't seen Yelena since he was ten, and Inna had never met her, but Maksym had contacted her and explained the family's dire situation. Rainer and Yelena had three children and lived in a modest house, but they had offered shelter unconditionally. Maksym, meanwhile, would travel from Lviv to Mukachevo, where his company had relocated several staff members. He would sign up with the reservists there.

For Inna, the thought of her amiable, slight husband joining the military was a source of both pride and anxiety. But she was more worried about the safety of her mother, her aunt Lyuda, and Lyuda's son, Oleksandr. They were all living together in Lyuda's apartment, in Kharkiv—a city under savage bombardment. A few years earlier, Lyuda had suffered a stroke, becoming paralyzed, and now took epilepsy medication to control her muscle spasms. Oleksandr, who was hard of hearing, had given up his job as a carpenter to care for her. When the war began, Svetlana refused to leave her sister's bedside: as a trained doctor, she could safely administer medicines.

Lyuda's apartment was on the seventh floor of a tower in Saltivka, which was suffering frequent artillery strikes. The building's elevator was disabled. There was no hot water and often no heating, and outside temperatures sometimes dropped below fifteen degrees. Svetlana was sixty-nine, Lyuda sixty-four. Maksym and Inna transferred money to Svetlana's account, but many A.T.M.s in Kharkiv were out of cash. Most days, Svetlana or Oleksandr spent hours waiting for food and medicine at a humanitarian market, then hauled everything up the stairs. Oleksandr once got frostbite on his cheek while waiting in line. Inna desperately wanted her family to escape Kharkiv, but how could you evacuate a disabled woman? "They are very tired," Inna told me. "And things are going worse."

Maksym escorted his family and Svitlana, his colleague, onto the minibus bound for Shehyni; from there, they would enter Poland on foot. A man named Andrzej would meet them and drive them to Warsaw, where they would spend the night with Svitlana's friends Mariusz and Gabriella.

Inna, Sasha, and Oliviia loaded their bags onto the bus. Inna knew that it might be the last time that she and the girls saw Maksym, but there was no emotional soliloquy from either husband or wife. "It wasn't a movie scene," Inna told me. "I was concentrated on what is coming—on my tasks. But we both knew what was going on."

The trip took two hours, through snow-covered fields. Inna sat with the cats; the girls slept. Near the Polish border, the bus passed a coach belonging to the Lviv International Symphony Orchestra which appeared to have broken down.

In Shehyni, it was snowing. Inna's party joined a line whose starting point, many hundreds of yards ahead, was out of sight. Ukrainian Army officers watched the procession of refugees. A soldier inspected my papers, to confirm that I was not Ukrainian. Some combat-age men had fled Ukraine illegally. The previous day, March 8th, had been International Women's Day, and my translator told me that Ukrainians had posted memes wishing these escapees a happy I.W.D.

Inna and the girls shuffled forward. Ahead of them was a girl whose woollen hat bore the inscription "*fuck winter*;" in English. Inna called her mother. The situation in Kharkiv was dismaying. Svetlana spoke of frequent explosions. A shell had recently landed on a nearby market. While talking to Inna, she left the room where Lyuda lay, so as not to terrify her. Similarly, Inna told her daughters only what they needed to know: Babushka Svetlana and Babushka Lyuda were O.K.

A toddler in the line wailed inconsolably. Inna's daughters occasionally hopped about to keep warm, but they did not once complain or cry. After about an hour, Oliviia poked Sasha, and Sasha poked her sister back. Inna snuffed out the incipient naughtiness with a look. It was the only such incident. The children's placidity amazed me. After we had waited for two hours, and my feet and hands had lost all sensation, I remarked that I could

not imagine my own children behaving so well under the same circumstances. Inna assured me that her girls had plenty of capacity for mischief. “The kids know when they can whine and fight,” Inna explained. “Now it’s ‘Listen to Mama.’ ”

Finally, the passport-control building came into view. At 4:40 p.m., after four hours in line, Inna’s family and Svitlana had their documents stamped by Polish border guards. The refugees walked toward a parking lot, down a tarmac path lined with people: television journalists, N.G.O. workers, Jehovah’s Witnesses. Volunteers pressed candy into the children’s hands.

Most of the refugees joined another line, for a free bus headed to the nearest large town, Przemyśl. There, Ukrainians slept on the floors of converted gymnasiums or shopping malls while they improvised plans. A transit center had sprung up in a parking lot, where volunteers helped refugees arrange onward travel. Many ordinary Europeans from across the continent—Helsinki, Madrid, Brussels—had driven their own vehicle to the transit center and were offering to take refugee families back home with them and provide free lodging. Some Ukrainians, taking a chance, headed off with a stranger to a distant country. But most planned to travel by bus to a major Polish city, where they hoped further assistance could be found.

A minority were met at the border by people they knew. Svitlana soon saw Andrzej—an athletic man with gleaming white teeth—and hugged him. Inna had never met Andrzej, but she hugged him, too. He smiled, took as many bags as he could carry, and guided them to his car. They reached Warsaw at midnight. On the drive, both children asked their mother, “Is the war far away now?” Inna sent me a message the next day, describing the pang she felt: “They don’t understand yet their father’s gonna be a soldier.”

A week later, Inna was sitting in an Italian restaurant beside a man-made lake outside Olching, a stolid German commuter town. Sasha and Oliviia had just eaten pizza and were in high spirits. Their giggles occasionally drew the attention of German retirees enjoying a glass of wine with their Thursday lunch. Inna wore a gray hoodie and jeans. She looked drawn. Sometimes her smart watch buzzed with an air-raid notification from Kyiv. There had been seven such alerts that day. Inna told me that during the previous week, in Warsaw, her girls had initially mistaken every ambulance siren and other

high-pitched noise for an air-raid warning. She had repeatedly reassured them that they were safe.

Inna said that she had left her cats in Warsaw. Gabriella and Mariusz had given the four refugees a room together, and at around 4 A.M. the cats had started meowing insistently. The next day, Svitlana moved her mattress to another part of the house, and Inna inquired about finding a temporary home for her pets. An elderly Polish couple adopted them. Meanwhile, Gabriella and Mariusz gave the children a bag of used clothing—donations from friends and colleagues—in addition to candy. The children gleefully accepted the treats, neglecting to tell their mother that their jacket pockets were still stuffed with candy given to them by volunteers at the border.

Svitlana planned to stay in Warsaw, but Inna’s destination remained Olching. Gabriella said that in a few days she could drive Inna and the girls to Dresden—seven hours away. From there, the family could take the train to Olching. (Ukrainian refugees could ride for free on both Polish and German rail lines.) The girls were happy in Warsaw and loath to move again. Inna explained the situation to them. She said, of Gabriella, “This woman is an angel. But she’s not our relative. She doesn’t have to do what she’s done.”

Inna and the girls said farewell to Svitlana and their hosts, and travelled to Olching. Yelena, Maksym’s cousin, greeted them warmly and told Inna that she could stay indefinitely. Yelena, an accountant about Inna’s age, is a glamorous woman who grew up in Kazakhstan and moved to Germany twenty years ago. She and her husband didn’t have bedrooms to spare, so they offered Inna and the girls the basement. Yelena wouldn’t take money but accepted Inna’s offer to contribute by cleaning the house and preparing meals. Yelena, admitting that she was not much of a cook, was thrilled.

The basement was normally used as a gym; exercise equipment had been pushed against the walls. The girls had bunk beds, Inna an air mattress. Each night, Sasha and Olivia argued about who would take which bunk. In the morning, Inna always found them in the same bed, snuggled up together.

Inna was contemplating multiple uncertain futures—she wasn’t sure where she’d be a month from now, let alone in a year. The best outcome would be a safe return to Kyiv, but that seemed unlikely, at least for the next few

months. She didn't want to remain in Germany, where she didn't speak the language well and felt like "an adopted dog waiting for its real owner." Although Germany had been welcoming to Ukrainians, Inna had heard that the most cosmopolitan cities, such as Berlin, were already at capacity and beginning to resist new arrivals. Inna thought that she and the girls should perhaps go to an English-speaking country, where she'd find it easier to work. Canada, she knew, had a large Ukrainian diaspora.

While Inna contemplated such a large move, she attended to more pressing matters. They needed to economize. She had about a thousand euros in savings and was making between a hundred and two hundred euros a month doing part-time remote work for the securities-trading company. But she didn't know how much longer her employer would be able to pay her. If Inna could register in Germany as a temporarily displaced person, the German government would give her family more than nine hundred euros a month while she looked for employment. The designation would also allow Sasha and Oliviia to attend school. But the town of Olching seemed to offer few support services for refugees. Inna had trouble accessing and filling out the necessary forms.

Inna also worried about her daughters. Yelena's youngest child was ten, and her eldest had just started college. They were happy to show Sasha and Oliviia around local parks in the afternoon; the cousins communicated in a mixture of Russian, English, and what Inna called Kiddish. But, in the mornings, while Yelena's children were at school, Inna needed to work or do chores. Sasha and Oliviia passed the time watching cartoons. Back home, Inna had driven her daughters hard. Their enforced lethargy pained her.

Once, Oliviia looked over Inna's shoulder as she read on her phone about an attack on Kyiv. The report was accompanied by an image of a building on fire, with rescuers at the scene. Oliviia asked who the people in the photograph were—whether they were Russian or Ukrainian, and if one of them was Vladimir Putin. Then she said, "Mommy, I'm so glad we're not killed." Every day, the kids had video calls with their father. Maksym tried to keep the conversations lighthearted, but even banal topics could be laced with sadness. "Do you miss the cats?" he'd ask.

After lunch, Inna and I walked around the lake with the girls. The day was sunless, but some fifteen degrees warmer than Ukraine had been. Olivia wore a light jacket—one of the donations from Warsaw. We passed a woman in her sixties who'd just been swimming in the lake. Inna longed to swim again, but she considered it madness to swim outside in March without a wetsuit. The girls threw stones in the water, and their peals of laughter rang out over the lake. Inna smiled, then said mournfully, "They don't look like kids fleeing war." She hoped that they would soon forget what they'd experienced in Kyiv.



"How many trees have died to blot your bacon?"
Cartoon by William Haefeli

The girls' rubber identification bracelets were still on their wrists. "I wanted to throw them away. I couldn't look at them," Inna later explained to me. "But the kids asked not to. So I tore off only the dirty stickers with faded letters."

She was consumed with worry about Maksym. If either of them had to join the Army, she said, it should be her. He was more cerebral; she was more physical. She told me how, in 2010, she had suggested doing a parachute jump at an airbase north of Kyiv. Maksym had agreed, and Inna had loved the experience. Maksym admitted to her afterward that he had gone along with the jump only because he wouldn't have felt "like a man" otherwise.

Now he was trapped in a war zone, and she was somewhere safe. She said that she felt “like a betrayer.”

Inna’s unease affected her perception of her new surroundings. She was deeply grateful to her hosts, but she found Olching stultifying. There was no noise. The Bavarian obsession with *COVID-19* regulations struck her as perverse, given that her family had just fled a war. This feeling of alienation, Inna explained, was more complicated than homesickness. “When you are refugees, the whole world cares for you—but I don’t want it,” she said. “I want my tiny apartment. I want my job that I don’t like. I want to see my boss. I want to spend two hours every day on the metro. I want to be tired. I want to do homework with my children. . . . All the things I hate—that’s what I want.”

The following week, Maksym was at a café in Mukachevo, drinking a cappuccino in the sunshine. Whereas Inna told her stories fast, Maksym often paused to search for a precise phrase. Inna had told me that he was a good chess player, and it was easy to imagine him at a board. In our conversations, he never showed deep emotion, although he occasionally conceded that his situation was difficult, or “complicated.” He said, “This is not a time to allow yourself to feel anything. You just need to be collected.”

Maksym hadn’t joined the Army, despite his best efforts. The day after Inna and the girls entered Poland, he had caught a bus to Mukachevo and immediately reported to a recruitment center. As in Kyiv, the recruiters were overburdened with volunteers. They also told Maksym that his paid work was considered part of the war effort: Russian hackers were trying to disrupt the Ukrainian-government sites whose domains his company protected. He was told to check in with the recruiters every week, to see if their needs had changed. Maksym and two colleagues moved into a small apartment. It was an unsettling period. Once a week, he faced possible enlistment in the military. In the meantime, he worked remotely, toting his laptop around in a plastic bag—Inna, he complained ruefully, had swiped his backpack.

Maksym and Inna tracked each other’s locations using their phones—a habit that they’d formed a few years earlier. It was discomfiting for him to see Inna’s avatar in a foreign country. They’d spent so much time in Mukachevo together. In a few weeks, the cherry blossoms would be out.

Every day, Maksym called his parents, who remained in the Saltivka neighborhood of Kharkiv. Yuri and Lyudmila were hoping to survive a bombardment by the very Russian forces whose presence they had encouraged. Maksym didn't know if the demolition of Kharkiv had changed his parents' opinions about Russia—he was still resolved not to discuss politics—but he begged them to evacuate. Unlike Inna's relatives, they could have left easily: their health was good, Kharkiv was not encircled, and trains departed frequently. But Yuri and Lyudmila refused. They'd lived for forty years in the same apartment, and they didn't want to go anywhere else, despite the danger. At one point, Inna, sensing a political rationale for this stubbornness, had told them, "A bomb doesn't care if you support Putin or Zelensky."

Svetlana and Lyuda lived close to Maksym's parents in Saltivka. Svetlana knew of just three other families who had remained in their apartment building, and those people had stayed only because they were more worried about looters than about Russian bombs. The air assault was so heavy, though, that Oleksandr, at Svetlana's urging, had started spending most of his time in a shelter; when he could, he climbed the seven flights to bring provisions to his mother and aunt. It was difficult to procure the epilepsy medicine that Lyuda needed. Without it, her muscle spasms could be excruciating.

On a freezing day in mid-March, Svetlana listened to the shelling with her bed-bound sister, wondering when a rocket would come for the two of them. She had the same ice-blue eyes as her daughter. Sometimes Lyuda cried out in pain. On the windowsill was an Orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary. Lyuda had become much more religious after her stroke, praying every day. Svetlana wasn't religious; she believed in science and order. But now she was afraid to say that she did not believe in God. From the window, Svetlana could see smoke from nearby explosions. Hundreds of Kharkiv residents had been killed. The city's morgues overflowed; bodies lay in bags on the street.

Svetlana had been quietly reassessing her political views. Despite her arguments with Inna, she had recently begun to suspect that the Russian government was not being entirely truthful about the wishes of the people of eastern Ukraine, whom it claimed to be liberating. Though Svetlana had continued to feel warmly toward the Russian people, she'd doubted the

Kremlin's motives. The bombing of Kharkiv had transformed her suspicion into astonishment, even hatred. Oleksandr had witnessed the aftermath of a recent shelling in which three civilians had been killed. There were no Ukrainian soldiers or military bases nearby. Such attacks were indefensible, Svetlana thought.

As the weather warmed, the bombing intensified. North Saltivka was so ravaged as to be nearly uninhabitable. South Saltivka, where Svetlana lived, was only a little better off. When she waited in line for food or for medicine, other residents expressed deep fear of what would come next. Svetlana told me that she had many sleepless nights. "My soul is hurting," she said.

On March 29th, Inna called her friend Tania. She and her two sons, the younger of whom had been on Sasha's swim team in Kyiv, had also fled to Germany. Inna told Tania that she was frustrated in Olching. Her efforts to register herself and her children as temporarily displaced persons had stalled —she couldn't find anybody at the town hall to assist her. Tania said that she and her sons were in Ladenburg, a picturesque town by the Neckar River, near the city of Mannheim. Ladenburg had opened its doors, wallets, and hearts to Ukrainian refugees, and there were about forty in the town already. Teens received free German lessons, and officials helped new arrivals complete registration forms. Tania urged Inna to come. That night, Inna thanked Yelena and Rainer for their hospitality and explained that it was time to go.

Ladenburg was even more welcoming than Tania had reported. The fountain in the central square was decked in blue-and-yellow ribbons. Inna and the girls were given a free studio apartment that had a view of nearby hills. The place had only a set of bunk beds, but Inna didn't mind: she could take one bunk, the girls the other. Ladenburg had designated a local building, the Martin Luther Haus, as a meeting place for Ukrainian refugees. A giant map of Ukraine had been pinned to a wall. A cook prepared Ukrainian meals, and there was an area where kids could play games. There was even, to Inna's delight, a grand piano. She resolved to resume teaching her daughters to play.

On the family's fourth day in Ladenburg, the city council paid for Ukrainian kids to use a trampoline gym. Inna joined in, but she misjudged a landing

and smashed her nose. Blood poured down her face. Unwilling to make a fuss—and unsure what her insurance status was in Germany—she went into the bathroom and reset her nose herself. She soon developed two huge black eyes, like a raccoon. Locals started calling her Frau Trampoline.

Despite her injury, Inna felt giddy—it was as if she were waking from a nightmare. Two mechanics in Ladenburg had organized a free bicycle-share program for Ukrainians; Inna and the girls were soon riding around town. A music teacher offered free lessons for Ukrainian children. Inna learned that she was eligible for a borrowing card at the university library in nearby Mannheim, and she took out several books, some in English and others in German. Inna discovered that the area had a reputation for being hospitable to refugees. In the seventies, Mannheim was one of the first German cities to appoint a commissioner for integration and migration. During the Syrian migration crisis, Mannheim absorbed more refugees per capita than most other German cities did.

Seeing a more hopeful future, Inna resolved not to waste time. She pinned a schedule to her bedroom door: appointments at the town hall, online tutorials for Sasha, German lessons for her. (Inna admitted to me that she was unpopular with the other refugees in her German classes, because she was a quick study and monopolized the teacher's time.) Sasha joined a swim team.

Inna realized that it was psychologically corrosive to be always planning a next move. Ladenburg was more than good enough for now. She and the girls would stay until the fall, if not longer. In early April, the Russian military had retreated from the outskirts of Kyiv but had laid many mines. The Russians also continued to fire rockets at cities across the country, including the capital. If Kyiv became truly safe again, Inna and the girls would go home. If not, they'd settle for a period in an English-speaking country. The United Kingdom had replaced Canada as her destination of choice, partly because of its relative proximity to Ukraine.

Inna spoke with Maksym often about these choices. When the Russians had retreated from Kyiv, Maksym had taken the first train home, arriving in the apartment at night and stumbling on abandoned toys. Soon, he resumed a semblance of a normal life. He worked, he went out to buy groceries, he

cooked. It was lonely, but at least he had some company: he had retrieved Banderas, the old cat, from their neighbor.

Inna developed an affection for certain aspects of German life. In Ukraine, she told me, old people were expected to *act* old. At forty, women chopped off their hair; at sixty, they complained about their backs and young people. Ladenburg was full of retirees, but, she noted, “people don’t know they’re old here.” Inna saw groups of pensioners on bike rides and runs. Older women dyed their hair and wore it long. Inna befriended a man named Dieter, who was in his sixties, rode a motorcycle, and wore a black biker jacket. He was part of Ladenburg’s water-rescue team. When Inna told him that she hoped to swim in the Neckar River when she got back in shape and the water was less cold, Dieter promised to accompany her in a dinghy, to insure her safety. They became friends, and she started training with the water-rescue team on Monday nights.

After four weeks in Ladenburg, Inna and the children were required to move out of their studio, but a local couple had offered them a ground-floor apartment, and the town council would pay the rent. There was only one double bed, which Inna shared with her daughters, but the place was tastefully furnished, and their hosts were a delightful couple nearing retirement age. Moreover, Inna’s status as a temporarily displaced person had been approved by the German government, meaning that she could apply for welfare. Sasha would be able to start school on April 30th. With the promise of some stability, Inna used her remaining savings to buy a computer. (She had worked on borrowed laptops since leaving Ukraine.) She also considered taking a coding course. There were few opportunities for career advancement at her firm. Now, Inna said, “I have the chance to reload my life.”

On April 15th, a rocket hit the courtyard outside Lyuda’s building in Kharkiv. The explosion knocked Svetlana over and smashed the apartment’s windows. Svetlana and Lyuda weren’t hurt, but they realized that they urgently needed to escape Kharkiv. Svetlana frantically called N.G.O.s with offices in the city. Most of them had closed. She stretched plastic wrap where the windows had been, to keep out the cold and the rain.

From Ladenburg, Inna attempted to find a group that could evacuate a bed-bound woman from a seventh-floor apartment in a city under siege. After two weeks of searching, she learned of Fight for Right, an organization that supports Ukrainians with disabilities. Svetlana called the group, and it agreed to help—it would transport Svetlana, Lyuda, and Oleksandr all the way to Ladenburg. (Oleksandr was of fighting age, but, because he was Lyuda's caregiver, he could legally leave Ukraine.) Svetlana asked Inna whether Fight for Right might evacuate them to Russia instead. No, Inna said.



"I just stubbed my toe and need you to come in here so I can scream at you."
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Inna felt relief that her family would be safe but trepidation about their arrival. With her work and her classes and everything else, she was already overextended. She had abandoned the idea of taking a coding course. Her mother, aunt, and cousin would have many needs of their own, which Inna would be duty bound to satisfy. Moreover, Ladenburg's Ukrainian community was fiercely patriotic. She wondered what the other refugees would think of her combustible mother's nostalgia for the Soviet past. Inna also felt ashamed of sizing up her mother in this way. Since leaving Ukraine, she had come to realize why she so treasured the necklace her mother-in-law had given her. It was, she said, "part of a previous life—before we talked

about politics.” Inna longed for this simplicity, but she knew that it would never return.

On Monday, May 2nd, volunteers from Fight for Right arrived at Lyuda’s apartment. That weekend, an explosion had rocked a nearby building. The elevator in Lyuda’s tower was still out, so the volunteers carried her down the stairs on a stretcher and into a waiting van. Oleksandr and Svetlana followed, with their bags. As they were driven away, Svetlana looked out the window, taking in the scale of destruction in her neighborhood. When the van arrived in downtown Kharkiv, she could still hear the bombing in Saltivka.

The volunteers loaded Lyuda onto a train headed west. Unlike in February and March, there was room for everyone to sit. The train took twenty hours to reach Lviv, pulling in at around 10 a.m. They had arrived just in time: shortly afterward, Russian cruise missiles hit three electrical substations in and near Lviv, disabling the train lines.

Lyuda, Svetlana, and Oleksandr spent a week in Lviv, then set off in a modified van for the final leg of their journey. On leaving their home, they had joined the thirteen million Ukrainians displaced by the war. Crossing into Poland, they joined nearly six million refugees who had left Ukraine. Now they are among seven hundred thousand Ukrainians living in Germany. Many refugees—especially those fleeing protracted wars—never return home. Already, the exodus has irrevocably changed millions of lives.

Inna digitally monitored her family’s journey from Lviv. She wondered how her mother would greet her on arriving in Ladenburg. Inna decided that Svetlana would be businesslike, narrating the details of the trip and asking practical questions. There would be no kiss.

By the time her mother’s van crossed into Germany, on May 11th, Inna was exhausted. She had spent the preceding days preparing a nearby apartment for her relatives—all while working long hours and caring for her girls. Her shoulders stooped from the effort.

The van arrived in Ladenburg that evening. Svetlana got out, embraced Inna, and kissed her on the cheek. Unaccustomed to such tenderness, Inna did not

know what to do. She didn't kiss her mother back. She stood there like a baffled child.

"Now, girl, what about your posture?" Svetlana said.

The six members of Inna's family settled into their new life together. The apartment that Lyuda, Svetlana, and Oleksandr shared was in a building with a working elevator, and it had a hospital bed for Lyuda. Sometimes Oleksandr pushed his mother through town to a riverside park, where she watched boats glide downstream. Sasha and Oliviia were thrilled to see their grandmother, uncle, and great-aunt after a long absence.

The strain on Inna increased, however. She was the only adult in the group who spoke a language other than Russian or Ukrainian. As Inna attended to three generations of her family, she began tussling with German officials—the first tranche of her welfare payments had not arrived. She was also trying to find work. Germany's Department of Labor would soon start offering her jobs. If Inna refused three offers, she would lose thirty per cent of her welfare check.

Svetlana, meanwhile, was often cantankerous. She hated being reliant on other people, particularly on her daughter. ("I'm used to being the commander," she told me. "It's frustrating.") She was still processing the horrors that she had endured in Kharkiv. It made her weep to recall the explosions in her neighborhood. She didn't want to be in Germany, but she couldn't return to Ukraine. Small problems often made her sad and angry. Mother and daughter negotiated their relationship uneasily.

There were some benefits to the new arrangement. During the day, Inna could leave Oliviia with Svetlana if she needed to. Sasha, meanwhile, was thriving. She'd made many friends at school, and her German was improving quickly. She was also training three times a week with the swim team, and had won a silver medal at a local meet.

Inna tried not to be downhearted, but she missed Maksym. She would not see him for a long time. After June 1st, under the rules governing her status in Germany, she could not easily leave the E.U. without risking her benefits. And, because the general mobilization remained active in Ukraine, Maksym

could not travel to see her. They hoped that around Christmas Inna and the girls might return to Kyiv for good. Until then, the family would remain as connected as they could, through video calls. This was better than nothing, Inna said, “but it’s like an electric piano—it plays music, but it’s not the same.”

On June 7th, Inna got dreadful news: Yuri, Maksym’s father, had died of a heart attack. He’d endured three months of shelling in Kharkiv—terrifying explosions at all hours. Maksym told Inna that, despite the danger, he had to return to Kharkiv to bury his father. She understood, but was worried about his safety—and she wasn’t sure a funeral could even take place. The main cemeteries, on the outskirts of the city, had been heavily bombed.

Amid all this tumult, Inna found solace in a reliable place—the water. Her fitness had deteriorated since leaving Ukraine, but she hoped to compete in some challenging open-water events later in the summer, including in the Neckar. She’d been given an old neoprene suit by a local swimmer. On the evening of June 13th, she put it on and dove into Ladenburg’s civic outdoor pool, alongside local triathletes. She swam more than two kilometres, willing her body on after a long break from serious training. Soon, she was ahead of all the other swimmers, feeling a mixture of pleasure, exhaustion, and relief. For the moment, she said, “things were as they should be.” ♦

Annals of Law

- [Why the “Privacy” Wars Rage On](#)

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)

Content

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In 1875, the future Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis met his classmate Samuel Warren at Harvard Law School. The two became close friends and soon formed a law firm together. Warren was from one of Boston's wealthiest families, whose doings were fodder for gossip columns; when Warren married a senator's daughter, details of wedding décor, guests, and dresses were extensively covered in national newspapers. This irritated Warren, who, even in his undergraduate days, had castigated Boston papers for divulging private facts about Harvard's secret societies.

Brandeis later pointed to Warren's “deepseated abhorrence of the invasions of social privacy” in explaining why the two men published their famous law-review essay “[The Right to Privacy](#),” in 1890. It decried invasions of “the sacred precincts of private and domestic life.” It deplored “the details of sexual relations” being “broadcast in the columns of the daily papers” and the publication of “idle gossip, which can only be procured by intrusion upon the domestic circle.” People should have legal recourse, it suggested, against those who publish private facts about them.

For decades afterward, courts debated whether the right to privacy existed. But, by the nineteen-sixties, many courts and legislatures had recognized such a right, in various forms, entitling people “to be let alone” and protected from incursions into their private affairs. The tort-law scholar William Prosser, an architect of modern privacy jurisprudence, noted in a classic 1960 study that the right to privacy had, confusingly, come to encompass rights against not only publishing private facts but also several other kinds of harm: portraying a person in a false light; appropriating a person’s name or likeness; and intruding on a person’s “seclusion.”

As privacy widened in scope, it seemed to grow in power. In the 1965 case *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court constitutionalized a right to privacy, ruling that prohibiting the use of contraceptives was unlawful because of “a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights.” As Justice William O. Douglas, writing for the Court, put it, “Would we allow the

police to search the sacred precincts of marital bedrooms for telltale signs of the use of contraceptives? The very idea is repulsive to the notions of privacy surrounding the marriage relationship.” Douglas, who married four times, explained that marriage is “intimate to the degree of being sacred” and promotes “harmony in living.” And so the constitutional right to privacy—which soon became the basis for the right to abortion and, later, the right to same-sex intimacy—was derived from the common law of marriage, in which an established doctrine of “marital privacy” had traditionally shielded the life of a married couple from interference.

Douglas’s repulsed imaginings drew on at least two distinct senses of privacy. First, privacy as secrecy: the idea that some personal matters, especially those of a sexual nature, should be sequestered from others’ view. And, second, privacy as autonomy: the idea that some personal decisions should be unimpeded by government interference. With marital sex serving as the paradigmatic private act—private in both senses—the rhetorical logic of Griswold suggested that the obvious importance of the first kind of privacy meant that the state must respect the second.

In [Roe v. Wade](#) (1973), the valence of constitutional privacy, helped along by the sexual revolution of the late sixties, broadened from sacred marital beds and domestic enclosures to personal autonomy and bodily integrity. People having control over decisions about their own bodies, free from the state, was the core liberty value that privacy represented. In *Lawrence v. Texas*, three decades later, the Supreme Court struck down a Texas anti-sodomy statute as an unjustified “intrusion into the personal and private life of the individual.” In effect, “Don’t look” had become “Hands off.”

The shifting terrain here invites the question of whether, when we talk about “the right to privacy,” we’ve been treating as interchangeable two terms that are merely homonyms: roughly, privacy as nondisclosure and privacy as noninterference. Justice Samuel Alito, in his [leaked draft opinion overturning Roe v. Wade](#), asserted that the Court, in holding that privacy covered abortion, had previously “conflated two very different meanings of the term: the right to shield information from disclosure and the right to make and implement important personal decisions without governmental interference.” Alito’s purpose, of course, was to deny the constitutional basis for the right to abortion. And yet disaggregating the two concepts of privacy

—the right to hide and the right to decide—may do the opposite, revealing both their interdependence and the contribution each makes to personal liberty.

Contemplating the overruling of *Roe v. Wade*, scholars have often speculated that abortion access might have been less vulnerable if it hadn't been grounded in a right to privacy at all. (Some have seen a sturdier foundation in the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.) In the decades after *Roe*, many feminists argued that privacy had long offered a cover for the subordination and abuse of women in the home and in marriage; as one unit in the eyes of the law, husband and wife were alone in their privacy—including in instances when a wife sought protection against her husband. The feminist legal theorist Catharine A. MacKinnon, along these lines, sharply criticized the Supreme Court's reliance on privacy to protect rights to abortion and same-sex intimacy. “Privacy works to protect systematic inequality,” she argued. The claim is particularly resonant at a time when *Roe*'s fragility is apparent.

Today, the right to privacy may implicate “everything from sexual intimacies and private scandals to police eavesdropping and computer data,” Amy Gajda writes in [“Seek and Hide: The Tangled History of the Right to Privacy”](#) (Viking). Although she notes the disparate interests that demand legal protection under privacy’s tent, her focus is on privacy as secrecy, on the right to prevent information about oneself from becoming public. Commentators these days regularly warn that Big Tech is getting rich by preying on our privacy for commercial purposes; they also point out that eliminating the right to abortion will disproportionately harm the poor and the marginalized. Yet Gajda, a journalist turned law professor, has a different story to tell. She contends that the right to privacy has, from the start, served the interests of rich men and élite society. “When we laud ‘The Right to Privacy,’ ” she writes, “we laud language influenced at least indirectly by a man—men, really—with much to hide.” Consonant with the feminist critique, Gajda’s theme is that privacy sounds “pretty darned great” until it’s used “to protect the most powerful, thereby shrinking public knowledge about the nation and its key players.”

Like Samuel Warren, early American proponents of privacy were powerful men with secrets to keep. Thomas Jefferson was bothered by innuendo

circulating about his hidden life, which included his relationship with the enslaved Sally Hemings, who was a teen-ager when she first bore his children. Jefferson attacked the very press whose freedoms he had previously championed, and he encouraged the prosecution of a newspaper editor. But, as Gajda recounts, he also gave money to an editor who reported on Alexander Hamilton's adulterous affair with the married Maria Reynolds. Hamilton, another champion of a free press, responded by complaining about the loss of his privacy. In letters exchanged in 1789, John Adams and William Cushing, soon to become a Supreme Court Justice, agreed that malicious press revelations of politicians' "male conduct" should be punishable, even if true.

When President Grover Cleveland, in his forties, started dating the young daughter of a friend of his who had died (they eventually married) and newspapers began making insinuations about the relationship, he complained of the "outrage upon all the privacies and decencies of life" and demanded that reporters respect the "rights of privacy." Gossip about a child born out of wedlock, domestic abuse, bacchanalian orgies, and his wife's preference for the company of older men drove Cleveland to deliver an address at Harvard in which he emotionally condemned newspapers that "violate every instinct of American manliness, and in ghoulish glee desecrate every sacred relation in private life." President Warren G. Harding, who had a secret child with one of his mistresses, persuaded journalists to adopt a national ethical code, which stipulated that "a newspaper should not invade private rights or feelings without sure warrant of public right as distinguished from public curiosity."

Gajda's point is that, throughout American history, enthusiasm for privacy has been linked to a truth that the [#MeToo movement](#) made familiar: privacy shields men's conduct concerning women. The "sacred precincts" that Warren and Brandeis so wanted protected are often the unholy environs of privileged misbehavior. A person's right to privacy can be at odds with the public's "right to know," which has been critical to the functioning of our democracy. Cue President Bill Clinton's statement, with respect to his affair with a White House intern, that "even Presidents have private lives," and President Donald Trump's insistence on keeping private his financial dealings, which included hush-money payments to a porn star.

Look more closely at the jurisprudence of privacy in the postwar era and you see that the two kinds of privacy had very different trajectories. The cause of noninterference bounded from *Griswold* to *Roe* to *Lawrence*. The cause of nondisclosure, meanwhile, was largely in retreat, as the Supreme Court increasingly gave priority to press freedom. The vicissitudes of privacy were exemplified by the saga of Frederick Wiseman's documentary "Titicut Follies," which portrayed inmates in a state hospital for the criminally insane. A court limited access to the film in 1967, citing the right to privacy; in 1991, a court allowed the film to be shown to the public without restriction. Later in that decade, a woman who objected to a television show that aired closeup footage of her rescue from a car wreck that left her a paraplegic lost parts of her privacy case because, the California Supreme Court pronounced, "the desire for privacy must at many points give way before our right to know."

Only recently has privacy as secrecy made something of a comeback. Nearly a decade ago, after Gawker published a video of Hulk Hogan having sex with a friend's wife in that friend's canopy bed, Hogan sought damages for invasion of privacy, in a suit funded by the tech billionaire Peter Thiel. The result was the biggest modern-day showdown between press freedom and privacy. Gawker's brazen stance at trial—in a deposition, a former Gawker editor said that the site was entitled to post any celebrity sex tape it wanted, unless the video depicted a child under the age of four—didn't bode well for its prospects. (Gawker said that he had answered "in a flip way.") A 2016 verdict awarding Hogan a hundred and forty million dollars and the resulting demise of Gawker Media showed, Gajda says, the right to privacy "rallying back with full-nelson force."



"Yeah, well, you sure don't drive like a slow loris."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Gajda worries that “in our zeal for privacy” we will err in a direction that limits the public’s right to know. Still, her emphasis on privacy as a weapon wielded by the powerful means giving less attention to the protections that privacy might afford the vulnerable. In cases involving charges of rape, intrusive questions about an accuser’s sexual history used to be routine; efforts to limit them have been informed by privacy interests. Instances in which press freedom has trumped privacy, on the other hand, have included the right to publish a rape victim’s name, and sometimes video of the crime. Even when it comes to sexual assault, privacy cuts both ways.

The suspension of privacy can harm poor women in particular. In the realm of domestic violence, for example, one effect of the feminist critique of privacy has been the rise of police and prosecutorial policies that were developed to counter an older regime of abuse-shielding marital privacy. The policies, which focus on mandatory punitive enforcement, consciously override the wishes of the victim, and can result in a kind of state-imposed de-facto divorce. People who lack privacy as secrecy, simply because their living quarters leave them exposed, are especially subject to being reported to the authorities, which can encroach on privacy as autonomy. And these people are, disproportionately, poor women of color. Privacy rights, in short, can shield victims no less than victimizers.

Where Gajda casts journalism as privacy's main opponent, Brian Hochman's "[The Listeners: A History of Wiretapping in the United States](#)" (Harvard) focusses on the government's eavesdropping. Hochman, a scholar of American studies, chronicles how electronic surveillance became "normalized" in the U.S. Although we once recognized that wiretapping was a "dirty business," as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it in 1928, we now, Hochman regrets, accept it as "a mundane fact of American life," spurred by routine crime-control measures and the policing of people of color.

Soon after the Supreme Court expressed revulsion at the thought of police searching marital bedrooms, it heard the case of Charles Katz, a Los Angeles bookie whose communications of wagers while using a public pay phone were intercepted by F.B.I. agents who had bugged the phone booth without a warrant. The Court decided that this counted as a "search" under the Fourth Amendment, because "electronically listening to and recording the petitioner's words violated the privacy upon which he justifiably relied while using the telephone booth," even though it was in a public place. *Katz v. United States* (1967) is widely understood as an important win for privacy, but Hochman points out that the ruling also "articulated the conditions under which wiretapping and electronic eavesdropping could be construed as permissible"—such as when police get a warrant and limit the duration and the scope. The case thus set the stage for electronic surveillance "to become an ordinary tool of law and order."

Americans, Hochman says, could have shut down electronic surveillance for good. President Lyndon Johnson even supported a Senate bill to stop government eavesdropping. Instead, we got law-and-order politics, which translated to racial politics, and helped domesticate wiretapping as a technique for criminal investigation. In 1994, the year that President Clinton signed a crime bill that has been blamed for ushering in a raft of further tough-on-crime measures and aggravating gross racial disparities, he also signed into law a bipartisan bill requiring telephone companies to design their equipment and services to enable surveillance and easily meet official requests for information.

For Hochman, the history of wiretapping ultimately feeds into the larger racial tragedy of mass incarceration and overcriminalization. Just as punishment and policing have had a disproportionate impact on Black

communities, he notes, key moments in the history of wiretapping involve surveillance of Black individuals. The federal government eavesdropped on Black political leaders and civil-rights groups, from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X to the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. Today, he writes, electronic surveillance has “turned up in cases involving drug dealers in Baltimore, undocumented immigrants in Detroit, and Black Lives Matter activists in Chicago.”

It’s striking that the two major social movements of the past five years, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, respectively, lend their frames to Gajda’s and Hochman’s projects: too much deference to privacy serves male entitlement, on the one hand, and insufficient deference to privacy serves white supremacy, on the other. An oscillation between the two sets of concerns captures not only our unstable moral and social-justice intuitions, which often depend on who’s the violator and who’s the violated, but also the real trade-offs between privacy and competing concerns.

The F.B.I. notoriously wiretapped Martin Luther King, Jr.’s home, office, and hotel rooms for years, seeking ways to discredit him, listening in on dozens of extramarital affairs, and, at one point, anonymously mailing him tapes of his sexual activities alongside a letter urging suicide to avoid exposure. In 1977, a federal court ordered the F.B.I. intercepts to be sealed at the National Archives until 2027. But they have been largely reconstructed and made available by the historian David Garrow, through clever Freedom of Information Act requests for wiretap transcripts of King’s associates. Unlike Garrow, whose examination of these private conversations, in “*Bearing the Cross*” (1986), resulted in a Pulitzer Prize, Hochman, who urges resistance to “intrusion into the most mundane corners of social life,” generally avoids using material that is available because of wiretaps. Indeed, his discussion of Garrow’s use of government intercepts omits mention of Garrow’s explosive publication, in 2019, of an F.B.I. agent’s notes about the contents of one particular hotel-room recording. (The recording, and the rest of the intercepts, will become available in five years.) The notes, released as part of the John F. Kennedy assassination records, state that King “looked on, laughed and offered advice” as a friend of his, a Baptist minister, raped a woman.

Readers looking for discussion of this contentious disclosure won't find it in Gajda's history of privacy, either, though she is not otherwise shy about describing allegations, even gossip, about prominent American leaders' behavior. Should Garrow have published the allegations? Many people denounced him for doing so. They properly warned that we should not take as established fact a highly motivated F.B.I. agent's account of what the recording contains. But they also recapitulated the familiar concern for the privacy of public men and invoked the privacy of female sexual partners, or victims. If all this seemed at odds with #MeToo and its suspension of male-protective privacy prerogatives, the collision of gender and race in public accountability remains deeply uncomfortable. We recognize that the privacy claims of oppressors may have to be restricted in order to curb their ability to oppress. The trouble is that the oppressor and the oppressed, the subordinator and the subordinated, aren't two distinct groups. People who are victims in certain contexts can be victimizers in others. And so privacy claims—and privacy critiques—will routinely clash.

Privacy, in its various forms, is ultimately about control. The ethic of nondisclosure involves our ability to control access to information about ourselves, whether the information is favorable or unflattering. The ethic of noninterference involves our ability to control decisions about our own lives, for good or ill. When we disaggregate these meanings, it becomes easier to understand how their connection, through mutual reinforcement, is basic to personal liberty.

The knowledge that others—whether private citizens or the government—may be observing our words and actions against our will alters the environment in which our decisions are made; it makes it harder to exercise true control over personal decisions. What Alito dismisses as a conceptual conflation is better understood as a necessary alliance. As we head into a world without Roe v. Wade, the enforcement of abortion restrictions will depend, tellingly, on industrious efforts to ferret out information about individuals seeking, obtaining, and performing abortions. People arriving at certain clinics already find themselves filmed, their license plates recorded.

So it's unfortunate but unsurprising that the use of one term to refer to the personal dimensions of both secrecy and autonomy has led to confusion over whether privacy really is a fundamental right. The problem arises when we

take secrecy as an end in itself, and thus as the paradigm of privacy—an error that can be traced back to Warren and Brandeis's parochial preoccupations. In truth, privacy with respect to the disclosure of information is an outgrowth of the deeper concern to preserve the conditions for individual autonomy, not the other way around. Rather than a prerogative of the privileged, intent on keeping the general public at bay, the right to privacy should have been understood from the start as a prerogative of the people, establishing a zone where the state cannot readily trespass.

Deciding where the zone extends and when that zone can be breached will always be a vexed and demanding process, because it takes place at the very interface between a polity and a person. Yet when we diminish an individual's protections against the state the costs are far from insignificant. That shouldn't be a secret. Personal autonomy, the ultimate value that privacy enshrines, doesn't just buttress freedom; it *is* freedom. ♦

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By [Judith Thurman](#)

Content

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In 1763, the young James Boswell finished his “London Journal,” one of the frankest accounts of high and low life in the eighteenth century. The following year, he embarked on a Grand Tour. In a Berlin tavern, he encountered a certain Neuhaus. This voluble personage of thirty-nine, unusually tall, with a dark complexion and affected manners, was an Italian who “wanted to shine as a great philosopher,” Boswell wrote, “and accordingly doubted of his own existence and everything else. I thought him a blockhead.”

The “blockhead” had also been travelling around Europe, although not on a patrician’s leisurely inspection of art and ruins. Giacomo Casanova, whose surname means “new house,” practiced many trades—violinist, gambler, spy, Kabbalist, soldier, man of letters—but his main line of work, he later admitted, was deceiving fools. Many of them were gulls at a card table, though he had recently convinced an elderly marquise, a widow with a vast fortune and an obsession with the occult, that he could arrange for her rebirth as her own son. How would this work? Casanova’s mystically enabled sperm would impregnate her with a male fetus endowed with her soul. A casket of jewels was involved, along with a comely young accomplice posing as a naked water nymph. When his ardor flagged, the nymph’s task was to rekindle it.

Casanova had a sideline, of course, which has earned him eponymous immortality; most of us, I’d venture to say, have met “a real Casanova.” But his conquests in the boudoir, not to mention those in carriages, in bathhouses, or behind park shrubbery, have eclipsed his accomplishments while fully dressed. He translated the Iliad into Italian; he published a utopian novel; he grappled with problems in classical geometry; he traded bons mots with Voltaire. He even charmed his way into the French court, posing as a financier, and sold Louis XV on the concept of a national lottery.

Having earned a fortune as a result, he led a princely life for a while, but lost much of it investing in a silk factory that went bankrupt. Now he was back

on the road, hustling other crowned heads. Frederick II of Prussia had received him warmly in Potsdam, though they hadn't struck a deal. Casanova's next stop was St. Petersburg, to woo Catherine the Great with a proposal for calendar reform. (Russia still used the old Julian system, which was out of sync with the solar cycle.) As the years passed, though, none of his forays bore much fruit except to enrich his journals, the only treasure he never squandered.

Casanova—a.k.a. Neuhaus, di San Gallo, the Chevalier de Seingalt, and Count Farussi—was a priapic precursor of Zelig. Some of his history can be verified, but much of it seems fantastical. Few of the great diarists among his contemporaries, Boswell aside, bothered to mention him, though police records did. Before there was a Wiki culture, a community of “Casanovists,” amateurs united by obsession, doggedly vetted his writings and established the reality of certain exploits. Yet most of what we know, or think we know, about Casanova is what he tells us in his epic, twelve-volume memoir, “*Histoire de Ma Vie*” (“[Story of My Life](#)”).

Of all his adventures, producing “*Histoire*” may have been the most brazen. It was also his last. Casanova spent his final years writing for thirteen hours a day, or so he said. He ultimately mislaid or destroyed his sources—the voluminous journals he had shuttled from place to place. His latest biographer, Leo Damrosch, the author of “[Adventurer: The Life and Times of Giacomo Casanova](#)” (Yale), is a prolific scholar of the eighteenth century who deftly flags a lie here, deflates a boast there, and corrects errors in chronology. But he sidesteps an essential question that he himself poses: To what extent was Casanova “re-creating the past” rather than inventing it?

Casanova was born in Venice on April 2, 1725. He describes himself as a “gloomy” little boy, “not the least bit amusing,” who suffered from hemorrhagic nosebleeds: “Everyone felt sorry for me and left me in peace; they thought my time on earth would be brief. My father and mother never spoke to me at all.”

His mother was a beautiful actress, Giovanna Farussi, who was a muse of the great dramatist Carlo Goldoni and achieved stardom playing the ingenue in his comedies all over Europe. She was known in the Venetian dialect as Zanetta, and, on the stage, as La Buranella. (She came from the island of

Burano.) Acting was then a disreputable profession, and Zanetta's parents, a pious cobbler and his wife, had been horrified when she eloped at seventeen with a fellow-player, Gaetano Casanova, who was eleven years her senior. His talents were mediocre, according to Damrosch, and he needed a day job to support the family: working with optical instruments.

Giacomo was the eldest of their six children (two of whom, Giovanni and Francesco, became notable artists, the latter a court painter renowned for his battle scenes). Casanova later chose to believe the rumor that his real sire was a nobleman, Michele Grimani, an owner of the theatre where his parents met. One might note that the rogue in literature is often a bastard whose sense of grievance against society drives him to subvert it by seducing its patriarchs' wives and daughters.

The couple's firstborn was a year old when they left for an engagement in London, parking him with Zanetta's mother, who doted on him. Seven years later, as his nosebleeds worsened, she took her grandson to an old "witch" on Murano, who did some hocus-pocus and predicted that he'd soon meet a "charming lady" upon whom his "happiness depended."

That very night, a woman emerged from the chimney, dressed like a queen, and ministered sweetly to him: "I have always thought it was a dream, unless a masquerade had been staged for my benefit," Casanova writes (in Stephen Sartarelli and Sophie Hawkes's translation). He dates "the beginning of my existence as a thinking being" to that experience, which is to say, it marked his birth as a cynic. "Sorcerers have never existed"—the witch's magic didn't cure him—"but their power has, for those who have had the talent to make others believe they were sorcerers." He had glimpsed his vocation.

When Gaetano died, months later, Grimani and his brother became guardians of Zanetta and her children. But the widow turned to another noble friend—Giorgio Baffo, a Venetian senator—for advice on her son's malady. A change of climate was recommended, so Giacomo was sent to Padua, on the mainland, where the air was healthier.



"Don't worry. He's an indoor cat."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Casanova never forgave his mother for an exile that his siblings didn't suffer. "Thus was my family rid of me," he writes. But he treasured his connection to Baffo: "I owe him my life." It's worth pausing to consider what else he owed to a man he called a "sublime genius." Baffo wrote pornographic sonnets in the Venetian dialect that were admired by his libertine contemporaries and condemned by the Inquisition—a badge of honor that Casanova would one day be proud to wear. A quatrain will give you their flavor:

My cock is so stiff that it hurts;
The glans is tingling and I can't hold on;
It's as hard as a bone or an iron spike;
Right now, it's bursting, right now, it's spurting.

Baffo accompanied Giacomo and his mother to Padua. On the journey, the boy noticed that the trees seemed to "walk" as the boat sailed along. From this phenomenon, he deduced that "the sun doesn't move either, and it is we who roll from West to East." His mother mocked his "silliness," but Baffo, Casanova later boasted, was amazed: an untutored nine-year-old had intuited a theory of which the Vatican took a dim view, heliocentricity. "Always draw the logical conclusions of your reasoning," he said, "and let the others laugh."

Casanova's intellect was central to his sense of worth, and he believed that it would have been stunted "by the cowardice of credulity" had Baffo not risen to his defense. The emphasis is his, and it stresses a horror that generates the drama in his life and work: of the credulity of fools; of his own as "a perfect dupe" of women; and of blind faith in authority, divine or temporal, enforced by the fear of perdition. Enlightenment Deism shaped Casanova's philosophy—and helped to rationalize his predations. "Mad are those who think the Supreme Being could ever enjoy the sorrow, pain and abstinence they offer up to Him in sacrifice," he wrote. "He never gave us anything except for the purpose of making us happy." But "Histoire" contains the germ of a modern anxiety: that no bond we hold sacred is reliable.

In the course of thirty-five hundred pages, "Histoire" has its longueurs. But the first chapter is a marvel of psychological economy. All the seeds of the narrator's character are planted there. Children of indifferent mothers grow up to doubt their own existence; they can never slake their voracity for love and approval. The charmless little boy becomes a flamboyant showboater. He dodges abandonment by escaping from attachments. Whenever he feels suffocated, he seeks a new climate.

Giacomo's stay in Padua was among his longer sojourns in one place. His grandmother rescued him from a vermin-ridden boarding house where his landlady had starved him, and lodged him with a young priest, Antonio Gozzi, whom he would later recall gratefully. Gozzi tutored him in Latin and nurtured his love of study, preparing him to earn a law degree. The clergyman also happened to have a sister, Bettina, a beauty in her early teens. Bettina took charge of the boy's toilette. She gave him a sponge bath every morning—and his first erections.

Bettina's trysts with an older swain inflamed Giacomo's jealousy, we're told in "Histoire," and she salted the wound with capricious teasing. One of her schemes involved dressing him as a girl so they could attend a ball together. Androgyny always titillated Casanova; a few years later, in Ancona, he fell deliriously in love with "Bellino," a young soprano of uncertain gender. Unlike Venice, the Papal States barred women from their stages, so the aspiring *divo*—a poor man's daughter—was passing as a castrato with the help of a prosthetic penis.

In 1742, at sixteen, Casanova defended his thesis at Padua's ancient university, having learned more about vice from his classmates than he had about law from his professors. He returned to Venice with a doctorate but also with a penchant for delinquency. Eventually, Zanetta, who was performing in Warsaw, called in a favor. She arranged for her wayward son to become the private secretary of a Franciscan monk who had, through her machinations with the Queen of Poland, been appointed to a bishopric in Calabria.

Casanova gaily set off for southern Italy, expecting to live well there. Instead, he found himself in a squalid backwater among "animals." After three days in the bishop's service, he decamped for Rome. Stopping in Naples, he met an aristocrat who was also named Casanova and convinced him that they were related. His namesake endowed him with a costly wardrobe.

"Histoire" doesn't shy away from the fact that the author's liaisons with older men were often transactional. Rome, he dryly notes, "obliges the whole human race to turn pederast, but won't admit it." Yet one of his most memorable seductions took place there. His lover was a married woman, Donna Lucrezia Castelli, and their clandestine fornication, some of it alfresco, produced a child. Casanova wouldn't discover the existence of his putative daughter Leonilda for some eighteen years, at which point he fucked her mother while she shared their bed. A decade later, he knocked Leonilda up as a favor, he claimed, to her impotent husband. Incest, he suggests, is a consummate delight: "I have never been able to conceive how a father can tenderly love his charming daughter without at least once having slept with her."

Plotted on a map of Europe, Casanova's advances and retreats resemble Napoleon's. In the course of his travels, Damrosch writes, he covered forty thousand miles. At twenty, he was back in Venice from Corfu, having served in the Venetian Army. Without any glamorous prospects, he played the violin at weddings and at the theatre where his parents met. Shortly thereafter, though, he was forced to flee La Serenissima after an alleged rape, not for the last time. He ended up in Paris, where he acquired a manservant and patronized a famous brothel. An Italian friend invited him to the opera in Fontainebleau. Mme. de Pompadour, he claims, took note of

him from her box, and he amused her with some off-color wit in his stilted French. One of many erotic discoveries from this chapter of his “apprenticeship” was a teen-age beauty from a family of prostitutes, Marie-Louise O’Murphy. They didn’t go all the way, but Casanova commissioned a miniature of her, which supposedly inspired “Resting Girl,” the famous nude portrait by François Boucher. It captivated the King of France, who added Marie-Louise to his harem.

After various adventures in Prague and Vienna, Casanova returned to Venice in 1753, living in luxury as the “adopted son” of an elderly senator and cavorting with a beautiful nun, M.M., who was herself a licentious prodigy. The Inquisition was keeping tabs on his gambling; on the pornographic poetry he wrote; on his rumored “devil worship”; and perhaps, Damrosch suggests, on his entanglement with a foreign diplomat, the illustrious Abbé de Bernis, his future enabler at the French court, with whom he shared M.M.’s favors.

In July, 1755, without being informed of the charges against him, Casanova was clapped into a rat-infested cell in the Ducal Palace—an infamous attic prison whose metal-plated roof gave it its name, the Leads. No one had ever escaped it, but he resolved to. He improvised a chisel and used his bed to hide the progress of his excavations. But then he was moved to a different cell. As the months passed, his prospects for release seemed to grow dimmer. A fellow-inmate, a monk incarcerated for corrupting virgins, joined forces with him. They bored holes in their ceilings, and, when they had breached the roof, they climbed onto its fog-slicked slope. Casanova nearly plunged to his death after managing to smash a window, but they gained access to a suite of offices. A watchman who discovered them the next day assumed that they were lost revellers. (Casanova had the foresight, he tells us, to have brought a change of clothes: “my elegant coat,” a lace chemise, a plumed Spanish hat.) They exited the palace by way of its grand staircase and hired a gondola that rowed them to freedom on the mainland.

Le Chevalier dined out on this story all over Europe and eventually published it as an illustrated chronicle that made him a celebrity. W. G. Sebald is among the writers who have cast him as a foe of censorship and despotism. He himself, however, casually told an admirer of Voltaire’s that “the Republic of Venice acted justly.” After his banishment ended, eighteen

years later, he volunteered as an informer for the Inquisition, plying his base trade under a pseudonym.

The escaped prisoner made a beeline for the City of Light, where, in 1757, he scored his great coup with the French lottery and found himself with a fortune to dissipate. (Gastronomy was one of his expensive passions.) Months later, he met the credulous marquise, and exploited her obsession with the occult. When she finally got wise to his scam, she had him run out of France. He later tried his luck in the London of George III but, unable to speak English, he didn't have much. He came to grief with an adventuress, and, in 1764, had to flee England to avoid a potential death sentence for forgery.

Next up was Germany, where he failed to impress Boswell or the Prussian king. His courtship of the empress Catherine proved equally unavailing. In Poland, King Stanisław tipped him two hundred ducats for reciting Horace —one of Casanova's favorite party tricks—though he subsequently ordered him to leave Warsaw. (His misdeeds in Paris had caught up with him.) Florence expelled him on suspicion of cheating at cards. He was run out of Vienna and Madrid.

Two of his siblings were established in Dresden, where their mother, the great Buranella, was an idol in retirement. She and Giacomo had been estranged for decades, yet he claims that she was overjoyed to see him. (He says nothing of his own feelings about seeing her.) She died in 1776, a year after Michele Grimani, and a year before Casanova revisited Gozzi, his old tutor, who was now an archpriest in Padua. The ruined Bettina was living with her brother; marriage to a “miserable wretch” had left her “poor and unhappy.” She died a day after Giacomo’s arrival, as he sat by her bedside.

Age isn’t kind to those who live by their charms. At sixty, Casanova was forced by destitution to accept a modest sinecure as the librarian of a castle in Bohemia, owned by a noble admirer who was rarely in residence. He had lost his teeth, and his faithful steed no longer reared at his command. “Luck,” he wrote, had “become a stranger” to him. The servants, irritated by his pretensions, tormented him. So did a lifetime of venereal infections, which was probably what did him in.

In 1789, without an outlet for his mischief and deprived of the nourishment that had always sustained him—the fresh sensations of lust and wanderlust—Casanova consoled himself by embarking on his memoirs. The French Revolution was also just beginning. He died nine years later and was buried in an unmarked grave.

“All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder,” Walter Benjamin writes. By that definition alone, Casanova is a great storyteller. “*Histoire*” has all the elements of a picaresque novel, a genre that had come into vogue during his lifetime with the fiction of Defoe, Smollett, and Fielding. The narrator is an antihero with a genius for imposture. Splendor and indigence are equally familiar to him; prudence and shame are equally alien. Men and women of every rank find him irresistible, often to their chagrin. His confidence games exploit the vanities of his age at all the echelons of society and mock the hypocrisies at its core.

Le Chevalier’s manuscript—written in (eccentric) French, the lingua franca of diplomacy, one of his ephemeral métiers—has its own picaresque history. A great-nephew sold it to a German publisher in 1821. The firm commissioned an abridged edition, altered and expurgated for the tastes of a primmer age. Stendhal was one of its avid admirers. Scores of subsequent versions, in multiple languages, compounded the tampering. By the late nineteenth century, Casanova had a cult of devotees clamoring to read the original, but it remained under lock and key, where it barely survived the bombing of Leipzig, in 1943. Two years later, Winston Churchill made a worried inquiry and an Army vehicle was dispatched to evacuate it from the rubble. The complete text was first published in 1960 (the year that a British jury found redeeming social value in “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”). Scholars gained access to the handwritten drafts in 2010, when it was acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris, for nearly ten million dollars. Few military secrets have been guarded as jealously.

Dozens of writers have contributed to the Casanova myth. Lorenzo Da Ponte, who had also been exiled from Venice, lent the old roué some money in exchange for a piece of advice that he regretted not taking: “Never sign your name.” But Da Ponte may already have repaid himself in composing

the libretto for Mozart’s “[Don Giovanni](#).” The infamous Spaniard resembles his Italian avatar most of all in his disdain for repentance.



Cartoon by Sam Marlow

The man who doubted his own existence has achieved an enduring afterlife. Toward the end of the First World War, Casanova inspired a novel by Arthur Schnitzler; a comedy in verse by Apollinaire (who translated Baffo into French); and fervent poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva. Schnitzler’s version embodies a corrupt society in its death throes. Apollinaire’s is a “tender and joyful lover” whose generosity contrasts with the nihilism of Don Juan. Tsvetaeva, whose own sex life flouted taboos, casts him as the hero of two plays—coded critiques of Bolshevik moralism.

Casanova made his film début in 1918, albeit silently. Bob Hope played a Casanova impersonator for laughs in the nineteen-fifties. Dennis Potter serialized his life for the BBC. Marcello Mastroianni’s performance as a ruined debtor fleeing his creditors, in Ettore Scola’s “La Nuit de Varennes” (1982), is probably the most indelible portrait: his gallantry in the arms of a capricious fate—his final and most exacting mistress—redeems his pathos. The protagonist of “Fellini’s Casanova,” released in 1976, reflected the director’s “repulsion” for a character in whom he saw “a meaningless universality.” In the final scenes, Casanova makes love with a mechanical doll.

Any life of Casanova has to compete with his memoirs, a masterpiece of reportage. His prose has the freshness of a live transmission. He was writing from the front lines of a secular revolution—one still being fought—for the principle of personal freedom. Despite paying lip service to religion and supporting the *ancien régime* (low-born upstarts are often the staunchest defenders of class privilege), he ran that principle past every obstacle of law or conscience to its end zone: the goal of unbridled pleasure whatever the cost to others or to himself.

In that regard, the memoirs represent Casanova’s ultimate seduction—of the reading public. Stefan Zweig calls them an “erotic Iliad” that “is hard for a man to read . . . without envy.” The eminent French historian Chantal Thomas, the author of “Casanova: Un Voyage Libertin,” contemplates him more coolly. His prowess as a “fucker” doesn’t interest her—the voluptuous pleasure he gives her comes from his language. Lydia Flem, a Belgian psychoanalyst, mounts an enamored defense of Casanova as “The Man Who Really Loved Women,” depicting him as a proto-feminist.

Damrosch’s biography condenses a vast trove of Casanoviana into a well-researched, four-hundred-page narrative that is most engaging on its subject’s catholic interests as an intellectual and on the milieus he traversed as an itinerant charlatan. But this is a life for a #MeToo-era readership, and the book’s first paragraph posts a trigger warning: Casanova’s “career as a seducer . . . is often disturbing and sometimes very dark.” In one column of Damrosch’s ledger are the “mutually gratifying encounters” that “helped him to write eloquently about sexual experience.” The other column quivers with outrage. Late in his career, a spunky girl slugged Casanova in the nose when he climbed into her bed uninvited and reached for her crotch. “He fails completely to recognize how appalling his behavior was,” Damrosch writes. “That fist to the face had been a long time coming.”

No doubt it had been. Some of Casanova’s paramours were bawds who used him for their own ends, and one such humiliation drove him to attempt suicide. Others were wives in loveless marriages or nuns whose parents had stowed them in a convent. (Depraving a willing novice excited him supremely, especially if she was a lesbian.) Unlike Don Giovanni, who deceived women to ruin them, Casanova thought of himself as their erotic benefactor, and if we take him at his word—we rarely have theirs—he may

sometimes have been. But he bought a Russian “slave” for sex whom he resold. As a violinist in Venice, he joined in a gang rape, then claimed that the victim was grateful. Returning to a port he had once passed through, Casanova met a local doctor who thanked him effusively for making his fortune—by sending him fifty patients with the clap.

And then there are “*les petites filles*.” Damrosch says that Casanova was more of a [Humbert Humbert](#) than a Lewis Carroll—that “what attracted him was rosebuds turning into roses.” Still, even his libertine friend the Prince de Ligne noted archly that “little girls, above all, fill his head.” He blithely deflowered pubescent virgins, some of whom were sold to him by their mothers. Chantal Thomas describes the games he played with them: “He undresses them, examines them, caresses them, takes them on his knees, makes them touch his sex,” and is entranced with their “mechanical docility.”

In her view, Casanova needed to identify with the “naïveté” of his victims —“their incomprehension of wrongdoing.” This delusion protected him, she theorizes, from “any insinuation of guilt” that would spoil his pleasure. But the only thing that ever spoiled his pleasure was frustration. One of the mothers who had pimped their daughters out to him complained to the authorities. Her terrified child had resisted his assault, so in a fury he had thrashed her with a broomstick. Yet Casanova raged at her gall. “I broke neither her arms nor her legs,” he protested, “and the girl kept her detestable flower.”

“Histoire” is a saga of wrongdoing from beginning to end, but Casanova indicts himself on every page, often consciously, so condemning him seems superfluous. “As my memoir advances,” he told a correspondent, “I am increasingly persuaded that it is fit to be burned. . . . The ‘Cynicism’ invested in it is outrageous.” In a subsequent letter, he calls himself “a detestable man.” All the same, he had concluded, “you wouldn’t believe how much all this amuses me. I have realized, ‘without blushing,’ that I love myself better than I love anyone else.”

Casanovas tend to swear that they really love women. Did Giacomo? Never more than his freedom, he admits, and not so well as “the glory conferred upon literature.” He writes, “What kept my passion for M.M. always at the

same intensity was the fact that I could never have her without the greatest fear of losing her.” Elsewhere, he admits that “love is nothing beyond a more or less lively curiosity.”

To love people is to care about what happens to them, and while Casanova occasionally hooked up with an old flame, their reunions were typically accidental. Whenever he was flush, he pampered his women with jewels and finery; he endowed his water nymph with enough capital to assure her an income; he could be magnanimous to despoiled maidens even when he hadn’t done the despoiling, arranging for secret deliveries. One of his publications was a pamphlet rebutting the work of two anatomists from Bologna, who, Damrosch writes, “claimed to have proved that feminine thought originates in the uterus, and is therefore irrational and literally hysterical.” Gender differences, in Casanova’s view, “are due entirely to education and social conditioning.”

Casanova’s descriptions of consensual sex are artfully graphic without being lewd, balletic in their pacing and naïve in their vanity. Once a woman has satisfied his desires, and he hers (some neophytes need lessons in anatomy), they talk for hours, and he listens raptly. Each paramour is unique to him—fleeting but exquisite, like a rare butterfly. There is only one he will never get over, who etches her mocking adieu in the windowpanes of an inn with a diamond that he has given her: “You will also forget Henriette.” Henriette’s great distinction—besides her breeding and her finesse, in every way superior to his—was to have dumped him. Her abandonment, like his mother’s, grieved him forever.

We live in an age of militant antipathies. Its criteria for judgment are stark. Is a character good or bad? Is a work of art edifying or corrupting? Does it have a redemptive arc? “*Histoire de Ma Vie*” certainly doesn’t, despite its motto, borrowed from Cicero: “He knows nothing who does not profit from what he knows.” Nor does its narrator evolve: he’s a *puer aeternus*. But the unregenerate knaves of literature, from Milton’s Satan to Philip Roth’s Mickey Sabbath, are compelling to us as demons precisely because they’re so human in their contradictions. Casanova deserves a place in their pantheon. Whether he invented the past or re-created it, his memoir possesses an incurable reality that still speaks to our own. ♦

By [Kristen Roupenian](#)

Content

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The idea that novelists might partake in the project of nation-building by reimagining the past in order to create the possibility of a shared future dates back to at least Walter Scott. But some of the most artistically successful examples come from post-colonial Africa, where belief in the meaning of arbitrarily drawn borders can require an unusual stretch of the imagination. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ousmane Sembène, and [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#)—along with many others—have produced extraordinary works of fiction that strive to reconceive national bonds (in Kenya, Senegal, and Nigeria, respectively), rather than reify them. Few countries, however, provide a conceptual challenge to the imagination of both novelist and citizen equal to that of Cameroon.

For Patrice Nganang, whose “[A Trail of Crab Tracks](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), translated from the French by Amy Baram Reid, is the concluding novel in an epic historical trilogy about Cameroon, reimagining a nation has required reimagining the novel. Each work in the trilogy—its previous volumes are “[Mount Pleasant](#)” (2011) and “[When the Plums Are Ripe](#)” (2013)—takes aim at the intricacies of history through an equally intricate narrative approach: the novels range back and forth across time, weaving real-world figures amid fictional characters, and shifting rapidly among different voices, registers, and languages. Cameroon, like all its neighbors—countries whose boundaries were scrawled on the map by colonial powers—encompasses enormous cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity; its inhabitants speak more than two hundred regional languages. Yet the country, with its jarring colonial history, has a further claim to complexity. Colonized by the Germans during the Scramble for Africa, in the eighteen-eighties, Cameroon saw its territory split after the First World War, with a smaller section under British control and the rest under French control. The two parts achieved independence separately, following an anti-colonial uprising that largely targeted the French. They voted to unite in 1961, though under somewhat rigged conditions: the Anglophone portion of the country, itself divided between a southern and a northern region, was given the choice of uniting with either Francophone Cameroon or Nigeria,

formerly under British control; independence on its own was not an option. The north, mainly Muslim, joined Nigeria; the south, mainly Christian, joined Cameroon.

This all occurred within a period of eighty years—a single lifetime—with repercussions that are still being sorted out. Today, French and English are the two national languages of a country that has been ruled by the same autocrat, President Paul Biya, for some forty years. Inevitably, then, Nganang’s national narratives are sustained by both ardor and alienation. And they grapple not just with the exigencies of culture and politics but with a question of literary form, which is also a question of scale: Is the novel big enough?

It probably matters that Nganang isn’t just a novelist; he’s also a poet, a literary theorist, a professor (of literary and cultural theory, at Stony Brook), an essayist, and a political activist. The son of a librarian, he was born in Cameroon’s capital, Yaoundé, in 1970, and went to college there, before receiving a doctorate in German studies from Goethe University, in Frankfurt. Nganang’s goal is, as he says, “to transform the city of my birth, Yaoundé, into a library . . . to create a sense of that city in letters.” But libraries aren’t defined by their geographical boundaries, and neither is Nganang’s Yaoundé. As the novels in his trilogy make clear, having a sense of Yaoundé requires a sense of Cameroon; a sense of Cameroon requires a sense of colonial Africa; a sense of colonial Africa requires a sense of the powers that colonized it, and so on, onward and outward in both space and time.

And so, where “Mount Pleasant” begins in French Cameroon in the early nineteen-thirties, and where “When the Plums Are Ripe” depicts the region during the Second World War, “A Trail of Crab Tracks” begins on a wintry day in twenty-first-century New Jersey. An elderly man, Nithap, plays in the snow with his granddaughter, while his son, Tanou, attempts the treacherous commute to his job as a professor. The simplest way to describe the plot of “A Trail of Crab Tracks” would be to say that it’s about Tanou’s attempts to come to terms with his father’s history, a history entwined with the birth of the Cameroonian state. But this hardly begins to capture the sweep of Nganang’s novelistic ambitions. It may help to note that Nithap’s relationship with the real-life political revolutionary and independence

leader Ernest Ouandié is a significant plot point; that much of the novel takes place in flashback, in the wake of a mass disaster at a Civil War reënactment event in Fredericksburg, Virginia; and that the gripping final portion is essentially the story of a father and a son who bond over the shared experience of having conducted extremely hot, troubled, and life-changing extramarital affairs.

You cannot write a novel about nationhood without asking questions about what, exactly, constitutes a nation, and an especially fascinating aspect of “A Trail of Crab Tracks” is the way it investigates how evolving technologies of communication, including social media, have altered the landscape of Cameroon’s political imagination. Émigrés have always exerted influence over their homelands, of course, but Nganang takes pains to delineate how these connections are maintained. “You know I keep up on everything that’s happening there,” Tanou tells his young cousin, Bagam, who is a student at the University of Yaoundé. “Twenty-four hours a day.” These constant updates are what allow him to smugly inform Bagam that “everything in Cameroon can’t be awful,” when Bagam complains about the conditions there. But Tanou admits there are gaps in his knowledge. “Your parents’ health is a topic that just doesn’t work over Skype,” he frets, and he’s right. Tanou learns that his mother has died when his phone buzzes to alert him that Bagam has posted about it, obliquely, on Facebook: “On that fateful day, Bagam had replaced his profile picture with a simple black square, which led to many questions posted in the comments and, after he added the words ‘The Mater is no more,’ to many RIPs.”

His mother’s death, after a hospital visit, reminds Tanou of a horrific video he’s seen, of another Cameroonian clinic, in which a pregnant woman is kept so long in a waiting room that her sister delivers the baby via improvised C-section. Nganang does an excellent job of capturing Tanou’s displaced, technology-mediated grief, the pained mixture of closeness and distance which provides the impetus for the deep dive into history that forms the bulk of the novel. A sense of remove produces a hunger for narrative:

Because he was the first to learn of his mama’s death, because he had learned at almost the very moment that her soul passed, Tanou didn’t have a chance to blame himself for not being there at the crucial moments that led up to this crisis. . . . Her loss had spawned in him a

drive, an almost tyrannical need to know everything, to have what had happened in those final moments described down to the smallest detail.

The Internet has, in a way, thrown open the borders of the nation, giving its émigrés and exiles a minute-by-minute view of the place they have left behind. Yet the question is whether they can intervene to affect the country's course, or whether they are doomed to numbly consume the information flooding in. A core argument of the novel is that geography ought not to be the limiting factor in citizenship, a claim that isn't new but has a fresh immediacy in the digital age. It recalls, too, an epigraph from "When the Plums Are Ripe," in which Nganang slyly offers "one clarification: The whole world is my country, Cameroon my subject, and Yaoundé my field of definition."

In "On Writing and Book Culture," a 2009 essay published in *Présence Africaine*, Nganang writes about how he always imagined that one day his books would sit on the shelves in his father's library, an ostensibly straightforward goal complicated by the fact that his father was, for many years, the librarian for the Cameroonian Ministry of Internal Affairs—that is, for the oppressive Cameroonian state. Nganang's essay describes the way his formative understanding of his father's library—which contained newspapers, pamphlets, and scholarly dissertations, as well as novels and poetry—led him to be skeptical of genre distinctions that would cordon off "literature" from other kinds of text. He would define literature in the broadest of terms, as "a combination of letters," and a writer as simply someone who puts those letters down on a page. "This lack of discrimination between texts makes me see the platform of a writer as being extremely potent, for it certainly makes me see no distinction between writing a novel and writing an interventionist essay," he wrote. Nor would he distinguish between "writing a poem and using the Internet to build a network of writers, to defend the constitution of Cameroon." This literary philosophy is evident in "A Trail of Crab Tracks," which includes long passages on Cameroonian history, geography, and linguistics, and contains many footnotes that point outward, beyond the text, to cite other fictional and nonfictional sources, including the occasional Internet link.

In one way, then, the blurring of genre distinctions fuelled Nganang's novelistic ambitions, expanding his conception of what a fiction writer

might hope to achieve. But the essay also includes an anecdote, poignant and profound, that pushes against a simplistic idea of the writer's relationship to power:

I could never stop dreaming that one day the dictator's minister would come down the few steps that separated him from my father's library, and take one book to read, the book of the librarian's son . . . and what . . . ? Be shaken to death by shame? O, this is just a dream, a writer's dream, for my father retired the very year I published my first book, *elobi*. And, African dictators and their surrogates don't read!

To speculate about the effect that a novel might have on the world is to daydream about a daydream. Such dreams nurture the hubris required to write fiction, but when the dream is over you are left with the reality that novel-reading is optional, and most people will choose not to do it, especially if they suspect that the novel's agenda is to make them die of shame. Changing someone's mind through the mechanism of novel-reading (which takes hours!) is both an intimate and a hostile act. Why would any reader consent to it?

The image of a novel on the shelf of a state library invites us to use a different scale to measure its size—one that compares it not only with other novels but with other things a minister might read, including newspaper opinion pieces, Facebook posts, Wikipedia articles, and everything that comes up when you Google "Cameroon." This scale, on which even the biggest novels begin to shrink, invites us to imagine yet another one, in which novel-writing is no longer separated from action but instead must be considered in the context of everything a human being might do to build a nation—up to and including either becoming a state minister or toppling one. Measured on that scale, the bigger a novel's ambitions, the smaller it becomes in comparison with the thing it hopes to influence, like a rock thrown at an F-16.

Nganang's trenchant awareness of the chasm between novelistic ambition and real-world effect imbues "A Trail of Crab Tracks" with a distinctly ironic cast. Throughout the novel, Nithap, who once played a role in fighting colonialism in Cameroon, continually punctures the pretensions of his son, Tanou, who has immigrated to the United States to teach Frantz Fanon and

Michel Foucault to undergraduates. Tanou's immense thirst for his father's recognition and approval, his attempt to find common ground, is the emotional engine that powers the novel, and roots its intellectual concerns in an unfolding of character. Through this dynamic, the novel suggests that thematic questions of scale are also questions for the heirs of generational trauma, who must process the enormity of the suffering they've inherited, while also wrangling with aging parents likely to scoff at the idea that people with the time to sit around and process their feelings could have any significant problems at all. *Is anything about me big enough to matter?* That question is hardly reserved for children whose parents had to survive mass atrocities in order to raise them, but it reverberates at a different volume across such a vast generational divide. In Nganang's novel, politics looms large over fiction, and fathers loom large over sons.

Tanou is an easy target—and the novel does make some stinging jokes at his expense—but his story holds its own, even as his father's far more dramatic history of colonial tragedy unspools around it; ultimately, the two narratives fuse into one. “A Trail of Crab Tracks” becomes a singularly complex interrogation of the relationship between thought and action, between writing and the world. Toward the end of the book, deep in a flashback, Ernest Ouandié has a conversation with a pastor who has devoted his life to re-creating a forgotten script for Cameroon, the Bagam alphabet. The revolution's mistake, the pastor says, “was believing that Cameroon already had a soul. But that's really what we need to create for this country. That's the only task for our era. Because without a soul, a country, like a body, is inert.”

This echoes the old idea that writers can help shape the soul of a nation, but there's something about the phrasing that points to a deeper conundrum: what's a soul without a body? It, too, is inert, ephemeral, as substantial as air. The novel can do nothing except sit on the shelf and wait for the minister's hands to pick it up, for his eyes to move over the page. It's almost inconceivable that he would do so, and yet the novel can be written only in the hope—in the faith, really—that he might. In that sense, novel-writing is not so much an action as a kind of prayer.

Near the end of “A Trail of Crab Tracks,” Tanou drops his father off at the airport for a flight home to Cameroon, and reflects, “JFK International

Airport is not very comfortable to someone who has just watched his father disappear into the customs and immigration lines.” In December of 2017, Nganang himself, leaving Cameroon after his final research trip there for the novel, got into a customs-and-immigration line at an airport, where he was taken into custody by police. He was held in detention for three weeks, and then put on a plane back to the United States, but only after officials seized his Cameroonian passport, hoping to usher him into permanent exile.

Part of what Nganang was researching on that trip was the so-called Anglophone Crisis: what had begun, the year before, with demonstrations, viciously suppressed, had grown into a bloody conflict in which the government sent its soldiers to attack English-speaking protesters. Nganang, an outspoken critic of the government, was accused of such offenses as inciting violence and insulting the country’s armed forces in a Facebook post; his supporters pointed out that he was more likely jailed as the result of an article he had published in the news magazine *Jeune Afrique* which was critical of the Cameroonian President’s treatment of the Anglophone minority. Either way, the arrest was unfortunate proof that African dictators, or their surrogates, do read on occasion.

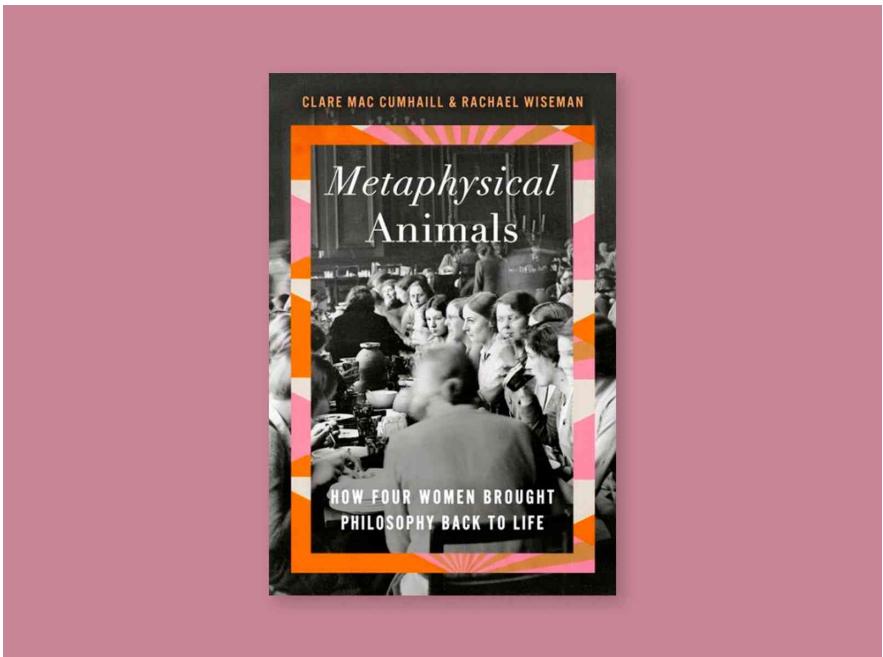
Shortly after he was freed, Nganang released a statement titled “[In Defense of the Anglophones](#),” and subtitled “Declaration made to the Criminal Court in Yaoundé.” Addressing the judge in charge of determining his sentence, he denounces the state for pressing “charges against me for what is clearly fictional.” In particular, he says,

I stand before you accused of . . . things that are clearly linked to writing, by which I mean the use of the alphabet to make meaning, for in the end, I used nothing more than twenty-six letters to write the contested text. Nothing more. So, I will prove to you in my statement that those twenty-six letters, such as I employed them, cannot in any way constitute a threat to the Head of State.

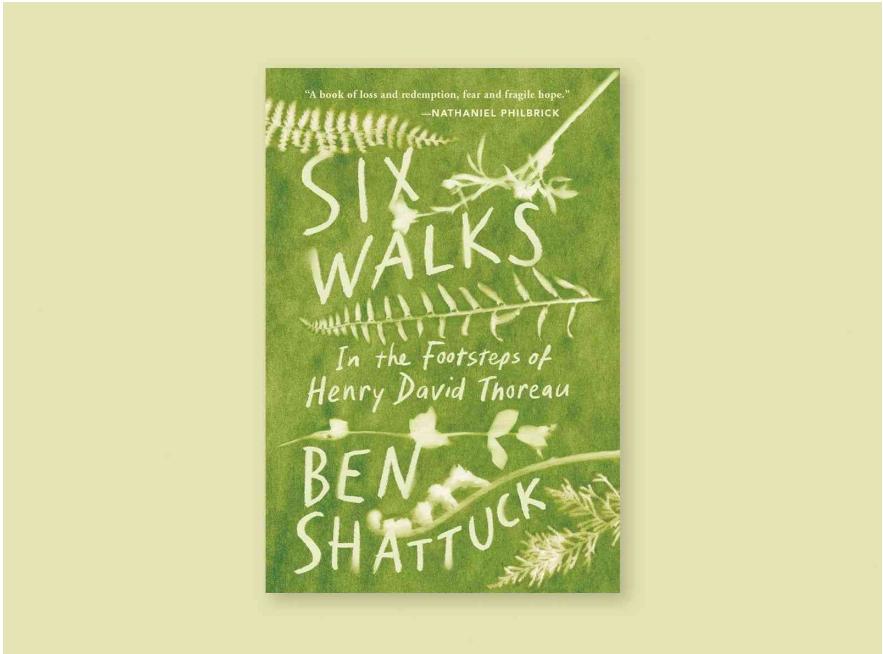
Insisting, in one moment, that he has been arrested for something “fictional,” and in the next that he has been detained for writing the truth, Nganang moves hypnotically between different conceptions of language, until the contested text is drained of any stable meaning whatsoever. The statement is an astonishing performance, layering irony upon irony, and deploying the

techniques of literary theory to make a case for the importance of language while simultaneously unravelling it. When Ngugi invoked “the barrel of a pen,” more than a generation ago, the idea of writing as national resistance still seemed straightforward; for Nganang, it is, like prayer, at once absurd and necessary.

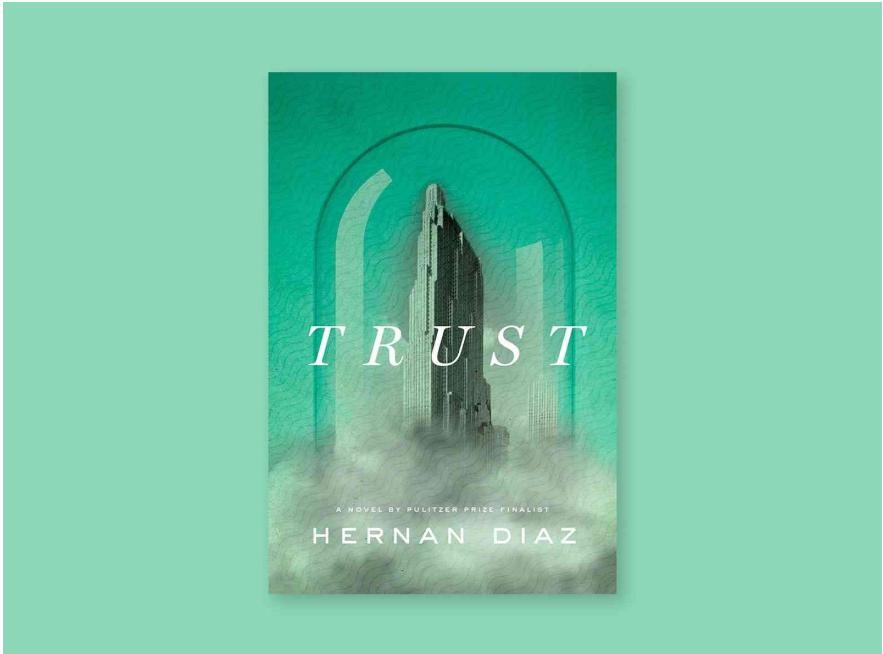
The Anglophone Crisis is not about language, but it’s mediated through language, and the weight of history and culture that all languages carry. “One day we will be Anglophones,” Nganang asserts in his declaration to the court. “All of us.” Yet one of the realities of power is that to speak to the state you have to address it in its own language. The declaration, as posted online, was translated from French into English by Amy Baram Reid. Such are the contradictions upon which “A Trail of Crab Tracks” subsists. Here is a novel written in French, the language of power in Cameroon, and translated into English, the language of power across the globe; a novel that also includes an array of regional tongues and a script, nearly lost, that its author evidently hopes to revive. These last are languages that, in this particular historical moment, can lay claim to no power except that of letters combined to make meaning. But on what scale should such power be measured? Is it everything, or nothing at all? ♦



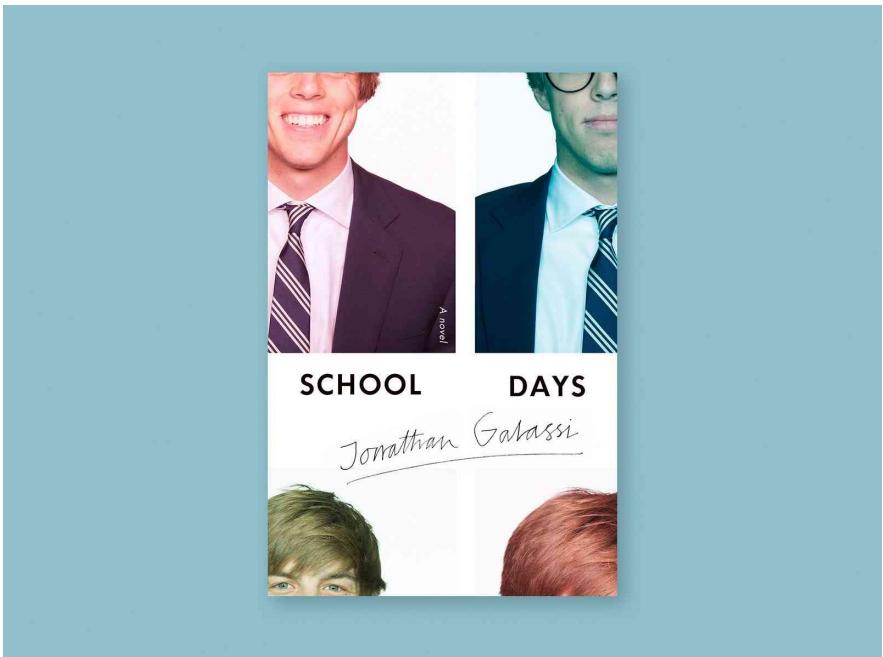
Metaphysical Animals, by *Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman* (Doubleday). In postwar Oxford, the four philosophers at the heart of this absorbing history—Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch—came together to give new life to moral philosophy. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman write, prewar British philosophy had been dominated by logical positivists who dismissed inquiry into the nature of goodness as “nonsense.” But the war presented urgent moral questions, not to mention new opportunities for women in academia. In the following decades, each of this book’s subjects produced work that, in seeking to reconnect “human life, action and perception” with morality, remains vitally relevant.



[**Six Walks**](#), by Ben Shattuck (*Tin House*). Although structured around a retracing of significant walks taken by Henry David Thoreau, this book quickly reveals itself to be less a historical reenactment than a series of meditations on the things that, now as then, fill our lives—breakups and new relationships, family history and its reverberations, nature and our rapidly changing place within it—all informed by Thoreau’s luminous, lyrical prose. From the shores of Cape Cod to the heights of Mt. Katahdin, Shattuck finds moments of sublimity (the call of a loon, the comfort of friendship) and disillusionment (health problems, tourists), but his main message is the primacy of love, for both the people around us and the world we inhabit.



Trust, by Hernan Diaz (Riverhead). This novel in four parts opens with a narrative about a mysterious Wall Street tycoon and his wife: “Because he had enjoyed almost every advantage since birth, one of the few privileges denied to Benjamin Rask was that of a heroic rise.” Ending abruptly, this tale is followed by a fragmentary memoir of the same narrative events, but it contains important, disorienting factual differences. In the third section, the pieces start to connect, thanks to a new narrator—a plucky Brooklyn woman hired as a ghostwriter by the memoir’s author. Diaz cleverly weaves the disparate strands together while showing how our shifting perception of the story relates to wealth’s ability to “bend and align reality” to its own motives.



School Days, by *Jonathan Galassi* (*Other Press*). Having once been a pupil at the ultra-preppy boarding school where he teaches, Sam Brandt, the protagonist of this novel, is approached by the headmaster to investigate a recent allegation of a decades-old sexual assault by an unspecified faculty member. As Sam starts digging, we are transported back to 1964, where febrile schoolboy crushes abound and students are enraptured by one particularly charismatic teacher. Meanwhile, Sam is forming a sense of his own gay identity, after spending his adulthood closeted and married. The book neatly encompasses much of modern gay history—pre-Stonewall secrecy, *AIDS*, today's climate of openness—but, as Sam mulls the paths his classmates have taken, it also becomes a sensitive evocation of late middle age.

By [Stephanie Burt](#)

If you spend time around transgender people, you may notice, on badges and buttons, on sewn patches, or even as a tattoo, the sigil “T4T,” or “t4t.” The characters stand for “trans for trans,” and the usage began as shorthand on dating sites. These days, it’s not only an erotic preference but a statement about solidarity, about membership. Imogen Binnie’s “[Nevada](#)” might be, in that extended, contentious sense, the first t4t novel.

Published in 2013 by the trans-focussed (and now defunct) Topside Press, and just reissued by the mainstream trade publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux, “Nevada” is hardly the first novel about trans characters, or the first by a trans author for the queer community—Leslie Feinberg got there in 1993, with “[Stone Butch Blues](#).¹” Still, “Nevada” seemed to be the first book-length realist novel about trans *women*, in American English, with an ISBN on it, that was not only written by one of us but written for us. In particular, it’s about the groups we create in the age of the Internet, encouraging one another in our new freedoms and in our self-destructive fallacies. And, in sixty brief chapters, it strenuously resists the stance my friends call “Trans 101”: it will not, as Binnie says in a new afterword, seek “validation from cis people.” The novel is defiant, terse, not quite cynical, sometimes flip (where Feinberg is bluntly earnest), addressed to people who think they know. It is, if you like, punk rock.

And Binnie knows punk rock. When the novel appeared, she was mainly known as a columnist for the punk zine *Maximumrocknroll*. Being trans, Binnie wrote there in 2013, “has taught me not to trust anybody”; she prefers “assuming that everybody fucking sucks and doesn’t know how to treat trans women as human beings.” But the same column also took note of serendipity. “For once in my goddamn life,” she reports, “the punker in the non-punk environment I was bumping into turned out to be a trans woman too!” Of course they teamed up: “being in a band with another trans woman is the best.”

“Nevada” is Binnie’s attempt to create, metaphorically, that band. Her twenty-nine-year-old protagonist, Maria Griffiths, addresses other trans women in popular blog posts on the early-two-thousands Internet (we see one of her posts), telling us about ourselves, and showing us, through her own life, where we get ourselves wrong. But “Nevada” is also a story of

failure: Maria can't get her offline life together. She plans to break up with her better-adjusted, cisgender girlfriend, Steph, but Steph breaks up with her first. Maria slacks off in her dead-end job at a prestigious used bookstore (modelled on the Strand) until she's fired. Then she steals Steph's car, and drives to Nevada in an attempt, for once in her life, to find out what she wants and what she likes, rather than what she rejects and loathes.

Maria stops at a charmless Nevada hamlet built around a Walmart and meets a young shrinking violet of a Walmart employee named James. She concludes that James must be trans, like her, but not yet aware of it—that he's what we call an egg. She wants to help James hatch, and invites him to join her on a trip to Reno. James finds Maria fascinating, then compelling, then alienating and bossy, so he ditches her.

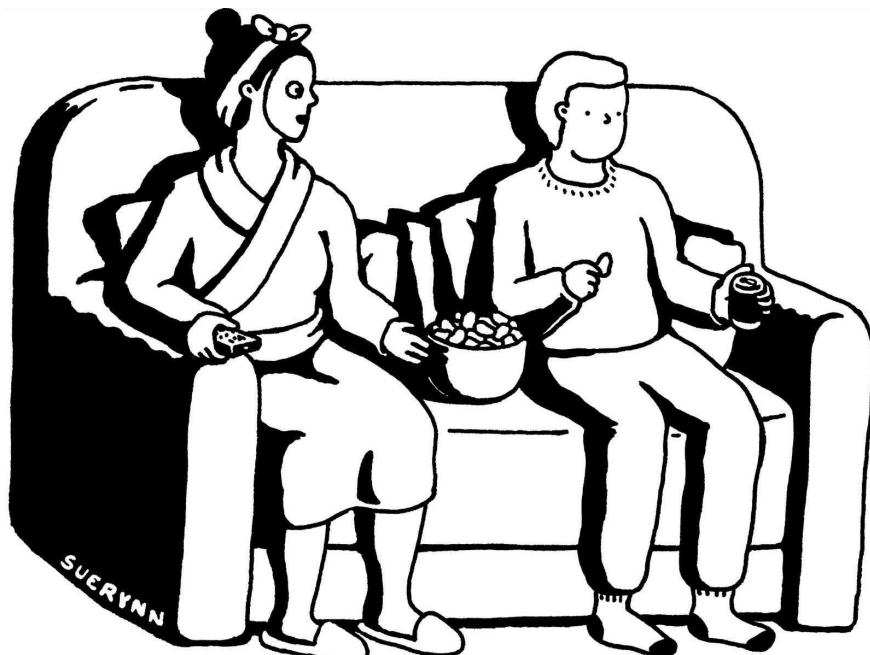
That's pretty much the plot. Binnie's deadpan, offhand narration makes clear how little the plot is the point. Instead, "Nevada" introduces its readers to a trans woman's consciousness from the inside, telling us things we might have expressed in blog posts or e-mails or song lyrics but would not yet have seen in prose fiction—certainly not in realist prose fiction about adults.

And the novel begins with depressingly bad sex. Maria "acts like she's into it," faking pleasure to satisfy Steph. "You'd think it would be impossible to fake it, with junk like Maria's got, but you can," Binnie writes. "Maria knows some stuff about faking it." Maria, we learn, takes hormones but has not had surgery. More important, we learn that Maria's partner is choking her, not just literally, in sex play, but emotionally. ("*She's choking me*" are the first words in the book.) "The moment her pants come off, she stops being in her body." That's how sex feels when you don't think your body is yours. (Ask me how I know.) Maria can't be her true self while Steph is around. But maybe she can't be her true self anyway. What even is a true self? Can you still be trans if you don't have an answer?

"Nevada" can't stop asking. It treats the injections, the pills, and so on with a knowing frown and a shrug. Authenticity, not uplift, is the point; it isn't a book about collective struggles for civil rights, although it is a book about people who have white privilege and still can't take those rights for granted. You don't need a fire alarm going off if you can already see that your

kitchen's in flames. You might, though, need safe ways to leave the house. And Maria has always needed to leave the house.

Maria grew up (flashbacks tell us) in rural Pennsylvania and spent a lot of her teen years stoned; as planned, she got through college, then moved to New York City. Once she started living as a woman, she had no idea where to go next, having spent her youth absorbed by rejection, resistance, and flight. Before coming out, "being present in her body meant feeling things like: My gender is wrong, and My body feels weird, and My mind feels like it's being ground into the concrete by how bad I need to fix that." After coming out, she faced the question she later asks James: "What do you want?" (James's reply: "Not all this.")



"Should we watch the lighthearted workplace comedy or the dystopian workplace drama?"
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

"Nevada" is a book about leaving, about rejecting, about saying no: no to the standard Trans 101 narrative, in which, before transition, we're all suicidal and, after transition, we're all happily indistinguishable from cisgender people, unless we become doomed sex workers; no to the expectations that books about trans people written for cis people usually meet. And no to the lives that Maria and James have been living. Nobody in "Nevada" finds true love, no cis character has an on-page epiphany thanks to a trans friend, and nobody dies. Binnie's tight third-person narration sticks closely to the figure that each chapter follows: mostly Maria, later James, and, for one chapter,

Steph. That arrangement lets readers stay with each character as she, or he, pushes away what the wider, respectable world of employment and romance expects.

“Nevada” says no—wryly, elegantly, entertainingly—to other literary tropes, too. It’s a road novel where no one, emotionally or existentially, gets anywhere. It’s a caper about a big drug score where nobody gets caught, nobody gets rich, and nobody makes a smooth getaway. It’s a breakup story where neither partner cares very much about the romance that ends. It’s also a trans novel where no one transitions. “Because the mysterious in-between phase is the most salaciously interesting thing to people who don’t have to go through with it, I decided to cut it out,” Binnie explains in her afterward. “Nevada” understands how, no matter what we do after we come out, we will probably feel that we got something wrong.

Every location does symbolic work. Maria hates her bookstore job not just because she hates her routine and bosses hassle her but because none of the books there can tell the story of her life. While Maria, who loves bicycling, takes to the road, James spends as much time as he can in sealed spaces, getting high: he likes “hotboxing,” filling a closed place with pot smoke—Maria’s car, for example, or his bathroom. Here’s Maria’s X-ray of where he lives:

His apartment doesn’t look like the apartment of a person. It isn’t the standard twenty-year-old boy apartment though—there’s no sink full of dishes, no armpit smell. It’s like a nonapartment, a ghost apartment. It’s literally, like, an overhead light, a futon, a computer desk, a beat-up old little kid’s dresser, and a flimsy-looking entertainment center with an enormous old twenty-seven-inch tube television. There are ways you could tell it was a Young Dude’s apartment: speakers so large they look out of place, hooked up to the stereo that gleams more brightly than anything else in the room. The extensive and neatly arranged library of DVD cases. It’s all, like, Classic Films, too, instead of complete anime series or something: pretentious, fully enmeshed in patriarchal constructions of validity, but at least not weird and annoying.

It takes her a second to figure out why a space so sparsely populated with stuff could feel lived in at all. It hits her: it’s because everything is

saturated in weed smoke.

All the characters in “Nevada” are trying to explain who they are, or trying to avoid someone else’s explanation. No wonder the novel is so insistently quotable. “That stereotype about transsexuals being all wild and criminal and bold and outside the norm and, like, engendering in the townsfolk the courage to break free from the smothering constraints of conformity? That stereotype is about drag queens. Maria is transsexual and she is so meek she might disappear.” (How many trans girls drew stars in the margins of their Topside editions right there?) Hanging out with Kieran, a popular, educated trans guy, Maria “can’t help but figure out that, while gender is a construct, so is a traffic light, and if you ignore either of them, you get hit by cars. Which, also, are constructs.” Even the numbly inarticulate James records thoughts that trans readers might have had. He looks at Maria and thinks, No thanks: “you were inevitably unhappy with your life because you’re trans, right? Meaning transition doesn’t work.” Steph thinks quotably, too. “Kinks are arrows giving you directions,” she reflects. “If you want someone to slap you and call you a stupid little girl, that probably says something about your relationship to ever having been a little girl.”

Mostly, though, the apothegms are Maria’s. Like many writers who want to sound hip, or punk, Maria eschews highfalutin words and complex sentences: her insights come off raw, even authentically clumsy. In fact, trans identity itself, in “Nevada,” means being raw, or clumsy, and experiencing things belatedly: puberty, for example, or crying all the time. “Maria is really good at being trans,” she knows, but she’s bad at basic self-care: “being trans interrupts normal human development,” so that “you end up getting stuck at the tween stage, the Nickelodeon stage, the I can take care of myself but I suck at it stage.” (Stars in the margins, again.) Coming out as trans “is rejecting the poisonous, normative idea that there is a Too Old for Catharsis. Or, really, a Too Old for Anything.”

If “Nevada” compiles wisdom, it’s hardly a how-to book, or even in any clear sense an edifying one: Maria’s a mess. The novel brilliantly contrasts the useful things Maria says with the dumb things she does. James “was a project she thought she could solve.” After all, he looks and acts like her at nineteen: stringy hair, “totally checked out,” constantly stoned, into online “erotic transvestite scenarios.” But he still has to work it out for himself: at

the moment, he thinks that “he’s just some fuckin dude who wishes he was allowed to wear dresses,” and he’s used to “liking girls just in a totally impossible way.” There are limits, Maria learns, to how much you can understand, or help, other people, and we can’t know in advance what they are.

There are limits, too, to the community that Binnie’s novel imagines. It depicts trans guys, like Kieran. (“For Maria, being trans is like, Here is this shitty thing I have to deal with, but for Kieran it’s like, Fuck yeah!”) It also depicts men who present as women in controlled circumstances, “coming from a cross-dresser place instead of a transsexual place.” But it doesn’t feature nonbinary characters, and a similar novel written today would require them, not least for accuracy. (These communities now include far more people whose pronouns are they/them, or xe/xym.) It would also be a novel written after “Nevada”—and after the novels of Casey Plett, April Daniels, Rachel Gold, Roz Kaveney, Kacen Callender, and Torrey Peters (and the work of various comics creators and musicians and poets)—and so would inhabit the space of literary possibility that “Nevada” helped to create.

What did trans readers have, before “Nevada,” other than memoirs? Myths and poems, from Sumerian songs and chants about third-gender priests to Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Hermaphroditus” (1866), Virginia Woolf’s [“Orlando”](#) (1928), Gore Vidal’s headline-grabbing [“Myra Breckenridge”](#) (1968). Certainly “Stone Butch Blues,” which begins with a “he-she” narrator “choking on anger”: when Maria thinks about how “sometimes trans guys come out of radical activist dyke communities,” she’s thinking about the communities that Feinberg helped build. In previous decades, Samuel R. Delany confected characters and species outside sexual dimorphism and binary gender in [“The Einstein Intersection”](#) (1967) and in the great short story [“Aye, and Gomorrah”](#) (1967). So did Ursula K. Le Guin, in her better-known [“The Left Hand of Darkness”](#) (1969): Delany’s [“Trouble on Triton”](#) (1976) followed its selfish antihero through a gender transformation common in her future universe. Science fiction, in other words, got ahead of literary realism.

So did young-adult fiction for the rising generation. Charlie Jane Anders devoted her first novel, [“Choir Boy”](#) (2005), to a twelve-year-old who takes

estrogen to prevent his voice from changing, and then gets taken, or mistaken, for trans: it's a strange, partly satirical affair that feels as if it were published much later than it was. A number of young-adult novels about trans and gender-nonconforming teens, such as Kirstin Cronn-Mills's "[Beautiful Music for Ugly Children](#)" (2012) and Steve Brezenoff's "[Brooklyn, Burning](#)" (2011), followed: Gold's "[Being Emily](#)," which appeared in 2012 (I wrote an introduction to a later edition), seems to be the first American Y.A. novel with a trans narrator, and the first of this pack by a trans author. These novels and their successors give directions: how to come out, how to seek what your body and your psyche need.

And yet many readers and writers, as the afterword to the new edition of "Nevada" acknowledges, see Binnie's novel as "ground zero" for modern trans fiction. That's partly a prejudice against writing for teens, and against science fiction. But it's partly accurate. Modern realist fiction for adults can, like "Nevada," forgo optimism, outreach, and uplift, and present dilemmas you might have to be an adult to recognize. Binnie's audacity was to address an audience—a community, an *us*—that hadn't quite seen itself this way before. Knowing a lot about being trans, we might even, like Maria, believe we know enough to teach someone else. Then again, like Maria, we might not be half as wise as we think. It's O.K. At least we can play in the band. ♦

Comment

- [Will the G.O.P. Finally Make a Deal on Guns?](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

At a press conference last Tuesday, Mitch McConnell, the Senate Minority Leader, made a statement that was significant but also oddly cryptic. He acknowledged that there had been an effort to “come to an outcome after these horrible school shootings,” which had resulted in a “coming together,” he said, “behind a framework.” He added, “For myself, I’m comfortable with the framework, and, if the legislation ends up reflecting what the framework indicates, I will be supportive.” Then he stepped away from the microphone, having avoided using the word at the heart of the matter: “guns.” One might not have known, listening to him, that ten Democratic and ten Republican senators—enough, in the evenly divided Senate, to survive a filibuster—had negotiated what could be the [most meaningful gun-safety law](#) to get through Congress in a quarter century. He didn’t say the word until later, in answer to a question, when he referred to “off the charts” support for the framework’s measures reflected in a poll of “gun owners only—just people who own guns,” as if that were the only sort of poll that counted.

It may not be surprising that such a poll would get McConnell’s attention, but it’s uncharacteristic of him to admit it. The G.O.P.’s pro-gun orthodoxy can be as irrational as it is remorseless, which is why the bipartisan framework is important. The immediate impetus was a mass shooting. John

Cornyn, who has been leading the negotiations on the G.O.P. side, represents Texas, where nineteen children and two teachers were shot dead at an elementary school in [Uvalde](#) by a young man who had legally bought an AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle a day after his eighteenth birthday. Of course, devastating school shootings are not a new phenomenon. The lead negotiator on the Democratic side is Senator Chris Murphy, of Connecticut. In a speech on the Senate floor after news of Uvalde broke, he spoke about the trauma of the murder, in 2012, of twenty children and six adults at [Sandy Hook Elementary School](#), in his state, and the shame of the legislative inaction that followed. “What are we doing? Why are we here?” he asked. But something in the usual equation has changed.

One indicator of the shift is the poll McConnell cited, which was conducted for the Common Sense Leadership Fund, a Republican-aligned group that is spending heavily to get G.O.P. candidates elected this fall. It surveyed people in “gun-owning households.” Eighty-four per cent of them said that they would support a package of legislation that includes—as the framework does—requiring more types of gun sellers to conduct background checks, making those checks more comprehensive for people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and providing money for school security and mental-health counselling. There was similar support for other elements of the framework: Seventy-nine per cent supported giving states financial incentives to implement “red flag” laws, which offer a route to temporarily take guns away from people who are threatening violence or experiencing a mental-health crisis. And eighty-six per cent favored closing the “boyfriend loophole,” which makes it easier for unmarried, non-cohabiting domestic abusers to have access to guns.

It’s possible to have a pessimistic view of the deal. Eighteen-year-olds will still be able to buy semi-automatic assault weapons, even if the federal background check extends, for the first time, to their juvenile records (and thus should create a brief waiting period while those records are searched). It does not stop the drive in an increasing number of states to loosen gun laws and permit carrying guns in more public places. Nor can it stop the Supreme Court from ruling, in a decision expected in the next two weeks, that a New York law restricting open carry is unconstitutional. And it won’t stop interstate gun trafficking, although it does give authorities more tools to combat it.

After Uvalde, one option for Democrats was to hold a vote on a more comprehensive bill that would have shown where each party stood, but that, because of the filibuster, would have had no chance of becoming law. Chuck Schumer, the Majority Leader, said that Murphy had instead asked him for “space” to try to find whatever common ground there might be. The second lead negotiator on the Democratic side is Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, whose relationships with Republicans are, Murphy told the *Times* podcast “The Daily,” valuable for getting the deal done. (The Republicans’ second negotiator is Thom Tillis, of North Carolina.) On MSNBC, Murphy said that the framework, despite its shortcomings, would save lives—for example, it could “stop a lot of suicides.”

People who try to kill themselves are often acting impulsively, and, thankfully, the majority of them survive—unless they pick up a gun. According to Giffords, the gun-control organization, “Firearms account for 5% of life-threatening suicide attempts in the United States but over 50% of suicide deaths.” The framework means that Congress is doing something, rather than just continuing to be the passive observer of a national shootout. But Murphy is also making an argument for the power of what might be called radical incrementalism to effect major change, by breaking down resistance, allowing children’s voices to be heard, and, now, offering Republicans the novel experience of running on a record of having acted to ease the gun crisis. The struggles after Sandy Hook may not have been as futile as they felt.

Still, a measure of the pressures within the Republican Party is that four of the G.O.P. senators who have been part of the negotiations are retiring this year. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson framed the deal as a dictatorial “gun grab.” He played a video of what appeared to be gang members, some of them Black, brandishing firearms, and then demanded, “Hey, John Cornyn, will your legislation do anything about *that*? . . . Fix those things and get back to me about the AR in my closet!” (Carlson, in a 2019 interview, said that he owns an AR-style weapon and that “all my guns are working-class guns.”)

The hedging, deference to extremism, fearmongering, firearm fetishizing, and moral timidity that have resounded in the Republicans’ approach to the country’s gun problem over the years have not gone away, in other words,

and will no doubt be part of this fall's midterm campaigns. Murphy's hope is to get a vote on a finished bill this week, ahead of the July 4th recess. The deal could still fall apart; McConnell left himself plenty of room to reject it. But it's also possible that a note of common sense, however faint, has broken through. ♦

Crossword

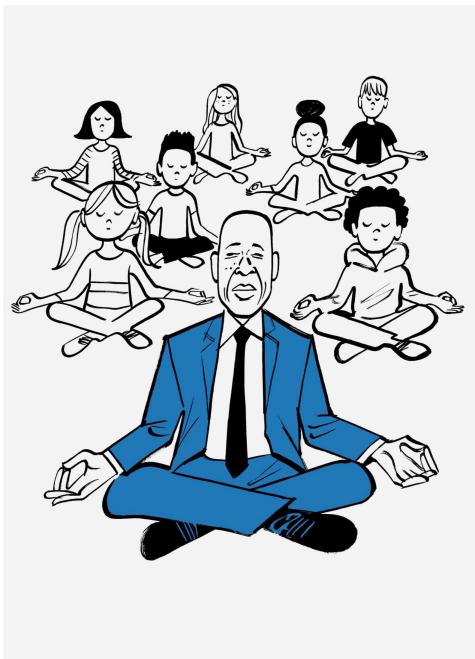
- [The Crossword: Wednesday, June 15, 2022](#)

By [Erik Agard](#)

Curriculum Dept.

- [Readin', Writin', and Regulatin' Emotions](#)

By [Parker Henry](#)



Eric Adams Illustration by João Fazenda

After language arts and before math the other day, third graders at P.S. 60 Alice Austen School, on Staten Island, assembled for their daily lesson on feelings. Two years ago, P.S. 60 began to integrate Social-Emotional Learning, which teaches kids techniques to identify and regulate their emotions, into its academic programs. “Even before *COVID*, I noticed these kids were in a crisis,” the principal, Donna Bonanno, explained as she walked past a poster that read “How do you feel about what you learned today?” She wore a leather skirt and alligator pumps; a walkie-talkie hung from a belt loop. Students waved to her as they walked by. “When we ask our kids how they are feeling and they say, ‘I’m good,’ we teach them good is not a feeling—how are you *feeling*? ”

After the pandemic began, the city placed an emphasis on S.E.L. It is now part of the curriculum in almost a thousand schools. Meanwhile, Mayor Eric Adams, who leads his staff through breathing exercises and has said that he wants police officers to meditate before and after every shift (“You cannot hate . . . if you meditate!”), has underscored the importance of mindfulness in the classroom; all public-school students, he has said, should start their day with twenty minutes of meditation. (An American Enterprise Institute research fellow recently warned, in the Daily Caller, that S.E.L. could “lay the groundwork for leveraging students’ feelings of empathy and emotional

tips and tricks towards political ends.”) Bonanno inhaled deeply and said, “Can’t you just feel the calm in here?”

Inside a classroom, the third graders assembled for the day’s first exercise, “My Best Self.” Their teacher Ms. DiGiacomo, who was wearing a bright-orange T-shirt, began with a rhetorical question: “If we are not our best selves, can we help others?” Several impassioned “No!”s resounded through the room. The kids broke into four groups, at separate stations, where they set about working on their best selves. At the station for “Managing Emotions,” two boys read the instructions aloud: “Check-in with yourself: Draw an emoji for how you feel today and explain why.” Both boys picked the “excited” emoji, which they interpreted as a happy face with sunglasses. One said, “I’m excited ’cause I’m gonna get paid!” His friend looked confused. The first boy went on, “If I practice my drum set later, my mom will give me a dollar.” The other one considered his excitement. “Well, I’m excited because I get to play games on the weekend,” he said.

Nearby, a girl and a boy worked on another assignment: “List three things you can do when you are feeling frustrated.” The girl rattled off her answer: “I can take deep breaths, I can count to ten, or I can”—she paused—“or I can scream in a pillow.” Her classmate leaned toward her, furtively, and said, “You know, you could punch the pillow, too.”

Across the room, at the “Kindness and Compassion” station, kids sitting on a rug exercised their empathic capacities. The assignment—“Draw a picture of a time someone was especially kind to you. Think about how it made you feel”—didn’t prompt much. One boy scrawled a video-game character in his journal. “I’m drawing when my friend Bryan gifted me a ‘skin’ in Fortnite,” he said. “It made me feel happy because I looked cool when I destroyed him.”

The class’s other teacher, Ms. Longo, in a cropped jean jacket, clapped her hands and said, “O.K., everyone, now we’re going to check in with how we feel we are doing in the ‘Best Self’ exercise.” A self-assessment of the self-assessment. She went over to the kids on the rug. A boy said, “I feel happy about it because the work turned out to be easy.” A girl with a pink sequinned face mask stood up to blow her nose.

Afterward, a group left with one of the teachers to visit the “sensory hallway,” an obstacle course of self-examination. On the way, they passed relics of previous emotional inquiries. A large poster board with the word “Anxious” hung outside a classroom. One student had written, “What if nobody likes me. What if that happens.” The first activity was emotional hopscotch—students jumped on a square that represented how they were feeling. The first few jumped on “Happy!” A boy named JJ jumped on the square that said “Sad.”

“O.K., we’ll see if that changes by the end,” Ms. DiGiacomo said. The students made their way down the hallway. Next activity: a “disposition board,” where the kids had to hop to positive-attitude words on the floor and say them out loud: “Generosity!” “Forgiveness!” “Presence!”

The last hallway station was an oversized Scrabble board attached to the wall, where students would decide on a collective mood. “Hopefully, they all feel the same way,” Ms. DiGiacomo said. “And then they spell out their mood with large Scrabble letters.” Leftover words from previous groups included “FOCUSED” and “CALM.” After a brief but earnest deliberation, the kids decided on “UPBEAT.” There was one dissenter. “I am not upbeat,” JJ declared. He carried some giant letters to a faraway spot on the board and spelled out “D-I-S-A-P-O-N-T-E-D.” He stepped back and almost smiled. ♦

Dance

- [The Oasis, a Dance Floor Under the Stars](#)

Lincoln Center once again turns its stately campus into a playground for all to enjoy, hosting concerts, dance classes, readings, and even, on July 10, a mass wedding ceremony for those that were cancelled during the pandemic. The centerpiece of its Summer for the City programming (through Aug. 14) is the **Oasis**, a giant dance floor under the stars, where, beneath a ten-foot disco ball, people can dance the night away to electro-pop (Ultra Naté and Bright Light Bright Light, June 23), *merengue típico* (MaxBanda, July 7), and much more.

Fiction

- “Mitzvah”

By [Etgar Keret](#)

Content

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

Audio: Etgar Keret reads.

Yogev and I sit on the tattered couch in his brother's living room, waiting for the Molly to kick in.

Yogev's brother is a dealer. He hates it when people call him a dealer. Says he's just buying for friends. But he's the mother of all dealers. Looks like a lizard. Cold-blooded. Takes money from his own little brother, but gives him a thirty-per-cent discount, like he's generosity personified. While we wait for the high to kick in, he drones on about how this is primo shit, super pricey, and how he paid top dollar to the Dutchman who sold it to him and now he's losing money on us. Yeah, right, Dutchman. I guarantee he bought the whole stash from some Arab kid in Jaffa. "When this shit goes to your head, it's straight to the penthouse!" he gushes. "Rocket launch. No stops."

"Let's go," I say to Yogev. "We bought it, we popped it, now it's beach time." Yogev's plan is to get high and go pick up girls on the beach. He did it with his brother once—got lit and went down to the promenade and came home with a Norwegian tourist. Normally, he wouldn't have the balls to talk to a girl like that, especially not in English. But the Molly made Yogev feel powerful, like a superhero. "You're so beautiful," he told her. "If God appears on Earth right now and grants me one wish, I'll ask him for ten minutes to go down on you. If he says, 'You can have another one,' I'll ask for eternal life. If I get a third, I might go for peace in the Middle East—throw a bone to my country. But, if he cheapens out and all I get is one, then it's just going down on you." Then he looked up at the clouds, like some dipshit, like he really was waiting for God to appear. The Norwegian chick laughed and said, "You're cute. Fucked up, but cute." They spent the whole night going at it in his brother's apartment. She was so happy, she had tears streaming down her face. He cried, too. From the joy, from the high, from both.

[Etgar Keret on writing as anger management](#).

“Let’s go,” I tell Yogeved for the second time. “We paid, we swallowed, let’s get the fuck out of here. We said we’d go to the beach to find girls.” Yogeved doesn’t move. This is the fourth time he’s done Molly. And it’s always the same thing. He doesn’t feel anything. Then he takes a shit. The stuff goes to his head only after he drops a load. It’s like uncorking a bottle. “It’s not gonna happen until I take a dump,” he says. And the last thing he wants is for the urge to come when he’s out. The bathrooms at the beach are all wet and stinky and there’s never any paper. Even when there is, it’s scratchy, it doesn’t breathe, like those napkins you get at a hummus joint next to a gas station.

“What’s with the stick up your ass?” Yogeved’s lizard brother asks me, flicking his forty-inch TV on to the fashion network. “Scared you’ll lose your high before you get downstairs? This is primo shit. It’ll give you ten hours at least. I guarantee it.”

I keep sitting there without saying anything. I’m not in the mood for a fight. On the fashion network, a flat-chested but pretty model is being interviewed. She talks a lot, but we can’t hear what she’s saying, because the TV’s on mute. Yogeved’s brother gives her a horny look. He didn’t take anything—he’s just horny. Like Yogeved, I’m not feeling the Molly yet. It’s my first time taking it. “Put some music on,” Yogeved says, but his brother doesn’t budge, just keeps looking at the model moving her lips and being careful not to smear her mascara when she wipes a tear from her eye.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Etgar Keret read “Mitzvah.”](#)

“Not now,” the lizard hisses, without taking his eyes off the screen. “You’re interrupting the words I’m making up for her.”

I try to help out. “Seriously, dude,” I say to the lizard, “play us some music.”

Yogeved’s brother puts a finger on his lips, like a teacher shushing me. “Sh-h-h,” he says. “See her now? She’s saying, ‘It’s been seven years since I got any, and I am so ready for it.’”

“Seven?” I say. “That chick isn’t even twenty yet.”

“Then four,” Yogeve’s brother says, and lights a cigarette. “Don’t interrupt.”

Yogeve’s getting impatient: “Go on, give us some music. And a Coke.” His brother picks up a remote control from the table and turns on the stereo at top volume. It’s trance. But the crap kind. Mindless beats. “And a Coke,” Yogeve repeats.

“I don’t have any Coke,” his brother snaps. “There’s water in the tap.”

Yogeve says he can’t be bothered to get up, and then he heads off. But not to the kitchen. To take a shit. I watch the model do a hair toss at the camera, and I can finally feel the Molly kicking in. Yogeve keeps up his soundtrack: “Now she’s saying, ‘I’d kill to be sucking on some dick right now, but only with a hot guy who knows what he’s doing.’ In other words”—he flashes his gross smile at me—“you’re outta luck, loser.”

Through the thumping bass line, I hear Yogeve hollering in the bathroom like he’s trying to lift a two-hundred-pound weight. And then a plop. Or maybe I just imagined that. It almost sounded too loud. Like someone threw a brick in the toilet. A minute later, he comes out, sweating, and says, “Let’s go.”

Outside, the sky is blue and reddish. The colors of the cars and the traffic lights get all mixed up in my head, but in a good way. A dry breeze cools my face. A bendy bus honks and almost runs me over. Yogeve turns seaward, moving fast: every second we waste on Allenby Street is a second with no hot tourist. I try to keep up.

By the Great Synagogue, a bald guy with a big black yarmulke stops us and mumbles something about a mitzvah. “Not a penny on us,” Yogeve lies, but the bald guy keeps talking. Says he’s not after money. Tells us about some eighty-year-old dude called Sasson, who comes every day for evening prayers and on Saturday mornings, too. Sixteen years the man hasn’t missed a service. But today he didn’t show up. So they call his cell phone and his son answers: Sasson’s in the hospital. Broke his pelvis in the shower. And now the sun’s setting and they’re short one man for a quorum. “If we don’t get ten men for the minyan, it won’t work,” the bald guy says with a sigh, like the prayers are a cell phone that has to be charged with the right cable. “Do a mitzvah, guys, make up the minyan for us.”

Yogev laughs like an idiot. At first, he thought the bald guy was a bum, and now he's confused. "Me? Now? Prayers? Are you for real?"

"You don't have to be religious," the bald guy insists. "You don't even have to believe. Do it for your fellow-man. It's like if my car got stuck and you helped me jump it."

"Right," Yogev says. "And what makes you think I'd help you jump your car if you got stuck?"

The bald guy comes close and puts his hand on my shoulder. He smells. Like airplane food. He looks at me with his enormous eyes—the eyes of a cow the second before it's slaughtered. To me, in my state, it looks like he's about to cry.

"Let's do it," I say to Yogev. "Let's pray, no big deal. Come on, it's going to be a blast."

Yogev shakes his head and walks away, toward the sea. Splitting off from Yogev and staying on my own in the middle of Allenby, high as a kite, seems like a bad idea. But I also can't leave the cow-eyed bald guy. I want to fuck, but I also want to be a good person. And praying is super easy. Much easier than talking to girls.

The synagogue is huge but empty. The bald guy brings me a prayer book and a white yarmulke with golden embroidery. It has a stain on it. Not exactly a stain but a kind of sticky patch caked with dirt. It's a gross shade of brown, but it's on the side that doesn't touch your head, so I put the yarmulke on and fasten it with a hair clip. I haven't opened a prayer book since my bar mitzvah. Nine years, and I still remember my portion by heart, and how I was so afraid to mess up, and how they threw candy at me afterward and one piece hit me in the eye.

There are eight guys there in addition to the bald one. Almost all of them have one foot in the grave. There's only one young dude, with an earring, and eyebrows plucked like a girl's. Of course he's the one who stands next to me, really close. Shows me where we are in the book. The letters are a blur, and they look blue, but all I have to do is mumble anyway. When we

get to the end of the page, he turns it for me. Maybe he's not gay. Maybe he's just nice. Or maybe he's gay and nice.

My phone rings. It's Yoge. "Where are you?" I ask him.

"No clue," he answers, but he sounds chill, like it's all good.

"Turn it off," Earring Dude whispers. "This is God's house. It's not right."

I hang up, but Yoge calls back a second later. I don't pick up, so he texts, but it's just random letters that don't form any words. I hope he's O.K. I want to help him, but I feel bad about Earring Dude. And about God. They're up to Shema Yisrael, and I remember that one, so I shout it out because I want everyone to know I know all the lyrics.

When the prayers are over, all nine of the men shake my hand and say I did a mitzvah. The fact that I hung up the phone when Earring Dude asked me to is what won them over. The bald guy asks if I need a ride somewhere. He has a moped. I try calling Yoge, but it goes to voice mail. "Take me to the beach," I say, and the bald guy nods and hands me a helmet. He drives really fast. Or maybe that's just how it feels because I'm high. I hold on to him and try not to tip over. When he drops me off at the promenade, I say thanks and walk away, but he calls after me, pointing at my head. He wants his helmet back.

Even though it's dark, there are still people on the beach. Two women are walking toward me. One of them's tall. Pretty. If I were Yoge, I'd probably say something to her. She and her friend walk past me, and I just keep standing there. But then the pretty one turns back. "Are you O.K.?" she asks. "You're shaking." It's the pretty one who says that, not her pimply friend. It's the pretty one who's worried about me. She takes an interest. She cares about me. It must be a reward from God.

I want to tell her something. Something good. But I can't think of anything. I try to remember what Yoge told that Norwegian girl, and I stretch out a smile and say, "If God comes down from a cloud right now and grants me a wish, I'll ask for ten minutes to go down on you." I know there's another part, but I can't remember it.

The ugly one says, “Let’s get out of here.” The pretty one makes a hurt expression and they both turn and walk away. Maybe it wasn’t a reward from God after all. Or maybe it was, but it didn’t work because I couldn’t remember the ending of the spiel. Only that it was funny. Something to do with peace in the Middle East.

I walk around looking for Yogeved. Maybe he’s back at his brother’s place with a girl, and the lizard is in the living room watching the fashion network and dubbing some Chinese model with high cheekbones while Yogeved blows his wad. No way. He has to be here somewhere. I just need to keep looking. All of a sudden, I fall on the sand. Or did someone knock me down? A guy is hovering above me like Superman. He’s kind of tall. He says something that sounds like a curse, and then he kicks me or throws something heavy at me. I think it was a kick. My head is spinning from being high. Or from being kicked. The pretty girl’s there, too, and so is her friend. The pretty one grabs Superman and pulls him off me. Maybe it was God after all. Maybe it’s my reward for not taking Yogeved’s call in the synagogue. That stoner could be anywhere by now. But he’s probably farther down the beach, sitting next to a tourist, asking what her horoscope sign is in his crappy English. Superman gets away from the pretty girl, runs back, and gives me another kick in the ribs. “Doron, stop!” the pretty one screams. “Enough!” She has a gentle voice, even when she’s shouting. A pretty girl’s voice. He keeps kicking me.

I wake up on the beach. I can only open one eye. There’s sand stuck to my face. Stuck to the blood on my face. Superman is gone. But the pretty girl’s still here, handing me a can of Coke. She says they didn’t have any water at the kiosk. I try to drink, but I can’t swallow. A guy in a baseball hat comes over. The pretty girl tells him something about what I said or about that guy, Doron, who beat me up. The baseball cap looks at me and says, “He should lie down,” and the pretty girl tries to smile, but the smile is lopsided. She says something I can’t understand, and then the word “ambulance,” and although her mouth is completely crooked now and she’s almost crying, she’s still pretty. I’ve never been with a pretty girl. I don’t even mean sex—just sitting on the same towel at the beach, talking. It was really nice of her to buy me a Coke. ♦

(Translated, from the Hebrew, by Jessica Cohen.)

Go Fish Dept.

- [Without Sylvia Earle, We'd Be Living on Google Dirt](#)

By [Dana Goodyear](#)



Sylvia Earle Illustration by João Fazenda

“Do you like to breathe?” This is a question that the marine biologist and deep-sea explorer Sylvia Earle asks frequently. The ocean produces half of the oxygen on Earth. If it dies, humanity can’t survive, so humans better pay attention to it. When Google introduced its 3-D map, Earle pointed out that the designers had forgotten to include the oceans: it was Google Dirt, she said, not Google Earth. (Google fixed the oversight, with her help.)

Earle, a gamine eighty-six, has searching brown eyes and a smile that could illuminate the midnight zone, and has actually done so. In 1970, she led an all-female expedition to the ocean floor and lived there for two weeks—her riposte to men on the moon. Then she broke the world record for untethered diving, exploring at a depth of one thousand two hundred and fifty feet in a special pressurized suit. Pictures of her in scuba gear bring to mind a Bond girl, with a Ph.D. in the macroalgae of the Gulf of Mexico.

Since the eighties, Earle has been designing manned submersibles. (She has a company, with her eldest daughter, that also engineers deepwater robots, remote-controlled vehicles, and underwater camera systems.) In late April, Earle announced that she had received a grant to produce a new three-person submersible. Her dream is to take children to the seafloor, “democratizing access to the sea.” It will be ready in about two years.

The next day, which was Earth Day, Earle paid a visit to the Aquarium of the Pacific, in Long Beach. She had on a blue Ultrasuede jacket, black slacks, and an octopus necklace. “Let’s swim this way,” she said, easing through a school of kids, to the cafeteria.

Clam chowder was on the menu, but not for Earle: “Does Jane Goodall eat chimpanzees?” What kind of fish were the fish and chips? she asked. The cafeteria attendant answered, vaguely, “Cod.” “It could be one of three thousand species,” Earle said. “They lose their identity.” Knowing them, she maintains, is the prerequisite for protecting them.

As she nibbled at vegan nachos, Earle described a life of fascination with the sea. She took her first scuba dive in 1953; Jacques Cousteau’s book “The Silent World” had just come out. She was an undergrad, in Florida, and her professor Harold Humm had managed to get two of the first scuba sets available in America. (They were called aqualungs.) “I thought I was going down to watch the fish, and the fish were watching me,” Earle said. “I was saying, ‘Who are you?’ And they were saying, ‘Who are *you*?’ ” Later, she named a parasol-shaped seaweed for the prof who let her dive: the Hummbrella.

From there, adventures. Husbands, children, and the sea—going deeper, staying longer, getting to know sea creatures as individuals. “Drop a stone almost anywhere in the ocean and it’s likely to land in a place no human has been,” Earle said. “But there’s life there, and life has been there for a very long time.”

Most of the ocean is still unexplored. But, like the boomlet in private space travel, aquanauts are having a moment. “We’re just getting to that stage right now where there’s a renewal of interest in personal access to the sea,” she said. The race to the bottom is on: for the past few years, the movie director James Cameron and the financier-explorer Victor Vescovo have been bickering about who got lower in the Mariana Trench. “Cameron was the first who went solo, and then Victor went solo, and now they’re back and forth—‘I went deeper than you did, by three inches,’ ” Earle said. She laughed. “The wonderful thing is we don’t really know. I think it’s kind of cool that there’s still one-down-manship, in inches and metres.” Meanwhile, the astronaut Kathy Sullivan, the first woman to walk in space, has

accompanied Vescovo to Challenger Deep, the lowest point in the Mariana Trench, becoming, in Earle's words, "the most vertical woman."

After lunch, Earle drifted through the museum, noting lava-lamp-like jellies, filigreed basket stars, and butterfly fish, which mate for life. In the center of one room was a display of spiny king crabs, sea stars, and translucent spot prawns, denizens of the twilight zone. A family stood beside the tank. The father looked at a crab and said, "I want to eat you." The mother, addressing a child of three or four, said, "Crab. Crab. Say, 'Crab.'" Earle smiled gently at them. She said, "You're saying, 'Crab.' He's saying, 'Human.' " ♦

Listening Dept.

- How Johan Lenox (and Some Acid) Merged Beethoven and Kanye

By [Andrew Marantz](#)



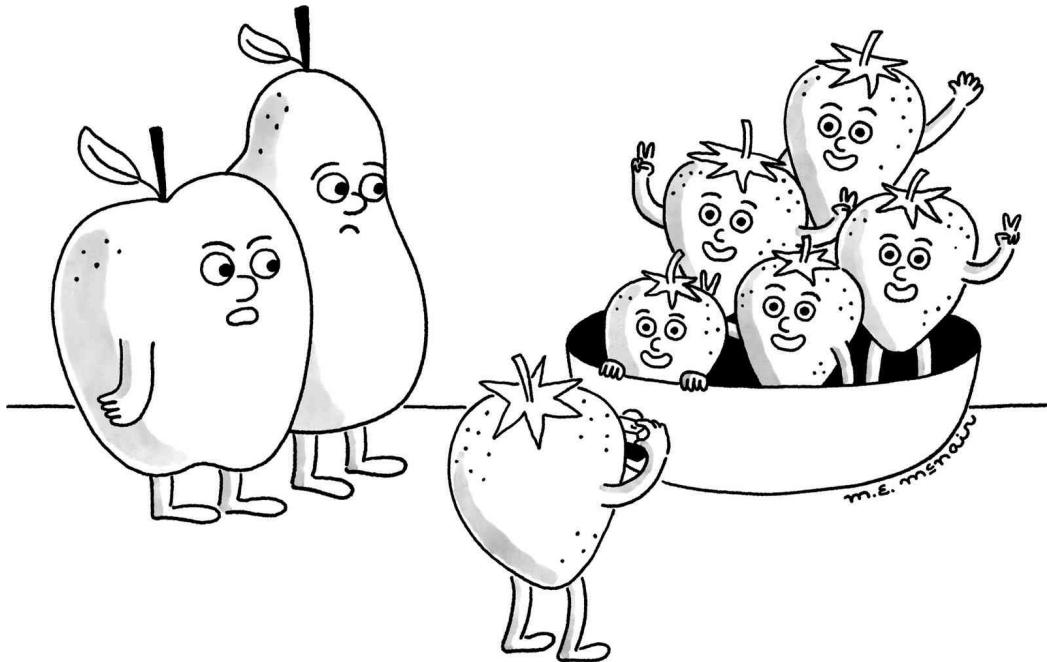
His real name is Stephen Feigenbaum, but it would be a bit much, even in today's relatively tolerant music industry, to walk into a recording session in Los Angeles or Atlanta and introduce yourself as Stephen Feigenbaum. So, in his life as a solo artist and a classical-cum-hip-hop producer, he goes by Johan Lenox. "Johan" is for Bach (perhaps you've heard of him). "Lenox" is for the town in Western Massachusetts where he went to a classical-music summer camp that was run by Tanglewood. "I was the kid who would come home from high school and throw on a Bartók quartet," he said recently. Pop music, to him, was the Boston Pops doing a tribute to John Williams. "Other kids would be, like, 'Pharrell this, Arcade Fire that,' and I'd be, like, 'Cool, I have no idea what that is.' "

He studied music theory and composition at Yale, where he won a Charles Ives scholarship and a Morton Gould Young Composer Award. A neighbor, Greg Berman, went to Brown. During a Thanksgiving break, in 2010, Berman threw a party. He put on "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy," the sprawling, instant-classic album by Kanye West. It had been out for less than a week, but everyone at the party had already heard it—everyone except Lenox, who was in a headspace that was conducive to close listening. "I don't remember whether the acid hit first or the Kanye hit first," he recalled. "All I know is I felt something click, like, Damn, there is way more going on

here, musically, than I ever realized.” The next day, after the acid wore off, the album still held up. In addition to his homework—twelve-tone compositions and the like—he started tinkering with Kanye West covers on the side. “There was this idea in the classical world, which I had totally bought into without realizing it, that you could make sophisticated music, or you could be culturally relevant, but the days when ‘serious music’ could be a part of mass culture were in the past,” he said. “Suddenly it was: But what if you can do both?”

A few years later, first in collaboration with the Young Musicians Foundation, in L.A., and then at Lincoln Center, he and a friend put on a concert called “Yeethoven.” A seventy-piece orchestra played snippets of Beethoven interspersed with Lenox’s symphonic arrangements of Kanye West beats (the “Egmont” Overture juxtaposed with “New Slaves”; “Blood on the Leaves” leading into Symphony No. 5). Mr Hudson, a songwriter and a frequent Kanye collaborator, was in the audience in L.A.; he introduced himself after the show, one thing led to another, and Lenox began dropping by the studio. Kanye works with a rotating stable of writers and producers. Lenox started edging his way into the outer circle. “They’ll be making something, and in the moment, depending on what the song needs, they’ll decide who to bring in,” he said. “‘This dude’s got the best drums.’ ‘She’s crazy with the lyrics.’ Or, when they needed an instrumental outro or an interlude—something with strings or woodwinds or whatever—they started calling me.”

These days, Lenox lives in Los Feliz. His first solo album, “WDYWTBWYGU,” was released last month; on its cover is a blond kid playing on a suburban lawn while, over his shoulder, the world burns. Shortly before it came out, Lenox passed through town for a night, and Berman, who lives in Brooklyn Heights, offered up his couch. Berman connected his phone to a Bluetooth stereo and played selections from “johan lenox: songs I helped make,” a Spotify playlist that is more than ten hours long.



"Oh, brother. Look who's here for the summer."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

“A lot of times, the assignment is unnervingly open-ended,” Lenox said. “They’ll send a beat and go, ‘Fill in the little gap at the end,’ or ‘This needs to go somewhere new’—that’s it. You just try shit, and they either like it or they don’t.” In 2018, when Kanye was in Wyoming, producing an album for the singer Teyana Taylor, one of his studio engineers texted a few rough tracks to Lenox, more or less out of the blue. “I just messed around for a while and sent them back a bunch of stuff,” he said—contrapuntal strings, and stacks of backing vocals. (It wasn’t his first time experimenting with vocal harmony; at Yale, he’d sung a cappella with the Whiffenpoofs.) “Ye ended up going, ‘Honestly, the strings are cool, but the vocals are crazy.’” In Berman’s living room, Lenox played those tracks from Taylor’s album: a swaggering autobiographical manifesto called “Rose in Harlem,” a spare sex ballad called “3Way.”

“You’re on this one?” Berman asked.

“You can hear the vocals if you listen close,” Lenox said. ♦

On and Off the Avenue

- [How to Buy a New Mattress Without a Ph.D. in Chemistry](#)

By [Patricia Marx](#)

Content

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

Before we can talk about buying a new mattress, you'll need a Ph.D. in chemistry and another in mechanical engineering. How else to make sense of the latest concepts in mattress technology—for instance, hyperelastic polymer, buckling column gel, phase-change molecule fabrics, ballistocardiograph sensors, ice fabric, and 3-D-matrix layers? A master's degree in marketing and bullshit will also come in handy.

You will have plenty of time to pursue your degree in mattress studies because you no longer have to get out of bed to buy a new bed. No more lolling on a mattress in a showroom, as if you're in a Marina Abramović installation. More than a hundred online merchants will deliver a mattress to you, rolled up like a Drake's Yodel in a box the size of a doghouse that a cocker spaniel would feel cramped in. I could not sample every e-commerce mattress. Some companies require a customer to live with the purchase for at least a month before sending it back, and where was I supposed to store an extra mattress, let alone a dormitory's worth of them? I did obtain, and later un-obtain, a couple of mattresses online. Who'd have thought that I, someone who spent years fastidiously fingering duvet covers to find the right softness, would be throwing caution to the wind and ordering a mattress on my computer? Welcome, mattresses, to the weird new disrupter world, where your neighbors include prescription eyeglasses, used clothes, and pets.

While I waited for my mattresses to be delivered, I hit some mattress stores. Aside from variations in size and upholstery, all mattresses look alike. Are they?

Let's start with the basic types: innerspring coil, foam, hybrid (foam and innerspring), and adjustable air. Within each category are subcategories. There seem to be more kinds of foam mattresses than there are craft beers from Brooklyn, but don't be fooled by proprietary terms like "Ambien-injected kosher crypto-foam." There are actually only two types of foam: polyurethane, of which memory foam is a subset, and latex.

You're just getting started making decisions, however. What level of firmness do you like? Do you sleep on your side, back, or stomach? When your bedmate tosses and turns, how much does it disturb you (on the Richter scale)? Do you want your mattress all-natural, or will a soupçon of nature do? Do any of the following materials alarm you: soy, hemp, horsehair, mohair, coconut fibre, green tea, polylactide derived from sugarcane? Are you for or against heat-conductive copper flecks? Is the amount of "edge support" that your mattress provides a matter of life and death? How much extra are you willing to pay for latex foam that is flash-frozen before it is baked, or will mere baking suffice?

"Which mattress should I get?" I asked Alex, a Saatva "sleep guide" who works in the company's New York showroom. "It depends on your palate," he said, like a waiter who'd been asked whether he recommends the chicken piccata or the trout amandine. Saatva is an e-commerce company, the parent of Loom & Leaf and Zenhaven, two other big names in direct-to-consumer bedding. Merchandise in the showroom is available for experiencing but not for purchasing. The lighting is subdued, the color scheme neutral; here and there, beige artificial trees are not growing. I surveyed the thirteen beds positioned throughout the space. Of the mattresses you can buy online, Saatva was named by *Good Housekeeping* "Best Overall." (\$1,695. Note: All prices here are for a queen, which is what forty-seven per cent of Americans sleep on.)

Dobrin Mitev, the former head of affiliate and strategic partnerships for Casper, advised me to beware of ratings. He left his job last year because, he said, "I could no longer get behind the mattress industry." Third-party review sites, he said, generally earn [commissions](#) based on how many consumer purchases are made through their links. At Casper, he said, "I was in charge of giving out a pretty penny to affiliates." This might be why every mattress seems to have received an award for something, even if it's Canadian Mattress That Tries Hardest or Best Mattress to Have Insomnia On.

Another thing: what is best for me is not necessarily best for you. Mike Magnuson, the founder and C.E.O. of a consumer site called GoodBed, put it this way: "If you were shopping for pants, you wouldn't say to your friend, 'Tell me what pants you're wearing, and I'll order the same ones.'

You wouldn't think to look on the Internet for the best pants of 2022." Take a look at Reddit, where people who care way too much about mattresses file wildly contradictory reports. One poster writes that he is "16 months and five mattresses into this journey"; another is "now googling Canadian coop cotton growers who work with family owned textile mills in Massachusetts."

Before there were mattress reviews, there were mattresses. The earliest known example, discovered in South Africa's Border Cave in 2020, is more than two hundred thousand years old. It's made from sheaves of grass, about a foot thick, placed atop a layer of ash that was used, scientists believe, to provide insulation and to discourage bugs from crawling upward. "It would have been like sleeping on a rather compressed haystack," Lyn Wadley, an archeologist at the University of Witwatersrand, who directed the excavation, said. Given the mattress's age, would it be covered under the terms of the lifetime warranties offered today by such companies as Puffy, WinkBeds, DreamCloud, and Awara? (The average warranty covers ten to twenty years.) "As long as the two-hundred-thousand-year-old mattress was still being used by its original purchaser, then yes!" Magnuson said. Nevertheless, mattress people tell you to replace your mattress every eight years, and they're not biased—no sirree.

By most accounts, the first water bed was created around 1600 B.C., when ancient Persians filled goatskins with water. Then, in 1833, along came Dr. Arnot's Hydrostatic Bed for Invalids, devised by a Scottish physician to prevent bedsores. Not until 1968, though, did the water bed become the lay of the land: Charles Hall, a San Francisco grad student, introduced his water-filled vinyl "Pleasure Pit" at an art exhibition called "The Happy Happening." Soon, Hugh Hefner reportedly got one (encased in Tasmanian-possum pelt), as did Tommy Smothers and a member of the Jefferson Airplane. A nudist colony owned two. "We called regular innerspring beds 'dead beds' and threw them off balconies from our hotel rooms at waterbed conventions," Dennis Boyd, a water-bed impresario, recounted on his Web site, The Bedroom Store. Water beds peaked in the mid-eighties, capturing around twelve to fifteen per cent of the mattress market. By then, the anti-establishment had become the establishment and developed backaches, and nobody had time for sex. Nowadays, water beds are used by dairy cows, including a hundred and sixty-five belonging to [Queen Elizabeth](#), as an aid

in milk production. (Entrepreneurs: Nobody is selling bovine dust ruffles yet.)

Back at Saatva, I'm sprawled on the Classic, the brand's signature model. It is composed of two layers of innerspring—the bottom is a system of interconnected coils that provide support, and the top has individually encased coils that contour to your body. Above the coils is a thin slab of memory foam, for “enhanced lower-back support and durability.” Covering it all, like icing on a cake, is a marshmallowy top of cotton quilting. The Saatva Classic mattress comes in three levels of firmness (firmest: sleeping on an airport bench; plushest: sinking in quicksand).

The innerspring mattress is the most old-fashioned type (it was invented in 1871, in Berlin) and the most popular. According to one bed blog, thirty-two per cent of Americans own one, and it has the highest satisfaction rate (sixty-three per cent, as opposed to eight per cent for foam types). I could complicate matters further by discussing the effect of coil gauge on mattress comfort (higher gauge equals thinner wire equals softer mattress), but what is this? Spring semester of coil college?

Have you ever lain awake at night, thinking, Well, I suppose I must chop off my arm now, because there is nowhere to put it if I remain on my side? If the answer is yes, your mattress is too firm, a common buying mistake. The mattress best suited to you is the one that keeps your spine in its natural S curve and relieves pressure points (shoulder and hips) by allowing you to sink into the surface just the right amount. In general, firmer mattresses are better for back and stomach sleepers and for people weighing more than two hundred and thirty pounds; softer mattresses are recommended for side sleepers and hummingbirds.

Memory foam is the biggest thing in bedding since those African sheaves of grass. It was invented, in 1966, by Charles Yost, an engineer who'd been contracted by *NASA* to come up with a material to cushion astronauts' seats during liftoff and mitigate the stress caused by g-force. Memory foam is polyurethane foam (polyol plus diisocyanate, both derived from petroleum) with additives that make it denser and more elastic. This means that it is slower to change shape under pressure yet quicker to spring back to its original shape. It should really be called short-term-memory foam. When

warmed by your body, it conforms to your contours, giving you a sense of being hugged. Some people feel trapped. Some people like feeling trapped. Because of memory foam's high density, it absorbs movement, reducing the chance that when your partner rolls over a ripple will be detectable on your side of the bed.

Memory foam's density also means that it tends to feel hotter than a spring mattress, which is airier. To compensate, memory foam is sometimes infused with gel, in capsules or swirls. Does that work? Not really, according to Michael Hickner, a professor of materials science and engineering at Penn State. "I think a lot of it is marketing and small design tweaks," he told me. But the main problem he has with foam mattresses is that they "do not biodegrade for all intents and purposes."

The type of foam the planet is rooting for you to buy is natural latex. Made from liquid extruded from rubber trees, it's whipped until frothy and then baked. The resulting material can be both biodegradable and recyclable. No trees are harmed in the process; for them, it's like giving blood. Latex is denser and heavier than urethane foam, in addition to being more durable, and often cooler. It has more air flow because of small perforations, which resemble the peg holes of a cribbage board. Latex foam is more expensive. It is also bouncier, which puts it on many Best Mattresses for Sex lists.

As with finding a person to sleep with, choosing what you want to sleep on is now largely done online. This was made possible because foam mattresses, unlike the old-fashioned battleships of steel and batting, can be compressed, jammed into a box, and delivered by UPS to your bedroom. Even hybrid mattresses—foam plus microcoils—are squishable and shippable. (Saatva is unusual in that it hand-delivers your purchase unfurled.)

After you coax your new mattress out of the box, it will expand in a leisurely fashion, like a slo-mo popcorn kernel; the process will take between four and forty-eight hours. It might smell funny, like new carpet or melted permanent markers, but don't worry. The fumes, an effect of off-gassing (the emission of minute amounts of volatile organic compounds), will go away in a few days. You'll likely have somewhere between a hundred days and a

year to try the bed out, and if it's not up to snuff you can return it for a refund.

The first of the new mattress disrupters, a Tennessee startup called BedInABox, appeared in 2006. The C.E.O. and founder, Bill Bradley, had been inspired by Magniflex, an Italian bed-maker that, since 1986, had been offering compressed, vacuum-sealed mattresses stuffed into duffelbags. Like Popsicle, Taser, and Zoom, the brand name BedInABox became synonymous with the category of product. But the hegemony of traditional retailers with a physical presence wasn't threatened until [Casper](#) arrived, in 2014, with just one mattress style, and launched a social-media campaign that made tugging a foam rectangle out of a box look like the most fun anyone could ever have. In 2010, by some accounts, less than one per cent of mattress purchases in the United States were online; in 2018, the slice was forty-five per cent; and since the start of the pandemic it's certainly grown even larger. Virtual buying has a lot to recommend it: the mattresses are generally cheaper, owing to lower operating costs and more competition; there's a lot more product to choose from; and the return policies tend to be more generous.

But can you reliably pick the right mattress sight unseen? Not automatically. However, if you try out some models in an actual store or two, you should do fine. I headed to the Third Avenue outpost of Tempur-Pedic, to find out what all-foam mattresses feel like. Tempur-Pedic gets credit for popularizing foam, but the original was produced, in 1991, by the Swedish company Fagerdala, which used the technology developed by *nasa* for the astronaut seats. (Those engineers had named the treated polyurethane Temper, for its temperature-regulating properties.) Fagerdala sold the North American distribution rights to Robert Trussell, a horse breeder in Kentucky, who, with a friend, created Tempurpedic, Inc. Today, the brand is part of Tempur-Sealy International, which, along with Serta Simmons Bedding L.L.C., is estimated to account for 45.4 per cent of mattress sales.

The showroom contained thirteen sheetless beds, some flanked by monitors projecting calming images of nature. I faked sleeping on three models, and I'll be damned if I could tell them apart. "This one is up to eight degrees cooler," an associate named Amir said, of the LuxeAdapt—or was that the

Luxebreeze? As I auditioned the *Luxebreeze* (twenty per cent more pressure relief), Amir said, “No other foam comes close to Tempur-Pedic’s foam.”



“Eventually, you’ll learn to hate your body, then love it again, then hate it—and back and forth until the beach becomes very complicated.”
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

I asked what makes it so special. “I can’t tell you,” Amir said. “It’s a trade secret.” Manufacturers often boast of a “proprietary formula,” which could be as meaningful as adding a dash of salt. Whatever the Tempur-Pedic secret, the beds I sampled were extremely comfortable. Tempur-Pedic mattresses, like real maple syrup, are generally regarded as superb but pricey (\$2,399-\$5,399).

Dobrin Mitev believes that price does reflect quality. “At least at Casper, the more expensive models had a more complex structure,” he said. “More layers, and each layer had a different function.” Comparing mattresses to wine, he recommended selecting from the middle price range. “You don’t want to buy the cheapest,” he said, but in the mid-range “there is not that much difference.”

If the middle range is still a financial stretch, you could try the Zinus Green Tea Cooling Swirl Memory Foam Hybrid (\$379 from Amazon), Denver Mattress Doctor’s Choice Plush (\$799.99), NovaForm Comfort Grande (\$599.99 from Costco), Allswell Bed in a Box Hybrid (\$349 from Walmart), or Hesstun Medium Firm Innerspring (\$549 from IKEA).

How bad could a cheapie be? Time to visit Mattress Firm, a repository of mattresses in a wide range of brands and prices—at the high end, Intellibed (\$5,799) and Tempur-Pedic (\$5,099); at the low end, Sleepy's innerspring (\$199) and Tulo's memory foam (\$259). At my local branch, I found fifteen or so beds shoved close together under ceiling lights, creating a warehouse vibe. I was immediately greeted by Moncef, a cheerful man whose nametag identified him as a Sleep Expert. When I confessed that I wasn't sure which type of mattress I wanted, he said, "Perfect! You're a mystery shopper." He added that he had a scientific method for determining my ideal mattress. It involved asking me a lot of questions and looking at a chart. From Moncef, I learned that although a plush mattress helps you fall asleep faster, a supportive mattress helps you stay asleep longer.

After flopping around on many expensive mattresses, I asked to see some, ahem, budget choices. Those were displayed in the basement. I spread out on a Beautyrest that felt like a slice of Wonder Bread. After twenty minutes, I told Moncef that I needed more time to make a decision. "Did I mention we're having a sale?" he said.

Did I mention that it's almost impossible to buy a mattress that is not on sale? March through May is the best time to buy, according to Bob Vila's Web site, because new product usually arrives in June. But everything is negotiable. Chris Regan, who manages the mattress-testing program at *Consumer Reports*, estimated that mattresses have a markup of forty to fifty per cent. Haggling usually works, unless you are dealing with a company with fixed prices, such as a warehouse club.

Regan recommends shopping in an area where there are lots of mattress stores. "When you head out of a place and say, 'I kind of like this one, but I'm going down the street,' the salesperson will likely offer you a better deal," he said. If a price reduction is a no-go, try for free sheets or pillows. There are online tricks, too: leave your item in the shopping cart—there's a good chance you'll receive an e-mail with a discount code within a day or two.

At Hästens, if you have to ask, you can't afford it. The company's most preposterously priced mattress, a king-size Grande Vivius, costs \$539,000 (bed frame included). When Drake bought one, in 2020, it was merely

\$400,000. For non-Grammy winners, there's a waiting list. Handcrafted by a team of artisans in Sweden, each mattress takes up to six hundred hours to assemble and stitch and is wrapped in checked cotton ticking. If you buy one, even the company's humblest (\$19,575), a pair of "sleep doctors" will come to your house twice a year for twenty-five years to flip, rotate, and massage your mattress.

No, these mattresses are not stuffed with caviar or antimatter or five hundred and thirty-nine thousand dollars in unmarked bills. In addition to steel (for the springs), wool, cotton, and flax, they are made from more than a dozen layers of hand-teased South American horsetail hair. Horsehair fibres are hollow, a Hästens executive explained, which means that they enhance the mattress's ventilation system. (Horses sleep standing up; make of that what you will.) Although the mattresses have a warranty of twenty-five years, the executive clarified, "We won't replace it if your dog rips it apart."

Not long ago, joined by the person with whom I share an old but good-enough-for-now mattress, I tried out a few Hästens models during a private sleep consultation. This was arranged by a Hästens employee, Kristel Kalm (real name), a lanky former tennis pro from Sweden. She'd offered to send a car for us, but we made the three-block journey on foot. In borrowed goose-down Hästens booties (\$200), we chilled on a king-size 2000T mattress (\$61,780). The lights were dim and candles burned, mimicking the ambience of a séance or a facial. I wish I could tell you that Hästens mattresses are uncomfortable, because then you wouldn't even think of spending the equivalent of a year's college tuition on a bed. But they are extremely comfortable, somehow simultaneously dense and pliant. Oh, well, sleep is as good as college for your brain.

The first of my online purchases to arrive was a Layla Hybrid, a flippable number composed of more layers than a lasagna—the one in the middle has individually wrapped coils for support, and on either side of this are foam layers for comfort, with one side firmer than the other. Many mattresses nowadays are not flippable. You like firm or you like plush; why would someone want two options? I'd asked this question of Alex, my sleep guide at Saatva. "Our numbers suggest there's an age group that enjoys firm, but, when they reach their sixties or seventies, they get arthritis and need something softer," he whispered discreetly. I wanted to try Layla because the

outer layers are infused with copper, which supposedly makes it cooler. If you shop for mattresses, you will reach the conclusion that the greatest problem facing Americans today is not climate change or gun violence but “sleeping hot.”

I dragged the duffelbag inside my apartment and watched a few online videos about how to set up a Layla mattress. In one, a spokesman says to use the duffelbag’s shoulder straps to carry it up the stairs. If you’re a mule. I could barely slide the bag across my floor. Every video shows the unpacker expressing delight at the complimentary extra-large T-shirt that says “Wake Up!” After maneuvering the Hybrid out of the bag, I nervously used the enclosed Layla cutting blade to remove the outer plastic casing. Trying to puzzle out which direction the unbound mattress would spiral so that it wouldn’t smash into the table, I understood how chimps taking I.Q. tests feel. Before I could get at the inner shrink-wrap casing, my Layla started to expand, and within a minute or two it was fully grown. I peeled off the last of the plastic to reveal a honeycomb-patterned charcoal-gray mattress cover, made from polyester, viscose, rayon, and Lycra spandex. Don’t even think of trying to get it back in the duffel. (\$1,699, reduced to \$1,499.)

For a few nights, I slept on the Hybrid. The soft side was too soft for me, and the other side was spongy but didn’t make me feel like I needed a forklift to get out of bed. You can also go for the extra topper with copper-infused memory foam (\$349), which provides cushioning, or, as the Layla Web site says, it’s “like adding an extra layer of clouds to a bed already made of cotton candy.” I consulted with Michael Hickner again to ask about the claims made by Layla and other companies that copper’s thermal conductivity allows it to pull heat away from your body.

“I’d like to see independent scientific data to support that,” he said. “Once companies figured out they can make money selling mattress snake oil to the public, they turned what used to be a boring thing you bought once every twenty years into a designer wellness solution that could change your life.” Still, if you want a soft, comfortable mattress, Layla does the trick. If you want a surface that is truly cooling, try sleeping on a glacier.

Next to arrive was the Avocado Green, rated No. 1 by *Consumer Reports*. It is so organic, carbon-negative, and eco-chummy that when global warming

finally gets us you can rest assured that it was not because of anything you slept on. Its vegan option, which replaces wool with cotton, is *PETA*-approved. Gwyneth Paltrow partnered with Avocado on the Goop x Avocado mattress—no, let's call it a sleep system—which starts at \$24,000 and is available on demand. I chose my model during a visit to Avocado's Experience Center, at 135 Fifth Avenue. While I waited for the couple chilling out on the Eco Organic model to move on, I asked a sales associate named Desi (long hair, leggings) if customers ever fall asleep. “All the time,” she said. “The longest was four and a half hours. He was so embarrassed that he bought the mattress.” I ordered the Avocado Green in king and opted for in-home delivery, recommended for beds that are royalty. For \$249—cheaper than back surgery—you get setup and free removal of your old mattress. Mine was ready to go in less time than it takes for a sleeping pill to kick in. The Avocado Green has a luxe-feeling surface, both firmer and bouncier than the Layla. And I cannot agree with the online reviewer who observed that the Avocado Green had a faint odor of sheep.

In truth, the more mattresses I slept on, the more I couldn't tell them apart. The Avocado innerspring and latex, topped with wool sheared from Himalayan Gaddi goats that, according to the brand's Web site, “graze on organic pastures [where] a frigid mountain stream runs downhill and peaks over 20,000 feet loom high above,” was also great (\$2,299). So was the DUX 6006, which has as many as forty-two hundred interconnected coils and a removable top pad for extra cushioning, if that's your thing (\$10,430). Ditto the Sleep Number 360 p6 Smart Bed, which contains two air-filled bladders, so that the inflation and deflation of each side can be adjusted on their own, to accommodate the preferences of you and your bedmate (\$3,099). And, for anyone who needs biometrics regarding each second of her slumber, the SleepIQ Technology found in every Sleep Number mattress is designed for you. (I'm more “Don't ask, don't tell” about my nocturnal heart and breathing rates.) The Casper Nova Hybrid (\$2,295) is awfully cozy, and I also like the Casper Original, both the all-foam (\$1,295) and the hybrid foam with springs (\$1,695).

Staring at the ceiling in Bloomingdale's, listening to the Four Seasons sing “Oh, what a night” over the sound system, I wanted to answer “Both” to the salesperson's question: Which is more comfortable? Some of this confusion is deliberate. Jerry Epperson, an investment banker who specializes in the

furniture and mattress fields, told me, “We’re an industry where five companies do sixty to seventy per cent of the manufacturing.” He named them: Tempur-Pedic, Sealy, Serta, Simmons, and Sleep Number. A manufacturer often sells the same product to various retailers, each of which may differentiate it in a trivial way—changing the color or the quilting pattern, making it a smidgen thicker or thinner. The retailer then slaps on a proprietary name, deeming the mattress an exclusive. Mattress people call this practice “the name game.” This makes it difficult to ask Mattress Firm to honor its guarantee to “beat any competitor’s price by 10% or your purchase is free.”

Ever notice how similar many of the logos and ad slogans of mattress companies are? Compare, for instance, the clean sans-serif lowercase fonts of Nectar, Layla, Purple, and Saatva. Is this intentional? “Absolutely,” Dobrin Mitev said. “It’s competitor mimicry.”

Amid all the shadiness and hyped marketing, how to choose? Before you resort to the “eeny, meeny, miny, moe” method, let me offer a few tips: Whether you buy online or in person, sample enough mattresses to figure out whether you prefer memory foam, latex, innerspring, adjustable air-filled, or some combination. Don’t buy any mattress that doesn’t come with a trial period. Keep the mattress pristine during this time. (Many people spring for a waterproof mattress protector.) Read the fine print on the return policy to avoid surprises. Some policies allow only exchanges. That’s not for you. In my experience, Costco and Amazon make it so easy to return that you’ll hope you don’t like what you ordered. A warning about warranties: many of them are prorated; many offer repairs, not refunds or replacements; and the criteria for determining what is covered can be stringent. (Technically, sagging means a dip of at least an inch and a half. I’m not sure even an elephant house guest would cause that.) You know that mattress tag? Removing it can void the warranty.

Some advice from the mattresscenti: Seth Basham, an analyst at Wedbush Securities who covers the mattress industry, believes in reading online customer reviews. Mitev puts greater stock in the bigger, long-established companies than in the small upstarts with no track record. In contrast, many grassroots sites advise staying away from big brands like Sealy, Simmons, Stearns & Foster, and Serta (often referred to as the “S brands”), because

they allegedly use poorer-quality materials. Brent Larson, a rep from the testing organization Element Materials Technology, suggests consulting *Consumer Reports*, which, as a nonprofit, purchases its own samples from the companies it evaluates and restricts which findings can be used in advertising.

What mattress does Chris Regan, who oversees mattress testing at *Consumer Reports*, sleep on? “A ten-year-old Sealy,” he said. “Is it time for me to get a new mattress? Yes. Am I going to? Probably not.” He added that the car he drives, an old Jeep, “is one of our lowest rated.” It gets him where he wants to go. ♦

Paris Postcard

- [Life After “Call My Agent!”](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)



Fanny Herrero is, according to *Madame Figaro*, “the most famous of French *showrunneuses*.” Not long ago, there was no such thing as a French *showrunneuse*, or, for that matter, a French *showrunner*—“a new profession, like a troll or a taster of organic bread, but more useful,” *Les Echos* noted in March. Herrero is best known for her work on “Call My Agent!” (the original French title is “Dix Pour Cent”), which became a huge international hit after Netflix bought it from the public broadcaster France 2. She quit the show after three seasons, in 2018, citing a work environment that could have perhaps benefitted from a shouty negotiation or two (when Herrero asked for extra help after the show took off, the producers said sure, but someone would have to pay for it), and also her desire to “tell other stories.” (Her show “Standing Up,” about striving comedians in Paris, is on Netflix now.) The other day, Herrero, who is forty-seven, was sitting in a café by the Seine, talking about the “industrialization” of French television as ducks and a traffic cone floated by. *Showrunneuses* are now a thing in large part because of her insistence, in a culture traditionally oriented toward the director-auteur, that the creative authority of writers be recognized. On “Call My Agent!,” she eventually got the title, if not the compensation. “I wasn’t a co-producer, so, even with the show’s big international success, I’ll never have any of the profits,” she said. “It’s O.K., that’s life.”

Herrero grew up in a family of brawny, oddball leftists in the right-wing redoubt of Toulon, on the Mediterranean coast. Her parents were *soixante-huitards*, gym teachers, naturists. Her father, Daniel, is as well known in France for his signature white beard and red bandanna as he is for coaching the Toulon rugby club from 1983 to 1991. Herrero—an athlete herself, who eventually made the French national junior team in volleyball—was always hanging around the locker room. “My father often said that there are players that you have to caress, giving them confidence that they’re the best. And then there are others—with them, you have to be brutal.” She continued, “All my work, it’s to find the angle to maneuver, with each person and then with the group. Psychologically, it’s a crazy experience to be a good coach, to be a human in a collective.”

Herrero brokered a deal with Netflix for her new show, called “Drôle” in France, but she hasn’t spent much time in Hollywood. Her formative experience of California dates to 1993, when she arrived there as a teen-age exchange student. She recalled, “I was, like, ‘San Francisco, woo-hoo,’ and then I got there and it was a suburb called Hayward, and I was going to community college.” For the commute, her choices were a three-hour round trip on the bus between the dorm and her classes, and learning how to drive. “All you had to do was take a test,” she said. “I was a danger to society. It’s shameful they let me have a license.”

In “Standing Up,” Herrero explores a younger, scrappier, more diverse milieu—the beer-soaked workplace of nascent talents with no coaches to mold them, no agents to call. “Standup isn’t a tradition here like it is in the U.S.,” she said, comparing the emerging scene to that of hip-hop in the eighties and nineties. “A sixty-year-old standup comedian—that doesn’t exist in France. They’re all between twenty and thirty-five years old.” The show’s four leading characters span the class gamut, and come from families with origins in Vietnam, Senegal, and Algeria and the posh, largely white Sixth Arrondissement. “More multiple, natural, and even dirty,” Herrero said, of the Paris she chose to portray. “Not necessarily glamorous, but, at the same time, full of energy.” She continued, “I don’t want to speak badly of ‘Emily in Paris,’ I realize that people like it, and good for them. But I don’t know—politically, I don’t like it. Because it reduces people, it reduces the world.”

Herrero was waiting for a call to find out whether “Standing Up” would be renewed. She wasn’t feeling good about its prospects. “Honestly, it’s not easy,” she said. “We’re not performing well enough for Netflix.” But she had never had so much support, so many people telling her that one of her shows meant something to them. It was hard to square the single-minded focus on numbers with the show’s intent. “I never envisioned ‘Standing Up’ as a blockbuster,” she said. “I realize that it’s a narrower series—even if it has ambitions in its form, it is. It has an appearance of modesty, *et voilà*, for the moment, we don’t have an official response for Season 2.” She added, “We can always hope for a little miracle.” In mid-May, Herrero got word. Cancelled. No miracle. The show had been streaming for only twenty-eight days. The algorithm was mightier than the *showrunneuse*. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Fanny Herrero's age and the year she arrived in California as an exchange student.

Personal History

- A Time Line of My Arrest

By [Dennard Dayle](#)

4:30 P.M. I need a haircut. Off to Atlantic Avenue.

5 P.M. A blond woman puts a sticker on a lamppost. I have stickers! The wheels of genius start turning.

5:04 P.M. I, blacker, put a sticker on the same pole.

5:05 P.M. Officer A chicken-wings my arm. Poorly. I try to help, but the maneuver is beyond his technical depth. This is no Bret Hart.

5:06 P.M. Officer A says to stop resisting. Officer B stifles laughter.

5:08 P.M. Officer B gets bored and cuffs me himself.

5:15 P.M. Their car smells like dead dog.

5:22 P.M. We reach the station. It's closer to the lamppost than their car was.

5:30 P.M. Officer A: "I don't get these stickers. What do you do?"

Me: "I teach at Columbia."

Officer A: "Stop lying."

5:40 P.M. Onboarding, of sorts. I plug my book.

6 P.M. It's the most diverse cell I've ever seen. American Black, African Black, Caribbean Black, indeterminate Black—the works.

6:01 P.M. The cell smells better than the car.

6:05 P.M. I settle into the front left corner. My new home.

6:15 P.M. Cellmate A flirts with our sister cell. We can't see them. He's an optimist.

6:20 P.M. Unseen Woman likes "Norbit." Cellmate A balks, but perseveres.

6:25 P.M. Cellmate B: "What are you here for?"

Me: "They said graffiti."

Cellmate B: "Was it some dope shit?"

Me: "I hope so."

6:27 P.M. Unseen Woman moves on to music. Cellmate A keeps trying.

6:30 P.M. I request a phone call. Officer A doesn't feel it.

6:45 P.M. Unseen Woman thinks P. Diddy runs an "Epstein island." Cellmate A powers through. I've come to admire him.

7:01 P.M. Cellmate C mutters about space. Probably fine.

7:20 P.M. Unseen Woman politely requests release.

7:30 P.M. Unseen Woman requests release less politely.

7:40 P.M. Unseen Woman screams every curse she knows and invents four new ones. I've come to admire her.

7:56 P.M. Cellmate C: "Can I just get my ticket?"

Officer C: "New mayor, new rules."

Cellmate C: "The law changed?"

Officer D: "Er, no. But new mayor, new rules."

8:02 P.M. Cellmate B snorts white powder off the bench. There's a camera.

8:11 P.M. Cellmate B slumps. Someone cut a depressant in there.

8:20 P.M. Cellmate B rallies. Cellmate A fakes more love for "Norbit." Cellmate C continues talking to himself. This cell has fighting spirit.

8:25 P.M. Cellmate B: "Don't worry, we're good niggas. A little time here, a little time in booking, and we'll be fine. No bad niggas in here. We haven't hurt anyone."

8:26 P.M. Unseen Woman asks if there's any coke left.

8:30 P.M. Officer C says I'll be out in fifteen minutes.

8:45 P.M. Cellmate A: “What are you here for?”

Me: “Graffiti.”

Cellmate A: “Was it good?”

Me: “They didn’t like it.”

9 P.M. Cellmate A departs. I hope he finds love.

9:07 P.M. I request a phone call. Officer E isn’t into it, either.

9:11 P.M. Cellmate C swears that he never meant to seduce his brother’s wife. He’s here for shoplifting.

9:30 P.M. I sketch out the fall semester in my head. I could talk about this, or “Oreo.”

9:41 P.M. I choose “Oreo.” Fran Ross deserved more.

9:42 P.M. It takes all of my life force to avoid making faces at the camera.

9:48 P.M. I get my phone call. Time to pick someone.

9:49 P.M. There’s my mom’s retired lawyer, my detective relative, or the defense lawyer I dated. Choices.

9:55 P.M. I make two calls. Voice mail.

10:02 P.M. Officer C repeats her fifteen-minute promise. She’ll be right someday.

10:12 P.M. Cellmate B departs. I hope he finds better coke.

10:20 P.M. Fingerprint time. My future as a cat burglar is ruined.

10:23 P.M. Officer A struggles with Windows 63. I hope it unfreezes before Watergate.

10:26 P.M. Officer A: “Gonna write about this?”

Me: “Probably not.”

10:37 P.M. Cellmate C: “What are you here for?”

Me: “Graffiti.”

Cellmate C: “How was it?”

Me: “Meh.”

10:44 P.M. Cellmate C says he watches “Baki.” We’re best friends.

10:51 P.M. History’s fifteen longest minutes are over. Time to go.

10:55 P.M. They return my backpack. I plug my book.

10:58 P.M. I look over my desk ticket. It has a something-stain. Green-brown. Perhaps Officer B’s signature.

11:02 P.M. I leave the pigsty.

11:20 P.M. I beeline to a diner. I need less metaphorical bacon.

11:30 P.M. I inhale two plates of heart disease.

11:35 P.M. The rest of my stickers are gone, along with a pro-wrestling wristband.

11:36 P.M. The wristband’s from Sumo Hall in Tokyo. Almost worth turning back.

11:44 P.M. More pork, just for the wordplay.

11:51 P.M. I imagine life on the fun side of guns, germs, and steel. It looks nice. Over here, the underdog novelty’s worn off.

12 A.M. I still need a haircut. ♦

Poems

- “Skeleton” and “Flesh”
- “Helianthus”

By [Deborah Landau](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

Skeleton

Summer dark found us binge-watching the Perseid, perched high
kinked on the lifeguard chair, undertowed by sky. The stars again with their
echolalia, their vanishing. August had come round once more with its
compulsory

lusciousness, its tang of cherries on the tongue. We preened in preparation,
epilation predictable as rosé, grass stains, mosquito bites, biking at night.

Toddlers thumbed their noses at the pandemic, the sidelined
octogenarians. We tried to stay preoccupied with seasonal frivolities, like
how

nano or non- were our sunscreens, like flip-flops, tick checks, the cycle of
tides.

Flesh

The long and short of it is a podcast can only take you so far.

There goes our summer neighbor, Wife-of-Bath'ing it at the barbecue again,
her toned shoulders, her backtalk and small army of dogs. Here we still are.

Another summer, same bathing suit. Same cutoffs and blueberries.

The same sordid daydream I keep having, ashamed
here to say because someone might see.

We won't do a single new thing it turns out, just keep cycling
through the years as if they were endless, as if they'd never cease.

Will we ever run out of days? Who dares to count.

To say there are maybe thirty more Christmases, if we're lucky,
thirty more Julys.

By [Page Hill Starzinger](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

The farmers' market has sunflowers again. It's another July, and bees scramble over the sticky chocolate

centers. My mother says, *Hi, sweets,*
but she died two years ago. I see her clearly—

wearing a drip-dry striped boys' shirt, looking straight
at me. There's something she's waiting for. I

can't figure out what it is—never could. Young
sunflowers track the sun until they mature,

then they are stuck facing east. I wonder when
memory is not a haunting, when disappointment is

not unlearned. The florets spiral, a Fibonacci sequence:
each number the sum of the two

preceding. A generation is supposed to be better
than the last, but my father once wondered, staring at

a portrait of his father, if sons always disappoint. I
can't remember what I said next, but it wasn't true.

Profiles

- [Can Ron DeSantis Displace Donald Trump as the G.O.P.'s Combatant-in-Chief?](#)

By [Dexter Filkins](#)

Content

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

One Sunday afternoon in September, 2020, Jay Bhattacharya, an epidemiologist at Stanford University, was at home in Los Altos when he got an unexpected call. It was Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, and he wanted to talk about the coronavirus. In the early months of the pandemic, Bhattacharya had established himself as an outlier among public-health experts. He is one of three scientists who drafted the Great Barrington Declaration, which argued that many governments were doing more harm than good by shutting down economies and schools. The only practical approach, they said, would be to protect the most vulnerable—mainly by isolating the elderly—and allow everyone else to go about their lives until vaccines and herd immunity neutralized the disease. With *COVID-19* killing hundreds of Americans every day, the signers of the declaration became pariahs in their profession. “I’ve lost friends,” Bhattacharya told me. “I’m lucky to have tenure.”

DeSantis, young and aggressively confident, was similarly convinced that he could find a better way to handle the virus. Talking with him, Bhattacharya was surprised by his command of the research. “He’d read all the medical literature—all of it, not just the abstracts,” he told me. The science, though, remained unclear—Did the virus linger on surfaces? Did it travel in droplets or in a fog?—and many politicians found that the most appealing solutions were the ones that fit their ideology. For DeSantis, who espouses a libertarian vision of small government and personal freedom, the ideas in the Great Barrington Declaration resonated. In his view, the government, apart from protecting the elderly and making treatments available, should do almost nothing.

[More on Ron DeSantis](#)

[Dexter Filkins discusses the Florida governor on The New Yorker Radio Hour.](#)

Initially, as the virus began spreading in Florida, DeSantis had ordered a statewide lockdown, in accordance with Dr. Anthony Fauci's recommendations. Three weeks later, he changed his mind. "We will never do any of these lockdowns again," he said. After talking to Bhattacharya, he lifted nearly all remaining restrictions—on schools, government buildings, stores, restaurants, and other private businesses—and halted the enforcement of mask mandates.

As the death toll mounted, he was mocked by critics as "DeathSantis" and denounced by the mainstream press. "Any public distrust of this administration has been well-earned," the *Miami Herald* editorial board wrote. "We can't trust the governor with our lives." A former political adviser with knowledge of the *COVID* response told me that DeSantis was unfazed: "We were getting crucified, but to him it was just noise." DeSantis revels in defying what he sees as a corrupt and self-satisfied liberal establishment. Those who work closely with him say that he is unique among elected officials in his disregard for public opinion and the press. "Ron's strength as a politician is that he doesn't give a fuck," a Republican consultant who knows him told me. "Ron's weakness as a politician is that he doesn't give a fuck. Big donors? He doesn't give a shit. Cancels on them all the time."

DeSantis's approach to the pandemic gave rise to an entire governing strategy, in which he regularly denounced some outrage, invariably perpetrated by the left, and proclaimed that he was the only one brave enough to stop it. He laced his speeches and press conferences with anger; when he walked, he thrust out his chest like a soldier on parade. He became a regular on Fox News, second only to Donald Trump as a figure of admiration. His aggressive defense of minimal state action, and his denunciations of anyone who disagreed with him, made him a conservative folk hero.

DeSantis faces reëlection later this year, but his ascent has been so dramatic that in a few polls he comes out ahead of Trump in the race for the Republican Presidential nomination; without Trump, he commands a big lead. Both men claim to channel the rage of an electorate that feels sneered at and dismissed by liberal institutions. But while Trump, with his lazy, Barnumesque persona, projects a fundamental lack of seriousness, DeSantis

has an intense work ethic, a formidable intelligence, and a granular understanding of policy. Articulate and fast on his feet, he has been described as Trump with a brain.

In February, DeSantis appeared at the Conservative Political Action Conference, held at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel, a sprawling resort near Orlando. The convention halls were filled with the Party's new vanguard, which was, on the whole, poorer and angrier than the bankers and golfers who led the G.O.P. a generation ago. The panels ranged from outraged to vengeful. A health-care panel was called "Obamacare Still Kills." A discussion of *COVID-19* policy was titled "Lock Downs and Mandates: Now Do You Understand Why We Have a Second Amendment."

From the main stage, DeSantis flashed a smile and tossed baseball caps into the crowd. In a twenty-minute speech, he described an America under assault by left-wing élites, who "want to delegitimize our founding institutions." His job as governor, he said, was to fight the horsemen of the left: critical race theory, "Faucian dystopia," uncontrolled immigration, Big Tech, "left-wing oligarchs," "Soros-funded prosecutors," transgender athletes, and the "corporate media." In Florida, he said, he had created a "citadel of freedom" that had become a beacon for people "chafing under authoritarian rule"; he cited disgruntled citizens of Australia, Canada, and Europe. (He didn't mention the Russian invasion of Ukraine.) "We're not letting Florida cities burn down," DeSantis told the crowd. "In Florida, you're not going to get a slap on the wrist. You are getting the inside of a jail cell." He offered no new policies, though he did mention that he was requiring high-school seniors to pass a civics exam.

DeSantis is not a charismatic speaker, but he is dogged and precise, and the crowd was inflamed. Trump, the ostensible star of *CPAC*, was scheduled to speak later, but DeSantis didn't mention him. ("Their relationship is complicated," a lawyer close to DeSantis told me.) And, while DeSantis used Florida as a touchstone, he sounded as if he had all of America on his mind. "In times like these, there is no substitute for courage," he said. "We need people all over the country to be willing to put on that full armor of God." As the crowd burst into cheers, he vowed, "We have only begun to fight."

From a remove—onstage at a conference, or pressing an argument on Fox News—DeSantis seems constructed for political success. He grew up in a working-class neighborhood, went to Yale and played on the baseball team, graduated from Harvard Law School, served in the military in Iraq. His family is ready made for a campaign brochure. “He’s good-looking,” John Morgan, a lawyer in Orlando who has worked with DeSantis, told me. “His wife is really good-looking. His family is beautiful. They look like they’re from central casting.”

In person, he often comes across differently. “Ron is at his best on paper,” a Florida political leader who knows DeSantis told me. “Then you meet him and you say, ‘Oh, my gosh.’” People who work closely with him describe a man so aloof that he sometimes finds it difficult to carry on a conversation. “He’s not comfortable engaging other people,” a political leader who sees him often told me. “He walks into the meeting and doesn’t acknowledge the rest of us. There’s no eye contact and little or no interaction. The moment I start to ask him a question, his head twitches. You can tell he doesn’t want to be there.” (DeSantis’s office declined requests for comment.)



“It’s Monday.”
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Nearly everyone I talked to who knew DeSantis commented on his affect: his lack of curiosity about others, his indifferent table manners, his aversion to the political rituals of dispensing handshakes and questions about the kids.

One former associate told me that his demeanor stems from a conviction that others have advantages that were denied to him. “The anger comes more easily to him because he has a chip on his shoulder,” she said. “He is a serious guy. Driven.”

In February, I drove to Dunedin, Florida, a city of thirty-six thousand near Tampa, where DeSantis spent most of his youth. His old neighborhood is typical of those built before the boom years began, in the nineteen-seventies; the houses are modest and close together, and the city, once dotted with open lots, is overrun by traffic. DeSantis’s street is quiet, though; many of the houses have screen doors and jalousie windows and sprinklers attached to garden hoses. American flags and Trump signs mark the lawns, including the one at the house where DeSantis’s parents still live.

When I knocked, the Governor’s father, also named Ron, came to the door. He was dressed in a Florida State University T-shirt and shorts, and there was a day’s stubble on his face. “I’d rather not talk to you,” he said. “You might be a good guy, but, if I tell you something, somebody—maybe not you—will twist it around.” Then he stepped outside and started to talk. The F.S.U. T-shirt, he said, came from his daughter, Christina, who earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees there. “When my daughter graduated from F.S.U., I thought it was the last time I’d ever have to make the drive to Tallahassee—two hundred and thirty-one miles,” he said. In fact, his wife, Karen, who is a retired nurse, was in Tallahassee that day to visit their son at the governor’s mansion; Ron, Sr., had stayed home alone.

DeSantis told me that he’d brought his family to Dunedin from Jacksonville, where Ron was born, in 1978. He had a job with Nielsen, the television-ratings company. For years, he traversed neighborhoods, asking people if they would agree to have a Nielsen box attached to their television. “It’s incredible how many people would just let me into their houses, even though they didn’t know me,” he said. “I’d be there until eight o’clock installing the thing.”

I asked what Ron was like growing up. “He was stubborn,” DeSantis said. “If he set his mind to something, you couldn’t shake him.” DeSantis pointed into the street, where he and his son used to play catch; there were ball fields nearby, where he had coached Ron’s Little League teams. “I tried not to

favor him, and Ron didn't like that," he said. Early on, his son had read "The Science of Hitting," by Ted Williams, the baseball great, who advised young hitters to take care in choosing pitches to swing at. "I must have thrown a half million pitches to Ron, and I think he swung at about five hundred of them," he said. "I wish he would have never read it." In 1991, when DeSantis was twelve, his team made it to the Little League World Series.

The young DeSantis attended Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School and then Dunedin High, where he was a star outfielder. He was focussed and motivated, his father said, adding, "He didn't get that from me." DeSantis scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on his SAT and was accepted to Yale, his father said: "It's still the thing I'm most proud of." But he didn't like to make too much of it. "Everybody wants to brag about their kids, and people ask me about Ron. I try to be modest."

At Yale, DeSantis majored in history and played on the baseball team, in the outfield. In the Yale tradition, the team never had a winning season while DeSantis was there. ("Pretty sure we were the worst team in Division One," one of his teammates told me.) In his senior year, he was among the best hitters, batting .336, and was elected captain. His former teammates' recollections are sharply divided, but nearly everyone I spoke with remembered him as singularly focussed, with little time for parties or goofing off; he worked several jobs to help pay his tuition. "Ron was a bit of a loner, not a social butterfly," Dave Fortenbaugh, a former teammate, told me. "He spent a lot of hours in the library."

Some recalled that DeSantis was so intensely focussed that he wasn't much of a teammate. "Ron is the most selfish person I have ever interacted with," another teammate told me. "He has always loved embarrassing and humiliating people. I'm speaking for others—he was the biggest dick we knew." But the same teammate praised DeSantis's intellect. "This is the frustrating part. He's so fucking smart and so creative," he said. "You couldn't even plagiarize off his work. He'd take some angle, and everyone knew there was only one person who could have done that."

After graduating, with honors, DeSantis taught history for a year at the Darlington School, a private institution in Rome, Georgia, before enrolling at Harvard Law School; a friend told me that he'd been inspired by the

movie “A Few Good Men.” In the film, Tom Cruise plays a judge advocate general—a Navy attorney—who defends marines accused of a deadly assault at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. With the war in Iraq still raging, DeSantis, too, became a judge advocate general. He was posted to Naval Station Mayport, near Jacksonville, and also to Guantánamo, where he dealt with detainees. A colleague who served with DeSantis remembered, “Ron was a voracious worker, and he worked at phenomenal speed. He was a superb writer, especially for his age.” Even then, his ambition seemed consuming. “Ron’s a user,” the former colleague told me. “If you had utility to him, he would be nice to you. If you didn’t, he wouldn’t give you the time of day.”

In 2007, DeSantis deployed to Iraq as a lawyer for *SEAL* Team One, which was conducting operations in Ramadi. The *SEALS* have a reputation for being secretive and insular, but DeSantis enjoyed their company, his father told me: “He worked out with them.” DeSantis briefed the *SEALS* on rules of engagement—when they could shoot, how they should treat prisoners. “Of course we were worried about him,” his father said. “Ron told us he was just in one place, in Ramadi, but afterwards we found out that he’d been moving all around the area, from city to city, with the *SEALS*. It really upset my wife.”

Back in Florida, DeSantis started dating Casey Black, a television news reporter for WJXT, in Jacksonville; in 2010, they were married. Not long afterward, a seat opened up in the Sixth Congressional District, south of Jacksonville Beach. In 2012, DeSantis entered the race.

DeSantis campaigned on smaller government and lower taxes, arguing to overturn Obamacare and eliminate entire federal agencies. “My mission was largely to stop Barack Obama,” he told a crowd later. As the campaign got under way, DeSantis published a book titled “Dreams from Our Founding Fathers”—a swipe at the President’s memoir. For a campaign book, it’s unusually wide-ranging, with carefully argued sections on the Federalist Papers, the Progressive Era, and the leftist theoretician Saul Alinsky. The basic contention, though, would have been familiar to followers of Barry Goldwater: “The conceit that underlies many of Obama’s policies and his allies is that virtually any issue, from the waistline of children to the temperature of the earth, is ripe for intervention of expert (and progressive)

central planners.” DeSantis’s book was largely ignored—he once told a crowd that it was “read by about a dozen people”—but his message resonated in the Sixth District, one of the most conservative in the state. He won the election, and was reelected twice by wide margins.

In Congress, an institution where seniority matters, DeSantis had little time to make a substantive impact. Theatrically, though, he created an impression. He helped found the Freedom Caucus, an invitation-only club of hard-right conservatives, and he was among the Republicans who took the government to the brink of default by refusing to raise the national-debt ceiling. Many people worried that the move would harm the government’s credit rating and the country’s economy. Even John Boehner, the House Speaker, opposed it. In response, DeSantis joined a group of Republican congressmen who threatened to remove Boehner from his post. “There were governing conservatives and shutdown conservatives,” David Jolly, a congressman from Florida who served with DeSantis, told me. “Ron was a shutdown conservative.”

Many of DeSantis’s colleagues remember him as remote. A former member of the Florida delegation told me, “He always had his earbuds in, to keep people away.” Others, like Jolly, had a more temperate view. “He’s a little reclusive, a bit of an odd duck,” Jolly said, “but he’s just incredibly disciplined.”

DeSantis’s colleagues say that he was less interested in drafting legislation than in positioning himself for higher office. In his first term, he started courting leading conservative donors, including the Koch family and Sheldon Adelson, and money began to flow. “It’s not easy getting those meetings,” Jolly told me. “But Ron did it, and he convinced them that he was one of their friends.”

In 2018, two years after Trump carried Florida in the Presidential election, DeSantis declared his run for governor. His opponent in the primary was Adam Putnam, the state commissioner of agriculture. Putnam was the sort of Republican that Trump had swept away in the primaries: a staid, moderate product of the establishment.

DeSantis's record in Congress had put him at the libertarian edge of his party; he earned one-hundred-per-cent ratings from the Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity. He was ideologically consistent, even when it cost him. Twice, DeSantis voted to cut price supports for sugar, pitting himself against one of Florida's most powerful interests, which receives tens of millions of dollars in state subsidies a year. The industry funded Putnam's campaign generously, and its allies financed several attack ads against DeSantis.

For much of the campaign, DeSantis trailed Putnam. But, in 2017, he started appearing regularly on Fox News, railing against the investigation of Russia's role in helping Trump get elected. On Laura Ingraham's show, he said that the special counsel Robert Mueller's efforts had criminalized ordinary political behavior. "This is actually taking a bias and basically saying you're gonna use the machinery of government to prevent the American people from making a choice," he said. (Mueller's team indicted or took guilty pleas from thirty-seven people and revealed more than a hundred contacts between Trump's campaign and agents of the Russian state.)

Trump saw DeSantis on television and found him appealing: a combative conservative and a former athlete. "The President loves athletes," the former DeSantis associate, who is also close to Trump, explained. Soon afterward, Trump endorsed him on Twitter and then appeared with him at a rally in Tampa. DeSantis shot upward in the polls, and beat Putnam in the primary.

DeSantis began mimicking Trump's characteristic gestures in campaign appearances and paying tribute to him in television ads. In one, DeSantis reads to his son, Mason ("Then Mr. Trump said, "You're fired!" —I love that part.") and plays blocks with his young daughter, Madison, exhorting her to "build the wall!" The ad was tongue in cheek, but it succeeded in linking DeSantis with the President. "It was the dumbest, most effective ad in Florida history," Kevin Cate, a media consultant for DeSantis's opponent, said.

DeSantis had an advantage in the general election: his opponent, Andrew Gillum, the mayor of Tallahassee and the first Black candidate for governor, was running as a progressive in a not particularly progressive state. Gillum

was also dogged by an F.B.I. investigation into whether he had accepted gifts from lobbyists. Still, DeSantis began the campaign with a disastrous gaffe, saying on television, “The last thing we need to do is to monkey this up” by electing Gillum. DeSantis insisted that there was no racial motive behind the statement—“He uses a lot of dorky phrases like that,” one of his former colleagues told me—and the outrage didn’t endure. But his tone deafness created a disadvantage. “We were handling Gillum with kid gloves,” the lawyer close to DeSantis told me. “We can’t hit the guy, because we’re trying to defend the fact that we’re not racist.” DeSantis won by about thirty thousand votes, less than half a per cent of the ballots cast.



I always play this record when I can't keep up my end of the conversation.
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In a recent phone interview, Trump took credit for DeSantis’s victory, saying, “If I didn’t endorse him, he wouldn’t have won.” The campaign was managed by Susie Wiles, a veteran political strategist who had helped Trump win the Presidency in 2016. But, after the election, DeSantis abruptly broke off his relationship with Wiles. A longtime Tallahassee lobbyist told me that DeSantis became angry that her lobbying firm—Ballard Partners, one of the most powerful in the state—was taking over the process of appointing officials. “There was a confrontation in a meeting, and it all fell apart,” he said. DeSantis told the firm that its clients would not be welcome in his office as long as they retained Wiles. (Brian Ballard, a founding

partner, denied this as “totally false.”) Wiles left, and Trump hired her to run his 2020 campaign in Florida. Trump told me that DeSantis complained about the move, but that he replied, “If you have a manager who wins the World Series, you keep the manager.”

In office, DeSantis took steps that suggested he intended to govern closer to the center. He buoyed environmentalists by forcing out the nine-member board of the South Florida Water Management District, political appointees who were considered hostile to environmental interests. He named a commission to tackle algae blooms, which befouled rivers and lakes in the southern part of the state. And he appointed several Black jurists. At his inauguration, DeSantis asked the Reverend R. B. Holmes, the pastor of a predominantly Black church in Tallahassee, to lead the prayer. “I was encouraged,” Holmes told me.

For decades, the Democratic Party had commanded a majority of Florida’s registered voters. But the state was changing, as Trump’s election helped energize a shift in political affinities. The Republican Party’s rank and file became increasingly radical, and G.O.P. leaders appeared only too happy to follow them. “There was always an element of the Republican Party that was batshit crazy,” Mac Stipanovich, the chief of staff to Governor Bob Martinez, a moderate Republican, told me. “They had lots of different names —they were John Birchers, they were ‘movement conservatives,’ they were the religious right. And we did what every other Republican candidate did: we exploited them. We got them to the polls. We talked about abortion. We promised—and we did nothing. They could grumble, but their choices were limited.

“So what happened?” Stipanovich continued. “Trump opened Pandora’s box and let them out. And all the nasty stuff that was in the underbelly of American politics got a voice. What was thirty-five per cent of the Republican Party is now eighty-five per cent. And it’s too late to turn back.”

In April, 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, DeSantis travelled to the convention center in Miami Beach to appear with Dan Gelber, the city’s mayor, to discuss the state’s response. Gelber, a Democrat, is a former minority leader in the Florida House who teamed up to pass legislation with such Republican leaders as Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio; he told me that he is

still friendly with both. “I don’t agree with Jeb on a lot of things, but I have a deep and abiding respect for him,” he said.

Appearing with Gelber, DeSantis outlined the steps that his administration had taken. He had ordered a statewide lockdown. He’d ordered nursing homes sealed off and told the elderly to quarantine; at the time, many states, including New York, were still sending virus patients into nursing homes, which ended in thousands of deaths. Florida had established the first of hundreds of testing centers and set up a Web site that detailed the virus’s trajectory. Most notably, it had ordered millions of masks for health-care workers; DeSantis said that he was fighting to get more. “Having a mask on, I think, would be something that could potentially ward off infections for the most vulnerable,” he said. At numerous public appearances, the Governor wore a mask himself.

DeSantis regarded these efforts as a kind of baseline. “If some folks want to do things more, then they can do more in certain situations,” he said. “We want to work with the local folks.” Under Gelber’s leadership, Miami Beach, a destination for visitors from abroad, had imposed a mask mandate and aggressively ticketed violators. Gelber told me that he urged DeSantis to establish a robust program of contact-tracing. “The Governor was supportive of everything we were doing,” he said.

But DeSantis soon seemed to lose faith in the scientific establishment. Early in the pandemic, Scott Rivkees, the state surgeon general, convened a conference call of many of Florida’s leading public-health experts; at the end of the meeting, he announced that it would be the last. Among those boxed out was Glenn Morris, an epidemiologist whom the University of Florida had recruited in 2007 to set up a center that would help guide the state through the next pandemic. “We spent years preparing for this moment,” Morris told me.

The Governor’s aides say that he was intent on his own research, poring over scientific data and medical journals. He also began to consult a small circle of experts from out of state, who saw the virus as essentially uncontrollable. In April, 2020, he began lifting the statewide lockdown—in keeping, he said, with guidelines set forth by Trump’s White House. The former political adviser with knowledge of the *COVID* response told me that

DeSantis sympathized with the state's working class, who weren't able to work remotely and typically didn't have much in savings. "The people who were criticizing the Governor for keeping everything open tended to be people who had the luxury of working at home," he said.

Florida quickly posted some of the country's highest totals of virus cases. In Miami-Dade County, according to records provided by a local official, the number of hospitalizations for *COVID* rose from about six hundred in an average week to more than two thousand. DeSantis carried on; in July, his education commissioner ordered schools to fully reopen. "Fear does not help us combat the virus," DeSantis said. At times, though, he seemed to be discouraging a clear picture of *COVID*'s progress. Florida's contact-tracing program was anemic; that July, Gelber noted, it reached only eighteen per cent of infected people in Miami-Dade, the state's most populous county. DeSantis's aides began ignoring Gelber's requests for city-by-city mortality data.

With cases skyrocketing, the Miami-Dade County Commission imposed a rule requiring masks in any public place. Daily cases declined sharply, in some places to lockdown levels. "The numbers speak for themselves," Gelber said. Across the state, at least nineteen counties followed suit.

Similar mandates were taking effect around the country, but Bhattacharya, the Stanford epidemiologist who advised DeSantis, argued that there was little evidence to support them. *COVID-19* is transmitted not by droplets—as many contagious diseases are—but by mist, he pointed out. In an analysis of sixty-seven randomized trials, the Cochrane Library, a medical database, found that masks did not significantly slow the spread of influenza, which is transmitted similarly to *COVID-19*. "Masks are good at stopping droplets, but not aerosols," Bhattacharya told me.

Bhattacharya's views are not widely shared; many scientists I spoke to said that, although real-world data is scarce, research shows that properly worn masks can slow the spread of the coronavirus. The problem, they said, was that what people do in scientific experiments—wear tightly fitting N95 masks—is not what they do in day-to-day life. They wear inferior masks, often incorrectly, and sometimes ignore the mask requirement altogether. "There isn't really a debate on whether masks work—we know that masks

work,” Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at Brown University, told me. “It’s theory versus practice. If you go into a crowded bar and take your mask off to drink, a mask requirement is not going to work very well.”

For DeSantis, the mandates were a futile, unacceptable intrusion on individual liberties. In September, 2020, as he lifted nearly all remaining government-imposed coronavirus restrictions, he issued an executive order prohibiting local governments from enforcing mask mandates. Gelber responded with a letter, arguing that the order invited needless suffering. “This is a frightening view, especially in a state where the major industry is hospitality and tourism,” he said. “It is not merely going to cause additional community spread and sickness but also hamper our efforts to reopen.”

That month, Florida recorded nearly a hundred thousand new cases. Patients overwhelmed hospitals, swamping emergency rooms. “It’s a free-for-all here,” Dr. Bernard Ashby, a cardiologist and internist who works at Lawnwood Hospital, in Fort Pierce, told me at the time. “We don’t have any beds. The nurses are exhausted.” Ashby said that, early in the pandemic, DeSantis had failed to alleviate the crisis by helping make such treatments as monoclonal antibodies available. “He is either completely ignorant of the science, or he’s doing what I suspect, playing politics.”

Dr. Aileen Marty, a professor of infectious disease at Florida International University who advised the mayors of several cities, believes that DeSantis was making a conscious choice. “I think the Governor in his heart of hearts is spreading the virus as a way to herd immunity,” she said. “He’s under the mistaken impression that once you get the disease you’re through with it.” Seeking herd immunity through natural infection, many scientists say, places a huge proportion of the population at risk of serious illness or death—not just the elderly but also cancer patients and others with compromised immune systems, as well as diabetics and the obese. “It’s forty per cent of the population,” Marty said.

DeSantis came under furious criticism, accused of putting the forthcoming Presidential election ahead of his citizens’ health. “We believe they want schools to open to falsely portray a nation—and the largest swing state—as moving past the virus,” an editorial in the *Sun-Sentinel*, a South Florida newspaper, said. DeSantis assured confidants that he was unmoved by the

outrage. The lawyer close to DeSantis told me that he said, “I’m not worried about what the news cycle is saying about me. It’s my responsibility to make decisions, and I’ll deal with the criticism.” But his administration became increasingly intent on controlling its message. At a press conference that April, Surgeon General Rivkees said that people should consider social distancing—for “probably a year, if not longer.” After Rivkees sat down, DeSantis’s communications director approached and escorted him from the room. Rivkees largely vanished from public view. Last September, he left the administration and joined Brown University.

In appearances, DeSantis adopted a strident tone, dismissing those who questioned him. During a press conference in January, 2021, Rosa Flores, of CNN, raised her hand to ask a question. Vaccines were becoming available, but the distribution was haphazard; reports had spread of elderly people, some of them in wheelchairs and makeshift beds, waiting all night to get inoculated. “Governor, what has gone wrong with the rollout of the vaccine?” Flores asked. “We’ve seen phone lines jammed, Web sites crashing—”

DeSantis interrupted: “There’s a lot of demand.” As Flores tried to complete her thought, DeSantis jabbed a finger and added, “You just said, ‘What has gone wrong?,’ so I’m answering the question.” Talking over her, he went on, “You’re going to ask how many questions? You get three?” He pointed to other reporters. “They only got one question. Why do you get three?”

When Flores finally finished her question, it was a reasonable one: Why had people been kept waiting for vaccines? DeSantis gave an answer, which was not unreasonable, either: Many hospitals had adopted a first-come-first-served policy. But by then DeSantis had evidently decided that much of the media was not worth trying to convince. His real constituency was elsewhere.

Around the time of the press conference, Meredith Beatrice, a communications aide to DeSantis, sent an e-mail to Bridget Gleason, a producer for “Fox and Friends,” the network’s premier morning show. Beatrice was offering an “exclusive” story: Florida was about to vaccinate its millionth senior citizen. “Look forward to working with you and the team bright and early tomorrow!” she wrote.



"Negative, Captain. Conditions here extremely hostile to rockabilly."
Cartoon by Edward Steed

The “Fox and Friends” segment, which aired on January 22nd, was more than seven minutes long, and as sunny as a campaign ad. DeSantis appeared with Henry Sayler, a hundred-year-old Second World War veteran who was to receive the milestone vaccine, and boasted about how swiftly his state was vaccinating seniors. The host Pete Hegseth said, “What are you doing differently that’s allowing you to vaccinate so many more of the vulnerable population?” DeSantis replied, “We are working with pharmacies, we are working with hospitals. And if you doubled my vaccine allotment next week, I would be able to do double the vaccines.” As he spoke, a chart appeared, detailing Florida’s nationwide lead in vaccinations; it had been supplied by his office.

Afterward, Gleason, the Fox producer, made it clear to DeSantis’s aides that the network would welcome him back anytime. “I honestly think he could host the show, with the chops we saw from him at the vaccine site with the 100-year-old veteran!” she wrote.

With Trump exiting the White House, Fox needed a dominating personality to animate its news and talk shows. DeSantis’s forceful presence and growing popularity seemed likely to yield high ratings. In the following months, e-mail traffic between Fox producers and DeSantis’s office, produced in response to a public-records request, revealed an unusually

collaborative exchange. DeSantis's aides could not only pitch stories, they could also shape the discussion. "We are flexible on topic," the producer Beth Sullivan wrote to Meredith Beatrice. (Fox denied any favoritism, saying, "Like all news organizations, we conduct pre-interviews with guests to ensure preparedness.") Before one appearance, Beatrice wrote to Fox, "Feel free to carry this announcement live on your feeds."

The e-mails suggest that the Fox News producers were intent on making DeSantis a national figure. Most of the stories focussed on amplifying his unorthodox approach to the coronavirus, but some traded on his nascent celebrity; one featured his three-year-old son's golf game. "We see him as the future of the party," a booker named Karrah Kaplan wrote to Beatrice. The producers all but begged him to appear on their shows. Once, when he demurred, Kaplan protested, "He made time for Tucker last night!"

In the year after the Presidential election, Fox News producers asked DeSantis to appear at least a hundred and ten times, and he agreed at least thirty-four times. They posted some three hundred and forty stories about him online. The coverage drew attention from across the country. This March, DeSantis's campaign and his political-action committee, Friends of Ron DeSantis, reported raising a hundred and ten million dollars. Nearly forty per cent of it came from out-of-state contributors, including the billionaires Peter Thiel and Ken Griffin.

The more DeSantis appeared on Fox and similarly strident platforms, the more polarizing his rhetoric became. He refused to say that President Biden had been legitimately elected; he referred instead to the Biden "regime" and adopted the language of the President's cruder detractors. "If you look at what we've done to fight back against Brandon so far, you know, we succeeded," he told the Fox News Radio host Guy Benson in March. "The contrast between a doddering, quasi-senile President who has to have his press team clean up his remarks after every time he opens his mouth, versus somebody like me who's out there—I am very direct, I say what I mean, I mean what I say, I lead, and I get things done."

Last January, a Jewish student was beaten up at a neo-Nazi rally outside Orlando; the next day, a group of men on a nearby overpass waved a swastika flag and placards with anti-Semitic slogans. Officials from around

the state issued condemnations. DeSantis's response came from his press secretary, Christina Pushaw, who suggested that the incidents might have been faked. "Do we even know they're Nazis?" she mused on Twitter.

After days of criticism from Democrats, DeSantis arrived at a press conference near Palm Beach; he was there to talk about the Everglades, but he took the opportunity to counterattack. "I'm not going to have people try to smear me that belong to a political party that has elevated anti-Semites to the halls of Congress, like Ilhan Omar," he said.

For DeSantis, the moment exemplified a theatrical governing style, which involved subverting a venerable American political ritual: an elected official says something offensive, or fails to condemn something offensive, which triggers waves of performative indignation in the press—until the politician offers an apology. DeSantis instead turned moments like the one with the Nazis to his advantage; the more he defied tradition, the more it thrilled his supporters. On Twitter, one of them suggested, implausibly, that DeSantis's critics were as bad as the anti-Semites on the bridge: "How about all cnts calling people racist, and essentially nazis for disagreeing with them? Desantis is probably the next president. Deal with it."

As DeSantis prepared to run for reelection, he introduced a series of legislative measures that seemed calculated to spark similar fights, and to inspire fevered discussion outside of Florida. Many rested on flimsy legal grounds. One bill banned "sanctuary cities," in which local governments refuse to cooperate with federal officials to deport undocumented immigrants; Florida has no such cities. Another bill created a police force dedicated to preventing election fraud; almost no fraud has been proved in recent Florida elections. DeSantis also dispatched a battalion of state law-enforcement officers to Texas to help stop illegal immigration, even though the nearest portion of the Mexican border is nearly nine hundred miles away. (As DeSantis saw off the troops, Fox covered the moment live.)

Some of these actions appeared brazenly partisan. In 2020, following a summer of protests over the killing of George Floyd, DeSantis proposed an "anti-rioting" law that would make it a crime to block traffic during even a peaceful protest. "When they start to do that, there needs to be swift penalties," he said. (In Florida, the George Floyd protests had been almost

entirely peaceful.) The Republican-controlled legislature passed the bill, but that September a federal judge declared it unconstitutional, saying that its definition of “riot” was so vague as to be open to partisan enforcement.

If DeSantis’s legislative strategy was polarizing, that seemed to be the point. When attacked, he gave no quarter; he went after reporters aggressively, sometimes inaccurately, often in person. Unlike Trump, he spoke in clear, complete sentences, which made him harder to dismiss. His principal partner was his press secretary, Christina Pushaw. From early morning until late at night, seven days a week, Pushaw took to Twitter to trash anyone who presented the slightest critique of her boss. In February, immigration activists likened people trying to cross the Mexican border to the Cubans who fled Castro’s dictatorship in the nineteen-sixties. DeSantis declared the comparison “disgusting”—a sop to Miami’s influential Cuban community. When Thomas Wenski, the Catholic Archbishop of Miami, argued that “no child should be deemed disgusting, especially by a public servant,” Pushaw responded by posting a photo of Wenski over the caption “Lying is a sin.”

Pushaw, thirty-one, previously worked at Stand Together, a nonprofit organization backed by the Koch brothers, and spent time in the former Soviet Union, where she claimed to have witnessed the failures of socialism. Pushaw says that her job is “debunking false narratives,” which often entails describing DeSantis’s opponents as pedophiles or socialists, and urging supporters to “drag them.” Her ferocity inspires cautious admiration. “She is the most powerful woman in Florida,” a consultant to several Republican candidates told me. “Ron loves her, because she says things that even he won’t say.”

Disdaining the “corporate media,” DeSantis and Pushaw often bristled under questioning. In March, 2021, when the *Herald* reported that some of the first vaccines in the state had gone to residents of wealthy enclaves where DeSantis donors lived, the Governor denounced the story as “a really, really poorly executed hit piece.”

It helped DeSantis that sometimes he was right. In April, 2021, “60 Minutes” reported that he had given the Publix supermarket chain a no-bid contract to distribute the *COVID* vaccine, after it contributed a hundred thousand dollars to his political-action committee. The segment featured

video of a press conference, at which the show's reporter Sharyn Alfonsi suggested that DeSantis had engaged in "pay to play." Viewers saw DeSantis tearing into Alfonsi: "It's wrong, it's a fake narrative. I just disabused you of the narrative, and you don't care about the facts." But the unedited video, which later circulated online, showed DeSantis providing an explanation: in consultation with local officials, vaccine contracts had also been offered to several other retail and pharmaceutical chains.

The unstated premise of DeSantis's approach was that there was little point in trying to attract Democratic or even moderate voters; if he got his loyalists outraged enough, they would come to the polls in sufficient numbers for him to win. Stuart Stevens, an adviser to Mitt Romney's Presidential campaign in 2012, told me that Republican leaders have made a calculated choice in recent decades. As their reliable cadre of white voters shrank, they realized that they could either try to attract more minorities or try to motivate white citizens who rarely voted by tapping their racial insecurities. When Romney ran, he rejected the latter strategy, Stevens told me. Then came Trump, who embraced it and won. "The G.O.P. has become a white-grievance party," Stevens said.

DeSantis, he believes, is following the Trump playbook. "To me, Ron DeSantis is a fairly run-of-the-mill politician who will do anything to get elected," he said. "The problem is what the Party has become. It's a race to the bottom."

This past May, DeSantis scheduled a ceremony to sign a bill that, in the name of ballot security, would restrict access to the polls. "Fox and Friends" was granted exclusive access; all other outlets, including the *Herald* and the *Tampa Bay Times*, were excluded. Fox ran the ceremony live for seven and a half minutes.

In March, U.S. District Judge Mark Walker nullified large parts of the law, calling it a "cynical effort" to suppress turnout among Black voters. DeSantis dismissed the decision as "performative partisanship." Legal experts say that DeSantis will likely prevail in federal appellate courts, which in recent years have given legislatures broad authority to rewrite voting rules.

The law was consistent with an array of Republican-led efforts to make voting more difficult, which typically discourage likely Democratic voters more than Republican ones. DeSantis and his allies in the legislature have launched a series of other initiatives to control the conduct of elections. In addition to creating the Office of Election Crimes and Security, they sharply curbed voting by mail and the use of third parties to register to vote and to cast ballots.

Earlier this year, DeSantis broke with tradition to take control of legislative redistricting. For decades, after each new census, the Florida legislature has redrawn voting districts. The process usually involved a protracted political struggle, but when the legislature—Republican or Democratic—presented its plan to the governor, it was typically approved.

THE WAY WE WERE



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In March, DeSantis rejected the new map and proposed his own. The legislature's plan had created a new district that seemed likely to be won by a Republican, but DeSantis felt that it was not ambitious enough. His redrawn map eliminated two of four congressional seats held by African Americans and created four districts that seemed likely to turn white and Republican. DeSantis justified the changes by saying that he was eliminating illegal "racial gerrymandering."

Black leaders were appalled. One of the congressmen whose districts were nullified was Al Lawson, who was first elected in 2016. He represents the Fifth District, which stretches from the small towns west of Tallahassee all the way to Jacksonville; its population is nearly half Black. “DeSantis is not representing the interests of African American voters in the state of Florida,” he said. “He just doesn’t do that.”

Last July, DeSantis travelled to St. Petersburg and encouraged Floridians to get a *COVID* vaccine. He’d received one himself, he noted: the single-shot Johnson & Johnson. “These vaccines are saving lives,” he said.

But DeSantis also signed a bill prohibiting businesses from requiring patrons to show proof of vaccination, even in such closed environments as cruise ships. He implied that people who wanted to protect themselves could simply get their own vaccine. If you argued otherwise, he said, “you really are saying you don’t believe in the vaccines, you don’t believe in the data, you don’t believe in the science.”

Within a few months, any enthusiasm he had felt for vaccines seemed to have evaporated. Asked whether he’d received a booster shot, he would say only, “I’m not gonna let that be a weapon for people to be able to use.” DeSantis clearly recognized the political gamesmanship around vaccines. He also clearly recognized which team he was playing for. Glenn Morris, the director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, at the University of Florida, told me, “He’s questioning the vaccine because he knows who his constituency is.”

In September, DeSantis appointed Dr. Joseph Ladapo the state’s surgeon general. Like DeSantis, Ladapo was an Ivy League apostate; trained at Harvard, he had often been at odds with the medical mainstream. Though he had served for several years on the U.C.L.A. faculty, his supervisor there declined to recommend him, writing, “The people of Florida would be better served by a Surgeon General who grounds his policy decisions and recommendations in the best scientific evidence rather than his opinions.” Ladapo had signed the Great Barrington Declaration and, early in the pandemic, had stood before the Supreme Court building to advocate such alternative *COVID* treatments as hydroxychloroquine, which has repeatedly been shown to be ineffective.

When Ladapo took the job, he appeared with DeSantis and chided his colleagues in other states who recommended more stringent measures. “We’re done with fear,” he said. “It’s over here. Expiration date. It’s done.” At the time, some fifty thousand Floridians had already died from the virus.

Democratic legislators were pleased to express outrage at Ladapo’s views. In October, before his confirmation hearings, he entered the office of Senator Tina Polsky without a mask. Polsky, who was scheduled to undergo treatment for breast cancer, asked him to put one on. Ladapo instead offered to meet her outside. “He was very condescending,” Polsky told me. Ladapo maintained afterward that the mask inhibited his self-expression: “It is important for me to communicate clearly and effectively with people. I can’t do that when half my face is covered.” (On hearing this, Polsky said, “Don’t doctors wear masks?”)

Ladapo gave vaccines only a lukewarm endorsement, even though they are widely understood to prevent more deaths and hospitalizations than any other tool. “There’s nothing special about them compared to any other preventive measure,” he said. He also said that there was more to learn about their efficacy, adding, “People need to continue to stick with their intuition and their sensibilities.” By 2022, Florida ranked twenty-second in the nation in its percentage of vaccinated adults, making it one of the lowest-ranking large states.

Increasingly, DeSantis argued that Democratic-leaning states were run by oppressive governments eager to strip citizens of their rights. He boasted that Florida had received a stream of new arrivals, many of them fleeing states like California. (This was true, but misleading. In the course of the pandemic, California’s population decreased by roughly three hundred thousand, and Florida’s grew by about the same figure. But Florida had gained citizens at a similar rate nearly every year since the late nineteen-sixties.) “Florida is a free state—we reject the biomedical security state that curtails liberty, ruins livelihoods, and divides society,” DeSantis said earlier this year. “These unprecedented policies have been as ineffective as they have been destructive. They are grounded more in blind adherence to Fauciian declarations than they are in the constitutional traditions that are the foundation of free nations.”

But DeSantis's insistence on preventing mandates sometimes violated the kinds of liberties he championed in his campaign book—former core principles of the Republican Party. Giving people the right to go to work unvaccinated also meant telling companies that they were not free to decide how to manage their employees. And preventing mask mandates meant telling town governments and schools that they were not free to enforce local standards.

After DeSantis issued executive orders to stifle mask mandates, more than a dozen school districts and local governments defied him. An ally of his, a Republican legislator named Anthony Sabatini, filed at least fifteen lawsuits against *COVID* protocols. DeSantis also called a special session of the legislature to pass measures that made local governments drop their *COVID*-safety mandates. Not a single Republican voted against them.

The laws meant that schools had to open but were powerless to compel students to wear masks or to get vaccinated. Local officials were mystified and angry. “People were dying all around me, including family members,” Joy Bowen, a school-board member in Leon County, told me. “I looked at this from a personal standpoint: I am taking care of my children, and I am taking care of other people’s children who voted for me to keep their kids safe.”

Glenn Morris, the director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, lamented the cost of the battle over *COVID*. “The politicization of the vaccine was entirely unnecessary, and it’s a tragedy,” he told me. As the pandemic began, Morris and his colleagues at the University of Florida in Gainesville maintained close contact with the state Department of Health. Two or three times a week, the department shared new data, and a group of epidemiologists analyzed them, to inform research and to make recommendations to the state. “When you have an outbreak, you have so many questions,” Tom Hladish, one of the scientists, said. “When will it peak? How bad will it be? What is the hospital burden? How many people are dead?”

In June, 2020, the epidemiologists say, the health department terminated the relationship and stopped sharing data. (The department declined requests for comment.) “The only reason you don’t collect data is that you don’t want to

know what the data says,” Derek Cummings, an epidemiologist at the University of Florida, said. “The recommendations we were making were consistently at odds with the policy of the state.”

At the university, a dashboard was set up to track the virus’s trajectory through the campus—a sprawling place, with sixty thousand students. After the campus reopened, on DeSantis’s orders, in the fall of 2020, the dashboard became an embarrassment to the Governor. Day after day, the university recorded the highest caseloads of any in the country. Mike Lauzardo, the deputy director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, who oversaw the dashboard, was ordered to destroy coronavirus data by health-department officials, who accused him of improperly sharing information. An investigation by the university found no evidence of misconduct, and the data remained intact. Still, one of his colleagues told me, “Lauzardo was feeling incredible pressure.”

On several occasions, the university prohibited professors from testifying as expert witnesses in court cases that were brought against DeSantis’s policies. Daniel Smith, a professor of political science, was one of three professors barred from testifying in a lawsuit against legislation that curtailed access to polls. Another professor, Dr. Jeffrey Goldhagen, was barred from testifying in defense of local governments that imposed mask mandates. The faculty senate found that professors were also discouraged from teaching or even researching controversial subjects like critical race theory. “The policy was, we couldn’t do things on campus that tick off the Governor,” according to one of the faculty members who took part in the investigation.

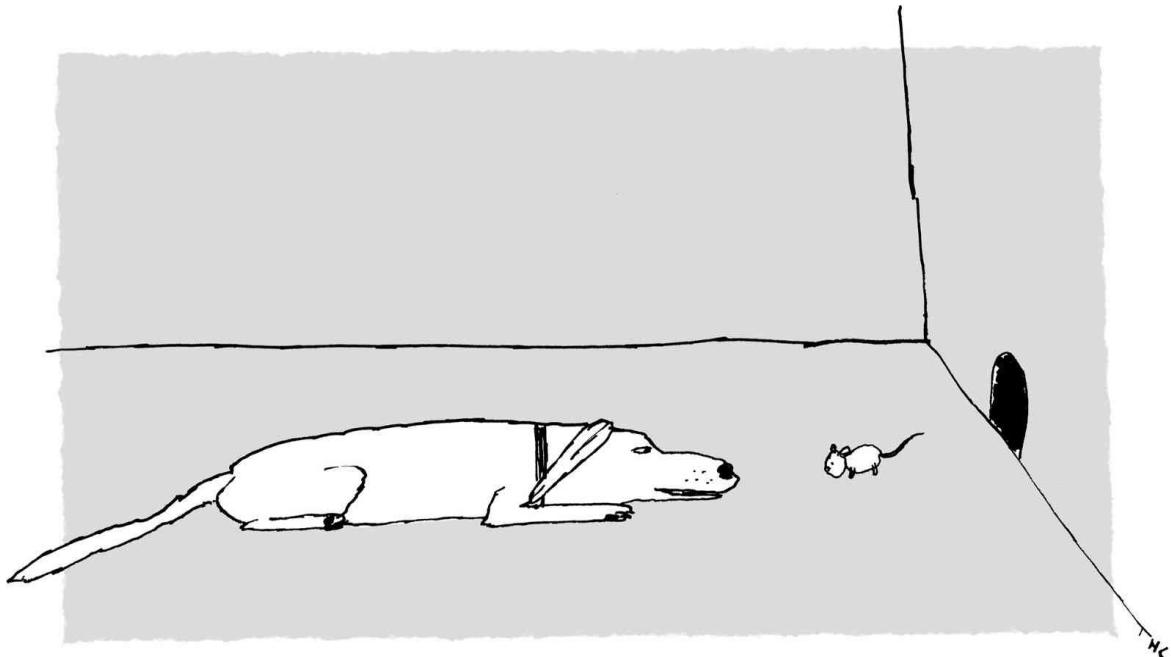
Kent Fuchs, the university’s president, declined to speak to me. In August, after the faculty senate gave his administration a vote of no confidence for its handling of the *COVID-19* response, he announced that he was resigning. Daniel Smith and other professors sued the university and won; a federal judge said, “U.F. has bowed to perceived pressure from Florida’s political leaders and has sanctioned the unconstitutional suppression of ideas out of favor with Florida’s ruling party.”

Much of DeSantis’s influence at the university appears to be exercised through Mori Hosseini, a real-estate developer who serves as the chairman of the board. Hosseini contributed more than a hundred and eighty thousand

dollars to DeSantis's political-action committee and, according to a report in Politico, gave the Governor's wife a ride on his plane. The board has thirteen members, most of whom were appointed by either DeSantis or his predecessor, Rick Scott. Together, ten of them gave nearly a million dollars to DeSantis's *PAC*. "Members of the board of trustees have told me that serving the Governor is their No. 1 task," Paul Ortiz, a history professor who leads the faculty union, told me.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of DeSantis's influence is that Joseph Ladapo, the surgeon general, was hired to teach at the medical school. An investigation found that Ladapo was made a tenured professor without a full tenure evaluation or a search for other qualified candidates—all in violation of university rules. (The university denies this, saying that Ladapo completed a standard application process. Ladapo didn't respond to a request for comment.) The professorship, along with the position of surgeon general, gave Ladapo a combined salary of four hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars. The process was initiated by Hosseini, according to an e-mail he sent to the head of the university's medical network, which was obtained in a public-records request. "There is only one reason that Ladapo was hired as a professor, and that is to support the Governor's policies," Goldhagen, the doctor who was barred from testifying, told me.

In January, DeSantis appeared at Florida's capitol for his annual State of the State address. He spoke for more than thirty minutes, in a celebratory mood. Florida was creating jobs and businesses at a robust pace. The state budget had a fifteen-billion-dollar surplus, despite one of the country's lowest tax burdens. "Our economy is the envy of the nation," he told the assembled legislators.



"My fight's not with you, I only want information."
Cartoon by Tristan Crocker

For DeSantis, it was a rare moment of publicity for his policy agenda rather than for his fight with the liberal establishment. “Compared to the culture-war measures, the mainstream stuff he has enacted is almost invisible,” Jon Mills, a former House speaker and a co-director of the University of Florida’s Center of Governmental Responsibility, told me. “But there’s a lot of it.” Many of these measures have enjoyed broad support. DeSantis persuaded the legislature to create one of the country’s first wildlife corridors and steered more than a billion dollars to Everglades restoration (even if much of the money came from Biden’s infrastructure plan). He signed a measure to temporarily suspend the state gasoline tax, and raised salaries for public-school teachers.

The moment of comity with teachers didn’t last, though. In March, DeSantis signed a bill forbidding educators to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity with students before the fourth grade; the law allows parents to sue school districts for violations. DeSantis said he was battling the imposition of “woke gender ideology,” and invoked his most reliable foils—“these leftist politicians, corporate media outlets, some of these activist groups” who “support sexualizing kids in kindergarten.” Pushaw, his press secretary, went further, suggesting on Twitter that opponents of the bill were

pedophiles: “You are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4-8 year old children. Silence is complicity.”

But, in his address at the capitol, DeSantis focussed on the fact that Florida’s public schools had stayed open during the pandemic, protecting some 2.7 million students from the educational damage brought on by closings elsewhere. In carrying out his *COVID* policies, DeSantis said, he had faced down “hysterical media,” public ridicule, and an array of lawsuits. “We have protected the right of our citizens to earn a living, provided our businesses with the ability to prosper, fought back against unconstitutional federal mandates, and insured our kids have the opportunity to thrive,” DeSantis told the legislators. “We were right, and they were wrong.”

It is difficult to say with certainty which policies have worked best during the pandemic. Every responsible official has made trade-offs between keeping citizens employed, keeping them educated, and keeping them healthy. Analysts who sympathize with DeSantis’s libertarian views maintain that the stringent and sometimes coercive measures taken by many of the country’s largest states did not necessarily save many lives. A recent study by researchers at the University of Chicago, the Heritage Foundation, and the Committee to Unleash Prosperity compared states’ death rates, adjusted for age and other risk factors. Florida came in twenty-eighth in the country. California ranked twenty-seventh, and New York forty-seventh. “States that withdrew the most from economic activity did not significantly improve health by doing so,” the study said.

But scientists I spoke to argued that adjusting for risk factors can be misleading; if your population is more vulnerable, they say, you should be more cautious, not less. And state-by-state comparisons are tricky, because populations and circumstances differ so widely. New York, for instance, had an enormous spike of deaths at the beginning of the pandemic, which has not recurred as precautions have become widespread. In Florida, deaths have tended to spike with each new wave of infections. In all, more than seventy-five thousand people died of *COVID* in Florida, one of the country’s highest totals. Ira Longini, a biostatistician at the University of Florida, argued that as many as half of those lives could have been spared if DeSantis had mandated masks and vaccines. This month, as vaccines were approved for children younger than five, every state in the country rushed to order

supplies—except for Florida, where DeSantis resisted until he was overwhelmed by criticism.

The thing that separated DeSantis from other governors was not just policy but tone. Interviewing scientists about *COVID-19*, it is easy to be struck by their humility before a disease that is still evolving. “There’s just so much we don’t know,” Nuzzo, of Brown University, told me. “We are going to be studying this virus for a long time.”

Humility is not a tone that DeSantis ever struck. The politicization of the virus was perhaps inevitable in a country as polarized as America has become, but it almost certainly inhibited our ability to have an intelligent discussion about it. “It’s a tragedy,” Bhattacharya told me.

But DeSantis’s outrage attracted followers. In 2021, registered Republicans exceeded registered Democrats in Florida for the first time. DeSantis and the Republican Party enjoy near-total command of the state’s political machinery. The Florida Democratic Party is so enfeebled that, in 2020, it applied to the Paycheck Protection Program for a loan, intended to help distressed small businesses survive the pandemic.

In the fall of 2020, when Trump was running for reelection, he harbored persistent doubts that DeSantis, whom he viewed as his creation, was entirely his ally. DeSantis campaigned for the President, appeared at his rallies in Florida, and occasionally went to Mar-a-Lago. “Ron will tell you he’s doing everything he can for the President, and he’ll sound believable,” a lawyer who speaks regularly to both men told me at the time. But Trump was not convinced.

In the early days of the pandemic, Trump and DeSantis had been happy to lean on each other. When DeSantis joined a press event in the Oval Office and explained his *COVID* policies, Trump held up a chart that the Governor had brought along—an uncharacteristic supporting role.

After Trump lost the Presidential election, he grew concerned that DeSantis no longer needed him. The following spring, Trump scheduled a rally in Sarasota—one of his first since losing—and invited DeSantis to join him onstage. People who know both men told me that DeSantis didn’t decline,

but he didn't confirm, either. "There were alarm bells ringing—will DeSantis appear?" a former Republican congressman told me. "Ron didn't want to be onstage with Trump." At the last minute, a condominium tower in Surfside collapsed, and nearly a hundred people were killed. DeSantis rushed to the scene and missed Trump's speech. "I've never seen anyone use Trump for his own purposes, but Ron used Trump," the former congressman said.

Trump told me repeatedly that he and DeSantis had a "very good relationship," adding, "I'm proud of Ron." But others say that, as DeSantis's popularity grew, tension hardened into resentment. "He won't kiss the ring," the political leader who sees DeSantis often told me. After the 2020 election, Trump made Mar-a-Lago his permanent home, but DeSantis rarely showed his face there. He looked busier than Trump, too: as a sitting governor, DeSantis could call a press conference or propose a new initiative anytime, whereas Trump was reduced to appearing on One America News and sending out e-mails.

The thing that grated most was that, as Trump considered running in 2024, DeSantis did not rule out a campaign of his own. The more plausible DeSantis has become as a nominee, the more people have speculated that he might decide to take on Trump.

Trump told me that he was "very close to making a decision" about whether to run. "I don't know if Ron is running, and I don't ask him," he said. "It's his prerogative. I think I would win." In nearly every poll of likely Republican contenders, Trump still has a solid advantage: DeSantis's constituency was Trump's first. Trump seems to want to keep it that way. A consultant who has worked for several Republican candidates said that the former President had talked with confidants about ways to stop DeSantis: "Trump World is working overtime to find ways to burn DeSantis down. They really hate him."

But Trump may have good reasons to sit out the election. "He can do everything now that he could do when he was President, except shoot off missiles," the consultant who knows both him and DeSantis said. "He's making a lot of money. That's the most important thing to him." Without Trump in the primaries, DeSantis would likely have an immediate lead. A

nationwide survey, conducted by the pollster Tony Fabrizio, suggests that thirty-nine per cent of Republican voters would support him; his nearest challenger is Mike Pence, with fifteen per cent. Whatever discussions DeSantis is having about the subject are private, in part because the uncertainty is good for him. “The moment he shows up in Iowa, the suspense is over,” the consultant to Republican candidates told me. In the meantime, all of the consultant’s colleagues are lining up to work for DeSantis: “Everyone is trying to get a piece of him.”

DeSantis has remade the political landscape in Florida. It seems conceivable that he could attempt something similar on a national level—though some political observers wonder whether he could endure the countless hours of banal conversation required to succeed in a national election. “He’s going to have to go sit in a diner and listen to the local county chairman jerk off for twenty minutes,” a Republican consultant told me. “I don’t know if he can do that.”

It is possible that the only thing that will complicate DeSantis’s ascent is his own impatience. At forty-three, he can afford to wait. But there is every indication that he doesn’t want to. “Ron has been told for four years that he’s Trump’s successor—that all the women want to sleep with him, and all the men want to be him,” the consultant told me. “Ron has heard way too many times, ‘You’re next.’ ” ♦

Tables for Two

- [At Bonnie's, MSG Is Wielded with Nuanced Artistry](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The claim that monosodium glutamate, or MSG, is inherently unhealthy has been thoroughly debunked—and dismissed, by anyone paying close attention, as thinly veiled racism. MSG, a salt that's extracted from fermented crops such as sugarcane and corn, is used as a flavor enhancer in many Asian cuisines, but it also occurs naturally in foods including tomatoes and Parmesan cheese, accounting for the sensation known as umami. It's as harmful as table salt, maybe even less so—it contains about a third of the sodium. Still, a stigma persists: I recently saw a Chinese takeout menu promising that the food was made without it.

That's one approach a restaurant can take. Another is to flip the script. At Bonnie's, in Williamsburg, the cocktails include an MSG Martini, made with a healthy shake of the seasoning, plus olive brine, Shaoxing wine, and vodka or gin. The L.L.C. behind Bonnie's is called MSG 88, which was printed on egg-custard-yellow hoodies that the chef-owner Calvin Eng sold to commemorate his most ambitious offering, Yeung Yu Sang Choi Bao, a deboned and stuffed whole rainbow trout; like almost everything else on the menu, it's enhanced with MSG.



The chef-owner Calvin Eng, who grew up in Bay Ridge, named Bonnie's after his mother.

And how! The food at Bonnie's explodes with flavor. This is not to say that the kitchen leans too heavily on MSG (except, I'd argue, in the case of the

Martini, which reminded me of A.1. steak sauce). In the grand tradition of Cantonese cooking—which Eng first learned from his mother, Bonnie, who was born in Guangdong and raised him in Bay Ridge—the Bonnie’s team wields it with nuanced artistry, taking no shortcuts. The steep price of the whole trout (fifty-three dollars) reflects the scrupulous effort it requires, which Bonnie herself undertakes only twice a year: bones and flesh are removed, the latter ground with shrimp, garlic chives, and water chestnuts and whipped into a paste that acquires the bouncy texture of a fish ball after it’s encased in the trout’s painstakingly preserved skin and cooked on a flattop grill.

The finished product gets sliced into (the lucky number) eight neat segments, to be wrapped in lettuce with herbs and a ginger-scallion purée. A poached half chicken, Bak Cheet Gai, is also sliced, fanned cold atop warm rice, glistening with golden chicken fat, and served with teacups of Gai Tong, or chicken broth, redolent of ginger and white pepper. “Sip it as you eat or dunk it to take away the chill,” my server suggested. “I love this liquid!” my dining companion announced as she sipped.



The Cha Siu McRib is available in the restaurant and also on the takeout-and-delivery menu, which is called McBonnie's.

I loved this liquid, too; on another evening I ordered a whole teapot of it. I used it as a palate cleanser between bites of long beans—delightfully sweet and shrivelled, positively clanging with garlic, and topped with croutons

made from a kind of savory cruller often served with congee—and bites of scorching-hot Cheung Fun, seared rolled rice noodles that were sticky on the outside and custardy within, the concentrated fishiness of XO sauce (from dried scallops and shrimp) punctuated by notes of fennel seed.

Another specious claim about MSG and Chinese American food, in particular, is that you can't eat it without getting hungry an hour later. I wanted to repeat my Bonnie's meals in short order not because I was mysteriously famished but because I longed to reexperience the pleasure. Good luck to me: booking a table in the boisterous dining room (my fruit plate came with a round of shots, one night) requires Sisyphean effort on Resy. That said, the bar and an outdoor seating area are reserved for walk-ins, and if all else fails there's McBonnie's, a Golden Arches-inspired menu for takeout and delivery. The regular menu's phenomenal Cha Siu McRib, featuring a half rack of boneless steamed ribs, pickles, sharp Chinese mustard, and onions on a sesame milk bun, suffered slightly in transit. Not so the McBonnie's-only Filet-o-Fish, a perfectly bevelled square patty made from the same mixture that's stuffed in the whole trout (at a third of the cost), topped with preserved mustard greens and a slice of neon-orange American cheese. (*Entrées \$17-\$53.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“Official Competition” Is More than Just a Movie-World Satire](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

At the start of “Official Competition,” we meet a rich Spanish businessman named Humberto Suárez (José Luis Gómez). Now eighty years old, he yearns to leave “something that lasts” and decides that, rather than build a bridge, he will finance a movie—a curious choice, given that most movies are about as enduring as a sandcastle, but still. Desiring only the best for his project, Humberto buys the rights to (but does not read) a novel by a Nobel laureate entitled “Rivalry.” He hires the dauntless director Lola Cuevas ([Penélope Cruz](#)), whose work has been festooned with prizes. In another coup, two lead actors of opposing dispositions are brought on board: the global superstar Félix Rivero (Antonio Banderas), who rolls up in a flame-colored Lamborghini, and Iván Torres (Oscar Martínez), the doyen of serious theatre, who comes in a taxi.

One of the pleasurable chores of “Official Competition,” which is directed by Gastón Duprat and Mariano Cohn, is to cock a snook at the world of filmmaking. Not a hard target, you might say, and one that is crying out for snooks. (At one point, because Félix and Iván will be playing brothers trapped in a long-standing feud, Lola has them bound together in plastic wrap, like a couple of chicken drumsticks.) What sets the new film apart is its specificity: instead of attending to the action on and around a movie set, as in “Singin’ in the Rain” (1952) and “Day for Night” (1973), or to the toils of the screenwriter, as in “[Mank](#)” (2020), Duprat and Cohn focus on the enjoyable madness of rehearsals. If this were a tale of motherhood, the whole thing would take place in a prenatal class.

At the initial read-through, Iván is asked by Lola to recite his second line of dialogue—“Good evening”—seven times, to guarantee the perfect intonation. Immediately, however, despite the apparent silliness of her demand, we realize something important: she’s right. The seventh attempt *is* the best. A pattern is thus established; Lola’s methods may be excessive, with a smack of cruelty, but she’s not a fraud or a windbag, unless you count the scene in which she sprawls on the floor and chants into the snaking hose of a vacuum cleaner. Duprat and Cohn find more to tease than to hold in contempt, and one sequence, near the end, in which Félix and Iván practice the brothers’ climactic encounter, is played completely straight. As a rule, movies within movies are little more than excuses for a plot; the hokey

Biblical epic that is glimpsed in production during the Coen brothers’ “Hail, Caesar!” (2016) would, one suspects, be a fairly limp creation. The film that Lola devises, on the other hand, though we see not a single frame of it, is something for which I might actually buy a ticket.

In short, “Official Competition” is nicely balanced, and the poiser-in-chief is Cruz, whose portrayal of Lola goes way beyond simple wackiness. The first thing you notice, it’s true, is her hair: a deep-russet explosion, reminiscent of the great mane that was sported by a leonine Whitney Houston in the video for “I Wanna Dance with Somebody.” Then there are the cheroots that Lola smokes, plus the eccentric majesty of her dress sense, the standout being her loosely shimmering gold pants. Yet observe the steady steel of her gaze; listen to the speech that she delivers unflinchingly to camera; and follow her approach to Félix, as he sits in front of a mirror and tends to a tiny cut on his face—or, as he refers to it, “my work tool.” (What a dick.) Lola straddles him and dabs at the wound. He nuzzles her neck, but she barely reacts, preferring to study her own reflection. Rising from his lap, and wandering off with a wicked grin, she says, “I may have to call my lawyer.” You watch Cruz at moments like these, not long after her agonized performance in last year’s “Parallel Mothers,” and you wonder, Is there any actress, since the prime of Sophia Loren, in whom the tragic instinct runs so unnervingly close to the spirit of fun?

Martínez and Banderas, likewise, make the most of the combat between their respective characters, whose vanities are parcelled out in equal measure. The former does a fine job of conveying what might be called the higher humbug; Iván decries the vulgarity of awards ceremonies—“I’d never subject myself to that circus”—and yet secretly tries out an imaginary speech for the Oscars, using a kettle in lieu of a statuette. As for Banderas, it’s a treat to be reminded of his comic adroitness. With a litany of shrugs, pouts, and sidelong glances, he demonstrates how eager Félix is to have his feelings either massaged or hurt. (There is a touch of little boy, perhaps, in the constitution of even the manliest of major stars.) My favorite detail, in the entire saga, is the pair of Chekhovian pince-nez that Félix clips to the end of his nose in order to read his script. Who came up with *that*?

The trailer for “Official Competition” suggests a farce, rollicking and wild, and boiling with satirical intent. Which only proves that trailers are not to be

trusted. Many viewers will be taken aback by the unexpected timbre of this film. It is sparsely populated, often shrinking into a chamber piece, with Lola, Félix, and Iván squaring (or triangulating) off against one another. And check out the chamber: a vast and cavernous modern construction, in which humans are easily dwarfed by the walls and the windows. The framing is super-precise, the emotional detonations are well controlled, and one glorious gag, sonic as well as visual, involving a giant rock, is crowned with a payoff of which Jacques Tati, the maestro of “Mon Oncle” (1958) and “Playtime” (1967), would have been proud. Indeed, it is the careful spectre of Tati—whose work seems ever stranger with the passage of time, leaning at a perilous angle away from Chaplin and toward Magritte—that hovers over the heads of Duprat and Cohn. Anyone hoping to see the movie industry being disembowelled, meanwhile, will have to look elsewhere.

Is it gratifying, or disturbing, that a film should turn out to be clairvoyant? When the Greek director Christos Nikou made “Apples,” at the beginning of 2019, he was not to know that, within a year, reality would be catching up with his fiction. The movie, his début feature, takes place in the midst of a pandemic. The symptoms may be far from *Covid*-like, and the mortality rate, as far as we can gather, is blessedly low, but what Nikou evokes, with a haunting prescience, is the air of a stunned world. The story opens with a man hitting his head against a wall. Tell me about it.

The man in question is Aris (Aris Servetalis), who is bearded, solemn, and alone. He would make an excellent monk. One day, Aris walks out of his home and does not return. To be exact, he cannot return, for he has forgotten where he lives. A nameless disease, spreading like knotweed through the public, is causing instantaneous amnesia. (Another man sits quietly beside his car, having just stepped out of it, and claims that it’s not his car at all.) Aris, bereft of I.D., is sent to the hospital, where he fails various tests; the one sure thing that links him to his former life is a taste for apples. He asks the patient in the next bed if *he* eats apples, too. “I don’t remember if I like them,” the patient replies. It’s a dry and dazzling line, sprouting with philosophical possibility; how much of yourself must you cease to recall before that self no longer survives?

Aris’s doctors seek to equip him anew for society. He is furnished with an apartment, a closet of clothes, and cash, and urged to forge a fresh identity.

This entails learning some of the basics all over again—riding a bike (he borrows one from a kid), joining in with convivial gatherings, and so on. He also goes to a movie; not just any movie, either, but “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre” (1974), to which he responds as if it were a documentary about woodworking. There he meets a fellow-amnesiac, Anna (Sofia Georgovassili), and, for a while, they join forces. I recommend the scene on a crowded dance floor, where Aris, Lord knows how, succeeds in doing the twist. The issue of whether he did it last summer, or whether he is merely copying everyone else, is left beautifully unresolved.

What Nikou shares with Duprat and Cohn is a penchant for the deadpan. But “Official Competition” is shot with a crisp gleam, whereas the light that hangs over “Apples,” outdoors and in, is deliberately veiled and flat, as if the sun had caught the bug and forgotten how to shine. No surprise, then, that Nikou should make room in his narrative for a sad interlude, in which Aris, by way of rehabilitation, is encouraged to care for the dying—a task that befits him, since he seems, at best, half alive. Most mysterious of all is a brief episode in a park, where a dog he used to know runs up to him. A bark from the past! Does Aris stay to greet the owner, and thus to pursue the scent of his old existence? No, he hurries away, as though fleeing the scene of a crime. Maybe this guy wants out. Some memories are just too heavy to bear. ♦

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