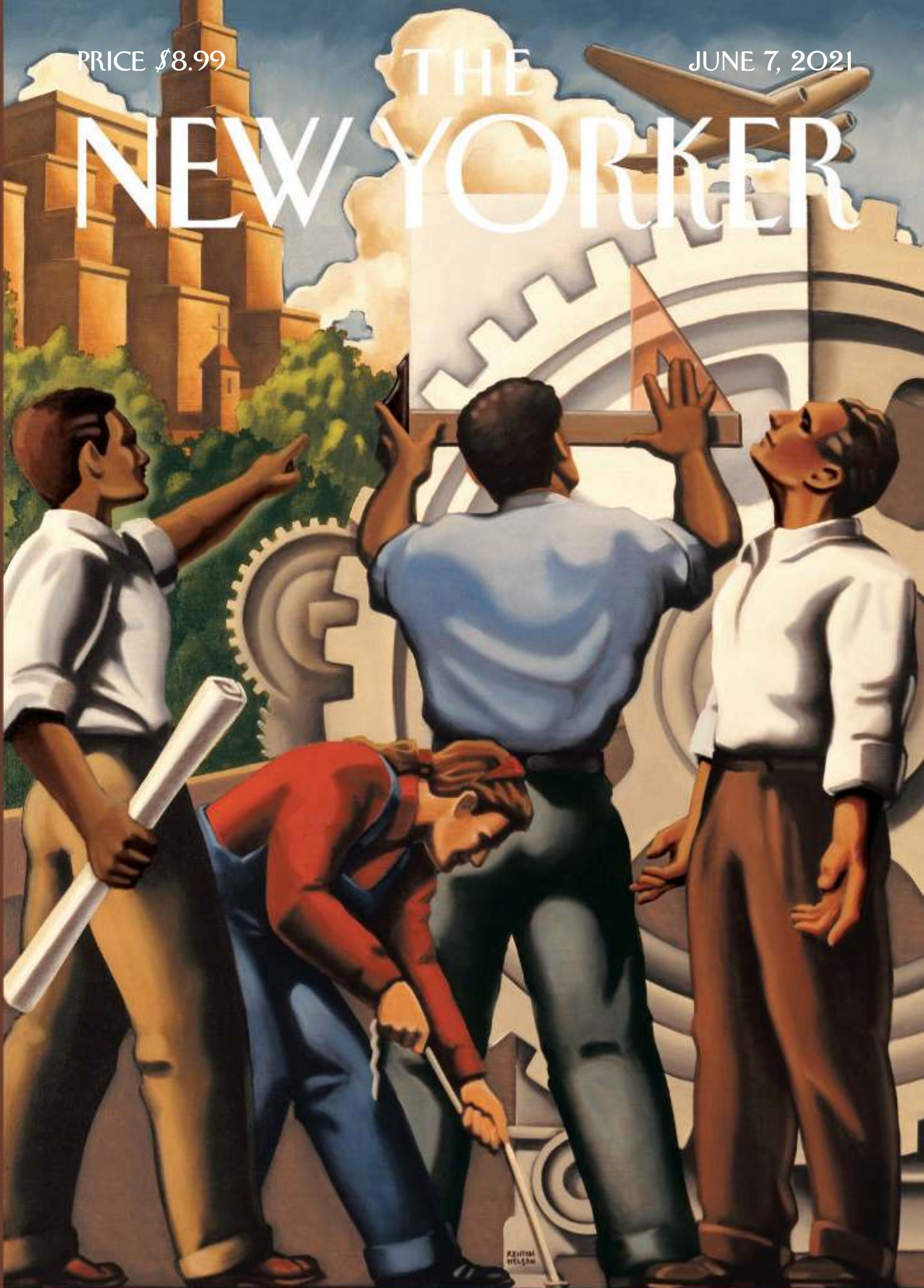


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**Simon Webster** (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 29), a lawyer and a writer, lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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Vinson Cunningham on the resurrection of live arena sports—and of the New York Knicks.



#### ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

Nora Caplan-Bricker on the rise and staying power of online test-monitoring services.

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# THE MAIL

## RISKY BUSINESS

Sheelah Kolhatkar's piece about the investment app Robinhood, which has been faulted for encouraging reckless trading practices among young people, prompted me to reflect on how the education system has failed when it comes to teaching our children about finance, investment, and risk ("The Big Gamble," May 17th). At one point in my career, I taught personal finance to undergraduates; at the same time, my kids were learning about the stock market in school. My students were divided into groups that followed various investment portfolios, from "all in one stock" to money-market mutual funds. Although initially students assigned to the low-risk portfolios were not happy with their gains, at the end of the term, when asked to choose their preferred portfolio, many elected the low-risk money-market funds, saying that they valued less volatility. But, in the "stock-market game" that my kids were playing at school, those who made the most money in a certain time frame were rewarded with higher grades. Why don't our schools spend more time teaching how economics and finance work? Looking at school curricula, you would never know that managing money and risk are essential skills. Our kids are sitting ducks for firms such as Robinhood.

*Kristine Chase  
Sierra Madre, Calif.*

## ARE WE LIVING TOO LONG?

I was pleased to see Brooke Jarvis's review of the new book by Katie Engelhart, about the right to die in a peaceful way, but was disappointed by the use of the term "physician-assisted suicide" (Books, May 17th). The American Association of Suicidology has distinguished between suicide and aid-in-dying, and has advocated for the term "physician-assisted suicide" to be dropped from use. The American College of Legal Medicine has also rejected it. The reason is that the difference between suicide and ending one's life at the end of one's life is profound; the right-to-die move-

ment is about finding dignity in the latter, and not the tragedy of the former.

*Doug Wussler  
Tallahassee, Fla.*

## DISGUSTING DELICACIES

Jiayang Fan, in her article about the Disgusting Food Museum, in Malmö, Sweden, observes that "Americans are generally uninterested in knowing where their food comes from" ("Yuck!," May 17th). And no wonder: the typical McDonald's hamburger is not much different from the Disgusting Food Museum's boiled guinea pigs and sheep's-head soup. Hamburgers, which can be made from the body parts of a hundred cows mashed together, are just as bad as the most disgusting foods—and they are certainly worse for the animals involved, for the health of the consumer, and for the climate. The biggest "yuck" is not the food but the cost to the earth exacted by our taste for eating sentient beings.

*Michael Betzold  
Dearborn Heights, Mich.*

Fan's description of the endlessly fascinating durian elicited fond memories of discovering the fruit. As a member of the Peace Corps in Malaysia, in the late nineteen-sixties, I lived with my wife in a Malay kampong house, where we received lessons on how to select a ripe durian, how much to pay for one, and how to separate the fruit into its fleshy pods. Once, a customs officer at the Malaysia-Thailand border waved us straight through after seeing two durians attached to our backpack. Should the durian be enshrined in the Malmö museum of disgusting foods? For hundreds of millions of Southeast Asians, I am confident that the answer is no.

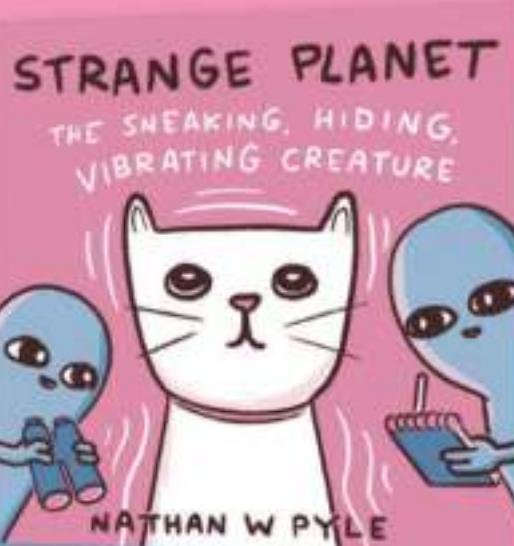
*Richard H. Sussman  
Atlanta, Ga.*

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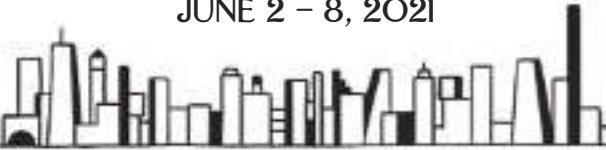
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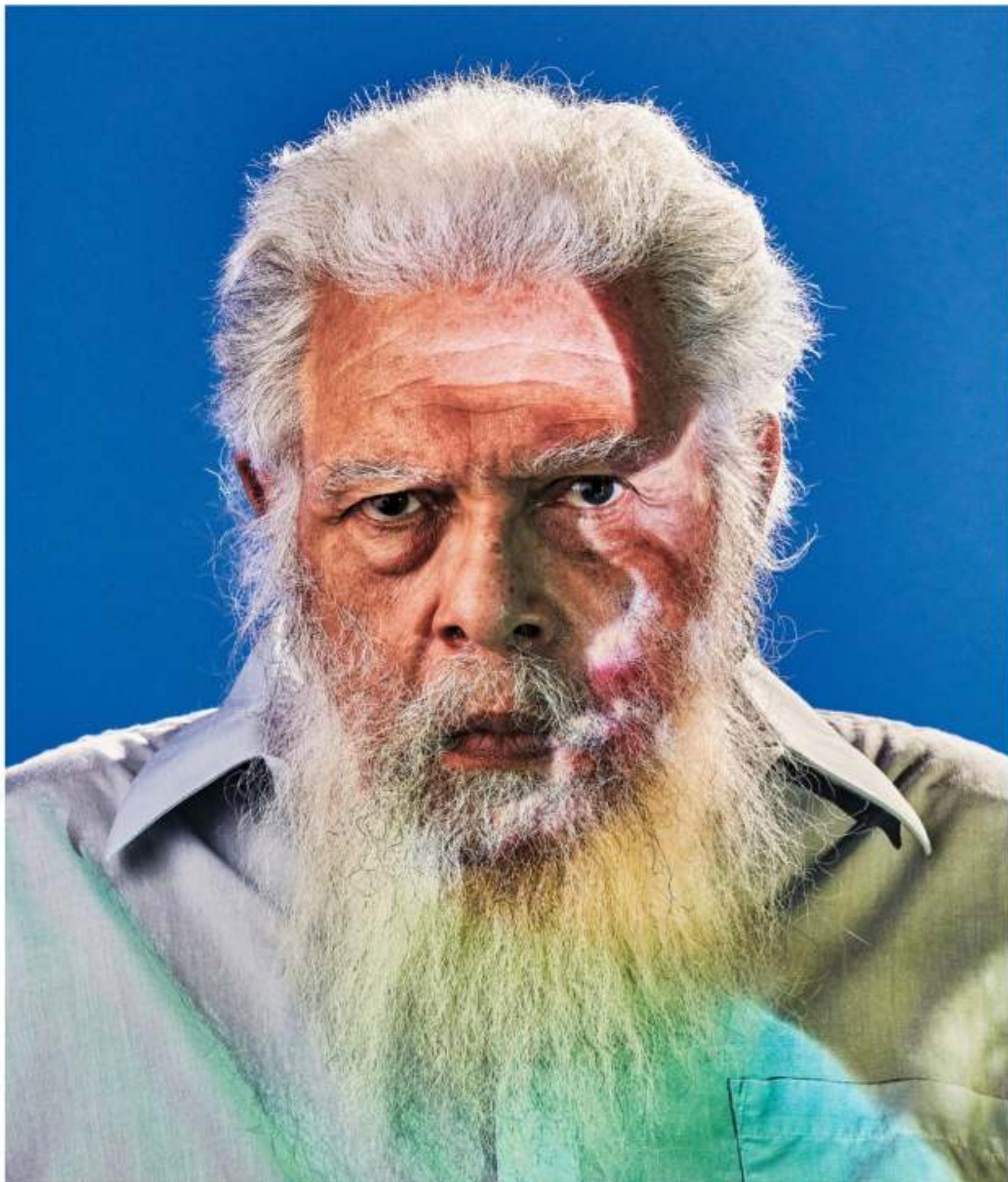
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

JUNE 2 – 8, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The “Carte Blanche” film series at MOMA, programmed by the prodigious science-fiction writer **Samuel R. Delany**, concludes this week with two personal works. He discusses his childhood in Harlem and his life as a gay man in nineteen-sixties New York in Fred Barney Taylor’s illuminating documentary “The Polymath, or The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman,” from 2007. Delany displays his directorial art in the 1971 featurette “The Orchid,” which blends street theatre and joyful eroticism with ingenious special effects.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNAH WHITAKER

## ART

### Nona Faustine

Candid moments mingle with theatrical gestures in “Mitochondria,” this Brooklyn photographer’s exhibition at Higher Pictures Generation, in Dumbo. The show’s title refers to the DNA that traces the maternal line, and Faustine’s subjects are her family—three generations of Black women, herself included—seen in their shared home. These portraits are displayed alongside staged scenes featuring Faustine alone. “African American Princess,” from 2012, shows the artist seated on a throne, nude except for an African mask and a pair of white pumps. (The shoes also feature in a subsequent series, in which Faustine pictures herself defiantly haunting sites related to New York’s hidden history of slavery.) References to royalty—to status reclaimed—recur in these photographs. In “The Two Queens,” from 2011, the photographer’s daughter and her late mother pose together, resplendent in red silk. “Blue Queen,” from 2015, captures Faustine’s child reclining on a burgundy sofa in what looks to be a Disney Cinderella dress, an image of the tenderest irony.—*Johanna Fateman (higherpictures.com)*

### Nan Goldin

The Sackler family has become a byword for villainy in recent years. (Patrick Radden Keefe has reported in these pages on the Sacklers’ role in the ruthless peddling of OxyContin and the subsequent epidemic of addiction and overdose.) The American photographer Nan Goldin—whose 1985 slide show, “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” a lush and louche portrait of her artistic milieu, defined her impressionistic vérité style—was perhaps an unlikely David against this pharmaceutical Goliath. But her advocacy group, PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), has helped make the Sackler name, and the reputation-laundering philanthropy associated with it, toxic to institutions, from the Met to the Louvre. The title work of “Memory Lost,” Goldin’s current show at the Marian Goodman gallery, updates the format of “Ballad” to reveal the personal stake of her activism. Her images are painterly, operatic, often blurred, yet unvarnished in their depiction of isolation and anguish, showing the toll of the opioid crisis in her own life and connecting it to other losses. The film “Sirens,” a seductive, appropriation-based meditation on cinematic euphoria, and an exquisite group of portraits of the writer Thora Siemsen (Goldin’s partner in pandemic lockdown) make this solo presentation of new work, Goldin’s first in New York in five years, a triumph in every way.—*J.F. (mariangoodman.com)*

### “Grief and Grievance”

This terrific show, subtitled “Art and Mourning in America”—whose starry roster includes Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Theaster Gates—was originally intended to open at the New Museum last October, amid the furores leading up to the Presidential election. The pandemic scuttled that. But “Grief and Grievance,” the brainchild of the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, doesn’t have a

use-by date, because it celebrates what artists are good at: telling personal truths through aesthetic form. Works by thirty-seven artists emphasize interiority and the patterns of feeling that attend Black experience in America, channelling the emotional tenors of the history, and the future, of race in this country. Playing in a darkened room near the start of the show is Arthur Jafa’s video-montage masterpiece “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death.” The quantity of rapid clips, ranging from violent scenes of the civil-rights movement to children dancing, overloads comprehension—so many summoned memories and reconnected associations, cascading. The experience is like a psychoanalytic unpacking, at warp speed, of a national unconscious regarding race. Irresistibly exciting and profoundly moving, the piece will induce a heightened state of mind

and heart to accompany you throughout the exhibition.—*Peter Schjeldahl (newmuseum.org)*

## MUSIC

### Aquarian Blood: “Bending the Golden Hour”

**ROCK** The day J. B. Horrell’s daughter, Ava, received her driver’s license, she took the car out solo; Horrell quelled his anxiety by writing “Come Home,” a slight song about that terrifying parental rite. By the time his daughter returned—from a high-school volleyball game—Horrell had recorded half of the song; Ava capped off her day by singing the other half. Although the track marks the

## AT THE GALLERIES



In the early nineteen-sixties, the American painter **Deborah Remington** did something almost unheard of: she applied realist principles (illusionistic space, glowing light, shadows) to her adamantly abstract work. She also honed a unique palette, uniting grisaille with smoky reds, greens, and blues, and the very occasional orange. The pictures that Remington made for the next half century—she died of cancer in 2010—are exquisitely rendered, indelibly weird, and, in their overlapping rapport with virtual and physical worlds, somehow cybernetic. She wasn’t unknown in her lifetime: a student of Clyfford Still in San Francisco, she hung out with the Beats and co-founded the space where Allen Ginsberg first performed “Howl.” In the sixties and seventies, after a move to New York, she showed with the prestigious Bykert gallery. Remington’s uncompromising pictures are now attracting a flurry of renewed interest, including two current shows in Manhattan. (It’s always bittersweet when an artist’s star rises posthumously and it’s worth noting how often it happens to women.) A stellar selection of early drawings is on view uptown, at the Craig F. Starr gallery (through July 30), and a condensed but nonetheless sweeping career survey, focussed on paintings (including “Dorset,” from 1972, above), is installed at the Bortolami gallery, in Tribeca (through June 12).—*Andrea K. Scott*

younger Horrell's lone appearance on Aquarian Blood's "Bending the Golden Hour," it sits comfortably on an album that turns its nose up at stiff professionalism, embracing a lived-in familial charm. Co-piloted by J.B. and his wife, Laurel Horrell, the Memphis band entered the world as a fire-breathing art-punk outfit before pivoting to the sleepy psychedelic folk that dominates this third record. As the music softens and slows, the punkish air of looseness and spontaneity lingers.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

## Bang on a Can Marathon

**CLASSICAL** From the start, the composers' collective Bang on a Can has incorporated vocal music into its signature marathons, including the online programs that the organization has presented throughout the pandemic. But for its next event, on Sunday, voice will be front and center in a four-hour streaming concert wholly devoted to speech and song—much of it handled by performers known for their instrumental prowess. The event features the pioneering text-sound composer Charles Amirkhanian, the singer-songwriter Allison Russell, the Tuvan rock guitarist Albert Kuvezin, and the saxophonist and media artist Matana Roberts.—*Steve Smith* (June 6 at 1; [bangonacan.org](http://bangonacan.org))

## SOUL



The Los Angeles musician Georgia Anne Muldrow's new album, "**Vweto III**," the third installment in a series of instrumental records, is fidgety and animated, as if the music is longing to move out of confinement, to vibrate toward something. *Vweto* is a Congolese word, from the Kikongo for "gravity," and though Muldrow's previous music has often dealt with matters of great importance, the gravity here is a physical force—the internal pull of substantial grooves. These tracks aren't designed to detonate and diffuse across a dance floor, but there exists an unshakable impulse to move to them. With song titles such as "Old Jack Swing" and "Boom Bap Is My Homegirl," the album conjures a deep love for classicist hip-hop, along with the soul and funk traditions from which the genre has borrowed heavily. This act of rap transference makes "*Vweto III*" a perfect gateway to appreciating the old, in a refreshing new context.—*Sheldon Pearce*

## Blythe Gaissert: "Home"

**CLASSICAL** Eight composers, many of them known for impactful operas, contribute pieces for the mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert's début album, "*Home*." The list includes David T. Little, Laura Kaminsky, and Ricky Ian Gordon, and Gaissert assimilates their styles beautifully, finessing tricky rhythms and intervals with a clearly produced voice. The record, inspired by the U.S.-Mexico border crisis, explores the ways a home is central to one's life—as a source of comfort or as a place of struggle for belonging. Among the many highlights are Little's "Archaeology," which contemplates a home as evidence of past lives, and Mikael Karlsson's swaggering "Bungalow," in which Gaissert holds forth, like a boss, in the octave below middle C. The quality of the string players, drawn from the Attacca Quartet, Aizuri Quartet, and Sybarite5, gives the set a luxurious finish.—*Oussama Zahr*

## Mach-Hommy: "Pray for Haiti"

**HIP-HOP** Until recently, the music of the enigmatic New Jersey rapper Mach-Hommy was as elusive as the man himself: he hid his face behind a bandanna as he rapped about the

seductive nature of crime, and many of his albums were sold exclusively on his Web site—in limited quantities, at exorbitant prices—before being pulled off the Internet entirely. In recent years, though, he's flooded streaming services with old releases, losing some of the allure of his cagey persona but growing more accessible, at least musically. (He still keeps his face concealed.) Now affiliated with the throwback upstate label Griselda, he's released a new album called "Pray for Haiti," executive-produced by his fellow-rapper Westside Gunn. The charms of Hommy's music are on full display as he moves slickly, with casually clever wordplay, through well-curated soul samples. With this distinguished approach to verses, he sets forth on a new mission, as rapped on "Au Revoir": "Making sure that everybody and they mama heard of Mach-Hommy."—*Sheldon Pearce*

## Mdou Moctar: "Afrique Victime"

**ROCK** The Tuareg guitarist Mdou Moctar plays *assouf*, or desert blues, with the kind of flash to be expected from a rock star nervy enough to remake the Prince film "Purple Rain" (retitled "Rain the Color of Blue with a Little Red in It"). His solo runs are dense, swirling, and vast, like skywriting in Day-Glo colors, with the rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane, the bassist Mikey Colton, and the drummer Souleymane Ibrahim offering near-telepathic support. That's as true of the quiet moments—such as on the indelible rumination "Tala Tallam"—as it is of the noisy ones.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## Strata-East at 50 and Charles Tolliver

**JAZZ** In 1971, the trumpeter Charles Tolliver and the pianist Stanley Cowell formed the Strata-East record label in a noteworthy attempt at independence. Five years later, the plucky venture was effectively over, but in that brief period it released a number of bold albums (many now coveted by vinyl collectors) from such artists as Billy Harper, M'Boom, and Gil Scott-Heron. The anniversary celebration of the label is led solely by the returning Tolliver, Cowell having passed away in 2020, and includes Harper, George Cables, Buster Williams, and Lenny White.—*Steve Futterman*

## THE THEATRE

### Capricorn 29

One hesitates to call Alex Hare and Julia Izumi's project a show: unlike most of this past year's streaming theatrical offerings, it's hard to picture "Capricorn 29" on a physical stage. Self-described as a "micro movie musical," this piece, presented by the Tank and the Post Theatrical festival, uses the Internet as both subject and platform. The concept draws loosely on the 1976 science-fiction film "Logan's Run" (here "Morgan's Run"), in which people are killed when they turn thirty. In the show, a millennial called the User (the very funny Lindsey Steinert) notices strange happenings afflicting peers as they near their expiration dates. The tale is told through a series of seemingly unrelated vignettes, featuring such fictional online personalities as Jess the Craftess (Kalyne Coleman) and Simon

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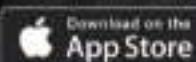
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## THEATRE ONLINE

Are you concerned about the influence of reality-competition shows? Raja Feather Kelly seems to be. With “**The KILL ONE Race,**” the choreographer of “A Strange Loop” and “Fairview” has devised a satire of TV competitions—a reductio ad absurdum in which seven contestants jockey to see who is the most ethical, and the winner dies. The project invokes and implicates multiple devices of the genre—speed dating, interview confessions, lots of dancing—and if “The Hunger Games” is an influence, so, too, are the metafictional film “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm” and a dystopian novel, invented for the play, called “Kill One.” Solid ground should be scarce. The work, filmed in the Playwrights Horizons theatre, is being released in seven episodes, June 4–13, on [thekillonerace.com](http://thekillonerace.com).—*Brian Seibert*

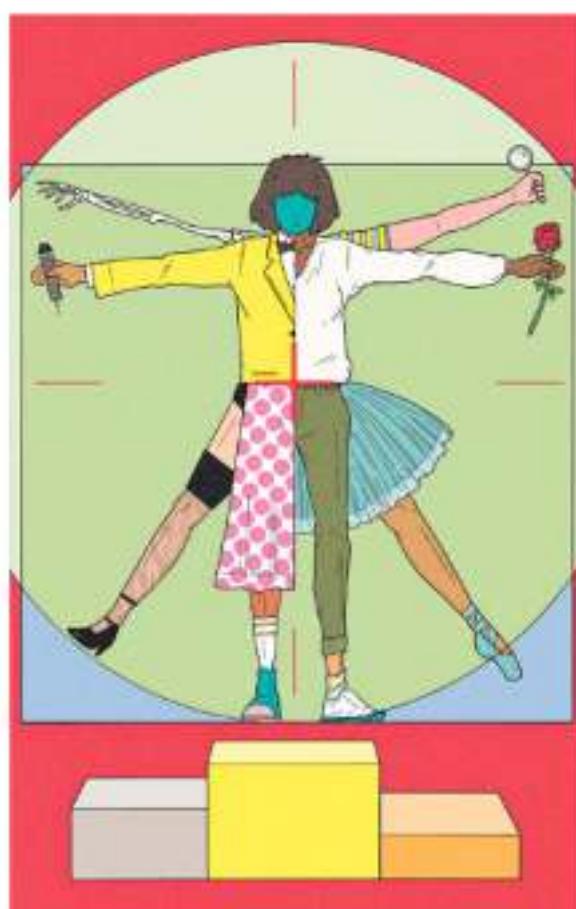
Skincare (Brendan George), their interventions interspersed with songs that don’t add much but are infernally catchy.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli* ([posttheatrical.org](http://posttheatrical.org))

## This American Wife

Michael Breslin, Jakeem Dante Powell, and Patrick Foley play versions of themselves in this overwrought riff on the equally overwrought “Real Housewives” franchise. Decked out in peach-colored finery, the trio stick to high C’s for camp as they attempt to simultaneously deconstruct, mock, and honor the series’ mix of earnest confessions, explosive bitchiness, and worship of wealth. Sometimes they spout lines from the shows and sometimes they launch into manufactured arguments. Conceived and written by Breslin and Foley (who were also behind last year’s digital hit “Circle Jerk”), the live-streaming experiment, directed by Rory Pelsue, displays impressive technical fluidity—the actors are continuously on the move throughout a McMansion—but the manic relentlessness of it all is exhausting. And what, exactly, the show is trying to say remains unclear: quoting Lisa Vanderpump in one breath and name-dropping Jerzy Grotowski in another does not a point make.—*E.V.* ([thisamericanwife.live](http://thisamericanwife.live))

## Zoetrope

This new play from Exquisite Corpse—written by Leah Barker, Emily Krause, and Elinor T. Vanderburg and directed by Porcia Lewis and Tess Howsam—is about two lovers, Angel (Vanessa Lynah) and Bae (Jules Forsberg-Lary), both referred to in the script with the pronouns “they” and “them.” (For half the productions, Starr Kirkland and Leanna Gardella play Angel and Bae.) In the midst of the pandemic, the couple are on lockdown in their



cramped apartment. The relationship is loving, but also riven with difference. Angel and Bae speak in well-educated millennialese, qualifying their sentences an inch beyond useful meaning, eloquently talking past each other. There’s a corniness in moments when the play reenacts quarantine traumas that are too familiar to take symbolic flight, but the real intrigue lies in the specifics of the production: Angel and Bae’s apartment sits inside a small trailer, in an empty lot near Fort Greene Park, in Brooklyn, and audience members watch them through the trailer windows. The setup produces a neat metaphor for the problems of private life in tumultuous times—sometimes it’s hard to hear the dialogue over the honking mess behind you, in the street.—*Vinson Cunningham* (*Reviewed in our issue of 5/24/21.*) ([exquisitecorpsecompany.com](http://exquisitecorpsecompany.com))

## DANCE

### New York City Ballet

As the performing-arts world slowly returns to live show, New York City Ballet offers its final digital program, a filmed 2013 performance of “Vienna Waltzes” (available on the company’s YouTube page, June 3–17). This 1977 work, by George Balanchine, is a celebration of the waltz in all its forms, from the youthful social dance in the first section, “Tales from the Vienna Woods,” to the sophisticated dance of seduction in the “Gold and Silver Waltz” section, reaching its apogee in an elegiac dance in a mirrored ballroom. The music begins with Johann Strauss II (known as the Waltz King), takes a sappy turn toward Franz Léhar, and ends with the swooping harmonies of Richard Strauss. “Vienna Waltzes” is like a rich meal that leaves you full and a bit tipsy, lost in a dream

world of taffeta, champagne, and a touch of sadness.—*Marina Harss* ([nycballet.com](http://nycballet.com))

## Janessa Clark

Dancers separated by huge geographical distances are superimposed in short virtual duets—Clark’s “Communion” is clearly a product of an earlier stage of the pandemic. Still, its cast of forty is distinguished: Doug Elkins, Alexandra Beller, Omagbitse Omagbemi, Ivy Baldwin, Rosalynde LeBlanc, Jasmine Hearn, Catherine Kirk, and Gus Solomons, Jr., to name a few. Since February, HERE has released one duet per week online; the full fifty-minute video installation can be viewed in person at the venue June 3–19.—*Brian Seibert* ([here.org](http://here.org))

## Ephrat Asherie Dance

Especially during a pandemic, New York City’s legendary underground dance parties at the Loft and the Paradise Garage, in the seventies and eighties—the ones with no alcohol, just music, teeming with people for whom dancing was refuge and religion—can seem like a lost utopia. Asherie honors that culture in “UnderScored,” a “Works & Process” commission performed live in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, on June 2. The ages within the cast range from twenty-five to seventy-seven, and the upper end is weighted with the authority of Michele Saunders, Brahms LaFortune, and Archie Burnett, who were on the floor way back when.—*B.S.* ([worksandprocess.org](http://worksandprocess.org))

## Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener

The latest episode of “Gagosian Premieres,” a virtual series that illuminates exhibitions at Gagosian galleries, often with starry conversations and performances, is devoted to Gerhard Richter’s “Cage” paintings, which he created while listening to music by John Cage. Mitchell and Riener, two standout dancers from the final company of Cage’s partner, Merce Cunningham, offer a five-minute première set to Cage’s song “Experiences No. 2.” Dressed like twins, they’re a postmodern vaudeville team capable of tender touches and striking sculptural pairings. The episode, which also features a musical performance and reading by Patti Smith, is available on the Gagosian Web site starting June 8.—*B.S.* ([gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com))

## MOVIES

### Love Is the Devil

A short but suitably warped account of the love affair between the painter Francis Bacon (Derek Jacobi) and a small-time criminal named George Dyer (Daniel Craig), who would model for some of Bacon’s most convulsive works. The action, for what it’s worth, starts in 1963 and ends in 1971, but the film’s director, John Maybury, is only fitfully tempted by the demands of plot. He prefers to function in impressionistic bursts; we get a series of flickering, semi-linked scenes in which Bacon gambles, brushes his teeth with bleach, drinks with his appalling cronies, braces himself for masochistic sex, and even occasionally begins to paint—although,

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since the film was forbidden to show any authentic Bacons, he never gets very far. What rescues the enterprise from indulgence is, first, the audacity of Jacobi's performance, with its blend of caution and abandonment, and also Maybury's honorable attempt not so much to mimic the blurring violence of Bacon's imagery as to suggest the ways in which it was triggered by ordinary life. Released in 1998.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 10/12/98.) (Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.)

## The Marrying Kind

Despite its buoyant tone and comic energy, George Cukor's drama of scenes from a marriage, as viewed in flashback by a couple in divorce court, is a scathing work of New York neorealism. Judy Holliday—tall, squawky, and full of purpose—and the muscular, raspy-voiced, impulsive Aldo Ray (in his first lead role) play Flo and Chet, two hardworking city people who meet cute in Central Park, marry amid a gaggle of relatives, move into a clean but soulless apartment in Peter Cooper

Village, and find that minor irritations quickly become open wounds. Money worries are constant and get worse when children arrive; when family tragedy strikes, the fragile couple falls apart. The screenwriters, Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin, offer sharply nuanced scenes of tight bonds at work and at home, and Cukor's agitated direction mixes emotions to the breaking point. The courtroom framework, which turns the pain of memory into a therapeutic obligation, evokes a new era of cultural modernism—of the private realm exposed in glaring clinical light. Released in 1952.—*Richard Brody* (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)

and an infant—leave their home in upstate New York to find other survivors whose signals they've picked up. Their long and perilous walk ends at an abandoned steel mill, which a former neighbor (Cillian Murphy) has turned into an elaborately armored hideout. Yet supplies there are short, and Regan sets out alone to track another signal that hints at safety. (She is deaf, and her cochlear implant plays a major role in the plot.) As other separations are forced on the characters, Krasinski relies on crosscutting between them to ratchet up suspense, yet they remain ciphers, reduced to their wiles and their battles; the result is a pared-down thriller of little significance.—R.B. (In wide release.)

## A Quiet Place Part II

John Krasinski dutifully and, at times, cleverly follows the rules laid out in the first installment of his budding franchise. In the second year of the invasion of giant arachnid space creatures that rely on sound to hunt their prey, the surviving members of the Abbott family—mom Evelyn (Emily Blunt), daughter Regan (Millicent Simmonds), son Marcus (Noah Jupe),

## Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue

In Jia Zhangke's interview-centered documentary, about Chinese authors of four generations, from the birth of the People's Republic to the present day, the director unfolds the close connections of writers' lives to the life of their times, and does so with passion and devotion—and with cagey omissions and keen ironies. The film spotlights four writers based in rural villages; Jia, who is also from a small provincial town, elicits extraordinary stories that highlight the desperate poverty that villagers endured, and the intensive transformations that have brought prosperity but threaten local traditions and the transmission of memory. Several writers detail the oppressions of the Cultural Revolution and the loosening up that followed. Liang Hong describes the economic and familial burdens borne by rural women at the turn of the millennium. Yu Hua speaks of censorship in the eighties with an anecdotal wryness; alludes, with a deft wink, to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, in 1989; and tosses off a sharp-edged phrase—suggesting the gap between personal experience and official accounts—that gives the film its title. In Mandarin.—R.B. (Film at Lincoln Center.)

## The Testament of Orpheus

Jean Cocteau begins this bittersweet fantasy—his farewell film, from 1959—as a periwigged poet who is forced to wander through time before being trapped in modernity by a bullet that's faster than light. This self-portrait in poignant, lyrical skits includes people from his life, characters from his writings, and clips from his movies—especially "Orpheus" (1950). The young poet from that film, Cégeste (Edouard Dermit, who also appears here in his real-life role, as Cocteau's adopted son), returns to guide the gaunt, troubled director to the underworld. There, Cocteau is judged by the Princess of Death (María Casares) and Heurtebise (François Périer), and he turns a plea of self-defense into a manifesto for cinema and poetry, which he considers inseparable. Using wondrously simple trick photography and stagecraft, he gives a genially self-pitying overview of a long life used up in the name of art. With one foot in the French New Wave and the other in the Ballets Russes, Cocteau fits a raging confession into a serene, sensuous neoclassical vessel. In French.—R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)

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## WHAT TO STREAM



The connections among visual representation, the creation of knowledge, and political power are at the core of Theo Anthony's documentary "**All Light, Everywhere**" (which opens in theatres and virtual cinemas June 4). It's centered on a flash point of current policy debate—the use of body cams by police officers. Anthony visits the headquarters of Axon Enterprise, which manufactures the devices, as well as the Taser, and discovers the links between the cameras and the weapon; he also observes the training of police officers in the use of body cams and examines the methods by which officials interpret the recordings. He surprisingly situates the origins of cinema in arms and astronomy—and traces the development of the mug shot to data analysis and racist eugenics theories. Anthony's work is experiential, his sense of discovery, personal; he attends public meetings in Baltimore regarding the deployment of satellite cameras for street surveillance in predominantly Black neighborhoods, and finds the technology's roots in trench warfare. For Anthony, unexamined history perpetuates its injustices—and his film dramatizes the artistic labor that fosters change.—*Richard Brody*



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Smashed NYC 177 Orchard St.

"A big part of what makes the Big Mac appealing in pictures," a burger aficionado I know mused the other day, "is that the patties extend past the perimeter of the bun. But then you actually get one, and most of the time you can barely even see the patties." We were sitting outside Smashed NYC, a new burger shop on the Lower East Side. He peeled back the black-and-white checkered wax paper folded around the Big Schmacc, a highlight of the menu. Two thin jagged-edged disks of deeply browned ground beef hung flopily over the limits of three halves of Martin's "Big Marty's" sesame roll; there was clear visual evidence, too, of sharp-cornered, barely melted slices of American cheese, shredded iceberg lettuce, crinkle-cut pickle coins, and Creamsicle-colored Smash Sauce. "This is what it's supposed to look like," he explained, with the authority of a biologist.

I confess that I've never tried a Big Mac—because I've seen what it looks like in real life. (It's better not to gaze directly upon the beef, which tends to

take on a gray tone.) But I imagine that the Big Schmacc is also what the Big Mac—which McDonald's introduced in the hope of attracting adult customers, and once advertised as "a meal disguised as a sandwich"—is supposed to taste like: a sandwich carefully layered to provide a uniform, balanced medley of charred, smoky fat, mellow cream, gentle tang, crunch, salt, and just a hint of sweetness in every bite. Unlike at McDonald's, where the burgers are pre-cooked and reheated, at Smashed your burger is made to order, pressed flat and seared on an extremely hot griddle until it becomes a marvel of the Maillard reaction, umami sparks flying as amino acids and reducing sugars collide, coalescing into a crunchy golden crust. According to one legend, the smash burger, a relic of Americana from which Smashed takes its name, was invented by an employee of a Kentucky burger stand called Dairy Cheer, who discovered that heaving a five-pound can of beans onto a ball of ground beef on the grill yielded maximum flavor.

Countless words have been spilled in arguments for and against the city's "best" burgers. The other day on Twitter, Folu Akinkuotu, the writer of Unsnackable, a popular e-mail newsletter about international snacks, perfectly articulated a thought I've often had, if more vaguely. "Sausage is like cheese," she wrote, weighing in on a debate about whether chorizo is king. "There are no true superlatives just perfect choices for different situations." This also ap-

plies, in my opinion, to burgers (not to mention pizza). I would never make the case that any smash burger is inherently superior to, say, any eight-ounce, dry-aged-short-rib burger cooked medium rare and topped with Gruyère on brioche, but I would contend that a smash burger—and, indeed, a Smashed burger—is the best to eat in New York right now.

That a single smash burger patty is relatively light, favoring surface area over heft, makes it palatable even in summer heat, and well suited for transport: you could eat one while walking down a slowly reawakening city street, catching up on a year's worth of people-watching, or bring a dozen to a picnic. At Smashed, to-go orders are packed extra conveniently, in sturdy cardboard boxes with handles.

You can make the burger even lighter by opting for the vegan iteration, featuring Impossible Burger, Follow Your Heart cheese, eggless mayo, and a dairy-free bun, which I like just as much as the beef version. (The McDonald's-style fries are also modifiable, cooked in a choice of beef fat or peanut oil.) You can also go heavier, by doubling (*à la* the Big Schmacc) or even tripling patties, or by ordering the lusciously messy blue-cheese-and-bacon burger, in which case I'd recommend eating in—or eating out, as it were, in Smashed's Plexiglas-walled parking-space pavilion. Plenty of perfect choices, for different situations. (*Burgers \$8-\$17.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT UNDUE BURDENS

One of the most striking facts in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, a case that the Supreme Court has now agreed to hear, concerns the identity of one of the parties. Jackson Women's Health is the only licensed abortion clinic in Mississippi. Women seeking its services often have to travel hundreds of miles to the pink building on North State Street, in Jackson, and to either make the trip twice or find somewhere to stay—Mississippi imposes a twenty-four-hour waiting period after mandatory in-person counselling. Girls younger than eighteen need a parent's permission or a waiver from a court. And when a woman arrives she is usually subjected to people shouting through megaphones that she is murdering her child. The city tried to limit the noise, which reportedly can be heard inside businesses down the street, but the ordinance was revoked after a challenge. "If there are protesters outside on the day of your procedure, please ignore them and come directly into the clinic," the clinic's Web site advises. "You don't have to stop."

Jackson Women's Health has another distinction. There is every possibility that the case bearing its name—along with that of Thomas Dobbs, the state health officer of Mississippi—will be the one that either overturns *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, the two Supreme Court rulings that are the bedrocks of reproductive rights, or renders

them powerless. This case began as a challenge to a Mississippi law forbidding abortions after fifteen weeks (counting from a woman's last menstrual period), except in very narrow circumstances. A woman would have to be facing a medical emergency that could cause "substantial and irreversible impairment of a major bodily function"—or threaten her life. The only other exception would be if doctors determined that the fetus, even if carried to full term, could not survive. Rape and incest would not be taken into account.

Crucially, fifteen weeks is well before the point at which a fetus would be viable outside the womb, and that is also the point at which the Supreme Court has said that a woman's interest in controlling her own body outweighs any other interests the state has. The Mississippi law is so clearly contrary to

the Court's precedents that Judge James Ho, a Trump appointee to the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, wrote in an opinion in 2019 that it was his "duty" to strike it down, even as he railed about pain being inflicted on "innocent babies." Similar state laws are regularly batted down. Why, then, did the Court take this one?

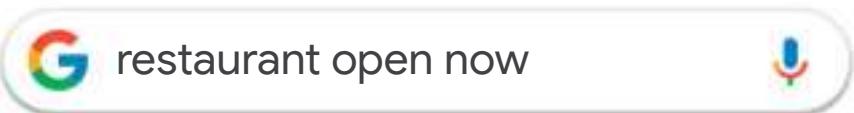
The obvious, depressing answer is that *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* will be argued in the term that begins in October, with Amy Coney Barrett seated in place of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died last September. It's a good bet that Barrett, Neil Gorsuch, and Brett Kavanaugh—the Trump trio—along with Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas, will try to severely limit reproductive rights. They wouldn't even need John Roberts. Groups working to restrict those rights plainly see this as a moment of opportunity. In the past few months, there has been a frenzy of anti-choice legislation at the state level; the Guttmacher Institute tallied twenty-eight new restrictions signed into law in the four days between April 26th and April 29th alone. The most pressing question now may be not whether *Roe* and *Casey* can survive but how reproductive rights can be sustained without them.

The specific question the Court has said it will examine is this: "Whether all pre-viability prohibitions on elective abortions are unconstitutional." The wording is important. *Casey* allows states to regulate abortion in certain ways, even before viability, as long as the rules do not put an "undue burden" on women. The burdens have nonetheless become





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quite undue in recent years, from mandatory waiting periods to licensing requirements designed to close down clinics. It's not an accident that there is only one clinic in Mississippi, and just a few in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and other states. About ninety per cent of the counties in the United States lack an abortion clinic. Before the pandemic, the A.P. estimated that, in a five-year period, more than two hundred and seventy thousand women travelled to another state to obtain an abortion. Even now, the reality of abortion access for a woman in the Northeast or California is in stark contrast with that for a woman in the South or the Midwest. The Mississippi case is different and more radical because the state claims, implausibly, that its near-total ban on abortion after fifteen weeks is merely a regulation of the sort envisioned by Casey. Indeed, the state, in its brief for the Court, objects strongly to the use of the word "ban" to describe the law.

A particularly shameless defense of

the Mississippi law can be found in an amicus-curiae brief filed by Texas and seventeen other states. It argues that the Court should treat the Mississippi law not as a profound conceptual shift, from regulation to prohibition, but as a small adjustment, *because* it's already so difficult to get an abortion in that state. Jackson Women's Health offers abortions only until the sixteenth week, and the amicus brief insists that the clinic must "explain why these women could not schedule their abortions one week earlier." This argument is doubly disingenuous because, soon after the Fifth Circuit struck down the post-fifteen-week ban, Mississippi passed an even more extreme one, on abortions after six weeks. That law has been blocked by the courts. There are also pending challenges to near-total bans approved in Arkansas, in March, and in Oklahoma, in April—and to a law that Governor Greg Abbott, of Texas, signed on May 19th, banning abortion after the detection of a heartbeat, which can be as soon as six

weeks and often before a woman knows that she is pregnant.

And yet, as harsh as the heartbeat law is, it took Texas only a week to outdo it. Last Wednesday, the state legislature approved what is known as a "trigger law," which would go into effect if Roe is overturned. It would ban abortion almost entirely, as would similar trigger laws that exist in a dozen other states, such as Missouri, Tennessee, and Utah. (Several of those states also have heartbeat legislation.) By comparison, about a dozen states have measures in place to safeguard access to abortion to a certain extent. California, for example, still has a pre-Roe law legalizing abortion on the books. More states need more robust trigger laws that would protect reproductive rights, and they will likely need them soon. Some of the most crucial conflicts in the coming years are likely to be in state legislatures, waged in the spaces between landmark Court cases. The Mississippi case need not be the end.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## CAFÉ SOCIETY STARTING OVER



"Someone sent me a box of hot dogs," Danny Meyer said, walking into Union Square Café, his oldest restaurant, clutching a large cardboard package. He placed the parcel on the bar, removed his mask, and opened an accompanying letter, from the owner of a string of hot-dog joints in Utah. The letter thanked Meyer for writing "Setting the Table," his 2006 best-seller about the power of risk-taking, eye contact, and pressed tablecloths. Meyer smiled.

The previous day, New York City had officially begun reopening, which meant that restaurants could again start filling their dining rooms. The past year has been the most difficult of Meyer's gilded career. When the pandemic arrived, his company, Union Square Hospitality Group, shut down its nineteen restaurants and also its events business, which provided ca-

tering for planes, stadiums, galas, and weddings. This meant laying off some two thousand people. A few days later, Floyd Cardoz, the chef who opened Tabla with Meyer, in 1998, died of COVID-19. Employees got sick and lost loved ones. Meyer was publicly criticized for seeking and receiving a loan from the Paycheck Protection Program—which Congress created to bail out small businesses—for Shake Shack, the international burger chain he founded. (Shake Shack returned the ten-million-dollar loan to the government.) A stop-start summer, fall, and winter followed. Meyer's restaurants experimented with retail and delivery, and with shipping chicken potpies, lasagne, and other items from coast to coast.

The evening's dinner service was just beginning, and Meyer went into the kitchen to greet Lena Ciardullo, the executive chef, who had recently returned from maternity leave. How did it feel to be cooking again? "Back is sore," she said. "Cooking is good." They discussed the past year. Rather than returning to normal, things now felt like they were starting over. "A big mistake is when people say we're

'reopening' restaurants," he said. "We're opening new restaurants." The latest challenge was staffing. Every place in town was suddenly hiring at the same time. Former employees had left the city, or left the industry, or were wary of giving up unemployment. Before the pandemic, Union Square Café usually had thirteen people in the kitchen for dinner. Now Ciardullo was



Danny Meyer



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making do with seven. The person who was preparing salads was also plating pastry.

"Our old pastry station is where we're currently packing to-go orders," Ciardullo said. "But that means I don't have anywhere to put ice cream."

"Where's the ice cream?" Meyer asked.

"We don't have ice cream right now," Ciardullo said.

"Jesus," Meyer replied.

Someone started frying soft-shell crabs. Meyer exited the kitchen, ascended a set of stairs, and selected a table on the balcony overlooking the dining room. He sat down and listened. "It's very quiet," he said, ruefully. "The sounds of a restaurant are one of the things I missed most." He picked up a knife and fork, clinked them together, and scratched them across a plate to demonstrate what he meant. "It's music," he said.

Ciardullo appeared, holding a dish of sourdough slices piled high with cheese and chopped bright-green vegetables. "We've got some burrata, some sugar snap peas, some pecans," she said. "Beautiful," Meyer said. "Very spring-y." He ignored his portion while a visitor chowed down.

Meyer talked about the business. Even before the pandemic, he had been deeply involved in debates about pay and sustainability in the industry. In 2015, his restaurants had done away with tipping, in an attempt to even out the pay disparity between servers and kitchen staff. In July, he abandoned the experiment, saying that during the pandemic he didn't want to deny any employee the chance to make extra money. It seemed that just about every premise in the business had been tested. It wasn't all bad news. Meyer glanced over the railing and out the window, at the covered patio outside. It had once been a gutter, parking spaces. "This could be a savior of the full-service restaurant industry," he said, of outdoor dining. He seemed amazed at how an idea that now seems obvious had once inspired resistance. The Modern, his restaurant at the Museum of Modern Art, overlooks the museum's sculpture garden, but there had never been tables put out there. Meyer plans to do so this summer, when the Modern reopens. "We

used to feel, You can't have café society right outside a Michelin two-star restaurant," he said. "And now: Hell, yes, you can."

In April, Bill de Blasio named Meyer the board chairman of the city's Economic Development Corporation, one of those nodes in New York's power structure that no one's ever heard of but which control a gigantic amount of money. "They're basically always trying to think, Where's the puck going, for jobs?" Meyer said. "De Blasio said, 'I have one job for the rest of my term, and that's to bring back the city's economy, and bring back as many jobs and as many tourists, and get as many people back to work as possible.' I thought, How can I not help the city? So I said yes."

The dining room was filling up with patrons, and with the music of a restaurant. Laughter bounced off the walls. Chairs scraped. A cappuccino machine hissed. "You can get a lot of good food in this city," Meyer said, rising from his seat. "Your favorite restaurant, invariably, is the one that loves you the most." The last thing he offered a visitor was a handshake.

—Eric Lach

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## REBOOT DEPT. NEW DIGS



The central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, on Eastern Parkway, has what has got to be the coolest façade in the borough: a fifty-foot-tall portico, adorned with bronze Art Deco sculptures depicting fifteen classic characters from American literature, framed by two huge limestone columns covered with gilded bas-reliefs of a hissing griffin, a rising phoenix, and a spiny dinosaur, representing the evolution of art and science. The interior is another matter. "The floor in the lobby used to be so grungy, I cannot even tell you," Linda Johnson, the president and C.E.O. of the Brooklyn Public Library, said the other day. "The lighting was dark, dingy—a mess. However"—she placed

a hand on the shoulder of the woman standing next to her—"that was before Toshiko."

"It was not the most airy space," Toshiko Mori agreed. "We did our best to make it more inviting." Mori is a Harvard professor and a New York-based architect who has designed an artists' colony in Senegal, a public pavilion in China, and dozens of sleek buildings across the East Coast. In 2015, the library hired her to draw up a master plan for a renovation to the central branch, where construction first began in 1912. Mori and associates from her firm spent three years, off and on, shadowing and interviewing the building's employees. "We found several systemic issues," she said. Some were aesthetic: the lighting; walls and staircases that were misplaced. But most were "infrastructural things. Wiring, duct-work, plumbing. Many, many problems with book storage."

The master plan became a four-phase, hundred-and-twenty-million-dollar project, the first part of which was completed last month. "The pandemic was terrible, obviously, but it allowed us to move much faster than expected," Johnson said. She and Mori were standing outside the main entrance, wearing masks and sunglasses, waiting for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to begin. Johnson, who is very tall, wore heels; Mori, who is not, did not.

The ceremony began. "Every time I stand up here, I start by saying how excited and delighted I am, and I mean it every single time," Johnson said, from a lectern. "But I have never felt it or meant it more deeply." Johnson's husband, the real-estate developer Bruce Ratner, fumbled to applaud, juggling a coffee cup in his left hand. Johnson, reading from a wind-rustled page, rhapsodized about a "poured-terrazzo floor that makes you completely forget the linoleum that preceded it." She ad-libbed: "Maybe it'll make *you* forget it. I will never forget it."

Mori spoke, followed by a philanthropist, some local politicians, and three sons of the late Major Owens, a long-serving congressman from New York, who got his start as a Brooklyn librarian. Chris Owens, the eldest son, struggled to lead a chant of "This is what a library looks like!" and read

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from his father's poetry. ("Human history is a long, ugly tale/Tragedy guided by the frail monster male.") Millard, the youngest, gave a speech that went on, judging by the poker faces behind him, about eight minutes longer than planned. Geoffrey, the middle son, recited Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, and, reading the room, left it at that. An hour in, the higher-ranking politicians had sneaked off. "Now, where's that scissor?" Johnson said.

After the ribbon was cut, Johnson and Mori led a tour. Standing a respectful distance behind them was Landon Brown, the project architect, who oversaw work on the site, walking there each day from his home, in Crown Heights. The new lobby was indeed much more inviting. "The biggest changes are the things you'll never see," Brown said. He gestured toward a ceiling duct: "You don't want to know how much stuff is hiding behind that."

"Everyone wants to talk about the sexier stuff, the fourth-phase stuff," Johnson said. "But first you've got to do the H.V.A.C. and the toilets." What was the sexy fourth-phase stuff? "Oh, I can't, it's a big secret," she said. She kept the secret for about five minutes. The fourth phase, if it ever gets funded, will involve a roof garden and a terrace that will connect the library to Mount Prospect Park and to the Brooklyn Museum, the Botanic Garden, and the park beyond. "That way, Eastern Parkway becomes a kind of Fifth Avenue," Mori said. This put her in a futuristic frame of mind, and she began talking about librarians as "navigators of knowledge," and the "limited associative capacity" of artificial intelligence. Ratner, behind her, tapped out a text on his iPhone.

The tour paused at the library's New and Noteworthy section, which is laid out as in a bookstore, with eye-catching light fixtures visible from the street. Brown, near the back, was still telling war stories from the construction. "You get a lot of funky stuff when you start messing around with an old building," he said. Feral raccoons, for example. "They were living in the stacks, inside the ceilings," he continued. "They really didn't want to leave." Eventually, one of the construction workers figured out a solution: maple syrup. "He

would spray it in the parking lot, and they'd all run outside," Brown said. "They tried to sneak back, but it bought us some time."

—Andrew Marantz

## CHEERING SECTION DAD SHOW



The actor Stephen Lang—best known for his role as the gleefully evil scourge of the Na'vi, Colonel Quaritch, in "Avatar"—was walking in midtown the other day, expressing dismay at the relative lack of pedestrian traffic and at the number of restaurants still shuttered. "It blows me away," he said, after finding the Oyster Bar, Café Un Deux Trois, and Osteria al Doge all closed.

But Lang wasn't in town for lunch; rather, as he walked, he wore a sandwich board that advertised his daughter Lucy's candidacy for Manhattan District Attorney, a post soon to be vacated by Cyrus Vance. "I LOVE LUCY LANG FOR MANHATTAN DA," the board read.

"My first idea for how to campaign for my daughter came to me in my sleep," Lang said. "I envisioned an airplane towing a banner. But my family talked me out of that one. It would have blown the entire advertising budget."

Lucy Lang, who spent twelve years working as an Assistant District Attorney under Vance—and before that under Robert Morgenthau—aligns herself with the progressive-prosecutor movement. In recent polls, she has come in second in a field of eight, lagging behind Tali Farhadian Weinstein, the wife of the hedge-fund manager Boaz Weinstein, of Saba Capital Management. So far, Weinstein is the only candidate who has been able to pay for any substantial advertising.

But then Lang thought of a sandwich board. "There's something old-timey about it," he said. "As a kid, I used to see people wearing sandwich boards and think, Well, there's a good job. I mean: 'GIMBEL'S—TWENTY-FIVE

PERCENT OFF ALL UPHOLSTERY.'"

Lang starred, with Dustin Hoffman and John Malkovich, in "Death of a Salesman" (1984); was nominated for a Tony for his role in "The Speed of Darkness" (1991); and, between 2004 and 2007, was a co-artistic director of the Actors Studio. In 2004, he created a one-man play, "Beyond Glory," which celebrated Medal of Honor recipients. After the *Times* ran an advertisement for the play which showed a very ripped Lang in a sleeveless T-shirt, he was contacted by Margie Simkin, a casting director for James Cameron's upcoming "Avatar."

"I finished my last preview, got on a plane, and met Cameron in his kitchen in Malibu," Lang said. He refers to the meeting as his "Schwab's-drugstore moment."

"Jim had me do some improvisation," Lang went on. "He'd brought in another actor to read some lines. At some point, I whacked the guy. I didn't hurt him, but I whacked him. That's how I got the Quaritch role."

Lang is scheduled to reprise the part in "Avatar 2," which, in addition to Lang and Sigourney Weaver, will star Kate Winslet and Chris Curtis, as leaders of a group of underwater Pandorans. The "performance capture" for the underwater scenes has proved complicated—Cameron's team has had to invent new technology, as it famously did for the first install-



Lucy Lang and Stephen Lang

ment. Lang is also reprising his horror-villain role as The Blind Man, in the thriller “Don’t Breathe 2,” which opens in August.

As Lang walked up Eighth Avenue, he seemed, in spite of the macho-man roles, shy about engaging with potential voters. “Look, I just want to get eyeballs on my daughter’s name. I want to do what I can to help,” he said. “And I get my cardio at the same time.”

Registered voters were scarce on the ground. Next to the U.S.S. Maine monument, at the entrance to Central Park, a group of four police officers were dismissive, telling Lang that they didn’t vote in Manhattan. A pair of tourists from Colombia approached; they recognized Lang despite his “Lucy Lang” face mask. They were asked which film they knew him from. When they said, “Netflix!” Lang put on a gravelly voice and became Quaritch. The cops suddenly wanted photos.

Lang kept looking for voters: a pedicab driver was from Senegal; a young woman on a bench was a student from Portugal. Finally, up West Drive, two women appeared to be pointing at the sandwich board. As he approached, Lang realized that they were handing out leaflets for Liz Crotty, one of Lucy Lang’s rivals, who’d been polling in the low single digits. Crotty is the law-and-order candidate, endorsed by several police unions.

One of the women, Mary Tierney, said that Crotty’s father—a federal judge—was a close friend of her brother’s. After listening to Lang make an animated pitch about the need for prosecutorial reform, Tierney said, “I’ll tell you one thing. Lucy Lang has a great father.”

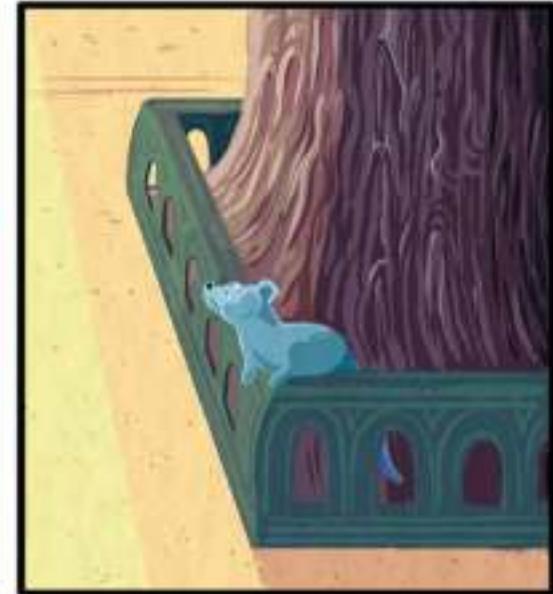
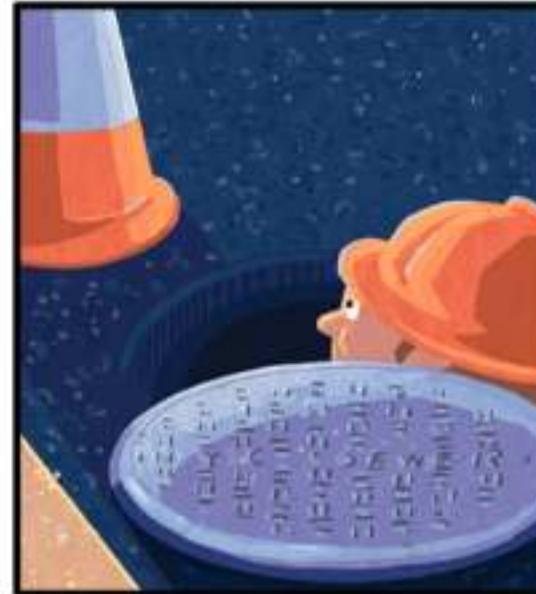
Tierney was on the board of directors of Theatre for the New City. She asked Lang if he had by any chance acted in “A Pound on Demand,” a Sean O’Casey play that she had directed at the Billy Munk Theatre, back in 1975.

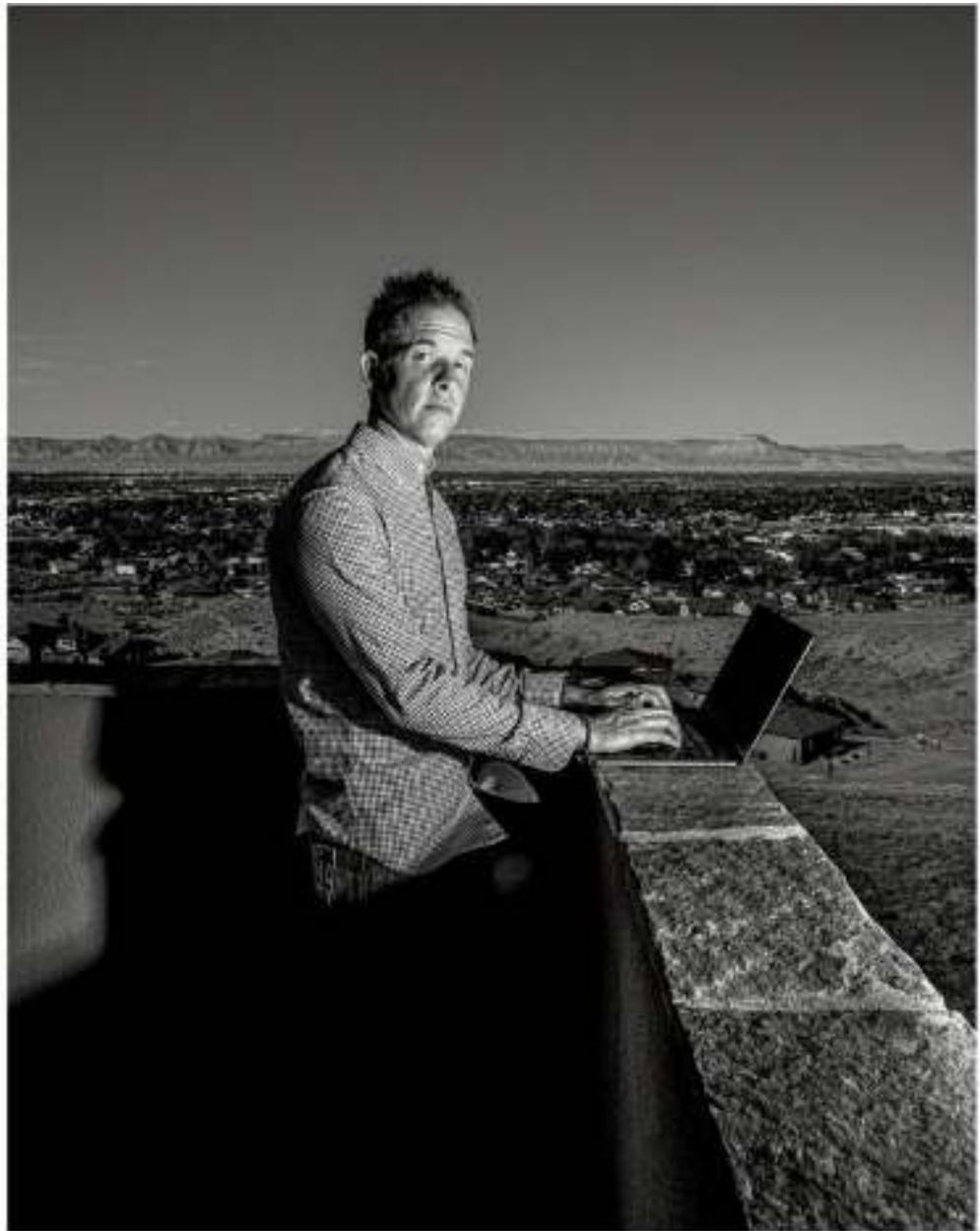
It had been his first New York role, he said, but he’d dropped out before the play opened. The late Brian Dennehy, who had a day job at Merrill Lynch at the time, had stepped into the part.

“It was perfect for him,” Lang said, as we walked along. “I was miscast.”

—Peter Canby

## SKECHPAD BY ELLIS ROSEN COAST IS CLEAR?





ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

## THE GO-BETWEEN

*Negotiating with the hackers and the hacked.*

BY RACHEL MONROE

A few days after Thanksgiving last year, Kurtis Minder got a message from a man whose small construction-engineering firm in upstate New York had been hacked. Minder and his security company, GroupSense, got calls and e-mails like this all the time now, many of them tinged with panic. An employee at a brewery, or a printshop, or a Web-design company would show up for work one morning and find all the computer files locked and a ransom note demanding a cryptocurrency payment to release them.

Some of the notes were aggressive (“Don’t take us for fools, we know more about you than you know about your-

self”), others insouciant (“Oops, your important files are encrypted”) or faux apologetic (“WE ARE REGRET BUT ALL YOUR FILES WAS ENCRYPTED”). Some messages couched their extortion as a legitimate business transaction, as if the hackers had performed a helpful security audit: “Gentlemen! Your business is at serious risk. There is a significant hole in the security system of your company.”

The notes typically included a link to a site on the dark Web, the part of the Internet that requires special software for access, where people go to do clandestine things. When victims went to the site, a clock popped up, marking

the handful of days they had to fulfill the ransom demand. The clock began to tick down ominously, like a timer connected to a bomb in an action movie. A chat box enabled a conversation with the hackers.

In the past year, a surge of ransomware attacks has made a disruptive period even more difficult. In December, the acting head of the federal Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency said that ransomware was “quickly becoming a national emergency.” Hackers hit vaccine manufacturers and research labs. Hospitals lost access to chemotherapy protocols; school districts cancelled classes. Companies scrambling to accommodate a fully remote workforce found themselves newly vulnerable to hackers. In May, an attack by the ransomware group DarkSide forced the shutdown of Colonial Pipeline’s network, which supplies fuel to much of the East Coast. The shutdown, which pushed up gas prices and led to a spate of panic-buying, put a spotlight on ransomware’s potential to disable critical infrastructure. A week after the attack, once Colonial paid a ransom of \$4.4 million to get its systems back online, eighty per cent of gas stations in Washington, D.C., still had no fuel.

The F.B.I. advises victims to avoid negotiating with hackers, arguing that paying ransoms incentivizes criminal behavior. This puts victims in a tricky position. “To just tell a hospital that they can’t pay—I’m just incredulous at the notion,” Philip Reiner, the C.E.O. of the nonprofit Institute for Security and Technology, told me. “What do you expect them to do, just shut down and let people die?” Organizations that don’t pay ransoms can spend months rebuilding their systems; if customer data are stolen and leaked as part of an attack, they may be fined by regulators. In 2018, the city of Atlanta declined to pay a ransom of approximately fifty thousand dollars. Instead, in an effort to recover from the attack, it spent more than two million dollars on crisis P.R., digital forensics, and consulting. For every ransomware case that makes the news, there are many more small and medium-sized companies that prefer to keep breaches under wraps, and more than half of them pay their hackers, ac-

cording to data from the cybersecurity firm Kaspersky.

For the past year, Minder, who is forty-four years old, has been managing the fraught discussions between companies and hackers as a ransomware negotiator, a role that didn't exist only a few years ago. The half-dozen ransomware-negotiation specialists, and the insurance companies they regularly partner with, help people navigate the world of cyber extortion. But they've also been accused of abetting crime by facilitating payments to hackers. Still, with ransomware on the rise, they have no lack of clients. Minder, who is mild and unpretentious, and whose conversation is punctuated by self-deprecating laughter, has become an accidental expert. "While I've been talking to you, I've already gotten two calls," he told me when we video-chatted in March.

The man who reached out to him in November explained that the attack, the work of a hacking syndicate known as REvil, had rendered the company's contracts and architectural plans inaccessible; every day the files remained locked was another day the staff couldn't work. "They didn't even have an I.T. person on staff," Minder said. The company had no cyber-insurance policy. The man explained that he had been in touch with a company in Florida that had promised to decrypt the files, but it had stopped replying to his e-mails. He wanted Minder to negotiate with the hackers to get the decryption key. "The people who reach out to me are upset," Minder told me. "They're very, very upset."

**A**s a child, Minder visited his father at the mill where he worked, in central Illinois, and watched him hoist fifty-pound sacks of flour. His mother, who worked for the state, sat in an air-conditioned office with a cup of coffee. He didn't quite understand what her job was, other than that it seemed to involve a lot of typing. "I was, like, whatever that typing job is, that's what I want," Minder told me.

After college, in the early nineties, he got a tech-support job at a local Internet-service provider. Within a year, he was promoted to assistant systems administrator, a job that entailed keeping tabs on the server logs. He

began to notice a strange pattern, which he eventually realized was evidence of hackers. "They would use our routers as what we would now call a pivot point—bouncing off them to attack someone else, so the attack looked like it was coming from us," he said. The attackers were typically hobbyists who were more interested in showing off their skills than in wreaking real havoc; Minder found the cat-and-mouse energy of outsmarting them deeply satisfying.

By that time, hackers had proved that they could inflict serious damage. In 1989, twenty thousand public-health researchers around the world received a floppy disk purporting to contain an informational program about AIDS. But the disk also included a malicious program that is now considered the first instance of ransomware. After users rebooted their computers ninety times, a text box appeared on the screen, informing them that their files were locked. Then their printers spat out a ransom note instructing them to mail a hundred and eighty-nine dollars to a post-office box in Panama. The malware, which came to be known as the AIDS Trojan, was created by Joseph Popp, a Harvard-trained evolutionary biologist. Popp, whose behavior grew increasingly erratic after his arrest, was declared unfit to stand trial; he later founded a butterfly sanctuary in upstate New York.

Popp's strategy—encrypting files with a private key and demanding a fee to unlock them—is frequently used by ransomware groups today. But hackers initially preferred an approach known as scareware, in which they infected a computer with a virus that manifested as multiplying pop-ups with ominous messages: "SECURITY WARNING! Your Privacy and Security are in DANGER." The pop-ups told users to buy a certain antivirus software to protect their systems. Hackers posing as software companies could then receive credit-card payments, which were unavailable to those deploying ransomware. In the early two-thousands, ransomware hackers typically demanded a few hundred dollars, in the form of gift cards or pre-paid debit cards, and getting hold of the money required middlemen, who siphoned off much of the profits.

The calculus changed with the launch of Bitcoin, in 2009. Now that people could receive digital payments without revealing their identity, ransomware became more lucrative. When Minder founded GroupSense, in Arlington, Virginia, in 2014, the cybersecurity threat on everyone's mind was data breaches—the theft of consumer data, like bank-account information or Social Security numbers. Minder hired analysts who spoke Russian and Ukrainian and Urdu. Posing as cybercriminals, they lurked on dark-Web marketplaces, seeing who was selling information stolen from corporate networks. But, as upgrades to security systems made data breaches more challenging, cybercriminals increasingly turned to ransomware. By 2015, the F.B.I. estimated that the U.S. was subjected to a thousand ransomware attacks per day; the next year, that number quadrupled. Mike Phillips, the head of claims for the cyber-insurance company Resilience, told me, "Now it's ransomware first and only, and everything else is a distant second."

Criminal syndicates are behind most ransomware attacks. In their online interactions, they display a mixture of adolescent posturing and professionalism: they have a fondness for video-game references and the word "evil," but they also employ an increasingly sophisticated business structure. The larger groups establish call centers to help talk victims through the confusing process of obtaining cryptocurrency, and they promise discounts to those who pay up in a timely fashion. Some ransomware groups, including REvil, work on the affiliate model, providing hackers with the tools to deploy attacks in exchange for a share of the profits. (REvil also handles ransom negotiations on behalf of its affiliates.) "It's way too easy to get into this," Reiner, of the I.S.T., told me. "You or I could do it—you just hire it out. There's been an incredible commoditization of the entire process."

Hackers use various techniques to gain access to a company's computers, from embedding malware in an e-mail attachment to using stolen passwords to log in to the remote desktops that workers use to connect to company networks. Many of the syndicates are based in Russia or former Soviet republics;

sometimes their malware includes code that stops an attack on a computer if its language is set to Russian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian. Some of the syndicates employ current or former members of the military, but they seem to care more about money than about geopolitical machinations. “We are apolitical,” a man claiming to be an REvil representative said in an interview with a Russian YouTuber. “No politics at all. We don’t care who’s going to be President. We worked, we work, and we will work.”

Phillips told me, “Paying a ransom, you worry about it being venture capital for this dark-Web Silicon Valley on the other side of the world.” Ransomware groups, like their Silicon Valley counterparts, move fast and break things. In May, 2017, the WannaCry attack infected three hundred thousand computers through old and unpatched versions of Microsoft Windows. In the United Kingdom, ambulances had to be diverted from affected hospitals, and a Renault factory stopped production. Just three years after that attack, though, the REvil representative called this scattershot approach “a very stupid experiment.” The WannaCry hackers had demanded ransoms of only three hundred to six hundred dollars, netting around a hundred and forty thousand dollars.

After WannaCry, ransomware groups concentrated on sectors where a combination of lax security and a low tolerance for disruption makes getting paid more likely and more lucrative—industrial agriculture, mid-level manufacturing, oil-field services, municipal governments. Groups timed disruption for periods of acute vulnerability: schools in August, right before students returned; accounting firms during tax season. Certain syndicates specialize in “big-game hunting,” launching targeted attacks against deep-pocketed companies. The group deploying the Hades ransomware strain focusses on businesses with reported revenues of more than a billion dollars. Another designs custom malware for each job. In 2019, during a Webinar hosted by Europol, the European law-enforcement agency, a security expert mentioned that the cryptocurrency Monero was essentially untraceable; soon afterward, REvil began

asking for ransom payments in Monero instead of Bitcoin.

When companies seem reluctant to negotiate, executives receive threatening phone calls and LinkedIn messages. Last year, the Campari Group issued a press release downplaying a recent ransomware attack. In response, hackers launched a Facebook ad campaign, using the profile of a Chicago d.j., whom they had also hacked, to shame the beverage conglomerate. “This is ridiculous and looks like a big fat lie,” they wrote. “We can confirm that confidential data was stolen and we talking about huge volume of data.” Last year, printers at a South American home-goods chain began spitting out ransom notes instead of receipts.

More recently, syndicates have added extortion to their playbook. They siphon off confidential files before encrypting systems; if their ransom demand isn’t met, they threaten to release sensitive data to the media or auction it off on the black market. Hackers have threatened to publish an executive’s porn stash and to share information about non-paying victims with short sellers. “I’ve seen social-work organizations where ransomware actors threatened to expose information about vulnerable children,” Phillips said.

**B**efore ransomware took over Minder’s life, he had settled into a routine. He walked to work, where he was usually the first to arrive and the last to leave. On the way home, he stopped at a coffee shop for a glass of wine and a salad. Back at his apartment, where he lived alone, he would work at his desk until he fell asleep. His major social outlet was the local motorcycle club, the BMW Bikers of Metropolitan Washington.

Early last year, GroupSense found evidence that a hacker had broken into a large company. Minder reached out to warn it, but a server had already been compromised. The hacker sent a ransom note to the company, threatening to release its files. The company asked Minder if he would handle the ransom negotiations. Initially, he demurred—“It never occurred to me as a skill set I had,” he said—but eventually he was persuaded.

To buy time, Minder suggested that

the company acknowledge receipt of the ransom note. He began studying up on negotiation tips, watching MasterClass tutorials and reading books by former hostage negotiators. He learned that he should avoid making counter-offers in round numbers, which can seem arbitrary, and that he shouldn’t make concessions without providing a justification. During the next few weeks, as the conversation with the hacker unspooled, Minder discovered that he had a knack for negotiation. He did his best to engage the hacker, who appeared to be unaffiliated with any of the major ransomware syndicates. When the hacker complained about how much time and effort he’d invested in breaking into the company, Minder complimented him on his skills: “I told him, ‘You’re a very talented hacker, and we’d like to pay you for that. But we can’t pay what you’re asking.’”

The negotiation became all-consuming. On a motorcycle camping trip with his girlfriend, Minder huddled by the campfire with his laptop, using a 3G hot spot to keep talking. Eventually, the hacker agreed to a price that the company’s insurer found acceptable. “I think I could get him even lower if you gave me a little bit more time,” Minder recalls saying. “But the cyber-insurance company said, ‘This is good enough.’”

Minder soon found more work. Sometimes it was a prominent company facing a multimillion-dollar ransom demand, and the negotiation took weeks. Sometimes it was a small business or a nonprofit that he took on pro bono and tried to wrap up over the weekend. But GroupSense rarely made money from the negotiations. Some ransomware negotiators charge a percentage of the amount that the ransom gets discounted. “But those really profitable approaches are ripe for fraud, or for accusations of fraud,” Minder said. Instead, he charged an hourly rate and hoped that some of the organizations that he helped would sign up for GroupSense’s core product, security-monitoring software.

Last March, after GroupSense’s office shut down, Minder paced in circles in his four-hundred-and-seventy-five-square-foot apartment. “I was, like, I need to go hike,” he said. He towed



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two motorcycles to a rental house in Grand Junction, Colorado. As the world fell apart, the ransomware cases kept coming. Minder handled the negotiations himself; he didn't want to distract his employees, and he found that the work required a certain emotional finesse. "Most of our employees are really technical, and this isn't a technical skill—it's a soft skill," he told me. "It's hard to train people for it."

The initial exchange of messages was crucial. People advocating on their own behalf had a tendency to berate the hackers, but that just riled them up. Minder aimed to convey a kind of warm condescension—"Like, we're friends, but you don't really know what you're doing," he explained. His girlfriend, who speaks Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and some Lithuanian, helped him find colloquialisms that would set the right tone. He liked to call the hackers *kuznechik*, Russian for "grasshopper."

Occasionally, Minder was called in to try to rescue negotiations that had gone off the rails. If hackers felt that a negotiation was moving too slowly, or they sensed that they were being lied to, they might cut off communication. Following the advice of Chris Voss, a former F.B.I. hostage negotiator who is now a negotiation consultant, Minder tried to establish "tactical empathy" by mirroring the hacker's language patterns.

Most of the time, Minder found himself dealing with a representative from one of the syndicates. "The first person you talk to is, like, level-one support," he told me. "They'll say something like 'I want to work with you, but I have to get my manager's approval to give that kind of discount.'"

GroupSense partnered with CipherTrace, a blockchain-analysis firm, which allowed Minder to see that a particular cryptowallet had been created and to trace its transactions. Determining the average payments flowing into a wallet gave him a sense of the going rate, so he could avoid overpaying. He came to understand that syndicates were working from a script. "Oftentimes, we can go to the client and say how it's going to go before it starts," he told me.

The clients themselves could be more challenging. Minder ran all communica-

cations by them, through a secure portal. Some wanted to edit every message to the hackers. "It's like a spy game to them," Minder said. Others erupted in anger or frustration. "Sometimes you're negotiating in two directions at once—with the hacker and with the victim," he said. "You have to have a personality type where you can be empathetic but also give directions in a way that isn't confrontational."

Minder has already seen pressure tactics and ransom demands escalate. In 2018, the average payment was about seven thousand dollars, according to the ransomware-recovery specialist Coveware. In 2019, it grew to forty-one thousand dollars. That year, a large ransomware syndicate announced that it was dissolving, after raking in two billion dollars in ransom payments in less than two years. "We are a living proof that you can do evil and get off scot-free," the syndicate wrote in a farewell message. By 2020, the average ransom payment was more than two hundred thousand dollars, and some cyber-insurance companies began to exit the market. "I don't think the insurers really understood the risk they were taking on," Reiner told me. "The numbers in 2020 were really bad, but, at the end of 2020, everyone looked around and said, 2021 is going to be even worse."

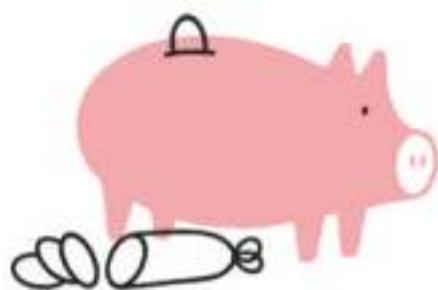
In 1971, a British manager at an Argentine meatpacking plant was seized by a guerrilla group. Several weeks later, after his employer paid a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar ransom, he

paid three million. One C.E.O. fetched \$2.3 million; by the time he was kidnapped again, two years later, the price had risen to ten million. Then Juan and Jorge Born, heirs to a multinational food-processing conglomerate, were captured in a scheme involving fake street signs and operatives dressed as telephone workers and police officers. They were eventually ransomed for sixty million dollars, plus a million dollars' worth of clothing and food to be distributed to the poor. Taking on the risk of kidnapping was "part of what it means to be an executive," Gustavo Curtis, an American manager working in Colombia, was told by his employer shortly before his abduction, in 1976.

For much of human history, kidnapping had been largely a local affair, governed by a certain amount of ritual and reciprocity. Globalization, political destabilization, and rising inequality upended those norms. In Italy, criminal gangs abducted wealthy foreigners and farmers' children; one year, eighty people were held for ransom. John Paul Getty refused to pay more in ransom for his kidnapped grandson than he could deduct on his taxes—reportedly three million dollars.

Kidnap-and-ransom insurance, a field that arose after the Lindbergh baby's abduction and murder, in 1932, surged. In 1970, the size of the market was around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars; by 1976, it was seventy million dollars. The majority of policies were underwritten by Lloyd's of London, the world's main market for specialist insurance. Soon, there were risk analysts, who advised policyholders on how to prevent kidnappings; private security firms that offered on-the-ground protection; and specialist negotiators, who took over if things went south.

Control Risks was founded in 1975, by former members of the British Special Forces, to help the insurance industry deal with its kidnapping problem. Its executives performed their work with a patrician discretion. When, in 1977, two of its founding members were arrested in Colombia—no one was quite sure whether the nascent negotiation industry was legal—they spent their ten-week detention writing a code of con-



was freed. The following year, an electronics company paid twice as much to retrieve a kidnapped executive. In 1973, businessmen in Central America kept getting abducted, and their ransoms rose at an alarming rate: Coca-Cola paid a million dollars; Kodak paid \$1.5 million; British American Tobacco paid \$1.7 million; Firestone

duct for their company. (The members were later exonerated.)

Around three-quarters of Fortune 500 companies eventually invested in kidnap-and-ransom insurance, but there was some discomfort with an industry that turned a profit by funnelling money to the Mafia, terrorist groups, and criminal gangs. “There is a feeling you shouldn’t make too much money,” a Control Risks co-founder told the *Times*, in 1979. Italy, Colombia, and the United Kingdom have all banned kidnap-and-ransom insurance.

But Anja Shortland, a professor of political economy at King’s College London, told me that privatized kidnap intermediaries were key in instituting what she calls “ransom discipline.” Control Risks didn’t merely negotiate ransoms; it also provided security audits, advising companies on how to keep staff from being abducted in the first place. Insurers offered reduced premiums to companies that beefed up their security, reducing over-all rates of kidnapping. When abductions did happen, skilled negotiators kept ransom demands from spiralling out of control. These days, some ninety per cent of kidnappings are resolved, typically through the payment of a ransom; when specialists are involved, the success rate rises to ninety-seven per cent. Countries that banned kidnap insurance drove negotiations underground.

Shortland specializes in the economics of crime. “A lot of economics is: let’s assume away all the complexities so we can come up with a tractable problem,” she told me. “And I’m just embracing the complexities.” To better understand the kidnap-for-ransom industry, she closely studied the piracy-and-kidnapping market in Somalia, where she saw how private insurers, consultants, and negotiators fostered a certain predictability in a trade that’s typically portrayed as unruly. “There is a pace, a rhythm to these things,” as one negotiator told her.

The orderliness, which relies on a mutual assumption of good faith, benefits all sides, Shortland told me. Kidnappers receive an expected rate of return; the kidnapped can reasonably expect that they’ll be released intact; companies in dangerous areas can as-



*“You literally could not pay me enough to relive my twenties.”*

sume that their staff won’t be abducted, but, if they are, they almost certainly won’t be killed. And the insurance companies and consultants can collect their fees.

Ransomware has less “kinetic impact” than kidnapping, Bill Siegel, the co-founder of Coveware, told me—that is, no one is sending severed ears in the mail. But, to an economist, the differences are small. “They are creating very similar kinds of institutions to the ones that the kidnap-and-ransom community has created,” Shortland said. “But they’re about eighty years behind.”

**W**hen it became clear that ransomware cases weren’t slowing down, Minder trained two of his employees to handle negotiations; one of them was Mike Fowler, a former narcotics detective from North Carolina. Working undercover had taught Fowler how to slip into character, which, he told me, “is part and parcel of being an effective negotiator.”

Last November, Fowler was the designated negotiator for the construction-engineering firm. When he logged on to the dark-Web site, he noticed that the timer showed that three days had already elapsed in the negotiations. In

the chat box, a conversation was in progress. “It was shocking for me,” Fowler said. “This is a whole negotiation—poorly done, but a whole negotiation—that I’m looking at.”

Whoever had been chatting on behalf of the engineering firm was confrontational and aggressive. When the hackers demanded two hundred thousand dollars to unlock the company’s files, the negotiator initially counter-offered ten thousand dollars, and then quickly went up to fourteen thousand, then twenty-five thousand. “What that communicates to the threat actor is: there’s more money here,” Fowler said. The hackers grew frustrated. “You have reported an annual income of \$4 million,” they wrote. “We are not expect small money from you.” The final message in the chat had arrived from the hackers two days earlier: “Are you ready to close with a cost of 65k?”

Fowler and Minder tried to piece together what had happened. The clients insisted that they had never gone to the dark-Web site, much less interacted with the hacker. Then Fowler reminded Minder about a recent post on REvil’s blog, warning about fraudulent middlemen who said that they could decrypt files; instead, the middlemen

would secretly negotiate with the hackers before offering the decrypted files at a markup. At the time, it had amused Minder that a cybercrime syndicate was issuing a warning about scammers. But now the clients acknowledged that they had reached out to MonsterCloud, a Florida company that advertises itself as “the world’s leading experts in Cyber Terrorism & Ransomware Recovery.” MonsterCloud’s Web site encouraged victims to use its ransomware-removal services instead of paying a ransom. That pitch likely appealed to the heads of the engineering firm, who were “very, very patriotic,” Minder told me. “It didn’t surprise me at all that they’d rather pay a software company in Florida” than send a ransom to a foreign criminal syndicate.

Minder soon learned that, shortly after the REvil hacker demanded sixty-five thousand dollars, a MonsterCloud representative told the engineering firm that it could recover the files for a hundred and forty-five thousand dollars. (MonsterCloud declined to comment.)

According to an investigation by ProPublica, MonsterCloud has a long track record of secretly negotiating with hackers. ProPublica spoke with a number of former clients who believed that their files had been decrypted without their paying a ransom, even though the ransomware strains in question made this outcome highly unlikely; most are impossible to decrypt unless there is an error in the code. MonsterCloud is one of a handful of U.S.-based data-recovery companies that appear to follow a similar business model. By purporting to decrypt files using high-tech tools, these firms allow their clients to believe that ransomware can be addressed without sending funds to criminal syndicates—a strategy that’s particularly appealing to MonsterCloud’s publicly funded clients, such as municipalities or law-enforcement departments. Ransomware groups recognize that data-recovery firms can be lucrative partners; one offers a promo code especially for such firms. MonsterCloud declined to discuss its methods with ProPublica. “We work in the shadows,” Zohar Pinhasi, the company’s C.E.O., told the publication. “How we do it, it’s our problem. You will get your data back. Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride.”

When Minder explained the situation to his client, the man let loose a string of expletives. Because the negotiation had already been bungled, there was little chance that Minder could get the hackers to agree to a lower price. The client asked Minder to tell the hackers to go fuck themselves, but Minder says he “respectfully declined.” Instead, the company attempted to rebuild files from backups and old e-mails. Minder encouraged the client to investigate how the breach happened, but the company seemed uninterested. “They said their I.T. guy has theories,” he told me.

Minder reported MonsterCloud to the Federal Trade Commission, but the incident continued to gnaw at him. “If you Google ‘save me from ransomware’ or ‘ransomware response,’ you’re getting these companies that are basically profiteering or fraudulently misrepresenting themselves,” he said. “I’m just nauseous about it.”

Last October, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control issued an advisory aimed at negotiators, cyber-insurance firms, and incident-response teams, warning that they may be fined for facilitating payments to criminals.

“They did this poorly,” Mike Convertino, the former chief information-security officer for Twitter, told me. “Maybe they got frustrated, but I view it as somewhat irresponsible. Let’s face it—if you’re a two-billion-dollar company and you’re encrypted and you don’t have good backups, they just took away your only option. So you just destroyed a two-billion-dollar company.” (The advisory seemed to have an effect: the number of ransomware victims who paid ransoms declined in the last quarter of 2020.)

In response, Convertino’s current employer, the cyber-insurance firm Resilience, participated in a Ransomware Task Force, which included representatives from major cybersecurity vendors and incident-response firms, as well as from the F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security, under the umbrella of the Institute for Security and Technology. “Make no mistake, our recommendations aren’t about eliminating ransomware as a threat,” John Davis,

a vice-president at the cybersecurity firm Palo Alto Networks, said at an online event; rather, the goal is to bring it to a level “that can be more effectively managed.” Those recommendations included requiring ransom payments to be reported to authorities and creating a fund to support victims who refrain from paying ransoms. In April, the Justice Department announced that it was forming its own ransomware task force to coordinate among the private sector, other federal agencies, and international partners.

Meanwhile, the ransomware syndicates have been working to shore up their images. DarkSide, the group responsible for hacking Colonial Pipeline’s system, had vowed that it would not attack schools, hospitals, funeral homes, or nonprofit organizations; it would target only large corporations. In October, DarkSide issued a press release announcing that it had just donated ten thousand dollars in cryptocurrency to two charities. “No matter how bad you think our work is, we are pleased to know that we helped change someone’s life,” the syndicate wrote. But disabling critical infrastructure brought another level of attention, as well as the threat of a significant law-enforcement response. DarkSide apologized for causing disruption and, sounding like a chastened tech company, promised to invest more in moderation, “to avoid social consequences in the future.” A few days later, the syndicate announced that its servers had been shut down and its Bitcoin wallet emptied, potentially an indication of law-enforcement actions. Seemingly spooked by the negative publicity, REvil announced that it would no longer attack targets in the government, health-care, and education sectors.

Shortland saw this kind of brand-burnishing as a good thing. “If this was a complete fly-by-night scenario, then I might despair,” she told me. “But people who do this want to do it again.” The hackers cared about their reputations, which was a sign that the market was governable. That didn’t mean ransomware would go away—at least, if the example of criminal kidnapping was any indication. “There is a certain amount of kidnap that works for everyone,” she said. ♦



## FIFTY LESS PUNCHY WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR LOVER

BY SIMON WEBSTER

You borrow your friend's car and park it behind our apartment. We spend the weekend sorting through our stuff, making a You pile, a Me pile, and an Us pile. We give the Us pile to a trusted third party, perhaps an aunt, who, in turn, threatens to cut each item in the Us pile in half. When one of us flinches and says we'd rather see the other have the thing than see it destroyed, this aunt sagely places the thing in that person's pile. Then you take the You pile down to your friend's car and scram, Jack.

Make a new profile on my Netflix account so that you can keep using it without my knowing. Call it something non-

descript, like "Children" or "Admin"—something I'm unlikely to click, thereby preventing me from learning that you've been watching "Marriage Story" on repeat, or wondering why "Irreplaceable You" is showing up as a ninety-eight-per-cent match for me when all I watch are Nordic noirs and documentaries about tiny houses, Stan.

You don't need to be weird around our friends, because we will make them choose sides, and we will each interact only with those friends who side with us. When our couple friends choose to side one with each of us, we will each interact only with *our* half of the cou-

ple, and only in neutral settings (i.e., no dinners at *their* house). Above all, when we do interact with one half of a couple, we will *not* spend the entire time complaining about how awful each other is, or asking them whether they've heard anything from their partner about what we might've said about each other. Something that, maybe, suggests we're not *over over*, Roy.

Hop on the bus, and then, frustrated by traffic, hop off and walk for a bit. Walk through that park, maybe, the one with the fountain, where we went on that disastrous date all those years ago, before we properly got together. The date we re-created, ironically, years later, which was just perfect, and, I think you said, was the moment you knew we had a future together? Hang there for a while, in that memory and in that park. Then take a cab to Union Square. Go down into the subway and catch whatever train will get you to Grand Central, and from there, really, it's up to you, Gus.

Just drop that thing I said about your mother, Lee.

You know that copy of "The Fountainhead" which I said I'd rather you have than see destroyed? On second thought, I think I'd rather see it destroyed. Can you give it back, Jack? And the cast-iron pot that you let me have—can you change your mind about that one? I'd like to see your aunt try to cut *that* in half.

In fact, while you're at it, Stan, make some new friends, too—I don't want to keep hearing about how well you're doing. And find a new dog park. And join a new gym. And get a new dentist.

You really think we're *over over*? Roy? I know you're in there!

But maybe give me a clue as to where you went, Gus. Upstate? Uptown? Do you have a forwarding address? Is it snowing where you are? Remember, I'll be waiting for you, a year from today, in *our* park, standing by *our* fountain.

Seriously, Lee, I'm warning you. Drop it. ♦



AMERICAN CHRONICLES

## DEATH OF A HOSPITAL

*When private equity came to a Philadelphia health-care institution.*

BY CHRIS POMORSKI

Lia Logio arrived at Hahnemann University Hospital, in Philadelphia, in March, 2018, two months after it was sold to a private-equity firm. Logio, an internist, had come from Weill Cornell, in New York, a prestigious and well-funded nonprofit hospital, where she was a vice-chair. Hahnemann served mostly low-income patients, but it had a range of medical subspecialties and was the primary teaching hospital used by Drexel University's College of Medicine. "It felt like they had all the ingredients to do something innovative and creative," Logio said not long ago. "It seemed like an opportunity to have an economy of scale to do coördinated

care for poor, complex patients, which usually doesn't happen very well."

Philadelphia is one of the poorest big cities in the United States, with about a quarter of its 1.6 million residents living below the poverty line. Since 1977, when Philadelphia General closed, it has also been the largest American city without a public hospital. Hahnemann, with nearly five hundred beds, occupied a city block on the edge of North Philadelphia, an area that includes several impoverished neighborhoods. A majority of the more than fifty thousand patients that the hospital treated each year had publicly funded medical insurance or none at all; two-thirds were Black or Hispanic.

*"Hahnemann took care of the people that no one else wanted," a doctor said.*

Because Hahnemann treated so many poor patients, it had significant financial difficulties. But patient outcomes rivalled those of practically any hospital in the country, and the people who worked there were driven by a sense of mission. "The doctors at Hahnemann were there because they wanted to be there," Logio said. "Hahnemann took care of the people that no one else wanted to take care of."

Logio regarded for-profit medicine with deep skepticism, but her new colleagues made her hopeful. "Everyone had this tremendous sense of positivity looking toward the future with the new owners," she said. Hahnemann and another medical center, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, had been acquired, for a hundred and seventy million dollars, by American Academic Health System, a company controlled by the California private-equity firm Paladin Healthcare Capital. Joel Freedman, the founder and C.E.O. of Paladin, had managed a sizable hospital in Washington, D.C., and a few smaller ones in Los Angeles. He seemed earnest about his commitment to Hahnemann, buying a large town house in Philadelphia and moving there with his wife and children.

Freedman told Logio and other senior staff that he was considering creating a new center for outpatient care. He talked about opening a pediatric clinic to serve poor families. His staff met with members of each department, asking what equipment they needed. In early 2018, Hahnemann received a deep cleaning, which included scrubbing the grout with toothbrushes. For the previous two decades, the hospital had been owned by Tenet Healthcare, a multinational company that had neglected to maintain the facility. Now, to many staffers, it seemed that, finally, someone was listening to them.

Broad and imposing, Freedman projected the reassuring self-confidence of a serial entrepreneur. He had arranged funding from two institutional investors: MidCap Financial—an affiliate of Apollo Global Management, one of the largest private-equity firms in the country—and Harrison Street Real Estate Capital, another private-equity firm, with some thirteen billion dollars under management. Bloomberg Businessweek has called Leon

Black, a founder of Apollo, “the most feared man in the most aggressive realm of finance.”

In May, 2018, the hospital held a banquet at the Logan Hotel, near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Some two hundred doctors went to hear the new owner speak. Joseph Boselli, a sixty-one-year-old internist who had been at Hahnemann for more than thirty years, and who was now the president of the medical staff, introduced Freedman. “This was the first time that many people had seen him in person,” Boselli recalled. “I told him, ‘Joel, keep it short and sweet.’” But Freedman talked for about thirty minutes. Evidently displeased with the financial condition of his new acquisition, he sought to blame the physicians who made up his audience. “He goes on and on about how he doesn’t think doctors are doing their job,” Boselli said. “That they’re not training residents well, not seeing enough patients.”

Still, the medical staff hoped that Freedman would provide the funding Hahnemann needed to survive. David Stein, who was then the chair of surgery at Hahnemann, said, “I don’t think anyone saw the writing on the wall—that by the following summer they’d be closing the institution.”

Hospitals in the U.S. are estimated to be closing at a rate of about thirty a year. Most closures happen for financial reasons, in places where there are relatively few privately insured patients. Increasingly, hospitals are regarded as businesses like any other: at least a fifth of hospitals are now run for profit, and, globally, private-equity investment in health care has tripled since 2015; last year, some sixty-six billion dollars was spent on acquisitions. The industry’s movement into health care has been linked to price hikes, an increase in unnecessary procedures, and the destabilization of health-care networks.

The bad actors of private equity are sometimes accused of destroying American health care. But they are more symptoms than disease. The story of Hahnemann is as much about the structural forces that have compromised many American hospitals—stingy public investment, weak regulation, and a blind belief in the wisdom of the market—

as it is about the motives of private-equity firms.

The idea that hospitals should turn a profit is somewhat recent. Pennsylvania Hospital, which is widely considered the oldest in the country, opened in Philadelphia in 1752. Co-founded by Benjamin Franklin, it was conceived as a place for “the reception and cure of the sick poor,” an example that, until the late nineteenth century, almost all American hospitals followed. Philanthropy—and taxes, in the case of public hospitals, like Bellevue, in New York, which opened in 1795—covered costs, and care was provided free.

The model evoked Hippocrates, who believed that, when possible, doctors should forgo fees. But it also reflected the crudity of the era’s health care. Before Pasteur’s germ theory was published, in 1861, hospitals were often unsanitary, as likely to cause infection as to cure it. Doctors relied heavily on a few primitive treatments: leeches, lancets, laxatives, liquor. Anyone with the resources to do so avoided hospitals altogether. As the medical historian David Oshinsky writes, in “Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America’s Most Storied Hospital,” “There was nothing a hospital could do for the upper and middle classes that couldn’t be done better at home.”

The institution that would become Hahnemann University Hospital, named for the German homeopath Samuel Hahnemann, was founded in 1848, amid advances in medicine that radically improved the quality of care: the stethoscope, blood transfusion, effective aesthetics. As hospitals offered novel procedures, they began to attract paying patients. To accommodate them, hospitals built separate units, with fireplaces and private rooms.

In 1957, a Hahnemann cardiac surgeon named Charles Bailey appeared on the cover of *Time*, after he’d completed a groundbreaking surgery to correct an abnormality of the mitral valve. Bailey, who attracted patients from around the world, was one of a number of Hahnemann physicians working at the medical vanguard of specialty procedures. In 1958, a Hahnemann administrator noted that Bailey and his team brought in some eight hundred thousand dollars a year.

In the decades after the Second World War, the cost of hospital care rose significantly, spurred by expensive procedures like Bailey’s and by the adoption of medical insurance. After the government began to offer tax breaks for employers who paid for their workers’ health benefits, the number of insured Americans grew to more than sixty per cent of the population. In 1965, the bill establishing Medicare and Medicaid passed, further increasing the number of patients seeking care. Guidelines dictated reimbursement for “reasonable costs,” which, for years, amounted to pretty much whatever providers said they were, and for-profit hospitals sprang up to capitalize on the boom. By the end of the decade, more than seven hundred for-profit insurance companies were offering medical coverage.

For-profit hospitals arrived in Pennsylvania in 1998. Tenet Healthcare, based in Dallas, owned a hundred and twenty hospitals in eighteen states, and that November the company bought Hahnemann out of bankruptcy, along with St. Christopher’s and six other area hospitals. “We promise we will be here for the long haul,” Michael Focht, Tenet’s C.O.O., said at a ceremony held at Hahnemann. “This is not a short-term visit.”

Eight years later, Tenet agreed to pay nearly nine hundred million dollars in fines to the Justice Department for excessive Medicare billing, distributing kickbacks to doctors, and exaggerating the severity of diagnoses in order to inflate charges. Mike Halter, who served as C.E.O. of Hahnemann under Tenet for two decades, told me that Tenet was forced to cut costs, which it did in part by ignoring requests to replace old equipment. Health care “is a very capital-intensive business,” he said. “Equipment has a useful life of five or six years. Facilities need to be upgraded every eight or ten.” A piece of stucco broke loose from the building and damaged a car. In reviews online, patients lamented conditions in the hospital. In December, 2013, a pregnant woman who went for an ultrasound complained of being kept in a cold room with flickering lights. In 2017, a patient reported finding “blood and shit on the floor.” Yet the hospital remained busy. “A lot of patients just

didn't have a choice," Kevin D'Mello, an internist, said. "This is where they had to go."

Freedman founded his first investment company with several young investment bankers about thirty years ago, when he was in his twenties. "We had a mentor who taught us how to turn around distressed businesses and acquire companies," he told me. "For the better part of seventeen years, that was my core business, restructuring insolvent companies."

By the end of 2011, Freedman and some partners had taken over four struggling hospitals in L.A., where a majority of the patients were Black or Hispanic, uninsured or covered by Medicare or Medicaid, and often afflicted with chronic illnesses. Many of those patients used the emergency room as their primary source of care, and Freedman's group focussed on making the E.R. more efficient: hiring doctors with expertise in medical coding, in order to maximize reimbursement; pursuing insurers for unpaid invoices; reducing the time patients spent in the E.R. Soon, all four hospitals were solvent.

In 2014, with Paladin, Freedman signed on to manage Howard University Hospital, in Washington, D.C., which that year reported a fifty-eight-million-dollar loss. Paladin cut salaries, benefits, and operating expenses, and two years later the hospital showed an operating surplus of more than twenty million dollars. "We were incredibly successful," Freedman said. "I'd become passionate about turnarounds in these communities."

Hahnemann staffers said that Freedman seemed to see reviving struggling hospitals as a reflection of his benevolence. He communicated a mixture of good intentions, sanctimony, and unabashed self-regard. He assured one physician that he and his wife, Stella, were people of deep religious faith. At other times, he boasted about his real estate. In addition to the Philadelphia town house, he owned a home in Hermosa Beach, with views of the Pacific. He was a member of an advisory council at Harvard Medical School, and sat on the board of a health-policy center at the University of Southern California. In 2016, Freedman had received a

lifetime-achievement award from a prominent nonprofit for his contributions to reducing racial health-care disparities. "He wanted to look like the hero," a former senior Hahnemann doctor told me.

Freedman seemed convinced that he was uniquely well suited to sort out Hahnemann's problems, but there were differences between Hahnemann and the other hospitals he'd helped lead. "He talked a lot about the things that made him successful at Howard," Jill Tillman, a health-care executive at Drexel College of Medicine, told me. But, unlike Howard, Hahnemann had long been under for-profit management. Tenet, as one of the world's largest buyers of hospital equipment, enjoys deep discounts and generally excels at controlling costs. "If Tenet couldn't get any more juice out of it, there was no more juice left to get," Tillman said.

Freedman also said that he had a plan to address the financial challenges of treating publicly insured patients. Medicare and Medicaid, which account for more than sixty per cent of all U.S. hospital care, often pay less than the cost of treatment: according to an analysis by the American Hospital Association, in 2018 Medicare and Medicaid underpaid the cost of care by a combined \$76.6 billion. In an early meeting with Halter, the Hahnemann C.E.O., Freedman explained that, at his other hospitals, he had profited from federal Disproportionate Share Hospital programs, which reward hospitals that serve large numbers of publicly insured patients. "What Joel did not know is that there are caps on Disproportionate Share payments in the state of Pennsylvania," Halter said. He explained to Freedman that Hahnemann was already at its cap. "He told me, 'You don't know what you're talking about,'" Halter said. Only after meeting with the governor's office and the state Department of Human Services did Freedman accept that Hahnemann would not receive additional payment from these programs.

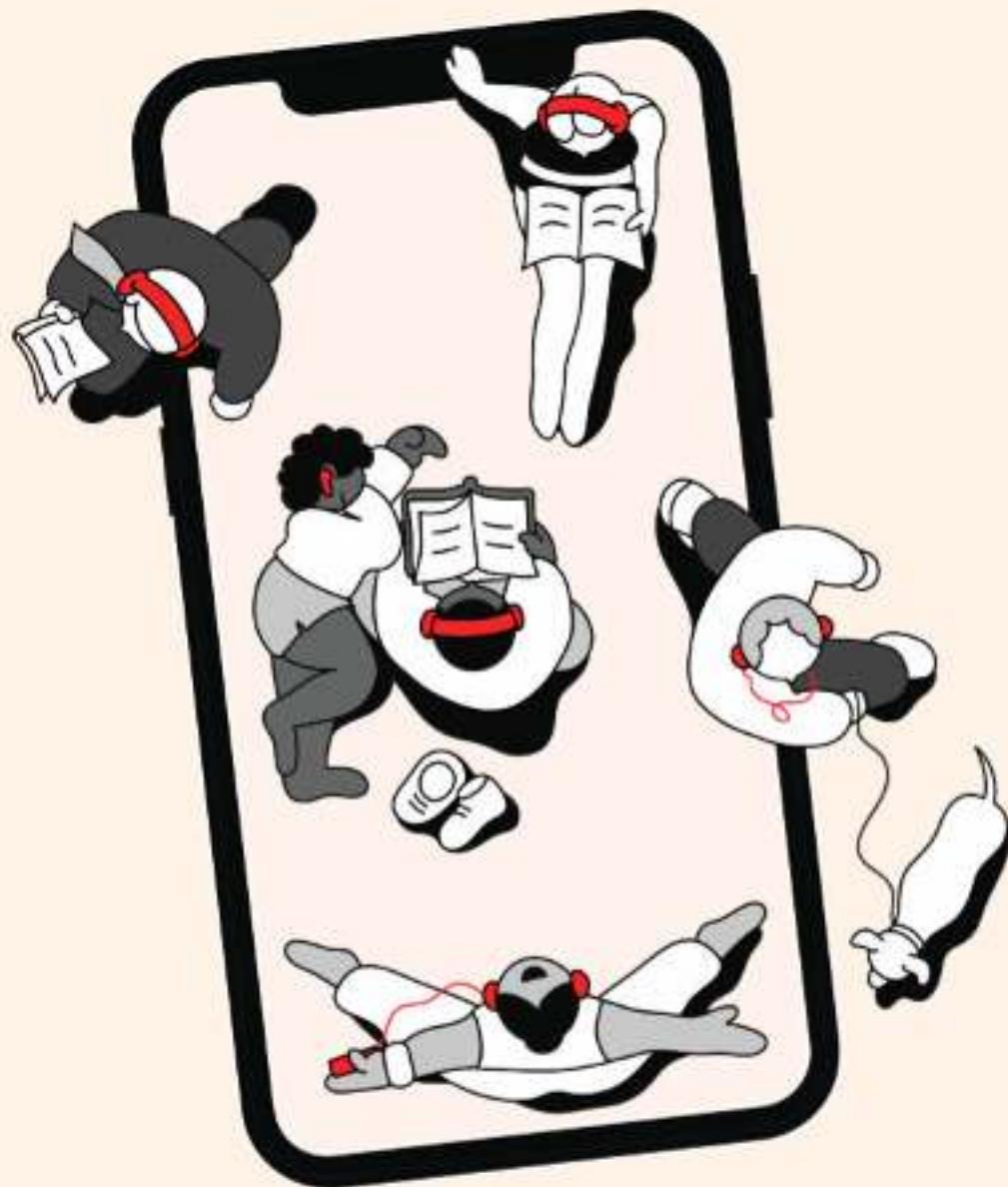
In April, 2018, Halter retired. In the next eighteen months, Hahnemann and St. Christopher's went through half a dozen chief-executive and financial officers, most of them dismissed by

Freedman with little explanation. Freedman hired battalions of consultants, who specialized in health care, technology, and management. "I would walk down the hall and half or two-thirds of the people I would not recognize," George Amrom, a former surgeon and long-serving chief medical officer, recalled. "They were all consultants." Few of them lasted long. "Joel has a twenty-week relationship with people," a former Hahnemann executive said. "The first eight, you're a 'rock star.' In the middle, you don't hear from him. The last eight weeks, it's 'You're a nice guy, but I need a rock star.'"

Senior physicians and administrators found it hard to plan for the future. Stein, the surgery chair, had been told that his department would be prioritized. He drew up detailed plans for improvement, some of which required no capital investment, and sent copies to each successive Hahnemann C.E.O. But none of them were in place long enough to act. Logio had a similar experience. "I had the same conversation with every single C.E.O.," she said. "And as soon as the C.E.O. got fired I would have to start over."

A majority of the hospital's patients came through the E.R., and Freedman believed that improving the flow of patients, and more precisely documenting the severity of their conditions for insurers, would allow Hahnemann to vastly increase revenue. One day, medical staff arrived at the E.R. to find that the procedures for patient check-in and ordering tests had been altered. Edward Ramoska, who had been a Hahnemann E.R. doctor since 2006, said, "It could potentially have worked for a community hospital"—one with no medical residency. But Hahnemann was a teaching hospital, with one of the largest residencies in the nation. Forty-five residents worked in the E.R. alone. Before an attending physician saw a patient, a resident generally took a medical history and conducted a physical exam. In the new E.R., patients were shuttled between a holding area and examination rooms, often undressing more than once. In addition to exasperating doctors and patients, the arrangement slowed the department's operations. "They didn't understand how an academic emergency room works," Ramoska said,

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of American Academic Health System.

A physical renovation of the E.R., intended to make things more efficient, was botched. A new door frame was too narrow for wheelchairs. Walls went up on either side of a service window. A space intended for patient examinations was built without a sink, forcing doctors to run elsewhere to wash their hands. In Pennsylvania, alterations to health-care facilities require approval from the Department of Health, which the hospital's management had neglected to get. Construction stopped and did not resume.

To increase reimbursements, A.A.H.S. hired a team of nurse-consultants to monitor how doctors documented diagnoses. Virtually all U.S. hospitals try to maximize payments from insurance companies, but the new approach struck some Hahnemann doctors as intrusive, if not unethical. The nurse-consultants sometimes second-guessed the diagnoses of residents. "They were thinking about the bottom line, and we were just thinking about the patient," Christy Johnson, a former resident, said.

Since 2008, American hospitals have been involved in more than a thousand mergers and acquisitions, resulting in large, powerful health systems with influence on the price of hospital

care and the reimbursement rates paid by private insurers. These conglomerates generally make up the losses incurred treating poor patients by building referral networks that attract privately insured patients seeking specialized care.

In Philadelphia, Tenet drew few referrals. As the Jefferson and Penn health systems cultivated satellite hospitals, physician practices, and urgent-care centers, including those in wealthy suburbs on the Main Line and in South Jersey, Tenet closed or sold most of its local holdings. Some of Hahnemann's best-known specialists left for other hospitals. After a group of cardiologists departed, the hospital's heart-transplant program closed.

If there was an area where Freedman's ostensible skill set met Hahnemann's needs, it was the negotiation of partnerships to draw referrals. "He went out and met with various leaders at different facilities," the former Hahnemann executive recalled. "At one point, there was going to be a relationship with organization X. Next, it would be organization Y. There were always a lot of deals in flux, none of which came to fruition."

Freedman did not appear to grasp the economics of tertiary care, the specialty practices that generate costly procedures. "He did not understand that

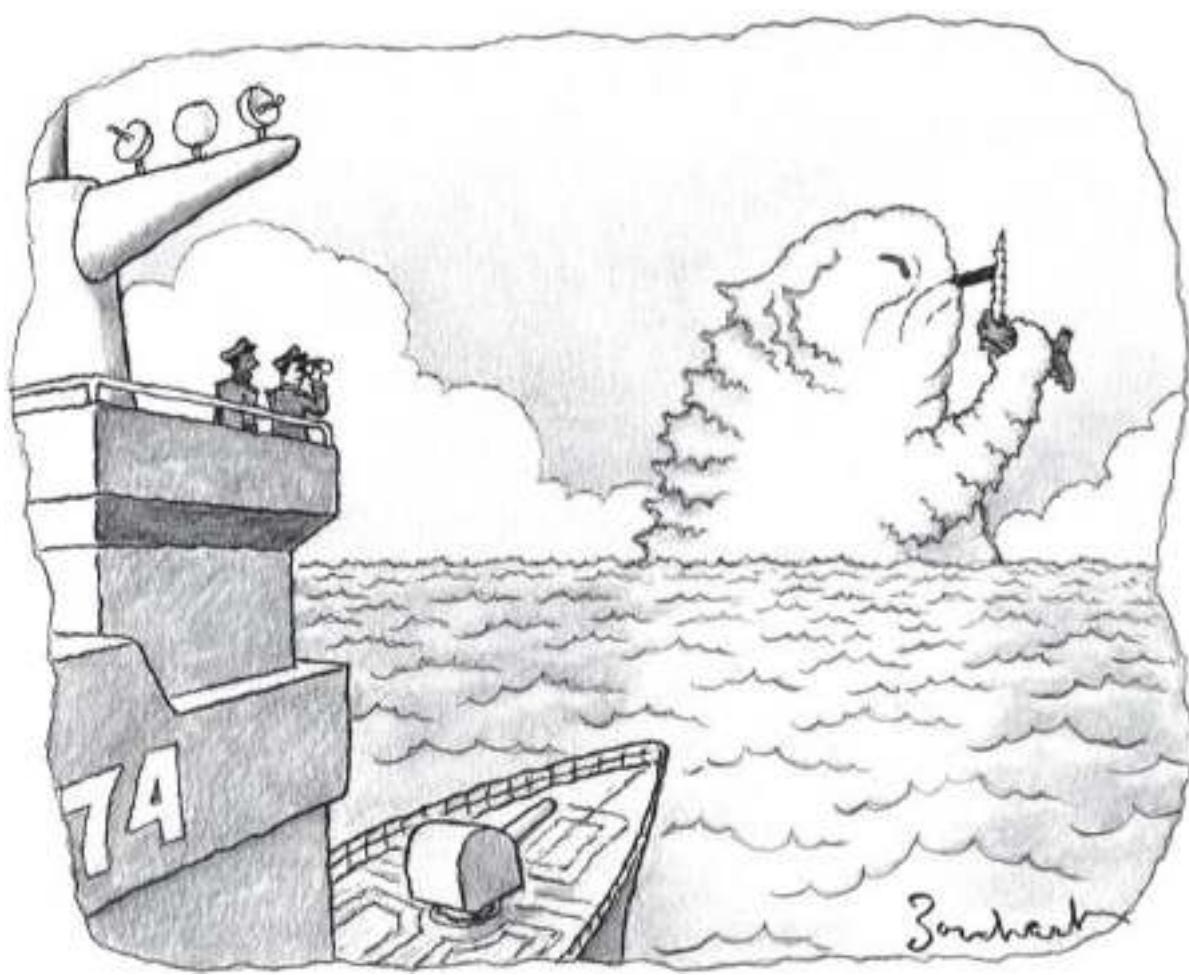
if you do away with tertiary care no one's going to come downtown to Hahnemann," Amrom, the former chief medical officer, said. "I remember trying to explain to him that one of our largest areas was nephrology. And if you did away with transplant you're going to destroy nephrology."

Many insurance companies paid less at Hahnemann than they did at other area hospitals, an arrangement that, according to Halter, Tenet had accepted in exchange for greater reimbursements in the company's other markets. (Tenet denies having made this arrangement.) Now those agreements could be renegotiated. The insurance companies had an incentive to compromise: if Hahnemann closed, the privately insured patients treated there would go to other city hospitals, where the cost of their care would rise. "You go into Blue Cross and you say, 'We need some help, and it's in your best interest to help us,'" Halter explained. "'Give us ten million dollars more per year'—versus losing fifty million per year." Whether Freedman overlooked this tactic or simply struggled to execute it effectively is unclear. "I did initiate a recontracting effort," he said. "But it was to their advantage to delay."

In late 2018, Freedman told staff that, by the spring of the following year, the hospital might be profitable. His forecast was based in part on the assumption that increasing in-patient admissions through the E.R. would yield greater reimbursements from insurance companies. But insurers continued to deny many Hahnemann claims, leaving Freedman incredulous. At one point, Tillman, the health-care executive, recalled him telling her, "This is impossible. You're lying to me!"

Hoping to convince one major private insurer that it had unjustly denied claims from Hahnemann, several doctors arranged a meeting with the company. "We found a few very good cases of patients who could have died if they didn't get care," Kevin D'Mello, the internist, who attended the meeting, said. "And the insurance company had rejected admission."

D'Mello said that the insurance representatives initially seemed receptive. Then, uninvited, Freedman appeared and harangued the representatives, ac-



"Bigger than Godzilla? Sir, it's lighting its cigar with Godzilla."

cusing their company of dishonesty. “He said that American Academic would resubmit all claims for the past year, and that they expected the insurance company to pay,” D’Mello recalled. The meeting ended without a compromise on the insurance-claims dispute. (Freedman does not recall the meeting.)

Such erratic behavior was becoming increasingly common. “He would call people stupid,” Tillman said. “He would say they should all be fired, that they were useless.” (Freedman told me that he does not remember using such language, but, he said, “I can express myself with passion.”) In one meeting, a Drexel administrator said, Freedman spoke for ten hours, pausing only for cigarette breaks. He threatened at one moment to close the hospital and the next he fantasized about instituting valet parking. Maria Scenna, a former C.E.O. of St. Christopher’s, told me, “He would speak as the authority on everything.”

Still, Freedman’s anxiety was rising—at least in part because of his obligations to his lenders. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the banks that once financed most leveraged buyouts have withdrawn, and private-equity firms have filled the void. According to an analysis by the *Financial Times*, some of the largest private-equity companies in the U.S.—including Blackstone, Apollo, and K.K.R.—now do at least as much lending as buying. Riskier deals can involve terms that one prominent New York lawyer, who represents private-equity lenders, described to me as thugish: “knuckle-dagger” conditions. “If you’re coming to me, that means you can’t get a loan from a bank,” the lawyer explained. “So I can charge you outrageous interest.”

MidCap Financial, the Apollo affiliate, provided Freedman’s group, A.A.H.S., with two loans, representing a commitment of a hundred and twenty million dollars. The loans had nine- to ten-and-a-half-per-cent-effective interest rates—significantly steeper than most commercial bank loans—and were secured by mortgages on Hahnemann’s real estate. (Harrison Street Real Estate Capital, which provided fifty-one million dollars in loans, took part ownership of several hospital-adjacent properties.) These financial

obligations, in combination with what Freedman describes as “bad debt,” raised the possibility that he would have to default, and that Hahnemann would go out of business.

Around March, 2019, Scenna said, administrators and executives suggested that Freedman consider filing for bankruptcy. Instead, he proposed gutting the residency program—an indispensable source of physician labor, whose cost was largely borne by federal funding. Eventually convinced that this was inadvisable, Freedman announced the departure of Suzanne Richards, the latest C.E.O. of Hahnemann and St. Christopher’s, and, in early April, the hospital laid off a hundred and seventy-five employees, including sixty-five nurses. Freedman said, “I felt immense pressure every hour of the day—not only from a financial perspective but, more importantly, because of my concern for quality of care.”

A.A.H.S. began closing floors of the hospital, but the execution was fitful. All or part of a floor might close one week and reopen the next, resulting in the frequent movement of patients. “Your patients could end up anywhere,” Steven Kutalek, a cardiologist, said.

One day, with little input from medical staff, the patients in the cardiac critical-care unit began to be moved to the main I.C.U. Cardiology specialists now had to shuttle between the twelfth and the twenty-first floors to see their patients, using elevators that were often broken. “Cardiac patients need specialized equipment—balloon pumps, crash beds, ECMO [a blood-oxygenation machine]—run by cardiac nurses,” Kutalek said. These items were hard to access in the main I.C.U., and it didn’t help that many cardiac nurses had been either fired or reassigned. Paulina Gorodin-Kiliddar, another cardiologist, told me, “I remember one instance where the telemetry monitor for one patient who had a critical event malfunctioned, and it went unnoticed for a while.”

Any savings proved insufficient. In early May, A.A.H.S. received a notice of default from MidCap Financial. In the

next seven weeks, Freedman and his executives met with city and state officials to try to find a way to keep Hahnemann afloat. Freedman hoped that the government would provide emergency funding, or that Drexel would buy the hospital. But, according to government officials, they never received the details about the hospital’s finances that they needed to

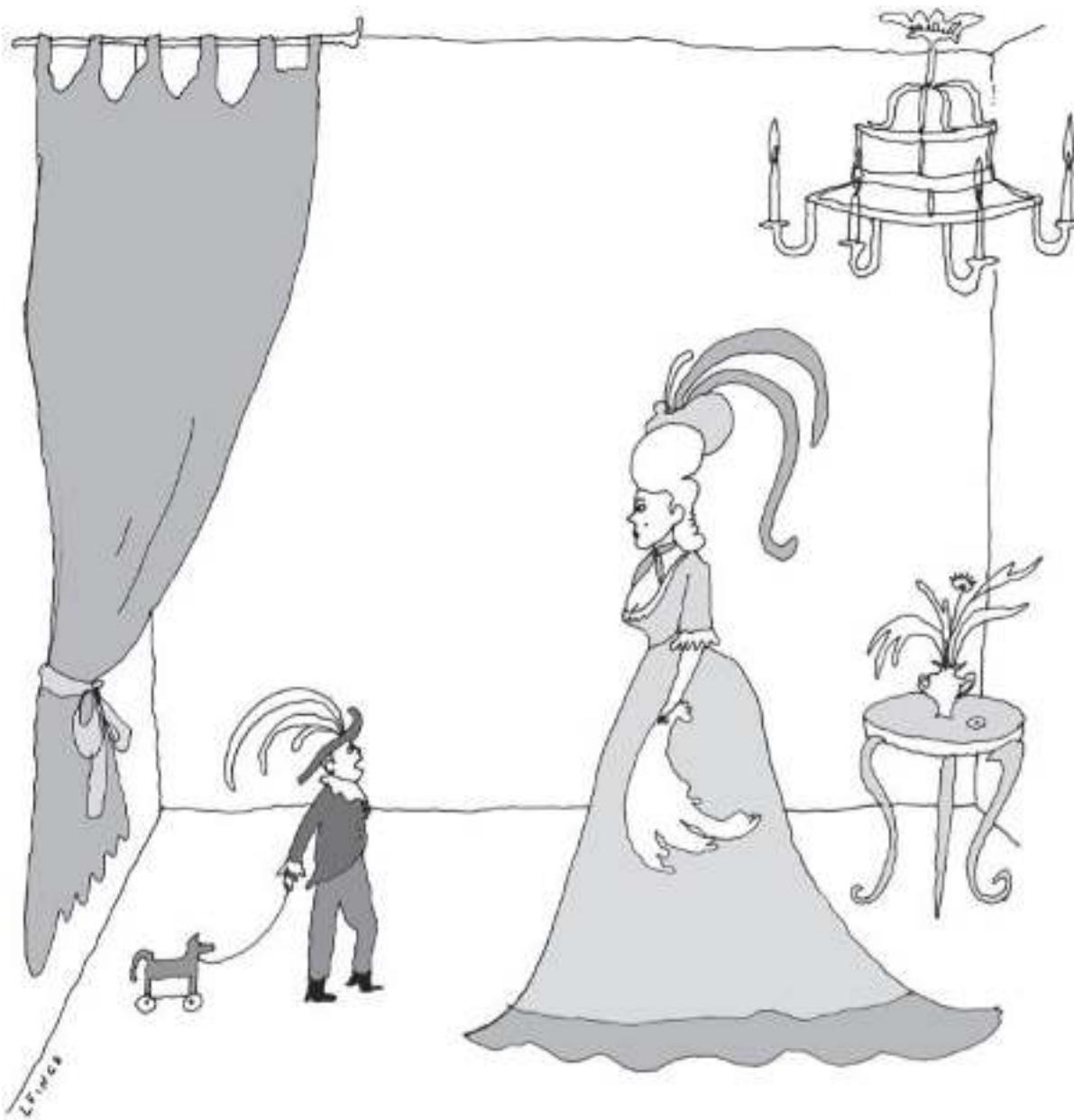
determine how to address its operating deficit, which Freedman estimated at between three million and five million dollars per month.

On June 30th, Hahnemann, St. Christopher’s, and several related entities filed for bankruptcy. A longtime Hahnemann physician says that Freedman told her, “My wife turned the faucet off. She said, ‘No more. We’re not losing any more money, Joel.’” (Freedman does not recall saying this.)



One afternoon in July, hundreds of people gathered outside Hahnemann, on North Broad Street. The road was closed to traffic for several blocks, and, in the southbound lanes, white folding chairs had been arranged in rows to face a lectern bearing a blue Bernie Sanders placard. A recently released patient, a Black man with facial scars, held a bag containing medication and personal effects. Doctors in scrubs and white coats looked on from the sidewalk. Sanders had come to speak against Hahnemann’s closure. “If an investment banker like Joel Freedman is able to shut down Hahnemann and make a huge profit by turning this hospital into luxury condos,” he said, “it will send a signal to every vulture fund on Wall Street that they can do the same thing, in community after community.”

Sanders was expressing what had become a widely accepted theory. From the beginning, the thinking went, Freedman’s purchase of Hahnemann had been a ploy to acquire the land on which it stood. Situated steps from city hall and the convention center, the real estate had skyrocketed in value. The mile-and-a-half stretch of North Broad between Hahnemann and Temple University, in North Philly, had long been run-down. But now developers were



*"Let me eat cake!"*

building luxury condos and rentals. To renovate the Metropolitan Opera House, a moldering wreck at North Broad and Poplar, Live Nation spent fifty-six million dollars, then filled the schedule with such acts as Alicia Keys and Sting.

"Everyone and their mother was trying to get that real estate," Peter Kelsen, a partner at the Philadelphia law firm Blank Rome, told me, speaking of Hahnemann. "I received calls from dozens of different people." Developers speculated that it could be worth as much as a hundred and twenty million dollars—only fifty million less than A.A.H.S. had paid for Hahnemann and St. Christopher's and all their assets. Crucially, the site was not part of the bankruptcy. Upon buying Hahnemann, Freedman had put its real estate in a suite of holding companies that were now beyond the purview of the bankruptcy court.

The maneuver was typical of private-

equity deals, in which firms can borrow against the assets of the companies they're buying. Eileen Appelbaum, a co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a progressive think tank, has written extensively about the influence of private equity. She told me that Hahnemann's demise reminded her of the retail sector, where hedge funds and private equity have used leveraged buyouts to purchase chains like Sears and Toys R Us, and then stripped their assets, including real estate, en route to bankruptcies. Appelbaum worries that Hahnemann might become a model, encouraging investors to destroy hospitals that occupy valuable land. "It definitely looks as if it was meant to be a real-estate deal," she said.

The structure of the Hahnemann deal insulated Freedman from much of the potential fallout. As the hospital floundered, staffers said, Freedman told them that, if they couldn't make the hospital succeed, he would simply turn the

property into something else. Freedman denies making such remarks, and, as a strategy for acquiring real estate, deliberately bankrupting a hospital of Hahnemann's size was likely too messy to be practical. "It's not the path that anyone would have chosen," Andrew Eisenstein, the founder of the Philadelphia development and investment firm Iron Stone Real Estate Partners, said. (Iron Stone later acquired two parcels of real estate from companies controlled by Freedman and Harrison Street.)

Freedman told me that he would never have invested millions in the venture if he intended to turn a quick profit and leave. But his leveraged buyout made excellent insurance against his own mistakes.

By May, 2019, when staff at Hahnemann tried to order basic supplies vendors had begun to turn them down, saying that the hospital hadn't paid its bills; by summer, conditions were dire. Surgical equipment was broken. The air-conditioning failed. To stretch supplies, nurses cut up the washcloths that they used on patients. Parts for instruments used to intubate patients and deliver intravenous medicine became scarce. It was difficult to find a pacemaker. Medications ran out. Even the FedEx account was cut off. "It happened so quickly and so horribly," Lorraine Alexander, a senior nurse, told me. "It was heartbreaking to see, and it was also just mind-boggling—the things that were allowed to happen."

Bruce Meyer, the president of Jefferson Health, told me that Thomas Jefferson University Hospital began hearing from Hahnemann physicians that the hospital could no longer provide quality care. "We began parking ambulances outside [Hahnemann] in mid to late June, and shuttling back and forth," Meyer said. Leaders from Jefferson and other Philadelphia hospitals asked for information about Hahnemann's patient population, to prepare for their arrival. "We never got any of that data," Meyer said.

Pennsylvania law requires a hospital to provide ninety days' notice and a detailed closure plan in advance of ceasing operations. But, even before a closure plan was approved by city and state officials, A.A.H.S. frantically tried to

empty Hahnemann. At night, private ambulances lined up at the rear of the building, waiting to take patients away—part of what staffers viewed as a reckless effort to discharge Hahnemann's occupants. "You'd have a census of two hundred and seventy-five at midnight, and the next day at noon it would have dropped to two hundred," Alexander said. Patients were released without clear plans for follow-up care, and often ended up back in the E.R. within twelve hours. Shanna Hobson, an E.R. nurse, said that a patient who had been prematurely taken off I.V. antibiotics returned with sepsis. Others came back with infected diabetic wounds.

Around that time, Sean Temple, who had been treated at Hahnemann for a heart condition for a decade, went for a routine cardiology appointment. His doctors had just been informed that their practice would be shut down. "They were under the gun," Temple said. He felt blindsided. "It's not like I came in and I knew that y'all were shutting down. Who's gonna pick up where they left off? And when and where?" Months passed without Temple's seeing a doctor, and he ended up at another hospital with a cardiac emergency. "I felt like a child lost in the park," he said.

Freedman places responsibility for the execution of Hahnemann's closure on EisnerAmper, an accounting-and-consulting firm that he hired to manage its finances and, later, the bankruptcy. (EisnerAmper declined to comment.) A report by a bankruptcy-court-appointed ombudsman describes two visits to Hahnemann in July, 2019, when the hospital's census had already fallen significantly, and after a temporary manager had been assigned by the state. "None of the nursing staff indicated any concerns over diminished care or safety of the patients," the report reads.

In advance of Hahnemann's shutdown, on September 6th, city and state officials pledged up to fifteen million dollars to take care of the hospital's patients. When other hospitals in Philadelphia had closed, a spike in infant mortality quickly followed. To prevent this, Jefferson brought on eight Hahnemann ob-gyns and expanded its obstetric unit. Hospitals across the city hired more staff and adjusted workflow patterns.

Temple and Pennsylvania Hospitals soon saw their E.R. volume increase by about twelve per cent, while at Jefferson, which is only a mile from Hahnemann, volume climbed by twenty per cent, adding almost twelve hundred visits a month. At all three E.R.s, the number of ambulance visits at least doubled. Unable to walk, drive, or take public transportation, patients who arrive in ambulances tend to be sicker and poorer than those who come by other means. Ambulances typically take patients to the nearest hospital. But the E.R.s were now frequently so crowded that the staff requested that patients go elsewhere. Studies of Black cardiac patients have shown ambulance diversion to be responsible for elevated numbers of deaths. Kory London, an emergency-medicine physician at Jefferson Health, told me that the E.R. became the scene of "daily human tragedies."

Most Philadelphia hospitals use an electronic record-sharing system, but Hahnemann had never taken part in it. Once the hospital closed, doctors at other medical centers had difficulty obtaining records for Hahnemann patients. "There were patients who had complex social histories, who were receiving many kinds of subspecialty care," London said. "They'd lost heart doctors, kidney doctors, and ended up in our emergency department. We had to understand as best we could what was going on with them."

Anastasia Cavanaugh, who has a chronic illness, had been seeing doctors at Hahnemann for years. "Knowing who your doctor is, that is one control you have," she told me. When the offices of several of her specialists closed abruptly, Cavanaugh, who had publicly funded insurance, despaired. "I cried for three days," she said. By January, 2020, Cavanaugh hadn't been able to see a doctor since Hahnemann closed. She feared that she'd have to visit an emergency room in flu season—a frightening prospect for the immunocompromised—in order to refill her prescriptions. "I was calling UPenn," she recalled. "The 'emergency appointment' was a month and a half away. It was a very stressful time. I didn't know if I could get my medications on time."

In Philadelphia, as elsewhere across the country, people of color have borne

the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic. In March, 2020, city officials entered negotiations with Freedman to reopen Hahnemann to house COVID patients during an anticipated surge. But Freedman asked for more than four hundred thousand dollars a month to lease the facility—a rate that he said was "very reasonable." The talks quickly broke down. Responsibility for the care of coronavirus patients fell heavily on the remaining hospitals in the area, including Temple, which converted a seven-story pavilion to a coronavirus clinic, and erected a tent outside the E.R. There have been some hundred and fifty thousand confirmed infections in the city, and more than thirty-six hundred deaths.

"What I feel about this whole event is that it's moral injury at a corporate level," Lia Logio, the internist, said. "Health care is supposed to be about taking care of the patients. Helping people to have long, flourishing lives, with limited illness and limited pain. Somehow, it isn't a priority."

**W**hen I spoke to Freedman by phone last summer, he had returned to California, where he had bought a new eight-thousand-square-foot house south of Los Angeles, with twenty-foot ceilings and a stone spa, for nearly seven million dollars. He was in the midst of two lawsuits with Tenet Healthcare, which he believes misled him about Hahnemann's financial situation. Freedman estimates that he has personally lost at least ten million dollars on the Hahnemann deal. He was asked to step down from his board position at the University of Southern California. "That really hurt me," he said.

But St. Christopher's Hospital had been sold, for fifty million dollars, and MidCap Financial had been repaid in full. Now Freedman was trying to reinvent himself. As we spoke one afternoon, there was an audible breeze on Freedman's end of the line. The family's Maltese, Snow, barked in the background. Freedman's confidence was undimmed. "I'm working on some things that I think could be meaningful," he said. "I would like to go back to working in health care someday. I have a lot of knowledge. I've seen a lot of bad things. Unfortunately, the solutions demand a lot of capital." ♦

# COOL STORY, BRO

*Chamath Palihapitiya says that SPACs can help ordinary people get rich. Can he deliver on the hype?*

BY CHARLES DUHIGG

In Silicon Valley, Chamath Palihapitiya, who has earned billions of dollars while tweeting things like “Im about to really fuck some shit up” to his 1.5 million followers, rarely requires identification beyond his first name. That’s in part because, in the past decade, he has spent significant time saying things in public that rich people aren’t supposed to say. Venture capitalists are “a bunch of soulless cowards.” Of hedge-fund managers: “Let them get wiped out. Who cares? They don’t get to summer in the Hamptons? Who cares?” (He made both proclamations after he had become a venture capitalist and started a hedge fund; he has yachted off the Italian coast.)

Recently, Palihapitiya has achieved even greater prominence by launching a series of special-purpose acquisition companies, or SPACs, which are among the fastest-growing financial instruments in the world. A SPAC takes a company public by attempting to sidestep regulations that help protect investors from potentially dodgy new businesses. People place money in a “blank check” fund, which then merges with an existing private company, allowing it to sell shares without having a formal initial public offering, a process that involves rigorous scrutiny by banks and regulators. SPACs have been celebrated as a way to spread Wall Street riches more equitably—you can often buy a share in one for just ten dollars—and condemned as potential catalysts of a financial crash. Palihapitiya promotes the SPAC as an innovation that “democratizes access to high-growth companies” while “dismantling” the “traditional capital market.” But he has sometimes acknowledged a simpler allegiance. “I want the fucking money,” he told students at Stanford’s business school, in 2017. “I will play the goddam game, and I will win.”

For the many people in tech circles who once proudly considered them-

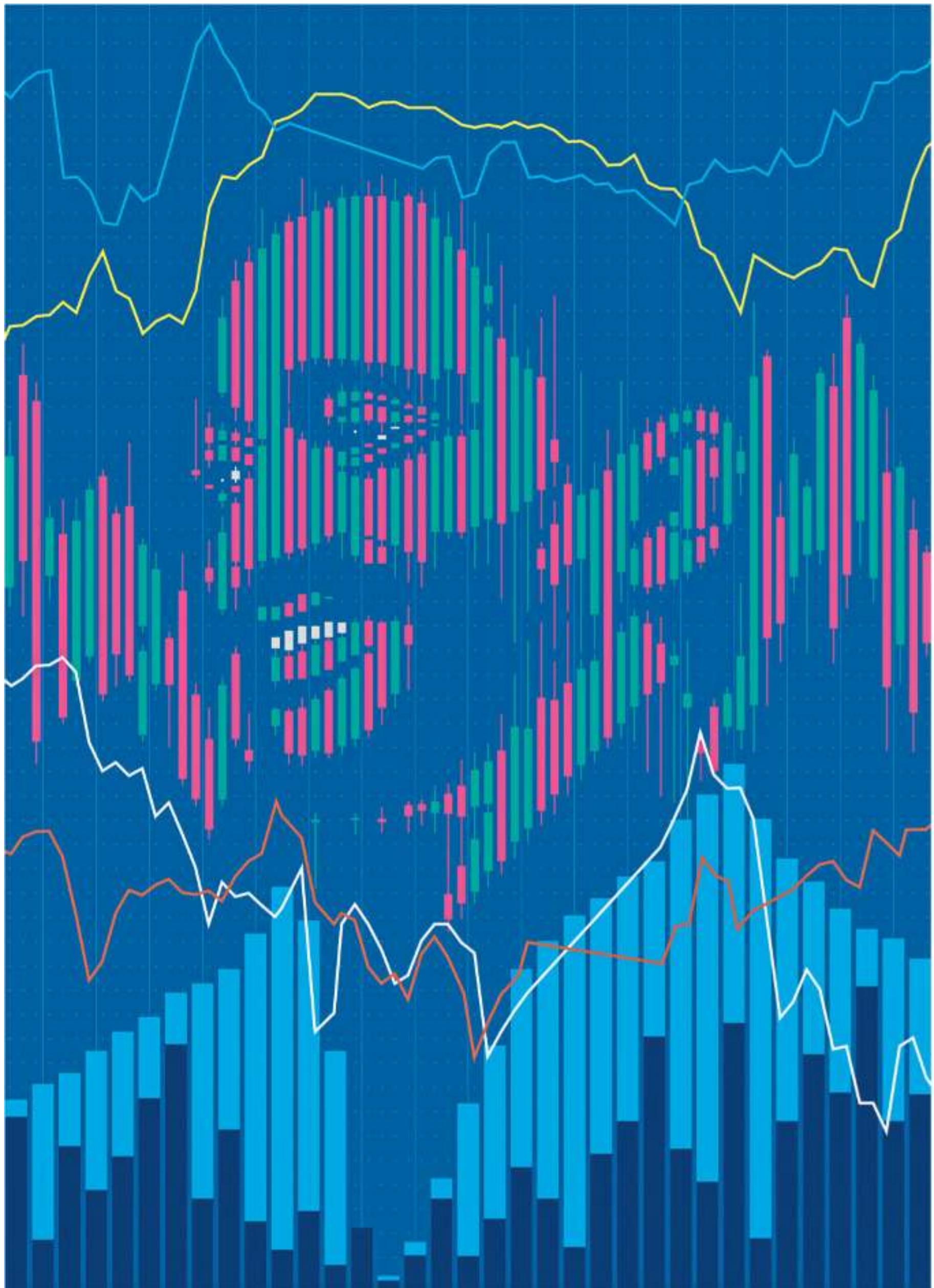
selves outsiders and now control some of the most powerful firms in the world, Palihapitiya embodies the kind of interloper currently in ascendance: the bitcoin millionaire, the Reddit over-sharer, the arriviste who moves markets by tweeting memes. Palihapitiya has gained notoriety by telling seductive stories of quick riches and upended hierarchies. These narratives have become such mainstays of how the technology industry sees itself that executives refer to enrapturing a roomful of people as “Chamathing the audience.”

Palihapitiya’s tales often serve an inspirational purpose. He has frequently spoken of how in 1982, when he was six, his family escaped civil unrest in Sri Lanka by immigrating to Canada. His father had been a government official, but in Ottawa the family lived in a cramped apartment above a laundromat; his mother worked as a housekeeper while his father—when he wasn’t drinking—applied to mid-level administrative positions, filing hundreds of rejection letters into binders. In high school, Palihapitiya began calling managers who had signed the rejection notes, suggesting that they reward his youthful determination by giving him a summer job. Newbridge Networks hired Palihapitiya to work on its I.T. help desk, where he bet his manager a fast-food lunch that he’d clear six thousand trouble tickets before school resumed. By August, Palihapitiya told me recently, he had “crushed all the trouble tickets.” He went on, “The guy took me to McDonald’s and I ate seven Big Macs. It was crazy.”

This origin story has been repeated dozens of times, one banker told me, as a demonstration of the can-do determination powering the tech industry. The banker—who has worked alongside Palihapitiya, and has taught clients to imitate his tactics—regularly goes into rooms filled with white pension-

fund managers in places like Des Moines or Biloxi and asks them to invest in obscure tech companies run by people with foreign accents. “They can’t even pronounce the company’s name, let alone the C.E.O.’s,” he said. Then the banker tells them that Palihapitiya is considering investing in the startup, and shares the story of Palihapitiya’s background. Suddenly, the investors feel that they’re being invited to join a narrative of heroic capitalism. “Now they have an up-by-the-bootstraps story to tell at the Rotary Club,” the banker said. “It’s like pixie dust.”

Other tales about Palihapitiya reinforce the tech industry’s rebellious self-image, which is increasingly difficult to maintain. After he received an electrical-engineering degree from the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, he followed his girlfriend to California and, in 2007, got a job at a small startup called Facebook. The C.E.O., Mark Zuckerberg, asked him to oversee efforts to grow the social network’s audience. Given that Facebook was expanding with little effort, this task, as one of Palihapitiya’s former colleagues put it to me, “wasn’t sexy,” and few colleagues wanted to join his team. To recruit co-workers, Palihapitiya promised them the most important project of their lives. Facebook would perish if it didn’t defeat MySpace and other social-media rivals. His team members would be underdogs fighting for a brighter future. To emphasize his point, Palihapitiya sometimes recalled a time he’d won fifty thousand dollars playing poker and then had gone to a BMW dealership. The salesman—eying Palihapitiya’s rumpled clothes and brown skin—refused him a test drive. Palihapitiya walked across the street to Mercedes-Benz, bought a car, and then drove it into the BMW parking lot to taunt the guy who’d rebuffed him. Palihapitiya assured Facebook colleagues that, if they joined him,



*Palihapitiya, a billionaire who grew up poor, says he is “focussed on a mission”: “evening the starting line.”*



*"I'm thinking of leaving the city, and I'm looking for a partner who can fix anything, grow his own food, and work remotely."*

they were showing up every bully—landing a blow for people who looked different and had unfamiliar pedigrees. Soon, many top employees were clamoring to join Palihapitiya's group. One told me, "It's intoxicating to hear someone describe your work like it's this noble calling." Within four years, Facebook was closing in on a billion users. Today, four of Facebook's top executives are alumni of Palihapitiya's team.

Other Palihapitiya stories go viral because they capture how delectably outrageous he can be. In 2019, when he was trying to persuade investors to support his first SPAC—for the space-tourism company Virgin Galactic—he met in New York with a group of mutual-fund managers and gave a dazzling speech about helping mankind reach for the heavens. It went unmentioned that Virgin Galactic had burned through nearly

a billion dollars, and that in its fifteen-year history it had missed every major deadline that it had set for itself. Instead, Palihapitiya proclaimed that the company would likely earn enormous profits—and change the world.

One listener—an older gentleman, conservatively dressed—began interrupting Palihapitiya to question both his track record and his projections. Palihapitiya let the man spout off for a bit, and then replied, "You're a complete fucking idiot."

The older man looked as if someone had just punched him.

"Have you even looked at the prospectus? Did you even fucking Google me before you came in here?"

All the eyes in the room went wide. "How lazy are you?" Palihapitiya said. "I don't even want your fucking money."

Silence. Then one of the younger

listeners started chuckling. Everyone under the age of fifty began grinning uncontrollably: now they had a Palihapitiya story of their own. "It was brilliant," an attendee told me. "It was completely calculated. That old guy wasn't ever gonna invest in space tourism. But the other people in the room—they loved it!"

About half of the investors called Palihapitiya's office afterward to say that they wanted in on the deal. "People either love Chamath or they hate him, and that's fantastic, because polarization gets attention," the attendee said. "Polarization gets you on CNBC, it gets you Twitter followers, it gets you a megaphone. If you believe that Chamath can get an hour on CNBC to explain Virgin Galactic, then you want to buy into this deal, because attention is money." Having a great story, and knowing how to tell it, can be a quick way to get rich. Which is exactly how capitalism, at certain moments, is supposed to work.

Economics is a science of cycles. There is the business cycle and the inflationary cycle, the rhythms of housing booms and credit busts. This periodicity affords money a whiff of certainty—a sense that wealth and poverty are, like the positions of the planets, subject to a set of objective and universal truths. But even the earliest economists acknowledged that divining financial fortunes requires as much knowledge of unpredictable psychology as of measurable facts. In "Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds," first published in 1841, Charles Mackay examined a series of economic bubbles and showed that many of them had little to do with underlying economic forces; they had often been caused by the actions of buyers and sellers who, like others, "believed the prophecies of crazed fanatics." A century later, John Maynard Keynes wrote that the marketplace is frequently guided by "animal spirits" that "depend on spontaneous optimism rather than a mathematical expectation." Financial affairs have an "instability due to the characteristic of human nature."

Two years ago, the Nobel-laureate economist Robert Shiller wrote a book, "Narrative Economics," arguing that many of our dearest economic theories

are simply stories that we've made true through collective belief. History provides numerous examples of rallies or recessions caused in large part by financial storytellers proclaiming that an upswing or a belt-tightening was imminent. Shiller has written, "We have to consider the possibility that sometimes the dominant reason why a recession is severe is related to the prevalence and vividness of certain stories, not the purely economic feedback or multipliers that economists love to model."

Researchers have pinpointed moments when investors' imaginations become especially labile: during periods of social uncertainty, or when new technologies emerge, or when it seems that some improbable group has become fantastically rich overnight. At such times, a few financial storytellers often rise to prominence: people you've never heard of who fill the media with sensational tales of wealth earned in bold, exciting ways. "There are some people who are *much* better storytellers than everyone else," Shiller recently told me. Although investors can find an array of new offerings unnerving—Should I buy bitcoin or a non-fungible token? Will investing in Tesla pay for my kid's college?—at least some of the innovations are likely to endure.

After the First World War, a group of speculators promised easy stock-market profits through a new fad: the mutual fund. An advertisement from the nineteen-twenties described them as "one investment that is *never* too high to buy." In the late fifties, bankers began mailing out a fresh invention—the credit card—with tales of checkout-aisle convenience, envy-inspiring sophistication, and even women's liberation. "A wife deserves some credit—her own Barclaycard," one ad declared. In the eighties, after years of stagflation, headlines began appearing about an audacious young financier named Michael Milken who was hawking "junk bonds" to help corporate raiders. Milken would have his firm prepare letters claiming he was "highly confident" that he could sell enough junk bonds for raiders to take over the companies they wished to acquire. The letters, which were often publicized, were so persuasive that targeted companies commonly surrendered.

A decade and a half later, Angelo Mo-

zilo, the son of a Bronx butcher, exploited sentimental beliefs about the importance of homeownership to encourage bankers to embrace the collateralized-debt obligation. The idea was that, by lumping together thousands of risky mortgages, subprime loans could be turned into safe investments. Federal policies directed vast amounts of money into the subprime marketplace. For a while, Mozilo's claim became a self-fulfilling prophecy: financial markets hit record highs, and Mozilo's firm, Countrywide Financial, was once celebrated with the headline "Meet the 23,000% Stock."

Irene Finel-Honigman, a financial historian and the author of "A Cultural History of Finance," told me that new kinds of financial storytelling regularly take off during times of unease, such as after a war or a recession: "You often see a lot of conspiracy theories floating around, and maybe some new kind of technology—like the telegraph or a faster printing press—that makes it easier for stories to spread." Shiller notes that people like Milken and Mozilo "understand you have to tell a sexy story if you want it to be sticky—they understand it's good to be a little bit controversial." Such storytellers often tap into investor resentments, "saying stuff like 'It's us underdogs versus the élite' or 'I grew up poor but became rich, and you can, too.'"

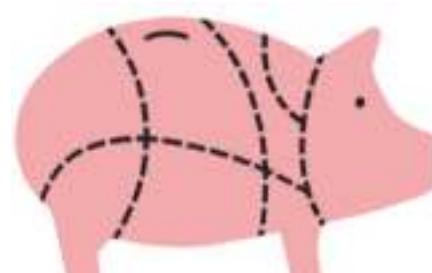
Periods like these often end badly, especially for ordinary investors. Mutual funds of the twenties became so

raiders defaulted on their debts. A recession followed, and it was partially blamed on junk bonds. Milken, meanwhile, was confronted with ninety-eight counts of racketeering, fraud, insider trading, and other misdeeds. After pleading guilty to a handful of charges, he was sentenced to ten years in prison and paid six hundred million dollars in fines and restitution. Mozilo was labelled "one of the chief villains of the housing crisis" of 2008, and his company was blamed for helping to cause the Great Recession. "It's the same pattern, again and again," Finel-Honigman said. "The storytellers become too grandiose, and it all crashes down."

These waves of storytelling aren't entirely without merit. In time, the financial instruments championed by unreliable narrators often become fixtures of the economy, as investors develop proper skepticism and regulations emerge. This is how capitalism propels forward: ambitious people create new economic truths with sweet whispers of imagined riches; the public pays for the construction of new financial marketplaces and economic infrastructures, many of which persist even after some of the storytellers have gone to prison and many investors have lost fortunes.

Today, mutual funds are among the safest and most popular investments. Credit cards are part of most Americans' daily lives. Junk bonds have become a crucial tool of corporate finance, a \$1.2-trillion marketplace used by tens of thousands of companies to build new factories and hire new workers. (Milken ended up serving less than two years, and today he is worth \$3.7 billion.) Although the implosion of Mozilo's Countrywide Financial helped hobble the international economy, hundreds of thousands of homeowners still get loans each year thanks to collateralized-debt obligations and subprime mortgages.

Lately, a lot of big-money cheerleading has been focussed on SPACs, "meme stocks" like GameStop, and cryptocurrencies. When the stock market was sky-high in January, and the price of GameStop—a floundering video-game retailer—was unaccountably increasing by nearly two thousand per cent, Palihapitiya was tweeting, "Tell me what to buy tomorrow and if you convince me I'll throw a few 100 k's at it to start. Ride



over-leveraged that, once the stock market began declining in 1929, the funds accelerated the worst crash in American history. During the credit-card craze of the sixties, unsolicited cards were mailed to felons, toddlers, and—in at least one case—a dog, initiating a surge of frauds and losses. In the eighties, leveraged buyouts like those made possible by Milken's junk bonds triggered a series of bankruptcies when corporate

or die.” As the price of bitcoin rose, he promised, “When \$BTC gets to \$150k, I will buy The Hamptons and convert it to sleepaway camps for kids, working farms and low-cost housing.”

Such peacocking, Finel-Honigman told me, is fun to watch and potentially useful: “These kinds of scam artists are really important, because, though maybe they go too far, they’re the ones who convince everyone else to start paying attention. They’re Pied Pipers. They notice things other people miss.” Then, as these fanciful tales are replaced with legal fine print, living happily ever after becomes having a 401(k).

This cycle can be hard to recognize when, as now, hype dominates the market. But eventually something happens—regulators issue warnings, or you see an absurd tweet like “Gamestonk!”—and the façade becomes obvious to all. Some of today’s mass financial hallucinations are already fading; recent magazines have featured covers asking “Can I SPAC My Stonks With NFTs?” and exposés titled “Inside the \$156 Billion SPAC Bubble.” Soon, Finel-Honigman said, “the party will be over, for a while.” She continued, “Everyone starts ignoring the scam artists and picking through the wreckage to figure out what’s useful, and finance becomes boring again.”

In 2011, Facebook was getting ready to go public, which would soon give Palihapitiya hundreds of millions of dollars. He decided that he was ready for a bigger stage. “I don’t want to be a slave to money,” he later told a reporter. “I want to be a slave to something bigger—an ambition.” Palihapitiya quit the company, spent a month playing poker in Las Vegas, then bought a small share in the Golden State Warriors.

Before long, he was showing up on CNBC—where he extolled the virtues of cryptocurrencies—and appearing in articles with such headlines as “The League of Extraordinarily Rich Gentlemen.” Reporters learned that he could reliably dispense colorful quotes: “To all the people that worked for me and whose money I took, you’re fucking welcome”; “I’m going to buy @GoldmanSachs and rename it Chamathman Sachs”; “In moments of uncertainty, when courage and strength are required, you find out who the true corporatist

scumbags are.” He later assured one journalist that, in a few years, “nobody’s going to listen” to Warren Buffett, because the world would need someone else to “take the baton and do it as well to this younger generation in the language they understand.” He was the obvious candidate.

Palihapitiya’s work at Facebook seems to have convinced him, earlier than most financiers, that social media offered a fast path to prominence. But the medium had to be harnessed in specific ways: it required ever-changing narratives, unexpected intimacies, and controversial declarations that spurred emotional reactions. “The simple and the most important thing I have to be is *authentic*,” he told me. “There’s not a thousand people reading my tweet before it goes out.” Palihapitiya nevertheless offers a curated authenticity: photographs of his six-pack abs on Instagram; lamentations that he off-loaded bitcoin too early. His social-media feeds make people feel that they are glimpsing behind the curtain, but the posts are never so candid that they risk turning people off. He told me, “I’m a person that makes a ton of mistakes. I’m a person that sometimes tweets a picture of his abs. It means nothing, and it means everything. It means that I am like everybody else.” Yes and no: some of Palihapitiya’s “mistakes” are relatable, but others involve him spending millions of dollars. In

Yammer. But, as the company matured, what seemed to excite Palihapitiya most was his heightened influence. “He went to this one hedge-fund conference and talked onstage about why one of our investments”—the file-sharing service Box—“was a great buy,” a former Social Capital colleague told me. “When he came back, he had his phone out, showing us Twitter and all these blogs, and he was so pumped at how much he had moved the stock price.” In a matter of weeks, Box’s stock leaped by more than a third, to twenty-nine dollars a share, a price that it has never reached again. (It is now at about twenty-three dollars.)

Palihapitiya had another media success in 2015, when Social Capital helped publish a list that ranked top venture-capital firms by “gender and ethnic diversity.” Palihapitiya placed his own company at the top, but the methodology turned out to be haphazard: firms were initially assessed, in part, by looking at their LinkedIn pages and tallying minorities based on names and photographs. In an essay revealing the results, titled “Bros Funding Bros: What’s Wrong with Venture Capital,” Palihapitiya complained that “the VC community is an increasingly predictable and lookalike bunch that just seems to follow each other around from one trivial idea to another.” The ruckus caused by the list prompted the *Wall Street Journal* to describe Palihapitiya as “the venture capitalist whom venture capitalists love to hate.” Nevertheless, another colleague of Palihapitiya’s told me that, “from that point on, every time there was an article about female founders, or diversity in tech, Chamath was mentioned—it was great P.R.”

Palihapitiya knew that crude hype wasn’t appropriate for every audience. On CNBC, he adopted the calm and serious language of high finance. On podcasts, he waxed sincere, confessing that, by working with two therapists, he had “realized how emotionally broken I was, and incapable of really connecting with people.” Twitter was for extreme boosterism and the occasional “Fuuuuuuuccckkk!!!!” During numerous one-on-one conversations that I had with Palihapitiya, all of which were conducted remotely, he was often contradictory. At one point, after vol-



any case, his brash approach was also adopted by other Silicon Valley influencers, including Elon Musk, and also by politicians. “Chamath was Trump before Trump,” a former colleague of his told me.

After Palihapitiya left Facebook, he and a few partners founded an investment firm called Social Capital. It raised more than a billion dollars and scored early successes with investments in fast-growing startups, including Slack and

unteering that his social-media posts were calculated, he said, “To be honest with you, I get a sense that you’re trying to insinuate that I’m calculating in a way that I’m not.” But he was certain that every choice he had made was part of a cohesive story. At Social Capital, Palihapitiya’s confidence had an enticing effect. “He’s talking about climate change while he’s wearing a three-hundred-thousand-dollar watch and flying around on a private jet,” one of the former employees said. “You know it’s ridiculous, but he makes you want to believe it can be true.”

Still, over time, Palihapitiya’s partners began to feel that his media appearances were taking precedence over Social Capital’s needs. The company was posting impressive returns, but Palihapitiya, they said, was missing meetings and ignoring e-mails. When he was in the office, he hijacked discussions to talk about social-media strategies or to offer monologues on income inequality. “There was a lot of erratic behavior,” a former Social Capital executive told me. “He was always making big pronouncements about his visions for the future, which didn’t really have anything to do with the deals we were trying to close.” Colleagues encouraged him to step back from day-to-day operations, but he resisted. Another former Social Capital executive said, “Chamath wanted to optimize for what served *him* best, instead of the companies we invested in or the team we built.” A close friend of Palihapitiya’s told me, “He’s the kind of guy who can convince himself that whatever he’s telling you right now is absolutely true, which can be intoxicating. But that also means there’s less oxygen for people who see things differently.”

By 2018, there were rumors that Palihapitiya’s love life was threatening the firm’s stability. He had married the woman he followed to California, and she, after a successful technology career, had helped him found Social Capital, working there as a partner. They had three children. Then Palihapitiya was spotted in Europe with Nathalie Dompé, an Italian pharmaceutical heiress and an executive at her family’s firm. “It was very awkward, because everyone knew what was going on,” one of the former Social Capital employees said. Palihapitiya’s wife began



*“No one ever tells you about the static.”*

telling friends that she had cancer. Shortly afterward, Palihapitiya filed for divorce. (She survived her medical crisis, and has since founded another venture-capital firm.)

As of mid-2018, two of Palihapitiya’s founding partners at Social Capital and several other high-profile hires—including a former chief executive of Skype, Tony Bates—had left or had announced that they were leaving. The company had expanded to about seventy employees and had raised billions of dollars, but investors, spooked by negative rumors, began indicating that they weren’t inclined to give Palihapitiya more money. Tech Web sites started reporting on Social Capital’s dysfunction. The online forums that had made Palihapitiya a star were turning against him. He went on the offensive, telling reporters that his co-founders had been arrogant. As for his employees, he told one journalist, “They probably felt maybe not listened to as much as they should have been by me. Tough.”

In September, 2018, after yachting around Sardinia and Corsica, Palihapitiya posted a missive on Medium titled “The Reports of Our Death Have Been

Greatly Exaggerated....” Nonetheless, many employees at Social Capital soon left or were let go. “He imploded Social Capital because he was getting bad headlines,” a person who was terminated told me. “I don’t think he put a second thought into the careers of the seventy people who had left other jobs to work with him. I don’t think he cares about other people. He’s a narcissist. He’s so good at telling stories that he can justify anything to himself.”

Palihapitiya went on a podcast hosted by the journalist Kara Swisher. “Just like Michael Jordan had a decision to retire and go play baseball, I chose to retire,” he explained. “This is my decision. I am *not your slave*. I just want to be clear. My skin color, two hundred years ago, may have gotten you confused, but I am not your slave.” When Swisher asked him how he had dealt with the anger of those he had abandoned, Palihapitiya adopted a cocky nonchalance: “I went to Italy, spent the summer there. Had a fabulous, fabulous time.”

By 2019, Palihapitiya was living with Dompé and expecting a child. He was a billionaire and could still command media attention. “It’s my company, and

I had the right to make that choice,” he told me. “I don’t really spend a lot of time trying to re-underwrite those kinds of things, because it’s not really productive.” In one of our Zoom conversations, Palihapitiya—framed by glass doors overlooking a garden—said that he had no regrets about these past decisions. “For me, safety *is* change,” he said. Of Social Capital’s cast-off employees, he said, “For the most part, everybody has found a really great landing spot.” Of his divorce: “Our marriage may have ended, but it wasn’t a failure. It was a grand-slam home run.” They’d had “an incredible twenty-year run—and I’m really proud of it.” He conceded that he has critics, but told me that they are largely motivated by “their own insecurity.” At one point, he said, “I’m trying to give you a simple narrative, which is my own.”

The bad publicity attending Social Capital’s demise, however, seemed to convince even Palihapitiya that his story needed sprucing up. He took a fresh look at assets that the company still possessed. Among other things, he had raised some six hundred million dollars from investors for a SPAC, but he had never chosen a company to merge with. At the time, a SPAC was a relatively obscure tool. It had been invented in 1993, by David Miller, a lawyer, and his friend David Nussbaum, a banker, as an alternative to the traditional I.P.O., but the idea had not really caught on. Palihapitiya decided that, if he put his name and his energy behind SPACs, they could become more popular—a lot more.

Many people in Silicon Valley had long complained that the traditional I.P.O. model took too long and involved too many regulations. Moreover, bankers and hedge funds extracted too much of an I.P.O.’s profits, leaving little for common investors and the startups themselves. “I fundamentally believe we’ve *robbed* most people of returns,” Palihapitiya told me, adding that private-equity funds had locked out regular investors from buying into fast-growing companies. The Securities and Exchange Commission’s paternalistic rules had made it nearly impossible for anyone except millionaires to get rich from tech startups. As Palihapitiya saw it, a SPAC enabled anyone to invest in high-risk, high-reward companies. He

## THE GREAT CONFINEMENT

Year of sighs, year of planning ahead—  
how to acquire food or meet friends  
for afternoon talks in the outdoor air.  
Of planning nothing. Whole days washed clean  
in the round of known rooms, known chores.

I followed forecasts to calculate when  
to walk down the alley, around the block,  
the same dogs barking, recycling bins  
bursting with cardboard. I envied people stuck  
in the country amid trees, beside a lake  
that took in sky. And people, I presume,  
envied us, with our covered front porch  
and back garden, its sloping tangle of leaves.  
We’d thrown ourselves down wherever the music  
stopped, in a place we planned to stay a season  
at most, until a hidden hand could hit the volume.

Year of stories—of books, recorded voices  
through the night, faces on screens: familiars  
holding cocktail glasses, jam jars  
into view to toast . . . what precisely?  
happy hours? Of meetings, of classes: click  
to speak, click to mute, click to leave.

Year of household tasks. Mold that grew  
because we used the kitchen so hard:  
the endless sponge-down—meal after meal,  
day after day. Dust that gathered  
like thoughts of Somewhere Else, Another Time,  
Other People. When I set two plates for dinner,  
I could imagine my mother on her daily walk—  
careful, stiff-hipped, alone—to the mailbox,  
silence at each elbow, around her throat.  
When I searched for new ways to cook kale  
or tried baking bread, as oven warmth  
and savory smells revised the room in stews  
or casseroles, I could imagine mothers  
trying to stretch their kids’ milk between  
food-bank trips. Year of feeling lucky.

Year of forgetting in the days’ drift. Then  
abruptly remembering: sadness sensed

branded his SPAC project as I.P.O. 2.0, and dubbed his first investment pool I.P.O.A. The implicit promise was that soon enough he’d get to I.P.O.Z.

**A**t the heart of a SPAC is a tension over who ought to be allowed to tell financial stories to the public. Many types of investment companies—such as private-equity funds, which have

yielded enormous riches in recent decades—are generally prohibited, by government regulation, from soliciting money from everyday investors who earn less than two hundred thousand dollars a year or whose net worth, excluding their home, is below a million dollars. Traditional I.P.O.s have other constrictions: firms that are going public cannot publish forecasts of anticipi-

in a jolt, the way when I opened the kitchen bin—  
just emptied, just cleaned, it seemed—  
a rotten smell hit me, knocked me back.

Year of sighs, year of sighs, names  
of the ones gone away, their faces appearing.  
For months, as afternoon light grew long,  
I thought, *Must call Mom*. Even after.

I thought of Hélène—years ago,  
when we stood, she and I, before  
a painting she'd made, its colors shifting  
as the oil she'd rigged behind the canvas  
face shifted inside its frame,  
and I thought, *I like your art, your stories:*  
her story's end in plastic tubes,  
white edges, machine thrums  
and bleeps, room mostly bleached  
of color against the blue hospital  
gowns that hovered then disappeared,  
Hélène, inside her great struggle,  
the suffocating, persistent,  
solitary smell of alcohol.

Year of distance upon distance. I thought  
of candles in the Hall of Mirrors when, one night,  
I'd walked its length after a concert—light  
echoing as lights regressed from sconce  
to mirror to mirror and back in Versailles, the flames'  
flicker—presence, movement—enclosed in infinite  
space, each candle point insisting, *here,*  
*here*, smaller and smaller, left and right,  
as I passed through, passed among them.  
*What is the point? Here is the point. What*  
*is the point? Here.* Thrilling, a privileged sight  
as I moved down the Hall, as down the year,  
toward the night air, the dear dead  
ones receding, drifting further back,  
in reflected, refracted, lovely multitudes,  
and then, at the end, no point, *no point at all.*

—Sandy Solomon

pated profits until key documents have been filed with the S.E.C.; the law also encourages an I.P.O. "quiet period," which can last for months, and during which executives are dissuaded from speaking in public about the future.

These rules were designed to protect unsophisticated investors from being exploited by hucksters, but many entrepreneurs and venture capitalists say that

they have undermined American capitalism. Jeff Epstein, an operating partner at Bessemer Venture Partners, who runs a SPAC of his own, said, "We've just lived through one of the greatest wealth-accumulation periods in history, and a lot of the public has been blocked from participating."

A SPAC is born when someone known as a sponsor creates a shell company,

with no assets or underlying business, then sells that empty firm to the public, usually for about ten dollars a share. The sponsor then typically has two years to identify a *real* company—a privately held firm with assets and, ideally, customers—and merge it with the SPAC. By combining an empty public company with a real private company, the result is a publicly traded real company. The process is sometimes known as "going public through the back door."

After Palihapitiya devised his I.P.O. 2.0 concept, he went on CNBC, podcasts, and social media to proclaim that SPACs were a way to preserve American resilience. "We don't have capital markets that can support young, high-growing, fast companies in a way that really builds for the future of America," he told one podcast host. "We need *thousands* of companies to go public." Palihapitiya argued that SPACs allowed companies to go public faster, and at a lower cost, than traditional I.P.O.s. SPACs also gave investors access to Palihapitiya's savvy and connections. He told the podcast host, "I'm using sort of, you know, my accumulated quote-unquote 'social capital' and credibility to say, 'Let me explain to you why you want to own this thing.'" But the most important advantage of SPACs, he said, was that they let executives tell the public about anticipated profits and expected breakthroughs. In an interview posted on YouTube, Palihapitiya complained, "In a traditional I.P.O., you *can't* show a forecast, and you *can't* talk about the future of how you want to do things." The host was wearing a shirt that read "Put your money where CHAMATH is." On another occasion, Palihapitiya explained, "Because the SPAC is a *merger* of companies, you're all of a sudden allowed to talk about the future."

Financial regulators and academics dispute many of Palihapitiya's claims about SPACs, including the notion that they are always faster or less expensive than a traditional I.P.O. Michael Ohlrogge, a professor at the N.Y.U. School of Law who studies financial markets, said of SPACs, "Claims of regulatory sidestepping are, in general, greatly overstated." Even if your company is going public through a SPAC, it's still against the law to, say, lie about your financial situation. In April, a senior official at the S.E.C.,

John Coates, warned that claims that SPACs are exempt from regulations are “overstated at best, and potentially seriously misleading at worst.”

Though SPACs do open the door to non-élite investors, they have their own inequalities. Most notably, the sponsors are paid lavishly—much better than they would be compensated in a traditional I.P.O. Sponsors often receive twenty per cent of a SPAC’s stock, simply for bringing it into existence. Such paydays can be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. In a recent influential study, Ohlrogge and some colleagues wrote that the “costs built into the SPAC structure are subtle, opaque, and far higher than has been previously recognized” and are mostly paid, unknowingly, by the individual shareholders whom Palihapitiya and others have claimed to be championing. Thanks in part to the twenty-per-cent giveaway to the sponsor, “although SPACs raise \$10 per share from investors in their IPOs, by the time the median SPAC merges with a target, it holds just \$6.67 in cash for each outstanding share.” One of Ohlrogge’s co-authors, the Stanford law professor Michael Klausner, told me, “The real reason SPACs are so popular right now, I think, is mostly because sponsors are making so much money off them.” A banker who has worked on a number of SPACs agrees: “There’s a lot of money to be made in convincing people to believe in something new.”

The clock on I.P.O.A, Palihapitiya’s SPAC, was ticking. If he didn’t find a company to merge with, he would have to return to investors the money that he had raised. Palihapitiya had invited a few Silicon Valley unicorns to explore merging with I.P.O.A, but nothing came of it.

Then he alighted on Virgin Galactic, which had been founded, in 2004, by Richard Branson, the celebrity entrepreneur, with an aim of building rocket ships to ferry tourists into space. The company was a marketing sensation: more than six hundred people had reserved seats, making deposits totalling eighty million dollars. But in almost every other respect it was a disaster. In 2007, three workers were killed when a rocket motor exploded. Seven years later, a pilot died during a test flight. Virgin

Galactic had spent hundreds of millions of dollars without sending a single tourist into space.

To finance the company, Branson had persuaded the Saudi Arabian government to invest a billion dollars. But in 2018 the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, was implicated in the murder and dismemberment of the *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It would be unethical—and a public-relations disaster—to accept Saudi funds. Branson urgently needed a new source of capital. That’s when Palihapitiya’s company proposed a SPAC merger.

Palihapitiya and Branson hit it off. “These guys are born salesmen,” a tech-industry banker who is familiar with both men told me. “It’s like watching someone trying to have sex with their reflection.” They rapidly came to an agreement: Virgin Galactic would receive hundreds of millions of dollars from I.P.O.A, as well as a hundred million dollars of Palihapitiya’s personal funds; Palihapitiya would own nearly seventeen per cent of Virgin Galactic.

Palihapitiya then had to persuade the mutual funds, the Wall Street chieftains, and the individual shareholders who had written checks for the SPAC to approve the deal. He prepared a series of flashy presentations explaining that Virgin Galactic’s technologies wouldn’t just put tourists into space; they would one day make it possible for people to travel from Los Angeles to Japan in two hours, on hypersonic jets. The company would build and operate sleek “spaceports.” Companies would pay millions to advertise to Virgin Galactic’s clients. One slide from Palihapitiya’s presentation noted that it costs about half a million dollars to rent a yacht for a week—meaning that a hundred thousand dollars for a spaceflight was a bargain.

When Palihapitiya spoke to me about Virgin Galactic, he avoided blithe talk of profits. Instead, he portrayed investing in the company as noble, likening it to supporting the Apollo program in 1969. And he emphasized that the company faced real challenges: “When you make these big leaps technologically, you fund something that’s very complicated.”

But, when Palihapitiya was making his case to investors, he let loose with

wildly optimistic projections. In the first nine months of 2019, Virgin Galactic had collected only \$3.3 million in revenues and had lost a hundred and thirty-eight million dollars. Yet Palihapitiya’s SPAC predicted that, shortly after closing the merger, the company would start sending people into space, and that annual profits would hit a quarter billion dollars by 2023.

It was during this period that Palihapitiya told the skeptical investor that he didn’t want his fucking money. In the end, many other investors wanted to be part of the Virgin Galactic deal—feeling certain that, at the very least, Palihapitiya’s self-confidence would garner tons of free press. They were right. As the deal approached finalization, CNBC gave Palihapitiya a series of slots on its most popular programs, where he boasted that Virgin Galactic was set to do “something absolutely fantastic in human technology.” The company had a sprawling list of rich tourists begging to go into space, he said, and hypersonic travel would “directly disrupt” the airline industry. Ultimately, the vast majority of I.P.O.A’s investors backed the merger.

On October 28, 2019, Virgin Galactic débuted on the New York Stock Exchange, opening at \$12.34 a share. Within four months, it had climbed to forty-two dollars. A year later, it reached sixty-three. Soon, the company was worth more than six billion dollars, buoyed by the same kind of social-media chatter that drove up the stock prices of GameStop, Tesla, and BlackBerry. Still, thus far, Virgin Galactic has failed to achieve essentially every projection set forth in Palihapitiya’s merger proposal. For example, the forecast for 2020 revenues was thirty-one million dollars, but the company collected only two hundred and thirty-eight thousand dollars that year. It is still unclear when, if ever, it will send customers into space.

The stock’s success added hundreds of millions of dollars to Palihapitiya’s net worth, and soon he was talking up I.P.O.B, I.P.O.C, I.P.O.D, I.P.O.E, and I.P.O.F. He publicly hinted that he might merge those SPACs with such sexy-sounding companies as Equinox gyms and OpenDoor—an “on-demand and fully-digital experience to buy and sell a home.” His success with SPACs made other financial professionals wonder if they could pull

off the same trick. In 2020, two hundred and forty-eight SPACs went public, raising more than eighty-three billion dollars. There have been more than three hundred SPACs so far this year—about three every business day.

An array of celebrities, including Shaquille O’Neal, Colin Kaepernick, and Jay-Z, have become publicly associated with certain SPACs, generating easy publicity for the latest launch. Perhaps sensing the inherent ridiculousness of their roles, celebrities have generally stayed quiet about their participation beyond stating, in regulatory filings, things like “Mr. O’Neal has a keen eye for investing in successful ventures.” An executive sponsoring a celebrity SPAC told me that “selling anything, whether it’s a company or a stock, is about telling a story that makes people want to buy. Celebrities get attention and they’re seen as heroic, which makes telling the story easier.” In February, the *Times* business columnist Andrew Ross Sorkin wrote that several financiers had told him they knew more people who had SPACs than had contracted COVID.

Palihapitiya has formed six SPACs thus far, yielding him and his firm more than a billion dollars. “The returns that we’ve generated—you can’t B.S. those,” he told me. In March, he sold the entirety of his personal stake in Virgin Galactic, worth some two hundred and thirteen million dollars. He might have needed the cash: a few months earlier, he’d reportedly acquired a seventy-five-million-dollar private jet.

Shareholders have not done as well. If an everyday investor had bought one share of stock in each of his SPACs on the first day the stock traded, three of those investments would have lost money. The entire bundle would today be worth thirty-one per cent more than the investor had initially paid. A comparable investment in the S. & P. 500 over the same period would have returned similar profits, but would have involved much less volatility and risk. Shares in Virgin Galactic have dropped more than fifty-five per cent since February—a decline presumably precipitated in part by Palihapitiya’s sell-off.

Many other SPACs have done much worse. Some public shareholders, lured by impossibly rosy financial projections, have lost enormous amounts of money

investing in companies that otherwise would likely have never been sold to the public. Last year, soon after the electric-truck maker Nikola went public through a SPAC, it was reported that the S.E.C. and the Department of Justice were looking into fraud allegations against the startup, which likely would have surfaced earlier in a traditional I.P.O. (Nikola has denied any wrongdoing.) According to a recent study, SPACs that have completed a merger since 2020 have, on average, lost thirty-nine per cent of their value. Another study, looking at various time periods, found that fewer than a third of SPACs end up making money for investors. The S.E.C. has become so concerned that it recently warned investors “not to make investment decisions related to SPACs based solely on celebrity involvement.”

As SPAC losses have mounted, some sponsors have been forced to agree to less lucrative payouts for themselves in order to secure merger deals. Some of Palihapitiya’s sponsorship arrangements have attracted particular scorn. *Bloomberg Businessweek* recently reported, of one Palihapitiya SPAC, that “the way the deal was structured made it almost impossible for him to lose.” In February,

a firm named Hindenburg Research, which often bets against stocks, accused Palihapitiya of misleading investors about ongoing regulatory issues with Clover Health—an insurance company that merged with I.P.O.C earlier this year. Palihapitiya defended himself on Twitter: “Yesterday’s report was rife with personal attacks, thin facts, and bluster that has been rebuked by the company.” But this time his narrative failed to stick: the company’s stock has declined more than forty-five per cent since the tweet. All told, Clover’s shareholders have lost nearly a billion dollars. Palihapitiya and his partners, however, are still doing fine. Their profits from I.P.O.C are estimated to be about a hundred million dollars.

**D**espite the backlash, one federal official told me, SPACs—like mutual funds, credit cards, and junk bonds—“are here to stay.” As SPACs become more familiar, and better regulated, they will be an important tool for a certain kind of company that hopes to go public but lacks the track record or the profits that a traditional I.P.O. demands. More than a dozen electric-vehicle makers and suppliers have gone public by merging



with a SPAC, or are working toward a merger. Some of those companies would likely go out of business if they couldn't sell shares to the public; building electric vehicles is enormously expensive, and automotive startups need reliable sources of capital. But it would be nearly impossible for many of them to mount a traditional I.P.O., given the companies' riskiness and the fact that most won't show profits for years. Klausner, the Stanford professor, said, "Our economy depends on finding ways to match risk-taking companies with risk-taking investors."

Firms often can't go public because of complicated tax situations, or because they're too cutting-edge to be easily understood, or because their industry is out of favor, or because they operate in legal gray areas, such as marijuana distribution. For companies without easy access to private funding, a SPAC can fill a gap—say, matching enthusiastic weed investors with industrial Maui Wowie growers, and offering the necessary due diligence and infrastructure that such a transaction requires. Last year, the online-sports-wagering company DraftKings—which probably would have had difficulty executing a traditional

I.P.O., given the regulatory issues surrounding its business—went public via a SPAC, and its stock has more than doubled. Right now, Klausner said, SPACs are a "minefield." Even so, "we need alternatives to I.P.O.s, and once the public learns how to price and understand the risks, and there's more transparency about costs and who is making ludicrous projections and who is being responsible, this will be a normal part of business."

That transition will likely involve forcing sponsors to accept smaller payments and making the costs borne by shareholders more transparent. The public will become savvier about promises of riches and novelty. In an e-mail, Klausner wrote, "I would be in favor of a SPAC in which the sponsor's compensation is lower and tightly tied to shareholder returns. There have been a few SPACs in recent months that are starting to approach this sort of improved structure."

Before too long, one investment banker told me, the current SPAC bubble will pop, and investors may lose lots of money. The marketplace will likely then rebuild in a more sensible, sustainable way. That's what happened with

junk bonds. Palihapitiya, meanwhile, has indicated that he's searching for new SPAC opportunities. "I don't know if Chamath's SPACs are going to look smart or horrible when the reckoning comes," the banker said. "But we needed that kind of blind arrogance and raw nerve to convince people to give this a chance. Without that, who's going to take a risk on something like this?"

**P**alihapitiya insists that he does not tell stories; rather, he says, he reveals truth discovered through careful deliberation, hard work, and unbiased reasoning. He told me, "I think why people want to work with me is because I do a reasonable job, and it's gotten better over time, of being able to dial down bias, dial up facts and intuition." Countering the notion that he offered simplistic pitches to the public, he argued that complex explanations are distracting: "The problem that I think happens sometimes is, when you're trying to make important decisions, a lot of the times people make them exceedingly complicated, and it's almost to get other people's validation. In my experience, when I've gotten things really, really right, it was very simple." He disagrees with the notion that SPACs are optimistic narratives built on shaky evidence, or a way for a new Milken or Mozilo to earn quick fortunes. He views SPACs as "an on-ramp to the capital markets"—a hack that allows everyday people access to wealth long reserved for the already rich.

Palihapitiya said that "a SPAC, for me, is a tool" for furthering his deeper goal: fighting income inequality. "I am focussed on a mission," he said. "Evening the starting line." He sees the world as deeply unfair, and believes that his success has put him in a position to fix problems like poverty and climate change. "I want to put my hands into owning businesses that can shape these huge parts of society that are broken," he said, adding, "A SPAC is one way to do it." He said that he has been concentrating on these larger goals since he left Facebook: "You know, I could have checked out, I could have been on a beach, I could have been wasting time, I could have been working on stupid problems, and I'm pretty proud of myself for not having done that." Virgin Galactic, for instance, may drive down



"Ten! Nine! Eight! . . ."

*astariotak*

the cost of travel, and thereby “democratize a *lot* of things.”

None of Palihapitiya’s SPACs have devoted significant money to fighting income inequality, and some of his most profitable investments, such as bitcoin—and some of his purchases, such as the private jet—have devastating environmental costs. His friends, however, say that his stated ambitions are genuine. Neal Katyal, an acting Solicitor General in the Obama Administration, who recently helped prosecute Derek Chauvin for murdering George Floyd, is a close friend of Palihapitiya’s and a Social Capital board member. “I think that feeling of not being properly valued, because of how he grew up, is so essential to his identity,” Katyal said. “We’ve spent a lot of time talking about how there are geniuses in Africa who never get to go to great schools, and how he wants to change that. I think he’s a true genius, and one of the few people committed to questioning everything, to transforming the system instead of just doing well for himself.” Palihapitiya has admirers in the media as well. “I shouldn’t like Chamath, but I do,” Kara Swisher said. “He’s a blowhard, but that’s not a crime. And he’s not a malevolent fuck, like so many of them.”

Palihapitiya, who is now reportedly worth multiple billions of dollars thanks to his SPACs, bitcoin holdings, and other investments, told me that he has “given a lot of money away,” and is planning future philanthropy “in the half a billion dollars of aggregate commitment.” This may well be true, but the only major donation attributed to him thus far is a twenty-five-million-dollar gift to the University of Waterloo. He declined to name other contributions. “In the Buddhist faith, which—I’m Buddhist—you do these things because they’re part of your moral culture,” he told me. “You don’t do it for labels and press releases.” (This modesty is not altogether confining: a few months ago, Palihapitiya triggered a flood of headlines by hinting that he was running for governor of California, then triggered yet more by announcing that he’d changed his mind.)

Even Palihapitiya’s friends admit to being confused by some of his actions. “There’s this self-destructive piece of him that seems bound up in what he

does so well,” one of them told me. Many of his public confrontations come across as juvenile. Recently, someone tweeted that he was not excited about seeing Palihapitiya speak at a forthcoming cryptocurrency conference. Palihapitiya tweeted back, “You’re a joke,” followed by “I owned Bitcoin when you were still living in Mommy’s basement.” He cancelled the appearance. His friend told me, “It’s like he can’t stop from going dark sometimes.” Palihapitiya is not alone in this regard: Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and others who have profited from adopting bellicose stances online clearly have trouble knowing when to stop.

Some of Palihapitiya’s friends suggested to me that his impulse to overshare may have roots in a desire to control narratives that none of us can easily direct. Katyal told me, “This whole idea of growing up brown and poor where the schooling system doesn’t recognize your talents and abilities, where racism manifests in teachers not paying as much attention to you, classmates thinking you’re just this one-dimensional geek, that you’ll never really be creative—that’s real. Chamath has this relentless need to prove himself, to just blow the system apart. He wants to be transformative, and, honestly, it’s inspiring. That should be what we *want* Silicon Valley to be.”

A Chinese-American former Facebook employee told me that, if he ever started a company, the first person he’d approach for funding was Palihapitiya. “My Chinese friends in the Valley feel the same way,” the employee said. “Other venture capitalists are white guys in khakis. Chamath understands what it’s like to be an outsider, to be dismissed because you’re an immigrant or how you look. And he’s honest and loyal and fights for you even when he doesn’t have to.” The tech industry is indeed filled with white guys who went to Ivy League schools, and who say ridiculous things online and buy planes and post selfies of their muscles. Palihapitiya has adopted a kind of braggadocio once reserved for the already powerful, and such boldness can be galvanizing.

There is one other tale that is often

repeated about Palihapitiya. For many years, he was close friends with Dave Goldberg, a widely beloved technology executive who was married to Sheryl Sandberg, of Facebook. Goldberg had mentored dozens of technology executives before he died, suddenly, while on vacation in Mexico, in 2015. A large swath of Silicon Valley’s élite attended his memorial, where men were asked to forgo neckwear, “in keeping with Dave’s life-long hatred of ties.” Palihapitiya paid his respects in a gray suit, a purple shirt, and a black tie. “Dave would have absolutely loved that,” a friend of both men told me. “Chamath’s outrageousness makes the world more fun.”

It is true that Palihapitiya “sometimes tells crazy stories, and he always makes himself the hero,” the friend said. “But don’t we all do that? Don’t we all want to find some way of believing that we’re heroic?” The American economy has thrived because we have agreed to collectively believe in a common set of stories, many of which aggrandize innovation, celebrate extreme optimism, and lionize the strengths and weaknesses that Palihapitiya embodies. This willing suspension of disbelief has spurred our economic growth. Now that set of stories includes SPACs, thanks to Palihapitiya.

In the short run, it’s likely that some SPACs will end in bloodbaths, and that many investors—and perhaps Palihapitiya himself—will lose billions of dollars and wind up looking much less impressive than they do today. It’s nearly inevitable that we will revisit this period and wonder, Why were we so credulous? How did we imagine we’d get rich with such little real work? But by then SPACs will have become commonplace and unexceptional, their sharp edges sanded by regulators and sober bankers.

Palihapitiya’s friend asked me, “When someone tells a new story, and then they make it come *true*—they invent something, or they help some company get funded, or they make us change how we see things—aren’t we better off?” He added, “I think we’re lucky some storyteller was willing to do that work and take that risk.” ♦



# CHANGE AGENT

*Rich Paul is transforming the business of basketball.*

BY ISAAC CHOTINER

**R**ich Paul, the trusted agent of LeBron James and a bevy of other National Basketball Association all-stars, has spent the pandemic working from his property in Beverly Hills. He often takes calls in a small house in the back yard, which is decorated like an old-time cigar lounge, with framed vintage photographs, dark-brown furniture, and low lighting. When we met there recently, Paul, dressed in a Nike T-shirt, basketball shorts, and sandals, sat in an oversized chair, in front of portraits of James Baldwin and Michael Jackson. There was a poster of Muhammad Ali that took up almost an entire wall, as well as a few stills from gangster movies. “I was watching ‘The Godfather’ at a very young age,” Paul said.

Paul, who is forty, is trim and about five feet nine inches tall, which means he stands eye-to-shoulder with many of his clients. He has a cool, even speaking style that must serve him well when he’s asking a team owner to part with many millions of dollars. He isn’t likely to laugh at your joke or concede a point just to make you feel more at ease. When I asked him why he had chosen Beverly Hills, after deciding to leave his home town of Cleveland for Southern California, in 2019, he said, without a glimmer of a smile, “Axel Foley”—Eddie Murphy’s character in the “Beverly Hills Cop” franchise. Lest anyone doubt his seriousness, Paul said he owns the same Detroit Lions jacket as Foley wore in “Beverly Hills Cop II.”

He began to speak about the pop culture of his childhood. He was an obsessive consumer of movies and TV and saw them as subjects to be mastered as much as relished. “I remember when ‘Bloodsport’ came out—I used to watch that movie over and over again,” he said. “I was a big Ninja Turtles fan.” Now he was watching documentaries about the great producers of that era—Norman Lear, who developed “The Jeffersons,”

Quincy Jones, who worked with Michael Jackson and produced “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air”—revisiting the eighties and nineties from the vantage point of a Beverly Hills executive. Paul said, “I’m just playing all those things back in my mind, where I was at that time as a kid, just dreaming big.”

Later, as Paul worked, personal assistants and other colleagues filtered through the property. Much business seemed to be done in his back yard. It was February, and Paul mentioned that he hadn’t been vaccinated yet, but I was the only person in a mask. The N.B.A.’s health-and-safety protocols are famously strict, so I was surprised when Paul told me that he was going to James’s house in Brentwood that evening.

Paul started his agency, Klutch Sports Group, nine years ago. Since then, he has negotiated nearly two billion dollars in deals for his clients. His list is growing and includes some of the N.B.A.’s most extraordinary athletes—Anthony Davis, of the Los Angeles Lakers; Ben Simmons, of the Philadelphia 76ers; Trae Young, of the Atlanta Hawks—but his biggest client, by far, was also his first.

Paul met LeBron James in 2002, at the Akron-Canton Airport. They were both waiting for a flight to Atlanta. James, who was seventeen, was widely expected to be the N.B.A.’s No. 1 draft pick the following year; he had already appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and had been described as the next Michael Jordan. Paul, who was twenty-one, was selling vintage sports jerseys out of the trunk of his car. James spotted Paul wearing a Houston Oilers jersey with the name of the quarterback Warren Moon on it. He was impressed and said so. Paul told James that his source was a store in Atlanta, called Distant Replays, and said that James should mention him if he went. The two stayed in touch. James told me that they talked about “basketball, foot-

ball, and the greatest that have ever played the game. And then just about being a Black kid growing up in the inner city, and the struggles that come with that.”

When, in the summer of 2003, James signed with the Cleveland Cavaliers, he started paying Paul a salary of forty-eight thousand dollars, as an investment in what the relationship could become. A few years later, Paul went to work at Creative Artists Agency, under James’s then agent, Leon Rose. “I have always felt that he had a purpose, and that’s why I kept him around,” James said. “I knew he was going to be something more than even what he thought he could possibly be at the time. It was just a feeling I had.”

Since the beginning of his career, James has worked with a tight circle of friend-associates. Maverick Carter, who played high-school basketball with James, became his closest business adviser. Randy Mims, a childhood friend of James’s from Akron, now works for the Lakers. Carter, who was in high school when he met Paul, recalled him as intensely smart and ambitious. “I think LeBron looked up to him as another person he could learn from, and LeBron is an avid learner,” he said. James, Paul, Carter, and Mims refer to themselves as the Four Horsemen, and take enormous pride in their loyalty to one another and in their worldliness—the way they absorbed the intricacies of the sports industry and made it work for them.

With James as his star client, Paul has developed tremendous influence in the N.B.A. The two men have come to be associated with “player empowerment,” a term that refers to the additional clout that athletes—usually superstars—wield as they change teams more frequently and develop fan bases distinct from those in the cities they represent. The argument for player empowerment is that, for too long, teams have had too much control over the careers of athletes, almost all of whom can be traded on a whim, and that players should



*Paul and his client LeBron James believe that athletes should have more control over their careers.*

have some say in where they work and live. Moreover, in the N.B.A., which remains Paul's principal business—even as he is building a list of N.F.L. clients—it's hard for a team to be successful without a top-ten player. That gives the league's best athletes tremendous leverage. As David Falk, an agent who represented Michael Jordan and many other stars, told me, "They bring in the fans. They bring in jersey sales. They bring in the revenue." Why shouldn't they have the power?

Player empowerment is also inextricably linked to race. Professional basketball, a majority-Black sport, has always been run by a white commissioner and, almost uniformly, by white owners. But as players have gained sway they have become increasingly outspoken about politics, leading the league to embrace the Black Lives Matter movement. Jeremy Zimmer, the head of United Talent Agency, which bought a major stake in Klutch in 2019, told me, "Underneath player empowerment is also, I think, a real connectivity to what's happening socially in our country and how we're dealing with the injustice that lives underneath."

But player empowerment has downsides. In a league of thirty teams, superstars cluster in New York and Los Angeles, as well as a few other big markets—Houston, Miami, Philadelphia, San Francisco—making it more difficult for teams in other cities to compete. "Player empowerment is a catchall for the fact that the league has done a terrible job of empowering teams," a current N.B.A. general manager told me. "The players have all of the leverage in every situation. I think it's the worst thing that ever happened to professional sports on all levels." Bomani Jones, a sports journalist with ESPN, framed the issue differently: "The N.B.A. has a problem, which is it's got some bad real estate. They put a lot of teams in places that young Black men don't necessarily want to live."

**R**ich Paul formed Klutch in the wake of the greatest controversy of LeBron James's career. In 2010, James, at the end of his contract with the Cavaliers, surveyed the league and privately

concluded that he could no longer stay in Cleveland. He made the announcement on a grandiose live broadcast on ESPN, called "The Decision," in which he declared, without a trace of irony, "I'm going to take my talents to South Beach and join the Miami Heat." James has always been admired among the press as a player and as a person, but "The Decision" was widely criticized as an exercise in egotism. (When I asked Paul if James left C.A.A. because of "The Decision," Paul answered, "He left because of me. Because I left. That was simple.")

"I blame the people around him. I blame the lack of a father figure in his life," Bill Simmons, then a leading columnist at ESPN, wrote. "I blame us for feeding his narcissism to the point that he referred to himself in the third person five times in forty-five minutes. I blame local and national writers (including myself) for apparently not doing a good enough job explaining to athletes like LeBron what sports mean to us, and how it IS a marriage, for better and worse, and that we're much more attached to these players and teams than they realize."

Paul saw this as condescension and worse. "That's why I don't speak to Bill Simmons," he said. "A lot of that has to do with race, too. He wouldn't have said that about Larry Bird. He wouldn't have said that about J.J. Redick. You get what I am saying? 'The Decision' ten years ago is the norm today. It's what everyone wants to do. Kids won't even decide where they go to college without it being a big production, and Bill Simmons says some shit like that."

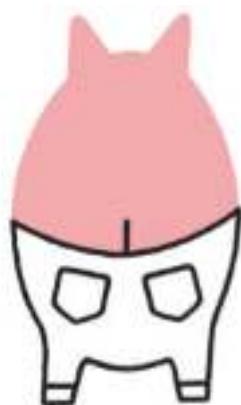
In retrospect, "The Decision" marked the start of the player-empowerment era—it's hard to imagine a similar event causing so much anger or upset today. James himself is unapologetic and believes that "The Decision" helped other athletes take control of their careers. He told me, "You are always going to have people that are not going to agree with something that you do, but at the end of the day they can't stop you, and can't stop your path, and can't stop your journey. I am happy that I was able to fall on the sword for the rest of these

athletes, men and women, to be able to feel empowered."

At Klutch, Paul became known for driving hard bargains, especially on behalf of James's teammates. After winning two championships with the Heat, James returned to Cleveland in 2014 and, two years later, led the Cavaliers to their first N.B.A. title. Paul's reputation was cemented after James joined the Lakers, in 2018. The following year, Paul all but forced the New Orleans Pelicans to trade Anthony Davis to the Lakers—just the teammate that James needed in order to win the championship in 2020.

Paul's strategy has become familiar. He first let it be known that Davis, who was under contract, was demanding a trade—a violation of N.B.A. rules—and then indicated that destinations such as Boston and New York were off the table. Paul was effectively making it clear that Davis would sign only with the Lakers, giving them an inside track on trading for him by depressing other teams' offers. The N.B.A. fined Davis fifty thousand dollars for the trade demand and could have fined the Pelicans if they had benched him—an appealing option for the team, because Davis wasn't playing his best, and an injury might have compromised the trade. Davis played sparingly during his remaining months in New Orleans, leaving bad feelings all around.

I asked Paul what he would say to a fan who believes that once an athlete signs a contract he owes it to the team to finish it out. "That would normally be a casual fan, and the casual fan doesn't understand the layers that come with it," Paul said. I asked him about his early conversations with Davis about leaving New Orleans. He grew circumspect. "I educated him on why I thought the team wouldn't be . . ." He paused. "All athletes are competitive and confident, until reality sets in. And I educated him on things." For a star player like Davis to commit to a franchise, "you either need your team"—a winning mix of players—"in place, or you need flexibility, assets, money, and the ability to make decisions. And, more important, the willingness to pay the tax"—the so-called luxury tax, for exceeding the league's salary cap, which the Pelicans at that time refused to pay.



"This ain't 'Moneyball,'" Paul said. He was referring to the book by Michael Lewis, in which Billy Beane, the nimble general manager of the Oakland A's, builds a winning baseball team on the cheap by using advanced statistical methods. But, as Paul knows, nothing quite trumps money. Players have short careers, and very few will remain sentimental about the charms of a small-market existence, particularly if their team is a loser.

Paul hadn't done much to rebut the notion that he had pushed Davis toward joining LeBron James and the Lakers. As one N.B.A. general manager said of Paul, "He is absolutely unrelenting in getting his players what they want, and he will use every means available to him to do that." Last year, James Harden, who is not represented by Paul, adopted his strategy, all but saying that he wanted a trade from the Houston Rockets and appearing not to play very hard until his wish was granted. Falk, the agent, called Harden's behavior "a debacle," but everyone around the N.B.A. seems to agree that this is the direction the league is headed in.

The rise of Rich Paul has led to heated conversations about what it takes to be a good agent. The role is changing along with the N.B.A. Agents have long done much of their work in bargaining sessions, painstakingly negotiating contracts for their clients. But now, particularly for star clients, the job is also about finding new ways to wield power, including using the media. This is where Paul excels. "It's not something that you go to school for," Jones, of ESPN, told me. "It's the kind of thing that you just pick up along the way, and he has got that resolve and that fundamental, innate understanding of leverage."

Paul, who dropped out of college during his freshman year, is intensely aware that he lacks the formal education of most agents. "It used to be, you had to be a lawyer, or have a lawyer," he told me. "You don't have to be a lawyer to do anything." But his background, as well as his approach to his job, clearly rankles others. In 2018, Paul negotiated an unconventional deal for the N.B.A. prospect Darius Bazley, in which Bazley, who had reneged on a commitment to play for Syracuse University, was later

paid a million dollars for an "internship" at New Balance (a prelude to a sneaker contract). The next year, the N.C.A.A. announced a new rule: agents could not represent college athletes unless they themselves had a college degree. On Twitter, LeBron James dubbed the new regulation "#TheRichPaulRule." Within a week, the N.C.A.A. had rescinded it. Paul told me, "It's a direct target of people of color for sure—a hundred per cent."

One day, I was talking with Paul and Adam Mendelsohn, a former political consultant and a longtime adviser to Paul and James. As a way of defending Paul, Mendelsohn alluded to the fact that he had worked at Creative Artists Agency before starting Klutch. Paul "came up the same way everyone else did," Mendelsohn said, by putting in time at a major firm.

"Well, let me tell you something," Paul responded. "I learned nothing at C.A.A."

"You know you're on the record, by the way?" Mendelsohn said.

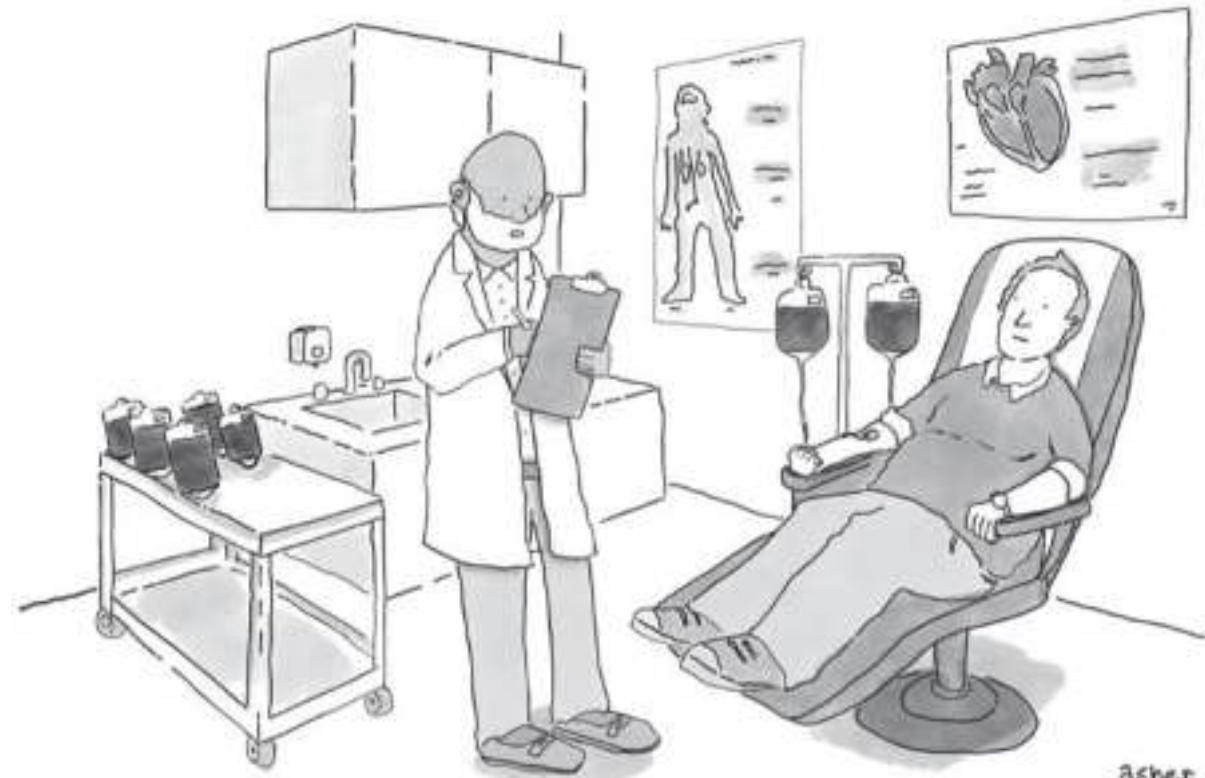
Paul forged ahead: "Nothing. I learned nothing. Because there was no investment in me for me to learn anything. There was no plan. I used my personal skill set that I grew up with for these opportunities."

Adam Silver, the N.B.A. commissioner, has known Paul for almost two decades, and told me that, from their earliest conversations, he was impressed by Paul. "Rich felt very different to me,"

he said. "It was more a sense of collaboration. And it was more a sense of curiosity, too. A lot more questions were being asked. He felt very comfortable to me acknowledging what he didn't know. There was always that adage that lawyers learn—Don't ask questions you don't know the answer to. Rich was willing to ask real questions and say, 'How does this really work?'"

Paul is proud of his willingness to fight for his clients, but he takes pains to combat the impression that he is constantly doing battle with teams. "You're not kicking in a door," he told me of his job. "I think the perception of it is wrong." He paused for a moment. "What I always focussed on was how to educate the athlete. It's one thing to be a Black man in America, right? It's a totally different thing to be a Black athlete."

For Black athletes, Paul explained, the sudden wealth of an N.B.A. contract comes with a "Black tax": "Their number of dependents is higher, their education in most cases is lower, their financial literacy is lower, their family infrastructure is lesser." He began to speak in the voice of a young N.B.A. recruit: "So now I become the breadwinner, which makes me the decision-maker. But I don't really know how to make these decisions or why I am making these decisions. In addition, I have this bond through affection, I have this bond through disparity, I have this bond through guilt. I



*"Wait—how many gallons are in a pint?"*

have this bond through absence. I am looking at the household, I am looking at every decision that has to be made, and I have to do this all with a focus on the money. I also have to look the part, which means I have to have the biggest car, I have to have the biggest house, I have to have the fanciest everything."

Paul and others at Klutch said that they see their job not only as making money for players but also as teaching them how to spend it. When I asked Fara Leff, the chief operating officer, how the company defines player empowerment, she told me, "Putting them in a decision-making role and educating them—not just putting paper or deals in front of them, but really talking to them and educating them about being a basketball or a football player."

Paul believes that he's in a unique position to help Black athletes. But he also thinks that many of them are reluctant to sign up with a Black agent. "If you go back in the history of representation, again, there were very few Black agents," he said. "There were very few families that had solid family infrastructure. So, you had Grandma really leading the charge, right? Well, who's Grandma going to listen to? She's going to listen to head coach. And head coach, in more cases than not, was probably not going to look like the player."

During our conversations, Paul kept returning to how the Black community viewed his role. "We're going from us feeling like, when you come in a room, if you see more Black people in the room, you're in the wrong room. No, you're in the right room. That mentality years ago, we have to change that," he said.

Draymond Green, an all-star forward for the Golden State Warriors and a Klutch client, told me he agreed with Paul's assessment: "There was always kind of this thought that, for African-American players, the best-fitting person to represent us wasn't one of ours."

At the same time, Paul said, "It's very difficult for me to represent a white player." I expressed surprise that this was the case.

"It just is. Look around. There's very few," he said. "I represent a player from

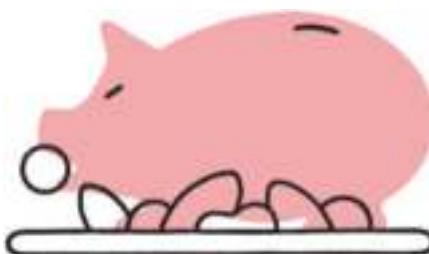
Bosnia. But, again, he's international. He looks at it different."

"So white players who are American don't want a Black agent?" I asked him.

"They'll never say that," Paul answered, cracking a rare smile. "But they don't. I think there's always going to be that cloud over America."

In early May, Paul was in Cleveland for the N.F.L. draft. He showed me Glenville, the neighborhood where he grew up, on the east side of the city. When Paul was young, he said, there was a family in every house, and he and his brother knew the names of the people in each one. Now even the main streets of Glenville looked empty, and nearly every residential block had several abandoned houses. As we drove past a mural proclaiming "Our Lives Matter," Paul pointed to a lot where he used to meet friends and play ball. It was now overgrown with weeds. His gleaming white Mercedes attracted attention, but it wasn't clear if people were staring at the car or at him. Paul seemed to know many of those we passed, all of whom looked happy to see him.

Paul spent his early years with his mother and three siblings. His father, Rich, Sr., owned a corner store, R & J Confectionery. Paul described his father as serious and business-oriented, which is how everyone in Cleveland described Paul as a child. There wasn't much to eat some nights, but his dad occasionally splurged on something his kids wanted.



Two people close to Paul in Cleveland recalled that he wore a tiny tuxedo to his third-grade graduation.

"I definitely wanted to be an athlete" as a kid, Paul told me. He played basketball and football, but it was obvious that he wasn't headed for a professional career. "Your heart is big, but I'm small in size," he said, so he tried to think more like his dad, "as an en-

trepreneur and businessman." Paul recalled that, at night, he stayed up late to watch the N.B.A. Western Conference games, and he studied every element of the players' behavior, "everything from mannerisms to what they said at press conferences." When he was twelve, he played in a local basketball league's championship game, and he was named most valuable player. Because he had spent so much time studying N.B.A. broadcasts, he said, "I kind of knew how to handle myself in the interview, thanking my teammates and so on."

Paul's mother, Peaches, battled drug abuse for much of her life, and when Paul was ten he went to live with his grandmother and a great-uncle, in a house several blocks away. He said of his mother, "I was never really angry, but I was definitely protective, and I was definitely sad in a lot of ways. Because, as a kid, you see other kids and their experience with their parents, and you want the same." (Peaches died, after getting clean, in 2016.)

When Paul was in ninth grade, his father sent him to Benedictine High School, which was Roman Catholic, and mostly white. Paul was excited that it offered what he called "a bigger stage" for basketball. "My dad was enthusiastic about it because he felt I would get a better education," he said. "He didn't really give a shit about basketball."

In 1999, when Paul was in college, at the University of Akron, his father was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. Paul transferred to Cleveland State to be closer to him. His father died a few months later, and Paul dropped out of school. "He was always telling me my education was important," Paul said. "I always wanted to work. But I still probably would have finished school if my father was alive. I never wanted to let him down."

We pulled up near an empty lot—the site of R & J Confectionery.

"This is my first time seeing it torn down," Paul said. "I'm so used to seeing a building right here." He told me that he plans to buy the lot. Paul's brother, Meco, who still lives in Cleveland, got into the car and began reminiscing. "That boy ain't switched up at all," he said of his brother. "He was exactly how he is right now. There's really no change, just he got a little bigger."

## SPRING

*In memoriam, Adam Zagajewski  
(June 21, 1945–March 21, 2021)*

Cool as the breeze, spring comes and proves the proven blank which was sorrow a turbulent need, a healing.  
Who am I kidding? To say “spring,” and to say so on the front steps just after noon in the bright cool of the day, is a form of dissolution.  
How have I arrived at that?  
Your death is only two weeks old, sudden and tender as the buds on the firethorn returning, and an old siren sound carrying on the breeze between two finches darting through shattered power lines cements a kind of comfort.  
I accept this. These creosote tears you must’ve seen on a Kraków statue streaked with rain. What arrives next is the marvellous phrase “half sea half land” (not yours but close), *marvellous* I mouth before I digress, and then zoom away to teach them, Adam, your “To Go to Lvov.”

—*Ishion Hutchinson*

As Paul drove, the brothers talked about the neighborhood and the tragedies that had taken place there. Paul kept pointing out telephone poles and trees that had been turned into shrines for victims of gun violence.

“You’ve been to my house in Beverly Hills,” he said to me. Now, showing me his old neighborhood, he asked, “Would you think there was a way out?”

“An old man got hit in the head right there,” Meco said, pointing to the sidewalk.

“Really?”

“Yeah. He was walking with his grandkids.”

“Oh, man,” Paul said, shaking his head.

Maverick Carter, LeBron James’s childhood friend and financial adviser, told me that he and Paul “developed a kinship and friendship based on how we grew up. We both had a view of the

long term, and if you came from a neighborhood like I did or Rich did it’s very hard to have a long-term view, because you have to figure out what you’re going to eat the next day.” He continued, “I think Rich is very good at giving people tough love. He has an ability to not be afraid and not back away from a tough conversation, because of the way he grew up, in part from having a father who died at a young age and having a mother who was a drug addict. Usually, our parents protect us from tough conversations, but he had the opposite experience.”

LeBron James told me that he believed Paul’s upbringing allowed him to connect with young players. “A lot of these kids that are being brought into these situations and being drafted, they are first-generation money-makers, they are from the inner city, they are from either single-parent house-

holds or from two-parent households, but they are from what we call the hood,” he said. “And Rich and I are from that as well, so he can relate to these kids. There is nothing they’ve seen that he hasn’t seen, so he is able to have real conversations with them.”

At dinner at a crowded upscale Cleveland restaurant, Paul seemed more relaxed than he had in Beverly Hills. He was sitting in a booth, and friends kept stopping by the table, often teasing him about his constant phone use, and the challenges it would pose to a romantic relationship. (Paul, who has three kids, has never married.)

The conversation turned to the pandemic, and I asked him if he’d been vaccinated since we last saw each other. He said he had. “What percentage of N.B.A. players will get vaccinated?” I wondered.

“Probably thirty,” he told me.

“Why is that?” I asked.

Paul tapped the side of his head and rolled his eyes. (An N.B.A. spokesman said that eighty per cent of players have had at least one shot. James has refused to say whether he has been vaccinated.)

We started talking about the Lakers, who were in a slump. Paul brought up the Nets, saying that they were “the only team that can beat us.” This sounded like a strangely partisan observation for an agent with clients across the N.B.A., especially after all the criticism he had received when bringing Anthony Davis to the Lakers. “I’ve got six guys on the team,” he said, shaking his head. “C’mon.”

**B**ecause of Paul’s close friendship with James, detractors have long claimed that Paul’s influence in the N.B.A. derives from his star client. When I asked Jeremy Zimmer, the head of United Talent Agency, about the connection between the two, he conceded the point: “I think that LeBron loves the success that his friend and agent Rich Paul has had and understands that a lot of that success has to do with his relationship with LeBron.”

There is a rumor in basketball circles that James owns a large stake in Klutch. Paul described such talk as an attempt to undermine him. “So why is it that LeBron has to own Rich Paul’s business?” he asked. “Let me tell you what that’s about. That’s all putting things in the atmosphere to

discourage, right? That's all they want to do." Zimmer said, "LeBron doesn't own Klutch Sports," and the N.B.A. agrees. The spokesman for the league said, "Current players are prohibited under the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the N.B.A. and the Players' Association from holding an equity interest in a business entity that represents other players. We have seen nothing to suggest Klutch Sports is in violation of this restriction."

When I talked to James about Klutch, I was surprised that he spoke of "our company." James told me, "I would say Rich and our company—I mean all of us around each other and Klutch—have done a great job of empowering their athletes and letting them understand the platform they have." I later asked Mendelsohn whether this indicated that James has a financial stake in Klutch. He responded, "LeBron does not and cannot have any ownership in Klutch. He refers to Klutch as 'us' because Klutch is his family. It's a dumb rumor, and while it doesn't bother Rich I don't think anyone paying attention is confused about why his detractors say it."

Brian Windhorst, an ESPN reporter who has known James for more than two decades and has written several

books about him, told me, "The burden that Rich faces is that people question his legitimacy. They want to delegitimize him because of his race, because of his lack of education, because he used to sell jerseys out of the trunk of his car. If that's the best they can do, they have to do a lot better." When I asked him about James's role in Klutch, Windhorst cut me off: "Is there some secret arrangement? So what if there is? If he tosses LeBron some sort of kickback, so what?" He added, "Rich may have been pulled up on his feet by LeBron, but he grew his own wings."

One afternoon in Beverly Hills, Paul and I walked into his living room with Mendelsohn. "She was over yesterday," Paul said.

Mendelsohn clarified whom he meant, dropping the name of a major pop star. "Doing what?" he asked.

"Hanging out," Paul replied.

"Why are you hanging out?" Mendelsohn asked.

"Why not?" Paul replied.

I wasn't entirely sure whether this exchange was for my benefit.

Paul said, "I'm not dating, I'm single. Put that in the story." He laughed for the first time all day.

That morning, Paul had had a Zoom

call with the mother of a potential client who was likely to be a first-round N.B.A. draft pick. She wanted to talk with Paul about what he could offer her son that other agents could not. "I just need someone to sell his quality points," she said. "You have got to believe in him."

"I think you hit on some good points," Paul responded, without much emotion. "Some of them I definitely agree with. Some of them I don't." He described the process that her son would undergo before being drafted, the work-outs in front of team executives and the meetings with general managers. "We help them understand how to approach these interviews, because that's where you really rise," Paul said of young athletes. "They will interview his teammates, and ask him, 'Did your teammates like playing with you?' ... 'Well, why didn't your teammates like playing with you?' How he answers that question matters. It really does."

Paul began speeding up his speech, rubbing his hands together. "Some guys are, like, 'I want to be an all-star, I want to be the M.V.P., I want to be this, I want to be that,'" he continued, clearly anxious to get to the reveal. "Well, that's wrong. You can be that, but you haven't yet said anything about how great you want to be as a teammate, how you want to do the things on both ends of the floor to help your team win." Suggesting what an ideal young recruit would say, he added, "Whatever the coach asks me to do, I am going to do it a hundred and ten per cent."

"It just sounds so generic," the mother said. "I thought you have to be authentic and say, 'Get to know me and my personality.'" Paul looked slightly skeptical but didn't respond. "'My teammates, my teammates,'" she said, lightly mocking him. "That's what they want to hear. I get it. But that's not the real authentic parts. I don't get the generic answers. Everyone is going to say similar answers. Is that what they are looking for?"

"That's exactly what they are looking for," Paul replied. "There's a fine balance, because you got to remember who's drafting these kids. In most cases, fifty-five-plus Euro men who have certain criteria and are stuck in their ways. The last thing they want to do is deal with



Kanin

*"I like the kind of art that when you're up close you're, like, 'This doesn't look like anything,' but when you back up you go, 'Oh, it's a face.'"*

what they perceive to be a headache to come.” Paul sounded as though he had given a version of this speech many times, but he didn’t betray any impatience. If this was tough love, so be it.

“I got you,” the mother responded. “I know this sounds weird, but why does this process sound like, how do I say it, I am not going to say slave-m mentality type, but I guess that’s what I am saying. Why does this process seem like we have to bow down?”

Paul exchanged a glance with Mendelsohn.

“I don’t think there is a bow down, because I don’t bow down to anybody,” Paul said. “I think it’s a balance. He has to be who he is. But, at the same time, what you don’t want to do is come off as a ‘me’ guy.” Paul then began discussing the intricacies of contracts. Eventually, they agreed to continue the conversation later and ended the call.

I asked Paul if he enjoyed talking to players’ families. “Yeah, I do,” he said, exhaling loudly. “One thing people don’t understand about our job is you’re not going to get every player the first time around. Because they don’t know the difference. But then, they get in and realize, ‘Hmm, Rich told me that all these things were going to happen. And they happened. This guy told me that things are gonna be different. And they’re not.’ And then they switch.”

In 2019, Paul sold what was described as a “significant stake” in Klutch to United Talent Agency, and became the head of the agency’s sports division. The move surprised many who know him. Draymond Green recalled that, in their early conversations, Paul had said, “Dray, I want to make all of these huge agencies obsolete.” Paul told me, “What I was saying to Draymond was there has been a monopoly in our space for many years, and I wanted to disrupt that.” He compared his own ascendance to the moment in “The Godfather” when “Michael went and killed all the heads of the five families.” Windhorst said, “That is as old as time. Klutch has absolutely gone corporate. There is no doubt about that. Some of the deals that they have made, you can tell there was more compromise. But joining U.T.A. has helped Klutch become a major power player.”

I recalled Paul’s conversation with the mother of his prospective client and his counsel of prudence; it had made me wonder about when Paul tries to use his leverage and when he doesn’t. LeBron James is known as one of the most politically outspoken athletes of his generation, campaigning for Democratic Presidential candidates and delivering his opinions on matters such as the killing of George Floyd and Georgia’s restrictive voting laws. Paul made it clear that he supports similar activism in his other clients. “You can’t turn a blind eye and just act like things don’t exist,” he said. “How you choose to involve yourself is up to you personally. The only thing you have to do is be aware. You can’t be tone-deaf to what the hell is going on around here.”

But there are limits to James’s political risk-taking. In 2019, Daryl Morey, then the Rockets’ general manager, tweeted about freedom for Hong Kong. At the time, the Lakers and the Nets were about to travel to China for a couple of exhibition games. James, who has a billion-dollar contract with Nike, which does business in China, was silent until he returned, and then criticized Morey. “We all talk about this freedom of speech,” James told reporters. “Yes, we all do have freedom of speech, but at times there are ramifications for the negative that can happen when you are not thinking about others and only thinking about yourself.” James, who often speaks about the importance of being educated about politics, went on to say that he and his teammates had not responded to Morey earlier because they had not “had enough information to even talk about it at that point in time, and we still feel the same way.”

Many liberals thought that James’s response had blemished an otherwise exemplary record of liberal activism. Unsurprisingly, Paul defended his client. “The thing about him criticizing Morey was that it wasn’t whether Morey said something about right versus wrong,” Paul said. “It was Morey’s comment affecting the environment and the business of the N.B.A. It wasn’t just LeBron being affected. It was everyone being affected.” I brought up Muhammad Ali, who had risked his career by refusing to serve in the Viet-

nam War. “I think there was a way to address it without—” Paul began, before catching himself. “I think people take it so literal, like he didn’t want to address what was going on in China because he didn’t want to hurt his Nike business. I mean, that’s so far away from the truth.”

At other moments, Paul was more forthright about how he weighed his interests. Last winter, the N.B.A. announced that it would hold an All-Star Game in Atlanta. The season had been condensed because of the pandemic, and players, already exhausted, expressed reservations about using what could have been five days off for an exhibition game that’s lucrative for the league but pretty dreary for them. James himself spoke up, saying he had “zero energy and zero excitement” about the game—but he never said he wouldn’t play, and he eventually agreed to do so. I asked Paul why he and James didn’t just decline to attend or demand that the game be cancelled.

“You can’t do that,” Paul replied, sounding frustrated that I didn’t grasp the obvious point. “You have to value what drives our business. All-Star weekend is a very important part of our business.” He mentioned the league’s corporate partners and sponsors. “To not have the All-Star Game, or not have all-stars playing in the All-Star Game, I think that would be a form of doing bad business. You don’t have to like it, and you don’t have to always feel up to doing something. No one feels up to doing something all the time. But you have to toe the line, and you have to be a good partner.”

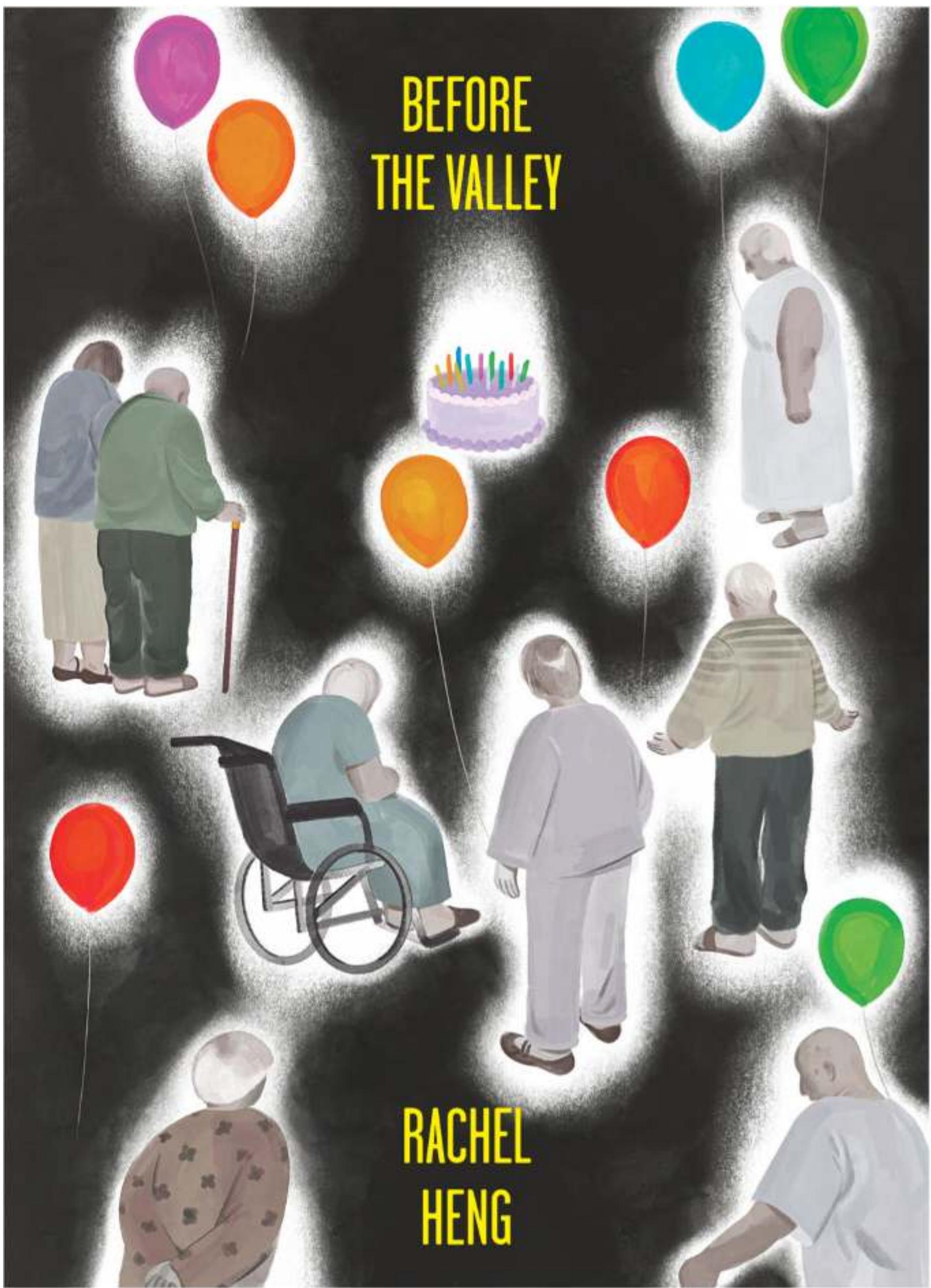
Mendelsohn cut in. “Rich is the first to tell LeBron and these players, ‘You have to do this,’ ” he said. “There is this idea about player empowerment that we are taking on the league and taking on the owners. But there is more time spent figuring out how to help the owners and the league be successful than there is spent trying to take them on. And a lot of people assume it’s some sort of activist orientation. It’s not.”

“The perception is that you are bursting into the room,” Paul said. “No. You are really trying to have conversations at the highest level, on How are we able to grow our game? How are we able to grow the business of our game?” ♦

FICTION

# BEFORE THE VALLEY

RACHEL  
HENG



**T**he candles were already lit when Hwee Bin arrived. Her mistake—she'd missed the announcement at breakfast saying today's party would take place in the Big Hall, instead of in the Rec Room. What was wrong with the Rec Room? she mentally complained, while taking her place in the crowd. Birthday celebrations were always in the Rec Room. But, catching a glimpse of potbellied Kirpal in his wheelchair, Hwee Bin softened. Likely the change had been made because Kirpal was so popular, and more residents than usual were expected to attend. Typically, birthdays were local affairs. Hwee Bin was in Ward 4, one of the fourteen-bed wards, which was a bad thing every day of the year except her birthday, when it meant that she could count on at least thirteen other people showing up to her party. A relief, since Hwee Bin had never been good at making friends, even before.

"Before" was the shorthand residents used for their lives prior to Sunrise Valley. Before wasn't talked about often; it felt unseemly somehow, self-indulgent, to dwell on one's past life. What did it matter, for example, that Cynthia, from Ward 8, had been an actress who starred in the horror films that used to be made here in Singapore, back in the sixties? Or that Hasmi, from Ward 12, had been a lawyer and was even rumored to have owned his own firm? They were all here now, Sunrise Valley residents one and the same. Sure, Cynthia was in a two-bedder with a garden view, and Hasmi had one of the few, coveted, and very expensive single wards. They still had to come to the linoleum-tiled dining room each morning for the same soggy kaya toast and watered-down coffee. Still took their seats each evening in front of the television, which blared, alternately, English-, Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-language soaps. Wards aside, were the residents not all in the same boat? The details might differ—mild dementia, children too busy to visit, loss of leg function, no living relatives—but the crux of the matter was the same. You were stuck in Sunrise Valley regardless, whether it was paid for by your dwindling pension, the government, or an erstwhile child.

Of course, Cynthia and Hasmi would disagree. Those in the smaller wards were most likely to let slip details of

their *Befores*—nothing too obvious, just a hint here, an old business card there—because they couldn't bear being lumped in with everyone else. Hwee Bin understood. Once, she, too, would have bristled at the thought of sitting among strangers in the dining room that smelled like a hospital, eating from childish plastic bowls. But you got used to it. And if you didn't—well, some didn't.

A scuffle broke out to Hwee Bin's left, then a wail.

"Sh-h-h, sh-h-h, Hazel, never mind, let her have it, sh-h-h, O.K., O.K., she'll give it back to you...."

The aide fussed and soothed, but Hazel's cries only grew louder. The nature of the offense: her neighbor had snatched the graying stuffed rabbit that Hazel carried everywhere. Baobao, she called it—one of the few words she still spoke. Baby. Even with the rabbit restored to her, Hazel continued to storm, flailing at her neighbor's face as if she were a nightmare to be banished.

Hwee Bin averted her gaze. Seeing Hazel like this made something open up inside her, a frightening abyss she had to carefully ignore or risk falling into. Just a year ago, Hazel had sat with them in the common dining hall, carrying on entire conversations, eating on her own, and complaining loudly about the food. "Curry as thin as my diarrhea," Hwee Bin remembered her saying once, when they were seated at the same table. Back then, Hazel's eyes had been bright and impish, her wispy white hair neatly pulled back with a shiny red clip. "You got diarrhea?" Hazel had asked. Hwee Bin shook her head. "Lucky you."

Hazel had had mild dementia then. Many of them did, and still lived happily with everyone else. But, six months later, she had disappeared from the dining room. "High-D," the others whispered, shaking their heads, and then they spoke of Hazel no more. No one liked to talk about the high-dependency residents, who lived on the third floor. Stroke victims, the paralyzed or severely incapacitated, the self-harming, and, on rare occasions, those who had lost all hope and simply refused to eat or move. There was a special ward in High-D for those with advanced dementia; that was where Hazel lived now. High-D residents were always in wheelchairs, and wore large, pillow-y gloves that looked like oven mitts.

With her teeth, Hazel now tore off a glove and flung it in the aide's face.

"Take her out, please," Mrs. Tan called from the front of the room, where the candles for Kirpal were slowly burning down. Mrs. Tan spoke in what Hwee Bin called her "weekend voice," the warm, syrupy tone she assumed on Saturdays and Sundays, when Sunrise Valley teemed with families and visitors. Her usual voice was rigid and cold, often crackling with impatience. One understood, Hwee Bin thought. As the floor manager responsible for some twenty wards and more than a hundred residents, Mrs. Tan could not be saying please and thank you in her weekend voice all the time or nothing would ever get done. But today was Wednesday. Could it be... Hwee Bin craned her neck to see the front of the room.

Sure enough, a tall, slender young woman stood beside Kirpal's wheelchair, one hand on his shoulder.

"O.K., Dada-ji, we sing now?" The woman smiled, and the smile lit up her lovely face. Her throat was like an egret's, long and graceful and smooth. She put one hand to it now.

"Indian girls, when pretty, always so pretty," Ah Gau, from Ward 5, said. He spoke in Hokkien.

"Pervert," Hwee Bin hissed back.

"Say only! Say also cannot?"

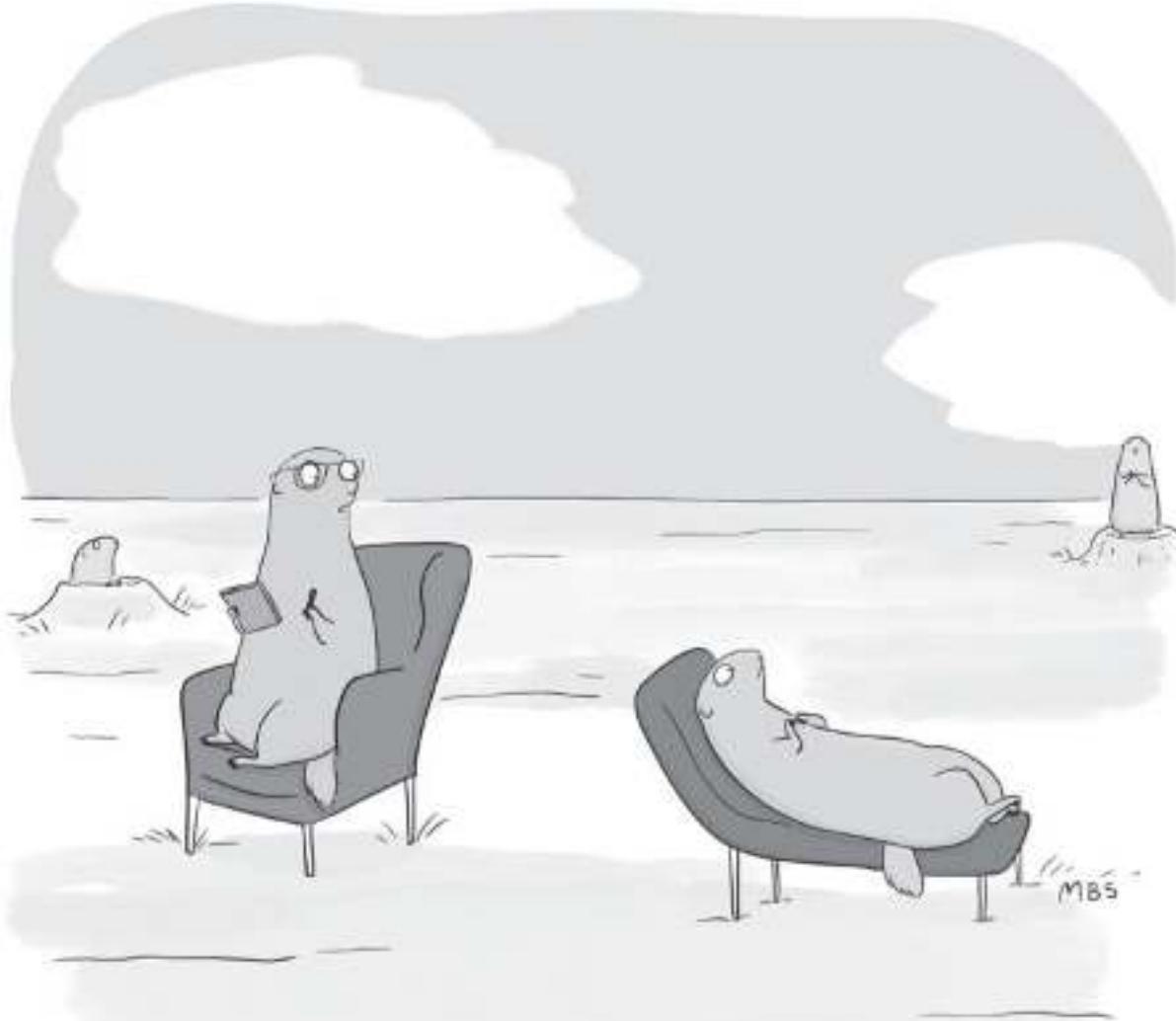
"Sh-h-h."

"Kirpal also always say, 'Satveer this,' 'Satveer that,' 'Satveer so smart,' 'Satveer the most pretty'—"

"Are you Satveer's grandfather?"

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you."

Ah Gau and Hwee Bin were drowned out by the singing, a dissonant chorus of residents' voices slipping in and out of sync. Mrs. Tan led the song in English, and the residents sang along in whatever version they knew. Ah Gau began singing in Mandarin, Hwee Bin, rather proudly, in English. She liked any chance to practice. Hwee Bin was born the youngest child of seven, at a time when her older siblings were already working, and thus, despite her father's having been a karang guni—rag-and-bone man—and her mother a laundry-woman, she'd been afforded the rare luxury of school. After attending the convent school up to Form Six and even learning a few words of French, she'd gone



*"Have you tried being more vigilant?"*

on to take a typing class and got a job as a secretary at a small shipping company. Eventually, she'd had to leave, of course, once she married and had her children. But how many of the women of Sunrise Valley could say that they'd once read "Le Petit Prince" to a roomful of elegant Brits at the Raffles Hotel? In hindsight, Hwee Bin saw how shamelessly she'd been used by the convent nuns to raise funds for the school, trotted out at charity galas and school fairs like a prize pig. Never would she have allowed her own child to be paraded in this way. And yet those golden evenings, filled with the scent of cut roses withering in tropical heat, the gloved hands of wealthy women cupping her chin, the applause and admiration—they would stay with her always.

"...Happy birthday to Kirpal, happy birthday to you!"

The room broke out into cheers, cameras flashed. Kirpal, however, was covering his face.

"Don't take photo. You said no photo," he growled.

Silence fell. Kirpal was never tense.

Known for his dirty jokes and the endless supply of M&M's he doled out from his pockets, even to the diabetics, he was usually the life of any party, the one to brighten so many of their gloomy afternoons. Everyone had a Kirpal story. Hwee Bin herself had met him on her very first day at Sunrise Valley. Her daughter had just left, it was teatime, Hwee Bin's few belongings—a Bible, eyeglasses, and some laminated photos—had been tucked away in the cabinet by her bed. She still remembered the terrible loneliness of walking into that dining hall for the first time, meeting the rheumy eyes that looked up at her from their cartons of Milo and chrysanthemum tea. Everyone was so old, so, so old. And yet they looked like children, with their paper bibs and dribbling mouths and meaningless gurgles. Oh, it was horrifying. Surely she did not look like that, surely she did not eat like that, sit like that. She had to call her daughter, she thought in a panic. She could not stay here. And then came the awful realization: even if she did call Doreen, all her daughter would say was what she always said—"There's no other op-

tion. It's just not safe. What if you fall again?" Hwee Bin would take falling again over this dining hall, these poor specimens hunched in their chairs, napping in their tea. Then a loud wolf whistle broke her spiral.

"Who's the new hottie?"

It was said with such aplomb that, to Hwee Bin's surprise, she began to laugh. The wolf whistler beckoned to the empty seat next to him. As soon as she sat down, Hwee Bin began to feel better. Kirpal had a way of looking at you, eyes half shut, challenging tilt in the chin, humorous twist to the mouth, as if to say, Now just look at what we have here. Something about him made you sit up in your seat and want to prove yourself. In a place where people came to die, you felt—for lack of a better word—alive. Along with his ribald cheer, Kirpal gave off an aura of no-nonsense pragmatism, a fatalistic acceptance of the situation, such as it was. He could calm any High-D resident, lift the spirits of any frightened newcomer. In the months that followed, Hwee Bin learned that Kirpal welcomed every new face—man or woman, hearing or otherwise, upright or wheelchair-bound—with the loudest wolf whistle he could muster.

So it made them all uneasy to see Kirpal cover his face now, snapping at his beautiful granddaughter, who had come all this way on a Wednesday afternoon, had perhaps even taken time off work to visit him. Not many residents had granddaughters who would do such a thing, buy helium balloons, hire a professional photographer, all just for a birthday, when birthdays were a dime a dozen around here.

"Dada-ji, it's O.K. I stand next to you," Satveer said.

Finally, Kirpal acquiesced. But even Satveer's dazzling smile could not compensate for the stony look he directed at the camera. Flash, flash, flash. The photographer took out a small electronic device, one that looked like a Walkman, and pointed it at Kirpal's closed mouth. Satveer chattered away brightly. Hwee Bin caught fragments from where she was sitting: *My Dada-ji is a man with a rare gift, my Dada-ji has a true work ethic, my Dada-ji would take me to the beach—and so on.* If it had been anyone else's granddaughter, Hwee Bin might have found the way the girl was going on a

little exaggerated, even mildly irritating. But it was natural to feel enthusiastic about a grandfather like Kirpal.

"Reporter," Ah Gau said, gesturing toward the photographer. "From the *Singapore Tribune*."

"Don't talk nonsense," Hwee Bin said.

"Not nonsense. I heard from Cynthia! Arrange by his granddaughter, big interview."

"Heard from Cynthia means true?"

At that moment, cake was distributed, and Hwee Bin didn't press further. They tucked in, rainbow sprinkles sticking to the corners of Ah Gau's mouth, Hwee Bin's fingers growing oily from the grease that seeped through her paper plate. Strawberry icing and sponge dissolved in a cloying paste on her tongue as Korean pop music—the aides' favorite—streamed from the radio. The residents chewed quietly. At the front of the room, Satveer was still speaking animatedly into the reporter's tape recorder. Her elegant arm was slung protectively around Kirpal, who said nothing and refused to take his eyes off his lap, where a slice of strawberry cake sat untouched on its plate.

**B**reakfast the next morning was nasi lemak, Hwee Bin's favorite. The fried chicken wings might be soggy and the peanuts low in salt, but the rice itself was soft and fragrant with the rich scent of coconut milk. And the belacan was always good—extra spicy and not too sweet. Hwee Bin carefully arranged each bite just how she liked it: a spoonful of rice, a morsel of egg dabbed with belacan, a piece of chicken. As she began to eat, Kirpal rolled up in his wheelchair.

"Good?" he said. "Mind if I join you?"

She nodded. Hwee Bin was in the habit of coming early to meals so as to avoid the awkward sting of solitude. Kirpal, on the other hand, typically arrived late, surrounded by his rotating posse. She'd never seen him come to breakfast at this time before. If she were Ah Gau or Cynthia, she might have questioned him about it. But, being herself, she just went on making neat, delicious mouthfuls of nasi lemak. Kirpal didn't speak, either. He ate slowly, his eyes fixed on the empty space between their trays. There they sat, fluorescent lights flickering overhead, the smell of fried chicken mingling with that of the lemony anti-

septic cleaner used to wipe down the tables. The longer the silence went on, the less Hwee Bin was able to enjoy her nasi lemak. The chicken seemed oilier than usual, the rice overcooked.

"Did you have a good birthday?" she said at last.

Kirpal looked up. Over the whites of his eyes crept a fine spiderweb of pink blood vessels. He seemed not to be thinking of his birthday at all. He had, Hwee Bin thought with a shiver, the air of a defeated man.

"Lovely," he said at last.

More silence.

"Did you like the cake?" A faint note of desperation entered her voice.

Suddenly, she thought of an afternoon many years ago, Doreen coming home from school to find her sitting motionless at the dining table, while Lisa, barely six months old then, screamed in the next room. Children have an uncanny instinct for their parents' pain, Hwee Bin remembered thinking, as she watched Doreen's face change. The girl didn't yet know that her father had left—in the most humiliatingly clichéd of ways, for a woman he kept up in Johor Bahru—didn't yet know that Hwee Bin feared not being able to find a job, didn't yet know that they might lose the flat in which they lived. But Doreen took one look at her mother and seemed, instantly, to acquire a maturity she had not had that morning. She poured her mother a glass of water, setting it down on the table before her with such care that it broke Hwee Bin's heart. Then she went to calm the baby. Soon the flat was quiet again. Hwee Bin took a sip of water and felt that she might go on.

"Yes," Kirpal said. "It was delicious."

It took Hwee Bin a moment to realize that he was answering her question about the cake. The silence that fell again was unbearable. Were their roles reversed, were she burdened by some private grief, Kirpal would surely have known how to comfort her.

"Your granddaughter is very beautiful," she said. "And so filial. Sweet of her to come yesterday."

Kirpal didn't answer, but instead cupped the bottom half of his face with his hands. His knuckles were enormous, as twisted and shiny as oiled walnuts. His fingernails, impeccably clean, made

small white smiles against his skin.

"She still working at Procter & Gamble? Young people these days work so hard—my Lisa, she does advertising in New York, so long hours and doesn't even pay well. Doreen also, every day work until eight o'clock, no time to eat dinner. She's still single, you know, forty-eight years old. I worry, does she want to be alone forever? But you know how they are...."

As Kirpal remained silent, Hwee Bin continued to spout meaningless chatter, even though she knew that she was somehow saying the wrong thing, that she was making it all worse, was turning the blade of some invisible knife between his ribs.

"Oi! Kirpal!" It was Ah Gau, shuffling in excitedly on his walker.

Gratefully, Hwee Bin stopped mid-sentence. In his armpit, Ah Gau gripped a newspaper. No doubt it would be damp, and a little smelly. Still, she was relieved for his presence, even when he spread the newspaper out on the table in front of them and it was dark with sweat stains.

"Look!" Ah Gau jabbed a finger at the page repeatedly. "Wa! Famous leh you!"

There they were, Kirpal and Satveer, he in his wheelchair, she leaning protectively over his shoulder. Around them were the colorful balloons she'd brought; on a table in the background was the cream cake studded with slices of strawberry. But it wasn't the balloons or the cake or even Kirpal that Hwee Bin was looking at. It was the words, those strange, incomprehensible words, marching across the top of the photograph, above Satveer's smiling face and her long, cascading hair, printed as simply as if they formed any ordinary headline.

"**RETIRED HANGMAN CELEBRATES 90TH BIRTHDAY.**" Beneath it, in smaller font: "Former state executioner was known for his affable nature."

"What does it say?" Ah Gau asked in Hokkien. "What does it say?"

Attracted by his loud voice, some of his wardmates had come over with their trays of nasi lemak. They crowded around the newspaper, pointing and exclaiming.

"Why never interview me?" one asked in Cantonese.

"Wa, Kirpal! Famous like Cynthia? You also movie star?" another said in Malay.

"What—" Ah Gau spoke slowly, in

English now, enunciating each word. “What does it say?”

They were all staring at Hwee Bin, mouths hanging open like hungry, slobbering dogs. Kirpal, too, raised his heavy-lidded eyes to meet hers. She tried to see it in his face: the man who, for decades, had made a living taking the lives of others. She stared at his large-knuckled hands that lay open on the table, palms as smooth as the inside of a seashell, from which she had so often accepted M&M’s and high fives.

He saw her looking. Slowly he brought his hands together, as if to pray.

“Go on, Hwee Bin,” Kirpal said. He spoke gently, in English, as intimately as if they were husband and wife. “Tell them what it says.”

Some weeks later, Doreen took Hwee Bin out for the day. The aides insisted on pushing her to Doreen’s car in a wheelchair.

“You know it’s all for show, right,” Hwee Bin said as soon as the car door was closed. “They let me walk around any old how when you’re not here.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” her daughter replied primly. “If that’s true, then why am I paying them so much?”

Not that much, Hwee Bin thought. She was in a fourteen-bed ward, after all. But, if she said that, Doreen would only start complaining about Lisa, living it up in New York with no thought for her mother and her responsibilities.

“Where do you want to go?”

Hwee Bin shrugged. Doreen drove them to the nearest mall, but, because it was Saturday, the underground car park was choked with crawling vehicles looking for a space and ambling families trying to remember where they had parked. Doreen and Hwee Bin went around in slow, frustrating circles for almost half an hour. The air-conditioning in the car was broken, and something rattled in the engine each time Doreen accelerated.

“You should get that fixed.”

“Where got money? When it finally conks, I’ll just sell it for junk and take the M.R.T. like everyone else.”

Hwee Bin pinched her nose. Doreen knew very well that her mother couldn’t go on the M.R.T. The escalators went too fast, their steps were too

steep, the train doors that opened and shut didn’t allow enough time. These day trips would end, too, then.

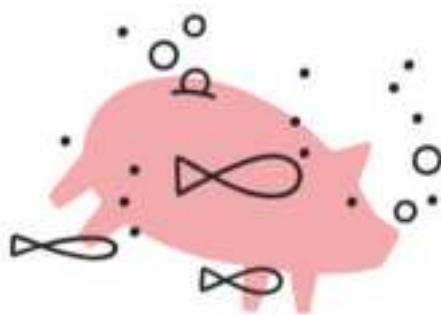
Finally, they found an empty space. Doreen backed the car into it with jerky, aggressive turns. Hwee Bin’s daughter had always been tightly wound, but she seemed to be getting worse of late. Hwee Bin wondered about her life. Was she not lonely? Didn’t she want a family of her own? Though, in truth, Hwee Bin knew very well the reason for Doreen’s solitude. After her father vanished, she’d built her walls carefully, painstakingly, as only a child knew how, so that no errant gap would let in the light of pain. And now here she was—living on her own, working days and nights and often weekends, so busy she had time to see no one, not even her own mother.

But Hwee Bin didn’t actually know that. Possibly, Doreen kept strings of lovers, held dinner parties with her school friends, was a regular social butterfly. Perhaps she had a husband, a child, even. An entire life kept secret, like the one her father had once had with his second family, across the causeway. His blood ran in her veins. Just because Hwee Bin had always taken Doreen at her word didn’t mean that it was true.

They made their way to Toast Box, in the basement of the mall. A long line snaked from the counter, and it seemed as though the parking situation would repeat itself.

“Kopi O gao, siew dai, right? Want any toast?” Doreen said, joining the line.

Hwee Bin shook her head and went off with her walker to find them a seat.



She hovered between two tables, each occupied by a couple who had finished eating but continued to sit silently, scrolling on their phones. Finally, one of the women brusquely tapped her husband on the elbow, gathered their shopping bags, and left. Hwee Bin took a seat. Her shoulders hurt. The café was jammed with strollers and scream-

ing babies, toddlers pressing their cheeks to the tiled floor, glossy paper bags filled with shoes and clothes blocking the aisles. The stool Hwee Bin sat on was wobbly and had no back. She found herself missing the plastic chairs in Sunrise Valley’s dining room, with their cushioned seats and sturdy, curved spines. Nevertheless, when Doreen arrived with the drinks and toast—even though she’d said she didn’t want toast—Hwee Bin started on her usual refrain.

“Work very busy?”

“Busy, yes. My boss just quit, so they’re getting me to do all his work. It’s a nightmare—”

“Wa, promotion?”

“No.” Doreen clicked her tongue impatiently. “That’s not how it works. You don’t just get promoted because—never mind.”

They drank their coffee. Doreen picked at the kaya toast. It was bothersome, how she kept breaking off small pieces and getting the sticky green paste all over her fingers, instead of just picking up the whole thing and eating it properly. But Hwee Bin swallowed the admonishment on the tip of her tongue. Her daughter was not fourteen anymore.

“So busy, got time to cook dinner every night?”

“You know I usually just da bao. A new coffee shop opened across the road, the Hainanese curry rice not bad. Next time I bring for you.”

“Aiya, girl, so unhealthy. How can you every day da bao?” Hwee Bin paused, weighed her next words carefully. “If Ma is at home, Ma can cook soup for you, steam fish like you like.”

“It’s fine. I try to make congee myself, since it’s easy. And I eat a lot of fruit.”

“Eating hawker food every day is not good. Even if you eat fruit.”

Doreen stopped picking at the toast. The corners of her mouth were dark with coffee. Hwee Bin thought of the nun at her convent school who’d given out waxy packets of chocolate milk every day. “Drink up and show me those chocolate smiles,” she’d say, and Hwee Bin would gulp down the powdery calcium supplement that she learned, later in life, tasted nothing like real milk, but had found so delicious anyway.

"Don't start with this now."

A warning in Doreen's voice. But Hwee Bin had to go on. She saw her daughter so rarely, she had to give it her best shot.

"I get around O.K. with the walker now. My bedroom is just sitting empty, gathering dust. I would be very careful. You just have to leave the food and kitchen things where I can reach—"

"And the physio sessions? And your medication?"

"I only do physio once a week now that my leg is better. You could take me. It's not more work than coming to visit. And I can take my medication myself—you just have to set it out each morning with some water. It's only the bottle lids I can't manage with my fingers, and the labels are too small to read—"

"And the commode shower?"

Hwee Bin fell silent. The plastic wheelchair with its open seat, the aides' rubber-gloved hands sliding between the cheeks of her buttocks, she, sitting, naked, placid as a cow. No, she could not ask Doreen to do that.

They finished their drinks. Doreen left half a piece of toast behind, and Hwee Bin did not have the heart to say, as she usually did, that one ought not to waste good food.

"Look, Ma—"

Just then, the woman at the next table let out a grating shriek. Doreen leaped to her feet, sending her stool clattering to the floor. Something large and dark scurried under the table. Others jumped up, too; some whipped out their phones and pointed them toward the ground.

"Get up, Ma, get up!" It was easy enough for Doreen to say. Hwee Bin struggled to get to her feet, determined not to stumble or fall. She was strong, stronger than her daughter or anyone else would imagine. Everyone was still screaming, filming, threatening to call the health-and-sanitation board, or the police. Someone yelled, "This place should be shut down! Such disgusting pests coming straight from the kitchen!"

So on and so forth. Young people had never lived with rats. The creature was under Hwee Bin's chair now. Slowly, she got up, and now she was standing, now she took hold of her walker. Do-



reen was gesturing frantically, her face so scrunched in fear it was laughable. Despite all Doreen's brusqueness, all the power she held over Hwee Bin, she was, at her core, a little girl afraid of a rodent. It occurred to Hwee Bin that she was wearing sandals, and it wouldn't be good for the rat to bite her. Yet, if she did get some disease and died that way, it would still be a better death than a slow decline in Sunrise Valley's high-dependency ward. Doreen was shouting for her to move. *What's wrong with you, Ma, move, move!* All this noise over a little rat.

Then she felt it: the rodent's weight on her left foot, its sharp claws digging into her flesh as it moved, the feeling of warm, filthy fur on her skin. Screams, more screams—not from her, though. She had known rats in the dilapidated row house she'd lived in as a girl, had been woken up by the sound of their teeth chewing through thick gunny-sacks to get to the rice, but never had one touched her. It was a sickening feeling. Then a quick, awful scuttling of the claws, and it was gone, a flash of

black dashing out into the glitzy fluorescent lights of the mall.

"Are you O.K.?" Doreen said, grasping her mother's arm protectively.

Looking into her daughter's face, Hwee Bin seemed to see her at every age. A little girl arranging colored pencils on the cold tiled floor. A teen-ager briefly venturing into rebellion, short skirt, permed hair. A young woman in her first job, boxy jacket with shoulder pads, a lightness to her walk, as if all the world awaited, as if all the world were at her feet. And now here she was: middle-aged, overworked, childless, alone.

To think that she'd imagined Doreen capable of saving her. Moving out of Sunrise Valley would take her no further from death.

What would happen to the rat? Hwee Bin recalled the neighbor boy she'd played marbles with as a girl, who she'd thought had terrible aim but realized, years later, had been holding back on purpose to draw out the game. That boy was long dead. Found with blood seeping from his nose and gums,

bruises pooling in the crooks of his knees. For most families on their block, there were weeks when food ran short and all a child might have to eat was some slices of sweet potato in watery congee. It was in such a week that the neighbor boy, empty stomach gnawing like an animal trying to get out of his body, had chanced upon a box of rat poison in the kitchen and mistaken it for food.

"Take me home," Hwee Bin said to her daughter. Doreen, pale as a baby chick, drove carefully this time.

Now Hwee Bin was the one who sat with people at mealtimes, and Kirpal who was alone. Satveer had not come back to visit after his birthday. Hwee Bin thought of her often, sitting in some air-conditioned conference room with men whose paunches strained against their shirts, who stared at her long neck as she went, line by line, through whatever contract was under discussion. Beautiful Satveer, intelligent Satveer, well-meaning Satveer, whose Dada-ji had once taken her to the beach. What emotion had moved her to contact the newspaper, take the day off, buy the balloons, request that Mrs. Tan hold the celebration in the Big Hall and not the Rec Room? What misguided pity, secret pride, warped vanity had made her chatter away to the reporter about Kirpal's past when he himself would say nothing? All that mattered for Satveer was the outside world, the world that would read the article in the *Singapore Tribune* the next morning and say, How touching. How brave. What sacrifices a man like this must have made for our nation. Impossible for her to imagine was the world of Sunrise Valley, where her mild, jovial grandfather who had taken her to the beach actually had friends—friends he cared for, friends with internal lives and moral compasses and hypocrisies of their own. Friends who had to sit next to him at lunch and think about what he had done.

He had not intentionally kept it from them, Kirpal had explained. No one talked about their lives from before. That this was true did nothing to stop the residents of Sunrise Valley from peeling away from him one by

one. Nothing this exciting had happened since Madam Seet had been caught in bed with a male aide. "I just feel like we had a right to know," Cynthia said, every time the topic was discussed, which was every occasion that Kirpal was not there. "I just feel like we had a right to know." Low voice, lips pursed, she lived for the performance. Know what? Hwee Bin wanted to ask. What was there to know, and why should they have a right to anything at all? But she kept her mouth shut. She had, after all, read the English headlines out loud to Ah Gau and his crew that very first morning, aware, the entire time, of Kirpal's soft, unblinking eyes on her.

The *Singapore Tribune* article was parsed over and over. Kirpal's "unique ability" to put prisoners at ease had often moved them to donate their organs before the end. To stay healthy, he "cracked a raw egg into his coffee" each morning. A young prison officer, he had started out as an assistant to Mr. Gloucester, a British hangman in the colonial prison services, "well-versed in the Table of Drops."

Hwee Bin was often enlisted to translate some English word or another. And there was no doubt that she was flattered by the attention. She was never alone now; the others had grown comfortable with her at last, and these days, even when the conversations had nothing to do with Kirpal, they included her out of habit.

No one, really, was against the death penalty itself. "No use feeling sorry for them," Hasmi, the lawyer, said. "I've met these drug dealers—trust me, you don't want them near your kids." Here Cynthia would shudder dramatically, wrap her bony fingers around her shoulders in a girlish manner that, a long time ago, might have been charming. "Someone must do lah," Ah Gau said matter-of-factly. "Otherwise how to keep Singapore safe? But—aiyo. Something wrong with him, do for so many years, so many people." The issue, then, was not the act of hanging itself but the consistency and equanimity with which Kirpal had seemingly carried on for so long.

And how did Hwee Bin feel about it? If there was one thing she had learned in her eighty-two years of life,

it was that she could grow accustomed to anything, anything at all.

It was still some months before Kirpal would begin to wake up with long scratches down the sides of his arms, and no memory of how they had appeared. Some months before the aides would recommend mitts for what they called his "night fidgets." A year before a bed jacket would be imposed. For anyone other than Kirpal, mitts and jacket would come much sooner. But Kirpal would wheedle the staff, charm Mrs. Tan, tease the aides. Once the residents would no longer have anything to do with him, he would turn his attention to his minders, direct all the cheer his nature could muster toward them. Being human, they would not be immune. But they were professionals. And eventually, as Kirpal continued to rake his fingernails into the thin flesh of his arms night after night, they would be left with no option but to move him to High-D.

For now, though, Kirpal still sat in the dining room in his wheelchair, feeding himself, his limbs unencumbered. What was it that made Hwee Bin rise from her table—Cynthia, interrupted mid-sentence, shooting her a look of annoyance—take her tray, and cross the room to where Kirpal sat? There was no one thing she could point to. Later, she would say that Kirpal was taking on the faded look that Hazel had had before her precipitous decline. *Curry as thin as my diarrhea.* The weight of a rat's claws on her bare foot. *He cracked a raw egg into his coffee each morning.* When her car finally conked out, Doreen would take the M.R.T. *My Dada-ji is a man with a rare gift.* The neighbor boy lying pale with blood trickling from his nose.

No one would save her.

Hwee Bin sat down. Kirpal looked at her with his soft, soft eyes. When she spoke, it was as if to an old friend, someone she had played marbles with in the sticky caress of the monsoon morning, on a street that once held so many lives, and families, and children, but had long since ceased to exist.

"Tell me," she said, "what it's like to die." ♦

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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## REGULATE THIS

*G.M., Ralph Nader, and the debate over big government.*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

Ralph Nader, now eighty-seven years old, has been a public figure for more than half a century. Many people know him as a long-shot left-wing Presidential candidate in four successive elections, from 1996 to 2008, and as the possible spoiler of a Democratic victory in 2000, when he got almost a hundred thousand votes in Florida and Al Gore lost the state by five hundred and thirty-seven. “Ralph Nader is not going to be welcome anywhere near the corridors,” Joe Biden told the *Times* back then. “Nader cost us the election.”

But his real heyday was in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. In 1966, he was the star witness at sensational hearings about automobile safety conducted by Senator Abraham Ribicoff, of Connecticut. Nader, a young lawyer who had just published a book titled “Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile,” seemed to know everything about auto safety, and to be motivated by a pure moral passion. What helped elevate him from star witness to celebrity, though, was the fact that his principal target, General Motors, hired private investigators to dig up dirt on him. There wasn’t any to be found, but Nader caught on and alerted first the *Washington Post* and then *The New Republic*. The idea of the country’s paradigmatic giant business corporation going after a penniless, idealistic reformer was journalistically irresistible.

In the years following the Ribicoff hearings, Nader was able to make himself into far more than an auto-safety expert. He sued G.M. for spying on

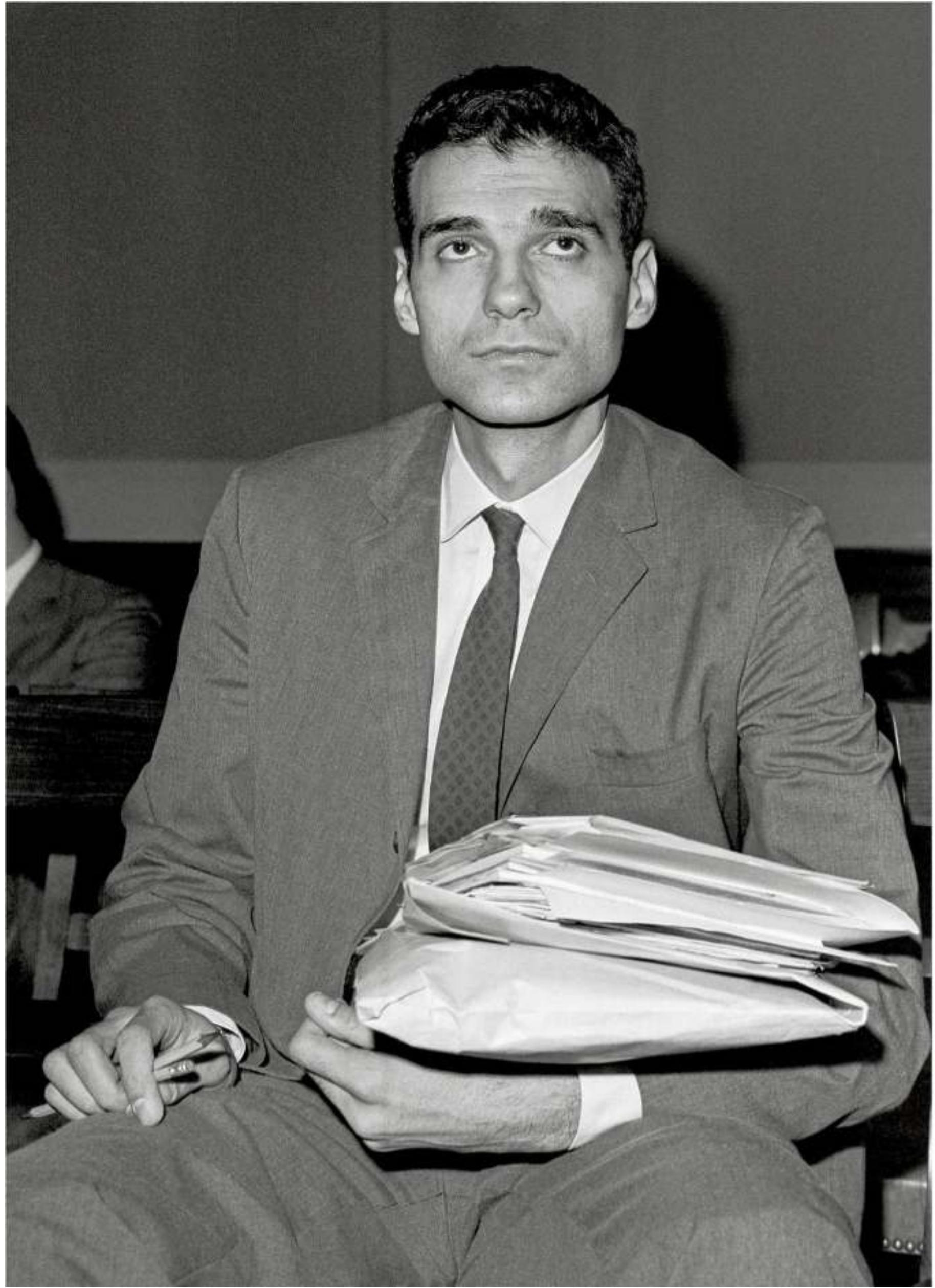
him, and used the proceeds of the resulting settlement to start a series of organizations that investigated what government agencies did and failed to do. Nader’s parents were immigrants from Lebanon who operated a restaurant in the town of Winsted, Connecticut, but he had Ivy League degrees (Princeton, Harvard Law School), and in those days becoming a Nader’s Raider, as staff members at his organizations were known, was a glittering credential, a blazer-wearing way of participating in the culture of the sixties and seventies. A Pete Buttigieg of that generation would have gone to work for Nader instead of McKinsey.

In a 2002 biography of Nader that had the subject’s coöperation, Justin Martin identifies 1971 as Nader’s zenith. That year, by his calculations, the *Times* published a hundred and forty-eight stories about him. The following year, Martin reports, George McGovern offered Nader the Democratic Vice-Presidential nomination, which he turned down. Four years after that, Jimmy Carter, during his successful Presidential campaign, met with Nader twice. Martin credits Nader with influencing around twenty-five pieces of federal legislation that were passed between 1966 and 1973. When Lewis F. Powell, Jr., soon to become a Supreme Court Justice, wrote a memo to the Chamber of Commerce titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System,” which helped lead to a new network of conservative organizations, he made the source of his alarm clear: “Perhaps the single most effective antagonist of American business is Ralph Nader,

who—thanks largely to the media—has become a legend in his own time and an idol of millions of Americans.” It’s hard to think of anyone in American history who achieved this kind of influence without holding any official position or leading a mass movement.

Nader’s appeal was enhanced by the fact that he seemed completely indifferent to worldly possessions and creature comforts. He was part prophet, part saint. Legend had it that he lived in a rooming house where he shared a telephone with three other residents—and, of course, he didn’t own a car. He was evidently celibate. He was known to work through the night. He wasn’t retiring or unambitious, exactly—he was a lecture-circuit regular, and his activism played out across a vast range of issues—but his selflessness was essential to his mystique. In the nineteen-seventies, Dupont Circle, a shabby-genteel neighborhood just past the edge of downtown Washington, was the acropolis of Naderism. It seemed as if everybody there worked for him, worked for an advocacy organization inspired by him, or covered him as a journalist. If you lived there, you’d sometimes see him striding briskly down the street, head lowered, a great wad of papers under his arm, wearing a drab suit and a skinny tie, and feel the validation that came from knowing you were at the center of a consequential movement.

Kenneth Whyte’s “The Sack of Detroit: General Motors and the End of American Enterprise” (Knopf), presents itself as an account of the decline of the leading automobile



*Nader at a 1966 congressional hearing. An expert in auto safety, he became a crusader for “consumerism.”*



*"I'll probably only invite you to be in my wedding out of obligation and you'll feel really out of place next to the friends that I've formed much closer bonds with."*

• •

manufacturer, and, by extension, of the entire American project, but it's really a book about Nader in the first period of his renown. Whyte argues that Nader and the hoopla surrounding the Ribicoff hearings set General Motors on the path that led to its humiliating bankruptcy, in 2009. That ascribes a great deal of power to Nader, but Whyte goes further still. The question of why the American economy has stopped providing for working people as well as it once did hovers over politics today—hence Joe Biden's and Donald Trump's similarly restorationist campaign slogans, "Build Back Better" and "Make America Great Again." Whyte has a simple answer: the fault lies with Ralph Nader, and everything he stood for.

"The Sack of Detroit" is told entirely from General Motors' point of view. It conjures a strain of business-oriented conservatism that seems to have receded, at least publicly, in favor of a preoccupation with the malign influence of "élites." In Whyte's account, the big automobile companies—

which once occupied roughly the same economic and cultural space that the Big Five technology companies do today—were almost always entirely admirable, the principal creators of an almost miraculous era of American happiness, prosperity, innovation, and global leadership. Business, in "The Sack of Detroit," is generative; its liberal critics are resentful and destructive. They aim to curtail honestly earned success and to limit people's ability to enjoy their lives. Ribicoff, Nader, and their allies "brought to its knees the greatest industrial enterprise in human history."

Whyte sees in Nader the confluence of two forces that had been building for some years. One was the dissatisfaction of liberal intellectuals—among them John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lewis Mumford, Vance Packard, and C. Wright Mills—with the post-Second World War apotheosis of the industrial corporation; they were troubled by the country's uncritical celebration of materialism and growth, and maybe by the idea of a na-

tional culture dominated by business. The other force was less well known but more demonstrably connected to Nader: the emergence of the "second collision" theory of auto safety. In the early days of the automobile, efforts to reduce driving fatalities focussed on highway design and driver education, not on the car itself. They aimed at preventing car crashes from taking place. The "second collision" refers to the way injuries occur when an accident does take place: it's the collision of passengers with the interior of the car. The creators of second-collision theory—a Chicago labor lawyer named Harold Katz, who wrote a law-review article about it that Nader read, and Hugh DeHaven, a former pilot who co-founded the Automotive Crash Injury Research Project, at Cornell—focussed on changes in automobile design that could make crashes safer.

In 1959, Nader wrote an article about auto safety for *The Nation* which led to a correspondence with the future New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had also become interested in the issue. A few years later, Moynihan, who by then was working for the Johnson Administration's Department of Labor, got in touch with Nader, and wound up giving him an office at the department to pursue his research. Whyte treats the relationships among Nader, Moynihan, and Ribicoff, then a freshman senator looking for a way to propel himself out of obscurity, as an outrage: Nader wasn't a lone crusader, he was a government-enabled compiler of other people's research, enlisted by politicians to help them further their personal ambitions. G.M. and the other American automakers, on the other hand, were blameless. Deeply concerned about safety, he writes, they had formed an industry group to promote it back in 1937, and the annual number of American traffic fatalities had fallen since then.

G.M. and the other manufacturers had already begun offering seat belts in some of their cars; the constraint on their efforts to build safer cars was that customers didn't want to pay the additional cost. The special target of Nader's crusade, the Chevrolet Corvair, an innovative model developed to help

G.M. ward off the imports that were already starting to compete with Detroit's products, was no less safe than other cars. What distinguished the Corvair was that it had become the target of tort lawyers—"ambulance chasers," Whyte calls them—who made a living by encouraging plaintiffs "to collect from others for one's own misfortunes instead of suffering fate in a stalwart fashion." (Whyte could have mentioned that, in 2015, Nader founded the American Museum of Tort Law in his Connecticut home town, featuring a bright-red Corvair on display in the middle of the museum.)

One direct consequence of the Ribicoff hearings was the creation, in 1966, of a new federal agency, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (Another was the demise of the Corvair, which G.M. stopped producing in 1969.) An N.H.T.S.A. report from 2015 estimated that between 1960 and 2012 auto-safety measures, most of them government-mandated, had saved 613,501 lives, and that the fatality rate per mile of travel fell by eighty-one per cent, substantially because of safety-enhancing changes in automobile design. The risk of dying in a car crash went down more over this period than the risk of dying prematurely from disease did. But Whyte insists that the auto-safety crusade was unnecessary, had little public support, and has produced few useful results. He will not entertain the idea that government is capable of doing something useful, rather than simply tearing down what business has built up. Liberals, in his account, are grandstanders, weirdos, or hypocrites. He tells us that Bobby Kennedy sped home from one of the Ribicoff hearings in a Lincoln Continental convertible, not wearing his seat belt; that Ribicoff, rather than being sincerely interested in auto safety, was merely "out for blood" and determined to "damage the reputation of automakers"; and that the prissy Nader found it repulsive that Detroit chose to give muscle cars of the sixties names like Thunderbird, Mustang, Cobra, and Barracuda. By contrast, big businessmen, in the book, exhibit an odd combination of idealism, a crippling inability to be anything but phlegmatic in public, and emotional vulnerability.

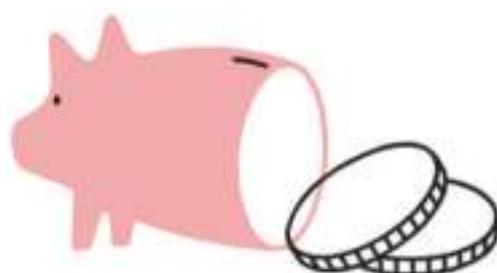
Whyte surmises that Nader's crusade may have killed Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., G.M.'s retired chairman, who died in 1966, at the age of ninety. As for G.M. executives who were still active, "their self-respect and their worldview were shattered."

Whyte concludes his detailed account with the end of the Ribicoff hearings and then covers a great deal of ground with a series of claims that he doesn't go to much trouble to support. One is that the campaign for auto safety wound up destroying General Motors. On the eve of the Ribicoff hearings, Whyte tells us, G.M. was, measured by economic output, "the size of Ireland, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Norway combined." At its personnel peak, in 1979, the company had more than six hundred thousand employees in the U.S., most of whom were hourly workers making an average of around forty dollars an hour in today's currency. In addition, G.M. and the other automakers spawned a vast network of ancillary businesses—"new and used car dealerships, repair shops, parts and accessory suppliers, automobile insurers, roadside motels, and fast food restaurants," in Whyte's summary. The company maintained a landscaped suburban research campus, designed by Eero Saarinen. Today, G.M. has about a hundred and fifty thousand

percent. The regulatory state expanded into food, cosmetics, credit instruments, packaging and advertising, monopolies and pricing practices, and air and water pollution." Within American culture more broadly, "torrents of entrepreneurial energy shifted from producing growth to identifying and combating growth and its consequences," which "spelled the end of American enterprise as it was known for the first two hundred years of national history." The interaction between Nader and General Motors is sufficiently interesting on its own that one can tolerate the tendentious way Whyte recounts it. But Whyte's sweeping claims about the advent of the regulatory state miss what really happened.

The standard explanation for the auto industry's decline—provided by, among others, Nader's childhood friend David Halberstam, in "The Reckoning" (1986)—is that Japanese and German competitors began making cars that were higher-quality, cheaper, and more fuel-efficient than their American counterparts. Other accounts emphasize that G.M.'s spending on wages, pensions, and health care became unsustainably high, owing to a series of generous contracts with the United Auto Workers in the fat postwar years. Whyte gives little or no credence to any of these explanations, because he sees G.M.'s decline as being entirely attributable to Nader-inspired regulation.

This raises an immediate question: how could safety regulations have destroyed General Motors but not, say, Toyota and Honda, which also had to comply with the regulations in order to sell cars in the American market? The larger question, though, is what Whyte means by "regulation," a term that he never quite defines. The Koch-funded libertarian Cato Institute produces an "Economic Freedom of the World" index, and it ranks the United States as the sixth most economically free of a hundred and sixty-two countries and territories, far ahead of Japan and Germany. (We're bested by a handful of island nations.) Thomas K. McCraw's "Prophets of Regulation," a Pulitzer Prize-winning history from 1984, described the post-Nader period as "a most peculiar spectacle," in which some types of regulation were advancing and



employees, and currently doesn't rank among the hundred most valuable American companies.

For Whyte, this is part of a broader tale of decline: in his view, the United States went from having a mainly unregulated economy to having a heavily regulated one—so much so that the country lost its ability to thrive. "Prior to the Ribicoff hearings, regulated industries in the United States represented 7 percent of Gross National Product," Whyte writes. "By 1978, 30

others were retreating. McCraw, no fan of regulation, listed “airlines, trucking, railroads, financial markets, and telecommunications” as arenas of regulatory retreat. Nader himself was a public supporter of several of these deregulatory efforts. So were such prominent Democrats as Jimmy Carter (who railed against “red tape,” and prided himself on deregulating the airlines) and Ted Kennedy. Later, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama presented themselves as friends of deregulation. The reason that we are now in the early stages of a great debate about regulating the Internet is that a quarter century ago just about everyone, including liberals, assumed that an unregulated Internet would be a good idea.

**S**o did Nader usher in an era of regulation or one of deregulation? The puzzle arises because regulation—government telling business what to do, or, anyway, what not to do—can take many forms. Ralph Nader’s larger cause is usually described as “consumerism,” a movement focussed on the welfare of someone who buys a consumer product. Most government regulation has focussed on other concerns. The very first federal regulatory agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission, created in 1887 and laid to rest in 1995, was intended to put railroads under a degree of government control, in order to protect not consumers but other businesses from being gouged. Ida Tarbell’s crusading journalism about Standard Oil, which helped lead to the government’s breaking up of the company, was aimed at protecting small oil producers (like her father), not people who bought gasoline or kerosene. During the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt’s liberal advisers relentlessly argued over what kind of regulatory state we would have, with the result that we had several. There was regulation to promote competition, to control prices, to prevent the failure of essential businesses, to buttress certain business sectors, to compel businesses to attend to the public interest, to create a stable set of players in one or another industry—and, even back then, to protect consumers.

Although conservatives constantly accused the New Deal of representing

a socialistic takeover of the private economy, its authors typically saw themselves as saviors of capitalism: giving the government greater economic power was a way of fending off the threats posed both by fascism and by communism. One common form of government regulation was an agency that would regulate an industry in a manner that represented a sort of brokered peace among the major companies within the industry, the government, and organized labor, which was the New Deal’s major supportive interest group. John Kenneth Galbraith’s book “American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power” was published in 1952. It was a celebration of this kind of arrangement as the foundation of a good society. (Galbraith had worked as a government price regulator during the Second World War.) In 1954, one of Galbraith’s mentors, the former New Deal brain truster Adolf Berle, proudly announced that an “incomplete list of the areas of American economy presently controlled” by the federal government included banking, electric light and power, radio and television, meat products, petroleum, and shipping.

Nader’s consumerism rejected this type of government regulation. He and his many organizations consistently criticized regulatory agencies that effectively protected existing business arrangements instead of focusing on consumers. When Nader favored deregulation, it was for this reason. He wanted regulators to be fiercely oppositional. After his close associate Joan Claybrook became the head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 1977, the two stopped speaking, because Nader felt that she was going too easy on the auto industry. Justin Martin identifies Congress’s refusal, in 1978, to establish the proposed Consumer Protection Agency as marking the end of Nader’s peak period of influence. The campaign to create the agency failed in part because of Nader’s purism. Rather than bargaining to create a bill that might pass, he travelled to the districts of congressional liberals who had reservations about his preferred version and attacked them. During the 1980 Presidential campaign, he claimed that there was no real differ-

ence between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. He never again had entrée into the White House.

Because Galbraith-style countervailing-power systems were anathema to Nader, his version of consumerism lacked one of their major strengths, designed-in political support. Compared with other liberal causes—civil rights, feminism, unionism, environmentalism—consumerism did not develop the kind of formal structures that can maintain consistent pressure on government for decades. It was concerned more with finding specific points of attack than with creating large permanent membership organizations, staging big rallies, or generating a cohort of reliably supportive elected officials. Founded on a dislike of conventional interest-group politics, it had little taste for the relentless bargaining and dealmaking that constitute much of the work of government.

Indeed, the intensity of Nader’s critique of almost all politicians and government activities created some overlap between consumerism and the resurgent free-market conservatism of the nineteen-seventies; Nader and Milton Friedman both joined in the crusade against airline regulation, with organized labor and the airlines themselves on the other side. Robert Bork’s highly influential attack on antitrust law, “The Antitrust Paradox” (1978), proposed that the primary consideration in government regulation of the economy should be the welfare of consumers—as opposed to that of the small-business owners, shopkeepers, and farmers who had traditionally propelled the antitrust movement—and it was hard for Nader-era liberals to refute Bork’s argument.

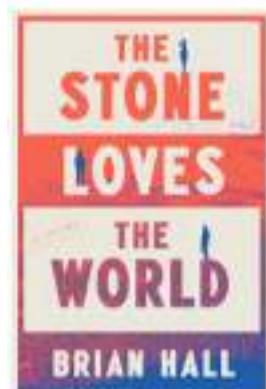
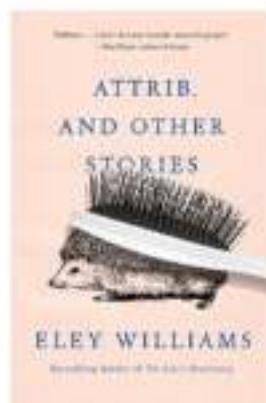
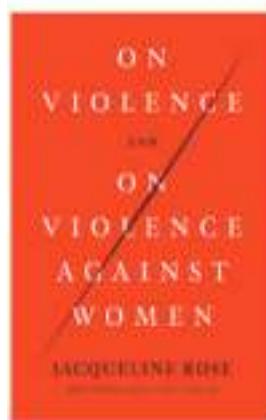
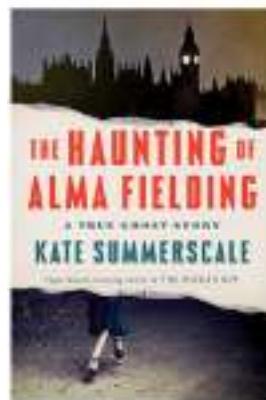
**G**.M.’s fall from glory wasn’t the story of a new regime of heavier regulation. But consumerist liberalism did tilt the focus of regulation, and the limits of the approach are illustrated by the excesses of tech giants like Amazon, Facebook, and Google. If the only test of a big corporation’s behavior is whether it provides consumers with good products, good service, and low prices—rather than how it treats its competitors or what it does with the information it gathers about its

customers—the tech giants pass with flying colors.

We are now in a moment, for the first time in half a century, in which American politics doesn't rest on a foundational mistrust of "big government"—a mistrust that Republicans have relentlessly promoted, and that generations of Democrats have acquiesced to, assuring voters that big government isn't what they have in mind. In truth, the size of the federal government hasn't changed appreciably during that time; the New Deal and the Second World War were really the era of big government, and what ensued has been an era of relatively level government, except in dire emergencies like the current pandemic. But, then, the idea of out-of-control government expansion was always a proxy for other sentiments, like resentment of the government's limited embrace of the social movements of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. The idea that Democratic Party liberalism is centrally devoted to attacking business, especially big corporations, also seems like a relic: Republicans are launching antitrust actions and attacking "woke corporations," and business sectors like Wall Street and Silicon Valley are either divided in their political loyalties or pro-Democratic.

In President Biden's early proposals, one can find a number of quite different ideas about what form an enhanced government role in the economy might take. We may see closer scrutiny of the conduct of business (possibly including more stringent rules for financial companies and stricter environmental controls), concerted support for favored sectors (like community colleges, electric-car manufacturing, and "care work"), measures to strengthen the countervailing power of the union movement, or controls on Big Tech. Any of this would be what Biden likes to call a B.F.D.; none of it would represent a Nader-like crusade on behalf of consumers. There are a multitude of other ways in which the government can try to ameliorate the distress of the moment and the rising inequality of the past few decades. As was the case during the New Deal, the *how* arguments will be far more significant than the *whether* arguments, and deserve our close attention. ♦

## BRIEFLY NOTED



**The Haunting of Alma Fielding**, by *Kate Summerscale* (Penguin Press). In nineteen-thirties London, the Hungarian parapsychologist Nandor Fodor began studying Alma Fielding, a housewife who claimed to be tormented by a poltergeist. Fielding summoned birds from thin air, performed astral projection, and channelled spirit voices—feats that raised suspicions of fraud but also led Fodor to a new understanding of the psychology of trauma. Summerscale draws on archival material and adds context, seeing the craze for Spiritualism as reflecting both the bereavements of the First World War and fears of rising European Fascism. "The nation's phantoms," she writes, "were distractions from anxiety, expressions of anxiety, symptoms of a nervous age."

**On Violence and on Violence Against Women**, by *Jacqueline Rose* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). These provocative essays probe assumptions that both fuel and mask violence in Western culture. Drawing on Freud, Lacan, and others, Rose traces undercurrents of fantasy and disgust in political decisions. American and British refugee and border policies are "drenched in sexual hatred"; when the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, after shooting his girlfriend, claimed that he had mistaken her for an intruder, "he was re-enacting one strand of his nation's cruellest past." Rose writes that "there is a violence in the world which buries its own ruthless logic deep inside the norm," and she argues that injustice arises from the suppression of uncomfortable truths.

**Attrib.**, by *Eley Williams* (Anchor). Mischief runs through this story collection, evident from the first line: "The plot of this is not and will not be obvious." Revelling in playful language and eschewing narrative convention, the stories feature encounters—with a lover, an art work, the natural world—that are endlessly teased out in protagonists' hyperverbal minds. One character, anxious about kissing in a museum, muses that the word "dandelion" comes from the French *dent-de-lion*, lion's tooth" and concludes that "a lion would not baulk at kissing you, toothily." Williams delights not simply in wordplay but also in people who are alive to the poignant and humorous potential of language.

**The Stone Loves the World**, by *Brian Hall* (Viking). This multi-generational tale centers on Mette, a twenty-year-old math genius who has difficulty connecting with people. After her first taste of heartbreak, she flees New York, ending up with her grandfather, an American physicist living in Denmark. His son, an astronomy professor, was absent in Mette's childhood, but although the father-daughter relationship consists mostly of e-mails about math problems, she has more in common with him than she does with her artsy mother. When the parents reconnect to find their daughter, the novel becomes expansive, chronicling Mette's forebears and their many intellectual enthusiasms: math, music, medieval history. Hall shows how the life of the mind offers a refuge from psychological distress and, in so doing, shapes our personalities.



## BOOKS

# SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

*A philosophical novel about adolescent bullying.*

BY MERVE EMRE

In an age of voice-driven fiction, the phrase “novel of ideas” has an unavoidably dusty ring. It summons the drowsy cadence of the philosopher, the tedious rehearsal of concepts on loan from antiquated sources. Knowing this, there is an admirable brazenness to the way that the Japanese novelist Mieko Kawakami describes “Heaven” (Europa), her novel of ideas, newly translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd: “Gaining inspiration from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the work takes up the theme of bullying in middle school and addresses the ultimate question of good and evil,” she has written on her Web site. It is as if she were determined to

alert us to the mismatch between the well-worn preoccupations of young-adult fiction and her grand philosophical objectives; as if she wanted us to question her ability—anyone’s ability—to draw the two together. One wonders if Kawakami, enthralled by Zarathustra’s mountaintop howlings about the death of God and the will to power, searched for a timely hook on which to hang these out-of-fashion ideas. And one sees the pitfalls before the possibilities. Certainly, there’s a risk that the novel will deliver puffed-up platitudes about the inherent cruelty and sympathy of children. Or that it will revel in nihilism, allowing sadistic teen-agers to

*Mieko Kawakami dissolves Nietzschean ideas into the confusion of adolescence.*

do harm not just with impunity but with their author’s admiration.

Yet Kawakami is interested neither in demonstrating what makes people good nor in delighting in their anti-social perversities. Rather, her project is, like Nietzsche’s, a genealogical one. Her novels trace how terms of moral value evolve—how “good” and “evil,” or “pain” and “pleasure,” get affixed to ordinary interactions: becoming friends or becoming enemies, fighting or refusing to fight, falling in love or falling into indifference. Her plots offer not a moral education according to the precepts of God but an exploration of how our language of morality is grounded in the shifting power among human beings. Kawakami never evangelizes, never wags a finger. She simply sets first-person narrations of suffering alongside stumbling dialogues, attempts to make that suffering intelligible to others.

The fourteen-year-old narrator of “Heaven” has no proper name, but his classmates call him Eyes, on account of his lazy right eye. His world is “flat and lacking depth.” All people and objects come bearing their own “blurry double,” and, for all his anxious squinting and blinking, he can never be sure whether he is “touching the right thing, or touching it the right way.” Descriptions of settings and of physical appearances are willfully, almost comically bland, bereft of the colors and the outlines that give realist fiction its sense of solidity. “My eyes took in the scenery like a postcard, but when I blinked, it slipped from view, replaced by a new scene,” the narrator says. His eye marks him as a target for bullying by other boys, led by Ninomiya—handsome, popular, and at the top of his class—and his quieter sidekick, Momose. They force the narrator to ingest chalk and toilet water; they imprison him in a locker; and, in the novel’s most throat-tightening scene, they devise a game called “human soccer,” with his head stuffed inside a ball, his gaze no longer wall-eyed but utterly blind.

The eye was Nietzsche’s preferred metaphor for the shifting nature of moral truth. “There are many kinds of eyes,” he wrote. “Even the sphinx has eyes—and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths,’ and consequently there is no truth.” The narrator’s eyes function as an

ingenious conceptual device—the novel would not work if the narrator were deaf or paralyzed—giving Kawakami a rationale for refusing to describe period details or local haunts. We know that “Heaven” takes place somewhere in Japan, and that the Japanese word for bullying, *ijime*, points to a subtle and brutalizing practice of classroom harassment that national legislation sought to address after several student suicides. We know, too, that the year is 1991—hence no cell phones, no e-mail, no cyberbullying. But all this presents itself as ambient knowledge, inessential to the archetypal drama that will unfold between strong and weak children, in a town that could be anywhere or nowhere.

More than any particular place, then, it is the narrator’s body that supplies the setting for the drama of “Heaven.” He is supremely mistrustful of it, attuned to every crick and cramp, forever measuring his pulse or noting the clench in his stomach when his bullies appear. His body marks the limits of all he can describe, and all the reader can know, a world of recesses and cavities mapped in choked little sentences, sharp spasms of the psyche: “I could hear my heart throb in my ears”; “It felt like my heart wanted out of my chest”; “I could hear my heart pulsing in my throat.” Imprisoned and helpless, his failures of sight and speech and touch must be overcome so he can extend himself into the world.

“I need companions,” Zarathustra exclaims, on descending from the mountain where he has lived for ten years by himself. “I need living companions, who will follow me because they want to follow themselves—and to the place where I will.” One day, the narrator finds a note in his pencil case that reads, “We should be friends.” The writer is a girl named Kojima, who is bullied by the other girls for having dirty hair and cheap clothes and a dark spot under her nose. The notes that she and the narrator begin to exchange, which structure the first part of the novel, are full of teen-age banality. They address homework and weather and contain none of the coy intimations of epistolary fiction. Yet it is not long before the words traced by Kojima’s hands—the Japanese word for “letter,” *tegami*, comprises the characters for “hand” and “paper”—start to usher in

the benevolent, nearly physical presence of the writer. Reading her letters, which he hides in the slipcase of his dictionary, the narrator sees “a little pair of rectangles casting a warm light at me through the darkness. I almost felt like I could reach out and touch it. Then I started thinking about how I hoped the notes I wrote Kojima brought her comfort when she was hurting.” Writing, the quasi-magical circuit that connects minds to hands to eyes, gathers an extraordinary aesthetic and ethical (and, to a certain degree, erotic) power. It sets the mind free. The childish notes become as momentous as the letters that make up Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” one of Nietzsche’s favorite novels.

“I love only what a person has written with his blood,” Zarathustra instructs his followers. “Write with blood and you will find that blood is spirit.” Kawakami takes the command very seriously, if not literally. The blood spilled furnishes not only the reason for the correspondence between the narrator and Kojima but also the spirit of the novel’s philosophical inquiry, initiating the friends into deep, sustained thinking about the world of middle school, their inferior position in it, and the responsibility they bear for each other. “When they bullied me and beat me up, why couldn’t I do anything but obey them?” the narrator asks. “What does it mean to obey? Why was I scared? Why? What does it mean to be scared?” The rhetorical question, Kawakami’s preferred device for showing thought leaping into action, can court faux profundity. But it also implies an earnest demand that the narrator—and, alongside him, the reader—connect his experience of a mental state (“Why was I scared?”) to an interpretation (“What does it mean to be scared?”). This process of putting pressure on meaning, twisting words this way and that, is how thinking works and how theories are made. During the most optimistic moments in “Heaven,” it is a shared process.

“I couldn’t stop thinking” emerges as a refrain for the narrator and Kojima, who start meeting to discuss what it means to be bullied. They utter it not as a complaint but as the compulsion that draws them to each other—the desire to impart clarity and depth to their suffering, the need to create a world apart from the world in which they cannot see or

stand up straight. When Kojima writes to the narrator to say that she wants to show him Heaven, he is surprised to find himself in an art museum. Heaven, Kojima reveals, is her name for “a painting of two lovers eating cake in a room with a red carpet and a table”; two lovers who have survived “something really, really sad” but now perceive the world in perfect harmony. It is a bad omen that the narrator and Kojima never get to see the painting, having grown thirsty and tired of walking and feeling overwhelmed by being in such close proximity. Their failure to secure total understanding of each other will soon push them apart and deeper into themselves.

“I was always quite a philosophical child, asking odd questions and in a hurry to grow up,” Kawakami has said of her upbringing, in Osaka. Her family was working-class and her father largely absent. At fourteen, the same age as the characters in “Heaven,” she got a part-time job at a fan factory, to supplement the family’s income. In her twenties, she worked as a bar hostess and a bookstore clerk while pursuing a career as a singer-songwriter and taking correspondence courses in philosophy. A blog that she started to promote her singing career, “Critique of Pure Sadness,” displays a wry fascination with Kant, and is cut with streetwise Osaka slang and unsparing discussions of sex. She studied Nietzsche’s writings with Hitoshi Nagai, a philosopher at Nihon University who had a particular interest in *resentiment*—the persistent hatred that impoverished, powerless people felt toward their noble oppressors. According to Nietzsche, *resentiment* motivated the rise of “evil” as a concept, allowing the oppressed to condemn their enemies, and of “good,” as the concept that could valorize their suffering.

Traces of Kawakami’s life and education are scattered throughout her novel “Breasts and Eggs,” which received international acclaim when it was published in English, last year. The book concerns two sisters from a working-class family: the older a bar hostess desperate for breast augmentation, the younger a writer who contemplates whether to have a child with a sperm donor—really, an ethical decision about whether to will another life into existence, thus condemning it to

inconceivable pain and death. Here, as in “Heaven,” questions of harm and compassion are anchored in dispossession: the vulnerability of a person’s body to the political, economic, and social demands of others. “Does it hurt to be you?” one character asks. “Does it hurt to be me? What’s it mean to hurt, anyway?” Contemporary dilemmas like plastic surgery and reproductive technology bait us into asking older questions.

The Nietzschean literary tradition has largely retreated in the past half century. It reaches back to the dazzling novels of ideas of Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and, on the other side of the world, to the fiction of Yukio Mishima and Natsume Sōseki, who helped an acquaintance translate “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” into Japanese and worked the novel’s themes into his 1906 satirical novel, “I Am a Cat.” Each man (Nietzschean novelists are almost all men) found himself mesmerized by Nietzsche’s vehement rejection of “slave morality”—the “good” values of compassion and selflessness, which Nietzsche believed were merely a way for the dispossessed to rationalize their suffering. The clearing away of such Christian values left the modern world vulnerable to nihilism, “the luxury of destruction, disaggregation, and negation,” Nietzsche acknowledged. But it also summoned artists to a new challenge, daring them to pose scandalous questions about the nature of power and about more just ways to relate to other people. If the challenge was met, art could bring a “disconcerting beauty and affirmation to light”—the beauty perceived by “the tortured person who frees himself from his torture.”

Freeing himself from torture is the narrator’s dearest wish in “Heaven,” and his exchanges with Kojima begin to wrest a beautiful, affirming, and private existence from their public experiences of bullying. The novel’s dreamlike expression of their fledgling ideas has an artistic value that flies in the face of critics like Northrop Frye, who believed that an “interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships.” But “Heaven” also models a rigorous and elegant pro-

cess of inquiry that can transcend its pared-down fictional world. It agitates against the enduring idea that the best novels concern themselves with the singular minds and manners of people, offering no resources for the political and moral demands of “real life.” The narrator’s persecutor Ninomiya energetically parrots this argument:

I don’t get novels. Reading about other people’s lives or whatever. Who cares? I mean, you have your own life, don’t you? You’d see it if you ever put the book down. Why go out of the way to get caught up in someone else’s made-up life? . . . In reality, nothing’s gonna change. No, maybe reading does change things. It makes them worse. Ruins your day. Anyway, it’s just a load of bull.

No doubt Kawakami knows that the risk of ruining someone’s day increases when a novel not only imagines other people’s lives but has those people voice other people’s ideas. Perhaps the cleverest feature of “Heaven” is that one could read it—indeed, one could learn from it—without knowing the first thing about Nietzsche’s philosophy. Its ideas are as concrete and as wounding as the blows the narrator cannot deflect. Through his eyes, as Nietzsche writes of learning new ideas, we learn “to see”—accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides.”

Letters in a novel allow for the emergence of ideas, and also for the expression of an ideal self, a “fictitious narrative” about a person who exists only on the “other side of life,” as Céline puts

tory narrative to a more dramatic staging of conversation slyly replicates the evolution of the novel as a form. But it also shows us how the idea of Heaven, the possibility of perfect correspondence between people, becomes corrupted when we see people try to live by their ideas.

Among the forms of “moralistic mendaciousness” that Nietzsche attacked, none repulsed him more than the “ascetic ideal,” the pursuit of “poverty, humility, chastity.” Asceticism was “the *harmful ideal par excellence*,” for it justified suffering, turning it into a ritualized practice. In Nietzsche’s writing, the aristocratic priests with their “quack-cures” preached asceticism to channel the *resentiment* of the dispossessed away from revolt. Asceticism enters “Heaven” through Kojima. We learn that the cheap clothes and humble appearance that mark her for suffering—“my signs,” she calls them—are, unlike the narrator’s eye, entirely self-willed. She has a rich stepfather, whom she despises; her poverty is affected, in solidarity with her biological father, who is virtually destitute and incapable of doing anything about it. Desperate to internalize his “beautiful weakness” as her own, she becomes obsessed with purity and self-abnegation. The narrator watches as she adds new “signs”: she stops eating and bathes less and less, turning into an uncanny, priestly figure, half saint, half monster. She is distraught when the narrator considers corrective surgery for his eye, arguing that he must learn to submit to his bullying:

We’re not just obeying, not anymore. We’re letting it happen. We know exactly what’s going on. We see it, and we let it happen. I don’t think that’s weakness at all. It’s more like strength.

Kojima’s preaching is parried by the bully Momose, the raging spirit of Nietzschean nihilism, ready to dismiss everything Kojima says as “total bullshit.” Good and bad, he tells the narrator, are values determined by the powerful. There is “no beautiful world where everyone thinks the same way,” no God or higher authority to redeem suffering as meaningful:

It’s just that some people can do things, and others can’t. There are things that they want to do and things that they don’t. Everyone has their own likes and dislikes. It couldn’t be any simpler. People do what they can get away with.



it in “Journey to the End of the Night.” Kawakami borrows Céline’s words for the epigraph of “Heaven,” but, midway through the novel, the letters disappear. They are replaced with dialogues, long exchanges between the narrator, who has grown increasingly talkative, and other characters. The shift from an epis-

Blunt statements like these may come off as juvenile, but a certain immaturity is latent in Kawakami's source material. "Altered is Zarathustra; a child has Zarathustra become," Nietzsche writes approvingly, of the prophet's manner of thought and speech. Like a child, he can think about ideas with divine frankness and unguarded simplicity. Untutored in self-deception, undisciplined by lifelong coercion and punishment in what Nietzsche calls "the morality of custom," the child remains open to many different meanings of being good. Like the narrator's eye, the figure of the child is a brilliant device, allowing Kawakami to get away with dissolving elemental ideas into the confusion of adolescent relationships.

Caught, like the narrator, between the duelling voices of Kojima and Momose, we ask the same questions he does: Will turning the other cheek mean submitting to oppression forever? Can we sympathize with another person's joy or pain? Is unity against a common enemy possible? The children in "Heaven" do not resolve these debates so much as reinvigorate their contradictions. In the novel's climax, the bullies make Kojima and the narrator strip and try to force them to have sex. For a delirious moment, Kojima and Momose seem to merge before the narrator's eyes: "Their voices hummed together, and their faces mixed so that I couldn't tell them apart." Creation and destruction, meaning and meaninglessness, come together in a moment of terrible revelation. The narrator must choose whose ideas to believe; only his choice will give those ideas any meaning.

The benefit of seeing double is that the narrator can hold two contradictory ideas in his head at once. If there is something deluded about Kojima's asceticism, something showy and fake about her "signs," there is also something glorious about her commitment to them. The darkness drains from her appearance; she begins to glow. "It felt as if she had made this shield herself," the narrator thinks. Her ethics may be suspect, but even Nietzsche would not have denied their effectiveness. On the playground, her "ineffable strength" forges a delicate alliance between her and the narrator, who kneel weeping in each other's arms as a golden rain de-



*"What time of year are you for!"*

scends: "Light bounded from the puddles, reflecting the sun even as the rain grew harder. . . . Kojima's skin glistened white in the sunlight."

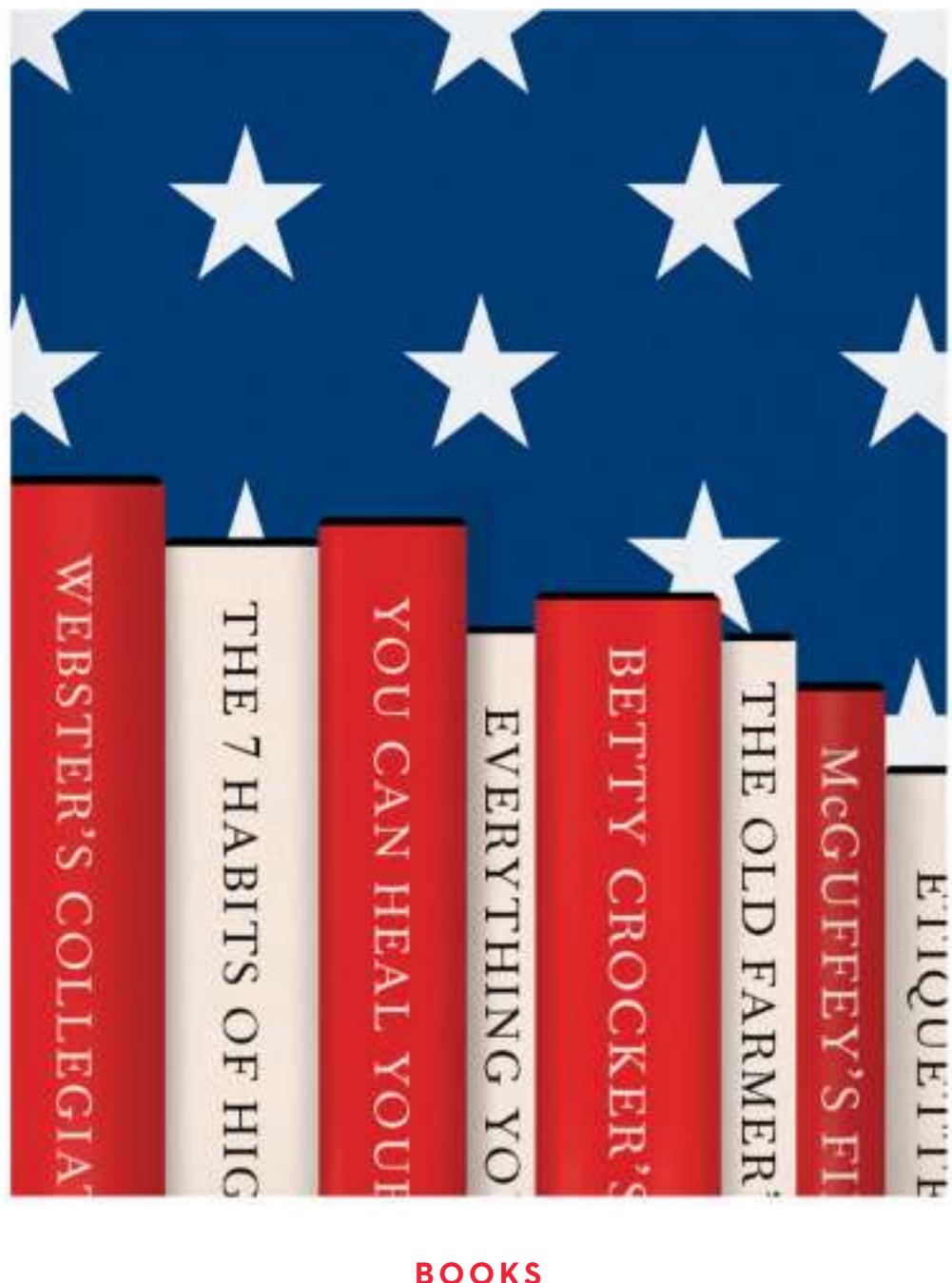
Kojima is taken away, and the narrator never sees her again. He decides to have his eye fixed. (Why it was not fixed earlier is the hidden nerve of the novel, and its true twist.) The moment he removes the bandage from his eye prompts the most gorgeous passage in "Heaven":

In the cold December air, all the leaves, thousands upon thousands of them, flashed against the sky, drenched in gold. Every leaf rang with its own light, and all the light poured into me without end. I inhaled and surrendered to the flow. The distance between one second and the next felt stretched out by the hands of some enormous being. I forgot to breathe, forgot to blink, and I let myself sink into the fragrant black bark of the trees.

The narrator's newfound capacity to slow time and catch light marks the birth of a new artistic vision—one that he, and only he, has willed into existence. Yet the beauty is bittersweet; one mourns the absence of Kojima, who made his choice possible. The light the

narrator sees at the end is, for all its majesty, only the afterimage of utopia lost. Like the halos that dance before our eyes when we retreat from sunshine into darkness, the glow of the leaves remains a private phenomenon, impossible for anyone other than the narrator to perceive. There is splendor here, but no solace. "Everything was beautiful," he tells us. "Not that there was anyone to share it with, anyone to tell. Just the beauty."

Are things better or worse for the narrator? "Just a load of bull," Ninomiya would scoff at such a question. He is not wrong. In novels, as in life, few things are more annoying than irresolution, the need to keep our thought moving rather than lay it to rest. This is the real magic of "Heaven," which shows us how to think about morality as an ongoing, dramatic activity. It can be maddening and ruinous and isolating. But it can also be shared, enlivened through writing and conversation, and momentarily redeemed through unheroic acts of solidarity, which come more naturally to the children in "Heaven" than to most grownups here on earth. ♦



BOOKS

## USER MANUALS

*Charting a nation's soul through its best-sellers.*

BY LOUIS MENAND

The “canon” in the title of Jess McHugh’s “Americanon” (Dutton) consists of thirteen American books, from “The Old Farmer’s Almanac,” first published in 1792, to Stephen R. Covey’s “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” which came out in 1989. It includes Webster’s Dictionary, Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” “Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book,” and “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex\* (\*But Were Afraid to Ask),” by David Reuben.

The works are all mega-sellers. McHugh tells us about the McGuffey Readers, textbooks first used in nine-

teenth-century homes and schools; they sold more than a hundred and thirty million copies—and, since most copies had multiple readers, the total circulation was even larger. Carnegie’s book came out in 1936, has sold more than thirty million copies, and is still in print. Louise Hay’s “You Can Heal Your Life” (1984) has sold more than fifty million copies, and Covey’s “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” has sold more than forty million. Betty Crocker’s cook-book has sold more than seventy-five million copies. At least a hundred million inquiring minds have read “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex.”\*

*Successful self-help books reflect, and project, the prevailing wisdom of an era.*

These sales figures are way beyond the range of even the most acclaimed fiction. Some of the books, such as “The Old Farmer’s Almanac” and Emily Post’s “Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home,” which was first published in 1922, are continually updated and reissued, and still maintain market share. McHugh says that “Etiquette” used to be the second-most stolen book from the library after the Bible (which presumably is taken by people unfamiliar with the Ten Commandments).

Fifty-seven million copies of Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary have been sold (I have a copy of the fifth edition, owned by my mother, which was published in 1936), and there are some two billion word searches on Merriam-Webster’s apps every year. The books in McHugh’s canon are not books so much as appliances. They are not read; they are used. And probably many of them have been bought by people who do not otherwise buy many books.

The term “canon” is also, well, loaded. Canons define a tradition, a culture, a civilization by excluding things that don’t belong to it. The claim of “Americanon” is that the enormous and enduring sales numbers of the books McHugh discusses mean that they can be understood to be promoting a national ideology, or what she calls a national myth. She does not think that this is a good thing.

In fact, McHugh disapproves of every one of the books she writes about. “Americanon” is, in effect, a critique of American society in the form of thirteen book reviews. It belongs to a critical strategy of attacking current inequities in American life by attacking prior representations of those inequities. This is an entry in the new culture wars.

It may be that the books in McHugh’s canon were received as summing up a sort of national consensus about how life should be lived in the United States, but, as she tells us, their authors’ vision of the ideal American all too often collided with who they themselves were.” Catharine Beecher, the author of “A Treatise on Domestic Economy”—a work, first published in 1841, purveying the notion that a woman’s

place is in the home—never married, had a career as a public figure, and seems to have been disliked by many who knew her, including members of her own family. (Harriet Beecher Stowe was her sister.) Carnegie grew up in deep poverty and suffered from a debilitating inferiority complex until he discovered that he had an amazing gift for public speaking (which most people do not).

Emily Post wrote her “Etiquette” book because she needed to make a living after divorcing her husband when it was publicly revealed that he had been having an affair with a showgirl. (How rude!) And Betty Crocker did not exist. She was a fabrication of what became General Mills, which eventually employed forty-five people to keep the brand going and to answer the letters—as many as five thousand a day—it received from women writing to ask Betty Crocker for advice.

The books McHugh writes about are all how-to or self-help books. These are overlapping literary domains, actually, since people tend to believe, not unreasonably, that knowing how to do things for yourself also makes you feel good about yourself. Our desire to learn (and share) “best practices” for everything from collecting maple syrup and pronouncing unfamiliar words to baking brownies, having sex, and eating asparagus in company is deeply ingrained. Even if there may not be a single best way to do these things, we know that there are many worse ways, and we feel that avoiding the worse ways has to be one ingredient of a happier life.

Given her thesis, it’s a little strange that one of McHugh’s most frequent epithets, in criticizing these books, is “arbitrary.” She accuses Emily Post and David Reuben and even Noah Webster of arbitrarily imposing their own norms on their users. But, as she herself points out repeatedly, every book in her canon was one of many just like it being published around the same time. There were at least a hundred eighteenth-century almanacs competing with “The Old Farmer’s Almanac,” and many dictionaries of the American language competing with Webster’s. Numerous domestic manuals besides Beecher’s came out in the nine-

teenth century, and there was a deluge of self-help books in the nineteen-eighties. It seems fair to assume that the books that made it onto the best-seller lists and into the canon are the ones that captured the prevailing wisdom the best.

For isn’t the prevailing wisdom what these books are selling? We don’t want to know how Emily Post eats asparagus when dining out. We want to know how people who are regarded as having impeccable manners eat it, and we trust Emily Post to know the answer. We normally want to fit in, not stand out.

Part of what makes these books seem arbitrary to McHugh may be the single-author format. The online world has produced a torrent of how-to and self-help advice, but that advice has a thousand authors, not just one. The books in McHugh’s canon are really not that different. When the medium is the printed book, the thousand authors get squeezed into a single name on the title page.

The effect is to make it appear as though the author were a fount of original wisdom, as though Dale Carnegie invented the idea of salesmanship, when all he was doing was summing it up, or as though Betty Crocker were a real person who had useful life advice, when “she” was mainly selling General Mills products. Emily Post was teaching etiquette in the same way that a mathematics teacher teaches math: this is how the best people do it, or aspire to do it. We can say that these authors understood what was better or what worked better than other people did. But they were not creating a new field.

McHugh is also annoyed that all her books seem to ratify existing social arrangements. (This appears to contradict her complaint about arbitrariness.) And they do. But isn’t that their *raison d’être*? “We cannot entirely blame Post for not revolutionizing etiquette in a way that shattered old ways of doing things,” McHugh says. Certainly, etiquette and “shattering old ways of doing things” are not exactly congruent concepts. People buy an etiquette manual in order to learn how things are done, not why they shouldn’t be done, or how they might

be done. Even iconoclasts need to know that much.

McHugh says that her books “continually take the pressure off the system and put it back on the person.” That is true, too, but that is the nature of do-it-yourself and self-help books. The problem is not other people, they are saying; the problem is you—not getting up at an early enough hour, not setting aside enough “me time” in your day, relying on someone else to make your maple syrup. Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography is in the canon, pulled himself up out of nowhere, and you can, too, even if you do not happen to be a genius of business, science, and diplomacy. Perceived barriers to success are illusory. This is not Karl Marx.

Is there something distinctively American about this belief? McHugh thinks that there is. “Self-help,” she says, “is in some ways the most American genre of literature.” It’s true that both the American pioneer narrative and the American immigrant narrative have themes of self-reliance and individual entrepreneurship woven into them. Even though all Americans enjoy benefits paid for by the state, from federal highways and product-safety rules to veterans’ pensions and food stamps, few Americans like to admit it.

Still, as Beth Blum has pointed out in “The Self-Help Compulsion” (2020), reading books for life advice is an ancient practice. Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics” can be read as a guide to virtuous living. (Like many of McHugh’s writers, Aristotle was only summing up the characteristics of people generally counted as virtuous in his time and place—that is, the eastern Mediterranean in the fourth century B.C. You want to be thought virtuous? Be like them.) Blum calls Boethius’ “The Consolation of Philosophy,” which was written in the sixth century, “bibliotherapy *avant la lettre*,” an idea that Alain de Botton, the leading contemporary bibliotherapist, acknowledges in the title of his 2000 book, “The Consolations of Philosophy.” People don’t generally describe the Bible as a how-to book, but it partly is—as is the Quran.

Books like these address a fundamental existential puzzle: although

everyone knows what it means to be a dog or a honeybee, no one really knows what it means to be a human being. A honeybee flies out, collects pollen, and brings it back to the hive. Next day, it does everything all over again. The honeybee doesn't ask itself, Is this all there is? But people do ask themselves that question. We think, This is my one shot at existence. Could I be doing it better? And there have always been other people eager to tell us (sometimes for a fee) how we could. Why shouldn't we listen to them? We could pick up a helpful tweak. Whatever else we might want to say about the books in McHugh's canon, millions of people have clearly found them empowering.

The most famous self-help book ever written is not American, however. It is Samuel Smiles's "Self-Help; with Illustrations of Character and Conduct," and it was published in London in 1859. It was one of numerous "self-culture" books that appeared in England during the same period, and it defines success by enumerating the traits of successful people in the world of Smiles and his readers, the world of Victorian Britain.

"Self-Help" won the self-culture sweepstakes and became an international sensation, translated into many languages, including Arabic, Russian, Korean, and Persian. In Japan, samurai were reported to have waited in line all night for a copy. (Japan recently returned the favor with "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up," by Marie Kondo, which has reconfigured closets across America.) Blum tells us that self-help books were popular in Nigeria and Ghana in the nineteen-fifties, and are widely read in China today.

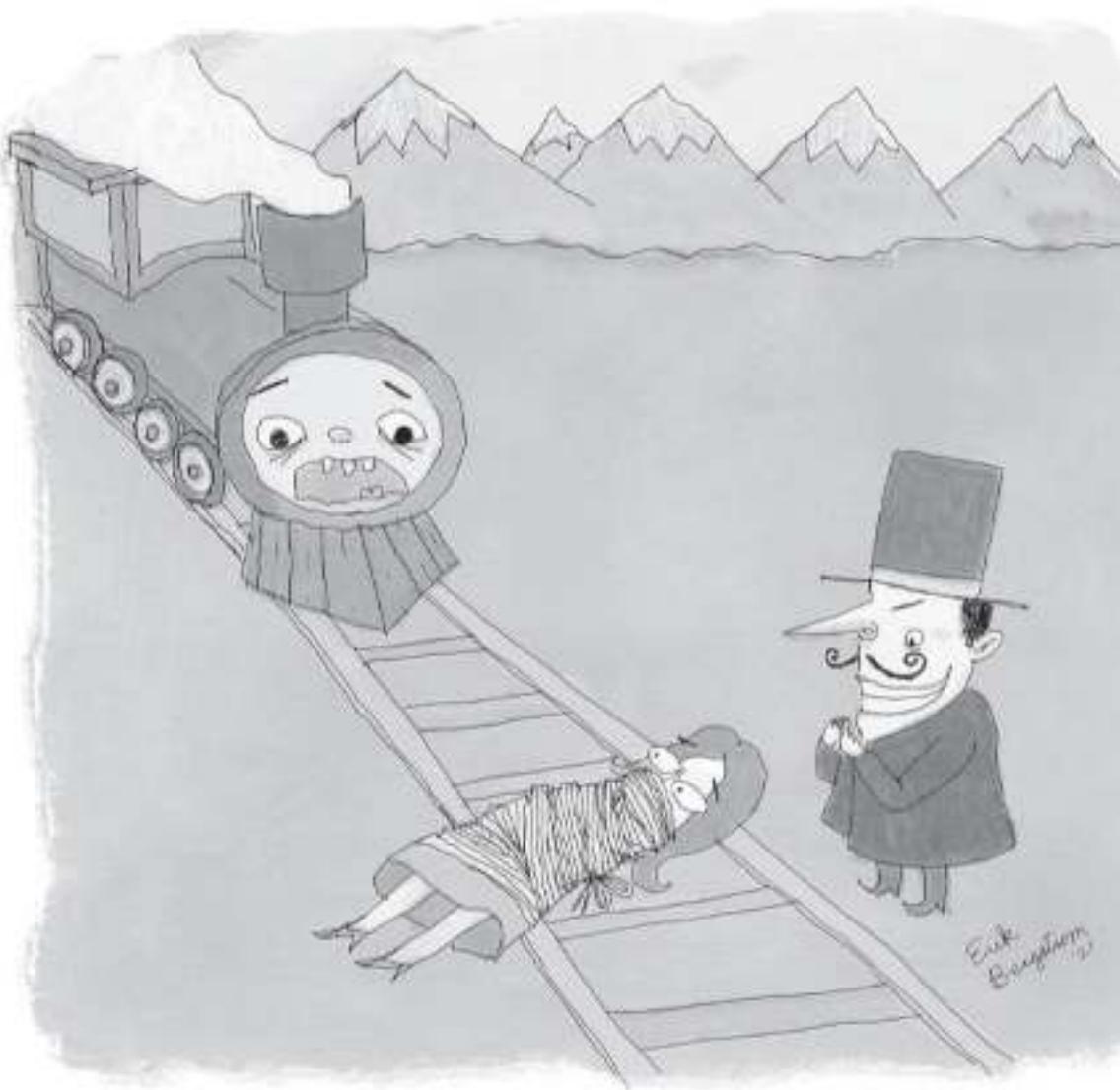
To the extent that self-help and how-to genres flourish in modernizing societies, we could speculate that people consider them useful when they think that their fate is not determined by the accident of birth, when they believe that they can rise above their parents' social station (or fall beneath it)—when people see life as a game of chutes and ladders. Since the United States was founded on the principle of "no aristocracy of birth," which was supposed to distinguish the New World from the Old, it makes sense that how-to and self-help should

be central to American life—and that a book about those books should be called "Americanon."

It is no surprise, therefore, that McHugh's chief criticism of her canon is that these books do not represent America, only a select portion of it. They are not inclusive. More pointedly, they are fake-inclusive. They are written as though anyone could profit from their advice, even though Americans are differently situated according to race, class, religion, immigration status, sexuality, and gender, and, for most of American history, those have been barriers that no amount of bootstrap pulling could overcome. Although she does not use the term, McHugh basically argues that her books represent the ideology of the Wasp ascendancy. They promulgate the values of what she calls the "white, Protestant, and physically and mentally fit." They erase difference. They are mechanisms of assimilation.

She complains that "The Old Farmer's Almanac" embodies "a rural nostalgia [that] is often male-centric and almost exclusively white." Of "How to Win Friends and Influence People," she says that "the power of outside influences—generational poverty, institutional racism, or even just bad luck—is suppressed by the Carnegie vision of America." She calls Reuben's "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex\*" homophobic, and describes it as "a violent standardizing tool, much like some of the other books in this collection, penned by an author obsessed with ridding the country of difference." McHugh ends her discussion of every book in her canon with this criticism, and the reader comes to approach those pages with dread, knowing that the mighty hammer of diversity will soon come crashing down. This is a very predictable book.

Still, who can argue with the thesis? Even if her books only reflect the unequal social dispensation out of which they arose, they also project that dispensation back. Within a world in which success was defined mainly in terms of what white male Protestants had achieved, and manners and mores mainly in terms of how middle-class heterosexuals behaved, these books can



*"Not again!"*

be read as telling their millions of readers, *This is normal*. Other ways of doing things are not.

The diversity critique is now ubiquitous, and there seem to be two approaches to dealing with it. One is to acknowledge the biases and prejudices of the times in which a book was written but to assume that we can hold our own values constant as we encounter minds from an earlier era. This is another way of acknowledging difference, with the recognition that some differences are not so desirable, but that differences from our own ways of thinking ought not to put a work on the Index of Forbidden Books. The other approach is more a (figuratively) "Ban the books" strategy. Just stop recirculating prejudice.

McHugh is a "Ban the books" person. Even Noah Webster and Betty Crocker, she thinks, are guilty of pretending that the way they and people like them pronounce words or cook dinner is the American way of doing those things. She argues that her writers do not merely ignore diversity; they actively seek to marginalize it and stamp it out. She believes, for example, that the definition of "immigrate" in the 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary as "to remove to a country for the purpose of permanent residence" has had the effect of stigmatizing the foreign-born.

Actually, the case of a dictionary or an etiquette manual is a lot simpler than, say, the case of a novel by William Faulkner. You can't change Faulkner, but user manuals are built to be updated. Betty Crocker now has international cookbooks—not what McHugh has in mind, probably, but headed in the right direction. The online Merriam-Webster has pretty much the same definition of "immigrate" as the 1828 edition. But how else should it be defined? Should we just not have a word for this phenomenon? To the degree that the national consensus is now centered on diversity, and that the national consensus is "there should be no national consensus," you would expect

successful how-to and self-help books to reflect that.

One reason the "Americanon" books, and books like them, have been so popular in the United States may be that they fill a vacuum left by the absence of civic education, or what McHugh calls "civic religion"—that is, a widely understood account of the privileges and responsibilities that come with living in our version of a democracy. If you don't have the Bible, which is civic religion enough for many Americans, there is not a lot of guidance out there. The Declaration of Independence, after a few inspiring sentences at the start, is just a list of grievances against George III. The Constitution is a rule book.

We tend to teach civics to schoolchildren by rote. When I was in school, in a relatively enlightened state in a relatively enlightened era, we had to recite, every morning, the Pledge of Allegiance (hands over hearts) and the Lord's Prayer (heads bowed). We also all learned Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want"), and, in middle school, we were required to memorize the Gettysburg Address.

Those texts were made to appear to belong to some common fund of national faith, such that it was fitting that they be recited in unison. And they all sounded good. But I don't think we had any coherent idea of what they meant, and I doubt they had much effect on our subsequent behavior as citizens.

I imagine that McHugh would think it's fine that those texts were ineffectual means of socializing. She seems like a person who does not believe in creeds or canons. She prefers, she says, ambiguity and change to the myth of a unified national narrative. But ambiguity and change are just the keywords in a different narrative. The position that we should not want to make all Americans think alike has an exception, which is that we want all Americans to think that we should not want to make all Americans think alike. I would subscribe to that, but it is a creed. And diversity, too, has a canon. Betty Crocker is excluded. ♦



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PODCAST DEPT.

## GUIDING STARS

*How “Who? Weekly” explains the new celebrity.*

BY RACHEL SYME

On August 14, 2013, someone posted a six-second video to Vine—the now defunct app that is more or less the spiritual predecessor of TikTok—of a little girl munching loudly on snacks and wearing an iridescent-blue dress. Between bites, the girl looks directly at the camera. “Hey,” she says, with a flick of her eyebrows and a hand on her hip. “I want to be famous.” Although the child remained blessedly anonymous, her wish came true: the clip racked up more than fifty-four million views. Major news sites reposted it; Internet scamps remixed it. The video felt like a distillation—the unfiltered truth of our online attention ecosystem, straight from the mouths of

babes. In 2013, Facebook had just bought Instagram, for a billion dollars. Kim Kardashian announced a pregnancy, a divorce, and an engagement in the span of eleven months. A new device, the selfie stick, began to enter the market. Of course, this was only a taste of what was to come. Looking back, the girl in the Vine seems close to a prophet.

I hear her voice all the time now, because it’s part of the theme song for “Who? Weekly,” a popular biweekly podcast hosted by the writers and long-time friends Bobby Finger and Lindsey Weber. Both hail from the world of entertainment blogging—Weber wrote for the pop-culture Web site Vulture,

Finger for the women’s-interest site Jezebel—and, a few years ago, they launched a newsletter to recap the comings and goings of D-list celebrities. In 2016, they created a companion podcast that quickly snowballed into the main event; each episode begins with a mashup of “I want to be famous” and the hip-hop artist Eve’s “Who’s That Girl?,” followed by Finger reading the tagline: “Welcome to ‘Who? Weekly,’ the podcast where you’ll learn everything you need to know about the celebrities you don’t.” Finger and Weber talk for an hour or so, spelunking deep into the demimonde with convivial delight.

The podcast, which at five years old is practically a dowager of the medium, is not interested in breaking tabloid news. Finger and Weber are primarily anthropologists: their aim is to taxonomize a new celebrity species, one that emerged, in the twenty-first century, with the rise of social media and smartphones. This species, which Finger and Weber lovingly refer to as Whos, includes influencers, former teen idols, actors with small roles in the Marvel Universe, members of mid-level rock bands, YouTube stars, guest hosts of “Jeopardy!,” and lesser-known royals. The opposite of Whos, in Finger and Weber’s vernacular, are Them. Them are the high-wattage celebrities that anyone might recognize. Rihanna is a Them; Beyoncé is a Them; Julia Roberts, Dwayne Johnson, and Oprah are Them. These are people for whom the fame machine still functions in the old-fashioned way—through high-powered publicists and manicured feeds, Oscar campaigns and major-arena tours.

The chasm between Whos and Them was once wide and clear-cut, but the proliferation of Internet platforms has led to confusion. To help us, Finger and Weber serve as guides through the rocky terrain of maybe-fame, pointing out strange and intriguing landmarks along the way. The podcast is not really about people. (I forget the names of most figures the hosts talk about.) What makes it enlightening is its study of process, the various levers one can use to catapult into the public eye. There are surprise pregnancies and Notes-app apologies, brand partnerships and pop singles, dance crazes and viral tweets. Fame has a shorter half-life than ever—most “ce-

lebrities” are Whos, not Them—and Finger and Weber navigate its workings so that you don’t have to, zooming in on the most telling examples of ambition and desperation.

Consider a recent episode, in which the duo took on the popular self-help author Rachel Hollis, who found herself in hot water after mentioning, in a live stream, that she has a housekeeper who comes twice a week and “cleans the toilets.” After a fan commented that this did not seem relatable, especially for a woman whose best-sellers trade on being a typical, burned-out mom, Hollis lashed out. “No, sis, literally everything I do in my life is to live a life that most people can’t relate to,” she said, in an Instagram post. (In the post’s caption, Hollis, who is white, cited Harriet Tubman as an example of another “unrelatable” icon.) The exchange was a case study in the limits of girl-boss culture, and, in order to get to the heart of the scandal, Finger and Weber close-read excerpts from Hollis’s audiobook and pored over her subsequent apology. “I haven’t read the book,” Finger said, with a grin in his voice. “But I can search in the book on Google Books and then find the accompanying passage on my audiobook from the library, so I just searched to see if she’s ever talked about being relatable, and guess what, *she has*.” This obsessive, rabbit-hole quality can make the show feel almost manic, but it also provides something of a public service. If fame can seem like a mystery, Finger and Weber operate like Columbo, casually collecting clues and weighing evidence until they crack the case.

Celebrity, as we know it, has changed dramatically during the past two decades. Fame always took work—one need only read a silent-film star’s memoir to know that ingénues have been burning their scalps with peroxide for a while. But, historically, stars went to great lengths to obscure their exertions. Most were Them, idealized figures whose everyday doings—Brad Pitt goes to the grocery store! Jennifer Lopez rents a film at Blockbuster!—we cared about because they otherwise seemed unreal. Today, though, we constantly encounter people who are *trying*, hard and transparently, to become famous, not through distance but through aggres-

sive proximity. Them take private planes to avoid the public eye. For Whos, being out of the public eye is a form of death.

This behavior was once viewed as gauche, but perhaps that’s changing, too. Despite Weber and Finger’s many zingers, they never punch down, unless a Who is trying to make it in a clearly offensive way. Their attitude is one of gentle bemusement, and their classifications are value-neutral; they know that whether someone is a Who or a Them can fluctuate, even from week to week. (A recent subject of inquiry was the British singer Ellie Goulding, who had a few monstrous hit singles and now fashions herself as a fitness expert.) In this sense, the show invites questions not just about celebrities but about the shifting ways in which we invest in them. As our attention spans fray, so do our fandoms; is it worth getting attached to a Who, knowing that she may never be drafted into the big leagues? Or is it even more exciting to follow niche figures, falling into ever-tighter communities around, say, a yoga influencer’s daily affirmations? The allure of fame might be greater now that it can so easily be lost. At times, “Who? Weekly” feels like a covert sports show: it tracks who is winning the game, who is losing, and who is about to fumble the ball.

Two people who are winning are Finger and Weber. “Who? Weekly” is independent thanks to the support of more than five thousand subscribers on Patreon. Its most devoted listeners have a name for themselves—Wholigans—and a bevy of inside jokes. Every Friday, Finger and Weber air an episode called “Who’s There,” in which they respond to listeners’ calls through an old-school hotline. Regulars end their messages with clannish sign-offs, like “Scar-Jo Yummy Pop!,” a nod to the fact that Scarlett Johansson opened a popcorn store in Paris. (In the language of the show, this is a very “Who-y” thing for a Them to have done.) Sometimes actual celebrities—those whom the hosts classify as Them—call in to profess their obsessions, or to offer clarifications on past portrayals. Finger and Weber have, through the kind of brazen effort that they so giddily dissect, become part of the landscape they observe. In fifty years, we’ll need someone to explain how, exactly, they achieved their small slice of renown. ♦

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POP MUSIC

## THE HEARTBREAK KID

*Olivia Rodrigo perfects the breakup song.*

BY KELEFA SANNEH

“Nini and I are very similar,” Olivia Rodrigo said. “She writes songs about boys and puts them on social media, and that’s totally something that I do in my real life.” Rodrigo was sitting in front of a mixing board, talking about the character she plays on television and the complicated ways in which her life and her art tend to resemble each other. It was 2019, and she was being interviewed in a Disney Channel program with a suitably recursive name: “High School Musical: The Musical: The Series: The Special,” a promotional vehicle (“The Special”) for her television show (“The Series”), which was about a bunch of students mounting a stage

production (“The Musical”) of a popular Disney Channel movie from the two-thousands (“High School Musical”). Later in the special, cameras captured the show’s producer telling Rodrigo and her co-star, Joshua Bassett, that a duet they had written was going to be included in a future episode. “You guys have your song chosen, and it’s called ‘Just for a Moment.’ It’s going to be a giant hit,” he told them, and they shrieked with gratitude.

The producer was right, or nearly right. “Just for a Moment” was a hit, but the show’s real breakout song was “All I Want,” a solo written and sung by Rodrigo, who delivered the lyrics with a

Rodrigo’s “Drivers License” is a beautifully crafted howl of romantic resentment.

hint of vibrato and a tentative affect—as if, at any moment, she might take it all back. In character as Nini, or maybe not, she sang, quaveringly, “All I want is love that lasts/Is all I want too much to ask?” And then, in January, even that song was overshadowed by “Drivers License,” Rodrigo’s proper début single, a perfectly crafted howl of romantic resentment that became an immediate blockbuster—one of the most infectious pop songs, surely, that anyone will release all decade. It set streaming records on Spotify, and by the time it appeared atop the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, a week and a half after its release, fans had already decided that they knew what it was about. Using clues gleaned from social media, they concluded that Rodrigo and Bassett had been dating, and that “Drivers License” was about how he had left her. “You’re probably with that blond girl,” Rodrigo sings, bitterly, and listeners imagined that she was referring to the actress and singer Sabrina Carpenter, who is blond, and who seemed to be friendly with Bassett. Like many great breakup songs, this one is both a lament and an indictment. A chiming piano evokes the insistent sound of a car asking its operator to shut the door. Singing for the prosecution, Rodrigo delivers her closing argument: “You said forever, now I drive alone past your street.” She is inviting fans to share her fury at the cosmic unfairness of it all, and evidently millions of them do.

The success of “Drivers License” spawned a small musical industry: the next week, Bassett released a spiteful song of his own (“Lie Lie Lie”), and, the week after that, Carpenter released one, too (“Skin”); even as “Drivers License” took over the world, Rodrigo and Bassett were on location together in Utah, shooting the second season of “High School Musical: The Musical: The Series,” which had its début a few weeks ago. Perhaps more important, “Drivers License” marked the launch of an impressive musical career: Rodrigo recently turned eighteen, and already she seems like the first major new pop star of this young decade. Her début album, “Sour,” is startlingly single-minded, and effectively so: eleven semi-sweet songs, almost all of them about love gone wrong. (Last week, it spawned

another No. 1 hit, “Good 4 U.”) In interviews, Rodrigo is strategically coy about the meaning of her lyrics, but when she sings she uses every trick—high, breathless asides; half-shouted choruses; a micro-eruption of mirthless laughter—to assure us that we know exactly what she’s talking about.

The original “High School Musical” was big and broad, built around clamorous ensemble dance numbers; the most memorable character was Sharpay, a brassy and imperious rich girl, played by Ashley Tisdale, who was essentially a walking punch line. “HSM:TM:TS,” as some people call it, is kinder and more intimate, driven by closeup love songs and affectionate humor. The cast is diverse (Rodrigo’s heritage is partly Filipino), and just about every character is thoughtful and sweet, at least most of the time. At one point, during a rehearsal, Nini and a friend pause to pass judgment on Troy, the male protagonist in the original movie; the way he treated his love interest, they agree, was “kind of unforgivable.” No doubt this updated sensibility reflects changing cultural expectations. “Gossip Girl,” another television hit from the two-thousands, is currently being rebooted for HBO Max, and during a recent Twitter exchange Joshua Safran, an executive producer of both the old series and the new one, explained that the 2021 version would have some strict rules: “No slut shaming. No catfights.” When some people wondered what, exactly, would be left, Safran suggested that the characters would still be doing “devious things”—just nothing unforgivable.

In an era of increasingly sensitive teen drama, what is a breakup song supposed to sound like? Boys who sing songs about perfidious ex-girlfriends risk sounding like jerks, or worse. Juice WRLD, the chart-topping singer and rapper who died from an overdose in 2019, at the age of twenty-one, was known for heartsick songs that sometimes traded on old clichés of feminine deceit: “I was tangled up in your drastic ways/Who knew evil girls had the prettiest face?” In the case of Rodrigo, who was seventeen when “Drivers License” detonated, lyrics about a cruel ex might call to mind a different possibility: that the girl in the song requires not

just commiseration but protection. There are worse things, after all, than heartbreak, even though a singer like Rodrigo can make you temporarily forget that. “Sour” is fun partly because Rodrigo’s complaints are so specific, and so non-actionable:

And maybe I’m just not as interesting as  
the girls you had before  
But god you couldn’t have cared less about  
someone who loved you more  
I’d say you broke my heart, but you broke  
much more than that  
Now I don’t want your sympathy, I just  
want myself back.

The joy of a great breakup song is the joy of magnification, of hearing a familiar romantic tragedy blown up to world-historical proportions. The girl in the songs can’t *believe* that her ex-boyfriend is playing Billy Joel for someone new. “I bet you even tell her how you love her, in between the chorus and the verse,” she sings, and you can understand her dismay: imagine realizing you had subjected yourself to such a maneuver in vain.

As she mentioned in that special, Rodrigo used to post snippets of songs on Instagram. One of her greatest assets is her ability to create the illusion of intimacy: a cloud of multitracked vocals will disperse, or a buzzing riff will hush, so that we can hear the sound of fingers moving on the fret board, or the sound of Rodrigo’s breathing, getting ready for the next indictment. Rodrigo worked with the songwriter and producer Dan Nigro, who previously helped a rookie singer named Conan Gray create one of last year’s best début albums. (It was called “Kid Krow,” and it was stocked with swooning laments and neat dance tracks.) Together, Rodrigo and Nigro ransack the recent history of emotional pop: one song deftly evokes the fizzy, defiant spirit of Paramore, and several evoke Taylor Swift in her accusatory heyday. Rodrigo’s album, much like her television show, cleverly mines short-cycle nostalgia; both seem designed to make relatively young listeners feel absolutely old. She has said that she wrote “Drivers License” after a drive, during which she had been crying and listening to one of her favorite songwriters. That songwriter turned out to be not some ancient hero but Gracie Abrams, a rising star who is only twenty-

one, and who has yet to release a début album of her own.

Rodrigo has been famous since she was thirteen, when she began playing a character named Paige on a Disney Channel show called “Bizaardvark,” which was nearly as meta as “HSM:TM:TS.” (It was about two girls who find growing fame by making viral videos; in the third episode, Paige and her friend learn to contend with online “haters.”) Rodrigo’s current alter ego, Nini, is gifted and soulful and slightly anxious—but she is also, literally speaking, a Disney character, which means that Rodrigo is already looking for ways to de-Disneyfy herself, at least slightly. In the climactic moment of “Drivers License,” she declares, “I still fuckin’ love you, babe,” a slightly awkward line that works because it doesn’t sound written—in fact, it almost sounds improvised. Not long after the song’s release, Rodrigo told an interviewer from *W* that her use of profanity wasn’t a stratagem, but she conceded that it might nevertheless be helpful to her. “If that naturally sort of separated me from the Disney archetype?” she said. “That’s cool.”

There used to be a general perception that teen pop music was destined to boom and then fade, as its fans grew up and grew out of it. But a song as big and as sturdy as “Drivers License” tends to stick around for years, even decades, no matter what happens to its creator. It’s easy enough to see how Rodrigo benefitted from the popularity of her show, and from the irresistible drama of three teen idols who seem to be singing songs about one another, and even from the hothouse environment of quarantine, during which people have spent lots of time watching television and making things go viral. But with “Sour” it’s easy to see, too, that Rodrigo has a knack for turning herself into a memorable protagonist, and for creating pop songs as memorable as the ones they borrow from. She probably won’t spend the rest of her life making breakup albums, even if some of us rather wish she would. And before long Rodrigo may well be inspiring short-cycle nostalgia of her own. Many high schools’ worth of listeners, by no means only teen-agers, will probably always think of “Sour” as the sound of this moment—2021: The Year: The Album. ♦



THE CURRENT CINEMA

## CHILD'S PLAY

*"Cruella" and "Tove."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

The milking of children's literature is now a dairy industry. Movies, in particular, continue to pump away. You might think that every drop has been wrung from the classic texts, yet still, unceasingly, fresh adaptations emerge. Last year brought a new version of "The Secret Garden," as well as Matteo Garrone's suitably sinister take on "Pinocchio."

Then there are the spinoffs, prequels, and sequels that kidnap a character from a book and freely riff on her, or him, or it. Between 2017 and 2019, readers devoted to "Anne of Green Gables" were treated to—or, if they were purists, mortified by—three seasons of a Netflix series called "Anne with an E." (Why the change of title? Did the producers hope to appeal to impurists by hinting that Anne would be taking Ecstasy at a rave in Club Avonlea?) Yet there is nothing inherently doomed about spinning variations on a theme; the bear/person interface, though it fizzled awkwardly in "Christopher Robin" (2018), with Ewan McGregor needing emergency life coaching from Pooh,

worked a treat in "Paddington" (2014) and its sequel, three years later.

The next riff is due on June 18th, when viewers will be lured back into cinemas with the carrot of "Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway." By some quirk of digital morphing, the bunnies are equipped with the narrow-eyed, suspicious air of gangsters' goons, and, having already seen the film, I reckon there's nothing wrong with it that couldn't be fixed by a short but effective surge of myxomatosis. More imminent temptation is offered by "Cruella," a new product from the Disney breeding program. In the beginning was the animated "One Hundred and One Dalmatians" (1961), which was based on a graceful novel by Dodie Smith, and which, after a gestation of thirty-five years, begat a live-action remake, starring Glenn Close as the puppy-scavenging Cruella de Vil. That in turn spawned "102 Dalmatians," in 2000. Now the infernal Cruella gets a movie to herself, with Emma Stone in the title role.

No villain, these days, is complete without a backstory. If a modern Oliv-

ier were remaking "Richard III," he would have to show little Dick being hump-shamed in the playground. The big news is that Cruella's real name is, in fact, Estella. She's the child of a single mother, then an orphan, then a thieving scamp on the London streets, and then, with no visible training, a couturier. The period shifts, very roughly, from the nineteen-sixties to the seventies, before landing in the era of gothic punk, generously strewn with anachronisms. Estella enters the orbit of the Baroness (Emma Thompson), a fashion maven, becoming her apprentice, her in-house enfant terrible, and, lastly, her nemesis, courtesy of a twist so ridiculous that Cruella has to stand in the open air, at dawn, and spell it out for us. "This is a confusing day," she says. You're telling me.

The film is directed by Craig Gillespie, whose auteurist signature, as far as I can gather, is a recurring weakness for Supertramp. We got to hear "Goodbye Stranger" in his previous work, "I, Tonya" (2017), and this time we are serenaded with "Bloody Well Right." In truth, there are passages of "Cruella" that seem like scraps of music videos, loosely stitched together. Forget about the plot: ask your heroine to pose in splendidious outfits; crank up the Stones, the Zombies, the Clash, or Doris Day; and, woof, there's your movie.

The brightest performances are given by Bluebell, who plays a hard-nosed Chihuahua named Wink, and by Tippi Seifert-Cleveland, as the young Estella. Admirers of queen bees will, no doubt, swarm toward the Baroness, who is partly modelled on the magazine editor in "Funny Face" (1957). The difference is that Stanley Donen kept that movie at a brisk trot, whereas Gillespie takes wonderfully quick-witted actresses—first Margot Robbie and Allison Janney in "I, Tonya," and now Stone and Thompson in "Cruella"—and grants them dramatic time and space that they simply don't require. Emotions are not toyed with glancingly but stretched out and blazoned forth, and the result is that the new film is nearly an hour longer than the original cartoon. Needless to say, any pretense that children might still want to watch a light, spirited, mutt-centered gambol has been skinned to the bone, to make way for human bitching, and anyone hoping to play Spot

Emma Stone stars as Cruella de Vil in Craig Gillespie's film.

the Dalmatian will be sorely vexed. I counted exactly three of the beasts, plus another two at the end. In short, "Cruella" is more catty than canine. Grrr.

**W**hy stop at children's books, though? Why not scrabble around in the lives of the folks who engender them? So far, J. M. Barrie, Beatrix Potter, P. L. Travers, and J. R. R. Tolkien have all been subjected to bio-pics, beneath which lie two assumptions. First, authors must be traumatized or otherwise triggered into creative activity. Second, within the genus of authors, those who write for kids constitute a uniquely weird species, somehow incapable of putting away childish things. The lesson of "Saving Mr. Banks" (2013), for example, was that the brittle adult carapace of Travers concealed her youthful memories of a beloved but blotto father, and that it was up to Disney—not the company, but Uncle Walt himself—to melt the shell.

One wonders who will get the treatment next. I can picture a Roald Dahl bio-pic turning ugly, and, under current conditions, a film about Dr. Seuss would probably start a war. For now, we have "Tove," one of the less presumptuous and more fruitful contributions to the genre. The director is Zaida Bergroth, and the subject is Tove Jansson (1914–2001)—the Finnish painter, illustrator, and writer, whose star has climbed anew in recent years, and who is still best known for having dreamed up the Moomins. One virtue of the movie is that, as played by Alma Pöysti, Jansson is not dreamy at all; she is awake, alert, and practical, with a challenging smile, a snub nose, a natty dress sense, and a strong inclination to dance. To one of

her lovers, a newspaper editor and a left-wing member of parliament named Atos Wirtanen (Shanti Roney), she proposes a walk in a gale, after dark. "In this weather?" he asks. "Yes, in precisely this weather," she replies, and sets off.

The story begins in 1944. We see Jansson drawing Moomin figures as she shelters from wartime bombing, in Helsinki, and intoning lines from "The Moomins and the Great Flood," her first book, as she walks down a half-ruined street. It's a promising prelude, because, as generations of children have learned, one consolation of the Moomin world is a refusal to be cowed and belittled by fear. The Moomins ride out natural disruptions—a comet, a volcano—and bid welcome to outsiders, and there's a case for saying that "Tove" could, and maybe should, have reached back to the heroine's earlier years, when so much of her imagining was hatched. Her father, Viktor, was a sculptor; her mother, Signe, constrained by domestic duty, was an illustrator who specialized in designing postage stamps. ("In my family, we always feel sorry for people who aren't artists," Tove says in the film.) Jansson fans have long delighted in her weaving of names, and it's gratifying to discover that her parents were known as Faffan and Ham, and that they had a housekeeper named Impi. Of course they did.

Viktor and Signe do appear in Bergroth's movie, though largely at the fringes of the action. Far more attention—unsurprising, perhaps, given Jansson's cheerful and extensive sexual latitude—is paid to those with whom she is intimately involved. Thus, we encounter not only Atos but also Vivica Bandler (Krista Kosonen), "an upper-class girl pretending to be a

theatre director," who towers over Tove. The two of them indulge in verbal games, as lovers will, and sneak into "Finn Family Moomintroll" (first published in 1948) as a pair called Thingumy and Bob.

What distinguishes "Tove" from lesser fare, like "Saving Mr. Banks," is that the protagonist is rarely in danger of being explained away. The roots of her inventiveness lie bedded deep, where they belong, and Jansson herself cannot quite account for the ensuing blooms. "It's just scrawl," she says of her Moominizing. "It distracts me from my work"—by which she means her painting. Gradually, though, and somewhat to her exasperation, the sideline becomes the main event; the doodles writhe and sprout into a forest. The sureness of her graphic line turns out to be matched by the clarity, all quizzical zest and no mush, with which she tells a tale.

Whereas "Cruella" sent me back to Dodie Smith, as a blessed escape from what Disney has done to her creations, "Tove" dispatched me down a rabbit hole, or through a Moomin door. I recommend the trip. You will meet some hulking biographies of Jansson along the way, as well as her own memoir, "Sculptor's Daughter," its recollections as sharp as pine needles. ("Underneath the Christmas tree, Christmas is vast. It is a green jungle with red apples.") And you will come upon photographs of Jansson as a child—infinitely solemn, with scissors, pencil, and paper, or seated on Ham's lap and calmly watching her draw. Here, at last, you catch a glimpse of how a maker is made. ♦

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NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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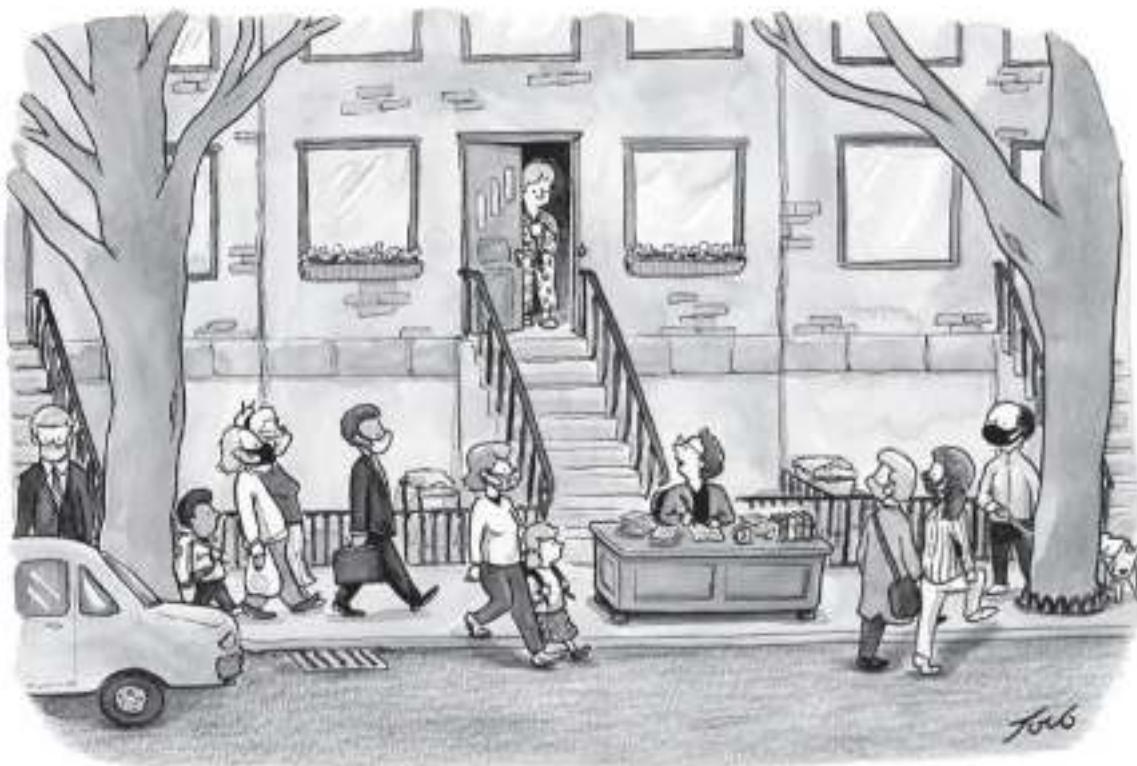
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Toro, must be received by Sunday, June 6th. The finalists in the May 24th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 21st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS

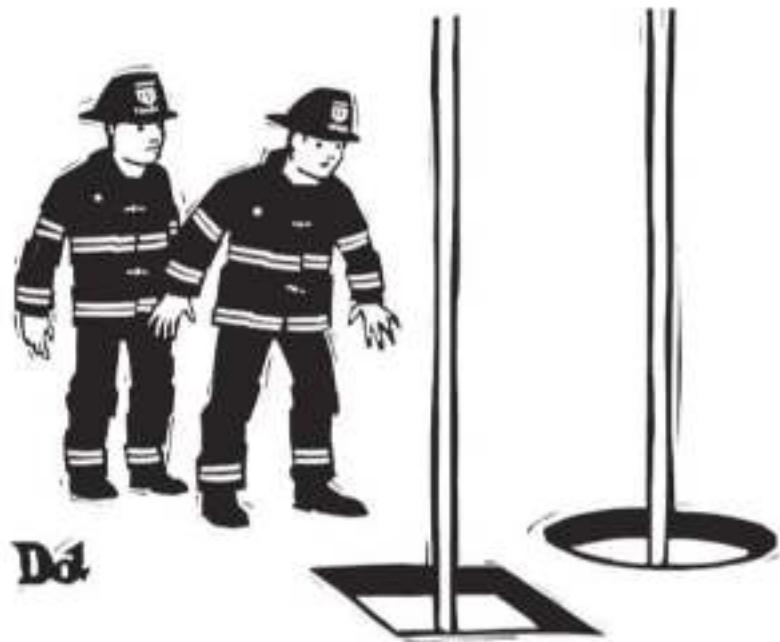


"So, you're saying you didn't miss  
your last two appointments?"  
Rebecca Tatro, South Portland, Maine

"Let's see how you feel on the curtains."  
Frank Cooper, Alexandria, Va.

"Hmm. I'm beginning to see a pattern."  
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



"Since when did the pizza delivery guy get his own pole?"  
Andy McDonald, London, England

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# THE CROSSWORD

*A challenging puzzle.*

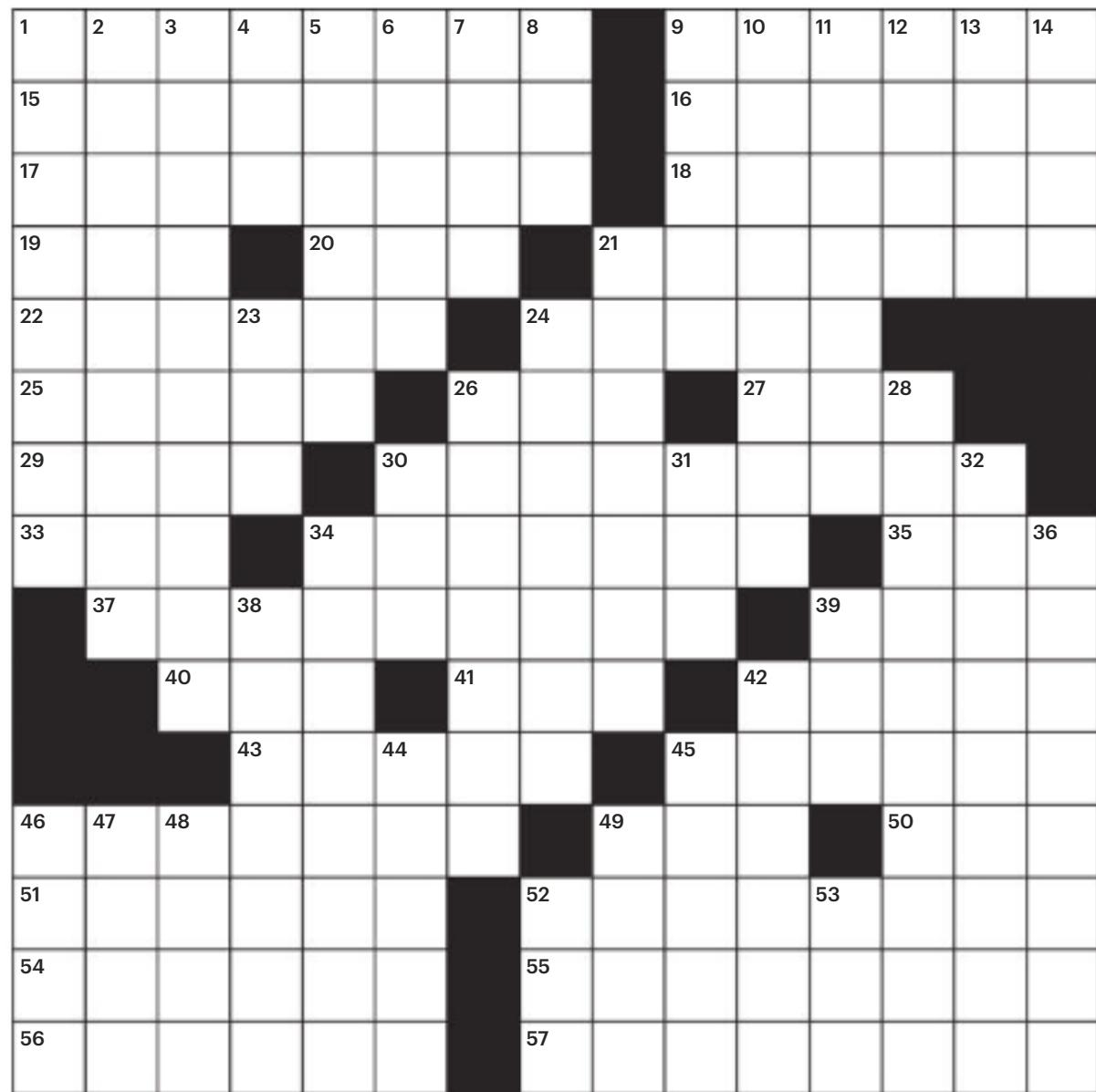
BY KAMERON AUSTIN COLLINS

## ACROSS

- 1 Japanese printmaker?
- 9 Agave by another name
- 15 Job that's all about making connections
- 16 Adapt
- 17 Is stuck on something
- 18 Bernardo's gang, on Broadway
- 19 R. & B.'s \_\_\_ Hill
- 20 Three-man vessel?
- 21 Although
- 22 Tears into
- 24 Found out
- 25 Cholesterol, for one
- 26 Make it?
- 27 The "N" in the acronym FANBOYS, a mnemonic device for coördinating conjunctions
- 29 Furry little guy in the funnies
- 30 "Suit yourself, moody"
- 33 "\_\_\_, I dunno . . ."
- 34 Akhenaten's kid
- 35 Soy, to many Americans
- 37 Longtime jurisdiction for Merrick Garland
- 39 Man, for one
- 40 Put away
- 41 Inclined
- 42 Beckham of sports
- 43 Some office decorations
- 45 National park with campgrounds on Mount Desert Island
- 46 Spur
- 49 Little thing to pick
- 50 \_\_\_ dance
- 51 Amazon regular with a big bill?
- 52 "Voilà!"
- 54 It's usually iced
- 55 Fade away
- 56 Like some bonuses
- 57 Areas for meals

## DOWN

- 1 Site for home cooks
- 2 Tore into



- 3 Blessed bling
- 4 Spleen
- 5 Didn't 40-Across
- 6 "We're here!"
- 7 Lisa at Lilith Fair
- 8 Title acquired with marriage
- 9 "\_\_\_ and the Bear" (Russian animated series whose episode "Recipe for Disaster" has more than four billion views on YouTube)
- 10 \_\_\_ cable
- 11 Hollywood dream
- 12 Preserve
- 13 Paul who co-wrote the Johnny Carson-era theme for the "Tonight Show"
- 14 Lower
- 21 "Enough!"
- 23 Move hastily
- 24 Fixations
- 26 Junky old rides
- 28 Sign up for protests?
- 30 Christmas decoration, perhaps
- 31 Caveat
- 32 Casual affair
- 34 Airborne trailer
- 36 Hodgepodge
- 38 Place to grab a bite while on the move
- 39 Pioneering journalist \_\_\_ B. Wells
- 42 Number at a station
- 44 Egg preference
- 45 Gillen of "Game of Thrones"
- 46 Teeny
- 47 Be down
- 48 Aqua \_\_\_
- 49 Pandora inhabitants, in film
- 52 Sack
- 53 "All right, cool"

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*



*Find more puzzles and this week's solution at  
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