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A Critic at Large

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Is Staying In Staying Safe?

Indoor life has its dangers, too, but building-design specialists have big plans for us.

By [Jill Lepore](#)

August 31, 2020



Porcupines like to live alone, but in winter they sometimes hole up in long-snouted little gangs inside hollow trees and logs, in cavities made by cracks in boulders, beneath piles of brush, or under your front porch, as sneaky as thieves. A gang of porcupines is called, magnificently, a prickle. They hardly ever venture out. Inside, in the damp and ratty dark, fallen-out quills carpet the floor. In spring, female porcupines raise their babies in those dens. A baby porcupine is called a porcupette. There isn't a word for a porcupine den, but I humbly propose calling it a quiver, except when it's a nursery; then it's a pokey.

The animal kingdom is a densely settled city-state of hives, burrows, lairs, nests, webs, caves, pits, and dens. Lodgings come in all sizes and for every length of stay, no security deposit required, from a grotty single bed for the night to fancy permanent quarters for a colony. Quivers are, generally, a mess. Porcupines are rodents, an order of mammals that are, as a rule, unkempt. The celebrated insouciance of the honey badger, a weasel, is nothing to the equanimity of the porcupine. Porcupines are fully armed, near-blind, and imperturbable. They leave their scat outside their front door, piling up. They don't care who sniffs them out. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont used to offer bounties to hunters, fifty cents a snout, forty cents for a pair of ears, twenty-five cents for every pair of feet. But since that practice ended, decades ago, porcupines have had few predators, aside from the sort of dog that's too dunderheaded to know any better, which, I confess, forlornly, describes every cur of my acquaintance. Porcupines, in their dens, aren't really hiding; they're just staying snug, in homes they haven't so much built as come by, like squatters, or Goldilocks, or Airbnbbers, lovers of the great indoors.

In the encyclopedia of animal accommodations, the most admirable architect is the beaver. Beavers build lodges out of sticks and mud, complete with ventilation and underground entrances. Domesticated animals live in houses built by people (etymologically, that's what it means to be domesticated), from cow barns to pigpens. One reason some people don't eat meat is that on big farms animals are forced to spend so much time crowded together indoors. Factory-farmed chickens, raised in giant sheds stacked with thousands of cages—ten to a cage the size of a file drawer—don't even have room to spread their wings, and most spend every last, miserable moment of their lives inside. That only started in the nineteen-fifties, and, recently, lots of people have been going back to raising their own chickens. Since the quarantine, there has been a rush on chicks and back-yard coops. (Enthusiasts who have never met a hen are well

advised to read Betty MacDonald's 1945 memoir, "The Egg and I," in which she recounts, "By the end of the second spring I hated everything about the chicken but the egg.") A D.I.Y. coop consists of a roof, a roost, and nesting boxes. Translucent roofing is recommended, the idea, apparently, being that if chickens can see the sky they'll forget that they're indoors. Chickens like to roost inside at night, but among the many reasons for letting them out during the day is that otherwise they might peck one another to death. That's what it means to be cooped up. The Italians call free-range chickens *polli ruspanti*. A wandering chicken is a happy chicken. People are no longer *ruspante*. We build lean-tos and huts and shanties and houses and motels and condominiums and apartment buildings. Lately, we've been stuck in them, like a prickle in a quiver, chickens in a coop, bears in a den, waiting out our desolate hibernation.

Even before the quarantine, Americans and Europeans spent about ninety per cent of their time indoors, as Joseph G. Allen and John D. Macomber report, in "[Healthy Buildings: How Indoor Spaces Drive Performance and Productivity](#)" (Harvard). Homes, cars, prisons, schools, buses, factories, trains, airplanes, offices, museums, hospitals, stores, restaurants: how much of your life have you spent indoors, not counting the quarantine? Multiply your age by 0.9. If you're forty, you've spent thirty-six of your years indoors. About a third of that is time spent sleeping, but still. Most humans who live in the United States and Europe spend more time indoors than some species of whale spend underwater. It may be that the minutes you spent walking to and from the subway on a Tuesday in January tallied up to fewer minutes than a whale spent on the surface, filling its lungs, that same day.

This trend won't reverse itself after the pandemic ends. "Unlike the outdoor world, the indoor world is expanding," the journalist Emily Anthes reports, in "[The Great Indoors: The Surprising Science of How Buildings Shape Our Behavior, Health, and Happiness](#)" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). "Over the next forty years, the United Nations estimates, the total amount of indoor square footage will roughly double worldwide." Nevertheless, the indoors is the poor stepchild of the outdoors, at least in terms of environmental activism and regulation. Staying indoors, long before our present woes, was not always and not even very often a choice, including for schoolchildren, prisoners, factory and office workers, and hospital patients. Entire cities sometimes shut down. In 2018, China issued "stay indoors" warnings for seventy-nine cities, owing to air pollution. And from Los Angeles to Shanghai air quality has sometimes been so bad that the elderly are advised to stay inside, and, at schools, recess is

cancelled. But how much better is it behind closed doors? For all the attention paid to outdoor pollution, Allen and Macomber point out, most people experience outdoor pollution while they're inside—it seeps in—and yet the [indoor environment](#), which produces its own toxins, is subject to very few rules.

Allen teaches at Harvard's T. H. Chan School of Public Health and Macomber teaches at Harvard Business School. Lately, they've been preparing reports and providing advice on whether and how to safely reopen schools. "Healthy Buildings" advises businesses about how to make their buildings more salubrious, on the back of the investor-directed argument that healthier buildings make for more productive employees and more profitable companies. One report from Allen's lab, "The 9 Foundations of a Healthy Building," advocates close control over air quality, dust and pests, lighting and views, moisture, noise, safety and security, thermal health, ventilation, and water quality. Allen and Macomber want to establish national standards, and they make a series of precise and persuasive recommendations for everything from insulation and window shades to water filters and vacuum cleaners.

Given that most pollution is produced by the burning of fossil fuels, and that climate change is a major force in driving people indoors (where they still get sick from the burning of fossil fuels outdoors), Allen and Macomber also extoll the green-building movement. One study they cite shows that in six countries within the span of twenty years, green buildings, compared with their non-green counterparts, averted fifty-four thousand respiratory symptoms, twenty-one thousand lost days of work, sixteen thousand lost days of school, eleven thousand asthma exacerbations, up to four hundred and five premature deaths, and two hundred and fifty-six hospital admissions, a savings that amounted to "\$4 billion in health and climate co-benefits, on top of the \$6.7 billion in energy savings, for a total benefit of \$10.7 billion." (Better ventilation uses more energy, but they insist that this is offset by the energy savings of green-building practices.) Still, "Healthy Buildings" also offers a vision of the future that many readers will find disturbing:

Optimizing indoor conditions is going to require a future of hyperpersonalization and hyperlocalization of thermal conditions to create zones of "personalized indoor health" that satisfy the unique preference of each person. This is already starting to happen. Some buildings have systems where each workstation has controls for its own temperature and airflow, and systems that disaggregate ventilation from temperature control.

The future of personalized indoor health is not far off.

That future is here! Anthes tells us that “Comfy, a California-based company, makes an HVAC-linked mobile app that allows office workers to tinker with the temperature of their own workspaces.” One can see the benefits, but this sounds like something out of “*WALL-E*.” It’s also hard not to hear holier-than-thou [Henry David Thoreau](#) preaching from across the duck-blind stillness of Walden Pond:

It costs me nothing for curtains, for I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and moon, and I am willing that they should look in. . . . A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil.

It is hard living with masks and scarcely ever touching anyone. But, reading these books, you begin to see how methods of separation are likely to proliferate, in the form of products and practices being sold not to stop a pandemic but to sell panic, for profit. Is it too late to avoid a world where only the poor go outdoors while the rich live in zones of personalized indoor health, each with its own temperature and moisture controls, earbuds and light visors and *HEPA* filters, its own customized light-diffusing curtains and dust-catching doormat? Will there be no room left by the postpandemic threshold for a cheap, recycled rubber, one-size-fits-all *WELCOME* mat?

Having a roof over your head is one thing: a home is a human right. Living almost entirely indoors is something else. The Great Confinement varies by place and by wealth, and, historically, it’s new. “Over several millennia, humans have evolved from an outdoor species into an indoor one,” Allen and Macomber write. Citing E. O. Wilson, they explain, “We evolved in the African savannah’s wide-open expanses, intimate with nature and seeking protection under tree canopies,” and so “our genetic hardwiring, built over millennia, still craves that connection to nature.” To satisfy this craving, photographs of redwoods adorn hospital waiting rooms; you can pop into the Grand Canyon via Zoom. I used to think these dodges were better than nothing, but I’ve changed my mind. Zoom is usually not better than nothing.

Velux, a Danish company, calls the twenty-first-century human being the Indoor Generation, and ascribes a plague of depression and disease to the stuffiness and

dampness and mold and darkness of living indoors. (The company sells skylights, the kind of thing you're supposed to put in chicken coops to stop your chickens from going stir-crazy.) Its Web site features a spooky, M. Night Shyamalan-style video of a pale and sickly little girl explaining, "It all started the day we left nature behind." We feathered our nests, with espresso machines and flat-screen televisions and Spotify. "Our homes became places you would never want to leave," the girl says, the shadows under her eyes grown darker. "But we had closed ourselves in, to a point where nothing could get out." We started getting sick. Itchy, cough-y, sleepless. "Many of us even started to feel sad." And that was in the beforetime.

Benjamin Franklin, who was forever advising his friends to crack their windows open, would have agreed. "It has been a great Mistake, the Sleeping in Rooms exactly clos'd and in Beds surrounded by Curtains," he wrote to a lady friend. At the time, this went against the advice of much medical thought and many books of learning, some dating to the plague years of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For the many who believed disease to be caused by miasmas, the best solution was to keep "bad air" out. Even Franklin had succumbed to the prejudice that he called "Aerophobia," "and clos'd with extreme Care every Crevice in the Rooms I inhabited," he recalled. But "experience has convinced me of my Error," he explained. Shutting up the sick made sense in order to keep them from infecting other people, but shutting them up from the outdoors often only made them sicker.

During and after the yellow-fever epidemics of the seventeen-nineties (five thousand people died in Philadelphia, then the U.S. capital, in 1793 alone), doctors and scientists, observing the patterns of diseases in cities, began studying the relationship between housing density and epidemics, with many subscribing to a contagion theory of disease. Cities installed public water and sanitation systems, and also designed parks, to encourage people to spend more time outdoors, in fresh air and sunlight. Living indoors itself became a sign of disease. Edgar Allan Poe's "[The Fall of the House of Usher](#)," published in 1839, is an indictment of medieval architecture. The narrator, on arriving at Usher's house, notices that "dark draperies hung upon the walls," and that it was impossible even to open the windows: "The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within." In a vault inside that building, Usher seals his sickly sister in a coffin, unaware that she is still alive.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, American cities like Denver and Phoenix and rural resorts in states like Montana boasted that they offered, along with fresh air and sunlight, relief from such diseases as asthma, hay fever, and tuberculosis, as the historian Sara Jensen Carr explains in “The Topography of Wellness,” a dissertation that will be published as a book next year. Informed by the British Garden City movement, which urged the setting aside of green space, cities across the country planted trees. A promotional tract for Santa Barbara, published in 1878, promised a change from the consumptive conditions in cities: “The absence of sunlight is a frightful cause of the prevalence of the disease. The streets are so narrow and the houses so high that sunlight seldom reaches the sitting rooms. The schoolhouses are so situated that children can scarcely ever see the sun.” In much the same spirit, Victorian-era builders added “sleeping porches” to the backs of houses (sleeping outdoors was thought to prevent tuberculosis), and hospitals, schools, and asylums were built on rural estates, where inmates might be encouraged, or required, to grow their own food, at places like Vermont’s Brattleboro Retreat.

Much of the reform of hospitals came at the direction of Florence Nightingale, who argued that “to shut up your patients tight in artificially warmed air is to bake them in a slow oven.” She also advocated windows, for the sake of light. But, Anthes reports, these reforms didn’t last: “As germ theory and the concept of antisepsis gained ground, hospitals sealed themselves off from the natural world, relying on antibiotics and chemical disinfection, rather than sunlight and fresh air, to reduce the spread of disease.”

Carr states the nature of this reversal more baldly. Where “miasma was an affliction of the public realm and consequently encouraged an era of social ethics and responsibility,” the advent of germ theory “suddenly shifted the burden of health from the external to the internal, and more implicitly, from the state to the individual.” In the age of the microbe and the antiseptic, “health became the burden of the individual, associated with personal exposure and responsibility.” Instead of addressing the urban pollution caused by automobiles, architects built skyscrapers set back from the smell of the street. Le Corbusier, in “The Radiant City” (1933), advocated replacing the actual (i.e., pestilential) street with streetlike features inside buildings—corridors and hallways and elevators—and treating inhabitants with doses of light and air. Postwar white flight and concern about urban “blight” led to suburban sprawl. Later, New Urbanists celebrated cities for their “walkability.” More recently, architects have been engaged in “active design,” trying to encourage, for instance, the use of stairs, by making

stairwells wider and more brightly lit, and piping music into them, while making elevators slower.

If “industry” was the watchword of building design in the nineteenth century, and “efficiency” the watchword in much of the twentieth, “wellness” has been the watchword of the twenty-first century. Wellness is a swindle. Many of the architectural experiments chronicled and the building-design reforms advocated in “The Great Indoors” and “Healthy Buildings” advance an anti-universal, hyper-individualized medical model, in which architecture is seen as therapeutic, building by building and person by person. Allen and Macomber date the origin of their field to the nineteen-eighties, when people began talking about “sick building syndrome,” defined in the dictionary as “a set of symptoms (such as headache, fatigue, and eye irritation) typically affecting workers in modern airtight office buildings that is believed to be caused by indoor pollutants (such as formaldehyde fumes or microorganisms).” Anthes, who describes herself as “unapologetically indoorsy,” embraces the possibility of building design as a cure-all: “The promise of improving our health and extending our life spans, even just a little, without ever leaving the house? Well, I found that idea irresistible.” She visits schools and apartment buildings specially designed to address aging, obesity, and depression. She gamely reports on smart offices and smart homes and floating cities and proposed villages on the moon and the new field of “indoor ecology” (the study of subjects like the mites to be found in your pillow). “The more I read about the world of indoor microbes, the more I found myself obsessing over my own invisible roommates. I contemplated fungi as I cooked, bacteria as I bathed,” she writes. “I began to feel like a stranger in my own home, humbled by how little I knew about what was happening under my roof.” The recommendations of that research? “Open a window. Get a dog.”

Building design is also increasingly driven by personal data, collected and held as a commodity, and used to improve business performance and productivity. Ethical objections to this type of data collection, suspended during the pandemic, are unlikely to recover their strength when it’s over, which means that, if you ever go back to the office, you may be monitored in ways you used to consider a violation of your rights. Anthes profiles an analytics company called Humanyze, which “makes software and hardware that enables companies to analyze their employees’ digital and in-person interactions.” Among its products is the “sociometric badge,” which is worn on a lanyard around your neck, and can detect conversations between two co-workers. The badge “contains a microphone, an accelerometer, and Bluetooth and infrared sensors, which can

track the badge-wearer's location as well as the direction that he or she is facing," she writes. "When two badge-wearers are in close proximity, facing each other and engaged in an alternating pattern of speaking, they're probably having a chat." Humanyze uses the data gathered on its badges to produce reports for its clients. It has suggested, for instance, that people who sit near one another in an office are more likely to have face-to-face conversations than those who sit at a distance from one another, and made recommendations for the division of departments between floors and the size of lunch tables. More recently, the company's president has been writing about how working remotely has reminded many of us of the importance of all those casual office interactions that we took for granted, and now sorely miss. A sociometric badge sounds terrible to me. But a lunch table sounds so good.

Anthes also recounts the work of Daniel Davis, "WeWork's slight and stylish director of research," who uses his company's data to fix office problems. A Washington, D.C., WeWork featured a "funky, bright yellow wallpaper" that elicited a lot of negative comments, perhaps even from readers of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 story "[The Yellow Wallpaper](#)," about a woman whose husband, a physician, hopes to make her well but instead drives her insane by locking her in a yellow-papered room. ("The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.") Anthes reports: "Armed with that Feedback, WeWork can switch out or paint over that wallpaper and make a note not to use it again." (Currently, WeWork appears to be on the verge of bankruptcy.) The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" peels it all off with her bare hands.

Are better-designed buildings the solution to all that ails the Indoor Generation? The wellness model is not without its critics, who include Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini, the curators of a 2011 exhibit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, in Montreal, and the editors of an accompanying book of essays, called "Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture." "An ever increasing number of urban, environmental and architectural problems are treated as medical, and remedies are sought for increasingly specific solutions," Borasi and Zardini write. "Tailoring requirements to particular groups of ill, or presumably ill individuals leads to conflicting, contradictory solutions, and finally to even greater segregation of various demographic groups." Fighting disease is a public-health crusade; leading a healthier life is, very often, a private one. Or, rather, it was. It isn't anymore.

A pandemic upends everything, including the relationship between the private and the public, the rich and the poor, the city and the country, and the outdoors and the indoors. The coronavirus acts like a miasma and a germ, all at once. It's in the air, it's on surfaces, it's inside us. There is nothing so wild as a virus and yet no creature so relentless in its search for a home, no matter how unwelcoming the host. Meanwhile, living indoors all the time is driving people crazy, staring at the wallpaper, peering out windows, craving nature, and one another, whimpering and howling inside.

No one knows for certain where the *COVID-19* virus came from, but one murky, unconfirmed theory has it that a pangolin, dragged from its den, caught in a snare, or tracked by a dog, contracted the virus from a live bat, a winged mammal that sleeps, upside down, in places where even the days are dark: chimneys, caverns, crevices in rocks. A colony of bats is sometimes called a camp, as if they'd pitched tents. Pangolins are anteaters, nocturnal and reclusive; scaly, long-snouted, near-blind, and solitary, they are not altogether unlike porcupines. Their scales protect them from stings and bites, and when a lion or a tiger comes near they curl up into a ball, like a prickly burr. Females give birth in dens; pangolin babies cling to their mothers' tails with their sharp-clawed, five-toed paws, much the way a koala joey clutches its mother's shoulders. Before China shut down the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, in Wuhan Province, in January, a wildlife section there sold live porcupines, beavers, snakes, badgers, and, possibly, pangolins. Maybe a pangolin, or some other wild animal, contracted the virus from a bat in that market, where peddlers stacked all sorts of animals in cages, cramped, wretched, filthy, desperate, in stall after stall, as if they had built a little city, half outdoors, half indoors, a mayhem. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.

- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Art

- [**The High Line Reopens, with Tickets**](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

The High Line Reopens, with Tickets

A portion of the elevated park, designed for the pleasures of walking for its own sake, is now available to the city's masked flâneurs.

August 28, 2020



Photograph by David Williams for The New Yorker

One of the silver linings of the pause in New York City has been seeing harried pedestrians become masked flâneurs, discovering the pleasures of walking for its own sake. The **High Line** was created for exactly that purpose—an elevated stroll in the fresh air, enhanced by outdoor art and sustainable landscaping. Of course, some people would rather just kick off their shoes and lean back. A portion of the park is now open daily, from noon to 8 P.M., with timed tickets available on the High Line app and Web site.

Books

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- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Inside Bernadette Mayer's Time Capsule](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Miss America's History-Makers and Rule-Breakers

For a century, women have conformed to, and rebelled against, the contest's strictures. But are beauty pageants finally beyond redemption?

By [Lauren Collins](#)

August 31, 2020



To the long-standing annoyance of people involved with the Miss America contest, which bills itself as “first, and foremost, a scholarship program,” the general public often confuses it with Miss U.S.A., which freely admits to being a beauty pageant. As annual tournaments of unmarried, childless women in their late teens and twenties, the two events have much in common. In fact, one emerged out of the other. In 1950, Yolande Betbeze, a convent-educated coloratura soprano from Mobile, Alabama, entered the Miss America contest and performed an aria from “Rigoletto” as her talent. She returned to her dressing room to find the words “Hairy sits here,” a reference to her thick eyebrows, scrawled in lipstick on the makeup mirror. But she won, and, newly crowned, refused to sign a contract that would have required her to tour the country in swimsuits made by Catalina, one of the pageant’s sponsors. “I’m an opera singer, not a pinup,” Betbeze said.

Catalina went and started its own contest, Miss U.S.A., scrapping the talent competition and offering cash prizes instead of scholarships. Despite the schism, Miss America endured, with a reputation as the more demure of the two franchises. Miss America finally did away with its swimsuit competition in 2018, in the wake of a scandal that began with male executives at the organization referring to one former winner as a “blimp” and to other contestants as “cunts.” Apart from their formats, the big difference between the two pageants is that, until 2015, Miss U.S.A. and its international offshoot, Miss Universe, were owned, in part, by [Donald Trump](#).

Of all the things Trump could have invested in, why a beauty pageant? The proprietary access to young, beautiful women was surely an attraction. As Jeffrey Toobin [reported](#) in this magazine in 2018, Trump also used Miss Universe to drum up foreign business. There are plenty of places to host clients, though. Pageants, commingling ideology and entertainment, offered something extra—the French-braided forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. As Margot Mifflin demonstrates in [“Looking for Miss America: A Pageant’s 100-Year Quest to Define Womanhood”](#) (Counterpoint), they have been woven into pageant culture from the start.

Participation has been declining for decades, but Miss America still commands attention, rivalling perhaps only major-league baseball in outsized nostalgia-based influence. The pageant isn’t a state-sponsored ritual, but its winners are invited to meet with Presidents and to address legislative committees. In 1995,

Hillary Rodham Clinton, at that time the First Lady, called in to a pre-competition press conference to chat with the reigning queen. Since girlhood, Clinton claimed, she had never gone a year without watching the pageant. “This is the only way I would ever, ever appear on a Miss America contest,” she said, deprecating herself instead of the contest’s premise. “It’s one of those dreams deferred, but it’s finally coming true.”

At its peak, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Miss America attracted more than two-thirds of the country’s television viewers. The annual telecast, culminating with Bert Parks, the m.c., crooning “There She Is,” amounted to a minor late-summer holiday, a reunion of the intact but dysfunctional American family. Boys learned how to watch girls, and girls learned how to watch boys watching girls. Philip Roth once tried to identify the primordial source of the pageant’s allure, “the quirk that made me watch this thing year after year.” All he could come up with was that his boyhood barber, a Jewish immigrant from Turkey, kept a framed picture of the current winner on his scissor tray. I remember tuning in to the pageant during the eighties with my father, who wielded the remote with ceremonious male authority. More than the seahorsey fonts and the sherbet gowns, it was his attachment to the ritual that fostered mine.

The first Miss America pageant was held in September of 1921, in Atlantic City. Inspired by Asbury Park’s popular baby parade, city boosters invited eight “Inter-City Beauties”—from New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New Jersey—to participate in a two-day festival. King Neptune, whom Mifflin describes as “a bronzed, bearded patriarch wearing purple robes and a jeweled crown,” ferried the ingénues around on a barge, depositing them on the shore near Million Dollar Pier for a meet and greet with the mayor. King Neptune was played by Hudson Maxim, the inventor of smokeless gunpowder: “He brandished his trident in his right hand, having lost the other in a lab accident.”

Mifflin is as alive to the pageant’s historical grotesqueries as she is to the weirdo details of its founding. Built near a bay that the Lenni Lenape people called Absegami, Atlantic City was a segregated town that relied on Black labor: African-Americans accounted for twenty-two per cent of the population, but, according to the historian Nelson Johnson, they made up ninety-five per cent of the workforce in the area’s white hotels, which enabled its main industry, tourism. After the opening ceremony at Million Dollar Pier, the contestants were escorted to a float by Black residents in slave costumes—as Mifflin notes, “the

only African Americans to participate in Miss America festivities for the next half century.”

The pageant’s “Bathers’ Revue” caused a sensation. Despite an ordinance that forbade women to bare their knees on the beach, the contestants were required to wear bathing suits, establishing a confusing precedent of control and empowerment. At the end of the festival, five male judges pronounced Margaret Gorman the most beautiful girl in America. At sixteen years old and just over five feet tall, Gorman was the smallest Miss America ever. We know this because contestants’ measurements were recorded in maniacal detail. (Newspapers congratulated the winner of the 1926 pageant, Norma Smallwood, on the twelve-inch circumference of her “well-molded throat.”) Gorman, Mifflin writes, “was not quite a woman, and she was decidedly not a ‘New Woman,’ by then a popular term for the enfranchised, independent, post-Victorian woman of the modern age.”

The inaugural pageant took place almost exactly one year after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote. (Mostly, white women got to exercise it.) Dramatic pageantry, Mifflin notes, had been instrumental in the suffragist movement, in the form of silk sashes and theatrical tableaux. “I can only state my firm belief that a pageant has more power to convince people of the truth of our cause than any other means,” Hazel MacKaye, a suffragist who served as the director of drama and pageantry for the Y.W.C.A., once wrote. Is it any surprise that, just as women won the vote, a repurposed form of pageantry emerged, out of the deep blue, to insure that they were voted upon?

Throughout the twenties, the pageant was a hustle. As its renown grew, the organizers angled for respectability, but the contest kept being thwarted by entrants who bent the rules with a madcap, Miss Hannigan-like period energy. In 1923, Miss Alaska, whom Mifflin describes as “a vivacious favorite in white—swimsuit, stockings, and jazzy tam,” was disqualified on the ground that she was a New York resident and a married woman. A recent immigrant from Sweden, she had “spent all of three days in Juneau.”

In the thirties, the pageant hired Lenora Slaughter, of the St. Petersburg, Florida, chamber of commerce, to spiff up the program. As the pageant’s director, Slaughter hoped to attract a “better class of girl,” and thus a better class of sponsor, transforming a popular entertainment into a tidy model of middle-class

advancement. She added the talent competition, instituted scholarships, created the coronation ceremony, and started pageant-momming the pageant with a genteel dauntlessness that left many of her “girls” in her thrall well into adulthood.

Using a “whack-a-mole approach to controlling the obstreperous beauties,” as Mifflin writes, Slaughter established a pattern of reactivity that plagues the Miss America Organization even now. Winner absconds with her chauffeur on the night of her coronation? Assign a society matron to escort each contestant twenty-four hours a day. Palomino nearly falls into the orchestra pit? No more animals in the talent competition. Slaughter is remembered as the pageant’s great reformer, but there were brittle limits to her progressivism, which placed education alongside, but never above, marriage as a pathway to fulfillment.

Miss America positions itself as a meritocratic institution—a congress of self-improving strivers pulling themselves up by their spaghetti straps. Its quasi-legislative structure, with each state and the District of Columbia sending a delegate, implies that Miss America not only reigns over the nation but also represents it. Demographically, she clearly doesn’t. In the course of a century, the pageant has had one Native American winner, in 1926, and one Latina winner, who was born in Paraguay to Mormon missionaries; it has never had a Muslim, trans, or openly gay winner.

The shame of Slaughter’s thirty-two-year regime was Rule Seven, which appeared sometime in the forties and stipulated that contestants must be “in good health and of the white race.” To Slaughter, “of the white race” seems to have meant pretty much anything but Black. For newly arrived Europeans, the contest served as a portal to whiteness, turning immigrants into Americans. In 1945, pageant officials pressured Miss New York, Bess Myerson, of the Sholem Aleichem Houses, in the Bronx, to Anglicize her name. (“‘Betty,’ or whatever, ‘Merrick’ or something,” Slaughter advised.) Myerson refused and won the contest, becoming the first and only Jewish Miss America.

Even in the sixties, as consciousnesses levitated across the country, the pageant remained a bastion of conservatism. In 1968, the feminist collective New York Radical Women organized “a day-long boardwalk-theater event,” in Atlantic City, to coincide with the pageant. As part of the protest, they filled a “Freedom Trash Can” with cosmetics, steno pads, floor wax, hair curlers, undergarments, and other such “woman-garbage.” Writing about the demonstration in the

Washington Post, the humorist Art Buchwald concluded, “There is no better excuse for hitting a woman than the fact that she looks just like a man.” Reading Buchwald now, one realizes that Trump’s tone of cruel appraisal is at least partly pageant-watcher-speak, the snap judgment of the Nielsen patriarch accustomed to rating bodies the way he rates shows.

As feminists protested on the boardwalk, the first Miss Black America was being crowned at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, four blocks away. The contest, sponsored by the regional N.A.A.C.P. and the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, was, Mifflin writes, “a pivot from pressuring Miss America to integrate,” which had already been attempted, with “pitiful results.” Miss America’s famous theme song dealt in superlatives (“she is fairest of the fair”), but the Miss Black America serenade, by Curtis Mayfield, offered a collective vision of victory (“You’re such wonderful people / And so beautifully equal”). As the sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig has written, “while Women’s Liberation protested the racism of the contest as one of the specific ways it oppressed women, the N.A.A.C.P. sought to fight that racism by having a black woman win the crown in the name of all black women.” An immediate success, Miss Black America exerted transformative pressure on traditional pageants and on the definition of beauty that they presupposed. At the end of last year, Black women held the crowns of five major beauty pageants: Miss America, Miss U.S.A., Miss Teen U.S.A., Miss Universe, and Miss World.

Miss America officials, Mifflin writes, considered themselves “concertedly apolitical.” In 1969, the pageant’s chairman declared, “We have no interest in minorities or causes. S.D.S. has its thing. We have no thing.” Soon, the pageant was not only thingless but sponsorless: Pepsi withdrew as a major advertiser, seemingly unimpressed by the chairman’s vision of a “plain American idealism” devoid of any actual ideals. In 1970, Miss America finally admitted a Black contestant, Cheryl Browne. Thirteen years later, Vanessa Williams, of New York, became the pageant’s first Black winner. But, even if women were no longer to be excluded on account of their skin color, their sexual histories, real or imagined, were still fair game: ten months into Williams’s reign, *Penthouse* published nude photos of her, taken when she was a teen-ager, and pageant officials shamed her into stepping down. Three decades later, Sam Haskell, the longtime C.E.O. of the Miss America Organization, formally apologized to Williams for its handling of the situation.

Haskell resigned in 2017, after his derogatory e-mails about contestants (“OMG

she is huge . . . and gross”) became public. He was replaced by Gretchen Carlson, Miss America 1989 and a former Fox News host, who had recently left the network and received a twenty-million-dollar settlement in a sexual-harassment lawsuit against [Roger Ailes](#). Carlson brought in an all-female executive team, promising, hilariously, “to make this organization 100 per cent about empowering women.” She was supposed to professionalize the pageant, and, surely, to lend it an aura of #MeToo credibility, but her tenure seemed to be less about empowering women than about remaking her career. Carlson left the pageant after a shambolic year during which the sitting Miss America, Cara Mund, accused her and other officials of workplace bullying. (They denied the charge.) In an open letter, Mund wrote of being silenced, marginalized, and treated like “a wind-up toy who they can power up to spit out the meaningless words that are put into her mouth.”

Delving into the history of Miss America, one is struck by the consistency of its critics. Political correctness is often presented as a function of time, a contemporary phenomenon forever on the rise. The pageant’s history, however, shows that social change is often about shifts in attention, that “cancel culture” is just an amplification of critiques that people were making even in the crinoline age.

Betbeze, the swimsuit apostate, received a hundred and sixty-three marriage proposals in the course of her reign. She once remarked that Miss America is the kind of girl who walks into a bar and orders an orange juice “just loud enough for everyone in the place to hear her.” Later in life, she channelled her sparkiness into activism, picketing segregated lunch counters and campaigning for nuclear disarmament. In the sixties, she was invited to return to Atlantic City for an onstage reunion with other previous winners. “Why would I want to do that?” she replied. “You’re not Miss America, y’all are Miss White Christian.”

Beauty queens were once remunerated in fun: “Had Champagne! Met Spanish playboys! Chauffeur drove us home at 6 A.M.!” Bess Myerson wrote in her diary, after being crowned Miss New York. Less thrillingly, there were consumer goods produced by pageant sponsors, such as the Philco “Miss America” television set, in whose advertisements winners appeared, draped in ermine. These days, being Miss America is a full-time job, with a salary that, according to a spokesperson, is “in the low six figures.” A listing on the pageant’s Web site enumerates the position’s requirements: “energy, positivity, professionalism and courtesy while engaging in extensive travel, often logging 20,000 miles a month

and at times changing location every 8-24 hours.”

If Miss America is a job, its winners need a union. The position offers little to no formal training, protection, or straightforward possibility for advancement. There is no set entry fee, but the Miss America Organization requires candidates to raise money for charity in a scheme that Kate Shindle, the 1998 winner, has described as “borderline fraudulent.” Contestants also have to guarantee that they’re neither married nor pregnant (attesting to “a mint-condition uterus,” as John Oliver has observed). Pageant winners are awarded college-tuition money, but they are required to take time off from school in order to carry out their duties. Many never go back. The scholarship money diminishes significantly at each ranking, so that seven finalists receive eighty-five hundred dollars apiece, enough to pay for a third of a semester at Georgetown, where Jade Glab, Miss New Jersey, is currently studying management.

Despite all this, pageants are an attractive option for many young women. Even Gloria Steinem participated in one as a teen-ager in Toledo, Ohio, standing on a beer keg in a bathing suit; she said later that it seemed “like a way out of a not too great life in a pretty poor neighborhood.” Competing in 1924, Miss St. Louis reportedly had her dimples insured for a hundred thousand dollars. Pageants have always been a means, above all, for young women to try to convert cuteness into capital. If it was once sacrilege to say you were competing for money—“to gain poise and develop my personality,” one 1949 contestant gave as her reason for entering—today it’s unusual to say you’re doing the pageant for anything else. In her memoir, Kate Shindle notes that “formers” have been known to use their crowns as receptacles for party dip. They weren’t all in it for the rhinestones.

Recently, Miss America [rebranded](#) itself as “Miss America 2.0,” promising “a fresh take” for “a new generation of female leaders.” In addition to forgoing the swimsuit competition, participants were no longer to be judged on “outward physical appearance.” Last December, at a new venue, the Mohegan Sun Arena, in Connecticut, fifty-one competitors posed in Velázquez-like formations on a black-and-white, minimalist stage. One of them had a pixie cut. Others had bare midriffs. Some of the old cheese endured, such as the habit of introducing oneself in the appositive (“A nationally known speed-painter, I’m Miss Kansas, Annika Wooton!”), but for the most part the “trifecta” of traits that organizers said they sought in a winner—passion, talent, ambition—were on display in abundance. The winner, a begoggled pharmacy student from Virginia named

Camille Schrier, basically gave a *TED* talk onstage, demonstrating the catalytic decomposition of hydrogen peroxide with exploding goo.

Still, it was impossible to magic away the event's fundamental dissonance. If recent contestants have been racially diverse, and even heroically outspoken ("From the state with eighty-four per cent of the United States' freshwater but none for its residents to drink, I'm Miss Michigan, Emily Sioma!"), they also remain overwhelmingly gorgeous and skinny. "I love how Miss America is really showing and highlighting that we're more than just a beauty pageant," one contestant said, in a video segment. Being more than just a beauty pageant is like being more than just a corset, adding comfort features to a base of constriction.

Progressivism has its limits in a regressive institution. A 2020 issue of the contest's magazine touts its scholarships as "much-needed great gender equalizers," asserting that each participant's "future will be brighter and her financial burden lighter." But that trajectory applies to, at most, only a few hundred American women a year. Pageants are expensive to participate in. Young mothers—who tend to need financial aid more than women who have children later in life—need not apply. For every woman who loves her pageant experience, there are scores more who, watching at home, feel diminished by its objectification of women. For every Yolande Betbeze, subverting pageant culture from the inside, there is an Erika Harold, Miss America 2003, advocating for virginity until marriage. (In 2018, Kellie Chauvin—the wife of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who killed George Floyd—competed in Mrs. Minnesota, a pageant for married women, wearing a sparkly navy-blue evening gown as "an homage to police officers," according to the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*. She has since filed for divorce.) To criticize Miss America is to risk seeming unsisterly, because, like success, criticism can always be personalized. Perhaps the most American thing about Miss America is that it fetishizes individual opportunity at the expense of the common good.

In 1988, a college student named Michelle Anderson infiltrated the Miss California pageant as a contestant, undergoing months of "bleaching, dieting, training, tanning, and feigning fundamentalist beliefs to get into the running." Seconds before the winner was to be announced, she reached into her cleavage and unfurled a silk banner that read "*PAGEANTS HURT ALL WOMEN*." Anderson went on to become a lawyer and is now the president of Brooklyn College. I think she was right. Miss America gets money for college. Everyone else gets lessons in sexism, racism, and capitalism that take a lifetime to unlearn.

There is no scholarship for that. ♦

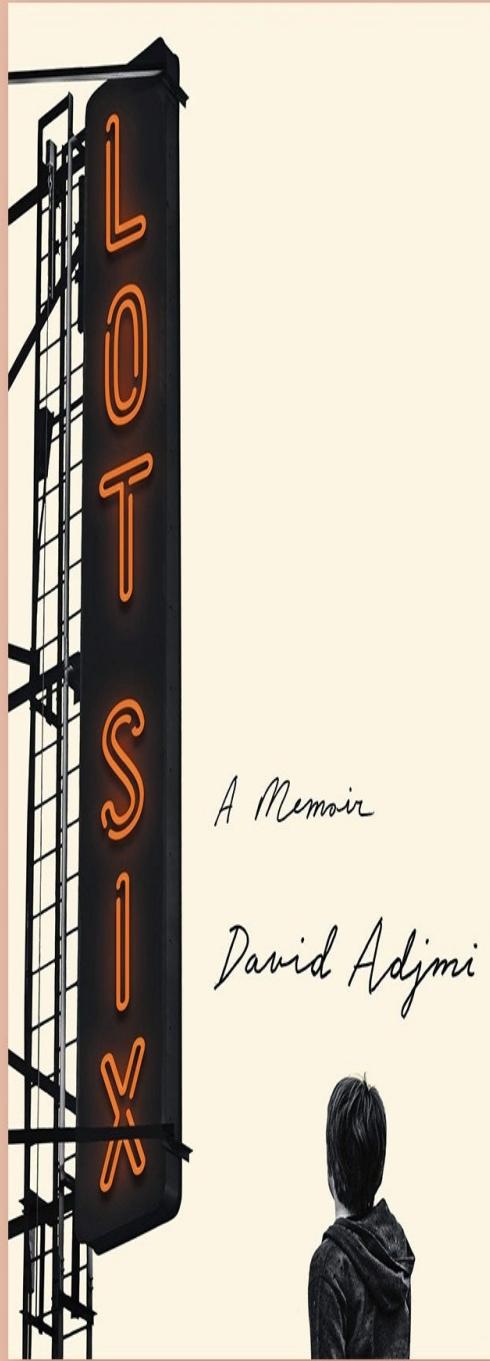
[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“Vesper Flights,” “Lot Six,” “The Death of Vivek Oji,” and “Sisters.”
August 31, 2020



[**Vesper Flights**](#), by Helen Macdonald (Grove). The sixth mass extinction—the ongoing disappearance of countless species at a blindingly rapid rate, as a result of human activity—is the subject of this masterly collection of essays. Macdonald, extending her decade-long attempt to redefine nature writing in order to capture a present that is as troubling as it is resistant to narration, trains her sights on how imperilled species, from peregrine falcons that circle skyscrapers in Manhattan to glowworms in Britain threatened by the “sodium glow of the surrounding town,” make do. Her book retains the essential wonder of classic nature writing, while, ultimately, she finds that being attuned to nature now means “opening yourself to constant grief.”



[**Lot Six**](#), by David Adjmi (Harper). In this witty and intimate memoir, a celebrated playwright considers the path that led him to his art. He delves into his prickly relationship with his Syrian Jewish family, who enforced “no chores, no punishment or discipline or order—everything was hanging by a thread”; the agonies of yeshiva and the absurdity of graduate school; and his adult life as a gay man, which follows a childhood in which he regarded gay people as “untoward.” Through sensitive, insightful prose, Adjmi focusses on his love for his parents, his best friends, and the theatre, a thrilling and frightening object of affection capable of playing “a magic trick,” in which “ugliness was made into something achingly beautiful.”

AKWAEKE EMEZI

author of
Freshwater

THE DEATH
OF VIVEK OJI

A Novel

[**The Death of Vivek Oji**](#), by Akwaeke Emezi (*Riverhead*). As a boy growing up in Nigeria, Vivek Oji, the central figure in this affecting novel of self-invention, begins to enter fugue states, or “small-small blackouts.” When in adolescence he grows his hair long, his family complains, but in secret he experiments with lipstick and women’s clothing. His moments of discovery are contrasted with the pain those dearest to him endure after he dies, possibly the victim of a hate crime: that of his doting Indian mother, who feels that she has failed him, and his cousin, who, for different reasons, feels the same. The novel poses searching questions about gender and acceptance, among them one voiced by Vivek himself: “If nobody sees you, are you still there?”



[**Sisters**](#), by Daisy Johnson (*Riverhead*). In this viscerally uneasy novel, two tight-knit teen-age sisters move to an isolated, decrepit house by the sea with their mother after an unspeakable incident occurs at their school. At home, the girls, September and July, spend their days playing childish games and watching television, as their mother, who is depressed, leaves them largely unsupervised. Soon the house and its surroundings become increasingly eerie, September's moods grow more volatile, "a darkening worry at the threshold of their good life," and her control over her younger sister intensifies. As the boundaries between them blur, their entanglement occasions an examination of the indelible effects of grief, abuse, and love.

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Inside Bernadette Mayer's Time Capsule

“Memory” is a fifty-year-old project, but its nostalgia for summers lost speaks uncannily to our moment.

By [Dan Chiasson](#)

August 31, 2020



On July 1, 1971, the American poet and conceptual artist [Bernadette Mayer](#) began to record one month of her life by shooting a roll of thirty-six color snapshots every day, developing them at night, and keeping a diary of her impressions. The resulting amalgam, a “crazy headed journal” that she called “Memory,” was shown as a mixed-media installation at a SoHo gallery in 1972: a honeycomb of more than a thousand three-by-five photographs mounted to the gallery walls, with six hours of narration playing on a loop. Whatever memory is, “Memory” was an exploration of the layers of what a person thinks they remember firsthand.

The project follows a band of New Yorkers, led by Mayer and her boyfriend at the time, the filmmaker Ed Bowes, back and forth between the city and Massachusetts, where Bowes had a gig shooting films for the Berkshire Theatre Festival. The exhibition of “Memory” operated almost as a film: viewers provided the motion as they followed the cell-like stills across the walls; the extremely committed could even pace themselves in order to synch the audio to the images. These mini temporal dramas eddy within the larger experience of passing time. From July 14th, Mayer gives us five shots of a game of bar pool, beginning with the break and ending when the last ball is sunk.

This spirit of transience extended to “Memory” itself, which for decades lived mainly in memory, surfacing every now and then in altered forms. In 1975, an edited version of Mayer’s script and a handful of photographs were published as a book. In 2016 and 2017, the whole experience was restaged in Chicago and in New York City. This year, the project has morphed yet again: all the photographs, along with Mayer’s original diary, have been [published](#) by Siglio, a new and beautiful embodiment of the work that speaks uncannily to our particular time.

Nostalgia—for the carnal, improvised mood of 1971, but also for the halcyon days of, say, last summer, before we were afraid of communal life—has become the work’s dominant key. Yet “Memory” also seems ahead of its time: a database of half-captured meals, barns, bodies—a kind of analog Internet. The visual images are underexposed, overexposed, and double-exposed. Objects are edged half into or half out of the frame; scenes are never complete. The text propels you past tantalizing sights and experiences. It’s all too much, in ways that seem very familiar to anyone who watches stimuli whiz by in a feed.

“Memory” was always a definitional project; that’s why it’s not called “Memories.” But its proposal for how memory works changes each time the work changes form. Bound in a book, “Memory” is set free within time and space. The Airstreams and roadsters, the delis and coffees are there whenever and wherever we want to experience them, and they can be reanimated on demand. Reading “Memory” with a phone handy, I followed Mayer and her crew along the back roads of the Berkshires to Nejaime’s, a local liquor store, which, I learned, stayed open this spring, deemed an essential business. In the city, Mayer took a photograph of a New York storefront: Casa Moneo. The business closed in 1988, but Google reveals its old address, on Fourteenth Street, in a building that once housed Marcel Duchamp’s studio. When I came across mysteries in the text—a forgotten restaurant, a long-gone landmark—I posed my questions to the Internet, and got answers from the hive mind. Though “Memory” is a famous work, it has been experienced firsthand by relatively few people: it is still a choose-your-own-adventure—uncharted, wide open. Finding a path through “Memory” seems like both a highly personal lark and a spur to collaborate.

William James once distinguished between “substantive” and “transitive” states of mind: the difference between “a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold” and “a feeling of if, a feeling of but, a feeling of by.” “Memory” tempts you to linger on the substantive, but, with its bountiful cars, highways, gas stations, rivers, and bridges, it’s really about getting somewhere. It is happiest in the in-between, and hyperalert to its own transit from one word and image to the next. There are many road trips’ worth of words—often erratically, racing to catch up with memories before their vividness fades. Syntax is stripped down, simple nouns sutured together with ampersands and commas. A conventional English sentence works by subordinating some elements while elevating others. But here, as on a highway, language passes at a steady, constant clip: “71 degrees ed’s reading in the back of the car & a truck with a turquoise thing a trailer back in it crosses the road, iroquois, two people in a sports car a neat compact close fast moving unit.” A tragic detail, the word “iroquois,” zips by on the side of a truck. That’s America.

It’s hard to quote from “Memory,” since its dense linguistic braid unravels when you sever it. The text often tries, almost comically, to guide itself along its own infinitely branching paths. There are detailed driving directions, swimming holes you can still find on a map, step-by-step recipes, and an ad for a steak-delivery place with a once dialable phone number. (I found the place—at 58 Greenwich

Avenue—mentioned in an old newspaper online.) As “Memory” approaches its conclusion, it becomes more aware of the date on the calendar, more consumed with itself—a transcript of a transcript. “& as I write all this stuff down I know it comes out of nowhere goes nowhere & remains, nothing leaves,” Mayer writes. “E back tom. That’s short 4 tomorrow this kind of writing makes it impossible to think straight.”

Mayer wanted “Memory” to serve as a time capsule, its meaning deferred until a future, or a range of futures, that she couldn’t have foreseen. She later said she’d “chosen this month in the forsythia-falling-from-branches seventies at random.” The images she conjures and captures are a kind of timeless Arcady, where capering young lovers address temporality as a series of daily jaunts. Elegy always has a way of creeping into art that documents the once teeming, now empty past: it is almost too painful to glimpse the innocence and the freedom of Mayer’s summer from the point of view of our current fearful season. It can seem a dubious advantage to have survived all those disconnected phones, defunct addresses, dead or forgotten friends. At our moment in history, “Memory” reads in part as an archive of suspended (in both senses of the word) pleasures. “Old cemetery we looked for a place to swim,” Mayer writes. “I showed grace the insane gazebo with wooden horse & carriage.” These pleasures are privileges, too. Mayer and her friends are white: no Black American would feel as free trespassing in somebody’s woods—not then, and not now.

History cannot be banished from the garden. Mayer’s entry from July 4th takes her to the World Trade Center, then under construction. In the early phases of assembling her own ambitious edifice, she marvels at all the rusted steel and rubble around the site. It’s part of a dynamic, jackhammering New York, where destruction and progress sit side by side. To read this day’s entry is to remember the look of those buildings as they came down. A piece of prophecy is accidentally found among the shards of memory. “When I’m not driving I’m thinking,” Mayer writes. “Some memories qualify where the present endures not for a minute or an hour or a day but for weeks & months & years.” The World Trade Center is a memory, but “Memory” is itself still being constructed, reader by reader. You never know when the present instant will end; sometimes it lasts thirty years. ♦

Comment

- [**The Republicans' Conspiratorial Convention**](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

The Republicans' Conspiratorial Convention

Trump and his supporters claimed that his opponents are seeking to deceive and subdue Americans. It's a dangerous path.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

August 30, 2020



Tiffany Trump is not the most prominent or politically adept of the President's children, but her speech at the [Republican National Convention](#) last week served as a succinct summation of the event's key messages. Donald Trump is a giant among Presidents, protecting the country and keeping his promises. His reelection is a contest between freedom and oppression. Yet he's subject to hatred, Tiffany said, because so many people have been "manipulated and visibly coerced" by the media and tech companies that present a "biased and fabricated" version of reality. "Ask yourselves, why are we prevented from seeing certain information?" she urged viewers. The answer is "control."

She was far from the only speaker to have discerned a connection between attempts to deceive the American people and efforts to subdue them. On Thursday night, when her father accepted his party's nomination, he did the same, saying, "They are coming after me, because I am fighting for you!" [Kimberly Guilfoyle](#), a former Fox News journalist who is Donald Trump, Jr.,'s partner, loudly warned about "cosmopolitan élites" who "want to control what you see and think and believe so that they can control how you live." Richard Grenell, the former acting director of National Intelligence, said that Trump's opponents "never want the American people to know who's actually calling the shots."

Claims that the media act in bad faith are a commonplace of electoral politics. [Senator Mitch McConnell](#), in his address on Thursday, said that, "like President Trump, we won't be bullied by a liberal media intent on destroying America's institutions." But the thesis of the Republican Convention was more extreme. Forces larger than the media, variously identified as socialists, anarchists, "wild-eyed Marxists," "woketopians," and "globalization fanatics," are gathering to bring down the country. Journalists may not even know who manages the levers. "Nobody really knows who's controlling who," Trump said on Monday, musing on what he calls "MSDNC."

This was the conspiratorial Convention. Speaker after speaker said that Trump is definitely not a racist, that he is a defender of people with preexisting health conditions, and that he has single-handedly defeated the coronavirus. Accepting such statements almost requires believing that his opponents are masterly practitioners of deception, with a hidden agenda, and that their grievances are a sham. Thus [Black Lives Matter](#) marchers and Democratic mayors were said to want protests to descend into violence. "It isn't an unintended side effect—it's

actually the goal,” Patrick Lynch, the head of New York City’s Police Benevolent Association, said.

Representative Matt Gaetz, of Florida, claimed that “the dangerous left needs America to be weaker in order to accomplish their goal of replacing her.” (The notion that white Americans are in danger of being “replaced” is a trope of the far right.) Gaetz, who grew up in the house where “The Truman Show” was filmed, promoted the idea that almost nothing is as it seems, calling [Joe Biden](#) an extra in a “horror movie” directed by unnamed figures on the left. Like all good conspiracy theories, the plot is as capacious as it is fearsome. An R.N.C.-produced video claims that Biden has been bought by Beijing; it shows the Statue of Liberty fracturing. [Vice-President Mike Pence](#) said that the election will decide “whether America remains America.”

Public-health imperatives were suspect, too. Senator Marsha Blackburn, of Tennessee, said that, “if the Democrats had their way, they would keep you locked in your house until you became dependent on the government for everything. That sounds a lot like Communist China to me!” Social-distancing measures weren’t just misguided; the coronavirus was a convenient excuse to promote socialism. (Similarly, Rebecca Friedrichs, a school-choice advocate, noted that “unsuspecting teachers” are being played by radical unions, whose true aim is “subverting our republic.”) And there are few clearer measures of how Trumpism, with its promise of an alternate reality, has captivated the G.O.P. than the sight, on Thursday night, of fifteen hundred mostly maskless people sitting close together for hours on the South Lawn of the White House to hear the President’s acceptance speech. Meanwhile, *COVID-19* is killing a thousand Americans a day.

In a video shown during the Convention, a self-proclaimed former Democratic Socialist who converted to Trumpism advises that, to understand what is happening, “you have to look deeper.” To illustrate what this means, she is shown scrolling intensely on her mobile phone. The image is appropriate; an increasing number of the President’s supporters are spending time in online forums reading up on [QAnon](#), a family of conspiracy theories centered on Trump’s supposed struggle against the deep state. It has different, often contradictory strands, at times involving tales of a secret military cabal, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and a coming apocalypse. Recently, in a press conference, Trump claimed not to know much about QAnon, other than that “they do, supposedly, like me.” Told that the crux of QAnon is the belief that he

is “secretly saving the world from this satanic cult of pedophiles and cannibals,” he asked, “Is that supposed to be a bad thing or a good thing?” He added that he’d be glad to save the world.

According to Media Matters for America, about twenty candidates on the ballot for the Senate or the House this fall have expressed an affinity for QAnon. One of them, Marjorie Taylor Greene, the Republican candidate for a House seat in Georgia, has speculated that the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas was a false-flag operation. (She now says that she is moving on.) After her primary win, Trump tweeted that she is “strong on everything.” She was invited to attend his acceptance speech.

This is a dangerous path. The country is facing challenges that demand a modicum of trust, from the counting of ballots to the equitable distribution of a *COVID-19* vaccine. “Nobody will be safe in a Biden America,” Trump said. He and his party are telling their supporters that, if he loses the election, everything will be gone—the country, the borders, the suburbs, their guns. A St. Louis couple who pointed firearms at Black Lives Matter marchers were rewarded with a speaking spot at the Convention. Another supporter of the President, in Kenosha, was allegedly all too ready to bring out his gun, with fatal results. But fear and suspicion cannot be the means by which this country is controlled. That isn’t how America remains America. ♦

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Dept. of Swaps

- [The Joys of Looking Out a Stranger's Window](#)

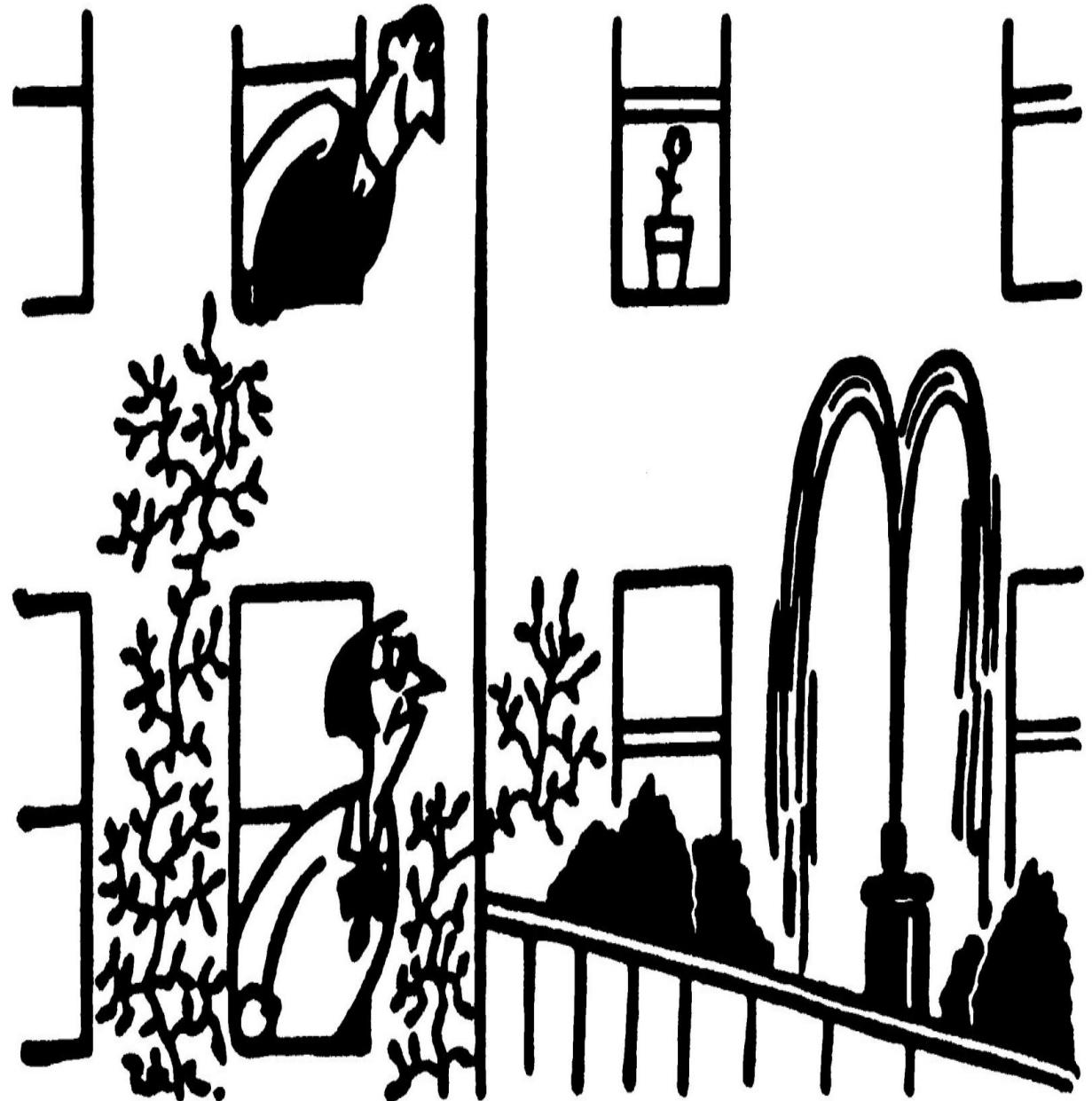
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The Joys of Looking Out a Stranger's Window

On WindowSwap, a new Web site, you might spot six maskless teen-age boys strolling along an Amsterdam canal and then disappearing into the Sex Palace Peep Show, or a white bird flying high across the pyramids of Giza, Egypt.

By [Patricia Marx](#)

August 31, 2020



No matter how great the view from your window may be, haven't you had enough of it? Even John Glenn, on his third circuit around the Earth, probably looked out the window and thought, Not Uranus again! It was this sort of fenestral fatigue that led Sonali Ranjit and her husband, Vaishnav Balasubramaniam, two advertising executives in Singapore, to create WindowSwap, a Web site that lets you check out other people's vistas. Users record videos from their windows, which include ambient sound, and, often, a peek inside the house. "One day, we were on Instagram, and we saw a picture of our friend in Barcelona, who was complaining about the view from his beautiful window," Ranjit said, over WhatsApp, as she and her husband perched close together on a sofa. "We started to wonder: He's bored with his view, we're bored with ours"—they look out on a huge glass apartment complex—"what if we could swap places? We realized, O.K., we can't swap places, but maybe we can swap videos of window views and pretend we're somewhere else for a little bit."

A large button on the site's home page reads "Open a new window somewhere in the world." Click on it, and a randomly selected snippet of *cinéma vérité* will appear, identified only by the first name of the videographer and the location. The effect is mesmerizing and addictive. You might spot six maskless teen-age boys strolling along an Amsterdam canal and then disappearing into the Sex Palace Peep Show; five badgers in Halesowen, England, fighting over food in a back-yard garden; a white bird flying high across the pyramids of Giza, amid honking horns and whining sirens; day turning to night in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where a stately but somewhat shabby apartment house is visible, but the man who is sneezing and laughing in the background is not; or loose guy wires swaying in the breeze on a residential block in Hyderabad, India, while inside, on a window ledge, sits a mugful of tea, a copy of Mitch Albom's novel "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," and a tinny speaker playing "Christmas Time Is Here."

Ranjit and Balasubramaniam, who spend a few hours a day going through submissions, estimate that they have roughly six thousand videos from more than a hundred countries. (Attention, Antarcticans: they'd love a little something from you.) One contributor is Simone Tengattini, who works for the Italian railway system, and whose family has a house in the Alps. He said that the site is like "looking out a train's window and seeing the scenery changing. It's an invitation to participate in somebody else's life." For others, the clips stir up feelings of homesickness, but in a nice way. Chiara Trincia, whose view in Rome

would make an art student take out his pastels—a tableau of clay-tile roofs, a bell tower, and satellite dishes, all in various shades of reds and browns—said, “I was struck by the video of a rainy New York, where I spent my childhood. It brought me back home in a visceral way.” Similarly, Liu Lu, a Chinese sociology student in Japan, recalled seeing a video of Chongqing, not far from where she grew up. “It seemed I can smell the Yangtze River,” she wrote. Lu submitted a clip of her view in Tokyo; she compared a passing train that can be seen in the background to the one that often appears in Japanese movies, convulsing the main character’s home as it races by, thereby symbolizing “the protagonist’s unstable life.” Taking a Disney-er point of view, Nevin, a six-year-old in Zion Grove, Pennsylvania, according to an e-mail from his stepmother, “wants everyone to see what he sees from his bedroom window”—namely, the kiddie pool on his front lawn.



"You're telling me that you don't have the same shoe size as anyone else on the planet?"
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

“When you get a glimpse inside someone’s house, you see that their view might be different from yours,” Ranjit said, “but everyone has a messy desk, mismatched furniture, and maybe music playing in the background.”

“What’s the word for that?” Balasubramaniam asked.

“Sonder,” Ranjit replied. (The word is a 2012 neologism from the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows.) “It’s the sudden realization that other people have lives as rich and complex as your own. We’re all going through the same thing.” She paused. “Except not everyone has a backlog of submissions to get through.” ♦

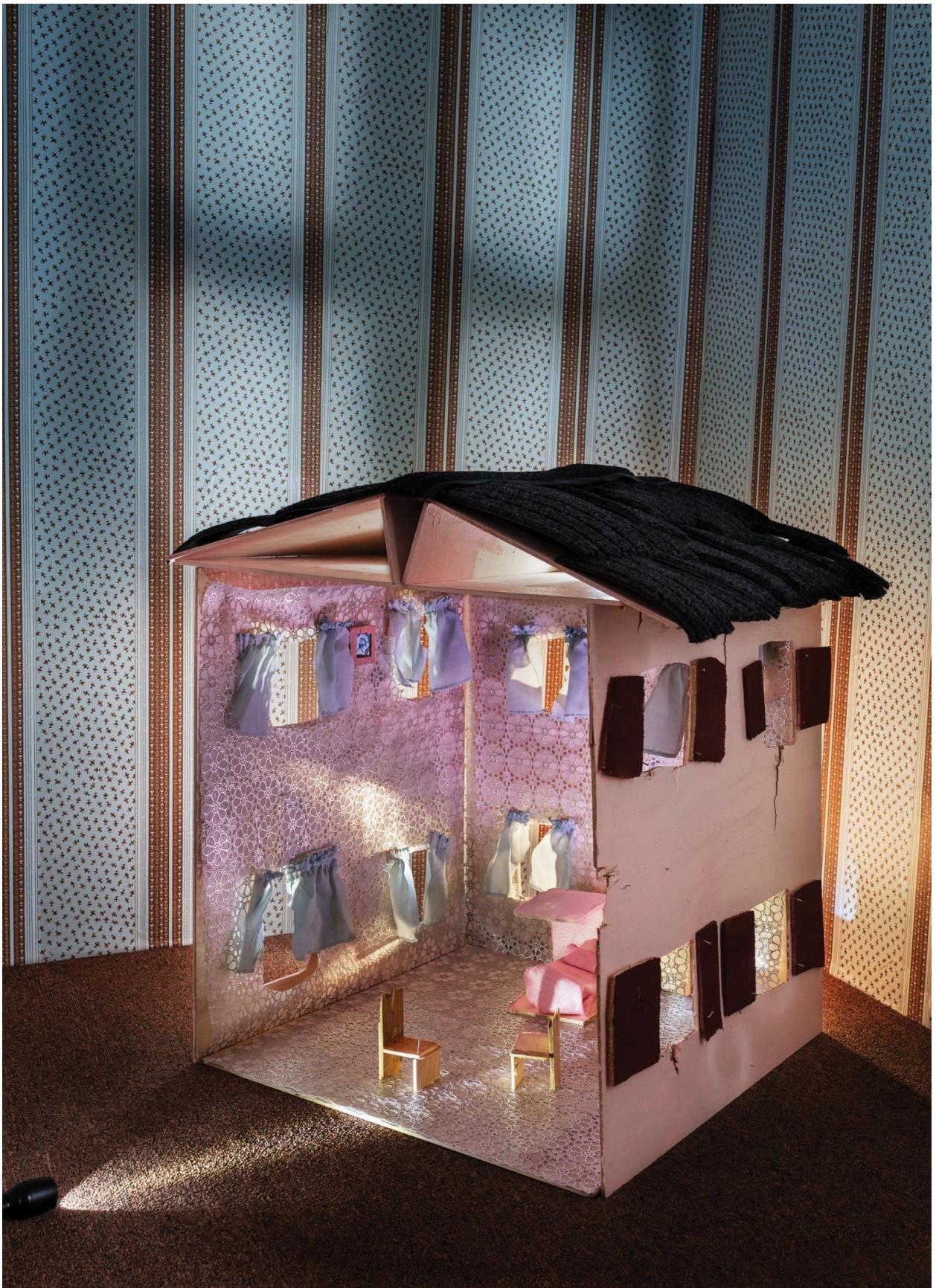
Fiction

- “[Flashlight](#)”

Flashlight

By [Susan Choi](#)

August 31, 2020



Audio: Susan Choi reads.

“One thing I will always be grateful to your mother for—she taught you to swim.”

“Why.” Not asked as a question but groaned as a protest. Louisa does not want her father to talk about her mother. She is sick of her mother. Her mother can do nothing right. This is the theme of their new life, in Louisa’s opinion: that Louisa and her father are two fish who should leave her beached mother behind.

They are making their way down the breakwater, each careful step on the heaved granite blocks one step farther from the shore. Her mother is not even on the shore, seated smiling on the sand. Her mother is shut inside the small, almost-waterfront house they are renting, most likely in bed. All summer Louisa has played in the waves by herself because her mother isn’t well and her father is invariably dressed in a jacket and slacks. Every day since they got here, four weeks ago, she has asked her father to walk the breakwater with her, and tonight he has finally agreed. Spray from the waves sometimes lands on the rocks, so he has carefully rolled up the cuffs of his slacks, though he is still wearing his hard polished shoes. In one hand, he holds a flashlight, which is not necessary; in the other hand, he holds Louisa’s hand, which is also not necessary. She tolerates this out of kindness to him.

Susan Choi on how much she can leave out.

“Because swimming is important to know how to do,” he explains. “For your safety. But when she gave you lessons I thought it was too dangerous. I was very unfair.”

“I don’t care. I hate swimming.”

They both know that the opposite is true. Perhaps her father recognizes her comment for what it partly is—a declaration of loyalty to him—as well as for what it mostly is: a declaration by a ten-year-old child who is contentious by reflex, without any reason. Far out over the water, far beyond where the breakwater joins with a thin spit of sand, the sunset has lost all its warmth and is only a paleness against the horizon. They’ll turn back soon.

“I never learned to swim,” her father reveals.

“Why?” This time her tone is surprised, her question genuine.

“Because I grew up a poor boy. I had no Y.M.C.A.”

“The Y.M.C.A. is disgusting. I hate going there.”

“Someday you’ll feel thankful to your mother. But I want you to act thankful now.”

These are the last words he ever says to her.

(Or are they just the last words that she can remember? Did he say something more? There is no one to ask.)

Louisa lay awake, staring into the dark. The ceiling showed itself in a narrow stripe of light—first sharp like a blade and then becoming softer and softer—which began at the doorframe, where the door was very slightly cracked open. The door was cracked open because Louisa was afraid of the dark. She didn’t use to be. Louisa opened the door every night once she knew that her mother was well out of earshot—once her mother, with maddening slowness, had made her retreat from the room, clumsily bumping her wheelchair into the doorframe until Louisa wanted to scream at her. When her mother was finally out in the hallway, she’d hesitate, one hand on the doorknob, the door almost but not fully shut.

“Close it all the way, please,” Louisa would say in a sharp, grownup tone.

The first time she’d said this it was because she couldn’t stand another second of her mother being there, peering in through the crack. She’d said it every subsequent night in the same way, because she had realized that it was, without being a wrong thing to say, satisfyingly hurtful. After she said it, there would be another brief hesitation, which Louisa didn’t mind, because it showed that her mother was indeed satisfyingly hurt. Apparently, her mother would have liked Louisa to ask for a story, or a kiss, as if Louisa were still five years old. Her mother never expressed this desire but it was nakedly clear. Such naked wanting to be wanted made Louisa’s mother even more repellent to Louisa than she generally was. The door would click into its frame heavily; it was the kind of solid American door that, in the year that she had lived somewhere else, Louisa had almost forgotten existed. A door meant for closing. Then Louisa would lie in the dark, her unsparing mind tracking her mother’s wheelchair down the hall and

imagining hidden trapdoors hinging open beneath it. Meanwhile, the dark, like a snake, slid onto her chest, organizing its weight into neatly stacked coils that might bury her, crush her, if she didn't leap out of bed just in time and, with deft skill, silently reopen the door. Louisa was a master at handling the knob. She wasn't clumsy, like her mother, or thoughtless, like her aunt. No sound escaped as the light was admitted, the darkness destroyed. Back to bed, to gaze up at the stripe.

Tonight, though, sound was admitted as well. She couldn't make out the words but she didn't need to—she knew they were talking about her. This morning, instead of going to school on time, she'd been taken by her aunt to a building downtown, to be examined by a child psychologist. No one had used those words—"child psychologist." They had called it an appointment to talk about her grade level, which, at least at the start, she had believed. On moving here, to Los Angeles, she'd been put into fourth grade when she should have been a fifth grader. She had been halfway through fourth grade when she and her parents had left the U.S. for a year in Japan, and during their time there she had finished fourth grade—done all the workbooks and readings and tests that her parents had brought on the trip—and she'd finished the Japanese fourth grade as well. She had done fourth grade twice, in two countries, and now was being made to do it over again, had been held back as if she had failed.

The appointment had been in a brick office building with a half flight of stairs at the entrance and, as they climbed, her aunt had said, "This is why your mom couldn't come with us—because of these stairs. I called ahead to ask if there were stairs at the entrance and, sure enough, they told me there were. Your poor mama."

"She's not sick," Louisa said.

"What's that, honey?"

Louisa was silent.

"I didn't hear you, honey."

Now Louisa could pretend that she hadn't heard. This was effective. No one was ever listening closely; even the people who especially claimed to be listening were not really listening.

It was this way with the man at the appointment. “My name is Dr. Brickner,” he said, making a show of bending down to shake her hand. He had already made a show of leaving her aunt in the waiting room, and another show of reassuring Louisa that her aunt would be right there waiting for her, as if Louisa were in any fear that her aunt might disappear. Louisa’s aunt was like a bright light that Louisa couldn’t turn off. On the nights when Louisa’s mother wasn’t up to it, it was her aunt who tucked Louisa into bed and then lingered too long in the doorway. Louisa’s aunt broadcast her kind disposition by constantly tilting her head to one side, crinkling her eyes, and compressing her mouth, as if to savor all the good-tasting mirth trapped inside. Sometimes, performing this face for Louisa, she added nostalgic comments about her two grownup sons, and how precious it was to be reminded of them by Louisa’s novel presence in her home. Louisa doubted her aunt felt this way. Until she and her mother had moved here, Louisa had never heard of this aunt or uncle—her mother’s brother, whom Louisa was now meant to pretend she’d known about her whole life. Her whole ten years of life, during which she had never heard their names, or seen their photos, or received a card or a gift from them on her birthday, had never answered the telephone to hear either one of them ask for her mother or her father. Now she lived in their house and drank orange juice with them staring at her. They behaved toward her the way all adults had since her father had died: with a combination of hearty attention and squeamish discomfort.

“*Brick-ner*, like this ugly brick building we’re in,” the man had added heartily. “That’s how you can remember! But my first name is Jerry, and I’d like you to just call me that. Can I call you Louisa?”

“So I don’t need to remember,” she said.

“What’s that?” He pointed his grin at her. “What did you say?”

“I said I don’t need to remember ‘Brickner, like this ugly brick building,’ because you said I should just call you Jerry.”

The man reared back and raised his eyebrows. “Let me guess—you’re a very smart girl.”

“At least smart enough to be in fifth grade.”

“Oh, I’ll *bet*. Oh, I’m sure there’s no doubt about *that*,” “Jerry” blathered, not listening, which was how she had understood that the appointment was not about

her grade level.

The room was full of admittedly interesting things: art supplies and those faceless wooden figures meant for posing, as well as actual dolls of different sorts, ranging from the sloppy-floppy Raggedy Ann style to the “realistic infant” style, with a hard plastic head, hands, and feet and a queasily soft trunk, arms, and legs, to wild-haired Barbies and those soldier Barbies for boys, the G.I. Joes. There was an intriguing if off-kilter doll house, the kind that was meant to be played with and not just admired, with cluttered furnishings in slightly different sizes, as if there had been disagreement about which scale to use. Louisa knew about scale, about one foot = one inch. Her father had made her a doll house the year she turned six. First grade had been the year of her passion for a store at the mall called It’s a Small World, which sold elaborate miniature homes that she would gaze into, mesmerized, with the peculiar sensation of leaving her body and slipping in amid those wee wonderful things, things she lacked the words for and so had to learn one by one—fireplace irons and grandfather clocks and hat stands and claw-footed armoires. The young heroines in the books she liked most lived in such houses, full of little wooden knobs and dust ruffles and embroidery, each stitch as small as those tiny black seeds which are lofted by dandelion fluff. Every visit to the mall, Louisa’s mother gave her twenty minutes to browse in the store, as a matter of policy, placidly ignoring her pleas that they actually buy something. Her father, by contrast, had needed her to plead only once. Off they had stormed to the mall, her father lambasting her mother’s cheapness the entire drive there. Into the store and immediately out he had stormed, once he’d seen the first doll-house price tag.

“I can make *that*,” he’d said.

The thin walls of hobby plywood had been tacked together with tiny nails that nevertheless caused the walls to split and splinter, their exposed front edges unsanded. The roof had been “shingled” with strips of a rough rubber matting that her father had found in the basement. Wallpaper scraps from the hardware store were cut down to size for the walls and the floor. He’d even built much of the furniture himself, sitting at the kitchen table night after night in his undershirt, with a glass of beer near at hand and his pipe clamped between his teeth, while he cut strips of balsa and glued them to form the crude shape of a canopy bed.

At first, Louisa had been horrified by the clumsy, indelicate house, though her

horror was silent. Her father's labor awed and grieved her. He was toiling to make something ugly that she didn't desire. Yet somehow, over time, she'd realized that here, too, was the charm of the small. Her mother perhaps helped reveal it, by sewing tiny pillows and bedspreads and the bed canopy, by showing Louisa that postage stamps could be put into brown cardboard frames to make art for the walls, that a length of embroidery yarn could be wound in a tight ball the size of a pea, and pierced through with two straight pins in an X, to look just like someone's miniature knitting.

Then Louisa had spent hours on the floor, gazing into her strange handmade house. It had come to feel so like her home that the very few items within it that were consolatory gifts her parents had bought her from It's a Small World—the grand piano with its blue velvet bench, the four spindly chairs—looked out of place and inauthentic. Wrong.

“Louisa?”

She was startled to find Dr. Brickner just over one shoulder. She turned away from the doll house, stepping neatly around him, and dropped into a chair. Moments before, during the introductions, the thing to do had been to shirk his eye contact and look at the things in the room that weren't him. Now he'd caught her looking interested in something, and the thing to do was shirk that something and seem not to care about it. They were alone together, and no one had told her how long it would last. But let it last forever, she wouldn't give him anything.

“You can play with the doll house,” he said, and she was pleased to hear a tinge of supplication. “That's what it's there for.”

“That's O.K.”

“Would you like to draw? I have terrific drawing stuff.”

“That's O.K. I don't really enjoy drawing.” Right away she regretted this offering. Sure enough, he nimbly caught on. Perhaps he was actually listening.

“What kinds of things *do* you enjoy?”

Certain adults could do this, Louisa had noticed. Instead of *oohing* or saying, “You sound so grownup when you talk,” these adults deftly plucked your words from the air and then flicked them back at you, with a straight face, as if they

thought you might somehow become hypnotized. It was a game, and not a playful type of game but a competitive, scorekeeping game, the quick-witted adult snatching one bit of you after another.

“What’s that flashlight for?” Louisa asked him, and now his mind had to spring to “flashlight” and pretend that the question was what he’d expected.

The flashlight stood on the windowsill, bulb end pointing down. The windows in the room were very large and high with deep sills, and the deep sills were very cluttered as every surface in the room was cluttered. There were potted plants set close together, and in the space between them ugly “art works” made from balls and tubes of clay incompetently stuck together, and other knickknacky arts-and-crafts garbage that Louisa supposed other children made during appointments. Amid all this, the flashlight hardly stood out, and Dr. Brickner had to crane his neck around in awkward almost-panic to figure out what she was talking about. “It’s to see in the dark!” he said clownishly.

“You have lights.”

He abandoned the clowning. “It’s in case of a power outage. Which doesn’t happen often, but it could happen. Especially if there’s an earthquake.”

“Where I lived before I moved here, there were earthquakes all the time.”

“In Japan.”

She was disappointed somehow that he already knew this, but of course he already knew everything. “Can we turn out the lights?”

“It won’t be dark.”

“You could pull the blinds down.”

“It still won’t be dark—it will be *dim*,” Dr. Brickner predicted, but he was already doing it. The blinds were an ancient, unreliable mess and were clearly never closed. As Dr. Brickner struggled with them, they fought back, their long metal strips rattling and seesawing slantwise and releasing a dust plume before they seemed to surrender and fall all at once. The dust, dissipating, glinted erratically as if flashing a code as it crossed the slim rays of afternoon light that were streaming in through the gap where the blinds did not quite meet the wall.

When her eyes adjusted, Louisa could see everything, but it was pleasantly dusky, so long as she didn't look straight into the needles of sun. Dr. Brickner, reaching over his desk toward the chair where she sat, held the flashlight out to her. It was surprisingly, satisfyingly heavy. Louisa slid the plastic switch with her thumb and a pale cloud of light appeared on the ceiling.

"Oh, good," he said. "I thought the batteries might have gone dead."

"If they had, and this was an earthquake, then you'd be in trouble."

"Very true."

She played the light over the ceiling, almost forgetting about him. The ceiling was far above her, twice as far as the extinguished overhead light, which was the hideous kind that looked like a huge upside-down ice tray suspended from wires. Beyond the enormous ice tray, the faint pool of light ventured over the ceiling and slid down the wall. It seemed alive, a being both at her command and mysterious to her. "Doo-doo-doo-doo-dooooooo," she sang out, now inexplicably goofy herself. She was singing the five famous notes that everyone recognized lately, the U.F.O.'s greeting from "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

Dr. Brickner laughed. They gazed up at the ceiling as if something were actually there. "Did you like that movie?" asked his voice, which she found was more tolerable than when she had to look at his face.

"It scared me." Her honesty surprised and annoyed her.

"Why?"

She shrugged, waving the flashlight beam over the ceiling as if in erasure. "Just in a fun way. Like Halloween stuff."

"Is that what you meant when you said that it scared you?"

She'd let the door open a crack, but he was too large and slow to slip through; she had already closed it. She almost felt sorry for him. The hidden side of her contempt for adults was this pity: that they imagined they understood her and then blundered so proudly, while she had to pretend to be caught. She sang the alien greeting again, conducting with the flashlight to make a five-pointed star in

the air.

“Did you like ‘Star Wars’?” Dr. Brickner wondered, as if her taste in movies were what they were here to discuss.

“Sure.”



"It's a panda-cam production of 'Streetcar,' but it is live theatre."
Cartoon by David Borchart

“So you like sci-fi.”

This she couldn’t allow. “ ‘Close Encounters’ isn’t *sci-fi*. Everything in that movie is normal. That’s what makes the aliens feel really real.”

“And that’s scary.”

“No. Those aliens aren’t scary at all. They seem nice.”

“Then why would their being real scare you?”

“It *doesn’t*. And besides, when they land, they look fake.”

“But you just said they felt really real.” He was onto something, his triumphant tone told her, as if he won a point for every little crack where her words didn’t fit smoothly together. She swung the light onto his face, and he squinted but didn’t scold her, so she swung it away as a reward.

“I didn’t. They don’t.”

“But the signs that they’re coming—the weird radio sounds, the lights in the sky, the dad who builds the tower out of mud and his family thinks he’s gone crazy—maybe *that* felt really real?”

She said nothing.

“Normal life turning strange—did *that* feel really real? Are there things in your own life that might feel that way?”

The flashlight dropped out of her hand, its butt end striking down on the cold tile floor with a noise like a gunshot. It clattered onto its side, rolled a few inches, stopped. Louisa wiped her palm on the front of her jeans. After she and her mother had arrived in Los Angeles, her aunt had taken her shopping for jeans. All her life she’d worn skirts, kilts, jumpers, pinafore dresses, sandals, and oxfords, and now she was clad in bluejeans and red sneakers. Her body didn’t feel or look like her body, which she hadn’t before thought of as feeling or looking like hers. She hadn’t before thought about it at all. She stretched her arm toward the flashlight without otherwise moving. Its light had been trapped, like

the sun in the blinds, and spread over the floor in a wedge.

“When I was getting ready to meet you, I talked on the phone to your mother,” Dr. Brickner resumed. “I know your mother’s not well. I didn’t want her to have to come into my office. So we talked a long time. I had lots of questions about you. She wanted to help me as much as she could.” Louisa’s arm dangled over the hard wooden arm of the chair, fingers slack, no longer attempting to reach for the flashlight. The beam spilled from its little round porthole. “She told me that when you were found on the beach in Japan, after your father had drowned, you told people that he had been kidnapped.”

“No, I didn’t,” Louisa said quickly, without looking up. She stared at the wasted light painting the floor. Whenever the next earthquake came, the batteries in this flashlight would surely be dead. Maybe, because he didn’t have a working flashlight, Dr. Brickner would also be dead. Louisa might take the blame for this, for having wasted the batteries now. She wondered how much of the fault for his death would be hers.

“Your mother wasn’t there when they found you, but the person who found you said that you’d said this.”

“I never said that,” Louisa said again. “I don’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Louisa,” Dr. Brickner said, coming around his desk toward her and propping his rear on the edge, so that his suit jacket, which was already rumpled, bagged up at his shoulders and looked even worse, “do you know what ‘shock’ is?”

“If you rub a balloon on a wall and you touch someone else you can give them a shock,” she recited. Perhaps she had read this in *3-2-1 Contact*. Or *Cricket*. She couldn’t remember.

“True, that’s electric shock. But that’s not the shock that I’m talking about, though the feeling can be similar. Like a sudden, sharp, frightening feeling. Does that make sense to you?”

“An electric shock isn’t frightening,” she countered blandly, fixing her eyes on his tiepin. It looked like a paper clip holding his tie to his shirt.

“Maybe I’m not explaining well. Sometimes I’m better at listening than at talking. Maybe I can listen, and you can talk some more.”

“That’s what you’ve been trying to do since I got here.”

“And this room is full of tricks to get children to talk, but you’re too smart for them.”

“I’m too smart for compliments. I don’t like them.”

“I’ve noticed that children who deserve them don’t like them.”

“I don’t deserve them.”

“Don’t you? I said you were smart, and you agreed with me. You said you were too smart for compliments.”

“Being smart shouldn’t get compliments. Being smart isn’t something I did. It’s just something I am. And I don’t like it,” she added after a moment.

“Why not?”

“Other kids are obnoxious to me. I don’t have any friends.”

“Your mother told me that you’ve always had friends. In Boston, you had friends. In Japan, you had friends. It’s only since you moved here that you haven’t had friends.”

“I don’t want friends.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like people asking me questions.”

“Like me?”

She shrugged. “No offense.”

“It’s my job to ask you questions.” He pushed off the edge of his desk and went behind it again. “Hand me my flashlight, please.”

She obeyed him before it occurred to her that she might not. Too late, though he didn’t seem to have marked it as a point in his favor. He was simply shining the flashlight down onto his desk, where white, yellow, and pink sheets of paper

appeared in its pool of light. "You see, one of my bosses is called the Los Angeles Unified School District, and when they send me a pink sheet of paper with a child's name on it that means I have to ask that child questions or they won't send my paycheck. You might think that our meeting has to do with you, but it really has to do with Mrs. Brickner, my wife, and Kelly Brickner, my son, who's a sophomore at U.S.C., and Cheryl Brickner, my daughter, who's a junior at Westinghouse High School. It's really because of them that I'm asking you questions—and because of the Los Angeles Unified School District. And the reasons *they* want me to ask you the questions—well, let's see what they wrote on your form. 'Defiance, disruptive behavior, deception, peer-to-peer conflict, tardiness, truancy, larceny—'"

"What's that?" she interrupted.

"Which?"

"The last one. Larson something."

"Larceny. A fancy word for stealing."

"I've never heard that."

"Do you mean you didn't know that you were accused of stealing?"

"No, I've never heard that word. 'Larson—'"

"L-A-R-C-E-N-Y. We've found the limits of your ten-year-old's vocabulary. Would you like to talk about larceny? You don't look very sorry about it."

"I'm not."

"I'm sure your parents taught you not to steal."

But this was just the point. Stealing was a thing you were *told* not to do, you were told was wrong, but why was it? Why did calling it wrong make it wrong? What bad result came when you stole, apart from people just making a fuss? Sitting in the supposedly nice restaurant her aunt and uncle had taken her to while her mother was getting more tests at the hospital, she'd put the saltshaker in her pocket and taken it home. What bad thing had happened? Only that the saltshaker had moved from the center of the soiled tablecloth at the supposedly

nice restaurant to a box in her closet. Sitting in the office of the school principal, Mr. Wamsley, she'd stolen an imitation-wood pen set off his desk. It had consisted of a pen that was made to look like a twig, a trough for the pen to lie in that was made to look like a hollowed-out log, and a small cup for thumbtacks or paper clips, concealed in what was intended to look like the miniature stump of a tree. It was the sort of thing that Louisa might have begged her mother to buy her father as a Father's Day gift back when she was seven or eight, before she realized, as she had now realized about so many things, that it was not charming and pretty but ugly and cheap. While Mr. Wamsley consulted with her teacher just outside the door, Louisa had removed her windbreaker and rolled all three of the desk items into it and sat with the roll on her lap the whole time that Mr. Wamsley was lecturing her, and then walked out with the roll in her hands. In what way had Mr. Wamsley suffered by no longer having those things on his desk? A stupid girl named Dawn Delavan had brought little blue plastic elf figurines, each with a different absurd attribute like a wizard's hat, a paintbrush, or a harp, to the classroom each day, and though these had disappeared one at a time, Dawn Delavan had never learned to stop bringing them; she just fussed and cried to their teacher, Miss Prince, while Miss Prince trained her cold steady gaze on Louisa.

"You don't think that stealing is wrong?" Dr. Brickner said now.

"I know that it's wrong. I don't see why. I don't see what difference it makes."

"Kidnapping is stealing, isn't it?"

He lowered the flashlight onto the surface of his desk so that its light shrank beneath it and vanished, along with all the white, yellow, and pink sheets of paper describing Louisa's problems and her crimes. Then, with a click, he turned the flashlight off. Twilight settled around them, taking on the dim shapes of the room. Dr. Brickner set to work raising the blinds, which required much more effort and time than lowering them had. He had to haul on the dangling cords hand over hand, as if they were a part of something really serious, like a boat or a flagpole. The blinds screamed in protest as they rose, but finally sunlight broke into the room. It was orange, like the light from a fire. Ever since arriving in California, Louisa had constantly noticed the light. Even Dr. Brickner, who presumably wasn't new here, seemed surprised by it and gazed out the window for a moment before sitting back down in his desk chair to face her.

"When you told people that your father was kidnapped, I think you meant he'd been taken away from you. Stolen. Death steals the people we love."

"But I never said he was kidnapped," Louisa repeated. "My mother made that up. She makes everything up."

Dr. Brickner answered with a contemplative expression. I believe you, he seemed to want his expression to say. Louisa gazed back at him unflinchingly, clothing him first in pity, then in contempt, and then in pity again, trying to decide which was best, as if he were a paper doll. There was nothing on his desk anymore to obstruct their calm view of each other, and Louisa wondered if he would notice, and thought that, if he did, she would find a new feeling to dress him in. She wasn't sure she wanted to have to do this. She wasn't sure if her suspense, as she waited, was eager or fearful. These two possibilities seemed to have opposite meanings but they felt the same way. Now Dr. Brickner took a pen from his jacket breast pocket and dropped his gaze from her face to a notepad. As he filled the pad with illegible writing, his face was serene. He seemed to have found what he needed. "Why don't you play with the toys while I finish my notes," he suggested as he wrote, but of course she could not move and didn't. He didn't repeat the suggestion.

When he had finished writing, he came around the desk again and said something about what a pleasure it had been to meet her. He put out his hand and she shook it without standing up. If he found this rude he didn't let on. Then she followed him to his office door with her arms crossed behind her, and, after some more pleasantries with her aunt, he disappeared behind his door again and Louisa rode home in the car with her aunt and a dull pain where the hard metal stump of the flashlight, shoved into the back of her waistband, dug into her buttock.

Now she pulled the flashlight out from where she'd concealed it in the crack between her mattress and the headboard. Aimed at the ceiling, it made a frail jellyfish of light, pierced by the stripe from the door. Walking the beach at sunset, her father had always brought their flashlight, its weight and shape awkwardly housed in his slacks pocket. If she let go of his hand and ran ahead a bit before turning back, she'd see the flashlight tugging the waist of his slacks down on one side as he made his way toward her. He'd been particularly cautious, her father. Full of strange fears. He was so afraid that she would ingest a sharp object—some piece of glass or metal accidentally included in her food—

that at restaurants he would poke through her dish with a fork before letting her eat it. In crosswalks, and even on sidewalks, he was afraid she'd be hit by a car, and even after she turned ten still held her tightly by the hand any time that they walked out in public. He feared the primal wildness of domesticated animals and would not let Louisa have a pet. And he must have feared darkness, too, always bringing that flashlight on their walks, despite how long the sunset's afterglow lived in the sky, despite his never letting Louisa stay out late enough to see the first stars. Except for that very last night, when they finally went out on the breakwater, and went so far that it was actually dark before they got back to shore. They'd needed the flashlight to be sure of their footing on the slippery rocks, her father's grip almost crushing her fingers. When the flashlight fell, it landed almost noiselessly in sand.

This fact—that the flashlight, in falling, had landed almost noiselessly in sand—rippled over her like the light rippling over the ceiling. It was not a memory, as Louisa understood memory: a fragmented, juddering filmstrip of image and sound. This wasn't something but nothing, an absence where a presence was expected. There had been no clattering onto the rocks. There had been no splash in the water. The flashlight had fallen almost noiselessly into the sand.

Her father, it was understood, had slipped and fallen off the breakwater, and drowned. Louisa had been found unconscious on the shore. Her father, his body, had not been found at all. Currents explained Louisa's father's body's disappearance. Shock explained Louisa's transposition to the sand. All of it was sad. None of it was surprising. The flashlight had fallen almost noiselessly into the sand, but it was possible that Louisa had dropped it there herself; she might have obtained the flashlight from her slipping, falling, drowning father, walked the rest of the causeway of slippery rocks to the shore, and dropped the flashlight almost noiselessly herself.

What had happened to that flashlight? Of course it was gone. She had remembered it only now, holding this flashlight, gripping its warm metallic heft and aiming its faltering ray. She loved this flashlight and not just because she had stolen it from Dr. Brickner. It was a faithful object. It had been forgotten, without purpose, before she had snatched it away. She would have to get fresh batteries for it, but that would be easy; she would steal them from the rack at the checkout the next time she went to the store with her aunt.

Her door swung open and the spill of light from the hallway washed over the

ceiling and drowned her jellyfish. “Louisa?” came her mother’s cracked voice. The wheelchair bumbled through the doorframe, banging and scraping in haste, and then her mother was on her, having somehow launched herself across the space between the wheelchair and the bed, confirming what Louisa kept saying: her mother didn’t need the chair; she was faking.

“Oh, Louisa, Louisa, oh, sweetie,” her mother was keening, drowning Louisa in touch as Louisa tried to thrash her away. Now her aunt was also busying into the scrum.

“What a sound! It’s like she’s being murdered!” her aunt cried. “It’s making my hair stand on end! Here’s milk—it should calm her right down.”

But she didn’t want milk or her mother’s hands on her. Why wouldn’t they let her alone? She kicked with everything she had and the flashlight fell out of her covers and crashed to the floor. It made such a bang that her mother and her aunt gasped and froze. Then her aunt saw the cause of the noise and picked it up from the floor.

“I can’t believe it,” her aunt said. “When the doctor called this evening and told me you’d taken his flashlight, I gave him a piece of my mind. You’ve made a liar out of me.”

Then they did let her alone, though she didn’t see which of them yanked the door shut, leaving her in darkness. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

In the Garden

- [The Disturbances of the Garden](#)

The Disturbances of the Garden

In the garden, one performs the act of possessing.

By [Jamaica Kincaid](#)

August 31, 2020



My obsession with the garden and the events that take place in it began before I was familiar with that entity called consciousness. My mother taught me to read when I was very young, and she did this without telling me that there was something called the alphabet. I became familiar with words as if they were all wholly themselves, each one a world by itself, intact and self-contained, and able to be joined to other words if they wished to or if someone like me wanted them to. The book she taught me to read from was a biography of Louis Pasteur, the person she told me was responsible for her boiling the milk I drank daily, making sure that it would not infect me with something called tuberculosis. I never got tuberculosis, but I did get typhoid fever, whooping cough, measles, and persistent cases of hookworm and long worms. I was a “sickly child.” Much of the love I remember receiving from my mother came during the times I was sick. I have such a lovely memory of her hovering over me with cups of barley water (that was for the measles) and giving me cups of tea made from herbs (bush) that she had gone out and gathered and steeped slowly (that was for the whooping cough). For the typhoid fever, she took me to the hospital, the children’s ward, but she visited me twice a day and brought me fresh juice that she had squeezed or grated from fruits or vegetables, because she was certain that the hospital would not provide me with proper nourishment. And so there I was, a sickly child who could read but had no sense of consciousness, had no idea of how to understand and so make sense of the world into which she was born, a world that was always full of a yellow sun, green trees, a blue sea, and black people.

My mother was a gardener, and in her garden it was as if Vertumnus and Pomona had become one: she would find something growing in the wilds of her native island (Dominica) or the island on which she lived and gave birth to me (Antigua), and if it pleased her, or if it was in fruit and the taste of the fruit delighted her, she took a cutting of it (really she just broke off a shoot with her bare hands) or the seed (separating it from its pulpy substance and collecting it in her beautiful pink mouth) and brought it into her own garden and tended to it in a careless, everyday way, as if it were in the wild forest, or in the garden of a regal palace. The woods: The garden. For her, the wild and the cultivated were equal and yet separate, together and apart. This wasn’t as clear to me then as I am stating it here. I had only just learned to read and the world outside a book I did not yet know how to reconcile.

The only book available to me, a book I was allowed to read all by myself

without anyone paying attention to me, was the King James Version of the Bible. There's no need for me to go into the troubles with the King James Version of the Bible here, but when I encountered the first book, the Book of Genesis, I immediately understood it to be a book for children. A person, I came to understand much later, exists in the kingdom of children no matter how old the person is; even Methuselah, I came to see, was a child. But never mind that, it was the creation story that was so compelling to me, especially the constant refrain "And God saw that it was good." The God in the Book of Genesis made things, and at the end of each day he saw that they were good. But, I wondered, for something to be good would there not have to be something that was not good, or not as good? That was a problem, though I didn't bother myself with it at the time, mainly because I didn't know how to, and also because the story had an inexorableness to it: rolling on from one thing to another without a pause until, by the end of six days, there were a man and a woman made in God's image, there were fish in the sea and animals creeping on land and birds flying in the air and plants growing, and God found it all good, because here we are.

It was in the week after this creation, on the eighth day, that the trouble began: loneliness set in. And so God made a garden, dividing it into four quarters by running water through it (the classic quadrilinear style that is still a standard in garden design) and placing borders, the borders being the eternal good and evil: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. One tree was to be partaken of, the other forbidden. I have since come to see that in the garden itself, throughout human association with it, the Edenic plan works in the same way: the Tree of Life is agriculture and the Tree of Knowledge is horticulture. We cultivate food, and when there is a surplus of it, producing wealth, we cultivate the spaces of contemplation, a garden of plants not necessary for physical survival. The awareness of that fact is what gives the garden its special, powerful place in our lives and our imaginations. The Tree of Knowledge holds unknown, and therefore dangerous possibilities; the Tree of Life is eternally necessary, and the Tree of Knowledge is deeply and divinely dependent on it. This is not a new thought for me. I could see it in my mother's relationship to the things she grew, the kind of godlike domination she would display over them. She, I remember, didn't make such fine distinctions, she only moved the plants around when they pleased her and destroyed them when they fell out of favor.

It is no surprise to me that my affection for the garden, including its most disturbing attributes, its most violent implications and associations, is intertwined with my mother. As a child, I did not know myself or the world I

inhabited without her. She is the person who gave me and taught me the Word.

But where is the garden and where am I in it? This memory of growing things, anything, outside not inside, remained in my memory—or whatever we call that haunting, invisible wisp that is steadily part of our being—and wherever I lived in my young years, in New York City in particular, I planted: marigolds, portulaca, herbs for cooking, petunias, and other things that were familiar to me, all reminding me of my mother, the place I came from. Those first plants were in pots and lived on the roof of a diner that served only breakfast and lunch, in a dilapidated building at 284 Hudson Street, whose ownership was uncertain, which is the fate of us all. Ownership of ourselves and of the ground on which we walk, ownership of the other beings with whom we share this and see that it is good, and ownership of the vegetable kingdom are all uncertain, too. Nevertheless, in the garden, we perform the act of possessing. To name is to possess; possessing is the original violation bequeathed to Adam and his equal companion in creation, Eve, by their creator. It is their transgression in disregarding his command that leads him not only to cast them into the wilderness, the unknown, but also to cast out the other possession that he designed with great clarity and determination and purpose: the garden! For me, the story of the garden in Genesis is a way of understanding my garden obsession.

The appearance of the garden in our everyday life is so accepted that we embrace its presence as therapeutic. Some people say that weeding is a form of comfort and of settling into misery or happiness. The garden makes managing an excess of feelings—good feelings, bad feelings—rewarding in some way that I can never quite understand. The garden is a heap of disturbance, and it may be that my particular history, the history I share with millions of people, begins with our ancestors' violent removal from an Eden. The regions of Africa from which they came would have been Eden-like, and the horror that met them in that "New World" could certainly be seen as the Fall. Your home, the place you are from, is always Eden, the place where even imperfections were perfect, and everything that happened after that beginning interrupted your Paradise.

On August 3, 1492—the day that Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain, later having a fatal encounter with the indigenous people he met in the "West Indies"—the world of the garden changed. That endeavor, to me, anyway, is the way the world we now live in began; it not only affected the domestic life of Europeans (where did the people in a Rembrandt painting get all that stuff they

are piling on?) but suddenly they were well-off enough to be interested in more than sustenance, or the Tree of Life (agriculture); they could now be interested in cultivating the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge (horticulture).

Suddenly, the conquerors could do more than feed themselves; they could also see and desire things that were of no use apart from the pleasure that they produced. When Cortés saw Montezuma's garden, a garden that incorporated a lake on which the capital of Mexico now sits, he didn't mention the profusion of exotic flowers that we now grow with ease in our own gardens (dahlias, zinnias, marigolds).

The garden figures prominently in the era of conquest, starting with Captain Cook's voyage to regions that we now know as Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, and Tahiti, its aim, ostensibly, to observe the rare event of the transit of Venus. On this trip, in 1768, the first of Cook's three voyages around the world, he brought with him the botanist Joseph Banks and also Daniel Charles Solander, a student of Carolus Linnaeus. The two took careful notes on everything they saw. Banks decided that the breadfruit of the Pacific isles would make a good food for slaves on British-owned islands in the West Indies; the slaveholders were concerned with the amount of time it took the enslaved people to grow food to sustain themselves, and breadfruit grew with little cultivation. And so the Pacific Islands came to the West Indies. Banks also introduced the cultivation of tea (*Camellia sinensis*) to India.

Then there is Lewis and Clark's expedition from the Mississippi River to California. On that adventure, which was authorized by President Thomas Jefferson and was inspired by Cook's scientific and commercial interests, the explorers listed numerous plant species that were unknown to John Bartram, botanist to King George III, who ruled the United States when it was still a colony. Bartram's son, William, a fellow-botanist, later wrote a book about his own explorations, which is said to have influenced Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other English Romantic poets.

There now, look at that: I am meaning to show how I came to seek the garden in corners of the world far away from where I make one, and I have got lost in thickets of words. It was after I started to put seeds in the ground and noticed that sometimes nothing happened that I reached for a book. The first ones I read were about how to make a perennial border or how to get the best out of annuals —the kind of books for people who want to increase the value of their home—

but these books were so boring. I found an old magazine meant to help white ladies manage their domestic lives in the nineteen-fifties much more interesting (that kind of magazine, along with a copy of “Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management,” is worthy of a day spent in bed while the sun is shining its brightest outside). But where did plants, annual and perennial, pristinely set out in something called a border, and arranged sometimes according to color and sometimes according to height, come from? Those books had no answer for me. So one book led to another, and before long I had acquired (and read) so many books that it put a strain on my family’s budget. Resentment, a not unfamiliar feeling relating to the garden, set in.

I began to refer to plants by their Latin names, and this so irritated my editor at this magazine (Veronica Geng) that she made me promise that I would never learn the Latin name of another plant. I loved her very much, and so I promised that I would never do such a thing, but I did continue to learn the Latin names of plants and never told her. Betrayal, another feature of any garden.

How did plants get their names? I looked to Linnaeus, who, it turned out, liked to name plants after people whose character they resembled. Mischievous, yes, but not too different from the doctrine of signatures, which attempted to cure diseases by using plants that resembled the diseased part of the body. I was thinking about this one day, stooped over and admiring a colony of *Jeffersonia diphylla*, whose common name is twinleaf. *Jeffersonia diphylla* is a short woodland herbaceous ephemeral whose leaf is perforated at the base so that it often looks like a luna moth, but the two leaflets are not identical at the margins, and each leaf is not evenly divided: the margins undulate, and one leaflet is a little bigger than the other. But isn’t Thomas Jefferson, the gardener, the liberty lover and slaveowner, often described as divided, and isn’t it appropriate that a plant such as the twinleaf is named for him? The name was bestowed by one of his contemporaries, Benjamin Smith Barton, who perhaps guessed at his true character. It was through this plant that I became interested in Thomas Jefferson. I have read much of what he wrote and have firm opinions about him, including that his book “Notes on the State of Virginia” is a creation story.

It was only a matter of time before I stumbled on the plant hunters, although this inevitability was not clear to me at all. Look at me: my historical reality, my ancestral memory, which is so deeply embedded that I think the whole world understands me before I even open my mouth. A big mistake, but a mistake not big enough for me to have learned anything from it. The plant hunters are the

descendants of people and ideas that used to hunt people like me.

The first one I met, in a book, of course, was Frank Smythe. No one had ever made me think that finding a new primrose—or a new flower of any kind—was as special as finding a new island in the Caribbean Sea when I thought I was going to China to meet the Great Khan. A new primrose is more special than meeting any conqueror. But Smythe gave me more than that. I noticed, when reading his accounts, that he was always going off on little side journeys to climb some snow-covered protuberance not so far away, and then days later returning with a story of failure or success at reaching or not reaching the peak, and that by the way he had found some beauty of the vegetable kingdom on the banks of a hidden stream which would be new to every benighted soul in England. But his other gift to me was the pleasure to be had in going to see a plant that I might love or not, growing somewhere far away. It was in his writing that I found the distance between the garden I was looking at and the garden in the wilderness, the garden cast out of its Eden which created a longing in me, the notion of “to go and to see.” Go see!

I end where I began: reading—learning to read and reading books, the words a form of food, a form of life, and then knowledge. But also my mother. I don’t know exactly how old I was when she taught me to read, but I can say for certain that by the time I was three and a half I could read properly. This reading of mine so interfered with her own time to read that she enrolled me in school; but you could be enrolled in school only if you were five years old, and so she told me to remember to say, if asked, that I was five. My first performance as a writer of fiction? No, not that at all. Perhaps this: the first time I was asked who I was. And who am I? In an ideal world, a world in which the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge stand before me, before all of us, we ask, Who am I? Among the many of us not given a chance to answer is the woman in the library in St. John’s, Antigua, two large rooms above the Treasury Department, a building that was steps away from the customs office and the wharf where things coming and going lay. On that wharf worked a stevedore who loaded onto ships bags of raw sugar en route to England, to be refined into white sugar, which was so expensive that we, in my family, had it only on Sundays, as a special treat. I did not know of the stevedore, the lover of this woman who would not allow her children to have much white sugar because, somewhere in the world of Dr. Pasteur and his cohort, they had come to all sorts of conclusions about diseases and their relationships to food (beriberi was a disease my mother succeeded in saving me from suffering). Her name was Annie Victoria Richardson Drew, and

she was born in a village in Dominica, British West Indies. ♦

Last Call Dept.

- [The Broom-Sweep Cleaning Out New York Estates](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

The Broom-Sweep Cleaning Out New York Estates

In the world of high-end clearance sales, Alan Bloom is the seeded sandwich roll to Sotheby's mille-feuille.

By [Susan Mulcahy](#)

August 31, 2020



When a certain breed of New Yorker dies, specialists are summoned: attorneys, accountants, appraisers, auctioneers, and, sometimes, Alan Bloom. Among those who settle estates, Bloom is known as a broom-sweep. He is the final step in emptying a home, coming in after other dealers have had their pick. Along with antiques and collectibles, Bloom takes tired appliances, old clothes, used medical equipment, and any food left in the refrigerator. In the world of high-end clearance sales, he is the seeded sandwich roll to Sotheby's mille-feuille.

One afternoon, not long before the city shut down, Daisy Edelson welcomed Bloom to the Emery Roth building on West End Avenue where she and her two sisters grew up. Her parents bought their "classic nine" floor-through apartment in 1965. Her father, Gilbert, lived there until his death, in 2019. A corporate litigator, he counselled art galleries, dealers, and collectors. He and his wife, Jane, who died in 2015, were collectors themselves. "Old Master drawings were the love of my father's life," Daisy said.

By the time Bloom arrived, the Old Masters had left the building, shadows marking the walls where they had hung. While some estates go to a single dealer or auction house, many are divvied up. The Edelsons consigned several pieces to Sotheby's, where Daisy is a senior vice-president. Stair Galleries was next, taking an etching by Egon Schiele and Diego Rivera's pencil drawing "Portrait of a Boy," among other works. Bloom was third. "Any costume jewelry?" he asked Daisy. "Any bric-a-brac?" His hair carefully shellacked, he wore a roomy suit and a patterned tie; his posture was slightly stooped, appropriate for someone hunting for treasure.

When assessing an estate, Bloom weighs the potential value of its goods against the cost of labor for his sweep. If he does not spot salable items, he pays nothing, instead charging for the disposal job. After half an hour in the apartment, he offered Daisy twenty-five hundred dollars. It would cost four thousand to empty the place, he explained, meaning that he would need to sell at least sixty-five hundred dollars' worth of its contents. He would return in six days to finish the job. It can be tricky to calculate estimates. When Bloom tackled the home of a famous socialite (he does not name names), it took several days, fifteen men, and thirteen dumpsters. But too many dealers had preceded him, leaving little of value behind. "I charged twenty thousand, but it cost twenty-five thousand to clean the place out," he said.

Bloom, who is seventy-five, grew up around old things. His father ran an antique shop on Coney Island Avenue, and Bloom's older brother, Elliott, later owned a Manhattan antique business called Elliott Galleries. The brothers worked together for decades, but after Elliott died, in 2011, his widow sold the marble-fronted structure on East Seventy-ninth Street that had housed the shop. "It was kind of a shock," Bloom said. He continued broom-sweeping and took a booth at Showplace, on West Twenty-fifth Street, but gave it up last year, and has begun sending his merch to small auction houses. In the new New York, broom-sweeping is perhaps more essential than ever. "People don't want to spend an extra month's rent," he said. "Or, if it's a co-op, and the closing is next week, they're in a rush to get out."

On the day of the sweep at the Edelson apartment, Daisy's sister Martha was on duty. Bloom had brought three trucks—one for items he hoped to sell and two bound for a landfill—and encouraged his crew to help themselves to non-antiques, such as TVs and the liquor on the Edelsons' cocktail cart. Broom-sweeps are messy, but Bloom was wearing a suit and tie again. ("He wears a suit to the beach," Alex Martinez, a longtime member of his crew, said.) The men in the kitchen listened to jazz as they boxed up china; Bloom moved from room to room selecting items. He was pleased with what he found: more art (watercolors, drawings, sculptures), fur coats, Murano glass vases, a variety of silver pieces, lamps, even a sword. "That was my great-uncle's," Martha said. "He was a well-known psychotherapist who worked with Alfred Adler." He also wrote a 1933 book, "Nervous Breakdown: Its Cause and Cure." "We could all use a copy," Bloom said. And that was pre-COVID.

The men emptied the place, but the Edelsons were unable to put it on the market right away, owing to the city's coronavirus restrictions. (The apartment is now listed for \$3.49 million.) Broom-sweeps were on hold, too, until June. Bloom's first job post-lockdown was in a high-rise building in Long Island City. As his crew headed to the apartment, the elevator operator told them that the person in that unit "had died of the COVID." The men refused to go up. The next day, Bloom sent a second crew, which carried out the assignment. "The apartment was cleaned very professionally and the person who died hadn't lived there for a while," he said. "If the guy didn't say anything, they would have went up and nothing would have happened, but they were scared. It's just a crazy time." ♦

Letter from Florida

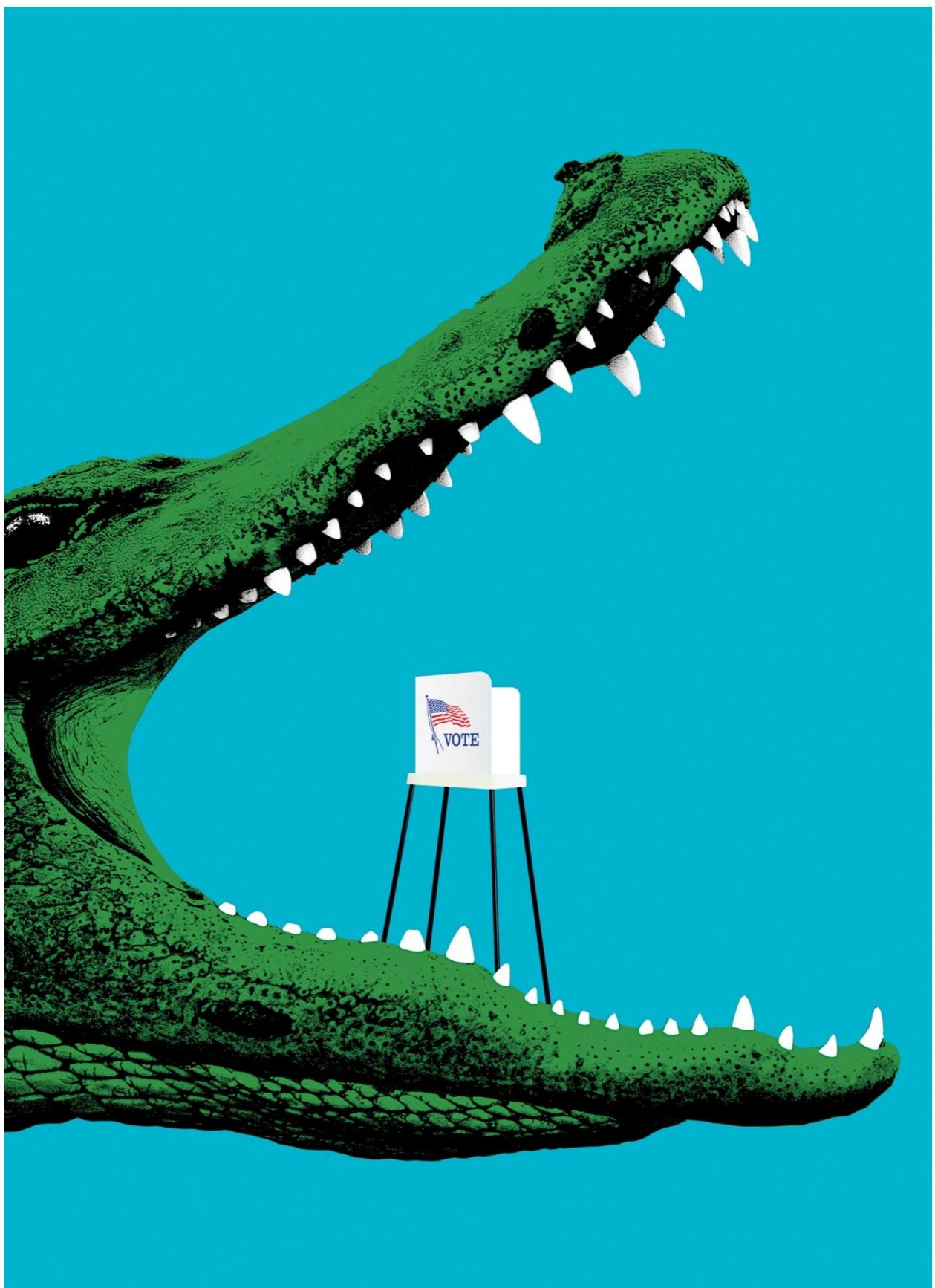
- **Who Gets to Vote in Florida?**

Who Gets to Vote in Florida?

With the election hanging in the balance, Republican leaders continue a long fight over voting rights.

By [Dexter Filkins](#)

August 31, 2020



Betty Riddle grew up in Sarasota, Florida, in a [segregated](#) neighborhood that people back in the nineteen-sixties called Black Bottom. She was raised by her mother, Idella, in a wooden house on Central Avenue. When she was twelve, Idella was murdered—"killed by a woman over a man," Riddle recalled—and so she moved in with her aunt. Riddle learned early how to fight. When she was fifteen years old and seven months pregnant, she stabbed a taunting rival in the eye with a hooked knife.

In 1975, Riddle was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon, and given three years' probation. After she had her baby, a daughter named Leola, she turned to drugs, especially crack cocaine. "I saw crack in everything," she said. "Whatever I could sell, I sold." She had another baby by another man, but mostly forgot about her children, resorting to robbery and prostitution to pay for crack. Riddle was in and out of prison, for drugs and for theft; she had two more babies by two more men. "Every boyfriend I ever had was a drug dealer," she said. In 2002, she was sentenced to a fifth term—ten years this time, for selling cocaine.

In the Gadsden Correctional Facility, in northern Florida, Riddle started listening to radio sermons by a pastor with a soothing voice. At first, the sermons were just a curiosity, something other inmates listened to, but after a time the pastor's gentle prodding made her examine herself. "I was watching my kids have kids and visit me in prison," she remembered. One day, while Riddle was writing a letter to her children, the pastor came on the radio with a new message. "God doesn't change who you are," he said. "He changes what you have become." The words startled Riddle. "I put my pen down and said, Damn, that's me. I was a good person, I used to be a leader, and I've become a drug addict. I'm tired of hurting my kids."

When Riddle got out, she and her daughter opened a food truck, called No Place Like Home, that served Southern cooking. She began attending classes in Bradenton, one county over, to earn a paralegal degree. Between working and studying, Riddle volunteered in the public defender's office, where the staff knew her from her criminal days. "I'd cussed out the lawyers so bad, that's why they remembered me," she said. Now, though, the attorneys found that her patient manner put defendants at ease, and in 2016 the office hired her. She bought a house and a car. "I learned I can do anything if I put my mind to it," she said. But one thing she could not do was vote.

In 1877, after Reconstruction, legislators across the old Confederacy initiated a sweeping system of laws, known as [Jim Crow](#), that made it virtually impossible for Black people to vote. From 1888 to 1968, not a single Black person was elected to the Florida legislature. The state's constitution imposed an additional stricture: felons were banned for life from voting.

The ban survived the dismantling of Jim Crow, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. While many states imposed waiting periods and other restrictions on felons voting, Florida, along with a few other states, maintained a lifetime ban. Black people are arrested at disproportionate rates for felonies, especially drug-related ones; as recently as 2016, the ban disenfranchised one out of every five Black adults in the state.

Desmond Meade, a former felon who had earned a law degree, launched a petition to abolish the voting prohibition on all but the most violent felons. Meade and his allies collected eight hundred thousand signatures, enough to put the question on a statewide ballot, in 2018, as Amendment Four. The campaign to encourage its passage began with volunteers painting logos on bedsheets, but it soon attracted significant funding, and in November the amendment was approved by nearly sixty-five per cent of Florida's voters. As Meade told me, "White people, Black people, Republicans, Democrats—a whole bunch of conservatives supported us." More than a million people who voted to elect the current governor, Ron DeSantis, an ally of [President Trump](#), also supported the measure. Amendment Four represented the largest act of enfranchisement since 1971, when the Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to eighteen.

On March 17, 2020, the day of the Florida Presidential primary, Riddle rose at 6 A.M. and put on a T-shirt with an inscription that she'd devised: "First in Line, First Time Voting." At the Robert L. Taylor Community Center, she signed her name to the voting roll and, at the age of sixty-two, cast her first ballot. "Like a gift from Heaven," she said.

But, after voting in the primary, Riddle may not be able to vote in the upcoming general election. Six months after Amendment Four passed, the Republican-dominated legislature approved a law dictating that ex-felons could vote only if they first paid all the fines, restitution, and fees imposed at their sentencing. The law may affect as many as seven hundred and seventy thousand Florida residents, about half of whom are Black. In many cases, the totals came to thousands of dollars. The burden was not just large but uncertain: state officials

testified that they had no way of knowing how much money felons owe, or whether they have paid; those calculations would take six years or so to complete. The legislation gutted Amendment Four, but DeSantis claimed that he was merely enforcing the language that voters had approved. “The amendment does not apply to a felon who has failed to complete all the terms of his sentence,” he maintained.

Riddle and sixteen other former felons sued DeSantis, arguing that the requirement amounted to a poll tax, which is prohibited by the Constitution. The case, filed with support from the [A.C.L.U.](#), became known as Jones v. DeSantis. In May, a federal judge ruled against DeSantis’s legislation, which he described as a “pay-to-vote system.”

DeSantis appealed, and the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals agreed to take up the case. The Eleventh Circuit Court is one of the country’s most conservative appellate panels. Two of the judges, Robert Luck and Barbara Lagoa, were DeSantis appointees, recently elevated from the Florida Supreme Court by President Trump. On that court, they had participated in oral arguments that resulted in an advisory decision supporting DeSantis’s view of Amendment Four. By legal custom, they should have recused themselves. They declined to do so, even after the ten sitting Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee wrote to remind them of the ethics breach.

The decision to hear the case pushed any final resolution closer to the voter-registration deadline, on October 5th; even if the judgment goes in the felons’ favor, they will have to scramble to register. Until then, any convicted felon who wants to vote must first pay his fines—meaning, in all likelihood, that the overwhelming majority of them will sit out the November election.



Mads

"All right, buddy! How's about you and me take this outside, because it is absolutely gorgeous out!"
Cartoon by Madeline Horwath

Riddle figures that her bill amounts to at least two thousand dollars. "I can't pay," she said. She told me that she wanted to address the Eleventh Circuit herself, in oral arguments, to explain what she believes to be the real motivation behind the new Florida law. "It's not about the money," she said. "Not all the Republicans are bad. But they don't want us to vote. Because they think they're going to lose."

For candidates in the coming Presidential election, Florida presents a singular opportunity and a vexing challenge. While other big states, such as Texas and California, reliably go to Republicans or Democrats, Florida is unpredictable. Polling suggests that Joe Biden could plausibly lose there and win the election, though the state's twenty-nine electoral votes would surely make a victory easier; Trump, by most analyses, cannot win without them.

Stretching eight hundred miles from end to end, Florida encompasses the Deep South counties of the panhandle and the urban centers of Miami, Palm Beach, and Fort Lauderdale, where Jewish and Latino voters predominate. There are growing Puerto Rican enclaves around [Orlando](#), and main-line Republican areas in Naples and [Tampa](#), linked demographically and culturally with the Midwest. This mixture creates an almost perfectly divided electorate. Statewide races are often decided by a few thousand votes, out of millions cast.

Even though Florida is closely split, Republican leaders dominate state politics; since 1999, they have controlled both houses of the legislature and the governor's mansion. One key to their success has been restricting access to the polls. Lower turnout, particularly among Black voters, has usually favored their side. "Older and more affluent voters tend to be more conservative, and they tend to vote more often," Daniel Smith, a professor of politics at the University of Florida, told me. That fact has motivated a relentless campaign to tamp down voter turnout. The most overt efforts were hindered by the Voting Rights Act, which until 2013 obligated places with a history of racial discrimination to get Justice Department approval before making major changes in electoral laws. But the less conspicuous efforts have had momentous effects. In 2000, they arguably helped decide the race for the Presidency.

That year's election, between [George W. Bush](#) and [Al Gore](#), was the most bitterly contested in modern American history, a template for decades of partisan

strife to come. Both candidates needed to win Florida, but the vote was too close to call, and the counting and recounting dragged on for thirty-five days. People argued over “hanging chads” (scraps of paper that clung to ballots that weren’t punched all the way through) and about “overvotes” (ballot designs that prompted voters to choose more than one candidate, disqualifying themselves). Amid the dispute, the former Nixon operative [Roger Stone](#) assembled Republican activists in Miami, to protest what he called a “left-wing power grab by Gore, the same way Fidel Castro did it in Cuba.” In what became known as the Brooks Brothers riot, the activists attempted to force their way into the office of the county’s election supervisor. The chaos subsided only when the U.S. Supreme Court, ruling along partisan lines, stopped the recount. Bush was awarded Florida’s electoral votes, and the Presidency. An official tally later showed that he had won the state by five hundred and thirty-seven votes. Gore had won the national popular vote by half a million.

The scrutiny that followed focussed on Florida’s balloting problems. Another factor received far less attention: a Republican effort, beginning before the election, that prevented thousands of eligible voters from casting ballots.

In the late nineties, after a scandal in which the ballots of about a hundred felons were counted in a Miami mayoral election, state officials began looking for a way to scour voter-registration records for felons. They hired a company called Database Technologies, which was founded by Hank Asher, a former cocaine smuggler and a self-taught computer entrepreneur who sometimes consulted with [Rudolph Giuliani](#) on anti-terrorist ventures. Database Technologies presented Florida officials with a choice: they could run a precisely focussed search or a broader one. “The state dictated to us that they wanted to go broader,” George Bruder, a D.B.T. executive, later testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “And we did it in the fashion that they requested.”

Using the looser criteria, D.B.T. technicians compiled a list of approximately sixty thousand names. As the 2000 election approached, the Florida secretary of state Katherine Harris sent lists of presumed felons to the supervisors of elections in the state’s sixty-seven counties, advising them to purge the names from voter rolls.

In Leon County, Ion Sancho was skeptical. The list that he received enumerated nearly seven hundred suspected felons, and he doubted that his voter rolls contained so many. Looking more closely, he found that most of the names

didn't match. "We were being told to purge a voter named Johnston, even though the felon's name was Johnson," he told me. Fewer than forty turned out to be felons.

The lists caused mayhem on Election Day. In some counties, many people who had never been convicted of anything discovered that they could not vote. Wallace McDonald, a commercial shrimp fisherman, went to his precinct, in Ybor City, in Tampa, as he had done for more than forty years. McDonald, who is Black, was told that he had been disqualified by an unspecified felony conviction. The son of a former New York City police officer, McDonald had once been rousted by cops in Jim Crow-era Tampa for sleeping on a public bench, but he'd never been convicted of a felony. He finally went home. "I was doing whatever I could do, and saying whatever I could say, but it didn't make a bit of difference—I couldn't vote," McDonald, who is eighty-three, told me.

Linda Howell, the supervisor of elections in Madison County, was notified that she herself was a convicted felon. Howell later gave indignant testimony about the state officials who had launched the purge: "The law said they had to verify this, but they were not taking it seriously—and that could destroy a person's life. You get that on your record, how do you get it off?"

After the election, a group of Floridians who had been prevented from voting sued Harris and other state officials. David Klausner, a computer-forensics expert who worked with the plaintiffs, told me that D.B.T. had used almost inconceivably sloppy methods, flagging voters with different Social Security numbers, and even genders, from the felons they were being matched with. The roster had been expanded by using names of felons from ten other states. "There were infants on the list," he told me. "There were dead people." Klausner calculated that about forty per cent of the people identified as potential felons were Black. "The project was explicitly racial—as Jim Crow as you can get," he said.

Officials from D.B.T., forced to reëxamine the list, admitted that at least twenty thousand voters had been improperly flagged—roughly forty times the number of votes separating Bush and Gore. Klausner believes that the actual number was much higher, but said that there was no way to determine an exact figure. "The state's records were a mess, and they were hiding things from us—they were lying," he told me. "I think they wanted to do it to insure a margin of victory for Bush."

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded, “Florida’s overzealous efforts to purge voters from the rolls, conducted under the guise of an anti-fraud campaign, resulted in the inexcusable and patently unjust removal of disproportionate numbers of African American voters.” It’s unclear how many improperly flagged voters were prevented from casting ballots on Election Day. Edward Hailes, who was the commission’s general counsel at the time, told me that he believed there were thousands. “As far as I’m concerned, that purge swung the Presidential election,” he said.

After the chaos of the 2000 election, Florida’s legislators enacted reforms to make voting and counting more efficient. Among the most popular was an expansion of early voting, which enabled people to cast ballots at specified locations before the election. Early voting was especially widespread in Black communities, where people often found that the extra days made it easier to vote without having to take time off from work.

In the state’s most populous counties, early voting included the two Sundays before Election Day. Around the state, pastors in predominantly Black churches urged their congregants to cast ballots after services were over. In 2008, when [Barack Obama](#) carried Florida and won the Presidency, the largest share of Black votes in the state came from those who voted early. The practice, known as Souls to the Polls, has spread across the country. “Souls to the Polls was an innovative way to tap into the strength of the Black church,” the Reverend R. B. Holmes, Jr., of the Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, told me.

The results of the 2008 election startled Republican leaders. Obama’s coalition, which included African-Americans, the college-educated, and the young, seemed built for the future. The G.O.P.’s older, whiter voters belonged to demographic sectors that seemed certain to shrink. Republicans across the country began an extended push to reduce voter turnout. “The Republicans realize that voting rules can be changed in a way to achieve a partisan end,” Marc Elias, a voting-rights lawyer for the Democratic Party, said. “Florida becomes a host of that virus—and an exporter.”

In 2010, Florida voters elected Rick Scott, a hard-edged conservative, as governor. Scott was the former chief executive of Columbia/HCA Healthcare, which he had helped to build into the country’s largest for-profit hospital chain. On his watch, though, the F.B.I. found that HCA was defrauding Medicare by, among other things, systematically overcharging the government and paying

huge kickbacks to physicians. Federal prosecutors chose not to indict Scott, but, after the F.B.I. raided the company's offices, HCA pleaded guilty to at least fourteen felonies and was fined \$1.7 billion, which was then the largest settlement for health-care fraud in American history. Scott resigned, having accumulated a net worth of more than two hundred million dollars, and financed his run for governor largely with his personal fortune.

When Scott took office, he and the Republican-controlled legislature embarked on a series of initiatives that curtailed access to the polls. In previous elections, state rules had allowed fourteen days of early voting; the legislature eliminated six of those days, including the Sunday before elections, and restricted the hours of early-voting sites. It also sharply tightened the use of third-party groups, such as the League of Women Voters, to register voters, and imposed criminal penalties for such lapses as registering voters without a permit. Under one of the more exacting requirements, volunteers who registered people to vote were given exactly forty-eight hours to submit each form to the state. Those who missed the deadline were fined.

The next year, a federal judge, Robert Hinkle, scaled back the restrictions on voter registration, wryly dismissing the idea that they had been intended to prevent the system from being abused. "If the goal is to discourage voter-registration drives and thus also to make it harder for new voters to register, this may work," he wrote. But Republican legislators portrayed the strictures as a victory for civic spirit. During one floor debate, the state senator Mike Bennett said, "Do you ever read the stories about the people in Africa—the people in the desert, who literally walk two and three hundred miles so they can have an opportunity to do what we do? And we want to make it more convenient? . . . Do we want to go to their house? Take the polling booth with us?" He went on, "I want them to fight for it. I want them to know what it's like. I want them to go down there and have to walk across town to go over and vote." Bennett later became the supervisor of elections in Manatee County. In the weeks before the 2014 midterm elections, he closed dozens of polling sites, forcing more than half the county's Black population to find a new place to vote.

Before Amendment Four passed, the Florida constitution provided only one avenue to felons who wanted their voting rights restored: clemency from the state. Jeb Bush granted clemency to seventy-six thousand felons during his eight years as governor; Charlie Crist approved a hundred and fifty-five thousand requests in four years. Scott, in eight years, gave clemency to barely three

thousand felons.

Clemency hearings are held four times a year in the capitol, in an auditorium where the Florida cabinet meets. The governor and his officials sit on an elevated platform. The felons appear one at a time, and have five minutes apiece to make their case. The law does not require the governor to give a reason for denying clemency, and Scott was unabashed about not having any. “Let me first explain how the process works,” he told one group of felons. “There are absolutely no standards. So we can make any decisions we want. . . . There’s really no law that says you deserve anything.”



After former felons were granted voting rights, Betty Riddle cast her first ballot. A legal challenge may make it her last. Photograph by Maggie Steber / VII for The New Yorker

In June, 2011, Scott heard the case of Leon Gillis III, a former drug addict who had served several years in prison for drug and robbery convictions. Since then, Gillis had founded a rehabilitation program and worked as a counsellor to seven hundred recovering heroin addicts in the Daytona Beach area. Gillis, who was sixty-two, told Scott that he took full responsibility for his crimes and asked that his voting rights be restored. Scott told him that he'd have to keep waiting.

"How long is that?" Gillis asked.

"I'm not sure," Scott said. "I think every case is different."

Gillis persisted: "What else am I supposed to do? If I am doing everything I am supposed to do, and I am making sure I do the right thing I'm supposed to do, then how long am I supposed to wait?"

"I couldn't tell you that answer," Scott said. "I don't feel comfortable doing it."

In the summer of 2012, with a Presidential election approaching, Scott initiated Project Integrity, a statewide program that he said was meant to safeguard the electoral system against noncitizen voters. "You don't get to vote in Florida if you're a non-U.S. citizen," he said. An initial sweep flagged a hundred and eighty-two thousand people, but the methodology was so shoddy—officials compared voter registrations with driver's licenses—that it apparently ensnared thousands of legal voters. Among those who received letters informing them that they weren't citizens was Bill Internicola, a ninety-one-year-old who had won a Bronze Star at the Battle of the Bulge. Officials later whittled the list of suspected noncitizens down to twenty-six hundred, but an analysis by the *Miami Herald* found that it was still dominated by likely Democratic voters. A federal appellate court nullified Project Integrity, ruling that it violated laws against political purges.

In the Presidential election that year, Scott and other Republican lawmakers found that the restrictions on early voting had backfired. Polling places were overwhelmed by heavy turnout, forcing many voters to wait in line for hours and causing several well-publicized cases of fainting. Facing an outcry, legislators repealed some restrictions, including the ban on voting the Sunday before elections, which they made optional by county.

But each failing strategy seemed only to inspire Republican leaders to look for another. In 2014, officials in Scott’s administration banned early voting on college campuses. Florida’s public colleges and universities had eight hundred and thirty thousand students, and nearly a third of them had voted early in the previous election; like many young voters, they tended to support Democratic candidates. Scott’s officials expressed concern that a lack of parking spaces would disrupt campus life. A federal judge, Mark Walker, rejected that argument, writing that the ban was “unexplainable on grounds other than age.”

Nevertheless, the legislature voted again in 2019 to require that early-voting sites have “sufficient non-permitted parking.” Since most college campuses allow parking only by permit, advocates said that the state was obviously trying again to quash early voting. Early this year, under the threat of another lawsuit, the state agreed to allow early-voting sites on campus. “We think it’s finally in place now,” Patricia Brigham, the president of the League of Women Voters of Florida, told me.

Even the weather became the basis for a fight over ballot access. When hurricanes struck before the elections in 2016 and 2018, Scott refused to extend registration deadlines. In the first storm, a federal judge forced him to keep registration open; in the second, another judge allowed him to close it in unaffected areas.

Legislators who sought to tighten ballot access often spoke of preventing fraud, even if they rarely produced evidence of it. But occasionally they described their efforts forthrightly as a matter of partisanship. In 2012, James Greer, a former chairman of the state Republican Party, told a Florida newspaper, “The Republican Party, the strategists, the consultants—they firmly believe that early voting is bad for Republican Party candidates. It’s done for one reason and one reason only . . . because early voting is not good for us.” Greer added that his fellow-Republicans hadn’t discussed voter fraud. “They never came in to see me and tell me we had a fraud issue,” he said. “It’s all a marketing ploy.” (Greer later pleaded guilty to funnelling two hundred thousand dollars from the Party into a shell company called Victory Strategies.)

Republican legislators were aided by the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Shelby v. Holder*, in 2013, which invalidated the provisions of the Voting Rights Act that had made it harder to enact discriminatory voting laws. “The *Shelby* decision opened the floodgates,” Myrna Pérez, who runs a voting-rights program

at New York University’s Brennan Center, said. North Carolina’s legislature quickly passed a voter-I.D. law that disallowed several forms of identification disproportionately used by Black people, including those for students, government employees, and people receiving public assistance. An appeals court struck down the law, calling it an effort to “target African-Americans with almost surgical precision.” Soon afterward, Texas imposed a similarly stringent voter-I.D. law.

In Florida, Democratic legislators sometimes objected to the Republican efforts, but they were perpetually in the minority. Some found that they couldn’t even discuss the matter with their peers across the aisle. “I can have a reasonable conversation with any Republican elected official about any issue—except voting,” Dan Gelber, a former House minority leader who is now the mayor of Miami Beach, told me. “When you bring up voting, the Darth Vader mask comes up right away. You can tell—their consultants have said to them, ‘This is how you win.’ ”

For years, lawyers close to the G.O.P. have battered the state with lawsuits seeking to restrict voting. In 2016, a conservative group called the American Civil Rights Union sued Broward County, the state’s most Democratic area, charging that election officials had failed to purge felons and other ineligible voters from their rolls. The suit was handled by J. Christian Adams, a leading conservative activist. Adams didn’t claim to have discovered any instances of fraud. Instead, he invoked a novel legal theory: because the number of registered voters in Broward County exceeded the voting-age population, the county must be maintaining illegal voters on its rolls. A federal court threw out the suit; excess enrollment is typically the result of voters who have moved or died. But, earlier this year, another high-profile conservative voting-rights lawyer, William Consovoy, made a nearly identical argument to the Florida secretary of state, threatening to sue unless the state embarked on a vigorous purge. Consovoy wrote, “Florida’s failure to provide accurate voter rolls violates federal law, jeopardizes the integrity of the upcoming 2020 federal election, and signals to voters that elections in Florida are not being properly safeguarded.”

Consovoy is also part of a team that is trying to prevent New York prosecutors from examining Trump’s tax records. He and the President seem aligned in their views on electoral fraud. After Trump failed to win the popular vote in 2016, he claimed, without citing any evidence, that millions of people had voted illegally. In office, he formed a commission to investigate voter fraud. The commission

was disbanded after eight months, having found no evidence of widespread cheating.

In November, 2018, Scott ran for the U.S. Senate, and he and the incumbent, Bill Nelson, were caught in a virtual tie. When the ballots were counted, Scott led by about twelve thousand votes, out of eight million cast. Under state law, that triggered an automatic recount. Decorum quickly collapsed.

Standing outside the governor's mansion, Scott vowed, "I will not sit idly by while unethical liberals try to steal this election from the great people of Florida." Then he flew to Washington, D.C., to preëmptively join in a photo op for new senators.

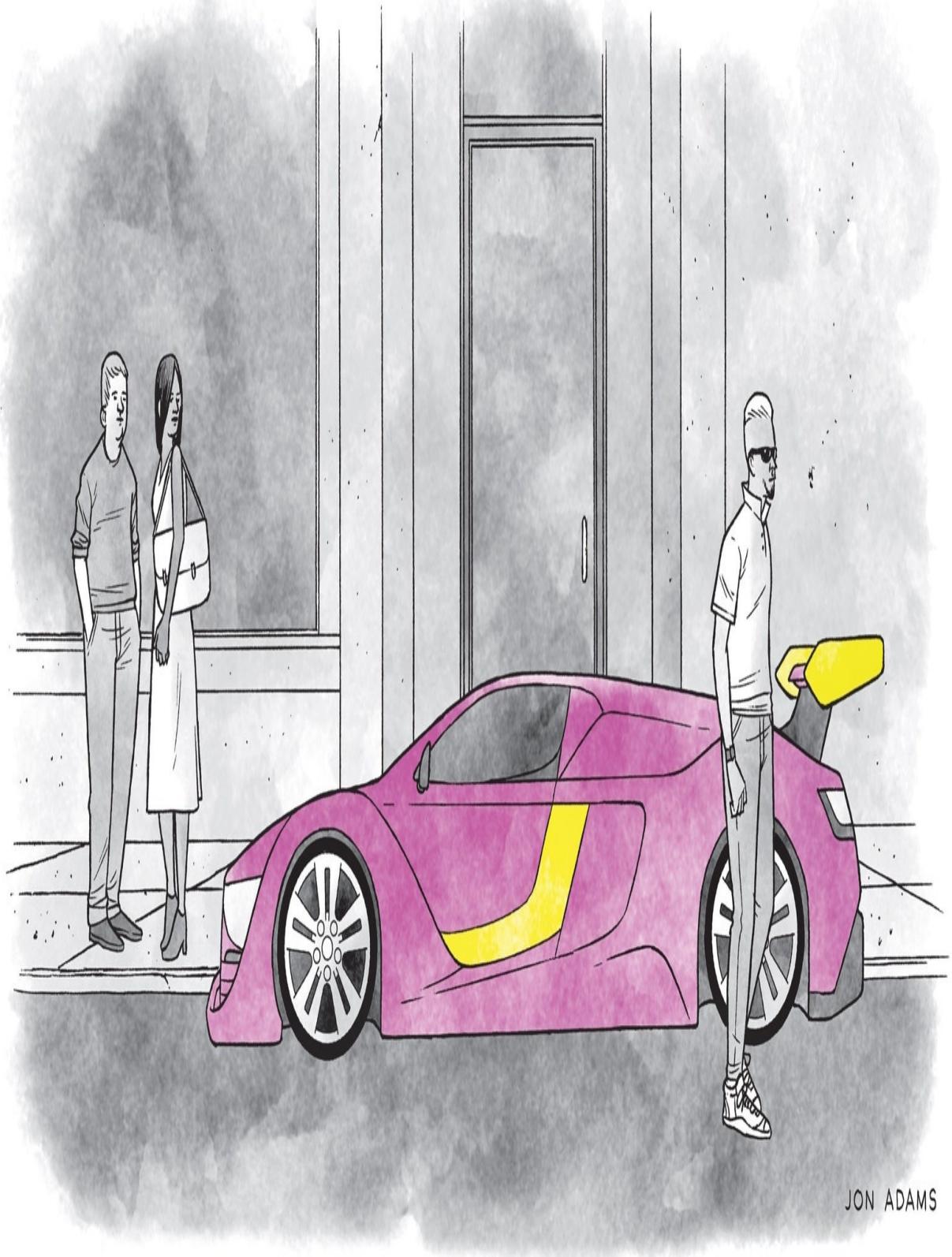
Under Florida law, a recount may take no longer than five days; after that time, only a court order can reopen the process. That year, three statewide races were close enough to trigger recounts, and election officials worked around the clock. In Palm Beach County, vote-counting machines overheated and malfunctioned. In local election offices, lawyers for each side disputed the validity of ballots. In Bay County, which had been ravaged by Hurricane Michael, the supervisor of elections took votes, illegally, by e-mail and by fax. Nelson's team filed federal lawsuits disputing counting rules, hoping to capture rejected ballots. "It was a gut-wrenching, soul-crushing experience," Marley Wilkes, his campaign manager, told me.

As the recount proceeded, Scott raised the possibility that he would not accept the outcome if he lost. Before all the votes were tallied, he sued two of the state's largest counties, which were mostly Democratic. "Every Floridian should be concerned there may be rampant fraud happening in Palm Beach and Broward Counties," Scott said, offering no proof. Matt Gaetz, a Republican congressman from the panhandle, flew to Fort Lauderdale to hold press conferences outside the office of the supervisor of elections, in which he accused Democrats of an elaborate scheme. "If the Democrats are able to learn now what techniques work and don't work, what transparency laws are going to be followed and which ones aren't, then it gives them a road map on how to steal the election from Donald Trump in 2020," he said.

Earlier in the campaign, Nelson had warned about the possibility of Russian intelligence officers breaking into Florida's election systems. "They have already penetrated certain counties in the state, and they now have free rein to move

about,” he said. Nelson had been briefed on the subject by the chairmen of the Senate Intelligence Committee, but the briefing was classified, and he was constrained in what he could reveal. Scott ridiculed him, calling him “confused.” In case voters didn’t get the hint about Nelson’s age—he was seventy-five—Scott’s campaign manager called him “rambling, incoherent, confused, disjointed.” A few months later, the report by the special prosecutor Robert Mueller revealed that the Russians had indeed hacked the election systems of at least one Florida county in 2016; a subsequent Senate report indicated that at least one more had been hacked and two more targeted.

As in 2000, any problem that affected even a handful of votes was potentially decisive—and several problems emerged that were large enough to swing the race. One of them was late mail-in ballots. In Florida, as in most states, ballots must arrive before the polls close, no matter when they were mailed. In 2018, according to an analysis by the Dartmouth professor Michael Herron, about two hundred thousand ballots arrived on Election Day or the day before, and more kept coming after the deadline passed. “There were thousands of ballots arriving every day, for days after the election,” John Devaney, a voting-rights lawyer who represents progressive organizations, told me. Nelson sued to compel the state to count any ballot postmarked before the election, as his lawyers offered statistical analyses showing that early deadlines were significantly more likely to exclude poor voters and minority voters. They failed, and some fifteen thousand absentee ballots went uncounted.



JON ADAMS

"I hate it when good parking spots happen to bad people."
Cartoon by Jon Adams

Florida law allows campaigns to appoint observers to monitor voting and counting, with the power to challenge voters or ballots that are thought to be invalid. Each absentee ballot must be opened by hand, and the signature on the ballot must match the voter's signature on file with the election authority. If an observer succeeds in challenging the signature, the ballot is rejected. In the 2018 race, according to Herron, about eleven thousand ballots were rejected because their signatures did not match, or because they were not signed. (Some ballots didn't arrive at all: after the election, a box containing two hundred and sixty-six ballots was found in a [U.S. Postal Service](#) distribution center that had been evacuated the previous month, after processing packages sent by Cesar Sayoc, a right-wing terrorist who mailed bombs to thirteen prominent Trump opponents.)

For Nelson, the harshest disappointment involved "undervotes." In the Democratic stronghold of Broward County, thirty thousand voters did not vote for either Senate candidate. It turned out that, because of a faulty design, the Senate race had been buried at the bottom of the ballot's first column, after a long list of voting instructions. Voters skipping over the instructions had evidently failed to see it. "That was the whole race right there," Nelson told me. "Those were my votes." After recounts by machine and by hand, Scott won by ten thousand and thirty-three votes—one-tenth of one per cent of the eight million cast.

Nelson and his aides suggest that the long Republican campaign to restrict voter turnout had finally come to fruition. They look forward to a time when the state's population has changed too much for such tactics to make a difference. "There is a systematic effort to suppress what Republicans believe are going to be Democratic votes," Nelson told me. "It's driven by demographics—but it's only a matter of time before demographics catch up with them."

In December, 2017, Ron DeSantis, a little-known congressman from Florida's east coast, appeared on Fox News, to talk with [Laura Ingraham](#) about the investigation into Trump's ties to Russia. On the show, DeSantis espoused an extreme—and unsupported—view of the inquiry, saying that it had been cooked up by F.B.I. agents to keep Trump from getting elected. "This is actually taking a bias and basically saying you're going to use the machinery of government to prevent the American people from making a choice," he said. "That's very disturbing." It was the third time that month that he had appeared on Fox to

portray the President as a victim.

At the time, DeSantis was running in the Republican primary for governor, and he trailed Adam Putnam, the state's genial agriculture commissioner, by a wide margin. Trump saw DeSantis on Fox, and nine days later endorsed him, calling him a "brilliant young leader" who "loves our Country and is a true FIGHTER!" DeSantis campaigned as Trump's surrogate, telling supporters that he had taught his young children to say, "Build the wall." Trump sometimes appeared at his side, and his backing helped DeSantis surge past Putnam and win the general election.

DeSantis was forty years old, with an eclectic background: he captained the baseball team at Yale, graduated from Harvard Law School, and served as a legal adviser to a Navy *Seal* commander in Falluja, Iraq. In Congress, he reinvented himself as a populist. (As a Florida lobbyist told me, "You won't hear him talk much about Harvard and Yale.") DeSantis helped found the Freedom Caucus, and signed a pledge, promoted by the Koch brothers, to vote against any legislation to slow global warming which required new taxes.

In the months after DeSantis was elected governor, he demonstrated fealty to Trump, appearing in the Oval Office and receiving him in Florida. Trump rewarded him with generous federal aid, for hurricane relief and Everglades restoration. Rodney Barreto, a Miami businessman who speaks to DeSantis regularly, told me, "Ron has made it clear that he's the guy who can call up the President and get what we need."

When the coronavirus struck, DeSantis disregarded the counsel of epidemiologists. He issued an order for people to stay at home for a month but declined to mandate masks and rarely wore one himself. He was slow to close beaches and parks, even as spring-break revellers gathered in Fort Lauderdale and in Miami. He ordered nonessential businesses to close but defined the term so broadly that it lost its meaning; among the enterprises deemed too important to shut down was professional wrestling.

Florida began reopening on May 4th, and, as the rate of infection initially stayed low, DeSantis was celebrated among conservatives. Rich Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, wrote an op-ed titled "Where Does Ron DeSantis Go to Get His Apology?" Lowry proclaimed that DeSantis, by ignoring the experts and the media, had allowed Florida to reopen at a relatively low cost. DeSantis told

Lowry that he regularly reviewed virus data and, with his team, charted a course that differed substantially from that of New York and other coastal cities, cordoning off retirement homes and allowing local officials to decide their own containment plans. He rejected criticism that he was flying without instruments: “I view it more as a badge of honor.” Lowry affirmed that DeSantis had outsmarted the experts, writing, “The disaster so widely predicted hasn’t materialized.”

Within weeks, DeSantis’s strategy collapsed. Hospitals were flooded with patients; many began bringing in nurses from other states, for wages as high as thirty thousand dollars a month. The state’s vast population of retirees, the backbone of Republican dominance, was suddenly threatened. Mayors began to close their cities.

Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins, told me that DeSantis’s strategy suffered from a misplaced faith that the state could protect its most vulnerable. “People drive, they go to the grocery store, their families come and visit them,” she said. What’s more, the elderly were not the only group at risk; there were the obese, people with diabetes and heart conditions. “The at-risk population is half the country,” she said. The plan’s other flaw was its lack of an aggressive contact-tracing campaign. “That’s not really happening in Florida,” Nuzzo said.

Facing catastrophe, DeSantis declared in late June, “We’re not going back.” [Schools would reopen](#) and [Disney World](#) would welcome visitors. At a press conference in Tampa, he and [Vice-President Mike Pence](#) emphasized that there was no trade-off between fighting the virus and reopening the economy. DeSantis attributed the spectacular rise in infections to increased testing, and assured Florida residents that the situation was under control. “If everyone is, you know, enjoying life but doing it responsibly,” he said, “we’re going to be fine.” Soon afterward, the editorial board of the South Florida *Sun Sentinel* wrote, “Your daily upbeat message is hopelessly at odds with what Floridians are going through.” The headline was “Help Us Out, Gov. DeSantis. We’re Dying Here.” By mid-July, the state was recording nearly twelve thousand new cases a day.

From the beginning, questions were raised about how truthful DeSantis’s administration had been regarding the epidemic. In May, Rebekah Jones, who managed the state’s coronavirus dashboard, was fired for refusing, in her words,

“to manually change data to drum up support for the plan to reopen.” (A DeSantis spokesperson has said that Jones was fired for a pattern of insubordination.) When death counts compiled by county medical examiners began to regularly exceed those released by the Florida Department of Health, the state withheld the higher number. After weeks of assurances that a vigorous contact-tracing campaign was reaching more than ninety per cent of infected people, workers in Miami-Dade County discovered that the rate was closer to seventeen per cent. “You can’t spin the pandemic away,” Gelber, the Miami Beach mayor, told me.

The chaos made folk heroes of people, like Jones, who insisted on getting reliable information to the public. Another was Mike Chitwood, the sheriff of Volusia County, which includes Daytona Beach. In March, Chitwood began posting the latest local virus statistics, including places where there had been large outbreaks, on social media. Every night, Chitwood got data from the Department of Health and updated the tally. The posts became hugely popular with residents; some fifty thousand people regularly viewed them, he said. But Chitwood became increasingly skeptical of the information he was getting. “We knew from people inside the state government that they were not accurately reporting the statistics,” he told me.

In early July, he posted a disclaimer, saying that he could not guarantee the veracity of the information. The next day, officials informed Chitwood that the data would no longer be available. “I went ballistic—absolutely batshit,” he said. “We’re in the middle of a pandemic. Why are we giving out *less* information?” He posted an apology and discontinued the updates. An outcry ensued, and the officials backed down. Chitwood is a DeSantis supporter, but he concluded that the Governor had been less than forthright. He recalled a lesson he had learned years before, as a police officer in Philadelphia. “When there’s trouble getting the information, it’s because the information is troubling,” he said.

The pandemic upended calculations of political self-interest. For much of the past two years, DeSantis has been expected to deliver Florida to Trump in November. But, with the virus dominating the public conversation, it seemed increasingly uncertain whether he could—or even wanted to.

By late summer, most polls showed Trump trailing Biden in the state. As DeSantis’s approval rating plummeted, too, he tried to distance himself from the President. A lawyer who speaks regularly with both men told me that DeSantis

had decided to provide as little help as possible. He stopped appearing with Trump, stopped visiting the Oval Office, and dragged his feet on raising money for him. DeSantis even tried to undermine efforts to stage the Republican Convention in Jacksonville, which Trump ultimately cancelled. “Ron will tell you he’s doing everything he can for the President, and he’ll sound believable,” the lawyer told me. “But there’s zero evidence for that, and the President notices.” Alan Rubin, a lobbyist who works in both Washington and Florida, told me that DeSantis was increasingly worried that Trump could lose Florida, and was positioning himself to be able to work with a Biden Administration. People around DeSantis believe that he intends to run for President in 2024 and isn’t convinced that having Trump in the White House improves his chances. “He’s a very smart operator,” Rubin said. “Ron’s going to do what he needs to do.”

In April, election supervisors from every county in Florida wrote to DeSantis, urging him to help minimize the effects of the coronavirus on voting in November. The supervisors said that the statewide primary, in March, had presented “significant challenges,” including “substantial numbers” of poll workers who had dropped out at the last minute. They told DeSantis flatly that they were not capable of conducting an election entirely through the mail, and were concerned that they lacked the resources necessary to conduct even limited in-person voting.

The supervisors asked DeSantis to adopt several measures: increase the number of places where early ballots could be cast; give supervisors more time to send voters mail-in ballots and more time to count early ballots; and allow early-voting sites to be reused as polling places on Election Day, to eliminate the need to erect new ones. “As counties are preparing and making staffing and logistical decisions now, the flexibility and authority provided *as soon as possible* would be of great benefit,” the supervisors said.

DeSantis waited two months to respond, and then granted one of the requests: election workers could begin counting mail-in ballots as early as forty days before the election, instead of twenty-two. He offered to make state employees available to work at polling places, and to “coördinate” with supervisors to supply hand sanitizer and protective gear. On the other requests, one election supervisor told me, “the governor basically ignored us.”

As DeSantis stalled on preparations, Trump was pursuing a campaign against voting by mail. “The 2020 Election will be totally rigged if Mail-in Voting is

allowed to take place, & everyone knows it,” he tweeted. During the summer, his Postmaster General, [Louis DeJoy](#), removed high-speed sorting machines and instituted other changes that radically diminished the capacity of the Postal Service. Testifying before Congress, DeJoy promised that the mail would be delivered “fully and on time” on Election Day. But in Florida’s elections in 2016 and 2018, even with mail delivery operating normally, thousands of ballots didn’t make it on time.

In Florida, and across the United States, the coronavirus pandemic is inspiring fears that voting in person could be dangerous. What happens if a voter shows up without a mask, angering those who are wearing them? Under Florida law, election supervisors have a responsibility to maintain order at polling places, but they cannot make arrests or prevent anyone from lawfully voting. “The bouncer at the precinct is typically a seventy-five-year-old lady sitting at a card table,” Jon Mills, a former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, said.

Since the spring, when the epidemic took hold, a team of lawyers led by Marc Elias, the Democratic voting-rights lawyer, has been presiding over lawsuits in eighteen states, spurring changes to make it easier to vote and in some cases overturning Republican-backed laws that have been in place for years. Elias has sought what he calls the “four pillars” of voting by mail: all mail-in ballots will have prepaid postage; any ballot postmarked by Election Day will be counted; voters whose signatures don’t match will be given a chance to explain themselves; and community groups will be allowed to deliver ballots for others. Elias’s team has won complete victories in three states and partial victories in four; the other cases are ongoing. “I have won in more states than I thought I would,” he said. One case involved the Wisconsin primary, in April, when tens of thousands of ballots were postmarked on or before Election Day but arrived late. Elias sued election officials, and the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the votes.



"You introduced me as your housemate, not your husband. What's up with that?"
Cartoon by Julia Suits

In Elias's suit in Florida, the state agreed to a settlement: it would launch a voter-education campaign and allow the maximum number of days for early voting. But on the central issue—counting all mail-in ballots that are postmarked before Election Day—Elias and his plaintiffs lost. Trump soon posted a bizarre tweet, urging Florida Republicans to vote by mail, a position that contradicted his earlier tirades. Mindy Finn, the C.E.O. of an analytics firm called Citizen Data, said her organization projected that far more Democrats than Republicans would vote by mail in Florida. "By polarizing vote by mail, Trump appears to have been depressing his own turnout," she said.

Finn's firm is predicting 4.2 million absentee ballots in Florida, and some observers worry that—given the unprecedented volume, the need to open each ballot by hand, and the shortage of workers—it will be nearly impossible to get them all processed before the deadline, on the Saturday after the election. Eddie Perez, of the Open Source Election Technology Institute, which focusses on elections and voting, told me, "My fear is that people will be drowning on Election Day."

Intelligence analysts have assured Trump that there is no evidence that foreign adversaries will try to falsify mail-in ballots. But the spectre of interference lingers. According to the Mueller report, Russian agents made Florida a focus in 2016. Before the election, they sent spear-phishing e-mails to a hundred and twenty officials, attempting to hack into local election systems. A Senate intelligence report found that in at least two counties they gained entry to voter-registration rolls. The Russians also successfully hacked a Florida-based company that makes software for voter registration and check-in. Experts say that registration systems are especially vulnerable, because they are linked to the Internet. "If the Russians had pulled the trigger, there would have been utter chaos on Election Day," Alex Halderman, a professor of computer science and engineering at the University of Michigan, told me.

According to a former senior Obama Administration official, there was concern that Russian agents were also apparently experimenting with their capability to alter vote tallies. "That's just what they do in elections in Russia," another former senior official said. American intelligence officials say they have no evidence that the Russians changed any totals. It's more likely, according to several former Obama Administration officials, that they were probing

vulnerabilities in election systems across the country. “This was a sort of dry run,” one said.

But it’s not clear that officials looked very hard for evidence of vote tampering. After the 2016 election, only a handful of states conducted audits that would determine if electronic voting machines had been penetrated; the federal government did none. After an inquiry from Senator Ron Wyden, of Oregon, the Department of Homeland Security responded that it had no “mandate” to examine state voting machines. Wyden was indignant: “On what basis can the Administration make its claims regarding a lack of evidence of foreign interference if it hasn’t looked for it?”

A foreign adversary who wanted to sow dissension wouldn’t necessarily need to change the election results—which, given the decentralized nature of voting in the United States, would be difficult to do. “I don’t think changing the counts is what they are aiming for,” Laura Rosenberger, a foreign-policy adviser to Hillary Clinton in 2016, told me, of the Russians. “They want to cause doubt and confusion, so that you have a situation where everyone is fighting and no one accepts the legitimacy of the election.”

At the Reverend Holmes’s church, in Tallahassee, the congregants are anticipating November with a mixture of fear and hope. On a recent Sunday, Holmes said from the pulpit that the election would be a defining moment in American history, and that his parishioners should let nothing—not voter suppression, not the coronavirus—stand in the way of their casting ballots.

Drawing on the Book of Daniel, Holmes told the story of three Hebrew boys who refused to bow to King Nebuchadnezzar, even at the threat of being burned alive, because he was not the true and only God. “Nebuchadnezzar was so full of himself that he wanted his own statue—on Mt. Rushmore,” he said, eliciting knowing laughs from the pews. “But the three boys would not bow down to this paranoid, insecure king.” Quoting John Lewis, the late congressman and civil-rights leader, Holmes told the congregants that the boys who defied Nebuchadnezzar were getting into “good trouble”—the kind that people make when they refuse to yield to a tyrant. “Never be afraid to make noise,” he said, “to get into good trouble—necessary trouble.”

Holmes’s right-wing counterparts have been spreading a more combative message. In north Florida, which Trump dominated in the 2016 elections, white

evangelists fill the airwaves with apocalyptic prophecies. One such commentator is the Reverend Gene A. Youngblood, the pastor of the First Conservative Baptist Church in Jacksonville, who hosts a radio show called “Let’s Face the Issues.”

In a recent broadcast, Youngblood warned of a country besieged by the forces of Marxism, state control, and anarchy. The summer’s protests against police brutality, he said, had brought a flood of chaos and crime. “We’ve seen blocks and blocks and blocks of our major cities burned and destroyed by vandals and thugs of Black Lives Matter,” he said. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is like a cancer —it is spreading across the whole body that we call the United States of America.”

Youngblood’s darkest vision was of the coronavirus, which the “socialist-Marxist-B.L.M.-communist Democratic Party” had used to “bring in fear and anxiety in America as never before.” The purpose, he maintained, was to impose forced vaccinations, which Bill Gates and the government would use to implant a chip that allowed them to control citizens. Youngblood said that it was imperative for Christians to vote in November. If they failed to turn out, he said, “we will lose the battle, and we will have a socialist, communist, dictatorship form of government in America.”

To prepare for the elections, each side is assembling an army of volunteers and lawyers to observe voting and counting. Juan Peñalosa, the executive director of the Florida Democratic Party, told me that he was deploying at least three thousand lawyers, trained in election law, to weigh in on ballot disputes in the state’s nearly six thousand precincts. The Trump campaign says that it is marshalling fifty thousand poll watchers to work in fifteen key states, presumably including Florida.

This November marks the first Presidential election since 1980 in which the Republican National Committee will not be bound by a court decree that has tightly limited its activities around voting sites. The decree arose from a Democratic lawsuit charging that, in a New Jersey governor’s race, off-duty police officers, some carrying guns and wearing armbands that read “National Ballot Security Task Force,” had intimidated Black voters. “We fully expect Trump volunteers to be at every polling place in the state on Election Day,” Peñalosa said.

The Reverend Holmes seemed unswayed. For years, he has urged his congregation to take part in the early voting of Souls to the Polls. After his sermon, he led about a hundred members on a walk to the county courthouse, where many of them cast early ballots for the statewide primary on August 18th. Holmes's march was given a police escort, and many candidates came along to solicit parishioners' support.

One member of the congregation, an eighty-year-old named William Brown, grew up in Mulberry, a phosphate-mining town in central Florida. The white neighborhoods, he recalled, were demarcated by hedgerows and railroad tracks, which no sane Black person would go past. For years, the center of Mulberry was marked by a hulking tree where many Black men were lynched. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Brown told me, voting was impossible for a Black person in Mulberry. "There was never any issue," he said. "I didn't even think about it."

Brown joined the Army and saw the world, and while he was away America changed a little. In 1984, at the age of forty-four, he went to the polls for the first time—to vote, he said, for "whichever Democrat was running against Reagan." His candidate, Walter Mondale, lost badly. But he hasn't missed an election since, and he looks forward to voting in November. "Oh, Lord," he said. "I'm not done yet."♦

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Matchmaking Dept.

- [**Sima Taparia's Matchmaking Business Booms in Lockdown**](#)

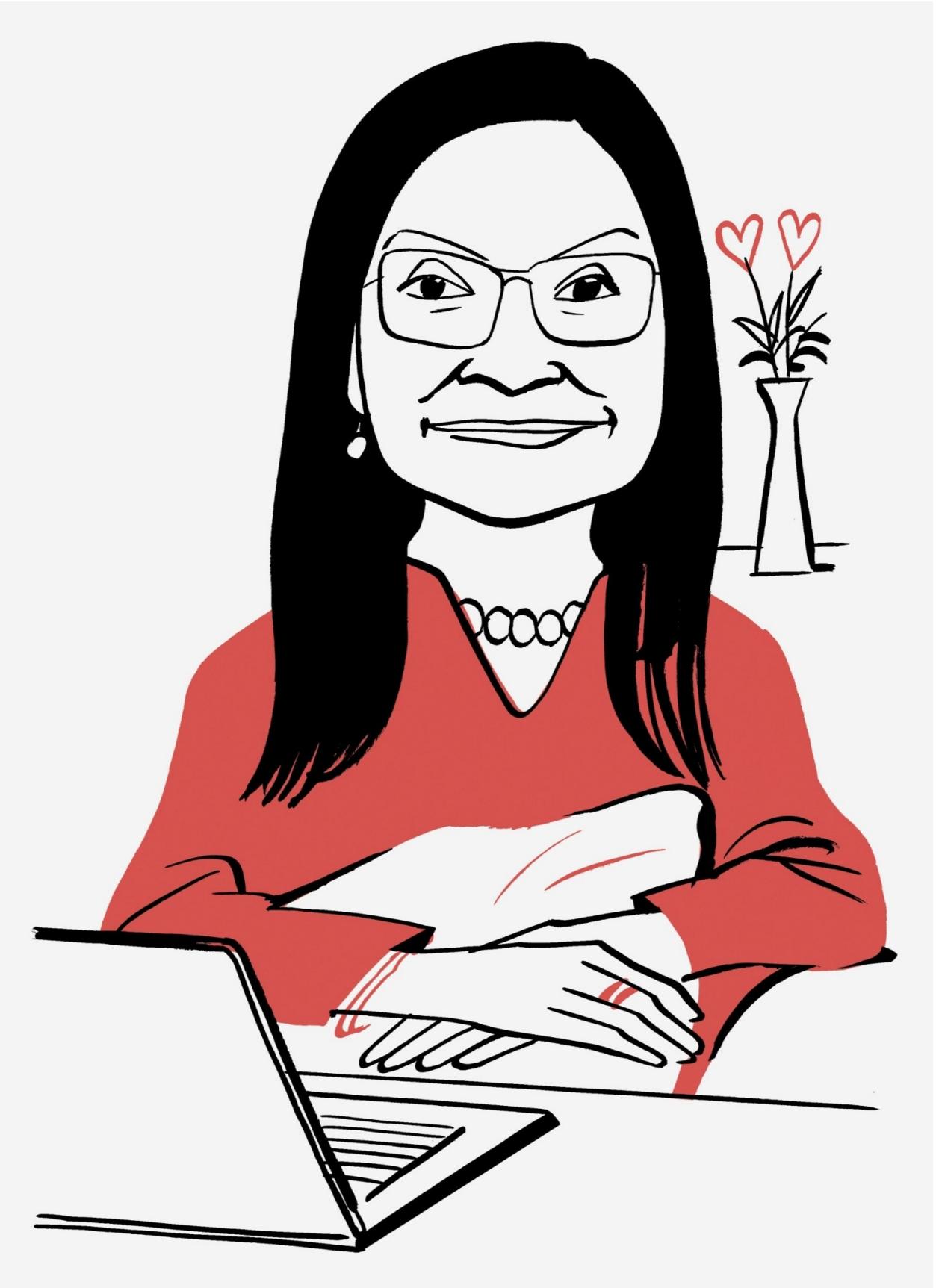
[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Sima Taparia's Matchmaking Business Booms in Lockdown

The star of the Netflix reality series “Indian Matchmaking” is actively trying to match more than a hundred clients, who come with such demands as “good-natured,” “not a lawyer,” and a working knowledge of geographic phenomena.

By [Sheila Marikar](#)

August 31, 2020



Is it possible to find love in 2020? Yes, according to Sima Taparia, the star of “Indian Matchmaking,” a new reality series that is to “The Bachelor” what chai is to White Claw. Taparia maintains a database of South Asians who claim that they want to settle down. Her clients, who are based around the world, come with such demands as “good-natured,” “not a lawyer,” and a working knowledge of geographic phenomena. “He didn’t know Bolivia had salt flats,” Aparna Shewakramani, a Houston lawyer, says of a failed suitor in one episode.

“She thinks finding a life partner is like ordering from a menu,” Taparia tells viewers. “She wants open-minded, she wants that, this. Many of these things are not very important for a happy married life.” The show premiered in July, on Netflix, but Taparia has been a matchmaker since 2005. (Previously, she imported and arranged artificial flowers.) She is actively trying to match more than a hundred clients—often with the help of experts, such as a “face reader” who, upon squinting at a head shot of Shewakramani on a cell phone, declared her to be “obstinate and stubborn.”

“The business is growing in lockdown,” Taparia said the other day, on a video call from her home, in Mumbai. She wore a kurta and lipstick—both red. Her initial fee is typically a few hundred dollars; she receives a lump sum if she facilitates a marriage. “My system is, I go to the client’s house, I see their way of living, how they are financially,” she said. Lately, she has had to make do with video calls. “At least it’s satisfying that we see each other on FaceTime. I don’t work as though I’m a broker or in some type of finance—it’s all emotion.” She has made “two big matches” during the pandemic, both stalled since the betrothal. “Only fifty people are allowed at a wedding right now. Here, we want to do a big fat wedding, a *huge* fat wedding.”

Smriti Mundhra, the executive producer of “Indian Matchmaking,” joined the call from Los Angeles. She had a shoulder-length bob; children’s drawings hung on cabinets behind her. Mundhra, who is forty and grew up in L.A. and Mumbai, had been tracking reactions to the series. “There are a lot of people tweeting that this upholds a very narrow, caste-ist infrastructure,” she said. “They’re not wrong. But, ultimately, it’s where Indians are as a culture, and I’d rather talk about it and engage with it than just pretend it doesn’t exist.”

Mundhra’s aunt introduced her to Taparia in 2008. “She said, ‘Please find a match for her,’ ” Taparia recalled. After eighteen months, they called off the

search. “I had given her a few matches, but Smriti is full of character,” Taparia said. “Those matches didn’t match her.”

“There were a couple people I would’ve considered, who rejected me,” Mundhra said. “I was never the ideal body type,” she added, “but I have light-skinned privilege. My family would talk about that—‘Oh, she’s a little chubby, but she has good fair skin.’” Taparia nodded knowingly. “In India, they still want fair skin,” she said, despite recent campaigns against popular skin-lightening creams such as Fair & Lovely. “They want good height. They want good education. They want good family—*everything*, they want. You know Aishwarya Rai?” she asked, referring to the actress, model, and former Miss World winner—“I explain to them, you will not get Aishwarya Rai.”

Mundhra ended up marrying “a Brazilian-Irish guy” from her Columbia University M.F.A. program and filming a documentary about arranged marriage, “A Suitable Girl,” featuring Taparia’s daughter. Afterward, Mundhra told Taparia, “We’re going to get you a show.” She pitched “Indian Matchmaking” to Netflix in 2017; the series became one of the ten most watched on the platform in the U.S. and in India.

Shewakramani joined the videoconference from Houston. After a late night—“I watched Episodes 1 through 5 and got a couple hours of sleep”—she had decided to take a personal day. “I said I had a bad headache, and like half my office got COVID, so they were, like, ‘Oh, God, is it . . . ?’ I was, like, ‘I don’t know, maybe, bye.’”

“Aparna, you have such a good sense of humor,” Taparia said. Shewakramani met six men over the course of the series’ filming, but none of them stuck. She remains hopeful. “I mean, yeah, the world situation right now is not ideal,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean that you can’t find love.” Taparia suggested virtual dating; she’d begun to arrange meetings over FaceTime. Mundhra suggested, “If you like a guy, you can let him stand at the end of your driveway.”

Shewakramani considered this. “Maybe he’ll have a boom box over his head,” she said. “Maybe that’s what I need.” ♦

Minneapolis Postcard

- **"We Can Solve Our Own Problems": A Vision of Minneapolis Without Police**

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

“We Can Solve Our Own Problems”: A Vision of Minneapolis Without Police

Every night, the Powderhorn Safety Collective monitors the neighborhood in which George Floyd was killed by local officers, and where residents have made an informal pact not to call the police.

By [Gili Ostfield](#)

August 31, 2020



When the Minneapolis City Council pledged “to end policing as we know it,” the announcement was made at Powderhorn Park, on the south side of the city, just blocks from where George Floyd was killed by local officers in May. Many people wondered what, exactly, an alternative to policing would look like. That question is being answered at the park, too. Every night, volunteers patrol the area, where, in the months since Floyd’s death, there has been an uptick in shootings and break-ins, and residents have made an informal pact not to call the police. Pouya Najmaie, a forty-six-year-old environmental lobbyist, is one of the founders of the patrol, called the Powderhorn Safety Collective, which has around forty active members. “We can solve our own problems,” Najmaie said. “We don’t have to bring the police in here.” For example, he said, the collective recently helped a woman get away from a man who had been stalking and threatening her.

Some of the calls have been trickier. Last week, volunteers got a tip about a suspicious vehicle with no plates, and five Black teen-agers were seen getting out of the car. The collective made the decision to stand down. Najmaie explained that, although the car had possibly been stolen, they couldn’t trust the police to handle the situation without escalating it. “That’s one of our principles,” he said. “Life over property.”

The other night, at the start of the 11 p.m. shift, a few volunteers dressed in reflective vests headed toward a trash can in an alley near the park’s entrance. On top of the can was a container filled with treats—Hostess cupcakes, cookies—left out for the team by a sympathetic neighbor. “I feel like a raccoon every time we do this,” Gaea Dill-D’Ascoli, a thirty-five-year-old artist who wore her hair in French braids, said, as she grabbed a Nutter Butter. Dill-D’Ascoli, Najmaie, and another volunteer, T. A. Tracanna, were the “surveyors” that night; others who volunteered as “dispatchers” would alert them to any activity in the neighborhood and direct them where to go. (They use Discord servers and WhatsApp channels to communicate; there are more than eleven hundred users on a community server that was made in the days after Floyd’s death.) Dill-D’Ascoli rode a teal bicycle; Najmaie and Tracanna crossed the park on foot. They headed toward the area known as George Floyd Square, which was barricaded by protesters in late May and is open only to pedestrians. A bicyclist stopped them; he said that he had heard about someone getting shot nearby. “Did you see something on Discord?” Najmaie asked.

“No, it was something on Citizen”—a crime-reporting app—the bicyclist said. Dill-D’Ascoli rode ahead to scout out the area. “The idea is to get eyes on what’s going on, to be witnesses in case the police show up and something happens,” Najmaie said. “Jamar Clark was killed during one of those incidents.”

There are circumstances under which the collective would call 911. Some volunteers are nurses and medics, and many of the patrollers carry first-aid kits, but in the case of a medical emergency the protocol is to phone for help, even if it means that the police will come. (“We don’t want to take responsibility for someone who’s, like, ‘That’s not what I wanted you to do with my life!’ ” Najmaie said.) The group is undecided on what to do in a violent situation—the issue hasn’t arisen yet—but Najmaie is wary of members’ engaging in physical force: “It’s a Rubicon to cross—you know, a whole other ballgame.”

A stream of gunshots rang out. “That almost sounded like a semi-automatic,” Najmaie said. Moments later, the bicyclist returned, saying shots had been fired at the corner of Thirty-fifth and Chicago. “It doesn’t feel like it’s over,” he warned. Najmaie put his phone up to his face and relayed the news to Dill-D’Ascoli through Zello, an app that simulates radio communications. “Be safe,” Najmaie said to the bicyclist, as he and Tracanna went to investigate.

“Yeah, I’m part of the block crew up in my hood,” he responded, riding away.

Najmaie and Tracanna passed a small candlelit tribute on the sidewalk. “I wonder if it has to do with this memorial up here, for a seventeen-year-old Latinx kid that was murdered,” Najmaie mused. He received a message from Dill-D’Ascoli: one block over, a group of teen-agers had been spotted running. A young Latino man in jeans and a gray sweatshirt emerged from a nearby alley. “Have you seen my boys?” he asked, as he walked past. Najmaie pointed east, adding, “If someone’s hurt, let us know, we’ve got med kits with us, O.K.?”

“Awesome,” the man replied, signing a grateful gesture with his free hand. He kept the other in his pocket, where the outline of a gun bulged.

Dill-D’Ascoli, who had watched the encounter from a few blocks away, radioed Najmaie: “I think that guy was looking for them, not with them.” The bicyclist, looping back around, said that it had looked to him as though the kids were being chased. “Oh,” Najmaie said, bewildered. “Well, that’s fucked up.”

The group headed east. Dill-D’Ascoli rode parallel to the other volunteers down

a different block, as Najmaie eyed the armed man from a distance. “He’s cool,” Tracanna said. “He’s just doing his thing.” They lingered for a while, but the man didn’t seem to be up to anything. Eventually, they moved on.

As the night wound down, a slow-moving squad car rolled by—a rare sight these days. (According to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, cops have referred to George Floyd Square and the surrounding area as a “no-go zone.”) “Even with those people that were carrying guns, the cops, like, creeping around still make me more nervous,” Tracanna said, with a laugh. Everyone agreed. ♦

Podcast Dept.

- [**“Nice White Parents,” “Fiasco,” and America’s Public-School Problem**](#)

“Nice White Parents,” “Fiasco,” and America’s Public-School Problem

Two new podcasts aim to upend listeners’ understanding of school reform and desegregation.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

August 31, 2020



The word “innocent” comes up early in the new podcast “Nice White Parents,” about separate and unequal education at a public school in Brooklyn. It’s hosted and reported by Chana Joffe-Walt, a producer for “This American Life.” In New York City, as with many places in the U.S., school segregation has long been de facto, and differences in school resources correspond closely with race; the city, in lieu of an integration plan, has focussed on “school reform,” along with an elaborate, choice-based system that involves testing, wait lists, and parental strategizing. In the series, Joffe-Walt, who is white, homes in on the insidious, sometimes unwitting role of white parents in perpetuating an unjust system that benefits their kids. The innocence we hear about, you may not be surprised to learn, comes from those parents describing themselves.

The public school in question is the School for International Studies, in Cobble Hill, where Joffe-Walt lives. She began reporting on S.I.S. in 2015, when the students there—middle schoolers and high schoolers—were mostly Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern, and from working-class and poor families. Enrollment was shrinking. The district was rapidly gentrifying, and white families tended to send their kids to the same three middle schools, which were becoming “packed.” S.I.S., like many of the underattended schools, was actively recruiting. As the series opens, Joffe-Walt and some other white parents are being shown around local schools by administrators, usually people of color. Most of the children they see are Black and brown, except for a “gifted” class, which is mostly white. No one on the tours mentions race.

The episode then reveals what happens when a group of white families, en masse, decide to send their kids to S.I.S.—and, as a kind of bargaining chip, persuade the school to start a French dual-language program. What follows is like a farce. At a PTA meeting, we learn that new parents have launched an aggressive fund-raising campaign, and that the French Embassy has already pledged ten thousand dollars. A PTA co-president, Imee Hernandez, an even-tempered social worker, is rattled but polite; the PTA, which allocates school funds, knew nothing about the campaign. (“I’d rather have a dinner where people of different cultures bring their food and we share together than have somebody else cater it,” she tells Joffe-Walt. “That’s how I feel you build community.”) Soon, parents are planning a lavish gala in Manhattan, at the French Embassy’s Cultural Services center. A new parent urges befuddled PTA members to help drum up auction items: Knicks tickets, Coach bags, Tiffany pieces. At the gala, a guest enthuses about her apartment in Saint-Germain-des-

Prés—“October is my *saison préférée* . . . you wear your scarf, your *foulard*”—and tells Hernandez, who is bilingual, “It’s so important to learn another language.” More money and white students begin flooding into S.I.S., not for the benefit of all, and subsequent episodes reveal a similar dynamic throughout the school’s sixty-year history.

“Nice White Parents” was made by Serial Productions, which was recently bought by the *Times*. Like all podcasts in the “This American Life” and “Serial” family, it’s expertly crafted. (The producer is Julie Snyder.) The sound design features plucky but nonintrusive original music (with a hint of Vince Guaraldi), incisive interview clips, and evocative archival recordings. In the second episode, we hear audio of chanting Black and Puerto Rican protesters at Freedom Day, a mass New York City school boycott in 1964, and of a teen-ager there, speaking to ABC News, who points out the armed police on horseback and says, “All we want is equal education. That’s all.” The richness of vocal inflection is perhaps the most powerful element of the podcast form; in that clip, the teen’s earnest calm contrasts with the skeptical, rat-a-tat tone of the interviewer. Later, we hear a similar calm from a modern-day eleventh grader, Tiffani Torres, when she asks Mayor Bill de Blasio, on a WNYC call-in show, *when* city schools will be integrated. “Tiffani, with all due respect, I really think you’re not hearing what we’re saying to you, so I’ll repeat it,” de Blasio says, with blithe impatience. Then he tells her that a task force is studying the issue.

We hear revealing tones in surprising places, such as in interviews with white parents who advocated for the integration of Brooklyn schools in the sixties; their voices brighten with pride as they describe the progressive bona fides of the private schools they *actually* sent their kids to. But the most distinguishing sound of “Nice White Parents” is Joffe-Walt’s narration, which is abundant, direct, and full of zingers. “It happens again and again—white parents wielding their power without even noticing, like a guy wandering through a crowded store with a huge backpack, knocking things over every time he turns,” she says. The backpack analogy will resonate with New Yorkers, who have observed such behavior in the cramped spaces we used to occupy all over town—and, in many ways, “Nice White Parents” seems to be speaking specifically to New Yorkers, and to well-off white ones, though it listens closely and with care to kids, parents, and administrators of color. Joffe-Walt often uses “white” as shorthand for affluent and educated, and, in neighborhoods like Cobble Hill, the association is apt, but it isn’t so everywhere in the country, or even in New York. The show has an astringently self-critical quality of wanting to straight-talk

“nice white parents” into taking action, but in doing so it can feel unnervingly clubby. It can also create an impression of being told what to think, even as we agree; when this happened in school, listeners might recall, we didn’t like it.

Another new series about race and education in the Northeast, “Fiasco: The Battle for Boston,” hosted by Leon Neyfakh, takes a different approach. “In September of 1974, the city of Boston faced a test,” Neyfakh says. “What would happen if thousands of white and Black children living in segregated neighborhoods were forced to go to school together?” In an archival clip, we hear a little girl named Joanne, who is Black, tell an NBC reporter, “When we go up there, we’re going to be stoned. It’s not fair.” She isn’t wrong. The series tells the story of the school system, the Black activists and parents who initiated change, and the inter-district busing, which resulted in several years of violence and mayhem, usually perpetrated by enraged white people: bus stonings, firebombings, threats, demonstrations, street scuffles. Even the gangster Whitey Bulger got involved.

Neyfakh, formerly of Slate’s “Slow Burn” podcast, was a marquee hire for Luminary, “Fiasco” ’s subscription-based platform, which launched in 2019. His work tends to focus on late-twentieth-century political scandals and the experience of living through them; he chooses historical episodes that listeners think they know and upends their assumptions. Here, he starts with “the busing crisis,” the conflict’s name in much popular memory. As Tom Atkins, the head of the Boston N.A.A.C.P. at the time, says in an archival interview, “ ‘Busing’ was a nationwide code word” for keeping Black people in their place. “People could run racist campaigns without making racist statements,” he says. Neyfakh is white, and he and his team quickly learned that “busing” wasn’t the best way to describe desegregation: when they used the term, potential interviewees hung up on them.

Neyfakh creates the artful impression of subtlety. His stories always have direct, clear connections to contemporary life, but he lets listeners have the pleasure, or the illusion, of connecting the dots themselves. He has a gift for crafting memorable scenes, and his longtime executive producer, Andrew Parsons, is deft at animating them through sound design. In one scene, from April, 1968, the liberal mayor of Boston, Kevin White, has recently defeated the anti-integrationist firebrand Louise Day Hicks; he seems to be one of the only forces who can prevent the desegregation controversy from exploding into chaos. So it’s startling to learn that when he hears that Martin Luther King, Jr., has been

assassinated, he's at a movie theatre, watching "Gone with the Wind." ("Rhett!" Scarlett says. "Where shall I go, what shall I do?") Officials are worried about civil unrest, and the next day, when Atkins, then a city-council member, proposes a peacekeeping plan involving that night's James Brown concert at the Boston Garden, we learn that White isn't sure who James Brown is. These are minor but potent details, vividly evoked, as is the concert, to powerful effect.

The series' strengths are exemplified in an episode that focusses on the image that came to define the crisis: a photograph of an anti-desegregation demonstration in 1976 in Boston's City Hall Plaza, in which a white teen holding a huge American flag lunges at a Black man in a three-piece suit, wielding the flagpole like a bayonet. Neyfakh describes the photo with forensic precision, telling the stories of its key players. We learn about the teen, Joseph Rakes; the man in the suit, Ted Landsmark, a lawyer on his way to a meeting about affirmative action; and the photographer, Stanley Forman, from the *Herald*, who won a Pulitzer Prize for the image. Landsmark's nose had been broken by a white teen; eventually a police officer helped him. "I immediately said to him, 'I want you to let go of my arm,'" Landsmark says. He worried that a photograph of them would make him look like a culprit.

The sensational violence of Boston's early busing era came to an end, but desegregation, with modified busing, lasted. Research has long shown that school integration, in Boston and far beyond, has worked, correlating with better-resourced schools and enduring academic and social benefits for students. Yet what many white people remember is the mayhem. De Blasio, who grew up near Boston in the seventies, believes that busing there "absolutely poisoned the well," and is a model to be avoided: "I think history is on my side here." Both "Fiasco" and "Nice White Parents" suggest otherwise. At one point, Joffe-Walt notes that her goal is to forge a "shared sense of reality" to counterbalance the innocence, or the naïveté, among white parents that she believes stands in the way of progress. Together, these two podcasts offer ample evidence of that reality, for those who choose to listen. ♦

Poems

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The Couple

By [Jane Shore](#)

August 31, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

Jay and Linda moved to Plateau Road
and brought with them a pair of horses:
old Kahlua and his longtime mare.
When her heart failed suddenly, Kahlua—
a paint the color of the Mexican liqueur
and swaybacked like a hammock—
went on a hunger strike. Fearing
that he might die from loneliness,
Jay and Linda heard about a donkey
housed unhappily an hour north,
whose spouse likewise had died.
Donkeys are stoic, disguising their pain,
and we know grief is pain. They hauled
him home, installed him in the barn,
to see if the widowers could get along,
the Odd Couple of Central Vermont.
Nickolai, a Slavic name, means “victorious;
conqueror of the people,” and, if that’s so,
he’s won us over, my husband and me,
Jody and David, Cathy and Eric, and other
long-marrieds of Peck Hill Road.
Driving to town for groceries and gas,
I shift my Subaru into neutral
to admire our two old bachelor uncles
free-ranging along the electric fence.
Their partnership so far so good.
Nickolai’s fur, mottled gray and white
like burnout velvet, gets waterlogged
when it rains; Kahlua’s is waterproof.
Nickolai’s lovely floppy donkey ears

are much larger than Kahlua's,
and he has a stiffer mane; his bray
is not Kahlua's pleasant whinny—
his hee-haws, like a wheezing accordion,
reverberate off our bedroom walls.
I once saw Kahlua bare his teeth,
like Mr. Ed, the TV horse who could talk.
But they say that donkeys are more personable
than horses. More affectionate than dogs.
So it's easy to forget that he's a jackass—
confined to the barn all freezing winter,
tired of nipping at Kahlua's flanks,
he stomped Jay's pet rabbit to death.
From afar, you cannot tell which one's
the boss, albeit equal on the equine scale.
On days when it isn't thundering,
you'll find them both civilly ensconced,
silhouettes grazing against the sunset,
the moon rising over Max Gray Road.
They stand head to tail, or tail to head,
their long tails ticking metronomes,
flicking flies away from the other's eyes,
their warm sides barely touching.
Facing opposite directions, they'll
age in place, bickering, companionable—
a photo on a country calendar.

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Basho & Mandela

By [Juan Felipe Herrera](#)

August 31, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

As Basho has said —
it is a narrow road to the Deep North — as Mandela has said
the haphazard segregation later became a well-orchestrated
segregation
— as Basho has said the journey began with an attained
awareness
that at any moment you can become a weather-exposed skeleton
— think of us in this manner
these are notes for your nourishment — hold them
as bowls of kindness
from journeys of bravery
the will to seek & find the sudden turning rivers & the dawn-eyed
freedom

Portfolio

- [Grace Wales Bonner's Visions of Black Style](#)

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The Makeup Artist at Ground Zero of Internet Beauty Culture

Kim Kardashian West's makeup artist, Mario Dedivanovic, launches a line in a pandemic.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

August 31, 2020



In 1953, [Marilyn Monroe](#) asked her longtime makeup artist Allan Snyder to sneak into the hospital where she was briefly admitted after filming “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,” so that he could powder her nose. According to Snyder, Monroe also asked that he do the same after her death, and gave him an engraved money clip to remind him to get to her while she was “still warm.” In 1962, Snyder touched up Monroe’s visage for her funeral, and served as one of her pallbearers. Not long ago, Mario Dedivanovic, who has spent twelve years painting the face of the reality-TV mogul [Kim Kardashian West](#), and who considers Snyder a spiritual mentor, texted me an article from a women’s magazine revealing Snyder’s “eight beauty secrets.” He noted that Snyder had used Vaseline as a highlighter—Dedivanovic does, too, though he prefers another emollient jelly, Elizabeth Arden’s Eight Hour Cream, which is the color and consistency of linden honey. Snyder was known to dust the tip of Monroe’s nose with blush in order to give it the impression of being more snubbed; Dedivanovic often engineers a similar trompe l’oeil on West’s nose, applying dark powder onto either side—part of the process known as contouring—to make it appear narrower. “Omg the similarities are uncanny,” Dedivanovic wrote. “I often wonder what it was like. I can imagine actually what it was like.”

West, who has a hundred and eighty-six million Instagram followers (only five people, including West’s half sister Kylie Jenner, have more), has inspired countless women to sport the “soft glam” look that Dedivanovic first gave her in 2008: airbrushed skin, sculpted cheekbones, peachy-pink blush, a “bronzy eye,” long false eyelashes, and dewy highlighter, all “baked”—an industry term for setting with loose powder—to a matte finish, like the shell of a cage-free egg. Dedivanovic’s method is a twist on a practice that dates back to the Elizabethan era, and that was later adopted by the drag community. Contouring was ideal for black-and-white film, a medium of light and shadow, and was used in early Hollywood by makeup artists such as the Polish beautician Max Factor (né Maksymilian Faktorowicz). It also proved, a century later, to look great on Instagram. West started using the app to post selfies in 2012, and her signature look seemed to replicate spontaneously on the site: countless mini-Kims with pouty nude lips (dubbed, with no small amount of snickering misogyny, “duck face”), beige on every surface, and hair pulled back into a bun so severe that it doubled as an eye lift.

In 2015, contouring was a “priority category” at Sephora, which began to sell a wide variety of contouring “palettes,” featuring powders and creams in tones

from vanilla to espresso bean. Some kits came with instructions: paint stripes of dark color on features you want to recede (jowls, hairline, chin) and light color where you want to draw focus (cheekbones, the bridge of the nose, the philtrum), then furiously blend. The backlash came swiftly. The legendary makeup artist Bobbi Brown said in an interview in 2015, “When I see contouring on people’s faces, it looks like dirt.” That year, Pati Dubroff, a makeup artist for Charlize Theron and Dakota Johnson who now works for Chanel, posted a picture on Instagram of a contoured face in progress, which was striped like the skin of a lionfish, and wrote, “i would NEVER SUFFOCATE THE SKIN or create a MASK LIKE CREATURE like this.”

The Kardashian family face continued to flood the visual field. (With the exception of [Kendall Jenner](#), a high-fashion model, West’s sisters all wore the look.) Previously, makeup artists had worked almost in secret; Dedivanovic soon found himself in an unexpectedly public position. West seemed genuinely fascinated by Dedivanovic’s ability to mold her face into different shapes, and she spoke often about his work, to anyone who would listen, with the giddy enthusiasm of a college student who has just discovered existentialism. When Dedivanovic would casually mention a product in an interview, such as Ben Nye’s “banana powder,” a pale-yellow talcum mixture from a theatrical-makeup brand that has been in business since 1967, it would sell out, or quickly triple in price. (Dedivanovic, for his part, uses banana powder less than he once did, having found that the daffodil color, on certain skin tones, turns slightly garish when illuminated by flashbulbs.)

Dedivanovic, who is thirty-seven, grew up in the Bronx. His parents are Albanians from Montenegro. He has an angular, lupine jawline and the bifurcated mustache of a young Errol Flynn. He is soft-spoken and, by his own admission, sometimes insecure. He is prone to crying, particularly when talking about his mother. For years, he hated the way his nose looked, and contemplated rhinoplasty. He did not talk at all in interviews or videos about his private life, and maintained the same discretion with his celebrity clientele. “Mario is probably one of the only people that I could trust—like really trust, like ‘Oh, my God, don’t tell anyone I’m pregnant’ kind of trust, you know?” West told me last year by phone, from Los Angeles. “I’m not pregnant, by the way,” she added.

Dedivanovic came up in the industry before the advent of “beauty influencers”—online personalities who present cosmetics tutorials on platforms like YouTube and [TikTok](#)—but he is arguably at ground zero for contemporary

Internet beauty culture. Arabelle Sicardi, a journalist who is currently writing a book about the concept of “beauty as terror,” described Dedivanovic to me as “the Venn-diagram middle point of Internet and celebrity.” His client roster has expanded beyond West to include other famous women, such as Kate Bosworth, Naomie Harris, Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and Demi Lovato. He did Lovato’s makeup for the most recent Grammys, where she shed a single tear during her performance. Dedivanovic, who was watching her on a monitor from about twenty feet away, told me that he briefly feared that his “career would be over” if her mascara ran. It stayed put.

Dedivanovic is perhaps best known for the Masterclass, a live event attended by aspiring makeup artists, who pay as much as seventeen hundred dollars (when West sits as the model) to observe him doing makeup for up to eight hours. A natural pedagogue, Dedivanovic told me that he feels his main purpose now is to educate other artists on how to pare back the excess that he himself partially inspired. He uses contouring only sparingly these days, and never, he told me, on very pale skin. Earlier this year, he taught a group of students in a small workshop in Chelsea. “My goal was to get them in there and see the type of work that they’re doing and then help them to sort of elevate a little bit,” he said. “And I literally, you know, I went one by one to all the students, like, ‘No, don’t contour her nose. No, don’t contour her chin.’ I probably redid ninety per cent of the eyebrows.” Makeup can be a form of personal expression, but, for a professional makeup artist, one of the allures of the job is the ability to have total control—over how a person looks and over products that require precise implementation. What bothered Dedivanovic most about watching the contouring trend explode, he told me, was that it “took on a life of its own”—one that he could not contain.

In November of last year, Dedivanovic accepted the Artistic Achievement Award at the second annual American Influencer Awards, in Los Angeles. West, dressed in a scarlet Dior gown with a high neck, presented him with the prize. “We’ve worked together for eleven years,” she said. “Eleven years of fights. You guys, we fight like, you don’t even understand, we fight like brother and sister. But he’s created some of my most magical memories, and really, I believe, made me who I am today.”

In his speech, Dedivanovic came out in public, calling himself “a proud gay man.” He said that, in the summer of 2018, he had purchased a plot of land in rural Montenegro, where his father was born. “But I can’t build the home that

my father dreams of,” he said, weeping openly, “because I still feel ashamed when I set foot on that land.” The revelation might have seemed a relic of another time—but, the following month, Dedivanovic told me that it had changed everything. “I was always ashamed,” he said, as we sat in his office space in midtown. “In my mind, I was in a prison.” He no longer wanted a nose job. “I love my nose right now—I would never change it,” he said. “And I would go naked right now, honestly, in the middle of the street, and not give a shit. My life has opened up. Every block that I had built, every defense mechanism that I’ve built from the age of two or three, has just one by one been coming down.” His sister had given him a pumpkin pie, and he offered me a slice. “I eat pie now,” he said.

He was also ready to realize a dream that he had been harboring for two decades: to launch a makeup line of his own. While some have suggested that the beauty market is so saturated that even a major name like Dedivanovic’s could have trouble drawing customers, he explained to me that what would make his line stand out was his almost maniacal attention to detail. Dedivanovic had spent years testing and refining products. Most laboratories allow the brands they work with to make three tweaks on a product before it is manufactured. Dedivanovic told me that he had far exceeded that number, often asking for dozens of tweaks.

The packaging for his brand, Makeup by Mario, had been finalized when, in March, New York City went on lockdown. Overnight, Dedivanovic, who lives on the Upper East Side, found himself without an income. He cancelled his celebrity bookings and scuttled the remaining Masterclass sessions on the calendar. The industry was in chaos. It seemed ludicrous to painstakingly dab on concealer that would be covered by a mask. Still, he believed that there was a need for a line that would enable beauty enthusiasts to do their faces like professionals. When things are chaotic, order and ritual become even more crucial. “I’m creating a legacy brand,” he told me. “Every product is going to help people out there to fix things and to clean things up.”

The Masterclass is run by Dedivanovic’s older sister Marina, his cousin Diana Benitez, and another cousin’s wife, Gina Dedivani. On a sweltering day last summer, Dedivanovic met them at the Bronx home of his parents, to discuss an upcoming class in Chicago. The house, which is ranch style, in a suburban neighborhood called Country Club, smelled of potpourri and fried sausages. Lula, Dedivanovic’s seventy-three-year-old mother, a petite woman with a chestnut bob, had set out a full Albanian buffet, including a bowl of boiled beets

and a tray of pickled cabbage.

In the dining room, Marina, a forty-year-old former nurse, with straight ash-blond hair and wire-framed glasses, sat at the head of a cherrywood table in a black cardigan, taking notes on a laptop. Dedivanovic sat across from her in a white T-shirt and baggy black athletic shorts, stroking the tiny skull of a Chihuahua perched on his lap and worrying about the quality of the projector at Chicago's Victory Theatre. Next to Marina sat the Masterclass's social-media manager, Bana Beckovic, who is not related to Dedivanovic (although, he told me later, "she is also Albanian"). Beckovic was the only person at the table wearing the type of heavy makeup, including false eyelashes, that evoked West's. In the living room, Dedivanovic's father, Tom, a tall, gruff man with a woolly mustache, sat on the couch watching Fox News.

Lula took a seat next to Dedivanovic. "Mario is the best child," she said, beaming. "The *best* one." Lula grew up in a shepherding family in a mountain village called Tuzi, in Montenegro, a tiny country wedged between Serbia and Albania. She did not go to school. She knew of Tom, who worked as a mail carrier, through a cousin. She saw him when he came to ask her father for her hand in marriage, she explained, and "maybe one other time, in church." The next time she saw him was on their wedding day. The Dedivanovics emigrated in 1974. Tom eventually found work as the superintendent of an apartment building in the Bronx, where he, Lula, and their three children—Mario is the youngest—occupied a small apartment. When Mario was three years old, Lula went to work as a cleaner in Manhattan, in lavish Upper East Side homes and at the corporate headquarters of the cosmetics conglomerate L'Oréal. Lula didn't wear makeup—she still doesn't—but she often brought free products home from work for her two daughters.

Dedivanovic remembers an early attraction to the L'Oréal swag. "I would see a product in the bathroom or somewhere in the house when I was alone, and I would pick it up and feel it," he said. "I wouldn't have dared to touch my face with it, but I definitely swatched and touched and felt them." When he was in elementary school, he often asked his father to drive him north of the Bronx to see "the beautiful gardens in Westchester," which he liked for their symmetry. "My dad wasn't really fond of it," he said. Dedivanovic was twelve when he got his first job, bagging groceries. His next job was at the Bronx Zoo, where he sold pretzels and was later promoted to manager of the hot-dog stand. He then began busing tables on the weekends at a red-sauce restaurant in Little Italy. In 2000,

when he was seventeen, he and his mother walked past the tri-level Sephora flagship store, on Fifty-first Street and Fifth Avenue. The French multinational beauty chain, whose black-and-white striped exterior resembles a travelling-carnival tent, had opened its first outlets in Manhattan the year before. It was a novelty concept: half department store, half professional supply cabinet.

That day, Dedivanovic applied to become a Sephora “cast member.” (Sephora’s terminology has an operatic quality: the store is known as “the stage,” the shelves are called “gondolas.”) He got a job in the fragrance department of the Nineteenth Street store. Cast members at the time wore a single black glove; female employees had to wear red lipstick. Dedivanovic bleached his hair and got a fake I.D. so that he could go to downtown clubs like Limelight and the Roxy with his new co-workers. Karina Capone, who now works in product development for cosmetics companies including Estée Lauder and Revlon, worked in makeup—what Sephora calls the “color department.” Dedivanovic, Capone recalled, was “this slick, skinny blond kid who kind of looked like Leonardo DiCaprio, but super nice, you know?” She continued, “Slowly, I could see makeup was pulling him in. Always, when we had a shortage of staff on the floor, he was very excited and willing to help the customers that were looking for the foundation.”

Dedivanovic brought home cosmetics samples from work and stashed them in a Nike shoebox under his bed. One day, his oldest sister, Vicky, showed the box to his mother, and the result was a family argument. “I was unhappy,” Lula said. “Because we don’t know nothing about makeup. Not those days. I said, ‘No, honey, you have to do something. You have to finish school.’ ” Dedivanovic ran away from home, staying in Stuyvesant Town, at the apartment of a friend he had made while hanging around the restaurant Cafeteria, in Chelsea. When he returned to the Bronx, two weeks later, he shoved the shoebox back under his bed, and his parents did not mention it again.

Dedivanovic’s first in-store makeover on a Sephora shopper took almost three hours. “I used this pearly-white eyeshadow,” he recalled recently. “And I remember my boss said, ‘Mario, it’s beautiful, but it took too long.’ ” Later, after transferring to the color department at the flagship location, Dedivanovic was recruited by a representative for Lorac, a cosmetics line founded in 1995 by the makeup artist Carol Shaw, whose clients included Nicole Kidman, Cindy Crawford, and Debra Messing. He became a kind of travelling salesman for the brand, visiting Sephoras all over Manhattan to push rosewood lip liners and

tawny blush.

Dedivanovic's makeup career outside Sephora began in 2001, when he assisted several established makeup artists, including Billy B., Isabel Perez, and Kabuki Starshine, who worked on "Sex and the City" and created the eccentric club-kid looks (Kiss-esque white greasepaint, spindly spider lashes, overdrawn, clownish lips) that the 2003 film "Party Monster" made famous. In the meantime, Dedivanovic gathered his friends in his apartment to take "test shots" for his portfolio. In 2007, he landed a part-time job doing touch-ups for the on-air talent at Fox News.

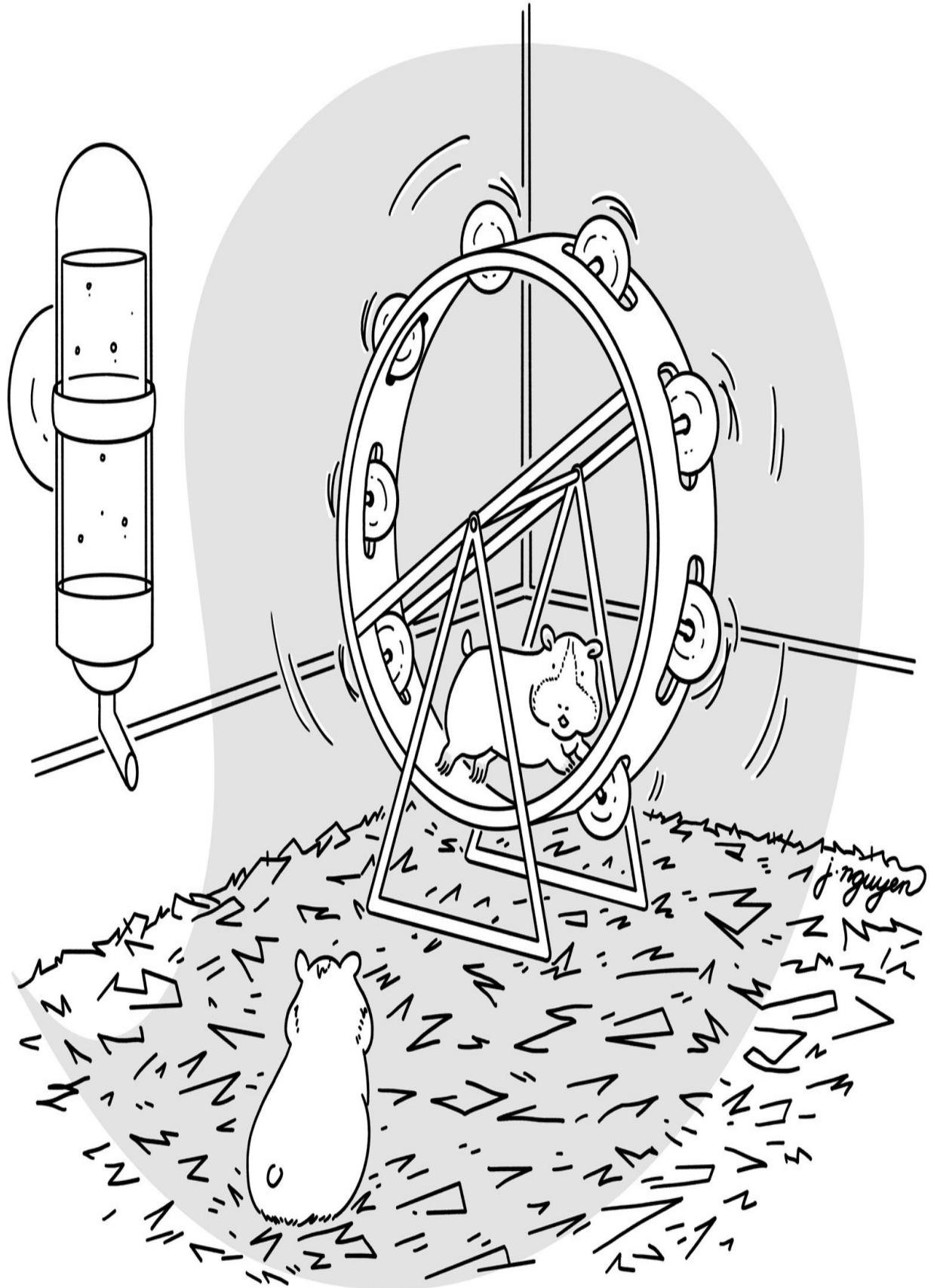
The female anchors on Fox wanted to look battle-ready yet feminine, with cheekbones that "popped" on television. Dedivanovic turned to a style of contouring, which he called his "glam look," that requires a great deal of blending and buffing. He gained a reputation around the Fox News building for making women look lacquered and pristine. Julie Banderas, who was then the host of "Fox Report Weekend," told me, "The first time he did my makeup, people thought I'd had a nose job. People thought that my cheeks were more sunken, that I had lost weight."

Dedivanovic met West in 2008, on a shoot for the cover of the Hamptons life-style publication *Social Life*. She had grown up in the shadow of the [O. J. Simpson](#) trial; her father, the attorney Robert Kardashian, had been a longtime friend of Simpson's, and her mother, Kris Jenner, had been a friend of Nicole Brown's. The reality show "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" had debuted on E! the year before. "I don't really know how to explain it," West recalled. "I just came alive when Mario did my makeup." Immediately after the shoot, she asked Dedivanovic to walk with her through Henri Bendel to buy every product he'd used. In the next year, Dedivanovic did her makeup in a series of three fitness videos called "Fit in Your Jeans by Friday," in which she did abdominal crunches in a latex bodysuit and silver hoop earrings. West also continued to hire him for photo shoots and press junkets in New York and Los Angeles.

Dedivanovic often tells the story of how, when he started doing West's makeup, his booking agent told him that, if he ever wanted to work on a *Vogue* cover, he needed to cut ties with her. "I get it," he told me. "At this time—and we're talking eleven years ago—a reality star was not a known thing. They just knew Paris Hilton, that was it." He and his agent parted ways, and he kept working

with West. He went on to do her makeup for six *Vogue* covers, including one in which she posed in a cherry-red helmet, her lips glassy crimson. He was also the head artist for West's wedding to the rapper Kanye West, in 2014, which took place over several days at Versailles and at an Italian castle once owned by the Medici family.

As West broadcast her life, she documented and promoted the people responsible for her image, such as her longtime hair stylist, Chris Appleton, and her brow expert, Anastasia Soare. In 2009, she suggested that she and Dedivanovic film a YouTube video together. In it, he re-created the biscotti-hued maquillage he had used on her for a recent cover of *Vegas* magazine. In the first moments of the video, Dedivanovic, with the gelled, spiky hair of a boy-band tenor, looks jittery, but he soon finds his rhythm, affecting a professorial tone. He grabs a hot-pink ovoid sponge. "This is called a Beautyblender," he says, holding the sponge like a science teacher holding up an owl pellet. "And you can get it at places like Ricky's or Alcone, in New York. You basically wet it, and you squeeze it, and it becomes fluffy, and it just really presses in the makeup and blends it beautifully."



"I need music when I run."
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Shortly after the tutorial appeared on YouTube, Dedivanovic, who lived in Astoria, Queens, at the time, found his MySpace and Facebook pages flooded with messages. “Makeup questions like ‘I have dark circles. What do you recommend?’ Or ‘My highlighter runs. What can I do?’ ” He took to spending hours of every day answering the questions, and discovered that he had an aptitude for education. In 2010, he briefly moved to Los Angeles to be closer to West, and there he launched an early version of the Masterclass, which he called the Workshop. He did a second, similar course in New York. Lula made chicken and Albanian bread to serve as a buffet. The class grew into a full-time business, selling out theatres in Miami, Sydney, London, and Dubai. His largest class, at the Palace of Congresses in Tirana, Albania, had more than two thousand students.

In his early courses, Dedivanovic taught the method that he used on West when they began working together, starting with thick, Nutella-colored stripes across the cheeks. In the years since, he has stressed that this exaggerated application should be reserved for formal events. For the daytime, he prefers a subtler, sun-kissed glow—a deceptively “natural” effect that takes more than a dozen products and at least an hour to achieve. Still, at a Masterclass in Chicago last August, which began before nine in the morning, I noticed that most attendees had shiny blowouts and were wearing high-drama looks, including false eyelashes.

When Dedivanovic teaches, he works offstage, in the wings, while a cameraman films his hands, beaming the feed to a giant high-definition screen. This way, he can stand close to a large table, invisible to the audience, covered with under-eye concealers in every shade, lipsticks smooshed into clear tackle boxes, stacks of shearling-soft powder puffs, breath mints, and Wet Ones baby wipes. The Masterclass follows an unusual Socratic format: students are encouraged to shout out their questions from their seats. Dedivanovic answers, using a headset microphone, in a mesmerizing stream-of-consciousness monologue. “I’m going to use a lot of makeup, a shitload of products,” he said to the packed room the day I attended. “But pay attention to my layering and blending. You are going to see in the end that, once the makeup is done, even though I’ve used so much product and so many techniques on this model’s face, in person she’s going to look softer, more feminine, not intimidating. Very doll-like.” The woman sitting next to me scribbled the word “doll” in her notebook and circled it.

He began the class by manicuring the model's eyebrows. The trick for getting the brows to stay put, he said, is to use the latex adhesive Pros-Aide. A few members of the audience gasped. "This glue is very strong," he said. "I don't want you to all go out and buy this if you're not used to it, because it will stay on your hands for days."

Around hour three, he started applying eyeliner. "Do you want me to use brown or black?" he asked. Several people in the crowd yelled out, "Brown!"

"Oh, wow, why?" Dedivanovic said.

"Because it's softer!" one woman yelled from the back of the theatre.

"You guys need to stop acting like you're not all drag queens," Dedivanovic teased; for all his emphasis on restraint, he is aware that something else made him famous. "I know what you guys wear, I know how you wear your makeup. You guys want to act all chic and natural but . . ."

Cries of "Black!" started to come from various corners of the room.

Dedivanovic laughed. "You see how the truth comes out?" he said.

In the years since Dedivanovic started doing West's makeup, [influencers](#) have become some of the most powerful people in the beauty business. Zoella Sugg, a British "hauler"—a term used to describe people who show off their purchases in videos—has more than eleven million subscribers on YouTube. Jeffree Star, a rainbow-haired electro-pop musician, was a fixture on MySpace before he migrated to YouTube, where he now has more than seventeen million subscribers; since 2014, he has had his own line of Day-Glo cosmetics. Huda Kattan, an Iraqi-American from Oklahoma, started her beauty empire with a WordPress blog in 2010; she now has more than forty-seven million followers on Instagram. She also has her own gondola at Sephora, and, in 2017, *Time* named her one of its "25 Most Influential People on the Internet." On TikTok, an even younger crop of stars has emerged, with their own hyper-specific skills: ethereal raver pastels inspired by the HBO show "Euphoria," neon cut creases, cosplay cosmetics, makeup you can apply to your character in the popular Nintendo video game Animal Crossing. Just this summer, a group of TikTok-famous beauty influencers, including La Demi and Cole Carrigan, decided to move into a Beverly Hills mansion they call the Glam House, from which they will broadcast primping content around the clock.

As the Internet has opened up new avenues of experimentation and education, cosmetics have ballooned into a multibillion-dollar business. The makeup-line “drop” is akin to the release of a limited-edition sneaker or a pop album. When [Rihanna](#) released her line, Fenty Beauty, in Sephora stores, in 2017, the brand pulled in more than a hundred million dollars in less than forty days. KKW Beauty, West’s own brand, which launched in 2017 as well, sold \$14.4 million in contour kits in less than three hours. Influencers get in on the action, too, releasing regular “collaborations” with brands including Anastasia Beverly Hills and Morphe. Sephora remains a valuable showroom for products, but newer, direct-to-consumer brands, like the minimalist line Glossier, have also flourished.

Dedivanovic claims not to be in competition with any other brand, but a stroll through Sephora on a drizzly afternoon last October told a slightly different story. As he walked past a glittery, highly pigmented eyeshadow palette, he took a swipe of an acid-green color with his finger and wrinkled his nose. He lingered over the Nars gondola, calling François Nars, a legendary makeup artist who launched his brand in 1994, an inspiration. Dedivanovic is most drawn to product lines developed by other successful makeup artists: Troy Surratt, [Pat McGrath](#), Laura Mercier, Bobbi Brown. In late 2019, he hired Alicia Valencia, a beauty executive, to serve as his global president. Valencia had overseen the global expansion of McGrath’s and Brown’s lines, and worked at Estée Lauder for twenty-three years. She told me, “Mario is, to me, this generation’s Bobbi Brown. It’s, like, yes, he could glam it up so much more than Bobbi did, but, I mean, the reality is that he does things in a way where it’s easy to understand, and there’s a *why* to every product and technique.”

In December, Dedivanovic released a technical brush collection with Sephora; it was, a representative told me, the fastest-selling collaboration in the store’s history. What Dedivanovic is really selling, perhaps, is his proximity to celebrities and the trust they put in him. The new beauty influencers, by contrast, don’t need to touch stars’ faces; they are the stars. The hugely successful twenty-one-year-old YouTuber James Charles, who, at seventeen, became the first male face of CoverGirl, makes elaborate videos for his sixteen million subscribers, but, as he told me, he is neither a makeup artist nor a professional teacher. “What I do is make entertainment content that happens to be about the beauty topic,” he said. He admires Dedivanovic, he hastened to add: “I think it’s always important to, like, respect your elders.”

The beauty-influencer world is rife with cliques and feuds, scandals and dethronements. Dedivanovic has, for the most part, resisted such drama. He refused to put his Masterclasses online, even as the pandemic wiped out his live-event revenue; he was waiting for a way to stream that could catch the micro-movements of his brushes. He had never used himself as a model until quarantine compelled him to test out his product line on his own face. As he insists to his students, it is control and consistency, not gimmickry, that make for a sustainable cosmetics career. He opens every Masterclass by telling attendees that, above all, he wants them to be able to make money doing timeless, glamorous makeup for weddings or quinceañeras. He also warns them that it took him two decades to perfect what he is about to do. “I tell you that,” he says, “so you don’t give up on your dream, or on yourselves.”

There are fewer weddings happening during the pandemic. And yet, as Dedivanovic put it, “we all have more time now.” There is a savviness to his business model, which relies on the language of education and mastery. Time-intensive, absorbing hobbies—sourdough baking, calligraphy—give everyone what he called an “instant hit of dopamine.” It was the playful, addictive side of makeup that Dedivanovic learned from Sephora, where amateurs were given the opportunity to feel like professionals. “They used to have this gondola at Nineteenth and Fifth, right in the front of the store,” he told me last fall, when we were walking through the Sephora near his apartment. He shut his eyes, recalling the moment when he felt he had become an artist. “It was like a rainbow of lipstick. I mean, yellow, green, blue, any color you can imagine. And that was the area where a woman asked me to help her choose a lipstick.” He had selected a “reddish shade” for the customer, who tried it on and told him she loved it. “That was the first time I thought, I can actually do this,” he said, his voice breaking. “It was like an epiphany: This is it. This is what I want to do.”

A moment later, several salespeople—these days known as “beauty advisers”—nervously approached Dedivanovic to ask for selfies. One young brunette, with a bright streak of magenta eyeliner running across her lids, said, “I know you’re from the Bronx, and your parents are immigrants, and you really didn’t have much when you first started.” She took a breath. “I can relate to that. My parents are from Colombia, and I was born on Long Island.”

“Yes!” Dedivanovic said, nodding along emphatically. She told him that she planned to work for free, doing makeup at children’s hospitals.

“I worked for free for many years myself,” Dedivanovic said. “You have to take the job you have here and use it to your benefit. This will make you a stronger person, a stronger artist, a stronger woman.”

Another employee, with a slicked-back ponytail and understated makeup in a sandy shade, tapped Dedivanovic on the shoulder. “Is it really you?” she asked. He nodded, staring at her face. “How did you put together your look?” he asked.

“These are three-dollar lashes,” she said, giggling. Later, as the woman walked away, he pursed his lips and softly inhaled, a small gesture of delight.

“Her look was very editorial in her own little way,” he said. “Like, she’s a glam girl, with full coverage on. But she did it in a way which is almost reminiscent of how I like it, where she left a lot of elements out. No liner, no shadow.” He looked suddenly reinvigorated. “I love it. That’s what gets me excited.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [How to Reduce Screen Time](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

How to Reduce Screen Time

By [Evan Waite](#)

August 31, 2020



In today's hyperconnected world, it sometimes feels as though our devices are controlling us instead of the other way around. Setting limits has become a real challenge. So how can you manage your screen time and find a healthy balance? It's simple. Try Rocco. He's an unhinged ex-bouncer who smacks your devices out of your hand.

First off, Rocco is crazy big. He's got bowling-ball biceps and competes in contests where lumberjacks throw logs. No matter how much you want to check Twitter, we guarantee that you won't be able to get your tablet back from Rocco. With his help, you'll come to realize that sneaking one last YouTube video isn't worth getting slapped off the toilet.

You may be asking, Doesn't Rocco have to go home sometimes? No. Not since his wife kicked him out for having an affair with the cashier at the GNC where he buys Muscle Milk. Now he's got nowhere to be but in your face, screaming at you to turn off "Shark Tank."

Rocco will not leave, even if you ask him to. That is how dedicated he is. You don't even have to pay him—he's good to go as long as you put a roof over his head and you keep the chicken cutlets coming. And he doesn't even need a real bed. He's fine with just lining up the sofa cushions on the floor. He always puts them back in the morning.

Rocco needs this.

Excessive screen time can affect your sleeping patterns even worse than Rocco's grunting during his regular night squats. It can also put a damper on your mood, which will already be strained by Rocco's head-butting your mirrors because he's mad that he's let his pecs go soft.

Studies have shown that social-media usage stimulates the same regions of the brain that drugs and alcohol do. This is insidious, and intentional. But Rocco has your back. Just say the word and he'll burst into Facebook headquarters and start decking coders. He's itching to body-slam Google's brain trust.

While there are a number of "digital wellness" apps to help people manage their cell-phone usage themselves, their main drawback is that they won't punch you in the face. Rocco will. It's honestly all he can think about.

For any customers who are unsatisfied with the experience of using Rocco, there is always the option of upgrading to Becca. Becca will read your Kindle over your shoulder until you get self-conscious and turn it off. While standing there, she will frequently ask you how to pronounce words, and her Dorito breath on your neck will turn your stomach.

Or you can switch to Garrett, who will crash your laptop by downloading pornography from shady torrent sites. The tech repair guy won't even be able to look you in the eye.

Once you've finally got your digital habits under control, you can start to rediscover the real world. There's nothing like the feeling of human connection that you get from witnessing half a dozen cops drag Rocco out of your house as he thrashes and tries to bite their shins. The ruckus will definitely alarm your neighbors. Some of them may even stop by to ask what all that was about. Who knows, you might just make a new friend! And, deep down, that's all Rocco ever wanted for you. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Caribbean Flavors to Shift the Palate, from Yardy](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Caribbean Flavors to Shift the Palate, from Yardy

During the pandemic, the event company founded by the artist, model, and chef DeVonn Francis has pivoted to Instagram Live gatherings and takeout with tropic-inspired ingredients like chayote, tamarind, and culantro.

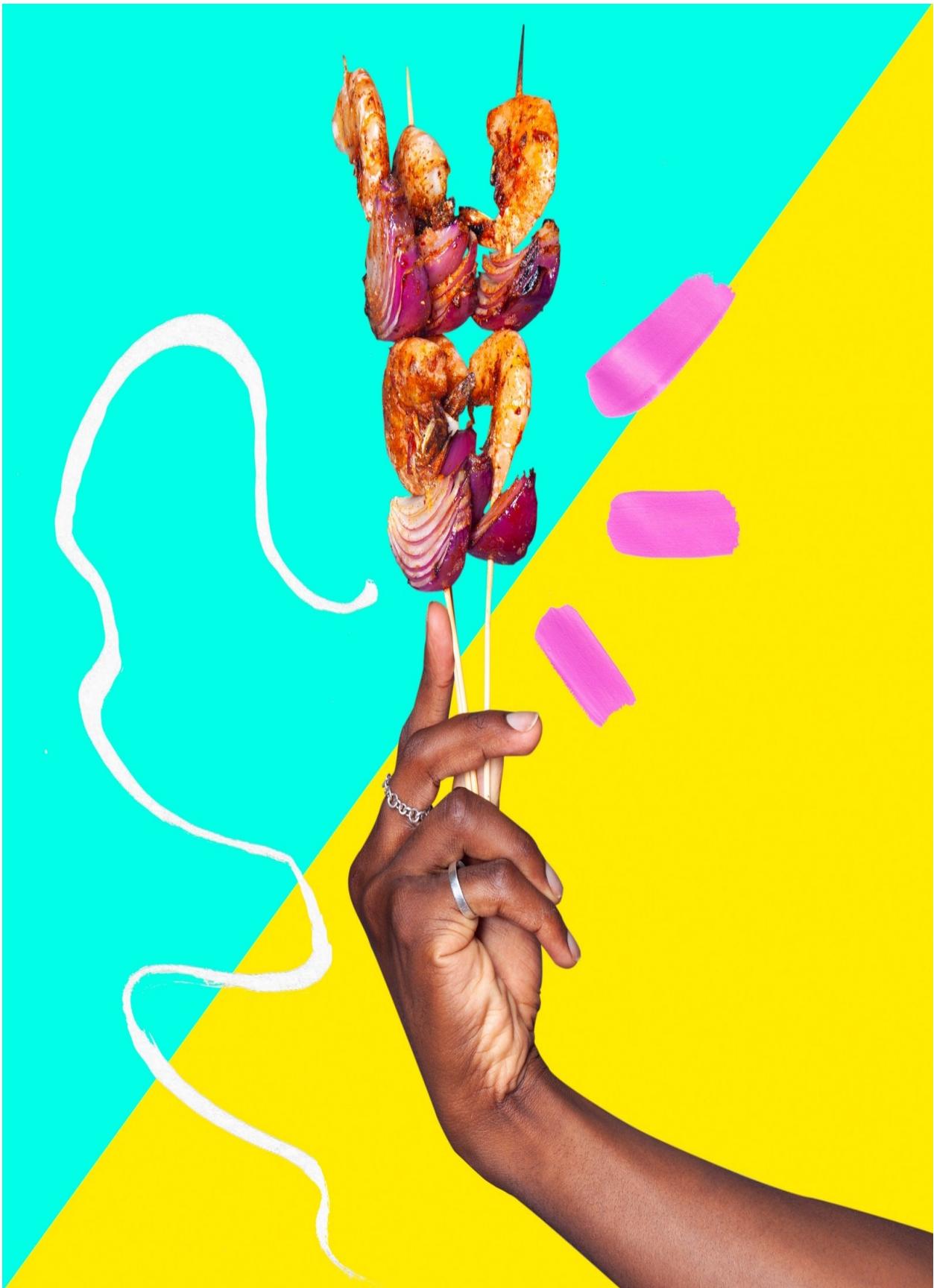
By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

August 28, 2020



The other day, as I ate a salad that I'd ordered from Yardy, an event-production company started by the twenty-seven-year-old artist, chef, and model DeVonn Francis, my brain kept short-circuiting. Every time I bit into a cube of yellow fruit, dusted with Francis's riff on Tajín (a Mexican chili-and-lime seasoning powder), I expected pineapple; in fact, it was mellow, sunny-fleshed watermelon. Between the cognitive glitch and the heat of the spice mix—heavy on dehydrated Scotch-bonnet pepper, ubiquitous in West Africa and the Caribbean—it was a dish that reframed my palate as much as it brought me pleasure.

Reframing the American palate by skillfully wielding pleasure, not to mention style, is one way to describe what Francis aims to do with Yardy. Before the pandemic, the company was focussed on food-centric gatherings, some public—a one-night roller disco in Bushwick, an Afro-Caribbean-themed dinner at the Lower East Side restaurant Dimes—and some private, for companies such as Gucci and Squarespace. Francis, whose Jamaican-immigrant parents owned a restaurant in Norfolk, Virginia, when he was a kid, waited tables at the restaurants Estela and Café Altro Paradiso while he was in art school, at Cooper Union. After he graduated, in 2015, he chose food—woven together with event production and design—as his medium for exploring the threads of his identity as a queer Black Caribbean-American.



The small menu, currently available for pickup at the SoHo café Smile to Go, includes grilled shrimp skewers. Photo illustration by Nichole Washington for The New Yorker

Parties may be on pause, but Yardy is not. In some ways, Francis told me recently, this strange new world has motivated him to move faster toward his biggest ambitions. “For a long time, I was, like, ‘Imagine if Yardy could be in everyone’s home,’ ” he said. “I spent so much time watching food shows that helped me get to where I am right now. Wouldn’t it be great if Yardy could be a beacon of what it meant to be a queer Black chef who has hit a certain amount of notoriety?”

Although the past few months have been “a huge challenge,” Francis said, “it’s been a really great way to amplify our message.” His “Living Room” series, which, until March, took the form of ticketed dinners featuring discussions with artists, poets, and chefs, has moved to Instagram Live, where anyone can watch. He’d like Yardy to be a household brand, offering Caribbean-inspired ice cream or condiments made with ingredients grown by Black farmers, packaged so that “a little Jamaican kid walking down the aisle” at Whole Foods will feel an immediate sense of recognition. As a precursor, he’s offering takeout from the SoHo café Smile to Go.



A salad of yellow watermelon dusted with a seasoning powder heavy on dehydrated Scotch bonnet, a pepper ubiquitous in the Caribbean, was inspired by baggies of sliced and spiced fresh mango sold by Latin-American street venders. Photo illustration by Nichole Washington for The New Yorker

The menu is short and features essential-feeling dishes found across cultures, made with Caribbean ingredients that Francis wants to spotlight and demystify for a broad audience. The blackened skin of his roast chicken is coated in tamarind and ginger; his brown-rice bowl is dotted with cubed mango, black beans, and pickled cabbage, and comes with a papaya vinaigrette. He reimaged the chayote squash of his childhood, usually boiled in chunks in soup, as a thinly sliced filling for a rich, savory tart, delicately arranged atop caramelized onions, in a thick but flaky pâté brisée, and garnished with culantro, a tropical cousin of cilantro. He's also collaborating with the Black Farmer Fund, which supports Black farmers and food entrepreneurs in New York State, to source produce to use in his prepared dishes and to sell as grocery items.

"Making things that feel like they just live with you, and are accessories to what you're already doing, is a great way to introduce people to unfamiliar food concepts," Francis told me. The watermelon salad was inspired by his favorite food to buy from a street vendor: a plastic baggie of ripe mango sprinkled with Tajín. "It's such a beautiful gesture of convenience and utility, to have a snack that you travel with that's in a bag," he said, clearly nostalgic for life as we knew it before March. I finished the watermelon in minutes. Most everything else I ordered from Yardy kept well for at least a week, playing happy accessory to life as we know it now. (*Dishes \$8-\$32.*) ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

The Current Cinema

- [Charles Dickens at the Movies](#)

[September 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Charles Dickens at the Movies

Armando Iannucci's "The Personal History of David Copperfield" has a Dickensian knack for gratifying popular taste while yanking the audience toward emotional truth.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

August 28, 2020



It did not take long for “[David Copperfield](#)” to escape the confines of the page. The novel first appeared in monthly installments, beginning in the spring of 1849. Even as it was being serialized, stage adaptations were under way, despite the fact that producers didn’t—couldn’t—yet know how [Dickens](#) would conclude his tale. It finally appeared in book form in November, 1850, and on January 6, 1851 a dramatized (and drastically shortened) version opened at the Lyceum Theatre in New York. Later, choice morsels from the novel were added to the author’s repertoire of public recitations. “I was half dead when I had done,” he said, in the wake of one such event.

Like “[A Christmas Carol](#),” in other words, “David Copperfield” is a shape-shifter, blessed from birth with a rare pliability—a story so resilient, and so resourceful, that it can survive whatever you make of it. Is it best read alone, read aloud, or acted out? A new screen adaptation, “The Personal History of David Copperfield,” directed by [Armando Iannucci](#), is instantly alive to this wealth of possibility. We start in a crowded Victorian theatre, where the adult David (Dev Patel) sports a brocaded waistcoat and wonders, echoing the famous opening of the novel, whether he will turn out to be the hero of his own life.

Without ado, we are lofted back to his origins. We meet his fragile mother, Clara, who is played by Morfydd Clark. (Later in the movie, in an Oedipal sleight of hand, the same actress will play Dora Spenlow, the flighty giggler to whom David, not always a good judge of character, plights his troth.) More robust by far is Peggotty (Daisy May Cooper), the maid of all work who oversees David’s childhood and never wavers in her love for him. Like Joe, in “[Great Expectations](#),” she is one of those solid bodies and spiritual comforters, barely educated and wholly dependable, who exist, under Dickens’s aegis, for the consolation of the stricken and the shamed.

Even if you’ve never read “David Copperfield,” or if you read it long ago, it can still feel as familiar as a fairy tale. Hence the noisy incursion of Betsey Trotwood ([Tilda Swinton](#)), the sister of David’s late father; she looks witchy enough to be wicked, and is appalled that David should be so ill-mannered as to be born male, yet her heart is sound and kind. By contrast, David’s stepfather, Edward Murdstone (Darren Boyd), and his sister, Jane (Gwendoline Christie), really are wicked, turfing the boy out of his home and exposing him to the iron rigors of warehouse work. Little Red Riding Hood was lucky in her predators. She had nothing worse than a lone wolf.

The novel, in fact, is more infested with carnivores than its cheerful reputation might imply. It resounds with feats of cruelty and snarling expressions of contempt. Even minor figures, encountered en route, speak as if they were spitting; you keep hearing phrases like “If I could hunt her to her grave, I would,” and “Oh, my lungs and liver, what do you want?” All of which ought to be meat and drink to Iannucci. After all, his previous film, “[The Death of Stalin](#)” (2017), was so farcically foul that not a single stray act of benevolence was allowed to intrude. It’s easy to think of him, in that vein, leaning toward the vengeful murk of Dickens’s later books—“[Hard Times](#)” or “[Little Dorrit](#),” say, both of which specialize in the squeezing and crushing of souls. There is no one better qualified to bring out the strain of nightmare in “David Copperfield.”

Yet that is not what occurs. To a remarkable extent, the new movie *is* full of cheer. It feels boisterous, bustling, and, at times, perilously close to a romp. Of the young David’s deep and dawdling loneliness there is no sign; later, on the other hand, there’s a sequence in which the action is speeded up—rarely, if ever, a wise move. True, you get a decent roster of bad ‘uns, led by Murdstone and by David’s schoolmate Steerforth (Aneurin Barnard), who addresses him as “Daisy” and wrecks their friendship with a sudden act of betrayal. In neither case, however, does the depravity make you blanch. The same goes for the oleaginous Uriah Heep (Ben Whishaw), the legal clerk who can worm into people’s brains, as if into their guts, with his show of humility. Whishaw, who is famed among recent moviegoers as Q in the Bond franchise, and as the voice of Paddington Bear, is an actor of great tact and reserve, but is he a natural instigator of dread? If you want a creepy Heep, I recommend Boris Karloff, who took the role in a 1950 radio production of “David Copperfield.” It didn’t matter that you couldn’t see the man. You could sense his looming presence, and hear the writhing menace in his tone. You could practically smell him.

More than any other classic author, Dickens would have *got* the movies. He was halfway to inventing them. Is a film like “City Lights” (1931), with its peculiar braiding of poverty, slapstick, and simpering romance, conceivable without Dickens? (The early chapters of [Chaplin’s “My Autobiography,”](#) published in 1964, read like the last pleading gasp of Victorian fiction.) And who was the main legatee of Dickens’s discovery that a stylized exaggeration, in the gratifying of popular taste, can yank you closer to emotional truth? The answer has to be Walt Disney.

I must confess to a recurring fantasy, in which Dickens is plucked from his own

epoch and flown through time, by the Ghost of Narrative Methods Yet to Come, to a darkened cinema, there to view the alchemy that has been wrought on his works. Imagine his eyes widening, first in mystification and then with a dawning delight, at Magwitch in the moldy graveyard, in “Great Expectations” (1946); at the sight of the famished boys who troop to their benches and their gruel, at the start of “Oliver!” (1968), chanting “Food, Glorious Food”; and at the matchless Murdstone of Basil Rathbone, in “David Copperfield” (1935), whose hatchet face all but cleaves the screen as he prepares to thrash David like a dog. Dickens, an incurable actor, would no doubt thrill to the troupe of players who throng that splendid film—among them W. C. Fields as Mr. Micawber, David’s sometime landlord and moral mentor, who dwells majestically in elation and despair, though never in between.

So how would Dickens greet the latest film? He would, I reckon, be roused by its momentum and proud of its unblushing theatricality. He would understand that the violent compacting of the plot, into a space of less than two hours, is a necessity rather than a wound. And, if he were politely underwhelmed by the wiry and breathless Micawber of Peter Capaldi (who should have been one of the villains), he would without question rejoice in other performers—instinctive Dickensians like Tilda Swinton, Gwendoline Christie, and, most endearing of all, Hugh Laurie. With a wild corona of hair, flaring and blazing like the sun, Laurie takes the part of Mr. Dick, Aunt Betsey’s lodger, who is obsessed by the severing of King Charles’s head, and not quite right in his own. Such, indeed, is the foremost virtue of this movie: it reminds us that almost everyone in the story, whether vicious or mild, is mad. It is not just David who, as the title suggests, is trapped in his personal history. To be alive is to sit in the cell of one’s manias, memories, and verbal tics, forever awaiting release.

The casting of the film is color-blind. It’s a practice that has long been standard on the stage, not least in productions of Shakespeare, but that is arriving woefully late in period movies. All hail to Dev Patel, then, whose charmingly hapless gusto, in the title role, does much to sweep the tale along. We also have Benedict Wong as Mr. Wickfield, an amiable, gullible, and constantly tipsy lawyer. His daughter, Agnes, one of the few sane characters in the whole cavalcade, is portrayed by the biracial actor Rosalind Eleazar. And, while Steerforth is white, his mother, fearsomely played by Nikki Amuka-Bird, is Black. Again, I couldn’t help wishing that Dickens—whose chapter on slavery in “[American Notes](#)” (1842), swayed by “the indignant tide of honest wrath,” may be the angriest thing that he ever wrote—were around to inspect this dramatic

demonstration of equality.

There is, of course, a countervailing thesis, which proposes that color-blind casting is less of a radical tactic and more of a liberal piety—smoothing over racial divisions as if they barely existed, and thereby erasing a vast chronicle of social and economic oppression. Would an Indian David Copperfield, by this argument, have stood a chance of worldly success? Regardless of our own attitudes, by what right do we export them to an earlier and less tolerant age, in which Mrs. Steerforth's color would not have gone unremarked? Opinions will be fiercely held on both sides; either way, it's hard to picture a more vivacious contribution to the debate than Iannucci's movie. “Although it's set in 1840, for the people in the film it's the present day,” he said in an interview. “And it's an exciting present.” That is a compelling claim, and “The Personal History of David Copperfield,” despite its shortcomings, is an enterprise full of hope. Like Mr. Micawber, it thrives on the ridiculous belief that something, somewhere, will turn up. ♦

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