

JULY/AUGUST 2020  
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# On the Nature *of Complicity*

Trump's Enablers  
and the Judgment  
of History

By Anne  
Applebaum

A

*The Atlantic*

EST. 1857



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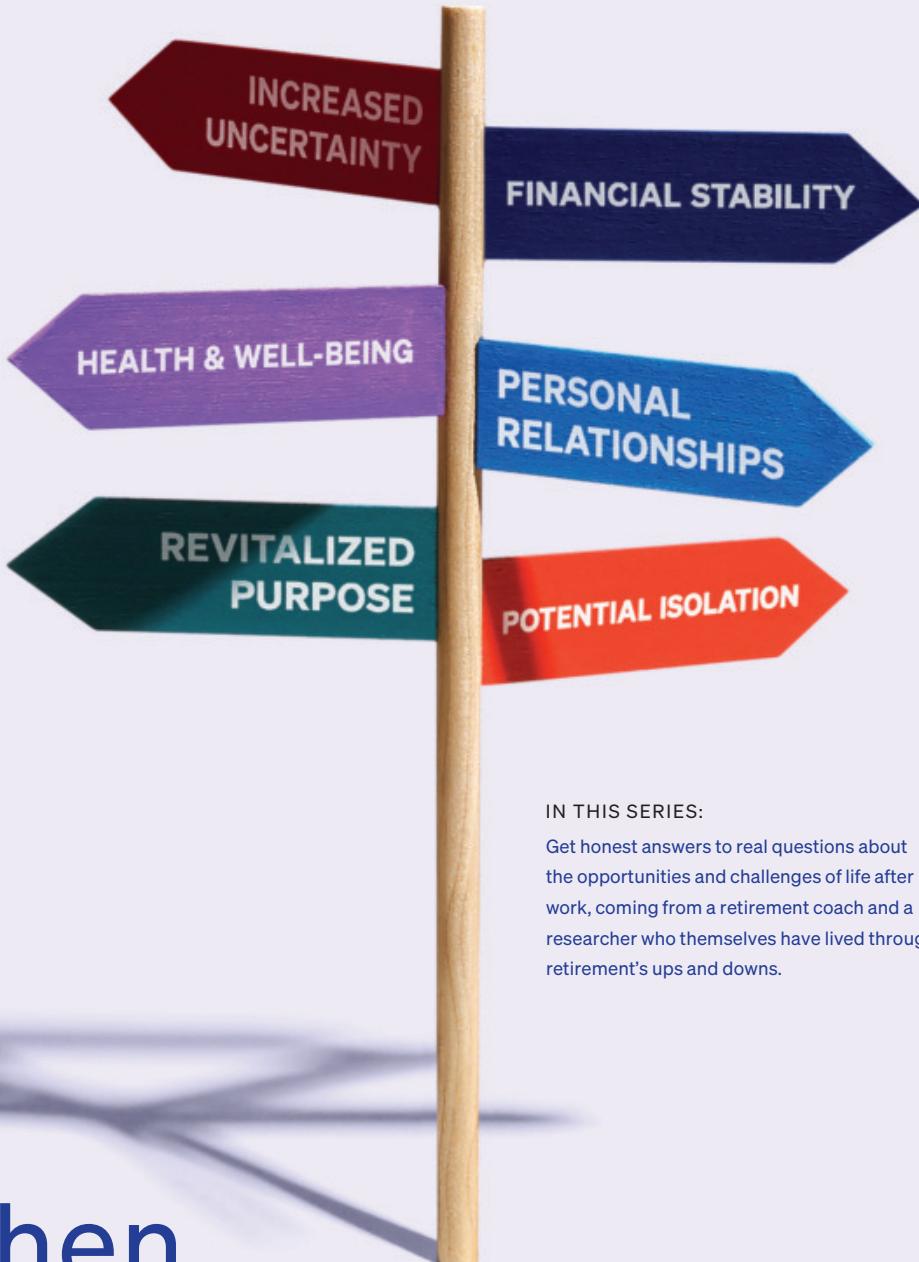
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IN THIS SERIES:

Get honest answers to real questions about the opportunities and challenges of life after work, coming from a retirement coach and a researcher who themselves have lived through retirement's ups and downs.

# When Tomorrow Becomes Today

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Social isolation has long been a concern for retirees. As they transition out of their careers and establish new routines, maintaining a sense of community is vital to physical and mental health. We take a look at groups that foster social connections for older adults.

**Retirement isn't what it used to be—and now more than ever, it can be fraught with uncertainty. But that doesn't mean it can't be what you hope. We're exploring the changing face of retirement, the challenges that come with tumultuous times, and what it takes to be prepared for what comes next.**



FOR DECADES, preparing for retirement has revolved around financial planning: saving and investing, IRAs and 401(k)s, and figuring out how much money you'll need to live comfortably in your so-called third act.

But retirement isn't just about math. It's an entirely new stage of life, less of a next chapter than a book of blank pages to be filled. It's thrilling and liberating—and, possibly, just a bit frightening.

That's never been truer than it is today. Retirement is changing. We're living longer, healthier lives, extending our golden

years into decades. The quintessential model of golf courses, bucket lists, and seeing more of the grandkids still persists for many, but now exists alongside an increasing array of new options.

We're starting businesses and careers. Making new friends and joining different social circles. Finding other ways to get involved, give back, get fit, pursue our passions, and explore our interests. We're creating missions for ourselves and making a mark on the world around us.

And if all of that weren't enough, we're now dealing with the social and economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic and the stress and uncertainty this global health crisis brings.

Preparing your financial portfolio will always be important—but to make the most of modern retirement and be your happiest, healthiest self, mental and emotional preparation is perhaps even more essential.

RETIREMENT IS A LARGER and more profound change than most of us expect. It forces us to contemplate some deep, difficult questions: *Who am I without my job or profession? What's my purpose in life? What do I want to spend my time on?* Retirement pushes us away from our

established social networks, into acute awareness of our health and wellness, and completely out of our comfort zones. *I finally have time to take care of myself, but how do I do it? Who do I socialize with if not my work friends? What will I do at home ... all day, every day?*

You shouldn't wait to psychologically prepare for retirement until you're already in it. Even—especially—in these uncertain times, you should start right now. But take heart: It's not something you have to do on your own. In this series, you'll hear firsthand from retirees who have successfully navigated this challenging transition, get good advice from retirement experts, and see how communities are finding new ways for people to connect and combat social isolation. Along the way, you'll learn how your health, wealth, lifestyle, and purpose tie together—and see that achieving a full and fulfilling retirement goes far beyond simple math. ●



After almost 50 years of airborne adventures, this former combat and medical rescue pilot suddenly found himself grounded—and then reinvented himself as a writer.

## VISIT

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to see our exploration into the changing face of retirement.

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**Behind the Cover:** In our present-day politics, complicity is everywhere in evidence. Anne Applebaum's cover story reminds us that the phenomenon has several damning historical precedents. For the cover, our director of photography, Luise Stauss, suggested that we show an

image of a crowd: powerful yet vague enough to suggest many examples of mass complicity. We hired the Spanish illustrator Borja Alegre to render the haunting scene of a single dissenter engulfed in an army of conformity.

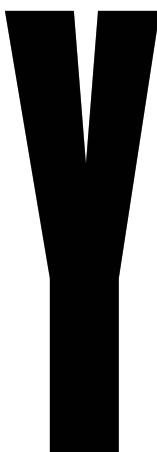
—Paul Spella, *Art Director*

# THE

## Childhood in an Anxious Age

*In May, Kate Julian wrote about why so many kids are so miserable—and what adults can do about it.*

### Letters



Your article was clear, informative, and insightful. But one thing I believe you missed was the demographic-evolutionary

account: We now live in a society in which parents' eggs are—literally and figuratively—all in one small basket. If you have four kids, not only do you have less time to obsess about each, but you carry “reproductive insurance.” But with only one, or even two, the risk of failing to pass on your genes to future generations (likely processed in the unconscious rather than the conscious brain) is increased. So what do you do? You become highly protective!

Jay Belsky  
*Robert M. and Natalie Reid Dorn Professor, UC Davis Davis, Calif.*

As the president of a small, rural, private liberal-arts college for eight years, I witnessed a three-fold increase in the number of

students accessing mental-health services during that time. Many students could not effectively cope with independence and individual responsibility when left to themselves.

While exploring the cause of the rise of student mental-health disorders, I learned that too many parents remained electronically and psychologically tethered to their children. Kate Julian’s reporting in the May 2020 issue should be required reading.

Richard H. Dorman, D.Ed.  
*Westerville, Ohio*

In both my work as an educator and my role as a parent of three small children, I have witnessed the contagious anxiety that Kate Julian describes. To her point that anxiety travels in families,

I would add that it travels in communities. At playgrounds, my wife and I have been repeatedly admonished by other parents for letting our 3- and 4-year-old girls wander to the other side of the playground and climb or slide by themselves. At times, other parents have taken it upon themselves to hover in our place, because, they said, they “didn’t know where the parents were.” I wonder how many of those hovering parents were acting so protectively by choice and how many were doing it because of social pressure. It’s great that people want to look out for children’s safety in their community, but they should also respect parents’ decisions to have a seat on the park bench and let their kids learn how to climb—and maybe fall—on their own.

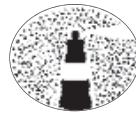
Neal Allar  
*Tempe, Ariz.*

One of the great secrets of child psychologists is that most of our work takes place with grown-ups. Kate Julian did a masterful job of walking the line between blaming parents and ignoring them. I hope this is not the end of the story, but rather a jumping-off point for further discussion.

T. David Elkin, Ph.D.  
*Jackson, Miss.*

**Exile in the Age of Modi**  
*Aatish Taseer wrote about how Hindu nationalism has trampled the founding idea of his country (May).*

# COMMONS



DISCUSSION  
&  
DEBATE

What an extraordinarily forceful and perceptive piece Mr. Taseer has written. My own family members were Baghdadi Sephardim who landed in Bombay in the mid-19th century, as the British were developing the city into the subcontinent's western export hub (we built the city's first deep-water dock, which is still in daily use). They then rode a spectacular Indian-cotton bubble created by the Union naval blockade of the Confederate States, which starved the English mills of raw material—a bubble that ultimately transformed Bombay from a backwater marsh into the wealthy metropolis it is today. I wonder what future ironies we have in store, for a future "Bharat."

Tim Sasso  
Venice, Calif.

Aatish Taseer wrote a thoughtful and poignant essay on the ways in which India is changing for the worse during Narendra Modi's prime ministership. But a couple of clarifications are needed.

First, the Overseas Citizenship of India is a pretend citizenship. It grants a lifelong visa with some accompanying rights, such as buying property. But with an OCI card, you need a valid foreign passport to enter the country; you cannot get an Indian passport, you cannot vote, and you cannot hold any office that requires you to be a

citizen. Canceling Taseer's OCI card on a clearly trumped-up charge was a travesty and cruel both to him and to his mother. But that does not excuse such sloppiness on a crucial distinction: He was not a citizen before the cancellation.

Second, it is true that in the riots in Delhi in February, "Hindus and Muslims alike were killed." But not in equal numbers, and the implied equivalency gives an undeserved pass to Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. *The Guardian* reported that at least

three-quarters of those killed were Muslims.

Ramesh Thakur  
Canberra, Australia

**AATISH TASEER REPLIES:**

*Ramesh Thakur is right that the use of citizenship in Overseas Citizenship of India is the government's language. The government offers this document as the closest thing to dual citizenship, which India doesn't allow. It is indeed a kind of fraud, and new policies make the possibility*

*of revoking the OCI still easier. I don't think any of this takes away from the fact that it was my only means of living and working in the country where I grew up—and it was canceled on grounds that make it impossible for me to go home.*

*As for Thakur's second point, it's a sad truth about communal riots in India that many of them result in more Muslims killed than Hindus. My aim was not to suggest equivalency, but rather to make clear that there were casualties on both sides.*



*In America, the coronavirus has revealed a sick and unequal society incapable of self-government, George Packer argued in June ("Underlying Conditions"). Here, he responds to readers' questions about his essay.*

**Q:** How do the failings of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fit into your account of America as a failed state? — Katie Whitehead, Chatham, Va.

**A:** In the article, I cite "a sclerotic bureaucracy" as one of the country's "serious underlying conditions." The CDC's failings stemmed from both weak leadership and endemic bureaucratic obstacles. One solution would be getting rid of stupid red tape; a second would be empowering bureaucrats to act rather than making all the incentives negative,

including the pervasive fear and demoralization that Donald Trump has instilled; a third would be to make the director's job a career position rather than a political one.

**Q:** Will anything change when this crisis is "over"? Given the entrenched political leadership, where will constructive approaches come from? — Marcia Goldstein, Laguna Woods, Calif.

**A:** Reform in America comes slowly. Since the New Deal, it's generally come from the national government, under pressure from popular movements. But political polarization and the Trump administration's failure have devolved decision making. As they were 100 years ago, the states and localities will more and more be the laboratories of democracy. I hope there will also be a wave of ideas coming up from below, from experts and ordinary citizens alarmed by the failures of the American state.

**Correction:** "Childhood in an Anxious Age" (May) incorrectly stated that more than a quarter of doctor visits end with a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication. In fact, 7.4 percent do.

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# DISPATCHES

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OPENING ARGUMENT

## A PRESIDENTIAL GUIDE TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

*What Trump should have  
learned from his predecessors*

BY JOHN DICKERSON

---

**D**onald Trump should have seen the coronavirus pandemic coming. This is not a statement about epidemiology. It's a statement about the presidency, a job of high-stakes surprises that are complex and overwhelming.

Over the past several years, I've talked with dozens of current and former members of the executive branch in order to understand the demands of the modern presidency. These interviews were conducted before the coronavirus appeared,

but almost everyone I spoke with foresaw a crisis of this kind. Some, such as Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, were specific. A year before the virus hit, he told me that the threat of a pandemic as deadly as the 1918 flu kept him up at night. Others were more general. They knew disaster would strike, they just didn't know what form it would take.

"It's the unexpected that will catch them," Condoleezza Rice said of new presidents. Every candidate promises, "*On day one, I will*," she told me. But "the world doesn't accord with the world that they thought they were going to be able to shape."

Rice has seen her share of black swans. She was serving as national security adviser when the 9/11 attacks happened. In the presidential campaign the year before, the topic of terrorism had barely come up. At the three debates between George W. Bush and Al Gore, the word was spoken only once, in passing.

It was hardly the first time a candidate—not to mention the press corps—failed to anticipate the events that would consume a presidency. In 1913, after Woodrow Wilson was elected, he remarked, "It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs, for all of my preparation has been in domestic matters." A little more than a year after his inauguration, World War I began. In 1928, Herbert Hoover accepted his party's nomination and proclaimed that Americans were "nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land." A year later, more

than 60 percent of the country earned less than the amount necessary to support a family.

As these examples suggest, some presidents have been more successful than others at rising to the unforeseen occasion. The presidents who have thrived when events veered in an unexpected direction have something in common: They are the ones who had the courage to ask for help.

**THE ORIGINS OF** Trump's disastrous response to the defining crisis of his presidency can be traced to his pronouncement, at the 2016 Republican National Convention, that he alone could fix America's problems. Trump's critics seized on the line as evidence of his authoritarian impulses. But he was also tapping into an idea about the presidency that is widely accepted, if rarely examined. We want the president to play the role of an action hero. What he really needs to do is far less glamorous.

To manage a job of surprises, the president needs to build a superlative team. I asked leaders in every walk of American life—CEOs, non-profit heads, generals, and some of the men who once sat where Trump does now—how they would conduct a job interview for the presidency. Almost all of them started by focusing on the ability to pick and manage a team. "More than anything else [I'd ask] is what their track record would be for hiring people," Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told me. "It's an undoable job. To be able to succeed, whatever success is, you need really good people around you."

Naturally, the importance of hiring is a particular obsession of the business world, the idea at the heart of many executive aphorisms. "I'd rather interview 50 people and not hire anyone than hire the wrong person," Jeff Bezos

WE WANT  
THE PRESIDENT  
TO BE AN  
ACTION HERO.  
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has said. Michael Bloomberg brought this view from business to the New York City mayor's office. "The press wants to write the 100-day story. They asked: 'What'd you do in the first 100 days?' And I said, 'I built my team,'" Bloomberg has said. "And they responded, 'Yes, but what legislation did you pass? What did you accomplish?' And I said, 'I built my team.' They never got the concept."

In part, a president must have a good team for the simple reason that there is so much to do. That has always been true, but it's especially true now. National-security threats are more numerous and more complex; economic challenges move at the speed of fiber-optic light; the U.S. government itself has become a behemoth. "No matter how good you are as president, you are overseeing 2 million people and a trillion-dollar-plus budget, and the largest

organization on Earth," President Barack Obama told me during his last year in office. "You can't do it all by yourself."

Hiring, however, is just the start. A president must also nurture the patterns of behavior that allow an administration to work effectively. He has to empower his subordinates to make decisions and also trust them when they say an issue demands presidential attention, a scarce resource.

By most accounts, the current president has done neither. As *The Washington Post* reported this spring, intelligence agencies attempted to alert Trump to the danger posed by the novel coronavirus by including it in the president's daily briefing on more than a dozen occasions, to no avail. When, on February 7, the Chinese doctor who had tried to warn the world about COVID-19 died from it, someone in the administration should have insisted that this was not the time for the president to assure the nation that China was being honest and transparent about the virus's spread. Someone should have stopped him from telling the country in early March that anyone who needed a test could get one. If anyone tried to, the president didn't listen.

**B L A C K - S W A N E V E N T S** expose presidents who haven't built strong organizations. Once the explosions start, you can't just conjure the ability to communicate and coordinate. As a former FEMA deputy administrator told *The New York Times* recently, in a story about the Trump administration's bungled attempts to secure crucial medical supplies, "There's an old saying



in emergency management—disaster is the wrong time to exchange business cards.”

Former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson had to manage the boiler room when the economy cratered in 2007. “If I hadn’t had a year before the crisis struck to build a relationship of trust with George Bush, I don’t know what I could have negotiated,” he told me. Paulson also stressed that a key to his success was working for a president who encouraged him to forge relationships with leaders of the opposing party. When he needed to, Paulson could draw on the trust of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

The Trump administration, by contrast, has set the modern standard for organizational chaos. Congress requires presidents to start building their teams before they ever get the job. Then—New Jersey Governor Chris Christie led the transition for Trump, but that work, contained in a host of binders, was thrown out almost immediately; Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner wanted to go another way. This initiated a slapdash process in which loyalty became the key factor in hiring. And when the new hires proved insufficiently loyal, they were fired. According to a Brookings Institution study, in its first three years, the Trump administration lost a record 86 percent of its “A-team staff,” a category that refers to the top non-Cabinet officials. Thirty-eight percent of those key spots experienced “serial turnover.” As a candidate, Trump had promised to hire “the best people,” but as president, he relies on constant churn to maintain

fealty and control. Cabinet members who have had the temerity to exercise autonomy have not lasted, and have found themselves the subject of presidential scorn long after their departure.

When asked why he had not installed and empowered people who could have predicted or managed the COVID-19 outbreak, Trump said that, as a general rule, he likes to keep the head count low. People can always be hired back if the situation calls for it. This is a vision of organizational design befitting fruit picking or hotels that staff up for vacation season, not the kind required for the sort of catastrophes presidents inevitably face.

**THE CORONAVIRUS** pandemic has exposed the weaknesses in all kinds of American systems. Because it arrived in the midst of a presidential campaign, we have an opportunity to talk about how to shore up many of those systems, including spotty health care and flimsy protections for the working poor.

But we should also take this opportunity to reconsider the presidency itself, and the expectations we have for the holder of the office. Candidates are inclined to boast *On day one, I will* because the press and the voting public tend to reward the ones who make the grandest promises, not the ones who offer the most practical solutions. We should think harder about the actual demands of the job when evaluating the people who seek it. We can’t forget that a president’s success in office will ultimately rest less on his ability to solve all the nation’s problems and

more on his ability to hire and manage a team that stands a chance of doing so.

Of course, even after the shock of the COVID-19 crisis subsides, it is unrealistic to think that campaigns are going to transform into rigorous job interviews. Still, we might look more favorably on candidates with genuine executive experience, or demand that candidates talk more about their approach to

“I DON’T TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AT ALL” IS NOT A PHRASE AVAILABLE TO AMERICAN PRESIDENTS.

building a team. Condoleezza Rice suggested that we ask candidates what black-swan event they anticipate happening on their watch—and how they would address it.

We have other ways, too, to judge whether a president will be up to his inevitable crisis. We can assess whether he has certain qualities that cannot be delegated to a team, yet are impossible for a president to draw on if he lacks the space and time that a good team can afford him. Can he speak to the entire nation, and not just his supporters? Can he deliver accurate information and maintain the public trust? Can he be the author of hope for Americans in moments of hardship? And, most important, will he be willing to take responsibility

when the unexpected thing happens on his watch—whether the crisis is of his making or not?

This isn’t just some dusty old norm. A leader who takes ownership of a calamity lets people know that, despite the uncertainty, he is on the case. And he lets his team know that the administration is on the hook. Political spin and excuse-making won’t do; only results. This is why Obama took responsibility for the BP oil spill even though his administration hadn’t caused it and even though capping oil wells was not a task central to the executive branch. “I ultimately take responsibility for solving this crisis,” the president said. “I am the president, and the buck stops with me.”

Donald Trump does not see the job that way. When asked in mid-March whether he took responsibility for the lag in scaling up coronavirus testing, he said, “I don’t take responsibility at all.” That is not a phrase available to American presidents. To his detractors, it was the signature statement of his presidency. To his defenders, it represented the fundamental shift in worldview that he has brought to the job. Why should he take the political heat for events that he did not initiate? The short answer is that it’s his job. *A*

*John Dickerson is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a correspondent for 60 Minutes, and the author of The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency, from which this article was adapted.*

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SKETCH

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## THE SHAKESPEARE OF STATUS ANXIETY

*Kevin Kwan, the author of *Crazy Rich Asians*, celebrates and skewers the social codes of the wealthy and powerful.*

BY RYAN BRADLEY

Kevin Kwan's career as an observer of class, privilege, and wealth began when he was in first grade. He attended the private Anglo-Chinese School, which catered to Singapore's ruling class. Kwan's great-grandfather was one of the founders of the nation's oldest bank, and his family had been going to ACS for generations. Back in his great-grandfather's day, the island was a port in the then-sprawling British empire. By the late 1970s, when Kwan was in first grade, Singapore was sovereign, and its banks were flush with capital. Money, serious money, was showing up everywhere.

At Kwan's school, students were getting dropped off in Benzes and Bentleys, expensive watches on their slender wrists. This was all new to Kwan. Not the wealth, exactly, but its display. His family's house was old and grand and packed with dusty antiques, in contrast with the glitzy high-rises where his friends lived. He didn't really consider what the wealth he was seeing at school might mean until it caused a scandal in the community.

Kwan still remembers the article today: "The Little Horrors of ACS," read the headline. The "school of snobs" had made its way into a national tabloid. Once the story broke, ACS held an emergency assembly. "I remember the principal crying at the podium, saying, 'This is such a blight on our history and heritage,'" Kwan told me. The school forbade students from wearing anything with a logo on it, and insisted that the chauffeured drop-offs happen out of sight. Of course, the restrictions only made the status symbols even more coveted. For

Kwan, it was like a switch had been flipped. “I didn’t know about *any* of these things,” he recalled. “Until, suddenly, I did.”

It was the beginning of Kwan’s lifelong fascination with snobbery—that strange, sometimes tragic, often funny dance people take part in to prove they’re richer or smarter or better-stationed than someone else. Thirty years later, it was this milieu that provided the backdrop for Kwan’s first novel, *Crazy Rich Asians*, which has sold more than 5 million copies and been translated into 36 languages. The 2018 film adaptation was also a huge hit, grossing \$239 million worldwide and featuring one of the first all-Asian principal casts in a major Hollywood film since 1993’s *The Joy Luck Club*.

*Crazy Rich Asians* and its sequels—*China Rich Girlfriend* and *Rich People Problems*—follow the Youngs, a clan of fantastically wealthy Singaporeans, first as Nick Young falls for Rachel Chu, an NYU professor; then as the pair marry; and later as the matriarch of the clan takes ill and the grand old family estate comes up for grabs.

Kwan’s new novel, *Sex and Vanity*, which will be released in July, is a departure, insofar as he’s left Singapore and the Youngs behind. Instead, Kwan draws more directly from the 16 years he worked in New York media, his “forays into the WASP world” while there, and the old British and American novels that he grew up reading and still loves. The plot is dishy and delightful, filled with all sorts of bad behavior performed in couture. But as loose and fun and compulsively readable as they are, Kwan’s novels are also very clearly the

work of someone who spends much of his social time paying extremely close attention. “I am not a creative person,” Kwan said. “I’m an observer. I just see things, and I soak things up.”

Kwan left Singapore when he was 11, moving with his family to a Houston suburb, where his father had business interests. Kwan has never returned to the island of his youth and has no desire to go back. He likes imagining the place as it once was. But the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy is distinctly, almost relentlessly, modern. So how—and where—was Kwan doing his seeing and soaking?

“LOOKING BACK NOW,” Kwan said, “I was a good shape-shifter from a very early age.” During school hours, he was a preppy ACS kid, but once classes let out he became a “wild little island child.” There were, back then, still *kampongs* in Singapore—simple village compounds, where Kwan and his gang from the neighborhood would get up to no good, stealing baby chickens and climbing trees to pick fruit. Then he’d hear the dinner gong, and he’d scramble home to clean up and make himself presentable for a wide range of potential guests—his aunt’s artist friends, or visiting dignitaries, or the finance minister.

One aspect of this existence that Kwan finds difficult for others—Westerners in particular—to understand is just how British his Singaporean family could be, how they were outsiders even in their homeland. His parents spoke nothing but English, and the little Mandarin he and his brothers knew, they

learned in school. The literature that Kwan latched on to early was by Jane Austen and F. Scott Fitzgerald. This was largely thanks to his aunt, who had been a journalist and later helped build the library collection at the National University of Singapore. “At some point she realized I was interested in books and she started assigning me stuff, so I got steeped in the classics early,” Kwan told me.

Later, once his family relocated to the States, Kwan

I AM NOT  
A CREATIVE  
PERSON. I'M  
AN OBSERVER.  
I JUST SEE  
THINGS, AND  
I SOAK  
THINGS UP.

discovered Tom Wolfe and Dominick Dunne—social satirists who would eventually inspire him to spin the same sort of comedies of manners out of the current culture. As a teenager, he wrote—poetry, mostly—but also felt pulled toward more visual mediums, photography in particular.

In 1995, Kwan moved to New York to attend Parsons School of Design. Many of the friends he made came from old-money East Coast families, and these families reminded him of his own. They were WASPs, and whenever he visited their Upper East Side apartments and weekend homes in the Hamptons, he felt pangs of recognition at the old wicker furniture, the

Anglophilic decor, and the well-worn penny loafers—the understated markers of privilege. He saw the 1985 film adaptation of the Forster classic *A Room With a View* and found, to his surprise, that Charlotte Bartlett (played by Maggie Smith) sounded exactly like his aunt, the former journalist. “Same tone. Same pitch,” Kwan said. “These Edwardian mores Forster was writing about, they were brought over to Singapore and just never died.”

The setup of his latest novel is an homage to *A Room With a View*, and much of the rest comes straight from Kwan’s lived experience. He told me a story about showing up at a club in the Hamptons in a designer shirt without a collar, and being sent around the corner to buy some cheap collared shirt, just so he could go inside. I realized, as he was telling it, that his story was nearly identical to one he put in *Sex and Vanity*. It’s these rules, spoken and unspoken and mostly ridiculous, that Kwan finds so fascinating. He says he loves seeing how they’re deployed. “Really, they serve to keep out the interloper.” He started laughing at some internal realization, then he said it out loud: “But I am the interloper.”

After Parsons, Kwan worked for Tibor Kalman, the legendary graphic designer. By 2000, he’d started a creative studio of his own—his clients included MoMA, TED, and *The New York Times*. All the while, he continued telling his friends stories about his childhood in Singapore. They encouraged him to commit the stories to paper, but he avoided doing so for years, until 2009,

when his father was diagnosed with cancer. Kwan flew to Houston to help care for him, and as they were shuttling between appointments and treatments, they'd reminisce about Singapore days.

His dad died—one of the seminal experiences of his life, Kwan said—and he thought, “I’m just going to try this. I’m going to write a novel.” He dusted off an old poem he’d written about his mother’s gossipy Bible group, and began putting together other vignettes, the sorts of true but larger-than-life tales that made the rounds at family dinners and during drives with his dad. “I was writing to amuse a small group of friends,” he said, mostly folks who knew nothing about the Singapore of his youth. He adopted a voice on the page that was fun and name-droppy, nothing like what he thought of as his “real” writing voice, which he describes as more reserved and minimalistic. Before long, *Crazy Rich Asians* emerged.

The book’s success shocked no one more than Kwan. He hadn’t planned on publishing a sequel, and while he was writing *China Rich Girlfriend* he started to feel trapped by the voice he’d concocted. “I was like an actor stuck in a soap opera for too long,” he said. He returned to the classics and realized that he could find inspiration in the plotting. He sensed, too, that with this series he could begin to mine a deeper, more universal vein.

When the actor Tan Kheng Hua first read *Crazy Rich Asians*, she felt “awakened,” as she describes it. “It makes you feel included and seen.” Tan, who is from Singapore, played the role of Rachel’s mother in the movie version of the book,

and later became close friends with Kwan while promoting the film.

I asked Tan if what she meant by feeling included was along the lines of what the books and film had helped launch, which was a reckoning within Hollywood of its severe lack of Asian representation. “It started a movement, which is wonderful,” she said. “But ultimately I think that what motivates Kevin is his love and belief in family, and family dynamics, these value systems, the tribal council that is the family.” That was why, Tan explained, she thought the books and movie have been so successful. Yes, they take you into this world you’ve never seen before, and the riches are nice window dressing, but at their root is entry into a specific sort of value system within a particular family unit. And of course, everyone can understand that—because just as everyone has a family, everyone’s family is crazy in its own unique way.

**T**HREE YEARS AGO, THE FIRST TIME I spoke with Kwan, he was sitting at home, alone, on his couch, being asked to describe himself and his surroundings to someone he’d just met on the phone. This person—me—had proposed that he deploy his skill at scene setting, ideally with some very specific Kwan-esque flourishes, such as brand names and asides that could be rendered into footnotes. “Are we going to go there?” he asked softly. “I feel like the brand-name thing, that’s the height of tacky.” He wanted to be clear that in real life, he lived in shorts and sandals, ever the island boy. Still, I pressed him on details. What about the couch? “It’s, like, a white kind

of, um—I’m losing my ability to describe anything.”

Later, after we’d talked for many hours across a few days, we returned to the particular discomfort of turning his gaze on himself. In New York, he’d been happy to go to cool downtown parties and remain unnoticed, “like the invisible Asian tourist that is ubiquitous and everywhere.”

Kwan now lives in Los Angeles, on the Westside. He, like so many of us, is stuck at

KWAN STARTED TO FEEL TRAPPED BY THE VOICE HE'D CONCOCTED. "I WAS LIKE AN ACTOR STUCK IN A SOAP OPERA FOR TOO LONG."

home during the coronavirus pandemic. The Zoom meetings were getting to him because they meant having to be on camera and not in the background, where he is more at ease. He was an executive producer on the *Crazy Rich Asians* film, and is doing the same for its sequels, which were scheduled to begin shooting but have been delayed, like everything else. Through his production company, he is also developing two TV shows. One he described as “*Downton Abbey* meets David Lynch set in Asia.” The other is a documentary series about the family dynasties behind luxury businesses.

One morning when I called, he sounded low. “Oh, I’m all right,” he said.

“It’s just—” He listed various attacks throughout the country, particularly in Texas, against Asian Americans, thanks to the persistent rebranding of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” He was worried about his mom, who still lives in Texas. He was worried about the world. He was also grateful for his work: “There’s a really lovely optimism in Hollywood. And some day, when we’re all able to go outside again, everyone wants to have created stuff to be ready.”

When would that day come? It seemed so uncertain, so unknown, and I wondered aloud if it felt strange, or inappropriate, somehow, for Kwan to have a novel called *Sex and Vanity*, detailing the snobbish lives of the rich and ridiculous, enter the world during a global pandemic. Kwan, by way of an explanation, turned back to his childhood obsession: “What is the root of snobbery?” He told me another story, about a party where he’d watched as the one other outsider in attendance—who was beautiful and successful in her own right, but not part of the in-group of Upper East Siders—was completely, viciously shut out. “What is the root of this exclusion?” Kwan wondered. The answer he’d come to was, in fact, the secret theme of all his books: that tribal, ancient reaction to the most primitive emotion. An emotion we are all used to living with every day, these days. “It’s fear. Fear of the unknown.” *A*

Ryan Bradley is a writer based in Los Angeles.

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## THE TRIUMPH OF THE SLOB

*Keeping a cluttered house has long been considered a little tacky, a little weak ... but now it's looking very wise.*

BY AMANDA MULL

When I go home to visit my parents a few times a year, my mom and I have a little dance we do. She asks me to go through some of the stuff in my childhood bedroom and decide what I want to get rid of. I tell her I will, and then I do not. I wouldn't know how to begin sifting through the drawers and storage containers brimming with high-school notebooks and old sweatpants, and my mom offers no guidance. Instead, we both gesture at a mutual effort to declutter, and that's enough to tide us over until the next time I return to Atlanta.

My mom and I did a version of this dance even before I left home for college, 16 years ago. I'd tease her about how many cans of on-sale soup were in the pantry; she'd banter back about the CDs I kept trying to sneak into the house. My dad contributes to the family's choreography of clutter too, usually with necessities for his favorite hobbies: books and running shoes. Now, separated by 750 miles, Mom and I keep limber for our occasional performances over the phone, vowing to each other that we're going to clean out our closets or organize our freezer, finally. Those promises are generally hollow, but it's nice to think about fulfilling them.

My grandparents were teenagers during the Great Depression, and my maternal grandmother raised my mother alone after her husband died suddenly when my mom was in the third grade. It does not take too many leaps of armchair psychology to understand why we're a family that prefers to hang on to what we have, just in case. We are a tribe of what my grandmother called "slopinis." The original Houdini was a legendary escape artist, but our specialty was letting few things leave. Our house was never dirty, but it was never neat, either. We kept old magazines—*Sports Illustrated*, *Southern Living*—for a little too long, and our closets heaved

with clothing that might, eventually, if someone lost weight or had a job interview, come in handy.

In adulthood, I've moved into apartment after apartment determined to find the domestic success that eluded my mother. I resolved to buy fewer, higher-quality things, and only when I could afford them. And I would conquer the shameful habit of refusing to let go. A decade and a half into my quest, my record has been middling. My own stack of old magazines is mostly *n+1s* and *Bon Appétits*, suggesting that although I have grown a bit tidier than my forebears in certain ways, I've mostly just become more pretentious.

My penchant toward clutter has always felt like a character flaw, but one of the milder ones. Now, inside my home like millions of other Americans lucky enough to have a laptop job, I've spent months shuffling around and tripping over all the stuff I tried for years to ignore or throw out. But instead of the self-recrimination that usually arises when I'm forced to confront my attachment to my things, I've felt only relief. A pandemic hit, and suddenly all my inherited neuroses about precariousness didn't seem so distant and silly.

CLUTTER ISN'T AN American concept—Victorians, for example, lived in spaces overflowing with objets d'art and many other kinds of objets—but modern Americans cultivate clutter's presence in ways that set them apart. While previous generations had plenty of stuff, they "would accumulate those things over a lifetime and value that process," says Susan Strasser, the author



of *Never Done: A History of American Housework*. “Your grandmother would die, and you would welcome her furniture rather than thinking you’d rather have something that looked new from IKEA.”

The shift from accumulation to consumption took place between the 1880s and the 1920s, a period Strasser says caused “a seismic shift in people’s relationship to the material world.” Before that, most possessions were either made at home or bought from peddlers, local craftspeople, or general stores. As American manufacturing and transportation took off around the turn of the 20th century, the economy of stuff began to centralize, setting us on a crash course with the big-box behemoths that largely dictate the country’s consumption patterns today.

But for American retail as we know it to thrive, people cannot simply stop shopping when they have what they need. Long before you could press a key and have a new set of throw pillows hand-delivered to your home in 48 hours, another turn-of-the-century innovation kept us buying: the secondhand store. “Salvage charities,” as Strasser calls them, assuaged people’s guilt about unloading perfectly good things. If relinquishing your unneeded possessions to the poor was a moral act, then why not redecorate and create a few more?

After World War II, this acquisitive trend combined with a housing boom, and people spent year after year filling up spacious suburban homes with freezers and clothes dryers and dishwashers. In the 1970s, kids who’d been raised by parents who still bore the

scars of the Depression entered adulthood encouraged to enjoy the spoils of modernity. Strasser remembers fretting with her college housemates over whether to throw out once-used aluminum foil, which her own parents always saved and pressed out: “Were my friends and I going to keep doing what we’d been raised to do and make one roll of aluminum foil last four years?” During that decade, she says, American clutter made its debut as the source of cultural anxiety we know today.

In the half century since, Americans have filled their ever larger homes with an ever greater number of belongings, thanks to leaner, cheaper manufacturing and the ease of online shopping. A 2019 survey found that one in 10 Americans rents extra storage space. The television series *Hoarders* has run in some form for 10 seasons, providing a lurid cautionary tale of the country’s pathological clutter-bugs and the emotional pain their habits reflect.

I’VE WATCHED THE competing forces of scarcity and excess tug at my mother for more than 30 years. She holds on to things because she knows firsthand that deprivation can come without warning. She buys new things not just because the country’s economy has turned shopping into a pastime, but because that’s how Americans are supposed to radiate stability and success. Psychologists have found that, in many cases, people who cling to too much stuff are responding to some sort of anxiety—about loss, financial instability, even body image—and that clutter itself is often a source of stress.

Having too much stuff might sound like a problem of affluence, but the country’s clutter tends to accumulate in the homes of working people, for whom the dangling carrot of financial stability and the lurking possibility of ruination

MY CLUTTER  
IS, IN A  
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WAYS,  
A SAVIOR.

are always present, the procuring and the keeping an attempt to attend to both. That, of course, is why a cluttered home is both so common in America and so unseemly. You’re not supposed to admit that everything might go wrong.

Of course, everything has gone wrong. A few weeks into coronavirus quarantine, a reader who had cleaned out his home according to the decluttering guru Marie Kondo’s ultra-popular KonMari method emailed me to ask if I had heard from anyone else who was regretting that move. He’d been happy with the results until the country’s circumstances had abruptly changed, and his family ended up reordering some of the same board games and casual diversions they had parted with back when their lives were busier and the boxes were taking up space in a closet.

Packing light for a lifetime has its perks, but it’s not a strategy that’s highly adaptable to sudden unemployment or

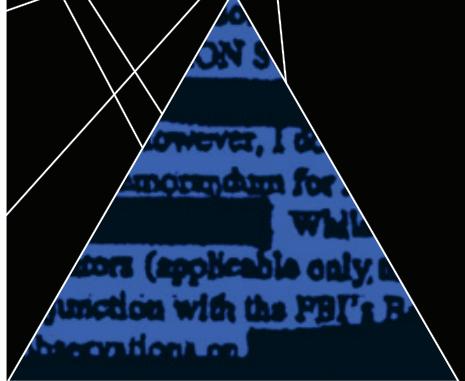
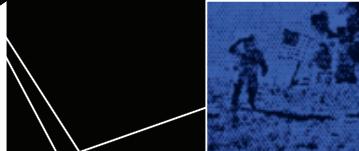
overburdened supply chains. America’s economy asks its residents to cycle new things in and out of their home constantly, and for decades, the process has looked like a perpetual-motion machine to all but the poorest among us. When the pandemic hit, it became clear that the process was much closer to musical chairs. Tossing everything that isn’t *just right* in the moment is its own kind of privilege, which is why Kim Kardashian’s house looks like a mausoleum, and why the set for the anti-capitalist film *Parasite* is all sharp edges and sleek wood. The pursuit of domestic perfection should be done only by those who don’t have to worry about what unforeseen wants or needs might lie ahead. Among consumer culture’s most impressive sleights of hand is convincing far too many people that they’re in that group.

My clutter, animated by the catastrophe for which it had been waiting, is no longer a moral failing or character deficit. It is, in a thousand unexpected ways, a savior, and it feels bizarre that in the recent past, I regarded my extra jars of on-sale spaghetti sauce and the T-shirts I never parted with as slightly disgraceful. The whole world now lives in the future my family always planned for, where an abundance of spaghetti sauce and cozy old shirts is among the best-case scenarios available to people living regular lives. I fought it for some 30 years, but now I’m willing to admit it: My mom was right, and the slopdinis have a point. *A*

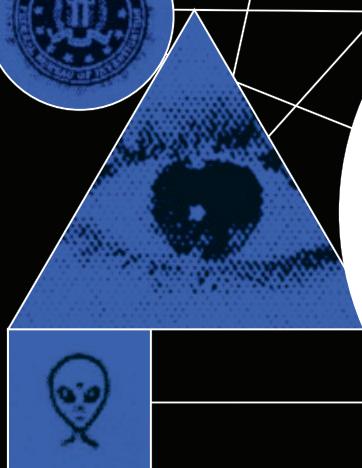
*Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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a golden age  
of conspiracy  
thinking.



How do we  
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## HEALTH

## HYGIENE IS OVERRATED

*But keep washing your hands.*

BY JAMES HAMBLIN

In October, when the Canadian air starts drying out, the men flock to Sandy Skotnicki's office. The men are itchy. Skotnicki studied microbiology before becoming an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Toronto. She has been practicing for 23 years, always with an eye to how the environment—including the microbial one on our skin—affects health. “I say to them, ‘How do you shower?’” she told me. “They take the squeegee thing and wash their whole body with some sort of men’s body wash. They’re showering twice a day because they’re working out. As soon as I get them to stop doing

that and just wash their bits, they’re totally fine.”

Bits?

“Bits would be underarms, groin, feet,” she said. “So when you’re in the shower or the bath, do you need to wash here?” She pointed to her forearm. “No.” Even water alone, especially hot water, slowly strips away the oils in the outer layers of skin that help preserve moisture—and the drier and more porous someone’s skin, the more susceptible it is to irritants and allergens.

Skotnicki believes that this is one way overwashing prompts eczema to flare in people with a genetic predisposition to the disease. While eczema itself can be debilitating, it often does not travel alone. It seems to be part of a constellation of conditions

caused by immune-system misfires. Infants with eczema have an increased risk of developing allergic rhinitis or asthma in childhood, part of a cascade of immune-system overreactions known as the “atopic march.”

“And so what if,” Skotnicki speculated, “as a society, you actually triggered eczema by overwashing?”

NOW COULDN’T BE a weirder time to question washing. I’ve spent the past three years reporting on how our notions of what it means to be “clean” have evolved over time—from basic hygiene practices to elaborate rituals that involve dozens of products targeted at each of us by gender and age and “skin type.” At the same time, the incidence

of immune-related skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis has risen in the developed world, while acne is as pernicious as ever, despite the constant stream of expensive new medications and unguents sold to address it.

Though no one would ever wish it to happen this way, the pandemic could mark a chance to reexamine how much cleanliness is good for us, and what practices we’d be better off without. Let’s start with the obvious: Wash your hands, for 20 seconds, many times a day. It’s possibly the single most valuable thing you can do to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Americans are notoriously resistant to that basic recommendation, but we’ve also been oblivious to the importance of the trillions of microbes that live on our skin, the largest organ in the immune system. An early jolt of public recognition that our skin was thick with them came in 2014, when researchers scraped the faces of a small group of volunteers in North Carolina and found DNA evidence of microscopic mites called *Demodex* burrowed in their pores. The detection of the colorless arachnids made headlines nationwide, eliciting a widespread cry along the lines of *Get these things off of me this instant*. But although an abnormally high density of the half-millimeter bugs has been linked to rosacea, they’re almost surely serving some useful purposes. Michelle Trautwein, an endowed chair of dipterology (the study of flies) at the California Academy of Sciences and a co-author of the study, told me that *Demodex* may feed off our dead skin cells—making them the most “natural” exfoliants of all.

Scientific findings like these are upending the traditional conception of germ theory, the idea that we must fight off microbes to avoid disease. The relationship between microbes and their hosts—that would be you and me—is more about context and balance. Self and other is less of a dichotomy than a continuum.

The implications of this new understanding are likely to have a far-reaching impact on how we take care of our skin. Consider, for example, a recent study led by the UC San Diego dermatologist Richard Gallo. His team covered one group of mice with a bacterium that is present on most human skin called *Staphylococcus epidermidis*; another group got a bath of a different strain of the same bacterium. Then the mice all got suntans—and those coated with one type of the *Staph epidermidis* developed fewer skin cancers. The reason, Gallo theorized, is that this strain produces a compound called 6-N-hydroxyaminopurine, which seems to prevent the replication of tumor cells.

An out-of-balance skin microbiome isn't just the result of too much soap and scrubbing. We've also exposed ourselves to preservatives with antimicrobial properties. Prime among them are parabens, which have been used for the better part of a century to extend the shelf life of many hygiene and beauty products—deodorant, makeup, toothpaste, shampoo—as well as packaged foods. In small amounts, parabens are harmless; the concern arises from cumulative exposure over decades. Virtually all of us now have parabens in our blood or on our skin, and, as intended, they destroy a wide range of

bacteria and fungi. So the question isn't whether parabens have altered our microbiomes, but how much it matters. Researchers at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases reported, for example, that products containing parabens can block the growth of *Roseomonas mucosa*—a bacterium that can kill another bacterium, one that proliferates during eczema flares called *Staphylococcus aureus*.

leads the Microbial Genomics Section at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. “Everyone wants to eat Activia yogurt and colonize themselves with bacteria, and then they want to use Purell.”

Venture capitalists are pouring millions into trying to change that—meaning by developing a topical probiotic that could be sold as an essential part of an everyday skin-care routine. At the



**THE GENETICIST** Julie Segre, who published the first topographical maps of human skin's bacterial and fungal diversity in 2012, sounds almost parentally defensive when she talks about the fact that the gut microbiome has gotten so much more attention than the skin's. “I don't understand exactly why it is that people have such a different sense of the microbes that live in their gut than they do about the microbes that live on their skin,” says Segre, who now

same time, some of Segre's scientific colleagues are testing “bacteriotherapy” to treat existing diseases. Researchers at NIAID tried spraying eczema patients' inner elbows with the aforementioned *Roseomonas mucosa*. After six weeks of twice-weekly applications, symptoms such as redness and itching diminished in most of the patients, according to Ian Myles, the lead investigator. Some also reported needing fewer topical steroids even after the treatment stopped.

The promise Segre sees at the moment is not in probiotics (which, technically, are the microbes themselves), but in prebiotics—the various products that “feed our microbial gardens.” The normal and beneficial microbes are there already; we probably don't need to add them so much as promote them, she says. Some things already on the market probably work as prebiotics, such as clay-based deodorants, which absorb sebum and may limit the microbial populations that produce odor.

At a fundamental level, spending time in the natural world, starting from early childhood, seems to be one of the best ways to build and maintain a healthy skin biome. We evolved in the presence of other people, animals, plants, and all the attendant microbes they carry to us. Of course, the pandemic limits our time outdoors and exposure to one another. For now, targeted hygiene—again, wash your hands!—and social distancing amount to crucial, lifesaving medical interventions. But the obliteration of all microbes as often and aggressively as possible is not always appropriate. As with any medicine, more does not mean better. An abiding overall theme of the pandemic: In addition to eradicating the bad, we need to seek out the good.

At the very least, we're starting to learn not to touch our face. Our mites are probably grateful. *A*

*James Hamblin is a staff writer at The Atlantic. His latest book is Clean: The New Science of Skin, from which this article was adapted.*

## BEWARE THE DIGITAL CURE

*Tech companies are helping the government respond to the pandemic. What's in it for them?*

BY FRANKLIN FOER

**L**ong before the coronavirus pandemic, the tech industry yearned to prove its indispensability to the world. Its executives liked to describe their companies as “utilities.” They came by their self-aggrandizement honestly: The founding fathers of Big Tech really did view their creations as essential, and essentially good.

In recent years, however, our infatuation with these creations has begun to curdle. Many Americans have come to view them as wellsprings of disinformation, outrage, and manipulation—and have noticed that the most profitable companies in human history haven’t always lived by the idealism of their slogans.

Now an opportunity for the tech companies to affirm their old sense of purpose has arisen. In the midst of the pandemic, Google Meet has become a delivery mechanism for school. AmazonFresh has made it possible to shop for groceries without braving the supermarket.

The government has flailed in its response to the pandemic, and Big Tech has presented itself as a beneficent friend, willing to lend a competent hand. As Microsoft’s chief

executive, Satya Nadella, wrote in April, “The challenges we face demand an unprecedented alliance between business and government.”

Also in April, Google and Apple announced that they would suspend their rivalry to work with nations of the world to create a new alert system. They would reconfigure their mobile operating systems, incompatible by design, to notify users if they have stepped within the radius of a device held by a COVID-19 patient.

The companies have failed to impress some public-health officials with their initial efforts, but their hastily designed program will likely improve with subsequent iterations. It could evolve to function like the official papers that Europeans are always fumbling to present to the authorities in grainy war movies. By documenting your history of social contact, your phone could be used to help demonstrate your fitness to return to the office or board a flight.

The shock of the virus has overwhelmed government at every level. In states facing an unmanageable deluge of unemployment claims, Amazon and Google have stepped in to revamp antique systems so that money can flow with less

bureaucratic friction. When Nadella invoked the possibilities of a new alliance, he was alluding to the abrupt shift to telemedicine and virtual learning. Public health and education may be traditional functions of government, but Nadella suggested that his industry should share the burden: “We at Microsoft view ourselves as digital first responders.”

The blessings bestowed by the online economy in this strange time are indisputable, and we should be grateful for them. But that’s not a reason to suspend skepticism of the tech industry as it attempts to make the most of the moment. In the years before the virus, critics began to prophesy that a handful of tech companies would soon grow more powerful than the government. Their scale and influence, and their ability to manipulate public opinion and shape markets, would permit them to reign unimpeded.

That warning, however dark, didn’t quite capture the emerging strategy of these firms—a strategy that was in fact taking shape before the pandemic began—or the graver threat they pose. Rather than supplanting government, they have, in essence, sought to merge with it.

**T E C H E X E C U T I V E S** didn’t always yearn to work in league with government. During their years of wild growth and political immaturity, the tech companies sounded like teenagers encountering Ayn Rand for the first time. Like John Galt, the protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged*, they muttered about the evils of government and how it kept down great innovators. This view of the world smacked of self-interest. Companies such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook wanted to avoid the sorts of regulatory controls that constrained their older, more established competitors.

But if self-interest neatly aligned with idealism, the idealism was real. Google’s co-founder Sergey Brin, a refugee from the former Soviet Union, warned about the moral costs of the company’s foray into China. He styled himself a purist, and the company’s experience in the country ultimately illustrated the logic of his stance: Despite abiding by the dictates of the regime, Google was breached by Chinese hackers, who attempted to steal its intellectual property and peer into the Gmail accounts of human-rights activists. In 2010, after four years of operating on the mainland, Google decamped to Hong Kong.

Across the industry, distrust of the state prevailed—and not just of the authoritarian state. In 2016, Apple famously refused the FBI's request to crack the password of a dead terrorist's iPhone. "We feel we must speak up in the face of what we see as an overreach by the U.S. government," CEO Tim Cook wrote in an open letter explaining his company's defiant stance.

But as idealistic companies age, they start to reconsider the principles of their youth. And the major tech firms can no longer plausibly pass as plucky start-ups. An antimonopoly movement, with adherents on both the left and the right, has been slowly rising.

When Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg appeared before the Senate in 2018, he preemptively conceded, "I think the real question as the internet becomes more important in people's lives is what is the right regulation, not whether there should be [regulation] or not." The statement was an acknowledgment of the zeitgeist. Big Tech stood accused of spreading disinformation, profiteering from its trade in private data, and contributing to an epidemic of teenage anxiety.

Zuckerberg invited government oversight, but not because he'd been chastened. In the past, when the public has grown suspicious of corporate behemoths, those companies have entered into a grand bargain: In exchange for government protection of their monopoly, the firms will abide by the dictates of the state. That's why, in the 1910s, the visionary AT&T president Theodore Vail famously submitted his company to invasive regulation. This allowed him to preserve

its dominance for generations. Zuckerberg, too, welcomes new rules, so long as they can be shaped to Facebook's advantage. And Facebook is indeed busy shaping regulation to its advantage. Last year, it spent roughly \$17 million on lobbying—more than any other tech company.

This same basic logic led Amazon to plant its second headquarters on the Potomac

to upgrade its computing prowess. It's telling that the nastiest internecine fight among the tech firms involves a \$10 billion cloud-computing contract with the Department of Defense.

As the pandemic accelerates Big Tech's insinuation into government affairs, the industry's most powerful companies will almost certainly exploit their relationships with agencies to damage less powerful

PRESIDENT Donald Trump insists that his handling of the pandemic has been a success, but the government is desperately aware of its shortcomings. It wants tests but can't procure enough of them. It needs contact tracing but has struggled to build a system to handle that. More than anything, it needs an aura of competence to cover for its flailing efforts. As the nation awaits a vaccine,



River, and it's led companies like Google and Microsoft to build relationships with the intelligence community. Eminces from these companies sit on official boards that counsel the government about how

rivals and extract lucrative contracts. But the companies will also provide valuable information and services to their Washington clients, increasing the government's powers, for good and for ill.

the government may have no choice but to rely on Big Tech to compensate for its gaps in ability and expertise.

Such a collaboration would be worrying under any circumstances, but it's terrifying in the

Trump era. This administration has low regard for the principles of liberal democracy, and a penchant for looking longingly at the powers available to autocrats. And we know what an autocracy powered by information technology can achieve.

China's tech industry has helped construct an advanced surveillance state beyond George Orwell's imaginative capacities. Technology companies practice the science of exploiting data to alter human behavior—ideal for a state eager to engineer the loyalty of its people. China's nascent social-credit system maintains a running tally of "good" behavior. The ratings are the basis for rewards and punishments. A citizen can lose the right to travel if he is caught jaywalking or playing music too loud. Private firms have assessed creditworthiness based on such metrics. According to *Wired*, "The aim is for every Chinese citizen to be trailed by a file compiling data from public and private sources" that can be pulled up by a fingerprint or other biometric information.

The U.S., of course, is a long way off from such a system. Even so, past crises can be read as an instruction manual for how to make the most of an atmosphere of anxiety and trauma. A year before 9/11, the Federal Trade Commission issued a report recommending robust legislation restricting the corporate use of online data—which would have included a right to correct (or delete) personal information. But the terrorist attacks scrambled the national calculus. Security took priority over other considerations: The nation quickly acculturated itself to omnipresent CCTV cameras, body scanners in

airports, and a drastic extension of powers to opaque government agencies.

In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff argues that this atmosphere allowed Google and Facebook to emerge as powerhouses. By eroding concern for privacy, the terrorist attacks established the conditions that gave these companies the latitude to plunder personal data. In a meaningful sense, the fears of that moment gave birth to the dystopian realities of this one.

Now, according to the nonprofit Privacy International, at least 27 countries have begun using cellphone data to track the spread of the coronavirus. *The Washington Post* has reported that more than two dozen governments are testing software called Fleming, developed by the Israeli firm NSO. The participation of NSO does not inspire confidence. Amnesty International has accused the firm of making spyware that states have used to monitor human-rights activists and other nettlesome dissidents, including, allegedly, the murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Google and Apple are not NSO. They remember the backlash visited upon the companies that Edward Snowden exposed in 2013 as having worked with the National Security Agency. Rather than giving the government exactly the data it craves, they have tried to dictate the terms of the partnership and posed as the guardian of civil liberties. They have designed their COVID-19 alert system to prevent the centralized collection of data and promised that the system will disappear with the disease. (It should be

noted, however, that a primary reason for their reluctance to track everything the government wants tracked is that they don't want to drain the batteries of their customers' phones.) Over time, Google and Apple will likely face growing pressure to surveil COVID-19 patients

AS TECH AND GOVERNMENT GROW CLOSER, THEY'LL BE TEMPTED TO INDULGE THEIR SHARED WORST INSTINCTS.

just as closely as they follow those who use their maps.

As tech and government grow more comfortable with each other, they'll face the temptation to further indulge their shared worst instincts. Both wield intrusive powers with inconsistent regard for the prerogatives of privacy. Both possess a not-so-humble sense that they can change public behavior. Even some academics who have praised Google and Apple's system have issued a stark warning. More than 300 European scientists and privacy scholars signed an open letter stating, "We are concerned that some 'solutions' to the crisis may, via mission creep ... allow unprecedented surveillance of society at large."

Without new constraints, this emerging alliance could grow more imperious than the apparatus that appeared after 9/11. In the decades since those attacks, the smartphone has become a universal fact of modern existence, a repository

of sensitive thoughts, candid photographs, and closely guarded secrets.

One lesson from China is that partnerships between the state and powerful tech companies must be kept shallow at best. The U.S. government should create a Data Protection Agency, modeled after the ones in Europe and empowered to scrutinize how these companies exploit the information that flows through their devices and platforms. And instead of treating Silicon Valley as the senior partner in the relationship, the government should use its clout to impose a moratorium on tech mergers, preserving the possibility of a competitive marketplace on the other side of the virus.

In the years after World War II, such constraints would have been considered common-sense. A bipartisan antitrust consensus was built, in part, on the memory of German conglomerates like Siemens, Krupp, and IG Farben, which had cheerfully acceded to the rise of fascism and handsomely profited from it. For the people of that generation, monopolies were less a menace to the consumer than to democracy. They were convinced that a symbiosis of concentrated economic power and concentrated political power was a path to fascism. Those warnings should also haunt the construction of the post-COVID-19 order. A world where monopoly exists in coalition with the only force more powerful than itself can never be healthy, even if it is no longer ill. *A*

*Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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VIEWFINDER

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Independence Day  
Photograph by Clay Benskin

On July 4, 2012, in the early evening, Clay Benskin walked to Washington Square Park, in New York. He had recently started using the black-and-white filter on his phone's camera to capture the serendipitous moments he observed on his way to work or on his lunch break. Benskin is a superintendent at an apartment building in Tribeca. His street photography, which has since been featured nationally, showcases the energetic spontaneity of urban life, its jubilant highs and mournful lows.

In the park that Fourth of July, a man Benskin thinks was homeless stood shirtless atop the fountain's grates, drenched. Others were closer to the fountain's perimeter, reveling in the time-honored tradition of cooling off in its waters. In Benskin's playful framing of the shot—which he calls *The Return of the Messiah*—the men in the foreground seem to be orbiting the mysterious central figure. The pleasure they take in the act of relaxing with strangers on a hot summer night in the city is palpable—and, these days, a reminder of an easy, carefree sociability that may not soon return.

"I took a bunch of shots that day, but that was the one shot I couldn't wait to get back and look at," Benskin recalls. "It brings me joy."

—Amy Weiss-Meyer

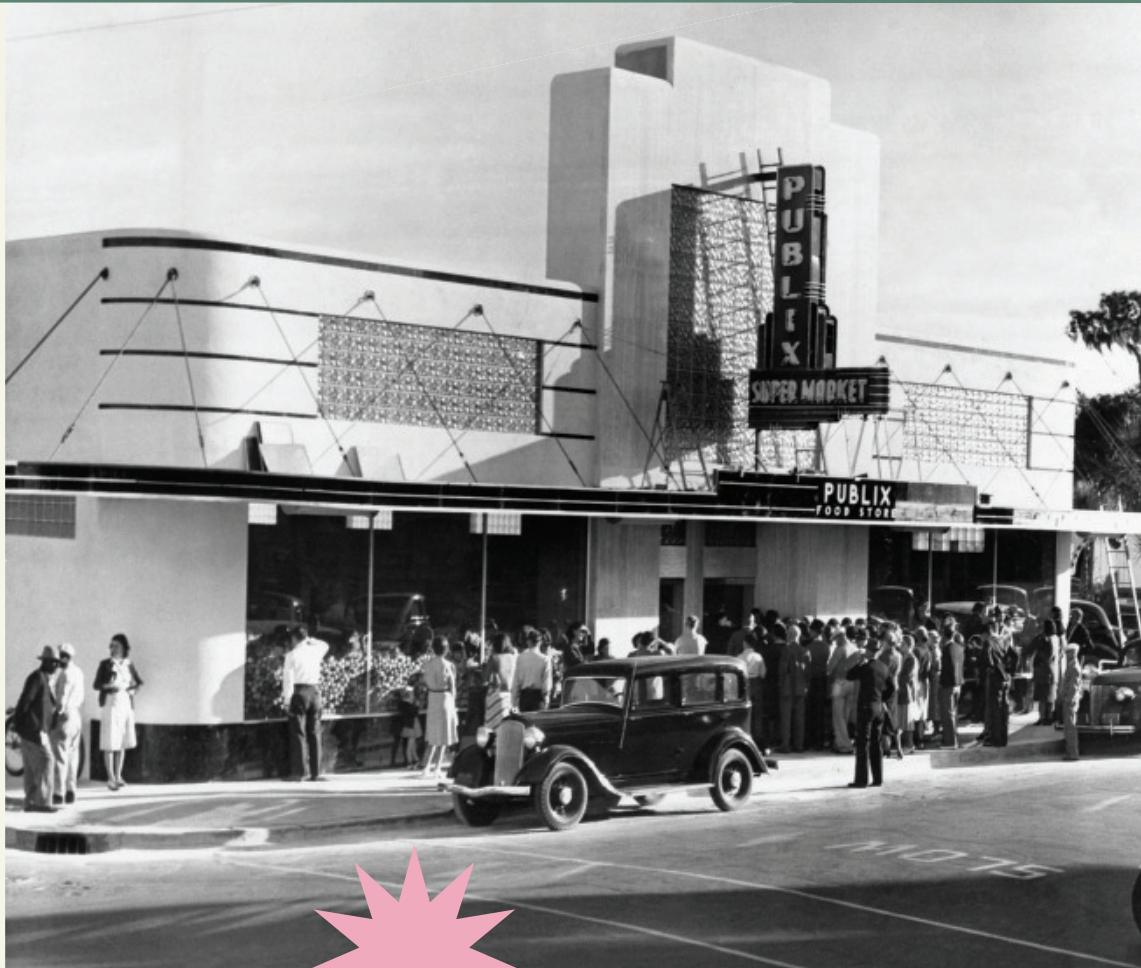
# SUPERM AREA

*Why did we ever take them for granted?*



# ARKETS MIRACLE

BY BIANCA BOSKER





Fairway Market, which credits itself with introducing New Yorkers to clementines, radicchio, fleur de sel, and vine-ripened fruit, started off as a small grocery store at 74th Street and Broadway, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where it still stands. According to family lore, Nathan Glickberg arrived at Ellis Island from Russia sometime in the 1910s, and by 1933 had saved up enough money to open his own fruit-and-vegetable store. Signs of a family fixation with produce are obvious in a black-and-white photo taken sometime in the vicinity of World War II: Nathan's wife, Mary Glickberg, is dressed up in heels, pearls, and an omelet-fold updo and, for her formal portrait, positioned in front of the store's rickety wood fruit crates, which are sagging under the weight of apples, lemons, and oranges stacked shoulder high. Pears back then came wrapped in squares of paper, which Nathan saved and placed beside the toilet. What was good enough for pears' skin was, evidently, good enough for his.

In 1954, Nathan brought in his son, Leo. In 1974, Leo brought in his son, Howie, and together they brought in Harold Seybert and David Sneddon, brothers-in-law who'd sold tomatoes wholesale. On Howie, Harold, and David's watch, the Fairway store grew, expanding into Tibbs luncheonette next door, then into the adjoining drugstore, and then into the D'Agostino supermarket to the north. "We were beating them up," Howie told me cheerfully. "They couldn't make a living." In 1995, the partners opened a second Fairway, in a former meatpacking plant in Harlem. That brought in my grandmother, ecstatic at being able to shop at a supermarket just around the corner from her apartment. And my grandmother brought in me.

I don't remember my first visit to Central Park or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but I do remember my first trip to Fairway. Coming from Oregon, where I grew up, I felt like Fairway had taken New York City's big, brash, elbowy spirit and crammed it into a single store: There was the smash of bodies on the subway at rush hour; the dull roar and occasional skronk of Midtown; the hyperactive buy-now pushiness of Times Square, with signs hollering from all directions (**HANDMADE STUFFED PEPPERS: WOW! HOOO! STRANGE BUT TRUE!**) and festive murals featuring steaks the size of taxis and promising **WHOLESALE PRICES FOR THE RETAIL CUSTOMER**. My grandmother, who had been forced to flee her home in what

was then Yugoslavia during World War II, had spent nearly two decades as a stateless person and, before coming to the United States, pieced together family meals from cabbage, offal, and the produce with which farmers paid my grandfather for teaching in a rural Italian school. Fairway, to her, was a place of surreal abundance. She could roll her black-metal grocery cart down the hill and roll it back up stuffed with old- and new-country fare: an Entenmann's Danish ring, Kraš Napolitanke, Thomas' English Muffins, Hungarian salami, panettone, hot dogs, ajvar, cornflakes. And the deals! She'd sit me down at the kitchen table and, beaming, haul out new brands of wafer cookies to marvel at how little she'd paid. Fairway acquired a mythic status in our family. We did not make a trip to the supermarket so much as a pilgrimage.

In 2007, Harold and David wanted to retire. Together with Howie, they brought in Sterling Investment Partners, a private-equity firm that acquired an 80 percent stake in the company in a deal that valued Fairway at \$132 million. Since then, Fairway has expanded to 14 stores in the tristate area, gone public, declared bankruptcy, cycled through owners, and declared bankruptcy again. On March 25, nine days after New York restaurants were banned from seating customers and five days after grocery stores were declared one of the few businesses allowed to keep their doors open, Fairway announced that it had sold six stores, the leases of two others, and its name in a bankruptcy auction. The news came even as customers were lining up outside their neighborhood Fairway, spending nearly three times as much as usual on groceries, and finding store managers unable to keep much in stock. The fate of the other six stores remains, as of this writing, uncertain.

Such is the whiplash supermarkets are now experiencing. Long-suffering as one of the thinnest-margined businesses in existence and one of the least-looked-forward-to places to visit, the supermarket has, for more than a decade, been under assault from e-commerce giants, blamed for making Americans fat, accused of contributing to climate change, abandoned in favor of restaurants, and, in parts of the country, disappearing at a concerning pace. Esteem for the supermarket runs so low that, although Fairway technically is one, Howie bristled when I called it that. "I never liked us to be considered a supermarket," he told me. "We used to be, you know, a food store."

Yet in recent months, the supermarket has assumed a new centrality in Americans' lives. Cashiers, stockers, distributors, wholesalers, packers, pickers, and truck drivers have, even in the absence of adequate health safeguards, continued working to ensure that shelves stay stocked. Foodtowns, Nugget Markets, and Piggly Wigglies have emerged as crucial lifelines, spawning a broad reappreciation for one of the most distinctly American institutions. Grocery shopping is no longer one in a long list of mundane errands. For many people, it's *the* errand—the only one—and it now seems not inevitable, but somewhat amazing to be able to do at all.

**SUPERMARKETS, TECHNICALLY DEFINED** as behemoths housing 15,000 to 60,000 different products, from tampons to sliced turkey, evolved in the only place they could have: the U.S. of A. Fourteen years after the creator of Tennessee's Piggly Wiggly came up with the revolutionary idea of a self-service grocery

where people could hunt and gather food from aisles rather than asking a clerk to fetch items from behind a counter, Michael Cullen (christening himself the “World’s Greatest Price Wrecker”) opened America’s first supermarket, King Kullen, in 1930 in a converted garage in Jamaica, Queens. (There is some debate about who was first, but over the years, King Kullen has pushed itself to the front of the line.)

For some 300 years, Americans had fed themselves from small stores like Nathan Glickberg’s and from public markets, where shopping for food involved mud, squawking chickens, clouds of flies, cadaverous smells, haggling, bartering, and getting short-changed. The supermarket took the Fordist factory, with its emphasis on efficiency and standardization, and reimagined it as a place to buy food. Supermarkets may not feel cutting-edge now, but they were—a “revolution in distribution,” one supermarket researcher declared in 1955. They were such exotic marvels that, on her first official state visit to the United States, in 1957, Queen Elizabeth II insisted on an impromptu tour of a suburban-Maryland Giant Food. During his own visit to the United States in 1989, Boris Yeltsin made an unscheduled, 20-minute detour to a Texas supermarket that is credited with souring him on communism. “When I saw those shelves crammed with hundreds, thousands of cans, cartons and goods of every possible sort,” wrote Yeltsin in his autobiography, “for the first time I felt quite frankly sick with despair for the Soviet people.”

Over the past 90 years, the average American supermarket has swelled from 12,000 square feet to nearly 42,000—big enough to swallow the Lincoln Memorial, two basketball courts, and a couple of Starbucks and still be hungry for more. The typical supermarket layout has barely changed during that time and could be thought of as a reverse mullet: party in the front, business in the back. Most stores open with a colorful bounty of flowers and produce (a breath of freshness to whet our appetites), followed by the flyover expanse of the center store (cans, jars, boxes, bags), followed, in the way back, by milk, eggs, and other staples (pushed to Siberia so you’ll travel through as much of the store as possible, and be tempted along the way). Store designers can choose from a variety of floor plans—forced-path, free-flow, island, wagon-wheel—but by far the most popular is the combination grid/racetrack, with nonperishable items in rectilinear aisles, and the deli, cheese, meat, seafood, and produce departments circling them on the exhilaratingly named racetrack, so called because we scoot faster on the store’s perimeter.

As the supermarket proliferated, so did our suspicion of it. We have long feared that this “revolution in distribution” uses corporate black magic on our appetites. The book *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in 1957, warned that supermarkets were putting women in a “hypnoidal trance,” causing them to wander aisles bumping into boxes and “plucking things off shelves at random.” A few years ago, *National Geographic* published a guide (one of many like it) to “surviving the sneaky psychology of supermarkets,” as though buying milk were fraught with existential risk. Supermarkets have drawn comparisons to casinos—both are believed to cunningly manipulate us into staying longer and spending more—though, according to one architect who specializes in constructing stores, this gives regional grocers far too much credit.

Still, a staggering number of studies have marshaled everything from video surveillance to eye tracking to decode how we behave while food shopping. The results suggest that we haven’t been applying ourselves. An analysis of more than 400 million shopping trips by the company VideoMining found that the average supermarket visit lasts just 13 minutes. During our time there, according to a study published in *The Journal of Consumer Research*, we typically demonstrate “only a minimal degree of cognitive effort.” My review of more than three dozen papers, ranging from “Observation of Parent-Child Interaction in Supermarket Decision-Making” (less exciting than it sounds) to “Shelf Management and Space Elasticity” (highly recommended), reveals that we ignore a full third of packages on the shelves; never make it to three-quarters of the store; take an average of just 13 seconds to pick out a product (including the time it takes to walk down the aisle and locate the item); spend 40 percent of our money on whatever chips or sports drinks the store’s manager is promoting on the aisles’ endcaps; dedicate, at most, 30 percent of our time in a store to actually selecting things to buy; and, per a 2012 article in *Obesity Reviews*, devote the rest of our shopping trip to “ineffective wandering.”

The experts have concluded that we buy more of the products stocked at or just below eye level, think more highly of items placed on high shelves, are 40 percent more likely to give a product a second look if it has eight facings on a shelf instead of four, and will buy 6 percent less canned soup if it’s organized alphabetically by flavor instead of clumped by brand. (Inefficiency can be profitable, and the soup study observed that making products easier to locate corresponded with a drop in sales.) Findings such as these are used to create planograms—aisle-by-aisle, shelf-by-shelf, inch-by-inch

*The average supermarket visit lasts just 13 minutes. We dedicate, at most, 30 percent of our time in the store to actually selecting things to buy, and devote the rest to “ineffective wandering.”*

maps that indicate whether Jell-O gets two facings or three, and whether Coke Zero is to the left of Diet Coke or to its right. (Often, the manufacturers whose products sell the most in a category—like Kellogg’s or Coca-Cola—get to advise grocers on where to put their products as well as their competitors’. Howie Glickberg used to sketch out Fairway’s planograms by hand; more typically, they’re determined using “category management” software that, per one vendor, relies on “space-aware assortment optimization,” “robust supply chain and shelf analytics,” and other things likely to make your eyes glaze over. “We’re constantly changing planograms in the stores, 52 weeks a year,” one supermarket executive told me.

Analyzing data is one way to determine where things go. Cash is another. Among grocers’ least-favorite topics of conversation is slotting fees, which many of them charge manufacturers in



# FRESH



**PARSLEY**  
3/<sup>s</sup>2



Clockwise from top left: A scene from a supermarket in 1958. Mary Glickberg outside the original Fairway location. Queen Elizabeth II visits a Giant Food in Maryland. A Piggly Wiggly in 1918.

exchange for real estate in their stores. Say you want to introduce a new product. In early 2018, getting it placed in the most visible areas of Whole Foods stores would have cost you, on average, \$25,000, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Distributing it in supermarkets nationwide would cost nearly \$2 million, but that's per a 2003 Federal Trade Commission report, and the price now is almost certainly higher. Although a Nielsen survey found that 85 percent of retailers take slotting fees, the practice is covered by a strict omertà. One woman, fearing retribution for testifying on the subject to a Senate committee in 1999, only did so while wearing a hood, hiding behind a screen, and having her voice scrambled.

**BEFORE SOMETHING IS** in your supermarket, it is in a truck. "Everything you have comes in by truck," one long-haul driver told me proudly. "We always say you'd be hungry, homeless, and naked if it wasn't for our trucks."

Over the past 40 years, Ingrid Brown has pulled bull racks and garbage trailers, but right now she feels blessed to be hauling a reefer. She runs 48 states with her refrigerated trailer, carrying eggs, milk, beef, toilet paper, computers, raw plastic on three-foot-tall rolls that will melt in the summertime, energy drinks that will freeze in the wintertime, and what she considers her specialty, "dead-on, fresh-hot freight"—blueberries out of California, bananas off the port in New Jersey, Vidalia onions out of Georgia, lettuce, squash, corn. "We're seasonal," she told me. "We move just like cabbage moves, from the bottom of Florida up."

Haulers consider produce one of the most difficult and temperamental loads to run. The Department of Agriculture's guide to "Protecting Perishable Foods During Transport by Truck" is high on drama and full of inspiration for the aspiring horror writer: chilling injury, highway shock, mold attacks, sunken skin, "pitting and physiological breakdown." Each fruit and vegetable has its own rider specifying its preferred travel conditions. Apples, for instance, are

most comfortable between 30 and 32 degrees Fahrenheit, unless they're Cortland, McIntosh, or Yellow Newtown Pippins, which desire an ambience 8 degrees warmer. Truck drivers must also know which foods do not get along. Apples are gassy; they release ethylene, which causes bananas, Brussels sprouts, kiwis, carrots, and a long list of other produce to brown or ripen prematurely. Other fruit is deliberately gassed: Strawberries are sealed in packaging into which carbon dioxide is injected, and grapes are often fumigated with sulfur dioxide. Garlic affects apples and pears the same way it affects us, which is to say, it makes them smell like garlic. Summer squash, poor thing, is "easily wounded," while the humble potato turns out to be a mini miracle that, even after it has left the ground, can self-heal a nick by essentially growing new skin.

Brown has a house in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, but her home is a Kenworth 18-wheeler named Peach O Mind. She spends about 11 months a year on the road. She sleeps on a narrow bunk with pale-blue sheets behind the driver's seat, and curls her hair most mornings in truck-stop bathrooms. While driving, she looks out on 40 gauges and switches, two orange teddy bears, and the open road. Brown drives for a carrier that pays either a set rate per run, or by the mile—44 to 47 cents, depending on tenure. When she and I spoke in the first week of April, the curve had not yet flattened, and Brown had just pulled into Love's Travel Stop in Lake City, Florida, with a load of apples from Wenatchee, Washington.

It took Brown a week to get from Wenatchee to Lake City. She drove southeast until she reached the Ranch Hand Trail Stop near the Idaho-Wyoming border; continued east to Nebraska, where she searched unsuccessfully for a Subway sandwich and settled for crackers and a can of Beanee Weenee; moved onward to Carthage, Missouri, where she did seven loads of laundry and sanitized her truck; then drove down through Alabama to Lake City. She was scheduled to deliver her load at 4:30 a.m. the next day at a Target distribution center, but Target wanted to delay. The panic-buying had apparently subsided. "Now they're actually getting overfilled, and they don't have as many workers in the warehouses to unload it," Brown said. "It's taken a flip-flop."

Brown has been bringing food, but having trouble getting it. "I'm living off peanut butter on a spoon," she told me. Roadside restaurants are closing early, if they open at all, and the convenience stores at truck stops have become heinously expensive: \$4.95 for a little cup of fruit, \$7.89 for the very smallest jar of peanut butter, \$8.39 for a bowl of instant mac and cheese. (Peach O Mind can't fit in a drive-through lane or a regular gas station, or stop at a Walmart, which is notorious for booting rigs parked in its lots.) At Love's, Brown couldn't even find sliced bread.

What Brown wishes she could spend her money on, but can't, is hand sanitizer, Clorox wipes, anything to disinfect her hands and truck. "There's none. None, zero. I ran out of everything last week, the last of everything. I have not had Lysol, a mask, gloves," she told me. "I've been searching and searching." There is nowhere to wash your hands in a truck, and finding bathrooms has become a challenge, as many rest stops have closed. Brown felt she was putting herself and others at risk. "Do you realize how many people I could infect?" she said. "If I got this across New York to New Jersey

to California to Florida to Portland to Washington? Fourteen days before I had any sort of symptom, I would be in twice that many locations. And nobody is listening."

There had been stories in the news about truck drivers not wanting to run loads into New York City, which is a logistical headache even in the best of times. But during the last three weeks of March, Brown had delivered three loads of vegetables to the city. Most recently, she brought 40,000 pounds of cabbage, which had been transferred, on a predawn morning, from a packinghouse in North Carolina into Peach O Mind's dark, frigid trailer; had rumbled north for a day; and then had been thrust into the fluorescent, honking insanity of the Bronx's Hunts Point, the site of the largest produce market in the world.

**T**H E N E W Y O R K C I T Y Terminal Produce Market, as the Hunts Point Produce Market is officially known, has a face only a mother could love. Bordered by barbed wire and concrete walls, the 113-acre complex is home to snowbanks of flattened cardboard boxes and four long, squat buildings with mottled cinder-block exteriors. At each building, there are 18-wheelers unloading, six-wheelers picking up, and boxes everywhere—TOP RED WASHINGTON STATE APPLES, TOP QUALITY LIMES, PREMIUM CALIFORNIA CITRUS—piled two stories high in refrigerated rooms, whizzing by on pallet jacks, getting hustled onto hand trucks, teetering beside a sales booth where someone nearby is on the phone telling Curtis, "I do not have a box of one-twenty-fives" (size-125 apples, so called because 125 of them will fit in a 40-pound box).

Everything is either on its way in or on its way out, or had better be. "You do not want to get caught with the product," says Joel Fierman, who represents the third generation of Fiermans to run Fierman Produce Exchange. "This is a perishable. This is not a sweater. This goes bad. Forty-eight hours—it's going bad, nobody's buying it." Fierman Produce Exchange is one of Hunts Point's 30 houses—distributors that buy from growers, then sell to restaurants, nursing homes, schools, jails, bodegas, street carts, and supermarkets, or the suppliers that stock them. Together, the houses handle 70 percent of the produce in the tristate area, feeding an estimated 25 million people each year.

From 6 a.m. on Sunday, when the week's first loads of inbound fresh arrive, until 5 p.m. on Friday, when most houses pause sales, the market hums. The phone rings all day—where are trucks, deliveries, orders? At 10 p.m., buyers flood in. Through 3 a.m., it's a madhouse, filled with the call-and-response of wholesalers pushing to sell for more while their customers needle for less. Workers assemble orders, stage produce, move so fast to load six-wheelers that they'll hop off their motorized pallet jacks and start running for the boxes before the jack rolls to a stop. Every distributor I spoke with constantly interrupted himself to have another conversation. When he answered the phone, the first thing Andrew Brantley, who oversees apples, grapes, stone fruit, citrus, and pears for S. Katzman Produce, said to me was "Hold on one second, all right?"

Nathan Glickberg, Fairway's patriarch, bought from Hunts Point when it was still Washington Market, in Tribeca. He'd venture downtown to pick out produce each morning, get it delivered, and have it in his stands by 7 a.m. (The market moved to the Bronx



Ingrid Brown spends about 11 months a year in an 18-wheeler named Peach O Mind, hauling produce and other goods across the country.

in 1967.) But Fairway was selling in larger and larger quantities as it grew, and began to self-supply, ordering trailers of produce directly from growers. Other large supermarket chains and cooperatives do the same, though, like Fairway, they still fill in at Hunts Point. “They need us for when a truck is late, a truck is frozen, a truck came in heated, or maybe the product just wasn’t that good,” Brantley said. “We negotiate a price. Of course, they’re going to try to pay as close—Excuse me one second. Hello? Greg?”

By early April, the market’s sales had cratered by about half. “We lost the restaurants. We lost the theater. We lost the arts. The museums. We lost the tourism trade. We lost the hotels,” Fierman told me. People are still eating, but our tastes change when we dine at home, and supermarkets buy differently than restaurants. Romaine, not frisée. A modest potato, not the overstuffed Idaho spud that the Morton’s steakhouse in Midtown serves for \$8.80. Supermarkets demand fruit with curb appeal, while chefs don’t mind irregular produce, since it’ll be chopped before anyone sees it. “You go to a store and you want everything to look—we call it ‘plastic,’ ” Brantley said. “Like you can buy at IKEA or Pier 1.” Lately, his sales of bagged fruit and clamshell grapes had gone through the roof.

At the entrance to the market, an electronic sign blinked instructions to STAY IN YOUR TRUCK, but that did not apply to Hunts Point employees. They were being exposed to 40 or more people a day, Fierman said, despite new protocols. At least 20 people at the market had gotten sick. Some deliveries were taking longer to arrive. Before, loading a truck at a farm in California might have required four hours. “Now it’s taking eight, 12, or maybe even 18 hours to

do that same process,” because of staffing shortages, Brantley said. And that’s if the fields are picked. Produce-industry publications had developed a careening tone: One day, they’d report on a Florida farmer who let 250 acres of cucumber, zucchini, yellow squash, and bell pepper rot on the vine because there were no restaurants or cafeterias to sell to; supermarkets, the farmer noted, weren’t compromising on their demand for “plastic” produce. Another day, growers would cheer spikes in demand for ginger, mushrooms, apples, oranges, grapefruit, or “hardware”—potatoes, onions, carrots. Shoppers were seeking groceries with a long shelf life.

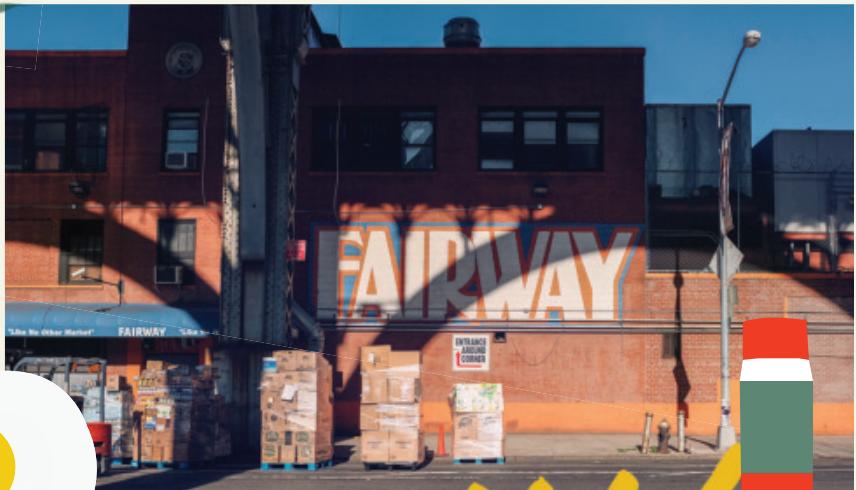
Some produce had been ready and waiting for months. Apples are picked in the late summer and fall and stored in a cold room, with the oxygen removed, until someone like Ingrid Brown comes for them. “There might be a time in October when you’re biting into an apple that was literally harvested that month, or sometimes you may be biting into an apple that was harvested back in November of the previous year,” Brantley said. “You’re still eating last year’s crop. And it’s no problem at all.”

**PRODUCE IS ONE THING** Fairway has actually managed to keep in stock. “Every day I wake up and it’s *What disaster is going to happen today?*” Rob Reinisch, a Fairway district manager, told me in mid-April. Reinisch’s suppliers are rationing him, and he is rationing customers. Approximately half of what he orders from his suppliers is out of stock, and the eight stores he manages have been constantly running out of things: orange juice (“Everybody thinks Vitamin C is the immediate cure for the coronavirus”), yeast (“I’m basically not in stock ever”), even the free plastic produce bags (“They’re flying off the shelves because people are using them to cover their hands as gloves”). A week after Reinisch and I spoke, the chairman of Tyson Foods wrote in an ad, “The food supply chain is breaking,” sparking fears of more shortages to come. During the month of April, grocery prices increased more than they had in almost 50 years, even as more than 20 million American jobs disappeared. The lines outside grocery stores paled in comparison to those outside many food banks.

In Fairway’s New York City stores, the panic-shopping had not subsided. “People continue every day to buy massive amounts of food,” Reinisch said. In wealthy neighborhoods like the Upper East Side, where, he assumes, people have disappeared to second homes, grocery purchases have leveled off. Alcohol purchases, on the other hand, have “exploded,” he said. “Wayyyy, way up.”

To get to her job as a cashier at the Fairway in Harlem, Elizabeth Miller takes the No. 27 or No. 39 bus from the apartment she shares with a roommate in the Bronx, transfers to the 6 train, and then transfers again to the No. 15 bus. The trip used to take an hour and a half each way. Now, because there is so little traffic, it takes about 45 minutes. Miller works five or six days a week, in six-to-eight-hour shifts. She wears jeggings, a black T-shirt that says FAIRWAY in orange, a beanie over a baseball cap, and orange-and-green sneakers with reinforced soles. Miller joined Fairway’s Pelham Manor store last June, then transferred to Harlem because it paid \$15 an hour rather than \$12. When she first started working as a cashier, she had nightmares about memorizing produce codes. “Every cashier will tell you about the time they dream of being at

cold room



SPECIAL!



# FAIRWAY



NEW



Steven Jenkins (center), a longtime Fairway employee and eventual partner, started making irreverent signs as an excuse to avoid talking to customers. But anything with his signs sold like crazy.

work and they have a long line, and they're by themselves, and there's no manager to help them, and they're trying to remember all the numbers of all the produce," Miller told me.

Stooping over the cash register all day and lifting heavy things from the belt make her back and shoulders sore, but to Miller, the hardest part of the job is not the long hours. It's the people. Less the chance that they'll get her sick—"I'm not as worried as most people," she said—than having to stay placid and polite in the face of their impatience, testiness, and sheer, incessant swarm. Recently, Miller was working her register when a new hire couldn't remember the produce codes and was mocked by customers. The cashier burst into tears and quit on the spot. "Honestly, being a cashier is not for the fainthearted," Miller told me. "You can't let someone get to you, because they'll be gone in a few minutes. You can't let them ruin your day." She's been cursed out, yelled at, called names. Just the other day, Miller asked a man to stay six feet away from her and another customer, and he started ranting and threw his money at her.

Still, she has lately felt more appreciated, and is thankful to have a job. "It's kind of weird—a lot of people are showing their gratitude, even though they're the same people that just stand there when you're bagging their items. It's like, 'What, you're grateful now?' Oh, how the tables have turned!" she said. "We actually matter more than celebrities and politicians and lawyers. We're keeping everybody fed. We're important." She'd heard that two co-workers had gotten sick and were in quarantine. Around the time we spoke, *The Washington Post* reported that at least 41 grocery and food-processing workers nationwide had died from the virus.

Miller tries to lighten the mood—by competing with other cashiers to see whose customers spend the most (\$1,139 is the current record), and teasing people who have waited an hour in line and just finished unloading their carts that she's closing the register to go on break. "They end up laughing, having a good time, getting a smile on their face," Miller said. "It won't help anybody if you show that you're scared or freaked out. It won't help the next person. So just smile a little bit."

*Recently, Elizabeth Miller was working her register when a new hire couldn't remember the produce codes and was mocked by customers. The cashier burst into tears and quit on the spot.*

Miller does her food shopping at the Family Dollar near her apartment, which lately has also had long lines just to get in. She tries to avoid buying groceries at Fairway, because even with a 20 percent employee discount, it's hard to leave without spending most of what she earned during the day's shift. "Sometimes I do shop at Fairway, but only for, like, meat or bread," she said. "Actually, no, not bread. It's a little expensive."

IN 2009, I MOVED TO NEW YORK and made a weekend ritual of seeing my grandmother for visits that inevitably revolved around Fairway. In 2013, the year of the company's public offering, a Fairway opened in my neighborhood. I looked forward to tasting my way through its hundreds of cheeses and developing the signature Fairway limp, cultivated through years of distracted shoppers ramming their carts into your ankles. But the store gradually stopped feeling like a Fairway. Prices ticked higher. The apples and lettuce no longer sat at attention, but slouched on displays, looking bored. The store, which I'd always associated with its totally arrogant, utterly New York motto "Like no other market," began to promote itself with a slogan I'd have bet good money was engineered in whichever lab invented pink meat goo: "The place to go fooding." Still, it stung to learn that the Fairway in Harlem, where my grandmother had spent so much time, had failed to sell in the bankruptcy auction in March, along with five other stores. Though Fairway said it planned to keep them open "for the foreseeable future," I found this less than reassuring.

What went wrong? According to industry experts, after Fairway's longtime owners sold the lion's share of their company, Fairway took on too much debt, expanded too fast, and went into a vicious cycle of trying to boost revenue by raising prices, which alienated shoppers. What went wrong, according to Howie Glickberg? "The Ivy League geniuses decided they knew more about the business than I did," he told me. "They couldn't understand that when you raise prices and get away from what the store was based on—best prices, best quality—you lose customers." In 2016, Glickberg left the company. By then, his meetings with the Sterling executives were regularly devolving into heated fights because he disagreed with changes to the stores. (Sterling said that competition from Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, and online grocers was responsible for the price pressures.) What went wrong, according to current Fairway Vice President Pat Sheils? "I'm not sure that I'm able to speak on that," Sheils told me. "Yeah," interrupted a publicist who'd been listening in on our call. "Yeah, agreed with you on that one, Pat."

For decades, Fairway felt like a store run by human beings, not calculators. Steven Jenkins, a longtime Fairway employee and eventual partner, started making irreverent signs as a way to look busy and avoid talking to customers (FRESH BLACK FIGS, RAW SEX—SAME THING, 79 CENTS EACH), but anything in the store with his signs sold like crazy, so he kept at them. He and Fairway's other managers stocked things for the simple reason that they were good to eat. While Jenkins and I were speaking, he got out an old notebook in which he'd kept a ledger of every item he'd shipped to the stores from Europe in December 2013. "Here's anchovies that I bought from the coast of Catalonia, the greatest anchovy in the world," he said, reading from his list. "There's some little mints from the village in France called Flavigny ... Oh my God, I brought in walnuts from the Périgord region ... Here's my vintage sardines from Brittany. These vintage sardines taste like a sardine that God made and gave to you, personally ... Olive oil, olive oil, olive oil. Mustards, vinegars, more French dried fruits ... There's my beets! I would bring in pallets and pallets of beets from just west of Paris, in Chatou ... You didn't have to peel the goddamn

beet; they were ready to go and they tasted perfect and they were organic as well and they were cheap as dirt. I sold mountains of beets. Can you imagine such a thing? I was *so* proud of those beets." He continued like this for 15 minutes.

Not every supermarket stocks French beets, but Fairway was less exceptional than it might seem. Private-equity firms have lately devoured supermarkets; since 2015, at least seven other grocery chains have been bought by private-equity investors, then bankrupted. And Fairway was no luxury-food shop: Besides the beets, which my grandmother adored, it stocked Kraft Singles, which I adore, and it evoked that same feeling of possibility that exists in even the most ordinary supermarket. Stuffed to the rafters, supermarkets overwhelm with the cacophony of choice. Floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall Light 'n Fluffy, Ding Dongs, Donettes, CRAVE, Fabuloso, Juicy Juice, Crunch 'n Munch, Pup-Peroni, Enviro-Log—all yelling, cajoling, promising, winking. At the very least, you have to marvel: How did we take something built to satisfy the simplest human need and make it so utterly baroque? The supermarket does not "curate." It is a defiantly encyclopedic catalog of our needs and desires, each and every one of which it attempts to satisfy. With nothing but a can opener, you can get a "turkey dinner in gravy," "chicken shrimp and crab stew," "saucy seafood bake," "chicken and turkey casserole," "prime filets with salmon and beef," "bisque with tuna and chicken," "ocean whitefish dinner with garden greens in sauce," or a "natural flaked skipjack tuna entrée in a delicate broth." And that's just in the cat-food aisle.

While researching this story, I became obsessed with supermarket names, which are the antithesis of the sanitized, one-word titles favored by cool venture-capital-backed retailers—Roman, Winc, Away. Traditional supermarkets have names as unpretentious and moth-eaten as an old wool sweater: Save A Lot, BI-LO, Great Valu. They don't promise something as ambitious as Whole Foods. Just something edible, for an okay price: Food 4 Less, Price Rite, Stop & Shop. The supermarket is not an aspirational brand catering to who we want to be. It's just there for who we are: people who need Light 'n Fluffy, and Ding Dongs, and Donettes.

The names I came across were also largely unfamiliar to me, because, even now, supermarkets have stayed stubbornly regional. That may not be the case much longer, as national chains are poised to continue squeezing local players. The supermarket has always operated according to the principle of pile it high and sell it cheap, and the bigger you are—Kroger, Walmart, Albertsons—the higher, and cheaper, your pile. You can trim costs by running your own trucking fleets, creating your own products, even designing your own produce. Walmart pioneered a cantaloupe that supposedly tastes equally sweet in summer and winter. Americans now buy about a quarter of their groceries from Walmart, which has stores so gigantic, they are technically *hypermarkets*.

Once upon a time, supermarkets were themselves the colossi putting small grocers out of business, and nostalgia for regional supermarkets in a sense seems risible. These Goliaths now look frail, as we've shifted to stocking up on groceries at places far beyond the super- and even hypermarket—gas stations, a onetime online bookseller. But until recently, you couldn't go too long without joining the people who live near you to ineffectively wander a supermarket's

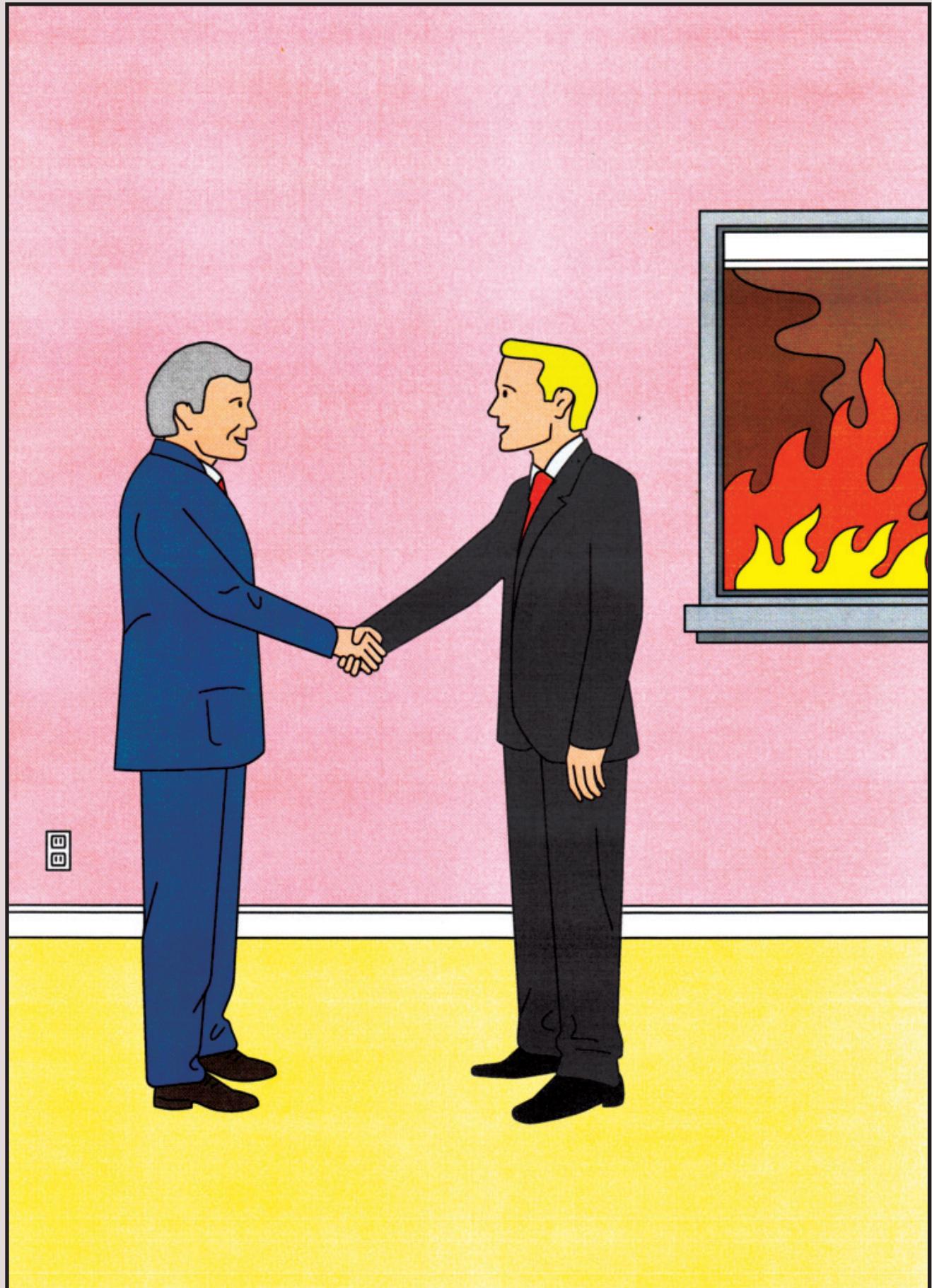


*Elizabeth Miller takes a bus to a train to another bus to get to her job as a cashier at the Fairway in Harlem.*

aisles, picking up toilet paper and milk and gossip. Supermarkets gather us together, and they reflect the particular appetites of our place. In speaking with the people who built Fairway, I perceived, despite the vastness of their stores, a neighborly sense of pride in focusing on the minute details of their shoppers' lives. Jenkins had been outraged that New Yorkers were eating cheeses and olive oils that, in his mind, were beneath them. "There wasn't a single bottle of olive oil worthy of anybody throughout the '80s!" he ranted. So he imported some that was.

Compared with inventing new cantaloupes, this was, arguably, a small act. But the result was not small. Once a week, my grandmother would put on her hat, scarf, gloves, and polished leather shoes, and pull her black-metal cart down the hill to Fairway, then back up to her apartment. When she could no longer pull the cart back up the hill, she'd make the pilgrimage to Fairway, do her shopping, and have her groceries delivered. When she could no longer negotiate the steep hill on her own, my aunt, or a neighbor, steadied her on the walk down. When my grandmother stopped going anywhere else in the city, she still went to Fairway, where the world came to her. *A*

*Bianca Bosker is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of Cork Dork.*



# The Worst Worst Case

The U.S. banking system could be on the cusp of calamity. This time, we might not be able to save it.

After months of living with the coronavirus pandemic, American citizens are well aware of the toll it has taken on the economy: broken supply chains, record unemployment, failing small businesses. All of these factors are serious and could mire the United States in a deep, prolonged recession. But there's another threat to the economy, too. It lurks on the balance sheets of the big banks, and it could be cataclysmic. Imagine if, in addition to all the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, you woke up one morning to find that the financial sector had collapsed.

You may think that such a crisis is unlikely, with memories of the 2008 crash still so fresh. But banks learned few lessons from that calamity, and new laws intended to keep them from taking on too much risk have failed to do so. As a result, we could be on the precipice of another crash, one different from 2008 less in kind than in degree. This one could be worse.

The financial crisis of 2008 was about home mortgages. Hundreds of billions of dollars in loans to home buyers were repackaged into securities called collateralized debt obligations, known as CDOs. In theory, CDOs were intended to shift risk away from banks, which lend money to home buyers. In practice, the same banks that issued home loans also bet heavily on CDOs, often using complex techniques hidden from investors and regulators. When the housing market took a hit, these banks were doubly affected. In late 2007, banks began disclosing tens of billions of dollars of subprime-CDO losses. The next year, Lehman Brothers went under, taking the economy with it.

*By Frank Partnoy*

The federal government stepped in to rescue the other big banks and forestall a panic. The intervention worked—though its success did not seem assured at the time—and the system righted itself. Of course, many Americans suffered as a result of the crash, losing homes, jobs, and wealth. An already troubling gap between America’s haves and have-nots grew wider still. Yet by March 2009, the economy was on the upswing, and the longest bull market in history had begun.

To prevent the next crisis, Congress in 2010 passed the Dodd-Frank Act. Under the new rules, banks were supposed to borrow less, make fewer long-shot bets, and be more transparent about their holdings. The Federal Reserve began conducting “stress tests” to keep the banks in line. Congress also tried to reform the credit-rating agencies, which were widely blamed for enabling the meltdown by giving high marks to dubious CDOs, many of which were larded with subprime loans given to unqualified borrowers. Over the course of the crisis, more than 13,000 CDO investments that were rated AAA—the highest possible rating—defaulted.

The reforms were well intentioned, but, as we’ll see, they haven’t kept the banks from falling back into old, bad habits. After the housing crisis, subprime CDOs naturally fell out of favor. Demand shifted to a similar—and similarly risky—instrument, one that even has a similar name: the CLO, or collateralized loan obligation. A CLO walks and talks like a CDO, but in place of loans made to home buyers are loans made to businesses—specifically, troubled businesses. CLOs bundle together so-called leveraged loans, the subprime mortgages of the corporate world. These are loans made to companies that have maxed out their borrowing and can no longer sell bonds directly to investors or qualify for a traditional bank loan. There are more than \$1 trillion worth of leveraged loans currently outstanding. The majority are held in CLOs.

I was part of the group that structured and sold CDOs and CLOs at Morgan Stanley in the 1990s. The two securities are remarkably alike. Like a CDO, a CLO has multiple layers, which are sold separately. The bottom layer is the riskiest, the top the safest. If just a few of the loans in a CLO default, the bottom layer will suffer a loss and the other layers will remain safe. If the defaults increase, the bottom layer will lose even more, and the pain will start to work its way up the layers. The top layer, however, remains protected: It loses money only after the lower layers have been wiped out.

Unless you work in finance, you probably haven’t heard of CLOs, but according to many estimates, the CLO market is bigger than the subprime-mortgage CDO market was in its heyday. The Bank for International Settlements, which helps central banks pursue financial stability, has estimated the overall size of

## Just as easy mortgages fueled economic growth in the 2000s, cheap corporate debt has done so in the past decade, and many companies have binged on it.

the CDO market in 2007 at \$640 billion; it estimated the overall size of the CLO market in 2018 at \$750 billion. More than \$130 billion worth of CLOs have been created since then, some even in recent months. Just as easy mortgages fueled economic growth in the 2000s, cheap corporate debt has done so in the past decade, and many companies have binged on it.

Despite their obvious resemblance to the villain of the last crash, CLOs have been praised by Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin for moving the risk of leveraged loans outside the banking system. Like former Fed Chair Alan Greenspan, who downplayed the risks posed by subprime mortgages, Powell and Mnuchin have downplayed any trouble CLOs could pose for banks, arguing that the risk is contained within the CLOs themselves.

These sanguine views are hard to square with reality. The Bank for International Settlements estimates that, across the globe, banks held at least \$250 billion worth of CLOs at the end of 2018. Last July, one month after Powell declared in a press conference that “the risk isn’t in the banks,” two economists from the Federal Reserve reported that U.S. depository institutions and their holding companies owned more than \$110 billion worth of CLOs issued out of the Cayman Islands alone. A more complete picture is hard to come by, in part because banks have been inconsistent about reporting their CLO holdings. The Financial Stability Board, which monitors the global financial system, warned in December that

14 percent of CLOs—more than \$100 billion worth—are unaccounted for.

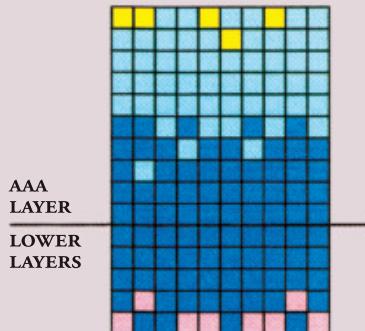
I have a checking account and a home mortgage with Wells Fargo; I decided to see how heavily invested my bank is in CLOs. I had to dig deep into the footnotes of the bank's most recent annual report, all the way to page 144. Listed there are its “available for sale” accounts. These are investments a bank plans to sell at some point, though not necessarily right away. The list contains the categories of safe assets you might expect: U.S. Treasury bonds, municipal bonds, and so on. Nestled among them is an item called “collateralized loan and other obligations”—CLOs. I ran my finger across the page to see the total for these investments, investments that Powell and Mnuchin have asserted are “outside the banking system.”

The total is \$29.7 billion. It is a massive number. And it is inside the bank.

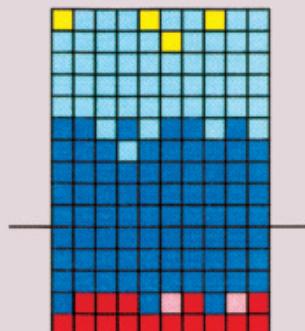
**SINCE 2008**, banks have kept more capital on hand to protect against a downturn, and their balance sheets are less leveraged now than they were in 2007. And not every bank has loaded up on CLOs. But in December, the Financial Stability Board estimated that, for the 30 “global systemically important banks,” the average exposure to leveraged loans and CLOs was roughly 60 percent of capital on hand. Citigroup reported \$20 billion worth of CLOs as of March 31; JPMorgan Chase reported \$35 billion (along with an unrealized loss on CLOs of \$2 billion). A couple of midsize banks—Banc of California, Stifel Financial—have CLOs totaling more than 100 percent of their capital.

BASED ON DATA FROM FITCH RATINGS. THE FOURTH CLO DEPICTS AN AGGREGATE LEVERAGED-LOAN DEFAULT RATE OF 78 PERCENT.

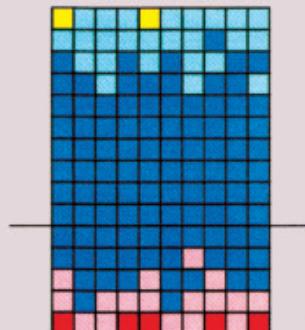
## CLOs: An Illustrated Guide



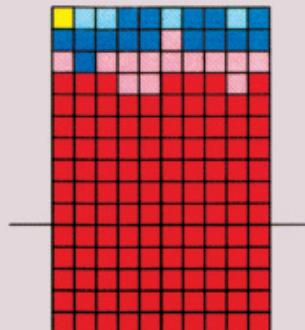
Here is a hypothetical CLO from before the coronavirus hit. Each of the small boxes represents a leveraged loan, color-coded by rating. The lower layers of the CLO are the riskiest. The AAA layer is protected by the lower layers.



Illustrated here is how our hypothetical CLO might have performed during the previous financial crisis. Many loans defaulted, but the defaults were limited to the lower layers.



A hypothetical CLO in April 2020. Many loans have been downgraded by the rating agencies, and defaults are increasing.



The worst-case scenario. If the present economic conditions persist or worsen, widespread defaults could hit not just the lower layers of CLOs, but the AAA layer as well.

■ BBB ■ BB ■ B ■ CCC OR LOWER ■ DEFECTED

If the leveraged-loan market imploded, their liabilities could quickly become greater than their assets.

How can these banks justify gambling so much money on what looks like such a risky bet? Defenders of CLOs say they aren't, in fact, a gamble—on the contrary, they are as sure a thing as you can hope for. That's because the banks mostly own the least risky, top layer of CLOs. Since the mid-1990s, the highest annual default rate on leveraged loans was about 10 percent, during the previous financial crisis. If 10 percent of a CLO's loans default, the bottom layers will suffer, but if you own the top layer, you might not even notice. Three times as many loans could default and you'd still be protected, because the lower layers would bear the loss. The securities are structured such that investors with a high tolerance for risk, like hedge funds and private-equity firms, buy the bottom layers hoping to win the lottery. The big banks settle for smaller returns and the security of the top layer. As of this writing, no AAA-rated layer of a CLO has ever lost principal.

But that AAA rating is deceiving. The credit-rating agencies grade CLOs and their underlying debt separately. You might assume that a CLO must contain AAA debt if its top layer is rated AAA. Far from it. Remember: CLOs are made up of loans to businesses that are already in trouble.

So what sort of debt do you find in a CLO? Fitch Ratings has estimated that as of April, more than 67 percent of the 1,745 borrowers in its leveraged-loan database had a B rating. That might not sound bad, but B-rated debt is lousy debt. According

## Loan defaults are already happening. There were more in April than ever before. It will only get worse from here.

to the rating agencies' definitions, a B-rated borrower's ability to repay a loan is *likely* to be impaired in adverse business or economic conditions. In other words, two-thirds of those leveraged loans are likely to lose money in economic conditions like the ones we're presently experiencing. According to Fitch, 15 percent of companies with leveraged loans are rated lower still, at CCC or below. These borrowers are on the cusp of default.

So while the banks restrict their CLO investments mostly to AAA-rated layers, what they really own is exposure to tens of billions of dollars of high-risk debt. In those highly rated CLOs, you won't find a single loan rated AAA, AA, or even A.

How can the credit-rating agencies get away with this? The answer is "default correlation," a measure of the likelihood of loans defaulting *at the same time*. The main reason CLOs have been so safe is the same reason CDOs seemed safe before 2008. Back then, the underlying loans were risky too, and everyone knew that some of them would default. But it seemed unlikely that many of them would default at the same time. The loans were spread across the entire country and among many lenders. Real-estate markets were thought to be local, not national, and the factors that typically lead people to default on their home loans—job loss, divorce, poor health—don't all move in the same direction at the same time. Then housing prices fell 30 percent across the board and defaults skyrocketed.

For CLOs, the rating agencies determine the grades of the various layers by assessing both the risks of the leveraged loans

and their default correlation. Even during a recession, different sectors of the economy, such as entertainment, health care, and retail, don't necessarily move in lockstep. In theory, CLOs are constructed in such a way as to minimize the chances that all of the loans will be affected by a single event or chain of events. The rating agencies award high ratings to those layers that seem sufficiently diversified across industry and geography.

Banks do not publicly report which CLOs they hold, so we can't know precisely which leveraged loans a given institution might be exposed to. But all you have to do is look at a list of leveraged borrowers to see the potential for trouble. Among the dozens of companies Fitch added to its list of "loans of concern" in April were AMC Entertainment, Bob's Discount Furniture, California Pizza Kitchen, the Container Store, Lands' End, Men's Wearhouse, and Party City. These are all companies hard hit by the sort of belt-tightening that accompanies a conventional downturn.

We are not in the midst of a conventional downturn. The two companies with the largest amount of outstanding debt on Fitch's April list were Envision Healthcare, a medical-staffing company that, among other things, helps hospitals administer emergency-room care, and Intelsat, which provides satellite broadband access. Also added to the list was Hoffmaster, which makes products used by restaurants to package food for takeout. Companies you might have expected to weather the present economic storm are among those suffering most acutely as consumers not only tighten

their belts, but also redefine what they consider necessary.

Even before the pandemic struck, the credit-rating agencies may have been underestimating how vulnerable unrelated industries could be to the same economic forces. A 2017 article by John Griffin, of the University of Texas, and Jordan Nickerson, of Boston College, demonstrated that the default-correlation assumptions used to create a group of 136 CLOs should have been three to four times higher than they were, and the miscalculations resulted in much higher ratings than were warranted. “I’ve been concerned about AAA CLOs failing in the next crisis for several years,” Griffin told me in May. “This crisis is more horrifying than I anticipated.”

Under current conditions, the outlook for leveraged loans in a range of industries is truly grim. Companies such as AMC (nearly \$2 billion of debt spread across 224 CLOs) and Party City (\$719 million of debt in 183 CLOs) were in dire straits before social distancing. Now movie-going and party-throwing are paused indefinitely—and may never come back to their pre-pandemic levels.

The prices of AAA-rated CLO layers tumbled in March, before the Federal Reserve announced that its additional \$2.3 trillion of lending would include loans to CLOs. (The program is controversial: Is the Fed really willing to prop up CLOs when so many previously healthy small businesses are struggling to pay their debts? As of mid-May, no such loans had been made.) Far from scaring off the big banks, the tumble inspired several of them to buy low: Citigroup acquired \$2 billion of AAA CLOs during

the dip, which it flipped for a \$100 million profit when prices bounced back. Other banks, including Bank of America, reportedly bought lower layers of CLOs in May for about 20 cents on the dollar.

Meanwhile, loan defaults are already happening. There were more in April than ever before. Several experts told me they expect more record-breaking months this summer. It will only get worse from there.

#### **IF LEVERAGED-LOAN**

defaults continue, how badly could they damage the larger economy? What, precisely, is the worst-case scenario?

For the moment, the financial system seems relatively stable. Banks can still pay their debts and pass their regulatory capital tests. But recall that the previous crash took more than a year to unfold. The present is analogous not to the fall of 2008, when the U.S. was in full-blown crisis, but to the summer of 2007, when some securities were going underwater but no one yet knew what the upshot would be.

What I’m about to describe is necessarily speculative, but it is rooted in the experience of the previous crash and in what we know about current bank holdings. The purpose of laying out this worst-case scenario isn’t to say that it will necessarily come to pass. The purpose is to show that it *could*. That alone should scare us all—and inform the way we think about the next year and beyond.

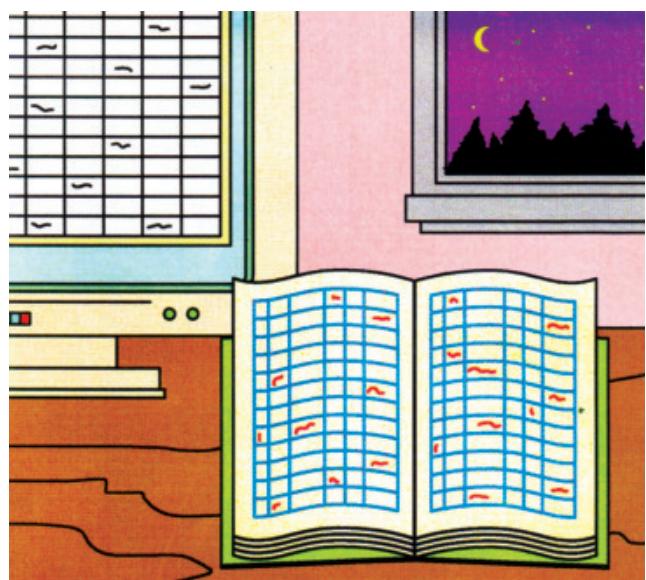
Later this summer, leveraged-loan defaults will increase significantly as the economic effects of the pandemic fully register. Bankruptcy courts will very likely

buckle under the weight of new filings. (During a two-week period in May, J.Crew, Neiman Marcus, and J. C. Penney all filed for bankruptcy.) We already know that a significant majority of the loans in CLOs have weak covenants that offer investors only minimal legal protection; in industry parlance, they are “cov lite.” The holders of leveraged loans will thus be fortunate to get pennies on the dollar as companies default—nothing close to the 70 cents that has been standard in the past.

As the banks begin to feel the pain of these defaults, the public will learn that they were hardly the only institutions to bet big on CLOs. The insurance giant AIG—which had massive investments in CDOs in 2008—is now exposed to more than \$9 billion in CLOs. U.S. life-insurance companies as a group in 2018 had an estimated one-fifth of their capital tied up in these same instruments. Pension funds, mutual funds, and exchange-traded funds (popular among retail investors) are also heavily invested in leveraged loans and CLOs.

The banks themselves may reveal that their CLO investments are larger than was previously understood. In fact, we’re already seeing this happen. On May 5, Wells Fargo disclosed \$7.7 billion worth of CLOs in a different corner of its balance sheet than the \$29.7 billion I’d found in its annual report. As defaults pile up, the Mnuchin-Powell view that leveraged loans can’t harm the financial system will be exposed as wishful thinking.

Thus far, I’ve focused on CLOs because they are the most troubling assets held by the banks. But they are also emblematic of other complex and artificial products that banks have stashed on—and off—their balance sheets. Later this year, banks may very well report quarterly losses that are much worse than anticipated. The details will include a dizzying array of transactions that will recall not only the housing crisis, but the Enron scandal of the early 2000s. Remember all those subsidiaries Enron created (many of them infamously named after *Star Wars* characters) to keep risky bets off the energy firm’s financial statements? The big banks use similar structures, called “variable interest entities”—companies established largely to hold off-the-books





positions. Wells Fargo has more than \$1 trillion of VIE assets, about which we currently know very little, because reporting requirements are opaque. But one popular investment held in VIEs are securities backed by commercial mortgages, such as loans to shopping malls and office parks—two categories of borrowers experiencing severe strain as a result of the pandemic.

The early losses from CLOs will not on their own erase the capital reserves required by Dodd-Frank. And some of the most irresponsible gambles from the last crisis—the speculative derivatives and credit-default swaps you may remember reading about in 2008—are less common today, experts told me. But the losses from CLOs, combined with losses from other troubled assets like those commercial-mortgage-backed securities, will lead to serious deficiencies in capital. Meanwhile, the same economic forces buffeting CLOs will hit other parts of the banks' balance sheets hard; as the recession drags on, their traditional sources of revenue will also dry up. For some, the erosion of capital could approach the levels Lehman Brothers and Citigroup suffered in 2008. Banks with insufficient cash reserves will be forced to sell assets into a dour market, and the proceeds will be dismal. The prices of leveraged loans, and by extension CLOs, will spiral downward.

You can perhaps guess much of the rest: At some point, rumors will circulate that one major bank is near collapse. Overnight lending, which keeps the American economy running, will seize up. The Federal Reserve will try to arrange a bank bailout. All of that happened last time, too.

But this time, the bailout proposal will likely face stiffer opposition, from both parties. Since 2008, populists on the left and the right in American politics have grown suspicious of handouts to the big banks. Already irate that banks were inadequately punished for their malfeasance leading up to the last crash, critics will be outraged to learn that they so egregiously flouted the spirit of the post-2008 reforms. Some members of Congress will

question whether the Federal Reserve has the authority to buy risky investments to prop up the financial sector, as it did in 2008. (Dodd-Frank limited the Fed's ability to target specific companies, and precluded loans to failing or insolvent institutions.) Government officials will hold frantic meetings, but to no avail. The faltering bank will fail, with others lined up behind it.

And then, sometime in the next year, we will all stare into the financial abyss. At that point, we will be well beyond the scope of the previous recession, and we will have either exhausted the remedies that spared the system last time or found that they won't work this time around. What *then*?

**UNTIL RECENTLY**, at least, the U.S. was rightly focused on finding ways to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic that prioritize the health of American citizens. And economic health cannot be restored until people feel safe going about their daily business. But health risks and economic risks must be considered together. In calculating the risks of reopening the economy, we must understand the true costs of remaining closed. At some point, they will become more than the country can bear.

The financial sector isn't like other sectors. If it fails, fundamental aspects of modern life could fail with it. We could lose the ability to get loans to buy a house or a car, or to pay for college. Without reliable credit, many Americans might struggle to pay for their daily needs. This is why, in 2008, then-Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson went so far as to get down on one knee to

beg Nancy Pelosi for her help sparing the system. He understood the alternative.

It is a distasteful fact that the present situation is so dire in part because the banks fell right back into bad behavior after the last crash—taking too many risks, hiding debt in complex instruments and off-balance-sheet entities, and generally exploiting loopholes in laws intended to rein in their greed. Sparing them for a second time this century will be that much harder.

If we muster the political will to do so—or if we avert the worst possible outcomes in this precarious time—it will be imperative for the U.S. government to impose reforms stringent enough to head off the next crisis. We've seen how banks respond to stern reprimands and modest reform. This time, regulators might need to dismantle the system as we know it. Banks should play a much simpler role in the new economy, making lending decisions themselves instead of farming them out to credit-rating agencies. They should steer clear of whatever new-fangled security might replace the CLO. To prevent another crisis, we also need far more transparency, so we can see when banks give in to temptation. A bank shouldn't be able to keep \$1 trillion worth of assets off its books.

If we do manage to make it through the next year without waking up to a collapse, we must find ways to prevent the big banks from going all in on bets they can't afford to lose. Their luck—and ours—will at some point run out. *A*

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# ON CALL

## THE CONNECTIONS AT THE CORE OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE

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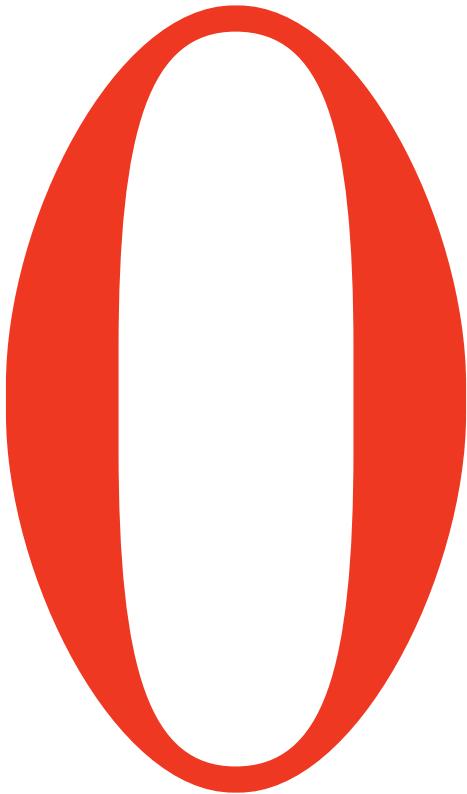
# COLLABORATORS

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WHAT CAUSES  
PEOPLE  
TO ABANDON  
THEIR  
PRINCIPLES  
IN SUPPORT  
OF A  
CORRUPT  
REGIME?  
AND HOW  
DO THEY  
FIND THEIR  
WAY BACK?

BY ANNE  
APPLEBAUM



On a cold March afternoon in 1949, Wolfgang Leonhard slipped out of the East German Communist Party Secretariat, hurried home, packed what few warm clothes he could fit into a small briefcase, and then walked to a telephone box to call his mother. “My article will be finished this evening,” he told her. That was the code they had agreed on in advance. It meant that he was escaping the country, at great risk to his life.

Though only 28 years old at the time, Leonhard stood at the pinnacle of the new East German elite. The son of German Communists, he had been educated in the Soviet Union, trained in special schools during the war, and brought back to Berlin from Moscow in May 1945, on the same airplane that carried Walter Ulbricht, the leader of what would soon become the East German Communist Party. Leonhard was put on a team charged with re-creating Berlin’s city government.

He had one central task: to ensure that any local leaders who emerged from the postwar chaos were assigned deputies loyal to the party. “It’s got to look democratic,” Ulbricht told him, “but we must have everything in our control.”

Leonhard had lived through a great deal by that time. While he was still a teenager in Moscow, his mother had been arrested as an “enemy of the people” and sent to Vorkuta, a labor camp in the far north. He had witnessed the terrible poverty and inequality of the Soviet Union, he had despised the Soviet alliance with Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1941, and he knew about the Red Army’s mass rapes of women following the occupation. Yet he and his ideologically committed friends “instinctively recoiled from the thought” that any of these events were “in diametrical

opposition to our Socialist ideals.” Steadfastly, he clung to the belief system he had grown up with.

The turning point, when it came, was trivial. While walking down the hall of the Central Committee building, he was stopped by a “pleasant-looking middle-aged man,” a comrade recently arrived from the West, who asked where to find the dining room. Leonhard told him that the answer depended on what sort of meal ticket he had—different ranks of officials had access to different dining rooms. The comrade was astonished: “But … aren’t they all members of the Party?”

Leonhard walked away and entered his own, top-category dining room, where white cloths covered the tables and high-ranking functionaries received three-course meals. He felt ashamed. “Curious, I thought, that this had never struck me before!” That was when he began to have the doubts that inexorably led him to plot his escape.

At exactly that same moment, in exactly the same city, another high-ranking East German was coming to precisely the opposite set of conclusions. Markus Wolf was also the son of a prominent German Communist family. He also spent his childhood in the Soviet Union, attending the same elite schools for children of foreign Communists as Leonhard did, as well as the same wartime training camp; the two had shared a bedroom there, solemnly calling each other by their aliases—these were the rules of deep conspiracy—although they knew each other’s real names perfectly well. Wolf also witnessed the mass arrests, the purges, and the poverty of the Soviet Union—and he also kept faith with the cause. He arrived in Berlin just a few days after Leonhard, on another plane full of trusted comrades, and immediately began hosting a program on the new Soviet-backed radio station. For many months he ran the popular *You Ask, We Answer*. He gave on-air answers to listeners’ letters, often concluding with some form of “These difficulties are being overcome with the help of the Red Army.”

In August 1947, the two men met up at Wolf’s “luxurious five-roomed apartment,” not far from what was then the headquarters of the radio station. They drove out to Wolf’s house, “a fine villa in the neighborhood of Lake Glienicke.” They took a walk around the lake, and Wolf warned Leonhard that changes were coming. He told him to give up hoping that German Communism would be allowed to develop differently from the Soviet version: That idea, long the goal of many German party members, was about to be dropped. When Leonhard argued that this could not be true—he was personally in charge of ideology, and no one had told him anything about a change in direction—Wolf laughed at him. “There are higher authorities than your Central Secretariat,” he said. Wolf made clear that he had better contacts, more important friends. At the age of 24, he was an insider. And Leonhard understood, finally, that he was a functionary in an occupied country where the Soviet Communist Party, not the German Communist Party, had the last word.

Famously, or perhaps infamously, Markus Wolf’s career continued to flourish after that. Not only did he stay in East Germany, he rose through the ranks of its *nomenklatura* to become the country’s top spy. He was the second-ranked official at the Ministry of State Security, better known as the Stasi; he was

often described as the model for the Karla character in John le Carré's spy novels. In the course of his career, his Directorate for Reconnaissance recruited agents in the offices of the West German chancellor and just about every other department of the government, as well as at NATO.

Leonhard, meanwhile, became a prominent critic of the regime. He wrote and lectured in West Berlin, at Oxford, at Columbia. Eventually he wound up at Yale, where his lecture course left an impression on several generations of students. Among them was a future U.S. president, George W. Bush, who described Leonhard's course as "an introduction to the struggle between tyranny and freedom." When I was at Yale in the 1980s, Leonhard's course on Soviet history was the most popular on campus.

Separately, each man's story makes sense. But when examined together, they require some deeper explanation. Until March 1949, Leonhard's and Wolf's biographies were strikingly similar. Both grew up inside the Soviet system. Both were educated in Communist ideology, and both had the same values. Both knew that the party was undermining those values. Both knew that the system, allegedly built to promote equality, was deeply unequal, profoundly unfair, and very cruel. Like their counterparts in so many other times and places, both men could plainly see the gap between propaganda and reality. Yet one remained an enthusiastic collaborator, while the other could not bear the betrayal of his ideals. Why?

**I**N ENGLISH, THE WORD *collaborator* has a double meaning. A colleague can be described as a collaborator in a neutral or positive sense. But the other definition of *collaborator*, relevant here, is different: someone who works with the enemy, with the occupying power, with the dictatorial regime. In this negative sense, *collaborator* is closely related to another set of words: *collusion*, *complicity*, *connivance*. This negative meaning gained currency during the Second World War, when it was widely used to describe Europeans who cooperated with Nazi occupiers. At base, the ugly meaning of *collaborator* carries an implication of treason: betrayal of one's nation, of one's ideology, of one's morality, of one's values.

Since the Second World War, historians and political scientists have tried to explain why some people in extreme circumstances become collaborators and others do not. The late Harvard scholar Stanley Hoffmann had firsthand knowledge of the subject—as a child, he and his mother hid from the Nazis in Lamalou-les-Bains, a village in the south of France. But he was modest about his own conclusions, noting that "a careful historian would have—almost—to write a huge series of case histories; for there seem to have been almost as many collaborationisms as there were proponents or practitioners of collaboration." Still, Hoffmann made a stab at classification, beginning with a division of collaborators into "voluntary" and "involuntary." Many people in the latter group had no choice. Forced into a "reluctant recognition of necessity," they could not avoid dealing with the Nazi occupiers who were running their country.

Hoffmann further sorted the more enthusiastic "voluntary" collaborators into two additional categories. In the first were those who worked with the enemy in the name of "national interest," rationalizing collaboration as something necessary for the preservation of the French economy, or French culture—though of course many people who made these arguments had other professional or economic motives, too. In the second were the truly active ideological collaborators: people who believed that prewar republican France had been weak or corrupt and hoped that the Nazis would strengthen it, people who admired fascism, and people who admired Hitler.

Hoffmann observed that many of those who became ideological collaborators were landowners and aristocrats, "the cream of the top of the civil service, of the armed forces, of the business community," people who perceived themselves as part of a natural ruling class that had been unfairly deprived of power under the left-wing governments of France in the 1930s.

Equally motivated to collaborate were their polar opposites, the "social misfits and political deviants" who would, in the normal course of events, never have made successful careers of any kind. What brought these groups together was a common conclusion that, whatever they had thought about Germany before June 1940, their political and personal futures would now be improved by aligning themselves with the occupiers.

Like Hoffmann, Czesław Miłosz, a Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, wrote about collaboration from personal experience. An active member of the anti-Nazi resistance during the war, he nevertheless wound up after the war as a cultural attaché at the Polish embassy in Washington, serving his country's Communist government. Only in 1951 did

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he defect, denounce the regime, and dissect his experience. In a famous essay, *The Captive Mind*, he sketched several lightly disguised portraits of real people, all writers and intellectuals, each of whom had come up with different ways of justifying collaboration with the party. Many were careerists, but Miłosz understood that careerism could not provide a complete explanation. To be part of a mass movement was for many a chance to end their alienation, to feel close to the "masses," to be united in a single community with workers and shopkeepers. For tormented intellectuals, collaboration also offered a kind of relief, almost a sense of peace: It meant that they were no longer constantly at war with the state, no longer in turmoil. Once the intellectual has accepted

that there is no other way, Miłosz wrote, “he eats with relish, his movements take on vigor, his color returns. He sits down and writes a ‘positive’ article, marveling at the ease with which he writes it.” Miłosz is one of the few writers to acknowledge the *pleasure* of conformity, the lightness of heart that it grants, the way that it solves so many personal and professional dilemmas.

We all feel the urge to conform; it is the most normal of human desires. I was reminded of this recently when I visited Marianne Birthler in her light-filled apartment in Berlin. During the 1980s, Birthler was one of a very small number of active dissidents in East Germany; later, in reunified Germany, she spent more than a decade running the Stasi archive, the collection of former East German secret-police files. I asked her whether she could identify among her cohort a set of circumstances that had inclined some people to collaborate with the Stasi.

She was put off by the question. Collaboration wasn’t interesting, Birthler told me. Almost everyone was a collaborator; 99 percent of East Germans collaborated. If they weren’t working with the Stasi, then they were working with the party, or with the system more generally. Much more interesting—and far harder to explain—was the genuinely mysterious question of “why people went against the regime.” The puzzle is not why Markus Wolf remained in East Germany, in other words, but why Wolfgang Leonhard did not.

**HERE IS ANOTHER** pair of stories, one that will be more familiar to American readers. Let’s begin this one in the 1980s, when a young Lindsey Graham first served with the Judge Advocate General’s Corps—the military legal service—in the U.S. Air Force. During some of that time, Graham was based in what was then West Germany, on the cutting edge of America’s Cold War efforts. Graham, born and raised in a small town in South Carolina, was devoted to the military: After both of his parents died when he was in his 20s, he got himself and his younger sister through college with the help of an ROTC stipend and then an Air Force salary. He stayed in the Reserves for two decades, even while in the Senate, sometimes journeying to Iraq or Afghanistan to serve as a short-term reserve officer. “The Air Force has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me,” he said in 2015. “It gave me a purpose bigger than myself. It put me in the company of patriots.” Through most of his years in the Senate, Graham, alongside his close friend John McCain, was a spokesperson for a strong military, and for a vision of America as a democratic leader abroad. He also supported a vigorous notion of democracy at home. In his 2014 reelection campaign, he ran as a maverick and a centrist, telling *The Atlantic* that jousting with the Tea Party was “more fun than any time I’ve been in politics.”

While Graham was doing his tour in West Germany, Mitt Romney became a co-founder and then the president of Bain Capital, a private-equity investment firm. Born in Michigan, Romney worked in Massachusetts during his years at Bain, but he also kept, thanks to his Mormon faith, close ties to Utah. While Graham was a military lawyer, drawing military pay, Romney was acquiring companies, restructuring them, and then selling them. This was a job he excelled at—in 1990, he was asked to run the parent firm, Bain & Company—and in the course of doing so he became very rich.

Still, Romney dreamed of a political career, and in 1994 he ran for the Senate in Massachusetts, after changing his political affiliation from independent to Republican. He lost, but in 2002 he ran for governor of Massachusetts as a nonpartisan moderate, and won. In 2007—after a gubernatorial term during which he successfully brought in a form of near-universal health care that became a model for Barack Obama’s Affordable Care Act—he staged his first run for president. After losing the 2008 Republican primary, he won the party’s nomination in 2012, and then lost the general election.

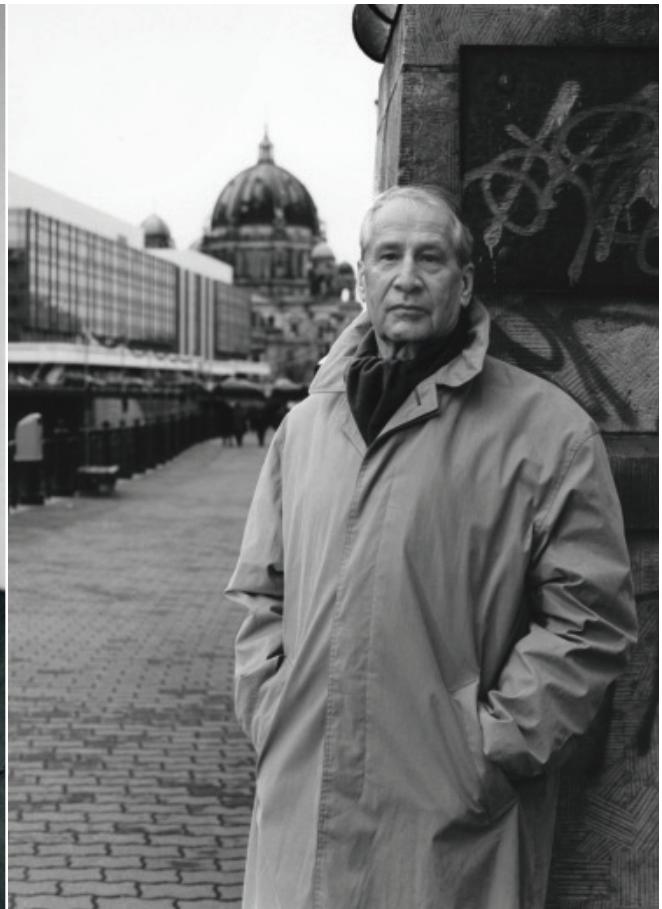
Both Graham and Romney had presidential ambitions; Graham staged his own short-lived presidential campaign in 2015 (justified on the grounds that “the world is falling apart”). Both men were loyal members of the Republican Party, skeptical of the party’s radical and conspiratorial fringe. Both men reacted to the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump with real anger, and no wonder: In different ways, Trump’s values undermined their own. Graham had dedicated his career to an idea of U.S. leadership around the word—whereas Trump was offering an “America First” doctrine that would turn out to mean “me and my friends first.” Romney was an excellent businessman with a strong record as a public servant—whereas Trump inherited wealth, went bankrupt more than once, created nothing of value, and had no governing record at all. Both Graham and Romney were devoted to America’s democratic traditions and to the ideals of honesty, accountability, and transparency in public life—all of which Trump scorned.

Both were vocal in their disapproval of Trump. Before the election, Graham called him a “jackass,” a “nutjob,” and a “race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot.” He seemed unhappy, even depressed, by the election: I happened to see him at a conference in Europe in the spring of 2016, and he spoke in monosyllables, if at all.

Romney went further. “Let me put it very plainly,” he said in March 2016, in a speech criticizing Trump: “If we Republicans choose Donald Trump as our nominee, the prospects for a safe and prosperous future are greatly diminished.” Romney spoke of “the bullying, the greed, the showing off, the misogyny, the absurd third-grade theatrics.” He called Trump a “con man” and a “fraud.” Even after Trump won the nomination, Romney refused to endorse him. On his presidential ballot, Romney said, he wrote in his wife. Graham said he voted for the independent candidate Evan McMullin.

But Trump did become president, and so the two men’s convictions were put to the test.

A glance at their biographies would not have led many to predict what happened next. On paper, Graham would have seemed, in 2016, like the man with deeper ties to the military, to the rule of law, and to an old-fashioned idea of American patriotism and American responsibility in the world. Romney, by contrast, with his shifts between the center and the right, with his multiple careers in business and politics, would have seemed less deeply attached to those same old-fashioned patriotic ideals. Most of us register soldiers as loyal patriots, and management consultants as self-interested. We assume people from small towns in South Carolina are more likely to resist political pressure than people who have lived in many places. Intuitively, we think that loyalty to a particular place implies loyalty to a set of values.



In the 1940s, both Wolfgang Leonhard (left, photographed in 1980) and Markus Wolf (right, photographed in 1997) were members of the East German elite. Both knew the Communist system was horribly cruel and unfair. But Leonhard risked his life to become a prominent critic of the Communist regime, while Wolf rose to become its top spy.

But in this case the clichés were wrong. It was Graham who made excuses for Trump’s abuse of power. It was Graham—a JAG Corps lawyer—who downplayed the evidence that the president had attempted to manipulate foreign courts and blackmail a foreign leader into launching a phony investigation into a political rival. It was Graham who abandoned his own stated support for bipartisanship and instead pushed for a hyperpartisan Senate Judiciary Committee investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden’s son. It was Graham who played golf with Trump, who made excuses for him on television, who supported the president even as he slowly destroyed the American alliances—with Europeans, with the Kurds—that Graham had defended all his life. By contrast, it was Romney who, in February, became the only Republican senator to break ranks with his colleagues, voting to impeach the president. “Corrupting an election to keep oneself in office,” he said, is “perhaps the most abusive and destructive violation of one’s oath of office that I can imagine.”

One man proved willing to betray ideas and ideals that he had once stood for. The other refused. Why?

**TO THE AMERICAN READER,** references to Vichy France, East Germany, fascists, and Communists may seem over-the-top, even ludicrous. But dig a little deeper, and the analogy makes sense. The point is not to compare Trump to Hitler or Stalin; the point is to compare the experiences of high-ranking members of the American Republican Party, especially those who work most closely with the White House, to the experiences of Frenchmen in 1940, or of East Germans in 1945, or of Czesław Miłosz in 1947. These are experiences of people who are forced to accept an alien ideology or a set of values that are in sharp conflict with their own.

Not even Trump’s supporters can contest this analogy, because the imposition of an alien ideology is precisely what he was calling for all along. Trump’s first statement as president, his inaugural address, was an unprecedented assault on American democracy and American values. Remember: He described America’s capital city, America’s government, America’s congressmen and senators—all democratically elected and chosen by Americans, according to America’s 227-year-old Constitution—as an “establishment” that had profited at the expense of “the people.” “Their victories have

not been your victories,” he said. “Their triumphs have not been your triumphs.” Trump was stating, as clearly as he possibly could, that a new set of values was now replacing the old, though of course the nature of those new values was not yet clear.

Almost as soon as he stopped speaking, Trump launched his first assault on fact-based reality, a long-undervalued component of the American political system. We are not a theocracy or a monarchy that accepts the word of the leader or the priesthood as law. We are a democracy that debates facts, seeks to understand problems, and then legislates solutions, all in accordance with a set of rules. Trump’s insistence—against the evidence of photographs, television footage, and the lived experience of thousands of people—that the attendance at his inauguration was higher than at Barack Obama’s first inauguration represented a sharp break with that American political tradition. Like the authoritarian leaders of other times and places, Trump effectively ordered not just his supporters but also apolitical members of the government bureaucracy to adhere to a blatantly false, manipulated reality. American politicians, like politicians everywhere, have always covered up mistakes, held back information, and made promises they could not keep. But until Trump was president, none of them induced the National Park Service to produce doctored photographs or compelled the White House press secretary to lie about the size of a crowd—or encouraged him to do so in front of a press corps that knew he was lying.

The lie was petty, even ridiculous; that was partly why it was so dangerous. In the 1950s, when an insect known as the Colorado potato beetle appeared in Eastern European potato fields, Soviet-backed governments in the region triumphantly claimed that it had been dropped from the sky by American pilots, as a deliberate form of biological sabotage. Posters featuring vicious red-white-and-blue beetles went up all across Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. No one really believed the charge, including the people making it, as archives have subsequently shown. But that didn’t matter. The point of the posters was not to convince people of a falsehood. The point was to demonstrate the party’s power to proclaim and promulgate a falsehood. Sometimes the point isn’t to make people believe a lie—it’s to make people fear the liar.

These kinds of lies also have a way of building on one another. It takes time to persuade people to abandon their existing value systems. The process usually begins slowly, with small changes. Social scientists who have studied the erosion of values and the

growth of corruption inside companies have found, for example, that “people are more likely to accept the unethical behavior of others if the behavior develops gradually (along a slippery slope) rather than occurring abruptly,” according to a 2009 article in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. This happens, in part, because most people have a built-in vision of themselves as moral and honest, and that self-image is resistant to change. Once certain behaviors become “normal,” then people stop seeing them as wrong.

This process happens in politics, too. In 1947, the Soviet military administrators in East Germany passed a regulation governing the activity of publishing houses and printers. The decree did not

nationalize the printing presses; it merely demanded that their owners apply for licenses, and that they confine their work to books and pamphlets ordered by central planners. Imagine how a law like this—which did not speak of arrests, let alone torture or the Gulag—affected the owner of a printing press in Dresden, a responsible family man with two teenage children and a sickly wife. Following its passage, he had to make a series of seemingly insignificant choices. Would he apply for a license? Of course—he needed it to earn money for his family. Would he agree to confine his business to material ordered by the central planners? Yes to that too—what else was there to print?

After that, other compromises follow. Though he dislikes the Communists—he just wants to stay out of politics—he agrees to print the collected works of Stalin, because if he doesn’t do it, others will. When he is asked by some disaffected friends to print a pamphlet critical of the regime, however, he refuses. Though he wouldn’t go to jail for printing it, his children might not be admitted to university, and his wife might not get her medication; he has to think about their welfare. Meanwhile, all across East Germany, other owners of other printing presses are making similar decisions.

And after a while—without anyone being shot or arrested, without anyone feeling any particular pangs of conscience—the only books left to read are the ones approved by the regime.

The built-in vision of themselves as American patriots, or as competent administrators, or as loyal party members, also created a cognitive distortion that blinded many Republicans and Trump-administration officials to the precise nature of the president’s alternative value system. After all, the early incidents were so trivial. They overlooked the lie about the inauguration because it was silly. They ignored Trump’s appointment of the wealthiest Cabinet in history, and his decision to stuff his administration with former lobbyists, because that’s business as usual. They made excuses for Ivanka Trump’s use of a private email account, and for Jared Kushner’s conflicts of interest, because that’s just family stuff.

One step at a time, Trumpism fooled many of its most enthusiastic adherents. Recall that some of the original intellectual supporters of Trump—people like Steve Bannon, Michael Anton, and the advocates of “national conservatism,” an ideology invented, post hoc, to rationalize the president’s behavior—advertised their movement as a recognizable form of populism: an anti-Wall

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SMALL CHANGES.**

Street, anti-foreign-wars, anti-immigration alternative to the small-government libertarianism of the establishment Republican Party. Their “Drain the swamp” slogan implied that Trump would clean up the rotten world of lobbyists and campaign finance that distorts American politics, that he would make public debate more honest and legislation more fair. Had this actually been Trump’s ruling philosophy, it might well have posed difficulties for the Republican Party leadership in 2016, given that most of them had quite different values. But it would not necessarily have damaged the Constitution, and it would not necessarily have posed fundamental moral challenges to people in public life.

In practice, Trump has governed according to a set of principles very different from those articulated by his original intellectual supporters. Although some of his speeches have continued to use that populist language, he has built a Cabinet and an administration that serve neither the public nor his voters but rather his own psychological needs and the interests of his own friends on Wall Street and in business and, of course, his own family. His tax cuts disproportionately benefited the wealthy, not the working class. His shallow economic boom, engineered to ensure his reelection, was made possible by a vast budget deficit, on a scale Republicans once claimed to abhor, an enormous burden for future generations. He worked to dismantle the existing health-care system without offering anything better, as he’d promised to do, so that the number of uninsured people rose. All the while he fanned and encouraged xenophobia and racism, both because he found them politically useful and because they are part of his personal worldview.

More important, he has governed in defiance—and in ignorance—of the American Constitution, notably declaring, well into his third year in office, that he had “total” authority over the states. His administration is not merely corrupt, it is also hostile to checks, balances, and the rule of law. He has built a proto-authoritarian personality cult, firing or sidelining officials who have contradicted him with facts and evidence—with tragic consequences for public health and the economy. He threatened to fire a top Centers for Disease Control and Prevention official, Nancy Messonnier, in late February, after her too-blunt warnings about the coronavirus; Rick Bright, a top Health and Human Services official, says he was demoted after refusing to direct money to promote the unproven drug hydroxychloroquine. Trump has attacked America’s military, calling his generals “a bunch of dopes and babies,” and America’s intelligence services and law-enforcement officers, whom he has denigrated as the “deep state” and whose advice he has ignored. He has appointed weak and inexperienced “acting” officials to run America’s most important security institutions. He has systematically wrecked America’s alliances.

His foreign policy has never served any U.S. interests of any kind. Although some of Trump’s Cabinet ministers and media followers have tried to portray him as an anti-Chinese nationalist—and although foreign-policy commentators from all points on the political spectrum have, amazingly, accepted this fiction without questioning it—Trump’s true instinct, always, has been to side with foreign dictators, including Chinese President Xi Jinping. One former administration official who has seen Trump interact with Xi as well as with Russian President Vladimir Putin told

me that it was like watching a lesser celebrity encounter a more famous one. Trump did not speak to them as the representative of the American people; he simply wanted their aura—of absolute power, of cruelty, of fame—to rub off on him and enhance his own image. This, too, has had fatal consequences. In January, Trump took Xi’s word when he said that COVID-19 was “under control,” just as he had believed North Korea’s Kim Jong Un when he signed a deal on nuclear weapons. Trump’s fawning attitude toward dictators is his ideology at its purest: He meets his own psychological needs first; he thinks about the country last. The true nature of the ideology that Trump brought to Washington was not “America First,” but rather “Trump First.”

Maybe it isn’t surprising that the implications of “Trump First” were not immediately understood. After all, the Communist parties of Eastern Europe—or, if you want a more recent example, the Chavistas in Venezuela—all advertised themselves as advocates of equality and prosperity even though, in practice, they created inequality and poverty. But just as the truth about Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution slowly dawned on people, it also became clear, eventually, that Trump did not have the interests of the American public at heart. And as they came to realize that the president was not a patriot, Republican politicians and senior civil servants began to equivocate, just like people living under an alien regime.

**IN RETROSPECT**, this dawning realization explains why the funeral of John McCain, in September 2018, looked, and by all accounts felt, so strange. Two previous presidents, one Republican and one Democrat—representatives of the old, patriotic political class—made speeches; the sitting president’s name was never mentioned. The songs and symbols of the old order were visible too: “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”; American flags; two of McCain’s sons in their officer’s uniforms, so very different from the sons of Trump. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Susan Glasser described the funeral as “a meeting of the Resistance, under vaulted ceilings and stained-glass windows.” In truth, it bore an uncanny resemblance to the 1956 funeral of László Rajk, a Hungarian Communist and secret-police boss who had been purged and murdered by his comrades in 1949. Rajk’s wife had become an outspoken critic of the regime, and the funeral turned into a de facto political rally, helping to set off Hungary’s anti-Communist revolution a couple of weeks later.

Nothing quite so dramatic happened after McCain’s funeral. But it did clarify the situation. A year and a half into the Trump administration, it marked a turning point, the moment at which many Americans in public life began to adopt the strategies, tactics, and self-justifications that the inhabitants of occupied countries have used in the past—doing so even though the personal stakes were, relatively speaking, so low. Poles like Miłosz wound up in exile in the 1950s; dissidents in East Germany lost the right to work and study. In harsher regimes like that of Stalin’s Russia, public protest could lead to many years in a concentration camp; disobedient Wehrmacht officers were executed by slow strangulation.

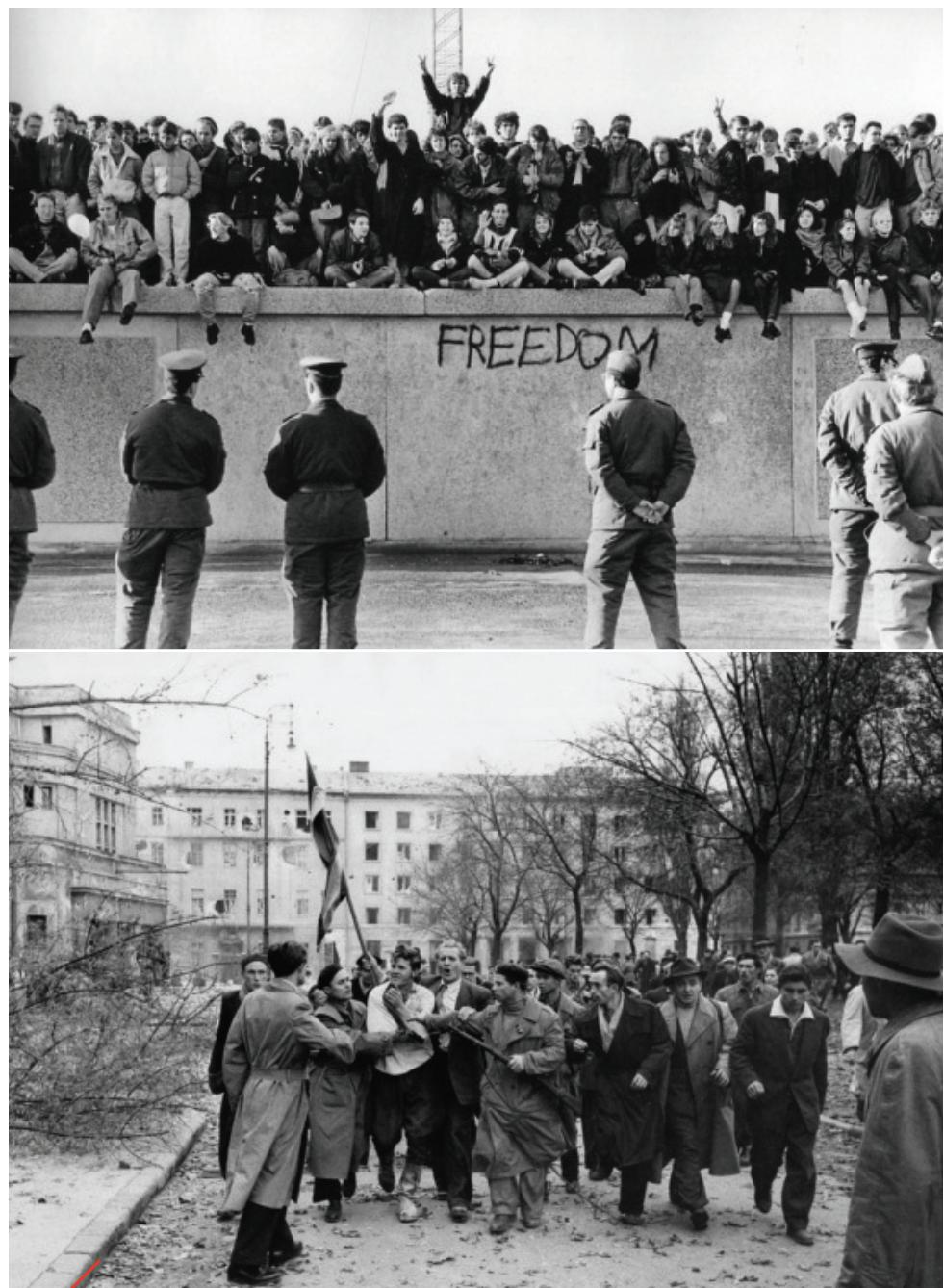
By contrast, a Republican senator who dares to question whether Trump is acting in the interests of the country is in danger of—what, exactly? Losing his seat and winding up with

a seven-figure lobbying job or a fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School? He might meet the terrible fate of Jeff Flake, the former Arizona senator, who has been hired as a contributor by CBS News. He might suffer like Romney, who was tragically not invited to the Conservative Political Action Conference, which this year turned out to be a reservoir of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, 20 months into the Trump administration, senators and other serious-minded Republicans in public life who should have known better began to tell themselves stories that sound very much like those in Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*. Some of these stories overlap with one another; some of them are just thin cloaks to cover self-interest. But all of them are familiar justifications of collaboration, recognizable from the past. Here are the most popular.

*We can use this moment to achieve great things.* In the spring of 2019, a Trump-supporting friend put me in touch with an administration official I will call "Mark," whom I eventually met for a drink. I won't give details, because we spoke informally, but in any case Mark did not leak information or criticize the White House. On the contrary, he described himself as a patriot and a true believer. He supported the language of "America First," and was confident that it could be made real.

Several months later, I met Mark a second time. The impeachment hearings had begun, and the story of the firing of the American ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, was then in the news. The true nature of the administration's ideology—Trump First, not America First—was becoming more obvious. The president's abuse of military aid to Ukraine and his attacks on civil servants suggested not a patriotic White House, but a president focused on his own interests. Mark did not apologize for the president, though. Instead, he changed the subject: It was all worth it, he told me, because of the Uighurs.



*Top:* East German students sit atop the Berlin Wall by the Brandenburg Gate in November 1989, the month the wall fell. *Bottom:* An enraged crowd surrounds members of the secret police in Budapest, Hungary, in November 1956, during an unsuccessful uprising against Soviet tyranny.

I thought I had misheard. *The Uighurs?* Why the Uighurs? I was unaware of anything that the administration had done to aid the oppressed Muslim minority in Xinjiang, China. Mark assured me that letters had been written, statements had been made, the president himself had been persuaded to say something at the United Nations. I doubted very much that the Uighurs

had benefited from these empty words: China hadn't altered its behavior, and the concentration camps built for the Uighurs were still standing. Nevertheless, Mark's conscience was clear. Yes, Trump was destroying America's reputation in the world, and yes, Trump was ruining America's alliances, but Mark was so important to the cause of the Uighurs that people like him could, in good conscience, keep working for the administration.

Mark made me think of the story of Wanda Telakowska, a Polish cultural activist who in 1945 felt much the same as he did. Telakowska had collected and promoted folk art before the war; after the war she made the momentous decision to join the Polish Ministry of Culture. The Communist leadership was arresting and murdering its opponents; the nature of the regime was becoming clear. Telakowska nevertheless thought she could use her position inside the Communist establishment to help Polish artists and designers, to promote their work and get Polish companies to mass-produce their designs. But Polish factories, newly nationalized, were not interested in the designs she commissioned. Communist politicians, skeptical of her loyalty, made Telakowska write articles filled with Marxist gibberish. Eventually she resigned, having achieved nothing she set out to do. A later generation of artists condemned her as a Stalinist and forgot about her.

*We can protect the country from the president.* That, of course, was the argument used by "Anonymous," the author of an unsigned *New York Times* op-ed published in September 2018. For those who have forgotten—a lot has happened since then—that article described the president's "erratic behavior," his inability to concentrate, his ignorance, and above all his lack of "affinity for ideals long espoused by conservatives: free minds, free markets and free people." The "root of the problem," Anonymous concluded, was "the president's amorality." In essence, the article described the true nature of the alternative value system brought into the White House by Trump, at a moment when not everybody in Washington understood it. But even as they came to understand that the Trump presidency was guided by the president's narcissism, Anonymous did not quit, protest, make noise, or campaign against the president and his party.

Instead, Anonymous concluded that remaining inside the system, where they could cleverly distract and restrain the president, was the right course for public servants like them. Anonymous was not alone. Gary Cohn, at the time the White House economic adviser, told Bob Woodward that he'd removed papers from the president's desk to prevent him from pulling out of a trade agreement with South Korea. James Mattis, Trump's original secretary of defense, stayed in office because he thought he could educate the president about the value of America's alliances, or at least protect some of them from destruction.

This kind of behavior has echoes in other countries and other times. A few months ago, in Venezuela, I spoke with Víctor Álvarez, a minister in one of Hugo Chávez's governments and a high-ranking official before that. Álvarez explained to me the arguments he had made in favor of protecting some private industry, and his opposition to mass nationalization. Álvarez was in government from the late 1990s through 2006, a time when Chávez was stepping up the use of police against peaceful demonstrators

and undermining democratic institutions. Still, Álvarez remained, hoping to curb Chávez's worst economic instincts. Ultimately, he did quit, after concluding that Chávez had created a loyalty cult around himself—Álvarez called it a "subclimate" of obedience—and was no longer listening to anyone who disagreed.

In authoritarian regimes, many insiders eventually conclude that their presence simply does not matter. Cohn, after publicly agonizing when the president said there had been "fine people on both sides" at the deadly white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, finally quit when the president made the ruinous decision to put tariffs on steel and aluminum, a decision that harmed American businesses. Mattis reached his breaking point when the president abandoned the Kurds, America's longtime allies in the war against the Islamic State.

But although both resigned, neither Cohn nor Mattis has spoken out in any notable way. Their presence inside the White House helped build Trump's credibility among traditional Republican voters; their silence now continues to serve the president's purposes. As for Anonymous, we don't know whether he or she remains inside the administration. For the record, I note that Álvarez lives in Venezuela, an actual police state, and yet is willing to speak out against the system he helped create. Cohn, Mattis, and Anonymous, all living freely in the United States of America, have not been nearly so brave.

*I, personally, will benefit.* These, of course, are words that few people ever say out loud. Perhaps some do quietly acknowledge to themselves that they have not resigned or protested because it would cost them money or status. But no one wants a reputation as a careerist or a turncoat. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, even Markus Wolf sought to portray himself as an idealist. He had truly believed in Marxist-Leninist ideals, this infamously cynical man told an interviewer in 1996, and "I still believe in them."

Many people in and around the Trump administration are seeking personal benefits. Many of them are doing so with a degree of openness that is startling and unusual in contemporary American politics, at least at this level. As an ideology, "Trump First" suits these people, because it gives them license to put themselves first. To pick a random example: Sonny Perdue, the secretary of agriculture, is a former Georgia governor and a businessman who, like Trump, famously refused to put his agricultural companies into a blind trust when he entered the governor's office. Perdue has never even pretended to separate his political and personal interests. Since joining the Cabinet he has, with almost no oversight, distributed billions of dollars of "compensation" to farms damaged by Trump's trade policies. He has stuffed his department with former lobbyists who are now in charge of regulating their own industries: Deputy Secretary Stephen Censky was for 21 years the CEO of the American Soybean Association; Brooke Appleton was a lobbyist for the National Corn Growers Association before becoming Censky's chief of staff, and has since returned to that group; Kailee Tkacz, a member of a nutritional advisory panel, is a former lobbyist for the Snack Food Association. The list goes on and on, as would lists of similarly compromised people in the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and elsewhere.

Perdue's department also employs an extraordinary range of people with no experience in agriculture whatsoever. These modern apparatchiks, hired for their loyalty rather than their competence, include a long-haul truck driver, a country-club cabana attendant, the owner of a scented-candle company, and an intern at the Republican National Committee. The long-haul truck driver was paid \$80,000 a year to expand markets for American agriculture abroad. Why was he qualified? He had a background in "hauling and shipping agricultural commodities."

*I must remain close to power.* Another sort of benefit, harder to measure, has kept many people who object to Trump's policies or behavior from speaking out: the intoxicating experience of power, and the belief that proximity to a powerful person bestows higher status. This, too, is nothing new. In a 1968 article for *The Atlantic*, James Thomson, an American East Asia specialist, brilliantly explained how power functioned inside the U.S. bureaucracy in the Vietnam era. When the war in Vietnam was going badly, many people did not resign or speak out in public, because preserving their "effectiveness"—a mysterious combination of training, style, and connections," as Thomson defined it—was an all-consuming concern. He called this "the effectiveness trap":

The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce in the presence of the great men—to live to fight another day, to give on this issue so that you can be "effective" on later issues—is overwhelming. Nor is it the tendency of youth alone; some of our most senior officials, men of wealth and fame, whose place in history is secure, have remained silent lest their connection with power be terminated.

In any organization, private or public, the boss will of course sometimes make decisions that his underlings dislike. But when basic principles are constantly violated, and people constantly defer resignation—"I can always fall on my sword next time"—then misguided policies go fatally unchallenged.

In other countries, the effectiveness trap has other names. In his recent book on Putinism, *Between Two Fires*, Joshua Yaffa describes the Russian version of this syndrome. The Russian language, he notes, has a word—*prisposoblenets*—that means "a person skilled in the act of compromise and adaptation, who intuitively understands what is expected of him and adjusts his beliefs and conduct accordingly." In Putin's Russia, anyone who wants to stay in the game—to remain close to power, to retain influence, to inspire respect—knows the necessity of making constant small changes to one's language and behavior, of being careful about what one says and to whom one says it, of understanding what criticism is acceptable and what constitutes a violation of the unwritten rules. Those who violate these rules will not, for the most part, suffer prison—Putin's Russia is not Stalin's Russia—but they will experience a painful ejection from the inner circle.

For those who have never experienced it, the mystical pull of that connection to power, that feeling of being an insider, is difficult to explain. Nevertheless, it is real, and strong enough to affect even the highest-ranking, best-known, most influential people in America. John Bolton, Trump's former national security adviser, named his still-unpublished book *The Room Where It Happened*,

because, of course, that's where he has always wanted to be. A friend who regularly runs into Lindsey Graham in Washington told me that each time they meet, "he brags about having just met with Trump" while exhibiting "high school" levels of excitement, as if "a popular quarterback has just bestowed some attention on a nerdy debate-club leader—the powerful big kid likes me!" That kind of intense pleasure is hard to relinquish and even harder to live without.

*LOL nothing matters.* Cynicism, nihilism, relativism, amorality, irony, sarcasm, boredom, amusement—these are all reasons to collaborate, and always have been. Marko Martin, a novelist and travel writer who grew up in East Germany, told me that in the 1980s some of the East German bohemia, influenced by then-fashionable French intellectuals, argued that there was no such thing as morality or immorality, no such thing as good or evil, no such thing as right or wrong—"so you might as well collaborate."

This instinct has an American variation. Politicians here who have spent their lives following rules and watching their words, calibrating their language, giving pious speeches about morality and governance, may feel a sneaking admiration for someone like Trump, who breaks all the rules and gets away with it. He lies; he cheats; he extorts; he refuses to show compassion, sympathy, or empathy; he does not pretend to believe in anything or to abide by any moral code. He simulates patriotism, with flags and gestures, but he does not behave like a patriot; his campaign scrambled to get help from Russia in 2016 ("If it's what you say, I love it," replied Donald Trump Jr., when offered Russian "dirt" on Hillary Clinton), and Trump himself called on Russia to hack his opponent. And for some of those at the top of his administration, and of his party, these character traits might have a deep, unacknowledged appeal: If there is no such thing as moral and immoral, then everyone is implicitly released from the need to obey any rules. *If the president doesn't respect the Constitution, then why should I? If the president can cheat in elections, then why can't I? If the president can sleep with porn stars, then why shouldn't I?*

This, of course, was the insight of the "alt-right," which understood the dark allure of amorality, open racism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny long before many others in the Republican Party. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary critic, recognized the lure of the forbidden a century ago, writing about the deep appeal of the carnival, a space where everything banned is suddenly allowed, where eccentricity is permitted, where profanity defeats piety. The Trump administration is like that: Nothing means anything, rules don't matter, and the president is the carnival king.

*My side might be flawed, but the political opposition is much worse.* When Marshal Philippe Pétain, the leader of collaborationist France, took over the Vichy government, he did so in the name of the restoration of a France that he believed had been lost. Pétain had been a fierce critic of the French Republic, and once he was in control, he replaced its famous creed—*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, or "Liberty, equality, fraternity"—with a different slogan: *Travail, famille, patrie*, or "Work, family, fatherland." Instead of the "false idea of the natural equality of man," he proposed bringing back "social hierarchy"—order, tradition, and religion. Instead of accepting modernity, Pétain sought to turn back the clock.

By Pétain's reckoning, collaboration with the Germans was not merely an embarrassing necessity. It was crucial, because it gave patriots the ability to fight the *real* enemy: the French parliamentarians, socialists, anarchists, Jews, and other assorted leftists and democrats who, he believed, were undermining the nation, robbing it of its vitality, destroying its essence. "Rather Hitler than Blum," the saying went—Blum having been France's socialist (and Jewish) prime minister in the late 1930s. One Vichy minister, Pierre Laval, famously declared that he hoped Germany would conquer all of Europe. Otherwise, he asserted, "Bolshevism would tomorrow establish itself everywhere."

To Americans, this kind of justification should sound very familiar; we have been hearing versions of it since 2016. The existential nature of the threat from "the left" has been spelled out many times. "Our liberal-left present reality and future direction is incompatible with human nature," wrote Michael Anton, in "The Flight 93 Election." The Fox News anchor Laura Ingraham has warned that "massive demographic changes" threaten us too: "In some parts of the country it does seem like the America that we know and love doesn't exist anymore." This is the Vichy logic: The nation is dead or dying—so anything you can do to restore it is justified. Whatever criticisms might be made of Trump, whatever harm he has done to democracy and the rule of law, whatever corrupt deals he might make while in the White House—all of these shrink in comparison to the horrific alternative: the liberalism, socialism, moral decadence, demographic change, and cultural degradation that would have been the inevitable result of Hillary Clinton's presidency.

The Republican senators who are willing to express their disgust with Trump off the record but voted in February for him to remain in office all indulge a variation of this sentiment. (Trump enables them to get the judges they want, and those judges will help create the America they want.) So do the evangelical pastors who ought to be disgusted by Trump's personal behavior but argue, instead, that the current situation has scriptural precedents. Like King David in the Bible, the president is a sinner, a flawed vessel, but he nevertheless offers a path to salvation for a fallen nation.

The three most important members of Trump's Cabinet—Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Attorney General William Barr—are all profoundly shaped by Vichyite apocalyptic thinking. All three are clever enough to understand what Trumpism really means, that it has nothing to do with God or faith, that it is self-serving, greedy, and unpatriotic. Nevertheless, a former member of the administration (one of the few who did decide to resign) told me that both Pence and Pompeo "have convinced themselves that they are in a biblical moment." All of the things they care about—outlawing abortion and same-sex marriage, and (though this is never said out loud)

maintaining a white majority in America—are under threat. Time is growing short. They believe that "we are approaching the Rapture, and this is a moment of deep religious significance." Barr, in a speech at Notre Dame, has also described his belief that "militant secularists" are destroying America, that "irreligion and secular values are being forced on people of faith." Whatever evil Trump does, whatever he damages or destroys, at least he enables Barr, Pence, and Pompeo to save America from a far worse fate. If you are convinced we are living in the End Times, then anything the president does can be forgiven.

*I am afraid to speak out.*

Fear, of course, is the most important reason any inhabitant of an authoritarian or totalitarian society does not protest or resign, even when the leader commits crimes, violates his official ideology, or forces people to do things that they know to be wrong. In extreme dictatorships like Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia, people fear for their lives. In softer dictatorships, like East Germany after 1950 and Putin's Russia today, people fear losing their jobs or their apartments. Fear works as a motivation even when violence is a memory rather than a reality. When I was a student in Leningrad in the 1980s, some people still stepped back in horror when I asked for directions on the street, in my accented Russian: No one was going to be arrested for speaking to a foreigner in 1984, but 30 years earlier they might have been, and the cultural memory remained.

In the United States of

America, it is hard to imagine how fear could be a motivation for anybody. There are no mass murders of the regime's political enemies, and there never have been. Political opposition is legal; free press and free speech are guaranteed in the Constitution. And yet even in one of the world's oldest and most stable democracies, fear is a motive. The same former administration official who observed the importance of apocalyptic Christianity in Trump's Washington also told me, with grim disgust, that "they are all scared."

They are scared not of prison, the official said, but of being attacked by Trump on Twitter. They are scared he will make up a nickname for them. They are scared that they will be mocked,

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WHILE EXHIBITING  
"HIGH SCHOOL" LEVELS  
OF EXCITEMENT,  
AS IF "A POPULAR  
QUARTERBACK HAS  
JUST BESTOWED  
SOME ATTENTION  
ON A NERDY DEBATE  
CLUB LEADER."**

or embarrassed, like Mitt Romney has been. They are scared of losing their social circles, of being disinherited from parties. They are scared that their friends and supporters, and especially their donors, will desert them. John Bolton has his own super PAC and a lot of plans for how he wants to use it; no wonder he resisted testifying against Trump. Former Speaker Paul Ryan is among the dozens of House Republicans who have left Congress since the beginning of this administration, in one of the most striking personnel turnovers in congressional history. They left because they hated what Trump was doing to their party—and the country. Yet even after they left, they did not speak out.

They are scared, and yet they don't seem to know that this fear has precedents, or that it could have consequences. They don't know that similar waves of fear have helped transform other democracies into dictatorships. They don't seem to realize that the American Senate really could become the Russian Duma, or the Hungarian Parliament, a group of exalted men and women who sit in an elegant building, with no influence and no power. Indeed, we are already much closer to that reality than many could ever have imagined.

**IN FEBRUARY**, many members of the Republican Party leadership, Republican senators, and people inside the administration used various versions of these rationales to justify their opposition to impeachment. All of them had seen the evidence that Trump had stepped over the line in his dealings with the president of Ukraine. All of them knew that he had tried to use American foreign-policy tools, including military funding, to force a foreign leader into investigating a domestic political opponent. Yet Republican senators, led by Mitch McConnell, never took the charges seriously. They mocked the Democratic House leaders who had presented the charges. They decided against hearing evidence. With the single exception of Romney, they voted in favor of ending the investigation. They did not use the opportunity to rid the country of a president whose operative value system—built around corruption, nascent authoritarianism, self-regard, and his family's business interests—runs counter to everything that most of them claim to believe in.

Just a month later, in March, the consequences of that decision became suddenly clear. After the U.S. and the world were plunged into crisis by a coronavirus that had no cure, the damage done by the president's self-focused, self-dealing narcissism—his one

true “ideology”—was finally visible. He led a federal response to the virus that was historically chaotic. The disappearance of the federal government was not a carefully planned transfer of power to the states, as some tried to claim, or a thoughtful decision to use the talents of private companies. This was the inevitable result of a three-year assault on professionalism, loyalty, competence, and patriotism. Tens of thousands of people have died, and the economy has been ruined.

This utter disaster was avoidable. If the Senate had removed the president by impeachment a month earlier; if the Cabinet had invoked the Twenty-Fifth Amendment as soon as Trump's unfitness became clear; if the anonymous and off-the-record officials who knew of Trump's incompetence had jointly warned the public; if they had not, instead, been so concerned about maintaining their proximity to power; if senators had not been scared of their donors; if Pence, Pompeo, and Barr had not believed that God had chosen them to play special roles in this “biblical moment”—if any of these things had gone differently, then thousands of deaths and a historic economic collapse might have been avoided.

The price of collaboration in America has already turned out to be extraordinarily high. And yet, the movement down the slippery slope continues, just as it did in so many occupied countries in the past. First Trump's enablers accepted lies about the inauguration; now they accept terrible tragedy and the loss of American leadership in the world. Worse could follow. Come November, will they tolerate—even abet—an assault on the electoral system: open efforts to prevent postal voting, to shut polling stations, to scare people away from voting? Will they countenance violence, as the president's social-media fans incite demonstrators to launch physical attacks on state and city officials?

Each violation of our Constitution and our civic peace gets absorbed, rationalized, and accepted by people who once upon a time knew better. If, following what is almost certain to be one of the ugliest elections in American history, Trump wins a second term, these people may well accept even worse. Unless, of course, they decide not to.

When I visited Marianne Birthler, she didn't think it was interesting to talk about collaboration in East Germany, because everybody collaborated in East Germany. So I asked her about dissidence instead:

When all of your friends, all of your teachers, and all of your employers are firmly behind the system, how do you find the courage to oppose it? In her answer, Birthler resisted the use of the word *courage*; just as people can adapt to corruption or immorality, she told me, they can slowly learn to object as well. The choice to become a dissident can easily be the result of “a number of small decisions that you take”—to absent yourself from the May Day parade, for example, or not to sing the words of the party hymn. And then, one day, you find yourself irrevocably on the other side. Often, this process involves role models. You see people whom you admire, and you want to be like them. It

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**Top:** Senator Lindsey Graham outside his office on Capitol Hill on December 19, 2019, the day after the House voted to impeach Donald Trump. Graham staunchly defended Trump during impeachment. **Bottom:** On November 21, 2019, during the House Intelligence Committee's impeachment inquiry, Trump's former deputy assistant Fiona Hill testified that Republicans were promulgating a false narrative about Ukraine.

can even be “selfish.” “You want to do something for yourself,” Birthler said, “to respect yourself.”

For some people, the struggle is made easier by their upbringing. Marko Martin’s parents hated the East German regime, and so did he. His father was a conscientious objector, and so was he. As far back as the Weimar Republic, his great-grandparents had been part of the “anarcho-syndicalist” anti-Communist left;

he had access to their books. In the 1980s, he refused to join the Free German Youth, the Communist youth organization, and as a result he could not go to university. He instead embarked on a vocational course, to train to be an electrician (after refusing to become a butcher). In his electrician-training classes, one of the other students pulled him aside and warned him, subtly, that the Stasi was collecting information on him: “It’s not necessary that you tell me all the things you have in mind.” He was eventually allowed to emigrate, in May 1989, just a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In America we also have our Marianne Birthlers, our Marko Martins: people whose families taught them respect for the Constitution, who have faith in the rule of law, who believe in the importance of disinterested public service, who have values and role models from outside the world of the Trump administration. Over the past year, many such people have found the courage to stand up for what they believe. A few have been thrust into the limelight. Fiona Hill—an immigrant success story and a true believer in the American Constitution—was not afraid to testify at the House’s impeachment hearings, nor was she afraid to speak out against Republicans who were promulgating a false story of Ukrainian interference in the 2016 election. “This is a fictional narrative that has been perpetrated and propagated by the Russian security services themselves,” she said in her congressional testimony. “The

unfortunate truth is that Russia was the foreign power that systematically attacked our democratic institutions in 2016.”

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman—another immigrant success story and another true believer in the American Constitution—also found the courage, first to report on the president’s improper telephone call with his Ukrainian counterpart, which Vindman had heard as a member of the National Security

Council, and then to speak publicly about it. In his testimony, he made explicit reference to the values of the American political system, so different from those in the place where he was born. “In Russia,” he said, “offering public testimony involving the president would surely cost me my life.” But as “an American citizen and public servant … I can live free of fear for mine and my family’s safety.” A few days after the Senate impeachment vote, Vindman was physically escorted out of the White House by representatives of a vengeful president who did not appreciate Vindman’s hymn to American patriotism—although retired Marine Corps General John Kelly, the president’s former chief of staff, apparently did. Vindman’s behavior, Kelly said in a speech a few days later, was “exactly what we teach them to do from cradle to grave. He went and told his boss what he just heard.”

But both Hill and Vindman had some important advantages. Neither had to answer to voters, or to donors. Neither had prominent status in the Republican Party. What would it take, by contrast, for Pence or Pompeo to conclude that the president bears responsibility for a catastrophic health and economic crisis? What would it take for Republican senators to admit to themselves that Trump’s loyalty cult is destroying the country they claim to love? What would it take for their aides and subordinates to come to the same conclusion, to resign, and to campaign against the president? What would it take, in other words, for someone like Lindsey Graham to behave like Wolfgang Leonhard?

If, as Stanley Hoffmann wrote, the honest historian would have to speak of “collaborations,” because the phenomenon comes in so many variations, the same is true of dissidence, which should probably be described as “dissidences.” People can suddenly change their minds because of spontaneous intellectual revelations like the one Wolfgang Leonhard had when walking into his fancy *nomenklatura* dining room, with its white tablecloths and three-course meals. They can also be persuaded by outside events: rapid political changes, for example. Awareness that the regime had lost its legitimacy is part of what made Harald Jaeger, an obscure and until that moment completely loyal East German border guard, decide on the night of November 9, 1989, to lift the gates and let his fellow citizens walk through the Berlin Wall—a decision that led, over the next days and months, to the end of East Germany itself. Jaeger’s decision was not planned; it was a spontaneous response

to the fearlessness of the crowd. “Their will was so great,” he said years later, of those demanding to cross into West Berlin, “there was no other alternative than to open the border.”

But these things are all intertwined, and not easy to disentangle. The personal, the political, the intellectual, and the historical combine differently within every human brain, and the outcomes can be unpredictable. Leonhard’s “sudden” revelation may have been building for years, perhaps since his mother’s arrest. Jaeger was moved by the grandeur of the historical moment on that night in November, but he also had more petty concerns: He was annoyed at his boss, who had not given him clear instructions about what to do.

Could some similar combination of the petty and the political ever convince Lindsey Graham that he has helped lead his country down a blind alley? Perhaps a personal experience could move him, a prod from someone who represents his former value system—an old Air Force buddy, say, whose life has been damaged by Trump’s reckless behavior, or a friend from his hometown. Perhaps it requires a mass political event: When the voters begin to turn, maybe Graham will turn with them, arguing, as Jaeger did, that “their will was so great … there was no other alternative.” At some point, after all, the calculus of conformism will begin to shift. It will become awkward and uncomfortable to continue supporting “Trump First,” especially as Americans suffer from the worst recession in living memory and die from the coronavirus in numbers higher than in much of the rest of the world.

Or perhaps the only antidote is time. In due course, historians will write the story of our era and draw lessons from it, just as we write the history of the 1930s, or of the 1940s. The Miłoszes and the Hoffmanns of the future will make their judgments with the clarity

of hindsight. They will see, more clearly than we can, the path that led the U.S. into a historic loss of international influence, into economic catastrophe, into political chaos of a kind we haven’t experienced since the years leading up to the Civil War. Then maybe Graham—along with Pence, Pompeo, McConnell, and a whole host of lesser figures—will understand what he has enabled.

In the meantime, I leave anyone who has the bad luck to be in public life at this moment with a final thought from Władysław Bartoszewski, who was a member of the wartime Polish underground, a prisoner of both the Nazis and the Stalinists, and then, finally, the foreign minister in two Polish democratic governments. Late in his life—he lived to be 93—he summed up the philosophy that had guided him through all of these tumultuous political changes. It was not idealism that drove him, or big ideas, he said. It was this: *Warto być przyzwoitym*—“Just try to be decent.” Whether you were decent—that’s what will be remembered. *A*

*Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic. Her latest book, Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism, will be published in July.*

## WHAT WOULD IT TAKE FOR REPUBLICAN LEADERS TO ADMIT TO THEMSELVES THAT TRUMP’S LOYALTY CULT IS DESTROYING THE COUNTRY THEY CLAIM TO LOVE?



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*Thirty years ago, the world discovered tens of thousands of children warehoused in Romanian orphanages, deprived of human contact and affection. They're adults now.*

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CAN AN  
UNLOVED  
CHILD  
LEARN TO  
LOVE?

---

BY  
MELISSA  
FAY  
GREENE

---



*Izidor Ruckel near his home outside Denver*

**FOR HIS FIRST  
THREE YEARS OF LIFE,  
IZIDOR LIVED  
AT THE HOSPITAL.**

The dark-eyed, black-haired boy, born June 20, 1980, had been abandoned when he was a few weeks old. The reason was obvious to anyone who bothered to look: His right leg was a bit deformed. After a bout of illness (probably polio), he had been tossed into a sea of abandoned infants in the Socialist Republic of Romania.

In films of the period documenting orphan care, you see nurses like assembly-line workers swaddling newborns out of a seemingly endless supply; with muscled arms and casual indifference, they sling each one onto a square of cloth, expertly knot it into a tidy package, and stick it at the end of a row of silent, worried-looking papooses. The women don't coo or sing to the babies. You see the small faces trying to fathom what's happening as their heads whip by during the wrapping maneuvers.

In his hospital, in the Southern Carpathian mountain town of Sighetu Marmației, Izidor would have been fed by a bottle stuck into his mouth and propped against the bars of a crib. Well past the age when children in the outside world began tasting solid food and then feeding themselves, he and his age-mates remained on their backs, sucking from bottles with widened openings to allow the passage of a watery gruel. Without proper care or physical therapy, the baby's leg muscles wasted. At 3, he was deemed "deficient" and transferred across town to a *Cămin Spital Pentru Copii Deficienți*, a Home Hospital for Irrecoverable Children.

The cement fortress emitted no sounds of children playing, though as many as 500 lived inside at one time. It stood mournfully aloof from the cobblestone streets and sparkling river of the town where Elie Wiesel had been born, in 1928, and enjoyed a happy childhood before the Nazi deportations.

The windows on Izidor's third-floor ward had been fitted with prison bars. In boyhood, he stood there often, gazing down on an empty mud yard enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. Through bare branches in winter, Izidor got a look at another hospital that sat right in front of his own and concealed it from the street. Real children, children wearing shoes and coats, children holding their parents' hands, came and went from that hospital. No one from Izidor's *Cămin Spital* was ever taken there, no matter how sick, not even if they were dying.

Like all the boys and girls who lived in the hospital for "irrecoverables," Izidor was served nearly inedible, watered-down food at long tables where naked children on benches banged their tin bowls. He grew up in overcrowded rooms where his fellow

orphans endlessly rocked, or punched themselves in the face, or shrieked. Out-of-control children were dosed with adult tranquilizers, administered through unsterilized needles, while many who fell ill received transfusions of unscreened blood. Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS ravaged the Romanian orphanages.

Izidor was destined to spend the rest of his childhood in this building, to exit the gates only at 18, at which time, if he were thoroughly incapacitated, he'd be transferred to a home for old men; if he turned out to be minimally functional, he'd be evicted to make his way on the streets. Odds were high that he wouldn't survive that long, that the boy with the shriveled leg would die in childhood, malnourished, shivering, unloved.

**THIS PAST CHRISTMAS DAY** was the 30th anniversary of the public execution by firing squad of Romania's last Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who'd ruled for 24 years. In 1990, the outside world discovered his network of "child gulags," in which an estimated 170,000 abandoned infants, children, and teens were being raised. Believing that a larger population would beef up Romania's economy, Ceaușescu had curtailed contraception and abortion, imposed tax penalties on people who were childless, and celebrated as "heroine mothers" women who gave birth to 10 or more. Parents who couldn't possibly handle another baby might call their new arrival "Ceaușescu's child," as in "Let him raise it."

To house a generation of unwanted or unaffordable children, Ceaușescu ordered the construction or conversion of hundreds of structures around the country. Signs displayed the slogan: **THE STATE CAN TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOUR CHILD THAN YOU CAN.**

At age 3, abandoned children were sorted. Future workers would get clothes, shoes, food, and some schooling in *Case de copii*—"children's homes"—while "deficient" children wouldn't get much of anything in their *Cămine Spitale*. The Soviet "science of defecatology" viewed disabilities in infants as intrinsic and incurable. Even children with treatable issues—perhaps they were cross-eyed or anemic, or had a cleft lip—were classified as "unsalvageable."

After the Romanian revolution, children in unspeakable conditions—skeletal, splashing in urine on the floor, caked with feces—were discovered and filmed by foreign news programs, including ABC's *20/20*, which broadcast "Shame of a Nation" in 1990. Like the liberators of Auschwitz 45 years before, early visitors to the institutions have been haunted all their lives by what

they saw. “We flew in by helicopter over the snow to Siret, landing after midnight, subzero weather, accompanied by Romanian bodyguards carrying Uzis,” Jane Aronson tells me. A Manhattan-based pediatrician and adoption-medicine specialist, she was part of one of the first pediatric teams summoned to Romania by the new government. “We walk into a pitch-black, freezing-cold building and discover there are youngsters lurking about—they’re tiny, but older, something weird, like trolls, filthy, stinking. They’re chanting in a dronelike way, gibberish. We open a door and find a population of ‘cretins’—now it’s known as congenital iodine deficiency syndrome; untreated hypothyroidism stunts growth and brain development. I don’t know how old they were, three feet tall, could have been in their 20s. In other rooms we see teenagers the size of 6- and 7-year-olds, with no secondary sexual characteristics. There were children with underlying genetic disorders lying in cages. You start almost to disassociate.”

“I walked into an institution in Bucharest one afternoon, and there was a small child standing there sobbing,” recalls Charles A. Nelson III, a professor of pediatrics and neuroscience at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital. “He was heartbroken and had wet his pants. I asked, ‘What’s going on with that child?’ A worker said, ‘Well, his mother abandoned him this morning and he’s been like that all day.’ That was it. No one comforted the little boy or picked him up. That was my introduction.”

The Romanian orphans were not the first devastatingly neglected children to be seen by psychologists in the 20th century. Unresponsive World War II orphans, as well as children kept isolated for long periods in hospitals, had deeply concerned mid-century child-development giants such as René Spitz and John Bowlby. In an era devoted to fighting

malnutrition, injury, and infection, the idea that adequately fed and medically stable children could waste away because they missed their parents was hard to believe. Their research led to the then-bold notion, advanced especially by Bowlby, that simply lacking an “attachment figure,” a parent or caregiver, could wreak a lifetime of havoc on mental and physical health.

Neuroscientists tended to view “attachment theory” as suggestive and thought-provoking work within the “soft science” of psychology. It largely relied on case studies or correlational

evidence or animal research. In the psychologist Harry Harlow’s infamous “maternal deprivation” experiments, he caged baby rhesus monkeys alone, offering them only maternal facsimiles made of wire and wood, or foam and terry cloth.

In 1998, at a small scientific meeting, animal research presented back-to-back with images from Romanian orphanages changed the course of the study of attachment. First the University of Minnesota neonatal-pediatrics professor Dana Johnson shared photos and videos that he’d collected in Romania of rooms teeming with children engaged in “motor stereotypes”: rocking, banging their heads, squawking. He was followed by a speaker who showed videos of her work with motherless primate infants like the ones Harlow had produced—swaying, twirling, self-mutilating. The audience was shocked by the parallels. “We were all in tears,” Nelson told me.

In the decade after the fall of Ceaușescu, the new Romanian government welcomed Western child-development experts to simultaneously help and study the tens of thousands of children still warehoused in state care. Researchers hoped to answer some long-standing questions: Are there sensitive periods in neural development, after which the brain of a deprived child cannot make full use of the mental, emotional, and physical stimulation later offered? Can the effects of “maternal deprivation” or “caregiver absence” be documented with modern neuroimaging techniques? Finally, if an institutionalized child is transferred into a family setting, can he or she recoup undeveloped capacities? Implicitly, poignantly: Can a person unloved in childhood learn to love?



*Children at the Home Hospital for Irrecoverable Children in Sighetu Marmăiei, Romania, in September 1992*

TRACT DEVELOPMENTS FAN out from the Denver airport like playing cards on a table. The Great Plains have been ground down to almost nothing here, to wind and dirt and trash on the shoulder of the highway, to Walgreens and Arby’s and AutoZone. In a rental car, I drive slowly around the semicircles and cul-de-sacs of Izidor’s subdivision until I see him step out of the shadow of a 4,500-square-foot McMansion with a polite half-wave. He sublets a room here, as do others, including some families—an exurban commune in a single-family residence built for Goliaths. At 39, Izidor is an elegant, wiry man with mournful eyes. His manner is alert and tentative. A general manager for a KFC, he works 60-to-65-hour weeks.

"Welcome to Romania," he announces, opening his bedroom door. It's an entryway into another time, another place. From every visit to his home country, Izidor has brought back folk art and souvenirs—hand-painted glazed plates and teacups, embroidered tea towels, Romanian flags, shot glasses, wood figurines, cut-glass flasks of plum brandy, and CDs of Romanian folk music, heavy on the violins. He could stock a gift shop. There are thick wine-colored rugs, blankets, and wall hangings. The ambient light is maroon, the curtains closed against the high-altitude sunshine. Ten miles southwest of the Denver airport, Izidor is living in an ersatz Romanian cottage.

"Everyone in Maramureş lives like this," he tells me, referring to the cultural region in northern Romania where he was born.

I'm thinking, *Do they, though?*

"You will see that many people there have these things in their homes," he clarifies.

That sounds more accurate. People like knickknacks. "Do you sound like a Romanian when you visit?" I ask.

"No," he says. "When I start to speak, they ask, 'Where are you from?' I tell them: 'From Maramureş!'" No one believes him, because of his accent, so he has to explain: "Technically, if you want to be logical about it, I am Romanian, but I've lived in America for more than 20 years."

"When you meet new people, do you talk about your history?"

"No, I try not to. I want to experience Romania as a normal human being. I don't want to be known everywhere as 'the Orphan.'"

His precise English makes even casual phrases sound formal. In his room, Izidor has captured the Romanian folk aesthetic, but something else stirs beneath the surface. I'm reminded of the book he self-published at age 22, titled *Abandoned for Life*. It's a grim tale, but once, when he was about 8, Izidor had a happy day.

A kind nanny had started working at the hospital. "Onisa was a young lady, a bit chubby, with long black hair and round rosy cheeks," Izidor writes in his memoir. "She loved to sing and often taught us some of her music." One day, Onisa intervened when another nanny was striking Izidor with a broomstick. Like a few others before her, Onisa had spotted his intelligence. On the ward of semi-ambulatory (some crawled or crept), slightly verbal (some just made noises) children, Izidor was the go-to kid if an adult had questions, like what was that one's name or when had that one died. The director would occasionally peek in and ask Izidor if he and the other children were being hit; to avoid retribution, Izidor always said no.

On that day, to cheer him up after his beating, Onisa promised that someday she'd take him home with her for an overnight visit. Skeptical that such an extraordinary event would ever happen, Izidor thanked her for the nice idea.

A few weeks later, on a snowy winter day, Onisa dressed Izidor in warm clothes and shoes she'd brought from home, took him by the hand, and led him out the front door and through the orphanage gate. Walking slowly, she took the small boy, who swayed on uneven legs with a deep, tilting limp, down the lane past the public hospital and into the town. Cold, fresh air brushed his cheeks, and snow squeaked under his shoes; the wind rattled the branches; a bird stood on a chimney. "It was my first time

ever going out into the world," he tells me now. He looked in astonishment at the cars and houses and shops. He tried to absorb and memorize everything to report back to the kids on his ward.

"When I stepped into Onisa's apartment," he writes, "I could not believe how beautiful it was; the walls were covered with dark rugs and there was a picture of the Last Supper on one of them. The carpets on the floor were red." Neighborhood children knocked on Onisa's door to see if the strange boy from the orphanage wanted to come out and play, and he did. Onisa's children arrived home from school, and Izidor learned that it was the start of their Christmas holiday. He feasted alongside Onisa's family at their friends' dinner table that night, tasting Romanian specialties for the first time, including *sarmale* (stuffed cabbage), potato goulash with thick noodles, and sweet yellow sponge cake

*To cheer Izidor up  
after his beating,  
Onisa promised that  
someday she'd take  
him home with her for  
an overnight visit.*

with cream filling. He remembers every bite. On the living-room floor after dinner, the child of that household let Izidor play with his toys. Izidor followed the boy's lead and drove little trains across the rug. Back at Onisa's, he slept in his first-ever soft, clean bed.

The next morning, Onisa asked Izidor if he wanted to go to work with her or to stay with her children. Here he made a mistake so terrible that, 31 years later, he still remembers it with grief.

"I want to go to work with you!" he called. He was deep into a fantasy that Onisa was his mother, and he didn't want to be parted from her. "I got dressed as fast as I could, and we headed out the door," he remembers. "When we were near her work, I realized that her work was at the hospital, *my* hospital, and I began to

cry ... It had only been 24 hours but somehow I thought I was going to be part of Onisa's family now. It didn't occur to me that her work was actually at the hospital until we were at the gate again. I felt so shocked when we turned into the yard it was like I'd forgotten I came from there."

He tried to turn back but wasn't permitted. He'd found the most wonderful spot on Earth—Onisa's apartment—and, through his own stupidity, had let it slip away. He sobbed like a newcomer until the other nannies threatened to slap him.

Today Izidor lives 6,000 miles from Romania. He leads a solitary life. But in his bedroom in a subdivision on a paved-over prairie, he has re-created the setting from the happiest night in his childhood.

"That night at Onisa's," I ask, "do you think you sensed that there were family relationships and emotions happening there that you'd never seen or felt before?"

"No, I was too young to perceive that."

"But you did notice the beautiful furnishings?"

"Yes! You see this?" Izidor says, picking up a tapestry woven with burgundy roses on a dark, leafy background. "This is almost identical to Onisa's. I bought it in Romania for that reason!"

"All these things ..." I gesture.

"Yes."

"But not because they signify 'family' to you?"

"No, but they signify 'peace' to me. It was the first time I slept in a real home. For many years I thought, *Why can't I have a home like that?*"

Now he does. But he knows there are missing parts—no matter how many shot glasses he collects.

**IN THE EARLY 1990S**, Danny and Marlys Ruckel lived with their three young daughters in a San Diego condo. They thought it would be nice to add a boy to the mix, and heard about a local independent filmmaker, John Upton, who was arranging adoptions of Romanian orphans. Marlys called and told him they wanted to adopt a baby boy. "There's thousands of kids there," Upton replied. "That'll be easy."

Marlys laughs. "Not much of that was accurate!" she tells me. We're seated in the living room of a white-stucco house in the Southern California wine-country town of Temecula. Kids and dogs bang in and out of the dazzling hot day (the Ruckels have adopted five children from foster care in recent years). Marlys, now a job coach for adults with special needs, is like a Diane Keaton character, shyly retreating behind large glasses and a fall of long hair, but occasionally making brave outbursts. Danny, a programmer, is an easygoing guy. Marlys describes herself as a homebody, but then there was that time she moved to Romania for two months to try to adopt a boy she saw on a video.

Undone by "Shame of a Nation," Upton had flown to Romania four days after the broadcast, and made his way to the worst place on the show, the Home Hospital for Irrecoverable Children in Sighetu Marmației. He went back a few times. On one visit, he gathered a bunch of kids in an empty room to film them for prospective adoptive parents. His video would not show children packed together naked "like little reptiles in an aquarium," as he'd described them, but as people, wearing clothes and speaking.

By then, donations had started to come in from charities around the world. Little reached the children, because the staff skimmed the best items, but on that day, in deference to the American, nannies put donated sweaters on the kids. Though the children seemed excited to be the center of attention, Upton and his Romanian assistant found it slow-going. Some didn't speak at all, and others were unable to stand up or to stand still. When the filmmakers asked for the children's names and ages, the nannies shrugged.

At the end of a wooden bench sat a boy the size of a 6-year-old—at age 10, Izidor weighed about 50 pounds. Upton was the first American he'd ever seen. Izidor knew about Americans from the TV show *Dallas*. A donated television had arrived one day, and he had lobbied for this one thing to stay at the hospital. The director had assented. On Sunday nights at 8 o'clock, ambulatory kids, nannies, and workers from other floors gathered to watch *Dallas* together. When rumors flew up the stairs that day that an American had arrived, the reaction inside the orphanage was, *Almighty God, someone from the land of the giant houses!*

Izidor knew the information the nannies didn't. He tells me: "John Upton would ask a kid, 'How old are you?,' and the kid would say, 'I don't know,' and the nanny would say, 'I don't know,' and I'd yell, 'He's 14!' He'd ask about another kid, 'What's his last name?,' and I'd yell, 'Dumka!'"

"Izidor knows the children here better than the staff," Upton groused in one of the tapes. Before wrapping up the session, he lifts Izidor into his lap and asks if he'd like to go to America. Izidor says that he would.

Back in San Diego, Upton told the Ruckels about the bright boy of about 7 who hoped to come to the United States. "We'd wanted to adopt a baby," Marlys says. "Then we saw John's video and fell in love with Izidor."

In May 1991, Marlys flew to Romania to meet the child and try to bring him home. Just before traveling, she learned that Izidor was almost 11, but she was undaunted. She traveled with a new friend, Debbie Principe, who had also been matched with a child by Upton. In the director's office, Marlys waited to meet Izidor, and Debbie waited to meet a little blond live wire named Ciprian.

"When Izidor entered," Marlys says, "all I saw was him, like everything else was fuzzy. He was as beautiful as I'd imagined. Our translator asked him which of the visitors in the office he hoped would be his new mother, and he pointed to me!"

Izidor had a question for the translator: "Where will I live? Is it like *Dallas*?"

"Well ... no, we live in a condo, like an apartment," Marlys said. "But you'll have three sisters. You'll love them."

This did not strike Izidor as an interesting trade-off. He dryly replied to the translator: "We will see."

That night, Marlys rejoiced about what an angel Izidor was.

Debbie laughed. "He struck me more like a cool operator, a savvy politician type," she told Marlys. "He was much more on top of things than Chippy." Ciprian had spent the time in the office rummaging wildly through everything, including desk drawers and the pockets of everyone in the room.

"No, he's an innocent. He's adorable," Marlys said. "Did you see him pick *me* to be his mother?"

Years later, in his memoir, Izidor explained that moment:

Marlys was the tall American and Debbie was the short American ... "Roxana, which one is going to be my new mother?" I asked [the translator].

"Which one do you want to have as your mother?"

"Which one is my mother?" I begged to know.

"The tall American," she replied.

"Then that's who I want to have as my mother," I said.

When I picked Marlys, she began to cry, filled with joy that I had picked her.

**THE PEDIATRIC NEUROSCIENTIST** Charles Nelson is famously gregarious and kind, with wavy, graying blond hair and a mustache like Captain Kangaroo's. In the fall of 2000, he, along with his colleagues Nathan A. Fox, a human-development professor at the University of Maryland, and Charles H. Zeanah, a child-psychiatry professor at the Tulane University School of Medicine, launched the Bucharest Early Intervention Project. They had permission to work with 136 children, ages six months to 2.5 years, from six Bucharest *leagâne*, baby institutions. None was a Home Hospital for Irrecoverable Children, like Izidor's; they were somewhat better supplied and staffed.

By design, 68 of the children would continue to receive "care as usual," while the other 68 would be placed with foster families recruited and trained by BEIP. (Romania didn't have a tradition of foster care; officials believed orphanages were safer for children.) Local kids whose parents volunteered to participate made up a third group. The BEIP study would become the first-ever randomized controlled trial to measure the impact of early institutionalization on brain and behavioral development and to examine high-quality foster care as an alternative.

To start, the researchers employed Mary Ainsworth's classic "strange situation" procedure to assess the quality of the attachment relationships between the children and their caregivers or parents. In a typical setup, a baby between nine and 18 months old enters an unfamiliar playroom with her "attachment figure" and experiences some increasingly unsettling events, including the arrival of a stranger and the departure of her grown-up, as researchers code the baby's behavior from behind a one-way mirror. "Our coders, unaware of any child's background, assessed 100 percent of the community kids as having fully developed attachment relationships with their mothers," Zeanah told me. "That was true of 3 percent of the institutionalized kids."

Nearly two-thirds of the children were coded as "disorganized," meaning they displayed contradictory, jerky behaviors, perhaps freezing in place or suddenly reversing direction after starting to approach the adult. This pattern is the one most closely related to later psychopathology. Even more disturbing, Zeanah told me, 13 percent were deemed "unclassified," meaning they displayed no attachment behaviors at all. "Ainsworth and John Bowlby believed infants would attach to an adult even if the adult were abusive," he said. "They hadn't considered the possibility of infants *without* attachments."

Until the Bucharest project, Zeanah said, he hadn't realized that seeking comfort for distress is a learned behavior. "These children had no idea that an adult could make them feel better," he told me. "Imagine how that must feel—to be miserable and not even know that another human being could help."

**IN OCTOBER 1991**, Izidor and Ciprian flew with Romanian escorts to San Diego. The boys' new families waited at the airport to greet them, along with Upton and previously adopted Romanian children—a small crowd holding balloons and signs, cheering and waving. Izidor gazed around the terminal with satisfaction. "Where is my bedroom?" he asked. When Marlys told him they were in an airport, not his new home, Izidor was taken aback. Though she'd explained that the Ruckels did not live like the Ewings in *Dallas*, he hadn't believed her. Now he'd mistaken the arrivals area for his new living room.

A 17-year-old from the orphanage, Izabela, was part of the airport welcoming committee. Born with hydrocephalus and unable to walk after being left all her life in a crib, she was in a wheelchair, dressed up and looking pretty. Rescued by Upton on an earlier trip, she'd been admitted to the U.S. on a humanitarian medical basis and was being fostered by the Ruckels.

Izidor was startled to see Izabela: "Who is your mother?"

"My mother is your mother, Izidor."

"I didn't like the sound of that," he remembers. To make sure he'd heard correctly, he asked again: "Who is your mother here in America?"

"Izidor, you and I have the same mother," she said, pointing at Marlys.

So now he had to get used to four sisters.

In the car, when Danny tried to click a seat belt across Izidor's waist, he bucked and yelled, fearing he was being straitjacketed.

Marlys homeschooled the girls, but Izidor insisted on starting fourth grade in the local school, where he quickly learned English. His canny ability to read the room put him in good stead with the teachers, but at home, he seemed constantly irritated. Suddenly insulted, he'd storm off to his room and tear things apart. "He shredded books, posters, family pictures," Marlys tells me, "and then stood on the balcony to sprinkle the pieces onto the yard. If I had to leave for an hour, by the time I got home, everyone would be upset: 'He did this; he did that.' He didn't like the girls."

Marlys and Danny had hoped to expand the family fun and happiness by bringing in another child. But the newest family member almost never laughed. He didn't like to be touched. He was vigilant, hurt, proud. "By about 14, he was angry about everything," she tells me. "He decided he'd grow up and become the American president. When he found out that wouldn't be possible because of his foreign birth, he said, 'Fine, I'll go back to Romania.' That's when that started—his goal of returning to Romania. We thought it was a good thing for him to have a goal, so we said, 'Sure, get a job, save your money, and when you're 18, you can move back to Romania.'" Izidor worked every day after school at a fast-food restaurant.

"Those were rough years. I was walking on eggshells, trying not to set him off. The girls were so over it. It was me they were mad

at. Not for bringing Izidor into the family but for being so ... so whipped by him. They'd say, 'Mom, all you do is try to fix him!' I was so focused on helping him adjust, I lost sight of the fact that the other children were scraping by with a fraction of my time.

"Danny and I tried taking him to therapy, but he refused to go back. He said, 'I don't need therapy. You two need therapy. Why don't you go?' So we did.

"He'd say: 'I'm *fine* when nobody's in the house.'

"We'd say: 'But Izidor, it's *our house*.'"

**AS EARLY AS 2003**, it was evident to the BEIP scientists and their Romanian research partners that the foster-care children were making progress. Glimmering through the data was a sensitive period of 24 months during which it was crucial for a child to establish an attachment relationship with a caregiver, Zeanah says. Children taken out of orphanages before their second birthday were benefiting from being with families far more than those who stayed longer. "When you're doing a trial and your preliminary evidence is that the intervention is effective, you have to ask, 'Do we stop now and make the drug available to everyone?'" he told me. "For us, the 'effective drug' happened to be foster care, and we weren't capable of creating a national foster-care system." Instead, the researchers announced their results publicly, and the next year, the Romanian government banned the institutionalization of children under the age of 2. Since then, it has raised the minimum age to 7, and government-sponsored foster care has expanded dramatically.

Meanwhile, the study continued. When the children were reassessed in a "strange situation" playroom at age 3.5, the portion who displayed secure attachments climbed from the baseline of 3 percent to nearly 50 percent among the foster-care kids, but to only 18 percent among those who remained institutionalized—and, again, the children moved before their second birthday did best. "Timing is critical," the researchers wrote. Brain plasticity wasn't "unlimited," they warned. "Earlier is better."

The benefits for children who'd achieved secure attachments accrued as time went on. At age 4.5, they had significantly lower rates of depression and anxiety and fewer "callous unemotional traits" (limited empathy, lack of guilt, shallow affect) than their peers still in institutions. About 40 percent of teenagers in the study who'd ever been in orphanages, in fact, were eventually diagnosed with a major psychiatric condition. Their growth was stunted, and their motor skills and language development stalled. MRI studies revealed that the brain volume of the still-institutionalized children was below that of the never institutionalized, and EEGs showed profoundly less brain activity. "If you think of the brain as a light bulb," Charles Nelson has said, "it's as though there was a dimmer that had reduced them from a 100-watt bulb to 30 watts."

One purpose of a baby attaching to just a small number of adults, according to evolutionary theory, is that it's the most efficient way to get help. "If there were many attachment figures and danger emerged, the infant wouldn't know to whom to direct the signal," explains Martha Pott, a senior lecturer in child development at Tufts. Unattached children see threats everywhere, an idea borne out in the brain studies. Flooded with stress hormones



Top to bottom: Izidor in front of his orphanage in June 1991, four months before the Ruckles adopted him and brought him to the United States; 11-year-old Izidor meets Marlys Ruckel for the first time in Romania, with one of the orphanage workers; Danny Ruckel and Izidor head for home after the boy's arrival in California; Izidor takes Marlys's picture at the airport.



like cortisol and adrenaline, the amygdala—the main part of the brain dealing with fear and emotion—seemingly worked overtime in the still-institutionalized children.

Comparing data from orphanages worldwide shows the profound impact institutionalization has on social-emotional development even in the best cases. “In England’s residential nurseries in the 1960s, there was a reasonable number of caregivers, and the children were materially well provided for. Their IQs, though lower than those of children in families, were well within the average range, up in the 90s,” Zeanah told me. “More recently, the caregiver-child ratio in Greek orphanages was not as good, nor were they as materially well equipped; those kids had IQs in the low-average range. Then, in Romania, you have our kids with really major-league deficits. But here’s the remarkable thing: Across all those settings, the attachment impairments are similar.”

When the children in the Bucharest study were 8, the researchers set up playdates, hoping to learn how early attachment impairments might inhibit a child’s later ability to interact with peers. In a video I watched, two boys, strangers to each other, enter a playroom. Within seconds, things go off the rails. One boy, wearing a white turtleneck, eagerly seizes the other boy’s hand and gnaws on it. That boy, in a striped pull-over, yanks back his hand and checks for teeth marks. The researcher offers a toy, but the boy in white is busy trying to hold hands with the other kid, or grab him by the wrists, or hug him, as if he were trying to carry a giant teddy bear. He tries to overturn the table. The other boy makes a feeble effort to save the table, then lets it fall. *He’s weird, you can imagine him thinking. Can I go home now?*



*Izidor’s parents, Marlys and Danny Ruckel, outside their home in Temecula, California*

The boy in the white turtleneck lived in an institution; the boy in the striped pull-over was a neighborhood kid.

Nelson cautions that the door doesn’t “slam shut” for children left in institutions beyond 24 months of age. “But the longer you wait to get children into a family,” he says, “the harder it is to get them back on an even keel.”

**"EVERY TIME** we got into another fight," Izidor remembers, "I wanted one of them to say: 'Izidor, we wish we had never adopted you and we are going to send you back to the hospital.' But they didn't say it."

Unable to process his family's affection, he just wanted to know where he stood. It was simpler in the orphanage, where either you were being beaten or you weren't. "I responded better to being smacked around," Izidor tells me. "In America, they had 'rules' and 'consequences.' So much talk. I hated 'Let's talk about this.' As a child, I'd never heard words like 'You are special' or 'You're our kid.' Later, if your adoption parents tell you words like that, you feel, *Okay, whatever, thanks. I don't even know what you're talking about. I don't know what you want from me, or what I'm supposed to do for you.*" When banished to his room, for rudeness or cursing or being mean to the girls, Izidor would stomp up the stairs and blast Romanian music or bang on his door from the inside with his fists or a shoe.

Marlys blamed herself. "He said he wanted to go back to his first mother, a woman who hadn't even wanted him, a woman he didn't remember. When I took him to the bank to set up his savings account, the bank official filling out the form asked Izidor, 'What's your mother's maiden name?' I opened my mouth to answer, but he immediately said 'Maria.' That's his birth mother's name. I know it was probably dumb to feel hurt by that."

One night when Izidor was 16, Marlys and Danny felt so scared by Izidor's outburst that they called the police. "I'm going to kill you!" he'd screamed at them. After an officer escorted Izidor to the police car, he insisted that his parents "abused" him.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Danny said when informed of his son's accusation.

"Great," said Marlys. "Did he happen to mention *how* we abuse him?"

Back in the car, the officer asked: "How do your parents abuse you?"

"I work and they take all my money," Izidor hollered. In the house, the officer searched Izidor's room, and found his savings-account book.

"We can't take him," the officer told the Ruckels. "He's mad, but there's nothing wrong here. I'd suggest you lock your bedroom doors tonight."

Again, they had the thought: *But it's our house.*

The next morning Marlys and Danny offered Izidor a ride to school and then drove him straight to a psychiatric hospital instead. "We couldn't afford it, but we took a tour and it scared him," Marlys tells me. "He said, 'Don't leave me here! I'll follow your rules. Don't make me go here!' Back in the car, we said: 'Listen, Izidor, you don't have to love us, but *you* have to be safe and *we* have to be safe. You can live at home, work, and go to school until you're 18. We love you.' But, you know, the sappy stuff didn't work with him."

Living by the rules didn't last long. One night Izidor stayed out until 2 a.m., and found the house locked. He banged on the door. Marlys opened it a crack. "Your things are in the garage," she told him.

Izidor would never again live at home. He moved in with some guys he knew; their indifference suited him. "He'd get drunk in the middle of the night and call us, and his friends would get on the

line to say vulgar things about our daughters," Marlys says. "Admittedly, it was finally peaceful in our house, but I worried about him."

On Izidor's 18th birthday, Marlys baked a cake and wrapped his gift, a photo album documenting their life together: his first day in America, his first dental appointment, his first job, his first shave. She took the presents to the house where she'd heard her son was staying. The person who answered the door agreed to deliver them when Izidor got back. "In the middle of the night," Marlys says, "we heard a car squealing around the cul-de-sac, then a loud thud against the front door and the car squealing away. I went down and opened the door. It was the photo album."

**AT 20, IN 2001,** Izidor felt an urgent desire to return to Romania. Short on cash, he wrote letters to TV shows, pitching the exclusive story of a Romanian orphan making his first trip back to his home country. *20/20* took him up on it, and on March 25, 2001, a film crew met him at the Los Angeles airport. So did the Ruckels.

"I thought, *This is it. I'll never see him again,*" Marlys says. "I hugged and kissed him whether he wanted me to or not. I told him, 'You'll always be our son and we'll always love you.'"

Izidor showed the Ruckels his wallet, in which he'd stuck two family photographs. "In case I do decide to stay there, I'll have something to remember you by," he said. Though he meant it kindly, Marlys was chilled by the ease with which Izidor seemed to be exiting their lives.

In Romania, the *20/20* producers took Izidor to visit his old orphanage, where he was feted like a returning prince, and then they revealed, on camera, that they'd found his birth family outside a farming village three hours away. They drove through a snowy landscape and pulled over in a field. A one-room shack sat on a treeless expanse of mud. Wearing a white button-down, a tie, and dress pants, Izidor limped across the soggy, uneven ground. He was shaking. A narrow-faced man emerged from the hut and strode across the field toward him. Oddly, they passed each other like two strangers on a sidewalk. "*Ce mai faci?*"—How are you?—the man mumbled as he walked by.

"*Bun,*" Izidor muttered. Good.

That was Izidor's father, after whom he'd been named. Two young women then hurried from the hut and greeted Izidor with kisses on each cheek; these were his sisters. Finally a short, black-haired woman not yet 50 identified herself as Maria—his mother—and reached out to hug him. Suddenly angry, Izidor swerved past her. *How can I greet someone I barely know?*, he remembers thinking. She crossed her hands on her chest and began to wail, "*Fiul meu! Fiul meu!*" My son! My son!

The house had a dirt floor, and an oil lamp glowed dimly. There was no electricity or plumbing. The family offered Izidor the best seat in the house, a stool. "Why was I put in the hospital in the first place?" he asked.

"You were six weeks old when you got sick," Maria said. "We took you to the doctor to see what was wrong. Your grandparents checked on you a few weeks later, but then there was something wrong with your right leg. We asked the doctor to fix your leg, but no one would help us. So we took you to a hospital in Sighetu Marmației, and that's where we left you."

"Why did no one visit me for 11 years? I was stuck there, and no one ever told me I had parents."

"Your father was out of work. I was taking care of the other children. We couldn't afford to come see you."

"Do you know that living in the *Cămin Spital* was like living in hell?"

"My heart," cried Maria. "You must understand that we're poor people; we were moving from one place to another."

Agitated, almost unable to catch his breath, Izidor got up and went outside. His Romanian family invited him to look at a few pictures of his older siblings who'd left home, and he presented them with his photo album: Here was a sunlit, grinning Izidor poolside, wearing medals from a swimming competition; here were the Ruckels at the beach in Oceanside; here they were at a picnic table in a verdant park. The Romanians turned the shiny pages wordlessly. When the TV cameras were turned off, Izidor tells me, Maria asked whether the Ruckels had hurt him or taught him to beg. He assured her neither was true.

"You look thin," Maria went on. "Maybe your American mother doesn't feed you enough. Move in with us. I will take care of you." She then pressed him for details about his jobs and wages in America and asked if he'd like to build the family a new house. After three hours, Izidor was exhausted and eager to leave. "He called me from Bucharest," Marlys says, "and said, 'I have to come home. Get me out of here. These people are awful.'"

"My birth family scared me, especially Maria," Izidor says. "I had a feeling I could get trapped there."

A few weeks later he was back in Temecula, working in a fast-food restaurant. But suddenly, he found himself longing for Romania again. It would become a pattern, restless relocation in search of somewhere that felt like home.

Friends told him there were jobs in Denver, so he decided to move to Colorado. Danny and Marlys visit him there and have gone on trips to Romania with him. It's harder for him to come home to California, Marlys says. "Thanksgiving, Christmas—they're too much for him. Even when he lived on his own nearby, he was bad at holidays. He always made an excuse, like 'I have to make the pizza dough.' When our whole family is here and someone asks, 'Is Izidor coming?', someone will say, 'Nope, he's making the pizza dough.'"

**THE NEUROPSYCHOLOGIST RON FEDERICI** was another of the first wave of child-development experts to visit the institutions for the "unsalvageables," and he has become one of the world's top specialists caring for post-institutionalized children adopted into Western homes. "In the early years, everybody had starry eyes," Federici says. "They thought loving, caring families could heal these kids. I warned them: These kids are going to push you to the breaking point. Get trained to work with special-needs children. Keep their bedrooms spare and simple. Instead of 'I love you,' just tell them, 'You are safe.'" But most new or prospective parents couldn't bear to hear it, and the adoption agencies that set up shop overnight in Romania weren't in the business of delivering such dire messages. "I got a lot of hate mail," says Federici, who is fast-talking and blunt, with a long

face and a thatch of shiny black hair. "You're cold! They need love! They've got to be hugged." But the former marine, once widely accused of being too pessimistic about the kids' futures, is now considered prescient.

Federici and his wife adopted eight children from brutal institutions themselves: three from Russia and five from Romania, including a trio of brothers, ages 8, 10, and 12. The two oldest weighed 30 pounds each and were dying from untreated hemophilia and hepatitis C when he carried them out the front door of their orphanage; it took the couple two years to locate the boys' younger brother in another institution. Since then, in his clinical practice in Northern Virginia, Federici has seen 9,000 young people, close to a third of them from Romania. Tracking his patients across the decades, he has found that 25 percent require round-the-clock care, another 55 percent have "significant" challenges that can be managed with adult-support services, and about 20 percent are able to live independently.

The most successful parents, he believes, were able to focus on imparting basic living skills and appropriate behaviors. "The Ruckels are a good example—they hung on, and he's doing okay. But I just had a family today. I knew this girl from Romania forever, first saw her when she was a little girl with the whole post-traumatic stress picture: fear, anxiety, uncertainty, depression. She's 22 now. The parents said, 'We're done. She's into drugs, alcohol, self-injury. She's on the streets.' I said, 'Let's get you back on a family program.' They said, 'No, we're exhausted, we can't afford more treatment—it's time to focus on our other kids.'"

Within his own family, Federici and his wife have become the permanent legal guardians for four of his Romanian children, who are now all adults. Two of them work, under supervision, for a foundation he established in Bucharest; the other two live with their parents in Virginia. (The fifth is a stirring example of the fortunate 20 percent—he's an ER physician in Wisconsin.) Both of his adult sons who haven't left home are cognitively impaired, but they have jobs and are pleasant to be around, according to Federici. "They're happy!" he exclaims. "Are they 100 percent attached to us? Hell no. Are they content with the family? Yes. Can they function in the world, around other people? Absolutely. They've figured out ways, not to overcome what happened to them—you can't really overcome—but to adapt to it and not take other people hostage."

When a baby was born into the family nine years ago—the family's only biological child—the doctor began to see new behaviors in his older kids. "The little one is a rock star to them," he says. "The big brothers at home are so protective of him. In public, in restaurants, God forbid anyone would hurt him or touch a hair on his head. It's an interesting dynamic: No one watched out for them in their childhoods, but they've appointed themselves his bodyguards. He's their little brother. He's been to Romania with them. Is this love? It's whatever. They're more attached to him than to us, which is absolutely fine."

**BY ANY MEASURE**, Izidor—living independently—is a success story among the survivors of Ceaușescu's institutions. "Do you imagine ever having a family?" I ask. We're in his room in the giant house outside Denver.

"You mean of my own? No. I have known since I was 15 that I would not have a family. Seeing all my friends in dumb relationships, with jealousy and control and depression—I thought, *Really? All that for a relationship?* No. The way I see myself is that there would be no human being who would ever want to get close to me. Someone might say that's false, but that's how I see myself. If someone tries to get close, I get away. I'm used to it. It's called a celibacy life."

He says he doesn't miss what he never knew, what he doesn't even perceive. Perhaps it's like color blindness. Do people with color blindness miss green? He focuses on the tasks before him and does his best to act the way humans expect other humans to act.

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*"I have known since I was 15 that I would not have a family," Izidor says. "The way I see myself is that there would be no human being who would ever want to get close to me."*

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"You can be the smartest orphan in the hospital. But you are missing things," Izidor says. "I'm not a person who can be intimate. It's hard on a person's parents, because they show you love and you can't return it."

Though Izidor says he wants to live like a "normal" human, he still regularly consents to donning the mantle of former orphan to give talks around the U.S. and Romania about what institutionalization does to little kids. He's working with a screenwriter on a miniseries about his life, believing that if people could be made to understand what it's like to live behind fences, inside cages, they'd stop putting children there. He's keenly aware that up to 8 million children around the world are institutionalized, including those at America's southern border. Izidor's dream is to buy a house in Romania and create a group home for his own former wardmates—those who were transferred to nursing

homes or put out on the streets. A group home for his fellow post-institutionalized adults is as close to the idea of family as Izidor can get.

**NEURAL PATHWAYS THRIVE** in the brain of a baby showered with loving attention; the pathways multiply, intersect, and loop through remote regions of the brain like a national highway system under construction. But in the brain of a neglected baby—a baby lying alone and unwanted every week, every year—fewer connections get built. The baby's wet diaper isn't changed. The baby's smiles aren't answered. The baby falls silent. The door is closing, but a sliver of light shines around the frame.

People once in a while paid attention to the baby with the twisted leg. Nannies thought he was appealing, and quick-witted. The director talked to him. One brilliant winter afternoon, Onisa took him out of the orphanage, and he walked down a street.

Sometimes, Izidor has feelings.

Two years after the Ruckels kicked him out, Izidor was getting a haircut from a stylist who knew the family. "Did you hear what happened to your family?" she asked. "Your mom and sisters got in a terrible car accident yesterday. They're in the hospital."

Izidor tore out of there, took the day off from work, bought three dozen red roses, and showed up at the hospital.

"We were in the truck coming out of Costco," Marlys recalls, "and a guy hit us really hard—it was a five-car crash. After a few hours at the hospital, we were released. I didn't call Izidor to tell him. We weren't speaking. But he found out, and I guess at the hospital he said, 'I'm here to see the Ruckel family,' and they said, 'They're not here anymore,' which he took to mean 'They're dead.'"

Izidor raced from the hospital to the house—the house he'd been boycotting, the family he hated.

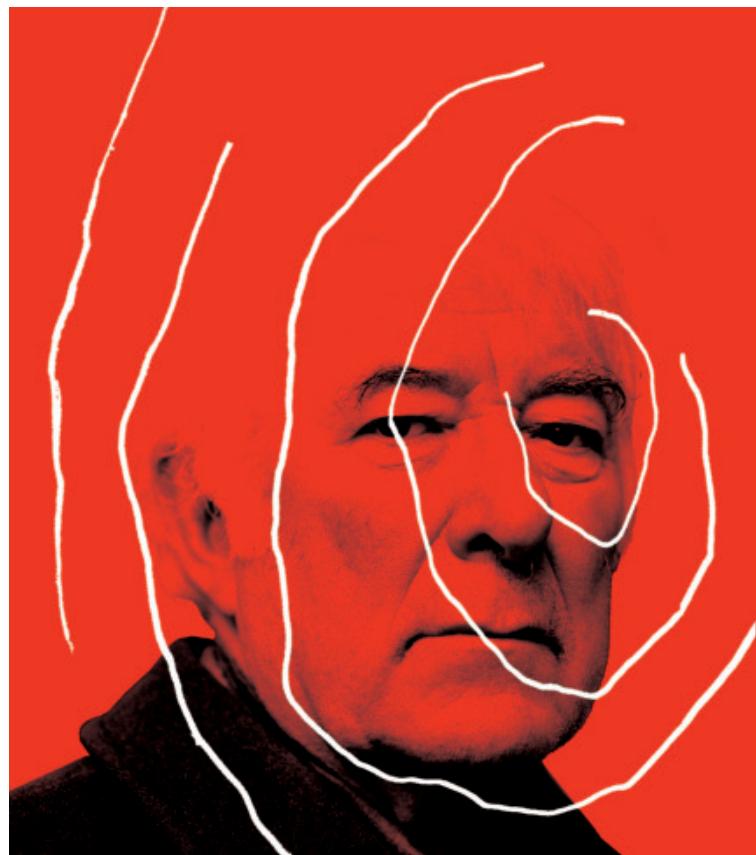
Danny Ruckel wasn't going to let him in without a negotiation. "What are your intentions?" he would ask. "Do you promise to be decent to us?" Izidor would promise. Danny would allow Izidor to enter the living room and face everyone, to stand there with his arms full of flowers and his eyes wet with tears. Before leaving that day, Izidor would lay the flowers in his mother's arms and say, with a greater attempt at earnestness than they'd ever heard before, "These are for all of you. I love you." It would mark a turning point. From that day on, something would be softer in him, regarding the Ruckel family.

But first Izidor was obliged to approach the heavy wooden door, the door against which he'd hurled the photo album Marlys made for his birthday, the door he'd slammed behind him a hundred times, the door he'd battered and kicked when he was locked out. He knocked and stood on the front step, head hanging, heart pounding, unsure whether he'd be admitted. *I abandoned them, I neglected them, I put them through hell*, he thought. The prickly stems of burgundy-red roses wrapped in dark leaves and plastic bristled in his arms.

And then they opened the door. *A*

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# Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

## “How Did I End Up Like This?”

*Seamus Heaney’s journey into darkness*

By James Parker

In a lecture called “Frontiers of Writing,” Seamus Heaney remembered an evening he spent as the guest of an Oxford college in May 1981. A “quintessentially Oxford event,” he called it: He attended chapel alongside a former lord chancellor of the U.K., went to a big dinner, slept in a room belonging to a Conservative cabinet minister. Heaney would not have been ill at ease in these environs. True, he was a long way from the farmhouse in Derry, in the north of Ireland, where he had been born in 1939, but by that time he was famous (for a poet) and even cosmopolitan. Awards and acclaim had been a constant since the publication of his first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966; a wistful post-agrarian sensibility in combination, or collision, with a crunching exactitude of language made his poetry irresistible.

That evening in Oxford, however, his thoughts were elsewhere. Earlier that day, in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, Francis Hughes had died. Hughes, after Bobby Sands, was the second IRA hunger striker to starve himself to death in protest of the British government’s refusal to classify Republican internees as political prisoners. Heaney, a Catholic, knew Hughes’s family. “My mind kept turning towards that corpse house in Co. Derry,” he wrote. “Even as I circulated with my glass of sherry, I could imagine the press of a very different crowd outside and inside the house in mid-Ulster, the movement of people from one room to the next, the protocols of sympathy, the hush as members of the bereaved family passed, and so on.”

*County Derry, glass of sherry.* In the Heaney poem that this moment somehow didn’t become, that would have been a perfect, perfectly pressurized, rhyme. And the Norse-sounding *corpse house* would have been in there too, one of his kennings or bardic throwbacks. The poet, although an honored guest, is deep in enemy territory; his imagination and his language are called back home, to the old and urgent place, to be with the mourners and the dead.

This long, downward-and-backwards pull is one of the sensations of Heaney’s poetry. It’s right there, prophetically, in the title poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, still one of his best-known pieces: the biological darkness with its reptile protectorate, the frogs that sit by the clogged water with “their blunt heads farting.” And the

poet hanging back: “The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.” I hadn’t understood, however, until I read R. F. Foster’s excellent new study, *On Seamus Heaney*, the extent of his negotiation with the pull of history, and the redemptive power of his creativity.

Heaney, writes Foster, “grew up among the nods, winks, and repressions of a deeply divided society, and saw those half-concealed fissures break open into violence.” This bloody breaking-open, the beginning of the Troubles, happened with the marches for Catholic civil rights in 1968 and 1969. Life was different afterward; poetry was different. Heaney’s “Requiem for the Croppies,” for example, was a defiant if faintly orotund homage to the rebels of the 1798 Rising, rural Irishmen taking on the English army: “Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon. / The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.” Now the poem became dangerous. “After 1969,” Foster writes, “with the British Army on the streets of Belfast and the birth of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, this could look like an invocation of blood sacrifice . . . Heaney was acutely conscious of this—so much so that he stopped reading it in public performances.”

“*Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*,” said the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. I am myself and my circumstances. Wilfred Owen was a war poet because he was a poet in a war. Heaney was a poet in Belfast. How to address actuality? How to write about occupation, sectarian killings, the contagion of fear? Heaney’s path was backwards and downward. He described the writing of “Bogland,” from 1969’s *Door Into the Dark*, as “like opening a gate.” The poem enacts a sinking, sucking, center-of-the-Earth draw into the chthonic mulch: ancestral cruelty, the unconscious, the self, the roots of words, whatever’s down there. It ends like a horror movie: “The wet centre is bottomless.”

“The Tollund Man” anticipated the grim forensics of Heaney’s legendary collection *North*. A pre-Christian murder, a bog burial, an exhumed preserved corpse: Tollund Man, whose body was dug from the embalming peat of the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark. Presumed by archaeologists to be a sacrificial victim, for Heaney he becomes an offering to the bog goddess, to that same insatiable horror-spirit of “Bogland.” “She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen.” And in these black depths, where the victims are hidden, the poet finds his link, connects to the atrocities of his own time: “The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards.” Heaney felt himself to be “crossing a line really” with this poem: “My whole being was involved.”

Heaney left Belfast in 1972, warily decamping south to a cottage in too-quiet County Wicklow. “How did I end up like this?” he asked in “Exposure.” “Escaped

from the massacre / Taking protective colouring / From bole and bark, feeling / Every wind that blows.” Four years after *North* came *Field Work*, in which—as if enabled by the plunging-down, the bog-bargaining, of the previous volume—he achieved a series of extraordinarily direct poetic confrontations with the situation in the North: the British armored cars encountered in “The Toome Road,” “warbling along on powerful tyres”; the abduction and murder of his second cousin Colum McCartney in “The Strand at Lough Beg.” “What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block? / The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling / Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?” (McCartney’s ghost would return, in the long title poem of his next collection, *Station Island*, to reproach Heaney for being too poetical: “The Protestant who shot me through the head / I accuse directly, but indirectly, you / . . . for the way you whitewashed ugliness.”)

Mire and violence and clubbing syllables; that was one Heaney. There were others. He incorporated within himself—it was part of his greatness, perhaps—several brilliant minor operators, each with his own specialty and stylistic angle. There was the love poet, and the journalist-in-verse, and the lyrical chronicler of potato-peeling or ploughing or ironing or just driving in the west of Ireland, where “big soft buffetings come at the car sideways / And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.” And then there was my favorite, the Heaney of his *Beowulf* translation, and his own recorded reading of it. I listened to this recording night after night when I was working as a baker, thumping in the back of the oven with a long-handled broom, dragging out flour-soot while Heaney’s warm and wry and somehow motherly voice went on: “There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes / A wrecker of mead benches, rampaging among foes.”

But there she is again, nesting in the action-packed heart of *Beowulf*: the bog goddess. Beowulf tracks the monster Grendel’s mother to the edge of a tarn, a black pond, what Heaney calls in his introduction an “infested underwater current.” Down there she guards the corpse of her son. Hear Heaney’s voice: “He dived into the heaving / depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day / before he could see the solid bottom.” Beowulf battles in the murk, killing the mother, decapitating the son, and finally breaking the surface before his astonished kinsmen, bearing Grendel’s head. Could there be a starker, surer metaphor for Heaney’s poetic endeavor, for the move on which his later achievement depended? You have to dive, you have to find what’s down there, be it ever so monstrous; you have to recover it and bring it back to the light of day. *A*

*How do  
you write  
poetry about  
occupation,  
sectarian  
killings,  
the contagion  
of fear?*

ON SEAMUS  
HEANEY

R. F. Foster

PRINCETON  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



## BOOKS

# Florida, Man

*The dark soul of the Sunshine State*

By Lauren Groff

Florida! Surreal state, plastic state, state of swamp and glitz, state as object of the lust and ridicule of the other 49, state dangling off the body of the continent like—well!—a hanging chad. Seek to encapsulate Florida in a single narrative, and you'll find yourself thwarted. What is normal in the backwoods of the panhandle or on the prairies of north-central Florida is ludicrously alien in Miami Beach. Even the stories that have lured the majority of Floridians to this place are largely empty promises, gusts of devilishly hot and humid air. Because most of us have come from elsewhere, including me, and because the state is a mishmash of un-integrated and wildly different peoples and cities, we have no deep, shared mythologies. We find our motley self-portrait composed of stories that shift like sand underfoot, without a single solid base to keep us standing (unless we count the inane violence of college football, which, oh please, let's not).

To try to understand this most incomprehensible state, we need varied and probing narratives, ones that change as Florida changes and are told by people who love the state too deeply to refrain from blistering criticism. Into this role steps the native South Floridian memoirist Kent Russell with his sharp, brilliant, mean, and exasperating hybrid book, *In the Land of Good Living*. By exasperating, I mean that I've never read an account of our gorgeous and messed-up state that is a more appropriate match of form and function. Russell's book is a braid of diverse strands that shouldn't work together and yet do.

The conceit of his memoir is a road trip taken with two of his friends as they walk more than 1,000 miles from the northwest corner of the panhandle south to Miami's Coconut Grove, from late August to December of 2016. They were inspired by former Governor "Walkin' Lawton" Chiles, who launched his national political career in 1970 with a "walking-talking and listening campaign." Their intention is "elegiac," to assemble "the last, most comprehensive

postcards from Florida as we know her. Before she takes the waters"—in other words, before climate change destroys many parts of the state.

The three men are trying to make a film, and because their trek takes place during the run-up to and weeks after the 2016 presidential election, they discover that swing-state Florida is the best place in the country in which to trace America's political divisions. The first-person speaker among the three (anti?)heroes is our author, Kent, a "paunchy nebbish," a Columbia University adjunct instructor with a mullet grown for the trip, who is most eloquent when he is either at his bitterest or most intoxicated by booze or drugs. His friends are Noah, a former marine turned client investigator at JPMorgan Chase, who is given the best punch lines in the book, and Glenn, the cameraman, a "blond, blue-eyed, dad-bodied" Canadian whose optimism is slowly infected by the reality of Florida until he becomes, by the end of the journey, hilariously bleak.

The spirit of Don Quixote presides over this buddy-trip plotline. Florida is so deeply quixotic that it probably does require three separate Sancho Panzas to refract its delusions. There are even multiple versions of Rocinante, Quixote's placid, bony horse: first an Office Depot cart with a mean torque, christened "Rolling Thunder," which carries the film gear and Kent's backpack; then a Victorian-esque baby carriage called "Rock-a-bye Thunder"; then a jogging stroller called "Jog-a-bye Thunder." Like Sancho Panza, our three errant philosophers are sometimes reluctant, sometimes avid participants in their adventures. They go out on a shrimp boat with Trump supporters. Homeless people and alligators beset the friends' tents in the night. At one point, they accidentally pawn their equipment for cocaine. They have multiple guns pointed at them on their journey, the first by a woman who thinks they've got "some IED-looking thing" in their cart. Their feet disintegrate over the

many miles. They get trashed on White Russians during a false-alarm hurricane, and get even more trashed at Epcot with an aspiring Jesus who unofficially performs miracles at the Holy Land Experience theme park. They get lap dances in Tampa. They devolve into fisticuffs among themselves like the overgrown, overprivileged, overeducated white boys they are.

Because the book is about the film that the men are making, many of the scenes between the buddies are written as though they are in a screenplay; these parts are funny and charming and, perhaps weirdly in a nonfiction book, have the distinctive tang of fiction. Or perhaps this is appropriate: As Russell says in a closing author's note, "This book is about Florida. To write a 100 percent factual book about Florida would be like writing an on-the-level guide to fraud ... The preceding is as Florida as can be: the real story built upon the true story." Throughout, Russell gives us the accepted story of Florida, then the actual—far darker—story.

That old canard about Ponce de León finding Florida while looking for the fountain of youth? It's a lie; de León stumbled upon the place in 1513 when looking for a better one, and, years later, when he tried to colonize the area for the Spanish, he was killed by the Calusa with an arrow dipped in poisonous manchineel sap. Russell excels at such delightful nutshell histories, many of which involve a measure of both peril and craftistry. The backstories of air-conditioning, hurricanes, orange cultivation, Walt Disney, and Miami, in Russell's telling, all feature some element of wildly ambitious delusion and/or a hair's-breadth escape from disaster.

RUSSELL IS at his best when he offers cultural commentary, dropping his gonzo persona and becoming wickedly insightful. He looks hard at the libertarian funk found everywhere in Florida, which can confound residents and outsiders alike. Russell quotes the historian Gary Mormino's observation that "frontier values—fierce individualism, gun violence, a weak state government, and rapacious attitudes toward the environment—defined and continue to define Florida." This is true even of the liberal Baby Boomers who keep flocking to the state, and who pride themselves on their nonconformity and resistance to authority, which they see as progressive values. But their stance in fact converges with an aggressive conservatism, marked by its attack-dog insistence on elevating the rights of individuals to do whatever the hell they want, society at large and the environment be damned. In Florida, Russell observes, "liberty" is equated with "license," in contrast to more noble past visions of liberty as "not the absence of constraint, but the exercise of self-limitation."

This unrestrained mentality pervades retirement utopias like the Villages, where 66,000-plus "active adults" over the age of 55 live in a "plastic antiplace"

that they don't really have to care about. Because their hearts are back where they're from—Cincinnati or Minneapolis or Albany—they are unwilling to invest in Florida schools and roads and public services; the state is just a place to let a little sun shine down on their heads, to play a few rounds of golf while they're awaiting death's sickle. Their particular brand of confused libertarianism intermingles with the more common flavor Russell and his friends encounter on their trip. Nearly everywhere they go, they find Trump supporters (most devastating, even a climate scientist they meet is a Trump apologist). He writes, sympathetically, that these people belong to

*The state has been built on promises of an eternal present, on blithe and deliberate disregard for the past, on a refusal to give a single naked whit about the future.*

a class that has been told time and again that they are exceptionally free. Free to fashion their social and economic identities howsoever they choose. Free to master their fates and captain their souls. Yet everywhere they turn, these individuals are stymied by political and financial powers from whose vantage they appear to be as abstract and insignificant as remainders on a spreadsheet. There is a growing discrepancy between [their] right to self-assertion and [their] capacity to control the forces that might make such self-assertion feasible.

Russell's most painful observation, the one that struck me where I live, is that the con men in politics who are able to capture the imaginations of these lied-to, thwarted people rely upon tropes that were first promulgated in the academy.

Call it what you like—relativism, postmodernism, deconstruction. The lesson is one and the same: The truth is not out there waiting to be objectively uncovered. The truth is made. Facts are fabricated as seen fit by the powers that be, and then consent for those facts is manufactured, enforced.

The idiot children born of Derrida and Foucault are alternative facts, fake news.

What undergirds Russell's narrative of Florida is despair as invisible, dark, and pervasive as the limestone bedrock that sits beneath the state. To me, this feels like both the real and the true story of Florida. In recent years, the diminishment of the aquifer through climate change and agricultural use, the slow and terrifying death of the Everglades' enormous filtration system, the pressure of salinated waters from the rising sea, the stupidly unconstrained construction and development are all creating an epidemic of sinkholes. When a sinkhole develops, the fragile karst suddenly gives way under the weight of the earth; in a moment, houses and cars and people are swallowed up.

I write this from the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a similarly collapsing effect on

IN THE LAND  
OF GOOD  
LIVING: A  
JOURNEY TO  
THE HEART  
OF FLORIDA

Kent Russell

KNOPF

Florida. A huge number of the state's jobs are in the service sector: tourism, restaurant work, elder care, the gig economy—the realm of employment that thrives more than any other on ideas of predatory short-term growth and lax worker protection. Disney World, that great burbling morass of capitalism, announced it would furlough more than 43,000 of its workers, a move whose effects will ripple into employees' families, both here and abroad; into school systems and food banks; into the very lowest and most fundamental reaches of the social safety net. What a small wind it takes for hedonism to tip into precarity!

This is not a flaw in the system. This has been, all along, the shifty, lying, scam-artist libertarian narrative at Florida's core, from the conquistadores who trudged through the malarial swamps; to the Ponzi schemes of Gulf American, the real-estate company that sent flocks of salesmen to the Midwest and Northeast in the late 1950s to lure suckers into buying worthless plots of land in the swamp; to Walt Disney himself, who created an oligarchic capitalist microstate (like Satan's Vatican) in the very heart of Florida; to the massive narcissistic baby in the White House who uses his Mar-a-Lago resort as a way to milk money out of patsies eager to buy influence.

The state has been built on promises of an eternal present, on blithe and deliberate disregard for the past so as not to have to learn from it—on a refusal to give a single naked whit about the future. Like people who don't protest their fleecing in order to watch other people be swindled, we continue to perpetuate this corrosive narrative. In most elections, Florida votes for precisely the people trying to strip necessary life-giving protections from our neighbors and from the glorious natural environment that we are dependent on. Which is to say, of course, that the story of Florida is a story, in microcosm, of the United States of America.

Does this idea fill you with despondency? Does the thought of Florida make you want to laugh and cry at the same time? I, too, laugh at the capers of Florida Man, at the stupid beautiful bodies of sun-blistered spring-breakers, at the tourists who drunkenly wander too close to retention ponds and tempt the hunger of the gators. But if I'm laughing, it's only through a quietly devastating despair. As Russell puts it in his hilarious gut punch of a book—a book that anyone who is interested in not only Florida, but the whole country, should read—"How long before a society of atomized individuals rightfully following only their desires, heedless of what they owe others, destroys itself?" *A*

*Lauren Groff is the author, most recently, of Florida, a collection of stories.*

## *Touchy*

By Elizabeth Bradfield

we say, when someone's sensitive. *So touchy*. So dangerous and delicate and ready to tip. *Touching*, though, is sweet. And we are *touched* by the gift, the thought. Moved into knowledge of care if not love. *Touched*, too, means crazy. God-kissed. The brain lit otherwise. I hope we've all known someone who has *got the touch*, able to ease a knot, make any machine hum true, tune a string. And *Touch me*, says Kunitz in the poem that always chokes me up. As if the hand of a wife would bring me back to myself or to the selves we both once were. *Don't touch*: first warning. The stove, the open socket's shock, the body unknown to you and all the bodies it, in turn, has, willfully or not, allowed such intimacy. When I first felt yearning for the skin I always kept hidden to touch another's hidden skin, it was the early decade of a different terrible virus. The danger was known and unknown both, and in some small way, the risk of infection was not unlike the risk of intimacy. *In touch*, when we know how someone is faring. *Touch and go*, when we're not sure how things will turn out.

*Elizabeth Bradfield's most recent collection is Toward Antarctica (2019).*

ART

# Time, Space, and the Virus

*How a pandemic transforms  
the familiar into the unfamiliar*

By Ai Weiwei

A pandemic changes the way we see ourselves, that's for sure. What is time? How do we use it, spend it? We make a phone call, have lunch, brew some coffee, apply makeup. Time can restart and begin anew, or it can hide entirely, get cut off, disappear. Time is more than what passes between this moment and another one, or the price required to finish a task. It seeds our imagination, and slows down when we're creatively absorbed. It spurs action, and is bound up with how we press forward with life and with our resolve to make ourselves complete.

A nurse leaves a bedside, and a few days later the patient's temperature drops and he no longer needs a ventilator. Then comes a tingling in her throat; her temperature rises, and she becomes obsessively focused on the length of her life. She remeasures her connections with her family and her society. Elsewhere in time, the politician performs his social role in the manner of a careening race car that strains to hold its balance around a curve without tipping over or crashing.

For so many others, there is no longer a something-to-do-next. Toss expectations into the memory bank! The distinction between this time and that time begins to blur. Life can go on without promises or fulfillment of duties. People who have lost their jobs have lost honor and vexation at once.

Similarly, time erases faith. There are no eulogies, no last words, and the corpses are no longer moved to manicured graveyards. They are put in refrigerated trucks, brought to parking lots. One loses belief in the government, in parents, in neighbors, in the very possibility that life will continue. How long can vegetables and melons stay fresh? Rice? Noodles? Will we have enough food a month from now? Several months?

The understanding of time is lost. It's dark, but you don't have to go to bed. The clock that runs is the one that counts deaths. The numbers mark the difference between now and a while ago. The death of an infant means that one life, even before consciousness arrives, passes from one eternity into the next. A ventilator is moved from the bedside of an elderly patient because less life remains to him than to a younger patient.

The difference between a human being and a virus grows elusive. A screen monitoring a heartbeat replaces the waves on the ocean, replaces the dangers of the stock market.

Wuhan becomes numbers to track: its coordinates on the globe, the size of its population, the number of people who fled before it was sealed off, their destinations. The "Wuhan virus" spreads to every corner of the world, deaths skyrocket, and the scale of its spread demolishes our understanding of order, science, regimes, freedom, dignity.

People want to know: How big is a virus? What does it look like? How does it get into a living cell? Where does it get the cell's "key"? How does it copy

itself, suffer attack from an immune system, eventually perish? To understand this tiny thing, far smaller than a bacterium, is about as easy as understanding the Earth and its orbit from the vantage point of the universe.

Space, location, scale, and time are the undergirding of self-knowledge. Abandonment of rational thinking leads to a collapse in which fear and joy, ignorance and wisdom, all blow in the wind. The new coronavirus, as it turns lives upside down, has led people to reflect on questions that had not occurred to them before. To wear a mask or not? What kind? When will the next batch of N95 masks be available?

These are serious topics in the news. And for a person, the feather-light mask carries all the weight of fears, hopes, pains, warmth. When the epidemic ebbs in China, the rest of the world finds itself lacking masks. The notion of "mask" drains other concepts of urgency. Masks become a banner for national pride. The imagination soars no longer toward moon landings and driverless vehicles. For the cost of a large commercial airplane, you could buy 10 million masks and 1,000 ventilators. That's just the way it is.

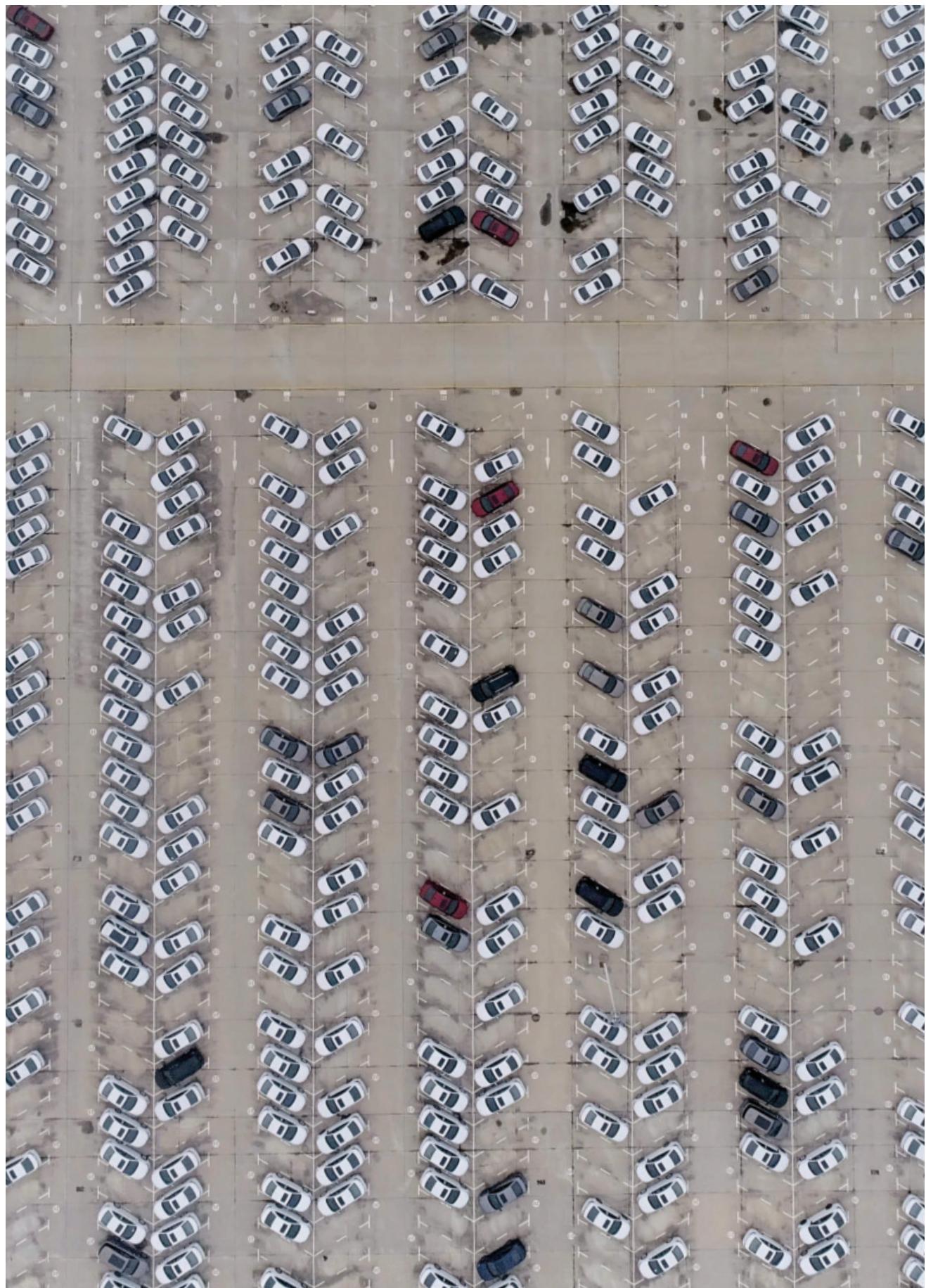
But no airplanes are in the sky anyway. You don't even get out the door. Cities are like mausoleums, streets like ruins. New York, Paris, London, Venice—they appear as if yesterday were doomsday. Behind all the shut doors and windows is this thought: *That* is my borderline; outside, the abyss, where I can be instantly attacked and no longer exist, or might visit disaster upon another.

A potted cactus, a piano, a bright table lamp, a microwave oven—all things familiar to us turn unfamiliar. Some become more important; others lose the ties to our inner life they once had. A plant dies as its owner succumbs. But flowers in the wild bloom without a thought. What do they care about human disaster?

The flowers have never been more beautiful, and at night a curved moon still hangs in the sky. Spring does not slow its arrival just because no one can go out and look at it. Nature is generous, sumptuous, and you've never seen cleaner air. Wild animals enter the city and saunter about. Fish and birds not seen for a time appear within their habitat.

Humans, like viruses, have hijacked the ecology of the Earth and wrought damage. Survival, desire, narrow dogma, and perplexing arrogance (the arrogance arises from ignorance) fill humans whose bodies last a set time. Like viruses, humans need hosts. When science and reason someday give us the key to everything, that may be the moment we lose everything. *A*

*Ai Weiwei is an artist and the author of the book Humanity. This essay was translated from the Chinese by Perry Link.*





BOOKS

## The Man Who Sacked Rome

*Alaric the Goth wanted to be part of the empire. Instead he helped bring it down.*

By Cullen Murphy

The sack of Rome by Alaric and his Goths has exerted an outsize influence on the Western imagination. It was a devastating event, and sent psychological aftershocks across the empire. On the night of August 24, in the year 410, thousands of Goths made their way into the city through the Porta Salaria, not far from where the American embassy sits today. Rome's walls were stout, and had recently been reinforced; an accomplice on the inside may have opened the gates. The invaders ravaged the city for three full days before departing with captives and plunder. According to legend, they took away sacred trophies the Romans had themselves looted from the Second Temple in Jerusalem more than three centuries earlier.

Rome's defenses had not been breached in 800 years—not since a sack by the Gauls at the beginning of the fourth century B.C., long before Rome became an imperial power. News of what the Goths had done spread quickly. The sack was seen as a portent—of the end of the empire or even, as some apocalyptic Christian writers saw it, the end of God's earthly creation. Saint Jerome wrote an emotional letter (“as I dictate, sobs choke my utterance”) from faraway Bethlehem: “The city that once captured the hearts and minds of the world has been captured!” Saint Augustine urged Christians to flee the “moral disease” of secular Rome and put their faith in a heavenly city that beckoned from beyond this life. A memory of the sacking shivered down the ages. “This awful catastrophe of Rome,” Edward Gibbon wrote in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “filled the astonished empire with grief and terror.” Victorian painters turned again and again to the subject, slathering pots of paint across acres of canvas. The depictions are disturbingly romantic: seminude invaders among smoldering monuments, preening with bloodlust and concupiscence. The sack has resonance to this day. The historian Niall Ferguson invoked it in a column published after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, noting: “This is exactly how civilizations fall.”

But who was this man Alaric, and what exactly happened during those

three days in A.D. 410? These are the questions that the historian Douglas Boin, the author of several specialized studies about late antiquity, sets out to answer in *Alaric the Goth: An Outsider's History of the Fall of Rome*, a smart book for the general reader. Boin has his work cut out for him. Alaric stands with Attila among Rome's best-known antagonists, but the source material is gossamer-thin. Few accounts by writers with firsthand knowledge survive, and most of these chroniclers have a slanted perspective—pro-empire or pro-Goth or pro-apocalypse. Other accounts were composed 50 or 100 years later. And historical works by a number of writers have come down to us only in bits and pieces.

Many other historical figures (Cleopatra, Chaucer, Shakespeare) have presented similar problems, which hasn't deterred historians: Stir the reliable bits and the speculative bits into a yeasty batter of everything else known about society at the time, and a focused narrative can emerge. "From this collection of odds and ends," Boin writes in that spirit, "we steal a glimpse of a real person." Yet even when the job is done with rigor, the results are a little weasely—ample use of *must have* and *could easily* and *not hard to imagine*. The method works best when the historical context provides solid ground, which the fifth century doesn't. Politically, the era was unruly and mysterious—a chess game in which players came and went, and the pieces on the board could change color and identity overnight. But instability and shifting allegiances are also essential to the story.

**THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE**—still encircling the Mediterranean but divided into eastern and western spheres—was held together by bribery, accommodation, backstabbing, and force of arms. The city of Rome was more than 1,000 years old and rich, but functionally no more than a symbolic capital; power lay with armies, and emperors could be anywhere. (Diocletian had been emperor for 20 years before he saw Rome for the first time.) Networks of influence crossed traditional boundaries of ethnicity and religion. Consider the life of a woman named Galla Placidia. She was the daughter of one emperor and the half sister of two others but grew up in the household of a general named Stilicho, the son of a Vandal. Stilicho fought faithfully for Rome but was never quite trusted, and was executed after military setbacks. Galla Placidia's first husband (who also met an unhappy end) was not some Roman blue blood but a Goth named Athaulf—who happened to be Alaric's brother-in-law.

It was a time when governance was fractured; the division of the empire into eastern and western

jurisdictions is just one example. Constitutional norms were a distant memory. Christian influence was ascendant even as eminent pagans fought to uphold the old ways. Threats to security came from all directions. Germanic tribes hired themselves out to defend the empire in the manner of private security firms like Blackwater, switching sides if the price was right. And who was a "Roman" anyway? Goths, Vandals, and Huns all fought on Rome's behalf at various times. They also fought against Rome, and one another.

Yet the soft power of *Romanitas*—a concept that is hard to define precisely but encompasses the values, amenities, and way of life of the imperial system—remained alluring. Many "barbarians"—not a word much in favor these days—became citizens; their families may have been citizens for centuries. When expedient, whole tribes were welcomed into the empire and given some sort of legal status. In A.D. 212, Emperor Caracalla, bowing to reality, granted citizenship to all freeborn persons within the empire's borders. Among the beneficiaries of Caracalla's edict was a foreign soldier of mixed heritage named Maximinus Thrax, who became an imperial soldier and in 235 was proclaimed emperor. Outsiders didn't seek to lay waste to Rome; they wanted to become insiders. In a way, they loved Rome to death.

Alaric was one of these people—don't think of him as a man in bearskins who worshipped the forest gods. The bare outline of his life is not in dispute. He was born north of the Danube River to a prominent Gothic family in what had once been the imperial province of Dacia (roughly corresponding to modern Romania). The Romans had long since withdrawn, but his family was familiar with Rome and its ways. Alaric spoke Latin as well as his native Gothic tongue. He had been baptized a Christian, even if doctrinal affinity put him in the heretical Arian camp.

As a youth, Alaric crossed the Danube to seek his fortunes in the imperial army, bringing others with him, and proved himself a natural leader. At the Battle of Frigidus, in 394, he and his Gothic *foederati* saved the day for Emperor Theodosius. The cost to the Goths was high: some 10,000 killed. Alaric seems to have felt that their sacrifice—and his own role—wasn't appreciated or even acknowledged. He retaliated angrily by marauding through Greece. As a placatory gesture, Emperor Arcadius—son of Theodosius—named him general of Illyricum, an imperial prefecture extending from the Balkans south to the sea. It was a significant responsibility. But administrative reshuffling soon eliminated the position. Alaric's sense of grievance was now at a boil.

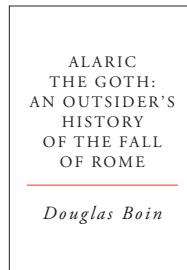
*Who was a  
"Roman"  
anyway? Goths,  
Vandals, and  
Huns all  
fought on  
Rome's behalf  
at various  
times.*

He commanded a force of Goths that was augmented, as time went on, by warriors from other groups. He wanted some combination of respect, money, territory to occupy, and a seat at the table. After one failed try, he led his forces into Italy a second time, buoyed by victories, undeterred by defeats, and always seeking to negotiate with the ruling powers. Extortion was generally involved. Eventually he reached Rome, putting the city under siege off and on for two years. His ability to interdict grain shipments led to hardship inside the walls. Countless efforts to defuse the crisis showed initial promise and then collapsed—Emperor Honorius, based in Ravenna, proved pigheaded and duplicitous. Finally, on the night of August 24, Alaric’s forces made their way inside.

Upbraided once for behaving badly, Evelyn Waugh replied, “Imagine how much worse I’d be if I weren’t a Catholic.” Something similar might be said of Alaric. He was Arian, to be sure, but regarded himself as a Christian, as Arians indeed were. He decreed churches and holy sites to be inviolable, and gave sanctuary to anyone who took refuge there. “He also told his men,” according to Orosius, one of the more straightforward chroniclers, “that as far as possible, they must refrain from shedding blood in their hunger for booty.” There was certainly violence, often attributed to the unruly Huns among Alaric’s forces, and many fires were set. Palaces and ordinary homes were looted. And yet even sources hostile to Alaric comment on his relative restraint, at least by the standards of the day. Archaeology has not uncovered evidence of vast destruction. A Sack of Rome Conference held in the city in 2010 revealed many disagreements among historians, but Rome’s fate was not that of Carthage or Dresden. Monumental buildings remained intact. Rome recovered, up to a point. But it was no longer seen as impregnable and, decades later, would be sacked again. A gradual depopulation began.

When their fury was spent, the Goths followed the Via Appia south, then veered off into the toe of Italy. The intended destination was North Africa, the breadbasket of Rome, where the Goths hoped they might find a place to call their own. They never made it: Storms forced their ships to turn back. Alaric suddenly took ill—with what, no one knows—and in a few days was dead.

His mode of burial, apparently following Gothic tradition, became the stuff of lore. A river near the present-day city of Cosenza was momentarily diverted and a grave dug in the riverbed. Alaric was interred, along with a trove of valuables. Then the river was restored to its course. The slaves who did the work were executed, consigning the whereabouts of the site



W. W. NORTON

to oblivion. Over the years, treasure-hunters including Heinrich Himmler have searched for the hoard of Alaric. In 2015, Cosenza launched a search of its own. So far, the treasure, if it ever existed, has proved more elusive than Alaric’s life story.

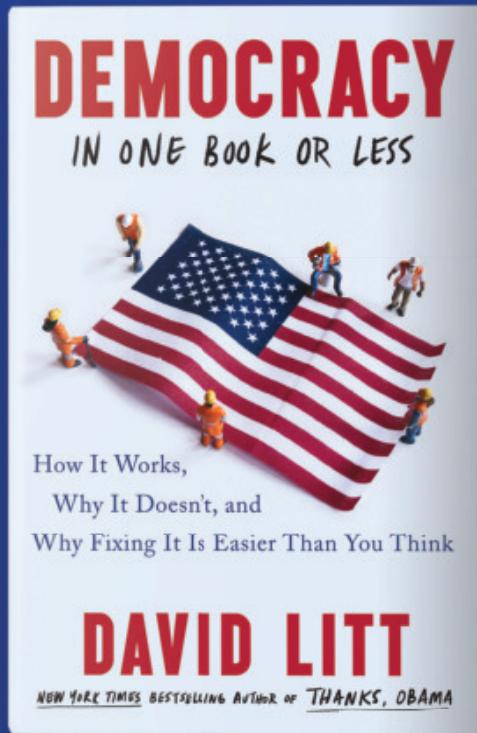
It is hardly Douglas Boin’s fault that the balance in his narrative between “the man” and “his times” is no balance at all. The scales tilt heavily toward Alaric’s times—a rich subject in its own right—and Boin renders the confusion of the era without replicating that confusion in his prose. Alaric can never emerge as a fully three-dimensional figure, but in Boin’s hands he is lifted convincingly from the realm of brutish caricature.

Though Boin doesn’t advance an explicit argument, a preoccupation lurks within his language. “Alaric’s actions,” he writes at one point, “forced a difficult, long-overdue conversation about acceptance, belonging, and the rights of immigrant communities.” That’s a very 21st-century formulation. Was there a Ravenna Ideas Festival? The collective term he uses for Goths, Vandals, Huns, and other groups is always “immigrants.” In his pages we encounter “border patrol,” “border separation,” “gated communities,” and “cultural warriors.” He refers to the Danube River as a “fence.” He describes a “new combustible mix of xenophobia and cultural supremacy” that encouraged public figures to work “populism and nationalism into their applause lines.” *Alaric the Goth* is not a polemic. It never invokes modern times explicitly. But the linguistic anachronisms are inescapable. Intended perhaps to be slyly allusive, they come across as winks.

“Presentism” is a snare. The 21st century is not the fifth. But history should provoke, and Boin has a point. Migration flows around the world today are unremitting. Group allegiance is fluid, and the distribution of power capricious. “Us” and “them” remain fundamental categories. There’s an American version of *Romanitas*, and even antagonists want a piece of it. General James Mattis once recalled interrogating a jihadist in Iraq—formerly Mesopotamia, that graveyard of Roman dreams. The man had been caught planting a roadside bomb. As he was led off to prison, he asked Mattis a question: When he got out, would it be possible to emigrate to America? Mattis appreciated the irony. Alaric might have too. ↗

*Cullen Murphy is the editor at large of The Atlantic. His books include Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America (2007).*

# ★ MORE THAN POLITICS AS USUAL ★



“Hilarious and incisive.

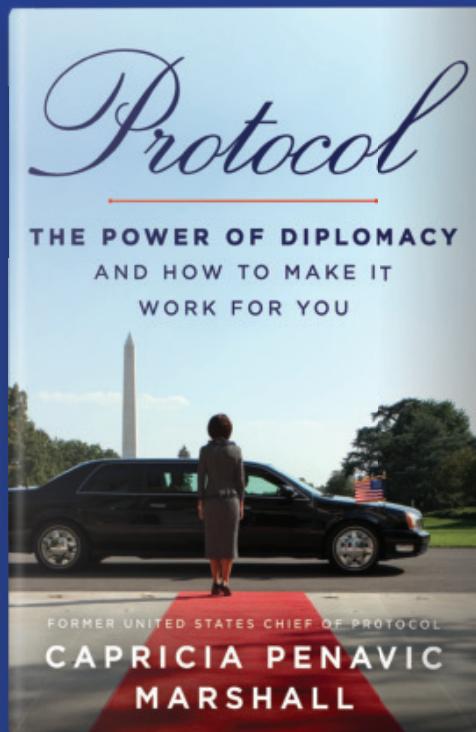
If you want to understand what happened to America and how to change it, *Democracy in One Book or Less* will make you laugh and think, all at the same time.”

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# The Atlantic

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Dear Reader,

When I joined *The Atlantic* as a writer in 2007, our magazine—the one you are holding in your hands—had a relatively modest internet presence. Modest, but volcanic: Much of TheAtlantic.com at the time was made up of bloggers (you young readers can go look up the term) yelling at one another. It was sometimes enlightening, often migraine-inducing (I remember the headaches the most), and frequently entertaining, in the way that *Deadwood* is entertaining.

The Wild West days of the internet are largely over, and today *The Atlantic* is a much different organization. If you are a subscriber, especially a longtime subscriber, you know that our print offering is more journalistically ambitious and aesthetically sophisticated than ever. If you are not a subscriber, but happened across *The Atlantic* at a newsstand (unlikely at

this particular moment in American history, but nevertheless possible), you should know that you are reading the best magazine published in the United States. Yes, I realize that I'm the baker praising his own bread, so please discount for self-interest, but I do believe that what *The New York Times* said recently about us—that we are America's "red-hot" magazine—is true.

One big reason we are "red-hot" (I promise that this is the last time I will mention it) has to do with our daily journalism. Over the past decade, we have built an online magazine that combines the best qualities of our print magazine—deep reporting, compelling writing, careful editing, superior design—with other important qualities: speed, spontaneity, experimentation. One of my goals as editor in chief has been to close the gap in journalistic ambition between our print magazine and our online coverage. I think we are achieving this, fairly rapidly. The print magazine is, of course, a gratifying and intellectually fulfilling way to experience *The Atlantic's* journalism. I have ink for blood, and I believe that there is no better delivery system on the planet for complicated thoughts, beautiful writing, and stunning art and design than a print magazine (and thank goodness so many of our readers agree).

But: The magazine in your hands comes to you 10 times a year. On the web, we never stop publishing. Our writers are all ambidextrous now. They pivot back and forth easily between print and digital, and when you're not taking advantage of our digital stories, you're simply missing out on the full *Atlantic* experience. This is a shame, in part because print subscribers have automatic access to all of our journalism.

If you come by the website, you'll discover a treasure chest of articles, including more by Anne Applebaum, who wrote this issue's cover story. Anne, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and an *Atlantic* staff writer, is one

of the world's great experts on the fragility of democracy and of the American experiment. In one of her recent articles on our site, "The Coronavirus Called America's Bluff," Anne takes apart the belief that the United States is—at this moment, at least—the best, most efficient, and most technologically advanced country in the world.

You'll also find more writing by Franklin Foer, whose article in this issue cautions against the encroachment of Big Tech into our lives, our government, and our bodies. Frank, who wrote last November's cover story on Jeff Bezos's master plan (and the previous issue's investigation into continuing Russian election interference), is publishing equally probing articles online, right at the intersection of politics and technology.

If you're a regular reader of Amanda Mull's "Material World" column, you can enjoy even more of her reporting on consumer culture on our website. Her recent stories explore, among other topics, the laptop as the unheralded villain of work-life balance; the dilemma of how to get food during a pandemic; and the many challenges facing Gen C, the coronavirus generation.

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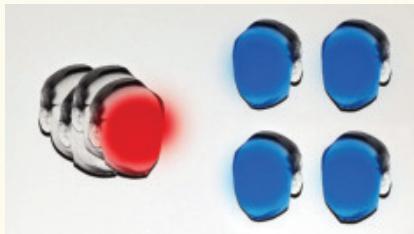
I thank you for your continued support.

Jeffrey Goldberg  
*Editor in Chief*

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If you liked **McKay Coppin's** March 2020 investigation into the billion-dollar disinformation campaign to reelect the president, you will want to follow the reporting he's done on politics and polarization since then.

## THIS IS TRUMP'S FAULT

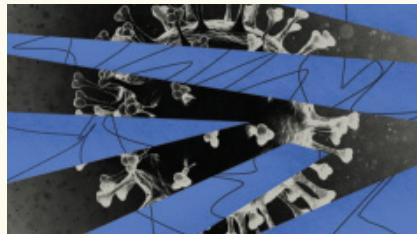
*The president is failing, and Americans are paying for his failures.*



**David Frum's** March 2017 cover story, "How to Build an Autocracy," was published 10 days after Donald Trump's inauguration. In it, Frum explained how the 45th president could set the U.S. down a path toward illiberalism; many of his fears have come true. More of Frum's continued analysis of the Trump administration can be found exclusively online.

## WHY THE CORONAVIRUS IS SO CONFUSING

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In 2018, **Ed Yong** published a story in the July/August issue that examined whether the United States was prepared for the next pandemic. He concluded that the country was "disturbingly vulnerable." Two years later, Yong is covering the coronavirus crisis with the same prescience and insight, helping readers understand this moment and what's to come.

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### HOW TO BUILD A LIFE

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### DEAR THERAPIST

Published every Monday, this column features the psychotherapist **Lori Gottlieb** responding, with insight and compassion, to complicated issues. Start with “My Husband Thinks Social-Distancing Measures Are Too Extreme”; “I Looked Through My Daughter’s Phone, and I Didn’t Like What I Saw”; and “Is It Possible to Apologize for a Sexual Assault?”



### THE ATLANTIC CROSSWORD

Our mini puzzle gets bigger and more challenging every weekday. The mastermind behind the crossword is **Caleb Madison**, who describes his clues as requiring “a little bit of creative brain work, rather than just knowing facts.” Here’s one: What’s a three-letter word for “gossip’s spillage”?

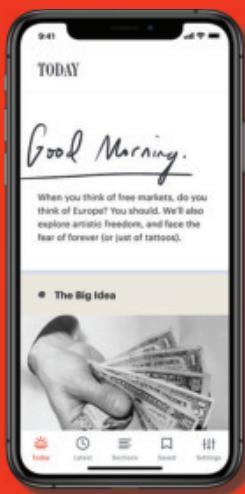
On Sundays, see if you can solve our larger crossword, which is created by a rotating cast of puzzle makers.

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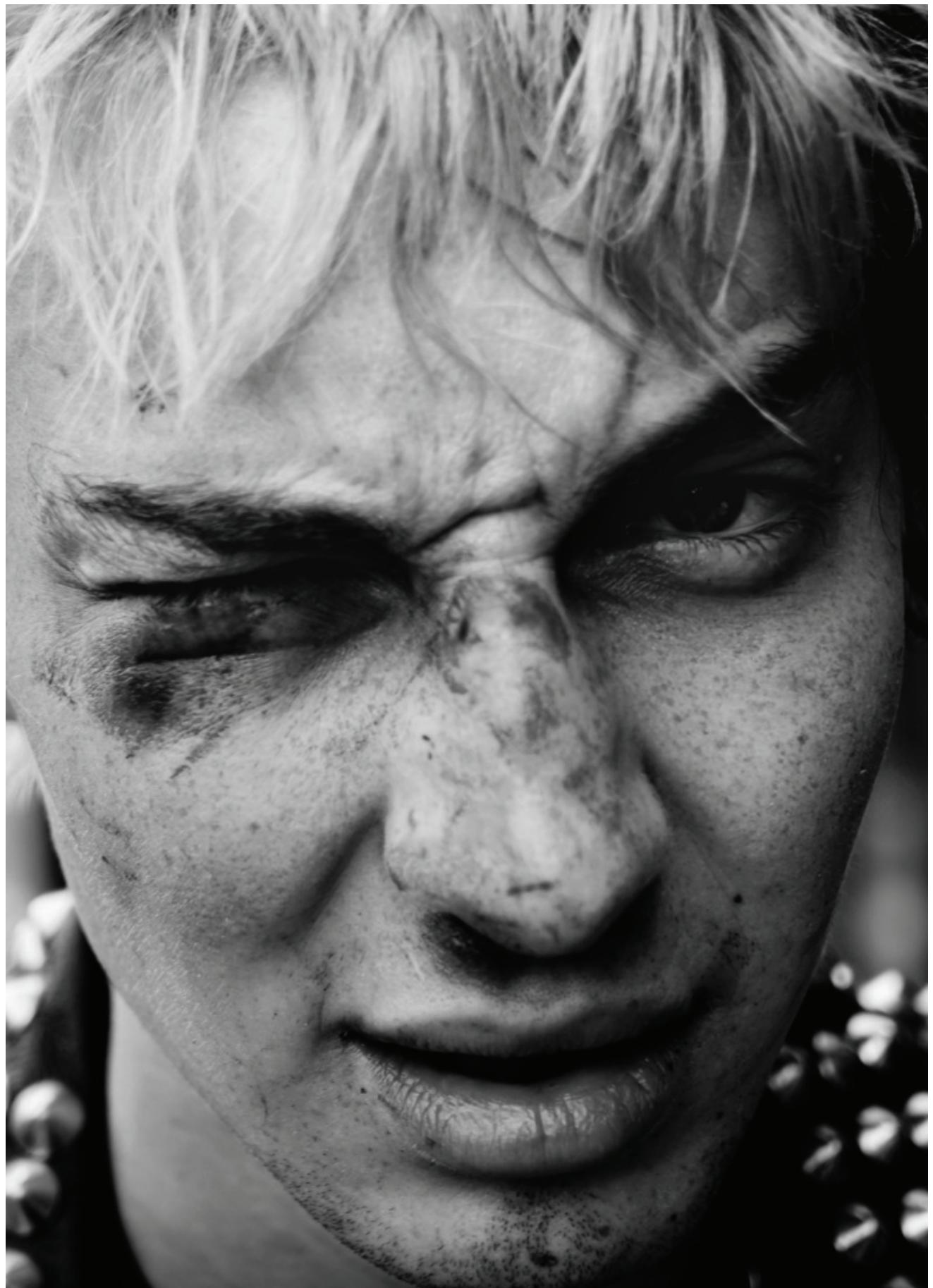
## FICTION



Deep Cut

By  
Andrew Martin

“Naw, you don’t have to worry about me,” Thomas said, after his mother had finished her characteristically perfunctory warning to us about drugs, alcohol, and rough-looking types. “Paul thinks he’s cool now, though.” ¶ “Paul, when did this happen?” Mrs. Rickley said. ¶ She wasn’t a hip mom, exactly, but she got points for not caring particularly about what her children or their friends got up to.



She was a physics professor at Princeton and had consistently made it clear that she did not need this shit.

"I just woke up one morning wearing Ray-Bans," I said. "I guess it was for an album-cover shoot, and it kind of spiraled out from there."

"He's trying to impress girls now," Thomas said.

"Oh, God forbid, Thomas," his mom said. "Maybe you should try to impress a girl. After your hair grows back. And don't be a smart-ass, Paul."

Thomas had surprised me with a freshly Bic'd skull and a three-piece suit when I arrived at his house a few hours before the concert. His light-blond hair and pale skin had already rendered him a solid candidate for the Hitler Youth; now he looked like genuine trouble, or at least troubled. The new look was an homage to one of the bands we were going to see, Execution of Babyface, whose members each rocked the "shaved head/natty threads" combo. EOB fans were notoriously violent, even for hardcore kids, and Thomas and I, best friends and cultural comrades since we were 10 years old, had spent a lot of time on message boards reading (probably?) untrue rumors about coordinated windmill-fist phalanxes and secret seven-inches given only to "executioners" who could present the band with a tooth, or teeth, knocked free during a show. It was all a bit scary and conspiratorial for punk rock, and even at that early stage, it was much more Thomas's scene than mine. But I did enjoy the music, or was at least fascinated by it. It was pulverizing and ultrafast and punctuated by terrifying screams. EOB's lyrics were inspired by Guy Debord, John Ashbery poems, and Kevin Smith movies, though you generally couldn't catch them in real time. It was a substantial leap from the Punk 101 I'd absorbed from a rudimentary website run by a Russian autodidact, which was filled with long paens to the brilliance of *London Calling*, *Zen Arcade*, and the brief, collected works of Rites of Spring. I'd just turned 16.

Mrs. Rickley pulled up to the venue, which turned out to be a wide single-story building off Route 35, a quiet highway in South Amboy, wherever that was. Before

I learned to drive, I never had any idea of my location in space—it seemed impossible to pay attention to something like that from a back seat, so I never tried. There were only a couple of years between my learning to drive and the rise of the talking navigation machines, which reduced the world to their glowing screens and precise, incorrectly pronounced instructions. In other words: Is it any wonder that I still have no idea where I am?

"All right, guys, I'll be back for you at midnight," Mrs. Rickley said. "Be ready. For every minute you're late I'm going to—what? Dock your allowance? Do you have an allowance?"

"Sure, we'll come out when the show's over," Thomas said.

"I know *Paul* heard what I said."

"Yeah, we'll definitely meet you out here when the show's finished," I said.

"Paul, do not be an asshole to me. I'll see you here at 12."

She drove off and we walked the length of a long line of people waiting to get inside. It looked to be maybe one-third EOB guys—all guys—trying not to look self-conscious in their suits; one-third old-school punks in the usual leather, plaid bondage pants, and assorted paraphernalia; and one-third shaggy-haired, emo-adjacent kids in black T-shirts and jeans, like me. We finally found the end of the line, wrapped all the way around the back of the building.

"Doors were at seven and it's 8:15, so I sure fucking hope we're not missing Class of '36," Thomas said.

"It shouldn't be that hard to get people in," I said.

A raccoon-eyed girl in a leather jacket turned around.

"Some EOB jackass threw a smoke bomb before anyone even went on," she said. "So everybody had to leave and come back in. And now they're doing, like, cavity searches, I guess."

"Fucking fascists," Thomas said, though the security response sounded reasonable enough to me. He took a Swiss Army knife out of the breast pocket of his suit jacket and contemplated it.

"Why did you bring that?" I said.

"Open stuff," he mumbled. He crouched down next to a shrub on the side of the building and clawed at the mulch

below, then dropped his knife in the hole and covered it back up.

"Like 50 people just watched you do that," I said.

"Punk is trust," he said.

We inched forward. I wished I had a cigarette—wished I *smoked* cigarettes. This was what they had been designed for, looking cool while waiting for things. Word was you could buy them, no questions asked, at the kiosk in Palmer Square as long as you were sure that no one from school was around. Though he'd never said it, my guess was that cigarettes were even lower in Thomas's moral hierarchy than alcohol or drugs or sex because the pose-to-effect ratio was so high. Per Minor Threat: I. JUST. THOUGHT. IT. LOOKED COOL.

Thomas shadowboxed next to me.

"What—is—the—*holdup*?" he said, punctuating the last word with a knockout punch.

"Class of '36 kind of sucks anyway," I said. They were, again per the internet, third-tier Rancid knockoffs, with lots of "oi oi oi"s and rousing shit about the Spanish Civil War.

"They're better than standing around looking at a closed fucking auto-parts shop," Thomas said.

A couple of minutes later, a chant went up in the crowd: "EOB. LET US IN. EOB. TEAR IT DOWN. EOB. FUCK YOUR LIFE." Despite the infamy of the band, and the implied threat of the chanted lyrics, this didn't strike me as a crowd that was going to start a riot, at least not right away. But the recitation gained force, and, as sudden as the opening of a traffic bottleneck when the wrecked car is finally towed, we started moving swiftly toward the door.

"Finally, collective *action*," the Mohawked guy ahead of us said. He dropped his cigarette and pulverized it into a smear of tobacco with a heavy black boot.

"All right, dude," Thomas said. "Things might get crazy in there, so we've gotta have each other's backs. If we see one of us getting in trouble, we're gonna step up, right?"

"Don't do something stupid," I said. "You're not that big."

The old anxiety bubbled in me, less fear than anticipation. I wanted, then and always, to have the best night of my life,

to do whatever thing would change me forever. Everything I read and listened to insisted that all was building toward catharsis. There could be no complete self without eruption, revelation, and the possibility of total defeat, however unlikely.

At the door, the fat white bouncer gave me a cursory pat-down—pockets, belly, chest, go—but he held Thomas back and made him take off his jacket and vest, lift up his shirt, even stick out his tongue.

"Profiling sons of bitches," Thomas muttered.

"Scuse me, son?" the bouncer said.

"You're doing a *very good* and thorough job."

At the ID table, I received the black X's in Sharpie on the backs of my hands. Thomas had apparently already drawn red ones on his, a frequent-enough occurrence, I guess, that the ID guy simply waved him on, eye roll very much implied.

Class of '36 was in the middle of a song when we got into the main room, the one with the chorus that went "Whoa-ahuh-uh-oh, we're taking it!" Maybe 50 people were jumping in place or standing with their arms crossed in front of the stage, occasionally shoving the skinny kids who were doing the stumbling-and-swaying-while-being-overcome-with-feeling thing. Save it for your subgenre, guys. Most of the EOB and hardcore-looking guys were stalking around away from the stage, looming over the merch table and wandering along the walls giving fist bumps to confederates. The bar was being used as a convenient leaning post by large, bearded dudes in hooded sweatshirts, most of whom were drinking water out of clear-plastic cups, if they were drinking anything. Over the course of the night, I saw people swigging out of flasks and label-less plastic bottles and discreetly hitting one-hitters, but I didn't see a single person buy a drink at the bar.

The merch table had a copy of the original Babyface EP on vinyl, which came out before the band was forced to change its name, because of a cease-and-desist order from Arista Records. (As if consumers would somehow mistake a violent, surrealist hardcore band for the smooth-singing R&B guy, but whatever.) I wanted to buy it, but didn't know what I'd do with it during the show.

"How many of those do you have?" I shouted.

"Extremely limited, dude," the merch guy shouted back. He was good at his job.

I sighed and bought it for 10 bucks, put it under my arm, and went looking for Thomas. I spotted him near the wall to the left of the stage, glaring furiously at the band.

"You were right, they fucking suck," Thomas said.

"They're actually better than I thought they'd be," I said. I did think that, but mostly I wanted to contradict him.

*The old anxiety  
bubbled in me,  
less fear than  
anticipation.  
I wanted, then  
and always, to  
do whatever  
thing would change  
me forever.*

He turned his attention to me. "I already have that," he said, nodding at the record.

"You never see it around, so I figured I should grab it," I said.

"Right, because rarity is an accurate proxy for significance."

"I'm with capitalism on that one, yeah."

Thomas turned his attention back to the stage. "It's gonna get all fucked up in the pit."

I put the record on the floor, leaning it against the wall, my carelessness intended as a further misguided rebuke to Thomas, and walked away into the thickening crowd.

"I want to thank all you motherfuckers for keeping it real and keeping real punk the fuck alive," the lead singer of Class of '36 said. "This is our last song, it's about not giving a fuck whether you live or die. Everybody stay safe tonight, look out for each other."

They started into "Suicide Mission," and people surged forward, shoving and skanking and, in a few cases, wildly swinging their fists. A skinny guy with a buzz cut made eye contact and gave me a frantic, bobbing thumbs-up. I gave him one back.

"Up, up!" he shouted. He lifted one foot off the ground and pressed his hand into my shoulder. I didn't understand that he wanted to crowd-surf until he tried to plant his foot in the middle of my leg, at which point I bent down and let him use my thigh for leverage. He stomped down on me and dug his fingers deeper into my shoulder and remained poised in that precarious state until a girl in a tank top crouched under his other foot and hoisted him up onto the heads of the people in front of us, who put their arms up and passed him forward. The guy lay on his back, aloft, and pumped his fist slightly out of time with the lyrics of the chorus:

"I said CHELSEA, I'm not coming back, the smoke is coming in and we're under attack. It's a SUICIDE MISSION, there's no turning back, the flames are getting high and the walls are turning black..."

A girl rocking tattoo sleeves with a flowered sundress clambered up onstage, saluted the audience, then went stiff and fell face-first into the pit. She was caught and passed back through the crowd. A pair of hands egregiously grabbed her breasts, prompting her to kick her heavy boots—hard—at the heads of the people holding her legs, which caused the bottom half of her body to abruptly drop to the floor. Somebody—quite possibly the guy who'd groped her in the first place—lifted her up by the armpits and stood her upright, at which point she immediately resumed head-banging and charged back toward the stage.

When the band finished, the PA played "Search and Destroy" at half the volume of the live set and people drifted toward the edges of the room. I spotted Thomas sitting against the wall in the spot where I'd



left him. He had his hands to his temples and he was staring at his lap. Oh, was the lame-ass opening band too loud for him? There were still two more to go before the band he wanted to see.

I left him alone and drifted out a side door to the smoking area, a small concrete patio enclosed by a genuine red-velvet rope. Most of the smokers looked much older than me, but a round-faced girl with pink streaks in her hair looked about my age, and open to solicitation.

"Nice to see a Cure shirt in the mix," I said.

"Wanted to remind the emo kids," she said. "Boys, just *don't*."

"Word," I said. Under my hoodie, I was wearing the Get Up Kids T-shirt with the brass knuckles on it, which was funny, in theory, because the Get Up Kids were extremely sensitive. "I know this is awful, but is there any chance I could trouble you for a cigarette?"

"Sigh," she said. "Start 'em young, I guess."

She offered me a cigarette and a lighter. It was a Parliament, and I turned it end over end a couple of times to make sure I didn't light the filter. Then I flicked the lighter repeatedly, failing to create a flame. I shook it and cupped my hand around it and tried again. Nothing.

"Windy," I said, though it wasn't.

"Here," she said, and took the lighter. I put the cigarette in my mouth and she held the fire to it.

"Inhale, man, inhale!" she said. I did, and started coughing when the smoke hit my lungs.

"Oh man, you do *not* smoke," she said.

"I just haven't in a while," I said.

"It's okay, dude. Gotta start somewhere. Who are you here to see?"

"My buddy's super into EOB. I don't know the other bands that much."

"Oh, Fall to Shadows is next. They're all right, but if you're into more melodic stuff, I think you'll dig Secret Keepers. They're on second to last. I can see that Get Up Kids shirt peeking out there, no worries."

"You are one on whom nothing is lost," I said. I'd read about Henry James recently because a girl I thought I liked had told me that *The Portrait of a Lady* was her favorite novel. I'd taken *The Golden Bowl* out of the

library, but it might as well have been in German for all the sense I could make of it.

"Fuck yeah, dude," she said. "And I'm Karen, thanks for asking. Kind of a scene queen."

"Paul," I said. "Straight-up wannabe."

"It's a glamorous life, for sure."

The cigarette was going down easier now, though it still felt pretty terrible, and was making me light-headed.

"Is this Babyface stuff really as nuts as everyone says it is?" I said.

"I mean, it's definitely *violent*," Karen said. "As a member of the fairer sex, I prefer

I waited a polite 10 seconds and then followed her. A big crowd had gathered for the next band, and I didn't see Thomas among them, or against the wall. My record was still there, though, looking intact. Maybe punk *was* trust. *Raw Power* had gotten to "I Need Somebody," which meant that a band had to be coming on soon; surely it was bad form to let an entire *album* play between sets? I saw the guy who'd crowd-surfed off me and he gave me a curt nod. Then the lights went down and the crowd pushed forward. I let the people go around me and stood in front of the line of burly, self-appointed enforcers. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw that Thomas was among them, almost right behind me, arms crossed, feet set.

"I thought you'd abandoned me," I said.

"Naw, man, that nostalgic shit just gives me a headache," he said. "I'm straight now, though. Smoking is bad for you."

"Yeah, it makes you feel like shit, too," I said.

Thomas looked highly energized, so much so that I was a little suspicious. Surely he hadn't ... *done* anything, substance-wise? There was no way to ask without pissing him off, and I liked him better like this, whatever the cause. We watched the set from a defensive position in the back of the scrum, shoving flailing kids back into the pit and helping fallen girls and large men alike off the increasingly slippery floor. Fall to Shadows weren't bad, despite their unfortunate nu-metal vibe and the fact that I wasn't at all sure what they were on about. ("I lament (?) you from my—[shaking? shaven?]—chest [\_\_\_\_], WAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!") When they finished, we ambled to the bar like victorious athletes and gulped water.

Thomas spent the keyboard-heavy, sparsely attended Secret Keepers set bobbing on his toes and opening and closing his fists while I bopped along too, semi-bored. Seconds after they finished—"You guys are fucking awesome, EOB is up next, everybody be safe out there"—the men in suits started pressing forward, pushing us up to the front of the stage.

"Are you cool with this?" Thomas said.

"We're here, right?" I said.

We were surrounded by pinstripes and solemn, shiny heads. Some of the

*We watched the set from a defensive position in the back of the scrum, shoving flailing kids back into the pit.*

not to get in the middle of it, but it's not much worse than the usual dumb hardcore shit. Unless you piss off one of the idiots. You shouldn't wear your glasses."

"I'm pretty blind without them."

"Exactly. You wanna go in?"

She flicked her lit cigarette an impressive distance into the street. I dropped mine on the ground and put it out with my heel, then picked it up and tossed it underhand over the velvet rope.

"Aw, newbie," Karen said.

"How old are *you*?" I said.

"Sixteen. Well, in a couple months. See you inside."

suit jackets had been decked out with punk stuff—metal studs, anarchy-symbol pocket handkerchiefs—but most were anonymous, which, as intended, just made them more intimidating. A roadie in a suit came onstage.

"CHECKKKKKKKKKKKK!" he screamed, neck veins bulging. He pointed upward. Louder. "CHECKCHECKCHECKCHECK CHECKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK." He pointed upward again. "CHECK MOTHERFUCKING CHECK," he screamed. "CHECK DIEEEEEEEEEE DIE DIE." This got big cheers.

Then, without further warning, the band was onstage, hurriedly plugging cords into guitars. We were right up against the metal barrier in front of the stage, and I felt hands pressing into my back and shoulders, urging me to create space where there was none.

"All right, motherfuckers, you know who the fuck we are," the lead singer said. "We don't want nobody getting killed tonight. But if there's, uh, a little damage along the way, who's to say we won't be a little stronger for it? This is 'Variation on a Spectacle,' let's go."

The band crashed into the song with double-time drums and chest-shaking bass and some unpredictable, processed shrieks that must have been emanating from a guitar. The room disappeared into darkness interrupted by toxic-green strobe flashes. Thomas spun away from me and into the pit. Someone to my right gave me a hard shove in the lower back and I stumbled toward the melee of thrashing people. I kept my hands in front of me and hip-checked a guy into the open floor. *Hell yes.* For about five seconds, I felt the pure exhilaration promised by a thousand Greil Marcus columns. Then I turned and caught an elbow in the face, the pain so blunt and clarifying that it didn't register as pain, just pure heat. My glasses went flying and my vision was reduced to glowing red spots underlaid by a sick green. I heard a crack, followed by the fatal crunch of lens underfoot. The pummeling music paused, because all of EOB's songs were about 90 seconds long.

"Glasses?" I called out. "Anybody see glasses?"

A blurry someone handed me some bent plastic.

"They're pretty fucked, bro," he said. "And your face is bleeding."

Somebody grabbed my shoulder. Thomas, blurry.

"Who did this?" he shouted.

"Nobody," I said. "It was just random."

"Nothing is random, dude," he said.

The music returned, faster and louder than before, and I ducked behind the sweatshirt mafia by the bar. I touched my finger to my eyebrow and it came away wet. Not great. I held the broken glasses up to my face. One of the lenses was still intact, so I pressed it to my eye socket and moved back

jerked like a wounded insect's under the guy, who held him down with both hands. I dropped my broken glasses and rushed toward them, hearing, when I got close, the stream of their obscenities beneath the music. I gave the blurry antagonist a shove, and he didn't move, didn't even seem to acknowledge that I'd touched him, and though I hadn't put everything I had into it, this seemed like an ominous sign. I grabbed blindly at him again, getting ahold of the collar of his jacket, and felt it tear under my hands. Now this indistinct mass of person turned, unlocked himself from Thomas, and stood over me. He shouted something in my direction. I covered my sweat-wet face, trying to shield myself from whatever was going to happen next. I felt his hand on my shoulder, heard more indistinct shouting through the music. Then it clarified:

"Dude, you're fucking bleeding everywhere," the guy said. "I'd beat the shit out of you, if that's what you're into, but you're covered in blood."

I held my hands out in front of me—the guy, whatever his other shortcomings, was right about the blood. It seemed to be running freely down my face. The shadowy outline of Thomas had materialized, and though I couldn't see him, I sensed concern.

"Okay, buddy," he said, or something like that, and steered me past the big guys to the bar. I pressed a pile of napkins to my head and held it there. In my mind's eye, I marveled at my stoicism, which I guess indicated how detached I was, a result, I supposed, of my lack of sight and the knock to the head and the dehydration and the minor blood loss. It wasn't, Thomas declared, squinting above my eye, a deep cut. I leaned against the bar, letting the music deafen me as he dabbed.

(By the time we started wearing earplugs, in our late 20s, it was too late to turn back the significant hearing loss we'd incurred, Thomas's much worse than mine due to the daily sonic pummeling of the bands that he led during the years I was in college and law school. When Republic of Suffering, his most successful touring concern, came to D.C. during my clerkship year, we stayed up deep into the night in my apartment, catching up. Though by then he'd modified his policy of strict

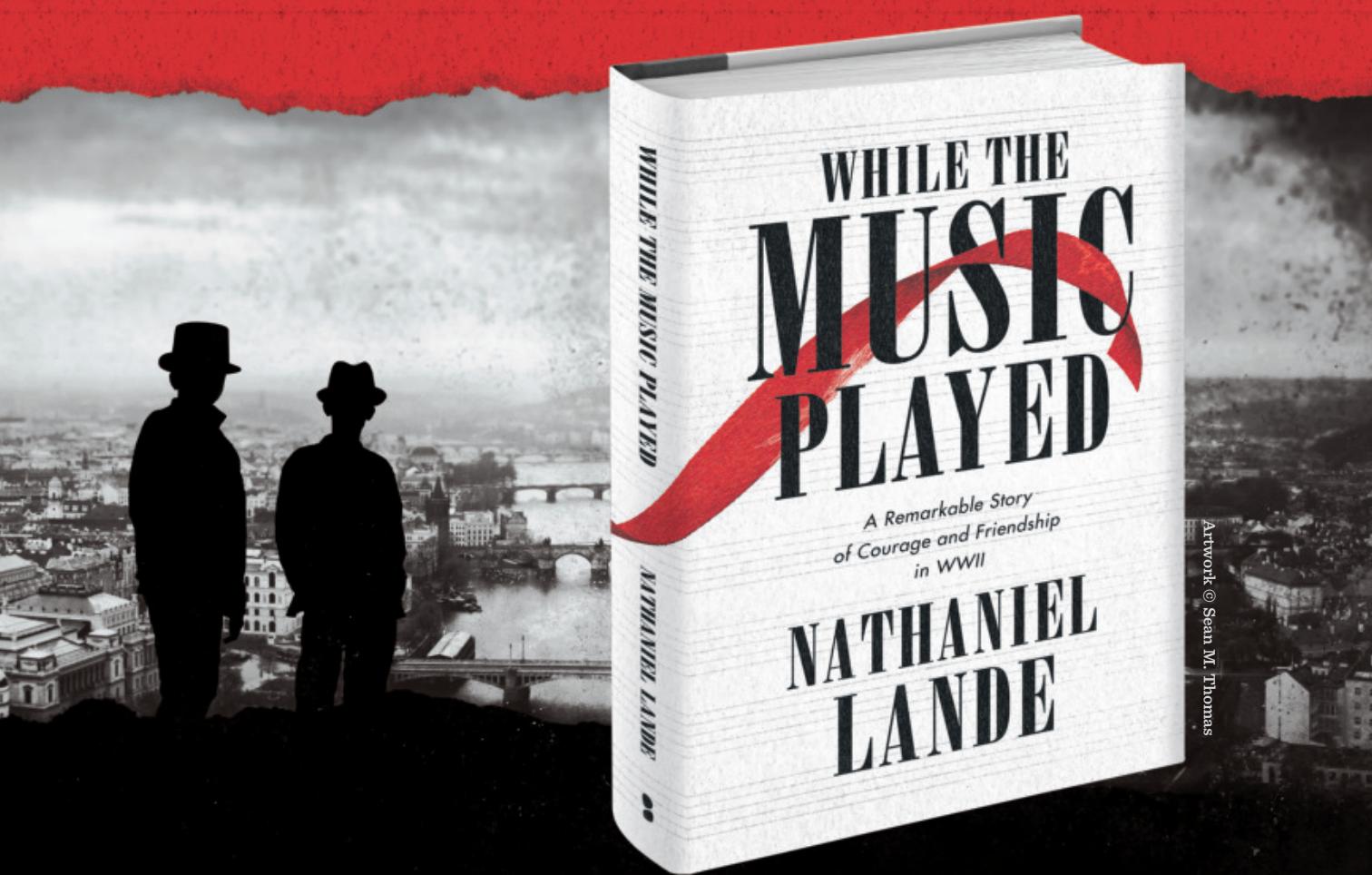
*"We don't want  
nobody getting  
killed tonight.  
But if there's, uh,  
a little damage  
along the way,  
who's to say we  
won't be a little  
stronger for it?"*

toward the main thrashing mass, trying to fulfill my pledge to keep an eye (if *only* an eye—cute, buddy) on Thomas. I held my watch an inch from the usable lens. It was 10 minutes until midnight.

I watched Thomas, in his ridiculous suit, beautiful and stupid, swinging his arms crazily through the air with great speed and no attempt at coordination. He clocked a large, bald devotee in the nose; the guy stumbled away, then turned and rushed at him, launching into Thomas with a linebacker tackle. Thomas's limbs

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abstinence, Thomas probably drank one beer for every three of mine, and I was, and still am, impressed and puzzled by the fact that he hadn't taken to booze or drugs as a default response to life's typical setbacks. At 4 a.m. I heard a faint pounding on my front door. It was the guy from the next apartment over, a muscled young political aide with perpetually wet hair. We were, he said, shouting at the top of our lungs. Didn't we know it was four in the morning? He had to be up in an hour. We were sorry. When I spoke to Thomas in a quieter voice, I saw in his eyes the effort required to follow along. His responses grew terse and general, like those of someone responding tentatively to questions in a foreign language, and we soon gave up and went to bed.)

"Do you mind if I get back in there?" Thomas said with a longing glance toward the pit.

"Yeah, no," I said. "I mean, of course. Get me a tooth."

He vanished and my head started to throb, which, at that moment, I found preferable to the alien light-headedness I'd been experiencing. I hadn't quite realized until then that every one of Execution of Babyface's songs was exactly the same. With that revelation came an unlikely surge in desire to join their thick-skulled brotherhood.

"Oof, dude," said a familiar female voice next to me.

"You caused this," I said.

"Aw, let mama kiss it," Karen said.

I waved her away, though I didn't think she was serious.

"I can't see shit," I said.

"Bald guys playing instruments. Bald guys punching each other. You're not missing much."

"At least the music's good."

"They're a little math-y, don't you think? Not a lot of human stuff."

"The lyrics are actually ..."

"Yeah, right, I know. But it's kind of a waste."

We let the music hit us.

"It's funny that you can't see," Karen said, very close to my ear. I was worried that she really might kiss me. Then, wetly, nearly inside my head: "You're just some fucking tourist, aren't you?"

I tried to focus on her.

"Maybe," I said. "So?"

"Just giving you shit," she said. "Everybody's a tourist. Except Sid Vicious. Kill Devotion's playing in two weeks at Hamilton Street. Come hang out. Your face is still bleeding."

The maelstrom of noise started up again and she drifted away from me. Up on the edge of the stage, I could just make out something that I assumed was the lead singer of EOB, bent over, screaming.

"And you," he bellowed. "Thank you for your book and yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeear. Something happened in the GARAGE, and I owe it for the BLOOD!"

"Traffic!" the crowd responded.

"Those lines are by the only real American poet," the singer said. "There will be no encore, go home and kill yourselves, good night."

Thomas led me back to the wall to retrieve my record, still standing where I'd left it. I pulled it out of the sleeve. It had broken in two, one chunk significantly larger than the other. I handed the smaller piece to Thomas. We walked outside, and the October air turned our sweat cold immediately. Thomas was shivering but trying not to show it.

"Do you see your mom?" I said. I was no help in spotting her, of course, and was worried that even no-worries Mrs. R would be freaked out by my grisly appearance. It was well past midnight.

"Naw," Thomas said, scanning the parking lot.

Apparently, we were being taught a lesson about coming out late—because we'd made her wait half an hour, she was going to make *us* wait for as long as she deemed fit. Which of course, like most parental punishments, just wasted more of her

own time. We found Thomas's knife—it had been dug up or accidentally unearthed somehow, but was basically where he'd left it—and I watched while he flipped it in the air unsheathed and mostly failed to catch it. His mother pulled up around 1 a.m., by which point only a few conspiratorial EOB diehards were left in the parking lot to keep us company.

"Oh, Jesus, Paul," she said when she saw me through the rolled-down passenger window. I imagine she'd planned to deliver some kind of wisecrack, something along the lines of "Not much fun waiting, is it?" Now, instead, she got out of the car and hurried toward me.

"What happened to you?" she said. I'd never seen her so actively concerned. "Paul, you need stitches."

"It's not that deep," I said.

"How would you know?" she said, which was fair. "I can't give you back to your parents looking like this."

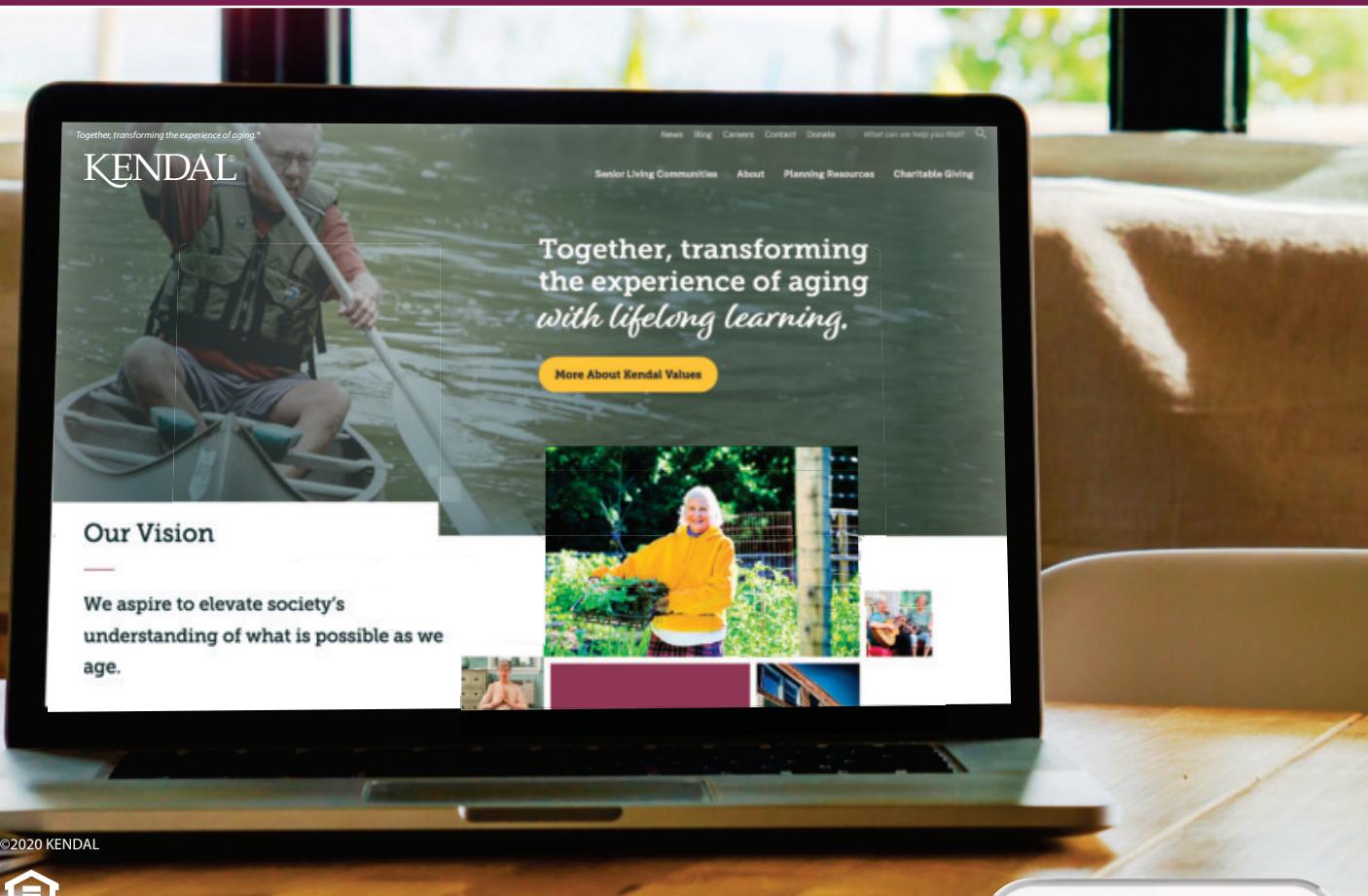
"I think it's an improvement, actually," Thomas muttered to me when we were in the back seat. "Somebody literally knocked that stupid look off your face."

I said nothing. I'd resigned myself to silence in protest of being taken to the hospital for necessary medical attention.

As it happened, I did not *need* stitches. Stitches, the doctor said, were optional at that point, cosmetic. After much debate with my parents, who were, despite my objections, summoned to the Raritan Bay Medical Center in the middle of the night, I chose to keep the scar. It was a stupid decision. I was afraid of the needle, sure. But I also thought that preserving the evidence of the wound might keep me from turning my youth into cheap nostalgia. As if a scar, of all things, were capable of that. *A*

*Andrew Martin is the author of Early Work. This story is an excerpt from Martin's upcoming story collection, Cool for America.*

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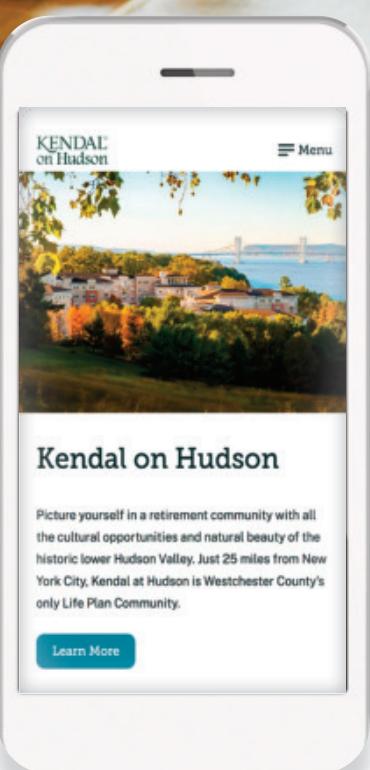
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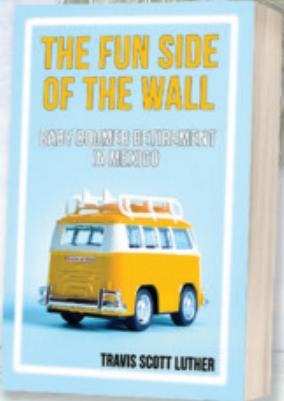
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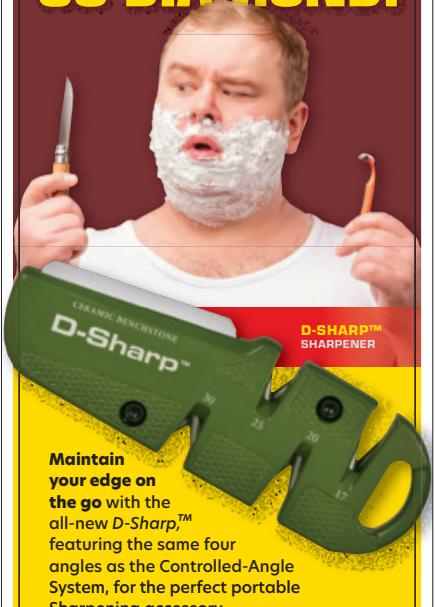
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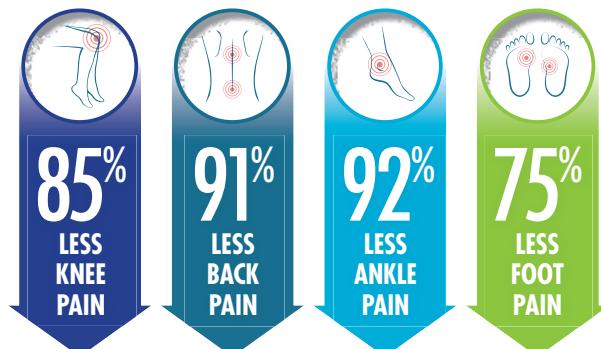


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*You have to  
get up.*

That's the first thing. Don't just lie there and let it have its way with you. The sea of anxiety loves a horizontal human; it pours over your toes and surges up you like a tide. Is your partner lying next to you, dense with sleep, offensively unconscious? That's not helping either. So verticalize yourself. Leave the bed. Leave its maddening mammal warmth. Out you go, clammy-footed, into the midnight spaces. The couch. The kitchen.

So now you're up. You've reclaimed a little dignity, a little agency. You're shaken, though. You make yourself a piece of toast; it pops up like a gravestone. Insomnia is no joke. The thoughts it produces are entirely and droningly humorless. Failure, guilt, your money, your body. Someone else's body. On and on. And over there, look, the world: the whole flawed and shuddering and horribly lit life-and-death-scape, with all of us shambling around the circuit like broken beetles. At 2:41 a.m., everyone who's awake turns into Hiëronymus Bosch.

And therein, my sleepless friend, lies the key: You're not alone. Even as you twist in these private coils, these very particular difficulties, you are joining a mystical fellowship of insomniacs. We are all out there, keeping an eye on things: a sodality, a siblinghood, an immense

and floating guild of piercingly conscious minds. What might happen, if not for our vigilance? Into what idiocies of optimism and vainglory might humanity collapse? We're like the Night's Watch in *Game of Thrones*, except there's millions of us. Above the city rooftops it shimmers and flexes; it tingles over the leafy suburbs: the neural lattice of our wakefulness.

"God time"—that's what my late friend, the writer Gavin Hills, used to call insomnia. Meaning, I think, a release from the individual and partial, a release into the eternal. The clock goes weird in the small hours. It speeds up and it slows down. It has moods. You yourself have moods. Now the Gothic backchat of insomnia fills your mind with terrible news, terrible apprehensions; now you feel at peace. Now panic seizes you: How will you function in the morning, on so little sleep? You'll be grumpy, you'll feel ill, your brain won't work! All those things you have to do and say! And now you feel something else: a serene compassion for your social self, for the buttressed and bashed-together you, so brittle, trying so hard, that you present to the world. Maybe you think about the other bashed-together selves that you'll encounter, in the grayness of the day, and you experience compassion for them too. This is quite precious.

It's 4 a.m. You've experienced yourself, fully and purgatorially. You've preserved the balance of global sanity. You've had pity on your fellow man. You have sniffed timelessness. Your work is done, insomniac. Go back to bed. *A*

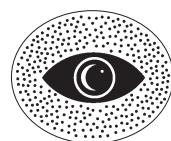
*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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## INSOMNIA

*By James Parker*



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