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S G S & L M

# The New Yorker Magazine

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# Goings On

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## [Goings On](#)

# The Sophisticated Kitsch of Blackpink

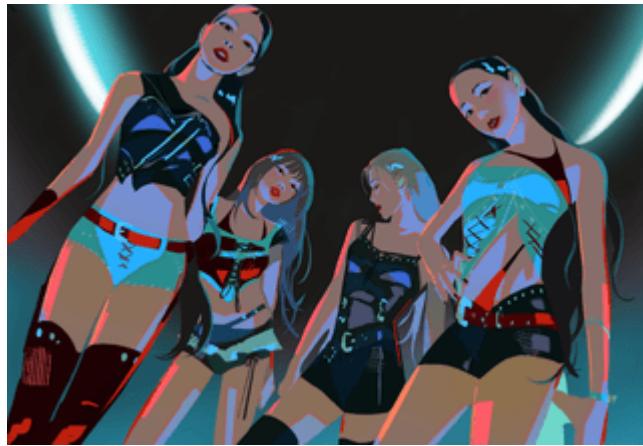
*Also: The stunning musical “The Gospel at Colonus,” Golden Age celebrity photos at MOMA, Soledad Barrio’s explosive flamenco, and more.*

*By [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Rachel Syme](#), and [Justin Chang](#).*

*July 18, 2025*

*You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)*

**In the mid-twenty-tens**, the incandescent girl group **Blackpink** was, along with BTS, at the center of the K-pop revolution that finally popularized the genre in America, after nearly two decades of domination in its birthplace, South Korea. The K-pop model is built around entertainment agencies that turn teen-aged trainees into synchronized performance units via carefully choreographed songs, dance routines, and fashion styles, all echoing the youth movements in American pop, with the twist that it’s performed in both Korean and English. A relentless, non-stop promotion cycle turns performers from rookies to “idols,” drawing devoted fans who closely follow their every move and treat the music as gospel. One such agency, YG Entertainment, having built the pioneering girl group 2NE1, in the late two-thousands, used the prototype to build a supercharged version in Blackpink, in 2016, choosing members who reflect the Korean diaspora—Rosé is Korean, born in New Zealand; Jennie is Korean, raised in New Zealand; Lisa is Thai; and Jisoo is Korean. The group’s music—produced by YG’s K-pop rapper turned in-house producer Teddy Park—was decidedly more robust and pulled explicitly from hip-hop; the group’s tag line, “Blackpink in your area,” made clear its global ambitions.



*Blackpink continues its reunion tour. Illustration by Marion Bordeyne*

With pomp, circumstance, and a worldly intuition never previously displayed in K-pop, Blackpink exploded onto the scene as a singularly magnetic girl squad, as kitschy and flamboyant as it was sophisticated and practiced. Its biggest singles are possessed by a zany hyperactivity offset by blasé cool and spells of muted balladry, and its two records, “The Album” (2020) and “Born Pink” (2022), made it the most successful K-pop girl group ever. In the years since “Born Pink,” the members have internalized the guiding principles of Korean cultural expansion, setting aside group activities and embarking on solo adventures. Since December, 2024, each has made a solo début—Rosé with “Rosie,” Jennie with “Ruby,” Lisa with “Alter Ego,” and Jisoo with the EP “Amortage”—all featuring songs primarily in English, with the three albums breaking into the *Billboard* 200 top ten. Blackpink continues its long-anticipated reunion Deadline tour with two shows at [Citi Field](#), July 26-27, navigating both group and solo stardom.—*Sheldon Pearce*



## About Town

Flamenco

The ensemble **Noche Flamenca**, led by the remarkable flamenco dancer and choreographer Soledad Barrio and her choreographer husband Martín Santangelo, continues its explorations of the paintings and etchings of Francisco Goya, which often depict characters in deep distress, hemmed in by dark forces. Such themes are well suited to the emotionally explosive range of flamenco performance, with its keening voices and driving footwork. The vignettes in “Legacy of Our Dreams,” set to guitar, percussion, and voice, each delve into a theme, from the shame of forbidden love to social isolation to the abuse of the powerless—or, as Santangelo put it, “the not-so-pretty parts of life.”—*Marina Harss ([Joyce Theatre](#); July 29-Aug. 10.)*

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## Classical

No matter how much you plan your wedding day, things can always go wrong. Maybe a count wants to sleep with your fiancée, your long-lost parents are revealed, or you disguise yourself as someone else. Another couple could even get married up there with you. In “Le Nozze di Figaro,” or “The Marriage of Figaro” for those less Romantically inclined, anything is possible. The opera company **Teatro Grattacielo’s** version of Mozart’s chaotic masterpiece, conducted by the Mexican pianist and conductor Abdiel Vázquez and directed by Stefanos Koroneos, plays with onstage lighting to highlight hidden motivations and desires. Who knows what may be found in the shadows.—*Jane Bua ([La Mama](#); July 25-27.)*

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## Art



Sylvia Sidney, c. 1932. Photograph by Eugene Robert Richee / Courtesy MOMA

MOMA's film department knows that the art and artifice of filmmaking have always thrived on publicity. To illustrate that point, "**Face Value: Celebrity Press Photography**," a show of more than two hundred portraits from the department's files, packs the galleries leading into the lower-level screening rooms with stars going back to film's earliest days. Enlisting photographers (and professional flatterers) such as George Hurrell, Clarence Sinclair Bull, and Ernest A. Bachrach to make the photographs, the studios molded and maintained the images of everyone from Jean Harlow to Harry Belafonte by leaving nothing to chance. Most of the pictures here have been painted, trimmed, collaged, or otherwise ruthlessly edited. In a shot of Carlo Ponti and Sophia Loren head to head, he remains, smiling, while she's x-ed out.—Vince Aletti ([MOMA](#); through June 21, 2026.)

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#### Alternative R. & B.

The London-based Nigerian singer **Obongjayar** has been steadily drifting toward his distinct sound. Initially discovered by XL Recordings head

Richard Russell for a freestyle over the Kendrick Lamar song “u,” his musical evolution sent him spiralling in many different directions—Afrobeat, spoken word, electronic music, soul. A self-described “identity crisis” left him searching for something that more markedly represented him and his home. His début album, “Some Nights I Dream of Doors,” from 2022, manifested these many turns as one integrated style, generating polyrhythmic hymnals that felt hallowed and personal. Obongjayar’s new album, “Paradise Now,” takes a deeper dive into fluid self-expression, even revisiting hip-hop, only now on his terms.—Sheldon Pearce ([Music Hall of Williamsburg](#); July 24.)

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## Off Off Broadway



Ayana George Jackson in “The Gospel at Colonus.” Photograph by Julieta Cervantes

Bob Telson and Lee Breuer’s stunning 1983 musical **“The Gospel at Colonus”**—Sophocles’ fifth-century passion play reimagined as a Black

Pentecostal church service—returns, this time directed by Shayok Misha Chowdhury. Long-suffering Oedipus, played here by both the great baritone Davóne Tines and the blind jazz vocalist Frank Senior, comes at last to the place where he will die; the music converts his deathwatch into joy. This thrilling “gospel” makes its message out of twilight: a golden sky turns purple as the congregation, dressed in lavenders and mauves, dances; David Zinn’s set is a circle, red as the sinking sun. “Let every man consider his last day,” the chorus sings, as it turns the encroaching darkness into glory.—*Helen Shaw ([Little Island](#); through July 26.)*

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## Movies

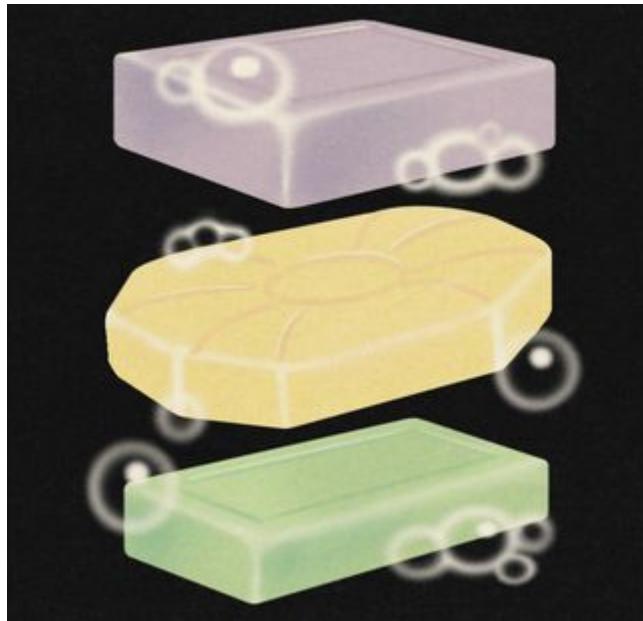
Reid Davenport’s documentary **“Life After”** is a passionate and revelatory fusion of investigative journalism, social analysis, and first-person exploration. He considers the case of Elizabeth Bouvia, a disabled woman who, in 1983, sought the right to assisted suicide, which was denied in court; in 1997, she appeared on “60 Minutes.” Finding no subsequent trace of her death—or of her life—Davenport pursues her story. His quest expands to consider efforts, in the United States and Canada, to legalize assisted suicide for disabled people, some of which he comes to see as political cover for denying them services—in effect, as cost-benefit euthanasia. In the process, Davenport, who is himself disabled (and deftly wields a camera from his wheelchair), gives voice to the intimate indignities of bureaucratic dependence and the fundamental prejudices and cruelties that it entails.—*Richard Brody ([Film Forum](#).)*

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## On and Off the Avenue

*Rachel Syme surveys the best bar soaps.*

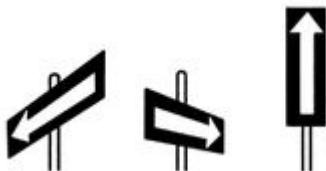


*Illustration by Jiyung Lee*

There are few indulgences I find more satisfying—particularly in the sweltering months—than a fresh block of upmarket bar soap. It is, in so many ways, the perfect splurge: solid and weighty in the hand, not exorbitant in cost, and, ultimately, able to justify its luxury through utility. Bar soap yearns to be *used*—and used up—rather than merely admired. For my money, the best-smelling, and most beautifully packaged, soap in the world (and I've tried too many to count) comes from the Parisian perfume house **Oriza L. Legrand**. The company wraps its soaps in creamy paper adorned with Art Nouveau designs, then tucks each one into an equally ornate, snug little box. My favorites of their offerings are [\*\*Relique D'Amour\*\*](#) (\$18), with a scent that evokes the mossy stones of an old church, and [\*\*Violettes du Czar\*\*](#) (\$18), which smells like chalky violet pastille candies. One area where bar soap certainly has shower gel beat is sloughing powers—if you are looking to shed a layer of dead skin for bare-arms season, pick up a [\*\*Soft Services Green Banana Buffing Bar\*\*](#) (\$30), which smells like tart, unripe fruit and feels like velvety sandpaper. Want to bring some history into the bath? Try [\*\*Caswell & Massey's Marem soap\*\*](#) (\$14), an octagonal cake smelling of red currants and Crimean roses. The perfume house (one of America's oldest) originally created the scent in 1914, for the actress Alla Nazimova, known for her impassioned Ibsen performances; onstage, she really whipped herself into a lather—you, blessedly, get to do it in the shower. Lastly, for that squeaky-clean

sensation, I've been turning to the [\*\*Los Poblanos Blue Corn Mint Bar\*\*](#) (\$12), made in my home state of New Mexico. It's herbaceous, cooling, and zesty; summertime in a slab.

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## What to Watch

*Summer is the time for blockbusters; our film critic Justin Chang picks some of the best.*

1. The term “blockbuster bomb” was first coined, during the Second World War, to describe explosives used by the Royal Air Force; “blockbuster” didn’t become film-industry shorthand until 1943, a few years after “[\*\*The Wizard of Oz\*\*](#)” was released in late August, 1939. Even so, this M-G-M classic inspired by the L. Frank Baum novel, a justly beloved pillar of Hollywood’s Golden Age, has, through almost nine decades’ worth of repertory screenings, TV airings, and home-video reissues, earned its blockbuster standing and then some. Call it a blockbuster Baum.
2. Steven Spielberg’s “[\*\*Jaws\*\*](#)” (1975) put the concept of the blockbuster, as we know it now, in circulation: despite a troubled production, it became such an outsized phenomenon that it forever transformed the way Hollywood films are made, marketed, and released. It remains the archetypal summer movie; its lurking terrors, still peerless after all these years, are inextricable from the sun-drenched pleasures of the season.
3. Some might argue that “[\*\*The Fly\*\*](#)” (1986), a respectable but hardly record-breaking commercial success, is a blockbuster only by the typically low-grossing standards of the director, David Cronenberg. I say that the explosion of cinematic preconceptions and limitations is precisely what this brilliant, wrenching film—a seamless fusion of horror and romance, genre and art—is all about.



Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock in “Speed,” from 1994. Photograph from 20th Century Fox Film Corp. / Everett Collection

4. Sometimes, I’ll rewatch the tremendously suspenseful and moving sequence from Jan de Bont’s “[Speed](#)” (1994) in which a group of passengers make their terrifying escape, one by one, from a hurtling bomb-rigged bus—and feel, for a moment, that all is right with the world.
5. It isn’t just the demonic force of Heath Ledger’s performance as the Joker that makes “[The Dark Knight](#)” (2008) one of the pinnacles of Hollywood comic-book filmmaking. It’s the way the director Christopher Nolan absorbs that force into the very architecture of his filmmaking, as if he had found a way to bottle the essence of anarchy in dramatic form. It’s rare to see a consummate control freak embrace his inner chaos agent; the effect is pummelling, unnerving—and entirely thrilling.

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**P.S. Good stuff on the internet:**

- [It's gas-station affogato season](#)
- [What it takes to work at \*Vogue\* in the nineties](#)
- [The case for an apartment ball pit](#)



[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker's* *Goings On* newsletter. [Marina Harss](#) has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of “[The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet](#). ” [Jane Buja](#) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*. [Vince Aletti](#) is a photography critic and the author of “[Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines](#). ”



[Helen Shaw](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of “[Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).”



[Rachel Syme](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of “[Syme's Letter Writer](#),” about the joys of handwritten correspondence.



*[Justin Chang](#)* is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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**Photo Booth**

# Sink or Swim

*In Tod Papageorge's photographs of L.A. beachgoers in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, he transforms formally challenging scrums into theatrical vignettes or semi-abstractions.*

By [Emma Allen](#)

July 5, 2025



*Photographs by Tod Papageorge / Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Connecticut*

Fifty years ago, a glitchy yet terrifying animatronic shark persuaded movie audiences never to go in the water again. Luckily—for the photographer Tod Papageorge, at least—it didn't keep people off the beaches. That same year, 1975, Papageorge was slowly making his way across the country, from New York City, where he'd become known for his 35-mm. street scenes, to Los Angeles, where he'd shoot throngs of sun-dazed, sweat-glazed beachgoers with a clunkier medium-format camera. He made four trips to L.A.'s beaches between 1975 and 1988, and a selection of the resulting black-and-white photographs—detail-rich, often dense, rapturous yet funny tableaux of stripped-down bodies engaged in sport or sprawled on the sand—will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Connecticut through October 26th.

Amazingly, few of Papageorge's subjects stare directly at the guy lugging a 6x9-cm.-format camera around the beach, although, as he said, “even on the

nude beaches, I was out there in my street clothes, looking like an idiot.” He noted that this was the same kind of format camera that Brassaï used to photograph in Paris night clubs, in the thirties and forties; Papageorge would also use it to photograph inside Studio 54—a series in which the revellers seem as oblivious to his presence as the sunbathers had been (could there be a correlation between the effects of club drugs and heatstroke?).

“In both cases, I just would stand still and pretend I didn’t exist, and eventually people seemed to accept the fact that I didn’t exist, that I’d somehow spontaneously combusted,” Papageorge recalled (this was even true of Wilt Chamberlain, whom he once stumbled upon in L.A.). “I would wait and wait until what I felt was a singular moment, only one moment, just one chance to lift the camera in a single gesture and make a single exposure.”

Papageorge, who is now eighty-four, grew up in the coastal town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In the summers, he worked in his father’s restaurant—“I’m Greek-American, so that’s a necessary condition,” he said. “Hot and sweaty after a day at work, I’d drive to the beach and swim.” But when it came to the West Coast, he added, “I’d never seen an Annette Funicello film, nor was I particularly interested in the Beach Boys.”

He was surprised by what he found in California: “I guess in your imagination you see four or five people wandering around, where in reality it’s piles, crowds of people moving around, so it’s much more enticing, engaging, exciting, because it is so complex.” Papageorge is drawn to formally challenging scrums, which his photos transform into theatrical vignettes or semi-abstractions: in addition to Studio 54, he has photographed in sports arenas, Central Park, and the Acropolis.



The photographer Lisa Kereszi, who organized the new show, is the assistant director in photography at the Yale School of Art, where Papageorge served as director of graduate studies in photography from 1979 to 2013. According to *MOCA CT*, a staggering forty-one of Papageorge's M.F.A. students went on to receive Guggenheim Fellowships, and prints of some of their grad-school work, as well as a looping slideshow of photos by almost three hundred of Papageorge's other students, will be featured in a concurrent show at *MOCA CT* titled "In the Pool." The name refers to a renovated former swimming pool at Yale, in which classes and photo critiques are held. Also, Kereszi likes to compare being an art student to "doing laps, over and over—you have crits, over and over, and you get better and better. You know, sink or swim."

"He was never Doctor Feelgood," the late photographer and Yale professor Richard Benson once wrote of Papageorge's pedagogical style. Still,

Benson and Papageorge's good-cop, bad-cop routine (Papageorge's description) clearly produced results. One infamous Papageorge zinger, "Your work looks like you've never read a book" was all the more stinging because Papageorge, who was an English major, has long insisted on "the absolutely direct relationship between photographs and poems."

Papageorge has said that he also views his beach photographs as musical. In college, he played timpani in the orchestra and drums in a jazz group. When asked whether pounding a drum—bang, bang, boom!—was the opposite of lurking on a beach, hoping to become invisible, he countered, "When you lift the camera to make the picture, that's something of a 'bang, bang, boom!'—at least for the photographer."



*[Emma Allen](#) is The New Yorker's cartoon editor and edits humor pieces on newyorker.com.*

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# The Talk of the Town

- **Behind Trump's Jeffrey Epstein Problem**

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells | The President has tried to blame the Democrats, and, more unexpectedly, he has called those in his base who have asked for a fuller accounting “weaklings” and “stupid.”

- **ICE Agents Invade a Manhattan Little League Field**

By Zach Helfand | Youman Wilder has coached local kids for twenty-one years—including four who have gone pro. When masked agents tried to interrogate his players, he told them, “You don’t have more rights than they do.”

- **“Yes, And” for Downsized Federal Workers**

By Sadie Dingfelder | A Washington, D.C., improv theatre invited recently laid-off civil servants to a free workshop. The goals: stay adaptable, and maybe even laugh.

- **Dining Sheds, Repotted**

By Naaman Zhou | Architects recycle a Brooklyn library’s al-fresco COVID reading room for a public garden.

- **Fragrances of Presidents Past**

By Barry Blitt | Now that Trump has released his new scent, Victory 45-47 (\$249), it’s time to sniff the competition.

[Comment](#)

# Behind Trump's Jeffrey Epstein Problem

The President has tried to blame the Democrats, and, more unexpectedly, he has called those in his base who have asked for a fuller accounting “weaklings” and “stupid.”

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

July 19, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

Donald Trump’s political allies have long insisted, with more than a little condescension, that the press should take the President seriously, but not literally. Yet the people who take Trump most literally are among his own supporters, who over the years have absorbed his most hyperbolic claims as if they were settled truth: that Hillary Clinton and various Bidens were guilty of high crimes, that the 2020 election was stolen, that the circumstances surrounding the death of the billionaire Jeffrey Epstein warranted “a full investigation” and might have involved Bill Clinton.

Rarely do the diehards demand proof. So earlier this month, when the Department of Justice and the F.B.I. issued a statement asserting that there was, in fact, no deeper mystery behind Epstein’s death—which occurred in a Manhattan jail cell in 2019, as he was facing trial for sex trafficking, and was determined to be suicide by hanging—the White House likely assumed that the *magaverse* would simply move on, as it had so many times before. The surprise—one that, two weeks in, Trump has still not been able to quell—is that it didn’t.

Squirming, the President has tried to dismiss the uproar (“Are people still talking about this guy?”) and to blame it, somehow, on Barack Obama and Joe Biden (the Democrats’ “new SCAM”). More unexpectedly, he has called those in his own base who have asked for a fuller accounting “weaklings” and “stupid,” lamenting that “my PAST SUPPORTERS have bought into this ‘bullshit,’ hook, line, and sinker.” But that has been just blood in the water, both to the Democrats who are now calling for the full release of the Epstein files and to the anonymous Republican strategists who have begun to warn of a drop in turnout in the midterms.

Among Trump’s aides, one theory was that his team had erred in promising not just vibes and insinuation, as he normally does, but something to which he is generally allergic: hard evidence. The details of Epstein’s life—the formidable connections he cultivated among political, financial, and academic élites; his conviction in Florida in 2008 for solicitation of prostitution; the way he avoided more serious punishment—have been exhaustively documented. But the *maga* fixation was that the government had participated in a coverup and had in its possession a list of Epstein’s clients, which could, the theory went, implicate scores of the powerful in heinous crimes. Last October, Trump’s running mate, J. D. Vance, said, “Seriously, we need to release the Epstein list.” In February, Attorney General Pam Bondi responded to a question about whether the Justice Department would soon make public the “list of Jeffrey Epstein’s clients” by saying it was “sitting on my desk right now to review.” Fifteen right-wing influencers had gone to the White House and were given binders titled “Epstein Files: Phase One.” But those “files” offered nothing new.

To Trump's allies in the right-wing media, many of whom had been predicting spectacular revelations about Epstein for years, this seemed like a dodge. "The fact that the U.S. government, the one I voted for, refused to take my question seriously and instead said, 'Case closed, shut up, conspiracy theorist,' was too much for me," Tucker Carlson said. Megyn Kelly posted on X that there were only two possibilities: that there was no client list and Bondi had misled the public or that "there is a scandal that's being covered up & it's at his"—Trump's—"direction." Steve Bannon estimated that the backlash would cost Republicans forty seats in the House of Representatives next year. That last prediction is probably worth taking seriously, but not literally.

More interesting was the reaction among Trump's most recent allies: the Silicon Valley billionaires and the podcast bros who were key to his win in 2024. Elon Musk has been making gleeful accusations against Trump for weeks. The comedian and podcaster Andrew Schulz complained, "He's doing the exact opposite of everything I voted for." Joe Rogan, among the most important of Trump's allies in November, now sounded betrayed: "Why'd they say there was thousands of hours of tape of people doing horrible shit? Why'd they say that?"

Trump is vulnerable to the Epstein case, and not only because the two men were photographed partying together, or because Trump praised Epstein in a quote that was widely circulated, or because Epstein had told the reporter Michael Wolff that, for ten years, he had been the President's "closest friend." (Trump eventually said that they had had a "falling out.") On Thursday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, for Epstein's fiftieth birthday, Trump, among others, sent him a "bawdy" birthday letter, which Trump denied, saying that he would sue the *Journal*, "just like I sued everyone else." Liberals, taking all this in, might suspect that it's a simple comeuppance for Trump's political choices: if you build a following on the internet fringe, you can become beholden to its obsessions. But the uproar also has to do with the ways in which the Trump movement has evolved.

In the post-pandemic atmosphere of fury and distrust, Trump moved much more nimbly than the Democrats to expand his support among people who are only irregularly interested in politics, and he has reached a group that is

young, nonwhite, male, and less likely to have a college degree. That group, and the podcasters whom they supply with an audience, has seemed drawn to Trump's persona as an outsider, an inveigher against the establishment. And yet, in the six months since the Inauguration, what Trump, despite adopting a cruel and autocratic style, has given them are Republican establishment policies: a budget that cuts Medicaid, stripping seventeen million people of health insurance, and gives huge tax breaks to the rich; a military intervention in the Middle East. A CNN poll released on Wednesday suggests that the number of Americans who "approve strongly" of Trump's Presidency—one measure of his base—is now at its lowest of any point in his first and second terms.

No wonder Trump sounds so exasperated. (On Thursday, he said that Bondi would produce "any and all" grand-jury testimony from Epstein's case, though this seems unlikely to satisfy anyone.) The central illusion of his political career has been that, despite his wealth and evident clout, he remains an outsider. But that was always a fiction, and now—with the G.O.P. leadership unified behind him and the Supreme Court mostly backing him—he may feel strong enough to leave some of his movement's weirdness behind. Second-term Trump is no longer acting as a populist, and the Epstein case is unfolding as a test of how *maga* responds to this news. ♦



*[Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)* began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.

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[Dept. of Masked Men](#)

# ***ICE Agents Invade a Manhattan Little League Field***

Youman Wilder has coached local kids for twenty-one years—including four who have gone pro. When masked agents tried to interrogate his players, he told them, “You don’t have more rights than they do.”

By [Zach Helfand](#)

July 21, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Since President Trump took office, agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement have swarmed areas with immigrant populations, questioning people and making arrests. They’ve patrolled near schools and raided a homeless shelter. They arrested a four-year-old, two students of New York

City public schools, and an Army veteran who happened to be Latino. Recently, masked and armed *ICE* agents descended on a baseball field in Riverside Park. They questioned a dozen or so eleven- to fourteen-year-olds who'd just finished batting practice, and left only after a confrontation with their coach, Youman Wilder, whom they threatened with arrest. He said, "I'm willing to die to make sure these kids can get home," he recounted afterward.

New York baseball people know Wilder. "I hold the city record in batting average to this very day," he said recently. "My teammate at Thomas Jefferson High ended up playing eighteen years in the major leagues with the Cubs. Shawon Dunston. He was the first over-all pick in the 1982 draft, over Dwight Gooden. The last two games, he got walked, like, six times in a row, and ended up hitting .790. And I went, like, six for six, so I ended up .800."

Wilder has run a youth baseball program called the Harlem Baseball Hitting Academy for the past twenty-one years. There are about twenty-five kids, no tryouts ("We don't take the best players. We take the guys that got cut"), and no minimum fee. "I'll tell our kids, 'Can your mom make us some rice and beans this week?'" Wilder said. He has produced four hundred college-scholarship baseball players, who have gone to Stanford, Princeton, and Columbia, and are now doctors and cops, or work on Wall Street. Four have made the major leagues.

After high school, Wilder played in a barnstorming league in Mexico. "It was sponsored by drug dealers. One game, we were losing 6–1, and the guy we were playing for said, 'You guys have to leave, unless we win.' We saw the guns, and we were, like, Oh, we actually have to win. My friends and I decided that maybe we won't do this anymore." He returned to New York, where he worked as a jazz and R. & B. singer, and hung around the baseball scene. "I actually helped Manny Ramirez with some of his hitting," he said. In 2003, he began holding informal sessions in a park for some local kids. They were asked to play in front of dozens of pro scouts who'd come to see a future Yankees pitcher named Dellin Betances. "The first inning we hit for the cycle," Wilder said. "The second inning we had eight straight singles up

the middle. And then I heard a scout say, ‘Who the fuck are these kids?’ ” After that, he turned his park sessions into a formal academy.

Wilder views baseball as a tool to teach important lessons. He also just loves it. “Baseball is life,” he said. “You start at home, and we’re going to send you out. And it’s going to be hard for you out there. But you could make it easier for yourself swinging at strikes to get to first base. And how can we get you to second and third? You can do things quicker, sharper, crisper. All those things get you around. Same thing in life. We deal with a lot of gangs. Our kids could get stopped and beaten up. I tell the kids, you have to use your baseball. How do you get from first base to third base without getting thrown out?”

The program sometimes practices at a field in Riverside Park, off West Seventy-second Street. The sand is lumpy. A foul pop-up off the third-base line lands in the Hudson River. You can bounce a longish home run off the elegant, arched steel superstructure of the Joe DiMaggio Highway, which is painted the color of the Statue of Liberty. Last month, Wilder had just concluded a session in the batting cages with a group of new kids. He saw six *ICE* agents approach. “I thought they were speaking about baseball,” he said. “And then I heard, ‘Where are you from? Where are your parents from?’ ” Four had face masks. All had guns and tasers.

Why were they questioned? “Our kids are from Washington Heights and Dyckman and the South Bronx and parts of Queens,” Wilder said. “They are Black and Latino. They come from the projects. Kids who love baseball who can’t afford baseball.” He went on, “We also have Milo. Milo is a white kid who actually is from Harlem and is proud of it, too.” All were American citizens. (A spokesperson said that *ICE* had not conducted any recent “enforcement activity” in the vicinity of the park.)

Wilder told his kids to get behind him. He told the *ICE* officers they were invoking their Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights. “My words were, ‘You don’t have more rights than they do,’ ” he said.

One officer said, “Oh, another YouTube lawyer.” They threatened to arrest Wilder for obstruction. But, after a few minutes, they left. The kids hurried home. The next practice, only one showed up.

In the days afterward, Wilder met with his congressman, Adriano Espaillat. An immigration attorney volunteered to sit and watch practice. “We are not victims,” Wilder said. “Our kids will do well in life.” Wilder had to leave town a few days later. He was driving four players on college tours in a rented minivan. But he received word that, last Wednesday, when his colleague Pedro came to pitch batting practice, seven players were there to take swings. ♦



*Zach Helfand* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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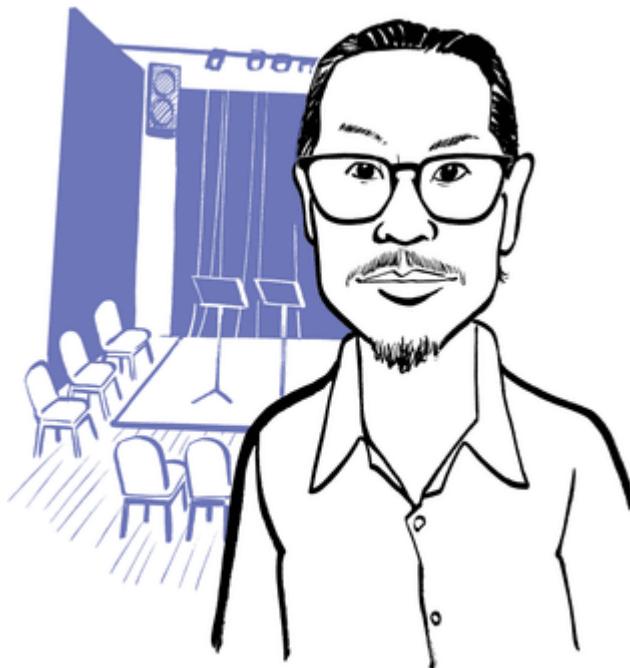
[D.C. Postcard](#)

# “Yes, And” for Downsized Federal Workers

A Washington, D.C., improv theatre invited recently laid-off civil servants to a free workshop. The goals: stay adaptable, and maybe even laugh.

By [Sadie Dingfelder](#)

July 21, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The Washington, D.C., air clung to the skin like a damp washcloth one Saturday not long ago. But inside the Mead Theatre it was almost cold enough to see your breath. A coltish woman tightened her shawl around her shoulders and watched as her fellow federal workers—some laid off, others

still clinging to their jobs like passengers on a listing ship—improvised a scene.

“Your word is ‘watch,’ ” an instructor, Richie Khanh, called out from the audience.

“I’m standing *watch*, I’m looking out—out for anything bad that might be coming near us,” a woman in an orange shirt said. An analyst at the Department of Commerce, she and some others who were there asked that their names not be used.

“Like the pirate ship that’s right behind us?” Willis, a federal health-care contractor whose contract may be at risk, asked her.

A third actor boarded the “ship” and demanded gold.

“We don’t have gold, we only have bananas,” Willis said. Then, in a stage whisper to a shipmate: “*Get the guns.*”

The plunder-and-betrayal plotline felt grimly familiar to the sixteen people in the room, who had shown up in response to an open invitation from the Washington Improv Theatre to “current and former federal employees,” to join a free workshop “to relieve the burden of living in uncertainty.”

Khanh surveyed the pirate scene and frowned; was it becoming too heavy? “I was hoping that they’d get a break from the things that are stressing them out,” he said, halfway through the class. Khanh, himself an employee of the Department of Transportation, has paid attention as the Trump Administration has fired approximately sixty thousand government workers, and seen firsthand how distressed people are—not only over losing their jobs but seeing their agencies’ missions obliterated.

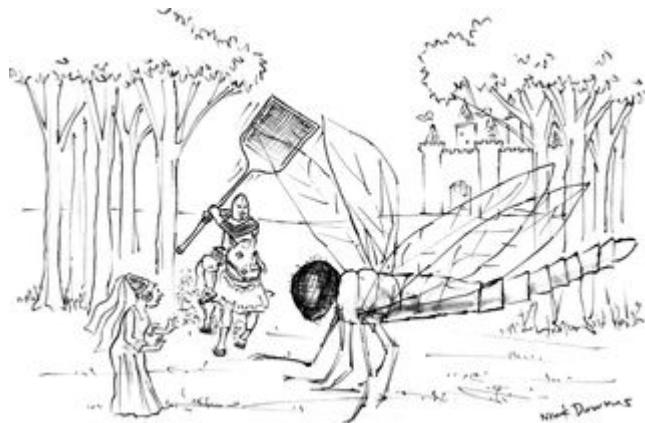
Khanh, who is slight and bespectacled, with a head of salt-and-pepper hair, scanned the room for late arrivals. A pair of Navy employees swapped e-mail addresses, and the woman from the D.O.C. expressed hope that her part of the agency would survive the cuts. “We’re uncontroversial,” she said, waving her crossed fingers in the air. “We have bipartisan support.”

After a break, Michael, a sixty-three-year-old former employee at the Department of Health and Human Services, took the stage. He'd opted for early retirement rather than stick it out with the new appointees. "They are not," he said, adding a tactful pause, "easy to work with."

"Your word is 'ladder,'" Khanh called out.

"This ladder does not look sturdy," Michael said.

"Look! The company is going through a really low season right now," his scene partner said.



*Cartoon by Nick Downes*

"It's called the Trump Administration!" Michael shot back. Lots of laughter.

Laura, a forty-five-year-old former U.S.A.I.D. worker, entered the scene:  
"Why do we need a ladder?"

"There's a bald eagle on top of the tree with a broken wing!" a fourth player explained. "It will starve to death if we don't help it."

Onstage, Laura contemplated the wounded "eagle" and looked distressed. Her scene partners persuaded her to climb the "ladder" to offer help, at which point the eagle (another worried federal worker) flapped its human arms and dive-bombed her with a shrill "Caw! Caw!"—a sound that no eagle has ever made.

"Ow! I thought it couldn't fly!" she yelled.

The room burst into laughter, and Laura gave a surprised grin.

U.S.A.I.D., Laura's agency, was one of the first to be gutted. Jobs in international development are scarce, and her unemployment benefits are about to run out. "I applied to a job at a bookstore," she said later. "It doesn't pay much, but at least I'd have some money coming in."

By nature and by training, federal workers tend to be rule-followers. They thrive in systems built on protocols, procedures, and predictability. "They are more analytical," Khanh said. "I've never had a class say, 'We got lost in the prepositions' before."

Watching the President's people gleefully torch the administrative state has been traumatic. In addition to providing stress relief, the workshop offered a crash course in surviving chaos. "Being able to adapt and respond in the moment? That's a hugely valuable skill," a Washington Improv employee named Dan Miller said afterward. "It's empowering to realize, 'I don't have to follow anybody else's rules. I don't have to look at the script.' "

Others had more practical ambitions. "I wanted to get a little experience with acting," Willis said, in a rich baritone. "I'm specifically trying to get into voice acting."

As the class wrapped up, Khanh gathered the group for a pep talk. "What we do is very important, and it matters," he said. "So thank you all for showing up and finding some time for joy. Let's give ourselves another big round of applause."

In the empty theatre, the federal workers clapped for themselves. Before they filed out into the heat, Laura said, "I came today because I was really in need of a laugh." She added, "Plus, it was free." ♦

*Sadie Dingfelder* is the author of "[Do I Know You?](#)," a memoir and a scientific exploration of face blindness.

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[Make It New](#)

# Dining Sheds, Repotted

Architects recycle a Brooklyn library's al-fresco *COVID* reading room for a public garden.

By [Naaman Zhou](#)

July 21, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The golden age of the shed—New York City’s outdoor-dining boom, circa summer, 2020—produced some impressive structures. At Carbone, the fancy Italian place, people ate rigatoni in a cabin made of navy-blue wood siding with red velvet curtains. Balthazar outfitted its shed with antique pendant lights, to make diners “feel like you’ve taken a train to Paris,”

according to a restaurant spokesperson. Bookworms were covered, too. Three branches of the Brooklyn Public Library installed outdoor reading rooms, designed by the firm Aanda Architects. The Roadway Readeries, as they came to be called, were painted the bright blue of Yves Saint Laurent's Jardin Majorelle, in Marrakech, with lyrical barrel-vault ceilings that evoked the breaking of a wave. They also had good Wi-Fi.

But what went up had to come down. New standardizing regulations swept a lot of sheds away. ("Last call at the rat shack," one al-fresco detractor wrote on Reddit.) With the Readeries facing demolition, the brains behind them cast about for a way to recycle. On a recent warm evening, a squad of architects gathered at the Success Community Garden, a two-and-a-half-acre plot in Brownsville, Brooklyn, to canvass local gardeners about how the dismantled reading rooms—now stored in a warehouse in Queens—might be refashioned into garden structures.

The discussion took place inside a large gazebo, painted Tiffany blue. Nearby were beds of purple basil, Swiss chard, okra, dill, cilantro, and multiple breeds of tomato. "I might have put six kinds down, but tomatoes are very aggressive," Robyn Glenn, one of the gardeners, said. She was wearing a loose shirt and a pink hat, and she clutched a bunch of parsley. She was optimistic about the architects' plans. "I'd like more people coming in to relax, read," she said.

Annie Barrett, one of the architects, stood up and handed out sketches of a triangular shelter—still electric blue—that evoked an airy community hall. Inside, she envisioned movable seats and modular planting beds, of various heights. The distinctive curved ceiling of the original shed peeked out from under an awning.

"It has this kind of Januslike quality," Barrett said, referring to the two-faced Roman god.

Jaffer Kolb, another architect, added, "It creates a lot of shade and a sense of enclosure, but without being enclosed."

The floor opened to comments. "I love it," Ora Goodwin, the garden's manager, said, peering at the page. "The only thing that needs to be fixed is

it needs a lot more concrete. It's easier to maintain the structure of a concrete base than it is of soil."

Glenn said, "And it'll be easier for the wheelchairs, too."

Ivi Diamantopoulou, a third architect, grabbed a pencil and started sketching. "What we did, perhaps mistakenly, is end the concrete right underneath the roof," she said. "I think what you're saying is bring the concrete out, to have, like, a porch."

"Something like that," Goodwin said, and pointed to a spot on the drawing. "A Weedwacker could fit there."

"It's a gazebo full of ideas!" Diamantopoulou said.

"We came to a garden and learned that people love concrete," Kolb said with a laugh.

"You'd be surprised," Goodwin said. "You have some kids who don't like grass."

Someone asked if they could have a surface to serve food on. (The garden hosts Sunday dinners and frequent cookouts.)

Kolb suggested repurposing some flower boxes as a prep counter. "They don't all have to be one thing," he said. "It's not all plant or all counter."

A Parks employee with a bandanna around her head piped up to say that the Central Park Conservancy had recently donated some leftover bluestone slabs. "They're really nice," she said.

"I don't want to turn away anything," Goodwin said.

Diamantopoulou loved the idea: "How beautiful is it to think you have a little bit of Public Library, a little bit of Central Park?"

As the forum wound down, Glenn handed each guest a small mixed bouquet of Italian basil, Thai basil, and parsley. Diamantopoulou looked around the space with an architect's eyes. The Success Garden, which also

has a chicken coop and a stage, hosts seventy-five community events a year, including a summer school, a food pantry, and a parents' day. "If this garden is a collection of geometries, it's like triangle, triangle, slanted line, square," she said. "And we're giving them circles. That's why they're so excited." ♦

*Naaman Zhou* is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff. He was previously a reporter for the *Guardian Australia*.

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# Fragrances of Presidents Past

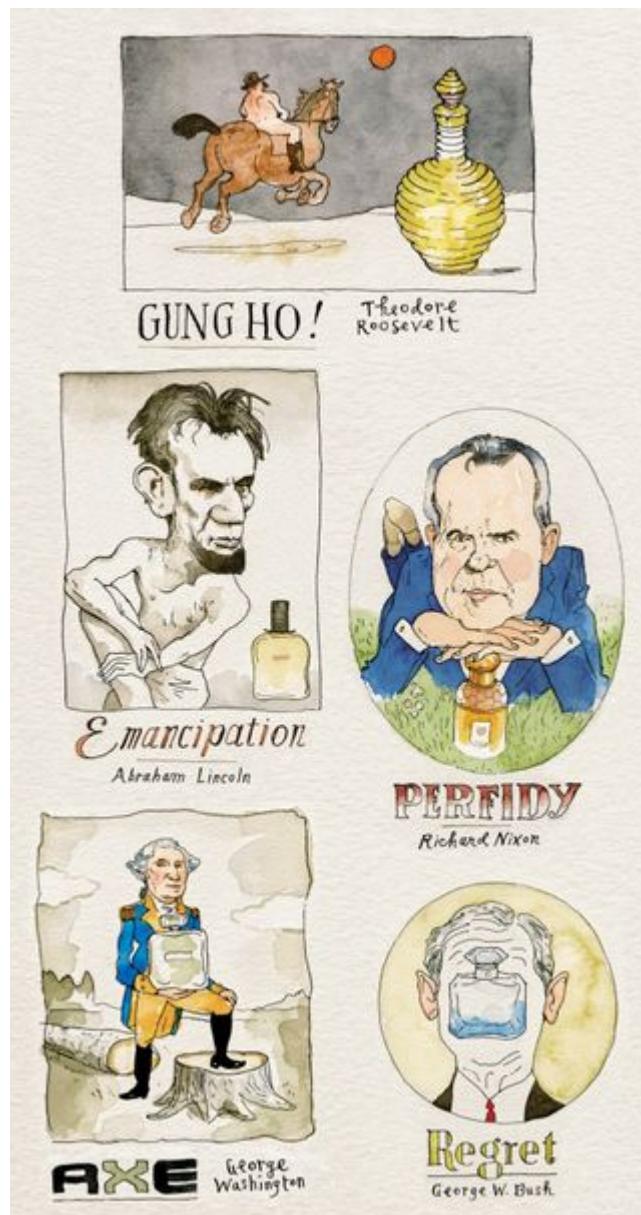
*Now that Trump has released his new scent, “Victory 45-47” (\$249), it’s time to sniff the competition.*

*By [Barry Blitt](#)*

*July 21, 2025*

Trump Fragrances are here. They’re called “Victory 45-47” because they’re all about Winning, Strength, and Success.

—Donald Trump, on Truth Social.



Barry Blitt, a cartoonist and an illustrator, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 1992. In 2020, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning.

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- **[In an Age of Climate Change, How Do We Cope with Floods?](#)**

By John Seabrook | The deaths in the Texas Hill Country are a tragic testament to the force of a raging river. Flood-stricken Vermont has a radical plan to counter the threat it faces.

- **[The Case for Lunch](#)**

By Lauren Collins | Notes on an underappreciated meal.

- **[Mary Had Schizophrenia—Then Suddenly She Didn’t](#)**

By Rachel Aviv | Some psychiatric patients may actually have treatable autoimmune conditions. But what happens to the newly sane?

- **[Donald Trump’s Tariff Dealmaker-in-Chief](#)**

By Antonia Hitchens | How Howard Lutnick, the Secretary of Commerce, plans to transform government into a money-making enterprise.

[Annals of Disaster](#)

# In an Age of Climate Change, How Do We Cope with Floods?

*The deaths in the Texas Hill Country are a tragic testament to the force of a raging river. Flood-stricken Vermont has a radical plan to counter the threat it faces.*

By [John Seabrook](#)

July 21, 2025



*On July 4th, the floodwaters of the Guadalupe were like a tornado or a wildfire—a volatile, rapidly changing hazard. Photograph from ABC affiliate KSAT / Reuters*

On the evening of July 3rd, as the sun went down over Kerrville, Texas, a small city of some twenty-five thousand people and the seat of Kerr County, the water in the Guadalupe River was just four inches deep, according to the U.S. Geological Survey's stream gauge there. The area hadn't had any rain since mid-June. R.V. campers in the HTR TX Hill Country campground in Kerrville, some of whom had arrived at the sixty-five-acre facility only hours before, could barely hear the river, even though they were parked in premium spots next to it.

At 3:30 A.M. on July 4th, Dalton Rice, the city manager, went out for an early-morning jog along the sluggish waterway. The river had risen to 1.71 feet, around the average depth. Kerrville's much anticipated "Fourth on the River" celebration at the riverside Louise Hays Park was scheduled for that

afternoon, and Rice saw “not a drop of rain” during his run, he later told Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor of Texas. By 4 A.M., when Rice went home, “there was very light rain,” he said that day. “We did not see any signs of the river rising at that time.”

Rice was apparently unaware that a few hours earlier, at 1:14 A.M., the Austin-San Antonio office of the National Weather Service had sent a flash-flood warning for south-central Kerr County. The area it covered included the town of Hunt, about twelve miles upstream from Kerrville, where Camp Mystic, a girls’ sleepaway camp, was situated, at the confluence of Cypress Creek and the south fork of the Guadalupe. At 4:03 A.M., the warning was upgraded to an emergency: “This is a *PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS SITUATION. SEEK HIGHER GROUND NOW!*” The stream gauge at Hunt showed the river nearing twenty-two feet, twelve feet higher than its banks. In the next hour, it would rise to thirty-seven feet, at which point the gauge stopped transmitting.

Network-news footage of flood-related disasters has traditionally shown low-lying coastal towns swamped by storm surges from named weather systems, with residents and rescue workers navigating the streets in hip waders, canoes, and powerboats, and the water level sometimes taking days to subside. Houston, New Orleans, Tampa, Charleston, and New York are among the cities that have been inundated in the past three decades. Yet storm-surge-driven inundation flooding is not the deadliest kind of flood. The disaster often unfolds slowly enough that there’s time for many people to get to higher ground—and for weather reporters to get in place. The water isn’t moving anywhere near as fast as that of a flooded river. The flowing water in a mad river reshapes the entire landscape, a process known as fluvial erosion.

The flood barrelling down on Kerr County more resembled a tornado or a wildfire, a volatile, rapidly changing hazard, with a narrow window within which to act before the deadly force of the raging river arrived at your door. The September, 2024, floods that killed a hundred and eight people in the high country of western North Carolina, when Hurricane Helene passed over, were this kind of event, as were the floods in Valencia, Spain, in late October, 2024, which killed two hundred and thirty-two people. The recent

flooding in Ruidoso, New Mexico, which claimed three lives, was, too. In my part-time home of Vermont, storms flooded much of the state, including the capital, Montpelier, in July, 2023, and flooding caused by the remnants of Hurricane Beryl hit the town of Plainfield, among other places, in July, 2024. Two people died in each event, and the damage from erosion was severe. The 2023 disaster wasn't even caused by a named storm. Rain-soaked "thunder boomers" were enough to do the damage.

Historically, this kind of flooding, which often occurs in hilly and mountainous regions, has received far less attention than storm-surge flooding, and local municipalities tend to be less prepared than coastal towns to deal with it. People who have moved away from the beach to escape hurricanes and rising sea levels, and have settled in supposed "climate havens" like Asheville, North Carolina, or Plymouth, Vermont, are reluctant to accept that they have merely traded a devil they know for one they don't. Francis J. Magilligan, a fluvial geomorphologist at Dartmouth College, told me, "We are actually getting pretty good at figuring out inundation risk. I would say, comparatively, we're at the starting point of thinking about erosional risk. And we don't have a good set of tools, *FEMA* or otherwise, to understand that risk."

The floodplain maps that the Federal Emergency Management Agency uses to designate a Special Flood Hazard Area, or S.F.H.A., are based on historical climate and geological data. The maps don't show the actual boundaries of past floods; rather, they illustrate statistical constructs based on the probability that a flood of a certain magnitude will occur there in a certain time range. The National Flood Insurance Program uses the maps to calculate risk. People who live in a hundred-year floodplain, for example, have a one-per-cent chance of being flooded in any given year. Anyone who builds or buys property in a mapped floodplain must take out federal flood insurance in order to qualify for a mortgage. The maps cover the coastal areas and the borders of major rivers, like the Mississippi, that flood frequently. They often don't cover mountainous communities with smaller rivers and streams, where flooding can affect not only people living down by a river but also those living on banks high above it, whose homes may be lost to erosion. Moreover, most of the data *FEMA* uses to designate S.F.H.A.s are based on readings from the nineteen-sixties and earlier—data

that climate change has largely rendered obsolete. The language, too, engenders a false sense of confidence. It makes it sound as though a bad flood will occur only once every hundred years, and that's not the way the statistic is supposed to work.

Flash floods often occur in terrain with steep, narrow valleys that drain into rivers where the water is confined in natural and man-made channels and has nowhere else to go. The trigger is very heavy, concentrated rainfall. Warmer oceans lead to more surface evaporation, and warmer air is capable of carrying more moisture. When the warm air is forced upward by mountains, it cools and loses its ability to retain water, causing a sudden release of rain. With the Valencia floods, a year's worth of rain fell in a single day. In North Carolina, upward of twelve to fourteen inches of rain fell in several hours. As global temperatures rise, outbursts of extreme precipitation will increase. Carl Renshaw, a hydrologist at Dartmouth, told me, referring to the meteorological conditions that led to the Texas floods, "You're dumping so much water so quickly because you've primed the system with moisture. It's like loading a gun. The people there had no time."

Kerr County and its neighbor Kendall County sit in a valley that is known as Flash Flood Alley, because of the speed with which rainfall runs off the cliffs of the Balcones Escarpment and sluices down through streams and rivers to the coastal plain around San Antonio. The hillsides are steep, and the thin, dry topsoil over bedrock retains little water. Major flooding occurs regularly. And yet, even in Flash Flood Alley, which the judge of Kerr County, Rob Kelly, described in a press conference on July 4th as "the most dangerous river valley in the United States," people continue to build in hundred-year floodplains. When properties are flooded, old-timers and newcomers alike tend to fix things back up. Kimberly Meitzen, a geography professor at Texas State University, in San Marcos, a small city in the Guadalupe River basin, told me, "We have this history of flooding and rebuilding here." She mentioned five floods within living memory, in 1978, 1987, 1998, 2002, and 2015, in which not just houses but whole neighborhoods were washed away. "They just rebuild," she said. Moreover, she added, "people continue to request variances to rebuild even closer" to

the river. “There’s no really strong regulatory authority to prevent it,” she went on. “And so it just continues to put more people at risk.”

In Vermont, a flood in August, 2011, caused by Hurricane Irene, was so devastating that the U.S. Geological Survey called it a five-hundred-year flood, and at least one analysis deemed it a thousand-year flood. The flood that tore through Plainfield on July 10, 2024, occurred one year to the day after the 2023 flood, which had been a hundred-year one. And, on the same day this July, a violent flood struck Caledonia County, in the north of the state. Although such a tight grouping of floods isn’t statistically impossible, it suggests that the probability curves used by *FEMA* are out of whack with real climate conditions.

A recent national study commissioned by First Street Foundation, a private risk-assessment firm, concluded that floods previously considered to be hundred-year events have become, on average, sixty-two-year events. (In some places, the estimate is as low as eight years.) The study also found that in Vermont’s Washington County, which includes Montpelier, Plainfield, and the city of Barre, more than forty-eight hundred properties (out of nearly thirty thousand total properties) are at high risk of flooding, yet *FEMA* includes fewer than fifteen hundred of those properties on its special-flood-hazard maps. Nationally, the study found that 17.7 million properties are at risk of flooding, but only about five million properties are in a *FEMA* flood-hazard zone. That means that millions of home buyers and owners are making decisions with an incomplete understanding of the true physical and financial risks they face. Jeremy Porter, the head of climate-implications research at First Street, told me, “Ultimately, what you end up doing is systematically underestimating flood risk.”

Vermont feels like the frontier of climate change in the Northeast. Farmers in the bottomlands, who previously planted wheat and barley, are beginning to plant rice, which can be underwater for two days without damage to the crop. The old roads that early Vermont settlers hacked out on hilltops, which lasted for more than two hundred years, are melting back into the forest. Extreme-rain events scour the roads down to bedrock ledges, rendering them impassable, and, because no one then uses them, any blown-down trees don’t get cleared. The next storm brings more

blowdowns. A road that I went mountain biking on ten years ago, when it was a distinct pathway with old-growth trees on each side, lined by aged stone walls, is now such a tangle of fallen trees, branches, and rocks that it's hard to tell a road was ever there.

Vermont is the second least populated state, after Wyoming, with fewer than six hundred and fifty thousand residents; it is also the fourth highest in disaster-relief funding per capita, nearly all of it flood-related. Washington County ranked first nationally in disaster declarations between 2011 and 2024. Annual precipitation in the state has increased six inches since the nineteen-sixties, and heavier-than-normal rain events in the Northeast are expected to increase by as much as fifty-two per cent by 2100. Vermont is a laboratory for the study of intense rainfall in steep terrain, and a proving ground for scientists, policymakers, regulators, and land-use planners who are on the front lines of a recurring catastrophe that traditional methods of prevention—dredging a river's bottom, armoring its sides, berming its banks—have only made worse.

Kevin Geiger, a land-use planner with the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission, in Woodstock, Vermont, told me that the first step in designing a sustainable flood-prevention program is “believing that the flood will come.” He went on, “Until you do that, nothing else follows. Why would we tell a person they can’t build there? Why would a town need to have a rescue boat? Why would we put in a system with sirens, unless you believe in the flood?” He added, “But believing in the flood means being constantly worried. And that’s not a good condition. People don’t want to live that way.”

Geiger and I were driving west on Route 4, toward the town of Bridgewater. Like all Vermont roads, Route 4 is built to withstand twenty-five-year floods. In 2011 and again in 2023, the Ottauquechee River, now burbling charmingly just below the roadway, tore away large sections of this vital artery across central Vermont and wiped out homes and businesses. In 2011, the floodwaters sent the Dead River Company’s propane tanks hurtling downstream, where they leaked gas and tumbled over three dams. That year, the iron-truss bridge in Woodstock was destroyed and never rebuilt,

and the covered bridge in Taftsville was severely damaged. The Quechee covered bridge had to be replaced.

Geiger pointed out structures near the river that won't survive the next flood, or the one after that. "I'm like that kid in the movie who sees dead people," he said, "except I see flooded houses. I just drive around and go, 'Oh, that one's a goner. It hasn't happened yet, but . . .' " The only real solution, he said, was to buy those property owners out. In most such buyouts, *FEMA* will pay seventy-five per cent of the estimated pre-flood value of a property. About two hundred owners have taken buyouts in Vermont since Irene. (State and local agencies will usually make up the remaining twenty-five per cent.) But anyone who takes a buyout still needs to find housing, and Vermont is already dealing with an affordable-housing crisis that keeps young people from moving to the state. And buyouts mean that towns' tax bases decrease, bringing in less money to apply to future floods. Bridgewater went more than five million dollars in debt from roadwork related to the 2023 flood. Although the town has finally begun to recover that money from *FEMA*, the six-per-cent interest it has been paying on its loan is not recoverable.

Before Geiger joined Two Rivers, he was briefly a firefighter in Zion National Park, in Utah, and he brings an emergency worker's mind-set to flooding. "The fire department thinks your house is going to burn down, right?" he said. "The reason the fire department exists is they believe that things are going to burn." But there is no equivalent of a fire department in flood response. That's because, Geiger continued, "we don't believe in floods the same way. We don't practice for them." He glanced over at the Ottauquechee. "Maybe it's because fires don't have a benign state like rivers do. Today the river is happy."

Geiger went on, "Given the money that's available, we can do a buyout here and there, or we could do a floodplain restoration, or maybe, you know, we could take out a bridge. But it's nibbling at the problem." He estimates that it would take thirty billion dollars to flood-proof Vermont, which would include moving crucial infrastructure away from the river and buying out hundreds if not thousands of property owners. "That's moving a bunch of Montpelier and Barre," he said. Only the federal government could afford

that, and earlier this year President Donald Trump threatened to shut down *FEMA* and make the states responsible for disaster relief.

Geiger told me, “I say about these flooding events, ‘That wasn’t the movie. That was only the trailer. The movie is still in production.’ ”

Kerr County, like much of the Hill Country of central Texas, has grown steadily in population in recent years. Well-to-do families have attractive “river houses” with long green lawns that slope down to stands of cypress trees at the river’s edge. Visitors flock to barbecue joints, authentic country inns, and R.V. parks that are situated next to the river. At the HTR TX Hill Country campground, pitches for tents could be booked on a small island near the confluence of the north and south forks of the river. But all this development has often meant that riparian borders (in this case, the wooded land adjoining the river), which can slow a flood down, have been fragmented.

Subdivisions and housing developments have sprouted up, and more homes and businesses have been built in the floodplain. Many visitors, and newcomers who have bought vacation homes and invested in rental properties along the river, may well have had a limited understanding of the history of flooding in the upper basin; the last major flood in Kerrville occurred in 2002. After previous floods, some property owners put their houses on raised foundations and stilts, unwittingly making them even more vulnerable. On July 4th, the Guadalupe easily plucked these structures off their pillars.

Children’s summer camps are also situated all along the river’s upper basin. One of the oldest is Hunt’s Camp Mystic, founded in 1926. According to records from a state inspection on July 2nd, three hundred and eighty-six campers, and sixty-four counsellors, were staying in the camp’s Guadalupe location that week. Much of the camp property lies within *FEMA*’s hundred-year floodplain. The cabins for junior campers—the Bubble Inn, the Wiggle Inn, the Giggle Box, and the Twins I and II—were on lower-lying land, with some of them in a “floodway,” where new development is supposed to be severely restricted, and which Kerr County defines as “an extremely hazardous area due to the velocity of floodwaters which carry debris, potential projectiles and erosion potential.” Even so, Camp Mystic

never had to reposition these cabins. (Indeed, as the Associated Press first reported, it made several successful appeals to *FEMA* to have some camp buildings removed from S.F.H.A. maps.)

Before the morning of July 4th, the upper river basin had experienced numerous floods, including the disaster in 1987, which killed ten teenagers, whose bus was cut off by water while they were trying to flee a camp downriver, in Comfort, and the one in 2015, which killed thirteen people and wiped out much of the town of Wimberley, eighty miles east of Kerrville. And yet Judge Kelly, the county's highest-ranking elected official, said in his July 4th remarks, "We had no reason to believe that this was going to be anything like what's happened here, none whatsoever."



*"So, basically, a polycule is if you give an affair the energy of a co-op board meeting."*  
Cartoon by Emily Flake

The flash-flood warning that the National Weather Service sent at 1:14 A.M. on July 4th went over the Wireless Emergency Alerts system, which allows government agencies to push alerts to all major cellular carriers' subscribers whose phones are in a designated area. Almost everyone with a cellphone in Kerr County should have received the message. Camp Mystic's longtime

executive director, Dick Eastland, got that alert, but the evacuation didn't begin until 2:30 A.M.

Spotty cell coverage could explain why the warning at 1:14 and the upgraded emergency notification at 4:03 weren't heeded by some Kerr County residents and officials. But even if the out-of-towners from Austin, Dallas, and beyond in the campgrounds along the river did receive these alerts on their phones, how many of them would have fully grasped the danger? According to the *Times*, the owner of the Blue Oak R.V. Park, Lorena Guillen, who bought the business four years ago, called the Kerr County sheriff's office at 2:08 A.M. to ask if she should be concerned. She said that the person who answered the phone had no information about any flooding.

Many people simply ignored the warnings, or had their phones silenced or turned off. Larry Leitha, the sheriff of Kerr County, wasn't awakened until around five-thirty. One commenter on Reddit's Texas forum wrote after the flood, "We get so many 'flash flood' warnings which end up being water on the roadway that clears quickly after the rain stops. No one thought it meant 30 feet of water coming." In addition to weather-related alerts, Texans receive Amber Alerts for missing children, Silver Alerts for missing seniors, Blue Alerts for suspects of violence against police, and *CLEAR* Alerts for missing adults in danger. Researchers have cautioned that people may become so desensitized to warnings that there's no benefit to them. A 2024 *RAND* report found that thirty per cent of Texans opted out of emergency alerts, the highest rate in the nation. (Vermont had the lowest.) Kerr County has a *CodeRED* alert system for emergencies, but emergency officials didn't make use of it in time.

Sirens, on the other hand, do get people's attention. Eighteen miles downriver from Kerrville, in the town of Comfort, where four hundred people lost their homes in the 1978 flood, a siren system was recently installed. On July 4th, the sirens sounded at 10:52 A.M., giving people time to find higher ground. (They also had the added advantage of daylight and, for some, the knowledge of what was happening upstream.) "People knew that if they heard the siren, they gotta get out," Danny Morales, the assistant chief of the Comfort Volunteer Fire Department, told NBC.

After the 2015 flood, Kerr County, which has an annual budget of sixty-seven million dollars, considered installing a siren system for the towns upriver. It would have cost the county about a million dollars. But, after much debate, county officials decided against it. One commissioner, H. A. (Buster) Baldwin, said in a 2016 meeting, “I think this whole thing is a little extravagant for Kerr County.” The potential noise bothered him. He went on, “The thought of our beautiful Kerr County having these damn sirens going off in the middle of the night—I’m going to have to start drinking again to put up with y’all.” Instead, Camp Mystic relied on a word-of-mouth warning system: camps upriver would phone those downriver if a flood was coming.

On a humid Saturday in late May, at the start of blackfly season in Vermont, I went to Plainfield to meet Mike Kline, a river scientist from nearby Middlesex, and George Springston, a local geologist who studies landslides. We walked along the Great Brook, the ordinarily placid and beguiling waterway that runs through the center of town. Of all the flood-damaged Vermont municipalities, Plainfield (population 1,236) is a poster child for the traditional, costly, and ultimately self-defeating flood-prevention practices. These include straightening and dredging rivers to allow for better navigation and more flow to power mills, and hardening the sides of streams and rivers with crushed stone and boulders known as riprap, to protect roads, railroad tracks, buildings, and other infrastructure from a river’s tendency to meander, which is what rivers in their natural state do. Rivers want to move; it’s part of the physics of flow and sediment transport. Unrestrained by human engineering, a river moves in a sinuous pattern that balances erosion and sedimentation.

But many rivers aren’t allowed to move laterally. They are straightened and “channelized” so that they remain in one place. During an extreme-rainfall event, the force of the water cascading down these straightened sluices meets with no resistance from meanders, and a river often has no way of reaching its floodplains—frequently now developed—which could absorb and store some runoff. The powerful flow scours valley walls, causing landslides, and finally inundates downstream places like Montpelier, Barre, and Waterbury, at which point it becomes the kind of flood you see on TV. Construction crews then re-dredge the river and re-armor its sides, insuring

that the hydrological conditions that caused the flooding will be the same, or worse, the next time.

“What we’re seeing here are the consequences of actions taken fifty years ago,” Springston said, “after the no-name flood of 1973.” That flood, coming after four relatively quiet decades, marked the beginning of the current era of extreme-precipitation events. Workers dredged the Great Brook afterward, using bulldozers to clear unsightly logjams (which can act as natural flood barriers), and rechannelled the stream. “I’ve told many folks,” Springston said, gesturing toward the wreckage, “this is payback from ’73. We’ve had a series of damaging floods since. We’re doing what doesn’t work over and over again.”

After the 2023 and 2024 floods, Vermont was able to muster the political will to break away from the traditional approach, and to begin managing its rivers in a more sustainable and less risky way. Mike Kline, more than anyone, is the man who made this happen. Kline is the driving force behind Vermont’s 2024 Flood Safety Act, a radical, first-in-the-nation law that gives the state jurisdiction over Vermont’s twenty-three thousand miles of streams and rivers. Beginning in 2028, when the new regulations take effect, Vermont’s rivers will be managed not as channels but as “corridors,” which will comprise all the land within the river’s natural meander pattern, plus fifty feet of riparian borders on both banks. The river will have the freedom to move and reconnect to floodplains. Riverside property owners will no longer have the automatic right to armor banks; in some cases they must allow the river to meander, even if that means it meanders through their land.

The river-corridor idea derived from what Kline calls a eureka moment, which he experienced in a river-science course he took in Colorado in 1999. The instructor had been discussing the concept of dynamic equilibrium in river management, which holds that healthy rivers with free meander patterns can achieve the right balance of sediment transport and riverbed stability to keep them from turning destructive. “I remember it very distinctly,” Kline said. “It’s, like, Oh, my gosh, if we can calculate all this mathematically, and it’s science-based, we can draw a river corridor and say, ‘Here’s our planning tool. This is how much room, at the minimum, the

river needs to get to its least erosive form.’” He then spent the next twenty-five years trying to get Vermont land-use planners and lawmakers to listen to him. A lot of destruction had to occur first, but eventually they did.

I asked how the idea would work in practice, since so much critical infrastructure has been built in river corridors. Kline pointed to a spot where the Great Brook had eroded a large chunk of its bank. He told me, “If a landowner who owned this land said, ‘I want to come in and put my farm road back here and move the stream,’ they would be denied a permit. But as soon as there’s public infrastructure involved, or it’s a public-safety concern, the regulations get set aside.” Although the Flood Safety Act gives the state authority over river corridors, it also includes a provision that grants exceptions to the law in cases of compelling public interest. Kline said, “We didn’t think we had the political base to say that even the public infrastructure is subject to this law, and that, ultimately, it’s in society’s best interest to let this occur”—that is, to abandon the roads to the rivers.

Together with Springston, we continued walking along the Great Brook, which joins the Winooski River just south of the center of Plainfield. Springston pointed out debris that remained scattered around after last year’s flood. There was a concrete pipe that used to be part of the town’s sewage system, a section of a bridge that the stream had taken out, and the remains of the Heartbreak Hotel, a storied old apartment building, half of which washed into the river on the night of July 10th. The people living there got out in time, but their cats didn’t.

Both Kline and Kevin Geiger spoke about how Vermont’s recent series of floods have compressed geological time into human-scale time. Fluvial erosion has begun to form whole new valleys in spots like Plymouth, where Money Brook, previously a tiny rivulet, has sliced a deep trench in the hillside. But the most dramatic example of valley formation I saw was in Plainfield. The terrace on which the road out of town once sat was completely gone, and several hundred yards of road were gone with it. The brook had left its channel and begun a new channel across the valley. “It totally switched sides of the valley bottom,” Kline said, pleased. “This is the river corridor in action.”

The traditional approach to flooding in Vermont, which is to put the river and the road back in place and hope that the problem doesn't return, was unthinkable in Plainfield. I have been in Vermont during all the major floods going back to '73, and I've seen how violent normally gentle brooks can turn, but I had never seen anything like what we were looking at now, from the edge of a cliff where the road had been. This wasn't just the trailer, to borrow Geiger's analogy.

More than two dozen young girls and two counsellors are known to have died at Camp Mystic, and several campers are still missing. All the girls were eight and nine years old. After finally deciding to evacuate, Dick Eastland, the camp's executive director, and his son, Edward, had attempted to drive to the lowest-lying cabins to help, but the waters rapidly rose. Edward survived by clinging to a tree along with ten or so girls. His father was discovered in a car with three girls he'd been trying to save, and he died shortly afterward. No survivors from the Bubble Inn were found. Heartbreaking pictures of the flooded cabins showed stuffed animals that had escaped the torrent, though their owners hadn't.

Over all, a hundred and thirty-five fatalities have been confirmed, a hundred and sixteen of them in Kerr County alone. A hundred or so people are still missing, many of whom were likely staying in the R.V. parks and campgrounds along the river. All thirty-three of the R.V.s in the Blue Oak park were taken by the river. Nearly everyone who was staying in the R.V.s managed to make it out, but four members of a family that was camping on the site's island drowned. At the neighboring HTR TX Hill Country campground, more than twenty people died or were declared missing, many of them washed away in their R.V.s or in cabins.

In the aftermath, many questioned whether the cuts made by the Department of Government Efficiency to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the N.W.S. delayed the emergency response. Joe Friday, a former director of the N.W.S., wrote on Facebook that "the loss of senior, experienced people may have made it more difficult to get the information the 'last mile' to the individuals in danger." The N.W.S.'s local warning-coördination meteorologist, Paul Yura, who had been pushed by *DOGE* into early retirement in April, would perhaps have

been the person who made the officials of Kerr County realize that the rising waters were a big deal.

Meitzen, the Texas geography professor, told me that Vermont's Flood Safety Act was "a great example of how so many of our river corridors across the nation, across the world, should be managed." But the upper basin of the Guadalupe is almost all privately owned, and in Texas the property owner is king. "So that's a really big challenge to land management in this environment," she said. Some property owners might take buyouts, but people who earn a living from riverside vacation rentals would be giving up long-term income.

In Vermont, the rivers make their way through topsoil and clay, which are easily eroded by the movement of the water, but the Guadalupe's meanders and straight reaches are entrenched in bedrock. Fluvial erosion, which Vermont's river-corridor management is aimed at specifically, plays out in a different way in the upper basin. "I mean, these river valleys are carved by these large floods," Meitzen said. "When you're in the river valley, it's full of giant boulders and cobbles that have been moved by large events. Those events form the rapids that everybody has so much fun playing on, and scour out the iconic pools that everybody likes to swing off of a cypress tree and jump into. These features are carved by these incredibly devastating events. People don't understand that." Flooding is an unavoidable part of the river's life cycle, as is made clear in James C. Scott's recent book, "In Praise of Floods." Scott writes, "From a long-run hydrological perspective, it is just the river breathing deeply, as it must." The question is, how do we live with floods in an era of climate change?

One measure, Meitzen said, would be to "remove buildings from the floodplain—residential houses, tourist houses, these camps, R.V. parks. Then we could help to really eliminate a lot of the loss of life that occurs during these events. But, you know, everybody's talking about building back. 'We will build back, we will rebuild.' "

A new, more accurate set of climate-related data is supposedly coming from NOAA, as part of its Atlas 15 project, which will presumably allow for a more realistic mapping of the risk of living near rivers throughout the United States. (Other risks, such as taking the subway in New York during

the second-highest amount of rain in an hour ever recorded at Central Park, as occurred last week, will be harder to calculate.) Whether *FEMA* will even be around to deploy the maps is an open question. President Trump had previously said he would like to close the agency by the end of this year's hurricane season.

For his part, the President has been calling the Texas floods “a hundred-year catastrophe.” On July 6th, he said, “They said once in a hundred years—they’ve never seen anything like this,” implying that there’s nothing anyone could have done, and that it won’t happen again in our lifetime. Until it does. ♦



*John Seabrook* has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1989 and became a staff writer in 1993. His books include “[\*The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty\*](#).”

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[\*\*Dept. of Gastronomy\*\*](#)

# The Case for Lunch

*Notes on an underappreciated meal.*

By [Lauren Collins](#)

July 21, 2025



*Unlike breakfast, lunch offers variety, but, in contrast to dinner, it tolerates repetition.* Illustration by Robert Samuel Hanson

In 1962, Roxane Debuisson, a Parisian housewife in her thirties, was walking down the Rue de Birague, in the Marais, when one of a pair of gilded iron balls—a traditional emblem of barbers—detached from its bracket and almost conked her on the head. The salon’s proprietor, it turned out, planned to replace them with a neon sign. This was *les trente glorieuses*, the postwar years in which French society raced toward modernity, leaving the past in the dust of massive state-sponsored construction projects. Debuisson took the remaining orb home, thereby beginning an exceptional collection of Paris ephemera—previously commonplace objects that were disappearing before her eyes.

“The collection began out of my love for Paris and my love of the street,” Debuisson later said. For decades, she conducted a one-woman salvage operation, scooping up rating plates, bench marks, pieces of bridges, tree corsets, street signs, fountains, gallows, Métro seats, mailboxes, and some seventy thousand commercial invoices. A 1970 photograph by her friend

Robert Doisneau shows her in a coat and kerchief, crouching on the pavement to examine a dilapidated bust of Molière, rescued from a bakery near the Pont Neuf.

Debuission detailed each of her finds in files stored in beige boxes and also displayed them in her apartment, at 19 Boulevard Henri IV, creating what was perhaps Paris's finest private museum. (She was apparently generous about showing people around, and I will always regret not having seen it.) Every room but the kitchen was stuffed with treasure. A visitor could walk through corridors hung thick with shop signs—a cobbler's boot, a glove-maker's hand, a six-and-a-half-foot-tall pair of scissors, two gilded snails—into the dining room, where an entire wall was given over to a set of enamel-and-glass panels from a defunct pâtisserie. After Debuission died, in 2018, her children sold many of her artifacts at auction; one article paid tribute to her as a “Proustian personage.”

But Debuission's Paris collection was, to many people, only the *second* most interesting thing about her. In her later years, she led an equally intense double life in the realm of food. My introduction to her came one day as I was flipping through a culinary encyclopedia, “On Va Déguster Paris” (“Let's Eat Paris”), by François-Régis Gaudry and collaborators. The book featured an illustration of Debuission in her signature look: printed blouse, sleek gray chignon, dark glasses worn inside. Her entry, by the food writer Ezéchiel Zérah, remembered her as the “godmother of grand restaurants,” noting that for decades she dined daily at a “Michelin-starred table or a palace restaurant.”

And did she ever, setting out each morning in a navy-blue Rolls-Royce Phantom V to cruise the city, belting out the classics of *la chanson française* with her chauffeur, the lyrics scribbled on index cards that she would produce from her handbag. The sale of her husband's I.T. company to I.B.M., in the nineties, permitted Debuission to do as she pleased in meals as in memorabilia. At each fine-dining establishment, she had a favorite dish: *chausson aux truffes* (L'Ambroisie), *bugnes* (the Ritz), *clfoutis et la caroline au café* (the Plaza Athénée), *pommes soufflées* (Le Meurice), *mille-feuille* (Le Grand Véfour), honey ice cream and frangipane tart (Drouant). Everywhere, wines by the magnum. If Ruinart Blanc de Blancs, her

preferred champagne, wasn't available, she sent out for it, once dispatching her driver all the way to Reims. She could be demanding, but she tipped big.

One eulogy noted, "She loved every element of the French restaurant ritual: chefs, seconds, commis, pastry chefs, cheesemongers, dining room managers, cloakroom attendants, waiters, florists, bellhops, valets, whom she knew by their first and last names." Eating this way was another form of classifying and collecting. Debuission amassed chef friends, feasting on culinary lore and gossip alongside their creations. Toward the end of her life, she received the luminaries of the food world at her apartment, presiding in a pink bathrobe and scarf. Forty chefs showed up for her funeral, all in white toques. *Food & Sens* memorialized Debuission as a "gastronomic grande dame," but, amazingly, her epicurean career took place entirely during daylight hours. She never ate dinner, considering lunch superior.

However you rate lunch, it is probably the original meal—for much of history, procuring food and finding fuel to cook it with took so long that people were unable to eat until several hours after waking up. At the same time, the amount of physical labor early humans performed required them to consume the bulk of the day's calories as soon as they were available. "So eating meant lunching if we take lunch to be the meal eaten in the middle of the day," the food historian Megan Elias writes in "Lunch: A History." As a class system emerged, the rich began to eat multiple times a day. The middle class followed, and eventually advances in lighting technology expanded the duration of daily activity, allowing for extended eating hours. By around 1850, the midday mono-meal had diversified into the three-meal system that now dominates Western culture.

Per Samuel Johnson's dictionary, the word "lunch" likely derives from "clunch" or "clutch," meaning "as much food as one's hand can hold." A lunch can be quick and convenient: tomato soup, grilled cheese, poke bowl, burrito, tuna salad, leftover pad kee mao, or office-microwaved miso salmon. Or it can serve as a redoubt of leisure and even decadence in an ever-optimizing world: the simmering Sunday ragù, the midday Martini, the vacation table laid at two o'clock and not abandoned until the heat fades. So

many lunches, so little time—hot lunch, cold lunch, liquid lunch, naked lunch. Lunch is the Thanksgiving of meals, neither underwhelming nor extra luxurious, adapting easily to various contingencies and configurations. It is what you make of it, whether you’re lingering over *mignardises* at Le Grand Véfour or scarfing down last night’s beans.

Unlike breakfast, lunch offers variety, but, in contrast to dinner, it tolerates repetition. I can measure my life in lunches: tepid ham-on-wheat sandwiches, gently curling like fortune-telling fish and infused with a weird hint of citrus from the clementine that inevitably accompanied them in my lunchbox (ages five through eighteen, North Carolina); vinegary barbecue, hush puppies, and a ten-cent York peppermint patty from a cardboard dispenser at Merritt’s (on the odd childhood day my mom had to take me to a doctor’s appointment); bagels with turkey, Swiss, and spicy mustard (ages eighteen through twenty-two, college); lamb-and-rice plates from halal carts, the Così salad with grapes and Gorgonzola (ages twenty-two through thirty, New York); the W.F.H.-er’s wild array of refrigerator forage, often topped with an egg and always followed by a cup of tea and two squares of dark chocolate (age thirty and on). And that’s leaving out weekend lunches—back-yard barbecues, dim-sum feasts, my own lunch wedding—which lend themselves to unhurried socializing and multigenerational exchange. Everyone’s awake; no one has to drive at night. Indulge by day, then take a walk or watch a movie.

Recently, the food publication *Mashed* polled some thirty-four thousand people about their eating preferences. Fifty-two per cent named dinner their favorite of the “Big 3” meals. Perhaps these people enjoy spending more money on identical restaurant dishes, enduring poor digestion, and having to hire a babysitter. Perhaps one of them is King Charles, who purportedly believes that lunch is a “luxury.” Or Donald Trump, who is said to go up to sixteen hours without eating, avoiding breakfast and often shunning lunch before gorging on a dinner of two Big Macs and two Filets-O-Fish, washed down with a chocolate shake. (Meanwhile, more than forty-seven million Americans live in food-insecure households, a number sure to increase with recent cuts to *SNAP* benefits.) In a meal competition, I’d put my money on Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson, who reportedly eats six meals a day, several of

them presumably lunches, a regimen that once had him consuming some eight hundred and twenty-one pounds of cod per year.

As though the case for lunch were not strong enough, it is the only meal that, for many months of the year, reliably allows the person eating it to simultaneously experience the pleasures of food and light. With the day stretching out ahead of you, lunch can feel less transactional and slotted in than other meals. It's a moment out of time—the August of the day. The only meal with a plethora of dedicated receptacles? That's lunch, muse of lunch pails, bentos, picnic baskets, *dosirak*, tiffins. (In keeping with the decline of midday home cooking, the Mumbai *dabbawalas*, who have delivered lunchboxes to Indian office workers for more than a century, recently opened a cloud kitchen.) The sweaty, surprisingly sexy meal of bustling sidewalks, office workers sprawled on the grass of city squares, and Frank O'Hara's "laborers [who] feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets / on"? Also lunch. Would anyone buy Breakfastables? (At one point, Oscar Mayer did introduce a line of morning snacks—bacon and pancake dippers, little cinnamon rolls—but they were called Lunchables Breakfast.)

Indisputably, lunch is the most public meal, with "a long history of establishing social status and cementing alliances," Elias writes. It is the meal you are most likely to eat outside of the home, with people who are not your immediate relatives, unless you are one of the five children of the LVMH boss Bernard Arnault. Reportedly, he convenes his family once a month for an "exactly 90-minute-long lunch" in order to "drill his offspring on company strategy and manager performance." They might consider the example of the Coney Island restaurateur Nathan Handwerker, who supposedly hired college students to hang around his hot-dog stand in white coats so that passersby would think that they were doctors on lunch break from a nearby hospital, their presence testifying to the impeccable quality of Nathan's kosher-style franks.

Recently, I was invited to lunch at the home of a woman who does not eat lunch. "One day, I went to a business lunch, and I looked at the menu and just thought, *I'm not hungry*," my host, the cook and writer Perla Servan-Schreiber, recalled. That was some fifty years ago. For decades, Servan-

Schreiber and her husband, Jean-Louis, breakfasted together, worked all day, and broke at 4 P.M. for tea and cakes. Then, in 2020, Jean-Louis died of *COVID*. A pair of Servan-Schreiber's younger friends, Émilien Crespo and Fany Péchiodat, came up with a ritual they call Magic Lunch: Servan-Schreiber cooks, and they invite fun guests around for the meal, of which she herself does not partake. (Péchiodat, it should be noted, also maintains an unhinged annual ritual of having her birthday dinner with someone she's never met.)

Why lunch? "It's almost subversive," Crespo explained, over a plate of Servan-Schreiber's red rice and spiced lamb meatballs. "It feels a little naughty telling people it may last until four o'clock and they have to cancel all their plans." Servan-Schreiber said that lunch felt more "recreational" than a rushed breakfast or a formal dinner. "Plus," she added, with a glimmer in her eye, "you're not obliged to invite couples!"

Last fall, in London, the chef Hugh Corcoran, the publisher Frances Armstrong-Jones, and their friend Oisín Davies opened a restaurant that serves only lunch, and a lot of people in the small world of the city's restaurant reviewing got disproportionately worked up about it. The restaurant is called the Yellow Bittern, after an eighteenth-century Irish poem about a sad bird in a "wineless place," and includes a bookshop in the basement. It is open only on weekdays and accepts reservations by phone or, supposedly, postcard. It does not take credit cards or have a written wine list. When it's cold out, you have to ring a doorbell to get in. This is the litany of quirks that begins every discussion of the Yellow Bittern, whose most idiosyncratic feature is actually its ability, deliberate or not, to activate a full complement of resentments, allegiances, and anxieties via bowls of soup and dollops of rice pudding served exclusively between the hours of twelve and four-thirtyish.

The Belfast-born Corcoran and the English-born Armstrong-Jones are romantic partners as well as co-proprietors, complicating the traditional man-at-the-stove/woman-in-the-front-of-the-house dynamic with a prole/posh overlay: his father was an auto mechanic; hers, the photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones, first Earl of Snowdon, who was once married to Princess Margaret. These biographical facts were tantalizing to the British

press. That the couple managed their own P.R.—that is, they simply answered questions about their restaurant, sometimes on the fly—and dressed in old-timey woollens and brogues made them irresistible. In the *Guardian*, Jay Rayner wrote that Corcoran “has about him the mien of a 1930s small-town butcher who has a lovely piece of gammon put aside for you,” and poked fun at “Lady Frances’s” whispery locutions. The Yellow Bittern, he suggested, walked “a fine line” between simplicity and taking its patrons for fools.

The real drama started about two weeks in, when Corcoran, who is also a writer, took to Instagram to denounce diners who treat restaurants like “public benches,” parking themselves at a table for hours, only to “order one starter and two mains to share and a glass of tap water” for a party of four. He continued, “At the very least, order correctly, drink some wine, and justify your presence in the room.” His frustration was understandable for a small businessman (even if it demonstrated a certain obliviousness to the many reasons a person might decline alcohol—do pregnant women, or Muslims, say, merit a seat at his table?). But some people did not appreciate his attempt to impose a more languid, indulgent rhythm on the midday pause, accusing him of entitlement, whining, “giving a giant middle finger to rather a lot of London,” and running “an 18-seat piece of performance art within which diners are unsuspecting subjects of a dining diktat delivered with all the fiscal charm of Ebenezer Scrooge.”

It probably did not help that Corcoran proudly proclaimed himself a Communist, displaying a portrait of Lenin in the Yellow Bittern’s dining room and a hammer-and-sickle tattoo on his right forearm. Or that he claimed that a unionized railroad worker would “definitely be able to afford” a meal at the restaurant, while regretting that it was likely inaccessible to “Deliveroo guys on bicycles,” whom he identified as “the new lowest rank of the proletariat.” A meat pie for two costs forty pounds at the Yellow Bittern. The average lunch break in the U.K., for workers who have one, lasts thirty-three minutes. Nevertheless, Corcoran argued that he was creating a “democratic space” and even an antifascist one, free from “technology and exclusivity” and “people who pay with their watches.”

However eccentric his politics, Corcoran's message was clear enough: he was taking a stand against the vending machine, the crumb-covered keyboard, the putrefying banana, the leaden ciabatta, the tragic hummus wrap from Pret. As the controversy spread across the Atlantic, he told the *New York Times*, "Is this the kind of society that we were trying to create? . . . We have to fight for lunch."



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Expressing an earnest opinion is the British equivalent of walking down a crowded street wearing a "Kick Me" sign. Commentators lined up to administer their licks, with a surprising number of them pummelling the idea of lunch itself, as though the meal were some kind of abominable kink. "What I find shocking is that four people might go out for a weekday lunch at all, let alone order main courses," Hilary Rose wrote, in the U.K. *Times*. "How do you find the time, and the money? What does your boss think? I haven't been out for a weekday restaurant lunch in decades, and even when I go out for dinner, I never have a main course." That may qualify as a personal matter, but the middling status of lunch in the hierarchy of meals invited all manner of projection. The phrase "it's only lunch" had never seemed more disingenuous, Jonathan Nunn observed in the magazine *Vittles*, writing that the Yellow Bittern was "a rich text, even before you get into the important matter of whether the food is any good."

In March, I invited a friend—an editor, alas, not a signalman or plate layer—to join me for the two-o'clock sitting at the Yellow Bittern. Just for kicks, I had tried to make a reservation by postcard, sending a Joachim Beuckelaer painting of a head of cabbage. (Embarrassing to be so on-theme bougie foodie, but it was what I had on hand.) A few weeks went by with no reply. Figuring that the postcard had got lost, I e-mailed Armstrong-Jones to book a table. Nobody seemed to mind the technological intrusion.

When the day arrived, I buzzed. Armstrong-Jones escorted me through a yolk-colored room with an English Oak banquette along one wall and to a snug table near the kitchen. The kitchen comprised a single oven and two induction burners, underneath a large casement window that was pleasingly left open. Corcoran stood behind the counter in a billowing blouse and a burgundy sweater vest, surrounded by the day's offerings: a hotel pan full of roasted guinea fowl; a plate of butter; a cherry-colored cast-iron pot of stew. Cooling nearby were a few loaves of speckled soda bread baked by Davies.

It was lunch, so there was sunshine, streaming into the dining room, backlighting the cursive lettering on the plate-glass windows. I felt as though I had just put on a cloche and pulled up a seat in the cafeteria of a Hopper painting. A white-haired man consulted the menu with reading glasses, attached to his neck with an *ENGLAND* 2015 strap. (Rugby, if I had to bet.) The table was set with a posy in a parfait glass and a pot of Colman's mustard. I scanned the room and saw an old-school reservation book lying open on a stool, paperweighted by a cordless phone. It seemed natural in the setting, rather than stagy.

We decided to comport ourselves as Corcoran's ideal patrons: hungry, thirsty omnivores constrained by neither watch nor wallet. We started with sherry apéritifs, per Corcoran's suggestion. I ordered celeriac soup: a homely beige mush, equally heavy on pepper, butter, and cream and devoid of croutons or other crunch-giving garnishes. I loved it. My friend had a crab-and-watercress salad. It was quiet but spoke wittily to notions of lunch by forgoing the fruit element (apple, mango, orange) that often characterizes such dishes. No cantaloupe balls at this luncheon!

We continued with the polemical meat pie, a simple green salad, a Pinot Noir from Alsace, Irish cheeses, and a piece of chocolate tart so dense that it resembled Ultrasuede. The bill was a hundred and seventy-five pounds—about two hundred and twenty-five bucks, before Trump tanked the dollar. The food was excellent, if not revolutionary. Its aggressive plainness paradoxically reminded me of the Dolly Parton saying "It costs a lot of money to look this cheap." (It takes a lot of imagination, too.) What I appreciated most was the sense of a presiding intelligence in the room, a

philosophy expressed with passion if not perfect coherence. Corcoran enlivens the table with endlessly debatable ideas alongside his rabbit in mustard sauce and Scottish langoustines.

I lingered after the meal to speak with Corcoran and Armstrong-Jones. Why lunch, I wanted to know, when dinner would offer a surer route to solvency and acclaim? Corcoran answered first, doubling down on his manifesto: “We live in a society that promotes this idea of constant production—you know, if you’re not in work working, then you should be doing something to be a good worker. To just cut all that and say, ‘Actually, I’m gonna drink a bottle of wine and eat a lot of food in the middle of the day,’ right?”

Armstrong-Jones focussed on the practical benefits of lunch, which also inspired the name of a culture magazine that she publishes, *Luncheon*. “I had three young children when I started it,” she said. “It was about the day, instead of being about what happened the night before and you feel like you’ve missed out on everything.”

Dinner can almost feel like a domestic space: proposals, breakups. “Lunch is more convivial,” Corcoran said. “People hardly ever get in arguments,” Armstrong-Jones added. Corcoran nonetheless wanted to be clear that he was no lunch naïf. “We shouldn’t forget the dark side of lunch,” he joked, noting that Spain’s ubiquitous *menú del día*—several courses for a reasonable price, historically set by the government—was conceived by Franco during a period of economic hardship.

Along with sustenance, the money I spent at the Yellow Bittern had bought me time. Time away from the computer and the phone, time outside the family sphere, time to catch up with an old friend—pleasures that, like all luxuries, are difficult to source and can be even more difficult to defend, depending on one’s tolerance for self-indulgence and inequality. British class hysterics aside, the furor over the Yellow Bittern may best be understood as an exercise in the political limits of self-care, individual action, and the iconoclastic stand. Demanding that diners justify their presence in the room, the Yellow Bittern justifies their absence, for better or worse, from the world outside.

Even if lunch is not quite the anti-capitalist oasis of Corcoran's telling, it has long been associated with the right of working people to restore themselves midway through their daily toil. "Workmen at their benches drop their tools, the stairs resound with hurrying feet, and from every exit pour jostling hordes," the journalist Granthorpe Sudley wrote in a 1901 article titled "Luncheon for a Million." In the 1896 Presidential election, William McKinley courted the labor vote with the promise of "A Full Dinner Pail." (At the time, many people called the evening meal "supper," so "dinner" in this case meant "lunch.") In maybe the most famous image of lunch, ironworkers in flat caps and overalls pause for a break eight hundred and fifty feet above the ground on a steel beam. They are supposedly enjoying sandwiches and coffee, but the photograph was in fact a publicity stunt, intended to promote the RCA Building as it was being constructed.

Until women entered the workforce in significant numbers, lunch was also the most gender-segregated meal. Middle-class women whipped up quiche Lorraine and ambrosia salads (often with the help of Black domestic workers, who were excluded from Social Security). With their children's lunchtime needs accounted for by the National School Lunch Act of 1946—passed after wartime physicals revealed widespread malnutrition—housewives visited department-store canteens and tea rooms like the Syracuse branch of Schrafft's, "the daintiest luncheon spot in all the State." Before sliced bread became widely available, women's magazines were full of advice "on social distinctions and the thickness of bread in sandwiches," according to the food historian Laura Shapiro. The trick to getting the bread thin enough for distinguished company was to butter the face of the loaf first, slicing as close to the spread as possible. Peanut butter, meanwhile, was introduced as "a high-end spread" popular at ladies' luncheons, intended to be mixed with enlivening elements, such as celery or nasturtiums.

Recently, when I visited New York, people were lining up for patty melts and cherry-lime rickeys at S & P Lunch, in Flatiron. (It began as S & P Sandwich Shop in 1928, but was known as Eisenberg's between the late fifties and 2021, after which it was revamped by new owners.) As a public institution, the lunch counter, devoid of tricky reservations and élite tables,

represents a certain idea of equality. It is no coincidence that, in 1960, four Black students at North Carolina A&T chose to challenge racial discrimination at a whites-only lunch counter, taking a stand by sitting down on stools below a placard advertising fifteen-cent lemon-meringue pie. The protest and the images that it produced were the picture of American democracy, galvanizing public opinion and accelerating the movement: an unbroken line of citizens seeking simple fare in side-by-side solidarity.

Nearly a decade later, Betty Friedan turned to the symbolic power of lunch in service of equal rights for women, when she and fifteen fellow-protesters installed themselves around a table at the male-only Oak Room in Manhattan. Unable to remove the women, waiters removed the table itself, but the point was made: within months, the decades-old policy of banning women between noon and three was rescinded.

Social justice has not tended to feature on the menu of executive-class lunches, but they, too, are social exhibitions, of both a bombastic commitment to work and the power it has bequeathed. Bricklayers and ironworkers, Sudley noted in 1901, did not “gobble or bolt their food” as Wall Street bankers were wont to do, “sail[ing] through the doorway with streaming coat tails” to snatch up “a sandwich, a fishball, [a] pie” at the nearest restaurant, or sending out for meals from “a white aproned waiter hurrying along with the hastening stream and bearing jealously a tray laden with steaming dishes.” (Messenger boys, for their part, lined up at carts for sausages with a dollop of sauerkraut: “Hey, boss, gimme a dog!”) To place an order with this early version of Seamless or DoorDash was to show that you were busy. The spectacle of the executive lunch reached its apotheosis in Hollywood, at the M-G-M cafeteria, where, Elias writes, three thirty-foot tables were equipped with telephones transmitting urgent messages from on set.

Renunciation, for the executive luncher, is its own form of ostentation. If the power move at a power lunch is ordering off menu (as Cary Grant was known to do at 21, demanding peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches), the most powerful form of power lunching is forgoing the meal altogether (“Lunch is for wimps,” Gordon Gekko declared in “Wall Street”). The

publisher Michael Korda once praised the expense-account lunch as “an essential tool of the trade, like a carpenter’s adze.” Yet his colleague Robert Gottlieb found the expectation of daily excess so oppressive that he proposed a moratorium, urging his peers to redirect their lunch money to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The three-Martini lunch was barely holding on in 2003, when the *GQ* editor Art Cooper suffered a stroke while lunching at the Four Seasons, but it has since evolved to suit contemporary tastes. In a recent issue dedicated to rediscovering “the most inessential and glorious part of the working day” (i.e., lunch), the *FT Weekend Magazine* visited a London brasserie that offers a special, lunch-appropriate “two-sips Martini.”

Still, the power lunch endures, retreating in periods of economic and moral penny-pinching only to reëmerge when the belts and inhibitions of the ruling class undergo their periodic loosening. Thus, the *Robb Report* recently declared that “power lunch is back,” and the *New York Post* reports that “midtown staples like Michael’s and Fresco by Scotto” are “swarming with the city’s movers and shakers.” A look in at the Grill, in the Seagram Building, confirmed that plenty of people are still willing to pay handsomely to wheel and deal among the ghosts of Vernon Jordan and Barbara Walters. “We’re very cognizant of the scalability of a pure model,” someone was actually heard saying. The cheeseburger was as tall and round as a melon. Martinis—a nostalgia order now—arrived with great pomp, poured high until the tinkly end, as though the “Pissing Boy” statue had inspired a midtown cocktail. “We’ll send you the deck,” a man in a blue shirt said, scurrying back to the office after a meal slightly longer and a lot more expensive but not much more fundamentally decadent than one at a Chipotle.

The middle meal, in fact and in spirit, is a bridge, a connector. “Because it offers such rich opportunities for the performance of culture, lunch is a meal in perpetual transition, so that any account of what is commonly eaten in one place or time is likely to change within a generation,” Elias writes. Psychologists and educators tell us that a distinguishing feature of our era is loneliness. According to a 2023 advisory by the Surgeon General, America is in the throes of an “epidemic of loneliness,” with roughly half of adults reporting feelings of isolation, which can increase the risk of premature

death as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Young people, alienated by the pandemic and social media, are turning to religion as a source of connection. God is great, but sometimes fellowship—a certain kind of existing in social space—can be as simple as a tuna sandwich. Plus, you get a pickle. ♦



*[Lauren Collins](#) has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008. She is the author of “[When in French: Love in a Second Language](#).”*

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[\*\*A Reporter at Large\*\*](#)

# Mary Had Schizophrenia—Then Suddenly She Didn’t

Some psychiatric patients may actually have treatable autoimmune conditions. But what happens to the newly sane?

By [Rachel Aviv](#)

July 21, 2025



*When Mary was treated for cancer, the drugs also relieved her psychosis of twenty years. Her daughter Christine described her as a “psychological débutante.” Illustration by Emilio Ponzi*

When Christine was nine years old, her mother, Mary, said, “Come here. I want to tell you a secret.” They sat on a brown couch in their living room, in Santa Ana, California. Mary, who was forty-three, said that a man she

had known in medical school, a professor, was sending her messages about a plan to take her away and live in a mansion together. “I remember feeling really excited, because that fit with my sense of what should be happening,” Christine said. “I was really into ‘Harry Potter’ and the idea that, if you are part of the select, you can see a bigger story happening out there.”

Mary leaned over and began separating strands of Christine’s hair, as if searching for lice. “Does he put listening devices in your hair?” Mary asked, about the professor. “Does he ever ask you to say things to me?”

Christine, the older of two sisters, said, “I believed everything she said until she accused me of something that I knew wasn’t true.” Mary had always been tender and doting and practical, and, Christine said, “I just had this feeling in my body that she was not the same.”

Her sister, Angie, who is seven years younger, learned to follow their mother’s instructions, whether or not they made sense. “I was taught the rules of her delusions at the same time as I was taught other rules and norms about the world,” Angie said. She came to view her mother’s stories about the professor, and about friends who were part of his mission, as akin to tales in the Bible. “It’s kind of like, O.K., some of these people are real, and some of these people aren’t real,” she said.

Christine was often cast in the role of the villain. Her mother would yell at her for poisoning her pizza or hiding her keys or other menacing deeds, even as Christine tried to explain that she hadn’t done them. Sometimes Mary smacked her. (Mary doesn’t remember this.) Christine began to mistrust her own memory, too. “My mom would accuse me of things, and then I’d be, like, Maybe I did do these things,” she said. In fifth grade, she asked Santa Claus for a polygraph machine. “I just had this baseline sense of: I could be doubted at any time.”

She felt that people might help her mother if she could just find the right language to describe her transformation. By high school, she was spending so much time studying the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*s that she texted a friend that she had actually “married the dsm-iv.” She explained that her mother suffered from the “fregoli delusion,” a belief that strangers were disguised as doubles of people she knew. In her

journal, Christine wrote, “My mom has erotomanic delusion disorder with a splash of persecutory delusions.” She asked for help from teachers and a school counsellor, but, she said, the “message I got was, basically, Everybody has their shit, and you have to just deal with it and keep getting good grades.”



*Angie has no memories of Mary before her psychosis, but Christine remembers her as a “magical, glowing figure.” Photograph courtesy the family*

Mary, who was from India and had worked as a physician there for a decade, spoke so much about the professor that her husband, Chris, who worked at the California Department of Motor Vehicles, eventually found the professor’s number and called him. “He said, ‘I am not in contact with her,’ ” Chris recalled. “ ‘I didn’t even know your wife came to America.’ ” At the professor’s suggestion, Chris scheduled an appointment for Mary with a psychiatrist. Christine sat in the waiting room, hoping that this would be the beginning of getting back the mother of her early childhood, whom she remembered as a “magical, glowing figure.” But when Mary finished the appointment she said that the psychiatrist thought she was fine. Not long afterward, Mary kicked Chris out of the apartment and barricaded the door

with a desk and two heavy suitcases. Christine and Angie allotted extra time to get to school each morning so they could remove the obstacles.

Karl Jaspers, the German psychiatrist and philosopher, has described what he calls the “delusional atmosphere,” a profound alteration in the way certain people experience the world. “There is some change which envelops everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light,” he wrote. People in this state search for a story that explains why everything suddenly feels uncanny and ominous. The “vagueness of content must be unbearable,” he wrote. “To reach some definite idea at last is like being relieved from some enormous burden.”

Mary had landed on a story that overwrote the reality of her daughters’ lives, but they also recognized in it a kind of emotional logic. Mary had been pressured to marry Chris, in an arranged match, and, when they settled in America, he had traditional ideas about a woman’s role and restricted her freedom to pursue her career. Christine and Angie came to feel that their mother’s delusions—that her former colleagues would free her from marriage and she’d be restored to her place in the medical community—were “a way of explaining how she ended up trapped in this position,” Christine said. “We theorized that psychosis was almost a reasonable response.”

Christine moved to New York after high school, because her favorite book, “Underworld,” by Don DeLillo, was set there, and because it seemed like the city where people went to escape their homes. She lived in the Bronx, near her father’s brother, and got a job at Planet Hollywood. She wanted to be a novelist, and obsessively re-read “Underworld,” covering the pages with determined annotations: “integrated dialogue”; “meta commentary”; “sensation of young immediacy.”

Angie and her mother would text Christine asking for groceries or pizza, and she would order the food for them from across the country. Mary was still barricading the door. Chris slept in his car. (Eventually, he moved in with a girlfriend.) Christine worried that Angie, who was eleven, was growing up in a kind of folie à deux, a delusional system that structures two lives. Angie said, of her mother, “I could never figure out why she was doing these things to me, and I had this kind of emotional explanation:

Other things are just more important to her. I'm only there as a vessel for the magical thinking." After about a year, Christine arranged for her mother and Angie to move to New York, too. (Mary asked me to use only her middle name, to protect her privacy.)

Mary moved into an apartment in the Bronx, in the same building as her brother-in-law, and plastered the walls with tape, to prevent reality-TV shows from recording her and Angie through the cracks. Angie tried to bathe while her mother was asleep because Mary believed there was a camera in the showerhead, and had covered it with a sock. Angie felt as if she were living in a kind of urban version of "Grey Gardens," a formative movie for her. The documentary chronicles the lives of a mother and daughter, relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who live together for years, piles of trash accumulating around them, social conventions becoming remote.

After two years in New York, Mary seemed increasingly unable to care for herself, so Christine, who had enrolled at Columbia, called the city's mobile crisis unit, a team that assesses people in psychiatric distress. The crisis unit knocked on Mary's door, and, after a conversation in which she described receiving electric transmissions through a filling in her tooth, she was admitted to Mount Sinai Beth Israel hospital, in Manhattan.

Psychiatrists there petitioned a judge for permission to hospitalize her for a month and treat her with antipsychotics, over her objections. "I believe that she has no judgment concerning the nature of her illness," one of them wrote. On an evaluation form, another psychiatrist initially wrote that Mary had an "unspecified psychotic disorder." Then, perhaps uncomfortable with such a vague diagnosis, she crossed out the phrase and wrote, "Schizophrenia." Mary was fifty-five years old, and her symptoms had begun in her early forties, which is unusual for schizophrenia. Most people are diagnosed in their twenties or early thirties.

Christine moved into her mother's apartment and filed a petition for joint custody of Angie. Their father, who was living in California, did not contest the petition. "I make breakfast in the morning," Christine wrote in her journal, describing her new routine with Angie. "I wash the dishes. I lock

the door at night. I have established, kicking and screaming, my own rightful place as an active agent in the universe.”

When Mary was released from the hospital, she stopped taking her medications. Neither she nor her daughters thought they had helped her. For about a third of people with schizophrenia, antipsychotics do not work. “I wish my mother’s delusions and paranoia were treatable,” Angie wrote, in a college-application essay. “However, she has lived with them for 12 years, and her institutionalization last year had no effect.”

Mary’s admission to Beth Israel was the beginning of a nine-year cycle in which she was sent to psychiatric hospitals for weeks at a time before being released, unchanged. Mary said that each time she was admitted to a hospital the staff “kept asking the same questions, and it never made anybody have a different outlook on the situation. Everyone stayed with the same thing. It was schizophrenia.”

After five hospital stays, including one in which the police led her to an ambulance in handcuffs because she wouldn’t leave her apartment, Mary was transferred to the Bronx Psychiatric Center, a state facility that provides long-term care. She observed that when patients refused medications staff would sometimes call security, and the patients would be injected with drugs, a prospect that terrified her. “I would take the medication without any question, because I’m not risking fighting with security,” she told me. “These people are very sensitive to what they call ‘challenging authority.’ ” She spent her days dreading the moment when she’d be forced to swallow her pills.

Mary sometimes imagined that God had a reason for keeping her in the hospital, but, she said, “I did not even want to go there, because the reasoning mind makes you feel very nervous and uncertain.” Her daily life became so narrow that she stopped noticing the weather. “They don’t remind you about the changing season—that spring is coming into summer or the winter is coming into spring,” she said. “You just pass the days as quickly as possible.”

Christine, who spoke to her mother every week, said that Mary never articulated her sorrow at the time. “I would have wanted to engage on the

level of ‘I’m sorry you’re there, do you feel sad?’ And I’m sure she was having those emotions, but she wasn’t able to express them. It was always ‘I’m being attacked. I’m being held like a prisoner here.’ ” Christine felt that her mother was safer at the Bronx Psychiatric Center than she would be anywhere else, but she felt guilty for hoping that Mary would stay there for the rest of her life.

Mary was discharged in September, 2023, after a year. A week later, she collapsed in her bathroom and struggled to move. She was taken to a hospital in Brooklyn, where the doctors told her to stop taking antipsychotics, because they thought her condition may have been a side effect of the drugs. Then they discovered that she actually had lymphoma, a sometimes fatal form of cancer. She began seven cycles of a treatment that combined chemotherapy with rituximab, a medication that targets antibodies involved in the body’s immune response.

When Christine and Angie visited her at the hospital, Mary responded to their questions with one-word answers. Her face had a vacant expression. Christine and Angie thought she was dying. Mary did, too. She dreamed about being a child, playing with her sister and four brothers, in Kolkata, where she grew up. “I told myself, ‘This must be the end of it,’ ” Mary said.

Angie, who was now twenty-two and had recently graduated from Dartmouth, prepared in therapy for her mother’s death. She said, “I had multiple sessions where I was just crying about the fundamental things I wish she had given me, like ‘I wish she could have told me what was going on in her head,’ or ‘I wish she could have told me she was sorry for what she did.’ ”

By Christmas, two months after beginning chemotherapy, Mary was moving a little more freely, and she had begun to carry on conversations. Christine and Angie noticed that her personality seemed different: she was calm, outgoing, and polite, and she often expressed gratitude. Angie texted Christine that Mary seemed peaceful, as if maybe she was “getting some post-life or death clarity?”

Christine, who was twenty-nine and had settled in London, having moved there for a master’s degree in psychology, was struck by her mother’s

ability to watch the news and absorb the information on its own terms. For years, the television had been a source of agitation; Mary had said that people were using her ideas and repeating her lines.



*"I was responsible for one of the largest back yards in the country."*

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

One day, when Christine was visiting the hospital, Mary asked for a phone. "I sort of teased her, 'Now you're asking for a phone?'" Christine said. "I wasn't really making much of it, but then afterward I thought, Why has she asked for a phone? That's quite unusual." Mary already had a phone, but it was in storage because she'd told Christine that it contained spyware.

Angie gave her a flip phone and, to be safe, covered the camera with a piece of tape. "She seemed fine using it, which was odd," Angie said.

In May, a month after Mary finished chemotherapy, Christine and Angie asked a psychiatrist at the hospital to examine her. Christine said, "The psychiatrist was, like, 'Why have you called me here? I don't understand. She has no symptoms.' And we were, like, 'Yeah, that's the reason we've called you here.' "

Christine had the same feeling in her body that she'd had when her mother first became ill—the sense that something at Mary's core had changed. She tried to get the doctors to grasp the scale of her mother's recovery. By the summer, her cancer was in remission. She hadn't taken antipsychotics for months, and yet "her psychotic symptoms are gone," a doctor wrote. Christine told the doctors, "She had a twenty-year psychiatric history. Have you heard of this? Could any of her medications have caused this?" She

spoke with a neurologist at the hospital, but he didn't have an answer. Omid Heravi, one of Mary's oncologists, didn't understand what had happened, either. "Medicine is very specialized—we don't get involved in other fields," he said. He guessed only that one of the cancer drugs she'd been given had had collateral benefits. "In medicine, all side effects are not bad," he offered.

When a person recovers from an illness, it is usually seen as the end of the story. But becoming sane also causes a kind of narrative collapse, a confrontation with a personal history that is no longer recognizable. Christine encouraged her mother's friends and siblings, whom she'd been estranged from for years, to get back in touch. She wanted to restore her mother's sense of connection, but, she said, "I also wanted them to be able to tell me—outside of my childhood memories—if this is the person she used to be."

For years, Christine's friends had known little about her mother beyond the details of her mental illness. "Suddenly, I was, like, 'Hey, my mom's better now. Would you like to call her up and talk to her?' And that was a shocking concept for them," she said. "I mean, there are a lot of people who wouldn't necessarily be open to jumping on a call without planning, but my mom was now the type of person who is quite flexible and responsive and conversationally fluid." Christine described her as a "psychological débutante."

Angie, who was living in Queens and working at a firm where she analyzed data on sexual violence, felt skeptical that their mother's transformation was real. Christine said, "I felt like, If Mom can disappear, then she can come back." But Angie didn't have memories of Mary from before the illness, and it felt to her like she was being asked to believe that her mother had become a new person. "I tend to choose security over the process of discovery," Angie told me. "I didn't have a curiosity that felt worth the emotional risks." Angie had always felt that, on some level, her mother had "chosen her delusions" over her children. She didn't want to experience that choice being made again.

Christine searched for medical papers that might explain her mother's recovery and allow Angie to believe in it. She read about each of the

medications that her mother had taken and concluded that the key drug may have been rituximab, the immunosuppressant. “I have a new working theory,” she texted Angie, in May, 2024. “Theoretically her chemo could have incidentally cured” her.

Christine found a handful of recent case studies that documented drastic psychiatric recoveries after people were treated with drugs that dampen immune activity. A 2017 study in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* described a woman with a twenty-five-year history of schizophrenia. She also had a skin disease, for which she was given drugs that reduced inflammation and suppressed her immune response. Her doctors noticed a pattern: when they treated her skin lesions, her psychosis went away. They hypothesized that the rash and the psychosis had been caused by a single autoimmune disorder, and were cured by the same drugs. Another paper in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* described a man with “treatment-resistant schizophrenia” who developed leukemia. After a bone-marrow transplant, which reconstituted his immune system, he startled his doctors by suddenly becoming sane. Eight years later, the authors wrote, “the patient is very well and there are no residual psychiatric symptoms.”

Christine also discovered a *Washington Post* article from 2023 about a woman named April, who had fallen into a catatonic state at the age of twenty-one and been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Sander Markx, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia, first encountered April at a psychiatric hospital on Long Island when he was a medical student; twenty years later, he was dismayed to find her at the same hospital, in the same condition. “She has not been outside for twenty years—out of sight,” he said, at a symposium at Weill Cornell’s medical school. He and his colleagues gave her an extensive workup and found that she had lupus, an autoimmune disorder that, in rare cases, can induce inflammation in the brain, causing symptoms that are indistinguishable from those of schizophrenia. After undergoing immunosuppressive therapy, including rituximab, April emerged from, essentially, a “twenty-five-year-long coma, and was able to tell us everything,” Markx said. “We don’t have a script for this. We don’t see patients coming back from this condition.”

April's case helped give momentum to the founding, in 2023, of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (S.N.F.) Center for Precision Psychiatry and Mental Health, at Columbia, which is working to uncover biologically distinct subtypes of illness that have been obscured by the broad categories in the *DSM*. Christine sent an e-mail to Markx, a co-director of the S.N.F. Center, with a brief time line of her mother's life. "Her psychiatric symptoms disappeared and have yet to resurface months later," she wrote. "But her current clinicians are stumped as to why it has happened." When Markx didn't respond, Christine, who was visiting New York, decided that she and Angie should go to Columbia to introduce themselves in person. Markx wasn't in his office—he had just begun an ongoing medical leave—but they slipped a handwritten card in a pink envelope under his door and used inter-campus mail to send cards to the other directors of the center. They tried to think of this step, Angie said, as "the part in the documentary where the cameras go all shaky and you get the sense that someone is about to break a hole in the case."

Emil Kraepelin, who developed psychiatry's first modern diagnostic system, in the eighteen-nineties, defined the disease we now know as schizophrenia largely in terms of its hopelessness. The diagnosis allowed hospital administrators to separate patients with "periodic insanities" (like depression and bipolar disorder) from those who were believed to be incurable and belonged in asylums. Kraepelin hoped that schizophrenia would eventually reveal itself to be a disease like neurosyphilis, which was then responsible for a large portion of the cases of insanity in psychiatry wards. In 1913, scientists demonstrated that bacteria had infected the brains of these patients. "The diseases produced by syphilis are an object lesson," Kraepelin wrote, four years later. "It is logical to assume that we shall succeed in uncovering the causes of many other types of insanity that can be prevented—perhaps even cured—though at present we have not the slightest clue."

Psychiatry and neurology were originally one medical discipline, but gradually neurologists took responsibility for diseases like neurosyphilis and dementia, in which the pathology could be seen in an autopsied brain, and psychiatrists handled the illnesses that were left behind, their causes still a mystery. Schizophrenia, which affects roughly one per cent of the

population, became the disorder through which psychiatry worked out its identity, in part because it seemed to embody the mystery and intractability of madness, presenting basic questions about what it means to have a self. “The history of modern psychiatry is, in fact, practically synonymous with the history of schizophrenia, the quintessential form of madness in our time,” the psychologist Louis Sass has written.

But psychiatrists struggled to pinpoint a single feature that unified the diagnosis. “The great question is what is this ‘something’ that underlies the symptoms,” Karl Jaspers wrote, in 1963. Three decades later, the psychiatrist Ian Brockington warned that the obsession with schizophrenia had stifled clinical curiosity. “Smaller, more homogeneous entities have been sucked in by the gravity of the big idea, and annihilated,” he wrote. For decades, scientists have been searching in vain for a biological marker that would confirm whether someone has schizophrenia. Last year, in a paper in *Schizophrenia Research*, seventeen international experts concluded that schizophrenia was defined by no single etiology, symptom, or biological mechanism. “It is prudent to wonder if the construct around which we are organizing this information is fundamentally flawed,” the authors wrote.

Perhaps the most vivid disruption to the idea of schizophrenia as a monolithic concept began in 2007, when Josep Dalmau, a neurologist at the University of Barcelona, started publishing papers with his colleagues which described young patients with delusions, hallucinations, and sudden changes in their behavior, like agitation and inappropriate giggling. Within days or weeks, they deteriorated, developing seizures, losing consciousness, or struggling to breathe. Dalmau discovered that they had a form of encephalitis, inflammation of the brain. Their immune systems had misidentified the NMDA receptor—a protein in the brain that affects mood and memory—as foreign and produced antibodies that attacked it. When these patients were treated with immunotherapy, the majority of them recovered completely, sometimes within a month.

Thomas Pollak, a neuropsychiatrist at King’s College London and the Maudsley Hospital, told me that treating patients with the condition was “revelatory and disquieting, because some of them looked exactly like the

people I'd been seeing in the psychiatry ward. It was uncanny to see that a presumably totally different pathway could lead to this." Their illness, which was named anti-NMDA-receptor encephalitis, usually began in their early twenties, just as schizophrenia often does. The discovery of the illness put pressure on the artificial division between psychiatry and neurology—the only two fields of medicine that focus on the same organ. "Many of the symptoms are shared, but we are using different words," Pollak said.

In "Brain on Fire," a memoir from 2012, the journalist Susannah Cahalan—the two hundred and seventeenth person in the world to be diagnosed with anti-NMDA-receptor encephalitis—describes how for a month, in which she swung between paranoid aggression and euphoria, some doctors treated her as if she were just a difficult psychiatric patient who drank too much. "If it took so long for one of the best hospitals in the world to get to this step," she wrote, "how many other people were going untreated, diagnosed with a mental illness or condemned to a life in a nursing home or a psychiatric ward?"

Since Dalmau's discovery, scientists have identified more than twenty new antibodies linked to psychiatric symptoms. In 2020, in a paper in *The Lancet Psychiatry*, some two dozen researchers proposed a new category of illness called "autoimmune psychosis," which may look like a milder or incomplete form of encephalitis, the illness never progressing beyond psychiatric symptoms. Christopher Bartley, the chief of a unit at the National Institute of Mental Health which investigates the role of immune dysfunction in mental illness, said that the twenty known antibodies may be a "drop in the bucket." There could be countless targets in the brain that antibodies attack, some subset of which may alter people's perceptions and behavior. "We have to have epistemic humility and accept that there are alternative models of disease," Bartley said.

To find psychiatric patients who might benefit from immunotherapy, researchers have set up centers, roughly similar to the one at Columbia, at Baylor University Medical Center, in Texas; King's College London; Uppsala University, in Sweden; and the University of Freiburg, in Germany, among other places. Some of the best research into the phenomenon has been conducted in Germany, where it's more common for patients in a first

episode of psychosis to have lumbar punctures to access their spinal fluid, which can reveal the presence of antibodies. Bartley estimates that between one and five per cent of people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia actually have an autoimmune condition—a figure he based on his own lab's research, which has not yet been published, and also on a German study of a thousand patients, the most extensive study of autoimmune psychosis so far. “Even one per cent ends up being almost a million people in the world who should be treated with a different kind of medicine,” he said.

The pharmaceutical treatment for schizophrenia has not meaningfully changed in three-quarters of a century. Many pharmaceutical companies have left the field entirely. To get approved for the market, a medicine that works for one schizophrenic patient must have a reasonable chance of working for another. But only blunt instruments have been effective in treating an illness that takes such varied forms. Newer antipsychotics are more refined than earlier ones, with fewer side effects, but almost all of them work in the same broad way, alleviating some symptoms, like hallucinations and delusions, but not other common ones, like lack of motivation and an inability to experience pleasure. Andrew Miller, the vice-chair for research in the psychiatry department at the Emory University School of Medicine, said that the field is haunted by the early success of antipsychotics, which were discovered by serendipity, in the nineteen-fifties. “You get lulled into this sense that, because the drugs are one-size-fits-all, the disease is also one-size-fits-all,” he said. “With autoimmune psychosis, it’s so clear that there is something different. And then you start to say, ‘Hey, is it possible that there are other clear-cut mechanisms to pathology that we’re missing because we’re lumping everyone together and saying they all have the same illness?’ ”



*Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby*

The S.N.F. Center is embarking on a project, beginning this fall, to screen all the patients hospitalized in the New York State mental-health system for autoimmune, metabolic, and genetic disorders, to see if there are people whose symptoms can be traced to a distinct biological mechanism. “I’ve always been aware of the possibility that there are treatable causes for psychosis lurking in chronic long-term patients,” Joshua Gordon, the executive director of the New York State Psychiatric Institute and a former director of the N.I.M.H., told me. “But the notion that we could make this work practically—that we could test for it—has really only become apparent in the last few years.” The S.N.F. Center will do blood work for everyone in the state’s psychiatric institutions, offering follow-up testing, such as lumbar punctures, to those with unusual results. Gordon said that, if the S.N.F. Center identifies a few dozen patients who can be treated effectively enough to leave the hospital, “we will be able to start answering the question of whether this is worth trying across the whole population of people with schizophrenia.”

Psychiatry has a legacy of implementing drastic procedures, like lobotomies, that later come to seem like folly. But it also has a history of proffering psychological theories for illnesses that are not yet understood on a biological level. Several psychiatrists told me that they’d found themselves rereading the history of the discipline, wondering, for instance, if some of those patients of Emil Kraepelin’s whose symptoms helped

define schizophrenia might actually have had encephalitis or autoimmune conditions—specifically, a subset he described as having “spasmodic phenomena in the musculature of the face” and an inability to walk without falling. There were also questions about whether these diseases could explain a condition called “lethal catatonia,” which was frequently described as a manifestation of schizophrenia: these patients became extremely agitated, and then slipped into a stupor. In 1986, in a study that inadvertently revealed the dangers of conceptual inertia, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* reviewed nearly three hundred cases of lethal catatonia. Nearly all the patients in the study had been treated with antipsychotics, and more than half of them died.

After reading Christine’s description of her mother’s case, Steven Kushner, a co-director of the S.N.F. Center, arranged a meeting with her and Mary and Angie. Mary was living at a rehabilitation center in the Bronx while she regained her muscle strength. She was reluctant to meet another psychiatrist, she told me, but she felt she needed to “rise up to the level of my daughters’ studiousness.” In October, 2024, Kushner and three colleagues came to the rehabilitation center and spoke with Mary for three hours. “Her psychosis was gone,” Kushner said. “There was no other conclusion. There was no way that she could have the quality of the conversation that we had and willfully suppress psychotic symptoms.”

In the conversation, Mary recounted intimate details about her daughters’ pasts—what they would eat for breakfast, their arguments at recess—but she made no reference to the delusional beliefs that had dominated their lives. When Angie told the doctors that her mother had sometimes prevented her from going outside, even to do homework with classmates, Mary offered a practical explanation: there was crime in the Bronx, and she worried about Angie’s safety. To explain why she put a sock over the showerhead in her bathroom, she said that she’d hoped to filter sediment from the water. She seemed to have filled in gaps in her memory in a way that was consistent with her current identity, as a sane person.

In 1911, the psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler described how schizophrenic patients are capable of a kind of “double bookkeeping”: they may simultaneously live in two “disjoint” worlds, one grounded in shared

reality, the other in private delusions. They might believe that they are the center of a conspiracy involving nearly everyone they see but also make small talk at a deli and remember to give the correct change. It's as if the delusions occupy their own ontological category, sealed off from the logic used to move through the world. Now, when Mary recalls her decades of illness, it is as if she is accessing only the shared-reality side of the ledger. When she talks about her time at the Bronx Psychiatric Center, her memories sound like those of a person trapped in an environment where she doesn't belong. "Angie and I treat it as if she had two selves," Christine said. "But Mom describes her self as continuous."

The S.N.F. Center arranged for Mary to have a lumbar puncture, to see if she had any antibodies associated with known neuropsychiatric conditions. During the procedure, Kushner said, he could sense that Mary had once had a "fantastic professional identity: she was holding court, telling stories about the lumbar punctures she used to perform, how many patients she used to see in a day." The test came back negative. Kushner tried to recover a frozen sample of Mary's cerebral-spinal fluid from when she was ill—a test done on that fluid would have been more revealing—but the fluid had been discarded. He believed that the most likely explanation was that she'd had a form of autoimmune psychosis for which the associated antibody has yet to be discovered. "I think the consensus is that we are probably only aware of the tip of the iceberg of different kinds of antibodies that can produce autoimmune diseases, and certainly that holds for autoimmune psychosis," he said.

Some people, when they recover from psychosis, understand that the strange enemies who plagued them never actually existed. Others say that they are relieved their enemies stopped pursuing them, but do not disavow the reality of the experience. "We don't know what happens for someone who was in a psychosis for twenty years and then they are—let's call it 'cured,'" Kushner told me. "And I hesitate to use that word, because the idea that this word is ever used in psychiatry is so exceptional." But, he said, "the treatment modified Mary's biology such that the disease is basically gone."

Kushner began meeting with Mary and her daughters every few weeks, in part to help monitor for possible signs of relapse. At the meetings, they mostly avoided talking about Mary's delusions. When the subject came up, Mary was quiet, or responded in a tangential way, changing the subject. "She has this extraordinarily pleasant way of disarming the situation," Kushner told me. The thought of having caused her daughters suffering seemed too painful to allow into her conscious awareness. "There's not an appointment that goes by where she doesn't remark, spontaneously, that her daughters are doing well," he said. "I don't think that's by accident."

Kushner did not believe that Mary's memory gaps reflected cognitive impairment—on a neuropsychological exam, her memory was better than average—but he also didn't believe that she was purposely not remembering. "To look back and say, basically, 'Twenty years of my life were out of reality'—that would be a fundamental blow to her identity as a physician and mom," he said, a challenge to "one of our most primitive instincts, that we can discern what is real." When I expressed concern about how to present the disparity in memories sensitively, he told me, "I think that is the story. How do you reconcile with, and compensate for, all those missing years?"

When people emerge from chronic delusional states, the work of psychiatry is considered complete. They are largely left on their own, with two irreconcilable views of reality. "We need to really start thinking about what happens the morning after these disorders are treated," Kushner said.

Christine wasn't sure if she could call her mother "cured" simply because she lacked her previous symptoms. "She's not fixated on things like contamination and surveillance, but at no point has she said she's left those beliefs behind," she said. Christine felt that it was taboo to talk to her mother about who she had once been. She suffered from the intrusive thought that if she confronted her mother with destructive things she had done, Mary would somehow revert back to the patterns from that time and become psychotic again. "It is quite a traumatized-kid thing to say, but I sort of feel like, How greedy can you get? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," she told me.

Christine didn't know how to have an ordinary conversation with her mother. For twenty years, Mary had been suspicious when Christine asked her questions about her life. Christine now felt like an adopted child "meeting my biological mom for the first time," she said. She bought a book by an anthropologist called "The Essential Questions: Interview Your Family to Uncover Stories and Bridge Generations" to help guide their conversations. "It says, 'Allow them to talk about what's important,'" Christine said, reading from the book, during a visit to her mother's rehabilitation center. "If no one has ever let you speak about yourself, it can be hard," Christine went on. "You have to kind of—"

"Think," Mary said.

"Maybe practice—gain your voice," Christine said.

Christine, who recorded the conversation, began with warmup questions: "When you were a kid, what was your favorite activity?"

"Running," Mary answered immediately.

"What did you like about running?"

"It makes you feel you have wings."

"What is your favorite TV show?" Christine asked.

"'Seinfeld.'"

"'Seinfeld'!" Christine said. "What did you like about 'Seinfeld'?"

"The absurdity."

Every few weeks, they tackled a new theme outlined in the book: time, identity, body, belief, possessions, memory, fear. Initially, Mary answered in few words, but eventually she became much more expansive. During one session, she offered that her views on physical discipline had evolved: she no longer thought that smacking was acceptable. Christine said, "Without relating it to me or Angie, she sort of said, 'That's what we were taught when we were younger, but I don't think that's the right way to raise a

kid.’ ” Christine felt that her mother may have been reflecting, obliquely, on what had happened in their home. “The ability to say, ‘I’ve changed my mind’ felt like as much as I could ask for,” Christine said.

For years, Christine had been documenting her life—keeping a journal, saving records, recording important conversations—to compensate for the fact that she, too, had blank periods in her memories, coinciding with traumatic events. She wasn’t sure if her mother’s breaks in memory—what she and Angie called “the missing years”—were different from her own. Recently, she had come across a proverb: “The axe forgets, but the tree remembers.” She felt that maybe she and her mother had reached an impasse that was actually universal—children have always formed their identities around blows that their parents don’t even realize they inflicted.

Angie felt less accommodating: “I’m happy that my mom is normal now, that we can have a deep connection and I can share my life with her. And, at the same time, I want justice for the child who was hurt by that other mother.”

Mary’s sister, Nima, told me that before her illness Mary was “very enduring, very patient.” Mary’s recommendations from professors at medical school describe her as “kind and sympathetic,” always “willing to shoulder any extra work.” When she came out of her psychosis, Mary returned to this dutiful version of herself. She and her husband, Chris, began speaking on the phone every day. Chris told me that he felt as if he were re-meeting the woman he had known in the early years of their marriage. “How come I lived all these years of darkness, and she suddenly looks normal to me?” he said. “She gives me comfort. She gives me emotional support.”

He asked her to do things, like travel to India to resolve a family financial dispute, that Christine and Angie found inappropriate. They encouraged Mary not to comply with the request. Mary had let go of her paranoia that everyone was targeting her, but they wished she could retain a wariness about people who had hurt her in the past. “Now that she’s better, you can see how the delusions protected her from people stepping on her boundaries—and she doesn’t have a replacement strategy,” Christine said.

Mary readily agreed to speak with me for this story, but she struggled to imagine that she could be anything more than a marginal presence in it. For years, she had described how people on TV were lifting ideas and plots from her life story. “It was like she was saying, ‘I’m important,’ ” Christine said. “‘I have value. I have things to say.’ And now we’re saying, ‘You’re important. You have value. You have things to say.’ And she can’t access that sense of deserving to be the main character.”

When I first met Mary, on a Zoom call with her and Christine and Angie, I asked if I could read her psychiatric records. She said yes but warned that they would be very boring, adding that she couldn’t remember any of her psychiatrists. “I left the memories long before I left the place,” she said. Christine suggested that we interpret this as her mother’s gentle way of saying no.

A few weeks later, Christine told me, Mary found a pile of psychiatric records in her room: “She was, like, ‘I don’t want to see them anymore, so Rachel can have them and can get rid of them.’ And I was, like, ‘Yes, Mom, but Rachel is a journalist. She’s not just a professional shredder.’ ” She said that her mom responded, “I just don’t want to see them myself.”

Mary seemed to be working out her ambivalence about her memories through this pile of papers. After speaking on Zoom every week for two months, Mary and I met at her rehabilitation center, along with Christine and Angie. Toward the end of our conversation, she stood up without explanation, walked to a cabinet, retrieved the psychiatric records, and gave them to me. “I felt like what happened was a miracle,” she told me. “If it will give anyone else confidence, I’ll go with it.”

There is almost no medical literature about the afterlife of madness, the experience of letting go of what Jaspers called the “definite idea.” Autoimmune psychosis raises the possibility of a swift, full recovery—a trajectory not typically seen in schizophrenia—and in doing so supplies a new category of witness: a person who can describe what it feels like to look back on a self that is, in some sense, defunct. And yet sanity does not mean that a person views the past without defensiveness or distortion. (To see too clearly can lead to a different kind of insanity, depression.) One of Christine’s fears was that, in talking with her mother about what she and

Angie had been through, she would “rob her of the human capacity for denial.”

During one of my visits to the rehabilitation center, I asked Mary if she’d like to know how I was writing about her daughters’ memories of her illness, or if she’d prefer not to listen to that part of the story. Christine and I sat in chairs, and Mary sat on the edge of her bed, beside a wooden table on wheels that she used both for eating and as a desk. Mary quickly responded that she wanted to know what her children recalled. “I’ll go with that, because that way it will help me to remember,” she said.

“You remember things very differently, and it might be painful,” Christine said, gently. “Do you feel comfortable emotionally with that?”

“Yeah, go ahead!” Mary said. “I’ll remember like a mother. I won’t remember from your point of view.” She told her, “This is the best time for me to relate to these memories and make amends.”

Christine shared her first memory of the illness: sitting on the couch as her mother told her that the professor from medical school was in love with her.

Mary sat straight up on the bed, holding her arms over her stomach, staring intently at Christine. She had the bearing of a diligent student determined to pass a difficult test.

“You asked if they had ever put things in my hair so that”—

“Microphones,” Mary said quickly. “Microphones.” She said that the professor and his friends kept urging her to leave her husband: “They said, ‘Don’t worry about the in-laws and all—just move away and begin on your own.’ ” The friends were trying to help, but they were also harassing her, and she had no one to confide in. “I felt like she was supposed to be there for me,” Mary said, gesturing toward Christine. “But she was talking on behalf of my friends.”

“You would think that I was repeating phrases that were said to me by other people.”

“I remember that very well,” Mary said.

“As a kid, I found it very hurtful.”

“I never blamed you,” Mary said. “But my classmates—I trusted them so much.”

“I was not in contact with your classmates,” Christine said, in a measured tone. “I would explain that to you, but it felt like you didn’t believe me at that time.” She asked, “Now that I’m older, do you trust me when I say they weren’t talking to me?”

Mary said it was possible that Christine had been reading her e-mails, rather than talking directly to the classmates, or that Christine’s father was the one telling Christine what to say. “She was very articulate,” Mary said. “She would do everything he would tell her.”

Mary explained that the feeling of being harassed—sometimes by people from her past, sometimes by strangers—continued until several weeks after her cancer diagnosis. “I felt like they were working through the doctors, and I had to take the chemotherapy just to hurt me and make me bald and make me lose weight and humiliate me,” she said.

But then, a few weeks into her treatment, her dreams became uncharacteristically pleasant. She kept dreaming of her sister and brothers, and they were so sensitive and loving that she thought maybe this was the prelude to a kind of heavenly afterlife. In time, the dreams began to feel more conscious, as if she were guiding the scenes herself. Lying in her hospital bed, she tried to recall details about her childhood home which she hadn’t thought about in years. “Whatever I could catch on to, I would collect,” she said.

Her reëmergence seemed to have occurred weeks before her daughters grasped what was happening. Her muscles were so weak that she couldn’t say more than a word at a time, and she wished she could communicate to her daughters, “I’m smiling. I’m all right with this.”

The thought that people were secretly trying to punish her hadn't completely disappeared, but it felt distant, a relic of a different era. When the thought resurfaced, she said, "I take myself out of it, and I say, 'It's not my burden.' I put the whole thing, like a gift basket, to God." She'd been taught this coping mechanism as a schoolgirl, but until recently it hadn't worked.

Christine felt both validated and disoriented by the idea that, between her and her mother, the facts were never really in question. "It is painful to hear that she still thinks I was spying on her all those years, but now she says, 'I am so proud of my daughters—they take care of me,'" she said. "Maybe her interpretation is that through the power of forgiveness she can now interact with me as her loving daughter. So can I make do with that?"

For a year, Christine and Angie had been speaking on Zoom with a family therapist, to help process the changes in their mother. Recently, Mary had begun participating in the conversations, too. During a session, Christine suggested that the three of them begin a process of sharing grievances, each taking a turn. "There were different times when each of us was a flawed caretaker," Christine said. She knew that her mother must have felt betrayed when she called the mobile crisis unit. Mary agreed: "I felt very let down because nobody trusted me enough to share that information." Christine began by telling her, "I did my best, and yet I'm sorry I hurt you."

Although Christine and Angie felt they had already worked out the conflicts in their own relationship, they tried "performing a kind of play," as Christine put it: they shared resentments—Angie's feelings of abandonment, Christine's sense that Angie didn't want her help—and then apologized, "so that at some point she can say the words to us." Each emphasized that she didn't think the other was a bad person, and that it was O.K. that they remembered things differently. They tried any exonerating phrase they could think of, "in case these might be the mental blocks for her," Christine said.

Mary was enthusiastic about the process, but Christine sensed that she didn't quite know what to say when it was her turn. A lifelong student of her mother's mind, Christine had several justifications for her mother's failure to respond in kind: she had not grown up in a culture where regrets were

aired in this way; the inability to see her daughters' perspective was a lingering cognitive symptom; in her fragile state, apologizing required a level of confidence she didn't yet have. "At this stage of my life, I need to feel like my mother is back," Christine told me. Later on, maybe in a few years, she said, "I'll deal with the fact that it was an imperfect mother who was returned to me." ♦



*Rachel Aviv* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She is the author of “[\*Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us\*](#),” a finalist for the 2022 National Book Critics Circle Award.

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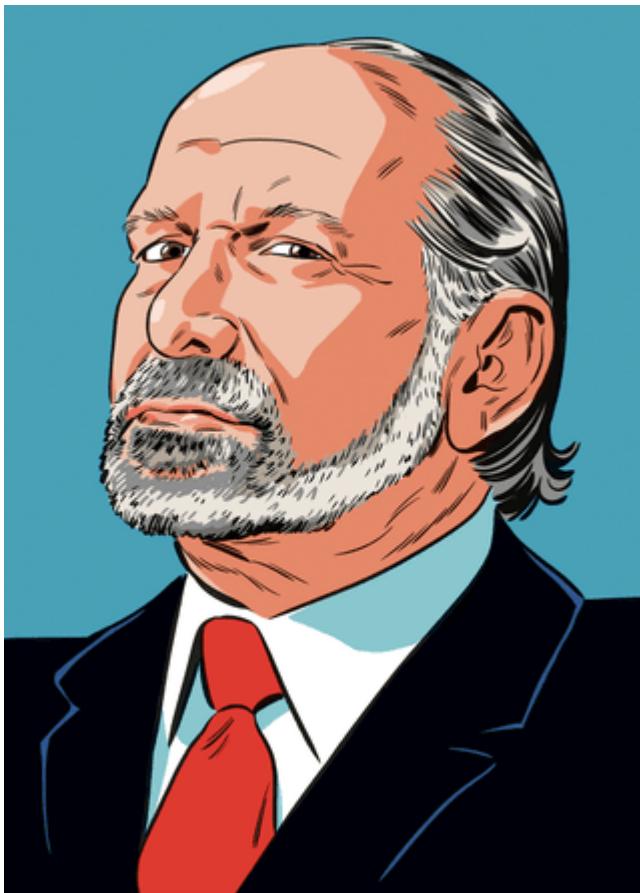
[\*\*The Political Scene\*\*](#)

# Donald Trump's Tariff Dealmaker-in-Chief

How Howard Lutnick, the Secretary of Commerce, plans to transform government into a money-making enterprise.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

July 21, 2025



*One trade negotiator assessed Lutnick's approach as "Don't try to make this anything but what it is, which is a shakedown." Illustration by Kristian Hammerstad; Source photograph by Aaron Schwartz / CNP / Bloomberg / Getty*

When Howard Lutnick moved to Washington, earlier this year, to become the Secretary of Commerce, he painted one wall in his new living room

gold. It was the only significant modification he made to the house, a château-style mansion purchased for twenty-five million dollars from the Fox News anchor Bret Baier. On a recent Sunday afternoon, Lutnick was in the living room, flipping through a commemorative coffee-table book designed by his family which pairs photographs of him with some of his favorite sayings. “It’s between me and the mirror,” one read. He turned the page: “You are either in or you are out.” Lutnick’s dog, a Havanese-poodle mix named Cali—three of his four children went to college in California—kept nosing her way through a gate to come sit with us. Lutnick was about to fly to London for a round of trade negotiations with China, whose restrictions on the sale of rare-earth metals were threatening to render parts of the American economy nonfunctional. Several suitcases were packed and waiting in the entryway, next to a gold Pop-art sculpture by Robert Indiana that spelled the word “LOVE.” Later, Lutnick led me from room to room to point out a few more works from his personal collection: Rothko, Diebenkorn, Lichtenstein, de Kooning.

A staffer gently reminded Lutnick that he had to leave for the airport, but he was in the middle of a story. Lutnick’s anecdotes, much like those of his boss, tend to meander. A billionaire who became the head of a major bond-trading firm at twenty-nine, he radiates a brash, ebullient energy that is often referred to as “scrappy” or “outer borough.” He likes to dish. He talks with his hands and emphasizes his points with catchphrases such as “How about no” or “How about we *don’t*.”

Lutnick and President Donald Trump speak on the phone most nights, at around one in the morning, just after Lutnick gets in bed. They talk about “real stuff,” like Canadian steel tariffs, Lutnick told me, and also about “nothing,” which he summarized as “sporting events, people, who’d you have dinner with, what was this guy like, can you believe what this guy did, what’s the TV like, I saw this on TV, what’d you think of what this guy said on TV, what did you think about my press conference, how about this Truth?” Of course, Lutnick said, “Trump has other people he calls late at night.” But does he have other people he *always* calls?

In “The Art of the Deal,” Trump’s ghostwritten business-advice memoir from 1987, he observes, “Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write

wonderful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks." One senses that Lutnick is animated by similar principles. The Department of Commerce, an agency with fifty thousand employees and thirteen bureaus, manages a vast and varied portfolio: the National Weather Service, the Census Bureau, the Patent and Trademark Office. It is, as one Lutnick adviser told me, "a junk drawer for everything under the sun, from red snapper to wind to ships to artificial intelligence—you name it." But Lutnick sees himself primarily as the President's dealmaker-in-chief. Lately, this has meant fielding pleas from companies and countries seeking relief from Trump's tariffs, which the department sets and helps to enforce. In early April, the Administration put a baseline ten-per-cent tariff on nearly every country in the world, alongside so-called reciprocal tariffs on countries with which the U.S. has the biggest trade deficits. China, the *bête noire* of the President's trade obsession, would pay thirty-four per cent. (This later skyrocketed up to a hundred and twenty-five per cent, then careened back down.) Lesotho, a country that, in Trump's words, "nobody has ever heard of," would pay the highest rate: fifty per cent. A number of America's closest allies, such as the E.U. and South Korea, were also targeted, as was a group of uninhabited islands near Antarctica. Trump slapped additional tariffs on automobile parts, inciting cries of protest from American car companies. Brides-to-be posted panicked videos to TikTok, wondering whether the cost of their wedding dresses would spike. Preppers, anticipating apocalyptic supply-chain breakdowns, stockpiled hundreds of pairs of shoes.

The announcement, which was immediately followed by widespread economic chaos, soon gave way to a patchwork of concessions and carve-outs. The reciprocal tariffs were paused for ninety days, to allow the affected countries to negotiate. (Trump repeatedly suggested that Canada, one of the U.S.'s top trading partners, could avoid tariffs altogether by simply becoming the fifty-first state.) Meanwhile, corporate executives reeled. They called Lutnick. He constantly held Zoom meetings on his iPad while being driven around town; everyone seemed to know the dead spot in his driveway where the signal briefly cut out.

During every outing I took with Lutnick, as spring turned to summer in Washington, he was approached by someone asking if he could intervene on

their behalf. Petitioners speed-walked to fall in step with him; they held the handshake firmly and for a second too long after posing for a photo. One afternoon, as we left a greenroom at the InterContinental hotel, moving quickly through a thick set of curtains, the C.E.O. of one of the largest companies in the world was lingering by a stairwell. As he clasped Lutnick's hands, I heard him say something about a supply-chain issue and two billion dollars. Lutnick, who had just wrapped up a panel discussion, was already running ten minutes late for an evening reception at the White House. They would settle this matter later. Lutnick held out his iPhone, with the screen facing down. Take a picture, he said. A sticker with Lutnick's phone number and e-mail address had been printed with a label-maker and affixed to the back of his phone. The C.E.O. snapped a photograph.



*"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have your ashes scattered somewhere warm, with a bustling night life and vibrant local food scene?"*

*Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai*

During Trump's Presidential transition, which Lutnick co-chaired, he lobbied vigorously to be appointed Treasury Secretary, a more powerful and prestigious position. He was crushed when Trump passed him up for Scott Bessent, a former hedge-fund manager. "There hasn't been an important Secretary of Commerce since Herbert Hoover," the founder of a major New York investment bank told me. "Call anybody and ask them to tell you the last five." Lutnick is determined to elevate the role. "I'm a *different* Secretary of Commerce," he said. "No one's ever cared before." And Commerce—with its tariff-enforcement authority—is at the center of the Administration's efforts to frantically rework the flow of global trade.

Although Lutnick spent decades as the chairman of Cantor Fitzgerald, a financial-services firm that does business around the world, his most valuable asset in this endeavor may be a natural intuition for what the President wants, and a penchant for radical oversimplification. Sitting across from me one afternoon, he pinched the fabric of his gray button-down shirt between his fingers. “If I buy this shirt and it’s made in Italy or in China, it doesn’t help us,” he said. “I consumed, but I didn’t employ anybody.” He grabbed hold of his pants. “Whereas if I buy jeans and they’re made in America, then that’s good.” Lutnick believes that he and the President possess a clarity of thought that is unique among Washington types. “I’m just experienced in business in the way none of these people are —except Donald Trump,” he said. “I know him so well that I know where the puck is going.”

It’s not just tariffs. Lutnick has all sorts of ideas about how to transform the government. “If I was in the Biden Administration, they’d be staring at me like I’m from some other planet,” he told me. “But this President, he wants to make change. So I pitch these ideas, and he says, ‘Let’s do it.’ ” Why not replace the I.R.S. with an External Revenue Service, which will collect tariffs and other levies from foreign sources instead of taxing citizens? And how about we get rid of most of the government enumerators, who gather data for the Census Bureau? (They “literally call to Lincoln, Nebraska, and ask what the price of cargo pants is, as if they don’t have a computer.”) Lutnick’s most prized idea is to sell U.S. citizenship for five million dollars per person. He calls it the Trump Card, and it looks like a gold American Express with the President’s face on it. “If I give two hundred thousand of them for five million dollars each, we make a trillion dollars,” he said. “A trillion! You would say, ‘This doesn’t sound like government, because it sounds kind of smart.’ But you just want outcomes, right? It’s obvious—common sense.”

Lutnick grew up in Jericho, on Long Island, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. He knew tragedy early in life: his mother died of lymphoma while he was in high school; in his first week of college, his father was accidentally administered a fatal dose of chemotherapy. Other relatives receded into the background, leaving Lutnick and his two siblings on their own.

After Lutnick graduated from Haverford, a small liberal-arts school in Pennsylvania known for its Quaker roots and progressive values, he moved to New York. He started working at Cantor Fitzgerald and became a protégé of Bernie Cantor, the firm's co-founder. "I ramped up really fast," Lutnick told me. "I was doubling and doubling and doubling." In 1996, Cantor died, and Lutnick, after an ugly succession battle with Cantor's widow, Iris, took control. The trading floor was "more about ass-kicking than old-school analysis," an old friend of Lutnick's said. Compared with other firms, Cantor Fitzgerald had a reputation that was "less preppy, less blue-blood—maybe more rumors about strip clubs." Around this time, Lutnick, who went by Howie, bought a bar called Rex, on the Lower East Side. "It was very Tom Cruise in 'Cocktail,'" the old friend told me, referring to the film about a business student and bartender who entertains patrons with tricks while making drinks. In 1998, Lutnick and his wife, Allison—the two got married at the Plaza—bought and gut-renovated a Beaux-Arts town house on East Seventy-first Street, behind the Frick Collection. (Their next-door neighbor was Jeffrey Epstein.) Lutnick started showing up to college reunions in a helicopter. "He'd always say he's five-ten—but six feet if he stands on his wallet," the friend recalled.

These days, Lutnick likes to tell stories from the nineties about cavorting with Trump at "rubber-chicken dinners" on the New York charity circuit and "chasing the same girls," but the two were not especially close. Back then, Lutnick had no particular interest in government. "I was a classic New Yorker," he told me. "I just gave money to whoever the local politician was, whatever."

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Lutnick was taking his son Kyle to his first day of kindergarten at Horace Mann, an élite private school in the Bronx. Cantor's offices were on the top floors of One World Trade Center. Everyone on those floors died, including Lutnick's brother, Gary.

"Whatever cord had attached me to my life had been severed," Lutnick later wrote. He set up a crisis center for Cantor families at the Pierre, a swank hotel on the Upper East Side. The firm had lost more than two-thirds of its staff; Lutnick sobbed during TV interviews while desperately trying to keep the business from going under. Four days after the attacks, Cantor stopped paying the salaries of the missing employees, many of whom were not yet

confirmed dead. Lutnick received a deluge of hate mail, including a letter that quoted Bob Dylan's "Masters of War": "Let me ask you one question / is your money that good / will it buy you forgiveness?"

By the spring, Lutnick and the surviving Cantor partners had distributed sixty-three million dollars to the families of the deceased. (They would eventually pay three times that amount.) Kenneth Feinberg, an attorney who oversaw the U.S. government's September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, told me that Lutnick "vigorously represented his people." Still, the narrative persisted that he had abandoned them. A chorus of critics accused Lutnick of crying crocodile tears. The first time I met Lutnick, he brought up 9/11 immediately, with the defensiveness of someone accustomed to being maligned. "The media was picking on me for not paying the salaries of people who died, which was crazy," he said. "All the people who made money were killed."

Lutnick did save Cantor; the company was trading again just two days after the Twin Towers fell. "Despite that, or perhaps because of his perceived self-enrichment," Lutnick was never granted access to the most rarefied Manhattan circles, one New York financier told me. "Sound familiar?" Someone close to Lutnick said, "It's the same as it is with Trump. The middle of the country is, like, Wow, he is so rich, he has a gold car, he's so successful. And then at a cocktail party in New York people are, like, Psh, who the fuck is this guy?"

Trump had called Lutnick to offer his condolences after 9/11, and to congratulate him on keeping Cantor afloat. Seven years later, Lutnick appeared on Trump's reality-TV show "The Celebrity Apprentice." In the episode, which featured a live charity auction, Lutnick bid on items such as high tea with the Duchess of York. The British media personality Piers Morgan, who was a contestant on the show that season, recalled Lutnick's entrance: "This balding, bullet-haired guy bullfrogged his way into the crowd, barrelled through, and shouted, 'One hundred thousand dollars!' Then he looked at me and winked. It was great TV, a real piece of theatre."

When Trump ran for President in 2016, Lutnick told a friend that he considered him a "buffoon," and donated to his opponent, Hillary Clinton. He did, however, support Trump's 2020 campaign. In the aftermath of the

January 6th attack on the Capitol, Trump was kicked off Twitter, owing to, as the site put it, “further risk of incitement of violence.” At the time, Lutnick was asked if he had qualms about Trump’s presence on other online platforms. He responded, “The key to being neutral is you take both sides.”

Last summer, in the run-up to the November election, Trump called to ask for money, and Lutnick obliged by hosting a fund-raiser for him in the Hamptons. Soon afterward, Trump asked Lutnick to co-chair his transition team. Lutnick initially appeared to see himself as something of a moderating influence. At the time, the campaign was trying to downplay its association with Project 2025, a comprehensive policy initiative that aimed to expand executive power and had amassed a list of thousands of potential hires in service of that goal. Lutnick insisted that the transition team wouldn’t recruit from that “radioactive” database. (In the end, it did.)

During the fall, Lutnick travelled on Trump’s campaign plane, and Trump started talking to him about tariffs, trade deficits, and his general sense that the U.S. was constantly being “ripped off” by other countries. Lutnick “sort of became a student,” one person close to him told me. The teacher, though, seemed more important than the lesson. Lutnick has “always loved celebrities,” his friend went on. “I think in his mind he’s hanging out with Matt Damon or Brad Pitt.” Lutnick and Trump both idealize the American economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era of dramatic industrial growth supported by muscular state protectionism. Lutnick has characterized the period as a “golden age,” a time when “our economy was rockin’ . . . . We had no income tax, and all we had was tariffs. And we had so much money that we had the greatest businessmen of America get together to try to figure out how to spend it.”

Trump, who is superstitious, refused to discuss plans for his Administration until after he won. But in October, 2024, Lutnick got a stretch of uninterrupted time with Trump in New York while driving back to Manhattan from a campaign event in Queens. Lutnick, sensing an opportunity to convey what he calls one of his “big ideas,” told Trump that he wanted to balance the budget of the United States. Dwight Eisenhower was the last Republican President to pull this off, and it has remained a G.O.P. fantasy ever since. (Bill Clinton, a Democrat, balanced the budget

for four years in the nineties.) Trump has always complained about the national debt, though his own budgets have increased it by trillions of dollars. In the car, Lutnick posited that the country could wipe out the deficit, which stood at two trillion dollars, by cutting a trillion a year in expenses and generating a trillion in revenues, through tariffs and a few other mechanisms, such as his five-million-dollar Trump Card—an ad for which now sits atop the home page of the Commerce Department’s website. “And the reason you want to work for Donald Trump is he looks at me and he goes, ‘Sure!’ ” Lutnick said. Lutnick suggested recruiting Elon Musk to help with the project. (At the time, Musk was campaigning for Trump in Pennsylvania—dancing around on a rally stage, enticing people to register to vote via a million-dollar sweepstakes of dubious legality—but he had no official plans to join the Administration.)

The next week, Lutnick flew to Brownsville, Texas, where Musk was testing a SpaceX rocket booster. After the test, Musk went to celebrate with the engineers, and his staff parked Lutnick in a SpaceX canteen, which Lutnick has described as “the equivalent of a Margaritaville.” He ate a quesadilla and drank a supersized Diet Coke. Hours passed. It turned out that Musk was taking a nap, Lutnick said. When Musk woke up, he summoned Lutnick to the living quarters that he keeps on the property. The men sat across from each other on plastic chairs, in a bare-bones room, and Lutnick told Musk that they should balance the budget together. Musk agreed that it would be easy to save a trillion dollars—by cutting eighty per cent of the federal government. He’d done the same thing with Twitter’s workforce after buying the company, in 2022. “Elon’s gonna cut, Howard’s gonna raise,” Lutnick said. This became his mantra. He texted Trump to say that Musk was on board, and that the venture would be called the Department of Government Efficiency. Lutnick and Musk posed for a photograph outside: arms crossed, grabbing their biceps. Lutnick posted it on X and wrote, “Welcome to *DOGE*.”

After Trump won, Lutnick, who was still running Cantor, decamped to Palm Beach to staff the new Administration. Each day, beneath one of Mar-a-Lago’s many chandeliers, he would gather top Trump advisers around a conference table to present potential appointees to the President-elect. Lutnick put A.I.-enhanced photos of the candidates on four eighty-five-inch

TVs, alongside bulleted résumé highlights; at the click of a button, a clip of a candidate speaking would play for twenty seconds. “President Trump makes decisions by orchestra,” Lutnick told me. “And I would say I’m the first violin.” Trump swiftly filled his Cabinet positions, and announced them on Truth Social. Lutnick told me that it was “the most successful transition in the world.” One candidate interviewed by Lutnick for a high-ranking job at a federal agency didn’t find him especially discerning. “He immediately told me how many billions of dollars he had and didn’t listen to a thing I said,” the candidate, who is now a senior Administration official, told me. “But I loved him. He had this libidinal Jewish energy, like a character in a Philip Roth novel. I’m *MAGA* because we are culturally lost as a nation, and we need that energy.”



*“Now that you’re older, it’s time you started carrying around little bags of nuts in your purse.”*  
Cartoon by Sarah Kemp

Lutnick is in many ways the most Trumpian member of Trump’s Cabinet—a raw, unbridled expression of the President’s mercantilist instincts and branding acumen, of government as dealmaking in gold-plated rooms. Lutnick delights in the aspects of Trump that make others in Washington bristle—the Trump who hosts a banquet for the highest-paying investors in his personal cryptocurrency business, the Trump who accepts a two-hundred-million-dollar “palace in the sky” as a gift from Qatar, the Trump who talks about Greenland as something to buy. (Cantor Fitzgerald actually has a preexisting financial stake in the island.) “Howard is just kind of, Boom, I came up with it, let’s do it,” a Lutnick adviser told me.

Another person close to Lutnick described his operating mode as “It doesn’t matter if it’s a state dinner—if you can get somebody to put a hundred

billion into the U.S., let's do that. It's, like, I'm here, you're here, let's do the deal." On a recent trip to Saudi Arabia, Lutnick started selling Trump Cards, which had yet to formally launch, during an official visit to At-Turaif, a UNESCO World Heritage site. "Everyone's really respectful, and I have my phone out," Lutnick said. "So one of the senior leaders walks by and he goes, 'Why do you have your phone out?,' and I go, 'I'm selling cards.' It's, like, O.K.! Everyone I meet is going to want to buy this card."

Lutnick and Trump both seem to view the government as one giant accounts ledger. Originally, *DOGE* was on one side, slashing away to save, and Lutnick was on the other, beating the bushes for cash. The *DOGE* effort, or Musk's stewardship of it, has ended ignominiously—with little money saved and vital services decimated. ("Was it all bullshit?" Trump reportedly asked.) Even though Musk has crashed out of Washington, Lutnick maintains that he isn't concerned about still being able to fulfill his end of the bargain. "If I could put my glasses on you, you'd see what can be accomplished," Lutnick told me. "It's really fun."

Until the late nineteenth century, tariffs were often the primary source of revenue for the U.S. government. Trump has long been enamored with them. "'Tariffs' is the most beautiful word to me in the dictionary," he said recently. "Because tariffs are going to make us rich as hell." (In the first half of the year, tariffs have brought in around a hundred billion dollars, a tiny fraction of the federal budget.) But tariffs, in Trump's view, will do more than just bring in revenue—they will incentivize companies to reinvest in American manufacturing and will reset what he considers the inherent injustice of trade deficits. "There's only one time when you'll have balanced trade with everybody, and that's if money didn't exist, if you had a barter economy," Robert Lawrence, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School, told me. "It's Stone Age economics."

Tariffs are often passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices; Trump has admitted that there will be "a little pain" in the short term. "Maybe the children will have two dolls instead of thirty dolls, and maybe the dolls will cost a couple of bucks more," as he put it at a recent Cabinet meeting. This, he argues, is a worthwhile sacrifice. In his view, U.S. consumers have become the growth engine for the rest of the world. But if

the idea is to bring doll production, among other things, back to American shores, the Administration's approach is so haphazard that, as Lawrence told me, "it's short-term pain for long-term gain." The notion, he continued, "that America should go back to making our own clothes, producing and undertaking very labor-intensive activities—this is the kind of work that Americans don't want to do."

On April 2nd, Trump's Cabinet gathered in the Rose Garden for an event that was billed as Liberation Day. Trump, using the name of a holiday that usually implies liberation from an occupying force or regime, said that it would be the day "America's destiny was reclaimed." In the preceding weeks, various factions in the Administration had pitched different tariff-implementation schemes. Trump himself liked the idea of one universal tariff; Lutnick and Kevin Hassett, the head of the National Economic Council, were drawn to reciprocal tariffs that were tailored to specific countries. The U.S. Trade Representative's office pitched a middle ground: an across-the-board tariff on a subset of nations. Bessent, the Treasury Secretary, outlined a more targeted approach, which he called the Dirty Fifteen: tariffs would apply to fifteen per cent of nations that had the highest persistent trade imbalances with the U.S. The camps jockeyed back and forth while a few aides were still trying to talk Trump out of the whole thing. Lutnick readied poster boards on which the final tariff rates were printed. "He and Trump like presentations," someone close to the Administration told me. "They like visual aids."

In the Rose Garden, Trump summoned Lutnick to the podium. "I'd like to see the chart if you have it—could you bring it up, Howard?" Trump asked. The President read aloud some of the countries and their corresponding numbers, then handed the chart back to Lutnick. "I think you better take it with you," he said.

The rollout was shambolic. Mainstream economists said that the measures were likely to push the U.S. into a recession, and both the stock market and the dollar plummeted. "There was no clear articulation or underlying logic for the levels of tariff that they were imposing," the New York financier told me. The founder of the major New York investment bank said, "If you did something like this at Goldman Sachs or Lehman Brothers or any place on

Wall Street, everyone would've been fired." Julius Krein, the editor of *American Affairs*, a political journal that has defended economic nationalism, wrote, "Minor changes to transportation safety regulations undergo more thorough preparation, vetting, and coalition building than did the largest tariff increase in a century." It was done, he added, "without any meaningful consultation with industry—including U.S. manufacturers that the measures were supposed to benefit—or political outreach."

Later that evening, Trump called Lutnick in a rage, wanting to know how the tariff amounts had been determined. Lutnick himself wasn't certain. Trump told Lutnick to go on TV and defend them anyway. Lutnick would take the fall, even if he didn't really know what had happened.

In 1981, David Stockman, President Ronald Reagan's budget director, admitted that "none of us really understands what's going on with all these numbers." He was talking about the "internal mysteries" of his Administration's budget. The tariff rates announced on Liberation Day resulted in a series of similar, shrugging admissions. Some commentators pointed out that you could generate the same tariff amounts by asking ChatGPT to design a global tariff policy; speculation emerged that *DOGE* engineers had in fact done just that. The White House said that the Council of Economic Advisers had calculated the numbers, but then Hassett said that it had been Jamieson Greer, the U.S. Trade Representative. Others blamed Peter Navarro, Trump's longtime adviser and trade hawk. One person involved in the deliberations, who told me that he still wasn't sure where the final figures originated, described the calculations as akin to "ninth-grade math."

On Fox News, the day after the Rose Garden event, Sean Hannity asked Lutnick what economic fallout American consumers should expect from the new tariffs. Lutnick responded by complaining about the European Union. "They won't take lobsters from America," he said. "They hate our beef because our beef is beautiful and theirs is weak." The same day, he told Jesse Watters, another Fox News host, that the tariffs meant that "robotics are going to replace the cheap labor that we've seen all across the world." Three days later, asked on CBS News to clarify, he said, "The army of

millions and millions of human beings screwing in little screws to make iPhones? That kind of thing is going to come to America.”

Lutnick’s muddled riffing, and what one person close to his team called his “naïve optimism that he can sell anything,” was seen in some quarters as a liability. “Generally speaking, he needs to be kept off TV,” a veteran Trump adviser said. Another *MAGA* operative described Lutnick as a “carnival barker.” Steve Bannon called his appearances “an unmitigated disaster.” When I recently asked top-ranking White House officials about Lutnick, they presented a united front. Vice-President J. D. Vance told me, “Howard is a natural salesman.” Hassett said, “Howard has an enormously high level of energy.” Stephen Miller, Trump’s deputy chief of staff, added, “No one fights harder than Howard.” Nevertheless, one person close to the Administration told me that many in the White House view Lutnick as “disreputable, so when you need to have a bad guy, people blame him. He’s not seen as a real actor. He’s an errand boy.”

In late April, Lutnick attended the Hill and Valley Forum, an annual event in D.C. for “technology builders” and policymakers. After gathering on Capitol Hill for a day of panels, such as “The Arsenal Reimagined: Designing the DoD for the 21st Century Battlefield,” select attendees retired to a banquet at Union Station. Venture capitalists mingled over themed cocktails with defense contractors, business executives, and members of Congress; Senator John Fetterman, of Pennsylvania, lumbered around in a sweatshirt. Lutnick gave the keynote address. He began by citing some simple examples of trade deficits, seemingly to help guide the audience, as though it were full of schoolchildren, through the economic reset that the Administration was pursuing. “I have a trade deficit with my barber,” he said, implying that this was unfair, and that the barber should compensate Lutnick to even things out. “I have a trade deficit with my grocery store. Right? I just buy stuff from them. That’s ridiculous.”

Jacob Helberg, Trump’s nominee for Under-Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, who co-founded the forum, told me that he had invited Lutnick because “he understands how to turn big ideas into reality and align industry with national purpose.” But during Lutnick’s speech the crowd was visibly confused and uncomfortable.

“His analogies and anecdotes seemed to misread the room of sophisticated tech and finance attendees,” someone with ties to the Administration, who had come to the event with several prominent venture-capital contacts, told me. “It’s obvious why Lutnick’s affect appeals to Trump. But it’s Bessent’s presence in the Administration that reassures us there is someone smart looking out for us.”

Bessent, the Treasury Secretary, flew to Mar-a-Lago after Liberation Day to encourage the President to pause the tariffs. Both he and Lutnick have loyally defended the President’s pet cause, but Bessent appeared to have a more realistic sense of the limits of devotion. Or, as a person close to the Administration put it, “Bessent was someone who was trying to temper Trump’s protectionist impulses and explain them in an intelligent way. Lutnick was an unsophisticated true believer encouraging what people viewed as the President’s worst policy instincts.”



*“I had it route us around anything Robert Moses built so you won’t tell me about it.”*  
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

Throughout the spring, Trump issued so many tariff-related threats and reversals that critics coined an epithet to describe his behavior: *TACO*, short for Trump Always Chickens Out. Even the rationale for the tariffs constantly shifted: they were intended to punish America’s trading partners for “cheating,” or they were meant to slow the flow of fentanyl into the country, or they were supposed to raise billions, “even trillions,” in revenue. “For Trump, tariffs are his hammer, and everything’s a nail,” Maurice Obstfeld, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told me. Lutnick appeared frequently around Washington,

assuming the role of salesman for a product that people didn't want. In May, on a rainy day at a new waterfront development in D.C., I joined him in a corporate ballroom for an event, co-hosted by Axios, on A.I., trade, and the "new rules of power." When Lutnick took the stage, his interlocutor asked what exactly was going on with the tariffs. Trump had recently committed to roll back some of the levies on China, prompting what the *Financial Times* described as "an outpouring of joy that someone is now threatening to chop off only your toe, rather than your whole leg." But what about the other countries? Lutnick told the crowd, "Every product in the world's got ten per cent on it right now, with no exceptions. . . . I want you to understand that in the month of May the United States of America is going to take in thirty-five billion dollars of tariff revenue." As for negative impacts, he asked, "Have any of you felt any of it? Seriously?" The audience groaned as many attendees shouted back, "Yes!"

After Trump paused the tariffs, he promised to produce ninety trade deals in ninety days. Lutnick would take the lead. By early June, with the deadline a month away, the Administration had made no deals, and had agreed to a framework for just one. At a congressional hearing, Lutnick was pressed by Representative Madeleine Dean, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, about the remaining eighty-nine. "I'm doing it," Lutnick snapped. He explained that countries could avoid the tariffs by simply encouraging companies to relocate factories to the U.S. "The concept is very, very clear," he said. (Dean held up a banana. "We cannot build bananas in America," she said.) The single agreement that the Administration had reached was with the United Kingdom; it would expand U.S. market access in the U.K. for items like animal feed, shellfish, and textiles while reducing tariffs on U.K.-produced steel and aluminum. On June 16th, Trump and Keir Starmer, the U.K.'s Prime Minister, signed the deal at a G-7 summit in Alberta, Canada. When Trump held up the finalized agreement, the papers blew out of his hands. Starmer crouched down to pick them up.

A few days earlier, the British Embassy in Washington had held a summer garden party in honor of King Charles III's birthday. Peter Mandelson, the British Ambassador, gave a joint toast to Trump, Charles, and America's upcoming semiquincentennial. In his remarks, he gently implied that the trade deal was a way of placating the President. "Our balanced trading

relationship, now *enhanced*”—he paused to let the crowd laugh—“by a trade deal, a beautiful trade deal. We are literally transatlantically the golden corridor for trade and investment.” Historic Land Rover models were parked on the grass outside. (Per the deal, a limited number of U.K. cars could be imported with a ten-per-cent tariff, instead of twenty-five.)

During the negotiations with the U.K., Lutnick met with Varun Chandra, an adviser to Starmer who doesn’t have a formal background in trade but has been described as an “arch-networker” and comes from the private sector. “They knew they couldn’t have Howard with some stiff trade negotiator whose job is to draw this out for, like, two years,” someone on Lutnick’s team told me. “They did, like, a matchmaking.” Chandra and Lutnick ended up having a three-course meal together at Lutnick’s house, late at night, after Chandra’s flight landed in Washington. They were to begin the first of many meetings the next day. “Howard is unorthodox as a trade negotiator,” Chandra said. “I’d describe him much more as a classic dealmaker—straight, direct, tough, creative—which is reflective of our interactions with the Administration.” Another negotiator who has dealt with Lutnick told me, “You basically listen to him go on and on about how Trump sees the world and how we’re doing everything wrong. He comes in guns blazing, he talks and talks and talks, he never stops talking.”

Trade deals typically take years to complete—the average negotiation lasts nine hundred and seventeen days. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which was signed in 1947, was for many decades the main multilateral pact governing international trade. Its main purpose was to reduce tariffs and promote free trade. Member nations were constantly renegotiating it; the final such round, which started in the mid-eighties, lasted more than seven years and resulted in almost three hundred thousand pages of legal text. It covered everything from toothbrushes to AIDS treatments, and ultimately led to the creation of the World Trade Organization, in 1995, to administer the new rules. Trump has long complained about the W.T.O., and his Liberation Day deals represent an attempt to sideline it.

The U.K. deal, like others that are still in progress, is more of a basis for continued negotiation than an actual commitment. The terms are vague and

unenforceable, reversible, and nonbinding. “At some level, you have to ask, Does Trump really want deals?” Obstfeld, of the Peterson Institute, said.

“Or does he just want to create constant froth that keeps everyone off balance but ultimately doesn’t do the job of reshaping trade in a way that might be more favorable to the U.S.?”

The dealmaking has been complicated by the “constant shifting of goalposts,” a negotiator from another major trading partner told me. For one thing, he said, “you don’t know if the tariffs are legal.” A number of states and businesses have sued the President, arguing that his invocation of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, the authority under which he has imposed the tariffs, is unconstitutional. And when Trump issues a tariff-related edict via social media, it can be difficult to parse the meaning. In May, he posted on Truth Social that “any and all Movies coming into our Country that are produced in Foreign Lands” will be subject to a hundred-per-cent tariff. “When you’re talking about tariffing movies, do you mean the literal cannisters for film, or streaming?” the negotiator said. The radically accelerated timeline for negotiating made the deals feel “more like the deals you’d do in private business, more like a gentlemen’s agreement. But how is it a gentlemen’s agreement if then you find out heading into the weekend that suddenly the steel tariffs are changed based off of a Truth Social post?”

In these talks, Lutnick has a distinctive style of bullying. The negotiator told me, “You feel with him that there is the idea of looking at potential tools beyond the tariffs to punish us. He would make these veiled threats about how we might not be able to access U.S. tech, how they might be able to harm us.” The negotiator and his team saw their job as making Lutnick think that they had been wrestled into submission. “We have to convince Lutnick that he can tell Trump that he’s hustled us, that they’ve extracted concessions from us,” he said.

Lutnick likes to make it clear that he is the one person who will be able to sell Trump on a deal. For the most part, he has little concern for maintaining relationships with allies. “There’s actually something honest about it,” the other negotiator told me. “Like, don’t try to make this anything but what it is, which is a shakedown.” One person close to Lutnick compared his style

to that of Steve Witkoff, Trump's golf buddy turned special envoy, who has been dispatched to broker an end to the hostilities in Ukraine and Gaza.

"Someone like Lutnick or Witkoff, Trump sees old friend, dealmaker," the person close to Lutnick told me. He views them as people who are willing to flout diplomatic norms. "It's like when the President said, Why do we have *NATO*? And the President sort of explains that he doesn't understand what *NATO provides us*." A person connected to the Administration told me, "There's all these things we do that have value that we don't charge for, so why don't we? We're doing them for free. If we let in immigrants, why not make them pay? People would pay. If we helped Ukraine, why not make them pay us back?"

In mid-May, Trump hosted a dinner for the board of the Kennedy Center in the State Dining Room at the White House. (Earlier in the year, he had fired the institution's traditionally nonpartisan board and installed himself as the chairman.) Administration officials sat alongside the new board members at round tables adorned with pink flowers and tall white candles. Trump addressed guests from beneath a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The painting hangs over a stone fireplace; toward the end of the Second World War, Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered a blessing from John Adams to be carved into the mantel: "May none but Honest and Wise Men ever rule under This Roof." Lutnick sat at a table with his wife and Ed Martin, the Department of Justice's new pardon attorney. The President called out compliments to various attendees, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio ("I know how tough he is because I used to have to be up there with him—he was not nice"); Attorney General Pam Bondi (she was there with "the best-looking guy in the room"); and Susie Wiles, the White House chief of staff ("She's the most powerful woman in the world"). He praised Lutnick for rebuilding Cantor Fitzgerald. "A very top firm," Trump said. "He was always there at six in the morning, five-thirty in the morning—you know, a lot of the stock guys have to do that. Someday you'll explain to me why. Probably insider trading, Pam, I don't know." Trump told the White House staff to begin serving the meal—green salad and lamb Wellington—while he continued.

Trump had just returned from the first major foreign trip of his second term, a swing through three monarchies in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the U.A.E. Lutnick had joined him. Beforehand, some of the families of

Cantor employees who died on 9/11 had asked Lutnick to help extradite a Saudi national tied to the attacks via newly unsealed evidence. He didn't. Terry Strada, the national chair of 9/11 Families United, told me, "Howard's cried with us year after year. You think we're going to just say, 'That's nice of you'? You can't sweep what happened under the rug just because it's been twenty years and we need to make deals with them."

Lutnick and Trump spoke of the trip like it was a summer fund-raiser on Martha's Vineyard that went better than expected. They had been accompanied by dozens of American executives. "We brought back about \$5.1 trillion," Trump said, boasting about commitments that the three countries had made to invest in defense, technology, and A.I. "We talk in the trillions now. Think of it. . . . We're talking big numbers." (In fact, Trump brought back less than a tenth of what he claimed. Senate Democrats sent Lutnick a letter expressing concern that the deals "greenlight the sale of sensitive U.S. technology in exchange for illusory promises" and "present an immediate threat to U.S. national security.") Lutnick slapped the table and howled with laughter when Trump joked about getting rid of "lesbian-only Shakespeare" at the Kennedy Center. He laughs the loudest at Trump's jokes, and it isn't the studied tittering of the President's other courtiers; he seems to be truly enjoying himself.

Earlier in the day, at an Oval Office reception for the families of fallen police officers, Trump had mused, "My whole life is deals. One big deal." He had spoken to Vladimir Putin on the phone for more than two hours that morning about Russia's war in Ukraine. "We've spent hundreds of billions of dollars," Trump said, referring to the aid that the U.S. had allocated to Ukraine. In Trump's accounting, the Middle East tour had helped balance that out. "We made much more than that just in four days," he said.

Helping the President secure foreign investment wasn't a big part of the Commerce Department's original remit. When Theodore Roosevelt signed legislation creating the department, in 1903, it was tasked with applying immigration law, taking the census, and protecting Alaskan fur seals. The National Aquarium was originally situated in the basement of the department's headquarters; fish from all over the country, as well as five

alligators, lived in tanks surrounded by terrazzo. At the time, it was one of the largest office buildings ever constructed.



*"Fresh-squeezed, or never squeezed?"*  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Nowadays, at Commerce headquarters, where the hallways are covered with vintage posters advertising the U.S. census, the word “innovation” frequently comes up in conversation. “The Secretary sort of sets the tone,” a senior adviser to Lutnick told me. “We’re not thugs, but we are going to question first principles.” Lutnick has created a new “investment accelerator,” for instance. As another adviser put it, “If you have a billion dollars, we’re going to give you concierge treatment.” Lutnick and Trump like to bat around ideas that Commerce could implement. Last month, when Nippon Steel acquired U.S. Steel, for fifteen billion dollars, Lutnick helped negotiate a “golden share” for Trump. The arrangement effectively grants the President a nonfinancial stake in U.S. Steel, and significant influence in its affairs.

Lutnick is unbothered by the appearance of a porous barrier between money and politics, and some lawmakers have alleged that he stands to gain financially from his position. After he was confirmed by the Senate, his eldest sons, Brandon and Kyle, who are in their late twenties, were named chairman and executive vice-chairman of Cantor, respectively. (Kyle is a d.j.) Last year, Cantor acquired a five-per-cent stake in Tether, a crypto firm that has been linked to money laundering, terrorism, and international fraud. (Tether has not been charged with any crimes.) Cantor also manages a substantial amount of Tether’s assets, for which it collects millions of dollars in fees. Since Trump’s election, Tether’s market capitalization has risen to more than a hundred and sixty billion dollars. According to the *Wall*

*Street Journal*, Giancarlo Devasini, Tether's chairman, told associates that Lutnick would "use his political clout to try to defuse threats facing Tether." (A spokesperson for Lutnick denied this.) Lutnick reportedly brought a lobbyist who works for both Tether and Cantor to transition meetings, and now participates in one of Trump's crypto advisory groups, which determine how companies like Tether will be regulated. "It is biologically painful for him to miss a business opportunity," his old friend told me. Another Commerce adviser said, of Lutnick and Trump, "They're just two deal guys going into rooms with people considering where to put their money. They're both very high-I.Q. individuals."

Earlier this summer, Lutnick held a town hall at the Patent and Trademark Office, one of Commerce's thirteen bureaus, in northern Virginia. Soon after he arrived, he was taken to the National Inventors Hall of Fame museum. He pressed a button that played the giggle of the Pillsbury Doughboy, then smelled a tub of Play-Doh. (Both the sound and the scent are trademarked.) In an interactive exhibit that allows visitors to identify counterfeit products, Lutnick paused in front of two Spalding basketballs. He pointed at me and asked, "You guessing the fakes?"

Downstairs, hundreds of Commerce employees ate doughnuts as an in-house choir sang "America the Beautiful." Then they filtered into an auditorium for Lutnick's town hall, which became an exercise, in part, in mollifying anxieties about *DOGE* cuts. During a Q. & A., a branch chief asked whether he should worry about the department's finances. Lutnick had signed off on eliminating hundreds of employees at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, including weather forecasters, and seventy or so at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which regulates measurement standards related to everything from electricity to atomic clocks. He had proposed slashing Commerce's over-all budget by nearly seventeen per cent. "We are going to make more money for America," he announced.

Later, Lutnick told me that he didn't understand why Democrats opposed his cuts, which also included National Weather Service employees who are essential during emergencies. "If I asked them, 'Why don't you like it?,' their answer would be 'Because of these twelve people in my district!'" he

told me. “They say, like, ‘Why isn’t this weather station manned 24/7?’ And I say, ‘Forecasting the weather is based on data. You don’t actually have to be in your district to forecast the weather.’ It’s not like the people are looking out the window and say, ‘Oh, it’s about to rain!’ ”

Lutnick had been pitching various ideas about how to make the department, and other government agencies, more efficient—having the U.S. Postal Service conduct the census, for instance. “You have a baby? Just tell your postman—they’ll take out their iPad,” he told me. The Postal Service employs between ten and twenty-two mules to deliver mail to a handful of people who live in the Grand Canyon. He wants to get rid of the mules. (“You can’t make this up!” he told me. “How stupid is this?”)

When I stopped by the Commerce Department’s headquarters in late June, little was happening with the trade deals. Lutnick was carrying around a physical prototype of the Trump Card, and combing through the sign-up list to see who was interested. Two days later, Trump abruptly ended negotiations with Canada, to protest a digital-services tax that the country wanted to apply to several U.S. tech companies. He called Japan “very spoiled.” Could Trumpian aggressiveness alone force the outcomes he sought? “We can do whatever we want,” Trump said.

With the ninety-deal deadline less than a week away, the U.S. seemed to have reached just three. Trump announced the third, with Vietnam, on Truth Social. Afterward, the Vietnamese negotiators claimed that he had doubled the tariff rate without telling them, and the country so far has refused to sign the deal. Another self-imposed deadline loomed. Trump had ordered Republican lawmakers to pass his “Big Beautiful Bill”—a gargantuan wealth transfer that would cut taxes for the rich, defund welfare programs for the poor, and, according to the Congressional Budget Office, add \$3.4 trillion to the federal deficit—by Independence Day.

Over the July 4th weekend, Trump and Lutnick holed up at the President’s Bedminster golf club, where they prepared letters calling for new deadlines and new tariffs for a handful of countries. Trump has always known how to recast bad news. “Throw out an unreasonable proposition, see if someone’s willing to bend, then pivot, diminish expectations, and tell people you achieved victory,” the New York financier said.

Since Liberation Day, the over-all trade deficit had actually worsened. Inflation was rising. Still, the financier told me, the economic impact may be less profound than the damage done to America's trustworthiness on the world stage. "In Trump's style of negotiation, there is no expectation of an ongoing relationship," he said. "He's using aggressive real-estate techniques in an international context. We have to work on other issues with all of these countries. The real risk is what happens if you treat your counterparties as a one-and-done."

The letters, which were posted to Truth Social, were topped with a gold coat of arms and littered with random capitalizations and confusing turns of phrase. To inform Indonesia that it would pay a thirty-two-per-cent tariff, starting August 1st, Trump wrote, "Nevertheless, we have decided to move forward with you, but only with more balanced, and fair, TRADE. Therefore, we invite you to participate in the extraordinary Economy of the United States, the Number One Market in the World, by far." Sometimes economic logic seemed to fade from the equation. Trump fired off a letter that imposed a fifty-per-cent tariff on Brazil, citing a "Witch Hunt" against former President Jair Bolsonaro, an ally of Trump, who is being prosecuted for attempting a coup. The U.S. actually has a trade surplus with Brazil.

After finishing the letters, Trump and Lutnick took a helicopter to the Morristown airport, where Air Force One was waiting. Trump wore an oversized white baseball cap emblazoned with the letters "USA," and Lutnick had on a black suit jacket and a white shirt. "The tariffs are going to be the tariffs," Trump told reporters. In Texas, flash floods had inundated the Hill Country, and rescuers were searching for survivors, including young girls at a summer camp. Seventy-nine people were already confirmed dead; key roles at local offices of the National Weather Service were vacant, and state officials were questioning whether staffing shortages had contributed to a lack of coördination as the disaster unfolded. A reporter asked Lutnick whether his cuts had played a role. He shook his head and interrupted Trump, who already had his mouth open. "They did not!" Lutnick said. The plane engines were running, and both men had to yell to be heard. Would more trade deals be signed soon? "The gentleman to my right's going to decide," Lutnick said, beaming at Trump. "And I'm going to be with him when he makes that decision." Trump turned to climb the

stairs to Air Force One, and Lutnick stood on the tarmac, wondering where to go next. ♦



*[Antonia Hitchens](#)* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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# Takes

- **[Stephen Colbert on Kenneth Tynan's Profile of Johnny Carson](#)**

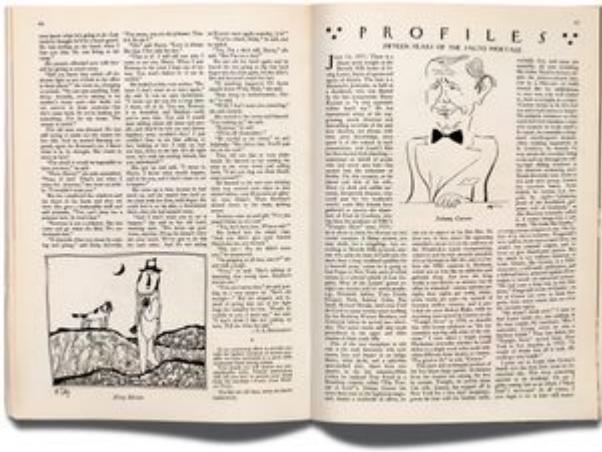
By Stephen Colbert | From Hollywood to the Hasty Pudding, we waft like smoke from an unfiltered Pall Mall through Carson's worlds, most of which are gone.

[Takes](#)

# Stephen Colbert on Kenneth Tynan's Profile of Johnny Carson

By [Stephen Colbert](#)

July 18, 2025



February 20, 1978

[New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.](#)

When Mr. Remnick asked me to write a seven-hundred-and-twenty-five-word Take on Kenneth Tynan's [1978 Profile of Johnny Carson](#), I said, "My honor, *cher* David." (*New Yorker* editors love when you use foreign words. They're weak for anything italicized. *Anything.*) "I write a late-night show. I eat seven hundred words for breakfast." In actuality, I *host* a late-night show and have a low-glycemic smoothie for breakfast. My doctor says the words were clogging my carotid, and, after reading "Fifteen Years of the Salto Mortale," I need a statin.

That article is twenty thousand words. Let me repeat that: *words*. Can anyone read that much Tynan without adopting his native tongue wag? Can

I possibly resist dropping in the occasional *causerie*, *sodality*, or *antiphonal*?

While I host a show in the same time slot and tradition as Carson, I am, *per certo*, not Johnny. Per Tynan, neither was “Johnny,” who is described as an “eighth” of Carson—the rest being hidden behind Midwestern and professional rectitudes and a protective sodality (*there we go*) of producers, lawyers, and execs who pronounced Johnny a reformed drinker, loving son, and husband faithful to the point of celibacy. (This last, from Swift Lazar, is by Tynan unchallenged with the logical counterpoint of pointing out Johnny’s wife count.)

True or false, what care we? Johnny or “Johnny,” he was there every night like the tide, and we loved him. I have the Carson books; I have watched the Carson bios; I have a dear friendship with his old writer and peer [Dick Cavett](#). Nothing in Tynan’s article surprised me, but I enjoyed it as a time capsule—or, given the submerged iceberg at its center, a cryogenic chamber.

When the “Tonight Show” started, it was a sort of public after-party hosted by Steve Allen at Broadway’s Hudson Theatre, with Steve’s famous friends and stars of the stage. Tynan seats us at the best table at Carson’s party, where, between sips of champagne, the author points a discreet, thin finger at a parade of the sparkling departed: Jack Lemmon, Orson Welles, Tony Curtis, Gregory Peck, Billy Wilder, James Stewart. (Why not Jimmy, Kenneth? Wilder got his Billy. Have a bit of the Bollinger and get back to me, won’t you?)

Forty-seven years on, some dropped names are less goggled at than Googled: Charles Aznavour, Roger Vadim, Michelangelo Antonioni, Lea Padovani. And Tynan liberally salts his voluminous causerie (!) with references unassociated with current (and what he might deem intellectually jejune) late night: Keats, Rabelais, Ezra Pound, and Hieronymus Bosch, though one can imagine H.B. appreciating the earthly delights of Floyd Turbo, Art Fern, and Carnac the Magnificent.

From Hollywood to the Hasty Pudding, we waft like smoke from an unfiltered Pall Mall through Carson’s worlds, most of which are gone.

Where now is the audience for ten verbal tons on the King of Late Night? Where is that Kingdom? Narrowed dramatically since '78, along with the lapels.

One disappointment: Tynan presents no process. How did Johnny arrive at “between sixteen and twenty-two surefire jokes” per monologue? What happened behind that rainbow curtain? I know the article is about the man, not the job, but we’re told that the show *is* Johnny; Johnny *is* the show. To be on the wire is life. The rest, as the dead man says, is waiting. We spend a lot of time in the waiting room.

I’m suddenly not sure what is meant by “[Take](#).” Is this supposed to be a review?

Tynan is a great writer, and it’s a great read, but was he right for this subject? Johnny was very intelligent and very well read, with a keen interest in politics, but largely kept those sides to himself. Carson was smart in a quiet way, while Tynan was an intellectual-firework salesman. Tynan has a style so antithetical to Carson’s that, when we get a joke from Johnny’s monologue or a conversational one-liner, it sticks out like a Popsicle in a Pavlova. Tynan bakes a tasty meringue, but I prefer the Good Humor Man.

Does anyone write (or live) like Tynan anymore? The tone of his prose is not cynical so much as omniscient. A teacher supposedly once remarked that Tynan was “the only boy I could never teach anything.” Here is something Kenneth could have learned from Johnny: fewer words. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



## Fifteen Years of the Salto Mortale

The world of Johnny Carson.

Stephen Colbert, the host of "The Late Show," has won ten Primetime Emmy Awards. He is the author of "I Am America (And So Can You!)."

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## Shouts & Murmurs

- **Super-Fun Romantic Sexy Beach Read**

By John Kenney | A little Proust, a little cancer, but in a light and sexy way. Isn't melancholy the new quirky?

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[\*\*Shouts & Murmurs\*\*](#)

# Super-Fun Romantic Sexy Beach Read

By [John Kenney](#)

July 21, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

To my editor:

Thank you for your notes on the new manuscript. I certainly take your point that death, as a theme, isn't a traditional beach read. And I like your idea for "more lightness and fun, and less glioblastoma." I'm curious, though, if you're open to other types of deadly cancers. Also, will definitely "sex it up," but still think that could include crying or feelings of profound sadness and despair while on the beach on a summer vacation.

I wanted to flag your note about my note about maybe mimicking "Swann's Way" in Chapter 2. Is that a hard pass on your part when you said, "Let's absolutely not do that"? My feeling is that everyone loves Proust because, in many ways, he's kind of the ideal beach read. One thinks of Proust's fictional seaside village of Balbec, in Normandy. Or maybe one doesn't. My

point is, people love the beach, people love Proust, and people love sadness in the summertime. Is melancholy the new quirky? I'm sure I've read that online.

To that end, some thoughts on the direction the novel could take.

We're in Nantucket. Or maybe Capri. Yes. No. Or in Cap d'Antibes. A young woman named Pippa is travelling alone. Why is that her name? No one knows. Does her name annoy people a little? It might. But she's also really pretty. Like, annoyingly pretty. How old is she? Maybe twenty-two-ish. She just graduated from Princeton but she is heartbroken because she caught her boyfriend, Dodge, cheating with her best friend as well as her second-best friend and some woman who isn't a friend at all but more of an acquaintance. How much sex can Dodge have? Apparently a lot. What about poor Pippa? Well, don't worry, because even though she's devastated, the bright side is Dodge is going to die in a plane crash really soon.

Does Pippa get a job working on a yacht? She absolutely does. If you like that idea. And everyone is super hot. Not like "Omigod it's like fucking ninety-five degrees and humid!" I mean they are physically attractive. I would give descriptions. Which you know is my sweet spot. Like, "She had boobs the size of boobs, only bigger." And male things as well.

Just to be clear, I'm not married to the yacht thing. In fact, maybe she's an au pair. Is there an older, hot French man? Yes, there is. Is he dying from pancreatic cancer? Probably not, though I'm open to it. Your call. What's the plot? I guess I would answer that by saying, What isn't the plot?

Let's forget the au-pair idea. No one even knows what those words mean.

Just doubling back on the whole Proust thing and how, to my mind, anyway, it screams light, funny, and sexy. Apparently, he spent the last year of his life in bed, sleeping all day and writing at night, really afraid of germs. And then he went out one night and got pneumonia and died. I know you don't love the cancer references. Thoughts about death from pneumonia? Seems beach-read-y to me.

What we do know is that Pippa wants to find true love. Dodge wasn't giving her that. But now he's dead. And she has a lot of student debt, even though she told everyone that her father was rich. Which he is. He's just cheap. Is she willing to take a job as a lifeguard at a private club? Why not? Who's that pool boy? He's certainly fit. But probably incredibly stupid. And he is. Like, he once asked if jujitsu was Israeli, "because of the Jewish thing."

But here's a twist. His brother, who is on the landscaping crew and part time on the rowing team, is even hotter. Is he dumb, too? Probably, right?

Except here's another twist. He's not an idiot at all. In fact, he just graduated from M.I.T. and is a genius cancer researcher. Who happens to have cancer. But he doesn't know that. It's O.K., though. He'll be dead soon. But his doctor, who is young and also a former landscaper who still does part-time landscaping with his shirt off, is grieving the death of his wife. He's hardened by loss and can't love again. Or can he? Can Pippa remind him of the wonders of casual sex? Nope, she can't. Once he realizes he's gay, he and Pippa laugh and part ways.

But something isn't right on the yacht or club or possibly polo grounds. Especially with the arrival of Adonis (not his real name) as the new head of lifeguards or maybe the new assistant to the food-and-beverage manager. He looks familiar. Wait a minute. Pippa knows him. They went to grade school together and back then he was called Melvin and he was chubby and awkward, but Melvin has changed his first name and is now Adonis Leventhal. People call him Don. (Isn't it funny how Greek mythology and Proust are kind of the pillars of the beach read?) To that end, Don will be killed in the same way Adonis was, by a wild boar.

Maybe Pippa has a nervous breakdown and checks herself into a high-end spa/sanatorium in western Massachusetts. Maybe she can't stop crying. Or get out of bed. It happens.

Excited to hear back from you. Kind of loving where this is going and feel like I've cracked it and am back on my game but also open to doing something else entirely that you like more. When do you think I could get the advance? ♦

*John Kenney* has contributed to the magazine since 1999. His books include the novel “[I See You’ve Called In Dead.](#)”

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# Fiction

- **[“The Chartreuse”](#)**

By Mona Awad | She could feel the mirror shining in her dark bedroom closet. Waiting for the offering.

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[Fiction](#)

# The Chartreuse

By [Mona Awad](#)

July 20, 2025

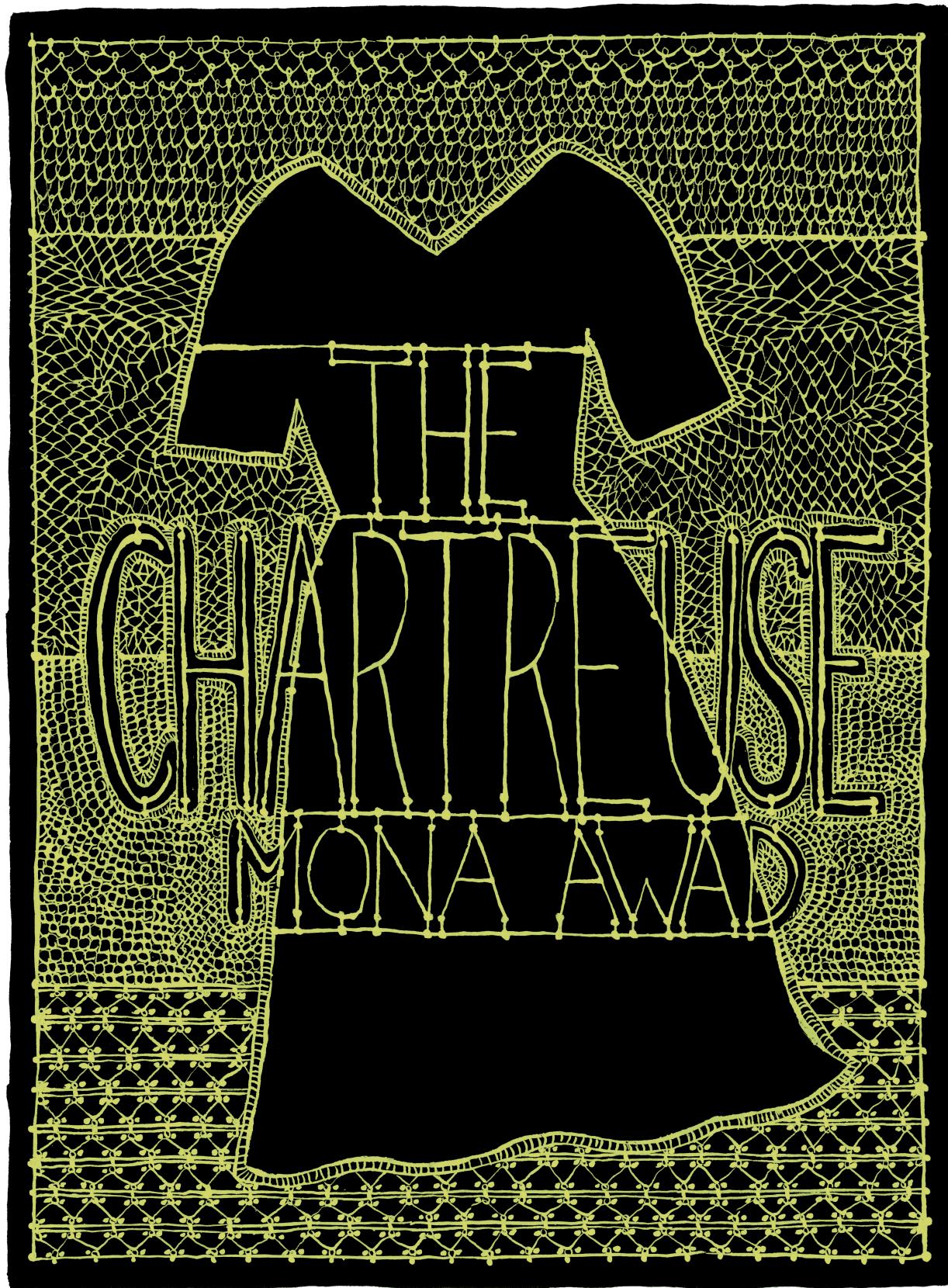


Illustration by Balint Zsako

The dress had come and gone and she'd missed it, apparently. "Sorry we missed you," the FedEx tag on her door said. That was all they'd left her with, a tag.

*How could you have missed me?* she thought, her heart thudding. *I only just went down to throw the garbage away.* She stared at her white front door, which was covered in rust spots. So many that it looked diseased.

"I wasn't even gone a minute," she told the door.

•

The delivery had been inexplicably delayed for a few days now. She'd seen this online, using the Track Your Package feature, which she had been checking hourly, then half-hourly, on both her laptop and her phone. According to the graphic, which resembled a giant red thermometer, the dress had been packed in Marly-la-Ville, France, then it had been shipped off to somewhere called Le Mesnil-Amelot, then Fort Worth, then made pit stops in random-seeming places in California (Oakland, Ontario—*why?*) before it at last reached San Diego, where it had languished all night in a warehouse facility downtown. She'd noted its movement toward her like inevitable weather, a coming storm, or the journey of the moon across the sky. It had still been in San Diego when she'd last checked. But now it seemed it was here in La Jolla. And the delivery person had attempted to deliver. And she'd missed it.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

She sat on the white couch in her empty living room, gripping the door tag in both hands. Some supermarket roses stood in a cracked vase by the window. "I was here, I was right here." She said this to no one but the room itself, its white walls and fogged windows. Beyond those windows, the beach. Pots of rotting flowers sat just outside, dead leaves trembling in the ocean breeze. There was an old spiderweb still clinging to the railing by her front door. The web had been there for months, maybe years. Every time she passed it, she thought, *I should really throw some water on it, I should really take a broom to it, I should really clear it away.* She stared at the door, where the

FedEx man had no doubt stood only moments ago, holding her package, which contained the dress, *the chartreuse*, in his hands.

“I didn’t even hear him knock,” she told the room, incredulous.

She looked down at the door tag, at the tracking number, about a thousand numbers long, until she saw swirling stars instead of numbers, then black.

When she opened her eyes, the sun was in a different place in the sky. Lower, though still shining, still bright.

*A walk, I should take a walk.*

•

Outside, the ocean roared like a lion, light playing on the waves. There was a shimmering on the water, on the distant edge of the horizon. She walked along the shore, watching the waves crash and the palms sway. Pelicans sailed through the air in V formations. It wasn’t dark, not yet. Night was still far away. Ridiculous to be upset about the chartreuse. Just a delayed delivery. Just a dress. Not even the right color for her, probably. Probably in the end she’d have to send it back. “The truth,” she told the sidewalk, “is that I didn’t even want it.” It had been an impulse buy from Farfetch, one of those sites along with Mytheresa and The RealReal which she’d been haunting with increasing frequency. She’d been in search of a new Mage, a particular type of dress, the namesake design from the label. She’d been hunting those dresses for a few months now. High-end, French, chickly esoteric. Prized for their saturated jewel-toned colors, their impossible falls and cuts. She’d already acquired several lengths and shades: rust, forest, jade, and four more blues beyond sapphire—azure, pigeon, powder, royal.

*It’s the material, she thought as she scoured the web for more. That’s what’s winning me over. Or is it the cut?*

She had bought the first one, the sapphire, at an actual shop in New York, just before she left her job, set her life on fire. When she tried it on in the dressing room, she’d felt a shiver as she looked at herself in the mirror. Yes, she’d murmured to her reflection. *This.*

“Can I help you?” a clerk had called softly through the curtain. There were no doors in Mage. There were hardly any lights. When the clerk spoke, he barely spoke at all.

“No,” she’d whispered back. “No, thank you.”

*I don’t need help,* she’d thought. *The Holy Ghost is here, it is moving through my flesh.*

She’d smiled at herself in the three-way glass. The dim lights above her flickered.

It wasn’t silk but it looked like silk, that was its trick.

•

Later, when she’d found the chartreuse on Farfetch, she’d clicked. An unlikely color. A perfect cut. The model, a sullen blonde with messy pageboy hair, looked vaguely sick in it. Miserable. Almost tantalizingly so. “Chartreuse,” it said beneath the photo, and nothing else. Chartreuse, that was a drink, wasn’t it? Made by French monks. Carthusian. In the seventeenth century, something like that. Distilled from herbs and flowers. She had a flash, maybe even a memory, of her mother enjoying a glass. A difficult color to pull off, of course, that glowing yellow-green. It didn’t suit everyone. It didn’t suit the pale blond model.

*Probably it won’t suit me, either,* she thought, staring, though she herself wasn’t blond or pale.

It was well past midnight at this point. Her overheated laptop was whirring and burning on her stomach. She watched a video of the model turning round and round in the chartreuse, her arms spread as if she were being crucified. Outside, there was a red moon over the dark water. She could feel the mirror in her bedroom closet shining, hungry. Her dresses were hanging in there in the dark, on black velvet hangers, so many colors and cuts, but they were all dead to her behind the door. The mirror had seen them already. One finger, a few clicks, that was all she had to do. *Add to cart. Checkout.* Then Google would know her, the machine would let her. Everything was in the cloud, after all, needed only to be drawn up by a touch, her touch. And

then it would be done. Always a hesitation with the credit-card click, that was part of it. The held breath, the raised finger, the uncertainty, a sense of underlying stakes, of drowning in dark water, her bank balance moving inevitably toward the red, the flash to a future in which she was a very old woman wheeling a shopping cart along the sidewalk. The cart was filled with dresses, all those dead ones in her closet. And herself, aged and broken, pushing the unwieldy cart of her brightly colored sins, leaving a trail of Angel in her wake. And then, in her mind, she saw her mother's ghost. Her diabetic feet shoved into the gold Louboutins she never took off. Looking at her through the cracked windshield of a leased silver Jaguar, glove compartment overflowing with tickets she'd never paid in her lifetime. *Get in.* Quickly, her hand moved to the keyboard and clicked. She breathed. Took a Xanax and shut her burning laptop—*done, it's done, and that's the last one for a while.* For a long, long while. She lay back and closed her eyes. *Promise yourself. I promise.* The sullen model continued to turn round and round in her mind, arms splayed. And then it was herself she saw turning and turning like that. Enjoying a glass of Chartreuse by the dark shining waves. In the dream she had red hair, which complemented the dress beautifully.

## 2.

Outside now, on her walk, it was getting darker. The sun sinking lower in the clear sky over the water. Somehow she'd veered away from the shoreline and was walking in the village. She didn't love the village. It reminded her that she was a stranger here. That hers was, in many ways, now a pantomime of a life. Everyone here was rich or they wanted to be, and they all looked it. Even the flowers and grass seemed moneyed, the streets literally perfumed, the water sparkling in the distance like liquefied diamonds. *That's why you came here, that's why you left everything behind. Heaven,* she often said, to remind herself that it was. She wasn't running away from anything. No, this was where she lived now, this was how she lived now, and it was wonderful. She could afford it, thanks to her uncle, God rest. For a while, anyway. And how lovely to have no idea where she was going or what she was doing anymore. To have no destination at all. No reason to be home and no reason to be not home: *isn't this what you wanted?*

Her uncle would've disapproved of the chartreuse, of course. He would have hated all those Mage dresses in her closet. It was the fabric. *Not silk but like silk.* He'd had a fondness for natural fibres. *The real thing is the only thing worth having*, he often told her. Well, but surely he'd never be able to tell. That was how good the Mage was. That cut, that shimmer—it could fool even the dead.

She smiled at the flowers, such striking shades of yellow and fuchsia. *I must do better at knowing their names*, she thought. *How terrible to die without knowing them.* Some of them looked very sharp and menacing today; they had beaks like birds. Mocked her slightly, she felt. Perhaps they knew about the failed delivery of the dress, she thought, but that was ridiculous. How could the flowers know?

Suddenly she saw a FedEx truck driving just up ahead, winding down the curving road. Her heart surged. She ran after it. She could hear her flip-flops slapping on the glittering sidewalk; it was only then she realized that she was wearing them, that she hadn't even changed into proper shoes. The *thwack thwack* so undignified and heavy. She imagined her mother frowning in disgust. Yet she continued to run, her breath ragged, her heart in her throat. The truck had parked on a corner, only a few blocks away. Her soul brightened. She quickened her pace, she was really running now—*thwack thwack thwack*—and people stared at her. *Is there an emergency?* Yes, she thought. *Yes, there is.* The flowers stuck out their tongues.

•

At the truck, no one there. Only the ghost of a man, his jacket crumpled on the driver's seat. *Where is he?* A to-go cup in the cup holder, the cup empty. The interior of the truck looked filthy. *Seventeenth century. Distilled from herbs and flowers.* A flash of the impossibly colored fabric falling over her body in the dark. *I'll wait.* And so she stood there by the truck door—there wasn't even really a door—waiting. Again, people watched her, the rich and the ones who wanted to be and the ones who never would be. *What is she waiting for?*

*I am waiting for the chartreuse. An unlikely color. A perfect cut. Very difficult to pull off.*

She closed her eyes under the deep-blue sky. Imagined herself back in her closet, throwing the silky dress over her head, her arms slipping into the sleeves, the skirt falling over her like water. And the mirror bearing witness, shining ecstatically. Her breath slowing and something deep inside her, the abyss, sighing. For a moment the world would go absolutely quiet. The ocean would still, everything would still. A sublime shiver ran down the back of her neck at the thought. Down her arms to her fingers, down her spine to her sacrum. *Distilled from herbs and flowers.* It made her smile, standing by that FedEx truck with her eyes closed to the mocking flowers, the staring people, the late-afternoon sun.

Not a holy smile. She did not look at all holy.

•

The sound of squeaking wheels pierced her dream. She opened her eyes and there he was. Her deliveryman with his dolly. The one who'd left the tag on her front door. The one who hadn't cared at all, hadn't even knocked.

There was an expression on his face, something between a smile and a smirk.

"Yes," he said, and it wasn't a question.

"My dread," she said. Panted, really. She was still out of breath from the running. "Dress. I mean my dress."

He frowned at her. *What?*

"You have my *dress* in your truck."

He looked as if he doubted this, extremely.

"You have a package," she clarified. "For me. I live just over there." And she pointed down the curving road. Pointed to nothing at all, really. Palm trees. A large unmown lawn where a woman sat staring. The woman was wearing a black garbage bag like a cape.

The man looked at her, confused.

“It needs a signature, you see,” she said, “and I forgot to waive it, stupidly. When I ordered.” Because she’d been in such a fever, *click click click*. The red moon over the water and the mirror shining in her closet and the laptop burning her stomach flesh and the model turning miserably before her eyes. And yet now she sounded very reasonable.

“You came by and left a tag on my door. A door tag?” *And you didn’t knock*, she didn’t say. *If you’d knocked, I would have answered right away. My whole body poised and ready, waiting for the knock.*

“And where’s the tag?” he said.

She’d left the tag at home, she realized. She had no evidence. “I don’t have it with me.”

He looked down at her flip-flops. Then he worked his way up. Her threadbare charcoal jogging pants. A faded hoodie with a toothpaste stain on it.

“Where do you live?” he asked her.

“Elysium?” Why had she said it like a question?

“Elysium,” he sighed. “That place on Ventura Drive.” *The drug den*, he didn’t say, but she could see it in his eyes. That flicker. She thought of the gaunt men and women going in and out of weathered doors at all hours and how she pretended not to see or hear them. She’d had no idea when she first stumbled upon the place. She’d seen only a shabby apartment building by the beach, its peeling walls the color of human flesh. Those sweet-smelling trees planted all around the “Now Leasing” sign. She’d wondered at her luck in finding something so reasonable by the ocean. *Someone’s clearly looking out for me.*

He smiled at her now. “I haven’t been there yet today,” he said. “But I’ll check.” He disappeared into his truck. She heard him sifting through the packages, or pretending to. Was he pretending to? Was this all an elaborate game? He was whistling now, a jaunty tune, and the happy sound hurt her face. *Please be careful*, she thought. *It is not silk but it is like silk.*

“Which apartment?” the deliveryman called to her.

“Thirteen.”

He emerged from the truck, shaking his head. “No packages for thirteen.”

“What? But how could—”

“I have one for seven. I have one for four.”



“I’m glad we didn’t bring our phones, so when we get back we’ll have more notifications to check.”  
Cartoon by Adam Sacks

“Four?” Number Four was a pale woman who ordered regularly from RueLaLa. That was all she ever saw of her neighbor, those RueLaLa packages piled high. Those red words dancing on the shining white plastic. She’d counted seven bags once, or had it been nine? Once, she’d been in the midst of counting when Number Four’s door opened and a ghostly face appeared in the dark space between the door and the frame. Unsmiling, just fucking staring at her. She’d quickly run away, down the worn steps and through the gate, which had clanked so crudely behind her.

“Nothing for thirteen?” she said to the man. “Are you sure? Because you left a—”

“I have one for seven and I have one for four,” he repeated. And he held up the RueLaLa bag. She pictured Number Four’s happiness. Better than a

visitor. A visitation. It was unbearable.

“But there has to be something for me.” She could feel the ghost of her mother nodding through the cracked windshield. *There has to be.* “There was a tag.”

“You know,” the man said now, “it might have been FedEx Express that left the tag.”

“Express?”

“There are two FedEx companies, you know.”

“There are two?”

“There are two,” he repeated, smiling.

“And you have nothing to do with each other?”

“Nothing.” He smiled again. These were the laws of the world. Unshakable.

*I find that very hard to believe,* she wanted to say. But she said, “O.K. Well, thank you, sir, so much. For checking.”

She walked away, shame coursing through her long body. In her fucking flip-flops. She could feel him watching her. Probably wondering, *What the fuck, lady?* Or maybe not. Maybe he’d already forgotten her. He’d looked, in fact, like he’d seen her kind many times before.

•

*I'll wait until tomorrow,* she told the grass quietly. And then she told the water. Still glistening though darker now with the setting sun, that patch of light swelling out there on the horizon. *I will not leave my apartment tomorrow, I will stay in all day so that I do not miss the knock. Which must come.* Because it was here, the chartreuse. Here in La Jolla, on a truck this very minute. Difficult color to pull off, but maybe. *You never know, that's why you try things.* Her mother saying these words to her how many times? Running her hands over fabric, nails always painted a pinky red that went

with everything, that looked completely perfect until they didn't, until the polish chipped away, revealing the sick beds beneath the bright color.

She pictured the dress—the cut, the fall, holy. The yellow-green, so unlikely. *Moving away from me.* Heading back to that warehouse facility, probably.

Then, up ahead, like a mirage, she saw another truck. Except it wasn't a mirage, it was real.

“FedEx Express,” the side of it said. *Express!*

She started running toward it. She ran and ran down the hard bright sidewalk. But the truck was too far ahead, it was speeding away, and she had no choice but to stop and catch her breath among the palm trees and the vivid flowers, their beaks wide open all around her as though waiting to take her in.

### 3.

The next day, it was an e-mail she received, not a knock. Just a ping on her phone.

“Attempted Delivery” was the subject line. “Twice failed.”

Her heart pounding and pounding. *What?*

She ran outside and scanned the door, which looked even more diseased than yesterday. “But there's no door tag!” she shouted at it. She stared at the web in the corner thick with dust, trembling. The dead flowers in the pot by the railing. “When did he even knock? *When?*”

Back in the apartment, she went over and over the day in her mind. Through the clouded windows, a high sun, crashing white waves. Had she closed her eyes? No, no, she'd just been sitting here. All day on the white couch, in the empty living room, waiting. Watching that light playing on the waves, the light that had brought her here, the light that had started everything. Maybe she'd closed her eyes for a second or two, but that was all. Outside, sickly-looking men in hoodies were leaving the apartment next door like shadows,

like ghosts. When she looked again, the men were gone. Just a lone woman standing out there now, smoking in the stairwell by the dead flowers. Her “neighbor” in number twelve. A dealer, she guessed, but also a user, probably. Stained activewear. Her bright lipstick and heavy eyeliner always bleeding into her face cracks. Her long hair brassy and dry and unbrushed.

“Oh, hello,” Number Twelve said, seeing her come out. Number Twelve loved to make conversation. Smiled invitingly, menacingly. “Lovely, just lovely,” Number Twelve murmured, staring at her. Number Twelve always said this.

*What’s lovely, exactly?* she wanted to ask. Looking into Number Twelve’s hazel eyes, her wide grin, felt like looking into a dark chasm; to pretend that this woman was a legitimate neighbor horrified her. And yet, today, this is what she did.

“Did you see a man come up the stairs? From FedEx Express?”

“Express?” Number Twelve repeated, openly delighted to be asked a question. “Oh, why yes! Yes, I believe I did. I believe *he* did, ha.”

“Carrying a box?”

“Carrying a big old box. Wrapped with ribbons, too.” She flicked some ash on the flowers. Gripped the rusty railing and it shook.

“Really?” she pressed. “Because I was here and I didn’t hear him. And there’s nothing here for me.”

“Oh, he didn’t come *up* the stairs. No no, he didn’t even bother with that, honey. He saw you weren’t home and he just left with his big old box.” Number Twelve was having too much fun.

“But I *was* home. I was right here. He was supposed to knock.”

“You were home, huh?” Number Twelve smiled. The word “home” such a joke. For both of them. The idea that she was home here, that Number Twelve was home here. That either of them would ever be home again.

“I thought I saw you earlier in the water,” Number Twelve said. “In the waves.”

“No,” she said, the sensation of being plunged into water running through her. “I was here. I was always here. I never left.” She looked down at the rusty railing. She was gripping it, just like Number Twelve was, with both hands, like they were on the bow of a ship.

“Maybe you were looking for the green flash,” Number Twelve offered softly.

“What’s that?” she asked, even as she thought, *Don’t engage her.*

Number Twelve smiled. “Just a flare of green light on the water. It comes at sunrise and sunset. This place is famous for sightings.”

“Is it?” She thought of the light she’d first seen on the water long ago. *The light that drew me here.*

“Oh, yes,” Number Twelve said. “I’m surprised you didn’t know. It’s supposed to show you the shape of your soul. Would you like to see that, honey? God knows I wouldn’t.”

“I was never in the water,” she said.

Number Twelve beamed at her. Her lipstick was all over her teeth, everywhere but on her lips. “So maybe I was mistaken.”

“You definitely were.”

“Sorry, *Professor*,” Number Twelve said. Why had she ever told Number Twelve that she’d been a teacher? *Taking a leave of absence*, she’d lied. *Getting some sunshine for a stretch*, she’d said, pointing to the white-gray sky.

There were regular people who lived here, too, of course. Professional-looking women just like she used to be. Sometimes she’d see Number Seven in her sun hat and Tahitian pearls planting rosebushes in the rotting wood chips. Number Five making a beeline for a white BMW covered in seagull

shit, her balayaged head bowed low like a penitent's. Pretending they lived in a building like any other. Watering the dead flowers. Adorning the crumbling courtyard with small statues of Eastern gods. Hanging motivational placards over nonworking doorbells. "Live Your Dreams." "Make It Amazing." One of them had even placed an impish rabbit statue in the garden. He lay leering among the thorns. These women never spoke to her. They never even really looked at her except out of the corners of their eyes. Their gaze always fixed on the beach, that water, that swell of light. Like hers was.

She recalled that shimmer she'd seen on the waves. Had it been green? More like green shot through with gold. She thought of the chartreuse. Were they the same color?

"What do you need, honey?" Number Twelve whispered to her now. "Do you want to come inside?" She waved at her black hole of a doorway. "You look sad."

She looked at Number Twelve, that dark chasm. In her pockets were how many pills? Behind that door, how many crystals and powders? One to put you to sleep, surely. Was there one to make you feel like you were always falling into silk, the Holy Ghost always moving through you? *Distilled from herbs and flowers. You never know, that's why you try things.*

•

She spent the afternoon behind her own locked door, calling FedEx. First the warehouse facility and then the FedEx Express customer-care line. Three numbers she dialled in the end. All with the same jazzy hold music, which she listened to, the phone pressed into her hot cheek, bruising the tender flesh, shouting her way through the automated prompts. "I need to speak to an agent." "I need to speak to a human person." "Speak to someone," she shouted at the automated voice. "Speak to someone, speak to someone, speak to someone."

Finally, a bored voice on a crackling line. "Ma'am?"

"Hello?" she called hopelessly. The sun was sinking closer to the water.

“Yes, ma’am,” the voice said. It sounded fucking threadbare. Barely there at all. The line crackling and crackling. “Yes, go on.”

She shook her head. She didn’t want to go on.

“Ma’am, can you—”

“He never came,” she sputtered at last.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

“I’ve been sitting here all day, all day. He never even came up the stairs. Certainly he didn’t knock on the door. I’ve just been sitting and waiting here.” Her voice quavering.

“Sorry, ma’am.” The woman sounded even more bored than before. “Now, what is the item?”

*The item.* Her soul curdled at the word.

“Ma’am?” the woman prompted. “What’s the item, please?”

“A dress.” *Chartreuse.* “From Farfetch. It requires a signature.”

“A *dress*, did you say?”

“Yes.” Shame enveloped her. Her face prickling with heat. In her mind, the chartreuse became nothing at all. A no-color scrap of fabric, dull and lifeless beneath the unseeing lights of this woman’s voice.

“I see. And is this *dress* for an occasion, ma’am? Upcoming?” Now she sounded curious.

The sun was sinking into the dark waves that were shining like a mirror, the first mirror of the world. The line of the actual horizon, she could always see it from these windows. *Why I chose this place.* She could see what she told herself was the curve of the Earth. The model in the chartreuse spinning there, right on the edge, arms splayed. Delighted by her reflection in the shimmering water.

“Of course it’s for an occasion,” she lied. “For tomorrow night.”

A pause, a crackle. “Uh-huh.” The woman was clicking away now like she might be taking notes. “What happens tomorrow night?”

*Highly unorthodox*, she wanted to tell her, *these questions*. Yet the woman was still clicking, still taking notes, apparently. As though such questions and their answers were important. She watched the sun disappear. She watched for the green flash, thinking of Number Twelve’s words. *The shape of your soul, would you like to see that?* But there was only darkness. She pictured her uncle, her mother’s brother, the last of her blood family, dying in his bed, his hand in hers and how he’d pulled it away at the last second. She’d stared at the hand, curled and empty. Closing slightly like it wanted to make a fist. Like it wanted to resist and then it didn’t, it couldn’t.

“There’s a party,” she said at last.

“A party, ma’am?” *Click click.*

“A special party in my honor,” she added. “At the hotel on the cliff.” This was bullshit. But she could see it through the window, the cliff and the hotel both. The hotel was pink and white like a cake, all lit up like a cake. Where she might wear the chartreuse. Watch the waves from a table at the bar by the water. Enjoy a glass with a friend (*what friend?*). See the sun sink behind the waves, framed by two palms. See the green flash, perhaps.

“On the cliff?” the woman on the line prompted.

“You know the one.”

“Sure, ma’am,” the woman said. Placating her, maybe.

“I’m being promoted. We’re celebrating my great success.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you, it took a lot of work to get here, I guess.” And for a moment, looking around the empty living room, she actually felt as if it had. Her eyes landed on a dusty white hutch that had come with the place. It was sparsely

filled with figurines, books she'd never open. She saw her warped reflection in its glass doors. "So you understand now why I need it. The dress. Why it's urgent."

"Yes, ma'am. The item will be delivered to you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But it's on a truck right now. Can't you get the truck to—"

"Ma'am," the woman said. "I don't have access to the trucks, unfortunately. But I'm putting a note in, O.K.? About all of this."

"You're asking him to *knock*?"

A very long pause. "Yes."

"*When* will it be here tomorrow?"

Another pause. "Noon."

"*Noon*?!"

"Well in time for your party, ma'am."

## 4.

She lay in bed in the dark, her eyes wide open. Her hands curled into gripping fists under her overheated body. On her laptop, a video played of a jolly British woman trying on all the yellow items in her closet—saffron, amber, daffodil, canary, flax. In her own closet, the mirror was shining, restless. Sounds drifted in through the open window. A woman crying, "Help me, help me. Oh, God, oh, God." Heroin being dealt quietly out of the garage downstairs. And then the waves, of course. Endless, relentless, a roaring reminder of the abyss. It was coming soon. Noon tomorrow. *Well in time for your party, ma'am.* Silly, she knew. Ridiculous. Waiting like this for a dress, a chartreuse. Putting her whole life on hold (*what life?*).

*I ran after a FedEx truck yesterday, she could tell a friend. I ran after two FedEx trucks, actually, isn't that funny? Not even silk but it looks like silk.*

*And I already know it's going to be the wrong color on me. Isn't that so funny?* she imagined telling this friend, not at all laughing. But the friend would laugh and then maybe she would, too. Shake her head—they both would. *Oh, I get it*, the friend would say.

*Seventeenth century*, they would both whisper. They'd be holding glasses of the drink, that yellow-green shade glowing like captured light.

*I left my job for a patch of light on the waves*, she might tell the friend. *I was in San Diego for a literary conference. A panel on the movement of dread in fictional narrative. Through the window, I saw this light on the water. Yellow-green, right after the setting sun. I couldn't resist it.*

In her mind, the friend didn't have a face, the friend was just a shape. Just the shape of a friend. But she could sense the smile on the friend's face. The warmth of it, the understanding.

*I walked out of the conference room, out of the hotel. I never came back. I couldn't believe how easy it was.*

*To leave the conference?*

*To leave my life.*

*I so get it*, this most perfect friend would say.

They clinked, then sipped from their glowing glasses.

*But what happens after?* the friend asked then. And suddenly the friend, who was only a shape, the shape of a friend, sounded just like her mother, had her mother's voice exactly.

She looked at the shape, still smiling at her. An unlikely color. A perfect cut.

*After what, Mother?*

*After you get the dress. After you tear open the box. After you throw it over your head and it falls all around you like water.*

A darkness fluttered in her then. A rising shadow. On her laptop, the British woman was finally trying on a chartreuse, turning round and round, arms splayed. She still looked jolly, but now she had a sickly pallor. Impossible, really, to tell if she looked terrible or amazing.

## 5.

He arrived at four-thirty, just before sunset. His dolly was piled high with boxes and plastic bags, including some RueLaLa bags, as though he hadn't made a delivery in days. She was already running toward him. She'd seen the truck pull up, the FedEx Express, she'd been watching from her window, her face in the fogged glass. Immediately she'd run out and down the worn stairs, across the ramshackle courtyard, to meet him like he was a lover long absent, come home at last. Except she had anger in her heart, accusations on her lips. *Where were you? Why didn't you knock? Why didn't you even come up the stairs? I was waiting and waiting and you never came.*

When he saw her approach, he seemed to recognize her, the look of acknowledgment in his eyes. *Yes, I'm the one who didn't knock. I'm the one who didn't come up the stairs. I'm the one who's been fucking with you.* She was going to say something, she'd been planning on it, but one glimpse into this man's eyes silenced her. She could see his soul thrashing inside his body, even as he stood there smiling tensely on the broken pathway.

"You have something for me" was all she said in the end. Very reasonably. Almost apologetically.

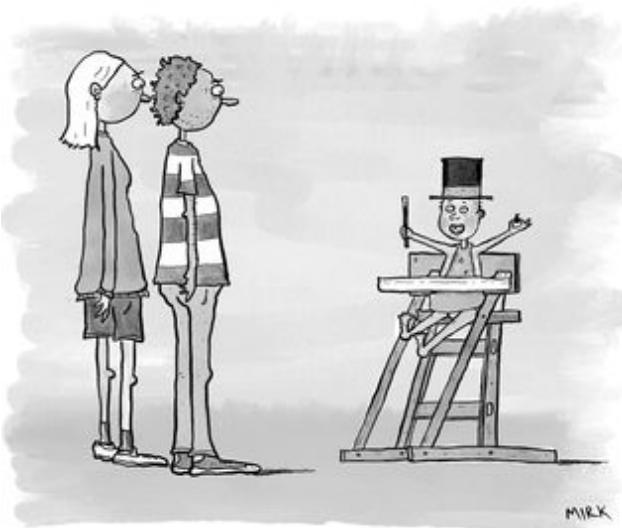
"Do I?"

"Yes." And she pointed to the box, fourth from the top, for she knew it by its shape. Saw the Farfetch logo. Her soul was humming.

"What number?" he said. His hand on the box. The very one.

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen," he repeated. "Looked like no one was home at thirteen. When I knocked."



*“Behold, as I transform this tiny berry into the biggest mess you’ve ever seen!”*  
Cartoon by Dan Mirk

“I was home.” You didn’t knock. She looked at the box and smiled. “I guess it was a misunderstanding.”

“Looked like no one even lived there,” he said, gripping the box. She thought of that web by her diseased front door, spreading. *Who are you to judge who lives? Are you a judge of the living?*

“Someone lives there,” she said. “Me. I’m not a ghost, am I?”

He laughed.

“A ghost doesn’t get packages,” she added, gesturing at the box.

“They don’t,” he agreed.

Reluctantly, he extended his device. “Signature?” She hastily signed with the little digital pen—broken spirals that looked nothing like language, let alone her name. And then, at last, he held the box out to her, so hesitantly that she had to sort of snatch it from him in the end. Which made him smile. And she thanked him. *So much, sir.*

She was halfway down the path, running, when he called her back.  
“Ma’am!”

“What?” She shot this at him. Clutching the box with both hands, the glowing silk, the question, held inside.

He was grinning at her now. “Congratulations,” he added. “On your promotion.”

“Oh,” she said. “Yes. Thank you.”

“I hope you have a *really* great time at your party tonight.”

A twisting feeling in her gut. Was he fucking with her? No, he was still smiling, beaming even. As though there might actually be a party. Well, maybe there would be.

•

She could feel the flowers watching her as she crossed the courtyard, the box gripped in her arms, which were tingling now. *Look at you with your box. So happy now.*

*Yes, I am, so what if I am?*

The water surged with light on the horizon. So happy now.

*But what happens after?* a voice inside said as she reached the stairs.

*Never mind about that right now*, she thought, going up the stairs. She could feel the mirror shining in her dark bedroom closet. Waiting for the offering. She passed Number Twelve’s apartment, almost hoping that her door would be open, that void of her face lurking in the doorway—*Well, look at you with your big old box. Yes, fucking look at me*—and maybe she’d go in there today, maybe they’d even talk awhile. But today Number Twelve’s door was closed, and the curtains, just two black sheets in the window, were sealed shut.

She barrelled through her own front door, past the web and the rotting flowers. That voice still ringing in her mind with its relentless question.

*What happens after?*

## 6.

In the bedroom, she tore at the box with her bare hands. *We've kept it in muted tones*, the building manager had told her. *I like it*, she'd said, following him down the creaking hallway, as if he were a real manager, not a slumlord. Looking at the apartment as if it were an actual place to live. A home. But she hadn't been home in a long time. Not since the day she saw the light on the water, left her life or what was left of it. *So you're a professor*, the slumlord had said pleasantly. *Of literature*, she'd said. *Taking a leave before my promotion. Catching up on my reading*. She'd never read again. For what was literature compared with that light? And just a few months before, the loss of her uncle, the loss that had broken her; she hadn't seen it coming, but now it suddenly made sense, everything took shape. His death had been meant to give her a new life. *A new lease on life*, wasn't that the saying? But what would he have made of it, her life? She pictured his tall, frail body in her sham apartment, staring at the dresses in her closet, those glowing colors and cuts, the very substance of dread. *Your mother's daughter*, he'd murmur softly. *Not silk but like silk*.

*You can't tell*, she would insist. *Surely you can't tell, that's its trick*.

And would he shake his head? Smile sadly at her, his face an eerie twin of her own. Say the words she dreaded most. *The real thing is the only thing worth having*.

There was a little framed print above the white bed that said "Daydream" in loopy letters. There was a small sly-eyed mermaid on the chipped white dresser. *Nice touches*, she'd said that day with the slumlord. *Homey*.

The little mermaid shook now as she tore at the box.

*I'll need more hangers, probably*, she'd told him, laughing.

And he'd laughed, too, lightly, trying to seem human, even though he had no idea. *More hangers, absolutely*, he'd said. *That's easy enough*.

•

Now the box sat disembowelled on the white bed.

And there it was. Inside the white tissue paper.

Yellow-green. Shining in the half-dark. Not silk but it looked like—

“Oh, God,” said a voice from outside.

Her hands were at her sides, trembling from the tearing. Boxes were getting harder and harder to open these days, all that tape. You needed a knife now, scissors. “So excited,” she insisted to no one, but her voice sounded flat and dull. *This is it. Finally.* And yet already a sinking feeling as she gripped the silky fabric in her hands, a knowledge brimming. Those shadows rising from the depths. That whisper. *What happens after?* A blackness gathering along the edges of her vision, even as she stared and stared at the bright color, like captured light.

*Let me at least have this moment with it first. Please. Seventeenth century. Distilled from herbs and flowers.* She imagined French mountains (what makes them French?), a cathedral like a spike driven into the hills. Her mother’s voice saying, *Something can look dead on a hanger, sure. But then you put it on and . . .*

Before the shining mirror, she stood for a long time in the chartreuse, arms splayed. Just like the sullen model in the video. Absolutely still. Not turning. Not breathing. Staring at herself while the mirror took her in. Waiting for the Holy Ghost. Waiting for something. Dust motes swirled in the air all around her. The dead watched from their black hangers.

“Oh, God, oh, God, help me, help me,” someone whispered outside. Outside or inside?

Her hair looked redder, much redder, than it had looked even a moment ago.

Her skin was paler. Sallow. And were her eyebrows always this dark? This pointed? *You’re going to laugh,* she wanted to tell a friend. *It almost feels as if I’m looking into my—*

“I have no idea,” she said at last through dry lips to her own reflection. “I have no fucking clue.” But she was literally filling with knowledge now. “How is it that I’m looking into a mirror and I feel as if I can’t even see myself anymore?”

She asked this even as the answer came to her. *You don’t need to see yourself anymore.*

She shook her head. She grabbed a gold tube of lipstick from the dresser. Slashed it hastily across her lips. A too bright pink that clashed with what she perceived to be the new shade of her face, thanks to the chartreuse. A sort of jaundiced porcelain. She slid on those gold heels which had belonged to her mother. They always hurt her feet, but the dress wanted them, wanted their light. *You’re like Cinderella’s sister*, her mother would say. *Ready to cut off the toes. Shave the heel to make the shoe fit. Well, God will do that soon enough. God or time or both. You’ll shrink right down to nothing at all. And then everything will fit quite beautifully, won’t it? The color, the cut, you’ll be swimming in it.*

She stood back again. Looked in the mirror until her eyes watered.

“Shut up,” she whispered. And then, startled by the cruelty in her voice, added “please.”

The sinking feeling grew as she stood before the mirror, which wasn’t shining anymore. It was flat. She almost started to feel like it couldn’t see her, either. Not just that it couldn’t, it *wouldn’t*. It was refusing. The blackness around her vision was gathering force.

Quickly, hands trembling, she took photos of herself with her phone. One from the side, two from the front. Trying to smile with what felt like new lips, a new face even. She sent the pictures to a friend she hadn’t texted in months, followed by a question mark. Three question marks. As though there were still questions. *The one you’ve been waiting for*, she thought. *Searching for its shape all these months and years. And now it’s here. An unlikely color. A perfect—*

“Going out?” Number Twelve called to her back as she rushed down the stairs.

She froze on the staircase, in the chartreuse, looked back up at her neighbor. Number Twelve was leaning against the railing with her cigarette, a ragged silhouette blowing smoke in the dark. “Yes.”

She waited for her to murmur, *Lovely, lovely*. Or to say, *Such a pretty dress*, which Number Twelve often did whenever she caught her in a new one. She’d done it for the royal, the rust, the forest—*Well, aren’t you just, don’t you look*—but of the chartreuse she said nothing. “Look at you” was all Number Twelve said finally, quietly.

“It’s new,” she offered up. The skirt belled and blew around in the wind. The unlikely color gleamed in the dark. “A chartreuse?” A question in her voice—desperate—even though the answer didn’t matter anymore.

“Fun,” Number Twelve said softly, with a kindness that made her sick.

Number Twelve threw her cigarette into a flowerpot. Turned back to her own dark doorway. “If you need something, honey, you know where I am. I’m *always* here. You only have to knock.”

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Outside it was colder. No sun on the waves anymore. It had sunk while she was in the closet, staring at herself in the unseeing mirror, the knowledge filling her like dark water. *The shape of your soul. Would you like to see that, honey?*

The sky was a deep red, moving into deep blue, then, above that, black. Barely any street lights on the curving road. She couldn’t see the flowers, but she could feel them grinning all around her in the dark, their mouths wide open. Number Twelve’s door loomed up ahead. No, that couldn’t be right. The hotel, that’s where she was headed, wasn’t it? Yes, of course. Look at it, all lit up like a birthday cake. She could see it up on the cliff, by the water’s edge, she really could. Lights twinkling. The party, she thought. Perhaps it was happening after all.

Her mother would be there. *You pay the price, don't you?* she'd say. *You pay the price on top of the price.* Her uncle, surely, his hands open now for there was nothing to resist anymore. The deliverymen with their dollies and boxes, ready with their tags. All of them smiling. She could see them raising their glasses, the last light sparkling from the liquor. *Distilled from herbs and flowers, a golden-green shimmer on the horizon. A flash of light sinking into dark water.* They were all there, waiting to celebrate her. Maybe her friend, too, was at the bar waiting. She could almost see her, couldn't she? The shape of her, waving. The hotel danced up ahead, as if it were floating. The ocean crashed by her side, the darkest door. She'd be there very soon. ♦

*Mona Awad* is the author of the novels “*Bunny*” (2019), “*Rouge*” (2023), and “*We Love You, Bunny*” (2025).

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# What Will Become of the C.I.A.?

The covert agency has long believed in the power of knowing one's enemy. But these days the threats are coming from above.

By [Keith Gessen](#)

July 16, 2025



*From assassination plots to torture programs, the agency's darkest operations have always been at the President's behest. Illustration by Ben Hickey*

In December, 1988, as the Soviet Union was beginning to come apart, Senator Bill Bradley, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, convened a closed-door hearing with several of the C.I.A.'s top Soviet experts. These were analysts, not operatives. They did not run spies or weapons, or shoot poisoned darts at people; mostly, they sat at their desks at Langley, reading *Pravda* or studying photographs of Soviet military parades. The hearing found them in a melancholy mood, pondering life without the U.S.S.R. “The Soviet Union is so fundamental to our outlook on the world, to our concept of what is right and wrong in politics,” Douglas J. MacEachin, who ran the C.I.A.’s office of Soviet analysis, said, “that major change in the U.S.S.R. is as significant as some major change in the sociological fabric of the United States itself.” And so, MacEachin explained, a C.I.A. analyst struggled to see things clearly; not only his world view but his livelihood was at stake. If the Soviet Union disappeared, what would become of those who made their careers analyzing it? “There are not many homes for old wizards of Armageddon,” MacEachin said.

Soon enough, the Soviet Union collapsed with a whimper, and the United States stood alone. Perceiving no enemies on the near horizon, the nation stopped looking for them so fervently. Budgets were cut, retirements suggested. Agents in the field were brought in from the cold. Bill Clinton, the first post-Cold War President, was elected to fix the economy. So infrequent were Clinton's meetings with his first C.I.A. director, James Woolsey, that when a small plane crashed onto the White House lawn, in the fall of 1994, people joked that it must be Woolsey, trying to get an audience with the President.

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History was over. Humanity had resolved most major questions. The great rivalries of the age were between Biggie and Tupac, "Friends" and "Seinfeld." When, in the late nineteen-nineties, Al Qaeda began mounting ever more sophisticated terror attacks—bombing two American embassies in East Africa, in 1998, and then blowing a giant hole in the hull of a Navy ship, the U.S.S. Cole, in 2000—it took some time to adjust. George W. Bush, in the first six and a half months of his Presidency, received thirty-six C.I.A. briefings on Al Qaeda. This was a lot of briefings—perhaps too many. If Al Qaeda was always about to launch an attack on American soil, would it ever actually attack? Then, on a cloudless morning in September, hijackers seized four planes on the Eastern Seaboard and flew two of them into the World Trade Center. History was back, and so was the C.I.A.

The journalist Tim Weiner begins his new book, “The Mission: The CIA in the 21st Century” (Mariner), amid the steady but fruitless drumbeat of intelligence about Al Qaeda, and then, following the attacks, the overwhelming response. Two days after the Twin Towers fell, the C.I.A. counterterrorism chief, Cofer Black—a large, charismatic former covert operative known for his imposing presence and already several years into the hunt for Osama bin Laden—gave a thrilling presentation to Bush and his national-security team. He promised to defeat Al Qaeda within weeks. “Bin Laden, dead,” he said. “Zawahiri, dead.” He added, “When we’re through with them, they’ll have flies walking across their eyeballs.”

Bush ate it up. Speaking to reporters at the Pentagon a few days later, he leaned in to his Texas drawl and said that bin Laden was wanted “dead or alive.” The C.I.A. analyst Michael Morell, who served as the President’s daily briefer and would later become the acting director of the agency, was less enthusiastic. “He cannot deliver on that promise,” Morell recalled thinking about Black. “We don’t have that kind of intelligence. We don’t have the capability to do that.” It was the ancient yin and yang of the C.I.A. Operatives were adventuresome; analysts were cautious. Presidents, unsurprisingly, preferred the adventuresome. And so the C.I.A. went to war in Afghanistan.

Weiner is a longtime national-security correspondent with a specialty in intelligence. His first book on the subject was about Aldrich Ames, the Soviet mole inside the C.I.A., who, before finally being ferreted out by the F.B.I., in 1994, handed over the identities of dozens of agency assets. When the K.G.B. learned from him the names of Soviet citizens spying for the U.S., it shot them. Weiner visited him in jail shortly after his arrest, and Ames maintained that he had done what he did not for money but for peace.

Weiner’s best-known book, “Legacy of Ashes” (2007), is a history of the C.I.A.’s first sixty years—a chronicle of analytical failures and harebrained operations that made the agency seem less diabolical than daffy. He found not only a divide between the Directorate of Analysis and the clandestine Directorate of Operations, but a further divide within the clandestine service itself. Was the mission to use tradecraft to gather intelligence, or to use money, propaganda, and violence to shape events? Was the point to know

the world or to change it? Increasingly, as the decades passed, the answer tilted toward the latter. In the name of fighting communism, the C.I.A. put its thumb on the scale of the 1948 elections in Italy, overthrew elected leaders in Iran and Guatemala, and generally ran roughshod through the Global South. The 1953 coup in Iran—which toppled Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and handed ruling power to what had previously been a constitutional monarchy—was, in Weiner’s account, a Pyrrhic victory: it gave the agency and its masters the dangerous impression that this was something they could pull off at will.



*“We gathered you all here in order to announce who our best friends are.”*  
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

Covert action became a regular Presidential recourse. One could see the appeal. It was far less noisy than sending B-2 bombers or your Secretary of State. If it went well, great; if it failed, you could often pretend that it had never happened. And failure was frequent. Throughout the early Cold War, the C.I.A. parachuted émigrés into Albania, China, North Korea, and Soviet Ukraine, hoping to gather information and maybe even spark some sort of resistance; the operatives were usually captured and never heard from again. But the C.I.A. kept trying. J.F.K., only recently sworn in, acceded to a half-baked C.I.A. scheme left over from the Eisenhower Administration: several battalions of Cuban exiles would land at a Cuban inlet known as the

Bay of Pigs and topple Fidel Castro. This turned out to be easier said than done. The fiasco was immediate and public, but, even after the rout, Kennedy kept pressing the agency to assassinate Castro. L.B.J., inheriting Kennedy's Vietnam mess, found himself in a bind of his own. As Weiner recounts, Johnson was convinced that Saigon would fall without American support, but he didn't want to commit huge numbers of troops. At the same time, it was politically unthinkable to be seen to have pulled out. Covert action was, in Weiner's words, "the only path between war and diplomacy," and so the agency became drawn ever deeper into the mire.

An organization devoted to secrecy ends up with a lot of secrets. The C.I.A. did its best to keep its own hidden—from the Warren Commission, from people in other parts of the agency, and, of course, from Congress. The C.I.A. operated like a besieged, landlocked country, surrounded by rivals and foes. Its goal was to fight communism, but you couldn't do that if Congress cut your funding or the Pentagon gobbled you up. The audience that mattered most was the President. In 1975, at a rare moment of introspection in American politics, Senator Frank Church wondered whether the C.I.A. had become a "rogue elephant on a rampage." The answer, actually, was no. Almost always, the orders came from the top. Presidents didn't like to hear bad news, and smart C.I.A. directors learned to withhold it. Richard Nixon, despite his contempt for the C.I.A. ("They've got forty thousand people over there reading newspapers"), ordered it to come up with a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg and to try to prevent Salvador Allende from getting elected. Ronald Reagan charged it with arming the Contras. Even the sweet, saintly Jimmy Carter, who cancelled a number of the agency's more odious operations, signed a covert-action order to send weapons to resistance groups after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The arms were routed through Pakistani intelligence, which favored the most committed and fanatical Afghan fighters. When the Soviets left, the holy warriors, and the weaponry, remained.

The story of the C.I.A. that Weiner tells in "The Mission" closely resembles the one he told in "Legacy of Ashes." At the start of the war on terror, as at the start of the Cold War, intelligence was at a premium. "Our knowledge of what the other side was up to, their intentions, their capabilities, was nil, or

next to it,” one of the C.I.A.’s early directors told Weiner about the Soviets. The situation with Al Qaeda was similar. Weiner quotes Bob Gates, a Soviet analyst who became the agency’s director and later Secretary of Defense: “We didn’t know jack shit about al Qaeda. That’s the reason a lot of this stuff happened, the interrogations and everything else, because we didn’t know anything. If we’d had a great database and knew exactly what al Qaeda was all about, what their capabilities were and stuff like that, some of these measures wouldn’t have been necessary.”

Like the Cold War, the war on terror kept expanding. By the time it was over, the U.S. had conducted antiterrorism trainings in as many as a hundred and fifty countries, deployed combat troops in at least fifteen, and launched drone strikes in at least seven. The most fateful expansion was into Iraq. In the lead-up to that invasion, under intense pressure, the C.I.A. told the White House what it wanted to hear: that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. (It didn’t.) The episode, to which Weiner devotes considerable space, remains a black mark on the agency, but it’s not as if Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were holding their breath in anticipation of a Colin Powell speech to the United Nations. As one former operative tells Weiner, “These guys would have gone to war if Saddam had a rubber band and a paper clip that could put your eye out.”

From the first, the fixation on Iraq interfered with the mission to destroy Al Qaeda. Reporting for the *Times* in Afghanistan in late 2001, Weiner heard from a local official that bin Laden was hiding in Tora Bora—travelling on horseback by night, sleeping in caves. The same official had, it turned out, told the same thing to the C.I.A., which had relayed it to General Tommy Franks, the top U.S. commander. But Franks, who later said that he was getting multiple intelligence reports of bin Laden in multiple places, didn’t act on the information. “Bin Laden was definitely there,” Weiner writes, and we missed him. “In the general’s defense,” he goes on, “he was distracted.” Rumsfeld had just ordered Franks—less than three months after September 11th—to create a plan for the invasion of Iraq. Bin Laden disappeared into Pakistan. It would take the C.I.A. a decade before it got another solid lead as to his whereabouts.

The overwhelming need to know the enemy, lest he attack without warning, eventually led, during both the Cold War and the war on terror, to the same place: torture. It was the dark, or darker, side of running human assets. In March, 2002, the agency got hold of an Al Qaeda associate known as Abu Zubaydah and flew him to a secret prison in Thailand. There, an F.B.I. agent named Ali Soufan, a fluent Arabic speaker, won his trust and learned a great deal. Zubaydah revealed that the 9/11 attacks had been orchestrated by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, described Al Qaeda's money-smuggling operations, and even mentioned outlandish future plots—like a plan to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge, inspired by a group viewing of the 1998 "Godzilla."

Then the C.I.A. began interrogating Zubaydah. Agents "stripped him naked, chained him hand and foot to the floor, and blasted death metal music in his ears," Weiner writes. They kept him awake for seventy-six hours, until medics intervened. They built a coffin around him. None of it worked. Soufan phoned F.B.I. headquarters and threatened to arrest the psychologist the C.I.A. had hired to run its "enhanced interrogation"; instead, Soufan was pulled out and recalled to the U.S. The interrogation continued. After receiving Presidential approval, the interrogators waterboarded Zubaydah for four days. They poured water down his throat and up his nose until he thought he would drown. "I have nothing more," he pleaded. "I give you everything." He nearly died. Finally, to make it stop, he started inventing things. The interrogators relented. All this was videotaped. Three years later, fearing that the tapes would leak, the head of the counterterrorism division at the time of the torture, Jose A. Rodriguez, and his deputy, Gina Haspel, ordered that the tapes be destroyed.

Weiner captures the mood of dread that gripped Washington in the aftermath of September 11th, when most in the national-security establishment were convinced that a "second wave" of Al Qaeda attacks was imminent. They missed the crucial point that better intelligence could have provided. Al Qaeda did plan further strikes, some of which the C.I.A. eventually thwarted, but the first attack had already achieved its aims: it dragged the U.S. into a protracted war in Afghanistan, pushed the country back into the moral swamp of torture, and, as a bonus, helped goad America into invading Iraq.

Barack Obama's election, in 2008, changed things less than some people had hoped. He put an end to torture, drew down forces in Iraq, and, when the C.I.A., after years of painstaking detective work, finally found bin Laden in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, authorized the *SEAL*-team mission that killed him. But, in the broader war on terror, he merely replaced torture with drone strikes. These killed a lot of Al Qaeda operatives and people who hung out with them, such as their families. The drone strikes were, in a way, the opposite of torture—distanced rather than intimate, wiping out everything in the blast radius rather than trying to extract every last molecule of knowledge—but they had the same effect. They were immoral; outside the United States, they were unpopular; and they did not win the war.

The night before the September 11th attacks, the New York real-estate mogul Donald Trump attended Marc Jacobs's spring fashion show in the meatpacking district, along with fellow-celebrities Sarah Jessica Parker and Monica Lewinsky. Just hours after the attacks, he was interviewed by a local TV station. One of the anchors asked him whether his property at 40 Wall Street had been damaged by the collapse of the Twin Towers. Trump said no and added that his building was now the tallest in downtown Manhattan.

Trump emerged as a national figure out of the ingredients of a peculiarly American cauldron: real estate, high-profile business dealings, reality TV—and the war on terror. Long before he ran for President, he had a lot to say about whom and what and how we were fighting. He thought that the U.S. was not prosecuting the war viciously enough. He thought that torture was just fine. And he thought, or claimed to think, that Obama was not born in the United States, and hinted darkly that he might, in fact, be a Muslim. Trump used, as Obama was not willing to use, the phrase “radical Islamic terror” to describe the enemy. As Spencer Ackerman wrote in “Reign of Terror” (2021), the phrase turned a geopolitical contest into a race war and “extracted the precious nativist metal from the husk of the Forever War.” It excited Trump’s future base.

The predominant intelligence story of Trump’s first Presidential run was, of course, Russian interference in the election. Years later, we still haven’t

fully digested what actually happened and what it meant. Did the Russian operation sway the results? Even if it didn't, what does it say that so many around Trump seemed willing to play along? Was this any worse than the dirty tricks of American politics past? For years, liberals followed a trail of crumbs from Paul Manafort to Konstantin Kilimnik to Oleg Deripaska, convinced that, somewhere, a smoking gun would be found. The fantasy was Watergate redux: nail down the connections, show how "high up" collusion went, and Trump's Presidency would collapse under the weight of scandal. If only we could establish that Trump's pal Roger Stone was in contact with WikiLeaks, which was talking to the Russians, who had hacked Hillary Clinton's e-mails at Vladimir Putin's direction—then the mystery would be solved, the nightmare over.



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

But clarity never came. There were too many cutouts and complications. G.R.U. hackers working for Putin were a far cry from the C.I.A.-linked burglars who broke into D.N.C. offices for Nixon; WikiLeaks was a media organization, arguably. Meanwhile, Obama was too careful; Senate Republicans were too truculent; the Steele dossier created unrealistic expectations. Even if we'd had perfect information, fully publicized, it probably would not have mattered. Trump, in front of the television

cameras, had urged the Russians—“if you’re listening”—to find Hillary’s e-mails. His poll numbers were unaffected by this apparent solicitation of illicit foreign intervention.

Fifteen years of the war on terror had done a lot to corrode political trust in the United States. If you’d been primed to believe that Obama was a secret Muslim or that Democrats were in league with Radical Islamic Terror, then working with the Russians to educate the public about Democratic leaders hardly seemed out of bounds. And then—unlike, say, the stories once told by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth—at least the e-mails published by WikiLeaks were real.

Trump’s first term brought a curious reversal in the C.I.A.’s public image. He repeatedly clashed with the agency over his view on Russian election interference. “President Putin says it’s not Russia,” Trump said at a summit with the Russian President in Helsinki. “I don’t see any reason why it would be.” He proved uninterested in much of the C.I.A.’s other work, as well. John Bolton, Trump’s longest-serving national-security adviser, later wrote of Trump’s weekly reports from his intelligence chiefs, “I didn’t think these briefings were terribly useful, and neither did the intelligence community, since much of the time was spent listening to Trump, rather than Trump listening to the briefers.”

Various former officials went public with their concerns about Trump, some labelling him a threat to national security. Several “formers,” as they’re called, became fixtures of liberal Resistance media. It was, notably, a C.I.A. agent detailed to the White House who blew the whistle on Trump’s “perfect phone call” with Volodymyr Zelensky, in 2019. Were C.I.A. agents now the good guys? Trump’s second C.I.A. director, Gina Haspel, nominated in part because Trump admired her work on the torture program, resisted his attempts to suborn the agency, especially in the wake of the 2020 election. She warned that Trump was attempting to mount a “right-wing coup.” It’s now clear that, as bad as things got in January of 2021, they could have been a whole lot worse.

The C.I.A. was a step behind during Russia’s interference in the 2016 election, but it did manage to confirm—through an agency asset inside the Kremlin, Oleg Smolenkov—that Putin was the one orchestrating it. (The

agency was worried that Smolenkov would be exposed, possibly by Trump, and is presumed to have exfiltrated the asset and his family by yacht from a putative vacation in Montenegro during the summer of 2017.) A few years later, though, when Putin began amassing troops on Ukraine's border, the agency was in its element. At the time, in the fall of 2021, many experts did not think that a full-scale invasion was likely. After all, Putin had sporadically concentrated forces at the border before, then brought them home. The C.I.A. had a different analysis. It had satellite imagery of the troop buildup; it knew from sources near the Kremlin that the government was investing money in reserve forces and military contingency planning; it eventually got something very close to the actual war plan. All these factors pointed to an invasion. The C.I.A. sounded the alarm, and in the course of several months urged the Europeans and, to some extent, the Ukrainians, to prepare for war.

It was a major intelligence victory for the agency—"a return to its central mission," according to Weiner—though it failed to deter the invasion itself. In November, 2021, the C.I.A. director, William J. Burns, a Biden appointee who'd previously been a senior U.S. diplomat, travelled to Moscow to try to talk Putin out of going to war. He brought all the intelligence the C.I.A. had gathered and warned of the consequences if Putin were to go ahead. The Russian President was "utterly unapologetic," Burns recalled. Putin believed that his army would roll into Ukraine with minimal opposition. There was nothing anyone could do to stop him. Knowledge is power, but, as it turns out, there are other kinds of power. It also turned out that Putin's intelligence on Ukraine was a lot worse than the C.I.A.'s intelligence on him.

After Burns's mission failed, the C.I.A. shared everything it knew with the Ukrainians. Once war began, the agency helped locate Russian troops, kill Russian generals, and run covert ops in occupied Ukrainian territory. The C.I.A. had once desperately tried to infiltrate Soviet Ukraine, leading to the torture and deaths of dozens of men. Now the agency could work hand in glove with Ukrainian intelligence officers inside Ukraine to hinder the Russian invasion.

Trump's return to office throws the C.I.A.'s success in Ukraine—and much else—into doubt. This time, Trump has made sure to put a loyalist in charge of the agency: the former Texas congressman John Ratcliffe, who promptly eliminated the agency's diversity-hiring program—a remarkably self-defeating move for a global superpower. "For more than forty years," Weiner writes, "the clandestine service had been trying to recruit and retain African American, Arab American, and Asian American officers, on the sound basis that sending an all-white cadre to spy in places like Somalia, Pakistan, or China was terrible tradecraft." When Elon Musk's *DOGE* requested employee names from government agencies, Ratcliffe failed to protect C.I.A. personnel, submitting a list of agents which included their real first names—a potential security risk. After America bombed Iran's nuclear facilities, and a Defense Intelligence Agency leak undercut the Administration's claims about the strikes' effectiveness, it was Ratcliffe who came forward to uphold the official line.

There was a time when the C.I.A.'s existential fear was of losing its adversary. In Al Qaeda, it found a new one; in Iraq, it created others. In Trump, it faces an adversary of a different kind. Weiner concludes his book by expressing his faith in the agency's rank and file, but with a clear sense of foreboding. If a genuine emergency were to take place, and Trump tried to use the occasion to cancel elections or declare martial law, who would be able to stop him? What if he tried to make the C.I.A. great again? "Who would disobey him," Weiner asks, "if he ordered the clandestine service to rebuild the secret prisons, overthrow a sovereign nation, or assassinate his political enemies?" Historically, Weiner writes, the C.I.A. has not directly defied orders. But individuals have blown the whistle, resigned in protest, and spoken to journalists. There may not be homes for old wizards of Armageddon, but surely there is space for them on MSNBC. ♦



*[Keith Gessen](#)* is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*.

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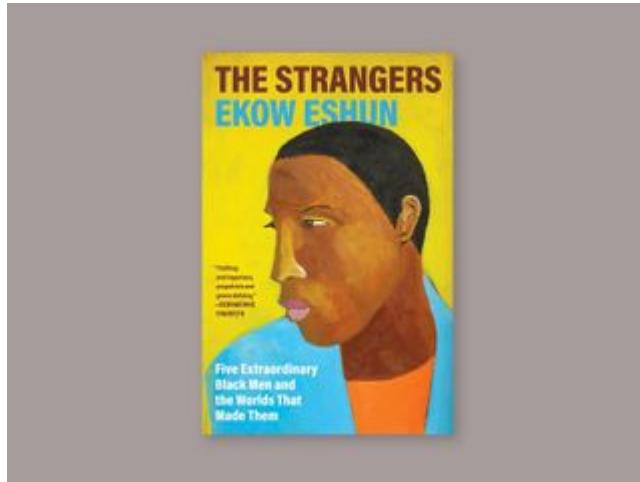
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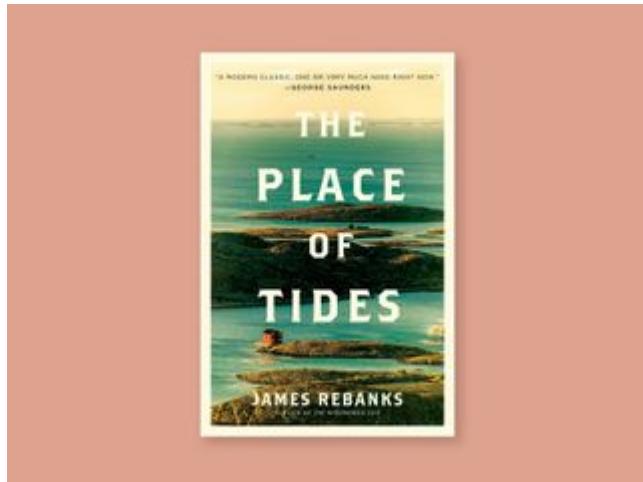
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July 21, 2025



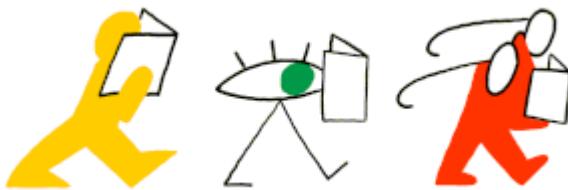
**The Strangers**, by *Ekow Eshun* (Harper). This stylish group portrait of five Black luminaries—the actor Ira Aldridge, the explorer Matthew Henson, the soccer player Justin Fashanu, the psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, and the activist Malcolm X—is a feat of historical imagination. Eshun’s deeply researched narrative deftly evokes particular chapters of his subjects’ lives, including Aldridge’s arrival in antebellum New York City, where Black ambition was openly mocked, and Fashanu’s struggles to conceal his homosexuality from the press. As Eshun follows the men from crowded New York streets to raucous London alleys to the “delirious sprawl” of Lagos, he occasionally turns his focus inward to recall events from his own life.



**The Place of Tides**, by James Rebanks (*Mariner*). Fjærøy, an island in the Norwegian archipelago, is the setting of this rumination on preserving ancient traditions in the modern world. Rebanks, whose other books center on his life as a shepherd in England's Lake District, follows a septuagenarian named Anna Måsøy as she embarks on her last season of caring for eider ducks, a species whose survival is threatened by mink farming. Måsøy's family has been tending to the ducks for generations, and she spends her days gathering and drying seaweed, fortifying stone walls, and building roosts for the eiders to hatch their ducklings, before finally collecting their precious eiderdown after they return to the sea.

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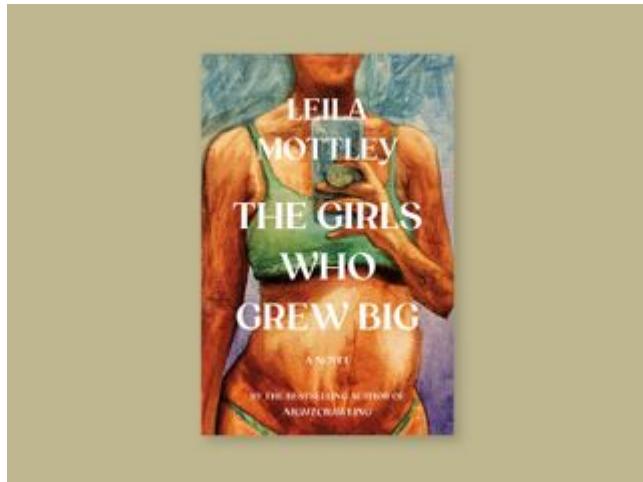
## What We're Reading



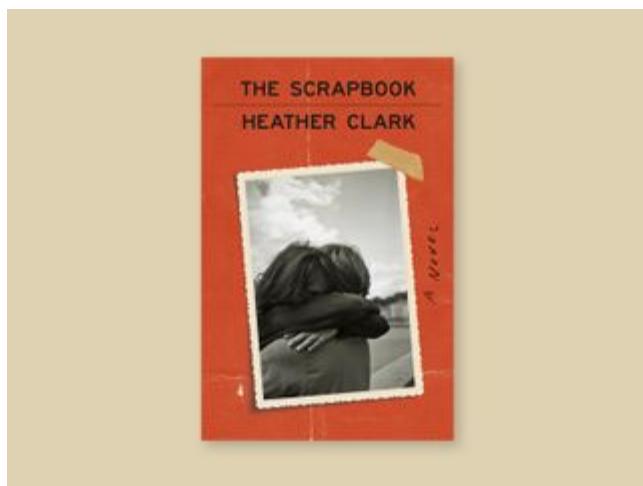
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

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**The Girls Who Grew Big**, by *Leila Mottley* (*Knopf*). This striking novel tracks the friendships among a group of teen moms as they struggle and strive in a small, gossipy beach town in Florida's sticky-hot panhandle. Simone, their strong-willed leader, gave birth to twins in the back of her boyfriend's truck. A young woman named Adela joins the pack after her parents send her away from Indiana, in shame, to live with her grandmother. Her arrival causes friction—one mom falls in love with her; Simone, on the other hand, is not so sure that Adela belongs—until a series of crises forces the women to see that, together, they can be “mother and child and friend, all at once.”



**The Scrapbook**, by *Heather Clark* (*Pantheon*). Anna, an American student at Harvard, falls deeply and unaccountably in love with Christoph, who is on exchange from Germany, in this melancholy début novel. Clark's narrative begins in 1996, but her characters' entanglement develops under

the long shadow of the Second World War, during which their grandfathers fought on opposing sides. As Anna contends with her infatuation, and with the weight of history, Christoph alternately embraces and eludes her, creating a sense that nothing—in their relationship, in the world—is what it seems. Full of references to music, literature, and philosophy, as well as heady discussions of Nazism and the complexities of national memory, this ambitious book, by an accomplished biographer of Sylvia Plath, ultimately fails to connect the stakes of its central romance to those of the larger questions that loom throughout.

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**Books**

# The First Time America Went Beard Crazy

A sweeping new history explores facial hair as a proving ground for notions about gender, race, and rebellion.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

July 21, 2025



*From the status conferred by powdered periwigs to the ham-fisted chauvinism of pro-beard propaganda, the cultural history of hair is as weird as it is weighty. Illustration by Cari Vander Yacht*

A stroll through the Presidential-portrait wing at the National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, D.C., is, among other things, a game of Now You See It, Now You Don't. In the beginning, not a whisper of a whisker—not on Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, or Monroe. In the early nineteenth century, John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren change things up with fluffy muttonchops that drift like snow from ears to laugh lines. Otherwise, it's a series of glabrous, faintly pink visages until you get to Abraham Lincoln. He adopted a beard after Grace Bedell, an eleven-

year-old girl from Chautauqua County, New York, wrote him in October, 1860, urging him to let his whiskers grow: “All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President.” Lincoln wrote back, wondering if “people would call it a piece of silly affectation.” But he took Grace’s advice, and won the election.

Moving into the late nineteenth century, you notice a post-Lincoln efflorescence of beards. Rutherford B. Hayes rocks a glorious russet-and-gray fur bib. James Garfield sports a luxuriant, pewter-colored mustache-and-beard combo. Chester Arthur’s ruddy face is framed by lacy, drooping curtains. And then, in the early twentieth century, another abrupt shift back to clean-shaven faces. No President since has cultivated a beard in office; the last with any facial hair—a sportive handlebar mustache—was William Howard Taft, who left the White House in 1913. J. D. Vance is the first Vice-President since the nineteenth century to wear a beard while in office.

If you’re the sort who wonders about the cultural meaning of such things, you will find much to ponder and enjoy in the historian Sarah Gold McBride’s “Whiskerology: The Culture of Hair in Nineteenth-Century America” (Harvard). Despite its whimsical title, “Whiskerology” is a serious academic book with many points to make about race and gender and their entanglement with coiffure in the United States. But McBride doesn’t shy from delightful anecdotes for those who like to magpie through history’s weirdnesses alongside its grave themes.

Consider Joseph Palmer, a Massachusetts farmer who, in the eighteen-forties, flouted convention by befriending transcendentalists and joining a short-lived agrarian commune. But, in 1830, what scandalized Palmer’s fellow-Americans was his beard. After he moved from his farm to the town of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, locals hurled rocks at him, called him an “old Jew,” and, when he refused to submit to a forcible shaving, threw him in jail. By the time he died, in 1875, whiskers were everywhere. But Palmer, or his survivors, had not forgotten his ordeal: his tombstone bore the inscription *“Persecuted for wearing the beard.”*

## What We’re Reading

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



This isn't the only tale of a hair-borne insult carried to the grave. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Thomas Butler, a Revolutionary War veteran, was twice court-martialled for refusing to cut his long tresses. They were, he said, "the gift of nature and an appendage to my person." Before dying, of yellow fever, Butler instructed friends to "bore a hole through the bottom of my coffin right under my head and let my queue"—his ponytail—"hang through it." Butler was too peculiarly a man of his time to pass as a proto-hippie. Still, I'm put in mind of David Crosby in 1970, singing about resisting pressure to cut his hair and instead letting his "freak flag fly." And of my brothers coming of age in L.A. in the seventies, all facing taunts for their long hair. ("Are you a girl or a boy?"—and other, more overtly homophobic insults.) Or of my nephew at Catholic school in the nineties, having his curls measured for height, not length, by a ruler placed atop his head. Why did people care? Who were these boys hurting with their lovely locks? But I digress.

McBride traces hair's cultural meaning through history. In medieval Europe through to the eighteenth century, people saw it as separate from the body—a substance extruded like, regrettably, excrement. By the eighteenth century, this theory was replaced by a view of hair as an ornament that signalled both aesthetics and social position. ("An English Puritan man who wore his hair long," McBride writes, "communicated to his fellow Puritans that his adherence to his faith had lapsed.") In the nineteenth century, the period that McBride focusses on, hair was framed as an intrinsic biological feature that revealed fundamental truths. Even a single strand could supposedly expose someone's race or criminality. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who proved influential in the U.S., claimed criminals had "thick hair" and "thin beards," with black hair prevailing over blond. Meanwhile, hair care

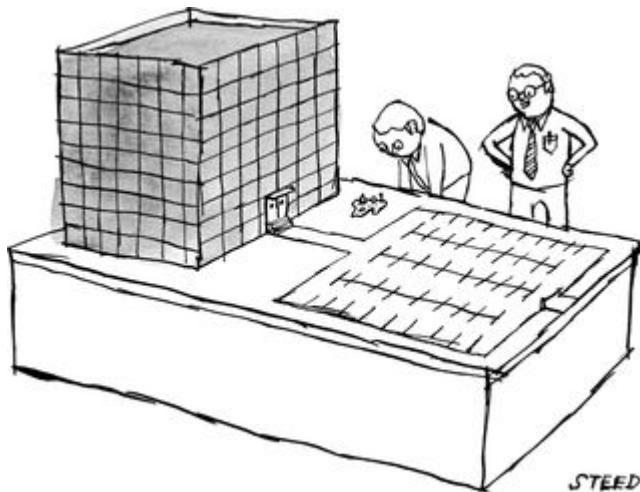
and styling became more of a form of self-expression, McBride says, however much that might be subject to cultural standards, fashion trends, and gender norms. (Somehow, the women of Trump world all know to wear their hair in cascading waves, just as they seem to know what the Mar-a-Lago face demands from fillers and Botox.)

As with many sweeping arguments, the fascination lies in the details. In colonial North America, men favored extravagant European aristocratic styles: fleecy, powdered periwigs with pigtails; high, peaked wigs bottom-heavy with crimped locks; long, rippling natural hair. Both African and European men wore wigs or grew their hair long. For an enslaved man, donning a silvery-white wig might be a way to claim social status or, perhaps, to parody his enslavers' beloved hairdos.

In the late eighteenth century, McBride writes, “long hair worn in public spaces could even *strengthen* a masculine gender presentation.” One example is the popular itinerant preacher known as the Public Universal Friend. Born Jemima Wilkinson in 1752 into a Rhode Island Quaker family, the Friend, after a severe illness, abandoned their birth name, claiming God had endowed them with an androgynous spirit. A contemporary journal described the Friend as “neither man nor woman.” When directly asked their gender, they replied simply, “I am that I am.” Yet in public they presented “explicitly and deliberately as masculine,” with followers referring to the Friend with male pronouns. This masculine exterior included dark clerical robes, a cravat, and, notably, a hair style of ringlets, “long and loose,” rather than covered by a cap, as was typical for women. Remarkably, such gender ambiguity did nothing to deter believers—the Friend attracted acolytes throughout New England.

Long hair and wigs on men fell from fashion in the early nineteenth century. Even in colonial times, Puritan leaders had condemned such styles, invoking St. Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians: “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.” Men’s hair that “savo’s of effeminacy,” the Reverend Michael Wigglesworth preached in 1669, “is unlawfull.” (Are you a girl or a boy?) For the Reverend Nicholas Noyes, wigs represented an alarming

“transmutation of the visible tokens and distinctions of sex.” Noyes was particularly affronted, McBride notes, by the fact that wig hair frequently came from women’s heads. (High-quality wigs used human hair, whereas cheaper ones employed horsehair or wool.) “Women’s hair when on their heads, is a token of Subjection,” Noyes declared. How, he demanded, could it cease to be so “when Men wear it?”



*“That’s an area for creativity and unstructured play.”*  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

The Puritans’ contention was strengthened by the fact that Indigenous men typically wore their hair long—a practice white missionaries were determined to eliminate. As late as 1901, William A. Jones, the Commissioner for Indian Affairs, instructed agents to “induce your male Indians to cut their hair.” Like face painting, long hair wasn’t “in keeping with the advancement they are making, or will soon be expected to make, in civilization.” Jones recommended starting with tact, then withholding rations and jobs from the noncompliant. But McBride argues that, by this point, Americans had begun viewing hair style as a personal choice, making Jones’s ultimatums controversial. Some agents refused to implement them, fearing Indigenous uprisings, and newspapers denounced his coercive tactics. Though Indian boarding schools still forcibly sheared children’s hair, Jones’s orders for adult men proved too noxious to enforce.

It took a while, but the Puritan view that linked femininity to long hair eventually prevailed. Wigs lost popularity partly owing to their association with English aristocracy. By the nineteenth century, long hair on men, too,

faced cultural disdain: it demanded care that industrious citizens of the young Republic supposedly lacked the time for. Let privileged women endure laborious beauty rituals—men fussing over ringlets undermined what McBride calls the American ideal of masculine “self-mastery.” The Supreme Court Justice John Jay, in a letter to John Adams, lamented arriving late to an appointment because he’d been getting his hair done —“ridiculous fashion makes us dependent on valets and the Lord knows who.” The resentment spread. In 1796, one critic argued that wigs encumbered the “open, manly, independent foreheads, which have freely sweat for the toil of freedom.”

This wasn’t an easy sell. The Founding Fathers loved their wigs. Washington’s famous Gilbert Stuart portrait shows his white hair styled to look wiglike, McBride says. She cites Virginia wigmaker records showing that Jefferson purchased multiple wigs, queues, and three pounds of hair powder in the seventeen-sixties and seventies. Long-haired holdouts persisted well into the nineteenth century—Indigenous men, Chinese immigrants (often harassed for their queues), and white men like Butler, who was as devoted to his mane as any glam-metal rocker.

You might think the beard boom made up for hair’s retreat from the head. Maybe it did, in part. But McBride gives other reasons why, after a century of clean-shavenness, nineteenth-century men embraced whiskers. Beards emerged as legible emblems of male virility and authority just as women began demanding the vote. The beard vogue of the late nineteenth century, McBride notes, was unusual in that it inspired celebratory writing about the whiskers themselves. Pro-beard propaganda included the daft theory, floated by the widely published slavery apologist and physician John Van Evrie, that the “Caucasian is really the only bearded race, and this is the most striking mark of its supremacy.” (Frederick Douglass, splendidly bearded, remarked that Van Evrie must have grown “weary of his *unprofitable* twaddle about the negro’s brain” to resort to “disquisitions upon the beard.”) It’s no coincidence, McBride argues, that the bearded lady became a sideshow staple during this era of male whiskers and women’s-rights activism. The “enfreakment” of women with facial hair, she suggests, helped reinforce the idea that beards—and power—belonged to men. That might be a stretch. Did men really need beards to remind anyone that they

were in charge? Still, McBride finds support in the anti-suffragist Horace Bushnell, who likened women voting to women growing beards, both being a “radical revolt against nature.”

One explanation for the rise of beards that deserves more attention is practical: avoiding dangerous razors. Before safety razors, shaving meant wielding a lethal blade against your throat—or trusting someone else to do it. Straight razors required skill to use without bloodshed. Henry David Thoreau’s brother died after nicking his finger on a rusty razor and developing tetanus—and such mishaps were likely not uncommon. Barbershops carried their own risks. In antebellum America, many were owned and staffed by African American men and patronized by whites; as the historian Sean Trainor notes, “Barbers ranked among the richest and most powerful members of the free Black community.” Over time, whites grew increasingly uneasy about submitting to Black barbers wielding sharp instruments. German immigrants gradually took over the trade, Trainor explains, initially serving “a growing population of working-class customers”—men “too poor, and in many cases too resentful of Black barbers’ success,” to frequent the best Black-owned shops. Meanwhile, a beard provided a simpler solution: a luxuriant facial covering requiring only the occasional scissor trim—no barber necessary.

There are some historical peculiarities that even patient scholarship cannot fully explain. Nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans collected locks of hair from the living and the dead alike, fetishizing these keepsakes.

McBride focusses on one motivation: the learned hope that a taxonomy of hair would reveal identity. This pseudoscience promised to resolve racial ambiguity—as in courtrooms where skin color proved insufficient for racial determination. (McBride cites Alexina Morrison, who, in the eighteen-fifties, escaped slavery in Louisiana with the claim that she was white and had been kidnapped by her enslaver. In the last two of three trials, Morrison’s lawyers presented evidence about her hair texture and color. Both of these juries found in her favor.)

Peter Arrell Browne, a Philadelphia lawyer, dubbed his hair science “trichology”; Dennis Corcoran, a New Orleans journalist with perhaps more humor, proposed “whiskerology.” These schemes produced hair collections

that survive today, no doubt bewildering (and possibly repulsing) generations of archivists. Browne left twelve volumes of animal and human hair at Drexel's Academy of Natural Sciences, many from famous people, including Presidents. Harvard's Peabody Museum houses hundreds of Indigenous hair clippings that an anthropologist diligently collected.

McBride is less interested in exploring another motivation for saving locks of hair: the particular sentimentalism that made people cherish the hair of loved ones, especially those who had died, or of honored forebears. Hair rested in scrapbooks or lockets, or was woven into Victorian jewelry. Today, as McBride notes, few of us see hair snippets as sweet emblems, as synecdoches for lost bodies or souls. We might save a lock from a child's first haircut, as we might save a baby tooth, but even those—if you have ever come across such an object in the back of a dusty drawer, you may agree with me—have a slightly creepy, relic-like quality. The collecting of hair is, in short, a deeply unrelated manifestation of deeply relatable emotions: love, grief, nostalgia, yearning. At least two nineteenth-century poems by English Romantics—one by John Keats, one by Leigh Hunt—express rapture at seeing a preserved lock of John Milton's hair. "There seems a love in hair, though it be dead," Hunt's poem reads, in part. "It is the gentlest, yet the strongest thread / Of our frail plant,—a blossom from the tree / Surviving the proud trunk;—as though it said / Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me / Behold affectionate eternity." The mystery endures. ♦



*Margaret Talbot* joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of *"By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American*

*Revolution.”*

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[\*\*Pop Music\*\*](#)

# The Sleazy, Unsettling Sounds of Mk.gee

*The artist, on tour this summer, makes songs underpinned by feelings of dread and longing.*

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

July 21, 2025



*It's been a while since someone figured out a way to make the electric guitar sound not only interesting but expansive, dangerous, infinite, pliable. Illustration by Keith Negley*

Earlier this summer, the singer and guitarist Mk.gee played two sold-out shows at the Stone Pony, a rock club just off the boardwalk in Asbury Park, New Jersey. The venue, which opened in 1974, is situated in a squat, salted building that previously housed Mrs. Jay's, a restaurant with a rough-and-tumble beachside bar next door, where broiling bikers once flushed down hot dogs with sweating pitchers of beer. In the seventies and eighties, the local upstart Bruce Springsteen was a regular patron and occasional performer at the Stone Pony. “That’s where I spent my Fridays and Sundays and I had no interest in what was going on in New York City or L.A.,” Springsteen told Nick Corasaniti, the author of “*I Don’t Want to Go Home: The Oral History of the Stone Pony*.” “I always said, ‘No, no, no.’ This is interesting. This is interesting to me.” Mk.gee, whose name is Michael Gordon, was brought up farther south, in Linwood, but seemed to feel

similarly about the place. (He has applauded what he calls the “deep, mad sincerity” of his home state.) The Stone Pony can accommodate around eight hundred and fifty people; a few days later, Mk.gee would play for some fifty thousand at Governors Ball, a festival in New York City. Gordon has appeared on “S.N.L.,” and received affirmations from Justin Bieber (Gordon is a co-producer on a song from “SWAG,” Bieber’s new album), Bon Iver, Frank Ocean, John Mayer, and Eric Clapton, who compared him to Prince and said, “He has found things to do on the guitar that are like nobody else.” This summer, Mk.gee (pronounced McGee) is touring the U.S. and Europe. Already, it seems unlikely that he will ever perform in a room this small again.

Gordon, who is twenty-eight, is a wildly compelling figure in the pop landscape. It’s been a while since someone figured out a way to make the electric guitar sound not only interesting but expansive, dangerous, infinite, pliable. Gordon began releasing music in 2016, but he didn’t put out his début studio album, “Two Star & the Dream Police,” until last year. It was one of my favorite records of 2024, gorgeously sleazy and vaguely unsettling—an R. & B. album, sort of, only filtered through punk and psychedelia and something stranger, darker, and more spiritually nebulous (the internet). Gordon is a voracious pillager, and his work contains echoes of dreamy, melancholic pop songs from the eighties and early nineties, including Don Henley’s “Boys of Summer,” Bruce Hornsby’s “Set Me in Motion,” and, perhaps most palpably, Phil Collins’s “In the Air Tonight”—it’s the same articulation of yearning and menace, big desire and big ennui.

I attended the first night in Asbury Park. The crowd was young, rapt, tightly packed. The rapper Lil Yachty was there. “Jersey, is this my town or what?” Gordon asked from the stage. People went bananas. Kids had been lined up on the sidewalk since at least midafternoon. Gordon is an entrancing but mysterious presence in a room. He played a vintage Fender Jaguar, wore work boots, and assumed a wide stance. His face was hidden by wavy tendrils of hair. He was either shrouded in haze (the gasps of the fog machine eventually became indistinguishable from the vapor being collectively exhaled by the crowd) or obscured by low-angle backlighting. On paper, that effect might sound vaguely noirish—a forties gumshoe sparking up in the murky glow of a gas lamp—yet here it felt futuristic,

almost extraterrestrial. It also looked extremely cool. (These days, opacity and obtuseness can feel like stylish munitions against a culture of relentless surveillance—hiding reconfigured as a kind of radical gesture.) Mk.gee’s music sometimes reminds me of the disorientation that comes from scrolling Instagram for a little too long, easing into a degraded sense of what is real and what is fantasy, of who you are and what you want. Gordon is interested in interrogating those odd, transitory, dissociative states—the moments in which we are deeply unmoored and aesthetically adrift. Though his guitar playing is tactile, occasionally virtuosic, he also seems to be purposefully making music that sounds like Phone. Something about it forces a person to consider her own catastrophic overreliance on technology, and to choose peace. (By the end of the evening, I was prepared to fastball my device into the frothing depths of the Atlantic.)

Gordon was accompanied by the multi-instrumentalist and programmer Zack Sekoff and the guitarist Andrew Aged. The trio played “*ROCKMAN*,” a one-off single from 2024. It’s an ambitious and idiosyncratic song that specifically recalls the Police. (I hear “Wrapped Around Your Finger” in the verses, though you could probably take your pick of singles to compare it to—Gordon mimics then reconfigures Sting’s phrasing and lopped-off delivery, the particular way he backs off a note.) Still, Gordon is not a romantic, and, whereas “Wrapped Around Your Finger” is about eternal, reluctant devotion, “*ROCKMAN*” positions love as less certain and more threatening. (The cover photo from the single is of someone pointing a handgun at a modular synthesizer.) The first verse is equal parts horny and portentous:

Honey  
Just shut up and ride  
Wherever you are  
I want it on fire

Yet, by the time Gordon arrives at the chorus, his voice is so suffused with tenderness—he sings in warm, cascading harmony with himself—that “*ROCKMAN*” begins to feel as if it’s actually about pining, or the act of slowly annihilating yourself for a person who’s hovering slightly out of reach. Gordon can be a bit of a trickster, and his songs rarely do what it

seems like they should; resolutions are scant, and his hooks, though gripping, are often buried or interrupted. Everything sounds wobbly and underwater. Occasionally, an errant sound (an eagle screeching, the clanging of metal, a whisper) drifts through a verse. Around two and a half minutes into “I Want,” a ballad of obsession and self-doubt (“I’m not your hero / But I got his desire,” Gordon moans), the track briefly becomes an entirely different tune, gnarled and jerky, then finally slips back into place. In an interview with the *Times* last year, Gordon referred to his work as “refractions of perfect songs” and brought up a friend’s characterization of his writing as “trying to remember what pop music sounds like.” These are hits, made surreal. Gordon is not an especially confessional writer, but his voice, which at times stretches into a coarse falsetto, contains enormous amounts of emotion. “Alesis,” one of the best songs on “Two Star & the Dream Police,” is about estrangement and oblivion:

Why me? Or better, why you?  
When we can fake it like any way we want to  
Why bleed when we don’t have to?

In Asbury Park, Gordon let the crowd sing the “Why me?” part, and we delivered the line with fervor. The question felt more confrontational than self-pitying. Even when Gordon’s songs don’t make narrative sense, they are underpinned by feelings of dread, longing, and frustration; some of them are nearly combative. Part of that seems inherent in Gordon’s creative philosophy—he likes wonkiness, and thwarting expectations, and never being perfectly legible or complacent. Even the Stone Pony dates had flickers of defiance—it would have made more sense, maybe, for Gordon to post up at a club in Brooklyn. Instead, he put on a show for restless Jersey teens, and anyone willing to make the journey from elsewhere, to drive toward the ocean until they ran out of road. He closed his encore with “Candy,” a song he had also played earlier in the set. (He does that sometimes.) It’s probably Gordon’s most forgiving and humane composition. “I’ve done some bad, I won’t fake it / I got patterns, don’t think I’ll shake it,” he sang, his voice soft. “Ah, but you fuck up too, and that’s fine / I cut you slack, you cut me mine.” The idea seemed to be that we all lose our marbles sometimes. The audience, hungry and eager, screamed along. ♦



*Amanda Petrusich* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records.](#)”

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[On Television](#)

# The Trophy Abs and Soul Ties of “Love Island USA”

The Peacock reality show, filmed in Fiji, offers a parallel America in which nearly naked contestants attempt to pair up and the audience votes on the winning couple.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

July 18, 2025

*The villa where the action goes down, soaked in neon pink and aqua, is like a hallucinated version of Miami. Illustration by Fromm Studio*

One good way to enjoy the latest season of “Love Island USA”—the seventh, in which new episodes aired on Peacock almost every day for six weeks and just wrapped up—is to imagine that you have made the questionable choice to pursue a new relationship by appearing on the show. You’re flown to Fiji—nice clime, clear water. Suddenly, you’re no longer allowed to wear the usual sort of torso-obscuring shirt, unless it’s totally unbuttoned in order to display your trophy case of abs. (You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t spend some fascistic percentage of your waking hours in the gym.) Around your waist, you’re wearing a fanny pack full of recording gadgetry; hanging from a thick cord around your neck, like the statement gem on an avant-garde necklace, is a microphone covered in fuzz. You can’t hide the evidence of TV production and also be as naked as this particular production insists that you be, and so even as you walk around in your seemingly realistic way, kissing and telling and sleeping in a room full of couples squirming under the sheets, you are also a perpetual visual reminder of our growing habit of surveilling while also being surveilled. You’re here to meet and consort with a harem of other hotties, all pining equally for an experience of love, and to do so—hence all the equipment—in front of an audience of millions who get to vote along the way, determining, ultimately, the winning couple.

Your fellow-contestants are from all over the United States (plus a couple of foreigners), and have all kinds of jobs. One's a rodeo performer. Two are nurses. It almost goes without saying that a few work as models on the side. One guy runs an after-school program for kids. He and another man—among the most conventionally “successful” of the group—used to play pro basketball overseas. You meet the gang and start to pair off; soon, you're speaking in an odd “Love Island” patois. (The show is a spinoff of a version in the U.K., but why the British lingo proved so durable as the franchise crossed the Atlantic is a mystery.) To talk with another person, for instance, is to “pull” him or her “for a chat.” “Cuddling” seems to mean any activity involving nighttime touching, from big-spoon-little-spoon sleeping all the way to the threshold of sex.

We hear a lot these days about the atrophy of attention spans, and what it portends for sundry forms of culture and art, but here we have a nonfiction narrative, more than thirty hours in length, whose whole substance is meeting and chatting and cuddling. Contestants decide to get together and decide to cut ties—and sometimes they meet somebody new (in this dimension, a late addition to the cast is called a “bombshell”) and set off on a different romantic adventure.

The show is filmed in the South Pacific, but the villa where the action goes down, soaked in pink and aqua light from neon bulbs, is designed to look like a hallucinated version of Miami, which might be the spiritual capital of the parallel America that's promulgated by “Love Island.” These people dress for the beach by day and for the club by night. They shuttle, chatting, between nooks given proper names that are displayed in brightly lit cursive signs. One of these cozy setups—the one most often smooched in, it seems—is called Soul Ties, a term I have heard only in half-woo-woo, half-evangelical Christian circles, designating the belief that to have sex with someone is to link your fate to theirs, your spirit to their spirit, in an invisible but perilous lifelong bond. One of the guys on the show this season—a tall, goofy, sweet kid named Austin, who, you may notice, just about never sits up straight—claims to have courted scores of lovers and sent thousands of nude photographs: soul ties galore.

In the course of the season, you learn lots of lessons. If you're a guy, the first one is that you have to make a nice big breakfast for your girl. That's the "bare minimum," we're told more than once. The dudes wake up early and whip up eggs and sometimes pancakes. Don't skimp on the protein. Come up with cute dates: yoga or meditation or a spin through the little weight room on the far side of the pool. Step it up! Be creative! Sometimes you'll be made to participate in one of the "Love Island" challenges: lurid spectacles like satyr plays, which force upon the villa denizens an organized orgy of makeouts and partner swaps, usually involving campy outfits. You end up covered in milk or some kind of goopy slime, and also saliva from so many wet kisses. The idea is to play along, but not so eagerly that it gives your favorite girl the ick.

If you're a woman, there's nothing more important than to be a "girl's girl." Come what may on the rough seas of relationships, the sisterhood among female contestants is lifesaving. A boy treats you poorly? One of the girls will be there to wipe the tears from your face and stem the sudden mudslide of your dampened makeup. She'll impress upon you—usually rightly—that he's a child, or that he's giving player vibes, or that he's been gaslighting or love-bombing or leading you on all along. Even if you're wrong, she'll offer you succor instead of correction. "Although I'm not the friend to feed into my friends' delusions at all—you can ask any of them—I will feed into this one," says Olandria, one of the funnier and cooler people in the villa, offering an impromptu manifesto on the practice of girl's-girlism. "At this point in time, she just needs support. And I can be that support system. Even if I don't really support your decision." That's love.

Olandria's wise mix of support and withheld disapproval is directed toward a contestant named Huda, easily the most compelling figure to come through the doors of the villa this season. She's got big brown eyes, a huge brush of black eyelashes, and a pair of cherry-red pool floaties for lips. Her face is spangled with freckles, and when she's talking directly to the camera she's often vulnerably pouting or downright crying. When she finds something funny, she says, "I'm screaming," without raising her voice. She's easily the star of this year's show, because she's both a cautionary tale and a questing hero.

Huda showed up at the villa with a secret. She has a child. (“I’m a mom,” she informs one of her friends, after holding out for a bit. “Mamacita?” he asks, not really processing the news.) She’s shy with the info, but still throws herself into an intense, gauchely exclusive (strict monogamy is looked down on in this milieu), and soon tumultuous pairing with a boy named Jeremiah. They’re constantly hugging and engaging in heavy petting —excuse me: cuddling—and then getting into awkward arguments that more than once conclude with Huda calling Jeremiah a bitch. Huda’s great talent is that—“screaming” notwithstanding—she is always emoting, with none of the cynicism or strategic intention of her housemates. (One of them, a dancer named Ace, is so dastardly that he should be barred from holding political office.)

Huda—open, messy, sensitive, insecure, verbally abusive, and a little bit toxic, sure, but still one of the girls and therefore, by necessity, your friend —miraculously makes it to the final episode. But, saddled with another boy she can’t consistently get along with, she doesn’t pull off the win. (That distinction goes to a mostly boring boy named Bryan and a nice girl named Amaya, whose ego was bruised by a short coupling with Ace but who keeps rising like a phoenix.)

That’s the thing about this show. It’s about the friends and the love matches you make in the villa, one on one, but, before long, America’s teeming waves of restless voters come rudely into the frame. “I feel like America fucking hates me,” Huda cries one night. “America, you tore us up with that one,” Olandria says after one particularly wrenching elimination. They’re both right to be wary, even resentful. America will steal your girl and hurt your feelings. America will disappear your closest friends. But don’t worry. You’ll see them on the other side. Smile! Wave to the camera! Live to cuddle another night. ♦



*Vinson Cunningham* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His début novel, “[\*Great Expectations\*](#),” came out in March, 2024.

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# “Eddington” Is a Lethally Self-Satisfied *COVID* Satire

*In Ari Aster’s dark comedy, Joaquin Phoenix plays the sheriff of a New Mexico town riven by political clashes and pandemic anxieties.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

July 18, 2025



Joaquin Phoenix and Pedro Pascal star in Ari Aster’s film. Illustration by Chris W. Kim

“Eddington” is a slog, but a slog with ambitions—and its director and screenwriter, Ari Aster, is savvy enough to cultivate an air of mystery about what those ambitions are. His earlier chillers, “Hereditary” (2018) and “Midsommar” (2019), had their labyrinthine ambiguities, too, but they also had propulsive craft and cunning, plus a resolute commitment to scaring us stupid. Then came the ungainly “Beau Is Afraid” (2023), a cavalcade of Oedipal neuroses both showy and coy, in which Aster didn’t seem to lose focus so much as sacrifice it on the altar of auteurism. With “Eddington,” his high-minded unravelling continues. No longer a horror wunderkind, Aster, at thirty-nine, yearns to be an impish anatomist of the body politic. The times grow worse and worse; must his movies follow suit?

“Eddington” cycles through genres with a deliberate yet half-distracted air, as if the very conventions of narrative have become caught in a feedback

loop. The film has the dust of a Western, the snark of a satire, the violence of a thriller, the nihilism of a noir, and the bloat of an epic. It also has the stale taste of yesterday’s headlines, peering backward, as it does, to the early days of *COVID-19*. Aster’s subject is nothing less than the void of meaning—the morass of misinformation and irreconcilable political rancor—into which America has tumbled since the pandemic. The isolated, polarized way we live now, he insists, can be traced back to the misery of how we lived then.

For proof, look no further than Eddington, New Mexico, a fictional town of two thousand three hundred and forty-five souls. (That number will dip by the movie’s end.) A mask mandate is in effect, but several Eddingtonians prove defiant, including the sheriff, Joe Cross (Joaquin Phoenix), who doesn’t realize that his asthmatic lungs have more to fear from *COVID* than from an N95. Joe is affable, obtuse, and easily aggrieved. He observes the slow-moving line outside a market where maskless customers are turned away, and scoffs in disbelief at such performative paranoia. The town’s mayor, Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal), firmly disagrees, placing himself and Joe on an ugly collision course. Ted is good-looking, popular, and civic-minded, which makes him, naturally, a disingenuous liberal scold. In Aster’s cynical schema, ideology is the phoniest mask of all, to be slipped on and off with frictionless ease.

Ted is running for reelection, and his campaign ad, in one of the film’s better gags, presents Eddington as a beaming multiracial utopia. (An onlooker wonders if Black extras were shipped in for filming.) But Ted’s real agenda has nothing to do with diversity; it hinges on the promise of a vast A.I. data center that’s being built nearby. The film’s cinematographer, Darius Khondji, frames the construction site as if it were the monolith in “2001: A Space Odyssey,” looming over Eddington like an omen. What it portends, though, is the opposite of a cosmic leap forward. The rise of artificial intelligence will only hasten humanity’s inexorable decline.

Bedlam is already upon us, to judge by the sheer quantity of invective we hear and, more important, see. “Eddington” is a visual harangue—an onslaught of Facebook posts, TikTok captions, cable-news chyrons, and attack-ad slogans. The history of the present moment, it appears, will be

written in a language that is imbecilic to the point of incoherence, and Aster has, accordingly, filled the movie with signs and blunders. “*Your being manipulated*,” an anti-lockdown message booms—one of several that Joe displays after he decides to run for mayor against Ted. Joe’s decision infuriates his wife, Louise (Emma Stone), the latest setback in a marriage that already looks starved of joy. If something immediately feels off about “Eddington,” it’s how wasted Stone is in this role, whose delicate sadness Aster seems uncertain whether to ridicule or dramatize.

Louise has a hushed, scandal-tinged history with Ted, and she fears not only that their secrets will be dragged back into the open but that Joe himself, in a misguided lust for revenge, will be doing the dragging. That political positions are often a cover for petty jealousy and one-upmanship is hardly news, but Aster inflates the idea into a governing thesis. In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, anti-police protests reach as far as Eddington, and only a fool would assume the young activists charging into the fray are as pure of motive as they claim. For every Sarah (Amélie Hoeferle), a tireless proponent of Black Lives Matter, there’s also a Brian (Cameron Mann), a tireless proponent of getting into Sarah’s pants. So dedicatedly horny is Brian that he becomes remarkably eloquent about anti-racism—a development that Aster regards as proof of just how easily, and mindlessly, the language of social justice can be co-opted.

Anthony Fauci, Hillary Clinton, George Floyd, George Soros, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Kyle Rittenhouse, hydroxychloroquine, Bitcoin, Antifa—“Eddington” references all these and more, as if to position Aster as a nonpartisan provocateur. Why, then, given such a range of targets, is it the conviction of the young and woke that stings him into comic rebuke? The tell comes when Brian lectures his family on what it means to dismantle whiteness, setting up his father to deliver the script’s idea of a knockout punch line: “Are you fucking retarded? What the fuck are you talking about? You’re white!” The self-flagellating nature of progressive activism may be ripe for mockery, but Aster goes further than just skewering the pieties of the left; he panders for reactionary laughs.

Would an “Eddington” set during a more recent wave of protests—say, those on behalf of Palestinians, or undocumented immigrants—dismiss the

participants so blithely? Happily, we'll never know; the datedness of Aster's scenario has its uses. At any rate, the director evidently has more patience for Eddington's right-wing fringe. In one corner skulks Vernon Jefferson Peak (Austin Butler), a seductive Christian cult leader who soon has Louise under his spell. More in-your-face is Louise's mother, Dawn, who is awash in sub-QAnon conspiracy theories, but whom Deirdre O'Connell plays with such verve that even her wildest ravings hold you oddly rapt. Most indulged of all is Joe himself, the kind of bogeyman that our headlines keep in dispiriting circulation: a white, middle-aged male with troubles at home and convenient access to firearms.

When "Eddington" premiered, at Cannes, some invoked the novels of Jim Thompson. The comparison isn't exactly flattering; next to the unflinching nastiness of hardboiled prose, Aster's self-satisfied japes feel decidedly over easy. Unlike, say, Nick Corey, the small-town sheriff who leaves a bloody trail through Thompson's "Pop. 1280," Joe is pathetically hapless. He doesn't have Nick's insidious way with words, or his way with women. It's worth recalling that Phoenix played the beaten-down antihero of "Beau Is Afraid," and Joe, though far more of a fighter, is no less thoroughly emasculated: rejected and abandoned by Louise, implicitly cuckolded by Ted, and, in one gratuitous scene, dragged naked to a toilet. Don't ask why; it's an Aster joint, and full-frontal humiliation comes with the territory.

It's worth wondering, after "You Were Never Really Here" (2018) and "Joker" (2019), why we need to see Phoenix descend again into bouts of murderous violence. (The film climaxes with severed limbs, an exploding head, and conjoined blasts of gunfire and hellfire, all put across with a juvenile smirk.) But Phoenix never plays the same monster twice, and he's attuned to the comic pathos of quieter moments. What you'll likely remember about "Eddington" is not just Joe's cold-eyed glare as he shoulders his rifle but also the endearing incompetence of his online campaign announcement, or the tenderness in his voice when he speaks of Louise. The trouble with Joe, then, isn't Phoenix; it's the conception of Joe as an ideal point of identification. Aster knows New Mexico well—he spent part of his childhood in Santa Fe—and he has spoken, in interviews, of his desire to capture a specific environment in which characters from all backgrounds could clash without judgment, and in which we could,

presumably, catch a glimpse of ourselves. But why tether such a film to Joe's perspective? If the aim is a panorama, why privilege a sociopath?

Really, the problem with "Eddington" is not that Aster judges his characters. It's that he barely finds them interesting enough to judge, and his boredom proves infectious. What purpose is served by the figure of Joe's deputy Michael (Micheal Ward), seemingly Eddington's sole Black resident of note? He exists only to stoically absorb punishment from white townsfolk, whether it's Sarah, who criticizes him for not joining a B.L.M. protest, or Guy (Luke Grimes), a fellow-deputy who turns against him overnight. Can we add Aster to the list of his tormentors? Ward is a fine actor, but the director gives him virtually nothing to play or express. He grants little more to the few Indigenous actors in the ensemble, including William Belleau, cast as Pueblo police officers from the surrounding county, who pop up on occasion to argue with Joe over jurisdictional issues. That's a sharper, sadder joke than I think Aster intends. These men have no place in Eddington—and neither, in any meaningful sense, do we. ♦



*Justin Chang* is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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# Poems

- **“Astounding Stories”**

By Robert Pinsky | “Fear of the foreign and the fear of being foreign.”

- **“Rift”**

By Arthur Sze | “How is it you shed earlier selves and are more yourself with each shedding?”

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[Poems](#)

# Astounding Stories

By [Robert Pinsky](#)

July 21, 2025

Fear of the foreign and the fear of being foreign.  
Terror of nuns from the Star of the Sea Lyceum  
Afloat in hooded habits with punishing rulers.

Difference. Wanting “someone who looks like me”  
Is different in different spaces. Jews in *Der Stürmer*  
Don’t look like Paul Newman or Lauren Bacall.

The nuns would teach you a lesson, said my mother.  
After her injury she and I spoke little,  
Concussed as she was, apart in the dim room,

But we did share the sci-fi magazines.  
We earthlings colonized or colonial, history  
Remade as future. One story made me wonder

Was I really one of the doomed ancestors  
Stranded to die on a foreign planet, or was I  
The microscopic descendants they designed.

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[Robert Pinsky](#) served as U.S. Poet Laureate for three terms. His poetry collections include “[Proverbs of Limbo](#),” and a record of the same title, part of his “PoemJazz” series, was released in 2023.

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[Poems](#)

# Rift

By [Arthur Sze](#)

July 21, 2025

As you tie shoelaces, a driver runs a stop sign and crashes into a van—  
before dawn, a lightning flash, then a torrent of rain—  
an archeologist unearths a whistle in the shape of a maize god emerging out  
of a flower—  
living on a float house, you reeked of yellow cedar smoke—  
you see a great blue heron perched on the float-house railing stretch its  
wings—  
under a street light, a raccoon on hind legs stretches and sniffs a mailbox—  
hail and rain reverberate on the roof like staccato chords—  
at the equinox, sunlight slants across a pyramid and forms, along the nine  
tiers, a descending serpent of light—  
we dilate each other's eyes—  
how is it you shed earlier selves and are more yourself with each shedding?  
—  
in defeat, you were thrown to the muck and, dazed, got back up,  
determined, reinvigorated—  
in defeat, you quickened to the pulse of a river—

a pianist leans over the keyboard, about to detonate the silence—  
aroma of pears scattered in the grass—  
you followed the thread of poetry out of a maze into sunlight—  
we revel in physical existence—  
we revel in the mysteries of worlds inside this world—  
water drains off the roof as dawn opens a rift of lapis-lazuli sky—

*Arthur Sze received the 2025 Bollingen Prize for lifetime achievement in American poetry. His books include “[Into the Hush](#)” and “[The White Orchard: Selected Interviews, Essays, and Poems](#).”*

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- **[The Crossword: Wednesday, July 16, 2025](#)**

By Robyn Weintraub | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

[\*\*Crossword\*\*](#)

# The Crossword: Wednesday, July 16, 2025

*A beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [\*\*Robyn Weintraub\*\*](#)

July 16, 2025



[\*\*Robyn Weintraub\*\*](#) has been constructing crosswords since 2010 and began contributing puzzles to *The New Yorker* in 2020. Her puzzles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *American Crossword Puzzle Tournament*.

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