PRICE $9.99

THE NEW YORKER

OCT. 13, 2025

Stauffer

The New Yorker Magazine

[Oct 07]

- Goings On
- The Talk of the Town
- Reporting & Essays
- Takes
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Fiction
- The Critics
- Poems
- Cartoons
- Puzzles & Games

Goings On

- **Man Ray’s Deadpan Wit on Display at the Met**
  Also: an immersive “Phantom of the Opera” follow-up, the Rock in “The Smashing Machine,” Paris Opera Ballet, and more.
- **The Mother as Antihero**
  Sasha Bonét, the author of “The Waterbearers,” shares four books about mothers who are both incredible and imperfect.

Goings On

Man Ray’s Deadpan Wit on Display at the Met

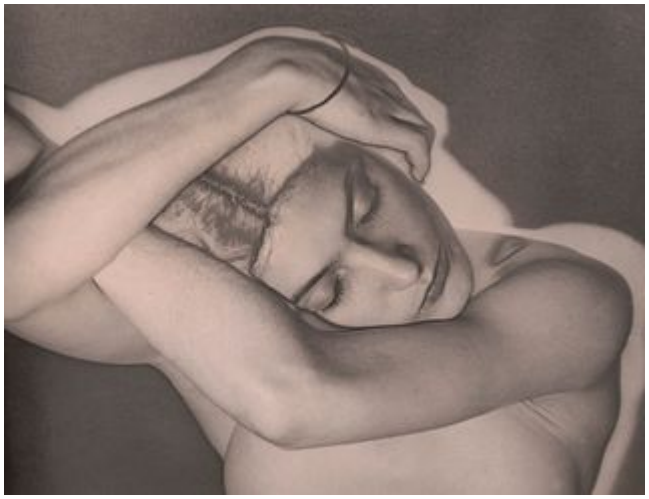
Also: an immersive “Phantom of the Opera” follow-up, the Rock in “The Smashing Machine,” Paris Opera Ballet, and more.

By Vince Aletti, Helen Shaw, Sheldon Pearce, Hilton Als, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, and Dan Stahl

October 3, 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.***

“When Objects Dream,” the sensational **Man Ray** show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Feb. 1), is centered on the artist’s refined experiments with the cameraless images he called rayographs: the shadowy impressions left on photographic paper by scattered objects after the paper has been exposed to light. It should come as no surprise that his first experiments in the form, published, in 1922, as a suite of twelve abstract images, are among his most accomplished. Ray had already channelled the antic, subversive spirit of Dada and Surrealism with a series of readymade sculptures that included a flatiron studded with a row of tacks. But, like Marcel Duchamp, Ray was a movement unto himself. No matter the medium—painting, sculpture, film, photography—he reimagined it with a focussed intelligence and a deadpan wit that still looks definitively avant-garde.



“Untitled,” 1931.Photograph © Man Ray 2015 Trust / ARS / ADAGP / Courtesy Bluff Collection

At the Met, the curators Stephanie D’Alessandro and Stephen C. Pinson set up a lively dialogue across mediums, which shows how all of Ray’s work from the nineteen-twenties and onward was intimately connected to his experiments in photography. Their installation opens up like a series of magic boxes, with windows that draw visitors deep into the exhibition, across time and space. As promised, many of the most astonishing images are photograms that, even when we can make out their ordinary components—a magnet, a pipe, a key, a handgun—glow like visions from another consciousness. And they always illuminate a painting or a sculpture nearby. Ray’s “Lampshade” (1921), a curl of painted tin suspended from a thin metal pole, anticipates the elegance and simplicity of many rayographs that followed. A group of solarized photographs, including some of Ray’s most famous portraits and nudes, capture the soft, silvery quality of many of the rayographs in a more concentrated form.

Ray’s most chaotic photograms—jumbles that push out of the frame or look like time bombs ready to explode—find echoes in his films, projected on the back walls, a show in themselves. Nervous, comic, plotless, and mesmerizing, his experimental shorts are classic underground cinema. Their restless energy doesn’t exactly tie everything together, but they help highlight the spirit of inventiveness that electrifies the exhibition as a whole.—*Vince Aletti*

About Town

Broadway

In James Graham's **"PUNCH,"** based on Jacob Dunne's memoir "Right from Wrong," Jacob (an impressive Will Harrison) is an aggressive lad from Nottingham, who kills a man at a bar with a single punch. A restorative-justice initiative links Jacob to the victim's parents, whose interest in him manages to counter the forces drawing him back toward violence. Graham's play, imported from the U.K. by Manhattan Theatre Club, is essentially a public-service announcement for the program that helped Dunne, its facts enlivened by the director Adam Penford's peripatetic choreography. Dunne's individual story has value, poignancy, and warmth, but the play's wider implication—that class paralysis can only be disrupted by tragedy—chills the blood.—*Helen Shaw (Samuel J. Friedman; through Nov. 2.)*

Alt-Pop

The producer and guitarist Nate Amos and the singer Rachel Brown, the duo behind the indie band **Water from Your Eyes,** were once a couple; ironically, they only locked in after they broke up. The pair started in Chicago, releasing four albums amid a move to Brooklyn, but they truly discovered their balance on the 2021 LP "Structure," which Brown credits with helping them become friends again. Since signing to Matador, the band has sharpened its sound into a quirky, exhilarated alt-pop, too uncanny to be dance-punk and too lively to be slacker rock. "Everyone's Crushed," from 2023, brought all of the band's previous exploits into alignment with a nihilistic sense of humor, while the latest Water from Your Eyes album, "It's a Beautiful Place," is beefier and harder to pin down, as the duo search for optimism amid absurdity.—*Sheldon Pearce (Bowery Ballroom; Oct. 10.)*

Art

“Community Service,” 2024.Art work by Parmen Daushvili / Courtesy the artist / Polina Berlin Gallery; Photograph by Steven Probert

Entering the London-based painter **Parmen Daushvili’s** world of beautiful muted colors, with its aquamarine blues and greens, is rather like entering a pool filled with eucalyptus-infused water—cool, refreshing, and transformative to both body and spirit. While the figures in some of the larger canvases are reminiscent of Lucian Freud’s twisting and turning sitters, Daushvili’s strongest work is not monumental but small and intimate. The outstanding “Community Service” (2024) is populated by a single person who seems to move toward us even while standing still under the scrim of the painter’s beautiful sense of color and his poetic, and ultimately gentle, sensibility.—*Hilton Als (Polina Berlin; through Oct. 11.)*

Off Broadway

The vanishing, last year, of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Phantom of the Opera” from Broadway (*cape whooshes mysteriously*) makes way for its not-quite-replacement, **“Masquerade,”** an immersive version directed by Diane Paulus. Theatregoers, dressed in cocktail attire, pursue—but do not apprehend!—the famously masked monster and his soprano abductee, chasing them from the vaulted basement of a midtown building to its roof. Even diligent Webberheads will need to overlook certain gaffes, like a hero who seems to have tied *himself* up in a climactic moment and a Stygian lair well marked with glowing Exit signs. The excitement of extraordinary voices singing close by fades, too, due to the necessity of canned

accompaniment—it's somehow not that scary to be stalked by a phantom of the karaoke.—*H.S. (218 W. 57th St.; through Feb. 1.)*

Dance

Paris Opera Ballet performing "Red Carpet."Photograph by Julien Benhamou

For its first visit to New York since 2012, the **Paris Opera Ballet** isn't bringing any of the classical works for which it is known, but instead a new piece by the brand-name Israeli-born contemporary choreographer Hofesh Shechter. His "Red Carpet" does supply some expected Parisian glamour: red velvet curtains, costumes by Chanel, a giant chandelier as in "The Phantom of the Opera." But the mode is his usual earthy dream, with live music that suggests rock concerts and dance clubs, clumps of bodies that sink and slink as arms float overhead, and shifting lines and circles out of some feral folk dance.—*Brian Seibert (City Center; Oct. 9-12.)*

Movies

Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson, a longtime star professional wrestler, brings wit and insight to his leading role in **"The Smashing Machine,"** a bio-pic about the mixed-martial-arts fighter Mark Kerr. The writer and director, Benny Safdie, presents the story from 1997, when Kerr had his first triumphs, to 2000, when personal problems caught up with him. Safdie perceptively locates the protagonist's troubling inner contradictions—the atavistic fury that drives him to compete and the intense self-control that competition demands—but dramatizes such outer crises as opioid addiction and conflict with his girlfriend (Emily Blunt) only schematically. The

director’s approach is coolly distant and underpowered; even scenes of bloody battle in the ring feel merely informational. Nonetheless, Johnson’s performance is eerily introverted and tautly disciplined; his presence is commanding from start to finish.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

Bar Tab

Dan Stahl finds I.P.A.s, arcade games, and portals in FiDi.

Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

If you play it right, a visit to the new, FiDi outpost of **Barcade**—the hybrid arcade and craft-beer bar that originated in Williamsburg twenty-one years ago—leads to a quasi-inter-dimensional portal. Your first move, after entering, is to advance to the stone countertop on your left. Survey the chalkboard menu, rich in I.P.A.s, and choose according to your mettle. If

that means the Evil Twin Pink Pineapple, prepare for a goblet of roseate brew whose tartness zaps the mouth like a laser. Explore your surroundings. Some may look familiar: pinball machines, Ms. Pac-Man, Street Fighter. Others may seem foreign, literally, such as !, a Japanese game whose name signifies “extreme table flipping!” A knowledge of the language will aid you, as the instructions are in kanji. “At the wedding . . . something’s happened,” a player recently endeavored to translate. He commenced pounding a small table attached to the machine, then victoriously upended it. Onscreen, a bridezilla sent an equivalent table soaring through a banquet hall, felling at least one chandelier. Venture to the far corner of the bar, where a staircase descends to a subterranean wood-panelled lair; perhaps the greatest arcade game of all time, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; and the aforementioned portal. Amid the blinking screens and battered tabletops, with a synth-heavy eighties anthem mingling with ambient beeps and boops, you may feel yourself transported four decades back—or, if you’ve imbibed liberally, into another reality altogether, one in which you are somehow a character in the universe of games surrounding you. But this state is fleeting, especially during family hours on Sunday, when a parental call to arms can instantly return you to the real world: “Hey, Susan—I have to change Reesie’s diaper!”

A New Yorker Quiz

It’s finally feeling like fall. Can you guess who wrote these autumnal works?

A poem, from earlier this year, which opens with the lines, “Black walnuts hitting a barn roof / Fairly rapped the morning.”

A poem, from 2017, which includes a stanza that reads, “Fall was approaching. / But I remember / it was always approaching / once school ended.”

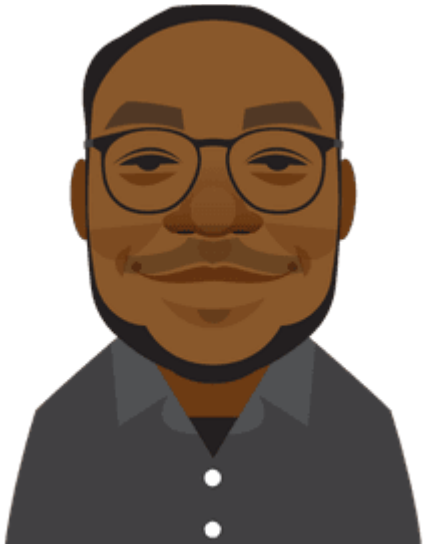
A story, written around 1961, which begins “November. Cold outside. It was warm inside, and the big combination played twelve wonderful records without stopping.”

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *What's on your nightstand?*
- *A few tunes for October*
- *The restaurant run by nonnas*

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.



Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.

Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin."
Brian Seibert has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2002. He is the author of "What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing," which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

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."
Dan Stahl is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.

Book Currents

The Mother as Antihero

Sasha Bonét, the author of "The Waterbearers," shares four books about imperfect mothers.

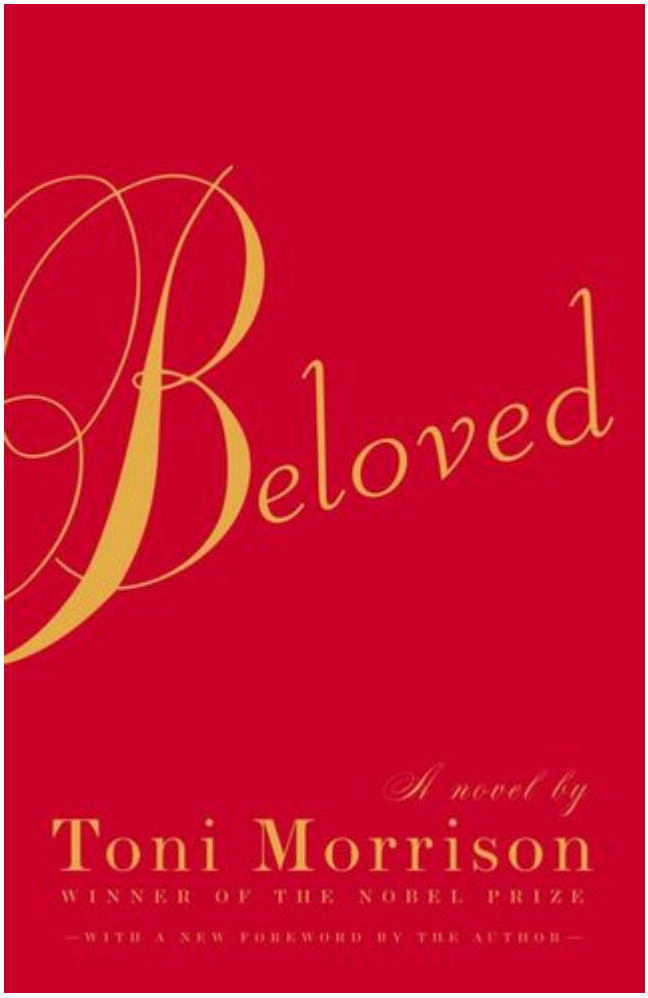
September 24, 2025

You're reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they're reading. ***Sign up for the Goings On newsletter*** *to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your inbox.*

Sasha Bonét's matrilineal memoir, "The Waterbearers," traces the lives of her mother and grandmother: powerful, complicated women whose personalities have been shaped by the rough edges of American society. Mothers, she suggests, can pass on both grace and grief. The flow of the bayous of Houston, where she grew up, remind her of "the way my mother and grandmother pour into me, and I into my daughter; the valuable and the harmful, the minerals and the mud." Not long ago, she joined us to discuss four other books that examine complex mothers. Her remarks have been edited and condensed.

Beloved

by Toni Morrison



Amazon | **Bookshop**

“Beloved” centers on a formerly enslaved woman named Sethe, who killed one of her daughters to keep her from becoming enslaved. And then, one day, years later, the daughter she killed, who has been lingering in the novel in spirit form, shows up as a physical being named Beloved.

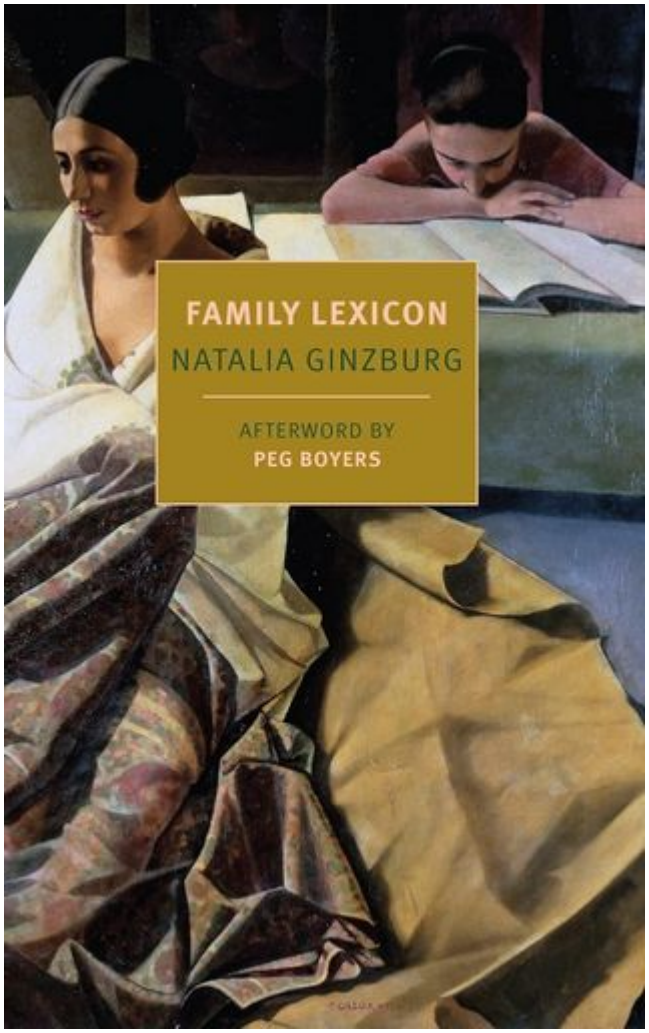
One of the great things about the book is that, over time, we see everything Sethe has gone through before that point, so we get a kind of understanding of why a woman would do this to her own child. She’s essentially saying, “You don’t get to take my daughter away and put her in these circumstances. I get the chance to choose.” In that way, it’s kind of a radical political act—but, at the same time, it’s unfathomable.

This book is really gorgeously rendered, and it is filled with such grace. Beloved’s reappearance prompts a very rich reckoning with the past and

with the dead that I think occurs across Morrison's novels. Ultimately, I think we want to judge Sethe, like all of her neighbors do. We want to ask, "How could she?" Like all the other women in the books I'm talking about, Sethe is shaped by her political environment. The decisions she's making aren't really always her own. But somehow she is still able to maintain a life and have love and have passion and have spirituality.

Family Lexicon

by Natalia Ginzburg



Amazon | **Bookshop**

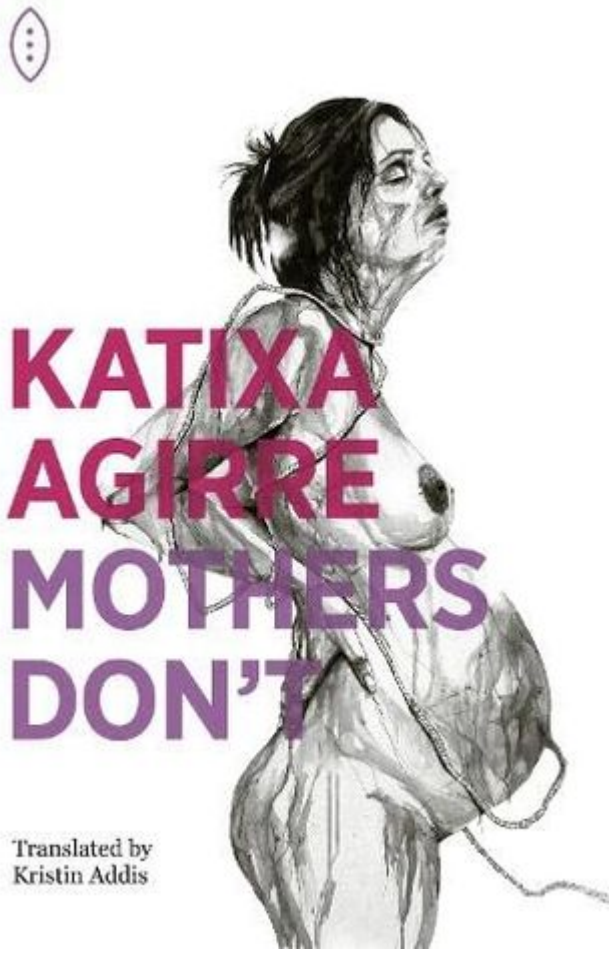
This is Natalia Ginzburg's family story. It's essentially about the dynamics that defined the relationship among her parents, her siblings, and her. Here,

too, there is a very strong mother character who is responding to her political environment—in this case, Fascist Italy.

Ginzburg's writing is very clean and crisp—it doesn't have a lot of emotion, which is very similar to the style in which she says she was raised. Her mother is not doting, she doesn't coddle, and there's a sense in which she feels that she has to nurture her children's strength and prepare them for uncertainty. She uses shame and humiliation as a way to get them to create armor for themselves. One of the ways this shows up is in her demonization of people who she perceives as weak, which she does because she wants to encourage her children to have the resilience she knows they will need in order to survive as Jews in Italy at that time.

Mothers Don't

by Katixa Agirre



Amazon | **Bookshop**

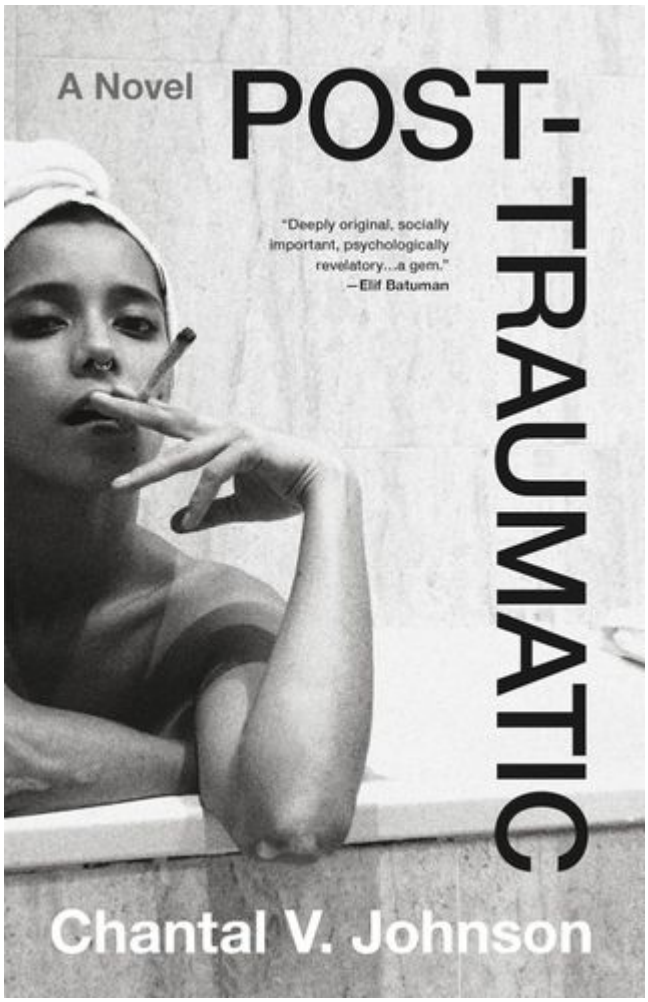
What's interesting about this one is that we have the perspective of an outsider. The antihero is Alice, a natural beauty who ends up killing her twin children when her husband is away. The narrator, who briefly knew Alice, learns about this and wonders, How could this happen?

The narrator is a new mother, too, and is experiencing her own dread about it. She starts investigating what happened. What I love about the book is that there's no real revelation; it's just the writer's projections. That ambiguity allows for a certain richness of imagination. Initially, the narrator is, like, Wow, this person is a monster. But then, as she starts to imagine herself into the situation, her projections create a space for analysis, and she starts to wonder what her thoughts about the situation have to say about her. It really illuminates how we need "evil" people to set standards for us. Especially in situations like motherhood, when we often don't know what

we’re doing, we like to point to people like that and say, “Well, at least I’m not that.” Ultimately, though, here, as the narrator comes to feel more empathy for Alice, she starts to be confronted with her own limitations and her own susceptibility to certain emotions and behaviors.

Post-Traumatic

by Chantal V. Johnson



Amazon | **Bookshop**

The main character of this novel, Vivian, is a young woman who has essentially escaped poverty. She’s highly educated and living in a nice apartment in New York. But, of course, you can get all of these degrees, you can have this beautiful life where you go out for cocktails, and you can still

have inherited trauma and you can still have a mother who causes you a lot of pain.

Vivian’s mother is not on the page that much, but she’s present in almost everything that Vivian does. You wonder why she’s making certain decisions, and then it becomes clear that she’s carrying things within her that stem from her family background. There are so many things that are being repressed here, and when Vivian brings them up her mother reacts poorly. And, ultimately, even though Vivian is not a child anymore, she wants to have her mother’s approval of the life that she’s built. That’s interesting to me—that you can intellectually have the answers to why you feel depressed or hurt, but you still need to go to the source of that pain for your comfort.

The Talk of the Town

- **Donald Trump, Pete Hegseth, and the “War from Within”**
  Peace abroad and war at home? It’s an unusual note to strike in an electoral democracy.
- **Before Kimmel, the Smothers Brothers Ate It**
  President Nixon got the brothers’ variety show cancelled after they wouldn’t let up on Vietnam. In the wake of the new late-night wars, Dick Smothers is having flashbacks.
- **Andrew Yang Goes Off the Grid**
  The former Presidential candidate, once endorsed by Elon Musk, has been hosting phone-free parties. But can his guests actually stop looking at their screens?
- **Charlie Puth’s Overdue Jam Session**
  The singer of “See You Again” trained as a jazz musician but was trapped in the pop machine. Finally, he’s at home at the Blue Note.
- **Tonatiuh Refashions Old Hollywood**
  The “Promised Land” actor goes window shopping as he stars in his first big movie role, opposite Jennifer Lopez, in “Kiss of the Spider Woman.”

Comment

Donald Trump, Pete Hegseth, and the “War from Within”

Peace abroad and war at home? It’s an unusual note to strike in an electoral democracy.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

October 5, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

For someone openly campaigning to get a Nobel Peace Prize, Donald Trump has been going about it in an unusual way. Early last month, the President proclaimed in a press conference that the Department of Defense would thereafter be known as the Department of War. At the same briefing, the presumed new Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, promised that the armed forces will deliver “maximum lethality” that won’t be “politically correct.” That was a few days after Trump had ordered the torpedoing of a small boat headed out of Venezuela, which he claimed was piloted by “narco-terrorists,” killing all eleven people on board, rather than, for instance,

having it stopped and inspected. After some military-law experts worried online that this seemed uncomfortably close to a war crime, Vice-President J. D. Vance posted, “Don’t give a shit.”

So it felt fairly ominous when hundreds of serving generals and admirals were summoned from their postings around the world for a televised meeting on Tuesday with Trump and Hegseth, at the Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia. “Central casting,” the President said, beaming at the officers in the audience, who sat listening impassively, as is their tradition. He praised his own peace efforts, particularly in the Middle East, and mused about bringing back the battleship (“Nice six-inch sides, solid steel, not aluminum,” which “melts if it looks at a missile coming at it”), then issued what sounded like a directive. He proposed using American cities as “training grounds” for the military, envisioning a “quick-reaction force” that would be sent out at his discretion. “This is going to be a major part for some of the people in this room,” Trump said, like a theatre teacher trying to gin up interest in the spring musical. “That’s a war, too. It’s the war from within.”

Peace abroad and war at home? It was an unusual note to strike in an electoral democracy, even if recent reports had indicated that a draft National Defense Strategy would shift the military’s focus from Russia and China to domestic and regional threats. But though Trump keeps talking about his domestic military missions in a dramatic future tense, not much has been demanded of the ones deployed so far. In Washington, D.C., where troops were sent this summer as part of a supposed war on crime, they were seen picking up trash, painting fences, and finding lost children, while the arrests they initiated often led to trumped-up charges that grand juries rejected, in what the *Times* described as a “citizens’ revolt.”

When that offensive petered out, Trump turned his attention to immigration enforcement in the Windy City. (“Chicago about to find out why it’s called the Department of WAR,” he warned on social media.) Yet there has been an asymmetry between the Sturm und Drang of that operation—a midnight raid featured agents rappelling from helicopters onto a South Side apartment building—and its effect. Alderperson Andre Vasquez, who chairs the city council’s Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights, said that

his office had not seen enforcement “to the level of what is being promoted by the President,” and reporters struggled to square government claims about the number of detainees with court records. Even so, the Border Patrol announced that a marine unit would be relocated to Chicago. “Lakes and rivers are borders,” an official said. With what, Michigan?

Cities do have problems, but no matter how much Trump wants to literalize the culture war they are not war zones. Memphis and Portland are next on the President’s list. But the generals and the admirals assembled at Quantico might have reasonably noticed a paradox: although Trump seems to want no restraints on what he can do with the military, he hasn’t yet articulated anything specific for it to do, other than make a show of reducing crime in places where the rate is generally already falling.

The call to Quantico initially came from Hegseth, lately seen staging a pushup contest with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. At the Pentagon, Hegseth, who has few typical qualifications for his position, has largely focussed on a de-wokeification program, restoring the names of Confederate generals to military bases and, last week, rejecting efforts to revoke the Medals of Honor for soldiers involved in the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. At Quantico, he declared that to instill a “warrior ethos,” a new promotions policy would be based on “merit only.” But it sounded like a pretty superficial idea of merit. “It all starts with physical fitness and appearance,” Hegseth said. He mentioned beards and fat (he’s against them) more than he did drones or missiles. “It’s completely unacceptable to see fat generals and admirals in the halls of the Pentagon,” he added. “It’s a bad look.” But does Hegseth want the best generals, or just the best skinny ones?

It’s interesting that the long tail of the misguided wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should wind its way here, to a militaristic right-wing President who loudly denounced those foreign conflicts but means to treat American cities as war zones, and to a Defense Secretary who wants to do away with rules of engagement. Among the defense community, the reaction to the Quantico speeches was an extended eye roll. “Could have been an email,” an anonymous senior official told *Politico*. On Tuesday, the White House announced that troops would be sent to Portland to “crush violent radical left terrorism.” That sounded much more frightening than the policy details

reported by Oregon Public Radio: two hundred National Guard troops would be sent to provide additional security at federal facilities. For now, there is a heavy element of make-believe in the President's domestic military ambitions, which, as was the case with the now greatly diminished *doge* project, allows him to pretend that he wants a major substantive change when what he really seems to want is more power.

On Wednesday, in Memphis, the White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller told a group of deputized federal officers, "You are unleashed." That same day, the President's lawyers asserted in a letter to Congress that the country is now formally in an "armed conflict" with the drug trade broadly, a determination through which Trump can claim extraordinary wartime powers. (There have been three more lethal attacks on boats in the southern Caribbean since early September, the most recent on Friday.) Each of these steps has elements of military theatrics and cosplay authoritarianism, but the more the White House insists on the trappings of war—the troop deployments, the "warrior ethos" grooming, the emergency legal powers—the more it risks nudging us toward an actual one. ♦

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.

Airwaves Dept.

Before Kimmel, the Smothers Brothers Ate It

President Nixon got the brothers' variety show cancelled after they wouldn't let up on Vietnam. In the wake of the new late-night wars, Dick Smothers is having flashbacks.

By Bruce Handy

October 6, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

An old letter from President Lyndon Johnson has been making the rounds on social media in the wake of ABC's nervous-gulp suspension of "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" and CBS's more definitive cancellation of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert"—decisions noisily lobbied for by our current

President, whose minions contributed some Paulie Walnuts-style arm-twisting. The Johnson letter was addressed to Tom and Dick Smothers, the comedians whose hit CBS variety show, “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,” took shots at the President’s stewardship of the Vietnam War in the late nineteen-sixties. L.B.J. offered magnanimity: “It is part of the price of leadership of this great and free nation to be the target of clever satirists,” he (or a secretary) wrote. “You have given the gift of laughter to our people. May we never grow so somber or self-important that we fail to appreciate the humor in our lives.”

The letter was dated November 9, 1968, five days after Richard Nixon defeated Johnson’s Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey, for the Presidency. Five months after that, with Nixon in the White House, CBS abruptly cancelled the Smothers brothers’ show. The network claimed that the series’ producers violated their contract by not providing finished episodes to its censors in a sufficiently timely manner (an assertion that would not pass muster in a subsequent civil-court case won by the brothers). Many, including the brothers themselves, felt that they were victims not only of skittish advertisers and conservative affiliates but also of the new Administration, which would prove unshy about targeting perceived foes in the media and elsewhere—though one might give that President a wee bit of credit for not going about it quite as nakedly as others.

Dick Smothers, who is eighty-six, took the long view the other day. “It sure didn’t start with us,” he insisted, when asked about politicians’ recurring habit of attempting to muzzle TV performers. “In my lifetime, it started with Edward R. Murrow, of course. But they didn’t fire him. They just switched him to a time slot not many people watched.” This is true. In 1954, Murrow exposed many of Joseph P. McCarthy’s lies on his CBS news-magazine show, “See It Now,” a tipping point in the senator’s downfall. Just a year later, the series lost its sponsor, Alcoa, and was shunted from its Tuesday-night prime-time slot to random, irregular dead zones on the schedule.

Smothers was speaking on the phone from his home upstate, not far from Niagara Falls, in the village of Lewiston—“a booming economic juggernaut of a hundred and fifty years ago,” as he put it. (A native Californian, he

moved there for love.) Tom, his older brother by two years, died in 2023. They first found acclaim, in the early nineteen-sixties, as comedic folksingers, playing night clubs and releasing popular LPs. A failed but apparently likable sitcom led to “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,” which débuted in February, 1967. It was a broad tent. Guests included Jack Benny, George Burns, Kate Smith, and Red Skelton. “We wanted the people we hung around the radio listening to when we were kids, people that meant something to us,” Smothers said. But the brothers also wanted the program to be “relevant. Not a silly show.” They assembled a legendary writers’ room, which included Steve Martin, Rob Reiner, and Bob Einstein. But relevancy turned out to be a moving, even accelerating target. “The sixties hadn’t really got into top gear yet,” Smothers said. When they did, “it was like being at the scene of an accident.”

The brothers clashed with the network over silly things, like a “Mutiny on the Bounty” sketch with George Segal that had naughty, homophonic fun with the word “frigate.” They also got in trouble for more serious efforts, like bringing on Pete Seeger, who was still blacklisted from the McCarthy era, to sing his antiwar song “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy.” But all in all, Smothers said, the show’s satire “was gentle. We didn’t do things that were right in your face, like the monologues today.” That wasn’t meant as criticism: he said that he’s a fan of Kimmel, Colbert, and especially Jon Stewart. “They’re brilliant. Brilliant,” he said. The times, in his view, demand in-your-faceness.

Back in the day, Dick was the duo’s straight man; Tom was the pretend naïf who got the best lines and, backstage, served as the act’s guiding hand. “My brother had a little bad-boy thing,” Smothers said. “But to the day he died he also had a strong moral compass.” To that end, he recalled, Tom wrote an earnest letter to L.B.J. which both brothers signed, “basically not apologizing for what we were doing, but saying that, if we were heavy-handed, we didn’t mean to be.” Johnson’s letter to the brothers was his reply. It concluded, “If ever an Emmy is awarded for graciousness, I will cast my vote for you.”

Needless to say, the current White House occupant, an actual member of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (though Emmy-less himself), is

offering no such absolution. ♦

Bruce Handy is the author of "Hollywood High: A Totally Epic, Way Opinionated History of Teen Movies" (2025) and the picture book "There Was a Shadow" (2024), illustrated by Lisk Feng.

Irl Dept.

Andrew Yang Goes Off the Grid

The former Presidential candidate, once endorsed by Elon Musk, has been hosting phone-free parties. But can his guests actually stop looking at their screens?

By Charlotte Goddu

October 6, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

At a Chelsea night club one recent evening, under spinning disco balls and big screens flashing the command "*LOG OFF*," Andrew Yang sheepishly slid his phone from his pocket. The former Presidential candidate was hosting the fifth in a series of "OFFLINE" parties, phoneless gatherings that he has organized for people to connect IRL. But this night's event was celebrating the launch of Yang's new phone plan, Noble Mobile, which is designed to reimburse users for their leftover data, and Yang needed to demonstrate. "I guess I shouldn't bust my phone out and show you," he said. "But I will."

The attendees—a mix of hopeful Luddites and dogged Yang Gangers—had been issued black plastic bags emblazoned with the Noble logo, not unlike

the mandatory phone pouches one might encounter at a comedy show. Device stowage was self-policed, and the rules seemed flexible, especially when it came to taking pictures with the host. “I have a force field that allows you to take your phone out,” Yang clumsily repeated to fans who expressed consternation about asking for a selfie.

The d.j.—a twenty-nine-year-old named Conrad Taylor, who at one point was the youngest city-council member in Binghamton, N.Y.—cued up a Black Eyed Peas remix as Yang explained his interest in the evils of the smartphone. During his 2020 Presidential campaign, Yang advocated for a universal basic income of a thousand dollars per month, an idea that won endorsements from Nicolas Cage and Elon Musk. Now his focus has turned to device usage (and party planning), a concern he picked up, in part, from the social scientist Jonathan Haidt (“The Anxious Generation”). Haidt’s anti-smartphone advocacy, Yang explained, “is the single most heroic act I have seen from a private citizen over the last number of years”—so heroic, in fact, that he owns a T-shirt with Haidt’s picture on it.

The partygoers were not necessarily as zealous. A few of their reasons for showing up:

“When we actually touch grass and be one with ourselves, we can see what’s wrong with life, what’s good, what we can make better.”

“Like, we don’t need to see the wedding photos of our exes.”

“He traded his kingdom for a squeaky toy.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

“I’m not really into the politics, but I was, like, I think I’m gonna meet Asian people here.”

A blond woman in a Kelly-green sweater dress and white sneakers approached Yang. She introduced herself as a sociologist named Caitlin Begg, and said that she had taken three years off TikTok—“I only posted film on my Instagram”—in order to understand its effects on her psyche. Begg invited Yang to appear on her podcast. His phone back in his pocket, he wrote his e-mail address inside the book she was holding (“Hotel Theory Reader”).

“Would you like to touch grass?” Yang asked her, pulling back a velvet curtain to reveal a plexiglass tray of sod on a white pedestal. A hovering photographer snapped a picture. After the party, Begg posted a TikTok about it.

Needing some air, Yang headed up to the rooftop bar. On the stairs, he reminisced about his past life as a club promoter, when he threw parties under the name Ignition NYC. (“This was before R. Kelly!” he said.) He’d wrap up each function by playing M.O.P.’s “Ante Up” (“Hand over the ring, kick over the chain / Gimme the fuckin’ watch before I pop one in your brain”). “At the end of the night, it always felt like the future was limitless,” he said.

The party was winding down, but there was a special guest Yang didn’t want to miss. Near the rooftop’s railing, with the Empire State Building shining in the background, was Blaise Serra, the current North American champion of closeup magic. Serra was developing some bespoke sleight of hand for Noble Mobile. “He’s actually coming up with some conjuring to turn people’s phones into patches of grass,” Yang explained. When asked if he would demonstrate, Serra demurred—the trick was still in progress. With no illusion to see, Yang made his way back to the d.j. booth, where he jumped ecstatically to Zedd’s E.D.M. hit “Clarity.” Partyers pulled out their phones to document the moment. ♦

Charlotte Goddu is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff. She has also contributed to the Post and Vanity Fair.

Dig It Dept.

Charlie Puth’s Overdue Jam Session

The singer of “See You Again” trained as a jazz musician but was trapped in the pop machine. Finally, he’s at home at the Blue Note.

By Jane Bua

October 6, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The Blue Note Jazz Club, in the Village, is not known for its legroom. But the other afternoon the joint was nearly deserted. A lonely employee was rolling forks into navy-blue napkins by the bar. The thirty-three-year-old

pop star Charlie Puth, headlining his first jazz residency, was due for a sound check with his band. Fans had already lined up outside for the 8 *P.M.* show.

“Hey! Hey! One, two!” a stagehand barked into a mike, maneuvering past a Roland Jupiter-80 synth keyboard. “Guest vocal! One, two!”

Members of the band started taking their spots on the tiny stage. Snare hits rang out like paintball shots and bass riffs bounced off the mirrored walls. An engineer sat down behind a soundboard; suddenly, a few seconds of music burst from the speakers—a new song, “Beat Yourself Up,” from Puth’s upcoming album.

Puth rushed in just after four, wearing AirPods Max headphones over a blue dad cap. As if magnetized, he veered straight for a sparkly red Rhodes keyboard. (“It’s actually a Rhodes shell with a synthesizer,” he said later. “I’m using a Yamaha CP-70 sound.” Ah, of course.)

“Louis, if you can hear me, put the flex up to forty or fifty,” Puth told another engineer. He then launched into a funkified cover of “Love,” by Keyshia Cole. The drummer was still tap-testing his set, but the rest of the group lasered in.

“Let’s go to B major,” Puth, who has wavy brown hair and a crescent-moon scar through one eyebrow (the legacy of a dog bite), urged the band. They moved to B major. “And now B *minor*.” Aye, aye, captain. After a labyrinth of shifting chords, he concluded, “It could be as simple as that.” He took a sip of water.

Of all the big names to pass through the Blue Note—Dizzy Gillespie, Keith Jarrett—Puth may be the most likely to provoke skeptics. What does he know about jazz, with his *Billboard* hits? But, at his core, Puth is a Jazz Guy. As a kid, he said, “I just fell in love with the two-five-one chord progression.” He grew up jamming with local cats in his home town of Rumson, New Jersey, and was a regular teen performer at Birdland. He has shiny degrees from Manhattan School of Music and from Berklee.

But in 2015, when Puth signed with Artist Partner Group, a joint venture with Atlantic Records, executives told him to back-seat what he loved most. “ ‘Don’t get too jazzy on ’em,’ ” he recalled them saying. “ ‘You’re gonna look old.’ ” So he bleached his hair and took a teen-idol swerve. “My music on its own was never enough,” he said, ruefully. (Of his 2016 début record, “Nine Track Mind,” Jia Tolentino wrote, “It’s *because* of Puth’s considerable abilities, and not in spite of them, that the album induces such despair.”)

Once he had a few platinum pop hits—“I recouped, they made their money”—Puth tried to sneak some Bill Evans energy onto his second album, “Voicenotes.” One track, “Boy,” has an electric-piano jazz solo as its bridge. “I thought it was the best song I had ever made,” he said. “I was, like, ‘I want this to be track one.’ And they were, like, ‘No.’ ” It ended up as track eight. Out of spite, Puth made it even jazzier.

Now that his twenty-tens fame spurt has calmed, Puth feels like he can go back to his roots. “It turns out, a decade later, no one cares if something is too jazzy,” he said, rolling his eyes. “It’s almost embarrassing that it took me this long.”

As the sound check continued, Puth goofed with his players. “You guys gonna take a Patrón flight?” he asked. “First class on Loose Airlines?” Preserving his voice for the shows, he played some melodies on the keys instead, adding plenty of licks and flourishes.

On opening night, the club was packed. (The series, called Whatever’s Clever, sold out in just a few minutes; Puth described this as “a pat on the back.”) Waiting-room smooth jazz floated out of the speakers while fans fiddled with the swag pens that were strewn on the tables: a reminder that Puth writes his own songs, and that he partnered with Bic last year.

“This is my fifth time seeing him,” a girl in her twenties said, her hoop earrings jangling. She sipped a Clever Cosmo, one of four special drinks offered for Puth’s run. Two were Jersey-themed (yum?). A dad, sitting with his wife and two sons, called Puth a “*real* musician,” then ordered a double tequila.

At 8 *P.M.*, the band slunk onstage, the house lights cut out, and Puth trotted up in a baggy Elastica T-shirt. He parked at the fake Rhodes, and the set began. At every keys solo and drum rip, he put on a goofy grin or a quasi-sexual stank face.

“I’m having too much fun, y’all!” he yelled out, to cheers. Then he started scatting. ♦

Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.

The Pictures

Tonatiuh Refashions Old Hollywood

The “Promised Land” actor goes window shopping as he stars in his first big movie role, opposite Jennifer Lopez, in “Kiss of the Spider Woman.”

By Michael Schulman

October 6, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Tonatiuh, a one-named actor who is thirty years old, six feet tall, and genderqueer, stood outside Bergdorf Goodman, on Fifth Avenue, gazing at a Schiaparelli window. “This world always felt inaccessible to me,” he said,

soaking in the weekend shopping frenzy. “It’s great, though, to escape into it, right?” Despite his professed fashion ignorance, his look evoked Cary Grant on a European holiday: black cashmere sweater tucked into high-waisted chinos, chic sunglasses, gelled hair. He considered the window display, in which an ink-black mannequin in a denim jacket posed in front of a gilded bull and some cacti. “The gold bull freaks me out,” he said. “It gives Biblical—like God’s about to smite us.” Glancing down, he added, “But the shoes are fab.”

In “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” a new movie musical, Tonatiuh plays Molina, a gay window dresser who shares a prison cell with a political dissident, Valentín (Diego Luna), during Argentina’s Dirty War. To pass the time, Molina recounts the plot of his favorite movie, which stars a screen siren he idolizes. “Spider Woman” began as a 1976 novel by Manuel Puig—which was banned under the authoritarian government it depicted—then became a play and a 1985 film starring Raul Julia and William Hurt (who won an Oscar for playing Molina), then a 1993 Kander and Ebb musical on Broadway, starring Chita Rivera as the movie goddess. In the new film, directed by Bill Condon, she is played by Jennifer Lopez.

Tonatiuh, whose credits include the ABC drama “Promised Land” and the Netflix thriller “Carry-On,” won his “Spider Woman” role after a worldwide casting search. He didn’t research window dressing, but he did binge on classic Hollywood—“Singin’ in the Rain,” Montgomery Clift—and study life under dictatorship. “God, imagine just getting pulled off the street for speaking,” he deadpanned. “What a crazy world.”

He grew up in Los Angeles County, the son of Mexican immigrants. His mother cut hair, and as a kid he’d hang out in her salon, “sitting with a bunch of old ladies talking about their divorces,” he recalled. Sauntering east, he described how he got his name. “It’s the Aztec sun god. My mom, when she was pregnant with me, had a dream that she was in a field surrounded by golden orbs, and they turned into the sun. When she woke up, she was, like, ‘My son’s name is going to be Tonatiuh.’ ” When he was young, the family moved from the Chicano-heavy Boyle Heights to the more white-bread West Covina. “My first day in fourth grade, my teacher

said, ‘What am I going to call you? It’s impossible!’ So I changed my name to Matt.” He laughed. “Until junior year, I self-colonized.”

On Madison Avenue, he checked out a Moncler window with two mannequins in puffy head scarves. “It’s giving babushka realness,” he observed. According to Aztec mythology, he went on, we are currently living under the fifth sun. When the fourth sun died, the gods built a fire and “turned to the strongest warrior to throw himself into the flames, and he wouldn’t do it. But this weaker god jumped in without hesitation and was gifted the ability to become Tonatiuh, the sun. In shame, the stronger god jumped in and became the moon. What’s beautiful about the sun changing is that we’re experiencing a metamorphosis as a culture.”

When he got his first *SAG* gig, on “Jane the Virgin,” he dropped his surname, Elizarraraz (“My first name’s already a big ask”), and went mononym, like Cher. “Acting became a thing for me as a trauma response, growing up as a more effeminate kid in a culture that doesn’t want that,” he said. “My aunt once said, ‘Everyone in our family is dramatic. But you went to school to perfect it.’ ” At fourteen, he sneaked out to a J. Lo night at a club in West Hollywood, but working with her years later didn’t intimidate him. “I’m a wonderful actor. I’ve trained my entire life to do this,” he said.

He passed some policemen who’d assembled for the German-American Steuben Parade. “Given recent events, a lot of people in uniform makes me anxious,” he said. “Kiss of the Spider Woman” considers the place of glamour and beauty under fascism; Tonatiuh is promoting his first big movie role while *ICE* raids terrorize his home town. “It’s been heartbreaking,” he said. “I was in a deep depression for a little bit, but I didn’t know why. I came to New York and saw seven Broadway shows. And then I realized I was grieving.” He sighed. “It feels whiplashy.” ♦

Michael Schulman, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2006. He is the author of "Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears" and "Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep."

Reporting & Essays

- **The Prime Minister Who Tried to Have a Life Outside the Office**
  As the thirtysomething leader of Finland, Sanna Marin pursued an ambitious policy agenda. The press focussed on her nights out and how she paid for breakfast.
- **The Hague on Trial**
  The chief prosecutor has obtained warrants against Israeli leaders for war crimes—but faces allegations of sexual misconduct.
- **A Year of Convulsions in New York's Prisons**
  How two murders and a strike exposed a system at its breaking point.
- **Keri Russell's Emotional Transparency Has Anchored Three Decades of TV**
  But, offscreen, sheâs not even sure that she wants to be an actress.

Letter from Helsinki

The Prime Minister Who Tried to Have a Life Outside the Office

As the thirtysomething leader of Finland, Sanna Marin pursued an ambitious policy agenda. The press focussed on her nights out and how she paid for breakfast.

By Jennifer Wilson

October 6, 2025

The former Finnish leader became the subject of intense media scrutiny, an experience she describes in her new memoir, "Hope in Action."Photograph by Lukasz Wierzbowski for The New Yorker

On a Saturday night in December of 2021, a text message was sent to Sanna Marin, then the thirty-six-year-old Prime Minister of Finland. The message, however, went to a work phone that she had deliberately left at home that evening; she had a date night with her husband, Markus Räikkönen, a former soccer player turned tech entrepreneur. The couple had dinner with friends, stopped by a cocktail bar near the Helsinki harbor, and then went

dancing at Butchers, a night club named to evoke New York City's meatpacking district.

On Sunday morning, Marin woke up and read the message. It was a briefing stating that the foreign minister might have *COVID* and that anyone who'd had contact with him the day before, as she had, should self-isolate, even if vaccinated. This was stricter than prior guidance, and Marin prepared for the fallout.

Three older male government officials also went out that weekend, but it would be pictures of Marin at the club, young and photogenic, which were splashed across the website of the Finnish gossip magazine *Seiska*. On Wednesday, amid mounting criticism from her political opponents on the right, Marin, a Social Democrat, held a press conference in front of the parliamentary building to apologize. Not all members of the Finnish press were convinced of her contrition. One journalist asked if it was a joke or just a coincidence that she had been drinking a Corona.

On social media, the reactions were of a different tenor. A BBC article headlined "Finland's PM Sorry for Clubbing After Covid Contact" took off on Twitter, with users from around the world rallying behind Marin. They posted comments like "hot girl shit" and "Sorry for what? For being cool? A badass? I don't accept her apology." Others were impressed by Marin's stamina—she was reportedly out until 4 *a.m.* "I guess maybe universal healthcare means that you don't feel like you're rapidly decaying the moment you turn 27," someone observed.

Practically overnight, Marin, who had been the youngest head of government in the world when she was elected, in 2019, became a millennial folk hero. "At Least Someone Has Work-Life Balance," read a headline in *The Cut*. It wasn't pure projection: helping Finns achieve that balance had been one of her top political priorities. The summer before she was elected, Marin had floated the idea of a thirty-two-hour workweek. "I believe people deserve to spend more time with their families, loved ones, hobbies, and other aspects of life, such as culture," she said at a Social Democratic Party conference. And, as Prime Minister, Marin tried to model a life that combined work and play. She was wonkish and industrious, pushing through her government's ambitious policy program, which

included extending family leave to nearly seven months for new parents and reducing the cost of child care to zero for more families. But, as she said on Finnish public radio, she was also intent on living “like someone my age.”

After the clubbing scandal, the Finnish media, which had already dubbed her Party Sanna, began ramping up its coverage of Marin’s off-the-clock activities. In 2022, a clip of Marin and her friends dancing at a private party while lip-synching the song “Peto On Irti” (“The Beast Is Released”) was leaked online. A rumor spread on a Finnish 4chan-esque message board that someone in the background of the video could be heard saying “flour,” which, it was alleged, was slang for cocaine. A tabloid newspaper enlisted a “sound expert” to enhance the audio, and Marin was pressured to submit to a drug test to prove that she was not part of a female “flour gang.” Meanwhile, women throughout Finland and female politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Hillary Clinton posted images of themselves dancing, some with the hashtag #solidaritywithSanna. Marin tested negative for drugs, and “flour” didn’t actually seem to be slang for anything, but the back-to-back scandals took a toll on her. Later that year, speaking to a crowd at an S.D.P. event in the city of Lahti, she tearfully tried to explain that partying hard didn’t preclude working hard. “Amid these dark times, I, too, sometimes miss joy, light, and fun,” she said. “But I haven’t missed a single day of work.”

In 2023, Petteri Orpo, of the National Coalition Party, unseated Marin as Prime Minister, forming a government that included the far-right Finns Party. An article in the *Guardian* paraphrased a tweet about the world having “returned to its natural state of being unable to recognise the Finnish prime minister in a crowd.” A few months later, Marin shocked foes and supporters alike by resigning from Parliament. It turned out that living like someone her age included experiencing millennial burnout, or, as Finns call it, *palaa loppuun* (“burn to the end”).

Marin is often compared to Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, who came into office at the age of thirty-seven. In early 2023, Ardern announced that she would not seek reëlection, citing occupational stress: “I no longer have enough in the tank.” But her approval ratings had plummeted amid *COVID*-lockdown fatigue, and the ensuing

election was described as a “bloodbath” for her party, Labour. Marin’s S.D.P., by contrast, gained seats in 2023, and she won the second-highest number of votes of any M.P.; it was her coalition parties that didn’t fare so well.

Marin was, in many ways, at the height of her powers, poised to regain the top job in the next election. Yet, as she writes in her new book, “Hope in Action: A Memoir About the Courage to Lead,” which will be published in the U.S. on November 4th, she, too, was exhausted. “I had coped with all the political difficulties and all the bullshit,” she writes.

The book’s working title was “Our Turn,” reflecting her place in a new generation of political leadership. But, even with the name change, “Hope in Action” still reads as a distinctly millennial text, and not just because the acknowledgments thank Lauren Oyler, the young American book critic known for her viral pans, who helped structure the narrative. As the memoir makes evident, Marin’s life, like that of many in her generation, was shaped by the deterioration of the welfare state in the late twentieth century, an era-defining economic crisis in the twenty-first, and technological advancements that have created an expectation of 24/7 professional availability, forever changing the culture of work.

But the book is also, in part, an embattled politician’s effort to set the record straight. Writing about her night out in December of 2021, she explains that she typically carried *two* work phones, and had left only one at home. She wasn’t unreachable; she had not, as one social-media user joked, “left a whole country on read.”

I was set to meet Marin for the first time at the Ateneum, an art museum in central Helsinki. It was August, and we were going to see an exhibit called “Crossing Borders: Travelling Women Artists in the 1800s.” I had guessed that she probably blended in when she wasn’t at a lectern or on the cover of a magazine, but I was wrong. She was just as striking in person. Amid what seemed like a sea of Fjällräven windbreakers and faded Marimekko tote bags, Marin was dressed like a preppy glamazon, in a thrifted blue-and-white striped Ralph Lauren button-down shirt tied at the waist, rolled-up jeans, and beige sandals that matched her tanned skin. “I was in Croatia,”

she told me. She had just returned from a beach trip there with her seven-year-old daughter, Emma.

These days, Marin has more free time than she did as P.M. but less than you might think if you follow her on Instagram. This summer, her one million followers—Orpo, the current P.M., has around forty-two thousand—were treated to scenes of her in Italy, sipping drinks with friends and cruising the canals of Venice. In fact, she had been in the country primarily on business. After leaving office, Marin accepted (not without controversy in Finland) a position as a strategic counsellor at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, an organization that provides political consulting to global leaders. Marin's main remit at the T.B.I. is to work on Ukraine's and Moldova's accession to the European Union. She was in Italy representing the organization at the Ukraine Recovery Conference, in Rome, and also attended the Global Women Leaders Summit, on Lake Como.

Marin's media adviser, Iida Vallin, a blonde with a trendy bob and thick black glasses, had suggested the museum setting for our meeting. In particular, she wanted us to visit a section featuring a time line of women's political progress in Finland. To get there, we passed a portrait by the late-nineteenth-century Baltic German painter Sally von Kügelgen of an otherwise nude man wearing a codpiece. (The accessory was apparently meant to protect the female artist's delicate eyes.) In a nearby alcove, a blue horizontal stripe was punctuated by key dates in red, such as 1906, when Finland became the first country in Europe in which women could run for political office. A black-and-white photograph of a stern-looking woman with her hair pulled back in a bun was captioned "1907—Hedvig Gebhard, one of the first female MPs."

I remarked to Marin that it felt odd to be there, given that in her book she expresses an uneasiness with the term "female leader." "I'm a feminist, of course, but I always wanted to be seen as a person who acts, not as something to be viewed," she told me. While in office, Marin felt that, as a woman, she often had to steer the conversation back to politics. On Twitter, Elon Musk once commented, under a picture of Marin—styled for a magazine spread in a blazer with no shirt underneath and a statement necklace—"She seems cool." Marin responded, "And Finland is cool too. A

nordic welfare state that wants to be climate neutral by 2035." In "Hope in Action," she describes the media frenzy that ensued after it was announced that the five parties in her coalition government would be led by women, four of whom were under forty. "One journalist even asked me, 'how does it work' when five of a country's parliamentary leaders are women?" she writes. "It's politics, not a knitting club."

Now that Marin is no longer in office, she has stopped couching her critiques of the Finnish media in niceties. "The Finnish press were, like, smelling blood," Marin said of the coverage she received. In the book, she elaborates on the press response to the "Beast Is Released" footage:

> The real political crime here, we realized, was that I didn't look or behave like a prime minister is expected to look or behave. I was too informal, too relaxed, and I danced in a way that was deemed promiscuous. I was at a party full of young people at someone's apartment instead of a staid dinner with eight courses and wine pairings.

I asked her why she thought she got so much flak for having fun as a young woman in a place like Finland, which regularly tops the World Happiness Report's annual rankings. And weren't we literally standing in front of a wall that tracked the country's achievements in gender equality? "It's something in Finnish culture," she mused. "We aren't Italians—our identity isn't *life is for living*."

But a conviction that life is for living was part of why she joined the Social Democratic Party, which had helped build the welfare state. Weekends are a labor issue, after all; in Finland, the eight-hour workday had been a central demand of a 1917 general strike. "The Finnish media never got how important welfare structures were in all of my policies," she said. "It's, like, in my spine."

We made our way to the museum café. "We are the No. 1 consumers of coffee in the world," Marin said, still in ambassador mode. I began to ask a question about her growing up working class, but she corrected me: "I was lower than working class." Born in Helsinki in 1985, she became the first member of her immediate family to graduate from high school. Marin's

youth and gender may have been what made her stand out on the international stage, but, she argues in the book, it was her class background that truly distinguished her from most other politicians in her homeland.

Marin's mother, she says, was raised in an orphanage until the age of nine, and at fifteen began working different low-wage jobs. When she was around twenty, she met Marin's father, who struggled with alcoholism. She left him when Marin, their only child, was two. Marin recalls once, as a little girl, waiting in vain with her mother for him to show up at a railway station for a prearranged visit. "When I talk about my father, or the absence of a father figure in my life, people respond with compassion," she writes. "They want to project a tragedy onto me."

But Marin doesn't see her life that way. "Because I was lucky enough to be born in Finland, I was privileged," she asserts. Like every baby in Finland, Marin was provided with a "baby box" containing what she would need for her first year of life—items like reusable diapers, knitted outerwear, a mattress that could be placed inside the emptied box to make a crib. The government-issued box, still given out today, provides for new mothers, too; in some years, condoms and sexual lubricant have been included. (The New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani, citing the example of Finland, has made "NYC Baby Baskets" part of his policy agenda.) Baby boxes are functional but also symbolic—they represent the ideal of a Finland where everyone is born with equal advantage, regardless of parental income. Since 2023, the conservative government has slashed the nation's spending by around ten billion euros. But Marin doesn't think that Finns would stand for the box disappearing: "It's holy."

As a child, Marin experienced firsthand the effects of rapid shifts in Finnish economic policy. She told me that she benefitted from being born in the "golden age" of the Finnish welfare state. Marin's mother was able to enroll her daughter in full-time day care at eleven months. In the mid-eighties, Finland, hoping to raise its standard of living closer to that of its Scandinavian neighbors, strengthened its commitment to the "Nordic Model": a series of economic policies that combine a strong social safety net with free-market protections. At first, the country experienced an economic boom, but by the early nineties an overheated economy and the

collapse of the U.S.S.R., a major Finnish trading partner, led to a deep recession. Marin was hesitant to attribute her politics solely to her age or her generation, but she did admit to feeling the sharpening effects of the nineties recession: “We all remember, as schoolkids, having to cut our erasers in half to share.”

Daena Funahashi, an anthropologist at Berkeley and the author of “Untimely Sacrifices: Work and Death in Finland,” told me that, amid the era’s rampant unemployment, “it became a privilege to have a job and no longer a right.” Funahashi’s book explores the impact of the economic crisis on Finnish culture. As Lutherans, she writes, Finns had long embraced a Protestant work ethic. But suddenly, Funahashi said, that wasn’t enough: “They were told ‘the workplace of today is faster and harder.’ ” The government had to set up burnout centers, staffed by physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists, and “leisure coaches.”

I asked Marin if she had ever considered a career besides politics. She replied, “Well, I never considered *this* one.” The closest thing to political activity that she remembers taking part in during her youth was protesting the razing of a forest where she and her schoolmates liked to pick blueberries; they sang the Finnish national anthem on the road leading into the woods. “It’s possible we had the idea to block off the street—not that there was anyone there to see it,” she writes. (It was her first political defeat—the forest was cleared.) She did recall having an ambient sense of outrage at injustice and enjoying the music of Rage Against the Machine. Her mother couldn’t afford for them to travel, but Marin got a sense of the larger world from watching “Globe Trekker,” a British TV show with young hosts who hopped around countries like Morocco and India. She also describes growing up in a “rainbow family.” When Marin was a child, her mother began living with a woman. Homosexuality had been decriminalized in Finland only in 1971; Marin thus had an early introduction to the idea that what one did in one’s personal life was a political issue that had to be defended.

Cartoon by Farley Katz

After high school, Marin worked retail jobs while preparing for college-entrance exams. Her wealthier classmates, meanwhile, took out loans to cover living expenses, confident that they could pay them back. (Years later, the Estonian interior minister Mart Helme derogatively referred to Prime Minister Marin as a “salesgirl”; after a public outcry, he said that his words were misconstrued.) In her book, Marin frames her economic disadvantages as an essential part of her political education. “I have always considered all work valuable, as long as the conditions are fair,” she writes. She cautioned me against tipping in Finland, a practice that leftists believe undercuts the minimum wage. “We should work toward better salaries instead,” she said.

By the time she was twenty, Marin had relocated to Tampere, a post-industrial city once known as the “Manchester of the North.” She was living with her boyfriend, Räikkönen, whom she had met at a bar called Emma. (“We totally forgot that was the name,” Marin told me. “We had no idea until recently we named our daughter after a bar.”) One day, Marin decided to attend a meeting of the S.D.P.’s youth organization. “When I walked into the room everyone just stared at me,” she writes. It was rare for a person without a social connection, someone just off the street, to get involved in Party affairs. She found the meeting underwhelming. The attendees were debating whether they should buy lunch for volunteers at an upcoming event. “I couldn’t believe it,” she writes. “These were young people, my peers. Weren’t we supposed to be the most passionate members of the political system? Where was the revolution?” And, she adds, lunch “should have [been] provided, without question or argument.”

Marin enrolled at the University of Tampere in 2007, and there she found her cohort. The school had a reputation as a “red campus.” (The filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki, who is known for his absurdist social-realist films, studied there in the late seventies.) Marin joined reading groups, where she read “all the socialist classics.” The following year, she launched her first campaign, a run for city council, which she lost. Her slogan was “Four Targets in Four Years.” I asked what the targets had been. “I don’t remember,” she said. “They weren’t that ambitious, something about recycling.”

The S.D.P., which Marin officially joined in 2007, was actually an odd choice for a Gramsci-reading freshman. Founded in 1899, it was increasingly viewed as out of touch, but she saw herself as part of a movement to revitalize the once storied workers’ party. The times required it. When the global recession hit Finland, the government implemented austerity policies that harked back to the days of eraser splitting. For millennials, who were now starting out in their adult lives, it was a galvanizing moment.

The Finnish media began inviting young up-and-coming political figures—including Marin, who in 2010 became vice-chair of the S.D.P.’s youth organization—to participate in televised debates. Another rising star was Li Andersson, who belonged to the youth organization of the Left Alliance, a party to the left of the S.D.P. “We were on this show—it translates very strangely—but it was called ‘Hate Evening,’ ” Andersson, who is now a member of the European Parliament, told me. She knew Marin only by reputation: “Sanna was seen as being more on the red-green side of the Social Democrats, so more modern.” (The term “red-green” in Finland describes people who support workers’ rights and environmentalism.)

Marin won a seat on the Tampere City Council in 2012, running as a left-leaning S.D.P. candidate. Using Photoshop, she had made her own posters, which she and Räikkönen passed out on the street. (“I have handed out tens of thousands of flyers,” Räikkönen told me.) Marin was appointed leader of the city council at twenty-seven, the youngest person ever to hold that position.

But Marin's true star turn came in 2016, after a clip from an hours-long city-council meeting that she led went viral. Marin was trying to move along a vote on a green initiative: the construction of a three-hundred-million-euro tram system. It was a big price tag for Tampere, a city known for its shuttered textile factories. Several council members dragged out the proceedings, with one speculating that unemployed people might "ride around together on the tram as there is nothing else to do." At the front of the room was Marin, then thirty, training her icy blue eyes on each person trying to stall. "Is Council Member Kaleva seriously asking for yet another turn? Last time, you were reading out a newspaper column." Marin prevailed, and the video now has nine hundred thousand views, equivalent to a sixth of the population of Finland.

Around Christmas of 2018, just months before the general election, Antti Rinne, the leader of the S.D.P., fell ill and was reportedly placed in a medically induced coma. He recovered, and that June, after the S.D.P. won more seats in Parliament than any other party, Rinne became Prime Minister. But six months later he was forced to resign, after he was accused of mishandling a labor dispute at the expense of postal workers, drawing rebuke from the Center Party, whose support he needed to govern. His coalition fell apart, and, in an intra-party election held to succeed him, Marin won by three votes against a more centrist male challenger.

"Nobody in Finland was thinking about her age or gender," Salla Vuorikoski, a journalist for *Helsingin Sanomat*, the country's largest newspaper, and the author of a 2024 biography of Marin, told me. "We knew her as a minister from Tampere. But when she had that first press conference I turned to my husband and said, 'This is going to be huge abroad.' She looked different."

Before arriving in Helsinki, I watched "First Five," an HBO documentary series from 2023 about Marin and the other party leaders—Maria Ohisalo, Annika Saarikko, Anna-Maja Henriksson, and Andersson—in her government. "First Five," which is mostly made up of sit-down interviews and news clips, felt a lot like a Finnair in-flight safety video: reassuring in terms of national welfare but a tad impersonal. (The most interesting tidbit is Andersson telling her friends that Bernie Sanders called to ask about

parental leave and early-childhood education in Finland.) “I don’t even remember doing the documentary,” Marin told me. I wondered if the series was flat because its subjects had grown tired of talking about their “lipstick government,” as some critics had begun calling it. As Andersson said, “It was, like, ‘Oh, wow, they’re all making decisions together in the sauna.’ ”

The next day, Marin gave me a tour of Kesäranta, a villa in a leafy part of Helsinki that serves as the official residence of the Finnish Prime Minister. The current P.M., Petteri Orpo, was out of town and had told Marin that she could show me around. “This is very Finnish,” Marin said of her successor’s hospitality. “Even though we’re opponents, people are cozy.” She led me to the sauna—one of more than three million in the country—which was in a stand-alone cabin. “This was one of the few places I could relax during *COVID*,” Marin told me. “I’d come in here at 11 *p.m.* and just . . .” She trailed off, miming an exhale.

We wandered around the grounds, which overlooked the waters of Seurasaarenselkä. She pointed out a basketball court, where she used to shoot free throws to decompress. We walked into the main house, and several members of the house staff waved hello. Marin showed me into a dining area that doubled as a conference room and pointed up at the ceiling: “Whenever Emma used to play upstairs, the chandelier would shake.” She gestured out the window. I could see a small gazebo on the water’s edge, and she told me that she and Räikkönen had been married there, in 2020. The pair would split three years later.

In her book, Marin writes, “I remember the exact moment when I realized that the string between Markus and me had snapped.” She recalled that the two of them, years earlier, had enjoyed the Danish show “Borgen,” about a female politician who unexpectedly becomes Prime Minister, putting a strain on her relationship with her husband. “Neither of us could understand why they had to sacrifice their relationship for the sake of her career,” Marin writes. “Now I could. It’s not a conscious choice. It’s just life.” Marin told me that part of the problem was that her relationship with Räikkönen had been a chatty one; they would talk for hours at a time. But many things that made up her day as Prime Minister were classified. Räikkönen told me that he didn’t want to comment on the split but said,

“It’s true that, before she was Prime Minister, we talked a lot.” They now co-parent Emma amicably.

Earlier, I had watched Marin and Räikkönen walk their daughter to her first day of school. After they said goodbye, Marin walked over to me and confessed that she had almost cried. As Prime Minister, Marin couldn’t pick Emma up from day care very often. “The day the parliament decided that it would grant me the resignation I had requested,” she writes in the book, “a door that I couldn’t wait to open was the one to my daughter’s daycare.”

Being a Prime Minister is a gruelling job in the best of times, but Marin had to lead her country through a global pandemic, and through fears sparked by the Ukraine War that Russia’s attempts to reclaim former territory would extend to Finland, which had been part of the Russian Empire until 1917. The five parties in her coalition were not always ideologically in synch. As a candidate, Marin had thought that Finland should stay “militarily nonaligned,” the country’s long-standing position. But once in office she saw that many E.U. countries had organized their national-defense plans around *NATO*. “As a result, the countries that were not part of *NATO* were left out of critical decision-making,” she writes. Not everyone agreed that Finland should join. According to Marin, Andersson, the leader of the Left Alliance, was “shouting” at her over the phone. Andersson and the Left Alliance maintained that if Finland were to join there should be no nuclear weapons or permanent *NATO* bases in the country. Andersson told me that the intensity went both ways. “In negotiations, there’s all these dances that need to be danced,” she said. “And I think sometimes Sanna was very frustrated with this. She could lose her temper.” Finland was admitted to *NATO* in April of 2023.

I repeatedly got the sense from Marin that it wasn’t the pressures of government that became intolerable but, rather, the press’s fascination with her personal life, which she intended to keep enjoying. Hillary Clinton, who posted her support after the dancing scandal, told me that she thought Marin had the right idea: “Keeping your sense of self and your humanity is critical to surviving in public life. Not to mention the whole thing was blatantly sexist.”

I spoke with a journalist named Jarno Liski, who broke a story about Marin that is known in Finland as Breakfastgate. In 2021, he got a tip that Marin's team was using government funds to cover her breakfast expenses and that the receipts were sealed. It was later reported that Marin's team had been misinformed about breakfast being included in the P.M.'s benefits, and had also wanted to shield her family's dietary preferences. Marin's supporters found the coverage of her breakfast bills sexist, the Finnish equivalent of the "women be shopping" meme. Liski saw it as a straightforward government-spending story but admitted that the press was ravenous for any detail about her life style: "It's true that if the papers found out what kind of cereal Sanna Marin was eating, they would have printed it."

"I don't eat breakfast," Marin told me, when we stopped by Cafe Regatta, a ramshackle coffee shop on the waterfront known for its cinnamon buns. Marin didn't have one, but I did—for cultural immersion. I told her that I had taken a taxi to meet her, after reading in her book that she was concerned that cabdrivers were losing their livelihoods to rideshare services like Uber and Bolt. "I think it's like some sort of human slavery," she said, referring to how little the apps pay workers. It was the most animated I had seen her in our time together, and I asked if she missed being able to do something politically about these kinds of issues. "It would be hard if I wasn't still doing it," she said between sips of coffee, sounding a little defensive.

As an example, Marin told me that the Tony Blair Institute collaborated with the *Halo* Trust to "help Ukraine demine faster. Land mines are a big problem there." She has also advised Yulia Svyrydenko, the new Prime Minister of Ukraine. "I think it's very rewarding, working with governments directly," Marin said. The T.B.I. has drawn intense criticism in the U.K. and abroad; there are concerns about the overlap between the T.B.I.'s policy proposals, which include heavy investments in A.I., and the corporate interests of its donors, like the Oracle founder Larry Ellison. Then there's the matter of Blair's own political baggage. To some, Blair is synonymous with the Iraq War and the Labour Party's rightward shift. When I mentioned this to Marin, she said, "Many world leaders have a contradictory legacy." She cited the example of Angela Merkel, the former German Chancellor. "I think she was a great European leader, but she also

made mistakes, especially concerning Russia and the energy connections that Germany has with Russia," Marin said. "We thought, with our logic, that having those kind of close economic connections would prevent the war, but of course Russians didn't think like this. Putin didn't think like this."

Marin's decision to work at the T.B.I. has divided her colleagues and supporters. The Finnish M.P. Timo Heinonen shared an article on X about the T.B.I. continuing to work for the Saudi government after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and tagged Marin: "Is such an entity really the right place for you, former Prime Minister @MarinSanna?"

I e-mailed Hanna Ylöstalo, an associate professor of gender studies at Tampere University, who has written about the Marin administration. At first, I thought that she suggested a call at 10 *p.m.* her time. "No absolutely not, 10am!" she wrote. "We Nordic feminists don't have your crazy working hours. . . . We are no servants of men or market economy." (I didn't protest. Two weeks before I flew to Helsinki, I had surgery on my elbow, and brought my laptop to the hospital so that I could send off a story pitch in the waiting room.)

Many politicians take controversial consulting gigs after leaving office, but Marin wasn't just any politician. "She was *very* to the left," Ylöstalo said. "Obviously, she's free to do what she wants, but I feel personally that she has all the power in the world, and she has all this space to address any kind of political issue. And what does she do? She gives inspirational speeches to political élites and poses with celebrities. So I'm very disappointed, to be honest."

As one would expect, Marin's friends and family are more understanding about her choices, and more protective of her reputation. "Is this going to be a good story about Sanna?" Räikkönen asked me. Ahead of the 2023 elections, Marin recruited her friend Nasima Razmyar, then a former M.P. who had left Parliament to work in city government in Helsinki, to run again. "She said, 'The Party needs you,' and then she left," Razmyar, who won her race, said, with a chuckle. Had she been upset? "I think it's a mixed feeling," Razmyar said. "On one hand, it was, like, 'This is too early

for you to leave.’ But then I remember that she has achieved so much already.”

Marin hasn’t sworn off a return to government. “It’s too soon, though,” she said. “I don’t have that nostalgia yet.”

The following day, I took a train from Helsinki to Tampere. An old friend of mine named Saara, whom I had met while she was in the U.S. on a Fulbright, had invited me to the city. She lived, funnily enough, in the same co-op that Marin and Räikkönen used to, and she and her neighbors were having what Finns call a *talkoot*, a sort of community-gardening-and-cleanup event. Marin, when I told her, was excited to hear that I was participating. “That’s so Finnish,” she said.

I also wanted to ride the famous Tampere tram, which Saara referred to as “Sanna’s tram” when she gave me directions. I hopped on a tram car; it had been painted with pictures of Moomins, to mark the eightieth anniversary of the children’s-book series by Tove Jansson. Marin had told me that her favorite Moomin book was “Moominvalley in November.” The last in the series, it’s a sombre tale in which various characters set off to visit the Moominhouse only to find that the first family of Moominvalley has gone away.

When I arrived at Saara’s courtyard, a little Russian girl was standing and waiting to perform a TikTok dance for me. She had heard that an American journalist was coming. I applauded, wondering when she had come to Finland. (The current government has moved to block asylum seekers at the Russian border.) I followed Saara upstairs to her apartment, where, over berry-flavored seltzer, she told me that she would tolerate no Sanna Marin slander. Didn’t she think that the breakfast story was fair game? “No,” she replied. “They were just mad that she bought her breakfast and wasn’t making everything from scratch, like churning her own butter.”

I asked Saara what the prior tram had been like. There hadn’t been one, she told me. The city had relied on buses and cars; there was terrible traffic. “It was awful,” she said. It was almost impossible for me to imagine. The tram is the lifeblood of the city—it’s even red—with a projected total of around twenty million riders in 2025. There are plans to expand it. All at once, I

could see why some of Marin's supporters felt that she had accomplished enough and others wished that she'd stayed and done more.

Back in Helsinki, I watched an Instagram story that Marin had posted that weekend of her and her friends at Flow Festival, an annual music festival taking place in Helsinki, where Charli XCX was headlining. Marin had added a clip of the singer's 2012 single with Icona Pop, whose chorus goes, "I don't care, I love it."

Earlier in my visit, Marin and I had gone to a public sauna on the island of Lonna, in the Helsinki archipelago. I'd been anxious. Between steams, people usually swim in the Baltic Sea, but I was worried that, so soon after surgery, my arm wouldn't be strong enough. The irony wasn't lost on me, that I was writing a profile of the Prime Minister of work-life balance as I prepared to die for my job.

When Marin and I arrived at the front desk of the sauna center, we each bought, at her suggestion, a Lonkero, a popular canned beverage containing gin and grapefruit soda which was invented for the 1952 Summer Olympics. As we approached a wooden seaside cabin, I told her about my elbow, and she asked how it was healing. "O.K.," I said. Then, maybe by coincidence or maybe because an old political muscle kicked in, Marin announced, "I won't be swimming. My back hurts." Now it was my turn to mime an exhale. "Also," she added, "inside is off the record. Sauna is sacred." ♦

Jennifer Wilson is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.

A Reporter at Large

The Hague on Trial

The chief prosecutor has obtained warrants against Israeli leaders for war crimes—but faces allegations of sexual misconduct.

By David D. Kirkpatrick

October 5, 2025

Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor. A colleague said, "He thought he could do something to improve the court—to get the court back on the map."Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photographs from Getty

The International Criminal Court, established in 2002, in the aftermath of the carnage in Rwanda and the Balkans, was designed to hold accountable future perpetrators of war crimes or crimes against humanity. It got off to a slow start: during the court's first two decades in operation, it issued fewer than forty public arrest warrants. Most targeted African strongmen or warlords; the court almost never took on the major international powers or their closest allies, and critics complained that it effectively punished the weak while sparing the strong. (A hundred and twenty-five states are party to a treaty recognizing the court, but the United States, Russia, China, and Israel aren't among them.) The court is governed by an assembly of the

participating states, and in 2021 it elected a new chief prosecutor, Karim Khan. A fifty-five-year-old British-born lawyer whose father emigrated from Pakistan, he had previously served as an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, where he'd overseen a team investigating abuses committed by *ISIS*. Khan vowed to reënergize the I.C.C. by upholding its promise of equal justice for all.

Khan boasted to colleagues that, in his first three years on the job, he had obtained more than forty new warrants, some not yet public. Among the public warrants were orders for the arrest of Vladimir Putin and top Russian military leaders, for war crimes in Ukraine; the leaders of Hamas, for its murderous attack on Israel on October 7, 2023; and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and a former Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, for the willful killing of civilians in Gaza, and for employing the denial of food as a weapon of war.

The Israeli warrants were easily the most controversial the court had ever issued, and also the first against a close U.S. ally. (In 2020, the first Trump Administration had sanctioned the previous I.C.C. prosecutor for merely beginning an investigation of possible crimes by U.S. forces in Afghanistan; no Americans were ultimately charged.) But Khan seemed to relish the attention his actions received. He is short and stout, with a shaved head and a gray goatee, and his austere look fits his hard-charging reputation. For much of 2024, he allowed a documentary filmmaker to follow him around the world as he conducted various investigations. That May, on the day when he applied for the Israeli warrants, Khan sat for an interview at the court with Christiane Amanpour, of CNN. A lawyer who worked closely with Khan at the court told me, "He can be a bit of a bully, and he is an impulsive character, but he is a damn good lawyer, and he thought he could do something to improve the court—to get the court back on the map." Instead, he has become enmeshed in a scandal that threatens to cripple it.

Khan's life unravelled in the course of only a few hours. On the afternoon of October 17, 2024, he was sitting in a kebab restaurant in London, preparing to deliver a speech, when his phone rang. The caller was a thirtysomething Malaysian woman, a lawyer who'd been at the I.C.C. for seven years. She now worked as a special assistant to the prosecutor, and

she had been open about her heartbreak over the suffering in Gaza. She said that she was speaking from her bed in her home in The Hague, where the court is based. The woman, who had told Khan that she was suffering from lupus, a respiratory infection, and debilitating depression, audibly vaped as she said that she needed time off to recover. Yet she soon made it clear that addressing health issues wasn't the sole purpose of her call.

Five months earlier, shortly before Khan applied for the Israeli warrants, two others working at the court had told the I.C.C.'s human-resources department that the Malaysian woman had privately complained about Khan, saying that he had subjected her to multiple unwanted sexual advances. Members of an internal-oversight bureau had met with her; she'd declined to participate in an investigation or to answer questions, and had informed Khan of those decisions. The I.C.C. halted its inquiry, and she kept working for Khan.

Throughout that spring, American and European officials had been waging a pressure campaign to dissuade Khan from pursuing the Israeli warrants. A military adviser with ties to Western intelligence warned the court that Mossad had been attempting to penetrate the organization, and the *Guardian* and other news organizations reported that Mossad had spied on, hacked, and, allegedly, threatened I.C.C. officials. (Israeli officials denied the allegations.) Russia was also retaliating against the court, including by ordering Khan's arrest. The Malaysian woman, in a text to Khan about her refusal to coöperate with the internal inquiry, sounded worried that political machinations might be driving the investigation, telling him that she refused to be "a pawn in some game I don't want to play."

Then, that fall, someone began a campaign to bring new attention to the months-old, secondhand reports about Khan. An anonymous e-mail account leaked one of the reports to journalists, and many attempted to contact the woman and the I.C.C. She didn't respond, thus holding off the press, although the inquiries appeared to set off rumors at the court. In the phone conversation with Khan, the woman never referred to any sexual advances or other misconduct, but she lamented several times that she'd heard colleagues gossiping that she was either "obsessed" with him or, worse, an Israeli spy.

It was “humiliating” to be called “a Mossad plant,” she told Khan, according to a recording she made of the call. “I have basically lost any friend that I did have at the court. . . . I don’t know where to look anymore. . . . I just think it’s time for me to go.”

Khan warned her more than once of “wolves around us.” The call lasted an hour, and during it he asked six times if she was recording their conversation. (She lied and said no.) But his tone was supportive; he encouraged her to take the time off that she needed, and to get continued pay through medical leave. Occasionally, he sounded confident that he was innocent of any misconduct, reminding her repeatedly that it was her choice if she wanted to initiate a more comprehensive investigation, including of him. “The truth will come out,” he assured her. Yet, at other moments, he sounded anxious that she might pursue a complaint against him. He told her that speculation about this was “keeping things alive,” and he urged her to formally clarify that she had no intention of accusing him of inappropriate behavior. “Then it’s well and truly over,” he said, and the I.C.C. could end the “feeding frenzy” by telling journalists, “Fuck off now—leave her alone.”

“Things are being pushed,” Khan told her, by forces out to “get rid of the warrants for Palestine, get rid of the warrants for Russia, get rid of the whole court.” Khan and the Malaysian woman were both married, and he warned her that a misconduct scandal would not only harm the woman and her family, and Khan and his family. The “casualties” would also include “the justice of the victims that now, finally, are on the cusp of progress.”

Ninety minutes after the call ended, an anonymous X account began leaking details from the same secondhand report that had been included in the anonymous e-mail. Stories appeared in the media, including an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, on October 23, 2024, which reported that the woman had accused Khan of “locking her into his office and sexually touching her,” making “visits to her hotel room in the middle of the night, demanding to be let in,” and “claiming to have a headache and lying on her hotel bed, sexually touching her.” A few weeks later, the I.C.C.’s governing body requested an external investigation. By the time the U.N. began one, the woman was levelling an even more serious allegation: that Khan had

repeatedly forced her into “coercive” sex. (Khan, who has denied any misconduct, declined requests for an interview.)

Selective leaks from the ambiguous phone call—in particular, Khan’s references to Palestinians and other victims being “on the cusp of progress”—have improbably bound together the woman’s allegation of sexual abuse with the international power struggle over the Israeli arrest warrants. Khan and his lawyers have contended that Netanyahu and his allies are exploiting a vulnerable woman in order to discredit the case against the Israeli leaders. Netanyahu, in turn, has repeatedly claimed that Khan sought the warrants only to divert attention from the woman’s charges.

Indeed, in a video interview in August with Breitbart, Netanyahu accused Khan of an elaborate scheme, claiming that, when Khan learned about the woman’s allegations, “he said, ‘I’m ruined. I have to get out of this somehow,’ so he decided the best way to get out of that was to hit the Jews, or to hit the Prime Minister of the Jewish state.” Dismissing the I.C.C. as “a completely corrupt organization,” and describing the female accuser as a Malaysian hostile to Israel, Netanyahu charged, without evidence, that the court had told her, “Listen, it’s more important to falsely accuse Israel of these war crimes than for your charges to be heard.”

“Long story short: ‘Fred,’ I said, ‘what good are monkey bars without monkeys?’ ”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

The Trump Administration and Netanyahu allies in the Republican-led U.S. Congress have seized on the sexual-abuse allegations as part of a broader defense of Netanyahu and Gallant against the I.C.C. charges. Six days after

the October 17th call and leak, Senator Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, announced that the woman's claims had put "a moral cloud" over Khan's decision to seek the warrants. President Trump, in a statement, has accused the court of "illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel" which constitute "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." The U.S. has now sanctioned Khan, his two deputies, and several I.C.C. judges—freezing their assets, blocking their access to the U.S. financial system, and restricting their ability to enter the country. Several I.C.C. staffers with American ties resigned.

The international uproar over the sexual-abuse charges culminated in an article this spring in the *Wall Street Journal*, which reported the woman's allegations and strongly suggested that Khan had sought the warrants as a tactical deflection. Six days later, Khan took a leave of absence that brought the work of the court to a virtual standstill.

The attempt to link the sexual-assault allegations and the Israeli warrants is at odds with many facts. Khan's pursuit of the warrants was hardly new or secret. A team of lawyers in the prosecutor's office had worked for several months on an investigation of Israel's assault on Gaza. Because accusing Israel of grave misdeeds was so explosive—Khan described it to Amanpour as "the San Andreas Fault of international politics and strategic interests"—he had also, in January, 2024, made the unorthodox choice to solicit a second opinion from an outside panel of experts.

That panel included two former judges who had overseen international criminal tribunals, a former legal adviser to the British Foreign Office, and Amal Clooney, a British Lebanese human-rights lawyer and the wife of George Clooney. They concluded that there was sufficient evidence for charges of war crimes or crimes against humanity on both sides of the Gaza conflict, including at the top of the Israeli chain of command. The lawyers inside the I.C.C. prosecutor's office agreed. The Hamas-led attack on October 7th had killed about twelve hundred people in Israel, including at least eight hundred civilians, and taken some two hundred and fifty hostages. By May, 2024, the Israeli assault on Gaza had killed upward of thirty-five thousand people, many of them women or children. According to

Gaza's Health Ministry, at least thirty-two Palestinians, including twenty-eight children, had died of malnutrition or starvation at Gaza's hospitals. An internationally recognized panel of experts was warning that more than a million Gazans could soon face catastrophic hunger. (The reported death toll has now exceeded sixty-six thousand; at least four hundred and fifty people have died of malnutrition or starvation, including a hundred and fifty-one children.)

When Khan spoke to Amanpour, he explained some of the reasoning behind the charges. Senior Israeli officials, he noted, had repeated "words like there's no such thing as an innocent civilian in Gaza—they're all responsible," and neither Netanyahu nor Gallant had ever "disowned" those comments or "dissociated themselves." Gallant had said that Israel was "fighting human animals" and imposing "a complete siege" with "no electricity, no food, no fuel"; Netanyahu had vowed "to exact a price that will be remembered by them and Israel's other enemies for decades to come." On November 21, 2024, six months after Khan applied for the warrants, a pretrial chamber of the I.C.C., which consists of three judges, ruled that Khan had presented "reasonable grounds" that Netanyahu and Gallant "bear criminal responsibility" for the crimes of "starvation as a method of warfare"; "murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts"; and "intentionally directing an attack against the civilian population."

Khan has told investigators that he decided to seek the warrants in May, 2024, because of frustration with what he considered to be delaying tactics by Israel, which included dragging out talks about letting him visit Gaza to carry out investigations on the ground. His requested visit had been blocked or postponed for months, and around May 15th Israel failed to provide necessary documents for a visit to Gaza that Khan had planned for the end of that month. He had come to believe that the Israelis would never permit such a trip. (Since the assault began, Israel hasn't allowed any outside journalists or rights monitors unfettered access to Gaza.)

What's more, if Khan intended to defend himself from accusations of sexual misconduct by claiming that Israel was plotting against him, he hardly needed to announce the warrant applications. His steps toward those charges had been widely reported in the news media before May of 2024,

and the fierce pushback from Israel and its allies was well known in diplomatic circles. According to official notes that Khan has provided to U.N. investigators, that April, Brett McGurk, then the top White House Middle East adviser, warned Khan in a phone call of disastrous consequences if he sought the Israeli warrants. David Cameron, the British Foreign Secretary at the time, told Khan that such a move would be a "hydrogen bomb." On April 24, 2024, a dozen U.S. Republican senators, including Mitch McConnell and Marco Rubio, sent a letter to Khan overtly threatening him: "Target Israel and we will target you. . . . You have been warned." The next day, the New York *Post* reported that Khan was poised to bring war-crimes charges against Netanyahu within days. Netanyahu reposted the article on social media and charged that the I.C.C. was attempting to undermine Israel's "inherent right to self-defense." According to an account that Khan shared with investigators of a conference call he had with U.S. senators, on May 1, 2024, Lindsey Graham told him, "You may as well shoot the hostages yourself," adding, "This court is for Africans." (Through a spokeswoman, Graham denied making the second statement, insisting he said only that the court was for places where the rule of law had collapsed.)

Yet, if the lawyers inside the prosecutor's office broadly agreed about the grounds for charges against Netanyahu and Gallant, many of them disagreed sharply about how to proceed, primarily because of the American threats. (Khan's accuser was one of those who had argued internally that he should move more slowly in making charges against Israeli leaders, and not rush to publicize high-level warrants.) Prosecutors usually sought warrants confidentially, to avoid putting political pressure on I.C.C. judges, and to give the states that recognize the organization a chance to arrest defendants who travelled inside their borders. (The I.C.C. lacks its own police force.) More important, several lawyers involved in the Gaza investigation contended that the singular nature of the I.C.C.—ostensibly a court of law, but also a relatively untested diplomatic construct—required a prosecutor to consider political realities in addition to international law. One lawyer told me that the I.C.C. "exists in a framework of international relations—states created us, so we have to be strategic." After the I.C.C. issued a warrant against Putin, in 2023, the lawyer continued, "the court was riding high, in terms of relevance and reputation," but on the subject of Israel "there were

concerns that, if we went big in terms of defendants and types of crimes, it would have massive reverberations" in places such as Washington, which could "make things very difficult for us." Another lawyer told me that the court simply couldn't afford to ignore the wishes of the United States, "the six-hundred-pound gorilla in the room."

At the same time, lawyers who worked with Khan said that he felt enormous pressure to do *something* to try to stop the escalating slaughter of Palestinian civilians. Human-rights and Palestinian-advocacy groups were attacking him on social media for failing to act. Some activists labelled him a "genocide enabler," and others were collecting signatures for an online petition that demanded his removal. Oona Hathaway, a Yale law professor, told me that, outside the U.S. and Israel, the lack of visible action "could also look like a very obvious omission, so there were risks to the court's credibility in failing to seek arrest warrants."

Khan, according to colleagues, argued internally that publicly announcing the warrant application might deter the Israelis from engaging in further war crimes. On CNN, he recalled that for months he had been publicly warning both sides of the conflict, "Comply now, don't complain later."

On April 29, 2024, as these tactical debates were playing out within the prosecutor's office, Khan's accuser burst into tears in front of a female colleague, and did so again, later that day, in the office of one of Khan's senior advisers. The adviser, Thomas Lynch, was an American lawyer who had previously worked as Khan's right hand at the U.N. Within the I.C.C., he was known as a skeptic of issuing high-level charges against the Israelis, and he had clashed with Khan the previous December over Lynch's edits to a public statement from the chief prosecutor's office about Gaza. Khan accused Lynch of inserting language preferred by the Israelis: the statement ended up describing Hamas as a "terror organisation" instead of as an armed group, and used the word "innocent" to describe the Israeli victims but not the Palestinians; the prosecutor's office usually avoided making such judgments in press statements. (Lynch has told investigators that Khan had asked him to work with a senior Israeli contact while finalizing the statement, and noted that Khan had kept him on as the prosecutor's liaison to Israel.)

According to people familiar with the initial, aborted sexual-misconduct investigation, the Malaysian woman had said nothing to colleagues about "coercive" sex. But she told both her female colleague and Lynch that Khan had made her work life intolerable with a long series of unwanted and physical sexual advances, which she described in detail. On May 2, 2024, Lynch and the female colleague told Khan that they felt obligated to pass her allegations to human resources.

The woman has told U.N. investigators she did not know that her confidants had informed Khan or the human-resources office until Sunday, May 5th, when she received a text from a representative of the I.C.C.'s internal-oversight bureau. A diplomat familiar with the inquiry told me that the bureau sought to speak to her before she returned to work that Monday, in order to protect her from being pressured by Khan at the office. But the text interrupted a family event, and the woman ended up meeting with I.C.C. investigators at a hotel restaurant, with her young son seated at a table a few feet away. She has told the U.N. investigators that she declined to answer questions because the context of the interview conveyed a lack of consideration for a potential victim. The diplomat, however, told me that bureau staff suspected another scenario: some at the I.C.C. had observed an unusual warmth between the woman and Khan, and a pattern of official travel together. This raised the possibility of an extramarital relationship gone sour.

According to records provided to the U.N. investigators, the woman texted Khan that Monday that she had "told them I have no interest in talking," adding, "I just want to do my job and continue my professional work." Khan sent back a boilerplate response, saying that he was "here if you need to talk," and adding that she could also speak to one of his deputies. The oversight bureau, concluding that the woman would not participate in any inquiry, e-mailed Khan on May 7th, advising him to "minimise individual one-on-one contact" with her. A message the next day told him that there was "no need, at this stage," for further investigation. On May 13th, the woman accompanied Khan to New York, for a meeting with the U.N. Security Council.

“I can’t get over the feeling that everyone is nice to me because I have something they want.” Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Khan had good reason to think that the drama of her allegations had ended there. But that fall, as the judges of the I.C.C. weighed an Israeli appeal of the warrant applications, someone launched the campaign to revive the woman’s allegations, in an apparent effort to undermine the war-crimes charges. The anonymous e-mail account began sending journalists copies of a four-page typed statement that Lynch had provided to the I.C.C.’s internal-oversight bureau, summarizing the woman’s initial allegations. In a note attached to this document, the sender claimed that Khan had sought “to cover up his personal mess” by seeking “to speed up his investigation of the war in the Gaza Strip—including a speedy process to request arrest warrants.” The sender added, falsely, that, after requesting the warrants, Khan, “as a preemptive measure,” had publicly “accused the Israeli ‘Mossad’ of threatening and blackmailing him.” Bizarrely, the sender then spoke up for Mossad: “It is my understanding that this never occurred and was just used as a cover up story and precaution shall this information of his sexual misconduct come up and be revealed.” The note listed the names and phone numbers of the accuser, Lynch, and several others at the I.C.C.; in the copy I obtained, there was also a single Hebrew word, for “telephones,” alongside some numbers.

Some of the journalists contacting Khan’s accuser for comment quoted Lynch’s statement to her. The woman has told U.N. investigators that, at about the same time, Khan and another court official close to him were pushing her to clarify that she had no intention of pursuing a complaint.

Feeling pressured from many sides, the accuser has said, she began seeking confidential advice from a senior female diplomat in the multinational assembly that governs the I.C.C. The accuser also began recording some of her phone calls.

Then, on October 17, 2024, the anonymous X account appeared. Its handle was @ICC_Leaks. The account's owner, claiming to be someone "personally familiar" with the court, described a "sexual harassment complaint" about "one of the most famous figures in international criminal law"—someone with the initials "KK"—which had been filed on May 4, 2024, and was still "being silenced." The account repeated details from Lynch's written statement and claimed that "no action has been taken," adding, "Why do so many people know about this but are afraid to demand immediate action?"

It remains a mystery who was behind the anonymous e-mail and the X account. Khan has unconvincingly argued to U.N. investigators that his accuser was complicit, contending that the mere ninety minutes between the taped phone call and the posting from @ICC_Leaks indicate that she played a role. But the X postings included her initials, and the e-mail had included her full name and phone number. It is hard to imagine that she willingly exposed herself and her family to such public scrutiny. Officials in the human-resources department or the internal-oversight bureau could have leaked Lynch's statement, but people in those offices had the ability to take action against Khan at any time without leaking—and nobody in those offices had an obvious interest in linking the allegations against Khan to the charges against Israel.

Were the e-mail and the X account part of an Israeli influence operation, or were the references to Mossad and the Hebrew letters heavy-handed misdirection? Some suspect that Lynch himself, or someone close to Lynch, played a role in the leak. He, of course, had a copy of his own statement. Records of communications on the day the X account appeared show that he'd met with the accuser shortly before her hour-long call with Khan, and colleagues of Lynch's have told me he believed that Khan had announced the warrants to deflect the charges, just as the anonymous e-mail argued.

But communications records also show Lynch expressing surprise when the leaks first emerged, and he has told investigators that he wasn't responsible.

Whoever was behind the @ICC_Leaks account, it had the effect of tying the allegations against Khan to the charges against Israel. Six days after that leak, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which consistently supports Netanyahu, declared that the accusations could "throw into question Mr. Khan's probity," and further suggested that his "Israel-bashing"—"a reliable way to divert attention and pressure"—had been a cover for his misconduct. The Associated Press, citing "people close to Khan's accuser," reported that investigators for the I.C.C.'s oversight bureau had inappropriately tried to question the accuser in front of her child. By the end of October, both Khan and his accuser had requested an independent inquiry.

In December, Khan's accuser sat for many hours of interviews with U.N. investigators. Among other submissions, she has provided nearly two hundred pages of texts between her and a friend. In these exchanges, she attested that she loved her job "90 percent of the time," called Khan a difficult boss, and described her struggle with depression. But, in at least a few texts from the spring of 2024, she explicitly described sexual advances by Khan. "He wants to go on holiday or link a mission and stay on for a few days. I'm beautiful, the smell of my neck," she wrote in a text that April, saying that she'd made an excuse to get away from him. (A person close to Khan said that U.N. investigators haven't sought his response to any such evidence.)

The accuser has told the U.N. investigators that Khan sexually assaulted her in his office and coerced her into sex at his home, in The Hague, and during five trips together. Those accusations became public on May 10, 2025, when an article in the *Wall Street Journal* described graphic details from her testimony, which the publication reported it had reviewed. The article said that Khan's accuser had testified, "He always holds on to me and leads me to the bed," adding, "It's the feeling of being trapped."

The *Journal* article quoted Khan's statement in the secretly taped October 17th phone call about "the victims that now, finally, are on the cusp of progress." Citing that quote and echoing the paper's earlier editorial, the

article argued that the timing of his announcement about the Israeli warrants "has spurred questions about whether Khan was aiming to protect himself from the sexual-assault allegations." The article also framed his decision to seek the warrants in May, 2024, as an abrupt swerve, emphasizing that Khan had been appreciative when senior White House officials had told him seventeen days before his announcement that they were still pressing the Israelis to let him into Gaza. Khan was then depicted as suddenly "canceling" a visit to Gaza, even though Israel had so far withheld the necessary travel documents.

In August, the *Guardian* reported that a former intern in Khan's law office had also come forward, on condition of anonymity, to attest that, sixteen years ago, Khan had made repeated unwanted sexual advances. (The newspaper reported that she refused to have sex with him.) Through a lawyer, Khan denied the allegations.

Determining exactly what happened between Khan and his accuser may be a difficult task for the U.N. investigators. In addition to denying any sexual misconduct, Khan has told them that the allegations had no bearing on his decision about the warrants. People familiar with his arguments to the investigators told me that his defense has included communications showing his strong support for the woman when, in 2022, she had complained about another colleague, accusing him of saying something that she deemed to be sexual harassment. (An investigation, which concluded at the end of 2023, exonerated that colleague.) In correspondence that Khan made available to the investigators, his accuser appears to be very warm, prone to disclosure about her personal life and struggles, highly solicitous of Khan and his wife, and perhaps overeager. Even in the period immediately before and after she cried to colleagues, she sent Khan messages saying that she was glad to be on a mission with him and suggesting art work that he and his wife might buy for their home. Khan has given investigators a photograph showing that his office was always at least partially visible through an internal window from the office of his personal assistant. He has also argued that bodyguards could testify about his whereabouts, and that he had the flu on one trip when she alleges he assaulted her.

At the same time, people familiar with the investigation told me that Khan has devoted much of his defense to convincing investigators that Israel and its allies are exploiting the accuser in order to damage him and the court. Among other things, he has provided texts and notes documenting what he argues was a private threat he received last spring. On April 26, 2025, Nick Kaufman, a prominent British Israeli international lawyer friendly with Khan, texted him that he'd received a call from the *Journal* reporter, who "had heard, so he said, that I have been informally advising Gallant." (A person familiar with the arrangement told me that Gallant has avoided formally retaining a lawyer, a step that would tacitly acknowledge the I.C.C.'s authority.) Kaufman commiserated to Khan about "snakes in the grass in your own office" and professed no interest in "the scandalous allegations people raise." Then, noting that he had spoken that afternoon to a well-connected former Israeli deputy attorney general, Kaufman suggested meeting with Khan the following week at his office in The Hague. "I do have a bit of an insight into the Israeli mentality regarding the current state of litigation," he said, offering "some information and an idea or two of a diplomatic kind."

Khan agreed to meet on May 1, 2025, at the Hotel Des Indes, joined by his wife, who is also an international lawyer. According to notes that Khan has given to U.N. investigators, Kaufman presented himself as authorized to make a proposal from Netanyahu and Gallant. He told Khan that the charges had effectively indicted the whole State of Israel and that Khan should find "a way to climb down from the tree." According to the notes, Kaufman said that, if Khan did not somehow withdraw the warrants, "they"—presumably, Israel and its American allies—"will destroy you and they will destroy the court." The same notes state that Kaufman also suggested reclassifying the warrants and related proceedings as confidential. Khan did not. The next week, the *Wall Street Journal* article appeared, and Khan's leave of absence quickly followed. When I called Kaufman, he denied that he'd ever made any threats or claimed to speak for Netanyahu or Gallant, and said that any reference to damage to the I.C.C. was about U.S. sanctions. He said, "I went to Khan as a friend, and he proved to me that his friends are expendable to him if he needs to save his own hide."

Andrew Cayley, a British lawyer who worked for Khan on the Gaza investigation and resigned under the pressure of the U.S. sanctions, told me that, because of the scandal and those sanctions, “enormous and potentially permanent damage is being done to the project of the court”—a project that he traced back to the Nuremberg trials. Leila Sadat, a professor at the Washington University School of Law, who left the I.C.C. in the summer of 2023, after a decade as an adviser in the prosecutor’s office, told me that she had worked with both Khan and his accuser. She said that she had “no reason to doubt the bona fides” of the woman, or to doubt that Khan had also acted “in good faith” when he sought the Israeli warrants. She said the linkage of the two matters was both implausible and “deeply regrettable,” and that, with the misconduct rumors never fully resolved, “Israel and the United States are going to be pulling out every weapon they have to fight against those warrants.” In September, the I.C.C. paid its staff through the end of the year in anticipation of additional U.S. sanctions that would all but shut down the court.

A person close to Khan’s accuser told me that the woman, too, deeply resented the conflation of the two issues. After the U.N. investigators issue a report—it is expected in the coming months—Khan’s future at the I.C.C. will depend on the assembly of states that governs it, and politics may well play a role. The scandal has already impeded the effort to hold Israel accountable for the death toll in Gaza; the woman fears that anger at Israel might now lead members of the assembly to discount her story and, instead, side with Khan. ♦

David D. Kirkpatrick, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of "Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East."

Annals of Justice

A Year of Convulsions in New York’s Prisons

How two murders and a strike exposed a system at its breaking point.

By Jennifer Gonnerman

October 6, 2025

For men with memories of abuse by correction officers, footage of a fatal beating was “like a boomerang,” one said.Illustration by Emiliano Ponzi

J. B. Nicholas runs a news website called *The Free Lance* from his home in upstate New York, and, near the end of last year, he started obsessively tracking one story: a man confined at a state prison outside of Utica had died in early December after an encounter with correction officers.

Reporting on a prison death can be tricky, but, in this case, there was evidence that rarely exists—video footage.

The New York attorney general, Letitia James, promised to release the footage, and, shortly before noon on December 27th, Nicholas was seated at his computer, waiting for James's virtual press conference to begin. Nicholas, who is fifty-five, brought unusual expertise to this story: he had spent twelve years in the state's prison system, from 1991 to 2003, serving time for manslaughter.

James appeared on his computer monitor, framed by the U.S. and the New York State flags. She explained that the videos were from body-worn cameras that the officers had on "at the time of the incident." The cameras had been powered on, but not activated, so the officers did not realize they were recording. "These videos are shocking and disturbing," James said. "I encourage taking caution before viewing."

In the footage, a forty-three-year-old Black man named Robert Brooks appears in prison greens. It is 9:21 *P.M.* on December 9th, and Brooks is outdoors, on a walkway at Marcy Correctional Facility. He is surrounded by officers. At 9:22 *P.M.*, three of them carry him by his limbs—wrists cuffed behind him, head hanging down—into a building, and then into a room in the infirmary. Two stethoscopes hang on the wall by the door, next to a poster about how to aid a choking victim. The guards place Brooks on a gurney covered by exam paper. And then a group of officers, all of whom appear to be white, start beating him.

Most of the officers are dressed in blue uniform shirts and navy uniform jackets, with a U.S.-flag patch on one arm. At 9:25 *P.M.*, one officer shoves what appears to be a rag into Brooks's mouth. Another lifts him by the neck and repeatedly drops him on the gurney. A third officer strikes Brooks with Brooks's own boot. An officer steadies himself by placing his hand on a counter, then stomps on Brooks's groin. At 9:26 *P.M.*, another officer enters the room and locks a pair of cuffs around Brooks's ankles.

As the minutes tick by, and the beating continues, Brooks becomes increasingly bloodied and unresponsive. More than a dozen people either participate in or witness what is happening, but nobody intervenes. Nobody

even seems particularly surprised or distraught. Two male nurses watch from the hall, and a camera captures them smirking.

Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

At 9:32 *P.M.*, the nurses enter the room. One stands next to Brooks's limp body and attempts to find a pulse. The other reaches into a cupboard for an Ambu bag—a resuscitation device—that he will hook up to an oxygen tank. The nurses' smiles have vanished. By "approximately 9:40," it was later disclosed, Brooks was "clinically dead."

Watching the footage at his desk, Nicholas was incensed. "It's a snuff film—state-sanctioned, -sponsored, -broadcast snuff film—that should make everybody fucking furious!" he told me. "It was just confirmation of what we—we, meaning formerly incarcerated people—have known for decades: that this goes on regularly."

Nicholas wrote quickly and decided on a headline:

> *WORSE THAN GEORGE FLOYD: VIDEO SHOWS PRISON 'BEAT-UP SQUAD' KILLING INMATE ROBERT BROOKS*

In the weeks that followed, Nicholas worked non-stop. He heard that Attorney General James was seeking court orders to seize the firearms of some of the officers who had been involved, so he borrowed his girlfriend's car and drove several hours to cover the proceedings. When he found himself far from home with no money for a hotel, he pulled out a tent and a sleeping bag and camped outdoors, in the middle of winter.

James had released two hours of video footage from four body-worn cameras, but, because it had been recorded in standby mode, there was no audio. In early January, Nicholas studied the footage second by second and published a “visual investigation” on YouTube—a fifteen-minute compilation, which he narrated, identifying each person by name and detailing his role in the assault.

Of all the correction officers who appear in the footage, one stands out: a tall man with a shaved head named Anthony Farina. At a certain point in Nicholas’s narration, he says, “There’s Farina stuffing the rag in Brooks’s mouth and then punching him repeatedly in the face.” (Months later, Farina’s lawyer claimed that his client had been trying to “wipe the face of Mr. Brooks,” to clean off pepper spray—not “stuffing something down his throat.”) At another point, Nicholas says, “There goes Farina stomping on Brooks’s genitals.”

James had promised to investigate Brooks’s death “thoroughly and swiftly,” but, on January 2nd, she recused herself from the case, because of a conflict of interest. Her office defends correction officers in civil lawsuits, and it was already representing a sergeant and three officers who had been present during Brooks’s beating and who had been sued by other incarcerated men alleging brutality. (In one instance, from the fall of 2024, the three officers were allegedly involved in a beating so violent that the victim was hospitalized for almost two weeks.) James referred the Brooks case to a special prosecutor, William Fitzpatrick, the longtime district attorney of Onondaga County.

Weeks went by, and the officers who had assaulted Brooks remained free. Dozens of people who had spent time in New York’s prisons—part of a new coalition called Incarcerated People’s Lives Matter—rallied outside Governor Kathy Hochul’s office in midtown Manhattan. On January 27th, many travelled to the state capitol, in Albany, for Robert Brooks Advocacy Day, when they delivered a list of demands for prison reforms to state legislators. Nicholas showed up, too, and published the demands—for, among other things, “a genuine culture shift” and “immediate accountability” for the killing.

On February 20th, seventy-three days after Brooks's death, Fitzpatrick announced that a grand jury had indicted nine correction officers and a sergeant in connection with the assault. The men appeared one by one, handcuffed, before a judge at the Oneida County courthouse, in Utica. They were not rookies; they ranged in age from thirty-three to fifty-four. Six of the officers, including Farina, were charged with murder.

At a press conference, Fitzpatrick gave a rundown of Brooks's injuries. "Robert died of massive beating to his body," he said. "Several of his internal organs were bruised. His hyoid bone"—in his neck—"was fractured. His thyroid cartilage was ripped." He continued, "He also died as a result of repeated restrictions to his airways, causing severe brain damage," and "by choking on his own blood."

Fitzpatrick explained that, before the assault, Brooks had been held at another prison, Mohawk Correctional Facility, where he had been attacked twice by his peers. "Officials made a judgment that, for his safety—ironically enough—he should be transferred to Marcy," Fitzpatrick said. He also stated that Marcy's officers had assaulted Brooks twice before they carried him into the infirmary. When asked why the officers had attacked Brooks, Fitzpatrick replied, "There's no valid explanation."

At a subsequent press conference, he said, "I have to admit that the first thing I thought of was, Well, Robert must have done something. He must have spit on them, or disrespected them verbally or something. And the reality is, he did nothing." Fitzpatrick cast the officers' violent actions as an effort to send a message: "You were trouble over at [Mohawk]. You're not going to be trouble here."

While Fitzpatrick spoke to reporters on February 20th, another breaking story about New York's prisons was unfolding: the state's correction officers had just gone on strike for the first time in nearly fifty years. Three days earlier, on the morning of February 17th, guards at two state prisons—Collins, in western New York, and Elmira, in the Southern Tier—had walked off the job. New York's so-called Taylor Law forbids state employees' unions from striking, and the correction officers risked losing two days of pay for every day they stayed out. But, by February 23rd, the strike had swept across the state to nearly all of its forty-two prisons. About

three-quarters of New York's officers and sergeants—some ten thousand workers—ultimately joined.

The president of their union, Chris Summers, insisted that he had not called the strike. And it did not seem especially well coördinated: there was no single spokesperson, and, at some prisons, the guards drafted their own lists of demands. But, to many observers, the timing seemed suspicious. "Everyone was just convinced that it was a cover," Nicholas recalled—that it was a "distraction operation" intended to draw attention away from the officers' indictments in Brooks's murder. "Normally, I think I would have the same kind of sentiment," he said, "but I decided to actually do some reporting and talk to people." He started visiting officers' strike sites to see what he could learn.

Less than sixty days into the new year, it was evident that 2025 would hold a historic reckoning for New York's prisons. Robert Brooks's murder never garnered the attention of the nation, as George Floyd's had. But the events of the winter have reverberated throughout the year, revealing a system so extraordinarily dysfunctional that multiple officers were arrested for murder and thousands of employees stopped reporting for work. Many feared a revolt that would end with numerous deaths, echoing the prison uprising in Attica, New York, in 1971. A man who had recently left prison texted me, "I feel another Attica coming."

The state avoided that sort of catastrophe, but the tensions inside its prisons between those confined and those paid to watch them seeped into the outside world, commanding the attention of reporters and the scrutiny of political leaders. Those tensions fuelled a narrative battle, too, over what, exactly, was going on inside the walls of the state's prisons and whose perspective would prevail. New York's prison system, which currently holds about thirty-three thousand people, is opaque and sprawling. Every correctional facility has its own character and culture. In J. B. Nicholas's view, this was a story that "could only be told rightly by someone who's lived both sides—who's been a prisoner and who's been a journalist."

I first met Nicholas over the telephone in 1998, when I was a reporter for the *Village Voice* and he was in Wallkill Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in the Hudson Valley. He worked as a clerk in the law

library, and had recently sued the state over its parole policies, which became more punitive after Governor George Pataki took office, in 1995. Nicholas struck me as smart, informed, and credible, and eventually he became one of my best sources. After he was released, in 2003, he earned a B.A. from N.Y.U. and worked as a photographer for the New York *Post*; he started working as a freelance reporter in 2015, writing about crime and prisons.

In 2022, Nicholas moved to Malone—his girlfriend's home town in the North Country, about eleven miles from the Canadian border. Malone once had thriving factories and mills where residents manufactured paper, pants, and slippers, but over the decades those jobs had disappeared. The town's economic woes had provided a strong incentive for its residents to support opening a state prison there in 1986, and, by the end of New York's prison-building boom of the eighties and nineties, Malone had three—more than any other town in the state.

Nicholas launched *The Free Lance* a few months after he moved to Malone, and his early articles focussed on the state budget, New York City snowstorms, and a proposed road through the Adirondacks. Then the correction officers' strike started, and he realized that he was in the ideal position to cover the story. He had sometimes encountered correction officers when he stopped to get gas at Stewart's, but he'd never spoken to any of them. (As someone who was once incarcerated, he said, "You're supposed to hate those guys.") But, after he heard about the wildcat strike, he drove to the outskirts of Malone, where the three prisons—Bare Hill, Franklin, and Upstate—are situated close together, surrounded by forest.

J. B. Nicholas, a journalist who'd spent twelve years in prison, published dozens of stories about the strike.Photograph by Landon Speers for The New Yorker

Malone's correction officers had set up a strike site near each prison; Upstate's officers gathered at an abandoned gas station with a vacant building and two tipped-over gas pumps. They brought steel barrels, filled them with wood, and lit fires to try to stay warm. The temperature was eight degrees, with a wind chill of thirteen below zero. Nicholas showed up wearing a balaclava, gloves, and two pairs of long johns. "I felt underdressed," he said later. He saw some officers wearing snowmobile suits.

The reporting was difficult; New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (*DOCCS*) bars employees from speaking to the media without permission. Often, when Nicholas tried to interview a correction officer, the officer would walk away and bring over his wife or a retired officer to talk instead. Some of those who spoke to him brought up a recent piece of legislation: the *HALT* Act—short for Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement—which restricted the use of solitary, and which, they said, had made the prisons more dangerous. They also spoke

about excessive overtime. When officers reported to work, they did not know if they would get out after eight hours or be forced to stay for a double, or even a triple, shift.

Like many states, New York was having trouble recruiting new correction officers. Its prison population had shrunk by about half in the past quarter century, owing to changes in sentencing laws and a falling crime rate, and the state had closed many prisons. But it still had forty-two to staff—some of which had hundreds of empty beds—and, according to *DOCCS*, there were two thousand officer vacancies. To keep its prisons running, the agency had relied on 7,441,833 hours of overtime in 2024—twenty-one per cent more than the previous year.

The human cost of all this overtime had been evident two weeks earlier, when the union's executive team met with regional representatives at the DoubleTree Hilton in Syracuse. "Is the union going to pay for my divorce lawyer when my wife decides to leave me because I'm being mandated every day?" an officer asked. Another said, "Families are being destroyed while our bosses sit in Building 4"—*DOCCS*'s headquarters, in Albany—"and ignore us." The officers spoke about co-workers who were "leaving in droves," and one brought up a problem at Sing Sing of "people casually not showing up" for work. "They don't care," the officer said, "and there's no penalties for them."

The attendees unanimously voted "no confidence" in the *DOCCS* commissioner, Daniel F. Martuscello III. They also voted to ask Governor Hochul to send the National Guard into the prisons because "there's no other answer," as one officer put it. "You can't hire fast enough." On the second day of the two-day meeting, Summers, the union president, reported that he had just spoken to the governor's office and warned them about the level of discontent among his members: "I told them, 'They are going to strike.' "

Later that week, union leadership showed a video of the meeting to Hochul's then deputy secretary for public safety, Marcos Soler. "It was not the first time I heard a threat of going on strike—that was routine," Soler recalled. The union gave him a list of demands, he said, and "I took the list and shared it immediately." Soon, however, officers started walking off the

job. “The obvious thing to me was the union did not have control of the membership,” Soler said.

Without the staff necessary to run the prisons, officials locked down the buildings. Incarcerated people could not leave their cells or dorms. Every aspect of daily operations was disrupted: garbage collection, medical care, laundry, showers. Meals had to be delivered to cells and dorms, and the food included pieces of bread that were “soggy” and “moldy,” according to messages sent to the Legal Aid Society, a nonprofit that provides legal services to low-income New Yorkers. “It’s dehumanizing,” Derrick Hamilton, a prison-reform advocate and the deputy director of a legal clinic at Cardozo School of Law, said. “And there’s a fear factor in this, because you’re saying, ‘Wow, what’s going to happen tomorrow?’ ”

On February 19th, Governor Hochul declared a “disaster emergency” and activated the National Guard. “I will not allow this chaos to continue,” she announced. “I am directing everyone involved in these unlawful strikes to stop these actions immediately.” She added, “Do your jobs.”

The same day, some thirty-five hundred members of the National Guard were deployed to New York prisons. The soldiers were locked inside; some slept on cots in prison gyms. Not long afterward, a reporter at News 12, a local cable outlet, interviewed a National Guardsman deployed to a prison. “We have soldiers getting feces thrown at them,” he said. “They are responding to suicide calls by the inmates. This isn’t what we train for.” He noted, “We all agree, Afghanistan was better.”

“Now the bride and groom will read their own vows while we silently assess whose were more thoughtful.”
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

State officials tried numerous strategies to get the striking employees back into the prisons. They obtained an order from a judge requiring the officers to return, negotiated an agreement with the union, paused parts of the *HALT* Act, and blasted out threatening text messages. (“AWOL employees will be docked pay, jeopardize their health insurance, risk termination, be subject to strike penalties, and risk further civil and criminal penalties,” one said.) Nicholas reported that he had seen about a hundred striking workers standing in front of Upstate prison as its superintendent begged them to return, saying, “Please, please, please, I need you back to work.”

Inside the prisons, incarcerated people with medical issues had to hope that an officer or a National Guardsman would be around if they were in crisis. A man incarcerated at Sing Sing described the state of health care: “If you’re not bleeding and it’s not serious, it’s a ‘We’ll get to you when we get to you’ type of deal.” He said that one of his neighbors had lit a fire because he was “having chest pains” and “nobody would take him seriously.” The smoke then spread through the housing area, putting everyone’s health at risk. “I’m, like, ‘Bro, how does that make sense?’ And he’s just angry and going off,” he said. Men like himself, who had been in prison for a long time, could handle the stress of the strike, he told me, but others could not: “They’re kind of losing their minds.”

Two men who had been held at Auburn prison died on February 22nd and 24th. On February 26th, I received a message from a man who had recently left prison, reporting that an individual “just took his own life in Sing Sing.” A second man died at Sing Sing that same day. Then, on March 1st—nearly two weeks into the strike—a young man named Messiah Nantwi died after being beaten by guards at Mid-State Correctional Facility. (Ten officers were later indicted, including two who were charged with murder. All initially pleaded not guilty.)

News of the deaths ricocheted through the prison system, spreading fear and unease. Hamilton, who’d spent two decades in prison on a wrongful conviction, was flooded with frantic messages and calls from people on the inside. The strike was “traumatizing” for them, he said. “They can’t get visits. They can’t go to programs. They don’t know if these guards are going to kill them, right? Because they’re hearing ‘Robert Brooks was murdered.’ ”

On March 4th, several hundred correction officers travelled to Albany for a protest outside the state capitol. Republican politicians spoke in defense of the strikers, and correction officers chanted, “Hold the line!” That same day, advocates for incarcerated people gathered inside the capitol to attend a rally with progressive Democratic legislators. They carried signs supporting the *HALT* Act; one poster declared “Justice for Messiah Nantwi.”

Nicholas published frequent updates on the situation in *The Free Lance:*

> March 5th: *COURT ISSUES ‘ARREST WARRANTS’ AS STRIKE BY NY’S PRISON GUARDS NOW LONGEST STRIKE BY JAIL WORKERS IN U.S. HISTORY*
>
> March 6th: *‘TICKING TIME BOMB ABOUT TO GO OFF’: NEW YORK’S STRIKING PRISON GUARDS VOW DEFIANCE AS STRIKE ENTERS 18TH DAY*

Finally, after twenty-two days, Hochul put an end to the strike. After negotiating another agreement with the union, she ordered the strikers to return to their prisons on March 10th, and then terminated those who did not show up—some two thousand officers and sergeants. The strike was

over, but New York's prisons were in a much more perilous situation than they had been when it began. The state's extreme reliance on overtime had been one of the strikers' chief complaints, and now the prisons were even more short-staffed, with only about two-thirds of officer jobs filled. More than seven thousand members of the National Guard had been deployed during the strike, and many would have to stay.

Early on, while walking through throngs of angry officers at strike sites, Nicholas had an ominous feeling about how the strike might end. "They were demanding something"—the repeal of the *HALT* Act—"that the Governor can't really give them without defying the Legislature," he told me later. "So, immediately, it was apparent to me that it was almost kind of like a suicide mission."

Incarcerated people have long talked about a "blue wall of silence" in prisons: an unspoken agreement among correction officers to cover up for one another's abuses. There may be no better example of this phenomenon than the "Unusual Incident" packet compiled by Marcy prison employees after the officers' assault on Brooks. The packet includes statements written by three officers on duty that night, who all told the same story. There is also a two-page memo by a sergeant who was in the infirmary when Brooks was attacked that echoes their version of events.

These documents formed the basis for the "Unusual Incident Report"—the official narrative of what had occurred. It says that the incident started when a correction officer was bringing Brooks to the infirmary "for his intake assessment." The report claims that Brooks "became irate," was "swinging his arms violently," and "attempted to turn toward" the officer, prompting the officer to take him to the ground. Another officer pepper-sprayed him, a third cuffed him, and then, the report continues, "the I/I was assisted to his feet and escorted to the infirmary." (*DOCCS* uses the abbreviation "I/I"—short for incarcerated individual—to refer to people in its custody.)

The most shocking part of the report may be the next two lines: "Once in the infirmary the I/I was placed on a gurney. At 9:39 *P.M.* the I/I became unresponsive." The narrative omits the nine minutes of brutality that officers inflicted on Brooks; instead, it just says that he "went into full cardiac arrest." The only injury to Brooks mentioned is "controlled bleeding

of the right nostril”—which, the report makes clear, is not the fault of Marcy’s officers because it was “documented earlier in the day,” before he arrived at the prison. The truth about how Brooks died was exposed only because of an unlikely confluence of events, including New York being one of the first states to introduce body-worn cameras into its prisons, and the state’s prison guards not yet having realized that their cameras would record even if they had not activated them.

When I asked Martuscello, the *DOCCS* commissioner, about Brooks’s murder, he said, of the prison staff shown on the videos, “They seemed very comfortable with what they were doing, and their reports reflected that—they attempted to lie about what they were doing.” He added, “We have no place and no tolerance for that in our prison system. If they were engaging in that type of behavior that led to the murder of somebody, they weren’t the type of employees that we want working for this agency, and we’re going to hold them accountable.”

One day not long ago, I visited a man named Anthony Dixon at his home in Brooklyn. Dixon had spent thirty-two years in New York’s prisons and today works as the deputy director of Parole Prep, a nonprofit that helps people advocate for their release. He also runs a support group for formerly incarcerated people called S.O.S. (short for Survivors of the System). How had he felt when he first saw the videos of officers assaulting Brooks? “Horrified,” he told me. “They brought back so many memories.” And then he spoke for thirty minutes straight, recounting specific instances of violence by correction officers that he had witnessed or personally experienced.

Many of these events had occurred decades earlier, and yet Dixon spoke about them as if they had happened last week. Since the release of the Brooks footage, he had been fielding calls from men with similar memories. For them, footage of a fatal beating was “like a boomerang,” he said. They told him, “It’s coming back to me again—stuff I was trying to forget.” He added, “There’s no past tense to our trauma, and it comes unexpectedly. When we are together, you hear it in our temperament. I mean, it’s not anger. It’s raw rage.”

On March 22nd, Dixon attended a town hall about the crisis in New York's prisons, held at Bedford Central Presbyterian Church, in Crown Heights. More than a hundred people showed up. The crowd was largely male and middle-aged, and almost everyone was Black or brown. Many, if not most, of the attendees had previously been incarcerated. José Saldaña—who left prison in 2018 after thirty-eight years—brought up the Attica revolt and the history of "racist murder and brutality" in New York's prisons. "Fifty years later, we're still talking the same thing," he said. "The only ones that are going to hold them accountable is us."

Most of the state's prisons are far from New York City, and some are situated in communities that are almost entirely white. Half the prison population is Black. In discussing the problems in the prisons, Derrick Hamilton, who'd helped organize the town hall, told me, "I really believe it stems from culture." He explained, "You can't put a correctional facility in a town where there's no Black people and then bring a majority of Black people to those towns and expect humanity," especially when officers have been "trained to believe the worst of these individuals."

New York's prison population grew rapidly in the nineteen-eighties and nineties—reaching a peak of almost seventy-three thousand in 1999—and one legacy of that incarceration boom was evident at the town hall: a sizable group of people who'd spent years in the state's prison system and now are determined to end its patterns of abuse. Perhaps their most significant achievement was the passage of the *HALT* Act, in 2021. The fight to pass this legislation went on for a decade and was led in recent years by two formerly incarcerated men.

Within the walls of New York's prisons, solitary confinement long operated as the ultimate means of control—a way for officials to punish anyone who they claimed broke the rules. These individuals were typically taken to the part of the prison called the Special Housing Unit, also known as the *SHU*, or the Box, where they were locked alone in a cell for twenty-three hours a day. Some had committed acts of violence, but many others were accused of only minor offenses. The conditions were grim, and the dangers of extreme isolation for months on end became increasingly apparent: depression, despair, self-harm, and suicide.

During the nineties, prison officials sent so many people to the *SHU* that they ran out of cells. So Governor Pataki oversaw a building spree in which state officials constructed ten facilities specifically to hold people in cells for twenty-three hours a day. Nine were hundred-cell units placed on the grounds of existing prisons, but one was designed as an all-*SHU* prison: Upstate Correctional Facility, in Malone. To save money, officials put two beds in each cell.

Few people outside the prison system noticed, but the state had just adopted a new type of punishment: confining two men together in a cell for twenty-three hours a day, forcing them to sleep, shower, and defecate within a few feet of each other. Their only reprieve was an hour a day of "recreation," when a door at the back of the cell slid open and they could step "outside" into a small cage. I took a tour of Upstate Correctional Facility shortly before it opened, in 1999, and its double-bunk design seemed an unwise experiment in human captivity. Not long afterward, a man there killed his bunkmate during a 3 *A.M.* fight over whether a reading light should be turned off.

In the prison disciplinary system, officers held all the power. They could send anyone to the Box: a disciplinary hearing would be held, but the incarcerated person almost always lost. Some incarcerated men even accused officers of sending people to the *SHU* to conceal their own abuses. Several told me,"If Robert Brooks had survived, they would have charged him with assaulting staff and thrown him in solitary." (His "Unusual Incident" packet did indeed include a misbehavior report accusing him of two rule violations that night: "violent conduct" and "creating disturbance.")

In 1986, a group of incarcerated men—including Anthony Dixon and a man named Jerome R. Wright—filed a class-action lawsuit against officials at Elmira prison, alleging, among other things, racial discrimination in its disciplinary system. They prevailed, although, as Dixon put it, "the victory came at a high cost." The lawsuit went to trial in Rochester in 1990, and the plaintiffs were kept at Wende Correctional Facility. One day, two plaintiffs who had just returned from testifying in court were attacked by officers. The other plaintiffs came to their aid, and it escalated into a melee. Dixon

escaped serious injury, but the other plaintiffs did not. “They beat us mercilessly that night and then charged us with assault,” Wright said. “My shoulder is still messed up.”

The plaintiffs were sent to solitary confinement. An officer had recorded the start of the conflict on a handheld video camera, however, and there was enough footage to upend the narrative about who was to blame. A grand jury indicted ten correction officers, five for felony assault, marking “the first time New York State indicted prison guards for brutality,” according to a report in the *Times.* (In the end, all of the guards were acquitted or had their charges dismissed. Six plaintiffs filed a second lawsuit regarding the brutality they’d endured and won a settlement from the state.)

A movement to curb the use of solitary confinement in New York’s prisons emerged in 2002, when a coalition formed to stop prison officials from sending people with severe mental illness to the *SHU*. The bill they championed, known as the *SHU* Exclusion Law, took effect in 2011. That same year, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture released a report that described the “mental pain or suffering solitary confinement may cause” and called for an end to “solitary confinement in excess of fifteen days.”

In 2012, the New York Civil Liberties Union released a report stating that the average length of a sentence in the *SHU* was five months, and that the state currently held forty-five hundred people in solitary confinement. That year, a new coalition launched a campaign to pass another, more ambitious piece of legislation. This coalition—known as the #HALTsolitary Campaign—eventually grew to include four hundred organizations across New York. In 2019, ten members of the campaign, including Dixon, went on an eight-day hunger strike to try to prod lawmakers into voting on the bill. In recent years, Wright was one of the coalition’s directors.

The union representing prison guards fought the legislation from the start, and Governor Andrew Cuomo at first did not support it. But after Democrats won a super-majority in Albany in the fall of 2020—electing progressives from New York City, such as Zohran Mamdani—Cuomo signed the bill. It went into effect in 2022, and immediately shifted the balance of power inside the state’s prisons. The *HALT* Act limited all stays

in the *SHU* to no more than fifteen consecutive days, prohibited officials from sending anyone to the *SHU* who was twenty-one or younger or fifty-five or older, and permitted incarcerated people to have an outside lawyer or a peer assisting them at disciplinary hearings. Perhaps most notably, it barred prison staff from sending someone to the Box for more than three days unless that person had been found guilty of a grave offense, like "causing or attempting to cause serious physical injury."

The *HALT* Act also created what it called Residential Rehabilitation Units for those coming out of the *SHU* who were deemed unfit to rejoin the general population. People held in R.R.U.s were not isolated; they were supposed to be let out of their cells for six hours a day to attend programs that supported their rehabilitation. Among the inspirations for this approach was the Merle Cooper program, which had operated inside Clinton prison, in Dannemora, for thirty-six years. There, men who struggled to adjust to prison life were housed together, and they spent their days participating in rehabilitation sessions and receiving intensive counselling.

"O.K., people! This is the moment the group that was supposed to be on this flight has been training for."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

In his book, "The Invisible Walls of Dannemora," Michael H. Blaine, a former lieutenant at Clinton, called Merle Cooper one of "the best programs I had ever seen implemented in New York State." Wright, who'd worked as

a counsellor for the program while incarcerated, explained that a key element was the “hot seat”—an exercise in which an incarcerated man would sit facing his peers and field questions. “And then your counsellor would be there with your entire record,” Wright said, so that anyone inclined to lie about or minimize his crime would be called out. Wright considered it an effective exercise, because, “if you don’t deal with why you came there in the first place, it’s hard not to come back.” (State officials shut down the program in 2013.)

In a report published in 2023, the Correctional Association of New York, a prison watchdog group, declared that *HALT* was then “the most expansive and progressive legislative change in the United States concerning the practice of solitary confinement.” But the group also found that the state was routinely violating the law by, among other things, “holding people in *SHU* for upwards of six times the legal limit.” The New York Civil Liberties Union and Prisoners’ Legal Services filed a class-action lawsuit to try to insure that the state followed the law, and, in June, 2024, a judge ruled in their favor.

Eight months later, the correction officers went on strike, with the repeal of *HALT* seemingly a priority for many of them. In the view of Derrick Hamilton, who’d spent about a decade in the *SHU*, “*HALT* was passed because the correction department was abusing incarcerated individuals. They were throwing them in the Box for minuscule offenses and driving them insane.” He added, “The prison guards didn’t like it because they weren’t allowed to continue doing business as usual. So they illegally strike and get the government to take back some of the most humane legislation that we ever had.”

After the strike ended, New York’s prisons largely receded from the headlines. But many incarcerated people remained stuck in their cells or dorms all day. Programs that had kept them busy did not start back up. During the strike, prisons “did not have the staff to conduct anything beyond the bare minimum operations (e.g. food, medical care),” as the *DOCCS* commissioner put it in a court filing. “For many facilities, this continues to be the situation post-strike.”

During the strike, guards and formerly incarcerated people alike had read Nicholas's coverage, and in the late spring I drove to Malone to talk to him about everything that had happened. I found him at home in the two-story house he and his girlfriend share, in khaki pants and bare feet, coffee mug in hand. He works in a room on the first floor, with a view of the Salmon River. His office has five fishing rods mounted on the ceiling—he's an avid fly fisherman—and a bookshelf holding journalism classics like "The Power Broker" and "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men."

Nicholas started his news website "because no one else would hire me," he told me. In early April, he published a "Report for Readers," noting that he had attracted fifty-seven thousand "unique readers" since late December of 2024. During that time, he had collected six hundred and twenty-two dollars in donations and thirteen dollars in subscriptions. (He briefly had a paywall.) Working "an average of 12 hours a day for 81 days," he had made a dollar and forty-one cents per day, which, he wrote, was "less than what I earned working in prison law libraries as a law clerk."

He has been out of prison for twenty-two years, but he's kept mementos from his time there. He showed me some visiting-room Polaroids of him posing alongside other men in prison greens. "Victor, I worked out with him for years," he said, pointing out one of the men. About another, he said, "Eddie, he lived in the law library." He read aloud part of a letter from a man he'd met in the Westchester County jail who had been sent to Auburn prison: "I have been here only one month, and already five people have been stabbed." Nicholas said that this friend "had never made it out." He was killed at another prison.

Nicholas, like many of his peers, carries memories of time spent in the *SHU*. One instance occurred in 1999, when men at Sing Sing and elsewhere were planning a work stoppage for the first day of the New Year, in part to protest New York's increasingly harsh parole policies. They called their plan "the Y2K strike." I decided to write about it, and even though Nicholas was not one of the leaders, I interviewed him about his peers' motives. ("Politicians don't want to hear our complaints, so that leaves very little avenues open for us to gain political power," he said.) The other men in prison I had interviewed for the story did not want to be quoted by name,

for fear of retaliation. Nicholas, however, was adamant that he *did* want his name used. We went back and forth on the phone, and eventually I agreed—and soon regretted my decision.

Not long afterward, his grandmother, who had helped raised him, called me. She had not heard from him in a while, and she feared that he had been sent to the *SHU*, where, at the time, there was no phone access. Her fear turned out to be well founded. The work-stoppage plan had fizzled, but Nicholas had been sentenced to ninety days in the Box for violating a rule that no incarcerated person could "lead, organize, participate, or urge other incarcerated individuals to participate in a work-stoppage." He appealed and won, but by then he had spent fifty-nine days in the *SHU*. (Later, he filed a lawsuit challenging his punishment. "Plaintiff was confined to a cell in which a light was kept on twenty-four hours a day," he wrote. As a result, he could not sleep and suffered "severe headaches," "altered perceptions," and "mental anguish.")

Nicholas later told me that this sort of abuse of the prisons' disciplinary system is "exactly what led to the *HALT* Act." After many off-the-record conversations with officers at strike sites, however, he had started to see the *SHU* somewhat differently. As the strike dragged on, he felt compelled to weigh in, because, as he put it, "each passing day creates an even graver risk that a prison might explode." He typed up an editorial that mentioned his experience in the *SHU*. Then he put on a shirt and tie, sat down at his kitchen table, propped up a camera, and read what he had written. "What I'm about to say is going to shock you," he announced. "I support striking correction officers' demand to amend the *HALT* Act."

Nicholas was now of the opinion that the fifteen-day limit on solitary confinement should be extended to ninety days, with the possibility of additional time in the Box "for extraordinary circumstances." He said, "The striking guards have a valid point. Just as society needs prisons to protect itself from dangerous people, prisons need prisons-within-prisons to protect the general population from the worst of the worst. Not everybody reforms overnight. Rehabilitation does not come in a nice, neat, straight line. Some are beyond saving." He added,"Yes, prison officials abused solitary

confinement for decades. . . . But fifteen days for stabbing someone—whether it's a C.O. or another prisoner—is not long enough."

Before recording the editorial, Nicholas told me, he had reached out to "activists, guys who advocated for the *HALT* Act," to talk through his conclusions. "There were a lot of difficult conversations, but I was unswayed from the view that, in the end, there is a problem." One call with an acquaintance who had spent years in prison got especially heated. "Basically, the phone conversation ended with him screaming, 'No! They abused it, they lose it! They have to lose it!' " he recalled. "And I was just, like, 'He's kind of got a point. I kind of agree with him.' But you still got to run a prison and keep everybody safe."

During my visit, Nicholas and I drove by the abandoned gas station where Upstate's striking officers and sergeants had gathered. There was a rusty barrel half full of wood embers. A faded lawn sign across the road read "*WE STAND WITH CORRECTIONS*"; frayed blue letters strung up along the building read "*HOLD THE LINE*." If Malone had become a "center of gravity" during the strike, as Nicholas put it, this abandoned gas station may be where the strike's militancy reached its peak. The location is so remote that there is no cell service. Nearly two weeks passed before Upstate's striking officers set up a satellite connection and began having daily video calls with other officers across New York. As Nicholas reported, on one of those calls, a veteran Upstate officer named Mike Ashley made a passionate plea to the others to "hold the line"—to not give in to Governor Hochul's demand that they go back to work the next day.

"No matter what happens in all this, whether you guys all go," Ashley said, "Upstate will still be here at this barrel."

Ashley became emotional as he talked about "the exposures at Upstate." On three days in January, multiple Upstate employees left the prison in ambulances, with symptoms such as fainting and vomiting, according to local media accounts. The employees suspected that they had been exposed to some sort of synthetic drug. Some had been in close contact with intoxicated individuals, but hazmat teams did not locate any hazardous substance. (Nicholas heard about one ambulance call on the evening of January 25th. He sped over to the hospital where the prison employees had

been taken and saw two of them on stretchers. “Both appeared unresponsive,” he wrote.)

In Ashley’s view, their bosses were not doing enough to protect them. He brought up an incident from January in which some twenty prison employees were taken to the hospital, including a nurse who’d passed out and “was Narcanned four times.” At the hospital, she learned that she was pregnant; soon afterward, she had a miscarriage. Her husband is a friend of Ashley’s. “We’re going to battle to the very end for this man who lost his child that he can never fucking get back!” Ashley told the other officers on the call.

The following day, most of the state’s correction officers and sergeants returned to work. The holdouts included more than two hundred employees from Upstate Correctional Facility. All of them lost their jobs.

Among them were Ashley and Sergeant Nate Locke, who had appeared next to him in the video call, and while I was in Malone I met them on a weekday morning at Hosler’s, a diner four miles from Upstate. Previously, they would have been in their uniforms at this hour, but now they wore civilian clothes. Ashley, who is forty, wore a Grunt Style T-shirt with a U.S. flag on the front; Locke, thirty-seven, had on a gray Carhartt shirt. Now that they were no longer prohibited from speaking publicly, they talked to me for five hours. “We could go on for days,” Ashley said.

When the two men were young, many people in the North Country were becoming correction officers. There were few other options, with so many of the area’s factories shuttered and with dairy farms closing down. The job of C.O. promised a sizable and steady paycheck without requiring a college degree. Ashley joined the department in 2006, at age twenty-one, after working as a dealer at a casino. Locke attended college at *SUNY* Canton for a year before joining the department in 2010, following in the footsteps of his mother. “This is a family business,” Ashley said. “My brothers are all in there. My cousins are all in there.” When Ashley began his career, the annual pay after the first year was about forty-one thousand dollars. Today, it is almost seventy thousand.

Nate Locke (left) and Mike Ashley (right), two striking officers, refused to return to work and were fired. In the prisons, Ashley said, "your life revolves around hate from every side."Photograph by Landon Speers for The New Yorker

The job has changed during those years, and one common complaint—among guards and incarcerated people alike—is the dramatic influx of drugs, which has meant that officers are dealing with more intoxicated individuals and more overdoses. In the past, Ashley said, "we would find marijuana—which you could tell was marijuana—or you would find tobacco, or you would find other drugs that were very easily identifiable." Now, he continued, "they're not smoking fentanyl. They're not smoking marijuana. They're smoking Raid bug spray." He recalled that he had found a recipe for soaking paper in the pesticide. An Albany woman was recently sent to federal prison for soaking legal papers with a synthetic cannabinoid and mailing them into New York's prisons.

According to Ashley and Locke, the surge of unknown substances and the instances of suspected exposures had devastated morale, as had the fact that some people doubted the officers' claims altogether, chalking their symptoms up to "stress" instead. Locke said, "You look down the hall and

you see one of your officers just slide down the wall, and now go and get Narcanned. How do you function in that environment?"

The officers also spoke about the strain of forced overtime. "Guys were bringing three to four Red Bulls with them in their bags to try and keep themselves from getting fired," Locke said. Last year, he said, he had worked about eight hundred hours of overtime, "which equates to essentially working an additional twenty weeks inside that same year." Sometimes he would arrive for his shift by 6 *A.M.* and not leave until midnight or 1 *A.M.* the next day. "You've got guys going to get an Adderall prescription, so they can function," he said. When I asked if he was one of those guys, he admitted that, for six months the previous year, he had been, stopping only when his dosage no longer seemed effective.

Ashley said, "Some of these guys we work with are not poster boards for fitness. Like, they live off energy drinks and cigarettes. They drink their lives away. They're miserable." Some, he noted, "were going home and lashing out at their kids, and they were lashing out at their wives." In his view, the culture of the job was part of the problem: "Everybody hates everybody in there, and that's the way it was. So a lot of these people are just taught, Go there, do your job. If you're blue, you're blue. If you're green, you're green." He added, "Your life revolves around hate from every side."

Prisons hide away many of society's most intractable problems—violence, mental illness, addiction—but the officers who work inside spend their days face to face with them. Studies have found that P.T.S.D. is fairly common among correction officers. Ashley said that many officers "have been walking around with traumas and nightmares and addictions." During the strike, Locke posted a series of dispatches on his Facebook page. "Any experienced officer can tell you the same story with a few different details. They've all seen something that would traumatize you," he wrote. It could be "the smell of blood" as "a cell door opens to another horrific scene. It could be another lifeless body staring you in the face."

After the strike, the two men travelled to Albany and around the state, speaking to legislators and other prison guards, in the hope that their advocacy could help improve working conditions. The video call on which

Ashley had told the story about his co-worker who lost a pregnancy sometimes came up, and Ashley said that some former officers told him, “I wish we’d known that the first day” rather than at the last moment, when they had only a few hours to decide whether to go back to work. (Ashley had not known the story until late in the strike, he said.)

“That’s a hard thing to swallow, because we didn’t do that to make people get fired,” Ashley said. “We did that so, that way, people knew our story and knew that we weren’t out here because we were mad that *HALT* was here. We did this because we were furious that we’ve been ignored.” He added, “In the academy, they tell you, ‘Don’t take the job personal.’ But when you see thirty people rushed to the hospital in ambulances—it felt pretty personal to us.”

Perhaps more than at any other prison, the *HALT* Act has radically changed the way that Upstate operates. People can no longer be held in the *SHU* for months at a time, and now the prison houses the state’s largest Residential Rehabilitation Unit. The R.R.U. is meant to be therapeutic: officers are supposed to take the men out of their cells each day, if they want to leave, and escort them to classrooms in the basement.

Ashley and other officers would sit outside the classrooms to make sure that nobody was attacked. Inside, the activities ranged from “playing trivia to watching National Geographic to watching just regular movies,” Ashley said. “It turned into nothing more than just a hangout. Even the incarcerated say, ‘We’re not rehabilitating.’ ” Nevertheless, Ashley and Locke did not want the *HALT* Act to be repealed. After its passage, Upstate had needed more officers to watch the men during the day. “Nobody at Upstate wants to see *HALT* come to an end, because these are good jobs,” Locke said.

But Locke brought up another practice that he thought should be ended: double-celling, which had persisted at Upstate even as New York’s prison population shrank. Eliminating double-celling would “alleviate inmate-on-inmate assault, because there’s no one in there for them to fight,” he explained. (In August, after we spoke, there was another homicide at Upstate, with one man strangling his bunkmate in their cell.)

Sometimes when a bus of new arrivals to Upstate learned that they would have to double-bunk, a man would refuse to enter his new cell. Ashley said, “We were always, like, ‘Nah, put them in a cell. They don’t want to? We’re putting their ass in there.’ ”

But, recently, Ashley has seen the situation differently. When speaking about the months since he lost his job, he repeatedly used the phrase “becoming human.” “The more I become human again,” he said, the more he could see this predicament from the incarcerated man’s point of view. “I don’t want to do that”—live in a cell with another man. “Why would they want to do it?”

The day the footage of Robert Brooks’s murder was released, the officers inside Upstate were on edge, wondering how much the Marcy officers were at fault. “And then we had that video—it speaks for itself,” Ashley said.

“There’s nothing that you can say where it’s a reasonable explanation,” Locke added.

“You can just see—there’s a lot of evil,” Ashley said.

After the footage came out, some of their co-workers stopped wearing their uniforms on their commute and instead changed once they got to the prison. Ashley said that some officers stopped “having any pride for being in law enforcement.”

“It has never been a job where we walked around and got a lot of appreciation and respect from the public, and that video set us back twenty years,” Locke said.

The two men spoke about how losing their jobs had brought them a sense of relief. “You start to notice that your blood pressure is better. You’re sleeping through the night. You’re more rested when you do wake up,” Locke said. “You’re repairing relationships with your kids.”

“Someday, if you make enough money, you’ll get much better advice from a therapist.“
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

Job hunting, however, was not easy. Several hundred officers in the area were unemployed, and they were competing for whatever work was available. “People do make assumptions, even people in a prison town that are pro-officers,” Locke said. “They’re still going to ask that question.” What question? “How do you think that you can deal with an irate customer? We don’t want to see you guys beating somebody.”

Across New York, more than eight hundred officers and sergeants who were terminated have been rehired by *DOCCS*. After listening to the two men’s critiques of Upstate prison for hours, I was surprised to hear them say that they, too, wanted to go back inside. “I saw things that were wrong, obviously, and those things are important to me, but I actually liked the job,” Locke said. “If I was offered to come back, it would be very difficult for me to turn that down.” But, he added, “I don’t think that offer is coming.”

On May 14th, the same day I sat down with Ashley and Locke, state legislators held a hearing in Albany about New York’s prisons. Among those who testified was Robert Ricks, the father of Robert Brooks. Ricks runs a youth program in Rochester, and, like so many other Americans who have lost a loved one at the hands of law enforcement, he had been visiting his state’s capitol to speak with politicians. “I hate coming here,” he told legislators that afternoon. “From the moment I set foot in this building, I want to cry. And I don’t want to cry because my son is dead. I want to cry because there’s an eerie, omnipresent feeling in the African American

community that's unspoken, often unspoken, that nothing is going to change."

Ricks and others were testifying in support of the Robert Brooks Blueprint for Justice & Reform—an ambitious package of twenty-three bills that was intended to improve New York's prisons, including one that would give the commissioner of *DOCCS* more authority to get rid of abusive officers. "If we can send rockets to the moon, if we can create bombs that blow up whole countries—we can't stop people from beating people to death?" Ricks asked.

He explained that several of the officers who'd beat his son had been accused of abuse in the past. "The stuff that these officers are getting away with is just beyond me," he said. "If *DOCCS* had an effective system of investigating and disciplining correctional staff—officers who had already been credibly accused of abuse by other prisoners—my son would be here today." When Brooks was killed, he had been serving a twelve-year sentence for first-degree assault, and had a tentative release date of July 23, 2026. "He was getting ready to come home," Ricks said. "He liked to cook, so I spent all my money to open a restaurant for him. And then I closed it because he never made it home."

Later that day, five formerly incarcerated people—all leaders of organizations focussed on prison issues—sat together for the afternoon's final panel. Two of the speakers were Anthony Dixon and Jerome R. Wright. It was an extraordinarily unlikely scene: thirty-five years ago, Dixon and Wright had both been serving long sentences when guards attacked them at Wende prison. And yet here the two men were, dressed in suits, testifying at the state capitol.

Both were upset that the public had not paid closer attention to Brooks's murder. "This level of racial targeting and brutality by prison guards, had it been directed at any other group of people"—other than incarcerated people—"it would have been a public outrage," Dixon said.

Wright was also frustrated that state officials had agreed to pause parts of the *HALT* Act, after activists had fought for more than a decade to get it passed and implemented. "What good is a bill if it's going to be treated like

the way y'all allowed *HALT* to be treated?" he asked the legislators. The *HALT* Act had made "appreciable changes in the dynamics of punishment" in the prisons, he said, but prison officials had never fulfilled all its requirements. "The whole point of *HALT* is programming," he said. "It is to provide the people that they say have the worst problems with the most programmatic opportunities to change their behavior."

Dixon delivered one of the last remarks. "We have made tremendous progress in New York State," he said. "We closed down over twenty prisons, most of them from the western part of New York. And we've got some more closing down to do."

The legislative session ended the following month. Seven bills from the Robert Brooks Blueprint package passed, but these were primarily focussed on increasing transparency about what was happening inside the prisons. Bills that would have helped reduce New York's prison population—by, for example, making people over fifty-five eligible for parole after fifteen years—failed. So did the one that would have made it easier for the commissioner of *DOCCS* to fire abusive officers. Wright was irate. "We don't need more monitoring of how bad the facilities are—we know how bad they are. We need them to get better," he told me. He said, of progressive legislators, "I feel like we got slapped in the face by my own people."

Seven months after the strike, life inside New York's prisons still has not returned to normal. One of my contacts inside Sing Sing recently reported that many of the prison's programs were now "hit or miss," running only if there was enough staff that day. The men had fewer chances to be productive, and, as a result, "you see the despair in people's faces," he said. His peers were angry, and, if he asked them why, they would say, "Because I'm not doing shit. I'm stuck in my cell all day."

He reported that the officers were unhappy, too. "They're tired," he said. "They're worn out." Officers now work twelve-hour shifts. There are still twenty-six hundred members of the National Guard serving inside the prisons, and no one seems to know when they will be able to leave.

One obvious strategy to try to tackle the staffing problems is to close more prisons, and this year's state budget authorized Governor Hochul to close up to three more. But, if officers are reassigned to prisons hours away, they may not be willing to move. The state is trying to bring in new officers —"the next generation of correctional professionals," as the *DOCCS* commissioner likes to say—and gave out a $5.2-million contract in March to an agency that specializes in recruiting law enforcement. But the headlines about the officers' strike would seem to be a strong deterrent to anyone thinking of signing up for the job, as would the news about Robert Brooks's murder. As Vanda Seward, a former *DOCCS* executive, put it to me, "Nobody is trying to come into the middle of this mess."

Since Nicholas first watched the videos of Brooks's murder at Marcy prison, he'd spent many hours mulling them over. "The biggest question to me," he said, "was what created the conditions that allowed these guards to operate in this way for as long as they have?" He went on, "It's not like these guys just jumped off the street, hopped into a prison, and tortured a guy in the infirmary. These guys were trained. They were supervised, or not supervised, or supervised in such a way that their worst tendencies were encouraged instead of discouraged. And the state kept paying them checks, even after previous credible accounts of brutality were brought forth by prisoners."

The murder of Brooks had been "a failure of their immediate supervisors" and "a failure of their supervisors in Albany," Nicholas said. "And, ultimately, this is a failure of the New York State government, of course, headed by Governor Kathy Hochul, so they're ultimately responsible." But, he added, the men who had been indicted "are the frontline soldiers who are going to pay the rightful price for the murder they committed on the state's dime."

On August 4th, the first correction officer was sent to prison in connection with Brooks's death: Christopher Walrath, who pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter, is now serving a fifteen-year sentence at Clinton prison, in Dannemora. (In May, another officer pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and did not receive prison time.) Eight defendants were

expected to go on trial this month, but then, on September 22nd, four more pleaded guilty.

As Nicholas sat in the jury box alongside other reporters, two officers who had been charged with murder appeared: Anthony Farina, who'd stuffed a rag in Brooks's mouth and stomped on his groin, and a guard named Nicholas Anzalone, who'd pummelled Brooks with his fist and hit him with a boot. Both men pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in exchange for twenty-two years in prison. The other two officers pleaded guilty to second-degree manslaughter.

Now all four men—along with their co-workers, if they are convicted at trial—will be sent back into the same broken prison system where they once worked. This time, however, other correction officers will be in charge of their fate, and they will be the ones wearing prison greens. ♦

Jennifer Gonnerman is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She was a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for her story on Kalief Browder, who was wrongly jailed for three years on Rikers Island.

Profiles

Keri Russell’s Emotional Transparency Has Anchored Three Decades of TV

But, offscreen, she’s not even sure that she wants to be an actress.

By Emily Nussbaum

October 6, 2025

Russell, rather like her character on “The Diplomat,” is darkly funny but almost too itchy for public life, and prone to self-sabotage.Video by Arkan Zakharov for The New Yorker; Set Design by Marissa Kohn; Hair by Anthony Campbell; Makeup by Tina Turnbow

In the twenty-first episode of Season 2 of “Felicity,” a sweet, slightly loopy television series about college life which débuted on the WB in 1998, the dreamy but unreliable Ben Covington, played by Scott Speedman, shows up at the Manhattan coffee shop where his ex-girlfriend, Felicity Porter, works, hoping to woo her back. Felicity, played by Keri Russell, looks a bit wary, her hair in short, meringue-stiff curls, the residue of a post-heartbreak haircut.

Ben says, in a husky whisper, “I tried to think, What was the *one moment*, the sort of turning point, where I blew it?” He’s found the answer: a movie date they had planned, months earlier, in Bryant Park.

“ ‘The Gold Rush,’ Charlie Chaplin,” Felicity says, both amused and stung. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I didn’t show up,” he adds.

“Yeah, I remember that, too,” she says, but this time she locks eyes with him and smiles. As he spools out his feelings (there are a lot of them!), she listens closely, and then she opens up an apology present he has brought for her—a flat, round package wrapped in crinkly brown paper.

“You know what that is?” Ben asks.

“Yeah, it’s a film cannister,” Felicity says, with a laugh.

“Nah—it’s a time machine,” he says. Russell’s eyes soften; the corners of her mouth curl upward. It’s the moment when Felicity forgives Ben—or maybe she already had. The way Russell plays the scene, it’s not about arch soap-opera drama but about the quiet bliss of first love, a subject the show treated with unusual gravity.

A quarter century later, the exchange still feels romantic, even when viewed in a grainy YouTube clip on a thirteen-inch laptop, with all the great pop songs that originally scored the series (in this episode, Sarah McLachlan’s “Ice Cream”) replaced by gluey soundalikes, because the network let the rights lapse. The clip is its own sort of time machine, taking viewers back to an era when television was becoming, to quote the “Felicity” theme song, a new version of itself. Once upon a time, serious actors looked down on TV. Then, in the nineties, the medium began to crackle, producing, among other things, warm, sophisticated shows about relationships, such as “My So-Called Life.” In the two-thousands, cable was dominant, full of rule-breaking antihero dramas (you know the ones). When streaming emerged, seasons got shorter and slicker, and over time “comfort TV” became the standard. Russell has been a steady presence throughout these shakeups, with a key role in each era: first, the warmhearted Felicity; then, a decade later, the cold-eyed Soviet spy Elizabeth Jennings, in FX’s “The Americans”; and, most recently, the high-strung, messy-haired, questionably hygienic foreign-affairs expert Kate Wyler, on the Netflix political thriller “The Diplomat.” Television, an intimate medium that rewards emotional transparency, made Russell a star.

On a steamy day in June, Russell biked to her favorite restaurant in Brooklyn Heights, near the brownstone where she lives with her family, and locked her retro Dutch eight-speed to a lamppost. (She doesn’t own a car.) The waitress led us to a discreet table in the corner, but Russell suggested that we decamp to some stools facing the window, right next to the bar. Customers sitting there shot us curious, guarded glances, discreetly confirming the identity of the small woman in huge tortoiseshell glasses with her telltale hair in a bun, like an elegant Clark Kent. She ordered a

beer, an empty wineglass, and a glass of ice, announcing that she planned to follow the beer with a few rounds of extra-chilled Sancerre.

In Season 2 of "Felicity," Russell's character got a dramatic haircut after breaking up with her boyfriend, Ben. The style change elicited an absurd amount of commentary in the media.Photograph by AJ Pics / Alamy

Russell had recently finished filming Season 3 of "The Diplomat" in London and New York, and she was in an ebullient mood, looking forward to a "monumental summer," the type of break she hadn't had in ages. Next year, she would turn fifty. Her son River had just graduated from St. Ann's School and was heading off to college; he is the eldest of her three kids, two of whom she had with her ex-husband, Shane Deary, a carpenter and contractor, the third with her partner, Matthew Rhys, who was also her co-star on "The Americans." She was planning to head to Oregon with a friend to attend an off-the-grid event celebrating the "divine feminine"; she would spend weekends upstate with Rhys, who was filming a horror-comedy

series in Boston during the week. Then she'd spend time on Martha's Vineyard.

She had just attended a series of graduation parties, where she'd marvelled at her son's friends, who struck her as gentler, and more mature, than the teen boys with whom she'd grown up. She imitated River throwing his arm around her in celebration: "I never did that with my parents, ever." On prom night, she had waited behind a tree, paparazzo style, to snap a photograph of the boys walking down a leafy street. "Like a *creep*," she joked.

Russell, who spent her teen years in Colorado, hadn't gone to her own prom. "No—because I kind of . . . left high school," she said, taking a sip of her first Sancerre.

At fifteen, on a whim, Russell, a pretty jock with a mane of wild, honey-blond curls, passionate about her after-school dance classes but with no particular dreams about show business, had tagged along with some friends to a Disney open casting call at the Colorado Convention Center. She didn't sing; she'd never acted. Even so, she got plucked from the crowd, then offered a role in the ensemble of "The All New Mickey Mouse Club." For the rest of high school, Russell spent months at a time in Orlando, Florida, the cool older girl to a cast of tweens that included Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Ryan Gosling, and Justin Timberlake. She lived in a nearby apartment complex with her mother and dated another cast member, Tony Lucca, who came from the Midwest. ("My Michigan boyfriend," she called him fondly.) In the years that followed, Russell played a babysitter in the movie "Honey, I Blew Up the Kid"; she starred in a soap opera, "Emerald Cove," in which Lucca played her boyfriend and Russell's best friend in the "All New Mickey Mouse Club" cast, Ilana Miller, played the best friend. It was stardom lite, nineties style: there was no internet to track her every move, but she was huge with teens.

When Russell was seventeen, Disney let her go: it seemed like the company dropped girls when they got too sexy, although the boys could stay on. (There was a running joke that *anyone* who flirted with Lucca got fired, another Mouseketeer told me.) That year, Russell moved, on her own, to Los Angeles, first couch-surfing, then renting a place in the Pacific Palisades. She was already professional, with a devoted manager; she never

waited tables. But the nineties television market was a lurid one for teen actresses, saturated with jailbait fantasies: Russell played a high-school student groomed by a psychopath in “The Babysitter’s Seduction,” on Lifetime; a hair-tossing homewrecker in a Jon Bon Jovi video; a dim-witted hottie in a Dudley Moore sitcom; and a rich (but hot!) virgin in Aaron Spelling’s “Malibu Shores.” In the fascinatingly rank sex-comedy film “Eight Days a Week,” the nerd hero delivered a breathless semiotic aria about Russell’s breasts as the lens hovered above her neon-pink bikini like a salacious hummingbird.

In her early twenties, Russell scored her first breakthrough role—and was met with a blast of It Girl publicity that nearly knocked her over. The part of Felicity, a dorky Palo Alto premed student who follows her high-school crush to the “University of New York,” struck skeptical observers—among them, her co-star Speedman, whom she wound up dating—as an unlikely match for the babe from “Malibu Shores.” But Russell’s performance was a beam of pure light, burning off any condescension. Like many smart teen shows of the period, the series—the first created by J. J. Abrams and Matt Reeves—got some patronizing coverage, particularly after that Season 2 haircut. Loyal viewers knew better. In a world of posers, Russell was a spontaneous presence, sensitive enough to capture the inner life of an emotionally intense “good girl” without making her cloying.

It took a decade for her to find a role as complex as that again: that of the Soviet spy Elizabeth Jennings. Yet, even after anchoring “The Americans,” the best drama of the post-“Sopranos” television renaissance, Russell never quite dropped a nagging sense of herself as a gun-shy performer, an accidental actress who still found it embarrassing that she earned her living playing make-believe. “It’s so *creepy*,” she told me, then muttered, “I shouldn’t say that.” Did she mean acting or celebrity? “Both,” she said, laughing.

Every time we met, Russell spoke to me about how grateful she was, which is the tax that famous people are required to pay journalists. But she had zero nostalgia for the model of network production that she’d grown up with, during a period she summed up, with a grimace, as “the old days—the *life-arresting* days.” At the turn of the century, starring in a television drama

meant filming about twenty hour-long episodes per year. Russell drove to the show's Los Angeles set at 5 *a.m.* every morning, filmed until late at night, then ran lines. Her free time was frequently eaten up by publicity, which made her so anxious that she began sweating through her silk blouses. (A hypnotherapist told her, unhelpfully, that she was too self-conscious.) She told me that she much preferred the medium's "modern template," which involved an intense, disciplined "uphill sprint" rather than a marathon: thirteen episodes per season for "The Americans"—a perfect length, because "you can really build a story"—and just eight for "The Diplomat."

"And then for six months you do laundry!" she told me, gleefully. "Save enough money, hopefully, that you can take those months off. Put it back into your life, or your relationship, or your kids, or your hobby." Other actors stacked up projects like poker chips, supplementing TV work with movies, theatre gigs, or branding deals, feverishly hedging against the risks of a shrinking industry. Russell prided herself on her discipline, on doing a job right; she also had no interest in making work her whole life.

Three Sancerres in, we spoke about the complexities of her blended family. "I think one person has to be the punching bag, a little bit—you have to, for the kids," she said, of the aftermath of her separation from Deary. Since then, things had grown easier: she, Deary, and Rhys sometimes went on vacation together with their kids. Her two older children, River, eighteen, and Willa, thirteen, moved between their parents' places every Friday. She and Rhys had never married; they were still "boyfriend and girlfriend," she said, waggling her eyebrows like Groucho Marx. There were multiple reasons for that—she preferred to keep her finances separate, for one thing. For another, she thought of her female friends as emotional mainstays as important as any romantic partner. She'd also seen the ways that marriage had affected the women around her—the things they talked themselves into, or into being. "I enjoy the freedom of it," she said, of the ring she didn't have on her finger.

She had a similar hesitation when it came to fame. Late in the evening, she held up her phone to show me a funny photograph she'd taken at the Emmys in 2017, a year when she and Rhys were seated in the front row, the

industry's Gold Coast. It was a surreptitious selfie: Russell's eyes were as wide as dinner plates, reacting to the presence of Dolly Parton, who was visible just over her left shoulder. Sofia Vergara had been seated nearby, too. "She said, 'Hallo, bella'! " Russell recalled, giddily. "She had this golden diamond bracelet. She took it off in the middle of the show and unscrewed a jaguar's head or something—and there was tequila inside."

Russell giggled, awed by her fellow-star's vivacity, her easy embrace of glamour. People who knew Russell well kept telling me that Kate Wyler, the war-zone veteran Russell plays on "The Diplomat," bore some resemblance to the actress: she was an introvert in an extrovert's profession, darkly funny but too itchy for public life, and prone to self-sabotage. In the series' most famous scene, Wyler, who has reluctantly accepted the role of Ambassador to the United Kingdom, is read, drag style, by Vice-President Grace Penn, played by Allison Janney. "It's a visual world," Penn tells Wyler, clarifying the job of a female diplomat. Nobody would ever look at Wyler's policy papers, but *everyone* would see her portrait: "Blond bob, red lipstick, pins like Albright, collars like R.B.G. Glasses—a shorthand so people see what you stand for. And little girls dress like you for Halloween!"

It was a speech with a meta ping, delivered to an actress who had spent years reduced to a hair style. Shortly before Russell biked home from the restaurant, she told me that she'd had a similar showdown with Nora Ephron in 2007, while auditioning for the role in "Julie & Julia" that ultimately went to Amy Adams. Russell, who had recently given birth to River, had bragged to Ephron about how well she was handling new motherhood: she didn't have a nanny, or even a washer-dryer, just a sling and the confidence to wing it. "She just cut through all of that," Russell recalled. "She looked at me in a dead stare and said, 'You need to take yourself more seriously.' " It had stung at the time. "But I knew exactly what she meant: 'Knock it off.' "

Russell and I didn't meet again for a month—she was on her trip out West, then getting her younger kids packed up for camp. During that time, I spoke to some of the female friends whom she had talked about with enormous warmth, starting with two "Mickey Mouse Club" veterans. Ilana Miller, her

“Emerald Cove” co-star, had left acting and become a corporate lawyer in New York, where she now worked for a nonprofit. Lindsey Alley, a brassy theatre kid from Florida, had struggled to find roles, eventually pouring her frustration into a witty one-woman show. In 2002, the year that “Felicity” ended, both Miller and Alley were living in Manhattan. Russell—toying with the idea of quitting acting for good—jumped coasts. “We found each other again as twentysomethings,” Alley said. She’d watched Russell on “Felicity” while she was in college herself, studying acting at the University of Missouri. “We had this history together.”

At the time, Russell was newly single, having ended her messy, on-and-off romance with Speedman, which had, at times, been reflected in the show’s scripts. She was exhausted, worn out by the hours and, especially, by the press. She’d socked away enough money to buy herself a second adolescence, this one out of the spotlight. She rented a one-bedroom apartment on Horatio Street, in the far West Village, then went on a kind of rumspringa with her friends—an experience that would bond the women for life.

It wasn’t exactly a drug spree: Russell spent most of her days doing a grand total of nothing, sleeping in and piling up books in her apartment. She read “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” at the coffee shop Doma; she floated through the Whitney Museum, killing time, deliciously, while Alley did shifts at restaurants and Miller, who had just graduated from N.Y.U., was gearing up to apply to law school. New York seemed to her to be a more elevated place than Los Angeles, down to its artistic heroes: one day, in Central Park, she was thrilled to spot Wes Anderson, wearing corduroy. A few nights a week, the three Disney vets would meet up, joined by their friend Sarah Stringer, a nonactor who worked in advertising and, they joked, had “had a good audition.” On Wednesdays, they headed to the Upper East Side, where Alley had lucked into a free sublet from some elderly snowbirds, to eat takeout Thai and watch “The Bachelorette.” On Thursdays, they dressed up for Eighties Night at the bar Don Hill’s, getting happily trashed and dancing until 3 *a.m.*, hooking up, and dishing afterward. “Between the four of us, someone was always laughing hysterically or crying,” Stringer said, recalling that Russell—a fan of the

Hemingway novel “The Sun Also Rises”—called this era her “Lady Brett Ashley summer of fun.”

Miller, a child star from Toronto, was feeling the vertigo of abandoning show business. In a mirror-world event, her most famous friend, who had basically played an N.Y.U. student on TV, was suddenly hanging out in Washington Square Park. It wasn’t that Russell never got recognized: on the subway, someone might yell “Felicity!” or make a dumb remark about her hair. “Keri would say, ‘Oh, my gosh, they’re so nice here!,’ ” Alley said fondly, remembering her friend’s occasional obliviousness to star treatment. But Russell could also be dryly self-aware: on a trip to Jamaica, some of the girls sneaked into the nude resort Hedonism, where a maître d’ who recognized Russell offered to comp them for the buffet. “You know, one shot from a paparazzi and my career’s over,” Russell joked, sipping her rum-and-coke in a sea of writhing flesh.

One day in Manhattan, Russell went to Film Forum and saw the documentary “Spellbound,” about young spelling-bee champions, which opens with a shot of a teary-eyed boy on a stage, fumbling a guess and murmuring, “Oops, maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” as cameras click around him. The movie affected her deeply: these people-pleasing, hyper-disciplined kids, petrified at the prospect of failure, felt intensely familiar. At times, Russell fantasized about applying to Sarah Lawrence and getting a college degree. She could follow a path that her mother—a sweet, New Agey housewife who’d been raised Mormon in California—had never taken. She didn’t do it, though. Instead, she kept delaying, vamping, letting her answering machine fill up.

About eighteen months after moving to New York, she got a phone call from Speedman, with whom she was still friends. “You said you were taking a year off,” he teased her. She started auditioning again; it made little sense to abandon a lucrative career, the one thing she had succeeded at. In the course of the next decade, Russell made a charming indie movie (Adrienne Shelly’s “Waitress”) and a few lesser ones (among them “Goats,” with David Duchovny). She played a mean hot girl in the Neil LaBute play “Fat Pig,” and a likable I.M.F. official in Abrams’s “Mission: Impossible III.” (Her former bosses from “Felicity” still kept her in the mix for popcorn

movies they directed, including “Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” and “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker.”) She played an idealist in the rom-com “Austenland,” and a do-gooder in the sitcom “Running Wilde.” If Russell was often typecast as a wholesome dream girl, that was just the nature of the job: it was glamorous, but it was gig work. Early in her career, when she turned down a werewolf film she got ambushed by Harvey Weinstein’s bullying brother, Bob, who growled, “Who do you think you are, Meryl Streep?”

On Valentine’s Day, 2007, Russell married her long-term boyfriend, Deary, a carpenter who lived in a Manhattan walkup, far outside the circles she ran with in Hollywood. She was five months pregnant and looking forward to a blissful, attachment-parent experience, having seen Ricki Lake’s natural-childbirth documentary, “The Business of Being Born.” But she also needed to make a living, so in 2006 she signed up for the type of deal she’d always scorned, becoming a face of CoverGirl cosmetics. She’d heard that she was the company’s third choice, cheaper than Drew Barrymore and Jessica Alba, but it was a paycheck. For a year, she posed for print and TV ads, and even filmed an episode of a branded reality series called “The Keri Kronicles,” on MySpace, in which she shopped for baby supplies in the West Village. Then she quit. When I asked her about that proto-influencer project, she slalomed around the topic until I was almost convinced that it had never existed.

Finally, in 2012, Russell got cast in “The Americans,” on FX. By then, big Hollywood stars were taking marquee roles on cable TV; the best shows were more daring, more adult, and more writerly than most of what was in movie theatres. “The Americans,” which was created by the former C.I.A. agent Joe Weisberg and set in the nineteen-eighties, was about Soviet spies who—years into a Potemkin marriage in the Virginia suburbs—unite against their handlers, transforming their fake marriage into the real thing. The match with Rhys was electric. “When you can trust someone, it lets you be better,” Russell said, simply, of how her acting deepened while filming the series.

“Can you read the chart for me?”
Cartoon by Will McPhail

By the time Season 2 finished shooting, she was separated from Deary and involved with Rhys; when she filmed Season 4, she was pregnant with Sam, who is now nine. (Laundry baskets and other objects hid her belly.) Although “The Americans” had its share of twisty espionage plots, nutty wigs, and bloody murders, it was ultimately a bleak, layered philosophical project about human identity. The show was raw and unsentimental in its exploration of marriage; it was also, in broader terms, about the disguises we all wear in relationships. Philip and Elizabeth Jennings were Soviet spies but also, in their way, trained actors: vulnerable teen recruits who had been groomed by their handlers, before they could fully consent, to become brilliant seducers. Russell played the steely zealot, and Rhys the warm one, full of doubts.

Thomas Schlamme, a veteran television director who brought the “walk and talk” to “The West Wing,” worked on numerous episodes of “The Americans.” He was initially uncertain what to make of the show, whose pilot suggested an action thriller, but when he began to work with Rhys and Russell, three episodes in, it all clicked for him: this was a show about intimate relationships. He compared Russell’s casting to that of James Gandolfini’s in “The Sopranos”—a brilliant choice that elevated and humanized the character. She had an “inner light, an inner soul” that made you feel for Elizabeth, even at her cruellest moments, he said. Russell’s native wariness, and her hesitation to perform, were part of that gift: “It’s never, ‘Ooh, look at me, look what I can do here.’ ”

For Season 3, Schlamme filmed a brutal sequence in which Philip extracts Elizabeth’s tooth without anesthesia. When the actors read the script, they

worried that the scene might be gratuitously violent, but Schlamme described it to them as a sex scene in disguise; he cut the dialogue. He told me, “I knew that she could convey this idea—‘I would never let another person on the planet do what I’m allowing you to do.’ To me, that’s what the scene was about.”

During filming, Schlamme told Russell to grab Rhys, tight; she gripped her partner’s arm, hovering below him. The director captured an extreme closeup of one of her eyes, isolated and watering up. “I don’t think the show ever did that kind of closeup again, but it was so important to me because I knew that was the *entrance* into her,” he said. “She pulled off one tear—it was kind of extraordinary. To me, it summed up her ability, when she wants, to have enormous and immersive trust, to just give in to it completely, in a performance.”

In early July, Russell and I met again, in a lovely, old-fashioned hotel in upstate New York, near a summer house that she and Rhys began renting during the pandemic. Rhys, who was joining us, showed up first, a bit weary after a week of shooting his new show. (The couple tries to alternate jobs when possible, but in practice it isn’t easy.) Unlike Russell, Rhys, a Welshman, is a natural extrovert; he told me that he was eternally aiming to channel the spirit of David Niven. But he shares Russell’s humility about their craft. Rhys’s parents were teachers, and he trained in an élite theatre program. Early on, he scored major stage roles. But in Hollywood he hit a wall for many years, travelling constantly between London and Los Angeles, unable to secure a steady livelihood. Now, in his fifties, he views acting as more mystical, more “elusive,” than ever. “When I was young, it was the full De Niro—pushups before the take! Have to feel every minute! Which is kind of great, because you’re so myopic,” he told me, wistfully. He recalled a line by Peter O’Toole: “You’re just a vessel. And it’s up to the gods whom they fill on what night.”

The actors did multiple chemistry reads before booking their roles on “The Americans,” but it wasn’t until they’d been cast that Rhys reminded Russell they’d met a decade earlier. A couple of weeks before Russell left Los Angeles for the West Village, they had been the final two people at a kickball party hosted by the actress Jennifer Grey. Rhys had asked for

Russell's number, then left a drunk message on her answering machine; she hadn't called him back. When he reminded her, her eyes widened. "I remember you," she said, aghast. This had become Rhys's narrative, at least in interviews: Russell was a prize, and he was a lucky man.

Russell arrived, wearing an extremely cute rust-colored summer outfit that looked as if several napkins had been bewitched by a tailor. I told her we had been discussing the idea that, unlike Rhys, she was a reluctant performer who had become an actress by accident.

"Tell the truth!" Rhys said to her, flashing a white grin like a scythe. "It was your life dream. Her life goal! She's in character *now*. That's how Method she is! She doesn't come out of character until the—"

"The makeup comes off," Russell said, smiling.

"No, until the DVD comes out," he said.

When I asked Rhys to describe what kind of actress she was, Russell joked, "A bad one. A lazy one."

"No, she's the antithesis of lazy," Rhys said, heatedly. "Impeccable in her detail. And rarely, *rarely* places a foot wrong." He spun into a rhapsody, praising her as unusually capable of performing the twin roles required of anyone cast as the lead on a major television show: both the main character and the star who established the mood on set. (Former crew members on "The Americans" still called her No. 1, for her place atop the call sheet.)

Russell, left, on "The All New Mickey Mouse Club."Photograph by Acey Harper / Getty

Rhys described Russell's bookishness as the key to her craft, citing her ability to pinpoint a character's arc within a narrative, whereas he more frequently got "lost in the weeds." After they'd filmed the show's pilot, he recalled, she handed him a copy of David Benioff's "City of Thieves," set in Leningrad. "And you can emote in a fly's wink," Rhys concluded, grandly. For the wrenching final episode of the series, in which the Jenningses glimpse their daughter standing on a train platform as they head to Russia without her, Rhys got four takes. But, because the shoot was cut short, Russell got only one.

"I'm not even sure I remember that," Russell said, sipping a beer.

Too late: Rhys was already reliving the conflict. "I was *outraged* at the time," he said. "I was, like, 'That is *disgusting!* This is the fucking culmination of six years of work! You can't do that to her!' She was, like,

‘It’s O.K., that’s fine.’ Because she’s prepared and then she kind of . . . does it.”

“You’re making me sound very professional,” Russell said, amused.

“No, no, no. I’m just recounting what happened on set. And then I saw it, and I was, like, ‘Oh, my God, fucking hell, how did she do that?’ ”

“But the writing was really great,” Russell said.

Rhys turned toward me, then whispered, “And the quick deflection.”

I asked how their romance started. “Oh, we just sort of started having sex,” Russell said. “No, I’m kidding. I don’t know.” She turned to Rhys: “How *did* we get together?” He told me that he’d had his share of on-set romances, and knew the pitfalls: “So, I would say, slowly. With a lot of, kind of, ‘Oh, we shouldn’t. Oh, this is terrible, we shouldn’t!’ . . . Inevitably, a bottle of red wine would be opened.”

Their bosses found out in stages. Season 2’s opening episode includes a sequence in which the Jenningses’ daughter walks in on her parents having oral sex, 69 style. Schlamme told me that, though he loved emotional risk-taking on set, he had always been “stunningly uncomfortable” shooting literal sex scenes, which could feel invasive. Not this time: “They were so comfortable! It was like we were filming a scene about eating Cheerios. And they had *jokes*. Matthew kept saying, ‘Hey, Keri, could you do me a favor? When she opens the door, could you jerk your head back really far, so it looks like I have a huge penis?’ ” When the scene was done, Schlamme walked over to the script supervisor and said, quietly, “Those two people are fucking.”

Soon afterward, thieves broke into Russell’s house, in Brooklyn, while she and Rhys were asleep in a garden-level bedroom. (Her kids were at Deary’s place.) After hearing noises, the couple barrelled up into the living room, naked, with Rhys brandishing a poker from the fireplace. The thieves ran off with items that they stuffed into Rhys’s backpack. (In Rhys’s telling, he feared having a “Force Majeure”-style failure of nerve in front of his

girlfriend; Russell laughed when she heard this account and reminded me that he was a storyteller, saying, “He’s not Irish, but he might as well be.”)

“You have him in your phone as ‘God (Work)’?”
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

The police arrested the thieves; the district attorney, hoping for a nice news story involving a star, arranged to have the stolen merchandise returned to Russell on set. That’s when a crew member blew the couple’s cover by yelling, in front of the entire production, “Wait, that’s not Keri’s backpack—it’s Matthew’s.”

At the upstate hotel, Russell’s friends Mollie, a retired nonprofit executive, and Andrea, a coder, arrived for a planned hike in the mountains. The actress’s weekly drinking buddies and frequent travel companions, they were fellow-parents at St. Ann’s School—their kids had nicknamed the trio the Moms Gone Wild. We climbed to a high-up shelter, where four chunky stone seats faced a clearing with a dramatic view of the mountains. The previous day, there had been a tragedy in Texas, in which young girls at a summer camp had drowned in a flash flood. The women talked about the event in quiet tones, trading stories of their own near-misses when their children were small—the sorts of scary stories that become funny anecdotes after nothing bad happens, like the time Mollie’s baby fell off a sled on the way home from Fort Greene Park.

Did Russell's kids want to act? She winced, as if she'd tasted sour milk. "They can do it when they're older," she said. "I think it's Creep City."

She had recently read Sarah Polley's memoir, "Run Towards the Danger," in which the director and actress described, among other things, her misery as a child star on Canadian TV, starring in "Road to Avonlea." When Polley was nine, she'd been pressured into running through live explosives during the filming of the movie "The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen"; in her teens, she was paralyzed by stage fright while playing Alice in Wonderland. Russell knew that Miller, her lawyer friend, who had recommended the book to her, had started to question whether children should work as professional actors at all.

Russell sympathized with Miller's thinking. But when she thought back on her early years, she was struck less by moments of danger than by what she described as "adultification"—being exposed early to enormous responsibility. She explained, "The second you start getting paid like an adult, you're expected—it doesn't matter what people say!—to *act* like an adult." Russell hadn't been victimized sexually, she noted, although as a young actress she'd had her share of sketchy moments. (Later, she told me, in broadly comic terms, about the time a married producer—"an ogre"—had tried to play footsie with her under the table.) Like every actress of her era, she'd had an "all-around" meeting with Harvey Weinstein. Hers took place in a room at the Peninsula Hotel, in Beverly Hills; because Russell's manager insisted on chaperoning her, nothing unusual happened, unless you count her and Weinstein bonding over their shared love of Leon Uris novels.

But there were other types of harm. Russell's mother and her father—a Vietnam vet who worked at a Nissan warehouse, then became a regional sales rep for the automaker—were hardly stage parents, she emphasized. They were unworldly people who had signed Russell's Disney contract without grasping what it meant, other than a major opportunity. Still, becoming the family's big earner had been a warping experience that Russell didn't fully comprehend until she was older. She understood that there were powerful works of art that couldn't exist without child actors.

But that type of sensitivity was a precious substance, one the world was too eager to tap.

On “The Americans,” her match with Matthew Rhys—now her partner—was electric. “When you can trust someone, it lets you be better,” Russell said.Photograph by Patrick Harbron / FX Networks / Everett Collection

“There is money on the line, there are hundreds of people on set, and you can’t have a bad day—you can’t fail,” she said, gazing at the pine trees in the distance, sounding a bit rattled. Regular kids got the chance to screw up, she went on: “And then it’s, like, ‘You’re a kid!’ And you just get to go to bed.”

At the end of July, Russell, looking breezy in frayed-hem ankle jeans, sat in a small studio in the Flatiron neighborhood of Manhattan, preparing to rerecord dialogue for “The Diplomat,” which débuted in 2023. Nearby was Debora Cahn, the showrunner, a former playwright who had made her bones with “The West Wing” and “Homeland.” Russell had told me how deeply she trusted Cahn, a savvy survivor in a shrinking environment for ambitious TV. She had crafted “The Diplomat”—a hugely popular political thriller about a brusque national-security whiz who gets abruptly promoted to American Ambassador to the U.K., then groomed as a potential Vice-President—to be a vessel for debates about American political power. Like “The Americans,” the show spirals around a tricky marriage, albeit a more estranged one that frequently feels less like a love affair than like a *NATO* negotiation.

Season 2 had ended with a satisfyingly bananas cliffhanger in which the U.S. President dies of a heart attack, making Janney’s Vice-President—a

shrewd operator who had been the secret instigator of a false-flag attack on a British warship (she had her reasons!)—the first female President. In Season 3, it was getting hard to keep every plot twist straight, even for the people who had constructed them. Midway through recording, a debate broke out as the team tried to sort out the proper tone for one of Russell's lines. Was Wyler *pretending* to learn about another character's tragic backstory, or was she authentically surprised? Had key information been cut during editing?

"Shit! Balls," Russell said.

"It's usually more together than this," Cahn said, laughing at the chaos.

Russell, spotting the next scene on her monitor, said, "Ugh, I have to cry."

The sequence took place between Wyler and her mercurial husband, a fellow-diplomat played by Rufus Sewell. Wyler was begging him for some type of reconciliation.

"I'm—so—sorry!" Russell said into the microphone, her voice choked with regret, stumbling over each word. "You have to forgive me." Afterward, Cahn offered a suggestion: she should try playing that line as a demand, rather than as a plea. On the second take, Russell's bossy tone rubbed up nicely against the neediness of the moment.

After the session, the three of us grabbed beers from a stand in the recording studio's lobby. Cahn explained that she had initially been resistant to hiring Russell, who was Netflix's suggestion for the lead role. She'd never watched "Felicity," which had aired back when she was an Off Off Broadway playwright who didn't watch TV, and she imagined Russell as someone balletic, "a volcano of power," not a neurotic. An introductory Zoom—which took place while Russell was midway through cooking a Christmas dinner for her extended family—convinced Cahn otherwise.

"She's, like, the hair is *up*," Cahn said, imitating a frazzled Russell. "And there was some sort of *scratching*. I was, like, 'Oh, my God, she's itchy and twitchy, this is going to be perfect.' " It was not the first time that Russell

had scored a nerdy role by figuratively putting on glasses the way other actresses took them off.

Cahn, who had worked in television long enough to know how to play to an actor's strengths, folded elements of Russell's personality into Wyler's. The actress was skilled at physical comedy, so "The Diplomat" featured scenes of Wyler sniffing her armpits before running off to handle the aftermath of a bombing, and struggling to escape from a fancy party dress. Russell's warmth was an additional gift, Cahn said: "She's very hard not to like, so she can be a fucking cunt on the page. And she *sells* it, in a way that doesn't feel oppressive." A wry remark by the British Prime Minister in Season 2 also touched on this idea: "You're disarming. It's useful."

A week later, Russell and I met up at Café Luxembourg, the Upper West Side bistro that Keith McNally co-founded. She had been reading McNally's memoir, "I Regret Almost Everything," and told me how much she admired McNally's acid wit, his willingness to dish about his sex life and his worst mistakes, his portrait of the nineties New York she idolized. He had a candor that, she said, felt risky and refreshing for a public figure.

She had just come from a writers'-room meeting with David Pressman, the former Ambassador to Hungary, who had recently published an op-ed in the *Times* titled "I Watched It Happen in Hungary. Now It's Happening Here." Pressman was "gay, Jewish, super-handsome," she told me, and also socially at ease in a way that fascinated her. "He's very naturally—well, it seems natural, but maybe it's hard work for him, I have no idea—very *graceful*. Self-possessed. The opposite of me."

Russell had always enjoyed the access her job gave her to brilliant thinkers, people whose jobs were less "shiny" than her own. She and Rhys had attended one of the final state dinners of the Obama Administration; she'd gone to Gloria Steinem's eighty-eighth-birthday party, thrilled to be among so many feminist powerhouses. But now, with Donald Trump's second Presidency taking shape, "The Diplomat," though never a grittily realistic portrait of public service, was beginning to feel less like "competence porn"—the term for escapist procedurals full of brainiacs in suits—than like science fiction, as it struggled to reflect the political moment. Nearly fifteen hundred counterparts to Kate Wyler had just been terminated in *DOGE*'s

purge of the State Department. The questions the writers had been asking Pressman, Russell said, were all about survival under authoritarianism: “Do you leave? Do you quit? Do you fight?”

Russell’s own struggles felt small to her compared with that. And her career, at least by industry measures, was going great: she’d just been nominated for an Emmy for best actress in a drama series. We’d planned to meet up on the day the nominations were announced, but Russell had rescheduled after a flareup of mouth ulcers—not the first time her immune system had rejected an Emmy nomination, she told me. In 2016, her face had swelled up after she was nominated for “The Americans,” leading her Felicity mentor J. J. Abrams to suggest that she might be allergic to success.

She hadn’t lobbied for the Emmy, she told me, a little stiffly, when I asked about how the process worked. “Well, I’m sure someone lobbies for it,” she added. “I certainly don’t.” She had agreed to appear on a *Hollywood Reporter* panel that included other best-actress nominees, among them Cristin Milioti, whose performance in “The Penguin” had fascinated her. Russell insisted that the best outcome would be for her to lose; that way, she could attend the glamorous parties but wouldn’t have to make a speech.

This felt like she was taking self-deprecation too far. I loved watching awards speeches, I told her—there was something thrilling about the pageantry of them, the rattled-off thank-yous and the unpredictable meltdowns, the moving bursts of authentic feeling amid the fakery.

We argued about it briefly. Did I want to see people embarrass themselves? she asked, tilting her head. Every time we met, Russell would make fun of how prototypically Gen X she had been when she was younger, so determined not to sell out that she occasionally came off as “a little jerk.” Up on the mountaintop with her Brooklyn friends, she had called herself “young and dumb” for dropping that CoverGirl deal, adding that she’d go for it now. “I was, like, ‘No, no, I think I’ll turn down *millions*,’ ” she said, in a voice that sounded like a mocking imitation of Felicity’s earnestness. “ ‘I don’t know if this is *right*.’ ”

At Café Luxembourg, I pulled up an old Los Angeles *Times* profile, which had come out shortly before “Felicity” débuted. In it, Russell had rolled her

eyes at the vapid contents of *Seventeen* magazine, on whose cover she had just appeared; marvelled that *anyone* would want to go to the Emmys; and complained, not inaccurately, about nosy female journalists on the hunt for fresh anecdotes. She had also committed the cardinal P.R. sin of talking shit about her peers. “I think living your life is a little more important than being in these crap movies,” she told the reporter, suggesting that Katie Holmes (“a really sweet girl”) might be getting bad career advice from her handlers.

Russell winced, remembering the backlash. She’d called Holmes to apologize. The female-journalist comment had been a response to *Jane* magazine, whose editors had spun her answer to a question about how she’d lost her virginity into a lurid cover line: “I lost it on the closet floor.” Back then, she’d felt as if she were stuck inside a rock tumbler that was determined to polish her for public display but would ultimately grind her down whether she decided to be frank or coy, to share her true opinions or hide behind the usual clichés.

She’d grown more comfortable with the obligations of celebrity over the years, even as expectations had changed for women in the public eye. These days, everyone seemed to be an influencer, producing their own variation of “The Keri Kronicles.” Russell—who stays largely offline—is impressed by stars, like Naomi Watts, who use TikTok or Instagram to flash eccentric senses of humor that don’t come across in their dramatic roles. Russell respected Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop, she told me: an actress building her own beauty empire struck her as a vast improvement on shilling for a big corporation. It made her laugh to think back on those silly TV ads: flacking for CoverGirl’s “gross magenta lipstick, like shellac,” mouthing exaggerated claims about the product lasting for up to ten hours, and then making alternate copy for the Canadian market, where such hyperbole wasn’t allowed. If members of the younger generation were less bothered by these bargains, if they drew less of a distinction between marketing and art, she got it. No profession was pure.

But her Gen X core hadn’t changed; she still preferred to stand a little off to the side. “There’s a thing where everyone is supposed to want *more*—to be a movie star,” she told me on the night of the Sancerres. “My goal isn’t to go to Cannes.” When people asked her if she wanted to become a director,

she quoted a wisecrack she'd once heard: "I like to sit down when I eat my lunch." When I spoke to Russell's old friend Alley, she sounded surprised by the idea that her friend had almost quit the business during that gap year in New York; you didn't make it that far in Hollywood without wanting it, she said. Alley described Russell, with admiration, as "scrappy," a "go-getter" who "always had something on the boil" but kept her plans close to the vest. Maybe it was that kind of instinctive discretion which had prevented Russell's life from spilling into chaos, and had kept her from going down the flaming path so many of her It Girl peers had taken, both those who hit it big and those who crashed early.

No time machine could take Russell back to her younger self, the Denver teen-ager who'd fallen down the rabbit hole. She didn't want to start over, anyway. But she'd been trying to master an internal discipline, what her friend Sarah Stringer described to me as "a sense of self that doesn't go up and down with your accomplishments."

Weeks later, I watched Russell in a baroque Armani gown at the Emmys, her hair long and smooth. There were multiple best-actress categories, and Milioti, who won for "The Penguin," shouted out, "I love acting so much!" In Russell's category, the winner was Britt Lower, from "Severance." I watched Russell's face onscreen when her name wasn't called: she was tense, and then she was smiling. ♦

Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2016. She is the author of "I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through The TV Revolution" and "Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV."

Takes

- **Rebecca Mead on Mary Ellen Mark's Photo from the Puerto Rican Day Parade**
  The longtime contributor sought out New Yorkers who were defiantly original.

Takes

Rebecca Mead on Mary Ellen Mark's Photo from the Puerto Rican Day Parade

By Rebecca Mead

October 5, 2025

Originally published in the June 30, 2003, issue.

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 the photographer Mary Ellen Mark arrived in New York City, in 1966, one of her strategies for finding arresting images was to attend parades and other large gatherings, seeking out subjects not in the main flow of the action but on the periphery. Mark shot street protests, Pride marches, and Thanksgiving parades—showing how the city's diverse cultures and identities are replenished by the demonstrative joy of belonging, and how the city at large is enriched by its variety of communities. After Mark's death, in 2015, the journalist Adrian Nicole LeBlanc wrote of her, "Common humanity wasn't a revelation but a clear fact that she wanted to document." Mark's warm engagement with the individuals she encountered reflected a genuine openness that invited a reciprocal trust, LeBlanc noted: "Her assumption allowed her subjects' singularity to grow in her presence."

In this photograph, which Mark made before the start of the Puerto Rican Day Parade in 2003, her subjects—Candice Lozada, nine; Fantashia Toro, eleven—seem literally to have grown in Mark's presence. The girls, both members of the South Bronx Kids Dance Group, are shot from a low vantage, their images doubled by the reflective glass of a storefront, and they look down into Mark's lens with a cool, confident regard. Pedestrians are hurrying past to find their places on Fifth Avenue, but the girls have a different kind of readiness about them. With their made-up faces, their up-done hair, and their belly-baring costumes, they know that there is no chance they will miss the main event—they *are* the main event. The girls are wearing heeled white dance shoes that are defiantly impractical for the city streets, in striking contrast to the robust sneakers that everyone else has on. (A third pair of shoes, mysteriously discarded, arrests the eye. The wrong size? Who knows?) The girls' pristine shoes, soon to be scuffed and dirtied as they dance up the spine of their city, mark their young wearers as something Mark respectfully recognizes: fellow-artists of the street. ♦

Read the original story.

Forward, March

Rebecca Mead joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include "Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return."

Shouts & Murmurs

- **These Black Boots Are Different from Those Black Boots**
  These have an almond toe. Those have a rounded toe. These have a Vibram sole. Those have a leather sole. These are suède. Those are waterproof.

Shouts & Murmurs

These Black Boots Are Different from Those Black Boots

By Alyssa Brandt

October 6, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

These have an almond toe. Those have a rounded toe.

These have eight pairs of eyelets and a Vibram sole. Those have twelve pairs of eyelets and a leather sole.

These are suède. Those are also suède, but the nap runs north-south rather than east-west.

These are waterproof. Those are . . . also waterproof. No, wait, neither is waterproof. That other pair of black boots is the waterproof pair.

These I bought on sale. Those I bought on Facebook Marketplace, before my account was suspended—IN ERROR, but have you tried communicating with Meta? Like screaming into the void. This other pair, I paid full price.

These I bought a half size too small because they were the only pair left and were just too good. I was certain at the time that, if I wore them every day, they could be stretched enough to feel comfortable with a thin sock. A very thin sock. Turns out I was wrong about that.

Those I bought on eBay in a fit of high-school nostalgia. Never worn (and in the original box!) and only fifty bucks! Because I couldn't try them on, I didn't realize how uncomfortable they'd be across the top of my foot. I also don't remember them looking so bulbous in high school.

This pair, well, what can I say? They're perfect. Almost perfect. They do give me hot foot because they're not so breathable. Kind of surprising for a boot at this price point, to be honest. But they do keep my tootsies dry! I have to take them off at the office or my feet start sweating, but outside, in the rain, on days when the high is between thirty-eight and forty-four degrees Fahrenheit? They're perfect.

These are just for looking at. Some people collect art. Or stamps. Coins. Baseball cards. Little smooth stones. Some things are just for looking at and then putting back in their dust bag, placing inside an archival linen box (with a lid), and gingerly returning to the closet, where they live, underneath those other two just-for-looking-at pairs and to the left of that pair I only wear with the dress from the last-ever Barneys warehouse sale that doesn't quite fit anymore.

That pair, the ones in the custom-made case with museum-grade glass, inside the dimly lit, temperature-and-humidity-controlled room that requires two-factor authentication to unlock and the donning of a gown, gloves, and booties before handling, is . . . appreciating. They will soon be sold at auction. The proceeds from the sale will be used to rebuild my black-boot nest egg, which has run low of late due to unfavorable market conditions. My words, not my accountant's, as he has asked me to note here for the record. Agree to disagree.

These I bought because they look sort of like a pair my former roommate once bought, spending, like, an entire paycheck on them, which is probably why she couldn't make rent that month and asked me to float her—*just this one time!* Instead, I sold her boots to a consignment shop on St. Marks. I

guess she was mad, because a week later she moved out while I was in Galveston at a conference, leaving me stuck with the lease for the rest of the year.

I mean, geez. They’re just boots. ♦

Alyssa Brandt has contributed humor writing to The New Yorker since 2023.

Fiction

- **“Coconut Flan”**
  Wherever Daria went, all over the world, strangers stopped her on the street for directions, as if she were such a neutral presence that she belonged almost anywhere.

Fiction

Coconut Flan

By Catherine Lacey

October 5, 2025

Photograph by Anastasia Fainberg for The New Yorker

Somehow, after the plane landed though before Andrés and Daria reached the taxi stand, Daria's wallet went missing.

Upon realizing that it was gone, Daria felt an impulse to dump the contents of her bag onto the ground and search for it, as it seemed to her that lost things might magically reappear if she indulged some childish impulse that she, a grown woman, was often trying to refrain from indulging.

The wallet wasn't quite a wallet, actually, but, rather, a black leather pouch large enough to comfortably hold her passport, *residencia* card, credit card, debit cards, Metrobús card, and house keys, as well as a small Polaroid of Andrés, two pens, and seven thousand pesos in cash. This was the litany that she, in her faltering Spanish, and he, in his native Spanish, repeated at the airline counter, the airport information desk, in the security department, the luggage department, and then to various voices on the phone. They described the thing that had been lost, and all the things inside the thing that had been lost, recited this list like a prayer, or a spell.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

Walkie-talkies were spoken into. There were silences, longer silences, "no news yet"s, then, definitively, no news at all. "But the passport, the *residencia*, the passport, the *residencia*," Daria kept repeating, increasingly pathetic. "Why would a stranger want my identification?"

"I think you should call the Embassy," Andrés said.

"The Embassy?"

What was an embassy, really, and what did it do? Calling the Embassy was something that rich people did. People called the Embassy when they had friends at the Embassy, college buddies named Teddy, ambassadors who owed them a favor. No one owed Daria anything.

But no, Andrés said. People called the Embassy when they lost their passports, sunburned tourists who'd done something stupid—and the moment the Embassy took Daria's call that was who she officially became. Except that she didn't have a sunburn, she never did, and could she even really *be* a tourist if she'd already begun the legal process of taking this

country as her own? She didn't have a tourist visa anymore; she had permission to live here. And yet her passport had betrayed her.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Catherine Lacey read "Coconut Flan."

Daria explained her problem to the voice of the Embassy. The voice, unfeeling, asked when she was planning to return home, to "the States." She bristled. "I'm not," she said, and she felt a sudden desire to whisper "Fuck America" on this recorded phone call, because she was even angrier than usual at the States right now, angry and ashamed and pained over all its wars. But, instead of giving in to her desire to rebel, she spoke as if reading paperwork: "I live in Mexico City. My husband is Mexican." Then she added, though it didn't matter, "It's our anniversary."

"And where are you now?" the voice asked.

Truly, where was she? The name of this particular city escaped her, as it was just the city that had the airport where they'd had to arrive in order to take a taxi to the dock to catch a ferry to the island where they'd be spending a week. She looked around for a clue, found the city's proud emblem on a trash can, and said the name aloud as if it were that of someone she'd long held a grudge against.

"One moment." The voice vanished without ceremony. Patriotic hold music played.

Maybe, probably, the States were also mad at her. Maybe the States even knew that Daria had been refusing to sing the national anthem ever since elementary school. And maybe, for that offense, and for so many other protests, the Embassy would refuse to help Daria, its prodigal daughter. But then another voice came on the line, someone at the local consulate, someone a mere mile away.

"Do I have to explain it all again?" Daria asked.

The consulate was situated inside a shopping mall. Conducting business with the State Department was now on the same level as purchasing soft pretzels and sweatshop clothing, and this calmed Daria. It felt honest, finally.

A security guard wearing a bulletproof vest told Andrés that he was not allowed inside, that he wasn't even allowed to wait anywhere near the door—then he added, in Spanish, that Andrés could wait in the food court.

Daria was instructed to turn off her phone before she was buzzed through two heavy doors, into a small, fluorescent-lit room, where she stood in line behind a woman in paisley pants. The woman was visibly trembling and radiated the metallic scent of tequila. Daria stared at the arrangement of perfectly circular reddish bruises on the woman's back, exposed by her halter top. She recognized the marks as the result of a traditional Chinese-medicine technique that involved suctioning glass cups to the body in order to increase blood flow and release tension, pain, and blocked energy. Cupping was quite popular among feeble white women in North America, and those same marks, Daria knew, were present on her own body, concealed beneath her loose T-shirt.

After a few minutes, the woman began to cry without discretion, yet, when it was her turn at the window, she took a hostile tone with the man she found there—expressing anger through her tears, as if she were the man's irate wife, as if he had something to do with her purse and passport being stolen, as if he, the person who might help her solve this issue, had surreptitiously created it.

All this emotion annoyed Daria, though at the airport she, too, had burst into tears, a primordial and humiliating distress signal, like a baby's cries, that instinctive and essential language of need.

But now, in the consulate, Daria did not want to seem as if she had been crying. She was a rational, unbothered woman. She was not in Mexico on vacation but, rather, for her life, a life she lived far from her family, the majority of her friends, and every home she'd previously known. She did not want sympathy. She did not want comfort. She did not want to belong to the same category as the woman in the paisley pants. "Don't make a scene," Daria told herself. "Don't make a goddam scene. You're just an idiot who lost her passport. You're just the inner child of an incompetent outer adult."

The woman at the window, undeterred by the man's placid eyes, related every detail of a violent assault that she had experienced the previous night,

how one masked man had pointed a gun at her while another threw her to the ground. It sounded like a scene from a movie. Did the man believe her? Did the United States of America believe her? Did it matter?

“Jericho,” the paisley-panted woman said, reading his nametag, “isn’t there something we can do about it? The police weren’t helpful at all. Not at all, Jericho.”

Jericho, unswayed by the use of his first name, did not dignify this question with an answer. Instead, he gave her a QR code for the forms that she would need to fill out. He told her that she would have to go back out into the mall, and over to the internet café next to the cellphone-case store, where she could complete the emergency-passport application, along with an affidavit describing the theft, all with the aid of an authorized clerk. The clerk would also take new photos of her, and she would have to pay for shipping labels. If she could return the completed paperwork to the consulate by 11:30 *A.M.*, and if everything was approved at the main office in Guadalajara, she could retrieve her new passport from a DHL office of her choosing in approximately three days. This was all the consulate could do.

“I think the cops are in on it,” the woman said, as if she were the first to notice the widespread corruption here, something of which Jericho was likely aware.

The process went smoothly enough for Daria, except for the moment when the clerk in the internet café paused at her middle name while reviewing her paperwork.

“Talluto?”

“It’s my ex-husband’s last name,” Daria said, thinking back to the compromise she’d made between vanishing into his lineage and remaining apart from it—taking his name, but not completely.

“Well,” the man said with raised eyebrows and a smirk that suggested he’d already taken her side in the divorce, “it’s yours now.”

But after Daria had written down all the facts of her body and her life—height, weight, eye color, occupation, birthplace, birthday, nationality,

father’s name, mother’s name, address, phone number, e-mail—and after she had been photographed and fingerprinted, and had signed her name and sworn on her life that it was all true, and after she handed everything over to Jericho and left the consulate, it somehow seemed to her that she had forfeited every attribute of her self, that the details she had listed no longer applied to her. Without legal identification, she could no longer prove anything about where she came from or who she was.

Daria did not turn her phone on for several days. She wasn’t sure what she could possibly say to anyone who happened to call.

Outside the shopping mall, Andrés called a car through an app. Now that Daria’s cards were lost and cancelled, and her cash all gone, her husband would have to pay for everything during their vacation. She was his wife, his economic burden.

The car arrived almost immediately, and the driver got out, all smiles and handshakes, saying something to Andrés that Daria couldn’t understand as he lifted their backpacks and duffelbags into the trunk.

“He wants me to sit in the front seat,” Andrés explained, and Daria smiled, half wondering if they were being kidnapped. But, no, it was just that the app was technically illegal in this state, and they had to make it look like they were friends.

In the back seat, she tried to pay attention to what her husband and the driver were talking about, but their Spanish was too rapid and slangy, leaving her feeling more wifelike than ever. Daria was living the Female American Dream, the vintage one—to be handled and paid for while men discussed things that she couldn’t understand. The situation reminded her of a discovery that she and Andrés had recently made: the only way she could truly feel pleasure while receiving oral sex was if she was tied up, restrained enough that she felt stripped of responsibility and agency, with nothing left to do but give in to whatever was being done to her.

“It’s the futility of the situation that does it,” she theorized, when confessing this development to friends. Was it a cheat code that had been mysteriously installed in her sexuality, or evidence of her body’s innate chauvinism?

Again she tried to follow the conversation between the men. They were talking about where Andrés was from, the driver obviously confused by the combination of blue eyes and a *chilango* accent. No one ever quite believed that he was truly Mexican with eyes like that; waiters in La Roma often switched to English with him, though maybe that was due to Daria's presence on the other side of the table, so obviously a foreigner. Daria knew that Andrés had long since tired of defending himself against the insistence that he must have some other heritage. She listened for a while, impressed that he managed to hide his annoyance all the way to the ferry terminal.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

"Ferry" didn't feel like the right word. It was more of a boat, a small boat that violently slapped its way across the waves while the captain sipped a beer, steering with one hand. She kept imagining the boat tipping over and pouring everyone into the sea, an image that seemed increasingly beautiful: all the vacation clothes unfurling in the water, phones and wallets and purses sinking to the ocean floor. Perhaps a whale or a shark would arrive to gulp down the passengers, one by one.

But there was no capsizing, no sudden death. The ferry did its job just fine. Several men at the docks made a great show of tossing all the luggage from man to man to man, then piling it neatly on the shore.

A couple in their sixties, the oldest of the passengers, wearing camping backpacks and sun visors, declined many offers from men with four-wheelers who wanted to drive them to their hotel, as the island had no real cars. Instead, the two hiked steadily up a steep hill, each with a pair of hiking poles. Daria watched their diligent ascent while Andrés studied the map on his phone. She'd always been the one who navigated on their trips, but everything was different now.

Finally, he figured it out: their hotel was at the top of that same steep hill. He insisted on carrying both the duffelbags and the larger of their two backpacks, and Daria did not object to this division of labor. She watched Andrés carefully. Was she enjoying his disproportionate efforts? Did she know who she was?

Daria continued to carry almost nothing that week—no phone, no wallet, no keys—and, for reasons that she didn't understand, she couldn't read the books she'd brought and didn't jot down any of the notes she so often took. A great shimmering passivity had settled over her. At their first meal out, she asked Andrés to choose what she would eat and to order it for her, and though he balked at the idea at first, she stared back at him, and he gave in.

The clerk in the internet café had given her four copies of her new passport photo, but she needed only two for the application. It was an especially hideous photo, and the man had immediately offered a second attempt, but Daria had declined. In any case, I.D. photos didn't show you as you were, only as your government saw you—a set of features, a taxable entity, a suspect.

"It's giving mug shot," Andrés had said. When they got to their hotel room, she threw the extra photos in the bathroom trash.

Lying on the beach the next morning, Daria wondered if there was anything specific about her face. She frequently had to reintroduce herself to people she'd met many times before who failed to recognize her. Her hair was not

any particular color. Her eyes were technically blue, but really more gray; other people's blue eyes seemed to draw commentary, but no one ever remarked on hers. A hair stylist was once unable to classify her face shape, and concluded that it was somewhere in between all of them. And wherever Daria went, all over the world, strangers stopped her on the street for directions, as if she were such a neutral presence that she belonged almost anywhere.

Andrés was doing laps in the ocean—backstroke one way, breaststroke the other. Had he ever noticed his wife's generic quality, or was he able to see past it, to some hidden particularity? Daria watched him for a while, then became worried that he wouldn't recognize her when he got out of the water. This was a stupid thought, or perhaps it was a practical concern. No, Daria assured herself, her husband would not glance over at her and then continue searching for his wife on the other beach blankets. Just to be sure, she stood up and waved at him, and he waved back—or was he only swimming?

A large boat, much larger than the one they'd arrived on the previous afternoon, had been idling in the bay, and, once Daria was standing, she noticed that a smaller boat had sailed out to it and was now returning to shore, full of day-trippers. The tourists disembarked one by one, holding the hands of men they didn't know to keep from falling.

Daria spotted the crying woman from the consulate, now in a pink bikini and a green mesh coverup, waiting her turn to leap onto the beach. They hadn't spoken at the consulate, but the woman had, just once, looked over her shoulder *toward* Daria, if not exactly *at* Daria. Would that have been enough? Might she remember this unmemorable face?

Daria hurried so as not to miss her chance. The woman and her friends were laughing and trying to keep their balance on the rocking boat, and when the consulate weeper turned her back to Daria she saw the faint circular bruises again—six of them, evenly distributed, visible even at this distance. Daria's own cupping bruises, she realized, were visible now, too, since her one-piece was nearly backless. This felt, somehow, incriminating. She stopped abruptly on the sand.

What did Daria want, exactly? For the woman to recognize her? Give her a stunned little hello? And what would that prove? The soles of her feet were getting scorched, so she ran back to where she'd come from, to where she most likely belonged.

Andrés was standing there, slightly out of breath, dripping seawater.

"Where did you go?"

"I thought I saw someone."

"Someone?"

"Someone I knew once."

"But you left our stuff. I mean—my wallet's in here," Andrés said, opening the tote bag. It was still there. "That isn't like you."

"What?"

Andrés was looking at her strangely, she thought, but perhaps he was only reflecting the strange look that Daria was giving him.

"I just mean, you're usually more careful. But it's fine. It's nothing. Nothing happened."

Andrés lay down on the blanket to dry off, and his wife joined him. They didn't say anything for a while, their eyes closed, then she asked him to tell her the story of his first marriage. She knew it already, but wanted to hear it again. What are children searching for when they ask to be told a story they already know? And what do they discover when they get what they asked for?

Andrés and his first wife had married fifteen years earlier. They had been young, and it was brief, but they still stayed in touch, fondly, like distant cousins or survivors of the same natural disaster.

Daria asked more questions about his first marriage than she ever had before. What had made him love her? When had he known that he loved

her? Who had he been back then? And why had it ended?

Andrés searched for new details, but all he could remember was the pattern on the dress that she had been wearing when they first met. He'd stared at her so intently that he had memorized the fabric—large blue flower, medium yellow flower, large red flower, small cluster of pink buds, repeat—and for many years Andrés saw this design kaleidoscoping on the inside of his eyelids as he fell asleep beside her. But when he fell out of love it faded away.

Daria had seen a few photos of the first wife; she looked so different in each one, though always beautiful and intense and slightly masculine, much like the first woman whom Daria had fallen in love with, a woman she hadn't contacted in years and feared she wouldn't recognize if they somehow, accidentally, crossed paths again.

"When was the last time you saw her?" she asked Andrés.

He thought for a moment. "Nine, ten years? I wonder if I'd recognize her."

Daria sat up and looked down at Andrés, tabulating the details that she'd be totally certain about if he ever went missing and she had to describe the identifying features of his face, his body.

When they returned to the hotel, a woman in a floral dress and a white apron came rushing through the courtyard, waving something in her hand.

"I saved these!" she called. "They must have fallen in the trash."

And the sad, twin photos of Daria were back again.

That evening, they went to the only restaurant that stayed open after the day-trippers had vacated the island. It was right on the beach, with a view of a dozen little boats that bobbed in the bay, anchored and empty. A few people on lounge chairs did nothing but watch the sun set, no longer talking or swimming, just lying there, drained of themselves, observing the day's end.

Andrés ordered two plates of fish tacos, then they eavesdropped on the people around them—some eating or drinking, others just loitering. Many

seemed to be locals, or gringos who came here to escape the cold winters back home. A very thin, very tan woman wearing multiple scarves and carrying a small dog dashed between the tables as a younger man followed her. Several naked children played with dogs in the sand while adults who looked a lot like them drank from coconuts, unbothered. The couple with the hiking poles were there, too, eating hamburgers and speaking too softly for Daria and Andrés to overhear.

If Daria had truly been herself, she might have taken some notes about the scene—the talk of a hurricane in the Pacific heading farther south, the way the waitress gleefully announced the sun's imminent setting—but instead she just listened, and so much of the Spanish was outside her grasp that she fell into that familiar state of incomprehension and powerlessness. How childlike, how wifelike it all was.

Then a voice in English broke through. A man was talking to the waitress, asking her how her kids were doing and whether she was ready for the rainy season, then ordering a michelada with some exacting specification about the glass in which it should be served. Daria felt repulsed and superior when she heard someone speaking so boldly in English here, especially in smaller towns. That Daria herself had to switch to English for anything too complex, and that she was often locked in an immovable muteness as she listened to others converse, was, she felt, a moral failing.

The only thing worse than overhearing such a voice was being singled out by it, being asked where you were from, and facing the embarrassment of a shared origin. The man's name was Kevin, and although he spent half the year on the island, he'd never learned the language. "Old dog, new tricks. You get the picture." He was wearing a pinkie ring. Kevin, leaning toward Daria and Andrés from his adjacent table, spoke primarily of himself, the real-estate career from which he'd retired, his world travels, his thoughts about A.I.

Then, suddenly, he asked the couple what they did for a living, and when they said that they were both novelists he laughed a big, abrupt laugh. "Two writers, how does that work?"

Versions of this question were often posed to Daria and Andrés, separately and together. The common assumption seemed to be that a marriage between two writers was a liability. In the years after her failed first marriage, to a teacher, and before her relationship with Andrés, Daria had lived for a while with another writer, who was cruel and violent and quite unwell, but not because he wrote books. That she now found herself not only in love with a writer but married to him seemed mundane.

Yet once someone had suggested the inherent instability in a relationship between writers, there seemed to be no way to defuse the assessment.

“It works just fine,” Daria replied.

“Oh, does it now?” Kevin said, not really asking. He then explained that he had a lot of good stories to tell and that, if he could ever find the time, he just might write a novel of his own.

“And, I don’t mean to pry, but is there something of an age difference here?”

Kevin was still leaning toward them, over the back of his chair, michelada in hand, and Daria looked to Andrés as if he were the only one of them who knew how to answer this question.

“We’re the same age. We’re both forty.”

“Well, I’ll be—I wouldn’t have taken you for forty, son!” Kevin reported that his last girlfriend had been forty-five years younger than him, so he wasn’t judgmental about such things. Daria tried to do the math, estimating Kevin’s age, but then she became aware of the pointed silence that had settled over them.

“We had a nice time together,” Kevin said. “A very nice time. But she died.”

“Oh.”

“She drowned, in fact. Right over there, in the bay. Undertow. It’ll get you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Daria said.

“And I was going to ask her to marry me! She would have inherited a lot of money. She could have had a nice life.”

Given the fact that she had drowned, this seemed beside the point. Andrés and Daria had no way to respond.

“You know, you look a little like her,” Kevin told Daria. “Just a bit older.”

It was then that the waitress placed two plates of fish tacos before them, and Kevin excused himself, walking toward some cabins set back from the beach, carrying his glass from the restaurant. Andrés and Daria began their dinner without speaking, only making baffled eye contact, through which they felt it was possible, in their love, to exchange messages.

After they’d finished the tacos, the waitress delivered a coconut flan and two spoons.

“From Kevin,” she said.

The flan trembled on its plate, oozing a sugary puddle.

“When did it happen?” Andrés asked. “With his girlfriend?”

“When did what happen?”

“His girlfriend who drowned here?”

“Oh, she left him last year, just up and left, and he told everyone that she’d been kidnapped. Nobody’s ever drowned here, not even a kid.”

The elderly couple were exactly the same height, Daria now noticed, as she watched them walking down the beach steadily, poles in hand, entirely synchronized.

Their week on the island, they later told friends, had been beautiful. Everything after the missing wallet at the airport had gone well, and though they didn’t tell the story of Kevin, or Kevin’s stories, they did mention the coconut flan, how impressive it was, and how the waitress had sat down at their table and taken a bite of it with a spoon she pulled from her apron.

After they'd paid the check, she produced a bottle of mezcal and poured them shots, then she confessed that she wasn't sure how much longer she could live on the island, though she didn't know where she'd go.

But when Daria thinks about that week, even years later, she mainly recalls the moment when she turned her phone back on and discovered a message.

"Is this still your number?"

She had long ago deleted her ex-husband's contact, but she hadn't been able to forget his number, and the moment it appeared on the screen she remembered that her lost passport had listed him, in pen, as her emergency contact. Maybe she should have whited out his name and number years ago, but she hadn't wanted to white out parts of her life. She'd wanted, impossibly, to exist in every moment of her life at once, wanted none of it to vanish, none of it to seem like an aberration.

Joseph would surely have preferred to take care of this by text, but she called him anyway. He picked up immediately, without a hello, and began to explain.

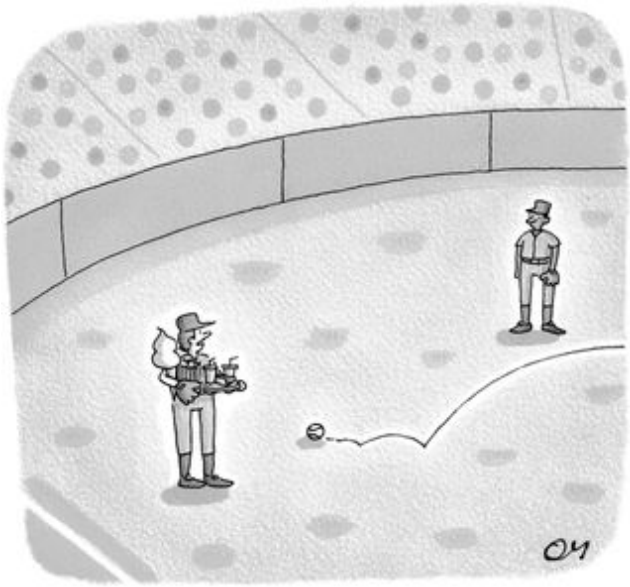
Someone from the American consulate in Guadalajara had called him to report that her passport had been recovered. She needed to call them; she needed to take care of it. This was not his problem, and he didn't know why, after so many years, she hadn't updated her emergency contact.

"Do you have a pen?" he asked, and Daria, off balance, didn't know what to say.

"Hello? Are you there?"

She said she was, that she was here, then she asked how he had been, as they hadn't spoken in so long, but he said nothing.

"How are you?" she repeated.



“I got the snacks—the least you can do is get the ball.”
Cartoon by Dan Misdea

“Do you have a pen?”

Andrés took the number down as Daria repeated it, and, once this task was complete, Joseph said that he had to go. She thought about telling him that she’d just been talking about him, since he might want to know what she’d said, or why he’d been on her mind. And she thought about telling him that it was her anniversary, that she had remarried after so many years. She doubted that he’d heard, but she knew that he wouldn’t care, that he was not the sort of person who tried to balance the math of the past.

“All right, well—”

He hung up without saying goodbye, as if in a film. It was how he’d always behaved—like the hero in a montage, running down the street in the rain, arriving somewhere just in time to save someone, or to escape something.

When Daria called the number he’d given, someone picked up on the first ring.

“Recovery Department, how may I help?”

“Recovery Department?” Daria repeated.

“Can I help you?”

She recited her name, explained the story of the lost passport, the ex-husband, the emergency contact she had never changed.

“I’ll have to transfer you to someone on site.”

“On site?”

“The crime scene.” Then the patriotic hold music played.

A man eventually answered and asked for her name, but didn’t offer his own. She gave it, all three words of it, and her birth date. Andrés looked at her and mouthed, “What’s going on?,” and she mouthed back, “A crime scene,” which he did not understand.

“Aha, here you are. So, we wanted to let you know that we did recover your passport.”

“Oh, well, that’s good, right?”

“Well, no—there was an attempt, a conspiracy, really, to use your identification in a human-smuggling operation. It’s an ongoing investigation, of course, and I can’t give you many details, but the Embassy takes these matters very seriously. We want our citizens abroad to be informed of the dangers of international travel.”

“Oh, but I live here. I live in Mexico.”

“Yes, I see that, but you’re still an American citizen. The suspects also had possession of your residency permit, though it was damaged.”

“Damaged?”

“Melted. They tried to melt the photo off, maybe to alter it somehow. The whole thing is truly amateur. But the passport, your passport—they tried to bring a woman into the States with it, through the land border, and part of the reason we caught them was that you had reported the passport as missing so promptly. We’d like to thank you for that, for being a responsible citizen.”

“Did she look like me?”

“I don’t actually know. That’s not my division. But maybe, probably.”

Daria was quiet, then it occurred to her: “Is this Jericho?” It wasn’t.

“But is this normal? That you’d call me? That you’d tell me all this?”

“This is an unprecedented and developing situation,” the voice said. “We want our citizens to be informed, safe, and responsible. But please be advised that you’ll still need to use the new passport, as the prior document has been cancelled in our system.”

“Aren’t you the system?”

“I’m what?”

“You’re the system, a representative of the system.”

“No, not that system, no.”

So the cash was gone, the credit and debit cards cancelled, and no one had ever cared about the pens or the Polaroid of Andrés. Even the leather pouch had probably been deemed worthless, since it was quite worn out and wasn’t designer. The Metrobús card, now that she thought about it, was empty. She’d used the last ride the previous week. Though her I.D.s had been recovered, they’d been rendered useless. All that was left were her keys. The keys were still missing.

“Nobody is going to do anything with your keys,” Andrés assured her, as they boarded the ferry back to the mainland.

But she couldn’t stop going over it. Was her address on anything in the wallet? Was there any way for someone to find their home in Mexico City with only her name? It might’ve been as simple as a phone call and a bribe. Maybe someone was already sitting comfortably in their living room.

“Should we change the locks?” she asked. But Andrés didn’t reply, because he didn’t hear her; the noise from the ferry’s engine and the roaring ocean

drowned out her little voice.

After they got off the boat and made their way up the dock, Daria stopped to read a missing-person sign on a wooden post. It was in English, and quite weathered. The missing woman had last been seen on the island. Her height was the same as Daria's, as was her eye color, blue/gray, and her hair color, brown/blond. The photo was too sun-bleached to discern much else, but there was an e-mail address and a WhatsApp number to contact if anyone found her.

As they waited in line at the nearest DHL office, Daria checked her social media for the first time in a week. Several journalists had been arrested, deported. Someone had asked his girlfriend to marry him. Her college roommate had made a pie, and cops were now allowed to open fire on peaceful protesters if the peace seemed tenuous in any way. Her nephew was learning to ride a bike. Dozens of doctors without borders had been killed.

Then, in an advertisement, Daria saw her own face. It seemed that her profile picture had been extracted from her account and run through a filter to show what would be possible if she visited a certain clinic back in Mexico City for fillers and Botox and eyelash extensions and highlights. All these services, a total transformation, were offered in one convenient location. The ad urged Daria—in the imperative case—to discover her true beauty.

It was her turn at the DHL counter, so she put away her phone, and after she received the envelope she asked Andrés to look over the bright-purple emergency passport, to double-check that it was actually her tiny face inside, to make sure that the birth date was correct, to confirm that it was hers, that this was the object that would permit her travel home.

Then their vacation was over, and Daria was back in their apartment, where she began to listen, quite carefully, to the comings and goings of people in the building—other residents, visitors, deliverymen. She tried to imagine the sound of someone putting her lost keys, their found keys, into the lock and turning the knob and entering her home. She thought so much about this possibility, with such focus, that she was quite sure she knew exactly how it would feel, finally, for some other character to enter her life, ready to repossess it as their own. ♦

Catherine Lacey is the author of "The Möbius Book," which is part fiction and part memoir, and novels including "Biography of X."

The Critics

- **Pan-African Dreams, Post-Colonial Realities**
  Two new books, on Kwame Nkrumah’s promise and Idi Amin’s tyranny, capture the soaring hopes and bitter aftermath of Africa’s age of independence.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies,” “The Improbable Victoria Woodhull,” “The Wilderness,” and “The Unbroken Coast.”
- **Why Does Taylor Swift Think She’s Cursed?**
  “The Life of a Showgirl,” the artist’s new album, is full of cringey sexual innuendo, millennial perfectionism, and an obsession with her haters that wears thin.
- **A Season of Rage at the Philharmonic and the Met**
  Gustavo Dudamel conducts John Corigliano’s blistering First Symphony; Chuck Schumer faces a hostile crowd at the opening night of “Kavalier & Clay.”
- **“After the Hunt” Is a Pleasurably Ludicrous House of Cards**
  In Luca Guadagnino’s film, Julia Roberts plays a Yale professor forced to choose sides when a student accuses a colleague of sexual assault.

A Critic at Large

Pan-African Dreams, Post-Colonial Realities

Two new books, on Kwame Nkrumah's promise and Idi Amin's tyranny, capture the soaring hopes and bitter aftermath of Africa's age of independence.

By Kelefa Sanneh

October 6, 2025

As Ghana celebrated its independence, in 1957, Nkrumah was hailed internationally as a figure of freedom. But at home his rule grew increasingly authoritarian and increasingly unpopular; when the military overthrew him, in 1966, there was relatively little protest.Illustration by Jonathan Djob Nkondo

In June, 1952, *Ebony* announced that a new era was dawning. "Africa is rather quickly awakening from its 1,000-year slumber," the magazine proclaimed, and it named one figure as the personification of this revival: Kwame Nkrumah, of the Gold Coast, a British colony in West Africa, who had "one of the most illustrious titles held by any Negro anywhere in the world." He was the colony's first Prime Minister—and, people were realizing, its last. The Gold Coast was on its way to becoming an independent nation called Ghana, owing in large part to Nkrumah, whom *Ebony* hailed as the leader of a "bloodless revolution" transforming Africa.

When Ghana declared independence, in 1957, dignitaries from around the world descended on the capital, Accra. Two especially high-profile visitors came from the United States: Richard Nixon, then the Vice-President, and Martin Luther King, Jr., fresh from his victory over bus segregation, who reportedly told Nixon, "We are seeking the same kind of freedom the Gold Coast is celebrating."

In many ways, *Ebony* got it right. Nkrumah became not only a head of state but a global symbol of freedom, and the continent followed his lead. By the mid-nineteen-sixties, Africa had been transformed from a patchwork of colonies to one of mostly independent countries, each devoted, at least in theory, to self-determination. But, in Ghana, Nkrumah grew increasingly authoritarian—he styled himself "Osagyefo," the Redeemer—and increasingly unpopular, and when the military overthrew him, in 1966, there was relatively little protest. Nine years is a short time in which to achieve redemption, but a fairly long time to serve as an elected head of state. Other African leaders would have terms either too short, broken by coups or assassinations, or too long, extended by a refusal to leave office; Nkrumah's tenure somehow managed both. After the coup, *Ebony* summarized, "Deposed president indicted by his people as tyrant-thief who nearly ruined Ghana," and when he died, in 1972, a *Times* obituary cited his "galloping megalomania." Today it is King, not Nkrumah, who is widely identified with the struggle for freedom. What seems astonishing now is that, not so long ago, Africa inspired in America so much excitement, and so much optimism.

Howard W. French thinks Nkrumah deserves better. French was a longtime Africa correspondent for the *Times*, and, in "The Second Emancipation: Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism, and Global Blackness at High Tide" (Liveright), he calls Nkrumah "comparable in his impact on the world of his era to Mandela, and even Gandhi." French grew up in Washington, D.C., but spent time as a young man visiting family in West Africa, where he met his wife, and where, he recalls, his light skin and "sandy afro" made him conspicuous. He is especially attentive to the way Nkrumah was influenced by Black Americans, and how he influenced them in turn, by showing what Black political power might look like. (*Ebony* marked Ghana's independence with photographs of Nkrumah and thirteen of the new

government's cabinet members, all of them Black.) Richard Wright and Maya Angelou travelled to the country, and both wrote books about their time there. "I was soon swept into an adoration for Ghana as a young girl falls in love," Angelou wrote, "heedless and with slight chance of finding the emotion requited."

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

And yet Nkrumah's political program was maddeningly miscellaneous, or just vague. He was some kind of socialist, not quite a communist, definitely a nationalist, and avowedly a "consciencist," a label he coined and attempted to define in a short book that feels very long. Mostly, he embodied a slogan that he once chanted, and that sounded radical across Africa until it didn't: "Self-government now!" This summer, Kwame Nkrumah's transatlantic legacy flickered back into view when Zohran Mamdani won the Democratic primary in the New York City mayoral race. He has said that his middle name, Kwame, was chosen by his father in tribute to Nkrumah, who died two decades before Zohran was born.

That father is Mahmood Mamdani, a political scientist known for his stringent and unsentimental view of African politics. The elder Mamdani grew up in Uganda, in East Africa, in a community of Ugandans of Indian descent, known as the Bayindi, who played a prominent role in the country until Idi Amin expelled them en masse in 1972. Amin, who ruled Uganda for eight years, is usually remembered as a cartoon villain, with an oafish sense of humor that only made his cruelty more unsettling. In "Slow

Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State" (Harvard), Mahmood Mamdani tells the story of his family's exile—and his own eventual return—in hopes of complicating our view of Amin, and of Ugandan politics. Mamdani is less interested in the jubilation of independence than in the turmoil that followed. Africa's transformation proved far bloodier than many had hoped, yet Mamdani still insists that the continent's independence leaders have something to teach the world. Read with Howard French's chronicle of Nkrumah and his movement, "Slow Poison" seems like an acerbic sequel: one re-creates the era of soaring hopes in Africa, the other takes a skeptical look at what came next.

Like many ambitious intellectuals, Nkrumah discovered his love of home by leaving it. Born in a small village in 1909, or perhaps 1912, the son of a goldsmith and his senior wife, Nkrumah was quiet but charismatic—good at schoolwork, even better at persuading people to believe in him. With the help of mentors, he made his way to Accra, then to England, then to America, where he enrolled at Lincoln University, a historically Black school in Pennsylvania. He was an ardent anti-colonialist, radicalized not by anything he had experienced in the Gold Coast but by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, in 1935. In his autobiography, Nkrumah recalls hearing the news in England: "For the next few minutes I could do nothing but glare at each impassive face, wondering if those people could possibly realise the wickedness of colonialism, and praying that the day might come when I could play my part in bringing about the downfall of such a system." It's impossible to know whether this epiphany truly occurred; by the time he published the book, in 1957, he was already leading the struggle, and the anecdote served as proof of a lifelong commitment.

Some earlier African intellectuals looked at Black America with pity, even disdain. "The black man, you know, has had no chance in America," J. E. Casely Hayford, a pioneering Gold Coast lawyer and author, wrote in 1903. "How could he? The environment has been dead against him, and, though emancipated, he remains in many respects a bondman." Casely Hayford hoped that, given time and freedom, the Gold Coast might achieve the progress that had eluded Black Americans, restoring the peace and prosperity that existed on the continent "before the advent of the foreign interloper." In the decades that followed, a number of Black Americans

came to agree. Marcus Garvey, born in Jamaica but famous in the United States, launched the Back-to-Africa movement, urging Black Americans to help build a “Negro Empire” across the Atlantic. The project turned out to be a mirage, if not a scam: Garvey raised money for ships that couldn’t sail, he went to prison for mail fraud, and he never once visited Africa before he died, in 1940, at fifty-two. Still, many were inspired by this vision, including Nkrumah, who embraced the “Africa” part of Garvey’s dream, while discarding the “Back-to.” What Nkrumah wanted, he later wrote, was not Black nationalism but *African* nationalism—no need for infusions of Black Americans on steamships.

In the opening pages of “The Second Emancipation,” French makes clear that his book is “quite deliberately not a comprehensive biography of Nkrumah,” who emerges as an energetic but elusive figure. He was so devoted to African self-determination that he sometimes ended letters “Yours Africanly.” We know less about his marriage, to a Christian woman from Egypt, than about his friendship with the Englishwoman who served as his private secretary. (“Marriage does not exist in nature,” he once remarked, “and does not warrant the importance that has come to be attached to it.”) For all his grand talk of philosophy, his real interest was political strategy. He once listed the four groups he studied in America: “the Republicans, the Democrats, the Communists and the Trotskyites.” He returned to England, where he acquired a Communist Party membership card without signing it, and founded a cell he called the Circle, dedicated to creating a union of African socialist republics. The group was less Soviet than it seemed, French assures us, though it was not much less authoritarian: members swore a literal blood oath, pledging loyalty not to Moscow but to Nkrumah himself.

Nkrumah returned to the Gold Coast in 1947. The next year, a protest he was involved with tipped into a riot, with mobs targeting Syrian shopkeepers, and he was arrested for being a threat to “public order.” He was released a few weeks later, and—once he had gathered enough followers, and quarrelled with enough local activists—founded his own party, the Convention People’s Party, launching a nonviolent campaign he called “positive action.” After further protests, in 1950, he was jailed again.

(One of his lawyers was Archibald Casely Hayford, a son of the turn-of-the-century writer.)

All along, he calibrated his rhetoric carefully: radical enough to galvanize local supporters, restrained enough not to panic the British, who hoped to offer inhabitants of the Gold Coast a measure of autonomy without giving them control. Nkrumah was still in prison in 1951, when his party won an election that put it in charge of the colony. In deference to the results, colonial authorities released him, and he assumed office within weeks. Nkrumah was not a dazzling speaker, but he was forceful. When he formally demanded independence, in 1953, he wrapped the claim in stiff, high-minded language, presenting decolonization as a vindication of the West's own ideals. "Throughout a century of alien rule, our people have, with ever increasing tendency, looked forward to that bright and glorious day when they shall regain their ancient heritage, and once more take their place rightly as free men in the world," he said, speaking at the National Assembly but addressing an audience in London.

In French's telling, Ghanaian independence feels almost inevitable—the British never had a feasible plan to stop it—and so its arrival is oddly anticlimactic. Perhaps it felt that way to Nkrumah, too. In his first speech as head of state, delivered just after midnight on March 6, 1957, the time the colonial mandate expired, he told a cheering crowd, "Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent." For him, Ghanaian nationhood was only part of a larger vision, and it's this larger vision that French wants to celebrate.

Liberation was already spreading—not everywhere (Rhodesia stayed under white rule until 1980, when it became Zimbabwe, and South African apartheid lasted until 1994), but through most of the continent. To Nkrumah, unifying Africa was the logical next step, no more implausible than what had just been achieved. In 1958, he hosted a Pan-African conference with a motto that evoked "The Communist Manifesto": "Peoples of Africa unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!! You have a continent to regain!"

Before he could unite Africa, Nkrumah had to unite Ghana. Even the country's name was a contrivance, borrowed from an empire that had

flourished a thousand years earlier and hundreds of miles away, in what is now Mauritania and Mali. Much of the land that became Ghana had been part of the Ashanti kingdom, but calling the new state Ashanti might have implied that descendants of these people enjoyed a privileged place. One of Nkrumah's first initiatives after independence was the Avoidance of Discrimination Act, which banned "the election of persons on account of their tribal, regional, or religious affiliations." Like many appeals to unity, it doubled as a demand for obedience. The law hampered opposition parties, many of which were rooted in ethnic or religious groups; to survive, they banded together to form the United Party, Nkrumah's main rival until 1964, when he banned opposition parties altogether.

French dutifully, if reluctantly, records how Nkrumah came to dominate nearly every corner of Ghanaian life—and how a good many Ghanaians came to feel that they needed liberation from their liberator. His face was on stamps and billboards; hundreds of his critics were detained or deported. One of the most prominent, the anti-colonial intellectual J. B. Danquah, died in prison. French sometimes points out, accurately but not germanely, that the British had been illiberal, too. At other moments he seems to excuse Nkrumah's excesses by faulting his rivals: "Those who faced off against him rarely did so with anything resembling the spirit of a loyal opposition." More often, he portrays Nkrumah as oddly passive. "The ruling party's growing reputation for corruption, like its leader's personality cult, created serious liabilities for Nkrumah," French writes, as if the founder with great ideas and the autocrat who undermined him were two separate people. His view of Nkrumah resembles Nkrumah's view of Garvey: a visionary whose vision is easy to admire if you ignore what he actually did.

It is surely no accident that many of the twentieth century's most beloved liberation heroes are men like King and Gandhi, who retain their unsullied reputations in part because they never had to govern. In Africa, one fondly recalled figure is Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese revolutionary who took inspiration from Nkrumah's dream of a united continent. Lumumba briefly served as Congo's Prime Minister; he was executed at age thirty-five by political rivals in collaboration with Belgian mercenaries. (The C.I.A. had drawn up its own contingency plans to kill him.) Nkrumah and Lumumba had once agreed, secretly, to form a Ghana-Congo federation. But, when

Lumumba fought for control of Congo, Nkrumah held back, and Ghanaian troops, serving under U.N. command, once halted a radio broadcast of Lumumba's. This may have been a Cold War calculation: Lumumba sought support from Moscow, while Nkrumah wanted American cash for a hydroelectric dam he hoped would supply power to Ghana. Africans may have had nothing to lose but their chains, but the leader of a precarious new state had plenty to lose—if, say, he failed to meet the country's need for more electricity.

In 1966, the Kenyan political scientist Ali A. Mazrui published a blistering essay in the African journal *Transition*, titled "Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar." Beneath Nkrumah's elaborate rhetoric, Mazrui argued, lay a simple drive to consolidate control through a one-party state that would inevitably empower only his most loyal—and least thoughtful—allies. By the time of his overthrow, Mazrui wrote, Nkrumah's "commitment to pan-Africanism" was "almost the only attractive aspect of his political career." Nkrumah was abroad, touring China and Vietnam, when the coup came, and he went into exile in Guinea, where the President, Ahmed Sékou Touré, named him an honorary co-President. He never returned to Ghana, and he died in 1972, in Romania, where he was seeking treatment for prostate cancer.

Mazrui's essay provoked a strong reaction. *Transition* published responses defending Nkrumah in terms that sound much like French's position today: whatever his faults, he remained a symbol of African liberation, and could not be judged without taking into account (as one rebuttal put it) "the venom of all the imperialist powers" bent on sabotaging his Pan-African project. Mazrui noted, in a rejoinder to the rejoinders, that many of the most fervent letters did not seem to come from Ghana. "I have a strange suspicion," he wrote, "that it is relatively easy to worship a particular African dictator—provided he is someone else's dictator." In fact, many Ghanaians seem to remember Nkrumah fondly, perhaps because of what followed his fall: decades in which the country's leadership alternated between elected Presidents and military juntas. John Dramani Mahama, whose father served in Nkrumah's government and was jailed after the coup, has recalled him as "a true visionary" and lamented the "lost decades" that followed his ouster. Mahama is now playing his own role in this history: he is the President of Ghana, reëlected this year to a second, non-

consecutive term. Nkrumah may not generally be considered a global liberation hero, but in Ghana he retains a title that is plenty impressive: founding father.

Mamdani discusses Mazrui in his book, because *Transition*, the magazine that published him, was founded by Rajat Neogy, who, like Mamdani, was a Ugandan of Indian ancestry, eventually forced into exile. Neogy left not during Amin's Asian expulsion but earlier, after running afoul of the preceding regime, President Milton Obote's. (Neogy landed in Ghana, where *Transition* continued for a time; decades later, I worked for a revived version of the magazine.) When Amin seized power, in 1971, many Ugandans hoped that he would be less brutal than Obote, though the early signs were ominous. Mamdani, then a teaching assistant at Makerere University, had his one encounter with the new ruler when Amin visited the university on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. Amin, a decorated soldier who was also an accomplished rugby player and boxer, enjoyed jokes that doubled as threats. "I came here with a battalion of soldiers so that when you lift your heads from the books, you know who has power," he told the academics. Next came a crack about gonorrhea which turned into a warning: "I will not tolerate you spreading political gonorrhea in Uganda." Weeks later, he announced the expulsion of Ugandans of Asian descent, including Mamdani, who was left stateless—and who has spent his career analyzing the complex relationship between power and political identities.

Unlike Nkrumah, Amin was an extraordinarily vivid character, sometimes gruesomely so. Forest Whitaker won an Oscar for playing him in "The Last King of Scotland," a film based on a novel inspired by his reign. (The title nods to Amin's taste for extravagant honorifics.) Nothing in the movie, however, matches the opening of Barbet Schroeder's 1974 documentary, "General Idi Amin Dada: A Self-Portrait," which lingers on a public execution—bodies dumped into a truck, blood still seeping from bullet holes. Mamdani takes a more nuanced view. He comes neither to bury Amin nor to praise him, but rather to puncture the more lurid myths—there's no evidence, he notes, that Amin was a cannibal—and to rebut the idea that Amin was "a Hitlerite presence in Africa." Even mild revisionism, however, proves hard to sustain. Mamdani suggests that the Army "kept

theft of Asian property to a minimum" during the expulsion, though his own mother's jewelry vanished at customs. He quotes Mazrui, who taught at Makerere and investigated a supposed campus massacre; after asking around, Mazrui concluded that soldiers had "started beating up students" but that no one had died. In 1978, testifying in Washington before Congress, Mazrui called Amin "a very brutal tyrant," but described Uganda as "relatively anarchic"—less controlled, he suggested, than apartheid South Africa, and therefore a less suitable target for economic sanctions.

If Mamdani seems curiously forbearing toward Amin, given his own history, that has much to do with what happened next. Amin was toppled in 1979, with Tanzanian help, and lived out his exile mostly in Saudi Arabia. A few years of chaos followed: Obote briefly returned and then, in 1986, Yoweri Museveni, a former Marxist, seized power and never relinquished it. He is now one of the longest-serving heads of state in the world. Where some accounts emphasize Uganda's economic growth and relative peace under Museveni, Mamdani emphasizes the way he amassed power by carving the country into ethnic districts. Much of Mamdani's scholarship has shown how colonial powers ruled Africa through tribal leaders, thereby hardening ethnic divisions, and how, in the post-colonial era, "tribal" politics persisted. Amin's mistake, he argues, was to treat the Bayindi as a special caste, just as the British had done. And Museveni's mistake, in Mamdani's view, was to treat "indigenous" inhabitants as entitled to preference from the state. In earlier books, Mamdani pointed out how "indigenous" status could amount to second-class citizenship, as in the United States, where Native Americans on reservations were long denied full rights. Wherever "tribal" or "indigenous" identity is invoked, Mamdani sees the remnants of a colonial order, and it sometimes seems that he rejects the possibility that *any* African phenomenon could be oppressive without also being tied to colonialism.

Despite his son's name, Mahmood Mamdani has shown little enthusiasm for Nkrumah. (In an essay published the year before Zohran was born, he listed Nkrumah among the African leaders whose "nationalism turned into a language of state repression.") For Mamdani, the most inspiring political story of the twentieth century is not Ghana's independence but South Africa's transformation from apartheid to multiracial democracy. In

“Neither Settler nor Native” (2020), he described the way that states have often treated settlers as citizens, and natives as aliens. He wrote that too many governments—from the U.S. and Israel to Sudan—have tried to distinguish between different kinds of citizenship, with predictable results: persecution by the state, or by citizens emboldened by the state. South Africa, by contrast, was “at the frontier of decolonization,” because it had sought to treat all groups as survivors of a common past, and as citizens. Mamdani is an unconventional thinker, but here he essentially affirmed the conventional wisdom—that Nelson Mandela, who declined to seek revenge or consolidate power, got it right. Or nearly right. Mamdani also argued that South Africa’s celebrated Truth and Reconciliation Commission was, in fact, fatally flawed, because, by encouraging perpetrators to confess in exchange for possible amnesty, it framed apartheid as a set of personal crimes. In this way, he writes, the commission helped “maintain racial privilege even in a South Africa with formal racial equality.”

Instead of giving South Africa a full-throated endorsement, Mamdani urged readers to imagine “political community beyond the nation-state,” though he declined to be prescriptive. “Exactly what this new kind of state might look like is hard to say,” he wrote. French, for his part, admits that the “second emancipation” he describes was in some ways a disappointment. He blames rich countries for being “miserly toward Africa,” but also notes the role of “unaccountable” rulers, and he seems unsure whether the next era will look much different from the last. French, writing about one of the most celebrated leaders of the independence era, and Mamdani, writing about one of the most reviled, show how easy it can be to imagine African politics as either a dream or a nightmare. What remains harder to imagine is something in between. ♦

Kelefa Sanneh has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008. He is the author of "Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres."

| Section menu | Main menu |

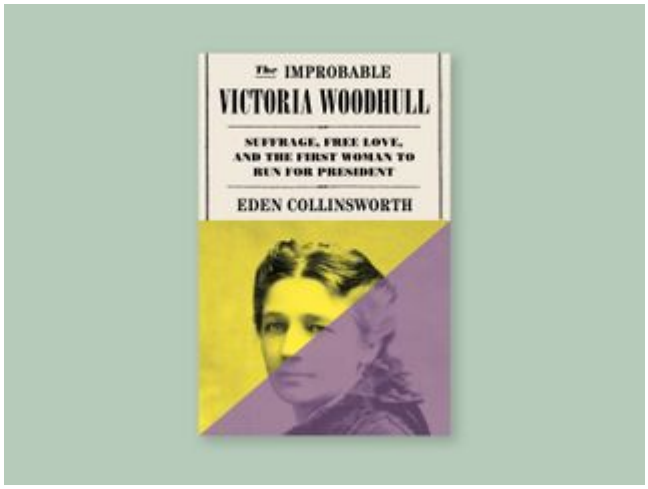
Books

Briefly Noted

“If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies,” “The Improbable Victoria Woodhull,” “The Wilderness,” and “The Unbroken Coast.”

October 6, 2025

If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies, *by Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares (Little, Brown)*. This controversial best-selling manifesto argues that the creation of artificial superintelligence (or A.S.I.) would lead to human extinction. Beginning with a primer on how A.I. systems work, the book examines the often counterintuitive ways in which intelligent beings realize their goals. These behaviors, Yudkowsky and Soares write, suggest not only that we are incapable of controlling A.S.I. but that such a system would inevitably conclude that it should extinguish our species. The authors point to a slew of engineering projects gone wrong—from nuclear meltdowns to the adoption of leaded gasoline—to show how complex systems and profit-seeking can breed disaster. But here, unlike in those cases, “humanity only gets one shot.”

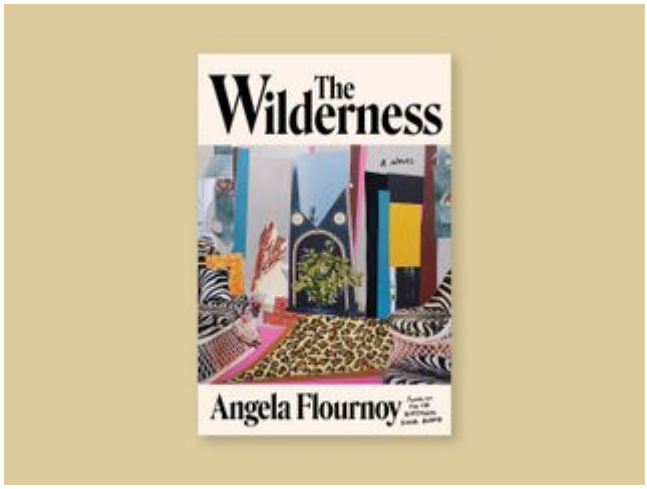


The Improbable Victoria Woodhull, *by Eden Collinsworth (Doubleday).* The subject of this sharply drawn biography was not just a noted suffragist but also the first woman to run for President in the U.S., the first woman to open a brokerage firm on Wall Street, and the first woman to testify before the House Judiciary Committee. Collinsworth's propulsive narrative traces Woodhull's path from performing as a child "clairvoyant" to serving as a spiritual adviser to Cornelius Vanderbilt and then as a newspaper publisher. Notoriety trailed Woodhull through her life, but, rather than sensationalizing her scandals, Collinsworth highlights Woodhull's flair for reinvention, and her drive to set the terms by which she would be remembered.

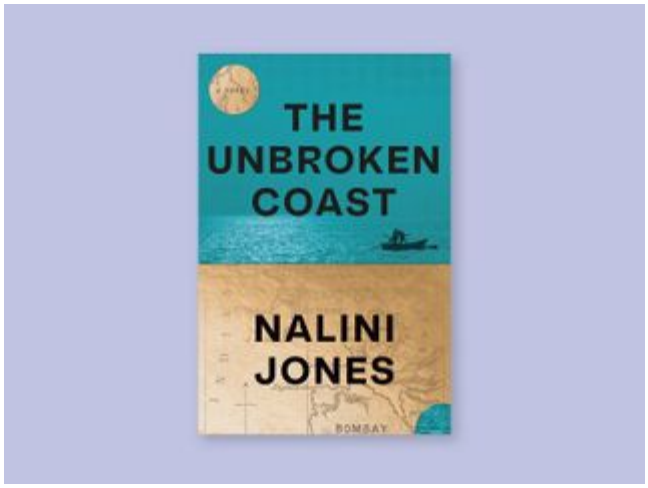
What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



The Wilderness, *by Angela Flournoy (Mariner)*. This novel, long-listed for the National Book Award, maps the friendship of five young Black women over the course of two decades. The story opens with the death of a grandparent, then weaves between the Presidency of Barack Obama, Donald Trump's first term, and the *COVID*-19 pandemic. The five main characters, who live in Los Angeles and New York City, come of age in the time of social media, climate anxiety, and police violence. Throughout, the women wonder what their responsibilities are to one another, and how to "be or do good" in the world and in their most intimate relationships. One reflects, "Aren't our nearest and dearest always our business, even when it's not technically our business?"



The Unbroken Coast, *by Nalini Jones (Knopf)*. In this début novel, a former history professor in Mumbai encounters a mother and her sick baby at a shrine of the Virgin Mary in 1978—a chance meeting that binds the two

families together for nearly thirty years. As the professor navigates retirement, the baby grows into a rambunctious child who rebels against the traditions of her fishing community. Jones, nodding to events like the 1992 Bombay riots, sets the story at a time when the city was contending with religious tension and tumultuous change—historical forces with which the characters reckon as they try to shape their own fates.

Pop Music

Why Does Taylor Swift Think She's Cursed?

"The Life of a Showgirl," the artist's new album, is full of cringey sexual innuendo, millennial perfectionism, and an obsession with her haters that wears thin.

By Amanda Petrusich

October 3, 2025

Swift has been slow to abandon the underdog mentality she developed as an upstart.Animation by Fromm Studio

Since Taylor Swift launched the record-breaking Eras Tour, in 2023—a hundred and forty-nine dates, fifty-one cities, more than two billion dollars in ticket sales—she has been freakishly omnipresent in the cultural consciousness: a grinning lodestar in Louboutin boots. The tour ended last December, but, rather than ceding the spotlight, Swift doubled down on her mega-celebrity, first with a wildly publicized engagement to Travis Kelce, a tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs, and then by releasing "The Life of a Showgirl," her twelfth studio album, and her second in less than eighteen months. It's a cocky, temperamental record about power and insecurity. "What could you possibly get for the girl who has everything and nothing all at once?" she sings on "Elizabeth Taylor," one of the album's best and heaviest tracks. That paradox is central to Swift's gestalt. She is equal parts formidable ("I'll be your father figure / I drink that brown liquor / I can make deals with the devil because my dick's bigger," she boasts on "Father Figure") and bruised. "I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness / I've been dying just from trying to seem cool," she sighs on "Eldest Daughter," a doleful ballad. ("Terminal uniqueness" is a phrase used in A.A. or other recovery programs—a toxic belief in your own exceptionalism.)

Swift has been slow to abandon the underdog mentality she developed as an upstart. What she does for a living is surely gruelling, but relentlessly

pointing out how fame is poisonous and burdensome isn't exactly revelatory. (A lot of jobs are hard; very few make a person unspeakably rich.) On "The Life of a Showgirl," Swift is occasionally tender—"Honey" is arch, delicate, lovely—but more often she is vengeful, eschewing vulnerability in favor of bombast.

Sometimes it works; often it doesn't. Swift reunited with the Swedish producer Max Martin and his protégé Shellback, the same long-haired studio savants responsible for co-creating some of her most iconic singles. More recently, Swift has been working with the indie-leaning producers Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner, though by her 2024 release, "The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology"—a wearying double album of savage, embittered breakup songs—it felt as though those relationships had ebbed, creatively. Martin, who is fifty-four, is the most commercially successful songwriter of the twenty-first century; his work is meticulous and precise, and his songs are taut, balanced, unyielding. (Part of the odd pleasure of his writing, which abides by some kind of inscrutable mathematics, is its strictness.) Martin is an interesting foil for Swift, who is so hyper-focussed on narrative and phrasing that she has now self-styled as something of an angsty comp-lit major. ("Your English teacher and your gym teacher are getting married," she wrote when announcing her engagement.) Martin, whose first language is Swedish, is chiefly concerned with melody. He writes lyrics phonetically (he has brought up *the punchiness* of ABBA's "Mamma Mia" as a kind of beacon)—a practice that can result in hilariously off-kilter grammar. (On the pre-chorus of Ariana Grande's "Break Free," Grande exultantly sings, "Now that I've become who I really are!" Swift, of course, would never.)

Together, Swift and Martin's overlapping obsessions have created a handful of perfect pop songs, including "Blank Space," a funny, caustic, and inventive tune—possibly still Swift's best—about the various ways love can feel doomed from the jump. (I laugh every time Swift sings, "Wait, the worst is yet to come . . . / Oh, no!") "The Life of a Showgirl," however, is missing some essential dynamism. Swift thrives within a rubric of structure and rigor. This is why the Eras Tour, with its clearly defined epochs and sharply choreographed cues, was so spectacular—she is a master of law and order. Yet Swift's aesthetic of flawlessness (when she announced the album

on “New Heights,” the sports podcast Travis Kelce hosts with his brother, Jason, I was briefly hypnotized by the utter exactitude of her winged eyeliner) is becoming the most dated thing about her. A scrappier, more chaotic vibe has fully supplanted the over-filtered perfection of the mid-aughts. Swift might approximate mess, but real heads can tell—she’s got it under control.

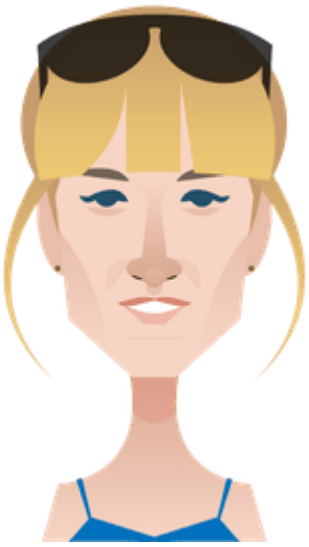
That might also be why Swift is so weirdly unconvincing when singing about sex, an experience that requires submission both to another person and to your own charred, mercurial desires. On “Wood,” a theoretically horny disco song about feeling safe in a relationship, she manages to make getting laid sound embarrassing. “Redwood tree, it ain’t hard to see / His love was the key to open my thighs,” she sings. The song is filled with cringey double entendres: “Girls, I don’t need to catch the bouquet, mmm / To know a hard rock is on the way.” O.K.! The same song features the line “The curse on me was broken by your magic wand,” which is of course very funny, but also gestures to a broader problem of perspective: There is no curse on you, Taylor Swift! You are simply . . . alive on Earth.

Musically, Swift’s pivot toward concision feels like a response to claims that her last album was repetitive and overlong. On “New Heights,” Swift described “The Tortured Poets Department” as “a data dump of everything I’ve thought, felt, or experienced in two or three years,” a tacit recognition of its rawness and volume. I found the album’s urgency and grandiosity exhausting at the time, though, in retrospect, I recognize the feral energy of the freshly brokenhearted, still teeming with rage and ache. Swift is successful enough to ignore her haters (or her exes), but it appears that she simply cannot—in fact, she sings about her enemies constantly. On “Actually Romantic,” a song widely presumed to be about Charli XCX (it sounds a little like Weezer’s “Say It Ain’t So,” and a lot like Olivia Rodrigo), Swift pretends to be turned on by Charli’s vitriol: “I heard you call me Boring Barbie when the coke’s got you brave . . . I mind my business, God’s my witness that I don’t provoke it / It’s kinda making me wet.” (For those not mired in Swift lore: Charli was an opener for Swift on the “Reputation” tour, but is now married to a member of the 1975, the British rock band fronted by Swift’s louche ex Matty Healy—make of this what you will!) Swift’s best songs are overloaded with animus, either for

herself or for people who have let her down. Fury is a powerful engine. One gets the sense that, in every transaction, Swift is always keeping score.

Swift is masterly when it comes to making money. This is the aspect of her career that most often forces me to interrogate whatever gnarly misogynist impulses are buried deep within my psyche: Would I find it just as obscene if, say, Morgan Wallen or Drake released thirty-six physical variants of an album? Part of what's uncomfortable about Swift's ambition is that she has built an empire on intimacy, or at least a simulacrum of intimacy. "I'm in the business of human emotion," Swift said on "New Heights," shortly before unveiling "The Life of a Showgirl" by removing the LP from a bespoke briefcase.

Lately, it feels as if her capacity to connect in new ways is beginning to falter—too much business, not enough emotion. While Swift's life is extraordinary, it's also cloistered by wealth and celebrity; perhaps the range of feelings she's allowed to experience has become circumscribed. It's easy to be paranoid and pissed when your interactions are eternally off balance and your validation is so tied to public perception. "Everybody's cutthroat in the comments / Every single hot take is cold as ice," she sings on "Eldest Daughter," a song mostly about websites. Swift is at a rich moment in her life—thirty-five can be the tipping point between youth and something else—but a lot of what's here, from the production to the performance to the lyrical themes, suggests she's not terribly concerned with transformation. In a way, Swift herself entrenched the idea that an artist should have eras, remaining attentive to the heft and thrill of reinvention, but "The Life of a Showgirl" is mostly about itself. On the album's title track, a pretty, moody duet with Sabrina Carpenter, Swift inadvertently admits to her own seclusion, estrangement, distance: "You don't know the life of a showgirl, babe / And you're never, ever gonna." ♦



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."

Musical Events

A Season of Rage at the Philharmonic and the Met

Gustavo Dudamel conducts John Corigliano’s blistering First Symphony; Chuck Schumer faces a hostile crowd at the opening night of “Kavalier & Clay.”

By Alex Ross

October 6, 2025

Dudamel is using his celebrity to advance the cause of contemporary music.Illustration by Brian Rea; Source photograph by Juliana Yamada / Getty

John Corigliano’s First Symphony, which Gustavo Dudamel and the New York Philharmonic presented early in the new season, begins with a blistering wail of orchestral rage. Strings play a unison A that quavers under the pressure of sawing bows. Timpani, bass drums, and piano follow with a concussive thud. After a second howl of strings, the percussion delivers two more thuds in quick succession—a dark echo of the stamping rhythm of Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man.” Finally, the entire ensemble

unleashes a dissonant scream, with pitiless timpani strokes recalling both Brahms's First Symphony and Bernd Alois Zimmermann's antiwar opera, "Die Soldaten." Corigliano wrote his symphony in the late nineteen-eighties, to lament friends who had died of *AIDS* and to decry indifference to those deaths. The work contains sonorous bouts of sorrow, but rage is its primary register.

Dudamel, who officially begins his tenure as the Philharmonic's music director next season but is already effectively in charge, has never been a brazenly political artist, yet politics has a way of catching up to him. A product of the Venezuelan music-education program known as El Sistema, he long remained silent about human-rights issues in his home country. Then, in 2017, he voiced concerns about the regime of Nicolás Maduro, resulting in a years-long absence from Venezuela. Now, as he ends his tenure with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and turns his attention to New York, he is brushing against a fresh wave of repression, this time emanating from the White House. This past summer, he planned to bring the Simón Bolívar Symphony, the flagship orchestra of El Sistema, to the Hollywood Bowl, but the appearances were cancelled, according to the L.A. Phil, on account of "travel complications"—presumably, Donald Trump's travel ban.

Against that backdrop, and with the Trump Administration demonizing trans people and undermining gay-rights advances, the Corigliano First lands with particular force. Dudamel and the orchestra delivered the score with absolute conviction and an almost punishing vehemence. Carter Brey's cello solos in the first and final movements provided a vulnerable, intensely human contrast to the onslaught. Corigliano, who is eighty-seven, was on hand to accept a tremendous ovation.

Two things struck me about the launch of the Philharmonic season. First, the orchestra is embracing pluralism and diversity in the face of a right-wing Kulturkampf. The opening program included "of light and stone," a luminous new piece by the Native Hawaiian composer Leilehua Lanzilotti. It quotes songs by Queen Lili‘uokalani, the last monarch of Hawaii, making the point that the islands have a proud cultural tradition that long predates their seizure by the United States. That work was paired with Bartók's

Third Piano Concerto, written in New York by an exile from Nazi-aligned Hungary. Later in the season, Dudamel will conduct an orchestral version of Frederic Rzewski's protest masterpiece, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"; Thomas Adès will reprise his 1999 cantata, "America: A Prophecy," which incorporates apocalyptic Mayan texts; and Kwamé Ryan will lead a new score by the great Black composer George Lewis. These events are part of a series observing the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the United States, but no one will mistake them for triumphalist propaganda.

Just as notable was the sense that Dudamel was using his celebrity to advance the cause of contemporary music. During his early years in Los Angeles, he focussed primarily on the classical canon, but of late he has given increasing attention to new work, placing special emphasis on Latin American composers. Encouragingly, he seems poised to carry on that mission in New York, and perhaps even push it further. Nor does he confine himself to easy-listening material. Corigliano's symphony is assaultive in style and confrontational in intent. If Dudamel hadn't been on the podium, I imagine that quite a few seats would have emptied out after intermission. I went to two performances, on Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, and on both occasions the vast majority of the audience stayed to the end.

In older repertory, Dudamel achieved mixed results. In the Bartók, he deferred to the astonishing young pianist Yunchan Lim, who, in the slow movement, voiced chords with a dreamy sensitivity that brought to mind the incomparable Radu Lupu. A sappy encore, in the form of Ennio Morricone's movie song "Love Affair," reminded us that Lim is still a kid. Dudamel's rendition of Ives's Second Symphony was initially undercharacterized, but in the Adagio the cellos heightened the mood with lustrous, amber-hued phrasing, and the finale was rambunctious to the max. The least satisfying offering was Beethoven's Fifth, which preceded the Corigliano. The first movement puttered along more than it drove forward; Dudamel slowed momentum by inserting odd little ritardandos. The second movement lacked songfulness, and the third was short on mystery. Throughout, the horns blared too loudly. Only in the finale did the performance snap to life. The orchestra seemed only fitfully engaged with Dudamel's direction—a warning sign amid hoopla.

Less than a week later, Dudamel was back in California, inaugurating his final season at the L.A. Phil. Again, a première was matched to a warhorse. Ellen Reid's choral-orchestral work "Earth Between Oceans," receiving its world première, is a thrillingly chaotic paean to the power of nature, which, the composer says in a program note, will inevitably outlast "rising political chaos." The Los Angeles Master Chorale uttered nonverbal syllables, yet the message was somehow clear. Reid's score alternates between rhapsody and pandemonium, with the latter winning out in a riotous coda. (Dudamel will bring the piece to New York in the spring.) An authoritatively paced account of Strauss's "Alpine Symphony" had a welcome wildness, as if influenced by Reid's narrative. Dudamel's charisma and energy will be missed in L.A., although, with Esa-Pekka Salonen slated to serve a five-year term as creative director, the orchestra is unlikely to lose ground.

Politics also surfaced at the Metropolitan Opera's opening-night gala, which featured the local première of Mason Bates's "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay." The fact that gay themes play a role in the story perhaps explains why Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, addressed the audience by saying, "At the Met, we're proudly standing for freedom of artistic expression." When Gelb walked onstage, he was greeted with applause and also some boos. The booers might well have been thinking of the Met's recently announced collaboration with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where expression is not free and homosexuality can be punishable by death. Gelb then introduced Senator Chuck Schumer, who said, "The arts are under attack," prompting several people in the crowd to reply, "Do something about it!" Others shouted, "Endorse Mamdani!" When a Met crowd starts getting feisty, all is not well in the land.

After the curtain went up, the evening lapsed into predictable patterns. Once again, the Met has commissioned a new piece on an ambitious topic—here, Michael Chabon's 2000 novel about two Brooklyn-based Jewish cousins, a closeted American and a charismatic Czech émigré, who concoct a Nazi-fighting comic-book superhero—and given it to a composer who demonstrates more proficiency than personality. Like Kevin Puts's "The Hours," from 2022, and Jeanine Tesori's "Grounded," from 2024, "Kavalier & Clay" flips through a catalogue of styles without finding a distinctive, generative voice. At the start, we hear brooding D minor followed by

brooding first-inversion G-sharp minor. Much the same progression appears in John Williams's score for "Raiders of the Lost Ark," to stronger effect. Later, chugging string figures and portentous drones have the flavor of Danny Elfman and Hans Zimmer. It makes sense for a comic-book opera to draw on comic-book movies, but, as with Bates's attempts at big-band swing and Broadway warbling, the music is stale to the point of indigestibility. The libretto, by Gene Scheer, is little better. The drudgery of combat and war work is evoked with the lines "Back and forth. / Up and down. / Over and over. / On and on!"

A deft, kinetic production, with direction by Bartlett Sher and sets, lighting, and video design by the collective 59 Studio, keeps the eyes engaged. "The Escapist," the cousins' comic book, is sketched in real time; wartime mayhem is juxtaposed with domestic routine; the Empire State Building becomes a platform for a nocturnal gay tryst. Miles Mykkanen, a plaintive Sam Clay, and Andrzej Filończyk, a rugged Joe Kavalier, headed a large and able cast that produced particularly striking turns by Lauren Snouffer, as Joe's doomed sister, and Edward Nelson, as Sam's doomed lover. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, in the pit, let the voices ring out clearly. Yet the entire spectacle felt inadequate to the weighty sprawl of Chabon's novel, which celebrates the exterior glamour of pop culture while observing its deceptions. Joe, Chabon writes, "was perhaps the first to feel the shame of glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man." An opera which seriously addressed *that* theme would be equal to the crisis that is engulfing the American experiment. ♦

Alex Ross has been The New Yorker's music critic since 1996. He is the author of "Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music."

The Current Cinema

“After the Hunt” Is a Pleasurably Ludicrous House of Cards

In Luca Guadagnino’s film, Julia Roberts plays a Yale professor forced to choose sides when a student accuses a colleague of sexual assault.

By Justin Chang

October 3, 2025

Roberts’s magnetism comes from the way she withdraws into a cocoon of inscrutability as her character, Alma, faces an increasingly fraught dilemma. It isn’t until Alma acts that you grasp all that she’s been quietly weighing.Illustration by Raj Dhunna

If there is a truth that holds firm beneath the wickedly slippery surfaces of Luca Guadagnino’s movies, it’s that presentation counts. No sartorial decision is made lightly, and no design element is arrived at by accident. The opening titles of his new drama, “After the Hunt,” should have you on high alert. They’re elegantly rendered in what looks to be Windsor Light Condensed, widely recognizable as Woody Allen’s onscreen typeface of choice. A Thad Jones jazz standard on the soundtrack more or less confirms that we’re watching a borderline trollish act of homage. Are we about to enter an enclave of attractive, privileged, hopelessly self-involved intellectuals, as in so many Allen movies? Or will Guadagnino’s art imitate Allen’s life, with a tale of grim allegations, firm denials, and he-said-she-said dialectics?

Yes, to all of the above. “After the Hunt” revolves around Alma Imhoff, a professor in the philosophy department at Yale, where the talk is neither light nor condensed. She is played by Julia Roberts, who, you may recall, was a nineteen-fifties art-history instructor in “Mona Lisa Smile” (2003), pushing conservative-minded Wellesley women toward self-realization. Alma, a creature of our times, offers a pricklier kind of feminist inspiration: she’s formidable, aloof, feared, and adored. I counted one unguarded outburst of laughter, when Alma, unwinding over drinks with a colleague, lets out the signature full-throated Roberts cackle, but it felt like a boozy anomaly—a stray glimmer of warmth from a woman who knows that scholarly authority is best served cold. Striding into a classroom, she has only to utter the words “Foucault’s panopticon” to reduce us all to teacher’s pets, eagerly leaning forward in our seats.

At a dinner party she hosts with her psychoanalyst husband, Frederik (Michael Stuhlbarg), Alma is no less in her element. Resplendent in Veronica Lake curls, and softly lighted against handsome wood panelling, she draws the attention of everyone in sight. The flirty blowhard with the goatee is a younger philosophy professor, Hank (Andrew Garfield), who signals their years of friendship (and maybe more) by propping his legs up against her on the couch. Seated nearby is Maggie (Ayo Edebiri), a doctoral candidate rumored to be brilliant, though all we can discern, watching her fidget, is an anxious yearning for Alma’s approval (and maybe more). The party chatter is thick with high-flown intellectualism, cross-generational sniping, and intra-department rivalry, none of which anyone could or should mistake for plausible academia-speak. The screenwriter, Nora Garrett, has achieved an amusingly florid Hollywood simulacrum—one that tilts into knowing parody—of an intensely self-regarding world. The more irritating the characters get, the more compelling the movie becomes.

It’s the fall of 2019, with #MeToo still ascendant and the rollback of D.E.I. and other reactionary assaults on social justice still far in the future. But “After the Hunt” doesn’t feel dated; as its title implies, it’s a period piece and it knows it. (An epilogue set in early 2025 makes this pointedly and poignantly clear.) The effect is to infuse the story with an undeniable and knowing nostalgia; how quaint, at Alma’s party, to find everyone debating matters of representational consequence. Will Alma earn tenure before

Hank, a guest noxiously suggests, simply because she isn't a straight, white, cisgender male? How will the progressive winds of the present affect the teaching of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and other problematic geniuses of the past?

Beneath such rhetorical feints, Garrett sets an intricate trap for characters and viewers alike. Alma returns home one evening to find Maggie waiting outside with a look of wild anguish and a terrible experience to recount. After the party, she says, Hank walked her back to her apartment, came up for a nightcap, and, against her protests, drunkenly assaulted her. "He crossed the line," Maggie insists, and something in her phrasing sounds a warning bell, as if she were describing not the trauma of a sexual violation but a meticulously recorded breach of moral protocol. Edebiri, wide-eyed and almost wraithlike, seems to have been directed to act as if she were lying—and lying badly. Maggie asks for Alma's support, but what we hear sounds less like a cry for help than like a test of loyalty. Alma, responding with more questions than sympathy, fails it utterly.

Have we in the audience also failed Maggie if we find her unpersuasive? Well, no: she's a fictional character, and, as Alma peevishly points out during a seminar, fictional characters don't need to be coddled; they're there to be scrutinized, analyzed, and, if need be, torn down. Guadagnino encourages our doubts, shooting Maggie in exaggerated horror-movie closeups set to the doomy bass notes and shrieking winds of Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross's score. The idea of Maggie's untrustworthiness has already been planted in an early scene, mid-party, involving a bathroom cabinet and a hidden envelope conveniently filled with old news clippings concerning dark secrets in Alma's past. Maggie is a snoop—and a clumsy one. (She rifles through the clippings at such length that I assumed she was scanning for coupons.) She's also emblematic of a story in which nothing and no one can be trusted.

Nearly every frame of "After the Hunt" spins a glossy lie, and not just because the film, though set in New Haven, was shot in London. It's a posh Ivy League whodunnit and a cinematic Rorschach blot, cleverly rigged to generate cascading waves of suspicion. Hank, desperate for Alma's ear, claims that he had confronted Maggie with evidence of plagiarism on her

part, and that her rape accusation is purely retaliatory. But what of the toxicity, the ill-disguised capacity for sexual aggression, lurking beneath his oily charm? None of it helps his case, though it does broaden Garfield's range. As an actor whose most famous roles include a conscientious objector, a Jesuit priest, and Spider-Man, he seems liberated to be playing the part of an out-and-out sleaze.

And Alma? She may be the shadiest of the lot, and part of her magnetism comes from the way she withdraws into a cocoon of inscrutability as her dilemma becomes more fraught. Roberts, her face a mask, hints at the character's internal calculations more than she dramatizes them. It isn't until Alma acts that you fully grasp all that she's been quietly weighing: the consequences of withholding support from Maggie, a queer Black woman whose parents are major donors to the university, but also the possibility of losing Hank, a longtime friend who also happens to be a professional rival. And then there is the guilty past alluded to in those clippings, the memory of which frequently strikes her down with debilitating pain and nausea. Roberts isn't the kind of actress you often see retching into a toilet, and the sight and sounds are genuinely upsetting, as if Alma's very guts were cancelling her from within. The only character who seems entirely transparent is Frederik, who can't hide his resentment of his second-class spousal status or his contempt for the sycophants and mediocrities who cling to his wife like barnacles. The role is not kind to Stuhlbarg, but here, as in Guadagnino's "Call Me by Your Name" (2017), he is well cast as a perceptive truthteller on the margins, and he rises to the occasion with the puckish wit of a cuckolded diva.

What would be Frederik's witheringly honest assessment of this movie? He might find that "After the Hunt," ostensibly a juicy conversation starter, has little to say about the matters it raises—not race, not gender, not queerness, not diversity, not cancel culture, not sexual assault, and certainly not philosophy. I mean this almost as a compliment; Garrett knows how to deploy verbiage as misdirection. At times, you may sense the film revealing its cards, as when a campus therapist (a supremely dry Chloë Sevigny) calls out the privilege, entitlement, and relentless self-victimization of Yale's students: "These kids," she scoffs, "have had everything handed to them their whole lives." But Guadagnino, alive to the pleasure of every line

reading, maintains a pretty good poker face. The conventions and gestures of a topical potboiler—reflexive eye rolls, snap-worthy tell-offs—clearly excite him. He's drawn to this material not by the weight of its ethical conundrums but by the chance to watch beautiful people attempt, or pretend, to hash those conundrums out.

"After the Hunt" will be derided as little more than an intellectual parlor trick, a flimsy house of cards. I wouldn't disagree, but few directors build more luxurious houses than Guadagnino does, whatever the materials. The most telling line comes from a peripheral character, the dean of the philosophy department, who laments the increasingly shallow and politicized nature of his position: "Against all odds, I've found myself in the business of optics, not substance." Guadagnino draws no such distinction. For him, style is substance, and optics are just variations on style. No wonder Roberts's performance reaches a peak of intensity, and tugs most irresistibly at our sympathies, when Alma's rage finally spills out into the open, in a full-bore character-assassination rant that's as commanding as it is ill-advised. It's not, as they say, a good look. It's a great one. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

Poems

- **“Bird Song”**
  “A bird sings and I don’t know its name.”
- **“Shapeshifter”**
  “The white deer appeared on the road to his sister / As she returned from looking for him.”

Poems

Bird Song

By José Antonio Rodríguez

October 6, 2025

A bird sings and I don’t know its name.
The branch on which it perches sways with the rough wind
but does not come close to breaking, secured as it is
to the hulking trunk of a tree whose name I also don’t know.
The roots breathe beneath an earth riddled with greens
of varied leaves and even diminutive flowers
that also won’t tell me their names.
I once told a room of young persons
that every writer must first be a great observer,
though I couldn’t bring myself
at that precise moment to look directly into their eyes.
Were they even listening?
Maybe I’ve grown tired of names—illusion of dominance.
The bird the tree and the blanket of green
will go on being what they were
before the horse-drawn men with their ledgers.
Before the first ever with their mitochondrial memories
of ice. So much ice and so many names for it.
And, anyway, the bird has stopped singing
and has flown from the tree in the park,
the man thinking the wind rushes past him
as if running away.

José Antonio Rodríguez is the author of the memoir “House Built on Ashes” and poetry collections including “The Day’s Hard Edge.”

Poems

Shapeshifter

By Joy Harjo

October 6, 2025

The white deer appeared on the road to his sister
As she returned from looking for him.
We look for signs everywhere. There was the wrecked car.
A lost shoe. And mystery.

He has been gone over seven days, then nine, then now.
Somewhere in the woods, in the rain, in the forever
Of the spinning map of his mind.

The mind hungers for water over rocks,
The companionship of trees
And how light and the winds play together against
The skin of the earth.

All we have is the evidence left in his tracks:

A favored brother in a house without a father,
A boy who liked cars and dinosaurs,
A man without a map who loved his mother,
A phantom who convinced him to run
From a story in which he no longer saw himself.

It must have been something like this
As he sunk down into the earth
To know himself again as earth
As he began to hear himself dream again:

First it was the deer’s heart that changed him,
How it made a song
Like a lullaby
In a time long before there were human words
To hurt him.
The song memorized him.
Then those luminous eyes that could see through the night,
The tender ears turning toward each even imperceptible sound.
That nose a silky antenna, the graceful being
Who could leap any obstacle of fear or shame
Or for the wild joy of it.

I am a white deer, he said, as he escaped through the trees.
I am the first light of awakening and the last light of leaving.

Then no one, not even the haunting, could find him.

Joy Harjo served three terms as U.S. Poet Laureate. Her books include the poetry collection “Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light” and the memoir “Girl Warrior.”

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the October 13, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, September 30, 2025**
  A moderately challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, September 30, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Wyna Liu

September 30, 2025

loading

Wyna Liu, a crossword editor at the New York Times and the writer of its game Connections, began contributing puzzles to The New Yorker in 2020.
