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DEC. 14, 2020

THE NEW YORKER



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A Tycoon's Deep-State Conspiracy Dive

Patrick Byrne, the former head of Overstock, had always been outspoken. Did an affair with a Russian agent push him too far?

By [Sheelagh Kolhatkar](#)

December 7, 2020

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In July, 2015, Patrick Byrne, the founder of the online discount retailer Overstock, delivered a twenty-minute talk at FreedomFest, the annual libertarian conference in Las Vegas. Other speakers included the venture capitalist [Peter Thiel](#); John Mackey, the chief executive officer of Whole Foods; and the Presidential candidate [Donald J. Trump](#). Byrne's talk, entitled "Turtles All the Way Down: How the Crypto-Revolution Solves Intractable Problems on Wall Street," was a version of one he had given many times before. It touched on several of his interests, including the kind of liberalism usually referred to as libertarianism, the flaws in the structure of the stock market which make it vulnerable to manipulation, and how a [blockchain](#)-based financial system could eliminate those flaws. After the talk, a line of people waited by the stage to speak to Byrne. Standing a little apart from them was a young woman with thick red hair, a pale, wide face, and a Russian accent. Introducing herself as [Maria Butina](#), she said that she was the president of a Russian gun-rights group. Judd Bagley, a former Overstock executive who accompanied Byrne to the conference, recalled that, after the exchange, Byrne had "a little sparkle in his eye."

At the time, many people in the business world considered Byrne to be an almost clairvoyant entrepreneur. In early 2000, years before Amazon and eBay popularized the practice known as "dropshipping," Overstock, which sells furniture and household goods, allowed third-party venders to send items directly to customers through its Web site. In 2004, a year before Amazon Prime was introduced, Byrne launched Overstock's Club O membership program, which gave shoppers a year's worth of shipping for a flat fee. And in 2014 Overstock became the first major retailer to accept bitcoin for purchases.

Byrne is the son of John J. Byrne, an insurance magnate whom [Warren Buffett](#), a family friend, once called "the Babe Ruth of insurance." Patrick Byrne has a Ph.D. in philosophy from Stanford and regularly cites Friedrich Hayek, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the conservative economist Thomas Sowell in conversation. Former employees describe a memory trick he likes to perform, in which he studies a deck of cards for a few minutes and then recites back the order of the cards, one by one. "When he's on, he's smart, charming, complex, and brilliant," Marc Cohodes, who was once a critic of Overstock and is now an investor in the company, told me. Byrne is also a showman; in 2014, he arrived at the breaking-ground ceremony for

Overstock's new headquarters, in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, by parachute, tearing off his flight suit to reveal a tuxedo.

Byrne was best known for waging a sensational legal battle with several investment firms and stock traders in the early two-thousands. He accused them of colluding to drive down the stock prices of various companies, including his own—a claim that seemed unlikely, even preposterous. He was mocked for the outlandish, bullying ways in which he presented his findings. “Everyone said for years, ‘Patrick Byrne is crazy,’ ” John Welborn, an economics lecturer at Dartmouth College who has worked as a consultant for Byrne, told me. But, shortly after the financial crisis began, Byrne’s suspicions were confirmed, and regulators soon cracked down on the practice he’d described.

Since then, Byrne has fashioned himself as a whistle-blower on financial malfeasance, using his Web site, Deep Capture, as a platform. The posts on the site are filled with cartoonish euphemisms (“Men in Black” for F.B.I. agents) and bombastic prose (“I swam around on Wall Street 2005-2008 drawing fire from the Establishment”), and they feature blocks of italicized text, lists, layers of footnotes, endnotes, and links to further reading. Byrne’s accounts of his battles with high finance include descriptions of yearslong collaborations with the F.B.I. and Mafia plots to kill him. Critics note that Byrne often exaggerates his importance, includes only details that support his theories, and has made false claims about his adversaries. (In 2016, a Canadian court found that he had committed libel against a businessman and ordered him to pay a million dollars.) David Luban, a professor of law at Georgetown University who has known Byrne since teaching him as an undergraduate, observed that improbable things seem to happen to Byrne with remarkable frequency. “He’s a hard man to bet against,” Luban said. “So many of his stories that have seemed utterly incredible turn out to be true.”

For a decade, Byrne, who is a prominent figure in libertarian circles, was the chair of an educational foundation launched by the free-market economists Milton and Rose Friedman. On his second day at FreedomFest, after he spoke on a panel, Maria Butina approached him again. This time, she said that she was a special assistant to the deputy governor of Russia’s central bank, Alexander Torshin. According to Byrne, she told him, “We know

about you, we know about your relationship with Milton Friedman, we watch your videos on YouTube about liberalism.” She asked if she could meet with him privately, and Byrne invited her to have lunch in his suite.

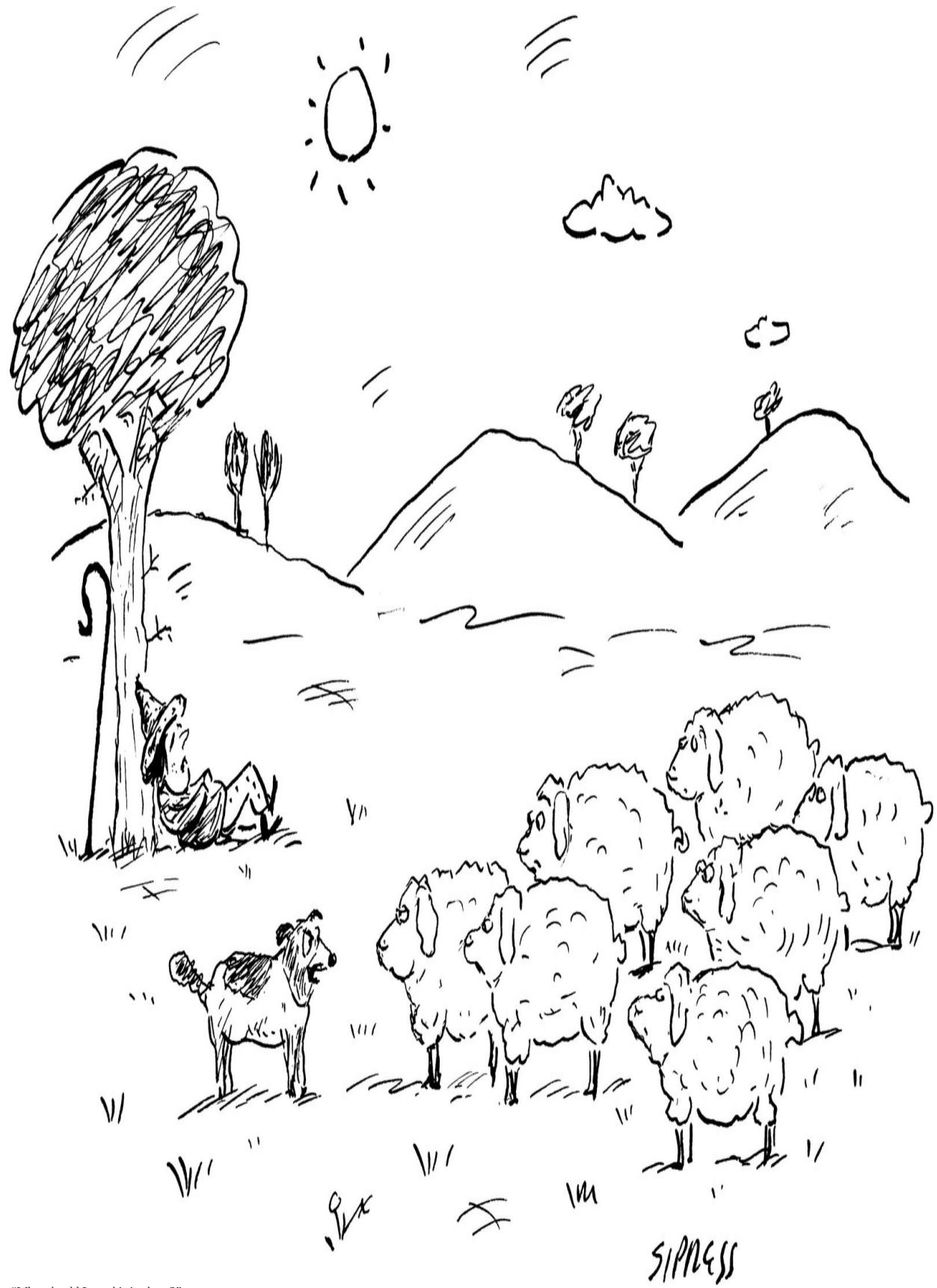
Byrne told me that he immediately wondered if Butina was a “red sparrow”—a reference to the 2013 [novel](#) that was turned into a film starring Jennifer Lawrence, in which a former ballerina becomes a spy for the Russian government, seducing and killing her targets. Before their lunch, Byrne said, he crafted sharp weapons from two coat hangers, which he stashed under the bed and under the sofa, and made a mental note to keep a close watch over his food and drink.

He was surprised to discover that Butina was an intellectual. They spent an hour and a half talking about Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, John Locke, and the Austrian school of economics. Butina said that she had been born in Siberia and placed in an élite educational program. She claimed to be close to several oligarchs, a few of whom were powerful politicians who believed that she could become President someday. She invited Byrne to speak about cryptocurrency and liberalism at an event in Russia, and, before she left, she proposed that they stay in touch as he planned his visit.

Byrne said that he knew “the number you were supposed to call if you had something strange happen to you, like a good-looking Russian gal comes up to you and says, ‘We want you to come to Russia.’” He claims that he reported the interaction, assuming that it would reach the F.B.I., which would likely instruct him to stay away from Butina. Instead, he said, federal agents came to see him, and after some discussion they gave him permission to meet with her again.

Byrne is a bachelor who likes to say that his “Acts I and II” of a relationship are “dynamite,” but that he has “no Act III.” What followed was an on-and-off romantic affair that lasted for a year and a half. During this time, Byrne claims, he was informing on Butina to the F.B.I. (The F.B.I., in accordance with policy, will not confirm any meetings or relationship with Byrne.) Byrne described the twists and turns of his exchanges with Butina and with his F.B.I. handlers in a widely circulated series of posts, written in his digressive, heavily footnoted style, that he published on Deep Capture in the summer of 2019. They lay out a complex narrative reminiscent of the plot of

a [John Le Carré](#) novel. Byrne explains that, in time, he came to distrust the federal agents he was working with, believing that they were manipulating him and setting up Butina. In July, 2018, Butina was arrested and charged by the Department of Justice with acting as an unregistered foreign agent for the Russian government. She was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. By then, Byrne's suspicions about the F.B.I. had crystallized into a belief that he had been part of a plot by high-ranking members of the Obama Administration to commit political espionage, in an attempt to control the next President.



"What should I say this is about?"

SIMPLICITY

Butina's arrest came at a time when the country was fixated on stories of Russian interference in the 2016 election. That month, the special counsel [Robert Mueller](#) indicted a dozen Russian intelligence officials. Butina, a beguiling and ambitious young woman who courted powerful men and fetishized guns, captured the public imagination. New details continued to emerge: Days after the election, she had held a costume birthday party at which she was dressed as Empress Alexandra and reportedly boasted about being involved in the Trump campaign's communications with Russia. She had enjoyed a Thanksgiving dinner with Representative Mark Sanford, Republican of South Carolina. She'd attended a Styx concert with J. D. Gordon, a Trump campaign aide, and had befriended the anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. Then, in July, an article appeared detailing her affair with Byrne.

In August, Byrne suddenly resigned from Overstock, the company that had been at the center of his life for two decades. Hours after his resignation, he appeared on the Fox Business Network wearing a red "Make America Grateful Again" baseball cap. When the host, David Asman, asked him why he had resigned, Byrne smiled, saying that he had left Overstock in a "perfect place." But, he said, "I've been warned that, if I come forward to America, the apparatus of Washington is going to grind me into dust." He made a pummelling gesture with his hands. "I have to get that away from the company." He claimed that he had been unwittingly drawn into a scheme of high-level corruption—he referred to "fishy" orders from "honorable federal agents"—that was part of a plot perpetrated by the deep state against Trump and other political leaders. He jumped from subject to subject, twice almost breaking into tears. To viewers, it looked like a moment of psychological unravelling. Nearly all his claims were exaggerated, false, or unproven. "The bottom line is: it's a big coverup," Byrne said, sounding anguished. "There was political espionage conducted against [Hillary Clinton](#)—Hillary Clinton, Marco Rubio, Cruz, and Donald Trump." He continued, "This isn't a theory of mine—this isn't a political position. I was in the room when it happened. I was part of it."

In the past five years, conspiracy theories that might once have seemed fringe have come to be embraced by millions of Americans. One of the most

prominent, [QAnon](#), holds that leading Democrats engage in Satan worship and in child-trafficking rings. Another suggests that Supreme Court Justice [Anthony Kennedy](#) was coerced into stepping down, in 2018, to protect his son, formerly a Deutsche Bank employee, from being implicated in the ongoing Russia investigation. Byrne's beliefs about a deep-state plot rivalled these in baroque complexity and seemed equally fantastical. Marc Cohodes, the Overstock investor, said that Byrne looked "like a nut." But other people close to Byrne suggested that his ideas, like many conspiracy theories, might contain seeds of truth. Jonathan Johnson, who replaced Byrne as the C.E.O. of Overstock, recalled the mid-two-thousands, when Byrne was pilloried during his crusade against Wall Street. "From 2005 to 2008, he was made to look crazy, and in 2008 he was vindicated," Johnson told me. "I don't know all the facts on this, as I did with the Wall Street stuff. But I do know Patrick, and it won't surprise me at all if he is vindicated again."

Last month, Butina published a memoir in Russia, "Prison Diary," about her time in D.C. and her experience in the American penal system. Her description of the romance with Byrne is broadly consistent with his, although he suggests that she was better connected politically than she claims to have been. Robert Driscoll, Butina's attorney, told me, "Although Patrick's story seems far-fetched, the parts of it that I could verify with Maria I was pretty much able to verify. It makes me not dismiss the rest of what he says out of hand, even though some of it's pretty wild."

Byrne has insisted that he is not a Trump supporter, but his Deep Capture posts feature a common right-wing theory that has been promoted on social media, on Fox News, and by President Trump: that coöperation between the Trump campaign and Russia, which sparked an F.B.I. investigation, was a hoax perpetrated by Democrats, or, as Trump has put it, a "collusion delusion." Shortly after Trump was elected, he began warning his followers that longtime employees of the federal government would try to sabotage his agenda. In May, 2019, Attorney General [William Barr](#) appointed John Durham, the United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, to look into the origins of the F.B.I.'s Russia investigation, and into what Barr has described as political spying against Trump.

In late January, I met Byrne at his suite in the Gramercy Park Hotel, in Manhattan, where he was staying. He had just returned from Southeast Asia,

where he had devoted himself to scuba diving and writing the Deep Capture posts about Butina. He is broad-shouldered, with dirty-blond hair and a weathered, square-jawed face. He seemed at once energized and exhausted, restlessly opening snacks from the minibar and searching for a pencil and a pad of paper. “When I’m talking to people, I often take notes or sketch things out,” he said, rubbing his forehead. He mentioned Barr, whom he considered a hero, and said that Durham’s investigation would reveal the extent of the conspiracy in which he was an “unknowing pawn,” and would result in “a stack of indictments.” He hinted at revelations that, he said, he was not yet at liberty to share. “At the very latest, after the coming election, I will reveal something, no matter who wins,” he told me. “There are basically two different realities emerging. And, unfortunately, the truth is not really either of them.”

At the time, few Americans were talking about [COVID-19](#), which had sickened nearly three thousand people in mainland China, according to official reports, leading to a national lockdown. But Byrne had cancelled trips to Florida and Singapore because of it. He was intrigued by the theory, which has since been widely discredited, that the virus had been created in a “giant Chinese bio-weapon lab.” If the virus became a pandemic, he said, the best way to handle it would be for the government to shut down all movement. “Everyone’s got to have the ability to just stay in their homes for two weeks,” he told me. “So you want to have thirty days of food in your home.” He urged me to go to Overstock’s survival section and buy a backpack of food that could feed a family of four for thirty days, for around two hundred and forty dollars.

Byrne has been a [survivalist](#) since before the financial crisis. In the early two-thousands, sensing an imminent collapse and fearful of a breakdown of civil society, he bought a handgun and sought a disaster-proof retreat. “I wanted a place to go when zombies walk the earth,” he said. He looked at six or seven properties before buying a ranch with more than a hundred acres, in the middle of national parkland in the Rockies. The ranch, which Byrne calls his “batcave,” is a five-hour drive from the nearest airport and is equipped to sustain sixty people for two years, with a stockpile of weaponry and a sealed mine shaft where agricultural supplies and water are stored. He seemed galvanized by the idea that the day he had spent so long preparing for might finally have arrived. “This is why these shows like ‘The Walking

Dead' are so interesting," he said. "The real drama is about human society, and how fragile human society seems to be—these things we take for granted, and, if they fail, how quickly they unspool."

Byrne, who was born in 1962, in Indiana, credits his father for his preoccupation with the possibility of societal collapse. John Byrne wrote his senior thesis, at Rutgers, on the fragility of the Social Security system, and, at the dinner table, he shared his economic thinking with Patrick, his older brothers, Mark and John, and their mother, Dorothy. "I grew up with this idea of actuarial soundness," Byrne said. "The United States government, from the nineteen-thirties on, became a big insurance company, and it has not been running on an actuarially sound basis."

In 1976, John Byrne was hired to run Geico, the automobile-insurance company based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, which was going bankrupt. A few months later, he was invited to meet with Warren Buffett, who was buying a significant percentage of Geico's stock, betting that it would recover. After the meeting, John told Dorothy and the children that he was cancelling the order they had just placed for a new Chevy Vista, and investing the seven-thousand-dollar deposit in stock in Buffett's company Berkshire Hathaway. According to Byrne, in the next decade John Byrne built Geico into a household name. In 1995, Berkshire Hathaway became Geico's sole owner. (Buffett did not respond to questions, but he said in a statement that he had known Patrick Byrne and his family for more than forty years, and called Byrne "very intelligent and patriotic." He added that, when Byrne recently visited him in Omaha, "though I knew nothing about the subject he was describing, I told him to follow his conscience.")

Byrne earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy and Asian studies at Dartmouth. He spent a year studying in Beijing, where he contracted hepatitis C while being treated for a head injury. David Luban, who supervised one of Byrne's undergraduate theses, on [Karl Marx](#), recalled that, on his return to Dartmouth, Byrne was very taken with the writing of [Noam Chomsky](#), and in particular with the idea that U.S. foreign policy had been co-opted to serve corporate interests. "He's had this very conspiratorial mind-set for almost as long as I've known him," Luban said.

In 1985, Byrne was given a diagnosis of testicular cancer. The disease had spread throughout his body, and he underwent three open-chest surgeries in nine days. He was later invited to participate in the trial of an early-stage experimental drug. Byrne claims that, of the six participants, he was the sole survivor. Delivering a speech at a fund-raiser, in 2000, he said that he had been inspired in his recovery by a high-school wrestling coach: “If you ever go through something like this, what you do, if you don’t feel tough enough, is you think of the toughest, baddest, meanest cat you know, and you just pretend you’re him.” Byrne’s cancer has returned intermittently throughout his life. He told me that he had also been given diagnoses of Asperger’s syndrome, and, perhaps as a result of his health crises, of post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of his friends mentioned his medical history as a cause for some of his more mercurial behavior. “It changes the way you look at things,” Cohodes said. “You don’t have time. You view the world as a very short runway, not a long runway.”

Byrne studied at Cambridge as a Marshall Scholar, then, at Stanford, wrote his philosophy thesis on the intellectual origins of the U.S. Constitution. “He was already staking out some version of libertarianism,” Luban said, adding that the thesis was five hundred and eighty pages long. “Patrick was trying to pull everything in there.”

Buffett was a mentor to Byrne, and in 1998 he asked Byrne to run one of his companies, the Cincinnati-based uniform manufacturer Fechheimer Brothers. The following year, Byrne invested four million dollars in Discounts Direct, a struggling company based in Salt Lake City that sold furniture, electronics, and other inventory that distributors wanted to get rid of. Byrne renamed the company Overstock and resolved to price products as cheaply as possible, and to keep costs low. In 2001, he introduced a sub-brand called Worldstock, which sold products created by artisans in developing countries.

Byrne had an idiosyncratic style. His investor letters featured boxing analogies and quotes from the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu. He was regarded by the media and by investors as, alternately, a maverick business visionary and a narcissistic leader whose family wealth insulated him from the consequences of his actions. As rival online retailers, including [Amazon](#) and Wayfair, successfully raised capital, he struggled to get outside funding

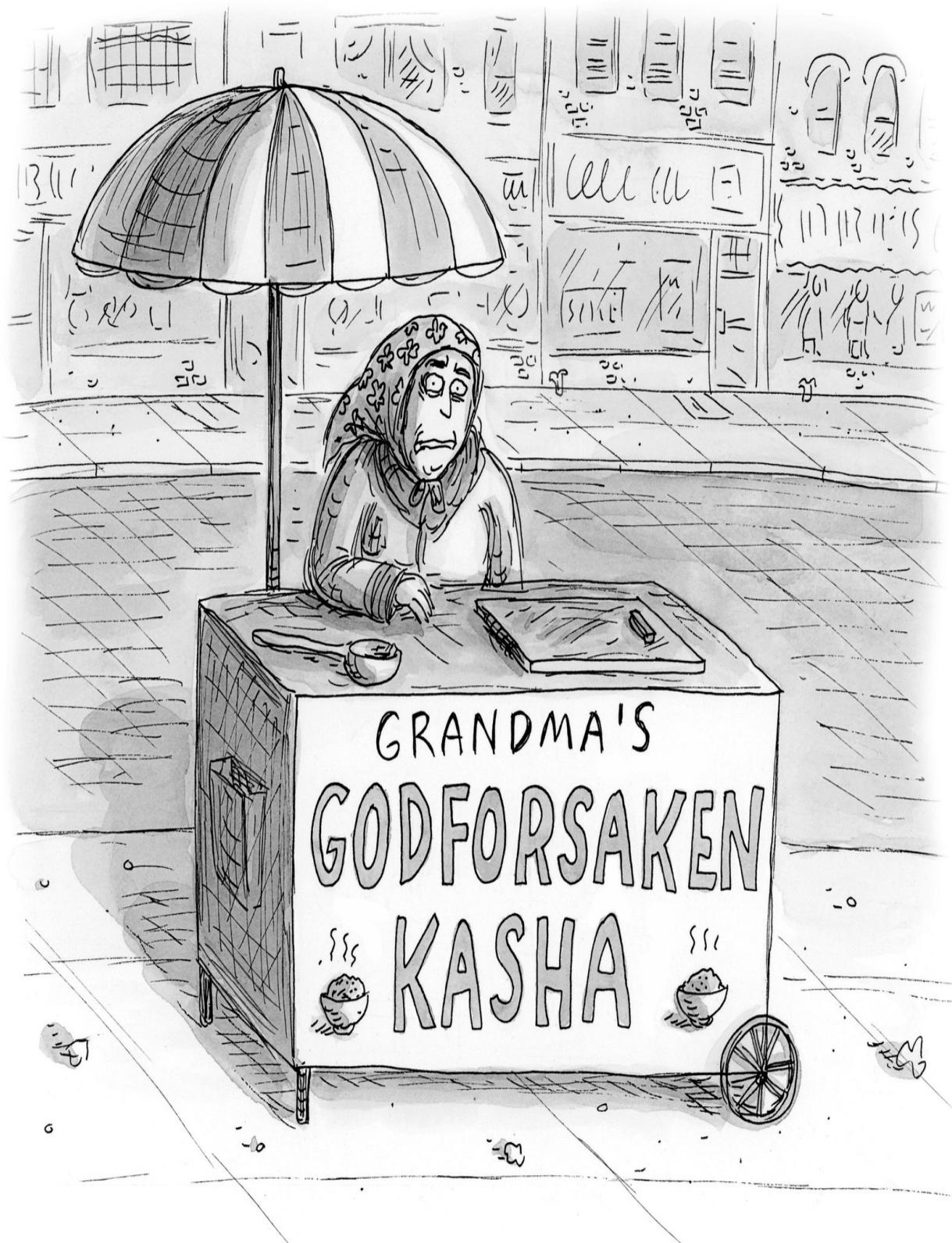
for Overstock. Byrne has often said that he sought backing from dozens of venture capitalists—the number has ranged, in his telling, from fifty-five to eighty-five—all of whom turned him down or offered terms that he found unacceptable. Nevertheless, in 2002, Overstock showed its first quarterly profit. That year, Byrne sought to raise capital by selling Overstock shares to the public without the help of investment banks, through a so-called Dutch auction. (Two years later, when Google went public, it used a version of a Dutch auction.) For employing this strategy, Byrne said, “I was told, ‘You’ll be a pariah on Wall Street for life.’ ”

Byrne was more focussed on expanding his company than on profits, and he launched several new businesses under the Overstock umbrella—including one that sold used cars—which he later abandoned. The early two-thousands were an active period for short sellers—traders who specialize in finding troubled companies and betting that their stock will go down. Short sellers often portray themselves as doing a public service by identifying companies that are committing accounting fraud or selling faulty products, but they have also been accused of manipulating companies’ stock, sometimes by driving negative press attention. In 2004, Cohodes, a partner at a hedge fund called Rocker Partners, and David Rocker, the fund’s founder, shorted Overstock after concluding that Byrne was making untenable promises about its financial performance. Soon afterward, financial journalists began to publish articles about Rocker’s allegations. Other funds also established short positions in Overstock. Byrne retaliated, accusing the financial journalists of being “condoms” used by the hedge funds. This inevitably led to further negative press. In 2006, the S.E.C. began to investigate Overstock for misstating its earnings. Byrne claimed that this, too, was the result of lobbying by short sellers.

Many people blamed Byrne’s obsessive and vindictive behavior for the fluctuations in his company’s stock price, but Byrne believed that the company was a victim of “naked short selling”—a largely illegal form of stock manipulation, not widely discussed at the time, in which a trader, selling short stock that he or she hasn’t actually borrowed, can potentially put overwhelming downward pressure on a company. The selling of such phantom shares was possible because of a three-day lag that was built into the process of settling trades. This weakness, Byrne believed, had the

potential to destabilize the stock market, likely with disastrous consequences.

Byrne became increasingly distracted from managing the company, spending most of his time gathering evidence and waging a publicity war against his adversaries. In August, 2005, he filed a lawsuit against Rocker Partners, alleging that it had defamed Overstock and engaged in naked shorting. On a conference call, Byrne told analysts and investors that he was naming the scheme at the heart of his lawsuit the Miscreants' Ball—after the Predator's Ball, a nickname for the annual gathering held in the eighties at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, and hosted by the financier Michael Milken, who in 1990 pleaded guilty to conspiracy and securities-fraud charges. (Milken was pardoned by Trump earlier this year.) Byrne claimed on the call that he had been under surveillance and that his communications had been intercepted. In addition to Rocker Partners, he identified as possible conspirators the hedge-fund investor David Einhorn and a handful of business reporters at the *Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, and TheStreet.com. He also mentioned the New York attorney general at the time, Eliot Spitzer, referring to donations that he said Spitzer had received from hedge funds. Byrne suggested that the head of the scheme was “a master criminal from the nineteen-eighties,” whom he dubbed the Sith Lord. He believed that these entities, along with the hedge funds, planned to crush the company’s stock so that they could take control of Overstock.



R. Chast

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The press seized on the bizarre way that he had communicated his allegations. A *Post* headline read “*Overstock CEO Stuns with Wild, Wily Rant.*” John Welborn, the economics lecturer, told me that Byrne had “expected the world to go into the breach, and nobody followed him into the breach.” He said that Byrne had been left wounded. “Although I think it suited Patrick’s personality to be the lone warrior,” he added. Several months later, John Byrne resigned as chairman of the Overstock board of directors.

Judd Bagley joined Overstock in 2006. He was initially put off by Byrne’s theatrics, but after seeing the evidence that Byrne had collected, including trading records and internal e-mails, he became convinced that Byrne had uncovered serious misconduct. “The problem was, it was pretty esoteric,” Bagley said. “It was very difficult to educate journalists, because there was so much, and it was so counterintuitive.” The two men decided “to create our own thing and use social media to get around the media filter.” They also documented on Deep Capture Overstock’s battle with short sellers. Cohodes, who renamed his fund Copper River Partners after Rocker left, in 2006, told me that Byrne had employed some people who were “quite distasteful” to engage in bitter arguments that played out on blogs and on short-selling message boards. “These days, you’d call them trolls,” he said.

Byrne has claimed that his work exposing naked shorting resulted in death threats. After he went public with his allegations, he was summoned to a Thai restaurant in Great Neck, Long Island, where he and two associates met a man who warned them that Russian gangsters were planning to kill Byrne for having exposed a profitable source of income. The man told them that he had received a package containing *matryoshka*, Russian nesting dolls, with Byrne’s name on a slip of paper inside the smallest one. Around that time, Byrne said, someone threw a pair of garden shears through the window of the Manhattan restaurant that his girlfriend managed.

Byrne arranged personal security for himself and several of his friends. “Those were really strange days,” Bagley said. “I was getting constant telephone calls, and weird, cryptic messages on message boards, warning me and my family.” In response to the threats, Byrne contacted the F.B.I.’s New York securities-crime division. Byrne hasn’t specified how many meetings he had with the F.B.I. between 2005 and 2008, but he has suggested that he worked with the Bureau to help identify the players who, by threatening him,

were implicating themselves. Byrne also brought his findings about naked shorting to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which issued a letter acknowledging his research effort.

In 2007, the stock market began to collapse, the result of an extended period of reckless mortgage lending and the trading of mortgage securities. The S.E.C., in an emergency order, banned naked shorting of financial firms affected by the crisis. Byrne felt vindicated, but he barely stopped to celebrate. “Every time we felt like we had made some progress, it was never enough,” Bagley said. “It was that feeling of being on a treadmill—the solution was out there, discernible, but you were never getting closer to it.”

As the stock market crashed, Overstock and Copper River, still fierce antagonists, independently concluded that Goldman Sachs, which held Copper River’s accounts, had lent Copper River and other hedge funds shares for shorting that did not exist. This discovery led Overstock to file an even larger case, against eleven brokerage firms, including Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch. Byrne’s father later said that, after “much initial skepticism,” he had decided that Patrick had been “right all along.” In 2009, Byrne and Cohodes agreed to a settlement of their case in which Copper River paid Overstock five million dollars. In 2010, some of the big banks that Byrne had named in his second lawsuit settled their cases, too. (In 2015 and 2016, the remaining two defendants, Goldman and Merrill, settled with Overstock.)

In 2014, Byrne began developing a new division of Overstock, Medici Ventures, investing in a half-dozen blockchain-based companies in areas such as voting and land titling, and in a blockchain securities exchange called TZero. Byrne expected that most of the new businesses wouldn’t make money for years, but he saw blockchain—a decentralized digital ledger system that could facilitate instant, transparent transactions—as a way to circumvent the banks. In a vote of confidence, Senator Rand Paul, a libertarian-leaning candidate for President, who was accepting political donations in bitcoin, appointed Byrne to his campaign’s technology-advisory council.

That year, Byrne gave a speech at the Institute of World Politics. He wore a gray, Mao-style collarless suit, and spoke with clarity and wit about the

complex short-selling abuses he had helped uncover. He went on to draw a connection—it was not clear what kind—between these abuses and an international syndicate of organized crime, which he catalogued with disorienting rapidity. The list included Italian and Russian mobsters, Milken, Islamic terrorists, and various banks and government agencies. The effect of the talk, a video of which is on YouTube, is to induce a sense that powerful figures, and the media, have been hiding vital information from the public.

Byrne also cited a passage from the controversial book “[Who Killed Daniel Pearl?](#),” by the celebrity French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, a semi-fictional work of investigative journalism in which Lévy hypothesized that Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was killed by Al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan in 2002, had been about to uncover connections between Sunni financiers, Pakistan’s security services, and Al Qaeda. “He had an experience quite like mine,” Byrne said, citing a passage in which Lévy’s Pearl observes that, “at the bottom of each new depth, there is always a new trap door opening beneath our feet.” Cohodes told me that he had never known what to make of Byrne’s extreme ideas about the relationship between high finance and international criminal syndicates: “Is there something to what he says? Absolutely. But it’s so all over the place you don’t know exactly what it is.”

This past February, I visited Byrne at his ski chalet in the mountains outside Salt Lake City. Byrne’s three cats, Che Guevara, Master Po, and One-Eyed Jack, were sprawled on sheepskin rugs, and Andy Warhol portraits of Mao and Franz Kafka adorned a wall. Byrne was shuffling around in his slippers, drinking kombucha and fretting about the coronavirus, which had surfaced in Seattle and New York City. He introduced me to a friend who was staying with him for a few days. “He wants to listen in to make sure I don’t venture too far into the deep state,” Byrne said. The friend said hello and then left.

The Deep Capture posts published between August and October, 2019, formed what Byrne came to think of as “the Butina trilogy.” In the first post, “Maria Butina and I, Part I: Meeting Maria,” Byrne describes how, two months after FreedomFest, and after exchanging many messages and apparently with the blessing of the F.B.I., he booked a two-bedroom suite for him and Butina at the Bowery Hotel. Butina told him that she had a boyfriend in Washington, but, Byrne told me, “it didn’t sound too serious—

and one doesn't ask, I suppose." In case he had misunderstood Butina's intentions, Byrne arranged to check in after her. When he arrived, he said, "it took about three seconds to understand that all this stuff was real and she had developed a crush on me." Butina was an amateur powerlifter, and Byrne joked that he was helpless in the face of her physical advances. That weekend, he took her to the musical "Hamilton," out for dim sum in Chinatown, and, he said, they ordered "a lot of room service."

In "Prison Diary," Butina excitedly describes her romance with Byrne. He was a Cambridge-educated "American oligarch" with "unruly golden hair" and "mathematical superpowers," who, on a helicopter tour to see the Statue of Liberty, wore "a black silk Chinese suit with a curved dragon on his back." She was travelling frequently to Washington, D.C., attending [N.R.A.](#) events and trying to get to know conservative politicians and policymakers. In December, she hosted a group of N.R.A. officials in Moscow. A few months later, she enrolled in a master's program in international relations at American University. The boyfriend she mentioned was Paul Erickson, a fifty-four-year-old political operative who was paying many of her living expenses and was close to David Keene, the former head of the N.R.A. (Erickson pleaded guilty in 2019 to money-laundering and wire-fraud charges, and in July was sentenced to seven years in federal prison.)

Byrne recalled, of Butina, "She sounded like a young gal on the rise. I told her, 'Do that all you want. If you feel like you want a break from your big-shot Republicans, let me know.' " In the months that followed, they met in Salt Lake City, D.C., and New York. According to Byrne, "There was a deep fondness that developed" between them. He compared the dreamlike rhythm of their assignations to the film "Lost in Translation."

In time, Byrne writes on Deep Capture, "Maria's pillow talk became less about John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and more about the U.S. political circles in which she was coming to swank around." She said that her patron, Alexander Torshin, of Russia's central bank, had encouraged her to focus her networking efforts "on Hillary, Rubio, Cruz, and Trump." (Butina denies this, claiming that Byrne offered to introduce her to someone on the Clinton campaign.) Byrne says that he became increasingly suspicious, and continued to inform on Butina to the F.B.I. He was confused to find that his handlers seemed unfazed by his reports. Their attitude appeared to be: "Why

are you so concerned about this Russian graduate student, anyway?" By January, he was alarmed. "They are being so indolent about reacting to Maria, it is almost like they are letting this develop on purpose," he writes. In March, Butina told him that she was trying to meet Trump's son Donald, Jr., at an N.R.A. conference. "Obviously, that was something that should not happen," Byrne writes. "So I let the Men In Black know about it and proposed that I whisk Maria off to the Bahamas for that weekend." Byrne claims that, to his surprise, his F.B.I. handlers told him that he should let the meeting take place. People familiar with counterintelligence investigations have pointed out that F.B.I. agents often watch a subject for months, even years, before making an arrest. Driscoll, Butina's lawyer, told me he believed that Butina had been treated too harshly but was not convinced that the F.B.I.'s behavior, as Byrne describes it, was so unusual. Still, Byrne wondered, "if some foreign agent is here schmoozing around, and it is the act of the schmoozing around that creates the compromises and troubles . . . why let her do it?"

That spring, Butina invited Byrne to a conference in St. Petersburg. According to Byrne, she told him that he would have sixty minutes alone with President Vladimir Putin, with her as the translator. "Of course, it would have been an honor," Byrne writes, with naïve swagger. "My sense is also that he is quite intellectual: if so, it would also have been a chance to ask him questions and perhaps engage in some Milton-esque mind-openers with him (and he with me)." But, when Byrne asked the F.B.I. for permission to attend the conference, he says, they gave him a confusing answer, at once continuing to claim that Butina was "just a grad student" and suggesting that the Putin meeting was too dangerous. Finally, they asked him to break off the relationship with Butina. "So I did," he writes. "Roughly, by text. Curtly. Simply told her I was tired of being 'the other guy.' What was she going to say to that? It was unlike me not to be kinder." (Butina says that she told Byrne only that Putin might be at the conference. She also says Byrne told her that he had met another woman, whom he wanted to marry.)

Byrne mentions in a post that, around this time, he was having serious health problems. Friends say that they were deeply worried. In March, he took a leave of absence from Overstock. He was undergoing an experimental treatment for complications related to hepatitis C which "really affected him," Bagley told me. Some days, Bagley went on, "he was perfect, classic,

brilliant Patrick.” On other days, “he was absolutely just debilitated from the effects of the medicine.” Luban observed another change. Byrne’s reading had deteriorated from “Cato and libertarian Web sites” to “a steady diet of Ben Shapiro YouTubes.” (Shapiro is a pro-Trump conservative commentator.) “I think he’s expanded his repertoire for the worse—things I think of as fringe tweets,” Luban said. According to Luban and others, Byrne became disillusioned with the American electoral process, in particular the way it disadvantages third-party candidates. He was concerned about election fraud. These two fixations played a part in “Rigged 2016,” a documentary film that he financed. He also hinted that political operatives had approached him about running for President.

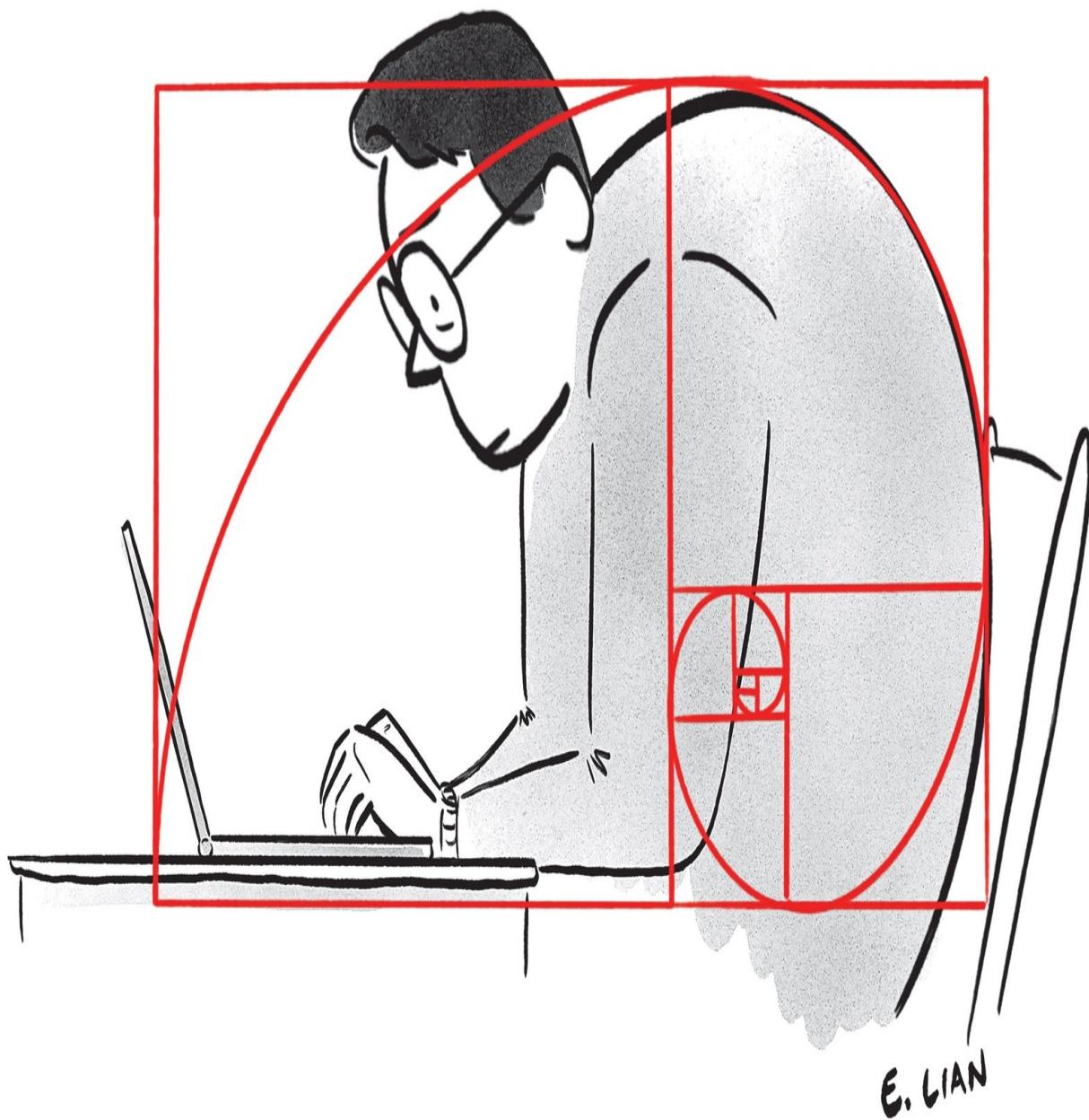
Byrne claims that, in July, 2016, his F.B.I. handlers told him that Russia was trying to interfere in the Presidential election, and asked him to resume his relations with Butina as part of their investigation. “The entire chain of command was being skipped,” Byrne writes, adding that the request had come via shady figures at the upper levels of the federal government, whom he called “X, Y, and Z.” Byrne did as instructed, joking that it “wasn’t exactly hardship duty.” In October, he invited Butina to attend the opening of the new Overstock headquarters, a circular building designed to resemble both the Roman Colosseum and a peace sign. Seth Moore, a former Overstock executive, recalled that at the party Byrne told him that Butina was under surveillance, and asked him to keep an eye on her.

As Byrne describes it, he wanted his F.B.I. handlers to believe that he and Butina were intimate, but, out of respect to Butina, he had decided not to pursue a physical relationship while he continued to inform on her. In his posts, Byrne often seems more concerned with the behavior of the F.B.I. than with Butina. In her memoir, she describes the Overstock party in awed terms, writing that, after the event, Byrne drove her through the serpentine roads to his house in the Rockies in a Tesla whose doors “futuristically opened up.” She was moved, she said, by Byrne’s struggles with physical illness and with the weight of his own genius. She writes, “I saw what it cost him every day to communicate with people whom he, intellectually superior as he was to all of his acquaintances and friends put together, did not understand, and how it burdened him with the need to sink to their level in order to ruminate on obvious truths that he had long understood.”

Byrne began to have “a pang of conscience” after Butina hinted that she was willing to leave Erickson for him. Not long afterward, he writes, his F.B.I. handlers summoned him to D.C. They were angered by the publication of an article in the Daily Beast about Butina, and they pointedly asked him whether he had been a source. Their anger again surprised Byrne, who claims to have had nothing to do with the story. This further convinced him that he was “being manipulated in a game unrelated to anything to do with law enforcement or national security.” Soon afterward, the F.B.I. asked him to end the relationship a second time. Byrne writes that he didn’t see Butina again until May or June of 2018, after she told him that she had been questioned by the Senate Intelligence Committee and that her apartment had been searched by the F.B.I.

According to the government’s version of events, the F.B.I. opened Crossfire Hurricane, its investigation into possible ties between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, on July 31, 2016, after it found out that the Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos had told an Australian diplomat that he’d heard that Russians had compromising information about Hillary Clinton. Byrne claims that it all really started a year earlier, when the F.B.I. became aware of his relationship with Butina. He speculates that corrupt officials were using him and Butina to create a “Can-O-Scandal that they were going to whip out some day in the future, shake up, and spray all over anyone they wanted to.” Butina, too, claims that Byrne was “patient zero” in a case that turned her into a scapegoat for American fears about Russia.

THE GOLDEN RATIO



In July, six armed F.B.I. agents burst into Erickson’s apartment, in Washington, dragged Butina outside, put her in handcuffs, and drove her away. Moore told me that, during Butina’s trial, Byrne was “distraught.” When she was moved into solitary confinement at a detention center in Virginia, in August, Byrne was “just livid.” Moore went on, “He said, ‘Everything they accused her of, they knew about before, and let her go forward with it. How can they now claim she had some devastating effect on national security?’ ” Butina was unaware that Byrne had betrayed her to the F.B.I.; in her memoir, she writes an apparently imagined scene in which Byrne, having learned of her sentence, “clutched his head with his hands, whispering, ‘Lord, what have I done.’ ”

Around that time, Byrne watched television clips of the F.B.I. agent Peter Strzok testifying about the Russia investigation before the House Judiciary Committee. Strzok, who is vilified in far-right circles, led the F.B.I.’s Russia investigation until he was dismissed in August, 2018, months after it emerged that he had described Trump as a “douche” and a “fucking idiot” in text messages to a colleague with whom he was having an affair. In another of Strzok’s messages, sent on August 15, 2016, he had referred to an “insurance policy.” Trump and his supporters seized on this as evidence of a plot within the Bureau to gather damaging material about Trump, in order to insure that he wouldn’t win. Watching Strzok on television, Byrne became convinced that he must have been one of the federal agents responsible for the “fishy” orders that Byrne had received. According to Butina, Byrne later wrote her a letter saying that he had done something terrible and deeply regretted it. The full details, he wrote, would soon be revealed.

Since leaving the F.B.I., Strzok has published a book, “[Compromised: Counterintelligence and the Threat of Donald J. Trump](#),” about what he sees as Putin’s dangerous influence over the current President. He has repeatedly denied that the “insurance policy” in his message referred to a plot against Trump, explaining that it instead had to do with how aggressively the investigation ought to be pursued in light of the risk to a particular source. In early November, he told me that he had never met Byrne, and had “no awareness” of him before reading about him in the news in August, 2019. When I asked about one of Byrne’s most incendiary claims—whether an F.B.I. agent might instruct someone to pursue a romantic relationship with a suspect in order to gather intelligence—Strzok said that the Bureau had

thirteen thousand agents, and that, though he couldn't dismiss Byrne's story out of hand, it sounded "extraordinarily fantastical." He went on, "This isn't some James Bond film—we don't tell people, 'Go bed this vixen for your country.' "

This year, the study of conspiracy theories has become more urgent, as the pandemic has heightened the conditions—panic and isolation—that breed conspiracy thinking. Scientists fear that disinformation about *COVID-19* will lead people to distrust the measures that will contain it, including a vaccine. Emory University recently released the results of the most comprehensive analysis to date of people who are prone to conspiracy beliefs. According to the study, the personality profiles most often associated with such beliefs are entitlement, self-centered impulsivity, a sense of being wronged, and elevated levels of depressive moods and anxiousness. All these applied to Byrne, whose case, I sensed, had been exacerbated by a bizarre chain of events and by the vast amount of unverified information on the Internet.

As a wealthy and well-connected man, Byrne also had a rare opportunity to place himself among other powerful people in a story of national import that, as he has often put it, was tearing the U.S. apart. In early 2019, as different branches of the government were warring over the Russia investigation, he secured a meeting with John Ratcliffe, a conservative representative from Texas who served on the House Intelligence Committee and has since become Trump's latest director of National Intelligence, to share his concerns about the deep state. In April, after an acquaintance introduced him to someone in Barr's office, he met with attorneys from the Justice Department. (Ratcliffe did not respond to a query about Byrne, and the Justice Department declined to comment on whether a meeting with him ever took place.) Byrne says that he came away from these meetings hopeful that his allegations would be seriously investigated.

Mueller's team briefly questioned Butina, in January, 2019, but she did not feature in Mueller's report, which Byrne considered strange. Byrne, who often seemed to interpret moments when he was not included as evidence of corruption, also thought it was "disturbing" that Mueller had not sought to interview him. He seemed even more upset about being left out of a "60 Minutes" broadcast about the Butina case that aired on November 3, 2019. "I

know more about that issue than any civilian walking the street,” he told me. “I was never contacted, and I find that odd.”

He was still hoping that Barr and Durham would issue the indictments, and continued to hint that he had access to information that had not yet been made official. “The right subpoenas are being made for the truth to be known,” he told me. When I asked whether he had any regrets about coming forward on TV, leaving himself open to accusations that he was crazy or a conspiracy theorist, he said, “I don’t care what they put in the *New York Post* and what they say about me. I wanted to test the system.”

In the second week of March, as states began to implement lockdowns, Byrne set out for his batcave in the Rockies. He stayed there for the next three months, enjoying the hot tub and taking long hikes, and periodically sending me photos of his cat Master Po. In May, Overstock’s stock price began to rise. Cohodes, who became an unlikely investor in Overstock in 2017, after visiting Byrne in Utah and learning about Medici Ventures, explained that this was part of a nationwide surge in online shopping, and also a result of Byrne’s departure. “All the engines that were misfiring due to misfocus of management—all of them are firing,” he said.

Several times over the summer, Byrne predicted that Barr would soon be making arrests, but they never took place. The Durham report did not appear, either, although a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report on Russian election interference was released in August. It mentioned Byrne several times, most significantly as someone Butina seemed to be using to connect with Rand Paul. The report was unequivocal: the Russian government had engaged in “an aggressive, multi-faceted effort to influence, or attempt to influence” the outcome of the election, and it had done so with the aim of aiding Trump’s campaign. The conclusion of the committee, which is chaired by Rubio, effectively contradicted Trump’s assertion that Russian interference in the 2016 election was a hoax. Even then, Byrne felt certain that by Labor Day Durham would be releasing explosive revelations and Barr would be making arrests. When that deadline passed, he wrote to me, “Heard the Durham report is delayed because they found new leads. You hear anything?”

On October 6th, Byrne published a fifteen-thousand-word post, which he said revealed the full extent of the conspiracy in which he had been unwittingly involved. In it, he claims, without offering any proof, that the F.B.I. had asked him to play a pivotal role in a sting operation by arranging for Hillary Clinton to meet with a foreign official before the 2016 election, so that the official could give her a bribe. Byrne understood this to mean that Obama Administration officials were going to use the compromising information to control Clinton while she was in office. In the post, which is full of non sequiturs, Byrne also alleges that he led federal agents to believe that he had drugged and raped Butina and was going to kill her—supposedly as a way of “catching” the agents as they encouraged him to commit a heinous crime.

Moore, who left Overstock in July, was reluctant to cast doubt on his former employer. Perhaps the F.B.I. had asked Byrne to set up a donor meeting, he suggested, as part of an investigation: “The challenge is, Patrick gives the basic facts of the story, but he also gives a lot of his inferences and interpretations.” Others felt that Byrne had finally gone too far. Bagley noted that Byrne, unlike in his crusade against naked shorting, had produced little evidence for his campaign against the deep state. “I sent him a message saying, ‘Hey, man, don’t you have any screenshots, any phone numbers?’ ” Bagley said. “And he hasn’t responded.”

Just after the post’s publication, Byrne told me that he had been in touch with Fox, CNN, and other outlets, offering to discuss his revelations, and that they had turned him down. In a video released on October 29th, he was interviewed by Matt Kibbe, the libertarian host of the YouTube show and podcast “Kibbe on Liberty.” Byrne told Kibbe, who sports a gray handlebar mustache and a leather jacket, that he had become so concerned for his security that he’d put all of his money into gold and cryptocurrencies.

A week later, after Trump lost the Presidential election, Byrne started retweeting posts criticizing [Antifa](#) and alleging voter fraud. He published a post outlining incoherent supposed evidence of widespread election fraud. (Last week, Barr surprised Trump supporters by declaring that the Justice Department had found no evidence of the kind of widespread fraud that would have altered the outcome of the election.) In mid-November, Byrne told me that he was concerned for his safety and wouldn’t reveal where he

was. He said that he had been financing a group of election-security experts and ethical hackers since the summer, and had shared his research with members of Trump's legal team. Byrne started appearing on podcasts and YouTube channels devoted to pro-Trump conspiracy theories. Luban and other friends were horrified. Overstock management sent me a statement stressing that Byrne had not been affiliated with the company for more than a year. On November 17th, on the right-wing television channel [Newsmax](#), whose viewership has surged since the election, Byrne spoke about all the ways in which computerized voting systems in America can be manipulated. He mentioned several times that he was a scholar and the founder of a tech company. "It's far easier to have hacked this than a PayPal or your Venmo account," he said. "This election was hacked. The outcome was rigged and should be completely ignored." ♦

An earlier version of this piece misstated one of the crimes to which Michael Milken pleaded guilty, and the subtitle has been updated to better reflect that Patrick Byrne has left Overstock.

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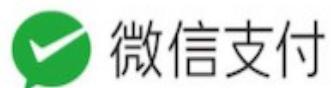
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Above & Beyond

- [A Taylor Mac Holiday Show, Tweaked for the Pandemic](#)

[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

A Taylor Mac Holiday Show, Tweaked for the Pandemic

The playwright and performance artist takes the vaudevillian romp “Holiday Sauce” online, with music, costumes by Machine Dazzle, and burlesque.

December 4, 2020



Photograph by Camila Falquez for The New Yorker

The playwright, performance artist, and sprite Taylor Mac (above) does holiday cheer with a twist of subversion. In 2017, Mac, who uses the gender-neutral pronoun “judy,” débuted “Holiday Sauce,” a vaudevillian romp emphasizing alternative family over Christmas capitalism, at Town Hall. This year, it goes virtual. On Dec. 12, Mac performs **“Holiday Sauce . . . Pandemic!”** (available online through Jan. 2), featuring music, burlesque, a tribute to queer elders, and designs by Mac’s frequent collaborator and fellow-maximalist Machine Dazzle.

Annals of Science

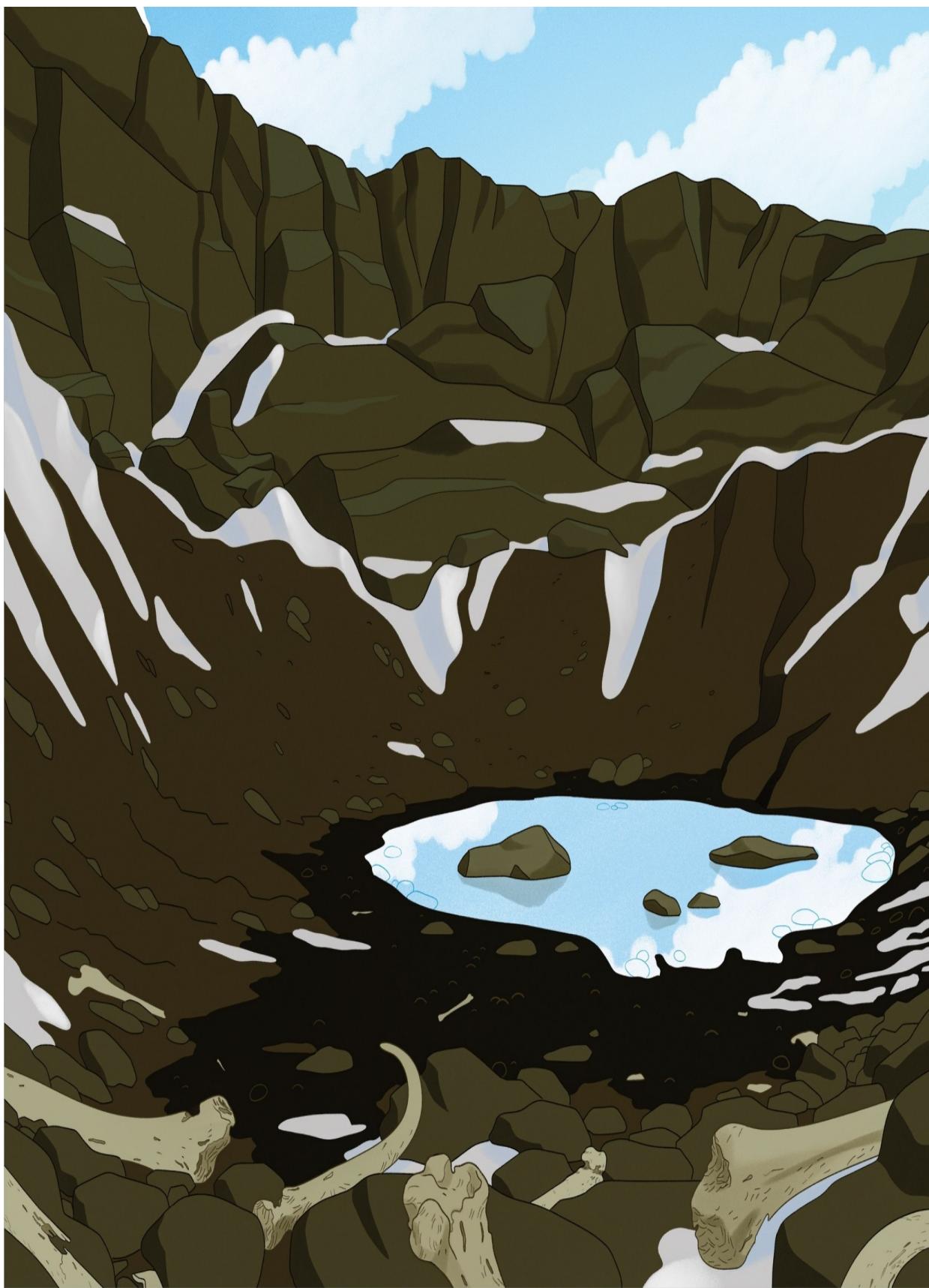
- [The Skeletons at the Lake](#)

The Skeletons at the Lake

Genetic analysis of human remains found in the Himalayas has raised baffling questions about who these people were and why they were there.

By [Douglas Preston](#)

December 7, 2020



In the winter of 1942, on the shores of a lake high in the Himalayas, a forest ranger came across hundreds of bones and skulls, some with flesh still on them. When the snow and ice melted that summer, many more were visible through the clear water, lying on the bottom. The lake, a glacial tarn called Roopkund, was more than sixteen thousand feet above sea level, an arduous five-day trek from human habitation, in a mountain cirque surrounded by snowfields and battered by storms. In the midst of the [Second World War](#), British officials in India initially worried that the dead might be the remains of Japanese soldiers attempting a secret invasion. The apparent age of the bones quickly dispelled that idea. But what had happened to all these people? Why were they in the mountains, and when and how had they died?

In 1956, the Anthropological Survey of India, in Calcutta, sponsored several expeditions to Roopkund to investigate. A snowstorm forced the first expedition to turn back, but two months later another expedition made it and returned to Calcutta with remains for study. Carbon dating, still an unreliable innovation, indicated that the bones were between five hundred and eight hundred years old.

Indian scientists were intensely interested in the Roopkund mystery. The lake, some thought, was a place where holy men committed ritual suicide. Or maybe the dead were a detachment of soldiers from a thirteenth-century army sent by the Sultan of Delhi in an ill-fated attempt to invade Tibet, or a group of Tibet-bound traders who had lost their way. Perhaps this was hallowed ground, an open-air cemetery, or a place where victims of an epidemic were dumped to prevent contagion.

People in the villages below Roopkund had their own explanation, passed down in folk songs and stories. The villages are on the route of a pilgrimage to honor Nanda Devi, a manifestation of Parvati, a supreme goddess in Hinduism. The pilgrimage winds up through the foothills of the Trisul massif, where locals believe that the goddess lives with her husband, Shiva. It may be the longest and most dangerous pilgrimage in India, and a particularly perilous section—the Jyumra Gali, or Path of Death—runs along a ridge high above Roopkund. As the villagers tell it, long ago Nanda Devi left her home to visit a distant kingdom, where she was treated discourteously by the king and queen. Nanda Devi cursed the kingdom, unleashing drought and disaster, and infesting the milk and rice with

maggots. In order to appease the goddess, the royal couple embarked on a pilgrimage. The king, who liked his entertainments, took along a bevy of dancing courtesans and musicians, in violation of the ascetic traditions of the pilgrimage. Nanda Devi was furious at the display of earthly pleasures, and she shoved the dancing girls down into the underworld. The pits into which they are said to have sunk are still visible high on a mountainside. Then, according to the legend, she sent down a blizzard of hail and a whirlwind, which swept all the pilgrims on the Path of Death into the lake. Their skeletons are a warning to those who would disrespect the goddess.

This story is retold in “[Mountain Goddess](#),” a 1991 book by the American anthropologist William Sax. Now a professor at Heidelberg University, he stumbled upon a reference to the lake and the bodies as an undergraduate, in the nineteen-seventies, and was fascinated. He and a friend travelled to the hamlet of Wan, the settlement closest to Roopkund, where a local man agreed to guide them up the pilgrim trail to the lake. The trail climbs through deep forests, emerging above the tree line, at eleven and a half thousand feet, into meadows carpeted with wildflowers. To the north is a vast wall of Himalayan peaks, some of the highest in the world. From there, the route follows steep ridgelines and leads past an ancient stone shrine, festooned with bronze bells and tridents and containing a statue of the elephant deity Ganesha. Then, at fifteen thousand feet, it goes over a pass and up a series of switchbacks through scree to Roopkund. The lake, about a hundred and thirty feet across and ten feet deep, is an emerald jewel nestled in a bowl of rock and ice. (In Hindi, *roop kund* means “beautifully shaped lake.”) Almost as soon as Sax and his companions arrived, they were engulfed by a blizzard and stumbled around the bone-strewn cirque in whiteout conditions, calling for one another and nearly adding their own bodies to the charnel ground.

Exhausted and feverish, Sax barely made it back to Wan with his companions, and spent ten days recovering in his guide’s stone hut. Yet his passion for the place was undimmed. He went on to write a doctoral thesis about the local traditions surrounding Nanda Devi. In the late eighties, he went on the pilgrimage himself, the only Westerner to have done so at that time, after which he published “[Mountain Goddess](#).” The book describes how the Himalayas, “associated for thousands of years in India’s literatures with famous pilgrimage places and powerful, ascetic renouncers,” became

the setting for followers to show devotion to the goddess by “giving suffering” to their bodies.

In 2005, Sax was featured in a National Geographic documentary about the lake. The Indian media company that made the film assembled a team of archeologists, anthropologists, geneticists, and technicians from research laboratories in India and the U.K. to collect and study the bones. In the decades since Sax first visited, the lake had become a popular destination in the trekking community and the site was being ruined. Bones had been stolen; others had been rearranged in fanciful patterns or piled in cairns. Almost none of the skeletons were intact, and it was impossible to tell which bones belonged together or where they had originally lain. Nature had added to the confusion, churning and fracturing the bones with rock slides and avalanches. But a recent landslide had exposed a cache of fresh bones and artifacts. Under a slab of rock, the team found the remains of a woman, bent double. The body was intact and still had skin and flesh. The scientists removed tissue samples for testing, shot video, and collected bones and artifacts. The team estimated that the area contained the remains of between three hundred and seven hundred people.



"O.K., now, who ordered the glass half empty, and who ordered the glass half full?"

The scientific analysis swiftly discounted most of the prevailing theories. These were not the remains of a lost army: the bones were from men, women, and children. Aside from a single iron spearhead, no weapons were found, and there was no trace of horses. The bones showed no evidence of battle, ritual suicide, murder, or epidemic disease. Nor was Roopkund a cemetery: most of the individuals were healthy and between eighteen and thirty-five years old. Meanwhile, the team's geographic analysis laid to rest the idea of traders lost in the mountains, establishing that no trade route between India and Tibet had ever existed in the area. Although the Tibetan border is only thirty-five miles north of Roopkund, the mountains form an impassable barrier. Besides, no trade goods or beasts of burden were found with the bodies. Artifacts retrieved included dozens of leather slippers, pieces of parasols made of bamboo and birch bark, and bangles made of seashells and glass. Devotees of Nanda Devi carry parasols and wear bangles on the pilgrimage. The dead, it appeared, were most likely pilgrims.

DNA analysis showed that all the victims appeared to have a genetic makeup typical of South Asian origin. Bone and tissue samples were sent to Oxford University for carbon dating. The new dates, far more accurate than the 1956 ones, formed a tight cluster in the ninth century. Tom Higham, who performed the analysis, concluded that the victims had perished in a single event and had “died instantaneously within hours of one another.” Meanwhile, a team of bioarcheologists and paleopathologists noted the presence of two distinct groups: there were “rugged, tall” people with long heads and also some “medium height, lightly built, round headed” people, who displayed a curious shallow groove across the vault of the skull. The scientists concluded that the dead represented two populations: a group of tall Brahmins from the plains of India and a company of shorter, local porters, whose skulls were marked by years of carrying heavy loads with a tumpline looped over their heads.

The investigation also revealed that three or possibly four skulls had compression fractures on the crown that had probably occurred at the time of death. “It is not a weapon injury,” the researchers noted, but came “from a blow from a blunt and round heavy object.” This stretch of the Himalayas is notorious for hailstorms, which destroy crops and damage property. The

team concluded that, around the year 800 A.D., a group of pilgrims were caught in a storm on the exposed ridge above Roopkund and were pummelled to death by giant hailstones. Over the years, landslides and avalanches had rolled the bodies down the steep slope into the lake and the surrounding area. Not only did the mystery of Roopkund appear to be solved; it also seemed that the local tales of Nanda Devi's wrath had originated in an actual event.

Last year, however, *Nature Communications* published the baffling results of a new study conducted by sixteen research institutions across three continents. Genetic analysis and new carbon dating revealed that a significant proportion of the Roopkund remains belonged to people from somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, most likely near Crete, and that they had perished at the lake only a couple of centuries ago.

India is an ideal country for studying human genetics, ancient and modern. There are fewer cultural barriers to handling human biological materials than in many parts of the world, and Indian scientists have eagerly pursued research into the peopling of the subcontinent. Geneticists have sampled the DNA of hundreds of living populations, making India one of the most genetically mapped countries in the world. In 2008, David Reich, a geneticist at Harvard, made the first of many trips to the country, and visited a leading life-science research institution, the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, in Hyderabad. While there, he discussed someday collaborating on a more detailed study of the Roopkund bones with the center's director, Lalji Singh, and Kumarasamy Thangaraj, a geneticist who had headed up the previous DNA analysis. By the time work began, in 2015, the team, led by the Reich lab and the laboratory in Hyderabad, also included researchers at Pennsylvania State University, the Broad Institute of M.I.T. and Harvard, the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, and the Anthropological Survey of India, where many of the Roopkund bones reside.

Not long before the [COVID-19](#) pandemic shut down the U.S., I visited Reich at Harvard Medical School. His office is a minimalist space with a whiteboard, a table, and a wall of glass looking across Avenue Louis Pasteur to the red brick façade of the Boston Latin School. Reich is a lean, fit man in his mid-forties who speaks with rapid, quiet precision. His self-deprecating

manner conceals a supremely self-confident iconoclast who is not averse to toppling received wisdom, and his work has attracted criticism from some anthropologists, archeologists, and social scientists. The Reich lab, the foremost unit in the country for research into ancient DNA, is responsible for more than half the world's published data in the field. Having so far sequenced the DNA of more than ten thousand long-dead individuals from all over the globe, the lab is almost halfway through a five-year project to create an atlas of human migration and diversity, allowing us to peer deep into our past. The work has produced startling insights into who we are as a species, where we have come from, and what we have done to one another. Hidden in the human genome is evidence of inequality, the displacement of peoples, invasion, mass rape, and large-scale killing. Under the scrutiny of science, the dead are becoming eloquent.

Last year, Reich led a team of more than a hundred researchers who published a study in *Science* that examined the genomes of some two hundred and seventy ancient skeletons from the Iberian Peninsula. It's long been known that, from around 2500 to 2000 B.C., major new artistic and cultural styles flourished in Western and Central Europe. Archeologists have tended to explain this development as the result of cultural diffusion: people adopted innovations in pottery, metalworking, and weaponry from their geographic neighbors, along with new burial customs and religious beliefs. But the DNA of Iberian skeletons dating from this period of transformation told a different story, revealing what Reich describes as the "genetic scar" of a foreign invasion.

In Iberia during this time, the local type of Y chromosome was replaced by an entirely different type. Given that the Y chromosome, found only in males, is passed down from father to son, this means that the local male line in Iberia was essentially extinguished. It is likely that the newcomers perpetrated a large-scale killing of local men, boys, and possibly male infants. Any local males remaining must have been subjugated in a way that prevented them from fathering children, or were so strongly disfavored in mate selection over time that their genetic contribution was nullified. The full genetic sequencing, however, indicated that about sixty per cent of the lineage of the local population was passed on, which shows that women were not killed but almost certainly subjected to widespread sexual coercion, and perhaps even mass rape.

We can get a sense of this reign of terror by thinking about what took place when the descendants of those ancient Iberians sailed to the New World, events for which we have ample historical records. The Spanish conquest of the Americas produced human suffering on a grotesque scale—war, mass murder, rape, slavery, genocide, starvation, and pandemic disease. Genetically, as Reich noted, the outcome was very similar: in Central and South America, large amounts of European DNA mixed into the local population, almost all of it coming from European males. The same Y-chromosome turnover is also found in Americans of African descent. On average, a Black person in America has an ancestry that is around eighty per cent African and twenty per cent European. But about eighty per cent of that European ancestry is inherited from white males—genetic testimony to the widespread rape and sexual coercion of female slaves by slaveowners.

In the Iberian study, the predominant Y chromosome seems to have originated with a group called the Yamnaya, who arose about five thousand years ago, in the steppes north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. By adopting the wheel and the horse, they became powerful and fearsome nomads, expanding westward into Europe as well as east- and southward into India. They spoke proto-Indo-European languages, from which most of the languages of Europe and many South Asian languages now spring. Archeologists have long known about the spread of the Yamnaya, but almost nothing in the archeological record showed the brutality of their takeover. “This is an example of the power of ancient DNA to reveal *cultural* events,” Reich told me.

It also shows how DNA evidence can upset established archeological theories and bring rejected ones back into contention. The idea that Indo-European languages emanated from the Yamnaya homeland was established in 1956, by the Lithuanian-American archeologist Marija Gimbutas. Her view, known as the Kurgan hypothesis—named for the distinctive burial mounds that spread west across Europe—is now the most widely accepted theory about Indo-European linguistic origins. But, where many archeologists envisaged a gradual process of cultural diffusion, Gimbutas saw “continuous waves of expansion or raids.” As her career progressed, her ideas became more controversial. In Europe previously, Gimbutas hypothesized, men and women held relatively equal places in a peaceful, female-centered, goddess-worshipping society—as evidenced by the famous

fertility figurines of the time. She believed that the nomads from the Caspian steppes imposed a male-dominated warrior culture of violence, sexual inequality, and social stratification, in which women were subservient to men and a small number of élite males accumulated most of the wealth and power.

The DNA from the Iberian skeletons can't tell us what kind of culture the Yamnaya replaced, but it does much to corroborate Gimbutas's sense that the descendants of the Yamnaya caused much greater disruption than other archeologists believed. Even today, the Y chromosomes of almost all men of Western European ancestry have a high percentage of Yamnaya-derived genes, suggesting that violent conquest may have been widespread.

The team members of the Roopkund study planned a variety of tests for the bones. DNA sequencing would show the ancestry of the victims and whether they were related to one another, and carbon dating would estimate when they died. The researchers would test for disease, and analyze the chemistry of the bones to determine the victims' diet and where they might have grown up. Under sterile conditions, the scientists in Hyderabad drilled into long bones and teeth, producing a powder. Vials of this were sent to Harvard and to other labs in India, the United States, and Germany.



"It's not actually that much after taxes."

An ancient human bone is packed with DNA, but, in many cases, ninety-nine per cent or more of that is not human. It is the DNA of billions of microbes that colonized the body during the decomposition after death. To tease the tiny fraction of human DNA from this mass of microbial debris requires a chemical ballet of enormous delicacy, and the risk of contamination is high. Stray DNA molecules from people who handled the remains can ruin an entire sample.

David Reich's lab has a "clean room" for extracting and processing DNA from human tissue. Personnel pass through a dressing area, where they don a full-body clean suit with booties and hood, double pairs of nitrile gloves (the inner one sealed to the suit with tape around the wrists), a hairnet, a face mask, and a plastic shield. The clean room is maintained at positive pressure, which keeps the airflow directed outward, to curtail the entry of airborne DNA. After anything is touched in the room, the outer pair of gloves must be stripped off and a fresh pair put on, in order to prevent the transfer of DNA from surface to surface. Intense ultraviolet light shines whenever the room is empty, to destroy stray DNA. The light is shut off when the lab is occupied, because it burns human skin and eyes.

When I visited, a technician was working on a nubbin of bone from an ancient Roman who lived in Belgium. The whine of a sandblaster filled the air as she removed excess bone from a tiny treasure chest of DNA—a spiral cavity in the inner ear called the cochlea. The bone in which the cochlea is embedded is the densest in the body, and provides the best source of preserved DNA in ancient remains. DNA this old breaks up into short strands. Getting enough to sequence requires complex processes, one of which involves placing samples in a machine that produces a polymerase chain reaction, copying the fragments up to a billion times. The lab doesn't sequence the entire DNA molecule, much of which is repetitious and uninformative, but maps about a million key locations.

Reich had asked a graduate student in his lab, Éadaoin Harney, to take charge of the Roopkund project. Her role was to analyze the Roopkund DNA, wrangle the worldwide team, assemble the results, and write the resulting paper as its lead author. (She has since taken a job as a postdoctoral researcher at the genomics firm [23andMe](#).) By the middle of 2017, it was

apparent that the Roopkund bones belonged to three distinct groups of people. Roopkund A had ancestry typical of South Asians. They were unrelated to one another and genetically diverse, apparently coming from various areas and groups in India. Roopkund C was a lone individual whose genome was typical of Southeast Asia. It was the Roopkund B group, a mixture of men and women unrelated to one another, that confounded everyone. Their genomes did not look Indian or even Asian. “Of all places in the world, India is one of the places most heavily sampled in terms of human diversity,” Reich told me. “We have sampled three hundred different groups in India, and there’s nothing there even close to Roopkund B.”

Harney and Reich began exploring the ancestry of the Roopkund B group, comparing the genomes with hundreds of present-day populations across Europe, Asia, and Africa. The closest match was with people from the Greek island of Crete. “It would be a mistake to say these people were *specifically* from Crete,” Reich said. “A very careful analysis showed they don’t match perfectly. They are clearly a population of the Aegean area.” The Roopkund B group made up more than a third of the samples tested—fourteen individuals out of thirty-eight. Since the bones at the lake were not collected systematically, the finding hinted that the Mediterranean group in total might have been quite large. One-third of three hundred, the lower estimate of the Roopkund dead, is a hundred people.

As bizarre as the result seemed, it nonetheless matched an analysis of bone collagen that the Max Planck Institute and the Harvard lab had done on the same individuals, to determine their diet. Dietary information is stored in our bones, and plants, depending on how they fix carbon during photosynthesis, create one of two chemical signatures—C3 or C4. A person who eats a diet of C3 plants, such as wheat, barley, and rice, will have isotope ratios of carbon in their bones different from those of a person eating a diet high in millets, which are C4. Sure enough, the analysis of Roopkund bone collagen revealed that, in the last ten or so years of their lives, the Roopkund A people ate a varied C3 and C4 diet, typical for much of India; Roopkund B ate a mostly C3 diet, typical of the Mediterranean.

During the study, the Reich lab had divided up its bone-powder samples, sending one portion to the carbon-14-dating laboratory at Penn State. (Doing this rather than having the Penn State samples sent straight from Hyderabad

was a way of insuring that the labs were working on the same individuals.) When the carbon-dating results came back, there was another surprise: there appeared to have been multiple mass-death events at Roopkund. The Roopkund A individuals probably died in three or possibly four incidents between 700 and 950 A.D. The Roopkund B group—from the Mediterranean—likely perished in a single event a thousand years later. Because carbon-14 dating is difficult to interpret for the period between 1650 and 1950, the deaths could have occurred anytime during that span, but with a slightly higher probability in the eighteenth century. The lone person of Southeast Asian ancestry in Roopkund C died around the same time.

The eighteenth-century date was so unexpected that Reich and Harney at first thought it might be a typo, or that the samples had been contaminated. Harney wrote up the findings, in a paper co-authored by twenty-seven other scientists. She told me, “We hoped that after the paper was published someone would come forward with information that would help us determine what might have happened at Roopkund—some historian or a person with knowledge of a group of European travellers who vanished in the Himalayas around that time.”

When William Sax learned of the results, he was incredulous. He had spent years in the mountain villages below the lake, among the devotees of Nanda Devi. The women consider themselves to be keepers of the goddess’s memory, and Sax had recorded and translated many of their songs and stories of the pilgrimage. He feels certain that if a large party of travellers, especially foreign travellers, had died at Roopkund in recent centuries, there would have been some record in folklore. After all, despite the new study’s surprises, the Roopkund A group was not inconsistent with the earlier findings.

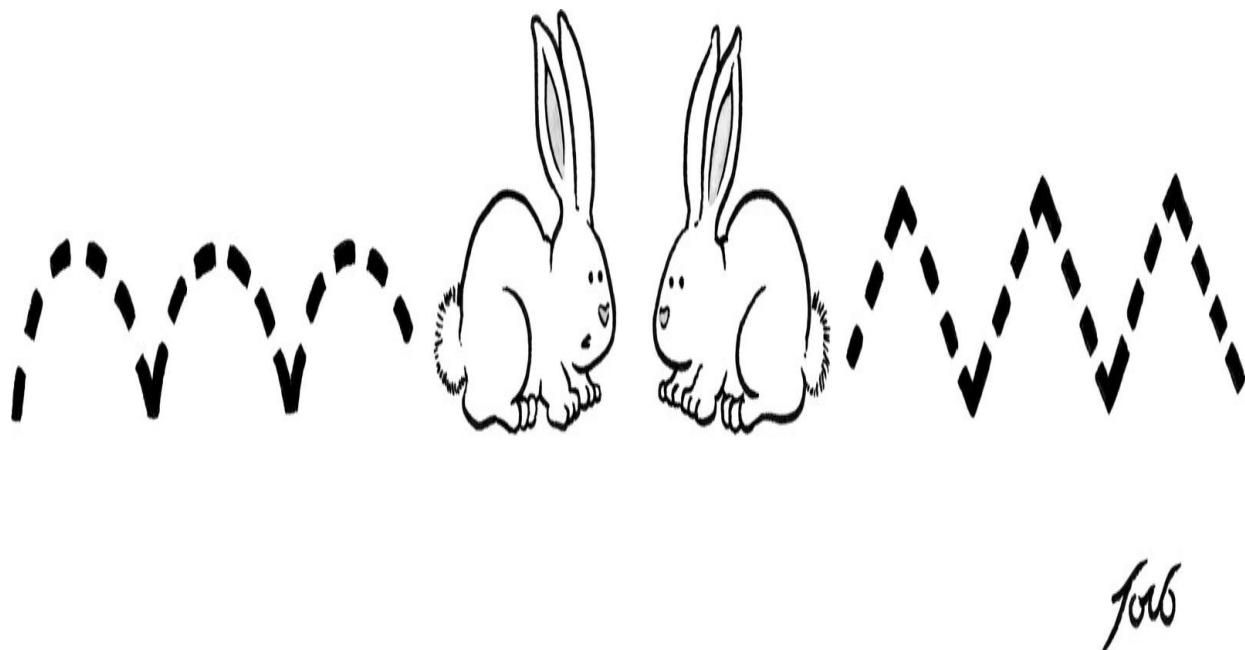
“I never heard a word, not a hint of a story, no folktale or anything,” Sax told me. “And there’s absolutely no reason to be up there if they *weren’t* on the pilgrimage.” The idea of a group of eighteenth-century Greeks on a Hindu pilgrimage seemed far-fetched. A simpler explanation would be that the Roopkund B bones somehow got mixed up while sitting in storage. “It is quite possible that these bones were contaminated,” he said, and the researchers were simply taking their provenance on trust: “They didn’t actually collect them themselves.” Having been fascinated with the region’s

way of life for four decades, he also found the scientists' perspective lacking. "This isn't just a story about bones," he said. "It's also a story about human beings and religious devotion."

Many anthropologists and archeologists are uneasy about the incursion of genomics into their domain and suspicious of its brash certainties. "We're not schooled in the nuances," Reich admitted to me. "Anthropologists and geneticists are two groups speaking different languages and getting to know each other." Research into human origins and the differences between populations is always vulnerable to misuse. The grim history of eugenics still casts a shadow over genetics—a field with limitless appeal for white supremacists and others looking to support racist views—even though, for half a century, geneticists have rejected the idea of large hereditary disparities among human populations for the great majority of traits. Genetic science was vital in discrediting racist biological theories and establishing that racial categories are ever-shifting social constructs that do not align with genetic variation. Still, some anthropologists, social scientists, and even geneticists are deeply uncomfortable with any research that explores the hereditary differences among populations. Reich is insistent that race is an artificial category rather than a biological one, but maintains that "substantial differences across populations" exist. He thinks that it's not unreasonable to investigate those differences scientifically, although he doesn't undertake such research himself. "Whether we like it or not, people are measuring average differences among groups," he said. "We need to be able to talk about these differences clearly, whatever they may be. Denying the possibility of substantial differences is not for us to do, given the scientific reality we live in."

In 2018, Reich published a book, "[Who We Are and How We Got Here](#)," about how genetic science is revolutionizing our understanding of our species. After he presented material from the book as an Op-Ed in the *Times*, sixty-seven anthropologists, social scientists, and others signed an open letter on BuzzFeed, titled "How Not to Talk About Race and Genetics." The scholars complained that Reich's "skillfulness with ancient and contemporary DNA should not be confused with a mastery of the cultural, political, and biological meanings of human groups," and that Reich "critically misunderstands and misrepresents concerns" regarding the use of such loaded terms as "race" and "population."

Reich's lab now has an ethics-and-outreach officer, Jakob Sedig, whose job is to work with some of the cultural groups being studied, to understand and respond to their sensitivities. "We are mapping genetic groups to archeological cultures," Sedig, who has a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Colorado, explained. "How we're defining these groups genetically is not how they see themselves culturally. We don't want to discredit other people's beliefs, but we don't want to censor our research based on those beliefs. There's no one answer. You need a dialogue from the beginning."



"You're carrying a lot of tension."
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Reich acknowledges that geneticists need to be careful about how they discuss their work. He said that the majority of archeologists and anthropologists welcome the insights that genetic research provides, although "there are a small number of Luddites who want to break our machines." In our conversations, Reich emphasized that the findings of geneticists were almost always unexpected and tended to explode stereotypes. "Again and again, I've found my own biases and expectations to be wrong," he said. "It should make us realize that the stories we tell ourselves about our past are often very different from the reality, and we should have humility about that." When I asked him for examples, he mentioned the origin of "white people"—light-skinned people from Europe and parts of western Asia. He assumed (as did most scientists) that whites

represented a stable lineage that had spread across western Eurasia tens of thousands of years ago and established a relatively homogeneous population. But his research showed that as recently as eight thousand years ago there were at least four distinct groups of Europeans, as genetically different from one another as the British are from the Chinese today, some with brown skin color. As he put it in an e-mail, “‘White people’ simply didn’t exist ~8,000 years ago.”

Around 500 B.C., the Greek traveller Scylax of Caryanda is said to have journeyed through parts of the Indian subcontinent and sailed down the Indus River. In his writings, known only from secondary sources, Scylax called the river Indos, from which the English name for the subcontinent derives. Alexander the Great invaded India in 326 B.C., having previously swept through what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. His armies traversed the Indus plains and reached as far as the Beas River before turning back. There was lasting Hellenic influence in the region for centuries, although the eventual decline of Greek civilization largely brought direct contact with Greece to an end.

Perhaps, the Roopkund researchers thought, there might be a tribe or a group in India descended from Greeks. Alexander left behind commanders and soldiers in some of the territories he conquered, many of whom stayed. Members of the Kalash tribe, in northern Pakistan, claim to be descendants of Alexander’s soldiers. (This was the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling’s story “The Man Who Would Be King.”) The Kalash are a distinct people with their own language and an ancient, animistic religion. Genetic research suggests that the Kalash have a Western European origin, and one disputed study found Greek heritage. On investigation, Reich’s team found that the modern genetic profile of the Kalash did not resemble that of Roopkund B. Two centuries before Christ, parts of northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan formed the Indo-Greek Kingdom, the easternmost state of the Hellenic world. But, again, Roopkund B didn’t resemble any populations living there now.

Could Roopkund B have come from an *unsampled* population in India descended from Greeks or a related group? In this scenario, an enclave of migrants to India never admixed with South Asians, and retained their genetic heritage. But the genetics of Roopkund B, showing no sign of

isolation or inbreeding, ruled this out, too. And then there was the stubborn fact that the Roopkund B people ate a diet more consistent with the Mediterranean than with India. The evidence pointed to one conclusion: they were Mediterranean travellers who somehow got to Roopkund, where they died in a single, terrible event. And yet the historians I consulted, specialists in South Asian and Greek history and authorities in the history of Himalayan mountaineering, said that, in recent centuries, there was no evidence of a large group of unrelated people from the eastern Mediterranean—men and women—travelling in the Himalayas before 1950.

Since the study was published, one of the most determined investigators of the mystery has been a recently retired archeologist named Stuart Fiedel, whose main research focus is the migration of Paleo-Americans into the New World from Asia. “I hate unsolved mysteries,” Fiedel told me. “It makes zero sense that a party of male and female Greek islanders would be participating in a Hindu pilgrimage around 1700 or 1800. That’s because, one, there is no documented presence of any substantial Greek communities in northern India at those times, and, two, there is no record of Europeans converting to Hinduism or Buddhism in those periods.”

He sent Harney and Reich a string of e-mails proposing alternatives to the Mediterranean theory. Fiedel contends that the mitochondrial DNA lineages and the Y-chromosomal DNA lineages of the Roopkund B group are rare or absent in the population of the Greek islands, but are relatively common in Armenians and other peoples of the Caucasus. His preferred hypothesis is that the Roopkund B people were Armenian traders. Armenians travelled widely in Tibet, India, and Nepal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, trading in pearls, amber, and deer musk, a precious ingredient in perfume. Several large Indian cities have Armenian communities that go back centuries. “They might have been hanging with some major Hindu party trying to sell them stuff,” Fiedel said. Noting that nothing of value was found on the bodies, he speculated that the travellers were killed by Thuggees, a cult of robbers and murderers whose fearsome reputation in British India gave us the word “thug.” Thuggees were said to attach themselves to travellers or groups of pilgrims, gaining their trust and then robbing and murdering them on a remote stretch of road. “The Thuggees would make off with kids,” Fiedel said. “Everybody in the Roopkund B population is mature. There isn’t any gold on the skeletons, no rings,

necklaces, or anklets on the victims. Who removed those things? And they were dumped in water. The Thuggees would dump people in water.”

Reich and Harney reject Fiedel’s genetic interpretation. Reich wrote back to him saying that the full DNA from Roopkund B was “extremely different from Armenians both modern and ancient.” What’s more, scholars increasingly view British reports about Thuggees as inaccurate or embellished, reflecting the colonialist fear and incomprehension of the country they occupied. Some historians question whether the Thuggees even existed.

Reich and Fiedel did agree, however, that Sax’s suspicion that the bones could have simply been mixed up was unsustainable. A jumble of bones from a poorly curated storage area would not have the consistency of age, type, diet, and genetics displayed by the Roopkund B remains. The data would be all over the map. Besides, even if these bones were proved to have been mislabelled, that would merely create another mystery: how did a bunch of eighteenth-century Greek bones get into a storage vault in India?

For the time being, Roopkund holds its secrets, but it remains possible that an answer will eventually be found. Veena Mushrif-Tripathy, a bioarcheologist on the previous study and a co-author of the new one, pointed out that Roopkund is so remote and inhospitable—in 2003, when she and her colleagues went to collect bones, altitude sickness forced her to turn back—there has never been a systematic archeological investigation of the site. All the bones studied so far have been picked up haphazardly, a flawed way of sampling that often skews results. A careful excavation, she believes, might solve the mystery, especially if it is able to plumb the lake itself. The water is frozen most of the year, so the skeletons and artifacts visible on the lake bed have been kept safe from looters and souvenir hunters. “Inside the lake, you can get more preserved bones with soft tissues,” she said. “And if they are Greek people we should get some artifacts or tools or something which we can trace back to Greece.”

And what of Nanda Devi? The new study established that multiple groups had died at the lake centuries apart. Did everyone die in hailstorms? Mushrif-Tripathy thinks that a hailstorm was probably involved in one mass death but that most people had likely just died of exposure. According to

Ayushi Nayak, who performed the isotopic bone analyses at the Max Planck Institute, Hindu pilgrims sometimes go barefoot and thinly clothed to sacred sites in the Himalayas as a spiritual challenge. Completing the pilgrimage in this way is a sign that the goddess favors you and wants you to survive. In other words, most of the Roopkund dead probably perished as Sax almost did, when he was an undergraduate—staggering around in a sudden blizzard and looking for their companions. ♦

Books

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The Italian Genius Who Mixed Marxism and Children's Literature

Gianni Rodari, who has been almost unknown in English till now, united a fantastical imagination with a deep interest in education.

By [Joan Acocella](#)

December 7, 2020



“Telephone Tales,” a collection of stories by the Italian children’s writer Gianni Rodari (1920-80), contains a piece called “The War of the Bells,” which begins, “Once upon a time, there was a war—a great and terrible war—in which vast numbers of soldiers died on both sides. We were on this side and our enemies were on the other, and we shot at each other day and night, but the war went on so long that finally, there was no more bronze to make cannons.” That didn’t stop “our” general. He ordered the army to melt down all the church bells in the land and recast them, together, to make a single cannon:

Just one, but one big enough to win the whole war with a single shot.

It took a hundred thousand cranes to lift that cannon; it took ninety-seven trains to transport it to the front. The Mega General rubbed his hands together in delight and said, “When my cannon fires, our enemies will run away all the way to the moon.”

The great moment arrived. The super cannon was aimed at the enemy. We’d all stuffed cotton wads into our ears. . . .

An artilleryman pushed a button. Suddenly, from one end of the front to the other, came the gigantic sound of pealing bells: *Ding! Dong! Bong!*

We took the cotton out of our ears to be able to hear it more clearly.

Yes, it was true. No cannon blast, just chimes. The opposing general, who had adopted the same strategy, got the same result. Whereupon the two commanders, greatly embarrassed, jumped into their jeeps and drove away. The soldiers, left with no means of killing one another, crawled out of the trenches and embraced. “Peace has broken out!” they cried.

In Italy, everyone knows who Gianni Rodari was: one of the country’s most cherished writers of children’s books. In the United States, practically nobody knows his name. Of his thirty books, not one was published here during his lifetime. A few came out in the U.K., and you can still get a copy of one of these translations, if, for example, you are willing to mortgage your house. The other day, I tried to buy “[Tales Told by a Machine](#),” from 1976.

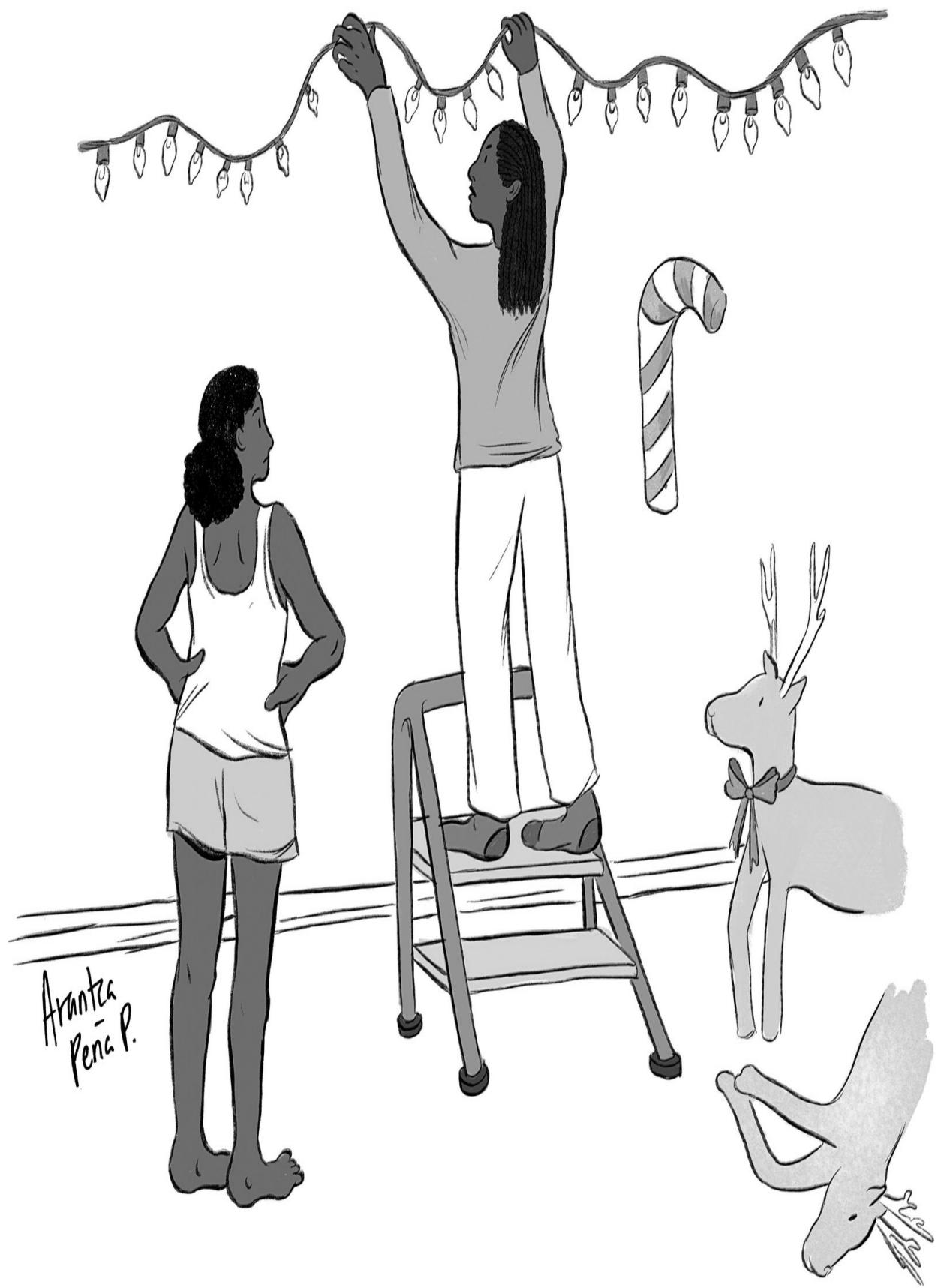
Amazon had a hardcover copy, for nine hundred and sixty-seven dollars, plus shipping. This is a crime against art.

Things may be changing, though. In honor of the centenary, this year, of Rodari's birth, a small, enterprising publisher in Brooklyn, Enchanted Lion, has brought out the first full English-language edition of "[Telephone Tales](#)," in a spirited translation by Antony Shugaar. Now, albeit decades late, Anglophone readers can find out why Italians love this writer.

Gianni (Giovanni) Rodari was born in 1920 in Omegna, a quiet little town on the edge of Lake Orta, in northern Italy. His father was a baker. Gianni loved his father. Every day, he said, the man would make a dozen rolls out of white flour for him and his younger brother. "These rolls were very crisp, and we devoured them like gluttons," he recalled. Another memory he recorded of his father was that one night, during a rainstorm, the family looked out the window and saw a cat marooned between two huge puddles, unable to move forward or back. The father went out, in the storm, and carried the cat to safety. When he returned, he was drenched. Rodari remembered him trembling, with his back pressed against the big oven, trying to get warm. Seven days later, he died, of pneumonia. Gianni was nine.

His mother moved the family back to her home town, Gavirate, near Milan. As Vanessa Roghi narrates in her new biography of Rodari— "[Lezioni di Fantastica](#)," not yet translated—Gianni, in his teens, dreamed of going somewhere else, doing something interesting. (Maybe music? He had studied violin, and he played at weddings and such.) But the family needed money, and so he went to work as a teacher in local primary schools. He discovered that he was good at making up children's stories, not so much because he wanted to, he said, but as a way of getting his students to sit down and pay attention. In his free time, he read hungrily, especially books on philosophy and politics. In 1940, Italy entered the Second World War. Rodari, who was in delicate health all his life, was excused from military service on medical grounds. Late in the war, after two of his friends had died in action and his brother Cesare, the one he had shared the rolls with, had been interned in a German prison camp, he joined the Resistance and enrolled in the Italian Communist Party.

After the war, the Party got in touch with him. Would he like to do some writing for its newspapers? In the next few years, Rodari produced copy—on sports, crime, the arts, everything—for Communist papers, one of which, *L'Unità*, finally asked him to write some pieces for children. In 1950, the Party transferred him to Rome, to edit a children's weekly. And now he began publishing books, not just stories.



"I know it's a little early, but I'm trying to get this year over with."

The Communist context of his writing is evident in the book that soon made his name, “[The Adventures of Cipollino](#)” (1951), in which a small onion-boy, Cipollino (the word means “little onion” in Italian), leads an uprising of aggrieved garden vegetables—Potato, Leek, Radish, et al.—against the tyranny of Prince Lemon and his brutal enforcer, Signor Tomato. Given the Cold War, it is no surprise that this book did not appear in English (Enchanted Lion hopes to publish a translation in 2022), or, conversely, that Rodari acquired a huge following in the Soviet Union, where “Cipollino” was adapted into an animated film, a live-action film, and even a ballet. Its hero’s sweet, bland face adorned a Russian postage stamp, and when the Soviet astronomer Nikolai Chernykh discovered a new minor planet, between Mars and Jupiter, he named it 2703 Rodari.

Gradually, Rodari’s reputation spread beyond leftist circles, and he acquired some literary friends. Italo Calvino, tiller of the same fields (folktales, new tales), admired him and stumped for him. But, like many autodidacts, Rodari was wary of the in-crowd, and he socialized mostly with newspapermen. In 1960, after being picked up by Giulio Einaudi, a politically unaffiliated and highly respected publisher (he published [Primo Levi](#), Cesare Pavese, [Natalia Ginzburg](#), Calvino), Rodari began to attract a mainstream audience. Eventually, he received the Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing, a sort of children’s-literature equivalent of the Booker Prize.

“Telephone Tales” is from this period. The book has a frame story. Once upon a time, there was a man, Signor Bianchi, who worked as a travelling salesman of pharmaceutical goods, a job that kept him on the road six days a week. He had one child, a daughter (as did Rodari, who married in 1953), and she missed him when he was away. But they had a deal. Every night, before she went to sleep, he would call her and tell her a story. Long-distance calls were expensive, so the stories were always very short, but they were wonderful. When Signor Bianchi was on the line, Rodari wrote, “all the young ladies who worked the telephone switchboard simply stopped putting calls through, so they could listen.”

The sixty-seven tales in the collection show us where Rodari came from, and where he was going. A few are frank agitprop. Rodari had spent twenty-three years of his life under Fascism, and as the book’s translator, Antony

Shugaar, has pointed out, the subject of a number of the stories is simply how not to be a Fascist. That's what they say: Don't kill one another, and don't listen to bullies who tell you to do so. But in other tales we can see agitprop morphing into something more bizarre. In "The Unlucky Hunter," a boy, Giuseppe, whose sister is getting married the next day is told by his mother to go hunting and bring back a rabbit to accompany the polenta at the nuptial feast. He goes off and soon spies a rabbit. But, when he shoots his rifle, what issues from the gun is not a bullet but a "cheerful, fresh little voice," saying, "Boom!," almost as if it were making fun of him. Next thing, "the same rabbit as before strolled by, right in front of Giuseppe, only this time it had a white veil over its head dotted with orange blossoms." "Well, what do you know," said Giuseppe. "The rabbit is getting married too." This is like a Surrealist painting, half funny, half unsettling. A rabbit bride, a talking gun: what's going on?

Part of what makes this story genuinely weird is that, unlike the chimes in "The War of the Bells," which employs the same comic device, the unexpected sound is human. This sort of transfer, from one mode of expression to another, starts to become common in Rodari's tales. In "A Distractible Child Goes for a Walk," the child in question, Giovanni, taking a stroll, loses his body parts along the way. He is looking at this and that—the cars, the clouds—and, oops, his hand falls off. Then he gets interested in a dog with a limp, and as he follows the animal one of his arms detaches itself and vanishes. By the time he gets home, he's missing both arms, both ears, and a leg. "His mother shakes her head, puts him back together." (The neighbors have thoughtfully collected Giovanni's body parts and brought them to her.) She kisses him. "Is anything missing, Mama? Have I been a good boy?" "Yes, Giovanni, you've been a very good boy." This is sweet, and also appalling. When we leave the house, young readers might ask, do we have to be careful that our feet won't fall off?

From the moment he began teaching, Rodari never stopped thinking about the education of children. He wrote about it, delivered lectures on it, gave interviews on it, to the end of his life. In 1972, to his great satisfaction, he was invited to confer for four days with a group of fifty teachers in the city of Reggio Emilia, a hot spot of postwar Italy's vigorous early-education movement. The following year, he published a book, "[The Grammar of](#)

Fantasy,” based on the talks he had given there. Here are the opening lines of Chapter 1, translated by the fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes:

A stone thrown into a pond sets in motion concentric waves that spread out on the surface of the water, and their reverberation has an effect on the water lilies and reeds, the paper boat, and the buoys of the fishermen at various distances. All these objects are just there for themselves, enjoying their tranquility, when they are wakened to life, as it were, and are compelled to react and to enter into contact with one another. Other invisible vibrations spread into the depths, in all directions, as the stone falls and brushes the algae, scaring the fish and continually causing new molecular movements. When it then touches the bottom, it stirs up the mud and bumps into things that have rested there forgotten, some of which are dislodged, others buried once again in the sand.

How I love this image, with its dark, wet, secret transactions, its mud and molecules. This is Rodari’s metaphor for cognition. In his view, children learned not by having something jammed into their brains—the multiplication tables, the sonnets of Petrarch—but by responding, almost involuntarily, to a sight, an idea, or often just a word, absorbing it, moving other mental contents around to make room for it, and thereby creating something new.

There seems to be no question that Rodari’s concern for education was related to the poverty of his youth. A modest man, he spoke not of his own difficulties but of other people’s—his mother’s, for example. She went to work at the age of eight, he wrote, first in a paper factory, then in a textile works, then as a domestic. When he began teaching, his pupils, too, were poor. In the winter, some could not come to school, because they had no shoes. Many of them also spoke a non-standard Italian, and he worried lest people make them feel embarrassed.

Apart from his students’ ability to get to school, what most concerned Rodari was the development of their imaginations. He said that a line of Novalis’s, which he read as a young man, always stuck in his mind: “If there were a theory of the fantastic such as there is in the case of logic, then we would be able to discover the art of inventing stories.” This he connected

with fantasist art of his own time, above all [Surrealism](#). Surrealism is a brew of many ideas, but the one most important to Rodari, it seems, was the simplest, the pairing of opposites—particularly the joining of a dream world to a punctilious realism. A hardy movement, Surrealism lasted from the nineteen-twenties until well after the Second World War, because it fit those wild and disastrous years. A locus classicus is [Vittorio De Sica](#)'s breakthrough film, "Miracle in Milan" (1951), which ends with a collection of homeless people who have just seen their shantytown razed by the authorities, taking off, on broomsticks, into the sky. Italy, after the war, was very, very poor. De Sica's other early films—"Shoeshine," "Bicycle Thieves," "Umberto D."—give a sense of this, as do Rossellini's "Paisan" and "Rome, Open City." The country was also humiliated. Many Italian artists were glad to move into new territory. Surrealism provided a picture of the truth they now faced—ugliness, violence, ruin—combined, however, with the memory of a happier past: trees, pocket watches, town squares, pretty women.

Many of the early Surrealists were committed Marxists. In "The Grammar of Fantasy," Rodari writes of a day that he spent drinking wine with friends in a village outside Kazan, near the Volga. The group visited a local landmark, a wooden house whose furniture, he noticed, was curiously arranged. Sturdy benches were set under the windowsills, so that the erstwhile owners' children, who liked to come in and out by the windows rather than by the door, could do so without breaking their necks. This, Rodari later decided, was a lesson of Communism. As it turned out, the house had once been the property of Lenin's grandfather. Whether or not Lenin adapted his political philosophy from his grandparent's furniture arrangements, Rodari learned critical thinking from Marxist doctrine. Whatever he writes about, he subjects to questioning, scrutiny, a mild irradiation of irony, or just wit. (Rodari inherited this approach in part, he said, from Russian formalist critics of the early twentieth century such as Viktor Shklovsky, who called it *ostranenie*, defamiliarization.) People in the West tend to associate Marxism with thought control. It is hard to convince them that, in the late nineteenth century, Marxism was considered by its adherents to be the standard-bearer of thought liberation.

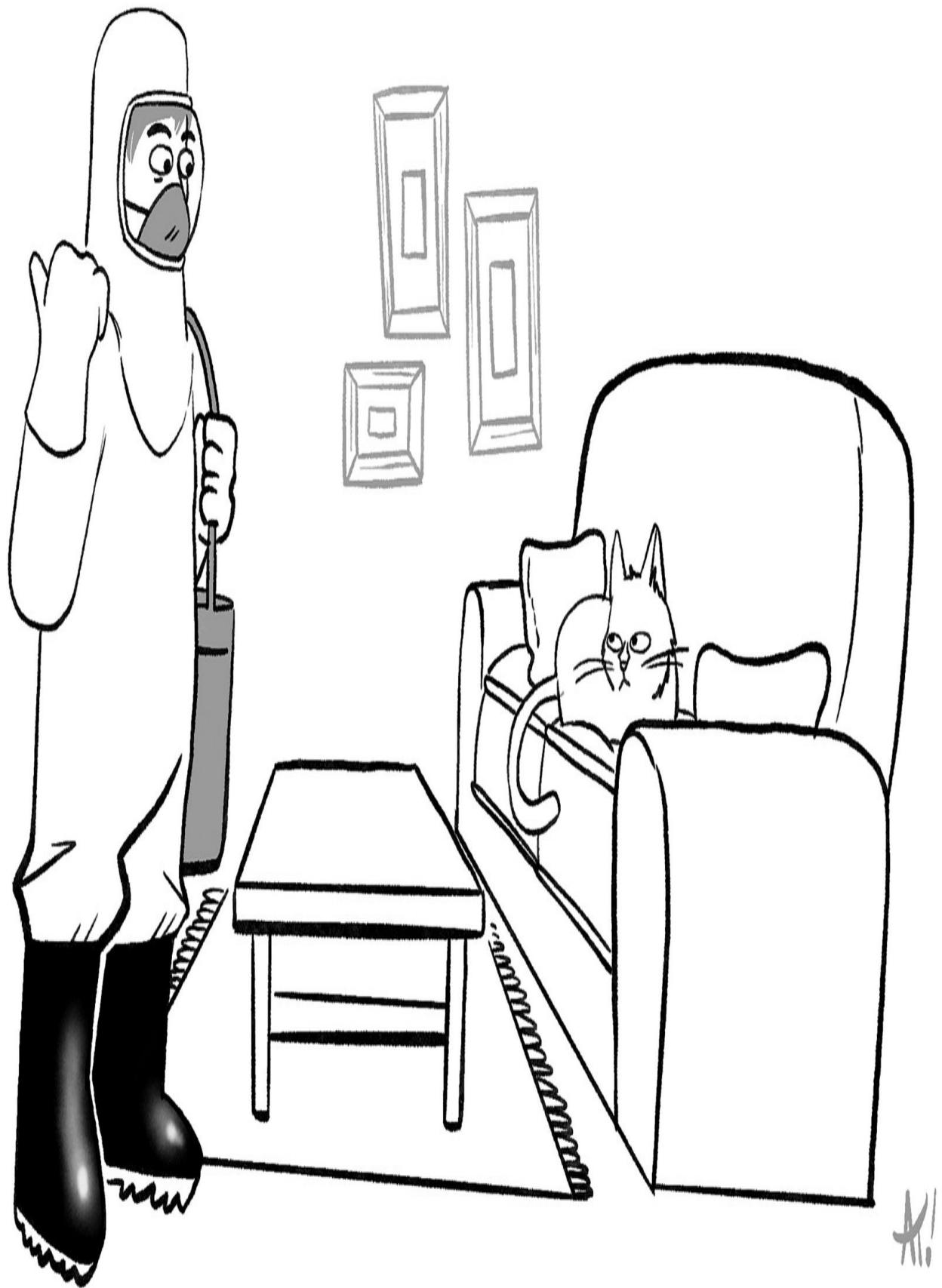
In keeping with Rodari's concern for children's imaginations, some stories in "Telephone Tales," like the stone in the pond in "The Grammar of Fantasy,"

journey into distant realms of strangeness. Two of them feature a little girl named Alice Tumbledown. Alice falls a lot, into places where we wouldn't think to look for a missing child. Her favorite landing place is the silverware drawer in the kitchen. She loves it there, in the spoon section. One time, her grandfather finds her inside the alarm clock. Later, he has to fish her out of a bottle. "I was thirsty and fell in," she explains. Elsewhere, Alice wanders into the ocean. She'd like to become a starfish, she thinks:

But instead she fell into the shell of a giant mollusk just as it was yawning, and it immediately snapped shut its valves, imprisoning Alice and all her dreams. *Here I am, in trouble again*, thought Alice. But she also felt what silence—what fresh, cool peace—was there inside the giant mollusk. It would have been wonderful to stay there forever.

Who would want to live inside a clamshell, in that cold, pungent fluid, next to that pink blob of a clam? Alice. But then she thinks of her parents, how they love her and would miss her. Regretfully, she pries the shell open, swims out, and goes home. I don't know of any writer, before Rodari, who would have explored such an experience.

There is worse, or better. In the tale called "Pulcinella's Escape," a Pulcinella marionette (Punch, from Punch and Judy) manages to cut the strings that attach him to his control bar. He escapes from the puppet theatre and hides in a nearby garden, where he survives by eating flowers. When winter comes, there are no more flowers, but he's not afraid. "Oh, well," he says, "I'll just die here." And he does. In the spring, a carnation grows on the spot where his body lies. Under the ground, he says to himself, "Who could be happier than me?" Here, and in "Alice Falls Into the Sea," two realities sit side by side, looking rather surprised, but not actually annoyed, to see each other. Yes, it would be rather dark and lonely under the ground or inside a clamshell. But how peaceful!



"Do you need anything else from the store?"

In keeping with his leftist sympathies, there is a rich vein of utopianism in Rodari's work. "When they are little, children must stock up on optimism," he wrote, "for the challenge of life." In one story, Jordan almonds rain down from a cloud in the sky. In a later tale, a Russian astronaut reports that, on Planet X213, people who don't want to get up in the morning just grab the alarm clock and eat it and go back to sleep. Another planet, called Mun, has a machine that manufactures lies:

For one token, you could hear fourteen thousand lies. The machine contained all the lies in the world—the lies that had already been told, the lies that people were thinking of at that very moment, and all the others that would be invented in the future. Once the machine had recited all the possible lies, people were forced to always tell the truth. That's why the planet Mun is also known as the Planet of Truth.

But there's always a hitch. Even a young child could tell you that Mun is not a good name for a planet, nor should anyone try to eat an alarm clock. As for the rain of Jordan almonds, Rodari says that people always waited for it to come back, but it never did. The humor is not as daffy as in [Edward Lear](#), and not as elaborate as in [Lewis Carroll](#). (Rodari loved both writers.) "Telephone Tales" also carries a heavy load of sarcasm. In one story, a man's nose runs away. (Rodari credits Gogol.) It is finally chased down, brought back, and reattached to the man's face. The man remonstrates with it: " 'But why did you ever run away in the first place? What did I ever do to you?' The nose glared at him . . . and said, 'Listen, just never pick me again as long as you live.' " Rodari was also fond of bathroom jokes. King Midas, when his touch-of-gold magic is revoked, does not immediately revert to normal. For a brief time, everything he touches turns to shit. These narratives were probably very popular with listeners young enough to remember their toilet training, but adults, too, may have enjoyed such talk.

Some people have asked whether Rodari's writing, so witty and strange, is not better suited to adults than to children, but children apparently love it. Rodari, before publishing his work, often tried it out on elementary-school classes, and made a note of which parts made the children laugh. I think that, like "Alice in Wonderland," his writing makes children feel intelligent.

Rodari once said that it might be best not to worry about whether his books were for children or adults, but just to consider them “books, *tout court*.”

It would be hard for anyone, of any age, not to love the illustrations—mostly in *Magic Marker*—that Enchanted Lion commissioned for “Telephone Tales,” from the Italian artist Valerio Vidali. The book design itself harbors surprises. Some pages have extra little inner pages glued to them. Others are gatefold pages, where you pull the inner edge and another page folds out. In the drawings, you are shown entire worlds of semi-abstract figures: giant noses, a palace made of ice cream, birds eating cookies, plus, of course, kings and queens and a princess in a tower. The pages are sewn with stitches worthy of a Balenciaga gown. It is astonishing that the book costs only \$27.95. Go buy one, right now.

Politics accompanied Rodari all the days of his life. He first visited the Soviet Union in 1951 and went back every few years thereafter, to accept prizes, judge competitions, and, as he no doubt felt, just to do his part. Communism, in some measure, gave him his morals, without laying its heavy hand on his blithe spirit. But in the end, according to Vanessa Roghi’s biography, it let him down. He wasn’t the only one. Events in the Soviet Union—the show trials of the thirties, Khrushchev’s famous speech three years after Stalin’s death, enumerating the man’s crimes—caused leftists across the Western world to abandon their loyalty to the U.S.S.R. If those developments didn’t discourage them, later ones did: the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the quelling of the Prague Spring in 1968.

Many Western Marxists openly disavowed the Soviet system, but not Rodari. He had been a Communist practically from his teen-age years, and he would not abandon the Party now, or not publicly. He stood by it even after Italy’s so-called “years of lead,” beginning in the late sixties, when the country was shocked almost daily, it seemed, by acts of political terrorism. (An especially horrifying episode was the 1978 kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, a centrist who had served five terms as the nation’s Prime Minister, by the Red Brigades, a neo-Marxist organization. Italians who lived through those years still speak of them with emotion.) In 1979, when Rodari made his last trip to the Soviet Union, he found little to praise about the country in which he had once placed so much hope. Roghi quotes his

travel diary, in which he deplores the venality of the Soviet Union and the hypocrisy of its young people. “One thing is certain,” he wrote. “They aren’t Communists.”

Rodari fans, however, should thank the U.S.S.R. By inspiring him and then disappointing him, it set him free, to work in a genre, the so-called children’s tale, where he would not have to confront his bitterness. And, in the end, it drove him beyond bitterness, into a wonderful wildness. The year before that last trip to the Soviet Union, Einaudi brought out Rodari’s final novel, a brilliant satire of both capitalists and revolutionaries. (It was published in English in 2011 with the title “*Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto.*”) In the book, a certain Baron Lamberto, who is ninety-three and fears that he may die, hears that the Egyptian pharaohs believed that if your name was endlessly repeated you could live forever. He decides to give it a try. He has his servants speak his name continuously into microphones placed in the attic of his castle. By the end—despite the best efforts of a gang of terrorists, who take him hostage and cut off his ear (this is actually funny)—he survives.

Rodari didn’t. Not long after “*Lamberto*” was published, an aneurysm was discovered in his leg. This necessitated a seven-hour operation, which seemed at first to be successful. But then, three days later, he died suddenly, of heart failure. He was only fifty-nine. I hope that his soul is at rest on the Planet of Truth. ♦

December 14, 2020 Issue

Briefly Noted

“Feline Philosophy,” “Billion Dollar Loser,” “The Arrest,” and “The White Dress.”

December 7, 2020

FELINE
PHILOSOPHY

CATS AND
THE MEANING
OF LIFE

JOHN GRAY



Feline Philosophy, by John Gray (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This teasing book by a political philosopher known for critiquing liberal theories of social progress argues that philosophy is a mere distraction from our deepest fears. Rather than groping for meaning in a universe that offers none, we should try to be more like cats, creatures congenitally “happy being themselves.” Gray has fun deriding philosophy but also draws on it; Taoism’s presumption that all species and ways of living are equal, for instance, allows for “the possibility that human beings might flourish in many different ways.” Ultimately, he endorses contemplation—a mode of perception that fosters equanimity—and offers a scheme for emulating the catlike qualities that might permit us to “thrive without anxiously inquiring how to live.”

The Epic Rise and Spectacular Fall
of Adam Neumann and WeWork

BILLION DOLLAR LOSER

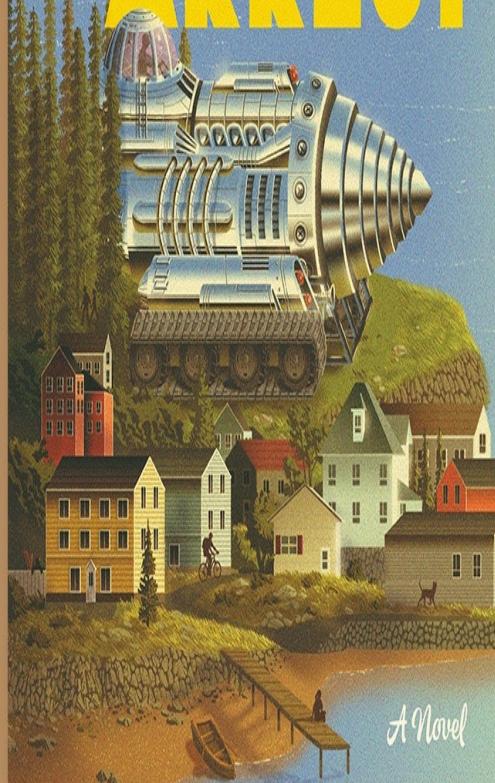
REEVES WIEDEMAN

Billion Dollar Loser, by Reeves Wiedeman (Little, Brown). By turns startling and mordantly funny, this book traces the rise and fall of the co-working startup WeWork and of Adam Neumann, one of its founders. Wiedeman approaches his subject with a wealth of documentation and a deadpan incredulity at the absurdity of Neumann's actions and ambitions. The book delves into WeWork's fatuous real-estate maneuvers, poor treatment of its employees, and dubious corporate expenditures (including \$13.8 million to acquire a company that manufactures wave pools). Throughout, Neumann is dislikable but not demonized. Wiedeman lays much blame on the numerous financiers and corporate bigwigs who boosted the would-be titan until the bitter end.

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE FERAL DETECTIVE

JONATHAN LETHEM

The ARREST



The Arrest, by Jonathan Lethem (Ecco). The title of this dystopian novel refers to an unexplained phenomenon that has caused almost all technology to fail. Our hero is Journeyman, a script doctor who'd been struggling in Hollywood at the time of the Arrest. The new world has no need for storytellers, so he finds work assisting the butcher and delivering local goods, until a former writing partner suggests that the Arrest is one of their unproduced science-fiction screenplays brought to life. The novel's levity masks the impact of its message, but Lethem, seeing technology as our greatest love, imagines its loss with poignancy: "They died not all at once, the screens, but in droves, like creatures of the warmed ocean."



The White Dress

NATHALIE LÉGER

The White Dress, by Nathalie Léger, translated from the French by Natasha Lehrer (Dorothy). Melding fact and fiction, this book revolves around the murder, in 2008, of Pippa Bacca, an Italian performance artist who, as part of a project to promote world peace, had been hitchhiking from Milan to Jerusalem in a wedding dress. Léger weaves together the story of Bacca's journey, astute discussions of Marina Abramović and Svetlana Alexievich, and an account of the injustice Léger's mother endured during her divorce. Léger grapples with her inability to understand the motivations of others, and with the ambiguity of giving voice to the silenced, noting that Bacca's killer had, in the days before he was caught, filmed obsessively with her camera, as if he wanted to "smash his body and his sin onto the images."

Comment

- [Getting Through the COVID Winter](#)

December 14, 2020 Issue

Getting Through the COVID Winter

We're in a strange limbo. Real empowered national leadership won't arrive until Inauguration Day, and the next wave of infections is already here.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

December 6, 2020

On November 25th, as millions of Americans were travelling for Thanksgiving, [Angela Merkel](#), the German Chancellor, gave a press conference with a double-edged message. For much of the pandemic, her country had kept the [coronavirus](#) relatively under control, only to see a second-wave surge; a full third of the country's eighteen thousand *COVID-19* deaths occurred in November. (Per capita, Germany has lost a quarter of the people the U.S. has lost.) The government responded with more stringent controls and guidelines—closing bars and restaurants, limiting gatherings—and now, Merkel announced, “the exponential growth in the number of infections has been broken.” But, even with a vaccine on the horizon, the crisis isn’t over. There needs to be, Merkel said, one more “energetic push,” which will require three things of her fellow-citizens: “patience, solidarity, discipline.”



Illustration by João Fazenda

In the week after Thanksgiving, [Donald Trump](#), who is not known for any of those qualities, put out a forty-six-minute video in which he made fantastic claims about the election being stolen from him, and dismissed the coronavirus as an “excuse” to send out mail-in ballots. Merkel’s message is useful not only as a contrast to Trump but as a starting point in thinking about how Americans can get through the next few months. We are in a strange limbo. The F.D.A. may issue emergency-use approval for Pfizer-BioNTech’s [vaccine](#), after a meeting on December 10th, and for Moderna’s, after a meeting on December 17th, but the supply will be tightly limited at first. Real, empowered national leadership won’t arrive until Inauguration Day, and the next wave of infections is already here. On Thanksgiving, Governor [Andrew Cuomo](#), of New York, said that, “as the phases change, your plans should change.” But to what?

The contours of a [winter catastrophe](#) are becoming clear. Last Thursday, the number of recorded daily deaths in the United States exceeded twenty-eight hundred, according to Johns Hopkins University, a record. In Pennsylvania, the testing positivity rate surpassed thirty per cent. In Idaho, it reached fifty per cent. Governor Gavin Newsom, of California, said that the intensive-care units in many parts of his state, with its forty million people, would be over capacity by next week; a dozen of Mississippi’s major hospitals have already run out of I.C.U. beds.

Last Wednesday, Robert Redfield, the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in remarks at a virtual event held by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that December, January, and February were “going to be the most difficult time in the public-health history of this nation.” The next day, on a CBS podcast, Dr. [Anthony Fauci](#) said that he agreed with Redfield, and spoke about “a surge superimposed upon a surge” as a result of Thanksgiving gatherings. He warned that the country’s death toll could double. Both men said that an even greater disaster—a surge upon a surge upon a surge after Christmas—could still be avoided, if, as Fauci put it, “we do the fundamental things.”

Those include practices, Fauci said, that “we talk about all the time,” such as mask wearing, social distancing, and avoiding indoor gatherings. The repetitiveness of the instructions is tedious, perhaps, but it reflects a real urgency. The lack of discipline at the top has been so extreme that it can be

hard for the public to know what prudent choices look like—if Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) sends out nine hundred invitations for departmental holiday parties held indoors, how bad could it be, one wonders, to have a few relatives over?

The answer, unfortunately, in more and more parts of the country, is pretty bad. The numbers are rising so rapidly that a well-thought-out risk calculation made a month ago may no longer apply. Cold weather, which exacerbates the spread of respiratory diseases, increases the need for vigilance, as it pushes people inside. There have to be trade-offs, but data show that it should be possible to keep schools open if—a big, often neglected if—there are mitigating measures in place, such as ventilation, contact tracing, capacity limits, and, particularly, masks. (Kansas, Pompeo’s home state, has a mask mandate that counties can opt out of; a C.D.C. study released in November reported that, in the counties that kept the mandate, cases fell by six per cent over the summer. In those that didn’t, they doubled.)

Many Americans, of course, do not have the luxury of isolation, among them the health-care workers who will be fighting the pandemic during the next, terrible weeks. And the task of distributing the vaccines is incredibly complex, involving everyone from commercial pilots (who’ve been given a dispensation by the F.A.A. to carry on board more dry ice, which it classifies as a hazardous material) and FedEx drivers to pharmacists who will give the injections. Solidarity, to borrow one of Merkel’s terms, may mean supporting those workers. For people who can stay home, perhaps the promise of a vaccine will make it easier to be patient with the winter’s restrictions—it won’t be forever.

In another respect, though, Merkel’s instructions seem inadequate, at least for this country. There is no reason to be patient with the G.O.P.’s adoption of Trump’s denialism, or with the failure of Senate Republicans to support *COVID* relief. Richard Besser, a former acting director of the C.D.C., who now heads the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said that “the ability to do the right thing in America, to protect yourself and your family, depends in large part on how much money you make and the color of your skin, and that’s just wrong.” Many people who may have been exposed to someone who’s infected fear losing their jobs—or their homes—if they stay home

from work. They might be interacting with elderly, vulnerable relatives because they have no other option for child care. Many of the income supports that Congress and states agreed on in the spring are gone or soon will be. Some fourteen million people may lose unemployment benefits on December 26th, and a partial federal eviction moratorium will lapse at the end of the year. There is still time for Congress to act, if the will is there.

Close to a million positive coronavirus test results were reported in the U.S. in just the five days after the Thanksgiving weekend. For those Americans—for us—the new phase is not an abstraction, and for many it will be a harrowing blur of caregiving, recovery, or loss. We'll need one another, and we'll each need a new plan. The virus won't wait for [Joe Biden](#) to act. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

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

Coronavirus Chronicles

- [Countdown to a Coronavirus Vaccine](#)

Countdown to a Coronavirus Vaccine

The race is nearly complete, but distributing the doses will be a breathtaking challenge.

By [Carolyn Kormann](#)

December 6, 2020



On a hot afternoon in August, Debbie Honeycutt walked into the crowded waiting room of the Medical Center for Clinical Research, an experimental-treatment facility tucked inside a squat office building in San Diego. She was volunteer number four hundred and ten out of four hundred and sixty-six that the clinic had recruited to test a potential [coronavirus vaccine](#). After a brief screening, a research assistant led her into an exam room, where a doctor administered a nasal-swab test and performed a physical examination. Honeycutt, who is sixty-nine years old, with short white hair and a matter-of-fact disposition, spent much of her career as a fund-raiser in the fields of education and science. This would be her sixth time volunteering in a clinical trial, and it had never felt more important. In the seven months since the first cases of [COVID-19](#) had been identified in the United States, 5.6 million people had been infected and a hundred and seventy-five thousand had died. Honeycutt, who lives alone in a tranquil suburb of San Diego—"the kind of place where you know all your neighbors"—had seen friends fall gravely ill. She also knew that the study needed people from high-risk demographics: over sixty-five, with underlying health conditions. She had high blood pressure. "They need guinea pigs," she said. "I believe in helping people."

A nurse gave Honeycutt an injection. Neither of them knew whether the liquid was a placebo or an experimental vaccine known as mRNA-1273. Developed by the Massachusetts-based biotech company Moderna, the vaccine contains a microscopic chain of messenger RNA, the atom-size instructions for building proteins. No vaccine made from mRNA has ever been licensed for commercial use. After the injection, Honeycutt was kept under observation for thirty minutes, to be sure that it did not trigger an anaphylactic reaction; during that time, the vaccine, if that's what she'd been given, was crossing her cell membranes, into the cytoplasm, where the ribosomes would begin using its code to manufacture a defense against the virus. Honeycutt hoped that she had got the real thing. But, she said, "you don't know. It could be saline."

Honeycutt was one of thirty thousand volunteers nationwide, aged eighteen and older, in Moderna's Phase III trial—the final test of safety and efficacy before a company applies to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for authorization. A Phase III clinical trial for an experimental vaccine is simple, at least in concept. Half the volunteers receive a placebo, and half receive

the vaccine. No one can see who got what except the members of the Data and Safety Monitoring Board, an independent group of experts appointed by the National Institutes of Health. Once a predetermined number of volunteers develop symptomatic cases, the board members take their first peek at the data.

On the morning of November 11th, Moderna announced that it had hit that threshold. A few days later, the Data and Safety Monitoring Board held a call with Moderna's management and N.I.H. officials, telling them that, of ninety-five confirmed cases of *COVID-19* among trial participants, ninety were in the placebo group. Eleven volunteers had developed severe cases; all of them were in the placebo group. The vaccine was nearly ninety-five per cent effective.

Pfizer, working with the Germany-based immunotherapy company BioNTech, was performing similar trials on its own vaccine, with forty-two thousand volunteers. A week earlier, Pfizer had released preliminary data showing that its vaccine was ninety per cent effective. Both companies still had to finish their trials, but the announcements were exciting. Medical experts, including the top doctors at both Pfizer and Moderna, had been hoping that the vaccines would be seventy to eighty per cent effective. "Something like ninety-five per cent was really aspirational," [Anthony Fauci](#), the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, at the N.I.H., said. "Well, our aspirations have been met. And that is really very good news."

The two companies achieved these results in less than four months, an unprecedented pace, without any serious side effects. "It is difficult to convey to those outside the field how extraordinary this achievement has been," Kathleen Neuzil, who is co-leading the federal network that designs and oversees coronavirus-vaccine trials, told me. "The science and manufacturing allowed these vaccines to be developed in weeks, not years." Pfizer and Moderna have since applied to the F.D.A. for emergency-use authorization, which could allow the first doses to be shipped out before the end of the year.

On the evening after Honeycutt got her shot, she signed into an app on her phone to record her temperature and any symptoms. Her arm was sore.

Otherwise, she felt unchanged. Both Moderna's and Pfizer's vaccines require two shots, roughly a month apart. After twenty-eight days, Honeycutt returned to the clinic for a second injection. The next morning, around nine o'clock, she started to get body aches and chills. Her temperature was slightly elevated, at 99.9 degrees. She bundled up and lay on the couch. By noon, her temperature was above a hundred. A few hours later, she felt better, she said, even excited: "I felt like I got the vaccine."

The vaccine that had possibly kick-started Honeycutt's immune system relies on a recent innovation. By now, just about everyone has seen images of the infamous spike protein, which the coronavirus *SARS-CoV-2* uses to fuse to our cells, like a key in a lock. Traditional vaccines inject bits of weakened or inactivated virus, but Moderna's and Pfizer's coronavirus vaccines contain the molecular instructions—the mRNA—for making a replica of the *SARS-CoV-2* spike. When injected into our body, the mRNA orders our cells to start producing spike proteins. Our immune system recognizes these new spike proteins as antigens, foreign invaders, and creates antibodies to neutralize them. Then, if the actual *SARS-CoV-2* virus tries to breach our cells, our body will be prepared.

A crucial development has allowed Pfizer and Moderna to move quickly. The spike protein alters its form once it fuses with a cell in our body; after the lock is opened, the key changes shape. In order for a vaccine to work, it has to present the body with the original key—the spike's delicate, unaltered form—so that the immune system can learn how to keep the lock closed. Several years ago, Barney Graham, the deputy director of vaccine research at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Jason McLellan, a professor at the University of Texas, were investigating another coronavirus, Middle East respiratory syndrome (*MERS-CoV*), in the hope of developing a vaccine. Earlier work on viruses suggested that, if they changed the genetic sequence slightly, the spike would retain its original shape. They tried two mutations on the *MERS* spike protein, which worked, resulting in a potent vaccine. "It was a big moment when we realized that the idea was transferrable from one virus to another," Graham told me.

In 2017, the N.I.H. partnered with Moderna to see how rapidly they could develop an mRNA vaccine if there were a pandemic; they accelerated the effort in mid-2019. Not long afterward, a mysterious cluster of viral

pneumonia cases appeared in the city of [Wuhan, China](#), and their experiment suddenly became real. On January 10th, Chinese researchers published the sequence of the *SARS-CoV-2* genome. The next morning, Graham and his colleagues went to work developing a potential mRNA vaccine, using the stabilizing mutations from their research on *MERS*.

BioNTech, like Moderna, had been experimenting with mRNA vaccines. In late January, when Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's co-founder, realized that *SARS-CoV-2* could cause a pandemic, the company began developing its own vaccine candidate. A few weeks later, Sahin called Kathrin Jansen, the head of vaccine research at Pfizer, and asked if her company would be interested in joining the effort. Jansen said that she had been planning to call him.

The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are more similar than different. In both, the mRNA is encapsulated in a substance called a lipid nanoparticle, a shell of precisely formulated fat, which helps carry the mRNA into our cells. Like nearly every vaccine in use today, they also both require two doses. (The flu shot is a single dose, but a new one is required every year.) The first dose exposes the immune system to the antigen, which creates a population of antibodies that can respond to it. The second dose expands that population. Anyone who catches the coronavirus between the first and second shots—a real risk in a pandemic—would likely have protection from severe disease, but no one knows yet the extent of that protection. Johnson & Johnson is currently testing a coronavirus vaccine, in a trial of sixty thousand people, that could work with just one shot. It might not provide durable protection, however, so in November the company started a second, global Phase III trial that will give two shots to as many as thirty thousand participants.

Thirteen companies worldwide have made it into late-stage, large-scale clinical efficacy trials. Back in April, to coordinate and accelerate this sprawling vaccine-development effort, Peter Marks, the director of the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, at the F.D.A., proposed a moon-shot program that, as a longtime “Star Trek” fan, he dubbed Project Warp Speed. Marks now leads the F.D.A. team that will make the final call on granting emergency-use authorization to the leading vaccine candidates. Acknowledging the stakes, he recalled a line from James Bond, in which the head of M.I.6 says, “This is the big one, 007. Do not screw it up.”

Moncef Slaoui, the former head of vaccine development at GlaxoSmithKline, was eventually appointed the head of what is now known as Operation Warp Speed. The program has so far provided at least twelve billion dollars to pharmaceutical companies for researching, developing, and manufacturing vaccines and drugs, with the biggest contracts awarded to Moderna, Sanofi (which is partnering with GlaxoSmithKline), Novavax, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca. All of them except AstraZeneca are using Graham and McLellan's mutations. According to Graham, the original RNA technology came from Drew Weissman, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, whose work was also heavily funded by the N.I.H. "What do they say?" Graham said. "Success has many fathers, and failure is an orphan."

Pfizer and BioNTech decided not to accept funds from Operation Warp Speed. "I wanted to liberate our scientists from any bureaucracy," Albert Bourla, the C.E.O. of Pfizer, said in [an interview](#) on CBS's "Face the Nation." BioNTech did receive four hundred and forty-five million dollars in funding from the German government, and the two companies signed a contract with Operation Warp Speed to sell their first hundred million doses to the U.S., at a cost of around two billion dollars. They also relied on Graham and McLellan's publicly funded work when they created their vaccine's mRNA sequence.

In trials on mice and monkeys, as well as in Phase I trials on people, Pfizer and Moderna showed that their vaccines were safe and provoked robust immune responses. In May, companies and regulators began to suggest that a vaccine could be ready sooner than expected. "Once we started getting human data, then we really got more confident," Graham said. Pfizer and Moderna began Phase III trials on July 27th. Waiting for enough volunteers to get sick—typically the most time-consuming aspect of a Phase III trial—was not likely to take long: *COVID-19* cases were surging around the country. The companies' stock prices soared as executives sold off their shares.

[Donald Trump](#), too, tried to capitalize on the news. By summer, he was hyping the possibility that a vaccine could be ready before the election, although few public-health experts believed this timeline to be realistic. "You could have a very big surprise coming up," Trump said in a press

conference. “We’re going to have a vaccine very soon, maybe even before a very special date. You know what date I’m talking about.”

Around the time of Trump’s remarks, the *COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence Project*, a nonprofit effort to advise the F.D.A., began conducting focus groups with people most at risk: workers in health care, service, and retail, and members of underrepresented communities. Many respondents were skeptical about the haste with which the vaccines were being developed. “Some of our listening-session participants noted that they would want to wait months, or even years, before choosing to receive a vaccine,” Susan Winckler, the C.E.O. of the Reagan-Udall Foundation, which is leading the project, said. In an online presentation, Winckler shared direct quotes from the respondents, a Greek chorus of worry: “When I hear the F.D.A. say they have a particular process, but then I hear the White House say they can cut that in half or negate it, it brings more distrust”; “I am suspicious that they are trying to get it out before the election”; “A lot of people don’t trust the people who are making the vaccine because they are politically motivated, and we are all a bunch of guinea pigs.”

Bourla, the Pfizer C.E.O., had an idea to quell some of these concerns. In early September, he and Sahin, of BioNTech, flew to Austria in a Pfizer jet to visit a vaccine-manufacturing facility. During the flight, Sahin said, they talked about the issue of public trust, and the risk that the vaccines “could be politicized, and how to react to that.” Bourla suggested that all the front-runners in the vaccine race publish an open letter, reaffirming their commitment to safety, scientific rigor, and ethics. Sahin thought that this was a great suggestion.

When Bourla returned to the U.S., he called Fauci, who told me that he strongly encouraged the pledge. Bourla rallied seven other companies, all of which were involved with Operation Warp Speed, and were likely aware that President Trump’s wish to hasten the arrival of a vaccine was creating the impression that developers were taking shortcuts. “You can feel if the public gets insecure about what is going on,” Sahin said. It seemed critical to be transparent about “the independence of this process from any political influence.”

On September 8th, Pfizer, BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, Sanofi, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, and Novavax released a joint pledge to “stand with science,” to make the “safety and well-being” of vaccinated individuals their “top priority,” and to “adhere to high scientific and ethical standards” for clinical trials and manufacturing. “So the pledge was ‘Let’s not try to jump the gun,’ ” Fauci told me. The race for a vaccine was becoming as much a public-relations effort as a scientific one.

A week and a half later, Moderna and Pfizer published their trial blueprints, which are usually kept secret until a vaccine study is complete. But the possibility that Pfizer might file for an emergency-use authorization before the election created more controversy. In the past hundred years, the F.D.A. has never granted an emergency-use authorization for a new vaccine. To address the public’s concerns, the agency issued updated guidelines on October 6th, asking drugmakers to collect two months of safety data following the second injection before applying for an authorization. This made the possibility of a preëlection vaccine almost nil. Trump was outraged, and attempted to block the guidelines’ release, a move that was widely condemned. In an abrupt reversal, the guidelines were cleared the next day. Still, the President tweeted, “New FDA Rules make it more difficult for them to speed up vaccines for approval before Election Day. Just another political hit job!”

To many observers, the F.D.A.’s guidelines represented the bare minimum of what was necessary to insure a safe and effective vaccine. The World Health Organization has advocated for no less than three months of safety data. Most side effects will occur in the first two to three months, so two months of follow-up safety data “is pretty much a base case,” Scott Gottlieb, Trump’s former F.D.A. commissioner, who sits on Pfizer’s board of directors, said. “It’s a short time frame, but it’s appropriately aggressive given the circumstances.” Doran Fink, the deputy director of the F.D.A.’s vaccine division, emphasized that the agency had tried to balance two imperatives: “having the amount of safety data that we thought was absolutely necessary” and “not withholding a vaccine that could have an impact.”

Victoria Smith works as a family physician at an outpatient clinic owned by Ochsner Health, a network of hospitals and medical facilities across

Louisiana. Back in March, New Orleans became one of the worst hot spots in the world, with a massive outbreak catalyzed in large part by the annual Mardi Gras celebration. Many of Smith's patients got severely ill. Some died. Since then, Ochsner's academic center has been running studies related to the virus, investigating how it has affected certain communities and how it might be treated. Two days after Pfizer's and Moderna's Phase III trials began nationally, Ochsner's chief academic officer told Smith that his staff had opened enrollment for Pfizer's trial. Smith signed up immediately. She knew that, as an African-American doctor, she could help establish trust in the vaccines. "I wanted to be a model to my patients, to communities of color," she said, "to encourage people to take part."

The companies were encouraged to recruit volunteers that reflected the country's demographics. In late August, Slaoui, the head of Operation Warp Speed, told Moderna's C.E.O., Stéphane Bancel, that the company had to slow down its trial in order to sign up more volunteers from Black and Latino communities, which have had much higher rates of infection and death during the pandemic than white communities have. The concern was not necessarily that physical responses to the vaccine might vary by race. "It was more to assure the public that the vaccine data, when it comes out, is applicable to everybody," Tal Zaks, Moderna's top doctor, told me. Moderna contacted leaders of historically Black universities and other academics with ties to Black and Latino organizations. Slaoui joined a virtual town hall organized by Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, in Atlanta, to ask for help in finding Black volunteers.

Moderna eventually recruited more than seven thousand Americans over the age of sixty-five, and more than five thousand with chronic conditions such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. Thirty-seven per cent of the study's participants were from communities of color, which have historically been underrepresented in clinical research. But, according to a Stat-Harris poll conducted in early October, there remains a significant racial discrepancy in vaccine confidence. Only forty-three per cent of Black Americans said that they would agree to receive a vaccine as soon as one was available, versus fifty-nine per cent of white Americans. "There's a long history in the United States of science being done on people of color and not with them," Smith said. "I'm thinking of the Tuskegee experiment." She continued, "So it is, I

think, the work of our medical and scientific communities to decrease those disparities, but also to understand that mistrust and work to create trust.”

On November 30th, Moderna announced that it had arrived at the end of its trial, with a hundred and ninety-six *COVID-19* cases among more than thirty thousand volunteers. A hundred and eighty-five of the people who got sick had received the placebo, indicating an efficacy rate of ninety-four per cent. All thirty people who got severely ill, including one person who died, were in the placebo group. The data was consistent across age, race, and ethnicity. Among the volunteers who contracted *COVID-19*, twenty-nine identified as Latino, six as Black, four as Asian-American, and three as multiracial; thirty-three were older than sixty-five.

The results were remarkably similar to Pfizer’s, which ultimately achieved an efficacy rate of ninety-five per cent. “The fact that two independent studies, with more than thirty thousand people in each one, both randomized and placebo-controlled, came to the same answer?” John Mascola, the head of the N.I.H. Vaccine Research Center, said. “That really gives you enormous confidence in their information.”

And yet there is still an entrenched anti-vaccination movement to contend with. Falsehoods circulating on social media claim that the vaccines will modify your DNA, and accuse Bill Gates of injecting people with location trackers. Francis Collins, the director of the N.I.H., said, “It is troubling, indeed, to see polls reflecting the vaccine hesitancy of Americans.” He pointed to “a lack of information about what the real details of the vaccine safety and efficacy were,” and “a lot of noise about it and a lot of conspiracy theories that have not helped.” Fauci emphasized the importance of making the public aware of “the transparency and the independence of the process, which I think they may not fully appreciate when they hear things about rushing or influence from the outside.” He noted the role of the Data and Safety Monitoring Boards, and the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, an independent body that holds public meetings to debate safety and efficacy considerations of the F.D.A.’s vaccine-approval process.

During an all-day meeting of the committee, on October 22nd, Archana Chatterjee, the dean of the Chicago Medical School, noted the challenge of

insuring the scientific rigor of vaccine development “in the face of a pandemic that is killing hundreds of thousands of people across the globe.” She continued, “What we’re being asked to do is build this plane as we fly it.” The committee is expected to endorse Pfizer’s request for an emergency-use authorization on December 10th. Marks, the F.D.A. regulator, said that the agency plans to issue a final authorization “days to weeks” later. (The committee will vote on Moderna’s authorization on December 17th.)

For some, that won’t be fast enough. On December 1st, Mark Meadows, Trump’s chief of staff, met with the head of the F.D.A., Stephen Hahn, to discuss why the agency “hadn’t moved faster to grant preliminary approval,” Bloomberg reported. The next day, shortly after regulators in the U.K. granted an emergency-use authorization to Pfizer, Meadows reportedly summoned Hahn back to the White House. According to Mascola, of the N.I.H., there is a simple explanation for the F.D.A.’s timeline: Pfizer has presented “a very large and complex set of data,” and “all that information has to be reviewed.” Investigators must double-check who tested positive for COVID-19, and what follow-ups were conducted to determine the severity of symptoms. “So far we only have Pfizer and Moderna’s word for it,” Mascola said. “What everyone wants is the F.D.A.’s word for it.”

For months, hundreds of thousands of vials of Pfizer’s and Moderna’s vaccines have been sitting in a few manufacturing plants in the United States and Europe. Based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, health-care workers and the elderly or chronically ill—about twenty million people—will be the first to receive a vaccine in the U.S. Scaling up to six hundred million doses—then safely and equitably distributing those doses around the country, and making sure that as many people as possible get a vaccine, including the second shot—is a breathtaking logistical challenge. “Something as simple as a supply chain usually would take five or six years,” Robert Johnson, the director of the Division of Influenza and Emerging Infectious Diseases at the U.S. Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, said. “We’re trying to do it in the course of a few months, with six candidates.”

Pfizer plans to manufacture 1.3 billion doses globally in 2021, but its vaccine must be stored at minus ninety-four degrees Fahrenheit, making mass distribution even more complicated. The company has created dry-ice-

packed shipping containers that can hold some five thousand doses, in two-millilitre glass vials. Once the containers arrive at their destination, they serve as temporary storage units for fifteen days, assuming that they are opened no more than twice a day and that the dry ice is replenished. Each container carries a G.P.S.-enabled thermal sensor that will track its location and temperature. On average, Pfizer will have twenty cargo flights a day carrying vaccines all over the world.

Moderna plans to manufacture between five hundred million and a billion doses globally in 2021. Its vaccine, which can be stored at normal refrigerator temperatures for thirty days, will be easier to distribute. Zaks, the doctor from Moderna, told me that some of the company's earlier efforts required storage at minus ninety-four degrees, but that there was no single "magic trick" that could easily be shared with Pfizer to apply to its vaccine. "It's not a simple sauce," Zaks said. "It is a collection of hundreds of small scientific steps." (The two companies have not collaborated, he added, at least not in any way "that has been publicly disclosed.")

Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccine-trial participants will be tracked for two years. A federal database, the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, already monitors vaccination side effects. The C.D.C. has also created a smartphone-based program called V-SAFE, which will track the health of the roughly twenty million people who receive the first round of vaccines. "Long-term side effects are not common with vaccines," Larry Corey, a virologist and a co-leader of the network overseeing coronavirus-vaccine trials, told me. "But you do need to do surveillance to assure safety."

AstraZeneca, whose vaccine is cheaper to make and easier to store, was expected to be the next developer to file for an authorization. On November 23rd, the company announced that its vaccine candidate was, on average, seventy per cent effective. The results, however, were quickly called into question. The company had combined data from two different clinical trials, in the United Kingdom and Brazil, and from two different dosing regimens. A small group of participants had accidentally been given a half dose for their first shot. In this group, which also didn't include anyone over the age of fifty-five, the vaccine was ninety per cent effective. In the other, much larger group, the vaccine was just sixty-two per cent effective. One AstraZeneca executive called the half-dose accident "serendipity." But many

industry experts saw a troubling lack of transparency, and a need for more data before the vaccine has a chance at authorization in the United States. An AstraZeneca spokesperson said in early December that the company is “continuing to further investigate these findings in order to establish the most effective dosing regimen.”

For nonessential workers and otherwise healthy Americans, all that is known is that a vaccine will likely be available at doctors’ offices and pharmacies sometime in late spring, and that it will be free. In order to achieve herd immunity and halt the pandemic, at least seventy per cent of the population will have to be vaccinated, according to Slaoui, the head of Operation Warp Speed. Only then will social distancing and universal mask-wearing no longer be strictly necessary. Operation Warp Speed has been generous in funding the vaccine’s development, but the rollout has been left to the states, with little federal support or coördination. “We’re talking about vaccinating three hundred million Americans with two doses,” Prashant Yadav, a supply-chain expert at the Center for Global Development, said. “For that, we need more infrastructure investment.”

Much of that effort will fall to the Biden Administration. Manufacturing supplies will be a concern—chemicals for making the vaccines, [glass for vials](#), plastic for syringes, endless blocks of dry ice. The incoming Administration will need to develop outreach campaigns to educate the public, and make sure that local agencies have the resources to hire and train people to administer the vaccine. Hard decisions will also need to be made regarding who gets a vaccine and when. “The first round of high-priority people is somewhat easier,” Rick Bright, an immunologist on the President-elect’s *COVID-19* task force, told me. The real challenge, he said, is choosing who comes next among “the other hundreds of millions of people across our country who are at high risk or have co-morbidities or are essential workers.”

Bright was the director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, until the Trump Administration demoted him in May. He quickly filed a whistle-blower complaint alleging that his “efforts to prioritize science and safety over political expediency” had led to his demotion. (Trump responded by calling Bright a “disgruntled employee.”) “There hasn’t been a lot of transparency from the current Administration

about how complex the challenge is, once the vaccine is produced and pushed out from the factory,” Bright told me. A major difference in the Biden Administration’s approach, he added, was to “let science lead and not politics.”

Honeycutt, the Moderna-trial volunteer, has had no other side effects since receiving her second shot, in September. “Everything is good,” she told me, though her trial contact has said that Moderna will not share who got the vaccine “until sometime later.” Since she began the trial, 8.3 million more COVID-19 cases have been identified in the U.S., and ninety-eight thousand more people have died. “It’s imperative that people get their lives back,” Honeycutt said. “This has been very sad on so many levels.” But, she continued, “I think the fact that we have some people urging swiftness ahead of caution has been detrimental to the whole process. I worked in the sciences. People need rigor in examining data. This is the way science works.” ♦

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

By [Michael Specter](#)

Dept. of Juvenilia

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[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

A Dad-Rocker in the State Department

Back at the Harvard Crimson, Biden’s Secretary of State nominee, Antony Blinken, dreamed of being Lester Bangs.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

December 7, 2020

When Joe Biden tapped Antony Blinken, a veteran of the Obama and Clinton Administrations, to be his Secretary of State, a quick batch of thumbnail bios noted that he was a “guitar aficionado.” Did this mean that he was a connoisseur of the object itself—a collector of fine guitars? Or that he knew a lot about guitar players? Or that he was an ace player himself? The clickbait-industrial complex quickly discovered that Blinken had a Spotify page, with two singles he’d recorded two years ago, under the handle (and pun) Ablinken. So here was another dad-rocker Pro-Tooling his sideline musings and chord changes into presentable foist-it-on-your-friends form. As someone with connections, money, and letterhead, he’d had help along the way. He’d played with Alex Chilton, from Big Star, and Grant Hart, from Hüsker Du, and Jeff (Skunk) Baxter, the session whiz known for his work with Steely Dan and the Doobie Brothers, as well as for his expertise in the field of missile defense. Blinken was also in a band with a couple of journalists and the former Obama spokesman Jay Carney. They had a bad-pun name (Coalition of the Willing) and a nice-ring-to-it genre (wonk rock). The Spotify tracks were called “Lip Service” and “Patience.” Jokes wrote themselves, as they will. One sensed, in the spasm of media excitement at this bit of late-boomer geek normalcy, the giddiness, in microcosm, over a restoration at Foggy Bottom.



Antony Blinken Illustration by João Fazenda

Blinken's friends have been calling the task he faces there "the Great Undoing." Taking on the doings and non-doings of the past four years will be a knotty task, not least because the current Administration has recently kept doing new things, or allowing things to be done, that could be hard to undo. Like most people his age, Blinken, as a pre-Internet kid, presumably has his fair share of non-undoable but hard-to-dig-up juvenilia. But some of it has made the digital leap. In the early eighties, at Harvard, Blinken wrote dozens of columns in the *Crimson* about politics and foreign affairs. His collegiate opining should not imperil a Senate confirmation; he was no radical firebrand or real-life Alex P. Keaton. His hottest take, not unprescient, was that the Olympics, owing to cost and politics, should be permanently relocated to Switzerland.

One also finds, interspersed with Council on Foreign Relations boilerplate, a few instances of rock criticism: juvenilia's juvenilia. Here was the future diplomat as aspiring Lester Bangs. He didn't gut anyone; he didn't pull a Jon Landau, who at Blinken's age boldly swatted down Jimi Hendrix in *Rolling Stone*. This was 1981-82, an odd in-between era for rock music. As Blinken, a Beatles and blues man, wrote, also not unpresciently, "Record sales are way down, new and true talent rare, and it takes prehistoric monsters like Fleetwood Mac and Crosby, Stills and Nash to deliver the goods." Nor was this period a career peak for the artists he took up: Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, the Who. (It may have been one for his lone comer, Marshall Crenshaw.) Still, Blinken would contribute more to the genre than any of his future predecessors at State. There is no record of Mike Pompeo or Warren Christopher going to the mat for Tiny Tim or Deep Purple. Perhaps they didn't know that if you wrote reviews the labels sent you freebies.

The Who album Blinken wrote up was "It's Hard"—no "Tommy," but it had a few bangers. He began, "I remember in agonizing detail a crush I had my second year of high school. After class, I would go home and release the pent-up frustration of unrequited love with my stereo. One track in particular spun over and over again on the turntable: 'Bargain' by The Who. As the music blasted forth, I would listen to Roger Daltrey and pretend his golden throat was mine. In my dream, the brown-eyed girl would sit entranced while I half sang, half shouted Pete Townshend's lyrics. . . . Then, charmed by my earnestness she would fall into my arms. The dream, alas, was never

more than just that—a dream. But The Who were always an impossible-to-ignore reality.”

The previous spring, he’d written, of Lou Reed’s latest, “‘The Blue Mask’ is the work of a mature artist.” The record was Reed’s turn away from the avowed queerness of his earlier solo work and toward an oddly timed celebration of heterosexuality and the straight married life. “Reed, a veteran of a difficult business and a difficult era, could easily have become a cynic with age,” Blinken wrote. “But instead of displaying unalloyed disgust, Reed confronts us with a touchingly realistic album that tempers anger with hope.”

Blinken also demonstrated a diplomat’s knack for conciliation in his review of Dylan’s “Shot of Love,” the last in his born-again trilogy. Critics had whacked Dylan around for his muddled pieties, but Blinken, the stepson of a Holocaust survivor, cut him some slack. “While we do not have to agree with his every word, we should at least respect his right to be his own man,” Blinken wrote. “Bob Dylan is no man’s lackey.”

After Thanksgiving, Blinken posted a new track on Spotify, called “Without Ya.” It’s about a woman, naturally, but the timing of the upload, and a few of the lyrics—“Must be light along the way/Lead us to a brand new day”—could lead one to wonder if it’s a statement of purpose, too. Hope, with a little anger. ♦

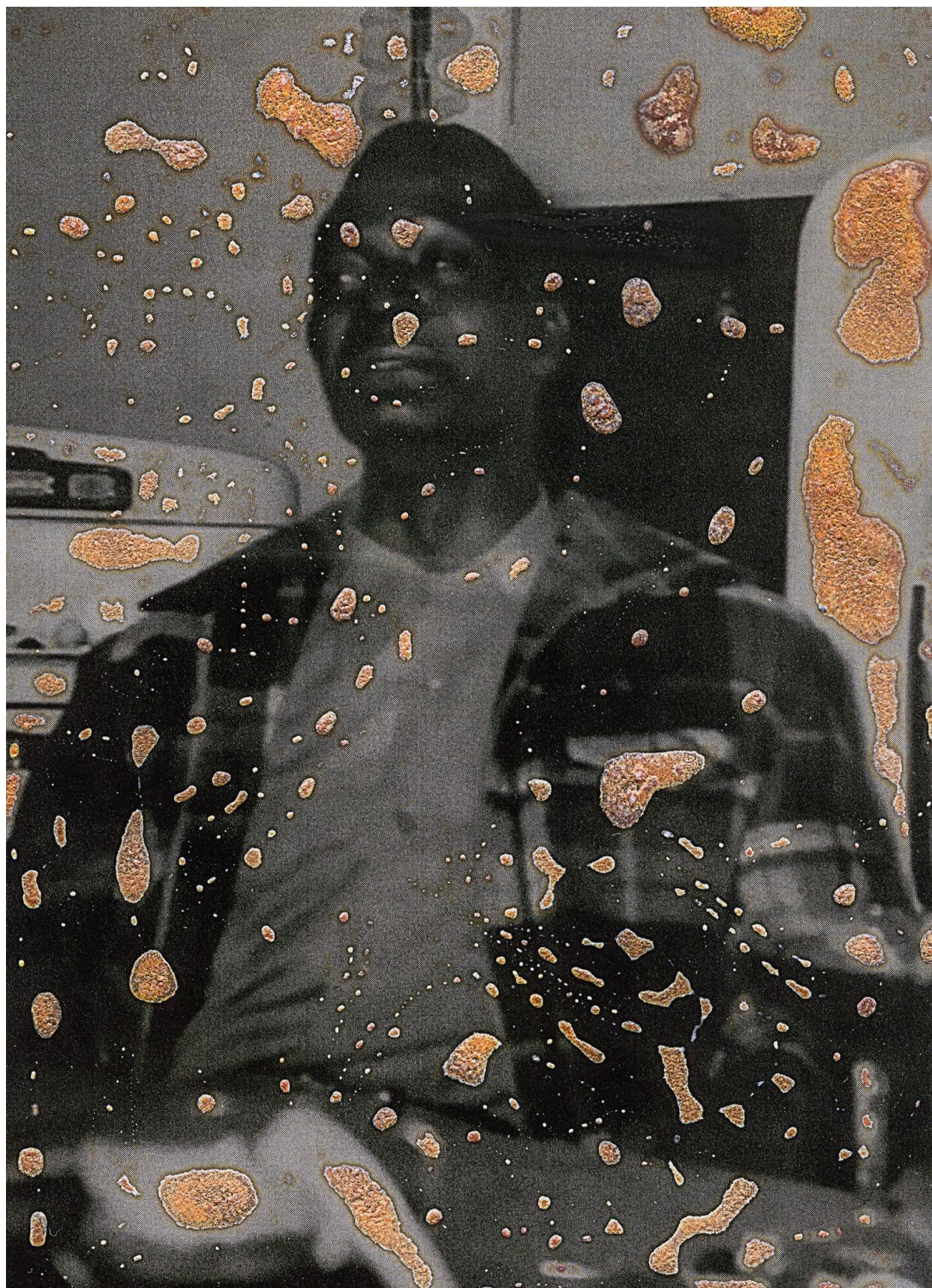
Fiction

- [“Rwanda”](#)

Rwanda

By [John Edgar Wideman](#)

December 7, 2020



I.

More a game than a question, he thinks. Then thinks maybe not much difference between games and questions. He decides to call it a thought experiment when he tries it out on a friend. If he can find a friend willing to play. Friend he wants to play with. He's old. Few friends left. A stranger might do. Start the experiment by asking: If you were one of those in charge of running the world and you learned in secret from unimpeachable sources that life on earth is going to terminate abruptly, very soon, within weeks, months, six months at most, if such incontrovertible information existed and you had the power to reveal it or keep it hidden, would you inform the public.

Thought experiment goes on from there as one question leads to another. If, for instance, politicians in power were now certain that the deadly plague we are experiencing these days means that all life will soon, very soon cease, no exceptions, no reprieves, no second acts, no escape, would they announce or withhold the news. Why. Who would benefit or suffer. Would those leaders you imagine, or would you, yourself, be governed by a moral, ethical imperative that outweighs all other considerations: to tell the truth. Do you trust anyone in authority. How would people react if such awful news were made public. Would chaos erupt. Total anarchy, panic. A violent, uncontrollable, global orgy of immediate self-gratification. Everybody determined to snatch whatever they can before it's too late. Constrained only by the fear of other people's strength and violence. Law of the jungle prevailing—eat or be eaten. Or would some of us stay on the job, attempt to maintain a semblance, at least, of order.

He would argue that everybody, whether conscious of it or not, engages in a version of the thought experiment daily. Because, of course, deep down, we all are aware life is temporary, and that anybody is liable to die the next instant. Which means each morning as we awaken and open our eyes and begin sleepwalking into our usual routines, we choose either to confront or to suppress the dirty secret of mortality. For obvious reasons, most of us choose not to start the day by reminding ourselves of our utter vulnerability.

But issues raised by his thought experiment—death, time, truth, responsibility—impossible to ignore or resolve, he's sure. Sure that his

responses to those issues are unsatisfactory and incriminating. And just as sure that his evil habit of taking advantage of others won't be cured by nattering away in so-called *thought experiments*. As the ultimate authority in the only world he can even pretend to run, he must admit, he reminds himself, that he exploits rather than shares his knowledge of the end. In this fragile place with everybody passing through faster than the speed of light, with the end never more than a heartbeat (or lack of one) away, what rules apply. None. Isn't that what he has convinced himself of. No rule except pleasing himself. His actions speaking louder than any thought experiment's words. Acting as if the certainty of everybody's imminent disappearance exempts him from responsibility.

Time. Less of it the older he gets. Very little, next to nothing left now, so why does he worry so much more now about time. Why does time frighten him. More time or less time equally unsettling. Though it feels as if it unfolds endlessly, time always relative, unquantifiable. Always limited. Not guaranteed no matter how precisely people attempt to measure, ignore, worship, save, anticipate, or prolong it. Time not something he can count or count on. Time mysterious and brief as any next instant that he imagines will follow the briefly present instant already lost. He doesn't possess time. Time possesses him. Locks him up like his brother serving a life sentence in prison.

Ahh . . . all these deaths. Ahhhh . . . all these deadly days. He can't help it. What's inside him sneaks out loud as a pitiful groan. Are these dire days (didn't his mother warn him they were near at hand) the Biblical Last Days. He's positive lately, his feeling sharp and unambiguous as a nail through the bottom of a bare foot, that the Last Days have been entered upon, but, to spite the vanity of the virulent, all-conquering virus ravaging the city, he keeps his feeling secret.

Careful, Uncle. Careful you don't get hit by a car, walking around up there in the big city having one those deep conversations like you do with your own self, she hollers at him. His smart pretty niece, a gift by way of a smart pretty niece, her mother. He missed them. Mother and daughter. Missed all his people. Only phone calls. Couple a month or so. His people far away. Too many gone for good now. Dead and gone. Seldom sees the ones left. Too bad. He likes his pretty niece. She likes him back, no doubt. She'd be a

perfect partner for the thought experiment. Next time he sees her he'll try to get her attention. She's the sort of person who might understand what enormous power anybody holds in their hands when they consider seriously the issues his thought experiment examines.

But an irony lurks within the thought experiment, always threatening to emerge and spoil the fun. With the end just around the corner, why bother to share thoughts with anyone. Why pretend anybody's responses are worth discussing. Or mean much. Or matter at all. Knowing the end on its way, and not knowing how to change it, what's the point of making up more stories, writing them or reading them.

He instructs himself to ignore the irony and try to draw out his favorite niece anyway. Woo her to talk about what she might do if she knew the world about to end. Should he remind her of Rwanda. Warn her about the terrible old man. Colored man he followed home and watched undress.

Why Rwanda. Because the horrors, sweet girl, unleashed in Rwanda, expose the stakes, the power and chaos, that the thought experiment confronts. Rwanda a country whose authorities announced the end of the world coming immediately. In days or weeks at most, life on earth would be finished unless certain Rwandans, designated by Rwandan officials as the cause, as agents responsible for the dreadful obliteration of all existence, are removed immediately. Hurry, hurry, the government said. Not a moment to spare.

An old, colored American man was summoned by Rwandan officials to do work in Rwanda, he would tell her. A man who is our ancient enemy but poses as a friend. For centuries, that man has been convinced of colored people's worthlessness. It shames him and he is ashamed of us. A traitor. Fattens himself consuming the flesh of others. He can never be trusted. His treachery unforgivable.

When the man returned home from his mission in Rwanda, I crouched one night outside his window. Watched the old fucker undress. Dim light. No naked glare of a single, lynched bulb like burns in the cell of my brother, your uncle. Near darkness O.K. with me. Kept me invisible to him, and I sure didn't want to see too much of a deteriorating old man. His movements encumbered by age. Yet he also resembled an obedient child as he went

about his business as kids do, attentively, earnestly, endeavoring to imitate their elders. To earn their praise, obtain their permission, the bounties they grant. Doomed forever to spy on others, spy on himself. To report progress or lack thereof to his superiors in their language he'd been taught to mimic.

In Rwanda, the old man had been first passenger off the plane. Got weeks of work in before the other commissioners disembarked and passed streamlined through customs. He was expected. No. He had been on the ground waiting. Been there before. Always. Never departed. His presence necessary. To authorize, facilitate slaughter. Argue justness. Righteousness. God's will. Proclaim the urgent necessity to eliminate fellow-citizens. Not a visitor. Home. Home boy. Home again. Honorary *Interahamwe*. *Impuzamugambi*. Machete ready in hand. Government-sponsored radio voices in the run-up to the executions had borrowed his gravity. His long-dead, once youthful spirit pranced onstage at rallies. Cheerleading killings. His expensive shoes splashed through blood, splintered bones.

Weary and decrepit, back home long enough to forget he had ever left, the man hangs up a grayish suit, embalmed stiff by dry-cleaning fluids. Submits each gesture for scrutiny, approval. Brown man, colored like him. Sufferer. Suffered. He listens to him breathe, to sounds of him farting. Spares himself the smell. A coon-aged coon honored by being appointed to a delegation invited to investigate, twenty-five years after the fact, Rwanda's genocide. Crimes of, by, for its people. Rewarded for his decades of labor in America's gulags—hard work, impeccably high standards, a guard many years, then assistant warden, a warden twice, chair of board of pardons and parole, expert witness, judge, jury, executioner—you name it—old man had been there, done that. Loyal. Steady. Unflinching. Why wouldn't Rwandans be happy to host him, toast him, solicit his advice and benefit from his lifetime of service, experience, knowledge, etc. . . . of incarceration, the incarcerated . . . etc. Him singled out, rewarded for achievement, for persevering in his chosen trade just as your uncle has been rewarded in the writing trade he practices, even granted permission to publish an occasional book. Lucky and colored . . . etc. Despite or because of color . . . etc. What's the difference.

Should he tell his niece how sorely he was tempted to throttle the man that afternoon when he conjured up just the two of them alone in the men's room

of a Rwandan courthouse. Disappointed himself, when he didn't finish him off then and there. When the hateful old man's time up, wouldn't his moans for morphine or death be music to my ears, he thinks. *Mehr Licht* the last words attributed to a dying Goethe. German words, niece, meaning "more light," and still sounding a bit like *Mehr Licht* when translated into English. *More dark*, that old darkie will gasp. Darkness to hide him, to cover up his fears, his rage, his betrayals, his shame.

But no point, he had decided that day in a faraway courthouse, no point in killing a nasty old man. Tutsi corpses don't return to life no matter how high the piles of Hutu corpses. Or vice versa.

At home in his bedroom, old-man eyes stare into emptiness between remembered/forgotten steps of untying his tie, loosening laces, removing shoes, rolling down crusty-toed, silk socks. Why commit a crime, he had asked himself. Risk his freedom killing the bastard when surely disease will rot his old body and perform a more impeccable, patient, subtle, sustained, excruciating assassination than he could ever hope to achieve.

Story of any country's citizens massacring fellow-citizens is many stories coming true, he will say to his niece. Also many stories becoming untrue. Yours. Ours. Thought experiments. Many stories redone. Stories crucified. Halal. Kosher. Bled white. Sanctified. Eaten. Goodness born inside each person along with evil, my dear, but goodness doesn't prosper like evil prospers. The woes an old, naked man—warden, keeper of the flame, keeper of coloreds, fellow-colored, colored fellow—has inflicted upon others defy words. Best revenge not to take his life, but to wish more years on him. Life everlasting interrupted daily, every hour on the hour, by death of one thousand self-inflicted cuts.



HOOK

"Honey, are you doomscrolling again?"

Maybe more mercy than he deserves, his niece or someone else might suggest. Too much mercy for a person who remains, until their dying day, willing to abuse others. How many times to please himself had he, like the old man, violated another person's trust. Acted as if he knew the world going to end in a quick minute and no consequences that matter would follow his actions. As if whatever comes next could never matter more than the sweet pleasure of pretending no tomorrow for him or his victim to fret about. No questions asked. No hesitation. Just a game, after all.

Of course, more than contempt had motivated him to spy through a window on an evil old colored man fumbling around in a dark room. Whose story was he attempting to tell anyway. To whom. He already understood more than enough about the man. Knows him much too well. Bitter, bitter knowledge. Studies him because he fears him. And you should fear him, too, girl, he will say. Always, he will say. Beware. Beware. Sorry as I am to admit it, dear heart, yours truly is very much like him. Both of us men who should know better. No excuse. Way, way, way too greedy. Too busy. Way too selfish. Too accomplished at getting what we want. Everything. Nothing. No matter who or how many we destroy.

II.

A few days ago on his early-morning walk—no risk of getting hit by a car, sweet niece—dawn and streets more quiet and deserted than usual, even at dawn, even during the unnatural calm of lockdown and sequestering the city has imposed upon its residents to slow the spread of an epidemic sickenning and killing thousands. He'd encountered almost no people, no traffic. Nearly absolute silence on streets leading to the walkway along the East River.

Close to the water's edge, he turned left, headed uptown, in the direction of Harlem, not on the paved, guardrailed, concrete walkway, but on a path through growing things—grass, bushes, shrubs, moss, flowers, weeds, trees—life someone had the good sense to preserve or plant and create park-like stretches paralleling the river. On his side of tall, black cyclone fences that protected tennis courts, running tracks and ball fields, he saw the same discarded paperback book he had been noticing for a couple days, a pale, bulky lump still lying there atop late-May grass, near the mud-colored path

scuffed into brown earth by many, many footsteps, the skittering trail he was negotiating, only a bit wider than a shoe length, mile of path, improvised about a yard away from fifteen-foot-high black wire fences. Curiosity he had managed to resist on previous sightings won this time. He stopped, used a foot to turn it over, and discovered the book's title, "Snow," on its torn cover, a novel by coincidence he happened to have read, its author a famous Turkish writer, and he was trying hard to remember the writer's name, remember more about the book, unable to take another step until he forced himself to remember more, embarrassed, ashamed when he couldn't. Silence of the morning, stillness of the streets on his way to the East River all he could recall.

Then snow. Instantly the green grass, the brown earth, the book are buried under whiteness. Huge snowflakes filling the air around him. If it had been a scene he read in the novel's pages, he might have dismissed it as "magical realism." But no, it was not words. No. Snow present. Snow a deluge of giant flakes slowly descending, snow dropping into the East River, turning edges of water into icy sheets, snow beginning to obscure tall towers—most completed, some under construction, crowned by skeletal arms of cranes—looming a half mile away on the river's opposite bank, snow falling until it buries that distant cityscape and all the buildings disappear.

Will he ever be able to express to her (or maybe she already understands—smart pretty niece by way of smart pretty niece—and maybe she will help him understand better) the painful complicity of inhabiting a world that holds his imprisoned brother, and holds another who *is* a prison.

III.

Not exactly reparations, I say to my brother during the second phone call to me he's been permitted after a hearing that denied parole, an old colored man (is he a soul brother of the bête noire my dreams spy on) presiding. My brother turned down for the fifth straight year since he became eligible, after twenty-five years, to apply once a year for parole. Not exactly reparations, I smile and wag my head, though my brother can't see me do it nor do I quite hear his little laugh nor see that smart-aleck smirk that wrinkles up my brother's face since he was twelve. Silence on the other end of the phone line connecting us, him trapped inside, me trapped outside stone walls, but I

keep talking, carefully of course, since our conversations are monitored and my words can be used against him. Say the story I saw on the NBC Nightly News not exactly reparations after four hundred years of damage, but maybe a step in the right direction. Whadda you think, man. Story the feel-good bit in these godawful times Lester always tacks on at the end of each broadcast. A project in a laundromat to teach preschool ghetto kids to read. Good idea, huh, though maybe a better idea, the best idea, just to stop pretending altogether they give a fuck. Excuse me. Give a damn. Probably my own bad mood as much as anything else, bro, but that piece made me so mad, so ashamed, I wanted to scream. Cry. Enslavement a terrible crime—just about everybody concedes that fact today—but all the victims and perpetrators dead, we’re told, if we ask. Not spoken about if no one asks. America’s gaping, cosmic black hole and here they come with another Band-Aid to patch it. Cringed when I saw those video clips of kids listening to grownups read, kids spozed to be learning to read inside some ugly fuck . . . damn laundromat in a raggedy-ass neighborhood. Let it bleed, I thought. Better to let it bleed. All of us falling one day, sucked into a black hole, but some of us encumbered with all the shit they’ve stolen will fall through faster, and the rest of us left behind, separated a blessed minute from those ruthless, greedy, toxic thieves at last, and maybe then at the end we might get a little smidgen of peace then.

Laundromat. Yeah. Yeah. Huge, barn-ass, noisy room and preschoolers stuck there anyway on wash day with mamas or grandmamas or aunts or big sis or whoever washes everybody’s clothes so why not. It’s available, cheap, plenty clients on hand regularly. Just bring in a couple volunteers and organize the locals, encourage them to read to the little burr-heads instead of just sitting around half the day smoking dope or doing nothing while all those machines rumbling, tumbling. Why not get the women involved who spawn too many colored kids. Teach them to sit their babies down and read to them instead of letting them run wild inside a filthy laundromat. And if mama missed that alphabet class in school, teach mama the alphabet, too. Makes perfect sense in a way. You know. Like, yes, please give our children a little extra head-start push. So niggers don’t fail because they start out—first day in kindergarten—far behind other kids. Except everybody knows ain’t no rule says niggers got to catch up. Four hundred years and we ain’t caught up yet.

Makes sense and no sense. Teaching ghetto kids to read a couple hours a week in some loud, crowded, funky laundromat, bro. As if it's the best school the richest country on earth can afford for them. What kind of fucking catch-up is that. Four hundred years and counting of starting out unequal. That amounts to some serious left-behind. Four hundred years' worth. And we spozed to catch up while our clothes getting clean. Why not slam up every single colored one of us into laundromats and lock the doors. Only let out a few, now and then. Ones who read well.

IV.

She sticks the check from her uncle back in its envelope, envelope in her bag to deposit next day in the bank after work. Money her uncle sent for her other uncle, the one she's seen only a few times in life, and never outside prison, where he's been since before she was born, money her uncle had asked her to begin taking charge of this year, money in a lump sum he sends for her to dispense to his brother, her uncle said, both to connect her more closely with her imprisoned uncle and to encourage more visits to the prison, his hope. Requesting that she dole out to his brother in small, regular amounts the money he sends her, either when she visits and can put cash directly into a prison account or JPay it through Internet, the second option equally available to her college-educated uncle wherever he is, she's tempted to remind him, though he always claims the Internet "befuddles him." Smallish portions, he schools her. Best not to forward too much money at one time because my younger sibling has a fondness for gambling and we don't want to tempt him, do we, dear heart, my uncle said. Little bro's fondness for risk and his boundless optimism insure he'll keep chasing after other folks' bad money until he loses all the little taste of good money in his hand, my uncle says, talking over the phone in that odd, elaborate way of his she thinks he must be as fond of as he claims his younger brother fond of gambling.

Her uncle had asked her once, Do you truly believe you're colored. Hey. Don't be looking at me all cross-eyed, young lady. A serious question. Do you, we, all of us still believe we are colored just because they keep telling us we are. Colored. Different. A damned shame.

Her odd uncle, book writer, wanderer, seldom in town. Her dead mom's uncle, really, Grandma's older brother. Her dead mom her grandma's eldest daughter, the man's actual niece, and that makes her what—great-niece, niece-in-law, second niece—whatever to this man she's standing next to on her grandmother's porch and always called Uncle since she was a baby, the wannabe front porch not much larger than a final step up to Grandma's house. Her house, too. For many years, she and her mom, after her beautiful mom got divorced, got sick, living there with Granddaddy and Grandma, her grandma who still misses a lost daughter seven years gone, mourns her lost daughter as fiercely, unconsolably, it seems and does not seem possible, as she does, daughter of that lost daughter who misses and mourns her mom, yes she does, still does very much, especially now, on this narrow, crooked front porch where she stands in the dark after family had gathered to talk and eat and drink themselves holiday-silly and each one finally at this late hour has had more than enough and begins peeling away into smaller family groups. Or a few, like her, alone, though her uncle beside her now, middle of the night, isn't it, and dangerous out there in the streets, and Uncle makes it his habit, whenever he's around, to escort each solitary family female outdoors, a sentinel on the porch until she's locked in her car, motor running, lights on and car rolls off, up or down the dark, steep hillside upon which his sister's house perches. Uncle there, bodies lightly touching when his arm goes round her shoulders and he leans down, kisses her cheek, and if her cheek just a wee bit higher or he leaned lower, his lips might have brushed hers, but didn't, no lip brushing because she's tough like her mom, though also unafraid like her, and believes, like her mom did, neither in sin, nor in everlasting romance of any mouth, uncle or anybody else on her mouth, knows better, raised better by her dead mom who nods gently, whispers best not, of course not, girl, best go on and get your behind down those treacherous slabs of broken concrete that serve as steps up and down from the sidewalk to your grandma's red front door. Glad now she chose sneakers and jeans not heels and dress for the family party. Don't break your butt, girl, careful, careful now, get yourself down step by step till your feet on solid street and your car door locked, and you got yourself sitting behind the wheel, girl.

Her uncle tall. Not as tall as tall, gorgeous Riley. Thirty smiling foot of Riley in skimpy running shorts, T-shirt, fanciest of training shoes posterized for months up on a wall next to Kmart entrance to the mall. Liked Riley lots.

Maybe still with him. Maybe if he shared fewer of those dumb notions guys his age, especially fine ones like finest Riley, share. *Gimme some. Get me some. Cop me a piece of pussy.* What in the world did they think we carry around down there between our legs, her mom asked once, think we can break off and wrap it up and send it home with them or they can grab and show off to their friends.

Her uncle had asked her, If you found out, a secret, no doubt about it, world going to end very, very soon, would you tell other people. With that knowledge buzzing around in your brain, my dear, what would you do. Then her uncle had stopped talking. Stopped explaining experiments or games, stopped asking questions. Looked at her. Waited. Waited. As if he expected an answer. Since she had no idea what to reply, she asked him, What would you do, Uncle. He smiled at her, then closed his eyes and whispered, If I knew sure enough the world about to end, think I'd probably kidnap you, girl, and run far away with you, and my, my, wouldn't that be a trip, and wouldn't people talk.

And she had smiled back, smile deep as his smile because she believed her old uncle just talking, just teasing. Long, long way for both of them to go. ♦

L.A. Postcard

- [A California Councilwoman's Quest to Keep Restaurants Open](#)

December 14, 2020 Issue

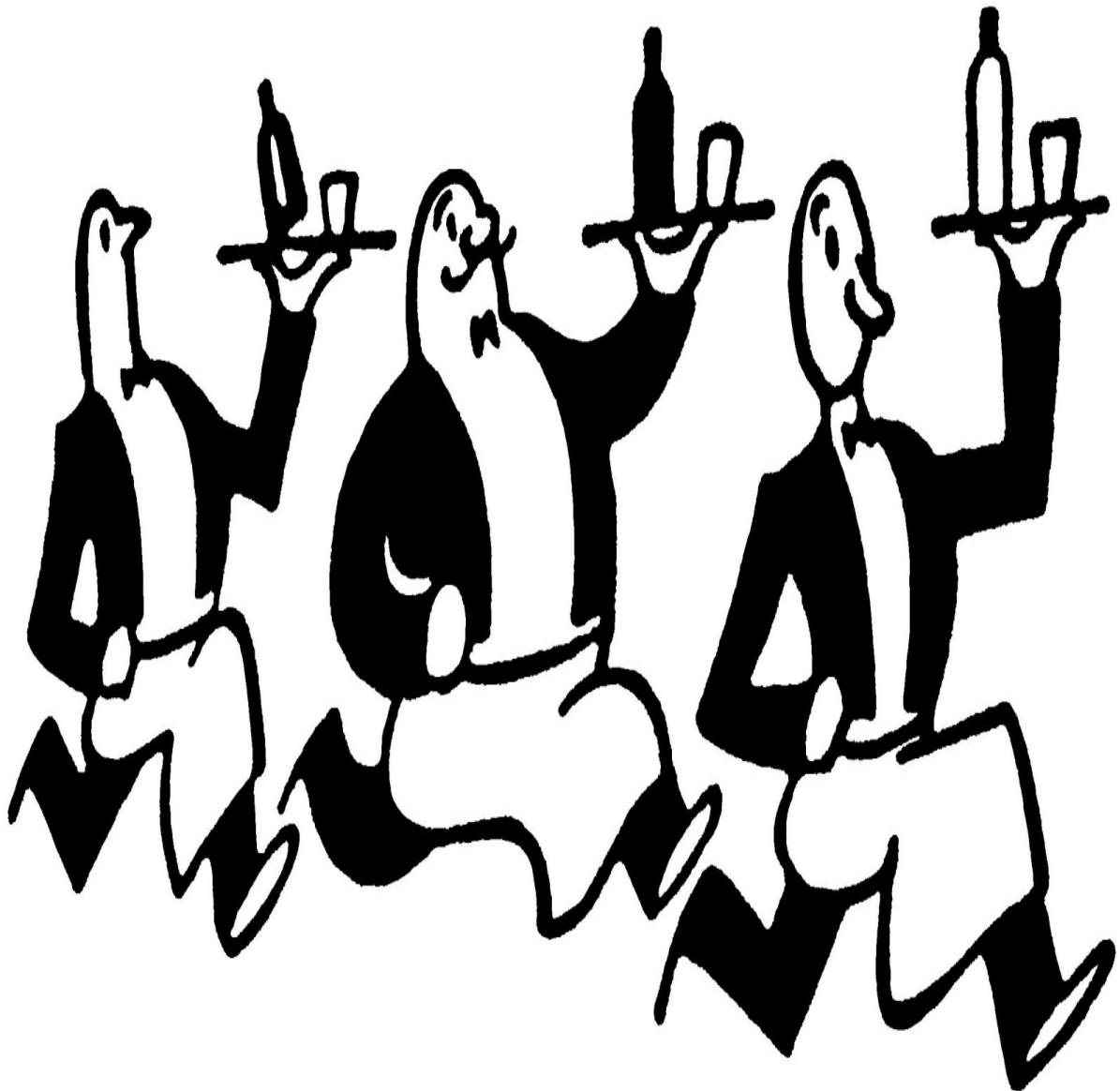
A California Councilwoman's Quest to Keep Restaurants Open

Monica Rodriguez is determined to overturn a ban on outdoor dining among the palm trees and heat lamps of L.A.

By [Sheila Marikar](#)

December 7, 2020

Two days before Thanksgiving, while many Americans were home spatchcocking turkeys, Monica Rodriguez, a member of the Los Angeles City Council, dashed off an emergency resolution to stop a ban on outdoor dining that was set to go into effect the following day. The government had offered no data to back up the notion that eating outside increases the spread of *COVID-19*, and Rodriguez, a Democrat and the first woman to represent L.A.'s seventh district (deep valley, taquerias and take-out joints), noted that seven hundred thousand jobs were at stake. She called on the county to reconsider, and to "reserve the tightest restrictions for activities that data prove are the leading causes of outbreaks."



“Like, everybody that went out to celebrate the Dodger game,” she said the next day, on a video call, or “churches still holding gatherings without proper protective gear.” She had a salt-and-pepper bob and wore large tortoiseshell glasses. She called the application and enforcement of the county’s *COVID* restrictions “inconsistent,” and added, “It’s frustrating as all hell.” She cited New York City, where her husband was born, as a model for how restaurants should function. “I saw some of the tents on Instagram,” she said, referring to the sidewalk bubbles in which New York restaurants are serving meals. “I thought, Oh, my God, look at what they’re doing, and how quickly they’re doing it. It was phenomenal.”

Rodriguez’s resolution passed eleven to three in the L.A. City Council and (as of last Friday) is awaiting a response from the mayor. But the outdoor-dining ban will be in place for a minimum of three weeks (indoor dining has been banned since July), and any loosening of restrictions will have to be approved by the county. Rodriguez has asked the county to provide data to support the ban. Restaurants, she said, “were operating all summer, and we didn’t have a problem. So I want to understand: how do we all of a sudden have a problem now?” Last week, a judge ordered county health officials to provide scientific evidence justifying the ban. (At least one county supervisor who supported the ban seems conflicted: hours after Sheila Kuehl called outdoor dining “a most dangerous situation,” she dined on the patio of a Santa Monica Italian restaurant.)

Rodriguez, who is forty-six, grew up in the San Fernando Valley and started working for the city at twenty, interning at city hall. Prior to being elected to the city council, in 2017, she was the vice-president of L.A.’s board of public works. In that role she worked with restaurateurs, helping the owners of Jon & Vinny’s navigate sidewalk dining, and expediting the opening of Petit Trois, a Hollywood bistro helmed by the French chef Ludo Lefebvre. (“He was, like, ‘Zee city permeets ees terrible,’ ”she recalled.) In 2014, Rodriguez and her husband met Doug Rankin, Lefebvre’s director of culinary operations. “She’s the only person I know that’s in the conversation,” Rankin said. “I can reach out and be, like, ‘Hey, what the fuck’s going on?’ ”



"I think we can do without that, Eddie."

Cartoon by Mort Gerberg

Last fall, the restaurateur Jeff Ellermeyer asked Rankin to be the executive chef of a French bistro in Silver Lake. (It's called Bar Restaurant, to the chagrin of the uninitiated who Google it.) On the final night of outdoor dining before the ban took effect, Rankin wistfully surveyed the more than two dozen patrons lingering at tables set out in the parking lot of Bar Restaurant. He wore a navy-blue apron and a face mask, which he lowered, intermittently, to sip from a tumbler of extra-dirty Martini. In July, Ellermeyer had spent ten thousand dollars on heat lamps, potted olive trees, and outdoor speakers. "Plus all the gear—fucking thermometers and shit," Rankin said. "When you're asked to do everything, and you comply, and then complying is still not enough." He shook his head. "If they told me, 'Shut down for three weeks, we're gonna give you P.P.P. again, and make sure your people are paid'—cool." He added, "By the way, show me the data that says we should shut down, first of all."

Behind him, an engine revved, and he turned around to address the driver, who was one of his sous-chefs. "You're leaving?" Rankin asked. "All right, buddy, I'll see you soon." He turned back and explained, "That's one of my right-hand guys. What we realized, after doing the math, is that we can only keep three of the four of us in the kitchen, even at a reduced rate. We had to have the conversation about who was in the best position in their life to be furloughed." The sous-chef's girlfriend works from home. The rest, including Rankin, are breadwinners. "He made the decision to furlough himself," Rankin said. "You know how hard it is to have a conversation like that with people? Like, 'Hey, who's losing their job?' "

"For me, what's weird about the whole thing is that it's kind of skewed my political views a little bit," he went on. "Like, *am I* a Democrat? Because if this is what that is, I'm not into it." ♦

On Television

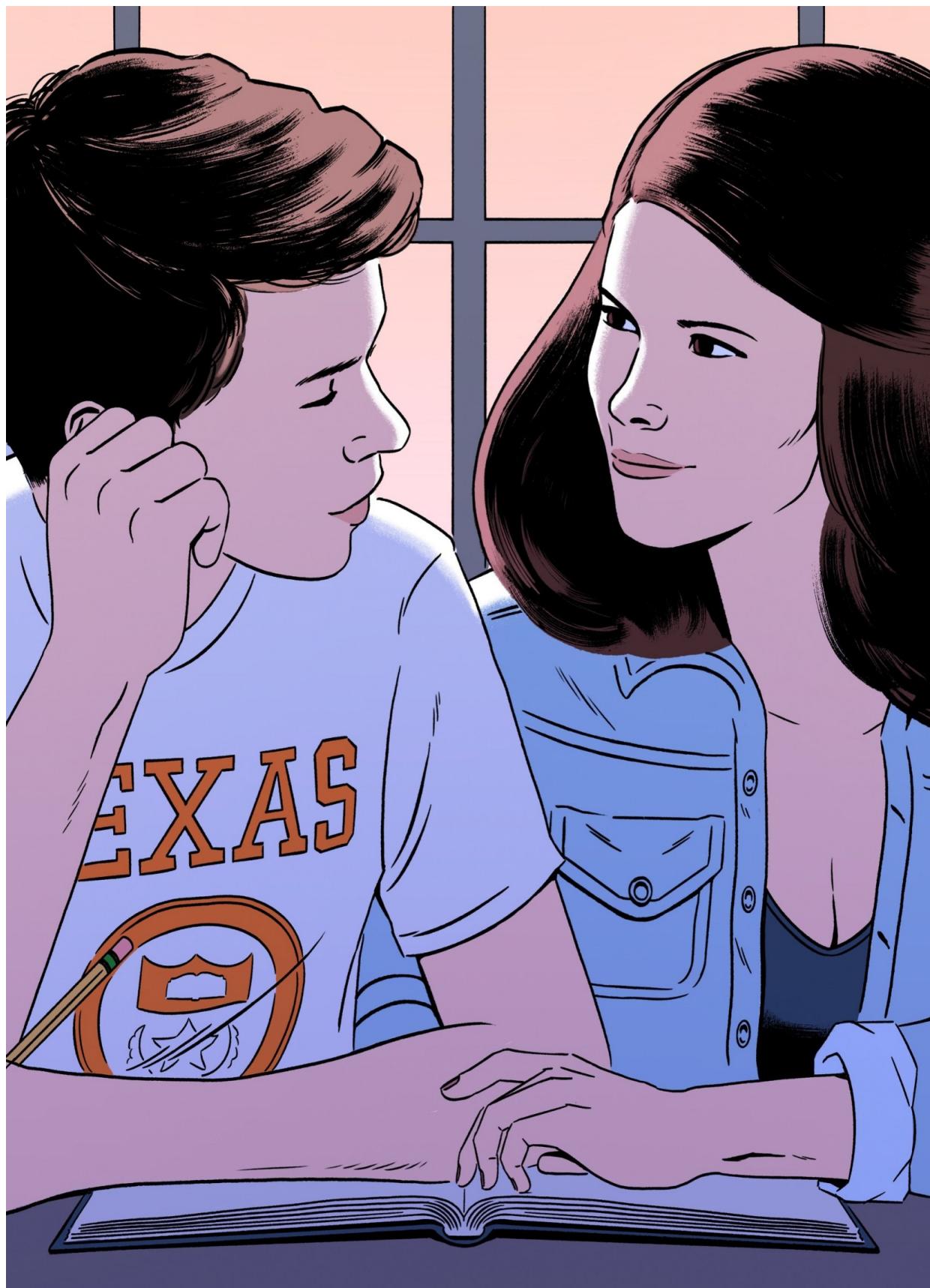
- [“A Teacher”: A Series Best Saved for Fourth-Period Health Class](#)

“A Teacher”: A Series Best Saved for Fourth-Period Health Class

Depicting a relationship between a high-school teacher and her student, the show takes aim at a permitted perversion, a subject of memes and giddy Post headlines.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

December 7, 2020



A high-school classroom is drenched with club lighting. Electronic dance music thumps as an overgrown, hoodied boy pads over to a desk, where his lustful teacher awaits him. She drops to her knees, a swift demonstration of her style of authority. Suddenly, an audience of students materializes. Confusion replaces pleasure, and the expression on the boy's face lasts well after his alarm clock rings.

This dream sequence opens the third episode of "A Teacher," a promising but emotionally vacant exploration of an illicit student-teacher relationship, based on an indie film of the same name. (Both were created by the filmmaker Hannah Fidell.) The miniseries, on FX on Hulu, wishes to splash cold, purifying water on a permitted perversion, a subject of memes and giddy *Post* headlines: the sexual abuse of boys and young men by women.

Claire Wilson (Kate Mara) is a new English teacher at Westerbrook High School, in Austin, Texas. Even though all the trappings of suburban life are available to her, she is unhappily married to a man named Matt (the heartbreaking Ashley Zukerman). The one thing that's missing is a baby, which Matt seems to want more than Claire does. It's not the most imaginative backstory—Claire is the daughter of an alcoholic, the suggested source of all her problems—but Mara's muted physicality makes the character believable. Claire is a woman who is not in touch with her body, and, as a result, is not in touch with herself. She does not understand why she gets a thrill from swiping a tube of lipstick from the grocery store, or why the stares of the boys at school make her blush.

Claire has attracted the attention of one student in particular, Eric Walker, the captain of the boys' soccer team, who is portrayed by Nick Robinson. The twenty-five-year-old actor, here playing a high-school senior, has starred in a number of teen films (most notably, "Love, Simon"), usually as the subdued heartthrob—the kid who is not popular but, rather, adjacent to popularity, and therefore good at keeping a secret. As Eric, Robinson projects the fragility of a young man who feels emasculated by his lot in life: the absence of his father, the fact that he must work at a local diner in order to keep up with his wealthier friends at school. (Although there are virtually no Black kids at this school, the soundtrack to the students' party scenes consists entirely of Top Forty rap hits, a detail that feels both canny and racially

loaded.) Claire takes a special interest in Eric, agreeing to tutor him for the SAT, for free, outside school. “You can call me Claire,” she tells him.

The series is set in 2013, which is when the original “A Teacher” premiered at Sundance. In the chaotic, intervening years we have reached a deeper understanding of the spectrum of gendered sexual violence, and the show wears its 2020 politics on its sleeve. There are ten episodes, each bookended by content warnings that “sexual situations as well as depictions of grooming that may be disturbing” will be on display. But sharing politics with a viewership is not the basis of a successful show: the disclaimers convey both an admirable sense of responsibility and an alienating timidity.

Maybe “A Teacher” will stir awareness of the insidious patterns of abuse, but its storytelling doesn’t rise to the complexity of its subject matter. Claire and Eric feel like stock characters who have been designed with a post-show roundtable discussion in mind. They are sophisticated banalities—improvements on past tropes, but banalities nonetheless. It seems wrong to watch “A Teacher” on anything other than a TV cart that has been rolled into fourth-period health class.

That’s not to say it isn’t watchable. It is—compulsively so. Mara and Robinson are both excellent at committing to their characters’ delusions. The series is also stodgily linear, more like a film than a collection of episodes, and so getting sucked in is a simple matter of gravity. There is a compelling friction, too, in the occasional clash of genre; the grim drama sometimes drifts into a register of campy degradation that’s reminiscent of Lifetime movies and We TV shows. I found myself clinging to every jock’s clichéd invocation of Ms. Wilson’s hotness. Satire can be a defter tool than condemnation.

Unlike her male counterpart, the female sexual predator is an aberration. We don’t know what to do with her, how to make the style of her abuse distinct without fetishizing it. In 2013, Alissa Nutting published “Tampa,” a caustic first-person novel about Celeste Price, a deranged middle-school teacher who molests a fourteen-year-old student and hides behind the veil of conventional beauty. The book is stomach-turning, but it is also gripping, in large part because of the sociopathic charisma of its narrator, who has no

affection for her prey. By being entirely unapologetic, Celeste is evidence of an offensive truth.

“A Teacher” is missing that shock of confrontation. FX, which is home to other auteurish explorations of women on the edge—Courteney Cox’s workaholic tabloid editor in “Dirt,” Glenn Close’s ruthless litigator in “Damages”—should have been a natural fit for an honest examination of a predatory educator. But, wary of accidentally titillating its viewers, the series has instead chosen to keep them at a frustrating distance.

The show is strongest early on, when it allows itself to tunnel into the messy dynamic between Claire and Eric. She teases him when he is surprised that she listens to Frank Ocean; he follows her on Instagram, where she posts cryptic captions that only he can understand. Their intimacy is unhealthy. It is also real. At times, it is difficult to distinguish the nurturing from the predation. Eric dreams of attending the University of Texas, which is Claire’s alma mater, and, one day, she surprises him with a tour of the campus.

There’s an interesting opacity to Claire’s motivations. She is not a strategist, an opportunist, or a sociopath. The power of this abuser is that she is weak. When Eric kisses her for the first time, after class, she recoils and seems genuinely surprised, despite her heavy flirtations with him. Her delusions appear to be fuelled by a subscription to traditional gender roles: she uses the force of Eric’s maleness to justify their sexual relationship. He started it, Claire convinces herself. Their first sexual encounter, in her Volvo, after the school’s homecoming dance, is prefaced by Claire coquettishly asking Eric for consent. It’s a different kind of toxic femininity than the one we’re used to seeing onscreen.

This murkiness doesn’t last for long. Once Claire and Eric consummate their relationship, the series becomes much more doctrinaire, backing away from the subtler aspects of their connection: bonding over family history, Eric’s vulnerable economic position. A switch has been flipped; Claire becomes cartoonishly crazed by her desire for Eric. (After their trysts, poor Eric flexes in the mirror, grunting, “I’m the man!”) The sex scenes, while unavoidable, lack a psychological aspect, and feel more like filler. “A Teacher” is careful

not to arouse; any sex is balanced out by the show's flat dialogue and indie aesthetic, which are designed to fill the audience with dread.

The second half of the series devolves into a mess of shallow sociological observations, improbable time jumps, and after-school-special fearmongering. Perhaps "A Teacher" could have benefitted from a narrator, as "Tampa" did with Celeste. Planting the story firmly in Claire's perspective, or in Eric's—thereby granting the victim the perch of protagonist—would have grounded it. Instead, we are jostled between the two characters, watching the inevitable crash from afar.

Spoilers ahead: Fidell's movie ended when the student-teacher relationship was exposed; the series continues long past that, chronicling the aftermath of the affair. For this, it deserves credit. Claire and Eric's final rendezvous trembles with a desperation and an ugliness that is difficult to watch. Claire is ostracized, and Eric is fetishized. She can't get a job, and he can't keep his grades up. Sex, for both of them, is sexless. Strangers expect deviance from the boy who fucked his teacher, and from the teacher who fucked her student. Their sexual partners expect them to act out a role. No wonder. ♦

Personal History

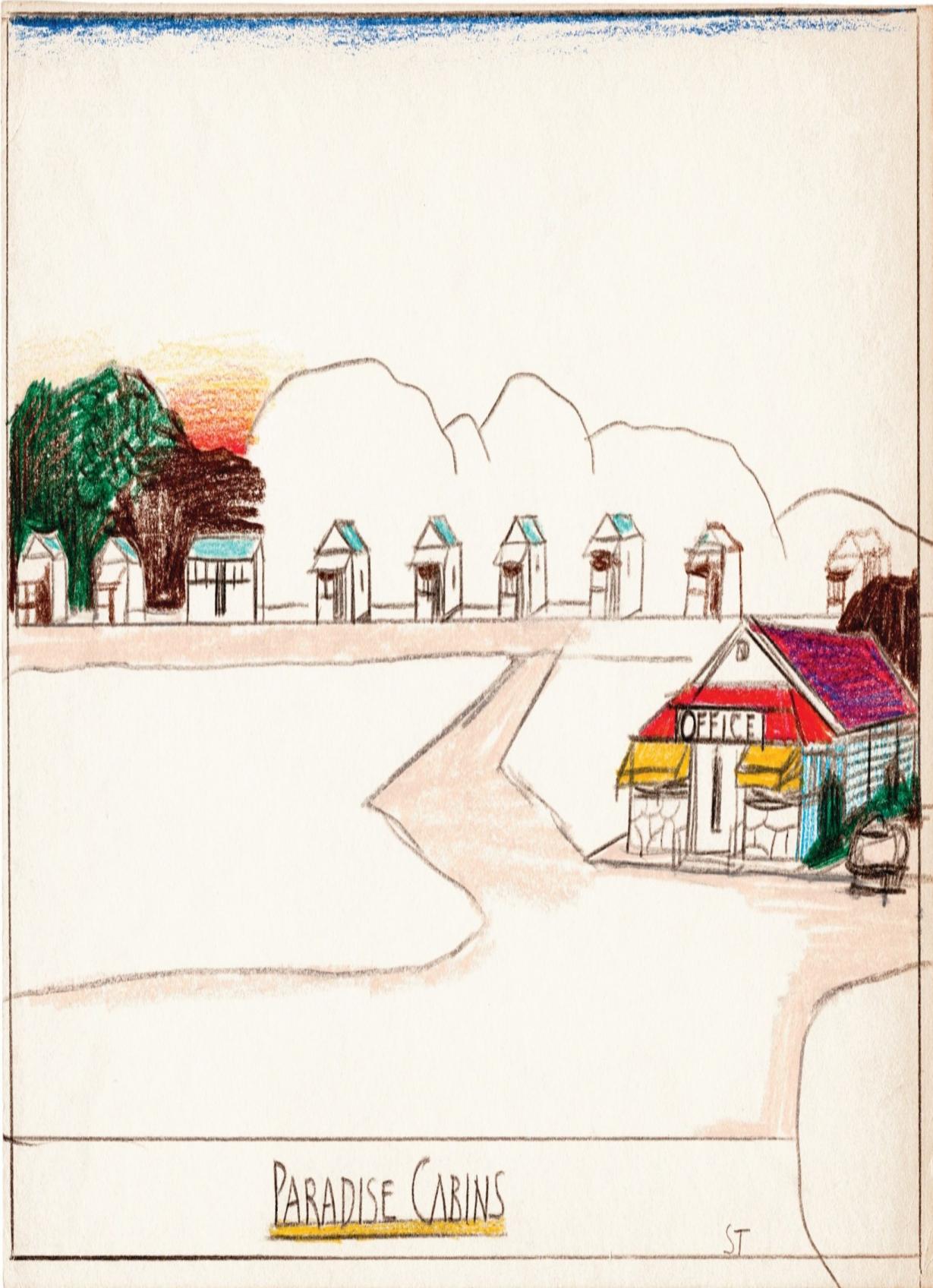
- Nabokov, Steinberg, and Me

Nabokov, Steinberg, and Me

Rereading “Lolita” and reflecting on crossing paths with two heroes on Route 66.

By [Ian Frazier](#)

December 7, 2020



PARADISE CABINS

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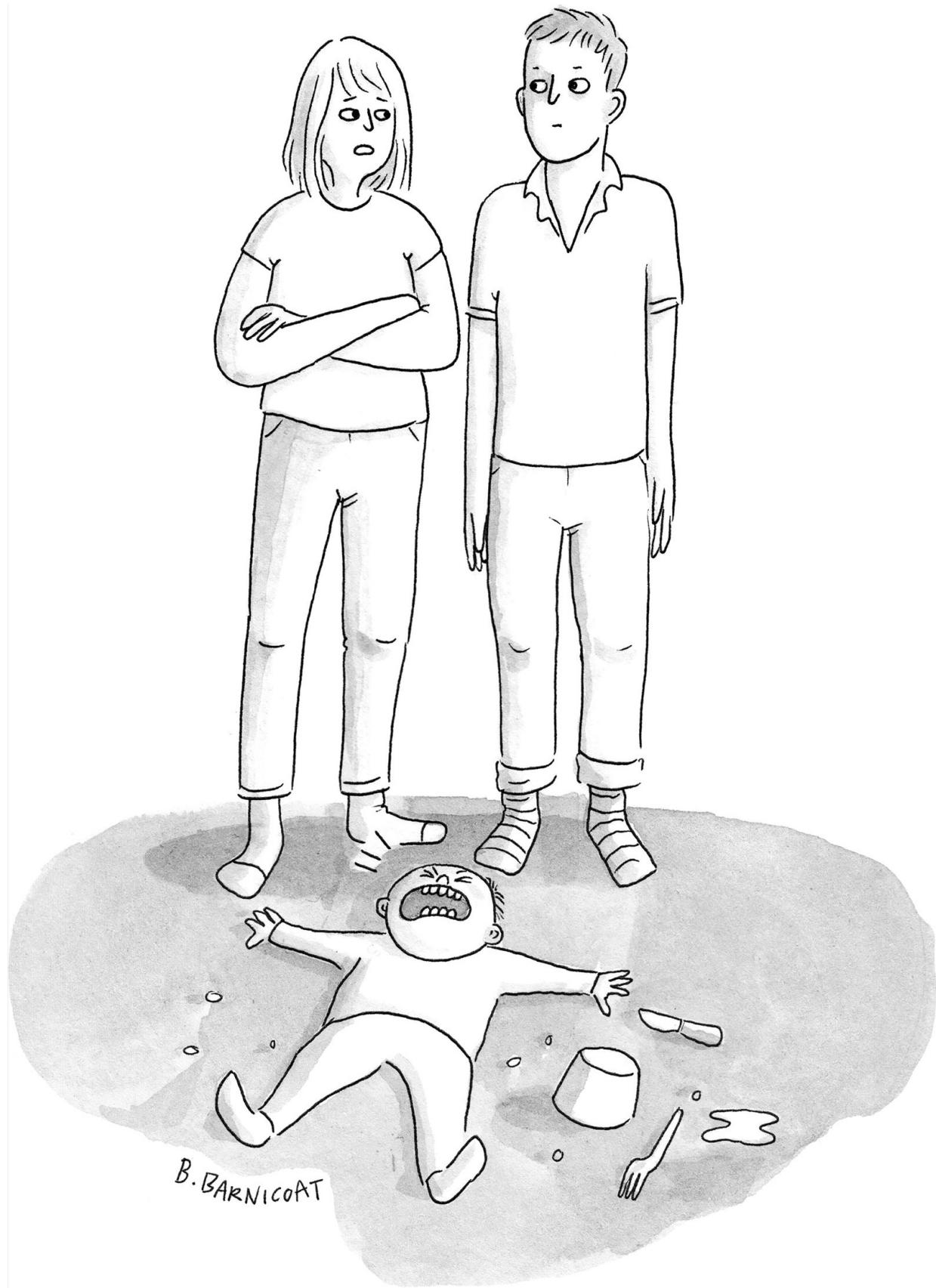
I first read “Lolita” fifty years ago, as a teen-ager. When I praised it to my mother—she taught high-school English and was a reader—she said that she hadn’t liked it, that it was a horrible, sad story. I disregarded her opinion, as I did with a lot of what my parents told me. I kept rereading the book, and eventually moved on to all of Nabokov’s other works in English that I could find. Nabokov mentioned landmarks of importance to him in his memoir, “Speak, Memory,” and I sometimes went to visit them. Travelling in Russia, I looked up the town house where his family had lived in St. Petersburg. It’s now a museum, and I’ve been to it three or four times.

As an unformed kid, I envied his self-assurance and Olympian disdain. I tried to imitate the style, dropping into conversations half-cribbed Nabokov-like phrases (“I scorn the philistine postcoital cigarette”). Once I happened upon a slim volume of his in the New York Public Library which no one I’ve met has heard of. It contained a line that I treasured like a rare archeological find. Published in 1947, the book is a short anthology of verse by three Russian poets—Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev—with Nabokov’s translations, accompanied by introductions in which he explains each poet to an American audience. In the introduction to Pushkin, he describes the poet’s end, when he received a fatal wound in a duel with the French ballroom roué Georges-Charles de Heeckeren d’Anthès, the alleged lover of his wife. About the later career of this pomaded zero who killed Russia’s greatest poet, Nabokov adds that d’Anthès went back to France, got elected to some office or other, “and lived to the incredible and unnecessary age of 90.”

Childhood is a darkened, fantasy-filled theatre in which, after a long or short while, the houselights are turned on, and the brightness makes you blink, and then you see the candy wrappers under the seats and the lines for the bathrooms. That moment can happen at any time. For me the lights in the Nabokov theatre—a glorious, twinkling venue—got turned fully on when I was in my thirties, during what was for me the waning end of our modern long version of childhood. Afterward I understood better what my mother had meant about “Lolita.”

We lived in Ohio, the centrifugal state, where it seemed that if you let go of the front-door knob for just a second the next thing you knew you’d be flung a thousand miles down the highway. Our house, in a rural development in

the town of Hudson, had a gravel drive, which led to a gravel street, to a barely paved road, to Interstate Highway 80, and to New York in one direction and San Francisco in the other. Or to Florida or Arizona or Canada or Alaska or anywhere else—the full three hundred and sixty degrees.



"I mean, he does have a point."

Across the street, past the Gellatlys' house, and past their back yard, was the house of my friend Don. He and I read "Lolita" at about the same time. Just as Humbert pleaded his love for Lolita before the "winged gentlemen of the jury," we expounded to each other on our love for various beautiful girls at Hudson High School. These girls were like Lolita, with their field-hockey sticks, and book bags, and scuffed knees on the school bus. Lolita starred in a famous, best-selling book by a high-class foreign author. Therefore, the girls who rode Bus 8 with us were themselves worthy of the loftiest regard—worthy of having love poems written to them, or of being painted by the old-time Italian painters whose names we didn't remember from trips to the Cleveland Museum of Art. Suddenly it was artistic to be these girls, and to be us, in love with them. The world seemed all in a sweat over this fictional girl, Lolita, who looked and talked and acted like girls we got to be next to, and hopelessly far from, every day.

As if there weren't enough roads waiting to take us away, more kept being built, making obsolete certain previous roads, which then had "old" added to their names. Thus there soon were Route 8 and Old Route 8, Route 14 and Old Route 14. Businesses on the old roads languished, but on Old Route 14, which was near where we lived, a place called the Hilltop Motel hung on for a long while. We knew the family that ran it, whom I'll call the Carluccis. Tony, their son, was in my grade in school. I liked him and, when I was younger, I sometimes went to his house to play. The family lived in rooms on the second floor of a building whose first floor was the motel's restaurant, where Tony and I sat on shiny red stools at the counter and ordered hamburgers. Then we went upstairs and played with his electric-football set while adults at a table in the next room drank and talked. Once, Tony pointed out a man in the group and told me that he had just got out of prison. The Hilltop's accommodations were small cabins, which my parents took an ironical view of, for reasons I did not at first understand.

Tony had a younger sister, Rosa, who was as rosaceous as all girls and women of that name deserve to be. She had long, dark hair and dark eyes, and at an early age she grew into the kind of plum-tinted look so admired by the old-time painters of her ancestresses. Once, I was riding my bike and I saw her and her friend Barb leaning on the railing of a bridge over Interstate

80, known to us as the Ohio Turnpike, and watching the traffic. That such beauty could be found on a tarry two-lane road among farm fields in Ohio proved that God was everywhere. Or—maybe better—that art could be anywhere, even in our unartistic (as compared with Europe) U.S.A. Oh, winged gentlemen, and my mom, of the jury! Mr. Nabokov, the defendant, gave that gift to us Americans, to me.

I was too shy to say anything to these visions, Rosa and Barb. Did they give me a mocking look as I pedalled by? If they were challenging me to step into Ohio's centrifugal jet stream, jump the wire fence, stand on the turnpike's apron, stick out my thumb, and disappear down the highway like the light diminishing to a dot in the middle of a nineteen-sixties TV screen—well, I did do that, not very many years afterward. But even when I was in my early teens, and weak with love for Rosa (and Barb), I had already been all over western North America as a passenger in the family station wagon, along with my mom and two brothers and two sisters, driven by my Ohio-flung dad.

Like most places, Ohio used to have worse winters than it does now. My mother's mother suffered from lung trouble, and, when my grandfather retired after forty-two years of teaching in the Cleveland public schools, the doctors recommended that he remove his wife from Ohio's winters to a warmer and drier climate. He chose Tucson, Arizona. This decision was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I was three years old when my grandparents bought a house in a development recently laid out among the cacti of the Sonoran Desert, a short drive from Tucson's main drag. Give my dad a target such as the one presented by my grandparents' four-bedroom ranch-style home and he could not be stopped. He let Ohio fling him at it like a dart, trailing all of us behind. We drove to Arizona to visit my grandparents every year, sometimes twice a year, throughout the nineteen-fifties and into the sixties, until they died. After that, we kept making long western journeys—to Los Angeles, San Francisco, the Yukon Territory, or Tok Junction, Alaska, and beyond—almost like annual migrations.

Nabokov worked on “Lolita” in the early fifties, during summers off from teaching at Cornell, while he and his wife, Véra, were driving around the country hunting butterflies. In an afterword to a later edition of the book, he said that one of the towns where he wrote it was Portal, Arizona. To get to

that place from Ithaca, New York, he very likely would have driven part of the way on the all-time-greatest American touring road, Route 66. If you were going from the Northeast to the Southwest, you probably took Route 66. The pleasures of this road were so many that books, entire careers, have been devoted to remembering and recording them, now that 66 has itself become an “old” road, superseded by Interstate 44, a characterless four-lane.

In my work as a freelance writer pursuing one story or another around the West, I sometimes come upon an unchanged stretch of “old” 66, and I’ll see something I remember from my childhood, and the tiny neural address that held the memory of the place in my brain will still be there, in good condition, though unvisited for sixty years. Outside Flagstaff, or maybe closer to Winslow, Arizona, while I was doing research for a piece about meteorites, I meandered off the four-lane onto an undisturbed span of old Route 66, and there was the giant concrete tepee at the gas station where we must have stopped dozens of times. As a kid, I loved that tepee, with its smooth, cool concrete floor and its racks of postcards. Another time, not long ago in Oklahoma, out of the corner of my eye I saw the motel with the Western theme—wagon wheels, oxen yokes, branding irons—where my family had stayed years before. My dad liked to drive straight through, night and day, but two thousand miles from Hudson to Tucson in one go was a haul even for him. The motels where we stopped offered sweet oases of pressed sheets and varnished knotty-pine walls and cigarette-smoke-scented furnishings, an interesting change from sleeping on a mattress on the station wagon’s folded-down back seats, all five of us siblings jumbled together. The cigarette smell also signified not-home—neither of my parents smoked—and recalled the Hilltop Motel’s nostalgic, heady hints of sin.

We didn’t know, nor did Nabokov, that we happened to be living in the golden age of motels. By the time I was out and driving on my own, most of the old motels had disappeared, replaced by the now familiar chains that try to be identical everywhere. In no work of literature are the wonders of the vanished Motel Age preserved and celebrated better than in “Lolita.” Motels and hotels and lodges dance by like a colorful all-American chorus line in the novel, while recurring road trips move the plot. After Lolita’s mother, whom Humbert has married to get to the daughter, is run over by a car and killed, he takes the girl on a long cross-country ramble, from one motel to the next:

We came to know—*nous connûmes*, to use a Flaubertian intonation—the stone cottages under enormous Chateaubriandesque trees, the brick unit, the stucco court, on what the Tour Book of the Automobile Association describes as “shaded” or “spacious” or “landscaped” grounds. The log kind, finished in knotty pine, reminded Lo, by its golden-brown glaze, of fried-chicken bones. We held in contempt the plain whitewashed Kabins, with their faint sewerish smell.

Ventriloquizing Humbert, the author goes on to list the places they stayed, and their attractions and proprietors and clienteles, for two more pages. The only other person to chronicle the Motel Age so well was the artist Saul Steinberg, whom I was lucky enough to know for twenty-odd years before his death, in 1999, and who gave me a drawing, “Paradise Cabins” [see illustration], which closely resembles the Hilltop Motel, home of the nacreous Rosa.



"Just because the election is over doesn't mean we have to stop predicting its outcome."

“Home of the nacreous Rosa” is not something I would normally write, but when the subject is Nabokov I take on a voice I think of as his, although of course it’s not, nor is it mine, but a nowhere hybrid voice, like a clumsy Russian hacking of an American Web site. Nabokov and Steinberg were friends, and Saul once told me that he gave up smoking while visiting the Nabokovs in Montreux. He just quit, with no program or nicotine chewing gum or anything, and never touched a cigarette again. He was a decisive guy.

Hearing Saul talk about his road trips all over America, such as the one in which he and his wife, the artist Hedda Sterne, drove a Cadillac they had bought from Igor Stravinsky from New York to Los Angeles, I understood that they and my family could well have crossed paths. The same is true of us and the Nabokovs. Vladimir and Véra sometimes went West as soon as classes at Cornell ended for the summer. Our family often headed for Tucson when I got out of school in June. The Nabokovs would have been unable to avoid Route 66, and my family always took it, regarding it as our grandparents’ very long driveway. In theory, we and the Nabokovs could have been on that road simultaneously. So it’s not impossible, either, that when we stopped at the Wagon Wheel Motel (or wherever) on 66 the foreign-looking professor and his elegant wife were in a room nearby. If they saw my dad and mom and their five baby-boomer offspring piling out of our blue Ford station wagon and boisterously occupying the adjoining room, did they admire us blond, frowsy-headed children, as my parents thought everybody did? Or not?

In an afterword to a 1970 edition of “Lolita,” Nabokov referred to a place called Gray Star as “the capital town of the book.” After Humbert is out of her life, Lolita, by then married and pregnant but still in her teens, moves to Gray Star with her husband, Dick Schiller. Gray Star is in Alaska, as the larger context makes clear. “Lolita” purports to be a manuscript written in prison by an accused criminal, Humbert Humbert, who is using this made-up name instead of his real one so as not to bring disgrace on anybody with a connection to the story, especially his beloved Lolita. Through his lawyer, the manuscript has come into the possession of an editor and psychologist, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. The book’s subtitle, “The Confessions of a White Widowed Male,” supplied by Humbert, makes it sound like a case study,

perfect for Dr. Ray, who writes a brief foreword explaining the provenance. Ray tells us of Humbert's and Lolita's ends. Humbert had expected to die soon, and his wish was that the book not be published until Lolita was also dead. He had hoped that she would outlive him by many years. Dr. Ray informs us that Humbert died of coronary thrombosis in prison in mid-November of 1952, shortly after finishing his manuscript, and that Mrs. Richard Schiller died in childbirth in Gray Star on Christmas Day of the same year. Per Humbert's wishes as conveyed to his lawyer, Dr. Ray is therefore publishing the manuscript.

Is Gray Star the book's "capital town" because Lolita—along with her baby, a stillborn girl—died there? Had Lolita lived a normal span of years, the book would not have come out, following its own logic, until our present century, and maybe would not exist even today; Lolita, born in 1935, would have been eighty-five in 2020. But I don't think that's the real reason that Nabokov made such a significant-sounding statement about Gray Star.

The first real-life piece of Russia that I ever saw was Sputnik, crossing the sky over Ohio one night in 1957. The second was when I went on a cruise to the Canary Islands with my family in 1973. The trip came about because one of us siblings had died. My brother Fritz, six years younger than me, died of leukemia when he was a sophomore in high school. The next year, at Christmastime, the spacious country we used to ramble was too small to hold my bereft dad and his sad family, so he took us all on a package cruise. We drove to J.F.K. airport, left the car, flew to Spain, got on a ship, and docked one night on Tenerife, in the Canaries. I came on deck and saw, anchored nearby, a huge, dark ship with a name in Cyrillic letters on its prow. I asked my dad what they said, and from his tour-book familiarity with the alphabet he sounded out "Mikhail Lermontov"; below the name was the hammer and sickle. The Lermontov projected the aura of a death star combined with a ghost ship, looming above and aloof from the other ships in the harbor. When we got home, I bought a paperback translation of Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time" and read it. I admired how cool, dashing, and romantic Lermontov was.

The name Gray Star and the memory of that ship are somehow near to each other in my mind. To me the name reads as Soviet, like the big gray letters, the brutalistic "L" resembling an "A" without a crossbar, on the Lermontov's

towering black bow. Gray Star could be the red star of the U.S.S.R. drained to grayness by the cold of the north. The name speaks of almost unreachable remoteness, and of Polaris, visible to both the Russians and to us, and of gray, beeping Sputnik going by. The novel's "capital town" is situated in our only state that shares a border with Russia. And, as recently as Nabokov's grandparents' lifetimes, Alyaska was a *koloniya*—a colony—of Russia. The place where Lolita dies is almost in Russia, and almost not in America.

The site of Lolita's mournful exit points toward Russia without mentioning it. On the surface, Nabokov does not come off as a Russian writer in the book. The text does not refer to many works of Russian literature, and he told an interviewer that he intentionally kept all touches of Russianness out of the portrait of Humbert, whose background he made Swiss, Austrian, French, and English, "with a dash of the Danube." Maybe something in Nabokov drew his thoughts Russia-ward despite himself as he devised Lolita's fate. I don't know if he ever went to Alaska, but he can't have been thinking of (for example) the town of Nome as a model for Gray Star. I stopped in Nome a number of times in my midlife project of going to Siberia by travelling west, continuing my own extension of my family's chronic westering. From Nome I flew to such Russian destinations as Chukotka, across the Bering Strait, and because I generally had to wait for tolerable flying weather I spent a lot of time in Nome. The town consists mostly of frozen mud, quonset huts, and heaps of rusted, twisted metal. Other Alaskan towns I've seen look basically the same. Don't get me wrong, I admire the feistiness of these towns. But for Lolita to wind up in such a place when she was seventeen years old and pregnant, and then for her to die in childbirth—what kind of medical facilities would they have had in any Gray Star in 1952?—made for a tough finish to an already ruined life. I do not believe that any real place could have been the inspiration for Nabokov's Gray Star. We have to imagine the town as more of an abstract notion.

The last time Humbert sees Lolita, she is still in the Lower Forty-eight, living in an unspecified non-coastal state that, judging by the amount of time it takes for him to drive to it from the New York area, could be Ohio. He is in pursuit of the even bigger pervert than himself who stole Lolita from him, and he finds his beloved in shabby surroundings. When he arrives, Dick, the husband, who's partly deaf because of a war injury, is working on some repair project out in back of their house with a friend, another vet, who has

only one arm. The friend injures his hand, they come inside, and Lolita bandages the cut. Humbert observes, “Her ambiguous, brown and pale beauty excited the cripple.”

On a rereading of the book during the early part of my chronological (but not actual) adulthood, I recall stumbling over that “cripple” for the first time. I wondered about Nabokov/Humbert’s use of the term to refer to someone who lost an arm in the war. The dimmer switch in the Nabokov theatre was turning to bright. And why did Dick, the poor schmo of a husband, have to be hard of hearing? His disability contributes little to the story, except to provide the image of Lolita shouting at him in order to be heard, as if he were the geezer and not Humbert. Somewhere I read a review that took Nabokov to task for picking on people with disabilities in his books. I had not previously noticed how often he does that. The entire plot of “Laughter in the Dark,” for example, revolves around the cuckolding of a blind man. The houselights in the theatre grew even brighter. Nabokov started to seem less like a lovable, bumbling Professor Pnin and more like a pitiless White Russian with a monocle and an ebony cigarette holder.



THEIR FLIRTATION GROUND TO A HALT WHEN SHE HEARD HIS DOG-TALKING VOICE.

I then looked at Lolita, the character, with the same literal-mindedness I applied to Gray Star. After Humbert has drugged her and attempted to rape her during their first night alone together, she wakes up, happy and frisky, and Humbert says to the reader, “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.” Lolita is twelve years old when this happens. Humbert informs us that she knows what she is doing because she had a lot of sex with a boy at the summer camp she has attended since she was eleven. Lolita is a “nymphet,” as we’re told again and again. That must be the explanation—a nymphet is someone who starts having intercourse on her own initiative when she is in the seventh grade.

Humbert’s claim, “It was she who seduced me,” attempts to excuse him from quite as much guilt as he deserves for raping a child. And she does know she has been raped—she says as much in a scene of distress and near-hysteria that follows soon after.

“It was she who seduced me” gives the reader a potential too-easy out as well, along the lines of the familiar “She was asking for it.” I guess it’s not impossible that nymphets exist, but I never knew or heard of one. Kids that age might fool around with each other, but they don’t go immediately to fucking. They’re not even sure how it works. For the author to portray Lolita as an experienced twelve-year-old who proposes grownup sex to her stepfather and then expertly and matter-of-factly begins it is implausible at best, and at worst extremely low and cheesy. Some reviewers of the book in the fifties thought it much worse than that, calling it filth, etc. The part where Humbert fantasizes about having a daughter with Lolita, a “Lolita the Second,” whom he would also molest in due course, producing a “Lolita the Third,” whom ditto, takes us to a whole new level of insane creepiness. That Lolita’s baby daughter is stillborn removes the possibility of another nymphet entering the world and running afoul of a future Humbert or similar fiend—a minor mercy granted by the author to his hard-luck characters.

At their last meeting, Lolita tells Humbert the name of her abductor, Clare Quilty. (Of course, Humbert says that the nymphet had conspired in her own abduction.) Teary and more in love with her than ever, he asks her to leave that very minute and come away with him. She declines. He then drives back east, finds the disgusting Quilty, whose own history of degrading children conveniently makes Humbert look less bad, and confronts him in his

Playboy-style mansion. He forces the criminal to read a self-indictment in verse that Humbert has written and then shoots him repeatedly with Chum, his nickname for the pistol he has brought along. Checking to see if Quilty is dead, Humbert notices two flies landing on the fresh corpse “with a dawning sense of unbelievable luck.” Humbert’s only friend—his gun—and the two lucky flies at the beginning of their own insectoid buddy movie round out this cautionary love story.

In a review in *The New Yorker* in 1958, the critic Donald Malcolm noted that comedy and horror are often combined. He placed Nabokov among those satirical writers who go back and forth between the two, citing Gogol and Twain. Russian humor-writing in general is horrifying, from the nightmare unrealities in Gogol’s “The Nose” and “The Overcoat,” through the Bolshevik-era mad laughter in Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita” and “Heart of a Dog,” to the absurdism of Daniil Kharms, who starved to death in one of Stalin’s prisons, and whose actual fate makes his stories seem almost gallant in their carelessness about logic and mercy toward the reader. Malcolm’s mention of Twain may seem surprising, because we are less likely to think of him as a writer of horror tales, but he told ghost stories (“The Golden Arm”) as part of his lecture performances. Moments of high-gothic horror occur in “Tom Sawyer,” as when Tom and Huck are watching the grave robbers dig up a corpse at midnight, and in “Huckleberry Finn,” when Huck gets chased around a cabin by Pap, his drunk and delusional white-trash dad.

In this light, “Lolita” ’s subtitle, “The Confessions of a White Widowed Male,” stands out as a joke on the well-intentioned psychologizing editor, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. For Humbert to have given his manuscript such a subtitle was a comic understatement of major proportions. Humbert is not so much a “white widowed male” as he is a maniac who should have been locked up, and the key thrown away, on page 42. Nothing is as funny as a criminal when he is carefully describing the (to him) self-evident and exonerating reasons for his crime. That kind of monologue will be funny almost from the first syllable and get only funnier as it goes on, even as your horror rises. “Lolita” is written in a monster’s voice, and the comedy and horror come from our awareness that the narrator is a ten-times-bigger monster than he knows.

My mother died thirty-two years ago, and as I reread the book recently for the nth time I used her eyes and winced and recoiled the way I imagine she did. (It really is a wince-inducing book, and far more so today.) I go back to the scene in “Huckleberry Finn” where Pap Finn is getting drunk before he starts chasing Huck around and calling him the angel of death and trying to kill him. As the liquor takes hold, Pap begins a lowlife soliloquy about the “gov’ment,” and about a white-shirted [N-word] who wouldn’t have given Pap the right of way if Pap hadn’t shoved the [N-word] off the sidewalk; and, while Pap is ripping and tearing around, he stumbles over a tub on the floor and then kicks it for revenge. “But it warn’t good judgement,” Huck says, “because that was the boot that had a couple of his toes leakin’ out the front.” Pap lets out a scream “that fairly made a body’s hair raise,” and then hops around cursing the gov’ment, and the [N-word], and the tub, with unprintable curses “hove” at all of them.

The scene is one of the wildest and funniest in American literature. Humbert’s tale—his long and morally clueless address to the winged gentlemen and -women of the jury—belongs in the same atrocious-hilarious genre. “Lolita” continues to challenge the equanimity of sane and decent readers, just as it has become difficult or impossible, for all practical purposes, to read Pap’s soliloquy out loud in respectable circles today. (That may have always been the case, but for changing reasons.) Horror and comedy entangle themselves with each other in these great American works of satire until our laughter and our recoiling become almost the same.

America construes itself as a game that anybody can play, and Russians know how to play it well, as we learn and relearn. In “Lolita,” Nabokov gave us a copy of ourselves we couldn’t tell from the original. No American writer has done the reverse—has written a novel about Russia that understood the country so profoundly, and that Russians themselves read widely and loved. “Lolita” is an American book in a way that no novel by a native-born American is a Russian book. It’s an American masterpiece of the atrocious-hilarious, like “Huckleberry Finn.” We encounter these works as best we can, and fail to civilize them, and pass by in our generations, and they remain. ♦

This piece is drawn from “[Lolita in the Afterlife](#),” a collection of essays edited by Jenny Minton Quigley, which will be published by Penguin

Random House in March.

Podcast Dept.

- [Why Do We Still Love “The Office”?](#)

Why Do We Still Love “The Office”?

The show’s enduring popularity, even during lockdown, says a lot about the place where we used to spend most of our time.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

December 7, 2020



M. D. H.

Until this spring, a dominant part of the human experience involved leaving one's home, going somewhere else, encountering a specific bunch of people, trying to get along with them, doing some work, bidding them goodbye, and going home again. The comedy of this ritual—disparate characters flung together day after day, attempting to accomplish grand or humble things without killing one another—has fuelled countless workplace sitcoms, from “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” to “30 Rock.” But “[The Office](#),” the American faux-documentary series that ran from 2005 to 2013, and which arose from the sour, drab-looking, painfully funny British sitcom of the same name, came to be one of our most prominent depictions of office life, because it seemed to show us the truth in the tedium. As Jim (John Krasinski), the show’s Everyman character, who finds love with Pam (Jenna Fischer), the receptionist, says, “Everything I have I owe to this job—this stupid, wonderful, boring, amazing job.”

Is the office good for us? The answer to that question changes during the long trajectory of the series. The British “Office,” created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, which began in 2001 and comprises fourteen episodes, was inspired in part by a reality-TV trend popular in the U.K. at the time, depicting regular people doing regular things, such as attending driving school. It was set at a middling place in a middling town: a branch of the Wernham Hogg paper company, in Slough. The boss, David Brent (Gervais), was a jokey, goateed nightmare wrapped in neediness and a necktie (“I’m a friend first and a boss second, probably an entertainer third”), and everybody else, his captive audience, was vaguely depressed and numb, getting by on paychecks, crushes, and pranks. The actors looked and acted like everyday people—almost startlingly so. Yet the show’s bleak world quickly became addictive, and its brief opening sequence—sweeping instrumental theme, mid-rise office buildings, cars swirling through a roundabout—can still provoke an aching wistfulness, for Wernham Hogg and, somehow, for the day-to-day life you’re actually living.

The American adaptation, created by Greg Daniels (“King of the Hill”) with Gervais and Merchant, supersized all this—some two hundred episodes, extensive world-building, more romance—and placed its middling paper company, Dunder Mifflin, in working-class Scranton, Pennsylvania. Viewer wistfulness has only increased with time. Though it ended seven years ago, the American “Office” competes, even now, to be the most-watched show on

Netflix. More than forty-six billion minutes of it were streamed in 2018. The teen pop star Billie Eilish, whose song “My Strange Addiction” samples “Office” dialogue, has seen the entire series fourteen times. And this year two of the most popular podcasts on iTunes and Spotify were “Office” podcasts, hosted by former cast members.

Both podcasts accept the show’s genius and significance as a given. “[An Oral History of ‘The Office,’](#)” a limited series with Brian Baumgartner, who played Kevin the accountant, aims to find out “how a group of unknowns overcame the odds and changed the face of television,” and recently concluded on Spotify; “[Office Ladies,](#)” “the ultimate ‘Office’ rewatch podcast,” hosted by Angela Kinsey (Angela) and Jenna Fischer, discusses each episode in order, and may go on forever. “We were on ‘The Office’ together!” Fischer says in the intro. Kinsey adds, “And—we’re best friends!” It’s a chipper gabfest. Fischer begins episodes with “Fast Facts”; Kinsey, who enjoys using “shiitake” as a swear, describes details she observes upon rewatching, such as Kelly Kapoor’s updo. The insight to be found is roughly proportional to the amount of work that gets done at Dunder Mifflin: enough, but it’s not really the point.

Baumgartner’s show is almost as giddy—the word “brilliant” is thrown around generously—but it accomplishes the useful service of making the familiar unfamiliar again. It can be easy to forget how strange the American “Office” was on prime-time television in 2005—and how unlikely it was to succeed. “O.K., here’s the pitch,” the executive producer, Ben Silverman, says, laughing, in Baumgartner’s first episode. “Unlikable lead, single camera, no one really attractive in a traditional television sense. Super awkward and slow, no laugh track, and a faux documentary.” The format was not only technically challenging—and unappealing to network execs—but hard for American audiences to comprehend; it wasn’t yet a sitcom trope in the U.S., and reality TV itself had yet to boom. The setting was mundane. And the creators wanted actors who were realistic-looking, just like the British cast.

For this last task, they hired Allison Jones, the casting savant who discovered Seth Rogen, Jason Segel, and others for “Freaks and Geeks.” “I always like to cast non-star people,” Jones tells Baumgartner. “I think it pays off most in the end.” She also liked nerds, and believed that audiences would

empathize with their fears and insecurities. On Baumgartner's podcast, Fischer recalls that, before her audition, Jones gave her some advice: "Dare to bore me." The characters' bold boringness, their willingness to talk in passive, everyday cadences, was a great part of the show's vérité thrill. Some cast members, such as Jones's longtime casting associate, Phyllis Smith, were nonactors; others, including Mindy Kaling and B. J. Novak, were writer-performers. Rainn Wilson, as Dwight, brought a weird power-geek bluster we hadn't seen on sitcoms before. And the middle-aged actors had a refreshingly low-key, over-it energy. "This here is a run-out-the-clock situation," the sales rep Stanley (Leslie David Baker) says, with dead-eyed seriousness, to a peer who wants to speed up a project in the warehouse. "Just like upstairs." The actors were filmed "working" at their desks every morning for a week; a resulting shot of Fischer, who had actually worked as a receptionist, using Wite-Out was added to the show's opening sequence. Watching these "ordinary-looking losers," as Baumgartner describes them, was different in almost every way from watching "Frasier" or "Friends."

Where the adaptation deviated from the original, and from realism, was in its tone. The original was a satire, skewering the deadening compromise of office life and celebrating the small human pleasures one might eke out within it. The adaptation was a comfort, portraying the office as a friendly, if bonkers, home. While it teased the lonely boss character, Michael Scott (Steve Carell), for needing his co-workers too much—"As far as I'm concerned, this says '*WORLD'S BEST DAD*,'" he tells the camera in Season 3, holding up a "*WORLD'S BEST BOSS*" mug, which he bought himself—it also rejoiced in its amiable world of cubicles, party planning, and passive-aggressive pranks. In Baumgartner's series, we learn that many children watch "The Office"—its rhythm and predictability have a soothing effect, with the familiarity of a classroom—and that fans of all ages keep it humming along in the background, letting its dozens of hours companionably unspool. For adults, even before lockdown, the solidity of the "Office" work environment, the 401(k)-style atmosphere, could represent a fantasy in itself.

But it didn't start out as a celebration. Gervais had worked in an office for ten years, and, in his telling, he'd been inspired by "your first boss, who was an idiot." Guys like David Brent played along with political correctness: they "knew they couldn't be sexist upstairs, because they'd get in trouble

with H.R.,” but they also “wanted to be a lad downstairs, where the warehouse is.” Daniels kept this idea, while aiming to give the American “Office” “ten per cent more hope,” he said. That ended up being a low estimate. In casting Michael Scott, Jones chose Carell, whose “sweet and simple” Michael is not a pitiable sad sack but a handsome, lighthearted buffoon, who was “as asleep in a woke world as it was possible to be,” Carell tells Baumgartner. Many of his foolish remarks are sexist or racist or loudly ignorant (“Kelly Kapoor is our dusky, exotic customer-service rep”), but he cares about the underlings whose approval he craves, and his core, unflagging sweetness makes him lovable. Much of both shows’ charm involves people bonding as they deal with the idiot boss; the sparky fun of Jim and Pam’s relationship, and the pleasure in our relationship to them, comes from their shared jokes and glances, moments of fellow-feeling amid the mayhem. The realistic aesthetic only heightens that pleasure.

And yet, as the show progressed, it could seem to want to have it both ways: to get credit for being P.C. and to be a lad downstairs; to be appreciated for aesthetic daring and to be an overbroad mainstream sitcom. In making Michael a beloved member of the gang, the creators intensified the Archie Bunker problem: Michael’s naïve bigotry, which quickly devolved into unfunny clowning, can be laughed at, laughed with, or wearily endured, and is as much a rhythm of the show as the sound of paper falling into copier trays. In later seasons, the series’ affectations of realism all but disappeared —characters became caricatures, plots got loopy and desperate, stars like James Spader were shoehorned in, several episodes were set in Florida—but the idea that the show is realistic persists, and the fandom continues to grow. The keepers of its legacy, as heard on these podcasts, are simply here to bask in its greatness. On Baumgartner’s show, we’re told that a mantra for the writers was “truth and beauty,” an idea echoed in the series’ last line, when Pam tells us, “Beauty in ordinary things—isn’t that kind of the point?”

The writers lost control of that mantra, but when you watch “The Office” now, if you peer past the shtick, the subtler details—moments so strikingly mundane that they might have seemed invisible a year ago—stand out. We might not have realized how going to the office lent our daily lives a sense of occasion, for example, but, seeing Stanley and Jim putting on their coats and scarves and trudging out the door, we do. There’s a wistful frisson in remembering that feeling: that we hadn’t accomplished everything we’d

hoped to, but that we'd come back tomorrow, encounter the gang, and try, gamely, to give it another go. ♦

Poems

- “[New York](#)”
- “[Marsyas, After](#)”

December 14, 2020 Issue

New York

By [Charles Simic](#)

December 7, 2020

No one sees me in your streets
Though I'm still there
Loitering and stopping
To peek into empty stores
And talk to a lone pigeon.

[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Marsyas, After

By [Monica Youn](#)

December 7, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

Dust loves me now, along with
leaflets, plastic bags, anything

unattached, anything looking for
somewhere to stop, something

to emblazon. Too painful
to brush them off, the day's

adhesions, too much
a reënactment. I float in my tub

of blood-warm water; element
of indecision, if only

it could be my habitat,
if only the sawtoothed air

didn't insist on its own
uninterrupted necessity.

I hate it, but, lacking skin, I've lost
my capacity for scorn: that

was my failing—not excess
of pride, but that stooping

to pick up their accoutrements,
as if emulation could engender

equality. I stain everything
I touch, it all stains me;

my raw surface is an unlidded eye,
each stimulus its own white-

hot knife, but why would I
submit to be resheathed?

To lessen pain? What used
to distinguish me is already

defeated, limp trophy
flag of conquest; now I could be

like them if I chose.
But the acidulated

rain imposes a least
common denominator

democracy, it scours away
the pigments they used

to humanize their marmoreal self-
regard, their eyes gone dull

as the calluses I would rather
suffer forever than become.

Pop Music

- [The Raw Sounds of Rico Nasty](#)

The Raw Sounds of Rico Nasty

The artist is part of a growing field of young women rappers who seem a little louder, a little freakier, and a little rougher around the edges each week.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

December 7, 2020



In the late nineteen-sixties, the clinical psychologist Arthur Janov conceived of a new form of treatment for his patients. It was called primal therapy, and it was based on the notion that most adult neuroses and mental strife could be ameliorated by deliberate, supervised regression into childhood, a process that would unearth some form of early-life trauma. The most notable by-product of this therapy was the “primal scream”—the guttural, involuntary vocal emission that accompanied such emotional excavation. Janov’s work generated plenty of suspicion among psychologists, but during the nineteen-seventies it was a cultural touchstone, particularly among musicians. John Lennon and Yoko Ono were both dedicated primal practitioners, and the therapeutic insights they gained from their time working with Janov informed the post-Beatles record “John Lennon / Plastic Ono Band”—an intense experimental album that delved deeply into Lennon’s childhood and featured many lyrics that were screamed. The influential Scottish group Primal Scream is, of course, named for the therapy; the English synth-rock band Tears for Fears borrowed heavily from its own experience with Janov’s methods.

Primal therapy is well past its cultural relevance, but Rico Nasty, an eccentric young rapper from Maryland, has drawn from Janov’s work. Although she never formally partook in primal therapy, Rico recorded a collaborative mixtape with the producer Kenny Beats, in 2019, that was inspired by their shared interest in its teachings. The art for the record, titled “Anger Management,” is a riff on a recurring image that appears on Janov’s book covers, a psychedelic illustration of a generic male human head with a screaming mouth bursting out of the top. (“Anger Management” depicts Rico Nasty with a similar mouth emerging from a split in her forehead.) The mixtape doesn’t explore much childhood trauma—Rico is more concerned with the foes of her adult life—but there’s plenty of screaming. “Rico, are you crazy?” she asks herself in a raw-throated yell on “Cheat Code,” a song in which she confronts her imitators, rapping over a beat that recalls the industrial churn of a manufacturing plant. “I don’t know, maybe!” she answers. The record draws as much from nu metal, E.D.M., and hard rock as it does from hip-hop. Rico makes aggression sound less like a stressful state of being or a vehicle for catharsis than like a form of personal amusement.

Heavy rap-rock is just one of many modes for Rico, a chameleonic stylist who takes full advantage of the aesthetic liberties available to her in today’s

freewheeling musical universe. Raised as Maria Kelly in Largo, Maryland, Rico, who is twenty-three, first attracted attention online with a homemade video, from 2016, that was the opposite of angry, though it did play with themes of childhood. It was for a song called “iCarly,” a reference to the hit Nickelodeon sitcom about a teen-age girl who becomes an Internet sensation. The song tells the story of a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde—Rico and her female best friend. In a theatrically girlish tone, Rico raps about the mischief they get into. “Scam, trap, plus we sold marijuana,” she says, over a twinkling bubblegum beat more appropriate for a children’s song. “She was my hitta, I was her robber.” In the video, Rico hangs with a throng of women and a lone man who is more of a mascot than a member of the clique. As the women dance and twirl in a generic suburban neighborhood, the man strums what appears to be an assault rifle like a guitar, a startling juxtaposition of child’s play and menace.

In the years since “iCarly,” Rico has established herself as one of music’s most effective shape-shifters. She has more in common with the lineage of histrionic pop stars such as David Bowie, Madonna, and Lady Gaga than with her fellow hip-hop artists. She favors elaborate visuals, and she tries on and discards musical styles as if they were costumes. One moment she’s a vulgar femme fatale, the next a character in a cartoon fantasy, or a feral mental patient spewing gibberish, or a punk-rock princess worshipping at the altar of Joan Jett. In a new single called “*IPHONE*,” Rico plays a futuristic avatar navigating a digital universe. The track was written and produced by Dylan Brady, of the maximalist avant-garde electronic act 100 gecs, and Rico’s vocals are pitched up to make her sound synthetic. During the bridge, she returns to the real world, and her voice quiets to a hush, the vocal filters turned off. Brady’s staticky, frantic digital effects multiply like a swarm of bees as Rico raps, “He said, ‘I think my phone is hacked / I think my phone is tapped / I think you got me blocked / Why won’t you call me back?’ ” This cyberpunk style is new, but Rico is instantly comfortable with it.

Like so many of her peers in today’s consumption-minded music ecosystem, Rico has churned out multiple releases in recent years, all of them labelled with the nebulous descriptor of “mixtape” or “project.” Last week, she released “Nightmare Vacation,” which has been designated her major-label début album. Unlike “Anger Management,” a tightly focussed concept album, the new record is more of a sampler plate of Rico’s scattershot ideas,

delivered in potent two- to three-minute bursts. There's plenty of the coarse, adrenalized sound that she's come to prefer. On "Let It Out," a mosh-pit anthem, she implores listeners, in a scream, to release their feelings. There are also abundant reminders of Rico's flippancy. "It's a good day if I say so!" she says on "STFU," a cartoonishly sinister track featuring a warbly, lopsided beat. But, in addition to these characteristically outlandish approaches, Rico carves out a new role: mainstream hip-hop star. On a number of more straightforward, mid-tempo rap songs, "Nightmare Vacation" hedges drama and experimentation with tradition. The album's marquee single, "Don't Like Me," which features the Atlanta rap icon Gucci Mane, is as muted as we've heard Rico, her gentle singing masked with light Auto-Tune. It's an atypically ho-hum moment—the hip-hop equivalent of a stock image. As far as characters go, the conventional radio-hit rapper is Rico's least convincing.

In recent years, many mainstream male stars—from regional breakouts like Lil Baby and NBA YoungBoy to global chart-dominators like Post Malone and Drake—have come to favor a forlorn, mid-range hybrid of singing and rapping that can make them difficult to distinguish. Several of the genre's women, by contrast, have produced increasingly diverse and dynamic work. Megan Thee Stallion, the Houston artist who appeared on Cardi B's bawdy, chart-dominating hit "WAP," also recently released a major-label début album. Stylistically, Megan is quite different from Rico—a raunchy, swaggering Southern-rap traditionalist—but she's equally brash and self-assured, always rapping as if preparing for battle. Her songs, even at their most cookie-cutter, are a forceful rejection of contemporary hip-hop's glibness and passivity. The campy, extravagant rap ingénue Princess Nokia and the spirited British talent Bree Runway have also channelled a punk ethos and a taste for outrageousness. Deadening these styles in the service of hit-making would drain some of the vitality from contemporary hip-hop.

One of Rico's favorite subjects is the other women she sees as shameless copycats of her work. Indeed, she is part of a growing field of young women rappers who seem a little louder, a little freakier, a little rougher around the edges each week. The effect is not totally unwelcome to Rico. "I can't act like that shit don't make me proud," she raps on a new song called "Girl Scouts." The closer on "Nightmare Vacation" is a reflection of this pride. It's a remix of her raucous viral single "Smack a Bitch," a catchy headbanger

from 2018 that has inspired hundreds of thousands of TikTok users to make playfully rageful videos on the platform. On the remix, three rising stars, Rubi Rose, Sukihana, and ppcocaine, tap into a new well of vocal vigor and personality. “I’m savage, I live life with no regret!” Sukihana yells, proudly deranged. Rapping with Rico, they sound relieved by the permission to scream. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [My Colleague, the Antichrist](#)

December 14, 2020 Issue

The Antichrist

By [Jack Handey](#)

December 7, 2020



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

I knew the Antichrist. We worked together in New York, at a major investment bank. (Due to the nondisclosure agreements we had to sign, neither the Antichrist nor myself can disclose which investment bank.)

The Antichrist was a pretty good guy, but, when we went for drinks after work, if he got drunk he'd start ranting on and on about how he was going to rule the world and how we'd all bow down and worship him. You wanted to say, "Give it a rest, Antichrist." Plus, he would conveniently make himself scarce just before the bill came.

Another annoying thing about the Antichrist was that he was always complaining that our department was not committing enough abominations.

But the Antichrist was not without his good points. When my girlfriend dumped me, he said, "Don't worry, there are plenty of other harlots in the sea." And he was a great coach for our softball team, the Evil, Vicious Bluebirds (formerly the Bluebirds). He had us focus on what he called the "three basics": good fielding, good hitting, and leading our opponents astray.

Imagine my surprise when I saw him on the big TV in Times Square. He was on all the TVs, in fact, saying that he was the new ruler. I nudged the man next to me. "I know that guy," I said.

Under the evil reign of the Antichrist, life in New York didn't change much. One new rule was that you had to join the Church of Satan. I was able to join the Reformed Church of Satan. It was less strict. Instead of sacrificing children, we would merely tease them.

I decided to go see the Antichrist. I had to wait outside his office. It seemed like an eternity. Most of the people waiting had sold their souls, and now they were trying to get them back. Yeah, right. *Good luck with that!* I had to laugh.

A she-devil with a forked tongue came by to make sure that my name was on the list. I started to ask her out, but they called my name. Before I was allowed in, the demon guards frisked me and made sure that I had the Mark of the Beast, which I had got years earlier, in my fraternity days.

The Antichrist was sitting at a huge desk that looked out on what used to be the Statue of Liberty but was now the Statue of Depravity. Like the Statue of Liberty, the Statue of Depravity was a gift from France.

He looked tired. He was signing papers with a pen that wrote with flaming ink. If the flaming ink stopped, he had to shake the pen hard to make it start again. He finally looked up and saw me.

“How’s it going?” I said. “Remember me?”

“Of course,” he said, but I’m not sure he did. It was nice of him to say so, though. “What can I do for you?” he went on.

I told him that I wanted him to put a curse on my friend Don.

He said he would. “Is that all?” he said.

“Yep. That’s it.” I had a thought. “Say, you want to go get a drink?”

“No, thanks,” he said. “I’m in A.A. now.”

He stood and walked to the window and stared out. “Let me ask you something,” he said wistfully. “How much weeping and gnashing of teeth can you take before it drives you round the bend?”

I took the opportunity to tiptoe out.

The Antichrist kept his word. He put a curse on Don, but not a very good one. Every now and then, Don would stub his toe, and occasionally something would fall on him, but nothing very heavy. That was about it. Once, a bag of flour fell on his head. That was pretty good.

Maybe I should have asked for a new recliner. I need one. Maybe a new recliner and a million dollars.

The other day, I heard on the news that the Antichrist had been cast into the fiery lake forever. It’s too bad, because if he’d stuck it out at the investment bank he’d probably be a partner by now. ♦

Tables for Two

- [A New Kind of Hot Chicken, from Pecking House](#)

A New Kind of Hot Chicken, from Pecking House

The takeout-and-delivery operation, from the pedigreed Taiwanese-American chef Eric Huang, offers a meat-and-three set, with Szechuan-peppercorn-seasoned fried chicken, Cajun-inspired fried rice, and greenmarket-driven sides.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

December 4, 2020



These days, moments of joy seem to arrive mostly by surprise, offering brief relief from the dull feeling that weeks and months are blurring together. The other night, one came via cheap beer. It was Tsingtao, a pale lager, produced by China's second-largest brewery, with an easy-drinking flavor profile that's as carefully calibrated and comforting as Coca-Cola's. I'd never had a Tsingtao at home but have rarely eaten in a Chinese restaurant without ordering one, if not two, especially to pair with anything spicy, its sweet, yeasty, almost creamy roundness cutting obligingly through heat.

I hadn't realized how much I missed it until I opened a bag of food dropped off by Eric Huang, the impressively pedigreed Taiwanese-American chef behind a new takeout-and-delivery operation called Pecking House. Two bottles were packed in ice, keeping the beers crisp and cold; my first sip felt like a portal to a former life. It was delicious on its own and a consummate foil for the salty, fiery seasoning on Huang's singular fried chicken, the centerpiece of what is essentially a meat-and-three meal.

Huang spent time in the kitchens of Café Boulud and Gramercy Tavern before earning the title of sous-chef at Eleven Madison Park; last year, he left, with plans to open a Michelin-star-worthy restaurant of his own. In the early months of the pandemic, he helped his mother, who owns a restaurant on Long Island, as she adapted her business. Once they had established protocols for outdoor dining and to-go orders, he turned to Peking House, his uncle's restaurant in Queens, which belonged to Huang's parents in the nineties and is where he spent much of his childhood.



The chicken recipe is inspired by both Taiwan and the American South, and especially Nashville. Photograph by Gioncarlo Valentine for The New Yorker

With a lack of demand for takeout in Peking House's corner of Fresh Meadows, the place closed. His uncle still needed to pay the rent. The empty kitchen had no oven but plenty of woks and two deep fryers; what if Huang could deliver fried chicken? A few weeks of R. & D. resulted in Pecking House. (Huang's fiancée, who is also a chef, came up with the name.) His recipe is inspired as much by the American South as it is by his heritage. The chicken is brined in buttermilk and battered in a mix of flour, cornstarch, potato starch, and five-spice powder, plus a secret weapon: a modified wheat dextrin called EverCrisp, which keeps the crust optimally crunchy even after time in transit. The finishing seasoning, a tantalizing medley of crushed Tianjin chilies, Szechuan peppercorn, salt, sugar, and MSG, calls to mind both Taiwanese popcorn chicken and Nashville hot chicken.

The chicken comes in three pieces, a combination of white and dark meat, as part of a set menu that also includes "dirty fried rice" (prepared Cajun style, with a wok-caramelized chicken-liver purée) and two greenmarket-inspired sides, such as crispy Brussels sprouts dressed in sesame oil and black vinegar, and dashi-simmered kabocha squash served with caramelized onion and bacon crumble. For vegetarians, Huang subs cauliflower for the chicken, achieving a texture that's custardy yet sturdy enough to hold up to the batter. You'd never know that dessert is born of creative constraint; unable to bake, Huang devises stovetop confections, like a recent peanut-butter pudding with Concord-grape gelée and pretzel crumble that more than justifies itself.

Part of the reason that Huang decided to set out on his own was his desire to "give Chinese cuisine a little boost," he told me by phone. "To kind of show everyone it's a lot more than General Tso's chicken, lo mein, takeout containers." He had imagined something high-end: "I felt that Chinese cuisine, especially Chinese-American cuisine, had not really gotten the appreciation or the kind of face-lift that it needed to enter the modern era." The past nine months have changed his perspective. "I don't know when or if fine dining will come back in the same way," he said. "This kind of helped me realize that maybe it's not what I want anymore. I'm getting back to what being a chef is about to me, as cheesy as it sounds—making people happy." (*Chili-fried-chicken set meal \$35.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- Meryl Streep on the High Seas in “Let Them All Talk”

[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Meryl Streep on the High Seas in “Let Them All Talk”

Shot aboard the Queen Mary 2, Steven Soderbergh’s film stars Streep as a distinguished novelist travelling to collect a literary prize.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

December 4, 2020



The new movie from [Steven Soderbergh](#), who directed “Traffic” (2000), “Ocean’s Eleven” (2001), and other films so numerous that he may have forgotten making them, is titled “Let Them All Talk.” It stars [Meryl Streep](#) as Alice Hughes, a distinguished American novelist who has been awarded something called the Footling Prize. (Can that really be the name? I do hope so.) In order to receive it, she must go to England, but she won’t fly. Instead, she condescends to travel by water, roughing it in a two-story suite on the Queen Mary 2, from New York to Southampton. She is accompanied by her nephew, Tyler (Lucas Hedges), plus two old friends of hers from college, Susan (Dianne Wiest) and Roberta (Candice Bergen). One is an advocate for imprisoned women, in Seattle; the other sells lingerie in Dallas. Alice hasn’t seen either of them in decades, so now is a chance to catch up. Such is the quartet of characters on whom this movie turns. It should be called “Ocean’s Four.”

One disappointment is that all of them, arriving on board, are politely conducted to their cabins. Boring! As any follower of the [Marx Brothers](#) can tell you, on the strength of “Monkey Business” (1931), the best—and certainly the most fragrant—means of embarking on a luxury liner is to stow away in a barrel marked “Kippered Herring.” There *is* a secret passenger in the new film, named Karen (Gemma Chan), but the only person she’s hiding from is Alice, who, en voyage, will be working on the manuscript of a new book. It’s rumored to be a sequel to one of her earlier successes, and Karen, having recently become Alice’s literary agent, yearns to discover what it’s about, and to chivvy along the creative process. This involves recruiting Tyler to spy on his aunt and to report back, the sole result being that Tyler starts to fall in love with her. With Karen, that is, not with his aunt. That would be weird.

To be honest, Karen’s part in the story is slight to the point of absurdity, and there’s something equally thin in Alice’s motives. If the plan was to revisit the past with her sisterly pals, why does she scarcely make contact with them, except at dinner? “It’s really important that I know something of their state of mind,” she says to Tyler, thus burdening the poor boy with yet more espionage, but why that’s important to her remains obscure, and, indeed, the first half of “Let Them All Talk” is barely there as a movie. Soderbergh seems to be sketching out ideas for a plot, and gingerly feeling his way into

its moral possibilities, as if he were clinging to a rail, beside a heaving sea. And yet the Atlantic stays calm.

Most of the action was filmed on the Queen Mary 2, during a crossing in August, 2019, and you're never entirely sure to what extent the resident mortals are aware of the stars who have descended among them. Does the helpful member of the ship's crew, giving directions to a lost and elegant lady, even realize that she is in the frame with Meryl Streep? "Let Them All Talk" belongs to the gang of speedy, shot-from-the-hip movies—like "Bubble" (2005), "Unsane" (2018), and "High Flying Bird" (2019)—that Soderbergh likes to fire off now and then, using the lightest and least obtrusive tools for the job. One of his legacies will be the encouragement of younger filmmakers, who will watch his no-frills ventures and say to themselves, "We may not have a Streep, but we've got a coffee machine, a script, and an iPhone 12. Let's do it."

The hardest thing to replicate, for any novice, will be the surreptitious ease with which, in the latest film, Soderbergh shifts gear. Gradually, against all expectation, we find ourselves in a serious and somewhat Jamesian drama, strewn with riddles. Who is the fellow who, observed by Tyler, emerges from Alice's room every morning? Could Susan be the first person on record to discuss her distant sexual history while playing Monopoly and Scrabble, and, if so, does a threesome count as a triple-word score? And what is Roberta's beef? The movie treats her ungallantly, I reckon, looking down on her as a gold-digger and an emotional desperado, yet there is genuine force when she suddenly says, of Alice, "I am convinced she asked me on this trip to find out what happened to me after my divorce. She wants to write about it as a sequel to her fucking book." Ah, that old lament. Despite protestations to the contrary, every novel is a roman à clef, for readers who are privately acquainted with the novelist. Most of them, moreover, persuade themselves that *they* are the keys that fit.

But wait. Also aboard is another novelist, a mystery-monger named Kelvin Kranz (Dan Algrant), who outsells Alice, many times over. Needless to say, she deems herself his artistic superior, and the film is worth seeing for a delicious moment of pure Streepery, when Alice and Kelvin meet in the dining room. She asks him, "How long does it take you to write one of your"—she flutters her fingers, as if brushing off dirt—"your books?" Three

or four months, he replies. “Oh, that’s longer than I thought!” she says. Ouch. The joke’s on her, though, for Kelvin is a gentlemanly soul, who admires Alice’s work, and it’s gratifying to see Susan curled up in bed with one of his best-sellers. What I longed for was a closeup of Alice, too, sneakily plucking “Fugue State,” “Boiling Point,” or another gripping Kranz from the shelves of the ship’s library and smuggling it to her room. Imagine her lapping up every word, her face aglow with envy, snobbery, thrills, and guilt. Sadly, Soderbergh can’t bring himself to take that illuminating step.

One mystery that even Kranz couldn’t solve is: Where’s Elvis Costello? “Let Them All Talk” is the opening number, pumping and brassy, on his 1983 album, “Punch the Clock.” In the film, however, we never hear it. (The succeeding track, “Every Day I Write the Book,” which may be the best song ever written about writing, would also be a nice fit for this movie.) Instead, the score is by Thomas Newman, whose jazz compositions are, I guess, better suited to Soderbergh’s narrative riffs. Much of the tale has a noodling and speculative air, and, if you’re braced for shipboard shenanigans, as in “The Lady Eve” (1941), forget it; the romance between Karen and Tyler is a nonstarter. Oddest of all is the fact that, when Alice, as requested, delivers a public lecture to her fellow-passengers, she addresses her thoughts—“What a miracle it is that consciousness emerged,” and so on—to a full house. Give me a break. I’ve been on the Queen Mary 2, from America to England, and, believe me, the folks on that noble vessel are in no mood for miraculous consciousness. They want to shop.

For fuchsia’s sake, the heroine of “I’m Your Woman,” Jean (Rachel Brosnahan), lounges around in a gauzy peignoir trimmed with fur. It still has the sales tag attached, suggesting that it was stolen rather than bought. Unhappy, bored, and home alone, Jean has tried in vain to have children—a hole in her life that is repaired, without warning, when her husband, Eddie (Bill Heck), returns one day with a baby. Where it hails from, and who its parents are, Lord knows; nonetheless, what a thoughtful gift. Jean names it Harry.

Soon afterward, in a further surprising development, Jean is hustled out of the house and compelled to go on the run. Eddie is a crook, he’s messed up, and now somebody’s seeking revenge on him and his loved ones. Typically, though, he’s not around, and so the fleeing Jean is attended by a guy named

Cal (Arinzé Kene)—a placid and capable sort, who drives her and Harry to a safe location and leaves them there, with plenty of diapers, food, and formula. More loneliness ensues. The movie, which is directed by Julia Hart, may have the outline of a thriller, but the gaps are filled with waiting.

The time is the nineteen-seventies B.C.—before cell phones, that is. (The ubiquity of them, I'd argue, has proved fatal to the crime film; information can now be instantly shared rather than being withheld in the interests of suspense or lost because of a missed call.) The cars of the period are like whales on wheels, lumbering and wallowing along in the course of a chase. There's also a splendid, disco-driven sequence at a club, where the beat is interrupted by gunfire. Jean, clad in a glittering jumpsuit, takes refuge in one of the club's phone booths, and we glimpse the chaos from her point of view, as the customers race past in a terrified stampede.

“I'm Your Woman” needs these dynamic interludes, because the rest of it, alas, feels dangerously numb. Remember the rollicking tone of “Raising Arizona” (1987), another kid-kidnapping saga? Well, swing to the opposite extreme and you come to Hart's movie, where nobody rollicks at all. Conversation is pause-heavy; smiles are fleeting and tight with anxiety; the plot is a knot. True, there's a smoothly controlled performance from Marsha Stephanie Blake as Teri, who also has Eddie troubles. But why is everyone so scared of Eddie, anyway? Is he really Mr. Big? We meet him only briefly, but he strikes me as Mr. Medium-Sized Jerk. Jean and Teri should be their own women, and belong to nobody else. ♦

The Great Outdoors

- [Zosia Mamet Is a Horse Girl](#)

[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Zosia Mamet Is a Horse Girl

Post-“Girls,” the actress is starring in “The Flight Attendant,” an HBO Max mystery series, and spending quality time with her six-year-old mare.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

December 7, 2020

On a recent Monday, Zosia Mamet, the actress, unwrapped a peppermint candy and offered it to her six-year-old dappled gray horse, Ten. “Nom nom nom. Yes, you good girl!” she said, her eyes soft, as the mare chomped loudly on the treat, then butted a velvety muzzle into her owner’s palm. “Horses love peppermints. Right, Tenny girl?”



Zosia Mamet Illustration by João Fazenda

Mamet, who is thirty-two, wore riding breeches and tall boots. She was spending her afternoon at the Stables at MiraBella, in Florida, New York, about two hours north of the city, where she has been riding for two years. Last spring, Mamet and her husband, the actor Evan Jonigkeit, gave up their Manhattan rental and moved upstate. Although the move wasn't animated by the pandemic, it dovetailed with it. "We ended up having this totally unprecedented pause, which meant I've been able to ride Ten five or six days a week," Mamet said. She led the horse out of her stall toward the grooming area, where she secured her to the barn's ceiling with a pair of cross ties. "We just celebrated the one-year anniversary since I got her," she said, brushing the animal, whose eyes followed her owner's movements. "Usually, on Mondays, the barn is closed. Look at her! She's, like"—Mamet's voice took on the cadence of a petulant tween—" 'Mom, it's my day off! What are you doing?'"

Best known for her six-season run as Shoshanna Shapiro, the plucky ditz savant on Lena Dunham's "Girls," Mamet is now starring in "The Flight Attendant," a fizzy murder mystery on HBO Max in which she plays Annie, the levelheaded lawyer best friend to Kaley Cuoco's good-time girl and murder suspect. Holding up a sleek black rider's helmet, she said, "This gorgeous thing was actually a wrap gift from Kaley. She's a horse girl, too!"

"I've always been a horse girl," she went on. "I was born in Vermont, and my parents"—the playwright David Mamet and the actress Lindsay Crouse—"had gotten my older sister a pony. She was, like, 'Cute, whatever.' But I was, like—" She mimicked ecstatically throwing her arms around Ten's neck. "From then on, I was hooked, a full-on horse nerd. I read all the 'Saddle Club' books, this dorky Y.A. series," she said. "That kind of love is like something in your blood; you either have it or you don't. Sometimes I describe it like an illness." She leaned down and began to clean out the dirt compacted in a horseshoe. "Ten has four shoes," she said. "Some have just two. My first horse was Lucy, and I got her when I was thirteen, in Los Angeles, and she lived until I was, maybe twenty-seven?" She worked a pebble from one shoe's grip. "My grandmother on my mom's side was a big rider," she said. "She was riding her horse, Uncle Sam, after a bad storm, and there was a downed power line and she didn't see it, and Uncle Sam stepped on it. He died underneath her! Very sad." She turned to Ten again. "Hey, boo-boo!" she said. "I've recently started showing her, and a few days

ago we were clipping her to make everything look nice, and we went a little too short with the forelock. So she's working with a smaller bang than usual."

Outdoors, it was nippy but clear, and Mamet mounted Ten and began circling the ring, accelerating to a trot. "What we're doing now is what's called flatwork," she called out. "All the stuff we do in training when we're not jumping. I'm teaching her to get into a frame. You see how she curls her head down? That's what we want. It makes them elongate their stride." She clucked rhythmically as she led the horse around the ring. "Ooh, this is a canter now," she said. "There you go, mama!" After a few more spirited circles, she paused. "There's nothing I'd rather do in the world than be an actor," she said. "But I've been kicked in the teeth so many times. It's such a hard profession; there's so much rejection, and so much instability and pressure. Riding is my solace." She patted Ten's neck. "My trainer has this saying: 'Ride the horse you have today.' Ten may have done something perfectly yesterday, and then I try to do it again and it's colder, it's earlier, I'm tired and my leg isn't as on her, and, for whatever reason, exactly what I did yesterday isn't getting the same response. And acting is the same. You have to accept the circumstances you have and the moment you're in, and remember you're doing this thing because you love it." Ten snorted, as if in rejoinder. "Good girl, Tenny," Mamet said. ♦

When Can I See Ya? Dept.

- [Andrew Bird's Cozy Melancholy](#)

[December 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Andrew Bird's Cozy Melancholy

The singer-songwriter-whistler-violinist adapts his “Gezelligheid” holiday concerts for the pandemic age.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

December 7, 2020

For the past several holiday seasons, Andrew Bird, the warmly tuneful singer-songwriter-whistler-violinist, has performed a concert series called “Gezelligheid”—meaning “coziness,” or kind of a Dutch hygge—often at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. The holiday concerts are “about creating an atmosphere,” Bird said recently. “That’s what seasonal music is to me—how do we get through the dark, cold months?” The Gothic Revival church is made cozier by Bird’s stagecraft, including colored lights and a mesmerizing red-and-white contraption: a two-headed rotating speaker called a Janus Spinning Horn, made by the Chicago luthier Ian Schneller. “It’s like a cross between a flower and a Victrola horn,” Bird said, on a Zoom from a sunny hilltop in Ojai, California. This holiday season, he and his family are staying put in California, and, on December 13th, he will live-stream “Gezelligheid” from Ojai. “I’m going to string up some café lights and do it at sunset,” he said. Otherwise, “it’s probably exactly what you’re looking at”: Oriental rug, Janus Spinning Horn, oak tree, orange groves, Topatopa Mountains. As Bird picked up his violin to play, the Janus Horn began to spin, like an amaryllis sending out an alarm signal.



Bird, forty-seven, is tall and lean, with dark hair and a serious expression. He tends to dress in a gently old-fashioned style—button-down shirts, the occasional fedora or vest—and when he, a non-actor, was recruited to play an earnest mortician in the current season of “Fargo,” set in mid-century Kansas City, it made intuitive sense. (His character, Thurman Smutny, whistles when he’s happy, is naïve about the criminal underworld, and says things like “It’s sigh-o-relief o’clock around here at the ol’ Smutny household.”) Bird grew up in Lake Bluff, outside Chicago, and began playing the violin at age four. “I’m very close with my mom”—Beth Bird, a print artist—“and she’s the one who started me on violin,” he said. “She tried to learn to play herself, out of solidarity.” Later, he got a bachelor’s in violin performance at Northwestern, and played with the jazz-swing combo Squirrel Nut Zippers, and with his own group, Andrew Bird’s Bowl of Fire; since 2003, as a solo artist, he’s excelled at doing his own thing.

This fall, he released “Hark!,” a holiday album, which, like this year’s concert, offers beauty, and a mood of distanced coziness: *gezelligheid* à la mode. Plaintive yearning abounds. “Christmas in April,” which Bird wrote as lockdown came, in March—“‘March’ would not have been the most lyrical-sounding”—hopes for “no more sorrow, and no more fear” and wonders about Yuletide togetherness: “Oh, my love, when will we know / If we can meet under the mistletoe?” It’s “a fairly simple, sentimental song,” Bird said. “But, whenever you know that you and most of the populace are thinking the same thing, that’s kind of an extraordinary moment.” His “White Christmas” heightens the song’s natural wistfulness with cascading strings that evoke the eerie falling flowers in “Ode to Billie Joe.” In “Alabaster” (“Keep your lamp on, keep your lamp on”), he wanted to “capture a sense of walking in Chicago at night, and looking in the warm glow of apartment buildings, wondering what people’s lives are like in there.” “Greenwine” merges “Greensleeves”—“one of those darker, minor-key Christmas tunes”—with a Handsome Family song about a “dysfunctional relationship, and alcoholism, with Christmas as a backdrop.” John Prine’s “Souvenirs” sings of melted snow, broken toys, and faded colors. Yet it all feels pretty good.

As lockdown began, Bird said, the album “‘Paris 1919’ was on our stereo non-stop, because my nine-year-old son is our household d.j., and he got really into John Cale.” (So was Lou Reed’s “Transformer,” Bird said: “My

son probably has better taste than I do.”) Cale, who is Welsh, composed “Paris 1919” in 1972, when he was working in L.A. and feeling nostalgic for Europe. Its snowy, dreamy “Andalucia” is “comforting and mysterious at the same time, which is, I think, the ideal description of a Christmas song,” Bird said. “It’s the melancholy. Melancholy is not sad—it’s about half and half the mixture of happy and sad.” Bird, plucking his violin like a guitar, begins “Hark!” with a delicate cover of it: “Andalucia, when can I see ya?”

Bird included some of his mother’s favorite holiday songs on “Hark!,” which also features her artwork on the cover: a red-yellow-and-smoky-black painting of a winged, lantern-bearing gentleman floating above a village, in a mood of Toulouse-Lautrec-meets-Chagall whimsy. “Not being able to see each other, it was nice to have this project to connect on,” Bird said. “She’s been my No. 1 collaborator over the years.” ♦

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