Frank Sinatra Has a Cold

By Gay Talese

IN THE WINTER OF 1965, WRITER GAY TALESE ARRIVED IN LOS ANGELES WITH AN ASSIGNMENT FROM ESQUIRE TO PROFILE FRANK Sinatra. The legendary singer was approaching fifty, under the weather, out of sorts, and unwilling to be interviewed. So Talese remained in L.A., hoping Sinatra might recover and reconsider, and he began talking to many of the people around Sinatra—his friends, his associates, his family, his countless hangers-on—and observing the man himself wherever he could. The result, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," ran in April 1966 and became one of the most celebrated magazine stories ever published, a pioneering example of what came to be called New Journalism—a work of rigorously faithful fact enlivened with the kind of vivid storytelling that had previously been reserved for fiction. The piece conjures a deeply rich portrait of one of the era's most guarded figures and tells a larger story about entertainment, celebrity, and America itself.

Frank Sinatra, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes who sat waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent during much of the evening, except now in this private club in Beverly Hills he seemed even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semidarkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music blaring from the stereo. The two blondes knew, as did Sinatra's four male friends who stood nearby, that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday.

Sinatra had been working in a film that he now disliked, could not wait to finish; he was tired of all the publicity attached to his dating the twenty-year-old Mia Farrow, who was not in sight tonight; he was angry that a CBS television documentary of his life, to be shown in two weeks, was reportedly prying into his privacy, even speculating on his possible friendship with Mafia leaders; he was worried about his starring role in an hour-long NBC show entitled *Sinatra—A Man and His Music*, which would require that he sing eighteen songs with a voice that at this particular moment, just a few nights before the taping was to begin, was weak and sore and uncertain. Sinatra was ill. He was the victim of an ailment so common that most people would consider it trivial. But when it gets to Sinatra it can plunge him into a state of anguish, deep depression, panic, even rage. Frank Sinatra had a cold.

Sinatra with a cold is Picasso without paint, Ferrari without fuel—only worse. For the common cold robs Sinatra of that uninsurable jewel, his voice, cutting into the core of his confidence, and it affects not only his own psyche but also seems to cause a kind of psychosomatic nasal drip within dozens of people who work for him, drink with him, love him, depend on him for their own welfare and stability. A Sinatra with a cold can, in a small way, send vibrations through the entertainment industry and beyond as surely as a President of the United States, suddenly sick, can shake the national economy.

For Frank Sinatra was now involved with many things involving many people—his own film company, his record company, his private airline, his missile-parts firm, his real-estate holdings across the nation, his personal staff of seventy-five—which are only a portion of the power he is and has come to represent. He seemed now to be also the embodiment of the fully emancipated male, perhaps the only one in America, the man who can do anything he wants, anything, can do it because he has money, the energy, and no apparent guilt. In an age when the very young seem to be taking over, protesting and picketing and demanding change, Frank Sinatra survives as a national phenomenon, one of the few prewar products to withstand the test of time. He is the champ who made the big comeback, the man who had everything, lost it, then got it back, letting nothing stand in his way, doing what few men can do: he uprooted his life, left his family, broke with everything that was familiar, learning in the process that one way to hold a woman is not to hold her. Now he has the affection of Nancy and Ava and Mia, the fine female produce of

three generations, and still has the adoration of his children, the freedom of a bachelor, he does not feel old, he makes old men feel young, makes them think that if Frank Sinatra can do it, it can be done; not that they could do it, but it is still nice for other men to know, at fifty, that it can be done.

But now, standing at this bar in Beverly Hills, Sinatra had a cold, and he continued to drink quietly and he seemed miles away in his private world, not even reacting when suddenly the stereo in the other room switched to a Sinatra song, *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning.*

> "Sinatra with a cold is Picasso without paint, Ferrari without fuel"

It is a lovely ballad that he first recorded ten years ago, and it now inspired many young couples who had been sitting, tired of twisting, to get up and move slowly around the dance floor, holding one another very close. Sinatra's intonation, precisely clipped, yet full and flowing, gave a deeper meaning to the simple lyrics—"In the wee small hours of the morning/while the whole wide world is fast asleep/you lie awake, and think about the girl..."—it was like so many of his classics, a song that evoked loneliness and sensuality, and when blended with the dim light and the alcohol and nicotine and late-night needs, it became a kind of airy aphrodisiac. Undoubtedly the words from this song, and others like it, had put millions in the mood, it was music to make love by, and doubtless much love had been made by it all over America at night in cars, while the batteries burned down, in cottages by the lake, on beaches during balmy summer evenings, in secluded parks and exclusive penthouses and furnished rooms, in cabin cruisers and cabs and cabanas—in all places where Sinatra's songs could be heard were these words that warmed women, wooed and won them, snipped the final thread of inhibition and gratified the male egos of ungrateful lovers; two generations of men had been the beneficiaries of such ballads, for which they were eternally in his debt, for which they may eternally hate him. Nevertheless here he was, the man himself, in the early hours of the morning in Beverly Hills, out of range.

The two blondes, who seemed to be in their middle thirties, were preened and polished, their matured bodies softly molded within tight dark suits. They sat, legs crossed, perched on the high bar stools. They listened to the music. Then one of them pulled out a Kent and Sinatra quickly placed his gold lighter under it and she held his hand, looked at his fingers: they were nubby and raw, and the pinkies protruded, being so stiff from arthritis that he could barely bend them. He was, as usual, immaculately dressed. He wore an oxford-grey suit with a vest, a suit conservatively cut on the outside but trimmed with flamboyant silk within; his shoes, British, seemed to be shined even on the bottom of the soles. He also wore, as everybody seemed to know, a remarkably convincing black hairpiece, one of sixty that he owns, most of them under the care of an inconspicuous little grey-haired lady who, holding his hair in a tiny satchel, follows him around whenever he performs. She earns $400 a week. The most distinguishing thing about Sinatra's face are his eyes, clear blue and alert, eyes that within seconds can go cold with

anger, or glow with affection, or, as now, reflect a vague detachment that keeps his friends silent and distant.

Leo Durocher, one of Sinatra's closest friends, was now shooting pool in the small room behind the bar. Standing near the door was Jim Mahoney, Sinatra's press agent, a somewhat chunky young man with a square jaw and narrow eyes who would resemble a tough Irish plainclothesman if it were not for the expensive continental suits he wears and his exquisite shoes often adorned with polished buckles. Also nearby was a big, broad-shouldered two-hundred-pound actor named Brad Dexter who seemed always to be thrusting out his chest so that his gut would not show.

Brad Dexter has appeared in several films and television shows, displaying fine talent as a character actor, but in Beverly Hills he is equally known for the role he played in Hawaii two years ago when he swam a few hundred yards and risked his life to save Sinatra from drowning in a riptide. Since then Dexter has been one of Sinatra's constant companions and has been made a producer in Sinatra's film company. He occupies a plush office near Sinatra's executive suite. He is endlessly searching for literary properties that might be converted into new starring roles for Sinatra. Whenever he is among strangers with Sinatra he worries because he knows that Sinatra brings out the best and worst in people—some men will become aggressive, some women will become seductive, others will stand around skeptically appraising him, the scene will be somehow intoxicated by his mere presence, and maybe Sinatra himself, if feeling as badly as he was tonight, might become intolerant or tense, and then: headlines. So Brad Dexter tries to anticipate danger and warn Sinatra in advance. He confesses to feeling very protective of Sinatra, admitting in a recent moment of self-revelation: "I'd kill for him."

While this statement may seem outlandishly dramatic, particularly when taken out of context, it nonetheless expresses a fierce fidelity that is quite common within Sinatra's special circle. It is a characteristic that Sinatra, without admission, seems to prefer: All the Way; All or Nothing at All. This is the Sicilian in Sinatra; he permits his friends, if they wish to remain that, none of the easy Anglo-Saxon outs. But if they remain loyal, then there is nothing Sinatra will not do in turn—fabulous gifts, personal kindnesses, encouragement when they're down, adulation when they're up. They are wise to remember, however, one thing. He is Sinatra. The boss. Il Padrone.

I had seen something of this Sicilian side of Sinatra last summer at Jilly's saloon in New York, which was the only other time I'd gotten a close view of him prior to this night in this California club. Jilly's, which is on West Fifty-second Street in Manhattan, is where Sinatra drinks whenever he is in New York, and there is a special chair reserved for him in the back room against the wall that nobody else may use. When he is occupying it, seated behind a long table flanked by his closest New York friends—who include the saloonkeeper, Jilly Rizzo, and Jilly's azure-haired wife, Honey, who is known as the *Blue Jew*—a rather strange ritualistic scene develops. That night dozens of people, some of them casual friends of Sinatra's, some mere acquaintances, some neither, appeared outside of Jilly's saloon. They approached it like a shrine. They had come to pay respect. They were from New York, Brooklyn, Atlantic City, Hoboken. They were old actors, young actors, former prizefighters, tired trumpet players, politicians, a boy with a cane. There was a fat lady who said she remembered Sinatra when he used to throw the Jersey Observer onto her front porch in 1933. There were middle-aged couples who said they had heard Sinatra sing at the Rustic Cabin in 1938 and "We knew then that he really had it!" Or they had heard him when he was with Harry James's band in 1939, or with Tommy Dorsey in 1941 ("Yeah, that's the song, *I'll Never Smile Again*—he sang it one night in this dump near Newark and we danced..."); or they remembered that time at the Paramount with the swooners, and him with those bow ties, The Voice; and one woman remembered that awful boy she knew then—Alexander Dorogokupetz, an eighteen-year-old heckler who had thrown a tomato at Sinatra and the bobby-soxers in the balcony had tried to flail him to death. Whatever became of Alexander Dorogokupetz? The lady did not know.

And they remembered when Sinatra was a failure and sang trash like *Mairzy Doats,* and they remembered his comeback and on this night they were all standing outside Jilly's saloon, dozens of them, but they could not get in. So some of them left. But most of them stayed, hoping that soon they might be able to push or wedge their way into Jilly's between the elbows and backsides of the men drinking three-deep at the bar, and they might be able to peek through and see him sitting back there. This is all they really wanted; they wanted to see him. And for a few moments they gazed in silence through the smoke and they stared. Then they turned, fought their way out of the bar, went home.

Some of Sinatra's close friends, all of whom are known to the men guarding Jilly's door, do manage to get an escort into the back room. But once they are there they, too, must fend for themselves. On the particular evening, Frank Gifford, the former football player, got only seven yards in three tries. Others who had somehow been close enough to shake Sinatra's hand did not shake it; instead they just touched him on the shoulder or sleeve, or they merely stood close enough for him to see them and, after he'd given them a wink of recognition or a wave or a nod or called out their names (he had a fantastic memory for first names), they would then turn and leave. They had checked in. They had paid their respects. And as I watched this ritualistic scene, I got the impression that Frank Sinatra was dwelling simultaneously in two worlds that were not contemporary.

On the one hand he is the swinger—as he is when talking and joking with Sammy Davis, Jr., Richard Conte, Liza Minelli, Bernie Massi, or any of the other show-business people who get to sit at the table; on the other, as when he is nodding or waving to his paisanos who are close to him (Al Silvani, a boxing manager who works with Sinatra's film company; Dominic Di Bona, his wardrobe man; Ed Pucci, a 300-pound former football lineman who is his aide-de-camp), Frank Sinatra is Il Padrone. Or better still, he is what in traditional Sicily have long been called uomini rispettati—men of respect: men who are both majestic and humble, men who are loved by all and are very generous by nature, men whose hands are kissed as they walk from village to village, men who would personally go out of their way to redress a wrong.

Frank Sinatra does things personally. At Christmas time, he will personally pick dozens of presents for his close friends and family, remembering the type of jewelry they like, their favorite colors, the sizes of their shirts and dresses. When a musician friend's house was destroyed and his wife was killed in a Los Angeles mud slide a little more than a year ago, Sinatra personally came to his aid, finding the musician a new home, paying whatever hospital bills were left unpaid by the insurance, then personally supervising the furnishing of the new home down to the replacing of the silverware, the linen, the purchase of new clothing.

The same Sinatra who did this can, within the same hour, explode in a towering rage of intolerance should a small thing be incorrectly done for him by one of his paisanos. For example, when one of his men brought him a frankfurter with catsup on it, which Sinatra apparently abhors, he angrily threw the bottle at the man, splattering catsup all over him. Most of the men who work around Sinatra are big. But this never seems to intimidate Sinatra nor curb his impetuous behavior with them when he is mad. They will never take a swing back at him. He is Il Padrone.

At other times, aiming to please, his men will overreact to his desires: when he casually observed that his big orange desert jeep in Palm Springs seemed in need of a new painting, the word was swiftly passed down through the channels, becoming ever more urgent as it went, until finally it was a command that the jeep be painted now, immediately, yesterday. To accomplish this would require the hiring of a special crew of painters to work all night, at overtime rates; which, in turn, meant that the order had to be bucked back up the line for further approval. When it finally got back to Sinatra's desk, he did not know what it was all about; after he had figured it out he confessed, with a tired look on his face, that he did not care when the hell they painted the jeep.

Yet it would have been unwise for anyone to anticipate his reaction, for he is a wholly unpredictable man of many moods and great dimension, a man who responds instantaneously to instinct—suddenly, dramatically, wildly he responds, and nobody can predict what will follow. A young lady named Jane Hoag, a reporter at Life's Los Angeles bureau who had attended the same school as Sinatra's daughter, Nancy, had once been invited to a party at Mrs. Sinatra's California home at which Frank Sinatra, who maintains very cordial relations with his former wife, acted as host. Early in the party Miss Hoag, while leaning against a table, accidentally with her elbow knocked over one of a pair of alabaster birds to the floor, smashing it to pieces. Suddenly, Miss Hoag recalled, Sinatra's daughter cried, "Oh, that was one of my mother's favorite..."—but before she could complete the sentence, Sinatra glared at her, cutting her off, and while forty other guests in the room all stared in silence, Sinatra walked over, quickly with his finger flicked the other alabaster bird off the table, smashing it to pieces, and then put an arm gently around Jane Hoag and said, in a way that put her completely at ease, "That's okay, kid."

NOW SINATRA SAID A FEW words to the blondes. Then he turned from the bar and began to walk toward the poolroom. One of Sinatra's other men friends moved in to keep the girls company. Brad Dexter, who had been standing in the corner talking to some other people, now followed Sinatra.

The room cracked with the clack of billiard balls. There were about a dozen spectators in the room, most of them young men who were watching Leo Durocher shoot against two other aspiring hustlers who were not very good. This private drinking club has among its membership many actors, directors, writers, models, nearly all of them a good deal younger than Sinatra or Durocher and much more casual in the way they dress for the evening. Many of the young women, their long hair flowing loosely below their shoulders, wore tight, fanny-fitting Jax pants and very expensive sweaters; and a few of the young men wore blue or green velour shirts with high collars and narrow tight pants, and Italian loafers.

It was obvious from the way Sinatra looked at these people in the poolroom that they were not his style, but he leaned back against a high stool that was against the wall, holding his drink in his right hand, and said nothing, just watched Durocher slam the billiard balls back and forth. The younger men in the room, accustomed to seeing Sinatra at this club, treated him without deference, although they said nothing offensive. They were a cool young group, very California-cool and casual, and one of the coolest seemed to be a little guy, very quick of movement, who had a sharp profile, pale blue eyes, blondish hair, and squared eyeglasses. He wore a pair of brown corduroy slacks,

a green shaggy-dog Shetland sweater, a tan suede jacket, and Game Warden boots, for which he had recently paid $60.

Frank Sinatra, leaning against the stool, sniffling a bit from his cold, could not take his eyes off the Game Warden boots. Once, after gazing at them for a few moments, he turned away; but now he was focused on them again. The owner of the boots, who was just standing in them watching the pool game, was named Harlan Ellison, a writer who had just completed work on a screenplay, *The Oscar*.

Finally Sinatra could not contain himself.

"Hey," he yelled in his slightly harsh voice that still had a soft, sharp edge. "Those Italian boots?"

"No," Ellison said.

"Spanish?"

"No."

"Are they English boots?"

"Look, I donno, man," Ellison shot back, frowning at Sinatra, then turning away again.

Now the poolroom was suddenly silent. Leo Durocher who had been poised behind his cue stick and was bent low just froze in that position for a second. Nobody moved. Then Sinatra moved away from the stool and walked with that slow, arrogant swagger of his toward Ellison, the hard tap of Sinatra's shoes the only sound in the room. Then, looking down at Ellison with a slightly raised eyebrow and a tricky little smile, Sinatra asked: "You expecting a storm?"

Harlan Ellison moved a step to the side. "Look, is there any reason why you're talking to me?"

"I don't like the way you're dressed," Sinatra said.

"Hate to shake you up," Ellison said, "but I dress to suit myself."

Now there was some rumbling in the room, and somebody said, "Com'on, Harlan, let's get out of here," and Leo Durocher made his pool shot and said, "Yeah, com'on."

But Ellison stood his ground.

Sinatra said, "What do you do?"

"I'm a plumber," Ellison said.

"No, no, he's not," another young man quickly yelled from across the table. "He wrote *The Oscar*."

"Oh, yeah," Sinatra said, "well I've seen it, and it's a piece of crap."

"That's strange," Ellison said, "because they haven't even released it yet."

"Well, I've seen it," Sinatra repeated, "and it's a piece of crap."

Now Brad Dexter, very anxious, very big opposite the small figure of Ellison, said, "Com'on, kid, I don't want you in this room."

"Hey," Sinatra interrupted Dexter, "can't you see I'm talking to this guy?"

Dexter was confused. Then his whole attitude changed, and his voice went soft and he said to Ellison, almost with a plea, "Why do you persist in tormenting me?"

The whole scene was becoming ridiculous, and it seemed that Sinatra was only half-serious, perhaps just reacting out of sheer boredom or inner despair; at any rate, after a few more exchanges Harlan Ellison left the room. By this time the word had gotten out to those on the dance floor about the Sinatra-Ellison exchange, and somebody went to look for the manager of the club. But somebody else said that the manager had already heard about it—and had quickly gone out the door, hopped in his car and drove home. So the assistant manager went into the poolroom.

"I don't want anybody in here without coats and ties," Sinatra snapped.

The assistant manager nodded, and walked back to his office.

IT WAS THE MORNING AFTER. It was the beginning of another nervous day for Sinatra's press agent, Jim Mahoney. Mahoney had a headache, and he was worried but not over the Sinatra-Ellison incident of the night before. At the time Mahoney had been with his wife at a table in the other room, and possibly he had not even been aware of the little drama. The whole thing had lasted only about three minutes. And three minutes after it was over, Frank Sinatra had probably forgotten about it for the rest of his life—as Ellison will probably remember it for the rest of his life: he had had, as hundreds of others before him, at an unexpected moment between darkness and dawn, a scene with Sinatra.

> "I don't want anybody in here without coats and ties."

It was just as well that Mahoney had not been in the poolroom; he had enough on his mind today. He was worried about Sinatra's cold and worried about the controversial CBS documentary that, despite Sinatra's protests and withdrawal of permission, would be shown on television in less than two weeks. The newspapers this morning were full of hints that Sinatra might sue the network, and Mahoney's phones were ringing without pause, and now he was plugged into New York talking to the *Daily News*'s Kay Gardella, saying: "...that's right, Kay...they made a gentleman's agreement to not ask certain questions about Frank's private life, and then Cronkite went right ahead: 'Frank, tell me about those associations.' That question, Kay—out! That question should never have been asked..."

As he spoke, Mahoney leaned back in his leather chair, his head shaking slowly. He is a powerfully built man of thirty-seven; he has a round, ruddy face, a heavy jaw, and narrow pale eyes, and he might appear pugnacious if he did not speak with such clear, soft sincerity and if he were not so meticulous about his clothes. His suits and shoes are superbly tailored, which was one of the first things Sinatra noticed about him, and in his spacious office opposite the bar is a red-muff electrical shoe polisher and a pair of brown wooden shoulders on a stand over which Mahoney can drape his jackets. Near the bar is an autographed photograph of President Kennedy and a few pictures of Frank Sinatra, but there are none of Sinatra in any other rooms in Mahoney's public-relations agency; there once was a large photograph of him hanging in the reception room but this apparently bruised the egos of some of Mahoney's other movie-star clients and, since Sinatra never shows up at the agency anyway, the photograph was removed.

Still, Sinatra seems ever present, and if Mahoney did not have legitimate worries about Sinatra, as he did today, he could invent them—and, as worry aids, he surrounds himself with little mementos of moments in the past when he did worry. In his shaving kit there is a two-year-old box of sleeping tablets dispensed by a Reno druggist—the date on the bottle marks the kidnapping of Frank Sinatra, Jr. There is on a table in Mahoney's office a mounted wood reproduction of Frank Sinatra's ransom note written on the aforementioned occasion. One of Mahoney's mannerisms, when he is sitting at his desk worrying, is to tinker with the tiny toy train he keeps in front of him—the train is a souvenir from the Sinatra film, *Von Ryan's Express*; it is to men who are close to Sinatra what the PT-109 tie

clasps are to men who were close to Kennedy—and Mahoney then proceeds to roll the little train back and forth on the six inches of track; back and forth, back and forth, click-clack-click-clack. It is his Queeg-thing.

Now Mahoney quickly put aside the little train. His secretary told him there was a very important call on the line. Mahoney picked it up, and his voice was even softer and more sincere than before. "Yes, Frank," he said. "Right…right…yes, Frank…"

When Mahoney put down the phone, quietly, he announced that Frank Sinatra had left in his private jet to spend the weekend at his home in Palm Springs, which is a sixteen-minute flight from his home in Los Angeles. Mahoney was now worried again. The Lear jet that Sinatra's pilot would be flying was identical, Mahoney said, to the one that had just crashed in another part of California.

ON THE FOLLOWING MONDAY, a cloudy and unseasonably cool California day, more than one hundred people gathered inside a white television studio, an enormous room dominated by a white stage, white walls, and with dozens of lights and lamps dangling: it rather resembled a gigantic operating room. In this room, within an hour or so, NBC was scheduled to begin taping a one-hour show that would be televised in color on the night of November 24 and would highlight, as much as it could in the limited

time, the twenty-five-year career of Frank Sinatra as a public entertainer. It would not attempt to probe, as the forthcoming CBS Sinatra documentary allegedly would, that area of Sinatra's life that he regards as private. The NBC show would be mainly an hour of Sinatra singing some of the hits that carried him from Hoboken to Hollywood, a show that would be interrupted only now and then by a few film clips and commercials for Budweiser beer. Prior to his cold, Sinatra had been very excited about this show; he saw here an opportunity to appeal not only to those nostalgic, but also to communicate his talent to some rock-and-rollers—in a sense, he was battling The Beatles. The press releases being prepared by Mahoney's agency stressed this, reading: "If you happen to be tired of kid singers wearing mops of hair thick enough to hide a crate of melons…it should be refreshing, to consider the entertainment value of a video special titled *Sinatra—A Man and His Music…*"

But now in this NBC studio in Los Angeles, there was an atmosphere of anticipation and tension because of the uncertainty of the Sinatra voice. The forty-three musicians in Nelson Riddle's orchestra had already arrived and some were up on the white platform warming up. Dwight Hemion, a youthful sandy-haired director who had won praise for his television special on Barbra Streisand, was seated in the glass-enclosed control booth that overlooked the orchestra and stage. The camera crews, technical teams, security guards, Budweiser ad men were also standing between the floor lamps and cameras, waiting, as were a dozen or so ladies who worked as secretaries in other parts of the building but had sneaked away so they could watch this.

A few minutes before eleven o'clock, word spread quickly through the long corridor into the big studio that Sinatra was spotted walking through the parking lot and was on his way, and was looking fine. There seemed great relief among the group that was gathered; but when the lean, sharply dressed figure of the man got closer, and closer, they saw to their dismay that it was not Frank Sinatra. It was his double. Johnny Delgado.

Delgado walks like Sinatra, has Sinatra's build, and from certain facial angles does resemble Sinatra. But he seems a rather shy individual. Fifteen years ago, early in his acting career, Delgado applied for a role in From Here to Eternity. He was hired, finding out later that he was to be Sinatra's double. In Sinatra's latest film, *Assault on a Queen*, a story in which Sinatra and some fellow conspirators attempt to hijack the *Queen Mary,* Johnny Delgado doubles for Sinatra in some water scenes; and now, in this NBC studio, his job was to stand under the hot television lights marking Sinatra's spots on the stage for the camera crews.

Five minutes later, the real Frank Sinatra walked in. His face was pale, his blue eyes seemed a bit watery. He had been unable to rid himself of the cold, but he was going to try to sing anyway because the schedule was tight and thousands of dollars were involved at this moment in the assembling of the orchestra and crews and the rental of the studio. But when Sinatra, on his way to his small rehearsal room to warm up his voice, looked into the studio and saw that the stage and orchestra's platform were not close together, as he had specifically requested, his lips tightened and he was obviously very upset. A few moments later, from his rehearsal room, could be heard the pounding of his fist against the top of the piano and the voice of his accompanist, Bill Miller, saying, softly, "Try not to upset yourself, Frank."

Later Jim Mahoney and another man walked in, and there was talk of Dorothy Kilgallen's death in New York earlier that morning. She had been an ardent foe of Sinatra for years, and he became equally uncomplimentary about her in his nightclub act, and now, though she was dead, he did not compromise his feelings. "Dorothy Kilgallen's dead," he repeated, walking out of the room toward the studio. "Well, guess I got to change my whole act."

When he strolled into the studio the musicians all picked up their instruments and stiffened in their seats. Sinatra cleared his throat a few times and then, after rehearsing a few ballads with the orchestra, he sang "Don't Worry About Me" to his satisfaction and, being uncertain of

how long his voice could last, suddenly became impatient.

"Why don't we tape this mother?" he called out, looking up toward the glass booth where the director, Dwight Hemion, and his staff were sitting. Their heads seemed to be down, focusing on the control board.

"Why don't we tape this mother?" Sinatra repeated.

The production stage manager, who stands near the camera wearing a headset, repeated Sinatra's words exactly into his line to the control room: "Why don't we tape this mother?"

Hemion did not answer. Possibly his switch was off. It was hard to know because of the obscuring reflections the lights made against the glass booth.

"Why don't we put on a coat and tie," said Sinatra, then wearing a high-necked yellow pullover, "and tape this..."

Suddenly Hemion's voice came over the sound amplifier, very calmly: "Okay, Frank, would you mind going back over..."

"Yes, I would mind going back," Sinatra snapped.

The silence from Hemion's end, which lasted a second or two, was then again interrupted by Sinatra saying, "When we stop doing things around here the way we did them in 1950, maybe we..." and Sinatra continued to tear into Hemion, condemning as well the lack of modern techniques in putting such shows together; then, possibly not wanting to use his voice unnecessarily, he stopped. And Dwight Hemion, very patient, so patient and calm that one would assume he had not heard anything that Sinatra had just said, outlined the opening part of the show. And Sinatra a few minutes later was reading his opening remarks, words that would follow "Without a Song," off the large idiot-cards being held near the camera. Then, this done, he prepared to do the same thing on camera.

"Frank Sinatra Show, Act I, Page 10, Take 1," called a man with a clapboard, jumping in front of the camera—clap—then jumping away again.

"Did you ever stop to think," Sinatra began, "what the world would be like without a song?... It would be a pretty dreary place... Gives you something to think about, doesn't it?..."

Sinatra stopped.

"Excuse me," he said, adding, "Boy, I need a drink."

They tried it again.

> "When you've been married to Frank Sinatra ..."

"Frank Sinatra Show, Act I, Page 10, Take 2," yelled the jumping guy with the clapboard.

"Did you ever stop to think what the world would be like without a song?..." Frank Sinatra read it through this time without stopping. Then he rehearsed a few more songs, once or twice interrupting the orchestra when a certain instrumental sound was not quite what he wanted. It was hard to tell how well his voice was going to hold up, for this was early in the show; up to this point, however, everybody in the room seemed pleased,

particularly when he sang an old sentimental favorite written more than twenty years ago by Jimmy Van Heusen and Phil Silvers—*Nancy,* inspired by the first of Sinatra's three children when she was just a few years old.

If I don't see her each day
I miss her...
Gee what a thrill
Each time I kiss her...

As Sinatra sang these words, though he has sung them hundreds and hundreds of times in the past, it was suddenly obvious to everybody in the studio that something quite special must be going on inside the man, because something quite special was coming out. He was singing now, cold or no cold, with power and warmth, he was letting himself go, the public arrogance was gone, the private side was in this song about the girl who, it is said, understands him better than anybody else, and is the only person in front of whom he can be unashamedly himself.

Nancy is twenty-five. She lives alone, her marriage to singer Tommy Sands having ended in divorce. Her home is in a Los Angeles suburb and she is now making her third film and is recording for her father's record company. She sees him every day; or, if not, he telephones, no matter if it be from Europe or Asia. When Sinatra's singing first became popular on radio, stimulating the swooners, Nancy would listen at home and cry. When Sinatra's first marriage broke up in 1951 and he left home, Nancy was the only child old enough to remember him as a father. She also saw him with Ava Gardner, Juliet Prowse, Mia Farrow, many others, has gone on double dates with him...

She takes the winter
And makes it summer...
Summer could take
Some lessons from her...

Nancy now also sees him visiting at home with his first wife, the former Nancy Barbato, a plasterer's daughter from Jersey City whom he married in 1939 when he was earning $25 a week singing at the Rustic Cabin near Hoboken.

The first Mrs. Sinatra, a striking woman who has never remarried ("When you've been married to Frank Sinatra..." she once explained to a friend), lives in a magnificent home in Los Angeles with her younger daughter, Tina, who is seventeen. There is no bitterness, only great respect and affection between Sinatra and his first wife, and he has long been welcome in her home and has even been known to wander in at odd hours, stoke the fire, lie on the sofa, and fall asleep. Frank Sinatra can fall asleep anywhere, something he learned when he used to ride bumpy roads with band buses; he also learned at that time, when sitting in a tuxedo, how to pinch the trouser creases in the back and tuck the jacket under and out, and fall asleep perfectly pressed. But he does not ride buses anymore, and his daughter Nancy, who in her younger days felt rejected when he slept on the sofa instead of giving attention to her, later realized that the sofa was one of the few places left in the world where Frank Sinatra could get any privacy, where his famous face would neither be stared at nor cause an abnormal reaction in others. She realized, too, that things normal have always eluded her father: his childhood was one of loneliness and a drive toward attention, and since attaining it he has never again been certain of solitude. Upon looking out the window of a home he once owned in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, he would occasionally see the faces of teen-agers peeking in; and in 1944, after moving to California and buying a home behind a ten-foot fence on Lake Toluca, he discovered that the only way to escape the telephone and other intrusions was to board his paddle boat with a few friends, a card table and a case of beer, and stay afloat all afternoon. But he has tried, insofar as it has been possible, to be like everyone else, Nancy says. He wept on her wedding day, he is very sentimental and sensitive...

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOing up there, Dwight?"

Silence from the control booth.

"Got a party or something going on up there, Dwight?"

Sinatra stood on the stage, arms folded, glaring up across the cameras toward

Hemion. Sinatra had sung Nancy with probably all he had in his voice on this day. The next few numbers contained raspy notes, and twice his voice completely cracked. But now Hemion was in the control booth out of communication; then he was down in the studio walking over to where Sinatra stood. A few minutes later they both left the studio and were on the way up to the control booth. The tape was replayed for Sinatra. He watched only about five minutes of it before he started to shake his head. Then he said to Hemion: "Forget it, just forget it. You're wasting your time. What you got there," Sinatra said, nodding to the singing image of himself on the television screen, "is a man with a cold." Then he left the control booth, ordering that the whole day's performance be scrubbed and future taping postponed until he had recovered.

SOON THE WORD SPREAD LIKE an emotional epidemic down through Sinatra's staff, then fanned out through Hollywood, then was heard across the nation in Jilly's saloon, and also on the other side of the Hudson River in the homes of Frank Sinatra's parents and his other relatives and friends in New Jersey.

When Frank Sinatra spoke with his father on the telephone and said he was feeling awful, the elder Sinatra reported that he was also feeling awful: that his left arm and fist were so stiff with a circulatory condition he could barely use them, adding that the ailment might be the result of having thrown too many left hooks during his days as a bantamweight almost fifty years ago.

Martin Sinatra, a ruddy and tattooed little blue-eyed Sicilian born in Catania, boxed under the name of *Marty O'Brien.* In those days, in those places, with the Irish running the lower reaches of city life, it was not uncommon for Italians to wind up with such names. Most of the Italians and Sicilians who migrated to America just prior to the 1900's were poor and uneducated, were excluded from the building-trades unions dominated by the Irish, and were somewhat intimidated by the Irish police, Irish priests, Irish politicians.

One notable exception was Frank Sinatra's mother, Dolly, a large and very ambitious woman who was brought to this country at two months of age by her mother and father, a lithographer from Genoa. In later years Dolly Sinatra, possessing a round red face and blue eyes, was often mistaken for being Irish, and surprised many at the speed with which she swung her heavy handbag at anyone uttering *Wop.*

By playing skillful politics with North Jersey's Democratic machine, Dolly Sinatra was to become, in her heyday, a kind of Catherine de Medici of Hoboken's third ward. She could always be counted upon to deliver six hundred votes at election time from her Italian neighborhood, and this was her base of power. When she told one of the politicians that she wanted her husband to be appointed to the Hoboken Fire Department, and was told, "But, Dolly, we don't have an opening," she snapped, "Make an opening."

They did. Years later she requested that her husband be made a captain, and one day she got a call from one of the political bosses that began, "Dolly, congratulations!"

"For what?"

"Captain Sinatra."

"Oh, you finally made him one—thank you very much."

Then she called the Hoboken Fire Department.

"Let me speak to Captain Sinatra," she said. The fireman called Martin Sinatra to the phone, saying, "Marty, I think your wife has gone nuts." When he got on the line, Dolly greeted him:

"Congratulations, Captain Sinatra!"

Dolly's only child, christened Francis Albert Sinatra, was born and nearly died on December 12, 1915. It was a difficult birth, and during his first moment on earth he received marks he will carry till death—the scars on the left side of his neck being the result of a doctor's clumsy forceps, and Sinatra has chosen not to obscure them with surgery.

After he was six months old, he was reared mainly by his grandmother. His mother

had a full-time job as a chocolate dipper with a large firm and was so proficient at it that the firm once offered to send her to the Paris office to train others. While some people in Hoboken remember Frank Sinatra as a lonely child, one who spent many hours on the porch gazing into space, Sinatra was never a slum kid, never in jail, always well-dressed. He had so many pants that some people in Hoboken called him *Slacksey O'Brien*.

Dolly Sinatra was not the sort of Italian mother who could be appeased merely by a child's obedience and good appetite. She made many demands on her son, was always very strict. She dreamed of his becoming an aviation engineer. When she discovered Bing Crosby pictures hanging on his bedroom walls one evening, and learned that her son wished to become a singer too, she became infuriated and threw a shoe at him. Later, finding she could not talk him out of it—"he takes after me"—she encouraged his singing.

Many Italo-American boys of his generation were then shooting for the same star—they were strong with song, weak with words, not a big novelist among them: no O'Hara, no Bellow, no Cheever, nor Shaw; yet they could communicate bel canto. This was more in their tradition, no need for a diploma; they could, with a song, someday see their names in lights...Perry Como...Frankie Laine...Tony Bennett...Vic Damone...but none could see it better than Frank Sinatra.

Though he sang through much of the night at the Rustic Cabin, he was up the next day singing without a fee on New York radio to get more attention. Later he got a job singing with Harry James's band, and it was there in August of 1939 that Sinatra had his first recording hit— *All or Nothing at All.* He became very fond of Harry James and the men in the band, but when he received an offer from Tommy Dorsey, who in those days had probably the best band in the country, Sinatra took it; the job paid $125 a week, and Dorsey knew how to feature a vocalist. Yet Sinatra was very depressed at leaving James's band, and the final night with them was so memorable that, twenty years later, Sinatra could recall the details to a friend: "...the bus pulled out with the rest of the boys at about half-past midnight. I'd said good-bye to them all, and it was snowing, I remember. There was nobody around and I stood alone with my suitcase in the snow and watched the taillights disappear. Then the tears started and I tried to run after the bus. There was such spirit and enthusiasm in that band, I hated leaving it..."

But he did—as he would leave other warm places, too, in search of something more, never wasting time, trying to do it all in one generation, fighting under his own name, defending underdogs, terrorizing top dogs. He threw a punch at a musician who said something anti-Semitic, espoused the Negro cause two decades before it became fashionable. He also threw a tray of glasses at Buddy Rich when he played the drums too loud.

Sinatra gave away $50,000 worth of gold cigarette lighters before he was thirty, was living an immigrant's wildest dream of America. He arrived suddenly on the scene when DiMaggio was silent, when paisanos were mournful, were quietly defensive about Hitler in their homeland. Sinatra became, in time, a kind of one-man Anti-Defamation League for Italians in America, the sort of organization that would be unlikely for them because, as the theory goes, they rarely agreed on anything, being extreme individualists: fine as soloists, but not so good in a choir; fine as heroes, but not so good in a parade.

When many Italian names were used in describing gangsters on a television show, *The Untouchables*, Sinatra was loud in his disapproval. Sinatra and many thousands of other Italo-Americans were resentful as well when a small-time hoodlum, Joseph Valachi, was brought by Bobby Kennedy into prominence as a Mafia expert, when indeed, from Valachi's testimony on television, he seemed to know less than most waiters on Mulberry Street. Many Italians in Sinatra's circle also regard Bobby Kennedy as something of an Irish cop, more dignified than those in Dolly's day, but no less intimidating. Together with Peter Lawford, Bobby Kennedy is said to have suddenly gotten *cocky* with Sinatra after John Kennedy's election, forgetting the contribution Sinatra had made in both fundraising and in influencing many anti-Irish Italian votes. Lawford and Bobby Kennedy are both suspected of having influenced the late President's decision to stay as a house guest with Bing Crosby instead of Sinatra, as originally planned, a social setback Sinatra may never forget. Peter Lawford has since been drummed out of Sinatra's *summit* in Las Vegas.

"Yes, my son is like me," Dolly Sinatra says, proudly. "You cross him, he never forgets." And while she concedes his power, she quickly points out, "He can't make his mother do anything she doesn't want to do," adding, "Even today, he wears the same brand of underwear I used to buy him."

Today Dolly Sinatra is seventy-one years old, a year or two younger than Martin, and all day long people are knocking on the back door of her large home asking her advice, seeking her influence. When she is not seeing people and not cooking in the kitchen, she is looking after her husband, a silent but stubborn man, and telling him to keep his sore left arm resting on the sponge she has placed on the armrest of a soft chair. "Oh, he went to some terrific fires, this guy did," Dolly said to a visitor, nodding with admiration toward her husband in the chair.

Though Dolly Sinatra has eighty-seven godchildren in Hoboken, and still goes to that city during political campaigns, she now lives with her husband in a beautiful sixteen-room house in Fort Lee, New Jersey. This home was a gift from their son on their fiftieth wedding anniversary three years ago. The home is tastefully furnished and is filled with a remarkable juxtaposition of the pious and the worldly—photographs of Pope John and Ava Gardner, of Pope Paul and Dean Martin; several statues of saints and holy water, a chair autographed by Sammy Davis, Jr. and bottles of bourbon. In Mrs. Sinatra's jewelry box is a magnificent strand of pearls she had just received from Ava Gardner, whom she liked tremendously as a daughter-in-law and still keeps in touch with and talks about; and hung on the wall is a letter addressed to Dolly and Martin: "The sands of time have turned to gold, yet love continues to unfold like the petals of a rose, in God's garden of life...may God love you thru all eternity. I thank Him, I thank you for the being of one. Your loving son, Francis..."

Mrs. Sinatra talks to her son on the telephone about once a week, and recently he suggested that, when visiting Manhattan, she make use of his apartment on East Seventy-second Street on the East River. This is an expensive neighborhood of New York even though there is a small factory on the block, but this latter fact was seized upon by Dolly Sinatra as a means of getting back at her son for some unflattering descriptions of his childhood in Hoboken.

"What—you want me to stay in your apartment, in that dump?" she asked. "You think I'm going to spend the night in that awful neighborhood?"

Frank Sinatra got the point, and said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Fort Lee."

After spending the week in Palm Springs, his cold much better, Frank Sinatra returned to Los Angeles, a lovely city of sun and sex, a Spanish discovery of Mexican misery, a star land of little men and little women sliding in and out of convertibles in tense tight pants.

Sinatra returned in time to see the long-awaited CBS documentary with his family. At about nine p.m. he drove to the home of his former wife, Nancy, and had dinner with her and their two daughters. Their son, whom they rarely see these days, was out of town.

Frank, Jr., who is twenty-two, was touring with a band and moving cross country toward a New York engagement at Basin Street East with The Pied Pipers, with whom Frank Sinatra sang when he was with Dorsey's band in the 1940's. Today Frank Sinatra, Jr., whom his father says he named after Franklin D. Roosevelt, lives mostly in hotels, dines each evening in his nightclub dressing room, and sings until two AM, accepting graciously, because he has no choice, the inevitable comparisons. His voice is smooth and pleasant, and improving with work, and while he is very respectful of his father, he discusses him with objectivity and in an occasional tone of subdued cockiness.

Concurrent with his father's early fame, Frank, Jr. said, was the creation of a "press-release Sinatra" designed to "set him apart from the common man, separate him from the realities: it was suddenly Sinatra, the electric magnate, Sinatra who is supernormal, not superhuman but supernormal. And here," Frank, Jr. continued, "is the great fallacy, the great bullshit, for Frank Sinatra is normal, is the guy whom you'd meet on a street corner. But this other thing, the supernormal guise, has affected Frank Sinatra as much as anybody who watches one of his television shows, or reads a magazine article about him...

"Frank Sinatra's life in the beginning was so normal," he said, "that nobody would have guessed in 1934 that this little Italian kid with the curly hair would become the giant, the monster, the great living legend... He met my mother one summer on the beach. She was Nancy Barbato, daughter of Mike Barbato, a Jersey City plasterer. And she meets the fireman's son, Frank, one summer day on the beach at Long Branch, New Jersey. Both are Italian, both Roman Catholic, both lower-middle-class summer sweethearts—it is like a million bad movies starring Frankie Avalon. . . .

"They have three children. The first child, Nancy, was the most normal of Frank Sinatra's children. Nancy was a cheerleader, went to summer camp, drove a Chevrolet, had the easiest kind of development centered around the home and family. Next is me. My life with the family is very, very normal up until September of 1958 when, in complete contrast to the rearing of both girls, I am put into a college-preparatory school. I am now away from the inner family circle, and my position within has never been remade to this day... The third child, Tina. And to be dead honest, I really couldn't say what her life is like..."

> "And here, is the great fallacy, the great bullshit"

The CBS show, narrated by Walter Cronkite, began at ten p.m. A minute before that, the Sinatra family, having finished dinner, turned their chairs around and faced

the camera, united for whatever disaster might follow. Sinatra's men in other parts of town, in other parts of the nation, were doing the same thing. Sinatra's lawyer, Milton A. Rudin, smoking a cigar, was watching with a keen eye, an alert legal mind. Other sets were watched by Brad Dexter, Jim Mahoney, Ed Pucci; Sinatra's makeup man, "Shotgun" Britton; his New York representative, Henri Gine; his haberdasher, Richard Carroll; his insurance broker, John Lillie; his valet, George Jacobs, a handsome Negro who, when entertaining girls in his apartment, plays records by Ray Charles.

And like so much of Hollywood's fear, the apprehension about the CBS show all proved to be without foundation. It was a highly flattering hour that did not deeply probe, as rumors suggested it would, into Sinatra's love life, or the Mafia, or other areas of his private province. While the documentary was not authorized, wrote Jack Gould in the next day's New York Times, "it could have been."

Immediately after the show, the telephones began to ring throughout the Sinatra system conveying words of joy and relief—and from New York came Jilly's telegram: "WE RULE THE WORLD!"

THE NEXT DAY, STANDING IN the corridor of the NBC building where he was about to resume taping his show, Sinatra was discussing the CBS show with several of his friends, and he said,

"Oh, it was a gas."

"Yeah, Frank, a helluva show."

"But I think Jack Gould was right in The Times today," Sinatra said. "There should have been more on the man, not so much on the music..."

They nodded, nobody mentioning the past hysteria in the Sinatra world when it seemed CBS was zeroing in on the man; they just nodded and two of them laughed about Sinatra's apparently having gotten the word "bird" on the show—this being a favorite Sinatra word. He often inquires of his cronies, "How's your bird?"; and when he nearly drowned in Hawaii, he later explained, "Just got a little water on my bird"; and under a large photograph of him holding a whisky bottle, a photo that hangs in the home of an actor friend named Dick Bakalyan, the inscription reads: "Drink, Dickie! It's good for your bird." In the song, "Come Fly with Me," Sinatra sometimes alters the lyrics—"...just say the words and we'll take our birds down to Acapulco Bay..."

Ten minutes later Sinatra, following the orchestra, walked into the NBC studio, which did not resemble in the slightest the scene here of eight days ago. On this occasion Sinatra was in fine voice, he cracked jokes between numbers, nothing could upset him. Once, while he was singing "How Can I Ignore the Girl Next Door," standing on the stage next to a tree, a television camera mounted on a vehicle came rolling in too close and plowed against the tree.

"Kee-rist!" yelled one of the technical assistants.

But Sinatra seemed hardly to notice it.

"We've had a slight accident," he said, calmly. Then he began the song all over from the beginning.

When the show was over, Sinatra watched the rerun on the monitor in the control room. He was very pleased, shaking hands with Dwight Hemion and his assistants. Then the whisky bottles were opened in Sinatra's dressing room. Pat Lawford was there, and so were Andy Williams and a dozen others. The telegrams and telephone calls continued to be received from all over the country with praise for the CBS show. There was even a call, Mahoney said, from the CBS producer, Don Hewitt, with whom Sinatra had been so angry a few days before. And Sinatra was still angry, feeling that CBS had betrayed him, though the show itself was not objectionable.

"Shall I drop a line to Hewitt?" Mahoney asked.

"Can you send a fist through the mail?" Sinatra asked.

He has everything, he cannot sleep, gives nice gifts, he is not happy, but he would not trade, even for happiness, what he is... He is a piece of our past—but only we have aged, he hasn't...we are dogged by domesticity, he isn't...we have compunctions, he doesn't...it is our fault, not his...

He controls the menus of every Italian restaurant in Los Angeles; if you want North Italian cooking, fly to Milan...

Men follow him, imitate him, fight to be near him...there is something of the locker room, the barracks about him...bird...bird...

He believes you must play it big, wide, expansively— the more open you are, the more you take in, your dimensions deepen, you grow, you become more what you are—bigger, richer...

"He is better than anybody else, or at least they think he is, and he has to live up to it."

—Nancy Sinatra, Jr.

"He is calm on the outside—inwardly a million things are happening to him."

—Dick Bakalyan

"He has an insatiable desire to live every moment to its fullest because, I guess, he feels that right around the corner is extinction."

—Brad Dexter

"All I ever got out of any of my marriages was the two years Artie Shaw financed on an analyst's couch."

—Ava Gardner

"We weren't mother and son—we were buddies."

—Dolly Sinatra

"I'm for anything that gets you through the night, be it prayer, tranquilizers or a bottle of Jack Daniel."

—Frank Sinatra

FRANK SINATRA WAS TIRED OF all the talk, the gossip, the theory—tired of reading quotes about himself, of hearing what people were saying about him all over town. It had been a tedious three weeks, he said, and now he just wanted to get away, go to Las Vegas, let off some steam. So he hopped in his jet, soared over the California hills across the Nevada flats, then over miles and miles of desert to The Sands and the Clay-Patterson fight.

> "He is a piece of our past —but only we have aged,"

On the eve of the fight he stayed up all night and slept through most of the afternoon, though his recorded voice could be heard singing in the lobby of The Sands, in the gambling casino, even in the toilets, being interrupted every few bars however by the paging public address: "...Telephone call for Mr. Ron Fish, Mr. Ron Fish...with a ribbon of gold in her hair... Telephone call for Mr. Herbert Rothstein, Mr. Herbert Rothstein...memories of a time so bright, keep me sleepless through dark endless nights..."

Standing around in the lobby of The Sands and other hotels up and down the strip on this afternoon before the fight were the usual prefight prophets: the gamblers, the old champs, the little cigar butts from Eighth Avenue, the sportswriters who knock the big fights all year but would never miss one, the novelists who seem always to be identifying with one boxer or another, the local prostitutes assisted by some talent in from Los Angeles, and also a young brunette in a wrinkled black cocktail dress who was at the bell captain's desk crying, "But I want to speak to Mr. Sinatra."

"He's not here," the bell captain said.

"Won't you put me through to his room?"

"There are no messages going through, Miss," he said, and then she turned, unsteadily, seeming close to tears, and walked through the lobby into the big noisy casino crowded with men interested only in money.

Shortly before seven p.m., Jack Entratter, a big grey-haired man who operates The Sands, walked into the gambling room to tell some men around the blackjack table that Sinatra was getting dressed. He also said that he'd been unable to get front-row seats for everybody, and so some of the men—including Leo Durocher, who had a date, and Joey Bishop, who was accompanied by his wife—would not be able to fit in Frank Sinatra's row but would have to take seats in the third row. When Entratter walked over to tell this to Joey Bishop, Bishop's face fell. He did not seem angry; he merely looked at Entratter with an empty silence, seeming somewhat stunned.

"Joey, I'm sorry," Entratter said when the silence persisted, "but we couldn't get more than six together in the front row."

Bishop still said nothing. But when they all appeared at the fight, Joey Bishop

was in the front row, his wife in the third.

The fight, called a holy war between Muslims and Christians, was preceded by the introduction of three balding ex-champions, Rocky Marciano, Joe Louis, Sonny Liston—and then there was "The Star-Spangled Banner" sung by another man from out of the past, Eddie Fisher. It had been more than fourteen years ago, but Sinatra could still remember every detail: Eddie Fisher was then the new king of the baritones, with Billy Eckstine and Guy Mitchell right with him, and Sinatra had been long counted out. One day he remembered walking into a broadcasting studio past dozens of Eddie Fisher fans waiting outside the hall, and when they saw Sinatra they began to jeer, "Frankie, Frankie, I'm swooning, I'm swooning." This was also the time when he was selling only about 30,000 records a year, when he was dreadfully miscast as a funny man on his television show, and when he recorded such disasters as *Mama Will Bark,* with Dagmar.

"I growled and barked on the record," Sinatra said, still horrified by the thought. "The only good it did me was with the dogs."

His voice and his artistic judgment were incredibly bad in 1952, but even more responsible for his decline, say his friends, was his pursuit of Ava Gardner. She was the big movie queen then, one of the most beautiful women in the world. Sinatra's daughter Nancy recalls seeing Ava swimming one day in her father's pool, then climbing out of the water with that fabulous body, walking slowly to the fire, leaning over it for a few moments, and then it suddenly seemed that her long dark hair was all dry, miraculously and effortlessly back in place.

With most women Sinatra dates, his friends say, he never knows whether they want him for what he can do for them now—or will do for them later. With Ava Gardner, it was different. He could do nothing for her later. She was on top. If Sinatra learned anything from his experience with her, he possibly learned that when a proud man is down a woman cannot help. Particularly a woman on top.

Nevertheless, despite a tired voice, some deep emotion seeped into his singing during this time. One particular song that is well remembered even now is "I'm a Fool to Want You," and a friend who was in the studio when Sinatra recorded it recalled: "Frank was really worked up that night. He did the song in one take, then turned around and walked out of the studio and that was that…"

Sinatra's manager at that time, a former song plugger named Hank Sanicola, said, "Ava loved Frank, but not the way he loved her. He needs a great deal of love. He wants it twenty-four hours a day, he must have people around—Frank is that kind of guy." Ava Gardner, Sanicola said, "was very insecure. She feared she could not really hold a man…twice he went chasing her to Africa, wasting his own career…"

"Ava didn't want Frank's men hanging around all the time," another friend said, "and this got him mad. With Nancy he used to be able to bring the whole band home with him, and Nancy, the good Italian wife, would never complain—she'd just make everybody a plate of spaghetti."

In 1953, after almost two years of marriage, Sinatra and Ava Gardner were divorced. Sinatra's mother reportedly arranged a reconciliation, but if Ava was willing, Frank Sinatra was not. He was seen with other women. The balance had shifted. Somewhere during this period Sinatra seemed to change from the kid singer, the boy actor in the sailor suit, to a man. Even before he had won the Oscar in 1953 for his role in *From Here to Eternity,* some flashes of his old talent were coming through—in his recording of *The Birth of the Blues*, in his Riviera-nightclub appearance that jazz critics enthusiastically praised; and there was also a trend now toward L.P.'s and away from the quick three-minute deal, and Sinatra's concert style would have capitalized on this with or without an Oscar.

In 1954, totally committed to his talent once more, Frank Sinatra was selected Metronome's "Singer of the Year," and later he won the U.P.I. disc-jockey poll, unseating Eddie Fisher—who now, in Las Vegas, having sung *The Star-Spangled Banner,* climbed out of the ring, and the fight began.

Floyd Patterson chased Clay around the ring in the first round, but was unable to reach him, and from then on he was Clay's toy, the bout ending in a technical knockout in the twelfth round. A half hour later, nearly everybody had forgotten about the fight and was back at the gambling tables or lining up to buy tickets for the Dean Martin-Sinatra-Bishop nightclub routine on the stage of The Sands. This routine, which includes Sammy Davis, Jr. when he is in town, consists of a few songs and much cutting up, all of it very informal, very special, and rather ethnic—Martin, a drink in hand, asking Bishop: "Did you ever see a Jew jitsu?"; and Bishop, playing a Jewish waiter, warning the two Italians to watch out "because I got my own group—the Matzia."

Then after the last show at The Sands, the Sinatra crowd, which now numbered about twenty—and included Jilly, who had flown in from New York; Jimmy Cannon, Sinatra's favorite sports columnist; Harold Gibbons, a Teamster official expected to take over if Hoffa goes to jail—all got into a line of cars and headed for another club. It was three o'clock. The night was young.

They stopped at The Sahara, taking a long table near the back, and listened to a baldheaded little comedian named Don Rickles, who is probably more caustic than any comic in the country. His humor is so rude, in such bad taste, that it offends no one—it is too offensive to be offensive. Spotting Eddie Fisher among the audience, Rickles proceeded to ridicule him as a lover, saying it was no wonder that he could not handle Elizabeth Taylor; and when two businessmen in the audience acknowledged that they were Egyptian, Rickles cut into them for their country's policy toward Israel; and he strongly suggested that the woman seated at one table with her husband was actually a hooker.

When the Sinatra crowd walked in, Don Rickles could not be more delighted. Pointing to Jilly, Rickles yelled: "How's it feel to be Frank's tractor?... Yeah, Jilly keeps walking in front of Frank clearing the way." Then, nodding to Durocher, Rickles said, "Stand up Leo, show Frank how you slide." Then he focused on Sinatra, not failing to mention Mia Farrow, nor that he was wearing a toupee, nor to say that Sinatra was washed up as a singer, and when Sinatra laughed, everybody laughed, and Rickles pointed toward Bishop: "Joey Bishop keeps checking with Frank to see what's funny."

Then, after Rickles told some Jewish jokes, Dean Martin stood up and yelled, "Hey, you're always talking about the Jews, never about the Italians," and Rickles cut him off with, "What do we need the Italians for—all they do is keep the flies off our fish."

Sinatra laughed, they all laughed, and Rickles went on this way for nearly an hour until Sinatra, standing up, said, "All right, com'on, get this thing over with. I gotta go."

"Shaddup and sit down!" Rickles snapped. "I've had to listen to you sing..."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Sinatra yelled back.

"Dick Haymes," Rickles replied, and Sinatra laughed again, and then Dean Martin, pouring a bottle of whisky over his head, entirely drenching his tuxedo, pounded the table.

"Who would ever believe that staggering would make a star?" Rickles said, but Martin called out, "Hey, I wanna make a speech."

"Shaddup."

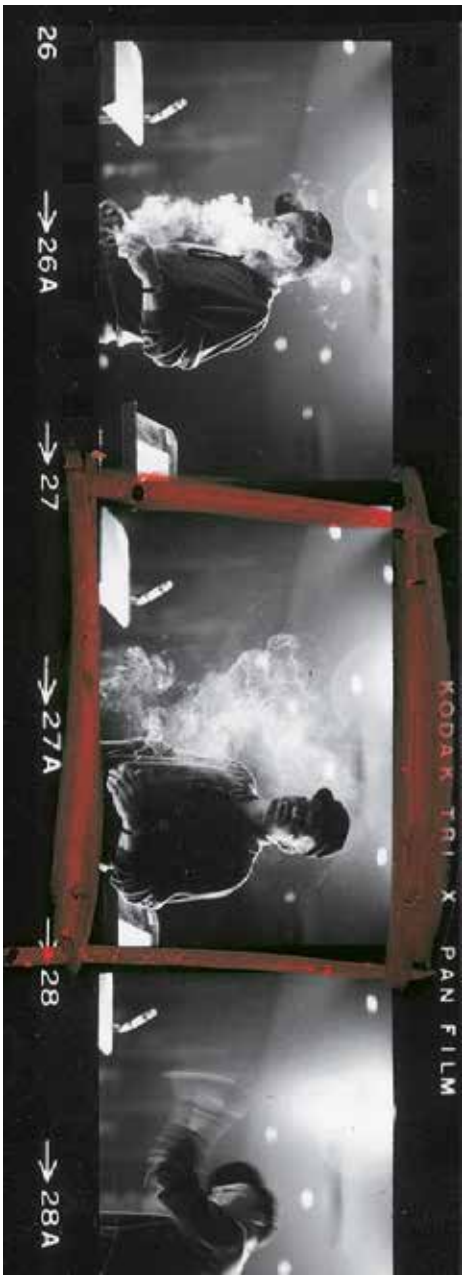
"No, Don, I wanna tell ya," Dean Martin persisted, "that I think you're a great performer."

"Well, thank you, Dean," Rickles said, seeming pleased.

"But don't go by me," Martin said, plopping down into his seat, "I'm drunk."

"I'll buy that," Rickles said.

BY FOUR AM FRANK SINATRA led the group out of The Sahara, some of them carrying their glasses of whisky with them, sipping it along the sidewalk and in the cars; then, returning to The Sands, they walked into the gambling casino. It was still packed with people, the roulette wheels spinning, the crapshooters screaming in the far corner.



Frank Sinatra, holding a shot glass of bourbon in his left hand, walked through the crowd. He, unlike some of his friends, was perfectly pressed, his tuxedo tie precisely pointed, his shoes unsmudged. He never seems to lose his dignity, never lets his guard completely down no matter how much he has drunk, nor how long he has been up. He never sways when he walks, like Dean Martin, nor does he ever dance in the aisles or jump up on tables, like Sammy Davis.

A part of Sinatra, no matter where he is, is never there. There is always a part of him, though sometimes a small part, that remains Il Padrone. Even now, resting his shot glass on the blackjack table, facing the dealer, Sinatra stood a bit back from the table, not leaning against it. He reached under his tuxedo jacket into his trouser pocket and came up with a thick but clean wad of bills. Gently he peeled off a one-hundred-dollar bill and placed it on the green-felt table. The dealer dealt him two cards. Sinatra called for a third card, overbid, lost the hundred.

Without a change of expression, Sinatra put down a second hundred-dollar bill. He lost that. Then he put down a third, and lost that. Then he placed two one-hundred-dollar bills on the table and lost those. Finally, putting his sixth hundred-dollar bill on the table, and losing it, Sinatra moved away from the table, nodding to the man, and announcing, “Good dealer.”

The crowd that had gathered around him now opened up to let him through. But a woman stepped in front of him, handing him a piece of paper to autograph. He signed it and then he said, “Thank you.”

In the rear of The Sands’ large dining room was a long table reserved for Sinatra. The dining room was fairly empty at this hour, with perhaps two dozen other people in the room, including a table of four unescorted young ladies sitting near Sinatra. On the other side of the room, at another long table, sat seven men shoulder-to-shoulder against the wall, two of them wearing dark glasses, all of them eating quietly, speaking hardly a word, just sitting and eating and missing nothing.

The Sinatra party, after getting settled and having a few more drinks, ordered something to eat. The table was about the same size as the one reserved for Sinatra whenever he is at Jilly’s in New York; and the people seated around this table in Las Vegas were many of the same people who are often seen with Sinatra at Jilly’s or at a restaurant in California, or in Italy, or in New Jersey, or wherever Sinatra happens to be.

In some ways, this quasi-family affair at a reserved table in a public place is the closest thing Sinatra now has to home life. Perhaps, having had a home and left it, this approximation is as close as he cares to come; although this does not seem precisely so because he speaks with such warmth about his family, keeps in close

touch with his first wife, and insists that she make no decision without first consulting him. He is always eager to place his furniture or other mementos of himself in her home or his daughter Nancy's, and he also is on amiable terms with Ava Gardner. When he was in Italy making Von Ryan's Express, they spent some time together, being pursued wherever they went by the paparazzi. It was reported then that the paparazzi had made Sinatra a collective offer of $16,000 if he would pose with Ava Gardner; Sinatra was said to have made a counter offer of $32,000 if he could break one paparazzi arm and leg.

While Sinatra is often delighted that he can be in his home completely without people, enabling him to read and think without interruption, there are occasions when he finds himself alone at night, and not by choice. He may have dialed a half-dozen women, and for one reason or another they are all unavailable. So he will call his valet, George Jacobs.

"I'll be coming home for dinner tonight, George."

"How many will there be?"

"Just myself," Sinatra will say. "I want something light, I'm not very hungry."

George Jacobs is a twice-divorced man of thirty-six who resembles Billy Eckstine. He has traveled all over the world with Sinatra and is devoted to him. Jacobs lives in a comfortable bachelor's apartment

off Sunset Boulevard around the corner from Whiskey à Go Go, and he is known around town for the assortment of frisky California girls he has as friends—a few of whom, he concedes, were possibly drawn to him initially because of his closeness to Frank Sinatra.

When Sinatra arrives, Jacobs will serve him dinner in the dining room. Then Sinatra will tell Jacobs that he is free to go home. If Sinatra, on such evenings, should ask Jacobs to stay longer, or to play a few hands of poker, he would be happy to do so. But Sinatra never does.

THIS WAS HIS SECOND NIGHT IN Las Vegas, and Frank Sinatra sat with friends in The Sands' dining room until nearly eight a.m. He slept through much of the day, then flew back to Los Angeles, and on the following morning he was driving his little golf cart through the Paramount Pictures movie lot. He was scheduled to complete two final scenes with the sultry blonde actress, Virna Lisi, in the film *Assault on a Queen*. As he maneuvered the little vehicle up the road between the big studio buildings, he spotted Steve Rossi who, with his comedy partner Marty Allen, was making a film in an adjoining studio with Nancy Sinatra.

"Hey, Dag," he yelled to Rossi, "stop kissing Nancy."

"It's part of the film, Frank," Rossi said, turning as he walked.

"In the garage?"

"It's my Dago blood, Frank."

"Well, cool it," Sinatra said, winking, then cutting his golf cart around a corner and parking it outside a big drab building within which the scenes for Assault would be filmed.

"Where's the fat director?" Sinatra called out, striding into the studio that was crowded with dozens of technical assistants and actors all gathered around cameras. The director, Jack Donohue, a large man who has worked with Sinatra through twenty-two years on one production or other, has had headaches with this film. The script had been chopped, the actors seemed restless, and Sinatra had become bored. But now there were only two scenes left—a short one to be filmed in the pool, and a longer and passionate one featuring Sinatra and Virna Lisi to be shot on a simulated beach.

> "Hey, Dag, stop kissing Nancy"

The pool scene, which dramatizes a situation where Sinatra and his hijackers fail in their attempt to sack the *Queen Mary*, went quickly and well. After Sinatra had been kept in the water shoulder-high for a few minutes, he said, "Let's move it, fellows—it's cold in this water, and I've just gotten over one cold."

So the camera crews moved in closer, Virna Lisi splashed next to Sinatra in the water, and Jack Donohue yelled to his assistants operating the fans, "Get the waves going," and another man gave the command, "Agitate!" and Sinatra broke out in song. "Agitate in rhythm," then quieted down just before the cameras started to roll.

Frank Sinatra was on the beach in the next situation, supposedly gazing up at the stars, and Virna Lisi was to approach him, toss one of her shoes near him to announce her presence, then sit near him and prepare for a passionate session. Just before beginning, Miss Lisi made a practice toss of her shoe toward the prone figure of Sinatra sprawled on the beach. As she tossed her shoe, Sinatra called out, "Hit me in my bird and I'm going home."

Virna Lisi, who understands little English and certainly none of Sinatra's special vocabulary, looked confused, but everybody behind the camera laughed. She threw the shoe toward him. It twirled in the air, landed on his stomach.

"Well, that's about three inches too high," he announced. She again was puzzled by the laughter behind the camera.

Then Jack Donohue had them rehearse their lines, and Sinatra, still very charged from the Las Vegas trip, and anxious to get the cameras rolling, said, "Let's try one." Donohue, not certain that Sinatra and Lisi knew their lines well enough, nevertheless said okay, and an assistant with a clapboard called, "419, Take 1," and Virna Lisi approached with the shoe, tossed it at Frank lying on the beach. It fell short of his thigh, and Sinatra's right eye raised almost imperceptibly, but the crew got the message, smiled.

"What do the stars tell you tonight?" Miss Lisi said, delivering her first line, and sitting next to Sinatra on the beach.

"The stars tell me tonight I'm an idiot," Sinatra said, "a gold-plated idiot to get mixed up in this thing..."

"Cut," Donohue said. There were some microphone shadows on the sand, and Virna Lisi was not sitting in the proper place near Sinatra.

"419, Take 2," the clapboard man called.

Miss Lisi again approached, threw the shoe at him, this time falling short—Sinatra exhaling only slightly—and she said, "What do the stars tell you tonight?"

"The stars tell me I'm an idiot, a gold-plated idiot to get mixed up in this thing..." Then, according to the script, Sinatra was to continue, "...do you know what we're getting into? The minute we step on the deck of the *Queen Mary*, we've just tattooed ourselves," but Sinatra, who often improvises on lines, recited them: "...do you know what we're getting into? The minute we step on the deck of that mother's-ass ship..."

"No, no," Donohue interrupted, shaking his head, "I don't think that's right."

The cameras stopped, some people laughed, and Sinatra looked up from his position in the sand as if he had been unfairly interrupted.

"I don't see why that can't work..." he began, but Richard Conte, standing behind the camera, yelled, "It won't play in London."

Donohue pushed his hand through his thinning grey hair and said, but not really in anger, "You know, that scene was pretty good until somebody blew the line..."

"Yeah," agreed the cameraman, Billy Daniels, his head popping out from around the camera, "it was a pretty good piece..."

"Watch your language," Sinatra cut in. Then Sinatra, who has a genius for figuring out ways of not reshooting scenes, suggested a way in which the film could be used and the "mother" line could be recorded later. This met with approval. Then the cameras were rolling again, Virna Lisi was leaning toward Sinatra in the sand, and then he pulled her down close to him. The camera now moved in for a close-up of their faces, ticking away for a few long seconds, but Sinatra and Lisi did not stop kissing, they just lay together in the sand wrapped in one another's arms, and then Virna Lisi's left leg just slightly began to rise a bit, and everybody in the studio now watched in silence, not saying anything until Donohue finally called out:

"If you ever get through, let me know. I'm running out of film."

Then Miss Lisi got up, straightened out her white dress, brushed back her blonde hair and touched her lipstick, which was smeared. Sinatra got up, a little smile on his lips, and headed for his dressing room.

Passing an older man who stood near a camera, Sinatra asked, "How's your Bell & Howell?"

The older man smiled.

"It's fine, Frank."

"Good."

In his dressing room Sinatra was met by an automobile designer who had the plans for Sinatra's new custom-built model to replace the $25,000 Ghia he has been driving for the last few years. He also was awaited by his secretary, Tom Conroy, who had a bag full of fan mail, including a letter from New York's Mayor John Lindsay; and by Bill Miller, Sinatra's pianist, who would rehearse some of the songs that would be recorded later in the evening for Sinatra's newest album, *Moonlight Sinatra*.

While Sinatra does not mind hamming it up a bit on a movie set, he is extremely serious about his recording sessions; as he explained to a British writer, Robin Douglas-Home: "Once you're on that record singing, it's you and you alone. If it's bad and gets you criticized, it's you who's to blame—no one else. If it's good, it's also you. With a film it's never like that; there are producers and scriptwriters, and hundreds of men in offices and the thing is taken right out of your hands. With a record, you're it..."

But now the days are short
I'm in the autumn of the year
And now I think of my life
As vintage wine
From fine old kegs...

It no longer matters what song he is singing, or who wrote the words—they are all his words, his sentiments, they are chapters from the lyrical novel of his life.

Life is a beautiful thing
As long as I hold the string...

When Frank Sinatra drives to the studio, he seems to dance out of the car across the sidewalk into the front door; then, snapping his fingers, he is standing in front of the orchestra in an intimate, airtight room, and soon he is dominating every man, every instrument, every sound wave. Some of the musicians have accompanied him for twenty-five years, have gotten old hearing him sing *You Make Me Feel So Young*.

When his voice is on, as it was tonight, Sinatra is in ecstasy, the room becomes electric, there is an excitement that spreads through the orchestra and is felt in the control booth where a dozen men, Sinatra's friends, wave at him from behind the glass. One of the men is the Dodgers' pitcher, Don Drysdale ("Hey, Big D," Sinatra calls out, "hey, baby!"); another is the professional golfer Bo Wininger; there are also numbers of pretty women standing in the booth behind the engineers, women who smile at Sinatra and softly move their bodies to the mellow mood of his music:

Will this be moon love
Nothing but moon love
Will you be gone when the dawn
Comes stealing through...

After he is finished, the record is played back on tape, and Nancy Sinatra, who has just walked in, joins her father near the front of the orchestra to hear the playback. They listen silently, all eyes on them, the king, the princess; and when the music ends there is applause from the control booth, Nancy smiles, and her father snaps his fingers and says, kicking a foot, "Ooba-deeba-boobe-do!"

There are more smiles, and then the orchestra prepares for the next number. And one hour later, it is over.

The musicians put their instruments into their cases, grab their coats, and begin to file out, saying good-night to Sinatra. He knows them all by name, knows much about them personally, from their bachelor days, through their divorces, through their ups and downs, as they know him. When a French-horn player, a short Italian named Vincent DeRosa, who has played with Sinatra since The Lucky Strike *Hit Parade* days on radio, strolled by, Sinatra

> "They are chapters from the lyrical novel of his life"

Then Sinatra calls to one of his men. "Hey, Sarge, think I can have a half-a-cup of coffee?"

Sarge Weiss, who had been listening to the music, slowly gets up.

"Didn't mean to wake ya, Sarge," Sinatra says, smiling.

Then Weiss brings the coffee, and Sinatra looks at it, smells it, then announces, "I thought he'd be nice to me, but it's really coffee..."

reached out to hold him for a second.

"Vicenzo," Sinatra said, "how's your little girl?"

"She's fine, Frank."

"Oh, she's not a little girl anymore," Sinatra corrected himself, "she's a big girl now."

"Yes, she goes to college now. U.S.C."

"That's great."

"She's also got a little talent, I think, Frank, as a singer."

Sinatra was silent for a moment, then said, "Yes, but it's very good for her to get her education first, Vicenzo."

Vincent DeRosa nodded.

"Yes, Frank," he said, and then he said, "Well, good-night, Frank."

"Good-night, Vicenzo."

After the musicians had all gone, Sinatra left the recording room and joined his friends in the corridor. He was going to go out and do some drinking with Drysdale, Wininger, and a few other friends, but first he walked to the other end of the corridor to say good-night to Nancy, who was getting her coat and was planning to drive home in her own car.

After Sinatra had kissed her on the cheek, he hurried to join his friends at the door. But before Nancy could leave the studio, one of Sinatra's men, Al Silvani, a former prizefight manager, joined her.

"Are you ready to leave yet, Nancy?"

"Oh, thanks, Al," she said, "but I'll be all right."

"Pope's orders," Silvani said, holding his hands up, palms out.

Only after Nancy had pointed to two of

her friends who would escort her home, and only after Silvani recognized them as friends, would he leave.

THE REST OF THE MONTH WAS bright and balmy. The record session had gone magnificently, the film was finished, the television shows were out of the way, and now Sinatra was in his Ghia driving out to his office to begin coordinating his latest projects. He had an engagement at The Sands, a new spy film called The Naked Runner to be shot in England, and a couple more albums to do in the immediate months ahead. And within a week he would be fifty years old...

Life is a beautiful thing
As long as I hold the string
I'd be a silly so-and-so
If I should ever let go...

Frank Sinatra stopped his car. The light was red. Pedestrians passed quickly across his windshield but, as usual, one did not. It was a girl in her twenties. She remained at the curb staring at him. Through the corner of his left eye he could see her, and he knew, because it happens almost every day, that she was thinking, It looks like him, but is it?

Just before the light turned green, Sinatra turned toward her, looked directly into her eyes waiting for the reaction he knew would come. It came and he smiled. She smiled and he was gone.

The Dragnet

By Russell Brandom

HOW A MAN ACCUSED OF MILLION-DOLLAR FRAUD UNCOVERED A NEVER BEFORE SEEN, SECRET SURVEILLANCE DEVICE

On May 6th, 2008, a package containing $68,000 in cash arrived at a FedEx store in Palo Alto, California. The bills had been washed in lantern fuel, as per instruction, then double-vacuum-sealed and placed inside the cavity of a stuffed animal, which was then gift wrapped. The store had been chosen carefully: it was open all night, and located just 500 feet from a Caltrain station. The package was general delivery, to be picked up at the store by a man named Patrick Stout.

The money was being closely watched. The package had been prepared by a criminal informant, working in cooperation with a joint task force of agents from the FBI, IRS, and US Postal Service, who were investigating a tax fraud scheme. The informant had been arrested and flipped months earlier, betrayed by yet another informant. Now they were after the mastermind.

Around 5 o'clock the next morning, the target appeared. A wiry white man in a dark hoodie came in through the back entrance, presented a driver's license in the name of Patrick Stout, picked up the package, and left the same way he came in. He tore open the package near a dumpster behind the store, pocketing the stuffed animal, and headed toward the train. Two officers tried to follow, but he recognized the tail and slipped away. Agents rushed to the station but couldn't find him among the early morning commuters. The trains could have taken him anywhere from San Francisco to San Jose, with connections to each city's airport.

Just a few minutes after the pickup, Stout was gone. It was as close as the cops would get for months.

From there, every lead seemed to dry up. Stout's driver's license was fake: the address didn't exist and the ID number belonged to a woman in Bakersfield. Stout kept talking to the informant, joking that he was becoming paranoid. He didn't know who he'd spotted following him at the FedEx store, but he was shy about setting up another cash drop. A few weeks later, Stout had $18,000 in gold bars mailed to the same FedEx office, but by the time investigators found out, the pickup had come and gone.

The informant led the task force to a nest of bank accounts where he'd been instructed to deposit money, but they were all in false names—Sam Blat, Benjamin Cohan, Aaron Johnson. There was more than $400,000 spread across the accounts, all of which could have been shuttered and seized using evidence the task force already had—but that would just have spooked the target. They wanted to catch him, not to scare him off.

Their best lead was the IP address Stout used to file the fraudulent returns, which traced back to a Verizon Wireless AirCard registered under the name Travis Rupard. Rupard—or were Rupard and Stout the same person?—had bought it through another post office box with another fake ID, kept active just long enough to receive the device. The whole point of an AirCard is to provide internet access that's not tied down to a fixed address, which made tracking down the owner tricky. When Rupard used the card, Verizon knew which cell tower he connected to—usually somewhere around San Jose—but they couldn't tell much more than that.

Three months after the FedEx episode, on August 3rd, the task force descended on an apartment complex near the San Jose airport, rented in the name Steven Travis Brawner. Agents caught Rupard outside the complex, and served a search warrant on his apartment and storage unit later that day. They found $117,000 in US currency, 230 ounces of gold, and 588 ounces of silver, along with the dark gray hoodie tying him to the drop at the train station and a Verizon AirCard tying him to the bank accounts. By the time the case was over, the agents would recover more than $1.4 million.

The suspect was charged with 35 counts of wire fraud, 35 counts of aggravated identity theft, and three other miscellaneous charges—enough to keep him in jail for the rest of his life. Taking his fingerprints three days later, the police finally worked back to his name—not Rupard, or Stout, or Brawner, or Aldrich, or any of the others. His name was Daniel Rigmaiden.

But there was something else, something that wasn't reported on the seizure affidavit, the complaint, or any of the documents that followed. To track Rigmaiden down, the investigators had used a secret device, one that allowed them to pinpoint their target with far more accuracy than Verizon could. They called it a cell-site simulator, or by its trade name, Stingray. Neither term was found in the court order that authorized its use. The device had to be kept secret, even from the courts.

The Stingray had worked perfectly. Agents traced the suspect's AirCard back to his apartment and now had more than enough evidence for a conviction. But in the years that followed, that open-and-shut case would turn into something far more complex. Working from prison, Rigmaiden would unravel decades of secrecy, becoming the world's foremost authority on the device that sent him to jail. By the time he was finished, a covert surveillance device and the system that kept it secret would be exposed to the public for the very first time.

THIS PAST OCTOBER, I MET with Rigmaiden in Phoenix, where he's lived since he was released from a near-by federal prison in 2014. In person, he looks like a scrappier J.J. Abrams, with thick, black glasses and spiky, black hair. Intensely private, he declined to meet at his home, preferring a shopping center some blocks away. It was a mild day and the sun was low, so we decided to go on a hike in an expansive park south of town where the flat plain of the city rises into rocky hills. He doesn't get out much these days, but the trail brought out his old outdoors instincts. As we climbed, he guided me away from brittle rock faces and possible snake pits. "Normally I wouldn't even come out without a full pack," he told me. "You're not really supposed to."

These days Rigmaiden is primarily concerned with the typical worries of a newly released prisoner—finding a good job and an apartment willing to rent to an ex-con. He likes his probation officer and seems to be adjusting well to life on the outside.

But the world has lots of ways of reminding Rigmaiden of his time locked up. As we came down from the hills, a City of Phoenix maintenance truck rolled toward us, the driver wearing a uniform we couldn't quite place. When we crossed in front of the truck, the driver rolled down the window and pulled out a camera, training it up the mountain and above it, to the sky. Were we accidentally trespassing? Neither of us was sure. Rigmaiden has to make an official report for every interaction he has with the police, so even minor mistakes can become dangerous. But the official didn't seem to care about us, and we walked past without being stopped.

> "He was meticulous about hiding his identity"

It was a tense, awkward moment, but Rigmaiden is used to the feeling. A natural outsider, he has spent much of his life coming to terms with authority, legal and otherwise. “I tried the non-participation way for 10 years, then I spent five years in jail,” he told me. “Now I’ve made the transition to try to change things for the better.”

Born in Seaside, California, Rigmaiden left home just after high school, living in a string of college towns up and down the coast. He became an expert at forging fake IDs and did a good business selling them to beer-happy college kids online.

Eventually, he decided to get off the grid entirely. “I just didn’t want to be attached to the whole society system,” he recalls. “I needed to take a step back and take a break from it all.” He traded the college towns for seaside motels, or a tent and remote campsites. “It was peaceful. What I liked about it was, you had to do everything yourself,” he says.

He spent one summer in Big Sur, an isolated stretch of the California coast famous for its massive redwoods and dramatic precipices. He set up camp deep in the forest and developed a taste for free-climbing, scrambling over the area’s boulders and cliffs. He liked the exertion, the independence, but most of all the heightened sensitivity that came with danger. “It’s not panic,” he told me. “It’s almost like you’re glued to the side of the rock. It’s that calculated. Because you know if you fall off you’re going to die.”

Once, looking out over a 60-foot dropoff, the ground gave way beneath him. He found himself sliding down the face of a cliff. “I was grabbing saplings to slow myself down but I ended up just pulling them out. It was this burnt stump that saved me,” he told me. “Eventually, I got back by swinging sapling to sapling.”

Those adventures cost more money than he could make from selling fake IDs, so he hit on another scheme, filing tax returns for the recently deceased. He liked the scam, he told me, because he saw it as relatively victimless. He didn’t have to steal from anyone who was still alive. All he got was whatever refund money would be coming back to the deceased, often thousands of dollars for a single return. It proved incredibly lucrative, pulling in far more than he needed to survive. Rigmaiden developed a rhythm: working his ID and tax return businesses for six months, squirreling away the extra money, then taking the rest of the year off.

He was meticulous about hiding his identity. His name changed constantly, with a new driver’s license for each new storage unit or post office box. Each step of his scheme was painstakingly arranged: from the computers that filed the returns to the post office boxes where the refunds were delivered, to the couriers that picked them up and the bank accounts where they were deposited. He approached it like a mental puzzle. As far as he could tell, there were no links that could trace the money back to him.

Except for that AirCard. He didn't think police had the expertise to trace it, but he knew enough about the physics of wireless signals to be sure it could be done. In radio terms, the AirCard was noisy, blasting out data in all directions like a barking dog on a busy street. By the time the signal reached the cell tower, it was mixed in with noise from thousands of other sources—but in theory, a person with the right equipment could always trace the bark back to the dog.

For years, the weakness of the AirCard was a hypothesis—but the moment federal agents arrived at his apartment in the summer of 2008, he knew it was real. When he was arrested, Rigmaiden's first thought was that the AirCard had given him away. The task force had used some device, some device no one knew about. His second thought was that he didn't want to take on all the work that would be necessary to prove it. But even then, he knew there was no other way. "I knew I was going to have to learn the legal system to get out of this," he told me.

IT WAS TWO MONTHS INTO HIS stay at the Florence Correctional Center that Rigmaiden discovered the law library. Since his arrest, he had been trying to plead his case while scrambling from prison to prison—first a local penitentiary in California, then to Florence in Arizona where the case was being tried. He did his best to keep a low profile at Florence, steering clear of mentally ill inmates and

making do through random shortages of staples like toilet paper. He wrote note after note to his lawyer, scribbling on the back of Prisoner Request Forms with the 3-inch golf pencils issued by the prison, but it didn't seem to change anything. He was facing a federal case, represented by a public defender. Making noise about invisible signals and secret surveillance devices was only going to get him in trouble.

Still, he knew the government was hiding something. He had seen the warrant for the raid on his apartment, but it gave no sense of how they had tracked him, attributing the information to "historical cell tower information and other investigative techniques." But a single cell tower serves thousands of phones at once. Even detailed records couldn't have been enough to pinpoint a single apartment complex. There had to be something else.

If he was right, it meant the agents had lied to the judge, which could be enough to get the case dismissed. But the key to his argument was buried in murky technical details that only he understood. His lawyer didn't know the first thing about cell tower data. Neither did the judge. He found himself drawn to the prison library's open hours, the three hours a week when he could actually get answers.

He made a valuable new friend at the library, a disbarred lawyer who was serving time for fraud. Rigmaiden learned about the rhythms of a trial, the motions and requests each side uses to stake out territory. Eventually, Rigmaiden opted for a strategy of total legal war, flooding the court with motions and proposals. "When you hire an attorney," he says, "they have to pick and choose the things they're going to challenge because of time and resources. But I just challenged everything."

He fired his first lawyer, then a second, then finally got permission to represent himself, which let him bump up his library time to five hours a day. He worked six days a week, sometimes 15 hours a day. When he couldn't print the motions, he wrote them out by hand, using the same nubby half-pencil.

Meanwhile, he was also poring through records for any evidence of the mysterious device that had caught him. In October, the court gave him access to his discovery file, 14,000 pages of documents that laid the groundwork for the prosecution's case. In the second to last box, he saw the word "Stingray," scribbled in one investigator's notes. He thought it sounded like a brand name.

The prison library didn't have internet access, but the prison's case managers would Google Search for you if you asked them. Eventually, Rigmaiden found a Stingray brochure from Harris Corporation, advertising exactly the capabilities he'd suspected. Now he just needed to prove police were using it. He found what he was looking for in the minutes of a Maricopa County board meeting: a unanimous vote to buy police equipment paid for by a federal grant. Because there hadn't been an open bidding process, the department had been required to submit its invoice for public consideration. The invoice was for a cell-site simulator device, built by the Harris Corporation.

IN 1993, A HACKER NAMED Kevin Mitnick broke into a software company called Netcom, stealing email archives and security programs. He concealed his location with a modem-connected cell phone, a hacked-together version of Rigmaiden's AirCard. To zero in on Mitnick's cell phone, police used a passive cell-site simulator combined with a silent SMS from the phone company that forced Mitnick's device to check in. It was primitive, but they were employing the same technique that would catch Rigmaiden more than a decade later.

In 1996, Rohde & Schwarz created a device called the GA 090, which bundled the ping and capture functions together, effectively masquerading as a cell tower. Driving through a neighborhood with your GA 090, you could see the unique subscriber ID for everyone within range, akin to seeing everyone's cell phone number. If one number was particularly interesting, you could drive around the corner and take another reading to triangulate exactly which house or car it came from.

The device exploited a fundamental part of how cell networks are built. Mobile phones rely on constant communication

with nearby cell towers, always listening for signals from a tower that might be closer or less congested than the current connection. As soon as the phone hears a signal, it spits back an identification number. But crucially, the signal doesn't have to prove it's coming from a tower. There's no authentication for the first stage of the process, so a device like the GA 090 could slip right in.

Security researchers have been concerned about that flaw since the '90s, some even accusing phone companies of keeping it open just to allow law enforcement to exploit it. But by the time those flaws were being used against Rigmaiden, the topic had largely faded from view. Researchers knew the system was broken, but everybody else counted it as a theoretical attack and moved on.

Meanwhile, devices like the GA 090 were gaining popularity in the law enforcement community. In 2003, Harris Corporation unveiled the Stingray, a sleeker, smaller version of Rohde & Schwarz's earlier model, and it came with an aggressive push into the US market. Intelligence agencies began using them overseas to surveil targets or identify their devices. US Marshals put Stingrays in planes and flew them over cities, collecting tens of thousands of phone numbers in search of a single fugitive's phone. Over time, the devices trickled down to local police departments, where they could be used to track down anyone from murderers to purse-snatchers.

But purchasing the device came with a catch. Every time an agency bought a device from Harris, they signed an agreement to keep it out of public court records. If Stingray methods were ever entered into evidence, Harris argued, criminals would catch on, rendering the device useless. Agencies still got court orders to use the devices, but they usually looked like a vaguely worded request for phone records. In most cases, the judges never knew what they were signing and defendants never knew how they'd been caught.

But they couldn't hide every trace. Rigmaiden found signs of Harris' Stingray device in random corners of the web. He searched through Harris' patent filings, which gave him far more insight into how the devices worked. He filed requests for information on the devices under the Freedom of Information Act, but departments locked up, citing confidential methods. He studied *The Fugitive Game*, a 400-page study of the Mitnick case, scouring for clues on exactly how police had tracked the rogue hacker. There was no public evidence of the device at the federal level, no documents or statements indicating it was in use. He turned his attention to local departments, hoping they would be less careful. When his library time was up, he would take the documents back, poring over them in his cell. Over more than two years, he built a file that sprawled to hundreds of pages, including every last trace of the Stingray he could find.

Rigmaiden needed allies, so he sent his file to half a dozen different privacy organizations, but never got back more than a form letter. Not only was Rigmaiden a self-represented prisoner chasing a mythical surveillance device, but he had filed hundreds of motions—these were sure signs of a crank. A normal person would take the plea deal and resign himself to his sentence. Rigmaiden's phonebook-sized file was testament to how unusual he really was.

Eventually, Rigmaiden sent his file to Christopher Soghoian, then a PhD student who had published work on wireless spectrum surveillance. There was something unhinged about the file, to be sure, but Soghoian knew that what Rigmaiden was proposing could very well exist. "My reaction wasn't, what is this strange device. It was, oh I read about this in graduate school. But I read about it as a thing that was possible, not a thing that the police in Baltimore were using," Soghoian says. He became convinced Rigmaiden was right.

Soghoian passed Rigmaiden's file along to privacy groups like the ACLU and EFF, many of the same groups who had ignored the package the first time around. But the breakthrough came when he sent Rigmaiden's sprawling file to Jennifer Valentino-Devries, a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*'s Digits blog. The next month, her story hit the front page of the paper, revealing Stingrays to the public for the first time and presenting

the unchecked, widespread adoption of the technology as a direct challenge to constitutional rights. When a copy of the paper made it to his cell, Rigmaiden was surprised. For the first time, he had reason to think his discovery would matter for more cases than just his own. "I knew that it wouldn't be a front page story if it wasn't such a big deal," he told me.

Rigmaiden's legal situation, however, hadn't changed. Arizona prosecutors wouldn't drop his case just because of a fudged warrant, and while the Stingray news weakened their case, they were determined to see it through. He kept up his barrage of motions: he filed 22 different motions to "continue trial," forcing the prosecution to adapt to his unusual speed. One filing was entirely concerned with the use of the word "preliminary" in testimony describing a handwriting analysis. After the FBI started ignoring his FOIA requests, Rigmaiden launched a civil suit against the bureau, eventually filing almost two dozen motions on that case before it was dismissed. The criminal docket sprawled to more than 1,100 entries.

In 2013, prosecutors finally offered a plea deal on his criminal charges. Rigmaiden believes the deal had more to do with his persistence than the merits of the case. "The reason they wanted to get rid of the case wasn't because they were worried the Stingray was going to get exposed more, because at that point it was pretty much already out there," he says. "The reason they wanted to get rid of me was because I was doing all that work. I was giving them so much work to do and it was pushing their resource limit." He was still reticent to take the plea—which waived his right to appeal—but prison was wearing him down, and he ultimately decided he could do more on the outside. In April of 2014, after nine months of deliberation, he took the deal and walked out of Florence a free man.

> "Everybody else counted it as a theoretical attack"

IN THE FOUR YEARS SINCE THE first *Journal* article, Stingrays have turned up everywhere. They've been documented at 53 agencies spread across 21 states, used in major cities like New York and Chicago as well as smaller departments in Memphis, Durham, and San Jose. In a 2015 review, Baltimore police admitted using the device more than 4,300 times, sometimes for crimes as minor as a stolen cell phone. The US Marshals have even lent the devices out to Mexican officials hunting down cartels. In each case, the departments had been using the devices for years, long before Rigmaiden came onto the scene.

Meanwhile, an informal network of defense attorneys has cropped up, with public defenders sharing notes on how to spot and deal with Stingray cases. Because of the intense non-disclosure agreements around the Stingray, most prosecutors will drop cases rather than defend the use of the device in the face of a well-versed lawyer. Rigmaiden has become a kind of in-house expert for those lawyers, tracking surveillance issues on Twitter and consulting behind the scenes. When Washington state started drafting a law to limit use of Stingray devices in late 2014, someone passed the bill along to Rigmaiden. For a month and a half, he spent each morning going over

a draft of the legislation, demonstrating the same obsession to detail he'd shown in planning his tax fraud scheme and criminal defense. Working with a local ACLU chapter, he recommended tweaks to the bill, specifying the language and expanding the rules to cover passive surveillance devices and other variants that are still secret.

In September, the Justice Department issued a new policy on cell-site simulators, instructing all federal agencies to get warrants before using the devices. For a lot of privacy groups, it was a victory—the first clear federal policy on Stingray use, openly instructing agents to play straight with courts. Rigmaiden was less optimistic. "A lot of it is just putting a new face on what they've been doing all along," he told me. "In my case, they had a warrant. The problem was the information on the warrant."

Rigmaiden now lives a modest life. He gets no money from his legal work, and when I visited, he had just quit a telemarketing job in favor of a slightly friendlier web development gig. He has no car (his record also makes auto loans difficult), so the telemarketing job meant a long walk to a bus to a train. Last year, he spoke at a defense attorney conference at the University of Arizona, an experience he'd like to repeat if he can. For now, the terms of his probation stop him from leaving the Phoenix area.

After climbing down from the hills, we drove to another park, this one a flat stretch of lawn closer to the center of Phoenix. It was quiet, empty except for a few couples and about a dozen people gathered near a stage for a benefit event. It was, as Rigmaiden pointed out, exactly the kind of crowd where you might want to use a Stingray. He had an app on his phone called SnoopSnitch, which looks for telltale disturbances in the network, one of the open-source Stingray-hunting projects that's sprung up since the device became common knowledge. That day, the data showed two disturbances, both silent pings from the phone company. Neither was necessarily suspicious, although we'll never know why they went out.

Rigmaiden suspects police have moved on from Stingrays to passive receivers, which sniff signals out of the air without disrupting the network at all. It's the kind of thing you could build yourself with open software and no FCC violations at all, although you'd need the phone company's help to connect the signals to actual cell numbers.

Cell-site simulators are now at least 20 years old, a long time for any one trick to stay secret. Police had been using the devices in secret for 12 years by the time they were trained on Rigmaiden. From there, it took another eight years to drag them into the light. Even that was only possible because of the chance alignment of a stubborn defendant, a legal shortcut, and a sympathetic judge. "If we hadn't picked up the scent on this, they could have gotten another five or 10 years out of it," Soghoian says.

This is the logic of surveillance, an arms race between police and criminals, but also between police and the legal systems meant to keep them in check. After

> "It's the kind of thing you could build yourself"

10 years off the grid and five years in jail, Rigmaiden is now on the side of those systems—privacy groups, lawyers, judges. It's a strange place to find himself. How did he make the turn from dodging surveillance to actually fighting it? He's still not sure, although it probably has something to do with getting older.

"You have to realize when you're in a situation where you can make a difference, and grab onto it," he told me. "I don't think those opportunities arise very often."

Edited by Michael Zelenko

The Patriot and The Correspondent:

Acts of friendship in a land caught in-between

By Mark MacKinnon

WHEN AN OUTSPOKEN YOUNG MAN VANISHES AMID TURMOIL IN THE FORMER UKRAINIAN REGION HE CALLS HOME, THE GLOBE'S Mark MacKinnon embarks on a risky journey to find out what happened to his friend

He looked thinner, and was dressed all in black even though he had previously favoured bright colours. His hair, always short, was now in a military-style crew-cut. He walked with a limp, leaning slightly on his umbrella as we approached our designated meeting point—a bust of the poet Alexander Pushkin in the middle of a pedestrian boulevard in Donetsk—from opposite directions.

This is how my friend Vlad appeared, two years after I'd seen him last, and 16 months after he had seemed to disappear from the face of the Earth.

His round face broke into a smile as we neared each other, and he extended a hand. "It's so good to see you," he said with a command of English that had once made him Ukraine's high-school debating champion in the language. I took his hand and pulled him into a hug, relief overwhelming all the precautions we had taken in setting up our meeting in the tense and isolated mini-state that broke away from Ukraine two years ago, sending Vlad's life into a terrifying tailspin.

Pulling back from our embrace, I asked him how he was. Fat snowflakes fell lazily around us on a chilly mid-March morning. He exhaled before answering. "I'm not okay, but at least I'm alive."

It's a common sentiment in the Donetsk People's Republic, a twilight zone that is neither Russia nor Ukraine, but a land in-between, where it feels as if the Soviet Union has somehow been resurrected.

And the Soviet Union was never pleasant to those who disagreed with its rulers.

'Dear Russians,
please do not tell me ...'

THE FIRST TIME I MET Vladimir Simperovich was in April, 2014. Ukraine had just experienced a pro-Western revolution, one that Donbass, his native region, was railing against. Groups of pro-Russian fighters had seized control of key buildings in the main cities of Donetsk and Lugansk, as well as several nearby towns. After a surreal referendum the following month, stage-managed by the Kremlin—which was furious about the developments in Kiev—the men with guns would declare themselves the government of separate *people's republics* for Donetsk and Lugansk that together encompassed a few thousand square kilometres between the Russian border and the Ukrainian army's new front lines.

Most of those I met in Donetsk that spring seemed willing to go along with what was happening. They repeated the narrative fed to them by Russian television: "Fascists" had taken over in Kiev, toppling the elected pro-Moscow government led by Donetsk native Viktor Yanukovych. Independence or, better yet, absorption into Russia had to be preferable to life in this new *nazi* Ukraine.

Or maybe they had come to the quiet realization that it was better to agree with the people holding the guns.

Not Vlad. Scanning my Twitter feed one night while I was in Donetsk, I came across an account written by a local resident who was openly critical of what was happening, albeit from behind a screen of online anonymity as @VoiceofDonetsk. He bitterly mocked the referendum, and cheered Ukrainian army advances (sometimes going so far as to celebrate separatist deaths—not uncommon in the angry social-media war being fought alongside the real one).

"Dear Russians," Vlad wrote early in the conflict, "please do not tell me what's going on in Donetsk. I am in Donetsk and can see things better from here than you can from Moscow."

Intrigued by the author's fearlessness, I arranged to meet him at a little yellow-walled bakery called Donbass Bread, not far from my hotel.

Donetsk then was still largely unscarred by the nascent conflict, the city's emerging prosperity a reminder of all that would be lost if the region followed the dimly lit trail stretched out before it.

Artema Street, the city's main commercial drag, featured Western brands such as Zara, Mango, Adidas and Calvin Klein. Not far away were Ramada and Park Inn hotels built for the 2012 European soccer championships (Donetsk was one of eight host cities). There was a brand-new airport, a world-class soccer stadium, as well as a modern ice rink where HC Donbass, Ukraine's lone member of the Kontinental Hockey League, played its home games. There was an impressive opera house, a bustling McDonald's, and an emerging karaoke culture.

I had visited the city a decade earlier—when it was far less developed, but even then a bastion of resistance to Ukraine's first pro-Western revolution in 2004—and was impressed by the changes made since (Donetsk residents, like their neighbours across the border in Russia, enjoy Western products far more than they like Western politics).

When we met, Vlad seemed flattered to be interviewed by a foreign correspondent, but despondent over what was happening to his city and region. Then 27, he told me that he'd started his blog and Twitter account in order to "fight against Russian propaganda."

> "He wasn't afraid of what would happen to him"

The conflict in Donbass, he said, was neither a Ukrainian civil war nor a full-on Russian invasion. Vlad saw it the way many Ukrainians did: as a cynical contest for command over the region's coal mines and steel mills. "Our local elites want to control the financial sources in Donetsk. They want to be able to steal money in the same amounts as before the revolution," was the crux of his analysis.

He said he was worried Donetsk would end up like Trans-Dniestr, a breakaway region of neighbouring Moldova controlled by Russian-supported separatists since a 1990 war there. I suggested that would be a grim fate. I had briefly visited Trans-Dniestr, and spent most of my trip worrying that the secret police—unreformed Soviet KGB—were monitoring me and those I met. The economy of Trans-Dniestr remains almost non-existent after more than two decades of *independence*.

The interview ended with the two of us cheerfully tussling over who would pay for the coffee. He eventually let me win.

We shook hands and promised to meet again. Then Vlad asked his stepbrother—who had joined us, but said little—to take a photograph of us in front of the café. It shows Vlad wearing a pink dress shirt with his sunglasses tucked into the neck. I've got a blue shirt on, a pen sticking out of the breast pocket.

Only later, when Vlad, unabashedly proud of our new friendship, posted the photo online and made it his profile picture

on VKontakte—the Russian equivalent of Facebook—did I wonder if the photo was a smart idea.

'Don't speak English!'

THE NEXT TIME I HEARD FROM Vlad was a month later, in May, 2014. I was on a train from the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, headed back to Donetsk when my phone rang.

"Where are you right now?" he asked with none of his previous mirth. When I told him, he became agitated.

"Exactly which wagon are you in?" he asked. Sounding upset, he told me he would meet me on the platform.

Vlad grabbed me by the elbow as soon as I stepped off the train. "Don't speak English!" he whispered fiercely in Russian. "People are looking for you!"

We walked briskly to a waiting car and sped away. Switching to English so that the driver couldn't understand, Vlad told me he had seen my picture on a VKontakte group used by pro-Russian activists in the city. Someone was claiming I was a CIA agent, he said, and there was talk of kidnapping me, along with another Western journalist (who turned out not to be in Donetsk at the time), so they could exchange us for comrades who had been captured by the Ukrainian army.

Worryingly, what he was saying sounded plausible. Two days earlier, I had been covering a pro-Russian demonstration in the bitterly divided city of Kharkiv, and had taken a photograph of the protest, from the top of a nearby building, that illustrated how small the crowd was relative to the massive plaza they were gathered on.

Immediately, pro-Russian Twitter accounts started claiming that I was a foreign agent sent to undermine and ridicule the *Novorossiya*—New Russia—project they were hoping to spread from Donetsk to Kharkiv. At the time, I chuckled at the online nonsense and continued my work.

But the look on Vlad's face convinced me I needed to be concerned now. I was in Donetsk, the airport was closed, and the train station was apparently full of people looking for me. After driving around the city for a while, we decided that the Park Inn, where many other Western journalists were staying, including several long-time friends of mine, was the safest place for me to be.

Vlad stayed for dinner, and despite the dangers—or maybe because of them — he downed one beer after another. Soon, he was telling me and two colleagues a horror story about how he'd been detained earlier that year for helping a foreign journalist, and held for three days and nights in the basement of the separatists' headquarters in the centre of Donetsk. (Many journalists hire *fixers*—local guides and translators—when reporting from a place they're unfamiliar with. I never hired Vlad as a fixer, or paid him for any of our meetings.)

Vlad told us how he had been handcuffed to a pipe and beaten. Our jaws dropped as he related the details. My colleagues and I debated whether we should write about what he was telling us. Vlad said he wasn't afraid of what would happen to him, but we were. We didn't want to put him in any more danger than he already was.

But Vlad instinctively charged toward trouble. As we finished our meal, he became irritated with a trio of Russian journalists who were talking and laughing loudly as they consumed a late-night bottle of vodka.

"I can't stand it," Vlad said. He walked over to ask the Russians what they thought was so funny about the war their country had brought to his city. A fistfight—one a stumbling, drunk Vlad would have been very unlikely to win—was narrowly avoided.

'Blessed With Coal'

MY WORRIES ABOUT VLAD EScalated a few months later. I was travelling back to Donetsk, and hoped to meet him, but discovered that both his phone numbers had been switched off. His social-media accounts were also uncharacteristically quiet (after writing a barrage of anti-separatist rants following the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight

MH17, with all evidence pointing to a missile fired from territory controlled by the Donetsk People's Republic). I sent him a series of increasingly concerned notes and, after what seemed like an eternity, he finally replied.

He was living with his grandparents in Ugledar, a town recently retaken by the Ukrainian army. He said he was safe, and working on a new project, which he described as "helping to evacuate women and children from Donetsk and nearby cities." Mobile reception was poor in Ugledar—and WiFi non-existent—but he was soon back tweeting full-bore, mocking the Kremlin and those who worked for it in Ukraine.

The name Ugledar means "Blessed With Coal," and during the Soviet era it was indeed a blessing. The coal brought factories, along with an influx of Russian workers and their families, to this part of what was then Soviet Ukraine. The region's industrial base meant both relative affluence, and something of an exemption from the Holodomor, the great famine, that Joseph Stalin inflicted on the agriculture-based centre and west of the country.

But Donbass has been in free fall since the end of the Soviet Union. As Ukraine opened its economy to the West, the region's coal mines and metallurgical factories became increasingly obsolete. The population of Ugledar shrank from more than 20,000 in the Soviet era to barely 15,000 at the start of the current war.

Even before the revolution in Kiev, many in Donbass seemed to long for a leap back in time. Nostalgia for the Soviet era grew continuously, manifesting itself each Ukrainian election in lopsided votes in favour of pro-Moscow politicians like Mr. Yanukovych, though bribery and other types of electoral fraud probably played a role in that.

When Mr. Yanukovych was ousted in February, 2014, much of Donbass watched in confusion. They weren't necessarily happy with life under the corrupt rule of Mr. Yanukovych and his cronies, but they were far from sure that greater integration with the European Union, the key demand of the protesters in Kiev, would work to their benefit.

When armed separatists started taking over government buildings that April, Ugledar was one of the towns they seized first. The local population took part in the May referendum, and—according to the separatists' count—voted overwhelmingly to be part of the Donetsk People's Republic.

Ugledar was recaptured that August, as the overstretched separatists withdrew to more defensible lines around the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk, but Soviet thinking still lingers across the region.

A poll in January financed by the Canadian government found that only one in five Donbass residents (only those living outside the separatist-controlled areas were asked) would choose a democratic government over a prosperous economy. Another poll result that set the region apart from the rest of Ukraine: Most respondents favoured joining a Moscow-led customs union over greater integration with the EU.

Vlad and I arranged to meet on my return to Donetsk in November, 2014, but his phones were again off when I arrived. I didn't worry at first, even when the occasional "Where is he?" tweet—posted by concerned followers of his blog—crossed my screen. I assumed Vlad was back incommunicado in Ugledar.

But when the weeks of silence became months, I started to fret, recalling his sometimes foolhardy bravery, as well as his stint in the dungeon of the Donetsk secret police. I sent a string of messages to his e-mail addresses, as well as his Facebook, Twitter and VKontakte accounts.

Months passed without any reply. Eventually, I tried reaching out to his Facebook friends, asking when they'd seen him last. Only one replied. "I don't know what to think," wrote a former classmate who said she hadn't seen or heard from Vlad for a long time. "All I know is that he was helping refugees."

Then Vlad's VKontakte account—where he had posted the photo of the two of us outside the bakery in Donetsk—was deleted. It was as though someone was

erasing all traces of his existence. A pro-Russian Twitter account suggested that Vlad had been kidnapped.

I returned to Ukraine in February, 2015, and dialed his number, hoping to end the mystery. It wasn't Vlad who answered. "We don't know the person you're asking for," said a man, speaking gruffly in Russian. He hung up when I asked him to identify himself.

My heart sank, even though I had no way of knowing at the time that Vlad had once more been arrested by the police of the Donetsk People's Republic.

Cursed by Chernobyl

VLAD WAS BORN WITH A REAson to hate the Soviet Union, and to sneer at those who felt nostalgia for it.

His father, also named Vladimir, was drafted into the Red Army, where he served as a mechanic and was assigned to a base near Kiev. He was working there on April 26, 1986, when Reactor No. 4 at the nearby Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded. Vlad's father spent the next few months cleaning and repairing the military vehicles coming and going from the exclusion zone.

He developed leukemia, and by November of the same year, Vlad Sr. was dead, at the age of 19. His only son was born three days later.

Vlad's mother, Svetlana, worked at a hospital in Donetsk. She would have another son six years later, but was left to raise the boys alone when the father of her second child left the family and moved to Kiev.

Although they were Russian-speakers in a heavily Russified region, a place where most around them longed for the stability of the Soviet days, Vlad grew up a Ukrainian patriot. He travelled twice to Kiev during the protests that eventually ousted Mr. Yanukovych, and joined a Ukrainian unity rally on March 6, 2014, on Donetsk's central Lenin Square.

The Lenin Square gathering was a last-ditch effort to stop events that were already in motion (by then, armed separatists had seized control of the main regional government building), and an estimated 10,000 pro-Ukrainian activists turned out. There was brief optimism that those working to hold the country together would prevail over those trying to pull it apart.

A week later, pro-Russian activists staged a counterdemonstration, on the square, that descended into a street brawl. A pro-Ukrainian protester, Dmytro Cherniavsky, was stabbed to death in the fracas.

It was the first death of the war for Donbass. More than 8,000 people have died since.

'Are you kidding me?'

I DECIDED IN MARCH OF THIS year that the only way to find out what had happened to Vlad was to return to Ukraine and look for him myself.

A short stopover in Kiev offered reasons for pessimism. The consensus among the diplomats and aid workers I met, as well as former residents of Donetsk and Lugansk, was that anyone who had gone silent as long as Vlad was likely in prison, or dead.

Especially if he had been outspoken about his pro-Ukrainian views.

I visited Maria Varfolomeeva, a journalist who had spent more than a year in captivity in the Lugansk People's Republic, hoping for clues as to how the separatists might deal with someone like Vlad. Ms. Varfolomeeva, who was accused of being a spy for the Ukrainian government because she filmed outside a residential building that turned out to be a separatist military barracks, laughed bitterly when I asked if Vlad might have put himself in danger by criticizing the separatists on his blog and Twitter. "Are you kidding me?"

Amnesty International researcher Krassimir Yankov said that stories like Maria's and Vlad's had become increasingly common in the separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine. The leadership of the unrecognized Donetsk and Lugansk statelets appeared to be "going after well-known 'enemies of the republic,'" in recent months, perhaps to distract from the economic problems in their regions, Mr. Yankov said.

He warned that looking for a single missing person—like Vlad—in that part of Ukraine was like "looking for a needle in a haystack. Nobody really knows what's going on in Donetsk."

But I had to try. I decided to travel to Ugledar, where Vlad had been, the last time he'd gone silent.

Mark MacKinnon first flew to Kharkiv, about 400 kilometres east of Kiev, rented a car and headed south to Ugledar in Ukrainian territory, hoping to find Vlad there, safe with his grandparents. After a stop in Kramatorsk for documents, he had to spend the night in Druzhkivka (the new home of Donetsk's hockey team) after mangled roads hobbled his car. He was about to pass Krasnoarmiisk when Vlad's brother, Bogdan, called and arranged to meet him there. The news Vlad was alive but confined to Donetsk required a return to Slavyansk and a second overnight stay, before a border crossing at Kurakhove and a much-anticipated reunion in the separatist capital.

I never reached Ugledar

TRAVELLING THROUGH EASTern Ukraine in early 2016 is a journey through a war on pause. There is something like a ceasefire holding around the

front line, but neither side believes the conflict is really over.

Under what's known as the Minsk peace process—named after the Belarusian capital where it was negotiated—both sides have pulled their heavy artillery and rocket launchers 30 kilometres back from the front. But every night, there is a cacophony of small-arms fire, and the occasional mortar round, as the two armies continue to probe each other's defences.

Driving on the Ukrainian side of the line, a planned 340-kilometre trip from Kharkiv to Ugledar became a two-day odyssey. The roads, always poorly maintained, have been torn up into a jagged mess by tanks streaming to a civil war no Ukrainian ever expected to fight.

The potholes were so deep that the battered Lada I was riding in managed to blow not one, but two tires, badly bending both rims and necessitating an overnight stop and a car swap. The next day's trek was slowed by a succession of sandbagged military checkpoints, where Kalashnikov-toting Ukrainian soldiers stared with interest at my Canadian passport.

I never reached Ugledar. On the second day of the drive, I unexpectedly received a text message informing me that a mobile number Vlad had once called me from was suddenly active again. (In Ukraine, if you call a number and it's out of service, the operator will send you a text message when that number is back on the network.) I dialled it anxiously, fully expecting to hear another stranger's voice. But this time, Vlad's half-brother, Bogdan, answered.

Bogdan had been with Vlad when we met for the first time. He took the picture of us standing outside Donbass Bread. He remembered me.

"He's okay," Bogdan answered cautiously, when I asked about his brother. "He's in Donetsk."

Questions whizzed through my mind—if he's okay, why didn't Vlad answer any of the dozens of messages I'd sent over the past 16 months?

Bogdan agreed to meet me in Krasnoarmiisk, another town briefly captured by the separatists back in 2014, but now behind Ukrainian lines. Bogdan's life, like many with roots in Donetsk and Lugansk, now straddles both sides of the unofficial border. He studies economics in Krasnoarmiisk, on the Ukrainian side, but his home and family are in the Donetsk People's Republic.

He was fidgety when we met, and clearly unsure what he was supposed to tell me about Vlad's whereabouts. He agreed to tell Vlad that I'd been scouring eastern Ukraine for him, and had feared—until reaching Bogdan—the worst. Bogdan admitted that the picture he took had "caused some trouble" for his brother.

> "Both sides have pulled their heavy artillery"

Vlad called me that evening, breaking 16 months of silence.

"I have some troubles here in Donetsk with the police and so on," Vlad explained vaguely. He told me he'd had his passport seized, and couldn't leave the Donetsk People's Republic. But if I could get to

TRISH McALASTER / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Donetsk, he would be happy to see me again.

The next day, I hired a driver to take me across the front line.

Vlad had helped me once when I was in danger. I figured I owed him one.

A shadow of its pre-war self

THE TWO-KILOMETRE STRETCH of no man's land between the last Ukrainian military checkpoint and the first line of separatist defences bears the scars of the hotter days of this war. As we drove between the front lines, we passed a pair of electricity towers that had somehow been bent in half. Next came the ruins of a white minibus that had edged off the road in February and hit a landmine, killing four people. Then an abandoned plant that once produced sunflower oil for Cargill, the U.S. food giant.

The fluttering black, blue and red flag of the Donetsk People's Republic marked the first separatist checkpoint. Five fighters in fatigues, cradling Kalashnikovs, emerged from a log-and-cement foxhole that was built in 2014, but could just as easily have existed in 1914. One looked briefly at my passport and press card before waving us on.

Next came the customs office of the unrecognized statelet: a metal shed in front of a burnt-out gas station. As another

man in camouflage gear registered the entry of our beige Chevy Aveo, my eyes wandered over freshly dug trenches, a symbol of how this once fast-moving war has entered a longer and much more drawn-out phase.

Finally we reached Donetsk, a city now a shadow of its prewar self.

The Western brands were the first to flee, leaving a row of boarded-up storefronts along Artema Street. The advertising market has unsurprisingly crashed, and most views in the city are scarred by empty metal billboards. The only active advertiser is the separatist government itself, which has erected dozens of signs reminding residents to celebrate Soviet-era holidays. One poster on Artema featured Stalin, chin up, over the slogan: "Victory will be ours!"

But while the Kremlin may have gained several strategic objectives by supporting the separatists—most notably by smashing talk that Ukraine might join Western institutions such as the EU or NATO any time soon—it doesn't feel like the people of Donetsk are winning anything.

Donbass Arena, the soccer stadium the city was so proud of in 2012, was hit during the Ukrainian army's sometimes indiscriminate shelling. Its undamaged parts now function as a distribution centre for the humanitarian aid that arrives in controversial convoys from Russia (the 50th such convoy arrived just before my visit in March). The airport, scene of the heaviest fighting to date, is a shattered mess.

The Ramada and Park Inn hotels have somehow kept functioning, although their business models have been turned upside down. Credit cards and bank machines stopped working early in the conflict, as Donetsk and Lugansk were cut off from the international financial system. The separatists threw businesses another curve ball last year when they declared that the Russian ruble, rather than the Ukrainian hryvnia, would be the lone currency allowed in the now cash-only economy. Nightlife is curbed by a 10 o'clock curfew. Donbass Bread, where Vlad and I first met, is boarded up.

On March 16, the Donetsk People's Republic took the symbolic step of issuing its first passports. Alexander Zakharchenko—prime minister of the unrecognized state—was the lead recipient, followed by dozens of Donetsk residents who had turned 18 since the war began, meaning they had no other travel documents.

They were the first official citizens of this republic no one recognizes, the teenagers' new passports a confirmation of their status as hostages of the conflict.

A Ukrainian passport can still get you through the checkpoints that separate Donetsk and Lugansk from the rest of the country (provided the Ukrainian side doesn't suspect you of fighting for the separatists), or across the Russian border. But passport-holders of the Donetsk People's Republic—or those, like Vlad, who don't have documents at all—can't go east or west. Their world is confined to the handful of cities and towns the separatists control.

I decided to spend some time watching the generation that may grow up knowing no other state but the Donetsk People's Republic. The sports palace" near my hotel was packed on a Saturday morning with children and preteens performing astounding feats on the tumbling mats and parallel bars. Above them hung a trio of flags: the Russian tricolour, the blue-black-red of the Donetsk People's Republic, and the blue cross on red background that is the banner of the *Novorossiya* project.

Later that day, the city would hold its amateur-boxing championship. For Donetsk athletes, it might as well have been the Olympic Games. "They can't go anywhere higher than this," Sergei Akhmetov, vice-president of the city's boxing federation, told me. "Maybe some competitions in Russia, but the European and world championships are not for us."

He was interrupted by one of his boxing coaches, clearly frustrated with his boss's overly polite description of the situation. "We are hostages here!" shouted a balding man with a mouthful of gold teeth. "Why does Canada recognize the revolution in Kiev, but not ours?" he continued at top volume. Then his comments slid into

a stream of hatred directed at the West, replete with racism and anti-Semitism.

'It's like a big prison'

THE REAL FIGHTING AROUND Donetsk has picked up again recently. The Minsk agreements, which somewhat stabilized the situation for the past year, seem to be crumbling, with both sides accusing the other of failing to implement its terms.

This time, I was awoken only once by the sounds of heavy machine-gun fire somewhere in the distance.

"It's like a big prison," Vlad began as I pulled out my notebook in a quiet corner of a coffee shop not far from the Pushkin statue where we had met that chilly Saturday afternoon in 2014. Before choosing a place to talk, we walked aimlessly for a while, trying to make sure we were not being closely followed.

donations from Ukrainians who wanted to help those still living in the rebel-held areas, and used the money to buy warm clothing and medicines that were starting to become scarce in the unrecognized republics. (It was better, he suggested to readers of his blog, that aid to Donetsk come from Ukrainians—otherwise residents would be forced to rely on the humanitarian convoys from Russia, a huge propaganda win for Moscow.)

With a friend, he also started arranging travel documents for those who wanted

> "I ordered a cappuccino. He had a back coffee."

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe say the separatists and the Ukrainian army have both started seizing ground in what was once the no man's land between the front lines. "The armies are getting closer to each other. This is causing increased tension," said one monitor, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity.

When I stayed at the Park Inn in the fall of 2014, my nights were sleepless as the city shook with artillery shells landing on or near the city's devastated airport.

I ordered a cappuccino. He had a black coffee. As proof of how worried I was, I pulled out a printed photo of him that I'd been planning to show around Ugledar before I heard from his brother.

Vlad smiled sadly. He didn't apologize for my worry. But he explained.

As the separatists tightened their control over Donetsk and Lugansk in 2014, he had shifted from online dissent to a mix of more active opposition and humanitarian work. He set up an account for

to leave. Vlad was spending most of his time outside the separatist-controlled areas, and used his contacts to help renew expired passports on the Ukrainian side. The new passports he brought back were effectively a ticket out of Donetsk for those who preferred to live in the government-run part of Ukraine.

Eventually, his efforts drew the attention of the Donetsk authorities. In February, 2015, he received a request from a woman who said she wanted his help getting her passport renewed. Unbeknownst to

Vlad, her husband worked for the separatist government as a police officer, and their meeting was photographed.

Vlad was arrested afterward, and his mobile phone seized with all his e-mail and social-media accounts open for the officers to read. He would have been in deep trouble then and there, except for the fact that they were mostly in English, which the police officers couldn't understand. He convinced them he was writing satire—and thus was conceivably pro-government—but knew he had to stop blogging and tweeting, since he was no longer anonymous.

Released with a warning to stop his passport trade, he quickly returned to the safety of Ugledar, on the Ukrainian side of the line. His mother—who needed to stay in Donetsk; her salary from the hospital where she had worked her whole life was now supporting the entire family—begged him to end his online war against the separatists, and he agreed.

He had fooled the regular police, but knew the MGB—the separatist secret police, reportedly led by retired KGB agents—would not be amused when they read the file. Vlad stopped using the e-mail and social-media accounts that had been open on his smartphone when the police seized it. He never saw my increasingly worried appeals for a reply.

He also might never have returned to Donetsk, had his grandmother not fallen ill, and needed surgery, a few months later. His mother arranged for expedited medical attention, and Vlad travelled with his grandmother from Ugledar to Donetsk last August.

The surgery was successful, but Vlad was awakened at 7 the following morning by pounding on his door. The police had found out he was back. And by now they knew exactly what kind of blogger he was.

"They didn't say anything to me, just that I had to go with them. Then they put my hands behind my back and put handcuffs on me," Vlad told me. He was put in a car and driven to a police station, where he was asked to sign a statement confessing that he had been trying to cheat people by taking money for travel documents he couldn't deliver.

Vlad says he charged just enough to cover his costs. The only person to offer more than that had been the police officer's wife. (Vlad believes one reason for the sting operation was to eliminate competition, since the separatists were offering a parallel service for several times the price.)

"They kept saying that I had committed a crime and had to sign this statement," Vlad said. "I refused, of course."

We ordered a second round of coffee, but by this point I was worried about whether we should keep talking. The café was becoming more crowded, and an emotional Vlad was struggling to keep his voice down as he told his tale.

He spent 72 days in prison, an experience that wasn't as unpleasant as he had expected. The guards were rough and the food was "not for humans, it was for pigs." But his fellow inmates were not what he had expected and feared. In today's Donetsk, it's often the intellectuals—rather than the hardened criminals—who end up on the wrong side of the law.

"At first I was afraid. But a lot of the people who are in prison today are good people who were arrested because they did something small." Because they were seen as opponents of the regime.

Eventually, Vlad's lawyer—an old friend with contacts inside the separatist regime—cut a deal. Vlad would be allowed out of prison, but the secret police would keep the SIM cards for both mobile phones he was carrying at the time of his arrest and, critically, hold onto his passport. He was free, but his world was now confined to the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic. (He also left with that limp, having been hit by a car outside police headquarters. Vlad doesn't believe it was an accident.)

Without a passport, he couldn't pass through separatist military checkpoints. Nor could he legally hold a job. Most of his friends had left Donetsk. But he was not the only one the separatists were

holding in painful limbo. “A lot of people are in the same position of me now. They have no documents, so they can’t get out to Ukraine or to Russia. They are in a prison,” he told me with a bitter laugh.

A pair of men in leather jackets entered the coffee shop and took a table too close to us for comfort. We paid our bill and headed back out onto the snowy boulevard.

It struck me that one of Vlad’s early predictions—that Donetsk would end up like Trans-Dniestr—had come true. The city was now just as isolated and paranoid as that other pro-Russian ministate. I recalled my day in the Trans-Dniestrian capital of Tiraspol a decade earlier, and how I had arranged a meeting with one of its few remaining dissidents. My source and I agreed that he would sit on a bench in a public park. If his newspaper was open when I approached, it would be okay to talk. If not, I was to keep walking.

The Donetsk of 2016 felt like Tiraspol in 2003. Or, for that matter, East Berlin or Moscow a few decades before.

Vlad and I strolled slowly past a series of children’s playgrounds that sat empty on a Saturday afternoon. “My mother says the DPR is a republic for pensioners,” Vlad commented. “Pensioners live very well. They collect one pension here in rubles, and then go to the other side and collect another one in Ukrainian hryvnia. So, of course, they support the Donetsk People’s Republic.”

But most young people—those not making money as fighters—have left, and little beside the pension system works. As we walked, Vlad listed off the names of factories that had closed since the outbreak of war two years before.

I asked him what he did with his spare time.

He used to relax by going to the park across Artema Street from his house, but stopped after someone—he can’t fathom who or why—uprooted most of its greenery. “Our people have even stolen the trees from the park,” he said. The words “our people” came out dripping with disgust.

He related how he and his prewar girlfriend—with family roots in Russia—had broken up in large part because they disagreed so vehemently about what was happening in Donetsk. He said he had not spoken to his only cousin, who worked for the separatist government, since the war began.

Vlad said he had recently taken up boxing. It seemed an odd hobby for someone who had struck me as a burgeoning, if combative, intellectual when we first met. But the intervening two years had clearly hardened him.

We parted for the afternoon, agreeing to meet up again for a precurfew drink that evening. My intention was not to interview Vlad again, but to give him what must have been a rare night off, to help him unwind, if only for a few hours. I wanted to see the cheerful young man I had met two years before.

It proved impossible. Shouting over 1990s Britney Spears songs and a plate of french fries at a bar in the city centre, I tried talking about soccer and hockey, but every conversation inevitably led back to politics and to Vlad’s precarious situation. Shakhtar Donetsk, the city’s beloved soccer team, was still one of Ukraine’s best, but now plays its home games in the western city of Lviv. The city’s ice palace was looted and set ablaze in May, 2014—HC Donbass has relocated to the Ukrainian-controlled town of Druzhkivka, and no longer plays in the KHL.

I tried asking about movies, but Vlad hadn’t seen any recently. He grumpily pointed out that the only films showing in local cinemas were ones stolen from the Internet.

The bar was crowded, but Vlad couldn’t keep his voice down. “There’s no future here,” he said several times, too loudly for my liking. “If I could leave this place, I would never come back.”

We parted, promising to stay in closer touch from now on. But I left Donetsk the next day feeling as if I was abandoning my friend to a rather unpleasant fate.

’I was very nervous’

THE IDEA TO RESCUE VLAD wasn't mine.

A mutual friend called a few days after I left Ukraine. He said he had found a way to get Vlad out of Donetsk, if someone was willing to put up the money. He had made contact with a network of smugglers who made their living driving back and forth across the front line, "tipping" soldiers on both sides not to look inside their vehicles.

One of the smugglers was claiming they could drive a person across the front as easily as any other contraband. They were asking for $400 (U.S.) for the whole operation.

I hesitated. No laws would be broken, since the border Vlad would be taken across was one no country in the world—not even Russia—recognizes, but this was clearly a dangerous endeavour. In my imagination, the smuggler would be using some poorly guarded back road, one where the fighting could flare up at any minute, potentially putting Vlad in the line of fire.

Paying for Vlad to escape was also against all the rules I'd been taught long ago at Carleton University's School of Journalism. Journalists are supposed to maintain objectivity at all times. We're only to observe—and never get involved in—the stories we report.

But Vlad and I had affected each others' lives since the moment I'd first come across his Twitter account. To pretend I'd had no impact on him, and played no role in creating the situation he was trapped in, felt ridiculous. I told the mutual friend that, if Vlad was willing to take the risk, I would pay the $400 from my own pocket.

Vlad indicated he was, indeed, desperate enough to trust a smuggler. "I hope it will happen soon," he wrote me by e-mail in early April.

Two weeks later, the right combination of soldiers—those who knew not to look in the smuggler's car—were in position on both sides of the front line. At 4 o'clock on a weekday morning, Vlad bade his mother goodbye, and got into a sedan that pulled up outside his apartment. The driver was a man, as Vlad expected, but there was also a young woman in the back seat. Nobody spoke.

After a short drive, they reached the separatist front lines. The driver got out of the car. Vlad could see three armed men, but studiously avoided eye contact with them. "I was very nervous. I knew that, if they asked for my documents, there would be a big problem, and I would never have another opportunity to leave."

The driver came back a few minutes later and wordlessly set off again. Next came a Ukrainian checkpoint where, after a longer wait, the driver again arranged for his two passengers to cross without showing any documentation.

Vlad exhaled as they left the war zone behind. He was dropped at the first bus station on the Ukrainian side of the line—he headed straight back to his grandparents' place in Ugledar—while the young woman stayed in the car with the driver. Vlad says he has no idea what ultimately happened her, or even why she was in the smuggler's car. Neither wanted to know the other's story, or to share their own.

"As soon as I passed through the checkpoints, I began to feel free. The sky is bluer here than it was in Donetsk. The trees are more green," Vlad recounted with a wide smile when we met again, this time in a Kiev pub. Six weeks had passed since we'd last seen each other.

Over a table laden with cheese and beer—"there's no good beer in Donetsk," he declared with a wide smile as he sipped a pint of Czech lager—I asked him what he thought he'd do next.

Top of his mind was getting a new passport, something he was unhappy to discover would require paying another bribe.

> "He wants everybody to know his name."

"Nothing has changed," he said, referring to Ukraine as a whole. This spring, a tranche of reformist cabinet ministers left the government, complaining that President Petro Poroshenko and his allies aren't serious about combatting the corruption that has plagued the state—and provoked successive waves of protest—since the Soviet era.

Next up on Vlad's to-do list was restarting his Twitter account. The separatists and their allies in the Kremlin would again be the target of @VoiceofDonetsk, but

Vlad also plans to take on the problems he sees around him in "free" Ukraine. It bothered him that the Ukrainian soldiers had taken money not to look in a smuggler's car that night. He pointed out that it could just as easily have been stuffed with explosives.

Vladimir Simperovich plans to drop the anonymity this time around. He wants everybody to know his name. He has dreams of becoming a respected political analyst and pundit.

"I'm not afraid any more," he said as we soaked up a sunny late-April afternoon in Kiev. "Now I can write as Voice of Donetsk and show my personality, and say yes when people ask to interview me. It's kind of a new life."

It looked like it. Just nine days after he'd escaped his open-air "prison," I noticed Vlad was again dressing and acting like the young man I had first met two years earlier. He was wearing an unbuttoned grey sweater over a white "Tokyo Tigers" T-shirt. He had sunglasses tucked into his hair, which had grown out of the crew cut he was sporting when we met in March. A pair of black earphones dangled from his slightly thicker neck. Over three meals we shared during the day our travels overlapped in Kiev, Vlad rarely stopped smiling.

The only time his mood dipped was when I asked if he thought he'd ever return to Donetsk.

"Donetsk was a good city. I used to think it was one of the greatest cites in Ukraine," he began.

Now, he knows, he'll almost certainly never go back. Even if the war were to end tomorrow, Vlad says he wouldn't feel safe in Donetsk "until Lenin is removed from the central square and the Ukrainian flag flies there."

Those things are unlikely to happen any time soon.

He can still see his mother when she travels to Ugledar, but he may never again see his home, or his local park, or Artema Street, or the bust of Alexander Pushkin where we had met so nervously just a few weeks before.

"Donetsk, for me, is a dead city," Vlad pronounced.

His voice softened as he said it, as if he were mourning a friend—one more casualty of the strange war in eastern Ukraine.

Unearthing the Secrets of New York's Mass Graves

By Nina Bernstein

OVER A MILLION PEOPLE ARE BURIED IN THE CITY'S POTTER'S FIELD ON HART ISLAND. A NEW YORK TIMES INVESTIGATION UN-covers some of their stories and the failings of the system that put them there.

Twice a week or so, loaded with bodies boxed in pine, a New York City morgue truck passes through a tall chain-link gate and onto a ferry that has no paying passengers. Its destination is Hart Island, an uninhabited strip of land off the coast of the Bronx in Long Island Sound, where overgrown 19th-century ruins give way to mass graves gouged out by bulldozers and the only pallbearers are jail inmates paid 50 cents an hour.

There, divergent life stories come to the same anonymous end.

No tombstones name the dead in the 101-acre potter's field that holds Leola Dickerson, who worked as one family's housekeeper for 50 years, beloved by three generations for her fried chicken and her kindness. She buried her husband as he had wished, in a family plot back in Alabama. But when she died at 88 in a New York hospital in 2008, she was the ward of a court-appointed guardian who let her house go into foreclosure and her body go unclaimed at the morgue.

By law, her corpse became city property, to be made available as a cadaver for dissection or embalming practice if a medical school or mortuary class wanted it. Then, like more than a million men, women and children since 1869, she was consigned to a trench on Hart Island.

Several dozen trenches back lies Zarramen Gooden, only 17 when the handlebars of his old bike broke and he hit his throat, severing an artery. He had been popping wheelies near the city homeless shelter in the Bronx where he and four younger siblings lived with their heroin-addicted mother. With no funeral help from child protection authorities, his older sister scraped together $8 to buy the used suit he wore at his wake. But the funeral home swiftly sent him back to the morgue when she could not pay the $6,000 burial fee.

For Milton Weinstein, a married father with a fear of dying alone, there was no burial at all for two years after his death at 67. A typographer in his day, he had worked in advertising for Sears, Roebuck & Company. But he lost his career to technology and his vision to diabetes; his wife's mental problems drove their children away. Though she was at his side when he died in a Bronx nursing home, she had no say over what happened to his remains—and no idea that his body would be used as a cadaver in a medical school and then shoveled into a mass grave on Hart Island.

New York is unique among American cities in the way it disposes of the dead it considers unclaimed: interment on a lonely island, off-limits to the public, by a crew of inmates. Buried by the score in wide, deep pits, the Hart Island dead seem to vanish—and so does any explanation for how they came to be there.

To reclaim their stories from erasure is to confront the unnoticed heartbreak inherent in a great metropolis, in the striving and missed chances of so many lives gone by. Bad childhoods, bad choices or just bad luck—the chronic calamities of the human condition figure in many of these narratives. Here are the harshest consequences of mental illness, addiction or families scattered or distracted by their own misfortunes.

But if Hart Island hides individual tragedies, it also obscures systemic failings, ones that stack the odds against people too poor, too old or too isolated to defend themselves. In the face of an end-of-life industry that can drain the resources of the most prudent, these people are especially vulnerable.

Indeed, this graveyard of last resort hides wrongdoing by some of the very individuals and institutions charged with protecting New Yorkers, including court-appointed

guardians and nursing homes. And at a time when many still fear a potter's field as the ultimate indignity, the secrecy that shrouds Hart Island's dead also veils the city's haphazard treatment of their remains.

These cases are among hundreds unearthed through an investigation by The New York Times that draws on a database of people buried on the island since 1980. The records make it possible for the first time to trace the lives of the dead, revealing the many paths that led New Yorkers to a common grave.

Matched with other public records, including guardianship proceedings, court dockets and hundreds of pages of unclaimed cadaver records obtained from the city's Office of Chief Medical Examiner under the state's Freedom of Information Law, the database becomes a road map to unlocking Hart Island's secrets.

Some secrets defy every expectation. Ruth Proskauer Smith, 102, died in her multimillion-dollar apartment in the Dakota building in Manhattan in 2010 after a life celebrated in a Times obituary and by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She now lies with 144 strangers in Trench 359.

"My God, she ended up there?" Gael Arnold exclaimed, shocked to learn that her mother had been buried on Hart Island in 2013, three years after her death and the donation of her body to science. Her children had assumed that the New York University School of Medicine would cremate her remains and dispose of the ashes, not send her corpse to the city morgue to be ferried to a pit.

> "Some secrets defy every expectation."

Some secrets still resist unraveling. Timothy Daniels, 17, is buried in Trench 209. He died in 1990 in an upstate homeless shelter run by the city for men over 35, a place no juvenile was supposed to be. Yet there is no trace of any official inquiry into how he died there.

The common expectation today is that families will be on the front line of burial arrangements. But as many cases show, families can be lost or outlived, left in the dark or hobbled by the same economic and social forces that drove their kin toward Hart Island.

Under a New York State law rooted in the 1850s and last amended in 2007, next of kin can have as little as 48 hours after a death to claim a body for burial, or 24 hours after notification, "if the deceased person is known to have a relative whose place of residence is known or can be ascertained after reasonable and diligent inquiry."

At that point, a body is legally available for use as a cadaver and for burial in a potter's field. Medical schools have the right of first refusal; the bodies they reject are passed to mortuary classes for embalmment training, which is required for a funeral director's license.

Views differ over whether the role of cadavers in teaching doctors, or even undertakers, should outweigh any concerns about consent, religious prohibitions or disparate treatment of the poor. Even some anatomists now argue that

the government's power to appropriate the bodies of the marginalized should be unacceptable today. But most people are simply unaware of the practice.

With the rise of private body donations, most medical schools no longer claim corpses from the city morgue. Still, the city has offered at least 4,000 bodies to medical or mortuary programs in the past decade; among these, more than 1,877 were selected for use before a belated Hart Island burial, records show. The city temporarily halted the flow of cadavers in 2014 after the medical examiner's office was caught in a series of blunders, including bodies lost or mixed up. But the practice resumed last spring when a mortuary school sued.

The city declines to identify the cadavers, invoking a privacy exception to public records laws. Citing security, the city's Correction Department also repeatedly rebuffed The Times's requests to witness Hart Island burials firsthand. Finally, in March, The Times used a drone to fly around the island's shoreline and record burials on video.

For a decade, a small band of activists, led by a visual artist, Melinda Hunt, sought access to the island's handwritten burial ledgers. More than a year ago, Ms. Hunt turned hard-won facts and old images into a website for the nonprofit organization she founded, the Hart Island Project, and shared the underlying data with The Times.

The recovered stories reveal the powerful reach of the past. And they show that in a time of passionate debate over inequality, racism and economic exploitation, the potter's field dead speak to us still.

Strangers With Common Fate

THE TERM "POTTER'S FIELD" IS biblical, referring to a clay-heavy piece of land near Jerusalem bought with the 30 pieces of silver returned by a remorseful Judas to the chief priests. Worthless for farming, the land would be used to bury strangers. The "strangers" in New York City after the Civil War were poor immigrants, African-Americans and casualties of the teeming, crime-infested slums.

The city bought Hart Island in 1868. It had been the site of a prison for Confederate soldiers, and for more than a century, the dead shared the island with living inmates of one kind or another, people who were likely to end up in its mass graves themselves.

The island is now haunted by the crumbling remnants of defunct institutions, among them a lunatic asylum, a tuberculosis hospital and a boys' reformatory. In the bulldozed barrens between these ruins, inmates outfitted, chain-gang-style, in red stripes and Day-Glo orange caps stack the dead three deep.

Throughout human history, archaeologists say, the treatment of dead bodies has been a key indicator of status differences in a society; the "unworthy" poor become the unworthy dead. As a burial place, unmarked ground shared with many strangers is at the bottom of the hierarchy. But Hart Island's dead were also always vulnerable to another fate.

New York was among many states that had added dissection to death sentences for murder, arson and even burglary by the early 19th century, when it was otherwise illegal. But the demand for cadavers in medical education had outstripped the legal supply of executed felons, and an illicit market in corpses mushroomed.

Its history is grim. Southern slave owners "donated" or sold bodies of dead slaves to medical schools; in the North, competing schools imported black bodies from the South in whiskey barrels. Potter's fields, almshouse cemeteries and African-American burial grounds were routinely ransacked as medical professors paid for corpses, no questions asked. Other bodies were diverted from morgues and the charity wards of urban hospitals.

Society largely turned a blind eye as long as the body snatchers took the black, the poor or the powerless, historians point out. But when even the bodies of "respectable" whites were not safe, outrage erupted. There were riots against medical schools in Philadelphia, New Haven and New York, where in 1788 a hospital

was sacked and Columbia College medical students were nearly lynched. Furor peaked nationwide in an 1879 scandal, when the naked, stolen body of a United States congressman was discovered in an Ohio anatomy lab.

Lawmakers in many states concluded that the only way to protect the respectable was to give medical schools more of what they were already taking illegally: the bodies of the disenfranchised. One of the first such laws was New York State's, passed in 1854 despite vehement opposition from representatives of New York City's immigrant poor. Over the next 50 years, many states followed suit, some passing laws requiring officials at every almshouse, prison, hospital and public institution to provide corpses to medical schools if the bodies would otherwise be buried at public expense.

Those are the roots of New York's present statute. Today, the rise of cremation and body donation has altered funeral practices for many, but in poor communities—not least among a generation of African-Americans who migrated north from the Jim Crow South—a pauper's grave and the specter of dismemberment never lost their horror as a final humiliation.

An opt-out provision in the law would seem to exempt the bodies of people who indicate that they do not want to be dissected or embalmed. But few are aware of it, and it may be unenforceable. Certainly it was unknown in the 1990s in the single-room occupancy hotel where an African-American woman named Gwendolyn Burke, blind and halt after a lifetime of menial work, had no way to avoid the potter's field.

Sure enough, when she died at 89, Ms. Burke went to Hart Island. But first, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine claimed her as a cadaver and used her body for dissection for 13 months before she was interred in 2000.

"She didn't deserve that," said David Minton, the city social worker assigned to Ms. Burke's hotel in Harlem, who learned of her body's use 16 years too late to object.

High Cost of Dying Alone

WHEN LEOLA DICKERSON FELL to the floor of her house in Pleasantville, N.J., in February 2006, no one was there to notice. Her dog, Champ, waited in vain to be let in. Her upstairs tenant came and went by an outside staircase. Days passed before a mail carrier found her, barely conscious, and called 911.

Her husband, one of 10 siblings, had wanted to retire to live with relatives in rural Alabama, before he died. But Ms. Dickerson, born near Tuskegee in 1919, refused to go back. "I'm out of the South," she would say. "We're set in our ways, and God has blessed us."

Family photographs covered her parlor walls: the children who had called her Grandma on visits from the South after she married their grandfather, Mango, in the 1960s; Mango's nephew Joseph Dixon, the boy she had raised as her son; the grandsons of her deceased employers, Milton and Helen Katz, who had always treated her like kin. Black and white and tan, the faces overlapped inside old picture frames.

But at 86, Ms. Dickerson's sole blood relative was her younger brother in New York, Johnny Maddox. After an ambulance took her to a hospital in New Jersey, he arranged to move her to a nursing home in Queens. The nursing home, saying she had dementia, petitioned the Queens County Court to appoint a guardian to manage her affairs and assets, including her house, valued at $88,200, and her monthly Social Security check of $783.

So began Leola Dickerson's two-year journey to Hart Island.

In Pensacola, Fla., her dead husband's granddaughter, Constance Dickerson Williams, knew something was wrong. She kept trying to call Grandma Leola, but no one answered. Finally she wrote, but there was no response.

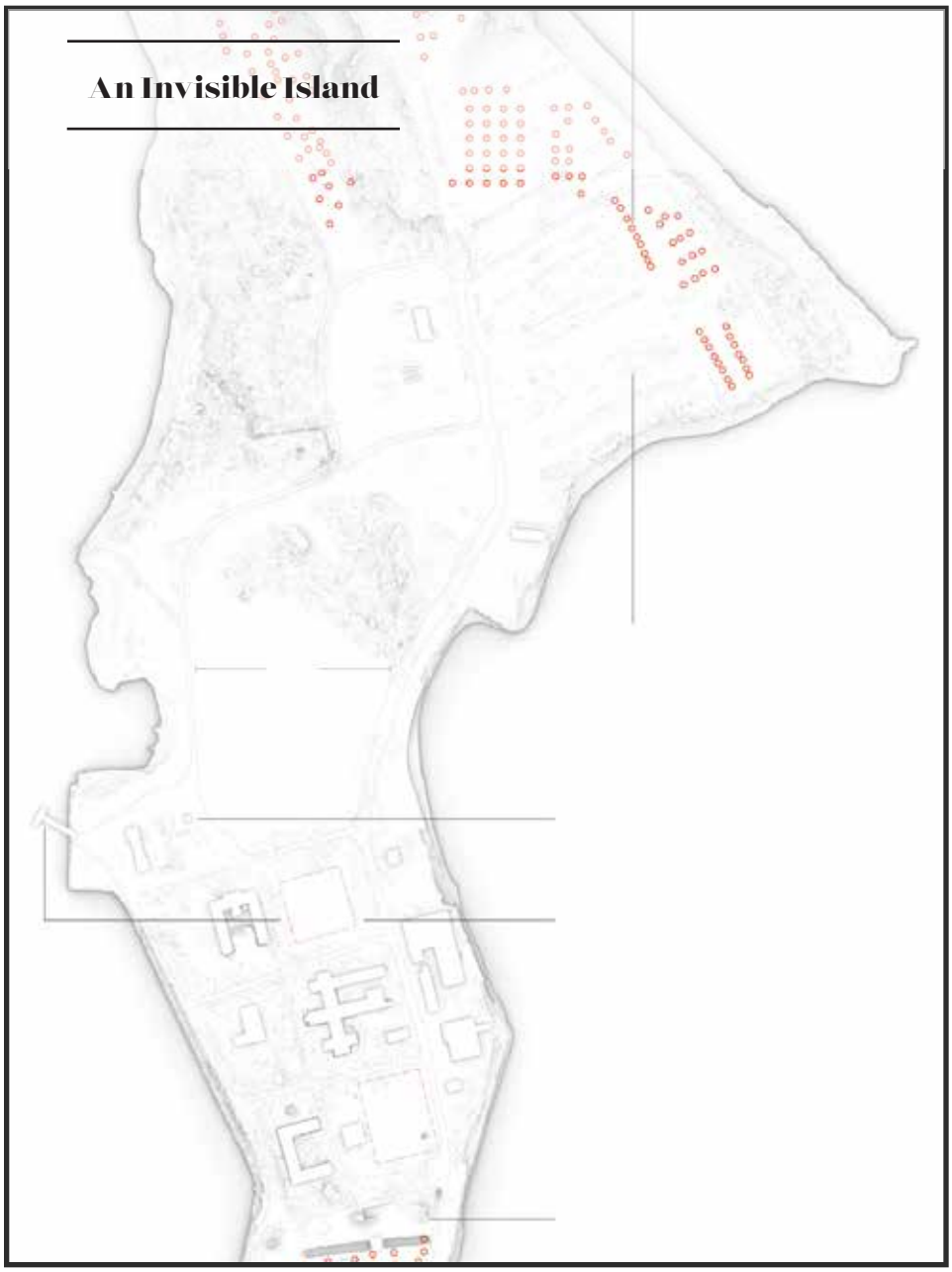
In New York, everyone agreed that Ms. Dickerson needed a guardian, and the court appointed one from a list of lawyers.

On paper, Ms. Dickerson was now covered. By law, the guardian was to "exercise the utmost care and diligence when acting on behalf of the incapacitated person" and show "trust, loyalty and fidelity." His powers and duties included creating "an irrevocable burial trust fund," notifying relatives in the event of death and paying reasonable funeral expenses out of remaining assets.

But guardians are paid out of those same assets, and a house on the outskirts of Atlantic City did not promise much. Moreover, the nursing home's lawyers were already claiming thousands of dollars in legal fees for bringing the guardianship petition in the first place.

A year went by as two appointed lawyers in succession declined to serve as her guardian. A third accepted but failed even to file the paperwork required to act on Ms. Dickerson's behalf. After an appeal by Dr. Michael Katz, a physician and the elder son of Ms. Dickerson's employers, the court appointed a fourth lawyer in October 2007. But by year's end he had not submitted the necessary documents, either.

The need to safeguard or sell Ms. Dickerson's house was urgent, Dr. Katz knew. He had rescued her from predatory lenders, covered $45,000 in needed repairs with a family loan and helped her collect rent from her tenant. Now, dying of a heart condition, Dr. Katz saw the empty house falling prey to squatters and scavengers.



"Leola Dickerson has been part of our family for 50 years," he had written in a eulogy for his mother in 2000, when she died of Alzheimer's disease at 86, tended by Ms. Dickerson, then 80. "Her years of devotion and caring for our parents will always be appreciated and never forgotten."

Dr. Katz, 69, died on Jan. 18, 2008, and was buried three days later. Ms. Dickerson died at a Queens hospital on Jan. 22. Her body would wait in the morgue for three months and 21 days.

For a long time already, her adoptive son, Joseph Dixon, had been trying to find her. "She was a good mother," he would say later. "Everybody loved her."

Their relationship had suffered after he left the Army and struggled with drugs. Nevertheless, he visited her in the hospital in 2006 after learning of her fall. When he returned the next morning, she was gone and the hospital would not tell him where. They kept insisting, "She doesn't have any kids."

There had never been a formal adoption. But inside the locked Pleasantville house lay his high school diploma and his formal Army portrait. Outside towered the tree he had planted in fourth grade. He tried to find out who controlled the property, to no avail. One day the garage door was open, and the blue Thunderbird that Ms. Dickerson called her *baby* was gone. He figured then that she had passed.

Notice of her death went to her baby brother, Mr. Maddox, a diabetic undergoing a double amputation. "He was in bad shape when she passed," the brother's widow, Bernice, recalled. "He was in no position."

Notice also went to the guardian and to the Queens County public administrator's office, which calculated that she had only $342.24 left. It would go toward a $7,771.18 claim by the nursing home's lawyers, or to offset $124,258.85 paid to the home by Medicaid.

That year the city referred 80 unclaimed Queens bodies to medical schools. Whether Ms. Dickerson was among them is not a matter of public record, but her burial site is: Trench 331, with 162 other bodies.

Even as her grave sank under bulldozers digging new trenches for the unclaimed, the unpaid tax liens on her house were being bought at auction, repackaged and resold for profit by various hedge funds.

By then the house was a boarded-up ruin where drug deals went down. When a stepgrandson, Thackus Dickerson, finally arrived, trying to find out what had happened to Grandma Leola, sheriff's deputies showed up to demand his ID.

Yet the guardian and the nursing home's lawyers were still battling for the last of her Social Security in 2012, four years after her death, the guardian claiming $23,793.69 in legal fees. He lost. The judge granted him just $1,576, and it became another uncollectable lien against a house in foreclosure that he never went to see.

The guardian, Jay Stuart Dankberg, 70, is a large man who wears big gold rings and meets visitors in a shabby Manhattan office crammed with overflowing cartons. He readily remembered the Dickerson case as a financial disappointment, but said he was hearing of his ward's Hart Island burial for the first time.

"It shocks me," Mr. Dankberg said. "I certainly should be paid, and certainly she shouldn't be buried in potter's field."

Where did he think she would be buried?

"I hadn't given it any thought," he replied.

Indifference and Betrayals

NEW YORK'S GUARDIANSHIP statute was considered a model when it was passed in 1993. It did not work out that way. Government and news media investigations have repeatedly found the system swollen with well-connected lawyers siphoning fees from wards' assets, and choked by paperwork requirements that fail to uncover even flagrant theft.

Past exposés have followed the money, not the human remains of wards with little left to steal. Guardianship data is spotty and often hard to obtain.

But here they are: guardianship files that bear the same names as people sent to Hart Island. Dozens of files can be identified and pulled one by one from courthouse storage.

Few of these wards were wealthy. But neither were they destitute—at least not until they entered the vortex of end-of-life care. In some cases of neglectful guardians, even the last safety net—a burial fund, a private plot, a will—proved no protection.

"That's one of the most horrible, predatory things I've ever heard," Felice Wechsler, a senior lawyer with the state's Mental Hygiene Legal Service and a veteran of guardianship proceedings, said when informed that records showed that many people with guardians ended up on Hart Island.

Constance Mirabelli, a widowed bookkeeper with a jolly laugh and a love of riding city buses, had a rent-controlled apartment in the West Village and a burial plot in a Catholic cemetery before she was placed under a guardianship in 1999 at her landlord's initiative.

"I'm not dilapidated yet," Ms. Mirabelli told the psychiatrist sent by the city after her landlord complained that she was incontinent and sometimes let the bathtub overflow. "I can still kick pretty good."

Four years, two guardians and two nursing homes later, Ms. Mirabelli died at 91. And despite her plot at St. John Cemetery in Queens, despite a $2,000 burial fund culled from her modest pension and preserved by court order, Ms. Mirabelli was among the last of 137 bodies to be lowered into Trench 307 in February 2004.

> "He tried to find out who controlled the property"

The guardian responsible for her at the time, Jo Ann Douglas, was a lawyer known for lucrative appointments as a law guardian for children in celebrity divorces. In her final accounting, she wrote that she had arranged "appropriate transport and burial for Ms. Mirabelli"—not specifying that she meant a city morgue truck and a pauper's grave. Questioned 10 years later, Ms. Douglas found nothing in her old notes to explain her decision. "Do you know if she can be moved to St. John's?" she asked in an email, seeking a way to undo the past.

Again and again, bulging guardianship files show that the consequences of bad luck and bureaucratic indifference fall with disproportionate cruelty on people who lack the buffer of money. Few are more vulnerable than immigrants to this proudly international city.

Ciro Ferrer, of Cuba, lies in Trench 357, where four dozen of 150 bodies have Hispanic names amid an Ellis Island grab bag. For 25 years, working in a food market in Elmhurst, Queens, Mr. Ferrer supported his wife and three children in Havana. But after the authorities found him disheveled and malnourished, wandering the streets near the Elmhurst apartment where he lived alone, he was initially described in records as 70, single and childless.

He told a court-appointed evaluator about his Cuban family after receiving a dementia diagnosis in 2007 and being placed at New Surfside Nursing Home in Far Rockaway, Queens. His guardianship file includes the Havana address and phone number of his wife, Regla, and even a 2008 report by his guardian citing a plan to buy him a phone card to call family "outside the country."

But that never happened. The guardian, Nicholas S. Ratush, who collected $400 every month as a fee from Mr. Ferrer's $669 Social Security check and paid the nursing home the rest, now says that he was unaware of any relatives and so could not notify any when Mr. Ferrer died on Oct. 29, 2012.

In Havana, Mr. Ferrer's daughter, Ilda, 53, learned of her father's death three years later from The Times. He was still alive, eight years ago, when her mother received a letter from the court evaluator saying that Mr. Ferrer was unable to care for himself, but her efforts to reply by phone and email went unanswered. Mr. Ferrer's wife died soon afterward, and the children tried in vain to reach their father through the Red Cross and the United States government.

"We could do nothing," his daughter said, "but let him die alone."

Wishes and Plans Ignored

TO LEAVE YOUR KIN TO THE potter's field has long been considered shameful. But Julie Bolcer, a spokeswoman for the city's Office of Chief Medical Examiner, said many people chose not to claim relatives lying in the morgue. The office does not track the numbers, she said, or ask the reasons.

For the big sister of Zarramen Gooden, 17, buried on Hart Island in 1999, the reason still sears: "Did we want him in potter's field? Hell no! We didn't have the money. I felt so bad knowing that my brother's body was just taken and dumped."

Zarramen was the family clown, the lovable prankster who had known a better life. His father was a good provider, an Army veteran working two jobs as a janitor in Brooklyn, in a hospital and in a bank. But he died when the boy was 7, and the family ended up on welfare and in the drug-ravaged homeless-shelter system. Their mother, Rita Nelson, became addicted to heroin. After Zarramen's freak bicycle accident, he bled to death on the way to the hospital.

When their mother died in 2014, the children came up with $7,000 for her burial in Calverton National Cemetery on Long Island, beside her husband. Only then did they learn that the burial plot had room for one more. Zarramen?

"They told us it was too late," said the older sister, Malondya LaTorre.

In another trench, from another realm in life, lies Doris McCrea, a widow who retired as the head of records retention for Continental Grain, one of the world's largest privately held corporations. She outlived her family but had made careful provision to be laid to rest with her husband in a cemetery in Turners Falls, Mass. When she died at 100 on July 10, 2012, she had a generous

prepaid burial plan and more than $5,400 in her personal account at the nursing home where she had lived for 15 years. Yet three days later, the city issued a permit to put her in the potter's field. Within four months, she was in a trench with 148 others.

"That's criminal," said Audrey Ponzio, a friend and former colleague from Continental Grain, when she learned where Ms. McCrea had ended up.

As in many cases, Ms. McCrea's personal information had been lost or ignored in the shuffle near the end of her long life, when she was sent from nursing home to hospital, from hospital to hospice. "What happened to this patient is very unfortunate," said Dr. Jonathan Mawere, the administrator of the nursing home, Queens Boulevard Extended Care Facility, who was prompted by an inquiry from The Times to find and try to reactivate her burial plan, three years late.

Unclaimed graves, unspent burial funds and uncollected life insurance abound in this fragmented system, critics say. Even concerned survivors with money to pay for burial themselves are no guarantee against Hart Island.

Take Emmett Pantin, 57, placed on a ventilator in 2008 after a severe stroke. For five years, he was repeatedly reported to have only one living relative, an older brother on active military duty "somewhere in Iraq." No one asked the Army to track down this brother, Master Sgt. Gerard Pantin, even when the younger brother died at 62 in July 2013 and was sent to Hart Island, his name misspelled Patin.

In fact, the brothers were two of nine siblings in a family from Trinidad. Relatives there and in the United States had been trying to find Emmett Pantin for nearly a year when they learned from a website that he had died. Immobile, voiceless, suffering bedsores and depression, he had been transferred through at least four medical institutions under the supervision of a court-appointed guardian in his last year of life, records show.

"Before he died, they kept telling us they couldn't find him," Sergeant Pantin said when reached in Florida, where he had retired from the Army at 69 in 2015, after deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Up to now we didn't know where the body was. I told them: 'This is America. If somebody went to the hospital and went to a nursing home, how can they not know where he is?'"

The Cadaver Market

THE UNCLAIMED DEAD WAIT IN cold storage, shelved on racks in city morgues. In theory, all who are destined for that last ferry ride are first subject to selection as educational cadavers under the authority of the chief medical examiner.

In practice, of those buried on Hart Island, only a portion—roughly 300 to 600 out of some 1,500 annually—were ever officially offered as anatomical specimens on the weekly or biweekly lists discreetly circulated by the medical examiner's office, citing name, age, race, sex, place and date of death. Fewer still were chosen.

"A lot of cherry picking," said Jason Chiaramonte, a licensed funeral director who for many years handled the acquisition of so-called city bodies for Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. "It's like, 'Hey, Jason, we have 10 people here; we're going to bury them at potter's field next week. If you want to take a look, see if you can use some.'"

"Technically, they're city property," Mr. Chiaramonte added, "and technically, they're only loaning them to us."

Ms. Bolcer, the spokeswoman for the medical examiner's office, said the city had stepped up efforts to identify relatives through the Internet and commercial databases. "We are enormously conservative about which bodies get offered to schools under the current law that requires us to make unclaimed bodies available," she said.

The street homeless and other casualties of rough living are generally not wanted by medical schools. Old age, however, is no obstacle. And each borough's morgue has had its own way of parceling out the cadavers, despite recurrent scandals over corruption and lawsuits over body mix-ups.

Rivals for the bodies periodically clash over access to the city's supply, and even over individual corpses. Medical schools have chafed at one-day body loans made to the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service, which these days signs out corpses at the Queens morgue, drives them to embalming classes in Midtown Manhattan and returns them after mortuary students have practiced incisions, drainage and chemical infusion—a process that leaves the cadavers unfit for medical schools' purposes.

"We can't get the morgue lists," complained Amy Koplow, executive director of the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which is dedicated to providing a traditional private interment to any Jew who cannot afford one. "We can't march into Einstein and say: 'Hold that scalpel! That person's Jewish; they belong to us."

So it was that Milton Weinstein, 67, a Brooklyn-born Reform Jew, became one of three bodies from nursing homes that Mr. Chiaramonte borrowed from the Bronx morgue on April 28, 2009, for Einstein's use. In a log book at the morgue, Mr. Chiaramonte filled out and signed a funeral director's receipt for each. He loaded the bodies on stretchers and trucked them away. It would be at least two years before they were buried.

There are no rules on how long such corpses can be used. The medical examiner's office redacted all cadavers' names from the records it gave The Times under the Freedom of Information Law. But hundreds could be identified anyway, through comparisons of dates and places of death. Many were separately confirmed by people with access to unredacted records. Some cadavers were traced to past lives and lost relatives.

"My God—where was his body for 24 months?" Michael Wynston, Mr. Weinstein's estranged son, asked when he learned that his father had been buried on Hart Island on April 20, 2011, two years after his death at Bay Park Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation in the Bronx.

With bitterness and self-reproach, Mr. Wynston sketched the broken arc of his father's life. Widowed in 1970s Brooklyn with a 7-year-old son and a 3-year-old adopted daughter, Mr. Weinstein remarried and clung to his second wife, Lynda, then a hospital nurse with a son of her own. Even when her descent into mental illness and abusiveness destroyed the blended family, Mr. Wynston said, his father rejected his suggestion of divorce, saying, "I'd rather have this than nothing."

His daughter ran away. His stepson fled the turmoil to live with his own father. Eventually Michael, who last saw his father in 2002, changed his surname to

> "He was still being used as a cadaver."

Record-keeping of such loans is sloppy; documents show some bodies signed out and never signed back in. And for decades, McAllister, along with the mortuary science department at Nassau Community College, had even more casual access to the dead, conducting classes in the city morgue at Bellevue Hospital Center in Manhattan until Hurricane Sandy flooded the premises in 2012.

Religious charities that handle burials have fruitlessly sought access to the names of people lying unclaimed.

Wynston, partly, he said, "so my father and stepmother wouldn't find me."

To the stepson, Barry Gainsburg, now a lawyer in Florida, Mr. Weinstein's fate was part of a larger economic unraveling. "The bottom line is, his industry was taken out by the computer age," he said, referring to Mr. Weinstein's career as a typographer. "He was a good guy; he just got crushed by society."

A diabetic, Mr. Weinstein lost his last job, driving for a car service, because of dimming sight. Destitute and ailing, he and his wife entered the nursing home together. When he died there in 2009, they had been residents for at least three years. But the nursing home, which did not respond to repeated inquiries about the case, sent his body to the morgue as unclaimed, and transferred his widow, over her objections, from the Bronx to a nursing home in Brooklyn.

"It's like the nursing home just collects their Medicaid checks, and when they're done, they just throw them in a heap outside," Mr. Wynston said.

Eventually, after Ms. Weinstein had been shuffled through a series of nursing homes, a Brooklyn hospital contacted her son: She was undergoing surgery for lung cancer. The stepbrothers learned only then of Milton's death. Nobody could tell them where he was buried. Now they realize why: He was still being used as a cadaver.

"It's the guilt and regret that I live with," Mr. Wynston said. "I essentially abandoned him."

The Ferry Ride Out

IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, THE ghosts of the unburied dead visit the living, demanding proper burial. In New York City's lexicon, Hart Island counts as decent burial—at least for those who can afford no other. But the longing to bring one's own dead home runs deep.

Sometimes the island's ledgers show a disinterment date. Here are the favored few, exhumed by number from the trench grid, collected by a funeral home and ferried back for a different ending.

Among these cases are two stories as redemptive as any faith could pray for, stories that illuminate what others have lost in the darkness that surrounds Hart Island.

Monica Murray, the oldest in a large Irish Catholic family, had married at 20. She was a good, protective mother to her two daughters, Maureen and Linda. But in 1986, when they were 22 and 17, she abruptly emptied the family bank account and vanished.

"When your mom walks out on you and takes all the money and doesn't leave a note, there's a lot of hurt and anger," Maureen Eastman, the daughter, recalled. Their mother briefly surfaced in St. Lucia, living with an abusive man and asking for money. Their father, who had filed a missing person's report, secured a quick divorce. Bitterness drove a wedge between the daughters and their maternal relatives. Except for a sighting at a Long Island halfway house in 1988, they heard nothing more of their mother for 25 years—years when they hated her.

In June 2013, their father got a call that changed everything. Ms. Murray was dead. She had died back in January, and she was buried on Hart Island.

"There's no words to describe how sad and overwhelmed we were to find out that's where she ended up," Ms. Eastman said. "We could barely sleep knowing that she was there."

More revelations followed. Their mother had spent a decade in Creedmoor, a psychiatric institution in Queens, before being transferred in 1998 to New Surfside Nursing Home. No visitors; alert but increasingly racked by seizures; ultimately unable to speak.

On Facebook, Ms. Eastman, living in Arizona, contacted New York relatives she had not spoken to for decades. Her mother's brother, a retired firefighter, was adamant: They would bring Ms. Murray back, to Grandma and Grandpa's plot in St. Charles/Resurrection Cemeteries in Farmingdale on Long Island.

As cousins gathered, Ms. Murray's daughters learned for the first time that Huntington's disease ran in the family. Those who inherit the incurable brain disorder become progressively unable to walk, talk, think or swallow. Symptoms typically start in the 30s or 40s, often with impulsive, manic behavior—like taking the money and running.

When she died, Ms. Murray had $6,887 left in her personal account at New Surfside. But she was buried as an indigent because the nursing home, which had collected $1.1. million from Medicaid for her care over the last decade of her life, failed to turn over her remaining funds promptly. (The home declined to comment.)

In an eerie coda, when money surfaced, the Queens County public administrator offered a funeral home $4,295 to disinter and transfer her body to a cut-rate New Jersey graveyard without markers. But when the undertakers checked Hart Island, she was not there. She had already been lifted from the pit, into the bosom of her family.

Her headstone reads: "Loving Mother, Daughter, Sister and Aunt."

"You feel grief," Ms. Eastman said. "But you feel: 'You know what? I'm allowed to love you again, Mom.'"

That same year, it took a whole community to reclaim another Hart Island exile, a woman who died alone at 53 in her brownstone apartment in Manhattan.

In her late 30s, Sheryl Hurst had been drawn to Congregation Rodeph Sholom, an Upper West Side synagogue, and she sang in its choir for years before formally converting to Judaism. With free-flowing hair and a mysterious facial deformity, she was a familiar presence, but no one knew her story.

Neither of her parents was Jewish. She was born three years after her mother, Terry Saunders, sang in the 1956 Hollywood version of "The King and I" as the head wife, Lady Thiang. Ms. Hurst's younger father, James Hurst, played cowboys in television westerns. Her parents broke up when she was about 4. As a teenager, she tried to kill herself, fell unconscious on a bathroom heater and badly burned her face.

"A funny thing happened to me on the way to becoming Jewish," she wrote when she completed an adult bat mitzvah class in 2007. "I, an atheist, developed a strong belief and deep love for God."

She had always lived with her mother and was devastated by her death in 2011. But in June 2012, she was looking forward to chanting at a special service, and when she did not show up, the synagogue kept trying to reach her. Finally, the cantor posted a note at Ms. Hurst's building on West 76th Street in Manhattan, appealing for information.

Word came back: Ms. Hurst had died in May—the synagogue members had just missed her at the morgue. She was lost to Hart Island.

"Everybody was just distraught," said Sally Kaplan, vice president of the congregation. "Somehow we had to bring Sheryl home."

They enlisted Plaza Jewish Community Chapel, a rare nonprofit funeral home, to try to retrieve Ms. Hurst for burial in the synagogue's cemetery. The process took nine months and was not easy. Among many requirements was written permission from Ms. Hurst's long-estranged father in California.

At first, he said he had not had a relationship with his daughter. But when they explained what they were doing, he wept, saying, "God bless you all."

Now her headstone bears not only her birth name but the Hebrew name she chose, Eliana, "because it means, 'God answered me,'" and an inscription by the community that refused to leave her in the dark: "Forever in Our Hearts."